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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Chocolá: An Ancient Maya Capital in a Contemporary Guatemalan Community

Review by Gavin Roger Davies

Water, Cacao, and the Early Maya of Chocolá

By Jonathan Kaplan and Federico Paredes Umana

University Press of Florida, 2018

Water, Cacao, and the Early Maya of Chocolá presents the results of Jonathan Kaplan and Federico Paredes Umana's three seasons of archaeological investigations and additional years of research at the large prehispanic site of Chocolá, located in the Pacific piedmont of southwestern Guatemala. More than simply a dry monograph, this book also represents the culmination of Kaplan's journey as the director of a project that was ultimately shut down by the modern community in which they were working. As Kaplan reveals in the Preface:

“Our research was halted by threats from Christian evangelical pastors and wealthier families in the town wishing to build bigger churches and homes, destroying mounds containing ancient edifices. They saw the archaeological project, with its mandate from the Cultural Ministry to protect the mounds, and the Guatemalan cultural patrimony protection laws themselves, as impediments to their ambitions” (xxii)

Given the problems that Kaplan's project precipitated in the local community, it is unlikely that archaeologists will be granted further access to these ruins anytime soon. For this reason, and due to the rapid rate of development occurring in that region, Kaplan laments that: “the record of our work may be all that remains for posterity and world cultural patrimony”. That this responsibility weighs heavy on Kaplan is evident both from such explicit statements and also by the exhaustive level of detail provided in both the background and results chapters of this book.

The site of Chocolá was one of several sites that rose to importance in southern Mesoamerica during Middle and Late Preclassic periods (c.600 BC – 300 AD). One of just nine sites in the region to have produced a ruler portrait (Monument 1), Kaplan reports that the site once boasted over 100 mounds, indicating that the population of the site may have rivalled that of better known Preclassic sites like Takalik Abaj (in the Department of Retalhuleu) and Kaminaljuyu (in the Valley of Guatemala).

Chocolá's location, in one of the premier cacao producing regions has long suggested to scholars that cacao may have been central to this center's political and economic power. However, specific evidence tying this ancient site to cacao production has so far been lacking. Kaplan's discovery of a sophisticated hydraulic system running through a large portion of the site and his identification of cacao residues in Preclassic pots, thus provides significant support for this theory and helps advance our understanding of the Preclassic economy of this region.

The first three chapters of Kaplan's book provide the historical and environmental context of the site and include a comprehensive review of previous investigations, and a thorough synthesis of the historical documentation for cacao production in the Province and later Department of Suchitepequez. The 70-page introductory chapter additionally provides an insightful discussion of the Southern Maya Region in the history of Maya scholarship, and perceptions of this region's role in the development of "Maya civilization".

This latter topic has received increasing attention in recent years, in part as a result of Inomata et al. (2014) proposed revisions for the Preclassic chronology of the site of Kaminaljuyu, the largest and most important site in the Southern Maya Region. The proposed revisions, which would involve shifting the preclassic chronology of Kaminaljuyu and several related sites forward by as much as 300 years, are significant because they suggest that key features of later Classic Maya civilization. (i.e. the Long-Count Calendar and the stela-altar complex), which were long believed to have emerged first in the Southern Maya Region and then spread north to the Peten region, may have emerged contemporaneously in both regions. As Kaplan and others (e.g. Love 2018) have observed, however, diffusion is too simplistic a concept to explain the processes involved in the spread and adoption of "Maya" ideology and culture. Kaplan, nevertheless lays out compelling evidence that many of these Classic Maya traits were in use during the Late Preclassic in the Pacific Coast.

The first three chapters include numerous high-quality maps and illustrations, which help to provide the reader with a clear understanding of Chocolá's geographical and environmental setting. Some of these maps (e.g. Figure 2.6), also highlight the challenge of reconstructing the history of this region (particularly in the Department of Suchitepequez) due to the patchy nature of previous work. One of these (Figure 2.6) for instance, shows that the area around Chocolá both to the south, east and west is still virtually unknown archaeologically. This makes it difficult to put Chocolá in its local historical context and to determine the extent of its political territory, which is assumed to have been extensive. Greater knowledge of sites in the surrounding region would greatly enrich our understanding of Chocolá's role as a political and administrative center. It is of course quite possible that urbanization at the site of Chocolá caused the majority of the rural population to move to that site. If this was the case, however, further research will be needed to determine how the leaders of Chocolá provided sufficient food for this population, when many of the city's inhabitants must have been dedicated to cacao production.

Chapters 4 through 6 of the book provide the hard data derived from Kaplan and Paredes Umana's extensive fieldwork and artifact analysis. These chapters are rich in detail and may prove difficult for non-specialists to digest. However, the quantity and quality of the illustrations help to make these chapters more accessible. Patience and perseverance with these chapters, is rewarded by a greater understanding of how the site's architecture and artifacts compare with those of nearby sites like Takalik Abaj and Kaminaljuyu.

For those who have followed Kaplan and Paredes Umana's previous reports and publications, little in these chapters will be new. An exception to this, however, is the ceramics chapter, which provides a more comprehensive listing of the ceramic types and wares than has previously been published and includes a large number of digitally produced illustrations. Given the time that has passed since the investigations took place, it is somewhat disappointing to find that the ceramic analysis is still "ongoing" and also to find that no quantification is provided for any of the ceramic types and wares that are described. This makes it difficult to assess changes in the population of the site over time as well as changes in the site's interactions with other sites and regions.

Chapter 7 represents the synthesis / discussion section of the book and focuses in on the two central themes: water management and cacao production. Although not fully adopting Wittfogel's hydraulic theory, Kaplan nevertheless supports the notion of a "causal link between water control and a

centralized source of political authority” and provides persuasive evidence that water management was central to Chocolá’s success as an urban settlement and as an early cacao production center.

Kaplan and Paredes Umana’s book is a welcome addition to the literature on the rise of complex societies on the Pacific Coast of Guatemala. The comprehensive review chapters will make it a useful reference source for both students and professional researchers working in the Southern Maya Region, while the detailed methodological discussions will make it of general interest for archaeologists working elsewhere in the world. Finally, the revelations concerning the problems that this project experienced with the local community mean that the book also provides an important cautionary tale for archaeologists engaging in research in small, indigenous communities.

References

Inomata, Takeshi, et al. (2014) “Chronological revision of Preclassic Kaminaljuyú, Guatemala: implications for social processes in the Southern Maya Area”. *Latin American Antiquity* 25(4):377-408.

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