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0521548020 - The Archaeology of Political Structure: Settlement Analysis in a Classic Maya Polity

Olivier De Montmollin

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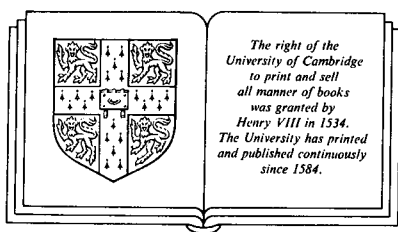
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OLIVIER DE MONTMOLLIN

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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1989

First published 1989

Printed in Great Britain by the University Press, Cambridge

British Library cataloguing in publication data

Montmollin, Olivier de
The archaeology of political structure:
settlement analysis in a classic Maya polity–
(New studies in archaeology)
1. Mexico. Chiapos (State). Maya settlements.
Archaeological investigation
I. Title II. Series
972'.7501

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

De Montmollin, Olivier.
The archaeology of political structure:
settlement analysis in a classic Maya polity/Olivier de Montmollin.
p. cm. (New studies in archaeology)
Bibliography.

ISBN 0 521 36232 6

1. Mayas–Politics and government. 2. Mayas–Antiquities.
3. Land settlement patterns. Prehistoric–Mexico–Rosario Valley Region.
4. Indians of Mexico–Rosario Valley Region–Politics and government.
5. Indians of Mexico–Rosario Valley Region–Antiquities.
6. Rosario Valley Region (Mexico)–Antiquities.
7. Mexico–Antiquities. I. Title.

F1435.3.P7D4 1989

972'.32–dc 19 88-16163 CIP

ISBN 0 521 36232 6

Cambridge University Press

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To Cathy and Peter

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PREFACE

In this study of settlement and politics in a Classic Maya polity I have set out to discuss and exemplify some elements of an anthropological approach to the archaeology of ancient complex polities. To begin, I want to sketch out briefly and rather informally the basic motivations for the work, saving the more detailed formal rationales for later. I see an anthropological approach to archaeology as something more than a simple mining of ethnographic lore in order to fill out archaeological interpretation. I also see it as something other than the uncritical adoption of a single paradigm from social or cultural anthropology (e.g., cultural ecology, structuralism, or post-structuralism). Rather, to my mind, an effective anthropological approach to the archaeology of complex polities requires the adoption of some of the more appealing intellectual traits that characterize the social and cultural anthropology of complex societies. Very broadly, these traits include sustained scepticism about received conceptual tools, respect for the diversity of behaviors and institutions in the record, a sensitivity to issues of social scale, and a sensitivity to the tension between approaches that use abstract formal models as opposed to approaches that use more particularistic substantivist models (the contrast between general comparative and particularizing approaches).

From my chosen anthropological-archaeological perspective, it seems that over the last few years many archaeologists have reached a kind of impasse in their studies of complex polities. Conclusions have been and continue to be drawn about such great issues as state formation or the rise of civilization. But in a more sceptical (and post-heroic) intellectual climate, it seems increasingly difficult to continue discussion exclusively along this track without falling into conceptual routinization. Another major source of worry is (or should be) the methodological problem of linking the conclusions to archaeological evidence. Discussion of methodological problems remains relatively underdeveloped with reference to complex societies, giving a distinct air of unreality or at least arbitrariness to the conclusions reached about them.

Given these difficulties and worries, one tendency might be to strike off in a completely new direction: the new-broom syndrome. Hoping to avoid this syndrome, which often carries with it an evangelical fervor, I prefer instead to react to previous work and to try to bring out some of the alternatives that have not been considered fully in the study of ancient complex polities. From this perspective, an effective research program includes several steps: research history, problem orientation, the archaeological record, fieldwork strategies (data gathering),

analytical tools (bridging arguments), drawing conclusions. Each one of these (not necessarily strictly sequential) steps requires a series of choices. What seems to be missing from many archaeological studies of ancient complex societies is a full discussion of the choices made (and especially of the alternatives foregone) at every step of the research program. In light of this, my study attempts to provide such discussion and additionally to do so in a manner which is self-critical. Any fervor or excitement associated with this approach emerges from having to negotiate a problem-solving maze: the video-game syndrome. This contrasts with the excitement that arises from the certainty of having discovered the golden road to understanding, truth or goodness, something more closely associated with the new-broom syndrome.

My use of a specific case study to explore a range of methodological and conceptual options concerning the archaeological study of ancient complex societies stems from a belief that specific case studies are the most effective context within which to examine comprehensively the several steps in a research program. The case study selected need not be perfect nor need it cover all possible options. Rather, the principal requirements are to have a case study which is interesting in its own right, and with reference to the general theme of ancient complex polities, and to set such a case study in the clearest possible context, especially with reference to the options which were not available or not taken up. An alternative approach for a critical (and anthropologically-oriented) discussion of ancient complex polities is to provide an overview of many case studies. While such an approach has great value, I favor the single case approach, in this instance because it allows closer attention to necessary detail and because it provides a more coherent format for tracing through the linkages between different steps in a research program.

Why do I look at a case study in ancient Maya political structure in particular? The ancient Maya have left us an astounding archaeological and historical record. This record has fascinated generations of scholars for its intrinsic and comparative interest. It continues to support a wide variety of interpretations without showing any signs of being wrung dry. Furthermore, the richness of the record makes it especially resistant to one-dimensional or monolithic interpretive approaches. A continuous series of interpretive challenges accompanies the attempt to come to grips with ancient Maya political structure, while keeping due respect for the evidential record. The Maya record provides a good arena for resisting conceptual and/or methodological routinization and for trying out a range of the conceptual and methodological options available for studying ancient complex polities. The Maya record is also a good one for demonstrating the value of an anthropological approach to archaeology. This is because the story of Maya development has been assembled through a variety of anthropological (or anthropologically oriented) disciplines – linguistics, biological anthropology, ethnohistory, ethnology, epigraphy, art history, archaeology – and through a variety of theoretical tendencies within each of these disciplines. The changing conceptions of the Maya presented over time through these different disciplines constitute a veritable museum (or perhaps graveyard) of attitudes and concepts that have prevailed in anthropology over the last century or more.

Framing a study of the Maya to reach the non-specialist (as well as the Maya *aficionado*) is a worthwhile enterprise if it can be done in a way that avoids twin vices. At one end of the spectrum is the *exceptionalist* vice in which the pose is to emphasize the mystery or even the mystique of the Maya compared to other complex cultures (even those of neighboring northern Mesoamerica). At the other end of the spectrum is the *demistificationist* vice in which the pose is to emphasize how the Maya were really just like everyone else, and thus easily insertable into general typological schemes. I have found it a very useful goal to attempt to steer a course between these two poles of particularism and extreme generalization in order to appreciate the particular and generic aspects of ancient Maya polities. More widely viewed, these options are the kind that do emerge and require thinking about whenever specialists in any of the ancient civilizations attempt to present their concerns to a wider audience.

Within the Maya realm, why have I chosen to look at a case drawn from the Rosario Valley in southeastern Mexico? First of all, not much can be done about conceptual and methodological problems without coming to grips with a specific data set. In this case I was fortunate to have the opportunity to assemble such a data set by surveying this uniquely pristine part of the Mexican archaeological landscape, part of an area with extreme marginality after its florescence in the Classic Period (ending around AD 950). The valley and its surroundings had already benefited from studies covering a variety of themes, but not to the point of saturation or staleness. The Rosario Valley itself turned out to have an excellently preserved single-period settlement record, allowing settlement survey and analysis to be stretched to the limit. For example, multiple analytical scales presented a wide set of analytical choices not usually available or exploited in other settlement studies of complex polities. Thus, for these and other reasons, the Rosario Valley provided me with a good and interesting set of materials for trying out a variety of the theoretical and methodological tools which can prove useful in studying ancient complex polities.

To turn these motivations into a formal study, I benefited greatly from the help of many people at various stages in the fieldwork, analysis, and writing. Permission to do the fieldwork was granted by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico. I would like to thank the Institute's director, Enrique Florescano M.; the president of the Consejo Nacional de Arqueología, Joaquín García-Bárcena; and the director of the Dirección de Monumentos Prehispánicos, Angel García Cook, for their gracious help.

Funding and logistical support for the fieldwork were generously provided by the New World Archaeological Foundation (NAAF), the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Rackham School of Graduate Studies (University of Michigan), and the J. B. Griffin Fund (Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan). I owe a special debt to the NAAF and to its archaeological staff, Gareth Lowe, Thomas Lee, Pierre Agrinier, Susannah Ekholm, and John Clark, for making it possible to explore the archaeological record of Chiapas to whose understanding they are contributing so much. Thomas Lee especially was helpful and supportive in seeing that the day-to-day running of the project proceeded smoothly, and I thank him for

lending his expertise and experience. I owe special thanks to Pierre Agrinier for his constant help and support, for his generous hospitality in San Cristóbal, for his providing the initial opportunities to work in the Rosario Valley, and especially for his friendship.

In the field, I received excellent and always cheerful help from Vicente Pérez Calvo who acted as foreman. I would like to thank him and also the numerous residents of Colonia Chihuahua, Colonia Guadalupe Zapote, Ranchería Santa Marta, and the various smaller ranches in the Rosario Valley who assisted in the survey. More generally, I would like to thank the people of the Rosario Valley for their tolerance in allowing us to walk over their lands. Also assisting in the fieldwork were Nicholas James and Catherine Starr, whose contributions were critically important. I want to thank them for their tireless efforts and for putting up with often difficult conditions. Catherine Starr's contribution was indispensable, not only in the fieldwork, but also at earlier and later stages in the research, and I would like to thank her for generously giving her time and talents.

During the laboratory studies in San Cristóbal, Chiapas, I received valuable help from the NWF's photographer, Ray Scippa, and from the NWF's draftsman, Elizabeth Ross. I also received capable help in processing the ceramics from Artemio Villalobos and from John Lee. Finally, I want to thank John Clark for supervising the analysis of the lithic artifacts.

With particular reference to the initial writing up, I am thankful for the patient and invaluable advice received from the members of my doctoral committee at the University of Michigan: Joyce Marcus, Jeffrey R. Parsons, Kent V. Flannery, and John W. Eadie. I am also grateful for the interest and insightful comments of Henry T. Wright. I owe a special debt to the chairperson of my committee, Joyce Marcus, for her tireless efforts in guiding and encouraging me throughout my graduate studies. While at the University of Michigan, I was able to develop an appreciation for the more appealing intellectual traits of anthropology by studying with these and several other masters of the discipline.

My graduate studies were funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Canada) and by the University of Michigan, for which I am extremely grateful. The final writing was done while working as a Research Officer at the Center of Latin American Studies at the University of Cambridge. I would like to thank its director, David Brading, and the staff, for providing a friendly and interesting work environment.

At various times, I have benefited greatly from discussing various aspects of the research presented here with the above mentioned members of the archaeological staff at the NWF, and also with Sonia Rivero, Carlos Alvarez, Alejandro Martinez, Manuel Gándara, Barbara Voorhies, Janine Gasco, Nicholas James, Catherine Starr, Michael Blake, and Jeremy Sabloff. I especially want to thank Jeremy Sabloff for taking the time to read and comment on an earlier draft of my book.

Particularly during the final writing stages, my sense of anthropological archaeology and its alternatives has been greatly enriched through contacts with the

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Preface

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members of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Cambridge. I feel privileged to have been a part of this lively scholarly community. I also received valuable advice and patient guidance from the editors at Cambridge University Press with a view to sharpening the study's scope and improving its readability. In this respect I am particularly grateful to the archaeology editor, Peter Richards.

As always, none of the people mentioned above should be held accountable for any deficiencies or obscurities in this study. For these I assume sole responsibility.