It seems that research at Chunchucmil began only yesterday, but it actually goes back more than forty years. The first anthropologist to visit the ruins of Chunchucmil was Salvador Rodríguez Losa, in the early to mid-1970s. At the time he was the director of the Escuela de Ciencias Antropológicas of the University of Yucatán, and he showed his sketch map of the site to Silvia Garza Tarazona de González, Edward Kurjack, and David Vlcek (Vlcek, Garza Tarazona de González, and Kurjack 1978:223). Garza Tarazona de González and Kurjack were then directing the project “Atlas Arqueológico del Estado de Yucatán,” and Vlcek was conducting surveys for the project. This was a state-wide archaeological survey conducted from 1974 until 1980, when Garza Tarazona de González and Kurjack published a compilation of the survey data in two volumes of text and maps. Several airphotos and a preliminary aiphotobased map of Chunchucmil were included in volume 1 (Garza Tarazona de González and Kurjack 1980:31–35, figures 7–10). As an urban center, Chunchucmil was considered one of the most important “finds” of the Atlas project, and is discussed in several sections of volume 1.

After examining air photos of the site, Vlcek and Kurjack visited Chunchucmil in 1975, and quickly realized its importance as a dense urban settlement. They asked Norberto González, then director of the Centro Regional del Sureste of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, if he would support a mapping project, which he did. The purpose of the project was to obtain a detailed map of a residential sector of the city, which included the foundations of houses and other
domestic structures, patio walls, winding streets, *sacbes*, and other features. I visited Vlcek with Kurjack shortly after he began work in June of 1976, and was impressed by the progress of his mapping, which continued until 1977. The final map—a residential area northeast of the site center—covered an area of 500-by-250 m, approximately 10 ha (or 25 acres). At the time Vlcek and his colleagues estimated the site covered an area of 6 km², with a population of approximately 12,000 people. From surface materials, it was clear that the city dated to the Classic period (*Vlcek* 1978; *Vlcek*, *Garza Tarazona de González*, and *Kurjack* 1978).

The ruins of Chunchucmil have long been known to residents of the region. A cattle ranch was established there in the late eighteenth century, and it evolved into a henequen hacienda in the nineteenth century. Stones from the prehispanic ruins were used to build the hacienda of Chunchucmil, and to provide a bed for the many *tranvía* (Decauville) rail tracks that crisscrossed the property. Today, the hacienda has become a village, and the core of the prehispanic city lies on the northeastern outskirts of the community.


After a hiatus of 16 years, a second phase of research, directed by Bruce Dahlin (1941–2011), began in 1993. This project was known as the Pakbeh Regional Economy Program (PREP), and involved all the authors in this book, as well as a host of students from Mexico, the United States, Europe, and Japan, and hundreds of fieldworkers from Chunchucmil and other surrounding villages. The project lasted 12 seasons, until 2006. Bruce had a long history of research in the Maya area, had experience investigating urban settlements (*Tikal*, *El Mirador*), and had particularly strong interests in settlement patterns and environmental adaptations. In an earlier draft of chapter 9 of this book, *Timothy Beach* and *Sheryll Luzzadder-Beach* offered a perceptive take on Bruce’s key interests:

Bruce Dahlin was interested in dirt. Based on many conversations with Dahlin, this interest arose from his deep past experience on settlement archaeology projects and his acquaintance with many of the soil scientists and other geoscientists working in the Maya world, from *Gerald Olsen* to *John Foss*, *Kevin Pope*, and *Gene Perry*. His work at *Tikal*, *El Mirador*, northern *Belize*, and northern *Yucatán* all had soil components, and Bruce was keenly aware of soil and geology in the field. At Chunchucmil and
Canbalam, the driving questions from the start were environmental and geographical: how did the Maya here subsist in a clearly marginal environment? What happened to the coastal site of Canbalam? What were their resources and how did they use them? How were these sites connected? Did the historical canals that penetrate the coast and lead eastward have Maya precedents? All of these questions attempt to explain the "colossus of Chunchucmil," to imitate a title he had used for El Mirador (Dahlin 1984).

Chunchucmil’s growth posed some of the same questions raised by other huge Maya sites: how did a large city thrive in an environment—the tropics—that some have considered inimical to advanced cultures? (personal communication 2015)

The contents of this book celebrate Bruce’s multidisciplinary approach to archaeological investigation, and he would have been proud of the results. Half of the chapters deal with issues of demography, settlement patterns, natural resources, and various aspects of the environment of Chunchucmil and its periphery. And they accomplish the main objective of the research: explaining how a city of 30,000 inhabitants—one of the largest in the Classic Maya world—could have prospered in an environmentally marginal region, one that has poor soils, and the most arid climate in the Maya lowlands. Careful analysis of the soils led Timothy Beach and his colleagues to conclude, in chapter 9, that

the many lines of evidence to assess the agricultural resources surrounding Chunchucmil make us question its agricultural self-sufficiency. It is reasonable to conclude that poor building materials, shallow rocky soils, low fertility, variable rains, seasonal inundation, and water repellent soils would deter any sustained large and dense population as it does today. Historic agricultural yields using traditional methods could not have supported the ancient population during Chunchucmil’s major period of occupation.

While low-yield farming, house gardening, and regional resources would have supported part of the population, only access to additional resources would have allowed the city to exist. At the outset of the project, we discussed the possible role of craft production and exports of such items, but the evidence suggests that not many people specialized in the production of non-perishable goods. However, since many household-produced goods are perishable (such as cotton cloth and clothing, wooden objects, string and rope, palm-woven petates, and other goods), or go off to market, there is scant evidence of such activities at the household level. Still, if we look at historic and ethnographic evidence from other parts of Yucatán, household industries were widespread (and still are in some places—witness the production of hammocks, huipiles, ceramics, and wooden objects in many towns today). I personally suspect that a community as large and complex as Chunchucmil had a sizeable set of cottage industries. In fact, once the Project members had developed
a consensus that Chunchucmil was not a “regal-ritual” city (Fox 1977), we jokingly referred to it as the “Pittsburgh” of the Maya area.

As Scott Hutson and Dahlin note in the Introduction, this book presents irrefutable evidence for the existence of a market economy in a Classic-period urban context. At Chunchucmil, this economy was integrated into long-distance trade networks from the Early Classic period onwards. While Maya scholars have emphasized the role of trade and markets for the Postclassic Maya, many have suspected that complex economies and long-distance trade emerged in Preclassic times, and played a major role in the rise of Maya civilization. The research presented here clearly supports this. Chunchucmil’s resources included a bounty of maritime resources, and one of the richest salt-production areas of the Mesoamerica. As Traci Ardren and her coauthors propose in chapter 12, Kenneth Hirth’s “gateway” concept (1978) offers an excellent model to explain the role of trade at Chunchucmil. With its rich forest and maritime resources, craft goods, and salt, Chunchucmil had much to offer its neighbors in northwestern Yucatán. Its geographical position, and that of its port at Canbalam at the mouth of the Celestún estuary, was strategically located for trade. The salt, and perhaps some of the other resources, would have also been traded down the Gulf Coast, perhaps as far as Tabasco or even Veracruz, a trade route that dates back to Middle Preclassic times (i.e., Yucatec Nabanché ceramics reached as far as La Venta). In return, obsidian and other goods from the west would have entered northern Yucatán through the gateway of Chunchucmil’s markets.

This book stands out as a cutting-edge model of multidisciplinary research, and future projects would do well to emulate its overall approach, which includes a meticulous investigation of the larger regional environment, coupled with a thorough examination of the settlement patterns. In the end we have a sophisticated view of interactions between the city and the hinterland, and an excellent example of the role of long-distance trade in the emergence of urbanism in the Maya lowlands.