

THE MAYA IN MESOAMERICA

The Development of Ancient Maya Culture within its Broader Regional Context

ANTH 3015 (Fall 2023) Anthropology Rm 419

Wednesdays 10.15-1.15 pm

Instructor: Simon Martin, Adjunct Associate Professor of Anthropology (simonm3@upenn.edu)



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The Development of Ancient Maya Culture within its Broader Regional Context

Course Description

ANTH 3015 will offer a comprehensive introduction to Ancient Maya culture and society, reflecting the insights gained from recent research. Fusing archaeology, epigraphy (the decipherment of Maya writing), art history, and ethnohistory, with the emerging technology of LiDAR remote sensing, as well as data from speleothem and isotopic analyses, “The Maya in Mesoamerica” examines the origins, florescence, and cyclical transformations of this long-lived culture. The emphasis throughout falls on placing the Maya within the wider context of a Mesoamerican cultural zone that stretched from Mexico to Nicaragua.

There will be a methodological focus on how these different types of evidence are integrated to assemble a persuasive “portrait of the past.” One of the reasons Ancient Maya studies has become such a dynamic field in world archaeology is the decipherment of their hieroglyphic script. This has transformed the discipline into a true historical archaeology, allowing us to construct not only an academically based portrait in the present, but to access the Indigenous voice of the only ancient American people to leave us a copious body of literature. Equally, the reading of images, and their interaction with texts and artifacts, speaks to broader humanistic concerns of a Maya worldview and belief system—where our primary interest lies in gaining access to past mentalities.

Geographically, the Maya cultural area covers the greater Yucatan Peninsula, which includes southeastern Mexico, the whole of Guatemala and Belize, and the western extremities of Honduras and El Salvador. Since archaic times (before 1200 BCE) this has been occupied by speakers of the Mayan language group and is where millions of their descendants continue to live today (despite popular notions to the contrary, the Maya have never “disappeared”). The term Mesoamerica describes the greater region encompassing neighbor and sibling cultures to the west and east, so defined by a variety of shared traits arising from a long history of interaction.

In sum, ANTH 3015 is a broad-based, contemporary look at history and culture in the ancient Americas—discussing what we know but just importantly how we know it.

No prior knowledge of archaeology or art history is necessary to participate in this course.

Course Structure

The course consists of one three-hour session per week, Wednesdays from 10.15-1.15 pm, consisting of a lecture followed by group discussion in seminar-style. We will take an approximately 20-minute break around halfway.

Additionally, in Week 7 there will be a tour of the reinstalled Mexico and Central American Gallery at Penn Museum. As well discussing specific artifacts, this will introduce issues of disseminating scholarship and building accessible narratives for the wider public, in which social and academic responsibilities play a part.

Workload

All students will be required to read two or three assigned texts each week, depending on length. In the seminar portion two students each week will be assigned to make brief verbal responses on those readings, forming the basis for a roundtable discussion—with each student presenting at least twice over the length of the course. Students will be encouraged to take on supplementary recommended readings and there will be one required textbook: “The Maya” (10th edition only) by Coe and Houston (2022).

At mid-term a 5-page paper needs to be delivered and at the end of the course a 15-page paper plus a final 10-25 minute (depending on class size) presentation in class with images. It is expected that students assemble information from the class, assigned texts, and conduct their own research for mid-terms and final presentations. AI-assisted writing is not allowed.

Assessment

The final grade will be composed of these proportions:

5-page mid-term paper 15%

15-page end-of-term paper 40%

Presentation of final project 20%

Responses to assigned texts 10%

Class participation 15%

Office Hours

Slots for one-on-one, or group, office hours can be booked on Wednesday afternoons. These will be held in the Museum Café.

Provisional Schedule

Week 1 August 30	The Maya in Mesoamerica: An Introduction
Week 2 September 6	Origins of Mesoamerican Complex Society
Week 3 September 13	Urbanism and Monumental Architecture
Week 4 September 20	Maya Script: Its Origins and Cousins
Week 5 September 27	Big Time: Mesoamerican Calendars
Week 6 October 4	Guided by Gods: The Maya Cosmos
Week 7 October 11	Special: Gallery Tour (submit 5-page paper)
Week 8 October 18	The Maya and Teotihuacan
Week 9 October 25	Political Organization: The Maya Mosaic
Week 10 November 1	Economy and Subsistence
Week 11 November 8	Rulership: Ideals and Practice
Week 12 November 15	Conflict: Pragmatics and Ideology
Week 13 November 22	Transformations 1: Cycles of Decline and Renewal
Week 14 November 29	Transformations 2: Restoring a Pan-Mesoamerica
Week 15 December 6	Final Presentations (submit 15-page paper December 13)

