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**Post-Apocalypto:
Crisis and Resilience in the Maya World**

Symposium Abstracts



Marie-Charlotte Arnaud

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Flexible cities in the Classic Maya Lowlands: dynamics of kings and farmers

Until recently, we used to consider that (apparently) “abrupt” abandonments of Classic Maya cities during the Terminal Preclassic, Terminal Classic, or even Postclassic periods correspond to “cultural or civilizational collapses”. Whereas a number of abandonment episodes certainly reflect rapid political collapses of *K’uhul Ajaw* dynasties, structural instability in urbanization processes must also be given attention. Social groupings changed through time, with social houses growing or decreasing as their ability to attract and retain commoners fluctuated. Probably the strongest rationale supporting Maya residential mobility lay in land use practices that required much flexibility to adapt to variable conditions in soils and annual rainfall. People used to grow crops in several places during the same year to minimize risks. Infield-outfield agriculture accommodates several strategies of this sort, by which families had a dual residence including one within urban contexts with infields (intensively cultivated land), and one amidst outfield *milpas* (swidden agriculture) at a distance from the urban settlement.

In Northwestern Petén, archaeological and palaeoenvironmental research on the La Joyanca uplands suggest alternating episodes of contrastive land use and settlement density. By the Terminal Classic period (ca. AD 850-950), the city was depopulated rather gradually after the demise of the local dynasty, and the rhythm of dis-urbanization would seem to correlate with the structural mobility of populations reversing to long-practiced subsistence strategies that allowed more flexibility than those imposed to them in urban contexts. It remains to explain why a new cycle of urbanization did not take place locally during the Early Postclassic period.

Erik Boot
(Independent Researcher)

*A Last Solitary Maya Stand, or First Step of "Pan-Maya" Societal Resilience?
The Stela Program at Seibal, ca. A.D. 840-870*

The stelae erected circa AD 840-900 at Seibal are part of a monumental and architectural program that coincides with the last substantial occupational phase at the site. Do these stelae and the visual narratives that they illustrate provide a last stand or a first step in societal resilience?

The time period commonly referred to as "Maya collapse" was a time of great societal stress in which, at different times and different places, some local royal elites incorporated centuries old as well as innovative religious imagery in their visual and written rhetoric to legitimize their leadership. Seibal Stela 3 and 13 show the iconographic complex of the Classic Maize God combined with the imagery of the cult of Tlawiskalpantekuhtli and Chikomekoatl, probably originating in Veracruz (ca. AD 600-800).

As I will show, through a chronological overview (ca. AD 650-1500) and from a macrohistorical perspective, this was not a last stand; it was the first step within a process of societal resilience in a large part of the Maya area in which non-Maya religious elements merged with long-standing Classic Maya religious expressions. I discuss various regions in the central and northern Maya lowlands and the shifts of trade routes that occurred (providing the incentive of the religious innovation) in that period. The initial results of the merger between Maya and non-Maya elements were the stelae at Seibal, followed by, for example, the Venus Platform at the Great Plaza at Chichen Itza and ultimately, the Venus pages in the Codex Dresden.

Geoffrey E. Braswell
(University of California, San Diego)

The Other Maya and the Other Collapse: Southern Guatemala during the Terminal Preclassic

The Classic Maya Collapse of the Maya Lowlands is one of the most studied events in New World archaeology. But it was preceded by a widespread collapse some six or seven centuries years earlier, one that had an especially dramatic impact in the highlands and Pacific lowlands of the Southern Maya Area. There, the Late Preclassic period saw a remarkable flourishing of complex polities—some have argued states—that produced carved stone monuments, built pyramids of stone or soils, and, in some cases, were literate. Among these sites were Izapa, Ujuxte, Takalik Abaj, Chocoma, Monte Alto, Sin Cabezas, El Baul, Kaminaljuyu, Santa Leticia, and Chalchuapa. Many of the most important sites were abandoned or suffered dramatic population losses during the second century A.D. Writing completely disappeared from most of the region, never to reappear again except in the Cotzumalguapan zone. The carving of stone sculpture also ceased until the Late Classic period. In this presentation, I focus on the Preclassic to Classic transition in the Maya highlands of Guatemala. I present data related to contraction and depopulation, which began in some regions just as the largest sites were reaching their zenith. Large-scale population movements and climate change are examined as possible causes of the Terminal Preclassic Collapse.

Allen J. Christenson
(Brigham Young University)

The Death and Rebirth of the World: The Spanish Conquest and Highland Maya World View

Pedro de Alvarado conquered the highland Maya kingdoms at Eastertime in 1524, commemorating the date by renaming the K'iche' capital *Santa Cruz* (Holy Cross), similar to Cortés' naming of the first Aztec lands as *Vera Cruz* (True Cross) on Easter day. I suspect that the timing of both campaigns was consciously linked with Easter as a powerful symbol of victory by God over his enemies and death itself. As is evident from several indigenous Maya texts written immediately after the Conquest, the Maya also linked Pedro de Alvarado with Easter because both involved death on a grand scale. Though certainly not beloved, Alvarado was respected as a powerful instrument of world renewal, even if it required an unthinkable measure of cruelty and death as a precursor.

During Easter Week in Santiago Atitlan, the Tz'utujil Maya display a figure known as Rilaj Mam who presides over the death of Christ as well as the world itself. But Rilaj Mam is not a god of death, if by *death* is meant the finality of nothingness. He is a means to a desired end-- the transition from lifelessness to rebirth. As a "god-slayer," the Mam is sometimes addressed as Pedro de Alvarado, linking the destruction of highland Maya power in the sixteenth century with the death of the gods and the world they created. In Maya world-view the world and its gods are neither omnipotent nor immortal. They die on a regular basis and require ceremonies and offerings to regenerate their world.

Demetrio Cojti Cuxil
(Ministerio de Cultura de Guatemala)

Guatemala - La crisis y resiliencia entre los mayas tras el conflicto armado interno

El objetivo de la presentación es abordar los mecanismos que ayudan a los ladinos y mestizos de Guatemala, pero sobre todo a los mayas guatemaltecos, a sobreponerse de los efectos de los desastres naturales (huracanes y terremotos, epidemias) y sociales (la guerra interna de 1975-85, la crisis económica y la invasión de las empresas mineras extractivas desde el 2000, la inseguridad ciudadana en la actualidad) y a la vez, dar seguimiento o continuidad a su vida.

El tema es importante pues a pesar de que los ladinos y mestizos de estratos medio y bajo, tienen algunas cosas en contra, y de que los mayas tienen casi todo en contra, y de tener nulas o mínimas oportunidades de progreso y estar obligados a sobrevivir en un contexto hostil (racismo, pobreza extrema, abandono gubernamental de hecho, reveses y fracasos en algunos de sus emprendimientos), ambos pueblos, una y otra vez, retoman y desarrollan su vida como pueblos diferenciados. La capacidad de resiliencia es uno de los factores explicativos. La resiliencia entendida como la capacidad individual y/o colectiva de sobreponerse siempre o mayoritariamente a los golpes de la naturaleza y del hombre.

Peter Eeckhout

(Université Libre de Bruxelles)

Sylvie Peperstraete

(Université Libre de Bruxelles, École Pratique des Hautes Études)

*To the End of the World... and Again. Perspectives on Apocalypses through
Mythic Tales from Central Mexico and the Andes*

Abstract t.b.a.

Sven Gronemeyer
(La Trobe University)
Markus Eberl
(Vanderbilt University)

Royal Downfall and Peasant Survival: Tamarindito and the Fragmented Petexbatun Collapse

Tamarindito is the oldest Petexbatun kingdom with an emblem glyph that eventually became a regional toponym still used in the Late Classic. The ousting of Dos Pilas' ruler K'inich Chan K'awil in A.D. 761 initiated a balkanization of the Petexbatun region with devastating wars between regional centres. It destabilised the political landscape and gave rise to competing 'petty kingdoms'.

Tamarindito's kings vanished at the end of the eighth century A.D. Based on our recent epigraphic and archaeological investigations, we pursue two questions: (1) how did Tamarindito's elite contribute to the downfall of Dos Pilas and eventually disappear? and (2) how did Tamarindito's non-elites fare during the balkanization of the Petexbatun region? The consequences of mutual attacks left Dos Pilas in ruins, royal architecture was torn down to hastily erect defensive systems. Tamarindito remains unaffected, with only few fortifications in its twin capital Arroyo de Piedra, and its last attested king still properly buried. The Petexbatun wars open a unique window to examine strategies for the continuation of dynastic power: how was it exercised and crisis managed in the constantly changing fortunes during the balkanization?

Even though central authorities did not survive for long, the socio-economic effects on non-elites were limited. Our excavations reveal a lasting settlement activity in Tamarindito's perinuclear and peripheral zones. A Late Classic workshop crafting prestigious goods suggests a power shift towards non-elites. As its abandonment in the eighth century attests, trade of elite goods was cut short during the collapse, until commoners came to control it.

Nikolai Grube
(University of Bonn)

Between Silence and Reconstruction: The Rhetoric of Maya Inscriptions of the Terminal Classic Period

The Maya have developed a very particular language to talk about crisis and resilience. The Chilam Balam books are a good example for an emic perspective on crisis, catastrophes, and great transformations. Other Maya texts from the colonial period and the Caste War also deal with apocalyptic experience. In my presentation I will analyze how the Classic Maya talked about the great transformation of their society which we call the collapse. Three observations will be placed in the focus: 1) during the Terminal Classic period, the Maya do not talk openly about the collapse; 2) individual biographies of kings disappear from the public record, and 3) the Maya had observed the changes in their society and attempted to reconstruct the old order. This reconstruction involved a last great attempt to re-establish diplomatic and kinship bonds between the ruling dynasties, a final rapprochement between former adversaries before the disappearance of royal courts and the abandonment of Maya cities.

Kathryn Marie Hudson

(University at Buffalo)

John S. Henderson

(Cornell University)

Mallory E. Matsumoto

(University of Bonn)

Choosing Collapse: Crisis and Transformation as Agentive Action in Southeastern Mesoamerica

For much of the Maya world, the collapse – better viewed as a transformation – heralded the end of political and socio-cultural systems through political dissent, environmental degradation, foreign invaders, and a varying suite of contributing factors. These changes had radical consequences for the cultural landscape and were unlikely to have been sought. However, some communities in the Uluu Valley region of the Southeast chose to maintain relationships with transforming regions and thus embraced the effects of collapse despite the absence of state systems that could collapse in the familiar manner. We assert that – in some of these cases – the crisis of collapse was a conscious choice. Careful analysis of changes in material culture and settlement organization indicates that some communities emulated features that accompanied the transformation in an attempt to maintain their position within the Maya cultural sphere – in effect they invited the effects of transformation and, unlike their northern contemporaries, chose crisis. Local manufacture of fine paste ceramics and the reorganization of social and settlement patterns reveal the intentionality behind this process and demonstrate that collapse could serve as a group-preserving identity construction. Comparisons with Los Naranjos and other sites where breaks with the past were less radical confirm that the desire to participate in and identify with the Maya sphere reflects localized patterns and preferences.

Takeshi Inomata
(University of Arizona)

Preclassic Collapse at Ceibal: Its Implications for Cultural Continuity and Change

The abandonment or decline of many lowland Maya settlements at the end of the Preclassic period has been drawing researchers' attention as another Maya collapse. The results of recent investigations suggest that this process was quite complex and diverse. Whereas El Mirador and other centers in the central lowlands appear to have declined around AD 150, the center of Ceibal located in the southwestern part of the lowlands persisted until around AD 450. These patterns indicate that various social and environment factors affected the process. The resurgence of some centers during the Late Classic period provides a unique opportunity for the analysis of continuity and change in memories, social structures, and cultural practices through the turbulent time.

Maxime Lamoureux-St-Hilaire
(Tulane University)

Interpreting Abandonment: A Behavioral-Contextual Approach to On-Floor Assemblages

The study of the ancient Classic Maya collapse is fascinating and may lead us towards research avenues involving novel, multi-disciplinary approaches. However, when in the field, this collapse process is hard to identify. The best archaeological correlate for the collapse is likely settlement abandonment following the Late Classic Period, which is sometimes recognizable in the very last occupation of structures, or 'on-floor artefactual assemblages'. Unfortunately, the taxonomy for abandonment-related assemblages varies vastly among scholars, ranging from 'problematical deposits' or 'de-facto refuse', to 'termination caches'. This paper proposes a methodical approach to on-floor assemblages based on site-formation processes theory, and anchored in a thoroughly contextual archaeology. This behavioural-contextual approach examines the vertical and horizontal architectural context of artefacts, the relative completeness of ceramic vessels, and the represented vessel forms, in order to produce quantitative and qualitative data which may be complemented by multivariate statistical analyses. The resulting interpretive framework allows for distinct settlement abandonment scenarios to be reconstructed in a systematic, replicable fashion, while using a specific contextual terminology. This model accounts for rapid and gradual abandonment, abandonment with anticipated return, mundane and ritual abandonment practices, and post-abandonment behaviours, which correspond to various socio-political contexts and differential resiliency. The proposed approach was designed for studying the abandonment of the centre of Minanha, Belize. The study of the 12 on-floor assemblages from Minanha revealed that its population detached itself from the site in a gradual and reverential fashion over a period of four centuries (ca. AD 810-1200).

Catherine Letcher Lazo
(University of Bonn)

The Living Rope: Oppression and Resilience in Yucatec Maya Oral Literature

Oral literature, as pointed out by John D. Niles (1999), provides human beings with a means to create a unique mental world they can inhabit, and to locate their lives in time and space. It can thus not only help the members of a social group to relate their past with the present, but can also pave “the way for an imagined future that may be a more blessed one” (p. 54). The Living Rope (kuxa’an suum) is a widely spread folktale among the Mayan speaking population of the Yucatán peninsula that exhibits the above mentioned properties and functions of oral narratives. Even though it has been documented by ethnographers, systematic studies of the plot structure, its characters and regional variations are still scarce. This presentation aims at offering new insights into the relationship between the narrative symbolism, a historical time of crisis and a coming future, when the Mayan speaking population will resort to insurrection to alter their condition and gain freedom from domination.

The research presented in this paper is based on data from previously published ethnographic studies and interviews that were recently recorded by the author in the Eastern part of the Mexican state of Yucatán.

David W. Mixter

(Washington University in St. Louis)

Surviving Collapse: Community-Level Political Reorganization in the Immediate Aftermath of the 9th Century Maya Collapse at Actuncan, Belize

Historically, research into the ancient Maya collapse has focused on the dramatic large scale processes of political and demographic transformation taking place during the 9th and 10th centuries. Little attention has focused on the strategies of remnant communities that survived in place in the immediate aftermath of collapse in the Maya lowlands. Although depleted of population, groups that remained were forced to negotiate new forms of political authority in the absence of failed divine kings. Because Maya kingship was deeply entangled in Maya religious institutions, local recovery also required a reformulation of the narratives underlying the legitimization of authority. This kind of negotiation happened first at the local level, where individual communities freed of the constraints of divine kingship developed varied solutions to fill the power void and legitimize the authority of new leaders. One such community was located at the site of Actuncan in the lower Mopan River Valley of western Belize. The collapse of nearby Xunantunich marks the end of divine kings in the region and follows the general depopulation of the valley. In contrast, the population of Actuncan's site core remains steady throughout the Terminal Classic period (A.D. 780 to 1000). The reinitiation of political life at the site is marked by the construction of a large public platform placed in the middle of the site's Classic period core. Here I report on excavations into this platform. These data indicate how the community at Actuncan innovatively reorganized starting at the community-level during the crisis of the collapse.

Jesper Nielsen
(University of Copenhagen)

Saints and Spolia: Crisis and Resilience in the Art and Architecture of Early Colonial Yucatan

The Spanish conquest and the subsequent Early Colonial period were arguably the two periods of Maya history that most dramatically affected Maya culture, language and life ways. A prolonged and violent episode of violence, tribute, relocations, rebellions, refuge and a forced change of religious beliefs and practices, it was a time of severe crisis that affected most levels of Maya society. Yet, as showed by several scholars, in many respects the Maya were successful in coping with and integrating the newly imposed Euro-Christian culture into the framework of ancient Maya culture and beliefs (e.g., Farriss 1984). In the present paper I wish to present some preliminary observations on how Maya artists incorporated some of the old, traditional visual expressions into a new Christian context, and more specifically I focus on how elements of pre-Columbian iconography were embedded in Catholic church architecture in Northern Yucatan. This kind of reuse of earlier building material or decorative sculpture on new monuments, a concept referred to as *spolia*, has recently been examined in detail in central Mexico, Oaxaca and Michoacan, whereas comparatively little has been done in the Maya region. However, embedded iconography and culturally hybrid paintings and sculptures offer us a unique insight into a process of crisis and resilience that characterized much of the Early Colonial in Yucatan. Key examples from Izamal, Uayma and Dzibilchaltun will be discussed, and I suggest that several of these embedded, sculptural elements were not the last, unheard expired gasps of the bearers of Indian rituals and manners expired, as George Kubler once so sombrelly remarked (Kubler 1961: 14), but continued to be imbued with significant religious and socio-political meaning to the Maya.

Suzanne Nolan
(University of Essex)

Resilience in the Late Classic: The Interregnum at Yaxchilan

The Late Classic is often considered a time of increasing conflict, yet ideological change may have played as great a role as warfare during this period. Yaxchilán's ten-year interregnum, between the eight-century reigns of Shield Jaguar and Bird Jaguar IV, has caused speculation since Proskouriakoff's work in the 1960s. Tate, Martin, Grube, Bardsley, and Josserand are among the scholars who have recently tackled the problem of the causes of the interregnum, but investigations are still influenced by the idea that "it was a time of conflict" (Proskouriakoff, 1963: 63).

I propose that instead of searching for sources of conflict during the interregnum, we look to the continuities and resilience of Yaxchilán during the period. From c. 730 – c. 770, the polity saw unprecedented growth and development, and monuments of excellent quality were erected in great number. The epigraphic record tells us that the interregnum was not a time of inactivity, for Bird Jaguar IV was politically and ritually active. Although Bird Jaguar could have fabricated events post-accession, this possibility is not in keeping with what we know about ancient Maya monumental practice.

This paper seeks to simulate debate by analysing the Late Classic primarily as a time of changing ideologies, rather than aiming to provide a definitive answer to the interregnum question; impossible at this time. This perspective shifts the emphasis to warfare as a strategy within a context defined by competing ideologies.

Johan Normark
(University of Gothenburg)

The Spanish Colonial Period's Relevance for the Mega-Drought Hypothesis for the Maya Collapse

Palaeoclimatological models for the Maya area suggest that a series of droughts coincided with the Maya collapse (ca AD 750-1100). In order to find correlates to how droughts affected Prehispanic communities, researchers have used direct historical analogies from the Colonial and modern periods. These correlations neglect the changes that the Spaniards brought to the area, such as the *reducción* and the *congregación*. This text focuses on how “black-boxed” analogies from the Colonial period affect contemporary interpretations of the earlier Terminal Classic collapse. Colonial period changes in local and regional settlement patterns reveal some inherent assumptions in the generalized and reductionist palaeoclimatic studies. Of special interest here is the Cochuah region east of Lake Chichancanab as it provides settlement data from both within and outside the extent of the Spanish empire. The main difference between Prehispanic and Colonial period settlement strategies in this area concerns a change from meteorological concerns towards hydrogeological concerns.

L. Gabriela Rivera Acosta
(Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México)

The Soldiers of the Virgin: Mechanisms of Cultural Survival in a Maya Rebellion in XVIIIth century Chiapas

In 1712, the Chiapas provinces of los Zendaes, las Coronas y Chinampas and the Guardianía of Huitiupán got involved in a military conflict known as the "rebellion of the Zendaes". The leaders of such a movement took advantage of the Spanish organization crisis in order to reach new and better times. The justification and main motivation to this rebellion was the apparition of the so-called "Virgin of Cancuc", who was said to have approached an Indian girl to lead what would become an armed movement. Within this organized armed group, known as the "soldiers of the Virgin", were all kinds of people, including ritual specialists with a cosmological heritage of both prehispanic and Catholic religions. This paper will focus on the religious aspects of the phenomena and the mechanisms of cultural survival that readapted through time in the mentality and the actions of its participants as can be attested through the historical accounts of the rebellion. The symbols and discourses in which the rebellion originated will be analysed pointing out the synthesis of the two world views involved.

Yuko Shiratori
(City University of New York)

Construction of Power and Identity: Itza Maya's Social Organization from the Postclassic through the Contact Period

Recovering from the aftermath of the demographic and political collapse of powerful Classic period polities, Lowland Maya Postclassic communities experienced population growth and thriving commerce through interactions with merchants and immigrants. Indigenous chronicles suggest that the Itza Maya of the Petén lakes region, Guatemala, may have migrated from northern Yucatán during the Postclassic period. These Itza Maya were considered to have originated in the central Petén region during the Classic period and to have migrated into northern Yucatán during the Terminal Classic founding the great site of Chich'en Itza. After the fall of Chich'en Itza, some of the Itza moved to inhabit Mayapan and migrated back to the original Itza heartland of the Petén lakes region, where they thrived until the Spanish conquest in 1697. Archaeological investigations at the Itza ceremonial centre of Tayasal, Peten, show the development of an Itza community during the transition from Postclassic to Contact period, which involved substantial social, political, and economic transformations. In order to exert significant power over the community, Itza elites appear to have constructed the Itza's social identity through residential and public architectural patterns and associated artefacts. Since Hernán Cortés' stopover in the Itza territory in 1525, the Itza experienced a 175 year-long period of culture contact. This paper examines the Itza's resilient social organization and power construction during the Postclassic and prolonged Contact period.

Benjamin N. Vis

(University of Leeds)

Scott R. Hutson

(University of Kentucky)

Social Implications of Maya Urban Form: Exploring instances of urban space in Chunchucmil comparatively

Recently archaeology has seen the rise of a research focus on low density (tropical) urbanism. Lowland Maya cities are a prime example of such low density urbanism. This proved a resilient pattern of urban settlement for many centuries, which has since globalisation largely been lost across the world. Increased availability of extensive and detailed mapping of contiguous urban areas, either through intensive surface survey or using innovative techniques (e.g. LiDAR), now enables directions of spatial and social research no longer tied to monumental centres.

This paper will present the initial results of applying a newly developed comparative method of mapping the socio-spatial significance of the physical shape of the built environment. This method aims to make a contribution to the comparative understanding of urbanism (see Smith 2011, 2012; Smith and Peregrine 2012; Isendahl 2012), by bringing the same principles to bear onto low density urban patterns, here exemplified by Chunchucmil, as would be possible to any other urban form. This method is limited to a fundamental consideration of the structural properties affording social interaction rather than functional and cultural specifics. It thus makes explicit the comparative socio-spatial context inherently present in urban form itself. It offers a new line of investigation in the light of the current interest in Maya neighbourhoods (Arnauld et al. 2012; Isendahl and Smith 2012, Magnoni et al. 2012), focusing on the intricate details of spatial arrangements from the bottom-up conducive to neighbourhood structure and coherence. It hopes to inform future research contributing to questions about urban alternatives and community resilience.

Jarosław Żrałka

(Jagiellonian University)

Bernard Hermes

(Nakum Archaeological Project)

Development, Transformation and Collapse in the Eastern Central Maya Lowlands: The Case of Nakum and its Neighbours

The Terminal Classic (dated to ca. 9-10th centuries AD) was a period of irreversible changes in the Maya lowlands, characterized by depopulation, a halt in construction activity and the collapse of the majority of Maya centres governed by "holy lords". Within the past several years, our knowledge of this turbulent period has increased significantly due to new studies that showed it is not only characterized by the collapse and fragmentation of the majority of Maya sites but also by the transformation and even expansion of other centres. Investigations conducted during last two decades at the Maya site of Nakum, located in the north-eastern part of Guatemala, revealed traces of very dense occupation of the Terminal Classic period. Nakum, unlike its neighbours experienced great cultural prosperity and demographic increase which might have been provoked by the influx of population from other abandoned areas. We argue that the site advantageous location on the banks of the Holmul River, combined with weakened competition from formerly more powerful neighbours such as Tikal and Naranjo, permitted Nakum's ruling elites to actively expand its trade relationships and strengthen its political power. In this paper we discuss architectural, archaeological as well as epigraphic data from both Nakum and other neighbouring sites to explain the mechanisms of growth and subsequent abandonment of this centre. We also compare Nakum's case to other Maya centres that experienced continuous growth between the Classic and Postclassic periods.