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THE HOUSE OF THE BACABS,
COPAN, HONDURAS

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Introduction

David Webster

During the past century of systematic Maya archaeology two great currents of scholarship have developed. The most venerable and traditionally most powerful has its sources in art history and in an archaeological tradition committed to description and classification. Its products include many of the classic publications in Maya studies, including those of Maudslay (1889–1902), Morley (1920, 1935, 1937–38), Spinden (1913), and Thompson (1950, 1962). Beginning modestly in the 1950s and swelling to a powerful tributary in its own right in the 1960s is another current: behavioral anthropology and human ecology. Both have been considerably commingled in their practitioners and in their goals, especially in terms of cultural-historical reconstruction. Both have depended heavily on many of the same resources, particularly ethnohistoric accounts and ethnographic studies of recent Maya and other Mesoamerican populations. The fruitful confluence of these two streams has produced spectacular insights into the nature of ancient Maya society that would have astounded Maudslay or Morley, as well as a whole new generation of stimulating debates. The data and interpretations in this book, which focus on the House of the Bacabs at Copan and its context, are recent products of this interaction.

As specialists engaged in a common enterprise—the retrieval of the Maya past—we must constantly bear in mind the dichotomous nature of our scholastic origins, especially at this juncture of Maya studies when extremes of specialization produce not only sophisticated insights but also, perhaps unavoidably, narrow viewpoints. Part of the

danger lies in the potentially divergent goals of the two scholarly currents. On the one hand, there is the continuing and vigorous traditional study of Maya elite culture, particularly as embodied in monumental architecture, astronomy, art, and inscriptions. Apart from cultural-historical concerns, its primary goal is reconstructing the details of Maya elite culture, particularly its ritual and sociopolitical dimensions, intricacies of specific dynastic sequences, and, on a higher level, recovering what we might call the elite Maya world view. On the other is the emphasis on reconstructing the larger behavioral systems and institutions the Maya devised for themselves and the social, political, economic, and demographic processes associated with their growth and decline. A related danger is that short-term shifts in our enthusiasm for one or another of these sets of broad goals distract scholars from the necessary integrative effort needed to make sense out of either of them.

We are currently witnessing a decided shift back toward the study of Maya elite culture, largely as a result of recent breakthroughs in understanding the content of Classic Maya inscriptions and iconography. This shift is most notably exemplified by the huge success of the recent *Blood of Kings* volume (Schele and Miller 1986) and its associated exhibition. In the introduction to this book, Michael Coe, himself long a student of Maya art, characterizes the study of Maya glyphs and iconography as the “cutting edge” of Maya scholarship. In making this claim, Coe is both correct and incorrect. Such studies certainly constitute a cutting edge if by this he means that they are producing very sophisticated and detailed

insights into the nature of elite Maya society, its ideological correlates, and specific lines of rulers, and that progress is much more rapidly being made in these endeavors than, say, in the reconstruction of Maya settlement systems or subsistence practices. If in addition, as his comment seems to suggest, he means that decoding epigraphy and iconography will provide us with the keys to a broad understanding of Maya behavior and institutions, he is, in my opinion, wrong. Ironically, the rapid breakthroughs in our decipherment of texts, whether texts are conceived of as inscriptions, iconography, or configurations of architectural or other features, show ever more clearly that the Maya elite were interested in conveying a limited and specialized dimension of information, now fragmented by the vagaries of preservation and recovery.

Certainly, as Miller and Schele and their colleagues have abundantly documented, our capacity to decode the elite Maya world view is impressive. So too are the implications derived from art and iconography concerning systemic aspects of elite behavior and structure, especially relating to politics and the imagery of power. But even here, unless the totally unexpected crops up, our findings will be limited. We will be able to reconstruct dynastic sequences and processes of elite interaction such as intermarriage, visitations, and warfare. But apparently no scribes or artists set down information that will inform us about the size of the territory or population ruled by a Maya king, his precise relationships with his subjects, the amounts and variety of goods obtained from them that fill his storehouses and the modes of their collection, or mechanisms of interregional economic exchange (even on the elite level). Almost entirely lacking are data on the nature of family and household structure, the range of staple crops and dominant systems of cultivation, or any other of the myriad, commonplace things that we need to know to provide a comprehensive picture of the ancient Maya and about which, not coincidentally, we argue endlessly. Eventually we may well have king lists for the Maya Lowlands comparable to those from ancient Sumer or Predynastic and Old Kingdom Egypt. Indeed,

such Maya accounts may be even more reliable than their Old World counterparts because they are usually drawn from primary texts rather than much later (often error-filled and dubious) transcriptions, which is generally the case in Mesopotamia and Egypt. But we will seemingly never have anything like the Sumerian archive accounts of economic transactions or the detailed tomb paintings of Egypt that record vivid images not only of the elite but of the mundane world as well.

What we seem to be getting is the elite perspective pure and simple, and an incomplete perspective at best, even on this level. To be sure, we may make assumptions about other aspects of Maya society based on the public "face" that rulers and elites presented, or alternatively try to trace the evolution of elite symbols and behavior out of more fundamental aspects of Maya life (and here we may certainly learn much about Maya language), but there is a limit to how far these assumptions can proceed without independent confirmation. In this regard it would be well if, as Mayanists, we remember how pathetically limited are our insights derived from texts for Early Dynastic Sumer or Old Kingdom Egypt and the degree to which large-scale archaeology is necessary to supplement historical documents to reconstruct these prehistoric cultures.

In thus characterizing the results to date of the traditional scheme of scholarship, my intention is in no way to demean it, but simply to point out its limitations and the degree to which it must be integrated with additional data derived from the more recent anthropological/behavioral/processual research approach in order to produce a meaningful reconstruction of general patterns of Maya culture. William T. Sanders, whose work is associated with the latter research orientation (as exemplified in Chapter 5), has remarked to me that the single paper in Maya archaeology he would most like to have written is Tatiana Proskouriakoff's (1960) breakthrough discussion of the implications of the Piedras Negras inscriptions. This does not betray Sanders as a closet epigrapher/iconographer. Apart from his admiration of the methodological ingenuity Proskouriakoff exhibited, his en-

thusiasm derives from the wider implications of her study, which broke the mold of the old "priest/intellectual/theocrat" conception of Maya kingship (especially as propounded by J. E. S. Thompson) and implied that the Maya elite conducted themselves very much like rulers in other early complex societies. Once the mystique of the Maya as somehow unique in organizational terms had thus been undermined, the efficacy of a comparative, behavioral, anthropological approach was strengthened, and our general understanding was considerably advanced.

If the cutting edge of epigraphic and iconographic studies slices quickly and accurately but not deeply, as I have maintained, then the standard methods of the behavioral/ecological/processual approach, such as surface survey, test-pitting, and large-scale horizontal excavations, function more like blunt instruments. They are very powerful, but they are also very slow, even tedious, and comparatively costly. Certainly they are seldom as immediately rewarding—or as dramatic—as epigraphic/iconographic breakthroughs. They provide general structural insights but seldom much fine-grained detail, and their content is anonymous, lacking the glamorous glimpses of once-living individual ancient actors, with personal names and life histories, that the texts yield. Inevitably, these approaches are complementary, all the more so because the same research efforts often produce the raw stuff informing both of them. In a very real sense, this book represents a plea to Maya scholars of all kinds to remember that we must pull in tandem if we are to make sense out of the Maya past.

The research conducted at Copan over the past century exemplifies the traditions of Maya scholarship discussed above. The earliest phases of this research, dominated by Maudslay and Morley, the Peabody Museum and the Carnegie Institution, focused on the recording and analysis of inscriptions and sculpture and the excavation and restoration of monumental architecture at the Main Group at Copan (Fig. 1). A more recent phase of research was initiated in 1975, fittingly under the direction of Gordon Willey, whose career has been conspicuous for its integration of

both currents of Maya studies. Willey's project began the systematic mapping and excavation of sites outside the Main Group at Copan in order to understand the larger settlement system, an effort continued by Claude Baudez after he assumed directorship of the project in 1977. Both also continued work in the Main Group, which yielded not only new inscriptions and sculpture but also a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of such materials recovered much earlier.

In 1980, at the invitation of the Honduran Government, William T. Sanders and I began Phase II of the Copan Archaeological Project, and we have codirected the project since then. The Phase II research had as its dominant goal the extensive excavation of a large sample of archaeological complexes—presumably the remains of ancient households—outside the Main Group. Because these exhibited great variation in size and complexity, we felt, as had Willey before us, that extensive excavation of a wide range of them would help to solve important issues concerning functions of Maya architectural complexes and the sociopolitical structure of Classic Maya society. Our work included, in good Copan tradition, the partial excavation of what we think is an elite young mens' dormitory in the Main Group. In addition, we conducted an extensive rural surface survey and test-pitting program, initiated a series of studies of the natural environment and ethnographic patterns (particularly land use), and also an ambitious program of obsidian hydration dating to provide much-needed chronological controls. This research, along with the accompanying extensive restoration, was carried out with the permission and financial support of the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia (IHAIH). Additional generous funding came from the National Science Foundation and the Wenner-Gren Foundation.

Most of our major excavations focused on the Las Sepulturas urban enclave, newly mapped by Willey and his associates, lying just to the north and east of the Main Group. This was clearly an area of probable elite residence, and Group 9N-8, the largest architectural complex at Las Sepulturas, was virtually completely excavated during 1980–

84. One of our principal discoveries was the elite structure 9N-82 center, which we now call the House of the Bacabs for reasons that will become clear later. The House of the Bacabs dominates Group 9N-8 and was the largest and most heavily embellished building excavated outside the Copan Main Group. It yielded an impressive corpus of sculpture as well as a lengthy inscription. The intent of this volume is to evaluate the significance of the House of the Bacabs by integrating the perspectives of the epigraphic/iconographic approach and the behavioral/anthropological one.

The following chapters present a synthesis of information and interpretation concerning the House of the Bacabs, which can be read on several levels: as description of an elite structure and its wider context, as an exercise in architectural excavation and restoration, as an example of the intricacies of iconographic and epigraphic reconstruction and interpretation, and finally, as an attempt to develop models for understanding important aspects of Classic Maya social and political life. Most of the discussion relates to the Late Classic occupation at Copan between about A.D. 700 and 900 when the polity reached its mature form, but other periods are also discussed; for convenience the standard Copan chronological sequence is presented in Figure 2.

All of the authors have been intimately involved with the recent Copan research. After directing the project from 1977 to 1980, Claude F. Baudez continued his studies of Copan's rich corpus of iconography. Berthold Riese has long been connected with various stages of the project as epigrapher. William L. Fash, Jr. began his Copan

work during Willey's regime and has continued it ever since, most recently with his own project focusing on the Temple of the Hieroglyphic Stairway. Finally, Sanders and I have directed Phase II since its inception. We gratefully acknowledge the support and encouragement of the IHAH, the National Science Foundation, Wenner-Gren, and all of the North American and Honduran personnel who made our work possible and productive.

Notes on Nomenclature

Throughout this volume we have standardized the spellings of two important terms. The name of Copan's last great king, who ruled from A.D. 762 to ca. 800, has been variously rendered in the literature as Yax Pac, Madrugada, New-Sun-at-Horizon, and Rising Sun. For the sake of clarity and consistency we use Rising Sun.

Iconographic and epigraphic information from Structure 9N-82 center, as we shall see, has as a basic theme a complex of minor Maya deities. Baudez and Riese prefer to call these deities Bacabs, while Fash would rather refer to them as Pauah Tuns. Sanders and I, unschooled in the vagaries of Maya epigraphic and iconographic debates, have no strong opinions on the matter. As editor I have bowed to the majority opinion, and we use the term Bacab throughout, including in the title. Those who prefer the term Pauah Tun may substitute it if they wish, bearing in mind Tozzer's (1941: 136) comment on the issue: "It is impossible to place the Bacabs, the Chacs, the Pauahs and the Uayeyabs, each in a distinct and special category."

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