

## Redefining the Epiclassic Period in Mesoamerica





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# **Redefining the Epiclassic Period in Mesoamerica**

Proceedings of the Copenhagen Roundtable

Edited by  
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Cover: A mould-made bowl from Xochicalco, depicting the Maya deity *K'awiil* (drawing by C. Helmke).



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To those that have dedicated themselves to the Epiclassic



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# Introducing the Copenhagen Roundtable on the Epiclassic Period in Mesoamerica

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There is a general scholarly consensus that following the decline of the great Classic metropolis Teotihuacan in the sixth century AD, there was a marked transformation in the social order and economic networks for at least the following three centuries (AD 600–900). Since the seminal work of Wigberto Jiménez Moreno in 1959, we have been maintaining, and to some degree preserving, some of the same notions that he used to hypothesize what transpired from the seventh to the tenth centuries, such as the appearance of highly militaristic societies, a notable shift in settlement patterns, the incursion of northern peoples to the central highlands, and heightened contact and exchange with contemporaneous Maya societies in the east. However, six decades on, are those premises still viable and heuristically informative?

Although the Epiclassic has received relatively little scholarly interest in general terms, in recent years, we have witnessed a renewed focus on this important period and cultural horizon of Mesoamerican history. Several publications and dissertations have appeared on the subject, as well as conferences, colloquia, and symposia that have been held—such as the volume *When East Meets West* published by BAR International Series, published in 2023, resulting from a series of papers presented at the Society for American Archaeology in 2018. Most recently, also, the colloquium *Sitios y materiales arqueológicos del Epiclásico*, organised and hosted by the Tlaxcala delegation of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, celebrated in 2023. While our interest, along with that of other Mesoamericanists, is in broadening our vision and conceptualisation of the Epiclassic, whether at the site, regional or macro level, some of the original questions remain valid and are waiting to be answered by new research, methods, techniques, discoveries and their integration into revised theoretical models.

Therefore, the main goal of the **Copenhagen Epiclassic Roundtable** was to critically review the basic underlying concepts and inherent assumptions ascribed to this period, as well as to assess and measure the degree of continuity from Classic period Teotihuacan and the impact of Epiclassic city-states on Postclassic imperial cultures. The present volume is thereby the result of a joint effort and a common interest in one of the main periods of Mesoamerican history, not merely a fleeting period of transition, wedged between the greatness of Teotihuacan in the Classic period and the appearance of Toltec-related city-states of the Early Postclassic.

Motivated by these objectives, we considered it necessary to convene a roundtable whose main objective would be to present evidence from a variety of sites and from various disciplinary vantages, to open a coherent dialogue on the Epiclassic period in Mesoamerica. This roundtable was organised as part of *The Origins and Developments of Central Mexican Calendars and Writing Systems* project, whose focus is on tracking the development of the central Mesoamerican writing systems, particularly from Teotihuacan, the Epiclassic and on the writing system of the Aztec in the Postclassic (Helmke and Nielsen 2024). Since 2019, The Velux Foundation (Grant 115078) has generously funded the research project, which is co-directed by Jesper Nielsen and Christophe Helmke. As part of the project, Claudia I. Alvarado León served as a one-year post-doctoral fellow at the University of Copenhagen who, together with Christophe Helmke, dedicated part of her time to organise and coordinate the Copenhagen Epiclassic Roundtable, held on the 3rd and 5th, of April 2024.

The event brought together a group of researchers from Mexico, the United States, France, Spain, and Denmark whose research focuses on the Central Highlands of Mexico and adjoining areas, such as Michoacan (see map). In the interest of stimulating dialogue, the questions that were raised and to which we tried to respond to with the papers presented, included the following: Can we speak of a single culture, or can we detect local variations that signal regional differences? Should the Epiclassic rather be considered a mayor scale event of culture-historical significance, rather than a protracted period of change? How did the independent city-states that characterise the geo-political landscape, maintain their autonomy and interact, both economically and politically? Where these





The distribution of major Epiclassic sites in the central Mexican highlands. Only the most salient sites introduced in the following chapters are plotted (map by C. Helmke).

city-states in unceasing competition and conflict, or were clashes more singular events that punctuated periods of tempered cohesion? Were there networks of allegiances and alliances between the city-states, and if so, were these driven by economic impetuses or other socio-political catalysts? How did the cultural impulses from eastern Mesoamerica, notably those of the Maya city-states of the Late-to-Terminal Classic, shape Epiclassic identities and forms of governance? How did the features that define the Epiclassic in turn integrate, or not, into the social, cultural and political fabric of the ensuing Postclassic?

To that end, each speaker was given ample time for his or her presentation, and each day ended with an open forum, the roundtable proper, to host a meaningful dialogue and exchange of ideas that allowed the speakers to revise their stances in view of the data and hypotheses presented by their colleagues, before coming to a greater consensus. These discussions were highly productive and bore fruit, providing the presenters with collegiate and constructive feedback, and allowing the authors to draw on these discussions to revise the contents of their papers, in the form that these now occupy. Likewise, the discussions form the very basis of the final synthetic chapter in which we thematically draw together the main points of discussion, furthering our understanding of the Epiclassic and provide, a more nuanced redefinition of this important period. We offer this redefinition for the benefit of our colleagues who are working at sites and materials of the Epiclassic, and who like us have been grappling with the defining characteristics of this phase, in hopes that we can stimulate further discussions and together make significant headways in the future.

Rather than a loose collection of papers, these proceedings seek to propose and establish in definitive terms what we understand by Epiclassic, evaluating some of the traits and features that have been raised, time and again, assuming that it is a relatively short period of transition that lies between the two great imperial metropolises of Central Mexico, namely Teotihuacan and Tenochtitlan. The volume consists of 12 chapters, some dealing with general issues and problems related to the Epiclassic (Chapters 1 and 2), others focusing on the archaeology of specific sites located in the cultural area occupied by Epiclassic cultures (Chapters 3 to 8), and finally contributions focusing on specific topics related to linguistics, iconography, and the relationship between the Epiclassic city-states and eastern Mesoamerica (Chapters 9 to 11, respectively). As already mentioned, the closing chapter (Chapter 12) provides a synthesis and a redefinition of the Epiclassic, resulting from the discussions held as part of the roundtable.

In the first chapter of the proceedings, by CLAUDIA I. ALVARADO LEÓN, introduces the concept of the Epiclassic and challenges its traditional view as a transitional phase between the fall of Teotihuacan and the rise of Tula. The text critically examines the conventional understanding of the Epiclassic by focusing on three key aspects: chronology, militarism, and artistic expression. It advocates for a more precise chronology, highlighting the need for robust chronometric data to understand the complex dynamics of this period. Furthermore, it challenges the pervasive narrative of militarism, pointing out the lack of direct evidence for widespread warfare. Lastly, it explores the rich artistic expressions of the Epiclassic, suggesting that they represent sophisticated strategies of identity formation and political legitimisation rather than mere reflections of ethnic migration. The text concludes by proposing a division of the Epiclassic into three phases: Early, Middle, and Late, each with its own distinct characteristics. This new framework encourages a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the Epiclassic period, recognising its significance beyond a mere transitional phase.

It is not possible to talk about the Epiclassic without making reference to the Classic period metropolis of Teotihuacan. Thus, in the second chapter, NATALIA MORAGAS SEGURA reflects on the impact that archaeology as a discipline has had on our understanding of Teotihuacan, leading us to perceive the Epiclassic as that which follows the collapse, destruction, and partial abandonment of Teotihuacan (dated to between AD 550–650). However, Moragas draws our attention not only to the information gleaned at the monumental and urban centre of the city, but also to the information from the periphery. From this vantage, the author hypothesizes that if peripheral groups were not as well-integrated into the Teotihuacan state, the violent upheavals associated with the downfall of Teotihuacan, may not have affected the populations of these more peripheral settlements in the same way as residents who had lived under this highly stratified system for generations, within the ambit of the urban capital. In this scenario, the new actors would have taken the initiative to generate a new order in the resulting power-vacuum that followed in the wake of collapse. Moragas leads us to understand that rather than collapse and abandonment, Teotihuacan was subject to reorganisation and adapted to a new order that would go on to define the Epiclassic.

YOKO SUGIURA and RUBÉN NIETO HERNÁNDEZ, for their part, focus their attention on sites of the Toluca Valley, a region that, despite its splendour during the Epiclassic period and unlike several of the cases presented in this volume, shows continuity in its rural character in the face of Teotihuacan's declining influence and control. The panorama observed in the Toluca Valley in an early phase of the period, which contrasts with the typical one observed in other regions of central Mexico, such as the location of new settlements in elevated and more readily defensible areas. Teotenango, on the other hand, seems to be founded in a later facet of the Epiclassic, bordering on the ensuing Early Postclassic. In this sense, it is interesting to note that several of the texts collected here present this disposition of dividing the Epiclassic into two or even three phases (see the chapters by Alvarado León; Fenoglio Limón; Sugiura and Nieto Hernández; Morehart), rather than assuming that it should be characterised as a single, more homogenous phase.

Under a World Systems theoretical approach, PATRICIA FOURNIER G. and FERMÍN SÁNCHEZ-ALDANA present two case studies from the Tula region: Chapantongo and Cerro Magoni. The authors assert that the Epiclassic was not the result of migrations, as is often claimed, forcing the authors to re-evaluate the development of sites in the Tula region through the empirical data obtained as part of their Mezquital Valley project. Thus, throughout the chapter, the authors present, one by one, the data that led them to demonstrate that the local development of the region was attributed to the local Otomian populations and not to groups coming from the Bajío, as had been previously suggested.

CHRISTOPHER MOREHART's chapter focuses on one of the most entrenched features in the definition of the Epiclassic: conflict. Social unrest, decentralisation and conflict have been repeatedly identified as some of the consequences of the collapse of the highly centralised Teotihuacan state. It is often associated with the idea of competition and

violence, prompting a shift in settlement patterns, away from valley floors to occupations in the upper hills and investing resources into defensive architecture, among others. From a geopolitical and economic perspective, the author analyses the possible relationships between Tula Chico and settlements located in elevated areas, such as Los Mogotes, seeking to understand the causes of decentralisation and conflict at large in the region.

Drawing our attention to the northwest of the Basin of Mexico, that is, to the Bajío, FIORELLA FENOGLIO LIMÓN seeks to explain the socio-political dynamics among a dozen sites located in the Panuco-Moctezuma Basin in the present-day state of Querétaro. To this end, the author offers a diachronic overview that explains the commercial relationship of this region with Teotihuacan and its consolidation with a new spatial, social, and political organisation appearing during the Epiclassic. The chapter deals with six settlements located in upland areas surrounded by deep canyons, a characteristic feature of sites of this period, in addition to the presence and absence of ballcourts, petroglyphs, and different ceramic types. One of the most notable suggestions in this chapter is the division of the Epiclassic period into potentially three phases.

Looking westward toward south-central Michoacan, JOSÉ LUIS PUNZO DÍAZ presents an analysis of a region that stretches over 100 square kilometres and ranges from 200 to 3,000 meters in elevation. In this area of great biodiversity, Epiclassic settlements stand out, at the interstice between three archaeological traditions: the Lupe Sphere, the Tepalcatepec River Sphere, and the Middle Balsas Sphere. At the convergence of these three spheres is the site of Tingambato, which, thanks to recent research, has been shown not to be a Teotihuacan outpost, as had previously been assumed, but rather an Epiclassic centre that played an important role in the development of the region.

In the western region, GRÉGORY PEREIRA focuses on the study of monumental architecture in the Zacapu region during the Epiclassic period. The author presents the results of information obtained through studies using LiDAR technology and the identification of a new type of territorial organisation that reflects increasing social stratification, as well as the documentation of previously unidentified monumental architecture. These findings led to the recognition of a configuration similar to what are considered palaces in other areas of Mesoamerica, particularly, that of the monumental platform of Cacaxtla, which leads him to question the mechanisms that could have been established between distant territories.

In the following chapter, MAGNUS PHARAO HANSEN, provides us with a linguistic perspective to the Epiclassic, fleshing out the linguistic panorama of the period, something that has been critically overlooked to date, but which provides an important foundation to our understanding of the linguistic diversity of the peoples who shared in and actively participated in Epiclassic culture. The evidence afforded, likewise considers the role and place of early Nahuatl speakers in central Mexico and conclusively demonstrates that Epiclassic cultures were characterised by a high degree of linguistic diversity. This chapter offers an alternative view of population movements through its proposed linguistic model, which, as the author points out, could be corroborated by new epigraphic, genetic and archaeological evidence.

The chapter by JULIETTE TESTARD explores the significance of “models” in understanding the emulation of artistic styles and cultural practices during the Epiclassic period, emphasizing the identification of canonical objects that served as standards for imitation. It reveals insights into the socio-economic and political dynamics of city-states and the active choices made by artists. The study underscores the dynamic role of models for achieving realism in art and the creative reinterpretation of imported styles and techniques. Testard also addresses the interaction and exchange of material culture during the Epiclassic from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. Her aim is to identify the models used for emulation and adaptation, using the material culture of two emblematic sites of the period, namely Cacaxtla and Xochicalco, as representative case studies. Despite challenges in establishing precise archaeological chronologies, identifying these models illuminates the complexity of cultural exchange and highlights how hybridisation and innovation shaped the artistic legacy of Epiclassic Mesoamerican societies.

Cacaxtla is renowned in Epiclassic archaeology for its elaborate polychromatic murals, which display a wide array of Maya-inspired stylistic traits and Maya ritual objects. However, analogous features are not discussed for other Epiclassic sites in central Mexico. The chapter by CHRISTOPHE HELMKE, JESPER NIELSEN, CLAUDIA I. ALVARADO LEÓN and SILVIA GARZA TARAZONA provides an extensive review of the material evidence from Xochicalco, indicating a strong emulation of Maya elite culture and symbolic expression. Beyond the superficial stylistic similarities debated by art historians, significant material features such as eccentrics, censers, architecture, sculptures, and idealised depictions of rulers reveal greater and more evident Maya influence. The substantial evidence of Maya-style elements at Xochicalco, coupled with a heretofore unpublished and fragmentary polychromatic mural from



the site, prompts the authors to suggest that the rulers of Xochicalco adopted Maya forms of governance, reflecting a translation of foreign ideologies into a central Mexican context, likely modelling their system after the monarchical city-states of the Maya.

In the final chapter, we present some of the most salient themes that emerged during the roundtable sessions discussions. These allowed us to outline some of the major aspects of the Epiclassic and propose a redefinition of the Epiclassic in Mesoamerica. Many of these traits, themes and features are addressed and have often been reiterated without the benefit of thorough analyses such as: chronology, population movements and settlement patterns. Likewise, the roundtables granted us the opportunity to delve into a discussion incorporating new data and to consider topics that have been generally overlooked, such as the linguistic panorama of the Epiclassic, the shared writing system, as well as the nature and timing of foreign influences attested in material and visual culture. Our collective effort highlights the heterogeneity of scenarios, material culture, dates, and regionality, and to confine these to one single model is evidently an impossible task. However, as was stated above, we offer this new redefinition for the benefit of our colleagues dedicated to the study of the Epiclassic with the sole objective of stimulating the discussion as we collaborate together to make significant progress in our understanding of the Epiclassic.