

TITLE: Paleoethnobotanical Explorations of Baking Pot, Belize, A Classic Maya City in a Neotropical Setting

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**Introduction:** This project is a paleoethnobotanical exploration of human-environmental interaction during the Late Classic period (600-900 CE) in the Maya Lowlands. Paleoethnobotany, the study of ancient people's plant use, offers an opportunity to document diverse ways people exploited the plant world. This study presents the analysis of archaeobotanical remains from Baking Pot, an ancient kingdom in the upper Belize valley of western Belize. Plant data provide information on the types of resources ancient inhabitants used for food, construction materials, and ritual. This project offers a description of dynamic economic, ecological, and cultural aspects of past plant use.

**Methods:** Ninety-seven archaeobotanical samples were collected at Baking Pot. Samples include carbonized organics recovered during excavation and soil samples. Soil samples were processed in the field using a manual flotation technique to separate organics from soil. All samples were sorted under low magnification using a stereoscope. Seeds, wood charcoal, etc. were separated and compared with contemporary reference material to determine taxonomic affiliations. Taxa were tabulated according to archaeological contexts (i.e., ritual, construction, midden, etc.).

**Results:** Many samples were devoid of ancient plant remains. However, several samples contained items indicative of past practices. Wood charcoal from pine (*Pinus* sp.) dominated ritual contexts and was common also in non-ritual contexts. Wood charcoal from dicotyledonous angiosperms was less common but present in both ritual and non-ritual contexts. Food consisted exclusively of maize (*Zea mays*) remains and was found only in ritual contexts.

**Conclusion:** The abundance of pine charcoal in ritual contexts suggests it was an important item of religious paraphernalia. Its appearance in non-ritual contexts indicates it was more widely used. Despite contemporary sub-tropical forest in this region, dicotyledonous angiosperms were not common. The dominance of pine, which was not locally available, suggests that it was either highly valued or that local hardwood forests were depleted. The dependence on one wood resource is mirrored by evidence of only one cultigen, maize. The lack of other botanical food items is surprising but may be the result of limited paleoethnobotanical sampling. Additional research is necessary to obtain more extensive data on ancient Maya plant use at Baking Pot.