**THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE ANCIENT MAYA CITY**

**OF EL PERÚ-*WAKA’*, GUATEMALA**

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**Introduction**

Hidden deep in the Central American jungle, the mysterious ruined cities of the Maya were a source of wonder to the early explorer who stumbled across them. Were these extraordinary pyramids and palaces the work of gods or humans? For three centuries the mystery only deepened, but, in the 19th century, as artists, photographers, and archaeologists began to piece the whole picture together, romantic speculation gave way to scientific fact, and the truth about Maya civilization and how these elaborate sites were built was finally revealed.

The first human population is thought to have arrived on the American continent at least 20,000 years ago, when a period of glaciations dried up the Behring Strait and made it possible to walk from Siberia to Alaska. Compared with the history of the Old World, American history is relatively recent, and its cultures have developed in isolation, although there are some rather disconcerting similarities between Maya art and the art of Southeast Asia. An alternative explanation to transatlantic contacts would be to attribute these resemblances to analogous environments, parallel histories or simply the artistic constraints of the human mind and intellect. It is worth mentioning that in the evolution of ancient civilizations there are only two cases for the independent emergence of complex societies in a tropical forest environment: one case is the Khmer, in Cambodia, and the other is the Maya in the Americas.

After thousands of years of nomadism, from 2000 BC the population of the Americas was, generally speaking, sedentary: This is a precondition for the creation of societies sufficiently complex to be called civilizations. The term “Mesoamerica” was first used to refer to an area of civilization that included central and southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador and parts of Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Within this vast cultural area, whose frontiers have altered through history, the homogeneity of Mesoamerica has changed. But, despite their differences, Mesoamerican civilizations have certain common characteristics that give the region its unity, whether looked at from an economic standpoint, or from an artistic, religious or intellectual angle.

Maya territory covers the southeast part of Mesoamerica, with a territorial extension of more than 125,000 square miles, including southeast Mexico (Yucatan peninsula and the State of Chiapas), Belize, Guatemala, and the west of El Salvador and Honduras. Its territory is divided into at least three main areas, each characterized by its own specific forms and historical development: 1) the Pacific coast and the highlands of Guatemala and El Salvador; 2) the central and southern lowlands, representing the largest expanse of tropical forest in Central America; and 3) the northern lowlands in the Yucatan Peninsula.

The culture history of Maya civilization has been divided into three main periods, referred to as Preclassic or Formative, from 2,000 BC to AD 300; Classic, from AD 300 to 900; and Postclassic, from AD 900 to 1542; which are in turn divided into Early and Late phases. These are sometimes subdivided once again into shorter periods such as the Protoclassic, Terminal Classic, and Protohistoric. The Classic period is often called, somewhat hyperbolically, the “Golden Age” of the Maya. In the New World, the term “Classic” represents an adoption of the term used to refer to the zenith of ancient Greek and Roman cultures, and carries with the connotation of the full flowering of Maya arts, some more-or-less imperishable, such as sculpture and painting, others not, including music and dance.

The Maya created one of the most advanced civilizations not only of Mesoamerica but of the ancient world. The Maya high culture, armature of elite political and economic power, grew and developed for more than a millennium. The royal courts evidently faltered for a time at the beginning of the Classic period, around 300 AD, but they surged forward for centuries after that, only to be checked by the convergence of catastrophic conditions of the so-called collapse. This began early in the Petexbatún region, and then came to full force throughout the southern lowlands in a pattern drastic reorganization or abandonment by AD 850 to 900. Most of the great ancient Classic cities were deserted and some intellectual practices were no longer as elaborate during the Postclassic period, from AD 900 to 1542. As a truly Precolumbian phenomenon, Maya civilization came to an end with the arrival of the Spanish conquerors in the XVI century. Slaughtered during the conquest itself, the Maya were now victim as well to viral infections transmitted by the Europeans: the overall population declined greatly, in some places by 50% or more. Nevertheless, the Maya endured such adversities with remarkable tenacity. Today, as many as eight million people speak one of the twenty-eight Maya languages and live in villages and rural communities, although they are also swelling urban and suburban populations in increasing numbers. The Maya are at present engaged in a determined political struggle to gain an equitable place in modern states that cover their ancient homeland, including Guatemala.

Founded on the cultivation of several varieties of corn, a starch-rich cereal crop, the Maya refined and embellished the cultural achievements of the other Mesoamerican civilizations that preceded them. The Maya where exemplary builders in Mesoamerica, despite serious constraints, such as the absence of metals, pack animals, and industrial wheels. Maya workmen built various types of imposing structures, ranging from towering temple pyramids, which symbolized the link between heaven and earth, to royal residences that were often called “palaces” by the Spanish conquerors, all with rubble fill borne on their backs and plaster prepared from crushed and burned native limestone. Artisans dressed the stone and carved the reliefs and inscriptions without metal tools.

The ancient Maya also developed the most sophisticated logosyllabic writing system in the New World, capable of expressing all types of thought and language through a combination of about eight hundred signs and symbols; a calendar of surpassing accuracy and complexity; a vigesimal numeration system, which includes the zero – a concept unknown among the ancient Greeks and Romans; and inscriptions on stones and painted ceramics of grace and beauty. The product of a stratified social structure, directed by a ruling class, the contents of the inscriptions carved on stelae and altars are mainly historical. They focus on the major events in the life of the ruler, such as name, birth, marriage, accession, wars, and the taking of noble captives. Maya texts also record the emplacement of ritual objects in sacred places.

Maya religion was developed over the centuries from a fundamental focus on the naming, summoning, and controlling of natural and supernatural powers and essences. During the Preclassic and Classic periods natural forces, such as earth, sky, death, corn, and lightning, were represented in the form of supernatural beings or symbols whose images changed according to what they were actually required to embody. During the Postclassic period these images became fixed; the creatures acquired personality and became immutable divinities that formed part of a hierarchical pantheon. An important ritual in Maya religion was the ball game. This game was not so much a sport or spectacle as a ritual, symbolizing the struggle between the forces of life and death, good and evil. At the end of some of the games the losers were decapitated. Human sacrifice played a major role in Maya religion from the very beginning. Sacrifice and self-sacrifice was a tribute that had to be made to natural and supernatural powers to obtain such favors as rains, a good harvest, victory, and harmonious balance.

Such generalities encompass the common features of Maya civilization, but it is through the fine-grained study of individual cities and their neighbors that we discern significant variability in local practices and history. Civilizations are by nature socially heterogeneous and culturally diverse, and a deep understanding of the Classic Maya requires documentation of these qualities to enrich our perception of broader trajectories. That is a central intention of this effort and its focus on the archaeology of the ancient Maya city of El Perú-*Waka’*.

**Location**

Despite its medium size, the attraction of El Perú-*Waka’* lies in the quantity and quality of its magnificent stone monuments and its spectacular jungle landscape. The site is located in northwestern Petén and perches on a one-hundred-meter-high escarpment overlooking the San Juan River, six kilometers north of its confluence with the San Pedro Mártir River, a stretch of 80 km of navigable water. Although access is sometimes difficult, it is possible to reach the site in the summer by taking a dirt road from Flores, with the modern Maya Quekchí village of Paso Caballos as its port of entry. During the rainy season the site can be reached by boat, motoring 15 km up the river San Pedro Mártir River from Paso Caballos and then walking along a trial of about 6 km long that passes through the IDAEH camp and ends at the site entrance.

The archaeological zone of El Perú-*Waka’* is located in the Laguna del Tigre National Park, the largest territory within the Maya Biosphere reserve. Laguna del Tigre has the largest wetlands of Central America and a wide variety of species, including some in danger of extinction, such as scarlet macaws (*Ara macao*), Baird’s tapirs (*Tapirus bairdii*), jaguars (*Panthera onca*), black howler monkeys (*Alouata palliata*), and crocodiles (*Crocodrylus moreletti*). Unfortunately, the uncontrolled development of agriculture and cattle ranching, as well as the exploitation of timber in recent decades have destroyed a large part of this ecosystem, despite government efforts to preserve such natural reserves.

**History of exploration**

Although there are numerous pre-Hispanic settlements in Northwest Petén, it is virtually an unknown region in archaeological terms. In fact, the existence of El Perú-*Waka’* was detected before the mid-1960s because of oil exploration in the area, but its discovery was never made public. Robert Christie, a graduate student from the University of Pennsylvania, was the first to report the site in 1970. However, the first scientific explorations must be credited to Ian Graham of the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions of the Peabody Museum at Harvard University, who arrived soon after Christie’s visit. Between 1970 and 1997, Graham and his colleagues conducted five short expeditions to record the preliminary map of the central part of the site. Graham was able to draw most of the monuments of the El Perú-*Waka’* and reported that looters had removed the carved surfaces of some of these sculptures for illegal sale abroad.

In 2002, in collaboration with the American archaeologist David Freidel of Southern Methodist University, I had the opportunity to launch the first multidisciplinary investigations at the site as Co-director of the El Perú-*Waka’* Archaeological Project. This is a long-term binational project that is still conducting systematic investigations to determine what culture changes occurred during the occupation of this crucial city. Moreover, we hope to define the ties and history of this ancient city with peer polities in the Maya Lowlands, particularly with respect to the important capitals of Calakmul and Tikal, the two superpowers in the Maya lowlands, situated 72 km to the east and 108 km to the northwest, respectively. During its tenure, the project has conducted rescue archaeology, mapping, surface collecting, laboratory analyses, along with deep excavations in plazas, monumental architecture and residential units, both at El Perú and several smaller secondary sites.

**Site description**

According to the hieroglyphic records, the original name of the city, *Waka’*, means “the centipede place with water”, with a pond at its center during this time. Much like other Maya cities, El Perú-*Waka’* fulfilled economic, political, administrative, and religious functions. The settlement was built on top of a long limestone escarpment that rises 100 meters over east bank of the River San Juan. Defensible and provisioned with a regular water supply, El Perú-*Waka’* was well-suited for use as a citadel or fort. A natural harbor on the San Juan was capable of protecting and embarking convoys of trade canoes along the eighty-kilometer stretch of calm river that links the interior of the Petén to the Usumacinta region. Settlement patterns and geological patterns of north-south-trending ridges suggest the existence of a secondary route overland through this water-rich zone, tying the Petén to southeastern Campeche and the heartland of Calakmul. This route proved particularly important in the seventh century, when *Yuknoom Ch’een* the Great of Calakmul attempted to consolidate a hegemonic empire in the Southern Lowlands. At a strategic crossroads, El Perú-*Waka’* was poised to be a key participant in the political, military, and commerce dynamics of Southern Lowland Maya civilization.

The core area of the site includes approximately 665 structures, distributed in an area of 36 hectares, with two main architectural complexes, the Western Center and the Mirador Group. The Western Center contains numerous structures arranged around four large plazas. Framed to the north and south by raised terraces, access to this section of the site begins at Plaza 2, where there are 12 monuments (Stelae 5 to 12 and 42, plus Miscellaneous Sculptures 1 and 2) and, most notably, the South-East Acropolis or Structure M13-1, the largest religious complex in the Western Center – with two terraces and a central pyramid that was once surmounted by a masonry temple. Plaza 1, which is the site’s main plaza, includes 22 monuments (Stelae 18 to 35, 40 and 42, Altars 1 and 2) dated from the Early and Late Classic periods, as well as the largest structure, M12-32, a tall cone-shaped funerary pyramid from the Late Classic. The most notable monument is Stela 15, which has the oldest inscription at the site (AD 416) and which records the arrival of *Siyaj K’ahk’*, the Teotihuacan warrior mentioned in texts at Tikal, Uaxactún, and Río Azul. Plaza 4 includes a ball court, the North-West Palace, a group of administrative buildings and elite residences, as well as eight monuments (Stela 36 to 38, three altars and two altar supports).

Located in the south-east of the core area is the Mirador Group or Temple Acropolis, the most imposing architectural complex at El Perú, which comprises Stela 1, two tall pyramids (Structures O14-2 and O14-4) and a triadic group (Structures N14-12, N14-13? and O14-7), settled on top of the escarpment. In ancient times, it would have been possible to see the tallest pyramid from several kilometers away.

**Pre-Hispanic History**

Excavations and ceramic analyses have revealed an occupational sequence of approximately 1,200 years, stretching from the Late Preclassic to the Terminal Classic periods, or from 200 BC to AD 1000. The presence of terminal Late Preclassic ceramics in the main plazas at the core of the site, indicate that it was during this period when El Perú emerged as an important Maya capital. The similarity between local ceramics from that period and contemporary ceramics in the central Petén suggests that the early settlers arrived from the latter area. Regional historical events such as the collapse of the Late Classic state in the El Mirador basin may well have had bearing on the foundation of El Perú on a defensive escarpment, which would have been an ideal location to control trade along and near the San Pedro Mártir river.

El Perú-*Waka’* boasts more than 40 limestone monuments whose inscriptions record historical relationships between the local rulers and dynasties of the most important capitals of the ancient Maya. The kings of El Perú-*Waka’* consolidated a local dynasty represented by 24 sovereigns who succeeded each other on the throne for a span of at least seven centuries (AD 100-800). Even though the local dynasty was founded around 100 BC, nothing is known of the first two centuries of its history. The first monumental buildings and carved monuments at the site, in traditional central Petén style, where dedicated in the Early Classic period (AD 250-600). Hieroglyphic inscriptions record information about the first rulers around the fourth century AD. Burial 24, discovered within Structure O14-4 in the Mirador Group, contains the remains of two young elite women and a fetus, dates from that period. In AD 378, during the reign of *K’inich B’ahlam* I, the famous Teotihuacan warrior *Sihyaj K’ahk* arrived to El Perú, eight days before marching to the west to conquer Tikal and install a new dynasty at that site. Consequently, El Perú maintained close ties with Tikal over the next 150 years. The last monument of the Early Classic period is dated AD 554 after which there was a hiatus of about a century. Burial 37 at Structure M12-32 in Plaza 1 appears to contain the remains of a ruler of El Perú-*Waka’*, who lived in the transitional period between the Early and the Late Classic periods.

Surprisingly, the Late Classic period (AD 600-800), despite the presence of numerous carved monuments from that period--the so-called “golden era”--is not well represented archaeologically at El Perú-*Waka’*, at least in the areas that have been excavated so far. One tomb from the beginning of the Late Classic period, Burial 39 at Structure O14-4, may correspond to the resting place of the last ruler of El Perú-*Waka’* to enjoy ties with Tikal. In AD 657, the tradition of erecting monuments was revived, but now under the influence of Calakmul, Tikal’s Nemesis. To seal the alliance, the ruler *K’inich B’ahlam* II was married Lady *K’ab’il*, the daughter of *Yuknoom Ch’een* the Great of Calakmul. Burial 8, the tomb of a royal woman situated in the North-West Palace, appears to date from this period. The king of Tikal, *Yik’in Chan K’awiil*, embarked on a military campaign to conquer neighbor kingdoms, bringing an end to Calakmul’s imperial ambitions in AD 695. In AD 743, the El Perú-*Waka’* ruler, *B’ahlam Tz’am*, was defeated by *Yik’in Chan K’awiil* at a satellite site called *Yaxha’*, and the effigy of his patron god captured and delivered to Tikal the following day. There is evidence of at least two more local rulers, but very little is known about them. The latest dynastic monuments, Stelae 24 and 25, were dedicated in AD 761 by the penultimate or last local ruler.

In the Terminal Classic Period (AD 800-900), after half a century of decadence, the monumental buildings and plazas were rebuilt. The discovery of Fine Orange and Fine Gray ceramics in the areas explored to date at El Perú-*Waka’* suggests that this is the final occupation of the site, a short-lived revival after the disappearance of the royal court. However, we still do not know whether the site was occupied by the same people: the transition from the period of the royal court to another governmental system, replacing the former’s authority in El Perú-*Waka’* during the Terminal Classic, remains obscure. Dating from this period is a termination ritual deposit with numerous fragments of grinding stones, precious objects made of shell and jade, artifacts used in bloodletting rituals, flint projectile points, figurines, stucco sculptures, human bones, and over 100,000 pot sherds, which were discovered on the upper level of Plaza 2, in front and on top of the base of Structure M13-1.

Just before the site was abandoned in the 9th century, there were several violent attempts to destroy the main historical monuments, damaging the portraits of the rulers depicted on their surfaces. This destruction contrasts with the attempts of other people to repair those monuments and re-erect them at the main plazas. The collective destruction of the monuments suggests the existence of internal power struggles between the factions that witnessed the fall of royal power.

**Conclusions**

In short, the strategic location of El Perú-*Waka’* indicates it was a political, religious, and economic Maya center of the highest importance. The position of the site is associated with one of the most navigable trade routes of the ancient Maya, between the kingdoms of central Petén and the Usumacinta River region. Therefore, El Perú-*Waka’* dominated the trade route of the confluence of the rivers San Juan and San Pedro Mártir, as well as the north-south terrestrial route linking southern Campeche to central Petén.

For a time-span of about 700 years, the kings of El Perú-*Waka’* transformed their city into an impressive urban and economic center with a population that ran into the thousands, both in the Early Classic and the Late Classic. They also left evidence of their vassalage to great foreign kings such as *Sihyaj K’ahk’* of Tikal and *Yuknoom Ch’een* the Great of Calakmul. El Perú-*Waka’* controlled a vast and strategic territory for the two most powerful Classic Maya kingdoms. El Perú-*Waka’* had intense interactions with their neighbors, in a dynamic historical mosaic, which, thanks to the archaeological investigations and epigraphic decipherment of their monuments, today I have had the honor to share with you all.