It Depends on How We Look at Things: New Perspectives on the Postclassic Period in the Northern Maya Lowlands

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MORE THAN three decades ago, William L. Rathje and I argued that it was time for Maya scholars to reexamine the Postclassic period (ad 1000–1519). More specifically, we contended that the Postclassic was a time of growing econo-political complexity, not a period of decline and decadence. Furthermore, we posited that the rising growth of mercantile interests played a key role in these developments. In effect, we argued that spectacular buildings—temples, palaces, and ball courts—and sophisticated, monumental works of art were not a necessary measure of cultural complexity and that their presence in the Classic period and relative absence in the Postclassic did not mean that the latter was less complex, let alone decadent, as most Maya archaeologists had traditionally contended.

1 Read 11 November 2005.
2 I am deeply grateful to my colleague and collaborator, William L. Rathje, who co-directed the Cozumel Archaeological Project with me in 1972–73, for his friendship and intellectual stimulation, as well as for his helpful comments on this paper. I am grateful as well to all the participants in the project, most particularly Paula L. W. Sabloff, David A. Freidel, and Judith Connor Propper, for their stimulating ideas and conversations about the Postclassic period. An earlier version of this paper was presented at Boston University, when I was the 2005 Context and Human Society Lecturer. I wish to thank the Center for Archaeological Studies (James R. Wiseman, director) and the Department of Archaeology (Norman Hammond, chairman) for their kind invitation to present the Context and Human Society Lectures, as well as the Humanities Foundation of Boston University for underwriting them. As always, I am greatly appreciative of Paula Sabloff for her support (and for her suggestion for the title of this paper). This paper is dedicated to the memory of APS member Evon Zartman Vogt Jr. (1918–2004).
While some of the details of our argument have not stood the test of time, the general thrust of our perspective has been refined and strengthened by a host of research projects in recent years. My goal in this paper is to examine some of these new scholarly understandings of the Postclassic period, with special attention to the Late Postclassic and the Northern Maya Lowlands (figure 1).

**The Traditional View**

For much of the twentieth century, the major focus of attention in Maya archaeology was the Classic period (AD 300–1000) in time and the Southern Maya Lowlands in space. In particular, the principal focus was on the elite and their architecture, art, burials or tombs, ceramics, and exotic artifacts (such as jade).

Based on this limited focus, the prevailing view held that the Classic Maya developed peacefully in their jungle stronghold, generally isolated from their Mesoamerican neighbors. The Classic rulers lived in non-urban ceremonial centers surrounded by peasant farmers, who practiced slash-and-burn agriculture and raised maize, beans, and squashes in their shifting fields, providing the food and labor for the relatively small number of elite who lived in the huge palaces in the ceremonial centers and worshiped in the large temples. The specialists who worked for the rulers carved inscriptions on stone monuments that spoke of the gods and the sacred calendar. For reasons that remained unclear (or at least about which there was no agreement), Classic civilization rapidly collapsed in the ninth century AD. Following this collapse in the Southern Lowlands, remnant centers slowly declined for a half-dozen centuries until the arrival of the Spanish.

In the Northern Lowlands, there was a brief florescence first among the Puuc region sites, such as Uxmal, Labna, and Sayil, and then at...
Chichen Itza in the Early Postclassic (the latter stimulated in part by a takeover by the Toltecs of Central Mexico, it was then believed), followed by a decadent period in the Late Postclassic, which witnessed the rise and fall of the Mayapan Confederacy and its densely occupied capital city with more than twelve thousand inhabitants within its wall before the Spanish Conquest in the sixteenth century AD. But neither Chichen Itza nor Mayapan was able to reclaim the former material glories of the Classic period. The quality and later the size of monumental architecture in the Postclassic declined, as did the artistry of painted ceramics. The Postclassic Maya virtually ceased carving inscriptions on stone monuments, and many other material hallmarks of the Classic period faded away. As Tatiana Proskouriakoff famously stated about Mayapan, which flourished between about AD 1250 and 1450,
“the fall of Mayapan appears as a dramatic culmination of a long process of cultural decay.”

As many scholars have argued, by the 1970s traditional Maya archaeology and its models of the development of Maya civilization began to change significantly. There were many reasons for these changes. Generally speaking, the number of field projects increased significantly; there were more rigorous research practices and thus better field data; and new methodologies and new field techniques were introduced, resulting in new kinds of data.

More specifically, settlement pattern research provided new information about ancient Maya commoners and how they lived; breakthroughs in the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions added a rich new historical context for Classic Maya civilization and new understandings of Maya politics and ideology; greater indications of close contacts with peoples throughout ancient Mesoamerica emerged; and a picture of significantly greater diversity and heterogeneity in the Maya world, than had previously been assumed, became much clearer. In particular, the in-depth research by the University of Pennsylvania Museum in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s at the great site of Tikal provided a major stimulus to these trends and offered important new ideas of Maya urbanism, warfare, and agriculture. Last, a host of new research projects began to pay much greater attention to the Preclassic and Postclassic periods, as archaeological data revealed unanticipated continuities between these periods and the better-known Classic period, as well as fresh understandings of cultural changes before and after the Classic.

Stimulated by the research and writings of E. Wyllys Andrews IV, among others, who emphasized the importance of the Northern Lowlands to any full understanding of ancient Maya development, and by the publications of the Carnegie Institution of Washington’s research at Mayapan, in the early 1970s Rathje and I took a new look at the Postclassic period and especially the Late Postclassic in the north. We were not convinced that the Postclassic was a time of cultural decay. Much of the argument for Late Postclassic decadence seemed to be based on perceived aesthetic decline in art and architecture. For example, A. Ledyard Smith forcefully states in the final Mayapan report:

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A fact well demonstrated at Mayapan is that the high cultural standards of the Maya of the Classic period had sadly degenerated by the beginning of the fifteenth century. . . . Stone carving and many of the arts deteriorated. . . . In order to make the walls appear smooth, a heavy coat of plaster had to be applied. It was poor construction, and it did not withstand the destruction of time like the earlier, well-constructed buildings of the Classic period. There seems to have been little striving for permanence, just window dressing and false fronts. . . . A coat of paint will hide many faults, and the ample use of plaster at Mayapan undoubtedly accomplished the same purpose.  

In a more personal vein, Eric Thompson notes, “The degeneration in all the arts in this last period of the Maya is really heart-breaking. I feel it is a manifestation of great cultural dislocation resulting from a shift from a hierarchic to a secular and militaristic culture.”  

The head of the Mayapan project, Harry Pollock, also shares this view. He states that “Mayapan was born when civilization was in eclipse, and, in spite, or perhaps because, of the numerous foreign influences that moved across the peninsula and filtered into the city, culture never approached the excellence of earlier centuries.” He continues: “That the age was materialistic, that personal comfort and glory came ahead of religious devotion, is shown by the palaces and finer residences being better built and apparently more lavishly furnished than the temples and other ceremonial buildings.” He also talks about “an internal dry rot in Maya culture” and further notes, “It is quite clear that Mayapan fell heir to an impoverished culture. Over its life the city was subjected to numerous outside influences, but instead of finding a stimulus in them the result was a sterile eclecticism, a culture without vitality.” In regard to the Carnegie Institution of Washington project at Mayapan, he concludes, “Looking at the results of the work as a whole, I think that it has been worth while, even though we were dealing with a degenerate civilization, devoid of great art, that to all intents and purposes reached a dead end in the Spanish Conquest.”

9 Harry E. D. Pollock, “Introduction,” in Mayapan, Yucatan, Mexico, 16.  
10 Ibid.  
11 Ibid.  
12 Ibid., 17.  
13 Ibid.
Eric Thompson also argues that the Late Postclassic period witnessed “the rise of secular forces at the expense of sacerdotal control, a vulgarization of the spiritual aspect of religion.”

In reading these analyses of Mayapan, in particular, and the Postclassic period, in general, Rathje and I began to question one of the key assumptions that underlay the assessments of Postclassic “decadence”: namely, that an apparent decline in aesthetic values was directly related to the condition of the rest of society. We believed that these assessments were based on a partial view of Maya civilization that emphasized an elite perspective and all but ignored a non-elite one. The potential importance of a mercantile ethos at that time was generally disregarded, and the importance of permanence and monumentality was over-emphasized. (After all, we reasoned, the Postclassic Maya were not looking for the praise of future archaeologists in their construction techniques!) Moreover, apparent aesthetic decline was not necessarily correlated with technological decline. In fact, as Lawrence Roys clearly notes, the opposite may be true: “It is not inopportune to call attention to the manner in which within our memory solid stone masonry has been completely replaced by either steel or reinforced concrete, and yet the semblance of solid stone masonry is retained. Our stone-veneered residences and our limestone-faced office buildings of steel are closely analogous to the Maya architecture we have just been studying. Artistically this is pronounced decadence; but, viewed from the structural standpoint, we have been advancing.”

He further points out that the Late Postclassic builders “showed a versatility and inventiveness in handling their structural problems that was not surpassed and possibly not equaled in pre-Columbian America.” Rathje’s and my view of the Postclassic was that society was thriving. Religion was still important, but, with the loss of dominance by the traditional dynastic elite, there was no longer the same level of central labor investment in large temples or monuments glorifying the rulers. As Rathje noted, there was “interdependence among populations through an expanding social and economic (rather than ideological) order.” Religion was as prominent as ever, but was more decentralized, with an emphasis on household shrines, deities, and worship.

16 Ibid., 77.
17 William L. Rathje (1975), cited in n. 3; p. 436.
In modern terms, we contended, the new mercantile-oriented elite was more interested in keeping its capital liquid and in finding ways, such as mass production, to increase the volume, extent, and efficiency of long-distance exchange. With the growth of trade, people in all walks of life had access to a wider variety of goods than ever before, and the general standard of living was higher than in the Classic period. Thompson is clearly aware of the latter, when he states, “There was . . . a marked retrogression in the arts and in architecture during the two and one-half centuries of Mayapan’s domination; but, in compensation, there was brisk trade and advances in material culture, a situation comparable to that of the Victorian Age with the coexistence of Pre-Raphaelitism, Mansard roofs, and Victorian furniture with inventions and material prosperity.”

In sum, we argued that by increasing the archaeological perspective beyond great temples and palaces, which settlement pattern studies had begun to do starting in the 1950s, a conclusion that Postclassic Maya civilization was not sliding downhill appeared eminently reasonable. Maya civilization clearly was evolving and changing. Postclassic culture was different from the Classic but definitely not decadent.

Rathje and I decided to explore some of our ideas by undertaking an exploratory research project on the island of Cozumel, off the east coast of the Yucatan Peninsula. Our field research in 1972 and 1973 provided much new information about both the island and Postclassic times in the Northern Maya Lowlands. The project’s survey located more than thirty sites on Cozumel, while its excavations documented an occupation that began in the Preclassic, continued at a relatively low level during the Classic, started to take off in the Terminal Classic/Early Postclassic, and reached its height during the Late Postclassic from about AD 1250 to AD 1519. In general terms, the archaeological research confirmed the role of Cozumel as an important Late Postclassic trading center as depicted in sixteenth-century Spanish documents.

One of the most interesting results of the field research was the finding that, contrary to the initial expectation of the project that a major port facility would be found, the island as a whole apparently acted as a trading center, with trading canoes docking in protected lagoons and their goods transshipped to inland warehousing facilities via raised causeways. Evidence also was found for possible pilgrimage routes to interior shrines on the island, and for a series of coastal

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19 See Cozumel Archaeological Project references in n. 3 above.
shrines that acted as early-warning stations for external threats and also as markers for dangerous limestone reefs. Close ties to the major Yucatecan city of Mayapan were found in architectural style, architectural groupings, and ceramics. Some evidence for local production of trading goods, such as honey, also was uncovered. In addition, an extensive system of stone field walls that covered the island was mapped. These walls may have marked the properties of individual farming families, while also improving the productivity of the fields by removing rocks and helping to retain moisture. Finally, evidence for the ritual caching of broken or used exotics in dedicatory caches, rather than new pieces, including those especially created for such usage, as was the earlier Classic period norm, also was discovered. “False front” structures with a front wall of stone and side and back walls of wood were mapped, as well. Such practices, along with the architectural practices of minimal use of cut stone and heavy use of plaster to cover rough, unprepared surfaces, appeared to support efficient practices of low labor investment in permanent architectural and ritual activities in Late Postclassic Cozumel. Those are just some of the principal results of the 1972–73 field research.

In planning for the fieldwork and in subsequent analyses, Rathje and I, our students, and colleagues raised a number of archaeological questions. Three of the issues that we raised generated considerable heat and some light at the time. Although they do not loom as large

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20 As Rathje discussed at length in his pioneering 1975 article on “The Last Tango at Mayapan,” cited in n. 3.


22 Also see the five doctoral dissertations that derived from the Cozumel Archaeological Project: David Allen Freidel, “Late Postclassic Settlement Patterns on Cozumel Island, Quintana Roo, Mexico” (Harvard University, 1976); Paula Lynne Weinberg Sabloff, “Tactics of Persistence: How Cozumel’s Middle Sector Has Preserved Its Locally-controlled Land Transfer Pattern over 116 Years” (Brandeis University, 1977); David Atlee Phillips Jr., “Material Culture and Trade of the Postclassic Maya” (University of Arizona, Tucson, 1979); Nancy Lee Hamblin, “Animal Utilization by the Cozumel Maya: Interpretation through Faunal Analysis” (University of Arizona, Tucson, 1980); Judith G. Connor, “The Ceramics of Cozumel, Quintana Roo, Mexico” (University of Arizona, Tucson, 1983) and subsequent publications.
today, they probably still deserve renewed attention in the future. These issues are (1) the nature of ports-of-trade, (2) the links between trading activities and the archaeological record (the material “signatures” of trade), and (3) the role of the Chontal Maya (or Putun) in Postclassic economics and politics.

However, two related ideas still resonate forcefully today, and it is to these issues that I plan to turn the bulk of my attention in the remainder of this paper. These issues are (1) the key role of trade and the nature of Late Postclassic political economies, and (2) the rise of merchants and a mercantile ethos in the Postclassic Maya world.

**What Do We Now Know?**

Due to a host of field research projects throughout the Maya Lowlands, especially at Mayapan, on the coast of Belize, and in the Central Peten, as well as new research on sixteenth-century ethnohistorical documents, discussions of the Postclassic period are much richer and more informative today than they were more than thirty years ago, when the Cozumel Archaeological Project undertook its fieldwork, or even twenty years ago at the time of the 1985 publication of the important volume, *The Lowland Maya Postclassic*, edited by Arlen Chase and Prudence Rice.\(^{23}\) There is much new evidence to support the notion that the Late Postclassic period was not a time of decadence but one of a thriving civilization. There also is much new information about the role of merchants and their influence at this time, as well as on Mesoamerica-wide trade, the large quantities of materials traded, and the significance of trade in bulk commodities.\(^{24}\) In addition, the importance of the Aztec Empire in the political economy of the Northern Maya Lowlands has been shown to have been much greater than previously thought.\(^{25}\)

Thus, as a result of recent research, scholars now have much better understandings of the Postclassic, especially in the Northern Maya Lowlands, the period and area upon which I am concentrating. First of all, there is much more insight into the nature of trade, its development, and its breadth than ever before. Long-distance waterborne trade was carried out by the Maya in large canoes, like the one sighted


\(^{24}\) See, for example, Michael E. Smith and Frances F. Berdan, eds., *The Postclassic Mesoamerican World* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2003).

on Columbus’s fourth voyage in 1502 near the Bay Islands of Honduras. Facilities for docking such canoes have been found at several sites, but much has been lost due to the perishable nature of wooden docks and the rise in sea level over the past few centuries (although McKillop’s recent finds of wooden salt production and storage facilities that are now underwater, as well as a wooden canoe paddle, are very promising). While research now indicates that such trade first developed in Preclassic times and expanded in the Classic period, it rapidly grew in size and importance in Terminal Classic times and throughout the Postclassic until the Spanish Conquest brought it to an untimely halt.

The products and materials traded over considerable distances were many and varied. One of the most important changes over time was the emergence of the movement of bulk goods in the Postclassic period. One of the principal foci of trade was that key staple of life—what William Rathje called a most critical “basic household resource,” what Heather McKillop has labeled “the white gold of the ancient Maya,” and what Susan Kepecs has called “Yucatan’s briny diamonds”—namely, salt. Large quantities of salt were processed or collected on the coast of Belize and the north coast of Yucatan. The quality of the Northern Yucatecan salt was particularly high; before the Conquest it was in demand as far away as Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztecs, even though closer sources were available.

Another key good was cacao, which was not only used for a prized spicy chocolate drink, but also served as a currency in market transactions. Cacao was grown in low-lying areas of Tabasco-Campeche, Northern Belize, and Honduras, as was another important trade product, cotton. It is no coincidence that these areas also had important trading centers, where these goods were collected and then picked up by water-borne merchants for trade not only around the whole Yucatan peninsula but to much more distant locations such as Central Mexico and Oaxaca.

30 Also see Anthony P. Andrews, Maya Salt Production and Trade (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1983).
Other important trade goods included honey, which was propagated and harvested in much of Yucatan; obsidian, which was obtained mainly from the Guatemalan Highlands in Postclassic times (in contrast to the Terminal Classic, when sources in Central and Southern Mexico were key suppliers); copper, used in bells and other ritual items, which came from West Mexico, Oaxaca, and the Guatemalan Highlands; gold from lower Central America; and jade from the Guatemalan Highlands, among others. Foodstuffs were traded locally and perhaps regionally in markets, but apparently were not moved in bulk for long distances.

Recent research has made it clear that the burgeoning Maya long-distance trade of the Postclassic was not isolated but was clearly part of a Mesoamerica-wide interaction sphere—what some scholars have labeled the Mesoamerican “world system.” While I am leery of using this loaded term, the breadth and interconnectedness of Mesoamerican polities in the Late Postclassic is undeniable. This interconnectedness can be seen both ideologically and materially. In relation to the former, iconography linked to a variety of Aztec, Mixtec, and Maya deities was found throughout Mesoamerica in the Late Postclassic period. This “internationalism,” if you will, was particularly noticeable in painted murals at a variety of Maya centers. As Marilyn Masson has pointed out, “Artists in the Yucatán, Quintana Roo, and Belize zones did not simply adapt foreign styles and symbols wholesale. Rather, they selected key elements from a broad repertoire of international possibilities and used these in creating paintings that depicted local and regional themes for a local audience. Their incorporation of cosmopolitan symbols also probably sanctioned local authority within these communities and with visiting merchant elites from other ports around the peninsula.”

Materially, according to Michael Smith and Frances Berdan, “the Postclassic period . . . witnessed the largest numbers and greatest diversity of trade goods, the greatest volume of exchange, and the greatest access to imported goods by communities of all sizes in all areas.”

“Even without detailed documentary descriptions of such practices and institutions” in the ethnohistoric writings of the sixteenth century AD, Berdan, Kepecs, and Smith argue, “the record for commodities, money,


33 Smith and Berdan (2003), cited in n. 31; p. 7.
merchants, and markets in Mesoamerica provides impressive evidence for the commercial nature of exchange in the Late Postclassic Period.”

Ongoing research at the city of Mayapan has clearly shown that the strength of the ties between the Central Mexican Highlands and Mayapan was greater than had previously been recognized. One can readily see why Central Mexican merchants were situated in economically strategic locations in coastal Tabasco and Honduras at both the western and eastern bases of the greater Yucatan peninsula. But why should such merchants have interests in Mayapan? We can surmise that given Mayapan’s strong economic and political position in Northern Yucatan, merchants from Central Mexico would want to solidify their cacao and cotton trade in both Tabasco and Honduras. They also were interested in securing quantities of high-quality salt from the shores north of Mayapan, as well as the mineral constituents of the paint that produced the highly prized Maya blue colors. In addition, they also may have been interested in slaves owned by the rulers of Mayapan, as well as materials such as jade and gold that flowed along trade routes upon which Mayapan had significant influence. Competition with other groups, such as the Mixtec of Oaxaca, also may have spurred such interest.

Growing standardization of production in the Postclassic, which Rathje and I posited three decades ago, has found support in recent research, as well. A detailed analysis of Postclassic ceramics by Masson, for example, finds a clear trend toward standardization after the close of the Classic period.

Another of Rathje’s and my contentions, that there was increasing access to a variety of goods by non-elites during the Postclassic and broad prosperity in the Northern Maya Lowlands in Late Postclassic times, also has found support in ongoing field research and analyses. As Rathje stated, “While Classic populations were to a large extent

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integrated through the costly maintenance of an elite minority, Post-
classic populations were most probably integrated through a rising
standard of living locked into large-scale population participation
in a commerce which emphasized economic efficiency and mass
consumption.”³⁸

The evidence for the conversion of prestige to mass consumption
of goods can be seen, for instance, in the use of obsidian in Belize or
ceramics in Chikinchel, among other examples. In Northern Belize,
Masson notes, in Postclassic times there emerge a number of sites
“located in coastal, riverine, lacustrine, and other aquatic settings that
appear affluent, prosperous, and integrated into an expanding, broad-
ranging sphere of economic production and exchange.”³⁹

Some Key Unanswered Questions

Despite the vast increase of information about the Postclassic period,
especially in the Northern Maya Lowlands, not surprisingly there still
are a number of key unanswered questions.⁴⁰ Let me mention just a
few. First, current chronological assessments of Chichen Itza indicate
that it declined much earlier than had traditionally been thought. Some
place its decline as early as before the end of the tenth century, while
others would place it in the early to mid-eleventh century.⁴¹ With May-
apan traditionally being seen as beginning its rise in the mid-thirteenth
century, the question of the day is what was happening in the two
centuries between the decline of Chichen Itza and the rise of Mayapan.
In other words, if Chichen flourished in the Terminal Classic period
between AD 800 and 1000 and Mayapan flourished in the Late Post-
classic from AD 1250 to 1450, what was going on in the Early Postclas-
sic between AD 1000 and 1250? The answer, according to ongoing
work at Mayapan, may be that Mayapan began much earlier than had

³⁸Rathje (1975), cited in n. 3; p. 436.
³⁹Marilyn A. Masson, In the Realm of Nachan Kan: Postclassic Maya Archaeology at
⁴⁰Anthony P. Andrews, “Late Postclassic Lowland Maya Archaeology,” Journal of World
Prehistory 7 (1993): 35–70; Joyce Marcus, “Where is Lowland Maya Archaeology
⁴¹See Anthony P. Andrews, E. Wyllys Andrews V, and Fernando Robles Castellanos, “The
Rafael Cobos Palma, “Chichén Itzá: Settlement and Hegemony During the Terminal Classic
Period,” in The Terminal Classic in the Maya Lowlands: Collapse, Transition, and Trans-
formation, ed. A. A. Demarest, P. M. Rice, and D. S. Rice, 517–44 (Boulder: University Press
of Colorado, 2004).
previously been thought, perhaps as early as AD 1050. If this is the case, and there was a power shift from Chichen to Mayapan at that time, then either Mayapan had both an Early and Late Postclassic occupation, or the older Early/Late division may prove to be outmoded. Clearly, the chronology of the Postclassic in the Northern Maya Lowlands will need significant reexamination in coming years, as will scholarly understandings of the nature of the city of Mayapan with new data beginning to emerge about significant, heretofore unmapped household remains outside the city wall and about the role of foreigners in the city’s political life, to name just two new trends.

A second unanswered question is the role of slavery in the Late Postclassic Maya world. We know from sixteenth-century accounts of the Maya that slavery existed in the Precolumbian Maya world, that slaves provided important labor in such activities as agricultural work and rowing long-distance canoes, that slaves were used in ritual sacrifices, and that inter-polity raiding was often undertaken to obtain slaves. The nature of this institution, however, is not clear, nor is its time depth. Did it reach back in time, for example, to the Classic period? Unfortunately, it is not easy to investigate slavery in the Maya archaeological record, although we are starting to see some attempts in this area. More research definitely needs to be undertaken in this regard.

42 See Milbrath and Peraza Lope (2003), cited in n. 35.
48 Lisa Marie Collins, “The Zooarchaeology of the Copan Valley: Social Status and the Search for a Maya Slave Class” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2002).
Last, what was the role of the Chontal Maya or Putun of the Tabasco-Campeche Lowlands in the Postclassic political economy of the Northern Yucatan? Unfortunately, scholarly understanding of this key group has not advanced greatly since Eric Thompson’s49 important discussion of them in the early 1970s.50 They controlled much of the pan-Yucatan sea trade in Late Postclassic times, but their possible political roles at Chichen Itza and Mayapan cry out for greater clarity.

Concluding Remarks

Let me conclude this all-too-brief discussion of the Late Postclassic by posing a more general question: what is the broader significance of Rathje’s and my arguments of the mid-1970s and of all the new understandings of this period in the Maya Lowlands that have emerged in recent years? Let me mention just two points. With the new data and insights into the Late Postclassic political economy in mind, when you read volume 2 of Fernand Braudel’s important and highly influential Civilization and Capitalism, the volume entitled The Wheels of Commerce,51 you cannot help but be struck by the parallels between Europe and the Maya world and the rich possibilities of future comparative analyses. As Susan Kepecs has stated in her discussion of her recent research in the Chikincheel province of Northern Yucatan, “Under weaker political conditions, merchants can reach the top of the economic ladder, from which they can control surplus production and distribution. . . . To move up the ladder, Braudel observed . . . merchants needed ‘a good start in life.’ This meant having the right social connections, and material inheritance built up through long processes of accumulation. The children of the Itzá were born to such conditions.”52

Second, as Marilyn Masson has pointed out, the Lowland Postclassic “is actually an important and underemphasized development in the evolution of civilizations.”53 Rathje and I argued that maturing secondary states, like that of Mayapan, are exemplars of political entities that have developed beyond early states, with their emphases on divine kingship and monumental art and architecture that glorify the kings, to

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52 Kepecs (2003), cited in n. 29; p. 268.
ones that emphasize mercantilism, broader economic prosperity, and efficient economic investment of time, labor, and materials. This argument, I believe, deserves renewed attention in light of the much richer database now available and the continuing relevance of this question to broad archaeological considerations of the growth and development of early pre-industrial civilizations.

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54 Rathje and Sabloff (1973), cited in n. 3; Sabloff and Rathje (1975), cited in n. 3.