

Mayas in Tabasco and Chiapas
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Rivers in Tabasco and Chiapas

The Mayas occupied southeast Mexico from the territory east of the Mezcalapa-Grijalva River basin. The mouth of this drainage basin is so wide that it covers the western half of the state of Tabasco. The Grijalva, Usumacinta, San Pedro Martir Rivers and their tributaries are among the predominant features of the Tabasco landscape. Without them it would be impossible to explain the shape, extension, and characteristics of this region. In fact, Tabasco owes its existence to the annual contribution of all of the rivers in the state. They transport massive amounts of alluvium from the mountains in Chiapas and Guatemala that are deposited on the land by annual floods that add a layer several centimetres thick to the coastal plain of Tabasco in a process of continuous and gradual modification.

Rivers occasionally change course, given the soft clayey soil of the plain that easily erodes with the annual swelling of water levels. The traces of these riverine shifts can be seen in the abundant streams, marshes, dried up riverbeds, and vast floodplains. However, their movement is not always visible to the human eye, because these processes are gradual and extremely slow.

The Mezcalapa-Grijalva River is born at the confluence of the Selequa or Rincon Tigre and San Gregorio Rivers, which originate in the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes in Guatemala. A number of other currents also feed into it to form one of the widest and mightiest water courses in Mexico. Downriver, it passes near the city of Tuxtla Gutierrez, enters Sumidero Canyon, and flows to the Chicoasen Dam reservoir. From there it continues northwest to Malpaso Dam and proceeds north to Penitas Dam. After that it enters the state of Tabasco, where in the sixteenth century it formed a fast-flowing current that moved northward to empty into the Gulf of Mexico, near Mecoacan Lagoon, where the first Spaniards called it the Rio de Dos Bocas or River with Two Mouths.

In the second half of the sixteenth century, a change in the course of this river took place some 55 km from its mouth. The Spaniards took advantage of this to alter its main course toward the east. After receiving the waters of the Pichucalco and La Sierra Rivers, the river continued to the northeast to join with the Usumacinta River at the point called Tres Brazos or Three Arms. From there, the water ran northward to empty into the Gulf of Mexico, next to the city known as Frontera.

The Usumacinta River is one of the mightiest in Mexico. Its headwaters are in the Peten region of Guatemala at the confluence of two rivers: the Salinas or Chixoy and the Pasión Rivers. With a basin of 106,000 km², it is also the longest river in the region. It discharges an annual average of 105 billion cubic meters of water into the Gulf of Mexico (Hamann and Ankersen 1996). In fact, 42% of the surface of Guatemala is drained by this river. Its course marks the border between Mexico and Guatemala, and later between Chiapas and Tabasco state lines, where it travels between the sierra of Chiapas and Guatemala, carving out its channel amidst limestone folds that form deep canyons and rapids. Finally, it reaches the sprawling Tabasco plain at a spot known as Boca del Cerro. From there the current runs northwest in a series of impressive meanders toward the lowlands to form one of the largest wetlands in the Maya area, known as the Centla Marshes. Here it joins with the Grijalva River and continues its journey to its delta-shaped mouth, where the main current passes by the city of Frontera.

The Grijalva River basin has been divided into three regions: Upper, Middle, and Lower Grijalva. The Upper Grijalva goes from La Angostura Dam to the Middle Grijalva Dam or Grijalva-Tuxtla Gutierrez, which includes Malpaso Dam, while the Lower Grijalva or Grijalva-Villahermosa begins

near the Penitas Dam reservoir and ends at the river's mouth.

In pre-Hispanic times, the Upper and Middle Grijalva River basin was occupied by Maya, Zoque, and Chiapanec peoples. Although they were farming cultures that possessed a Mesoamerican cultural foundation shared with other groups that occupied Mexican territory, they spoke a different language, distinct from the Mayance language group. The foremost Maya sites in the Upper Grijalva were Lagartero, [Chinkultic](#), Tenam Rosario, and [Tenam Puente](#), among others.

In the Lower Grijalva River basin, the most outstanding Maya archaeological cities were [Comalcalco](#), El Bellote, Tecominoacan, and Tierra Nueva, although [Comalcalco](#) has been studied the most to date. In the Tabasco lowlands, [Comalcalco](#) was built as a major territorial capital. Here the Mayas had to adapt to the lack of accessible stone deposits, so they built their platforms of clay, compacted with oyster shells, and then coated with a layer of lime, also obtained from this shell species. In the seventh century they began to use adobe bricks. At that time the older earthen platforms were covered with a layer of bricks joined with lime mortar and plaster. This was the first time that Maya constructions on the plain were made with permanent materials, which soon led to the construction of brick walls, false arch vaults, and roof combs.

Around AD 649 the Maya city of Tortuguero attacked and apparently defeated [Comalcalco](#), according to a limestone tablet with inscriptions known as Tortuguero Monument 6. Evidence of this conquest can be found in architecture at [Comalcalco](#). The internal layout of temples, vaults, and the dimensions of construction in this ancient city are surprisingly similar to those of the architecture at [Palenque](#). With the exception of a pair of funerary chambers, none of the brick vaults that once crowned the temples at [Comalcalco](#) have remained standing. Nevertheless, photographs taken by Desire Charnay, who visited [Comalcalco](#) in 1881, and pre-Columbian drawings incised on many of the bricks used in construction give us an idea of the original appearance of the city's buildings.

Fragmentary censer bases similar to those from [Palenque](#) found at several sites on the plains further attest to cultural ties with this great centre. These large-scale ceramic pieces consist of a cylinder with lateral flanges in which the central tube often bore the faces of fantastic characters, adorned with symbolic elements and attributes of their power and sacred nature. Clearly associated with [Palenque](#), where large numbers were cached in ritual deposits, these censer bases were also adapted to the local ideology of the inhabitants of the Tabasco sierra, bordering the state of Chiapas.

For the study of pre-Hispanic cultures; the Usumacinta River basin has been divided into three regions: the Upper Usumacinta that goes from the confluence of the Salinas and Pasión Rivers to Boca del Cerro; the Middle Usumacinta from Boca del Cerro to Tecolpan; and finally the Lower Usumacinta that starts at Tecolpan and ends in the Gulf of Mexico, where the river flows to the delta (Rands 1973).

Numerous pre-Hispanic settlements were built on the banks of the Usumacinta in Mexico as well as Guatemala. The river also served as a major communication route, although some stretches had to be travelled by land to avoid the perilous rapids, which made the river unsuitable for rowing. In the Upper Usumacinta the leading ancient cities were [Yaxchilan](#), Piedras Negras, El Cayo, Boca de Chinikiha, and Panjale, while in the Middle and Lower Usumacinta, the best-known sites were [Pomona](#), Tierra Blanca, Pocvicuc, La Carmelita, Nueva Esperanza, Tecolpan, Jonuta, Centla, and a number of unexcavated ancient settlements.

The San Pedro Martir River was also important for Tabasco for its volume and headwaters in the Peten in Guatemala. The source began north of Lake Peten Itza and was fed by its tributary, the Kantetul River, close to the lake. It also stood out for the number and complexity of ancient Maya

settlements on its banks, which included Waka' and La Florida in Guatemala and San Claudio, Santa Elena, Resaca, El Tiradero, and Moral-Reforma in Tabasco.

From the source the San Pedro Martir River runs toward the west and northwest until it enters Mexican territory at the boundary established at 90°58'W, two km away, where the border forms a straight angle with the line marked by 17°15'N, the south border between Tabasco and Guatemala. In Tabasco the river continues northwest for five km and then shifts to the west for ten km. From there it splits into a number of currents that empty into the Usumacinta five km away.

After crossing the piedmont of the Sierra de Chiapas and Guatemala, the river enters Tabasco. It leaves in its path a vast floodplain between the mountains and the river, in some stretches up to five km wide, which influenced the location of ancient settlements. The sites on its banks were generally positioned on natural elevations above the plain. Other centres, such as San Claudio and roughly twenty-some others were established on low hilltops between the sierra and the plain.

The area known as the 'river region' in Tabasco was densely populated in pre-Columbian times. Despite the lack of information on pre-agricultural settlements, a group of some 550 archaeological sites have been recorded in the municipalities of Balancan, Tenosique, and Emiliano Zapata, some dating back to the Middle Formative (Middle Preclassic) to about 500 BC. If we also take into account the sites in the municipalities of Jonuta and Centla, the number of ancient settlements reaches 744, and this is without including the Maya population centres in the Usumacinta basin in the state of Chiapas.

By about 500 BC, the settlements on the banks of the Middle Usumacinta and San Pedro Martir Rivers were affiliated with Olmec culture. These sites have not yet been studied in any depth and only casual finds of Olmec-style pieces, such as figurines, celts, and ceramics, now held in local museums, have been reported. Bas-relief sculptures were found in different spots in the municipalities of Balancan, Tenosique, and Guatemala. These pieces, carved from local limestone, suggest the presence of a permanent population that adhered to Olmec customs, styles, and ideas, also evident in their pottery and figurine production.

In the Usumacinta River basin, Maya groups date to the first three centuries BC and AD. Generally known as the Upper Formative (Late Preclassic), this period is characterised by the presence of numerous groups living in the 'river region'. At this time construction began at many of the region's most well-known archaeological sites: La Trinidad, Tierra Blanca, Pocvicuc, Pomoca, Santa Elena, Moral-Reforma, [Pomona](#), San Claudio, and Panjale, to name a few. These settlements exhibit the oldest remains: pottery with a waxy red, cream or black surface finish, dubbed 'Paso Caballo Cerosa' ware by archaeologists and related to the Peten region ceramic tradition. Also associated with this pottery type were the first stone buildings, also in the Peten style, at Panjale and Moral-Reforma. They have rectangular platforms with sloped walls and recessed corners. [El Mirador](#), [Uaxactun](#), [Tikal](#), and [Calakmul](#) stand out as the largest cities in the Peten region of Guatemala and south Campeche at this time.

This connection between Maya culture in the 'river region' and the Peten continued into the Classic period. Architecture and pottery from sites in the Middle Usumacinta and San Pedro Martir River basins bear a strong resemblance to those of the more powerful and developed centres in the Peten region.

Pre-Hispanic Maya society achieved a high degree of complexity in social and political organisation. This understanding today contrasts with ideas about the ancient Maya in the first half of the twentieth century, when it was believed that the Mayas never formed a single state or 'empire'. Instead, it would appear that there was a hierarchical series of territories dominated by a

city that served as a regional capital with other settlements and nearby villages subordinate to the centre.

Although we do not know the dimensions that these territories might have had, inscriptions carved on monuments tell us that at certain times some cities were dominated by others. Warfare aimed at conquering new lands was rife according to epigraphic evidence on stelae, as well as lintels, tablets, and stairways carved in bas-relief. A remarkable group of murals completely covering the walls and ceiling in the interior of three rooms in a building at [Bonampak](#) display scenes of preparation for war, the battle, and the victory celebration after defeating the rival. These images, inscriptions, and ceramics have made it possible for scholars to draw the political map of Classic period Maya conflicts and alliances.

The leading capitals at that time were [Tikal](#), [Palenque](#), [Calakmul](#), and [Copan](#). Nevertheless, roughly fifty cities that controlled an independent territory in the Maya lowlands (without including the Yucatan Peninsula) have been identified on the basis of the decipherment of their emblem glyphs. These symbols that were emblematic of specific cities were first identified in the 1960s by Heinrich Berlin, who noticed that they were often repeated in inscriptions at a single centre and only occasionally at others. Today we know that these emblem-glyphs formed part of a longer statement normally preceded by the name and titles of a ruler and the emblem glyph to read: 'the divine lord of ... (a city)'.

Two of the most powerful cities, [Tikal](#) and [Calakmul](#), were fierce rivals for more than 200 years. They attacked and dominated neighbouring cities or forged alliances with others, until they grew to form two sizeable political spheres. In this panorama, few cities could be completely independent for any length of time.

In the Usumacinta River basin and nearby, the cities that served as capitals were [Bonampak](#), [Yaxchilan](#), Piedras Negras, Anaite, [Tonina](#), and [Palenque Pomona](#), Santa Elena, and Moral-Reforma were also capitals of territories in Tabasco that were known for their inscriptions. El Tortuguero, a Maya centre in the Tullja River basin, boasted the same emblem as [Palenque](#), prompting a rivalry between two rulers for possession of the same extensive territory.

There is no data for the Lower Usumacinta basin that indicates which sites might have been regional capitals. Jonuta, a faraway yet strategically important site, was apparently dominated by [Palenque](#), whereas on the coast, a single sculpture of a high-ranking Maya dignitary carved in limestone was found at Ejido Nuevo Centla, but it lacks any inscription. A reasonable explanation for the paucity of stone monuments bearing glyphic information is the absence of natural sources of stone in this area, which meant that the Mayas had to use other materials of a perishable nature to record their inscriptions. These materials included pottery, wood, bone, shell, and stingray spines.

Capitals that stood on the San Pedro Martir River included El Peru, today known as Waka' in Guatemala and Santa Elena and Moral-Reforma in the municipality of Balancan in Tabasco. As archaeological enquiry progresses, it will be possible to identify other sites that were territorial capitals.

Recently researchers have made an effort to determine the extension of the territory dominated by [Pomona](#), particularly in a context of rivalry with Piedras Negras (Anaya Hernandez 2002, 2005). This research was based both on monuments with inscriptions and major geographic features that were natural obstacles that could have marked limits. [Pomona](#)'s territory would have extended south to the San Josecito rapids, which served as a boundary with the lands of Piedras Negras.

Panhale (Boca del Cerro), an archaeological site on the banks of the Usumacinta River, on the

summit of the hills before reaching the plain, formed part of [Pomona](#)'s domain. It served as a check point that controlled access to the river from the hilltops. The sole monument bearing an inscription from Panjale mentions a ruler from [Pomona](#) and records the year AD 770, which supports this interpretation.

[Pomona](#)'s enemy, Piedras Negras, an ally of [Calakmul](#), would have lorded over a portion of the Usumacinta and dominated the Redencion del Campesino valley and the natural pass at Santa Rosa, a gap between the hills that afforded easy access to the coastal plain of Tabasco (Anaya Hernandez 2005).

As was the case of a number of Maya cities, [Pomona](#) and Piedras Negras were longstanding enemies. Piedras Negras Stela 12 indicates that the lords and warriors of [Pomona](#) were the adversaries of Piedras Negras and records a payment of tribute to [Pomona](#) in AD 554. Other clashes between these two cities took place in AD 792 and 794.

[Pomona](#)'s relations with other neighbouring centres were little better. The panel found east of the Temple of the Inscriptions at [Palenque](#) records [Pomona](#)'s attack on April 7,611 (9.8.17.14.14 in the Long Count), when [Palenque](#) was ruled by Ak Kan (Grube 1996). The Hieroglyphic Stairway in House C of the Palace at [Palenque](#) records the capture of six prisoners on 9.11.06.16.11 (August 10, 659). Two of these captives were identified as from [Pomona](#), one of whom was the ruler. It has been suggested that the ruler of [Pomona](#) lived as a prisoner for four years, for his death is recorded in an inscription on the substructure of House A of the Palace at [Palenque](#) on July 16,663.

It was not until AD 692 that [Pomona](#) began to carve its own monuments, once it managed to free itself from [Palenque](#)'s yoke (Grube 1996). This pattern can be seen at many other sites in the Maya lowlands; when a city was vanquished in battle and its ruler taken prisoner, it was not allowed to erect monuments with inscriptions. Consequently, at a number of centres there were periods in which no events were recorded in the wake of a defeat.

[Palenque](#) was one of the most prominent Classic Maya cities and it faced a bitter rivalry with [Calakmul](#) and other centres. Although the full extent of its territory is unclear, it must have encompassed the area west of Tortuguero, ruled by Ahau Balam, who prominently displayed the same emblem glyph as [Palenque](#) in a bid to assert his power, and extended to [Comalcalco](#), which shared stylistic and architectural features with the capital. In the north, [Palenque](#)'s territory could have included Jonuta, on the coastal plain; to the south, it adjoined the territory of [Tonina](#); and to the east, it abutted the lands of [Pomona](#) and Piedras Negras.

Meanwhile, Moral-Reforma served as another capital, although it was subordinate to the control of other cities at some time. Thus, the inscriptions on Stela 4 at this centre relate the life story of a man called Falcon Skull (Martin 2003) who ascended the throne at age five in April 662, marked by a ritual that included tying a band on his head. Strangely enough, a year later a tying ceremony and the transfer of power were held again, but this time under the supervision of Yuknoom Ch'een 11, the ruler of [Calakmul](#). To perform this ceremony, Falcon Skull had to travel to another place that was unfortunately not named.

Another event in the life of Falcon Skull was a military victory in 687, when he was now an adult, and perhaps another in 689. To everyone's surprise, he performed another tying ceremony to mark his accession to the throne in 690, but this time under the watchful eye of Kan Bahlam, the ruler of [Palenque](#), where the ritual was held.

Based on the reading of Maya hieroglyphic texts we can deduce that the region's political situation was highly unstable, especially for [Pomona](#) and Moral-Reforma, which stood in the region where

[Calakmul](#) and [Palenque](#) vied for control. Falcon Skull of Moral-Reforma had no choice but to turn to the paramount powers at that time to establish alliances or to offer submission to be recognised as the ruler of his city.

As for Maya social organisation, the inscriptions only reveal the highest ranks of the ruling elite and their closest supporters.

Archaeological sites represented by pieces in the exhibition:

CHIAPAS

[Tonina](#)

[Bonampak](#)

[Palenque](#)

[Yaxchilan](#)

Lagartero

Simojovel

[Chinkultik](#)

Lagartero

Tenam Rosario

Chiniklha

La Mar

Tila

Izapa

Depresion Central

[Tenam Puente](#)

TABASCO

Moral-Reforma

[Pomona](#)

Teapa

Tacotalpa

Tapijulapa

Isla Chable Paraiso

Emiliano Zapata

Usumacinta

Jonuta

Panjale

[Comalcalco](#)

La Cuchilla

Balancan

Ejido la Esperanza Tenosique

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