



A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya

Linda Schele , David A. Freidel

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Recent interpretation of Maya hieroglyphs has given the 1st written history of the New World as it existed before the European invasion. In this book, two of the 1st central figures in the effort to decode the glyphs, Linda Schele & David Freidel, detail this history. *A Forest of Kings* is the story of Maya kingship, from the beginning of its institution & the 1st great pyramid builders 2000 years ago to the decline of Maya civilization & its destruction by the Spanish. Here the great rulers of pre-Columbian civilization come to life again with the decipherment of their writing. At its height, Maya civilization flourished under great kings like Shield-Jaguar, who ruled for over 60 years, expanding his kingdom & building some of the most impressive works of architecture in the ancient world. Long placed on a mist-shrouded pedestal as austere, peaceful stargazers, Maya elites are now known to have been the rulers of populous, aggressive city-states. Hailed as "a Rosetta stone of Maya civilization" (Brian M. Fagan, author of *People of the Earth*), *A Forest of Kings* is "a must for interested readers," says Evon Vogt, Harvard anthropology professor.

A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya Details

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Bob Newman says

Mayas come out of the woods

When I was a youth, people said the Mayas were the one peaceful civilization. As far as I knew, nobody could read their writing. I went to Copán about 50 years ago; the ruins impressed me, but I had not read anything about the Mayas. The silence and emptiness of the land where once a great city had stood remained in my mind. More recently, I have read a few books about the Maya, especially Demarest's "The Ancient Maya" about seven years back. I still feel that that volume is the best overall history. A FOREST OF KINGS is something else. It combines intensive analysis of Maya art, the translated inscriptions, and good archaeological guesswork to give the reader a most intensive "experience" if I may call it that. The book provides names and dates for a civilization that once seemed lost and mysterious.

The Maya certainly were not a peaceful civilization. In fact, their array of small kingdoms engaged in constant warfare and human sacrifice. When they wrote, they mostly recorded royal events, chronicled the passage of time, or boasted of their great victories. Schele and Freidel attempt to bring to life the events and personalities of the Maya world, from 200 BC to the arrival of the Spanish. The myriad reproductions of the Maya drawings, writings, and city plans by several modern artists is phenomenal. What a labor of love this book is! Each major chapter also contains a piece created from the authors' educated imagination of some event during the Maya centuries, whether at Palenque, Copán, Chichén Itzá, or Tikal.

I would say that it is not an easy read, though the language is mostly jargon-free. It's just the amount of detail which may overwhelm a reader who is not so familiar with the Maya or who doesn't need every date, every name, and every symbol. The art work on any number of buildings is described and analyzed. Their system of counting time is explained. We are familiar with Julius Caesar, with Charlemagne, with Ivan the Terrible, and even with Qin Shi Huangdi. How many Maya figures did you ever even hear of? After reading this book, some of them will stick in your mind forever. The Maya recorded many things on stelae, stone columns which the authors refer to as "tree stones". A forest of these tree-stones stood by many important buildings of the Maya ages. Now we can say that the Mayas have come out of the forest into our consciousness, thanks to these two authors.

Kavita says

The book started off very slowly and made some assumptions that only Westerners would be reading this book. I also found it hard to believe that rain dance of the Mayans worked and that historians must treat those customs with respect. These things in the beginning almost made me give up on the book, but the later chapters became more and more professional and detailed. Once I had reached the middle of the book, I had a lot more respect for the author than at the beginning.

Other than these minor irritants, the book is very well written and presents a detailed account of both the archaeology and history of the ancient Mayan kingdoms from conception to decline. It works well as an introductory book to the world of Maya, but does not limit itself to just one period. Instead, an overview of the entire Mayan history is meticulously given along with archaeological details. And pictures. Plenty of pictures explaining the Stelas. Overall, a good book!

Silvio Curtis says

Given that this book assumes no previous knowledge and sometimes words things melodramatically, but packs its information pretty densely, I'm guessing that it's intended as an introductory college textbook. The first chapter covers basics of pre-conquest Maya culture, and the last chapter discusses the collapse of Classic civilization and a little about the European conquest. In between, most chapters focus on a specific city: Cerros for the Pre-Classic rise of kingship and monumental architecture, Tikal for the first wars of conquest, a chapter on the reconstructed intercity politics of the middle Classic, two chapters on Palenque and Yaxchilán for detailed examinations of dynastic ideology, Copán for the Terminal Classic and collapse, and Chichén Itzá for post-classic civilization. So many then-ongoing discoveries and controversies appear in this book that it must be significantly out of date by now, more than 20 years after it was published.

Marc Severson says

This is possibly my favorite book on the Maya which is saying something. Schele and Friedel have a way of conveying not only knowledge of their subject but understanding of the deeper meanings inherent in that knowledge. I find myself returning to it over and over again and continuing to learn something new each visit.

Jesse says

Linda Schele rules! and i hope all the mysteries of the maya were revealed to her when she entered xibalba. and I know she will trick the gods of death and emerge from the turtles back as a resplendent world tree shining under the mesoamerican sun!

Jan-Maat says

The joy of this book is that it was one of the first to be published after the major breakthrough in understanding the Maya script. No longer were we in the serene world of priestly astronomers but of the would be big beasts of the political jungle asserting their greatness, heritage and deeds on steles.

The obvious limitation is that as time moves on from publication, more is discovered and more is translated the more the views advanced in the book will be subject to revision.

However it tells of an interesting world. A city-state civilisation built out of the jungle that struggled to maintain political order in the face of an obscure environmental or ecological catastrophe. It's a nice update to Eric Thompson's *The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilization*.

The big surprise was that understanding their script overturned understanding of the Maya world which because it was understood that they were interested in numbers and astronomy - many of their carved stelae marking significant dates, so it was thought they were cerebral astronomers their culture fixated upon the

heavens, their written inscriptions revealed that their interest in dates and astronomy and conjunctions was in part political. All quite a change from Erich van Daniken who made a fine living claiming that the same inscriptions showed alien astronauts rather than aristocrats burning scraps of paper soaked in their own blood in the smoke of which they perceived dream visions of their ancestors and gods.

Nicole says

This book wasn't really what I was looking for. I looked all over Amazon for a book on the history of the Maya that was not a children's book and not also about Aztec and Inca. There aren't that many books like that out there, unfortunately. Anyway, I chose this book because of the reviews and it had the best rating. I mean, it is a good book about the history of the Maya cities, but there wasn't much about the daily life of the ancient Maya. Maybe if I had paid more attention to the reviews I would have noticed that the book is the story of what the authors discovered from reading Maya ruins about the cities. For example, I would have loved a tangent about the enema bowls popping up in the Maya drawings. What the hell were those for?*

Anyway, I'm still looking for a general popular history of the Maya. I want to know what it was like back then, what did they eat, more about their religion, etc. Suggestions would be highly appreciated.

I did find the explanation of Mayan language and writing very interesting.

*I read about 1/2 of the book and skimmed through the rest once I realized it wasn't going where I was interested. If there was an explanation about enema bowls, I didn't see it and it wasn't referenced in the index.

Kyle says

This book is a great showcase of what we lost when the great Linda Schiele died. Though obviously the book is a bit outdated (we just know more about the Maya, particularly their written languages, now than when this book was written), it still holds surprising relevance to Mayan studies today. The technical information is presented in an accessible format that anyone can understand regardless of their previous knowledge/experience in Mayan studies.

This book also does something very unique that few other history books are willing to do (let alone Mayan ones); this book provides fanciful story-style interpretations of historical events surrounding the various Mayan players (like Kings). Some people may not like these short story excerpts as they are historical fiction, but I think they provide the reader with real connections and emotional investment with the historical figures presented in the "history book" portions of the book.

Overall, this is a great book for people interested in some of the major city states and kings of the ancient Maya, and though the information is outdated and the translations crude by today's standard, it is still an enjoyable, educational, and accessible read for people of all backgrounds.

Mike Steinborn says

This is a book written by a couple of field researchers and academics in the field of archaeology, so it's not easy reading! However, the authors made a much appreciated attempt to include a fictional prose section in each chapter, incorporating their findings into a story that depicts people, things, and events as they might

have appeared at the time. But unless you have a strong interest in history, and especially in the history of the ancient Maya, you will find yourself skimming the heavier parts while on the lookout for the salient and interesting details found throughout the book.

The main thing that struck me while reading this book about the history of the ancient Maya was how completely different their worldview and culture is from my own. They might as well have been visitors from Mars when it comes to my ability to relate to their world! However, I can appreciate their accomplishments nonetheless. And how I wish I could draw pictures and symbols like they did! No wonder Erik von Daniken (of Chariots of the Gods fame) interpreted some of them as being pictures of galactic visitors from outer space piloting advanced spacecraft!

Timothy Boyd says

This is the 2nd book I have recently read on the Maya. Like the other book this one was heavily written from a more archeological view than a historical view. The writer does try to fill out the history with reimagined events of everyday life of the Maya based on the archeological evidence. Not recommended unless you are greatly into reading archeological studies.

Megan says

While I am sure there are many books with updated information and new findings (this book was published in 1990), I found this book an extremely interesting and informative read.

Some thoughts/highlights:

- At the beginning of the book there is a section on how to pronounce Mayan words. It was extremely helpful.
- I learned I've been using the terms Maya and Mayan wrong (Mayan refers to language spoken; the name of the people as a noun or adjective is Maya).
- Book has lots of glyph drawings and pictures!
- There are fictional perusals in each chapter, which they are kept short and used as a way to explore and conjecture what life may have been like. I thought they were well done.

Keep in mind, the subject matter is focused on writings, cities and kingship rather than on day to day life of all the Maya. Most of the writing and art was done by/for Kings so there is not really a lot of physical evidence for what the common people thought or did.

It is fascinating to try and piece together the remnants of lives so far past from what little remains. The Maya's own ritual destruction of tablets, plus the Spanish conquest, plus the ravages of time shadow the past in an air of mystery.

Alexander says

I am officially giving up on this book at page 185. While both authors are undisputed authorities in Mayan civilization, this book has all the appeal of a research journal:

- Instead of reasonably coherent and systematic top-down treatise of the Mayan civilization, we get "lumps" of lengthy and excruciatingly boring discussions of some specific detail or event in Mayan history, what evidence there is for it, and how it is supported by the graphics discovered.

- The book is choke-full of very well done drawings of Mayan graphics that survived, but these drawings are barely annotated (the annotations that are present are of such kind an archaeologist would scribe for himself, much less for anyone else) and there is absolutely no attempt to explain it to someone who has not devoted his life to Mayan civilization research. I mean, it is great that you get an annotation like "sacrifice" pointing to an incomprehensible (to an uninitiated) jumble of lines, but that is as much explanation as you get.

Here's a good analogy from the computer world (I know, geeks here): the book is akin to being handed a grimoire on PostScript language when all you need to do is to print a couple of documents.

To summarize, if you are already well-versed in Mayan history, script, and culture, you would absolutely LOVE this book as it will greatly deepen your knowledge of specific events in Mayan history in a well supported, documented, and illustrated manner. If you are - like me - just want to learn more about Maya, their history, religion, culture, and maybe even get some very basic understanding of the principles of their writing system, this is probably not the book you are looking for.

Chris says

Co-written by one of the most prominent Maya scholars of the 20th century, the late Linda Schele, this book examines the Mayan civilization through its linguistic legacy. Showing the processes which helped decipher a large amount of Mayan inscription, this book also describes their genealogical legacy as described through the Mayan stelae record.

Erik Graff says

I visited the NE Yucatan three times in the 1990s, devoting most of my time to hiking the coast and, with the help of young Maya, trekking overland to ruins they'd tell me of. Preparatory to these trips I'd read some of the literature, much of it dated. This then is one of the first books I've read which purports to be based on the recent decoding of Mayan script. Armed with this new insight, Schele and Freidel tell a number of stories, histories really, of several Mayan centers and the people who dominated them.

Frankly, given the evidence they present (confronting my ignorance), I am skeptical. Their accounts seem just a bit too certain, their qualifications too muted. Their approach approaches the novelistic--and indeed the whole is punctuated by little illuminating fictions.

I would have been more comfortable with a more cautious, scholarly approach, on the one hand, or a more purely novelistic one, on the other.

On one point, though, they got me going, that being their repeated references to the vision quests through bloodletting. Apparently the Maya would do stuff like putting stingray barbs through their penises and tongues in order to obtain visionary access to spiritual realms. In the text itself the authors treat this as unremarkable, as though 'of course, such painful practices induce altered states of consciousness'. Well, that

made no sense, so I went through the footnotes, all of them (and there are many), and found that there they amplified their descriptions by adducing pain, fasting and 'intoxication' as the causes of their visions. Now that made it seem a bit more plausible, but still left me wondering what the intoxicating agent(s) might have been. That is nowhere addressed.

Personally, I find both Egyptian and Mayan art to be 'trippy'. Both are very colorful, often as if self-illuminated. Both delineate forms starkly. This is how things look to me--and to many others, from what I hear--under the influence. So, naturally, I wonder if it's common to find oneself in pseudo-MesoAmerican environments simply because of the overweening influence of the writings of Carlos Castaneda et alia or, more intriguingly, if it's because both we and our American (or Egyptian) ancestors took similar substances and had similar visions, visions which their cultures took seriously enough to represent in their art and religion.

I find it odd that the authors of this book didn't address this matter at all.

Ryan says

Read ages ago on a trip to Honduras where I visited several Mayan sites. In general, reading about a place on a trip to the place usually reflects poorly on either the place or the literature. In this case, the literature suffered. But there is a lot of human sacrifice to keep the story in the red.
