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# I

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## *The Classic Maya and Their Political System*

When Chakaw Nahb Chan acceded as ruler of the small Classic Maya kingdom of La Corona in the mid-seventh century, he immediately began his reign by commissioning three temples. Dedicated a month after his accession, these temples housed three deities—"Firstborn Lord," "Yellow Rain God," and "Great Temple Rain God." The rapid completion of this building project, recorded in hieroglyphic inscriptions, draws attention to these gods. What was their significance? Why did Chakaw Nahb Chan make their temples a top priority? Archaeological and epigraphic evidence at La Corona paints a picture of a protracted power struggle within the kingdom, in which these temples played an important role. But La Corona was not the only Classic Maya community to possess such local patron gods, and Chakaw Nahb Chan was not alone in sponsoring the building of temples for them. Many Maya rulers wielded rituals and narratives of patron deities as political tools in order to influence their peers and subjects. This book explores Classic Maya patron deity cults and how they were used in power relationships within and between communities.

### **THE EXCEPTIONAL MAYA?**

In the mid-twentieth century, it was widely held that the ancient Maya were a unique and exceptional civilization. Other early societies built populous cities, engaged in military conquest, and intensively farmed

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fertile soils. But the Maya, the story went, had low populations living in dispersed hamlets around vacant religious centers where priests recorded esoteric calendar rituals on carved monuments. They rarely fought one another except for religious purposes, and they supported their low numbers with slash-and-burn agriculture in a marginal jungle environment (see Becker 1976). Over the course of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, new ideas about Maya society have replaced those of Maya exceptionalism. Decades of excavation and mapping have revealed the high populations of Maya sites. The decipherment of Maya writing has shown that carved monuments recorded historical narratives about political leaders. And new insights into the Maya economy have revealed intensive farming techniques that allowed them to thrive in a diverse tropical landscape.

Anthropological archaeologists have also contextualized the ancient Maya within theoretical scholarship about the nature of pre-modern political evolution. In the 1960s and 1970s the “New Archaeology” championed evolutionary and cross-cultural models of chiefdoms and archaic states, and Mayanists looked for comparisons with other ancient civilizations. Should the Maya be considered a chiefdom-level or a state-level society? And, since the general consensus came out on the side of the state, what kind of state did the Maya constitute? How centralized and integrated? In spite of this turn toward scientific and anthropologically-based approaches to the past, the Maya have continued to provoke public and scholarly fascination with their seemingly exceptional accomplishments. Their sophisticated writing system, complex calendar, exquisite art, and breathtaking architecture are all immediately recognizable cultural traits. And their political system continues to inspire heated debates among archaeologists and epigraphers.

Were the Maya unique? Was their political organization different from that of other ancient societies? Were their governing institutions distinct from those of other pre-modern peoples? The answer, I argue in this book, is yes. But this claim is not as outlandish as it may appear at first blush. Over the past few decades, a number of archaeologists have shown dissatisfaction with the evolutionary models of ancient polities that were developed in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Pauketat 2007; Smith 2003, 2011; Yoffee 2005). Do traditional definitions of chiefdoms and states, they ask, actually obscure the differences between early social systems? Might it not be more useful to look at how authority was actually constituted in different cultural contexts? Or how historically contingent circumstances contributed to the rise of political institutions? Might the concept of a cross-culturally applicable definition of a chiefdom or a state actually be a delusion? Instead, these archaeologists are

increasingly looking at the ways that politics in all ancient societies (not just the Maya) were shaped by unique cultural and historical factors.

But how to systematize this vast collection of uniqueness? Does this approach diminish the comparative project of anthropology? In this book I argue that a semiotic approach offers a mode of analysis and a common vocabulary with which cultural and historical factors can be explained and compared without reducing them to a set of universal typologies. Semiotic anthropology—born from the philosophy of Charles S. Peirce and developed by linguists, ethnographers, and archaeologists—examines how human beings mediate social relationships through signs. These signs can be linguistic or material in nature, ephemeral or highly durable. And their social effects can be felt long after the moment of their use. Semiotic anthropology breaks apart culture—that familiar tool of anthropological analysis—like splitting the atom to reveal its constituent parts. Its methodologies allow archaeologists to describe culturally and historically contingent circumstances in ways that are intelligible to colleagues working in other parts of the world.

This is a book about the ancient Maya. It offers new data and interpretations of Maya deity cults and should therefore be of interest to scholars working in that area. But I wrote this book for all archaeologists interested in studying ancient complex societies. And although I claim that the Maya were unique, they were no more unique than any other human society studied by archaeologists and anthropologists. In chapter 2 I describe what I believe are the most useful insights of semiotic anthropology for archaeologists. Over the course of the book I apply this model to the study of Maya religious practices and offer a new look at Maya political relationships. It is my hope that by demonstrating the utility of this approach to my own work, I encourage other archaeologists to use it as well.

But first I must provide some background on the ancient Maya. Who were they? What is the state of knowledge about their religion and political organization? And what questions still remain that a semiotic approach can address?

## **ETHNIC ORIGINS OF THE MAYA**

The Maya are one of many groups considered part of a wider phenomenon known to scholars as “Mesoamerica.” This region consists of parts of Mexico and Central America, where indigenous peoples shared certain cultural traits such as religious beliefs, artistic styles, and political institutions (Kirchoff 1943). Throughout their history, the Maya visited, exchanged, and borrowed from

other Mesoamerican groups and vice versa. Nevertheless, they are recognizably distinct as an ethnic group, particularly by their languages.

The word “Maya” was originally the indigenous place-name for the northern Yucatan Peninsula at the time of Spanish contact (Zender and Skidmore n.d.). The term may have derived from the name of the city of Mayapan, a late Postclassic capital near modern-day Merida.<sup>1</sup> Spanish colonists eventually adopted “Yucatan” as the name of the province, but “Maya” stuck as an ethnic designator for the indigenous inhabitants, their language, and their immediate ancestors. As anthropologists and archaeologists began to investigate the history of the region, they noted clear linguistic similarities to other indigenous groups in Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, and the Mexican states of Tabasco and Chiapas. Originally calling these languages “Mayoid” and later “Mayan,” the scholarly community began to conceptualize the Maya as a single family of related ethnic groups spread out across this region. Not only do they share linguistic features, they also have many cultural traits in common, such as religious practices and material culture. The ancient Maya also shared these linguistic and cultural characteristics and were the ancestors of today’s modern Maya groups. But the use of a single ethnic designator for all these modern communities as well as the entire history of Maya civilization can artificially obscure the diversity that in fact characterizes the ancient and the modern Maya.

The area that is today inhabited by speakers of Mayan languages is composed of diverse landscapes, ecological zones, and natural resources (Figure 1.1). The Yucatan Peninsula—also called the northern lowlands—has a low elevation and hot, humid climate. Although there is comparatively less rainfall here, the Maya of the Yucatan were able to practice rain-fed agriculture just as their southern neighbors. The southern lowlands—stretching across Tabasco, Campeche, Quintana Roo, northern Guatemala, and Belize—have more rain and can support higher tropical forest. To the south of these are the highlands, a band of mountains running through Chiapas, southern Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. This region is cooler and is home to many valuable mineral commodities such as obsidian, jade, and volcanic ash used to temper pottery. Finally, a hot, humid strip of land hugs the Pacific Coast, a premier region for growing chocolate.

Today Mayan language speakers inhabit all of these regions, though this was not always the case. These groups originally emerged from a smaller population of Proto-Mayan speakers and spread out to absorb or displace Archaic populations. The origins and spread of the Maya have been traced linguistically and archaeologically. Kaufman (1976) proposes that the Proto-Mayan homeland

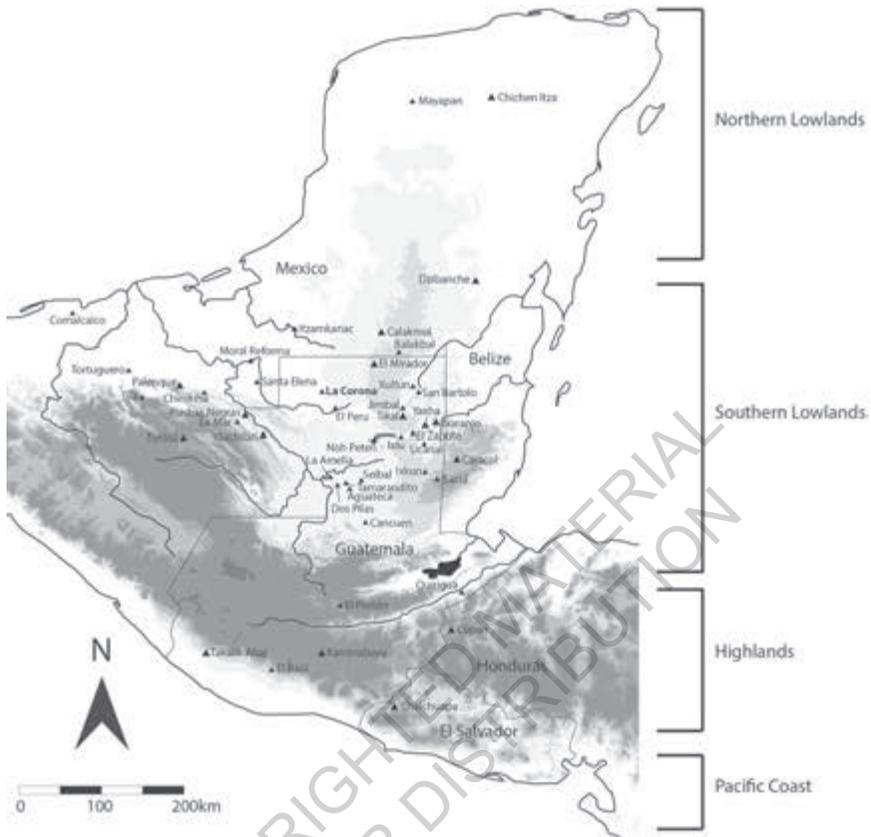


FIGURE 1.1. Map of the Maya area showing sites mentioned in this book

may have been in the Cuchumatán Mountains of southwestern Guatemala. Using glottochronology, he suggests that this language broke up at the end of the Archaic period or Early Preclassic period, around 2000 BCE. Greater Tzeltalan, one of the branches of the Mayan language family, may have spread into the lowlands around 1000 BCE (Figure 1.2). He also proposes that this linguistic dispersal corresponds archaeologically to the appearance and spread of the Mamom ceramic tradition, which replaced earlier ceramics in the lowlands. Of course, as archaeologists long ago realized, it is dubious to assume an absolute one-to-one correlation between a particular language group and a particular feature of material culture like ceramics (Andrews 1990:2).

By the Late Preclassic period (400 BCE to 250 CE) many of the most celebrated features of Maya material culture had emerged across the whole

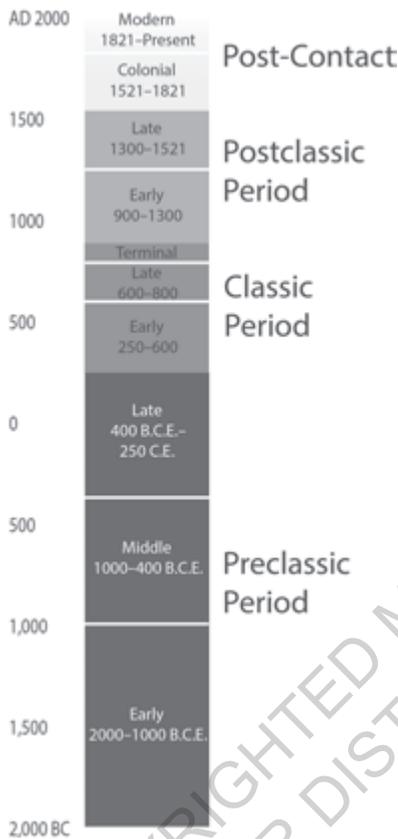


FIGURE 1.2. *Timeline of major periods in Mesoamerican archaeology*

region (Freidel and Schele 1988). These include carved monuments with the famous long count. This calendrical notation recorded the amount of time that had elapsed since the mythical beginning of the world in 3114 BCE. The earliest examples of the long count on Maya monuments come from the highland and Pacific sites of Tak'alik Ab'aj, Chalchuapa, and El Baúl during the first centuries BCE/CE. The lowland site of San Bartolo records the earliest legible Maya hieroglyphs, dating to around 200–300 BCE (Saturno, Stuart, and Beltran 2006). Maya-style monumental architecture, which had emerged in the earlier Middle Preclassic period, reached a grand scale at sites like Kaminaljuyu in highland Guatemala and El Mirador in lowland Guatemala. Political institutions like hereditary rulership are also evident in the archaeological record, with depictions of enthroned rulers. Ideological narratives justifying the ruler's power can also be traced back to this period, in particular on

the murals of San Bartolo, where the accession of the site's ruler is framed as part of mythical cycle involving the birth of the Maize God.

## THE CLASSIC PHENOMENON

The Classic period is so named because of scholars' admiration for the cultural achievements of the Maya of this era, which they equated to classical Greece and Rome. It was once defined as the period in which the Maya carved long count dates on stone monuments from 292 to 909 CE. Of course, earlier long count dates have now been identified on Preclassic stelae, and archaeologists have acknowledged that the institutions and material culture of the Classic period are an outgrowth of Preclassic developments. Nevertheless, the Classic period was a circumscribed chronological era.

One reason for this is that the Classic Maya themselves saw their era as different from what came before. Martin (2003:5) notes that in addition to stylistic changes in architecture and iconography, Classic Maya dynasties traced their origins to founders who lived in the first few centuries CE. Archaeological evidence shows that the end of the Preclassic period corresponded to a series of demographic shifts. El Mirador, the largest Maya city ever built, saw a dramatic decrease in population, as did the highland city of Kaminaljuyu, though it eventually recovered. Classic period hieroglyphic inscriptions contain sparse historical references to this time of change, remembering a place called "Maguay Grinding Stone" and a person epigraphers have nicknamed "Foliated Ajaw" (Stuart 2003, 2014).

In addition to being chronologically circumscribed, the Classic Maya phenomenon was also geographically circumscribed. To be sure, Mayan-speaking groups inhabited the entire Maya region for the duration of the Classic period. However, the southern lowlands were characterized by a unique suite of features. This included a particular elite artistic and architectural style. It also included a florescence of hieroglyphic writing, which, though present at some other Maya sites, was concentrated in the southern lowlands. Not only did these sites share a set of orthographic conventions, they also recorded the same specific language, known today as Classic Ch'olti'an (Houston, Robertson, and Stuart 2000). Still unclear is whether the Classic Maya of the southern lowlands were linguistically homogenous, or whether this language constituted an elite lingua franca among a more diverse commoner population. Finally, in addition to these similarities, the Classic Maya of the southern lowlands shared a common geopolitical system that integrated their communities into a single large network. So while this region clearly engaged

in economic and cultural exchanges with other Mayan and Mesoamerican groups, its synchronized historical trajectory and the inward-looking geopolitical focus reflected in its historical records allow it to be treated as distinct from other areas.

The beginning of the Classic period saw a proliferation of small kingdoms across this southern lowland area. It is likely that this political landscape in fact represented a fragmentation of the more consolidated Preclassic polities (Martin 2003). Classic period kingdoms were centered on the royal court, which consisted of the residence of the ruler, religious structures, and administrative buildings. The court was surrounded by homes of lower-class individuals, most of whom engaged in maize farming. Each of these courts had its own hereditary nobility, though they often intermarried. Many of these kingdoms produced carved hieroglyphic monuments, demonstrating that they had their own unique historical and mythological narratives, creating an emic distinction between the different polities.

The Classic period ended in a dramatic fashion with the famous Maya collapse. During this period, the southern lowlands were largely abandoned, though they had seen their highest populations shortly earlier. This demographic shift seems to have been precipitated by an abrupt event just after 800 CE, after which many sites ceased to record hieroglyphic inscriptions. This was followed by a slower decline over the next century, in which lower-class populations gradually left their homes.

During this period of decline, called the Terminal Classic (800–900 CE), sites elsewhere in the Maya area saw greater populations and an increase in wealth and political influence, especially in northern Yucatan. One of these was Chichen Itza. Archaeological evidence and later written chronicles indicate that it was probably founded around 750 or 800 CE. During the first century of its occupation, the nobility of Chichen Itza commissioned monumental architecture that showed both continuities with typical Classic Maya sites as well as inspiration from other Mesoamerican groups in Central Mexico. The hieroglyphic writing of Chichen Itza was also dramatically different from that of the southern lowlands, with a less ornate style. It also records the Yucatec Mayan language rather than Classic Ch'olti'an. However, these inscriptions are still legible and thus constitute a continuation of the orthographic system in use during the Classic period. They also reflect political institutions of hereditary rulership similar to those of the southern lowland Classic sites (Boot 2005). Most relevant for this book, these inscriptions also discuss devotions to patron gods. For these reasons, I have included Chichen Itza in my analysis of Classic Maya patron deity cults.

After the Terminal Classic the Maya area saw changes in political institutions, the distribution of ethnic groups, and economic relationships with the rest of Mesoamerica. Other Maya kingdoms rose and fell, even in the now sparsely populated southern lowlands. The historical rupture brought about by the Classic collapse makes it impossible to identify any specific modern Maya group as direct descendants of the Classic Maya of the southern lowlands. Linguistically, the closest relation to Classic Ch'olti'an would be Ch'orti', spoken today in eastern Guatemala and western Honduras (Houston, Robertson, and Stuart 2000). But it is likely that the population dispersal at the end of the Classic period sent southern lowlanders all over the Maya area, to be absorbed into local populations and adopt local languages. Thus, in a general sense, today's many modern Maya ethnic groups can be considered inheritors of the Classic phenomenon. As I will demonstrate in chapter 4, these cultural continuities make historical and ethnographic information about these groups invaluable for reconstructing the religion and politics of the Classic period.

#### CLASSIC MAYA POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

The nature of Mesoamerican politics is a theme that has occupied many archaeologists and scholars (see Kurnick 2016). In particular, the political organization of the Classic Maya has been the subject of intense debate over the past several decades. Already in this chapter I have referred to Maya sites as “kingdoms,” “polities,” and “communities,” an ambiguity that reflects both the unique aspects of Maya political organization and the lack of scholarly consensus on what Maya politics entailed. So far I have also avoided using the term “state,” given its association with problematic evolutionary models (Smith 2003). However, much of the literature takes it as given that the Classic Maya constituted a “state-level” society and focuses on what kind of state they represented. Were they strong or weak states? Large or small? Centralized or decentralized? Were they segmentary states like those observed in Africa or theater states like those of Southeast Asia?

Early attempts to model Maya states focused on the size and architecture of Maya sites. Bullard (1960) classified sites by the number and size of buildings and plazas and the presence or absence of inscriptions and ballcourts. He suggested that these differences might reflect a political hierarchy, with larger and more ornate sites representing the highest levels of political control. Similarly, Adams (1980; Adams and Jones 1981) counted the number of courtyards at different sites to propose hierarchies. Hammond (1974) recommended using Thiessen Polygons to estimate the size of the “realm” controlled by Classic

Maya sites. This geometric exercise involves the assumption that the boundary between two hierarchically equivalent sites should be equidistant between them. Of course, without an independent way of judging whether two sites are in fact equal in the political hierarchy, this methodology is problematic and even circular. Especially in areas of high population density, using Thiessen Polygons in this way simply produces a model of small polities (Adams 1980).

Although the Maya writing system was not well understood until the 1990s, researchers in the mid-twentieth century used epigraphic data to model political organization. Berlin (1958) first recognized “emblem glyphs,” hieroglyphic signs seemingly associated with particular sites. These signs can now be read as titles of Maya rulers (see chapter 3), but at the time Berlin proposed that they might correspond to the place-name, patron deity name, or dynastic name of each site. Barthel (1968) noted that two inscriptions (Copan Stela A and Seibal Stela 10) both recorded a set of four emblem glyphs, which at Copan were associated with the four cardinal directions. He suggested that these four emblem glyphs corresponded to four regional states and that it might be possible to identify the area of political control of each of them by looking for references to its emblem glyph at smaller nearby sites. Marcus (1973; 1976) built upon Barthel’s observations, suggesting that a subordinate site might mention its capital’s emblem glyph in its inscriptions, but never the other way around. She made a systematic attempt to identify the areas of regional control of each of the four proposed Maya capitals. But since few glyphs could actually be read at the time, her initial model was eventually replaced.

Mathews and Justeson (1984) realized that part of the emblem glyph read *ajaw*, meaning “lord” or “ruler.”<sup>22</sup> They also noticed other titles in the epigraphic record and proposed that there was a hierarchy of titles, each associated with a particular kingdom. Stuart (1984a) recognized one of these titles, which he read as *cabal* (now read *sajal*). He demonstrated that individuals with this title were nobles who often controlled minor sites but were never rulers with emblem glyphs. He observed that the word *sajal* could be grammatically possessed by a person of higher rank, indicating a political hierarchy. But *sajals* remained in office even after the death of the original *ajaw* who “owned” them. This suggests a degree of autonomy, as if *sajals* were hereditary or appointed for life. The implication of these new glyphic readings, as interpreted by Mathews (1985; 1991), was that all sites with emblem glyphs (i.e., ruled by *ajarws*) were hierarchically equal to one another, while they controlled subsidiary sites with lower-ranked nobility such as *sajals*. And because numerous Classic Maya sites recorded emblem glyphs—including the *ajaw* title—in their inscriptions, he argued that Maya states were relatively small and weak. This was in direct

contrast to earlier proposals by Barthel and Marcus that there were four large regional states. Mathews instead saw twenty-three small states spread over the southern lowlands by 790 CE.

During the 1990s most Maya scholars were divided between these two “strong state” and “weak state” models. Most proponents of the weak state agreed with Mathews, arguing that glyphic evidence demonstrated that Maya polities were not particularly stable or powerful beyond their immediate capitals. Sanders and Webster (1988), for example, argued that Maya sites had low populations and small hinterlands. Rulership was based on family relationships, and the entire court could be seen as an extended household. The activities of lesser nobility mirrored that of the ruler in a disguised form of mechanical solidarity (534). They called this system a “segmentary state,” a term borrowed from African anthropology (Southall 1956). Demarest (1992), borrowing from Tambiah’s (1976) model of the “galactic polity” of Africa and Geertz’s (1973a, 1980) model of the “theater state” in Southeast Asia, claimed that the Maya state was centered on rituals performed by the ruler. This, he argued, made the state inherently weak, since the same functions performed by the ruler were mimicked at lower hierarchical levels. Other scholars (e.g., Ball and Taschek 1991; Hammond 1991; Houston 1993) concurred with these African and Asian parallels.

But the other camp saw evidence for more centralized Maya states. Chase, Chase, and Haviland (1990) pointed to evidence of high population densities as well as public works like roads, raised fields, and earthworks as evidence of strong central authority. They argued that large Maya sites like Tikal and Caracol had political control over smaller surrounding communities with an efficient system of administration not accounted for by weak state models. Culbert (1988:73) concurred, suggesting that the sophistication of intensive agricultural systems, craft specialization, and regional trade point to some degree of centralized coordination. He also pointed out (Culbert 1991) that just because *ajaw* was the most evident political title in hieroglyphic inscriptions, this did not preclude some higher order of political organization. Indeed, he noted, some site with emblem glyphs seemed to express fealty to other sites with emblem glyphs, belying the argument that all *ajaws* were politically equal.

Martin and Grube (1994; 1995; 2000) expanded on this point with their development of the “superstate” (a.k.a. “hegemonic”) model. They used epigraphic analysis to show that while many Maya rulers were nominally equal to one another and used the *ajaw* title, a higher order of political organization structured their relationships with one another. Marcus (1998:63) argues

that the term “superstate” is unnecessarily hyperbolic, as if the Classic Maya represented a state on steroids. The term, however, was not meant to imply a new step in the evolution of social complexity, but rather a political structure above the level of the individual royal court. Specifically, the rulers of Tikal, Calakmul, and a few other sites were able to control networks of allies and vassals to create power blocs that acted in concert. Because of the advances in epigraphic decipherment, Martin and Grube also recognized that these blocs were not geographical regions, as Barthel and Marcus had proposed, but rather spread amorphously across the southern lowlands. Individual *ajaws* of different sites held important decision-making powers, however, and frequently shifted their loyalties.

In recent years this “suprastate” model has become widely accepted among scholars of the Classic Maya. It is acknowledged that Tikal and Calakmul were exceptionally powerful polities, which controlled the affairs of client kingdoms over several generations and whose bitter rivalry shaped many of the historical events of the Classic period. But Maya politics cannot be fully comprehended by looking at political organization alone. That is why many scholars have also debated Maya political strategies, both at the level of the local polity and the suprapolity network.

#### CLASSIC MAYA POLITICAL STRATEGIES

A number of scholars of the ancient Maya and Mesoamerica have examined strategies used by rulers to establish and maintain political relationships with their subjects. Blanton et al. (1996), for example, propose that these can be broken into two categories. Network strategies are those in which individuals attempt to gain political power by monopolizing resources such as contacts with leaders in other polities, esoteric knowledge, and exotic commodities. Corporate strategies, in contrast, emphasize interdependence and reciprocity between social groups such as lineages or economic classes. Blanton et al. conceptualize these as two poles on a spectrum and argue that, while a polity may display varying degrees of one or the other, either a network or a corporate strategy usually predominates.

This dual-processual theory has proven useful for many Mesoamerican archaeologists as a heuristic for considering the nature of ancient polities. Blanton et al. themselves applied it to the study of ancient Mesoamerica, though the model is intentionally general enough that it can be applied to the study of any complex society. Indeed, the authors drew upon examples from all over the world when formulating their arguments. It has been

critiqued, however, as a simple one-dimensional typological axis rather than a means of truly elucidating the complex nature of political action (Kurnick 2016; Smith 2011:419). In other words, while dual-processional theory places political actions into certain categories, it cannot offer an *explanation* of why a particular strategy was adopted at any given place or time, nor can it predict whether or why such strategies were successes or failures. This is because it simply does not address the unique cultural and historical circumstances that would contribute to political variability. The authors themselves recognize the importance of such contingencies, noting, “whatever its source, power is always exercised in a culture-laden social situation. Materials and symbols are powerful only to the extent that they move people” (Blanton et al. 1996:3). Thus, in order to move beyond a generalizing typology, archaeologists must explore these very cultural factors to determine why and how materials and symbols contribute to political dynamics.

An area of particular emphasis by scholars of the ancient Maya has been the relationship between political power and religious beliefs and ritual (this book is no exception). The phrase “divine kingship” is frequently used to describe the Classic Maya system of rulership, not least of all because the most common royal title, *k’uhul ajaw*, can be translated as “divine king” (but see chapter 3). However, the foundational literature on Classic Maya divine kingship, produced in the 1980s and 1990s, generally does not consider the subject in relation to the extensive literature on sacred kings in the Old World (but see Fields 1989; Fields and Reents-Budet 2005:21). Instead, these authors explore the topic in relation to cross-cultural literature on shamanism. Central to this concept was the work of Eliade (1964), who defined shamanism as the ability of a ritual specialist to undergo a trancelike change of mental state in which the soul journeyed to other places to communicate with powerful spirits. Furst (1976) expanded on this work, building a model of shamanism in the Americas. Believing that a definition of shamanism relying solely on altered states of consciousness was not always appropriate for Native American societies, he instead focused on specific ideological features of Native American religion. For Furst, shamanism was associated with a three-tiered universe and an axis mundi connecting these levels, often surmounted by a supernatural bird. It also included beliefs in an animistic universe, in which supernatural forces were personified, and the ability of humans to transform into animals. These features are indeed common in Native American beliefs. As a consequence, Furst’s definition of shamanism became circular—common American religious beliefs defined shamanism, and therefore most Native American groups must be shamanic by definition (Klein et al. 2002:388–89).

Furst applied his model of shamanism to the study of Olmec figurines, concluding that they depicted shamans engaged in transformation into jaguars as part of a trance ritual.

Other scholars argued that in hierarchical Mesoamerican societies hereditary rulers must have appropriated shamanic powers as a path to political authority (e.g., Coe 1972; Guernsey 2006:20; Joyce and Winter 1996; Masson and Orr 1998; Reilly 1994). For the Maya, this idea was championed by Schele and Freidel and their students (e.g., Freidel and Schele 1988; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993; Schele and Freidel 1990; Fields 1989; Fields and Reents-Budet 2005). They argued that in the Preclassic period village-level ritual specialists (shamans) used their personal charisma to intercede with gods and spirits on behalf of community members through ritual transformation. This power became institutionalized in the Late Preclassic and Classic periods, such that Maya rulers were seen as shamanic specialists, through which they derived their power. This political strategy, they argued, was apparent in features such as rulers' royal regalia, which resembled the World Tree/axis mundi. They also pointed to glyphic references to *wahy* creatures, which they interpreted as shamanic familiars.

Others have been critical of the shamanic approach (e.g., Klein et al. 2002; Stuart 2005; Zender 2004). Zender (2004), for instance, refutes the evidence that Maya rulers embodied the axis mundi or that they made shamanic journeys. He believes that Schele and Freidel misinterpreted certain iconographic contexts and that the *wahy* glyph represents a more complex concept than originally supposed. On theoretical grounds he also contrasts the shamanic model to a cross-cultural model of a priestly hierarchy. Shamans, he argues, tend to command and threaten divine forces while priests merely plead with them. Shamans serve individual clients on a case-by-case basis while priests serve the whole community. The shaman works in his or her own home or in that of a client, while the priest operates in a temple or official religious building. Shamans are recruited through their personal charisma or spiritual power, while priests are recruited from particular families or social classes.

But the debate about whether Maya rulers were more priest-like or shaman-like, and even the very definition of shamanism itself, obscures the most valuable contributions of this scholarship on Maya religion. Neither of these cross-cultural models adequately describes the relationship between Maya politics and religious practices. Instead, archaeologists and epigraphers have to do the careful work of reconstructing the actual claims to political authority made by rulers through their ritual practices and discourses and the extent to which their followers found these claims plausible (Kurnick 2016).

Research has revealed the myriad connections between the complex systems of Classic Maya religious belief and politics. For example, Stuart (1996) showed that Maya stelae, often carved with images of Maya rulers, were considered actual embodiments of rulers themselves. Furthermore, since these monuments were carved and dedicated to commemorate significant junctures within the Maya calendar, rulers and their carved images were, by extension, manifestations of time's passage. McAnany's (1995) analysis of Maya ancestor veneration has revealed the importance of "living with the ancestors" in claims to inherited rights and privileges, not just of rulers but of other community members as well. Houston and Stuart's (1996) study of Classic Maya gods revealed the role of deities in Classic Maya politics—rulers were named for gods, impersonated them, and cared for their images. They propose that Maya rulers were not so much themselves considered gods, but that they served "a central role in communications between gods, humans, and, frequently, royal ancestors" (290). This is particularly significant, they argue, because the ruler's interpretation of divine will would be equally applicable to all of his subjects. Houston et al. (2003) extend this observation, noting that, as intermediaries with gods, rulers embodied the ethnicity of the polity and served as the hub of a "moral community."

This important research on religion-based political strategies has mostly focused on the level of the individual polity or community. In other words, it has examined how the *ajaw* (ruler) acquired and maintained authority over his local subjects. What remains to be seen, however, is the extent to which suprapolity political strategies of network and alliance building also had religious aspects. Evidence points to the importance of intermarriage, gift-giving, tribute payments, and warfare in the creation and maintenance of these power blocs. But Sabloff (2015) has recently challenged scholars of the Maya to explore the cultural specificities of Maya politics more aggressively. Neither a peer-polity nor a superstate model is sufficient, he argues, to explain the Classic Maya phenomenon, nor is it enough to say that Calakmul, Tikal, or other large sites controlled client kingdoms. What did that "control" actually entail, since it did not seem to have involved outright military occupation? What did warfare actually achieve? What was the Classic Maya polity?

#### PATRON GODS

This book cannot fully solve the questions posed by Sabloff, but it takes a step. Classic Maya political strategies were extremely complex, and even those we would call religious are too numerous to explore in one volume. Here I

focus on just one of the many overlapping and intertwined sets of ideological discourses and practices through which the Classic Maya enacted social relationships and power differentials. This book explores the phenomenon of patron deities of particular Maya communities. I will show that each kingdom had its own local pantheon of gods that were believed to inhabit physical effigies. Though the evidence suggests that these gods were believed to protect all people living in a given place or region, rulers loudly proclaimed their own obligations to care for their effigies. These gods were considered important players in the political machinations between different polities. Not only did they bring success in war, they also represented the local kingdom in its dealings with allies and vassals. And, in fact, some powerful polities such as Calakmul and Tikal experimented with political strategies involving the patron deities of their clients and enemies.

In the chapters that follow, I will turn to the extensive evidence of patron deity veneration from Classic period hieroglyphic inscriptions. I will contextualize it within the archaeological evidence for temples and rituals for these gods as well as the obvious continuities of these practices in later periods of Maya and Mesoamerican history. I will also explore the role of patron deities in the politics of the kingdom of La Corona, a site with valuable epigraphic and archaeological information about its tumultuous dynastic history. But first I will turn to an exploration of semiotic anthropology. By applying a semiotic approach to the archaeological study of ancient societies, I believe scholars can simultaneously recognize the contingent cultural and historical factors—like patron deity veneration—that shaped political action in the past, while still employing a set of concepts and terms that are applicable cross-culturally. And in the end I believe a semiotic orientation toward the study of Maya patron deity veneration will provide a partial answer to some of the persistent questions about the nature of Maya politics.

## NOTES

1. Interestingly, the *-pan* ending of the word *Mayapan* means “banner” in Nahuatl, a language of Central Mexico. Whether the word “Maya” was also borrowed from Nahuatl is unclear.

2. Lounsbury (1973) had previously argued that this sign was of highland origin and read *ahpop* or “lord” and that it was adopted by lowland Maya and read as *ajaw*. While his conclusion (that the sign reads *ajaw*) was ultimately correct, his explanation was not.