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## Introduction

Why do the ancient Maya fascinate us so much? The field of Maya studies is filled with stories of a single site visit or artwork that changed the course of someone's life – suddenly we must know all we can about this very foreign culture located so close to home. There are scores of Maya conferences open to the public, and magazines like *National Geographic* or *Archaeology* seem to run a story about the ancient Maya in nearly every other issue. Is it because they are mysterious and unknown? Or because they mastered a challenging tropical environment for over a thousand years? Is it that many Americans travel to Mexico and become familiar, even if only in a passing sense, with the deep history of Indigenous Mexico? Or is it simply the superb artwork and architecture of Classic Maya culture, with its graceful lines and intricate stonework? This book sets out to introduce the new student or admirer of ancient Maya society to the best approximation that current scholarship has to offer of the glorious achievements and challenges of this unique ancient society. To those who have already visited the ancient cities of the Maya scattered throughout southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras, this book will help the reader see the people who populated those wonderfully diverse and complex cities, and the countryside in between. To those who are new to this culture, I hope to share some of the excitement scholars like myself have for the rich history of Maya society, and to bring you a few steps closer to what life was like in ancient Maya times.

## NATURE OF THE DATA

If you know anything about the ancient Maya you likely know that archaeologists are very fond of excavating the ancient tombs of Maya kings and queens. Every few years a new undisturbed Maya tomb with all its riches is opened from deep within a pyramid. These discoveries remind us of the sense of wonder we had as children, when the world was filled with unknown treasures from days gone by. Because the ancient Maya had a strong belief in the afterlife, like Pharaonic Egyptians they filled a royal burial with all that a royal ruler would need in the underworld – things such as ritual tools, delicious food and drink, and elaborate jewelry befitting their status – many of which were made by expert craftspeople and today are justly considered masterpieces of art. In the later chapters of this book we will explore what daily life was like for the royalty, or the ruling families, and those who surrounded them to perform courtly activities. Their palace life was filled with intrigue, luxury, and dynastic competition much as the lives of Medieval European royalty or Chinese dynastic royalty. These people created the only system of full literacy in the ancient New World, and used these hieroglyphs to commemorate their accomplishments in books and carved stone. The writing and calendrical systems of the ancient Maya are unsurpassed in ancient New World history, and the Maya are one of a handful of ancient cultures that created a fully phonetic written language like our own. Why wouldn't these accomplishments fascinate us?

But in order for those elites to have time to learn how to read and write hieroglyphs, many, many other people had to grow the food they ate, weave fabric for their clothing, build palaces and patios where they lived, and defend their cities from often aggressive neighbors. Fortunately, in addition to excavating ancient Maya tombs, the field of Maya studies is rich in data on all these other people as well, often labeled “commoners,” and described as the vast and diverse bulk of Maya society who were not discussed in writing and had less access to resources and state power. This book will try to bring them to life also, and to show how the life of a humble farmer was interconnected with the lives of the royalty that appear much more frequently in popular media. Increasingly, we are able to discern more about the lives of the vast middle of Maya society: the bureaucrats, administrators,



FIGURE 1.1 Wealthy merchant known as the “Woman in Blue,” from a Classic period mural on the Chiik Nahb structure sub 1-4, Calakmul, Mexico. Photograph courtesy of Proyecto de Conservación y Estudio del Conjunto Pictórico Chiik Nahb, Acrópolis Norte, Calakmul. Coordinación Nacional de Conservación del Patrimonio Cultural del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia de México. Photo by Marcos Deli and photo mosaic by Diego Ángeles.

merchants, skilled tradespeople, architects, and healers – those who were neither royalty nor commoners (Figure 1.1). Scholars are slow to adjust their models of ancient societies, but today we acknowledge the importance of moving beyond a binary of inequality that includes only the nobles and the poor. One useful suggestion is that we relinquish “elite” and “commoner” in favor of more specific terms such as the occupational categories listed above, which better capture systematic measures of wealth, status, and power.<sup>1</sup>

Maya studies has a vast assortment of data available, because the ancient Maya not only left written records and pyramids; they left material evidence and art that speaks to every aspect of ancient lives. We can excavate the gardens where they grew papaya and chili peppers and find evidence of those plants in the soil. Animal bones left over from daily meals and ceremonial feasts can be identified to help us know how they hunted, what they ate, and what foods held ritual significance. While royals went into death accompanied by a

<sup>1</sup> Hutson 2020:407–423.

rich assortment of their favorite items, ancient Maya people of all social levels wore their favorite jewelry when they were buried. Often their families sent them into the afterlife with a ceramic plate or obsidian blade that helps us understand how their identity was symbolized by the tools they used every day. Archaeologists study the homes of farmers and merchants of all social levels to see how their living environment differed from (or was similar to) the lives of the elite. Art historians look for patterns in figurines found in the homes of nearly all ancient Maya people just as often as they look for patterns in elite portraiture. Epigraphers decipher hieroglyphic inscriptions and help us understand who was literate and who was not, as well as how those who held political power used writing to uphold that power. Ethnohistorians translate documents written in Maya languages from the period when Europeans first arrived in this part of the world and show how Maya people quickly adapted to new systems of authority as well as how they resisted or embraced Spanish culture. Finally, we are truly fortunate that today in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras, millions of people speak Mayan languages and keep Maya cultural practices alive in their own 21st-century way. These modern Maya people are not a uniform culture by any means, and there are thrilling differences between what a person who speaks Maya as their native language in rural Belize or the modern city of Merida thinks, believes, and knows about Maya history. But our understanding of ancient Maya life is undoubtedly much richer because certain elements of modern Maya life, such as the value placed on corn in the diet and as a ritual food, the importance of gender-specific work in the household but also in factories or hotels, and the value of learning and speaking Mayan languages, persist today.

These manifold data speak to different ancient lives and tell different stories about the ancient people who lived in the Maya area during the Classic period (200–800 CE). For the most part hieroglyphic inscriptions and texts concern the lives of the “1 percent” – the most powerful and privileged members of society, who were fully literate and controlled tightly their access to the historical record. These texts were written for posterity, for other members of the 1 percent, and as magical incantations to attempt to control the weather, land, deities, and fortunes of each polity or dynastically ruled city-state. Art history tells us stories of the elite as well, as they controlled the production of

the most elaborate and formal artistic works, but art was not only the province of the wealthy. Even members of modest households made clay figurines and personal ornaments, and there are wonderful stories hidden in crafts, such as pottery and cloth, that were made in every household. In Maya studies archaeology is the great democratizer, and the techniques of archaeological research can speak to all members of ancient Maya society, although scholars today acknowledge we have often overlooked certain populations like women, children, or elders, due to our own cultural prejudices. In short, there are many stories to tell about daily life in ancient Maya society, and no one book or analytical technique can hope to capture them all. However, by utilizing current data as skillfully as possible, and acknowledging that we do not have enough information on certain understudied groups, this volume attempts to convey a wide swath of the astounding stories available to us today about ancient Maya people. Their lives were rich and complex, full of happiness as well as stress. Some had vast material advantages over others, while some had greater freedom of movement and self-determination. This volume seeks to bring the reader closer to the actual experiences of living in Classic Maya culture by emphasizing the human experiences to which we all are subject, whether we live in an ancient city carved out of the tropical jungle or a small apartment in a contemporary urban jungle. It is not an act of fantasy to try to blur the distinctions between present and past – it can be an exercise in appreciating the common experiences all humans share while learning from the great accomplishments and failures of societies just as elaborate as our own.

The book you are reading is also shaped by my own experiences and life story. I have directed archaeological excavations in the Maya area for over thirty years, and collaborated with Yucatec Maya speakers from Yaxunah, Mexico, for most of that time (Figure 1.2). I was trained by archaeologists who worked closely with art historians and museum professionals because they had an appreciation for how profoundly art speaks to Maya cultural values. I was fortunate to have an undergraduate professor who grew up in Mexico and spent his career working at Maya cities of the Yucatan, a strong influence on my choice to center my research in the northern Maya lowlands. I am a white cis-gendered woman from a middle-class family who spent their discretionary funds on travel and would probably describe themselves



FIGURE 1.2 The author excavating ceramic vessels from a burial context at Xuenkal, Mexico. Photograph courtesy of the Proyecto Arqueológico Xuenkal.

as animists, taking spiritual lessons from nature. My archaeological research in the Maya area continued while I had two sons, and they accompanied me to the field. I improvised how to balance field research and parenting, and we experienced the extraordinary kindness of many Maya people and Mayanist scholars who rescued me from my improvisations. I have written about how taking my kids into the field transformed my understanding of modern Maya life, as once I had kids, Maya women felt we had a lot more in common and started talking to me about their lives. I am fortunate to teach at a university and my choices about what to include in this volume are shaped by the decades of students I have taught about the Maya and their questions about this amazing culture. I am also deeply committed to sharing the knowledge my field produces with the interested public, and through museum exhibits, public lectures, and articles I have developed a

sense of what questions visitors to the Maya area ask the most. Everything I have to say about the ancient Maya is shaped by my friends and colleagues in Yaxunah.

Scholars make choices about what data to utilize – even social scientists who follow the scientific method of hypothesis testing – and I consider myself one of those scientists, gravitate toward certain questions or aspects of ancient cultures. This book is the result of a conversation between my particular research interests and experiences alongside what my students and friends have wanted to know about the ancient Maya that draws on the latest and best scholarly research. I say all this to demystify the process by which archaeologists and other scholars create the depictions of ancient societies we put out into the world. My story is not the only story about ancient Maya lives and I embrace that fact.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

You also might know that the ancient Maya lived in the tropical rainforests, where thick vines cover pyramids and wild jaguars roam the cities. This is partly true. Another well-earned fascination with the Maya stems from their success in a challenging tropical environment. Long ago, archaeologists and other scholars of ancient history thought a complex state could not succeed in the tropical regions of the world. This misconception was based on incomplete information about the stunning accomplishments of ancient people in the tropics of Southeast Asia, the Amazon, and Mesoamerica, the area from Mexico south through Central America. Yet living in the tropics does pose many challenges, especially to a complex state facing issues such as food storage, maintenance of infrastructure, and widespread agriculture. We are still discovering how the ancient Maya managed their environments, or how they were managed by them – but by any measure it is certainly an impressive story. The Maya region is usually defined as southern Mexico: the modern states of Chiapas, Campeche, Yucatan, and Quintana Roo that make up the Yucatan peninsula; all of Guatemala and Belize; and northern Honduras (Figure 1.3). This is a large area that was never brought under a single authority but where cultural traits are shared in a patchwork of independent but allied city-states. Within this area there are both highlands that run parallel to the Pacific Coast and stretch into lower

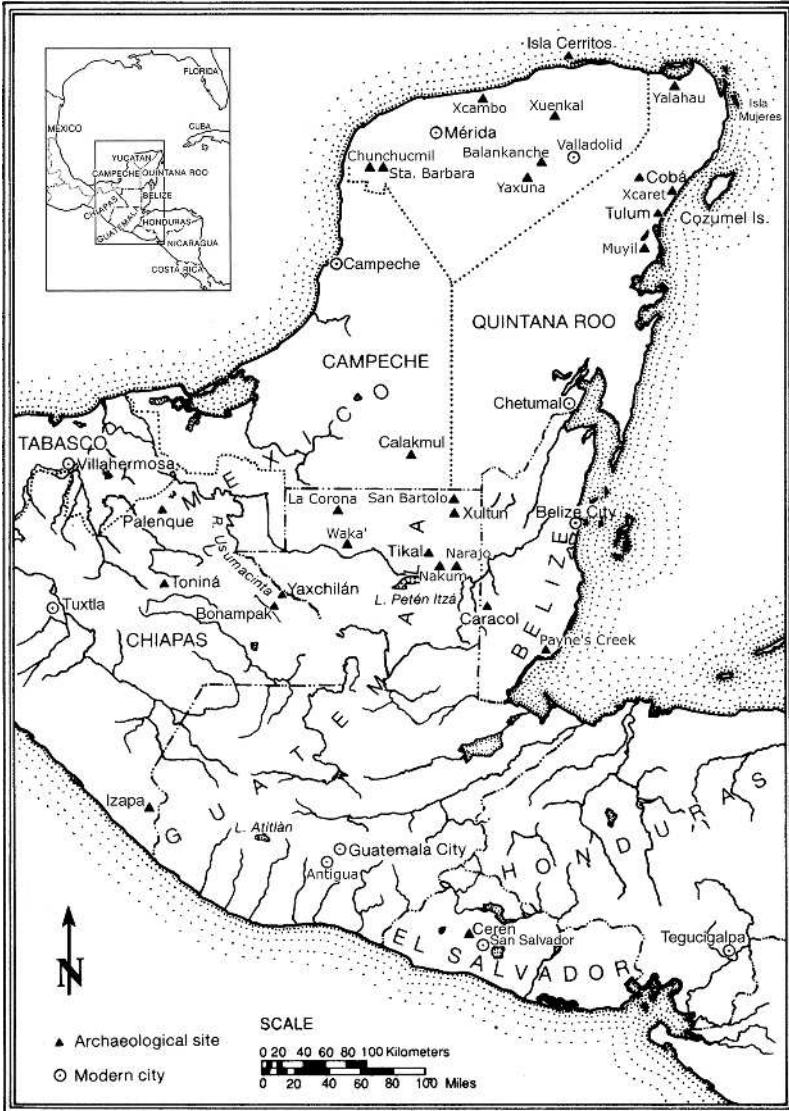


FIGURE 1.3 Map of the Maya area, showing archaeological sites and modern cities mentioned in the text. Illustration by the author and Michael C. Owens.





FIGURE 1.4 Agua Volcano, near Antigua, Guatemala, in the Maya highlands. Volcanic activity created the abundant obsidian resources used by ancient Maya people, but remains a risk to modern occupants of the Maya highlands. Photo: Dave Wilson, WebArtz Photography / Moment / Getty Images.

Guatemala, and lowlands that run from where the highlands end up through the tip of the Yucatan peninsula. Resources and terrain vary in predictable ways between the highlands and the lowlands, with granite, obsidian, and jade found in the mountainous region, while tropical animals and plants are found in the lowlands (Figure 1.4). Add to this the longest coastline of any ancient society, with approximately 1,500 kilometers of inlets, bays, and shallow beaches. Coastal resources such as shell and dried fish made their way deep inland throughout almost the entire Maya area (Figure 1.5). In the middle of the peninsula, the lowlands are cut through with rivers that often run over dangerous rapids or through narrow gorges that made the ancient cities perched on nearby escarpments easy to defend (Figure 1.6). Toward the northern part of the peninsula the rivers disappear but are replaced by natural sinkholes that provide access to underground freshwater reservoirs (Figure 1.7). The seasons in the entire Maya area, as in most tropical regions, are governed by the presence or absence of daily rains. In the summer it often rains every



FIGURE 1.5 Rainforest meets the Gulf of Mexico along the western coast of the Yucatan peninsula, Bay of Campeche. Photo: Cavan Images/ Cavan / Getty Images.



FIGURE 1.6 Usumacinta River canyon, the border between Guatemala and Mexico. Photo: Kenneth Garreth, Danita Delamont/ Alamy Stock Photo.