

ONE

INTRODUCTION: THE QUESTIONS

Few issues are more central to understanding an ancient people than how they were organised politically, a topic that touches on virtually every aspect of their social, cultural, and economic life. Configurations of power are the critical frameworks within which identities, relationships, and events are formed, understood, and function both within communities and in their interactions with others. This was no less true for the ancient Maya, who occupied the Yucatan Peninsula and adjacent highlands to the south, an area now divided between the nations of Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and the western extremities of Honduras and El Salvador (Map 1; see also Maps 2–4) – today home to millions of their descendants.

The traits traditionally used to identify the ancient Maya as a material culture had coalesced by at least 1200 BCE, and substantial monumental construction was taking shape soon after. By 500 BCE there were expansive settlements, and this florescent Preclassic Period, lasting until about 150 CE, was crowned with the growth of major cities that manifest all the core features of Maya civilisation. But it was during the ensuing Classic Period – lasting from around 150 to 900 CE, and here divided into Proto, Early, and Late sub-periods – that the region saw its highest populations, most abundant architectural and artefactual remains, and most precocious intellectual and artistic achievements. The collapse of Classic Maya society, which began close to 800 CE and was completed by the early tenth century, left its core regions abandoned, never to be fully re-occupied. Reclaimed by a tropical forest for the last millennium,



MAP 1 Principal sites in the Maya area, which is today divided between Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. (All maps in this volume by the author, using base maps made available by NASA/JPL)

this has bequeathed us – despite various modern depredations – one of the richest and least disturbed archaeological landscapes in the world.

The nature of the Classic Maya political landscape has been a long-running question, a source of fascination and no small measure of frustration for a century or more. A sizeable number of scholars have been drawn to the problem over that time, each bringing their own datasets and approaches to bear. All have attempted to show how the enormous number of settlements,

ranging in size from the mammoth to the miniscule, were composed into units and structured with others across space and time. The resulting interpretations have proved to be divergent, even deeply polarised, fuelling a vigorous debate that continues to the present day. Two disciplines, archaeology and epigraphy, lie at the heart of the endeavour, and it is clear that only their direct engagement will allow us to build a persuasive portrait of the Maya past. For a long time, our understanding of their hieroglyphic script was rudimentary, leaving physical remains as our only viable source. That began to change in the 1950s, with revelations about the historical content of the inscriptions, but it was only after the phonetic decipherment that took hold in the 1990s that the full value of the texts could begin to be realised.

The decipherment of any ancient script is a rare and transforming event, but when it illuminates the only sizeable corpus of writing from two entire continents it is a precious one indeed. The steady unravelling of the texts has opened unparalleled vistas on the beliefs, practices, history, and institutions of a New World society as it existed a thousand years or more before European contact. Maya inscriptions offer the best, indeed the only, opportunity we will ever possess to understand an ancient American people through their own words and on their own terms.

The challenge taken up in this book is to utilise these data to conduct a thorough re-analysis of Classic Maya politics. It is a surprising fact that no single, long-form work using the inscriptions for this purpose has been attempted in over four decades. This same period has seen a huge expansion of archaeological work in the region, providing an ever more complete picture of the physical remains of ancient Maya communities. Advances in survey technologies, most especially airborne laser scanning, have produced a quantum leap forward in data-gathering. This offers a wealth of new information on settlement size and distribution, revealing in unprecedented detail how the Maya adapted the landscape for agricultural and defensive purposes. The excavation of sites great and small has also led to the discovery of many new inscriptions, while our enhanced literacy means that even long-published texts provide a steady stream of fresh material. These same decades have also seen significant shifts in theoretical orientations, with the rise and fall of paradigms in the social sciences that have altered the intellectual setting within which any interpretation must take place. The time is, therefore, ripe in a number of respects to launch such a project. I will argue that the quantity and quality of evidence now in our possession, the epigraphic together with the archaeological, allows us to put long-standing differences to rest, enabling a move from basic questions of Classic Maya political organisation to the richer and deeper ones that lie beyond.

Points of scholarly disagreement have focussed on the size of political units, the degree of centralisation they achieved, and whether material or ideational

factors played the greater role in their structure and behaviour. By the mid-1990s, Mayanists could choose between a vision of regional-scale entities, in which a handful of capitals with strong central governments administered tiers of provincial centres, or a diametrically opposed view of a multitude of polities with weak, faction-riven governments with domains so small that some could be traversed by foot in a single day. A third, hegemonic perspective, took its cue from the then-newly emerging epigraphic data on the differing statuses of kings and the patron–client bonds between them. This was a model that could accommodate the evidence for the highly-segmented character of the political landscape with that for significant disparities in site size, with the greater power and influence this seemed to imply.

More than two decades later, we can say with confidence that the evidence is in. It shows that there was indeed a plethora of small kingdoms, each of them notionally sovereign but, in reality, engaged in enduring struggles for autonomy and dominance over others. Especially powerful kingdoms had expansionist ambitions, at times achieving multi-generational ascendancies, but none secured a monopoly on power or consolidated their conquests into anything resembling large unitary states or institutionalised empires.

However, even though this hegemonic interpretation is one I initiated and have long argued for, it remains incomplete. To date we have learnt much about the who, where, when, and what of the system, but far less about the how and why. How could a system of multiple polities persist essentially unchanged for hundreds of years, and why were none among them willing or able to create larger and more unified formations? These closely related questions are far from the only ones to be addressed in this book, but they can be seen as the core problems that motivate it.

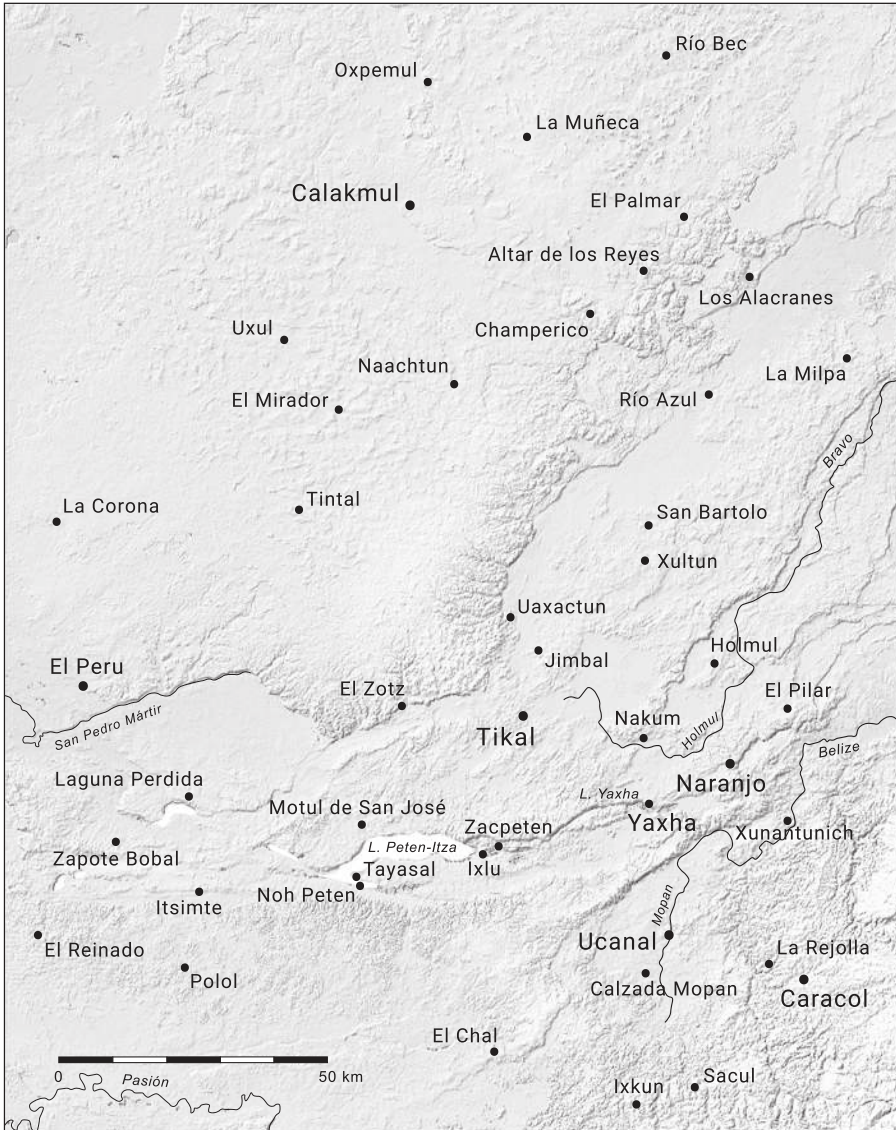
This study makes a fresh analysis of the data, using material newly unearthed in the field or deciphered in the greater comfort of the office or library. But equally important to the project are the methodological and theoretical positions it takes. A central premise is that Classic Maya inscriptions are not only particularistic accounts of the identities, relationships, and deeds of individuals, they are inherently mirrors to the organising principles of the societies that produced them. We can, and often do, look at recorded events as ends unto themselves, but from an appropriate standpoint they become the means through which to perceive a grammar of political life. This permits a move from political history to political anthropology, a shift that looks at particularities for what they can tell us about the rules, norms, and conventions that operationalise notions of authority, power, and legitimacy. In doing so we take on the wider imperatives of political anthropology to look beyond the parochial to see how local phenomena relate to universal ones, exploring how the communities at hand fit within the greater picture of structure and power in human society.

This volume is concerned with all facets of political organisation and behaviour, but reverses the usual focus on the structure of individual polities in favour of the relationships between them – a systemic outlook which, if not ignored, has certainly been under-emphasised in previous work. I will argue that, in classic recursive fashion, neither polity nor system can be understood independently, since each plays a pivotal role in determining the other. Political anthropology has dealt at length with the factors, both practical and conceptual, that allow communities to cohere and operate as individual units. However, it has no strong tradition of analysing multi-polity ecologies of the kind we find in the Maya region, and if we want relevant theoretical insights into this we are forced to look elsewhere, toward fields that have made such issues a central concern.

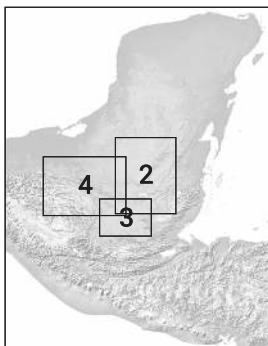
While mine is an epigraphic investigation, it is far from insensible to archaeological interests and in no manner wishes to reinforce the epistemological divide between the textual and the material. Indeed, it seeks further opportunities to bring these “two ways of knowing” together, not in the merely additive sense but, at best, as part of a dialectic in which each makes propositions that can then be compared and contrasted with the other. The sorely depleted remains of the past mean that the original place of words and objects within a unified social reality is irrevocably lost to us – we must accept that only a tiny percentage of the available fragments can be refitted today. This means that any examination of the past necessarily involves interplay between the seen and the unseen.

That issue is especially acute in the case of the Maya because of the poor preservation endemic to the tropics, which robs us of almost all perishable materials. When it comes to writing, this means that we are restricted to the subject matter found on stone, stucco, shell, bone, and ceramic, and even there little has survived unscathed from the scouring effects of heavy rain, corrosion by acidic soils, and the impacts of falling trees. With all these limitations, we must acknowledge how much falls around and between the features that can be discerned. Like the search for dark matter and dark energy, the material and force that are together thought to make up some ninety-five per cent of the mass-energy of the universe, we are often in pursuit of things that cannot be observed directly, only inferred from their effects.

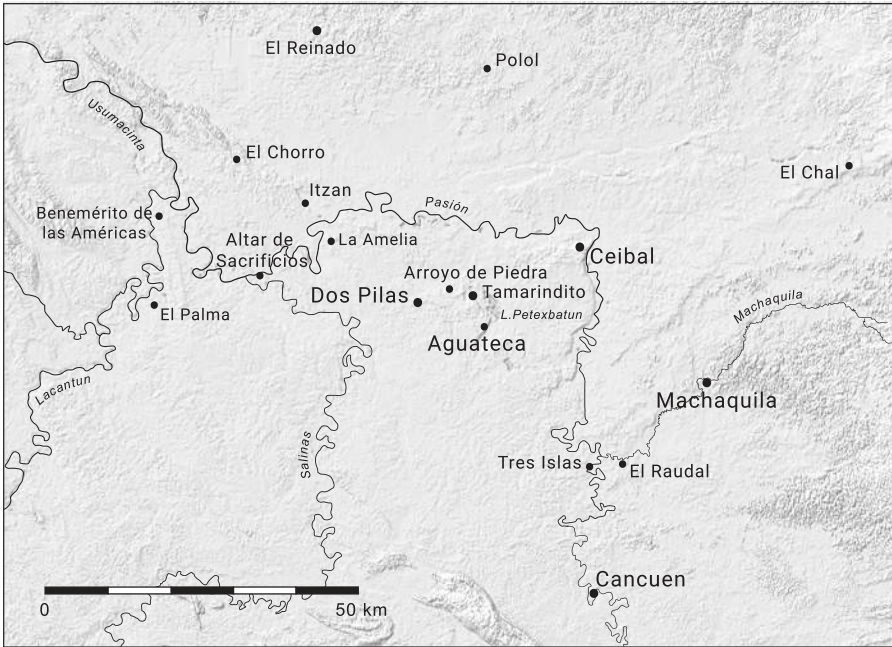
The Classic Maya economy is a case in point. Because the inscriptions make virtually no reference to the topic – eschewing any direct mention of land ownership, market and exchange systems, tax and tribute lists, long-distance trade networks, and the organisation of agricultural or craft production – we must seek to understand a political system in the absence of written knowledge about how resources moved around inside and outside the polity to support the lifestyles of commoners and elites alike. Yet, while we may be blinkered, we still have the capacity to make inferences, combining our sparse epigraphic clues with archaeological, ethnographic, and comparative historical



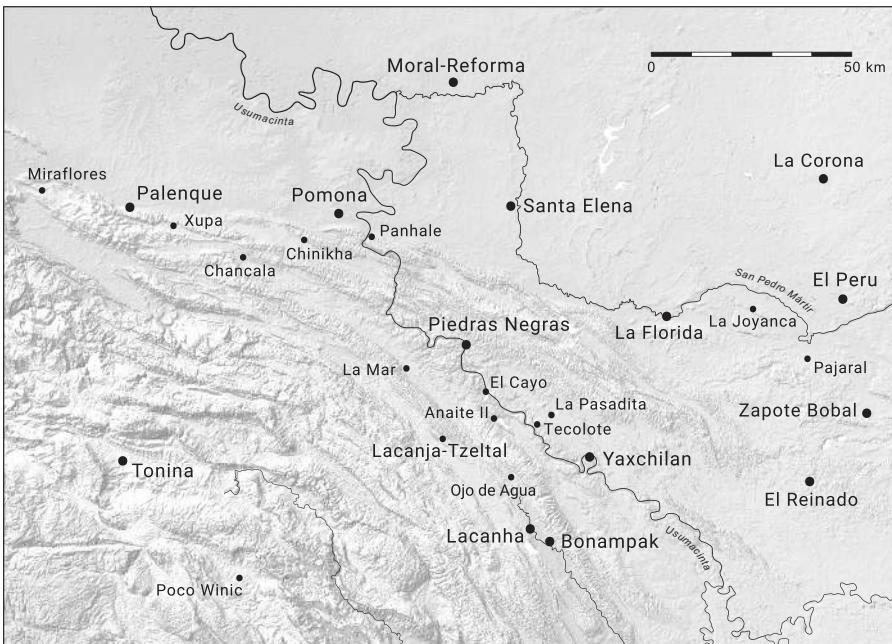
MAP 2 Central southern lowlands or Peten.



Key to Maps 2–4.



MAP 3 Southern and Petexbatun regions.



MAP 4 Western, Usumacinta, and Lacandon regions.

data to offer credible conjectures, even if certainties and finer points will always elude us.

In discussing Classic Maya politics as a generalised phenomenon, I do not mean to deny or gloss over some real variations in organisation and practice across the region and through time. However, I join others in maintaining that the consistent expression of authority in art, writing, and architecture we see across the length and breadth of the lowlands is clear evidence for a single dominant political culture. Emerging from the social and demographic collapse that brought an end to the Late Preclassic Period (400 BCE–150 CE), this new tradition developed its distinctive character during the transitional Protoclassic Period (150–300 CE), before spreading outward from the central southern lowlands – the interior of the peninsula known as the Peten (Map 2) – in a materially attested process. Its homogeneity is significant because it means that what we lack in comprehensiveness at any single centre is compensated for by the geographical expanse of its coverage and a 600-year-plus time span. The one important caveat is the marked weighting of the data toward the latter part of that range. The transition between the Early Classic (300–600) and Late Classic (600–900) eras entailed, among other changes, a substantial increase in the production of inscriptions and the kinds of topics they discuss. Here it is important to strike a balance between an idealised, but heuristically useful, synchronic approach and the reality of diachronic processes, some of which may be masked by intentional efforts to preserve tradition and present outward continuity.

This study concentrates on the nature and operation of the Classic Maya political system, placing less emphasis on its origins. We have few, if any, inscriptions from the initial founding events of the second to fourth centuries CE, and here archaeology can be our only direct source. That said, retrospective accounts of political genesis, whether historical or mythistorical in character, are of considerable interest to us, if only in casting light on the ideological self-perception of Classic Maya kingdoms. As for the famed collapse of the ninth century, that event represents an end to the regimes that produced the inscriptions, progressively robbing us of our textual “window” into the past. Although monuments were raised and inscriptions carved during this social, cultural, and political tumult, their aim was more to fortify and preserve a fading tradition than to offer a reportage of crisis. However, late texts do supply significant clues to the processes at work during the collapse, providing evidence for transformation as well as disintegration. This makes the topic worthy of a chapter-length treatment which presents evidence that runs counter to notable parts of the current consensus.

An implicit critique throughout the book regards the long tradition of exceptionalist thinking in Maya studies. By this I mean the propensity to see the Classic Maya as following their own unique star without meaningful

precedents in world history and anthropology. It goes without saying that every society will have individual, culturally mediated, responses to the challenges it faces. Yet the recurring nature of those challenges, together with the base cognitive and physical capacities we all share, mean that familiar problems will often find familiar solutions, even if they are framed in distinctive ways. The dazzling virtuosity of Maya culture, its remarkable accomplishments and enduring enigmas, has a beguiling quality that we must, in some respects, resist. In the absence of an argument as convincing as the posited feature is extraordinary, exceptionalism leads us back into the kind of interpretive cul-de-sac that blocked progress in Maya research for a major portion of the twentieth century.

This relates to a wider intent to counter the exoticism attributed to the Maya in much contemporary popular culture. It is only by placing the Maya within the common thread of global history that we can appreciate their universal as well individual qualities, opening a genuine debate on what concepts of identity, ethnicity, and culture mean in ancient as well as modern times. Only by asserting a comparative equivalence can we analyse their past in the same way we would that of any other complex historical society.

My approach is to use epigraphic data as an informant, as a set of sources that must be first accessed, then interpreted and contextualised, taking an emic resource for the etic purpose of explicating an extinct sociopolitical system. We cannot collaborate with these sources in the way we would in ethnographic fieldwork, and our dialogue with them can only be of a metaphorical kind. But in our own way we can interrogate them, parsing their meaning by discerning how one text reflects upon others and the wider physical record. The textual past is never a whole or continuous narrative, but so many scattered scenes with characters, acts, ideas, settings, and relationships that we hope to restore to something like their original sequence and place within a simulacrum of their original matrix.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The arguments in this volume are developed through three parts. Part I, “Agendas in Classic Maya Politics”, sets out the context, methodology, and conceptual orientation in which the remainder of the study takes place. It begins with “Modelling the Maya”, a chapter that explores the interwoven history of sources and interpretation that constitute the quest to understand ancient Maya political organisation. Here each of the pivotal developments is discussed within the milieu of its times, setting out how data and theory have interacted to produce both major advances and major revisions.

The next chapter, “On Archaeopolitics”, broadens the focus to discuss why certain concepts and agendas will be useful for this study, and others not. It

begins with a discussion of the “state” in anthropological thought, joining the critique of formal socioevolutionary schemes that has steadily grown over the years. This is followed by a look at the recursive social models that have superseded them in several respects, discussing the amendments required to patch their omissions, especially in their understanding of hierarchy and collective agency. Lastly, it looks at how these models might be viewed within the framework of complexity theory, a field that expressly studies the relationship between wholes and parts that constitutes the central rub of this study.

Since epigraphy provides the dataset with which this book builds its understanding of Classic Maya politics, it is necessary to offer some epistemological grounding for the use of written sources. Thus, the fourth chapter, “Worlds in Words”, revisits the often-uneasy relationship between the textual and the material, addressing the unique challenge faced by historical archaeologies. It takes a special interest in defining the rhetorical purposes of Maya inscriptions, and examines potential bridges between history and anthropology – viewed here as estranged cousins more illuminating in combination than they are in isolation. The end purpose here is to demonstrate how the information on events provided by texts can contribute to an understanding of both process and structure.

These presentations prime us for Part II, “Epigraphic Data on Classic Maya Politics”, which begins with six chapters that each examine a major theme in the composition, operation, or interaction of Maya polities. Here the decipherment of key terms serve as points of departure for lexical and semantic analyses, elaborated through specific examples and additional iconographic, ethnographic, or archaeological materials. Where appropriate, statistical studies test for underlying patterns. Each of these chapters closes with one or more case studies that examine particular sub-themes or pertinent historical episodes in greater detail.

Part II opens with “Identity”, an examination of status, office, and role in the construction of Classic Maya authority. Divided between royal and noble titles, it examines how these epithets were employed and changed through time, shedding light on the construction of political personas. Next, “Constitution” concerns the institution of kingship and the specific acts that established fields of royal action. It begins with an examination of the royal life cycle and how authority passed between generations. It then moves to accounts of political foundation, seeking to understand how individual acts grounded institutions in time and place. The seventh chapter, “Transcendence”, deals with the fused nature of Classic Maya politics and religion. Among a large array of deities, some were attached to particular places and dynasties, supernatural associations that rulers used to fix themselves at the spiritual core of their communities. The eighth chapter, “Matrimony”, concentrates on that singular institution to explore how unions within and between polities worked