

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-66006-8 - The Classic Maya  
Stephen D. Houston and Takeshi Inomata  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

PART I

SETTING

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### THE THRILL OF DISCOVERY

An archaeologist trains for years to frame the right questions. But every now and then comes a flash of unexpected discovery. Takeshi Inomata felt this in the rooms of a ruined building at Aguateca, Guatemala. Scraping through muddy soil, he found a scatter of objects, including pottery, figurines, shells, stone tools, and pieces of jade. Many were of exquisite design and manufacture. Inomata soon discovered that, at Aguateca, after an attack by unknown people some twelve-hundred years ago, nobles or members of the royal family left their treasure, having fled invading enemies or been captured by attackers. At that instant Inomata knew his life would change. His team had uncovered a Pompeii of the Classic Maya, with a privileged glimpse into a lost way of life (Inomata 2003). Houston felt that same thrill when seeing, for the first time, a carved panel at Piedras Negras, Guatemala, a text just emerging from its sheltering earth, or while peering into an infrared TV camera at Bonampak, Mexico, its murals obscured by crust, its meaning laid bare by new technology (Houston et al. 2000; Ware et al. 2002).

The study of the Classic Maya, who flourished in and around the Yucatan Peninsula from about AD 250 to 900, is in a golden age (Figs. 1.1 and 1.2). There are unprecedented numbers of excavations, a flurry of publications facilitated by the web, along with dozens of advanced degrees on Maya subjects or new positions for academics who teach classes on the Maya. A largely deciphered system of writing gives a strong, often surprising voice to the past (Houston 2000). Effective scientific techniques provide new detail on manufacture, agriculture, and imagery (Beach et al. 2006; Dunning et al. 2002). Piqued by popular magazines, TV specials, and Hollywood movies, public interest has reached new heights, as does tourism in sites that are only a few hours away by jet or land vehicle from the United States or metropolitan Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras (Ardren 2006; Casteñeda 1996; Aimers and Graham 2007). Descendants of Maya who lived at sites like Copan, Palenque,

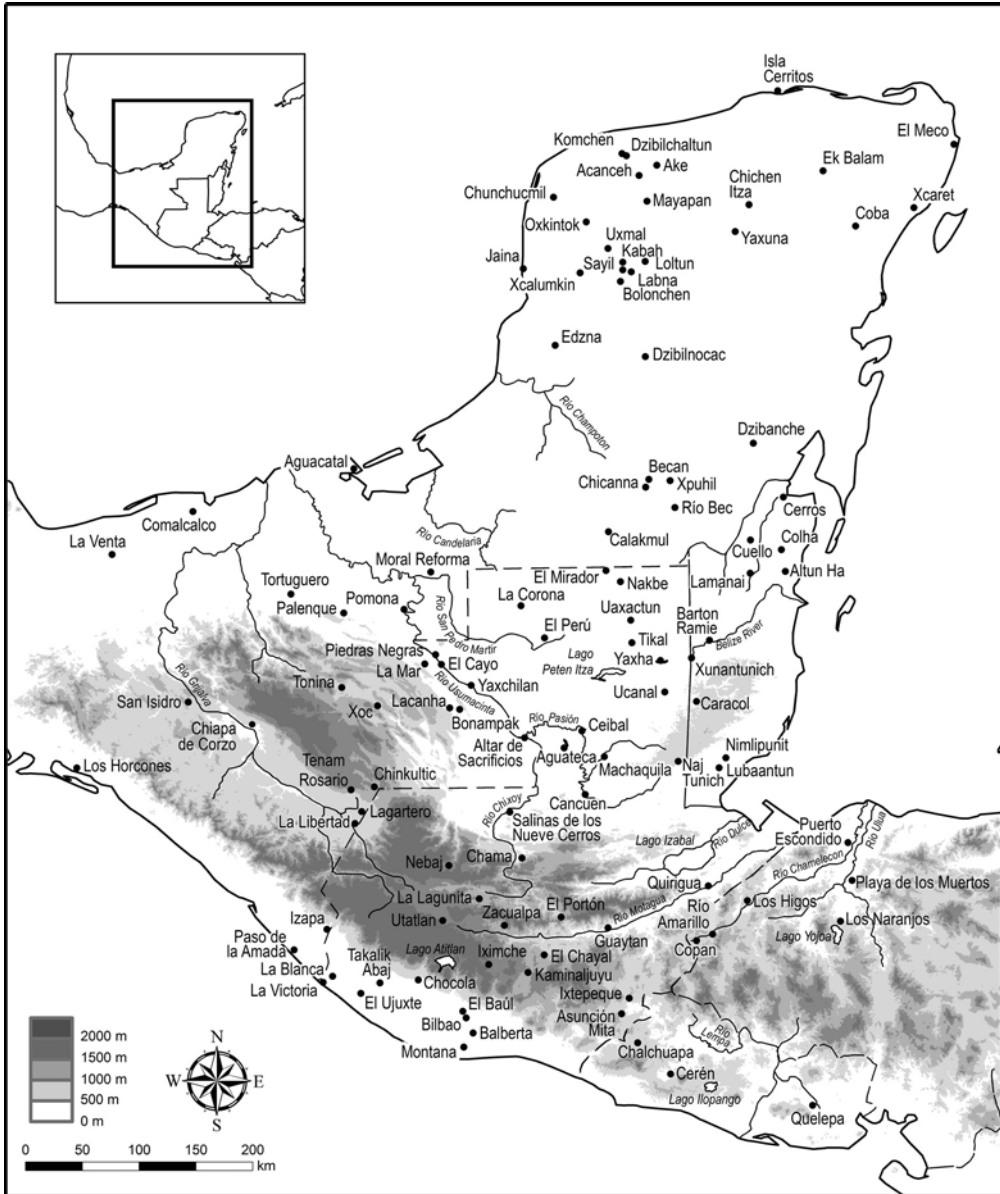


Figure 1.1. Map of Maya region, showing the location of archaeological sites and geographic features.

and Chichen Itza pay attention to the meaning of such cities and, in some circles, wish to have a say in their interpretation and use. This is a rich story of scholarship and reception, with many participants and as many opinions as there are scholars working with Maya materials. In this introductory chapter on finding out who the Classic Maya were, we first present a discussion of the physical Maya setting. We follow this discussion with a history of



## THE CLASSIC MAYA AND THEIR WORLD

Who were the Classic Maya? Their ethnic identity is a complex issue with profound historical and anthropological implications. For today's Maya, anthropologists and cultural activists consider language the primary marker of ethnicity (Fischer and Brown 1996). The Maya are, above all, those who speak Mayan languages. The origin of the term "Maya," however, remains opaque. The sixteenth-century bishop Diego de Landa (Tozzer 1941: 7) and the seventeenth-century chronicler Diego López de Cogolludo (1971, I: 65) noted that certain areas of Yucatan, particularly those around the Postclassic center of Mayapan, were called "Maya." Yet the notion of the Pan-Maya cultural identity is a relatively recent historical product shaped by contrasts with groups of European descent and Ladinos of mixed heritage who exercise economic and political dominance (Warren 1998). The perception of the "Maya" as a culturally unified, self-acknowledged population may have been nearly absent during the Classic period, although a general sense of similarity or relatedness probably existed in contrast to Central Mexican groups and the residents of neighboring regions (see Preface).

Excluding the Wastekan branch, a linguistic relative occupying northern Veracruz, the Maya language family today includes roughly 29 known languages, although the number may change slightly depending on classification (Figs. 1.3 and 1.4). The lowland area, on which this book focuses, was dominated by the Yukatekan and Ch'olan branches. According to recent epigraphic decipherment, most Classic-period inscriptions were written in Classic Ch'olti'an, a predecessor of today's Ch'orti (Houston et al. 2000; for another view, see Wald 2007, which strongly privileges the language of Acalan Chontal of Tabasco, Mexico). In the northern part of the Yucatan Peninsula the majority of the population most likely spoke an ancestral form of Yukatek, indicating the coexistence of an elite prestige language and a conversational language for everyday use. This pattern implies the importance of language in forming cultural ties that cut across political units, at least for the higher echelons of the society. Mayan speakers during the colonial period and the present day have occupied an area encompassing today's Guatemala, Belize, the western portions of Honduras and El Salvador, as well as the Mexican states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatan, and Quintana Roo.

The Maya area can be roughly divided into the lowlands and highlands, a geographical division that strongly shaped the courses of historical development (Fig. 1.1). The Maya lowlands consist of thick, horizontal limestone formations. Though flat and uniform on a regional scale, the area often exhibits topographic and ecological diversity on a smaller level, with well-drained hills and low-lying wetlands shaped through karstic formations and tectonic activities. A gigantic meteor hit the peninsula some sixty-five-million years ago, spewing out ejecta that continue to affect water in the Maya world and

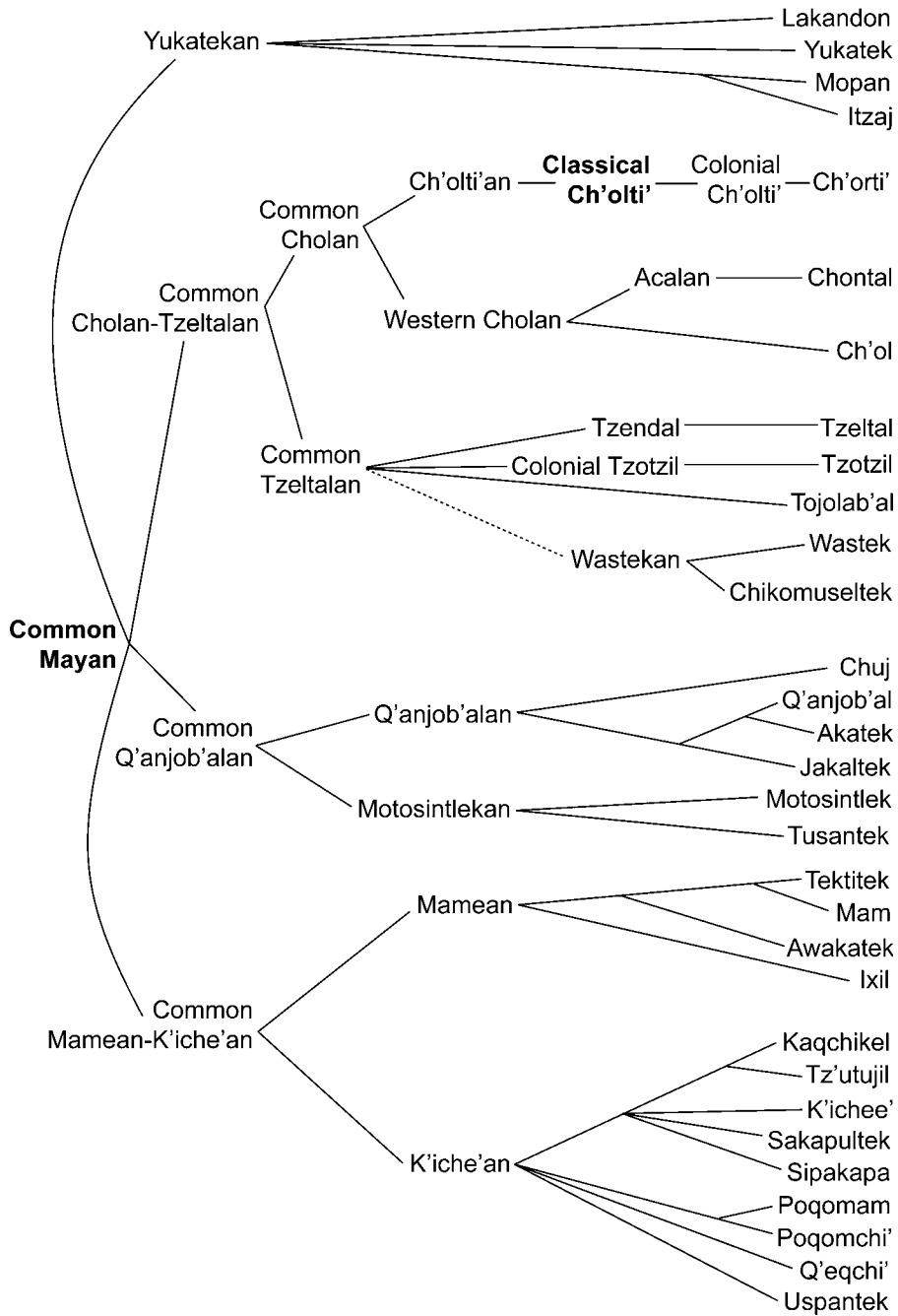
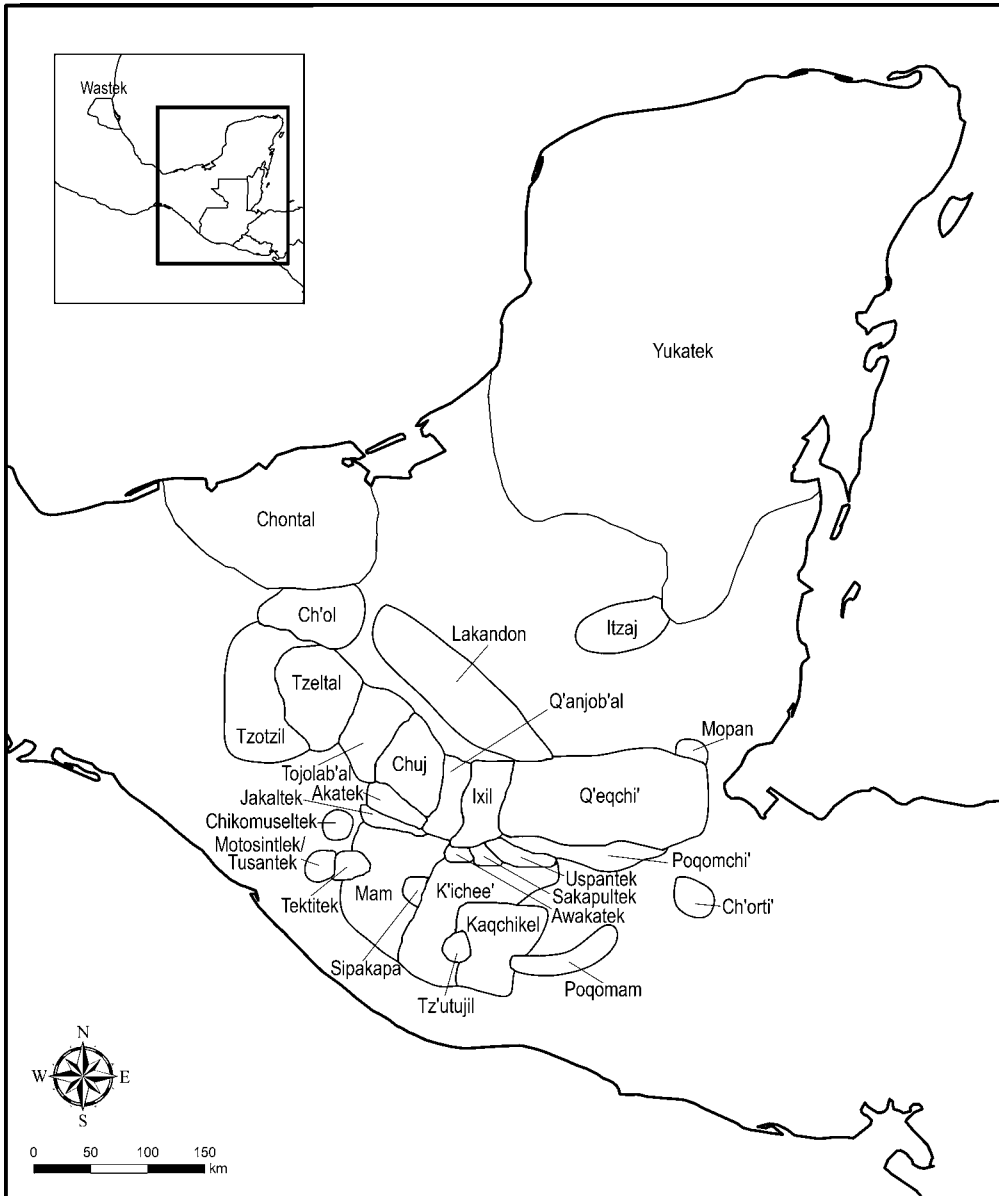
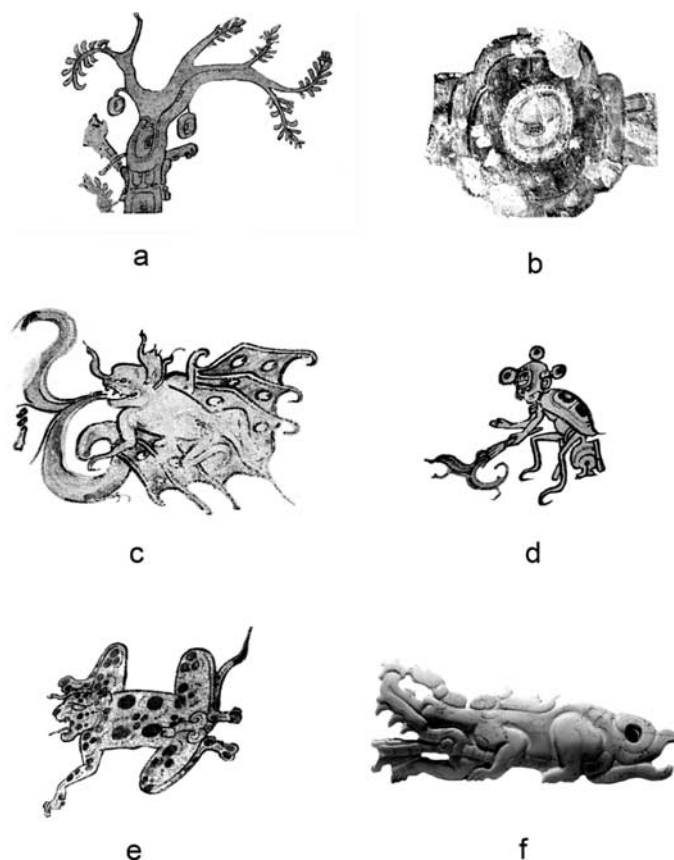


Figure 1.3. Mayan languages (after Houston et al. 2000, for other views, see Campbell 1984, figs. 1, 2).



**Figure 1.4.** Map showing the distribution of Mayan language groups around 1950.

resulting in a crater, the Chicxulub, that influenced the distribution of *cenotes* and water flow to the north. The Maya Mountains in eastern Peten and southern Belize add to the heterogeneity with their rugged topography and igneous rock formations. Rainfall is highest in the southern lowlands, with the annual precipitation ranging from two thousand to four thousand millimeters. It decreases to five hundred millimeters towards the northwestern corner of the Yucatan Peninsula. A large part of the rain concentrates during the rainy season from May to December, with brief dry spells therein that affected



**Figure 1.5.** Flora and fauna of the Maya region, a selection, all Late Classic period: a) mythic tree (K1226, copyright Justin Kerr); b) flower (House E, Palenque; photograph by Stephen Houston); c) bat (K1080); d) firefly (K521); e) jaguar (K771); f) crocodile (K8750) (copyright Justin Kerr).

human activity. Because of the erosion and dissolution of limestone bedrock, much of the rainfall is quickly lost underground, into the byzantine maze of caves dissolved out of limestone. Surface bodies of water are scarce, particularly in the northern part of the peninsula. Securing water during the dry season was an important concern for the Maya of many areas and led to a technology of water capture from wells to reservoirs of varying size.

Vegetation changes according to the precipitation, from the high tropical jungle in the south to low, thorny shrub forests in the north. The flora and fauna of the lowlands are characterized by the great diversity of species – from jaguar (*Panthera onca*) to tapir (*Tapirus bairdii*) and a variety of fearsome serpents, to still undocumented riches in the arthropod phylum, and, along the coast, fishes that include the *xook*, “shark”: many are attested in Classic iconography, and it is possible that English words like “shark” or “cockroach” were of Maya origin (Fig. 1.5; see Jones 1985, also Anderson and Tzuc 2005; Nations 2006; and Schlesinger 2002). Diverse ecological niches, such as high forests in



uplands and low vegetation of palms and sedges in seasonal wetlands (*bajos*), may coexist in relatively small areas (Rice 1993). The Maya often used dark, fertile soils of uplands (Rendzina or Rendzina-like soils) for agriculture, sometimes building terraces to reduce soil erosion and to create planting surfaces, a trend that clearly accelerated during the Classic period. Vertisol soils commonly found in *bajo* wetlands shrink and harden drastically during the dry season, but productive wetland agriculture was possible in some areas with adequate drainage systems (Dunning 1996). In contrast to the remarkable biodiversity, the lowlands offered little in terms of mineral resources other than clay for ceramics and limestone as construction material and raw material for lime plaster. A notable exception is the chert found in limestone formations that was used for cutting tools. Concentrations of slate were sometimes employed by Classic Maya for sculptures or tools (Healey et al. 1995), and quartz pebbles and other objects could be collected for ritual purposes, particularly in the enigmatic, copious deposits in caves of Classic Maya date (Brady et al. 2005; Brady and Rissolo 2006). The very notion of a “resource” – from essential, nutritional ones like salt from brine-boiling along the coast or near salt domes inland to hacked-off cave stone for ritual purposes – requires a Maya mind-set that scholars still endeavor to understand (Andrews 1983; McKillop 2002).

The highlands are marked by rugged mountain ranges and deep valleys shaped by rapid-flowing rivers, tectonics, and active volcanoes. Rainfall varies from below one thousand millimeters in the Motagua Valley and the central Chiapas depression to three thousand millimeters in the northern highlands. To a pronounced degree, vegetation varies according to precipitation and altitude, including broadleaf evergreen forests, broadleaf deciduous forests, and coniferous forests (Wagner 1964). The cloud forest of the northern highlands was home to quetzal birds (*Pharomachrus mocinno*), whose bright green feathers were highly valued. The highlands were rich in mineral resources, providing basalt and other igneous rocks for grinding stones and axes, as well as obsidian for cutting tools. Pyrite used for polished mirrors may have been obtained in the Huehuetenango region, and the Middle Motagua Valley is the only confirmed jade source in Mesoamerica (Seitz et al. 2001). Soil types vary widely depending on age, local climate, vegetation, and topography, but volcanic soils of the highlands are in general highly fertile. In highlands and lowlands alike, it is important to remember that patterns in vegetation and climate have shifted over time (see Chapter 3) as a result of rises in sea level, oscillations in rainfall, and human activity – the Maya world was dynamic in its natural and human processes, and the two were intertwined for many millennia (Beach et al. 2008; McKillop 2005).

#### STUDYING THE CLASSIC MAYA

“Discovery” varies according to point of view. For every archaeologist who claims the first glimpse of this or that site (Bourne 2001), there is a Maya

or humble logger or *chiclero* (a tapper of chewing gum sap, from *chicozapote* trees deep in the jungle) who knew of it long before. Recent studies illustrate how at certain sites in the southern lowlands, Maya often visited ruins to supplicate gods and leave objects of reverence (Palka 2005: 258–60). Others were never “lost,” especially in northern Yucatan, where some of the first archaeological maps appear in colonial documents (Tozzer 1941: 178). But the eighteenth century is really when Classic Maya cities, especially Palenque and Chiapas, attracted expeditions that influenced scholars and public alike. These expeditions, motivated by the need of the Bourbon monarchs in Spain to understand the farthest reaches of their colonies, did not in fact have an immediate impact, although, ironically, their projects proved destabilizing to the empire they sought to preserve (Dym 2006: 36–42).

The impact of the first expeditions was rather felt through delayed publications, appearing in steady flow from the early nineteenth century on, stirring interest but not, because of indifferent quality, answering many questions (G. Stuart 1992: 4–13). By chance, this was precisely when the Maya lands began to open up to foreign visitors. Spanish control, long allergic to travelers from other lands, gave way to national governments in Mexico and Guatemala that allowed perceptive explorers, most notably John Lloyd Stephens (1805–1852) and his artist Frederick Catherwood (1799–1854), to acquaint the world with Classic-period cities like Copan, Palenque, and others still in Yucatan (Fig. 1.6; Stephens 1841, 1843). Equipped with *camera lucida* (an optical device that facilitates copying), a skilled hand, and a will to master unfamiliar shapes, Catherwood recorded and communicated as never before the aesthetic riches of Classic civilization, although his and Stephens’ grasp of the chronology of such pieces remained vague. It was nonetheless Stephens who appended a description of the Maya calendar, by Juan Pío Pérez (1798–1859), and thereby offered an indigenous view of time (G. Stuart 1992: 17; see Section titled “Time”).

Soon, and certainly by the decades just prior to the American Civil War, educated readers knew that the Yucatan Peninsula and environs held ruins with palaces, pyramids, and inscriptions. By growing consensus, these remains came from Maya hands, the ancestors of indigenous peoples in and around the peninsula (Houston et al. 2001: 21–3). It took a few more years, however, to see the broader links between Mayan languages and to treat its speakers as historically related peoples, albeit with varying connections to this site or that inscription (Houston et al. 2001: 80–1).

By the late-nineteenth century, individual researchers, often of independent means – Alfred Maudslay (1850–1931), a determined and thorough documenter of sites like Quirigua, Copan, and Tikal, is the exemplary figure (I. Graham 2002) – collected valuable information, to be complemented in the final years of the century by institutions like the Peabody Museum at Harvard. The innovation was not the use of intrepid explorers, as that would continue to the present – until a surprisingly late date, into the 1950s, Maya archaeology had the air of “gentlemen’s avocation” (M. Coe 1990). Instead,