



Dissertation Abstract

Identifying Household-Level Political Economy on the Maya/Spanish Frontier: A Zooarchaeological Perspective from Lamanai, Belize

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This study uses zooarchaeology to examine the impact of Spanish colonialism on household-level political economy at Lamanai, Belize, a Maya community in the Spanish borderlands. Although many studies have documented a diversity of indigenous responses to Spanish colonialism, few have compared the responses of Maya households of different statuses and political authority in frontier-zone communities. Building on previous site-level investigations, this study considers continuities and transformations in the use of and access to animal resources by Lamanai community members as they adapted to the new colonial order. The animal remains were recovered from one possible elite leader, two elite, and four non-elite households occupied from the Terminal Postclassic (AD 1450–1544) through Early Colonial (AD 1544–1700).

To document change or transformation in cultural practices at Lamanai, I first used taphonomic, refitting, and chronological data to refine the chronology of deposits recovered from shallow stratigraphies. This multi-method analysis allowed me to more accurately separate the stratigraphic levels in which the faunal remains were recovered and assign them more precisely to the Postclassic or Colonial period.

Second, I identified differences in animal resources used in political economic activities by comparing taxonomic, skeletal, and isotopic data among contexts and periods. Together, these data demonstrated that the Lamanai elite enjoyed access to a higher diversity of fauna and animal parts than non-elite households, and possibly controlled marine shell crafting. Some non-elite households were possibly butchers and fishmongers who provisioned the elite in valued animal resources. The Lamaneros did not readily adopt European domesticated animals. Instead, they increasingly exploited mass-captured species (e.g., fish and turtles), engaged in opportunistic garden hunting, and intensified practices such as marrow cracking and turkey husbandry. These changes reproduced animal use practices already in place during the Postclassic, a strategy that likely provided economic stability. The Lamaneros also retained access to some regionally acquired taxa (e.g., deer, marine shell), albeit in lower proportions than before contact. Overall, the zooarchaeological analyses revealed that relations of production and distribution of animal resources were both transformed and maintained at Lamanai, with moderate direct impact of Spanish colonialism on the pursuit of these activities.

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