

SIX RECENT WORKS ON THE MAYA

Prudence M. Rice
University of Florida, Gainesville

- THE ANCIENT MAYA*. By SYLVANUS G. MORLEY and GEORGE W. BRAINERD. Revised by Robert J. Sharer. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983. Pp. 708. \$28.50.)
- ANCIENT MAYA CIVILIZATION*. By NORMAN HAMMOND. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1982. Pp. 337. \$27.50 cloth, \$12.95 paper.)
- THE QUICHE MAYAS OF UTATLAN: THE EVOLUTION OF A HIGHLAND GUATEMALA KINGDOM*. By ROBERT M. CARMACK. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981. Pp. 435. \$24.95.)
- THE TZUTUJIL MAYAS: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE, 1250-1630*. By SANDRA ORELLANA. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984. Pp. 304. \$32.50.)
- ARCHEOLOGY AND VOLCANISM IN CENTRAL AMERICA: THE ZAPOTITAN VALLEY OF EL SALVADOR*. Edited by PAYSON D. SHEETS. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984. Pp. 307. \$35.00.)
- COBA: A CLASSIC MAYA METROPOLIS*. By W. J. FOLAN, E. R. KINTZ, and L. A. FLETCHER. (New York: Academic Press, 1983. Pp. 224. \$70.00.)

These six volumes on Maya prehistory represent in either their focus or content virtually all extremes of the various dichotomies that transverse the field of Maya studies: highland versus lowland settings, Preclassic origins versus the aftermath of the Spanish Conquest, detailed site reports versus general overviews, esoteric glyphics versus mundane potsherds. As a sampling of the broad range of Maya archaeological and ethnohistoric research of the late 1970s and early 1980s, these volumes are a choice selection. But in their appeal to the non-specialist, they vary considerably.

Two of the books, *The Ancient Maya* and *Ancient Maya Civilization*, are general introductions to the Maya, specifically to the lowland Maya civilization. Two others treat questions of continuities and ethnohistoric source matter on two highland Maya societies in Guatemala, the Tzutujil and the Quiché, before and after the conquest. The last two are essentially site reports, one on the Classic lowland center of Cobá in

Quintana Roo, Mexico, and the other on a variety of Preclassic, Classic, and Postclassic manifestations in the Zapotitán Valley of El Salvador.

Robert J. Sharer's revision of *The Ancient Maya* is extremely welcome and timely. The work was originally published in 1946 by Sylvanus Griswold Morley, the intrepid early-twentieth-century explorer of ruins and student of Maya epigraphy; a second edition was published a year later, and in 1956, a third edition was issued, which had been revised by George W. Brainerd. The fact that nearly thirty years later this book could be revised yet again and republished testifies to its enduring value and to the quality of Morley's scholarship.

The latest revision is encyclopedic in its coverage, with sixteen chapters divided into four sections on culture history, society, material culture, and "intellectual culture." The organization and overall content retain much of Morley's original, although certain specific material—such as the stereotypical, almost racist comments on the psychological characteristics of the Maya—has been wisely expunged. Surprisingly readable for what amounts to a reference work, the book is also abundantly illustrated with site and region maps, photos of modern Maya, drawings of glyphs, reproductions of codex pages, rollouts of vase paintings, and other visual material. These features make the new edition of *The Ancient Maya* a must for anyone interested in Mesoamerican prehistory. For the Maya specialist too, the amount of detail and informative appendices make this revision a monumental tome for any bookshelf.

Norman Hammond's *Ancient Maya Civilization* is likewise an introduction to the subject, but one that is avowedly directed toward a nonacademic audience. It is not as long, detailed, or well-illustrated as *The Ancient Maya*, but neither is it as formidable, making up for the lack of detail with a stronger narrative thread. Particularly noteworthy are the first two chapters, which treat the history of Maya archaeology. Touching on the personalities and interests of early writers and explorers—such as Diego de Landa, Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood, and Alfred Maudslay—as well as more recent scientists, Hammond paints an entertaining picture of the development of the field. Although this history may be somewhat long, given the relative brevity of the book as a whole, it provides information not likely to be available elsewhere to a general readership.¹

Both of these books were written in response to the explosion in Maya research, especially during the last twenty-five years, which has drastically altered many aspects of our understanding of this civilization. One topic receiving massive attention in the last two decades has been the Maya writing system. Many early researchers, including Mor-

ley and J. Eric Thompson, believed that Maya writing was ahistorical (used only for recording astronomical or esoteric religious matters) and logographic (a form of picture writing).² Subsequent research has proved these scholars wrong. Studies since the 1950s have shown that the inscriptions on carved monuments were celebrations of historic events, and work since the 1970s has revealed the syllabic and phonetic character of much of the writing system. Both Hammond and Sharer review the most recent research on the Maya writing system, which Sharer summarizes in considerable detail, and both acknowledge its complex “logosyllabic” and highly phonetic character.

Neither of these volumes, however, provides an equitable geographical and temporal treatment of the subject matter. The title role, that of the ancient Maya, is played by the spectacular lowland Maya civilization of the Classic period (A.D. 300–900). This focus results in the Preclassic being largely prologue, the Postclassic terminally “decadent,” and the Maya highlands a lackluster backwater.

Ancient Maya Civilization, for example, focuses squarely on the lowlands, but with a pronounced skew to the east, as a result of Hammond’s work in various parts of Belize throughout the 1970s. For the nonspecialist, this bias is not likely to be as apparent as it is to the academic reader, and it actually contributes a unifying point of view and theme to the discussion. Furthermore, Hammond’s work with the extremely early (2000+ B.C.) Early Preclassic component in northern Belize is showcased by this emphasis. On the other hand, he ignores the Postclassic, although it must be admitted that this period is only now coming under serious scrutiny in the lowlands.³

In the revised edition of *The Ancient Maya*, the subject matter is now a mix of the writings of the original author (Morley) and the distinctive stamp of later individual editors. Morley’s detailed ethnographic and ethnohistoric observations on the Maya of northern Yucatán, which stem from his long years in Yucatán as director of the Carnegie Institution of Washington project at Chichén Itzá, have been retained in this latest revision. Much of the chronological sections has been redone, however, with special attention to bolstering data on both the Preclassic and Postclassic periods, which were little known in Morley’s day. Morley’s original “Old Empire”–“New Empire” model, which contrasted the Classic Maya civilization in Petén with the later Postclassic civilization to the north in Yucatán after the collapse, has long since been discredited by scholars. Brainerd removed the concept from his third edition, and indeed the whole notion of a unified Maya “empire,” Classic or Postclassic, is inapplicable. Finally, Sharer’s extensive work in the highlands and southeast periphery provided the basis for adding considerable comparative information drawn from recent re-

search in these areas, thus broadening the geographical coverage of the volume.

It is unfortunate that neither *Ancient Maya Civilization* nor *The Ancient Maya* gives adequate attention to the Maya highlands because no existing text offers a satisfactory introduction to pre-Columbian highland Maya cultures. This lack is doubly distressing because highland and lowland societies were closely linked throughout prehistory by commodity exchange relations, although the ways in which these interchanges were actually accommodated has yet to be determined. More specifically, lowland and highland peoples shared the similar phenomenon of “foreign intrusions” in the early part of the Postclassic period, and closer comparisons between the two groups would be useful. To learn something about highland societies, however, the reader must delve into monographs that often are written with very specific objectives.

Such “intrusions” are to varying degrees subsumed in the treatment of pre-Columbian highland Maya societies in Robert Carmack’s *The Quiché Maya of Uatlán* and Sandra Orellana’s *The Tzutujil Mayas*. These books are similar in many respects. Both use archaeological and ethnohistoric data to reconstruct aspects of Postclassic highland Maya society and the processes of acculturation and deculturation accompanying the Spanish Conquest. The stories of these two Postclassic societies are closely related: the Tzutujil language is a branch of Quichean Maya, and the Tzutujils were one of the four groups belonging to a loose confederacy in the central Guatemalan highlands (the Quichés, Cakchiquels, and Rabinals being the others).⁴ Complex patterns of interaction developed between these four highland groups, with marital and military alliances drawing them together but war and differing languages and religious systems keeping them apart.

In telling their stories, the authors take different points of view: Carmack emphasizes the growth of Quiché power while Orellana concentrates more on comparing pre-Hispanic and post-Hispanic culture among the Tzutujil. Each monograph is a useful complement to the lowland Maya texts to the extent that each attempts to illuminate Postclassic highland Maya culture. The manner in which each work accomplishes this goal—and the degree of success achieved—differs, however.

In Carmack’s reconstruction, the Postclassic and postconquest Quiché are viewed as descendants of the “Quiché forefathers,” a small group of aggressive “epi-Toltec” warlords who pushed southward from the Gulf Coast of Mexico and entered the Guatemalan highlands in the early thirteenth century. They became identified by the name of the native language spoken in the area, Quiché, and about A.D. 1400, they

founded their capital, Utatlán (or K'umarcaaj), as the center of a confederacy in the central highlands. Orellana, who draws heavily on Carmack's ethnohistoric work, describes how the Tzutujils were part of this population dispersion, probably arriving in the Guatemalan highlands about the same time and settling southwest of the Quiché region around Lake Atitlán. The aggressive Quiché expanded their power, fighting almost continuously with the Tzutujil, who lost ground and were forced to pay tribute to Utatlán.

These two books present interesting narratives, but they exhibit several flaws. One concerns the role of the migration myth in reconstructing highland prehistory. Migration myths are an important feature in the surviving legends and writings of Postclassic peoples throughout Mesoamerica and are usually traced to a diaspora of Early Postclassic Toltecs from the legendary capital of Tula or "Tollan," which is thought to have been situated northwest of present-day Mexico City. The premise of Carmack's and Orellana's books is that the late highland groups in Guatemala had Mexican (as distinct from Maya) origins. The highland Maya myths describe the movement of the confederacy members into and out of Tula, as well as subsequent revisits to that capital to acquire symbols from bona fide Toltec leaders in order to bolster their own power base. The problem is that several different migrations may be involved here, and the precise number of migrations and their dates are uncertain. In addition, several different places may be referred to as Tula or Tollan (perhaps including Chichén Itzá in Yucatán). For Postclassic peoples, Tula generally connoted "civilization," thus demonstrating that ties to that capital provided a means of legitimizing the social and political authority of a ruling line.

Second, establishing ethnicity—such as a distinction between "Mexican" versus "Maya" cultural affiliations—is a notoriously tenuous proposition for archaeologists anywhere, and this particular set of affiliations is especially recalcitrant throughout Mesoamerica in the Early Postclassic period. The proliferation of vague terms for the mythical migrants—"epi-Toltec," "Mexicanized Maya," "Toltecized Maya," "Gulf Coast peoples," "Putun Maya"—gives some idea of archaeologists' continuing inability to name and define the object of their search. More significantly, archaeologists have found it even more difficult to determine what they should look for on the ground. Little work has been done thus far on the archaeology of the Gulf Coastal area of Veracruz and Tabasco, the putative home of the migrants.⁵ Such work is needed to give some clue as to the cultural baggage of ideas about structure types, settlement arrangements, and pottery styles that they were to take with them into the highlands.⁶

Finally, both Carmack and Orellana appear to depend heavily on archaeological data for their reconstructions of population and settle-

ment, but this data base is rather illusory.⁷ *The Quiché Maya of Utatlán* offers a laboriously detailed (and highly repetitive) description of settlement patterns and individual buildings at a series of sites, which are interpreted as to use and occupation in light of ethnohistoric source material. But the details on sites and structural forms are almost entirely based on mapping and surface collections rather than excavation (or they were advanced prior to complete analysis of artifacts where excavation has been done). The ability to relate this information confidently to the hypotheses of “epi-Toltec” migration, and to changing relations between indigenous and “epi-Toltec” immigrants, is virtually nil.

In *The Tzutujil Mayas*, the problem is more serious. The reader is presented with two maps showing the location of some two dozen sites (many of which are unnamed and simply indicated as “mounds”), which were found during a cursory survey around the shores of Lake Atitlán. No information is provided on the distribution of sites throughout the rest of Tzutujil territory, which is described as extending southward in pre-Columbian times to the Pacific coastal lowlands.⁸ The absence of such essential data on population size and distributions in the Tzutujil area and the lack of solid excavation and analysis in both regions severely strain the limits of credibility for these attempts at reconstructing several centuries of prehistory on the basis of legendary migrations and Toltec affiliations.

Where both books achieve a greater degree of success—and a more reliable focus for the nonspecialist reader—is in describing the events of the conquest and its aftermath, and in assessing their effect on cultural continuities and survivals up to the present day. Remaining isolated in mountainous terrain has allowed the Quiché and Tzutujil to maintain their language and many of their institutions, beliefs, and organizational principles (in many cases syncretized with Christianity) into the twentieth century. Two episodes of acculturation occurred, however, one between the native highland populations and the incoming “Quiché forefathers,” and the second involving the later peoples of the Quiché state and the Spaniards. The extent to which similar processes operated in both contact situations remains to be explored satisfactorily, but this question cannot be answered on the basis of cursory surveys and unexcavated sites.

What the previous two books lack in detail is more than made up in *Archeology and Volcanism in Central America*. Edited by Payson D. Sheets, this volume consists of thirteen chapters and ten appendices treating archaeological and geophysical surveys, site excavation data, and analyses of soils and volcanic tephra (ash and dust deposits), plus more standard archaeological descriptions of bone, pollen, and ceramic and lithic artifacts. The work is a field report on the findings of

the 1978–1980 Protoclassic Project, set in the Zapotitán Valley of west-central El Salvador. But despite the project's name, the book hardly deals with the Protoclassic, that elusive phenomenon of Maya prehistory when the Classic civilization was supposedly launched. Instead, *Archeology and Volcanism in Central America* deals with the conjunction of archaeological and geological research in investigating an ancient natural disaster and the process of human recovery. The sheer weight of technical detail is likely to deter the general reader, but the collection provides an extraordinarily accurate picture of real-life field research—problems, surprises, indecision, and all.

The entire history of this area is one of recurrent volcanic activity, but at about A.D. 260, an unprecedented eruption occurred. The volcano Ilopango in central El Salvador erupted explosively, spewing a massive cloud of tephra over much of the western and northwestern part of the country. Sites close to the vent were buried by as much as fifty meters of ash, while the thriving Preclassic Maya center of Chalchuapa, seventy-five kilometers away, was covered with a meter of volcanic material and had to be abandoned. It has been estimated that as much as forty cubic kilometers of volcanic material may have been blasted into the air by this single eruption. Following the eruption, the entire region was uninhabited for several centuries until it began to be reoccupied sometime during the sixth century.

Sheets's conclusions about the long-term processes of human recovery from the Ilopango disaster, as well as from later, smaller eruptions in the area, are based on the findings of the individual authors' contributions, and his conclusions involve questions of migration and ethnicity similar to those treated in the volumes already discussed. They are presented here with a great deal more data and far more caution, however, making them much more palatable scientifically.

Sheets hypothesizes three possible models of migration to account for resettlement after the third-century abandonment of the valley: expansion of remnant groups who somehow survived the disaster, gradual in-migration by peoples living in the lowland Maya peripheries, or deliberate colonization of the area by the Classic Maya for specific economic objectives. Of these three possibilities, the last was supported most by the excavation data (and by other information on political and economic events in the lowlands). Sheets therefore concludes that the Zapotitán Valley may have been resettled in the sixth century by Chortí Maya from the lowland peripheries, a group motivated by a need to control nearby obsidian outcrops. The Chortí ethnic identification is made largely on the basis of findings of a type of polychrome pottery manufactured by the Chortí in nearby Honduras, where these people founded the ceremonial center of Copan around A.D. 495.

Soon after the Zapotitán Valley was reoccupied, about A.D. 600,

another volcano called Laguna Caldera erupted. The resultant ash blanket preserved a rural household and the adjacent agricultural field, complete with casts of maize stalks, near the small modern village of Joya de Cerén. This site was discovered serendipitously some years ago when the jaws of a bulldozer sliced through five meters of overlying tephra. Project personnel were understandably desirous of locating more of these residences, but rather than use bulldozers, they turned to “high-tech” instruments such as ground-penetrating radar and resistivity surveying. These procedures located two subsurface anomalies that appear to be additional households.

The extraordinary preservation of the one Late Classic Cerén household that was excavated provided smatterings of information on a variety of rural household activities, including food preparation and storage, textile manufacture, and pottery manufacture. Unfortunately, too little is known about prehistoric economies at either the household or community level throughout the Maya area to be able to specify much about production organization, specialization, or local trading activities.⁹ It is a sad commentary on archaeological methodology that considering the enormous quantities of potsherds excavated at Maya sites, virtually nothing at all can be said about how, where, or by whom they were made. Archaeologists have traditionally used their sherds to establish the dating of a site or level and have largely ignored broader economic issues of production.

One site where archaeologists have attempted to come to grips with similar socioeconomic questions at the household level is Cobá, in northern Quintana Roo, Mexico. Unfortunately, however, the attempt by W. J. Folan, E. R. Kintz, and L. A. Fletcher to set out their findings in *Cobá, A Classic Maya Metropolis* is not particularly successful.

Cobá is an extremely large lowland center dating from the Late Classic period, comprised of some twenty thousand structures housing a population of fifty-five thousand. The urban area covers between sixty-three and seventy square kilometers, and the structures are arranged in a series of zones around five small lakes. Among the unusual features of the site are more than thirty monuments (or stelae) and fifty causeways (or *sacbeob*) traversing the site and extending as far as one hundred kilometers to connect with other sites.

The Cobá Archaeological Mapping Project was organized to map this impressive center. The site was divided into thirteen zones on the basis of the orientation and intersection of the *sacbeob*, and four of these zones were mapped using compass and tape. The resulting large maps are unbound and accompany the volume in a separate box. Strangely, they are neither directly referred to nor reproduced within the text.

The text exemplifies what authors Folan, Kintz, and Fletcher call

“landscape archaeology”: efforts to analyze the different types of structures at the site, their spatial relationships, and internal variations. From the maps, the authors infer population, household composition, ward and neighborhood distributions, land tenure, social status, and craft guild formation at Cobá. Yet most of their inferences from these complex phenomena and processes are based not on mapped data from the site as a whole but on only one of the thirteen zones, Zone 1. For example, of the twenty-two boxed maps, fifteen refer to parts of Zone 1. Also, out of twenty-one tables presenting data on structure or distribution of features within zones, eleven are based on Zone 1 only, five use data from Zones 1 and 6, and only five give data on all thirteen zones. Nowhere do the authors show any awareness of the kind of bias that might result from relying so heavily on a single zone in generalizing about such a large, complex site.

In many respects, the study on Cobá has much in common with the Quiché and Tzutujil books, despite the fact that it is set in the lowlands during the Classic period. Like those who studied the highland Postclassic, the Cobá authors use surface mapping rather than excavation as the major means of elucidating the development, composition, size, and organization of the site. This sort of phrenological approach to site function is not the way archaeological methodology should be presented to the general reader. It is particularly disappointing that this book cannot be recommended to a nonspecialist audience because the Cobá site is large and accessible to tourists and because its importance in the area extends into the Early Postclassic period.¹⁰

Maya archaeology has recently been described as being “at a crossroads.”¹¹ While that assessment is not itself pejorative, the trenchant observations underlying it have prompted an immediate and heated response.¹² This review is not the appropriate forum to debate the merits of the criticisms and their counterpoints, but because of the undeniable fascination that Maya archaeology holds for the layperson, it is important to acknowledge that Mayanists have not agreed on a single paradigm for research. If these six books accurately reflect the work being done today—and clearly they do—it is equally important to point out that not all competing paradigms are equally useful. *Caveat emptor*.

NOTES

1. Other articles summarizing the history of Maya archaeology include N. Hammond, “Lords of the Jungle: A Prosopography of Maya Archaeology,” in *Civilization in the Ancient Americas*, edited by R. M. Leventhal and A. Kolata (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983), 3–32; also Marshall Joseph Becker, “Priests, Peasants, and Ceremonial Centers: The Intellectual History of a Model,” in *Maya Archaeology and Ethnohistory*, edited by N. Hammond and G. R. Willey (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 3–20.

2. For example, Morley's *Inscriptions of Petén* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1938–39), based on his explorations in the tropical forests of the Maya lowlands to record inscriptions on carved monuments, was a pioneer publication on the deciphering of the dates on these stelae. A later compendium is J. E. S. Thompson's *A Catalog of Maya Hieroglyphs* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962). For more up-to-date work on epigraphy and the Maya writing system, see L. Schele, *Maya Glyphs: The Verbs* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).
3. See the papers in *The Lowland Maya Postclassic*, edited by A. F. Chase and P. M. Rice (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985); A. Benavides C. and A. P. Andrews, *Arqueología histórica en el área maya* (Mexico City: Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología, in press); and *Late Lowland Maya Civilization: Classic to Postclassic*, edited by E. Wyllys Andrews V and Jeremy A. Sabloff (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, in press).
4. See *Annals of the Cakchiquels*, trans. from Cakchiquel Maya by A. Recinos and D. Goetz (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953).
5. L. Ochoa and L. Casasola, "Los cambios del patrón de asentamiento en el área del Usumacinta," in *Estudios preliminares sobre los mayas de las tierras bajas noroccidentales*, edited by L. Ochoa (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1978).
6. The theme of intrusions by Mexicans or Toltecs into the Maya highlands in the Postclassic period, the crux of Carmack's book, is also to be found in J. W. Fox, "Lowland to Highland Mexicanization Processes in Southern Mesoamerica," *American Antiquity* 45 (1980):43–54. But other excavations at Uatatlán and nearby sites associated with the Quiché confederacy have revealed little solid evidence indicating ties to the Gulf coastal lowlands. See K. L. Brown, "Postclassic Relationships between the Highland and Lowland Maya," in Chase and Rice, *The Lowland Maya Postclassic*, 270–81. Another view of these relationships is based on Maya intrusions into the highlands; see D. McVicker, "The 'Mayanized' Mexicans," *American Antiquity* 50, no. 1 (1985):82–101.
7. For archaeological settlement data and maps of the highland areas discussed in these books, see J. W. Fox, *Quiché Conquest: Centralism and Regionalism in Highland Guatemalan State Development* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978); also E. M. Shook, "Archaeological Survey of the Pacific Coast of Guatemala," in *Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica*, vol. 2 of *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, edited by G. R. Willey (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 180–94.
8. See Shook, "Archaeological Survey."
9. See, for example, R. Wilk and W. L. Rathje, "Towards an Archaeology of the Household," *American Behavioral Scientist* 7 (1982):617–41.
10. See A. P. Andrews and F. Robles C., "Chichén Itzá and Cobá: An Itzá-Maya Standoff in Early Postclassic Yucatán," in Chase and Rice, *The Lowland Maya Postclassic*, 62–72.
11. J. Marcus, "Lowland Maya Archaeology at the Crossroads," *American Antiquity* 48, no. 3 (1983):454–88.
12. See D. Pendergast, "Recent Research on Maya Lowlands Prehistory," *LARR* 19, no. 3 (1984):238; A. P. Andrews, "Long-Distance Exchange among the Maya: A Comment on Marcus," *American Antiquity* 49, no. 4 (1984):826–28; N. Hammond, "Two Roads Diverged: A Brief Comment on 'Lowland Maya Archaeology at the Crossroads'," *American Antiquity* 49, no. 4 (1984):821–26.