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Not Lost but Living: Rethinking Engagements with Ancient Maya Cities

Abstract

The notion of ancient Maya cities as lost in the forest and calling for discovery has been part of the Western population imagination for well over 250 years. It emerged as part of colonial and imperial discourses of European and North American explorers ‘discovering’ Maya cities and has been equally promoted in popular books and movies as well as scholarly research. This paper argues that ancient Maya cities were never really lost and takes the site of Ucanal, from Petén, Guatemala, in the Southern Maya Lowlands as its focus of long-term archaeological and historical analysis. Ucanal, similar to other ancient Maya cities, is only lost when scholarship ignores rural engagements and understandings of the ancient ruins in the fields, forests, and backyards of Pre-Colombian Maya and contemporary Maya and ladino peoples. Local inhabitants’ engagements with the ruins of Ucanal over the last 2000 years included their use of ancient buildings to stimulate urban renewal during the Late Classic period, its role as a sacred ancient place for ritual during the Postclassic period, as a possible refuge for Mopan Maya peoples resistant to Spanish rule, and as a landmark in the forest for Maya and ladino peoples living in the area. Maya ontologies underscore that forest-ruins are living entities that serve as critical points of negotiations between spiritual forces, ancestors, and humans. As such, we might consider such landscapes to be more living and dynamic than lost.

Introduction

The notion of ancient Maya cities as lost in the forest and calling for discovery has become part of the Western popular imagination since at least the publication of John Lloyd Stephens' *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*.¹ Such conceptions are further nourished by early scientific expeditions by foreign institutions as well as other popular writings, movies and shows from Dana and Ginger Lamb's *Quest for the Lost Maya City* to the animated film (and later video game) *The Road to El Dorado* (2000) among many others.² Intimately tied to the idea of lost Maya cities is a misunderstanding of 'the Maya collapse', most commonly recognized as having occurred at the end of the Classic period (ca. 800 CE) with the cessation in the erection of stone monuments dedicated to Maya kings and queens and a demographic decline in some regions of the Maya area.

Both the trope of Maya lost cities waiting for discovery and a single Maya collapse, however, can be problematic if taken at face value since they do not recognize the rich and textured histories of Maya peoples after the Classic period, on the one hand, and since they ignore contemporary Maya and local peoples' relationships with the ruins of ancient cities on the other. Taking the site of Ucanal in the Central Maya Lowlands as its focal point of analysis and building on previous work from other regions of the Maya area (Figure 1), this paper challenges these two tropes.³ Firstly, we examine Maya lifeways and political changes during and after the Classic period to reveal how Maya peoples actively participated in and creatively adapted to multiple collapses. Secondly, we examine Postclassic (ca. 1000–1521 CE) Maya and more contemporary Maya and mestizo (or ladino) engagements with the ruins of ancient Maya urban centers to underscore that such cities were never lost in the first place.

The Trope of Lost Maya Cities

Popular and fictional imaginings of lost Maya cities derive, in part, from scientific and scholarly discourses. As entrenched practices of the historiography of archaeological research, the background section of any archaeological site report often begins with the "discovery" of the site by the first European or American expedition leader and a

recounting of research undertaken since, culminating with the authors writing the report. For the archaeological site of Ucanal, Petén, Guatemala, the narrative begins with Teobert Maler, a German-Austrian military official and later ex-pat who is often considered as 'the first among firsts' for recording many Maya sites.⁴ As part of the 7th Harvard University Peabody Museum Expedition in 1904–1905, he noted the site of Ucanal on his map of Petén, Guatemala, but he actually never visited it.⁵ Maler probably recorded the site based on information from one of his local Maya or ladino (mestizo) interlocutors. These local guides were, of course, the ones who knew about or who knew people who were intimately familiar with these ruins before his arrival.

In turn, Raymond Merwin was the first to document Ucanal with an in-person visit as part of 11th Peabody Museum Expedition in 1914 and whose work with C.W. Bishop provided a rudimentary map of the larger monumental buildings and carved stone monuments.⁶ While we know little about the local guides who told Maler about Ucanal or who brought Merwin and Bishop to the site, Maler's photographs from other Maya sites have local guides standing beside the monuments he recorded, a contrast to more recent (late 20th century) photography that prefers to depict Maya ruins as devoid of any local peoples at all.⁷

Both Maler and Merwin recorded the local Maya name for the site, Ucanal or Yucanal, which means the place of the timber or wood used to burn lime.⁸ Merwin also mentions that the site was used, at the time, as a camp for the extraction of hardwoods. Indigenous Maya peoples and former African slaves participated in the 19th and early 20th century logging industries in the Eastern Maya Lowlands, whose extractions primarily benefitted colonial and foreign enterprises.⁹ Maya and *ladino* inhabitants of Petén were also well-aware of many ancient Maya cities and ruins through their travels in the forest for the global extraction of chicle, a natural resin deriving from the sap of the *Manikara sapota* tree for the production of chewing gum.¹⁰ The Mopan Maya commentary on the name, Yucanal (or Ucanal), however, underscores the local value of hardwoods in the area for lime production. The making of lime through the burning of calcium carbonate rock was not an export industry but a local activity for obtaining slaked lime used in vernacular building constructions (stuccoed floors and plastering of wooden walls) and in local cuisine, most nota-

1 Stephens (1841).

2 Lamb/Lamb (2004).

3 Masson/Hare/Lope (2006); Masson (2012); Masson et al. (2024); Aimers (2007); McAnany/Brown (2016); Arnauld/Andrieu/Forné (2007); Erickson/Vapnarsky (2022).

4 Frej et al. (2020).

5 Maler (1908) fig. 9.

6 Morley (1938) 186–201.

7 See e.g. Frej et al. (2020).

8 Maler (1908) fig. 9; see Merwin's unpublished personal journal (1914) p. 326.

9 Johnson (2003).

10 Schwartz (2010).



Figure 1. Map of the Mapa area showing the location of Ucanal and selected Maya sites mentioned in the text (draft by C. Halperin).

bly the *nixtamalization* process of making corn, the basis of the Maya diet.¹¹

The name Ucanal differs from its Classic period name, K'anwitznal (place of the yellow hill or mountain), which is known from hieroglyphic texts between the 4th and 9th centuries CE. This glyphic name simultaneously served as a toponym for the capital of the K'anwitznal kingdom and/or its larger region and was a component of the local kings' and queens' royal titles, such as the phrase, *kuhul ajaw k'anwitznal* or 'divine ruler of the yellow mountain

place/kingdom'.¹² While the change in name suggests some shift in the memory and meanings of the site, its role as an important landmark in the landscape for Maya peoples continued into the Postclassic period as elaborated below.

More recently, however, the trope of lost Maya cities has flourished once again as archaeologists have applied LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) and other remote sensing techniques to the mapping of ancient Maya settlements.¹³ These LiDAR surveys, the most common being Airborne Laser Scanning (ALS) from a fixed wing airplane,

11 Seligson et al. (2017); Cagnato (2024).

12 Stuart/Houston (1994).

13 Hare/Masson/Russel (2014); Canuto et al. (2018); Inomata et al. (2018).

allow researchers to record and quantify ancient settlement at an unprecedented scale (hundreds to thousands of km² per flight expedition) and speed (within a few days for the flights and within months to a few years for post-processing).¹⁴ Indeed, there is a sense of discovery in these surveys as new agricultural or defensive features become more visible at the macro-scale, as remote regions far from roads become more visibly accessible from the sky, and as settlement characteristics, such as structure densities, become easier to quantify. Nonetheless, most of these surveys do not ‘discover’ new Maya urban cities lost in the forest, since these urban centers have already been recorded, to some degree, by archaeologists and are often known, to some degree, by local rural communities or those living in protected forests as part of forestry concession management programs.¹⁵ Rare exceptions do occur, such as Luke Auld-Thomas and colleagues’ post-processing of LiDAR data collected by a Mexican firm.¹⁶ Although they did not visit the ancient city they identified from LiDAR in person, they named the site Valeriana. One wonders if our archaeological documentation of ‘new’ sites overlooks local rural experiences of such landscapes.

Future work at the site of Ucanal will include a LiDAR survey of Ucanal and nearby sites including Calzada Mopan, to be conducted by the Proyecto Arqueológico Ucanal (PAU), a project directed by Christina Halperin (2014–present), an archaeologist from the Université de Montréal, Jose Garrido (2014–2022) and Carmen Ramos (2022–present), both Guatemalan archaeologists, and with the expertise of Jean-Baptiste LeMoine, an archaeologist from the Université de Montréal, as well as many other Guatemalan and Canadian collaborators. Research by the PAU builds heavily on previous survey and excavations by the Proyecto Atlas Arqueológico de Guatemala (AAG), a state-funded Guatemalan project, previously directed by Juan Pedro Laporte and now directed by Mara Reyes and Liliana Corzo, that records vast zones of the country with tape and compass maps visited in person.¹⁷ The collective PAU and AAG research over the years has identified two important findings. Firstly, Ucanal and other sites throughout the Mopan Valley region were heavily occupied during the Terminal Classic period (ca. 800–950/1000 CE), a period in which Maya kingdoms in other regions had stopped erecting stone monuments and were experiencing population declines. Secondly, our research has identified light Postclassic occupation throughout the region and thus evidence for continued memories and new forms of

engagement with ancient Maya cities by descendants who later identify themselves as Mopan Maya.

No Single Collapse but Multiple Collapses

A collapse at the end of the Classic period is well recognized partly because Classic period sites (ca. 300–810 CE) have been well-studied archaeologically and partly because this period holds a certain fascination to scholars and non-scholars alike. The Late Classic period (ca. 600–810 CE), in particular, was a phase in which many settlements became urbanized, when the production of durable hieroglyphic texts in stone and ceramic was at its height, and in which the political rule of *kuhul ajaw* and other ruling elites was celebrated on carved stone monuments displayed in public plazas and monumental building facades. In turn, the Classic period collapse is often characterized by the crisis in political rule in which stela monuments dedicated to Maya rulers were no longer produced and certain types of monumental architecture, such as stone palaces with vaulted stone roofs and multiple interior courtyards fell out of fashion.

Archaeological research, however, has identified other major political and demographic disruptions and collapses, which neither capture the public imagination nor scholarly interest to the same degree as the end of the Classic period. Most notable among these earlier collapses is at the end of the Late Preclassic (ca. 100–250 CE), in which investments in the construction of large monumental buildings in the form of Triadic Structure complexes (large pyramid foundations with three temples at its summit) and E-Groups (radial pyramids that sat west of and thought to be astronomically aligned with long, rectangular monumental buildings on the eastern sides of the public plaza spaces). Parallel to these reduced efforts at monumental construction were reductions in populations at some – but not all – Maya Lowland sites.¹⁸

Such trends are also found at the site of Ucanal in which monumental building programs diminished in number and settlement population dipped significantly during the Early Classic period (ca. 300–600 CE) (only 12% of excavated residential groups occupied, *n*=33) from Late Preclassic period times (with 33% of excavated residential groups occupied, *n*=33).¹⁹ As is the case elsewhere in the Maya area, earlier Preclassic living spaces are difficult to investigate since they are often covered by later Late Classic architecture and soil accumulation. Interestingly, vertical excavations in one of the city’s reservoir’s, Aguada 2, revealed large-scale evidence of burning with heavy concentrations of charcoal

14 Chase et al. (2011); Fernandez-Díaz (2014); (2016).

15 Devin (2018).

16 Auld-Thomas et al. (2024).

17 Corzo/Gómez (1995); Mejía (2002); Laporte (2004).

18 Sabloff (1975); Hansen et al. (2008); Hiquet (2024).

19 Halperin/Ramos Hernandez (2025) table 11.1.

in levels dating to the Late Preclassic and Early Classic transition, perhaps suggesting that part of the city was burned during this time (either on purpose or by accident, we have no way of knowing).²⁰

Despite such declines in settlement, the Late Classic period (ca. 600–810 CE) was a time of urban development and political expansion among both established and newly emergent kingdoms throughout the Maya Lowlands. Unlike many prosperous urban centers, however, Ucanal and its neighboring centers, such as Calzada Mopan, did not undergo a ‘collapse’ at the end of the Classic period.²¹ Rather, there was a slight expansion in occupation at Ucanal during the later Terminal Classic period (ca. 810–950/1000 CE; with 100% of excavated residential groups occupied and 97% excavated residential groups with evidence of construction activities) from the Late Classic period (with 94% of excavated residential groups occupied). Although Terminal Classic monumental building forms relied more heavily on more modest wooden rather than stone temples and superstructures, Ucanal and its neighboring cities were a bustle of activity with large-scale water infrastructure projects built, new ball courts installed, and the re-pavement of causeways and plazas, many of which comprised public resources accessible to all social groups and not just the highest elite.²² In fact, the highest elite residences became more modest and replicated design layouts of common residences throughout the city.²³

Indeed, settlement decline at Ucanal during the Postclassic period (ca. 1000–1521 CE) converted the city of Ucanal into a small village or small-scale ritual or pilgrimage center with much of its previous buildings likely covered in vegetation. At least 36% of excavated residences were occupied during the Postclassic and almost all residences had some Postclassic ceramics even though little to no evidence of construction activities have been identified during this period.²⁴ Both paleoenvironmental and archaeological data indicate that much of the Central Maya Lowlands had been abandoned during this time with pockets of settlements in the Petén Lakes region and more extensive settlement along the coastal region, the Northern Maya Lowlands and the Highlands.²⁵

A large quantity and variety of Postclassic (ca. 1000–1521 CE) ceramics used for burning incense (*incensarios*) has been found by our project on major ceremonial buildings at Ucanal, indicating that the ancient city was not lost but

continued to possess a potent spiritual force or forces that drew local peoples to the ancient ruins of K'anwitznal on a regular basis.²⁶ These *incensarios* were different enough from those from prominent Postclassic political centers elsewhere in the Southern Maya Lowlands, such as in the Petén Lakes area of Guatemala or Lamanai, Belize, to suggest that a local population of autonomous Mopan Maya peoples lived in the Mopan Valley but were similar enough to those from other regions to indicate that these local inhabitants were connected to these other peoples through exchanges and movements between them.²⁷ Postclassic ceramics and other light occupation are actually quite common among the ruins of Late Preclassic and Classic period urban centers in the Southern Maya Lowlands, but are discussed much less frequently because they do not correspond to large-scale political expansions or settlement revitalizations.²⁸

Similarly, little is known about the region during the Colonial period in the 16th–18th centuries. The Mopan Valley appears to have been a rural and forested zone that served as a refuge for Maya peoples who resisted Colonial rule. Colonial documents suggest that occupation of Southeast Petén included at least eighteen factions of the Mopan “nation”.²⁹ Fray Bartolomé de Fuensalida and Fray Juan de Orbita note from their Itzaj informants in 1618 that the principal settlement of the Chinamita branch of the Mopan Maya was Tulumci (tulum ki or “wall of agave”), which had 8000 inhabitants and was fortified, perhaps with an agave hedge as noted by its Maya (*tulumci*) and Nahuatl name (*chinamitl* or “maguey hedge”).³⁰ These Mopan settlements were reportedly 9 days east of the Itza island capital, Nojpetén (Flores), in Lake Petén Itzá. Itzaj Maya peoples portrayed the Mopan living in the region as ferocious and warlike, unlike the Maya peoples living at the Colonial mission of Tipu, Belize, who were seemingly more amenable to collaborate with Spanish colonial officials.³¹

It is by ignoring these smaller-scale visits and rural settlements that one can more readily adopt the trope of Maya lost cities. In addition, because Postclassic and Colonial architecture in Petén was characterized primarily by wood buildings that do not preserve well in the archaeological record and do not appear clearly in LiDAR maps, these settlements are much more difficult to document archaeologically. Nonetheless, later engagements with these ancient urban landscapes can be better understood with a more rigorous and focused attention to these seemingly insignificant

20 Gómez/Quezada (2023).

21 Mejía (2002); Laporte (2004).

22 Halperin/LeMoine/Zambrano (2019); Halperin et al. (2020); Tremblay/Halperin/Douglas (2024).

23 Halperin/Garrido (2019).

24 Halperin/Ramos Hernandez (2025) table 11.1.

25 Carmack (1981); Turner/Sabloff (2012); Masson et al. (2024); Lyons/Turner (2025).

26 López López (2020); Halperin/Gauthier (2025); Salas et al. (2025).

27 Bullard (1970); Rice (2009); Howie (2012).

28 Manahan (2004); Stanton/Magnoni (2008); Halperin (2014).

29 Feldman (2000) 203, 208.

30 Jones (1988) 19–21.

31 Graham: Christians (2011).

periods in the archaeological record as well as by considering how more recent populations including local Maya and mestizo peoples today conceive of and engage with the ancient ruins in their fields, forests, and everyday landscapes.

Living Ruins

Contemporary Maya peoples often view their landscapes as living entities — potentially animate, ensouled and embedded with particular forces.³² As such, ancient ruins and other vestiges of Pre-Columbian cities have the potential to be particularly potent points on the landscape alongside other landscape features, such as mountains, caves, and corn plants.³³ These landscape features are places of negotiation and interaction with ancestors, spirits, and living forces.

Contemporary Maya and ladino (mestizo) peoples' relationships with the remains of previous generations, however, are varied and dynamic. For example, Yucatec Maya communities often call ancient house and buildings *múul* (mounds) and consider them to be *kuxa'an* (living) as they are the homes of the *yuuntsilo'ob* or the guardian spirits of the earth and forest.³⁴ These beings also manifest as great jaguars or ancestors. The ground near these *múul* are considered to be fertile but these entities must be appeased with offerings of maize drinks among other gifts. Failure to do so might enduce cold winds that lead to headaches, fever, or even death.³⁵

Likewise, K'aqchikel Maya peoples indicate that *rajawal* (earth owners and protective forest forces) can manifest in archaeological objects or *objetos antiguos*, ancient mounds (archaeological buildings) and mountains alike. An essential element of the relationships they have with these living objects and places is a mutual reciprocity of care. K'aqchikel Maya often care for these entities by setting aside ceramic sherds and worked stones found in one's *milpa* field and burying them together in a small hole, placing *objetos antiguos* in particular spots in the household patio, or even bathing sculpted stone pieces found on their properties.

Not all ancient ruins, however, possess the same animacy or potency. The Itzaj Maya inhabitants of San José, Guatemala, often say that *arux* or *uyumil k'aax*, the guardians of the forest and trickster-like figures living among ancient forest-ruins are scared off by tourists and too much noise from television and other electronics.³⁶ Similarly, oral traditions among the Lacandon Maya note that at one time

the Lacandon could see and visit with their gods and wild animals in their own villages and houses, but that their sight is now impeded with these animate worlds now largely invisible.³⁷

Forced displacements, voluntary migrations, and the weight of colonial hierarchies have also greatly estranged descendant communities from claiming links to ancient ruins.³⁸ Some inhabitants living near Chunchucmil, for example, do not consider themselves as 'Maya' or as genealogically related to those that built the Classic period city of Chunchucmil even if they speak Yucatec Maya. Instead their ties with the *muulob* (mounds visible in the landscape) is one of relational experiences in the everyday as they recognize their similar uses of the land as *milpa* agriculturalists, their shared use of local materials in their construction of vernacular architecture, and the meanings and memories embedded in them as part of their daily movements and engagement with the land.³⁹

Similarly, many of the inhabitants of the rural villages near the site of Ucanal today largely identify themselves as *ladino* (*mestizo*) and do not trace a direct genealogical connection between them and the ancient inhabitants of Ucanal or other sites in the region. A significant reduction in the speaking of Mopan Maya and other Maya languages in Petén has occurred since the Guatemalan Civil War (1960–1996), which coincided with language policies hostile to Indigenous Maya peoples.⁴⁰ In addition, some Mopan Maya peoples have migrated to neighboring Belize over the last century and other Indigenous or ladino groups from the Guatemalan highlands have come to live in Petén.⁴¹ These local Mopan Valley inhabitants are intimately familiar with the ancient pyramids and residences in their fields, cow pastures, and forests. Their stories of the landscapes in their backyards should be told as well.

Conclusion

In many cases, ancient Maya cities are not lost. Rather the lost cities of the Maya area — and in other regions of the Americas — have often served as useful tropes of colonialism and as a byproduct of Western scholarly documentation that privileges non-local explorers as the first among firsts to discover ancient Maya cities. We can better appreciate a dynamic engagement with ancient ruins in the Maya area, however, with the recognition that ancient Maya cities

32 Pitarch (2012); Montejo (2021); Matul Morales (2023).

33 Cap et al.: (2017); Erickson/Vapnarsky (2022); Palka/Balsanelli (2024).

34 Vapnarsky (2022).

35 Vapnarsky (2022) 81–82.

36 Lois/Vapnarsky (2010) 90.

37 Palka/Balsanelli (2024).

38 Ajb'ee Jiménez/Chok (2011); McAnany (2016).

39 Hutson (2009).

40 Hofling (2011); (2017).

41 Wilk/Chapin (1990); Steinberg/Espejo-Saavedra (1996); García (2001).

were abandoned or left partially in ruins over multiple time periods over the last three millennia and that the ancient Maya themselves remade their own landscapes in reference to earlier ruins.

At the site of Ucanal, Late Classic Maya peoples undoubtedly structured their new urban building campaigns partially based on the memories and vestiges of the imposing Late Preclassic buildings before them. Likewise, Mopan Maya peoples during the Late Postclassic period did not forget about the ancient Terminal Classic city that was largely abandoned. They treated it as a sacred place and pilgrimage site within a rural and forested landscape. During the Colonial period, the region was a refuge for Mopan and other Maya peoples who resisted Spanish Colonial rule. These populations would have been familiar with the ruined buildings turned mounds near their settlements. In turn, visits to the site by scholars sponsored by Harvard University's Peabody Museum at the beginning of the 20th century make it clear that Mopan Maya peoples knew of the ancient city and it served as a landmark in a forested region where hardwoods for burning lime could be obtained and used for local consumption.

The dynamism of ancient Maya cities can also be appreciated through the consideration of landscapes as living – a conception best known from contemporary Maya ontologies, but one that likely has deep roots in antiquity as understood from Classic period texts and Pre-Columbian ritual practices. Landscape features, such as ruins, mountains, and caves, were and are especially charged, animate places where negotiations with spiritual forces, ancestors, and deities can be undertaken. These relationships with ancient ruins, however, are not static. Contemporary local peoples' links to and memories surrounding the ancient city of Ucanal today remain as subjects of inquiry. Regardless of the various stories they may tell about them, these are not lost cities – but textured landscapes in which they live – a constantly shifting living landscape.

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