Book Reviews

The Rise of the Maya

The Origins of Maya Civilization. Papers from a seminar, Santa Fe, N.M., Oct. 1974. RICHARD E. W. ADAMS, Ed. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1977. xvi, 466 pp. $20.

Classic Maya civilization, which flourished between A.D. 250 and 900 in the lowlands of the Yucatan peninsula south to the Guatemala highlands, has long been something of an enigma to scholars. The humid southern lowlands, with their tropical forest cover, and the desertlike northern lowlands have always seemed unsuited to the development of civilization. In 1974, a group of scholars tackled this problem in a seminar at the School of American Research. This volume brings to publication the results of that seminar. It is an important book, not just for those interested in the rise of Maya civilization but for all those interested in the rise of any civilization.

The book begins with an introduction by Richard E. W. Adams and T. Patrick Culbert that offers a working definition of Classic Maya civilization—one that owes much to Childe's definition—in addition to a review of past and present thought about its rise and a list of major problems to be solved in order to understand that rise. This is followed by six chapters each of which reviews archeological data on the Maya rise for a specific site or region: Tikal by Culbert, Belize by Norman Hammond, Rio Bec by Adams, the northern lowlands by Joseph W. Ball, the Pasión Valley by Gordon R. Willey, and the northwestern lowlands by Robert L. Rands. This set of chapters is well written and thought-provoking but has one drawback: a heavy emphasis on ceramic data. Of course in those instances where there are few other data to work with there is no option. In some cases, though, the authors seem to have emphasized ceramic material because they are most familiar with it. This is understandable, and ceramics are critically important, but important nonceramic data may be slighted in the process. For example, a body of nonceramic data on Preclassic settlement at Tikal does exist that Culbert does not touch upon in his chapter. When these are used to distinguish between purely residential and other contexts, the population plateau that he seems to see for the period between 100 B.C. and A.D. 150 disappears. Instead, a steady population buildup through Preclassic times is indicated. A comparison of burials from these Preclassic residences with those at the North Acropolis indicates clear status differentiation as early as the period between 500 and 250 B.C. Storage facilities (chultuns) indicate some intensification of agriculture by at least 200 B.C.

The six "data" chapters are followed by three that deal with external areas and influences: Olmec by Michael D. Coe, Mixe-Zoque by Gareth W. Lowe, and early Mesoamerican art styles by Jacinto Quirarte. Coe and Quirarte make convincing cases for Olmec elements in Classic Maya art, and both stress an Itzapan linkage between Olmec and Maya. Lowe presents a fascinating argument that Olmecs, Itzapans, and others of the Isthmian region were Zoquean speakers and that some marginal Zoqueans spilled eastward into the Maya lowlands. At the same time, Maya-speaking peoples (whose language may not have differed greatly from the Zoquean of the time) were spilling into the lowlands from the south. In the geographically favorable setting of the lowlands, this mix of peoples maintained an ethnic rivalry with their neighbors to the west, out of which developed the distinctive lowland pattern of Maya culture.

In the next four chapters, William T. Sanders, Robert McC. Netting, David L. Webster, and William L. Rathje present models that seek to explain the Maya rise. Sanders argues that population growth led to a shortage of good agricultural land. The result of this was intra- and intersocietal competition, producing inequities in control of land, and hence ranking and stratification. Netting sees parallels between the Maya and the Ibo of West Africa, who live in a tropical forest environment and among whom there is an evolutionary association between population increase, agricultural intensification, growth in occupational specialization and trade, and the development of new types of sociopolitical integration. Webster sees large-scale conflict as crucial and argues that after about 100 B.C. there was no more vacant land available to feed expanding populations and warfare became important as a means of gaining more land. A complex organization was required to defend a region as well as to conquer others. Successful defenders and conquerors alike developed into managerial elite classes. Rathje criticizes the warfare idea—I think cogently—and argues instead for trade. His argument is that a growing population may result in a demand for high-turnover resources and hence in the development of long-distance trade. In this, the larger and more complexly structured groups win out over the smaller and less complex. Although the four authors differ in their emphasis, all reject monocausal explanations and recognize that such phenomena as warfare or trade by themselves cannot adequately account for the rise of Maya civilization.

In the final chapter, Willey summarizes and attempts a synthesis of the data, argument, and discussion presented in the preceding chapters as well as at the seminar itself. This concludes with the presentation of an "overarching model." As Willey explains it (p. 418), this is "a sort of canopy that will cover the models and processes which all of us in the seminar have put forward. It is an attempt, too, to arrive at some sort of consensus." As Willey further notes (p. 421), this model "places demographic pressure—in its systemic complex with ecology and subsistence productivity—in the position of prime mover or prime cause of the rise of Lowland Maya civilization."

The various contributors to this book have performed a valuable service in their definition of problems, synthesis of data, and formulation of explanatory models bearing on the Maya rise. As a statement of the "state of the art" as of 1974, it is very good.

I am, however, not entirely satisfied—nor, I am sure, are the book's authors. For example, the discovery of pottery going back to 2500 B.C. or so in northern Belize, even while the book was in press, renders much of the discussion having to do with the earliest lowland populations of historical interest only (an errata note to this effect is inserted in the book). More fundamentally, though, I am dissatisfied by all the attention given to economics, ecology, demography, and warfare, without adequate attention to ideology. In his summary Willey recognizes the problem (p. 416): "No one offered a formal model to explicate the role of ideology in the growth of

Maya civilization, but it is difficult to look at the monuments and remains of this civilization without believing that this role must have been an important one." To be sure, the subject of ideology is not ignored altogether, but where it is discussed it is seen as being of secondary importance. The impression one is left with is of the Maya competing away with one another as if they had been convinced by a team of prehistoric U.S. Commerce officials that competition is the only road to success.

I do not see much evidence of competition at Tikal until this center was well advanced on the road to civilization. This seems important, for, as the contributors to this book recognize, Tikal took an early lead in the development of lowland Maya civilization. What I do see at Tikal may be interpreted as people cooperating to solve problems of wind, water, and crop pests, which are known to make swidden agriculture a risky proposition at Tikal. Their response to this was the development of a strong religion that attempted to control the uncertainties of nature. In keeping with practices among neighboring peoples, special ritual paraphernalia, used in permanent religious centers, were important in the religion they developed. And at Tikal, the first craft specialization seems to have developed in the service of religion, just as the first masonry architecture was for religious purposes. In other words, religion seems to have provided the impetus for occupational specialization and management, which were to develop into key elements of civilization.

Tikal, then, as an early religious center required the services of a variety of people, from priests to the artisans who produced the religious paraphernalia. They could operate most effectively by living where their services were required. Beyond this, the religious importance of Tikal probably acted as a kind of magnetic attraction to others. Thus, I see religion as a primary nucleating force that created an artificially high population density at Tikal, a density that by 200 B.C. exceeded the support capacity of swidden agriculture. The solution to this was agricultural intensification, which ultimately allowed for further population buildup and further occupational specialization, both of which required more in the way of political organization just to keep the system working.

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Struggles of Human History

Cannibals and Kings. The Origins of Cultures. MARVIN HARRIS, Random House, New York, 1977. xii, 242 pp. $10.

As an idealist, I had expected thoroughly to dislike this book by a dyed-in-the-wool material determinist. It is true that I found something to infuriate me on almost every page, but I also found much that was instructive, entertaining, and perhaps even convincing.

Harris's main theoretical position, which he rigorously maintains throughout the 15 chapters, is that

> Reproductive pressure, intensification, and environmental depletion would appear to provide the key for understanding the evolution of family organization, property relations, political economy, and religious beliefs, including dietary preferences and food taboos.

Now that is a big order, but Harris is no intellectual coward, and he touches on an incredible range of societies, from primitive hunters and gatherers to Melanesian "big man" agriculturalists to modern industrial capitalism. In certain cases, Harris not only proves his point but genuinely illuminates matters that have long puzzled anthropologists and social historians. In other cases, his argument, which seems to derive in equal parts from Marx, Wittfogel, and Boserup, loses its force through a poor handling of sources and data. I will touch upon a few of these successes and failures.

In chapter 2 ("Murders in Eden"), Harris attempts to show that hunters and gatherers lived a far more prosperous life than that described by Thomas Hobbes, mainly by keeping their populations low through artificial means such as infanticide. This rosy picture of the preagricultural standard of living may in part be valid for selected regions, such as southern Europe during the Late Pleistocene or the maritime Arctic and sub-Arctic of North America, but is denied by eyewitness accounts of the Algonkian hunters of the North American taiga, such as the Ojibwa; all too frequently we read of death through starvation during the long winters, recurrent cannibalism, and the psychotic fear of the cannibalistic windigo monster. In many instances, sheer lack of food in lean times may have been the factor limiting population growth in hunting and gathering societies.

Warfare is another population-regulating mechanism invoked by Harris. Why is it universal? Explanations vary according to the sociopolitical level achieved by a particular society, but at least in its origins it was a mechanism to disperse populations, and, like infanticide, to depress the rate of population growth. A curiosity of intellectual history is that this view is identical to the position of the late, and very right-wing, Sir Arthur Keith, that war is "nature's pruning-hook." Harris sees in war the *fons et origo* of male supremacy, as well as female penis-envy and the Oedipus complex. Far-fetched? I doubt it.

I find myself unable to swallow the theses of chapters 8 and 9, which concern my "own" area, Mesoamerica. The data Harris uses are either wrong or out of date, and often both. Let me overlook the mishandling of Olmec archeology and concentrate on Aztec cannibalism. Here Harris's broad brush has spattered more paint on the walls and floor than on the canvas. Harris enthusiastically adopts a sensational thesis first promulgated by Michael Harner that cannibalism, so shocking to Western observers, was the direct result of protein deficiency. According to Harner and Harris, the late pre-Conquest Aztec had so depleted the resources of the Valley of Mexico that their elite class resorted to cannibalism to provide themselves the high-quality protein not available to the commoner class. As John Pfeiffer has remarked to me, this is the ultimate Marxist explanation: the ruling class not only exploits everybody else, it eats them. There is no space to go into the sources and data involved in this complex subject (Mayanists will be pleased to note that Harris has delved into the "Dresden Codex, a sixteenth century book written in Nahuatl"), but suffice it to say that most specialists in the subject, such as the outstanding authority on the Aztec, Henry Nicholson (not cited by Harris), view the Aztec eating of captives as something closer to the Christian Eucharist than as a need to make up for the alleged deficit of beans and flesh. There are ample data indicating that all strata of Aztec society had full access to both animal and plant protein.

But wait! Harris also has an explanation for the Eucharist. In chapter 10 ("The lamb of mercy"), he makes sure that he steps on everyone's toes by holding that the Body and Blood of Our Lord are little more than a nutritionless substitute for the real food that had once been the focal point of great redistribution feasts of "big men" in chief-run societies. The rulers of early Christian Eu-