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## Late Classic Maya Provisioning and Distinction in Northwestern Belize

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# PLANTS AND PEOPLE

## Choices and Diversity through Time

edited by

*Alexandre Chevalier, Elena Marinova  
and Leonor Peña-Chocarro*



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## 8.8. LATE CLASSIC MAYA PROVISIONING AND DISTINCTION IN NORTHWESTERN BELIZE

David J. Goldstein and Jon B. Hageman

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### Introduction

Our investigation into food preparation and use at two small Late Classic Maya settlements in northwestern Belize indicates that the Ancient Maya developed an active set of codes or foodways for the use of certain foods (Douglas 1971, 61; Keller Brown and Mussell 1997). Feasting, when contrasted with daily food use in less ceremonial settings, exemplifies the kind of contrast in food use that Douglas (1971) argues is emblematic of social codes used to actively establish and maintain social hierarchy. Our work focuses on this coding as expressed by two residential units within a Late Classic (CE 600–900) lineage. At our case study site of Guijarral, a rural site in northwestern Belize, we recovered archaeobotanical datasets associated with periodic feasting near ancestor shrines as distinct from daily domestic activities near housemounds. The consumption of specific foods in specific places created and reinforced within-group social inequality during the Late Classic. Our data include plants generally held to represent comestibles outside of the agricultural complex considered as ‘traditional’ by Mayanists (Coe 1994; Fedick 1996; Reina 1967; Sharer 2005). In keeping with the concept of how the historical and ecological realities impacted the resource base in our study area, the species encountered indicate a heavy reliance on successional forest species. That these species were used for performing both daily food production and feasting is in line with results from other lowland tropical areas, where successional or disturbance response species provide the backbone to subsistence (Rappaport 1984; Moran 1990; Baleé and Erickson 2007).

### The Pre-Hispanic Context

The ecological history constructed for northwestern Belize indicates a trend of increasing deforestation from the Middle Preclassic through Late Classic 1 (1000 BCE–CE 700). Pollen cores indicate a marked increase in maize and other pollens associated with human agricultural disturbance (Marchant *et al.* 2002), such as grasses and asters. With the exception of some plant families with a high abundance of economically important plants such as the *Sapotaceae*, primary forest taxa are absent (Dunning *et al.* 1999, 654). Similar data from across the Yucatan Peninsula during Late Classic 2 (CE 700–850) are interpreted as demonstrating further agricultural intensification. Sediment core data correlate increasingly heavy phosphate loads with the presence of an increased land clearance, and this is attributed to a surge in shifting agriculture and settlement (Curtis *et al.* 1996; Hodell *et al.* 1995).

In northwestern Belize (Fig. 8.37), this intensification of land clearance is evinced through geoarchaeological investigations at the mouths of drainages intersecting with *bajo* (seasonal swamp) margins. These excavations yielded buried peats containing aquatic plant pollen. Dunning *et al.* (1999, 655) use this evidence to argue that, by the beginning of the Early Classic (CE 250), the *bajos* in northwestern Belize had been transformed from perennial to annual wetlands through infilling processes, and that much of the region’s sloping upland terrain was ‘largely devoid of soil cover’ (Dunning *et al.* 1999, 656). Though land clearance was widespread and transformed much of the

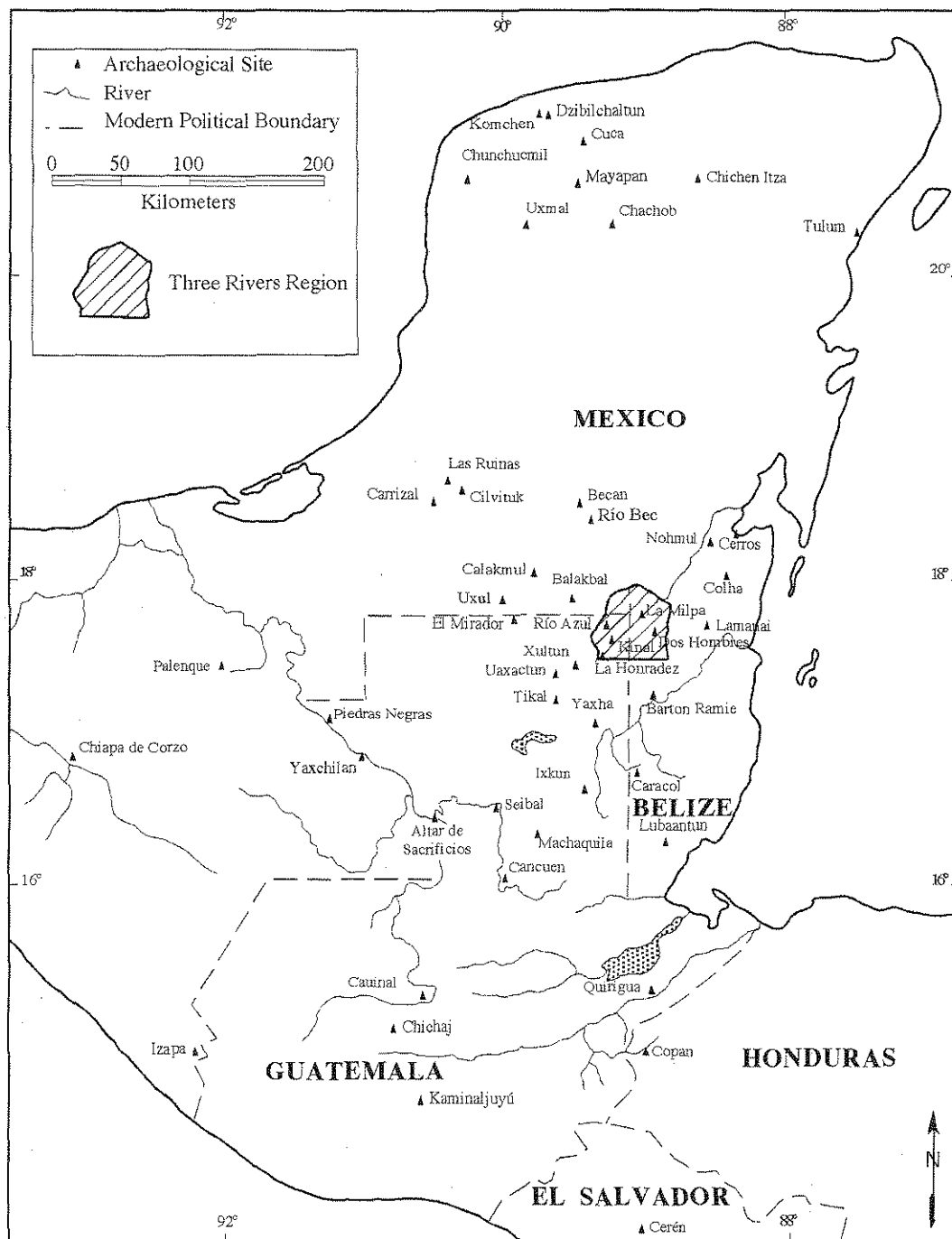


Fig. 8.37. Three Rivers Region of northwestern Belize relative to Central American countries and major Ancient Maya centres.

landscape during this era populations would not peak for several centuries.

Settlement pattern studies indicate a significant and profound population increase shortly after CE 700. Around CE 650 the population density, based on settlement extension and functional architecture, is estimated at about 110 persons per km<sup>2</sup>. 150 or so

years later, this density is estimated at 510 persons per km<sup>2</sup> and includes increased construction in the regional major centres (Adams *et al.* 2004). As populations increased, houses and farms were constructed in ever more marginal landscapes, where large-scale modifications to the land were implemented and added to earlier infrastructure to increase agricultural productivity. Agricultural

land became scarce, and corporate groups such as lineages arose to secure resources and manage their use (Hageman and Lohse 2003).

In sum, by CE 700 the environment of northwestern Belize had been severely degraded as a result of widespread and long-term human impact. Populations in the area quintupled between CE 700 and 850, while facing diminishing amounts of arable land. Agricultural terraces appear in greater numbers during this period and are ostensibly interpreted as ways to conserve soils and permit marginal areas to sustain more intensive agricultural use. Shifting agriculture is thought to have been practiced on these terraces. Lineages emerged in parts of northwestern Belize as a potential means of securing productive resources and minimising risk, particularly in areas where resources were in high demand (Hageman 2004; Hageman and Lohse 2003).

### Guijarral: A Late Classic Maya Rural Settlement

The small ritual centre and settlement of Guijarral is situated eight km east of the Late Classic centre of La Milpa, in the Three Rivers Region of Guatemala, Belize, and Mexico (Fig. 8.37). The site is near the edge of the western Rio Bravo Escarpment, straddling an intermittent drainage that flows from the escarpment at the east to a western *bajo* (upland swamp; Fig. 8.38). The settlement includes several housemounds, a few small plaza groups, and a single two-courtyard ceremonial or elite architectural enclosure. This last group contains two shrines in the form of small pyramids at its centre. Research at the site included the record of 140 hillslope and cross-channel terraces in the 0.5 km<sup>2</sup> area. Regionally, this concentration represents a major investment in landscape modification. This phenomenon parallels ethnographic examples cross-culturally as suggesting that Guijarraleños were invested in the maintenance and extraction of all productivity potential from their surroundings, and concerned with sustaining dependable and consistent production levels (Dunning *et al.* 2003; Hageman 2004).

Guijarral's developmental history is long-lived and socially complex. From the relative chronology of ceramic finds, we know that the site and some of its



Fig. 8.38. Contour map of Guijarral site core and study area.

surrounding households were occupied during the Late Preclassic and Early Classic. This continuity at the surrounding and less impressive *plazuela* groups (plazas bounded by two or more buildings; oriented toward cardinal directions) reveal an 800-year occupation period. The smaller of the two pyramids, in the Guijarral site core, was constructed at the end of the Early Classic, at about CE 550, but the remaining construction dates to Late Classic 2 (CE 700–850). As with later and contemporary Maya, the house of the lineage head, and the seat of group power, is denoted by the shrine.

The research area is circumscribed on the west by a *bajo*, to the south by a large intermittent drainage, and on the east and north by the escarpment. The terraces and shrines, emblematic of organised labor investments in the landscape, reflect the boundaries of the area's resources and a corporate claim to the landscape, respectively. Comparable to other Late Classic Maya sites, feasting is indicated through

	Feasting Middens			Domestic Middens	
	Xunantunich Group D	Paco 15	Guijarral Site Centre	Xunantunich Plazas	Grupo Chispas
Bowls, Plates, Food Prep and Serving Pots	72.45%	64.26%	64.55%	50.46%	50%
Jars and Food Storage Pots	26.50%	27.70%	35.44%	48.82%	50%

Fig. 8.39. Distribution of ceramic forms at Xunantunich (LeCount 2001), Paco 15 (Fox 1996), and the study area (Hageman 2004). Figures represent percentages of the ceramic assemblage at each site. Not all ceramics were used for food. Note that domestic middens have 1:1 ratio of food storage to food preparation and serving vessels.

a predominance of food preparation and serving vessels in middens associated with ancestral shrines (Fig. 8.39). This holds for Guijarral, where almost 65% of the ceramics recovered from the site centre were from food preparation and serving vessels, compared to 50% from regular domestic contexts (Fox 1996; Hageman 2004; LeCount 2001).

#### *Plant Use at Guijarral in the Late Classic*

Given that the ceramics associated with specific architectural features indicated the presence of ancient feasting, we were interested in what was being consumed at these feasts and the degree to which these items differed from those foods consumed as part of the daily diet. In 2005 and 2006 we excavated middens in two residential groups at Guijarral. The first was the site centre (referred to here as GSC to distinguish the primary residential group from the rest of the site), identified with ancestor shrines and feasting. The second was Chispas, a small residential plaza group atop a hill some 100 metres away from GSC. Excavations covered eight metres<sup>2</sup> at each midden. We excavated the middens in 10 cm levels, collecting four metres of soil from each 1 m × 1 m × 0.1 m level. We then used flotation and dry standard series fine-screens to recover archaeobotanical remains. While all of the soil samples were examined, our report represents the materials recovered from 21 cm below the ground surface as bioturbation (disturbance of the sediment or soil by the activity of plants or animals) was less evident and this material is likely better preserved.

We recovered 3,738 charred or mineralised items. Of these, 1,710 were recovered from GSC's middens

associated with the feasting ceramic assemblage and 2,028 were from the Chispas' middens associated with primarily domestic, non-feasting ceramics. Between the two contexts, 190, or 4.1% of the total individual plant remains, were unidentifiable. This leaves some 20% of our materials as unknowns needing further study to arrive at determinations.

#### *Guijarral Site Centre (GSC) Feasting Plant Assemblage*

We have assigned seven different taxonomic determinations (n=205; 10% of GSC assemblage) to plant remains recovered exclusively in the feasting contexts at GSC (Fig. 8.40). An additional 12 items require determination (n=109; 5% of GSC assemblage). Together the remains from these taxa comprise 8% of all the taxa recovered from both sites. Many of these taxa are known to have been utilised by the historic and ancient Maya. Yet, we recovered several plant remains that are known to be used ethnographically and ethnohistorically by the Maya in feasting, including *Amaranthus* sp. (amaranth, n=3), *Guazuma* sp. (guácima, n=5), *Orbigyna* sp. (babassu, n=1) *Psidium* sp. (guava, n=2), and *Zuelania* sp. (arbol caspa, n=2). Ecologically speaking, for the lowland rainforest of northwestern Belize these are not uncommon taxa. What is of interest, however, is that these are disturbance taxa associated with human clearance and/or treefalls. In no case are they strictly associated with open air agriculture, or specifically *milpa* (traditional Mesoamerican shifting agriculture) agroecosystems. The recovered taxa are common in successional and modern agroforestry throughout the region today, including the use of *Zuelania* sp., *Psidium* sp., and *Orbigyna* sp. (Atran 1993). Aside

Family	Determination	Guijarral Raw Data	Guijarral Ubiquity (n=11 Lots)
Asclepidaceae	<i>Asclepias</i> sp.	191	81.8%
Unknown	UKN #35-FS19	45	45.5%
Unknown	UKN #28-FS7	28	27.3%
Unknown	UKN #34-FS19	6	27.3%
Amaranthaceae	<i>Amaranthus</i> sp.	3	18.2%
Flacourtiaceae	<i>Zeulania</i> sp.	2	18.2%
Myrtaceae	<i>Psidium</i> sp.	2	18.2%
Sterculiaceae	<i>Guazuma</i> sp.	5	18.2%
Unknown	UKN #39-FS19	4	18.2%
Unknown	UKN #44-FS20	3	18.2%
Arecaceae	<i>Orbigyna</i> sp.	1	9.1%
Burseraceae	UKN #195-FS4	1	9.1%
Malvaceae	<i>Malva</i> sp.	1	9.1%
Unknown	UKN #24-FS7	3	9.1%
Unknown	UKN #38-FS19	2	9.1%
Unknown	UKN #45-FS20	7	9.1%
Unknown	UKN #49-FS20	3	9.1%
Unknown	UKN #50-FS20	4	9.1%
Unknown	UKN #56-FS29	3	9.1%

Fig. 8.40. Taxa exclusive to feasting at Guijarral.

from their incidence, South American lowland rainforest agriculture models accept the importance of these species in agricultural and cultural contexts (Denevan 2007). These species offer shade cover, regenerate quickly and survive well as renewable resources in terrace-based agricultural systems, such as those recovered at Guijarral (Clement 2007). The trees have predictable and consistent fruiting seasons while providing timber, renewable fuel resources, and protection from erosion even when the field systems directly associated with them are not undergoing active cultivation (Atran 1993).

These taxa have documented medicinal and ceremonial uses among modern Maya, and may have been used similarly in the past. *Zuelania* sp. (n=2) may be *Zuelania guidonia*, (Sw.) Britt. and Millsp., common in contemporary forests of northwestern Belize. For the modern Yucatec Maya, the bole of the tree serves as a game where people are invited to climb a greased tree trunk during certain festivals, e.g. carnival (Roys 1931; Atran *et al.* 2004). The leaves, when ground into a fine paste, present an

alkaloid that is used as a diuretic and pain reliever. *Psidium* sp. is known in the form of *Psidium guajava*, L. (guava), for its fruits. *Guazuma* sp., potentially *Guazuma ulmifolia*, Lam., has been used in the Maya lowlands for producing fermented beverages, and by ethnographic extension may represent potential parts of ritual feasts (Roys 1931; Atran *et al.* 2004). *Guazuma* sp., a relative of *Theobroma cacao*, L. (cacao), is sometimes used to make a ritual beer. We also have seeds from what might be *Bursera* sp. in our feasting context, UKN #195-FS.4. Different incenses are made from the sap, fruit, bark, and leaves of *Bursera copal*, L., (Stross 1997; Roys 1931; Atran *et al.* 2004). While several archaeological examples of *Bursera* sp. seeds are known, most are from construction fill or agricultural canals at sites such as Cuello, Pulltrouser Swamp and Tikal (Lentz 1999). The connection of these remains with the feasting ceramic assemblage suggests that these items were associated with festal events.

Other food consumption species include *Amaranthus* sp. This is a commonly used source of greens that can be boiled and eaten as an important dietary source of fibre and iron in the rainforest (Bye 1981; Roys 1931). *Amaranthaceae* species native to the region are associated broadly with agricultural activity and specifically human disturbance, as weeds growing in open fields. The presence of amaranth seed here indicates the potential collection and processing of this resource as a foodstuff in the performance of daily and festival events. *Orbigyna* sp., likely *O. cohune*, (Mart.) Dahlg. ex Standl., or cohune palm fruits are an additional reminder that non-domesticated and ordinary plants were associated with human activity in the Mesoamerican rainforest (Atran 1993). These provide palm oil and also nut meats not dissimilar in flavor and texture to coconut, *Cocos nucifera*, L. Each of these plants could have played substantial roles as ordinary commodities that were transformed into extraordinary items in feasting contexts (Kaličk 1997).

#### Domestic Non-Feasting Plants from Chispas

We determined the presence of nine taxa (n=73; 4% of Chispas assemblage) that occur only in the middens together with domestic non-feasting ceramics (Fig. 8.41). They comprise 2% of the all the plant remains recovered from both sites. Of these taxa, only *Potamogeton* sp. (pondweed) has been determined (Fig. 8.42). *Potamogeton* sp. is found

Family	Determination	Chispas Raw Count	Chispas Ubiquity (n=9 Lots)
Fabaceae	UKN #11-FS1	5	33.3%
Fabaceae	UKN #6-FS1	27	22.2%
Unknown	UKN #14-FS1	3	22.2%
Alismataceae	<i>Potamogeton</i> sp.	3	11.1%
Verbenaceae	UKN #5-FS1	4	11.1%
Pachychilidae	<i>Pachychilus</i> sp.	2	11.1%
Unknown	UKN #26-FS7	3	11.1%
Unknown	UKN #31-FS7	3	11.1%
Unknown	UKN #32-FS7	11	11.1%
Unknown	UKN #51-FS13	13	11.1%

Fig. 8.41. Taxa exclusive to domestic contexts at Chispas.

in standing water or ponds, easily found growing in the nearby *bajo* during the rainy season (Roys 1931; Atran *et al.* 2004). Recovery of seeds in house middens is not completely unexpected, as these were historically collected, stewed and consumed as leafy greens (Roys 1931).

Eight other taxa are present only in the domestic middens at Chispas. These taxa, including two legumes/pulses (*Fabaceae*) and one from the vervain

family (*Verbenaceae*), are potential indicators for foodstuffs or daily-use materials, heretofore unrecognised by other investigators in non-elite household settings. In the case of UKN#11 and #6 they were present in several of our excavation units. Their increased ubiquity potentially signifies that their presence is not a chance occurrence and instead is related to human preferences and activities at this residence. UKN#11, based on its morphology, is likely a tree legume; these are trees common around the site today, whose sap, bark, wood, and fruits are/were used by the modern and historic Maya (Roys 1931; Atran 1993).

#### Plants Common to Both Feasting and Non-Feasting contexts

14 determined taxa appear in both midden types (n=660: 20% of the total assemblage (Chispas + GSC) Fig. 8.41). These include species of locustberry (*Byrsonima* sp.), yarumo (*Cecropia* sp.), South American mountain bamboo (*Chusquea* sp.), maize (*Zea mays* L.) and unknown seeds from the Families *Fabaceae*, *Asteraceae*, and *Solanaceae*. Additionally, we recovered evening-primrose (*Oenothera* sp.), Family *Onagraceae*, seeds (n=67) from both sites. This plant is not found in the region today, though it is the most common determined taxon from both

Family	Determination	Chispas Raw Count	Chispas Ubiquity (n=9 Lots)	Guijarral Raw Data	Guijarral Ubiquity (n=11 Lots)	Overall Raw Count	Overall Ubiquity (n=20 Lots)
Onagraceae	<i>Oenothera</i> sp.	43	77.80%	24	81.80%	67	80.00%
Unknown	UKN #20-FS7	51	77.80%	10	27.30%	61	50.00%
Poaceae	UKN #37-FS19	6	22.20%	9	54.50%	15	40.00%
Unknown	UKN #13-FS1	22	44.40%	15	27.30%	37	35.00%
Malphigiaceae	<i>Byrsonima</i> sp.	12	33.30%	11	18.20%	23	25.00%
Fabaceae	cf. <i>Fabaceae</i>	2	22.20%	2	18.20%	4	20.00%
Poaceae	cf. <i>Poaceae</i>	1	11.10%	5	27.30%	6	20.00%
Asteraceae	cf. <i>Asteraceae</i>	1	11.10%	3	18.20%	4	15.00%
Poaceae	<i>Chusquea</i> sp.	1	11.10%	4	18.20%	5	15.00%
Solanaceae	UKN #4-FS1	2	22.20%	1	9.10%	3	15.00%
Unknown	UKN #7-FS1	3	22.20%	27	9.10%	30	15.00%
Cecropiaceae	<i>Cecropia</i> sp.	1	11.10%	1	9.10%	2	10.00%
Poaceae	<i>Zea mays</i>	2	11.10%	9	9.10%	11	10.00%
Unknown	UKN #33-FS23	1	11.10%	1	9.10%	2	10.00%
Unknown	Lithics	79	66.70%	232	100.00%	311	100.00%
Unknown	Unid	69	100.00%	125	100.00%	194	100.00%

Fig. 8.42. Taxa common to both feasting (Guijarral) and domestic (Chispas) contexts.

contexts. Some authors have suggested that this plant is part of the pre-Hispanic ceremonial snuff traditions of the Caribbean and South America (Newsom and Wing 2004). Whatever its use may have been, its ubiquity in the Guijarral area during the Late Classic indicates that the plant and an understanding of its ecology were integrated in domestic, private settings, as well as potentially more ritual affairs.

*Byrsonima* sp. (locustberry) is one of several trees that produce edible and oil-bearing nuts in the Neotropics, and *Byrsonima crassifolia*, (L.) DC., (craboo) is known to be used as a famine food as well as for producing fruit preserves and a fermented beverage (Puelston 1971; Roys 1931). *Cecropia* sp. (n=2), may represent *Cecropia peltata*, L., (trumpet tree), which is common to house gardens, abandoned fields, fallow areas and any disturbed area of the forest. As a local medicinal plant; it is used to cure common ailments, e.g., flu, fungal activity and fever (Roys 1931; Atran *et al.* 2004). In all, given the modern and – potentially – the ancient ecological setting, none of these three species appearing in either context is particularly surprising. Instead their presence reinforces the idea that disturbance forest taxa may have predominated what was available and useful to the Late Classic Maya in the area.

These plants, associated with both feasting and domestic contexts, likely indicate similar resource consumption patterns for the households around GSC. Furthermore, they demonstrate an overlap between daily and festival foods. The presence of *Z. mays* is no exception. We have very limited evidence for *Z. mays* at either site. We recovered only seed fragments from Guijarral and cupules, cob fragments, only from contexts at Chispas. Hence, we interpret *Z. mays* to have been the common denominator for food use at both sites. Rather than being restricted to the activities of one or the other sites, as described by Spanish Chroniclers (Coe 1994; Roys 1931), maize use may have been a basic staple to foodways activities at both loci.

#### *Social Implications of Plant Remains Recovered from Guijarral and Chispas*

There is no question that recovering plant remains from archaeological contexts in the rainforest presents challenges to traditional archaeobotanical recovery. This situation is especially so when

compared with the archaeology of deserts or the temperate climate zone. The data presented here are limited in their quantity, but their presence is a testimony to Ancient Maya foodways, and this deserves interpretation and consideration.

Plants from both our feasting and domestic middens are related to smallholding agriculture typical of contemporary regional farming systems as well as broader Neotropical rainforest subsistence patterns (Baleé and Erickson 2007; Clement 2007; Denevan 2007; Fedick 1994). Maya archaeologists often invoke an idealised vision of Ancient Maya food production presented by authors like Rice (1990) and Reina (1967). In this model, infield and outfield systems played major roles in traditional agriculture, similar to how they are used in the region today. The data from GSC and Chispas, however, demonstrate the importance of other kinds of agroecological systems in the immediate area, if not regionally, in the Late Classic. Apart from the traditional use of gardens and fields in production, the Late Classic Guijarral relied, to a large extent, on a variety of successional species growing between houselots and field systems. These spaces generated catchment areas, including the fallow terraces. Apart from gardens being the resilient catchment area for use in times of scarcity (Killion 1992), local foodways included a variety of successional species and disturbance taxa across social boundaries.

In this way, successional or resilient plant resources were extensively used in potentially different kinds of households, serving to increase the breadth of the local diet (Winterhalder and Goland 1997). Food resources likely included plants from fallow terrace agriculture, e.g. tolerated invasives (weeds) near habitations and successional fruiting trees. These resources were, in turn, integrated into marked food preferences. As these items were seasonal fruits they were used to mark scheduled rituals that included foodway expressions, e.g. feasts.

Returning to Douglas's (1971) ideas, our data may demonstrate remnants of distinction processes of foodstuff selection in feasting versus domestic consumption at both GSC and Chispas. Given their archaeological and historic context, it is clear that these two sites were linked through a social bond, if not by sightlines alone. Looking more closely, the production and consumption residues, e.g. garbage, signal that processes of choice and selection of

foodstuffs were encoded at both sites. Kalčík (1997, 46) revisits Douglas' codes and applies them directly to cultural material by arguing that food preferences are often the best indicators of cultural identity. The fact that foodstuff commonalities existed between the two residential groups represents potential indicators of taste culturally common to both the GSC residents and those of Chispas. More than that, the fact that successional trees and what a modern observer could consider 'wildfoods' were potentially a part of the subsistence base taken from the local ecosystem strengthens the bond between culture and landscape even further.

Alternatively, the distinctions between foodstuffs, again taken from the same breadth or catchment base, deployed in each locale under different circumstances may demonstrate how distinction was asserted or socially constructed during the Late Classic. Kalčík (1997, 48) argues that patterns of acceptance and avoidance of comestibles, especially in contexts of kinship ties, can be used as cultural indicators of social stratification and modalities of kinship. In our case, the distinctions are between feasting activities and daily meals, as evidenced through the material ceramic record when compared with the archaeobotanical remains. Using these datasets in tandem we can begin to distinguish commonalities from more auspicious occasions. We believe that we are beginning to locate the potential threads of Late Classic Maya foodways that coded for the ties that bound the residents at the sites in our research areas. These practices marked not only significant events, like ancestor veneration, but also the places in which those events were staged, and how resources from these places were managed. The association of plants used by contemporary and colonial Maya for

feastal purposes, the ancestor shrines and the large houses, speak to the use of these plants as part of ritual activity that not only proclaimed the unity of the lineage, but also distinguished the practices of the denizens of this residential group from those of other residences.

## Conclusion

The residents of Guijarral transformed their social organisation and their environment to safeguard their resource base and to produce more food during the Late Classic. In so doing, successional and invasive plant resources became of greater importance to local residents. This suite of plants is concomitant to human-induced landscape change and also incorporated into diet and ritual cycles in the area. As Guijarraleños organised themselves into a landholding corporation grounded and legitimised in the ancestral past, their foodways, ritual or mundane, culturally incorporated the products of this landscape into their consumption practice. Some of these practices included domesticated plants used by Maya in colonial-era and modern feasts, as well as tree crops, plants associated with fallow fields, and wild plants. Some of these fallow and wild plants were used exclusively for feasting, others for domestic consumption, and still others were utilised in both contexts. The plants used, many of which are wild and successional species from the transformed landscape, were implicated in negotiating the status of the lineage head through feasting, thereby associating them with long-term processes of land tenure and cultural preference in Late Classic Maya society.