

The Editorial

Maxime Lamoureux-St-Hilaire

Mount Royal University; AFAR

maxlamsh@gmail.com

Ramón Folch González

Arizona State University

and

C. Mathew Saunders

Davidson Day School; AFAR

This ninth issue of *The Mayanist* is the first to be entirely dedicated to a specific area of the Maya World, namely the Comitán region. The Comitán region occupies the south-central section of Chiapas and is characterized by both mountainous and lacustrine landscapes—featuring some of the most impressive Mesoamerican lakes. As reflected in this issue, the cultural bounds of this region, forever altered by European colonizers and modern nation-building practices, can actually be pushed into the northern Guatemalan Department of Huehuetenango.

It is a privilege to feature research on a relatively understudied Maya region—a mission which will be extended to the next two issues of *The Mayanist*, which will respectively be centered on the southern Guatemalan highlands and the western Maya Mountains, around the Dolores municipality in Southeastern Petén. Whereas the topics for these next two issues have been defined, we are open to proposal by prospective guest editors; please simply send your special issue idea, or any questions, to the editor-in-chief (email address above).

Issue 9 of *The Mayanist* is guest edited by Ramón Folch González, takes an interdisciplinary look at the material culture and languages of the Comitán region, and contains four research articles. The first two articles, by Angel Sánchez Gamboa, Ramón Folch González, and Martha Cuevas García, and Caitlin Earley and Ulrich Wölfel, study the impressive ceramic urn traditions which have traditionally been associated with the Comitán area and, more specifically, the Classic Maya site of Chinkultic. The following two articles, by Fernando Guerrero Martínez and Cristóbal Pérez Tadeo, and Mary Jill Brody, adopt distinct linguistic lenses to study key toponyms of south-central Chiapas and aspects of the modern transformations of spoken Tojol-ab'al.

We are delighted to feature, for the first time, artwork by the talented artist Lucerito Ochoa

Say. Lucerito, who hails from the municipality of La Esperanza (Quetzaltenango Department, Guatemala), brings back watercolors to our pages, using her distinct and colorful style to create wonderful original artwork for our authors.

As always, our layout maestro Joel Skidmore was instrumental in assembling this issue. Once again, our team features four dedicated copy-editors from Mount Royal University: Kento Ammond, Morea Carle, Robin Gimon Serrano, and Tobias Nakamura. Below, the issue's guest editor, Ramón Folch González, further introduces the Comitán Region and the four research articles.

From Our Guest Editor

The 21st century is finally catching up with The Comitán Valley. This issue of *The Mayanist* will introduce the reader to different approaches to the cultures of the Comitán Valley: a large plateau linking the Highlands of Chiapas and the Cuchumatanes mountains of Highland Guatemala. Important bodies of water exist in the area, particularly the Montebello Lakes, but it is also important to point out that both the Grijalva and Usumacinta River basins originate here. The abundance of water and good soils likely played a key role in the development of human societies in the area, especially regarding its much later “classic collapse”, which occurred centuries later than in other Maya regions. This area hosts unique expressions of Maya art and culture that have not yet been fully recognized in the canon of Maya research. When I was offered the opportunity to be a guest editor for an issue of *The Mayanist* I did not hesitate to suggest this place, which had only been minimally investigated in recent decades. Shockingly, the last relevant publication dedicated to the area, *Comitán: Una Puerta al Sur* (2nd Ed., published by the state of Chiapas), dates to 1999. For the last 24 years, only a few isolated articles, book chapters, and dissertations were published on the area. Thankfully, this year broke the spell twice with this issue and Caitlin Earley's *The Comitán Valley: Sculpture and identity on the Maya Frontier* (2023, University of Texas Press).

Beyond publications, a new and exciting wave of research is happening in the Comitán Valley, led by a generation of scholars pioneered by Earley and followed by Ulrich Wölfel, Elizabeth Paris, Fernando Guerrero Martinez, Angel Sanchez Gamboa, and myself. It is important to mention Paris's project (co-directed by Gabriel Laló Jacinto and Roberto López Bravo) because it includes students from the Universidad de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas and the University of Calgary, who are being trained in the field at Teman Puente and could soon become the new specialists. This issue also features seasoned authors who carried out research in the 1970s and 1980s, like Mary Jill Brody and Martha Cuevas. While not every relevant author was available to be included in this issue, our goal was to present work by scholars of different backgrounds (Mexico, Canada, USA, Germany) and disciplines (archaeology, art history, linguistics, ethnography, and museum studies) to introduce the reader to this fascinating place and hopefully spark their curiosity.

Many linguistic groups overlap in this region, mainly the Tojol-ab'al, Tzeltal, and Chuj Maya—something that has long puzzled historians and anthropologists trying to understand which groups inhabited it between the 16th and 19th centuries. Similar complications occur archaeologically. For example, unlike for many Maya sites, the abandonment process for Chinkultic remains unclear: writing is interrupted in 844 A.D., yet the site is inhabited well into the 13th or 14th centuries. The Spanish left almost no written records for most of the 16th century, while 19th century nation-building relegated this area to archival obscurity. The modern international border also severely impacted our understanding of cultures split by these arbitrary lines. The harm goes beyond academic problems, and deeper knowledge of cultures along the frontier will someday contribute to better informed actions to reduce harm done to cultures, heritage, and the environment.

This issue's four contributions touch on both the Pre-Hispanic and contemporary Maya. The first paper, entitled *The Chinkultic Effigy-Urns Complex and How They Made their Way to our Museums*, is an effort by Angel Sánchez Gamboa, myself, and Martha Cuevas García to document and characterize the unique Late Classic effigy-urns found in the Chinkultic and the Montebello Lakes regions. The context of the urns was previously unknown, but newly located documents show how chaotic were the early days of institutionalized cultural management. Documents reveal how some of the urns were found, allowing for more informed interpretations, from the fire cult to the Jaguar God of the Underworld, and touching upon relations with other Maya regions.

This includes the neighboring Chaculá region, in Huehuetenango, Guatemala, which is the topic of the second paper, entitled *Old Collections and New Insights: Recent Research in the Comitán Valley and the Chaculá Region*. Its authors, Caitlin Earley and Ulrich Wölfel, introduce us to the Kanter collection through archival data and five years field research carried by Wölfel's project. The Chaculá region is immediately south of Montebello and shares many similarities with the Comitán Valley. Uniquely detailed information of Chaculá cave archaeology remains important for ceremonies by Chuj Maya people.

Important information can be gained about the Chuj people through the ethnohistoric study of their cultural geography—the topic of Fernando Guerrero Martínez and Cristóbal Pérez Tadeo's paper, entitled *Acercamiento a Algunos Topónimos de la Región de Comitán y los Lagos de Montebello, Chiapas*. This important etymological study of placenames from around the Lakes of Montebello shows the influence of Chuj, Tojol-ab'al, and Tzeltal Mayan languages spoken by those who have inhabited the area for centuries. This paper represents a first step in a more ambitious project to intensively analyze placenames and their significance. Placenames also inform us of crafts and activities that were carried out in certain places, providing us with alternative ways to overcome our common lack of historical documents.

Finally, the modern Tojol-ab'al language is studied in Mary Jill Brody's article entitled *Language Ideologies and Choices: Tojol-ab'al and Spanish in Las Margaritas, Chiapas, Mexico*. The author, who has recorded changes in the way the language has been spoken for almost 50 years, presents how Tojol-ab'al speakers deal with contradicting ideas and realities when speaking their language. This is particularly interesting for a group whose identity relies heavily on a language which name can be translated as "the one true language".

I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to work on this issue and to have to opportunity to share a little bit of the Comitán Valley with a broader audience. I hope that you can experience some of the amazement I continue to feel about this corner of the world.