

Maya Palaces and Elite Residences: An Interdisciplinary Approach. *Jessica Joyce Christie*, ed. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003, 392 pp. \$50.00, cloth.

The authors in this book argue that Maya palaces can contribute crucial evidence to our understanding of ancient Maya social, political, economic, and religious organization. Now that numerous royal and lesser elite residences have been excavated, archaeologists should be able to use the various types of data on palaces (architectural, artifactual, epigraphic, and distributional) to extend our knowledge of the ancient Maya. These chapters fail to move scholarship ahead, however, for a number of reasons. The biggest obstacle is a lack of problem orientation. Most of the papers are descriptive studies of palaces. The few explicit applications of comparative social models are quite simplistic. Not a single author cites James Sheehy's article in the William Sanders festschrift volume, the most thorough and explicit application of comparative data to Maya palaces. Readers will look in vain for discussions of topics like social class, elite exploitation, state ideology, or house society.

Guderjan et al. describe an undefined sample of elite residences at Blue Creek. Traxler summarizes work on early structures under the Copan acropolis, and Andrews et al. contribute a detailed look at one building in a palace compound at that site. Harrison rehashes past publications on the Central Acropolis at Tikal and advocates a poorly defined concept of "royal court" analogous to the court of Louis XIV of France. Demarest et al. present a clear description and analysis of the Murciélagos Complex at Dos Pilas as a royal palace, the most useful chapter in the volume. Inomata and Triadan provide a thoughtful discussion of elite residences at Aguateca, but most of this material has been published elsewhere. Liendo Stuardo describes an access analysis of Maya palaces.

Kowalski contributes a useful review of palaces in the northern Maya area, stressing cosmological symbolism. Ambrosino focuses on a termination deposit at one building at Yaxuna. Kurjack supplies a subjective and outdated essay on northern Maya palaces that is full of unsupported assertions about the nature of ancient states. Christie associates tripartite room plans at some Maya buildings with cosmological symbolism and offers a number of subjective interpretations. In a concluding chapter flawed by circular reasoning, she tries to synthesize the contributions of the chapters, but the lack of problem orientation and social models only leads to trivial conclusions.

These chapters illustrate a number of methodological and conceptual obstacles to be overcome before significant progress can be made in understanding Maya palaces. First, many of the relevant research questions—about inequality, power, and hierarchy, for example—are inherently quantitative in nature, yet there are almost no quantitative data in this book. Many authors make "quantitative" assertions (e.g., this form of palace is the most common, or, most palaces have that function) without any supportive numerical data. No one discusses sampling, yet how can we possibly judge these analyses when it is not clear how the examples were selected?

There are few fresh analytical techniques in this book. The presence of a

chapter on access analysis is a breakthrough of sorts in the conservative field of Maya architectural studies. Liendo's analysis, however, falls short due to the problem of multiple entrances that plagues the technique of access analysis. One cannot simply ignore alternative entrances to buildings and expect reasonable conclusions from the results of incomplete access studies. Maya palace research cries out for applications of energetic studies of labor investment (a valuable approach pioneered for the Maya by Adams and Abrams that has been allowed to stagnate), quantitative locational analysis (using GIS methods), and comparative analyses of artifact inventories. Even the simple, low-tech technique of detailed architectural comparisons is weakened here by the small number of illustrations of palaces. This research would benefit from truly interdisciplinary approaches. The subtitle of the book ("An Interdisciplinary Approach") is misleading; the authors include twenty archaeologists and two art historians. Where are contributions from epigraphers, ethnohistorians, or architectural historians?

Readers interested in the houses and lifestyles of the Maya rich and famous may want to skip this volume and look instead at one of several other edited volumes on the topic. In addition to the scholarly problems outlined above, the book suffers from poor copyediting; numerous figures and tables are not cited in the text, works cited are not in the bibliographies, and too many maps lack scales and north arrows. Most chapters are current to about 1999, with only a few citations after that date. In sum, *Maya Palaces and Elite Residences* attacks an important topic with disappointing results.

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