

History among the Maya THE CODE OF KINGS The Language of Seven Sacred Maya Temples and Tombs

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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FULL TEXT

History among the Maya THE CODE OF KINGS The Language of Seven Sacred Maya Temples and Tombs

Saturday, April 25, 1998

By Linda Schele and Peter Mathews

Scribner, 431 pages, \$56

OUR understanding of the Mayan world has been revolutionized in recent years by a group of scholars dedicated to the mastery of epigraphy – the decipherment of a hieroglyphic system of writing – and the subsequent reading and interpretation of the events and circumstances that shaped one of history's most accomplished civilizations.

Linda Schele and Peter Mathews, among other researchers whose work they would be the first to acknowledge, have been at the forefront of this revolution, which has seen the focus of Mayan archeology shift from discussions of astronomy, cosmology and the contemplation of time to the more mundane operations of war and politics, especially the rise and fall of dynastic rulers and city states. In this bold and assertive synthesis, attractively illustrated throughout by line drawings and the photography of Justin Kerr and MacDuff Everton, Schele and Mathews lay to rest depictions of a Mayan past that is still too often veiled in romantic mystery and scientific intrigue.

The authors spell out, instead, detailed accounts of the fate of kings and kingdoms from about 1000 BC to AD 1697, usually by reference to the written texts the Maya left behind, often inscribed literally on the stone palace walls, temples and other revered buildings in cities that once flourished in southeastern Mesoamerica. Schele and Mathews also distinguish their labours by making the reader aware that the Mayan voices they release from the silence of glyphs are alive and well today, spoken by some three million people in Mexico and approximately twice that number in Guatemala.

The narrative strategy is novel and ambitious, and indeed quite daring. Schele and Mathews choose just seven Mayan sites – one in Honduras, three each in Mexico and Guatemala – and around the particulars of their archeological record weave an elaborate, nuanced reconstruction of Mayan land and life. The effect is cumulative, although some evocations of the essence of place resonate more fully than others: Seibal, for instance, seems slight when compared to the richness of what is now known about Tikal, Palenque, Copan or Chich'en Itza.

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Whenever possible, actions, deeds and their repercussions are attributed to specific historical figures. While there will always be conjecture and lacunae in the pursuit of knowledge, anonymity and mystique no longer need define the field of Mayan studies. Schele and Mathews take pains to leave us at Iximche' in January, 1996, with the image of living Maya repossessing a "sacred ancestral place" during a holiday marking Epiphany. The site was full of local Kaqchikel Indians, not foreign tourists.

"Knowing their own past and understanding what their ancestors built," the authors write, "has become a means of resistance against the fate of becoming strangers in their own land." The events of the past two decades in Guatemala, and more recently in Chiapas, have galvanized Mayan people against that fate and stimulated heightened consciousness of what exactly it means to be Mayan.

Though the dust jacket of *The Code of Kings* claims the book to be suitable "for readers of every level of expertise," Schele's and Mathews's informative but often intricate text may prove too demanding for some readers, especially those intent on taking the book along with them on their travels. For this purpose, Ronald Wright's *Time Among the Maya* might be a better idea. Specialists, on the other hand, should not be put off by the dust jacket's sloppy copy, which manages to present the reader with two howling errors of fact in the opening two sentences. Ironically, both these infelicities pertain to issues of time, which the Maya centuries ago computed and measured with remarkable accuracy.

Time, sadly, ran out for Linda Schele, who died last weekend after a dignified battle with cancer. The University of Calgary-based Mathews, one suspects, is not yet done with doing, despite his traumatic escapades while engaged in archeological fieldwork last summer in Chiapas, which resulted in his swimming for his life across the Rio Usumacinta. As for Schele, she leaves behind a fitting monument to the people she studied and loved, for whom the upcoming millennium will be their fourth here on Earth.

George Lovell teaches geography at Queen's University. His most recent book, A Beauty That Hurts: Life and Death in Guatemala, will appear next year in a revised U.S. edition.

DETAILS

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