

## SHIFTS IN THE POLITICAL SITUATION AND SOCIOECONOMICAL CONDITIONS OF THE SAN PEDRO MAYA IN BRITISH HONDURAS, 1855-1936

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The San Pedro Maya Project was initiated in 2002, using a multidisciplinary methodology that joins together archaeological data, written documents and oral histories, all aimed at achieving a greater understanding of the San Pedro Maya, and more specifically, to discover the processes that resulted in its incorporation – political, economical and social- in the English colony of British Honduras (Leventhal *et al.* 2001; Yaeger *et al.* 2004a). The Maya group that is the focus of this project is one of the Yucatecan speaking groups that arrived in British Honduras –present Belize- during the Caste War of Yucatan.

During the 2003 symposium, the historic context of the San Pedro Maya was presented in a detailed manner, and the work of the first four fieldwork seasons was also described (Yaeger *et al.* 2004a). Now, the results obtained during the 2003 season shall be described, following a short summary about the San Pedro Maya and how they finally arrived in Belize.

### THE SAN PEDRO MAYA

The Caste War broke out in Yucatan in 1847, when Maya and *mestizo* peasants rose to obtain their independence from Mexico (Reed 2001; Rugeley 1996). Although the Maya leaders almost succeeded in liberating Yucatan and Campeche, one-year later the Mexican troops pushed the rebels towards the eastern coast and the peninsular inland, a zone of isolated and dispersedly populated jungles. In this region, the Maya established villages and hamlets, connected through a network of paths and trails, where they enjoyed political autonomy though they lacked any international recognition of their *de facto* sovereignty. The decades that followed witnessed sporadic armed confrontations with the Mexican army, until the government gained control of the entire area at the beginning of the XX century (Dumond 1997; Reed 2001; Sullivan 1989).

The insurrected Maya organized themselves in two territorial groups. The eastern zone of the peninsula was the territory of the Cruzob, with Chan Santa Cruz as their capital. The group known as the Peaceful of the South (*Pacíficos del Sur*) occupied the south-central zone of the peninsula, and their capital was Chichanha, and later Santa Clara Icaiche (Dumong 1977; Sapper 1904; Villa Rojas 1945). These groups

were differentiated by religion; the Cruzob worshipped the prophetic Speaking Cross, while the Peaceful were Catholics (Barabas 1976; Dumond 1997; Reed 1997). In turn, each group displayed a different foreign policy; the Cruzob searched for the help of officials and negotiators from Belize and England to proceed with their independence war against Mexico, while the leadership of the Peaceful –as inferred by the name they were given- was willing to close a peace treaty with the government of Yucatan, a policy opposed to that of the Cruzob (Angel 1997; Antochiw 1997, Dumond 1997; Sullivan 1989). A consequence of these profound differences was the permanent conflict between both groups, made evident through warfare activities of any one group against the other (Dumond 1977).

Several Maya groups abandoned the area of conflict between the Cruzob and the Peaceful, and one such group settled in a mountain region in current northwest Belize and northeast Petén, Guatemala, a territory which at that time was being claimed by Mexico, Guatemala and England (Bolland 1977; Jones 1977; Schwartz 1987, 1990; Shoman 2000; Sullivan 1978; Tzul 1993). Grant Jones (1977) named them the San Pedro Maya because their major settlement was San Pedro Siris, where some 350 people lived in a village organized around a church, a town council, and a garrison for the town’s guard. The other major village of the region was San José Yalbac (Figure 1).

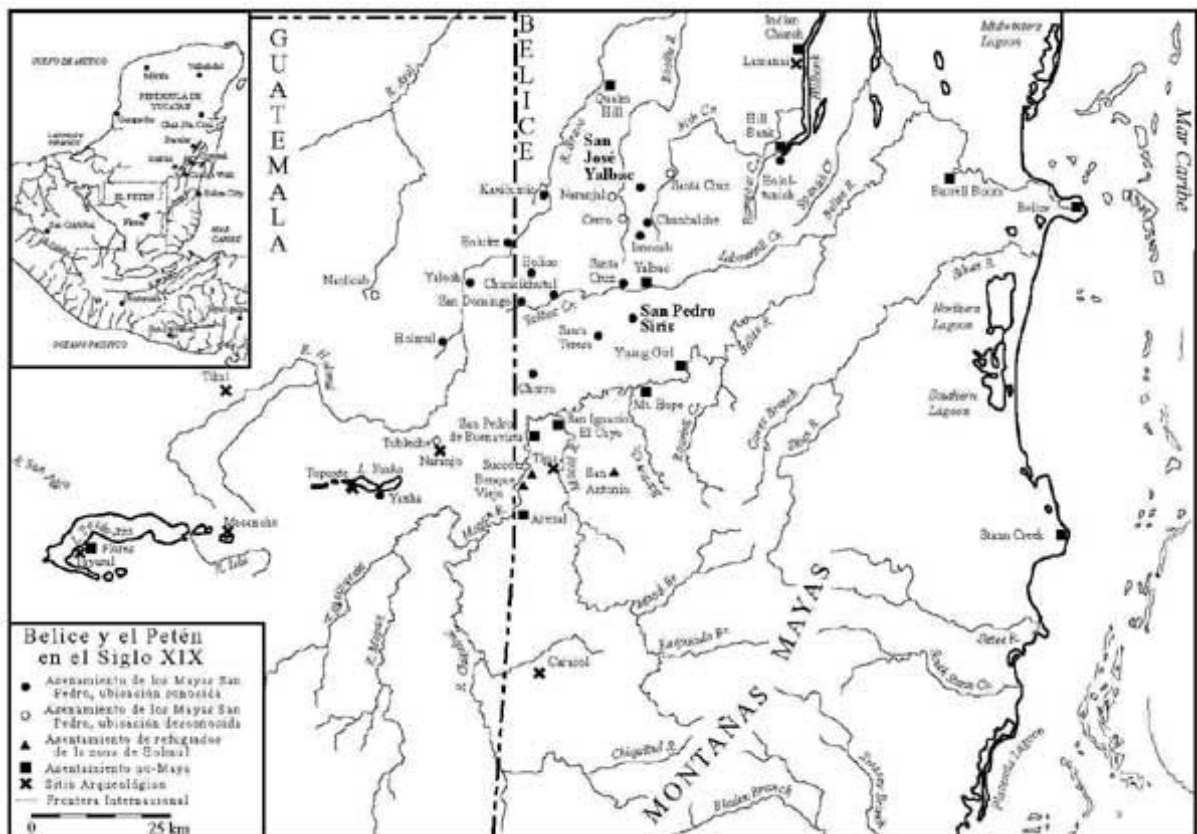


Figure 1. Central sector of Belize in the XIX century (after Jones 1977).

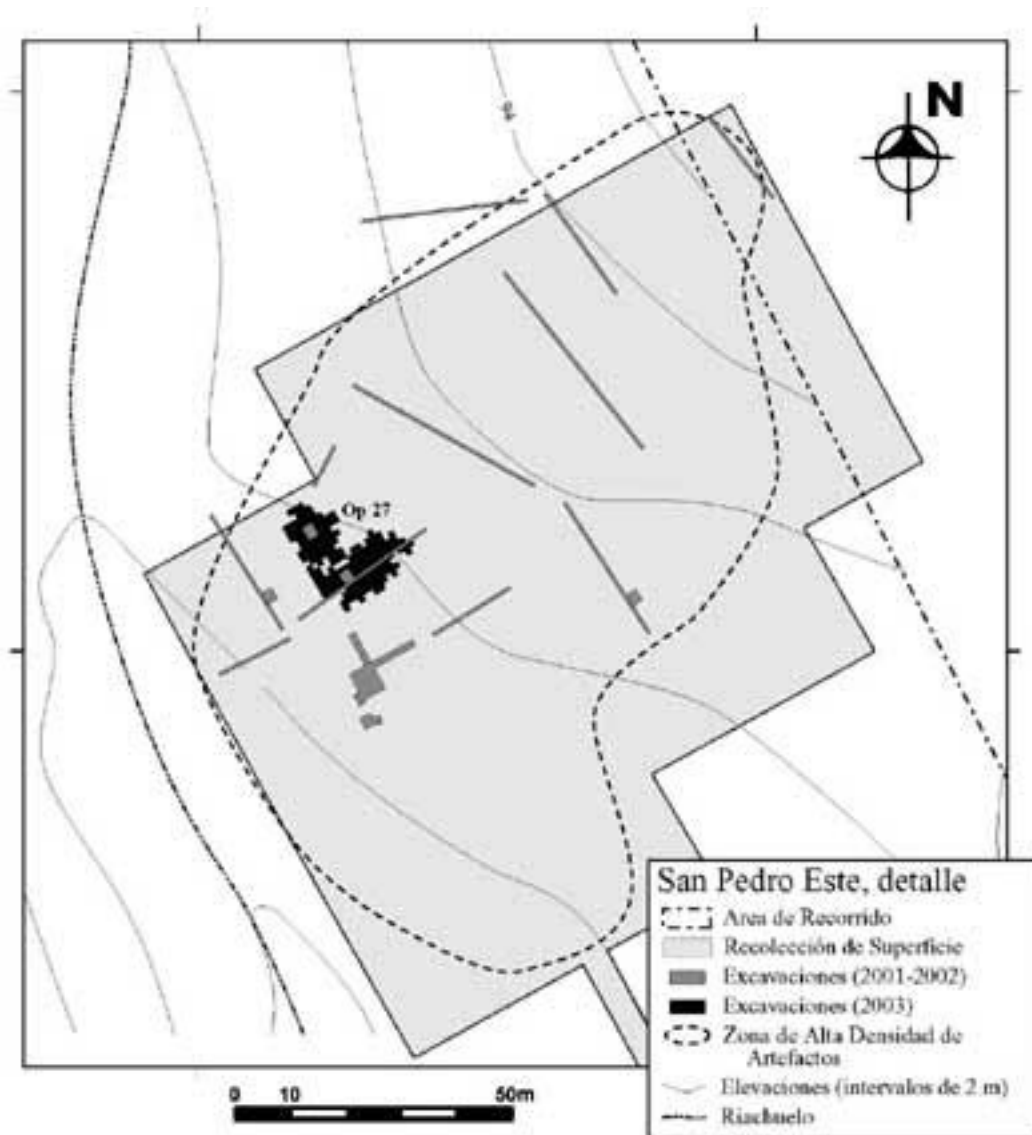
As mentioned earlier in this report, the San Pedro Maya Project is aimed at discovering the social, political and economical processes by which this group was

finally incorporated in the English colony. In the pursuit of this goal, a multidisciplinary methodology is being used:

- Archival research conducted in Belize and England reveal documents that are relevant to the discussions involved in this project.
- Interviews with a small number of individuals born at San José Yalbac, the last village of the San Pedro Maya abandoned in 1936, record the memories of daily life and local politics in those days.
- Finally, archaeological investigations provide a material perspective to daily life, economy, and ethnicity in the village of San Pedro Siris.

Fieldworks at San Pedro Siris were initiated in 2000. The first seasons were focused on the reconnaissance of the area and the collection of thousands of artifacts found on the site surface (Leventhal *et al.* 2001, 2002). Artifacts were concentrated in three discrete components, separated by a creek, and surface collection was implemented in almost the entire area of the site with concentrations of colonial artifacts. In this first stage of the project, the absence of architectural traits or any other visible indication of the presence and location of buildings, both public and residential, was frustrating. In order to identify such traits under the surface, different methodologies were implemented, such as posthole test units, and other more formal units of 1 x 2 m, which proved unsuccessful to find buildings or other traits (Yaeger *et al.* 2004a).

In the 2002 season, a new strategy was implemented for discovering architectural traits (Yaeger *et al.* 2003, 2004a). Eleven trenches, 0.50 m wide and 14 to 38 m long were excavated, producing the discovery of 29 traits of an amazing diversity. The excavations revealed stone alignments that probably delimited the edges of the different buildings, and several small holes excavated in the earth with stones altered by fire and with plenty of charcoal, likely used as hearths to cook meals. Some garbage pits were also found, as well as several much subtle but clear and distinct strata that contained small calcite stones, artifacts and stones altered by fire, possibly surfaces for external use.



**Figure 2. Detail of San Pedro Siris showing excavations in the 2001 season (Ops. 6 and 9), the 2002 season (Ops. 12-25), and the 2003 season (Op. 27).**

The distribution of traits of a clearly domestic character identified in trenches, jointly with the differences in surface artifacts densities, suggests the presence of two different residential units. Farther towards northeast, two burials were found in pits dug in the limy slab; the burials and the very different stratigraphy in the zone suggest that this once was a cemetery.

The discoveries in 2002 prompted the preparation of a broader eight-week research program for 2003, with the following four objectives (Yaeger *et al.* 2004b):

- A number of reconnaissance and transects were conducted to corroborate that no other sites and no other components remained undiscovered; these efforts did not reveal new sites assignable to the XIX century.
- Surface collection was completed in the last sectors of the site with historic occupation.

- An extensive excavation was carried out in one of the households mentioned, with the purpose of better understanding the space organization in domestic contexts and the activities of daily life. This operation was denominated Op. 27 (Figures 2 and 3).

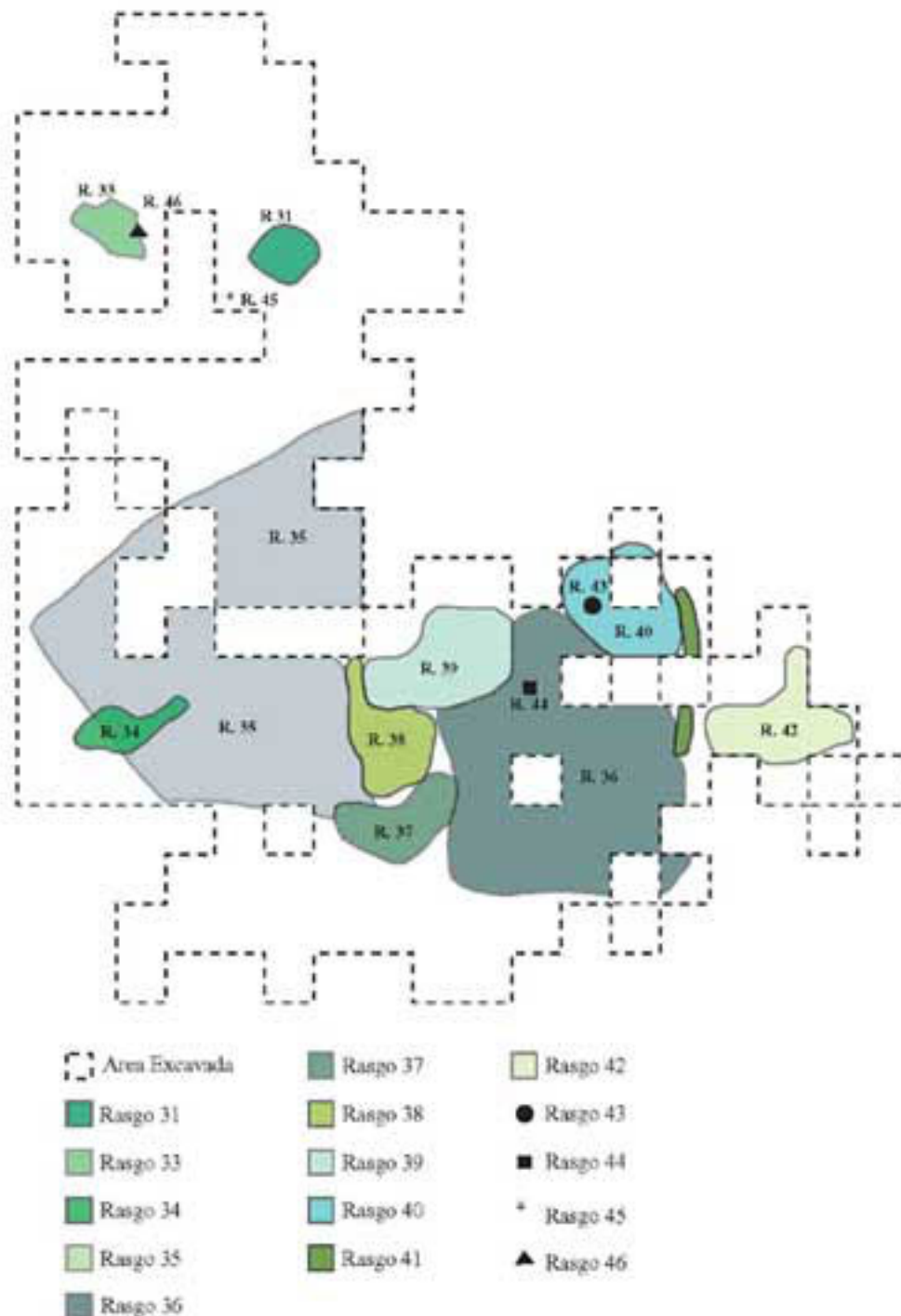


Figure 3. Outline of traits discovered in Op. 27.

- Laboratory work continued, particularly the analysis of XIX and XX century artifacts.

## THE 2003 EXCAVATIONS

As already noted, the excavations conducted during the 2003 season were concentrated on revealing a wide household area. It was denominated Op. 27 and was based on a grid with units of 1 m x 1 m. Work began in those areas where traits were discovered in previous seasons, wherefrom they were expanded to discover other traits or interesting strata. The units were excavated in layers with a maximum thickness of 0.05 cm, always respecting the cultural and natural strata. A soil sampling program was additionally implemented for chemical analysis, and abundant samples were as well collected for flotation. The excavation involved 133 m<sup>2</sup>, and revealed several traits which seem to constitute one single household. The associated artifacts suggest that the occupation of the house took place during the last decade of the XIX century.

The focus of this unit was placed on a platform (Trait 36; Figure 3) less than 10 cm tall and fully invisible from the site surface, covered by less than 5 cm of earth. It consists of middle size stones, probably collected from the brook and from the nearby outcrops of rock strata. Several probes in the platform revealed at least one additional and very similar construction event (Traits 37 and 38).

The presence of two postholes on the platform's surface suggests it supported a building made of perishable materials (Traits 43 and 44). It should be noted that no fragments of burnt clay were found, so it seems that it was not a daub construction but rather one made with sticks and guano, like those known as *coloche*'. In addition, a few nails, window glass and wire fragments were found, suggesting that the house was built with materials obtained in the jungle, in the traditional Maya style.

On top of the platform there were several thin layers of rubble (Traits 39 and 40) containing abundant artifacts. This rubble seems to have been a formal surface, although it was not preserved in the entire platform but in some portions of it only. There was no evidence of a packed mud floor, or of *sascab*. Trait 41 is a strip of land and stones with an elevation of less than 5 cm, which probably served to prevent the house from flooding during the heavy storms.

There was a diversity of domestic artifacts associated with the platform and its building: decorated china bowls imported from England, locally manufactured ceramic jars, flasks for medicines, scissors, buttons, pipes, china dolls fragments, etc. The materials associated with the building suggest they served a domestic function, in other words, this was a house. Besides, the presence of two crucifixes and a medallion with the image of San José strongly supports oral histories and archive documents, which underline the significance of the Catholic Church in the villages of the San Pedro Maya.

Trait 42 extends as of the eastern edge of the house and consists of a thin layer of gravel and stones 1 m wide. It seems to form a road towards the northeast, but unfortunately there was not enough time to excavate the area towards which it was headed.

An additional very interesting trait extends as of the south and west edges of the platform, Trait 35, a layer of dark earth with a high concentration of limestone pieces and some very small stones. This stratum is 5 to 8 cm thick, and is found approximately 10 cm under the present surface. This stratum probably corresponds to some sector with an intensive activity in the zone that constituted the lot associated with the house. It contained artifacts, but it should be noted that most of them are small, of an average smaller size than the artifacts associated with the residential platform. It would seem that the process used to maintain the lot clean consisted in relocating the large artifacts elsewhere, and that the activity and constant movement that characterized this sector of the lot, finally caused the fragmentation of the artifacts involved. In association with Trait 35, there was a hole with lime stones on its edge –heavily altered by fire- full of charcoal and black earth, possibly a hearth or *pib* for underground cooking.

Other sectors of the excavation revealed artifacts of a remarkably larger size. First, around the residential platform there were larger and even complete artifacts. It would seem that the local inhabitants deposited garbage and useful artifacts in the less used areas adjacent to the house, perhaps to keep them there for some later use.

On the other end of the heavily used surface of this lot, some remarkable traits were found in the shape of not too large accumulations of much bigger stones than those forming the platform (Traits 31, 33 and 34). Large artifacts were mixed with the stones of these accumulations, including a number of complete bottles and abundant fragments of bone material, mostly from pigs. Traits 31 is directly associated with the surface of use already mentioned (Trait 35); the two others are not, but instead, they are associated with postholes (Traits 45 and 46).

These three traits seem to correspond to other areas of the lot with a lesser activity, where large stones and artifacts were accumulated when the lot was cleaned up; it should be noted, however, that the complete bottles were carefully deposited, so that they would not break, probably with the purpose of using them later on. The hypothesis considered for understanding these traits is that they were accumulated at the edge of the lot, probably adjacent to a fence built with perishable materials or a hedge that demarcated the edge of the residential unit.

## **ARTIFACT ANALYSIS**

Now, our last goal for the 2003 season was to analyze the artifacts recovered in Op. 27 as well as those from research carried out in previous years. The analyses were conducted by Minette Church (2002; Church *et al.* 2001), and were greatly significant, having contributed highly relevant information and observations regarding the integration and incorporation of the San Pedro Maya in Belize.

First, it has been corroborated that the San Pedro Maya enjoyed a remarkably high degree of independence during the first decades that followed their arrival in Belize. A central issue in this autonomy was their self-sufficient sustenance strategy, as they did not depend from the colonial market to obtain basic foods, in a very clear and crucial contrast with other populations in the colony. The basic tools used for

agriculture were found distributed throughout the site, while documents and accounts narrated by people who lived in San José refer to a rather complex agricultural system.

Even though axes and *machetes* came from elsewhere, other articles of domestic economy did not originate in the colonial market. For instance, many ceramic pieces manufactured locally or in Yucatan have been found. Residents of San Pedro also worked with bottle fragments and flint to manufacture simple tools such as scrapers and knives, although metal knives were also imported.

Documents suggest that this degree of independence was as well consistent with a degree of political autonomy. In the first decade after their arrival in Belize, the San Pedro Maya were not formally subjected to the British Crown, notwithstanding they occupied a territory that would later be incorporated in Belize. In 1866, the Maya soldiers defeated an English force that attempted to invade the region, thus showing their strong will for preserving their autonomy. In 1867, the English troops returned and burnt to ashes the villages of San Pedro and San José, among others, events that are corroborated in the artifact collection, which includes fragments of flare rockets used by the British in 1867. In turn, the Maya fought back with old shotguns, many fragments of which were discovered. Interestingly, all the shotguns present some damage; the cannons are bent and/or the points closed. Cartridges manufactured later in time were also found, suggesting that the use of firearms did not cease with the sacking of the village.

Upon this action, the San Pedro Maya became politically incorporated in the English colony, and such incorporation was reinforced through the imposition of a system of mayors duly acknowledged by the colonial authorities (Boland 1987). However, material data do not show a reduction in the degree of self-sufficiency in regard to sustenance.

The second important observation to be explicitly specified is that the Maya participated in the colonial economy, despite their agricultural self-sufficiency. Actually, there is undisputable evidence that they obtained many articles from different colonial sources. The site features many bottles of liquor, medicines and eatable products, abundant metal artifacts such as axes, *machetes*, scissors and knives, in addition to many bowls and dishes of decorated china.

The amount and diversity of imported products in San Pedro show that the Maya of this village participated in the colonial and global economy in a comprehensive manner. In addition, it means they had money or agricultural and/or wild products available for such an exchange, which took place during the occasional trips of the villagers to Belize City and to the town of San Ignacio.

The third conclusion to be underlined is that it was the Mayas who regulated their participation in colonial economy by making decisions that allowed them to satisfy those needs they valued the most. For instance, analyses of the china forms suggest they would choose bowl shapes, such as soup dishes or tureens, which account for most of the china collection, while dishes represent less than 10% (Figure 4). The ceramics of a coeval English village would show very different frequencies. Besides, a very scarce number of cutlery pieces were found. Evidently, the San Pedro Maya



bought china to serve and eat soups and stews, probably emblematic dishes of the Yucatecan food, such as brines, *chilmole*, and black beans. Apparently, meals were eaten with *tortillas* rather than with a fork or a spoon.

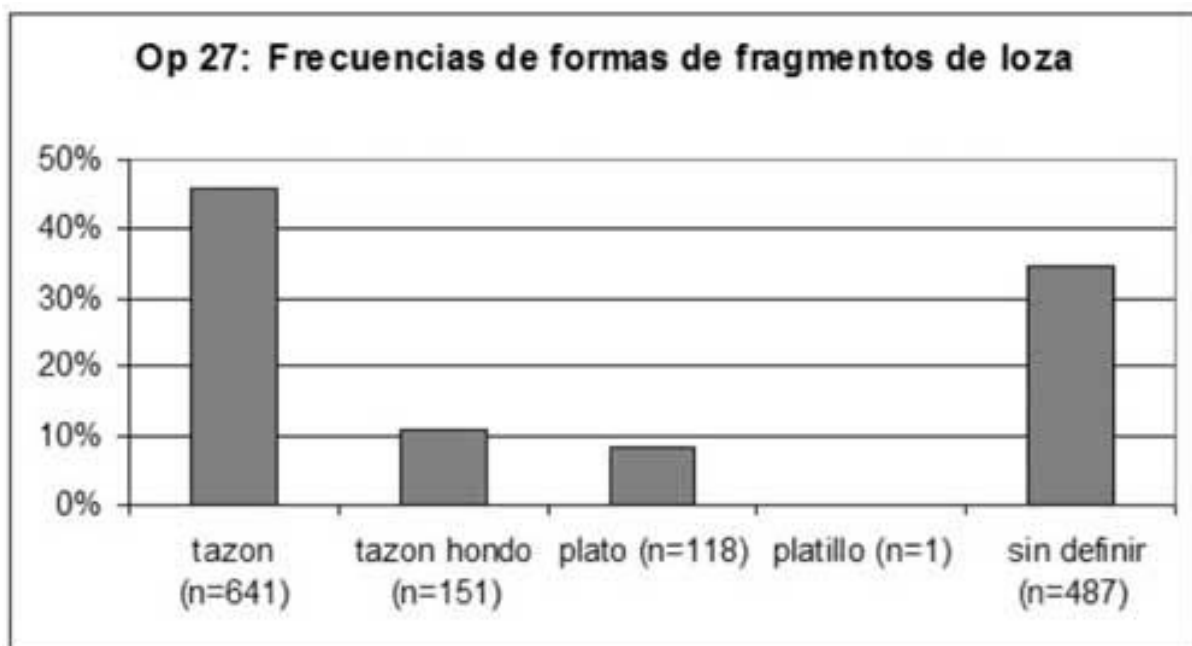


Figure 4. Frequency in the forms of china fragments, Op. 27.

The abundant *pib* hearths, together with the iron pots, evidence a *pibil* style in food preparation. The high frequency of pig mandibles suggests that the *cochinito pibil*, the exquisite stew of the Yucatec Maya was a popular dish. In addition, the data of the investigations described here in regard to food and agriculture indicate the long-standing of the Yucatec Maya food system at San Pedro Siris. Besides, the use of traditional techniques for building homes with local materials such as stone, sticks, reeds and guano, has been documented.

## SUMMARY

Work accomplished in 2003, particularly the excavation of a household, has allowed for a closer approach to the incorporation of the San Pedro Maya in the ancient colony of British Honduras, now Belize. All archaeological data, as well as the interviews and documents found in archives, suggest that the San Pedro Maya had some degree of autonomy in regard to their participation in colonial economy and their relationships with the foreigners, particularly during the first decades of the village.

It is remarkable as well as interesting to note that the villagers maintained their food practices, their sustenance system and their construction techniques for traditional houses, in spite of the fact that their participation in colonial economy opened other possibilities in regard to forms and standards. Having said this, we must point out that the interpretations presented here must be considered provisory ones until analysis of the artifacts is fully completed, which is the objective of the 2004 season.

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Figure 1 Belize's central sector in the XIX century (after Jones 1997)

Figure 2 Detail of San Pedro Siris showing excavations during the 2001 season (Ops. 6 and 9), the 2002 season (Ops. 12-25), and the 2003 season (Op. 27).

Figure 3 Sketches of traits discovered in Op. 27.

Figure 4 Frequency of forms in china fragments, Op. 27.