

The Rupture and Transformation of Maya Kingship

An Epilogue

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The transition from the Classic to Postclassic periods is usually viewed as being disjunctive because of general perspectives about the totality of the Classic Maya collapse and the abandonment of most sites in the southern Maya Lowlands. Exactly what transpired during this pivotal time in Maya history—usually encompassed within the Maya Terminal Classic period (ca. 800–900/950 CE)—has been the focus of many archaeological projects, but the key factors leading to the Maya collapse and the related abandonment of much of the central landscape of the Yucatan Peninsula, Guatemala, and Belize remain debated. However, the last 50 years of research have revealed that the so-called Maya collapse was not a singular event. Rather, it took place over more than 100 years and resulted from a series of long-term processes that affected various parts of the Maya region and its widespread settlements differentially. This collapse involved many factors and multiple causalities at various points in time and space.

Of particular interest is the stability of quite a number of individual Maya governing bodies during this time. This book is an attempt to explore what happened in the political realm during this transitional period of time—what stayed the same and what changed—with an emphasis on the role of Maya kingship during this era and in the subsequent Postclassic period. Based on the chapters within this book, it appears that significant change took place. Yet the situation is more complicated than a simple singular temporal transition. It appears that kingship in the Maya area was not uniform during the Late and Terminal Classic periods, with the transformation of Maya

kingship starting prior to the Terminal Classic period at some cities (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase, Chapter 13, this volume). There were also significant differences in governance between contemporary sites in the northern and southern lowland regions during both the Classic and Postclassic periods, with some researchers seeing divine kingship as being a late southern introduction to the north (e.g., Ringle et al., Chapter 14, this volume). Whatever the case, Postclassic Maya kingship in the lowlands appears to have been different from its Classic period counterparts, especially as expressed throughout much of the southern lowlands. But exactly how, in what ways, and why Maya kingship changed are still matters to be addressed.

Considerations of changes in Maya kingship invariably require an examination of the disjunction associated with the Classic Maya collapse and its potential causes. We know that many cities ceased being occupied after the Classic period and that this disjunction occurs in the archaeological records of much of the Maya southern lowlands sometime between 750 and 950 CE. With only a few exceptions in the southern lowlands (e.g., Lamanai, Belize, which has a continuous sequence from Classic to Postclassic; see Graham 1987; Pendergast 1986), Postclassic material culture is a new introduction to the area, implying a severe disjunction. Past researchers believed that this disjunction could be placed within a much shorter duration—on the order of 50 to 100 years—and that it had impacted the entire Maya area in similar ways. We now realize that this is not the case. Although it included a wave of rapid political change by 810–820 CE, the so-called Maya collapse occurred over a more extended period of time and was caused by any number of stressors operating on Classic populations.

The view of the collapse that was once espoused by researchers was largely based on a review of carved stone stelae and the tracking of the last recorded dates and portrayal of rulers at each site (e.g., Lowe 1985), combined with archaeological data for abandonment at the close of the Terminal Classic period (e.g., Culbert 1973). The cessation in construction and carved stelae portraying rulers throughout the lowlands was believed to represent significant changes in rulership and governance. Under this scenario, the collapse of the southern lowlands was interpreted to have initially occurred at the sites in the southwest. The last monument at Palenque bears a date of 9.18.9.4.4 (799 CE). The last monument at Piedras Negras in the Usumacinta area is dated to 9.18.5.0.0 (795 CE) and at Yaxchilan to 9.18.17.13.14 (808 CE). According to researchers, the site of Dos Pilas was among the first to be abandoned in 761 CE (ca. 9.16.17.0.0, but occupation continued at a series of neighboring sites; Martin and Grube 2000:64), with Ceibal manifesting

monuments dated to 10.3.0.0.0 (889 CE) or even later. The last dates at Tikal and its dependent sites of Ixlu and Jimbal also date in this timespan, being from 10.2.0.0.0 to 10.3.0.0.0 (869 to 889 CE). With the final erection of carved stelae in 10.4.0.0.0 (909 CE), all vestiges of Classic-era kingship disappeared from the archaeological record.

While the hieroglyphic texts are important, using the dates of the latest texts alone is insufficient to define and model the collapse. First, using the latest dates at various Maya sites assumes that all carved and dated monuments have been found and that these monuments were directly representative of the existence of central governance at these centers. But archaeological discovery is ongoing. For instance, most textbooks and even recent articles (e.g., Ebert et al. 2014; Sharer and Traxler 2006) have Caracol disappearing from the monumental record in 10.1.10.0.0 (859 CE), but in 2014 a new monument dating to 10.2.15.0.0 (884 CE) was discovered, lengthening the city's recorded history by 25 years (A. Chase and D. Chase 2015a).

Second, the use of latest dates on monuments assumes that the dates on these carved monuments directly reflected the continued existence of a structurally stable Maya kingship in a given location and polity. But, as can be seen from chapters within this book (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase, Chapter 13; Grube, Chapter 3; and Helmke et al., Chapter 7), the content of what was recorded in these texts and what was iconographically represented on these carved monuments during the Terminal Classic period changed significantly (e.g., A. Chase 1985b:Figure 3), strongly suggesting that there were also changes in the structure and role of Maya kingship that predated the final carved stone monuments. One of the contributions of this volume has been to document the abrupt end of many old dynasties of the lowlands well before the last dated monuments, in one (or two) wave(s) from 760 to 810–820 CE, based on archaeological as well as epigraphic evidence mostly related to warfare, diplomatic, and building activity (Grube, Chapter 3; Inomata, Chapter 4; Demarest et al., Chapter 18, all this volume). Requiring politically specific causalities, this wave of abandonments was nevertheless followed in a number of cities by hiatus, then revival, and then another desertion. Thus, as dramatic as any documented abandonment may have been, it represented but one political moment in a longer series of distinct processes resulting in the so-called collapse (see Grube, Chapter 3, this volume).

And, third, sometimes the archaeological record provides a different or expanded view from the hieroglyphic record. Thus, while hieroglyphic texts are no longer found at Dos Pilas after 761 CE (Houston 1993) and initial thoughts were that the city and surrounding area were sacked and destroyed,

a “squatters’ village” continued in use through at least 830 CE (O’Mansky and Dunning 2004:94). The interpretation of the hieroglyphic texts privileges the elite (and our nuanced interpretation about them) but does not necessarily reflect all that transpired for the remainder of the population. We are reminded by ethnohistoric documents that in Late Postclassic, Yucatan Maya rulers depended on the goodwill of their subjects and their deputies (Okoshi, Chapter 17, this volume). Classic period canonic kingship and its aftermath certainly involved various types of interaction among the “people in the land” that included both nobles and commoners (see Suzuki and Izquierdo, Chapter 9; Tsukamoto and Esparza Olguín, Chapter 11, both this volume).

Also significant in former interpretations about the ancient Maya was the correlation of sequences between the northern and southern lowlands and the assumption that the northern lowlands extended later in time, beyond the collapse of the southern lowlands—originally spurring considerations of “old” and “new” empires for the Maya (Morley 1946). Even in the 1960s, some researchers were still suggesting that the Classic Maya collapse had led some populations in the southern lowlands to have been involved in forced migrations to the northern lowlands (e.g., Cowgill 1964a). While a largely one-way population flow does not have much present-day support in the archaeological record, hieroglyphic interpretations have been used to show that there were likely long-term connections between the northern and southern lowland populations, one example being the Itza populations that are assumed to have connected Chichen Itza in the north and Lake Peten Itza in the south (Boot 2019:241–284; Schele and Mathews 1998:204).

While the Itza example may show the interconnectivity that existed between the northern and southern lowlands, it does not mean that all of the Maya political units shared the same systems of governance. This variation can be clearly seen in the discussion of modifiers and titles employed within the hieroglyphic records of the north and the south. As pointed out by Ringle and his colleagues (Chapter 14, this volume; see also Cobos, Chapter 15, this volume), there are differences in hieroglyphic titles for rulers in the north (*k’uhul ajaw* are not named; K’uk’ulkan would have replaced *ajaw*) and the south during the Late Classic that is suggestive of the existence of coeval but different governing structures for these two parts of the lowlands. These differences are also expressed within the archaeological records of the northern and southern lowlands (e.g., D. Chase and A. Chase 1992). In particular, long buildings, interpreted as being council houses that were used in a more open form of governance, are found in most northern lowland sites (e.g., Arnauld

2001) but are not prevalent in the southern lowlands, an area that appears to have had a governance structure more aligned with a central authority (or “divine king”) and therefore more in need of long halls that controlled palace movements rather than fostering spaces for councils (Arnauld, Chapter 8; Barrientos, Chapter 10, both this volume). Thus, the dynastic rulers posited as existing in the south may not have occupied the north until the Terminal Classic period (Ringle et al., Chapter 14, this volume).

Even a brief comparison of the archaeological records for all of the Maya cities spanning the lowlands of the Yucatan Peninsula and northern Guatemala makes it clear that implied uniformity in the Maya area was not present. “The Maya” occupy a wide range of environments and speak over 30 languages today; they were as diverse in the past (A. Chase et al. 2014). While the hieroglyphic records found throughout the Maya Lowlands may have lulled Maya archaeology into seeing uniformity in the governance systems because of the use of a rather standardized prestige writing system on the carved monuments of the southern lowlands (Houston et al. 2000; but see Wichmann 2006 for some of the expressed linguistic diversity in these texts), differences in social, economic, and governance systems always lurked beneath the surface. These varied adaptations may be the underlying factors reflected in the nonrapid, multiprocess chain of the collapse. It is also clear that the southern populations were not in and of themselves responsible for migrations that led to a northern florescence. In fact, the collapse played out in very different ways in these two areas, possibly as a result of structural differences in governance and in relationships between the elite and the non-ruling echelons of society (Okoshi, Chapter 17, this volume).

One wonders whether the contrast between the eastern and western lowlands was not almost as marked as between the northern and southern lowlands. By 798 CE in the eastern lowlands, Caracol reestablished the canonic recording of its sacred dynasty for one more century, whereas by 800 CE in the western lowlands, the royal palace of Cancuen was destroyed, the ruler killed, and the city deserted. From Cancuen, and also to Copán to the south as well as to Palenque to the northwest, the “underbelly” and western edge of the lowlands were under stress due to the close presence of non-Maya and non-Lowland Maya people during times of deep changes in Mesoamerica and its frontier. These pressures resulted in the closure of old trade routes that had been used for many centuries. The eastern lowlands did not experience anything similar but rather benefited from increasing maritime interactions with the north. Distinct political-economic entanglements among cities also enhanced the contrast between both sides.

The stressors leading to the Classic Maya collapse are still being enumerated by research. Largely because of modern concerns with climate change, there is a wide body of popular and scientific literature that has portrayed the Classic Maya collapse as being due to extended periods of drought (e.g., Diamond 2005; Douglas et al. 2016; Hodell et al. 1995; Hoggarth, Breitenbach et al. 2016; Iannone 2014; Kennett et al. 2012). Often the drought scenario for the collapse is combined with interpretations of an overpopulated landscape that is on the verge of ecological disaster (e.g., Diamond 2005). But most reconstructions of Maya drought are based on proxy data from lake sediments or cave speleothems that are constantly being updated and changed, especially concerning conditions in existence during the ninth century (e.g., Akers et al. 2016; Lachniet 2015; Rosenmeir et al. 2016). There is no doubt that there were serious droughts in the Maya area during their long history (Medina-Elizalde and Rohling 2012), but the Maya were a resilient people who overcame many adversities in their tropical environment (e.g., Iannone et al. 2014). And the detailed data in some of the climate reconstructions would indicate that what was once interpreted as a period of drought in the final part of the ninth century (e.g., Gill 2000) can now be portrayed as a very wet period, at least in parts of the Maya Lowlands (e.g., Kennett et al. 2012 supplementary data; see also climate data from Akers et al. 2016: Figure 9, which shows that the severe drought after 1020 CE is the only one consensually dated). In any case, while drought would certainly have been a stressor, it alone was likely insufficient to cause the Maya collapse (e.g., Haldon et al. 2018; Turner and Sabloff 2012) and is no more than tangential to this discussion on divine kingship.

Warfare has also been viewed as causing the Maya collapse. Some of the evidence for this scenario derived from excavations undertaken by Gordon Willey at Seibal, Guatemala (now Ceibal), in which the researchers highlighted the foreign influences within the iconographic corpus found on that site's monuments and modeled on its latest ceramics (Adams 1973; Graham 1990; Sabloff and Willey 1967). Based on recovered burials and residential patterns, the research at Ceibal also concluded that a new population had settled at the site prior to its final abandonment (Tourtellot 1990). In some texts (e.g., Adams 1984:263), these populations were portrayed as condottieri or marauders who raided and plundered other cities, perhaps using a different, more destructive form of warfare (e.g., A. Chase et al. 1991). Archaeological data from both Ceibal and Aguateca, Guatemala, also raise the possibility that sites could have been abandoned and reoccupied several times within a relatively short time frame (Bazy and Inomata 2017; Inomata, Chapter 4, this

volume), providing strong support for the role of violence and intergroup fighting at the end of the Classic period in the southern lowlands. Terminal Classic ceramics in the form of modeled-carved pottery that is recovered throughout the southern lowlands also contain scenes of warriors, captive presentation, and alliance (Adams 1973; A. Chase et al. 1991; Helmke and Reents-Budet 2008; Sabloff 1973)—all suggestive of a time of conflict. Using different databases, both Kazuo Aoyama (Chapter 5, this volume) and Diane Chase and Arlen Chase (Chapter 16, this volume) concur in thinking that the divine quality of Maya kings may have been lost through recurrent defeats in disastrous wars. Endemic warfare is also considered by several authors to have considerably affected political institutions (e.g. Inomata, Chapter 4; Arnauld, Chapter 8, both this volume).

There is also the possibility that one of the stressors at the time of collapse was the introduction of religious beliefs that challenged the existing political order. This possibility was initially raised for the northern lowlands, where it was referred to colloquially as the “cult of Quetzalcoatl” and associated with Chichen Itza (Ringle et al. 1998; Ringle et al., Chapter 14, this volume). It was also tied to a series of specific pan-Mesoamerican artifactual materials that do indeed appear in some of the latest on-floor deposits in the Classic-era southern lowlands (A. Chase and D. Chase 2013:Figure 4.6). In a political regime in which the ruler’s relation to “metapersons” (*sensu* Sahlins 2017a, i.e., gods and ancestors) was so central, religion was a powerful motivator and, if combined with other stressors, it could result in drastic change in various aspects of life and in governance or rulership (Andrieu, Chapter 2, this volume). Moreover, interdependence among the southern lowland kingdoms in ritual practices as recorded on carved monuments would have made those polities vulnerable to the introduction of foreign religious elements—using Demarest’s “hypercoherence” as an apt metaphor (Chapter 18, this volume).

Among the points that emerge from the chapters in this book is that the Classic period Maya were globalized (*sensu* Appadurai 1996). This is specifically apparent regarding the interdependence of their Late (and Terminal) Classic period economies. By the onset of the Terminal Classic period, no Maya city was self-sufficient in terms of either quotidian or prestige goods, let alone food production from city hinterlands. Instead, many everyday items were imported into the cities from elsewhere (A. Chase and D. Chase 2015b), and major centers like Tikal and Calakmul needed to import foodstuffs for their burgeoning populations (Dahlin and Chase 2014; see also Chunchucmil for food importation, Dahlin et al. 2005). Because of the symbiotic interconnectivity of the Late Classic economies (e.g., Demarest et al.,

Chapter 18, this volume), all these centers were subject to different levels of risk. The disruption of one center was likely to have had an effect at other centers, and, importantly, multiple disruptions would have been amplified because of the Maya global economy. Disturbances to the economic networks would also have had ramifications for the southern lowland institution of kingship and could have resulted in changes in structure and role, something seen both in the iconography of the Terminal Classic period and in the temporal transition to the Postclassic era. The mechanisms that demonstrate the entanglements between kingship, economy, religion, and ritual are now being clarified (e.g., McAnany 2010). Still, Caracol is a case in point where prosperity without sacred/divine kingship developed before “the 810–820 CE wave” and where non-prosperity with sacred/divine kingship (yet in a distinct regime) delayed the collapse for almost a century after that wave. Also, after the 810–820 CE wave, Naachtun evinced prosperity without kingship (Nondédéo et al., Chapter 6, this volume), while Nakum had prosperity with kingship during roughly the same timespan (Žračka, Chapter 12, this volume). All of these coeval spatial differences suggest that prosperity and sacred/divine kingship were not necessarily conjoined; instead, the relationship was to a large degree conditioned by local urban conditions as well as by the changing context of Mesoamerican globalization. What the kings could no longer unify or stabilize to ensure prosperity, the city and its governing body would. Yet, no matter the political structure employed in the ninth century, all forms of government eventually crumbled throughout the southern Maya Lowlands.

In summary, the exercise of examining changes to the nature of Maya kingship between the Classic, Terminal Classic, and Postclassic periods has borne fruit both in pointing to a real rupture and transformation of Maya kingship and in providing grist for the formation of new research questions that can be asked and investigated by future archaeological projects.