

# Maya Pilgrimage to Ritual Landscapes

Insights from Archaeology, History, and Ethnography



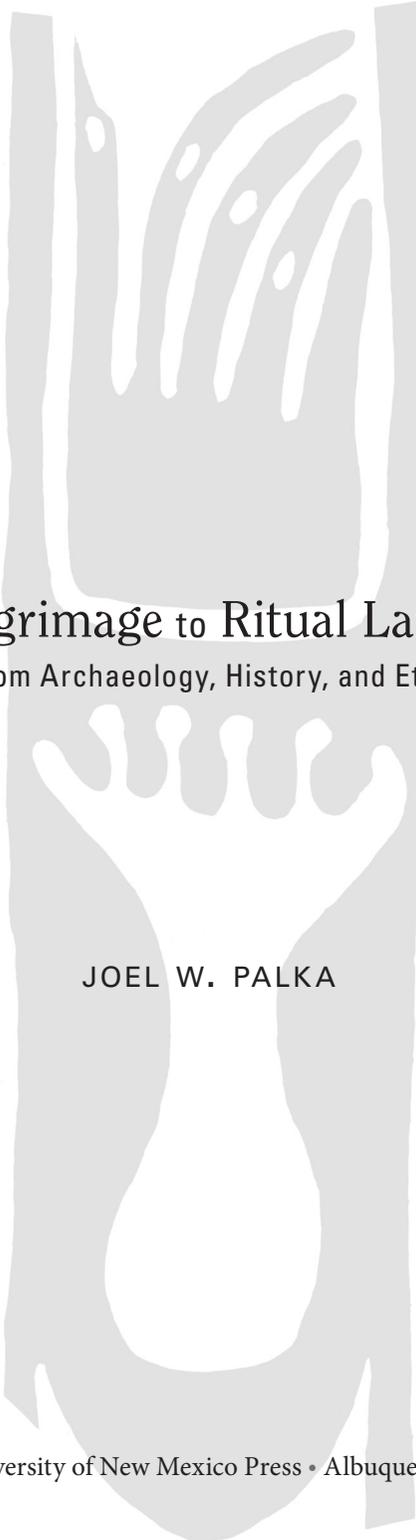
JOEL W. PALKA

## Maya Pilgrimage to Ritual Landscapes

ARCHAEOLOGIES OF LANDSCAPE IN THE AMERICAS SERIES

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**Maya Pilgrimage to Ritual Landscapes**  
Insights from Archaeology, History, and Ethnography

JOEL W. PALKA

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH: Maya ritual cliff at Lake Mensabak, Chiapas, Mexico  
Courtesy of Joel W. Palka

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For my wife, Nilda, and kids, Elena, Diana, and Julian,  
who made this work possible.



# Contents



*Illustrations ix*

*Acknowledgments xv*

*Chapter One*

Ritual Landscapes, Pilgrimage, and  
Cultures in the Southern Maya Region 1

*Chapter Two*

Pilgrimage, Ritual Landscapes, and Material Culture 37

*Chapter Three*

Ritual Landscapes, Communicating Places, and Community 100

*Chapter Four*

Homes of the Earth Lords: Maya Caves,  
Ruins, and Boulders 153

*Chapter Five*

Creation and the Moon Goddess:  
Maya Islands and Ritual Waters 201

*Chapter Six*

Mountains of Sustenance and Cliffs of Paradise  
in Maya Pilgrimage 242

*Chapter Seven*

Conclusions: Interpreting Maya Ritual Landscapes  
and Pilgrimage 299

*References Cited 321*

*Index 361*



# Illustrations



## FIGURES

1.1.	Lacandon Maya ceramic incense burner	2
1.2.	Island in a ritual lake	3
1.3.	Stained glass showing the pilgrimage shrine of Lourdes	8
1.4.	Nazca ceramic pilgrimage scene	9
1.5.	Pilgrimage to a Spanish church on an ancient Maya temple, Chichicastenango	12
1.6.	Lacandon Maya youth visiting a Preclassic Maya temple	15
1.7.	Map of Mesoamerica	16
1.8.	Map showing the ethnic groups and pilgrimage sites of the Southern Maya Region	17
1.9.	Map of the Southern Maya Region	20
1.10.	Map of the archaeological sites and pilgrimage shrines, Mensabak	21
1.11.	Maya temple or effigy mountain, Tikal	26
1.12.	Southern Lacandon Maya pilgrims at the Classic Maya ruins of Yaxchilan	30
1.13.	Tzeltal Maya men praying at a ritual cliff for rain	34
1.14.	Ch'orti' Maya festival and the great horned rain serpent Noh Chih Chan	36
2.1.	Ritual mountain shrine of Machu Picchu	39
2.2.	Composite drawing of Ancient Pueblo rock art	44
2.3.	Footprints in pilgrimage iconography	45
2.4.	Maya metal votive offerings and clay pilgrims' tablets	49
2.5.	Maya pilgrim road at the entrance to Kabah	57
2.6.	Pilgrims at the shrine of Chalma	66
2.7.	Pilgrims bathe in the springs at the shrine of Chalma	67
2.8.	The apparition of Christ above pilgrims at the cave shrine of Chalma	68
2.9.	Aztec pilgrims ascend Mount Tlaloc	69
2.10.	Aztec ancestors leave the island of Aztlan	70

2.11.	Catholic church on a Maya ritual hill, San Cristobal de las Casas	71
2.12.	Spanish churches on ancient Maya platforms, Chichicasteango	72
2.13.	Teotihuacan mural showing footprints and elite male religious specialist	73
2.14.	Temples near mountains with boulders and rock art, Chalcatzingo	75
2.15.	Handprints and foot-shaped ceramic stamps from Chalcatzingo	76
2.16.	Female and male figurines from Chalcatzingo	77
2.17.	Mixtec pilgrim arrives at a cave shrine	78
2.18.	Mural at the Colossal Natural Bridge cave	79
2.19.	Sculpture of goddess Ix Chel	83
2.20.	Red handprints, Las Manitas Temple	84
2.21.	Cave passage under Las Manitas Temple	85
2.22.	Stone causeway and arch leading to a shrine, San Gervasio	86
2.23.	Shrine at a causeway terminus, San Gervasio	87
2.24.	Maya hieroglyphs and images related to ritual and pilgrimage	90
2.25.	Preclassic Maya cave painting with walking Maya noble, Loltun Cave	91
2.26.	Foot- and handprints, Tixcuytun Cave	92
2.27.	Altar 45 (monolith) at the ruins of Takalik Abaj	94
2.28.	Line of basalt monuments near mounds, spring, and hills, Naranjo	98
3.1.	A prominent mountain as a ritual landscape, Teotihuacan	112
3.2.	The mountain on the island of Aztlan	113
3.3.	A feathered serpent from the symbolic mountain, Tenochtitlan	114
3.4.	Maya sacred mountain near the ruins of Copán	116
3.5.	Springs at the pilgrimage shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico City	118
3.6.	Maya ritual cliff at Lake Mensabak	121
3.7.	Springwater flowing over a ritual cliff at Chechem Ha Falls	122
3.8.	Possible Tlaloc face on a Maya ritual cliff, La Casa de las Golondrinas	123
3.9.	Boulder sculpture with Tlaloc images and water channel at Bilbao	124
3.10.	The Olmec "pilgrim" on a boulder (Monument 13), La Venta	126
3.11.	Maya carved zoomorphic boulder at Quirigua	128
3.12.	Boulder with rock art near the Copán Valley	129
3.13.	Lacandon Maya ritual cave in a cliff on the shore of Lake Petha	130
3.14.	Carved monolith showing an Olmec ruler, La Venta	132
3.15.	Actun Tunichil Muknal Cave	134
3.16.	Drawings of monkeys and a jaguar on the wall of Bombil Pec Cave	136
3.17.	Ancient pilgrimage avenue, Pyramid of the Sun, and shrine, Teotihuacan	137
3.18.	Sculpted monolith and modern Maya shrine, El Baúl	139

3.19.	Postclassic Maya temple over a ruined substructure, Coba	141
3.20.	Ceramic incense burner with deity image, Coba	141
3.21.	Carved stone stela where modern Mayas left offerings, Coba	141
3.22.	Depiction of Pantitlan and offerings in Lake Tetzco	143
3.23.	Miniature ceramic vessel used as a pilgrim offering, Lake Chapala	144
3.24.	Mouth of the sacred cenote, Chichen Itza	146
3.25.	Mixtec nobles traveling by canoe to a ritual island	148
3.26.	Central pyramid on an island in a swamp, La Venta	150
3.27.	Temple shrine on a cliff, Isla Mujeres	152
4.1.	Profile and plan drawing of a Tzeltal Maya ritual cave, Chacalchib	156
4.2.	Ritual cave associated with ancestors and Lacandon Maya myths, Mensabak	157
4.3.	Historic Lacandon Maya cave shrine, Mensabak	161
4.4.	Late Postclassic–historic Maya zoomorphic ceramic figurine and anthropomorphic incense burner from Maya ritual caves, Jatate River	163
4.5.	Red handprints in the Cueva de las Manos Rojas near Budsilha	166
4.6.	Wooden stool in a cave shrine in the Mensabak ritual cliff, Lake Mensabak	168
4.7.	Ritual cave on the lakeshore, Mensabak	169
4.8.	Items found in an ancient Maya shrine, Balankanche Cave	171
4.9.	Ancient Maya pilgrimage shrine, Balankanche Cave	172
4.10.	Maya shrine of piled stones in a pool at the end of a tunnel, Balankanche Cave	173
4.11.	Tlaloc rain and earth god image on a Maya ceramic incense burner, Balankanche Cave	174
4.12.	Maya rock carvings on a flowstone boulder, Aktun Uayazba Kab Cave	175
4.13.	Mural depicting the maize god and attendants, San Bartolo	176
4.14.	Polychrome jar from Cieneguilla Cave	178
4.15.	Carving of the Tlaloc rain and earth god from a cave, Jatate River	178
4.16.	Tzeltal Maya shrine with offerings near a standing stone, Cololte	181
4.17.	Lacandon Maya shrine in a ruined building, Yaxchilan	184
4.18.	Classic Maya stone altar and historic Lacandon Maya ceramic incense burners, Yaxchilan	185
4.19.	Late Postclassic to historic ceramic incense burners, Tikal	187
4.20.	Maya pilgrim graffiti, gouges, and red handprints, Tikal	187
4.21.	Small pilgrim shrine attached to an ancient terrace wall, Tonina	188
4.22.	Handprint and a stone celt with a footprint, Tonina	189

4.23. Historic Lacandon Maya ceramic <i>incensarios</i> or “god pots,” Petén	191
4.24. Boulder sculpture and contemporary Maya earth lord shrine, El Baúl	194
4.25. Olmec carved monolith possibly from San Antonio Suchitepequez	195
4.26. Olmec carving of a walking noble or god on a boulder at the Xoc site	196
4.27. Carved boulder with two seated figures, Piedras Negras	197
4.28. Carvings on the limestone slab at Planchón de las Figuras	198
5.1. A contemporary highland Guatemala Maya shrine	204
5.2. Cathedral and pilgrimage shrine at Esquipulas	207
5.3. Lacandon ritual near a small waterfall, Palenque	209
5.4. Flock of cormorants, Lake Catzajaja	211
5.5. Postclassic Maya carved bone from Lake Peten Itza	213
5.6. Late Postclassic to historic Maya ceramic female figurines, Lake Mensabak	214
5.7. Plan of the ritual cave and cliff site of Kuyak, Lake Mensabak	215
5.8. Monumental carved feathered serpent, Lake Mensabak	216
5.9. The Tzibana ritual cliff, Lake Mensabak	217
5.10. Red and black feathered serpent, Chiquimula, and carved feathered serpents, Santa Elena de Izopo	218
5.11. Ceramic vessels and plan of ritual architecture, Contreras Alto and Los Jicaques	220
5.12. Pilgrim offerings from Lake Amatitlan	221
5.13. Acropolis flanked by cenotes, cliffs, and lakes, Chinkultic	223
5.14. Acropolis and shrine, Chinkultic	224
5.15. Cliff, the Blue Cenote, lakes, and mountains, Chinkultic	225
5.16. Stela illustrating a Maya ruler, Chinkultic	226
5.17. Ritual cave at the ruins of Chinkultic	227
5.18. Late Postclassic Maya ceramic incense burners, Lake Mendoza	228
5.19. Fragments of Maya modeled ceramic incense burners, Lake Mendoza	229
5.20. Small copper bell with a loop to attach to clothing, Lake Mensabak	230
5.21. View of island and cliff shrines from Mirador Mountain	231
5.22. Ancient Maya island, Usumacinta River	232
5.23. Flores Island with a cathedral over Maya constructions, Petén	233
5.24. Islands with leveled summits at Lake Mendoza	234
5.25. Reconstruction of modified island, Lake Mendoza	235
5.26. Late Preclassic Maya ceremonial architecture, Lake Mendoza	237
5.27. Lacandon Maya pilgrims at Lake Petha	238
5.28. Reconstruction of rituals, Lake Petha	239

5.29. Elite Maya structure, Progreso Lagoon	240
5.30. Historic Maya ceramic stamp and a glass scallop shell, Progreso Lagoon	241
6.1. Tzotzil Maya shrine and cemetery on a ritual hill in highland Chiapas	244
6.2. Curved mountain that resembles Culhuacan, Jatate River	258
6.3. Stela showing Maya lords, Santa Elena Poco Uinic	260
6.4. Cliffs at the split mountain of Aguateca	261
6.5. Mirador Mountain on an island in Lake Mensabak	263
6.6. East side of Mirador Mountain, Lake Mensabak	264
6.7. Cave on the north side of Mirador Mountain, Mensabak	265
6.8. Cenote and cliff on the west side of Mirador Mountain, Mensabak	266
6.9. Temple on the summit of Mirador Mountain, Mensabak	267
6.10. Late Preclassic ceramic incense burner, miniature abstract anthropomorphic figurine in quartzite, and small ceramic flask, Mirador Mountain	268
6.11. Late Preclassic Maya ceremonial constructions, Mirador Mountain	269
6.12. Terraces on the north side of Mirador Mountain	270
6.13. Modified hill with thirteen terraces and leveled summit, Ocosingo	271
6.14. Lower two terraces at Ixtabay at the base of Mirador Mountain	272
6.15. Large boulder on Terrace #7, Mirador Mountain	273
6.16. Reconstruction of the Mirador Mountain pilgrimage plazas, shrines, and terraces, Lake Mensabak	274
6.17. Cliff shrine for the Lacandon Maya god Mensabak with rock art panels, Lake Mensabak	276
6.18. Tzeltal Maya rain ritual at a cliff shrine in the Mensabak region	278
6.19. San Diego cliff carving, Petén	279
6.20. Rock art on a cliff, Lake Miramar	280
6.21. Maya cliff carving with a turtle shell design, Piedras Negras	281
6.22. Cliff shrine with rock art panels, Lake Petha	282
6.23. Late Postclassic to historic Maya ceramic incense burner, Lake Petha cliff shrine	283
6.24. Red handprint and black figure on a cliff shrine, Lake Petha	284
6.25. Itsamna' images: Lake Petha cliff shrine and Santa Rita mural	285
6.26. Reconstruction of the Mensabak ritual cliff	286
6.27. Shrine at the base of the Mensabak ritual cliff	287
6.28. Rock painting of a face, essence, or smoke scrolls, Lake Mensabak	289
6.29. Late Postclassic images of Tlaloc as a rain god	290
6.30. Red handprints on the Mensabak cliff, Lake Mensabak	291

6.31. Carved footprints near the K'ak' cliff shrine, Mensabak	292
6.32. Sak Tat cliff shrine, Mensabak	293
6.33. Rock art on the Tzibana ritual cliff, Mensabak	295
6.34. Red-painted hieroglyphic panel on the Tzibana cliff, Mensabak	297

**TABLE**

7.1 Chronology, pilgrimage, and potential stresses at Lake Mensabak	309
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## Ritual Landscapes, Pilgrimage, and Cultures in the Southern Maya Region



When the people [male ritual leaders] have finished their promises [on the San Antonio Mountain] they move to the cave of “El Señor,” where it is said that they conclude their petitions in this sacred place. The interior of this cave has a stone image that represents him. From this image water is born that they say is blessed. With their drums and their flutes and red banners, the leaders initiate their return [to the church].

—Ch’ol Maya narrative, José L. Pérez Chacón,  
*Los Choles de Tila y su mundo*, 1993, 214–15

As we cleared the brush obscuring the stone walls of an ancient Maya temple on a mountain at Lake Mensabak in Chiapas, Mexico, our Lacandon Maya collaborator shouted that he had discovered an old Lacandon incense burner nestled between some slumped blocks (fig. 1.1). He then told a story about how local Lacandon men, including his father, had ascended the mountain to leave the offering. The rituals they performed consisted of curing ceremonies for family members back in the village. His male relatives would travel to this shrine to provide food offerings and burn incense for the resident gods (*k’uh* or *k’ul*) in ceramic god pots (*u lakil k’ul/k’ur*) to request their help in healing the sick. The Lacandon men would take small stones from the temple back to their villages to animate their god pots and leave incense burners as payments for the gods’ help and to compensate them for removing the stones. He finished his story by stating that the men visited similar homes of the gods in caves and mountains around the lake to ask for rain.



*Figure 1.1.* Lacandon Maya ceramic incense burner placed in the stone-block wall of a Preclassic Maya temple on the summit of Mirador Mountain, Mensabak, Chiapas, Mexico.

Maya pilgrimages to ritual landscapes have a long history at Lake Mensabak. As it turns out, the stone-block temple visited by the Lacandon men rests on the summit of a mountain on an island (fig. 1.2). Furthermore, the ruined temple used by the Lacandon for ritual purposes was constructed by the Preclassic Maya around A.D. 200. This building sits in front of a dramatic vertical cave shaft, and it faces a series of cave and boulder shrines on the north slope of the mountain. What is more impressive is that this temple is found in a rectangular plaza that was meticulously leveled on the summit by ancient Maya architects. The cave shrines, plaza, and temple complex were visited by large numbers of Maya pilgrims arriving by canoe who ascended the hill on monumental terraces. Ancient pilgrimage sites like this one—as well as innumerable shrines at springs, on islands, near boulders, and in other ritual landscapes—can be found throughout the Maya region and Mesoamerica (Broda et al. 2009; Carrasco and Sessions, eds. 2007; Crumrine and Morinis 1991; Hammond and Bobo 1994; Kubler 1984; Martínez Marín 1972; Vogt 1981).

Maya ritual landscapes and pilgrimage have retained their social, religious, and political importance for Maya people for thousands of years, as cave



*Figure 1.2.* Island in a ritual lake with the pyramidal Mirador Mountain and red-stained limestone cliff, Mensabak, Chiapas, Mexico (photograph by Sebastián Salgado Flores).

archaeology has demonstrated (Brady 2000; Prufer and Brady 2005; Stone 1995). In the colonial period, the continued occurrence of native Maya rites far from the Catholic churches weighed heavily on the minds of Spanish priests and officials. They often complained about the survival of Maya pagan rituals at shrines in caves, in forests, and on mountains where the Mayas' so-called idols or god images were kept (Chuchiak 2009; Clendinnen 1987; Stone 1932; Ximénez 1999). The shrines were maintained by Maya religious specialists for communication with spiritual essences and to maintain cosmic balance during the tumultuous times of the Spanish colonial period. These rites were not innovations, but the continuation of ancient practices. The need to preserve both Maya images in shrines and the freedom to travel to and worship at them provoked native rebellions in Chiapas following the Spanish conquest. The Tzeltal Maya revolt in 1712, for instance, ignited after Spanish priests curtailed pilgrimages to and rituals at a recently established shrine on a hill near Cancuc (Bricker 1981:59–69; Gosner 1992:122–23). A young Maya woman claimed to have had a vision of the Virgin Mary in the forest near the mountains. At this special place, the apparition told the Tzeltal woman that she would help the

indigenous people if they would construct a shrine dedicated to her. Subsequently, Maya male religious and political leaders from Cancuc declared themselves head priests and attempted to break away from Spanish rule to set up their own religious order and political organization. Meanwhile, the shrine was visited by large numbers of Maya pilgrims from surrounding areas who came to ask the Virgin for favors and cures as well as to listen to her messages. The Spanish retaliated by hunting down the Maya leaders, abolishing the ceremonies, and destroying the shrine.

Descriptions of Maya pilgrimages to shrines in the ritual landscape frequently occur in contemporary ethnographic writing about Chiapas. Anthropologists studying the Lacandon Maya at the turn of the twentieth century remarked upon the Mayas' journeys to caves and cliffs in the forest to undertake rituals (Soustelle 1961; Soustelle 1970:33; Tozzer 1907). Later in the twentieth century, the study of Maya pilgrimages to ritual landscapes became a cornerstone of anthropological and archaeological work in Chiapas (Vogt 1969, 1981). These investigations heralded the current interest in Maya shrines at significant geographical features, particularly caves and mountains (Bassie Sweet 1996, 2008; Brady and Prufer 2005; Brown 2005). Research questions regarding Maya pilgrimage to ritual landscapes and its long history can be examined within the anthropology and archaeology of native religion in Mesoamerica (Benson 1981; López Austin and López Luján 2009; Monaghan 1995; Sandstrom 2005). For instance, why has Maya pilgrimage to ritual landscapes prevailed from the distant past to the present? What are the functions of Maya pilgrimage, and why have journeys to ritual landscapes been important in Maya religion? How can we recognize Maya pilgrimage to ritual landscapes in the archaeological and ethnographic records? How does Maya behavior compare to other pilgrimage practices around the world? In this book, I will address these questions through cross-cultural comparisons based in archaeology, ethnohistory, and ethnography, and I will also consider the importance of Maya ritual landscapes and pilgrimage for native social identity and community.

Before I discuss the central elements of Maya pilgrimage to landscape shrines, I would like to point out that I examine them in a Mesoamerican cultural context. Also, I consider pilgrimage in Maya state- and village-level societies from its development thousands of years ago to the present. Like McCorrison (2011), I am interested in pilgrimage as a metastructure, or an element of social life that is so integral to a cultural core that it transcends political and temporal parameters. Like certain aspects of social organization,

subsistence, and religion in both ancient Maya states and modern villages, Maya pilgrimage to ritual landscapes has survived over the centuries and can be studied through material remains and ethnographies. Since pilgrimage to ritual landscapes is important around the globe, I am interested in exploring cross-cultural similarities. I concentrate on the Southern Maya Region, or Chiapas and adjacent areas in Guatemala, because of my research interests and the wealth of information found there.

Three main points regarding Maya culture are important for our consideration of Maya ritual landscapes and pilgrimage. The study of Maya pilgrimage must take into account the intersection of ritual landscapes and religion in Mesoamerica. Impressive landscape features are the “communicating places” or abodes of deities who can act benevolently or malevolently toward humans. The essences responsible for providing rain, food, health, and life itself are concentrated in ritual landscapes, and these essences must be visited and propitiated for their life-giving properties to be released. These places are separated from human settlements because they are potentially dangerous. This separation is an important component of beliefs in human versus nonhuman space and the achievement of pilgrims’ goals, which include heightened ritual experiences, contact with spiritual forces, and subsequent transformation. But rather than a few major pilgrimage centers, as seen elsewhere in the world, Mesoamerica has countless pilgrimage shrines since each community has places to contact deities and ancestors. Mesoamerican people manifest a “pilgrimage culture” in which visits to shrines are a part of everyday life. Furthermore, pilgrimages to ritual landscapes in Mesoamerica are related to the covenants between indigenous people and spiritual forces, thus they are more obligatory than voluntary. In this regard, Mesoamerican and, in particular, Maya pilgrimage revolves around the maintenance of cosmic order and the collective good. Rites at the shrines frequently concern fertility (human and agricultural), curing the sick, and the control of rainfall.

Pilgrimages in this culture area are at times carried out during annual festivals, and hence pilgrimages undertaken on a regular basis are often in tune with ritual calendars. However, pilgrimages are additionally carried out in times of crisis or periods of imbalance, including during droughts, conflicts, and when the need for curing arises. Moreover, people perform pilgrimages to give thanks to spiritual forces for providing necessities and good health. Mesoamerican and Maya pilgrimage to ritual landscapes also has sociopolitical aspects centering on identity, political power, and economics. Pilgrimage

is important to ideas about community origins and social identity and is connected with notions about territory. Elites and adult male religious specialists largely manage pilgrimages because they run community politics, economies, and agriculture. They are more “ritually pure” than women and younger non-specialists. Also, pilgrimage has economic consequences since it involves trade, markets, feasting, temporary housing, and the production of things related to ritual journeys, such as offerings given at the shrines. Importantly, elites and male religious specialists organize economic activities associated with pilgrimage and benefit from the control over the producers, traders, and flow of goods. Hence, political and religious leaders strive to establish pilgrimage shrines in the ritual landscapes of their territories.

### PLACE AND MAYA RITUAL LANDSCAPES

Maya, as well as other Mesoamerican peoples, describe the ritual landscapes that affect human perceptions and actions as being the homes of the gods. They visit the gods to give them offerings for rain, good harvests, and health or to pay for something they want or have received, among other reasons. Through ritual landscapes Maya religious specialists contact deities, spiritual essences, and ancestors to petition them for favors and provide these forces with the things they need, such as food, social interaction, and entertainment. Since ritual landscapes are linked to gods, ancestors, and native histories and mythologies, these places figure prominently in narratives about social identity and territory. Importantly, ritual landscapes or homes of spiritual forces are located away from human settlements, thus people must journey to visit them. Therefore, we must examine the close relationship between ritual landscapes and pilgrimage.

In this chapter I provide background information on both ritual landscapes and pilgrimage, introduce the Maya cultures of the study area, and discuss the historical connections between them. In the rest of the book I examine case studies of Maya ritual landscapes and pilgrimage and show how these places and practices were important for Maya societies over time. Ritual landscapes have always been the destinations of Maya and Mesoamerican pilgrims, and thus we must examine these places and pilgrimage together. However, a great deal of the academic literature focuses on either ritual landscapes or pilgrimage, while mentioning the other only in passing. For example, some archaeological studies of ancient Maya caves

refer to pilgrimages in a cursory manner (Bassie-Sweet 1996; Brady and Sears 2000; Prufer and Brady 2005; Stone 1995). Many publications have not offered detailed explanations of the importance of pilgrimage to ritual landscapes in a Mesoamerican context. Authors recognize the prevalence of Maya pilgrimage to ritual landscapes and its centrality for the study of Maya religion and society, but investigations of pilgrimage in Maya culture history and Mesoamerica in general have not been widely pursued in primary research (but see Adams and Brady 1994; Broda 2009; Crumrine and Morinis 1991; Freidel 1981; Good Eshelman 2009; Kubler 1984; Martínez Marín 1972; Patel 2009; Sandstrom 2005; Vogt 1969).

Past examinations of Maya pilgrimages have described the ritual landscapes to which Maya people journeyed, such as mountains, caves, springs, and islands, but rarely have these works discussed the functions of pilgrimage in society and religion. Moreover, the myriad sites and diachronic evidence for pilgrimage in the Maya area and Mesoamerica indicate that the topics covered in this book are important. It is intriguing that investigators have not given pilgrimage in Mesoamerica adequate consideration in a comparative anthropological analysis. While intensive studies of landscapes predominate (Ashmore and Knapp 1999; Brady and Prufer 2005; Koontz et al. 2001; Staller 2008), few treatments of pilgrimage have appeared in book form, especially in archaeology (but see Freidel and Sabloff 1984; Rodríguez-Shadow and Shadow 2000; Sabloff and Rathje 1975).

To address these issues, my research also builds on studies of place and its importance in pilgrimage behavior. I am interested in the intersections of religious ideology, cultural landscapes, and human settlements (Ashmore and Knapp 1999). The literature on pilgrimage stresses the presence of outstanding geographical features as pilgrimage destinations, including caves, mountains, islands, and lakes (fig. 1.3). Because of their unique physical features and material indicators of ritual, such as shrines, offerings, and burials, these places accumulate “spiritual magnetism.” Spiritual forces are present at such ritual places, and people must make pilgrimages to engage them at their homes for religious and practical purposes, such as the reinforcement of identity and healing of the sick (fig. 1.4). Previous works have also pointed out that ritual landscapes are social constructs and that people experience significant places through their senses and the movements of their bodies (Tilley 2008). Furthermore, place has been seen as central to social memory, experience, and identity, which are transmitted through stories, visits, and rituals (Basso 1996).



*Figure 1.3.* Stained glass in Ascension Church, Oak Park, Illinois, showing the pilgrimage shrine of Lourdes and communication with spiritual forces at ritual landscapes in Christian iconography. Note the shrine near a hill with boulders, cave, and a spring.

A key perspective of this book is that ritual landscapes are “places of interaction”: significant places are not only constructed based on their unique features and connection to memories and identity, they are created through people’s ceremonies in the landscape (Molesky-Poz 2006). People not only perceive and experience the landscape, but impressive landscapes themselves invite human interaction and influence people’s responses to



*Figure 1.4* Nazca ceramic pilgrimage scene with traveling figures playing music and carrying offerings and provisions (Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Antropología e Historia de Perú).

place and how they are utilized (Olsen 2010). Significant places attract humans for ritual purposes, and people build connections to the landscape through ritual. Specific places maintained for ritual are subsequently connected to histories, memories, and identities. The unusual places that draw human interaction are the ones I am interested in: mountains, cliffs, boulders, caves, ruins, bodies of water, and islands, which have always been important to Mesoamerican cultures. These places can be identified in the archaeological record due to their noticeable features and associated remains of ritual, such as terraces, platforms, shrines, altars, incense burners, offering bowls, human burials, and rock art, which were created by ritual specialists and pilgrims to facilitate communication with spiritual forces, appease these forces, and reflect their religious values. Such materials also signaled the social identity of the people who visited the shrine and helped them to mark their territory.

Ritual landscapes are thus unique, culturally significant geographical features that Maya people—largely elites, male religious specialists, and household heads—selected as places for pilgrimage. These ritual landscapes tend to be impressive and to contain multiple natural features, such as mountains with caves, cliffs with springs, or boulders with rock art near streams. While these places were selected by members of a society and are historically important, their impact on the human senses—particularly sight, touch, and hearing, in short, their phenomenological importance—cannot be stressed enough.

Although the term *sacred landscapes* is common in the literature, I revert to the concept of “ritual landscapes” (Anschuetz et al. 2001; Moore 2004) and “communicating places,” following research that challenges the idea of landscapes as being sacred to indigenous Mesoamerican people (Astor-Aguilera 2010; Monaghan 2000). Landscapes are not hallowed ground or worshiped in a Western sense; they are connected with indigenous histories, spiritual essences, rituals, and identities. *Ritual landscapes* may also be a slippery label, but it is common in the literature, more so than “communicating places” or “landscapes of human-spiritual interaction,” which closely describe the Mesoamerican case. It is also more accurate and convenient than the term *significant place*, which is found in pilgrimage studies. Native Mesoamericans refer to these places in descriptive terms or as homes of gods, such as “Round Mountain” or “Cave of the Earth God.” As we will see, *pilgrimage* itself may not be the best word to describe ritual journeys in Mesoamerica. Needless to say, I do not wish to get bogged down in a discussion of definitions and terminology, and the concepts I have chosen to frame my discussion of these topics will become clear as we proceed.

#### MAYA PILGRIMAGE AND COLLECTIVE BENEFIT

In this study, I see pilgrimage as a central aspect of Maya religion, ritual, and culture (fig. 1.5). We will look at pilgrimage through time and in state versus nonstate societies, in both small and large social groups, and in elite versus non-elite social and material contexts. For our purposes, the term *pilgrimage* essentially refers to a journey to one or more ritual landscapes to leave offerings for and interact with spiritual essences residing there in order to fulfill obligations relating to the maintenance of world balance and social identity. Pilgrimages over short distances in Mesoamerica are carried out for purposes

of healing, delineating boundaries, and maintaining cosmic balance. Pilgrims cover longer distances when they have a problem of greater significance or urgency, like a request for rain during a drought or the periodic need to reinforce group identity. Mesoamerican pilgrims attain various individually focused social, economic, and religious goals, as in other parts of the world, yet pilgrimages are also seen as benefitting others, whether a pilgrim petitions for abundant crops or for divine assistance to cure sick family members. From an emic viewpoint, the journeys to Maya ritual landscapes are seen as “visits,” “arrivals,” “travels,” and “seeing” rather than what Europeans call pilgrimage and *peregrinación*, but the actions and functions are essentially the same. Therefore, I follow the use of the term *pilgrimage*, as established in the literature, to describe the journeys of Maya people who leave their homes to visit ritual landscapes to communicate with spiritual forces through offerings and ceremonies then return to their homes when their religious goals have been achieved. Furthermore, native Mesoamericans recognize that gods and ancestors make pilgrimages just like people do, thus humans perpetuate the gods’ actions and maintain the proper interactions with important spiritual essences, tutelary deities, and ancestors (Hamman 2002).

Maya and Mesoamerican societies have what can be referred to as a pilgrimage culture. Pilgrimage is a part of daily life, and it deals with everyday concerns, such as the maintenance of food sources and the continuation of life (Kubler 1984). For instance, frequent pilgrimages to ritual mountains to petition the deities and pay them offerings for rain, crop health, and good harvests are just as necessary for successful farming as planting seeds and weeding. Patron gods residing in important landscape features also protect Maya communities (Montejo 2001:xv), which explains why redoubts were constructed on certain hilltops—both the walls and deities there shielded people from attackers. These deities are nourished and their protection of humans acknowledged through Mayas’ pilgrimages to their landscape abodes to leave them offerings. However, pilgrimage is not undertaken solely for personal religious purposes, individual healing, adherence to religious dogma, community cohesion, or random reasons, as seen in other world religions, although some of these aspects are part of Maya and Mesoamerican pilgrimages. The movements of people symbolize the travels of deities and celestial bodies, and pilgrimage is important for maintaining cosmic balance and world order (Martínez Marín 1972). Thus, pilgrimage is collectively beneficial, for both humans and spiritual essences. Mesoamerican pilgrimages may also take place at specific times according to religious calendars or market or agricultural cycles (Tedlock



*Figure 1.5.* Pilgrimage to a Spanish church on an ancient Maya temple, Chichicastenango, Guatemala. Note the burning incense and offerings at the altar on the temple steps (lower left).

2010). Furthermore, Mesoamerican pilgrimage has political and economic benefits. Trade and markets occur at pilgrimage sites, and elites and male religious specialists and household heads tend to manage both pilgrimages and shrines, which leads to political power and economic gain.

Maya and Mesoamerican pilgrimage, in comparison to pilgrimage traditions elsewhere, does not focus on a few primary ritual sites (Morinis 1992; Stoddard and Morinis 1997; Tedlock 2010; Turner and Turner 1978). A potentially infinite number of sites exist in the Mesoamerican landscape where people communicate with spiritual beings. The ritual landscape that houses these divine forces has many access points, what I call “communicating places,” where people make contact with them, much like the multiple doors and windows of a house. Spiritual forces also penetrate the physical universe, allowing Maya people to interact with them at many geographically significant places in the landscape or at altars and temples created for communication. Maya pilgrimage operates within the covenants that Mesoamerican societies have with spiritual or nonhuman forces (Astor-Aguilera 2010; Monaghan 1995). These covenants are described as constant obligations to spiritual forces by Maya and Mesoamerican peoples, but this continuous interaction is for the mutual benefit of all. Maya people must make numerous pilgrimages to the homes of their gods and ancestors to provide offerings to maintain the covenants with them. The right amounts of rain, abundant food supplies, and human health and fertility depend on the renewal of the covenants, and at the homes of the gods in the ritual landscapes away from human settlements, the offerings and petitions are more efficacious. Visits to their houses facilitate communication and are more effective since the things people need are found there. Pilgrimages to ritual landscapes have also been viewed as pleasing to the spiritual forces, for they receive food, drink, music, and prayer, which help sustain them (Girard 1995). Therefore, Maya and Mesoamerican pilgrimages are not singular religious opportunities, as in other cultures, but are part of the everyday tasks of keeping the covenants and balance with spiritual essences.

Based on the available archaeological and ethnographic information, I argue that Maya journeys to ritual landscapes, like pilgrimages elsewhere, also relate to native social identity, economic prosperity, territory, and life crises and other stresses. For instance, Mesoamerican elites, including male religious specialists, visit pilgrimage shrines in their roles as mediators with spiritual forces to preserve order and economic prosperity. The shrines, too, are associated with particular communities, group identities, and boundaries, and a chronological perspective shows that past ritual activity picked up at pilgrimage shrines during episodes of social or environmental difficulties, such as warfare and droughts. The proliferation of ceremonial sites in Mesoamerica and visits to them have had significant social, political, religious, and economic

benefits. The numerous investigations of anthropologists and archaeologists in the Southern Maya Region over the last one hundred years have generated copious amounts of data demonstrating the importance of native pilgrimage to ritual landscapes and the maintenance of the covenants between humans and spiritual forces over a long time.

A study of these combined components of the Maya pilgrimage metastructure from Preclassic to modern times, or two thousand years, is long overdue (fig. 1.6). Through the perspective of the *longue durée* we can study the development and common behavioral aspects of Maya pilgrimage to ritual landscapes in the Southern Maya Region. The examples of ritual landscapes in this book and their importance for Maya pilgrimage demonstrate the continuation of elements of the Maya religious metastructure. In the following sections, we will explore the cultural and historical connections between Maya peoples in the study area to better understand the topics of ritual landscapes and pilgrimage as seen in the archaeological, historical, and ethnographic records analyzed in the rest of the volume.

#### ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF THE SOUTHERN MAYA LOWLANDS

The *Southern Maya Region* is adopted in this book as a label for the lowland area bounded by the upper Usumacinta River in lowland Chiapas, Mexico, and central Petén, Guatemala; the Lacantun River in the southern limit of lowland Chiapas; and the Pasión River in southern Petén (figs. 1.7 and 1.8). It also includes the valleys, rivers, and lakes to the west of the Usumacinta River in northeastern Chiapas from Lake Miramar to Lake Catazaja. The study area also includes central to western Petén. This region, or a large portion of it, has alternatively been called the southwestern Maya lowlands and the Chan Maya region in central-west Petén and northeast Chiapas (Thompson 1977). Additionally, the area was divided into the Spanish provinces of El Próspero, Lacandon, Acala, and Tequepan Pochutla (Vos 1988a:215, 54–57). I also draw on ethnographic information from the lowlands and the adjacent Maya highlands in Chiapas and Guatemala, whose peoples had cultural affinities with the Maya in the lowlands. However, the archaeological focus here is on the Southern Maya Region.

The prehistoric cultures described in this book belong to the Preclassic, Classic, and Postclassic periods:



*Figure 1.6.* Lacandon Maya youth visiting the Preclassic Maya temple on the summit of Mirador Mountain, Mensabak, Chiapas, Mexico.

### **Pre-Columbian Periods**

1. Preclassic (2000 B.C.–A.D. 300): Early, 2000–1000 B.C.; Middle, 1000–400 B.C.; Late, 400 B.C.–A.D. 300
2. Classic (A.D. 300–1000): Early, A.D. 300–550; Late, A.D. 550–850; Terminal, A.D. 850–1000
3. Postclassic (A.D. 1000–1525): Early, A.D. 1000–1200; Late, A.D. 1200–1525

### **Historic Periods**

1. Colonial (A.D. 1525–1825): Early, A.D. 1525–1650; Late, A.D. 1650–1825
2. Ethnographic (A.D. 1825–present): Early, A.D. 1825–1900; Late, A.D. 1900–present

Cultures and periods can be identified by distinct material cultures, settlement patterns, and lifeways. The earliest Maya societies examined in this volume belong to Late Preclassic times, dating to approximately to 400 B.C. to A.D. 300. The Late Preclassic Maya, along with those of the Postclassic



Figure 1.7. Map of Mesoamerica showing geographical areas, archaeological sites, and pilgrimage centers.

period, have not been as widely investigated as Classic Maya civilization in the study region, even though Preclassic occupations are found in Classic period centers (Butler 2005; Liendo Stuardo 2008; López Varela 1989; Rands 2007). Some sites in the region are largely Preclassic in date, such as El Lacandon near Palenque (Liendo Stuardo 2008; López Bravo 2005), the newly discovered site of Noh K'uh at Lake Mensabak (Palka and Sánchez Balderas 2012), El Mirador (Hansen et al. 2008), and Lake Mendoza (Palka et al. 2007). Preclassic sites are characterized by large buildings made of earth and large stone blocks and monochrome pottery similar to the red-, orange-, and black-painted wares found in Petén (Sharer and Traxler 2006). Few carved stone monuments or hieroglyphic texts are associated with Preclassic sites compared to those of the Classic period.

The Classic period, including the Terminal Classic, is placed between A.D. 300 and A.D. 1000. The Early Classic generally dates from around A.D. 300 to 550, the Late Classic from A.D. 550 to 850, and the Terminal Classic from about A.D. 850 to 1000. A large percentage of Maya sites date to the Classic period or have occupations at this time (Butler 2005; Liendo Stuardo 2008; López Varela 1989). Well-known sites in the study region include Palenque, Yaxchilan, Bonampak, and Plan de Ayutla in Chiapas and Piedras Negras, Dos Pilas, and Tikal in Petén. Classic Maya texts and historic



Figure 1.8. Map showing the ethnic groups and pilgrimage sites of the Southern Maya Region.

documents from the area mention important ritual sites, such as Lakam Tun (Wide Stone/Island), Lakam Ha' (Wide Water), Matawil (Place of the Cormorants), and Sak Tzi' ("White Dog"; Martin and Grube 2008). Classic Maya sites can be recognized by their large urban settlements with stone-block temples with terraces, stairways, and vaulted rooms in addition to stone monuments, hieroglyphs, polychrome pottery, and carved jade. A great deal of the archaeological research conducted in the study area concentrates

on Classic period Maya sites and culture at the expense of other periods, especially the Postclassic.

The final pre-Columbian era in the region, the Postclassic period, dates from around A.D. 1000 to 1525 and ends arbitrarily with the start of Spanish colonization. However, certain aspects of Postclassic Maya material culture, like pottery and behavior (including ceremonies at shrines in the ritual landscape), continued into historic times. Postclassic Maya sites have been identified on islands, peninsulas, and shores of lakes and rivers in the southern Maya lowlands and adjacent regions (Blake 2010; Rice and Rice 2009; Rivero Torres 1992; Voorhies and Gasco 2004). Sites dating to this period in the area include Noh Peten (Flores), Tayasal, and Zacpeten in Petén and Lakamtun (Miramar), Canajaste, Las Margaritas, Petha, and Mensabak in Chiapas. Postclassic Maya sites contain small stone-block temples, low house platforms, and distinctive ceramics that include incense burners with modeled anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figures on them, round colanders, and plates with long supports, some of which bear modeled designs (Blake 2010; Lowe and Alvarez Asomoza 2007; Rice and Rice 2009; Voorhies and Gasco 2004).

#### HISTORIC MAYA SOCIETIES IN THE SOUTHERN MAYA LOWLANDS

I have incorporated historic information on societies in the southern Maya lowlands into this book to better examine the topics at hand. The historic documents contain many descriptions of Maya ritual landscapes, but less information is available on pilgrimage. However, we can reconstruct past Mayas' cultural practices based on historic and ethnographic information from their descendants, in addition to increasing our understanding of the origins and long-term development of contemporary Maya religious practices and ritual landscapes. I will concentrate on the historic lowland Maya, but I also reference the abundant ethnohistoric studies of highland Maya in the study area. Myriad documents regarding historic Maya peoples in the lowlands range in date from about A.D. 1525 to 1900. The records were created by priests, government officials, and explorers. The colonial period is bracketed by the dates 1525 to 1825, and the subsequent period, which coincides with ethnographic descriptions of Maya cultures, roughly dates from 1825 to the present. Documents describing Maya cultures in the southern

Maya lowlands are underutilized by archaeologists, compared to written material from Yucatán and highland Guatemala, despite their wide availability. Instead of relying on Diego de Landa's manuscript from colonial Yucatán (Tozzer 1966), for instance, investigators can peruse historic sources, many of them published, from the southern Maya lowlands (Hellmuth 1972; Palka 2005b; Thompson 1938; Vos 1988a).

This section contains descriptions of Maya peoples and cultures of the lowlands from relevant documents (see fig. 1.8; fig. 1.9). The most extensive cultural information concerns the Nohha, Ch'olti'-Lacandon, Manche-Ch'ol, and late colonial period Yucatec Lacandon Maya peoples (Feldman 2000; Hellmuth 1972; López de Cogolludo 1957; Nations 1979; Villagutierre Soto-Mayor 1983; Vos 1988a, 1988b). I use spellings of Maya groups common in the literature. Although cultural and linguistic diversity existed in these groups in the past, these societies were closely integrated over time through trade, warfare, ritual, and social interaction (Becquelin-Monod and Breton 2003; Bricker 1981; Calnek 1988; Villa Rojas 1995). Thus, they have exhibited similar economic, political, social, and religious behaviors and organizations over a long period, which is obvious from cultural comparisons. The Maya societies considered were also united in their beliefs about ritual landscapes, especially with regard to mountains, bodies of water, and caves (Thompson 1938:603; Villa Rojas 1995).

### *The Nohha Maya of El Próspero*

Around 1646 Spanish explorers and priests encountered a Yucatec-speaking Maya community on a lake known as Nohha (*noh ha'* or "great water") in northeast Chiapas, where they established a church and demanded tribute from the native populace (López de Cogolludo 1957:684–701; Nations 1979:80–83; Scholes and Roys 1968:45–46). To reach this settlement, the Spanish crossed the Usumacinta River at Tenosique (also Tenocis, Tenosik, and Tanoche), Tabasco, and entered the valleys and lakes of the sierra of Chiapas. After a three-day journey, they could see the lake and pueblo of Nohha from the crest of a hill (López de Cogolludo 1957:687–88). Investigators have argued that Lake Naha (also Naja), currently inhabited by Yucatec-speaking northern Lacandon Maya people, is the location of historic Nohha (Nations 1979:80; Thompson 1970:69; Vos 1988a:215), and the similar place-names suggest a historic connection. However, I believe that Lake Petha, or



Figure 1.9. Map of the Southern Maya Region: archaeological sites and pilgrimage centers.

possibly Lake Mensabak (see fig. 1.9; fig. 1.10), both near Naha, was actually where Nohha was located (see also Thompson 1977:18). Lake Mensabak and Lake Petha (also known as Lake Pelja, Guineo, or Itsanok'uh), only a few hours' walk from Naha, contain Late Postclassic to historic period Maya sites. My recent surveys and discussions with local informants indicate that no archaeological sites exist at Lake Naha. Furthermore, Nohha (noh ha') also means "great/large/true lake" in Yucatec Mayan languages, thus the term was more likely used to describe the lakes of Petha or Mensabak, which

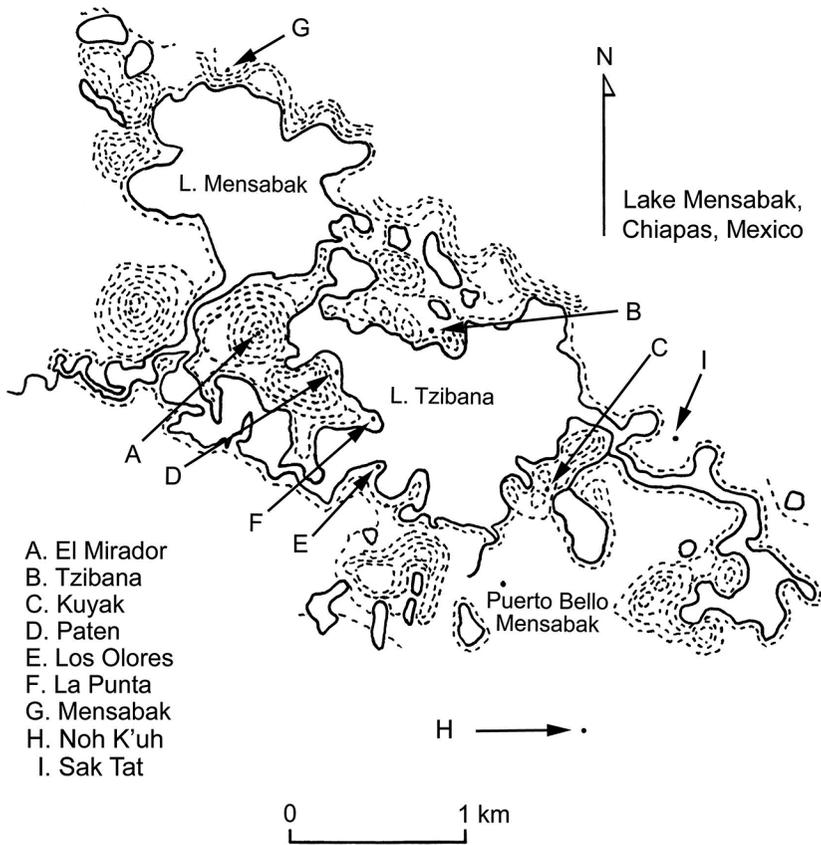


Figure 1.10. Map of the archaeological sites and pilgrimage shrines, Mensabak, Chiapas, Mexico.

are much larger than Lake Naha. Moreover, Lacandon Mayas refer to Lake Petha, the biggest lake in the region, as Yahaw Petha' or "Great Lake."

The historical information on the Nohha Maya is important for archaeological research in the study area. Nohha was a principal indigenous community in a colonial province called El Próspero or Reino de El Próspero (Vos 1988a:129–30, 215). Nohha was home to three hundred apostate and unconquered Mayas in addition to their women and children ("300 personas con mujeres y niños") and other local families not counted (probably six hundred to eight hundred people; see López de Cogolludo 1957:695), which would make it comparable in size to the widely studied Tipu mission in Belize (Graham 2011; Jones 1989). These population figures also align with

the archaeological demography at Lakes Petha and Mensabak. Nohha's inhabitants were either indigenous Yucatec speakers from northeast Chiapas, or they were migrants from nearby Campeche or Petén who took over traditional Ch'ol Maya territory (Nations 1979:82–83). More than likely, the Nohha Maya differed ethnically from other Yucatec-speaking Maya peoples to the north, based on descriptions of their appearance and cultural practices (Thompson 1977:18; Vos 1988a:218–19). It is possible that the Cehach Maya (also Kehach or Quehach), located in northwest Petén and southern Campeche, were culturally related to the Maya at Nohha (Villa Rojas 1995:447). The Cehach Maya created fortified towns on islands in lakes and swamps in the region, which are similar to sites found in the study area. Spanish officials state that Nohha was inhabited by Maya peoples of various ethnicities (Nations 1979:82; Scholes and Roys 1968:46): Ch'ol, Ch'olti'-Lacandon, Yucatec, or Cehach. Importantly, Spanish colonists removed the Ch'ol Maya and later the Yucatec Maya from El Próspero to Palenque (Thompson 1966), which indicates interaction between different Maya ethnic groups in the region.

### *The Ch'olti'-Lacandon in Lowland Chiapas*

Various Ch'olti' Mayan-speaking peoples resided in the lowlands during the colonial period (Robertson et al. 2010; Vos 1988a). The better known groups were the Ch'olti'-Lacandon societies at Lake Miramar, Sac Bahlam, Pochutla, and Topiltepeque in lowland Chiapas, which borders the Maya highlands to the west and south (Nations 1979; Vos 1988a). The Ch'olti'-Lacandon Maya area is demarcated by the Lacantun River to the south, the Usumacinta and Salinas (Chixoy) Rivers to the east, and perhaps Lakes Naha and Mensabak to the north (Caso Barerra and Aliphath Fernández 2006; Vos 1988a). Hernán Cortés heard of the Ch'olti'-Lacandon or “Lacandones” (also “caribes” and “kabnales” according to documents and highland Maya informants) from Cehach Maya people he visited on his journey through Campeche and Petén in 1525 (Vos 1988a:47; also see Scholes and Roys 1968; Villagutierre Sotomayor 1983). The warlike reputation of the Ch'olti'-Lacandon was well known: Dominican friars in sixteenth-century Guatemala considered the southern lowlands a native “land of war” waiting to be transformed into a colonial “land of peace” (Vos 1988a:64–67). The Spanish entradas to conquer the Ch'olti'-Lacandon were responses to these Mayas' long-term attacks on

other Maya populations in colonial towns in the lowlands and highlands of Chiapas and Guatemala (Stone 1932:239–43; Vos 1988a). The attacks were demonstrations of Ch’olti’-Lacandon resistance to Christianity: they punished colonized Maya and destroyed churches (Bricker 1981; Vos 1988a:76–79); they captured other Mayas for slaves and sacrificial victims; and they even sacked some colonial Maya villages. Importantly, significant numbers of Ch’olti’-Lacandon Mayas maintained autonomous settlements and traditional lifeways into the colonial period.

The name *Lacandon* was derived from a Ch’olti’ place-name near Lake Miramar and the Lacantun River in Chiapas. This place-name, *Lakam Tun* or “Wide Stone,” occurs in Classic Maya inscriptions (Stuart and Houston 1994:37–39). The name refers to an island in Lake Miramar that had substantial Classic and Postclassic ceremonial architecture, limestone cliffs, and was called the “gran peñon/peñol” or “great rock” by Spanish explorers (Rivero Torres 1992:22; Vos 1988a:15). Mayas in Petén and Chiapas used the name *Lakam Tun* to refer to the island in Lake Miramar, its inhabitants, and their territory. The Spanish derived the name *Lacandon* from Ch’olti’ Mayan *Lakam Tun* and applied it to the island, Maya people residing nearby, and the province itself. The words *ah kan tun*, or “he/they of the sacred stone,” and *Acandon* may also have been roots of the term *Lacandon* (Perera and Bruce 1985:8). Another possible origin of this ethnic Maya label was *Lakanton*—the name for lowland Maya people in Tzeltal and Tzotzil Mayan of Chiapas (Gossen 2002:722; Pineda 1986:121).

Indigenous people in Chiapas experienced demographic change at the time of contact with the Spanish (Calnek 1988; Clark and Lee 2007). By 1695, only the Ch’olti’-Lacandon Maya center of Sac Bahlam was prominently mentioned in historic sources from the Chiapas lowlands. At this time, the town had about one hundred houses and four smaller satellite communities (Comparato 1984:12; Helmuth 1972:185; Vos 1988a:136). This settlement system was possibly organized under a Maya quadripartite cosmogram with a center and four quarters. Around 1694, Ch’olti’-Lacandon from the satellite settlements established two more villages of about twenty houses each, called Peta (Petha’ [?]) and Map (Mop [?]), to the north or northeast of Sac Bahlam (Vos 1988a:153, 158, 496). Another earlier center, called Culhuacan from the term for “curved mountain” in Aztec Nahuatl, was abandoned by this time (Helmuth 1972:186; Vos 1988a:163, 165, 188). Other small pueblos, and perhaps their leaders, were called Jxulamna (Ixulamna or Sulamna [?]), Tzatzitz