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ALL OF A PIECE: THE POLITICS OF GROWTH AND COLLAPSE IN CLASSIC MAYA KINGDOMS

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Abstract

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 our archaeological research in the Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan kingdoms, we will argue, instead, that the growth and collapse of the Classic period kingdoms of the Usumacinta Basin was all of a piece. It is our 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.

Resumen

Los procesos políticos que producen el crecimiento de las sociedades complejas, organizadas como estados, han sido percibidos como procesos distintos de los que contribuyen al colapso de esos sistemas. Los períodos de crecimiento se interpretan como el producto del saludable y pleno funcionamiento de los regímenes políticos y las sociedades, mientras que los períodos de colapso político y la disolución demográfica se interpretan como el resultado de una u otra patología sistémica. Así, el “Colapso Maya” de las tierras bajas del sur en el siglo noveno dC se ha interpretado como el resultado de la guerra fuera de control, el cambio climático, las revueltas campesinas, las invasiones de los pueblos extranjeros, o alguna combinación de estos. Al reunir los datos epigráficos y los resultados de nuestra investigación arqueológica en los reinos de Piedras Negras y Yaxchilán, se argumentará, en cambio, que se formó el crecimiento y el colapso de los reinos del período Clásico de la Cuenca del Usumacinta de una sola pieza. Es nuestro argumento que los mismos procesos que permitieron a las dinastías de Piedras Negras y Yaxchilán a establecerse en pequeñas capitales nucleadas y poco a poco extender su control sobre un territorio cada vez mayor resultó de una forma lógica - aunque de ninguna manera inevitable - a su eventual colapso.

INTRODUCTION

This is a paper about the processes of state failure and collapse and what they can tell us about the functioning of Classic period Maya states. Most reconstructions of the Maya collapse begin with the premise that the collapse is the result of some political pathology of internal or external origins, whether this is environmental change, the collapse of particular trade networks, population movements of groups external to the “Classic system,” or warfare raging out of control. Without denying the significance of any one or more of such causes, we want to shift the discussion a bit. We want to begin with the premise that although the dissolution of a political system is in some ways inherently pathological – *it is, after all, political death* – the causes of that dissolution may be found in the fully functional and apparently “healthy” state that precedes collapse. That is, quite simply, collapse is an outcome of the same processes that lead to state growth.

To summarize then, in this paper we will explore some aspects of political collapse that should inform us about the once functioning political organization. This reverse engineering of political systems is helpful in moving us towards a more robust understanding of how a once successful system can find itself in collapse with or without outside influences. In particular we examine the collapse and growth of two Maya kingdoms, Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan, in the Middle Usumacinta River basin, where together with many international colleagues we have been conducting research in one form or another, with one project or another since 1997 (e.g., Golden & Scherer 2006; Golden *et al.* 2008; Golden 2002; Golden 2003; Golden *et al.* 2005; Houston *et al.* 1998; Houston *et al.* 1999; Houston *et al.* 2003; Houston *et al.* 2006; Scherer & Golden 2009; Fig. 1 and 2). In so doing we hope to find a better understanding for how the relationships between dynastic ruler, noble courtiers, and the complex system of non-noble members of the political community were integrated to form what we interpret as the Classic Maya polity.

WHAT IS MEANT BY COLLAPSE

The definition of collapse itself is problematic – too often in the archaeological literature there is a conflation of the collapse of political authority with demographic collapse and dramatic changes in material culture. Certainly there are areas of the Maya lowlands where political collapse seems to go hand in hand with demographic collapse. Researchers working in the Petexbatun region (e.g., Demarest 2004; Demarest *et al.* 1997; Houston & Inomata 2009: 295-300; Inomata 1997; Inomata & Triadan 2000; O’Mansky & Dunning 2004) argue for the rapid abandonment of political centers and rural settlements in the aftermath of the defeat of the Dos Pilas/Aguateca dynasty. The persistence, and even growth, of populations at nearby centers such as Ceibal (Houston & Inomata 2009: 306-309; Ponciano *et al.* 2007; Sabloff 1975; Tourtellot 1988), however, demonstrates rather clearly that healthy political systems could maintain robust populations in the 9th century AD. Moreover, in the case studies of Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan that we wish to focus on, the collapse of a political system organized around dynastic kingship preceded the abandonment of capital centers and some rural settlements by at least a century before sites were almost completely abandoned. Simply, demographic collapse is not evident before political collapse in much of the Maya area.

Further, those cultural changes identified with the collapse of Classic Maya civilization are essentially the loss of material culture associated with dynastic kingship and the political-economic system it supported. It is the disappearance of abundant glyphic inscriptions on monuments, a reduction in the investment in public/political architecture including palaces and temples, and a change in ceramic and lithic technologies and styles that in many ways represent the loss of specialized production of fine

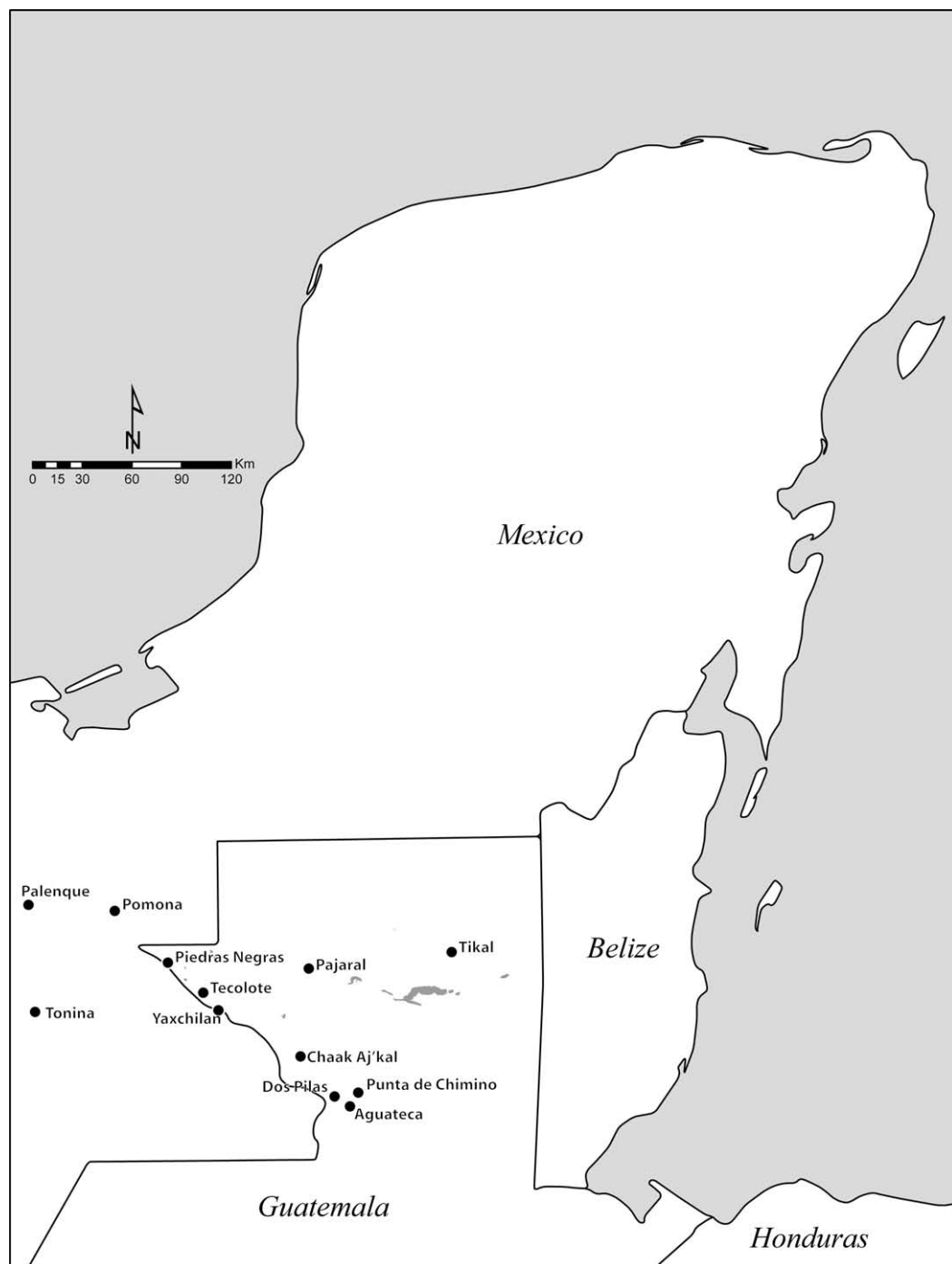


Figure 1. Map of the Maya area showing sites mentioned in text as well as immediately adjacent areas (map by Charles Golden).

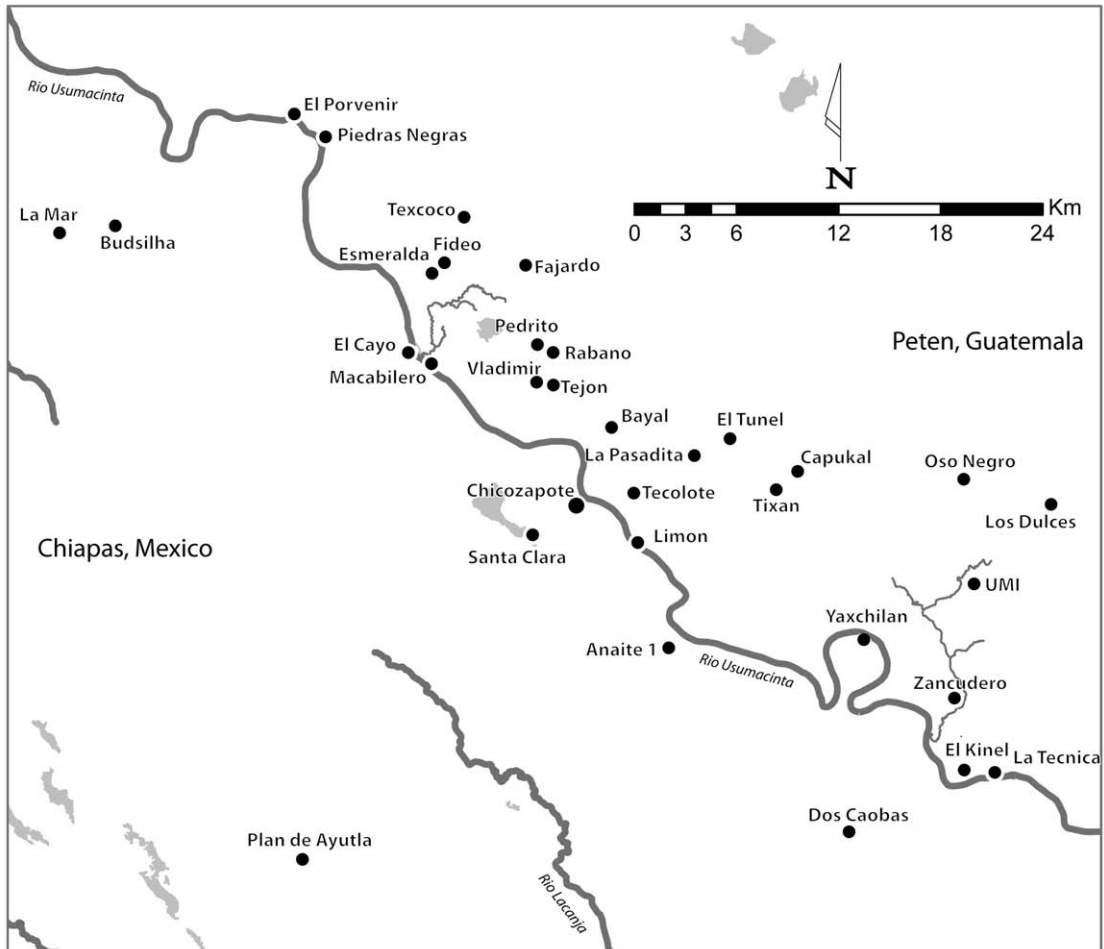


Figure 2. Regional map of the middle Usumacinta River basin showing sites mentioned in text (map by Charles Golden).

objects for and by courts and courtiers. What we want to focus on, then, is political collapse because it is from this – in the Southern lowlands – that other aspects of collapse follow.

Political collapse, at its most basic level, is the loss of a government's legitimacy across the extent of the territory within which it once exercised legitimate authority (Rotberg 2003: 1; Rotberg 2004; Zartman 1995). A collapsed state is not the same as a failed state. A failed state may retain some modicum of government, even as that government is under assault and is incapable of delivering effective administration to the territory that once defined the physical limits of the state. A collapsed state, in contrast, is *"a rare and extreme version of a failed state. A collapsed state exhibits a vacuum of authority"* (Rotberg 2003: 9).

The loss of legitimacy in a failed or collapsed state is not the outcome of short-term pathologies, but is rather *"a long-term degenerative disease"* (Zartman 1995: 8). It is not a new process, but is instead the exacerbation of more general problems of governance that plague even healthy states (Cowgill

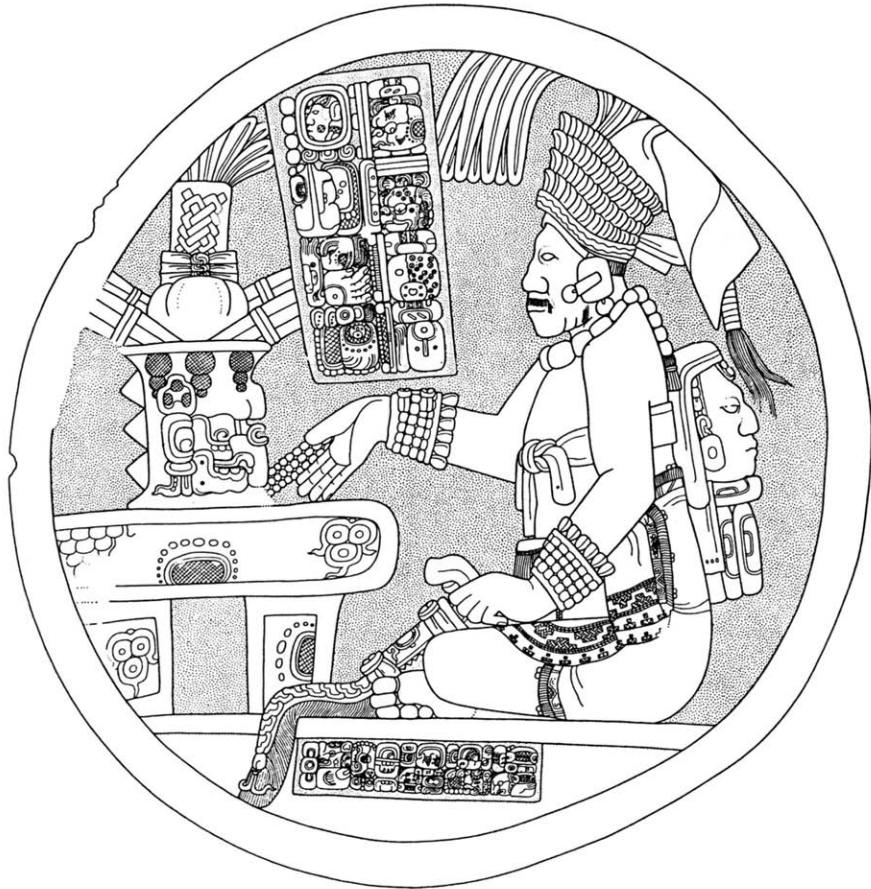


Figure 3. El Cayo Altar 4 showing the *sajal* – the governor/ruler – of El Cayo, Chiapas, who was a subordinate to the ruler of Piedras Negras (drawing by Peter Mathews, courtesy of Peter Mathews).

1988; Zartman 1995: 7). Moreover, because as archaeologists we see the outcome of collapse we tend to view the process of collapse itself as inevitable (Tainter 1988: 59). Political scientists concerned with modern failed and collapsed states, however, are keenly aware of the lack of inevitability in collapse. States may pull back from the brink of collapse, or reform after collapse, to restore the central authority and legitimacy of government functions and functionaries (Meierhenrich 2004; Zartman 1995: 8). Modern examples, such as Lebanon, demonstrate the potential for returning a failed state to at least a moderately functioning state when political actors and warring parties are all, independently committed for their own reasons to the notion of a state, preferring it to all political options (Barak 2003: 318-320).

State failure and collapse is not inevitable, then, nor is it merely the outcome of negligent political actors (Rotberg 2003: 14). Rather the failure of a state requires the movement of political actors away from a commitment to the state as a serious political option, and it requires effort on the part of rulers in a failing state to achieve this end (Rotberg 2003: 23; 2004: 14). Complex polities like “The State” are not problem solving systems or rational actors, they are the products of individual and corporate actors whose rational decisions may result in the collapse of the polity. This is not to say that rulers



Figure 4. La Pasadita Lintel 2 showing *sajal* of La Pasadita (left) together with his overlord, Bird Jaguar IV, king of Yaxchilan (right). Drawing by Linda Schele, reproduced courtesy of FAMSI.

necessarily seek to destroy the state apparatus that they head, but rather that political leaders may make rational decisions about maintaining their personal power even when it is to the detriment of the polity as a whole – something we see often in modern failing states. Collapse comes when leaders make choices and implement policies aimed at the consolidation of their own power and that of crucial political allies, at the expense of society as a whole (Rotberg 2003: 23).

Governments in failing and collapsed states actively destroy civil society through actions intended to limit the potential of alternative political foci in the state, and to shore up their declining authority. If not destroyed, civil society can actually be driven to be a force of political fragmentation if government institutions are not well integrated with it, or if the government cannot otherwise provide for the political good (Berman 1997: 402; Chambers & Kopstein 2001; Posner 2004: 237). Part and parcel of the loss of legitimacy is the loss of trust in government and super-local organization in general. The government can no longer provide security, a primary political good, from threats external to the polity or from competing groups within the failing polity (Rotberg 2004: 3).

There is not time here to discuss all the problems and perils in the application of models of political life in modern nation states to that of Pre-Columbian Maya kingdoms, however we think it safe to say that all states necessarily have civil society, and that trust between non-state associations and communities, and between those non-state associations and the government are critical as glue holding the polity together. Maya kingdoms did not have the security structure to impose a state through force on its populace. If trust and security could not be extended from the house to the local community to the political community constituted by the Maya kingdom, then the kingdom would have fractured.

OUTLINE OF COLLAPSE AND GROWTH IN THE PIEDRAS NEGRAS AND YAXCHILAN POLITIES

We want to move now to the case study of Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan to put some specificity to what so far has been a rather vague discussion. The Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan polities appeared on the fractured political landscape of the Terminal Preclassic period with the foundation of dynastic courts in the 4th century AD (Houston *et al.* 2003; Golden *et al.* 2008; Martin & Grube 2008). There is circumstantial archaeological and epigraphic evidence that both dynasties arrived on the banks of the Usumacinta as offshoots from older polities in the Central Petén (e.g., Child & Golden 2008: 75; Houston 2008; Houston *et al.* 2003: 236; Satterthwaite 1937: 167, 1941). The landscape into which these courts thrust themselves consisted of small, scattered political centers. Some of these small centers are associated with defensive features that hint at the turmoil that wracked the Maya lowlands in the early part of the 1st millennium (Golden & Scherer 2006: 11-12; Golden *et al.* 2005: 13-14; Golden *et al.* 2008: 265).

The arrival of dynastic courts dramatically altered the demographics of the Middle Usumacinta River region. Most of the once numerous small centers were abandoned and their populations concentrated around Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan, and only a few significant settlements, such as El Cayo, persisted outside the dynastic capital (Golden *et al.* 2008: 259; Mathews & Aliphath Fernandez 1997: 200-205). It seems probable that the newly founded royal courts offered a desirable political nucleus around which communities could grow and provided the fundamental political good of security and stability in the aftermath of intercommunity conflict. Until the end of the 6th century the two polities were essentially communities of daily interaction, and most people lived within a few kilometers of the capitals (Golden *et al.* 2008; Houston *et al.* 2003).

Here, then, is where trust, legitimacy, and civil society come into play. The Maya king formed a moral center of authority for the political community that grew up around the dynastic center, but to maintain that legitimacy required actions to integrate civil society into the polity; it requires that generalized trust – trust that does not require the expectation of reciprocity between members of the political community – be built among all classes of society (Uslaner 2000-2001: 579; Posner 2004; Widner 2004). Generalized trust is directly related to the rule of law and state legitimacy.

In particular, we would suggest that individuals, households, and other corporate groups – *groups who would not otherwise have found themselves in daily contact with one another* – were involved in activities including the construction of public architecture at the political capitals, military campaigns launched from the capital, as well as feasts, the performances associated with the dedication of royal monuments, and other activities associated with the dynastic court. Such practices furthered these goals of building civil society centered on the state and the dynastic center. Modern studies demonstrate that the greater the diversity, and the involvement of multiple social and economic strata, the more effective the formulation and maintenance of trust and civil society (Stolle 1998: 504, 521; Uslaner 2000-2001). The stress and strain – social, economic, and physical – of building, warfare, feasting and more would

have facilitated the formulation and maintenance of civil society (Uslaner 2000-2001: 573). To be clear: we are not saying that trust-building was the intent of such activities and performances, rather it was a beneficial outcome of actions intended to enhance the authority of dynastic rulers.

By the 7th century AD, though, populations began to expand out into the hinterlands and control of the landscape became the major concern of the two dynasties. Concomitant with demographic changes, the epigraphic data yield an abundance of new political personages – lords and ladies who were active at the royal court and who governed subordinate centers in the countryside of both kingdoms (Figures 3 and 4). Such members of the nobility must have existed in some form before the 7th century. But their dramatic appearance and proliferation on monuments indicates their growing importance at the political capitals and at the territorial limits of royal authority, suggesting two likely, and not mutually exclusive, causes: 1) expansive populations in the countryside required the promotion of noble lords needed to focus the work of those people on the state, or 2) an abundance of noble lords in the court proved threatening to dynastic rulers who sent these erstwhile allies to the fringes of the kingdom accompanied by retainers and other settlers who might control the countryside and stay out of the dynast's nicely coiffed hair.

At this point, the rulers of Piedras Negras and the rulers of Yaxchilan had to contend with decidedly different political realities in seeking to extend their authority (Golden *et al.* 2008). Yaxchilan's rulers were free from competition in a sense – no existing power centers were present within the territory to which they laid claim between the centers of Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan. To extend their authority the Late Classic rulers of Yaxchilan sponsored the construction of secondary political centers like El Chicozapote, Tecolote, and La Pasadita at the northern reaches of their authority, and established subordinate nobles – *sajal* – as their lieutenants in the hinterlands. Many – perhaps all – of these secondary centers were built as integral components of fortifications, and Yaxchilan's landscape was tightly controlled and demarcated (Scherer & Golden 2009).

In contrast, the expansion of the Piedras Negras kingdom into its hinterlands required the rulers of that kingdom to reach a negotiated system of authority with a pre-existing political community centered on El Cayo, and perhaps other centers such as La Mar to the west. For El Cayo, at least, Piedras Negras was merely the most powerful local source of royal authority, while the *sajal* of El Cayo maintained complex political relationships with other dynasties. At the southern reaches of the Piedras Negras territory is a much looser distribution of secondary centers with no signs of a well organized defensive system to match that of the Yaxchilan polity. Although El Cayo, La Mar and other centers were integrated into the Piedras Negras polity, the rulers of Piedras Negras probably never exercised control as directly over their subordinates as did their counterparts at Yaxchilan.

Faced with different political landscapes, the rulers of both dynasties encountered a common problem – how to integrate these nobles and populations on the territorial peripheries with the governance of the state. It is unlikely that populations from across the now expansive state territory could be brought in regularly to the center, and contributions to the state in the form of taxes or other tribute could be delivered by a few people at most, or collected by nobles in the periphery. We have no evidence of a complex bureaucracy linking communities to the state, nor is there any evidence to suggest that the Classic Maya state could enforce its presence on an unwilling populace. Lacking the mechanisms to directly link populace to king, rulers sought to maintain and strengthen the linkages between the king and the nobility. Evidence of material support for nobles comes from monuments and mural programs that were carved and painted by artists sent out from the royal court. These monuments presumably were constrained to a historical canon defined by the needs of the dynasty, though they by no means are restricted to the glorification of the dynasty. Intriguingly, towards the end of the Classic period monuments dedicated to subordinate lords, and which are not carved by royal artists, appear in both

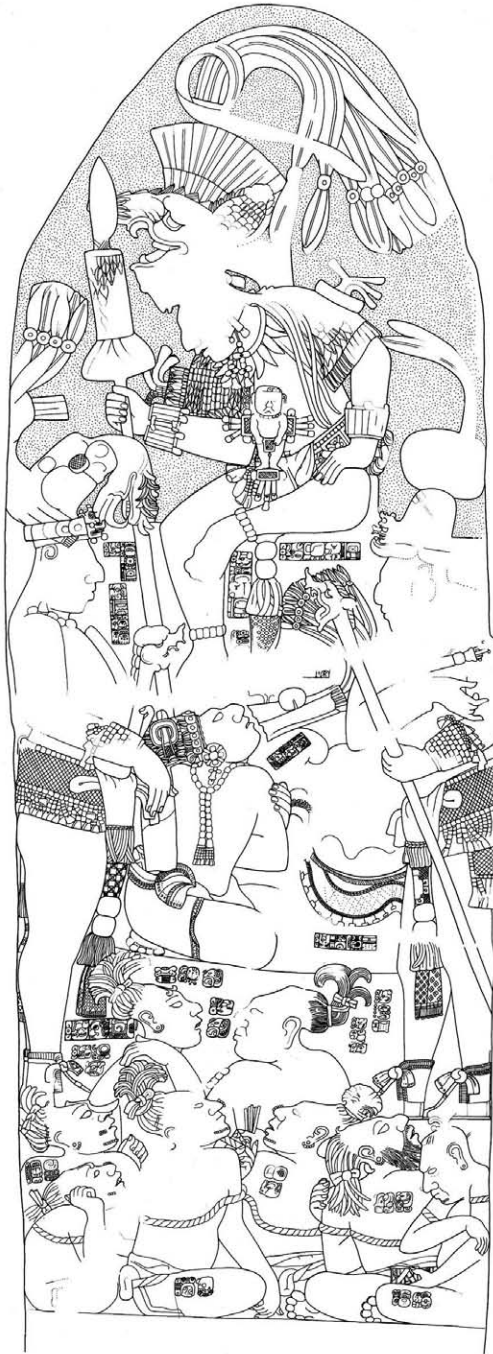


Figure 5. Piedras Negras Stela 12, showing the ruler of Piedras Negras receiving captive warriors from the Pomona kingdom. The standing figure at left is the ruler of La Mar (drawing by David Stuart from *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions* Vol. 9, Part 1, reproduced courtesy of the President and Fellows of Harvard College).

kingdoms. Such monuments depict the local lord alone, and sometimes provide different historical perspectives on the events also recorded at the polity capital.

More telling, perhaps, are the palaces and other public architecture built for the governors of hinterland sites. At least some of these buildings were probably designed and overseen by royal masons. The most parsimonious interpretation of the labor pool that built these edifices, however, is that it was made up of local community members; people who lived in the vicinity of secondary centers and whose labor contribution to the state was now being directed towards the construction of non-royal buildings.

Formerly royal prerogatives in the form of architecture, performances of texts inscribed on monuments, feasting and other communal activities were thus increasingly focused on the local community, not on the person of the king or the larger community of the kingdom. Warfare, too, may have been increasingly atomized. We have tantalizing hints – as with the monument from La Mar, or other scenes showing captives delivered as tribute rather than as true captives of the king, that warfare was being led by local lords with presumably local manpower (Figures 5 and 6). Trust building was thus taking place between smaller groups who lived in dispersed settlements, each with a smaller population than could be found around the polity capital of earlier periods. Activities focused on these smaller political centers did not foster polity-wide trust, nor did they actively link civil society into the polity as a whole. Seeking to strengthen their relationships with key allies in the form of tributary lords, Maya kings actually fostered the dissolution and atomization of civil society.

HEIGHT OF POWER OR STATES IN FAILURE?

Intriguingly, we have traditionally interpreted Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan as polities at the height of their power in the late 8th century AD, when the epigraphic data would suggest that they were at their maximum extent, and were engaged in conquests that furthered the political and economic goals of expansion. What then caused their collapse? In one sense, we know what happened to the dynasty of Piedras Negras – the last known ruler of Piedras Negras was captured and presumably killed sometime around AD 808 by the ruler of Yaxchilan. Without a regional rival Yaxchilan's dynasty should have emerged stronger than ever. And yet, its history too falls silent at this point with no evidence that it fell victim to conquest from outside.

We would suggest that the failure of both polities – kingdoms that in previous centuries had successfully weathered the loss of individual kings and the sacking of their capitals – came not primarily because of warfare, or environmental stress, nor other dramatic and short term causes. Instead, rather than polities at the height of their power both dynasties were victims of their own success. The very processes that royal dynasties used to expand their authority and grow the territorial extent of the kingdom moved the polity from a strongly centralized community to a weakening and eventually failed state of atomized communities no longer integrated with a civil society that supported the state. A reliance on subordinate lords had required the elevation of courtiers, war-captains and regional governors and resulted in the devolution of too many royal prerogatives onto non-royal nobles.

In the years following the cessation of dynastic monuments in both kingdoms, populations persisted. Purpose built border centers like Tecolote were quickly abandoned, but other communities – including the sites of Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan themselves, as well as rural sites such as El Porvenir and El Kinel – may have persisted into the 10th century or beyond, and proxy indicators such as skeletal health and the presence of trade goods don't suggest a highly impoverished lifestyle. Abandonment of the polity capitals took multiple generations – quick, perhaps, in our archaeological perspective but not for the people who lived those lives. But despite persistent populations local lords were not successful



Figure 6. La Mar Stela 3, showing the ruler of La Mar with his captive, a Pomona captive also shown on Piedras Negras Stela 12 (drawing by John Montgomery, reproduced courtesy of FAMSI).

in occupying the role that had once been occupied by royal dynasts, and by the 9th century civil society had abandoned the very concept of the territorial dynastic polity. The king no longer occupied a unique or necessarily desirable political role, and the loss of a particular king through warfare or natural death removed any impediment to political fissioning. There was nothing on which to rebuild a state.

CONCLUSIONS: GENERAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF MAYA POLITICAL LIFE

In conclusion we want to move from this case study to the general implications for the study of the growth and collapse of Maya polities, or indeed the archaeological study of complex societies in general. First and foremost, growth and collapse are political-economic processes and must be understood as such. This seems an obvious truism, and yet the search for explanations of political collapse often

leads us to explanations that are distinctly non-political. We do not deny the significance of devastating droughts, invasions, or other explanations that have been put forward to explain the collapse. But lacking mass death and wholesale devastation – something for which there is almost no evidence outside of some very interesting and exceptional cases – the reaction of a state to such influences is entirely dependent on their political structure and the integrity of the state, and its integration with civil society. This means that if we are able to see signs of disaster – environmental or otherwise – in the archaeological record, we must explain the impact of such disasters as the outcome of long-running political processes. Processes of growth and collapse cannot be dissociated from one another.

Further, an approach that considers the role of civil society and trust in binding together the polity provides another way to navigate a middle-ground between a top-down or a bottom-up approach (e.g., Canuto & Fash 2004). For example, an abundance of monumental architecture and the expansive distribution of royal and noble monuments proclaiming the power of the state are not merely the result of royal willpower – authority from on high. We cannot quantify man-hours invested in construction efforts and read them simply as the signs of the ability of the state to mobilize populations, in which more powerful states build bigger than less powerful states. Neither does warfare – despite the emphasis on monuments – merely result in the loss or conquest of new territory, the elevation of a particularly successful noble, or a particularly close haircut for the loser. Instead of these processes that represent the negotiation of dynastic power with competing interests from the elite and from society as a whole. They represent the involvement and restructuring of civil society that may either benefit or – as in the case we've outlined today – eliminate the power of the state. Moreover, understanding the distribution of such monuments and buildings across the landscape is critical – neither the political center nor rural settlements can tell the whole story.

We want to emphasize that we are not suggesting by any means that architecture, monuments, and warfare are the only loci and signatures of these processes – they are simply the most accessible and suited to the brief treatment presented in this paper. Further, in all candor, we are still considering how best to expand this exploration to other categories of material culture. But we believe that to understand the Classic period Maya polities we need to explore the processes of centripetal and centrifugal forces working against each other and better consider what constituted civil society.

Finally, understanding “The Collapse” – with a capital “C” – requires an understanding of why civil society abandoned the notion of the dynastic state across the Southern Maya Lowlands, and how this connected to transformations of state systems throughout Mesoamerica in the second half of the 1st millennium. Failing states can, after all, set off a cascade of collapse as we see today in Africa and fear for in Central Asia. We must find ways to incorporate into our interpretations the possibility that the waves of state collapse across Mesoamerica opened up new political options for corporate groups – non-state options in some cases, and differently organized states in others – in a political landscape that for centuries at least have been clogged with states organized around the principles of dynastic kingship.

There are certainly problems with the model we have put forward here, it is simplified, leaves too much to the imagination, and applies many theories about modern nation states to a pre-modern and non-western case study. Nonetheless, we think that this offers a fruitful way forward, one that we plan to pursue in future research. Consideration of trust and civil society are not merely the addition of jargon from yet another allied discipline in the social sciences to say the same thing in new ways. These offer different lenses – perhaps too rose-colored at the moment – to peer into the past.

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