

INTRODUCTION

IVAN ŠPRAJC

Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Ljubljana, Slovenia

The present volume of *Anthropological Notebooks* is dedicated to one of the most intriguing civilisations of the ancient world. A relatively uniform culture, created by the peoples nowadays known collectively as the Maya, began to emerge in the second millennium B.C. and flourished up to the Spanish Conquest on the territory corresponding to what are now the southeastern part of Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador and Honduras. The Maya culture evolved within a larger cultural area commonly labelled Mesoamerica, which corresponds to the central and southern parts of modern Mexico and the northern part of Central America. The Mesoamerican cultural area was defined by Paul Kirchhoff (1943), on the basis of a number of cultural traits that were shared by the peoples living in this area at the time of the Spanish Conquest, but which started emerging already in the 2nd millennium B.C., when the first complex, state-organised societies appeared. In spite of a great linguistic diversity and considerable regional and time-dependent cultural variations within Mesoamerica, the general cultural unity – a result of both common origins and intensive cultural interaction – of the groups composing this cultural complex can be observed in their economy, which was based on intensive agriculture (mainly on the cultivation of maize as a staple crop), in the similarities in monumental architecture, characterised most prominently by the temples built in the shape of stepped pyramids, as well as in their social organisation, arts, religion and calendrical system (Kirchhoff 1943; Matos 2000).

The history of prehispanic Mesoamerica is usually divided into three main periods or evolutionary stages: the Preclassic (c. 2000 B.C. – A.D. 200), the Classic (c. 200 – 900) and the Postclassic (c. 900 – 1521). The earliest stratified and urban societies appeared in the Preclassic period along the southern part of the Mexican Gulf Coast and in central Mexico, as well as in the Maya area, which corresponds to the southeastern part of Mesoamerica. The greatest splendour, particularly notable in fine arts, architectural achievements and writing systems, appeared during the Classic period, while the Postclassic was characterised by intensified migrations, the diffusion of newly developed cultural manifestations, pronounced militarisation and, particularly in the Maya area, by increased political fragmentation (cf. Adams 1991; Adams and MacLeod 2000; Carrasco 2001; Manzanilla and Luján 2000-2001).

The land of the Maya (Fig. 1) covers the area of some 400,000 km² and consists of two substantially different geographical regions: the lowlands in the north correspond to the karstic and relatively flat Yucatán peninsula, while the highlands in the south comprise mostly volcanic mountain ranges stretching across Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and the Mexican federal state of Chiapas. These two general zones differ notably in climate, geological peculiarities, soil, vegetation and the availability of natural resources, but there is also considerable environmental diversity within each of the two regions (Hammond 1994; 2000; Sharer 2000; Sharer and Traxler 2005; Demarest 2004).



Figure 1. Map of the Maya area (after Martin and Grube 2000: 10).

The history of the research dealing with the Maya begins in the early colonial period, with some studies on written sources and the discoveries of important archaeological sites. However, the Maya captured particularly strong public interest and imagination only after the first reports by the early 19th century explorers, who revealed the existence of monumental vestiges of a vanished civilisation to a wider audience. The most important landmark was the publication of the books written by the American lawyer and diplomat John Lloyd Stephens (1841; 1843), in which the story of his explorations was accompanied by the drawings of the English architect and artist Frederick Catherwood. Stephens' accounts are descriptive and free of unwarranted speculations, but his style is attractively narrative, even for a present-day reader, whereas Catherwood's drawings are both very accurate for those times and embellished with details that add a strong romantic appeal to his renderings of buildings and monuments. It is for these reasons that Stephens' books mark the beginning of Maya archaeology as a serious endeavour on one hand, and represent the most important origin of the public fascination surrounding the Maya right up to the present day on the other (Bernal 1980; Sabloff 1990).

The exotic and apparently hostile environment, the fact that many ruins of what were evidently glorious cities with magnificent temples, palaces and sculpted monuments

with reliefs and enigmatic hieroglyphic inscriptions, were found lying deep in the jungle, overgrown with giant tropical trees and embraced by lianas, was undoubtedly one of the most powerful reasons for this popular appeal, which has not passed away. However, this has not been the only reason. The Maya were, in several aspects, unique among the native American peoples. Although they lived, in terms of technology, in a Stone Age – considering that the few known metals had little significance in their economy and everyday life – and even though they never used the wheel, the plough and traction animals, they reached a relatively high level of economic, social, artistic and intellectual development, comparable to that of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and China, i.e. of the cultures based on extensive use of bronze and – in later periods – iron. The splendour of the Maya is attested not only in their impressive monumental architecture and the diversity and elegance of smaller objects of art; they also developed a true phonetic writing system, which was the most elaborate one in pre-Columbian America. While their predecessors, the Olmec, invented a positional notation of numbers, even before similar achievements occurred in the Old World, the Maya developed it further and used it most extensively in their sophisticated calendar system and astronomical computations, in which they held primacy in the pre-Columbian New World (Sabloff 1990; Hammond 1994; 2000; Demarest 2004; Sharer 2000; Sharer and Traxler 2005).

What is particularly interesting is that all of these developments occurred in isolation: there is no compelling evidence that trans-oceanic contacts, if they ever existed, influenced the course of cultural evolution in the New World in a notable way. Therefore the Maya, together with other native American peoples, became highly relevant for the theoretical studies aimed at unveiling the causes and processes that resulted in the cultural similarities and differences between the peoples that, although vastly separated in time and/or space, attained comparable levels of cultural development.

Another reason for the widespread interest in the Maya is the general opinion that permeated the study of their civilisation for many decades, even during much of the 20th century: the Maya were viewed as fundamentally different from any other comparable civilisation of the ancient world; they were conceived as a peaceful people of peasants and artisans, governed by a noble elite, whose only concerns were religious matters, observation of the sky and exaltation of the spirit. What were the causes for this romantic but enduring image, both scientific and popular, of the Maya?

The late 19th century studies that focused on written sources – such as the *Popol Vuh*, a sacred book of the Quiché Maya Indians living in the Guatemala highlands, the *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, a report written in the 16th century by bishop Diego de Landa and containing a wealth of data on the Maya of northern Yucatán, and a few codices or painted manuscripts that managed to survive – resulted in the first important breakthroughs concerning the Maya numeration, calendar and astronomy. Archaeological excavations that started at a few large Maya centres in the late 19th century brought significant new information, but the attempts at deciphering their hieroglyphic writing, in spite of a rapidly growing corpus of monumental inscriptions recovered and documented at a number of Maya sites, did not manage to get much beyond the calendrical and astronomical glyphs for decades to come. The profusion of texts that were evidently calendrical

and astronomical in nature, the failure to grasp the meaning of other glyphs, and the apparent scarcity of other kinds of evidence suggesting bellicosity of the Maya and revealing their true nature, were the reasons for a notion that was, however aberrant, common and persistent. It was repeatedly expressed by scholars as famous and meritorious as Sylvanus G. Morley (1946), who believed the Maya texts, unlike those of ancient Egypt, Assyria and Babylonia, contain neither histories of real conquests and military victories nor glorifications or even names of individual persons. This opinion was shared much later by another great figure in Maya archaeology, J. Eric S. Thompson (1954: 168).

It was not until the 1960s that this idealised picture began to change, mainly as a result of rapid advances in the decipherment of the Maya hieroglyphic writing. From the darkness of the past real persons from the Maya history suddenly emerged: formerly anonymous figures, sculpted on stelae, altars and building façades, once believed to be deities, introduced themselves by their names and deeds; arrogant and lavishly clad lords appeared, glorifying their births, enthronisations, victories in battles and sacrifices of their captives. Something that was unimaginable for decades was now perfectly clear: the Maya were in no essential way different from other comparable cultures (Sabloff 1990; Coe 1992; Stuart 1992; Fash 1994; Martin and Grube 2000).

The Maya thus lost their romantic allure, but the fascination has not vanished. We know they were simply humans, with their virtues and defects, qualities and vices, but scholarly research continues to be as exciting as it used to be. Archaeological sites, even large centres with monumental architecture, sculptures and hieroglyphic inscriptions, continue to be discovered deep in the jungle, and vast territories that have not been surveyed suggest that many others remain hidden in remote areas, awaiting the modern explorers. The ongoing archaeological work remains full of surprises, particularly because every site has, in spite of the relatively high degree of Maya cultural uniformity, some singular features, peculiarities that have not been found elsewhere.

Furthermore, even if our knowledge has drastically increased during the recent decades due to a multitude of researchers from a number of scientific fields, who have contributed to what we now know – or believe to know – about the Maya, they are still enigmatic in many aspects. There are several big questions that persistently defy a compelling solution. What were the prime movers and processes that brought about the so-called collapse at the end of the Classic period, reflected in the abandonment of the majority of the large urban centres in the central and southern lowlands? Climatic changes, epidemic diseases, peasant revolts, anthropogenic degradation of agricultural landscape, warfare and other causes have been suggested, but no ample consensus has been reached among the researchers. The origin of the Preclassic social complexity and splendour, as well as the demise at the end of this period in certain areas, represent a similarly intriguing problem. What was the role of Teotihuacan in the rise and florescence of the Classic Maya? We know they had some sort of connections with this large city in central Mexico, which dominated considerable portions of Mesoamerica for centuries, but what exactly was the nature and impact of these relations? (cf. Gunn et al. 2002; Brenner et al. 2002; Hansen et al. 2002; Webster 2002; Braswell 2003; Marcus 2003).

And then, how did the Maya organise agricultural production, craft specialisation and other economic activities? This question is intimately related to the more general one, concerning their social and political organisation. It seems that numerous different versions of feudal organisation, such as are known from the ancient Near East, Asia and medieval Europe, constitute appropriate analogues, but due to the diversity of the known systems this comparison is too general to clarify the specifics of the Maya social organisation. Some scholars argue their states were powerful and centralised, having a clearly defined class structure and controlling all important aspects of life of the subordinate communities, while others prefer to view their political entities as 'segmentary', 'galactic', 'theatre' or 'regal-ritual' states, governed by the charismatic rulers whose power was unstable and relatively weak, based on their kinship ties, ritual performances and access to luxury items that served as signs of authority and prestige. Recent studies suggest that there is no single answer, and that different explanations may account for situations in different periods and places (Fox et al. 1996; Trejo 1998; Grube 2000; Marcus 2003; Scarborough et al. 2003; Demarest 2004).

These and many other questions are currently being discussed by Maya scholars, and some of them are tackled in the articles collected in this volume. While there is no single topic unifying these articles, most of them present synthetic views on certain sites and areas of research, focusing on particular problems.

Antonio Benavides summarises the archaeological research and restoration works that have been accomplished in recent decades in the central part of the territory once occupied by the Maya and nowadays pertaining to the Mexican federal state of Campeche. This region comprises large segments of the central and northern lowlands, where the vestiges of the Classic period Maya florescence are particularly rich and diverse, although archaeological remains from other periods, including colonial, are no less important and interesting. However, it may be noted that in spite of the density of the ancient settlement distribution revealed in the zones surveyed so far, it is precisely in Campeche where some of the most extensive blanks on the archaeological map of the Maya area still persist.

Palenque, located in the Mexican state of Chiapas, is one of the most important, famous and touristically attractive Maya sites. However, in his contribution Rodrigo Liendo Stuardo does not focus on the urban core of Palenque, with its monumental buildings and sculpted monuments, but rather on the surrounding settlement distribution and its implications for the understanding of the regional social and political organisation. Analysing the rural architectural and site variability and considering the chronological data, he discusses the settlement dynamic trends, discriminates several sub-regions within the Palenque area that suggest the existence of smaller socio-political groups within the polity, and concludes that the Palenque political entity must have been held together not only by vertically functioning control mechanisms exerted by a centralised power, but also by local cooperation networks that integrated the rural population into socially discrete units.

Norman Hammond presents a summary of the archaeological research conducted during the last decades at the site of Cuello in northern Belize. A special importance of Cuello resides in the fact that it is the oldest Maya village site known so far; due to the investigations carried out between 1975 and 2002, it is also the most extensively

excavated early Middle Preclassic settlement. The author outlines the chronology of the site and the characteristics of the domestic and public architecture, including a sweat bath, which is the earliest one known thus far in Mesoamerica. He also presents evidence of burials as well as animal and plant remains recovered at the site, and summarises the results of the analyses that shed light on the diet of the ancient inhabitants of Cuello.

Geoffrey E. Braswell, Christian M. Prager and Cassandra R. Bill synthesise the recent investigations at Pusilhá, another interesting Maya site located in southern Belize. Their discussion is focused on the problems of state formation and the site's external relations. Analysing different types of archaeological and epigraphic evidence, they argue that Pusilhá, flourishing from the Late Classic to the Early Postclassic period, had some relations with Copán to the south and, to a greater extent, with the Petén area to the west, but was never – unlike many other known Maya settlements – under the direct control of its more powerful neighbours. It seems that the site was deliberately founded in a relatively peripheral and underpopulated region, where the governing elites managed to keep themselves distant from the political struggles among the large centres, such as Tikal, Calakmul, Copán and Quiriguá. However, on the other hand certain rulers apparently claimed an affiliation with Teotihuacan, and the authors also mention other data suggesting connections of some sort with this powerful and legendary city in the central Mexican highlands.

Nikolai Grube presents interesting newly recovered epigraphic data that reflect some formerly unknown aspects of the Classic Maya political geography in the southern part of the Mexican state of Campeche, i.e. in the area that was until recently quite poorly known from the archaeological point of view. The occurrences of the so-called emblem glyphs, which are currently understood as royal titles carried by rulers of particular polities, indicate that the Kaan dynasty, whose seat was at least during a certain period at the huge centre of Calakmul, was a dominating force in the area for several centuries, while the identity and regional significance of another polity, whose emblem glyph represents a bat, remains obscure. The inscriptions found in the region also contain incomplete and unusual variants of emblems, which the author calls 'toponymic titles' and suggests they designate lower hierarchical positions of the political entities they refer to.

Hasso Hohmann's article differs from the rest in that it does not present a general and synthetic view on a site, region or research problem. Instead, it is an original and meticulous report on the architectural characteristics of an interesting Maya building at the site of Chunchimai, located in the northwestern part of the Yucatán peninsula. The author provides detailed drawings of the building and the remaining parts of decoration, characteristic of the Puuc architectural style prevailing in the region during the Late Classic period, and pays special attention to certain elements that were evidently taken from an older building and reused; considering analogies from elsewhere, he suggests they reflect a deliberately expressed relationship of the builders with their ancestors.

Also included in the present volume are a few book reviews, most of them dealing with the Maya.

At the end I wish to express my sincere thanks to all contributors, to Liza Debevec (Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts) for her

editorial assistance, and to the editorial board of *Anthropological Notebooks*, who encouraged me to edit a volume dedicated to the Maya archaeology.

REFERENCES

- Adams, Richard E. W. 1991. Prehistoric Mesoamerica (revised ed.). Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Adams, Richard E. W., and Murdo J. MacLeod (eds.). 2000. The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas, vol. II: Mesoamerica, 2 parts. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bernal, Ignacio. 1980. A History of Mexican Archaeology: The Vanished Civilizations of Middle America (transl. from Spanish by R. Malet). London: Thames and Hudson.
- Braswell, Geoffrey E. (ed.). 2003. The Maya and Teotihuacan: Reinterpreting Early Classic Interaction. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Brenner, Mark, Michael F. Rosenmeier, David A. Hodell, and Jason H. Curtis. 2002. Paleolimnology of the Maya Lowlands: Long-Term Perspectives on Interactions among Climate, Environment, and Humans. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 13 (1): 141-157.
- Carrasco, David (ed.). 2001. The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures: The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America, 3 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Coe, Michael D. 1992. Breaking the Maya Code. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Demarest, Arthur. 2004. Ancient Maya: The Rise and Fall of a Rainforest Civilization. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fash, William L. 1994. Changing Perspectives on Maya Civilization. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23: 181-208.
- Fox, John W., Garrett W. Cook, Arlen F. Chase, and Diane Z. Chase. 1996. CA Forum on Theory in Anthropology; The Maya State: Centralized or Segmentary? *Current Anthropology* 37 (5): 795-830.
- Grube, Nikolai. 2000. The City-States of the Maya. In: Mogens Herman Hansen (ed.), A Comparative Study of Thirty City-State Cultures, *Historisk-filosofiske Skrifter* 21, Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, pp. 547-565.
- Gunn, Joel D., Ray T. Matheny, and William J. Folan. 2002. Climate-Change Studies in the Maya Area: A Diachronic Analysis. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 13 (1): 79-84.
- Hammond, Norman. 1994. Ancient Maya Civilization (5th ed.). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- . 2000. The Maya Lowlands: Pioneer Farmers to Merchant Princes. In: Adams, Richard E. W., and Murdo J. MacLeod (eds.), The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas, vol. II: Mesoamerica, Part 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 197-249.
- Hansen, Richard D., Steven Bozarth, John Jacob, David Wahl, and Thomas Schreiner. 2002. Climatic and Environmental Variability in the Rise of Maya Civilization: A Preliminary Perspective from Northern Peten. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 13 (2): 273-295.
- Kirchhoff, Paul. 1943. Mesoamérica: sus límites geográficos, composición étnica y caracteres culturales. *Acta Americana* 1 (1): 92-107.
- Manzanilla, Linda, and Leonardo López Luján (eds.). 2000-2001. Historia antigua de México, 4 vols. (2nd ed.). México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia – Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México – Miguel Ángel Porrúa.
- Marcus, Joyce. 2003. Recent Advances in Maya Archaeology. *Journal of Archaeological Research* 11 (2): 71-148.
- Martin, Simon, and Nikolai Grube. 2000. Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens: Deciphering the Dynasties of the Ancient Maya. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Matos Moctezuma, Eduardo. 2000. Mesoamérica. In: Linda Manzanilla and Leonardo López Luján (eds.), Historia antigua de México, vol. I: El México antiguo, sus áreas culturales, los orígenes y el horizonte Preclásico (2nd ed.), México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia – Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México – Miguel Ángel Porrúa, pp. 95-119.
- Morley, Sylvanus G. 1946. The Ancient Maya. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Sabloff, Jeremy A. 1990. The New Archaeology and the Ancient Maya. New York: W. H. Freeman.
- Scarborough, Vernon L., Fred Valdez Jr., Nicholas Dunning (eds.). 2003. Heterarchy, Political Economy, and

- the Ancient Maya: The Three Rivers Region of the East-Central Yucatán Peninsula. *Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.*
- Sharer, Robert J. 2000. *The Maya Highlands and the Adjacent Pacific Coast.* In: Adams, Richard E. W., and Murdo J. MacLeod (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas*, vol. II: Mesoamerica, Part 1, *Cambridge: Cambridge University Press*, pp. 449-499.
- Sharer, Robert J., and Loa P. Traxler. 2005. *The Ancient Maya (6th ed.)*. *Stanford: Stanford University Press.*
- Stephens, John Lloyd. 1941. *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán*, 2 vols. *New York: Harper (reprinted by Dover, 1962).*
- . 1943. *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, 2 vols. *New York: Harper (reprinted by Dover, 1963).*
- Stuart, George E. 1992. *Quest for Decipherment: a Historical and Biographical Survey of Maya Hieroglyphic Investigation.* In: Elin C. Danien and Robert J. Sharer (eds.), *New Theories on the Ancient Maya*, *University Museum Monograph 77, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania*, pp. 1-63.
- Thompson, J. Eric S. 1954. *The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilization.* *Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.*
- Trejo, Silvia (ed.). 1998. *Modelos de entidades políticas mayas.* *México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.*
- Webster, David. 2002. *The Fall of the Ancient Maya: Solving the Mystery of the Maya Collapse.* *London: Thames and Hudson.*