Before Kukulkán

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INTRODUCTION

The Bioarchaeology of Yaxuná

The Classic period (AD 250–900) represents the peak era of cultural and social evolution of Maya civilization prior to the well-known collapse of many of the large central lowland city-states (Demarest et al. 2004; Webster 2002). While the political, economic, and social meltdown took its toll among the central Maya kingdoms deep in Petén and along the Usumacinta River, their northern Maya neighbors rose to political and economic power, soon to be dominated by the metropolis of Chichén Itzá (Andrews et al. 2003; Cobos 2003; Ringle et al. 1998). In this volume, we wish to illuminate human lifeways in the northern Maya lowlands prior to the rise of Chichén Itzá by using the direct testimony of the human skeletal remains of those who played an active role in the history and evolution of Classic Maya society (figure I.1). Specifically, this volume focuses on the center of Yaxuná, located some 18 km south of Chichén Itzá and the largest city in its immediate vicinity. An ancient city whose occupation stretches back well into the first millennium BC, Yaxuná was the capital in the area before the rise of Chichén Itzá and coexisted with it before this northern rival rose to regional domination toward the end of the tumultuous Classic period. Yaxuná would experience its own tragic end as a strategic power when the Itzá capital sent forces to conquer and subdue it. Chichén Itzá became the last urban metropolis of the Classic period lowlands. But this is a different trajectory, and Yaxuná and its people, represented in part through their remains, are worth knowing in their own right.

There is no doubt that the Classic period region of the northern lowlands has been poorly understood on its own terms, obscured by scholarly focus on the central lowland Maya kingdoms to the south and the rise of the Itzá merchant leagues (Demarest 2004; Houston and Inomata 2009). Here in the north a comparative lack of epigraphic and iconographic data has historically limited the cohesive regional sociopolitical coverage that characterizes the southern Maya neighbors (e.g., Martin and Grube 1995, 2000; Schele and Freidel 1990; Schele and Mathews 1998). This situation has led to a marginalization in treatment of the northern lowland cities prior to the development of the famous late urban phenomena of
Chichén Itzá and Mayapán in archaeological narratives of the Maya lowlands. This omission is most notable in the case of Izamal, which by the Early Classic was arguably half the size of Tikal when this southern city was at its maximum occupation during the Late Classic (Hutton 2012). Yaxúná itself stands up in monumentality against its famous urban neighbor; its largest pyramid measures nearly three times the size of the famous Castillo at Chichén Itzá.

FIGURE I.1. Map of the Maya area.
by volume and was in use at least half a millennium longer than Chichén Itzá’s iconic central monument. It is time to think again about the north.

To provide a fresh look at the complexity of Classic period life in the north we have chosen a particular approach that we believe will facilitate a complementary and in many ways more nuanced vision of life and death, an immediacy of experience, before the advent of the Itzá trader leagues. As scientists, our point of departure is the final arrival point of individual people in the ground. Their mortal remains provide a testimony of their prior journeys through life, in a site-specific perspective of a single settlement located at an important and contested cultural interstice of the Yucatán Peninsula: the Classic Maya capital of Yaxúná (Stanton et al. 2010). Our site-focused exploration is held up by extensive interdisciplinary research, which has been conducted by four projects over the past 30 years (e.g., Brainerd 1958; Kidder 1932, 1935; Stanton and Magnoni 2013; Stanton et al. 2010; Toscano Hernández and Ortegón 2003). Using burial contexts and the remnants of their human occupants from two of these projects as the analytical focus, we explore the evolving roles and collective identities of Yaxúná’s Classic period people. We examine and discern locals and foreigners who were eventually interred at the site, representing nearly a millennium of life and death at this central Yucatecan city. In short, we attempt to wield the human lens of history. This lens elucidates human experiences inscribed on the body, lived on a day-to-day basis, some of them surrounding the time of death. Beyond death, bodies turn into corpses, person-keepers that anchored to surviving kin the transition of the deceased to the status of ancestors.

Yet we do not study the Yaxúná data in isolation. Rather, we place them into regional context through the use of the human skeletal database compiled throughout the years by the Laboratory of Bioarchaeology and Histology at the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán (Autonomous University of Yucatán, UADY), as well as published data and interpretations from like-minded scholars from throughout the whole Maya area. This insertion into the regional context allows for multiscalar analyses whereby we can zoom in to look at households and neighborhoods while maintaining the possibility to zoom out to analyze settlements and regions, all the while maintaining the focus on the ancient Maya of Yaxúná. By combining this multiscalar analysis with different academic and analytical frameworks (e.g., bioarchaeology, mortuary archaeology, culturally sensitive mainstream archaeology), the work in this volume spans the gamut of human existence in state-level societies, ranging from individuals and neighborhoods to cities and regions.

Given the long and intense traditions of stratigraphic excavation in areas of archaeological sites that often yield human remains in the northern lowlands (e.g., Andrews and Andrews 1980), the region represents an ideal area for this type of regional and also site-specific anthropological approach. From mortuary temples and caves to cenotes (sinkholes) and areas beneath household floors, northern Maya archaeologists have amassed and recorded detailed data on a tremendous amount of human remains over the last century on the final encounter of people with their understanding of the “otherworld.” Many of these data have been studied in a cursory manner (mostly coming from salvage and restoration projects with little time and few resources to dedicate to the complete study of skeletal remains and burial
contexts) or they have been contextualized in terms of individual sites. There are exceptions represented by a number of well-preserved archaeological skeletal populations from the coastal fringes of Yucatán—namely, the large burial series from Jaina, Xcaret, and Xcambó. The latter sample comprises some 600 dated and well-documented individuals from a Classic period trader population, recovered by an INAH team led by Thelma Sierra Sosa during the last decade of the twentieth century (Sierra Sosa et al. 2014a, 2014b) (figure I.2).

Over the past 15 years, two of the authors of this book (V. T. and A. C.) have been gradually building up a large database of skeletal remains from across the Maya lowlands, working out of Mérida in the heart of Yucatán (currently the sample stands at over 3,000 individuals).
This database is the accumulative result of several collaborative field and laboratory projects sustained by the Laboratory of Bioarchaeology and Histology at the UADY. The systematically recorded skeletal record along with the other extensively reported material remains at sites across the Yucatán Peninsula, benefits the successful contextualization of skeletal series from individual sites such as Yaxúná, the focus of this study.

Human existence is complex and even more so where social stratification exists—it is sometimes traced on the earthy remains. Human demise is always a rift in the social fabric—it registers palpably in mortuary practices. Understanding the complex tapestry of human interaction requires us to move beyond studies that focus on single sites as isolated entities in favor of research that places people in the complex regional and supraregional contexts that they would have moved through in the past. Like a puzzle, where every piece is essential but if taken alone does not provide the full idea of the final picture, bioarchaeological collections from single sites cannot be really usefully scrutinized without putting them into a regional context of larger studied populations. Background “noises,” like poor preservation or contextual and osteological biases, still add to the challenges in interpreting human lifeways from the skeletal record, and comparison helps to mitigate these challenges. The ultimate purpose of this study is, beyond elucidating life at Yaxúná specifically, to address Classic period Maya society through the lens of its people, with their remains as testimony. We believe that contrasting the regional versus site-centered data can be widely applied to other sites in the Maya region and to all those other world areas, as well as periods, where such regional databases exist (e.g., Glencross and Boz 2014) or where they can be created. As we wish to illustrate in this volume, such a multidisciplinary, regional approach manages to contextualize the past in ways that neither traditional archaeology nor site-centered bioarchaeology can fully and thoroughly achieve.

THE COMING OF AGE OF MAYA BIOARCHAEOLOGY

Positioned at the interstices between archaeology and physical anthropology, bioarchaeology is well suited to offer a uniquely human view of our past, more so as its immediate study object is the human body (Buikstra and Beck 2006; Larsen 1997). Bioarchaeology may be broadly described as a thematic specialization in archaeology and/or physical anthropology that studies human remains in their context and as fundamental elements in the reconstruction of archaeological societies (see Blakely 1977; Buikstra 1997; Goldstein 2006; Powell et al. 1991). Thus, bioarchaeological analyses subscribe to the physical vestiges of those individuals who once shaped societies: those very same actors who forged regional and local history on a day-to-day basis (Sofaer 2006). In regional Mesoamerican research, bioarchaeological research is particularly important in studies of costume and body modifications such as dental decorations and head shaping of infants (Houston et al. 2006; Tremain 2011), as well as other important life issues, ranging from health and diet to occupational stress and migration (Katzenberg and Saunders 2000; Larsen 1997; Powell et al. 1991; B. Smith 1991).
There are different approaches to the study of the peoples who once inhabited ancient landscapes. While many bioarchaeological studies are site-centric, often a product of research strategies employed by the archaeologists collecting primary data, in this study we advocate for an approach that situates the remains of people from a single site in a broader regional context. This approximation allows for a more detailed and multilayered understanding of patterns discerned from skeletal and other material remains. Approaching site-specific skeletal collections from a regional perspective allows us to contextualize individuals buried at a particular place within the broader social and environmental landscape, within which they and their peers existed. It also opens consideration of different analytical scales while holding constant the focus of study—the site. Thus, bioarchaeologists can apply small-scale analysis to look at the individual households and neighborhoods while maintaining the possibility of taking a step back to analyze settlements and regions, thus providing different perspectives on the same data. This approach has the most utility where there is a large and diverse range of available archaeological and bioarchaeological data from the site itself and from other sites across the region. Skeletal and other material evidence are therefore best used in tandem to benefit more informed interpretations or, in this case, critique. Naturally, the amount of data and its diverse quality have a direct impact on the possibilities of generalization and for understanding the larger frames of past human behavior and existence. This panorama incorporates fields such as mortuary archaeology, mainstream archaeology, and a variety of archaeometric approaches, including studies on carbon (C) and nitrogen (N), and strontium (Sr) and oxygen (O) isotopes, respectively, for diet and place of origins.

Broad approximations to skeletal data are possible also thanks to the increasing influx of bioarchaeological contributions that Maya scholarship has produced since the 1980s. Such studies began in the early 1970s with a first systematic skeletal site appraisal conducted by Saul (1972) at Altar de Sacrificios, Guatemala. In the following decades, bioarchaeological approaches have gradually been gaining ground in Maya studies, as a number of edited volumes before the close of the last millennium already shows (White 1999; Whittington and Reed 1997; see Tiesler and Cucina 2014 and Scherer 2015 for a recent review of the literature).

While much of the early work in Maya bioarchaeology was still devoted to basic descriptions of, and inference from, skeletal remains, twenty-first century scholarship has been striving toward understanding the human sides of ancient Maya life. Traditionally, it has been epigraphers and art historians who have lent voices to the ancient Maya through their texts and their personal portraiture (e.g., Houston et al. 2006; Martin and Grube 2000). In this vein of humanizing the ancient Maya, bioarchaeological datasets are also suited to complement these more discursive examinations by contributing novel insights into those sectors of the population, such as commoners, children, and women, who are less often found in the male-centered elite art and texts.

Despite the fact that many of the current research strategies in regional Maya bioarchaeology do not differ substantially from those pursued in the past decades, skeletal analysis has increasingly reached out to other disciplines (e.g., Sierra Sosa et al. 2014a, 2014b; Scherer 2015; Tiesler and Cucina 2006; Wright 2006). Aside from ever more sophisticated statistical analyses and a host of special studies on bone and dental substrate, biocultural,
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Multidisciplinary approaches are gaining increasing attention in regional scholarship working with burial remains. Despite some resistance to fully integrate bioarchaeological studies into archaeological research designs, in recent years the analysis of skeletal materials has increasingly responded to parameters set forth by multidisciplinary or specifically bioarchaeological agendas that favor the integration of biological and cultural datasets (Buikstra 1997:223; Cucina and Tiesler 2005:30; Tiesler and Cucina 2014).

By examining the literature, it is clear to see that most Maya territories have become the focus of broad yet explicitly “bioarchaeological” studies. For example, correlations between subsistence patterns, paleopathology, and social status distinguish a number of recently published works both for pre-Hispanic (Cucina and Tiesler 2003; Cucina et al. 2011a; Marquez Morfin et al. 2006; Méndez Colli et al. 2009; Ortega 2007) and colonial times (Tiesler et al. 2010a). The new millennium has witnessed the establishment of new approaches for the reconstruction of biological affinity patterns and mobility, through the analysis of morphological and morphometric traits (Cucina 2015; Duncan 2005; Scherer 2007; Tiesler and Cucina 2012a; Wrobel 2004), or of individual movement thanks to sophisticated chemical techniques on trace elements, and strontium (Sr) and oxygen (O) isotope analyses, as well as through the combination of these different indicators (Cucina et al. 2011b, 2015; Price et al. 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017; Sierra Sosa et al. 2014a, 2014b; Wright 2005a, 2005b; Wright et al. 2010). The morphological and morphometric studies at local and regional scales, though limited by looming interobserver variations and small sample sizes, offer a starting point for a new overall appraisal of Maya biological group affinities and macro-regional evolvement in an effort to foster a new biologically grounded definition of what is Maya. In turn, the standard incorporation of new chemical techniques by both archaeologists and bioarchaeologists has already provided valuable novel input on resolving old and new hypotheses on topics such as Maya migration, population history, and diet.

Finally, Maya bioarchaeology has had an impact also on the taphonomy of human remains. For example, the analysis of postmortem changes suffered by the body has been applied in attempts to reconstruct the varied and often complex posthumous body treatments that characterize ancient mortuary Maya traditions, an essential element for a thorough reconstruction of past societies, as underlined by Goldstein (2006). Human taphonomic research, based on the concepts set forth by forensic research or the French anthropologie de terrain (“field anthropology” [Duday et al. 1990]—now called “archaeothanatology” [Duday 2009])—has been applied both to case studies (Pereira 2013; Pereira and Michelet 2004; Tiesler et al. 2010b) and to regional mortuary behavior in general, be it reverential or postsacrificial (Duncan 2005; Tiesler 2007). Considered jointly, the fruitful combination of research tools and academic lenses has resulted in the creation of a vibrant mosaic of Maya bioarchaeological investigation that, in conjunction with archaeological, epigraphic, iconographic, and ethno-historic data, is set to propel a better understanding of what it meant to be Maya in different eras and places on the cultural landscape.

Inserting these types of bioarchaeological analyses into the larger, academically founded narratives of Maya society has been slow. It is unfortunate that most published archaeological syntheses of the northern Maya still appear to neglect the territory’s residents themselves.
As a matter of fact, mainstream archaeology in this area (not dissimilar to other areas of the world) still relies heavily on concepts such as ceramic spheres and settlement patterns to understand larger sociopolitical complexities and cycling, dissociating interpretations based on the study of human remains from other material categories. We believe that this proclivity translates into a biased, mechanical, and shortsighted perception of past economic dynamics, social shifts, and political processes.

**YAXUNÁ AS A TEST CASE**

It was this general lack of a human dimension in northern lowland Maya archaeology that provided us with the initial inspiration to write this book using the burial series from Yaxuná as the cornerstone of historical reconstruction. These data speak to the quotidian facets of growing up, changing residence, eating, combating illness and death, the physical looks of people, and the drama of natural or ritually caused death—things that mattered in the daily lives of the ancient Maya. Our inquiries into the human side of ancient Maya kingdoms do not stand as isolated efforts, of course, but instead follow in the footsteps of a number of prior studies converging on body-anchored information (see Houston et al. 2006; Saul 1972; Scherer 2015; Tiesler 2012, 2014; Tiesler and Cucina 2006; Tiesler et al. 2010a, 2010b; White 1999; Wright 2006; Whittington and Reed 1997).

The site of Yaxuná is located in the northern Maya lowlands in the modern state of Yucatán, Mexico. While the number of skeletons (the majority dating to the Classic period [AD 250–900]) excavated from the site itself is relatively low (N = 48), Yaxuná provides an interesting test case for our regional approach for several reasons. First and foremost of these reasons is the long history of research at the site, spanning almost one century (figure I.3). Four distinct archaeological projects have conducted stratigraphic excavations at Yaxuná, resulting in a broad base of knowledge of the archaeology of this ancient city (e.g., Ardren 1997; Brainerd 1958; Freidel 1987, 1992, 2007; Novelo Rincón 2012; Stanton et al. 2010; Stanton and Magnoni 2013; Suhler 1996; Suhler et al. 1998a, 1998b; Toscano Hernández and Ortegón 2003; see chapter 1 for a broader view). The depth of previous research helps us to put the ancient people at Yaxuná into context much better than we can for many other archaeological sites in the northern Maya lowlands, while ongoing research, currently directed by Travis Stanton and Traci Ardren, continues to refine our understanding of the site and the region (figure I.4).

Second, the ancient city looks back on a very long and continuous occupation, spanning the Middle Formative (1000/900–300 BC) to the Terminal Classic (AD 700/750–1000/1100) periods. Even after the abandonment of the site during the Terminal Classic, people continued to bury their dead in repositories within the ruins. In fact, after the Spanish conquest a substantial Colonial/Historic period occupation covered sections of the former pre-Hispanic capital, resulting in the burial of at least one individual dated to postcontact times (Stanton et al. 2010). This extended timespan gives us the opportunity to frame the life and death of the ancient people of Yaxuná with even greater historic depth.

FIGURE I.4. Photo of the UADY bioarchaeology team recovering Burial 27 at Yaxuná (photo by S. Simon).
Third, apart from the extended time dimension at Yaxuná, the existing regional database anchors the case study of Yaxuná within broader population and cultural dynamics. The Maya lowlands is one of the most researched areas of Mesoamerica, with the state of Yucatán and the country of Belize being foci for particularly intensive and extensive research over the past since the late 1980s. This comparative database makes most work in the Maya lowlands amenable to the type of regional analysis proposed here but particularly in Yucatán where Yaxuná is located.

Fourth, Yaxuná is located at an important crossroads in the Maya area, resulting in the intersection of styles and people in what we envision to have been a city with a fairly high degree of multiculturalism. Yaxuná is located at the borders of the eastern and western cultural spheres of the northern Maya lowlands (see Andrews and Robles 1985; Freidel 1992). Its continued cultural ties to the southern lowland kingdoms—from the Formative period through the Late Classic—indicate that it was an important hub of interregional trade networks from the time of its initial establishment (Brainerd 1942; Loya Gonzalez and Stanton 2013, 2014; Stanton 2012).

Fifth, two of the few known Classic period royal tombs from the northern territories were found at Yaxuná (Suhler 1996; Suhler and Freidel 1998). Both of these contexts date to the Early Classic and give us a rare view into dynastic rule in the north. Finally, given the close location of Yaxuná to the Terminal Classic metropolis of Chichén Itzá and its connection to the east to the Late Classic power of Cobá by way of the longest-known Maya causeway (sacbé) (100 km), Yaxuná is in a unique position to offer a greater understanding of the socio-political dynamics of some of the most important urban states of the Maya Classic period.

Apart from our targeted research design, the choice of Yaxuná as the site-centered focus of this regional study has much to do with timing. The creation of the regional skeletal database was a process that took years in the making. The quantity and quality of analyses of the individuals represented in this database, which result from research projects conducted at the UADY directly or under the supervision of two of the authors of this book (V. T. and A. C.), has reached a point now that the data collection can be adequately used as a contextualizing tool to understand the remains of the social actors at individual sites, even in cases where the sample size is not particularly large, such as in Yaxuná. The issue of sample size will be addressed by studying locals as part of much larger populations who were interacting with each other to varying degrees, benefiting a much more nuanced study of bioarchaeology in the Maya area and the lives of people in one particular community, in this case Yaxuná.

**A ROADMAP FOR THIS BOOK**

The organization of the volume follows its central goals and is structured according to core aspects of life- and deathways. Chapter 1 provides the groundwork for what follows by situating Yaxuná in a regional context while leading the reader through a detailed discussion of the previous work conducted at the site. The chapter explores what we currently know about...
social, economic, political, and ideological trajectories of the people who lived in the area from the beginning of the Middle Formative (ca. 1000–900 BC) to the Spanish invasion in the sixteenth century. This survey provides the backdrop for understanding the remains of the ancient settlers of Yaxuná and serves as an interpretive framework for creating a period-by-period working narrative using different skeletal data as cornerstones. A recount of colonial and postcolonial Maya experiences in the core of Yucatán rounds out our archaeological chronicle.

The archaeological and cultural overviews of chapter 1 set the stage for examining ancient population dynamics and mobility in Yaxuná and beyond in the next chapter. Yet how may we infer the place of origin of those who died in Yaxuná, as well as identify those who emigrated out of the area to reside elsewhere? To address these and similar questions through a bioarchaeological lens, we combine different approaches. First, individual provenience is analyzed in all individuals by means of strontium and oxygen isotopes, a methodological tool recently adopted by Maya bioarchaeology (Price et al. 2008) that allows researchers to discern individuals of distant geographic origins from those who are likely local folk. Specifically, the isotopic information used in this chapter derives from the individual isotopic data published by Price and his colleagues (2017) and reelaborated according to sex.

Our second approach to mobility explores the biological distances (or in some cases affinities) of individuals from Yaxuná to other groups from the area. To this end, we use sets of dental morphological traits, which are heavily conditioned by genetics. Microevolutionary theory holds that those human groups in close biological contact with one another show blending of traits. Inversely, prolonged reproductive isolation will lead to a progressive dissimilarity in traits. Thus, by using dental morphology as an indicator, we attempt to identify movements of people in and out of this socially dynamic community.

Moving on to demography, lifestyle, and health issues, chapter 3 explores the basic biocultural information of the individuals represented in the Yaxuná sample. Translating the biological concept of sex into gender (a cultural construct) and the concept of biological age at death into social age groups and age-related horizontal stratification, we interpret and discuss the people from Yaxuná collectively as social actors in a changing society. Analyzing biocultural data in relation to mortuary spaces, residential areas, and funerary equipment will allow us to address broader questions of inequality, specialization, and social organization. Here we will also touch on other relevant aspects, such as life expectancy, childhood mortality, physiological stressors, and physical loads on women and men. More general questions regarding growth potential and retardation, as well as adult health and lifestyle, are addressed by scrutinizing stress markers in our skeletal series.

Foodways, dietary habits, and lifestyle will be the focus of chapter 4. Chemical analyses focus on the relative proportions of C$^{12}$, C$^{13}$, N$^{14}$, and N$^{15}$ stable isotopes, expressed by their $\delta^{13}C$ and $\delta^{15}N$ values, which are used to assess respectively the extent of C3 versus C4 plants in the diet and the individuals’ trophic level in relation to protein consumption. Concurrently, we use indirect indicators of dietary intake, such as faunal data (Götz and Stanton 2013), and focus on diet-related health issues, such as oral pathologies (e.g., carious lesions)
and dental wear, to discern the nutritional quality of the Yaxuná Maya. Compared to other material datasets such as cooking and serving implements, as well as faunal data, we contextualize the foodways in relation to social status, sex, and gender.

In the next chapter (chapter 5) we move on to examine physical embodiment and social identities at Yaxuná. Here we elaborate specifically on those permanent body modifications that have left traces in the skeletal remnants of the living—namely, dental decoration and head shaping. Both practices were commonly performed by the Classic period Maya, leading to visible changes in the appearance of head and teeth in the living, and to changes in dental and cranial morphology in the skeletonized dead. After briefly addressing the techniques, instruments, and health risks involved in their execution, we discuss some of the ideological roles of specific artificial head forms and dental reductions. This analysis draws also on regional comparison of Maya body modifications, specifically on areas such as the southern Maya lowlands, the coast, the Puuc Hills, and the central and eastern northern lowlands (Tiesler 1999, 2012, 2014).

Local funerary traditions are communicated by the arrangement of the body (or in some cases body parts), funerary spaces, and burial goods or equipment. In chapter 6 we focus on the breadth and depth of local mortuary practices at Yaxuná, the collective ancestral beliefs and related ritual behaviors. Their physical remnants have been principally found underneath the floors of domestic structures. Here we primarily reconstruct the mortuary pathways of different forms of body preparation, deposition, and posthumous manipulation during the Late and Terminal Classic, from which we date all the burials from domestic contexts in our sample.

The lives and deaths of two rulers and their posthumous treatments are addressed in chapter 7. The focus of our attention are Burials 23 and 24, two Early Classic royal burial chambers discovered during the early 1990s by the Selz Foundation project (Suhler 1996). A step-by-step reconstruction of the preparations, depositions, and subsequent visits introduces a contextual analysis of the symbolism in the bodies and the artifacts of the tombs. There is suggestive evidence that Burial 23, dating to the fourth century AD, represents the first dynast to rule at Yaxuná. This king shows ties to the Kaanul, the Land of the Snake Kings, further south. In the case of Burial 24, a later tomb dating to the fourth or possibly early part of the fifth century AD, there is convincing taphonomic evidence that the ruler was ritually sacrificed along with an entourage of men, women, and children. This literal decapitation of the state at Yaxuná is accompanied by artifactual and iconographic evidence that the conqueror was associated with the Teotihuacan-inspired *entreda* (arrival) of Sihyaj K’ahk’ documented in the southern lowlands (Schele and Freidel 1990; Stuart 2000). The new order of kingdoms that were aligned with Teotihuacan and Sihyaj K’ahk’ after AD 378 were ruled by adversaries of Kaanul kings. Could Yaxuná have functioned as a northern vassal kingdom conquered by the forces of Sihyaj K’ahk’? Why was Burial 23 reentered, and why were some of the materials contained in it carefully manipulated to graph as the immediate ancestor of the sacrificed king in Burial 24? We will discuss these and other questions in regard to the politics of Maya ancestor veneration versus desecration.
In chapter 8, we shift our discussion regarding the last rites for Yaxuná’s populace toward the treatments of individuals found in particular contexts suggesting their role in offering rituals, often involving sacrifice. Most sacrificial killings stand in stark contrast to reverential treatments of the deceased from the Maya area. Some of the contexts discussed in this chapter stand out by presenting cut-marks from flaying or dismemberment, or other expressions of deviant sepulchral behavior. We will compare these interments of sacrificed individuals to body treatments that we have documented in other coeval Maya sites and confront them to later forms of body processing, such as those known from Chichén Itzá.

Finally, in chapter 9 we tie the lines of argument and survey to situate the ancient Maya of Yaxuná into the larger regional context. A theoretically informed and contextualized discussion offers glimpses of Yaxuná and its people in the larger arena of Classic period sociopolitical dynamics, more so as Yaxuná played an important role in the political and economic scheming of some of the most important polities across the lowlands during the Classic period, including Cobá, the Puuc centers, and the distant Petén kingdoms. These shifting social and biocultural dynamics, in the form of urbanization and sociopolitical reproduction, operated successfully for centuries before and during the arrival of the Itzá.