

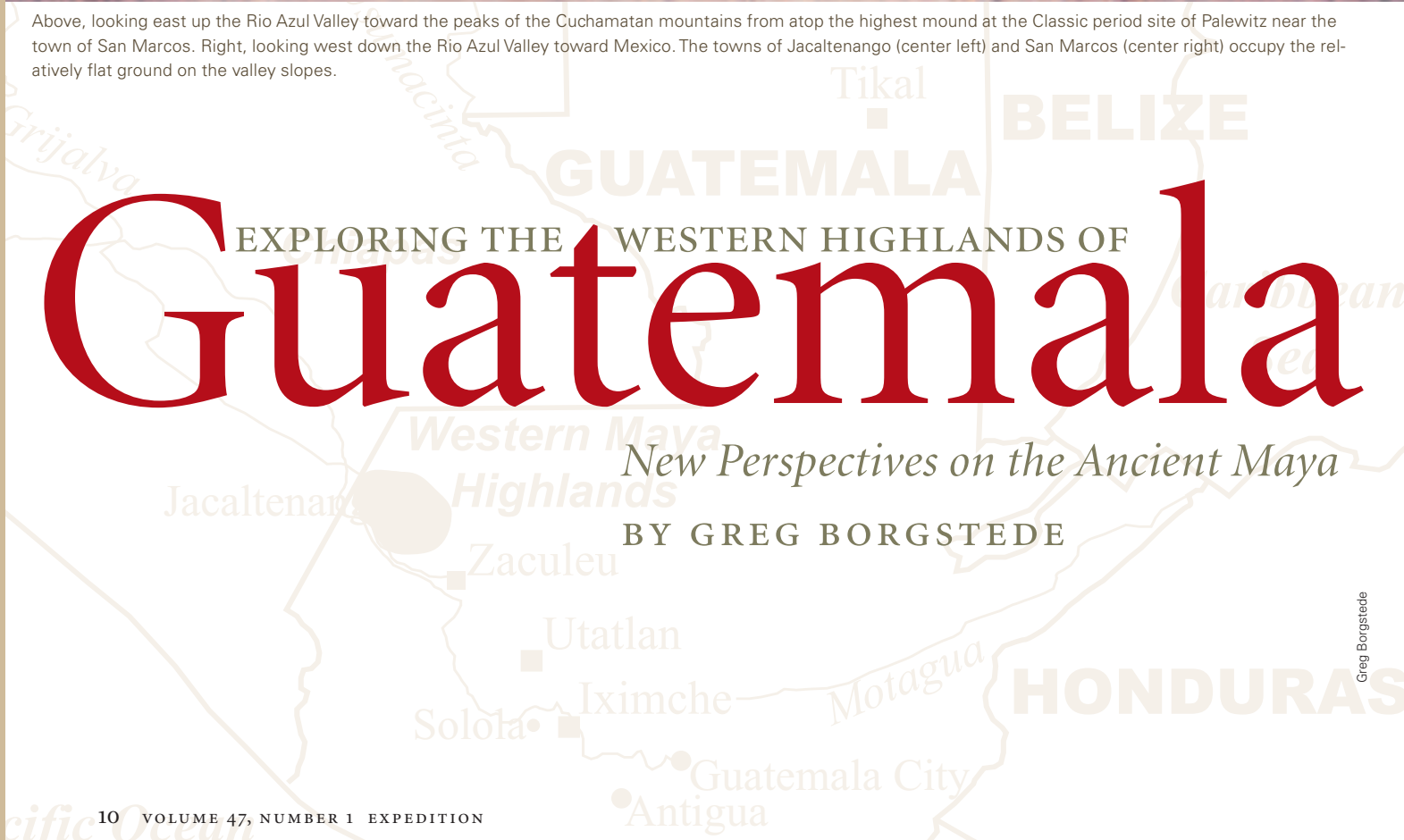


Above, looking east up the Rio Azul Valley toward the peaks of the Cuchumatán mountains from atop the highest mound at the Classic period site of Palewitz near the town of San Marcos. Right, looking west down the Rio Azul Valley toward Mexico. The towns of Jacaltenango (center left) and San Marcos (center right) occupy the relatively flat ground on the valley slopes.

# EXPLORING THE WESTERN HIGHLANDS OF Guatemala

*New Perspectives on the Ancient Maya*

BY GREG BORGSTEDTE

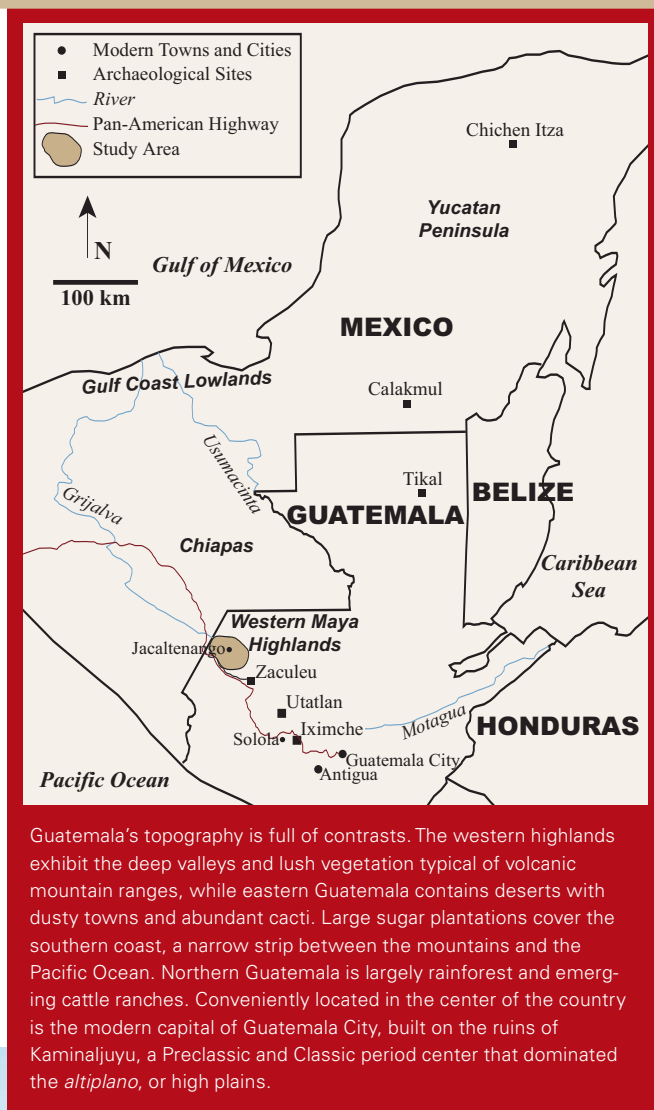


Greg Borgstede

**T**HE DRIVE FROM the capital city of Guatemala westward into the modern Maya heartland follows the Pan-American highway, twisting and turning up and down a steep, volcanic landscape dotted with small cornfields clinging to the sides of mountains. Cinder-block houses are sprinkled around community churches, and coffee plantations spread over miles of rich and broken farmland. The western highlands have become the centerpiece of Guatemala's tourism industry, providing colorful tapestries of Maya textiles, beautiful vistas of volcanoes, valleys, and lakes, and bustling village markets. The emergence of this region is notable because it was one of the most heavily affected by the country's recently ended 30-year civil war.

While cultural anthropologists have long been interested in and conducted extensive ethnographic investigations on the Maya communities of western Guatemala, archaeological research in this area has been relatively scant. Instead, archaeologists have favored the larger, more famous sites of the Maya lowlands to the north.

Many obstacles have stood in the way of intensive archaeological research in the western highlands. Practical concerns included the instability caused by a civil war, the lack of roads and electricity in this area, and the difficulty of obtaining permission to survey and excavate on lands owned by Maya communities. But equally significant was the general perception by archaeologists that the western highlands had few important pre-Columbian Maya centers to investigate and therefore had little new to offer to interpretations of the ancient Maya.



Guatemala's topography is full of contrasts. The western highlands exhibit the deep valleys and lush vegetation typical of volcanic mountain ranges, while eastern Guatemala contains deserts with dusty towns and abundant cacti. Large sugar plantations cover the southern coast, a narrow strip between the mountains and the Pacific Ocean. Northern Guatemala is largely rainforest and emerging cattle ranches. Conveniently located in the center of the country is the modern capital of Guatemala City, built on the ruins of Kaminaljuyu, a Preclassic and Classic period center that dominated the *altiplano*, or high plains.





Flowers and offerings are carried and deposited in the Catholic church during the Virgin of Candelaria procession in Jacaltenango, January 2000.



Traditional Maya dance performed by Jacalteco men during local saint's day festivities in front of the Catholic church.

However, with the signing of a general Peace Accord in 1996 between the Guatemalan government and guerillas, and infrastructural developments during the 1980s and 90s, this area became less intimidating as a research locale. In 2000 I began a research project in Jacaltenango, a traditionally closed Maya community near the Mexican-Guatemalan border to which I have familial ties.

### CHALLENGING PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS

What role did the western Maya highlands play during the pre-Columbian period? Were they a demographic and cultural backwater, isolated from and irrelevant to the wider Maya world? Or were they a full participant in ancient Maya culture and trade? Where did the Maya who live there now come from? How were they different from their better-known neighbors from the lowlands in the North?

In 2000, a number of archaeological sites were visible around Jacaltenango, and local cultural leaders hinted at the

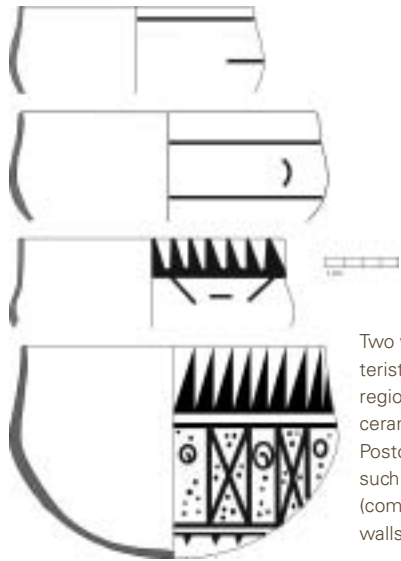


Primary mound at Palewitz, a Classic period archaeological site near Jacaltenango. The mound is approximately 3.5 m in height. Note the two fallen stelae on the left side of the mound.

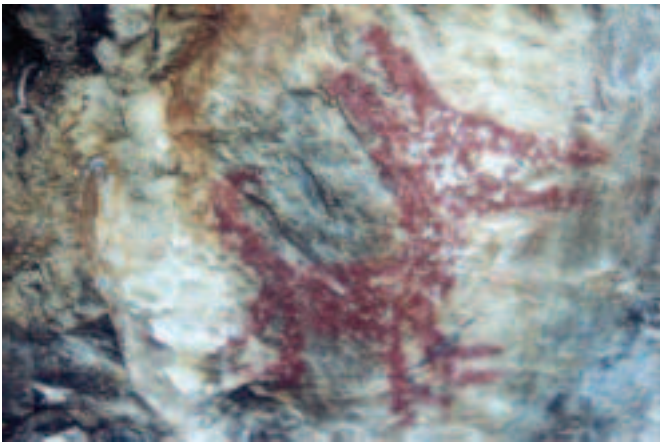
existence of many more. After a brief feasibility study of the region, at least 30 sites were identified, each with 20 or more structures, and some containing typical Maya high status markers such as ballcourts and stelae. After investigating the region's archaeological settlement pattern over two years, more than 150 archaeological sites were found, ranging in size from simple households spread across the rough terrain to large centers with over 100 structures, 15 m high pyramids, and ballcourts. The datable ceramic evidence showed that people were living in the area since at least the Late Preclassic period (*ca.* AD 100–300), reaching a peak in population during the Classic period (AD 300–900), and continuing to thrive through the Postclassic period (or Protohistoric, AD 1000–1500), until the arrival of Europeans in the early 1500s.

This long, unbroken occupation contradicts two widely held preconceptions about the western highlands within Maya archaeology. The first of these is that the region was a backwater, without significant population levels or interaction with the rest of Mesoamerica during the Classic period. In contrast, archaeological evidence clearly shows a close relationship between the western highlands and the Lowland Maya cities and polities to the north. This is indicated by the widespread occurrence of those characteristics associated with being “Maya.” These include the use of certain ceramic types, artistic motifs, the construction of similar houses, large temple pyramids, ballcourts, and the organization of sites according to the cardinal directions.

A second notion that was overturned was the theory that the Postclassic and Contact period Maya occupation of the western highlands resulted from a large migration into the region of groups from the lowland coastal areas on the Gulf of Mexico. Instead, the archaeological evidence, particularly the continuity seen in the ceramics and architectural style, suggests that these Maya groups actually developed gradually



Two widespread cultural characteristics of the Jacaltenango region: Chinautla polychrome ceramics (common in the Postclassic period) and rock art, such as this red-painted dog (common on cliff faces and cave walls throughout prehistory).



from local western highland indigenous roots dating back to at least the Late Preclassic period. Rather than a rapid population influx during the Postclassic period, the region was in fact more heavily occupied during the Classic period and that continuity was the norm from one period to the next. Ceramic types, architectural styles, and principles of site organization continue through both periods while general population levels did not decline from one period to the next even as they abandoned some sites and founded new ones.

### THE CLASSIC TO POSTCLASSIC TRANSITION

Even with continuity, however, we have known since the 1950s that there was a noticeable change from the Classic to the Postclassic period in how sites were organized and where they were located within the western highlands. Classic period sites sat on valley floors and were more centrally organized, clustering around a main ceremonial group with a temple pyramid and ballcourt. In contrast, Postclassic period sites consisted of

## Questioning the Postclassic Migration Theory

For many years, anthropologists, led by J. E. S. Thompson, Robert Carmack, and John Fox, have believed that the large Maya states of the Postclassic period (AD 1000–1500) in the western highlands originated from groups that migrated from the Mexican Gulf Coast. Starting with the general perception that the western highlands were sparsely occupied during the Classic period (AD 300–900), this belief grew out of a number of lines of evidence. First, ethnohistorical documents written by the Maya, such as the *Popul Vuh*, or recorded by their early Spanish conquerors, state that the Quiche Maya came to their capital of Uatlan in the western highlands after a period of wandering.

A second line of evidence comes from the recognition that Postclassic Maya languages often have words that refer to items native to the Gulf Coast lowlands and not the highlands. These words have been suggested as remnants that survive from the time when these Maya groups may have previously lived along the Gulf Coast. In a similar way, some have noted that many Maya words derive directly from, or are close cognates of, words in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs. It has been argued that close contact with the Aztecs in the Gulf Coast area, prior to migration, caused this abundance of such words in some Maya languages. Others have noted the presence of non-Maya architectural characteristics in Postclassic period archaeological sites in the western highlands. These include Aztec-like twin temple pyramids (tall platforms with two temples on top), round structures, columned structures, and staircases with balustrades, all of which closely resemble Aztec and Toltec features in other parts of Mesoamerica.

By the late 1980s, anthropologists began to challenge aspects of this migration model. For example, ethnohistorians now question the strict, historical interpretation of Maya documents such as the *Popol Vuh*. Instead, they suggest metaphorical readings of many events, and they argue that many statements in the documents were attempts to create or consolidate leadership through ties and parallels with foreign powers. Furthermore, linguists now suggest that the presence of Nahuatl words in highland Maya languages may result from culture contact at a late date, rather than constitute evidence of early, pre-migration interaction. Similarly, archaeologists now see many of the correspondences between highland Maya architectural features and those of the Aztecs and Toltecs as imitations meant to reinforce ties between ruling elites and confer status and power on the imitators. Combining these new interpretations with the results from archaeological research, it is clear that the migration model is slowly unraveling and there is a need for more research to develop a new one.



The defensive wall at the site of Tzulublaj has a parapet halfway up its internal face which allowed defenders to man the walls without exposing their bodies to attackers.

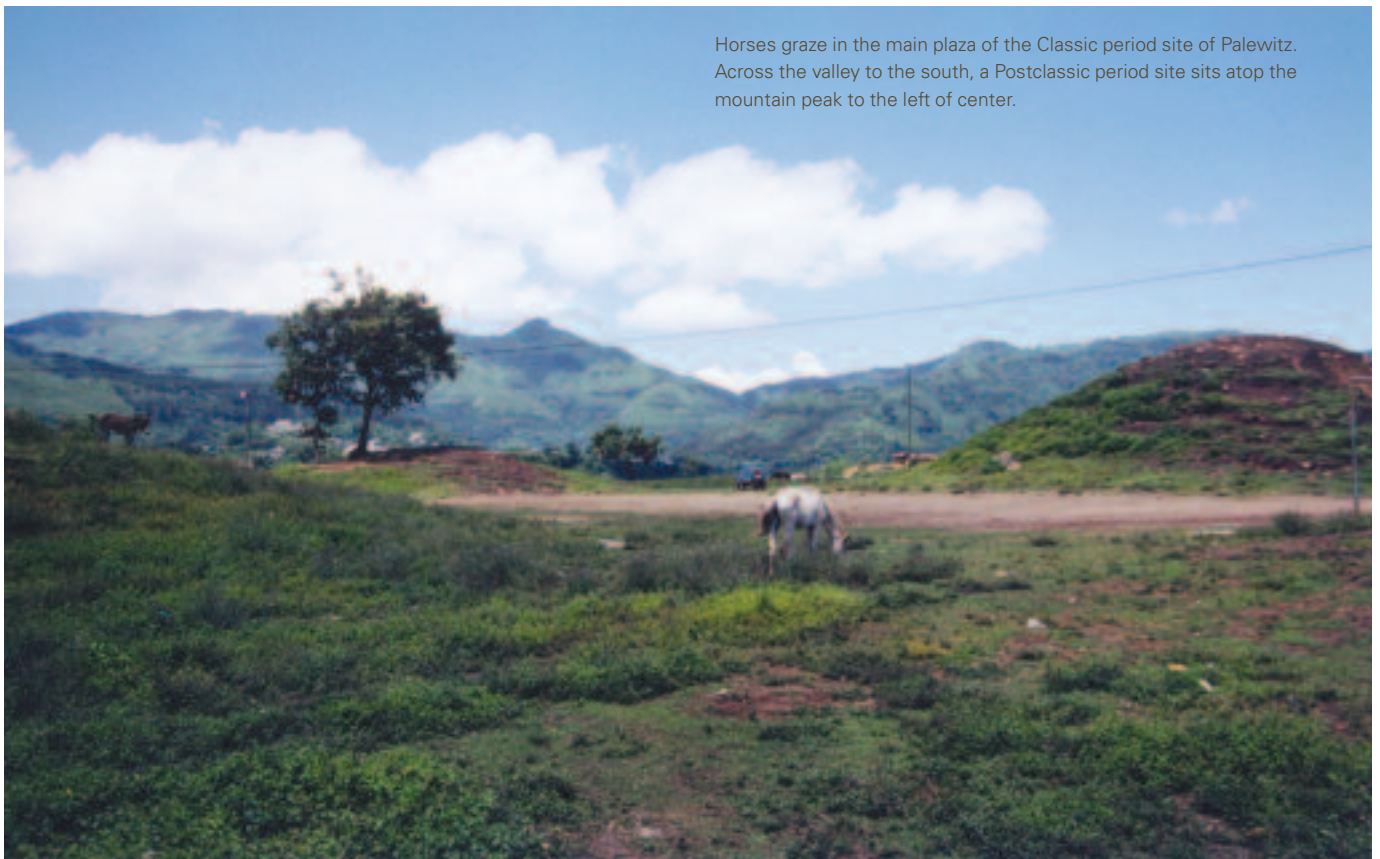
smaller ceremonial centers located on mountaintops and common households spread across the mountain slopes.

This shift in settlement patterns within the highlands was also attributed to the alleged in-migration of outsiders, with their supposedly militaristic nature requiring centers to be built in defensible locations, such as mountaintops, instead of indefensible valley floors. In and around Jacaltenango, my research supports and rejects different aspects of this explanation.

First, the migration model was built upon the assumption that the Classic period saw low population levels and few sites in the western highlands. This was not actually the case. In fact, the Classic period, and more specifically the Terminal Classic period (AD 800–1000), saw the most archaeological sites in the widest variety of locations.

Second, although there is solid evidence that the overall settlement pattern in the highlands shifted from a focus around valley floor sites to more mountainous sites, this does not translate to a clear increase in defensibility from one period to the next. That is, Classic period sites, occasionally seen as valley floor sites, can be just as defensible as Postclassic period sites, though in different ways. Where the former employed walls, ditches, and surrounding low hills for defense, the latter relied more on the inherent defensibility of hilltops and the long-distance vistas they provided for surveillance.

Instead, this shift in settlement pattern within the highlands has more to do with ideological and practical concerns than with strict defensibility. The Maya built sites in accordance with their ideological focus on mountains, rivers, and caves, and to make the best use of the available land in a region disrupted by numerous cliffs, mountains, and deep river valleys. The Maya worldview revolves around mountains and height. Where the Classic Maya constructed man-made



Horses graze in the main plaza of the Classic period site of Palewitz. Across the valley to the south, a Postclassic period site sits atop the mountain peak to the left of center.

mountains—temple pyramids—on relatively flat ground, the Postclassic Maya constructed their ceremonial centers on top of natural mountains. Both focused on height, but in different ways. In the western highlands, the rugged topography provides only limited spaces for its residents to live. These spaces need to have certain characteristics, such as access to water in the form of springs, rivers, and cenotes, and agricultural land, and relatively flat spaces on which to build houses. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that as the population increased, more and more of these areas were taken up with sites during both the Classic and Postclassic periods.

### A NEW EXPLANATION FOR THE SHIFT IN SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

How are we then to explain the transition we see in settlement patterns between the Classic and Postclassic periods? The answer seems to be tied to understanding ancient Maya sociopolitical organization. What was the Classic period sociopolitical organization like in the western highlands? There appears to have been a clear, hierarchical organization of sites, with dominant ones stressing their political power over smaller centers and with political ties among sites displayed in various ways. This is similar to the situation during the Classic period in the Maya lowlands and also in neighboring Chiapas, Mexico. There, a recent study has highlighted the complex political organization which incorporated site hierarchies, the internal organization of centers, and connections between sites, among three Maya polities.

What changed during the Postclassic period? There appears to have been a shift away from a focus on political alliances and organizing in this manner and a shift toward political alliances organized around cultural, or ethnic, characteristics instead. For example, the oral history of the Jacalteco Maya, those from around Jacaltenango, traces their roots as a people, or *raza*—meaning a society aware of its cultural distinctiveness in relation to other groups—to the beginnings of the Postclassic period.

There are a number of different possible explanations for this shift. The first is that it may merely reflect the different sort of data on which our understandings are based. For the Classic period, our understanding of the Maya comes primarily from archaeological evidence allied with descriptions of political relationships and achievements described by the elites in hieroglyphic texts. In contrast, for the Postclassic period (occasionally called the “Protohistoric”), documents, either written or dictated by the Maya, augment the archaeological evidence and focus our attention on specific Maya groups, providing historical detail. In Jacaltenango, while archaeological evidence is abundant for both the Classic and

## Contrasting Lowland Classic and Highland Postclassic Political Organization

Archaeologists and epigraphers (researchers who study the Maya hieroglyphic writing system) have suggested numerous ways of interpreting Lowland Maya political organization during the Classic period. These range from early descriptions of lowland cities organized into an “empire,” to later views which saw each site as an independent city-state, to the current dominant position which envisions independent political entities loosely organized in a hierarchical fashion with large cities such as Tikal and Calakmul forming super-states that politically and militarily compete with each other. While most Maya cities, including those of the western highlands, shared what is understood as a common Maya culture—in writing, artistic style, worldview—there was great diversity in the outward display of many characteristics. For example, ballcourts, common throughout the Maya area, are much more widespread in the western highlands—where practically every Classic site of any size has one—than in the lowlands.

In contrast, in the highlands during the Postclassic period, ethnohistoric and archaeological data suggest the presence of numerous ethnic groups, including the Quiche and Kaqchikel Maya. As Robert Carmack has



Kaqchikel Maya capital of Iximche in the central Maya highlands.

shown in detail for the Quiche Maya, these groups were organized around kinship. This prompted anthropologists to characterize them as lineages—groups of people descended from one common ancestor—each of which had its own residential section in the Quiche Maya capital of Utatlan. The lineages, while independent, still considered themselves members of the Quiche Maya, using various terms, such as *vinak*, to indicate the cohesion of the larger ethnic group, or the social bonds connecting different lineages. Therefore, the overall structure of the Postclassic Quiche Maya society was based dually on kinship, as manifested in the lineage system, and ethnicity, or the recognition by the various lineages that they comprised a single socio-cultural unit that was different from others in the highlands.



Archaeologists crossing the Río Catarina on a rope bridge while conducting settlement survey during the rainy season.

Postclassic periods, only the Postclassic period is augmented by oral histories passed down in the community and some ethnohistoric documents.

A second explanation for the shift from political to cultural organizing depends on a broader understanding of what happened to Lowland Maya cities at the end of the Classic period—the so-called Maya collapse. Archaeologists have long been aware of a drastic reorganization of Lowland Maya society at this time and have developed numerous theories to explain it (or explain it away). Current models suggest numerous causes arising from multiple sources, including environmental degradation, drought, population pressure, political instability, complications with descent and kingship, and increasing militarism and warfare. Based on research in different parts of the Maya lowlands, the change varies from drastic and probably militaristic (as in the southern Maya lowlands), to gradual and prolonged (as in northern Belize), and everything in between. But as many archaeologists have pointed out, it may be unwise to stress overly this period of decline after hundreds of years of successful development, which was then followed by hundreds of more years of successful existence. Perhaps the term “collapse” should be replaced with “reorganization,” a process that occurs in many societies throughout their histories in different ways, both radical and gradual.

### SITUATING THE WESTERN HIGHLANDS WITHIN THE MAYA WORLD

The roots of changes in the western Maya highlands are probably located in the same processes of reorganization as in the Maya lowlands. Close ties between these regions make it

unlikely that developments in the lowlands did not affect the highlands as well. The response of the population in the western highlands to the changes happening elsewhere in Mesoamerica was to reorganize their society around cultural similarities, stressing kinship and language ties within the group. The Maya of Jacaltenango, for example, developed a complex oral history to explain this point in their history—they mention their “founding fathers,” the sacred places from which they emerged, the routes of their early migrations, and the founding and development of places that were occupied throughout the Postclassic period until the Spanish Conquest. The archaeological evidence

suggests that these were not a “new” Maya group, migrating from the Gulf Coast lowlands, but a group that was recognizing its cultural uniqueness as it underwent a process of abandoning old ways and creating new ones.

This process of distinguishing one’s social group from others—creating one’s ethnicity—is termed *ethnogenesis* by anthropologists. Social scientists define *ethnicity* in a fairly specific way as the sharing of cultural traits in a manner that is recognized, and intentionally utilized, by the group as a whole. That is, a group of people is an “ethnic” group not simply when they share religion, art style, history, language, or cultural symbols (flags, national anthems, or political parties), but when they, as a group, realize that this configuration of culture sets them apart from others. The process by which this realization happens is ethnogenesis, and it usually involves the group taking on a name for themselves (e.g. “Americans” following the Revolutionary War) and explicitly stating which characteristics are required to be a member of the group. This process of a group recognizing its uniqueness and setting itself apart from others usually occurs in times of social stress, often when there are external pressures attempting to pull the group apart or redefine it.

A hundred years ago social scientists theorized that the realities of the modern world would eclipse ethnic groups, crushing them under the weight of contemporary politics, science, and capitalism. As seen in the contemporary situations in the Balkans, West Africa, and Latin America, however, ethnic groups have not disappeared, but seem to thrive as an alternative to the modern nation-state. My research in the western Maya highlands suggests that social processes—ethnogenesis, the ups and downs of society, and how people view themselves and others—have roots deep in the past.

# The Quiche and Kaqchikel Maya: Highland States of the Postclassic

The best known groups of highland Guatemala are the Quiche and Kaqchikel Maya. These related groups dominated and controlled the highlands when the Spanish arrived in the early 1500s and their descendants still comprise the majority of Maya in the western highlands.

The Quiche Maya controlled the western highlands from their capital of Utatlan, spreading outward until most of the western highlands were under their control. Their history, origins, and expansion are detailed in one of the most important Maya written documents, the *Popol Vuh*—often called the “Maya Bible” because of its combination of religious, ideological, and historical information.

Late in the history of the Quiche Maya kingdom, the Kaqchikel Maya decided to fight the yoke of the Quiche and successfully broke off to found their own kingdom, with their capital at the city of Iximche. Located near the modern Pan American highway, Iximche is one of the most visited archaeological sites in Guatemala and a center of modern Maya spiritualism. Much like the Quiche Maya, Kaqchikel Maya history is also known through a combination of archaeological research and written documents. For example, the *Annals of the Cakchiquels*—whose original manuscript resides in Penn’s Museum Library—records a history of the group immediately prior to and during the Spanish Conquest.

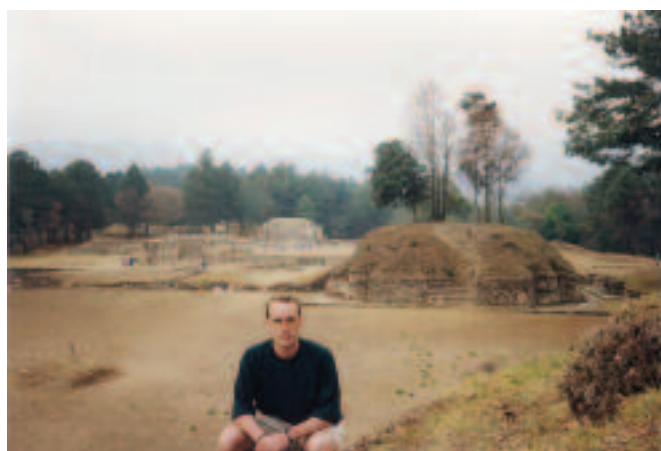
Modern Maya at the weekly outdoor market in Solola wearing *traje*, traditional Maya dress.



During the Conquest, the Quiche and Kaqchikel Maya were among the first Guatemalan groups to be overcome by the conquistador Pedro de Alvarado. The centralized nature of their kingdoms, and the existence of figurehead leaders, made it possible for Alvarado to conquer the kingdoms largely by burning their capitals and capturing their kings. Iximche became Guatemala’s first Spanish capital, which was later moved to Antigua and then ultimately to Guatemala City. Today, both Iximche and Utatlan are important sites for Maya religion, tourism, and Guatemalan history.

While rarely straightforward, examples of these processes in the past provide a means by which we can understand the emergence and role of ethnic groups in the modern world. For the modern Maya, ultimately, archaeology provides a scientific and historical way of bridging their past, present, and future. 🏠

GREG BORGSTEDT received his Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Pennsylvania in 2004. His research interests include the ancient and modern Maya, archaeological ethics, and the study of ethnicity. He recently co-edited (with Charles W. Golden) *Continuities and Change in Maya Archaeology: Perspectives at the Millennium* (Routledge, 2004). He is a Research Associate in the American Section of the Museum.



The author at Iximche.

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## For Further Reading

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