



McDONALD INSTITUTE CONVERSATIONS

# The Evolution of Fragility: Setting the Terms

Edited by Norman Yoffee



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of Fragility:  
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Norman Yoffee, 2019

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## Chapter 4

# Fragile Authority in Monumental Time: Political Experimentation in the Classic Maya Lowlands

Patricia A. McAnany

Notions like fragility or its obverse, robusticity, have at their core an idea of durational time. Entities that are fragile may not last very long, are prone to dissolution or breakage, and may be unstable arrangements. Conversely, entities that are robust are said to possess staying power and to be sustainable. But how long must an entity survive to be considered sustainable or how briefly before it is perceived to have been fragile? Quantification of these qualities is problematic although Yoffee (2018) notes that many early states – here defined as fragile constellations of power with aspirations of long-term societal integration – tended to last about 200 years, perhaps four generations. By way of comparative analysis, Feinman & Carballo (2018) argue that more authoritarian modes of governance in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica tended to flame out more quickly while those asserted to be less authoritarian and more collectively organized were sustained over longer periods of time. I return to a critical analysis of these assertions in the pages to follow but by way of introduction point to the important cross threading of political strategies with notions of time and temporal duration.

In certain regions of Mesoamerica – the southern Maya lowlands particularly – this cross threading constituted a central strut that supported governance along the lines of hereditary rulership. A ruler was positioned metaphorically within vast folds of time that created the supra-reality of rulership or, as Paul Ricoeur (1985, 106) has written – monumental time: ‘To this monumental time belong the figures of authority and power that form the counterweight to the living times experienced....’ In the southern Maya lowlands, the fleeting evanescence of a human life combined with strategies of governance emphasizing authority and social difference were yoked to monumental time, which lent an aura of stability and durability regardless of the reality of the situation.

If we equate, as Yoffee (2018) has suggested, the evolution of fragility with the evolution of complexity, there are large implications. Basically, we are asserting that humans moved from a lived experience of small groups (very successful over the long run) to large-group aggregations (which are prone to hierarchy and violent ruptures). This transition took place quite possibly with full knowledge that the latter posture was inherently more fragile, prone to authoritarianism, and ultimately to dissolution. As Wright (2006) has suggested, the term *experimentation* seems to capture appropriately this transformation in which new modes of self-governance were tested for efficacy and durability. Scott (2017, 183), likewise, emphasizes the improvisational qualities of early states.

In the pages to follow, I first discuss how experimentation might be relevant to the topic of fragility and then refer to some early experiments from across the globe. Thereafter, the focus narrows to the Maya Lowlands where early experiments in large-group aggregations share commonalities but later exhibit pronounced divergences in the manner in which authority was anchored in monumental time and hereditary (dynastic) rule. Based on empirical patterning, such anchoring produced a political constellation of considerable fragility.

### Political experimentation

In an effort to depart from a paradigm that seeks to understand political formations in terms of ‘rise and fall’, I consider the human proclivity towards experimentation. Here, the term *experimentation* is used to mean a test or trial to see if something works. Deployed in this way, experimentation is conceived as social practice with political import. This usage is less formalized from that of nineteenth-century philosophers Auguste Comte or John Stuart Mill who codified the

use of experimentation as a critical component of the scientific method (Loizides 2014), although their usage does not preclude the central role of experimentation in early state formation.

Because political forms codify relations of power and positions of authority, they are frequently contested and sometimes ephemeral constructions as noted by Scott (2017, 183–218). Blanton & Fargher (2008, 5) link such fragility to rational but selfish social actions. But rationality is not always relevant to the construal of authority that oftentimes was rooted in mythic time and cosmic forces. Nonetheless, political forms tend to be unlike social, religious, or economic forms, although all can be imbued with significant relations of power. There is a resiliency – particularly to religious constellations – that is not often seen in political forms. By nature of their negotiated status, political arrangements often are finite, with an emphatic beginning (or founding event) and a muddled yet definitive ending. As Wright (2006, 316) notes, resurgent political entities frequently fine-tune more fragile aspects of earlier structures and in the process become more resilient. Such Lamarckian ‘descent with modification’ is observable in the Maya lowlands. In Postclassic Yucatán, rulers were called true men or *halach uinic* rather than the title of holy lord (*k’uhul ajaw*) in use during the Classic period. Elsewhere, Yoffee and Cowart (2010) have emphasized the distinction between political cycling and cultural resilience – the former tends towards dynamism and instability while the latter often prevails against all odds. Examining the fragility of political forms does not equate with cultural fragility or negate the possibility of political resurgence or ‘descent with modification’ as mentioned previously.

In their reiterations, political forms parallel the structure of scientific experimentation. Thus, archaeology – although not an experimental science – may be thought of as *the study of political experimentation*. What might we perceive as the range or continuum of human possibilities vis à vis political experimentation? Like the human imagination, variations are nearly endless (more on this shortly), but through time a funnelling effect occurred that resulted in surprisingly similar structures of authority among early states, such as those discussed in this volume. The polar extremes of this variation can be grossly characterized as authoritarian leadership, on the one hand, and voluntary collaboration (some would use the term anarchism, others collective action) on the other (Blanton & Fargher 2008; Graeber 2004; McLaughlin 2007). In between are councils, elected officials, and other variations on hereditary, achieved, elected, and appointed positions. Wright (2006, 314) argues that the experiments

archaeologists refer to as ‘early states’ often emerged from a milieu of intensely competitive polities, which often is argued to have been the situation in the Pre-classic Maya Lowlands (Clark & Hansen 2001; Freidel 2018; Ringle 1999). Frequently there is archaeological evidence of violent termination of places at which authority was concentrated, which is particularly the case throughout Mesoamerica. Nonetheless, why and how humans *disassemble* (à la Scott 2017, 183) political experiments is one of the most persistent (and overdramatized) questions of archaeological research. The popularity of this societal transformation perhaps is due to the fact that political dissolution can cause great suffering and misery for many although Scott (2017) contends that disassembly liberates ordinary people by removing the authority to extract taxes and labour in kind from power brokers.

Before examining how political experimentation might be pertinent to Lowland Maya governance, I range farther and examine some political forms with which humans experimented before a funnelling effect constrained variation and entrained selected forms of political relations – those with a more authoritarian bent.

### Large ‘anomalous’ aggregations

Wengrow & Graeber (2015) have written about seasonal experimentation with less equal political relations during the very distant Upper Palaeolithic – a time for which narratives of egalitarianism are more commonly proposed as an accepted correlate of hunting, gathering, and collecting modes of subsistence. By suggesting that humans, as self-conscious political actors, shifted between more and less authoritarian modes of organization, Wengrow & Graeber (2015, 613) argue that ‘no social order was immutable: that everything was potentially open to negotiation, subversion, and change.’ While this assertion is open to contention, such a dynamic model of political relations prior to what is conventionally called early state formation unmoors us from a comfortable stage sequence. That sinking feeling of sand shifting underfoot is compensated by the discovery that providing wider latitude for political experimentation in the Upper Palaeolithic renders more comprehensible archaeological evidence from this period that indicates pronounced differentiation in burial practices and other ritual actions that previously were considered anomalous.

Concomitant with the poor fit between archaeological evidence and stage schemes is the increasingly large array of Post-Pleistocene sites investigated by archaeologists that are characterized as anomalous – a sure indication that something is amiss in the way



we are thinking about the past. Göbekli Tepe, Turkey, comes to mind – a central node of great ritual significance that is too early and too elaborate given our current scheme for understanding the role of religion during this time.

Roland Fletcher (2018) repeatedly has brought together archaeologists who study *anomalous giants* (as they are sometimes called) with the goal of developing terms that might accommodate such anomalies. While new terminology has not been quick to percolate to the surface, discussion of these places has deepened our understanding of sites that violate archaeological assumptions about when and where large sites with evidence of planning and monumentality should occur. We might think of these sites as canaries that give us early warning that political experimentation with a discernible material imprint is entering the repertoire of human strategies of socialization.

Early experiments are present on most continents and some bear familiar names: Cahokia, Hopewell, Caral, Stonehenge, Ukrainian *Trypillia*, *oppida* of Iron-age Europe, C   Lo   in Southeast Asia, and Zimbabwe in east Africa, along with the many pre-Shang dynasty mega-sites of China (see contributions in Kim et al. 2018). These are places that cannot be explained by reference to our great grandfathers' neo-evolutionary scheme. They are *too big* and *too early* to shoehorn into a preconceived, gradualist understanding of social transformation suggested by older social theories. Rather than evincing a step-like or incremental increase in societal size and complexity (e.g., bands, tribes, chiefdoms, and states), these very large aggregations appear with little prelude and some included population concentrations exceeding 5000 people.

A common feature of early mega-sites is the presence of significant and often monumental constructions – mounds, ramparts, enclosures, and stone walls. Arguably, the cooperative work of building these constructions was not novel but the large scale on which they were conceived must have been highly innovative at the time. Something was changing as places were constructed at which thousands of people would assemble and witness negotiation and conflict resolution, perhaps within the context of spiritual practice. Such places would truly have been public architecture and, as Takeshi Inomata and colleagues (2015) have argued in reference to the 1000 BC E-Group construction (more on E-Groups shortly) at the lowland Maya site of Ceibal, they need not be causally linked to emerging elites.

For the middle Mississippi Valley of AD 1000, Timothy Pauketat (2018) suggests that Cahokia was the product of political negotiation and experimentation with ways of communicating with supernatural forces.

Further, he wonders if the builders of Cahokia intended for the construction to last forever, despite substantial investment in the Monk's Mound complex. Increasingly, we are beginning to understand that it was the *process of building* – the coming together of people to work on crafting something – that was significant. The end product – a built environment of monumental scale – did not necessarily evoke the sense of permanence that we impart to it today. Perhaps this investment in process represented a realistic assessment that political experiments can be fragile and finite.

This increasingly large array of old places – called anomalous, weird, or special depending on your investment in stage schemes – can be viewed as early political experiments in human sociality. Rather than being set aside as anomalous, these places represent key moments in time when humans tried with varying success and durability to thrive, *to express a large group identity*, and to perform their spirituality while promoting group cohesiveness and negotiating internal and extra-community conflict. Stanish (2017) advances the thesis that these 'anomalous' places represent experiments in large-group cooperation among complex but stateless societies. In effect, Stanish argues for the successful scaling up of human cooperation to accommodate large groups (greater than 1000 persons), deal with the free-rider problem, and manage common-pool resources (Ostrom 1990). He envisions a managerial authority structured in a manner that dissuaded authoritarian excess while ritual sanctions, covenants, and celebrations played a large role in promoting group solidarity and adherence to group norms (Stanish 2017, 40).

Whether or not Stanish's thesis is accepted, there is no denying that these evolutionary-stage defying places display more variation than exists among early states, lasted a good bit longer than the 200-year average of early cities, and rarely yield evidence of pronounced authoritarianism or rulership. Empirically, there is reason to suggest that these enigmatic places represent a societal transformation that is qualitatively different from the emergence of archaic states. Their remnant presence on the landscape indicates a deeper and richer well of political experimentation than older schemas of lineal evolution suggested.

In many respects, this realization aligns the study of the past with a perspective expressed by Indigenous leaders of the Americas and Hawai'i. At a 2008 conference on *Indigenous Perspectives on Cultural Heritage* organized by the Maya Area Cultural Heritage Initiative and the Penn Cultural Heritage Center (held at the University of Pennsylvania), Indigenous participants expressed the view that 'ancestral places and social memory are repositories of Indigenous knowledge

and experimentation. They provide a wellspring of innovation and resilience.' By reframing the past as a repository of knowledge and experimentation, the old paradigm of the past as a study of the rise and fall of political regimes is cast aside in favour of an examination of the variable ways in which humans self-organize into large-group aggregations.

### Preclassic Maya lowlands: E-Groups and patron deity shrines

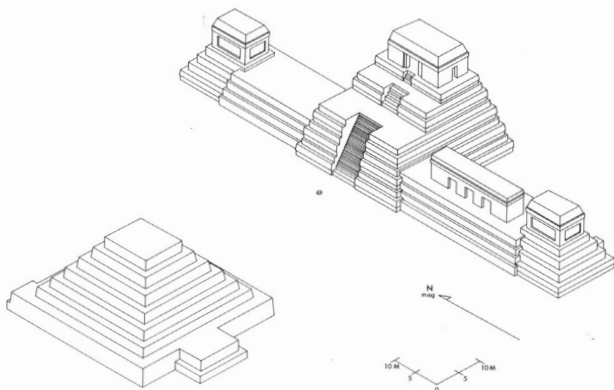
As we grapple with newly synthesized understandings of group aggregation and the implications for cooperation, hierarchy, and conflict, the highly enigmatic Preclassic Maya Lowlands provide an important case study. In contrast to the Gulf Coast where Olmec sites dominated the landscape during the Early Preclassic period (2000–1000 BC) with prominent displays of rulership, at this coeval time there is only a faintly discernible footprint of settlement in the Maya Lowlands at resource-specific locales such as the chert quarry at Colha, Belize (Iceland 2005).

At the cusp of the Early/Middle Preclassic and in the absence of appreciable settlement, a particular kind of non-residential architecture has been documented by Inomata and colleagues (2015) at Ceibal in the western part of the Maya Lowlands. Called an E-Group complex after its first recognition at Uaxactun where the complex of structures was found in map quadrant 'E' (Blom 1926), E Groups initially were built for ground-based solar and planetary observation. They are composed of a simple square western platform fronted with an open plaza to the east. On the eastern side of the plaza, a long, thin platform oriented

north-south was constructed (Fig. 4.1). If one stood on the western platform and sighted along the eastern platform, the solstice and equinox (for example) could be observed at pre-marked positions. This construction is now recognized as the earliest nonresidential architecture built for ritual practice in the Maya region (Freidel et al. 2017; Inomata et al. 2015). Contemplating the significance of E-Groups for the archaic states that followed, Inomata and colleagues (2015) question whether a direct line can be drawn connecting the two. E-Groups in their original conception might be closer to the 'anomalous' constructions discussed above than to incipient states. From this perspective, E-Group construction signals the cooperation of persons from a large catchment who came together seasonally (thus the lack of identifiable residences that are coeval with the earliest E-Group at Ceibal).

During the ensuing Middle Preclassic period (1000–350 BC), there was explosive growth of settlements with and without monumental structures. E-Groups continued to be constructed through the Early Classic period (AD 250–600), but during the latter part of the Middle Preclassic period these constructions were eclipsed by massive pyramidal shrines built for deities (Chase et al. 2017). Spectacular examples of massive Middle and Late Preclassic (1000 BC–AD 250) shrines – likely dedicated to patron deities – exist across Mesoamerica and include the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan (Valley of Mexico); Cholula in Puebla, Mexico; La Venta on the Gulf Coast of Mexico; La Blanca (Pacific coastal Guatemala); Dante at El Mirador, Guatemala; Xocnaceh in the Puuc Region of Yucatán, Mexico; and Lamanai, Belize (Fig. 4.2), to name just a few. Tunnel and trench excavations at many of these massive, squat pyramids have yet to reveal the presence of a royal tomb. This fact indicates that these structures were not funerary monuments dedicated to deceased rulers but shrines built to venerate deities.

Stucco masks that adorn the façades of many lowland Maya Late Preclassic (300 BC–AD 250) shrines represent a range of supernaturals, some of which were local to a place (i.e., a patron deity) while others were more widely venerated. The important point here is that a monument to a locally important deity proved an effective mechanism of large-group integration and identity-building during Middle and Late Preclassic times (1000 BC–AD 250) across Mesoamerica. But massive monuments have a way of massively restructuring a built environment (Love 1999). These colossal constructions created zones of restricted access and thus facilitated practices of inequality. Sacred shrines also engender the need for protection since they become a focal point of both internal contestations and external threat (McAnany 2010, 150–3).



**Figure 4.1.** Plan of Preclassic E Group at Cenote, Belize (after Chase 1983:1302, reproduced courtesy of Arlen Chase).





**Figure 4.2.** *The 33 m-tall Preclassic deity pyramid at Lamanai (courtesy of Wikipedia commons).*

Broadening the temporal and spatial focus of deity shrines, consider the fact that widespread burning of ritual structures along the Street of the Dead at Teotihuacan (now thought to have occurred about AD 550) is widely interpreted as an inside job (Cowgill 1997; Millon 1988). Also relevant is the fact that among Postclassic Aztecs, the final task of invading Mexica warriors was to torch the patron deity shrine of a conquered *altepetl* (a city-state entity). Although deity shrines provided a strong and compelling focus for group identity, solidarity, and well-being, such structures also could become the focus of intra and intergroup conflict precisely because they catalyzed group membership and, in the process, engendered categories of ‘other’.

Thus, the presence of a deity shrine did not preclude intense competition and violence both within and between groups; in fact, such shrines probably accentuated identity-based conflict. But these colossal structures certainly did not instantiate governance through hereditary rulership with all of its lineal connotations. The ensuing Classic period (AD 250–600) is the time during which political practices that placed emphasis on rulership through lineal descent crystallized in the southern Maya Lowlands. This impulse towards dynasty stood in contrast to the northern Maya Lowlands where hereditary rulership that passed

through family lines either was not practised or is not visible archaeologically in features such as funerary pyramids that signal a large role for ancestor veneration (Freidel 2018).

Much of the Mexican Highlands also continued to embrace a ritual politics in which patron deities and those of naturally potent forces (such as rain and sun) provided the focus for large-group identity and ritual practice. The Aztec imperium was no exception. The twin pyramid complex at the centre of their capital at Tenochtitlán was dedicated to their patron deity Huitzilopochtli and to the god of rain, Tlaloc. Despite the absence of royal ancestor veneration among the Aztecs, pronounced social strata (in fact, an aristocracy) existed within a highly militarized society. Important decisions – particularly regarding imperial succession – lay in the hands of a high-level council; sodalities also provided an organizational matrix for cadres of soldiers and other professions. The Aztec marketplace at Tlatelolco – avidly described by Spaniards – indicates that commerce was brisk and unfettered. But whether this marketplace activity and other forms of domestic organization can be deployed to assert collective action around common-pool resources à la Ostrom (1990) is highly debatable. Feinman & Carballo (2018) assert that collective action was a strong organizational characteristic of Aztec society (and also of earlier Teotihuacan).

This assertion does not sit well with the highly visible militaristic and authoritarian rulership that existed among Aztecs and earlier at Teotihuacan. As a counterpoint, Murakami (2016) provides a compelling analysis of the standardized apartment compounds of Teotihuacan as indicative not of collectivization but of a dialectic of control and promotion of a corporate ideology. Thus, the absence of named rulers and funerary pyramids is not necessarily an indicator of equality and democratic decision-making about common-pool resources in the manner modelled by Ostrom (1990).

#### **Authority and hereditary rulership hybridized: southern lowland Maya experiment**

The divergent pathway followed in the southern lowlands reaches back to Preclassic times but unfolded during Classic times and particularly during the Late Classic period – a short time span of about 200 years (AD 600–800). During the Late Classic period, the southern lowland is thought to have reached a

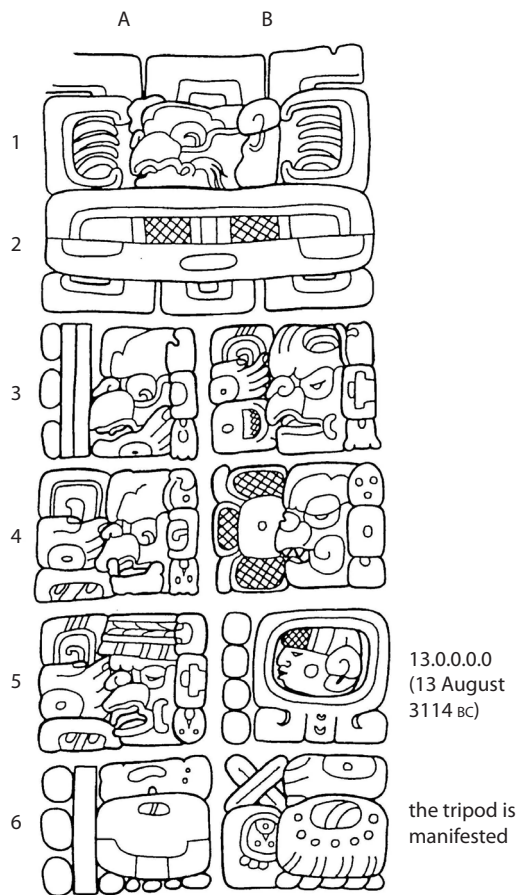
population maximum of perhaps 3–4 million (Kennett & Beach 2013). Somewhere between 60–80 per cent of ordinary people lived within the satellite orbit of about three dozen royal courts (Inomata & Houston 2001a & b; Martin & Grube 2008; Miller & Martin 2004). Most artefacts and monumental constructions that are considered quintessentially ‘ancient Maya’ were made, inscribed, or painted during this 200-year heyday of royal courts.

During the Late Classic period, the design of pyramidal monuments morphed into taller and thinner pyramids, many of which were associated with or housed the remains of members of ruling families (Fig. 4.3). As at Palenque’s Temple of the Inscriptions, funerary shrines often were erected or completed by sons or survivors of deceased rulers who inherited the throne or sought to make a statement about their right to the throne. Within southern lowland society of the Classic period, rulers were heavily vested in hereditary rulership and unequal access to power and wealth became entrenched. As Joanne Baron



**Figure 4.3.** Late Classic funerary pyramid (Temple 1) of Tikal ruler, Jasaw Chan K'awiil (photo by author).





**Figure 4.4.** Part of inscription from Quirigua, Stela C, that contains a 'creation' date of 13 August 3114 BCE or 13.0.0.0.0 in the long count followed by a calendar-round date of 4 Ajaw 8 Kumk'u (reproduced fromLooper 2003:159, courtesy of author).

(2016, 18) has shown, Classic-period consolidation of rulership did not eliminate the need for patron deity shrines. Rather, such shrines became active agents in the political ecology of royal courts. Patron deities were promoted or demoted as part of a strategy of governance by a ruling faction.

Interestingly, long-count dates (five-position calendrical notation associated with Classic royal courts) were deployed to provide 'birth' dates for patron deities. With origins in a mythic past, deities bridged the gap between mythic time and lived time. The Palenque Triad of patron deities are probably the best-known examples of local deities with histories that extend back to primordial times but there are many others (see Baron 2016, 173–87; Stuart 2011, 245–51). Since the long-count was capable of expressing bundles of time in excess of thousands of years, the mythic past (and future) could be chronicled

alongside contemporary events. The long-count calendar originated during Preclassic times outside of the Maya region and there is good reason to suspect that this count of monumental time was invented to create deep narratives of place for patron deities thereby rooting group identity in a mythic past. Only later was the long count adapted to the cosmic framing of earthly rulers.

Stuart (2011, 229–51) illustrates how social order and continuity was reaffirmed using massive bundles of time at southern lowland sites. The ability of scribes to extrapolate bundles of days and years to the nineteenth order (Stuart 2011, 237) allowed time to be abstracted in a truly monumental fashion. Rulers could key into auspicious folds of monumental time to emphasize their accession to rulership, martial campaigns, or building dedications. K'inich Akhal Mo' Nahb of Palenque did just this. His accession took place on a Tzolk'in (Calendar Round) anniversary of the earlier 'accession' of the maize god in 2325 BCE and also commemorated the 'seating' of a Palenque patron deity (GI) much earlier (Stuart 2011, 248–9). At Tikal, where the k'atun or 20-year passage of time was the focus of much celebration and monument erection, Stela 31 depicts and describes the ruler Siyaj Chan K'awiil as one who tends to the k'atun much as one would a maize field (Stuart 2011, 274). *K'uhul ajaw* were master cultivators of monumental time, which stood for longevity and durability and provided a sharp contrast to the realpolitik of fragile political authority.

The way in which the royal chronicling of the long count meshed with the older agricultural Calendar Round to create a complex whole indicates the perceived importance of grounding the abstractness of very large numbers with the seasonal concerns of farmers who were served by the Calendar Round (Fig. 4.4). Notably, the farmer's Calendar Round proved far more durable than the long count and the former is still observed in parts of the Maya region. The abstract quality of large numbers – particularly in reference to bundles of time – presumably would *not* have been very effective in mediating the social distance that stood between Classic Maya royals and their supporters who likely were more vested in mundane affairs that included planting, harvesting, and transporting heavy tumplines filled with crops or goods from place to place. Thus, the genius of Waxaklahuun Ubaah K'awiil (thirteenth ruler of Copan, AD 695–738) who is shown on Stela D with a long-count date carved in full figural glyphs (Fig. 4.5). In this extraordinary stela, each unit of time is represented by a figure that carries a bundle (of time) in a tumpline. The message is clear: time is a heavy burden to be borne by those who have authority over (and responsibility for) the wellbeing of



**Figure 4.5.** Stela D (back side), Copan, with a long-count date rendered in double-column full-figural glyphs that emphasize the burden of deep time accepted by dynastic ruler Waxaklajuun Ubaah K'awiil: (a) photo by author; (b) drawing by John Montgomery (copyright 2000, JM 00602).

the kingdom. One cannot help but imagine that such representations strove to create an intersubjective or shared basis of experience between ruler and ruled. Such conventions address what Kurnick (2016, 19–20) refers to as the paradox and incongruity of governance by rulership that simultaneously reinforced social inequality and also promoted solidarity.

The southern lowland experiment celebrated named rulers in both life and death and sought to place them within a grand cosmic order that mimicked the thousand-year folds of time within which deities were placed. Just as patron deities were metonymically linked to place, so a royal court might be founded and conceived as an *axis mundi* – a central place of cosmic importance. Extensive use of the long count lent an air of stability and immortality to the fragile and shifting nodes of power that dominated the southern lowland landscape during the Late Classic period.

#### Northern ambivalence to monumental time

The northern lowlands differ from the south in a number of ways but despite significant contrasts the two are grouped together as the Maya Lowlands. The points of contrast that are most relevant to the topic of fragility are the underrepresentation of royal tombs and carved hieroglyphic texts with long-count dates in the northern lowlands. The presence of massive Late/

Terminal Classic palace complexes and the popularity of carved stone mosaic façades indicate that there was no shortage of stone or skilled stone workers in the north. Yet an explicit and omnipresent link between political authority and the long count does not seem to have been a central strut of northern rulership. In so far as a hieroglyphic collocation called an *emblem glyph* has been used to signify the presence of a royal court among archaeologists and epigraphers, the underrepresentation of emblem glyphs (and stone-carved hieroglyphs in general) has produced a quandary in nomenclature. Was there a royal court at Uxmal or at Chichén Itza? Few doubt it but the accompanying corpus of texts with emblem glyphs and long-count dates provides weak evidence by southern standards.

The contrast between north and south is displayed in a not-so-subtle manner at Ek' Balam – a northern site located in the eastern part of Yucatán, México. At Ek' Balam, George Bey and colleagues (1998) document a history of occupation going back to the Preclassic (Balam ceramic complex, 600–450 BC) and continuing through colonial times. More recent work by Leticia Vargas de la Peña & Victor Castillo Borges (2017) on the acropolis of Ek' Balam yielded what Alfonso Lacadena (2004, 116) referred to as a 'tomb never seen before north of Calakmul'. The latter site is located about 400 km south of Ek' Balam and considered the northernmost (and a very powerful) player in the nodal





**Figure 4.6.** Entrance to burial chamber of Ukit Kan Le'k Tok' behind ornate white stucco façade on the Acropolis of Ek' Balam (photo by author).

network of royal courts that dominated the southern lowlands during Late Classic times. As a northern outlier to this network, the royal court of Ek' Balam was *founded* in the eighth century during the reign of Ukit Kan Le'k Tok'. Referred to as a *kalo'mte'* (a ruler more powerful and possibly more skilled in martial tactics and strategy than a *k'uhul ajaw*), Ukit Kan Le'k Tok' was buried in a crypt within the acropolis (Fig. 4.6). Also found on the acropolis was a room containing a painted mural of 96 hieroglyphs that opaquely describes the arrival in AD 770 of a powerful person who witnessed the accession of Ukit Kan Le'k Tok' to rulership (Vargas de la Peña & Castillo Borges 2017). Of course, Ek' Balam existed before AD 770. As mentioned previously, Bey and colleagues (1998) documented the deep history of this place at which occupation started nearly 1500 years earlier. Rather, this date marks the establishment of a royal court and the founding of a kingdom called Talol of which Ek' Balam was the centre (Lacadena 2004). The mural of 96 glyphs marks the beginning of a northern experiment with southern-style sacred kingship in which hieroglyphic texts and

long-count dates figured prominently in positioning the ruler within cosmic time.

With the accession of Ukit Kan Le'k Tok' there was an explosion of hieroglyphic texts – *especially painted texts* – at Ek' Balam (Lacadena 2004, 3–84). The abundance of painted over stone-carved texts is significant because long-count dates were more often chiselled into durable stone than painted on to plaster. True to the northern tradition of kingship and despite all the writing at Ek' Balam, only four long-count dates are known and one of them is Stela 1, which bears the image and name of Ukit Kan Le'k Tok' (Lacadena 2004, 98). The four dynastic counts are outnumbered by twelve Calendar-Round dates (Lacadena 2004, 84) – the older calendar that marks seasonal agricultural and ritual events.

Ek' Balam is further distinguished by the fact that its glyphic texts are an eclectic mix of Classic Cholan grammar/vocabulary (identical to southern lowlands texts) and ancestral Yucatec conventions and word usage (Lacadena 2004, 117–20). Houston and colleagues (2000; see also Law et al. 2009) have

suggested that the written and spoken language of royal courts likely was distinct from the language of ordinary people living in the southern lowlands. As such, sacred hieroglyphic texts would have reinforced social differences within a polity. But at Ek' Balam, both the court language of the southern lowlands and the local language of the north were painted on preserved texts from the acropolis. Thus, Ek' Balam, capital of the kingdom of Talol, adopted many characteristics of southern-style rulership including the visit of a foreign dignitary concurrent with the founding of Talol and the spectacular entombment of Ukit Kan Le'k Tok' upon his death. The literacy of the scribal community at Ek' Balam is beyond doubt yet only four long-count dates have been discovered thus far and texts display a hybridity between Classic-period Cholan and ancestral Yucatec languages. The final dated text from Ek' Balam records a date that is less than 100 years after the AD 770 founding date. Thus, the incorporation of southern elements of rulership at Ek' Balam was short-lived and highly selective. Over the long run, the conjoining of monumental time with political authority seemingly was not of extreme importance in the northern lowlands. Successors to Ukit Kan Le'k Tok' chose not to portray themselves as master cultivators of monumental time.

### **Fragility in its many guises or how political experiments end**

As mentioned earlier, political arrangements tend to be finite, with a clearly defined beginning that often is expressed materially as a founding event and a messy ending that in the Maya region is often interpreted as a violent termination. Generally, the founding of a Lowland royal court was textually documented – as at Ek' Balam – and witnessed by an emissary or representative of an overlord from a more powerful court. With a founding event of AD 770, Ek' Balam may have been the last royal court to be founded and to join the intricate network of court alliances that appear to have pivoted around the two influential courts located at Tikal and Calakmul. Freidel (2018) argues that the philosophy of governance differed fundamentally between these two supra-states with Calakmul representing an older, sodality-based system of governance and ruler selection while Tikal embraced hereditary rulership with chains of succession bolstered by reference to monumental time.

Elsewhere, we have reviewed the evidence for the end of royal courts and the abandonment of the southern Maya 'urbanized' landscape (McAnany et al. 2015). Since the long count provided support for the institution of rulership, its absence – in conjunction

with architectural and ceramic evidence of abandonment – indicates that royal courts could not muster the resources necessary to celebrate highly significant dynastic and calendrical events of the ninth century. The seating of a new Bak'tun in AD 830 is one such event that many southern courts did not/could not celebrate. In fact, AD 830 often is invoked to separate the Late Classic from the subsequent Terminal Classic period (~AD 830–950/1000) during which remnants of royal courts were radically reformulated and survived in distinct pockets of the lowlands (Ebert et al. 2014; Kennett & Hodell 2017).

Perhaps the most striking feature of the process of court dissolution is the diversity of ways and variable tempo by which Classic Maya places were terminated (also see Aimers 2007 and Masson 2012). This pattern suggests that one external crisis – such as drought or invasion – was not responsible. Rather, specific vulnerabilities coalesced with stochastic processes (some of which may have been climatic or environmental) to render the congeries of lowland Maya cities no longer livable, initially for royals and then for nearly everyone else. As elaborated elsewhere (McAnany et al. 2015), several trends stand out: (1) royals left first – perhaps fleeing to a more secure environment – while sustaining populations generally remained; (2) within one to three generations, sustaining populations moved elsewhere; and (3) the termination of royal courts cascaded irregularly across the Maya lowlands (Ebert et al. 2014). Islands of more resilient and resurgent Terminal Classic courts re-organized in a less hierarchical manner and – judging from costuming representations – in conversation with polities to the north and west in which hereditary rulership was less emphasized. Nonetheless, Terminal Classic attempts to regroup and reinvent rulership in the southern lowlands met with only limited success, although a greatly transformed style of rulership eventually was reinstated throughout the lowlands and might have coalesced into larger-scale political entities in the absence of sixteenth century Spanish invasion and subsequent wars of conquest.

A reluctance to leave among ordinary people living around royal courts is a determinative factor that contributed to the long-term cascade phenomenon that characterizes the abandonment of the southern lowland landscape. The archaeologically documented sequence of leaving throughout the lowlands unfailingly indicates that royals – who were able to move strategically within a network of royal courts – abandoned their royal courts. Yet, the interdependence between courts and sustaining populations is rarely discussed in collapse scenarios. The fact that most sustaining populations chose to migrate elsewhere



within one to three generations of court abandonment suggests that, over the long run, the experience of living without the social order and hierarchy imposed by a royal court was not easy. Even though the politics of densely networked courts heavily vested in hereditary rulership and monumental time proved unsustainable, so too did life without vertical obligations, royal mediation with the gods, impressive pageantry, and security within a patron-client relationship.

The southern-style experiment in sacred rulership and cosmic time – beautiful to behold and expensive to maintain – was closely tied to local landscape so that subsequent regeneration within the same landscape was either not possible or perhaps not necessary. A kind of path dependency seems to have frustrated attempts at regeneration in the south. Kennett and colleagues (2012, 790) examined the concordance between proxy evidence of dry spells and archaeological data that includes long-count dates and other indicators that the southern courts were in trouble. Droughts between 820-870, around 930, and again from 1000-1100 are clearly indicated and must have stressed lowland Maya populations. But when correlated with hieroglyphic accounts of martial activity and the erection of monuments with long-count dates, it's clear that Maya royal courts were in trouble before the droughts began. Were courts further destabilized by the dry spells? Probably, but droughts likely provided the final blow to a network of royal courts situated within an already politically fractured landscape. To borrow a term from James Scott (2017, 202–9) – *politicide* – rather than *ecocide* appears to be a major contributing factor to the dissolution of the Lowland Maya royal courts.

Even after the southern courts ceased to be political capitals, they were not completely abandoned but rather entered into a new use regime as places of pilgrimage, ritual commemoration, and a focus of hunting activity. Into the twentieth-century, Lacandon Maya visited old royal courts along the Usumacinta River – Palenque, Bonampak, and Yaxchilan in particular – and left offerings to their deities until tourist traffic rendered these practices untenable because of the rampant theft of Lacandon offerings (Palka 2005).

Significantly, in the northern lowlands, where practices of governance were never as vested in hereditary transmission and the trope of monumental time, the political experiment endured for another hundred years. During the Terminal Classic period, Chichén Itzá became the most powerful and influential polity – some would say imperium – in the Maya region. The northern scribal community survived several profound political transitions. Postclassic scribes continued to use a modified hieroglyphic script and taught the

syllabary to Bishop Diego de Landa in the sixteenth century. Extant Maya codices – now held in Madrid, Paris, Dresden, and Mexico City – were created during the Postclassic period. These amazing records of Maya literacy postdate the threshold year of AD 830 by as much as 500 years. Thus, the fragility of Classic-period political constellations should not be confused with the scribal literary tradition, which survived the political transition at the end of the Classic period.

Ek' Balam continued to be a seat of power through the Postclassic period although construction activity diminished greatly. Nonetheless, sixteenth-century Spanish *encomendero* Diego de Contreras stated in a *relación* that (before the coming of Spaniards) the people of Tahcabo (a town just 17 km north of Ek' Balam) gave tribute to Namon Cupul, a Late Postclassic ruler of Ek' Balam (RHGY 1579[1900], 50). By this measure, political authority at Ek' Balam proved vastly more resilient than the southern variants.

### Final considerations and conclusions

Rulership meshed with concepts of monumental time as southern rulers assumed responsibility for the *order of days* (Stuart 2011). Such coupling established a durability to political authority that, in reality, can be ephemeral and fleeting regardless of whether we are examining Maya rulership in the eighth-century or the U.S. presidency in the twenty-first century. Because political forms codify authority through governance and the imposition of order, they are more fragile than social or religious constellations. The construction of massive shrines and the origins of the long count in the Preclassic period suggest an initial linkage between patron deities and deep, mythic time, which later was adopted by southern rulers to establish a deep-time temporality to their rule.

Significantly, the practice of yoking rulership to the long-count calendar didn't become widespread in the north – an area in which sixteenth-century Spaniards found thriving populations. Perhaps the practice of framing rulers within folds of monumental time masked a tacit recognition of the fragility of rulership. The northern lowlands – less vested in hereditary rulership although greatly involved in monumentality – appears to have been engaged in a more integrative and resurgent political experiment. Perhaps for this reason, archaeologists continue to draw parallels between the northern Maya lowlands and central México.

Political formations can be approached as fragile yet dynamic social experiments fraught with contestation. By discarding the 'report card' approach to political forms, archaeologists gain an opportunity to



analyse complexity as experimentation and to understand more deeply human political constructions that are beautiful, awesome, and sobering in their capacity to engender inequality. But critically pertinent to this consideration is the limited ability of pre-industrial states to wreak environmental havoc and large-scale destruction to the degree that is possibly today. Our crises were not necessarily their crises and we need to keep this in mind in order to develop more realistic narratives of the past.

As humans experiment with political relations, there is a noticeable pulsing between authoritarianism and more representational styles of governance. Today, we can see that societal trauma – especially economic insecurity and rapid social change – tends to move people in the direction of authoritarianism. Whether or not these factors are relevant to understanding the past requires much more thought. Recognition of the propensity for humans to construct and deconstruct political scaffolding – in evidence today and certainly in the past – provides a strong starting place for examining the fragility of political experimentation. Such an approach lends itself to more productive analysis and moves archaeology beyond the rise-and-fall approach that V. Gordon Childe (1965, 4–5) critiqued over 50 years ago.

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