
RETHINKING THE RURAL IN ANCIENT MAYA STUDIES

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Abstract

This Special Section provides a glimpse into the vitality of rural investigations in the Maya area by presenting recent archaeological research and interpretive perspectives on the ancient rural Maya. This introduction serves to contextualize the articles of this Special Section within and outside of academic discourse and practice. I start by reviewing the common ways in which rural people and places are essentialized, to underscore that these now unpopular ideas continue to implicitly pervade research priorities, definitions, and interpretations. I then provide a brief historical summary of rural research in the Maya area and some of its significant contributions to our current understandings of ancient rural Maya peoples. Finally, drawing from rural studies, I argue for greater theorization of rurality—including how it was constituted, experienced, perhaps even perceived in the past, and its relationship to periurban, conurban, and urban life, and the continued existence and transformation of rural spaces and lifeways within increasingly urbanized societies. This introduction aims to invigorate further theoretical elaboration with regard to ancient Maya rurality and elicit archaeologists to place themselves and their work within the broader historical and cultural trends of how the rural is perceived and addressed.

INTRODUCTION

Building upon the last five decades of work that decenters scholarship of past urbanized societies by increasingly including rural people and places, this issue's Special Section presents recent archaeological research and interpretive perspectives on the ancient rural Maya (Figure 1). The aims of this Special Section are to provide a glimpse of the vitality of rural investigations in the Maya area and to further explore this work's potential for enhancing theoretical models and interpretations of ancient Maya societies. As heuristic categories, the terms “rural” and “urban” can be useful in communicating and comparing our findings. Yet, as a reductionist way of establishing meaning, such terms can also be deceptive and may inadvertently reinforce the dualisms embedded in our cultural perceptions and practices. Research within the Maya area, as well as in other past and contemporary cultures globally, has pointed out that the binary opposition of urban-rural is flawed due to the interdependencies and syncretic qualities of such settlements and their inhabitants. Notwithstanding, qualitative and quantitative differences have been noted between the country and the city, past and present. Therefore, the questions that guide the following contributions are: In what ways are rural relationships, embodied experiences, landscapes, and other materialities similar and/or different to non-rural contexts? What kinds of horizontal and vertical social relations did rural people maintain outside of their settlements of residence? What possibilities exist for discussing and defining rurality without reifying urban-rural and other associated dichotomies? How can rural archaeology enhance our reconstructions of the past and of theory building?

Although a few edited volumes and sole-authored books have focused on the rural ancient Maya, this Special Section differs from these publications in its breadth. The contributors present research across the Maya area, spanning from the Preclassic through the Classic to address diverse topics such as public rituals and spaces (see Ingalls and Yaeger 2022; Lamb 2022; Pantoja et al. 2020), physical mobility (see Fisher 2022; Lemonnier and Arnauld 2022), social inequality including health outcomes (see Lamb 2022; Lemonnier and Arnauld 2022; Pantoja et al. 2022; Tiesler and López Pérez 2022), place-making (see Fisher 2022; Ingalls and Yaeger 2022; Lamb 2022), rural resilience and longevity (see Ingalls and Yaeger 2022; Lamb 2022; McNeil et al. 2022; Pantoja et al. 2022; Valdez et al. 2022), and inter-polity relations (see Ingalls and Yaeger 2022; Lemonnier and Arnauld 2022; McNeil et al. 2022; Tiesler and López Pérez 2022; Valdez et al. 2022). The authors work at various scales of analysis, from individual buildings to interregional comparisons, using a variety of datasets including settlement and landscape patterns, architecture, portable goods, iconography and epigraphy, and human remains. Diverse theoretical approaches and concepts are applied, such as practice and agency, heterarchy, embodiment, historical ecology, political economy, and biocultural dialectics. While some are explicit in considering and even defining “rurality” (Fisher 2022; Ingalls and Yaeger 2022; Lamb 2022; Valdez et al. 2022), others do so more tacitly through comparing rural and city experiences and processes (Lemonnier and Arnauld 2022; McNeil et al. 2022; Tiesler and López Pérez 2022). Yet amidst this heterogeneity, the articles in this Special Section share the notions that rural sites are interesting places worthy of study, that the countryside is necessary to understand city and polity dynamics, and that rural people and places were integral in broader social processes of continuity and change, albeit in

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Figure 1. Map of the Maya area showing locations of sites emphasized in the Special Section articles (noted in bold) and selected notable sites. Map by the author.

diverse ways. Moreover, when considered together, the following articles show that while the countryside and the city shared various characteristics, differences also existed between rural materialities, experiences, and relations and those of neighboring cities and urban centers.

In this introduction, I contextualize this Special Section within the historical trajectory of rural Maya archaeology, the interdisciplinary field of rural studies, and the culturally pervasive perceptions of “the rural.” I start by reviewing the common ways in which rural people and places are essentialized, to underscore

that, while no longer popular in academic scholarship, these ideas continue to implicitly permeate many research priorities, definitions, and interpretations. I then provide a brief historical summary of rural research in the Maya area and some of its significant contributions to our current understandings of ancient rural Maya. Finally, drawing from the interdisciplinary field of rural studies, I argue for greater theorization of rurality within ancient Maya scholarship and point to some topics that such a task may illuminate. As archaeologists move towards more relational understandings of ancient Maya society, rurality can provide explanatory power not only for those invested in rural research, but more generally for those interested in urbanized ancient societies.

RURAL STEREOTYPES AND URBAN-CENTRISM

The distinction between rural and urban is one of the most pervasive binaries, deeply embedded within cultural imaginaries and co-constituted through discourse, representation, public policy, and everyday practice. These binaries exist not only within the Western world (Ching and Creed 1997; Cloke 2006; Williams 1973; Woods 2011) but in many current urbanized societies throughout the globe, for example in Mexico (Broyles-Gonzales 2002; Napolitano 2002; Ramirez 2008;), China (Cohen 1993; Wang 2015; Yan 2003), Thailand (Charoensri-o-larn 2013; Ferguson 2010), Nigeria (Chigbu 2013), Zambia (Siwale 2014), and Senegal (Perry 2009). As Derrida (1972:56–57) has argued, dichotomies are not neutral—within them exists a hierarchy that favors one of the two opposing poles (see also Plumwood 1993). Thus, while *mutual* stereotyping and derision exists between urban and rural cultural spheres, the rural becomes “the urban’s devalored Other” (Yan 2003:viii). Most pervasive is the idea of the rural, in comparison to the city, as a place of limitation, stagnation, and ignorance.

Rural populations are commonly, although not universally, essentialized as socially conservative, uneducated, unsophisticated, dirty, poor, and isolated. Assumptions about the rural further include sexuality (Herring 2010), gender identity (Archetti 2007; Gutmann 2006: 59–64; Little 2002; Ramirez 2008:115–116) and race and ethnicity (Casteñada 2004; Litcher 2012; Panelli et al. 2009). For example, within Central America and Mexico, common stereotypes of rural people include that they are Indigenous or Afro-descendant, poor, technologically illiterate, homophobic, *machistas* (male chauvinist), and submissive in the case of women (Broyles-Gonzales 2002; Gutmann 2006; Johnson 2019; Ramirez 2008). Violence, radicalism, and drug production and trafficking (Castañeda 2004; Edelman 1998; Fitting 2011; Maldonado Aranda 2013) are also commonly associated with rural, particularly Indigenous, populations in these regions.

Like most stereotypes, perceptions of “the rural” operate through contradiction, simultaneously containing positive and negative elements. For example, common notions of the rural include idyllic landscapes, peacefulness, social familiarity and solidarity, and self-reliance. Some of these elements are idolized as representations of national identity or embodiments of cultural traditions and national essence, for example the *charro* in Mexico, the *gaucho* in Argentina, or the “family farm” in the United States (Archetti 2007; Broyles-Gonzales 2002; Fitting 2011; Ramirez 2008). Such romanticizing, however, supports notions of the rural as homogeneous and static, and disguises the harsh realities experienced in many rural places, such as disproportionate rates of poverty and low health outcomes, inequitable land distribution, displacement, racism, genocide, and environmental degradation.

Because “all knowledge claims reflect and constitute the contexts of their production” (Wylie 2008:201; see also Chinchilla

2012; Gero 1985; Joyce 2008; La Salle 2010; Rocabado 2015; Trigger 1984, 1995), the rural-urban binary has also shaped Maya archaeology. The historical focus on large site centers certainly relates to the methodological and taphonomic constraints of working in the dense jungle vegetation and semitropical climate of the Maya area, as well as the difficulty of funding extensive large-scale research. Notwithstanding these difficulties, however, some archaeologists were already investigating small house mounds by the early 1900s and, starting in the 1960s, settlement archaeologists recorded numerous features and settlements of all scales (see section Developments in Ancient Maya Rural Research for further discussion). Research in the past five decades and particularly since the early 1990s has radically changed our understandings of ancient Maya rural life, yet a significant portion of Maya scholarship continues to focus on cities and urban settings. While most archaeologists acknowledge that understanding ancient complex societies requires studying rural people, there are still comparatively few who foreground the *significance* of these populations. Even fewer position rural sites at the center of their investigations, as rural research is often subsumed within projects focusing on state formation, political organization, and collapse. An exception is that of the minor centers, settlements that are at the top of a region’s hinterland settlement hierarchy and share characteristics with urban settlements (Iannone and Connell 2003), which have gained increased attention in the past 20 years. Yet understanding rurality necessitates intensive and long-term investigations of the full scope of the people and places that existed throughout the ancient Maya rural landscape. Thus, while traditional notions of peasants (e.g., Foster 1965; Marx 1963 [1869]; Redfield 1941, 1955; Wolf 1966) are no longer explicit in ancient Maya scholarship, city-centric biases continue to be embedded within our research questions, methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and interpretations (see also Erickson [2006] on the cultural assumptions undergirding archaeological perspectives on agricultural intensification).

Additionally, it is important to note that our research not only reflects the cultural contexts in which it is conducted, but also produces and reproduces such contexts. We must therefore consciously examine the ways that our research priorities and interpretations may support current urban-rural cultural hierarchies that are harmful to many of our host communities. More than simply misrepresenting the past, the use of the urban-rural binary, whether intended or unintended, legitimizes the marginalization and extraction of rural people (Ching and Creed 1997; Williams 1973) and reinforces racialized discourses and oppression within the nation-states in the Maya area (e.g., Montejo 2005).

My emphasis here on rural research is not a call to abandon scholarship on ancient Maya cities. Urbanism studies are as critical as rural research since the two mutually inform each other and, as shown by some of the following contributions, urban and rural life are interconnected and can be interdependent (Lemonnier and Arnauld 2022; also see Garrison et al. 2019; Hutson 2016; LeCount and Yaeger 2010; Yaeger 2003). For this reason, some scholars (e.g., Lemonnier and Arnauld 2022; Marcus 1983; Yaeger 2003) have argued that they should, in fact, be studied together. To do so, however, requires increasing the number and intensity of rural-focused investigations to comparably reach the abundance of information gained on major and secondary ancient Maya centers.

DEVELOPMENTS IN ANCIENT MAYA RURAL RESEARCH

Settlement, landscape, and household archaeology have been integral in the last 50 years in shifting Maya scholarship away from

urban- and elite-centric perspectives toward a more complete and nuanced scholarship by including rural people and places within interpretations of ancient Maya society. Rather than retrace the history of these subdisciplines within Maya research (for syntheses, see Ashmore 1981[2004]; Ashmore and Wilk 1988; Ashmore and Willey 1981; Dunning et al. 2018, 2020; Fedick 1996; Garrison 2020; Gonlin 2020; Robin 2003), I focus on some of their important contributions towards our current understandings of the ancient Maya, in particular, rural populations.

From its inception until the mid-twentieth century, archaeology in the Maya region—like in most other parts of the world—was heavily focused on the monumental centers of large site centers and their ruling elite. Although some early attention to house mounds (e.g., Thompson 1886, 1892) and mapping outside of site-cores (e.g., Bullard 1960; Ricketson and Ricketson 1937) had taken place, not until the mid-1960s did systematic regional survey in Maya archaeology begin to redress earlier sampling biases to include overall settlements, including rural areas (e.g., Carr and Hazard 1961; Kurjack 1974; Puleston 1974, 1983; Willey et al. 1965). Since then, survey efforts have demonstrated that sizeable populations inhabited large centers, their immediate surroundings, and intersite areas, where numerous hamlets, villages, and minor centers have been recorded.

Following the discoveries of intensive agricultural systems in the 1970s (Harrison and Turner 1978; Siemens and Puleston 1972; Turner 1974; Turner and Harrison 1983), subsistence and land-use strategies as well as environmental variability became integral to settlement research agendas. Researchers have documented, throughout diverse ecological areas, a range of intensive agricultural techniques, water-management systems, and other kinds of landscape modifications that would have supported rural populations as well as the food needs of densely populated cities (Chase et al. 2010; Dunning and Beach 2010; Fedick 1996; Ford and Nigh 2009; Johnston 2004; Lentz and Hockday 2009; Sheets 2002).

Moreover, through formalized settlement classifications, archaeologists recognized significant variation among and between a range of settlements. Settlements identified as “rural” have been found to differ in their distance from larger centers, spatial organization, and architectural elements, some of which were originally assumed to exist in only major centers (Connell 2010; Hutson et al. 2015; Iannone and Connell 2003; Sheets et al. 2015; Walling et al. 2005; see also Fisher 2022; Ingalls and Yaeger 2022; Lemonnier and Arnauld 2022; McNeil et al. 2022; Valdez et al. 2022). These findings, along with the architectural variation identified *within* settlements, challenged earlier notions that sites within the same settlement rank were functionally and socially redundant and led many archaeologists to argue that ancient Maya social stratification was more complex than a two-class (elite versus commoners) model (Carmean 1991; Chase 1992; Hammond 1991; Hendon 1991; McAnany 1993; Sharer 1993). Thus, rural as well as non-elite settlements became vital sources of information for developing chronologically accurate models of population estimates, labor mobilization strategies, and political and economic organization.

The introduction of airborne LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) to the Maya region starting in the 2010s has enabled archaeologists to examine settlement patterns at previously unmatched regional scales. In addition to identifying numerous previously unrecorded sites and features, LiDAR data have further demonstrated extensive settlement densities and regional variation concerning site boundaries and intersite articulation (Beach et al. 2019; Canuto et al. 2018; Chase et al. 2010, 2014, 2016;

Garrison et al. 2019; Hutson et al. 2016; Inomata et al. 2017; Pruffer et al. 2015; Stanton et al. 2020). These great strides in settlement visibility provided by LiDAR will hopefully lead to a growing number of extensive investigations of newly recorded or previously understudied rural sites and areas.

Household archaeology, as well as the study of intermediate scale social groups, has further underlined that the commoner-elite and rural-urban models are oversimplifications and that they cannot be mapped onto each other as socially and spatially discrete. These smaller scales of analysis have deepened our understanding of sociopolitical and economic dynamics of polities and regions provided by settlement studies. By considering rural people’s daily lives, relationships, identities, and positionalities, they have provided us with a window into the rich and complex lives of those living outside of cities.

As summarized elsewhere (Lamb 2020), through the past and continued investigations including the contributions of this Special Section, our understandings of the rural ancient Maya have radically changed. Farming was an essential rural activity, as it was in most cities, yet rural residents pursued diverse livelihoods through a range of farming techniques and crops, resource specializations, and water-management systems (Dixon 2013; Johnston 2004; Sheets et al. 2012; see also Fisher 2022 and Valdez et al. 2022) and were also capable craft producers (Isaza Aizpurúa and McAnany 1999; Robin et al. 2014; Sheets 2000; VandenBosch et al. 2010; see also Lamb 2022; Pantoja et al. 2022; Valdez et al. 2022). They engaged in hierarchical and heterarchical economic systems of different scales, at times outside of the purview of regional capitals (Keller 2012; Kestle 2012; Potter and King 1995; Scarborough and Valdez 2009; Sheets 2000; VandenBosch et al. 2010; see also Lamb 2022; McNeil et al. 2022; Pantoja et al. 2022; Valdez et al. 2022). Rural people constructed differences of status, wealth, and authority which, while commonly less severe than distinctions in cities, were locally meaningful and impacted the wellbeing of individuals, households, and communities (Clayton 2013; Dixon 2013; Gonlin 1994; Kurnick 2016; Robin et al. 2014; Yaeger and Robin 2004; see also Ingalls and Yaeger 2022; Lamb 2022; Pantoja et al. 2022; Tiesler and López Pérez 2022; Valdez et al. 2022). They organized themselves in diverse intermediate scale social groups, including social entities similar to urban neighborhoods, socially constituted and imagined communities, lineages, and Houses (Canuto and Fash 2004; Canuto and Yaeger 2000; Eberl 2007; Fash 1983; Freter 2004; Hageman 2004; McAnany 1995; Robin 2012; see also Lemonnier and Arnauld 2022). Rural people were innovative ritual practitioners who strategically deployed sacred knowledge and performances also used by city dwellers, including those on top of the social pyramid (Gonlin and Lohse 2007; Hutson et al. 2018; Robin 2002; Zaro and Lohse 2005; see also Ingalls and Yaeger 2022; Lamb 2022; Valdez et al. 2022). And they were agents of social reproduction and change, integral to processes of social inequality, identity and social memory, urbanization, polity formation, and disintegration, as well as the longevity and transformations of rural places (Eberl 2007; Hutson et al. 2015; Lohse 2013; Mixer 2017; Robin 2012, 2013; Schwarz 2013; Yaeger 2000; see also Ingalls and Yaeger 2022; Lamb 2022; Lemonnier and Arnauld 2022; Tiesler and López Pérez 2022; Valdez et al. 2022). Rural research has blurred the spatial and social boundaries between the diverse yet articulated regional settlements, underlining commonalities between rural and city life while highlighting some of the specificities of life in the ancient Maya countryside.

In light of such blurred boundaries, how are we to make sense of rural heterogeneity and the shared aspects of rural and urban life and settlement patterns? The simplest solution is to be explicit about what is meant by “rural” and other categories (e.g., Canuto et al. 2018; Garrison et al. 2019; Iannone and Connell 2003; Tourtellot et al. 2003) and acknowledge the assumptions undergirding our definitions. Yet restricting ourselves to descriptions limits meaningful analyses of rural people, places, and processes, as well as topics not specific to the rural ancient Maya, such as social identities, human and material agency, political transformations, religion and cosmology, and environmental change. Engaging with rurality as a theoretical construct provides greater explanatory power for reconstructions of the ancient Maya past.

CONCEPTUALIZING RURALITY

The aim of this section is to incite further *deliberate* consideration of ancient Maya rurality. Some key terms are first clarified. I then synthesize how the interdisciplinary field of rural studies has approached rurality, which parallels some central anthropological debates and particularly the tensions between the different frameworks used in the case of ancient Maya rurality. I end by arguing how engaging with rurality as a theoretical concept can enhance our reconstructions of the ancient Maya past.

Definitions of the “rural” abound, varying over time and among scholars, disciplines, countries, and private and state institutions. Within Maya scholarship, spatial and demographic variables are the most widely used criteria for designating a settlement as rural, although not always explicitly (Lamb 2020). The thresholds used for these criteria, however, differ and thus what is designated as “rural” or “hinterland” is highly variable among publications. Because there is no consensus among the authors of this Special Section as to what constitutes “the rural,” my goal here is not to provide a definition, which would potentially misrepresent some of the following contributions. Where the different authors do seem to agree is that spatial and demographic variables, while integral, are insufficient and instead must be considered in concert with social and material relations, locally and more broadly.

The terms “rural” and “hinterland” are often used interchangeably in Maya archaeology, although some authors prefer one over the other (Ingalls and Yaeger 2022; Lamb 2020). I emphasize the term rural—and at times “countryside” to avoid redundancy—because ancient Maya cities and rural settlements were interconnected by much more than economic relations and because rural places and experiences were historically-contingent and not necessarily determined by spatial localities. While Ingalls and Yaeger (2022) are correct in warning that the term “rural” implies a juxtaposition with the urban, rural studies scholars tend to reject this essential dualism, and are reinterpreting the term “rural” and its many meanings. This parallels how numerous people from or who identify with rural places reclaim and strategically deploy identities like hillbilly, redneck, *campesino*, or *ranchero* (e.g., Broyles-Gonzales 2002; Costanza 2009; Edelman 1998; Fitting 2011; Hernandez 2014; Maldonado Aranda 2013; Roberts 2010). I consider the work presented within this Special Section in line with the broader body of scholarship and lay discourse that is rethinking rurality, its meanings, and how to represent it.

By rurality, I mean the qualitative and quantitative characteristics that can be used to describe rural people, places, and experiences or, as Halfacree (2009:449) simply puts it, “that which makes somewhere, someone, or something rural.” Within rural studies, rurality

has been conceptualized through four general frameworks (Cloke 2006; Cunningham and Rosenberger 2014; Heley 2008; Marsden et al. 1990; Shucksmith and Brown 2016; Somerville and Bosworth 2014; Woods 2010, 2011). Each approach offers different insights and has both strengths and weaknesses—including their ability to be operationalized within archaeological investigations—that researchers should keep in mind when considering their questions, available datasets, and interpretive frameworks.

Functional or *structural-functional* approaches view the rural to have distinct functional characteristics, including agriculture, which engender quantitative differences (e.g., population densities and distance from large city) as well as a rural “way of life” (e.g., mechanical solidarity or self-reliance). *Political economy* approaches position the rural as a product of broader relations of power, particularly emphasizing the agrarian sector and extractive industries. Within anthropological scholarship specifically, peasant and community studies fit into these first two approaches. The *constructivist* approach deterritorializes the rural, viewing it as socially constructed (e.g., a political identity or a consumable product). Part of this “cultural turn” has focused on otherness and diversity in challenging generalized and homogenous representations and discourses of rural populations. Finally, a growing body of literature urges us to consider the rural as “*more-than-representational*” (Carolan 2008), using theories that rematerialize and reterritorialize the rural such as practice and agency, actor-network theory, embodiment, materiality, and dwelling (Carolan 2008; Cloke 2006; Edensor 2000, 2006; Halfacree 2006; Heley 2008; Lu and Qian 2020; Macpherson 2009; Woods 2010, 2011; Wylie 2005). These perspectives emphasize the rural as multi-faceted and co-constituted by human and nonhuman actors, by discourses, embodied experiences, and material practices, and through both local and regional/global processes.

The notion of inherently distinct rural-urban cultures has long been critiqued and with Mesoamerican scholarship, some archaeologists have further contended that pre-Hispanic societies did not conceive of settlements, such as cities or villages, as culturally meaningful units (Hirth 2003; Marcus 1983). For example, Hirth (2003:63) argues, “throughout Mesoamerica, urban centers were not viewed as places qualitatively distinct and separate entities from the countryside as they were in western societies.” To be sure, some contemporary case studies indicate that this distinction emerged through Western colonization and/or globalized cultural commodity exchanges (e.g., Ech-charfi and Azzouzi 2017; Ferguson 2010), although these categories and associated meanings are incorporated and transformed into locally meaningful practices and categories. Yet various studies (Cloke 2006; Jones 1995; Munkejord 2006; Thompson 2007) also underline the tension between academic critiques of the rural-urban dichotomy and the lay discourses and practices that (re)produce and transform such binaries. In other words, distinctions may not “objectively” exist, yet people do practice and experience them. Regardless of whether ancient Mayan languages included distinct spatial categories such as rural or city, these contexts could differ in their ecological landscapes, the size and density of buildings, the intensity of social differentiation, the types of rituals taking place, the degree of social familiarity, or the forms of economic exchange and distribution, among other examples (see Lamb [2020] for a more extensive review). If we consider the social and material interactions that constitute experience, identity, and place (*sensu* Tuan 2005), then the lack of emic designations of “rural” and “city” does not exclude the possibility that people would have recognized,

experienced, and attributed meaning to the qualitatively and quantitatively salient aspects of rural contexts (Fisher 2022; Hutson 2016; Lamb 2020). Conceptualizing rurality attempts to identify what these differences are, and how these relate to social structures, relationships, and processes within and beyond rural places.

Within Maya scholarship, rurality has taken a theoretical backseat to urbanization, urbanism, and urban neighborhoods (although notable exceptions include Garrison et al. (2019); Iannone and Connell (2003); Robin (2012, 2013); Schwartz and Falconer (1994); Yaeger (2003); Yaeger and Robin (2004)). Without remedying this situation, we run the risk of reifying the misconception of rural places and people as remnants of what has been “left-behind” by urbanization and therefore not requiring explanation. Yet rural settlements are not natural entities; they are maintained and transformed over time through external forces as well as local practices, choices, and relations. Moreover, the conditions of rural life and place constantly change alongside broader social, economic, and political relations, thus shifting in significant ways the material, spatial and social manifestations of rurality (see Fisher 2022; Ingalls and Yaeger 2022). Various case studies demonstrate that rural longevity and resilience can be explained beyond outdated notions of rurality as isolated and self-sustaining (e.g., Iannone et al. 2014; Robin 2012; Schwarz 2013; see also Ingalls and Yaeger 2022; Lamb 2022; McNeil et al. 2022). Discussing rural to urban migration among the ancient Maya, Hutson (2016) considers urban attractions as more likely factors than shortcomings of the countryside (see also Lemonnier and Arnauld [2022] on urban “pull factors”). In addition to their vulnerabilities and nuisances, rural towns, villages, and hamlets have attractive qualities and many people choose, whether “rationally” or tacitly, to stay in or move to the country. The contributions of this Special Section point to potential benefits of living outside the city, such as greater biological health for particular social groups; a wider range of ecological resources, including food; accessibility to multiple social and economic networks, including those outside the reach of regional centers; greater autonomy in ritual practices and local governance; fulfilling relations of obligations and reciprocity; and attachments to place, individuals, and local communities. However, our understanding of the factors leading people to *choose* rural life, as well as the push factors leading to urban outmigration, is still limited until more rural-focused research is conducted. Further inquiry into of what “makes somewhere, someone, or something rural” in the ancient Maya world may provide stronger explanations for the longevity and resilience of many ancient Maya rural settlements, the social dynamics of urban migration and urbanization,

and shed light on who created, maintained, and transformed rural places.

How are we to make sense of the continued existence and transformation of rural spaces and lifeways? How are we to make sense of both the diversity of rural places *and* the shared aspects of rural, periurban, conurban, and urban life? The diverse collective presented in this Special Section illustrates how the notion of rural changes and blurs depending on our methods, theoretical approaches, and topics and timeframes studied. Rather than a locally circumscribed or universal definition of rurality, or loose talk of a generic “rural,” what is in order are frameworks that recognize ancient Maya rurality as constituted by a complex assemblage of people, landscapes, relations, and experiences, that makes room for its diverse manifestations and transformations, its appeal and constraints, its vulnerabilities and resilience, and that can account for its endurance as societies become increasingly urbanized. Building such frameworks will enable us to better assess the diverse roles that rural people and places played within complex societies, and therefore develop more dynamic and inclusive models and interpretations of the past. Considerations of rurality further contribute to the relational approaches to various topics that have enjoyed recent or renewed popularity within Maya research, such as the constitution of place, social memory, embodied inequalities, urbanization, and non-human agency and personhood, particularly of plants, animals, and topographic features. Finally, through its access to deep human histories grounded in material remains and paleolandscapes, Maya archaeology may contribute to broader discussions within rural studies. As mentioned above, rural theorization and conceptualization is skewed toward the global north in the capitalist era, where discourses and representations of rurality are overt and pervasive. By examining a context in which discourses on the city and the countryside are limited if at all existent, an attention to ancient Maya rurality may provide a novel exploration concerning the embodiment, tacit performance, and materiality of rurality.

Critiquing past theories and pointing to gaps in scholarship is, of course, easy; the real work begins with finding adequate replacements. Hopefully, this Special Section will contribute to invigorating further theoretical elaboration regarding ancient Maya rurality, how it was constituted, experienced, perhaps even perceived in the past, and its place in broader social processes. Until then, a critical step is for scholars to clearly state what is meant by “rural” or other associated terms, thus facilitating mutually intelligible dialogue and fruitful comparisons among our datasets and interpretations.

RESUMEN

Con base en las investigaciones de las últimas cinco décadas, que han enfatizado no centrarse exclusivamente en las sociedades urbanizadas, por el contrario, proponen incluir cada vez más a personas y lugares rurales, surge esta Sección Especial que presenta investigaciones arqueológicas recientes y perspectivas interpretativas sobre los antiguos Mayas rurales. Los objetivos de esta Sección Especial son demostrar la vitalidad de las investigaciones rurales en el área Maya y explorar más a fondo el potencial de este trabajo para mejorar los modelos teóricos y las interpretaciones de las antiguas sociedades Mayas. Como categorías heurísticas, los términos “rural” y “urbano” pueden ser útiles para comunicar y comparar nuestros hallazgos. Sin embargo, tales términos también pueden causar confusión y reforzar implícitamente los dualismos incluidos en nuestras percepciones y

prácticas culturales. Las investigaciones dentro del área Maya, así como de las culturas pasadas y contemporáneas a nivel mundial, han señalado que la oposición binaria de urbano-rural es defectuosa debido a las interdependencias y cualidades sincréticas de tales asentamientos y sus habitantes. No obstante, también se han observado diferencias cualitativas y cuantitativas entre el campo y la ciudad, pasado y presente. Por lo tanto, las preguntas que guían las contribuciones de esta Sección Especial son: ¿De qué manera las relaciones rurales, las experiencias vividas, los paisajes y otras materialidades son similares y/o diferentes a los contextos no-rurales? ¿Qué tipo de relaciones sociales, horizontales y verticales, mantuvo la población rural fuera de sus asentamientos de residencia? ¿Qué posibilidades existen para discutir y definir la ruralidad sin basarnos en las dicotomías urbano-rural y

otras asociadas? ¿Cómo puede la arqueología rural mejorar nuestras reconstrucciones del pasado, incluyendo nuestros modelos y teorías?

En este artículo introductorio contextualizo la investigación actual presentada en esta Sección Especial, tanto dentro, como fuera del discurso y la práctica académica. Comienzo revisando las formas comunes en que se perciben las personas y los lugares rurales, para subrayar que estas ideas ahora impopulares (lo rural como pobre, no sofisticado, aislado, homogéneo y socialmente conservador) continúan impregnando implícitamente las prioridades, definiciones e interpretaciones de la investigación. En particular, argumento que si bien, la mayoría de los arqueólogos reconocen que la comprensión de las antiguas sociedades complejas requiere del estudio de la población rural, sin embargo, son relativamente pocos los que destacan la importancia de estas poblaciones y aún menos los que ubican los sitios rurales en el centro de investigaciones extensas. Luego ofrezco un breve resumen histórico de la investigación rural en el área maya, incluyendo la

arqueología de asentamientos, paisajes y hogares, así como también describo algunas de las formas significativas en que estos campos han cambiado radicalmente nuestra comprensión de los antiguos mayas rurales en los últimos cincuenta años. Finalmente, a partir de los estudios rurales, abogó por la necesidad de proponer teorías que traten a fondo el tema de la ruralidad, incluyendo definiciones y explicaciones como se han elaborado para el urbanismo y la urbanización. Dicha teorización puede incluir cómo se constituía, experimentaba y tal vez incluso como se percibía lo rural en la antigua sociedad maya, su relación con la vida periurbana, conurbana y urbana, así como también, la continua existencia y transformación de los espacios y formas de vida rurales dentro de sociedades cada vez más urbanizadas. Esta introducción tiene como objetivo fortalecer la elaboración teórica adicional con respecto a la antigua ruralidad maya y provocar que los arqueólogos se ubiquen a sí mismos y a sus trabajos dentro de las tendencias históricas y culturales más amplias de cómo se percibe y aborda lo rural.

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