Before Kukulkán
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THIS BOOK FOCUSES on a uniquely human side of our past—a past represented here by the ancient Maya of Yaxuná, in the heart of the northern lowlands of Yucatán, Mexico, and their neighbors throughout the region. The pre-Columbian inhabitants of what are now the archaeological ruins of an important Maya city lived in a world of daily activities and customs, which we can find reflected in their mortuary practices and which also partly left their marks in their skeletal remains. During their lifetimes, they experienced trauma and illness, and they cumulatively witnessed the challenges, transitions, and crises of nearly two millennia of occupation stretching back to the dawn of Maya civilization to the Classic period collapse in the ninth century AD. It was our combined academic curiosity concerning just how these pre-Columbian people lived and died, not in abstract terms, but in the real human dimensions of everyday life, that triggered our initial conversations about the Yaxuná material. Our interest in the remains of Yaxuná’s ancient inhabitants was also fueled by our frustration with the conventional disciplinary divides of comprehending the past, which in practice has led to either less-than-rigorous interpretations of the forensic clues registered on bones or to analyses of final resting places that overly rely on the artifactual materials and architectural contexts. Sadly, the scrutiny of humans as such and of the experienced past registered in their remains has not been a focus of sufficient systematic research in the area of the world where we work, although this is now changing. A phenomenon as elusive as it is complex, the study of human experience etched into the people themselves, of human life and death, awaits deeper explorations in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, and this volume is a step in that direction. We hope it is as exciting and intriguing a foray for our readers as it has proven to be for us.

Human remains at Yaxuná first came into focus during the late 1980s and 1990s when the Selz Foundation Yaxuná Project, directed by David Freidel, recruited Sharon Bennett to be project bioarchaeologist. Sharon had worked previously on human remains from the site of Cerro Maya, focus of Freidel’s research in the 1970s, and became an enthusiastic member of the field staff of the Selz Foundation project. She set up her lab in the main communal
building of the project in the nearby Maya village of Yaxuná and subsequently studied the remains in the Mérida laboratory of the project. Sadly, Sharon passed away before she could complete her analyses, but her findings are incorporated into the monograph on the first Yaxuná project (Stanton et al. 2010).

Sharon was responsible and dedicated. Her principal assistant was a comisario of the village of Yaxuná, and he and his companions were rightly proud of their efforts to document ancestral people of the ancient city together with the professional anthropologist, just like the people of Yaxuná in general, who remain proud of their work at the archaeological site. Despite all her enthusiasm and rigor, Sharon’s training and skills were limited compared to what bioarchaeologists now have at hand, given the recent impressive advances in the study of ancient human remains. Sharon’s work was therefore unfinished, as it left many areas to explore, an open chapter to be filled in and updated. We knew that what we had originally published would be provisional. We now know just how much more we can know about these ancestral Maya.

In 2005, Travis Stanton (a member of the original project staff) helped renew international collaborative work at Yaxuná. The Proyecto de Interacción Política del Centro de Yucatán (PIPCY) took form in 2007, then directed by Travis Stanton, Aline Magnoni, and Scott Hutson. Focused on questions regarding chronology, the relationship of Chichén Itzá with its hinterland, and the origins of Maya civilization, PIPCY was a survey project and did not have the recovery of human remains as a part of its original research agenda. However, the completion of the analysis of the burials recovered by the Selz Project and how they could inform the ongoing research at Yaxuná remained a goal and led to the initial contact between PIPCY and the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán (UADY) Bioarchaeology Laboratory in 2010 (Tiesler et al. 2012, 2014). Coincidentally, at the time of these initial conversations, human skeletal remains began to appear during the PIPCY excavations in 2011, and at this time formal field collaborations were established to document and analyze the human remains through collaborative work. This joint fieldwork triggered rich discussions of the archaeology of the Maya and of the role of human remains in creating culturally aligned and scientifically sound narratives of the ancient Maya.

In this vein we soon recognized that the potential of this collaboration went beyond just human bones. We saw that the human remains, with their details discerned, were unique starting points that sustained broader discussions concerning culture change in Maya society, traditions embodied by the living and the dead, life crises, and collective contingencies. André Leroi-Gourhan’s chaîne opératoire (operational chain) could be applied to the treatment of people themselves. While a trove of meanings and culturally sanctioned practices surfaced, with their complex and varied expressions in the mortuary record, we began to see patterns and the potential for our dialogues to have a substantial impact on larger discussions of the Maya past. At this point, all four authors started to talk about a full volume that would situate the Yaxuná materials in a regional perspective, a volume that would be anchored in the mortuary record—the physical remnants of the people of the past so to speak—but within the context of local and regional archaeological data, epigraphy, and iconography,
combining cutting edge methodology on dietary and migratory reconstruction with the best that bioarchaeology and funerary archaeology has to offer. Truth be told, bioarchaeology is relatively recent in the Maya area. While epigraphers and art historians have been crafting the “human side” of Maya narratives for quite some time, although from a male-dominated elite faction perspective, we felt that bioarchaeological work had progressed enough to enter these broader humanizing discussions from a point of view that would give us insights from commoners, children, and women as well.

In our “human” approach, the lifeways of the ancient Maya (the domain of bioarchaeology) are just as central to us as their deathways. The latter embrace both burial practices and human sacrifice and are reconstructed here through the scrutiny of a recently developed discipline known by the term “archaeothanatology” in the Anglophone academic community (Duday 2009). This is a uniquely French approach to conducting an “archeology of human skeletons” and comes with a philosophy. In the chapters of this volume we embed archaeothanatology within broader schemes of interpretative transdisciplinary burial reconstruction. Indeed, we believe that this way of conducting mortuary research offers a compelling contribution to all archaeological decompositional processes and therefore receives special attention in our efforts. Two of the authors have received training by the distinguished bioanthropologist Henri Duday from the University of Bordeaux who, together with his work group, has established an anthropologie du terrain (field anthropology), known for more undertakings that include the excavation of human remains.

What is archaeothanatology exactly about? As a supplement to most conventional field approaches, archaeothanatology does not rely so much on recording standards, a priori taxonomies, patterning, complex statistics, or—more recently—cognitive narratives, but rather advocates an almost intuitive, essentially inductive integrative approach that respects all empirical data equally, but ultimately proposes a synthesis that foregrounds the body. General knowledge of behavioral patterns and funerary traditions is conceived to accrue out of an accumulation of carefully crafted, detailed case studies in human taphonomy. The latter usually recognize decompositional patterns and sequences of single anatomic segments and discuss their individual and joint interactions with the extrinsic environment. Archaeothanatological work ideally begins with active in situ documentation of corpse and skeletal arrangements, a heuristic tool for active comprehension, designed to lead a discovery trajectory serendipitously to the integral recognition of the individual taphonomic processes operating in each case, and from here to the often protracted funerary pathways of individual burials or the growth of ossuaries during decades and centuries.

Applied to the local mortuary record of Yaxuná, the operational dimension of conducting archaeothanatology, concretely the active process of reconstructing mortuary behavior stepwise from the material record, allowed us to reconstruct those operational chains that led to the formation of the mortuary contexts, through which we reformulated the original interpretations by the Selz Foundation on death cycling and residential continuity, on the funerary pomps of the privileged, and the ritual slaughter of sacrificial victims and dynasties to be replaced. By contextualizing the funerary record within the multiple dimension of the time, at macrolevel (i.e., the Classic period) we could reconstruct the biocultural evolutionary
pattern of a population from the onset of Yaxuná as a kingdom ruled by a foreign king to its final abandonment under the political and military pressure of the rising power of Chichén Itzá. Under the microlevel lens (i.e., the timing and sequencing of depositions within a multiple burial), instead, we eventually understood the line of processes that led to the violent extermination of a dynasty, as witnessed by the ritual depositional sequence, mode, distribution, and organization of the richly attired dead bodies of a king, his spouse, and their companions at the end of the Early Classic period.

It was clear from the start of our publication project that this endeavor, despite its single-site perspective, was by no means limited to the human remains from the ancient Maya center of Yaxuná. Instead, the site documentation was to be contextualized and enriched with information gleaned from all over the Maya lowlands. To this end, we compared the local bioarchaeological and mortuary signatures with those from thousands of skeletal remains, collected during more than two decades from across the area. In doing so, we did not neglect to underscore that Yaxuná was a unique center, which was distinctive from its urban Maya peers in many ways. For example, Yaxuná adopted Petén-style architecture already from the Middle Formative when most other northern lowland centers still used regional architectural conventions. This “foreignness” is attributable to the location of Yaxuná along an early inland trade route from the salt flats just to the north of the city to the southern Petén kingdoms, which was first proposed by David Freidel in the 1980s. For the same reason, Yaxuná in all likelihood consumed much larger quantities of foreign trade goods than its regional peers, a trend that continued in fact up to the Late Classic.

Revisiting the Selz Foundation materials from a culturally ingrained bioarchaeological (and really interdisciplinary) perspective and working under the framework of archaeothanatology, the outline of the present volume finally began to take shape during the sabbatical year of Vera Tiesler and Andrea Cucina. The academic year was financed by the CONACyT and UC MEXUS Scholar Exchange Program and hosted by Travis Stanton and Karl Taube at the University of California at Riverside. Working together on a daily basis, it became obvious to us then that while there has been an increasing number of superb journal articles and volumes of Maya bioarchaeology following the interdisciplinary path, a manuscript of the undertaking contemplated by us had not been attempted yet. We believed that contextualizing a copious series of human burials (from two distinct archaeological projects) from a single Maya city with sixteen field seasons worth of settlement survey, excavation in both public and domestic areas, and extensive artifact analysis definitely deserved a publication.

Many people contributed to making this project a reality. First and foremost we wish to thank the community of Yaxunáh for allowing us to conduct research on their community lands and having access to the human remains. Bernard Selz and the Selz Foundation of New York supported the original Yaxuná project beginning in 1989 and following renaming of the project as the Selz Foundation Yaxuná Project in 1992 continued substantially supporting the project through the completion of that research program in 1997. Mr. Selz has continued his generous support of archaeologists of the first Yaxuná project, making a significant contribution to the science and ancient history of the Maya of Yucatán. The first Yaxuná project also received support from the National Geographic Society in 1986, 1987,
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