

Preface

In essence, this volume began in May 2014, at Yaxnohcah, Campeche, Mexico, an ancient Maya site deep within the protected Calakmul biosphere, and in the center of the region's largest continuous tropical forest canopy. On May 21 of that year, I first sorted pre-Mamom pottery from Shawn Morton's excavations of the lowest floors of the Brisa E Group plaza and linked them to Xe ceramic sphere. Two days later, while I was still shaking my head in disbelief at the sphere affiliation of this early pottery, a low-flying plane scanned a stretch of high-canopy bush over Yaxnohcah, producing a detailed lidar map that ultimately allowed Kathryn Reese-Taylor and her colleagues to find previously undocumented early architecture, which, in turn, produced more early pottery.

Although I had been trained in Maya ceramic analysis at Colha, Belize, by Dick Adams, who defined Xe sphere originally, and there was a substantial pre-Mamom component to study at Colha (described in Sagebiel et al. chapter 4), I had not encountered it in my subsequent work at sites in Mexico, Belize, or Guatemala. While still in the field, I scoured all the digital sources available to me, trying to find some rationale for the seemingly disjunctive presence of Xe

sphere pre-Mamom pottery in the Central Karstic Uplands (CKU); it had seemingly skipped over central Peten altogether. The subsequent year, after more lidar-revealed pre-Mamom pottery, excavated by Atasta Flores, cropped up a meter below surface at Helena complex, I confirmed that pre-Mamom really *was* present in quantity, and it really *was* affiliated with Xe sphere.

After discussions with several colleagues, there was consensus that a show-and-tell session would be the most instructive method of comparison for everyone involved. Indeed, Takeshi Inomata had been visiting colleagues all over the peninsula and perusing their collections (see chapter 7 acknowledgments). The Society for American Archaeology (SAA) seemed like the right place for such a confab, but a series of papers, even ones shared in advance among the participants, would leave too much of the two-hour time slot bogged down in interpretive discussion of site-by-site and type-by-type comparisons.

In the end, I invited participants to a forum-style event instead and asked them to bring ten (10) of their favorite pre-Mamom pottery slides to share. The forum took place 8–10 a.m. on Friday, April 8, 2016, at the SAA meetings in Orlando, Florida. I was surprised to find that so many people were as interested in pre-Mamom pottery as I was; despite the early hour, the relatively small room was packed to overflowing. Most of the authors who report their findings in this volume brought slides of their pre-Mamom pottery and talked about them to a room filled with enthusiastic ceramicists, fielding questions rather than reading papers. Besides what I provided, there were slide presentations by Will Andrews, Kat Brown, Michael Callaghan, Jerry Ek, Takeshi Inomata, Laura Kosakowsky, Nina Neivens, Terry Powis, Kerry Sagebiel, Katie South, and Lauren Sullivan. At the end of the too-short forum, discussion continued, even though we had to adjourn to the hall to accommodate the next symposium. We realized that, in fact, we had much more to talk about; hence, the present volume was launched in the hall that very day as a way to consider the data in a more expansive way. As organizer of the forum, and still keenly interested in learning more about pre-Mamom pottery, I agreed to edit the volume, while Mesoamerican colleague Rob Rosenswig agreed to work on getting the volume published.

The volume coalesced around the proposition that pottery in what we now call the lowland Maya region first appeared nearly simultaneously throughout the peninsula, yet individual complexes exhibited considerable variability, representing distinct and to some extent separate traditions. How to reconcile this conundrum of spontaneous variability was the task we took on. One might describe this volume as a “first read” of pre-Mamom ceramic prehistory, particularly since some of the material described here had not even been *excavated* when the volume was initiated.

Of course, we recognize the contributions of our predecessors, on whose shoulders we stand. We dedicate the volume to Richard E. W. Adams (figure 0.1),



FIGURE 0.1. *Richard E. W. Adams in field lab. (Photograph courtesy of Fred Valdez Jr., University of Texas, Austin.)*

who first defined pre-Mamom pottery in the 1960s, and Edith Bayles [BAY-less] Ricketson (figure 0.2), who first defined Mamom pottery in the 1920s. Nearly a century on from Edith's research, we can still recognize a field lab not too dissimilar from ours today in the curated photograph, yet travel then clearly was onerous. Perhaps one of the first women from the United States to visit Peten, Edith came via ship to Belize and then by boat up the Belize River, and then endured three more days trekking to get to Uaxactun. There must have been stern resolve in Edith's constitution to sort pottery in so remote a world. Dick Adams's experience working at Altar de Sacrificios in southern Peten came with similarly difficult logistics, but at least he had the option of air travel for a portion of the journey.



FIGURE 0.2. *Edith Bayles Ricketson in field lab. (Photograph provided by the family and reproduced with their permission.)*

As editor, I sought advice and made some decisions about orthography that are useful to mention. This is an English-language text; any words derived from Maya languages only carry Maya diacritical markings. For example, we use Peten rather than Petén, but the site Nixtun-Ch'ich' retains its diacritical marks. A Spanish-language text editor may have done otherwise. We also have one special case usage for the colon in rendering the name of the pottery analysis system we use, termed “type: variety-mode” here. In addition, we chose not to capitalize certain components of the system, so that it is “Xe complex” rather than “Xe Complex.” Finally, we have italicized non-English words when they appear rarely but have not italicized some that appear throughout the text, and relate to pottery production and use in particular, such as *nixtamal* (lime-soaked corn or hominy) rather than *nixtamal*. These are arbitrary decisions for which consensus does not necessarily exist.

As this volume goes to press four and a half years after the pre-Mamom forum, and eight months into an ongoing pandemic, I have learned more about pre-Mamom pottery than I could have imagined in 2014, and, to circle back on the inception of this work, Takeshi Inomata and colleagues have now discovered similar Xe-like materials at Aguada Fénix, which is not too far from Yaxnohcah, so the beginning of the answer to the question that started my journey is also coming into focus. I imagine that both Dick and Edith would be pleased, and perhaps astounded, with the progress we have made on understanding the first pottery producers in the Maya lowlands. We thank them for getting us started on this fascinating journey.