

The proposed archaeological research will investigate how actions and activities of members of an ancient community influenced the construction of an early urban society during the Preclassic (2500 B.C.-A.D. 200) at the recently discovered site of Noh Kuh in Chiapas, Mexico. My research takes a holistic approach which treats the activities of all Noh Kuh residents as crucial components in incipient urbanization. I employ a multi-scalar approach to reveal how the people of Noh Kuh organized their society through either hierarchical or heterarchical political systems. My research will be carried out in three main phases: (1) archaeological survey and mapping of house mounds and architecture at Noh Kuh, (2) systematic test pit excavation of residential and ceremonial architecture across the community, and (3) laboratory analyses of excavated materials. The approach to studying early urbanism proposed here, contrasts with traditional investigations that largely focus on the decision of elites during incipient urbanization (e.g. Cohen and Service 1978; Childe 1951 [1936]; Cowgill 2004; Blanton et al. 1996; Algaze 1993; Service 1971; Carniero 1970). Urban development models typically position the actions of elites and hegemonic authority as the primary catalysts of social change and community growth, while the actions of commoners are largely ignored or minimized as a response to elite authority.

Intellectual Merit and Significance

This research considers how macro- and micro-structures are mutually constituted during a dramatic phase in social evolution, making my research relevant to broader analyses of complex societies. Military force, marriage alliances, and diplomacy are seen as catalysts in the development of Preclassic urbanization (Demarest 2004; Grube 1995; Marcus 1998). Although such processes were important in the expansion of Preclassic communities, I propose that the actions of commoners played an equally important role in the growth and expansion of trade networks and economies. By focusing on models of social organization, my research combines the study of elites and commoners to determine the relationships and interactions that sustained this community during a period of growth and change. My research includes the investigation of household activities, as these small scale activities reflect many socio-economic behaviors that are invisible in the study of elites. Regardless of whether Noh Kuh was organized as a heterarchical or hierarchical society, this research will reconstruct how people of all levels were involved in urban formation processes. My research adds new depth to the study of state-formation and the rise of civilization by focusing on the social and economic practices of all residents.

Broader Implications

This research will continue the relationship that I have established with the Lacandon community of Mensabak, located near the site of Noh Kuh. The Mensabak Archaeological Project, which includes my research at Noh Kuh, would not be possible without the cooperation of the community. Government permits alone would not have secured our ability to conduct research, as the Lacandon have protected their surrounding environment to ensure the survival of the rainforest and their community. We are guests of the Lacandon community and as a guest, I report to the local leadership with my findings, and to explain my research to the broader community on a regular basis. Furthermore, I am allowed to conduct my research because the local community wanted information on the many archaeological sites that surround their village. The Lacandon people have always valued these archaeological remains, but they wanted to know more about the age of the sites, how and why monuments were built, and why these sites were eventually abandoned. Thus, I and fellow members of the project directly serve the interest of the community, as their questions parallel our own. In the next field season, I and other project members will present our latest findings through conference style papers (which will include illustrations, figures, and reconstructions) during a community gathering. Additionally, this project will integrate students from the University of Illinois at Chicago during the survey, excavation and laboratory phases. This research will provide an opportunity to train students in archaeological methods to develop relevant experience and to provide undergraduates with data for theses.