

MESOAMERICAN
RELIGIONS AND
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ESSAYS IN PRE-COLUMBIAN
CIVILIZATIONS

Aleksandar Bošković

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Cover: Tikal, Structure 5D-43, probably built before 700 CE, with the Temple of the Jaguar (Temple I) in the background. The structure was built along the East Plaza Ballcourt, and it is one of the finest examples of the “talud-tablero” style, which was typical of Teotihuacan in Central Mexico, and probably exported to Tikal with the new ruling family in the late 4th century CE.

Back cover: Ceramic vessel with the duck-shaped lid. Petexbatún, Guatemala, around 700 CE.

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Foreword

Modernity involves increasing specialization and the extraction of knowledge from its context; Bruno Latour argues that we have never been modern, even if academic disciplines tend in that direction. For the hard sciences, hyper-specialization has produced impressive advances. For the social sciences and interpretative fields, it often results in models and conventions that become ever more removed from the reality they seek to describe.

Like hemlines and haircuts, theoretical approaches ebb and flow in cycles. Is it structure that produces subjectivity or is it human agency that builds structures? Does history produce the present or is our view of history but a rearward projection of current concerns? The human sciences, despite the complexity of the subject matter, keep coming back to a very few basic questions.

In this collection of insightful essays, Aleksandar Bošković grapples with the big questions of the human condition as grounded in the particular circumstances and histories of Mesoamerican cultures. He rejects the sterility of abstract theory while calling on its insights, artfully grappling with existential issues in the context of native American linguistics and religious particulars. Bošković builds on a rich tradition in Mesoamerican studies of polymaths weaving together methods, contexts, and histories in narrative accounts unbound by narrow disciplinary conventions.

In fact, Bošković takes his epistemological inspiration from the ancient Maya themselves, who were decidedly not modern, at least to the extent that Latourian purification defines modernity. A hallmark of Classic Maya cosmologies is their integration: science and religion, governance and economy, astronomy and architecture—all were part and parcel of one system. And imbalance in one area could produce ill results in another. Crop growth was tied to religious ritual, which was linked to astronomy, and so on. The universe was seen as intensely and intimately interconnected, in a way that we in contemporary academia might call interdisciplinary or multidimensional. At the same time, as Bošković makes clear, this was not a monolithic system; for example, the (singular) pantheon of gods we attribute to the Maya was actually composed of locally variable and heterogeneous sets of deities.

In this collection Bošković combines review and critique with original contributions. The style is effective—we get an overview of major works in the field since the 1980s as well as a deep dive into a number of areas. Focusing on pre-Columbian civilizations, Bošković's approach is more than nominally archaeological, but this is archaeology in context: not just artifacts, but also the art and iconography, the extant oral traditions and ethno-historical literature. He includes the often overlooked tradition in Serbo-Croatian and Slovenian – and the surprising role Vinko Paletin played in the conquest of Yucatan (and his unfortunate defense of war against the Indians). There is also an enlightening exegesis of the *Codex Borbonicus*.

The result is a holistic approach to understanding pre-Columbian civilization. I first met Aleksandar Bošković in New Orleans in the early 1990s when we were both attending Tulane for graduate school in anthropology. Professor Munro Edmunson led our obligatory graduate seminar on the history of anthropological theory, and he was everything I imagined a brilliant professor to be—erudite, of course, and a quick wit, he commanded an amazing expanse of material, from philosophy to psychology to astronomy and anthropology. He inevitably quoted in the original, whatever that may have been for a particular topic, and most likely had an opinion about the etymology of a difficult word. Bošković once gave him a copy of a book he had written in Serbo-Croatian, and Ed (as we all called him) glanced through it and pointed to a typo.

Bošković carries on the grand tradition of Munro Edmunson and such exceptional scholars not content to stay inside narrow disciplinary boxes or to reproduce conventional wisdom. Rather Bošković is driven to understand the Maya and the Olmecs and the other Mesoamerican civilizations on their own terms and in their own context. The result is this wonderful collection of essays that students of Mesoamerican studies will value for years to come.

Edward F Fischer (Vanderbilt University)
30 December 2016

Acknowledgements

My journey into Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica was very much influenced by “chance and serendipity” – to use the expression I heard from my colleague from Sweden, Professor Ulf Hannerz, some years ago at Durham. Over the years, I was very fortunate to have the support of some brilliant people and formidable scholars. They shared their insights and knowledge, provided important suggestions, invited me to lectures and meetings (like Baudez did at Sorbonne, whenever I was in Paris), and were always ready to comment on my papers. In retrospect, meeting some of them almost looks accidental, but they have certainly left their mark, and I am humbled to have had the opportunity to meet them, to learn from them, and to discuss aspects of interpretation (especially when it comes to methodology) with them. My interest in first Maya, and later Mesoamerican studies, was sparked by the writings of the late Mr Tibor Székely (1912-1988), citizen of the world in a true meaning of this word, and one of the world’s leading Esperanto scholars. I was fortunate to meet him at his home in Subotica, in the Vojvodina province, in 1987, and I was also quite lucky that he was able to contribute a number of entries in the *Dictionary of Non-Classical Mythology*, a project that I co-edited, and for which I wrote over 150 entries (Bošković, Vukomanović and Jovanović 2015).

The interest in ancient Maya brought me to Tulane University in 1990. I was supervised by Professor Munro S. Edmonson (1924-2002), a man of fascinating erudition and vast knowledge, who was also an amazing scholar, and a great believer in humanity (“human nature”). Edmonson was instrumental in my “discovery” of important ethnohistorical sources related to the ancient Maya. I was also very fortunate to be introduced into the ancient Mexican art (and interpretation of Mexican manuscript paintings in particular) by another great scholar, Professor Mary Elizabeth Smith (1932-2004). While at Tulane, my research in Guatemala was supported by the Matilda Geddings Gray Fellowship, as well as by the help by the Instituto de Antropología e Historia de Guatemala (IDAEH). Over the years, I also benefited from the critical conversations and support by Professor Richard E. W. Adams (1931-2015) from the University of Texas at San Antonio, and Dr. Claude-François Baudez (1932-2013) from the CNRS in Paris. Another colleague from Paris, Dr. Bertrand Masquelier (also from CNRS) helped me to get the access to the original manuscript of the *Codex Borbonicus*, at the *Bibliothèque de l’Assemblée Nationale*, in 1992.

In Belgrade, I owe immense gratitude to my friend Ms Miroslava Malešević from the Ethnographic Institute of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, who introduced me to Evon Z. Vogt (1918-2004) during his 1989 visit. Professor Vogt was also very helpful for the early stages of my research – as well as in providing contextual information on the reception of my paper on Maya myths. As one of the first academic texts that I wrote was published in the *Bulletin of the Ethnographic Institute of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts* (actually a commentary on the chapter from Edmonson’s edition of the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* – Bošković 1988b; Edmonson 1986), I also acknowledge the support of the Secretary of the Academy and one of the most prominent world Neolithic

archaeologists, Dragoslav Srejšović (1931-1996). Professor Srejšović was passionate about symbolism and religion in archaeological context, and he saw the value of publishing something on a topic both geographically and culturally distant from Serbia as very important for the local scientific community.

My friend William H. Fisher from the College of William & Mary helped me with some language issues (especially with the parts of the text originally written in Serbo-Croatian), but also provided a crucial critical reading of the whole manuscript. Dr. Sanja Brekalo Pelin sent me a book from Madrid, Mr Slavoljub Bajčetić helped with several illustrations used in this book, and another friend from Belgrade, Mr Nemanja Milićević, was most helpful in setting the text together. Last but not least, the publisher of this book, Archaeopress, proved to be very supportive, and I especially acknowledge the timely and precise communication and guidance I received from Dr. David Davison.

There is something to be said about the phrase “standing on the shoulders of Giants” (as famously put by Bernard Sylvester of Chartres around 12th century CE) – many times I felt that I could arrive at some important insights only because some great people have laid the foundations for it in the past, and I was fortunate enough to meet them and discuss with them. I could also conclude with a quote from another person who was very helpful in my work since 1990, Clifford Geertz (1926-2006), when he observed that: “The essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said” (1973: 30). Over the years, a number of friends and colleagues from different places, like Henyo Trindade Barretto Filho, Erik Bähre, Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Edward F. Fischer, Miroslava Malešević, Antonádia Monteiro Borges, Isak Niehaus, Mariza Peirano, Maja Petrović Šteger, Nigel Rapport and Milan Vukomanović turned out to be important, occasionally critical, but always extremely valuable interlocutors, making available to me important “answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given.” Their presence contributed to my studies and made me a better person. Of course, none of the people mentioned here bears any responsibility for any potential omissions or errors.

Preface

This book contains book reviews, review essays and articles dealing with different aspects of Pre-Columbian civilizations of ancient America, most of them published between 1989 and 2014 in *Anthropos*, but also in *American Antiquity*, *Bulletin of the Ethnographic Institute of the Serbian Academy of Sciences & Arts (SASA)*, *Bulletin of the Slovene Ethnological Society*, *Human Mosaic*, and *Indiana*. The chapter on Codex Cihuacoatl (or Codex Borbonicus, chapter 8) was originally written in 1992 for the Seminar in Mexican Manuscript Painting at Tulane University (with Mary Elizabeth Smith), revised in 1993, and later published (in again revised form) in the Serbo-Croatian translation (Bošković 2006). When it was originally published in mid-1989, “The Meaning of Maya Myths” was the first article on this subject in English – studies by Taube (1992, 1993) and Miller and Taube (1993) followed later. In the meantime, some of the books that I wrote about have gone through multiple editions (Ch. 2), and some have served as important markers in our understanding of these cultures (Ch. 1). Some have also demonstrated the limitations of using incomplete data (Ch. 11), but others have become classics in their field (Ch. 18). All of the texts were slightly revised and updated. What ties all of these texts together is insistence on clear *methodology*, supported by the *field research*. This methodology is inseparable from the *context* of specific archaeological finds, and it helps us put these cultures and societies in a *historical* perspective. The choice of the books and topics reflects my own geographical/regional interests, which included Guatemala and Central Mexico – so, unfortunately, there is not enough on South American cultures. This, however, is simply a consequence of personal experience, nothing more. On the other hand, I believe that the basic methodological principles set forth in this book (as well as the moral stance advocated by archaeologists referred to here) have relevance for the study of all Pre-Columbian civilizations of the Americas.

When it comes to *method*, I agree with the approach taken by Adams, Sabloff, Sharer and other notable archaeologists about the importance of what Richard E. W. Adams has called “field archaeology school” approach (Adams 1989, personal communication). As he put it: “Excavated data are quite important, but we also consider epigraphy, iconography, ethnology, and native literatures” (ibid.). Several decades ago, art historian George Kubler also pointed to the importance of combining different disciplines in order to interpret ancient Amerindian cultures (1990: 32-34). The alternative approach, focusing on art history and art criticism, puts an emphasis on artefacts (especially ceramics) that have no provenience. This raises the problems of authenticity, along with different legal and moral problems, but also the loss of *context* – leading to loss of information. This is very obvious for anyone who has conducted archaeological research, and had to deal with the destruction left by looters. Again, as put by Adams:

An example of this loss of information is that of the Altar Vase and the 40 printed pages of description and interpretation that were possible because it was found in excavation. It is clearly a scene of an historical event, a funeral of the female ruler of Altar de Sacrificios (1989, personal communication; cf. also Adams 1971).

Furthermore, as authentication and evaluation of unprovenienced ceramics were used for items stolen from Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Peru (to list only some countries that have had to deal with this problem) – as these items could not be exported legally from their countries of origin, Adams also noted that:

Authentication and evaluation is against the code of ethics of the Society for American Archaeology because it adds to commercial exploitation of the cultural patrimony of various victim countries. Therefore there is a real tension between field archaeologists who abide by the rules and those who do not (1989, personal communication).

The moral issue of whether to use or not to use artefacts (especially painted polychrome ceramics) from the looted tombs and of unknown provenience has been with archaeologists, anthropologists, and art historians for decades. Some influential anthropologists, like Michael D. Coe, have enthusiastically approved their use: “My feeling was then, and still is, that all of these materials, even though looted (like the majority of Greek pots or Chinese bronzes) ought to be put out in the public domain so that scholars could study them” (2000: 209). On the other hand, one of the most distinguished archaeologists and epigraphers (and someone who has had personal experiences with looters, who killed a member of his team in Guatemala), Ian Graham, saw things differently:

To begin with, the pieces most in demand among institutional and wealthier private collectors were stone sculptures, for they proclaimed status more emphatically than ceramics. The damage to archaeology caused by this trade [in stolen objects – A. B.] often embraced not only loss of provenance, but of part of the hieroglyphic inscriptions too, since those on the back or sides of a stela were often cut off to lighten it for clandestine removal. (2002: 909)

In their article for the *Annual Review of Anthropology* written over a decade ago, Brodie and Renfrew quoted from the Archaeological Institute of America Code of Ethics, which stipulates that

[Members should] refuse to participate in the trade of undocumented antiquities and refrain from activities that enhance the commercial value of such objects. Undocumented antiquities are those which are not documented as belonging to a public or private collection before December 30, 1970 (...) or which have not been excavated and exported from the country of origin in accordance with the laws of that country. (Brodie and Renfrew 2005: 352)

Furthermore, the International Council of Museums noted in its own Code of Ethics that “Museums should not acquire objects where there is reasonable cause to believe that their recovery involved the unauthorized, unscientific, or intentional destruction or damage of monuments, archaeological or geological sites” (Brodie and Renfrew 2005: 351).

In the review of an earlier Renfrew's book (Renfrew 2002), and while understanding the excitement of some epigraphers and their desire to have *all* the objects that could help them understand scenes from painted ceramics that might refer to religion or myths, Graham wrote that it would have been wiser to wait a little bit and use the numerous sources found and documented during actual archaeological excavations instead of spectacular but unproven materials. Given archaeologists' reluctance to take into account unproven objects, it is no surprise that M. D. Coe's remarkable and elegantly written summary of the history of the decipherment of Maya script ends in bitter disappointment over archaeologists' apparent lack of understanding of the importance of these new discoveries (2000: 255 ff). Perhaps the fact that, by 1983, almost sixty per cent of all the Maya sites in Belize have been damaged by looters (Brodie and Renfrew 2005: 346) has something to do with it?



FIG. 1. STELA 4, UCANAL, GUATEMALA, 849. HEIGHT: 1.9M. MUSEO NACIONAL DE ANTROPOLOGÍA E HISTORIA DE GUATEMALA.

I believe that archaeological and anthropological research is in itself exciting enough to not need stolen artefacts, forged vases, fantastic stories and invented mythical genealogies or, as Adams put it in his letter, “scholarship founded on sand.” There are numerous examples that clearly demonstrate how the use of the archaeological research (and the data acquired *in context* – as pointed by Ian Graham and Richard Adams) provided fascinating and very detailed information about ancient sites – like, for example, Tikal (Coe 1965, 1988, 1990; Sabloff 2003), or much smaller Altar de Sacrificios (Adams 1971) or Río Azul (Adams 1986, 1987, 1999), all in today's Guatemala. In writing this book, my main intent was to produce both a methodologically sound and ethically valid interdisciplinary introduction into this exciting world, as well as an overview of the different topics (mostly dealing with culture and religion) that remain important in the study of Pre-Columbian civilizations.