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Classic Period Chocolate

Searching for Clues About the Maya Luxury Goods Economy

by Taylor McNeil



At the Hershey site in the upper Xibun river valley, CAS Associate Professor Patricia McAnany and her crew this spring unearthed a small ball court near a pyramid. "Certain sites like Tikal that have larger ball courts also have a small ball court," McAnany says, "and they are always directly adjacent to, right in the shadow of, one of the major pyramids, just like we found at the Hershey site." Photograph by Patricia McAnany.

McAnany divided the 100 kilometer-long river valley into five sections, and with the help of graduate and undergraduate students and outside professionals, conducted reconnaissance, did surveys, mapped, and excavated test sites. Looking for evidence of ancient cacao production, she and her colleagues took core samples from the old oxbows of the Xibun River where it had spilled over its banks as it changed course over the years, to compile a pollen history of the valley.

Evidence of cacao production won't just help explain who supplied the powerful Maya centers with chocolate. It may also help with another puzzle: the rapid decline and fall of

Ever get a hankering for some chocolate? It turns out that the desire goes back, way back. Traces of chocolate -- cacao is a New World plant -- have been found in Maya pottery vessels dating to 800 b.c. By what's called the Late Classic period in Maya archaeology, about a.d. 600 to 800, chocolate beverages, often mixed with corn gruel or chile peppers, were the elixir of the ruling class. But cacao wouldn't grow near the Classic Maya sites like Chichen Itza, in Mexico's northern Yucatán, which was too dry to support the crop, or Tikal, in the Petén region of Guatemala.

It must have been imported, and Patricia McAnany wants to know from where. An associate professor of archaeology in the College of Arts and Sciences, McAnany spent the spring semesters of 2001 and 2003 in the Xibun (pronounced shee-boon) river valley in western Belize looking for evidence. "We don't know whether the chocolate-producing areas were under the political control of the major seats of power, or if they were locales of entrepreneurial or trading activity, which perhaps maintained their political independence while enjoying a brisk trade with the royal courts," she says.

McAnany's research fits neatly with her longtime focus on Maya political economy. "I'm not so much interested in studying the elites as looking at the total fabric of society, and the relationship between seats of power and the smaller settlements across the Maya landscape," she says. "A place like the Xibun river valley is perfect for me: it's a strategic area and was producing a crop that was highly valued, yet the small scale of the monumental architecture indicates there were no primary seats of power there."

With a grant from the National Science Foundation and a research permit from the Belize government,



Cacao flowers in western Belize, some of which will become pods yielding cacao seeds. Photograph by David Buck.

the major Maya centers, such as Tikal, Palenque, and Copan, around a.d. 800. Current theories suggest that in centers where populations had grown rapidly, the Maya “leaned too hard on the environment,” McAnany says, cutting down most of their trees for fuel, construction of buildings, and to make way for agricultural land, perhaps leading to a series of droughts and sudden economic decline. “If that is the case, we should see a drop in high canopy species during that time,” she says, and pollen studies in the Petén, just to the west of the Xibun river valley, support that theory.

Most of the large trees there had been taken down by a.d. 700 to 800.”



A human incisor found amidst a scattering of human bones at the Hershey site in the Xibun river valley in Belize. It has been filed so the base resembles a T and has a jade inlay. Other remains at the site indicate that the bones date to a.d. 750 to 950. Photograph by Patricia McAnany.

But if cacao was a major economic force in the valley, “then we should see a totally different signature, because cacao trees need to grow in the shade of taller trees,” McAnany says. “So the pattern I’m looking for in the Xibun valley should contrast with what was going on in the Petén.”

The next stage, after two seasons in the field excavating, is the lab work. “In archaeology, for every day you spend excavating, you need to spend three to four days analyzing,” she says. “When you excavate, it’s really like deconstructing a site, taking it apart. The pottery goes off to the pottery specialist to be analyzed; the stone tools to the lithic specialist, the macrobotanical remains to the botanist to be analyzed. Then all that information comes back and is synthesized, put back together for the master narrative.”

It’s fitting that the location of the most substantial ruins that McAnany has uncovered in the Xibun river valley are at what’s called the Hershey site. Among the findings there this spring were a small Maya ball court near a pyramid, and evidence of what may have been a massacre of a royal or elite family during the Terminal Classic period, from a.d. 750 to 950, a time of great turbulence and strife. Hershey Foods owned the cacao plantation until twenty years ago, and even now, amidst the new citrus cash crop, are cacao trees, producing a fresh crop every year, as they have for centuries.