

**Francis Robicsek and Donald M. Hales, *The Maya Book of the Dead; The Ceramic Codex*. Norman, University of Oklahoma Press (with University of Virginia Art Museum), 1981. 257 pp., 90 figs., 27 tables**

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sketches, followed by more precise figure and drapery studies.

Figure drawings, particularly the representation of naturalistic figures who could convey a narrative, were a major artistic concern. Ames-Lewis contrasts the Central Italian artist's intense interest in rendering the nude with the North Italian draughtsman's interest in rendering surface textures. A clearer exposition of the author's understanding of the relationship of Alberti to developments in figure drawings would have been welcome in this section. It is somewhat confusing when Ames-Lewis alternatively refers to the 'impact of Albertian ideas' and the reflection of Alberti's suggestions, but then comments on how much Alberti 'summed up, and probably extrapolated from, his experience of artistic activity in early Renaissance Florence.'

In the final chapter, contract drawings and compositional sketching are examined as part of the creative processes of fifteenth-century workshops. By the second half of the quattrocento, the working methods of artists like Carpaccio and Ghirlandaio can be reconstructed on the basis of their more numerous extant drawings. The author describes well the various stages that could play a part in the evolution of a major pictorial design such as Ghirlandaio's mural paintings: compositional sketches, patterns, preparatory studies for single figures, contract drawings, cartoons.

Subject to the caveats mentioned, Ames-Lewis' text is generally well organized and persuasively argued. It gives the reader a good sense of the working procedures of fifteenth-century artists, particularly Central Italian painters. This book succeeds admirably as an introduction to the study of Italian drawings, particularly their roles in the creative process of a master's workshop. A large number of excellent illustrations are intermingled with the text which makes consultation both pleasant and efficient.

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FRANCIS ROBICSEK and DONALD M. HALES *The Maya Book of the Dead; The Ceramic Codex*. Norman, University of Oklahoma Press (with University of Virginia Art Museum), 1981. 257 pp., 90 figs., 27 tables.

*The Maya Book of the Dead* is an attempt to show that certain pre-Columbian ceramics, known as 'codex style' ceramics, did not 'merely look like a codex', but collectively constitute a document that 'actually is a codex' (their italics).

Maya literate civilization had almost vanished by the time Europeans began arriving in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Copies of ancient manuscripts still existed, possibly in considerable numbers, but nearly all were destroyed in the conquest. Three survived and a fragment of a fourth has recently been discovered. Presumably these must now be referred to as the paper codices; gate-fold manuscripts made of bark paper sized in white or cream, and inscribed calligraphically with symbols and figures mostly in black paint. Their subject matter is the supernatural world of powers that affect human destiny; the astronomy that provides access to a knowledge of these powers – and therefore the possibility, if not of control, at least, of favourable intervention; divination, the practical value of the system; and chronology – the operational-mathematical model through which the ancient Maya could understand the actions of supernatural powers.

Codex style ceramics have a light cream slip as a ground for black-line calligraphic representations of images, scenes, and glyphic inscriptions. Thus, they clearly resemble the paper codices. To substantiate their hypothesis that certain sets of ceramics literally formed an equivalent 'book', Robicsek and Hales examine 308 painted vessels purporting to be from the southern Maya lowland area, a zone of maximal late classic urbanization and cultural climax centering on the Peten district of Guatemala, but including adjacent regions of Mexico and Belize. The vessels are thought to originate in the late classic period, conventionally taken as 600 to 900 A.D., although the authors themselves

concede that some of the vessels included might be modern fakes. None of the vessels are from archaeologically controlled excavations and, therefore, none have any provenance or known association with other Maya artefacts. In fact, it may be that no codex style ceramics have ever turned up in archaeological investigations although fragments are reported from El Mirador. A possible exception might be the Actun Balam vase discovered by David Pendergast in a cave in Belize. Robicsek and Hales do not discuss the issue of authenticity except in passing, nor do they consider the implications inherent in the apparent discrepancy between the archaeological ceramics and those produced through looting, faking, and the antiquities market. Robicsek and Hales do refer to physical analyses carried out on fifty-five codex style vessels. But this work is aimed at identifying source locations of raw materials, not date of manufacture. The conclusions that they reach, that the vessels come from four or six major centres in the Peten, are based on stylistic analysis alone.

The study is based on a sample of very unclear structure. The material illustrated includes 'most photographs taken during the course of the study,' and 'all presently known vessels ... by Codex Style Site A artists that were currently available.' Apparently this would admit any vessel with figurative or inscriptional representation in black outline on a light ground. There is no discussion of the possibility that this technique might be used for ceramics not making up pages of a codex.

The major substantive portion of *The Maya Book of the Dead* consists of iconographic and epigraphic readings for 184 vessels of the sample (they have designated 186 vessels by number, but n<sup>os</sup> 132 and 133 are neither illustrated nor discussed, although n<sup>o</sup> 133 is assigned to their hypothetical 'painter 1'). The remaining vessels are illustrated in 27 'tables' which are just photographic plates without specific stylistic identification or commentary, and 90 'figures,' which again are mostly photographs. Documentation is black and white roll-out photographs or drawings of adequate quality and readable size.

Primary descriptive treatment of the material is broken up into two

sections. First, the 131 vessels classified as belonging to six thematically defined, hypothetical codices are discussed. This is then followed by a commentary which interprets the sense of the images when viewed as successive 'pages' of a codex. Then the 277 vessels not included in codices are discussed. Finally, there is a section on identification of sites from which the codices may have come, and a brief stylistic analysis aimed at identifying the 'hand' of individual artists.

The commentary, perhaps rightly, concentrates on the readings produced by the hypothesis that individual vessels should be regarded as 'pages' of a codex. This is the respect in which the ceramic codex theory will either prove useful or gratuitous. It is not very convincing. Most readings are sequential, confined to individual vessels. Sequential readings are proposed for only nineteen vessels in two series of Codex Fragment 1 (55 vessels total): vessels 8-13, and 18-30. The 'strong case for sequential interpretation' that these vessels are considered to establish is hardly conclusive. The narrative played out scene by scene through vessels 8-13 features a poignant classic Maya figure, an aged deity, apparently dallying with a young female. The ceramic version of this scene is concocted by Robicsek and Hales who simply arrange the vessels in an order that yields a kind of story hinging on their interpretation of vessel 11 as showing the old god 'complaining to two ancestral deities.' There is absolutely no basis for this reading. The scene shows a confrontation, but nothing indicates 'complaining.' Furthermore, apart from this reading, there is no basis for seriation of the vessels.

The 18-30 series contains a highly enigmatic scene on vessel 24 interpreted as a climatic sacrifice. Vessels 18-23 do not include sacrifices and are placed to precede vessel 24, thus yielding a reading as 'events leading up to' the sacrifice. No specific sequential actions are identified and, again, there is no supporting evidence for the seriation.

Codex fragment 2 (17 vessels) is thought to tell a *Popul Vuh* story of gods turned into monkeys by a trick. Accordingly, the vessels are arranged so that the anthropoid figures precede the simian figures. But here, there is no compelling evidence that the different figures represent the same individual. They

just have similar poses. Fragment 3 (33 vessels) is thought to narrate a journey including wading through water. But either some 'pages' are missing or the journey is very inconclusive. The vessels could be placed in any devised order and they would still tell the same vague 'story.'

Fragment 4 (4 vessels) is specifically not based on sequential action, but on 'somewhat similar style and scenes.' Fragment 5 (10 vessels) has no sequential analysis. Fragment 6 (11 vessels) consists entirely of glyphic inscriptions and one wonders why it is even included as a codex fragment. Here particularly, the issue of the content that might be expected in a codex seems to be called up. But this question is never addressed. Nor is the question of why 277 vessels are not assigned to codices at all even though many of the scenes they present closely parallel some in the six proposed codices. These unassigned vessels include some of inferior craftsmanship possibly 'crude replicas painted in modern times' (i.e. fakes). Iconographic readings are given for these vessels, but their inscriptions are not reviewed because they are 'apparently incorrect.'

Robicsek and Hales do not develop any compelling argument regarding either the structure or the purpose and intent of codices, whether ceramic or paper. Yet there seems to be a strong correlation between media and subject matter in Maya art. For example, paper codices address the gods while monumental sculpture, the stelae, record dynastic history of the divinely ordained social elite. The theoretical framework within which the ceramic codex idea would operate to affect hermeneutics is not specifically confronted. The assumption that these ceramics were looted from spectacular tombs has already been applied by Michael Coe to direct their interpretation toward a mythology of the underworld. Through this inference the Highland Maya *Popul Vuh* becomes the indispensable literary key to the reading of the images. Robicsek and Hales seem to have added little to this. It is significant that the larger portion of the sample, vessels 132-186 together with all the unnumbered vessels not assigned to hypothetical codices, generated some of the most detailed and fulsome iconographic interpretation.

These readings do not depend at all on the ceramic codex theory. It seems curious that the six sites postulated as possible sources of the sample are not correlated with the inferred ceramic codices, nor are the sixteen individual artists that are identified.

The translation of Maya texts on paper codices, stone monuments, architecture, jade, ceramics, and other materials, has a scholarly history extending back over a century. Initially, decipherment concentrated on calendrics and astronomy, areas in which mathematical relationships provide a basis for internal validation of readings. Although this epigraphic work is still far from complete, activity since the mid-twentieth century has been most vigorous in iconography, a distinct branch of Maya studies that depends very heavily on subjective interpretation and cannot rely on syntactical structure for verification. The readings presented by Robicsek and Hales benefit from this most recent phase of 'god-spotting.' Whether the ceramic codex theory holds up or not, the book will stand as a state of the art benchmark in this rapidly developing field.

Certainly the ceramic codex idea possesses the glamour of the 'eureka' phenomenon. It presents a new way to look at these ceramics and a new basis for interpretation that assigns significance to some details that would otherwise appear meaningless. Therefore the theory would seem to have potential utility even if not convincingly documented here. The main difficulties would seem to reside in the lack of argument supporting the theory. The hypothetical codices proposed are identified on the basis of stylistic and thematic similarity, but lack narrative structure. The same evidence could just as well support an entirely different interpretation. Robicsek and Hales offer no strong argument for the need of a ceramic codex. There could well have been schools of artists who drafted codices and also painted in similar styles on pottery, but who did not produce ceramic codices. Robicsek and Hales suggest permanency as a possible motive, although this was achieved through copying, and a vessel once placed in a tomb is permanently removed from the possibility of reference. They refer obliquely to what seems a

major problem with the ceramic codex idea, the bulkiness of a series of vessels, each operating as a page. Such an entity, consisting of 30 or more vessels, could hardly be kept together. Robicsek and Hales suggest that one vessel deposited in a tomb might stand for the whole codex. But this would seem to negate the very aspect that they find most compelling, that is, the frame-by-frame narrative.

Whether iconographers find the ceramic codex concept useful or not, *The Maya Book of the Dead* is a rich lode of astonishing and powerful symbolism, even though many of the vessels included have been published better elsewhere and some might be fakes. Even if only some of the vessels are authentic, the collection testifies to the horrifyingly destructive effect of looting and the moral paralysis of the market. The alternative is that the vessels are all fakes, and scholarship based on such material serves only the antiquities traffic.

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JEAN MARGUERON *Recherches sur les palais mésopotamiens de l'âge du bronze*, 2 vol. Paris, Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner (Collection Institut français d'Archéologie du Proche-Orient, Bibliothèque Archéologique et Historique, n° CVII), 1982. 635 p., 376 illus.

Voici le fruit d'une recherche très approfondie qui fut étalée sur plusieurs années, puisqu'il s'agit d'une thèse de doctorat d'État soutenue à l'Université de Paris I – Panthéon Sorbonne en 1978 par Jean Margueron, professeur d'archéologie à l'Université de Strasbourg. Ce dernier est aussi le fouilleur qui a succédé, depuis 1979, à André Parrot sur le prestigieux site de Mari en Mésopotamie (actuellement en Syrie), après avoir dirigé auparavant les missions archéologiques de Senkéré/Larsa en Iraq (1969-1974), de Ras Shamra/Ugarit en Syrie (1974-1977) et de Meskéné/Emar en Syrie (1972-1978).

L'ouvrage proprement dit est un monument : 635 pages d'un texte en petits caractères, dense, copieusement annoté, clairement subdivisé, et complété par un second volume



FIGURE 4. Plans des édifices palatiaux. Margueron, fig. 373.

de 376 figures (dessins au trait, plans et reconstitutions refaits par l'auteur des palais étudiés dans cette recherche). La figure 373 (voir ici Fig. 4) est particulièrement intéressante car elle montre, à la même échelle (1/1000), les plans de tous les édifices palatiaux décrits dans ce travail.

Dans son Introduction (p. 1-20), Margueron délimite d'abord son sujet : « bâtiments ... habituellement reconnus comme étant des palais de l'âge du bronze, même si la fonction de certains d'entre eux est parfois contestée » (p. 3), puis, comme il était prévisible, tente de définir le terme de palais à la lumière de ce qui a déjà été écrit à ce propos. Il fait ainsi ressortir que la désignation de palais prêtée à un monument architectural est très imprécise car, archéologiquement, elle s'appliquerait à tout édifice aux dimensions supérieures à celles des maisons habituelles. S'il y a imprécision, c'est justement parce que le sujet n'a jamais fait l'objet d'une étude systématique. L'auteur s'est précisément livré à cette recherche devant l'incohérence de la définition du terme « palais » en Mésopotamie durant le deuxième millénaire avant J.-C. Pour résoudre ce problème, il se devait d'appliquer une grille d'analyse à tous les bâtiments interprétés comme des palais. Il explique donc, au terme de son introduction, sa méthode d'analyse, soit la nature des indices et des critères qu'il a utilisés.

Le volumineux ouvrage se divise en deux parties : 1. Analyse architecturale des palais (p. 21-460); 11. Études comparatives d'architecture (p. 461-583). La première consiste en un corpus des palais mésopotamiens de l'âge du bronze connus à ce jour – une vingtaine. Chaque édifice correspond à un chapitre : l'édifice de Djemdet Nasr, le palais « A » de Kish, le palais « P » de Kish, les palais présargoniques de Mari, le palais d'Eridu, les palais septentrionaux de Tell Asmar, le palais de Tell Wilaya, le palais de Tell Brak, le palais d'Ur-Nammu et de Shulgi à Ur, le palais des dynasties Amorites à Tell Asmar, le palais de Mari à l'époque des dynasties Amorites, le palais de Nur-Adad à Larsa, l'ancien palais d'Assur, le palais de Tell Al-Rimah, le palais de Sinkashid à Uruk, le palais d'Adab, l'édifice de Chagar Bazar, le palais de Nuzi, le palais de Dur-Kurigalzu et le palais d'Adad-Nirari à Assur. Il est très important de souligner ici, et c'est ce qui constitue la plus grande originalité de cette recherche, qu'il ne s'agit pas d'un simple catalogue mais d'une analyse, c'est-à-dire d'un examen minutieux et détaillé de chaque monument en regard de certains indices et critères définis dans l'Introduction : analyse des circulations et de l'organisation générale (notamment par l'étude des emplacements des crapaudines qui donnent le sens des ouvertures des vantaux de portes, détail omis jusqu'à maintenant par les archéologues), nature des indices