

*Ancient Worlds of the Americas:
Explorations in anthropological archaeology at Brandeis University*

Date: Friday October 23, 2009 from 1:30 to 6:00 pm
Napoli Trophy Room, Gosman Convocation Center, Brandeis University

1: 30 – Opening remarks (Javier Urcid)

1: 40 – 2:05

Charles Golden: The Dynamic Relationship of Growth and Collapse in the Maya Kingdoms of Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan

The political processes that lead to the growth of complex, state organized, societies are often taken to be dramatically different from the processes that lead to the collapse of such systems. Periods of growth are interpreted as the product of fully functioning and healthy political regimes and societies, while periods of political collapse and demographic dissolution are interpreted as the result of one or another systemic pathology. Thus the “Maya Collapse” of the Southern Lowlands in the 9th century AD has been interpreted as the result of warfare raging out of control, climatic change, peasant revolts, invasions of peoples from outside the Southern Lowlands, or some nuanced combination of these prime movers. Bringing together epigraphic data and the results of archaeological research in the Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan kingdoms, I will argue, instead, that the growth and collapse of the Classic period kingdoms of the Usumacinta Basin was all of a piece. It is my argument that the very political processes that allowed the dynasties of Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan to establish themselves in small nucleated capitals and slowly extend their control over an ever growing territory lead in a logical – though by no means inevitable – way to their eventual collapse. I conclude by examining the implications for this model for kingdoms across the Southern Maya Lowlands.

2:10 – 2:35

Betsy Marzahn-Ramos: Rural Settlements as Actors in a Regional Political System: Ongoing research in the Middle Usumacinta River Basin

Based on archaeological and epigraphic data, it has been hypothesized that the political landscape of the Classic period (c. 300-900 AD) Maya was comprised of competing dynastic kingdoms. I argue that rural settlements in the hinterlands of major polity capitals played an active role in negotiating, maintaining, and changing regional socio-political dynamics throughout the Classic period. In this paper, I will discuss my work in the region, and future field and lab seasons that will allow me to address my research interest.

2:40 – 3:05

Melanie Kingsley: **Understanding the Maya Landscape: a preliminary look at Laguna Mendoza, Guatemala**

Laguna Mendoza is a small lake with a scattering of island sites located in Southwestern Peten, Guatemala between the Classic Maya kingdoms of Yaxchilan, Hix Witz, and Altar de Sacrificios. Though island settlements in the Maya World are often discussed in regard to their Postclassic occupation, the changing use of space during the unusually long chronology (300 B.C.-present) found at Laguna Mendoza reflects the shifting political history of the region. This paper will present preliminary findings from the 2009 field season and discuss how the changing political and social organization of the Maya from the Preclassic through the Classic Periods was experienced in rural areas.

3:10 – 3:35

Don Perez: **Cartography in the Digital Age: Using Spatial Technologies to Record and Interpret ancient Maya Settlement in Central Yucatan, Mexico**

The Proyecto de Interacción Política del Centro de Yucatán (PIPCY) is a consortium whose aim is to study the remains of the ancient Maya, and to conduct ethnographic research on the modern Maya, in the region of central Yucatan, Mexico. Among the goals of the project's 2009 field season were to survey and map a portion of the large pre-Hispanic site known today as Yaxuna and the ruins of a smaller rural hamlet located roughly five kilometers to the northwest. I will present on the methods used by the PIPCY team to map these sites and the data collected during the 2009 field season.

Coffee break 3:40 – 4:00

4:00 – 4:25

Don Slater: **Seeking Xibalba: Preliminary Investigations of the Central Yucatan Archaeological Cave Project (CYAC)**

CYAC's preliminary investigations have revealed a vast abundance of cave features within the Yaxcaba Municipal region of Yucatan, Mexico. The 50+ caves documented thus far, including caverns, rejolladas, cenotes, and rockshelters, represent merely a fraction of those visible via remote sensing. However, the data gathered from this sample is beginning to uncover interesting clues about the timeline and ritual use of the area's caves. Evidence of cave/chamber termination, and the discovery of offerings, cosmograms, ritual pathways, rock art, and unusually placed architectural elements, presents new opportunities for the interpretation of socio-political and religious power relations among the region's pre-Hispanic Maya.

4:30 – 4:55

Bryce Davenport: **Style and Substance: The Influence of the Mixteca-Puebla Style on the Azatlán Complex**

The spread of the Mixteca-Puebla ceramic style linked Postclassic Mesoamerica and beyond, from the American Southwest to Pacific Nicaragua, into what many scholars consider a nascent international system of trade and political influence. On the West Mexican coast, this spread was accompanied by intense political, economic, and social change. In this paper I argue that the Azatlán phenomenon of the Pacific littoral can best be understood as a series of local developments taking advantage of the Postclassic International style in order to generate idiosyncratic claims to legitimacy, rather than as an overriding 'wave of influence' from Central Mexico.

5:00 – 5:25

Tatiana Loya González: **Clay mixing and Grog: Interpreting Potters' Choices with Petrography**

The Arena Red is a ceramic type that appeared during the Late Classic (AD 600-750) in some northern Maya lowland sites. Associated with the longest masonry road known to date -the Sacbe 1- the pottery type was thought to be the political signature of the site of Coba. Analyses conducted by Loya (2008; Loya and Stanton n/d) posited the type's origin in the vicinity of the site of Yaxuna, in the center of the Yucatan Peninsula. According to the author, the Arena Red vessels found in Maya sites came from Yaxuna or its vicinity. Petrography suggest that the type was manufactured with endogenous materials, some of which are still used today, and further elucidated technological practices that may have cosmological connotations. Can petrography shed light on the potters' ideological agenda? Interpreting the choices represented by temper selection can be a useful tool when grappling with the relationship between technology and ideology in pottery analyses.

5:30 – 5:55

Dicru Reivaj: **Detecting the boundaries of Classic period scribal traditions in Southwestern Mesoamerica**

Research at the site of Huehuepiactla, in southwestern Puebla, evinces the existence of stone monuments carved with conventions from two scribal traditions that partially overlapped in time. One is related to the script from the Central Highlands; the other to the script from the Mixteca Baja of southwestern Mesoamerica. Aside from helping in assessing the regional distribution of scripts, such overlap of stylistic choices allows a temporal seriation of the carved monuments. Since the inscribed stones appear to render the calendrical names of rulers, the seriation generates a local dynastic sequence that highlights the political importance of ancient Huehuepiactla.