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Changes in Maya Rulership at the End of the Classic Period

An Introduction

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From 760 to 810 CE, one-fourth of the Classic Maya cities (among those that have been investigated) suddenly lost their royal dynasties. Palaces were abandoned; no more stone monuments were erected; no more inscriptions were carved using a calendric date in the Classic Long Count notational system. Even though most of these cities were not immediately depopulated, their inhabitants ceased to build large masonry temples and residences; and, within one hundred years, the residents of these sites gradually emigrated to other settlements as the cities themselves were returned to the forest. While this was happening, even more cities saw the abrupt demise of their own dynasties and their own eventual abandonment. A few cities survived, but generally, by 950 CE, the entire system of capitals, towns, and villages throughout much of the Maya area had been displaced. Some populations resettled around lakes, on the shores of rivers, and on seacoasts and their proximate hinterlands in the Yucatan Peninsula. Thus, during those disastrous times (750–950 CE) between the Classic (250–950 CE) and Postclassic (950–1540 CE) periods, a widespread political collapse occurred (Culbert 1973; Demarest et al., eds. 2004; Houston and Inomata 2009:288–319; Turner and Sabloff 2012; see also Aimers 2007; Arnauld and Breton 2013; Arnauld et al. 2017) from which only limited parts of the Maya Lowlands ever fully recovered (Turner 2018).

Much attention has been given to the general causality of this major disjunction, highlighting the advent of droughts in a climatic change (e.g.,

Douglas et al. 2016; Gill et al. 2007; Hodell et al. 1995; Iannone 2014; Kennett et al. 2012; Lucero 2002). A subsequent Postclassic settlement system that was concentrated on coasts and lakes (Chase and Rice 1985:6) suggests that, while droughts may have impacted Maya societies, climate alone was not responsible for the political turmoil at the end of the Classic period (Haldon et al. 2018; Turner and Sabloff 2012). Other often mentioned causes for this diaspora are social unrest (Hamblin and Pitcher 1980; Lowe 1982), generalized environmental degradation (e.g., Diamond 2005; Dunning et al. 2012; Heckbert 2013; McNeil et al. 2010), and possibly economic collapse (D. Chase and A. Chase 2017; Demarest et al. 2014). Demographic trends during this era have been assessed (e.g., Culbert 1988; Culbert and Rice 1990; Roman et al. 2018); anthropological models have been applied (Tainter 1988); and multifactorial models have been built that make the most of available data (e.g., Chase and Scarborough 2014; Demarest 2013a). All of these discussions are compromised by a lack of tightly controlled chronological data before 1000 CE; the newer data that we do have highlight the problems in simply using ceramic cross-dating (e.g., Hoggarth et al. 2014).

The goal of this book is to concentrate on the political collapse. After long-held debates on the “collapse of civilizations, cultures, or societies,” it is generally admitted that only political regimes really collapse, while societies disintegrate and cities decrease until their final desertion. Most Classic period Maya archaeological sites were deserted cities, but not all their political systems had collapsed. What occurred during the late eighth and early ninth centuries was the political collapse of Classic Maya kings, and possibly of kingship as well. An increasing amount of evidence is now available on detailed aspects of this process, allowing us to raise and answer many questions about the timing, the spread, and the mechanisms of the demise. Who were the protagonists of this drama, and how did they make decisions and act? How much can be discerned as definitive rupture and loss in the rulership systems or regimes? What happened by 800–830 CE in the Maya area? Were there a series of successive wars or revolutions? Did some political components survive? Did the entire lowlands undergo a political transformation during the transition from the Classic to the Postclassic periods? Did the demise of kings mean the end of divine or sacred kingship?

OUR PRESENT UNDERSTANDING

Classic Maya kingship has been defined in three complementary ways following disciplinary approaches. Epigraphers have explored the concept of

the “king as person” in his capacity to embody deities and to be a “ruler of time” (Fields and Reents-Budet 2005; Houston and Stuart 1996; Schele and Miller 1986; Stuart 1996; Wright 2011). Iconographers have studied Maya sacred or divine kings relevant to aspects of their bodies (Baudez 2000; Gillespie 2008), their relation to the sun or maize deities (Baudez 1985; Salazar 2015; Tokovinine 2013), and their symbolic regalia (Principal Bird Deity headdress, K’awiil scepter, serpent bar; Rice 2012; Sharer and Traxler 2006:737–740; Stone and Zender 2011; Taube et al. 2010). Archaeologist Patricia McAnany (1995) has shown how the kings pertained to the places and social groups in which they revered their ancestors. Those three disciplinary approaches consistently define the Classic Maya king as a human being profoundly different from other society members due to his special relation to the gods, supernatural entities, and ancestors.

Archaeologists have studied the monumental architecture and the placement of certain kinds of structures in Classic period centers in order to gain an understanding of the practices of royal governance (e.g., Barrientos 2014; Inomata 2006; Inomata and Houston, eds. 2001; Lamoureux-St-Hilaire 2018; Tsukamoto and Inomata 2014). In a more regional and geopolitical perspective, epigraphers Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube (1995, 2000, 2008) have reconstructed a hierarchy of kingdoms under the “hegemony” of one or more rival capitals in the southern lowlands; these politics engaged the cities of Tikal, Calakmul, Dzibanche, and Caracol during most of the Classic period (Figure 1.1).

No single unitary kingdom ever existed in this area. Regional states may have existed (A. Chase and D. Chase 1998a, 2021; Chase et al. 2009), but much of this region was probably composed of city-states (*sensu* Grube 2000b) loosely integrated into the southern lowland geopolitical system (*sensu* Tokovinine 2013). In brief, any deep interrogation on the end of the Classic Maya kingship must address the pragmatics and geopolitical reconstructions of the lowland kingdoms as much as the definition of the divine-sacred king. Does the demise of Classic royal dynasties represent the collapse of sacred or divine kingship? Did the disintegration of the southern geopolitical system also deeply impact or transform the northern lowlands?

This volume takes the stance that the sacred or divine qualities of the king were part of governance pragmatics, modifying his agency and relation to elites and commoners. More than despotic or absolute power (rarely present as such in ancient societies), these qualities gave the king an ontological position in the universe not easily amenable to negotiation. Thus, “rupture” may have been the main mechanism of political change available to Maya



Figure 1.1. Map of the Maya area (drawing by Jean-François Cuenot and Sylvie Éliès, ArchAm, CNRS).

societies at the end of the Classic period—a rapid, brutal disjunction ending forms, effigies, and style, even persons, and operating a “revolution” after which nothing “could ever be the same.” We have many signs (archaeological and others) that such breaks did occur in the Maya Lowlands from the end of the eighth century through the first years of the tenth century. The entire hierarchy of kingdoms was deeply affected, but with different rhythms over space and through the times of repeated ruptures during a long crisis. Through conscious and also unconscious intervention of agents—by substitution, reform, repetition, recursivity, and other successive manipulations of traditional systemic elements—overall transformation of the Maya universe may have developed gradually, arising not so much as a system per se but rather as the operation of different temporal rhythms in agency, both regionally and locally. “Rupture” introduces rapid discontinuity; “transformation” gradually reconfigures extant elements into a system in which continuity may not be easy to detect.

Analytical scrutiny of the Maya collapse frequently leads to an emphasis on regional–local variability in conditions and trajectories. But variation must also be considered in the temporal dimension. We propose that a political collapse can be singled out from other processes that developed later within different causality systems. By the ninth century CE, political rupture and transformation in many cities opened the way to variability in existing regimes (and governance) of Maya urban communities—at least for the ones that survived into the following century. The urban collapse had its own distinct rhythms and timing. Too frequently subsumed in the moment of dynastic failure, chronologies of urban desertion instead had their own logic. A third stage of demographic collapse plausibly followed with a slower, more gradual rhythm that was not necessarily articulated with political and urban dynamics—the result being almost total abandonment of the southern lowlands between 1000 and 1100 CE. Droughts and other environmental degradation certainly would have affected the earlier urban collapse, but the long, eleventh-century series of deep droughts (e.g., Kennett et al. 2012) would have completed the demographic collapse.

The present collective contribution seeks to answer academic curiosity over the paradox between political collapse, a large part of which took place during the 760–810 CE interval, and the overwhelming literature on non-political causalities that focus on environmental degradation and climate change (a paradox also raised by Aimers and Iannone 2014 and by Chase and Scarborough 2014). As a result, Charlotte Arnauld and Philippe Nondédéo