

A World Surrounded by the Sea - Maya Societies on the East Coast of the Yucatan Peninsula
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The east coast of the Yucatan Peninsula, the modern-day state of Quintana Roo, with its sprawling beaches, mangrove swamps, and lush vegetation, has attracted human populations since their arrival to this part of the continent some thirteen thousand years ago. At that time the area was not a rainforest, but rather a temperate grassland where mammoths, giant sloths, American horses, and camelids were a secure food source for nomadic groups that sought refuge in the region's many caves, which were dry at that time, in the area between what is known today as Puerto Morelos and Tulum. It is highly likely that at that time access to freshwater was not as simple as in later times, so the region's most ancient inhabitants had to enter dark caverns, at the back of which they could usually find the clean fresh drinking water that they needed to survive.

Life expectancy of the peninsula's first residents was limited. It was difficult for people to live more than thirty years as a result of disease and frequent accidents; men often met their death when they went out to hunt or to look for water. For example, Naia, the adolescent whose body was found in Hoyo Negro cenote near [Tulum](#), died after falling into a dark hole almost 30 m deep when he entered a cavern in search of water to take back to his camp (Chatters et al. 2014). To date no pre-Maya Pleistocene settlement has been found in the region. Available evidence comes from spots where a person died or from sites where the deceased's relatives or companions decided to deposit the body as part of an incipient ritual that reflected from the start the deep respect that people on the east coast always had for local caves, caverns, and bodies of water. Nor is there any evidence that suggests that these early settlers in Quintana Roo were in any way related to the Mayas, who were most likely the result of later ethnic blending with other migrants, perhaps from the Gulf of Mexico or the Guatemala highlands.

Although by 2500 BC small farming communities have been found to have existed in other regions of the Maya world, such as Belize, on the east coast the oldest evidence of permanent occupation was found at the northern tip, in the area of Yalahau, opposite the island of Holbox. There, archaeologists recovered materials that show that by 700 BC there was already intense interaction between these groups and communities on the west side of the peninsula and in the Peten region, more than 500 km away from the north coast.

Designs on pottery and artefacts recovered at other sites suggest a close relationship among diverse Maya groups from an early date. This interaction contributed to the forging of a vision of the world and recognition of the sacred character of a group of rulers believed to be related to deities, which endowed them with power and inspired them to devise large-scale construction projects in the years that followed.

One of these settlements is located a few kilometres from the coast, at the site of Uchben Kat, which is part of the urban zone of the modern resort of Cancun, archaeologists found structures in a civil and ceremonial area dating to the Late Preclassic (300-50 BC), as well as a cluster of domestic units laid out according to a well-established urban design.

The existence of communities with a planned layout with clearly differentiated religious and civil constructions indicates that around 300 BC there were already powerful families that claimed the divine right to rule and that controlled well-defined political territories. Plazas and temples were architectural settings that were essentially the tangible representation of the Maya idea of the universe, in which pyramids evoked the first mountain that arose from the primordial sea - represented by the open space of the central plaza - at the moment of the creation of the cosmos. Much farther south of the north coast, at the site of [Cerros](#) on the Belize coast, a structure beside the

sea still preserves the massive architectural masks that adorned it. Here the king personified the divine sun Yax Balam when he performed a ritual as the lord of creation (Freidel and Schele 1988).

The principal metropolises of the Maya Classic period emerged around AD 250. All of them may be found inland on the peninsula, but clearly they all had differing ties with coastal communities, which would have supplied them with salt and other marine products. Coastal settlements also would have provided access to sailing vessels that permitted the arrival of products from other regions, such as jadeite, obsidian, and volcanic ash for pottery and stucco production, among other goods.

In the second century of our era, several coastal cities were established, such as [Oxtankah](#), [Muyil](#), [Xelha](#), Tanchah, and [San Gervasio](#), whose populations seem to have had considerable mobility. These settlers must have been attracted by the riches and power of the large urban centres. About a hundred years later, around AD 250, they began to construct buildings inspired by the Peten style, with multi-tiered pyramidal platforms and sloped walls topped by a narrow moulding, such as those at [Oxtankah](#) in Chetumal Bay, Noh Kah on the banks of the Hondo River and Calica on the north coast, which date to this time.

In addition to these secondary and tertiary centres, there were small fishing villages that paid tribute or traded their products via an exchange system controlled by the powerful inland kingdoms. This system of settlements was not only organized on the basis of residential platforms and small temples, but also by a considerable number of campsites, which may have been occupied seasonally. The latter settlements have been identified on the basis of mounds with middens containing products from the sea, pottery, and other remains that reveal that the Early Classic Maya coastal economy depended heavily on the exploitation of marine resources.

Beginning in AD 600 most of the Maya region witnessed enormous demographic growth linked to the rise of competing territories. However, this was not the case of coastal communities, where not only did the population not experience much growth, but some sites were virtually abandoned, such as [El Meco](#), Xarnanha (Playa del Carmen), [Xcaret](#), [Xelha](#), and [Muyil](#) (Martos 2002). Archaeologists believe that the economic and political might of cities like [Coba](#) and Dzibanche might have been so great that they attracted much of the region's workforce. The only other settlements that have been detected apparently formed a system of communities devoted to salt production and the exploitation of marine goods, as in the case of the saltworks at Punta Ycacos on the south coast of Belize and some settlements on the island of Cozumel (McKillop 2009; Sabloff and Rathje 1975).

Not much is known about the degree to which Late Classic coastal settlements were dependencies of major inland cities. They were probably under their control or else alliances may have been established to guarantee regular supplies of salt and other products (McKillop 2009).

What we do know is that the sea and its symbolic meaning were ever-present in the ancient Mayas' vision of the world. As Taube (2010) has pointed out, the sea surrounded and defined the Maya universe, because they saw life and death as inevitably linked to water and the sea: it was the place where the world had emerged at the moment of creation, where the gods originated, and the medium through which communication with the ancestors could be established (Finamore and Houston 2010). According to Taube, in the Maya vision of the world, land floated on the sea and therefore it was related to the underworld and cenotes, whose underground currents were portals that afforded access to this supernatural realm. In this way of thinking, the sea on the east coast was of critical importance, because it was where the sun was born and where the rain-bearing clouds and winds came to life. The k'ahk' nahb or 'burning pool'; named after the colour that the sea tended to assume when it reflected the Sun, was envisaged as a source of light, abundance and wealth.

Beginning in the eighth century, the pace of constructing new buildings at the major cities inland began to wane, although the population continued to grow at a high rate. It was then that a slow process of socio-political change was set in motion, linked to the many 'collapses' that took place in the history of the ancient Mayas, in which the rising strength of [Chichen Itza](#) must have played a leading role.

At this time, the east coast reinforced a system of settlements with an economy based on regional and long-distance exchange. In the ninth century, an architectural style inspired by buildings at [Chichen Itza](#) and the Puuc region began to appear in this region, which gave rise to the East Coast style. [Chichen Itza](#)'s ascending political power was a factor that might well have stimulated the emergence of new settlements in Cozumel, such as [San Gervasio](#), Castillo Real, and El Cedral, and in other locations on the north and central coast, such as [Muyil](#), [Tulum](#), and [El Meco](#) (Suhler 2004).

In all likelihood the transformations stemming from the political crises at the major inland cities led to a redistribution of the population, most of which gradually shifted toward the east coast, which became the most densely populated area on the peninsula. At this time port cities, such as Chae Mool, located between Ascension Bay and Espiritu Santo Bay, grew strong, along with [El Meco](#), [Xcaret](#), [Xelha](#), Tanchah, Ichpaatun, and various sites on the Belize coast. These formed an expanding system of settlements that by the eleventh and twelfth centuries came to occupy almost all the non-floodable lands on the east coast.

Initially, this new system of coastal cities maintained a close relationship with [Mayapan](#), the preeminent political centre after the fall of [Chichén Itza](#), based on close similarities in the design of residential structures in both regions (houses with two rooms, a porticoed entrance, and flat roof). These cities also apparently shared a number of other elements and symbolic concepts, materially expressed in the use of effigy censers and other vestiges that display a revival of the iconography known in the past as 'Mexicanised' and that today is understood to be the result of intense interaction throughout all of Mesoamerica.

However, while the power of Maya pan was fleeting, the political system on the east coast, organised around autonomous territories known as kuchakabaloob ('province' or 'jurisdiction' in Maya), was much more successful. Although its features are only summarily known, it is estimated that between sixteen and twenty-four of these territories occupied the east coast. These included Ecab, in the central and northern area; Uaymil, perhaps from Espiritu Santo Bay to Mahahual and north of Chetumal Bay; and Chactemal, in Chetumal Bay and north of modern-day Belize. It is highly likely that Cuzamil was an independent domain.

Little is known of the structure of these provinces, particularly on the east coast, whose limits have been a matter of speculation. Some authors (Andrews 1984) believe the east coast was a mosaic of small coastal cities that were simultaneously competitors and collaborators. However, others believe that the east coast had a system of central places or *batabil*, with borders that fluctuated depending on local alliances and clashes.

What is clear is that the coasts of what is today known as Quintana Roo was the home of an enormous population from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. More than a hundred archaeological sites dotting the coastline have been identified and these were connected by a system of continuous residential constructions, at least from Cancun to Punta Allen, as well as along Chetumal Bay. If we bear in mind that from AD 800 to 1000 there was a vast population inland on the peninsula, it is understandable that as these political systems began to crumble, the population must have moved (or returned) to the coast, in order to take advantage of the burgeoning coastal trade and the zone's resources. The remains of these cities attest to this intense economic activity and challenge the traditional idea that the Postclassic was a period of decadence in the region.

Instead, it would appear that sixteenth-century Maya society was dynamic and in continuous reformulation, as well as in close contact with the Mexican highlands and other regions of Mesoamerica.

This new system of settlements corresponded to what Samuel Lothrop dubbed the East Coast style. It was associated with architectural innovation characterised by palaces with flat roofs and vestibules with columns, with a room at the front and another at the back, temple-pyramids, buildings that served to help navigators, sanctuaries, and even temples inside cave interiors.

Postclassic coastal societies did not abandon the former inland cities that were left in ruins; instead these remained as sites to venerate the ancestors. Stelae and altars were repositioned in spots conditioned for new ritual activity, offerings were constantly deposited, and censers were placed on top of the ruins of collapsed buildings. In other cases, simple houses were built in plazas, now overgrown with jungle vegetation, and construction materials were reused to construct walls and platforms.

Postclassic Maya gods on the east coast are perhaps the best documented of all in the pantheon, given the numerous examples of representations in codices, mural paintings, censers, and even sixteenth-century colonial sources. Obviously, the image and characteristics of these supernatural creatures were a metaphor of the real world and as such they were adapted to the changing conditions of each period. The deities from the Postclassic were conceptualisations that arose from the close exchange of ideas that took place in Mesoamerican in the final centuries of its pre-Hispanic history. At this time, iconographic elements from Central Mexico proliferated, especially the concept of the feathered serpent, while the clear presence of Maya gods was found in other regions, as seen in the Borgia group codices.

The Late Postclassic (AD 1300-1450) was when supernatural beings acquired their own character, because Classic period deities were fundamentally intended to provide a sacred context for divine kings and queens (Baudez 2007). On the east coast of the Yucatan Peninsula, Postclassic gods were personified, with the exception of their heads, which for the most part displayed monstrous or animal attributes that defined them. Their characterisation was related to the functioning of coastal communities, which in addition to serving as ports of trade, were places of veneration and pilgrimage, particularly Tulum and Cozumel, where there were sanctuaries for oracle deities that were seen as living entities, such as the well-known case of Ix Chel ('Lady Rainbow'), the patroness of fertility and birth, whose oracle was located in a no-longer extant sanctuary in the modern-day city of San Miguel de Cozumel (Sabloff and Rathje 1975).

And so it was that Maya societies on the coast at the beginning of the sixteenth century, with their enormous settlements and ports and a complex supernatural world that governed the daily life of each and every one of the thousands of inhabitants, looked out over the immensity of the Caribbean Sea and saw the origin of light, food, and rain. However, this was the same sea that brought the strange sailing vessels that gave rise to precisely the opposite: hunger, death, and destruction.

[Tulum](#) might have been one of the first towns that the Spanish travellers under the leadership of Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba caught sight of in 1518 when they reached the east coast of the peninsula. The dimensions of this city were such that it reminded them of Seville, but the start of the campaign of conquest and Spanish colonisation of the east coast had such a devastating impact that by 1579, its splendour was only a memory and sites such as [Tulum](#) were described as cities in ruins.

Much of the population died, mainly as a result of disease and famine. Others fled to the jungle, refusing to acknowledge Spanish domination. The few remaining inhabitants left on the coast at the

end of the sixteenth century were sent to Valladolid and other communities, where most of the indigenous people in the zone were relocated. The north coast went on to become a small *encomienda* that paid a meagre tribute, given its sparse population, and by the seventeenth century the entire region was virtually abandoned.

During the colonial period the jungle enveloped the deserted cities and the east coast was barely the destination of sporadic inspection trips, for it was regarded as extremely dangerous as a result of the renegade Mayas who could never be subjugated to viceregal control. Ultimately, the only force powerful enough to extricate it from its isolation was the overwhelming wave of twentieth-century modernity, which brought new inhabitants to revive the veneration of its splendid sea through the tourism industry.

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