

RECENT RESEARCH ON MAYA LOWLANDS PREHISTORY

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- THE ORIGINS OF MAYA CIVILIZATION*. Edited by RICHARD E. W. ADAMS. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1977. Pp. 337. \$20.00.)
- LOWLAND MAYA SETTLEMENT PATTERNS*. Edited by WENDY ASHMORE. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981. Pp. 465. \$30.00.)
- MAYA ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOHISTORY*. Edited by NORMAN HAMMOND and GORDON R. WILLEY. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979. Pp. 292. \$20.00.)
- THE WORLD OF THE ANCIENT MAYA*. By JOHN S. HENDERSON. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981. Pp. 271. \$29.95.)

The volumes under review here represent, in one form or another, virtually all of the major avenues now being traversed in publishing Maya research, with the exception of basic reports of excavation data. While in some senses the Maya past has been under investigation for more than a century, "modern" archaeological work spans only about sixty years; and within this period have occurred shifts and expansions almost as significant as those that marked ancient Maya society itself. With six decades of excavation as a background, today's Mayanists might be expected to be attempting synthesis of the data, as indeed many continue to do. There remains, however, much about ancient Maya cities and their inhabitants that places synthesis still far beyond the reach of scholars.

The yawning chasms in our knowledge of the Maya lead many to concentrate on data collection, while others struggle to draw a broad picture from the limited aspects of Maya prehistory on which a reasonably large body of information is available. With the strictures imposed on field research by the world's economic state, the search for insights into ancient Maya life seems often to lead either down a very narrow path or onto an avenue so broad as to give one reason to question the stability of its underpinnings. Attempts to avoid these two courses or to join the two in such a way as to create some sense of a central route have lately taken the form of publishing seminar and symposium proceedings, of which the first three volumes are examples. This process has

advantages and shortcomings, luckily not always in equal measure, and at its best provides some sense of focus upon which general coverage of Maya prehistory like John Henderson's study can be based.

The volume edited by Richard Adams, *The Origins of Maya Civilization*, is one of two deriving from School of American Research (SAR) advanced seminars. It was designed to give scholars the freedom to present data and theoretical approaches to a problem, discuss matters at considerable length, revise their views, and finally produce a publication that aims at being the best possible representation of the current state of knowledge of the subject. Disagreement often arises in the seminars, and similar feelings are likely to be evoked in most specialist readers by individual papers or even by general conclusions. This sense is entirely expectable, given the data gaps that beset Maya studies and the fact that the writers wisely view the volume as something less than a solution to every problem. In those areas with which I am familiar, I am struck by the ease involved in leaps from the particular to the general, but at the same time I recognize that the urge to make such leaps may deny the breadth and depth of the abyss to be crossed.

This volume on Maya origins, like other products of the SAR advanced seminars, is nearly impossible to review in terms of individual papers and is therefore most sensibly judged as a whole. In the larger view, the volume surely achieves its stated goal and benefits greatly from the introduction of data and points of view derived from research outside the Maya area. Any humanist approach, however, is notably lacking among the seminar participants. This shortcoming results in data presentations that are devoid of people and fail to consider the possible role of individual and family strengths and interests in the rise of Maya civilization. This lack of a humanistic approach may reflect the difficulties of dealing with humanistic concerns archaeologically, but it also reflects the biases in Maya research over the past several decades. The result is a well-argued, but incomplete, view of an extremely complex topic, one on which concrete archaeological data are never likely to be complete.

The most awesome task in a volume of this sort is the production of a summary, which is important not only for other Mayanists and Mesoamericanists, but also for nonspecialists who may find themselves unable to wade through the remainder of the work. Gordon Willey provides the summary here, as he has done for many other seminars and symposia, and as usual, he manages to find the threads required to weave a fairly solid tapestry, albeit one with scattered holes. Some of the holes are of major significance for comprehending the process of social evolution, and Willey's handling of them enhances the quality of his overview.

Although this volume was published in 1977, the seminar was

held more than nine years ago, making much of the information more than a decade old by now. Many of the authors would probably revise their statements if given the chance today, but most of the conclusions reached have yet to be refuted by newer data. Thus, the volume remains about as definitive a general statement on the origins of Maya civilization as it was when the papers were written.

Lowland Maya Settlement Patterns, the seminar volume edited by Wendy Ashmore, is a second example of the utility of the SAR approach to problem solving, this time in an area that first appears to be considerably more restricted than that of the Adams volume. In fact, the study of settlement patterns opens the door to considering almost every aspect of the ancient Maya relationship to the environment, both natural and constructed. This book differs from the origins volume in commencing with several methodological discussions; these sections establish a framework for the examination of the data presentations upon which the three closing papers on models for Maya settlement are focused. Although data gaps abound here as in the question of origins, their significance is automatically reduced to some extent by the nature of the topic, in that the specifics of settlement are more easily observable than are the multiple factors that may have borne on the rise of Maya civilization. The study of settlement also forces upon scholars a somewhat more humanistic approach, with the result that people, their activities, and their exercise of choice continue to appear in the data presentations, which considerably enhances the volume.

As with the origins study, many points are raised in papers with which one might well take issue, but it is the overall achievement of the seminar's stated goal that is of paramount importance. In these terms, the volume on settlement patterns ranks high, perhaps higher than the Adams volume, if only because the data seem to lend themselves to a somewhat smoother blend. The principal problem lies in the area of categorization and ranking of sites, a matter that continues to be given an inordinate amount of attention in Maya lowland studies. It is here that weaknesses in the data take on great importance, in company with questions of method and of the utility of this kind of approach. In this volume as well as a number of other recent studies, struggles with the approach to ranking seem generally to produce agreement as to which centers were most important but disagreement below that level, with little beyond a mechanical consideration of what *important* really means. Although discussion of ranking in a study of settlement patterns is sensible enough, here as elsewhere one is left wondering whether examination of the matter is likely to provide any real insight into the workings of Maya society.

Like the origins volume, the settlement patterns study benefits from a summary by Willey that draws together the methodological and

regional presentations into a reasonably coherent whole. His summary not only unites what seem to be disparate bodies of data but manages to find some common ground among what at first appear to be three sharply differing models for Maya settlement. The nonspecialist is well advised to look to the summary because the linkages among the papers discerned by Willey are often difficult for newcomers to identify. Hence, the distillation proves more palatable than the full-bodied products that precede it.

If the seminar volumes are to be accepted as effective reflections of the state of knowledge and the quality of theory in the areas covered, one must then take note of what is missing from the presentations. The absence of humanists among seminar participants and the resultant omission of or skirting reference to the roles of individuals in the course of Maya prehistory have already been noted. The other significant failing is the lack of scholars from the countries of the Maya world.

In some cases, the absence of Latin American Mayanists is a result of language difficulties, a serious problem in a week-long intensive discussion. Generally, however, it is the result of the restricted focus that has characterized much local research in the Maya area in times past. Most of the work of Mexican, Guatemalan, Belizean, and Honduran archaeologists has focused on individual sites rather than on regional prehistory for reasons of economics as well as of national interest. Such a focus obviously does not disqualify a Latin American scholar from participating in a seminar intended to provide sweeping coverage of a very broad issue, but it hinders such participation. In addition, the approaches to presentation of data in countries in the Maya area have differed until recently from those used by North American and other Mayanists, so that communication through the written word has often been less than satisfactory. A seminar organizer therefore tends to draw upon North American Mayanists in seeking participants from whom the most productive discourse can be expected. I am happy to aver that both a Mexican archaeologist and an avowed humanist were participants in the most recent SAR seminar on the Maya, which gives one hope that future sessions will continue this somewhat broader sampling of the scholarly world.

To turn from the seminar volumes to *Maya Archaeology and Ethnohistory*, edited by Norman Hammond and Gordon Willey, is to enter a different world, one in which the focus is obscured by the disparate character of the papers. This volume results from a symposium on recent research in Mesoamerican archaeology organized by Hammond in 1976. Such a broad theme can obviously shelter a highly varied group under a single umbrella, and it is no mean task to assemble such a disparate lot of papers into some sort of organized whole. The editors attacked the task by first dividing the fourteen papers into an introductory section of five

theoretical interpretations, followed by five data presentations and a closing group of four papers that either combine archaeology and ethnohistory or deal only with ethnohistoric data. This format gives the work something of the appearance of a seminar volume. The editors also provided a lengthy introduction that touches on the main points of each paper and attempts to draw them together into an overview of current Maya research.

The introduction identifies the collection of papers as a random sample of current scholarship and quite rightly states that the assembly and discussion of heterodox interests has proven value. The problem is that discussion is provided only in the introduction. The hammering process of the seminar, which does not necessarily produce great refinement but at least results in shifts of emphasis and some revision of views, is absent here, to the detriment of the papers. The theoretical papers particularly could have benefited from the seminar process. At least two of the papers in this volume are likely to produce discussion of a fairly heated nature, which is often productive despite its warmth. Without such raking-over, specialist readers are left to gnash their teeth, while nonspecialists are forced to accept or reject the idea on faith because of the lack of a following body of data that might tip the scales to one side or the other.

Much of the foregoing may seem to be a criticism of the Hammond-Willey volume for not being something it was not intended to be. In fact, however, it is intended as a broader criticism of the now-common approach to symposia, which assumes that a random sampling of research or a group of papers loosely organized around a theme merit publication without some sort of revision and discussion, either by the symposium participants or by other scholars. Several such symposium volumes are now in press or in the planning stage, and at least two focus on the Maya. In one case, the theme may be narrow enough to give the assembled papers a semblance of focus, but the second instance is likely to produce another near-random sample of research that is unaccompanied by the discussion needed to achieve even an appearance of cohesion. For Mayanists, all volumes have value, if only in stimulating a response that demolishes some particular paper. For other Mesoamericanists and the larger nonspecialist audience, however, the contents of a volume such as the Hammond-Willey effort are likely to prove even heavier going than the papers in seminar volumes; and the introduction, even when as carefully crafted as in this instance, is not likely to provide a clear guide through the maze.

If the three volumes considered thus far speak primarily to the Mayanist and are best skimmed or sampled by the nonspecialist, where does the general reader turn to acquire the most up-to-date knowledge of ancient Maya civilization? Even the information contained in seminar

and symposium volumes is some years old by the time it appears in print, and the filtering-down of data to the level of general Maya studies also requires time. Hence the answer is that nowhere can one find a book that encapsulates everything known at the moment about Maya society. In one sense, however, this situation is not deplorable because it reflects the constant change resulting from ongoing research.

One can expect that reporting will lag well behind recovery of information, with the exception of popular articles that may appear shortly after major discoveries. The complexity of Maya architecture, as well as the great variety of other material culture remains, often increases the time gap between excavation and final reporting, sometimes to well over a decade. Given this situation, the author who essays a general study of the ancient Maya must do so in the knowledge that many of the things put into print will have been proved incorrect before the book reaches its readers.

John Henderson's *World of the Ancient Maya* is one of the more recent attempts to bridge the gap between the Mayanist and the general reader, and in some respects, it succeeds about as well as its predecessors of the last three decades. The book's organization differs from most others in presenting ethnohistoric evidence immediately following coverage of the Maya area and its people, then turning to matters of the calendar, deities, and the writing system before outlining the archaeological record. Although this approach to the Maya is not a bad one, in discussing the Maya universe and elsewhere, the author's redrawing of glyphic and iconographic material often obscures or omits critical elements, thereby weakening the presentation. Nonetheless, Henderson's coverage of the literature is generally good, and many parts of the volume are as up-to-date as can be expected in the circumstances.

The task confronting the authors of a general work resembles that of summarizing a seminar, but on a far larger scale. Not only must writers develop themes that will bind together an otherwise confusing mass of data, they must also compress the data sufficiently to allow the whole story to be encompassed in something less than a fifty-kilo book. The need for compression is generally accepted as an excuse for the presentation of conjecture in the guise of fact because not every shade of opinion or every possibly relevant bit of data can be offered for the general reader's consumption. Yet in many cases, the simplified statement will be taken by the reader as the consensus view, if not as irrefutable truth, and in actuality, the separation of truth from pure authorial judgment is generally impossible. This problem frequently enrages the Mayanist who peruses a general work, and it gives other readers a false sense of complete order where the data actually resemble something closer to chaos. Perhaps there is no way around the general problem, but in every study of the Maya, I detect areas in which a few additional

words or a different phrasing would have brought the coverage much closer to the truth as most Mayanists currently perceive it.

Apart from the individual points on which I disagree with Henderson, I find one large omission that is difficult to comprehend given the date of publication. Henderson fails entirely to cover the Central Maya Lowlands in his discussion of the Postclassic, despite a considerable amount of evidence available since before 1981 on events in the area from the tenth century onward. The volume thus perpetuates the kind of view of the Postclassic prevailing in the 1960s, although with the addition of new data from both northern Yucatán and the Maya Highlands. A forthcoming SAR seminar volume on the lowland Postclassic will embody even more changes in our understanding of this complex period than occurred in the 1970s, but it is unfortunate that Henderson did not manage to reflect some of the earlier changes in his work and thus begin to erase the image of the Central Lowlands as near-wasteland after about A.D. 950.

The gaps in Henderson's volume, as well as many of the arguable statements therein, may be partly a product of the fact that the author is not deeply immersed in Maya studies. Such immersion unquestionably gives an author a different sort of perspective, as is demonstrated by Norman Hammond's *Ancient Maya Civilization* (Rutgers University Press, 1982). Still, Hammond does cling loosely to MacNeish's series of Archaic "cultures," which Henderson avoids altogether, and Hammond gives fairly short shrift to the Central Lowlands Postclassic. Overall, however, his coverage of the ancient Maya is better balanced, somewhat less given to certainty in many areas of hot debate, and marked by a writing style that is considerably more felicitous. If one hopes to interest students or general readers in the intricacies of Maya prehistory, Hammond's volume is much the better choice, even though simplification and time lag take their toll on it just as surely as they do on Henderson's work.

If readers finish reading the four volumes reviewed here with their heads spinning from the quantity of data, the variety of practical and theoretical approaches, and the numerous lacunae in our knowledge about the workings of Maya society and the lives of the people, they will share the feelings of a good many Mayanists. The state of Maya research has recently been the subject of a lengthy paper, which is in a sense akin to a summary discussion at the end of a huge pile of research papers.¹ I would not for a moment recommend that general readers turn to the paper for the most current analysis of where Maya studies stand because the article contains many statements that are already being hotly contested by those at work in the Maya Lowlands, and it generally presents a picture that is at best misleading. This article exemplifies, however, the concerns that continue to beset Mayanists, excavator and theoretician alike.

Some of the concerns that shape today's Maya studies can be recognized in the volumes reviewed here, but nonspecialists who seek to understand Maya society and the research into its workings will probably have to continue to content themselves with somewhat dated general studies and with volumes of papers that are often difficult to digest. From perusing these sources, they will likely conclude that progress, although frequently very slow, is being made by a multiplicity of scholars with disparate backgrounds and viewpoints who are working along sometimes implausible courses toward the truths of Maya prehistory. If nonspecialists also recognize that further research often reveals that we know less than we thought we knew, they will come closer to understanding the views shared by most who now labor in the lowland jungles where ancient America's most splendid civilization once held sway.

NOTE

1. See J. Marcus, "Lowland Maya Archaeology at the Crossroads," *American Antiquity* 48 (1983), no. 3: 454–88.