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THE CLASSIC MAYA

In the first millennium AD, the Classic Maya created courtly societies in and around the Yucatan Peninsula, leaving some of the most striking intellectual and aesthetic achievements of the ancient world, at large settlements like Tikal, Copan, and Palenque. This book is the first in-depth synthesis of the Classic Maya. It is richly informed by new decipherments of hieroglyphs and decades of intensive excavation and survey. Structured by categories of the person in society, it reports on kings, queens, nobles, gods, and ancestors, as well as the many millions of farmers and other figures who lived in societies predicated on sacred kingship and varying political programs. *The Classic Maya* presents a tandem model of societies bound by moral covenants and convulsed by unavoidable tensions between groups, all affected by demographic trends and changing environments. Focusing on the Classic heartland but referring to other zones, it will serve as the basic source for all readers interested in the civilization of the Maya.

Stephen D. Houston is the Dupee Family Professor of Social Sciences at Brown University. The author of numerous books and articles, he is also an archaeologist who has excavated and mapped Classic Maya cities for more than twenty-five years. A MacArthur Fellow, Houston is also the recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Science Foundation.

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PREFACE

The Classic Maya are a fiction from which deeper realities emerge. In all probability, indigenous groups of the Yucatan Peninsula and adjacent zones never perceived themselves as a single “people” during the first millennium. Yet, they can be treated as such for a very simple reason: the Classic Maya lived in ways more alike than unlike. Most spoke related languages, including a prestigious form, now extinct, termed “Classic Ch’olti’an.” Some of their thoughts found expression in an elaborate hieroglyphic script, easily the most complex developed in the New World. This script recorded ideas and practices found consistently across the Maya region. Codified symbols, including images freighted with meaning and narrative, reflected much of the same, with conventions and concepts that could be understood from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to the valleys of western Honduras. Regardless of area, the Classic Maya lived in civic communities of semidivine kings, nobles, farmers, and craftspeople, in daily converse with spirits of sundry origin, location, and influence. Their settlements had similar layouts, their crafts and agriculture related technologies. Scholars can be forgiven, then, for treating the Classic Maya as a single phenomenon, albeit one of a diverse and complex nature.

In part, this book is a new story of the Classic Maya. Over the last two decades, with more generous funding and greater numbers of Mayanists, evidence of who the Classic Maya were and what they did has increased. Large sums of money and other resources – although never enough – have been invested into archaeological digs, but not all of the results have been fully published, nor are there signs of their being published in a timely fashion. The decipherment of glyphic texts and more refined studies of iconography disclose new views on the Maya. Other disciplines, from soil science to biological anthropology, reveal tandem information. The Mayanist can now poach valuable and stimulating ideas from gender or cultural studies, geography, political science, psychology, linguistics, art history, and comparative anthropology. The belief that studies of the Classic Maya should be reduced to any one interpretive approach, be it “processual,” “ecological,” or “humanistic” archaeology,

restricts rather than enhances understanding. This book attests to the futility of maintaining rigid disciplinary boundaries or defending the sanctity of “-isms.” The Classic Maya will remain elusive without an eclectic and flexible approach from which scholars can paint a portrait in color rather than monochrome.

A work of synthesis cannot, without becoming a tedious encyclopedia, cover all advances or touch on every theme and archaeological site. Nor can it be a chronicle of historical developments, an approach essayed successfully by others (Martin and Grube 2008). But it can and must chart the most important topics, in fair evaluation of the current state of Classic Maya studies. Progress in research has seldom been uniform. Most archaeological projects take place primarily in the lowland areas, from which the richest epigraphic and iconographic data emerge. As a result, our discussions deal mainly with the lowland Maya at the expense of their highland neighbors and target the southern lowlands more than the northern reaches of the Yucatan Peninsula. This is a weakness we attempt to remedy in part, but the uneven emphasis is unavoidable given the range and availability of present knowledge and authorial expertise.

Synthesis walks in steady pace with analysis. The first combines and balances information, the other dissects and scrutinizes it. A useful line of study is to consider opposed themes, since the conflict and friction between these polarities produce insights into the Classic Maya. This book highlights two such themes. The first is the divide between inside and outside perspectives, what the Classic Maya said about their world and what we, from a vastly different vantage, perceive in their actions and artifacts. The second concerns two overlapping domains of the Classic Maya. One domain involves royal courts as forces for cultural conservatism and innovation. In some respects, the courts and the apparatus of ancestor veneration and god cults housed in temples *were* the Classic Maya city. As collections of palaces, pyramids, plazas, reservoirs, and courtyard residences, the cities served as centers of pilgrimage, worship, and defense; places of patronage for difficult skills; nodes of tribute and redistribution; repositories of the dead; schools for the courtly arts – all features that exerted a powerful attraction to settlement, as part of a continuing spectacle that must have entertained and enthralled Maya communities. In ancient perspective, such activities not only meant spiritual fulfillment but led to material and social consequences. On these hinged the successful continuation of society and the smooth cycling of individual lives. The other domain held the farmers, fishers, hunters, gatherers, and traders who made up the mass of society. Their labor materialized food, shelter, and other substances and objects that made possible the activities of royal courts, as well as the maintenance of society as a whole. These individuals did not merely follow cultural schemes devised by the royal court but actively assisted in the creation of Classic Maya society and worldview. Their value systems assimilated and were assimilated by those of

royal courts. In other ways they diverged, if in a manner that remains difficult to decode.

The story of the Classic Maya concerns the convergence and interplay of the two domains, one courtly, the other not. Loosely speaking, the former contained “elites,” the second “nonelites.” We use these terms with reservations. Our disquiet with a simplistic, two-layered model of Maya society is offset by the need to develop a convincing picture of power relations, one that nonetheless recognizes diverse social roles, statuses, and identities that overlapped and crosscut. The same is true for our categorization of “farmers,” “craftspeople,” and “traders.” Evidence tells us that in most cases these people did not form distinct social groups. A craftsperson who produced exquisite art objects could also engage in royal ceremonies and court intrigue. An artisan who fired large storage vessels might just as easily hold a digging stick in his *milpa*. Our understanding of courtiers, farmers, and craftspeople is directed more toward activities, formalized as “practices,” that contributed to survival, political achievement, and social fulfillment.

This book came into existence for several reasons. First, we wished to focus on the Classic Maya per se. Many excellent volumes, including those by Coe (1999b) and Sharer and Traxler (2005), give a rich and satisfying account of the Maya as a whole, from archaic lifeways to the agonies of the Guatemalan civil war (other such volumes include Demarest [2004] and McKillop [2006]). But we felt the Classic Maya deserved their own treatment. Why are there no good volumes on the Greeks, from Mycenae to Perikles and from Lord Byron, promulgator of Greek independence, to King Constantine of Greece and the Colonels who overthrew him? Because too much has changed in that small part of the world, and no scholar would willingly write such an expansive work. So too for the Maya. The only other book on the subject, now translated into English, presents the Classic Maya in discrete slices (“art,” “Mayan writing”) that do not, for us, meaningfully describe the civilization (Arellano et al. 1999).

Second, we wished to write a book around kinds of people and, where possible, about specific people, without, however, getting mired in the controversial minutiae of Classic history. Donadoni’s *The Egyptians* (1997) was a direct inspiration, with its delightful and instructive chapters on “The Dead,” “Women,” and “The Pharaoh.” The congruence of this treatment with “agency theory” or “practice theory” is deliberate and even provocative. In the last decade, it has become perilous to avoid citation of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens – although their sway is diminishing somewhat – just as an earlier generation found it necessary to reference Maurice Godelier and Louis Althusser. To what extent does this literature recycle theological concerns with free will (Herzfeld 2001: 149)? How is our interest in the changing pattern of Maya kingship specifically elucidated by the feedback loops of practice and agency theory? The search for compromise is laudable. Theories of human behavior that emphasize individual action must find a balance against those stressing

social hedges of the same, just as the physical facts of the human body require conditioning and appraisal by the human mind. This dynamism forms part of the human experience, and no amount of abstract modeling will account for all of its capricious motions.

A third reason stemmed from our wish to present this information in an academic manner. For us, “academic” does not equate to snobbish or showy erudition. Rather, the text is designed for undergraduates, professional colleagues, and other readers who wish to engage the nuances of difficult material, openly acknowledged to be demanding and subject to shifts of interpretation. In our judgment, the undoubted popularity of Maya studies is its own blessing and curse. Mayanists benefit from popular attention that garners jobs, TV spots, and fame, leading even to the recent and, by some lights, lamentable movie *Apocalypto*. That same public distinction can be the scourge of our field. There is an inevitable risk (and temptation) to distort, oversimplify, and sensationalize in a subtle form of marketing that curries yet more attention. At the writing of this book, we are in another such cycle, this one relating to apocalyptic prophecy and the year 2012.

A final motivation for the volume is to allow readers to eavesdrop on a conversation that is only partly resolved. *The Classic Maya* records a dialogue between two very different people who, somehow, have made their way to the Classic Maya. One comes out of art history, epigraphy, and the archaeology of meaning (Houston), the other from settlement analyses, household archaeology, and the study of power relations (Inomata). Both are interested in social science and in deeper stories about people reacting creatively to a stressed but malleable environment. Thus, the book can be said to represent a fusion of two perspectives joined into a whole that is designed not to be seamless but to be sensitive to the contradictions of the Classic Maya. Again, our particular expertise, the southern Maya lowlands, colors the presentation, in part because, with some exceptions, textual data from the northern Yucatan are relatively scarce and problematic.

The narrative we devise also relates to the present, and to the connection between the past and the modern world. In this volume, the explicit focus on people comes from our self-reflection as practitioners of Maya archaeology – a field that, at some points in the past, devoted far more attention to objects than to the individuals and groups who created them. This ought to change. The Classic Maya left cultural and biological heirs who have suffered much over the past few centuries. Writing an account that focuses on people reminds us of the respect due to their descendants. However, this does not imply a blurring of Classic and modern Maya. Classic Maya do not walk on the streets of Santiago Atitlán, in Guatemala, or through the markets of Mérida, Yucatan. They deserve to be seen in context, as beings of their time and place; evidence from them and about them everywhere and always trumps information from later Maya.

To put this another way, the difference between a sacred king of the Classic Maya and a Yucatec *hmen* is surely greater than their similarity. A delicate and challenging antinomy for the students of the Maya is the strain between the ancient legacy of the modern Maya and the plain fact that they, like any other ethnic group, have recreated and modified their culture and society in response to changing natural and human environments. Nor should compassion and respect for the Maya lead to a utopian view of their society. The Classic Maya had their share of social problems and contradictions. For all our admiration of Classic Maya culture, we, as scientists and humanists, necessarily confront the negative aspects of their world. The purpose of this book is not to provide a final word on the Classic Maya and their culture. That will never be possible, nor can all mysteries be clarified from current data. We need many other perspectives, including those prompted by reactions to *The Classic Maya*.

Readers will want a roadmap through this book. The first section, “Setting,” begins with Chapter 1, which introduces the Classic Maya and their academic study. Chapter 2 sketches a view of social convergences and dissonances among the Maya; Chapter 3 examines the beginnings of the Classic Maya in the Pre-classic, when many themes of the Classic period first appear, if obscurely. Chapter 4 presents the arc of Classic Maya development within its environmental setting, as currently understood and as those milieux changed through time. The second section, “Social Actors,” opens with Chapter 5, which turns to the royal courts that served as stages of their interaction, along with their denizens and other features of court-centered settlements. Chapter 6 focuses on the nobles that undergirded and populated the court, and Chapter 7 considers “beings” that the Maya saw as important members of their civic community – deities, supernaturals, and ancestors. Chapter 8 explores the farmers on whom all others depended, and Chapter 9 presents the craftsmen and women who shaped objects of value and utility, trading them on far-flung networks. These people are the most shadowy but crucial to understanding the majority of Classic Maya. The final chapter examines the ruptures within Classic Maya society and, especially, the tumult of the Maya collapse, which sent the Classic Maya into oblivion. Houston was principally responsible for Chapters 2, 5, 6, and 7, along with the Preface, whereas Inomata took the lead for Chapters 3, 4, 8, 9, and 10; they split work on Chapter 1. The spelling of royal names follows Houston’s reading of the relevant glyphs, with input from a magisterial book by Martin and Grube (2008); most dates, where exact, derive from historical texts and from the dominant correlation of the Christian and Maya calendar (Lounsbury 1983). The transcription of day, month, and language names tends also to accord with common practice, with the proviso that alternatives exist, some equally valid.

A book comes from the authors’ minds and fingers but draws on the hidden encouragement and help of many people. Norman Yoffee commissioned the

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