

Book Review:

*The Real Business of Ancient Maya Economies:
From Farmers' Fields to Rulers' Realms.*

Edited by MARILYN A. MASSON, DAVID A. FREIDEL, and ARTHUR A.
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by Jillian M. Jordan
University of New Mexico
Jjorda01@unm.edu

The Real Business of Ancient Maya Economies: From Farmers' Fields to Rulers' Realms brings together case studies from across the Maya world to inform on the “nuts and bolts” of ancient Maya economy. As Freidel and Masson point out in the introduction and conclusion, respectively, and Yoffee discusses in his comparison of “Maya-land” and Mesopotamia, Maya studies have come a long way from simplistic views of the economy that dominated the literature for decades. The twenty-four intervening chapters are divided into five parts: (1) theoretical approaches; (2) household and community economies and resources; (3) agriculture, climate, and land; (4) political elites, wealthy persons, and economic administration; and (5) economic exchange spheres: routes, facilities, and symbolic contexts. This subdivision of the volume provides thematic organization but does not mean the authors consider these aspects of Maya economies as separate and distinct from one another. Rather, the individual chapters discuss the interconnectedness of Maya economies and the many ways that items can get from producers to consumers.

The three opening theory chapters by Freidel, King, and Demarest et al. reference each of the chapters and set the stage for the case studies that follow. The length of this volume, which includes an exceptional appendix of indigenous plant foods compiled by Fedick, is necessary to document and explore variability but precludes a summary of each chapter in my review. I limit this review to some highlights that may pique the interest of readers with diverse interests.

The strongest chapters are those that address production in addition to distribution and consumption. Ringle et al. consider evidence for stone quarrying and lime production used in the construction of masonry residences in the Puuc Hills. They argue that masonry construction, as a kind of inalienable wealth, was part of the palace patronage system and the force behind economic, political, demographic expansion in the region. Woodfill's chapter on the production of salt at Salinas de los Nueve Cerros in Guatemala details salt production and derivative industries (e.g. salted fish, leather). The site was constructed to facilitate the production and exchange of salt on a massive scale under elite control while derivative industries showed no elite involvement. The volume includes chapters on interesting concepts not often included in discussions of the ancient Maya economy. Sheets considers the service economy and household obligations at Cerén. Golden

et al. discuss the importance of trust built through interactions with people beyond individual households, and multiple chapters examine labor as a commodity (Batún et al.; Tokovinine; Sheets). There are also many chapters on items that do not preserve in the tropics, but no doubt played an important role in ancient Maya economies: edible plants (Fedick; Wyatt), copal (Sheets), cotton and textiles (Reents-Budet and Bishop), and a tally system using wooden sticks (Tokovinine). Reents-Budet and Bishop use ceramic paste composition (Instrumental Neutron Activation Analysis) and archaeological data to understand exchange networks and acquisition tactics by Maya elites. These proxy measures identified three interaction networks each linking a major population center with a cotton-producing zone. Above all, the case studies use diverse datasets “to address a range of questions, drawing on many categories of material culture and their contextual and distributional analysis, taking into consideration variable political and social strategies and constraints” (Masson, p. 464).

A weakness of this volume is how few of its studies focused on the production and distribution of everyday household items. It is difficult to evaluate the nature and scale of economic systems if we do not understand how, where, and by whom these utilitarian items were produced. The geologic homogeneity of the region undoubtedly complicates provenance studies, but the nuts and bolts approach promoted in this volume provides vital information. Two chapters stand out as examples for how researchers can approach the production and distribution of utilitarian goods. Cap provides empirical evidence of the presence of a marketplace at Buena Vista del Cayo in the Belize River Valley. She includes a list of marketplace activities and the archaeological expectations for each so that researchers can identify markets at other sites. Cap concludes that limestone bifaces, obsidian blades, organics, and possibly ceramics were exchanged at the Buena Vista marketplace. Horowitz et al.’s chapter on the production of distribution of chert artifacts in the Belize Valley and at La Corona, Guatemala, point out that value is not intrinsic, and that production/exchange of everyday items varies by location.

This volume presents case studies on a range of locations, time periods, and datasets to explore the complexity of Maya economic systems and drives home the point that there are multiple ways for items to get from producers to consumers. This broad view of current research in the Maya region highlights the complex, diverse, and integrated economies which include market exchange in addition to other distributive mechanisms. Masson’s conclusion chapter skillfully incorporates each of the case studies to summarize the current state of economic anthropology within the field of Maya archaeology and the lingering questions that remain to be answered. Meanwhile, the introduction and conclusion chapters provide historical and theoretical context for readers unfamiliar with the research trajectory on Maya economies.

The edited volume is a must read for Maya scholars and students. Readers with different research goals and analytical specialties will find something in this volume relevant to their research. Interested avocational readers will also enjoy this book because the “nuts and bolts” approach provides a how-to guide for using archaeological datasets to answer diverse research questions. As Eppich (p.171) states, “we cannot return to a simplistic view of the Classic Maya economy”. I look forward to seeing how Mayanists incorporate the data and perspectives from *The Real Business of Ancient Economies* into their own work and how they employ different theoretical perspectives and analytical techniques to further understand ancient Maya economies.