



The origins of Maya kings, queens, and courts

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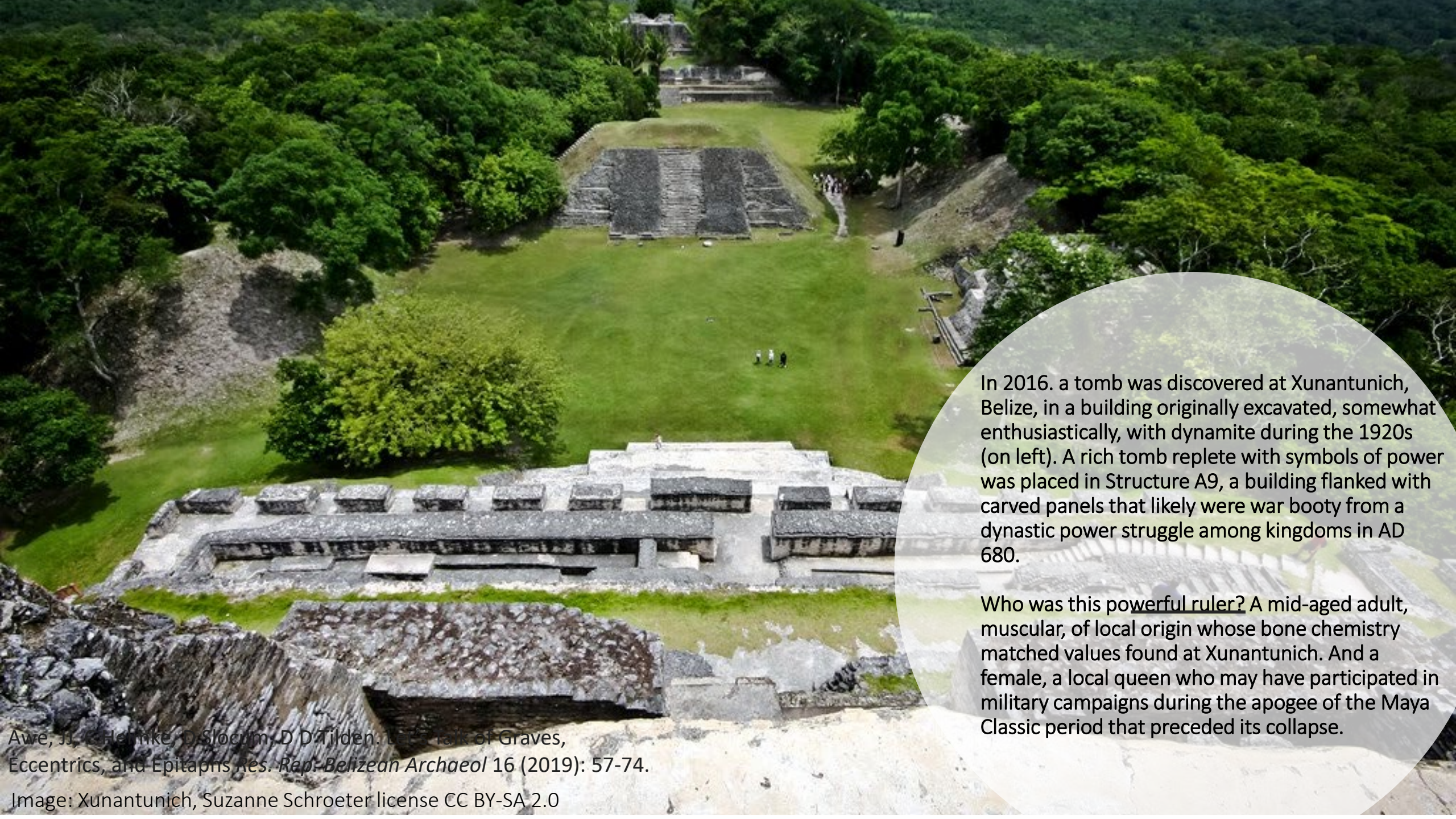
Lady Xok of Yaxchilan in the Maya lowlands.
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Maya kings and queens were buried in elaborate tombs and their images and names were carved into stone, wood, and jade, and painted on polychrome vases, seashells, and bone, to tell stories of their victories in war and politics, marriages, and communication with the gods and their ancestors.

Some had foreign names or grave goods, but even so it is rare to find the name of the rulers buried even the richest tombs. Were Maya cities run by foreign rulers or local ones?

The chemistry of the bones and teeth of rulers shows that most were Maya, not from distant lands or neighboring kingdoms even when they were buried with foreign goods.

K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' of Copan, Honduras (first page), for example, was consistently shown in a Central Mexican style found hundreds of miles away. His tooth enamel had chemical signatures that told a more complex story, one of multiple moves between infancy, childhood, adolescence, and eventually his move to Copan where he ruled and was buried. Glyphs corroborate his complex residential history, a rare case of a non-local king, and one with a name.



In 2016, a tomb was discovered at Xunantunich, Belize, in a building originally excavated, somewhat enthusiastically, with dynamite during the 1920s (on left). A rich tomb replete with symbols of power was placed in Structure A9, a building flanked with carved panels that likely were war booty from a dynastic power struggle among kingdoms in AD 680.

Who was this powerful ruler? A mid-aged adult, muscular, of local origin whose bone chemistry matched values found at Xunantunich. And a female, a local queen who may have participated in military campaigns during the apogee of the Maya Classic period that preceded its collapse.

Awe, J., Helmke, D., Slocum, D., & Tilden, D. (2019). *Excavating the Past: A Tale of Graves, Eccentrics, and Epitaphs Res. Rep. Belizean Archaeol* 16 (2019): 57-74.

Image: Xunantunich, Suzanne Schroeter license CC BY-SA 2.0

People across Mesoamerica, however, moved. Archaeologists have sampled hundreds of burials across Mesoamerica and found in-migration to nearly every site sampled to date. Men, women, and children, rich and poor, urban and rural. We are learning where people moved, which will help us better understand why.

