THE NEW MAYA

HAVING DISPELLED THE MYTH OF A MODEL SOCIETY LED BY GENTLE PRIEST-KINGS, SCHOLARS ARE PIECING TOGETHER A FRESH PICTURE OF THE RISE AND FALL OF A COMPLEX CIVILIZATION.

by T. PATRICK CULBERT

> *The Maya inscriptions treat primarily of chronology, astronomy... and religious matters.... They tell no story of kingly conquests, recount no deeds of imperial achievement... indeed they are so utterly impersonal, so completely nonindividualistic, that it is even probable that the name glyphs of specific men and women were never recorded upon the Maya monuments.*
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> SYLVANUS MORLEY
> The Ancient Maya (1946)

WHEN ARCHAEOLOGY DEBUTED in 1948, the views of Sylvanus Morley and J. Eric S. Thompson, the leading Mayanists at the time, prevailed. The majority of the Maya, they believed, were devout peasants who practiced slash-and-burn agriculture and lived in small, sparsely populated settlements on the outskirts of temple precincts. They were guided by priest-kings, gentle men without egos, devoted to prayer and temple building. This utopian view of Maya civilization persisted until a new generation of scholars took to the field on the heels of the Second World War.

Unlike their predecessors, concerned only with temples and tombs, postwar archaeologists wanted to study the lives of common people, whose labor had built the great sites. In the early 1950s Tulane, Harvard, and the University of Pennsylvania, among other institutions, undertook the first systematic mapping of large portions of sites like Tikal in the Petén region of Guatemala. These projects revealed thousands of small structures surrounding pyramid complexes, proving that Maya cities were bustling metropolises, not vacant ceremonial centers reserved for a priestly class.

Following the gradual decipherment of the hieroglyphs, which began in the 1960s with the pioneering work of Tatiana Proskouriakoff of the Carnegie Institution and Russian epigrapher Yuri Knorosov, the mystical, spiritual society the ancient Maya were thought to have enjoyed began to crumble. Though decipherment of Maya inscriptions is far from complete—epigrapher Peter Mathews of the University of Calgary estimates that 60 percent of the hieroglyphs can now be read with some certainty—we know the names of those responsible for the great buildings and of those buried in royal tombs. What is clear from the inscriptions is that Maya rulers were not devoted to esoteric matters and calendar keeping, but rather to self-aggrandizement. Egomaniacs all, they warred incessantly and sacrificed prisoners to build prestige.

Based on settlement pattern analysis, archaeologists estimate that by the Late Classic, ca. A.D. 600, Maya population had reached a density of 600 people per square mile across a 36,000-square-mile area in the forested lowlands of northern Guatemala and adjacent parts of Mexico and Belize. This is a staggering figure, comparable to the most heavily populated parts of rural China today. Slash-and-burn agriculture alone could not have supported populations this dense. To feed the multitudes, the Maya had to turn to new agricultural techniques that included shortening the fallow cycle to put more land under cultivation, terracing, and cultivating the wetlands that make up 40 percent of the southern Lowlands. The exact mix of techniques used is still a matter of debate.

POPULATION ESTIMATES ALSO FIGURE in our interpretation of the mid-ninth-century Maya collapse. We now know that populations grew at an exponential rate for centuries, peaking around A.D. 750. Within a few decades, however, both urban and rural populations plummeted. By 850, two-thirds of the people living in the Southern Lowlands were gone, and most of the remainder disappeared by 1100. Archaeologists agree that to point to any single factor as the cause of the collapse would be naive. Most concur that centuries of uninterrupted growth put the Maya in a perilous position from which almost any disaster—drought, erosion, or social disorder—could have triggered a decline.

There has been a recent surge of interest in household archaeology aimed at informing us about the lives of nonelite people. The vast majority, perhaps 90 percent, of the Maya populace was devoted to some level of agricultural production, but there is increasing evidence of specialization in the manufacture of everyday items such as pottery. There are also indications of a middle class of specialists whose status was above those of full-time farmers.

Some of the most exciting work is in the area of Maya political organization, made possible by continued progress in hieroglyphic decipherment. In the 1970s, it was generally thought that a few great Maya cities served as the centers of regional states. By the late 1980s many scholars began to view the very large centers as city-states with limited areas of political control. A minority argued for larger political units. Epigraphers Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube have discovered phrases within inscriptions that indicate hierarchical relationships among Maya rulers of different cities (see ARCHAEOLOGY, November/December 1995, pp. 41–46). They see Late Classic history as a competition between two superpowers, Tikal and Calakmul, a massive site in Mexico just to the north of the Guatemalan border. In a masterful political strategy, Calakmul amassed allies in the sixth and seventh centuries who attacked Tikal and greatly diminished its power. Not until a new ruler (known as Ruler A) took the Tikal throne in 682, after his father had been captured and sacrificed by one of Calakmul's allies, did Tikal begin to recover. Ruler A's major accomplishment was to capture and sacrifice the ruler of Calakmul. He went on to build the two giant temples at the ends of Tikal's great plaza and a number of the other buildings at the site today.

The late Linda Schele probably did more than anyone to bring the results of Maya hieroglyphic decipherment to public and professional attention. In a series of books with various coauthors, Schele vividly presented the lives and world view of the ancient Maya. Like a growing number of Mayanists in recent years, she focused on ideology as a mainspring for society. The Maya view of the universe underscored the actions of powers and principalities, and the ruler, as mediator between subjects, gods, and ancestors, maintained the universe. Her most recent book, *Code of Kings,* "recounts" the funeral of Palenque's Pacal (A.D. 603–683), whose tomb in the Temple of the Inscriptions is perhaps the most famous of all Maya royal burials.

Some scholars have taken a more materialistic view of Maya rulers. Ideology, they say, could be manipulated to suit the purposes of those in power and was backed with spears for those who chose not to believe. We now know that war was commonplace in the Classic period and that it was accompanied by the capture and sacrifice of prisoners amid much fanfare. But were sacrifices the chief reason that the Maya went to war or were they simply the ceremonial trappings of campaigns motivated by the desire for tribute and territory? Perhaps the two were inextricably linked.

Despite differences in opinion and approaches inherent in the wide variety of disciplines involved in the study of the Maya, it is possible for scholars to integrate their data in an effort to understand these ancient people. Copán in western Honduras, the first major Maya site to be extensively excavated since the decipherment of hieroglyphic writing, provides an example of a happy marriage of archaeology, epigraphy, and art history. Research by a variety of institutions and investigators has been under way there for more than 30 years. Archaeology has provided information about not only the site itself, but the whole Copán Valley, along with indications of ecological stress that resulted in the erosion of the surrounding hillsides, which may have contributed to the site's eventual abandonment.

At the main site, archaeological investigations and the study of inscriptions and iconography have provided a vivid image of elite life and a history of victories and defeats. Most stunning, perhaps, of all the discoveries are those that have been made in the tunnels dug into centuries of early construction underlying the Temple of the Hieroglyphic Stairway and the Acropolis. Just a few years ago, it was thought that the early fifth-century ruler Yax K'uk Mo' (Blue Green Quetzal Macaw), repeatedly acknowledged by later kings to have been the founder of the Copán dynasty, was either mythical or a vaguely remembered leader of a small village that once stood at the site. How wrong these guesses were. Deep beneath the Acropolis, archaeologists have uncovered buildings dating to the time of this reign, including a stela erected by his son and a small temple containing what are probably the remains of Yax K'uk Mo' himself.

EVEN WITH THE ENORMOUS ADVANCES that have been made in the last few years, there are a multitude of questions still to be answered. We need to know far more about how commoners, who supplied food for the upper classes and labor for building the great structures, were integrated into the larger social picture. Was most land held privately by individuals or families, or communally by neighborhoods or villages, a proportion of whose production was collected as taxes? Or were there great estates held by Maya nobles, farmed by serfs or corvée labor? And what of the religious life of the commoners? Even in small groups of structures there are flat-topped pyramids that were once topped by perishable religious structures. Were the ceremonies that took place there simply a small-scale reflection of those performed in the great temples, or were there whole cults largely confined to poorer people? Were the ceremonies conducted by local lineage heads, or by "parish priests" who came to conduct rites that demanded special training or an equivalent of ordination? The crux of these questions is the extent to which the lives of the majority of the Maya population

were separate from those of the upper classes in kind as well as in degree.

It no longer seems profitable to look at each site in isolation. Beyond the great cities, there are hundreds of Maya sites, and neighborhoods within large sites, of intermediate size that have stone temples and palaces whose construction involved considerable investments of labor, but which lack the inscriptions that would tell us about their ties to the great rulers. Those who governed these sites were certainly elite, but who were they? Were they members of the great royal families, sons and cousins who had been granted small domains in the interlands? Or were they local lords, ruling areas that had belonged to their families long before the mighty became mighty? We know from the inscriptions that ruling families visited each other, intermarried, and fought. But if there were long-distance alliances and enmities, how did they work? How strong were superpowers such as Calakmul and Tikal? Texts suggest that rulers in allied cities acknowledged the authority of the great centers, but how dependent they were is still unclear. Did they participate willingly in political campaigns or did superpower lords have to beg, wheedle, or threaten them into joining their causes? Answers to these questions can only come from research by investigators with different interests.

Today, Maya sites attract crowds of tourists. Roads are being opened to previously inaccessible sites such as Calakmul and Uaxactún. While the environmental impact of the new roads is a matter of concern, tourism may be far easier on the landscape than cutting and burning the forest for agriculture, as is currently being done. The Classic Maya collapse may be an example of the price paid for mismanaging the environment. Those concerned with managing the remaining tracts of tropical forest would do well to learn from the experience of this ancient people.

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