



Yaxchilan: The Design of a Maya Ceremonial City

By Carolyn E. Tate

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As archaeologists peel away the jungle covering that has both obscured and preserved the ancient Maya cities of Mexico and Central America, other scholars have only a limited time to study and understand the sites before the jungle, weather, and human encroachment efface them again, perhaps forever. This urgency underlies *Yaxchilan: The Design of a Maya Ceremonial City*, Carolyn Tate's comprehensive catalog and analysis of all the city's extant buildings and sculptures.

During a year of field work, Tate fully documented the appearance of the site as of 1987. For each sculpture and building, she records its discovery, present location, condition, measurements, and astronomical orientation and reconstructs its Long Counts and Julian dates from Calendar Rounds. Line drawings and photographs provide a visual document of the art and architecture of Yaxchilan.

More than mere documentation, however, the book explores the phenomenon of art within Maya society. Tate establishes a general framework of cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, and knowledge likely to have been shared by eighth-century Maya people. The process of making public art is considered in relation to other modes of aesthetic expression, such as oral tradition and ritual. This kind of analysis is new in Maya studies and offers fresh insight into the function of these magnificent cities and the powerful role public art and architecture play in establishing cultural norms, in education in a semiliterate society, and in developing the personal and community identities of individuals.

Several chapters cover the specifics of art and iconography at Yaxchilan as a basis for examining the creation of the city in the Late Classic period. Individual sculptures are attributed to the hands of single artists and workshops, thus aiding in dating several of the monuments. The significance of headdresses, backracks,

and other costume elements seen on monuments is tied to specific rituals and fashions, and influence from other sites is traced. These analyses lead to a history of the design of the city under the reigns of Shield Jaguar (A.D. 681-741) and Bird Jaguar IV (A.D. 752-772).

In Tate's view, Yaxchilan and other Maya cities were designed as both a theater for ritual activities and a nexus of public art and social structures that were crucial in defining the self within Maya society.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Among the great urban relics of the Classic Maya period, few surpass Yaxchilan in its visual expression of the notion of ritual kingship. Tate's iconographic analysis provides convincing affirmation of this complexly elaborated theme in the site's numerous relief-carved lintels, stelae, and altars. She also convincingly advances the idea that these sculptures are, in turn, part of cosmically aligned ceremonial structures. Tate develops her thesis that the monuments are an intertwined articulation of social, dynastic, and religious functions through ethnographic evidence, archaeoastronomical calculations, hieroglyphic translation, and the meticulous scrutiny of the works' visual elements and principal themes. While the sculpture requires additional consideration in purely formalistic terms, Tate has made a significant beginning in formulating a notion of the Maya aesthetic. A very important addition to advanced subject collections.

-Robert Cahn, *Fashion Inst. of Technology, New York*

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Review

Art historian Carolyn Tate presents, in a well-organized and amply illustrated two-part format, a holistic treatment of a single archaeological site—the great ancient Maya city of Yaxchilan.... This is the most successful attempt to relate [art and architecture] within a Maya site that I have seen. (*Ethnohistory*)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Marvin Murphy:

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Heather Garcia:

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Debra Becnel:

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