

CONTINUITIES AND CHANGES IN



MAYA ARCHAEOLOGY

Perspectives at the Millennium

EDITED BY

Charles W. Golden

Greg Borgstede

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**Continuities and Changes in Maya
Archaeology: Perspectives at the
Millennium**

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**Edited by Charles W. Golden and Greg
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To Maura and Karla, for their unfailing support

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PART 1

Introduction

1

Continuities and Changes in Maya Archaeology: An Introduction

CHARLES W. GOLDEN

GREG BORGSTEDE

To call an edited volume *Continuities and Changes in Maya Archaeology* seems overly ambitious at best and disingenuous at worst. It is beyond the scope of any one volume to encapsulate the entire field of Maya archaeology, covering the history of its past one hundred years, its current state, and its future prospects. But this volume is not an attempt to circumscribe and delimit the field. It is intended, instead, to highlight the diversity of methodologies, theoretical approaches, and interpretive frameworks that make up archaeology as practiced in the Maya area—extending from southern Mexico to western Honduras—at the beginning of the twenty-first century (figure 1.1). To this end, the volume includes contributions on “traditional” topics in archaeology, such as ceramics, sociopolitical organization, and epigraphy, as well as “innovative” topics, such as residue analysis, social context studies, and community studies, which highlight the theoretical and methodological diversity and fluidity of our discipline.

The beginning of the twenty-first century seems an opportune moment to take stock of the growth and development of a field that arose as an academic, institutionalized discipline at the beginning of the previous century. The roots of academic archaeology in the Maya area lie in the nineteenth century. Dilettantes, explorers, and gentlemen scholars brought forth the field in an era of continuing exploration and colonialism (e.g., Charnay

Willey and Sabloff 1993). Excavations led by archaeologists from the Carnegie Institution of Washington continued for decades and covered the area from Yucatán to Honduras. Other institutions, including the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology, and the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, soon joined in this research (for an overview, see Black 1990; Schavelson 1989; Willey and Sabloff 1993). The doctoral programs of these university-based institutions not only helped to populate the field, they also encouraged the developing professionalism of archaeologists who would lead the discipline for the next quarter century.

The great interest in the Maya, within intellectual circles as well as among the broader public, drew more researchers and funding to Maya archaeology over the course of the twentieth century. This proliferation of archaeologists, and an enthusiastic public, required occasional assessments of the field as a whole. This need for a broad overview of the field has periodically resulted in the publication of large edited volumes dedicated to summarizing the “state of the art” of Maya archaeology. The most famous of these was the seminal *The Maya and Their Neighbors* (Hay et al. 1977 [1940]), which included both innovative scholarship in Maya archaeology, as well as a critique of the state of scholarship (Kluckhohn 1977 [1940] see also Sabloff in this volume).¹

It is within this vein that we view *Continuities and Changes in Maya Archaeology: Perspectives at the Millenium*. As with *The Maya and Their Neighbors*, this volume is an attempt to take stock of the field of Maya archaeology, and to situate it within the wider scope of anthropological archaeology. The authors elaborate on the strengths and weaknesses of the discipline, and explore how archaeologists working in the Maya area can make contributions to a wider variety of publics—academic, popular, and political. Contributors consider not only the past and present, but also hypothesize on the future of various aspects of Maya archaeology. As the editors of this volume, we have elected to provide a relatively free forum to allow for debate and discussion. Our sole admonition to the authors was to offer statements that examine where the field stands in relation to the past, and its perceived future directions. We do not necessarily agree with all the interpretations put forward in this volume, but we acknowledge that the field can only grow and move forward in an environment of such open debate.

This volume provides a means of assessing Maya archaeology’s contribution to anthropological archaeology and the influence of broader concerns—in anthropology, the social sciences, and political and social contexts—on Maya archaeology. As we have said, *Continuities and Changes in Maya Archaeology* is not an attempt to summarize or categorize the field of Maya archaeology. The diversity of the discipline precludes summary, which would be essentializing. In fact, it is the diversity of Maya archaeology—in its methodologies, theoretical approaches, practitioners, contexts, and knowledge—that is one of its greatest strengths and it is this diversity that the volume emphasizes. Following the conjunctive approach, a holistic, anthropological archaeology of the Maya consists of the insights drawn from all the data and perspectives available to us (Carmack and Weeks 1981; Fash and Sharer 1991; Taylor 1948). Following in the footsteps of *The Maya and Their Neighbors*, the goal of this volume is to provide points of discussion and debate that will advance our understanding and approaches to Maya archaeology.

The Contributions

This volume has been divided into four sections. In addition to the present chapter, the first section includes an introductory statement by Jeremy A. Sabloff, discussing a critical juncture in Maya archaeology—the critiques offered by Clyde Kluckhohn (1977[1940]) and his student Walter Taylor (1948), and their aftermath. Sabloff suggests five directions in which Maya archaeology responded to this juncture, and the shifts it engendered (and continues to foster) within the field. His hopeful tone offers a pointed counter to the mid-century critiques of Kluckhohn and Taylor and highlights some important changes in Maya archaeology over the past fifty years.

The second section consists of contributions on the social, political, and ideological aspects of ancient Maya culture. These studies draw on analogies and developments in archaeology outside the Maya area. Authors examine, for instance, cross-cultural models of social organization and issues of landscape archaeology. In so doing, these chapters underscore Maya archaeology's continuing engagement with broader archaeological and anthropological theory.

Robert J. Sharer and Charles W. Golden discuss the various forms of Maya sociopolitical organization and how it has been interpreted based on the archaeological record. They reject the wholesale adaptation of cross-cultural models often applied to Maya polities, and instead build a picture of the polity that, while informed by similarities to other societies, is distinctly Maya. The intent is not to reject cross-cultural studies of political organization, but to avoid the reification of cross-cultural models.

Marcella A. Canuto and William L. Fash, Jr. develop the concept of the “community” in settlement pattern studies, suggesting that it can bridge the theoretical gap between elites and non-elites. Methodologically, they also see that a false dichotomy has been established at both ends of this elite/ non-elite spectrum: (1) between the civic-ceremonial center and the polity of which it forms the center, and (2) between the household and larger population of which it is a component. They see research into the community as providing the methodological and theoretical link that can integrate multiple scales of organization.

Don and Prudence Rice examine the nature of “text-aided research” as it pertains to the reconstruction of Maya culture. They examine texts from Classic period inscriptions and Postclassic documents such as codices and colonial Spanish records. Using their research into the Colonial period Maya of the Petén as a case study, they seek to clarify the difference between “past” and “history,” and challenge our preconceived notions that somehow these are one and the same. In so doing, they address a primary concern of many researchers, within and without Maya studies: Even with the abundance of textual data available to supplement our archaeological research, can we develop a picture of the “true” or “accurate” past?

Finally, Wendy Ashmore moves beyond settlement pattern studies to discuss the present and future of landscape archaeology in the Maya area. She sees landscape studies as the search for links between individual, society, and the world. Looking into the present and future of the discipline, Ashmore sees these links manifested in studies that expand on the fundamental definition of landscapes, that examine the often blurry boundaries between “natural” and “built” landscapes, and that offer a recognition of how time and human activity interact to constitute landscapes.

The third section—textual and material analysis—focuses on lithics, ceramics, zooarchaeology, bioarchaeology, and epigraphy. These categories of knowledge, common across regional specialties in world archaeology, provide a base for comparing advances in Maya archaeology with developments in other geographical and theoretical areas.

Stephen D. Houston and Alfonso Lacadena García-Gallo begin this section, addressing the history of an important defining characteristic of Maya studies—epigraphy. Although histories of the decipherment of Maya writing have been presented before (e.g., Coe 1992; Stuart 1992; Houston, Stuart, and Chinchilla 2001), here the authors focus on the present and future directions of epigraphy. They look at the “culture” of epigraphy and epigraphers as practiced in academic and popular circles, and they explore the promise and problems associated with integrating epigraphic data into broader interpretations of ancient Maya society.

Utilizing modern techniques, Nicholas P. Dunning and Timothy Beach address the role of environment in ancient Maya society. At issue is the nature of ancient Maya techniques for agricultural production and intensification, and the changing interpretations and theoretical approaches to the topic within Maya archaeology. As a more dynamic picture of the interaction between ancient Maya and their environment has emerged, so too has our understanding that agriculture as well as the environment were far more variable in time and space than we had previously believed.

Antonia Foias tackles the large problem of ceramic analysis in Maya archaeology—where it has come from and where it is going. Her brief history of the topic provides a much-needed assessment of the utility of current approaches to ceramic typology in the Maya area and where it may be headed. Much like lithic studies, ceramic analyses long focused on the development of typologies as the basis for site and regional chronologies. As Foias shows, however, the field of ceramic analysis has, in recent decades, made use of a wide variety of macroscopic, microscopic, chemical, art historical, and anthropological methods to provide us with a more complete picture of ancient Maya society.

Geoffrey E. Braswell examines the past and present of lithic studies in the Maya area, specifically the important role of the political economy of obsidian. He finds that before the 1970s lithic studies focused on typological analysis, but in that decade there was a “lithic revolution” during which Maya archaeologists began to focus on the economic implications of stone tools. Since then lithic studies have been a cornerstone of studies of Maya political economy—including issues of production, exchange, and extraction, among others.

Lori E. Wright, using specific case studies, underscores the importance of bioarchaeology in developing robust interpretations of burial remains and the social and political strategies they encode. Wright discusses three issues: (1) the reconstruction of life histories, (2) the development of skeletal biodistance studies, and finally (3) forensic analyses. Through these avenues of study she stresses that we can reconstruct more about social organization and heterogeneity, and group histories, including important processes such as migrations.

Kitty F. Emery highlights the important contributions made by zooarchaeology in interpretation and the future prospects for this field of study within the Maya area. She notes that despite a long history of zooarchaeological studies, it is only recently that such

work has come to be incorporated into larger issues of ritual, economics, and politics. Emery believes that this shift forms the basis of a new “social zooarchaeology” that has much to contribute to Maya studies.

Finally, arguing that Maya archaeologists have for too long focused on the “big remains” found in tombs, caches, and other such contexts, Daniela Triadan and Takeshi Inomata develop an argument for the importance of small, or microscopic, artifact analysis. Their case study from the site of Aguateca, Guatemala, relies on residue analysis and activity area research, techniques that promise innovative and important insights into ancient life.

The final section of the volume—contemporary concerns—represents an important advance in the practice of Maya archaeology over the last twenty-five years. As archaeologists in the United States and elsewhere have struggled with the nature of their obligations to the descendant communities of the people they study, Mayanists are coming to an understanding that the practice of archaeology is firmly embedded in a social context that influences all aspects of archaeological practice. Jason Yaeger and Greg Borgstede begin this section with a historical examination of the relationship between archaeologists and contemporary Maya communities. They highlight how this relationship has not arisen in academic isolation, but has been influenced by broader developments in anthropology and social sciences more generally. They finish with a brief discussion of the implications of an “engaged” archaeology in the Maya area, and the importance of including alternate voices in the archaeological process.

K.Anne Pyburn begins with a look into the theoretical standpoint of Western archaeology, particularly in relationship to indigenous peoples, in a world of “posts” (post-modernism, post-colonialism, etc.). Taking a critical view of Maya archaeology and archaeologists she suggests a number of ways to rethink the context of anthropology in general and Maya archaeology in particular. Her broad-ranging argument contextualizes Maya archaeology within the wider arena of social sciences and humanities. She explores the issues surrounding modernity, post-modernity, objectivity, and subjectivity, particularly as these affect archaeological practice and modern communities in the Maya world.

Matilde Ivic de Monterroso analyzes the impact of a specific social development—the Guatemalan Peace Accords—on the practice of Maya archaeology within Guatemala. She argues for the importance of including nonarchaeological perspectives—particularly those of descendant communities—in academic discourse. More than this, Ivic looks at the other side of the coin to explore how descendant communities view the work of archaeologists.

The volume closes with a discussion by T.Patrick Culbert. This final chapter plays two roles. In the first place, Culbert examines his own experience over nearly fifty years in Maya studies, and his perceptions of the changes that have most affected the field. Second, he offers his interpretation of the state of the field as evident in some of the volume’s chapters.

The Contributors

This volume grows out of a much larger project, an attempt by Drs. Houston and Sharer to bring together nearly two dozen scholars at the 99th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, D.C., in 2001. The current volume includes the work of most of those present in Washington, who have here contributed extended versions of their papers. This volume also incorporates a number of papers not presented at the original meeting, including those by Emery, Ivic, and Culbert.

Just as no single volume can hope to encompass the diversity of approaches within the field, this work is not representative of the diversity of archaeologists at work in the Maya area. Drs. Inomata, Lacadena, and Triadan, and Lic. Ivic notwithstanding, the contributors to *Continuities and Changes in Maya Archaeology* are from the United States, Canada, and Guatemala. Although attempts were made to include Honduran and Mexican, as well as additional Guatemalan, scholars, even this would not represent the range and diversity among archaeologists working in the region. Archaeologists and epigraphers come from Poland, Hungary, France, Spain, Britain, Australia, Guatemala, Mexico, El Salvador, Belize, Honduras, Canada, Japan, and the United States, among other countries, and provide a unique cauldron; a set of diverse cultural standpoints that continues to influence the development of Maya archaeology.

Moreover, apart from national affiliation, this volume is a production of non-Maya archaeologists concerning the field of Maya archaeology, and as such, it cannot “speak for” indigenous peoples. Although several contributions address issues related to indigenous positions and perceptions of archaeologists, none can speak in an “indigenous voice.” Indeed, the question of what constitutes the indigenous voice and representation, particularly in relation to archaeological practice, is itself a subject of heated debate contested at professional meetings and political gatherings, and would constitute innumerable volumes (see Warren 1998; Montejo 2002).

Diversity as Strength

Finally, as stated above, the goal of this volume is not to define or delimit the extent of Maya archaeology but to engender discussion and debate—on the history, current state of the art, and future of the field. The current state of the art is as diverse as any geographical specialization in world archaeology, and we believe that the practice of archaeology in the Maya area has much to contribute to anthropological archaeology in general. We also believe, however, that the traditionally provincial focus of much Maya research remains an issue that archaeologists continue (by and large successfully) to struggle against. Only by drawing from research elsewhere in Mesoamerica and around the world can Maya studies remain a vital aspect of anthropological archaeology.

In the end, the diversity of the discipline, far from being divisive, fosters cohesion as researchers attempt to incorporate the full breadth of data in conjunctive, holistic studies. Diversity does, however, challenge efforts at summation, as this volume clearly shows. Although various contributors have made attempts to envision the future of Maya

archaeology, its diversity precludes any firm statements about that future. The only certainty, if the past is any indication, is that methodological, theoretical, and contextual advances will surprise and challenge practitioners as Maya archaeology moves rapidly into the next millennium.

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Notes

1. Mayanists have sometimes extended the scope of these volumes to include a wider Mesoamerican perspective, and a number of edited volumes have addressed issues of regional interaction (e.g., Hammond 1974; Hay et al. 1977 [1940]). These state-of-the-art volumes have also narrowed their focus to examine a temporal slice of Maya history (e.g., Sabloff and Henderson 1993) or have explored more specific topics within Maya archaeology, as with *Lowland Maya Settlement Patterns* (Ashmore 1981), *Function and Meaning in Classic Maya Architecture* (Houston 1998), and *Ancient Maya Women* (Ardren 2002). One of the most important of these volumes is *Classic Maya Political History* (Culbert 1991), which included early syntheses of archaeological and epigraphic data following the explosion of epigraphic decipherment of the 1980s.

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