Ancient Maya Landscapes: A Community of Prosperous Farmers (Robin's *Chan: An Ancient Maya Farming Community*)
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Ancient Maya Landscapes: A Community of Prosperous Farmers

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Chan: An Ancient Maya Farming Community. Edited by Cynthia Robin. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012.

The call for appreciating the ancient Maya community has been heard for decades since the harsh critique of W. W. Taylor in the 1940s (Taylor 1967). Yet, at the threshold of the twenty-first century, there have been few inroads into this varied and complex arena. Certainly the surveys of Puleston (1973), Rice (1976), and my own work (Ford 1986) have made strides and given shape to the greater Maya agrarian landscape. Robin's edited volume *Chan: An Ancient Maya Farming Community* sets a new standard. Engaging her students and colleagues in the pursuit of discrete evidence and relying on this engagement to provide a synthetic approach, Robin's treatise on Chan is at once fundamental in its coverage and plentiful in original data. No subject is relegated to appendixes, all evidence is incorporated equally, and the result is a remarkably readable, data-thick, innovative compilation that breaks ground on archaeological research and at the same time provides textured intricacies of community patterns across millennia, from the earliest settlements ca. 800 BC to 1200 AD, bracketing the rise and fall of major centers of the region.

Chapters are far reaching in coverage with solid firsthand field data and interpretations of patterns across time and space, illuminating agricultural intensification and land use management, complexity and diversity in daily life, and the interconnections of procurement, production, distribution, and consumption. Useful tables, maps, and drawings support interpretations with enumerations on data from residential unit typologies, ceramic distributions, botanical species, chert and obsidian distributions, shell artifact types, and burial and cache compositions. These are basics from archaeological fieldwork, in this case, comprising nearly a decade of data collection and analyses with indebtedness to 123 project members for their contributions.

Robin's approach starts with the defined survey, building the case for community centrality and the building blocks of agrarian society at the periphery of the major events of Maya civilization. Situated nearby a prominent minor center, Chan, with its resident farmers, is presented as a diverse, complex, and prosperous community interacting with and responding to well-known elements of Maya civilization. Robin effectively brings us to her appreciation of the Maya by tracing, with her collaborators, the details of farming life. Recognizing the simplistic views that pervade the literature on Maya farmers as homogeneous and passive laborers, Robin, with 18 other authors, exposes the sophistication of farming communities.

Mapped in 1994, the hilly area of Chan had the remains of ancient structures, evidence of terracing, platforms, retaining walls, *sacbe* (roads), *chultun* (constructed pits used for storage, burials, etc.), and *aguadas* (constructed ponds). Importantly, it featured a central complex with open plazas that have now been defined as the administrative hub of the area. For the Chan Project beginning 2002, a 3.2 sq km survey area was mapped; 562 mounds grouped into 275 residential units were recognized, along with 1,223 identified terraces and other cultural features. The chronology, based on stratigraphy and radiocarbon dates, is described in quantified illustrated type-variety ceramic classifications used to unravel the growth and development of the Maya Chan. Details on the agricultural terraces trace beginnings in the Preclassic, with engineering that reveal intimate knowledge of geography at the outset.

Plant identification supports the availability of annual crops, shrubs, and trees; a veritable forest garden (cf. Ford and Nigh 2009); and a green community. Contrasting common thinking on deforestation (Turner and Sabloff 2012), data from Chan present a nuanced picture. The variety of species argues for a complex landscape with mature trees as well as open cultivated spaces. Far from simple, these data demonstrate that regional deforestation is not tenable (see Fedick 2010; McNeil 2010).

Chan's heterogeneous farmers had access to luxuries, practice household ritual, share in community feasts, and demonstrate a level of worldliness that belies the passive peasant. Chan farmers, while maintaining strong ties to place from the first occupation, integrated ideology into their political strategies, incorporated economic diversity into their activities, and managed their local environment to support their households. The community of Chan did this while expanding from 19% occupation in the Middle Preclassic to 79% in the Late

Classic, intensifying use over a 2,000-year period. This is sustainability.

The data and interpretations focus on novel means of characterizing spatial dimensions of access to goods, provision of services, and the importance of the community constituents. Using cache and burial data along with artifact distributions, the contributions demonstrate continuity of both individual-centered and group-focused strategies, reflecting adaptation and change of a flexible, innovative, and creative community. Far from marginalized, such agricultural communities are shown as integral to the development of Maya civilization. The essence of the Maya kingship owes much to the original farming communities. And on this exacting basis, population estimates for Chan are made. Mound groups are enumerated by size and composition (26), and proportions are linked to the occupation chronology. A detailed footnote explains the strategy that merits thought (I confirmed a numerical error using 452 instead of 436 mounds for the population calculations on 41).

I have troubled over the nature of archaeological populations estimations and recently ventured into the arena (Ford and Clarke, forthcoming). I am intrigued with Robin's treatment of contemporaneity and convinced by the use of the model of continuous occupation (41). What challenges me is the resultant population densities ranging from ca. 78–131 persons/sq km at first occupation to 310–522 at the apex (8–37). I have reservations about such high numbers. Boserup, in her synthetic treatise on population and technology, shows that the Ming Dynasty China (1500 CE) had a population density of ca. 64 persons/sq km and Premodern Japan (1750 CE) a density of ca. 128, both considered "dense" (Boserup 1981:9). Turner (1990) proposes a Mayan population density of 100–200 persons/sq km. Yet, it must be recalled that these are for overall populations, not one community. As a defined community, the immediate lands would not be the accessible landscape.

Chan is described as relatively self-sufficient, managing natural forest resources with consistent access to unique and exotic items. A conservative factoring of maize requirements at 34% of the Maya diet, a population of 1,000 persons would require 26–86 ha in maize production, depending on yields (Ford and Clarke, forthcoming) and close to four to five times that to complete the milpa-forest garden cycle that provides the mix of shrubs and trees identified. Calculating just maize needs for the minimum Middle Preclassic would be 7–21 ha, while the maximum Late Classic would be 44–143 ha. In a community of 320 ha, areas beyond the community to meet Late Classic maize needs would be required. Chan and its minor center would be expected to use its complex intensive infields and terraced lands as well as outfields beyond the domain of the community.

As I reflect on my own research and the predictive model of Maya settlement, I see that Chan is situated in the context of the high-priority settlement class (Ford et al. 2009:12), where high fertility, good drainage, and moderate slope converge to invite the growth of ancient Maya settlements. In fact, such high-priority locations are estimated to have ca. 375–390 people/sq km (Ford and Clarke, forthcoming), in the low range of Robin's estimates. Given the nature of infield-outfield land use at the time of contact (Teran and Rasmussen 1995) and the continuity of traditional land use today (Zetina and Faust 2011), the estimates for Chan would imply a greater whole land use area. This is the kind of musing that Robin's in-depth reporting inspires.

The Maya series of the University of Florida Press, edited by Diane Chase and Arlen Chase, has provided another valuable, rewarding publication. Presented in a straightforward manner, Cynthia Robin has raised the bar on Maya studies at the same time she has challenged our understanding of ancient Maya farmers. Rich in comparative data for the scholar and student, this volume demonstrates the character of farming communities deserve critical attention. With more research along the lines of Chan, we will begin to appreciate the true complexity of the Maya civilization.

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