

Working Groups at the BCDSS

Asymmetrical Dependency in Classic Maya Society (ADCMS)

In this interdisciplinary working group, we study all facets of asymmetrical dependency in ancient Maya society in Mesoamerica. Our group is open to all people interested in Maya culture, especially to those who want to contribute with their own expertise to illuminate a still unexplored topic.

The problem of studying ancient Maya society

The Maya of the Classic period (ca. 250-900 A.D.) lived in the culture area of Mesoamerica in the territory of the present-day states of southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador and northwest Honduras. Like all premodern societies in Mesoamerica, they developed without any contact to cultures outside the Americas. As a consequence, many cultural aspects show a strong contrast to the "Old World" and do not allow for direct comparisons, making them difficult to reconstruct. Although the Maya had a complex writing system, little is known about their lives and social conditions. The hieroglyphic texts, which we can understand better nowadays, speak mostly of the nobility, the deeds of the divine rulers, their victories and defeats, diplomatic moves, important rituals, mythical tales, astronomical observations and calendar predictions. However, nothing is ever written about the lives of ordinary people, their rights and duties. Clues on topics such as gender, property, social roles and the social relationships between different status groups are best provided by iconographic representations, archaeological proxies and diachronic analogies.

What we want

Our working group aims to shed light on these issues with a special focus on dependency using various disciplines. We want to explore methods with which we can reconstruct dependencies in ancient Maya society. With settlement and environmental archaeology, we discuss social relations about resource management and the spatial distribution of people and objects. With bioarchaeology, the study of human remains, we look for the effects of violence, the different access to food and health care, etc. With linguistics we investigate terminology and use it to explore culturally internal concepts of dependency. With iconography, epigraphy, colonial ethnohistory and ethnoarchaeology we search for parallels and analogies. By combining these different perspectives, we want to investigate lived experiences of dependency. This includes the agency of dependent actors, which we can explore through archaeological research as well as through the analysis of emic terms from the written and spoken language of contemporary and ancient Maya groups.

The spectrum of our working group is not limited to the Maya and not only to the Classic period, but also requires the observation of neighboring cultures (e.g. Teotihuacan and the Aztec in Central Mexico) and other epochs (e.g. Postclassic and colonial) in order to work out spatial and temporal connections and to use them as references for comparison.

What we do

Our activities so far include mainly brainstorming sessions and discussion of literature. However, we are open to new formats and may want to write papers together later.

Who we are

Our working group is thematically located on the courtyard of the BCDSS, thus inviting not only interested members of the cluster to participate in our activities, but also Mayanists, Mesoamerican researchers and students from other institutions around the world.

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