

Telling about the Maya

A Forest of Kings. The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya. LINDA SCHELE and DAVID FREIDEL. Color photographs by Justin Kerr. Morrow, New York, 1990; reprint, 1991. 542 pp., illus., + plates. \$29.95; paper, \$15.

Scribes, Warriors and Kings. The City of Copán and the Ancient Maya. WILLIAM L. FASH. Drawings by Barbara W. Fash. Thames and Hudson, London, 1991 (U.S. distributor, Norton, New York). 192 pp., illus. \$35. New Aspects of Antiquity.

In *A Forest of Kings*, Linda Schele and David Freidel comment that we inhabit "a special time" in studies of ancient Maya civilization. Behind us: years of archeological excavation and hieroglyphic decipherment. Now at hand: an exhilarating period of synthesis, when, at last, scholars may use historical and archeological evidence to write a coherent story about the ancient Maya. That this story would interest a broader audience is one of the characteristics of Maya studies, which, along with Egyptology, hold a special, favored place in the public eye. Reflecting the current situation, the two books under review here attempt to achieve two not easily reconcilable things: a synthesis of the latest breakthroughs for academic colleagues and a palatable account of Maya research for an enthusiastic wider audience. *A Forest of*

Kings is by far the more ambitious, since it chronicles the key events of Pre-Columbian Maya civilization. *Scribes, Warriors and Kings* by William Fash meets a different challenge, bringing to public attention the intensive research focused on the dynastic city of Copán, Honduras.

Schele, Freidel, and their editor, Joy Parker, deserve praise for an original, often brilliant book that shows an impressive breadth of scholarship. The varied backgrounds of the authors make this breadth possible: Schele is an art historian, Freidel an archeologist; both are distinguished in their fields. Over the last decade Schele in particular has searched for the central metaphors of Maya thought. In an earlier book, *The Blood of Kings*, coauthored with Mary Miller, she identified royal sacrificial blood as the "glue" of Pre-Columbian society. In this book she invokes another metaphor: "the kings of the Maya realms comprised a forest of sustaining World Trees within the natural forested landscape of the Maya world" (p. 90)—hence the title. Since the concept of "kingly trees" rests on ambiguous iconographic evidence and an incompletely deciphered hieroglyph, it might have been better to use another title. Yet



"Less than a year after the dedication of Temple 33, Ah-Cacaw [a ruler of Tikal] attacked Calakmul again, this time taking captive a lord named Ox-Ha-Te Ixil Ahau, who was immortalized in one of the most elegant drawings left to us by the Maya. The artist incised the image of this man on two carved bones deposited in Ah-Cacaw's tomb." [From *A Forest of Kings*]

who can deny the vivid, enticing quality of the metaphor, especially in these days of ecological sensitivity?

The book begins by presenting the historical and physical background of the Maya. Here, as throughout the book, luscious if sometimes cluttered drawings supplement the text. Later sections contain theological ruminations about Maya thought and, more important, discussions of the questions confronted by the ancient Maya. Schele and Freidel deal with these questions chronologically, although the issues are relevant to most phases of the Maya past: How did the Maya justify social inequality? How did Maya sculptors describe competition between emerging kings and the conquest of one divine ruler by another? How did dynasties achieve regional hegemony? What means did the Maya use to relate the personal charisma of the king to the legitimate inheritance of divine status? How did Maya rulers negotiate power-sharing with subordinates? And how, finally, did the concept of divine rule undergo modification and, in some places, extinction? Schele and Freidel make their ambitions clear. They are examining not only material and historical evidence but the intentions and attitudes of Maya lords, an assertion that will not sit well with more cautious readers.



A vision serpent appears to Lady 6-Tun, a wife of Bird-Jaguar, in this lintel carving from Temple 21 in Yaxchilán. The serpent rises from paper that was soaked in Lady 6-Tun's blood during a bloodletting ceremony. [From *A Forest of Kings*]



Artist's reconstruction of a lintel carving from Temple 23 at Yaxchilán. It depicts a bloodletting ritual performed by Lady Xoc, a wife of the ruler Shield-Jaguar. He holds a torch over Lady Xoc as she pulls a rope through her tongue. The ceremony is in celebration of the birth of Bird-Jaguar, Shield-Jaguar's heir. [From *A Forest of Kings*]



"The Great Plaza [at Copán], looking south-southeast, with Ballcourt A-III and the Hieroglyphic Stairway in the background. Structure 10L-4, which defines the southern limit of the Great Plaza, has four stairways, in keeping with rituals related to the four cardinal directions." [From *Scribes, Warriors and Kings*]

Some parts of the book work better than others. The chapter on royal legitimation at Palenque draws upon Schele's 20-year exploration of monumental art and writing at the city. This is the most compelling account ever written of Palenque history. In contrast, the chapter discussing the beginnings of inequality relies on heavy doses of speculation, probably because most of the evidence is prehistoric. For example, how can we know that shaman kings performed ecstatic, dervish-like dances on stepped platforms? Why are the hollows on the top of Structure 5C at Cerros the roots of "world trees" rather than simply postholes for roof support? And can the elaborate interpretation of an early building facade be convincing when it rests on only one small clue? Similar problems mar the chapter discussing the beginnings of territorial conquest, labeled by the authors, somewhat misleadingly, as "empire." (The actual area involved is rather smaller than metropolitan New York.) There are several factual errors here—a certain "Scroll-Ahau" is not depicted on an early monument, although a person named "Jaguar-Paw" is, and some hieroglyphs described as personal names refer instead to places. But these are less important than the overall argument, which proposes a "spectacular campaign . . . waged [by the city of Tikal] against [the city of] Uaxactún" (p. 144). The victor was one Smoking-Frog, "whose triumphs at Uaxactún inspired the admiration and imagination of an entire region" (p. 179) and who adopted an international war ritual from the Mexican city of Teotihuacán. This "staggering victory . . . made

[the Tikal] kings the dominant ahaub [lords] of the central Petén" (p. 163). Yet what is the main basis for this interpretation? an eroded text, of which only a date and one name are legible, and the associated image of a warrior in Teotihuacán garb. Nowhere is it clear who is depicted on this monument and in what historical setting.

In sum, there is much that is good, even moving, in *A Forest of Kings*, and a little that is bad. This extends also to the tone of the book. The writing is impassioned, personal, and, at times, gushing: autobiographical vignettes of how the authors came to understand Maya civilization parallel "you-were-there" sketches of Maya rulers and other personalities. Some readers will like these accounts, others will find them distracting and overwritten, the prose thickly clotted with adjectives. As a fan of the late Isaac Asimov, I also detect a science-fiction quality to some passages, as in the discussion of "otherworld portals" that can be "deactivated."

This raises the point made earlier about the two audiences for the book. I learned a great deal from *A Forest*, but I cannot say it was easy to read. Both the detailed arguments and the scholarly endnotes—90 pages of dense, tiny print—can be overwhelming. Whom then is the book for? Perhaps the intended readers were people like those attending Schele's hieroglyph workshops at the University of Texas. Although highly popular, these meetings succeed because of Schele's charismatic personality and persuasive lecture style. Some of these qualities

seep into *A Forest of Kings*, but not enough for a book that must stand alone.

William Fash's superb *Scribes, Warriors and Kings* is more limited in scope and more orthodox in its handling of the material. It represents the first attempt to bring together in digestible form the results of separate projects that have focused on the city and settlement of Copán, a site endowed like no other with a rich historical record. Having spent much of the last 17 years working at Copán, Fash is ideally suited to the task of describing "the most thoroughly investigated of all the Classic Maya sites" (p. 27) and of infusing history into archeology. His writing is restrained and fair, giving credit to other scholars—some not always in agreement with him. To Barbara Fash goes the credit for most of the fine drawings and architectural reconstructions featured in *Scribes*.

Fash focuses above all on the central precincts of Copán, with secondary emphasis on the heavily excavated Group 9N-8, where he first envisioned his current project. The sculptural and hieroglyphic evidence is fantastically abundant in both locations; indeed, it was work at the latter that convinced him of the need to refit the many thousands of loose sculpted blocks in the center of Copán. The result has been an entirely renovated view of what Copán looked like during its heyday and, more significant, of how some of the buildings might have functioned. This architectural record is placed in the context of particular rulers, including the great Yax Pac, who, according to Fash, encountered increasing resistance to centralized rule from a restive group of nobles. The backdrop to these changes is ecological degradation in Copán's ecotonic setting, which made the top-heavy, elite-centered society at Copán difficult to support.

The book is handsomely produced and almost without flaws. There are two typos, one photograph languishes on its side, and a few statements might be revised in future editions. For example, Fash's comments that east is "the most sacred direction in ancient Maya cosmography" (p. 26), that the *ti* vulture was read *ahau* (p. 95), or that a smoke-engulfed shell represented a pun for a royal name, "Smoke Shell" (p. 149) will need some rethinking. Yet Fash deserves high marks for seeing Copán not as an exemplary Maya center, to be used as a model for understanding Pre-Columbian society in other parts of the Maya area, but as a fusion of long-standing highland traditions with "sporadic lowland inputs" (p. 76). His placement of Copán in its highland setting may also explain his heavy interpretative use of sections from the Popol Vuh, an account from highland Guatemala of the history and legends of the Quiché Maya.

Both books, then, are outstanding syn-

theses, although they show different scope and ambition. Fash's succeeds better as a book for lay readers; Schele and Freidel's presents provocative conclusions of greater interest to scholars. What remains is, for Fash, a more complete scholarly publication of his finds—a pressing task as data mount from his continuing excavations—and, for Schele and Freidel, a winnowing of the more imaginative ideas from the solid.

Stephen D. Houston
Department of Anthropology,
Vanderbilt University,
Nashville, TN 37235

Uses of Sport

The Mesoamerican Ballgame. VERNON L. SCARBOROUGH and DAVID R. WILCOX, Eds. University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1991. xvii, 404 pp., illus. \$45.

Few aspects of ancient Mesoamerican culture have generated as much interest among both specialists and the general public as the game that was played with rubber balls on masonry courts. According to Paul Kirchhoff, the ball game constitutes a defining trait of the Mesoamerican region. In the archeological record, ball courts, stone paraphernalia, and scenes in art all testify to the importance of the game. Early colonial texts also underline the importance of this sport. According to accounts pertaining to the Aztec and West Mexican Acaxee, the ball court was the first structure fashioned in a community. The ball game plays a prominent role in the mythology of the Aztec, Tarascans, and Maya. Far more than simply entertaining sport, the game was inextricably tied to native society, ritual, and belief.

During the past century aspects of the ball game have been intensively studied by many scholars, among them Eduard Seler, Walter Krickeberg, Theodore Stern, Gordon Ekholm, Stephan Borhegyi, and Ted Leyenaar. Derived from a conference held in Tucson in 1985, the 16 studies contained in this most recent work on the subject not only review and assess earlier work but also provide new interpretative insights and previously unreported field data. Geographically, the coverage is broad. Fourteen of the studies concern specific regions, among them the Gulf Coast, Central Mexico, Oaxaca, West Mexico, the Maya lowlands and highlands, and the southern piedmont of Chiapas and Guatemala. In addition, Wilcox describes Hohokam ball courts of the American Southwest and rightly notes that they are but northern manifestations of the Mesoamerican ball game.

This volume demonstrates the efficacy of

studying such a phenomenon in the context of the Mesoamerican interaction sphere. Despite its many permutations over time and distance, the Mesoamerican ball game is notably consistent in form, function, and symbolic meaning. Along with delineating enduring essential qualities, such a broad comparative approach can also call attention to markedly divergent forms. Regrettably, there is virtually no attempt in the volume to synthesize and discuss the implications of the papers it includes.

The essays display a wide range of interpretations of the roles and functions of the ball game. According to Wilkerson, Schele and Freidel, and Parsons, the game functioned primarily as a ritual means to communicate with the gods. Other contributors adopt a more functionalist approach and argue that it enhanced social and economic organization. Weigand suggests that, for highland Jalisco, the game served a politically central-

essay focusing upon the distribution of ball courts in Central Mexico, Santley, Berman, and Alexander suggest that the game was an elite means to acquire wealth and territory through high-stake betting. Although this is an intriguing idea that merits comparisons with the intense betting associated with the more humble *patolli*, the ball game was probably not an important means of economic betterment. As Scarborough notes in his essay, the high stakes associated with the game may reflect status rivalry more than immediate economic gain.

Many authors note the close relation of the ball game to warfare. According to Taladoire and Colsenet, the Classic Maya of the Usumacinta regarded the game as "a substitute and symbol for war." The contact-period Acaxee identification of the ball game with war cited by Kelley is probably of considerable antiquity in West Mexico, as Weigand notes a subtle gradation between ball-player and warrior figurines in Proto-classic Jalisco. Kowalewski, Feinman, Finsten, and Blanton mention that in the Valley of Oaxaca courts first appear in frontier areas of conflict, and suggest that a function of the ball game may have been to keep militia fit and ready for combat. Following the 1949 work of Stern, some authors argue that the game was a substitute for military conflict. However, the game would best be considered as an expression rather than a resolution of conflict. Although it is tempting to view it in a strictly functionalist sense as a means of integrating and stabilizing competing social groups, it can also be considered as but another manifestation of conflict and aggression. Classic Maya texts provide compelling evidence that individuals sacrificed in ball games were often captives taken in war.

The Mesoamerican Ballgame is a balanced synthesis of archeological field research and iconographic interpretation. Detailed information on actual ball courts and their distribution is provided for the Tehuacán Valley, the Valley of Oaxaca, West Mexico, the American Southwest, southern Chiapas, and the Quichean region of highland Guatemala. The discussion of excavations at the Uxmal ball court by Kurjack, Maldonado, and Robertson is especially important for determining the chronological relationship between this Puuc site and the Toltec period, or Modified Florescent, of Chichén Itzá. It is unfortunate that two of the illustrations of this study (figures 8.1 and 8.3) are transposed, since this could confuse the distinctions between Toltec and Maya that the authors so carefully point out.

Among the studies focusing upon iconographic interpretation, Wilkerson examines the role of the ball game in northern Veracruz and provides a detailed interpretation of the six reliefs upon the South Ball



Drawing of ball-court sculptural panel from Aparicio, Veracruz, suggesting sacrificial death by decapitation. [From P. C. Weigand's chapter in *The Mesoamerican Ballgame*]

izing function by formalizing internal social opposition in public ritual. In a like manner, Fox states that the Quiché ball game united competing factions within the community. Two other studies stress economic functions. According to Wilcox, the Hohokam ball game was an integral part of a regional ceremonial exchange system that regulated the flow of exotic valuables and other goods. In an