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# Creating “Belize”: The Mapping and Naming History of a Liminal Locale

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# Creating “Belize”: The Mapping and Naming History of a Liminal Locale

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The origins of the settlement in southwest Yucatan that subsequently became the British colony and then nation of Belize, along with the etymology of the toponym Belize, are poorly understood and clouded by colonialist mythology. Using cartographic, archival, and other textual sources, including some in Yucatec Mayan, this article offers a revisionist argument regarding initial British settlement in the region and proposes a new solution to the mystery of the name Belize.

**KEYWORDS** Belize; Yucatan; Maya; Spanish imperialism; British imperialism; colonial cartography

Les origines de la colonie dans le sud-ouest du Yucatan, qui par la suite est devenue une colonie britannique et puis la nation de Belize, ainsi que l’etymologie du toponyme Belize, représentent toutes les deux des sujets mal compris et embrouillés par la mythologie colonialiste. En utilisant des sources cartographiques, des documents d’archive, et d’autres textes, y compris certains textes en maya yucatèque, cet article présente un argument révisionniste en ce qui concerne la colonie britannique dans la région et propose une nouvelle solution au mystère du nom de Belize.

**MOTS CLÉS** Belize, Yucatán, Maya, impérialisme espagnol, impérialisme britannique, cartographie coloniale

Los orígenes del asentamiento en el suroeste de Yucatán que subsiguientemente se convirtió en la colonia británica y luego nación de Belice, junto con la etimología del topónimo Belice, son mal conocidos y están empañados por mitología colonialista. Utilizando fuentes cartográficas, de archivo y textuales de otros tipos, incluyendo algunas en maya yucateco, este artículo ofrece un

argumento revisionista sobre el asentamiento británico inicial en la región y propone una nueva solución al misterio del nombre Belice.

PALABRAS CLAVE Belice, Yucatán, Maya, imperialismo español, imperialismo británico, cartografía colonial

When was Belize, both place and name, created? To date, there is no clear and convincing answer to that question.

All nations in the Americas have complex origins rooted in their histories of colonialism and decolonization, with their names explained by some aspect of those histories. This is equally true of Belize—one of the hemisphere’s youngest nations, born from British Honduras in 1981—and the country is likewise hardly unique in embracing origin mythology in order to build a national identity among its own subjects and in the eyes of the outside world.

But no nation in the Americas can rival Belize for the persistent ambiguity of its genesis, the mysterious etymology of its name, and its long history of definitional ambiguity. That is perhaps not surprising, considering that for centuries the region that is today’s Belize was a place where geography and imperial competition intersected in complex ways—a “territory [that] was imperial before becoming colonial,” before becoming a nation.<sup>1</sup> Its historical uncertainties of origin, sovereignty, boundary, and location are so deep-rooted that Belize’s peaceful twentieth-century creation as a nation-state is a significant testimony to its people.<sup>2</sup>

My purpose here is to use maps of the early modern centuries as a starting point to expose some of Belize’s origin mythology, to explain when and why that mythologizing occurred, and to solve the mystery of the toponym Belize. P.A.B. Thomson, a former British High Commissioner in Belize, summarized in his concise history of the colony and nation the various theories regarding the origin of its name, concluding the “truth of the matter seems unlikely to be resolved.”<sup>3</sup> This article aims to belie Thomson’s pessimism.

Archaeologist Elizabeth Graham observed that “Belize never crystalized as a place in European consciousness of the sixteenth century. If Belize was anything, it was a liminal, elusive, shifting, dangerous space, neither land nor sea, neither here nor there, betwixt and between an idea of a ‘Yucatan’ and an idea of a ‘Kingdom of Guatemala.’”<sup>4</sup> I suggest that Graham’s characterization of sixteenth-century Belize

<sup>1</sup> Quote by Odile Hoffmann, in a fine study of how maps of 1783–1902 reflect Belize’s colonial creation, in *British Honduras: The Invention of a Colonial Territory. Mapping and Spatial Knowledge in the 19th Century* (Bondy, France, and Benque Viejo del Carmen, Belize: IRD and Cubola, 2014), p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> There are numerous toponyms across the Americas whose origins remain elusively mired in local folk history (e.g., see Lauren Beck, “Early Modern European and Indigenous Linguistic Influences on New Brunswick Place Names,” *Journal of New Brunswick Studies* 7, no. 1 (2016), pp. 15–36), but “Belize” is the only national name with such a history. On Belizean national mythology, see the work of Assad Shoman and of Anne Macpherson (e.g. Shoman’s *13 Chapters of a History of Belize*, ed. Anne S. Macpherson (Belize: Angelus Press, 1995); and Macpherson’s “Imagining the Colonial Nation: Race, Gender, and Middle-Class Politics in Belize, 1888–1898,” in *Race and Nation in Modern Latin America*, eds. Nancy P. Applebaum et al. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), pp. 108–31).

<sup>3</sup> P.A.B. Thomson, *Belize: A Concise History* (Oxford: Macmillan, 2004), p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Graham, *Maya Christians and Their Churches in Sixteenth-Century Belize* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), p. 107.

applies likewise to the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Take, for example, two versions of a map of Yucatan and Guatemala widely reproduced during that period (Figure 1(a-b); Table 1), in which the Gulf of Honduras pushes into the base of the Yucatan peninsula, narrowing the isthmus that connects the peninsula to the mainland, leaving the peninsula sticking out like a sore thumb. The casualty is Belize; the region that is today's nation is almost entirely submerged (Figure 2).<sup>5</sup>

In the sixteenth century, Spaniards made frequent incursions into the region, while Franciscan friars built churches in Lamanai, Tipu, and a few other Maya towns in what is today northern Belize. Thenceforth, Spain considered Belize part of the Spanish Yucatan. But from the late sixteenth century to the 1710s, the place no longer existed in practical terms to Spaniards because their colonial efforts had failed. Meanwhile, in the seventeenth century, according to British and Belizean historiographical tradition, loggers from the British Isles began to take dyewood from the banks of what would become the Belize River, and—again, according to modern sources—a Scottish buccaneer named Peter Wallace eponymously founded the settlement that would eventually evolve into a nation, the name Wallace becoming Belize. But—again, in practical terms, and as I argue—the place did not yet exist for the British, who had yet to settle there.<sup>6</sup>

Belize's elision on early maps is therefore partly an expression of what Ricardo Padrón has called "cartographic jingoism,"<sup>7</sup> and a reflection of the region's long history as a colonial battleground. But that early invisibility is a clue to the fact that much of that jingoism dates from Spanish and British insistence, from the 1710s on, that their claims had deep roots. British officials and slave-owning creoles were especially imaginative and persistent in inventing Belize's seventeenth-century foundations. Such were the colonialist contradictions faced by European mapmakers.

Padrón also noted that it is now well known that "in clever ways," maps "serve particular interests while ostensibly representing objective realities. Like other discourses of power, they often naturalize what is contingent."<sup>8</sup> In this case, Belize's cartographic absence faithfully conveyed its persistent liminality, whereby for

<sup>5</sup> John Ogilby, *America: Being an Accurate Description of the New World* [...] (London: Tho. Johnson, 1670), between pp. 172–73, with a variant map in the twin volume, Arnoldus Montanus's *de Nieuwe en Onbekende Weereld: of, Beschryving van America* (Amsterdam: Jacob van Meurs, 1671), between pp. 258–59). The Pieter van der Aa map is in *Nouvel Atlas* (1714), Bibliothèque nationale de France (hereafter BnF), Paris, GG DD 2987 and Ge D 7568. Also see *La galerie agreable du monde* (1729). Library of Congress (hereafter LoC), Washington, DC, Geography and Map Division, G4800. and Alain Breton and Michael Antochiw, *Catálogo Cartográfico de Belice/Cartographic Catalogue of Belize, 1511–1880* (Paris: Bureau Régional de Coopération en Amérique Centrale & Centre d'Études Mexicaines et Centraméricaines, 1992), pp. 71–72, 129.

<sup>6</sup> On the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century history of Belize, see O. Nigel Bolland, *The Formation of a Colonial Society: Belize, from Conquest to Crown Colony* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 17–26; Grant D. Jones, *Maya Resistance to Spanish Rule: Time and History on a Colonial Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989); and Graham, *Maya Christians*. Also see Mavis C. Campbell, *Becoming Belize: A History of an Outpost of Empire Searching for Identity, 1528–1823* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2011), pp. 3–92, which summarizes previous work.

<sup>7</sup> Ricardo Padrón, "The Indies of the West' or, the Tale of How an Imaginary Geography Circumnavigated the Globe," in *Western Visions of the Far East in a Transpacific Age, 1522–1657*, ed. Christina H. Lee (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Padrón, "The Indies of the West'," pp. 21–22.



FIGURE 1 Two examples of the narrow-waisted sequence of cartographic renderings of the Yucatan peninsula, with Belize elided, submerged, and unnamed—and the Maya city of Lamanai turned into “Lamanay” island: (a), from John Ogilby’s *America* (London: Tho. Johnson, 1670, inter 172–73; in, e.g., JCB; LoC, Kislak Collection #473); (b), a 1729 Pieter van der Aa variant (in *Galerie agreable*, individually archived as LoC/G&M #G4800).

centuries its location, name, and even very existence were ambiguous, inconsistent, contested, or just plain missing. Before the eighteenth century, the place later called Belize did not yet exist. That is, I argue, buccaneers or pirates did not found a permanent settlement there in the seventeenth century; Peter Wallace is pure invention. The Wallace legend has been thoroughly debunked by scholars in this century,<sup>9</sup> yet it clings on in textbooks, guidebooks, and websites, partly in the absence of an alternative, historically resonant toponymy. But, as I shall show, the name Belize has obvious origins in Yucatec Maya, the clues to which have been before us all along—ironically, perhaps—on old maps.

Thus, the metageographical effect of Belize’s absence from early maps, combined with the history of its appearance in the eighteenth century, was to naturalize the contingencies of delayed, protracted, and contested colonialism in the region. Because maps are textual as well as visual, both graphic and physical,<sup>10</sup> the absence and then appearance of the toponym Belize and its early variants were an additional reflection of the place’s historical liminality. Maps were the starting point for this study. But in my quest to solve the riddle of the toponym Belize—the explanation to which is here published for the first time—I discovered that cartographic evidence, the Belize solution, the details of the Wallace myth, and other archival and linguistic evidence, all combine to reveal something new about Belize’s origins. That revelation is not just that its name has Maya, not European, origins, but also the genesis of the

<sup>9</sup> Most notably and recently by Mavis C. Campbell, “Naming and History: Aspects of the Historiography of Belize,” *The Journal of Caribbean History* 43, no. 1 (2009), pp. 72–114; and by Barbara and Victor Bulmer-Thomas, “The Origins of the Belize Settlement,” *Tempus* 4 (2016), pp. 137–60.

<sup>10</sup> An observation often made, but see Jerry Brotton, *A History of the World in 12 Maps* (New York: Penguin, 2012), pp. 5–6.

Table 1 YUCATAN AS AN ISLAND OR NARROW-WAISTED PENINSULA ELIDING BELIZE, 1503–1733.

Rendering of Yucatan	Rendering of Belize	Map, date	Cartographer (source)
Two islands (off Asia)	Absent	Nautical world chart, c.1503	Nicolay de Caverio (BnF)
Two islands (off America)	Absent	World Map, 1507	Martin Waldseemüller (LoC/G&M)
An island (off Asia)	Absent	Carta marina, 1516	Martin Waldseemüller (LoC/G&M) [Figure 3]
An island	Absent	Nuremberg map, 1520	In 1524 ed. of Cortés's <i>Cartas</i> (JCB & LoC) [Figure 4]
An island	Absent	Mapamundi, Planisferio, etc., 1525–65	Anon. Castiglioni maps, maps by Battista Agnese, and by Bartelli & Gastaldi
An island (off Asia)	Absent	Hoc Orbis Hemisphaerium, 1527	Franciscus Monachus (HCPY 51)
An island (called Zipangris)	Absent	Various globes, 1515–33	Johannes Schöner (HCPY 52–80)
An island (called Zipangris [Japan] on the Gilt Globe)	Absent	Paris Gilt & Wooden Globes, 1528 & 1535	Unknown (BnF)
An island ( <i>Iucatani</i> )	Absent	Geographia universalis, 1540	Münster (JCB)
An island	Absent	World maps (Universale novo, Universalis exactissima, et al.), 1548–72	Giacomo Gastaldi, Johann Honter, Gerard de Jode, Paolo Forlani, Benedictus Arias Montanes, et al. (HCPY 53–56)
Narrow-waisted peninsula	Unidentified	Las costas de Tierra-Firme y de las Tierras Nuevas, 1519	Alonso Alvarez de Pineda (AGI, MyP, México 5)
An island created by a cross-peninsula river	Absent save of cayes & islands	El yslario general, 1536–38	Alonso Alvarez de Pineda (CCB 113)
Very narrow-waisted peninsula	Absent save for cayes & Islands (unnamed)	Americae ... Exactissima Descriptio, 1562	Diego Gutiérrez (LoC/G&M #G3290)
Over-sized triangular peninsula	Absent and elided completely	Yucatan, 1566	Anon., in Landa's <i>Relación</i> [Figure 5]
Very narrow-waisted peninsula	Absent save for cayes & Islands (unnamed)	[MS World Atlas K3], 1580s	School of Teixeira da Mota (facsimile in LoC)
*Very narrow-waisted peninsula	Absent save for cayes & islands ("Lamanay" etc.)	Description del Destricto ... de Nueva España, 1580s[?]	Juan López de Velasco, first published in Herrera (1601) (TNA MPI 1/80)
Very narrow-waisted peninsula	Absent	Partie de L'Amérique, 1583	Jacques Vaulx, BnF (photo in LoC/G&M)
Very narrow-waisted peninsula	Absent (elided by moving Chetumal to Honduran coast)	Iucatana regio et Fondura, 1597	Cornelius Wytfliet (CCB 115; LoC/G&M G110.W9)

(continued)

Table 1 (Continued).

Rendering of Yucatan	Rendering of Belize	Map, date	Cartographer (source)
*Narrow-waisted peninsula	Identified as “Campeche,” mostly cayes (“Lamanai”)	Carta Prima Generale, 1646–47	Sir Robert Dudley (JCB; LoC/G&M)
*Very narrow-waisted peninsula	Absent save for cayes & islands (“Lamanay” etc.)	Mexicque ou Nouvelle Espagne, ..., 1650	Nicolas Sanson d’Abbeville (BnF Ge D 13915, LoC/G&M)
*Very narrow-waisted peninsula	Absent save for cayes & islands (“Lamanay” etc.)	Insulae Americanae, 1662	Joan Blaeu (JCB; LoC/G&M)
*Narrow-waisted peninsula	Absent save for cayes & islands (“Lamanay” etc.)	Yucatan [&] Guatimala, 1670 & 1671	In Ogilby’s <i>America &amp; Montanus’s America</i> , pp. inter 172–73, 258–59 (JCB, LoC, et al.) [Figure 1a]
Very narrow-waisted peninsula	Totally absent	Description ... of America, 1685	Anon., in Ringrose’s <i>Dangerous Voyage</i>
Narrow-waisted peninsula	Absent save for islands (unnamed)	A Map of the Bay of Campeachy, 1699	Herman Moll in Dampier’s <i>Voyages in A Collection of Voyages</i> Vol. II [Figure 6]
*Very narrow-waisted peninsula	Absent save for islands (“Lamanay”enlarged)	Teatre de la Guerre en Amer-ique, 1703	Pieter Mortier, BnF (CCB 120)
Narrow-waisted peninsula	Absent save for islands (unnamed)	Carte du Mexique et de la Floride, 1703 & 1722	Guillaume de L’Isle, BnF (CCB 121)
*Very narrow-waisted peninsula	Absent save for cayes & islands (“Lamanay” etc.)	Yucatan [&] Guatimala, 1714 & 1729 (& al.)	Pieter van der Aa, <i>Nouvel Atlas</i> (BnF Ge D 7568) & <i>Galerie agreable</i> (LoC/G&M #G4800) [Figure 1b]
*Very narrow-waisted peninsula	Absent save for cayes & islands (“Lamanay” etc.)	1717	Visscher (LoC/G&M)
*Very narrow-waisted peninsula	Mostly islands (“Lamanay” etc.), “Salamanca” south of “R. Balesia”	Westindien, c.1728	Gerard van Keulen (LoC Kislak G4391.P5)
*Very narrow-waisted peninsula	Absent save for islands (“Lamanay”enlarged)	America Septentrionalis, 1733	Henry Popple (TNA CO 700/Am N&S 11; CCB 118, claims date 1700)
Not included	Cayes and river mouths named (incl “R. Belleze”)	ye Spanish & Musketor Shore & the Bay of Honduras, 1733	Samuel Penhallow (TNA CO 700/Brit Hond 1; BnF Ge Sh 18 Pf 143 Div 2)

Source abbreviations: AGI = Archivo General de Indias, Seville (MyP = Mapas y Planos). BnF = Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. JCB = John Carter Brown Library, Providence, RI. LoC/G&M = Library of Congress, Geography and Maps Division, Washington, DC (items without shelf numbers are uncatalogued). TNA = The [British] National Archives, Kew. Where I was unable to locate or see originals, either online or in the flesh, I have indicated published sources with page numbers (CCB = Breton and Antochiw, *Catálogo Cartográfico de Belice*. HCPY = Antochiw, *Historia Cartográfica de La Península de Yucatán*). The maps that comprise what I dub the narrow-waisted or “Lamanay” sequence are marked with an \* (such maps continue as a fading minority after 1733, especially by non-British and non-Spanish cartographers; examples are in JCB and LoC/G&M through 1756).

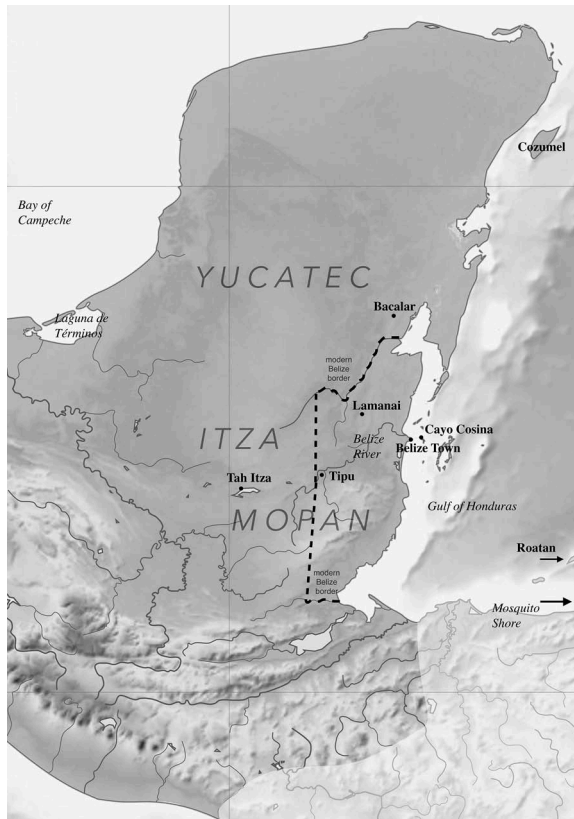


FIGURE 2 The Yucatan peninsula and Belize.

settlement from which the nation would evolve dates only from its appearance on maps—almost a century later than the British claimed.

### Metageographical Mischief

As Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen have shown, “metageographical mischief,” or the imposition of geopolitical hierarchies onto world maps, has been a persistent early modern and modern phenomenon.<sup>11</sup> If we therefore approach colonial-era maps of the Yucatan peninsula expecting metageographical representations, rather than strictly geographical ones, we should not be surprised to find Belize absent or shrunk. Such distortions were expressions of imperial partisanship, reflecting Belize’s unimportance to Spain and Britain prior to the eighteenth century, and its limited importance after that. They also expressed what we might call cartographic ethnocentrism; Belize being a zone whose Indigenous population was unconquered,

<sup>11</sup> Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 11.



and thus classified as insignificant or long-gone, erased on Spanish maps by the label *despoblado* (“depopulated”).<sup>12</sup>

Consequently, in the beginning, Yucatan was an island. At the peninsula’s base are two large indentations, the Laguna de Términos in the southwest and the Gulf of Honduras in the southeast (Figures 1(a-b) and 2). In the early years of Spanish exploration along the Central American coastline, it was imagined that these indentations eventually met, making Yucatan another large Caribbean island. Despite discoveries to the contrary, that assumption persisted cartographically for decades—fading out slowly in the second half of the sixteenth century.

On Martin Waldseemüller’s spectacular 12-sheet world map of 1507—the first to name America on a map, and to show it separate from Asia—Yucatan appears as a pair of unnamed islands. On Waldseemüller’s sequel map of 1516, equally sized but in portolan instead of Ptolemaic style, one of the islands has been eliminated, although the adjacent mainland is “part of Asia” (Figure 3).<sup>13</sup> Waldseemüller was not alone; from the century’s first decade and well into its second half, most maps of the region created in Europe styled Yucatan as an island (Table 1 and Figure 4); the Belizean region of Yucatan was consequently absent.

As it became clear to Spaniards in the 1520s that the Laguna de Términos and the Gulf of Honduras did not meet, Yucatan gradually became a peninsula; the first map to do so clearly and with some accuracy was drawn as early as 1519.<sup>14</sup> For example, one of the rough maps in Diego de Landa’s manuscript fragment, the “Account of the Things of Yucatan,” shows that in the fledgling colony of Yucatan in the 1550s, where the map’s original version was sketched, the broad base of the peninsula was known—albeit over-sized here, with Belize, as always, completely elided (Figure 5). Nonetheless, the transition to representing the peninsula was highly protracted. With sketches such as the Landa map unpublished, cartographic conventional wisdom left Yucatan with an exaggeratedly narrow waist.<sup>15</sup>

The peninsula’s southwest side received heavy Spanish traffic after the Spanish encounter with the Aztec Empire in 1519, resulting in an increasingly accurate mapping of the Gulf of Mexico. But whereas that southwest side was on the sea

<sup>12</sup> A common designation on both Spanish and British maps for uncolonized regions; see Tables 1–2.

<sup>13</sup> On both maps, the Gulf of Mexico (not named) is peppered with two dozen islands. All identifications (such as capes, lagoons, and rivers) are placed along Florida and adjacent coasts, although some of those features are on Yucatan’s coast (such as Río de los Lagartos, today’s Río Lagartos). Both maps are in LoC, Geography & Map Division, and the 1516 map forms part of the Kislak Collection; see John W. Hessler and Chet Van Duzer, *Seeing the World Anew: The Radical Vision of Martin Waldseemüller’s 1507 & 1516 World Maps* (Delray Beach, FL: Lavenger Press and Library of Congress, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Alonso Álvarez de Pineda, “Las costas de Tierra-Firme y de las Tierras Nuevas,” 1519, and Archivo General de Indias (hereafter AGI), Seville, Mapas y Planos, México 5.

<sup>15</sup> This is one of three sketch maps at the end of the Landa’s *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, Real Academia de la Historia, Madrid, 9–5153; maps on fols. 67v–68r, reproduced in some modern editions, but see the edition in preparation as Matthew Restall, Amara Solari, John Chuchiak, and Traci Ardren, *The Friar and the Maya* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, n.d.).



FIGURE 3 Detail, showing Yucatan as a spade-shaped island, from Waldseemüller's 1516 world map, in LoC/G&M (Kislak Collection #271); see Hessler and Van Duzer, *Seeing the World Anew*.

route between Cuba (and thus Spain) and Veracruz (and thus the Mexican heartland of New Spain), the southeast side was a treacherous bay, lined with cays and reefs, leading relatively nowhere. Spanish conquest *entradas* failed dismally<sup>16</sup>; Franciscan mission efforts in Tipu and Lamanai had a lasting religious impact, but did not lead to Spanish settlements, with the maintenance of Christianity soon left primarily to the Mayas themselves.<sup>17</sup> The nearest colonial Spanish town, Bacalar, founded in the 1540s, was overrun by Mayas in 1648 and not refounded until 1729. There never ceased to be Spanish visitors to the region that would become Belize—friars, cacao traders, members of petty *entradas*—but without a settlement within or close to the region, it became less and less known to Spaniards; it was thus there where that

<sup>16</sup> Failed in that they did not lead to Spanish colonies, and caused extensive population loss. See AGI, Escribanía 304b (the *probanza* of Melchor Pacheco); Bolland, *Formation*, pp. 17–20; Jones, *Maya Resistance*, pp. 41–60; and Matthew Restall, “Invasion: The Mayas at War, 1520s–1540s,” in *Embattled Bodies, Embattled Places: Conflict, Conquest, and the Performance of War in Pre-Columbian America*, eds. Andrew Scherer and John Verano (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2014), pp. 93–117.

<sup>17</sup> Graham, *Maya Christians*.

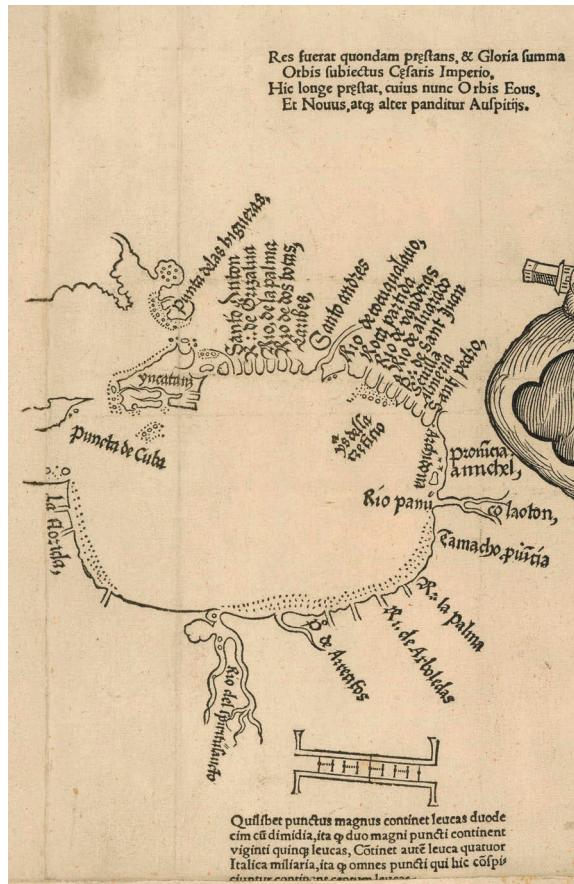


FIGURE 4 The Gulf of Mexico, from the Nuremberg map of Tenochtitlan, printed with the 1524 edition of Hernando Cortés’s “second” *Carta de relación*, created from a long-lost sketch, probably made largely by an Aztec artist and sent to Spain by Cortés in Mexico in 1520. Yucatan is shown as wedge-shaped island. As in the Waldseemüller map, the effect is to disappear the region that would become Belize. In, e.g., JCB; LoC (Kislak Collection #211).

exaggeratedly narrow waist was consistently created on maps of the sixteenth to early eighteenth centuries—thereby perpetuating Belize’s omission (Figure 1(a-b)).<sup>18</sup>

While the rendering of Yucatan as an island persisted into the late-sixteenth century, especially among German and Italian cartographers, the narrow-waisted peninsula gradually took over mid-century as the predominant rendering (Table 1). It remained such well into the first half of the eighteenth century. An influential version was created

<sup>18</sup> There have survived a few exceptions that prove the rule: one late example is Gerard van Keulen’s c.1728 map of the West Indies (*Nieuwe groote en seer curieuse paskaart van geheel Westindien*), which shows the Laguna de Términos so enlarged as to almost cut the peninsula’s waist; listed in Table 2. On periodic but regular Spanish visits to the region, see Jones, *Maya Resistance*, pp. 13–21, 62–64, 95–104, 189–203, 237, 245–50, 285–90.

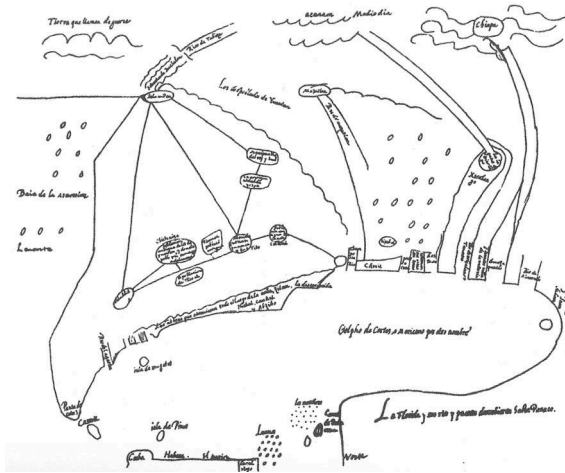


FIGURE 5 One of two sketch maps included at the back (fols. 67v-68r) of the *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, an 18th-century series of excerpts, given the date 1566, from the long-lost, unpublished *recopilación* of fray Diego de Landa; the original would have been drawn in the 1550s. The dovetailing of the Ascension and Honduras bays into one, with Bacalar (then Salamanca) slotted into its armpit, and the “Straights of Bacalar” attached to the “Rivers of Tah Itza,” all have the effect of eliminating the Belize region. Redrawn by the author.

by Nicolas Sanson d’Abbeville in the 1650s, used most notably in *America*, the great compendium published by Ogilby in English (1670) (Figure 1(a)) and Montanus in Dutch (1671), and persisting in numerous near-identical versions into the 1730s.<sup>19</sup>

Whereas Spanish colonial activities in the region provided cartographers like Sanson with information—or misinformation—in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was English activity that more influenced how and when the region later called Belize appeared on eighteenth-century maps. The point is deftly illustrated by the map that the famous cartographer Herman Moll engraved for the 1699 and subsequent editions of William Dampier’s account of his voyages to “the Bay of Campeachy” (Figure 6).<sup>20</sup> Belize was also absent from Moll’s map and the area partly reduced to a series of small islands. Bacalar was given its initial sixteenth-century name (Salamanca) and relocated south into what is left of mainland Belize, far from where Bacalar had been, before its

<sup>19</sup> Copies of Nicolas Sanson d’Abbeville’s 1650 “Mexicque ou Nouvelle Espagne” are located at BnF Ge D 13915 and LoC, Geography & Map Division, uncatalogued; also see Ogilby, *America*, and Montanus, *de Nieuwe en Onbekende Weereld*. I think of this rendering of the region as the narrow-waisted sequence, or the Lamanay sequence; “Lamanay” because the cays are included as a *multitudo insularum*, with the largest island labeled Lamanay—a reference to the major ancient Maya city of Lamanai, continuously occupied from around the sixth century BCE through the seventeenth century CE, which in reality was neither an island nor a coastal site, but located roughly in the middle of northern Belize on a freshwater lagoon. I borrow *multitudo insularum* from a label on the *Miller Atlas* (1519), referring to an East Asian archipelago (Padrón, “The Indies of the West,” pp. 23, 40–41). For more maps in the narrow-waisted or Lamanay sequence, see Breton and Antochiw, *Catálogo Cartográfico*, pp. 50–51, 69–71, 111–19; Michel Antochiw, *Historia Cartográfica de La Península de Yucatán* (Campeche: Gobierno del Estado de Campeche, 1994), pp. 161–71; and Elizabeth Graham, *Maya Christians*, pp. 112–16.

<sup>20</sup> Moll’s map was originally created for the first edition of 1699; the version included here as Figure 6 is from William Dampier’s *Voyages to the Bay of Campeachy* in Vol. II, Part II of *A Collection of Voyages* (London: J. & J. Knapton, 1729).



FIGURE 6 The 1699 rendering of Yucatan and the Campeche bay by Herman Moll, accompanying editions of William Dampier's *Voyages to the Bay of Campechy*; Belize is unidentified and elided partly by being under the "Golph of Honduras," partly reduced to a series of islands, and partly through the relocation of Bacalar ("Salamanca") south from its eponymous lake; the toponymic focus is on the Laguna de Términos and its adjacent rivers, where the British maintained their "Bay of Campechy" logging settlement from 1662 to 1716. Author's collection.

abandonment half a century before the map was made. This was, in other words, Belize from the perspective of old Spanish-derived maps of Yucatan (like Figure 5, although Moll would not have seen that specific sketch) combined with seventeenth-century English, French, and Dutch observations from the sea. Pilots sailing past Belize would get an impression of the place as an archipelago, with a distant mountainous mainland, for the Maya Mountains can be seen from the deck of a ship sailing the cays, appearing closer than they are, and effectively disappearing the Belizean lowlands.<sup>21</sup>

There may have been occasional, small-scale logging incursions up the Belize River during the half-century of British logging in the Bay of Campeche and on the northern Yucatec coast (1662–1716), but its scant, circumstantial evidence simultaneously confirms that there was no settlement or permanent presence in the Belize region—and thus no detailed knowledge from which a mapmaker like Moll might have drawn. British logging activity was focused instead where Moll had added geographic and toponymic detail, the Laguna de Términos region; Dampier lived for three years at the Laguna's British logging settlement, which flourished until its destruction by Spaniards.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Graham, *Maya Christians*, 113.

<sup>22</sup> AGI, México 56; 1010; 1017, fols. 1–524; Indiferente General 88; all cited in Jesse Cromwell, "Life on the Margins: (Ex) Buccaneers and Spanish Subjects on the Campeche Logwood Periphery, 1660–1716," *Itinerario* 33.3 (2009), pp. 43–71. Also see AGI, México 45, n. 69; The National Archives (hereafter TNA), Kew, CO 1/62, fols. 367–68. Prior to 1716, English logging activity on Yucatan's eastern coast was centered on Cape Catoche (see "Loggerhead Key" on the Moll map, Figure 6; also AGI, Patronato, 80, fol. 29). Bartholomew Sharp's capture on Cayo Cosina of José Delgado, a Spanish friar traveling up the coast, in 1677, confirms only that the cay was a seasonal camp for buccaneers; there is no evidence that Sharp and his crew were logging in the region nor that they resided on the cay, which did not yet contain a permanent settlement. Likewise, Spanish attempts to dislodge or capture Britons allegedly camped on Cosina in 1695 and 1696 were frustrating failures, but claimed as successes when the cay was observed to be uninhabited. For an example of how such cases have been used to back-project a settlement on Cosina, see Mavis C. Campbell, "St. George's Cay: Genesis of the British Settlement of Belize—Anglo-Spanish Rivalry," *Journal of Caribbean History* 37, no. 2 (2003), pp. 176–79; for Delgado's account, see AGI, Guatemala 152 and Escribania 339a; Ethel-Jane W. Bunting, "From Cahabon to Bacalar in 1677," *The Maya Society Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (1932), pp. 112–19; and Jones, *Maya Resistance*, pp. 248–49.

Only then, in 1716, did British loggers begin regular logging activities on the Belize River, establishing themselves in seasonal logging camps and on the cays at the river's mouth—primarily on Cocinas or Cayo Cosina (today's St. George's Caye)—to a degree that constituted a permanent settlement. That permanence, or the appearance of it, was enough to provoke Spanish raids almost annually, and full-scale attacks stretched from 1716 to 1798 in every year that Britain and Spain were permanently at war. British loggers were completely expelled on five occasions between 1730 and 1779. In the early decades, the Jamaica-based authorities used British and Miskitu soldiers to launch raids into Spanish Yucatan and Guatemala in an effort to secure the Cayo Cosina settlement. But from mid-century onward the British relied more on treaties that conceded Spanish sovereignty while permitting logging rights, which the loggers immediately violated by expanding their activities from dyewood into mahogany, moving upriver and jumping to other rivers, and developing a slave society supported by enslaved African laborers imported from Jamaica.<sup>23</sup>

Thus it was only in the second and third decades of the eighteenth century that the Belize region appeared on European maps, not as mere islands and cays off a narrow-waisted peninsula, but now identified by its river; it was named in various, muddled, and inconsistent forms, based on earlier Spanish usage, Balesia, Belleze, and Valiz (Table 2). One of the earliest maps to mark the Belize River with that name (Belleze) was made by Samuel Penhallow in the 1730s (Figure 7). Thereafter, with growing British cartographic interest in the region, Belize was increasingly named in some form and represented with increasing geographical accuracy and metageographical investment (Table 1).<sup>24</sup>

The implications of the map evidence are significant, as they suggest that Belize's seventeenth-century history is an invented one. Furthermore, that suggestion is supported by a careful reading of archival evidence: simply put, the history of early Belize, in which Britons carved out a logging settlement in the face of Spanish hostility, is very much an eighteenth-century history, not a seventeenth-century one. Its seventeenth-century origins are back-projections that are mythical more than historical. The creole elite or "Baymen," keen to convince the British colonial authorities in London of their legitimacy, were quick to extend their own presence back in time, just as they were quick to exaggerate the "depopulated" or "uninhabited" state of the region. William Pitt,

<sup>23</sup> While different from that of a sugar plantation, slavery in Belize was far from the benevolent institution that apologists have described; see Bolland, *Formation*, pp. 25–85; O. Nigel Bolland and Assad Shoman, *Land in Belize 1765–1871* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1977); Anne S. Macpherson, "Viragoes, Victims and Volunteers: Creole Female Political Cultures and Gendered State Policy in 19th Century Belize," in *Belize: Selected Proceedings from the Second Interdisciplinary Conference*, ed. Michael D. Phillips (Lanham, DE: University Press of America, 1996), pp. 23–44; Matthew Restall, "Cook's Passage: An English Spy in the Yucatan," *World History Connected* 10, no. 1 (2013); and by the same author, "Crossing to Safety? Frontier Flight in Eighteenth-Century Belize and Yucatan," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 94.3 (August 2014), pp. 381–419.

<sup>24</sup> The earliest map I have found that has on it the word Belize or any of its many variants is the Gerard van Keulen map of the West Indies, c.1728, LoC Kislak G4391.P5; see Table 2; he labeled the Belize River "R. Balesia", but I suspect there are earlier examples—although probably none pre-1716 and certainly none pre-1700.

Table 2 HOW BELIZE IS IDENTIFIED IN MAPS, 1728–1809.

Region name	Town name	River name	Map scope/name, date	Cartographer (source)
Part of <i>Lucatan</i>	—	R. Balesia	West Indies ( <i>Nieuwe groote ... Westindien</i> ), c.1728	Gerard van Keulen (LoC Kislak G4391.P5)
<i>Itza</i>	—	—	Provinces of Tabasco [etc.] and Yucatan, 1731	Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville (redrawn for var. Dutch & English pubs., & by Jacques Bellin for Prévost, 1754 [Figure 10])
—	—	R. Belleze	<i>ye Spanish &amp; Musketor Shore &amp; the Bay of Honduras</i> , 1733	Samuel Penhallow (TNA CO 700/Brit Hond 1; also in BnF Ge Sh 18 Pf 143 Div 2, as 1735) [Figure 7]
—	*[Baraderos]	Rio Valiz	<i>Yucatan</i> , 1766	Juan de Dios Gonzalez (BL Add MS 17654)
<i>The Logwood Cutters</i>	*[Barcaderes]	Rio Baliz or River Bellese	Map of the West Indies, 1775	Thomas Jeffreys (LoC G&M; TNA; HCPY 203–4)
—	—	R. Baliz ou R. Bellese	<i>Isles Antilles</i> [etc.], c.1780	Rigobert Bonne (JCB; LoC G&M)
—	—	Rio de Valix en Yngles River Bellese	<i>Plano de los tres Rios de Valix, Nuevo, y Hondo</i> , 1783	Anon. (TNA MPK 1/155)
—	—	Rio Valiz en Ingles River Bellese	<i>Territorio señalado a los Ingleses para el corte del palo de tinte</i> , 1783	Tomás López (AGI MP-Guatemala 314/Cuba 277b)
<i>British Yucatan</i>	—	Rio Walix	<i>Peninsula de Yucatan</i> , 1785	Anon. (AGI México 399)
Part of Yucatan con-ceded to the English	—	R. Wallis ou Belleze	<i>Partie de L'Yucatan concédée aux Anglois par les Espagnols por la coupe des bois</i> , 1786	Anon. (BnF Ge Sh 18 Pf 143)
<i>A Part of Yucatan...</i>	—	Old River Bellese	<i>...or That Part of the Eastern Shore Within the Bay of Honduras Alloted To Great Britain for the Cutting of Logwood</i> , 1787	William Faden (BnF IFN-5970792)
Bay of Honduras	—	The River Belize	The principal British settlement in the Bay of Honduras, 1797	David Lamb (TNA MPG 1–562; also see 1–561)

(continued)

Table 2 (Continued).

Region name	Town name	River name	Map scope/name, date	Cartographer (source)
Poblacion Ynglesa	Establecimiento Yngles en la boca del Rio Waliz	Rio Waliz	<i>Provincia de Yucatan</i> , 1798	Juan José de León (HCPY plate 32)
[Interior labeled <i>Despoblados</i> ]	—	Rio de Balis	<i>Peninsula y Provincia de Yucatán</i> , 1801	Tomás Lopez (LoC/G&M #12867)
<i>Cortes de los Ings. British</i>	Walis	R. Valis	Yucatan, in 2 halves, 1806	Anon. (AGI Mapas & Planos/México 495 & 496)
<i>Logwood Cutters</i>	Balize	R. Balize or Main R.	<i>Map of Honduras</i> , 1809	Fold-out in Henderson, <i>An Account of British Settlement of Honduras</i> (London, 1809)

Source abbreviations: BnF = Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. JCB = John Carter Brown Library, Providence, RI. LoC/G&M = Library of Congress, Geography and Maps Division, Washington, DC. TNA = The [British] National Archives, Kew. The 1783, 1786, and 1787 maps are reproduced in color in Hoffmann, *British Honduras*, 23–29. The 1806 maps are reproduced in Restall, “Crossing to Safety?” HCPY = Antochiw, *Historia Cartográfica de La Peninsula de Yucatán*. Baraderos etc., marked \*, is at the Belize River mouth, where logs were loaded and where the town of Belize would later exist.



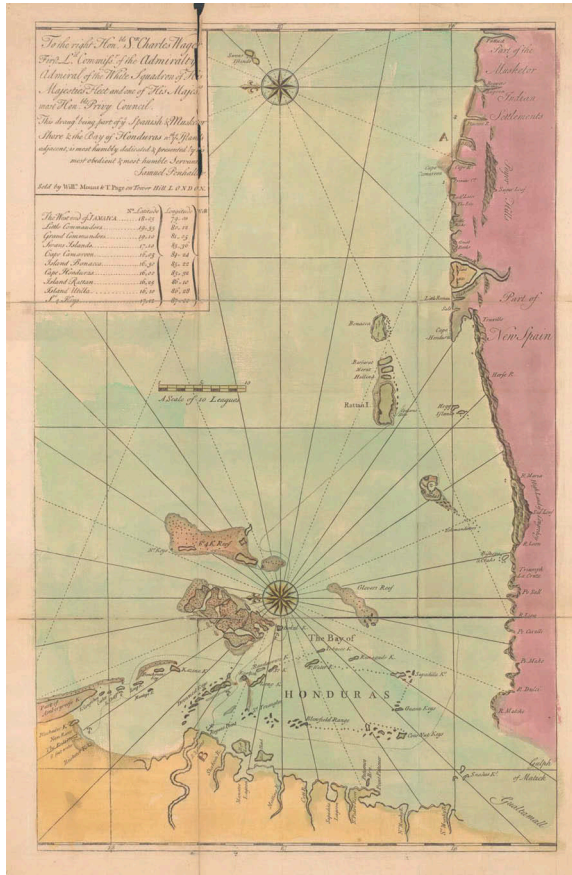


FIGURE 7 Samuel Penhallow's map of "ye Spanish & Musketor Shore & the Bay of Honduras" (copies in TNA, as CO 700/Brit Hond 1, archived as 1733, and BnF, BnF Ge Sh 18 Pf 143 Div 2, archived as 1735), one of the first maps to use the toponym "Belize" (for the river, as "R. Belleze," in the map's lower portion).

a contemporaneous relative of the man well-known by this same name, and a one-time settler on Roatán and on Honduras's Mosquito Shore, asserted in 1734 that logging sites on "the River Walix had been possessed by the English for more than a hundred years." But Pitt was using one of the Spanish names for the river, speaking to the Spanish governor in Bacalar, in the context of a 1733 treaty that had permitted limited logging by the English, who had immediately violated those limits, prompting a Spanish attack that had cleared the loggers out. In other words, the claim was a politically motivated rhetorical exaggeration that was increasingly believed by loggers and British commentators as the century wore on.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> By way of underscoring Pitt's position, note that he complained that he was forced to send his family and slaves "to the Mosquitoes" (i.e. to the Mosquito Shore); his testimony ended up in a viceregal report from Mexico to Spain, so the phrase above is my translation from what a notary wrote in Spanish (AGI, México 3099, fols. 5–10); on Pitt also see TNA, CO 137/59.

Edward Long, in his multi-volume 1774 history of Jamaica, employed the slippage that would become more common and specific: discussing the logwood wealth that began flowing from the Bay of Honduras in the 1710s, he assigned Belize's origins not to those 1710s loggers, but "to the Bucaniers, who first established a settlement here, and maintained their ground against a continual annoyance of the Spaniards."<sup>26</sup> Modern historians have followed suit, employing two forms of that slippage: either back-projecting from the eighteenth into the seventeenth century; or citing seventeenth-century documents that discuss the extensive and violently contested English logging activities in Yucatan—that is, from Cozumel around Cape Catoche and the northern and western coasts of the Yucatan to beyond the Laguna de Términos—as if Belize were included.<sup>27</sup>

It was not. As this article asserts, possible periodic logging expeditions made to the Belize River mouth in the final decades of the seventeenth century, especially in seasons of intense Spanish campaigns against the Laguna de Términos settlements, did not transform the temporary camps on Cayo Cosina into a permanent settlement. The first assertion that "the River of Bullys [is] where the English for the most part now load their logwood," by an Englishman named John Fingas, was not made until 1705; I suspect Fingas was referring to a specific season, and his remarks can hardly be applied to the previous century.<sup>28</sup>

## Bullys, Wallix, Kitchen, Haulover

In view of Belize's muddled, mythologized history, and its cartographic liminality, it is not surprising that the region's name was inconsistent. In fact, it had no clear toponym before the nineteenth century.

Once Britons had established a permanent settlement for logging the Belize River, beginning in the late-1710s, it was on Cayo Cosina, called Caye Casina or Kitchen Caye (renamed St. George's in 1765). That settlement was destroyed in the Spanish attack of 1779, along with the logging camps on all the rivers; when the British returned with African and African-descended slaves in 1783, they resettled St. George's Caye but also in that year, for the first time, founded a permanent town "at the mouth of the River Belise." Only then, at century's end, was anywhere other than the river given the name Belize—usually "Belize Point" or "Haulover

<sup>26</sup> Edward Long, *History of Jamaica* (London: T. Lowndes, 1774), vol. I, p. 331.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Narda Dobson, *A History of Belize* (Kingston, Kingston, Jamaica: Longman Caribbean, 1973), pp. 47–59. Gilbert M. Joseph does so tentatively in "British Loggers and Spanish Governors: The Logwood Trade and Its Settlements in the Yucatan Peninsula," 2 parts, *Caribbean Studies* 14, no. 2 (1974), pp. 7–37 and 15, no. 4 (1976), pp. 43–52; and by the same author, "John Coxon and the Role of Buccaneers in the Settlement of the Yucatán Colonial Frontier," *Terrae Incognitae* 12, no. 1 (1980), pp. 65–84. Also see Bolland, *Formation*, pp. 25–26 and Bulmer-Thomas and Bulmer-Thomas, "Origins," pp. 151–56; and Campbell, *Becoming Belize*, pp. 95–117 follows Dobson, employing both forms of slippage as compensation for lack of evidence.

<sup>28</sup> From Fingas's description of Yucatan in TNA, CO 137/5 (also see Bolland, *Formation*, p. 26; Dobson, *Belize*, p. 59; and Bolland and Shoman, *Land in Belize*, p. 3). My conclusions in this respect require more space than is relevant to use here; in a book-length study I am re-evaluating the archival evidence in, e.g., TNA, CO 1/62; CO 123/3; CO 137/5; British Library, Add. Ms. 36,806; Add. Ms. 36,807; Sir John Alder Burdon, *Archives of British Honduras. Volume I: From the Earliest Date to A.D. 1800* (London: Sifton Praed & Co, 1931), vol. I, pp. 50–60; AGI, Escribanía 62; Guatemala 22, r. 1, n. 11; México 45, n. 69; 48, r. 1, n. 39; México 1017, fols. 1–980; and México 3099.

River Bellize,” but sometimes “Haulover Wallix River,” or plain “Haulover”—after the riverine spur that connected the larger river to the sea some ten kilometers before the river mouth.<sup>29</sup>

Beginning in 1784, a superintendent, answerable to the governor in Jamaica, was appointed to administer the Baymen; the first to hold the office, Col. Edward Marcus Despard, arrived in 1786. The river and new town were called by the various names above, with Despard more influenced than his successors were by the Spanish tendency to use “Walix” or “Valix.” The superintendents referred to the wider region under their jurisdiction as the place where “the Logwood Cutters upon the Bay of Honduras” lived with their slaves and exploited their wood “works.” Finally, during Colonel Barrow’s and Lieutenant Colonel Hamilton’s superintendencies from 1803 to 1809, “Belize” or “Belize Honduras” began to be used to refer to the town and the region around it, albeit still vaguely.<sup>30</sup>

The inconsistency stemmed from an uncertainty regarding what the settlement was, where its limits were, and how long it could last—a major Spanish attack in 1798 had provoked more than a year of panicked preparations for evacuation. But it was also a symptom of official colonial policy. In 1805, the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies ordered the commander of British forces stationed on Jamaica to withdraw troops from “the Settlement in Honduras.” He stressed “the Settlement in Honduras being a Settlement under Treaty, within the Territory and Jurisdiction of a Foreign Power”—Spain—“is not to be considered in the nature of a colony.” Eight years later, his successor wrote to the senior officer stationed among “the English settlers of the Establishment of Wallix” instructing him to stop the settlers crossing “the Boundaries assigned to them by the Treaties of 83 and 86.”<sup>31</sup>

In other words, the British authorities deliberately refrained from giving the settlement a clear, permanent, official name. That vagueness influenced and was reflected on maps, with the loggers themselves no more consistent; official policy, cartographic choices, and local practice all reinforced each other. It may be tempting to sequence the Valis/Wallix/et al. and the Baliz/Bellise/et al. variants to show an evolution from Wallace to Belize—as Spanish historian José Antonio Calderon Quijano did in a 1944 book, offering an “exact proof [*prueba precisa*]” of the toponym’s origins.<sup>32</sup> But he

<sup>29</sup> TNA, CO 137/75; Burdon, *Archives*, pp. 127–41; Bolland, *Formation*, pp. 28–48; and Restall, “Crossing to Safety?” pp. 386–94.

<sup>30</sup> TNA, CO 137/99; Bolland, *Formation*, pp. 32–40, 158–73; Campbell, “Naming and History,” pp. 77–81. Despard would achieve lasting infamy as the last man to be publicly executed for treason, as an alleged Anglo-Irish plotter (he finally received revisionist biographies in 2000 and 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Stationed in case of “attack from the Spaniards,” their garrison-sized numbers were no longer necessary, as war with Spain had given way to “alliance with the Spanish Nation and the annihilation of the French Power” in the region (the Secretary was Lord Viscount Castlereagh, the celebrated architect of the international alliance that had defeated Napoleon; his successor was Lord Bathurst). Belize Archive and Record Service (hereafter BARS), Belmopan, Belize, Records 1 (“Despatches Inwards 1805–1820), 9–10, 55–56. In other words, Bathurst was one of a series of officials who tried in vain for decades to stop the Baymen “felling and collecting Timber” on other rivers and giving “just Cause of Complaint to the Spanish Authorities in the Neighbourhood.”

<sup>32</sup> José Antonio Calderón Quijano, *Belice, 1663(?)–1821: Historia de los establecimientos británicos del Río Valis hasta La independencia de Hispanoamérica* (Seville: Universidad de Sevilla, 1944), pp. 33–34.

invented that evolution simply by shuffling the variants to fit his argument. If there was any pattern on eighteenth-century maps and correspondence it was for a preference early in the century for Balis—a carry-over from the previous century, and indeed fray José Delgado, who traveled to the river in 1677, called it by that name.<sup>33</sup> When the Wallix/Valis/et al. variants did come into vogue later in the eighteenth century, it was among Spaniards, not Britons—the label on one 1783 map was “Rio Valiz; en Ingles, River Bellese.” Even that was not a name change but a shift in writing the bilabial sound /b/; Bacalar was occasionally written as “Vacalar.”<sup>34</sup>

If Wallace was created from Valis/Wallix/et al., which were variants on Baliz/Bellise/et al., used by Spaniards in the seventeenth century, if not before, then the toponym’s origins clearly lie with Spanish-Maya interaction of the mid-sixteenth to mid-seventeenth century. But before we turn there, we must pursue and catch, or eliminate, Wallace the buccaneer.

## Hunting Wallace

John Herbert Caddy, a British army lieutenant posted to Belize’s small Royal Artillery garrison in 1838, kept a diary, in which he described the town of Belize as “the only one in the settlement. It is situated at one of the mouths of the old River and takes its name from a Buccaneer chief named Wallace who established himself here, taking refuge from the vengeance of the Spaniards on whom he had committed depredations.”<sup>35</sup>

This presumably was the tale told to Caddy by Colonel Alexander MacDonald, the settlement’s superintendent at the time, or perhaps by one of the slave-owning creoles—although he lamented that they were so busy cutting mahogany that “there is little society in Belize at the present time.”<sup>36</sup>

A half-century later, the “Buccaneer chief” had risen to the level of historical fact, unquestioned by the prolific nineteenth-century historian of the Americas, Hubert Howe Bancroft, who gave passing attention to early Belize in his 34-volume *magnum opus* on North America’s “Pacific states.” Bancroft noted that around 1717, English “wood-cutters” were “finally driven” by Spaniards from the Laguna de Términos region, and that meanwhile in the “latter half” of the seventeenth century the Spaniards abandoned “that portion of Yucatan bordering on the Bay of Honduras.” Its isolation and “its numberless reefs and shoals on its sea-coast, made it peculiarly fitted for the haunts of the buccaneers.” Bancroft then stated that, as a result,

<sup>33</sup> Campbell called Calderon Quijano’s shuffling of variants “merely a linguistic play” in “Naming and History,” pp. 89–90; on Delgado, see note 22.

<sup>34</sup> This analysis is based on my survey of AGI, México 1017 (over 980 folios, 1702–1750s) and 3099 (1,420 folios, 1733–1777), as well as a dozen shorter AGI *legajos*; and TNA, CO 30/47/17; 123/2; 123/3, 137/50; 137/92; the 1783 map is in AGI MP-Guatemala 314/Cuba 277b (see Table 2).

<sup>35</sup> David M. Pendergast, *Palenque: The Walker-Caddy Expedition to the Ancient Maya City, 1839–1840* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), pp. 20–21.

<sup>36</sup> Pendergast, *Palenque*, p. 24.

One of these, Peter Wallace, a Scotchman, landed with some eighty companions at the mouth of the Belize River, and erected on its banks a few houses, which he enclosed with a rude palisade. His name was given both to the river and the settlement, and subsequently to the whole region occupied by the English. By the Spaniards this territory was variously termed Walis, Balis, and Walix, and the word became finally corrupted into the present name of Belice or Belize.<sup>37</sup>

Whereas Caddy's summary has the feel of folk history told over dinner, Bancroft's adds detail that lends the whole tale verisimilitude. If Wallace were merely a mythical founding hero, one would expect Spaniards to play the role of villains, as they did in Caddy's version. But if Wallace were invented, from whence came such details as his 80 "companions" and his "rude palisade," and was there an element of truth to the tale?

Nor are those the only details found in histories of Belize stretching from Caddy's day, past Bancroft and through the twentieth century to the Internet age; a Google search for "Wallace" (or common variants "Wallice" and "Willis") with "Peter" and "Buccaneer" produces close to a million hits.<sup>38</sup> Even though many of these preface the mention with "some say" or "according to legend," these online entries—some originating from websites, others scanned from guidebooks and other print sources—contribute to centuries of confirmation bias by providing specific dates and details.

Intertextuality is crucial to mythmaking, to the alchemic transformation of imaginary details into written evidence—of which the Wallace myth is a stark example. The most common date for Wallace's foundational act is 1638, but 1640 is also frequent, and one can find dates ranging from 1603 into the next century. Details include the French expelling Wallace and his fellow buccaneers or pirates from Tortuga, forcing them to flee to Belize where they "founded" a settlement or even a colony. Most cite no sources or evidence, but they clearly feed off each other, occasionally referring to other nineteenth- or twentieth-century works. The persistent paradox of a grudging recognition that Wallace may be "a legend," while simultaneously suggesting veracity through the accumulation of detail, is summed up in one author's comment that the "Wallace theory" is "fairly convincing, but equally not documented."<sup>39</sup>

In fact, not only is the Wallace story not documented, the lack of evidence to support it is incontrovertible. It is, without any shadow of a doubt, a complete invention. There was no buccaneer or pirate, Scottish or English, called Peter Wallace or anything similar, operating in the Caribbean in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. Nor did anyone like him found or establish a settlement in Belize within decades of 1638. Moreover, the Wallace myth has been thoroughly debunked

<sup>37</sup> Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of the Pacific States of North America*, 34 vols. (San Francisco: A.L. Bancroft & Co., 1882–1890), vol. 2 (1883), p. 624.

<sup>38</sup> The idea for such a search came from Bulmer-Thomas and Bulmer-Thomas, "Origins," p. 138, who claimed "over one million entries."

<sup>39</sup> Renate J. Mayr, *Belize: Tracking the Path of Its History* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2014), p. 102.

in a pair of recent articles by scholars who conducted similar research, unaware of each other's work, and drew the same conclusion.<sup>40</sup>

For the sake of certainty, I went over the same sources—and more. I reasoned, as did Mavis Campbell and Barbara and Victor Bulmer-Thomas before me, that if Wallace had existed, there would at least be one mention of him in seventeenth or eighteenth-century sources. But there is not even a passing mention of a Wallace in any of the printed sources from the era: not in the massive compendium of hemispheric history that is *America* by Ogilby (1670) and Montanus (1671); not in *de Americaensche Zee-Roovers* [*The Buccaneers of America*], Alexandre Exquemelin's graphically illustrated history of Jamaica- and Tortuga-based pirates and privateers, first published in 1678; not in Basil Ringrose's first-hand 1685 account of the "dangerous voyage and bold attempts" by Englishmen on Spanish coastal colonies; and not by William Dampier in his famous travel memoir, despite the fact that his decades in the Americas included time both as a buccaneer in the Caribbean and as a logwood cutter on Yucatan's southwest coasts. Dampier offers detailed descriptions of English incursions into Spanish America in the 1670s and 1680s, including the Yucatan peninsula, but merely mentions the existence of logwood "on the south side of Jucatan in the bay of Honduras," without reference either to Wallace or to any English settlement at a place called Belize (or anything like it). This was, of course, because no such settlement yet existed—as reflected in the Moll map accompanying Dampier's *Voyages* (Figure 6).<sup>41</sup>

The Wallace hunt is likewise a wild goose chase in eighteenth-century sources. Although later accounts take us further from Wallace's supposed lifetime, they also begin to focus more on Belize, as it slowly comes into existence. Yet the imaginary buccaneer remains unmentioned by all the following: Nathaniel Uring, whose 1726 account of his "voyages and travels" in "the Bay of Honduras and the Caribbee Islands" included a description of "the river of Bellese," which he visited for the duration of the 1719 logging season; Lieutenant James Cook (not the famous captain), a British naval officer who wrote an espionage report from Yucatan and "Balise" or "Baleise" in 1765; Edward Long, who stated in his already-mentioned 1774 history of Jamaica that "Bucaniers [ ... ] first established a settlement [ ... ] about the river Balise, where the best logwood grows," but omitted mention of Wallace or the origins of the river's name; and George Henderson, whose 1809 *An*

<sup>40</sup> Campbell, "Naming and History," published before Barbara and Victor Bulmer-Thomas gave a lecture in Belmopan in 2012 debunking the myth (see <http://7newsbelize.com/sstory.php?id=21474>), and published their work as "The Origins of the Belize Settlement," apparently unaware of Campbell's article.

<sup>41</sup> Ogilby, *America*; Montanus, *de Nieuwe en Onbekende Weereld*; I consulted original editions in LoC of A. O. Exquemelin, *de Americaensche Zee-Roovers* [etc.] (Amsterdam: Jan ten Hoorn, 1678), and the first English edition, *Bucaniers of America* [etc.] (London: William Crooke, 1684), but there are various modern editions in print; Basil Ringrose, *The Dangerous Voyage and Bold Attempts of Captain Bartholomew Sharp, and others* [etc.] (London: William Crooke, 1685), bound as a "second volume" of *Bucaniers of America*. I also consulted eighteenth-century editions of Dampier, including *A New Voyage Round the World and Mr. Dampier's Voyages to the Bay of Campeachy*, Vol. I and Vol. II, Part II of *A Collection of Voyages* (London: J. & J. Knapton, 1729), already cited is vol. II, part II, p. 57; I looked in vain through all four volumes of *Voyages for Wallace and Belize*; *The Voyage of Capt. William Dampier in The World displayed*, Vol. VI (London: Newbery & Carnan, 1771); and *The Voyages and Adventures of Capt. William Dampier* (London: n.p., 1776), already cited is vol. I, p. 59—but there are modern editions in print.

*account of the British settlement of Honduras* was the first book devoted entirely to Belize and its loggers.<sup>42</sup>

In addition, for over a decade I hunted for the elusive Peter Wallace in primary source documents in archives in England, Spain, Mexico, and Belize, while researching the intertwined histories of Belize and the neighboring colonies in the viceroyalty of New Spain. I found no mention of Wallace, nor of the origins of the word “Belize” and its variants, in the archives in Belmopan, where I focused on the extant legal and administrative correspondence of the 1790s through 1820s. Nor was there anything revealing in the Mexican national archives or the state archives in Campeche and Yucatan. The search took on needle-in-haystack proportions in Spain’s archives in Madrid, Seville, and Simancas, as it did in London, where there is a modest quantity of archival material on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Belize in the British Library, but a massive amount in the National Archives in Kew; as yet, no needle.<sup>43</sup>

As the hunt extended into the nineteenth century, and into correspondence between the superintendents and their superiors in Jamaica and London, a new source emerged: from 1826 to 1839, the slave-owning creole elite founded an annual *Honduras Almanack*, a compendium of information on the settlement’s history, geography, economic health, and political and even social activities. The first edition declared that “the British settlement of Honduras, of which Belize is the capital, cannot be traced to be of any greater antiquity than from the administration of Oliver Cromwell” (the 1650s). But the following year (1827)—and I soon discovered that I was not the first to find this pirate’s treasure, with Campbell and the Bulmer-Thomases finding it shortly before me—Wallace made his debut appearance: it was a “Lieutenant among the Bucaniers who formerly infested these seas” with the name of “Wallice” who “first discovered the mouth of the River Belize.”<sup>44</sup> Thus the tale told to Caddy had been invented just a decade earlier.

This fiction was repeated as fact each year in the *Almanack*, with new details added in 1839. Wallace was “a native of Falkland in Kinrosshire,” Scotland, and the “small fort” he built at the river mouth “stood on the site now occupied by the

<sup>42</sup> Nathaniel Uring, *A history of the voyages and travels of Capt. Nathaniel Uring, with new draughts of the Bay of Honduras and the Caribee Islands, and particularly of St. Lucia, and the harbour of Petite Carenage, into which ships may run in bad weather, and be safe from all winds and storms* (London: J. Peele, 1726); Restall, “Cook’s Passage” (a transcription and study of Cook’s report, which was published in London in 1769) Long, *History of Jamaica*, vol. 1, pp. 327, 331; Capt. George Henderson, *An account of the British settlement of Honduras* (London: R. Baldwin, 1809; 2nd ed., 1811). Campbell, “Naming and History,” pp. 76–77, consulted Long before me, and searched Bryan Edwards’s 1793 two-volume history of the West Indies, which ignored Belize completely, and the posthumous five-volume 1819 edition, which was no more revealing than Long.

<sup>43</sup> BARS, Records 1 through 7; I refer here to the Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City, to the Archivo General del Estado in Campeche (whose colonial holdings are few and very late), and to the Archivo General del Estado in Mérida, Yucatan (with more extensive colonial holdings beginning at the turn of the eighteenth century). The relevant Spanish archives are too numerous to mention here, save for the AGI, where there is extensive material on eighteenth-century Belize. Relevant sources in the British Library are in a handful of Egerton Mss and a dozen or so Mss Add (for the 1670s, and the 1740s into the nineteenth century), and in TNA, numerous Colonial Office folders—beginning with CO 1, but also CO 23, and CO 137 onward (where most material on Belize begins, starting primarily in the 1740s); also see Burdon, *Archives*, vol. 1.

<sup>44</sup> *Honduras Almanack* (Belize: Authority of the Magistrates, 1826), p. 5; *Ibid.* (1827), p. 5; and Bulmer-Thomas and Bulmer-Thomas, “Origins,” p. 139.

handsome premises of Messrs. Boitias and Delande.” The story was soon picked up and embellished by anyone writing in Spanish or English on Belize; Mexican, Guatemalan, American, and British authors all took up the story as if it were common knowledge—which, with each repetition of it in print, it fast became—and a foundation upon which details could be constructed. For example, in the 1840s, the Yucatecan historian and novelist Justo Sierra O’Reilly added the first name “Peter” and invented his 80 fellow buccaneer-founders—later echoed by Bancroft. The Guatemalan historian Francisco Asturias rewrote the myth in 1925 to turn Wallace into Sir Walter Raleigh’s principal officer, going off on his own to found Belize in 1603. This fantasy was challenged in 1930 by Sir John Burdon, governor-*cum*-historian of British Honduras; but despite his skepticism Burdon perpetuated the myth by repeating it. Its peak was mid-century, with brief but separate chapters devoted to Wallace by E. O. Winzerling (1946) and Stephen Caiger (1951) in books partially titled *British Honduras*. Wallace had become “not only a pirate” but “a diplomat,” “our hero,” a founding father who left a legacy of “Scottish words” still spoken in Belize “after all these years!” With transparent patriotic fervor, the Wallace myth was repeated in scholarly books for another three decades, fading—yet far from dying—after the onset of Belizean Independence in 1981.<sup>45</sup>

The timing of the Wallace myth’s invention, perpetuation, and partial decline, is key to understanding it. With Spain’s loss of its adjacent colonies in the 1820s, and the increasing power of the British Empire, Belize’s centuries-long liminality receded and the British set about building a “colonial-nation.” In 1825, Britain recognized Mexico, and a treaty signed at the end of the following year effectively denied Mexican sovereignty over Belize; treaty-making negotiations with the Central American Federation meanwhile ran through the 1820s.<sup>46</sup>

Months after the Mexican treaty was signed, the creole élite debuted the Wallace myth—as simple fact in the 1827 *Almanack*. By linking Belize’s name to a Briton, and anchoring his act of foundation back to the early seventeenth century, the legitimacy of the colony could be bolstered, and questions regarding Indigenous and Spanish claims put to rest. Although in reality there never ceased to be Maya

<sup>45</sup> *Honduras Almanack* (Belize: Authority of the Magistrates, 1829), p. 5; *Ibid.* (1839), pp. 2–3; Burdon, *Archives*, vol. 1, p. 3; E. O. Winzerling, *The Beginning of British Honduras, 1506–1765* (New York: North River Press, 1946), pp. 51–64. Stephen L. Caiger, *British Honduras: Past and Present* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1951), pp. : 31–39); Campbell, “Naming and History,” pp. 81–108 covers the myth’s modern perpetuation in detail (including evidence that Sierra O’Reilly, in a series of articles in the Campeche newspaper *El Fénix* in the 1830s and 1840s, invented the idea that the name Wallace turned into the toponym Belize); Bulmer-Thomas and Bulmer-Thomas, “Origins,” pp. 139–45. In addition to the above, authors repeating and re-inventing the Wallace myth include Francisco de Paula García Peláez (1851), John L. Stephens (1854), E. G. Squier (1858), Manuel Peniche (1869), Archibald R. Gibbs (1883), Eligio Ancona (1889), Lindsay Bristowe and Philip Wright (1890), Monrad Metzgen and Henry Cain (1925), Francisco Asturias (1925; 1941), Calderón Quijano, *Belice* (1944), William Arlington Donohoe (1947), Rubén Leyton Rodríguez (1956), R. A. Humphreys (1961), D. A. G. Waddell (1961), and Dobson, *Belize* (1973).

<sup>46</sup> Thus set on a steady path toward full institutionalization as a formal colony in the 1820s, Belize was officially named and identified on maps as British Honduras from 1862 to 1981; Humphreys, *British Honduras*, pp. 20–46; also see Hoffmann, *British Honduras*.



communities in the region, and Spain never relinquished its sovereign claim, both the creole élite and the British authorities embraced the twin notions that the Maya were ancient residents, long gone by the time the British arrived, and that the Spaniards failed to settle the region. But creoles were also motivated by an anxiety over labor control, exacerbated by the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and increased flight to Belize's new slave-free neighbors. One of the five wealthiest slave-owners in the settlement, George Hyde, traveled to London in 1827 to press his case for free colored civil and political rights; Hyde had African ancestry on his mother's side, but his paternal line was Highland Scottish. That very same year, Wallace the imaginary Highland Scot appeared in print for the first time.<sup>47</sup>

## The Way to the Itza

As Belize was clearly neither founded by nor named after a seventeenth-century pirate invented in the nineteenth century, let us view the Wallace myth as a dead horse to be buried, not further flogged.

Such a flogging is not in fact new, at times coming tantalizingly close to the etymological solution revealed shortly. Almost since its creation, the Wallace story has been periodically challenged, partly due to its blatant lack of evidence, and partly in partisan efforts to show that the region was rightfully Guatemalan—that is, having always been a legitimate Spanish colony in Maya lands, never founded or legitimately held by the English. Such efforts had significant political motivation and significance; Guatemala's threatening claim to Belize persisted through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into the twenty-first century, periodically stirring well-founded fears in Belize of military invasion, and effectively postponing the colony's transition to independence.

But although Guatemalan writers spotted that *belize* (or *belice*) must have been rooted in a Maya name or phrase, they were not well-acquainted with the Yucatec Maya language or with colonial-era Maya cartographic and toponymic practice. Their failure to see the obvious origins of the name is ironic in view of its reference to a kingdom that lay within modern Guatemala's borders.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> TNA, CO 123/38; Bolland, *Formation*, pp. 84, 92–94, 164–65; Macpherson, "Imagining the Colonial Nation," p. 114. Slavery was abolished in Central America in 1824 (1829 in Mexico and 1833 in Britain's possessions; Bolland, *Formation*, pp. 49–124; Restall, "Crossing to Safety?"). A closely related myth, driven by the same mix of neo-colonial and quasi-patriotic motives, was that of the 1798 Battle of St. George's Caye (I am writing a parallel article on the battle, but see Macpherson, "Imagining the Colonial Nation"; Campbell's uncritical discussion of the battle in "St. George's Cay" is also included in *Becoming Belize*, mostly pp. 260–88). The combining rationale of the two myths—the British founding of Belize in the early seventeenth century and the great naval victory of 1798—was neatly summarized in the 1925 *Handbook of British Honduras* (London: The West India Committee): "Thus it was that the settlement became English by right of conquest in addition to claims of occupation," p. 34.

<sup>48</sup> A sample cluster of Guatemalan attacks on the Wallace myth are found in the following: Francisco Asturias, *Belice* (Guatemala City: Tipografía Nacional de Guatemala, 1941), Carlos García Bauer, *La controversia sobre el territorio de Belice* (Guatemala City: Editorial Universitaria, 1958), and Gabriel Ángel Castañeda, *Belikín: Descripción monográfica de veintidos mil novecientos kilómetros cuadrados de centroamericanidad irredenta* (Guatemala City: Tipografía Nacional de Guatemala, 1969).

As we have seen, the name Belize was applied only to a river until the nineteenth century, when it was applied first to Belize Town, then, much later, to the region. We know that the Maya had names for the region's rivers: what the British came to call the Sarstoon River was the Sactun or Zactun to the Maya—as recorded by Spaniards as early as the Cortés expedition down part of this fluvial passageway in 1525; the Manatee River was the Texach or Tekach; the Sibun was the Xibum or Xibun; and the section of the upper Belize River upon which the Maya city of Tipu sat seems also to have been called the Tipu by local residents.

The Bulmer-Thomases picked up on this last fact and argued that Tipu was the Maya name for the entire Belize River. Their intriguing theory is that Belize referred only to Haulover—the riverine spur described earlier.<sup>49</sup> Their case is based on a reading of Delgado's account of his expedition from Guatemala to Yucatan, via Belize (and an unscheduled seizure by English privateers) in 1677. In describing the distances between the region's rivers, as if traveling northward up the coast, the friar stated that from the previous river "to the river Texocc, 2 leagues; and thence to the river Texach [Manatee], 3 leagues; thence to the river of Xihum [Sibun] 4 leagues; thence to the river Balis, 2 leagues. After these two leagues one enters in the river Tipu."<sup>50</sup>

The Bulmer-Thomas theory deserves consideration and is the closest yet to a convincing, evidence-based explanation. But the Delgado passage reads more as if he is calling "Balis" the two-league (ten-kilometer) stretch of the Belize River from Haulover Creek to the sea, rather than Haulover itself. And while Delgado correctly understood that the Belize River eventually became the Tipu, he surely suggested a name change far too close to the coast (if he were right, the Tipu name would have echoed in eighteenth-century sources, which it does not do). Furthermore, the etymology of Belize—or any of its variants, including Balis—is still left hanging; and, as we shall see shortly, the meaning of the phrase that became Belize strongly suggests that the reference was to most of the river, not to Haulover Creek, nor to a short stretch of the main river close to the coast.

Various explanations of Belize have been offered that are mainly or entirely unsupported by the lexicon and grammar of Yucatec, Itza, Mopan, or any other Mayan language. These include the suggestion that *belize* derives from *belakin*, supposedly meaning "land toward the sea" (neither land nor sea are contained therein) or "road to the east" (an accurate gloss, but there is no linguistic logic or precedent for *belakin* to evolve into *belize* in Maya, Spanish, or English). A supposed variant on *lakin* (east in Yucatec) is *likin*, but in 30 years of archival research I have never seen it used to mean that in a colonial-era Maya document (Yucatec or Itza). The *belakin* fantasy appears to have originated with a pair of partisan Guatemalan writers in the 1950s, before being popularized in a 1958 newspaper article by George Price, who was then leader of the People's United Party. Price went on to be Belize's *pater patriae*, ruling as First Minister, then Premier, then Prime Minister,

<sup>49</sup> Bulmer-Thomas and Bulmer-Thomas, "Origins," pp. 145–51.

<sup>50</sup> See note 22 above on Delgado's 1677 account.

from 1961 to 1984. Not surprisingly, his idea remained popular; it survives, for example, on the bottles of a beer brewed in the country since 1969, whose logo is a pyramid-temple from the ancient Maya city of Altun-Ha, and whose Wikipedia page states that Belize is either from *belakin* or means “muddy” (Figure 8).<sup>51</sup>

That, indeed, is the explanation favored both by Campbell and the Bulmer-Thomases, who agree that the word’s origin must be Maya, with “muddy water” the best option. Campbell concludes that “there does not seem to be much here over which to cavil,” reasoning that this “is the most plausible view, given the swollen nature of the Belize River during the rainy seasons.” However, neither *belize* nor its variants can by any linguistic contortion be turned convincingly to mean “muddy river” or “muddy water.”<sup>52</sup> The Bulmer-Thomases admit that by “[u]sing modern Maya-Spanish dictionaries, this cannot be proven;” but nonetheless they leave it as the solution that “may be correct” and one “where modern scholarship may yield dividends in the future.”<sup>53</sup>

In fact, the solution to the Belize mystery is clear and obvious, once the word is placed in the cultural and linguistic context of the colonial-era Mayas. Its first half, *be*, or *bel*, means road, path, way in Yucatec, Itza, and Mopan Mayan. There are scores, perhaps hundreds, of attestations of the term being used in documents written in Yucatec during the Spanish colonial period—not as part of a toponym, but prefixed to a toponym, as in *bel ticul* (the road to Ticul). Often the two forms were used together, as in *be bel ch’icxulub* (the road to, or going to, Chicxulub), or *nob be bel cauquel* (the large road, or highway, going to Caucel).<sup>54</sup> The phrase is ubiquitous in Maya documents relating to land. For example, in the largest surviving corpus of Maya wills, the eighteenth-century Testaments of Ixil, *bel* is used in this way any time a plot of land is bequeathed that is on a road or track between Ixil and

<sup>51</sup> Erroneous etymologies summarized by Campbell, “Naming and History,” p. 109; Bulmer-Thomas and Bulmer-Thomas, “Origins,” pp. 148–51 (both articles also mention but rightfully dismiss possible French and African etymologies). Dictionary sources include Juan Pío Pérez, *Diccionario de La Lengua Maya* (Merida, Yucatan: Imprenta Literaria, 1866–1877), pp. 23, 192, 200; Cristina Álvarez, *Diccionario etnolingüístico del idioma maya yucateco colonial* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1980); Alfredo Barrera Vásquez, ed., *Diccionario Maya Cordemex* (Merida, Yuc.: Ediciones Cordemex, 1980), pp. 46–48; Charles Andrew Hofling, *Itzaj Maya Grammar* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000), pp. 404, 413; and by the same author, *Mopan-Maya-Spanish-English Dictionary* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2011), pp. 129–30, 219. Bulmer-Thomas and Bulmer-Thomas, “Origins,” pp. 150–51 trace the roots of the *belikin* myth to a 1957 article by Gabriel Ángel Castañeda, repeated the following year in García Bauer, *La Controversia*, and again in the same year by Price in the *Belize Times* (November 4), before being turned into a book (Castañeda, *Belikin*) the year the beer was launched.

<sup>52</sup> There is no simple cognate for river in Yucatec (the peninsula, after all, has few rivers); rivers in Belize with descriptive Maya names use *ha*, water, as in the Yaxha or Yaxhal (Moho River) (literally, “main, or principal, water”), and the Xnoha (*x-* being the female marker or prefix, *nob* meaning large; literally, “large water [gendered female]”). Although outdated in many ways, there is some useful discussion of rivers in J. Eric S. Thompson, *The Maya of Belize: Historical Chapters Since Columbus* (Belize: Cubola, 1988; reprint of Belize: Benex, 1974).

<sup>53</sup> Campbell, “Naming and History,” p. 109 (who cites a footnote by David Pendergast in *Palenque*, p. 21, who in turns states that the name likely “derives from the Yucatecan Mayan word *belize*, meaning ‘muddy water,’” but offers no further explanation or reference); Bulmer-Thomas and Bulmer-Thomas, “Origins,” p. 148 (who cite J.E.S. Thompson’s 1972 *Maya Hieroglyphs Without Tears*; his *Maya of Belize*, p. 43, states in a footnote that “Beliz [*sic*] in Yucatec Maya signifies muddy or muddy water” without further explanation or reference).

<sup>54</sup> Examples drawn from documents formerly in the Archivo Notarial del Estado de Yucatán, now in the Archivo General del Estado de Yucatán, Mérida (in volume #s 1812ii, fol.8[1753]; 1826ii, fol. 340 [1787]), selected because they are also in Matthew Restall, *The Maya World: Yucatec Culture and Society, 1550–1850* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 194, 215, 328–29; also see pp. 195, 326–27.

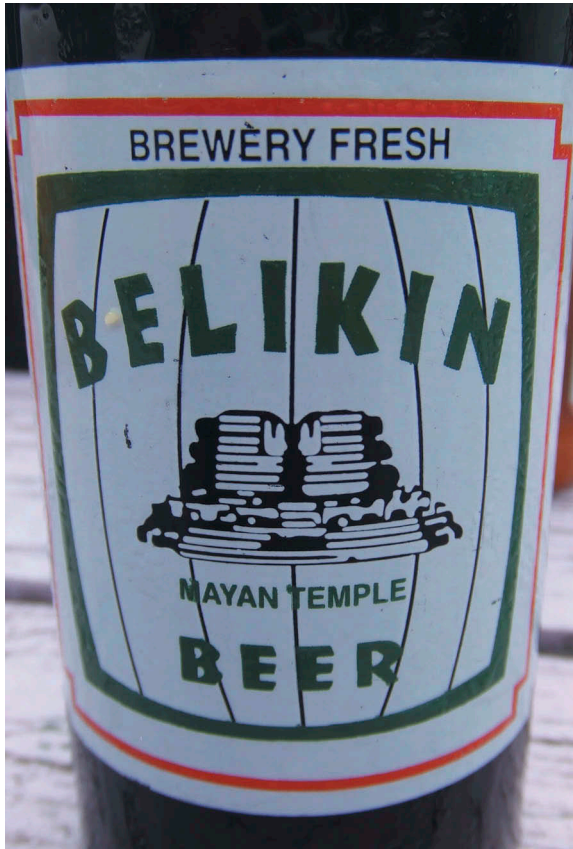


FIGURE 8 One of the labels for Belikin beer, brewed in Belize since 1969; at that time the Premier of British Honduras was George Price, who had popularized a Guatemalan theory that the name “Belize” derived from an (imaginary) Maya word “Belikin.” Photo by author.

another village: *yan Bel Bena* (it is on the road to Bena), *yan bel Kaknab* (it is on the road to Kaknab), *bel baca* (the road to Baca), *bel bena tu nohol be* (the Bena road, on the road south), *bel xku* (the road to Xku), and so on.<sup>55</sup>

If the *bel* of Belize means the road (with the locative implied, “the road to”), what of *-ize* (or *-is*, or *-ix*)? Let us turn again to cartographic evidence for the answer. Although pre-contact Maya maps have not survived, and colonial-era Maya maps contain European elements (most obviously, alphabetic glosses), there are enough of the latter to give us a good sense of how Mayas represented territory on the page using a circular format. Although these maps are arguably “a new pictorial genre,”

<sup>55</sup> Mark Christensen and Matthew Restall, *Return to Ixil* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2019), will numbers A19, B14 (twice), B15 (thrice), B37, B41, B43, B55, C2 (the B and C series are also in Matthew Restall, *Life and Death in a Maya Community: the Ixil Testaments of the 1760s* (Lancaster, CA: Labyrinthos, 1995)). Note that colonial Maya notaries often hypercorrected *l* to write it as *r*, so Ixil’s notaries tended write *ber* for *bel*.

being “intercultural in their circular design,” they nonetheless convey how the Maya saw local worlds in terms of centers, cardinal directions, and round horizons—complete with distant places or roads to those places on the horizon.<sup>56</sup>

One such map, an early colonial example, employs the same *bel* phrase found in textual sources, indicating, for example, the road to Itzmal as *Bel Ytzmal* (Figure 9). The *ytz* or *itz* in Itzmal meant “sacred substance,” usually a fluid, in Yucatec, relating to the city’s centuries-long role as a pilgrimage site; but *itz* also evoked *Itza*, the name of the lineage that had invaded and conquered northern Yucatan in the historical-mythical pre-contact past.

During the centuries of early contact between Mayas and Spaniards in the Belize region—the sixteenth and seventeenth—Itza was not only a common patronymic throughout the peninsula, but was also the name of an Itza-ruled kingdom in what is today northern Guatemala, independent from colonial rule until its conquest by Spanish invaders in 1697. That kingdom was called Peten Itza—*peten* meaning region, province, peninsula, island in Yucatec and Itza Maya (Itza, or Itzaj, being a Yucatecan Mayan language closely related to Yucatec). Its capital city was eventually called Tayasal by Spaniards, a Hispanization of Tah Itza, meaning the place of the Itza—*t*-being the locative, *ah* the agentive. As early as the Landa map of the 1550s, the waterways of Belize are reduced to *Rios de Tahitza* (the rivers of Tah Itza) (Figure 5). Often the name was simply reduced to Itza, surely in speech and certainly on maps (for example, Figure 10). Across the peninsula, it was common for a kingdom or city-state to be named after the *chibal* (patronym-group or lineage) that ruled it—or had founded it, once ruled it, or dominated it; at the dawn of Spanish contact, states in northern Yucatan were named after the Canul, Pech, Cupul, and Xiu *chibalob*, with the Itza and Couoh giving their names to states in what is today northern Guatemala.<sup>57</sup>

As Spaniards found the *itz* sound difficult, they tended to simplify it to an *s* or *z*; hence Itzmal was soon reduced to Izmal or Izamal (as it is known today). Likewise, *bel itza*, meaning the road or way to Itza, would naturally have been reduced by Spaniards to *beliza*. From *beliza* is a tiny step to Belice and Belize.<sup>58</sup> The Sotuta (Figure 9) and other colonial Yucatec maps help us to imagine the design of a map drawn by the Mayas who encountered Spaniards in Belize, especially near the coast; it would have been circular, and the Belize River or its basin would likely have been marked Bel Tipu and Bel Itza.

<sup>56</sup> Amara L. Solari, “Circles of Creation: The Invention of Maya Cartography in Early Colonial Yucatán,” *The Art Bulletin* 92, no. 3 (2010), pp. 154–68; 165.

<sup>57</sup> Jones, *Maya Resistance*; Matthew Restall, *Maya Conquistador* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); Graham, *Maya Christians*, pp. 29–58; Sergio Quezada, *Maya Lords and Lordship: The Formation of Colonial Society in Yucatán, 1350–1600* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014). On Itzaj Maya, see Hofling, *Itzaj Maya Grammar*. Campbell (“Naming and History,” p. 109) states “some” have suggested a derivation “from *balitza* (‘land of the Itza’),” but she gives no source and of course only the Itza part of the theory is correct.

<sup>58</sup> Note that an intermediary stage of toponym hispanization in colonial Mesoamerica sometimes changed *tz* to *x*—pronounced *sh*—before arriving at an *s* or *z*; Tetzco, for example, in Central Mexico, became Texcoco, then Tezcoco. Thus the intermediary variant of Balix is predictable. The interchangeability of *b*, *v*, and *w* in colonial-era Spanish, combined with the intrusion of efforts by Spaniards and English-speakers to understand the toponym, likewise explains the Wallix and Vallix variants.



Maya references to Bel Ticul, Bel Tiho, and Bel Itzmal—or to Bel Itza, if maps and documents had been written alphabetically and survived from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Belize—were not, of course, toponyms per se. The place was Tah Itza, or Titza, or just Itza; Bel Itza indicated its direction, and the way or road or river that took one there. Thus the origin of the name Belize not only takes us linguistically to Mayan and geographically to Indigenous politics; it also takes us historically to moments of Maya-European contact, and to probable conversations between locals and interlopers.

Such conversations took place up and down the Americas for centuries, leaving a trail of place-names that echo half-understandings and mistaken communications, whose ambiguous, confused hybridity make them lasting symbols of the colonial encounter.<sup>59</sup> Adjacent to Belize, the toponym Yucatan stems from just such conversations, and between speakers of the very same two languages—Spanish and Yucatec Maya—spoken in parallel encounters to the south. *Ca than* (using colonial orthography; pronounced *ka-tan*) means “our language”; *u* is the third person pronoun, *nuc* is a verb meaning “reply,” and *natic* is a present tense form of a verb meaning “understand.” It is thus easy to imagine Spaniards asking where they were, and Mayas responding, “Respond in our language!” or “Do you not understand our language?”<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, farther down the coast, Spaniards would have pointed at the mouth of the river that at some moment became the Tipu, and asked what it was or where it went. “That’s the way to the Itza,” they would have replied—“Bel Itza!” We cannot know exactly where and when these conversations took place, but the location of the river and of the Itza kingdom suggest they either occurred in the sixteenth century on or off the central Belizean shore—on the cays, for example, or on a ship anchored off the cays—or up river.<sup>61</sup>

Such Maya could not possibly have known that they were thereby naming a river, as well as a town that would not exist for centuries, and even a nation that would not exist for centuries more. Regardless of how far up the Belize or Tipu River such conversations took place, those Mayas were likely from villages subject to the states centered on Lamanai and Tipu, and their response would thus have been designed to direct the foreigners beyond those home states and toward the more distant, rival kingdom of Itza. It is thus ironic—but also befitting so multiethnic a modern nation—that a Maya phrase would become the Hispanized Maya name for a river, then used by the British to name the settlement, then claimed by Belizean creoles to be derived from an imaginary Scottish invader, rather than an historic Maya one.

<sup>59</sup> For example, as Alan Rayburn remarked of toponyms in Canada, they are “imperfect renderings of what Aboriginal people may have said to explorers, who then provided their interpretations to publishers and mapmakers” (*Naming Canada: Stories About Canadian Place Names* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002], p. 183; quoted by Beck, “Place Names,” p. 18).

<sup>60</sup> Diego de Landa claimed that the derivation was *ci u than*, “funny talk” or “comical language,” but as *ci* is the preterit form of *cen* (again, using colonial orthography), “to say,” it was likely heard when Mayas responded with questions such as, “What language are you speaking?” (see Restall et al., *The Friar and the Maya*).

<sup>61</sup> On Cayo Cosina, for example, already named as such by the mid-seventeenth century but not yet a seasonal camp for English buccaneers and loggers; it appears on the 1641 Sigüenza y Góngora map of New Spain (albeit as “Cosinas” and as a site on the mainland), reproduced in Miguel A. Sánchez Lamego, *El primer mapa general de México elaborado por un mexicano* (Mexico City: Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia, 1955).

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