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The Maya Then and Now: Archaeology and Living Heritage

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Introduction

The Maya world is not only a constellation of celebrated ruins and hieroglyphic texts; it is also a network of living communities whose languages, rituals, and responsibilities to place endure. This book begins from that simple but often overlooked truth. The temples, plazas, and household mounds that attract scholarly and public attention today are embedded in ancestral landscapes where contemporary Maya people cultivate fields, hold ceremonies, and pass on knowledge. Archaeology, when practiced as a respectful partnership, can help illuminate deep histories while strengthening living heritage.

For much of its history, archaeology in the Maya region mirrored global patterns of extractive research: artifacts were removed, decisions were made far from the communities most affected, and publications circulated in languages inaccessible to many stakeholders. Over the past several decades, however, a different practice has emerged—one that centers collaboration, consent, and accountability. This volume documents that shift. It argues that ethical stewardship is not a technical add-on but the core of good science: robust interpretations follow from relationships of trust, reciprocity, and transparency.

Our approach is pragmatic and grounded. We describe concrete tools for collaborative research design, from Free, Prior, and Informed Consent to community review boards and co-authorship agreements. We examine participatory mapping of sacred and everyday places, protocols for handling culturally sensitive materials, and strategies for ensuring that training, employment, and credit flow to local partners. These chapters offer checklists, example memoranda of understanding, and step-by-step workflows developed in field labs, museums, and community cultural centers across the Maya lands.

Stewardship also requires attentive site management. Conservation plans succeed when they braid archaeological techniques with local knowledge—about seasonal cycles, materials sourcing, and ritual obligations to particular spaces. We explore maintenance as a year-round practice, the role of guardians and site stewards, and the expanding challenges posed by climate change, from intense rainfall to heat stress and biological growth. Throughout, we foreground low-cost, locally adaptable solutions that honor places as living landscapes rather than static monuments.

Repatriation is another pillar of ethical practice. We consider pathways for the return of objects, archives, and ancestral remains, as well as community-driven models for curation, traveling exhibitions, and digital repatriation. The volume discusses Indigenous data sovereignty, proposing guidelines for managing images, 3D models,

and excavation records so that communities retain control over how their heritage circulates. Equally important is interpretation: multilingual signage, co-created narratives, and inclusive programming can transform how visitors and residents experience archaeological sites.

Heritage tourism brings both opportunities and risks. Done well, it can support community economies, fund conservation, and amplify local voices; done poorly, it displaces people, commodifies sacred places, and concentrates profits elsewhere. We present models for visitor management, benefit-sharing, and participatory monitoring that keep cultural values at the center. Metrics matter: we offer ways to evaluate social as well as financial outcomes, and to pivot when initiatives are not meeting community goals.

The organization of the book reflects these commitments. Early chapters set a historical and theoretical foundation, tracing how research traditions evolved and why shared stewardship matters. The middle chapters provide field-tested methods for collaboration, conservation, repatriation, and interpretation, supplemented by detailed case studies from the lowlands, highlands, and southeast periphery. Later chapters turn to governance, funding, and accountability, culminating in a practical roadmap for scholars, heritage professionals, and community leaders. Our aim is not to present a single template but to offer adaptable practices shaped by local priorities.

Ultimately, *The Maya Then and Now* invites readers to see archaeology as a collective endeavor that extends beyond the excavation trench and the museum gallery. When researchers, government agencies, and Maya communities work together, the result is more than knowledge—it is care for places and people across generations. We hope the pages that follow serve as both reflection and toolkit, contributing to futures in which the past is honored, responsibilities are shared, and heritage remains vibrantly alive.

CHAPTER ONE: Landscapes of Continuity: The Maya Past in the Present

The first thing to understand about the Maya past is that it has never been past. It is a living geography, a network of places where the present unfolds alongside the echo of earlier lives. When you stand on a limestone terrace at Tikal, you smell the same resins, hear the same cicadas, and feel the same afternoon heat that shaped daily routines a thousand years ago. The temples are remarkable, but so are the trees that root between the stones and the birds that nest in their crevices. This continuity is not a metaphor; it is a material condition of the landscape itself.

The second thing to understand is that “the Maya” refers to a set of languages, histories, and communities with deep regional diversity, not a single people frozen in time. More than seven million Maya speakers live today across Guatemala, Mexico, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. They speak distinct languages—Yucatec, K’iche’, Q’anjob’al, Itza’, Mam, Kaqchikel, Q’eqchi’, Tojolabal, and many others—and maintain place-based traditions that are both ancient and innovatively modern. Ruins, fields, and forests are part of their everyday worlds, alongside cell phones, buses, and global markets.

Archaeology in this region has often been taught as a sequence of dynasties, dates, and decorative styles: Preclassic, Classic, Postclassic, and Colonial eras defined by shifts in settlement and political organization. These frameworks are useful for understanding changes in architecture and material culture, but they can obscure the social and ecological continuities that sustain communities today. A household mound is not simply a diagnostic feature of a time period; it is a place where meals were cooked, children were raised, and ancestors were honored, and often it continues to be a place where similar activities occur.

One way to grasp this continuity is to consider the everyday paths that connect ruins and villages. At Palenque, for instance, the modern town of Santo Domingo sits just beyond the ancient city’s periphery. Residents walk along the same causeways that once linked plazas and patios, market days draw vendors into courtyards once used for household activities, and ritual specialists still enter the forest to conduct ceremonies near ancestral springs. The archaeological site, official boundaries and all, is integrated into the local lifeworld rather than isolated behind a conceptual wall.

In the Petén lowlands, community members navigate forests using place names recorded in colonial documents and remembered in contemporary speech. These toponyms often correspond to ancient settlements and water sources, mapping a

living geography that researchers can learn only by listening. When local guides point to “X” as a noble’s residence or “Y” as a ceremonial center, they are invoking historical knowledge that may not appear in excavation reports. This knowledge is not folklore; it is a cartography of memory, experience, and responsibility to place.

In the Yucatán, the relationship between surface and subsurface is particularly intimate. Cenotes, or natural sinkholes, are both hydrological features and sacred portals. Archaeologists map them for data on ancient settlement and access to water, while Maya communities treat them as living entities with ritual obligations. The same object—a ceramic vessel, for example—can be understood simultaneously as an artifact for typological analysis, as a material witness to ancestral practice, and as a relational being that requires respectful handling. This multiplicity is not a contradiction; it is an ethical starting point.

Maya agricultural practices illustrate the ongoing dialogue between landscape and livelihood. Milpa systems—the rotational cultivation of maize, beans, squash, and other crops—are often portrayed as pre-modern techniques, yet they remain sophisticated ecological strategies. Farmers read soil colors, plant communities, and microclimates, adjusting cycles to seasonal variation. Archaeologists who study ancient field systems benefit from this expertise, which can inform interpretations of past land use and help design conservation strategies that are practical, low-cost, and culturally appropriate.

The built environment also tells a story of continuity. At Copán, households perched on terraces above the river have long histories of construction and adaptation. Contemporary residents repair walls, regrade patios, and add new rooms, just as their ancestors did. For archaeologists, this presents both an opportunity and a challenge: how to document and interpret long-term occupation without assuming that modern activity is a disturbance to a static past. It is a living stratigraphy, where layers of experience accumulate and interact across time.

In the Belize River Valley, small towns and farmsteads are interwoven with ancient settlement patterns. Community members often know where ancestors built homes and where certain families have lived for generations. This continuity informs local identity, stories, and land tenure. It also shapes research priorities: when residents ask about the origins of a particular mound or the history of a place name, they are not seeking an abstract chronology; they are asking for a narrative that connects their present to those who walked the land before them.

Highland communities in Chiapas and Guatemala have distinct histories of resilience and adaptation, shaped by volcanic geology, terraced slopes, and vibrant markets. Textiles, language, and ritual calendars carry deep historical threads, and archaeological sites are often integrated into daily routines. A traveler might pass a shrine on the way to a milpa, hear a prayer offered at a spring, or attend a festival

that references ancestral guardians of place. In these settings, archaeology is not about discovering something new; it is about documenting relationships that have persisted through change.

At Uxmal and other Puuc sites, architecture and symbolism can appear so distinctive that they encourage a sense of cultural rupture. Yet these places were embedded in regional exchange networks and local lifeways that extended beyond the plastered facades. Contemporary Yucatec communities maintain ties to such landscapes through language, craft, and ritual. The relationship is not simply aesthetic or historical; it is practical and ethical, involving responsibilities to maintain, honor, and share the stories of places that remain active in community life.

On the Caribbean coast, sites like Lamanai and Cerros are framed by wetlands, lagoons, and mangrove forests. Local economies depend on fishing, small-scale agriculture, and tourism. Archaeological work here intersects with environmental management, as conservation of heritage places is inseparable from the health of estuarine ecosystems. Community knowledge about seasonal fish migrations, storm surges, and plant communities can guide site maintenance and interpretive planning, illustrating again how stewardship bridges cultural and ecological dimensions.

The relationships between Maya communities and archaeological sites are shaped by legal frameworks and property regimes. Some places are within national parks or protected areas; others lie on private farmland, communal ejidos, or indigenous territories. Access, use, and decision-making rights vary widely, and archaeologists must understand local governance structures before planning research. Ignoring these frameworks is not merely a bureaucratic oversight; it risks undermining trust and replicating extractive patterns that earlier generations of scholars normalized.

Language is a fundamental medium for continuity. Maya languages encode place-based knowledge, historical memory, and cosmological concepts that are essential for interpreting archaeological data. When researchers rely solely on Spanish or English, they miss nuances embedded in toponyms, kinship terms, and ritual expressions. Working with translators and community linguists is not a courtesy; it is a methodological necessity that can reshape research questions, refine site interpretations, and prevent misreadings of the material record.

Continuity also appears in everyday material culture. Pottery forms, weaving patterns, and cooking techniques have long genealogies, even as they adapt to new tools and markets. Archaeologists who study ancient ceramics can learn from contemporary potters about temper selection, firing techniques, and the social contexts of production. These exchanges are not simply about reconstructing the past; they create opportunities for skill transmission, youth engagement, and the recognition of local expertise as a valid form of knowledge.

Ritual practice is another axis of continuity. Many communities maintain shrines, altars, and sacred trees near archaeological features. Ceremonies often mark agricultural cycles, rites of passage, or community well-being. For archaeologists, these practices are not obstacles to fieldwork; they are living data about how people relate to place. They also require protocols for access and consultation, since ritual spaces are governed by responsibilities that may not align with research schedules or interpretive goals.

Climate change introduces a new layer to continuity. Rising temperatures, shifting rainfall patterns, and more intense storms affect both living communities and ancient structures. Water management—critical in the Classic period—remains essential today, and communities are adapting with updated techniques informed by long-standing practices. Archaeologists studying ancient reservoirs or field systems can contribute to resilience planning, while learning from local strategies for drought adaptation, shade management, and soil conservation.

Economic transformations also shape continuity. Tourism generates income but can reorganize community priorities, labor, and land use. Heritage economies create new roles—guides, artisans, site stewards—that draw on historical knowledge while responding to global markets. Researchers must account for these dynamics when designing projects, ensuring that benefits are distributed equitably and that local voices guide decisions about interpretation, access, and revenue. Otherwise, the past becomes a product rather than a shared responsibility.

The social fabric of continuity is woven through intergenerational relationships. Elders carry knowledge about place names, seasonal cycles, and ritual obligations; youth bring skills in technology, communication, and new forms of organizing. When these generations collaborate, archaeological work becomes part of everyday learning rather than a specialized activity. This is especially true in community workshops, school programs, and local heritage committees, where research is linked to education and cultural transmission.

Practical logistics illustrate how continuity shapes fieldwork. Transporting gear to a site may involve negotiating access with multiple landowners or community authorities. Tents and tools are stored in local buildings rather than remote warehouses. Camp setups respect nearby homes, fields, and shrines, and schedules accommodate market days or planting seasons. These details are not peripheral; they reflect the embedded nature of archaeology within ongoing community life and underscore the need for careful relationship building before any excavation begins.

Where sites are co-managed with government agencies, continuity becomes a matter of formal collaboration. Community members serve as site guardians, participate in stabilization projects, and help interpret heritage for visitors. These roles recognize

local stewardship and provide employment, but they also create responsibilities for training, safety, and long-term maintenance. Successful programs balance archaeological standards with local priorities, building flexible frameworks that can respond to changing conditions and opportunities.

Continuity is evident in the way places hold multiple meanings. A ceremonial plaza can be a performance space, a market area, and a classroom. A cave can be a source of water, a ritual portal, and an archaeological deposit. Researchers who acknowledge this multiplicity avoid reducing complex places to single functions. Instead, they seek layered interpretations that respect the rights and responsibilities of those who use these spaces today, while still answering scientific questions about the past.

There is also continuity in the stories people tell about the past. Histories of migration, resilience, and adaptation are not confined to academic volumes; they circulate in family narratives, songs, and local teaching. These stories can align with archaeological findings or challenge them, prompting dialogue about evidence and interpretation. When researchers approach such narratives as complementary sources of knowledge, they build a richer, more inclusive understanding of how the past is remembered and lived.

Consider the role of trees and plant communities. At many sites, ceiba, ramón, and sapodilla grow among ruins, providing shade, fruit, and habitat. Local knowledge about these species informs conservation choices—where to clear vegetation to prevent structural damage, where to maintain growth to stabilize soils, and how to use native plants in site restoration. Archaeologists who document ancient land use can benefit from this knowledge, bridging ecological and cultural perspectives on long-term landscape change.

Water, as ever, is central. Ancient Maya cities invested heavily in reservoirs, canals, and catchment systems. Today, communities manage wells, cisterns, and seasonal flows with careful attention to rainfall and drought. Observing how local households collect, store, and share water can illuminate past strategies, while contemporary challenges—like water scarcity in the dry season—frame the urgency of integrating heritage management with resource planning. The continuity is practical and deeply rooted in daily survival.

Even the smallest artifacts can carry continuity. A bead, a shard of pottery, or a flaked tool may be found during farming or construction. In many communities, such finds are reported to local authorities or researchers, but they may also be kept, reburied, or integrated into household shrines. Understanding these responses requires respect for the meanings attached to objects, not just the data they provide. How an object is handled matters as much as how it is analyzed.

The continuity of the Maya past in the present is also visible in health and lifeways.

Archaeological studies of diet, disease, and labor leave traces in bones and teeth. Contemporary health issues—like nutrition and access to healthcare—are shaped by social and economic factors, yet they sometimes echo ancient patterns of regional adaptation. Researchers can partner with local health workers and educators to connect past lifeways to present well-being, avoiding simplistic narratives and focusing on actionable insights.

Humor and everyday banter can be part of continuity, too. Site stewards and guardians often share stories about tourists' missteps or the antics of monkeys at the ruins. These moments matter. They remind researchers that archaeological places are part of a lively social world, not quiet backdrops for study. They also help build trust, as laughter and shared experience cut across professional boundaries and create a sense of collaboration that goes beyond formal agreements.

Continuity carries responsibilities. When archaeologists work on land that families have farmed for generations, they must recognize that research has impacts on livelihoods, access, and memory. This means paying fair wages, sharing results in accessible formats, and ensuring that the benefits of knowledge production are not confined to academic circles. It also means accepting that some research questions may need to be redesigned or postponed if they conflict with community priorities or seasonal rhythms.

Ultimately, continuity challenges the idea of archaeology as a field focused solely on the distant past. It shows that the past is a living presence, embedded in language, landscape, and daily practice. It invites researchers to see themselves as participants in a long conversation rather than as detached observers. And it sets the stage for the collaborative work described in later chapters, where the tools of archaeology are braided with local knowledge to build practices of stewardship that are ethical, effective, and enduring.

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