

ANTH 697
Ancient Maya Civilization
Fall 2008

Professor: Dr. Ellie Harrison-Buck
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Office Hours: Tues. 3:30-5:30pm
Class: Tues. & Thurs. 2:10-3:30pm; Rm: HUDD 320

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The Maya civilization—occupying Guatemala, Belize, southern Mexico, and parts of Honduras and El Salvador—has been in the news in recent years, as discovery after discovery has highlighted the seemingly exotic nature of this Mesoamerican society. Students have probably heard about the Maya and the recent spectacular decipherments of their hieroglyphic texts, or perhaps their practice of human sacrifice (much exaggerated in the recent Mel Gibson film “Apocalypto”). Are these cultural practices just curious traits of a past culture, or can they tell us something about the society of which they are apart? This course presents archaeological finds from the Maya area to show students how archaeologists, as well as art historians and epigraphers (Maya glyph readers) have come to reconstruct Maya society through ancient artifacts, architecture, iconography, epigraphy, as well as ethnohistorical documents from Colonial times. Scholars who study the history of Maya culture apply anthropological theories of social, economic and political organization and use models derived from ethnographic studies to better understand the past behavior of the ancient Maya.

This scholarly research has helped refine and define our current perspectives on Maya history—from the transition to agricultural societies and the origins of social inequality in the Preclassic period to the development of Maya kingship and centralized political power in the Classic period. Students will be introduced to these theories and will see the importance of integrating different datasets, such as archaeological, art historical, and ethnohistorical data. The goal of the course is to provide students with an in depth knowledge of the Maya civilization and their cultural developments through time. Students will be exposed to different worldviews of a non-western culture and will learn about contemporary method and theory in Maya archaeology. This upper-level course will be appropriate for students with interests in anthropology, Latin American studies, archaeology, and art history.

COURSE STRUCTURE

The class is an upper-level seminar and fills a writing requirement. Students will learn how to carry out scholarly research and should be prepared for a writing intensive class. There will be no formal exams. Rather, discussion, presentations, a 3-5 page written assignment and a final 10-15 page research paper will form the basis of your grade (see details of requirements below). The class meets twice a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays. In general (and the format may change if other things come up), the format will include a lecture for the first half of the class and student-led discussion for the

second half of the class, which will be based on weekly readings.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The course is divided into three parts. The first section of the course examines the earliest complex society of Mesoamerica—the Olmec—and how sedentary and agriculturally-based chiefdoms were formed, with complex religious, economic, and political systems. In this first part of the course, we discuss how the Olmec may have served as a “Mother Culture,” influencing broad areas of Mesoamerica, including the Maya region. The beginnings of Maya civilization—the Middle and Late Preclassic period (ca. 900 B.C.-A.D. 200)—are examined. Topics of discussion include the development of royal Maya kingship, formalized religious ideology, and long-distance exchange networks.

The second part focuses on the Classic period (ca. A.D. 200-A.D. 900) of Maya civilization. This period is by far the most ostentatious epoch of Maya history in terms of investment in architecture, sculpture, and art. Large-scale sculptural and architectural programs, with monuments featuring deified kings, are indicative of centralized authority and the power of royal kingship in the Maya region. This is the era of Maya cities, such as Tikal, Calakmul, Copan, and Chichen Itza. The latter city, located in northern Yucatan, becomes a major political capital in the Terminal Classic period, as most cities in the Southern Maya Lowlands decline in power. New influences stemming from Central Mexico are discussed, particularly from the city of Teotihuacan, introduced in the Maya area during the Classic period. Various theories regarding the political decline of the Classic Maya cities are examined.

The third section of the course describes the so-called “collapse” at the end of the Classic period and the reorganization of Maya society into new and deceptively less visually impressive forms, which characterize the period known as the Postclassic (A.D. 950-A.D. 1500). Although less grand in the physical scale, the Postclassic period included some of the most far-reaching and complex political and economic systems of the entire sequence. The course will end with a discussion of the Spanish Conquest in the 16th century, and its impact on Maya culture during the Colonial and Post-Colonial periods. This final section of the course examines ethnohistoric documents and contemporary ethnographic studies of Maya society.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

The two required texts (listed below) will be supplemented by a large body of additional assigned readings, most of which will be available digitally online (see under “Reserve Reading” further below). This course will incorporate both lectures and class discussion (led by a weekly team but involving the entire class). Therefore, it is essential that students thoroughly read the assignments BEFORE class, and come prepared to discuss the materials (participation is 20% of your grade). All students will be expected to read the two required texts and supplemental reading on reserve. Readings will be assigned to different groups of students each week that will prepare a set of questions and come prepared to lead class discussion.

Evaluation of student work will be based on class participation/discussion leading, a 3-5 page written assignment and a corresponding 10-minute oral presentation, as well as a final 10-15 page research paper and corresponding 20-minute presentation on the selected research topic. The two written assignments will be

discussed ahead of time and paper topics will be cleared with the professor. For the final paper, an outline will be required in advance, along with an annotated bibliography (which will be explained).

REQUIRED TEXTS

There are two required books for this course available at the Durham Book Exchange (36 Main Street):

- 1) Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens. Deciphering the Dynasties of the Ancient Maya (2000) by Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube
- 2) The Ancient Maya, 6th edition (2006) by Robert J. Sharer and Loa P. Traxler

RESERVE READING

The remaining reading for this course will be selections from journals, edited volumes, and scholarly books that will be available either on Blackboard (www.blackboard.unh.edu), through e-reserves or, in some cases, available in hard copy in the Anthropology office (309 Huddleston) for photocopying. You are responsible for getting the readings off blackboard and e-reserves and making photocopies when necessary from hard copies distributed in the department. Optional readings and relevant web-links will be posted on blackboard during the course.

COURSE GRADING:

Attendance/Discussion Leading 20%

This breaks down as follows: if you come to class every time (you can miss 2 classes without penalty) you will earn 10% of this automatically. The remaining 10% is earned through your participation in discussion. You will be divided into teams of 4 (this may change with class size shifts) and your team will be responsible for leading discussion at 3 different Thursdays during the semester. As discussion leaders, you are responsible for distributing at least 8 questions (2 per teammate) derived from the week's readings to the rest of the class no later than the PRIOR Tuesday class (These can be emailed to the class, but a HARD COPY must be given to me as well). You will lead the in-class discussion based on, but not restricted to, your distributed questions. You will be graded on the timeliness of the distribution of your questions (if you fail to distribute them on time you will automatically lose 5% of your overall grade), the content of these questions, and how you work as a team to lead and direct in-class discussion. If you skip on EITHER of the times your team is responsible for leading discussion you will automatically lose 5% of your overall grade).

3-5 Page Written Assignment 20%

You will choose from a selected list of topics and write a 3-5 page (double-spaced) paper. Papers will explore topics in more detail that have been introduced in class discussion and readings. Some additional outside research will be necessary. This assignment will be due 10/23. This must be submitted in the Digital Dropbox and handed in on the due date to ensure full credit for the assignment. An electronic copy will be circulated to the entire class.

Class Presentation 10%

A short 10-minute presentation will be given based on your 3-5 page paper. Everyone will have read your paper and will come prepared to discuss the topic in class.

Final Research Paper 50% of Grade, Broken Down Accordingly:

Topic Paragraph: 5% (due Oct. 7)

Paper Outline & Annotated Bibliography: 15% (due Nov. 13)

Class Presentation of Research Paper: 20% (due Dec. 4-11)

Final Research Paper: 60% (due Dec. 15)

The main component of your grade is a 10-15 page (double-spaced) research paper. Your paper must have 5 citations from peer-reviewed journals (we will be discussing what this means). This paper process has the following steps:

On 10/02 we will go to the library to explore together researching topics through avenues besides google or wikipedia (these can form first source options for you to familiarize yourself with your topic but these cannot be your primary sources!).

On 10/07 a paragraph describing your paper topic will be due. I will return this to you on 10/09. If I approve the topic, you can go forward with your research. If I do not approve it, we will meet between 10/09 and 10/14 and decide on a new topic together and your new paragraph will be due 10/16.

On 11/13 a detailed outline and annotated bibliography for your paper is due to me. Comments on these will be available before Thanksgiving break.

The week of 11/17-11/21 individual meetings about papers may be scheduled during office hours (and, of course, we can discuss the paper any time throughout the term during office hours).

You will have 11/25 off as a work day for your paper.

Class presentations will be on 12/04, 12/09, and 12/11. These last three classes dedicated to student presentations will be our own mock archaeology academic conference. That is, I will group the papers by topic and give each session (one per class) a title. You will present for 20 minutes, using power point if you wish (I recommend it), and question and answers will follow the session. Your presentation will be graded on preparation effort, composure, and content. It should be related to your paper (obviously) but can include other information and/or less information than your paper so as to make it a concise presentation.

The **final research paper** will be **due** in the DropBox on Blackboard by midnight **Monday December 15th**.

****All written assignments are to be double-spaced, using Times New Romans 12pt font with margins no wider than 1.25"**