

Maya Christians and Their Churches in Sixteenth-Century Belize (Maya Studies)

Review

instrument, rather than as raw-material for casting, might deserve to be revisited.

This volume raises exciting new questions: can the vision of an ethnically mixed community of urban entrepreneurs be maintained, or was the diaspora 'Frisian merchant' a more typical inhabitant? Was the urban character sustained into the tenth century, or did Kaupang enjoy an early ninth century 'emporium moment', followed by a long twilight? There is no question however that this book makes new strides in refashioning our image of Norway's first town, and leaves enduring new knowledge and visions of early North Sea urban centres.

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ELIZABETH GRAHAM, *Maya Christians and their churches in sixteenth-century Belize*, xx+436 pages, 100 illustrations, 2011, Gainesville (FL): University Press of Florida, 978-0-8130-5666-5 hardback \$79.95.



Elizabeth Graham's book deserves great praise and should be read by anyone interested in Mesoamerican and Iberian worldviews. The archaeological and ethnohistorical study of religion is extremely problematic and Graham is not shy about pointing out its failings. Many studies of ancient worldviews are plagued by little to no definition of what is meant by 'religion' or how or if it can be studied from the material record. A key feature in Graham's scholarship is her recognition that "rethinking problematic terms is not trivial, but essential" (p. 59). Graham acknowledges that it is no longer possible to proceed with discussing Maya worldviews without highlighting the problems inherent in universally applying Western theological concepts. Since her book is mostly a discussion centred on the colonial period, social-cultural ethnographies of Mesoamerican worldviews were deliberately not included in her analysis.

Researchers interested in descriptive fare reifying religion as if archaeologically tangible might be uneasy with Graham; on the other hand, critically-minded

scholars seeking to understand worldview processes in-depth will find much here to engage them in a study of Mesoamerican peoples that is presented in a mostly impartial manner. A case in point is Graham's non-idealised treatment of the socially-sanctioned killing typically categorised as 'human sacrifice' done to *worship the gods*. Graham establishes the difference between the giving up of something that one does not want to surrender, hence making it sacred, and that of killing someone, even if executed in highly ritualistic style, when direct political gain is to be achieved from this action: the difference between the two are *not* nuances and are highly significant for understanding all-too-human motivations. Graham portrays the ancient and colonial-period Maya as the pragmatic peoples they were, steering clear of another Eliadian-like foray into mystical shamanic activities as is commonly attempted when describing 'Maya religion'. She tries, as much as she can, to present the reader with a study of Maya religious processes in a holistic, and therefore non-separated, sphere engaging politics and economics. Our construction of ancient Maya ritualistic practices as a theologically codified religion is a distortion that Graham is acutely aware of; she strives to distance herself from this but is not always completely successful in her attempt.

Getting over the entrenched, academic, reified view of assumed codified pre-Columbian beliefs based on supernatural gods is however extremely difficult; given our Western social backgrounds, even when we are making the point that 'belief' and 'religion' are tenuous concepts, as is the case here. Graham, from an insider's point of view, explains that Roman-Catholic images and statues of virgins, saints, angels and demons do not represent gods; growing up as a Roman-Catholic, like Graham, I know to be accurate too, but she does not extend this same logic to Maya worldviews concerning their imagery and statues. Herein lies the difficulty: although Graham explains that the uncritical application of the terms worship and deity abound (p. 305) assumptions regarding an actual pantheon of gods for pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, and therefore a lingering notion that its inhabitants made our Western scientific distinction between supernatural and natural worlds and the Judeo-Christian-Muslim distinction between sacred and profane, is surprisingly still present. Why the colonial Maya kept animal bundles, such as that of Cortes' horse, and made offerings to them as if sentient is not clear. Also not clear is why the colonial Maya were attracted to Roman-Catholic crosses.

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