



# TIME OF KINGS AND QUEENS

BY ROBERT SHARER

**T**HE ORIGINS OF MAYA KINGS can be traced back to the Middle Preclassic period (*ca.* 1000–500 BCE). Archaeology reveals the beginnings of Maya civilization during this span with evidence for rulers of small independent polities, the first great temples and other large-scale constructions, evidence for warfare, trade in status goods, and the earliest stone monuments. These monuments may represent the oldest surviving markers of the cycles of time in the Maya calendar, placed to commemorate each K’atun.

In the southern Maya area of Guatemala, a series of growing population centers were located along trade routes on the Pacific coastal plain and in the adjacent highlands. These areas were also prime regions for producing food and export crops such as cacao. Trade linked the southern Maya area with the lowlands to the north, where agricultural settlements were expanding. Everywhere population growth and trade led to increasing wealth and power for the privileged segment of society, the elite class. Thereafter, Maya society was divided between a small powerful elite group and a far more numerous non-elite.

## EARLY MAYA RULERS

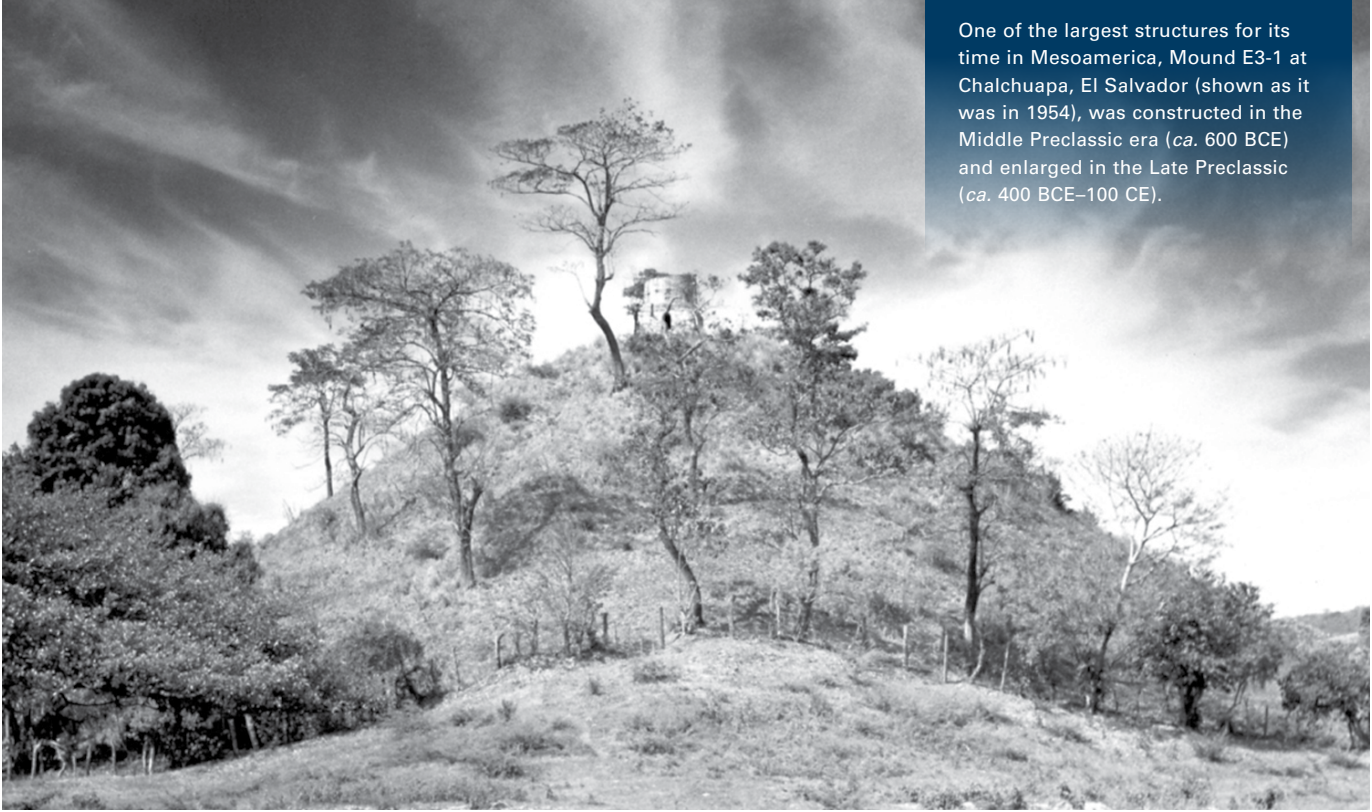
The Maya area provided many resources and diverse potentials for human exploitation. Most regions had good soil, plentiful rain, and valuable natural resources; some were close to sacred features like mountains, caves, and springs. Such favored areas nourished the growth of small polities with leaders skilled in warfare, trade, and religious ritual. Success reinforced the authority of these early rulers, the ancestors of later Maya kings and queens known from portraits and texts on carved monuments. From their beginnings Maya rulers relied

on their non-elite subjects who farmed the land and processed resources destined for trade, providing rulers with food, tribute, and labor. In return, rulers provided physical and psychological security. As war leaders they protected their subjects from enemies. As traders they provided essential goods from afar. As religious leaders they were believed to hold special powers over supernatural forces and sacred ancestors.

Many religious and economic activities reinforced the authority of early rulers. They sponsored public ceremonies, ritual ball games, markets, and craft manufacture. Markets provided access to food, goods, services, and also were an outlet for the products of each household. Maya rulers encouraged long-distance trade and gained new sources of wealth from markets, craftsmen, and merchants. Rare materials, such as jade and the iridescent green quetzal feathers, were believed to possess sacred qualities and were reserved for elite use, increasing their prestige and authority.

The construction of temples, causeways, and reservoirs, as well as palaces for rulers encouraged the prosperity and growth of major population centers. These were built and maintained by the labor of non-elite subjects, both for the common good and in the belief that these constructions would win the favor of the gods. Two of the largest known Middle Preclassic temple mounds in Mesoamerica are in the southern Maya area, at Chalchuapa in western El Salvador, and at La Blanca on Guatemala’s coastal plain.

Success in war increased the ruler’s prestige and authority. Growth and prosperity led to competition and conflict, as polities attempted to control more land, trade, and people. Polities that controlled vital raw materials often had an advantage. The site of Kaminaljuyu became the dominant Preclassic capital in the Maya highlands by controlling access to obsidian and jade. In the Middle Preclassic the rulers of Kaminaljuyu



One of the largest structures for its time in Mesoamerica, Mound E3-1 at Chalchuapa, El Salvador (shown as it was in 1954), was constructed in the Middle Preclassic era (ca. 600 BCE) and enlarged in the Late Preclassic (ca. 400 BCE–100 CE).

oversaw the construction of one of the earliest irrigation canals in Mesoamerica to expand agricultural production and their growing capital. Pairs of plain stelae and altars at Naranjo near Kaminaljuyu may mark Middle Preclassic K'atun endings (page 20), as was customary at most Maya capitals in later times.

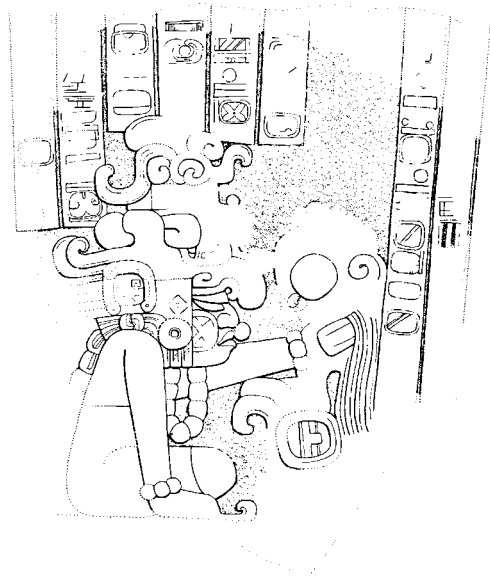
Other Maya polities located along major routes managed the transport, exchange, and redistribution of products. Several lowland sites gained power and prosperity from locations that controlled portages between river trade routes. The Middle Preclassic lowland site of Nakbe was probably among the first to control the strategic route across the base of the Yucatan peninsula. The rulers of Nakbe also ordered the construction of the earliest known causeway in the Maya lowlands. Overall, location and successful economic, social, political, and religious activities were all crucial to the early development of Maya kings and their polities.

## THE FIRST MAYA KINGS

By the Late Preclassic the first Maya kingdoms had emerged in the southern area, ruled by kings possessing the hallmarks of the powerful kings of the subsequent Classic period. Like their better-known successors, these Preclassic kings left their portraits on carved stone monuments that associated their reigns

with the cycles of time. The earliest known dates in the Maya Long Count calendar come from Late Preclassic sites on the Pacific coastal plain. Monuments at Tak'alik Ab'aj and El Baúl combine carved dates and royal portraits. One El Baúl monument has a Long Count date equivalent to 37 CE. Several Tak'alik Ab'aj monuments have early dates, the best-preserved corresponding to 126 CE (page 20). Kaminaljuyu in the highlands remained the largest of these southern Maya capitals; its Late Preclassic kings ruled their subjects from elaborately carved stone thrones and were depicted on beautifully carved monuments. Undeciphered texts undoubtedly proclaim their achievements and triumphs, like those of their later counterparts. One

Excavated broken and battered at the foot of Mound E3-1, Chalchuapa Monument 1 depicts a Late Preclassic ruler accompanied by an extensive but unreadable Maya hieroglyphic text.





Kaminaljuyu sculpture depicts a succession of three kings seated on thrones, each flanked by pairs of bound captives. To accommodate Kaminaljuyu's Late Preclassic growth, two huge canals were constructed to increase supplies of irrigation water. The tombs of two of its kings have been excavated, and were found filled with sumptuous goods, jades, hundreds of pottery vessels for offerings, and several human sacrifices.

The Maya lowlands also saw the emergence of a series of Late Preclassic kingdoms. The largest had its capital at El Mirador, the hub of a network of causeways that facilitated control over its hinterland. Although no portrait of an El Mirador king has been identified, royal power is amply reflected in the size of the constructions they commissioned. Two temple complexes at El Mirador stand as the largest ever constructed by the Maya. Fragments of carved Preclassic monuments survive in their shadows, at least one with an undeciphered text.

Although El Mirador dominated the lowlands, there were numerous smaller Late Preclassic kingdoms spread across the Petén of Guatemala, east into Belize, and north into Yucatan. Like the early states in the southern area, these Preclassic lowland kingdoms were marked by increased size, greater concentrations of power in the hands of kings, and the use of writing to publicly proclaim royal authority and achievements. Late Preclassic Maya kings also reinforced their authority by taking captives in war and hosting ceremonial displays, including feasts, triumphs, and inaugurations.

Many of these elements are now stunningly visible in the recently discovered murals at San Bartolo, the capital of a rela-



Left, Monument 65 from the powerful highland Maya capital of Kaminaljuyu depicts a succession of Late Preclassic rulers seated on thrones, each flanked by two bound captives. Top right, this artist's 1977 reconstruction of El Mirador portrays the site as it might have appeared at the height of its power, as the capital of a large lowland polity in the Late Preclassic period (ca. 400 BCE–100 CE). Above middle and bottom, unknown to archaeology until their discovery in 2001, the beautifully preserved murals at San Bartolo, Guatemala, date to ca. 100 BCE and depict the Maya creation myth along with the inauguration of an unidentified king.

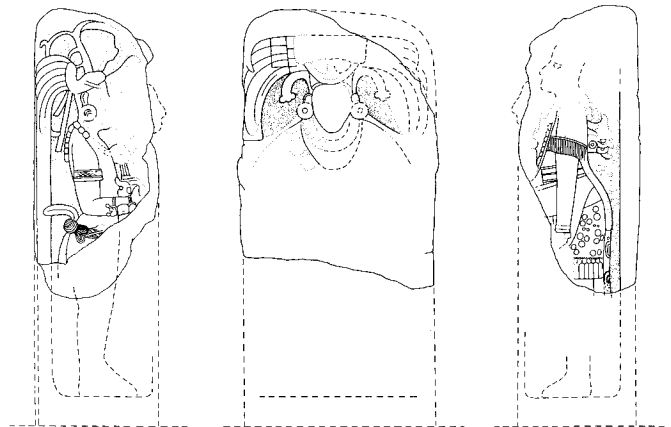


tively small Late Preclassic kingdom southeast of El Mirador. The mural was found inside a royal building dating to *ca.* 100 BCE; it depicts scenes from the Maya creation myth marking the beginning of the world, much like the later Maya epic, the *Popol Vuh*. This saga was an important source of royal authority for later Maya kings, and its presence at San Bartolo testifies to over a millennium of continuity in the Maya institution of kingship. In keeping with its connection with royal authority, the mural culminates by depicting the inauguration of a San Bartolo king.

The Late Preclassic period ended with a still mysterious decline that saw disturbances and changes in the economic and political landscape. Most Preclassic capitals declined, and some were abandoned altogether. Several factors contributed to these changes, including environmental problems, population movements, and shifting trade routes. El Mirador collapsed, probably due to overexploitation of local resources that led to repercussions throughout the lowlands. There were changes at Kaminaljuyu, yet it was not abandoned. Trade routes were disrupted and southern capitals never resumed the use of royal monuments with Long Count dates and texts. Decline in the south also probably led to increased lowland trade, which spurred development in several northern regions that ushered in the era of Classic Maya civilization.

## THE TIME OF KINGS AND QUEENS

Following the major changes that ended the Preclassic era, lowland Maya kings and their kingdoms reached a peak of prosperity and power in the Classic period. These Classic Maya “Lords of Time” fully associated their destinies with the cycles of the Maya calendar. Their carved monuments, often dedicated at the end of each K’atun, used the Long Count calendar to chronicle the events of their reigns. The decipherment of these texts allows us to read the names of individual Maya kings and queens, learn of their life histories and exploits, and recognize their roles within royal dynasties that ruled each lowland kingdom over the cycles of time. Classic Maya kings held the *k’uhul ajaw*, or “holy lord” title, and belonged to a royal house defined by ancestry and residency in royal palaces. Each *k’uhul ajaw* presided over a royal court and an administrative hierarchy, which usually included a number of subordinate officials and centers.



Top, this view from the Monumental Plaza in Copan, Honduras, faces south toward the famous Ball Court, beyond which are the Hieroglyphic Stairway and royal Acropolis, the political and ritual center of the kingdom. Middle, these drawings of Tikal Stela 23 (left side, front, right side) depict the only identified female ruler of Tikal. Her name remains unknown, so she is referred to as the Lady of Tikal. Right, Tikal Stela 31 was dedicated to the auspicious 9.0.0.0.0 Bak’tun ending by Tikal’s 16th king, Siyaj Chan K’awiiil II. The king is portrayed on the front while the text on the back recounts the dynastic history of his royal predecessors.



## COPAN ALTAR Q

Altar Q was dedicated by Copan's 16th ruler, Yax Pasaj Chan Yopaat in 776 CE. The four sides of this carved stone display the portraits of all 16 Copan rulers seated on thrones formed by their name glyphs. The sequence begins with the dynastic founder, K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo', whose name is in his headdress and who sits on an *ajaw* ("ruler") glyph as he hands the royal scepter to Yax Pasaj with his left hand. K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' is thus portrayed left-handed with a shield on his right arm, matching the evidence of a left-handed male buried in the Hunal Tomb. Behind K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' sits his son, the second ruler of Copan, followed by the rest of the successors, four to a side. The text on the upper surface of Altar Q records the inauguration of K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' on September 5, 426 CE ("he took the k'awiil scepter") and his arrival in Copan to take the throne five months later (February 8, 427).



Above, the west side of the altar is shown here with K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' facing Copan's 16th king. Below is a detail showing K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'. Note the bar pectoral around his neck; a similar jade bar pectoral was found in the Hunal tomb.

Maya kings possessed economic, religious, and political power reinforced by a belief that they ruled with the support and approval of the Maya gods in harmony with the cycles of time.

Tikal was one of the largest of these newly powerful Early Classic kingdoms in the Maya lowlands. Retrospective texts record a Tikal king named Yax Ehb' Xook who had founded a new ruling house in the Late Preclassic era, around 100 CE. His origins are unknown, although his name appears at Kaminaljuyu and he may have come from the highlands. Over the following two centuries some ten kings ruled Tikal as the dynastic founder's successors. By *ca.* 300 CE Tikal's prosperity was boosted by links with the powerful city of Teotihuacan in Central Mexico. With the death of Tikal's 14th king, Chak Tok Ich'aak, in 378 CE, there was a regime change probably orchestrated by Teotihuacan. A new king, Yax Nuun Ahiin, took the throne as the 15th ruler in the line of the dynastic founder. Under its new king Tikal expanded and dominated other lowland polities. One successor of Yax Nuun Ahiin was a queen who dedicated several monuments. Although her name does not survive, she apparently reigned as Tikal's ruler from 511 to 527 CE. At least two other woman rulers are known from lowland Maya texts. Lady Yohl Ik'nal ruled at Palenque from 583 to 604 CE and Lady Six Sky was regent or ruler at Naranjo from 682 to 693 CE.

The site of Copan in western Honduras is a prime example of the expansion of Maya kingdoms in the Early Classic period. The kings of Copan counted their succession from a dynastic founder named K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'. The evidence suggests this founder was dispatched to Copan by Tikal to establish an allied kingdom on the southeastern borderlands of the Maya area. Thereafter, Copan with its subordinate center at nearby Quirigua controlled the critical Motagua River trade route and the frontier with Central America.

The Copan dynasty is recorded on Altar Q, an extraordinary monument set in the royal Acropolis. Tunnel excavations beneath the Acropolis have discovered palaces and temples from the dynastic founding era, and three inscriptions dedicated by K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo's son, Copan's 2nd king. One of these founding era buildings, the Hunal Structure, is likely the original house and burial place of K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'; the Hunal Tomb is covered by a sequence of temples commemorating the founder. One of these, the Margarita Temple, was decorated with a large panel representing the founder's name. Nearby is an elaborate second tomb along with a hieroglyphic

text and date (437 CE) that refers to K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo', which probably holds the burial of the founder's queen, the mother of Ruler 2. Excavations under Copan's Hieroglyphic Stairway found another sequence of Early Classic buildings and a carved monument, the Motmot Marker, portraying K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' and Ruler 2. This stone and the later Stela 63 refer to important ceremonies performed by K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' and his son in 435 CE marking the end of a major calendrical cycle, the 8th Bak'tun, and associated the new dynasty's destiny with the succeeding 9th Bak'tun.

The Acropolis excavations show that centralized political power associated with Maya kings began at the very time later texts record the founding of Copan's royal dynasty. The reigns of Copan's first eight kings between 426 and 551 CE were marked by huge building efforts that created much of the royal Acropolis. The Acropolis excavations also found the SubJaguar tomb, which may be the burial of the 8th ruler, Wi' Yohl K'inich (534–551 CE). This tomb was on the west side of a courtyard, opposite a temple with a text recording its dedication by Ruler 8 in 542 CE. Soon thereafter a splendid new temple decorated by painted stucco masks commemorated the central sacred location under the Acropolis established by the founder's tomb. Nicknamed Rosalila, this temple was eventually buried by an even larger structure. A final temple built by the last Copan King, Yax Pasaj, completed a sequence of seven temples built over the Hunal Tomb that were dedicated to the founder of Copan's royal dynasty.



Top right, the Hunal Tomb, under Copan's royal Acropolis, was discovered and excavated by Penn Museum archaeologists. The male skeleton buried in the Tomb has been identified as the remains of the dynastic founder, K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo', who reigned 426–ca. 437 CE. Middle right, after removal of the skull, various jade objects were revealed: a carved bead that had been placed in the founder's mouth, an ear flare, a ring, and a bar pectoral like that depicted on Altar Q (page 30). Bottom right, this modeled and painted stucco panel from the Margarita Temple represents the name of the founder: K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo'.

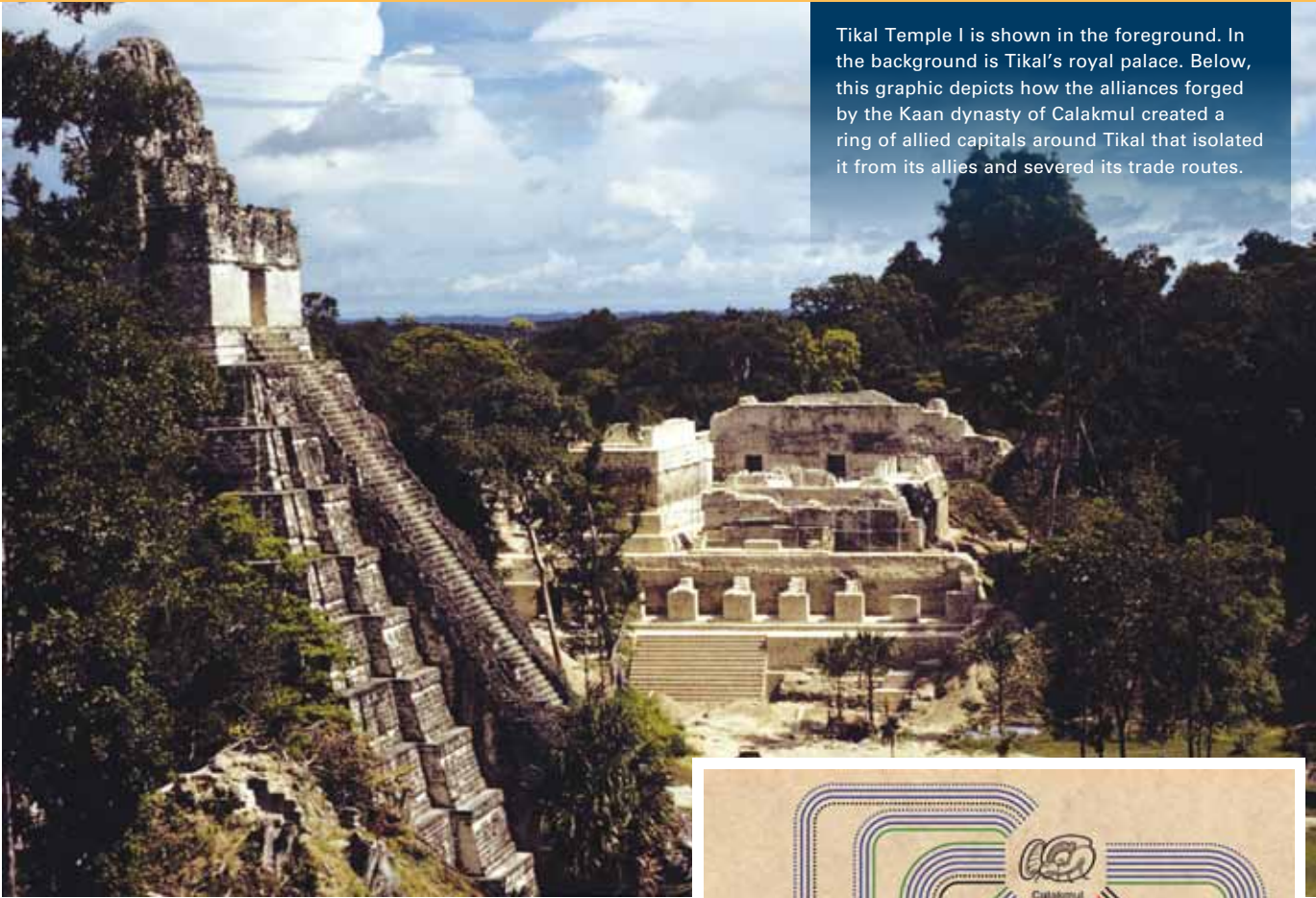


These three offering vessels recovered from the Hunal Tomb testify to the strong ties between Copan and other Maya cities during the dynastic founding era. The two vessels on the right were made in the Tikal region of the Maya lowlands; the Deer Vessel (far left) comes from the Kaminaljuyu region of the highlands and contained chocolate (cacao). A shell scoop in the shape of a hand (second from left) was found inside the Deer Vessel.

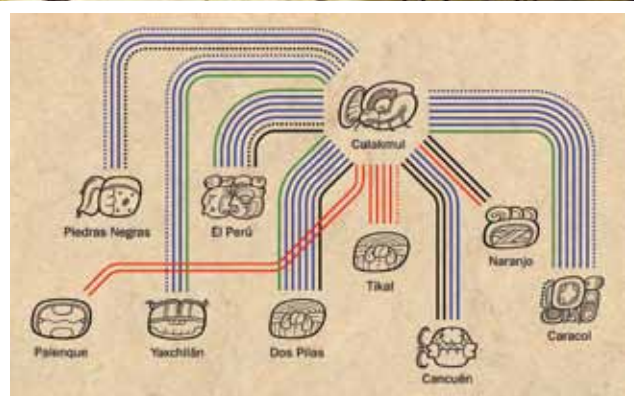


Left top, Copan's Margarita Tomb adjacent to the Hunal Tomb was discovered and excavated by Penn Museum archaeologists. The female skeleton buried here has been identified as the dynastic founder's queen, the mother of Copan's 2nd king (ca. 465 CE). Middle left, the SubJaguar Tomb (ca. 550 CE) was the first Copan royal burial found and excavated by Penn archaeologists Loa Traxler and Robert Sharer, shown here with Honduran conservator Nando Guerra. Right clockwise, this carved jade head was part of the necklace worn by the queen in the Margarita Tomb, which also contained the Dazzler Vessel seen in a roll out of its painted decoration. In his excavation of the Rosalila Temple at Copan, Honduran archaeologist Ricardo Agurcia found a cache of beautifully crafted flint scepters including this example. Bottom right, these stucco-painted offering vessels were recovered from the SubJaguar Tomb. All photographs by Kenneth Garrett.





Tikal Temple I is shown in the foreground. In the background is Tikal's royal palace. Below, this graphic depicts how the alliances forged by the Kaan dynasty of Calakmul created a ring of allied capitals around Tikal that isolated it from its allies and severed its trade routes.



By the time the Copan dynasty was founded, another power was emerging to the north of Tikal. With possible origins at Late Preclassic El Mirador, the Early Classic Kaan (snake) dynasty settled at Dzibanche. The Kaan kings established alliances with a number of lowland polities, eventually displacing several former Tikal allies, until Tikal was encircled by a ring of allied kingdoms. Cut off from its trade links and more distant allies such as Copan and Palenque, Tikal was vulnerable when the Kaan alliance struck and won a decisive victory in 562 CE. Soon thereafter the Kaan kings moved to a new seat of power at Calakmul, located closer to their defeated foe.

From their Late Classic capital of Calakmul, the Kaan dynasty and its allies dominated Tikal for over a century. The Kaan kings had their greatest successes under Yuknoom Ch'een II (636–686 CE), also known as Yuknoom the Great, during his long and successful reign at Calakmul (see page 15). The power of the Kaan dynasty relied on alliances with client states, without expanding its own territory. Difficulties in communication throughout the expanse of the Maya lowlands probably inhibited the creation of a larger unified state

under its authority. As a result, Calakmul's political and military control over its allies remained tenuous at best.

Even after a series of defeats, Tikal continued its efforts to restore its former prestige and power. The failure of Calakmul to consolidate its political control led to Tikal's resurgence under its 26th king, Jasaw Chan K'awiil (682–734 CE). In 695 CE Tikal struck back and defeated Calakmul, changing the course of lowland Maya history in one dramatic battle. After burying his father in a splendid tomb under Tikal's most famous monument, Temple I, Jasaw Chan K'awiil's successor, Yik'in Chan K'awiil (734–766 CE), reinforced his father's success by defeating two of Calakmul's major allies. As a result Tikal regained its ancient east-west trade routes across the lowlands, ushering in a final period of renewed expansion and prosperity.





Although it suffered a mysterious episode of destruction about the same time as Tikal's defeat, Copan continued to prosper at the beginning of the Late Classic era. Its 13th king, Waxaklajuun Ubaah K'awiil, took the throne in 695 CE, and is known for sponsoring Copan's greatest assemblage of sculptured monuments. One of these proclaims that Copan ranked with Tikal, Palenque, and Calakmul as the four greatest kingdoms of the Maya world. His final project was rebuilding Copan's Great Ball Court in 738 CE. But only 113 days after its dedication, Waxaklajuun Ubaah K'awiil was captured and ritually decapitated by his vassal, K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yopaat of Quirigua.

This disaster destroyed Copan's power monopoly in the southeast. Although Quirigua did not conquer Copan, it did gain its independence. Since it no longer sent tribute to Copan, Quirigua enjoyed unprecedented prosperity thereafter. For the remainder of K'ahk Tiliw Chan Yopaat's 60-year reign, this newly won wealth and prestige transformed Quirigua through a major rebuilding effort. Meanwhile Copan suffered a severe economic setback by losing the Motagua Valley and its trade route. Copan also lost prestige and power, for the Maya believed the capture and sacrifice of a *k'uhul ajaw* meant the gods had withdrawn their blessings from the destiny of king and kingdom.

How Quirigua defeated its far more powerful superior has long been a mystery. A text on a Quirigua monument provides the likely answer. It states that shortly before its victory

Left, Quirigua Stela D depicts K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yopaat, who captured and ritually decapitated Copan's king, Waxaklajuun Ubaah K'awiil. The size of the monument can be gauged from the man standing to the right. Right, Copan Stela C was erected by Ruler 13, Waxaklajuun Ubaah K'awiil. The 13th king, known for sponsoring Copan's greatest assemblage of sculptured monuments, took the throne in 695 CE. Remnants of the stela's original red paint are still visible.



Alfred Maudslay (left), Robert Sharer (right)



“Tikal Abandoned” by Russell Hoover, was painted for the Penn Museum in 1985. It depicts this once mighty city as it might have appeared soon after the fall of its ruling dynasty. UPM Image #153736.

Quirigua hosted a visit by the king of Calakmul. This suggests an opportunity for Calakmul to offer to help Quirigua defeat Copan, perhaps by providing armed forces. The motive seems obvious: by defeating Copan, one of Tikal’s oldest allies, Calakmul could avenge its defeat by Tikal and gain some of the wealth from the Motagua trade route.

Little is known of Waxaklajuun Ubaah K’awiil’s successor at Copan. At Quirigua, K’ak’ Tiliw Chan Yopaat took the title of 14th successor of the dynastic founder and may have even controlled Copan by installing a subordinate king. After its defeat, ruling authority at Copan came from the sharing of power among Copan’s nobles, crippling the power of its kings.

The 15th Copan king, K’ak’ Yipyaj Chan K’awiil (749–763 CE), re-established Copan’s prestige by dedicating the famed Hieroglyphic Stairway recording Copan’s former glories. Copan’s 16th king, Yax Pasaj Chan Yopaat (763–ca. 810), dedicated Altar Q and Temple 16, the final temple built over the sacred center of the Acropolis established by K’inich Yax K’uk’ Mo’. Yet the damage to royal authority remained. Yax Pasaj tried to keep his kingdom together by rewarding his nobles with more titles and greater status, but in so doing, he only increased their power at his expense.

## THE END OF KINGS

After the victory over Copan, the rulers of Quirigua reigned supreme in the Motagua Valley, controlling the lucrative jade route. In 810 CE the ceremonies marking the auspicious 9.19 K’atun ending were held at Quirigua, where Yax Pasaj visited a reconciled Quirigua king. But the end of the 9th bak’tun in 830

CE was not recorded at either site, for by this time the rulers of both kingdoms had lost their thrones and their subjects had already abandoned Copan and Quirigua to the tropical forest.

Tikal’s triumph was also short-lived, and the Terminal Classic kings of Tikal, Calakmul, and the other kingdoms of the Maya lowlands were plagued by a host of threats to their authority. Overpopulation, environmental degradation, and drought brought recurring disasters to their subjects. Many died from famine, disease, and violence. The failure of Maya kings to stave off disaster destroyed their credibility and authority. As the survivors left for better lives elsewhere, the lowland Maya kingdoms were abandoned and their “Lords of Time” disappeared forever. 🏠

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### For Further Reading

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