

DEVELOPING THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE NORTHERN MAYA LOWLANDS

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss how a knowledge of the historical development of a discipline is necessary to understand the current status of research in that discipline, and how this knowledge itself can be useful to help us more successfully approach the problems which we encounter in our own research. In a quite abbreviated form I will consider the development of the chronology of the northern Maya lowlands in a way which will allow me to make some general statements relevant to a discussion of this problem.

This paper was written for a group of interested students, not for professional Maya archaeologists. To make the historical development of this part of the Maya chronology relevant to my audience, at the end of the paper I draw some general conclusions about how the knowledge of the development of any discipline can be used to help us all to learn from the past, to free us to make our own mistakes rather than repeat the mistakes of years ago.¹

Early studies.

In the period of Maya archaeology spanning the years from 1840 to 1914 the groundwork for much of subsequent thought concerning the ancient Maya was laid. Popular accounts of the travels of John Lloyd Stephens brought the existence of Maya civilization to the attention of large numbers of Europeans and North Americans.² Following Stephens's lead, a number of adventurers and scholars in the latter half of the 19th century crossed and recrossed the Maya lowlands to discover new sites or to fur-

ther record known ones. By the end of this period many of the Maya ruins had been discovered, and most of the major sites in the northern area had been mapped and photographed.

During this early stage in the development of Maya studies the enigmatic Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions and various colonial documents received scholarly attention. Rather rapidly the units used by the Maya to designate time periods were deciphered from the codices and monumental inscriptions.

An understanding of the units used by the Ancient Maya to reckon time is a pre-requisite to a correlation of the Maya and Christian chronologies, the basis of the Mesoamerican chronology. Certain documents written after the Spanish conquest by Spanish officials, or by Maya scribes who wrote in the Maya language using European script, dealt with certain aspects of Maya history and thought up to colonial times. Since time units were sometimes included, tentative dates could be assigned to events referred to in these colonial documents.

Morley's chronology.

By the second decade of the 20th century, before systematic excavation of any site in northern Yucatan had been attempted, Sylvanus Morley had defended the use of native chronicles to produce valid pre-Columbian history (1911) and produced a reconstruction of the rise and fall of Maya civilization in the light of the monuments and the native chronicles (1917). This hypothesis, based on almost no excavation, was to be espoused by him almost unchanged until his death in 1948.³

Morley throughout his life was reluctant to abandon his historical reconstruction of northern Maya history. He felt that the occupation of

the northern area during the Initial Series Period was a period of colonization, the time of the Greater and Lesser Descents of the colonial documents. The epoch following the Initial Series Period was the New Empire, and was divided into three periods.⁴ The first was the Puuc Period, what he termed the Maya Renaissance, which lasted for approximately 200 years (A.D. 987-1194). This period according to his reconstruction of history in the Maya chronicles, covers the time of the founding of Uxmal, Mayapan, and Toltec Chichen Itza. It is clear from his discussion that he believed Toltec Chichen Itza, and not the earlier structures in the Puuc style, was contemporaneous with the construction of Uxmal.⁵ Perhaps it is more accurate to state that he felt Uxmal was built at the same time as Toltec Chichen Itza. The second period of the New Empire, the Mexican Period, lasts for 250 years (A.D. 1194-1441), and is the time of the ascendancy of Mayapan after a war with Chichen Itza. The period ends with the fall of Mayapan in a civil upheaval. The abandonment of the three cities after the fall of Mayapan and the following Spanish conquest of Yucatan is Morley's Period III, the Period of Desintegration.

The purpose of briefly tracing Morley's reconstruction of the history of the northern area is to stress the fundamental impact early work on the native chronicles had on the conceptualization of archaeological problems in Yucatan. By 1924, when large-scale excavations began to be carried out at Chichen Itza, scholars had worked out a detailed history and chronology for not only this site, but for the whole northern peninsula. Historically, then, there was little to be learned from the excavations at Chichen Itza. The chronology given by the native sources was more detailed than one retrieved from a site lacking a battery of long

count dates, and it could be assumed that the site's history was probably already known in more detail than a study of its art and architecture would yield. Massive excavations would probably only supplement and not contradict the historical and chronological outline already known.

The result of this assumption was a basic lack of problem orientation, a lack which characterized the Carnegie Institution's program at Chichen Itza from the outset. With hindsight, the best of all possible perspectives, the excavations at Chichen Itza seem without major problem orientation, except for a general vow to "understand and interpret Maya culture, its motivating forces, its development and decay in so far as these social evolutionary processes could be studied at Chichen Itza."⁶ The excavations were geared toward restoration, and now seem somewhat haphazard. If the documentary evidence had not provided an historical framework tacitly if not widely accepted, the excavations might have been done with an eye not only to elucidating relationships among the buildings at Chichen Itza itself, but also to solving problems of the areal chronology. A lack of problem orientation was of course not uncommon in those early days of American archaeology, but I suspect that had there been no historical record whatever, those early engineers of archaeological policy might have attempted to solve some of the basic problems which plague us to this day.

Other interpretations.

If Morley's view of Maya history was the most widely published for many years, it did not stand unmodified by other Maya archaeologists. Ceramic and epigraphic evidence was amassed by some scholars during the late 1930's and early 1940's which indicated that buildings of the Puuc

style might not, after all, date to the period following the collapse of Classic civilization in the southern lowlands, but might in fact be contemporaneous with the later periods of the southern cities. J. Eric Thompson (1937) presented a new way of reading and deciphering the abbreviated dates from Chichen Itza which indicated that buildings of the Puuc style at that site probably dated from the last katun before 10.3.0.0.0, a traditional date for the end of Classic civilization. If Thompson is correct, it appears that buildings of the Puuc style at Chichen Itza fall within the time span formally termed Late Classic, not Postclassic as held by Morley.

This line of evidence is not the only one which led to modification of Morley's analysis. Evidence compiled by Brainerd (1941) indicates that Z fine orange, a ceramic type generally associated with the Puuc architectural style, precedes X fine orange and the associated plumbate ceramics which are associated with Mexican architecture at Chichen Itza. This ceramic evidence would indicate that the Puuc sites predate Toltec Chichen Itza. Thompson then cross-dates plumbate with the ceramic sequence in central Mexico based on the presence of plumbate in the Mazapan horizon and its absence in the following Aztec 1 horizon (1941). The Mazapan-Aztec 1 division can be made not later than 1240; thus, on the basis of the ceramic evidence, Chichen Itza was abandoned by the majority of its population and major architectural construction ceased between 150 and 200 years before the final abandonment of Mayapan in 1441. Thompson's and Brainerd's work, then, indicates that architecture of the Puuc style is Late Classic and antedates Toltec Chichen Itza which in turn antedates the major occupation of Mayapan. Thompson summarizes the ceramic and

architectural evidence of the Puuc period and addresses himself to the theory of a Maya renaissance:

It is now amply clear that this style does not represent a renaissance of Maya culture but is contemporaneous with the great buildings of the central area which flourished in the classical age.⁷

Morley may acknowledge this view in his textbook when he states that Puuc architecture is earlier than the last or Mexican architectural phase of Chichen Itza, but it is clear from his overall discussion of the New Empire that he was reluctant to abandon his old views.⁸

The only comprehensive monograph on the archaeology of Chichen Itza was written by the late Alfred Tozzer of Harvard University (1957). Based on a synthesis of ethnohistorical and archaeological evidence, he divides the history of Chichen Itza into five chronological phases, Chichen I through V. Chichen I, or Maya Chichen, he places in the Late Classic period following Thompson. Chichen II is the period of the first occupation of the Toltec Maya (A.D. 948-1145). This period is believed to have lasted 200 years on the basis of information from the native chronicles. The third period, Chichen III, is Toltec Maya Stage B. This stage is divided into B' and B'' on the basis of the relative numbers and positions of Maya or Toltec personages depicted on various buildings. Chichen IV is the Mayapan period, and Chichen V is from the abandonment of Mayapan to the collapse of the last Maya group in 1697.

Tozzer presents long, involved, well researched, and often insightful discussions of archaeology and documentary history to develop his thesis. One part of his historical reconstruction is based on the identification of the sculptured figures at the site as either Maya or Toltec,

an idea he had been interested in for years (1930). He assigns buildings in which figures he identifies as Maya are predominant to his Chichen III B'. In buildings where Toltec figures predominate the structures are assigned to Chichen III B". This archaeological scheme, which is based on the identification of most figures in the Chac Mool Temple as Maya and most of those in the overlying Temple of the Warriors as Toltec, is then worked into an historical reconstruction. After the initial influx of foreigners in Chichen II, a period of Maya resurgence follows in Chichen III B', which is then followed by a second period of Toltec domination in Chichen III B". This alternating dominance of different ethnic groups has been questioned by Thompson (1959), who feels that the building sculptures suggest the function of the building rather than indicate that the structure belongs to an historical period when one or the other group is dominant.

Until about 1960, then, attempts to synthesize the chronology of the northern lowlands relied on colonial documents to greater or lesser degrees. As yet no one had attempted to produce a regional chronology which completely ignored the colonial sources. About this time, however, the regional chronology was being ironed archaeologically in two major excavations: those at Mayapan completed by the Carnegie Institution about 1955, and the excavations at Dzibilchaltun by E. Wyllys Andrews from 1956 to 1967.

Dzibilchaltun is one of the longest continuously inhabited sites in northern Yucatan, and therefore has the advantage of providing a long sequence from which to view the briefer periods of occupation in other northern sites like Uxmal, Chichen Itza, and Mayapan. The results of the excavations at Dzibilchaltun do not support the most recent reconstruc-

tions of northern Maya history, nor do they favor the most widely accepted correlation of the Maya and Christian chronologies.⁹ This work reaffirms the temporal priority of the Puuc sites, followed by Chichen Itza and then Mayapan. Andrews writes, however, that his excavations indicate that Puuc sites postdate Late Classic sites in the southern lowlands, an idea not seriously argued since before Morley's death.

And so the situation stands to this day. The most recent excavations in Yucatan, according to Andrews, indicate that the Puuc sites may be later than the southern cities (1960, 1965). If Andrews's stratigraphic work is correct the current view of later Maya history would have to be substantially changed. For example, Andrews points out that the Good-Martinez-Thompson correlation of the Maya and Christian chronologies allows only 335 years of development for the Puuc sites, Toltec Chichen, and Mayapan. Given the sequence established for these three horizons, only about 110 years is allowed for the development of each style. Anyone would think that this is an incredibly short amount of time for the amount of construction involved. The Spinden correlation, on the other hand, would allow 595 years total, or roughly 200 years for each of the three horizons. A time span of this length is certainly more compatible with the archaeological remains. The question almost becomes one of choosing between Andrews's stratigraphic work and the Goodman-Martinez-Thompson correlation. Almost all scholars today prefer the latter correlation, and certainly any major change now would require rearranging the entire Mesoamerican chronology. Andrews, however, maintained that his stratigraphic work was valid, and he pointed out that most of the carbon 14 age determinations from the northern area favor the Spinden

correlation.¹⁰ Unfortunately this problem in establishing the chronology for the northern Maya lowlands has yet to be finally resolved.

The problem of chronology.

Hopefully this abbreviated discussion of the development of the chronology in the northern area can serve as the basis from which to draw some conclusions about how a knowledge of the development of our disciplines can aid us in formulating our own research methods. We have seen, for example, that the role played by the ethnohistoric sources in the development of the Maya chronology has sometimes hindered more than it has helped clarify the historical situation. The fact that there was evidence by which a history of the northern peninsula could be constructed led to an archaeological program that did not solve pertinent archaeological problems. In addition to not seeking archaeological answers to problems, it seems that often archaeological data have been used to support ethnohistoric reconstructions, rather than using the documentary material to help formulate questions which could be answered by archaeological methods. Many questions were not even perceived as problems, because the story was to be found in written sources.

The sites chosen to be excavated and the sequence of archaeological discoveries are of course of great importance. Morley could not have known when he began his excavation at Chichen Itza that archaeologists would not find deeply stratified deposits at that site even if he had been aware that such a find was desirable. Digging in sites where good stratified deposits were not found, however, probably contributed to the reliance on documentary sources. Certainly today, if we were interested in solving problems of regional chronology, we would look for sites with

remains from the temporal horizons in which we are interested, and hopefully sites could be found with good vertical or horizontal stratigraphy. If the first excavation in northern Yucatan had been in a site which yielded a good stratigraphic record, perhaps many of the problems which we have today would no longer be problems. Excavations which have not produced good stratigraphic sequences have led to much confusion in the Maya chronology in the northern area.

These are problems that go to the very foundations of the subject under consideration. There has been a tendency to allow theories published years ago to pass without review and to go unquestioned in the literature. There is a danger in accepting something as fact because of the weight of years or prestigious bibliographical support. A look at the Mesoamerican chronology indicates that it is not a closed issue, nor can the correlation question be considered finally settled. The Goodman-Martinez-Thompson correlation seems to be the most acceptable, but the lessons of history tell us not to be too sure in these situations.

Conclusion.

The purpose of this paper has been to illustrate, by using the chronological problem of the northern Maya lowlands, the importance of understanding the historical background of any issue. This history must be studied critically, or we will find ourselves making the same mistakes our predecessors did rather than learning from them. Morley, Tozzer, and Thompson came to their theoretical positions on the chronology question at early stages in their careers, and they did not make major modifications in their positions in later years. For example, compare Morley's

1917 paper with the section on the New Empire in his 1947 textbook, or Tozzer's 1930 paper with his 1957 monograph, or Thompson's early papers with one of his latest statements on the subject.¹¹ I make this statement without criticism, for there are few men that I admire more than some of the great Maya scholars. However, the lessons of history indicate that a periodic re-evaluation of what are accepted as "facts" is in order, and our own thinking is a good place to begin. In doing this we need to work from where the best evidence pertinent to a particular problem is to be found, whether it is the oldest or the newest, or proposed by someone we do not like. This study also warns us to keep a critical eye on our problem orientation; first, in selecting what is hopefully really a problem, and second, by using methods which will produce a valid solution to the problem. Finally, a point on method itself. Problems of chronology cannot be solved by just thinking about them. They are not outside the realm of solution by methods which are available to us today. They need only be utilized.

NOTES

¹This paper was originally read at the Annual Meeting of the Kroeber Anthropological Society in the spring of 1974. Although it briefly traces selected aspects of the development of the chronology of the northern Maya lowlands, a paper delivered in 20 minutes on such a broad subject can by no means be comprehensive. The ideas of the men considered below were developed over the course of their lifetimes, and reducing their complex historical and archaeological discussions to a page or two obviously does not do justice to their thoughts. Many persons who should have been considered in a paper like this had to be left out due to the demands of time and space. Hopefully readers who have a detailed knowledge of the works of Morley, Thompson, Tozzer, and Andrews will forgive the cursory treatment of their views, and keep in mind my purpose when I wrote this paper: we must understand where we have been in the past to understand where we are today and where we must go in the future.

²Stephens, 1841 and 1843.

³Morley, 1947; Barrera Vasquez and Morley, 1949.

⁴Morley, 1947, p. 83.

⁵Morley, 1947, pp. 89-90.

⁶Morley, 1943, p. 214.

⁷Thompson, 1945, p. 8.

⁸Morley, 1947, p. 80.

⁹Andrews, 1965.

¹⁰Andrews, 1965, pp. 60-66.

¹¹Thompson, 1945; Thompson, 1970, pp. 3-47.

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