

## **Where are the Maya people in history? Insights from Archaeology**

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Our knowledge of women and common people in the Mayan world is poor. This results less from data limitations than from limitations in interpretation. First, the Classic Maya were not misogynistic, but many archaeologists are, argues Professor Joyce. Second, many archaeologists prefer to excavate palaces over villages. For example, the Mayan site Lubaantun contains much evidence for ordinary people's lives, but many scholars are uninterested in this. Belize and Honduras did not feature as much social inequality as is seen at Chichen Itza, Tikal, and Palenque; in the hinterland of Palenque, Rodrigo Liendo has managed to investigate the lives of many people. Chan in Belize has been excavated by several scholars such as Cynthia Robin and Chelsea Blackmore interested in everyday life and the variation in lives of ordinary people.

A violent image of the Maya inevitably has emerged from certain forms of evidence often privileged by moderns. Literature on the Maya overprivileges war scenes depicted on pottery and monuments. Splendid monuments and stelae such as the impressive Monument of the Thirteenth Ruler at Copan in Honduras often incorporate writing, and scholars often privilege what is written. Yet narratives inscribed in stone often self-aggrandize, and archaeologists seldom read against the grain. Other works have perished, such as those written on hide and bark paper. Some Mayan books reached Europe, but these were medical treatises, almanacs, and divinatory books used by philosopher-priests, rather than the historical accounts that could fill out our picture.

Other evidence conveys less warlike impressions. The palace at Palenque holds the garbage of everyday life. For palaces are large households, full of evidence for women, children, and people of varied age and status. Even the kings depicted in artwork in palaces like that at Tikal wore garments made by workers, and ate field laborers' produce. Figurines from Copan depict non-elites. And there were many non-elites: Maya lowlands held millions of people. An 800 square mile valley in Honduras has some 500 villages and field houses. Typically, they built houses on raised earthen platforms facing an open patio or courtyard. They Mayans venerated dead ancestors by burying their corpses, often de-fleshed, under their homes, whether the houses were built over stone or dirt. Copan in Honduras features a Mayan village with stone platforms or foundations under the houses, built-in stairs, and paved patios. Smaller mounds are only forty-five centimeters off the ground; larger ones a meter high off the ground. Here the burial population under the main axis of the stairways and within the building platforms seems primarily male, but around the edges of the building are females and children. A garbage pit in Copan is full of black ash, broken pots, and plant remains.

Quality evidence allows us to understand the Maya diet. When people abandon a site, they do not take everything away – only what is still usable. There remain tiny particles of worked stone, and chemical signatures of activities such as cooking. Microresidues from a unique study in Honduras tell us that the people there used their

obsidian tools to remove corn from cobs, peel root vegetables, chop palm leaves, and so on. Some figurines show us how Mayan people ground corn on a raised platform, an invaluable contribution to our understanding of these people. Each tool tells us about the history of its use. Mortars and pestles were used to smash chilies. Food preparation can be identified by analyzing artifacts and hearths for starches, pollen, and so on. In the Honduran example, some of what is found is unexpected or extends our understanding. Two-handled brewing jars are found in broken pieces on sites, and residues of squashes in the fires. They did not have many beans, but much corn.

Looking at different isotopes in a bone tell us whether its owner ate primarily vegetarian or carnivore diets, and what kind of food he ate. Elites in Maya cities did not so much have a better diet as one higher in meat, high in corn and less diverse. Common people had less meat, less corn, but more diversity. The normal Belize Mayan ate a tasty tamale with turtle or iguana, whereas elites ate a haunch of roasted venison with vegetable matter on the side. Even people from wealthy sectors of cities experienced malnutrition as these cities aged, and in some cases, the ordinary people may have had access to better diets.

The old characterization of Mayan people as dependents and subordinates of the aristocrats is limited and un-nuanced. The nobles existed on one end of the power spectrum. After 800 AD, in many sites the everyday people simply moved away from cities falling into disrepair, with higher levels of malnutrition and poorer health among the city population. The commoners had access to beautiful things that they made themselves including figurines, good cloth, and a life in which the houses participated in rituals including those marking the death of the persons in the household and the births of new members of the household, who are recorded in the visual imagery. In one well-studied example from Honduras, they used some 150 kinds of plants, and had a richly varied diet. Commoners made many home luxuries such as figurines in Honduras, Belize, and Guatemala, all over the Mayan world. These tend to be found in the households of various non-aristocratic strata. Most houses were probably like some we have from a Honduran site, featuring clay walls and posts.

Several tropes have often been used to define the Maya. Scholars debate the existence and prevalence of human sacrifice among the Maya. Epigraphers affirm human sacrifice; bioarchaeologists are split into two groups. Some believe acts of violence are indicated by some bone cuts; others, that bone cuts cannot tell us this, and that people may have undergone post-mortem decapitation so that their skull could be venerated in religious rituals. In either case, we must remember that human sacrifice was not the central value of the civilization of the Maya.

As for crossed eyes and flattened foreheads, cranial deformation is simply a form of beautification. This was an aesthetic ideal of beauty. It was not uniformly done to babies, but was a fashion running in certain families, along with filing teeth into points and inserting jade.

As for the Maya ball courts, there were some attached to some elite houses. The ball games were probably more broadly distributed than historical records tell us, and date back to 1,500 BC at least. Teotihuacan has no ball courts but artistic drawings showing ball games.

“Relics of bygone instruments of labour possess the same importance for the investigation of extinct economical forms of society as do fossil bones for the

determination of extinct species of animals. It is not the articles made, but how they are made, and by what instruments, that enables us to distinguish different economical epochs. Instruments of labor not only supply a standard of the degree of development to which human labour has attained, but they are also indicators of the social conditions under which labor is carried out.” – Karl Marx.