

'A Forest of Kings': Mayan civilization of the first millennium CE in the Petén region on the border of present-day Guatemala and Mexico

Class notes, 25 October 2019, ALL presentation, Bruce Matthews, Professor Emeritus, Comparative Religion, Acadia University

The title for this presentation comes from the cover of a book by the foremost scholars Linda Schele and David Freidel (Harper Collins, 1990). I find it especially apt for the **Petén** region in the middle of Mesoamerica, along the heavily-forested and thinly settled current border of Guatemala, Belize and Mexico, sometimes also identified as the *Selva Maya*. In the first millennium CE, the historic Mayan civilization spread beyond this corridor. But the centre of this amazing civilization remained in the middle of the vast Yucatan peninsula, the Petén, west from Palenque to Caracol in the east, marked by structures of sometimes immense complexity, soaring temples in the pyramid style reaching to the heavens where contact with the deities was thought to be facilitated, and from which the pyramids of other distant but separate polities could sometimes be seen in the far distance. Somewhat different, though still Mayan in identity, is the northern part of the great Yucatan peninsula, the so-called **Puuc** ('low hills') region, with its own distinctive architecture (carefully cut stone, lower rectangular blocks, long low buildings, upper facades with geometric facades) and famous city-states (e.g., Uxmal), again dating from the first millennium CE. Two other Mayan territories with their shared, distinctive architectural styles are identified as **Río Bec** and **Chenes**, (with lower two or three-tower edifices, very steep, no rooms, and use of frightening 'monster-temple' masks as entrances), both found largely in Mexico's Campeche state. 'Bec' is a kind of tree that grows along river banks, and Río Bec on the eastern border of Guatemala is a fascinating, off-the-beaten-track part of the Mayan territory well worth visiting - no crowds!. In today's presentation, I will give examples of all four Mayan architectural groups, but the main point is to tell the story, however briefly, of one of history's greatest civilizations and peoples.

As noted, I have long been fascinated by pre-Columbian societies in Central and South America, and in 2018 and 2019 my partner Pam (an accomplished photographer) and I made a special effort to visit as many of the major sites in this classical Mayan Petén and Río Bec belt as we could, sometimes with small, archaeologically-focused groups, (e.g., to Caracol, Tikal, Yaxchilán), and sometimes on our own with generally excellent local guides (e.g., to Calakmul, Xpujil (*shpu-heel*), Kohunlich). Some involved river travel in areas where migrants were at the same time crossing from Guatemala into Mexico; others in convoy with armed police; others again down many kilometers of primitive backwoods roads. This presentation is a quick trip highlighting some of the major features of this intriguing and historically significant part of the world.

In a previous ALL class on Central American civilizations (2016), I offered a few historical notes, some of which are pertinent to this topic today as background. In them I noted that the earliest archaeological evidence of peoples in Mexico's south eastern region and the Yucatan peninsula (a vast largely limestone plateau undergirded by multiple sources of fresh water) is the 1939 discovery in Oaxaca of several enormous

stone ‘Olmec heads’, as well as ancient glyphs of jaguars and carved stele dating to 750 BCE, precursors of the Maya civilization to follow. More recent archaeological exploration in the Petén area of Guatemala and Mexico using light and radar detection methods (LIDAR) or airborne lasers, have revealed quite incredible ceremonial sites with enormous platforms long buried and forgotten dating back to 700 BCE. As one map (*National Geographic*, August 2007) of the Yucatán describes it, “the very word Maya evokes images of mystery – ancient pyramids soaring above trackless jungle, giant carved stones proclaiming artistic and intellectual prowess, a sudden and enigmatic demise.” This is no understatement. The ‘classical’ period we are interested in was from 200-800 CE, identified with Mayan ‘super-states’ like Palenque, Tikal, Calakmul and Caracol. Historian Michael Coe writes: “During a span of six and a half centuries, the Maya reached intellectual and artistic heights which no others in the New World and few in the Old, could match at that time.” (*The Maya*, 1966). A ‘post-classical’ period continued until 1524, but was Mayan only in part due to incursions by other Mesoamerican peoples into traditional Mayan territory.

From early on, the Mayans likely borrowed religio-cultural notions from their Toltec and Teotihuacan ‘neighbours’ to the north-west, contributing their own cosmological ideas, to bring to birth “one of the most brilliant civilizations of antiquity amid the rain forest in the heart of the Yucatán Peninsula” (Coe). But they had their own unique way of writing. *Mayan glyphs* or specific symbols or signs representing actual words date to the 3rd cent. BCE. About 800 individual glyphs are known, though only 60% fully understood. Some glyphs have a *phonetic* value, some are *hieroglyphic* (a little picture) or are a *logogram* (a character that represents a word or phrase). Blocks of glyphs are often found arranged in columns, and are read left to right, top to bottom, and are found largely on stelae (standing pillars), stone slabs, lintels and pottery. Only a few codices of glyphs on paper, bark or vellum survive, all in European museums. (e.g., the Dresden codex). Central to Mayan identity as well is their *Book of Council (Popol Vuh)*, an agricultural creation story relating to the annual planting and harvest cycle of maize (‘the staff of life’). We note too the mixed blessing of *Diego de Landa*, Bishop of Yucatan, 1566, who did much to translate and understand the Mayan glyph writing, but also presided over their destruction as documents.

It is notable that the *Aztecs* and the *Inca*, two other great civilizations in the southern Americas, did not have a writing system (though they had other methods of communication, like the Inca *quipu*, strings of various lengths).

The full glory of the Mayan era ended in the eighth century, however, and within 150 years, all of its magnificent cities had fallen and been abandoned, which Coe describes as “surely one of the most profound social and demographic catastrophes in all human history” Other city-states (e.g., Chichén Itzá, Mayan in part, but mostly Toltec from central Mexico) followed this droll end of the classical era for a couple of centuries. By the time the Spanish conquistadors arrived in 1517, the Mayan empire, however defined, had disappeared, its peoples scattered, its fabulous edifices left to the ever-encroaching jungles. Remarkably, when the principal Spanish adventurer *Hernán Cortés* undertook a long trip through the Petén region of the Yucatan peninsula in 1519, all he found were

small hamlets separated by thick forests. He passed by the vast ruin of Tikal and other Mayan sites with no knowledge of them at all, so thick was the obscuring jungle.

For the purposes of this brief lecture, let's start in Mexico's Chiapas state, south of the current city of Villahermosa (reminiscent of Hamilton, Ontario in 1960 – not a compliment!), important historically for its archive of so-called colossal Olmec stone heads pre-dating the mature Mayan city-states. Far more important is near-by **Palenque**, (incidentally the home of Mexico's current president, André Manuel López Obrador). Here one of the finest Mayan ruins has been spectacularly restored. It is reminiscent of a phrase historians sometimes use to describe the great city-states that emerged at the same time in distant Southeast Asia, so-called "theatre states" like Angkor and Borobodur, as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz called them, political states in which power is exercised through spectacle. To a certain degree, the same description could be made about the dozens of separate Mayan city states sprawled across the Yucatan, supporting at a time a population of up to 20 million. Spectacles they certainly were - fine architecture, pyramid and otherwise (often painted in gorgeous colours), dramatic political centers of various city-states, residences (and sometimes tombs) for royalty, solemn religious centres and places of pilgrimage. These pavilions and pyramids remain all the more remarkable when one takes into account the fact that the builders had no access to metals stronger than copper, though volcanic obsidian and jadeite were functionally able to take the place of iron to a certain degree.

So let's start in **Palenque** (a Spanish term for a fortified city), in the so-called altiplano or foothills of western Chiapas, and which Mayans call *Lamkamha* or 'big water' because of its access to pure, voluminous mountain water from the Lacandón jungle. This in turn allowed this city-state to thrive from 600-750 CE., the water providing a high standard of civilization, including a septic system. Although there are an estimated 1450 structures here, only a handful (24) have been fully excavated and restored. Their interiors are wide and well-ventilated. The central Group of the Cross complex of buildings facing each other with complicated low relief sculptures dates from 600 CE. Its *Temple of the Sun* is considered one of the most perfect of all Mayan structures, and *Temple of Inscriptions* (620 of them) a funerary monument with vaulted staircase leading down to one of the most magnificent burial chambers ever found, exemplifying the life of the last of the so-called 'Snake Kings' dynasty, K'inich Janaab *Pakal* 111, who died in 799, considered one of the greatest of Mayan monarchs (*ajaw* – "owner of the earth"). Here one also finds such features as the traditional Mayan ballcourt, a feature found in every Mayan city state, with the ballcourt and its fierce game a metaphor of life and resurrection, a crack in the earth connected to the underworld (*Xibalbá*).

Further south to the border of present-day Guatemala on the *Usumacinta River*, and approachable only by vessel (large outboards), are **Bonampak** and **Yaxchilan**, though a thousand years ago, these locations, as elsewhere in the Yucatan peninsula as a whole, would have been linked to a certain degree by so-called *sacbeobs* (or *sacbes*), raised stone paths covered in white limestone (visible for travel at night when it was cooler and dark, and humans only carried goods, not animals or wheeled vehicles). *Bonampak* dates from 410 -790 CE. The central pyramid is famous for its interior painted walls, which

have miraculously survived, at least in part (a near-miss was their partial desecration by local chipotle harvesters in the nineteenth century, who lodged in the pavilions at night and were frightened by the fearsome figures portrayed in such activities as blood-letting and prisoner captivity).

Across the Usumacinta River and on the other side is *Yaxchilán*, a sprawling archaeological site in both Guatemala and Mexico, accessible only by boat. It has a fantastic over-grown jungle setting dominated by ruins on a jungle-shrouded hilltop accessible by a daunting staircase of several hundred steps. The climate is largely hot and humid, the forest home to bands of territorial howler monkeys screeching non-stop during the day from the canopy high overhead – surely one of the most chilling but intriguing sounds nature can produce! With its maze of passageways and ruined edifices, its surviving sculptures of jaguars and crocodiles on lintels, and bas relief of ceremonial life, Yaxchilán needs a guide to help make sense out of something so overwhelming. Fortunately ours for the week spent in the area was *Alfonso Morales*, a renowned archaeologist, able to read the glyphs that make up the complicated ‘writing system’ of the Mayans. Some of the buildings still have excellent relief carvings and sculptured figures (19th century robbers decapitated the best ones, like that of Pájaro Jaguar 1V) dating from the 700s CE.

Leaving Mexico’s Chiapas state east into Campeche’s *Reserva de la Biosfera Calakmul* and to Guatemala’s *Parque Nacional El Mirador*, we encounter three of the most celebrated citadels in world history. This is the heart of the Petén region identified with the Mayan Classic Period (200-900 CE) at its height in 750, home then to several million people, one of the world’s most densely populated regions. The three citadels are **Tikal** and **El Mirador** in Guatemala, and **Calakmul** in Mexico, all within 100 kms of each other. *El Mirador* (the Look-off, or La Danta) is the oldest, dominant in the first century CE, the first well-defined political state in Mesoamerica. Even at 18 stories (85 meters or 250 feet) in height, its pyramid remained essentially lost until 1926 and the area unexcavated until the 1960s (now scholars from many universities are on the site). *El Mirador* is inaccessible except by helicopter or a four-day trip on a donkey, which is why I haven’t been there! But archaeology reveals very old creative agricultural practices using mud from the many area swamps, three summit pyramids used as funerary monuments, early Mayan deities (generally grotesque) in stucco masks, and the use of *sacbeobs* for regional communication.

80 kms south of *El Mirador* is the fabulous **Tikal**, set in 21K square kms of protected rain forest, noted for its giant Ceiba trees (and howler monkeys!) in particular. Tikal is where the monumental or *Motagua* style of Mayan architecture was developed between 300-600 CE. The largest and best-known edifice is Temple 1V at 70 meters in height, an acropolis filled with stone, but so designed it seems almost to have a kind of soaring movement, reminiscent of the huge pyramids found in central Mexico’s ancient Teotihuacan capital (250 CE). Surrounding temples similarly support massive so-called roof crests where royalty and priests felt they could come into contact with the gods. The pyramid-style temples were religious structures only, with only a few tiny rooms in the interior. Each had large public squares, where everybody participated in religious festivals, and

population increase required even more pyramids to accommodate this need. Elsewhere there were palaces of up to five stories and with many rooms. Peasants lived well outside this privileged landscape. I climbed Temple V, a remarkable pyramid soaring out of the trees, and encountered the huge task of workers constantly removing roots and vegetation from these massive edifices. My guide pointed north west over a solid jungle canopy and claimed that on a clear day and with binoculars one could see El Mirador with its 72 meter-high acropolis. And beyond that on a clear day, from El Mirador, technically one could see Calakmul in Mexico some 40 kms distant. *Sacbeobs* would have linked these great capitals, though more often than not, they seemed to be in conflict with one another.

Calakmul (250-695 CE, “two adjacent mounds”, not its ancient name) was the great rival to Tikal, (though its city population only 50,000 compared to Tikal’s 200,000) and briefly (7th century) the strongest centre of Mayan power, linked by treaty with Palenque three hundred kilometers to the west, and with Caracol, a third powerhouse at the time, two hundred kilometers to the east, all together arguably the greatest flowering of Mayan political power history has known, under the *Kaan* or Snake dynasty (Kingdom of the Serpent’s Head) with its prominent queens as well as kings, the most famous of whom was arguably King Jaguar’s Paw (Garra de Jaguar) who lost in battle to Tikal in 695 and was taken there as captive to an uninviting fate. Now a UNESCO protected site, Calakmul is difficult to access and much less frequently visited by tourists (60 per day at the most, whereas Chichen Itza in Quintano Roo receives up to 4000), but well worth the effort. Deep in the jungles of the Petén Basin, it was only ‘rediscovered’ in 1931 by an American botanist (Cyrus Lundell). With an estimated 6750 structures, the whole site was a dense residential area situated on a rise of secure land or limestone dome above a vast but fertile swampy zone. The total surrounding rural population is estimated to have been 1.7 million, linked by eight *sacbeobs*. Calakmul’s excavations reveal jade masks, polychrome pottery, body ornaments, murals and friezes, along with hieroglyphs providing facts about territorial organization, trade networks, even the exchange of ideas with other regions. It has 120 commemorative stelae providing information on political conditions, social relationships, ideas and beliefs. Arguably Calakmul’s most celebrated pyramid is Structure 2, a massive, north-facing pyramid temple of 45 meters (148’), added on to over centuries, with various shrines, stairways, large masks and, on top, a nine-room palace complete with steam bath. (The Mexican government jealously guards aerial photographic rights, with no drones permitted.) Other structures reveal burial sites, such as Tomb 4 of a male royalty wrapped in jaguar pelts and textiles, with jade mask, obsidian knives, and prized fossilized sea creatures from Chicxulub on the Gulf of Mexico, and with the royal cypher or glyph of a serpent facing east but travelling west, a symbol of rebirth. Tombs reveal information on the nine levels of rebirth (also symbolized by the snail or *caracol*), about the various gods (*A Kin*, sun deity, *Chaac*, rain deity, among dozens); the nature of the soul (*chulel*), and the passage to the underworld (*Iznabna* or *Xibaldá*). Other structures were important astronomical observatories. But like many great Mayan capitals, with political defeat in 695, Calakmul experienced a dramatic decline followed by complete abandonment over a period of less than two centuries. Climate change was a likely factor, as it certainly was in the Puuc area of northern Yucatan. Yet even today, botanists consider the Calakmul tropical forest as one of the most resilient ecosystems on the continent, still an important water catchment area,

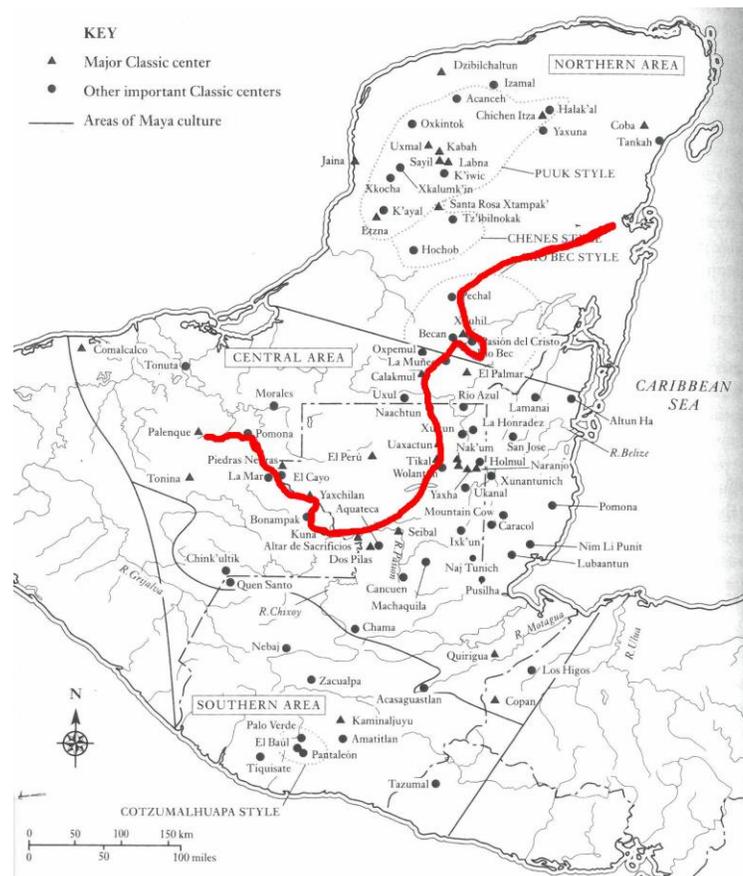
and a unique area which in part has been preserved because of the environment of the rain forest, the “Forest of Kings”. Nonetheless, this forest in both Mexico and the moreso in Guatemala is threatened by massive deforestation and looting, requiring constant government oversight.

East of Calakmul and from the same general era are several important closely associated or satellite sites. First is *Becán* or Path of the Snake, one of the largest and most elaborate Mayan centers, on top of a rock outcrop. Access is through a rock passage, to reveal a huge twin-towered temple in the Río Bec style, with seven *sacbeobs* leading to its seven gates. Near-by *Chicanna* (House of Snakes), c. 750 CE, in the Río Bec style, and approachable through a forest of curly red-bark trees and liana vines, is an amazing series of low, elongated buildings richly decorated with zoomorphic facades, including that famous hideous fanged face. of Itzamná, whose open mouth is an invitation to communicate with the dead or the underworld. (Xibalbá). Within the same region is *Xpujil* (*shpu-heel*), 120 kms east of Calakmul but in the same political orbit, another striking example of the Río Bec style with its three towers (the tallest 53 meters, but very steep and hard to manage - specially in a hot morning!), with “the feel of a cathedral” as one guide book puts it, though my notes indicate I was weak from too much sun to appreciate that. At this point, I bring forward the name of one of the Mayan civilization’s greatest scholars, the late *Tatania Proskounakoff*, and the work she did here in 1943 – though unfortunately since then, parts of the structure have been looted for their complex facades.

Further east again, towards the Bacalar lagoon in Mexico’s eastern state of Quintana Roo, is *Dzibanche*, older than Calakmul, with dates from 250-900 CE, impressive with large pyramidal platforms and plazas, and eleven major structures with exquisite motifs such as the Templo Búho (Temple of the Owls), Templo de los Dintales (Lintals), Templo Comoranes) (Cormorants) and Templo de los Cautivos (Captives), some exhibiting a style of red paint associated with the great central Mexican early empire of Teotihuacan.

There is finally **Caracol** (originally ‘Three-stone place of creation’) in Belize, to the far east and south of the more populated and developed Petén and Usumacinta regions. Set in the Chiquibul National Forest of the Maya mountains, historically it had access to its own secure resources (minerals, materials, wildlife, birds, etc.). Even today its giant 300 year-old Ceiba trees provide a unique forested setting, and its easy to see how at one time its vast branches were thought to reach up to (and possibly sustain) heaven. Although completely independent, Caracol was part of a 7th century confederacy that linked it with Calakmul and distant Palenque. Today the site is difficult to access. On the jungle border with Guatemala, the possibility of being confronted by bandits requires accompanying armed personnel. The last part of the long road from San Ignacio is passible only in four-wheeled vehicles. Not discovered by archaeologists until 1937 (at that time, everything there was covered in jungle), and covering 88 square kms, only 10% has been mapped. At the center of its principal structures is the so-called *Caana* acropolis, only for the nobility, its courtly life taking place beyond public observation. South and north-east acropolis structures, and a complex terrace system of agriculture, indicate a substantial population of 100,000 in the 7th century. Surrounding buildings marked by a smoothed limestone paste, and at one time brilliantly painted, and an integrated series of massive

structures, plazas, palaces, ball court and residences, complemented the Caana, giving this Mayan capital a majesty unique and still wondrous in its layout and presentation. Near-by smaller centres in Belize like *Xuantunich* (itself a beautifully excavated treasure) and further south in *Cópan* (Honduras), remind us of the widespread eastern outreach of the Mayan civilization. This remarkable Mayan people and their city-states that spanned centuries over a vast terrain in Central America were surely the equal of other once-vibrant civilizations which also came, to use to use the language of Percy Bysshe Shelley, “from an antique land. ”



Note: the Péten, Puuc and Río Bec areas, each with a distinctive Mayan style of architecture