Art and Politics in the Maya Courts

_Spring recess fieldtrip to Chiapas, Mexico_

_Learning Across Borders funding application_

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During the 7th and 8th centuries A.D., dozens of competitive Maya polities thrived in the region now encompassed by southern Mexico and northern Central America. Each of these kingdoms was ruled by a ‘godly lord’ (_k’uhul ajaw_), a ruler who claimed superhuman capacity to affect monistic sacred forces on behalf of his (or rarely, her) community. _K’uhul ajaw_ were also the epicenters of richly appointed courts, elaborate architectural complexes populated by lavish material culture and a host of courtiers, including bailiffs, military captains, religious specialists, dwarfs, captives and scribes. In ART468/LAS468, students will explore the nature of ancient Maya courts from a variety of perspectives and academic methodologies, including hieroglyphic decipherment, visual and haptic analysis of material culture (primarily from the collections of the Princeton University Art Museum), archaeological investigations, and ethnohistoric and ethnographic analogy. The planned trip over spring recess is considered a crucial facet of the course’s goal of providing multiple means of understanding this ancient world, as it will allow us, for a short time, to inhabit the very spaces where the ancient _k’uhul ajaw_ held court over 1000 years ago. It will additionally grant the students direct exposure to the tropical ecology that forms the basis of much ancient Maya religious thought and visual symbolism. As students will come to realize, while hieroglyphic texts may seem the most direct and thus authentic lens through which to study ancient Maya courts, they are also frequently fragmentary or incompletely deciphered, often laconic, and always politically motivated.

For several reasons, the course focuses intently on a handful of Maya kingdoms concentrated near the Usumacinta River, which presently forms the border between Mexico and Guatemala. The region exhibits exceptional variety and quality in its art and archaeology, preserves a corpus of hieroglyphic texts that are relatively transparent yet tell interrelated tales of courtly intrigue, and offers comparatively easy access to several of the most important sites in a short period of time. During the first half of the semester, our attention will focus on the art and political history of Piedras Negras, a kingdom whose capital lies on the eastern bank of the Usumacinta, in Guatemala. Our spring break trip will then shift our attention to neighboring, politically interactive kingdoms in Chiapas, Mexico, including Palenque, Toniná, Yaxchilán, Plan de Ayutla, Bonampak and Lacanjá. Each site visit is accompanied by readings, focal hieroglyphic texts, key monuments, and student presentations to encourage dynamic engagement with these spaces, considering such aspects as scale, access, and topographic influences on city planning, each of which are best posed while in the spaces under investigation.

Multiple applicants for the course, including some juniors and seniors seeking Latin American Studies certificates, noted the minimal exposure they have had at Princeton to indigenous culture and history from anywhere in Latin America. It is my intent to remedy this lacuna for those enrolled in
ART468/LAS468, including in direct ways during our trip. While our focus is squarely on the ancient past and how we can know it from evidence still lingering today, contemporary issues inevitably arise on a trip of this sort. At Palenque, whose majestic ruins are flooded with Mexican and international tourists each day, for example, one witnesses the effects of economy on political history: Lacandon Maya, whose simple white garments and long hair seem to epitomize the timeless ‘Indian,’ have long enjoyed a privileged place for selling tourist trinkets in the visitor parking lot. The highland Tzotzil vendors from San Juan Chamula that once shared access to the parking lot are now allowed to sell only in the nearby Palenque town. Chol Maya, who live in communities surrounding the ruins and arguably hold more direct decent from the ancient inhabitants of Palenque, have only recently been granted vending rights in select areas within the park. Tourists, Lacandons and Chamulans alike find the Chol presence frustrating. Here, we will not only consider the ancient city of Palenque, but also how ‘ruins’ as tourist attractions can become places of political contention. Additionally, our trip will conclude with visits to contemporary Tzotzil Maya communities in the highlands around San Cristóbal de las Casas. Our timing is fortuitous: we will be able to witness the annual visit of San Andrés (the icon of St. Andrew) from the community of Santa Marta to Santa María Magdalena. The event is a stunning and vibrant case of cultural syncretism, thoroughly blending ancient Maya traditions with colonial Catholic ones. For this visit, we will be guided by Walter Morris, a leading scholar of contemporary Maya textile arts and a fluent Tzotzil speaker. He will also provide us intimate access to quotidian aspects of Maya life in San Juan Chamula and reveal to the students the rich and highly competitive world of contemporary Maya women’s fashion. I consider this a particularly important component of the excursion, as it will reify for students that the ancient court culture lingers in certain ways among living peoples but that like us all, Maya people continue to adapt and innovate in order to thrive in ever-changing political landscapes.

The seminar trip will be attended by the eleven enrolled students, me, and Caroline Harris, the museum’s associate director for education, who is serving both as a female chaperone and researching how we might adapt this trip to accommodate museum docents in the future as a component of their continued training. During the final two weeks of the semester, the students will participate in conference-style presentations of term research, which will be open to the University community and advertised as such in the hope of sharing the fruits of the excursion and related studies with Princeton faculty and students.