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978-0-521-39210-5 - Classic Maya Political History: Hieroglyphic and Archaeological Evidence

Edited by T. Patrick Culbert

Excerpt

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# 1 Introduction

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This book is concerned with the historical reality recorded on Classic Maya monuments of the first millennium AD, its interpretation in terms of social and political interaction within and between states, and the better understanding of Maya civilization that is emerging from a more accurate perception of the role of its ruling elites.

Since Berlin (1958, 1959) and Proskouriakoff (1960) showed that the Classic inscriptions dealt with real people in historical time, there has been a rapid expansion of knowledge of the nature of the Maya writing system and the specific content of the texts. As a result, outline biographies of named individuals can now be elucidated and dynastic histories constructed for a number of sites. Epigraphers have estimated that some 50 percent of the extant Classic period inscriptions have now been read, and close to nine-tenths of the content of most of them can be understood.

Over the same three decades there has been a similar influx of data on other aspects of Maya civilization: four previous School of American Research Advanced Seminars examined the Preclassic rise, Terminal Classic collapse, and Postclassic transition of complex society in the lowlands, together with the patterns of settlement and community structure that formed the spatial matrix of that society (Adams

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1977a; Culbert 1973; Sabloff and Andrews V 1986; Ashmore 1981a).

Other symposia have analyzed the agricultural foundations underlying those patterns (Harrison and Turner 1978; Flannery 1982). The manifestations of elite activity present in architecture, sculpture, burials, craft products, iconography, and inscriptions have been the subject of numerous particularizing studies. Yet Classic civilization itself, the phenomenon of unity and interdependence over more than six centuries and nearly a quarter million square kilometers, has not; nor has elite culture been related to its economic and social infrastructure on a broad scale, although the studies of individual sites such as Tikal and Copan have treated their subjects holistically. A holistic approach to Maya civilization was advocated by Willey (1980) and has become apparent in some recent studies of Maya art (e.g., Schele and Miller 1986).

The purpose of the S.A.R. Advanced Seminar embodied in this book was to consider both the infrastructure and the superstructure of Maya civilization in the light of the textual decipherments which have brought some Classic elites to the edge of history. The discussion of these advances, so rapid that many are yet unpublished and unsynthesized, brought together a group of epigraphers, art historians, and archaeologists to share information and begin to bring together the multiple sources of evidence now available for an understanding of Classic Maya society: stratigraphy, epigraphy, and iconography were seen as coequal and perhaps congruent sources of information on elite behavior. It was nevertheless clear that the inscriptions would be the focus of consideration: they provided data new to many of the group, and a prime purpose of this book is to assemble for the first time in the charts of historical events information that spans the Maya lowlands.

Because Emblem Glyphs are so fundamental in reconstructing the political history of the Maya lowlands, an article by Peter Mathews that outlines the structure and function of Emblem Glyphs follows this Introduction. The succeeding articles interweave the inscriptional record with the more familiar archaeological data to provide syntheses of the political histories of sites and, in some cases, entire regions. A number of concepts were axiomatic: the cultural unity of Maya elite activities as the principal definition of Classic civilization spatially and temporally; the impact of epigraphy in bringing it within the ambit of history; the realization that this was "winners' history," with the risk of partiality; and the development of scholarly approaches from the sub-

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stantive to the theoretical that has accompanied a century of investigation and formed a cumulative data base for present and future considerations of Maya elites.

These approaches were brought to bear on a variable data base: of the four regions considered principally here, the western has abundant and well-published texts, but apart from Palenque has seen a minimum of published archaeological research. Schele's paper for the first time collates inscriptions from all the sites and provides a summary of political history. The Pasion region is likewise rich in Late Classic inscriptions, and also benefits from major archaeological projects at Altar de Sacrificios and Seibal. Mathews and Willey have integrated the data into a regional history that demonstrates what will be possible for other regions when more research has been done.

The southeast region has a significant number of inscriptions only at Copan and Quirigua but provides a good research area because both sites have been the location of recent major projects that included both excavation and epigraphy. The Fash/Stuart and Sharer papers lay out the results and demonstrate the interactions and antagonisms between these two sites, while their contrasting developmental trajectories provide an unusually clear example of both variation and mutual impact within a region.

The northeast Peten region is an area, frequently considered to be the heartland of Classic Maya civilization, with densely packed large sites, major projects executed at Uaxactun, Tikal, and Rio Azul, and an abundance of inscriptions covering the entire historical span of the Classic period. Tikal is probably the most intensively studied of all Maya sites. Jones' paper presents the history of the Tikal dynasty, and shows the integration that is possible when epigraphic data can be matched with superb stratigraphic control of architectural development and burials. Culbert's chapter treats of interaction between sites within and beyond the northeast Peten and raises the question of the size of Maya polities.

Sites in the north of the Yucatan Peninsula have far fewer inscriptions than those in the southern lowlands but are also now beginning to reach historical status, as Wren and Schmidt demonstrate. The emergence of a new political ideology at Chichen Itza is their primary theme, and one which marks the recent limit in time of the cultural system that generated the inscriptions forming the focus of this book.

In addition to the presentation of historical data and the substantive

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reconstruction of Maya history, the seminar was concerned with the ways in which the Maya elite interacted, with the objective of determining the nature and rules of interaction from the new epigraphic understanding, complemented by the data from iconography and archaeology. The rules were, of course, never made explicit in the inscriptions, but we had to hand a set of concrete examples from which to elicit the underlying structure. Some of the structure was vertical, linking the ruling elite to the lower levels of the social pyramid, while other, lateral links provided the great network of interaction that tied together elite lineages across the lowlands.

Much of this is inherent in the reconstructions of site and regional histories: in one paper here, emerging from the seminar discussions, Schele and Mathews describe a pattern of intersite visitation previously unrecognized in the literature and summarize data on such patterns of interaction as warfare and marriage. Mechanisms of elite interaction discussed at the seminar but not explicitly covered in the papers are reviewed in Culbert's summary chapter.

We then turned to a consideration of what the new conjunction of data tells us about the overall structure of Classic Maya society. Here, the lacunae in the inscriptional record are clear: the texts provide a limited story that concerns only the formal acts of a few members of the uppermost stratum of Maya society. Their purpose was not to recount dispassionate history but to present the protagonists in the best possible light. The texts relate a ruler to the cosmos and to his own deified ancestors but do not link him to the rest of society or give information about administration, economy, or trade. They recount victories, captures, and sacrifices but leave us to guess why the battles took place.

This is why, in reconstructing Classic Maya society, we need both archaeological and epigraphic data: the former to tell us about the lower echelons of society and about areas such as economics and trade where the inscriptions are silent; the latter to provide more specific detail about the structure and functioning of the elite than can ever be gained from excavated evidence. My own paper attempts such a holistic reconstruction of Classic Maya society and brings in comparative evidence from mainly historical cultures elsewhere. Yoffee's paper, which focuses upon elite interaction, provides in particular a view of Maya civilization from the perspective of Mesopotamia, where the combination of textual, iconographic, and archaeological evidence

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has been a rich source of scholarly advancement for far longer than it has in the Maya lands.

## GEOGRAPHICAL AND CHRONOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

Previous S.A.R. Advanced Seminar volumes have divided the Maya lowlands into archaeological zones, the details of which have changed slightly as knowledge has increased (see Sabloff and Andrews V 1986:Fig. 2.1 for the most recent version). This volume uses a broader framework of regions: the western, Pasion, northeast Peten, and southeast regions (Fig. 1.1). That only these four regions are taken for detailed scrutiny is due to the restricted distribution of Emblem Glyphs. Since polity interaction can only be discussed when polities are recognized, and the Emblem Glyph is the only signifier that we have (cf. Mathews; Mathews and Willey; Schele and Mathews, this volume), the area of consideration is confined to the southern lowlands where more than 85 percent of the known Emblem Glyphs occur. (Most of the others are around Uxmal and at Chichen Itza.)

This factor apart, the traditional boundary between the southern and northern lowlands is now much less solid than it used to be. Not only has the existence of a “central lowlands” focused on the Rio Bec area been mooted, and much of Quintana Roo linked to the south by the characteristics of the Coba polity and the “Petenized” sites south of it, but the presence of Yucatecan speakers as far south as the Usumacinta in the Classic period and the widespread interpenetration with Chol has indicated more unity than was once apparent. The unity of elite culture, expressed in iconography and hieroglyphic writing, has been a commonplace since the time of Stephens in the 1840s; its regional variations, most strongly expressed in architectural style, are sufficiently within a common tradition for the cultural frontiers with the highlands, the Mixe-Zoque and Zapotec across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and the peoples of lower Central America to have been long implicitly accepted, whatever the degree of proposed linguistic or cultural diffusion across them.

Similarly, traditional chronological boundaries have recently been re-examined. The tripartite division into Preclassic (Formative), Classic, and Postclassic, with the Classic beginning in AD 300 and ending in 900, was predicated on the sudden appearance, from a Preclassic

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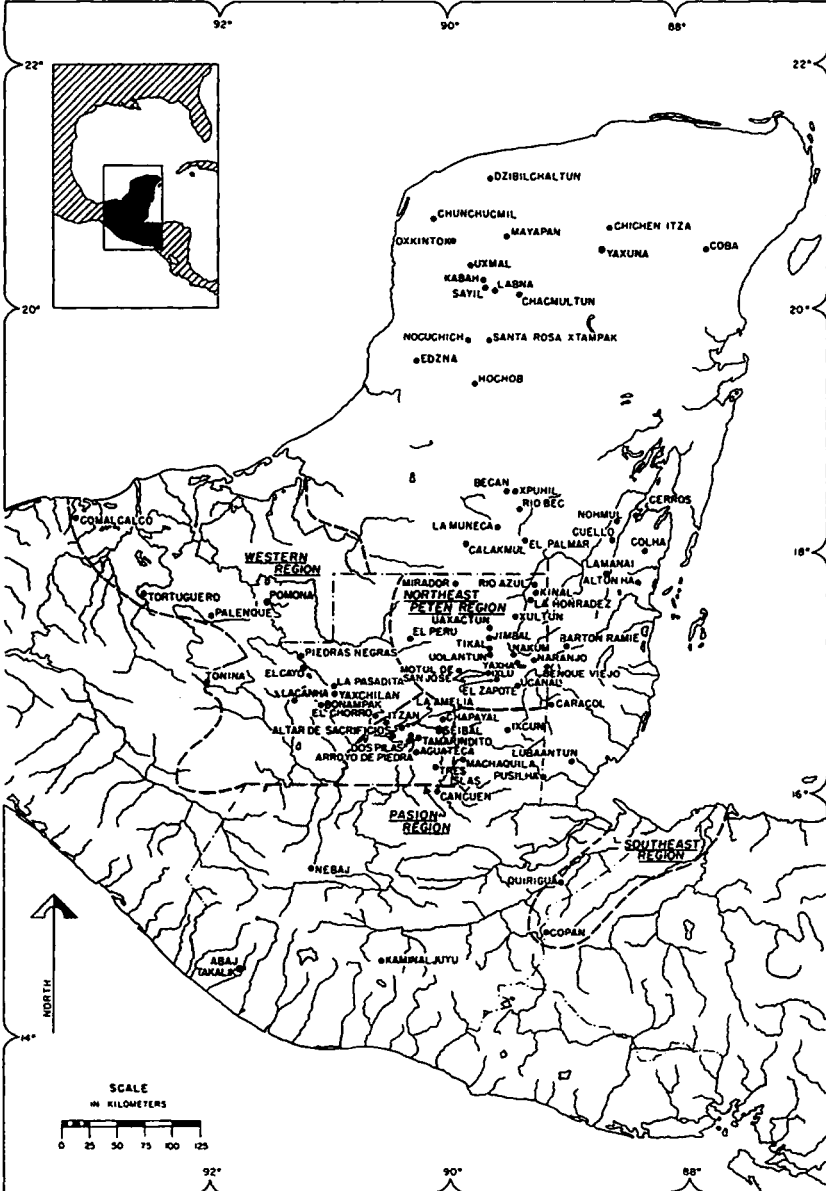


Fig. 1.1 The Maya lowlands: regions and sites.

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base of farming villages, of ceremonial centers with vaulted stone architecture, polychrome pottery, and carved stone monuments with hieroglyphic inscriptions. These inscriptions bore Initial Series dates (so called because they always began the text) in the Long Count, a quasi-linear measuring of time from a base date in 3114 BC, divided into cycles of 400 “years,” 20 “years,” one “year” (actually 360 days), months and single days. Each day was also designated in two shorter cycles, of 365 days and 260 days, with the result that any one day had a unique definition within a period of over 5,000 years. The correlation between this native calendar and the Christian one, established by Joseph Goodman at the beginning of this century and refined by Martínez Hernández and Thompson (the G.M.T. correlation, used in this book), placed Maya civilization within real time, assigning it an antiquity comparable with the Byzantine Empire, or making the Late Classic apogee coeval with the T’ang Dynasty in China. It was this correlation and the temporal distribution of Initial Series dates that led to setting the boundaries of the Classic at AD 300 and 900.

A beginning for Classic civilization in AD 300 was called in question by the discovery of earlier monuments, such as Tikal Stela 29 at AD 292, the undated but stylistically Preclassic stelae of El Mirador, and the San Diego rock-carving. Monuments on the Pacific slope, such as Abaj Takalik Stelae 2 and 5, with their second-century AD or earlier dates and their clear resemblance to Polol Altar 1 in the lowlands, also demonstrated a longer and more complex development of the dynastic monument complex or “stela cult,” as did the discovery of a plain stela of c. AD 100 at Cuello (Hammond 1982). Excavations, particularly at Tikal (Coe 1965a), demonstrated similar Preclassic origins for vaulted buildings, while the origins of Classic geometric and figured polychrome pottery in trichromes and polychromes of the Late Preclassic at Cuello, Holmul, and Nohmul (Pring 1977; Hammond 1982, 1984) showed that an autochthonous evolution of ceramic technology was more likely than the migrationist theories espoused by Gifford (1974) and Sheets (1971).

Subsequent widespread discovery of Preclassic cultural complexity at El Mirador (Matheny 1980), Edzna (Matheny *et al.* 1983), Cerros (Freidel 1979), Lamanai (Pendergast 1981), and Nohmul (Hammond *et al.* 1985) made it clear that “the Classic period is the second phase of Maya civilization” and “that to talk of ‘Preclassic Maya civilization’ is no longer a contradiction in terms: the outward and visible signs of



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Classic civilization emerge from an already complex society” (Hammond 1986b:411; 1980:189).

In the same manner that elites and elite interaction began before the start of the Classic period, they obviously continued into the Postclassic. Sabloff (1985) emphasizes this continuity in a radical reformulation of Maya periodization that combines the entire interval from 300 BC to AD 1250 into a single Middle Phase.

Even with such continuity of elite culture, however, the inscriptions that were at the heart of our deliberations are still almost entirely confined to the Classic period. The wealth of detail and chronological precision that they provide – martial and marital interactions involving named individuals from known polities that can be pinned down to a specific day – continues to justify separating out the span of time when inscriptions occur.

The chronological framework we will use, therefore, delineates a Classic period beginning in AD 250 (in accordance with modern usage that attributes a slightly earlier start for the period) and ends at AD 900. An Early Classic from 250 to 600 is followed by a Late Classic from 600 to 800 and a Terminal Classic (a relatively recent invention that is now generally used) from 800 to 900 that encompasses the period of the collapse in the southern lowlands. Such additional elaborations as a Middle Classic (400 to 700), useful in the southeastern region (Fash and Stuart, this volume), and a Tecep that conflates the Terminal Classic and Early Postclassic in Belize are of regional utility but do not have relevance to our purposes.

## THE CONTEXTS OF MAYA INSCRIPTIONS

Classic Maya texts survive in contexts ranging from the monumental to the minuscule, from the most public assertions of regal power to the most private indications of ownership. All of them help to develop our understanding of the role of the elite in ancient Maya civilization, as would, had any survived, the codical books (which, at the time of the conquest of Yucatan, Diego de Landa described as containing “antiquities and their sciences”) which were the precursors of the surviving codices and the Books of Chilam Balam.

Since no Classic books are known, although the rotted remains of several have been reported from tombs, the textual record is impoverished. It has been depleted still further over the past quarter



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century by looting, which has wrenched hundreds of monumental and portable inscriptions from their archaeological contexts, robbing them of their vital associations and the Maya of their history. The information that can be gained from a looted monument when its origin is established, as for instance with the *cahal* inscription of La Pasadita Lintel 2, is a poignant reminder of what has been lost.

The most spectacular vehicles for Classic inscriptions are the great stelae and their accompanying altars or zoomorphs, which stood in the plazas of Maya centers and proclaimed both dynastic history and the passage of time. Similarly public are the hieroglyphic stairways, half monument and half architecture. While the largest of these, on Copan Structure 10L–26, was a history of the kings of Copan, others, such as those at Dos Pilas, commemorated victories in battle and the capture of important lords. Elsewhere, as at Naranjo, such stairways could mark defeat by another polity which imposed a monumental commemoration on the vanquished.

Architecture was also the vehicle for roofcomb inscriptions, such as that on Temple VI (Temple of the Inscriptions) at Tikal, with its mythical dates, and those on façades, as with the zodiac on the Monjas Annex at Chichen Itza. The interiors of buildings held less publicly visible texts, including inscribed benches of the kind found in nobles' houses at Copan; wall panels with texts or images or both, for example at Palenque; those carved on lintels which would have been readable only by an observer lying on the floor or craning the neck; and those on murals, as at Uaxactun and Bonampak.

Murals with texts have also been found in tombs at Tikal and most recently at Rio Azul, where they commemorate both the lives of elite individuals and the cosmic framework within which those lives were passed. Similar to tombs in their chthonic location, but differing in function and in the nature of their texts, are caves such as Naj Tunich where the content of the murals runs from the solemn to the *risqué*.

All of these contexts are immobile: the inscriptions are in the location where the Maya intended them to be when they were carved or painted. The other major group of contexts consists of portable objects, mostly personal possessions, which although they often finished up in tombs were not always made for funerary purposes. The largest number of texts occurs on pottery vessels, many bearing the "Primary Standard Sequence," which Coe (1973) originally thought to be specifically funerary in content but which now seems to reflect the

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quotidian function and ownership of the pot and sometimes the name of the man who painted it (the signatures of stela sculptors have also been recognized) (Houston and Taube 1987; Stuart 1986a,b, 1988). Personal jewelry such as jade earflares could be “name-tagged,” as Mathews and Pendergast (1979) showed for a pair from Altun Ha, while several of the carved bones from Tikal Burial 116, the tomb of “Ruler A/Ah Cacau” beneath Temple I, also bore the ruler’s name glyph. The inscribed bone from a Late Preclassic burial at Kichpanha, several shells incised with texts from funerary and other contexts, jades such as the Pomona flare and the Kendal shell-effigy, and mundane objects like the Kendal axe are less consistently explicable but invaluable members of the corpus of early Maya texts.

### INTELLECTUAL FRAMEWORKS

A realization of the cultural unity of Maya civilization dates from at least as early as Stephens and Catherwood’s visit to Palenque in 1840, when Stephens (1841, II:343) noted that “the hieroglyphs are the same as we found at Copan and Quirigua . . . there is room for the belief that the whole of this country was once occupied by the same race, speaking the same language, or at least having the same written characters.” The inscriptions at Copan he believed to be historical in content, and the sites in general “the remains of a cultivated, polished and peculiar people, who had passed through all the stages incidental to the rise and fall of nations, reached their golden age and perished, entirely unknown” (Stephens 1841, II:356).

Stephens correctly surmised the nature of the Maya monuments and their inscriptions, but he could not read them. Constantine Rafinesque (1827) had identified the Palenque inscriptions, from Del Rio’s publication of 1822, with the script in the Dresden Codex and with “a peculiar language, distinct from the Azteca, probably the Tzendall . . . spoken from Chiapa to Panama, and connected with the Maya of Yucatan,” but had not guessed at their contents.

Reading of the glyphs did not begin for another generation, until Brasseur de Bourbourg (1864) published the Madrid transcript of Diego de Landa’s *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* with its “alphabet.” De Rosny deciphered the directional glyphs in 1876, working from the Madrid and Paris Codices, and in 1882 Cyrus Thomas showed that inscriptions were read by pairs of columns from the upper left corner.