

Anthropology Book Forum

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Focused archaeology on an inconstant subject

THOMAS G. GARRISON AND STEPHEN HOUSTON, editors, 2018, *An Inconstant Landscape, The Maya Kingdom of El Zotz, Guatemala*, Lewisville: University Press of Colorado, 470 pp., ISBN 978-1646420773.

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This is an excellent book. It is a highly focused book, the text concerned solely with the Pre-Columbian archaeology of Guatemala's Buenavista Valley. This geological consists of a broad, low valley in the northern portion of that country, running east-west and connecting the big lakes of the interior to the western-flowing drainage of the Río San Pedro Martir. This valley holds the remains of a half-dozen ancient communities centered on the Classic-era ruin of El Zotz. In antiquity, the Maya referred to this ruin as *Pa'ka'n*, "Split Sky." In Stephen Houston's own translation of the emblem glyph, El Zotz was "A Fortress in Heaven." The landscape around this heavenly fortress experienced some 28 centuries of cultural development, a sequence that saw the rise and fall of the Preclassic and Classic Maya civilizations, as well as the subsequent Postclassic. The book even documents the tragic looting episodes of the 20th century that visited such destruction on the valley. As such, *An Inconstant Landscape* stands as an impressive contribution to our understanding of the ancient Maya and is a superlative example of how to plan, execute, and publish regional archaeology in the 21st century.

It is not a perfect book, but it accomplishes everything that it intends to. The text aims to present the results of the dirt archaeology carried out by the Proyecto Arqueológico El Zotz from 2006 to 2012, although the volume does contain information from ongoing investigations. In the preface, the editors write that “this volume reports primarily on data” (xx). That is precisely what the book does for the next thirteen chapters. It is organized into two parts, cultural history and epigraphy in the first half, technical analysis and material culture in the second. These chapters range from the Preclassic settlements to the construction and occupation of the different components of El Zotz itself, as well as the Postclassic usage of the ruins. Following chapters focus on different aspects of the valley’s material culture, ceramics, lithics, the environment, figurines, architecture, and osteology. Over the centuries, the Maya of the Buenavista Valley settled, modified, built, farmed, and abandoned different parts of the valley at different times, sometimes choosing the floor, other times the slopes. It really was an inconstant landscape, settlement, usage, and occupation shifting through the ages.

The only significant issue with the book lies in this single-minded focus on the archaeology of El Zotz and its environs. This is not a text that explores large issues in Maya scholarship, either historical, regional, or theoretical. In its pages, *An Inconstant Landscape* discusses Classic rulers but not the nature of rulership. It documents the changes in settlement over time but does not make any great effort to explain those changes or compare them to other parts of the Maya world. It includes information on the material culture of the valley but does not go into significant detail about those artistic traditions or the means by which such material culture was produced, distributed, consumed, or deposited. There is very little comparison to other sites or how the data can speak to the whole of Maya civilization. The contributions in the book describe, but rarely explain. For instance, El Zotz is referred to as a city, but there is no attempt to explain its urban character. This is almost certainly an editorial decision, the decision to keep the focus on archaeological data itself, however, the text would have greatly benefited from a broader perspective, even in the context of a comprehensive conclusion.

There are smaller, minor criticisms of the text, but these hardly matter. Both the black-and-white photographs and high-resolution topographic maps tend to be quite muddy and washed out in the final publication. For academic presses, line illustrations are greatly preferred for this very reason. The entire ceramic chapter lacks a single depiction of a whole vessel. The scholarship

itself, while not sloppy by any measure, is less than meticulous in places. There are far too many citations for personal communications, even when that exact information has previously published. In some places, important information is presented and not cited at all. What, exactly, are “El Perú-Waka’-style bowls”? Sometimes it seems as if the authors use the terms “El Zotz” and “Buenavista Valley” interchangeably and it is left to the reader to puzzle out which is which.

But, again, such criticisms hardly matter when compared to the excellent work done in the Buenavista Valley. The book is a major contribution to our understanding of the Maya world and the Native American past. The archaeology presented in its pages provides an unadulterated perspective on a Maya kingdom over the *longue durée* of its existence. The skill and patience required to provide this perspective are impressive. Whether the book discusses the Preclassic archaeology of James Doyle and Rony Piedrasanta or the osteological research of Andrew Scherer, or the soil chemistry and landscape modification documented by Timothy Beach and his colleagues, the text is authoritative, it is professional, it is high quality. It is an excellent book and is a required text for anyone interested in ancient Maya civilization. For example, there are two outstanding chapters that will be described here, although this is not to diminish the other contributions. The first is Chapter 4, by Nicholas Carter and his colleagues, where they rebuild the dynastic sequence of El Zotz using only looted vessels, architectural drawings, tiny fragments of epigraphy, and the meticulous archaeology of the El Zotz project. The result is an imperfect portrait, to be sure, but it is complete enough to show how the El Zotz dynasts met the political challenges of their day, coping with an ascendant Tikal in one generation and a bellicose Calakmul in the next. The second is Zachary Hruby’s Chapter 9, focusing on the lithic technologies of the valley. He shows how the traditions of chert and obsidian meet the needs of the people who made them and used them. Hruby documents how different actors modified stone tools at different times and the type of artifact needed in the palace was quite different from those used in farming households. He also notes how supply was a major problem and the valley’s geology forced the local Maya to import much of their stone, and restrictions on this importation changed their lithic traditions. It is an impressive chapter on the subject.

The whole book is impressive. It does exactly what it means to do, describing and documenting the archaeological investigation of a key portion of the ancient Maya world. Whatever its trivial flaws, it will occupy a permanent place among the books of any serious

Mayanist scholar. Indeed, *An Inconstant Landscape* itself makes a wonderful companion to the previous text on the site, *Temple of the Night Sun*, a gorgeous book on the intact royal tomb from El Zotz and its associated architecture. Each book complements the other and, on the shelf, they look very good leaning on each other, both intellectually and literally.

References

Houston, Stephen D., et al. 2015. *Temple of the Night Sun: a royal tomb at El Diablo, Guatemala*. Precolumbia Mesoweb Press.

Keith Eppich has been a professional archaeologist for twenty-five years, and has worked across the continental United States as well as in the Republic of Guatemala. He has worked at the site of El Perú-Waka' since 2003, focusing on the Classic traditions there. He has published numerous reports, articles, and chapters on the subject, including co-editing the volume *Breath and Smoke, Tobacco among the Maya*. He teaches in Texas.



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