

ROUTLEDGE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE ANCIENT  
AMERICAS

**3,000 Years of War and  
Peace in the Maya  
Lowlands**

**Identity, Politics, and Violence**

Edited by **Geoffrey E. Braswell**



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**ARCHITECTURE AS A MATERIAL  
REPRESENTATION OF  
SOCIOPOLITICAL STRUCTURE**

An analysis of lowland Maya palace  
complexes in the late eighth century

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The archaeology of the Maya lowlands, especially research that focuses on the development of cities during the Classic period (AD 250–900), constitutes an important field for the analysis of the sociopolitical organization of ancient states. The study of geopolitics in this region concentrates on hieroglyphic inscriptions that have made it possible to identify the presence of well-defined political entities governed by a monarchical and dynastic system headed by rulers who held titles such as *k'uhul ajaw* (sacred lord). This system originated during the Preclassic period, and there is strong evidence of the presence of such rulers from the first century BC onward. Nonetheless, the political system of the sacred lords consolidated in the Classic period. Although written records are the main source of information used to reconstruct the political environment, archaeological research in Maya cities has provided material evidence of the complexity achieved by these centers. This was expressed through monumental architecture and fine art, as well as complex settlement patterns that allowed the sustained use of the tropical forest environment for more than a thousand years.

Given the long history of this sociopolitical system, it is no surprise that its characteristics evolved over time. Although all Maya cities contained elements in common and shared the same ideological basis, each one also developed its own characteristics that were the expression of the variability that existed within the system of the sacred lords. Therefore, we can identify what may be called “regimes” specific to particular cities or regions, which in turn created a complex network of interaction throughout the lowlands (Canuto and Lamoureux-St-Hilaire 2017). As many studies have shown, this political system began to collapse in the late eighth century AD and eventually disappeared in the late ninth century, only to be replaced by new forms of government during the Postclassic period (Demarest et al. 2005; Iannone 2014).