

Book Review:

Ancient Maya Politics: A Political Anthropology of the Classic Period 150-900 CE.

SIMON MARTIN. 2020.

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Dr. Simon Martin's much anticipated new book, *Ancient Maya Politics: A Political Anthropology of the Classic Period 150-900 CE*, is a must-read for all scholars interested in ancient Maya politics. This massive tome masterfully assembles 394 large pages of dense text subdivided into 15 chapters packed with excellent black and white illustrations (including several new ones by its author). This book contrasts with Martin's previous co-authored offerings: it is primarily aimed at theory and epigraphy-savvy graduate students and scholars. This is not a coffee table book! This Cambridge University Press product is also much pricier than his co-authored Thames and Hudson (2004, 2008) offerings. But this is for a good reason; this is the most sophisticated epigraphically-driven study of ancient politics I have encountered. Through its theoretical inflexions and rich empirical datasets, this book elevates the field of Maya epigraphy to a new level: the plane of historical archaeopolitics. The wealth of information and intellectual prowess contained in this book make its price tag an afterthought.

Among the fascinating questions asked in this book, one stands out (p.4): "How could a system of multiple polities persist essentially unchanged for hundreds of years, and why were none among them willing or able to create larger and more unified formations?" This complex question, anchored in well-defined political science foundations, brings the author to explore ancient Maya notions through the emic lenses of their own writing, glossed as "patrimonial rhetoric". Thus, Martin defines the Classic Maya political world as a "multi-polity ecology" best modeled as a "society of kings" kept in "dynamic equilibrium" through a system of "balance of power" ruled by a "moral order". In addition to his strong pan-Maya treatises, Martin relies on astutely selected case studies placed at the end of chapters which help synthesize and simplify their many concepts.

One of Martin's most elementary premises is to approach the Classic Maya world "less as a series of separate polities than as a unified political culture" (p.303). Thus, he focuses on the glue unifying all Maya polities and largely dodges the question of internal political dynamics. In this, he diverges from much of the recent archaeological literature, which explores how individual polities emerged, developed, and what political mechanisms maintained their internal cohesion (e.g., Foias 2013; Lecount and Yaeger 2010). I believe Martin's notion of a homogeneous Classic Maya political culture is well-articulated and certainly fruitful. Yet, I also perceive a certain incongruity between the quest to understand "the Classic Maya polity" and the well attested multi-faceted and multi-lingual natures of ancient Maya geopolitical landscapes.

Amongst the key topics thoroughly investigated by Martin, his treatises of hegemony, matrimony, nobility, and collapse stand out. He provides insightful and up-to-date summaries – along with a few controversial ideas – of the major contingencies of ancient Maya history, including the mythohistorical foundations of dynasties, the Teotihuacan entrada, and the Terminal Classic Chontal incursions. Throughout the book, much ink is devoted to the geopolitical ramifications of the Mutul-Kaanul hegemonic warfare, the single most influential force of the Classic Period. Martin also makes great use of statistical data, producing useful graphs to support his interpretations of Classic Maya warfare and collapse (including an anticipated new version of his famed *Tube Map*). The book's case studies and datasets are largely focused on the Southern and Western Lowlands, while the Northern Lowlands and Highlands are not addressed comprehensively. I realize that further investigating these regions would have brought this volume to outrageous proportions, yet I do look forward to a fuller regional integration within the ancient Maya geopolitical discourse.

In his book, Simon Martin aspires to put to rest the historiographic divide between archaeologists and epigraphers, and I do believe it will become a central reference for all archaeologists seeking to understand ancient Maya governments. His robust theoretical discussions are anchored in sociology, anthropology, and political sciences, but he under-utilizes some recent key theoretical contributions, such as Graeber and Sahlin's *On Kings* (2017), Shannon Lee Dawdy's *Anti-History* (2016), and Adam T. Smith's work on landscapes (2003) and political machines (2015). Martin is thorough in crediting all his colleagues for their epigraphic contributions, but as is the norm in the field, sometimes glosses over the international archaeological staff responsible for unearthing hieroglyphic texts and the corollary, key topic of the context of texts.

An important point made by Martin is that the ancient Maya were not exceptional and are eminently comparable, as reflected by his excellent comparative work featuring ancient Mesoamerica, Greece, India, China, Ireland, Fiji, and Egypt. Yet, while comparisons between the Maya and other world areas are illuminating, little effort is made to compare the Classic and Postclassic/Modern Maya worlds, which is surprising. Indeed, Maya ethnohistory and ethnographies are rarely mentioned in the book.

Ancient Maya Politics has a few shortcomings, most of which are likely related to limitations in space – the book is, after all, already gargantuan. Nonetheless, this book is a model of intellectual rigor and the new golden standard in Maya archaeopolitics. Simon Martin successfully married paradigm-shifting theoretical treatises to encyclopedia-worthy explanations of rich epigraphic datasets, the product of which will no doubt hegemonize the field of Classic Maya studies for at least one *k'atun*.

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