

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Maya Archaeology: Looking Forward

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This essay reviews the following works:

Maya Gods of War. By Karen Bassie-Sweet. Louisville: University Press of Colorado, 2021. Pp. viii + 324. \$66.00 hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-64642-131-2.

Maya Ruins Revisited: In the Footsteps of Teobert Maler. By William Frej. Santa Fe, NM: Peyton Wright Gallery Press, 2020. Pp. 291. \$55.17 hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-578-63921-5.

Archaeology and Identity on the Pacific Coast and Southern Highlands of Meso-America. Edited by Claudia García-Des Lauriers and Michael W. Love. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016. Pp. ix + 226. \$60.00 hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-60781-504-4.

Life and Politics at the Royal Court of Aguateca: Artifacts, Analytical Data, and Synthesis. Edited by Takeshi Inomata and Daniela Triadan. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2014. Pp. vii + 356. \$30.00 hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-60781-318-7.

Miscellaneous Investigations in Central Tikal: Structures in and around the Lost World Plaza. By H. Stanley Loten. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2018. Pp. xvii + 36. \$55.00 hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-934536-97-1.

Miscellaneous Investigations in Central Tikal: Great Temples III, IV, V, and VI. By H. Stanley Loten. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2017. Pp. xix + 61. \$59.95 hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-934536-93-3.

The Real Business of Ancient Maya Economies: From Farmers' Fields to Rulers' Realms. Edited by Marilyn A. Masson, David A. Freidel, and Arthur A. Demarest. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020. Pp. xvii + 631. \$125.00 hardcover. ISBN: 978-0813066-29-5.

The Origins of Maya States. Edited by Loa P. Traxler and Robert J. Sharer. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2016. Pp. ix + 681. \$69.95 hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-934536-86-5.

One of the eight books under review here, all of which focus on the pre-Hispanic history of the Maya, is an annotated compilation of stunning photographs by William Frej. These vivid images, some set up to compare to those taken by Teobert Maler at Maya sites across the Yucatán Peninsula (and beyond) roughly a century earlier, illustrate both the creativity of the Maya and the partiality and fragility of the material record left as clues for

archaeologists to discover and study the behaviors, the products of joint labor, and the genius of the deep past. For me, a practicing archaeologist for decades, the album of photographs by Frej, along with the other works discussed here, illustrate the present promise and challenges faced by Maya archaeology and, in a real sense, archaeology more generally today.

The cumulative findings from many decades of fieldwork, along with incredible new technologies, like Lidar (light detection and ranging), have amplified and yielded a more global scope for archaeology's empirical foundation. Significant increments in the discipline's empirical record provide a portal to the past, a material basis to examine human history for times, places, or even social segments that are represented by no, few, or skewed written records. As illustrated by the books under review, our accumulating knowledge concerning the pre-Hispanic Maya past is expanding especially rapidly. Painstaking epigraphic breakthroughs have afforded us the chance to decipher and read ancient Maya texts, which have provided rich independent lines of evidence to supplement archaeological and other suites of data. These multiple lines of evidence are sufficiently robust that they can be traced forward in time rather than extending analytical frames and analogical suppositions backward from the present. And yet with development, modernization, and environmental destruction, the rich remnants of the past are rapidly slipping beyond the fingers of archaeological analyses. In the face of these countervailing forces, it is the discipline's great challenge to devise and apply enhanced conceptual constructs that keep pace with the tsunami of new empirical knowledge that we have gathered regarding the Maya past. The ongoing dynamic between that expanding record and how we conceptually frame it anchors my focus here.

A potent lesson that archaeologists have absorbed since the time of Maler (over one hundred years ago) is that the contexts of archaeological remains, the relational distributions of artifacts and architecture, may be as revealing as the material record (objects) itself (themselves). And herein lies a distinct challenge for archaeological investigations, which often can destroy contexts as they are discovered and exposed. The careful and detailed recording and publication of investigated contexts provide ways for archaeologists to eclipse this conundrum. In this respect, Frej's photographic record is one of the four works under review here that have created an exemplary and lasting empirical reference on the Maya past. The two volumes by H. Stanley Loten, two components of the twenty-third volume in the long-running Tikal (Guatemala) Reports, archive detailed architectural section drawings and photographs of central civic-ceremonial structures and plazas at the major Maya lowland center that were mapped and excavated as part of the University of Pennsylvania's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology project at the site (1956–1969). A fourth volume, edited by Takeshi Inomata and Daniela Triadan, is the third and final volume in its own series that meticulously reports the findings of research led by the editors at the Classic Maya settlement of Aguateca (situated in the northern Guatemalan Petén). This third book provides select artifactual descriptions, contextual analyses, and sections of synthesis. It follows two earlier volumes focused respectively on the excavated architectural contexts along with ceramic vessel descriptions and studies of stone artifacts.¹

The concluding volume in the Aguateca sequence serves as an admirable exemplar of how much knowledge about past activities can be derived through the careful contextual analysis of artifact distributions across excavated residential spaces. By examining the spatial patterning of different artifact classes, Inomata, Triadan, and their collaborators define the array of behaviors (economic, political, and ritual) that occurred in Late Classic

¹ The former is Takeshi Inomata and Daniela Triadan, eds., *Burned Palaces and Elite Residences of Aguateca: Excavations and Ceramics* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2010). The latter is Kazuo Aoyama, *Elite Craft Producers, Artists, and Warriors at Aguateca: Lithic Analysis* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2009).

Maya elaborate residences by syncing the material record with scenes depicted on Maya painted vases and murals. Their detailed, relational studies (Inomata, in *Life and Politics*), amplified by a study of the monument record (Houston, in *Life and Politics*), yield a vivid picture of Aguateca's shifting history of political affiliations and fortunes, which ended with the rapid abandonment of excavated structures. As the residents of these elaborate structures fled attack, they left behind valued goods, such as shell and jade ornaments, "a frozen moment" (ca. 810 CE) ensconced in an extended process during which many Maya centers, such as Aguateca, were heavily depopulated between 730 and 910 CE.²

Despite shared elements of material culture, including a writing system, formerly entrenched notions of a single unified Classic Maya polity are now untenable, a theme magnified in the volume by Karen Bassie-Sweet, *Maya Gods of War*. On the basis of my review of these eight books (in conjunction with other recent works), when it comes to the ongoing and healthy rethinking of presumptions and preconceptions about the pre-Hispanic Maya, Lidar and the rapid advances in epigraphic decipherment often (and rightfully) are given top line. But it is the field-derived findings implemented through painstaking archaeological excavations and pedestrian surveys at dozens of sites, large and small, by hundreds of archaeological teams that also have yielded the empirical foundations to revisit and revise the entrenched basic assumptions and tenets that have framed the Maya past since Maler's time.

The remainder of this essay neither provides thumbnail synopses of the eight diverse works under review nor attempts an abbreviated overview of the pre-Hispanic Maya deep past. The latter could not be done justice in the allotted space. And importantly, even since the publication of these eight works, the tempo of discoveries has continued apace, with such key findings as the numerous large earthen platforms that were built early in the Preclassic period (ca. 1250–1050 BCE), possibly even predating fully sedentary settlements, in the Middle Usumacinta region.³ Rather, I highlight the basis for the optimism that I gleaned from many of the authors who contributed to this set of works, a confidence to reconsider the nuts and bolts of our conceptual frames on the deep past, to borrow the words that the editors of *The Real Business of Ancient Maya Economies* brought to their subject. As one editor, David Freidel, recognizes, the "nuts, bolts, and the interpretive bridges to a new understanding of Maya political economy that we build with them are [now] here" (3). In other words, as fragmentary as it is, the geographic breadth and multidimensional depth of the empirical record for the Maya past is so much richer than ever before. If we build from what we have learned, the time is ripe to work toward forging greater consensus on the assumptions, constructs, and linking arguments that we use to frame the expanding record. Although I find only limited agreement on how precisely to proceed, I do see an emergent reckoning that "we need new and better theory than we have traditionally been using," as Arlen F. Chase and Diane Z. Chase write in the book's foreword (xvii), and that many legacy presumptions left by past paradigms, including culture history, the linear notions of progress associated with cultural evolutionary thought, and environmental determinism, no longer conform to what we now know.

To assess the increments in knowledge and the shifting frames currently being brought to investigating the Maya deep past, there is utility in establishing prior benchmarks, key syntheses that characterized earlier eras of scholarship. By selecting two classics, my aim is definitely not to diminish these works but to illustrate how and why our baseline assumptions and tenets are being revised and that we still have more conceptual

² Claire Ebert, Keith M. Prufer, Martha J. Macri, Bruce Winterhalder, and Douglas J. Kennet, "Terminal Long Count Dates and the Disintegration of Classic Maya Polities," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 25 (2014): 337–356.

³ Takeshi Inomata, Daniela Triadan, Verónica A. Vázquez López, Juan Carlos Fernandez-Díaz, Takayuki Omori, María Belén Mendez Bauer, Melina García Hernández, Timothy Beach, Clarissa Cagnato, Kazuo Aoyama, and Hiro Nasu, "Monumental Architecture at Aguada Fénix and the Rise of Maya Civilization," *Nature* 582 (2020): 530–533.

rethinking to do.⁴ J. Eric S. Thompson's volume was originally penned in its first edition before the post-World War II burst of archaeological research and relies heavily on personal experiences, preconceptions, and the newly discovered yet still fragmentary findings of the era.⁵ The Richard E. W. Adams collection, as highlighted in a summary chapter by Gordon E. Willey, integrates preliminary results from key research, such as from the aforementioned University of Pennsylvania project at Tikal, as well as reflections from generalizing theoretical efforts associated with a mid-twentieth century growth spurt and fieldwork expansion in archaeology.⁶ Yet over the past decades, the tempo of field and lab studies in the Maya region has continued, and as Francisco Estrada-Belli insightfully recognizes in the synthetic tome *The Origins of Maya States*, "Each time significant amounts of new data [are] brought in, our assumptions necessarily [have] to be adjusted" (226).

Perhaps the most fundamental shift in framing is evident in the volume titles. Whereas the subject of both the Thompson and Adams volumes is Maya civilization, the editors of *The Origins of Maya States*, Loa P. Traxler and Robert J. Sharer, define their focus in the plural (*states*). Likewise, a more pluralistic usage is employed by Marilyn A. Masson, David A. Freidel, and Arthur A. Demarest, the editors of *The Real Business of Ancient Maya Economies*. The conceptual ramifications of this key distinction are severalfold and not merely semantic. The contributors to the latter books acknowledge that the Maya region was never politically unified; it was always home to multiple polities rather than a single empire or unified political realm tied together through benevolent elite interaction, an idea that Thompson still explicitly entertained.⁷ But by implication, Traxler and Sharer's framing decouples the civilizational tradition, in a sense the high culture of the Classic Maya, including the shared system of writing, from any specific Maya polity or city.⁸ This decoupling is more than mere words. As Astrid Runggaldier and Norman Hammond recount in *The Origins of Maya States* (34), conceptions of Maya states were derived from the Classic period and projected back. Now, it is clear that the variable processes toward hierarchical forms of governance (e.g., *states*) in the Maya region can be temporally and causally disentangled from the civilizational traditions, including writing and personalized holy kingships associated with the final centuries of the Classic period (ca. 250–900 CE) political landscape. In other words, degrees of interpersonal inequality, leadership, and centers with monumental architecture were present in parts of the Maya region well before the advent of the highly personalized mode of rule generally associated with the Maya Classic period.

Likewise, it has become evident that the facile assumptions, grounded in traditional cultural history, that equated shared material culture to a homogeneous Maya identity and seeming parallels in material culture to unified governance can no longer be sustained empirically.⁹ Nor is it helpful to treat, as Thompson did, the complex, multiscalar world of the pre-Hispanic Maya as if it were a bounded culture or system, analogous to a living organism with an inevitable sequence or life span of growth and decline.¹⁰ The inexorable

⁴ Richard E. W. Adams, ed., *The Origins of Maya Civilization* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1977); J. Eric S. Thompson, *The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilization, Second Edition* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966).

⁵ Thompson, *Rise and Fall*.

⁶ Gordon R. Willey, "The Rise of Maya Civilization: A Summary View," in *The Origins of Maya Civilization*, ed. Richard E. W. Adams (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1977), 383–423.

⁷ Thompson, *Rise and Fall*, 94–98.

⁸ John Baines and Norman Yoffee, "Order, Legitimacy, and Wealth in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia," in *Archaic States*, ed. Gary M. Feinman and Joyce Marcus (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1998), 199–260.

⁹ Thompson, *Rise and Fall*, 94–98.

¹⁰ On Thompson's use of the cultural historical frame, see Gary M. Feinman and Jill E. Neitzel, "Excising Culture History from Contemporary Archaeology," *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 60 (2020): Art. 101230. On a

doom loop (so often presumed) for Maya civilization was bolstered by early, uncritical applications of ethnographic analogy and environmental determinism. In concert, they served to foster the presumption that tropical forests were basically unsuitable for large, dense populations due to a reliance on swidden farming, tenets now shown to be historically inaccurate.¹¹ In the Maya lowlands, labor investments to intensify agrarian production have been extended back to early in the first millennium BCE (Hansen, *The Origins of Maya States*, 362).

There is little current agreement about how to think about and define social identities in this past world, as the contributors to Claudia García-Des Lauriers and Michael W. Love's edited collection, *Archaeology and Identity on the Pacific Coast and Southern Highlands of Mesoamerica*, illustrate through their writings. But there is an emergent consensus that identities in ancient Mesoamerica were not innate, fixed, or statically demarcated in space. As Love aptly notes in his chapter in *Archaeology and Identity*, "identity, both collective and individual, is always dynamic and in flux" (29), especially in a pre-Hispanic Maya landscape of people not territories that was characterized by persistent personal and domestic mobility and the rises, demographic ebbs, and demises of key central places.¹²

Just as the static, categorical constructs of traditional culture history require redress, so too must we break from simple, stepped models of change. In general, these were built by pyramiding synchronic snapshots from contemporary ethnographic cases into presumed linear sequences of diachronic change.¹³ Underpinned by an ever-expanding empirical record, I was buoyed by the ever-greater analytical depth evident when reading side by side the more recent papers in *The Origins of Maya States* with those in Richard E. W. Adams's 1973 compilation.¹⁴ In the earlier collection, many of the contributions looked to a single prime mover (e.g., warfare, population growth, trade) and/or episode of diffusion (whether from the Gulf Coast, the Pacific highlands of Chiapas and Guatemala, or Central Mexico) to account for the transformational rise of Maya civilization. This early modeling not only was framed to account for a rapid (practically *de novo*) rise of Classic period Maya royals but also emphasized external origins, given the presumed limitations of the lowland forested environment.

In *Maya Ruins Revisited*, Jeremy A. Sabloff underscores that "both the quantity and the quality of archaeological research throughout the Maya region has been growing significantly" (25). With these findings, which are summarized thoroughly for different sectors of the Maya region by Francisco Estrada-Belli, Michael Love, and Richard D. Hansen (chapters 6, 7, and 8, respectively, in *The Origins of Maya States*), the underlying categorical or stepwise tenets and framing of past models no longer are tenable. As typified through lavish burials situated beneath temples and other civic structures, the regalia and rituals of lordship (Sharer and Traxler, *The Origins of Maya States*, 24) are evidenced in our current empirical record centuries later (ca. 100 BCE) than many other indicators of "social complexity." Significant increments in the sizes, hierarchical complexity, monumentality,

uniform notion of the cycling of societies, see Anders Sandberg, "The Lifespan of Civilizations: Do Societies 'Age' or Is Collapse Just Bad Luck," in *How World's Collapse: What History, Systems, and Complexity Can Teach Us about Our Modern World and Fragile Future*, ed. Miguel A. Centeno, Peter W. Callahan, Paul A. Larcey, and Thayer S. Patterson (New York: Routledge, 2023), 375–396.

¹¹ Shanti Morell-Hart, Lydie Dussol, and Scott L. Fedick, "Agriculture in the Ancient Maya Lowlands (Part 1): Paleoethnobotanical Residues and New Perspectives on Plant Management," *Journal of Archaeological Research* 31 (2023): 561–615.

¹² On people not territories, see Alexandre Tokovinine, *Place and Identity in Classic Maya Narratives* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2015), 123. On key central places, see Takeshi Inomata, "The Spatial Mobility of Non-Elite Populations in Classic Maya Society and Its Political Implications," in *Ancient Maya Commoners*, ed. Jon C. Lohse and Fred Valdez Jr. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 175–196.

¹³ Elman R. Service, *Primitive Social Organization* (New York: Random House, 1962).

¹⁴ Adams, *Origins of Maya Civilization*.

and governance of centers and polities are well and repeatedly documented both in the Maya lowlands and in adjacent regions centuries before (1000–800 BCE) highly personalized examples of Maya kingship. Eleanor M. King, in *The Origins of Maya States*, captures this ongoing reframing: “the development of the state was not uniform throughout the Maya world.” Maya polities were “not a single monolithic entity. Not only were early Maya states often differently configured, but they changed from the Preclassic through the Classic” (422).

What does this mean in a practical sense? To conceptualize long-term change in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, it seems time to more regularly apply Eric R. Wolf’s now-famous metaphor and no longer model different geographic sectors as discrete cultural historical “billiard balls,” each tied to a list of traits.¹⁵ Esther Pasztory advanced a prescient alternative decades ago when she compared Mesoamerica to historical Europe.¹⁶ Each was composed of diverse regions that were linked through exchange, dynastic alliance, war, calendar, religion, and elements of ideology. Both were what Fernand Braudel described as “known worlds,” in which people were aware of neighboring regions.¹⁷ The internal borders and boundaries in each of these worlds were neither impermeable nor fixed. Moving beyond culture-defining trait lists and assertions that shared forms or traits constitute a rather vague process of diffusion seems like a necessary step toward framing historical pasts occupied by living, thinking, interacting agents. If we are, as William Frej (in *Maya Ruins Revisited*, 19) implores us, to look for answers to contemporary challenges in the preserved remnants of the Maya past, then visioning people, past and present, seems like an essential starting point. Likewise, to achieve this aim, our perspectives on the past in Mesoamerica and beyond must expand beyond the top 1 percent, a liability that has biased our thinking about the Maya before the 1960s (Sabloff, in *Maya Ruins Revisited*, 24–25).¹⁸

As evidenced in these collected works, we are in the midst of a reconsideration of how we think about the Maya past in regard to how core institutions worked and were articulated. Under debate are the relational processes through which the Maya governed themselves (governance) and the mechanisms through which they engaged in exchange.¹⁹ Nevertheless, in a broader, comparative sense, both of these issues currently extend and ramify well beyond the Maya, and even Mesoamerica, as archaeologists globally are now able to collect, analyze, and assess actual information on the past in relation to long-entrenched models.²⁰

As a premise, it is reasonable to begin with Eleanor M. King’s admonition that “we cannot hope to understand the Maya if we do not leave room in our models for variation over time and space” (*The Origins of Maya States*, 459). For governance, this realization should neither be difficult nor surprising given the geographic extent and environmental diversity of the Maya region and our temporal focus over millennia. But to recognize and account for diversity, it is also necessary to refine our analytical lens and to disentangle the various indicators of what is too often lumped under the general rubric of “social complexity.” For too long, archaeological theory and much of contemporary social science thought have reflexively equated indicators of cooperative labor, planning, and elements of order in non-Western, premodern contexts as indicators of top-down, coercive leadership. Yet leadership is, by definition, relational and may take different forms, not all

¹⁵ Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 6–7.

¹⁶ Esther Pasztory, “An Image Is Worth a Thousand Words: Teotihuacan and the Meanings of Style in Classic Mesoamerica,” in *Latin American Horizons*, ed. Don S. Rice (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1993), 126.

¹⁷ Fernand Braudel, *The Perspective of the World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984).

¹⁸ Jeremy A. Sabloff, “How Maya Archaeologists Discovered the 99% through the Study of Settlement Patterns,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 48 (2019): 1–16.

¹⁹ Mark Bevir, *Governance: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁰ Gary M. Feinman, “Reframing Historical Rhymes from the Dawn of Everything,” *Clodynamics* 5 (2022): 1–5.

of which entail disparate power differentials or high degrees of inequity.²¹ And the ability of people and their institutions to get things done cooperatively without coercive force was not unique to the West or modernity.²²

In regard to interpretation, the implications are that mound construction, ball courts, buildings aligned with astronomical phenomena, grid plans, small-scale agricultural intensification, and demographic nucleation may indicate planning and coordination, but they should not be seen as direct indicators for top-down, coercive, or highly individualized rulership.²³ In contrast, stark inequities in the wealth of the living or what was interred with the dead, individualized monuments and highly elaborate residences and palaces are all indicators of more personalized forms of rulership that tend to be associated with concentrated, as opposed to distributed, power arrangements.²⁴ These distinctions, indicative of variable modes of governance, are relevant; across the Early and Middle Formative (or Preclassic) periods in the Maya region, there are many indications that settlements were getting larger, and public spaces and civic architecture were being built at scale. But with few exceptions, the differentials in grave goods, the sizes of elaborate houses, and the personification of individuals through monuments were much rarer than later in the Classic period. As Estrada-Belli observes in *The Origins of Maya States*, the Preclassic-to-Classic transition was not a transformational episode, but royal graves were “increasingly individualistic in character as time progresses and [only] first appear in public settings at the turn of the Christian era” (268) toward the end of the Preclassic period. As John Clark notes, “Developments in the Maya lowlands and highlands during the Middle Preclassic period were part of a broader pattern of the construction of cities and towns . . . all across Mesoamerica” (*The Origins of Maya States*, 220).²⁵ Though linked through time and webs of connectivity, the processes behind the advent of late Preclassic (and Classic) Maya kings are not an inevitable linear extension or natural outgrowth of the earlier Early and Middle Preclassic shifts in settlement scale and institutional complexity. Across most of Mesoamerica the urban governance of the Classic period was starkly different, less personalized, than rule by “holy lords” who led Maya cities.²⁶ Palaces and royal courts embodied the physical and symbolic capitals of the Classic Maya (Runggaldier and Hammond, in *The Origins of Maya States*, 55) to a far greater degree than found elsewhere in the Mesoamerican world at that time. The processes and conditions that underpinned the changes of the Early and Middle Preclassic periods in the Maya lowlands were markedly different from those associated with the concentration of personalized power in that region later in the Preclassic. The colossal stone portrait heads and tablet altars associated with more personalized power on the Gulf Coast in the Early and Middle

²¹ John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi, “Leadership: What It Is, What It Does, What We Want to Know about It,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 14 (2011): 1–24; Richard Blanton and Lane Fargher, *Collective Action in the Formation of Pre-Modern States* (New York: Springer, 2008).

²² Gary M. Feinman and Jill E. Neitzel, “The Social Dynamics of Settling Down,” *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 69 (2023): Art. 101468; Richard E. Blanton, Gary M. Feinman, Stephen A. Kowalewski, and Lane F. Fargher, “Editorial: Origins, Foundations, Sustainability, and Trip Lines of Good Governance: Archaeological and Historical Implications,” *Frontiers in Political Science* 4 (2022): Art. 983307.

²³ Colin Renfrew, “Beyond a Subsistence Economy: The Evolution of Social Organization in Prehistoric Europe,” in *Reconstructing Complex Societies: An Archaeological Colloquium*, ed. Charlotte B. Moore (Cambridge, MA: Bulletin of the School of Oriental Research, 1974), 69–95.

²⁴ Gary M. Feinman and David M. Carballo, “Collaborative and Competitive Strategies in the Variability and Resiliency of Large-Scale Societies in Mesoamerica,” *Economic Anthropology* 5 (2018): 7–19.

²⁵ Gary M. Feinman, David M. Carballo, Linda M. Nicholas, and Stephen A. Kowalewski, “Sustainability and Duration of Early Central Places in Prehispanic Mesoamerica,” *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution*: 11 (2023): Art. 1076740.

²⁶ Richard E. Blanton, Gary M. Feinman, Stephen A. Kowalewski, and Linda M. Nicholas, *Ancient Oaxaca*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Preclassic were not adopted in the Maya lowlands (Sharer and Traxler, in *The Origins of Maya States*, 13).

In the Maya region, Simon Martin (*The Origins of Maya States*) weaves empirical threads together to trace diachronic shifts in Maya ideology over centuries from the advent of sedentary communities to the Classic period. In parallel with the changes outlined here, core supernatural elements were present from early in the Preclassic period. But, around 200–100 BCE, key shifts took place in the relative importance and the articulations of symbolic elements. For much of the Preclassic, certain structures (such as E-groups) and ritual buildings with decorative facades marked by supernatural imagery were broadly represented across the region. Such facades were often positioned on both sides of a stairway to ritual spaces where groups of the select could assemble. And yet despite the great monumentality and spatial extent of El Mirador, which in the Late Preclassic was volumetrically comparable to (if not more massive than) other Maya cities of the Classic period (Sharer and Traxler, in *The Origins of Maya States*, 29), indicators of the kinds of personalization and exclusivity associated with Classic-period Maya rulers are rare. Nevertheless, late in the Preclassic period, in the preserved murals at San Bartolo, we see elements of an investiture scene that remains a core dimension of Maya rulership through the Late Classic period. According to Martin, in *The Origins of Maya States*, “The essential feature more concerns the activation of a ‘kingship’ in a particular place and in some ritually distinct manner” (538–539), events that were personalized and divinely sanctioned.

Monumentality, leadership, degrees of inequity, agricultural intensification, and demographic nucleation were all present in the Maya lowlands centuries before the amassing of exclusionary, more personalized power and wealth that seemingly was initiated late in the Preclassic period.²⁷ What factors and processes underpinned the advent of such more individualized concentrations of wealth and power? There are no consensually agreed-on answers in these collected works or elsewhere (Canuto, in *The Origins of Maya States*, 462). We do know that, despite the aforementioned ideological messaging, Classic-period Maya holy lords were not immune to political demise, and their subaltern followers could at times vote with their feet, exposing the vulnerability of rulers (Inomata, in *Life and Politics*, 327–328). Part of the answer for personalized Classic-period Maya rule may lie with the fiscal financing of power and governance or the ways power was funded, although directly relevant data remain sparse (especially for Late Preclassic contexts that basically lack pertinent texts) to ask and frame the right questions (King, in *The Origins of Maya States*, 423).²⁸

According to Diane Z. Chase and Arlen F. Chase, in *The Real Business*, “In the Maya area, the ancient domestic economy was centered on households and residential groups as the units of production. Subsistence agriculture was practiced at the household level” (138). Maya practice dovetails with the rest of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica.²⁹ For this essay, the crucial queries then become, if Maya rulers did not directly control economic production, how did Maya governing institutions secure funding, and how did these economic foundations change late in the Preclassic period, enabling the exclusionary consolidation of power and wealth by select lords?³⁰

²⁷ Timothy W. Pugh, “Social Complexity and Middle Preclassic Lowland Maya,” *Journal of Archaeological Research* 30 (2022): 545–595.

²⁸ On fiscal funding, see Richard E. Blanton, Lane F. Fargher, Gary M. Feinman, and Stephen A. Kowalewski, “The Fiscal Economy of Good Governance: Past and Present,” *Current Anthropology* 62 (2021): 77–100.

²⁹ Gary M. Feinman, “Rethinking Our Assumptions: Economic Production at the Household Scale in Ancient Ejutla, Oaxaca, Mexico,” in *Pottery and People: A Dynamic Interaction*, ed. James M. Skibo and Gary M. Feinman, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1999), 81–98.

³⁰ Gary M. Feinman, “Re-visioning Classic Maya Polities,” *Latin American Research Review* 52 (2017): 458–468.

During the Classic period, the Maya cities along the Usumacinta, the central Petén, and adjacent areas erected the most stela, had some of the most elaborate royal courts and lavish burial contexts, and were central to the most far-ranging networks of elite economic and political interactions.³¹ These areas were the epicenter where Late Preclassic and Classic Maya exclusionary power was materialized to the greatest degrees. For example, the jockeying between competing Maya lords is evidenced at Aguateca (Houston, in *Life and Politics*) through the monument record. Dynastic conflicts, the dynamics of which extended over centuries, have been linked to access to exchange routes (and the interpersonal ties that connected them) through which valued goods were transferred (Bassie-Sweet, *Maya Gods*, 251–257, 262–264).³² Late in the Classic period, seaborne, long-distance exchange diminished the importance of riverine trade in the Maya region and likely contributed to the fall of holy lords, their royal courts, and the settlements associated with them (Inomata, in *Life and Politics*).³³

Sedentary lowland Maya communities were never entirely self-sufficient (King, in *The Origins of Maya States*, 441). And even the inhabitants of the earliest Maya communities consumed goods, like obsidian, acquired through long-distance exchange ties. But the nature and directionality of these extraregional networks shifted late in the Preclassic era roughly coincident with the emergence of Maya lords with exclusionary power.³⁴ In addition to the scene of investiture in the San Bartolo murals, the advent of more individualized leadership is evidenced by dynastic sequences that can be traced back to this era as well as the elaborate burial at Tikal with a jade mask that bore a symbol associated with royal status (Estrada-Belli, in *The Origins of Maya States*, 245–256). Through the Classic period, exotic and highly crafted adornments were fundamental to the individualized standing of Maya lords.

Architecturally, a shift also occurred between the Preclassic and Classic at Maya sites in the regional core, although the tempo of these changes was not spatially uniform. Preclassic monumentality often included structures that were neither elevated, exclusive temples nor palatial residences with royal courts, whereas the generally less monumental cities of the later Classic period were more typically dominated by such structures. Middle and Late Preclassic investments were seemingly more tied to the public good with “the construction of monumental platforms, pyramidal structures, dams, reservoirs, canals, raised fields, and causeways, as well as the construction of specialized ritual structures of consistent form” (Hansen, in *The Origins of Maya States*, 351). If agrarian intensification, labor drafts for construction, and public and civic spaces were key features of Preclassic Maya institutions and polities, what factors and processes prompted the shift to greater fiscal reliance on trade corridors, exotic goods, and governance centered on transactional,

³¹ Sarah E. Jackson, *Politics of the Maya Court: Hierarchy and Change in the Late Classic Period* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013); Simon Martin, *Ancient Maya Politics: A Political Anthropology of the Classic Period 150–900 CE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Jessica L. Munson and Martha J. Macri, “Sociopolitical Network Interactions: A Case Study of the Classic Maya,” *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 28 (2009): 424–438; Alexandre Tokovinine, “It Is His Image with Pulque: Drinks, Gifts, and Political Networking in Classic Maya Texts and Images,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 27 (2016): 13–29.

³² Brent Woodfill and Chloé Andrieu, “Tikal’s Early Classic Domination of the Great Western Trade Route: Ceramic, Lithic, and Iconographic Evidence,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 23 (2012): 189–219; Martin, *Ancient Maya Politics*, 347.

³³ Mark Golitko, James Meierhoff, Gary M. Feinman, and Patrick Ryan Williams, “Complexities of Collapse: The Evidence of Maya Obsidian as Revealed by Social Network Graphical Analysis,” *Antiquity* 86 (2012): 507–523; Takeshi Inomata, Daniela Triadan, Jessica MacLellan, Melissa Burham, Kazuo Aoyama, Juan Manuel Palomo, Hitoshi Yonenobu, Flory Pinzón, and Hiroo Nasu, “High-Precision Radiocarbon Dating of Political Collapse and Dynastic Origins at the Maya Site of Ceibal, Guatemala,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114 (2017): 1293–1298.

³⁴ Kathryn Reese-Taylor and Debra S. Walker, “The Passage of the Late Preclassic into the Early Classic,” in *Ancient Maya Political Economies*, ed. Marilyn A. Masson and David A. Friedel (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2002), 87–122.

patrimonial networks and faced rulers (albeit with minimal bureaucracy) that characterized Classic period polities in that region?³⁵

Here, it is useful to expand the spatial lens to the wider Mesoamerican world. From late in the Preclassic through the Early Classic, macroscale connections and flows of goods shifted as local and regional market and exchange networks were interlinked over the macroregion.³⁶ This expansion fostered increased consumption and commoditization of lowland products, like cotton, cacao, feathers, shells, and greenstones, while highland obsidian was more readily procured in the Maya region.³⁷ A lowland spider monkey was even brought and interred at the Central Mexican metropolis of Teotihuacan.³⁸

As early as the Middle Classic period, Maya ritual specialists and leaders engaged in craftwork, and the production and distribution of exotic and valued goods provided a pathway to concentrate power.³⁹ By the Classic period, Maya lords attached specialists to their households, taking advantage of surplus labor to make valued goods at their royal courts (Inomata, chapter 14, *Life and Politics*), and thereby to expand opportunities to transfer these goods in transactional, patron-client relations both with high-status peers and to secure followers.⁴⁰ Cacao, textiles, and other valued-good production, along with the monopolization of networks for their distribution, were key to the fiscal underpinning of Classic Maya courts and the polities that they ruled.⁴¹ During the Classic period, in contrast, neither the production nor distribution of staple or utilitarian goods was controlled from the top down (Triadan and Inomata, in *The Real Business*).

There is an increasing recognition (*The Real Business*) that by the Classic period, if not before, marketplace networks and exchanges further interconnected the Maya region.⁴² Marketplaces may have provided an additional revenue source for Maya lords while

³⁵ On the Preclassic, see Pugh, "Social Complexity and the Middle Preclassic," 581. On the Classic, see Antonia E. Foias, *Ancient Maya Political Dynamics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013).

³⁶ Gary M. Feinman and Linda M. Nicholas, "Teotihuacan and Oaxaca: Assessing Prehispanic Relations," in *Teotihuacan: The World beyond the City*, ed. Kenneth G. Hirth, David M. Carballo, and Barbara Arroyo (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2020), 331–369.

³⁷ Richard E. Blanton, Lane F. Fargher, and Verence Y. Heredia Espinoza, "The Mesoamerican World of Goods and Its Transformations," in *Settlement, Subsistence, and Social Complexity: Essays Honoring the Legacy of Jeffrey R. Parsons*, ed. Richard E. Blanton (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, 2005), 260–294; Gary M. Feinman, Linda M. Nicholas, and Mark Golitko, "Macroscale Shifts in Obsidian Procurement Networks across Prehispanic Mesoamerica," in *Obsidian across the Americas: Compositional Studies Conducted in the Elemental Analysis Facility at the Field Museum of Natural History*, ed. Gary M. Feinman and Danielle J. Riebe (Oxford, UK: Archaeopress, 2022), 98–137.

³⁸ Nawa Sugiyama, Saburo Sugiyama, Clarissa Cagnato, Christine A. M. France, Atsushi Iriki, Karissa S. Hughes, Robin R. Singleton, Erin Thornton, and Courtney A. Hofman, "Earliest Evidence of Primate Captivity and Translocation Supports Gift Diplomacy between Teotihuacan and the Maya," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119 (2022): Art. e2212431119.

³⁹ Kazuo Aoyama, "Preclassic and Classic Maya Interregional and Long-Distance Exchange: A Diachronic Analysis of Obsidian Artifacts from Ceibal, Guatemala," *Latin American Antiquity* 28 (2017): 213–231; Ashley Sharpe and Kazuo Aoyama, "Lithic and Faunal Evidence for Craft Production among the Middle Preclassic Maya at Ceibal, Guatemala," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 34 (2023): 407–431.

⁴⁰ On attached specialists, see Christina T. Halperin, "Classic Maya Textile Production: Insights from Motul de San José, Peten, Guatemala," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 19 (2008): 111–125. On transactional relations, see Gary M. Feinman, "Leadership, the Funding of Power, and Sustainability in the Classic Maya World," in *Consumption, Status, and Sustainability: Ecological and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Paul Roscoe and Cindy Isenhour (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 114–143; John P. Walden, "The Political Roles of Inter-Hierarchical Agents in the Classic Maya Lowlands," *Mayanist* 4 (2023): 21–44.

⁴¹ Joanne P. Baron, "Ancient Monetization: The Case of Classic Maya Textiles," *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 49 (2018): 100–113; Joanne P. Baron, "Making Money in Mesoamerica: Currency Production and Procurement in the Classic Maya Financial System," *Economic Anthropology* 5 (2018): 210–223.

⁴² Marilyn A. Masson and David A. Friedel, "An Argument for Classic Era Market Exchange," *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 31 (2012): 455–484; Alexandre Tokovinine and Dmitri D. Beliaev, "People of the Road: Traders and Travelers in Ancient Maya Words and Images," in *Merchants, Markets, and Exchange in the Pre-Columbian World*, ed. Kenneth G. Hirth and Joanne Pillsbury (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2013), 169–200.

potentially serving to attract subalterns to centers where economic prosperity and general well-being were evidenced. At the same, the expanding role of traders and markets likely provoked institutional stresses at times between merchants and lords.⁴³ These are new questions to ponder and probe that reflect marked theoretical movement away from long-entrenched conceptual tenets and frames while opening new avenues for future research.

As represented by these eight volumes, the study of the Maya past is at a critical juncture. Adequate amounts of data have been collected at diverse scales to render long-held presumptions false. Spatially, temporally, and environmentally, this world was diverse, heterogeneous, certainly not static. Across deep history, the Maya were not simple reflections of the ethnographic present or even what can be seen through ethnohistoric records. Such more recent sources provide threads of evidence that may (and should) be deftly considered and interwoven with others, but they ought not be used as analogical models or mirrors. Likewise, it is time to move beyond reductionist views that “dismissed the Maya lowlands as too impractical for autochthonous complexity” (Canuto, in *The Origins of Maya States*, 465) as well as progressivist notions that change is necessarily linear, stepped, and in accord with categorical forms, which also were drawn from the ethnographic present. Rather than carrying out archaeology strictly looking backward and starting from categories and constructs drawn from the postcolonial present, the data on the precolonial Maya are sufficiently robust that we have the opportunity to practice archaeology looking forward. Although we would have to rid ourselves of now-unsupported notions that humanity’s past was basically uniform, generalizable, or divisible into a few discrete paths, we have much to learn and contribute by giving archaeological findings the attention they merit while also embracing the diverse yet connected, human histories that archaeology as a discipline (in conjunction with our academic partners) is uncovering. With continued theoretical introspection, Maya (and Mesoamerican) studies, with well more than a century of investigations on which to build, are now positioned at the disciplinary forefront.⁴⁴

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⁴³ Baron, “Making Money in Mesoamerica,” 214–218.

⁴⁴ Marilyn A. Masson, “The ‘Othering’ of Maya Political Economies,” *Archeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association* 32 (2021): 109–127.