

Recent Investigations on Ambergris Caye, Belize

Elizabeth Graham* and Scott Simmons†

In June and July of 2012, a second season of fieldwork directed by Elizabeth Graham and Scott Simmons was carried out on Ambergris Caye, an island off the north coast of Belize and a popular tourist destination for divers (**Fig. 1**). In Precolumbian times the caye supported a number of towns, the Maya residents of which engaged in wide-ranging commercial activities (Guderjan and Garber, 1995). The ancient Maya are best known through accounts of the rise and fall of cities such as Tikal (Martin and Grube, 2008); less well known is the degree to which Maya villages, towns, and cities were dependent on water-borne trade and commerce. So enduring was this commercial framework that coastal towns flourished despite the 'collapse' of inland cities in the 9th and 10th centuries.

This season we concentrated on lab work under the aegis of a field school organised by Simmons. Most of the material sorted and analysed was excavated from the site of Marco Gonzalez, at the caye's southern tip (**Fig. 2**; Graham and Pendergast, 1989; Graham and Simmons, 2011). We also worked on ceramics derived from a series of rescue excavations carried out in 1991 and 1993 in the town of San Pedro, situated c.8km north of Marco Gonzalez. Other members of the team comprised Jim Aimers, from the State University of New York at Geneseo, who assisted

the students in sorting ceramics, and Petra Cunningham and Lisa Duffy, from the University of Florida at Gainesville, who worked with students in identifying fauna. Duffy also studied the diverse ground stone inventory.

Simmons obtained a grant to fund a community engagement project, in partnership with Belize's Galen University and the local site-preservation group, Marco Gonzalez Maya Site, Ambergris Caye, Ltd (MGMS), headed by Jan Brown, its founder. The grant supported two anthropology students who came to the caye to assist in laboratory work with the field school, but their primary objective was to act as 'Ambassadors to the Past'. Victor Cucul is Kekchi Maya, from Toledo (Belize's southernmost district), and Ismael Teul is Mopan Maya from Camalote village, in the Cayo District. Victor and Ismael gave a series of talks on both general Maya and Marco Gonzalez history, in part in their respective Mayan languages, to primary and secondary schools and colleges in San Pedro (**Fig. 3**). All in all, they reached over 300 school students during a 3-week period.

For our 'lab', Jan Brown secured a hangar at the local airport, courtesy of local businessman John McAfee. The Marco Gonzalez artefacts, many of which are in an excellent state of preservation, came from excavations carried out in 1986 and 1990, directed by Elizabeth Graham and David Pendergast, and from Graham and Simmons' first joint effort in the field in 2010. Prior to 2010, the site was in danger of being covered by a condominium resort development, but it is now San Pedro's first official Archaeological Reserve/National Park, created on 1 April 2011. Since 2010,

* UCL Institute of Archaeology,
London WC1H 0PY, United Kingdom
e.graham@ucl.ac.uk

† University of North Carolina Wilmington
(UNCW), United States
simmonss@uncw.edu

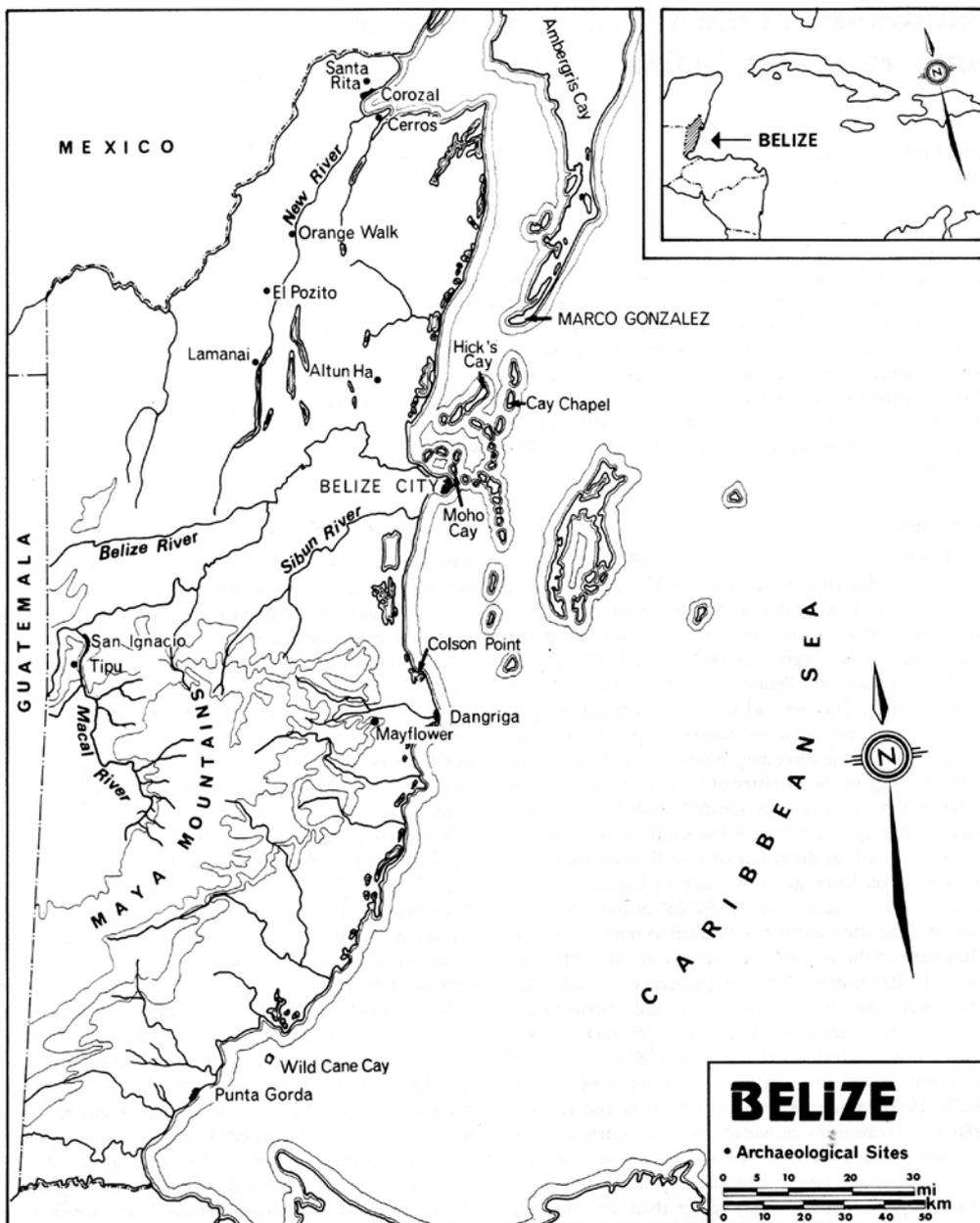


Fig. 1: Map of Belize showing the location of Marco Gonzalez on Ambergris Caye.

the MGMS, through Jan Brown's efforts, has been raising funds to support site preservation and development. There is now a park employee for security and grounds maintenance, an entry hut and an on-site *palapa* (a thatched-roofed, open-sided, building to shelter people when it rains).

Although Marco Gonzalez today is located in the middle of a mangrove swamp, the site in the past was open to windward breezes. It functioned as a port and probable trading centre for hundreds of years, although its character changed through time. We know that the people at Marco Gonzalez invested



Fig. 2: The Marco Gonzalez site, Belize, at the caye's southern tip (looking south-west).

heavily in salt processing from about AD 600–750, and exported salt cakes to mainland cities and towns (for Maya trade in salt, see McKillop, 2002). One of our plans is to study the environmental impact from salt processing, and Graham has been fortunate to receive – in partnership with her colleague Julia Stegemann (UCL Department of Civil, Environmental and Geomatic Engineering) – funding from UCL's Institute for Sustainable Resources for a PhD student to focus specifically on assessing the long-term environmental impact of salt processing activities on the caye. Although salt processing clearly involved cutting down vegetation and burning huge amounts of fuel to drive off water in forming the salt cakes for shipment, the soil at Marco Gonzalez is astoundingly fertile. In fact, the main problem in site protection is the tide of people who come to take away its soil. One possibility is that the carbon debris from burning fuel in salt pro-

cessing has enhanced soil fertility.

Many Maya inland cities in the Petén region of Guatemala, and in parts of Campeche in Mexico, are known to have declined in the late 8th through 10th centuries (see Martin and Grube, 2008), but the occupants of Marco Gonzalez were highly active in trade and exchange during this period which suggests that much of the Maya world was still up and running. It was during the late 8th to mid-11th centuries that the town grew and expanded its involvement in the transport of goods around the coast of the Yucatan Peninsula. We know this because pottery recovered from this period originates from Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, Yucatan and the Gulf Coast. There is even green obsidian from central Mexico. It is not yet known exactly when the town was abandoned, but excavations so far indicate that the community thrived until c.1200, when mangrove encroachment affected its utility as a port,



Fig. 3: Victor Cucul and Ismael Teul talking to students at the San Pedro Roman Catholic School, Belize.



Fig. 4: Ceramic vessels from under-floor burials at Marco Gonzalez: (left) a vessel depicting a man on one knee, from highland Guatemala; and (right) a red-slipped vase with pedestal base, from the central Belize mainland.

and its occupants moved north to what is now San Pedro. Individual families, however, continued to live at the site until the Spanish colonial period.

Although the site is densely covered with sherds, much of the pottery has been recovered whole from burials (**Fig. 4**). Individuals, at least during the late 8th-11th centuries, were interred, as is ancient Maya custom, beneath the floors of houses. The unusual feature at Marco, however, is that they were buried face-down (occasionally face-up) with their legs bent backward. Although a large quantity of potsherds date from the 12th and 13th centuries, they are mainly from the surface and from deposits overlying the buildings; we do not yet have any primary deposits from this period and cannot tell with which buildings, or phases, the pottery is directly associated. Not surprisingly for a coastal community, we have recovered large quantities of fish bones and shells (mostly species of conch). The shells have the characteristic small punch holes near their crowns which indicate that the conchs were removed for eating. There is also evidence in the form of shaped fragments and other debris that selected conch shells were worked to make tools – or to form blanks for jewellery-production. Conch middens left by centuries of Maya activity lie everywhere, and the shells are used today by hermit crabs for their houses – an excellent example of recycling.

Marco Gonzalez provides a fascinating opportunity to explore Maya civilisation that did not collapse. The coastal economy was critical to Maya development, but its importance is generally undervalued. If coastal

traders were not affected by collapse, then Maya society clearly had a resilience that has heretofore been downplayed. In addition, Marco Gonzalez provides us with a model for human-environmental interaction over a long and continuous period. Although the Maya were, like any civilisation, exploitative, it is of interest that Maya sites on the caye are characterised by highly fertile soils which have been cultivated at least since the 16th century, and very likely earlier. We are therefore hoping to illuminate not only the ancient activities of the Maya, but also the chemistry and transformational qualities of these activities that resulted in the creation of an environment of rich soils and vegetation.

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