



# TIME BEYOND KINGS

BY LOA TRAXLER

**P**ROFOUND CHANGES WITHIN MAYA society ended the time of kings. Traditionally, kings monopolized the political, economic, and religious power within each Maya state regardless of its territorial extent. These powers were lost in the midst of famine, disease, and violence at the end of the Classic period (*ca.* 300–900 CE). As their subjects fled from local and regional problems, the kings of polities like Tikal lost upwards of 90 percent of their population by the end of the Classic period. With their authority undermined, and few if any subjects acceding to their rule, the last of the traditional Maya kings vanished.

What brought about this unraveling of the supreme authority held by individual kings and their royal houses? Celebrated for generations as semi-divine figures, royal lords anchored the political and religious systems at the heart of each kingdom. Like the towering ceiba tree—which the Maya believed grew at the center of the world and held together the multi-



Tikal, like most other Classic cities in the central Maya lowlands, was abandoned by the beginning of the Postclassic.

layered heaven, earth, and Underworld—the king connected and interceded with the supernatural forces of the world all around him. Acting to sustain the proper order of daily life and relationships across time and space, Maya kings held immense power over their communities. However, as their kingdoms grew in population, straining local resources and political alliances, the challenges to royal authority increased.

Further complicating the strain of managing expanding royal territories and burgeoning populations, the impact of environmental changes—revealed through modern analyses of climate history—certainly pushed some Classic lowland kingdoms to a breaking point. Recent paleoclimate studies indicate severe and persistent multi-year droughts occurred throughout the Yucatan peninsula at the very end of the Classic period. The Maya were able to manage the normal wet-to-dry season fluctuation of rainfall throughout the year, building extensive water management systems as part of their urban centers and farming settlements. Yet all these engineering systems, no matter the scale, relied primarily on annual rainfall to recharge the cisterns, reservoirs, lakes, and wetlands.

Analyses of sediment cores from lakes in northern Yucatan, supported by climate data from the southern Caribbean, indicate that a relatively wet period in long-term climate cycles characterized the decades from 550–750 CE. The large Classic-period kingdoms of the lowlands reached their political stride, economic dominance, and height of population by the 8th century CE, sustained by this favorable climate that allowed peak agricultural production. Unfortunately, from 800 to 1000 CE this Classic florescence experienced the driest interval of time in the last 7,000 years throughout the circum-Caribbean region. Within this dry period, severe multi-year droughts occurred approximately every 40 to 47 years beginning after 760 CE. Especially severe was a 10-year period around 810 CE.

While no one factor seems to have caused the collapse of the 9th century political and religious system of divine kingship,



the impact of severe drought on kingdoms and the authority of individual rulers throughout the central and southern lowlands must have been significant. An example of the response by kings to reassert their role of sustaining the world order can be seen on Jimbal Stela 1. This monument dedicated in 879 CE (for the half K'atun celebration of 10.2.10.0.0) presents the ruler of this petty kingdom claiming his descent from the Tikal royal house. (For an overview of the Maya calendar system, see Simon Martin's article in this issue.) Although archaeology indicates his territory and power were limited, his portrait presents him in a swirl of deity figures interpreted by some scholars to be wrapped in rain clouds. The next stela carved at the site just ten years later to mark the K'atun celebration of 10.3.0.0.0 in 889 CE had no royal portrait at all, perhaps an indication that rulership for the people of Jimbal had begun to change, and the authority of the king was diminished. The last stela with a clear Long Count date was carved at Tonina for the 10.4.0.0.0 celebration in 909 CE, while texts at Itzimte and Chichen Itza include dates that point to the end of the Long Count in Yucatan. After this, use of the Long Count for public inscriptions on stela and other royal monuments and architecture ceased, marking the disappearance of Classic Maya kings.

## TRANSFORMATIONS IN MAYA CIVILIZATION

The final pre-Columbian episode of Maya civilization—the Postclassic period (*ca.* 900–1500 CE)—is characterized by a transformed and less centralized political order. Scholars once described the Postclassic period as a time of cultural decline or decadence because of evidence of new standards of artistic expression and other changes. But viewed on its own terms, the Postclassic was a time of political, economic, and religious transformations, which led to the integration of more widespread Mesoamerican traditions into Maya society and culture. These Postclassic transformations spurred the development of a more cosmopolitan culture based on expanded commerce, communication, and interchange of ideas. Certainly the movements of peoples and the expansion of trade inspired many of these changes. Increased external contacts created new opportunities for the Maya to adopt new technologies, products, religious practices, and political ideas.

Whereas the central and southern lowlands saw the rise and florescence of Classic period Maya civilization, the Postclassic was a time of ascendant polities in the northern lowlands and

## CASTS AND REPLICAS PRESERVE THE PAST

Casts and molds of ancient sculpture play an important role in preserving art works that are often damaged or destroyed by environmental change and human intervention. A mold was created from the carved face of Jimbal Stela 1, uncovered by the Penn Museum Tikal Project in 1965, and a cast was made from that mold shortly thereafter at the Museum. Tragically, the stone monument at the site in Guatemala was targeted by looters, who destroyed the upper zone of carving in a failed attempt to saw off the carved face of the stela for sale in the antiquities market. The cast at the Penn Museum is the only preserved record of the three-dimensional carved relief that exists today.

Tikal Project, Penn Museum (left), Joya Hairs (right)



Left, Jimbal Stela 1 was uncovered in 1965 and set upright during the field investigations at the site carried out by the Penn Museum's Tikal Project. Right, tragically, the monument was destroyed by looters attempting to saw the carved face off the stone slab in order to make it lighter in weight for transport to the illicit art market.





K'uk'ulkan, a feathered serpent deity depicted by these sculptured temple columns at the site of Chichen Itza, was the focus of a popular religious cult that spread throughout the Maya region during the centuries of the Postclassic period.

southern highlands. Postclassic states were sustained by new trade routes that linked the Maya lowlands, highlands, and the rest of Mesoamerica. Managing some of these routes were the Chontal Maya of the west coast of Yucatan, who expanded sea-borne trade circulating around the entire coast of the peninsula, linking ports such as Cozumel, Tulum, and Chetumal. Sea-borne commerce provided more efficient and far-reaching distribution of everyday products, and this Postclassic economy promoted growth and prosperity that transformed Maya society. Across the Maya world, a middle class sector of



These pages from *The Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, one of the *Books of Chilam Balam*, are examples of native accounts that were written down using European script in the Yucatek Mayan language. Based on pre-Columbian records, the accounts were recopied and continued to be used during the period after the Spanish Conquest.

craft specialists expanded along with the mercantile economy, and increased prosperity reduced the distinctions separating the elite from the rest of Maya society.

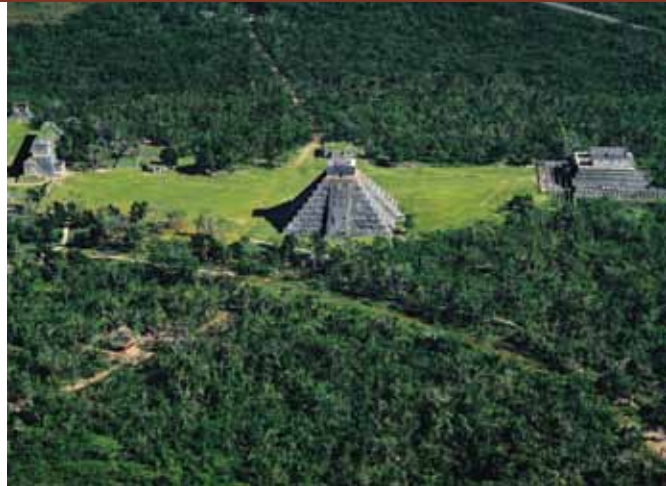
The new mercantile economy was reinforced by a multi-ethnic religion based on the cult of K'uk'ulkan—a feathered serpent deity. With its widespread adoption throughout Mesoamerica, this cult encouraged commercial interaction and communication with a shared stylistic vocabulary. The new religion was less hierarchical and centralized than its predecessors and more focused on family-based ritual and pilgrimages.

It required fewer and smaller temples, thereby lessening the huge expenditures for temple construction typical of earlier centuries.

The Maya recognized how their society had changed. In Yucatan they recorded how their past was a time when “the course of humanity was orderly.” Thereafter the Maya often despaired of the arrival of new peoples and new ideas: “There were no more lucky days for us; we had no sound judgment.” This comes from a Postclassic Maya chronicle, the *Books of Chilam Balam*, which records history according to the K'atun cycle of the Maya calendar. For the Maya such records of past events were an important means to compile and understand



This map of the Maya area shows the location of prominent sites during the Postclassic period.



Left, Chichen Itza rose to power in the 9th and 10th centuries CE and became an important economic and religious center in the northern Yucatan peninsula. Built for celestial observations and rituals, the Caracol is one of several famous structures at the site. Right, El Castillo temple at Chichen Itza inspired similar temples at other sites throughout the Maya area during the Postclassic period.

the prophecies made for each cycle of time, including the K'atun period of 20 years. Maya histories often present past events as fulfilling the prophecies for a sequence of K'atun endings.

## NEW POWERS EMERGE IN YUCATAN

Even as Classic kings disappeared, a new political order took shape on the coasts, highlands, and plains of the northern Yucatan peninsula—areas resettled by émigrés from the declining traditional lowland kingdoms. These migrations spurred the rise of new polity capitals with more dispersed political, economic, and religious authority. The trend toward a decentralized political system can be seen first at Chichen Itza, where rulers and advisory councils shared power based on the control of critical commodities, corvée and slave labor, strategic warfare, and religion. Rising above the control of the site of Ek' Balam during the end of the Late Classic period, Chichen Itza became both a major military power and a major religious center, attracting pilgrims from all over Mesoamerica to its shrines. As a cosmopolitan center, Chichen Itza incorporated imagery and glyphic symbols influenced by central Mexican traditions in its inscriptions and public displays, allowing a wider range of visitors to comprehend their meanings.

Prominent at the site of Chichen Itza is the building known as the Caracol—a distinctive round structure associated with the wind-deity aspect of K'uk'ulkan from central Mexico. The building's interior chamber and windows provided sightlines for important celestial observations. Elsewhere at the site the famous structure called El Castillo presents nine terraces and

four radial stairways interpreted to represent the order of the cosmos. Associated with the massive structure on the same expansive platform are the Great Ball Court and Temple of the Warriors, connected by means of a causeway to the Sacred Cenote (deep well). These buildings were the focus of architectural emulation and a destination of religious pilgrimage for generations.

The inscriptions of Chichen Itza reveal many changes in the political arena of this northern city. Bishop Diego de Landa's famous description of Yucatan, penned in the 16th century, mentions the rule of Chichen Itza by a group of brothers. Recent decipherments of the hieroglyphic texts identify two leaders who receive prominent mention: K'ak'upakal and his brother K'inil Kopol. No clear indication of hierarchy between the two contemporary lords is stated in the texts. In addition, a noble family named Cocom appears in the inscriptions associated with multiple shrine buildings during the time of K'atun 1 Ajaw. Almost all the inscriptions at the site fall within a single K'atun, with the last mention of K'ak'upakal dating to 890 CE. Texts also suggest a notion of co-rulership by humans and supernaturals—divinities who protected the lords and gave them power. These inscriptions refer explicitly to the gods and humans as owners and residents of certain buildings.

Like most of its Classic predecessors, Chichen Itza eventually succumbed to overpopulation, depleted environments, warfare, and failures of leadership. The decline of Chichen Itza was fully evident by 1050–1100 CE, its ruling house likely overthrown by military conflict and sacking of the capital center. The site continued to be an important pilgrimage destination, access to which was highly sought and controlled by





Mayapan rose to power after the fall of Chichen Itza. Within its city walls residents constructed the Temple of K'uk'ulkan, patterned after El Castillo at the still-famous pilgrimage center.

descendant elite groups. Yet, after its fall, this city became a legendary inspiration for later capitals, which continued to develop decentralized political systems during the Postclassic period based on the remembered heritage of Chichen Itza.

The leaders of new Postclassic polities looked to the past for inspiration and for practical ways to reinforce their authority. At the same time, these leaders succeeded by reformulating the failed socioeconomic, political, and ideological foundations of past Maya states. Their most immediate inspiration was the legendary city of Chichen Itza. During its heyday Chichen Itza reached far beyond the Maya area to secure resources and exchange ideas throughout Mesoamerica. Its successors did the same, and continued to import new products and concepts that fostered further changes to Maya society.

After the fall of Chichen Itza, a new capital arose at Mayapan (see page 17), which continued many of the political, economic, military, and religious institutions found at Chichen Itza and which became the dominant power in the northern lowlands. According to *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, Mayapan's ascendancy over Yucatan spanned one cycle of 13 K'atuns, or 256 years. Its founding took place in K'atun 8 Ajaw (1185–1204 CE), and its earliest architecture dates to this period. Archaeology reveals that Mayapan's Central Plaza was renovated 13 times—perhaps a new plaza floor was laid as part of the ceremonies marking each new K'atun.

Mayapan is smaller than its sprawling predecessor, protected by a wall with four gateways enclosing an area of dense settlement that once numbered around 20,000 people. Its major buildings cluster around the central public plaza, and many (including the Temple of K'uk'ulkan) are patterned after those at Chichen Itza, though not as large or as well-constructed. A round platform in the plaza once supported carved stone stelae dedicated to K'atun-ending ceremonies. Mayapan Stela 1 commemorates the completion of the K'atun in 1185 CE. Temples, shrines, and colonnaded buildings likely served both residential and administrative functions for Mayapan's elite. Some buildings retain stuccoed decorations and painted murals rendered in the prevailing styles of Postclassic Mesoamerica, reflecting wide-ranging commercial contacts and broadly shared religious concepts.

Mayapan controlled much of the coastal salt production—a crucial product throughout Maya history—as well as the source of rare clay that combined with indigo made the highly prized “Maya Blue” pigment. The Mexica, or Aztecs, in Central Mexico imported Maya Blue pigment from Yucatan to decorate buildings in their capital at Tenochtitlan. Mayapan's merchants traded Maya Blue pigment and other products (cotton textiles, honey, and pottery), along with slaves, for products from western Mexico (including copper bells) and the Maya highlands (especially obsidian and jade). Distribution



via water-borne commerce centered around ports along the Yucatan coast, although goods were also carried over inland trade routes, supplying communities that repopulated the central lowlands.

The Postclassic political system controlled the new economic, military, and religious institutions. Scholars reconstruct the governing system at Postclassic capitals as a collective sharing of power among elite ruling lords, usually in the form of a ruling council. Decision-making and responsibility were shared rather than concentrated in a single individual, although one lord was usually identified as paramount among the ruling council for a time. For Mayapan, an informant describing its leadership to Bishop Diego de Landa in the 16th century referred to 12 priests, each from a prominent family, who controlled the city.

The chronicles relate that a new ruling house, anchored by an elite family named Cocom, came to Mayapan in K'atun 13 Ajaw (1263–1283 CE) and took control of the city. The Cocom brought mercenaries from the Tabasco region in Mexico to enforce their authority. Loyalty of the provinces controlled by Mayapan was assured by means of representative captives held in the capital.

The Cocom erected large structures similar in design and purpose to the famous buildings of their former capital, including shrines for the cult of K'uk'ulkan. Mayapan became the center for a revived cult of K'uk'ulkan associated with the past glories of Chichen Itza. This is seen in representations of K'uk'ulkan throughout the city and the introduction of distinctive incense burners adorned with modeled deity figures. These Mayapan-style incensarios were traded widely and are found at sites from the Maya lowlands to the Gulf Coast. They remained popular long after Mayapan's fall; the Spaniards documented their use and destroyed many such "idols," which they found inside Maya temples.

*The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* records that in K'atun 1 Ajaw (1382–1401 CE) the Cocom expelled another noble family, the Xiu, who likely controlled the K'atun-ending ceremonies at Mayapan. This allowed the ruling Cocom to consolidate their power over all aspects of the Mayapan community and economy. The chronicles also tell how during this time the mercenaries controlled by the Cocom abused the people of Mayapan. Later in K'atun 8 Ajaw (1441–1461 CE) the surviving Xiu at Mayapan revolted against Cocom rule in a famous episode of invitation and ambush. All members of the Cocom ruling house were killed except one who was away on



Above, a modern Christian chapel has replaced the original Postclassic temple that once crowned the summit of this pre-Columbian substructure in the Maya highlands. Right, this Mayapan-style incense burner adorned with an elaborately modeled and painted Maya deity dates to the Postclassic period.



a trading mission. Archaeology supports this account of sacking the ruling house with evidence of burned buildings and destroyed altars from the period. With this revolt the confederacy of ruling houses and provinces disintegrated. The abandonment of Mayapan occurred during the return of K'atun 8 Ajaw, 256 years after the site's founding.

After the breakup of the Mayapan state, its former provinces returned to a mosaic of independent rivals. These petty states were frequently at war with each other, sometimes triggered by fallout from the revolt against the Cocom that initiated





# POPOL VUH AND THE K'ICHE' CREATION STORY

From the K'iche' comes perhaps the greatest literary work of the Maya, the manuscript known as the *Popol Vuh*. Written down in the 16th century and recopied multiple times, the text preserves the creation story and history of the K'iche' people. The stories of the Hero Twins and their exploits, including their defeat of the Underworld deities as recorded in the *Popol Vuh*, represent what were likely long recounted poems, oral histories, legends, and myths that accompanied painted books and ceramic vessels depicting scenes from these oral traditions.

Mayapan's downfall. These internal conflicts continued even as the Spanish were attempting to conquer Yucatan, preventing the northern Maya from uniting against the invaders from Spain.

Elsewhere the new Postclassic economy revived inland trade routes following major river systems, restoring the fortunes of the Peten Lakes region of the old Classic heartland. This reinvigorated economy supported the rise of several small lowland states that claimed origins from Chichen Itza or Mayapan. In their relative isolation from the coasts, these lowland Postclassic communities remained independent from Spanish control far longer than Maya states in northern Yucatan or in the southern highland area.

## NEW POWERS IN THE MAYA HIGHLANDS

Postclassic populations increased along the coasts of the Maya lowlands as well as in areas of the highlands, which had not seen the expansive kingdoms of the Classic period. Movements of new people into the highlands brought influences from the coast and northern Yucatan, as well as non-Maya areas of Mexico. The K'uk'ulkan religious cult reached the highlands along with other ideas and trade goods associated with Chichen Itza and its successors of the northern lowlands. Postclassic states in the Maya highlands followed a similar course as those to the north, and often traced real or fictive origins back to



This shows a temple at the ruins of Q'umarkaj (Utatlan) before excavation. Founded in the 15th century by the highland K'iche' Maya, Q'umarkaj fell to the Spanish Conquistadores in 1524.

Chichen Itza or Mayapan. After *ca.* 1300 CE, the aggressive K'iche' Maya state in the central highlands of Guatemala grew rapidly by conquest and political consolidation.

Increased warfare across the Maya area forced many Postclassic settlements to more defensible locations. In the highlands, centers typically were located on hills and mountaintops. In the 15th century CE, warriors of the K'iche' Maya and their chief competitors, the ascendant Kaqchikel, fought for supremacy in the highlands. The *Popol Vuh* records the history of the K'iche' and the founding of their capital at Q'umarkaj (or Utatlan) in the 15th century. The Kaqchikel in time defeated the K'iche' and were in the midst of expanding their territories when the Spanish Conquest halted their independent careers, as it did to the petty states of Postclassic Yucatan.

## THE CONQUEST

The Spanish Conquest of both the Maya highlands and Yucatan required numerous campaigns, beginning in 1517 CE, and resulted in countless fallen Maya warriors and villagers. The campaign across what is now Guatemala, begun in 1523 by Pedro de Alvarado and continued by his brother Jorge de Alvarado, is the subject of the remarkable *Lienzo de Quauhquechollan*. Painted by artists from the Puebla region of Mexico, the *lienzo* (painted cloth) presents both an indigenous map of the territories crossed and the history of the campaign as recorded by these Nahuatl-speaking allies of the Spanish *conquistadores*.





These 16th century painted scenes, part of the *Lienzo de Quauhquechollan*, show the territories crossed by the Spanish and allied indigenous forces who marched with Pedro de Alvarado to conquer the Maya living in what is now Guatemala.

The legacy of conquest in Yucatan was a patchwork of subjugated communities, some defeated in battle, others who submitted without waging war, and a small number of fiercely independent kingdoms. A group of communities around the Peten Lakes, most notably the Kan Ek' polity, successfully resisted and remained independent of Spanish rule. Even once conquered, however, polities did not always remain loyal to the Spanish crown. The influence of Catholic missionaries and negotiated surrenders held back the final round of military conquest of the interior of the Maya lowlands until the late 17th century. In 1697 a water-borne assault on the Kan Ek' capital of Tayasal, situated on an island within Lake Petén, brought the last independent Maya kingdom under Spanish control.

The centuries of the Postclassic and the early Colonial periods were times of great change, innovation, and accommodation in the Maya world. The influence of new ideas, languages, and technologies shaped the history of mountainous highlands and expansive lowlands. Throughout these centuries, an attention to recording events and interpreting the passage of time resulted in the monuments and chronicles that survive. Through these primary sources, contextualized and augmented through archaeological research, we see the impact of successive arrivals—from Maya groups to the Mexica to the

Spanish Conquistadores—and their continuing influence on the lives of Maya descendants today. 🏠

LOA TRAXLER is Andrew W. Mellon Associate Deputy Director of the Penn Museum and an archaeologist with the Penn Museum's Early Copan Acropolis Program. She is also Curator of the exhibition *MAYA 2012: Lords of Time*.

#### For Further Reading

Brenner, Mark, Michael F. Rosenmeier, David A. Hodell, and Jason H. Curtis. "Paleolimnology of the Maya Lowlands." *Ancient Mesoamerica* 13 (2001): 141-157.

Haug, Gerald H., Detlef Günther, Larry C. Peterson, Daniel M. Sigman, Konrad A. Hughen, and Beat Aeschlimann. "Climate and the Collapse of Maya Civilization." *Science* 299 (2003): 1731-1735.

Kowalski, Jeff, and Cynthia Kristan-Graham, eds. *Twin Tollans: Chichén Itzá, Tula, and the Epiclassic to Early Postclassic Mesoamerican World*. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, 2007.

Peterson, Larry, and Gerald Haug. "Climate and the Collapse of Maya Civilization." *American Scientist* 93(4) (July-August 2005): 322-329.

Sharer, Robert J., and Loa P. Traxler. *The Ancient Maya*, 6th edition. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006.