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SPECIAL SECTION: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON ANCIENT LOWLAND MAYA SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

INTRODUCTION

This issue's Special Section presents recent archaeological research and interpretive perspectives on ancient Maya social organization. This topic has received increasing archaeological attention in recent years, with inferences drawn primarily from settlement studies, excavation data from households, and mortuary patterns complemented by evidence from ethnohistoric sources and ethnographic data and interpretations (Fash 1994:187–188, 190–192). An anthropological approach to ancient Lowland Maya social organization based on archaeological data began with William A. Haviland's (1968) landmark publication, which set the stage for all succeeding research on the topic. In this paper, he developed a hypothetical dynamic model for changes through time in pre-Columbian Lowland Maya social organization. Haviland (1968:95–96) identified two problems of variability that we do well to keep in mind: "One is the time factor, the other is comparability of units." Robert J. Sharer (1993:93) echoed this warning, pointing to variability due to differences in time, space, and scale and cautioning that no such monolithic entity as "Classic Maya social organization" ever existed. Importantly, Sharer (1993:91–92) reminded us that the reconstruction of ancient Maya social organization is fundamentally an archaeological enterprise—although epigraphic, ethnohistoric, ethnographic, and iconographic data remain important (but secondary)—to avoid elite bias (cf. Henderson and Sabloff 1993:451). If any consensus exists, it is on these two points: the research must be archaeologically grounded and we must expect variability and heterogeneity.

Many issues of debate attend the general topic of ancient Maya social organization. Without attempting exhaustive coverage (impossible in a brief comment), we can mention a few topics that are most prevalent in current research. The thorny problem of differences between elite and nonelite organization is far from resolved (Haviland and Moholy-Nagy 1992; Sharer 1993:95–96). This point draws attention to the related issues of kinship and descent, the role of kinship in integrating society, and the correspondence between kinship and residential groups (Haviland 1992; Hendon 1991; Marcus 1983:469–473; McAnany 1995; Sharer 1993:97–100). Obviously, the debate that has emerged in recent years concerning the concepts of "lineage" versus "house" has served to focus attention on these matters (Gillespie 2000a, 2000b). The issue of gender has become and will continue to be an important issue to be explored (Ardren 2002; Joyce 2000a). To conclude this short list, issues of linking material culture with social forms are also much more present in the minds of researchers than ever before (Joyce 2000b).

The papers presented in this Special Section explore these issues through a number of models currently being developed by Mayanists to explore questions of social organization examining the implications that specific forms may have for larger economic and political questions. Rather than focusing on debates between proponents of various models, we have attempted an even-handed representation of models being applied in studies of Classic Maya social organization. To compile an even remotely representative coverage, the papers address social organization from a range of geographic, demographic, and theoretical perspectives. Diverse regions of the Maya lowlands are represented, including Yucatan, Peten, northern and southern Belize, and Copan. The contributors focus on a wide range of site scales, from the large nucleated centers of Caracol and Tikal, to intermediate centers such as Copan and Chunchucmil, to rural farmsteads in northwestern Belize.

The first paper, by **Jon B. Hageman**, examines the appropriateness of the lineage model as applied to sites in the Barba Territory of northwestern Belize. He identifies the following archaeological correlates of Classic Maya lineages: corporate property, lineage identity expressed through architectural traits, internal ranking, and ancestor veneration. Comparing the archaeological data with the expectations, Hageman finds a "close, though imperfect, fit with the model." His examination of a rural social group provides a nice counterpoint to the overwhelming emphasis in the literature on elites living in densely populated, nucleated centers. In contrast, **Scott R. Hutson, Aline Magnoni, and Travis Stanton** dispute the relevance of kinship and descent and instead apply their version of practice theory to the interpretation of three intensively excavated patio groups at Chunchucmil, northwestern Yucatan. Their data and interpretations lead them to favor the "house" model.

AnnCorinne Freter offers a detailed consideration of regional settlement and excavation data and ceramic production data from two rural communities in the Copan Valley, Honduras. Weaving the results together at a higher interpretive level, she combines an ethnographic model with recent archaeological interpretations on political rulership to develop a multiscalar model of Late Classic Copan sociopolitical organization. **T. Kam Manahan** looks at the collapse at Copan from the perspective of the house model by exploring the relationships between social groups and broader political entities. His description and analysis of a small Early Postclassic community inhabited by post-Collapse intruders living near the abandoned city center of Copan provides new insights into

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these issues in addition to important empirical data concerning the dynastic collapse at Copan.

Turning to the largest centers, **Marshall Joseph Becker** employs his Plaza Plan concept as a means to understanding the architectural grammar (an emic or cognitive model) used by the builders and inhabitants of residential groups at Tikal, Guatemala. The nature of variation in Plaza Plans leads him to infer that heterarchy was an important characteristic of social organization at this ancient Maya city. He suggests that this heterarchy may be a reflection of the structural fragility of Classic Lowland Maya kingdoms and, in turn, an underlying cause of their eventual collapse. **Diane Z. Chase and Arlen F. Chase** present their current views on ancient Maya social organization at Caracol, Belize. They assess the theoretical models and encourage a "grounded," empirical approach to Maya social organization.

We conclude the section with two comprehensive, critical overviews by two scholars, **Ellen R. Kintz** and **John M. Watanabe**, respectively. Their own original work has done much to advance the study of Maya social organization, with Watanabe working in the venerable tradition of Highland Maya ethnography and Kintz combining archaeological and ethnographic research in the Yucatan peninsula. We believe that this collection of papers will further the study of Maya social organization and demonstrate the validity of diverse, yet not mutually exclusive, theoretical perspectives and the importance of recognizing and dealing with spatial, temporal, and demographic variability.

William R. Fowler
Jon B. Hageman

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