Before Kukulkán

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FOREWORD

TRACI ARDREN

YAXUNÁ IS AN extraordinary place. This may sound like hyperbole or simple exaggeration, but the volume you hold in your hands will convince you that the ancient Maya city of Yaxuná is a place like no other.

All archaeological sites are venues for contemplating the arbitrary boundary between past and present. When does the past become past? How is the present ever separated from what came before? In thinking and learning about Yaxuná, familiar terms such as “ancient” or “memory” take on profoundly new depths of meaning, enlivened by the realities of a place that Maya people have called home for more than three millennia. What is ancient about Yaxuná, its early settlement and precocious adoption of royal insignia, carries forward for thousands of years and informs the present-day life of people who live and visit this site. There is no way to keep what is ancient about Yaxuná in the past or in any way divisible from the present (and future). What is memory to someone who lives on a landscape where humans have eaten the same food and climbed the same pyramids for millennia? How are memories of one’s own research sifted from the memories of earlier researchers, their stories, and theories? Boundaries are blurry in a place where scholars have been compelled to ask questions and seek answers for over a hundred years.

Perhaps the boundaries of past and present are blurry at Yaxuná because by its nature, it is situated in both the past and present. It is neither a relic of the past, long forgotten and ready to be rediscovered, nor is it a fully formed creation of the present, free to speak in any language or on any topic. It is a place rooted in Maya culture and history, a place that breathes Maya culture and history into life every day, and a place that will be at the forefront of what the world comes to know about Maya culture and history well past the twenty-first century. It defies boundaries and reminds us how our modern notions of time and meaning are so very arbitrary and ephemeral. The capacity of this settlement to defy definitions is due in part to its location at a crossroads—a place where cultures meet, where people crossed paths in the past as they do today, where ideas were bartered and change was always in the air.
Researchers have long searched for an obvious explanation for the location of this settlement and its subsequent longevity. There are few observable clues—no river crossing or huge cenote, no rare and strategically important natural resource that would have provided economic security. Rather, like many ancient Maya cities, the founders of Yaxuná and those who continued to renew and reinvent the city for the next three thousand years followed an intangible call to mediate social interactions. Almost equidistant from the eastern and western coasts of the peninsula, halfway from the northern coast to the central lowlands, the history of Yaxuná was, is, and always will be dictated by its ability to draw together the people and ideas from other regions, to use the strength of the crossroads location to reinvent itself when the fortunes of one tradition failed or a new cultural movement arose. We see this demonstrated in the earliest occupation of the site, when key markers of Maya cultural identity from the southern lowlands, such as the astronomical temple known as an E-Group, are built for the first time in the northern lowlands. Later, as described in detail in this volume, the leaders of Yaxuná drew on royal insignia of the Petén region, as well as local elite traditions to generate a statement about the Early Classic royal dynasty of Yaxuná in the provisioning of the royal tomb known as Burial 23. During the Late Classic period, Puuc architectural styles jockeyed with the political maneuvers of an ambitious queen from Cobá, who built the longest Maya sacbé from her city to Yaxuná, in one of the clearest materializations of Yaxuná’s role as a cultural crossroads. Even following conquest by Chichén Itzá, people from the west returned to Yaxuná to build Late Postclassic shrines as memory of the past was reinvented for thirteenth- and fourteenth-century political needs. During the Colonial period Yaxuná was both far from the European influences of Mérida and Valladolid, and was brought within Colonial-era agricultural enterprises. The Caste War (1847–1901) saw refugees take shelter at Yaxuná as they fled east, away from the violence centered in the western part of the peninsula. Today Yaxuná remains at the crossroads—the modern village and adjacent archaeological site are just south of the highway that bisects the peninsula and equidistant from the state capital Mérida and the touristic capital of Cancún. Young people from the village are drawn out of Yaxuná to work in both Mérida and Cancún and bring the economic resources and cultural influences of those two very different cities back to their home in the center of the peninsula.

Scholarly investigation of the archaeological site of Yaxuná began almost one hundred years ago. While intermittent, it is reasonable to argue that Yaxuná is one of the best-documented and best-published Classic Maya sites. With the addition of this volume, such an assertion takes on even greater strength. The authors have written an exciting and comprehensive study of the cultural aspects of death, and life, at ancient Yaxuná. Bioarchaeological studies allow us to know the unwritten histories of ancient people, especially the people who were not the subject of Classic hieroglyphic inscriptions or art. In this volume you will learn a great deal about the royalty of Yaxuná, especially the foreign-born Sun King who died around AD 400 and was buried in a tomb full of entheogenic paraphernalia, as well as the royal woman who carried a Moon Goddess figurine when she was ritually sacrificed just over one century later. Death touches us all, and the bioarchaeological analyses presented here
speak as powerfully about children, commoners, and the forgotten as they do about the elite. This forces us to think about power and inequality in novel ways, freed from the usual strictures of a tiny royalty and an immense supporting population. The discussions in this book allow us to see the many places where difference and congruence existed in the past, often far from the palaces and tombs of kings and queens.

Thus this volume is different from most books about the ancient Maya. It is the result of a unique and powerful collaboration between four accomplished specialists in ancient Maya culture, each bringing to the table their own detailed bioarchaeological, iconographic, archaeological, and ultimately anthropological investigations in order to jointly tell the very human story of a long-lived and complex Maya kingdom. Archaeology is always best when it is a collaborative science, but this type of publication is a rare effort and likely unique in the northern Maya lowlands. It integrates everyone from the past into the narrative of ancient life and death. It is a book to inspire our imagination about ancient cultures and yet one deeply grounded in the scientific analysis of material evidence. There is nothing comparable to this volume in the field of Maya studies, and I invite you to enjoy the exploration of the rich stories and reconstructions that are possible only at a remarkable place like Yaxuná.