



# *Art Book Review*

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# Panorama of an Ancient Culture

by Robert K.G. Temple

*The World of the Ancient Maya* by John S. Henderson, 271 pp., 10 colour plates, 11 maps, 122 monochrome photos, (Orbis, £15.00) ISBN 0 85613 402 3.

This magnificent survey of the ancient Maya world is the first serious rival to Professor Michael Coe's *The Maya*, which after 16 years is teetering on the edge of obsolescence. The Maya are so little known outside the narrow archaeological circles of Mesoamericanists that popular surveys of scholarly calibre are of great benefit to the public, who may be attracted by a culture which produced such impressive art, architecture, and eerie ruined cities covered in tropical vines in the heart of impenetrable jungles.

Henderson offers a superb panoramic view of the entire history and extent of Maya culture, from its origins in the Olmec and Izapan cultures up to and beyond the Spanish Conquest. He represents the 'new school' of scholars who take the 'dynamic view' of things. This differs from the traditionalist approach which tends to be rather static, standing back and commenting in awe about site after site like a kind of technical Baedeker. Henderson's approach is to view Maya history as the lively and continual interaction of regional power centres which pulsate, throb, advance, and withdraw like so many octopi wrestling with each other over the terrain of Mexico and Guatemala. This is refreshing and far more convincing than the old approach for above all it is 'alive'. It is like the contrast between Madame Tussaud's wax effigies and a police lineup: the effigies may be grand, but they are still wax; the police lineup may be more earthy, but at least the people are real.

Our understanding of Maya history over the past two or three decades has undergone this kind of change. Before, there was far more mystery: the great ruined cities were assumed to be relics of sinister theocracies where effete priests

held in thrall the secular population, politics being almost an inconceivable intrusion. But we now know that the Classic Maya cities were centres of secular and temporal power, where religion was more an adjunct to the material interests of ambitious rulers. The stelae, sometimes far higher than a man, feature not the giant figures of gods, but the giant figures of rulers with the occasional god standing beside the ruler as a sponsor or possibly even an ancestor.

Henderson goes a bit too far in this new secular approach, however, for religion was still a powerful and dominating force in the lives of the ancient Maya, and Henderson almost ignores it to the point of perversity. He gives no summary of the Maya gods or pantheon, for instance, as Coe helpfully did. His attempts to comment on Maya 'thought' are weak and pathetic except when he is talking about technicalities like the calendar systems. He is as bad at discussing religion and philosophy as a motor mechanic, and seems just about as interested.

This is not just a peripheral fault, but one that lies at the very core of Henderson's book. For this reason, one cannot recommend it as the best of its kind or praise it unreservedly. For, although religion was ancillary rather than at the heart of Classic Maya cities, this was not apparently the case earlier on. The 'floreescence' (a word beloved of archaeologists) of Classic Maya culture was in a profound sense a decadent and degenerate flowering: there may have been incredible buildings, temples, plazas, and towers built which rival those of nearly anywhere in the world, but the religion, metaphysics, proto-science, and writing were leftovers from earlier eras and other localities when these things seem to have

been the product of 'sacred science' and genuine theocracy. Henderson seems to have no powers to comprehend such things. He continually bewails the mystery of what united the widespread and separate regional centres of the Maya: obviously, since it was not temporal power, it must have been 'culture-power', the motor of which was clearly religion. What was the invisible thread of Maya culture? It is only invisible to Henderson because he is blind to it: shared and highly-charged religious beliefs. Henderson has absolutely no ability to empathize or 'put himself into the mind of an ancient Maya'; his lack of imagination, and his extreme aridity of intellect are positively breathtaking. For all the boldness and liveliness of his dynamic view of temporal history, his view of cultural history is as dry as the dust of Yucatan.

One feature of Henderson's book is particularly splendid: the maps. This reviewer has never seen an archaeological book better provided with maps, which appear to have been prepared in collaboration with the author. Henderson also seems to have taken all but half a dozen or so of the photos, which match the text to a precision which is also unparalleled. It would be hard to achieve a better match between illustrations and text for such a book, and this book is an absolute triumph of book production. A few sites are strangely absent, and one wonders whether Henderson ran out of film at Cobá, for instance. But those can only be minor quibbles in the face of such stunning excellence.

With the exception of the one central objection already mentioned, this book is so superb that it could be taken as a model of its kind. Henderson is to be congratulated for his achievement which does full justice to the scope and grandeur of the civilization which he so majestically describes.

# Weak Opening Line

by Robert K.G. Temple

*Likenesses in Line: an anthology of Tudor and Stuart engraved portraits* by Harold Barkley, 87 pp., 44 plates b & w (Her Majesty's Stationery Office for the Victoria and Albert Museum, £4.95), ISBN 0 11 290352 5.

The sub-title of this booklet is highly misleading, since only one subject who was alive after 1636 is included, and 52 years of the Stuart era are thus unrepresented. The author seems to suffer from an obsessive concern with the history of Roman Catholicism, which often appeals to be more important to him than his supposed subject, the history of England. He writes an appalling apology of 'Bloody' Mary Tudor, eccentrically attributes the estrangement between James I and his queen to Anne's supposed 'Catholicism' (whereas the real reason is well known to have been James's notorious homosexuality and lack of interest in female company), and insists on highlighting within his slim and limited

collection two startlingly obscure 'Jesuit missionaries' who spent much or most of their lives in Italy and could not reasonably be expected to interest readers outside of the Vatican. Parts of the booklet (financed by the taxpayers) lapse into what could be construed as Catholic propaganda.

The choice of personalities is not particularly inspired even without the Jesuits, and the engraved portraits are not only poorly reproduced (the plates give the impression of a printer continually running out of ink) but are presented with no imagination whatsoever. There was no need for full reproduction of all the borders when interesting faces are concealed in the midst of reduced-size mazes of ornate decor like single grapes

set in fruit bowls stuffed with oranges. Few of the portraits are as compelling as the paintings from which they may be taken, though for some, like Lord Darnley and Prince Henry, the originals are lost and the engravings are therefore of great value.

When an interesting face or pose does appear in this booklet (like Bishop Lancelot Andrewes) it would have been more effective if it had been enlarged, sacrificing the reproduction of the lengthy poem beneath. The face of Thomas Cavendish is relegated to a mere seventh of the height of a page, one third of which is wasted blank space. What possible reason is there for reproducing the lengthy text beneath Sir Francis Drake when it is entirely in Latin and French? One half page beneath the Gunpowder Plot Conspirators is filled with turgid Latin, French, and German in writing too tiny to read anyway. It is difficult to praise the fine points of this booklet when distracted by so many infuriating and needless faults. In sum then, a good idea, but badly done.