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## Maya Courts

*Royal Courts of the Ancient Maya*, vol. 1: *Theory, Comparison, and Synthesis*, edited by Takeshi Inomata & Stephen D. Houston. Colorado (CO): Westview Press, 2001; ISBN 0-8133-3640-6 paperback, £18.50 & US\$39, xix + 292 pp., 65 ills.

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*Royal Courts of the Ancient Maya* is a two-volume publication that brings information together from a session of the 1996 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association and a subsequent symposium held at Yale University in November 1998. Volume 1, reviewed here, presents comparative and theoretical approaches to royal courts. Volume 2 assembles information on royal courts from specific site centres and geographical areas.

In their introduction to Volume 1, Inomata and Houston make it clear that their book's focus is firmly on the court as a group of people and their activities and not on the court as an architectural compound. In fact, what first attracted me to the volume was my interest in gleaning information on court architecture, particularly owing to my present involvement in the excavation of a palace complex at the site of Lamanai, in Belize. Despite the many years of excavation in the Maya area, we know startlingly little about the functions of palace buildings from archaeological remains. Nonetheless, the editors' decision to focus on courtly life — on people and their activities — is clearly the right priority. Left to our own devices, we archaeologists tend to neglect envisioning the living because we become preoccupied with detail in describing the inert and the dead. I found that my perspective was substantially enriched from reading every chapter in this volume, even though I did not necessarily agree with every conclusion. By forcing me to put emphasis on 'seeing' or imagining people involved in activities within buildings — buildings that the authors emphasize are not simply material residues of behaviour (p. 3) but draw meaning and significance from their social use in courtly

life — the book has enhanced my repertoire of ideas for approaches to excavation. Although archaeological evidence confirming the functions of palace buildings is likely to remain elusive, the papers in this volume arm archaeologists with a range of possibilities drawn from imagery, glyphic evidence, ethnohistory, ethnography, and architectural inter-site comparisons. Such possibilities drive the creation of hypotheses that provide a greater chance of information recovery through archaeology than would have been the case had such information not been available, or had the priority been given instead to architectural stratigraphy and sequences.

No one would deny that understanding monumental architectural stratigraphy is essential to understanding the court as a *group* of functioning buildings and spaces. But at this juncture, the focus on people and their activities is critical to disciplinary growth. As Reents-Budet points out (p. 199), most pictorial narratives on polychromes depict palaces rather than other types of Maya buildings. Although some of the activities pictured may not have been meant for public viewing, the frequency of depiction attests that such activities were believed by those in power to be important to the maintenance of the body politic. Thus the dominance of the palace as a setting critical to social well-being is a concept worth exploring archaeologically. In my own work, for example, special attention will be given to the multi-roomed buildings that straddle both the private space of the palace courtyard and the public space of the main plaza. The hypothesis that rituals or ceremonies may have differed based on their private or public orientation could affect interpretation of features or artefacts associated with particular rooms and the directions in which they face. Another idea comes from the depiction on vases of the payment or offering of tribute in palace rooms, which suggests that there might be a connection worth exploring between the palace complex and the nearby lagoon that Lamanai borders, along which canoes must have travelled frequently on their way to and from the sea, bringing goods to and from the site.

The Introduction goes on to outline the historical background to the study of Maya courts. Perhaps, as Inomata and Houston explain, the most significant fact that would help non-Mayanists to understand why the question of the structure and composition of Maya courts is so late in being answered is that only 30 years have passed since Maya scholars came to the realization that it would even be possible to think in terms of the presence of rulers and courts in Classic Maya society. Although the

concept of hieroglyphics as dynastic history began to be recognized in the 1960s through the work of Proskouriakoff, the editors point out that the research based on this breakthrough did not come to fruition until the late 1970s and 1980s. This has led to a focus in the last decade on the nature of kingship and the reconstruction of dynastic history, but the search for an understanding of the wider relationships that constituted Maya court life is first represented by the chapters in this book. In addition to a thorough discussion of the ways in which the elucidation of Maya royal courts can be approached, Inomata and Houston include a comprehensive set of questions that will serve to guide research well beyond the book's individual contributions.

How do the volume's contributors define the Maya court? The editors state in the first chapter that the studies of kingship, political organization, administrative systems and social stratification are important themes, but do not cover important dimensions of Maya courts. Therefore they have encouraged contributors to employ other approaches in their analyses. The first is the question of how courts should be defined. In this book, as the title makes clear, the focus is solely on the royal court and the organization centred around the sovereign. Such a focus entails examining the royal court's organizational principles: Who is excluded? Were the dead as well as the living a part of the royal court? What role did court members — men, women, children, royals, nobles, scribes, musicians, servants — play?

Inomata's contribution examines non-royal members of the Maya court, and in the process demonstrates the importance of court administrative functions. The information drawn from Chinese, Japanese, African and West Asian examples provides a much needed comparative perspective. Other examples that might also prove useful in a comparative sense are the Mycenaean palace states, which share with the Maya a spatial focus on the palace as the functional, social, and economic centre of the community (e.g. Whitelaw 2001).

Houston and Stuart explore the varied composition of Maya courts, and they summarize information from glyphic decipherments to reveal what we now know about non-royal court members, queens, consorts and royal children. They deal with the important issue of the relationships between rulers and secondary lords; the power — and numbers — of the latter increased during the second half of the eighth century AD. In the process of examining these relationships they tackle a range of important yet difficult questions, such as our use of the term 'élite' to

differentiate the higher ranks of Maya society. Archaeologically, we generally identify élites by the elaborate material goods with which they are interred. These material indicators may indeed have been used by the individual in life to distinguish himself or herself from non-élites, but the types of material indicators also reflect a group cohesiveness and power that must be explained on another level. What sorts of élites do we envisage by the term? Houston and Stuart explore the rich sociological literature for a range of possibilities. Mosca's view (1994 in Houston & Stuart, p. 58) is particularly interesting because it suggests, at least to me, that the basis of élite power lies more with the inertia of non-élites (élites act in concert; non-élites don't) than with any particular élite strategy for success. The authors' summary presents data that demonstrate an association between the increasing references to non-royal nobles and a massive increase in Late Classic populations in the lowlands. Most interesting in some senses is not so much the bearing this information has on the Maya collapse, but its relevance in helping to explain the birth of Postclassic society, which is characterized by the growing number of small-scale polities and the rise of numerous new lineages vying for power.

McAnany and Plank return to the theme of the royal court as an expanded version of the Maya household, but also emphasize that buildings themselves in royal complexes acquired personalized histories and played special roles in the life of the court, and in ritual practice. They compare the royal court and the household by examining the evidence that exists — archaeological, epigraphic, and documentary — for positions of authority, administrative activities, and male- and female-gendered roles in both the royal court and the non-royal household. They return to the theme of buildings with personalized histories by focusing on the royal court at Yaxchilan, where there are five structures dedicated in the hieroglyphic inscriptions as the houses of particular personages. Indeed, two of the structures dedicated belong to royal women, and the authors' detailed discussion of particular texts in their architectural contexts emphasizes the influential role of women at the Yaxchilan royal court.

Because physical proximity to the ruler is considered by the editors to be critical, and although the emphasis is on people and activities rather than on architecture, the boundaries of the studies in the book are defined largely by the built environment. That is, the activities of interest are those associated with palaces and palace compounds and not, for example, temples or dance platforms or ball courts.

Palaces can be defined architecturally as one-storey, multi-chambered buildings, usually with multiple entrances and internal benches, and supported by long, relatively low terraced platforms. Although palace architecture itself is not a topic of discussion, Webster's and Martin's contributions deal with the 'mapping (of) court activities onto the built environments of the Classic Maya' (Webster, p. 130). Webster reviews the not inconsiderable problems in defining palaces as royal residences. Indeed it remains difficult archaeologically to document residential functions for palaces. With rare exceptions such as the Middle Classic Structure A-8 (Pendergast 1979, 100–142) and the Late-Terminal Classic Structure E-7 (Pendergast 1990, 72–122) at Altun Ha, middens, not surprisingly, do not generally occur piled against palace walls, nor are kitchens a common interior feature. Concerning this apparent problem, Webster makes the excellent point that an insistence on domestic correlates overlooks a critical aspect of Maya royal households, which is that they were not spatially organized in the way lesser households were, mainly because they did not function only as domestic places (Webster, p. 134). He provides a needed discussion of the historical problems in identifying royal and élite palaces and suggests the term 'court complex' to refer to the combination of royal court facilities as well as the architectural features that are believed to encompass the functions of the larger institution of rulership and its dimensions. He then details what is known about the court complexes at Tikal and Copan both in terms of their architectural, spatial and organizational complexities, and the problems that remain in determining building function.

Perhaps the only jarring note in an otherwise highly informative chapter is Webster's reference to Maya urban centres as regal-ritual cities (see Sanders & Webster 1988). According to this model, Maya cities are merely gigantic royal households, and not administrative or mercantile centres. Although this idea is presented as a model, it keeps surfacing as an explanation. It would seem to me that on logical grounds alone we cannot approach with an open mind the question of how Maya royal courts functioned (or whether a range of specialized facilities existed as part of Maya centres) if we already assume, via the regal-ritual model, that Maya centres were not truly urban *because* they were composed entirely of hierarchies of households (Webster, p. 144). There are other ways to approach Maya urbanism that may be just as productive in envisioning the nature of Maya royal courts, such as the idea that the humid tropics generate complex, composite built environments — walled and roofed space;

roofed and unroofed space; unroofed and walled space; unroofed, unroofed, paved and/or landscaped spaces; stone spaces; green spaces; and spaces created by perishable materials. Such environments are veritably absent from archaeological consciousness, let alone studied for their functional properties (Graham 1999). But even if we accept the premise of the governing body locus as a supra-household (e.g. the *White House*) it doesn't follow that the governing body is limited to supra-household functions.

Martin, like Webster, focuses on architecture and court settings, but his emphasis is on court organization. He observes that court architecture and court space provide the setting for political functions and decision-making, and they can therefore be seen as signatures of how these activities are organized. He compares lowland court complexes at four sites, and in the discussion that follows, he considers data from architecture, pictorial representation, epigraphic references and ethnohistorical analogy to explore the evidence for court complexes as settings for craft production, state offices, the administration of tribute, and residences for foreign nobles. His comparison among sites suggests that it is worth exploring whether there is a causal relation between court sizes and political success.

Reents-Budet reviews pictorial imagery on Classic Maya polychrome vases and the representations of court scenes, settings, paraphernalia, and iconography. She points out that the visual narratives on Classic polychrome vases are rich sources of data on both the actual royal court and the Maya ideal of courtly life. As noted above, the most common building form depicted is that of the palace (also known as a range structure). The paintings are a source of information on the perishable materials that made up the Maya court, such as curtains, mats, textiles, baskets and wall hangings. But perhaps most interesting is the information on the dynamics of interaction among nobles and courtiers: the symbols and hierarchy of power, but especially the iconography that reinforces the sacred and cosmic foundations of rulership.

Reents-Budet's familiarity with a vast number of polychrome vases makes her well positioned to synthesize their pictorial range of data on courtly life. She is able to comment on palace interiors, and furniture, but especially on the narratives of power. Unfortunately for archaeologists, despite the existence of iconic signs adorning representations of structures, these signs seem to relate to the ceremonies carried out and not to any particular function associated with a particular structure. Court buildings clearly, and perhaps not surprisingly, were multi-functional. Nonetheless, the detailed discussion of

the range of iconic signs adorning the structures provides a basis on which to build our knowledge of the meaning and significance of key ceremonies and rituals: some iconic and pictorial images are references to historical events or myth, others are representations of important rituals in the lives of rulers and associated élites, such as accession or divination or acceptance of tribute. None is devoid, however, of celestial or cosmic associations, and it is clear, as it is in depictions of European rulers and their personal and court paraphernalia, that one of the forces behind pictorial imagery is the representation of ruling élites — and indeed of the office of kingship itself — as divinely or cosmically sanctioned.

Evans' chapter describes Aztec palace life based on the extensive native and Spanish accounts of palace layouts, court functions, personnel, and the customs and rituals of courtly life. For Mayanists, as Evans points out, these descriptions provide a critical basis for inference about Classic Maya courtly life. They help us to attune ourselves to activities that are not readily suggested by the silence of ruined buildings or even the idealized brushwork portraits of courtly scenes — activities such as gardening, landscaping, weaving and dyeing, feasting, sleeping, bathing, child-minding, praying, studying, planning military manoeuvres, keeping archival records, or storing and keeping track of foodstuffs, textiles, armaments, books, maps and other records.

Coe's concluding remarks measure the distance Mayanists have come in order to be able to 'speak confidently' of Classic Maya courtly life (Coe, p. 274). He suggests avenues for future research, such as the study of headdresses and body garments as codified uniforms. The criticism, however, that the authors of the volume ignore the importance of religion among the ancient and modern Maya is misplaced. That the sacred and the mundane are inseparable in Maya life is an awareness that is communicated unquestionably in the various contributions, and is a unique strength of the book. In fact, the old academic view that 'religion' is a sphere of activity somehow treatable as a phenomenon on its own may be anathema to an in-depth understanding of palace life.

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