

**BOOK REVIEW ESSAY**

# Re-visioning Classic Maya Polities

Gary M. Feinman

Field Museum of Natural History, US

[gfeinman@fieldmuseum.org](mailto:gfeinman@fieldmuseum.org)

---

This essay reviews the following works:

**Ancient Maya Pottery: Classification, Analysis, and Interpretation.** Edited by James John Aimers. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013. Pp. vii + 293. \$79.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780813042367.

**The Huasteca: Culture, History, and Interregional Exchange.** Edited by Katherine A. Faust and Kim N. Richter. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015. Pp. vii + 241. \$55.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780806147048.

**Excavations in Residential Areas of Tikal: Group 7F-1.** By William A. Haviland. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2015. Pp. xi + 133. \$65.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781934536810.

**Politics of the Maya Court: Hierarchy and Change in the Late Classic Period.** By Sarah E. Jackson. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013. Pp. ix + 248. \$29.95 hardback. ISBN: 9780806143415.

**The Ancient Maya Marketplace: The Archaeology of Transient Space.** Edited by Eleanor M. King. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015. Pp. vii + 325. \$60.54 cloth. ISBN: 9780816500413.

**The Spectacle of the Late Maya Court: Reflections on the Murals of Bonampak.** By Mary Miller and Claudia Brittenham. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013. Pp. xi + 285. \$54.05 cloth. ISBN: 9780292744363.

**Maya Lords and Lordship: The Formation of Colonial Society in Yucatán, 1350–1600.** By Sergio Quezada. Translated by Terry Rugeley. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014. Pp. ix + 248. \$34.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780806144221.

**Place and Identity in Classic Maya Narratives.** By Alexandre Tokovinine. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection/Harvard University Press, 2015. Pp. vii + 180. \$39.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780884023920.

---

The eight volumes under review attest to the richness and diversity of contemporary research on the pre-Hispanic Maya and their Mayan-speaking but somewhat distant neighbors, the people of the Huasteca region. For this scholarly assemblage, the authors and editors (three of the works are compendia) draw on the hard-won products of generations of multidisciplinary empirical research by archaeologists, epigraphers, art historians, historians, social anthropologists, and linguists. Together, the papers on the pre-Hispanic past of the Huasteca region (at the conjunction of Hidalgo, Veracruz, San Luís Potosí, and Tamaulipas) provide an excellent survey of current knowledge on a relatively less-investigated sector of Mesoamerica. In contrast, the other works, which reflect the outcomes of centuries of concerted research, offer me the chance to gauge where scholarship on the pre-Hispanic Maya is situated, with a focus on the Classic period (AD 250–900); where key issues of broad interest are poised; and which questions are at the cusp of debate or require attention.

These works engage far-ranging realms of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican studies. I do not aim here for equal coverage of all volumes, regardless of how important each book may be. Rather I use my allotted words both to take stock and to look forward on one suite of central and long-standing issues: the political realm of the Classic Maya and its economic and ideological underpinnings, a focal topic that lies in some sense near the heart of the majority of these volumes. Some of the books considered here, along with other recent scholarship, point toward significant new interpretive paths that have promise to cut through age-old debates and conceptual quandaries surrounding Classic Maya polities and, perhaps, preindustrial political formations more comparatively, while teeing up critical questions that still require investigatory pursuit. Thus this essay is more synthesis than summary, targeted for this journal's multidisciplinary readership looking for a retooled perspective on the deep political history of a long-studied region of Mesoamerica.

## Classic Maya Political Organization

For almost a century, debates over Classic Maya political organization have revolved around two overarching questions. How centralized or decentralized were political relations in the eastern lowlands of Mesoamerica?<sup>1</sup> What was the nature of Classic Maya rulership? The latter is an analytical issue intertwined with oppositional perspectives on the workings of preindustrial polities more generally.<sup>2</sup> In what ways was power wielded, and how was it funded materially and underpinned ideologically? Although the first question has been largely resolved in favor of political decentralization (albeit to varying degrees of decentralization/centralization across time), the recognition that the Classic Maya realm was never politically united, in spite of a broad range of shared cultural traditions, raises new questions regarding political practice. Was the character of Classic Maya rulership homogeneous or variable in space and time?

The endurance of this initial issue reflects the decades-long struggle to escape the conceptual constraints of culture area and cultural historical thinking in anthropological archaeology. Theory building in the social sciences is more evolutionary than revolutionary, and so while culture history is no longer a dominant paradigm, it has taken concerted subsequent research to decouple the vestigial notion that coresidents who shared broad cultural and linguistic affiliations also likely were unified politically.<sup>3</sup> The challenge of disentangling this paradigmatic presumption is evident for the Huasteca, an area far less intensively researched than the Maya lowlands. Kim N. Richter and Katherine A. Faust (*The Huasteca*, 5) bemoan that “‘Huastec’ . . . is used interchangeably . . . to denote an ethnicity, a language, a geographic region, and a pre-Columbian culture.” Likewise, even in the current recognition that the Classic Maya domain was never administratively unified nor an empire, Sarah E. Jackson (*Politics of the Maya Court*, 3) illustrates the legacy of earlier frames that must be dealt with, in describing the Classic Maya as “a loosely aggregated cultural area, sharing many traits, but composed of independent kingdoms.”

Both Jackson (81–103) and Alexandre Tokovinine (*Place and Identity in Classic Maya Narratives*, 61–91), drawing mostly on Classic period inscriptions, through painstaking compilations of glyphic texts, illustrate the spatial and to a lesser degree (given the available epigraphic corpus) temporal variation across the Maya realm in the distributions of specific glyphs representing subprincipal courtly titles (Jackson, see maps, 88–89) and place designators (Tokovinine, emblem glyphs). These analyses yield important distinctions in the operations or workings of different Classic Maya polities and networks of political relations (Tokovinine, maps, 100), but they also evidence how these polities centered on the relations between paramount “holy lords” and lesser courtiers as well as seemingly between lords and commoners.

At the same time, wider lordly networks defined and circumscribed the macroscale contexts in which more localized polities operated. Because of these enduring, albeit changeable broad-scale networks, polity may be decoupled from the wider, shared communication webs through which Classic Maya elite knowledge was communicated and reproduced. “Despite ever-changing alliances, hegemonies, conflicts and feuds lasting for generations, Classic Maya elites maintained a shared cultural identity. Maya nobles were using the same writing system and speaking the same language, celebrating the same rituals related to the passage of time,

<sup>1</sup> Damien B. Marken and James L. Fitzsimmons, “Introducing Maya Polities: Models and Definitions,” in *Classic Maya Polities of the Southern Lowlands*, ed. Damien B. Marken and James L. Fitzsimmons (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Richard E. Blanton, *How Humans Cooperate: Confronting the Challenges of Collective Action* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2017). Gary M. Feinman, “Framing the Rise and Variability of Past Complex Societies,” in *Alternative Pathways to Complexity*, ed. Lane F. Fargher and Verence Y. Heredia Espinoza (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2016). Monica L. Smith, “Networks, Territories, and the Cartography of Ancient States,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 4 (2005): 832–849, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.2005.00489.x>.

<sup>3</sup> Randall H. McGuire, “The Meaning and Limits of the Southwest/Northwest: A Perspective from Northern Mexico,” in *Boundaries and Territories: Prehistory of the U.S. Southwest and Northern Mexico*, ed. M. Elisa Villalpando, Anthropological Research Papers 54 (Tempe: Arizona State University, 2002).

venerating similar deities, sharing mythology, dancing many of the same dances, and acceding to many of the same offices" (Tokovinine, 90–91).

Classic Maya polities were relational, based on intricate interpersonal networks, and not territorially fixed or heavily bureaucratic. Holy lords and their courts were tied to specific places, but the spatial extents of their political power appear to have been neither tightly bounded nor tied to static homelands or populations. In parallel, working back in time from colonial era and Postclassic (AD 900–1520) texts, Sergio Quezada (*Maya Lords and Lordship*, 7–8) notes that "Maya use of power was more personal than territorial," and that "no documentary evidence . . . suggests that . . . Maya nobility were landowners" (Quezada, 5).<sup>4</sup> Clearly for the Classic Maya, and preindustrial polities more generally, we need better conceptual frames and the associated concepts and terms to describe, compare, and contrast networks of "diverse agents operating at overlapping spatial scales."<sup>5</sup>

Yet, if the Classic Maya realm was a "landscape of people and not of territories" (Tokovinine, 123), what was the nature of rulership? How was royal power underpinned economically and ideologically? What linked commoner households to those with political clout, and how could these relations shift over time? Such questions extend well beyond the eastern lowlands of Mesoamerica, and at these wider contexts for discussion,<sup>6</sup> the theories used to address these issues have been defined as either "adaptationalist" or "political." From a simplified perspective, the former tend to envision elites as managers operating for the good of a larger, implicitly homogeneous population. Alternatively, the latter see those with power as exploitative often in direct control of land or production (Arlen F. Chase, Diane Z. Chase, Richard E. Terry, Jacob M. Horlacher, and Adrian S. Z. Chase, in *The Ancient Maya Marketplace*, edited by Eleanor M. King, 228).

During the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, many scholars thought that the Classic Maya lived in largely vacant ceremonial centers, ruled by benevolent priests, who mainly studied the calendar. Households were viewed as largely self-sufficient. Warfare was minimized in importance. These adaptationalist perspectives were sustained in part by notions of the rain forest as unproductive and environmentally incapable of sustaining dense populations (King and Leslie C. Shaw, in King, 6–7). The last six decades of Maya scholarship have overturned each of these earlier views. Researchers have adopted new perspectives on the Classic Maya that elaborate the lives of powerful, oftentimes militaristic rulers.

These new vantages are far more grounded in the multidisciplinary record (archaeology, epigraphy, ethnohistory, and more) that has been amassed over the last centuries of research. Yet, until recently, they have tended to minimize the role of most of the ancient Maya population (nonelite) in the workings and cycling of Classic period polities.<sup>7</sup> If Maya rulers did not directly control economic production, then how did they gain and maintain the allegiance of followers? And, importantly, how do we explain the spatial and temporal swings in the power and influence of specific Classic Maya royal individuals, dynasties, and major centers? In what ways do Classic Maya political relations compare and contrast to those elsewhere in Mesoamerica and beyond? Frankly, these questions are too grand, and too messy, to expect definitive answers yet, but the works reviewed here collectively do offer a promising suite of ways forward.

## Ideological Underpinnings

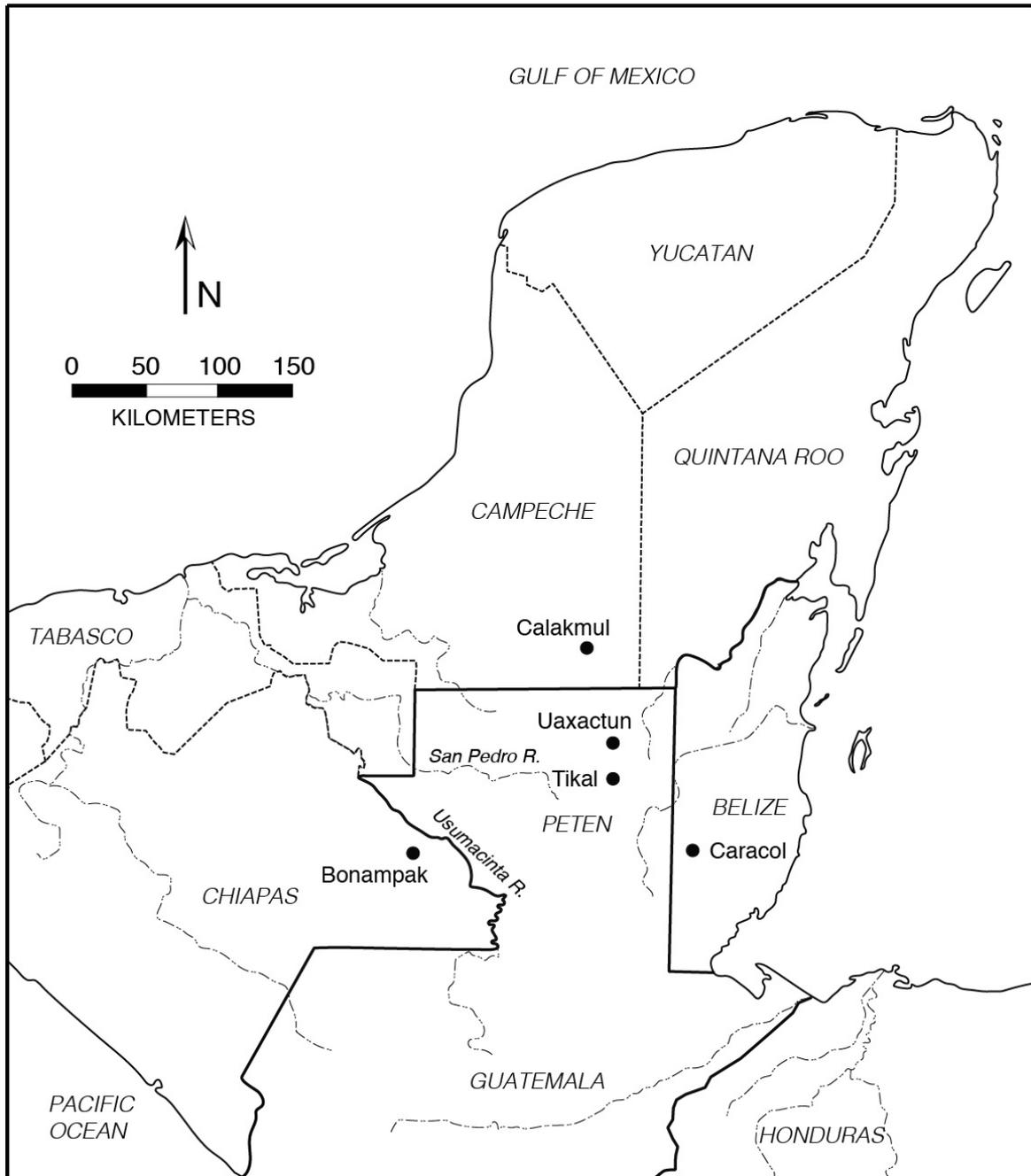
In the preface to the resplendent description and contextual analysis of the famous Bonampak murals by Mary Miller and Claudia Brittenham, Miller (*The Spectacle of the Late Maya Court*, xiv) asks a telling question: Why were incredible time, resources, and planning devoted to the creation of masterful paintings across twelve walls, using thirty different pigments, rather than comparable expenditures devoted to public works and other public goods? The murals, painted in AD 791, were never completed and were produced at the cusp of Bonampak's abandonment during an era when many extant Maya centers were depopulated and underwent political upheaval (see **Map 1**). The murals, through an association of scenes that harken both backward and forward in time, richly represent courtly life, the pageantry of rule, warfare, ritual performance (including deity impersonation), and royal succession. Yet "what is important ultimately in the

<sup>4</sup> See also Marken and Fitzsimmons, "Introducing Maya Polities," 6.

<sup>5</sup> Edward M. Schortman and Wendy Ashmore, "History, Networks, and the Quest for Power: Ancient Political Competition in the Lower Montagua Valley, Guatemala," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18, no. 1 (2012): 1, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2011.01728.x>.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Brumfiel and Timothy Earle, "Specialization, Exchange, and Complex Societies," in *Specialization, Exchange, and Complex Societies*, ed. Elizabeth Brumfiel and Timothy Earle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1–19.

<sup>7</sup> Joyce Marcus, "Maya Commoners: The Stereotype and the Reality," in *Ancient Maya Commoners*, ed. Jon C. Lohse and Fred Valdez, Jr. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 255–283. Cynthia Robin, "New Directions in Classic Maya Household Archaeology," *Journal of Archaeological Research* 11, no. 4 (2003): 307–356, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1026327105877>.



**Map 1:** Maya area of Mesoamerica with sites mentioned in the text.

mural program of Structure 1 at Bonampak may not be the stories told by the paintings but the experience of viewing them” (Miller and Brittenham, 92). Their construction was a political act targeted in a limited, restricted space at a small set of elite viewers (Miller and Brittenham, 94, 147). The use of the building with the display of murals clearly was meant to reaffirm the dynamic of power for those who commissioned the works. However, the destructive defacement later directed at some of the central figures in the artwork hint that the intended message was not long absorbed by all involved.

The “contradiction at the heart of Maya rulership” has been noted: “Divine kings claimed unique authority, but in practice their power was circumscribed both by technological limits on travel and communication and by their reliance on the labor of vassal lords hungry for wealth and honor.”<sup>8</sup> William A. Haviland’s

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas P. Carter, “These Are Our Mountains Now: Statecraft and the Foundation of a Late Classic Royal Court,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 27, no. 2 (2016): 235, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956536116000316>.

detailed excavation report of a highly elaborated Classic period multihousehold residential group at Tikal, situated more than a kilometer from the Great Plaza at that site, hints at some of the ways Maya nobility (in this case, out-of-power descendants of a former Tikal ruler) may have been kept in check by the site's paramount rulers (*Excavations in Residential Areas of Tikal: Group 7F-1*). The large excavated house, which had an abundance of high-status goods in the trash, was located close enough to the Great Plaza to not be a perceived threat, but was removed from the site's center of ritual and political activities. In addition to the status goods, Haviland (122) further reasons that during two episodes of dynastic change at Tikal, ceremonial activities were intensified in this residential group, perhaps indicating heightened efforts by ruling dynasts to woo potentially competitive nobles and reaffirm political ties during times of dynastic transition.

Although each major Classic Maya polity was ruled by a "holy lord" who intertwined aspects of political and religious authority, including the prerogative of ritual access to the supernatural world, the specific dynamics between paramount rulers and lesser nobles and elite varied across space and time (Jackson, 107–108). Jackson's analysis (82–83) of secondary courtly elite titles found that almost all such titles in the Maya region date to the Late Classic (between ca. AD 600 and AD 775, with a peak around AD 725). Spatially, most of these titles were present at sites along the Usumacinta River in the western sector of the lowland Maya region, while few were present in the Petén and even fewer farther to the east (Jackson, 86–87).

Tokovinine also finds important west-east differences in the Classic Maya world (see **Map 1**). His study is empirically grounded in a thoughtful epigraphic reconsideration of emblem glyphs, which he now views as "titles connecting certain royal families to places of their political origins" (81). This significant reinterpretation offers a solution to several puzzles. "As a category of ascription to a royal line and its place of origin, rather than its place on the actual landscape, emblem glyphs can be shared by different royal families" (86), and the same sites may have more than one emblem glyph (63–71). Tokovinine then examines the textual contexts for these glyphs and how they extend to their placement in macroscale networks that extend beyond specific sites. Although textual records of geopolitical networks exist for the east and central sectors of the Classic Maya world, they are absent in the west (123). Tokovinine concludes that "there must be something fundamentally different in the way that Late Classic regimes operated between the eastern and western polities," and observes that the patterns in the west could be related to greater textual references to warfare, captives, and nonroyal nobility (126) (as evidenced in the Bonampak murals). Elite Maya concern with such broader networks is understandable given the diverse pacific and militaristic ties between rulers of different settlements. Furthermore, the social requirements of legitimate Classic Maya kingship required receipt from another king. Establishment of a new dynasty necessitated special intervention by someone already royal.<sup>9</sup>

In a detailed analysis of Mayan place names, Tokovinine also finds that more than one hundred reference different locales as variable kinds of corn or cornfields (9–10). The Classic Maya saw themselves as "people of corn," and their inhabited landscape was interspersed with corn places (Tokovinine, 10). The connection is significant because communities tend to plant specific local strains of corn, a practice documented for certain modern Maya populations where correspondences have been documented between ethnolinguistic affiliations and maize varieties.<sup>10</sup> The link between maize and human beings extends to the realm of identity: "Eating maize 'from here' enables one to become part of an ethnic group, speak the language, and perform proper rituals" (Tokovinine, 122). According to the sacred Maya Popul Vuh, "Human flesh and maize are a shared substance with humans created by the gods from corn dough" (Jackson, 115).

The metaphoric tie between the life cycles of maize and humans takes on greater meaning through further analysis, which identifies monumental places in the Maya built environment (e.g., temples, palaces, including funerary features) to different maize gods (Tokovinine, 115–122). Rulers, who derived their legitimacy through their connection with their specific places ("mountains") of origin, were then returned to those settings for burial. The belief was that they would later sprout back to life to provide for the community. "The connection of royal families to various maize gods effectively defines these families as sources of group sustenance" (Tokovinine, 122). Through local variants of the maize god, connections were drawn between networks of people, their ruling lords, place, and corn as a source of food and identity (Tokovinine, 126).

"The agricultural metaphor calls upon deep-seated themes—subsistence-related and religious—in Mesoamerican life, in which the agricultural process, the life cycle of the maize plant, and the importance

<sup>9</sup> Carter, "These Are Our Mountains Now," 234.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Benz, Hugo Perales, and Stephen Brush, "Tzeltal and Tzotzil Farmer Knowledge and Maize Diversity in Chiapas, Mexico," *Current Anthropology* 48, no. 2 (2007): 289–300. Raymond Stadelman, *Maize Cultivation in Northwestern Guatemala* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1940), 111–114.

of maize as a creative, culturally, and religious substance take center stage" (Jackson, 137).<sup>11</sup> "By implicating elites and governance in this process, the political life of the Classic Maya is naturalized" (Jackson, 137). It uses fundamental agrarian knowledge and work, comprehensible to individuals of distinct statuses, as a conceptual basis to justify and legitimize those differences. In the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican world, the metaphor linking the life histories of corn, humans, and rulership extends far beyond the Classic Maya. Of course, the key details concerning the ritual and practical manifestations of these beliefs vary in time, space, and institutional context (for an example, see Jesús Ruvalcaba Mercado's chapter in Faust and Richter).

The links between local maize gods, specific royal families, and geographically specific varieties of corn provide ideological underpinnings for a Classic Maya political and demographic world in which dynastic cadets and especially subalterns were frequently mobile,<sup>12</sup> and settlement and subregional populations shifted dynamically through time.<sup>13</sup> Maya commoners voted with their feet in search of lords to provide defense, economic opportunities, and spectacle. After such moves, they could, in a simplified sense, transition their identity through fealty to local elites and their supernatural realm, and by planting and eating local maize. The ideological model outlined dovetails closely with perspectives on Classic Maya politics defined by and reliant on interpersonal ties and networks.<sup>14</sup> These were webs of relations centered in noble courts that were materialized in elaborate palaces and their restricted temples (Jackson).

### Economic Underpinnings

How do we move toward an understanding of the already noted differences between the eastern and western sectors of the Maya region during the Classic period? Why did the Classic Maya elite invest so much on the trappings of status, royal performance, and art masterpieces restricted to the few, and so relatively little on public goods (beyond defense)?<sup>15</sup> To examine these issues, the arguments must be extended beyond ideological spheres and to matters economic. To account for both the self-aggrandizing nature of Maya lords compared to most pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican rulers, and how they were unable or unwilling to offer subaltern householders much in the way of public goods (e.g., wide thoroughfares, broad open plazas),<sup>16</sup> we might look toward the ways in which lordly power was funded.<sup>17</sup> Prior generations of scholars, hinged by the appropriation of Marx and Wittfogel to pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica,<sup>18</sup> presumed that Maya lords fostered their positions through primordial legacies of local land ownership or direct control of the economy; but neither idea yet has ample empirical grounding.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, as Tokovinine documented, Classic Maya dynastic families that were able to retain power back to deep time seem to have been more the exceptions and not the rule (126). Likewise, Jackson found that secondary lords were memorialized in roles such as regents, scribes, captors of prisoners, artists, performers, and witnesses to life crises events (66–69), but there is little evidence for formal bureaucratic roles, like accounting, warehousing, and personnel management. Perhaps we should look to approaches that compare and contrast the nature of relations between rulers and commoners,<sup>20</sup> rather

<sup>11</sup> Karl Taube, "The Classic Maya Maize God: A Reappraisal," in *Fifth Palenque Round Table*, ed. Merle Greene Robertson (San Francisco: Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute, 1985), 171–181.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Golden and Andrew Scherer, "Territory, Trust, Growth, and Collapse in Classic Period Maya Kingdoms," *Current Anthropology* 54, no. 4 (2013): 397–435, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/671054>. Takeshi Inomata, "The Spatial Mobility of Non-Elite Populations in Classic Maya Society and Its Political Implications," in *Ancient Maya Commoners*, ed. Jon C. Lohse and Fred Valdez, Jr. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 175–196.

<sup>13</sup> Don S. Rice, "Late Classic Maya Population: Characteristics and Implications," in *Urbanism in the Preindustrial World*, ed. Glenn R. Storey (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 252–276.

<sup>14</sup> Richard E. Blanton, Gary M. Feinman, Stephen A. Kowalewski, and Peter N. Peregrine, "A Dual-Processual Theory for the Evolution of Mesoamerican Civilization," *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 1 (1996): 1–14, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/204471>.

<sup>15</sup> Richard E. Blanton and Lane F. Fargher, "The Collective Logic of Pre-Modern Cities," *World Archaeology* 43, no. 3 (2011): 505–522, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2011.607722>. David M. Carballo and Gary M. Feinman, "Cooperation, Collective Action, and the Archaeology of Large-Scale Societies," *Evolutionary Anthropology* 25, no. 6 (2016): 288–296, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/evan.21506>.

<sup>16</sup> Timothy J. Dennehy, Benjamin W. Stanley, and Michael E. Smith, "Social Inequality and Access to Services in Premodern Cities," in *Archaeology of Human Experience*, ed. Michelle Hegmon, Archeological Papers 27 (Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association), 153.

<sup>17</sup> Richard E. Blanton and Lane F. Fargher, *Collective Action in the Formation of Pre-Modern States* (New York: Springer, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Gary M. Feinman and Linda M. Nicholas, "The Late Prehispanic Economy of the Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico: Weaving Threads from Data, Theory, and Subsequent History," *Research in Economic Anthropology* 32 (2012): 225–258, DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1108/S0190-1281\(2012\)0000032013](https://doi.org/10.1108/S0190-1281(2012)0000032013).

<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey L. Baker, "The State and Wetland Agriculture in Mesoamerica," *Culture and Agriculture* 20, nos. 2–3 (1998): 78–86, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/cag.1998.20.2-3.78>.

<sup>20</sup> Blanton and Fargher, *Collective Action*. Gary M. Feinman, "The Dynamics of Cooperation in Context: Concluding Thoughts," in *Cooperation and Collective Action: Archaeological Perspectives*, ed. David M. Carballo (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2013), 299–307.

than past models that have tended to assume either that people (including rulers) generally act for the good of the collective whole (adaptationalist) or that agency was always restricted to those in power (political).

For the Classic Maya economy (and all of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica), we as a discipline have farther to go to assess models concerning how power was funded, how resources were distributed, and how access varied. Significant progress has been made over the last five decades on issues such as agrarian production, land use, and the garden cities of the Maya.<sup>21</sup> We also are starting to get quantifiable measures that support earlier inferences<sup>22</sup> that economic inequality at Classic Maya cities was greater than for their highland Mesoamerican contemporaries outside the Maya realm.<sup>23</sup> Yet key gaps and fundamental questions remain.

The collective thrust of the essays included in *Ancient Maya Pottery*, edited by James John Aimers, serves to highlight one issue and, perhaps through the topic's airing, a greater collective willingness to address it. Thematically, the volume is focused mostly on debating the pros and cons of different classification systems for pottery, in particular the type-variety system, which has been applied widely to study ceramic collections at Maya archaeological sites. Regardless of where the individual authors come down, the general consensus seems to be that type-variety is most utile for deriving ceramic chronologies and basically less helpful for addressing other research questions.

Ceramic artifacts, so abundant at most Mesoamerican archaeological sites, represent a critical source of evidence for archaeologists. Undoubtedly, chronology is essential to the archaeological endeavor that appropriately governs key elements of the ways that we classify and study pottery. Yet still, after generations of excavation, it is perplexing that we know relatively little about where most pre-Hispanic Maya pottery was made and at what intensities of production (Robert E. Fry, in Aimers, 76). As a consequence, we are limited when it comes to determining how ceramics were distributed and the shifts in those circulation patterns across time.

At the same time, if we do not know much about domestic economies in ancient Mesoamerica, it is hard to unravel the political economy (particularly how power was funded and the modes through which resources were dispersed by those with political clout). Years ago, when domestic self-sufficiency (or something close) was presumed for most pre-Hispanic Maya households, this knowledge gap may not have seemed like a major issue. But household economic autonomy appears to be a less convincing scenario now. Cassandra R. Bill (Aimers, 34–43) illustrates and argues persuasively how ceramic distributions may be used to help define sectorial social affiliations and networks, and potentially how shifts in these spatial relationships could be examined over time. Such axes of ceramic variation would be a valuable independent means to compare and contrast cross-temporally with some of the geospatial divisions outlined above. How large a factor the heavy focus on classification and chronology has been in the analytical directions pursued (and not pursued) historically cannot be determined, but it probably did not help our current state of knowledge regarding pre-Hispanic pottery production and distribution. Although pottery is but one key good (it does leave a robust archaeological signature, in contrast with many other consumables), the picture for many others is not a whole lot better, with the partial exception of obsidian.<sup>24</sup>

Eleanor M. King's edited collection also signals a new perspective on the Classic period Maya economy. In contrast to focusing on an abundant good (as does Aimers), *The Ancient Maya Marketplace* considers modes of exchange as part of a growing body of published works in which marketplace exchanges are recognized as a key element of ancient Mesoamerican<sup>25</sup> (and preindustrial)<sup>26</sup> economic systems. As most pre-Hispanic Classic Maya production was situated domestically, and regional populations were larger than could be accommodated entirely by face-to-face reciprocity, marketplace transactions were certainly a viable

<sup>21</sup> Arlen F. Chase and Diane Z. Chase, "Scale and Intensity in Classic Maya Agriculture: Terracing and Settlement at the 'Garden City' of Caracol," *Culture and Agriculture* 20, nos. 2–3 (1998): 60–77, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/cag.1998.20.2-3.60>.

<sup>22</sup> Gary M. Feinman, "Mesoamerican Political Complexity: The Corporate-Network Dimension," in *Leaders to Rulers*, ed. Jonathan Haas (New York: Kluwer/Plenum, 2001), 163–167.

<sup>23</sup> Clifford T. Brown, April A. Watson, Ashley Gravlin-Beman, and Larry S. Liebovitch, "Poor Mayapan," in *The Ancient Maya of Mexico: Reinterpreting the Past of the Northern Maya Lowlands*, ed. Geoffrey E. Braswell (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2012), 318. Michael E. Smith, Timothy Dennehy, April Kamp-Whittaker, Emily Colon, and Rebecca Harkness, "Quantitative Measures of Wealth Inequality in Ancient Central Mexican Communities," *Advances in Archaeological Practice* 2, no. 4 (2014): 311–323.

<sup>24</sup> For example, Mark Golitko, James Meierhoff, Gary M. Feinman, and Patrick Ryan Williams, "Complexities of Collapse: The Evidence of Maya Obsidian as Revealed by Social Network Graphical Analysis," *Antiquity* 86, no. 2 (2012): 507–523.

<sup>25</sup> Marilyn A. Masson and David A. Freidel, "An Argument for Classic Era Maya Market Exchange," *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 31, no. 4 (2012): 455–484, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaa.2012.03.007>. Leslie C. Shaw, "The Elusive Maya Marketplace: An Archaeological Consideration of the Evidence," *Journal of Archaeological Research* 20, no. 2 (2012): 117–155, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10814-011-9055-0>.

<sup>26</sup> Gary M. Feinman and Christopher P. Garraty, "Preindustrial Markets and Marketing: Archaeological Perspectives," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39 (2010): 167–191, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.012809.105118>.

alternative, especially since there is no credible evidence for large-scale centralized redistribution or the huge storage facilities that would be requisite. The recent recovery and presentation of the marketplace murals from Calakmul<sup>27</sup> further underpins the interpretive position that marketplace exchanges were a key element of the Classic period Maya economy.

Together, the papers in King's volume employ a suite of methods to identify marketplaces, including soil chemistry (Richard E. Terry, Daniel A. Bair, and Eric G. Coronel), architectural analysis (Marshall Joseph Becker), artifactual studies (Keith Eppich and David Freidel), and an explicitly multivariable approach (Bernadette Cap). The unequivocal archaeological identification of markets and marketplace exchange is rarely straightforward, yet collectively the papers in this book do make a convincing, cogent argument for Classic Maya marketplace exchange. Christopher Jones (King, 69–70) provides useful context for the marketplace at Tikal, which was built in the early eighth century AD during a revival of the site's importance and as part of a significant construction episode. Jones ties the location of this marketplace to "the portage from the canoe routes of the Holmul and Mopan Rivers on the east to those of the San Pedro and Usumacinta Rivers on the west" (Jones, in King, 87), which passes directly through the market area. The centers of Uaxactun and Calakmul were situated where they could control rival portages. The portages were likely transfer points for a bevy of precious resources, including jaguar skins, obsidian, jade, cotton cloth, salt, marine shells, tropical bird feathers, and cacao; many were highly desired in contemporaneous highland Mesoamerican communities, where some likely could have been headed (Jones, in King, 87–88). Jones (King, 87) raises the hypothesis that long-distance exchanges, and potentially also marketplace participation and transactions, were all sources of noble revenues at Tikal and seemingly elsewhere in the lowland Maya region as well.

Of course, unquestionably, Classic Maya royals were not all funded in precisely the same ways, although the production and movement of status goods and agriculture likely remained two components of their economic foundations. Nevertheless, despite empirical lacunae, perhaps an argument can be made that the relative importance of these two components also varied east to west across the Maya region.

Clearly, cross-regional exchanges of status goods (following Jones, in King) were a key component of the Maya economy. Lowland Maya lords lived and died cloaked with highly crafted and often exotic adornments. The ostentatious outfits worn by many lords memorialized in the Bonampak murals, as well as other artistic representations, admittedly could be somewhat exaggerated or idealized, but they match what is found repeatedly in burials and other contexts.

For Bonampak, the argument is made that the tomb beneath Structure 1 (housing the murals) "was not terribly elaborate" (Miller and Brittenham, 3). The interred individual was associated with only 443 small pieces of jade, which is modest compared to certain elite Maya tombs. But, to put this in a broader regional context, if you totaled the amount of jade from all Classic period burials excavated at the largest settlement in the Valley of Oaxaca, Monte Albán (over one hundred), my guess is that you may not reach a grand total much above the quantity in the one Bonampak tomb. Exotic and highly crafted goods were exchanged across the Maya area during the Late Classic period. Transfers of these goods was a potential basis for funding elite power, and such opportunities would have been most pronounced at sites adjacent to major river courses and near key ports and portages.<sup>28</sup> The longest of those river courses, the Usumacinta, sits near the western edge of the Classic Maya world.

Conversely, agricultural surpluses in the southern Maya lowlands during the Classic period were likely more readily produced in the east than the west. Not only did rainfall gradients decline slightly from east to west,<sup>29</sup> but in the Maya lowlands, features associated with Classic period agricultural intensification are more prevalent in the east than the west.<sup>30</sup> (This is exemplified by terracing at Caracol and the wetlands in northern Belize.)<sup>31</sup> Of course, such factors vary site to site, so the generalized pattern is broad-brush, not precise.

<sup>27</sup> Ramón Carrasco Vargas, and María Cordeiro Baqueiro, "The Murals of Chiik Nahb Structure Sub 1-4, Calakmul, Mexico," *Maya Archaeology* 2 (2012): 8–59.

<sup>28</sup> Arthur A. Demarest, Chloe Andrieu, Paola Torres, Mélanie Forné, Tomás Barrientos, and Marc Wolf, "Economy, Exchange, and Power: New Evidence from the Late Classic Maya Port City of Cancuen," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 25, no. 1 (2014): 187–219, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956536114000121>.

<sup>29</sup> Nicholas P. Dunning and Timothy Beach, "Farms and Forests: Spatial and Temporal Perspectives," in *Landscapes and Societies: Selected Cases*, ed. I. Peter Martini and Ward Chesworth (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 370–371.

<sup>30</sup> Dunning and Beach, "Farms and Forests," 369–389.

<sup>31</sup> Sheryl Luzzadder-Beach, Timothy P. Beach, and Nicholas Dunning, "Wetland Fields as Mirrors of Drought and the Maya Abandonment," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109, no. 10 (2012): 3646–3651, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1114919109>. On Caracol, see Chase and Chase, "Scale and Intensity," 62–72.

My own perspective is that the Caracol terracing and other Classic period agrarian intensification was more likely initiated from the bottom up.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, such intensification generally entails increased productivity per unit land (or possibly greater reliability of production from year to year). If not, why invest the labor in building and maintaining these features? Presence of agricultural terracing and other features to intensify production also requires a degree of collaborative labor between farmers, whether to clean channels between fields or reinforce terrace retaining walls. The labor often recurs at regular intervals. These “sunk costs” build trust with collaborating neighbors, but they also lessen the prospects for mobility. More reliable surplus at least establishes a basis for taxation.

### Framing Variation in Classic Maya Political Formations

As a means toward encouraging future thought and research, I conclude by returning to key questions posed earlier. I employ a modified cooperation-collective action approach that views how power is wielded as in large part a product of how it is funded.<sup>33</sup> Power underpinned by external revenues or free-floating resources, such as spot resources, war booty, or control of trade routes, allows rulers maximum prerogative to behave autocratically. As long as a segment of mercenaries, cronies, generals, or other agents of the ruler are paid off and kept in check, the principals can act basically as they please and need not supply extensive public goods and services to subalterns. Alternatively, reliance on internal revenues, those that come from the immediate local population, such as farm surplus, manufactured goods, or labor drafts, implies that rulers must gain compliance from their followers and hence have to be more responsive. Often, responsiveness involves expenditures by the ruler or government on public goods that assist the lives of the broader populace.<sup>34</sup>

From this perspective, can we understand the willingness of Classic Maya lords to expend lavishly on the Bonampak murals, which were to be viewed by a few coelites, or on ornate ceremonial regalia, but, in general, much less on public goods? Clearly, a functioning system of streets and communication thoroughfares and broad plazas that could fit wide segments of the local population were more typical of broadly contemporaneous cities outside the Maya realm (e.g., Teotihuacán, Monte Albán) than of Classic Maya centers. If the control of exchange routes, along with revenues from markets, and the monitored production of key steps in the crafting of status items<sup>35</sup> were main sources of revenue for Classic Maya suzerains, then underpinned mainly by external revenues, they had the leverage to behave relatively autocratically and dress ostentatiously compared to the rulers at non-Maya urban centers like Monte Albán, where agricultural production (internal revenue) likely was the main funder of governance.

Furthermore, one of the greatest threats to Classic Maya royals, especially by the later part of the Classic period, was from other elites, especially regents. Anybody placed in position to govern new settlements could ultimately declare independence. And if the revenues to support power came mainly from the control or monitoring of exchange routes, the transfers of precious goods,<sup>36</sup> then these could be relatively easily co-opted through the creation of new alliances or other means of misdirection.

I now return to the aforementioned differences between the eastern and western sectors of the Maya region during the Classic period. Why do we see more secondary titles along the Usumacinta, with those holding the titles more often participating in rituals that were generally restricted to royals only in the west (Jackson, 86–87)? This corresponds with Tokovinine's findings of shared geopolitical collectivities in the east and center, but less so in the west (87–123). Furthermore, in the connections between settlements that were expressed in texts, antagonistic expressions were especially well represented in the west.<sup>37</sup> I propose that these patterns may all be related to the Late Classic differences between the ways that power was funded in the west as opposed to elsewhere in the Maya region. In the west, along the Usumacinta, status goods,

<sup>32</sup> Baker, “The State and Wetland,” 78–86. Andrew R. Wyatt, “The Scale and Organization of Ancient Maya Water Management,” *WIREs Water* 1, no. 5 (2014): 449–467, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/wat2.1042>.

<sup>33</sup> Blanton and Fargher, “Collective Action,” 12–22. David M. Carballo, Paul Roscoe, and Gary M. Feinman, “Cooperation and Collective Action in the Evolution of Complex Societies,” *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 21, no. 1 (2014): 98–133, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10816-012-9147-2>.

<sup>34</sup> Blanton and Fargher, *Collective Action*, 253–256.

<sup>35</sup> Brigitte Kovacevich, “From the Ground Up: Household Craft Specialization and Classic Maya Polity Integration,” in *Classic Maya Polities of the Southern Lowlands*, ed. Damien B. Marken and James L. Fitzsimmons (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015), 39–73.

<sup>36</sup> Alexandre Tokovinine and Dmitri Beliaev, “People of the Road: Traders and Travelers in Ancient Maya Words and Images,” in *Merchants, Markets, and Exchange in the Pre-Columbian World*, ed. Kenneth G. Hirth and Joanne Pillsbury (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2013), 174–184.

<sup>37</sup> Jessica L. Munson and Martha J. Macri, “Sociopolitical Network Interactions: A Case Study of the Classic Maya,” *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 28, no. 4 (2009): 424–438, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaa.2009.08.002>.

their production, distribution, and the routes and institutions involved in their transfer likely made up the greatest component of royal revenues. In contrast, in the central and eastern sectors of the Classic Maya realm, agrarian resources likely made up somewhat greater proportions of what funded power.

Trade goods and the routes they travel are relatively easy targets to pirate or commandeer. The likely insecurity generated by such opportunities and rivalries fits with both the seeming status-related concessions that were memorialized for specific subroyals (Jackson, 85–91) and the back-and-forth militaristic forays and proxy wars, which played out along the Usumacinta during the Late Classic period.<sup>38</sup> The greatest threat to the royals whose polities sat along the Usumacinta did not lie with the allegiance of their commoner followers but rather with their elite regents, whose continued loyalty and support helped prop the royal's power by maintaining controls over precious goods and their supply channels. When interelite relations broke down, wars could ensue, and war booty likely was another external form of revenue that sustained suzerains in the Usumacinta region. A vicious competitive cycle was kicked off during the Late Classic, and it led eventually to large-scale abandonments up and down the river.<sup>39</sup> In the rest of the Classic Maya realm, where power seems to have been funded somewhat differently, elites seemingly behaved rather less flamboyantly (at least at times).<sup>40</sup> One such episode of lessened flamboyance appears to have closely co-occurred with heavy investments in large-scale agricultural terracing. In the north and east of the Classic Maya area, polities and populations were somewhat more resilient to the intense political upheavals and the extreme demographic transitions that took place toward the end of the Classic period.

Structure 1 was built on a broad platform at Bonampak, a mid-sized Maya center of its time where the rulers had a history of complex and shifting ties to elites from other communities, including some that were larger or more powerful. The patrons who commissioned the incredible Bonampak paintings must have viewed the undertaking as a worthy investment regardless of the enormous expenditures that were consumed in planning, labor, and materials. If the rule-related sequence of events that they wanted told was eventually legitimized and/or sanctioned by their coelites, who were meant to view the paintings, then the status and positions of those who produced them, maybe even their very lives, would have had a greater chance to be celebrated and sustained. Unfortunately, despite the artists' attention to detail and the brilliance of the masterwork, that is not precisely how this matter was destined to end.

## Author Information

Gary M. Feinman is the MacArthur Curator of Mesoamerican and East Asian Anthropology at the Field Museum of Natural History. He has conducted archaeological field research in Oaxaca, Mexico, over the last four decades. Feinman also has codirected a Sino-American collaborative archaeological survey in eastern Shandong, China, over the past twenty-one years. He has published on a range of topics including ancient economies, settlement patterns, inequality, and human modes of collective action and cooperation.

---

<sup>38</sup> Golden and Scherer, "Territory, Trust, Growth, and Collapse," 408–416. Jessica Munson, Viviana Amati, Mark Collard, and Martha Macri, "Classic Maya Bloodletting and the Cultural Evolution of Religious Rituals: Quantifying Patterns of Variation in Hieroglyphic Texts," *PLOS ONE* 9, no. 9 (2014): 10–11, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0107982>.

<sup>39</sup> Claire E. Ebert, Keith M. Prufer, Martha J. Macri, Bruce Winterhalder, and Douglas J. Kennett, "Terminal Long Count Dates and the Disintegration of Classic Period Maya Polities," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 25, no. 2 (2014): 337–356, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956536114000248>.

<sup>40</sup> Arlen F. Chase and Diane Z. Chase, "Symbolic Egalitarianism and Homogenized Distributions in the Archaeological Record at Caracol, Belize: Method Theory, and Complexity," *Belizean Archaeology* 6 (2009): 15–24.

**How to cite this article:** Feinman, G. M. Re-visioning Classic Maya Polities. *Latin American Research Review*. 2017; 52(3), pp. 458–468. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.114>

**Submitted:** 23 January 2017

**Accepted:** 30 January 2017

**Published:** 22 September 2017

**Copyright:** © 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*Latin American Research Review* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

**OPEN ACCESS** 