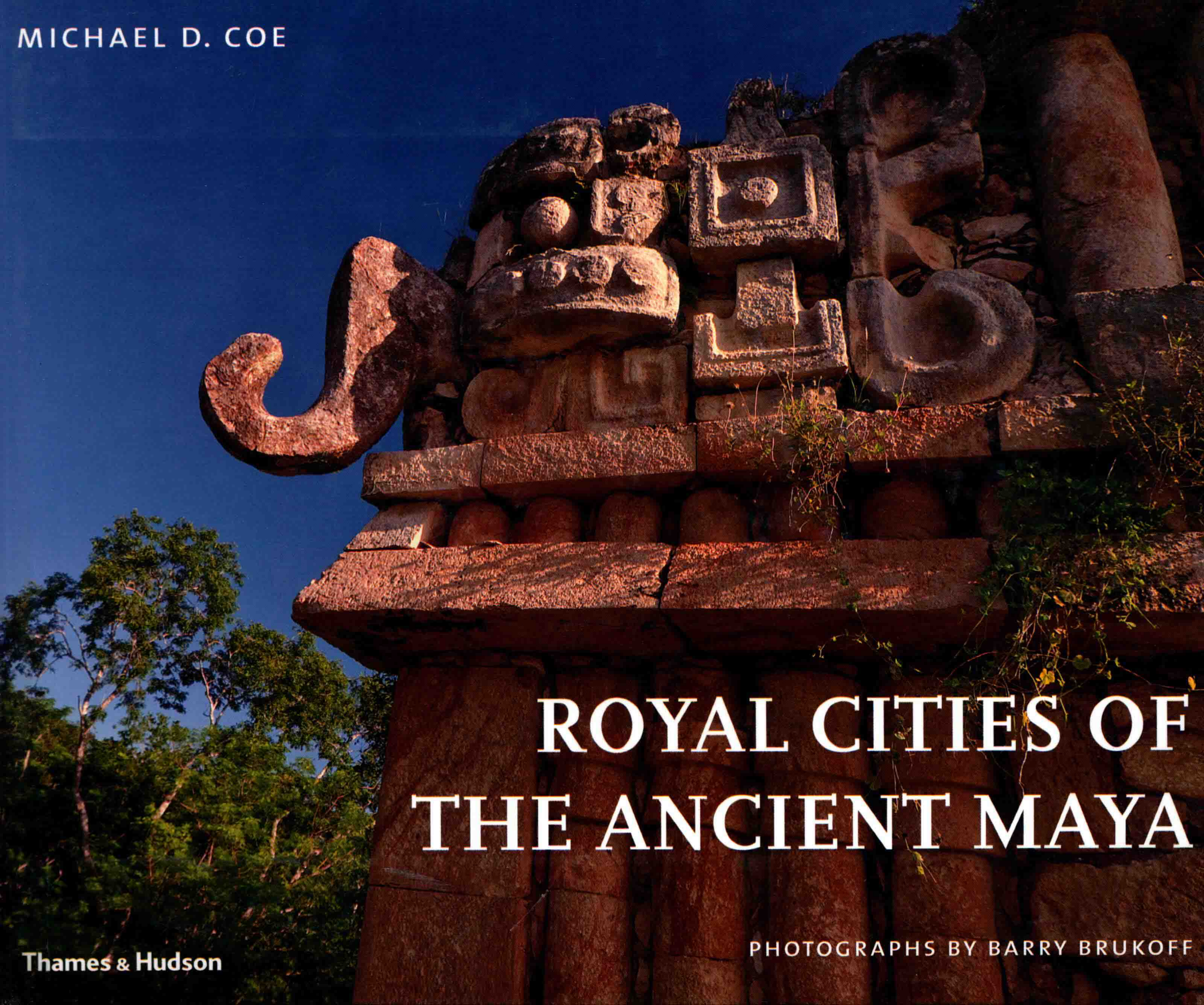
MICHAEL D. COE



ROYAL CITIES OF THE ANCIENT MAYA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BARRY BRUKOFF

Thames & Hudson

ROYAL CITIES OF THE ANCIENT MAYA

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My deep gratitude to Professor Michael D. Coe for agreeing to collaborate with me on this project. It would not have been possible without his guidance; he supplied the selection of sites that he thought appropriate to include in the book. We were fortunate to be able to travel together throughout the Río Bec area, which Mike had not revisited for a number of decades. We share the gifts of curiosity and imagination, which have served both of us in our chosen fields of expression. This has resulted in a delightful give-and-take in the creation and interweaving of text and images. It has not only been the closest collaboration with an author that I have experienced on any of my books, but it has also been the beginning of a friendship with a kindred spirit. My thanks to my publisher Mark Magowan, who asked of me, while discussing our *Temples of Cambodia* project, "Do you think you might have any interest in doing a similar book on the Maya?" I laughed and told him that I had begun to do so in 2003. Many thanks to Sandra Klimt and Heather Graef for their invaluable contributions to the production of this book. My sincere appreciation to Jacqueline Decter for her discernment and wisdom in editing the book. I am deeply indebted to Dan Griffin of Merida for his knowledge of the Maya ruins throughout Mexico and Guatemala; he has been my guide and companion on a number of journeys through all of those sites. My thanks to Mike Valladares for performing a similar role during my travels to Copán Ruinas in Honduras, and to Flavia Cueva for her gracious hospitality at her lovely Hacienda San Lucas. My thanks also to Nikon and Nik Software for their continued support. My sincere gratitude to my dear friend and mentor Morrie Camhi, whose spirit sustains and supports me in my photographic endeavors.

—Barry Brukoff

I would like to thank Mark Magowan, Barry Brukoff, and Helen Ibbitson Jessup for suggesting that I participate in the creation of this unique project.

—Michael D. Coe

First published in the United Kingdom in 2012 by
Thames & Hudson Ltd, 181A High Holborn,
London WC1V 7QX

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-500-97040-9

Printed and bound in China

To find out about all our publications, please visit
www.thamesandhudson.com.
There you can subscribe to our e-newsletter, browse or download our current catalogue, and buy any titles that are in print.

Endpapers: *A stucco relief on the Toniná Acropolis. The meaning of the symbolism, which includes sunken handprints, remains elusive.*

Page 1: *Lid of polychrome bowl, ca. AD 500, excavated in Becan, Campeche, Mexico. Depicted is a composite jaguar/iguana monster, devouring human bodies.*

Pages 2–3: *Temple of the Five Stories (on right) and Platform of the Knives (on left), Edzná, Campeche.*

Pages 4–5: *Detail of a Flower Mountain mask from a stuccoed frieze, Balamk'u.*

CONTENTS

6 Photographer's Note

9 MAYA GENESIS

27 RIVAL GIANTS OF THE CLASSIC PERIOD

63 CITIES OF THE RIVER

85 CITIES OF THE WEST

107 CITIES OF THE EAST

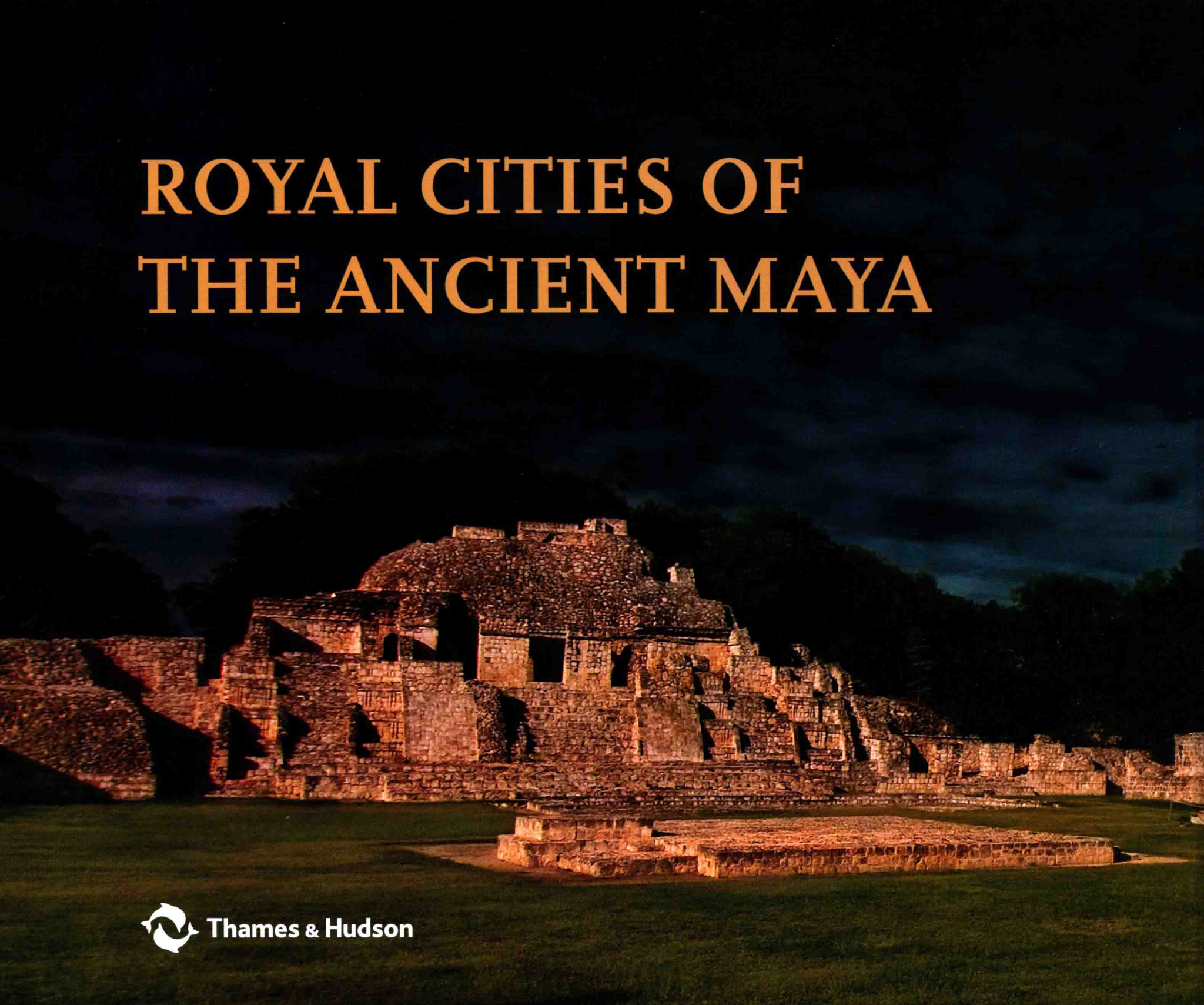
125 MAYA RENAISSANCE IN THE NORTHERN LOWLANDS

195 TWILIGHT OF THE ANCIENT MAYA

220 Glossary
220 Selected Bibliography
222 Index
224 Acknowledgments

ROYAL CITIES OF THE ANCIENT MAYA

ROYAL CITIES OF THE ANCIENT MAYA



Thames & Hudson

MICHAEL D. COE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BARRY BRUKOFF

CONTENTS

6 Photographer's Note

9 MAYA GENESIS

27 RIVAL GIANTS OF THE CLASSIC PERIOD

63 CITIES OF THE RIVER

85 CITIES OF THE WEST

107 CITIES OF THE EAST

125 MAYA RENAISSANCE IN THE NORTHERN LOWLANDS

195 TWILIGHT OF THE ANCIENT MAYA

220 Glossary
220 Selected Bibliography
222 Index
224 Acknowledgments

I dedicate this book to my granddaughter, Lea Marina Brukoff,
who at her tender age is already an inveterate traveler.

PHOTOGRAPHER'S NOTE

When Mike Coe and I discussed the general direction to take in creating *Royal Cities of the Ancient Maya*, we agreed that I should attempt to provide a photographic equivalent of English artist Frederick Catherwood's renowned drawings and lithographs of the Maya world in the 1850s. He traveled on mule back and carried a *camera lucida*, which allowed him to accurately trace the complex forms of Maya architecture for his meticulously detailed works. Digital-era advancements have enabled me to composite many of the photographs in a way that would have been impossible in an earlier age.

There are a number of images in the book that present views of sites that cannot be seen even by visitors to those sites. The stucco frieze at El Mirador (pages 24–25), for instance, was photographed under extremely difficult conditions, as the upper and lower rows of the frieze were separated by workmen's scaffolding. I had to shoot many individual images and meticulously piece them together, absent the scaffolding. The 56-foot-long Balamk'u frieze (gatefold front between pages 56 and 57) is composited from ten photographs. It is impossible to photograph the entire frieze in a single shot, because one can stand no more than 8 feet away from it. The white stucco frieze on the Acropolis summit at Ek' Balam (pages 186–87) is also a composite, as many wooden columns support the thatched roof, precluding a clear shot. And each of the photos that form the composite had to be taken at an odd angle; then their frontal perspectives had to be aligned and composited to create the finished image. No archaeologist has ever seen this frieze as it appears in this book. The photo of the three pyramids at the summit of the La Danta temple-pyramid, glimpsed through thick tropical foliage (pages 18–19), is, in fact, three separate photographs blended into a panorama to convey the feeling of the pyramids emerging from the dense jungle. The actual jungle vegetation was too thick to capture this sensation in one photograph. The other panoramic images in the book were created in a similar fashion.

Almost all ancient cultures were in awe of the sun and the moon and created rituals and made sacrifices to ensure the continued existence of those potent and incomprehensible forces of nature. I arranged my trips through the Maya empire to coincide with the full moon, which appears in a number of images, to acknowledge the extraordinary power that these elemental forces had on the Maya people.

What I hope this book will impart to the reader is a sense of how it feels to wander among the Maya ruins, to walk through the thick jungle and come upon these marvelous edifices. It is that sense of wonder that I have strived to capture in my photographs, presenting the ruins in a manner that emphasizes their beauty and the uniqueness of their architecture.

—Barry Brukoff

MAYA GENESIS

INTRODUCTION

A little over 170 years ago, two young explorers—the American lawyer and diplomat John Lloyd Stephens and the English topographical artist Frederick Catherwood—arrived at the ruins of the great Maya city of Copán, in Honduras. It was the height of the rainy season, and the fallen temples and toppled monuments were shrouded in dense, wet vegetation. As their local workmen began the task of clearing . . .

> we sat down on the very edge of the wall, and strove in vain to penetrate the mystery by which we were surrounded. Who were the people that built this city? In the ruined cities of Egypt, even in the long-lost Petra, the stranger knows the story of the people whose vestiges are around him. America, say historians, was peopled by savages; but savages never reared these structures, savages never carved these stones. We asked the Indians who made them, and their dull answer was "Quien sabe?" "who knows?"

In the course of their two great journeys in Yucatán, Guatemala, southeast Mexico, and Honduras, and in the magnificent volumes published by Stephens in 1841 and 1843, Stephens and Catherwood not only brought to light dozens of ruined cities but made it abundantly clear who had made them: the same Maya Indians that they had traveled among, and not Egyptians, lost tribes of Israel, Welshmen, or some other Old World people.

Ek' Balam: view of the central plaza from the Acropolis (see pages 184–89).

We now know a great deal about the Maya themselves. First of all, far from being near extinction (as some modern popular writers seem to believe), they are remarkably numerous: best estimates are that there are at least eight million people who speak one or another tongue belonging to the Mayan language family, most of them in northern Yucatán or in the highlands of Guatemala and Chiapas (Mexico). Many now live and work in the United States, part of a diaspora that resulted from a two-decade reign of terror conducted by the Guatemalan military from the late 1970s through the mid-1990s (some of the team washing your car might well be Maya). In the face of all sorts of repression, beginning of course with the long-drawn-out Spanish Conquest, their culture has been resilient as well as adaptable. In particular, the post-Conquest Maya have retained their religious vitality by melding native Maya beliefs and rituals with Catholic ones, so that it is often impossible to separate what is native from what is European.

Linguists have defined about twenty-nine or thirty distinct languages within the larger family, all of them as closely related to each other as, say, English is to other Germanic languages such as Dutch or Danish. While today they are mutually unintelligible, many thousands of years ago they were one; where this ancestral, proto-Mayan tongue was spoken is a mystery, but some think it may have been in the western Maya highlands of Guatemala and Chiapas. Nevertheless, the area occupied by Mayan speakers is remarkably homogenous: no other linguistic group (including the Aztecs) has ever managed to split up Maya territory in any lasting fashion.

MAYA CIVILIZATION TIME LINE

DATES CALIBRATED	PERIODS	SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENTS
1530		Spanish Conquest
	Late Postclassic	Tulum
		League of Mayapán
1200		
	Early Postclassic	Toltec hegemony in Yucatán
		Maya-Toltec Chichén Itzá
		Toltec arrive in Yucatán
925		
	Terminal Classic	Classic Maya collapse
		Río Bec, Chenes, Puuk cities
		Bonampak murals
800		
	Late Classic	Height of Maya civilization
		Reign of Janaab Pakal at Palenque
600		
	Early Classic	Teotihuacán interference and influence
250		First lowland Maya dated stela at Tikal
AD / BC	Late Preclassic	Massive pyramid-building in lowlands, San Bartolo
400		
	Middle Preclassic	
1000		Olmec civilization
	Early Preclassic	
1800		

As we shall see in this book, the Maya realm was many: there was never anything like a "Maya Empire," and even at the height of Maya civilization, numerous independent or quasi-independent city-states were scattered across the Maya region. One might therefore compare the Maya world to the small city-states of ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy. But in very recent decades, Maya hieroglyphic research has shown that Classic Maya elites were linked to each other by a high-status, literary language (and writing system) that was shared by all—in the way that medieval Latin, for instance, once bound together the elites and intellectuals of Europe, no matter what internecine wars and other mayhem were going on. And while each city-state had its own unique characteristics, all of them remained bound up in a common social and religious environment with very deep roots in the past.

MAYA ORIGINS

There is not one Maya area, but three. In the far north lies the relatively flat limestone shelf of the Petén-Yucatán Peninsula, which separates the Gulf of Mexico from the Caribbean. To its south are the volcano-studded highlands of Chiapas and Guatemala. And finally, there is the Pacific coastal plain.

As we now realize, the outer shell of our planet is made of a small number of enormous, rocky plates that are constantly in slow motion, pulling apart over the eons to form oceans, grinding together to form mountain chains; where one relatively heavy plate dips under a lighter one, volcanoes are formed, and earthquakes may devastate the landscape. This is the case for the highlands of Guatemala; here, in a country no bigger than Ohio, there are no fewer than twenty-nine volcanoes, nine of them active during the past two centuries. The soils are rich, and fields can be cultivated almost year round, with abundant yields of that Mesoamerican staple food, corn (maize), along with beans, peppers, squashes, and many other crops. One might therefore expect that Maya civilization first arose here, but that was not the case. As we shall see, fully settled village life began on the Pacific coastal plain to the south, and the apogee of ancient Maya culture took place to the north.

Driving south from Guatemala City to that coastal plain, one enters a different world, with temperatures that can only be called torrid. This is a mainly alluvial lowland, traversed

by numerous rivers originating in the highlands. Today it is largely devoted to cattle ranching and enormous sugar plantations, but in the pre-Spanish past it was a land covered by maize fields and groves of cacao (the "chocolate tree"). Where the plain meets the sea there are mangrove-lined lagoons and estuaries that produce abundant fish and shellfish. It is in this environment that we have the first evidence of real villages, and the first Mesoamerican pottery and fired-clay figurines. Radiocarbon dates prove that this way of life had begun by at least 1800 BC, almost a millennium before the earliest known permanent settlements of the northern Maya area. One might expect these ancient peoples (dubbed "Mokaya" by archaeologists) to have been simple and unsophisticated, but their ceramics are some of the best ever manufactured in the New World, they already show social stratification, and we now know that they produced and drank chocolate!

THE OLMEC

Let us now cross the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to another coastal plain, this one lying along the Gulf of Mexico in the Mexican states of Veracruz and Tabasco. This is the homeland of the Olmec civilization, Mesoamerica's "mother culture," as many archaeologists (including me) believe. Here, as along the Pacific coast, rivers undulate across the landscape, flooding during the summer rains to cover natural river levees with annual deposits of rich mud. This is the most productive land for maize cultivation in all of the Americas.

About 1500 BC, San Lorenzo—Mesoamerica's first civilized center—took shape, atop a natural plateau raised by an underlying salt dome. Pottery from the deepest excavation levels on this site suggest that it might have been founded by Mokaya people from across the isthmus. Destroyed by unknown antagonists about 900 BC, San Lorenzo was under the rule of powerful chiefs—or, more likely, real kings—who could order gigantic portraits of themselves and have them set up in plazas, presumably in front of their thatch-roofed clay palaces. These are the famous colossal heads, enormous sculptures of basalt quarried on the slopes of a distant volcano and brought by raft and human labor to San Lorenzo.

Well before San Lorenzo's downfall, these people already had a complex religious system, which featured such deities as the gods of maize and rain, carved by expert

Monument 1, an Olmec colossal head from San Lorenzo, Veracruz. Early Preclassic, 1400–900 BC.

sculptors using a stone-on-stone technique (metallurgy was not to appear in Mesoamerica for another thousand years). During the time of San Lorenzo's ascendancy, the Maya of the lowlands to the east were nothing more than simple hunters, gatherers of wild plant foods, and small-scale cultivators; they knew nothing of such arts as pottery, let alone massive stone sculpture.

With the mysterious but total destruction of San Lorenzo, during which many dozens of huge stone monuments were defaced and/or smashed, another great Olmec center appeared well to its east: La Venta, situated on an island amid an extensive swamp just over the border between Veracruz and Tabasco. Occupied from about 900 to 400 BC, La Venta is noted for its 110-foot-high pyramid, for a large number of stone sculptures, some of them bearing complex relief scenes involving costumed individuals and gods, and for its magnificent jade offerings and ceremonial deposits. Excavations have shown that jade and other polished green stones were in use as far back as the Early Preclassic period (1800–900 BC) on the Pacific coast and in the Olmec area, often in the form of fine green celts; in a number of studies, archaeologist and epigrapher Karl Taube has shown that these were symbolic representations of ears of maize, the principal focus of Olmec religion. Some of the best jades are of a beautiful light blue color, and were apparently quarried in the mountains near Guatemala's Motagua River, a region where ancient tectonic plates had subducted to produce the conditions under which jade is formed.

All Olmec art, whether in jade, clay, or stone, is extraordinarily beautiful, and its religious iconography is highly complex. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that the Olmec invented most of the major gods worshiped throughout time and space in Mesoamerica. Indeed, Olmec influence can be detected in many of the nascent civilizations of Mesoamerica, including, as we shall see, the Maya.

The big question is, what language or languages did the Olmec of San Lorenzo, La Venta, and other centers speak? Many scholars think that it was an ancestral form of Mixe-Zoquean, a linguistic family that includes a few tongues still spoken within the "Olmec heartland"; others have suggested that it might have been Mayan. We probably will never know, as we have no readable Olmec writing. The mystery remains.