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Reviews

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The goal of the editors of *Ancient Maya Commoners* is to ‘bring attention to the rich diversity that characterised social non-elites in Maya society’ (p. ix). The volume succeeds because the energy of the contributors has not been spent on considering why prior assumptions about Maya commoners are wrong, but on exactly how details of settlement patterns, settlement organisation, architecture, cultivation, building function, spatial mobility and economic constructs can enhance our knowledge of the ways in which common-status individuals and family groups participated in Maya life.

The final chapter by Marcus also functions effectively as an introduction. She summarises prior assumptions about ‘commoners’ as well as available information concerning where commoners lived, what we know about non-elite residences, what problems exist archaeologically in identifying residences and living space, what units of analysis can be used in the study of commoners, and what epigraphy has to offer. In recognising as problematic the broad set that subsumes Maya commoners – essentially all those not of noble birth (p. 277) – she nonetheless expresses reservations about a term that is coming to be used as a subset – the middle class – because it is an economic bracket which can subsume some nobles and some commoners. It is true that ‘middle class’ obscures the very social issues that validate the division between elites and non-elites, but deciding what terms we should use is still complicated by the fact that economic fluidity can be the stimulus behind changes in the elite/non-elite ratio.

Lohse and Valdez, the volume editors, set out to describe scholarly focus on elites and the partial picture of Maya society this produces; their concern is to frame a larger picture by defining the ways in which non-elites can be illuminated. Vogt provides a description of daily highland Maya life and ritual drawn from his ethnographic research of the 1950s. Powis, who analysed the Preclassic ceramic assemblages from the site of Lamanai in northern Belize, concludes that there is considerable variability in ceramic content within commoner and elite households, and also that the differences in ceramic types and forms identified in elite and commoner contexts and in domestic and ritual contexts are not significant. Arroyo focuses on the Pacific Coast, which is especially interesting because of its early development. This area certainly has much to contribute to our understanding of how social divisions developed in the first place.

Dunning’s contribution explores the idea that houses and households were tied to landholdings. Lohse poses the important and neglected question of how different levels of social organisation might have acted simultaneously as agricultural agents. The interpretation of settlement distribution variation as a function of decision-making processes concerning land use is well worth further exploration. Yaeger and Robin studied two small-scale communities within the Xunantunich polity in Belize.

Many aspects of life were examined such as local resources, chronology, architecture, domestic economy, ritual, and socio-political affiliations. Although commonalities existed, each community had clearly developed its own identity.

Inomata's focus on whether non-elites had the option of spatial mobility – that is, the option to move from one place to another – is a critical issue, and one not often envisioned. Masson and La Peraza make the proposition that in the Postclassic period social mobility based on economic power was an option that did not exist in Classic times. Gonlin emphasises how important it is to determine (as much as possible) the function of the structures being investigated as well as the function and use of areas such as courtyards, covered spaces, patios, and other activity areas.

All of the studies are highly effective in pointing out the ways in which future archaeological excavations can be conceptually and practically expanded to include information left us by non-elite Maya. Vogt's descriptions of Zinacantan life confirm the importance and relevance of continued ethnographic research. Powis's results suggest that we need to re-evaluate the ways in which we expect material culture to reflect social divisions. Arroyo distinguished a trend from early ellipse or apsidal house shapes to rectangular shapes through time, and it remains important to look to the Pacific Coast for details concerning the material expression and lifeways of the earliest Maya communities. Dunning's concept of an urban farmstead requires a new integrated thinking that seems well suited to discovering more information about commoners. Yaeger and Robin's approaches provide detailed and tangible guides for other investigators in locating daily practices and interactions in small-scale communities and situating these practices within the larger social and political institutions to which they belong. Inomata makes clear that the option of being able to move about the landscape must be a focus of greater concern among Mayanists. The incorporation of spatial mobility as part of lifestyle and social organisation must certainly have affected other areas of life; spatial mobility is therefore important in modelling what we can expect of Maya commoner activity, and indeed Maya activity in general. Masson and La Peraza's discussion of Postclassic society and its economic, occupational, and social complexity concludes by emphasising that social mobility warrants further study at more sites across the lowlands. Gonlin leaves us with a range of innovative ways – access analysis, considering cultural conventions and boundaries, hearths, energetics – to undertake the complicated and often frustrating task of determining the function of Maya structures. And Marcus's contribution closes by emphasising that although our archaeological units of analysis may be material expression, it is people whom we should have in mind. But even if we keep people in mind, will this make a difference? I think that the volume is helpful in this regard. For example, one of a number of important implications in Lohse's chapter is the case made for small-scale examination of environmental variability and its relationship to settlement patterning. Under these circumstances, the role of commoners as agents whose decisions matter looms large, whereas in the past commoners remained hidden in the shadows cast by monumental architecture and assumptions about elites.

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