

Yucatán

Thirty Centuries of History before the Spaniards

Adriana Velázquez Morlet*



Yucatán-Labná



Yucatán-Dzibilchaltún

When people think about the ancient Mayas, they usually conger up the traditional image of peaceful, wise men dedicating their time to astronomy and mathematics, the great builders and artists. But the history of the pre-Hispanic Mayan world on the Yucatán Peninsula is enormously complex and still far from being completely understood. The term “Maya” involves elements united by common roots, but diversified down through its long history and over the vast territory they settled.

THE MAYAN LANDS

The peninsula’s Mayan civilization developed over a little more than 175,000 km² that included what are now Yucatán, Campeche and Quintana Roo. Researchers have divided this area into three: the plains of the North, the Puuc mountainous region and the southern lowlands. These differences contributed to enriching the Mayan culture and creating successful subsistence strategies over the centuries.

* Director of the Quintana Roo National Institute of Anthropology and History Center.
Photos by Elsie Montiel



Yucatán-Sayil



Yucatán-Kabah



Yucatán-Uxmal



Yucatán-Ek-Balam



Campeche-Balamkú

ORIGINS

Little is known about the first Mayan ancestors. Research shows that 12,000 years ago, the peninsula was a plain similar to Africa's, covered by now-extinct animals. Its first inhabitants, very different from historical Mayas, hunted some of these animals and explored the caves in the Tulum area —then dry, but now flooded— in search of temporary shelter, water and a place to bury their dead.



Campeche-Calakmul

THE FIRST VILLAGES

Initially, the region's inhabitants set up small camps that they struck to search for food. This way of life made them familiar with the developmental cycles of the animals and plants and led them to start manipulating them for their own purposes. So, by around 2800 B.C., they were already cultivating maize, and by 900 B.C., in places like Komché, Yucatán, they were raising platforms with small temples where they buried important personages.

In the pre-classical period, the Mayas developed the essential concepts of their view of the universe and the divine nature of their rulers, who became the *raison d'être* for their largest construction projects. Starting in 600 B.C., cities like Dzibanché and Ichkabal in southern Quintana Roo, Calakmul in Campeche, and Dzibilchaltún in northern Yucatán already had rather important structures. At that time, the founda-

tions of Mayan world view was already the divine power of their rulers, based on their claim to a mythological genealogy that gave them the sacred right to exercise power. This is why the representation of the divine lords in great stucco masks placed on the basements of the pyramids became the way to express the kings' power and authority. Beautiful examples of these decorations have been documented in Calakmul, Chakanbakán, Edzná and Acanceh.

THE CONSOLIDATION OF MAYAN POWER

The final years of the pre-classical period (approximately 200 B.C.) saw the burgeoning divine dynasties become all-powerful, each establishing its own political territory. From then on, war and high-level alliances would be the constant in the dynamics of Mayan politics.

Throughout the early classical (A.D. 200-600), Mayan civilization on the peninsula became notably complex, with great cities and enormous buildings in the Petén style, like the ones in Calakmul, Dzibanché, Kohunlich, Ichkabal, Nadzcan, Becán, Oxkintok and many others. Of course, the Mayas were not cut off from what was going on in other regions like Central Mexico, where Teotihuacan exerted immense territorial



Campeche-X-puhil

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Campeche-Chicanná



Campeche-Edzná

dominance. However, despite the many elements present in the iconography of the time, there is no reason to think the Teotihuacan culture dominated the peninsula. The use of those elements was surely due exclusively to their political and symbolic value and to the prestige that their use represented. The fall of Teotihuacan around A.D. 650 sparked profound transformations in the political geography of Central Mexico. However, in the Mayan area, this was the time of greatest population growth, which led to innovative architecture, specifically with the emergence of the Río Bec, Chenes and Puuc styles and their exquisite edifices.

In the late classical period, the giant masks stopped being used and the construction of stelae and stone altars became generalized. On them, inscriptions referred to the kings as *Ahaw* (“noble” or “lord”), and to the cities, the seats of royal power, as *K’ul Ahaw*, a name for a godly place. The lords were sometimes given the title of *kaloomte’* (“supreme lord of war”) after victories in their frequent military clashes. In most cases, royal succession among the Maya was defined through the paternal line, but there are cases known in which, faced with the absence of a male heir, this rule was broken and a woman was made queen.

Historical inscriptions show us the complex political relations the Mayan kings established, but offer little infor-



Campeche-Becan

mation about the way of life of anyone who was not part of the nobility. Excavations in the residential areas of Calakmul, Kohunlich, Cobá or the Puuc cities show that their inhabitants may have organized themselves in neighborhoods, each with its own temple and ruled by a minor lord who was in charge of coordinating the group's activities.

The cities of the classical period were the combination of a viable locale, with high ground and good drainage, surrounded by fertile lands and water sources, and a design linked to the social order and the Mayan ideas about the sacred universe, which gave every element of the urban landscape a cosmological significance. All the elements of the city (plazas, stelae, temples) reproduced the sacred primary landscape (jungle, mountains and caves). In their own way, the humble peasants of the surrounding areas also replicated this vision of the universe in the *cenotes* (sink holes), caves and hills of the jungle.

We are far from understanding how the political and economic inner workings of the classical Mayan world broke down around the ninth or tenth century, the moment traditionally known as the "Mayan collapse." It seems to be a fact that the royal authority of the great cities had seriously deteriorated, which leads us to think that their

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Quintana Roo-Cobá



Quintana Roo-Tulum

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powerful lords were dethroned. However, evidence also shows that the cities were not abandoned and that their inhabitants continued living their daily lives, invading the old ritual spaces to turn them into dwellings, re-utilizing the sacred monuments for simple building materials. The Mayas did not disappear, but their society did enter into a process of transformation that would lead to new political and economic structures.



Quintana Roo-Tulum

Meanwhile, in the northern part of the peninsula, the rulers developed more successful strategies that apparently centered on government structures with non-permanent members. In the Puuc region, splendid constructions began to be built that portrayed divine power differently, and they abandoned the use of stelae and inscriptions. In the eastern part of the region, Chichén Itzá began to develop, becoming an enormous city, perhaps at the start as an ally of the Puuc, but later acting on its own.

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rulers of Chichén may have found the Chontales from what is now Tabasco to be good allies, and together created a new regional order that allowed them to accumulate unprecedented power in the Yucatán Peninsula after A.D.1000.

The consolidation of Chichén Itzá as the victor was the first time in Mayan history that a single city had concentrated control over an enormous region, developing at the same time a vision of the world that included very innovative political and religious ideas. While this was happening in the spheres of power, the peasant communities continued life without major changes; although some activities like salt gathering and fishing became more important, the dwellings of ordinary people at that time were practically identical to those from previous periods.

Chichén Itzá was the most powerful capital of the post-classical Mayan world until almost A.D. 1200, when its highly centralized power structure broke down, incapable of containing the conflicts among the kin groups of the city's *multepal* or "governing boards." The ethno-historical stories that have survived mention the migration of those kin groups, some to nearby places like Mayapán, and other to far-off lands like Tayasal in Guatemala, where they founded a new city which resisted even the European conquest.

Mayapán is a replica of Chichén Itzá: its buildings are very similar and there is a clear intention of perpetrating the old order. However, the success of the walled city of Mayapán was ephemeral. Chronicles say that it was destroyed in 1441, when the alliance among its governing kin groups broke down. Whether this story is true or not, the fact is that archaeological research seems to point to its being destroyed at that time.

DECADENCE?

After these events, the Yucatán Peninsula fragmented politically into 16 autonomous provinces, the *kuchkabalooob*, some of which became very rich and relatively powerful thanks to their control of the salt-producing regions and the coastal ports. Tulum, Xcaret (Pole), Xamanhá (today Playa del Carmen), Xelhá and Ichpaatún, among others, are some of the most important port cities of those late-period times, some of them walled, others concentrated in clusters lining the coast. These were the settlements the Spanish voyagers sighted when they arrived at the peninsula's east coast in 1517. From that time on, history would be different. **MM**



Yucatán-Chichén Itzá

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