ONE

INTRODUCTION

The study of ancient politics is a messy endeavor. The basic questions are not the problems: How did past societies organize themselves, and how and why did those organizational strategies succeed or fail? Yet archaeologists can only glean social choices and cultural meanings from materials and architecture and by identifying where people built their lives. Acknowledging the inherent challenges we face to understand fully how ancient peoples conceived and narrated their own beliefs, this book puts forth a new take on an old story to understand how political authorities emerged.

Archaeology has long centered on investigating the rise and fall of societies by targeting political institutions and the individuals and groups that embody them. Early anthropologists sought to identify the cross-cultural emergence of hierarchy, motivated by the need to explain or justify modern schemes of power or, conversely, to incite action against power structures. One of the key questions of broader social science became the relationship of *agency*, or an individual's capacity for intentional choices and actions, to *structure*, or predetermined sociocultural systems and norms. Later studies moved away from structure and institutions to highlight the relationship of individuals to each other within frameworks of everyday politics reinforced by ingrained practices. Navigating social change is a universally human experience, and as we explore themes of belonging to communities and domination over people and landscape, we ultimately learn about ourselves.

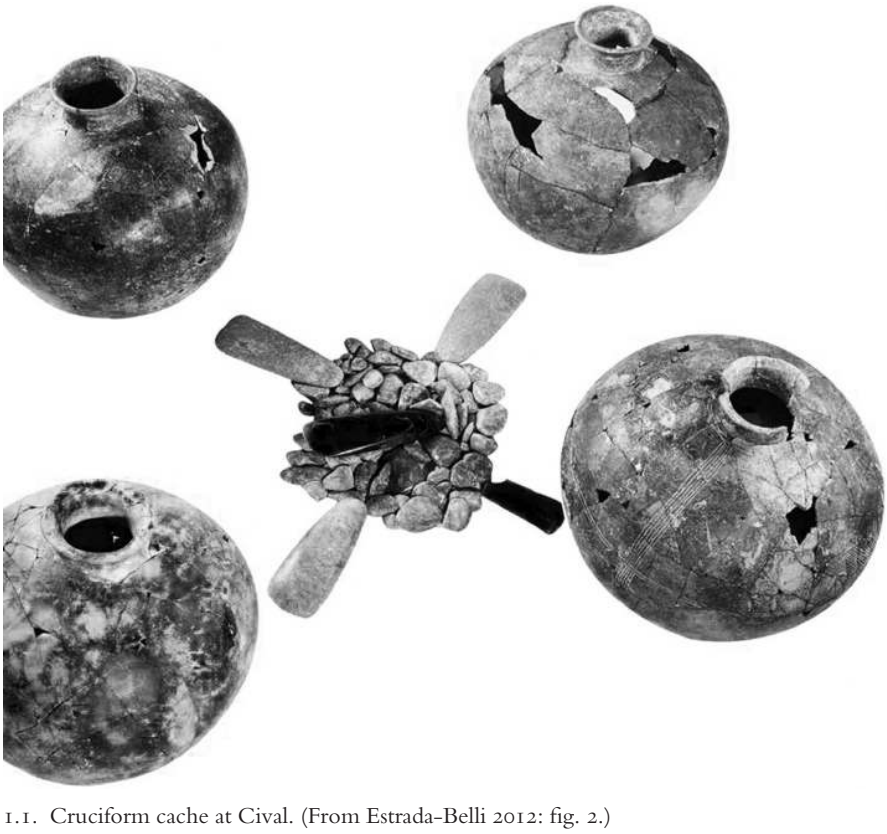
THE PRECLASSIC MAYA

The Preclassic Maya period (*ca.* 1000 BC–AD 250) is an ideal case study to address global emerging politics. I focus here on the cross-cultural link between *monumentality*, the quality of human collaborations and buildings having enlarged size or imposing intent, and what is sometimes called *urbanism*, the tendency of humans to live in densely aggregated settlements. During the Preclassic, farming families who had cemented their place on the landscape near reliable water sources began to create a built environment that engendered permanence. Eventually, the descendants of the early agricultural villagers cooperated to build some of the largest structures ever built in the ancient Americas. Recent discoveries allow archaeologists to chart collective shifts in Maya material and aesthetic values before the rise and fall of the Classic-period (*ca.* AD 250–900) kingdoms. Thus, within the broader field of anthropology, this study forms a vital bridge between the more abstract discussions of the nature of inequality among human societies and the specific biography of a well-known civilization, in this case, the Classic-period Maya.

An interest in the earliest Maya often comes unexpectedly, whether from stumbling on magnificent murals while lost in the jungle or simply expecting Classic remains and finding earlier materials. The earliest explorers in the Maya area began to suspect that the grandiose Classic cities did not arise spontaneously but after generations of "early Maya" (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937) or "pre-Classic" Maya settlement (Smith 1950: 4). In fact, by the time work ended in the large-scale excavations at Tikal, Guatemala, William Coe (1965: 1417) had concluded that "by about 100 B.C. . . . the known cultural traits are basically indistinguishable from those of Classic times."

Recent discoveries have perhaps tempered the awe or surprise of yesterday by consistently showing that the Preclassic groups in the Maya heartland defy traditional narratives of "simple" precursors to "complex" Classic societies. One of these discoveries (Figure 1.1), the multilayer cruciform cache at Cival, Guatemala, sparked my own interest in the Preclassic Maya. The offering of jade axes and pebbles covered with large water jars marked a dedicatory event in which one ancient group celebrated new beginnings. Witnessing the remains of such a sumptuous foundation event led me to question why people would invest so heavily to build their communities in such unlikely a place as the sweltering lowland tropical forest.

Before the Classic-period, Maya peoples were constructing monumental buildings and gathering spaces, producing sophisticated ceramic items, sculpting masterpiece works out of stone and stucco, and engaging in mural painting with extensive hieroglyphic texts. Unfortunately, the subsequent search for Classic traits in Preclassic times clouded some of the more important questions about early Maya societies. In other words, research on the Preclassic Maya was

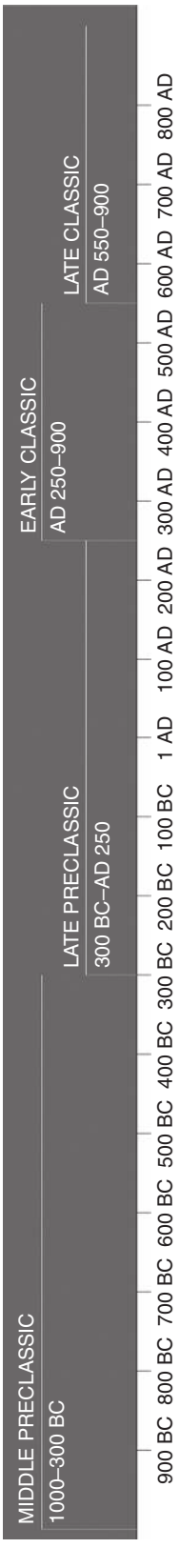


1.1. Cruciform cache at Cival. (From Estrada-Belli 2012: fig. 2.)

stunted in a sense by overreliance on interpretation using a Classic-period lens. To compare, it would be like studying the early Roman Empire by using models and methods developed for the early Byzantine Empire. Here, rather than asking loaded questions such as, What is the early evidence of divine kingship? I instead ask, What do material remains, such as spatial distribution of early communities, common building and production practices, and shared imagery tell us about how early Maya peoples self-organized? I argue that people founded community centers, places of social communion and exchange, at specific places on the landscape that reflected commonly held beliefs in a solar cosmology and aesthetic ecology. These early centers of emerging urbanism, and the gathering of people therein, facilitated the development of divine kingship and coordinated political interactions.

OVERVIEW OF THE ANCIENT MAYA

Ancient Mayan language-speaking peoples occupied the Lowlands of the Yucatan Peninsula from archaic times to the present, with an apogee of pre-Hispanic population in the Late Classic-period (Figure 1.2). Most information



1.2. Timeline of cultural periods in the Maya Lowlands.

on preceramic (i.e., pre-1000 BC) populations comes from modern-day Belize, where cave excavations and chance finds of projectile points indicate that hunters lived in the area very early. Environmental evidence suggests that small groups were clearing forest and farming maize and other crops as early as the third millennium BC but conspicuously not building permanent settlements or engaging in ceramic production until after 1000 BC. During the Middle Preclassic period (*ca.* 1000–300 BC), the Maya built the first major ceremonial centers, perhaps as a result of increased interaction with peoples from the Gulf Coast or Isthmian regions who had prior large centers and ceramic traditions. The Late Preclassic period (*ca.* 300 BC–AD 250) marks one peak in the dynamic cycles of Maya centers, in which early kings built gigantic pyramids and commissioned elaborate sculptures to adorn their facades.

The traditional focus of Mayaland research has been the dynastic royal courts and surrounding settlements of the Early and Late Classic-periods (*ca.* AD 250–900). Intriguing clues about the interaction of Maya peoples with the faraway urban society of Teotihuacan in Central Mexico have fueled research at several sites with Early Classic monuments and constructions. The realistic portraits, murals, and rich tombs of Late Classic rulers captured the imagination of several generations of archaeologists and dreamers. Later centers from the Terminal Classic and Postclassic periods (*ca.* 900–1500), such as Chichen Itza, still attract tourists today with their eclectic building styles and past narratives of mystery.

Aside from the fascinating culture history, how do the ancient Maya contribute to the field of anthropology? The most obvious contribution has been through the decipherment of the hieroglyphic writing system, from both linguistic and historical perspectives, which has formed a foundation for understanding of pre-Columbian thought. The Classic Maya have also long served as a prime case of unique governance practices and low-density urban settlements. One crucial question in the coming years will be that of socio-environmental sustainability of people in a tropical ecological context. Although the famed "collapse" gets more attention, the sheer number of years and size of populations that Lowland Maya practices sustained are truly remarkable in the ancient world.

PUSHING THE LIMITS

Although research on Maya origins has gained traction in recent years, several challenges limit research on the Preclassic Maya. On a very practical level, the remains are buried under later buildings, constructed by descendant populations. Similarly, the megascalar aspects of some of the Preclassic buildings preclude them from extensive study. In times of constrained budgets

and environmental limitations, archaeologists have selectively scratched the surface of the Preclassic Maya world.

Material culture studies subsequently suffer from the problem that low-resolution chronological sequencing does not adequately account for the diversity of material culture over time. For example, as many have noted, the earliest ceramics in the area share certain production characteristics, but regional differences also exist. Or, during the Late Preclassic, ceramic surface decorations are nearly uniform across most of the Maya area, impeding a clear picture of settlement chronologies. The fullest picture of chronology in relation to material culture comes from the work of Takeshi Inomata and his team at the site of Ceibal, a model for future work on coordinating radiocarbon dates with ceramic sequences (see Inomata et al. 2013).

Perhaps the most pressing challenge to understanding Preclassic society is that the households of ordinary people elude archaeological work in most places. This is so because of both an investigative focus on monumental centers and a lack of methods to locate and extensively excavate early residential compounds. It is no surprise that research in monumental cores dominates in the Maya area, as has been the case in all corners of the globe. The Maya case presents similar ecological challenges to Amazonia or Southeast Asia because of the extent of forest cover overlying major sites. Alternatively, land grabs and destruction of sites also plague research in deforested areas. Where forests still grow, ordinary households are extremely difficult to recognize through traditional means of ground survey.

We still lack vital information necessary to clarify the relationships of the humblest dwellings to larger communities to emerging authorities. This challenge to Preclassic Maya research has led to a reliance on outmoded understandings of ancient politics focused on the search for material correlates of "states," "chiefdoms," and the like. This is most apparent in the extensive back-and-forth regarding the Maya and other early Mesoamerican peoples, namely the "Olmec" from the Gulf Coast of Mexico (see Pool 2007). Instead of approaching the tired question of what evidence exists that the Gulf Coast "Olmec" influenced emerging political authority in the Maya Lowlands, I focus on what distinct choices Maya populations made in the face of intense interaction with these other societies between about 1000 BC and AD 250.

CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL MEANINGS

The main archaeological information I draw on comes from three different scales of analysis. At the coarsest level, I am interested in the distribution of early Maya centers in the Central Lowlands, specifically with respect to factors such as visibility of the landscape and routes of exchange (see Doyle 2012; Doyle, Garrison, and Houston 2012). At the site level, my research focuses on

the architectural sequences of particular buildings and the relationship of those buildings and spaces to each other. I especially consider the implementation of a larger vision in the design of community centers (see Doyle 2013). At fine-grained resolution, this book addresses the materials and practices of everyday life, mostly through ceramic and lithic artifacts, but including the environmental milieu of the Preclassic period. My objective is to build a model for the Preclassic Maya based on available evidence that perhaps highlights that social meanings of materials and architecture were vastly different from those of the successor cultures in the Classic-period.

Painting a picture of everyday life in the early Maya Lowlands begins with the environmental canvas. The complex interactions of climate, weather patterns, seasonal fluctuations, and the life cycles of flora and fauna all constituted the necessary substrate for human activity in the area. This is not to say that environment alone determines human behavior and the relative successes or failures of communities; rather, human interaction with the environment is of paramount importance to understanding the priorities and worldviews of certain peoples. New research on ancient deforestation and agricultural activities has begun to deepen our understanding of what the earliest settlers in the Maya area were growing, eating, and discarding.

Discarded items removed from the daily circulation in households also inform outside observers about the quotidian actions of individuals and groups in the past. The Preclassic Maya remains are tricky, as mentioned earlier, because the vast majority come from contexts such as architectural fills, wherein residents piled up broken pottery, lithic debitage, shattered figurines, and other items to contribute to the construction of new surfaces or buildings. One interesting question that remains for Preclassic archaeologists is, Are the items deposited in the fills of ceremonial buildings a representative sample of items used in everyday dwelling? In my own work, I have used the ceramic and lithic material mostly to construct chronological sequences rather than trying to draw broad conclusions about residents' behaviors from the materials. Often we archaeologists excessively couch our conclusions with qualifiers such as "possibly" and "suggestively," but I think with Preclassic material remains these terms are justified.

We simply do not know enough about what items were deposited in monumental cores versus simply discarded in household contexts. However, Foias (2013: 6) points out why we should still care about pottery and other objects:

> All that human beings make (and that later archaeologists encounter as the archaeological record) is a series of discourses (about identity, power, ideology, etc.). By deciding to do anything in a particular manner, each

> individual is asserting his or her power to do it. The archaeological record accumulates through such decisions and actions and such assertions of power to do something. Figurines are the discourses of their makers, pottery vessels are the discourses of their potters, painted polychrome vases and stone monuments are the discourses of their makers and patrons, the royal elites, and so on.

Aside from the sequences of construction, germane to all archaeological studies of built environments of the global past, one of my goals with this book is to explore the relationships of buildings to each other and to the spaces that separate them. The obvious starting point is the role of plazas, or large, level gathering spaces, among early Maya communities. Plazas are often connected by purposeful routes meant to guide human movement and affect the experience of those who walked through on a daily basis, as well as periodic visitors to the monumental cores. The intense episodes of planning that must have guided the ancient builders in the Preclassic Maya Lowlands have not received adequate attention, other than brief conclusions that planning implies centralized institutions. How did the ancient Maya measure their plazas and building foundations, and what meanings do the geometric proportions and astronomical alignments suggest to the modern observer? Often, as we examine Maya sites from the bird's-eye view – idealized Cartesian perspectives – we forget that techniques of planning and building produced individualized experiences for ancient individuals walking around these places, and that they never saw an entire site from plan view.

The Cartesian trap also holds true for the distribution of early Maya communities. We rarely consider the movement of actual people and the effect that these routes of exchange and communication would have had on where and why people built monumental centers. Too often archaeologists speak of settlements as totalities, for example, "Tikal sought to . . ." or "Calakmul then attacked . . ." without truly explaining the implications of such actions. One of the objectives of this study is to address the question, Why are early Maya monumental centers where they are (and, consequently, *not* found in other places)? I suggest a hypothesis about landscape visibility based on analysis using the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to perform viewshed studies that represent the area possibly visible from community centers. The conclusions from the study of the Central Maya Lowlands could be a window into broader early Maya geopolitics or the confluence of geographic factors and political order. Given that Classic-period textual metaphors invoke supervision of the actual landscape, it is possible that the earliest settlers decided where to build monumental centers based on what, or how far, they could see from a certain point on the landscape meaningful to them. However, GIS analysis makes it far too easy to depopulate the ancient Maya landscape, and human factors of risk and conflict probably played a pivotal role in where people built big things.

URBANISM AND POLITICS

One of the theoretical objectives of this book is to situate the case study of the Preclassic Maya among a growing body of studies in early complex societies, specifically within the global archaeology of emerging political authority. So what do I mean by "urbanism" and "politics"? In the early twentieth century, the social sciences began to collectively examine the concept of ancient and modern population centers, or "cities," the "urbanization" processes that produced them, and the "urbanism" that analogous cities displayed (see Smith 2007). The first definitions of the city grew out of modern sociological demographics, and the city represented the better half of the divide between urban and rural, present and past (Marcus and Sabloff 2008: 6–10; Wirth 1938: 1–2).

Since then, however, cities have eluded precise definition, and ancient cities ranged broadly in their size, meaning, functional organization, and durability. Recent archaeological research has described cities as complex foci of aggregated populations, wherein geographic proximity affects communication, social and kinship networks, political authority, and economic production and consumption (Marcus and Sabloff 2008: 13; M. L. Smith 2003: 8–12). Perhaps the biggest question that remains about ancient cities is, How do very different social and environmental factors produce archaeologically analogous settlements around the world and across time (Smith and Peregrine 2012: 5; Trigger 2003: 3)?

In this book I approach early urbanism through the lens of city-as-experience, where the "sheer concentration of diverse functions, services, and activities" was a motivation for people to move to these new places (Marcus and Sabloff 2008: 21). Preclassic Maya cities can thus be seen as early creations engendered by proximity that attracted people through experiencing novel attitudes and events. In fact, one could view such cities as inventions specifically intended to satiate "the desire for increased interpersonal interaction" (Betz 2002: 113). The experiential aspect of cities – the ability to facilitate face-to-face experiences among populations – provides a promising avenue for archaeological research that could contribute to the examination of bottom-up approaches to ancient urbanism.

It is thus impossible to divorce urbanism from political authority, although the correlation of cities to institutions is far from clear. Scholars have traditionally approached politics through two different perspectives: through institutions and their functions or through the politics of the everyday present in all interactions. This book aims to explore the intersections of the two traditional analyses by investigating the preconditions for institutions that lie in everyday practices. I argue that the earliest monumental building projects in the Maya Lowlands as pre- or proto-urban places were the nexus of this

interaction, where people began to cooperate in pre- or proto-institutional politics.

Investigations into the aggregations of populations and institutional expressions of political authority have a long-standing tradition in political anthropology. In the early studies of ancient politics, absolute leaders formed the primary analytical focus. The search for ancient "states" (as opposed to chiefdoms) led archaeologists to construct settlement hierarchies; that is, the larger the settlement, the more political power it likely held in the regional scheme. Recent critiques have pointed out that such tactics overemphasize "centralized administration, as well as the grandeur of the state," which leads to a lack of consideration of what was likely local, nonstate apparatuses (Kosiba 2011: 119). Newer approaches consider politics as an omnipresent aspect of all human relations and that models of the ancient state neglected "what polities actually do" (Smith 2003: 80), mainly by suppressing or burying synchronic and diachronic variation and complexities of development (de Montmollin 1989: 14–15; Yoffee 2005: 31).

Archaeology benefits from recent developments in political anthropology and political science, which provide new avenues of inquiry in the analysis of ancient politics (Flannery 1998: 15–16). For example, if the modern nation-state "can never be an empirical given" as a hierarchical administrative body and "is not reducible to government" (Trouillot 2001: 126–7), would the same hold true for ancient cultures? If true, then understanding archaic states by purely searching for archaeological correlates for statehood or complexity will only produce superficial understandings of what was actually occurring, which was probably turbulent, chaotic, and dissonant. Modern ethnographic inquiries into the human experience of a "mystifying illusion of a center of power called the state" provide a window into how ancient people may have experienced the "reality of disparate relations of power" (Aretxaga 2003: 401). Foias (2013: 5) goes so far as to challenge all archaeologists to "credit ancient states with as much complexity as we can envision for ourselves today rather than as despotic systems with monolithic politics and economies."

Only recently has archaeology embraced such a complex view of ancient political practice, highlighting such heuristic terms as "sovereignty," "subjectivity," and "performance." Investigating multiscalar politics in the past necessarily involves the highest authority, or a sovereign person or body. In political theory, sovereignty "describes an ultimate authority, an apparatus of supremacy within a delimited territory that insinuates itself into all other domains of association – the home, the workplace, etc." (Smith 2011b: 416; see also Smith 2011a, 2003). By insinuating itself, abstract sovereign power becomes "a tentative and always emergent form of authority grounded in violence that is performed and designed to generate loyalty,