

## Fruits of the earth

Warwick Bray

**The New Archaeology and the Ancient Maya.** By Jeremy A. Sabloff. (Scientific American Library). Freeman: 1990. Pp. 193. £16.95, \$32.95.

IN POPULAR imagination (encouraged by the media and the buried treasure industry) an archaeologist is a person who digs things up. Professor Sabloff disposes of this misconception in the opening sentence of chapter 1. "I'm not", he writes, "particularly interested in ancient objects" — and in the rest of the book he enlarges on this statement by explaining, for non-specialists, what archaeologists have really been doing for the past thirty years. Filling museum cases is not the purpose of excavation. Concern has shifted away from artefacts (and from narrative history presented as a sequence of cultures, art styles and dates) to the study of how human societies functioned. Today's archaeologists want to know about institutions, not just about pyramids and potsherds. The search is, first, for patterns of behaviour, next for explanations of these patterns, and then comes the big question: why is it all like this, and what made a particular culture develop as it did? Sabloff is writing about the prehispanic Maya, but the theoretical issues are universal.

In the professional literature, these straightforward aims are all too often concealed behind a screen of jargon and pseudo-philosophy. One of Sabloff's purposes (brilliantly achieved in this book) is to tell the public about the tactics and strategy of archaeological research, not merely about its results, and to do so in language that anybody can understand. He prefers to analyse actual case studies rather than to indulge in philosophical abstraction. The result is a book about archaeology in Maya territory and not, thankfully, another conventional textbook on the ancient Maya.

The author has done plenty of digging in his time, but his full title at the University of Pittsburgh is Professor of Anthropology and History and Philosophy of Science. These are the keywords of the book itself. Sabloff describes the early history of Maya archaeology, with its emphasis on monumental architecture, epigraphy, fine art and the life of the ruling elite. Then, in the early 1960s, came a break with tradition, the "new archaeology" of the title, a movement which had its roots in the philosophy of science (the logical positivism of Carl Hempel and his associates), and which broadened the scope of archaeological enquiry by

introducing new, more rigorous methods of collecting and interpreting data. Investigators of the new generation began to look at the nature of Maya kingship and politics, the relationship between religion and the state, the economics of trade and the control over access to goods, the ecology of subsistence, how people farmed, made tools, disposed of rubbish, and so on.

Having explained the objectives and ideology of the new archaeology, Sabloff examines its effects on Maya studies.

aggressive dynasties. Large urban populations were sustained by intensive agriculture (with terracing and drained fields) rather than by shifting cultivation, and much of the forest that we see today was open farmland during the first millennium AD. Trade products, ideas, marriage partners and, perhaps, armies crossed the internal frontiers of the Maya world, and these connections extended northwards to highland Mexico and south to the Isthmus of Central America. One consequence of recent research is that the Maya have lost



The huge temple-pyramid at Chichén Itzá, once the economic centre of the Yucatán.

Under the onslaught of these new investigations, the traditional view of Maya civilization turned out to be inadequate and often downright nonsense. Sabloff's volume chronicles the rise and fall of a myth, invented by academics but accepted gratefully by a public looking for 'romance' in archaeology. To Sabloff, happiness lies in solving a problem; in other respects he is deliberately anti-romantic, concentrating on new evidence, new ideas and the changes these have brought about in our perception of the Maya.

Most of the things we were told in the 1950s turn out to be untrue. We now know that monumental architecture, complex political organization and the roots of Maya art and religion go back several centuries BC and that the classic Maya were not the peaceful, unworldly intellectuals of the older textbooks. The 'ceremonial centres' of the 1950s model have turned out to be true cities, ruled by

their uniqueness; their culture is no longer an anomaly to be explained away, and in the past twenty years the 'mysterious Maya' have turned into normal Mesoamericans.

This excellent little book tells us what is new, and also how we know these things, what ideas the investigators were testing and what techniques they used. The illustrations, well up to *Scientific American* standards, have been chosen to complement the text, and depict the unglamorous sides of archaeology (surveying, surface-collecting, sieving dirt) as well as the glories of the ancient Maya. In his epilogue, Sabloff notes that the problems of population growth, ecological damage and social stress are not new, and that archaeological studies of past mistakes may help to stop us repeating them. □

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