

The Editorial

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We are delighted to bring you the first issue of *The Mayanist*. Number 1 of Volume 1 contains four articles by authors who were also presenters at the 9th annual Maya at the Lago Conference, which was dedicated to the study of Northern Yucatán. *The Mayanist* seeks to somewhat shift the paradigm of academic journals. The landscape of academic archaeology is populated by excellent peer-reviewed journals. There are also many productive conferences and regional meetings dedicated to the archaeology of the Americas – some of which promptly produce editor-reviewed proceedings. Yet, one thing amiss, even within the Mayanist ecosystem, is a peer-reviewed journal aimed at both academics and the broader public. In particular one that is open source, relatively straightforward, and free to publish with.

We should say that *The Mayanist* is rooted in the AFAR philosophy which has fueled the Maya at the Playa/Lago Conferences since 2007. “Playa”, which occurs in September, is at its 13th edition this year, while “Lago”, held in April, will be at its 10th edition in 2020. These events have sought to facilitate a discourse between senior and junior scholars, lifelong learners, and the broader public (with an emphasis on precollegiate students). Our conferences have evolved from a largely Belize-oriented gathering to one seeking to integrate scholars working in the broader Maya world and originating from Belize, Guatemala, Mexico, Canada, the U.S.A., the U.K., and continental Europe. Although the initial intention was not to produce thematical meetings, themes have emerged organically and worked well.

American Foreign Academic Research (AFAR), based at Davidson Day School, has for principal activity its pioneering field school program – bringing dozens of pre-collegiate students to be initiated to field archaeology in Belize, Portugal, Spain, and Greece. Yet, Maya at the Playa/Lago have been the academic and social node for the ever-growing AFAR family. It is important to note

that these fun, atypical, scholarly events are only possible thanks to the faithful participation of groups of erudite, lifelong learner; some of whom produce dedicated newsletters. One of the outcomes of this long collaboration has been a certain feedback; one which is at times critical. The principal criticism that has emerged is that great conference talks and workshops are rarely recorded or published; and when they are, delays can be long.

The Mayanist emerges out of a desire to create a new sort of peer-reviewed journal; one which delivers excellent contributions to the archaeology, epigraphy, ethnohistory, and anthropology of the ancient and modern Mayas. These contributions' quality is attributable to their coherency, conciseness, and to their visual appeal. This journal is not only dedicated to the creation of detailed knowledge, but to that of a literature that is appealing to both specialists and to anyone interested in advancing their knowledge of the Mayas. In addition, we are dedicated to a prompt publication schedule, with a gestation period of six months, from submission to print. We receive submission 2 weeks after each conference and deliver the printed product by the following conference. Each paper is peer-reviewed by three scholars. In addition, we are dedicated to crafting a visually appealing product. This is why we have partnered with Canadian artist Aaron Alfano, who has collaborated personally with each lead author to create the fine watercolors featured in this issue. Finally, we would like to emphasize that *The Mayanist* is open source – and so, free of charge to the authors.

We, the chief and executive editors, recognize that this is a work in progress. Its submission format and review process will likely evolve. Yet, we hope to fill a nice new niche with this journal and to contribute to the advancement of Maya Studies for a long time. We are grateful to this issue's authors who believed in this project. We would also like to thank the people who have supported this endeavor: Joel Skidmore, whose help has been invaluable, our gracefully prompt reviewers, and our talented team of artists, Aaron Alfano, Laura Mueller Woods, and Mike Thomas. We must, of course, also thank our efficient and critical guest editor, Bill Ringle, to whom we now give the floor so that he may adequately contextualize and introduce the first issue of *The Mayanist*.

A Word from our Guest Editor

I first met Mat Saunders about a decade ago, soon after his arrival in Davidson to begin a new career at Davidson Day School. Not content with the success he had enjoyed with the Maya at the Playa conference, he had the audacity to suggest a similar conference could succeed in this small college town. I kept my opinion to myself, which was that its chances were somewhat less than those of the proverbial snowball, and it is a good thing I did. Over the intervening years the conference has grown and prospered, playing host to some of the most prominent, and some of the most promising, Mayanists in the field, all of whom welcome its intimate format and the chance to speak beyond the usual 15 minutes of academic conferences. Mat has continued to be its guiding spirit, in the process assembling a dedicated group of volunteers to help him, and now he and Maxime Lamoureux-St-Hilaire are taking it to the next level with this inaugural number of *The Mayanist*. *The Mayanist* will publish in a timely, visually attractive, and approachable manner a selection of the wonderful talks given annually at the Maya at the Lago conference. We hope the digital format will provide some idea of the intellectual excitement of the meeting to those not able to attend in person.

The Maya at the Lago conference has also been a welcoming forum for scholars in the early stages of their career. In fact, I don't think any other conference (besides the Maya at the Playa) affords younger scholars similar attention and encouragement. This first issue of *The Mayanist* underscores that commitment by featuring authors who have either recently completed their Ph.D.'s or are in the final stages of their graduate careers. The four articles all relate to the archaeology of northern Yucatan, the theme of the 2019 conference. Northern Yucatan comprises a substantial portion of the Maya lowlands and counts many of the most popular tourist destinations among its archaeological sites, sites such as Tulum, Chichen Itza, and Uxmal, but for various reasons it often receives short shrift in general treatments of the ancient Maya. One reason is that it lacks the extensive hieroglyphic record of the southern lowlands. Thanks to the fullness of southern texts, epigraphers are now able to trace the complexities of dynastic politics over several centuries at dozens of sites. In contrast, the limited number of texts in the north mainly mark calendrical period endings and the dedication of structures. The north differed ethnically as well, for an ancestral form of Yucatec Maya predominated in the north, while southern texts are in a language most closely related to historical Cholti and current-day Chorti. Broad regional differences were also expressed in material culture, such as the near absence of brightly decorated polychrome pottery in the north, of the sort that has been so important in shaping our understanding of Maya religion and court life.

The north also differs in terms of its terrain. Geographically it forms the tip of a long peninsula, making it a "world apart" according to some scholars. Much of the north is relatively flat, with the exception of an uplifted wedge, the Puuc hills, that defines the southern limit of the northern lowlands. Rainfall decreases as one moves west and north across the peninsula, so that tall forest yields first to lower deciduous forest and finally to thorny scrub north and west of modern Merida, an area which nevertheless was densely populated in prehispanic times. Conversely, the low elevation of the northern plains meant that the water table was relatively easy to tap, either by means of natural features such as *cenotes* (sinkholes) or via wells. Only in the Puuc was it necessary to build facilities to capture and store rainwater, most notably the famous *chultuns*, cisterns which were excavated into house platforms and were filled by the drainage from their plastered floors.

Yet despite these challenges, and despite several severe demographic upheavals, the ancestors of the present-day Maya of Yucatan persevered and prospered, building a landscape whose beauty and complexity continues to hold us enchanted.

Introducing the Contributions to The Mayanist

Turning now to the contributions to this issue, readers may be surprised to learn that despite countless studies of Maya architecture, we know very little about actual extraction and construction practices. Ken Seligson is at the vanguard of this line of research. Working in the Puuc region, Seligson has been able to make a very strong case that so-called annular structures were in fact prehispanic open-air kilns for the production of lime, a necessary ingredient for mortar-and-rubble construction. In this article, Seligson considers the broader implications these kilns have for understanding ancient management (or mismanagement) of the ecosystem. This is especially pertinent given recent popular treatments arguing that the Maya essentially did themselves in environmentally. Seligson instead advocates reframing the relationship as one of

cultural resilience rather than collapse. After noting Maya achievements in the management of agricultural and water resources, Seligson then situates lime production within broader forest management practices lasting over 700 years in some places. As he notes, this adaptability has very clear implications for our current concerns with climate change.

The research of Parker et al., also based in the Puuc, concerns another aspect of Maya construction practices, in this case the dwellings of those he argues were stone masons. These form part of a hilltop group known as Escalera al Cielo (Stairway to Heaven). This group is composed of several vaulted buildings, and so housed families of relatively high status in addition to the masons' houses. A further point of interest is that this group seems to have been abandoned fairly rapidly at the close of the Classic period. Though the masons' houses were of perishable construction, they were located quite close to these masonry structures, suggesting to Parker et al. that their labor was controlled by these neighboring elites. However, it is first necessary to establish that this was in fact the occupation of the occupants, so the heart of this article is a comparison of previously excavated stoneworking toolkits to those found at Escalera al Cielo. Parker et al. then provide a nuanced discussion of the possible implications of this assemblage for understanding the organization of labor in the Puuc hills.

Research into the northern Maya Preclassic (or Formative) period has been especially prominent in recent years, revealing a time depth and areal extent unknown just a few decades ago. The article by Barry Kidder et al. addresses the close of this period and the transition to the Early Classic period among a network of communities on the northern plains linked by a long causeway, or *sacbe* in Maya. The authors argue that a shift from a more communitarian ethos to one recognizing the privileges of an elite subset can be observed in the changing architectural spaces and exchange patterns of the main site of Ucanha, located to the east of modern Motul. Kidder et al. emphasize that community membership and obligations had to be continually negotiated and take the novel approach of assessing the quality of life of community members. Thus, instead of just attempting to measure household wealth, the authors also look at "capabilities," essentially the ability of households to connect with other households and participate in the larger life of the community. By looking at a variety of measures, from household inventories to construction techniques, to the building of community monuments, the authors demonstrate a promising avenue of research for future projects.

The final article of *The Mayanist*, by Stanley Guenter, addresses a perennial debate in the archaeology of the north: were foreigners, in particular Toltec migrants from Tula, Hidalgo, responsible for the highly unusual art and architecture of Chichen Itza? Iconographic and architectural similarities between the two sites have long been recognized, yet there are significant difficulties in squaring the testimony of native chronicles with the archaeological evidence, especially with regard to chronology. Archaeologists have also pointed out influences at Chichen Itza from elsewhere in Mesoamerica. Nevertheless, Guenter argues the iconographic, sculptural, and architectural similarities between Chichen Itza, Tula, and elsewhere in Central Mexico are too close to have been the result of happenstance or general diffusion. Guenter advances philological, ethnohistorical, and iconographic evidence to argue for the essential truth of native chronicles, including mentions of intrusion and conquest by "Mexicans" in early Spanish texts, and similarities in the late writing systems of Chichen Itza, Tula, and other sites of Central Mexico. This is a huge and vastly complicated topic for such a short contribution, so it will be interesting to see Guenter's future amplifications on this theme.