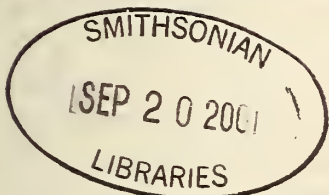


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THE ANCIENT MAYA: NEW RESEARCH ON 2000 YEARS OF DEVELOPMENT

by Jeremy A. Sabloff



INTRODUCTION

Ancient Maya civilization flourished for more than 2,000 years, lasting from approximately 500 B.C. until the 1540s A.D., the time of the Spanish Conquest. The ancient Maya are renowned for their achievements in art, architecture, writing, science, and urban planning in the varied and challenging environment of the greater Yucatán peninsula and neighboring areas. Today, the ancient Maya civilization's cultural heirs, who number in the millions, continue to thrive in modern-day Mexico and Central America.

In recent years, path-breaking archaeological, epigraphical, and ethnohistorical research is providing significant new insights into the development and accomplishments of the ancient Maya. Scholars now understand that the Maya territory was an integral part of a wider cultural area known as Mesoamerica, which includes the Maya area and most of Mexico to the north. The ancient Maya were not an isolated culture but had numerous economic, political, and ideological interactions with peoples in other parts of Mexico such as the Gulf Coast lowlands, the Valley of Oaxaca, and the Basin of Mexico.

THREE GEOGRAPHIC ZONES

The Maya area covers over 300,000 square kilometers that today includes southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and parts of Honduras and El

Salvador. This huge area can be divided into three geographic zones: the lowlands, the highlands, and the Pacific coastal plain and piedmont. Today, a wide variety of environments can be found in these zones, which do not differ significantly from those of more than 2,000 years ago. The Maya successfully exploited these differing and challenging environments but also had to cope with their fragility and the impact of short-term changes such as drought, and natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions. Ancient Maya civilization reached its zenith in the lowlands, especially in the south, but all of the geographic zones played key roles in the growth and flowering of this fascinating, complex Pre-Columbian culture. Through time, the demographic, economic, and political focus of ancient Maya civilization shifted across the landscape of this vast and varied homeland area.

The beginnings of complexity emerged in the Pacific coastal and piedmont zone. This productive zone, which runs along the entire southern margin of the Maya area, has relatively high rainfall and a variety of fertile agricultural regions. The coastal plain is crosscut by a large number of small rivers that flow south from the adjacent highlands. The shoreline and widespread rivers offered numerous trade routes, which the ancient Maya exploited throughout their history. The low foothills of the highlands to the north also supported intensive cultivation of such key crops as cacao.



Shortly after the beginnings of complexity emerged along the coastal plain, both the highlands and the lowlands began to develop rapidly: writing first flourishing in the highlands and large monumental architecture flourishing in the lowlands. The lowlands ultimately emerged as the center of Maya civilization, first in the south and later in the north. The highland, Pacific coastal, and piedmont zones also witnessed important developments throughout the later history of Maya civilization. Although the Spanish conquered the whole area, beginning in the early sixteenth century A.D., the timing and intensity of the Conquest differed significantly within and among the geographic zones.

EARLY HISTORY

What became the Maya area was initially occupied soon after the close of the last Ice Age, more than ten thousand years ago. Over the following millennia, small groups of nomadic hunters and gatherers utilized the area's varied animal and plant resources, leaving occasional traces of their short-term occupations in the form of stone tool fragments. The beginnings of the domestication of the crucially important maize plant currently can be traced as early as the middle of the fourth millennium B.C. (3,500 B.C.) with later settled village life based on the productivity and storage of cultivated plants emerging by the second millennium. It is at this time that the roots of ancient Maya civilization emerged.

The chronology of ancient Maya civilization has traditionally been divided into three parts—Preclassic, Classic, and Postclassic—each with its own subdivisions. These chronological periods were originally formulated to mark significant changes in Maya history, especially what was seen

as the peak of Maya civilization, namely, the Classic period in the southern lowlands.

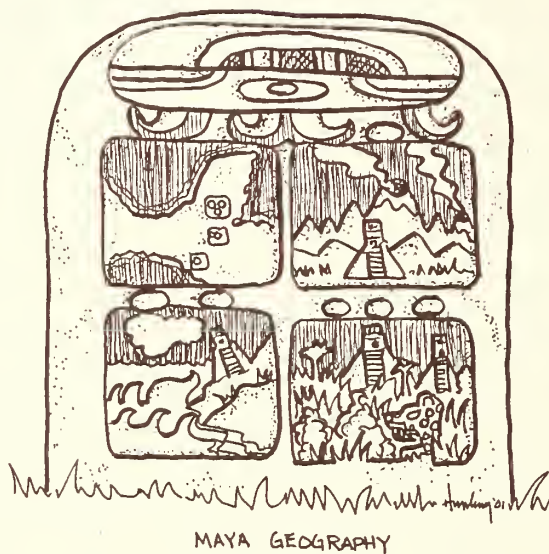
Recent research has shown that the hallmarks of the Classic period—writing, monumental art and architecture, the corbeled vault, and polychrome pottery—were all present during Preclassic times. New research also demonstrates that the Postclassic period was *not* a time of Maya decline after the end of the Classic; other zones besides the southern lowlands witnessed significant cultural developments as well. Nevertheless, the traditional periodization of Maya history remains well entrenched in both scholarly and popular usage, and to avoid confusion, I will continue to use it in this article.

However, as I maintained more than a decade ago, it is useful to group these traditional periods into three longer phases without internal subdivisions: *The Early Phase* (2000 B.C. - 300 B.C.), *The Middle Phase* (300 B.C. to A.D. 1200), and *The Late Phase* (A.D. 1200 to the

1540s). These period names use more neutral terms than the word "classic," and, I believe, better correspond to the general developmental trends in the ancient Maya world than do the traditional period scheme. In this paper I will refer to both the traditional periods, and the longer phases that I designate in italics.

THE EARLY PHASE (2000 B.C. - 300 B.C.)

This phase includes the Early and Middle Preclassic periods, the time when scholars can trace the beginnings of Maya civilization to settled agricultural villages, which cultivated a number of productive crops, including maize. The earliest villages were in the Pacific coastal and piedmont zone, but the highlands and southern lowlands soon



followed. The rise of complex technological, economic, political, artistic, and religious developments also can be traced to this time period. Thereafter, growing populations throughout the Maya area moved into previously unoccupied zones and the size of individual farming villages expanded.

Between 1000 and 500 B.C., increasing population together with decreasing land available for settlement and agricultural production led to larger population aggregations. This in turn brought with it administrative developments, more intensive forms of agriculture to support the growing populations, and ultimately the emergence of competition and conflict over scarce lands and resources.

The first highly visible signs of change began to appear by 500 B.C., if not earlier, as several population centers began to increase relatively rapidly in size, and large public buildings burst upon the scene at population centers such as Nakbé, El Mirador, and Tikal in the southern lowlands, and Kaminaljuyú and El Portón in the highlands. Monumental carved stones with depictions of local rulers also first appeared in the highland and coastal zones during this Early Phase. It is evident that rulers were able to mobilize considerable labor forces to construct large public buildings and use monumental sculpture to glorify and consolidate their economic, political, and religious powers.

Moreover, even in these early times, the Maya already were interacting with groups in neighboring areas, such as the Olmecs from the Gulf Coast and the Zapotecs from Oaxaca. These interactions led to trade, as well as the introduction of new ideas and ideologies. For example, the use of hieroglyphic writing and calendrics were invented north of the Maya area in places such as the Valley of Oaxaca. The Maya built on these early innovations to

produce their own sophisticated writing system before the end of the Early Phase. Clearly, what archaeologists generally call “chiefdoms” emerged at this time, as many Maya settlements grew in cultural complexity, and the roots of Maya cities and states were planted.

THE MIDDLE PHASE (300 B.C.- A.D. 1200)

This *Middle Phase* includes the Late Preclassic, the Classic, the Terminal Classic, and the Early Postclassic periods in the older classification. It is during this long and critical phase that Maya civilization is widely perceived to have reached its height. Cities attained their largest size; rulers had their greatest powers; and artistic, architectural, and scientific achievements were extraordinary. The locus of widespread cultural developments during the first period of the Middle Phase was in the highlands and Pacific coastal and piedmont zones and most particularly in the southern highlands. However, in the southern lowlands, sites such as El Mirador and Tikal soon rose to prominence.

In recent years, scholars have recognized that many of the hallmarks of “Classic” Maya civilization were present by the Late Preclassic period, if not earlier. In particular, the growth of urban centers, political states, and dynastic rulership can be traced to this time in both the highlands and lowlands. Hieroglyphic inscriptions with calendric and historical information became more widespread in the highland and Pacific coastal and piedmont zones but soon spread into the lowlands. By the middle of Late Preclassic times, the people had also begun to utilize the uniquely Maya calendric system—the Long Count—which was based on a linear calendar that reckoned time



from a start date of 3114 B.C. However, use of Long Count dating did not become common in the lowlands until Classic times. Rulers at El Mirador constructed some of the largest structures that were ever built in the Maya area, consisting of immense stone platforms supporting huge elite buildings.

Toward the end of the Late Preclassic period, the highland and Pacific coastal centers suffered a major decline, as did some of the lowland centers such as El Mirador, which had had close ties to the highlands. The reasons for this decline remain unclear. It is at this time that the political and economic locus of Maya civilization shifted from the highlands to the lowlands. The idea of dynastic rule, which had been present in the highlands, took root in the lowlands and both older sites like Tikal and relatively newer ones like Copán near the southern frontier of the lowlands grew in size and importance under dynastic political leadership. Although some highland sites recovered from their declines at the close of the Late Preclassic period, they lost their pre-eminence to the lowlands.

The Classic Period (A.D. 300-800)

During the Classic period, Maya civilization burgeoned in all geographic zones. Populations at older centers increased, while many new cities were founded as the growing numbers of peoples filled in the landscape. Although there is great scholarly debate about the population figures, by the beginning of the Late Classic period, the overall lowland population alone may have exceeded five million and the larger cities such as Tikal had populations in the many tens of thousands. The arts and architecture thrived; significant achievements in astronomy and mathematics were made; and an intricate ideological system involving numerous deities with multiple personae evolved. Social divisions became exacerbated with a small elite class growing in wealth and power and a large peasant class supplying the food and labor that supported the expanding cities. There is considerable scholarly debate about whether the non-elite class was further divided into a series of subclasses as well.

The Maya area was an important player in the larger Mesoamerican cultural system during the Classic period. Cities such as Tikal, Copán, and Kaminaljuyú had ties to Teotihuacán—the great city in the Basin of Mexico—and elite goods and peoples moved over relatively large distances. Archaeological and epigraphic data indicate that Teotihuacán played an important role in the political and economic development of Maya civilization, although the exact nature of this role remains unclear and controversial.

Recent dramatic advances in the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphic texts now allow scholars to appreciate the very complicated political landscape during Classic times in the lowlands and the waxing and waning of political fortunes of individual cities and ruling dynasties. Important archaeological research at the great urban centers of Tikal and Calakmul, for instance, along with new historical understandings from the texts, have illuminated the rivalries between these two cities. Tikal and then Calakmul and then Tikal again gained the upper hand with either direct or indirect influence over a number of other lowland centers.

In addition, significant ongoing research at Copán has been able to tie together dynastic rule, architectural growth, urban and rural settlement, and the ecology of the Copán Valley in a much clearer picture of the city's rise and fall throughout the Classic period. As similar knowledge is gained at other Maya cities, scholarly understanding of this key time period clearly will be significantly strengthened.

Terminal Classic (A.D. 800-1000) and Early Postclassic (A.D. 100-1200) Periods

Toward the close of the eighth century A.D., after a lengthy flourishing, many of the principal cities in the southern lowlands declined rapidly in population and power. From this time on, the southern lowlands remained relatively lightly populated and drastically less important both politically and economically. The causes of this demise were systemic and multiple with demographic stress, a possible drought, trade

disruptions, and intercity conflicts all implicated in this downturn.

Scholars used to believe that Maya civilization collapsed in the ninth century A.D., but recent research indicates that this was not the case. First, some southern lowland cities, especially those located near water trade routes and rich cacao and cotton growing areas, continued to thrive while other cities were declining. Second, cities in the northern lowlands, especially Chichén Itzá and others like Uxmal, began to thrive just as many southern cities were collapsing. Third, a mercantile, water-oriented Maya group from the Gulf Coast lowlands—the Chontal—who had close economic contacts with many areas of ancient Mesoamerica, began to spread their influence at this time in both the highlands and lowlands. Ultimately they focused their attention on the northern lowlands.

Thus, just as the demographic, political, and economic focus of Maya civilization had shifted from the southern highlands to the southern lowlands in the first part of the *Middle Phase*, so did the focus shift again in the later part of the phase, from the southern to the northern lowlands. Contrary to previous understandings, Maya civilization did not collapse, but continued to prosper, in a different and more restricted area.

This new northern florescence can be seen in such zones as the hilly Puuc region, where densely packed cities like Uxmal, Kabah, Sayil, and Labná thrived at the end of the Classic period and the first half of the Terminal Classic. The indigenous Maya population of the region grew rapidly at this time, exploiting the best agricultural lands in the northern lowlands. The reasons for the rise of the Puuc region sites and their relatively brief heyday have yet to be established. Recent research has shown that a few Puuc sites developed much earlier in the Classic, while my colleagues' and my research at Sayil does not indicate any influx of population from the south at the end of the Classic. So the connections between the southern decline and northern florescence were not demographic but were probably at least in part economic. The causes of decline of the Puuc sites also are unclear.

Drought and overpopulation are two of the factors often mentioned in this regard.

However, new research at the great site of Chichén Itzá and elsewhere in the north is beginning to shed new light on this hitherto enigmatic city and its relations with the Puuc region. This research indicates that Chichén Itzá had widespread political (including military conquest) and economic influence throughout the northern lowlands during the Terminal Classic and into the Early Postclassic period. It may have defeated the cities in the Puuc region, causing their decline, and appears to have had no rivals by the early 10th century A.D. Chichén Itzá had tremendous religious importance, and its sacred well, or *cenote*, was a key pilgrimage destination. Its ruler, perhaps Chontal Maya, had close relationships with groups elsewhere in Mesoamerica, especially Central Mexico.

Most scholars now believe that this major political capital was not conquered by the Toltecs of Central Mexico. The similarities between Toltec Tula and Maya Chichén Itzá likely resulted from common cultural ties. Sometime toward the close of the Early Postclassic period, Chichén Itzá declined for reasons that still are not fully understood, and the northern lowlands split into a number of small political entities.



THE LATE PHASE (A.D. 1200 - 1540s)

The Late Phase witnessed some important cultural shifts in ancient Maya civilization. These included new emphasis on mercantile activities, changing urban designs, significantly diminished investments by the ruling elite in large labor-intensive architectural projects to glorify themselves and their cities, and innovative forms of political control. The latter is best illustrated by the emergence of an extensive political confederacy led by the northern lowland center of Mayapán, which was a walled city with a dense population of about 12,000 people within its boundaries. Long-distance, water-borne trade around the Yucatán peninsula gained greater importance with several trading centers becoming key nodes in the exchange of bulk goods such as cotton, honey, and salt. In the highlands, a series of regional centers that had first emerged toward the end of the *Middle Phase* gained additional power and prominence. These cities were still thriving at the time of the sixteenth-century Spanish Conquest. However, Mayapán had declined by the middle of the fifteenth century and the political scene throughout the lowlands when the Spanish arrived was one of small decentralized polities.

THE SPANISH CONQUEST

The Spanish Conquest of the Maya area began with the early voyages of Grijalva, Hernández de Córdoba, and Cortés from 1517-1519 and was essentially complete by the 1540s. Parts of the area remained unconquered, and some Maya remained resistant to Spanish and then to Mexican control even up to modern times. The Spanish Conquest destroyed much of the Maya elite and their cultural practices, and it decimated a significant part of Maya population through introduced diseases such as measles and smallpox. Military conquest, disease, and Spanish political control effectively brought an end to Maya civilization after more than two thousand years.

(Note: This article is a shortened and revised version of a heavily illustrated chapter published in *Maya*, edited by Peter Schmidt, Mercedes de la Garza, and Enrique Nalda [see the "For Further Reading" section below for bibliographic details].)

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