Tipu: A Maya Town on the Spanish Colonial Frontier

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One of the most remarkable characteristics of lowland Maya civilization was its tenacious longevity. This civilization did not simply disappear following the so-called collapse of the great centers of the Guatemalan Petén in the ninth and tenth centuries A.D. In fact, the Postclassic period (A.D. 900–1525) was a time of great intellectual, political, architectural, and commercial achievements that marked changes in orientation rather than a decline of lowland Maya life. What has not been fully appreciated, however, is the fact that in some areas of the lowlands an intensely Maya way of life continued long after the Spanish conquest of Yucatán.

In the southern Maya lowlands, not far from such major Classic period (A.D. 250–900) sites as Tikal, Naranjo and Altun Ha, many thousands of Mayas pursued a nearly independent way of life long after the Spanish conquest. In the Guatemalan Petén the Itzas and their neighbors warded off Spanish conquest until 1697. At Tipu, to the east of the Itzas in present-day Belize (formerly British Honduras), the Maya inhabitants alternated periods of peaceful tolerance of Spanish control with extended periods of separation and resistance, on occasion even allying themselves with the Itzas in order to expel the Spanish from their territory. How did the Maya of this “frontier” region cope with the realities of European Colonial pressures while maintaining a distinctively Maya way of life? The site of Tipu offers some fascinating glimpses of this important time.

Studying this period in Tipu’s history has offered an excellent opportunity to combine the methods of archaeological and ethnohistorical research. While careful interpretation of the surviving written records tells us much about Maya life during the time of Spanish colonialism, archaeological study complements this knowledge with information about such important factors as external contacts and trade, material wealth, and both Maya and Christian religious practices. It also tells us about the significant transition from the ways of life that preceded the Colonial era to those imposed on the Maya by the Spaniards.

Such collaboration began with the actual discovery of the site of ancient Tipu, which we now know was situated on the west bank of the Macal Branch of the Belize River, about nine kilometers south of the Cayo District capital of San Ignacio. Author Grant D. Jones, following initial suggestions by the well-known Maya ethnohistorian and archaeologist Sir Eric Thompson, pinpointed the probable location of Tipu at the modern site of Negroman. Negroman is today (to the archaeologists’ good fortune) under pasture, with the forest growth restricted largely to the limestone hills that border the fertile valley floor.

In 1978 Jones and archaeologist David Pendergast of the Royal Ontario Museum detected low mounds that were not organized into groups characteristic of prehistoric periods. In 1980 such clues led archaeologists under the direction of author Robert Kautz and his assistant Claude Belanger to unearth the remains of an Early Historic period Christian church. This exciting discovery confirmed Negroman as the location of Tipu, for the description of just such a church had already been “unearthed” in the Spanish records.

Following three seasons of excavations of Prehistoric and Historic period areas by Kautz and his associates, author Elizabeth Graham assumed direction of the archaeological research in 1984 and carried out a fourth season of fieldwork that

The principal temple of the Postclassic ceremonial complex before excavation. During its final phase of occupation the substructure was mounded over with material taken from the earlier temple to its north.
concentrated on the excavation of buildings bordering Tipu’s Historic central plaza. Graham is also participating in Postclassic (A.D. 900 to the early sixteenth century) and Historic period excavations at the site of Lamanai on New River Lagoon, just 100 kilometers north of Tipu as the crow flies. Because Lamanai is also known from documentary sources, investigators at both sites continue to work jointly. Our knowledge has also expanded as further documentary evidence was discovered in the Archivo General de las Indias in Seville, Spain. From all of this information there begins to emerge a fascinating history of the volatile relationships between Spaniards and Mayas on the frontiers of southernmost Yucatán.

This history began in 1543 or 1544, when two Spanish cousins, Alonso and Melchor Pacheco, conquered the Tipu region. The conquest was part of their particularly vicious campaign against the inhabitants of the three southern Yucatecan provinces of Uaymil, Chetumal and Dzulunícob. The aim of this campaign was to control the vast stretch of territory between the lands around Chetumal on Corozal Bay (near the mouth of the New River, possibly at the site of Santa Rita) and the distant Verapaz region of eastern Guatemala. Despite its harshness, it did not lead to firm political control over the dispersed Maya population. The Spanish headquarters, Salamanca de Bacalar, remained a tiny, forbidding outpost town for many years to come. As early as 1547 the inhabitants of Chanlacan, not far from Lamanai, murdered their encomendero (the Spaniard assigned to oversee their security and religious conversion in return for the collection of tribute), an act that signaled the beginning of a long period of hostility between Spaniards and Mayas.

The hostility soon reached crisis proportions when during 1567-68 the lieutenant governor of Yucatán, Juan Garzón, reconquered much of the territory that had been “pacified” by the Pachecos. Finding the region besieged by Maya rebellion, Garzón and his soldiers destroyed “idols,” burned native hieroglyphic books, and forced many rebels and runaways to live under the watchful eyes of Spaniards around Salamanca de Bacalar.

Tipu, which Garzón visited at that time, was a center of rebellion, maintaining its role as the political center of the Dzulunícob province. Unfortunately, we do not know who were the first encomenderos of Tipu or when the first mission church was established there. The town must have paid tribute to a Spaniard and must have been visited by a traveling priest from Salamanca de Bacalar well before being visited by Garzón in 1567 or 1568. A church at Tipu—constructed some time in the last half of the sixteenth century—faces directly west, as do virtually all Colonial period churches in Yucatán. Located near the edge of a bluff overlooking the valley below, on the north side of a generous plaza around which several structures of Historic construction have been excavated, its form is rectangular with truncated corners, with facing entrances on the longer north and south sides. Worshipers faced east toward the rising sun, where a series of three low steps led to an altar. A room was reserved for preparing the ritual behind the altar. Excavations to the west of the church within a small outlying circle of stones proved that the stones functioned as a foundation for a wooden post, possibly a large Christian cross that would have attracted the community’s attention.

The size of the church as well as its solid part-masonry walls reflects strong initial Spanish commitment to the conversion of the population. The large number of Christian interments suggests that Tipu was an active town in the latter part of the sixteenth century. Mark N. Cohen directed the excavation and analysis of over 200 such interments out of a possible total of 500, located both within and outside the walls of the church.

Around the time of Juan Garzón’s entrada—a Spanish armed intrusion—the Mayas of the Tipu area were pursuing their own “entradas” into the old Chetumal province near Salamanca de Bacalar. Just as the Spaniards pursued bodies and souls to bring back to their mission towns, the Mayas were attempting to incorporate the populations of the Chetumal province into a Maya sphere of power around Tipu. This pattern of Maya-led campaigns to concentrate scattered native populations near centers of anti-Spanish frontier activity was common throughout.

The principal temple of the Postclassic ceremonial complex after excavation. The building was a focus of Maya ritual activity even after the Christian church was built.
The excavated church at Tipu, facing west, reveals the remains of the altar (foreground) and cobblestone paving marking the entrances on the north and south sides. Only the base of the masonry portion of the wall still stands. A reconstruction drawing of the church (above) shows the sanctuary with the altar at the far end.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some Spaniards depicted the forced population shifts as the work of murderous apostates who were anxious to kidnap peace-loving tribute payers from the protection of the Spanish. Other Colonial observers more realistically observed that voluntary flight from oppressive Spanish control, stimulated by the attraction of compelling anti-Spanish religious movements in the frontier areas, was at the root of these movements.

Although the archaeological record does not help us understand the impetus behind these movements, it does document the presence of an active population at Tipu in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Much of this population was certainly a carry-over from precolumbian times, for the preceding Postclassic period is well represented by the ruined Postclassic temples that stand only a stone's throw from the historic central plaza and from remains later buried by historic buildings.

There are also, however, aspects of the material remains that have a “foreign” flavor. The influx of non-local Maya may be a possible explanation. The very limited presence of pottery types known to be Late Postclassic at the fourteenth-century site of Mayapán in Yucatán, and Terminal Postclassic to Early Historic at Lamanai in northern Belize, also hint at northern contacts. Perhaps more telling is the variety of European-made goods recovered—glass beads, and sherds from a variety of majolica wares and from coarse Spanish “olive jars” and other earthenwares. These could have been acquired in direct trade with visiting Spaniards, although few Spaniards seem to have traveled to Tipu. They may also have been collected over time through trade with Maya either from, or with ties to, northern Yucatán. There European goods were in wider circulation, and many goods must have been carried to faraway places such as Tipu by Maya fleeing the heavy hand of Spanish rule.

During the years following Garzón’s entrada, Tipu and the other mission towns of the region must have fallen yet again out of Spanish control, for in about 1608 the Spanish carried out yet another reducción around Tipu. By 1622 Tipu had a new encomendero from Salamanca de Bacalar, whose arrival signaled the beginning of a 20-year period when the Spanish made a renewed effort to control this wayward region, all in the hope of moving westward to the conquest of Tayasal, the Itza island capital in Lake Petén Itzá. Franciscans stayed at Tipu during 1618–19, using the town as a base to visit the Itza ruler Can Ek and to try to convince him that prophecies circulating among the Maya signaled an upcoming capitulation to Spanish rule. These efforts, however, apparently further hardened Maya resistance, leading to a resurgence of “idolatry” and an uneasy but powerful anti-Spanish truce between the Tipuans and the Itzas.

This truce, bolstered by Maya prophecies and claims of Spanish extortions, led to widespread rebellion centered at Tipu in 1638. So successful was this rebellion that all Spanish civil and ecclesiastical control was removed from the region between Salamanca de Bacalar and Tipu for more than 50 years following its outbreak. Not until 1695 did Tipuan leaders, who knew of further prophecies that the Itzas would succumb to Spanish rule in 1697, make peace overtures to Spanish authorities. Missionaries baptized several hundred individuals around Tipu in 1696, but hopes for voluntary surrender by the Itzas were soon abandoned. The Spanish conquered Tayasal militarily in 1697, and in 1707 they moved the residents of Tipu to the shores of Lake Petén Itzá. Tipu itself ceased to be a Maya settlement, and the old location was soon occupied by seasonal British lumber camps as these new colonists pressed westward into the valuable forests of western Belize.

Such events at Tipu are best seen in light of the wider scenario of the Spanish conquest of Yucatán. In the Yucatán peninsula and its southern perimeter across Belize and the Petén, the Spanish confronted numerous independent provinces that varied considerably in size, degree of centralization, and extent of confederation with neighboring groups. The enterprise of conquest was of necessity a step-by-step process in which each territory had first to be secured before pacification of the lands beyond could take place.

This relatively slow process of conquest meant that beyond the few centers of Colonial control, which were confined for the most part to the northern half of the Yucatán peninsula, there remained a vast frontier of unconquered “heathens.” Although this uncontrolled territory continued to shrink as the Spanish economic and religious net was cast farther into the forest, it remained an intractable problem for the Spanish for more than a century and a half following the pacification of northern Yucatán.

At the heart of this territory were the powerful, warlike Itzas and
their confederated neighbors. The Itza capital—Tayasal—was located on the present-day island of Flores in Lake Petén Itzá, about 110 kilometers west of Tipu. The Itzas were governed by a dynasty named Can Ek, who traced their ancestry to the rulers of Chichén Itzá, the seat of power in northern Yucatán until the end of the twelfth century A.D.

Cortés visited Tayasal in 1523 after his conquest of central Mexico, en route from the coast of Tabasco to Honduras. The elites of Tayasal at that time were a formidable economic force, controlling much of the trade in cacao and other luxury goods between Yucatán to the north and Verapaz and the Motagua Valley to the south.

Luxury goods that were part of this trade, such as copper and jade, have been excavated at Tipu, supporting historical evidence that Tipu was part of the Itza economic sphere. More direct evidence of interchange with Maya communities in the Petén comes from the ceramics, which are being analyzed by project ceramicist Prudence M. Rice. The pottery of Maya manufacture from Tipu from the period just before the Spanish conquest—the Late Postclassic—clearly shows strongest similarities with pottery recovered from sites in the Petén. There is at least one type that was probably brought in from the Petén. Indications are that such Postclassic-style pottery continued to be made and exchanged in the Historic period. Although we cannot identify specific vessels made by Itza potters at Tayasal, the Tipu ceramic inventory clearly reflects the strength of Petén-Belize cultural ties. Clearly the archaeological evidence supports the documentary inference that Tayasal and Tipu were important centers in a network of Maya alliances that survived the Spanish economic and spiritual invasion, and that later turned the invasion to their own advantage by incorporating refugees from Spanish rule.

Few other important Spaniards besides Cortés visited Tayasal before its conquest by the Spanish in 1697, but Spanish leaders continued to view the island stronghold and its vast hinterland as a major prize both for its economic potential and because it contained a large reservoir of unconverted souls. The Spanish strategy for conquest of this region was hampered, however, by conditions on the entire southern frontier that prevented a direct attack upon Tayasal. Central to this situation was the frontier zone's magnetic pull for the many thousands of Maya who fled northern Yucatán to escape forced labor, tribute payments, and charges of idolatry. Some refugees joined the Itzas and their neighbors, while many expanded previously existing communities—such as Tipu—in a volatile no-man’s-land between the centers of Spanish control and the Petén heartland. Their absence from the encomiendas—the tribute-paying populations assigned to an encomendero—created great consternation in Spanish circles. Frequent military forays into the forest were executed to round up the runaways and a constant effort to reintroduce Christian missions and tribute schedules into the frontier itself was undertaken. But these attempts were only temporary plugs in the leaking dam of Yucatán's human resources. The Spanish had to face constant rebellion, apostasy, and loss of population along their southern borders.

(Above, top) These four ceramic faces once decorated censers (incense burners) in the Late Postclassic period. Evidence suggests that the censer in the center from the Postclassic ceremonial complex was part of an offering that dates to the Early Historic period. Height of censer, 12 centimeters.

(Above) In the Postclassic ceremonial complex (photographed from the north) archaeologists have uncovered a large platform that supported four main structures.
The ethnohistorical evidence indicates that at Tipu, even during the times when it was nominally Christian, Maya religious practices remained active. Archaeological excavations reveal even more about this phenomenon. A poignant example is the "pagan" offering of a Late Postclassic-style effigy pendant and marine shell placed in the foundation of a Historic building near the church plaza. On a larger scale, an "abandoned" Postclassic ceremonial building complex yielded evidence of having continued as a focus of pagan ritual ceremony. The Postclassic date of the original construction and use of the complex is based on the architecture, ceramics and other artifacts, including offerings of Spondylus (thorny oyster), beads, jade, and copper. Historic period use is indicated by the presence of European-made earthenware sherds in the final construction phases of two of the buildings, and by a ceramic offering intruded into a small platform of Late Postclassic construction.

This Postclassic complex's location on the same river view bluff enjoyed by the church is certainly an indication of its importance in prehistoric times. It had been anticipated, before excavation began in 1980, that the complex predated the church's construction and that it rep...
opening bordered by 13 faced stones permitted access to a chamber below, stained by the smoke of offering fires. This western antechamber was separated from a smaller rear altar room by walls extending north-south, divided by a narrow entrance to the altar. Inside this second chamber, facing the entrance, stood a pedestal that may have served to project a three-dimensional representation of a deity. Similar deity pedestals have been found at Mayapan, and were described by the Spanish conquerors of Tayasal in 1697. Behind the pedestal was the altar itself, containing a limestone turtle effigy. Both the rectangular form of the altar and the presence of the effigy again recall similar forms at Mayapan.

The second temple contained two very rich offerings, several stone "idols," evidence of the use of copal incense, and jade and Spondylus beads and pendants clustered in the rear altar room. The last phase of construction at this temple added mounded earth and construction debris around the vertical walls, creating an amorphous mound while leaving the temple's foundation walls and roof intact. Deep in this debris, amid a variety of Late Postclassic censer ware, were scattered more than 20 large Spanish olive jar sherds. The presence of this type of jar, a popular trade ware between ca. 1570 and 1640, suggests that the temple may have been in full operation even as the Catholic sacraments were being offered no more than a stone's throw away.

We see from both historical sources and archaeological findings that Tipuans continued to practice their ancient rituals even as they allowed their dead to be buried in a Christian cemetery. Like Mayas in other areas, they used their religious beliefs to reinforce their efforts to retain political and economic autonomy, at least until foreign forces became too great to resist and dictated their complete submission.

The presence of European pottery and glass beads, and imported iron hardware and artifacts of copper and silver indicates that Tipuans had ready access to items produced outside the community, even in the absence of a local Spanish population. The documents suggest that the inhabitants of Tipu were solely Mayas, except for the occasional visiting Spanish tribute-collector, priest, or soldier. No individuals of European stock have been identified in the more than 200 Christian interments. Thus, it was the Mayas and not resident Spaniards who created the demand for goods made in European forms and styles. Such goods were transported along trade routes that extended northward via the New River and Lamanai to northern Yucatán, but they may also have been transported to and from the east coast along the Belize River. Marine species are commonly found in middens excavated in Tipu, suggesting an active trade with the Caribbean coast.

Of the Mayas at Tipu who came from Yucatán there were some wealthy and elite individuals who, according to the written record, grew much cacao in large orchards for which the soils along the Macal River were especially well suited. They sold the valued cacao beans and other agricultural products to Mayas in the north, receiving in exchange metal goods which they in turn traded to the Itzas around Lake Petén Itzá. We may speculate that a cacao-producing elite lived at Tipu before the Spanish Conquest as well, for the rich offerings found in the second temple of the large Postclassic ceremonial complex indicate deep investment in long-distance trade.

The variety of artifacts found at Tipu clearly marks the site as an active center of trade. Likewise, as we have seen, Tipu was a center of Maya intellectual and religious activity. Here underground Maya priests and Spanish-trained religious assistants worked side by side. This intellectual climate fostered the blending of Maya traditions of calendar-based prophecy with a "Mayanized" form of Christianity. The resulting ideological mixture must have appeared serene enough on the surface to satisfy the occasionally visiting Spanish priest. It is not difficult to see why frontier communities such as Tipu were fertile ground for distinctively Maya solutions to the threat of incorporation into the Spanish Colonial world. As the archaeological team continues to combine the methods of archaeology and ethnohistory in future seasons, we will be able to determine what it was about Tipu—and by extension the frontier phenomenon itself—that engendered both creative adaptive strategies and effective methods of resistance to Spanish rule.