

Preface

Isn't it a shame we can't converse with the ancients? If we could, I believe we would find that we got many things mostly right about their societies, economies, political organizations, and perhaps even their religious worldviews. Yet it seems that we would also discover an important aspect of the study of ancient worlds that has mostly gone missing: the people themselves. Archaeology is not a discipline that easily engages at the scale of the individual; rather, it is most powerful at the community or the societal scale. Creative writing, however, is well suited to representations at the individual scale that, I believe, contribute to a greater understanding of the whole.

The genesis of what became *House of the Waterlily* was sparked by a student at Eastern Kentucky University, where I teach. After I had regaled my young students with an undoubtedly rousing lecture on the Maya collapse, presenting detailed evidence of its many and varied interacting and contributing factors, a student asked, "But ... what actually happened?" At first I was puzzled. Had he not been listening to what I said? Then I understood: while I was lecturing on the academic causality of the Maya collapse, he had been looking for its human story. At the time I muttered something like "Oh, it must have been terrible ... full of chaos and death!" But once I started thinking about what actually happened at the *human* level, I couldn't stop. My challenge then became how best to render my academic knowledge into an accessible written form offering a sound fictional portrayal of a vitally important and tragic lived human experience. *House of the Waterlily* is the result.

Impetus for writing *House of the Waterlily* also came from Mel Gibson's problematic Hollywood movie *Apocalypto*. Although Gibson, a talented filmmaker, depicted visual elements of the Maya civilization quite well, there was much more that he got wrong. A quick example: time and space and culture in *Apocalypto* are so grossly conflated that we see the Spanish arriving at the height of the Classic period, and the Maya conducting Aztec-scale human sacrifices. Why are these mistakes important? My view is that Gibson deliberately manipulated the evidence with the goal of encouraging viewers to breathe a sigh of relief as Christianity lands on the shores to put the morally bankrupt Maya out of their misery. The problem is that much of the general public who watched *Apocalypto* likely learned everything they think they know about the Maya from it. I offer *House of the Waterlily*, humble though it may be in comparison, as a publicly accessible alternative to *Apocalypto*.

House of the Waterlily is a work of historical fiction. It deliberately does not chronicle one person or family dynasty at one place or one time. Rather, it is an amalgam of archaeological and hieroglyphic material, or has been extrapolated from that material in, I hope, appropriate and probable ways. It takes place in what today is lowland Guatemala. *House of the Waterlily* is fiction, so people and places bear invented names. Centered on the fictional city of Calumook, the story is set at the very end of the Classic Maya Period, in the years around AD 830. Specialist Mayanist readers will recognize the general outline of events occurring toward the end of the occupation of Dos Pilas, but beyond that, *Waterlily* is a deliberate amalgam of Maya life and culture. In the Afterword, I offer some background to help readers place the story in its larger historical, anthropological, and Maya context.

Many of the Maya gods I mention here cannot be proven to have existed in the Classic Period. Rather, they are a mix of historic Yucatec and other, modern interpretations of Classic Period gods. I aimed to animate the Maya cosmos as fully and richly as possible, because the sense of such a cosmos is what is accurate, regardless of time period. Throughout *Waterlily*, I offer a view of what Maya life *could* have been like around AD 830—not what it *was* like.

To bring a sense of the Maya world and yet retain readability, I have used Maya and other indigenous terms sparingly. I have

also used Spanish in instances where it has been widely adopted by Maya speakers. I hasten to underscore, however, that the Classic Period ended some 700 years before the Spanish Conquest.



I offer the following glossary for words with which readers may not be familiar.

- Cenote**—a natural sinkhole that exposes ground water. Spanish.
- Comal**—a flat ceramic dish used to cook tortillas. Nahuatl [Aztec language].
- Huipil**—a woman's tunic-shaped cotton dress woven on a back-strap loom, often with elaborate colors and designs. Nahuatl.
- K'uhul Ajaw**—Holy Lord of a city-state. The Maya title for divine king.
- Mano, metate**—traditional stones used to grind maize. Low to the ground, the metate is stationary; the mano is held in both hands. Spanish.
- Milpa**—slashed and burned from the forest, a milpa is a plot of maize—a cornfield—worked by hand with traditional tools. Nahuatl.
- Quetzaltun**—in *House of the Waterlily*, the name of a fictional highland city. A quetzal is a large green lowland bird, as well as the currency of Guatemala. Quetzal is Nahuatl; thus it is a word that likely did not exist in AD 830. I use it in *Waterlily* because readers may be familiar with the bird and/or the currency. The Maya equivalent is *k'uk'tuun* or *k'uk'ultuun*.
- Sacbe**—a raised road or causeway built primarily for regal-ritual processions in cities, and sometimes between them. Yucatec Mayan.
- Sajal**—the title of a noble member of the Maya court, and often one who governed his or her own subsidiary town or city. Here it refers to a trusted advisor and administrator within the fictional city of Calumook. Interpretation deciphered from Classic Period hieroglyphs and images.
- Stela**—a freestanding stone monument carved with hieroglyphs and images, usually concerning the history of Maya royalty. The plural is stelae. Latin.