

ANCIENT MAYA POLITICS

The Classic Maya have long presented scholars with vexing problems. One of the longest running and most contested of these, and the source of deeply polarized interpretations, has been their political organization. Using recently deciphered inscriptions and fresh archaeological finds, Simon Martin argues that this particular debate can be laid to rest. He offers a comprehensive re-analysis of the issue in an effort to answer a simple question: how did a multitude of small kingdoms survive for some 600 years without being subsumed within larger states or empires? Using previously unexploited comparative and theoretical approaches, Martin suggests mechanisms that maintained a “dynamic equilibrium” within a system best understood not as an array of individual polities but an interactive whole. With its rebirth as text-backed historical archaeology, Maya studies has entered a new phase, one capable of building a political anthropology as robust as any other we have for the ancient world.

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A POLITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF
THE CLASSIC PERIOD 150–900 CE

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In memory of Diane Martin
1932–2015

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PREFACE

In 1971 the doyen of Mayanists J. Eric S. Thompson asked why, if the key to deciphering Maya hieroglyphs had truly been found, had the trickle of initial readings not swollen into a river – instead drying up completely? That key was real enough, but the script proved decidedly jealous of its secrets. Yuri Knorozov's discovery of some core phonetic principles, first published in 1952, was not enough to fully unlock what is widely acknowledged to be the world's most complex writing system. It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that a new generation of epigraphers followed up on those initial clues and the flow of readings was resumed. Only now could the underlying structure of the script be properly discerned and the language it encoded made clear – restoring sounds to the signs, and thereby meanings to the monuments.

This book follows directly from that unravelling and the information that has flowed from it. The decipherment is still on-going and year-by-year fresh interpretations of the inscriptions allow us to read the words of an ancient people – ancestors to the millions of Maya people who inhabit the same lands today. What these texts have to say provides unique access to what was thought and done in this part of the world 2,000 or more years ago, offering the kind of data that Mayanists of yesteryear could only have dreamed of. The profound transformation that this has wrought has turned Maya studies into a historical archaeology, one as rich and robust as many more well-established ones across the globe.

It was the political organisation of the Classic Period that first drew me into Maya research and has been at the core of my interests ever since. This book represents the fullest statement of my views yet on this long-contested topic, but its aspirations go beyond that. It seeks to tackle critical questions that have long puzzled me and to explore the theoretical issues any answers to them must provoke. It is clearly not enough to produce a narrative of events, we must seek to comprehend the inner mechanisms and structures of their society. If Maya studies is to reach its full potential it will need to show how the material and textual can be harnessed and shown to work synergistically to do this. The emphasis of this book accordingly falls not on the minutiae of the decipherment but on the understandings it makes possible. Those wanting to know the full justifications behind individual readings will need to chase the

relevant citations. It is addressed to the Mayanist community as a whole – scholars, students, and aficionados alike – but has the greater ambition of communicating the advances in our field to a broader audience of anthropologists, historians, political scientists, and anyone interested in comparative sociopolitics worldwide.

I have been very fortunate to be encouraged and enabled by a variety of fine scholars and good friends over the past thirty years. It was a chance encounter during a mud-splattered trip through northern Guatemala in 1990 that Anthony Aveni first urged me to pursue a professional life in Maya research. The Maya Meetings at the University of Texas at Austin would soon become an annual fixture in my calendar, where Linda Schele and David Freidel proved enormously supportive of my early efforts. Ramón Carrasco graciously accepted the petition of a little-known epigrapher to join his archaeological project at Calakmul in 1994, an engagement with this crucial site that continued for more than two decades.

My fellowship at the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library in 1996–1997 was a transformative experience that gave me the time and study materials to begin writing *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens*. Jeffrey Quilter, as Director of Precolumbian Studies, was a splendid ringmaster of that rich and enjoyable year. That book took me a further two years to complete and was the product of frequent dialogues, sometimes daily correspondence, with my then-collaborator Nikolai Grube. In 2003 I took up an appointment at the University of Pennsylvania Museum, leaving my original career in design behind me. Here appreciation must go to not only the Director of the time, Jeremy Sabloff, but to the late Bob Sharer and Chris Jones – who proved to be ideal colleagues. I am grateful to have received strong support from former Director Richard Leventhal and current Director Julian Siggers, at an institution where I have been honoured to follow in a long and storied history of Maya research. In regard to this particular volume, I want to thank the Museum for its financial support and the role Steve Tinney as Deputy Director played in that.

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