Since the beginning of this century archaeologists and scientists in related disciplines have looked for clues and facts relating to the Maya occupation of Central Petén. The heavy forest area to the north of Lake Petén-Itzá and the savanna area to the south show signs of heavy population. The number of house mounds and the abundance of potsherds in the savanna, as well as the notable Tikal site and others yet unstudied, document the existence of a complex settlement pattern. Philip A. Means, in his History of the Spanish Conquest of Yucatán and the Itzá, stated that the Central Petén (the region which concerns us in this paper) was still heavily populated in the 15th century and that Tayasal was the cultural center of the Itzá. Cyrus L. Lundell, while studying the vegetation of Petén, asserted that savanna flatlands were still forested during Old Empire times. Increase of the population, shorter cycles of milpa rotation, and retrogression of the vegetation to grassy growth may have occurred during the Great Period, the epoch in which the Peló, Insirite, and Lake Pooka cities flourished. (p. 91)

In fact, Lake Petén-Itzá is an outstanding geographical feature of the southern Maya Lowlands and is located near its center. It is about 23 miles long and 10 miles wide. With reason, this huge body of water influenced Hernando Cortés in 1525 to think that he had encountered an arm of the sea.

On the fifth day the outsiders ahead came upon a huge lake, seemingly an arm of the sea, and such I believe it is on account of its size and depth, although its water is sweet. (Letters to the Emperor, p. 309)
Characteristic of this water is its high lime content, causing the bottom to be covered by a thick layer of limestone ooze. Tayasal currently is a peninsula jutting out into the lake, reaching a height of 600 feet while the water level of the lake is 400 feet.

As far as we know, Cortés and his men were the first Spaniards to visit the Petén. It was in 1525, after several days of travelling through deserted country, that Cortés came upon this area and found numerous settlements. He goes on to say in his Fifth Letter to the Emperor that there was:

...a town on the island in the middle of it which the guide showed them (the outsiders) to be the biggest in the whole province of Taica, but without canoes it was impossible to cross over to it. (p. 309)

Cortés soon met the chief, “Canec by name,” on the coast of the mainland.

...He begged me very earnestly ... to go with him in a canoe to visit his town and house where I should see him burn the idols and could have a cross made for him. (p. 314)

Unfortunately, Cortés did not describe the town. He only stated,

We spent all the day in festival. At nightfall I took my leave of him and embarked again in a canoe with a guide ... (p. 314)

The only observation made by Cortés about the ecology was the existence of “some iguanas, a kind of large lizard which are to be found also in the Islands.” (p. 315)

The people encountered by Cortés were the descendants of the Itza of Yucatán. In reconstructing history, we know that when the Itzá began to lose their foothold in Yucatán in the latter part of the twelfth century, there were migrations. The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel makes reference to the following event:

Then late in the Twelfth Century Hunac Ceel, the ruler of Mayaun, organized a conspiracy against Chichen Itzá ... The consequences were far-reaching ... Not only was there a permanent realignment of the political forces of northern Yucatán ... it resulted in a migration of a considerable portion of the Itzá nation to the distant region of Lake Petén in what is now the Republic of Guatemala. (Roa, 1933, p. 177)

These people enjoyed the reputation of being “vicious” and promoters of “evil and war.” (Goetz and Morley, 1950, p. 68.) In spite of the first peaceful contact with Cortés in 1525, the Itzá of Petén resisted political and religious subjugation until 1697 when Martín de Ursua felt justified in crushing the "uncivilized" traditions of the people and defeated them. He then gave orders to his soldiers and to his lieutenant priest, in the name of his King Charles II, to visit all places of worship in Tayasal (the great island of the lake) and destroy pagan idols. The report shows that this was such an extensive task that it took constant work from eight in the morning until five in the afternoon. (Villagutiére Soto-Mayor, 1933, pp. 369-384)

Before Ursua’s final conquest, the descriptions given by missionary expeditions in the 17th century indicate that:

In the Petén Grande there were nineteen places for worship (alabatorias) or temples for idols; and the priests saw four of them and all were large houses of almost two stories in height, of very strong walls and thick ... (Villaguátiére Soto-Mayor, p. 313)

Because the Itzá occupied five small islands and one great island, and since the largest island today is the site of the city of Flores, there has
been much confusion as to this "large island" referred to in the writings. For example, J. Eric S. Thompson in *Homenaje al Dr. Alfonso Caso* writes,

The Itzá occupied five small islands in Lake Petén and Eixmil and the swampy parts to the West, of which Noh Petén (Great Island) or Tayasal, site of the modern town of Flores, was the most important . . .

On a peninsula of the mainland opposite Noh Petén lies the archaeological site named Tayasal. This is an early site which is shown by potsherds and hieroglyphic texts to have been occupied during the Formative and Initial Series Periods. Morley believed it to have been the historical Noh Petén, but it is evident from the comments that the site should be an island, as, indeed, the name in itself indicates. (p. 390)

Thomas Gann and Eric Thompson remarked elsewhere that,

The Itzá rulers abandoned Chichen-Itzá and migrated south into the Petén. There they established themselves on the island in the middle of the lake now known as Flores. (Thomas Gann and J. E. Thompson, *The History of the Maya*, p. 85)

However, Tayasal is not the same as Flores. There is an obvious confusion in the above statements. The question raised here is, then, whether Tayasal was an island, and perhaps the largest island in the lake at the time of Cortés and Ursúa. Could the water level of the lake have been sufficiently high at the time of the arrival of the Spaniards so that Flores would have been one of the five small islands instead of being the largest?

Even recent writings by Stephen F. de Borhegyi in *Archaeology* refer to the island reached by Cortés as the "refuge of the Itzá Maya on Lake Petén-Itzá." (p. 14)

In 1698 the island was fortified by the Spanish and made into a penal colony. Today the island is called San Andrés and its city, Flores, is administrative capital . . . (p. 16)

George Cowgill traces the location of Cortés in the lake area and assumes also that the "Great Island" refers to Flores. He states:

Cortés has a good reputation for accuracy in his estimates of distance . . . and this end of the lake is a little over eight kilometers from Flores, which agrees very nicely with Cortés' further remark that he was now 'a good two leagues' distant from the town of the island. (MacNeult 1908:271, p. 391)
Drawing of Lake Petén-Itzá and the surrounding area, found by the author in the Archivos de Indias, Seville. Published by permission of the Archivos de Indias.
Street in the city of Flores, showing a mixture of Spanish and Maya architecture.

An uphill street in Flores leading toward the plaza at the center of the island.

Scene at the beaches, where marketing takes place. Floresenos await the arrival of San Joseino and San Andrito, who bring products from their pueblos.

Without other documents from the past, and looking only at the present geographical configuration, it might seem plausible that Flores was the island referred to in the earlier writings. However, having lived and studied in the area for more than two years, I could not help but wonder whether Flores was in fact the island referred to in the historical documents. It is a very small island on which presently live over 1500 persons, and the island is very congested in the present urban pattern. To find iguanas, as reported by Cortés on his first visit, is unlikely in Flores. And if the Maya kept the settlement pattern of other Maya villages, then only a handful of families could have resided on a small island, and not the “immense multitude of people” reported by Ursua when he attacked “the island” in 1697:

The principal island of the Itzá with such an immense multitude of people . . . preferred to throw themselves into the deep water (in search of escape). (Villagustrie, p. 371)

If Ursua referred to Tayasal, and if Tayasal were a peninsula at that time, the inhabitants would not have found it necessary to throw themselves into the water, but could have retreated directly into the forest as Ursua attacked by water. Maya are not good swimmers, and if they were to attempt to swim from Flores to the coast I foresee many difficulties for poor swimmers.
My interest increased when I learned from a ninety-year-old informant in 1960 that his father had told him Tayasal Peninsula had once been an “island”; and in eliciting additional information, other growers of corn (milpas) in the area corroborated this statement.

There are manifestations (indicios) that Tayasal was surrounded by water. It shows in the view from here that these waters (around Flores) joined those from El Remate (the farthest end of the lake opposite Flores).

While searching for ethnohistorical material in the Archivos de Indias in Seville, Spain, in 1964, I came across a general map of northern Guatemala and what is today British Honduras, dated in 1785. Many geographical features are inaccurate, but the map shows a large island in the area of what today is the Tayasal Peninsula.

The Spaniards had already colonized the area and were establishing towns along the routes to the north (Yucatán) and the south (Guatemala Highlands). With the same group of documents there was the special document—a drawing of the lake area in water color. The towns of San José, San Andrés, Sta. Ana, Sto. Toribio, Los Dolores, San Francisco, San Luis, and San Migue exist today; but others such as Estancia del Rey, San Pedro, Sta. Rita, San Martin, San Felipe, Concepción, San Antonio, and San Bernabé have disappeared as towns, though the areas are known by these names on the map. The most important and relevant feature is that Tayasal is clearly an island. The map has no specific date, but I found it among documents dated between 1700 and 1750. Other documents in the 1730’s mentioned these towns; therefore, the map can be safely placed around 1730. It seems highly unlikely that this drawing could have been an invention of the “artist” who so perfectly placed many environmental features and the relative location of all settlements.

Can one find statements to support the information presented in this drawing? Lundell pointed out that the waters of the lake seemed to fluctuate and that:

Since 1929 the water level of Lake Petén-Itzá has been rising annually so that much of the shore has been inundated, with the result that the aspects of the lower banks are constantly changing... Scores of buildings in the city of Flores and in the villages around the lake have been flooded and abandoned. Plates 2 and 11, Figure 2, show the ancient beach line of the lake, estimated to be about 20 meters above the present level (65.6 feet). (pp. 20-21)

The oldest inhabitants of Flores remember when, in 1900, their island was larger, having since lost some land to the lake. This issue has caused the crowded conditions along the beaches of the island. However, if the waters were sufficiently high to leave Tayasal as an island, then Flores would have been a very small island, an impractical place for habitation. Only the area of the present Plaza and a block around could have been above water.

On the basis of this map, the conquistadores, Cortés and Ursúa, would have referred to Tayasal as the big island. It is my assumption that Cortés approached the area along the southern shore of the lake, having come from the eastern side of the lake, from which vantage point Tayasal would not have been confused with a peninsula. Had he faced Tayasal from the center of the lake it would have appeared to be a peninsula. And had there been this type of confusion, it would have been a matter reported to the king. Furthermore, Cortés’ crossing by canoe, when accompanied by the Itzá chief, evidently seemed short and no mention of weather conditions affecting the waters was made. If the trip had been made from the coast of San Andrés, it would have taken several hours and weather conditions, particularly the winds, affect navigation of small canoes to the extent that the crossing is considered very dangerous and is usually avoided in the late afternoon and at night.

Ursúa destroyed the idols and oratories of Tayasal, founded three settlements there with the Maya population, and began the development of a fortress (El Castillo) on today’s island of Flores. He called the island Nuestra Señora de los Remellos y San Pablo. This settlement pattern seemed practical and logical for administration and protection from further attacks by the Itzá.

During the recent remodeling of the Catholic Church in Flores it was found that an old prehispanic wall had been used as the foundation for the first church. Also a great many potsherds were collected and are now in the Museum at Tikal. Flores evidently had some important oratorio or Maya temple at its highest point and the Spanish clergy may have used it for the building of the Christian church. This was a pattern followed in other areas of South America.

If we take the statement that the Itzá occupied five small and one large island of the lake, and if we assume that the water level was about 500 feet, then the present peninsula of Tayasal was the large island. However, the location of the other five small islands still remains a problem.
view of the north shore of the lake from the heights of Tayasal, showing the area of lowlands easily flooded in the rainy season. San José, a town of Izá, at the left—two and a half to three hours crossing from Tayasal by dugout canoes.

since our document does not show them. If the water level, however, reached a height of 350 feet or more, then we find that a series of islands should have existed in what is today a single piece of land known as Tayasal Peninsula. Morley stated that, "it seems probable that 225 years ago the water level was between 40 and 42 feet higher than at present." If this assumption can be substantiated, then it would seem probable that there did exist a sufficiently large island for habitation.

Furthermore, it is interesting to speculate on the effects of fluctuation of water level, particularly on food supply. If the water in this general region of Petén was about 50 feet higher, the bajos (low depressions containing water only in the rainy season) in Tikal would have been a substantial body of water and perhaps naturally linked to the general water systems of the large rivers, particularly in the rainy season. As the water receded in the dry season, large quantities of fish would have been trapped, as is currently the case in the savanna area, and would have supplemented any insufficient amount of maguey. By the same token, when the water level of lakes and rivers subsided for a prolonged period, an important source of food disappeared and could have caused a disruption of life in a highly urbanized Maya center.

The map found in the Archives in Seville proves Morley's assumption that Tayasal was an island and that it, not Flores, was the "historical Noh Petén." Although other questions can be raised regarding Flores, for the time being we can assume that the present peninsula of Tayasal could have been the large island referred to by both Cortés and Ursúa. The exact boundaries, however, cannot be precisely determined with the data at hand and are therefore a matter for further research.

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