

STUDIES OF ANCIENT  
MESOAMERICA AT THE END  
OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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- THE CODEX BORGIA: A FULL COLOR RESTORATION OF THE ANCIENT MEXICAN MANUSCRIPT.* By Gisele Díaz and Alan Rodgers, commentary by Bruce E. Byland. (New York: Dover, 1993. Pp. 77. \$14.95 paper.)
- PRIMEROS MEMORIALES.* By Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. Facsimile edition, photographed by Ferdinand Anders. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993. Pp. 176. \$160.00 cloth.)
- THE CODEX MENDOZA.* 4 volumes. Edited by Frances F. Berdan and Patricia Rieff Anawalt. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992. Pp. 900. \$495.00 cloth.)
- THE FLAYED GOD: THE MYTHOLOGY OF MESOAMERICA.* By Roberta H. Markman and Peter T. Markman. (New York: Harper Collins, 1992. Pp. 456. \$30.00 cloth.)
- TEOTIHUACAN: ART FROM THE CITY OF THE GODS.* By Kathleen Berrin and Esther Pasztory. (San Francisco, Calif.: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993. Pp. 288. \$24.95 paper.)
- IN THE REALM OF EIGHT DEER: THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MIXTEC CODICES.* By Bruce E. Byland and John M. D. Pohl. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994. Pp. 292. \$65.00 cloth.)
- MESOAMERICAN WRITING SYSTEMS: PROPAGANDA, MYTH, AND HISTORY IN FOUR ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS.* By Joyce Marcus. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992. Pp. 495. \$49.95 cloth.)
- IDEOLOGY AND PRE-COLUMBIAN CIVILIZATIONS.* Edited by Arthur A. Demarest and Geoffrey W. Conrad. (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press, 1992. Pp. 261. \$35.00 cloth, \$15.95 paper.)
- MESOAMERICAN ELITES: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT.* Edited by Diane Z. Chase and Arlen F. Chase. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992. Pp. 375. \$39.95 cloth.)
- ANCIENT MESOAMERICA: A COMPARISON OF CHANGE IN THREE REGIONS.* Second edition. By Richard E. Blanton, Stephen A. Kowalewski, Gary M. Freeman, and Laura M. Finsten. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pp. 284. \$69.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)

*COLLECTING THE PRE-COLUMBIAN PAST*. Edited by Elizabeth Hill Boone. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1993. Pp. 359. \$30.00 cloth.)

Scholarly research on Mesoamerican antiquity in the last two decades of the twentieth century mirrors the last two decades of the nineteenth century in a cyclical way that ancient Mesoamericans themselves would have appreciated. One hundred years ago, the building blocks of our scholarly edifice were set by a host of explorers and scholars, including Alfred Maudslay, Teobert Maler, Eduard Seler, Zelia Nuttall, Ernst Forstemann, Francisco Paso y Troncoso, Antonio Penafiel, and others. New sites were discovered and mapped, calendrical mysteries of arcane writing systems were worked out, and monuments and documents were photographed and published. Scholars built on the groundwork laid by this generation for many decades.

The end of the twentieth century has witnessed another period of widespread investigation and synthesis. Rapid expansion of archaeological field projects, refinements in archaeological method and theory since the 1960s, proliferation in art historical investigations of Mesoamerican subjects since the 1970s, and the interdisciplinary collaborative works underway since the early 1980s have combined to make this an extraordinarily bountiful time for scholarship on Mesoamerican topics. My review essay will examine only a sample of the fine works published over the last few years. The works chosen cover wide-ranging topics rather than narrow ones, in part to emphasize that these have produced some unusually synthetic and multidisciplinary works. I write from the perspective of an art historian rather than a field archaeologist, and as a scholar who believes strongly in interdisciplinary collaboration as the most fruitful way to pose and answer major questions in Mesoamerican studies.

The effective dissemination of scholarly research requires publication of high-quality visual images, whether of hieroglyphic inscriptions (as in Ian Graham's ongoing publication of the *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions*, out of Harvard) or pictorial codices. While Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt of Graz, Austria, has long led the way in publishing codex reproductions, several recent U.S. projects are noteworthy. The books will be reviewed by moving from the most modest publication to the most lavish.

The ancient Central Mexican Codex Borgia (in the collection of the Vatican's Apostolic Library in Rome) is now accessible to a new generation of students in Gisele Díaz and Alan Rodgers's painted (rather than photographed) reproduction, *The Codex Borgia: A Full Color Restoration of the Ancient Mexican Manuscript*. This publication is not strictly speaking a facsimile, for these artists have reproduced the extant manuscript but have "improved" on it by filling in damaged and deteriorated areas where

possible. Exact replica drawings were made, transferred to *amatl* (bark paper of the kind used by Aztec scribes), and then painted. The artists call this a “restoration” rather than a reproduction. Although it will always be preferable to use photos of the original to study issues of artistic style, this inexpensive version serves well for studying iconography. Codex experts may quibble over some details of its restoration, but *The Codex Borgia* is nonetheless a first-rate inexpensive reproduction that is suitable for use by students. The introduction by well-known Mixtec scholar Bruce Byland helps place the manuscript in its cultural context and begins to explain its complex iconography.

Dover Press should be commended for its commitment to making accessible so many significant works on indigenous American culture. This inexpensive paperback as well as Dover’s previous reproduction of the Mixtec Codex Nuttall (published in 1975 and still in print) have provided the public with easily accessible versions of important visual material.

The University of Oklahoma Press’s publication of *Primeros Memoriales* is a high-quality photographic facsimile of the 176 pages of this colonial pictorial manuscript. Composed in the mid-sixteenth century under the direction of Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún and drawn and recorded by Nahuatl scribes, both the text and the pictures provide information on pre-Hispanic religion, calendrics, and iconography. Curiously, this volume lacks even a brief introduction, nor does it mention that the press is preparing a companion translation of the manuscript by the late Nahuatl scholar Thelma Sullivan. The manuscript’s artistic style has already been well studied by Ellen Taylor Baird.<sup>1</sup>

A much better integrated publishing project is the University of California’s four-volume set of *The Codex Mendoza*. No discussion of recent publications of manuscript material would be complete without mentioning this landmark achievement, one of the great interdisciplinary collaborations of modern Mesoamerican scholarship. Economic anthropologist Frances Berdan and art historian Patricia Rieff Anawalt worked together on this ten-year project. The Codex Mendoza remains the fundamental ethnohistoric pictorial document of the Aztec Empire. Its seventy-two pictorial leaves and sixty-two pages of colonial Spanish commentary cover the foundation of Tenochtitlan, the history of the Mexica, records of taxation and tribute from thirty-eight provinces reporting to the Aztec capital, and ethnographic data on daily life in Mexica society at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Berdan and Anawalt, both meticulous scholars, have published a fine photographic facsimile accompanied by their superb description and

1. Ellen Taylor Baird, *The Drawings of Sahagún’s Primeros Memoriales: Structure and Style* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

interpretation. Several other scholars contributed brief essays that further illuminate aspects of the book's history, contents, and style. One of the most valuable parts of Berdan and Anawalt's work is what they term "parallel image replicas" (in Volume 4). Each pictorial leaf has been drawn in outline form, with the Spanish glosses replaced by English translations. This format allows even beginning students to mine the rich ethnographic information in the manuscript. Although the lavish boxed set is prohibitively priced for most individuals, it is a must for university research libraries.

One noteworthy publishing trend is the recent interest taken by mainstream commercial publishers in Mesoamerican topics. For example, Linda Schele and David Friedel's *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya* (1990) and *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path* (1993) were both published by Morrow, while Dennis Tedlock's *Popol Vuh* (1985) was brought out by Simon and Schuster. Now Harper Collins has published a huge compendium of Mesoamerican myths, poems, images, and stories entitled *The Flayed God: The Mythology of Mesoamerica*. Compiled by Roberta Markman and Peter Markman, professors of comparative literature and English respectively, the volume begins with a brief overview of Mesoamerican prehistory that grounds the stories in cultural context. But the authors' primary purpose is "to present in modern English translations virtually all of the important myths that remain. These are the key texts with which any understanding of the unbelievably complex and beautiful Mesoamerican mythological tradition must begin" (p. 27).

The authors have selected excerpts from the major Mesoamerican texts, including Munro Edmonson's translation of *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, Dennis Tedlock's *Popol Vuh*, translations of Sahagún's texts by A. J. O. Anderson and Charles Dibble, and other Aztec texts translated by Thelma Sullivan. To the specialist in Mesoamerican antiquity, the book may appear to be a mishmash of visual and textual material, all of which is well known and available elsewhere. Yet for the general reader, *The Flayed God* is surely a fascinating and accessible compendium of rich stories and images. The Markmans are up-to-date in their scholarship and have consulted the leading authorities on Mesoamerican art and history. It is a pleasure to see such a volume because all too often commercial presses either reissue old standards or commission individuals with little expertise to produce this kind of book.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a staggering revolution in scholarly understanding of Classic Maya art, ideology, and writing (a topic not discussed in this review because it has received so much attention elsewhere). Less dramatic but no less significant have been the advances made in understanding the enigmatic Teotihuacan culture of Central Mexico. Ongoing archaeological investigations have discovered new murals,

new glyphs, spectacular burial and sacrificial practices, and new structures (many of them reported in publications by George Cowgill and Saburo Sugiyama). Much of this information is now being made widely accessible for the first time in English in *Teotihuacan: Art from the City of the Gods*, a lavishly illustrated catalogue of an exhibition held in 1993 at the M. H. de Young Museum in San Francisco.<sup>2</sup>

Although the pivotal role of Teotihuacan in state formation, trade, and the dissemination of ideology is well known to Mesoamericanist scholars, this culture is not familiar to the general public, despite the fact that the site of Teotihuacan is Mexico's top tourist attraction. The more dramatic Maya and Aztec cultures seem to outshine the other regional civilizations in the popular consciousness. Publication of this superb catalogue by Kathleen Berrin and Esther Pasztory should do a lot to address the problem.

Many scholars have long viewed Mixtec codices as a difficult topic to understand and to teach satisfactorily, especially their historical dimensions. This difficulty has been ably remedied by Bruce Byland and John Pohl's superb volume *In the Realm of Eight Deer: The Archaeology of the Mixtec Codices*. This splendid work resulted from collaboration between two anthropologists: Pohl is primarily an ethnohistorian and iconographer while Byland is a field archaeologist. As has been demonstrated in the Maya region, this kind of collaboration advances knowledge much more rapidly than the isolated pursuits of single researchers.

Chapters 1 and 2 describe lucidly the unfolding of scholarly thought about the Mixtecs and their screenfold manuscripts over the past century. Scholars have long recognized that the saga of Eight Deer referred to an actual elite lord. Byland and Pohl have built on the work of many predecessors, further grounding Eight Deer's historical actions and family history in several small decentralized sites in the Mixteca Alta. They characterize the Mixtec codices in general as "proof of standing obligations between rulers clearly based upon significant mutually recognized past cultural events and genealogical relationships. . . . The stories in the codices are told to 'fix' in ritual terms the status of long-term, complex political interrelationships following the breakup of Classic period centralized authority and to document the rise and redistribution of that authority among the decentralized factions of Postclassic small states" (p. 33).

Byland and Pohl have also done a fine job of documenting continuities of belief and practice into modern Mixtec society. Byland and Pohl make some cogent observations on the role of codices as historical and political documents, particularly in their concluding chapter (pp. 220–29).

2. This catalogue was published nearly concurrently with my own conference volume, *Art, Ideology, and the City of Teotihuacan* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1992).

In these documents, myth legitimizes history, and history is grounded in elite genealogical ties (whether fictive or real). The authors conclude by noting that “to the ancient Mixtec, history was a form of symbolic explanation concerned only with those events that directly affected the inter-relationships among the factionalized and privileged elite class” (p. 229).

*In the Realm of Eight Deer* is interesting to read in conjunction with Joyce Marcus’s *Mesoamerican Writing Systems*. The latter’s substance can be discerned in the subtitle, *Propaganda, Myth, and History in Four Ancient Civilizations*. Thus the book is not about epigraphy per se but the uses to which Mesoamerican societies put their writing. Marcus may be the only person working in Mesoamerican studies today who could have written such a wide-ranging work. Her earlier groundbreaking studies of Zapotec and Maya writing and polity (two of the four systems she examines here, along with Aztec and Mixtec writing) laid the foundation for *Mesoamerican Writing Systems*. Marcus evinces tremendous erudition in having digested a century’s worth of epigraphic studies on four regions (plus comparative material from Egypt and Mesopotamia) and rendering it understandable to the average historian or archaeologist. She writes with great clarity about complex topics. It is to be hoped that this book will be read not only by Mesoamericanists but by scholars of Old World prehistory who seek to understand analogous processes of cultural development in the Americas.

The first chapter, “Truth, Propaganda, and Noble Speech,” presents myth as “the prologue to and justification for the present world order” (p. 8). Marcus outlines the manner in which history and propaganda were intertwined in Mesoamerica and the way that political propaganda disseminated ideology, simplifying history “by focusing attention on idealized models and stereotypes” (p. 11). Marcus posits that “Mesoamerican writing was both a tool and a by-product of competition for prestige and leadership positions” (p. 15). As one might expect, writing identified those in power and those they had vanquished as well as the limits of their political territory and their ancestral ties, marriages, births, and deaths. Yet, Marcus cautions, readers will also find “that they rewrote history to their own advantage; exaggerated their age; damaged or obliterated the records of some of their predecessors; inflated the length of their own reigns to cover the gaps left by those obliterations; claimed descent from, or a relationship to, mythical personages; altered genealogies to include themselves; and used a combination of conquest and political marriage to secure thrones for which they were never in the line of succession” (p. 16).

Maya epigraphers have been critical of this controversial book because Marcus does not engage fully with the proliferating literature on deciphering Maya glyphs published during the last two decades. Although she decries what she sees as Maya epigraphers’ uncritical belief in

Maya inscriptions as “fact,” she provides little specific analysis of other scholars’ flaws. Despite this drawback, *Mesoamerican Writing Systems* is a tremendously impressive book that synthesizes a great deal of knowledge about diverse polities in Mesoamerica. Marcus has integrated archaeological, art historical, epigraphic, anthropological, and theoretical concerns to produce a work that will be studied and talked about for years. It will also be useful for preparing survey course lectures on the difficult topic of Mesoamerican writing systems and their uses.

Two volumes of essays survey the “big picture” of ideology and its elite manifestations in the pre-Columbian world. *Ideology and Pre-Columbian Civilizations*, edited by Arthur Demarest and Geoffrey Conrad, is notable for its coverage of Mesoamerican and South American cultures, with four papers on Mesoamerican topics, three on South America, and three of general or theoretical interest. The collection arose out of a seminar held by the School of American Research in 1987 that brought together a group of archaeological field directors. The resulting volume would surely have been different and perhaps more useful in its diversity if scholars whose specialities were more clearly focused on objects that reveal ideological preoccupations (including art historians and epigraphers) had been part of the dialogue. Such a mixture would have helped the editors achieve their stated goal of making “archaeologists look beyond ecology and economics in each of their respective regions” (p. 2). One contributor who excels at this task is David Friedel. His fine essay, “The Trees of Life: *Ahau* as Idea and Artifact in Classic Lowland Maya Civilization,” skillfully blends the strands of kingship ideology as they can be discerned from iconographic, epigraphic, archaeological, and ethnohistoric evidence. Demarest’s useful introduction, “Archaeology, Ideology, and Pre-Columbian Cultural Evolution,” outlines the major issues of New World archaeology in the last thirty years and demonstrates how they may have impeded a nuanced understanding of the role of ideology in culture formation.

Some of the same ground is also covered (and by some of the same authors) in *Mesoamerican Elites: An Archaeological Assessment*. Edited by Diane Chase and Arlen Chase, this collection of nineteen essays includes many that were first presented as papers at the 1987 meeting of the American Anthropological Association. The subject matter ranges widely from presentation of new archaeological data, to a consideration of ethnicity, to a discussion of writing and elite texts, to a concern for theoretical models. Contributors disagree over whether Mesoamerican societies were composed preponderantly of two-class strata (of elites and commoners) or of multiclass strata.

A noteworthy trajectory in some recent Mesoamericanist scholarship is a willingness to step back from intensive specialized research and survey the comparative data. Like the Marcus volume and the two collec-

tions of essays just discussed, *Ancient Mesoamerica: A Comparison of Change in Three Regions* is representative of this trend. In fact, it was a leader in the trend, this volume being the second edition of a work first published in 1981. Authors Richard Blanton, Stephen Kowalewski, Gary Freeman, and Laura Finsten state that their goal is "to offer a current assessment of the nature and causes of cultural evolution in Mesoamerica" (p. 27). They are particularly interested in population dynamics, the evolution of the state, and market systems. Ideological concerns are only of passing interest. The bibliographic essay ending the volume will be particularly useful to students or newcomers to the field.

The 1980s and early 1990s have been a time of spectacular advances in archaeology, epigraphy, and interdisciplinary Mesoamerican studies as well as a time of examining the bigger cross-cultural picture. This period has also been a time of disciplinary stocktaking. One outcome of this historiographic impulse is *Collecting the Pre-Columbian Past*, edited by Elizabeth Hill Boone. It resulted from a 1990 Dumbarton Oaks conference convened on the fiftieth anniversary of the conveyance of Dumbarton Oaks and its collection from private hands to Harvard. Thirteen scholars examine different aspects of the collection, the connoisseurship, and the cultural context of the acquisition of pre-Columbian antiquities. Boone explains that the volume aims to "understand the broader cultural processes that have shaped the valuing, collecting, and displaying of Pre-Columbian artifacts and artworks over the last five centuries. It considers the influence of economic, social, and political forces in Europe, the United States, and Latin America on the enterprise of collecting Pre-Columbiana, just as it investigates how changing aesthetics, values, and symbol systems have affected and continue to affect the phenomenon" (p. 2).

*Collecting the Pre-Columbian Past* is an intriguing and insightful book. Its existence reminds researchers of how much more evaluative and historiographic work remains to be done. The contributions range from personal remembrances by Elizabeth Benson, Dumbarton Oaks' first curator of pre-Columbian collections, to analyses of the social forces that have shaped the art market and museum displays over the last one hundred years. Many of the essays are worthwhile, but Boone provides a particularly useful summary essay, "Collecting the Pre-Columbian Past: Historical Trends and the Process of Reception and Use."

This essay has discussed only briefly a few of the publications and scholarly trends of Mesoamerican studies at the end of the twentieth century. But the range of books reviewed reveals broad interdisciplinary and synthesizing trends at work, a salutary sign indeed.