If studies like Lindgren’s ask us to look at a not altogether attractive aspect of our past, he is not alone; in fact, this sort of revisionism has been given ample expression in recent years. Catherine Bisher, for example, has recently written a devastating account of how white supremacists used North Carolina’s Classical Revival, as well as violence, as a means of asserting white power there. (“Landmarks of Power: Building a Southern Past, 1855–1915,” Southern Cultures [1993]: 5–45.) But does the fact that the preservation movement may have been born as a means to reassert white supremacy make it in itself bad? It would not if it ended there, yet even today one hears echoes of these same formative values when preservationists decide which buildings are “important” in their community. What is this but another power elite promoting their version of the past to control the present? Maybe that version is a little more democratic these days, but it’s been a long time coming.

Lindgren tries to show all sides. He does not demonize the past, and yet he and his readers unconsciously are made to apply modern-day standards to it. We recoil when we read statements like that of the APVA rejecting the history of slavery as having “no part in the life of the Colony.” We do not share these views in the late twentieth century, and we are repulsed and morally outraged by them.

The APVA may have used historic preservation as a means of providing the visual symbols for their own view of history, but they also accomplished much. They did save a number of significant buildings, and they laid the groundwork for what would later be developed at Williamsburg and Jamestown. They set the precedent for state involvement in preservation, and they promoted tourism, something that today has become the economic lifeblood of preservation.

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The ancient Maya city of Yaxchilan lies on a hairpin bend of the Usumacinta River, once a great artery of communication and now the border between Guatemala and Mexico. Difficult of access even today, it can only be reached either by boat or charted plane. Nevertheless, since its rediscovery in the late nineteenth century, Yaxchilan has been a pivotal site for understanding Classic Maya civilization (ca. A.D. 250–900).

In the first place, it has one of the largest and best-preserved corps of stone sculpture anywhere in the Maya region. Scores of stelae, lintels, altars, benches, and carved steps remain in situ and in the case of pieces removed to museums, their original locations are recorded. Yaxchilan’s texts, carved on these monuments, were among those first used to demonstrate the historical nature of Maya writing, just over thirty years ago. Furthermore, its images are among the most beautiful and informative of all Maya reliefs. Here, the typical Maya motif of a single, standing, elaborately attired ruler is supplemented by scenes of capture, portraits of rulers and their heirs, and representations of women, sometimes shown actively participating in bloodletting and serpent-vision rites.

Secondly, there is a considerable amount of standing architecture in relatively good condition at Yaxchilan, much of which has been carefully cleared and consolidated in recent years. Yaxchilan’s original builders took advantage of the site’s hilly terrain, placing numerous structures on top of natural elevations as well as on the narrow level embankment. As a result, today’s visitor cannot readily grasp either the plan or full extent of the site: because of the hills and dense vegetation, one is constantly climbing up and down to view individual temples or groups, but is also continually thwarted in attempting to view one area of the site from another. While this problem would have been somewhat alleviated in ancient times, when the plaza and hills would have been cleared of trees, Yaxchilan still represents one of the more complex feats of siting and planning of any Maya city.

Carolyn Tate has taken on the difficult task of interpreting the iconography of an entire ruined city, one which she views as a planned work of art. She sets the stage in her introductory chapter by providing a “Maya cultural map” outlining ancient and contemporary Maya beliefs regarding space and time, the ancestors, and social and political organization. Citing the work of anthropologists, historians of religion, and sociologists, Tate concludes that Maya society was tradition-directed or locative, meaning that both social experience and ceremonial cities were meant to recreate the cosmic order.

The author pursues this theme on a number of levels. She concludes, for example, that one of the most important organizing principles for the classic Maya was the sun and its movements. According to Tate, the siting of Yaxchilan was determined not only by the river, but also by the view of the eastern horizon provided by hills. She observes that a cleft between two prominent peaks on the horizon across the river marked the place where the Maya saw the sun rise on the longest day of the year. The cleft may also have been the source for Yaxchilan’s ancient name, whose hieroglyph is usually translated as “Split Sky.” Referring to the deliberate orientation of buildings as “solar-architectural hierarchies,” Tate notes that some structures and their accompanying monuments were oriented toward the summer solstice and others toward the winter solstice. To counter those skeptical of such astronomical arguments, she documents her own observations of solar phenomena. For example, a large three-dimensional stone portrait of the ruler, Bird Jaguar, still seated within the central chamber of an important temple, is only illuminated by the sun’s rays at sunrise once a year, around the time of the summer solstice.

Tate also notes that several reliefs celebrate a ritual that took place near the summer solstice, according to their accompanying texts. All show the Yaxchilan ruler wearing a unique set of costume elements, including a wooden staff, to which is attached a cloth with cutout designs in a quatrefoil pattern. According to the author, the quatrefoil itself is a cosmic sign referring to the four directions and the shape of the opening between the sky and underworld through which the sun must pass on its daily voyage.

Although Yaxchilan was occupied for at least five hundred years, Tate concentrates on the lives of the powerful seventh- and eighth-century rulers, Shield Jaguar and his son Bird Jaguar. Their reigns were marked not only by numerous military campaigns and strategic political alliances, but also by an ambitious building and sculptural program that produced some of the site’s finest monuments. Tate discusses the events of those reigns in the order in which they were recorded rather than in absolute
chronological order to demonstrate how Maya kings attempted by visual means to both define and influence their relationship to their subjects, their environment, and their own past.

This chapter covering the reigns of the two kings is probably the most useful of the book. It provides a readable if still tentative history of the period when Yaxchilan was at its height, no mean feat given the complexity and contradictions of Maya hieroglyphic writing and iconography. Because photographs and drawings of the site’s monuments are grouped in the second half of the book, however, the reader is forced to flip back and forth between the text and the images in order to completely follow Tate’s arguments. And although a number of monuments from other sites are mentioned for comparison in this chapter and elsewhere, none are illustrated in the book, a handicap for the nonspecialist reader in particular.

Given the quantity and quality of Yaxchilan’s sculpture, it has naturally attracted the attention of Mayanists attempting to identify workshops or the hands of master carvers. Fortuitously, hieroglyphic phrases apparently naming painters or scribes and sculptors have recently come to light on painted and carved vessels as well as on sculptured monuments. Although these phrases are limited to a fairly restricted time period and geographical area, Yaxchilan is one of the sites at which they occur, albeit on only two sets of lintels. Tate examines not only the limited textual evidence for individual artists, but also the style of the carved images and texts. While others have proposed the identification of a single master or of two schools working at the site, Tate believes that a larger number of artists were at work, and that sometimes several worked on the same piece. Furthermore, she attributes a number of Bird Jaguar’s monuments to the same artists and workshops who worked for his father. Tate’s rather complex arguments require large photographs and many details to be persuasive. Unfortunately, with one or two exceptions, the images are too small or unclear to be of much use, and the reader is left unconvinced of some of her conclusions.

Tate’s short concluding chapter sets Yaxchilan within what she calls the “Great Tradition,” a set of cultural traditions shared by all Maya that was reinterpreted locally at each Maya site. For example, the two-headed sky-serpent held in the arms of rulers throughout the Maya area but only on early classic stelae at Yaxchilan, on later monuments at the site is transformed into a frame separating the living ruler from his ancestors depicted above him. And while at other Maya centers royal bloodletting was either merely implied visually or mentioned only in texts, Yaxchilan is unique in representing the act graphically, as performed by both males (from the penis) and females (from the tongue). According to Tate, then, within the conservative structures of Maya culture the public art of Yaxchilan represents an imaginative designed response to the need to unite elite and community, ancestors and cosmos.

The second half of the book is an illustrated catalogue of major structures and their accompanying sculpture. In addition to providing basic information such as condition, dimensions, and orientation, Tate also presents arguments regarding the order of construction of buildings, the original location of monuments, and the contents of the inscriptions, including dates. The catalogue should prove to be an invaluable supplement to Ian Graham’s exhaustive Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, from which many of the drawings of Yaxchilan sculpture have been taken, supplemented by those of the author and other scholars. It is unfortunate that Tate’s drawings of several new reliefs uncovered in recent years, which appeared in her dissertation, are not included here. Presumably permission to reproduce them was denied by the National Institute of Anthropology in Mexico, whose archeologists discovered them, but Tate gives no explanation for their absence, although she discusses the works in considerable detail.

Three appendices complete the volume: one listing the location of all monumental sculpture at the site, another giving the chronology of Yaxchilan as based on its hieroglyphic dates, and a third paraphrasing the site’s texts in English. The last appendix, derived from one of Linda Schele’s Notebooks for her annual Maya hieroglyphic workshop, is the one most subject to revision in the face of continually changing interpretations of Maya glyphs. (Those interested in another recent analysis of the Yaxchilan inscriptions might also want to consult epigrapher Peter Mathews’s as yet unpublished 1988 Yale dissertation, “The Sculpture of Yaxchilan.”)

Books on single pre-Columbian sites by art historians—as opposed to archeologists—are still relatively rare, most having been published in the last ten or fifteen years. While some archeologists still denigrate the efforts of scholars who come to work not with a trowel but with only their eyes, the tide has been turning as art historians (and in the case of the Maya, epigraphers) have begun to make important contributions to our understanding of pre-Hispanic society. Ideally, of course, art historical and hieroglyphic analyses should serve to supplement archeological investigations. Although Mexican archeologists have been working at Yaxchilan for twenty years, very little has been published yet about their discoveries. It is hoped that the appearance of Tate’s book will encourage them to share their findings and allow others to judge the validity of her conclusions against the archeological evidence. In the meantime, although specialists will undoubtedly quibble with some of Tate’s conclusions, Yaxchilan: The Design of a Maya Ceremonial City will remain the standard work on the site for archeologists and art historians alike.

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ARCHITECTURE AND POLITICS


Gwendolyn Wright’s new book chronicles the translation of French urban reform ideals and colonization policies into city plans, architectural designs, and ultimately, the urban landscapes of Morocco, Indochina, and Madagascar between 1890 and 1940.