

# Deciphering the MAYA



*Researchers derive different themes from ancient Maya writing*

By BRUCE BOWER

**T**he mystery of Lord Water, Double-Bird and the intertwined destinies of the two ancient Maya kingdoms they ruled emerged in 1986 among the ruins of Caracol, an archaeological site in Belize. Excavation of what once served as a ballcourt revealed a round stone with 128 hieroglyphic symbols circling its surface. Thanks to substantial advances in deciphering the Maya hieroglyphic writing system in the past 20 years by researchers known as epigraphers, the elegant carvings told modern readers of an “ax war” launched by Lord Water of Caracol against the nearby city of Tikal in A.D. 556.

Inscriptions carved into stone monuments at Tikal indicated that the city and its ruler, Double-Bird, survived Caracol’s assault. But according to the Caracol ballcourt stone, Lord Water came back with a vengeance six years later, leading a victorious “star at Tikal” assault. Beginning at about that time, the installation of inscribed monuments and the construction of temples and pyramids dramatically declined at Tikal, while Caracol experienced a boom in building and population.

But what did military victory really mean for Caracol and other regional powers during the Classic Maya period, from A.D. 200 to 900, when culture and population centers flourished on the Yucatan peninsula and its southern borders? Scholars offer a range of answers to that classic question.

Researchers such as Linda Schele of the University of Texas at Austin and David Freidel of Southern Methodist University in Dallas claim that hieroglyphic symbols—glyphs, for short—and archae-

ological evidence document Caracol’s political and economic takeover of the Tikal regional dynasty and point to the capture and killing of Double-Bird. Others, including William A. Haviland of the University of Vermont in Burlington, accept Lord Water’s pronouncement of victory over Tikal, but doubt that Caracol immediately assumed political control of its

neighbor or dumped Double-Bird’s dynasty. Another camp, exemplified by Richard M. Leventhal of the University of California, Los Angeles, holds that the glyphs on the ballcourt stone portray Lord Water’s attempt to enhance his power and that of his royal lineage, not necessarily an actual event.

“It’s questionable whether Caracol had an immediate impact on Tikal after the war,” says Arlen F. Chase of the University of Central Florida in Orlando. Artwork and burials at Tikal do not show influences from Caracol until about 100 years after Lord Water’s attack, although the defeat apparently stymied urban growth and abruptly halted the erection of stone monuments at Tikal, asserts Chase, co-director of the project that unearthed the Caracol ballcourt stone.

**D**on’t expect a tidy solution to this Maya mystery anytime soon. It illustrates deep-seated differences that have surfaced in the last several years over how to use the information gleaned from glyphs. These differences play into varying reconstructions of Classic Maya society and theories as to why the so-called “golden age” of the Maya world eventually lost its luster and crumbled roughly 11 centuries ago.

Investigators probing Maya glyphs and archaeological sites staked out their places in the ongoing debate at the recent annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Chicago and in interviews with *SCIENCE NEWS*.

Ironically, this contentious debate occurs as different scientific teams converge on the same intriguing conclusion: As the Classic period progressed, kings who controlled far-flung stretches of rain forest increasingly negotiated for power with subordinate lords or rulers who governed subdivisions of each kingdom. Until recently, investigators largely neglected Maya subordinate elites, focusing on either kings or commoners (*SN*: 1/27/90, p.56).

Negotiations between kings and nobles ran the gamut from marriage exchanges and mutual agreements to arm-twisting and outright threats, according

to Maya scholars. The lack of an imperial authority and the ambitions of secondary lords helped inspire constant warfare among the dynasties clustered in the lowlands at the base of the Yucatan hump. Classic Maya civilization collapsed for reasons that varied from kingdom to kingdom following the advent of this brutal period.

**I**ncreasing questions about the historical accuracy of deciphered glyphs, however, cast a long shadow on this rough consensus concerning Classic Maya kingdoms. Researchers tend to harbor one of three “biases” toward the ancient writing, says Stephen D. Houston of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, who has worked on Maya glyph decipherment for the past 10 years.

One group accepts glyphs as accurate descriptions of the past; a second contingent views them as the hopelessly distorted propaganda of kings and secondary lords; and a third maintains that although glyphs may often describe actual events, the inscriptions largely ignore key aspects of Classic Maya civilization, such as the lives of peasant farmers and trends in population, agriculture and economics.

“It’s absurd to view glyphs as candid snapshots of elite Maya life,” Houston says. “But I don’t see Classic Maya society as so atomized that the glyphs reflect nothing of the society as a whole, especially since glyphs and the archaeological record correspond at many sites.”

Perhaps the most far-ranging interpretation of Classic Maya civilization based on glyphs and archaeology comes from Linda Schele and David Freidel. In their book *A Forest of Kings* (1990, William Morrow), they argue that the Classic Maya—kings, peasants and everyone in between—shared a common system of beliefs, handed down from their ancestors, about the universe. This gave rise both to a political system of kingships and to an eventual crisis of confidence in royalty that heralded the Classic demise.

Royal lineages justified their power through rituals adapted from pre-Classic village shamans, Schele and Freidel argue. In fact, they maintain, shamans practicing modern variations of the ancient belief system described in Maya glyphs still exist among the 5 million speakers of Mayan languages, suggesting that the basic Maya world view survived the fall of the Classic civilization as well as the Spanish conquest and the forced religious conversions of the 16th century.

From the Teotihuacan culture of central Mexico, early Classic-period Maya adapted concepts of warfare timed around the position of planets in the sky—particularly Venus—and sacrificial rituals involving bloodletting as conduits to their deities, according to the two researchers.

Thus, Schele and Freidel interpret Lord Water's "star" attack on Tikal as timed around the appearance of Venus in the night sky. The victors captured Double-Bird for a ritual sacrifice back at Caracol and cut off his subordinate lords from the extensive trade routes that provided their wealth, as evidenced by the sudden poverty of items placed in the tombs of Tikal's nobility after Caracol's conquest, they say.

**W**hether or not Classic Maya kings launched "star wars," evidence for influential networks of secondary lords comes from several ongoing research projects.

Excavation of a modest structure amidst the ruins of Copán in western Honduras indicates it served as a "mat house," or council house, toward the end of the Classic era, according to Barbara W. Fash and William L. Fash of Northern Illinois University in De Kalb. Barbara Fash participated in the dig and William Fash directs an archaeological project at the Copán acropolis, or city center. One of Copán's kings, Smoke Monkey, dedicated the mat house in A.D. 746 and apparently met there with the heads of eight local jurisdictions, Barbara Fash reports.

Interlocking lines symbolizing a mat appear at 10 spots on all four sides of the structure, she says. Historical accounts written at the time of the Spanish conquest describe mat houses as places where Maya rulers convened with representatives of the people, she points out.

Niches dug into the stone between the mat symbols contained eight human figures with distinctive headdresses and other adornments. These sculptures represent the king's councillors, she suggests. Each niche hovers above a large glyph that refers to its inhabitant's home region and possibly to the ritual dance performed at that location, she maintains.

Remaining pieces of a sculpted royal throne framed by snarling jaguars sit atop the roof of the mat house.

Glyph decipherment at Copán, Tikal and elsewhere indicates that Classic-era kingdoms split into varying numbers of subordinate sites, Linda Schele contends. For instance, all Tikal regional lords carry the number 13 as part of their written names, suggesting that 13 political districts fell within the kingdom, she says. At nearby Naranjo, monument inscriptions describe seven political partitions within that region, according to Schele.

Written symbols refer to some subordinates as "sul"—literally, "one who fears"—

followed by the name of their political superior, either a regional lord or the king, Schele asserts. Another glyph found at various sites translates as "ahau" and designates the head of a local lineage, she adds. These nobles typically referred to themselves in writing with imagery also employed by their king, leading some epigraphers to conclude incorrectly that these individuals served as kings, in Schele's view.

Glyph-bearing monuments document the founding of another major Classic city, Dos Pilas, early in the 7th century by "cadet royals" who left Tikal after some kind of dynastic struggle and then organized a successful war against their former cohorts in A.D. 678, argues Arthur A. Demarest of Vanderbilt. Ongoing excavations in northern Guatemala show that Dos Pilas eventually controlled settlements spread over more than 2,000 square miles of rain forest, Demarest says.

A rival kingdom conquered Dos Pilas around A.D. 760 and fierce fighting continued to grip the region for at least 70



*A sculpted figure and hieroglyphics (right) apparently once occupied a niche in Copán's "mat house" (below) and may have represented one of eight councillors to the king.*



years, Demarest argues. Settlements built in the aftermath of the Dos Pilas collapse contain massive defensive structures, including three concentric moats that created an island fortress at a large lake and stone walls built around open fields and villages.

The sequence of events that caused Dos Pilas' demise remains unclear, Demarest says. Secondary elites probably proliferated rapidly at Dos Pilas and jockeyed for control of trade routes that carried high-status goods, such as jade

and obsidian, leading to one battle after another, he speculates. By the 8th century, population in the region had expanded to meet the need for more warriors. Maya farmers then engaged in destructive cultivation practices to stave off food shortages, a tactic that further weakened the kingdom.

At least at Dos Pilas, the secondary rulers controlled food and other goods produced in their areas and thus entered into fierce competition over trade routes, with the king having little influence in trade matters, Demarest says.

"Maya elites may have destroyed themselves," he asserts. "Each local ruler sought short-term survival over his rivals and neglected long-term problems."

**S**econdary lords or rulers also increased in number at Caracol as the Classic era progressed, contend Ar-



Barbara Fash/Copán Acropolis Archaeological Project

len F. Chase and Diane Z. Chase of the University of Central Florida. Monuments and altars erected between A.D. 790 and 889 commemorated the actions of individuals referred to in the glyphs as dependents of the overall ruler, according to the Chases, co-directors of annual excavations at Caracol since 1985.

Classic-era settlements on the outskirts of the ancient city have yielded numerous tombs containing jade and other elite goods, as well as inscribed stone monuments. The evidence points to a rapidly expanding "middle level" of society at Caracol in the last half of the Classic period, a social development "no one would have predicted even two years ago," Diane Chase remarks.

The burgeoning of Caracol's middle-level citizenry accompanied a series of successful wars waged against neighboring kingdoms, the Chases maintain. Caracol stood "on the cutting edge" of the more destructive, less ritual-bound warfare that appeared in the 9th century, they



*This roof frieze, which served as the model for the cover illustration, lies in part of a building purposely buried under later construction.*



Caracol Archaeological Project, University of Central Florida

add. Warriors razed and looted the cities of rivals rather than capturing a few high-ranking captives for sacrifice back home, and on at least one occasion, Caracol simultaneously attacked three cities. Excavations show that a large segment of Caracol's society, not just the royal circle, enjoyed the spoils of those wars.

Ethnic rivalries probably spurred Caracol's military prowess, Arlen Chase contends. Glyphs and artwork indicate Caracol residents spoke the Mayan language of Yucatec and laid claim to a cultural heritage distinct from that of "a vast sea" of neighboring peoples speaking another Mayan tongue — either Chol or possibly a mixture of Chol and Yucatec. In other parts of the world, especially violent warfare that follows no common rules regularly occurs between different ethnic groups, whereas ethnically similar groups tend to fight rule-bound battles with fewer casualties, Chase notes.

Increasingly destructive warfare toward the end of the 9th century drove much of Caracol's battle-diminished population — which had reached a peak of about 179,000 in the previous century — into the center of the city, presumably for protection. Residents then hurriedly abandoned the site, probably as victims of the intense warfare they introduced to the region, the Chases conclude. Particularly dramatic evidence for abandonment comes from the recently discovered skeleton of a 6-year-old child left unburied on the floor of a Caracol home, they note.

**A**lthough many investigators refer to kingdoms such as Caracol and Dos Pilas as "city-states," implying relatively independent political units, they actually spread their influence out over large areas and more closely resembled "regional states," argues T. Patrick Culbert of the University of Arizona in Tucson. The push for regional expansion by various royal dynasties led to population growth and food shortages that combined with intensified warfare to bring down many of the Classic-era kingdoms, Culbert maintains.

"I'm suspicious of glib generalizations about the collapse of Classic Maya civilization," he says. For instance, the political hierarchy crumbled quickly at Tikal, where an estimated 425,000 citizens living in the city and nearby satellite communities placed a tremendous strain on farming and food supplies. In contrast, Copán — with a peak population of about 27,000 — suffered a gradual collapse over several hundred years.

Culbert also questions the emphasis

some researchers, such as Schele, place on ritual aspects of Maya warfare, such as the capture of prisoners for sacrifice. The Maya, like other early civilizations, usually fought over land and resources, particularly as population outstripped food supplies in the final centuries of the Classic period, he argues.

"It's easy to be misled by interpreting Maya art and inscriptions too literally," Culbert contends. "Both art and writing were highly ritualized and propagandistic."

**U**CLA's Richard Leventhal takes a more radical stand, in part based on "postmodernist" arguments that written texts, such as histories or biographies, tell as much or more about the author's background and biases as about the subject. Maya epigraphers have assumed that glyphs refer to actions, such as ritual bloodletting, when these symbols may actually represent attempts by kings and nobles to create and maintain power, Leventhal proposes.

"We can't use glyphs to say whether an event happened in the past," he asserts. "Right now we're dealing with two creations of history, one by the ancient Maya, the other by modern scholars."

Ancient Maya civilization developed in three stages, broadly defined for other early societies by German sociologist Max Weber more than 70 years ago, Leventhal says. Authority first developed among charismatic individuals — local shamans, in the Maya case. The need for succession of power led to the belief in sacred shamanic traditions and the authority of people issuing commands under those traditions. As the Classic period began, kings and nobles emerged, claiming authority over the masses based on more structured rules that found expression in glyphs carved on stone monuments and other public structures.

Heirs to the throne recreated Weber's cycle by portraying themselves in writing first as shamans who communicated with the gods through bloodletting and other techniques, Leventhal proposes. The symbolic claiming of this special ability

allowed fledgling rulers to assume all the power granted to their predecessors. Leventhal's scenario of succession also derives from a "stranger king" model, developed by other researchers, which holds that in many early societies the heir to a king first physically or symbolically separates from society and performs ritual functions that justify the transfer of power.

"I've taken a lot of heat for my position," Leventhal says. "But researchers have neglected what the glyphs have to say about power arrangements during the Classic period."

Another critic of recent Maya investigations, Richard R. Wilk of Indiana University in Bloomington, takes particular exception to Schele and Freidel's contention that glyphs, archaeology and modern ethnography combine to reveal a common Maya world view extending from pre-Classic times to the present.

"Continuity in written texts may not reflect continuity in cultural identity and politics," asserts Wilk, who studies modern Maya populations. "Schele and Freidel's approach may dissolve many Maya groups with different points of view into 'The Maya,' a term that raises my hackles."

Classic-period cities display cultural differences, but the many glyphs, ritual portrayals and types of structures those sites shared "aren't our fantasies," Freidel responds.

Arguments over the nature of Classic Maya societies and their complex array of glyphs show no signs of abating. Epigraphers currently possess literal translations for fewer than half of the ancient inscriptions, rendering broader historical interpretations tentative, notes David Stuart of Vanderbilt, who works on glyph decipherment at Copán.

"Glyph translation is the raw data we use to make historical interpretations," remarks Linda Schele. "We're now trying to help the modern Maya to become epigraphers so they can get involved in glyph translation and interpretation."

Lord Water's "star at Tikal" war, Double-Bird's uncertain fate and plenty of other Classic Maya conundrums await them. □