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# Calakmul, Campeche: a centralized urban administrative center in the northern Petén

William J. Folan

The development of civilization in Greater Mesoamerica is a complex process poorly understood in spite of a considerable amount of time and energy dedicated to unravelling its complexities. Previous models have repeatedly indicated that these activities were carried out more in the highlands than in the lowlands of Mesoamerica, principally in relationship with the formation of urban centers and other forms of administrative entities (Sanders and Price 1968; Sanders and Webster 1988). There exist, however, a few investigators that have considered the lowlands as a source rather than a recipient for many of the most impressive facets of higher development in Greater Mesoamerica. Recent investigations in the state of Campeche, Chiapas and Tabasco, Mexico as well as in the department of the Petén, Guatemala show, for example, that in spite of models to the contrary, some of the first indications of villages and early ranking took place in areas such as the coast of Chiapas according to Ceja Tenorio (1985) and Clark and Blake (1989).

Although we have been led to believe that the Olmecs developed religious centers only containing a few inhabitants, recent work by González (1989) within and around La Venta, Tabasco have indicated that instead of being a purely ceremonial center, La Venta clearly manifests the nucleus of a fairly large urban center.

Given the above, it was not unexpected to learn that large Preclassic centers such as Calakmul, Campeche (Folan 1985, 1988) (Fig. 1) and El Mirador in the Petén of Guatemala (Dahlin 1984; Matheny 1987) as well as Nakbe and Tintal (Hansen 1990) have been identified in the lowlands of southeastern Mesoamerica dating, in the latter cases, from approximately 600 BC.

In an effort better to understand the sociopolitical organization of these centers, one of the principal objectives of the Calakmul project has been to investigate the formation of the regional state of Calakmul modeled by Flannery (1972) and elaborated by Marcus (1973; 1976) including the capital city of Calakmul itself and its tributary centers distributed in a concentric fashion in a hexagonal lattice some 30 to 35 kilometers distant from the state capital (Fig. 2).

As a result of our mapping activities (Fletcher, May Hau, Folan and Folan 1987; May Hau, Cohouh Muñoz, González Heredia and Folan 1990) we have been able to conclude that Calakmul represents the largest, most populous city in the Maya area (Folan 1988; Fletcher and Gann 1991) (Fig. 3).

While considering the most recent population estimates for Tikal, Fletcher and Gann

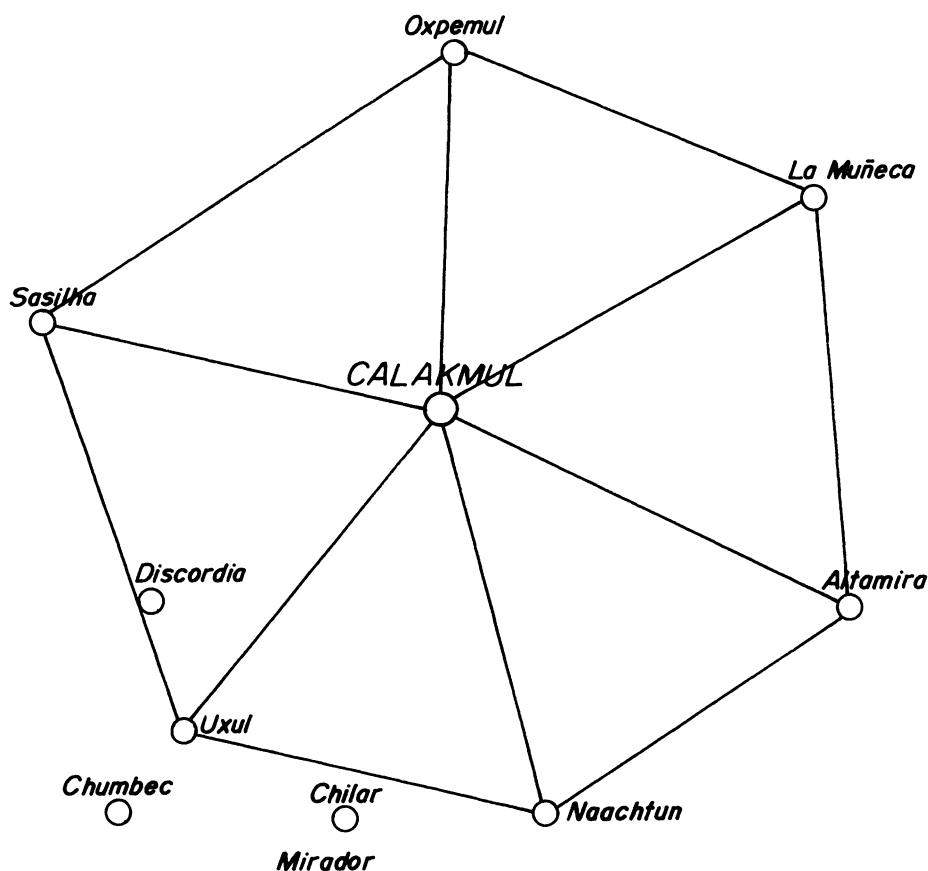
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Figure 1 Map of the peninsula of Yucatan showing the location of Calakmul, Campeche and other major sites.

(ibid.) compared the two cities utilizing both the formula of Culbert et al. (1990) and Folan (1977: 40–6) which indicate a 37 per cent difference in their populations in favor of Calakmul. We have also been able to establish that Calakmul has been occupied since the Middle Preclassic (M. del Rosario Domínguez Carrasco 1991) at which time it began to develop into one of the largest urban centers in Mesoamerica.

With the idea of understanding more about the sociopolitical organization of the Calakmul area Rubentino Avila Chi (who has worked as a *chiclero*, alligator hunter and lumberman in and around the region of Calakmul since 1938) and I have developed a list of the *aguadas* in the 723,000ha. Reserva de la Biosfera de Calakmul (Folan 1978; 1984; 1987; and Gobierno de la Republica Mexicana (1989) (Fig. 4) and its surrounding area including the name of their associated *chicle* camps as well as the Central Chiclero within whose territory they are located. Avila Chi estimated the capacity of the *aguadas*, lagoons, *arroyos*, ponds, springs and wells associated with those camps while naming the months during which each contains drinkable water. We also noted the presence or absence of ruins related to these water sources including their relative size as well as the number and size of the stelae noted by Avila Chi around the 550 *chicle* camps in the northern Petén, the

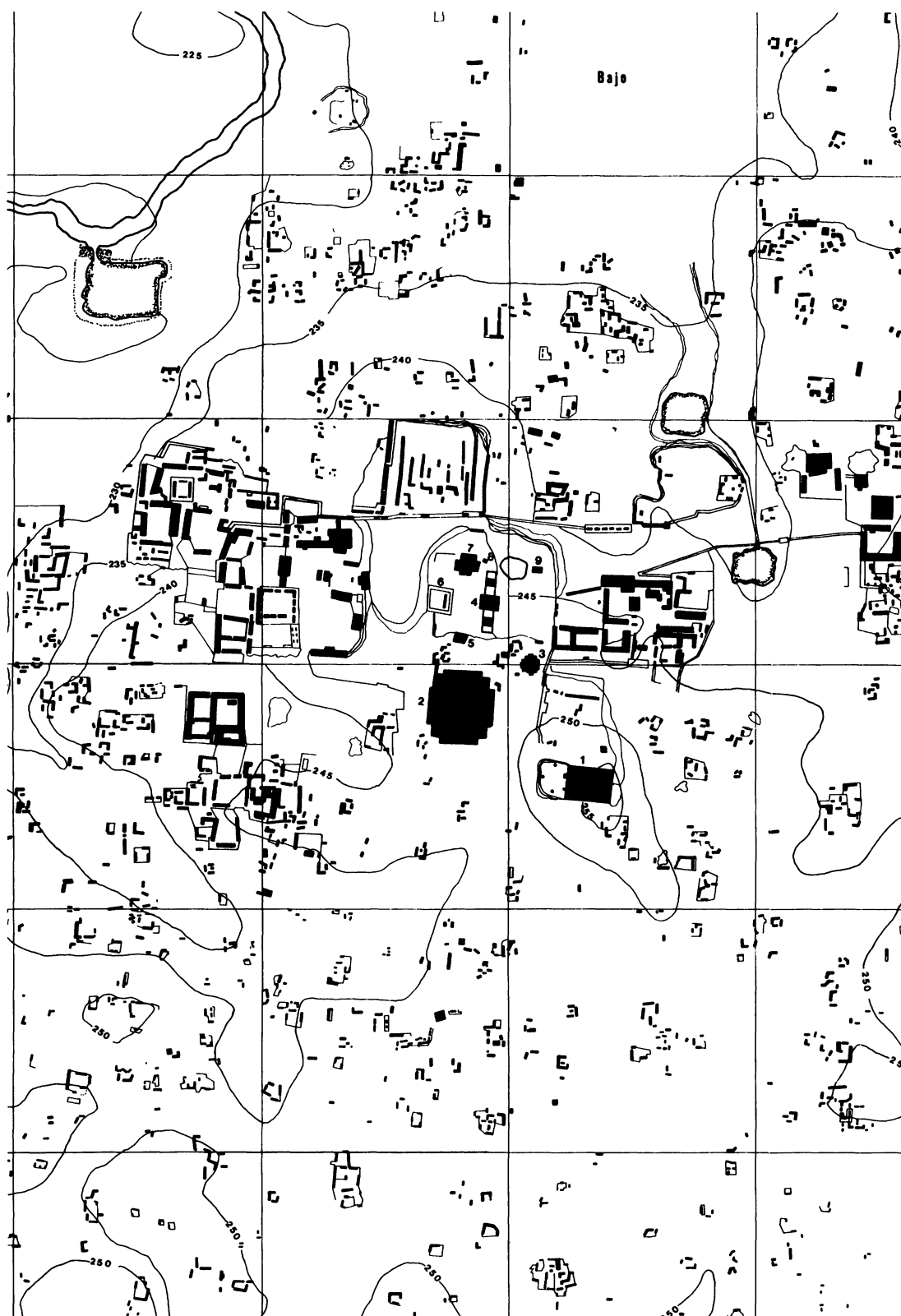


**Figure 2** The regional state of Calakmul, Campeche including its tributaries according to Flannery (1972) and Marcus (1973, 1976).

Rio Bec and Chenes region of Campeche stretching north from the border of the department of the Petén in Guatemala to the southern tip of the cone forming the southernmost limits of the state of Yucatán. It should be recalled that virtually all major sites in the Petén area of Mexico have, over the years, been located by knowledgeable individuals such as Rubentino Avila Chi.

As a preliminary result of this quantifiable ethnography, we are able to determine the existence of fifty-six *aguadas* and ruins associated with the Central Chiclero of Buenfil within which a good part of the regional state of Calakmul is located. Of all of these ruins, however, only eighteen (or 32 per cent) are associated with a total of twenty-five comparatively small stelae or 1.4 stelae per ruin without including Calakmul which has ten *aguadas* and 108 stelae and monoliths (Marcus 1987). At Calakmul the stelae are concentrated in the site nucleus. The only other sites with appreciable numbers of stelae are those designated as tributaries of Calakmul by Flannery (1972) and Marcus (1973) such as La Muñeca and Oxpemul while Calakmul headed a strongly centralized state in the northern Petén with a territory of between 5,000 and 8,000 km<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 2).

A great part of the above would only be of passing interest if it were not for the writings



*Figure 3* Map of the central part of Calakmul showing its principal plaza laid out in the form of a giant sundial under analysis by Abel Lopez Morales (1989). Each square represents 250,000m<sup>2</sup> of the complete 30km<sup>2</sup> map including 6,500 structures and features drawn at 1:6,250 (May Hau, Cohouh Muñoz, Gonzalez Heredia and Folan 1990).

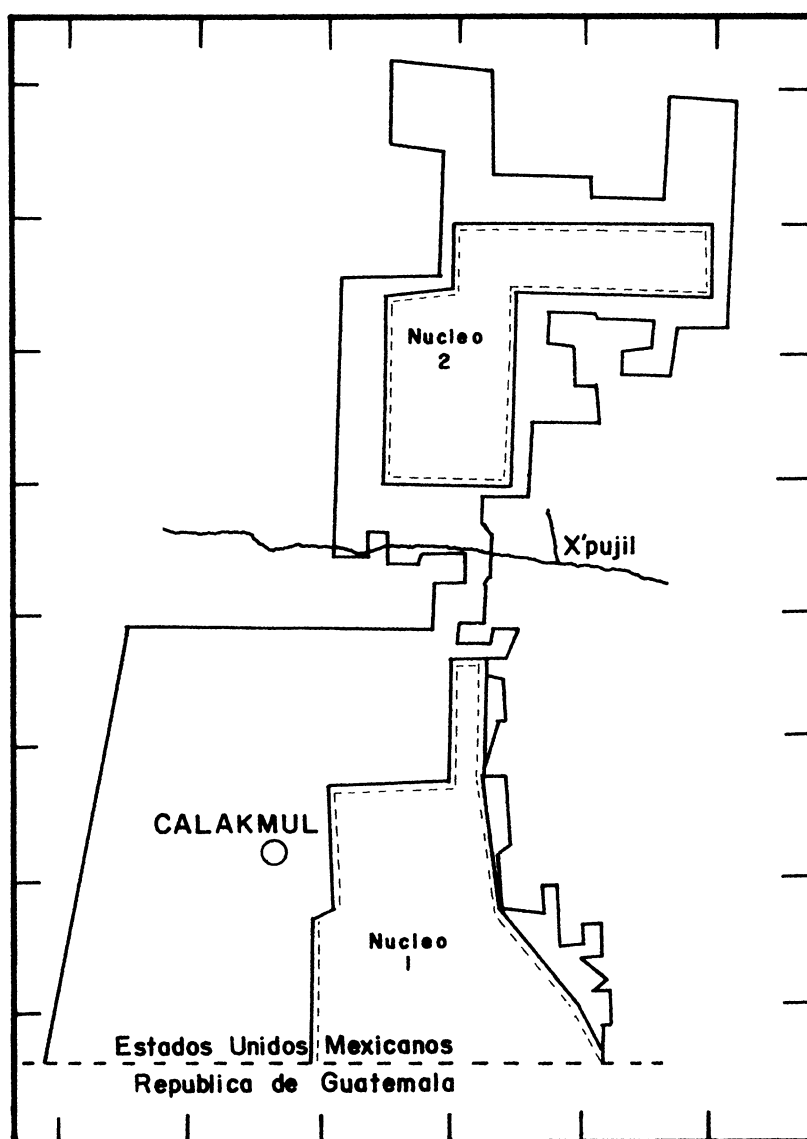


Figure 4 Map showing the limits of the 723,000 hectare Biosphere Reserve of Calakmul extending from the border between Campeche, Mexico and the department of the Petén, Guatemala in the south and the southern tip of the state of Yucatan in the north. (SEDUE)

of the sociologist, Richard Fox (1977) cited in a recent publication by Sanders and Webster (1988). In this article, Sanders and Webster compare what Fox calls regal-ritual cities with Maya centers such as Copán, Honduras in contrast, for example, with administrative type centers that the authors, following traditional alignments, compare with highland cultures such as Teotihuacán. In this way Sanders and Webster (1988: 534) following Fox (ibid.) suggest that Maya cities such as Copán 'are embedded in states with relatively weak, decentralized authority at the top'.

Sanders and Webster (1988: 534) also indicate 'the intense use of royal display found at Copán and other centers, especially as expressed in stelae, altars and heavily embellished monumental architecture, is evidence for the essential weakness of Maya centralized rule rather than its strength'. From my standpoint, however, the data suggest the exact opposite of what Sanders and Webster (*ibid.*) propose. I do not consider the large public structures, 108 stelae and two royal tombs (Plate 1) already located in a place such as Calakmul, as representing a decentralized or weak authority; to the contrary, power is also indicated by the large structures, stelae, sacbes and altars apparent in a place such as Coba, Quintana Roo (Folan, Kintz and Fletcher 1983) (Fig. 5). The written records of nobles and rulers on publicly-displayed monuments served to establish the legitimacy of leadership even though the commoner was not able to read them or to dispute their claims. It must be noted, however, that the indications of strong centralism and power of organization evident in Calakmul and Coba do not seem to be the same for the entire Maya area as indicated by recent studies by Mathews (1991: 29) on the emblem glyphs of Petén-based and other sites in the Maya area.

As part of the same study by Avila Chi and this writer (Avila Chi and Folan 1990) sixty *aguadas* and ruins were identified within the territory of the Central Chicleria de Nohsayab near Xpuhil in the northern Río Bec region. Of all these ruins twenty-eight are associated



*Plate 1* Jadeite mosaic portrait mask from Tomb I, Structure 3, Calakmul, Campeche, Mexico excavated by Mario Coyoc Ramírez (1989) and Sophia Pincemin (1989). Life size. Restored by Ezequiel Pérez Herrera and Florentino García Cruz. (Photo by Lynda Florey Folan)

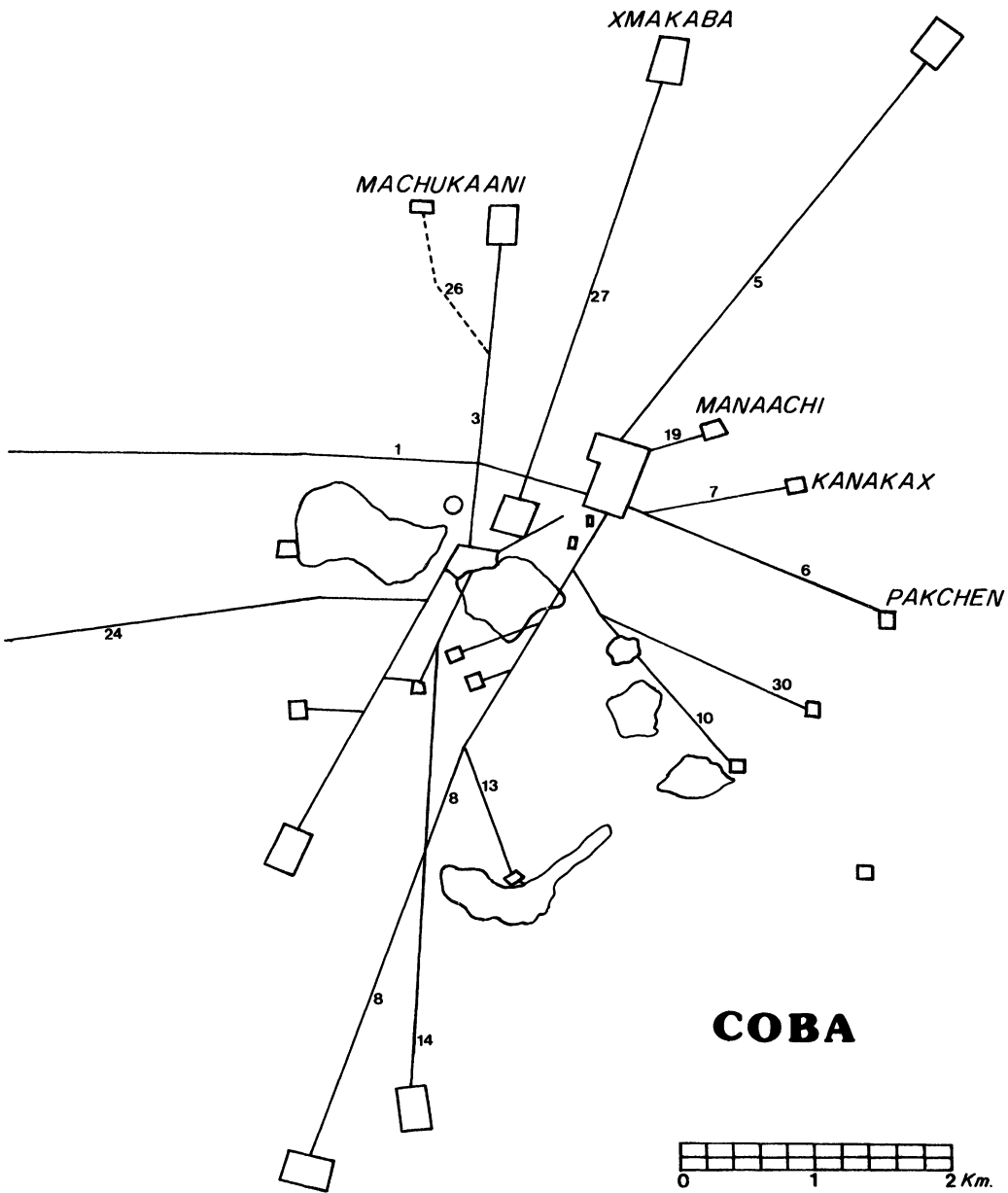


Figure 5 Sacbes of Coba, Quintana Roo, México showing its principal groups and lagoons. Original map drawn by George E. Stuart. (Folan, Kintz and Fletcher 1983)

with a total of fifty-five comparatively small stelae (or 46 per cent of the total) which include 14 per cent more sites than the area around the Central Chiclero de Buenfil with an average of two stelae per ruin. The exceptions are two moderate sized centers each associated with six stelae that are not equal to the size of the Calakmul monuments.

Although I have not had the opportunity to check Avila Chi's information in the field, it would seem to me that Calakmul's size and high population (with impressive examples of public architecture including a 6 meter high wall within what we have considered to be a regional state) existed as a highly centralized administrative center with a frequently-mentioned and widely-distributed emblem glyph instead of one organized in a regal-ritual manner around a decentralized authority.

The Río Bec region, however, seems the opposite with many smaller centers with fewer inhabitants with symbols of authority such as stelae being less concentrated and more dispersed and much less impressive in size.

As a result of the above calculations it would seem reasonable that instead of classifying, as did Sanders and Webster (*ibid.*), all the central places in the Maya area as being weak and decentralized, it would be much more reasonable to consider the largest central places including Calakmul, Coba, Tikal, Naranjo and others as densely-packed administrative centers similar to sites such as Teotihuacan in the highlands whose original development, to a large measure depended on advanced earlier sites in the tropical lowlands such as the urban centers described by Lowe (1989: Fig. 13) along the banks of the upper Grijalva River in Chiapas, Nakbe in Guatemala and La Venta and perhaps Calakmul and El Mirador in their earliest stages of development. Although their forms were not identical, their functions were similar in every respect. The northern part of the Río Bec region, like those ruins situated within the Central Chiclero de Iturbide in the Chenes, with up to 64 per cent of its sites associated with stelae or 50 per cent more than those sites located around Central Buenfil is, however, without this type of organization. In this manner, these regions demonstrate for the most part a dependency on a decentralized and segmentary order in part described by Fox (*ibid.*) that included a large variation of different governmental groups distributed over a fairly extended area and a cultural development in the direction of groups even more decentralized and segmentary developing in an exponential form from the south. This for example, is where Hammond (1991: 282) identified a similar pattern in Belize during the Terminal Classic, up to the northern part of the peninsula of Yucatán where they were identified by Marcus (1983, 1989) during the post Mayapan period not to forget the breakdown of strong centralism in the Valley of Oaxaca after Monte Alban as described by Marcus (*ibid.*) and Teotihuacan c. AD 750 by Mastache and Cobean (1989). It is not the fall of Teotihuacan that brought about great changes in the highlands as thought by some (e.g. Millon 1972: 336 in Diehl and Berlo 1989: 1) but the atmospheric and other conditions that contributed to this process (Millon 1967: 51).

In summary, one can offer a general model of development for the tropical lowlands that includes the earliest forms of urban and state development in Mesoamerica coupled with strong, centralized state capitals associated with ideal climatic conditions (Gunn, Folan and Robichaux 1991) that were replaced later by what can be best described as a city state type organization with less centralized authority associated with less idealized climatic conditions rendering their redevelopment as major preindustrial centers beyond their capacities.

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## Abstract

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### **Calakmul, Campeche: a centralized urban administrative center in northern Petén**

Traditional models explaining the development of higher culture in Mesoamerica have largely ignored the contribution of the tropical lowlands toward urban and state organization in favor of the highlands. This paper offers a more realistic model of Mesoamerican development including the sociopolitical mosaics forming the northern and southern lowlands through time and space.