Betraying The Maya

Who does the violence in Apocalypto really hurt?

BY DAVID FREIDEL

KING KAN B’AHLM OF PALENQUE in Chiapas, Mexico, commissioned three beautiful temples in the late seventh century A.D. Inside each is a smaller one, just big enough to house a large relief framed by long inscriptions. Written in verse, the inscriptions recount the births of the kingdom’s three patron gods and show that they were the beloved of the king; nurtured as a mother suckles a baby; and given new homes, revived, and healed after a terrible desecration at the hands of enemies almost a century earlier. The story weaves the history of the kingdom and Kan B’ahlam into the fabric of the cosmos.

In Mel Gibson’s Apocalypto, a Maya ruler sits silently as his priests butcher captives in the fashion of the Aztecs of highland Mexico. He has no words, no songs, no history, no name. He is a rich, powerful, sadistic brute. In stark contrast, the people of the forest in Apocalypto, the defenders of nature, are funny, wise, handsome, beautiful, and profoundly naïve. They are primitives, innocent of the corrosive influences of civilization and urban society. But no such people existed in the Maya world. Gibson has several engaging natives in his tableau macabre nightmare of civilization versus nature, but they bear only superficial resemblance to Maya peoples, ancient or modern, despite speaking the Yucatec language.

Apocalypto is a violently grotesque and surreal work, crafted with devotion to detail but with disdain for historical coherence or substance. It is a horrific and gripping vision from the mind of its maker. Most film critics and moviegoers probably will not see that the film is a big lie about the civilization created by the pre-Columbian Maya. As one who has devoted his life to bridging the gap between the Maya and Americans, I wish Gibson had chosen other victims to sacrifice for his art. Allegory and artistic freedom are well and good, except when they slanderously misrepresent an entire civilization. Gibson insults his audience’s intelligence if he thinks it could not grasp or be entertained by a subtle depiction of Maya culture, religion, and social organization. The sad irony is that, in the wake of the most recent research, really good films about the Classic Maya, and the period of the Spanish conquest, have been waiting a long time for a director of Gibson’s talents.

THE PLOT OF APOCALYPTO is straightforward allegory. Idyllic hunter-gatherers are attacked, raped, and abducted by sadistic warriors from the city. On the journey to the desperate, dying metropolis, the raiders and captives encounter all the usually posited causes of the Maya collapse: oppression, pestilence, drought. Once there, they also find arrogant and cruel leaders savagely sacrificing blue-painted captives. Our innocent hero escapes the slaughter and delivers violent retribution on his tormentors in the forest that sheltered his life before—the allegorical journey in reverse.

Gibson’s take on the urban pre-Columbian Maya as bloody savages is the latest in a long line of modern projections of this past. For much of the twentieth century, the American public heard from scholarly professionals such as J. Eric Thompson about how the Classic Maya (A.D. 250–900) were peaceful theocrats overwhelmed by brutal Toltec invaders who established militaristic and materialistic states in the Terminal Classic and Early Postclassic periods (A.D. 750–1100). Archaeologists, including Thompson, who wrote popular, accessible books about Maya archaeology, just preceding the Spanish conquest, the Decadent period (A.D. 1350–1500) because of the inferior quality of the art and architecture of the time. Thompson’s notion of the Classic Maya as generally peaceful was belied by the amazing and colorful battle painted on a wall discovered at Bonampak in Chiapas in the late 1940s, but his view was influential among both archaeologists and the public. Popular magazines

featured articles on the contemporary Maya of Yucatán and Guatemala and juxtaposed them with the towering pyramids of Chichén Itzá or Tikal, and gorgeous jade, shell, and ceramic artifacts. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, popular images of the Maya in the United States and Mexico emphasized art and architecture, but also featured pictures of beautiful virgins being thrown into the Sacred Well of Chichén Itzá or draped over sacrificial altars by muscular priests. The latter still grace, in living color, the advertising calendars pinned up in garages throughout Yucatán. Meanwhile, scholars in the field continued working to determine, for example, whether the Classic Maya lived in cities or in villages scattered around ceremonial centers presided over by the priestly elite envisioned by Thompson.

Surveys at the Classic sites of Tikal in Guatemala and Dzibilchaltun in Yucatán during the 1950s and 1960s made a strong case for Maya cities. Excavations revealed remarkable buildings adorned with complex decoration in stone and painted plaster. At Tikal, tunneling excavations uncovered magnificent royal tombs stocked with beautiful ceramics, jade adornments, and other artifacts. These discoveries supported a view of Classic Maya society different from Thompson’s, one structured into tiers of elites, professionals, and commoners ruled by powerful kings. Courtiers, craftsmen, warriors, and merchants—the usual professions of urban life—have been documented archaeologically and pictorially in the Classic Maya record. Gibson’s costume designers spared no expense to convey contrasts in wealth and status in his city, but his vision lacked grounding in scholarship from either Thompson or the later work. The city, for example, is a bizarre computer-generated pastiche of Maya styles from different places and times. The movie asserts authenticity while demanding complete freedom to build a fantasy out of bits and pieces of pre-Columbian Maya life.

Were Classic Maya cities the dens of iniquity Gibson envisions? Extensive research has not revealed the slums depicted on the outskirts of the

The colorful frescoes at Bonampak, among the finest examples of Maya painting, depict occasionally bloody court rituals and ceremonies. Here, the ruler Chan Mauwan presides over the torture of captives.
film’s city; most people lived in simple wood-and-thatch homes resembling the rural ones the Maya have used since the Spanish conquest. Moreover, some researchers, such as Mayanists Arlen and Diane Chase, who have worked at the Classic city site of Caracol in Belize since the 1980s, have found substantive evidence for a prosperous urban middle class alongside royalty and commoners.

Were city dwellers the bloodthirsty predators Gibson portrays? Simply put, they were not, but the public deserves a more accurate and sophisticated view of the pre-Columbian Maya, and Gibson certainly had the resources, advisors, and talent to have provided it. With the deciphering of Maya glyphic texts and continued field research since the 1970s, the Classic Maya have emerged as more recognizably worldly. For them, warfare was a staple of statecraft—sadly a hallmark trait of virtually all civilizations. Their religious practices and social organization are also coming into focus. While the great bulk of Maya literature was on bark paper and is now lost, what we have in stone provides a wonderful glimpse of the aesthetics, intellectual life, and historical consciousness of Maya nobility.

In addition to its depiction of urban life, Apocalypto is wrong from the opening shot of an idealized rainforest hamlet. The Maya lived in and revered their rainforest environment, but they had thoroughly transformed it with 2,000 years of farming. In 1972 and ‘73, I conducted surveys on the island of Cozumel, where the Spanish under Cortés made landfall in 1519. While the Spanish describe woods on the island, virtually the entire landscape was defined by stone walls dividing habitation and farming plots. Evidently this strategy allocated land for slash-and-burn agriculture in small plots that could recover during fallow periods. All along the coast of the Yucatan Peninsula, the Spanish encountered people living in towns. To be sure, in the sixteenth century large regions of the interior southern

![The temples of the Classic Maya site at Palenque contain reliefs that depict Maya mythology, which ties Maya kings and history into the fabric of the cosmos.](image)
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lowlands had reverted to mature rainforest and were sparsely inhabited. But even there the Maya had towns. The rural villagers who lived in the Petén and other interior areas were farmers planting a wide variety of crops. Gibson’s hunter-gatherers are pure fantasy: Ordinary Maya were peasant maize farmers and craftpeople from 1000 B.C. This fact is not incidental; Maya religion in the Preclassic and Classic periods exalted the maize god and tied royal power to him.

APOCALYPTO JUXTAPOSES IDEAS about social and political failure from the ninth-century crisis in the southern lowlands—the Classic Maya “collapse”—with the posited “decadence” of the period of the Spanish arrival five centuries later. These periods may have some links, but they are as distinct as the periods of the Magna Carta and the U.S. Constitution. The “decadence” of the Late Postclassic period is an aesthetic attribution by mid-twentieth-century scholars who observed that the quality and scale of public architecture had diminished compared with buildings raised several centuries earlier. My teachers, Jeremy Sabloff of the University of Pennsylvania Museum and William Rathje of Stanford University argued that the Late Postclassic Maya were reallocating resources away from public architecture and into trade, commerce, and comfortable residences. The elite may have had less access to the wealth of the people, this theory goes, but the societies were more equal. Whether that was the case is a matter of ongoing inquiry, but the term “decadent” is no longer used to describe that period by Maya archaeologists.

Were the later, “decadent” Maya more materialistic and secular than the Classic Maya? The later Maya have emerged, through ethnohistorical and archaeological investigation, as cosmopolitan and pious peoples who sustained long traditions of city life, literacy, and commerce. Some modern Maya towns in these areas have been continuously occupied since centuries before the Spanish conquest. Even in the southern lowlands, kingdoms rose again after the ninth-century decline and persisted into the seventeenth century. While the ancient Maya had their shortcomings, including the organized violence typical of civilized people, they were remarkable in their achievements, and not just the brutal monsters depicted by Gibson.

As to the ninth-century “collapse,” while the nature of that social change is more contested by experts than ever before, there are some areas of consensus relevant to Apocalypto. While the Maya fought many protracted wars during the Classic period, the victims of combat, capture, and sacrifice that we know of—based on artistic representations of the rituals from sites such as Tikal, Yaxchilan, and Piedras Negras, and in glyphic texts from sites such as Dos Pilas, Uaxactun, Yaxuna, and El Perú-Waká, among others—were members of the elite and even royals, not ordinary city dwellers or peasants. This is not to say that ordinary people did not fight, suffer, and die in conflict, but that they were not of interest to the elite. Moreover, mass sacrifice
can only be inferred in a few exceptional cases, as in the walls of carved skulls of the Terminal Classic period at northern lowland sites such as Chichén Itzá. The purely savage killing fields of *Apocalypto* are alien to the Maya world. The Maya practice of public execution of important military and political enemies is akin to practices unfortunately common in Western history. The lesson I draw from the ninth-century collapse is that Maya leaders, like their modern counterparts, were capable of taking societies in catastrophic directions through arrogant ambition, blind perseverance, and stilted political imagination. Gibson has been quoted as stating that he sees parallels between the Maya elite of *Apocalypto* and modern elites, but he did not necessarily set out to make a film about the Maya—they just provided the right vehicle for his violent allegory and became the victims of his disregard for the boundary between reality and fantasy. Direct predation and slaughter of ordinary people is a reality in some times and places, but it is a slander when attributed to the ancient Maya.

In the first week of its release, *Apocalypto* provoked many eloquent and detailed critiques among professionals who work with and for the modern Maya, and for fair representation of the Maya past. Reaction among educated modern Maya will be worth contemplating. Modern Maya leaders have been speaking out against racism and oppression for generations, and *Apocalypto* will likely strengthen the depressing sense that their voices are drowned out by the self-absorbed fantasies and deep denial of privileged people. Ordinary Maya, with their hard lives and bleak futures, may see *Apocalypto* as another bizarre action flick, no more connected to them than comparable action films from China. Or maybe not. Some may be angered and saddened.

How modern people depict the ancient Maya matters because we use the past to reflect on the present and the future. Jared Diamond, drawing principally on the work of Maya archaeologist David Webster, features the case of the Classic Maya in *Collapse*, his latest contemplation on human history. But the dark lessons of antiquity are not the only ones. In the twentieth century, the Maya have emerged in public consciousness as master mathematicians who invented place notation and the concept of zero, brilliant astronomers whose calendars were as accurate as any in the Old World, and revered architects—Frank Lloyd Wright is reputed to have declared Puuc-style architecture in the northern lowlands the best in the Western Hemisphere. We newcomers to the Americas, with our shallow roots in this old place, could hold up the Maya with pride to our contemporaries elsewhere and their millennia-old cities and institutions. Our continent is rich in ancient accomplishment, too, and our admiration has been earned through clear-minded appraisal of the material record, and increasingly the historical one. The Classic Maya wrote history, scripture, and poetry that contain knowledge of the human condition and spirit, as well as wisdom that compares favorably with that of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and other hearths of

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At El Perú-Waka' archaeologists found the remains of a Maya Its’at, or king-scholar. Modern Maya working at the site made offerings and prayed at the grave of their ancestor.
Christopher L. W. Smith

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civilization. Finally, the accuracy of modern depictions of ancient Maya matters deeply and personally to those of us who care about the millions of people who speak a Mayan language and the societies that they call home in Mexico, Central America, and the United States,

IN APRIL 2006, my colleague and co-director of the El Perú-Waká Archaeological Project in northwestern Petén, Héctor L. Escobedo, discovered the tomb of a Classic period king deep inside a pyramid. The king was buried not as a warrior, but as an Its’at—a scribe, artist, scientist, and creator. Escobedo found the king’s spangled turban, a cloth headdress sewn with bright red shells, placed carefully above and to the right of the head. The headdress is a defining insignia of the scribal creator-gods and their human counterparts. This king was accompanied by symbols to show that he was the maize tree—the tree of abundance for his kingdom. Finally, he was buried with his mirror of prophecy, a polished mosaic of pyrite crystals.

Above the vaulted tomb chamber, the king-scribe’s successor raised a small white-stuccoed fire shrine, its interior blackened with burnt offerings before it was buried in the heart of the pyramid. When Escobedo and his student Juan Carlos Melendez completed their excavation of the king, the Minister of Culture of Guatemala, Manuel Salazar Tezahui, and the director of prehistoric monuments, E. Salvador Lopez, visited. With candles lit in the altar niche of the shrine and copal incense burning near the door, the minister prayed in his native K’akchiquel, a Mayan language of the highlands. He explained to us that he prayed for the peace of the spirit of the king; he prayed to the heart of heaven, the heart of the earth; he prayed for reconciliation and healing of the people of Guatemala. Then, master musician that he is, he played on his flute a song of remembrance and healing, the gift of one Its’at to another. Yes, how we reflect on the ancient Maya does matter.

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