The Road to Caracol  Husband and wife anthropologists study ancient Maya city

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By
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When Arlen and Diane Chase first came to Caracol in 1983, the city was completely covered by Belizean jungle. Very little of what we now know about Caracol was known then – that it had defeated the mighty Tikal in battle, that at its peak its population had exceeded 100,000, or that its collapse may be partly attributable to the concentration of wealth and a growing divide between haves and have-nots.

In more than 25 years of research, the Chases, husband-and-wife anthropologists at the University of Central Florida, have pieced together what Diane describes as “a much more complete story about Caracol,” one of the largest Maya cities. Through stable isotope analysis they can tell you what Caracol’s residents ate -- which
residents had a high-maize, high-protein diet, and which didn’t -- and they can also tell you how the relatively uniform distribution of pottery suggests a strong sense of shared identity across social classes.

In 2010, experimenting with new laser technology, they were able to map the 177-square-kilometer site, revealing the density of agricultural terracing and pinpointing the locations of the site’s 36,000 structures, the vast majority of which remain unexcavated. What emerges is a portrait of a low-density, agriculturally self-sustaining, prosperous city that achieved and, for a while, maintained social integration and cohesion through investment in common infrastructure -- such as causeways and markets -- and propagation of what the Chases describe as a deliberate program of “symbolic egalitarianism,” characterized by the distribution of luxury and ritual items across the general population. The result was a literal “sharing of the wealth” and the cultivation of shared ritual practices.

“The number of years [of fieldwork] has made it a lot easier for us to think about and answer a number of different questions about the Maya,” Diane says. “On the other hand, in terms of the sample, we’ve barely scratched the surface.”

Arlen Chase
The story of the Chases’ research is that of an ancient city uncovered, but it is also a yarn about balancing fieldwork and family. For years the Chases buckled their three children into the car for the annual four-day road trip from Central Florida to Caracol. The kids joined their parents in the field from the age of two months until when they went to college. The oldest, Adrian and Aubrey, are now at Harvard University and the University of Pennsylvania, respectively; Adrian, who studies computer science and archaeology, is writing his undergraduate thesis on the location of reservoirs at Caracol. The youngest, Elyse, a high school junior, still accompanies her parents for the annual field season. Twice, the Chases brought their dog.

These days the Chases fly instead of drive, typically remaining at Caracol for two months per year. Their camp is remote and rustic: thatched-roof, open-sided buildings in which they can hang their hammocks. UCF students join them at the site; participating in this year’s dig are three master’s students and six undergraduates, who can earn up to 15 credits for the field season. (As Arlen jokes, “We’ve done undergraduate research since before there was undergraduate research.”)

In all, it’s a sharp departure from life at Central Florida, where the Chases spend much of their days bogged down in the details of academic administration. In addition to both being Pegasus professors, UCF’s highest teaching distinction, Arlen is chair of the anthropology department and Diane is the university’s executive vice provost. “I can do without vacations,” Diane says, “but I can’t do without fieldwork.”

The Chases’ research put Caracol on the Maya map. The city was only rediscovered in 1937, by a lumberjack out looking for mahogany. Although archaeologists had done preliminary sampling at Caracol in the 1950s and early ‘80s, at the time the Chases arrived it was considered to be a minor Maya site.

That’s no longer the case. “There’s no question that the research that they’ve done has helped to place Caracol within the context of the great Maya cities of pre-Columbian days,” says Jaime Awe, director of Belize’s Institute of Archaeology. “They certainly helped to establish the fact that the site was an important player in the sociopolitical landscape when Maya civilization was at its peak.”

The once-overgrown site now attracts about 20,000 tourists per year, according to Brian Woodye, associate director of parks at the Institute of Archaeology. Woodye is one of three institute employees whom the Chases trained as undergraduates.

The Chases have worked closely with institute archaeologists in conserving and stabilizing the site for tourism. In the 1980s and early ‘90s, they successfully petitioned the U.S. Agency for International Development for grant funding, arguing that archaeological tourism development would make a good investment. (“I admit,” says Diane, “the first time we went into USAID they thought we were funny.”) The idea, Diane says, was to make Caracol a main inland attraction. While tourism is a leading industry in Belize, many visitors come only for the Caribbean. “The question was what could be done to keep the tourists inland for even a day or two more, to spend money on food or other types of things,” Diane says.

When the Chases started their research there was no road to Caracol. As Arlen recalls, “We would make it about four miles out [by vehicle] and have to walk in, and the men would all have to carry 100-pound sacks of
flour into the site. Initially, the British army made a helipad at the site, and they helicoptered water into us the first two field seasons.” Now there’s a paved road, bathrooms with flush toilets, and a modest museum for tourists.

Of course, every tourist who ventures to Caracol wants to know the same thing: How did it collapse? Interpretations differ. Awe, at the Institute of Archaeology, attributes the city’s decline to drought and agricultural over-exploitation: “I think the Maya were victims of their own success,” he says. “Things were going great, the population kept increasing, and eventually they got to the point that they couldn’t produce enough food for their people.” By contrast, the Chases emphasize social and political decisions, arguing that weather conditions and variations in agricultural yields are not in themselves sufficient in explaining the collapse.

For whatever reason, the system of symbolic egalitarianism failed. The elite simply stopped sharing, and by the end, says Diane, it was as if the wealthy were using fine china and everyone else plastic dishes. “It’s that great a distinction.” Furthermore, rather than invest in common infrastructure, as they had in the past, Caracol’s leaders increasingly focused their construction efforts on palaces and temples for the elites downtown. The sense of common identity began to erode, as suggested by evidence of ritual patterns.

There are indications of violence at the end, a sudden abandonment of the epicenter: crushed ceramic on the palace floors, an unburied child in a doorway. Around 895 Caracol’s epicenter was burned, “by whom,” the Chases write, “we do not know.”

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