Baron’s interpretations are solid and compelling. Her neatly laid out arguments are based on a foundation of understanding Maya religious practices that she reasonably extends to Classic times. Political intrigue is the order of the day as the dynamics of rulership are reflected in writing, tombs, architecture, and middens.

Tatsuya Murakami (Chapter 6) reminds us that Teotihuacan is such an enormous site that archaeologists are still making discoveries about its history and reinterpreting its massive structures. Changes in various architectural complexes symbolize evolving political practices. The urban renewal manifested in the ubiquitous apartment compound reflects interactions between the city’s rulership and its citizens; however, some of the interpretations are tenuous. Excavation of more apartment compounds throughout the city will surely reveal a clearer picture of the interaction between various segments of society.

In Chapter 7, Bryce Davenport and Charles Golden tackle the material manifestation of power and authority as expressed in landscape boundaries of the Maya and Mixtec peoples. The rich historical and ethnographic records are effectively used in combination with the archaeological record to elucidate an understanding of the consistencies and contradictions within ancient polities. The boundary concept nicely connects the peripheral household and milpa to the center, and commoners to elites. This chapter was one of the most useful in the volume.

Helen Perlstein Pollard’s research on the Tarascans of Western Mexico (Chapter 8) expands the geographical and chronological coverage of the volume. Though there is evidence for human occupation that spans centuries in the Pátzcuaro Basin, the Tarascan empire was centralized only just before the area was conquered by the Spanish. The judicious use of ethnohistoric documents and archaeological evidence strengthens the interpretations of how ruling elites manipulated ethnic identity and religion as political weapons to control access to leadership and how commoners fared during the evolution of the polity.

Simon Martin (Chapter 9) concludes the volume with a thought-provoking synthesis of trends in studying ancient political systems that is one of the best summary chapters I have seen for an edited volume. Rather than simply acknowledging each contribution, he takes us on a journey that situates the authors’ contributions within the larger framework of archaeological thought on ancient politics. Martin’s critique of the usual suspects in processual and post-processual camps provides a succinct review of how archaeologists use, and have used, theory to further our understanding of cultural phenomena. This reflective chapter serves the reader well, as it goes far above and beyond the subject matter of the volume.

Political Strategies in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica is a welcome addition to the literature as it provides numerous case studies that successfully demonstrate various theoretical approaches to understanding ancient politics in Mesoamerica that ultimately rely on a robust archaeological record.


Reviewed by Brett A. Houk, Texas Tech University

In Classic Maya Polities of the Southern Lowlands: Integration, Interaction, Dissolution, Damien B. Marken and James L. Fitzsimmons bring together “a group of younger scholars” to examine the nature of Classic period Maya polities at multiple scales (p. 4). The chapters in the volume sprang from a 2009 Dumbarton Oaks roundtable and cover a variety of themes and topics. As established in the introductory chapter by Marken and Fitzsimmons, the editors situate the volume at the end of a century-old debate about “to what degree were Maya polities centralized or decentralized” (p. 3), and the authors explore themes “from internal polity identities and organization to polity boundaries and larger extrapoli networks” (p. 4).

In the first chapter, Marken and Fitzsimmons, in addition to sketching the themes of the volume, frame the debate about the nature of Maya polities. Here they outline the centralized versus decentralized debate, debate the nature of Maya polity, and introduce the subsequent chapters.

The rest of the volume is clearly organized along a spectrum from bottom-up to top-down approaches to studying various aspects of Maya polities. Serving as bookends to the two extremes of this spectrum are Brigitte Kovacevich’s examination of household craft specialization at Cancuen (Chapter 2) at one end and Sarah E. Jackson’s study of royal courts and written landscapes (Chapter 9) at the other. Following Kovacevich’s chapter is Timothy Murtha’s comparison of settlement and spatial organization at Tikal, Guatemala, and Caracol, Belize (Chapter 3); a consideration of political interaction as seen from the farming community of Chan, Belize, by Cynthia Robin and colleagues (Chapter 4); and Marken’s study of the spatial patterning of the urban core and periphery of El Perú-Waká, Guatemala (Chapter 5). These chapters proceed from a bottom-up approach with Marken’s chapter serving as a natural segue to the second half of the volume.
The latter chapters look at Maya polities from the top down, beginning with Chapter 6, Allan L. Mau’s presentation of Tomb 68-1 in the El Bosque archaeological zone of Copan, Honduras, Alexandre Tokovinine and Francisco Estrada-Belli examine La Sufricaya, Guatemala, a short-lived Early Classic site near Holmul, in Chapter 7, and describe a rare case in which it is possible to examine the same story from corresponding archaeological and textual data. Fitzsimmons proffers the idea that charismatic authority sustained the Classic Maya polity and its boundaries, turning to a case study from Zapote Bobal, Guatemala, in Chapter 8. Jackson’s attempt to understand the Maya polity from the internal structure of the royal court, as elucidated through the use and distribution of titled offices, caps the individual contributions. The final chapter by Fitzsimmons and Marken nicely summarizes the contributions of the volume and examines how they inform questions of internal polity organization and archaeological perspectives of polity.

Although the volume embraces both bottom-up and top-down approaches to studying Maya polities, there is a subtle undertone that seems to favor the former. In fact, Jackson in Chapter 9 seems both apologetic and defensive in her introduction and conclusion for employing a top-down approach.

For the most part, the individual contributions are strong; they are well presented, well argued, and well written. They also provide new insight into various aspects of Maya political and social organization and explore the question of Maya cities and settlements from multiple scales and perspectives. In other words, there is something for every Mayanist in this book. Scholars interested in household archaeology and craft specialization, settlement patterning, and how agrarian communities related to larger political institutions will find plenty to consider in the Chapters 2 through 5. Those interested in the relationship between site plans and politics, concepts of urbanism, political history, epigraphy, and royal courts will likely find Chapters 5 through 9 to be most useful.

The volume, however, is not without its weaknesses. Edited volumes are their own form of agony, as it is often difficult for the editors to achieve a coherent focus and avoid assembling a group of loosely related chapters. Classic Maya Polities of the Southern Lowland wrestles with this challenge. Several structural problems set the stage for this situation—the introduction does not include an overall map showing how the various sites discussed are distributed across the southern lowlands, which would have been an easy way to situate them together for the reader, and the volume lacks an integrated bibliography, which contributes to the impression that each chapter is meant to stand alone rather than contribute to a unified effort—but the chosen context seems to present the biggest challenge to the volume and its authors. As Marken and Fitzsimmons note in Chapter 1, there are many problems with the decentralized-centralized debate and numerous studies show that both hierarchical and heterarchical forms of integration and organization operated independently and concurrently in Classic Maya polities. Most of the authors of the individual chapters attempt to embrace to various degrees the centralized versus decentralized debate. Robin and colleagues present the best treatment of the issue in the introduction to Chapter 4—in many ways this section would have made a stronger introduction to the debate than the one in Chapter 1—ultimately concluding, and representing the bottom-up perspective, that “what is missing in both political models is the roles of commoner households and local communities and their relations with larger political institutions” (p. 102). At the top-down end of the spectrum, Jackson concludes, “Ultimately, the centralized/decentralized dichotomy is not terribly compelling or, for that matter, revealing” (p. 259). I think all the authors agree with this statement but are left trying to situate their studies within a debate that has evolved beyond the original dichotomy in the past few decades.

Despite these criticisms, the volume is an important contribution that addresses two currently popular topics in Maya archaeology: cities/urbanism and household archaeology. Its multi-scalar studies and diverse range of topics will have broad appeal to Mayanists in particular and scholars of ancient cities in general.


Reviewed by Manuel A. Hermann Lejarazu, Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, Mexico, D.F.

A very important group of indigenous pictorial manuscripts comes from a vast territory of broad mountain ranges and small valleys that stretch across the Mixteca Alta in the northern part of the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. This area is the Coixtlahuaca Valley, inhabited by speakers of the Chuchona or Chocholtec language, among others indigenous groups. The pictorial corpus from this region is formed by 14 manuscripts elaborated in several materials and styles, most of them on large sheets of cotton or canvas. One of them, the Lienzo of Tlapiltepec, is the theme of this book.