

Review of Jeremy A. Sabloff (ed.), *Tikal: Dynasties, Foreigners & Affairs of State. Advancing Maya Archaeology*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press / Oxford: James Currey (2003). Pp. 419.

This collection of papers represents the results of a 1999 School of American Research advanced seminar on Tikal and is intended as a progress report summarizing previous work and anticipating future publications. It provides an overview of what is currently known about one of the most important and best researched Maya sites regarding diverse issues such as epigraphy, ceramics, settlement, demography, architecture, and dynastic history. Focal points of the history are in particular the earliest history of the city, the 6th-7th century ‘hiatus’, the revival after A.D. 700 of the city under the rulership of Jasaw Chan K’awiil, as well as its collapse during the 9th century. Some contributions contain information of a relatively spectacular nature which, however, has already largely been disseminated in other publications, e.g., Simon Martin’s overview of the dynastic history or Robert Sharer’s report on the founding-era acropolis. Others give overviews of work in different parts of the city, i.e., Robert E. Fry’s paper on the peripheries of Tikal, Peter Harrison’s on the Central Acropolis, Christopher Jones’ on the East Plaza Ball Court, and H. Stanley Loten’s on the North Acropolis. Additional papers include William A. Haviland’s discussion of the long-term study of settlement patterns, a chronological outlook on the collection of artifacts by Hattula Moholy-Nagy’s, and an overview by Juan Pedro Laporte of some major results of the various Guatemalan projects that have taken over after the cessation of the University of Pennsylvania Tikal Project.

In this review I have chosen to single out for special attention two papers that stand out as being particularly interesting for their strong emphases on methodology.

The first of these is Marshall J. Becker’s contribution on plaza plans at Tikal, which summarizes three decades of inquiries into what “architectural grammar” may reveal about the syn- and diachrony of social organization. This work has resulted in a firm taxonomy of 10 different plaza plans (PP’s). Since all PP’s come in variable sizes and since their functions relate to shape rather than size, Becker concludes that size is analytically unimportant. PP1, the “twin-pyramid group”, had a ritual function, the widespread PP2, whose diagnostic element is a square, tallish structure on the eastern side of the plaza, would be a certain type of residential group. A possible diachronic link between PP2 and the earlier so-called E-groups (or PP10) is said to

perhaps “reflect the shifts in rituals from the socially homogeneous Maya chiefdoms of the Preclassic to the heterogenous states of the Early Classic period” (pp. 277-8). In turn, PP10, along with PP1 and PP4 (the latter defined by a central, low platform), may provide evidence of outside (Teotihuacan?) influence. For other PP’s functions and origins are more difficult to discern. Becker concludes his essay by suggesting some very concrete strategies for future research.

Another methodologically central contribution is T. Patrick Culbert’s summary of the ceramics of the site, which is intrinsically interesting because the ceramics of Tikal are the best studied of all Maya sites and are replacing that of Uaxactun as the standard point of reference for the central Petén. For instance, the Tikal sequence has allowed for a differentiation of the Preclassic into five sequent complexes whereas the Uaxactun materials only yielded two. The great variety in the earliest ceramics (ca. 800-600 B.C.) suggests that initial populations moved into the Lowlands from several different directions. During the subsequent half a millenium or so typological stability ensued and ceramics across the Maya Lowlands were highly similar. The Cauac complex (A.D. 1-150) shows stylistic influence from the El Salvador region. Major periods of change were the onset of the Classic period and that of the Late Classic in A.D. 550-600. While ceramicists have been successful in producing a detailed sequence, much remains to be known about cultural implications. Thus, there is evidence to suggest that ceramics were produced by specialists, but only one center of production has been securely identified; and although it is hypothesized that a market system was involved in the distribution of ceramics, nothing specific can be said about such a system. One gets the impression that the insights to be derived from studying vessel shapes and the quantitative make-up of assemblages have largely been exhausted and that major advances will require a more holistic approach also involving detailed chemical, stylistic, and epigraphic analyses—even if limited to a small number of specimens.

Although this review has been highly selective it should be said that something useful may be found in all the papers. As a whole the volume provides a good overview of Tikal archaeology. Given that much of the research at this site has served as a model for Maya archaeology at large, the book can be recommended to Mayanists in general and even to outsiders wishing to learn more about approaches taken by colleagues working in this part of the world.