

ASSIGNMENT 8

ANCIENT MAYA CIVILIZATION

More archaeological ink has been spilled over Maya civilization, its origins and collapse, than over almost any other topic in archaeology, except, perhaps, Tutankhamun. This is hardly surprising, for Maya civilization represents one of the great peaks of ancient cultural achievement in the Americas.



WHAT LIES AHEAD

Assignment Objectives

After completing Assignment 8, you will be able to:

1. Describe the salient features of ancient Maya civilization and provide an analysis of its development, collapse, and fundamental political, religious, and social institutions.
2. Compare and contrast Sumerian Ur with Maya Tikal.



Work required

Assignment 8 requires you to complete:

- Web exercise: A Maya city.

Be warned that much of the material in this assignment is vital to your final synthesis-essay.



LECTURE 1

This week's lecture is a general survey of Mesoamerican civilization, which examines the general features of early states in the region, some of the key sites, civilizations, and ideologies. I try and give you a general visual survey of early civilizations in Mesoamerica as background to the rest of the assignment.



The Videoclip on the Web introduces the subject matter of Assignment 8. You might care to view this now ... Then read on here ...



LECTURE 2: EARLY STATES IN THE AMERICAS

A background survey of some of the general issues surrounding the study of early states in the Americas, which covers:

- The origins of states in different environments in the Americas, including maritime hypotheses,
- The issue of the unusual volatility of native American states and the reasons for same,
- The role of drought, El Niño, and other short-term climatic events in the rise and fall of New World states,
- Similarities and dissimilarities between Old World and New World civilizations.

This is very much a comparative lecture, which will focus for the most part on civilizations other than the Maya.



GENERAL SUMMARY OF MAYA CIVILIZATION

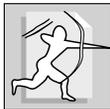
As in Assignment 7 with Egypt, we think it's important you acquire a general impression of what happened from the beginnings of Mesoamerican civilization up to the Spanish Conquest of A.D. 1519–21.



World Prehistory. Read Chapters 12 and 13.

These passages are essential background.

When you have finished, please read on . . .



MESOAMERICAN CITIES

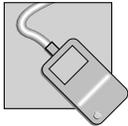
You'll remember from Assignment 7 that cities were an integral part of most preindustrial civilizations. Mesoamerican cities reached spectacular sizes. The Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, was perhaps the third or fourth largest city in the world when Hernán Cortés entered it in A.D. 1519. The Spaniards were profoundly impressed by the well-organized city. But the far older highland city, Teotihuacán, which flourished from about 250 B.C. to A.D. 700, is better known, for the Aztec capital is buried under modern-day Mexico City. So sacred were the great pyramids and shrines of Teotihuacán that the Aztecs believed their own world had begun on the summit of the Pyramid of the Sun. The description of the city which follows is designed to amplify that in the text. Note:

- The importance of the city as a symbolic landscape,
- The long-term, master plan design,
- The role of the city as a religious and political center, and as a major market for much of Mesoamerica.



Anthology Section: "Teotihuacán, Mexico."

When you have finished reading, please proceed to the Web exercise:



WEB EXERCISE: TIKAL, A MAYA CITY (8-1)

(60 to 90 minutes)

Maya civilization was based on a series of city-states, of which two, Tikal and Calakmul, were among the most powerful. Throughout the Classic Period, these two great Maya powers competed with one another diplomatically and militarily. We know of this competition from political inscriptions at both centers. But whatever the dominant power, the great Maya cities were imposing masterpieces of native American architecture in stone, adobe, and stucco. Each was a symbolic depiction of the Maya world, which included plains, mountains, caves, sink holes, rivers, lakes, and swamps, to say nothing of the places and buildings constructed by people. The world was alive and imbued with a sacredness concentrated at special points like caves and mountains. The gods had established these power points as they created the cosmos.

The human plane of Maya existence was one of three layers of a much larger universe: The Underworld with its dark waters lay beneath the Middle World of earth, which was nourished by the blood of kings in sacred ceremonies. Above was the starry arch of heaven, with its own sacred crocodile monster, which shed its blood as rain. There was Xibalba, too, a parallel and unseen world into which Maya kings and shamans passed in ecstatic trance. Running through the center of the earth was the Wacah Chan, the “six sky,” symbolized by a World Tree with roots in the watery underworld, its branches flourishing high in the arch of heaven. This tree was a vital link between the world of humans and the other Maya realms of existence. The tree materialized in the person of the ruler, who brought the World Tree into existence as he stood in trance atop a high pyramid. In the rapture of blood letting rituals, the king brought the axis into being as a conduit between the human and Otherworlds. The symbolic world recreated in the Maya ceremonial center, with its plazas and pyramids, was the setting for these ceremonies.

This Web exercise takes you on a tour of the great Maya city at Tikal in Guatemala, at the height of its powers in about A.D. 600. The exercise gives you an impression of the three-dimensional effect of the pyramids, plazas, and other features of the city, which was the setting for the sacred ceremonies that lay at the very core of Maya civilization and human existence.

When you have finished the exercise, please read on . . .



MAYA KINGSHIP

Just as in ancient Egyptian civilization, the institution of divine kingship lay at the very heart of human existence, of civilization itself. How did Maya kingship function, what bound commoners and elite together? What differences are there between Egyptian and Maya kingship? Read:



Anthology Section: “Ancient Maya Kingship.”

This brilliant piece of archaeological writing by Linda Schele and David Freidel provides the essence of how Maya lords ruled and kept the loyalty of their subjects.

ASSIGNMENT 8: ANTHOLOGY

1. TEOTIHUACÁN, MEXICO

Fifteen hundred years ago, Teotihuacán was already known the length and breadth of Mesoamerica. Every traveler to the Valley of Mexico would take time to visit the great city, if only to admire its brightly painted public buildings and stroll down the wide and imposing Street of the Dead that traversed the city's center. Teotihuacán was the largest human settlement in the Americas, with a population of at least 100,000 people. The Mesoamerican world shopped at Teotihuacán, traded with its merchants, and worshipped at its temples. Thousands of scattered villages in the Mexican highlands relied on its markets and specialist manufactures. At certain times of the year, the entire countryside would flock to Teotihuacán's plazas to participate in the annual public ceremonies that ensured the future prosperity of the great city and the people of the Valley. Yet, within a few short centuries, the city had vanished forever. Only a few crumbling pyramids and temples remained as testaments to its former glory.

The earliest ceremonial buildings were erected at Teotihuacán about 100 B.C. Within a few centuries, Teotihuacán had mushroomed into a huge city dominated by the great Pyramid of the Sun. This sacred, truncated edifice stood 210 feet high and 650 feet square, a vast pyramid of rubble, adobe mud, and earth all faced with stone. A wooden temple on the summit of the pyramid afforded a spectacular view of the sprawling city below.

The priests who served this temple had a panoramic view of a remarkable urban complex. In the morning, they could look westward, down to the long plaza in front of their pyramid and to the Street of the Dead, an avenue that seemed to stretch for miles into the far distance north and south. Its north end opened onto a large plaza in front of another huge pyramid. In the rising sunlight, this vast structure cast long shadows below. The priests could see the small temple at its summit, but the figures of their colleagues there were dwarfed by the scale of the pyramid under them.

Southward, the Street of the Dead led through another plaza and, as the sun rose higher, the priests could gaze even further in this direction. Their eyes would light on the Temple of the Plumed Serpent Quetzalcoatl. The elaborate serpent carvings on its facade were barely discernible in the dark shadows. But the gigantic, open square in front of the temple already teemed with bustling life. From their lofty porch, the priests could dimly hear the noise of the busy city below.

The Street of the Dead was lined with fine civic and religious buildings. Beyond these, the priests could survey a mass of densely packed houses and apartment complexes interspersed with courtyards and separated by winding streets. A linger-

ing pall of smoke from innumerable domestic hearths generally hung in the morning air. Outside the ceremonial precincts, numerous paths led into the surrounding countryside. Small villages of thatched huts dotted the distant landscape. From the heady elevation of the pyramid, Teotihuacán was truly a wonderful sight.

Any traveler to Teotihuacán first made a beeline for the market. There were several markets in the city, but the largest flourished in a huge open compound off the Street of the Dead, opposite the Temple of Quetzalcoatl. The markets supplied the needs of the entire city, a teeming urban population estimated to have once been as high as 100,000 people. While the priests and craftsmen lived in dwellings built around small courtyards, the less privileged dwelt in large compounds of rooms connected by narrow alleyways and patios. Most of these people were urban dwellers who bought their staple diet of maize, squashes, and beans in the market. There were few farmers within the confines of Teotihuacán itself, but we know that many rural villages flourished nearby. Most of them were compact and expertly planned settlements whose agricultural activities were carefully supervised by city rulers. These were in the annual public ceremonies that ensured the future prosperity of the great city and the people of the Valley. Yet, within a few short centuries, the city had vanished forever. Only a few crumbling pyramids and temples remained as testaments to its former glory.

The earliest ceremonial buildings were erected at Teotihuacán about 100 B.C. Within a few centuries, Teotihuacán had mushroomed into a huge city dominated by the great Pyramid of the Sun. This sacred, truncated edifice stood 210 feet high and 650 feet square, a vast pyramid of rubble, adobe mud, and earth all faced with stone. A wooden temple on the summit of the pyramid afforded a spectacular view of the sprawling city below.

The priests who served this temple had a panoramic view of a remarkable urban complex. In the morning, they could look westward, down to the long plaza in front of their pyramid and to the Street of the Dead, an avenue that seemed to stretch for miles into the far distance north and south. Its north end opened onto a large plaza in front of another huge pyramid. In the rising sunlight, this vast structure cast long shadows below. The priests could see the small temple at its summit, but the figures of their colleagues there were dwarfed by the scale of the pyramid under them.

Southward, the Street of the Dead led through another plaza and, as the sun rose higher, the priests could gaze even further in this direction. Their eyes would light on the Temple of the Plumed Serpent Quetzalcoatl. The elaborate serpent carvings on its facade were barely discernible in the dark shadows. But the gigantic, open square in front of the temple already teemed with bustling life. From their lofty porch, the priests could dimly hear the noise of the busy city below. The Street of the Dead was lined with fine civic and religious buildings. Beyond these, the priests could survey a mass of densely packed houses and apartment complexes inter-

persed with courtyards and separated by winding streets. A lingering pall of smoke from innumerable domestic hearths generally hung in the morning air. Outside the ceremonial precincts, numerous paths led into the surrounding countryside. Small villages of thatched huts dotted the distant landscape. From the heady elevation of the pyramid, Teotihuacán was truly a wonderful sight.

By AD 500, Teotihuacán had established a unique position for itself in the Valley of Mexico and possessed a prestige and power unprecedented in Middle American history. But just as its art and architecture were reaching their full climax and trading activities were at a peak, the political, economic, and religious fabric of the city began to unravel. The first strains appeared about A.D. 650. A century later, Teotihuacán was a shadow of its former self. The population had declined so rapidly that the once-proud city was now little more than a series of hamlets extending over an area of about a square kilometer. Some great catastrophe apparently struck the city in A.D. 700, reducing its population to below 70,000. Many of its people moved eastward. The city was deliberately burnt and destroyed. Over the years, its buildings collapsed and the pyramids became overgrown with dense vegetation. Teotihuacán's decline was almost as rapid as its rise to prominence. Even so, eight centuries later, Teotihuacán was still revered far and wide as an intensely sacred place. But no one remembered who had built it or that tens of thousands of people had once lived there.

2. ANCIENT MAYA KINGSHIP BY LINDA SCHELE AND DAVID FREIDEL

The Maya community was embedded in the matrix of sacred space and time. Socially, the Maya people organized themselves into families that reckoned blood membership through males and marriage membership through females. This method of organizing kinship relationships is known as patrilineal descent. The principle of selecting a single inheritor of supreme authority in the family from each successive generation usually focused on the eldest male child. This is called primogeniture and it is a principle underlying hierarchical family organization from ancient China to medieval Europe. Maya families were large, and included several generations of people under one roof or within one household compound.

The principle of reckoning through the male line made it possible for extended families to combine into larger groups, called lineages, which acknowledged a common ancestor. The Maya further combined lineages sharing an even more distant common ancestor into clans. These clans could function as very big families as circumstances warranted, often crosscutting differences in wealth, prestige, and occupation. Maya families still have such clan structure in some communities today.

Some patrilineal systems regarded families within clans to be equal in status, but the structure also lent itself to hierarchical organization. One particular family could successfully claim a higher status if it could prove that it was on the direct line of descent from the founding ancestor. This was done by demonstrating that direct

descent had passed through only one member of each generation. Once primogeniture designated a single inheritor of the line in each generation, it was possible to claim that there was a single line of males stretching back to the beginning of the clan, and that all other member families were descendants of a second rank. Internal ranking could be quite complicated, depending as it did on the reckoning of relative distance or closeness to the central lines of males. The principle was essentially open-ended in the respect, and the logical extreme was the ranking of each individual in each family in a pyramid of people stretching back to the beginning. While most societies, including the Maya, quit far short of this extreme, our point is that ties were a flexible and powerful means of establishing social hierarchy.

The Maya institution of kingship was also based on the principle of inheritance of the line by a single male individual within any one generation leading back to a founding ancestor. Furthermore, families and clans were ranked by their distance or nearness to the central descent line manifested in the king. Political power based on family allegiance may appear to be relatively simple compared to our own social-classes system, but it effectively integrated states composed of tens of thousands of people.

Not surprisingly, the Maya applied the principle of primogeniture and the reckoning of the central line to other important social statuses in addition to the kingship. This principle of inherited status permeated the entire society and affirmed the legitimacy and prerogatives of the most exalted, as well as the most humble, of society's members.

Public monuments erected by the Maya king during the Classic period emphasize not only his role as shaman, but also his role as family patriarch. A larger percentage of the texts on stelae focus on his genealogy as the source of his legitimacy. Not only were statements of his parentage regularly included in his name phrase, but pictorial records of all sorts show the parents of the king observing the actions of their offspring, even after these parents had died.

Problems with legitimate descent, such as the lack of male heir or the death of one in war, were solved in extraordinarily creative ways. So critical was the undisputed passage of authority at the death of a king that the designation of the heir became an important public festival cycle, with magical rituals spreading over a period of a year or more. At the royal capital of Bonampak on the Usumacinta River, exquisite polychrome murals show that these rites included both the public display of the heir and his transformation into a special person through the sacrifice of captives taken for that purpose.

The sculptural record also shows the shamanistic nature of Maya kingship, central to the Classic conception of the cosmos, by depicting the divine ahau as a conductor of ritual. Sculptures show a king with the supernaturals he has materialized by the ritual of shedding his blood. In the case of the Hamberg depiction, we

know that this bloodletting preceded the protagonist's accession of kingly office by fifty two days. This ritual was most likely a public affirmation of his ability to open a portal to the supernatural realm. Although the verb in both the monuments is "he let blood", the Maya of these earlier times preferred to depict the materialization of the ancestor or god rather than the actual act of taking blood. There was a logical reason for this preference. By featuring the vision, rather than the sacrifice, the successful performance of the king as shaman could be documented publicly.

Throughout the Classic period, Maya public art remained focused on the part of the ritual performances of the king, whether these rituals were part of the regular festivals that punctuated Maya life, such as the calendrically timed ritual of period endings, or special celebrations triggered by dynastic events, such as marriages, births, or deaths.

During the Classic period, the heart of Maya life was the ritual of bloodletting. Giving the gift of blood from the body was an act of piety used in all of their rituals, from the births of children to the burial of the dead. This act could be simple as an offering of a few drops of one's blood, or as extreme as the mutilation of the different parts of the body to generate large flows of this precious fluid. Blood could be drawn from any part of the body, but the most sacred sources were the tongue for males and females, and the penis for males. Representations of the act carved on stelae depict participants drawing finger-thick ropes through the wounds to guide the flow of blood down onto paper. Men with perforated genitals would whirl in a kind of dervish dance that drew the blood out onto long paper and cloth streamers tied to their wounded members. The aim of these great cathartic rituals was the vision quest, the opening of a portal into the Otherworld through which gods and the ancestors could be enticed so that the beings of this world could commune with them. The Maya thought of this process as giving "birth" to the god or ancestor, enabling it to take physical form in this plane of existence. The vision quest was the central act of the Maya world.

The practice of personal bloodletting took place not only in the temples of the mighty but at alters in the humble village as well. This fact is witnessed to by the presence of obsidian, one of the main implements of the ritual, at many ancient village sites. Obsidian is volcanic glass spewed forth from the towering fire mountains in highland regions of the black glass, and such blades are found in virtually every lowland community context of the Maya—albeit in small quantities outside of great cities or the manufacturing towns near the natural sources of the stone. Obsidian was prized for many reasons—not only for its rarity, but for its unsurpassed ability to make clean, quick wounds. No doubt obsidian blades were used for a wide variety of cutting tasks once their main function as bloodletters was at an end, but for this primary ritual use, obsidian was to Maya propitiation of the divine what wine and wafers are to the Christian communion. What the great kings did with obsidian on behalf of all, the farmer did on behalf of his family. To be sure, the gift of obsidian

from a king to his subject in return for labor, tribute, and devotion was a kind of subtle coercion. We can say this in light of the fact that the king held a virtual monopoly over the supply of obsidian and chose who was to receive it and who not. But this gift was also an affirmation of a common covenant with the divine and a common means of sustaining this covenant.

The king upheld his part in this divine covenant through his enactment of many rituals of power performed for his people. Indeed he was power, power made material, its primary instrument. On public monuments, the oldest and most frequent manner in which the king was displayed was in the guise of the World Tree. Its trunk and branches were depicted on the apron covering his loins, and the Doubled-headed Serpent Bar that entwined in its branches was held in his arms. The Principle Bird Deity at its summit was rendered as his headdress. This Tree was the conduit of communication between the supernatural world and the human world: The souls of the dead fell into Xibala along its path; the daily journeys of the sun, moon, planets, and stars followed its trunk. The Vision Serpent symbolizing communion with the world of the ancestors and the gods emerged into our world along it. The king was the axis and pivot made flesh. He was the Tree of Life.

For the Maya, trees constituted the ambient living environment, the material from which they fashioned homes and tools, the source of many foods, medicines, dyes, and vital commodities such as paper. They provided the fuel for cooking fires and the soil-enriching ash that came from the cutting and burning of the forest. Trees were the source of shade in the courtyards and public places of villages and cities, and the home of the teeming life of the forest. It was natural that the Maya would choose this central metaphor for human power. Like other trees, the king was at once the ambient source of life and the material from which humans constructed it. Together, the kings of the Maya realms comprised a forest of sustaining human World Trees within the natural forested landscape of the Maya world.

The king sustained his people, but he also required much from them in the way of service. The regularities of the Maya calendar and the celebration of local history generated endless rounds of feasts and festivals. The rich ceremonial life of the great public centers, reflected in smaller towns and villages surrounding them, drew deeply upon the natural and human resources of the Maya. The king and his court commanded the skilled and unskilled labor of many craftsmen and commoners, whose basic needs had to be met by an even larger population of farmers, hunters, and fishermen. It is hard for us to imagine just how patience, skill, and effort went into the creation of the elaborately decorated objects and buildings used by the king in his performance of ritual. A single small jade carving must have taken a craftsman months to complete, and we can document the fact that great temples took many years of skilled work by construction specialists, carvers, plasterers, and painters as well as common laborers.

The tribute which the community gave to the royal court to finance such work was no doubt a real burden, but not necessarily a severe hardship. In times of general prosperity, which existed for most of Classical Maya history, the common folk enjoyed ready access to the basic necessities of life, both practical and spiritual. In times of hardship and privation, the commoners and nobles all suffered alike.

The ancient Maya view of the world mandated serious and contractual obligations binding the king and his nobility to the common people. Incompetence or exploitation of villagers by the king invited catastrophic shifts in allegiance to neighboring kings, or simple migration into friendlier territory.

Such severe exploitation was a ruler's last desperate resort, not a routine policy. The king and his elite lived well. They enjoyed the most favored foods, the most pleasant home sites, the finer quality of clothing. But the great public displays of the Maya were not designed just to exhibit the personal wealth of the king. They also exhibited the community's property entrusted to the king, fashioned by the hard work and inspiration of many people, and ignited into luminous power by their most prized possession, the king himself.

(Reprinted with permission from Linda Schele and David Freidel, *A Forest of Kings* (New York, William Morrow, 1990). Pp. 85-92.)