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# **1 TRANSITIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS: INTERPRETING CHANGE AND REALIGNMENT BETWEEN TEMPORAL PERIODS IN THE MAYA ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD**

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*Archaeological interpretation of ancient civilizations is characterized by periods of stasis and times of rapid change. While archaeologists can easily segment phases of material culture into sequent units, the points of transformation between these units are difficult to define archaeologically. The combined rapidity and lack of uniformity that can be associated with transitions makes it more difficult to model and to interpret cause and effect. Yet, these material shifts are precisely the most interesting part of the archaeological quest for knowledge. In the Maya area, times of transition fall at the beginning and end of each of the major recognized units of time. Thus, while the Preclassic, Classic, Postclassic, and Historic Periods can all be readily documented and explicated, what happened in the interstices between these periods foments differences of opinion. Recognizing the theoretical issues associated with the frameworks that are imposed onto our archaeological databases helps with making interpretations about the sequence of transformations that define Maya civilization. This paper looks first at transitions within the archaeological record of the Maya and then attempts to contextualize these pivotal timeframes.*

## **Introduction**

Archaeological investigations recover the residues of the past and produce artifactual materials and building remnants that must be interpreted to assign meaning. By its very nature, archaeology collects a body of diverse data, the interpretation of which actively incorporates modern biases and perceptions. This is why an understanding of hermeneutics (the study of interpretation or “how you know what you know”) is so important (Shanks and Tilley 1987: 107-108; D. Chase and A. Chase 2004 for the Maya). In making interpretations, there also may be an unstated reliance on single classes of data – such as ceramics, cache patterns, or building styles – because of the expertise of the analyst, the size and nature of the collected archaeological sample, or simply frame of reference used. Thus, interpretations about how change, transformation, and transition occurred in the archaeological record may not accurately reflect past situations, but rather are conditioned by a host of other factors.

Change occurs at varying scales both within and between time periods. Here, however, we primarily focus on the interstices between the larger blocks of time in the Maya archaeological record, usually designated as: Archaic, Preclassic, Early Classic, Late Classic, Postclassic, and Historic. We also stress how many of our field’s research interpretations are

guided by external factors and single classes of data.

## **Archaeology and Change**

When identifying transitions and transformations in the archaeological record, considerations of how we see change and how we interpret meaning are essential. Key factors in forming perspectives on change include the kind of archaeological investigations undertaken, the data that were recovered, and the sampling that was done. What are the markers, mechanisms, and material remains in the archaeological record that are used to identify change? Was change widespread or localized (e.g., are considerations of change based on the perspective of a single site or region or on multiple sites and regions)? Is change gradual or rapid and abrupt – or some combination of these two extremes? What importance can be assigned to external versus internal factors in creating change (e.g., climate and/or other populations as opposed to insular socio-political dynamics)? And, can alternative explanations for patterns be identified?

Given differences in training, background, and models used by any given investigator, there can be differences of opinion over why, what, and how something transpired in the past and on a variety of scales – from overarching theory to finer points that are context-dependent. This is a normal part of research and science. Conceptualizations of

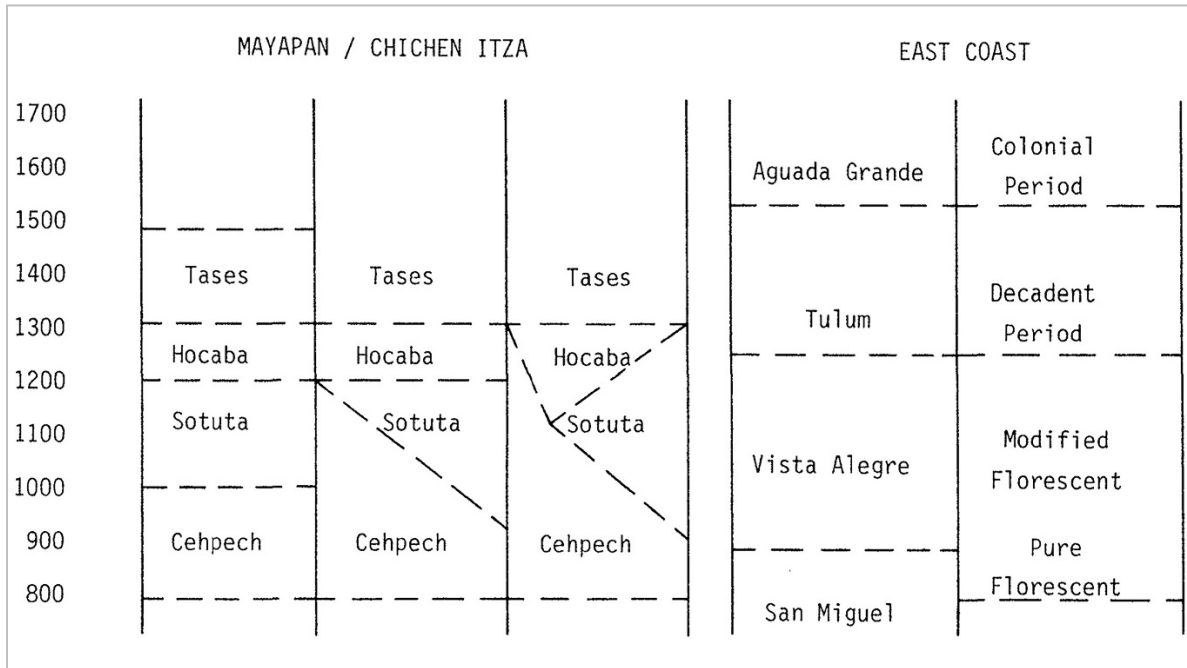
change, transitions, and transformations are linked both to the archaeological methodologies and theoretical premises used by researchers (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 2008), and the way in which excavations are conducted affects archaeological interpretations and perceptions of time (D. Chase and A. Chase 2004, 2006). Areal or horizontal excavation usually makes functional analysis of past features possible, providing a more comprehensive understanding of coeval remains; but deeply buried features are rarely areally excavated, meaning that it can be difficult to gain time depth pertaining to form and function. Penetrating excavation yields a sequence of events, but provides less information regarding the form and overall function of each layer in the sequence. Test pitting is useful for gaining an idea what is present at given locales, but often will produce insufficient remains to make functional interpretations without other forms of investigation. How large or small an excavated sample is also affect interpretation. And, primary deposits – representing past materials deposited in meaningful and purposeful ways – are truly key both for firmly anchoring any archaeological sequence in time and for providing insight that can be used for broader understanding, but they may not be present at all sites or for all points in time.

Materials deemed to be similar across sites may be cross-dated across a multitude of sites, creating coeval horizons (e.g., Rice 1993). Material culture that co-occurs in time is used to construct past histories across places. The breaks and punctuations between time periods are usually correlated with perceptible changes in material culture. These breaks can be characterized as being very gradual or as being very abrupt, but are usually portrayed as the latter (see Figure 1). Importantly, material remains may vary across a site or social sectors and change at different rates, but these kinds of considerations only rarely impact synchronic analyses (e.g., D. Chase and A. Chase 2006). Rather, these materials are conjoined into single broad units of time and the breaks in the material content between these broader units results in the definition of larger patterns that become categorized as times of transitions, transformations, and change.

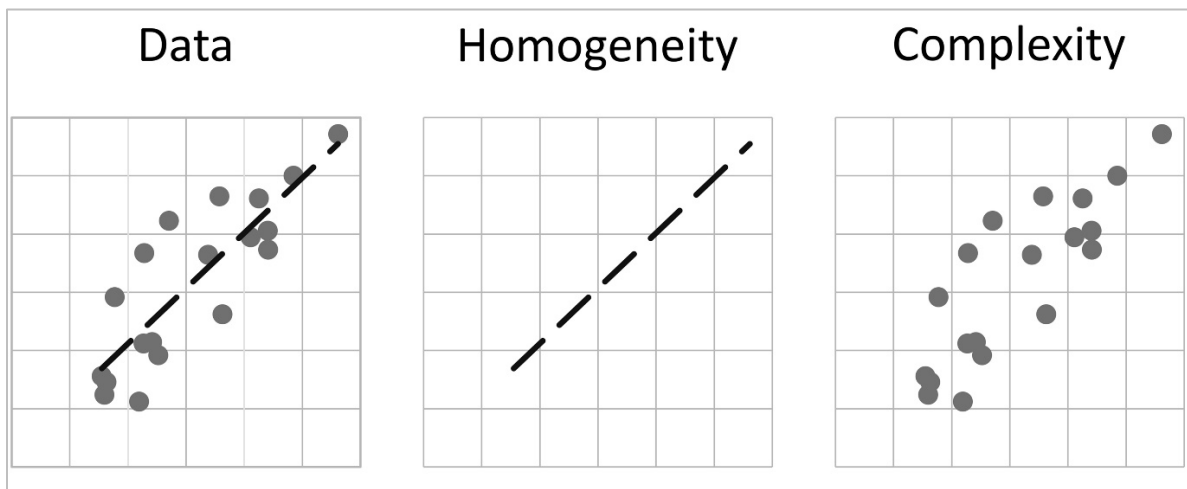
Analysis of materials in a laboratory also impacts interpretation. “Lumpers” or “splitters” each approach change differently. Some analysts group materials together to establish complexes that are viewed as representing a broad span of time, such as the Maya Late Classic Period. Others might break the same materials into smaller groups, seeing slight differences over time or space. By convention – and as a result of many past excavations and analyses – we break Maya history into a series of blocks of time. While methodologies that are used for analysis tend to homogenize time periods (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 2009) and may over-emphasize breaks, the eras themselves – just like places today – were often localized and heterogeneous (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 2004).

Over time we have come to realize that the horizontal blocks of time established for broader regions incorporate spatial differences at multiple frames of reference. Sites themselves varied in their histories with some peaking during the simultaneously decline of others. And, changing the temporal parameters for a block of time by even 50 years may substantially alter resulting interpretations (especially of population growth rates; see A. Chase 1990 for an example). One of the most described transitions, the Maya collapse, once seen as uniformly abrupt (Culbert 1973), is now viewed as spanning at least 150 years and as being characterized by substantial variation within the Maya region (Okoshi et al. 2021).

It is further important to note potential differences between ancient Maya concepts of time and those of current archaeological practitioners (e.g., Freidel et al. 2023) – and the potential input that these distinctions may have on ancient transitions (e.g., cyclical versus linear time and abrupt versus gradual change). While temporal differences can be ferreted out of the archaeological record by defining and seriating stratigraphic and material sequences e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 2013), concepts of time and change may be in opposition between the past and the present and have an impact on interpretation. For instance, recovered archaeological materials may be interpreted as simple trash by the archaeologist when they may have actually served as objects of ritual renewal or ritual termination (A. Chase and D. Chase 2020a).



**Figure 1.** Illustration of the difficulty in portraying (and interpreting) transitions in ceramics and phases; examples to the left show various potential relationships between ceramic complexes in Terminal Classic and Postclassic northern Yucatan; examples to the right show various horizontal phase alignments for eastern Yucatan. Note that the timing for the phase transitions does not always align with ceramic transitions (see A. Chase and D. Chase 1985: Figure 2 for more detail and sources).



**Figure 2.** The homogenization of interpretations can eliminate the complexities that actually may exist in a data set; a more in depth analysis of the complexity sometimes elucidates other findings; the more interesting analysis is actually looking at the variance from any global pattern.

The frameworks and models that are used to describe past societies and their change also impacts, and even foreshadows, the way in which transitions and change are described. Many of

these models, frameworks, and the associated terminology used by archaeologists derive from bodies of theory that relate to societal evolution or political ideology. Terms like “primitive” and

“complex” (e.g., Tylor 1871) as well as “civilization” (Morgan 1878) were infused with meaning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century during the formalization of archaeology as an academic discipline. Models and terms applied to recent historic societies (Service 1975: bands, tribes, chiefdoms, states; Fried 1967: egalitarian, rank, stratified) are also used to interpret the past. The remnants of these earlier frameworks remain built into many of modern archaeology’s terminology, theory, and resulting interpretations about transitions – whether or not they are apropos. While newer data has changed some views of the past, the frameworks that are used rarely change, even though they may be incorrect or parochial. Preconceptions about past societies have become embedded into these theoretical frameworks and are difficult to modify. Betty Meggars (1954) argued that complex societies could not develop in the tropics and these arguments were infused into a series of theoretical frameworks that were used to look at transitions and change. Urbanization was at one point largely viewed as being only in the purview of Western civilization, thus limiting perceptions of the transitions in societal development elsewhere.

There is a long-standing assumption that cities represented a culmination of societal development, largely deriving from the work of Childe (1950; see also Smith 2009). Even current alternative models for explaining the rise of complexity focus on the importance of cities (Yoffee 2005). Yet, Childe (1950:9) had great difficulty conceptualizing Maya cities and noted that they posed an issue for his interpretive framework, meaning that the recognition of Mesoamerican urbanism was fraught with issues (D. Chase et al. 2023). Frameworks like the one that Childe provided on the urban revolution became so established in archaeology that they are difficult to modify. While we can now define a different kind of tropical city (e.g., Fletcher 2009, 2019) and demonstrate that the structural organization of these early tropical cities does accord with broader organizational theory used for modern cities (ASZ Chase 2021; Klassen et al. 2021; Lobo et al. 2020), past models still hinder our interpretations. For instance, assumptions about urban and rural dichotomies derived from Western societies imply that agriculture remained separate from cities,

something we also know does not hold for the Classic Period Maya (Chase and Chase 1998, 2016; Fisher 2014; Graham 1999; also see Lamb 2022 for issues in dealing with “rural”). Thus, the very frames of reference that have become established in the social theory used to illuminate archaeological remains can sometimes predetermine interpretations.

Single well-known researchers can also disproportionately impact interpretive frameworks. J. Eric S. Thompson held back epigraphic interpretation in the Maya area for decades because of his belief that hieroglyphs were neither phonetic nor dealt with history (M. Coe 2012). Using a focus on culture ecology, William T. Sanders (1973; Sanders et al. 1979) stressed the complexity of highland peoples over lowland populations. He incorporated already established narratives (Meggars 1954) of the inability of the tropics to give rise to and maintain civilizations and cities (Sanders and Price 1968; Sanders and Webster 1988) into his published interpretations, in spite of archaeological data to the contrary (Chase et al. 1990; W. Coe 1965; Smith 1990). The echos of Sanders’ culture ecological approach are still found in arguments about carrying capacity for Maya archaeological settlements (Dickson 1980; Lentz et al. 2014) and in the debate over Maya social complexity and urbanism (D. Chase and A. Chase 2017). However, current research now recognizes that Maya cities persisted for hundreds of years (D. Chase et al. 2023).

### **Transitions and Transformations in the Maya Area and Mesoamerica**

One of the first collaborative attempts to utilize archaeological data to analyze culture change in the New World was published in a Society for American Archaeology memoir entitled *Seminars in Archaeology: 1955* (Wauchope 1956). Its goal was to illuminate “cultural dynamics and human relations . . . through archaeological techniques.” Two of the four papers in this volume are particularly relevant to considerations of change and were “classed with the work of Childe and Steward as attempts to look at the artifactual data of archaeology from the viewpoint of the search for regularities in cultural phenomena” by one reviewer (Spicer 1957: 186). In the first of four

papers in the volume, change was viewed in terms of cultural “contact” that could be analyzed in the material record as either “site-unit” or “trait-unit” intrusion, leading to considerations of acculturation in terms of “assimilation, adaptation or fusion, and revivalistic phenomena” (Spicer 1957:186). In the second, change was considered diachronically, focusing on five different traditions: direct (unchanging), converging (fusing diverse traditions into one), diverging (breaking apart into two or more traditions), elaborating (integration of new elements), and reducing (loss of elements); these “tradition segments” were then viewed from the standpoint of “causal factors,” 29 of which were listed and included “influences of slowly or rapidly changing physical environment, increasing and decreasing population size,” and “compatibility and incompatibility of contacting culture traits” (Spicer 1957:187). This seminar represented a major advance for the culture historical bent of its participants, who previously had focused on change as being caused predominantly by migration, diffusion, and trade; it specifically facilitated a shift to more robust explanations of why and how change occurred. And, it was within this milieu that archaeological paradigms for both the rise and the social composition of Maya civilization were framed (e.g., Adams 1977), using then extant archaeological data as well as models focusing on trade, warfare, and cultural ecology.

When we survey the current state of our understanding of past transitions in the Maya area, it becomes apparent that, while we have progressed beyond the 1955 considerations of change in the archaeological record, we still have much to do. Wauchope (quoted in Spicer 1957: 186) noted that in carrying out the 1955 exercise, it was unclear whether the sponsor “actually had confidence in the intellectual curiosity of archaeologist or whether they just wanted to see how stupid we really were, for ... the stereotype of the American archaeologist has somehow come to be a pretty dull sort of clod, with most of his gray matter under his fingernails.”

With the above caveats in mind, we now turn to looking at the major transitions, many not yet fully resolved, that can be defined in the Maya area.

### *Early Developments*

Based on general models derived from almost two centuries of intellectual thought and accumulated archaeological data from other parts of the world, interpretations about the early developments in the Maya area have been driven by a focus on the origins of sedentism, agriculture, ceramics, monumental architecture, and increasing populations. Our past approaches, assumptions, and researchers, however, may have blinded us to other possibilities in the past that are now being re-evaluated (e.g., Cagnato 2021:490). What kind of transition occurred in moving from the Archaic (prior to 1200 BCE) to the Preclassic (1200 BCE to 250 CE)? Was it from foragers to subsistence farmers participating in early village life? Was it a uniform process across Mesoamerica? Was maize the primary focus for early Mesoamerican societies, as research undertaken by Scotty McNeish (1964; Mangelsdorf et al. 1964) assumed?

A full model for the development and transition of Archaic society in Belize was published in a front-page New York Times article shortly after McNeish began his research in 1977. Somewhat in the forefront of the “New Archaeology” with its focus on the hypothetico-deductive model (Watson et al. 1971), McNeish (1978) used this approach in his volume “The Science of Archaeology” and applied a developmental model across the Americas, laying the groundwork for subsequent research. Until recently, it has proven difficult to deviate from already framed, pre-existing developmental frameworks like the ones provided by McNeish (1978) and Adams (1977). However, recent research on the Archaic Period, focusing on palaeoecology and aDNA, is modifying past models of early New World migration of both people and plants (e.g., Kennett et al. 2022; Prufer et al. 2021; see also Awe et al. 2021). But, following the model created by McNeish, much research still focuses on the use of maize in identifying possible sedentary populations. Yet, the early Maya food spectrum was likely far broader than maize, probably also focusing on other items such as chaya, squash, and manioc (Cagnato and Ponce 2017; Schwarcz et al. 2021).

New archaeological research also is shedding light on transitions once considered to be understood. Inomata and his colleagues’

(2021) have discovered the replication of monumental site plans in the Gulf Coast region of Mesoamerica that showcase the early importance of ideology by or before 800 BCE in the physical manifestation of built space, specifically with a focus on 20 structures, viewed as representing early calendric ritual, situated around massive plazas that are often centered on E Group complexes (Freidel et al. 2017). Yet, how these massive built spaces articulated with the other settlements in these early societies is still unknown. Inomata and colleagues (2015) have provided a general model of foragers congregating to build these complexes as they transition towards agriculture, a general model also employed in other parts of the world (see Wengrow and Graeber 2021). The huge built platforms have implications for complexity and organization early in Mesoamerican prehistory no matter the social or economic structure. And, the focus on twenty structures around a large public plaza emphasizes an ideology focused on early calendric ritual that is apropos for ancient Mesoamerica.

This new research, however, disrupts assumptions about the late establishment of settled life, complexity, and agricultural production. Rather than seeing these factors as being the driving force for society and change, ideology and religion come to the forefront. This highlights the issues of seeing traditional prime movers – be they agriculture, population, or ideology – as causing change and transitions. Further research will undoubtedly shed even more light on the transition to what are recognizable as ancient Mesoamerican cultural traditions.

### *The Maya Preclassic*

The Preclassic period (1200 BCE – 250 CE) is viewed as being the developmental era during which the Maya slowly transformed into a civilization characterized by monumental architecture and “high art” (Thompson 1954). As with other time periods, transitions relative to the Maya Preclassic are framed materially by ceramic data with populations reacting to both exterior and interior influences. When first formulated, the Preclassic Period was viewed as the time during which the development of villages, agriculture, and complexity occurred –

and these were considered to be the areas in which change would be recognized. Newer archaeological data suggests that high levels of complexity existed from the onset of the Preclassic era and that older models of social development do not actually mirror what occurred.

Based on archaeological data, we can state confidently that the ancient Maya developed in situ (Coe 1965, Inomata et al. 2015) and were not implanted into the lowlands from highland regions, as was once postulated (Meggers 1954; Sharer and Sedat 1987); at the same time, we recognize that population movement was common across time and space (e.g., Arnauld et al. 2021). For the ancient Maya, consistent patterning in their monumental architecture, specifically relative to E Groups (Freidel et al. 2017), indicates that a fully developed and widely shared ideology was in place among the Maya by 300 BCE. They also experimented with a gridded city form even earlier in the Middle Preclassic era (see A. Chase and D. Chase 2020b; Inomata et al. 2020; Pugh et al. 2017). In parts of the lowlands, Late Preclassic road systems indicate the existence of interlinked settlements, viewed as representing multiple state polities (Hansen 2016; 2023); what occurred in the northern Peten Preclassic era likely accords with Renfrew’s (1975) model of Early State Modules. Exactly how these socio-political units were composed and governed, however, has not been defined. Their interconnectivity through causeways suggests an extremely large political unit that is not seen in later periods (at least in the archaeological record).

Iconography, as found in murals from San Bartolo, Guatemala dating to minimally 200 BCE, has been used to suggest that these developments may be linked to the rise of divine kingship, as the murals are believed to show the accession of a ruler (Taube et al. 2010). Iconography found in these same San Bartolo murals, focusing on centering and world trees, is also apparent in Postclassic codices from the northern Yucatan (e.g., D. Chase 1985), again suggesting long-term – and spatially broad – Maya ideological consistency. However, given the lack of a stone monumental record, it is probable that any divine rulers in the Preclassic era varied from those found in the Classic Period.

### *The Early Classic Period*

The transition between the Preclassic and Early Classic (250-550 CE) in the Maya lowlands has been a source of puzzlement and debate. There are questions over the impacts of drought, relationships with other parts of Mesoamerica, and volcanic eruption; internally, rulership associated with the erection of stone monuments and accompanying texts becomes widespread, presumably restructuring Maya societies. Ceramic change was not uniform, resulting in many questions over dating. Archaeologists often have had great difficulty in identifying early Early Classic remains in the archaeological record, largely because of a focus on specific ceramic types and the existence of different ceramic traditions (e.g., Pring 1977; Freidel et al. 1982; Sabloff 1975; Sidrys 1983:397-399; Willey 1977: 395-396).

One explanation for the perceived lack of Early Classic remains being recovered in the archaeological record is that the use of Preclassic ceramics continued into the Early Classic (e.g., Lincoln 1985) along with newly introduced forms and finewares that appeared predominantly in special deposits. Larger archaeological samples of materials dating to this transition reveal that it was a time of great cultural experimentation and showcase the need for contextual analysis that goes beyond a type-fossil approach (A. Chase and D. Chase 2018).

Some researchers have associated the transition to the Early Classic era with an extended drought that could have caused a mini-population collapse (Ebert et al. 2019; Haldon et al. 2020; Medina-Elizalde et al. 2016), potentially explaining both a perceived disruption in population levels and the confused ceramic situation. Part of the issue with understanding the Early Classic Period is that the dating assigned to this block of time was poorly framed in its initial definition at Uaxactun, Guatemala (CE 300-600); it was correlated with the presumed hieroglyphic dating of the site's stelae, which lengthened the time period on one end (CE 600 rather than CE 550), making comparative interpretation across sites appear to show a nonexistent decline in Early Classic population (A. Chase 1990:151; A. Chase and D. Chase 2005:18).

We know that there was contact and constant movement of peoples throughout Mesoamerica in this era. An earlier view held that there were migrations into the lowlands from areas to the southeast (El Salvador) due to the eruption of the Illopango volcano, as Willey and Gifford (1961) once argued for the Floral Park ceramic complex in the Belize Valley (see also Sharer and Gifford 1970). Much of this debate centered on ceramic interpretation and dating that has now been superseded by subsequent ceramic analysis and by a better understanding of the timing of events (moving the temporal frame for the associated volcanic eruption forward by over 300 years; e.g., Dull et al. 2019). Ancient aDNA analysis will eventually clarify this situation.

An internal factor in the Early Classic transition is the role that Maya dynastic rulership may have played in the southern lowlands. The earliest carved stone monument, portraying what is thought to be a ruler, was recovered at Tikal, Guatemala and is dated to CE 292 (Coe 1965). Later epigraphic notations about the foundings of Maya dynasties are also generally placed during or at the start of this era (Tikal ca. CE 100-250; Caracol in CE 331; Copan in CE 426), adding another layer to considerations of change, transitions, and transformation. The advent of these dynastic rulers with their textual linkages to Maya cosmology herald a significant transition in ancient Maya societies, presumably associated with changes in governance.

Finally, there are open questions about the role that Teotihuacan, Mexico, may have played in two transitional periods in the Maya area. During the Preclassic to Early Classic transition, both epigraphy and archaeology have been used to suggest that the highland Mexican site was actively involved in the Maya area and may have been responsible for the rise of Classic Period Maya kingship and states during this time (Stuart 2000; Martin 2020:390). Teotihuacan-related deposits at sites in the southern lowlands, such as those recovered from Caracol (A. Chase and D. Chase 2011) and Tikal (Houston et al. 2021) provide archaeological support for dating Maya-Teotihuacan relationships long before the CE 378 epigraphically recorded entrada (e.g., Sugiyama et al. 2020), which has been interpreted as resulting in the installation of a Teotihuacano ruler at Tikal (Stuart 2000). The end of the Maya

Early Classic Period now correlates with the collapse of central Teotihuacan circa CE 550 and, thus, Teotihuacan is being viewed as possibly having played a role in the transition between the Early and Late Classic Periods in the Maya area, building on earlier comments by Willey (1979) relative to the Maya hiatus. Yet another explanation for the Early to Late Classic transition, however, is the “CE 536 Event” (e.g., Gunn 2000), a worldwide climatic event caused by one or more massive volcanic explosions (see Newfield 2018). Rather than looking to exterior causes like Teotihuacan or volcanos (and, indirectly, climate) to explain this transition, it more likely resulted from the development of complex, elaborated, and layered governments as population levels and commerce increased. Research at Caracol suggests that this was period with strong autocratic governance (A.S.Z. Chase 2021).

#### *The Late Classic*

The transition to the Late Classic continues trends seen in the Early Classic towards increased population as well as increased economic and political infrastructure. Again, ceramics are typically used to identify Late Classic remains. The Late Classic constitutes the timeframe that is perhaps the best known for the ancient Maya. This was the era of maximum population. Late Classic archaeological remains are well represented both spatially and in terms of excavation. The proximity of Late Classic remains to the surface, at least compared to Preclassic and Early Classic materials, also means that a century of investigations has produced a significant amount of data relative to this era. Yet, questions still exist for this benchmark timeframe. How many Maya people were there in the Late Classic Period? How were they organized? And, how diverse were they? The answers to these questions are interlinked and have implications for any considerations relative to change (e.g., A.S.Z. Chase et al. 2024).

Only with the advent of lidar have we gained an idea of the larger spatial extent of Maya sites and regions – and of differences in these regions with regard to defensive structures, road systems, and population densities (compare Chase et al. 2011, 2014 with Canuto et al. 2018). And, only since approximately 2010 has there been widespread

archaeological recognition of marketplaces and market economies at Maya sites (Garraty and Stark 2010; King 2015; Masson et al. 2020). The existence of widespread markets among Maya cities has a profound effect for our interpretations concerning the nature and complexity of Late Classic society. Some sites, such as Caracol, show a more collective governance system and lessened inequality at this time (A.S.Z. Chase 2021). By extension, these conceptualizations affect interpretations regarding transformations and change, adding a series of possible factors to the mix that were not part of the established paradigms.

#### *The Terminal Classic*

Perhaps the transition over which there has been the greatest speculation in the scholarly literature is the Terminal Classic Period (CE 790-900/950) or the timespan immediately antecedent to the Postclassic Period (CE 950 – 1542/1697) that is better known colloquially as the “Classic Maya collapse” (Culbert 1973; Demarest et al. 2004; Okoshi et al. 2021). As much of the Late Classic ceramic repertoire continued in use, this era was originally defined through the use of specific types, such as modeled-carved pottery and fine orange ware. Because these materials were not widely distributed at sites like Tikal, Guatemala, the impression of a drastic population collapse was fostered (A. Chase and D. Chase 2008). As in the Early Classic Period, we now realize that a focus on finewares can be misleading without also understanding other aspects of the ceramic assemblage (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 2004; Halperin et al. 2021; LeMoine et al. 2022) and changes in the iconography associated with Terminal Classic stone monuments (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 2021; D. Chase and A. Chase 2021).

The issues in conceptualizing this transition lie in the diverse factors facing different sites and regions in the Maya area as the Late Classic Period drew to a close (A. Chase et al. 2021). The fact that populations in the southern lowlands never fully recovered to the same kind of population levels and architectural constructions after this collapse (Turner 2018) also has led to the propagation of romanticized views about how a society can vanish. This transformation has long been contextualized as a



parable for our current world situations (e.g., Wilk 1985). Explanations for the collapse have included peasant revolts (i.e., the Russian Revolution of 1917; Becker 1979; Thompson 1954); endemic warfare (Demarest 1997; Houk et al. 2016), environmental degradation (Webster 2002), climate change (Gill 2000; Iannone et al. 2014), and global networking (Demarest and Victor 2022). Given the recent COVID pandemic, it would also be easy to see how disease could have disrupted Maya society. We now understand that this “collapse” not only took place over a long period of time, but also that it impacted populations in varied ways in the southern Maya lowlands, meaning that multiple factors must have been involved. At some sites, such as Caracol, there was a return to more autocratic forms of governance and greater socio-economic inequality (A. Chase and D. Chase 2021).

Our views of the Classic Period Maya have changed as a result both of new technologies (like lidar and stable isotopes – Chase et al. 2012, 2024; Price et al. 2015) and of continued archaeological analysis and research (e.g., on economics – Masson et al. 2020; on ceramics – Aimers 2013). Our explanations are becoming more complex and nuanced (e.g., Okoshi 2021). Newer analyses and models permit an understanding of how Late Classic Maya polities were interlinked in terms of economies, making Mesoamerican globalization a potential factor in the southern Maya collapse (A. Chase et al. 2024; Demarest and Victor 2022). Whatever is the actual case, the Terminal Classic to Postclassic transition remains especially difficult to interpret archaeologically. Re-occupation of sites in the same locations usually did not occur. Throughout most of the southern lowlands there is a transition . . . and then nothing at what were previously large thriving cities. Importantly, the Maya did not disappear, but rather changed locations and modified certain aspects of their lifeways.

### *The Later Maya*

Some Postclassic peoples stayed in the southern lowlands after the Classic Maya collapse, but their settlements and remains appear substantially reduced in size and varied from those of the earlier Classic Period (A. Chase and Rice 1985; D. Chase and A. Chase 1988; Sabloff

and Andrews 1986). The socio-political structure also changed, with the loss of Classic era divine kings and a return to more collective governance (D. Chase and A. Chase 2021). As with previous transitions, the forms and styles of ceramics changed, but it is sometimes difficult to differentiate Postclassic materials from earlier ceramics, especially when looking at sherds. For many years, researchers found it problematic to identify what was Postclassic within the Maya archaeological record; this was true for the Barton Ramie excavations in the 1950s and for the 1971 Tayasal excavations (e.g., A. Chase and D. Chase 2019:12).

Immediately following the end of the Classic Period, settlement and ceramic assemblages were sparsely distributed, making this era difficult to fully define. We currently have a much better understanding of this later block of time, but as in earlier timeframes, issues in interpreting this era are similarly driven by limited archaeological samples, researchers’ preconceptions, and spatial variability in ceramics (A. Chase and D. Chase 2008, 2020c; D. Chase and A. Chase 2004, 2021; Graham 1987; Rice and Rice 2012). Nevertheless, much has been done to change perceptions of the Postclassic Period Maya – and it is now clear that these were vibrant populations with both continuity and variation in patterning from earlier periods of time.

Postclassic peoples and their ceramic traditions continued into the Historic Period. The addition of clearly foreign European artifacts and buildings to the Colonial archaeological record is the primary way to identify Historic Period Maya occupation (Oland and Palka 2016). Even though Colonial Maya might be interred in cemeteries associated with Christian churches, archaeological data still reveal syncretic practices that in some cases obscure the Historic present (e.g., Graham 2011). Amplifying the widespread death due to disease after Spanish contact, the resettlement practices of the Spanish (Farriss 1984) also severely altered pre-contact ways of life, making interpretation about the past using the direct historic approach extremely difficult.

### **Conclusion**

Archaeology has always had difficulty interpreting change, transitions, and

transformations. The archaeological record requires interpretation, and each researcher brings their own background and perspectives to that understanding. However, new techniques and technologies, greater site and areal coverage, and convenings of all archaeologists working in the same country (as occurs at the Belize Archaeology Symposium) are making a difference.

Particularly salient in interpretations of the past are the use of external prime movers to explain transitions and the dominance of single bodies of data – be they ceramic, hieroglyphic, or applied models – in modeling change. Searching for simpler explanations, we may also tend to homogenize what happened in the past rather than to emphasize the complexity found in the archaeological record (Figure 2).

Our views of the ancient Maya past have slowly evolved as newer archaeological data have been collected and interpreted. Past societal models often focused on the stability of populations, not realizing the amount of mobility that was present, as is noted by Arnauld and her colleagues (2021). Past research also generally focused on larger “type” sites – e.g., San Lorenzo in the Olmec region and Tikal in the Maya area – seeing each as being exceptional and emblematic of change in their broader regions. Established interpretations, even if contested, have become reified through repetition, and it is only with great difficulty that new research can modify past viewpoints. For instance, both the Olmec site of San Lorenzo and the Maya city of Tikal were once seen as being unique, but both have now lost that status with newer research (e.g. A. Chase and D. Chase 2016; Inomata et al. 2021).

Continued excavation in the Maya area has produced much new data, making simple explanation difficult and highlighting variation in individual site histories (as the fortunes of one center rise, another center suffers decline). The ancient Maya were resilient and continued to adapt to changing situations. With more information, change and transitions have become more difficult to categorize in uniform ways. Instead, we see multiple inter-twined histories. What was once “the” transition, when data were limited, becomes a more general transition with localized variations and caveats. And, it is in the permutations that exist in these variable changes

that a better understanding of the vibrant Maya societies that comprise the archaeological record will be delineated.

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