

Reviews



Estudios de Cultura Maya, vol. XXXI

(Mayan Culture Studies, vol. 31)

Maricela Ayala Falcón and Roberto Romero Sandoval, eds.

Institute for Philological Research (IIFL)/UNAM

Mexico City, 2008

This volume of the magazine *Estudios de Cultura Maya* includes seven articles, a formerly unpublished text and three book reviews. They deal with history, epigraphy, archaeology, linguistics and social anthropology, spanning pre-Hispanic, colonial and modern times.¹

The article that opens this issue, “La composición dinástica de Yaxchilán durante el reinado de Yaxuun B’ahlam IV” (The Dynastic Composition of Yaxchilán During the Reign of Yaxuun B’ahlam IV), by María Elena Vega Villalobos, analyzes the socio-political organization of the Mayan city of Yaxchilán. Based on the new epigraphic readings, specialists have understood how the Mayas documented their relations with other cities and the way in which power was distributed

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Volume XXXII of *Estudios de Cultura Maya* is a valuable instrument for approaching Mayan culture from the standpoint of poetry, linguistics, archaeology, anthropology, history and society. It includes articles by Mexican and foreign specialists who have tried to understand this civilization’s complexity through the prism of their respective disciplines. The result is a rich, interesting, polyphonic academic product that can satisfy the reader’s curiosity by delving into different aspects of this culture. Its articles range from studies on the role of elderly women in the pre-Hispanic Mayan world, to the acoustical strategies of the archaeological sites we are all familiar with like Palenque, Chichén Itzá or Tulum.

among the different lords' dominions. These findings also reveal the titles other figures used that had gone unregistered until now.

Thus, Vega Villalobos's article deals with part of Yaxchilán's written history, particularly during the government of Yaxuun B'ahlam IV (ca. A.D. 752-768), better known under the name of Bird Jaguar IV. The texts written during his reign illustrate the political scene and its actors by showing us the new political order that began to be set up in the Usumacinta region and other Mayan cities.

Carlos Humberto Herman contributes the article "Las etapas constructivas de la Plaza A del Grupo 3D-XIV o Zona Norte de Tikal, Petén, Guatemala" (The Constructive Stages of Plaza A of Group 3D-XIV or Northern Zone of Tikal, Petén, Guatemala). He presents the 1980s archaeological reports about this area of Tikal that until now had gone unpublished. This valuable information tells us more about the political-religious group settled to the north of the Main Plaza, a group or lineage that the author argues shared power with the Mak'ina group during the early and late classical periods.

These reports reveal the exact location where the "Tikal Man" was discovered, the only sculpture found in the city. Its shoulders and back are finely decorated with a long hieroglyphic text, and since its head is missing, it very probably was the object of vandalism in the pre-Hispanic era. Some authors suggest that it is a representation of the ruler Chak Tok Ich'aaik I or II, who governed between A.D. 350 (?) and A.D. 378.

The article "Aspectos corporativos de la persona (personhood) y la encarnación (embodiment) entre los mayas del período Clásico" (Aspects of Personhood and Embodiment among the Mayas of the Classical Period), by Susan D. Gillespie, analyzes the Mayas' two political-economic strategies. In Mesoamerica in general, there were two opposite strategies: the network or exclusionary strategy, in which power is exercised by individuals, and the corporate type, in which power is shared among large corporate groups. Gillespie argues that the Mayas of the classical period opted for the network strategy, while in Teotihuacán, the corporate strategy was implemented.

Evidence that the Mayas used the network strategy is based on the emphasis these peoples put on the representation of kings, their elaborate burials and the construction of palaces. However, the anthropological sources that analyze the concept of personhood show the ongoing difficulty for distinguishing between individuals and groups, and casting doubt on the usefulness of the network/corporate dichotomy.

The issue opens with an article about the archaeological finds by the Mexican Atasta Flores and the Slovenian Ivan Šprajc in southern Campeche. Both men worked for seven seasons from 1996 to 2007 in the Calakmul biosphere reserve, which had not been extensively explored since the 1930s. Their explorations led them to identify and map 65 previously totally unknown sites and relocate others. The project attempts to reconstruct the temporality of the settlements and the political relations based on stratigraphical and architectural studies and epigraphical findings.

Readers interested in archaeology will enjoy the essay "Arqueoacústica maya" (Mayan Archaeo-acoustics). The team that authored this research is made up of Clara Garza, Andrés Medina, Pablo Padilla, Alejandro Ramos and Francisca Zalaquett, all academics from different disciplines, which has made for extremely interesting results in their work on the acoustical phenomena produced in the structures at Mayan sites. The study analyzes the acoustical qualities of some of the rooms in Mayan palaces and of some musical instruments. For example, the fact that researchers found whistles buried at the base of certain structures, like Temple III at Palanque, plus the capacity of its rooms to raise acoustical frequencies show that this was probably a place well suited for putting on performances or dancing and singing. Another interesting example is a structure in Tulum, where the wind warns of hurricanes by making a specific whistling sound when it passes through a cylinder and stone ring, functioning as the first "storm warning" in history.

The last phenomenon the authors studied closely was a sound like a bird's, called "the tail of the quetzal," produced when you applaud in front of the main stairway of the castle of Chichén Itzá. Today, tour guides amaze visitors with what has come to be called "acoustical tourism."

Spanish historian Rocío García Valganón delves into the function of elderly women in Mayan culture. According to her analysis, elderly women have not been studied much. García states that in the 1940s, researchers began to be interested in the presence of elders in Mayan graphics; they identified old gods in the codices, in particular the Becabes and the goddess of the moon. This led to other studies about the aged in traditional cultures.

The rise in the mean age of the world's population and the increasingly important role played by the elderly led to many more studies and symposia about aging. Since the 1960s and 1970s, there have also been more studies about elderly gods in Mesoamerica and their symbolic value associated

my. Gillespie examines how large corporate groups are embodied in their kings —the Mayan rulers of the classical period personified their royal houses. She goes on to point out the potential diversity of the components of personhood, and concludes that researching the embodiment of personhood, singular and plural, may prove to be a more productive strategy for exploring diversity in the different representations of the human body —or its absence— in Mesoamerica.

Guillermo Bernal Romero analyzes the inscription on the ear plugs that were part of the funeral dress of the most important ruler of the Mayan city of Palenque: K'inich Janahb'-Pakal. Bernal Romero's reading of the text proposes that it alludes to two deities associated with rain and lightning, Chaahk and Yopaat, closely related to each other and to the god K'awiil. An interesting piece of information the author found on the inscription is that the ear plugs were given in tribute by O'-Kan, a dignitary from a foreign locale called Lah, politically affiliated to the dominion of Piedras Negras. To conclude, the author proposes the possibility that these ornaments were part of a larger lot of jadeite pieces used for Pakal's funeral attire.

"Excavations at Río Bec, Group B, Structure 6N-1, Campeche, Mexico," by Prentice M. Thomas and L. Janice Campbell, recovers the archaeological field research done at Río Bec in 1976, which netted three important finds: first, that Structure 6N-1 was built and inhabited in the late classical period; probably it was a dwelling for the elite that functioned at the same time as a public space. Second, the inhabitants of Río Bec made structural changes in the building, among them adapting the twin towers. And third, the archaeological evidence reveals that Structure 6N-1 remained in use until the terminal classical period.

The next article is "Ciudades mayas preclásicas, raíces y evolución: el Preclásico Medio en Cuello, Belice" (Pre-classical Mayan Cities, Roots and Evolution: the Middle Pre-classical in Cuello, Belize). Author Norman Hammond presents the archaeological evidence found at one of the earliest sites in the Mayan area: Cuello. Without any doubt, Hammond's archaeological work is very interesting because he is one of the few who has extensively excavated a middle pre-classical site (700-400 B.C.), and because he collected data about the population's lifestyle, its natural surroundings, crops, food and even how it made *amate* paper, used by the city to record its symbols. All this evidence indicates that it was a stratified society, whose upper echelons had access to exotic products imported from far-off regions.

with power, like the creator gods, the smoker god and Teotihuacán's old god of fire. The idyllic vision of the Mesoamerican world is a recurring theme, in which supposedly there was great respect for the elderly.

García's conclusion is that even though there are many contemporary studies about old gods, there is no specific interest in female Mayan figures. Even though some studies about Mayan goddesses do exist, most of them focus on comparisons between men and women and concentrate on what was going on in Central Mexico.

Mexican anthropologist Ana Rosa Duarte Duarte contributes an article analyzing the representation of current Mayan identity in *Sáastal: los hijos de la Santa Gracia* (*Sáastal: The Children of the Holy Grace*), a 55-minute fiction video. The film was conceived as didactic material for learning Yucatecan Mayan, but as the research advanced, it became more complex, depicting the drama of a rural Mayan family's daily life as it deals with the threats of globalization, modernization and different "civilizing" policies. The emphases are on planting, self-sustaining consumption and the children's education according to Hispanic cultural models. For the author, coexistence with Western culture has fostered the construction of "soft identities," that is, identities that fluctuate according to the circumstances of interaction with different subjects from the same community or from outside it. According to this visual document, in the current identity, self-sustaining consumption coexists with consumerism, Mayan with Spanish, and modernity with the conservation of traditional values.

The last section of this issue is made up of three articles inter-related because of their linguistic, rhetorical focus. The first is the result of extensive research by French ethnolinguists Aurore Becquelin and Cédric Becquey who study parallelism in Mayan poetry, that is, the repetition of grammatical structures and parallel lexicons, such as in the case of the verses "I made them dance in the clarity of the earth, I made them dance in the clarity of the world."

The object of the essay is to study the frequency and function of parallelism in Mayan poetry in light of the analysis of texts like *Rabinal Achí* or *Chilam Balam* or others of a ritual, contemporary nature. The use of parallelisms in rhetoric can be found from the classical period until our time in all the variations of the Mayan language family, testifying to this artistic body of work's exceptional capacity to preserve discursive strategies. The authors argue that this technique is the expression of a binary vision of reality, also evident in the culture's iconography.

Caroline Cunill, in her article “La alfabetización de los mayas yucatecos y sus consecuencias sociales, 1545-1580” (Teaching Yucatecan Mayas to Read and Its Social Consequences, 1545-1580), deals with the repercussions of Yucatán Mayas learning the Western alphabet in the early years of colonization. From the very first, the Mayas tried to adapt to their new circumstances to defend their economic, political and cultural interests. The Franciscans, for their part, learned Yucatecan Mayan and organized schools to teach the indigenous not only Christian doctrine, but also how to read and write. The Mayas learned the new language swiftly because during the pre-Hispanic period they had developed logo syllabic writing, and because the elite sought to preserve its position within colonial society. According to Cunill, the Mayan indigenous were perfectly aware that knowledge of alphabetical writing would allow them to aspire to certain posts in Spanish society of the early colonial period.

Lastly, I must congratulate Dr. Maricela Ayala for her fortunate decision to open a new section in the magazine dedicated to recovering previously unpublished Mayan research materials, like the work of Heinrich Berlin, a pioneer of Mayan epigraphy. His article “El texto del sarcófago y su relación con otros textos palenquinos” (The Text of the Sarcophagus and Its Relationship to Other Texts in Palenque) is an invaluable piece in the study and deciphering of Palenque’s Mayan rulers. **MM**

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NOTES

¹ This volume is available on line at <http://www.filologicas.unam.mx/indices/estculmay31.htm>. Volumes 27, 28, 29, 30 and 32 are available at <http://www.filologicas.unam.mx/indices/estculmay.htm>. I would like to thank Sergio Reyes Coria for uploading these volumes to the internet, the Institute for Philological Research (IIFL) Publications Department, particularly Eliff Lara Astorga, for editing this publication, and Samuel Flores Osorio for his excellent cover designs.

French linguist Valentina Vapnarsky also studies parallelism. Her essay deals not only with its occurrence in phrases or adjoining verses, but also with its role in the profound framework of ritual texts. This study starts off with a rigorous analysis of a ritual dialogue among Macehual Mayas from Quintana Roo during the Saint John the Baptist pilgrimage. It confirms that the parallelisms not only have an aesthetic or poetic purpose, but that they are strategies for discursive organization.

The last article is a linguistic-poetic study by Mexican linguist Lucero Meléndez Guadarrama of four of the “Songs of Dzitbalché.” The author does a new transcription and modernization of the *corpus* in Yucatecan Mayan, which allows for new interpretations of the text and a greater understanding of its poetic structure. She underlines the importance of doing new translations of the indigenous writings and rigorous studies of the language and its resources in order for Spanish speakers to be able to appreciate its rhetorical proposal.

The issue closes with reviews of three works. *Tortuguero, una historia rescatada* (Recovering the History of Tortuguero), by epigrapher Alfonso Arellano, published in 2006 by the Center for Mayan Studies (CEM), is reviewed by Martha Iliá Nájera. Tomás Pérez reviews *Tabasco, antiguas letras, nuevas voces* (Tabasco, Ancient Letters, New Voices), edited by Mario Ruz in 2005 and also published by CEM. And finally, Antonio Benavides reviews *Introducción a la arquitectura maya* (Introduction to Mayan Architecture) by Gaspar Muñoz Cosme, published in Valencia in 2006 by Biblioteca TC General de Ediciones de Arquitectura. **MM**

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