ANTHROPOLOGY (ANT) 4168
MAYA CIVILIZATION

Class Meets: T 4-5 Norman 184, R 4 Weimer 1084
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COURSE PREREQUISITE: ANT 2140 or 3141, or permission of instructor

COURSE DESCRIPTION: This course provides an indepth study of the Maya civilization, located in the region stretching from southern Mexico to Honduras. Emphasis is given to Maya social, cultural, and historical features as determined from archaeological investigations of their extensive material remains as well as decipherment of their hieroglyphic writing and analyses of their artworks and architecture. The course follows a chronological framework tracing 3000 years of history beginning with the first settlements of Maya-speaking peoples in the area during the first millennium BC. Topics include social and political organization; economic systems based on agriculture, manufacturing, and exchange; settlement patterns and ecology; warfare and other competitive interactions; religion, calendars, and worldview; art and writing systems, literature; and aspects of daily life such as family organization, diet, the life cycle, and gender roles. A final topic is the legacy and heritage of the Maya civilization into the Spanish colonial era up to the present, and a brief look at the status of Maya peoples today in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras.

As we study each of these topics, we will examine the various sources of information and methods for constructing knowledge of the preColumbian Maya and discuss major controversies concerning them, in some cases referring to website and blog postings. These include popular notions of the so-called Maya “collapse” and the stereotyping of Maya peoples in works such as Jared Diamond’s Collapse and Mel Gibson’s “Apocalypto.” Did the Maya unwittingly destroy their own fragile environment, or did they understand it in profound ways that would aid modern attempts to create sustainable agriculture? Were they as bloody and violent as portrayed in some popular works, or is this view based on Western biases and an over-emphasis on certain representations? Were they a fatalistic people who placed too much reliance on their cyclical calendar— which will end in December 2012—or were they pragmatic and able to adjust to changes in natural and political realities? Should we treat them as a “unique” culture, as they have been romantically portrayed, or view them in terms of comparisons and relationships with other cultures? What influences did the Maya have on their neighbors, e.g., the spread of chocolate production, the use of jade, the development of metallurgy? How did Maya trade impact Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean?

COURSE DESIGN: This course has been designed for advanced undergraduate students who have a keen interest in preColumbian peoples and cultures, and more specifically for majors and minors in Anthropology, Latin American Studies, History, Art History, Classics, and Religion. Because this course involves the study of a nonwestern culture based primarily on archaeological evidence, students should have completed a prior course in archaeology (ANT 2140 or 3141) or obtain the instructor’s permission to substitute another course(s) for the stated prerequisite. This course integrates well with ANT 3162 Aztec Civilization, ANT 4323 People of Mexico and Central America, and ANT 3332 Peoples of Latin America.

COURSE OBJECTIVES AND STUDENT GOALS: All students are expected to gain knowledge of the Maya civilization of the past and present within a holistic and historical perspective. Examination of nonwestern value systems enables students to appreciate and understand lifeways, beliefs, and
expressions alien or similar to their own, and therefore to better understand their own through that comparison. Students will gain familiarity with different methods for evaluating information from a variety of sources. Current controversies are examined in order to engage students in the intellectual process. Cross-cultural comparison, evaluative and analytical skills in examining evidence for the holistic study of culture, and communicative skills in writing papers and in oral discussion contribute to success in many career fields.

REQUIRED READINGS: The two required textbooks available for purchase at the book stores are:

*Ancient Maya: The Rise and Fall of a Rainforest Civilization* 2004 by Arthur Demarest
*Reading the Past: Maya Glyphs* (1989) by Stephen Houston

Additional required readings are available as photocopies, electronic journal articles, or on the web. Read the textbook for more in-depth material on topics covered in the lectures. Supplementary readings are especially important for class discussions of contemporary issues and controversies. Assigned readings should be done each week. All students are also required to access the lecture outlines, assignments, and study materials on e-Learning. Students who preregister for the course will be emailed the reading assignments for the first week of class.