

Explaining the Weak Political Economy of the Classic Maya: A Comparative Analysis

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My Argument

- Small polities, because they have territorial limits are not able to capture and control the “extra-polital” political and economic networking of their own elites
- This leaves the elites free to challenge the evolution of the political economies of these polities
- The result is a noticeably weak political economy within the polity
- As Earle recently phrased it, “...a political economy...takes no special form, except the ability to mobilize and direct resources in support and extension of ruling institutions” (Earle 2011:241).

My Method of Analysis

- The characteristics of my argument are brought out through comparative analysis, using the insights gained from the analysis of one set of small polities to highlight similar internal issues in another set.
- My comparative cultures are the archaic and classical period (ca. 1000 – 300 BCE) Greek polities and the classical period (ca. 250-850 CE) Maya.

The Greek Case

- Pre-existing political and economic institutions tied various groups (kin and otherwise) together over the Greek landscape
- There were economic ties – the transfer of wheat surplus
- There were political ties – interpolitical alliances between different factions in different polities

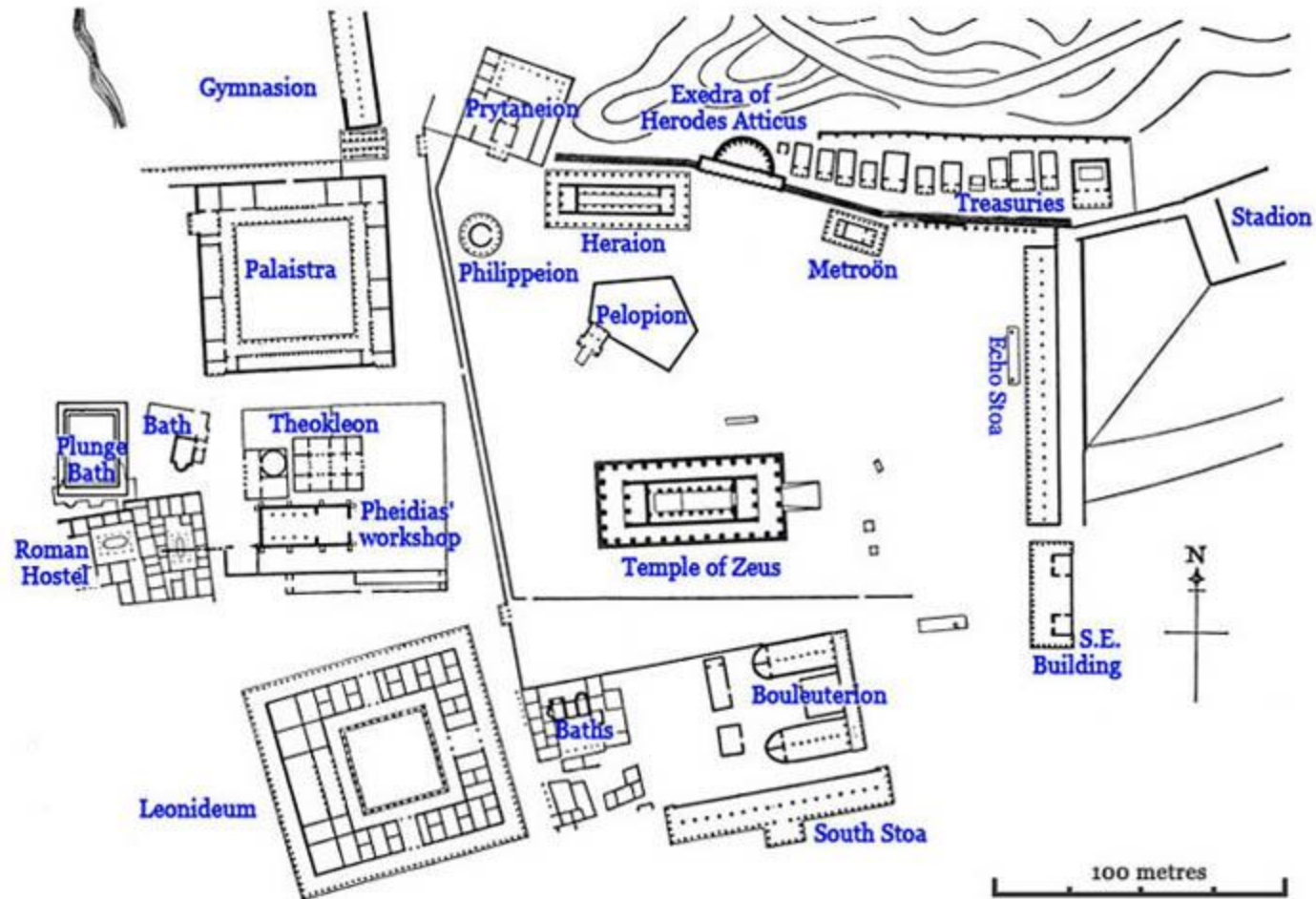
Some Greek Polities



Nodes of Contact and Interchange: Feasting – at Elite Funerals



Nodes of Contact and Interchange: Interpolital Sanctuaries



Feasting from Early Olympia



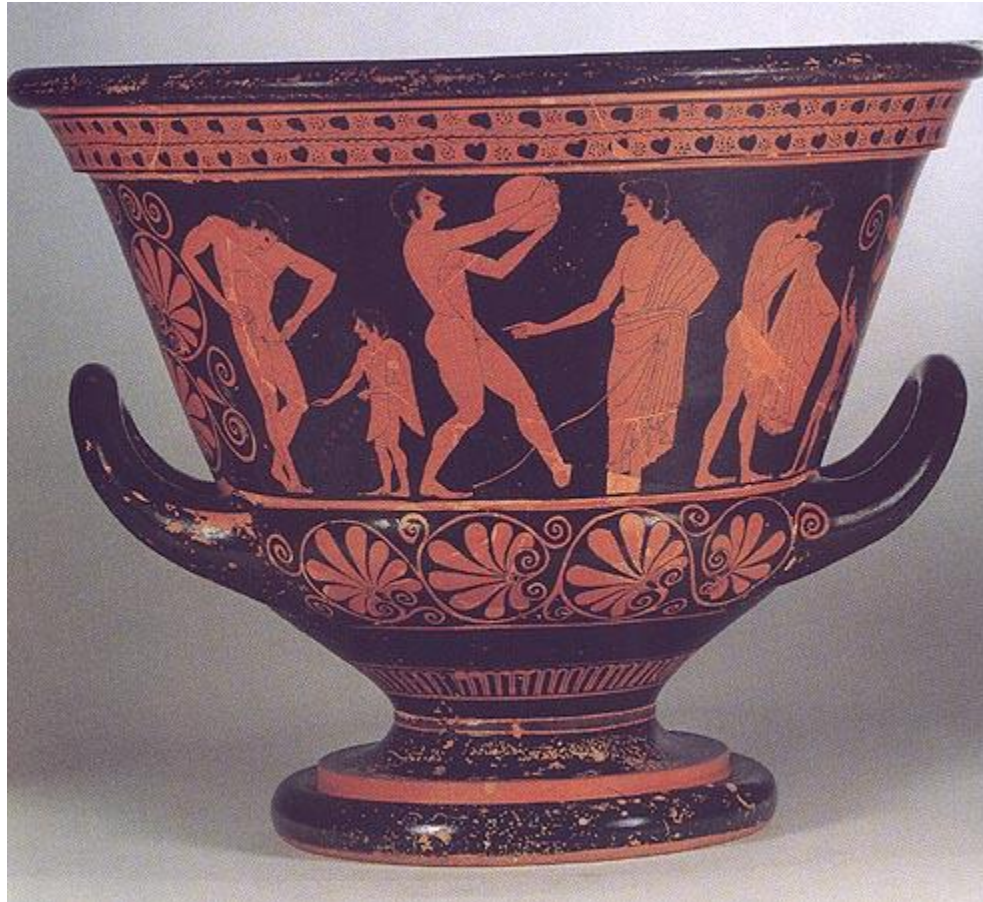
Partial View of Sanctuary Distribution



Another Node: Feasting in the Andron



Themes similar to those at funerals and sanctuaries



The Web

- Different powerful families would meet for feasting and engage in economic and political activity
- Economic: trade in wheat surplus
- Political: alliances with families in other polities to fight for factional goals in one's own polity
- Major institution: guest friendship – formal bond between families with no regard for the economic or political goals of one's own polity

Result

- Greek polities exhibited very limited political economies. They could not control the economic or political activities of their principal families.
- This left them with a weak economic and political armature to center themselves on, resulting in internally changing constitutions
- They had underdeveloped institutions of economic control, particularly, taxation

Could not absorb any conquered territories economically



Overview

- Networking by feasting with elites from other polities, coupled with the limited territorial extent of the Greek polities
- Resulted in weak internal political economies, vacillating internal constitutions, absence of developed economic and political armature to absorb conquered territories

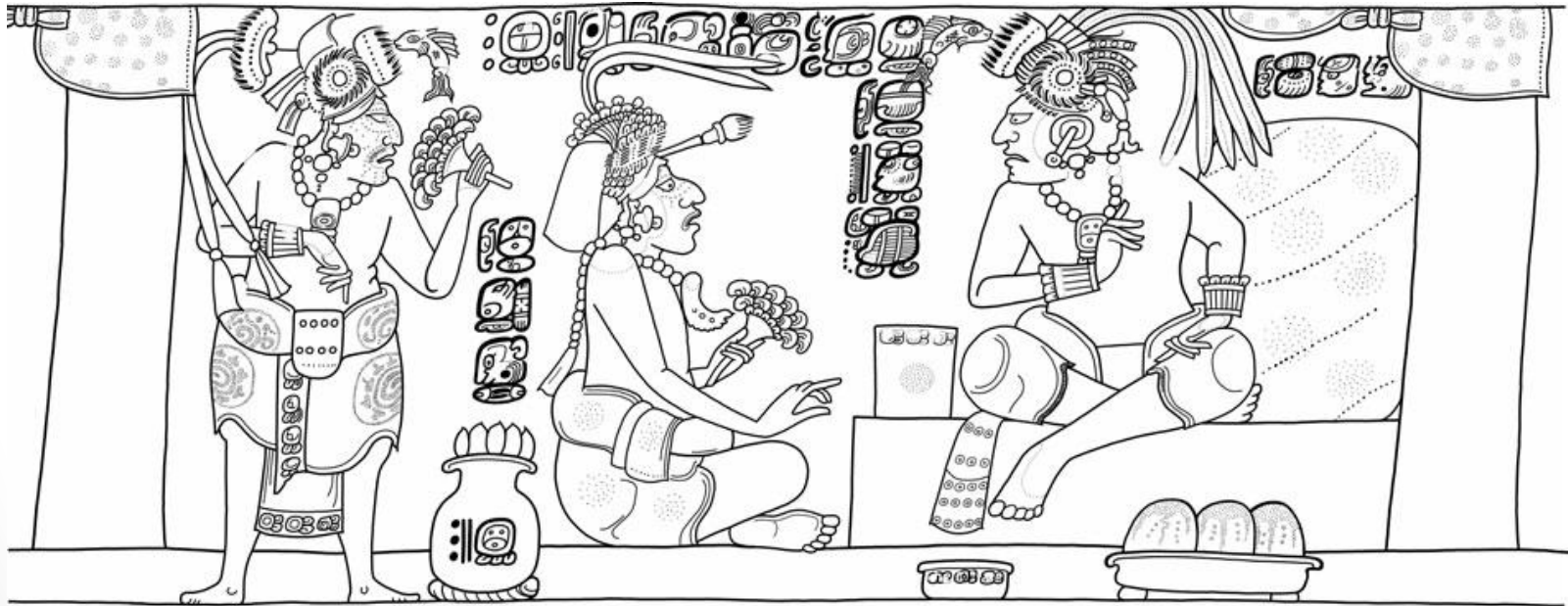
Similarities: Small polities



Similarities: Elite networks based upon economic exchange

- Elites were trading in commodities such as jade, shell, obsidian, and pyrite, prestige items, such as decorated ceramics
- Economic wealth of some elites was based on extra-political economic relationships

Similarities: Network Feasting



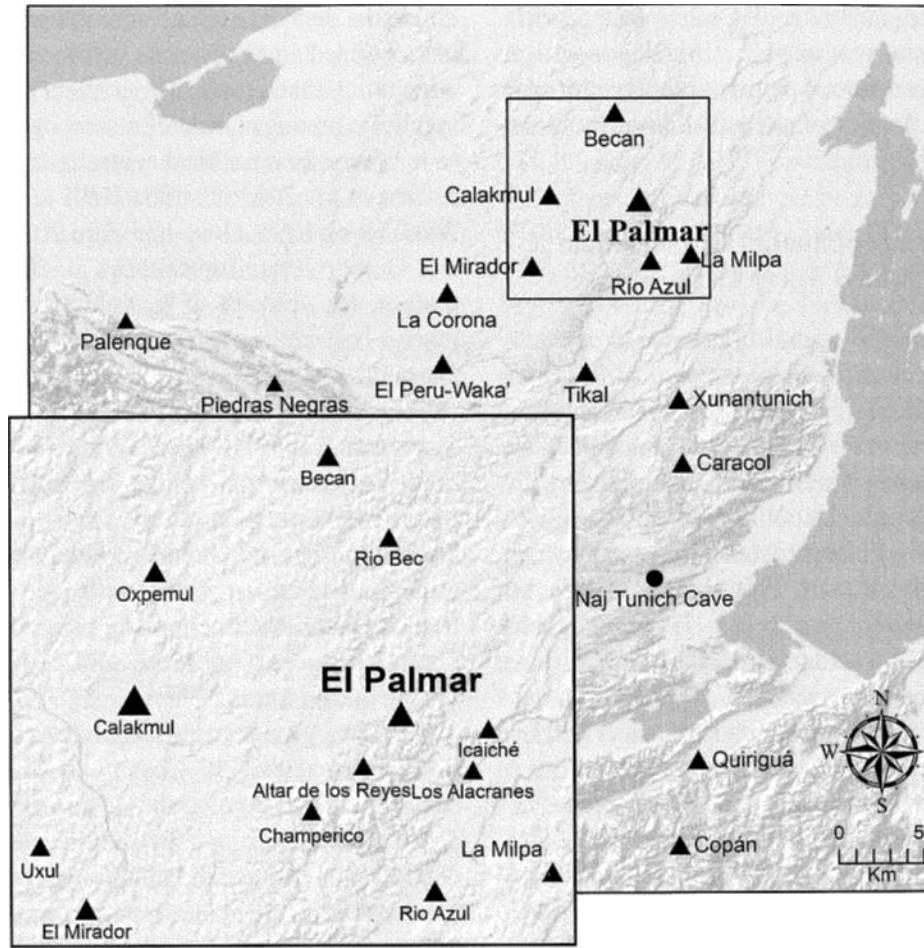
Feasting

- Diacritical
- Linking rulers with royals and subroyals at other polities
- Often seen in the gifting of certain feasting ware – concept similar to that of guest friendship for the ancient Greeks

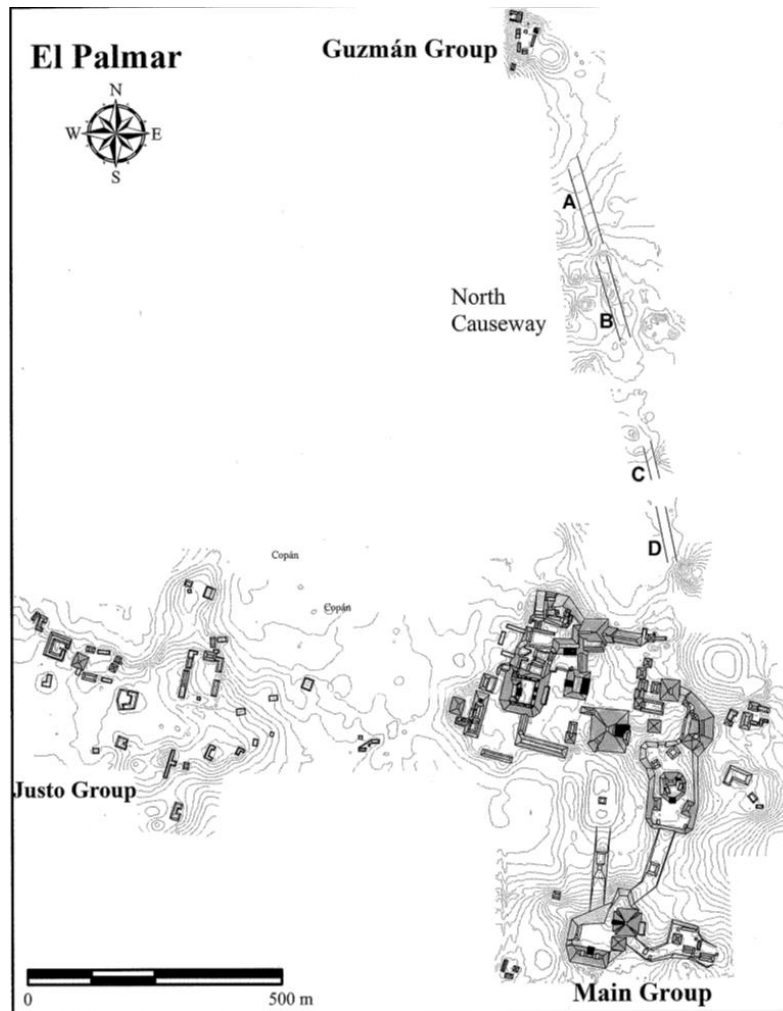
Connected Mayan elites

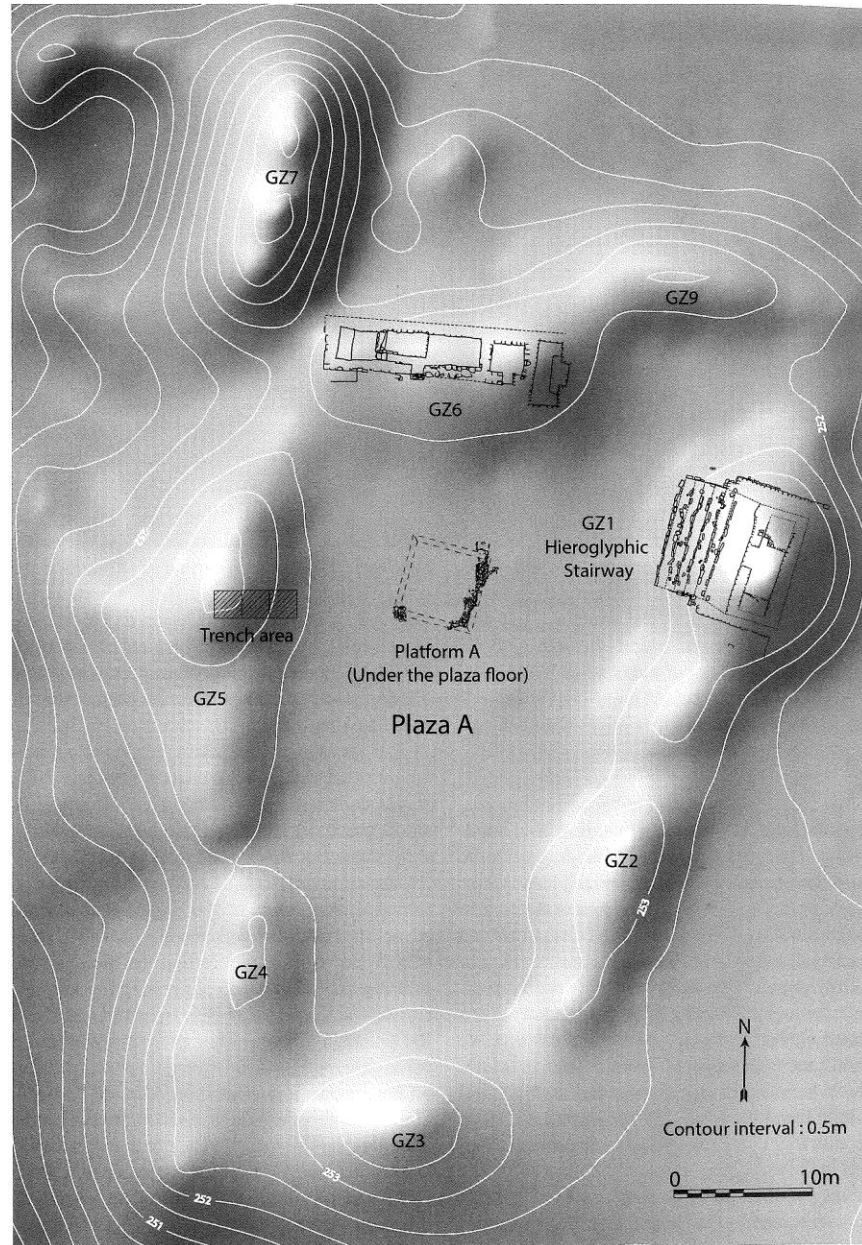


Mayan elites could also challenge the political power of the center



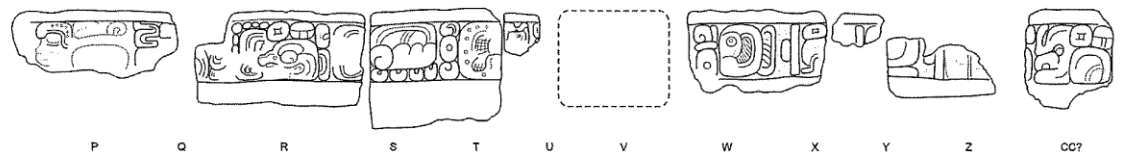
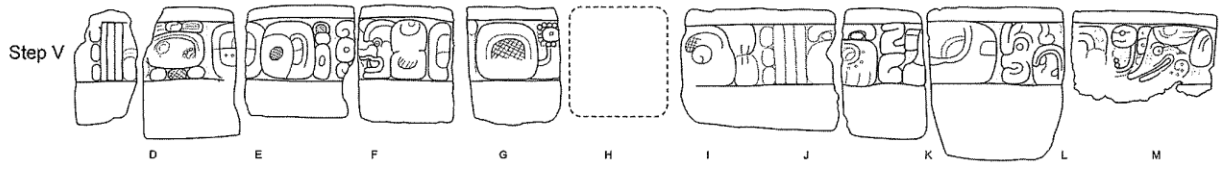
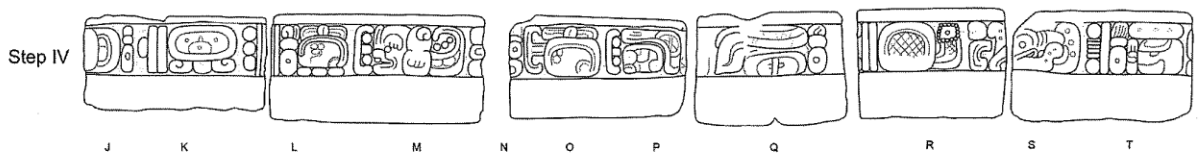
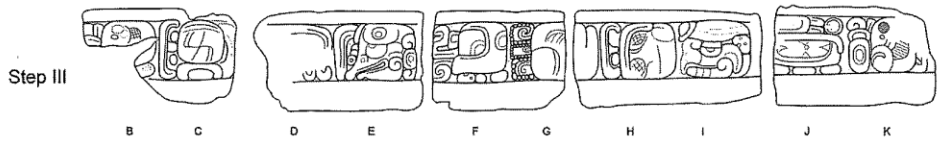
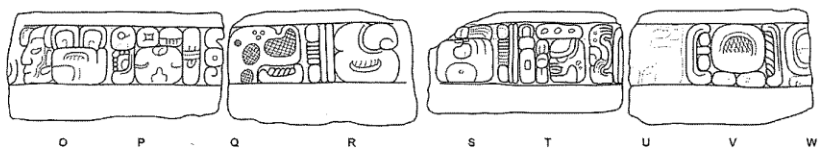
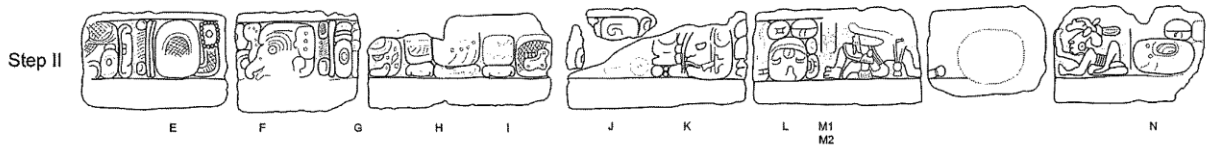
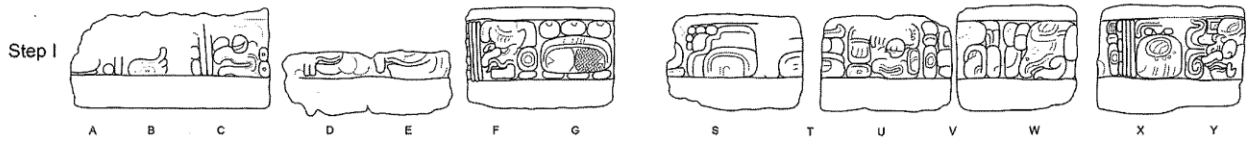
El Palmar





El Palmar: Hieroglyphic Stairway





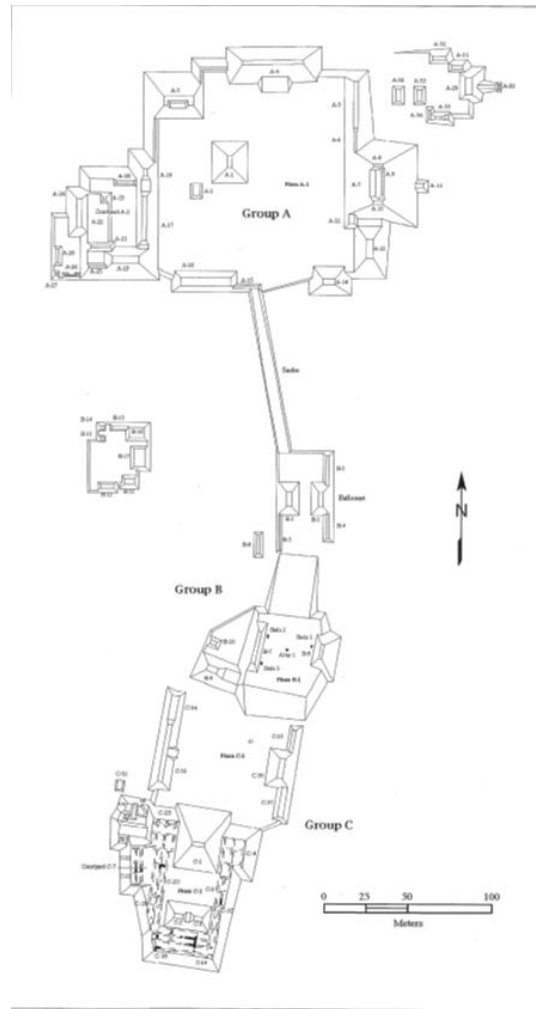
Inscription on Hieroglyphic Stairway

- Ties the ruler of the group's lineage to the ruler of Copan and that of Calakmul. It further identifies the ruler of El Palmar, but does not list the lineage head of the Guzman group as his subordinate, even though the group is tied to the Main Group by a causeway, which usually indicates that such a group is an active member of the polity.

Upshot

- Rather than seeing this feasting and gifting between royals and subroyals as witnessing the extension of the power of the rulers of one polity, I think we should see it as challenging the power of the rulers of various polities, working against the evolution of a political economy

There is a tendency for lineage independence among the Classic Maya



There are other Examples

- Las Quebradas, Guatemala – different compounds have distinctly different symbols of authority
- Las Sepulturas, Copan – sub-elites' usurpation of the “sky band” or celestial monster relief, used once only by the Copan rulers.

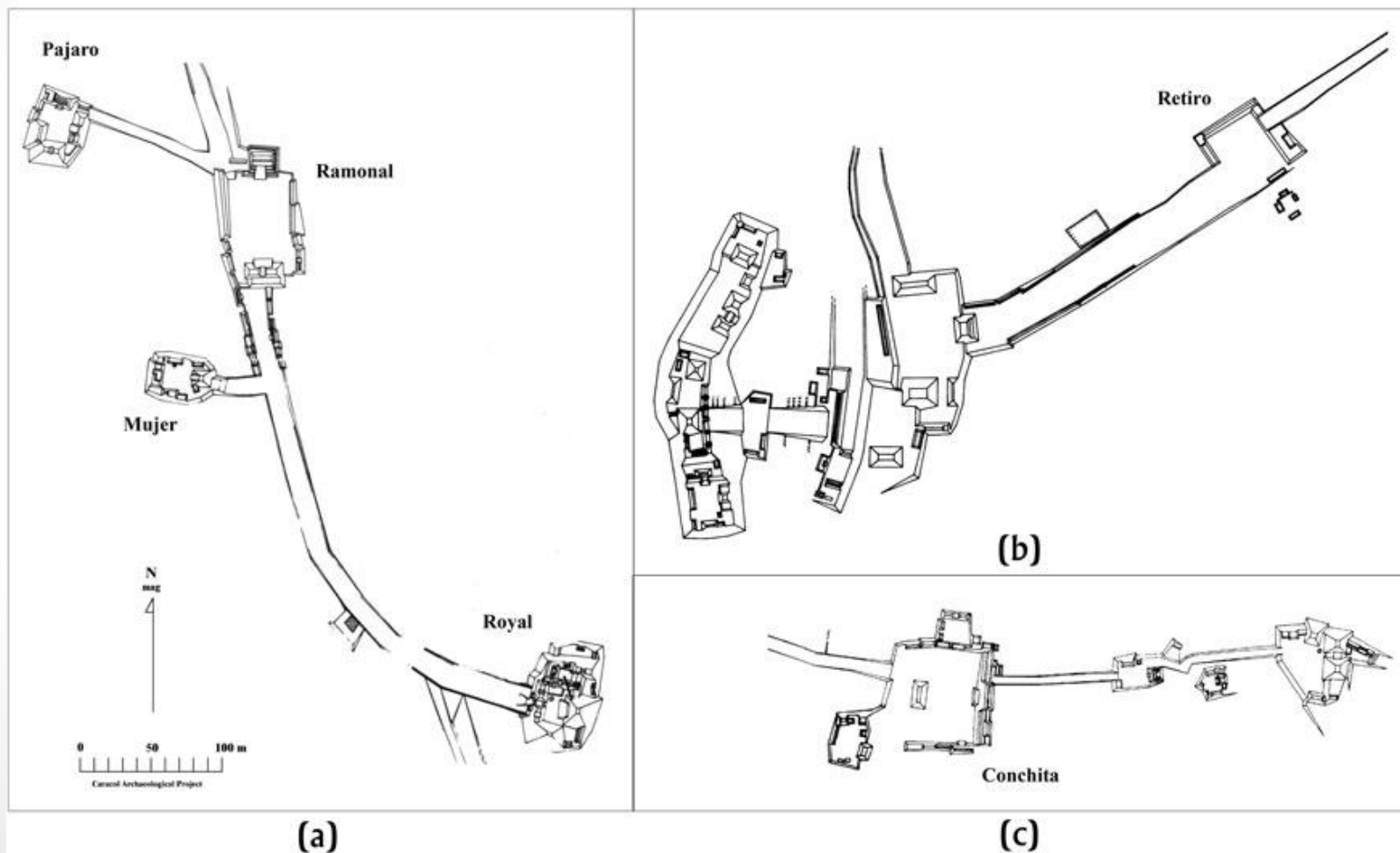
Challenge of Royal Power

- Like the Greeks, the political economy of the Mayan polity was hampered in its evolution by these extra-political elite networks
- Power of the ahau was not based on economic control, rather the power of the lord or ahau lay in his role in the larger religious context of the polity. In an important way he created power over others when he blood let, incensed/burnt, and danced.
- Many of the Mayan polities were internally unstable, with only some of the larger polities exhibiting stability.

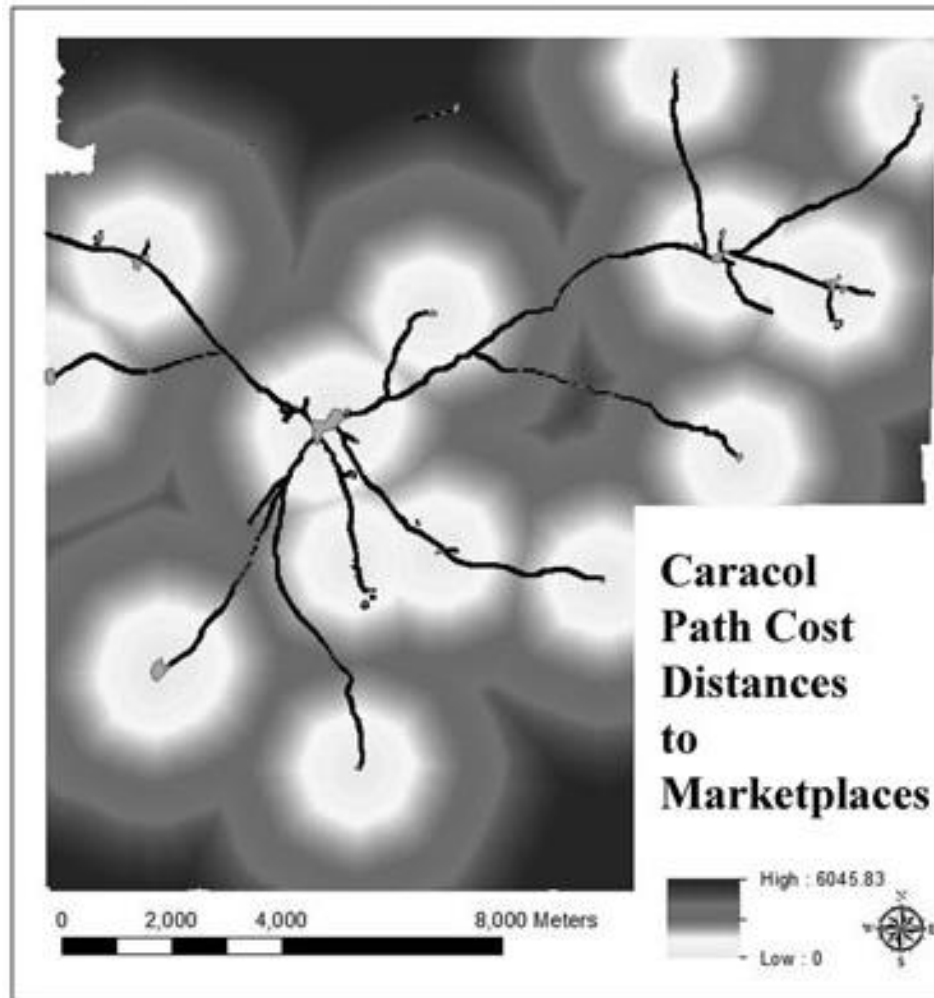
Two Observations from this Study

- First, it would be wise not to base recreations of a Mayan political economy on assumptions that it was somehow tight and centralized.
- Caracol is a case in point. The excavators point to the archaeological record which contains evidence for causeways which connect numerous architectural groups like those at El Palmar to the main group at Caracol and the presence of compounds near these groups which could have been used as markets, controlled by the royals of the main group through taxation.
- But the opposite could be just as true.

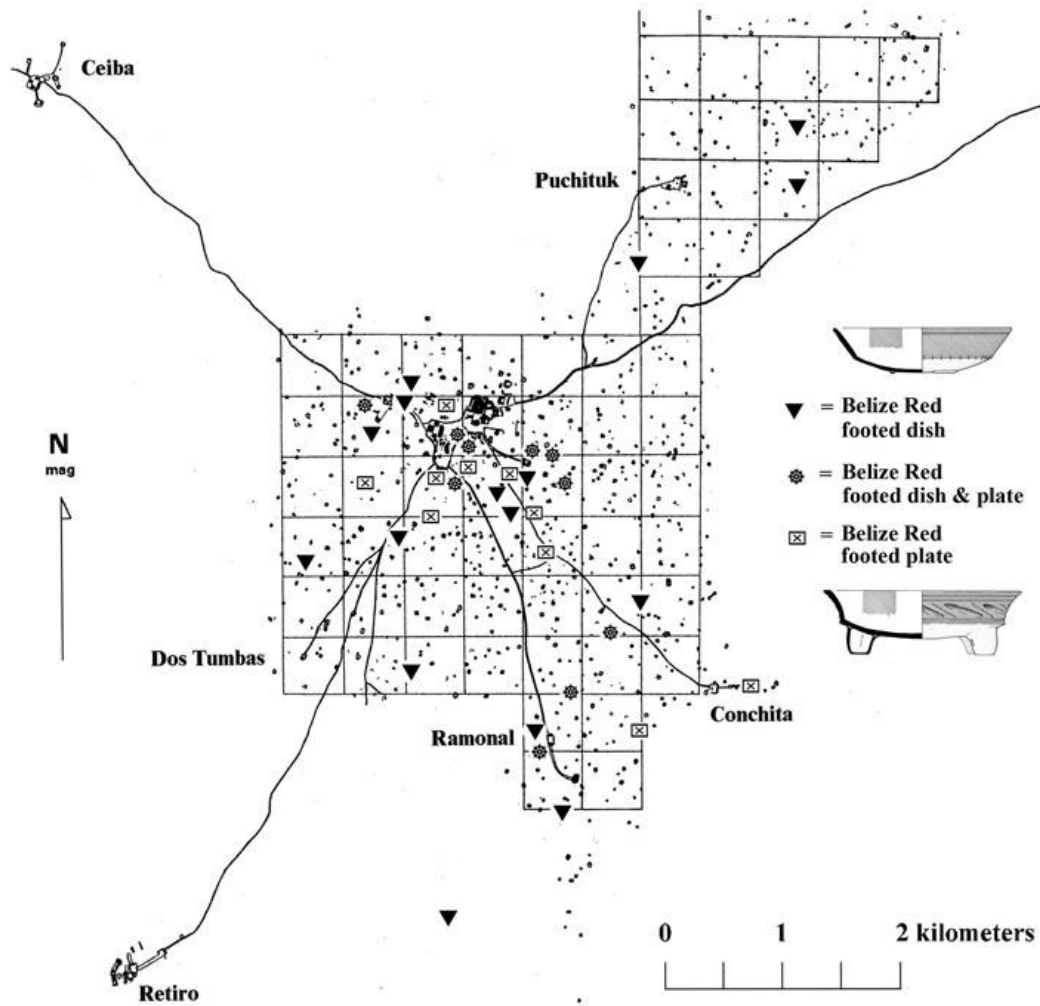
Caracol



Caracol



Caracol



Observations

- My second observation looks at the inability of the Mayan polities to integrate conquered territories. The Maya historical landscape is populated with several different instances of recorded overlord/subservient relations, as a result of defeat in battle. Yaxchilan over Machaquila in 664 and 729 CE; Piedras Negras over Pomona in 793 CE; Caracol over Ucanal in 800 CE; Caracol over Naranjo in 631 CE; and Caracol over Tikal in 562 CE.

Observations

- While these relationships of dominance and submission are recognized, the actual relationships between these polities were extremely unstable and in a state of constant change. Once a polity conquered another, it could not maintain any dominant control for any period of time. In general it seems that the unequal relationship between these polities was mainly along a political plane. There is no evidence for any of these conquering polities using any economic means to incorporate newly conquered states into a larger polity. We have mentions of tribute, but tribute is not structurally similar to an instituted tax.

In the End

- The internal weakness of the Classical period Mayan polity can be analyzed by using observations gained from the study of the ancient Greeks.
- Commonalities exhibited in the nature of small polities in both civilizations can be seen to hamper the evolution of strong political economies.
- Hopefully, this type of study can be extended to that of small polities elsewhere.