
David S. Whitley’s enthusiasm and passion for rock art comes through clearly in his new book, Cave Paintings and the Human Spirit: The Origin of Creativity and Belief. The first two-thirds of the book are an intensely personal account of his experiences visiting some of the most important decorated caves in western Europe and of his intimate take on the Coa Valley dating controversy. The final third of the book details what he believes rock art can tell us about the origins of religion and creativity and when we became “human” in the fullest sense of that word.

The primary audience for this book is a popular one. On the positive side, this means that the writing style is very accessible and indeed the book is a quick read. On the negative side, Whitley does not feel compelled to support his arguments in the same way that one is accustomed to in academic writing, and often what is conjectural at one point in the book becomes fact, a “certainty,” later in the volume. Similarly, there are a number of instances of intellectual naiveté. For example, Whitley writes that while some researchers argue that symbol use is a defining character of behaviorally modern humans, he feels that this is a “current but odd concept inasmuch as animals of all kinds regularly act ‘symbolically’ as anyone with a dog should know” (p. 244). This statement suggests that Whitley has misunderstood both the debate surrounding the origins of modern behavior as well as the notions of symbol use, intentionality, etc.—dogs do not and cannot act symbolically.

The central thesis of the book concerns the relationship between shamanism and rock art. I have not taken a position on this debate and Whitley’s arguments did nothing to persuade me either way, and in this sense the volume does not succeed. Specifically, he argues that Paleolithic parietal art is exceptional (a series of “masterpieces”). All rock art, including Paleolithic parietal art, is the work of shamans. Based on ethnographic accounts it is clear that shamans were mentally ill. Specifically, they suffered from a variety of mood disorders (including mild to severe depression and bipolar disorder). Paleolithic art was produced by these shamans because the relationship between mental illness and extraordinary creativity is well documented. He writes, “the painted caves are remarkable expressions of artistic talent because they were created by unusual people: those with specific kinds of mental disorders...that drive them mad yet, at the same time, promoted their genius” (p. 244). Whitley’s primary justification for speaking with authority on this topic is that he too suffers from mood disorders and thus can understand the “emotional landscape that shamans travelled” (p. 238). This is an admission that seems almost too personal to reveal in such a context, especially since it does little to convince the reader of the validity of his thesis, which is based on an exaggerated and stereotyped characterization of Paleolithic cave art. Furthermore, Whitley does little to address the criticisms such a model engenders within, for example, the fields of Paleolithic archaeology (e.g., P. G. Bahn, The Cambridge Illustrated History of Prehistoric Art, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and medical anthropology (J. B. Waldram, The Revenge of the Windigo: The Construction of the Mind and Mental Health of North American Aboriginal People, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004). He brushes them aside by writing, “although there are dissenters (there are always dissenters for issues that matter), the arguments in favor of this conclusion are very good, if not compelling.”

Bottom line: Who should buy this book? Anyone interested in a highly personal account of one individual’s visit to and experience of some of the more well known decorated caves in western Europe. Who shouldn’t buy this book? Anyone looking for new data or for a meticulously documented, well-reasoned argument for the shamanism interpretation of cave art and for the origin of religion, art, and creativity.

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This book describes the nature of change in the ceramics produced over more than 30 years, 1965–1997, by potters in Tielc, a Maya community, and attempts to explain the nature of those changes. Dean Arnold is a cultural anthropologist who has worked with potters in Mexico, Guatemala, and Peru across a distinguished career spanning more than 40 years.

The author is an ethnoarchaeologist, yet his work is largely directed toward the archaeological community and presents vast amounts of data highly useful for strengthening archaeological inference. Arnold’s seminal book, Ceramic Theory and Cultural Process (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), is widely used and cited by archaeologists working with ceramics. I suspect that Arnold’s interests in pottery and archaeology were stimulated by one of his mentors during his graduate school training at the University of Illinois in Urbana, the late Donald Lathrap, an archaeologist who worked extensively in Latin America and who undertook ethnoarchaeological studies of pottery in Peru.

During the 30 years reported in this book, Arnold took ten trips to Tielc and observed changes in the numbers and organization of the potters as well as the nature of the pottery being produced. The extraordinary depth of this longitudinal study has resulted in an unusual amount of detailed information about both change and continuity in the organization, production, and distribution of pottery in Tielc. The majority of the chapters present summaries of these data.

Space does not permit an adequate summation of the results, which provide data that will be of great interest and use to archaeologists interested in pottery and its production and distribution. Some of the findings can be highlighted to whet the appetites of archaeologists, and not only those who work in the Maya area.

There is little change in the nature of the production unit over time. Production remains mostly household-based and relatively small. Nor is there significant change in the location of production. What has changed greatly is the distribution of the pottery. In the early part of the study, potters sold their products directly to the consumers. With time, the consumers changed to tourists in areas far from Tielc, and this change was made possible by growth in transportation options and the booming tourism in cities.

The majority of chapters are devoted to exploring the changing technology of the ceramics themselves. Clay procurement involves mining, and that technology has changed from shaws to open pits and the development of exclusive clay sources for individual potters. Tempers have remained constant because the potters appreciate the excellent performance characteristics that affect the paste and the drying and firing of the pots. Both clay and temper procurement show increased intensity and specialization. But the greatest change takes place in the forming technology of pottery production. The two developments that receive most of Arnold’s attention are the introduction of the ball-bearing turning platform and the use of molds. The changing nature of firing technology and the development of larger kilns is also presented.

The amount of information and theory-driven interpretation presented in this book is extraordinary in scope and detail. It is a model for displaying the tremendous value in longitudinal studies that encompass multiple decades. The rich data are presented in text, tables, and graphs that make them amenable for use and testing of alternative explanations by other readers. For example, the notion of performance characteristics as a means of
interpreting changes in the design or composition of vessels may provide additional insight into the array of changes documented by Arnold in his rich description. He only considers performance in examining the selection of temper, a choice that did not change over the three decades of the study. Arnold notes the cessation of the production of ceramic cooking pots and ascribes the reason cooking pots disappear to the selection of metal cooking pots by most households after metal pots became available.

Similarly, he notes the demise of the ceramic water jar, previously an important item for all households for the storage and transportation of water. Arnold ascribes the potters’ decision to stop production of water jars to the availability of water pipes in even the most rural parts of Yucatan after 1980. Perhaps some investigation into the associated performance characteristics of these changing assemblage compositions would have added some additional insight into the explanations of these changes.

This book is a mine bursting with detailed information on a pottery technology and the ways in which it has changed across 32 years of observation. It will be a source of inspiration and, more important, a source of beautifully organized and presented data on the shifts in that technology over time. It provides the opportunity for students to explore alternative explanations and to test them against real data from this exceptional longitudinal study.

Arnold notes in his conclusions that he has presented aspects of production and distribution broadly and identified general patterns. But he notes that there is more social and more personal side to the changes in the units of pottery production. These reveal a different dimension to the results presented in his book. But Arnold promises that this perspective is the subject of another book on ceramic change in Ticul. I look forward with great anticipation to that next monograph and anticipate it will be as interesting, abundant in information, and helpful as the book under review.

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Matthew Looper’s To Be Like Gods: Dance in Ancient Maya Civilization is an exhaustive, cutting-edge study of Classic Maya dance that will likely remain definitive for years. The subject matter may sound like a pleasant diversion, but readers are advised to check their fantasies at the door before delving into this dense, scholarly book. Looper’s approach is methodologically rigorous, analytically detailed, and does not try to sweep away annoying uncertainties under the rug. The fact that the Classic Maya left paintings and sculptures of dancing figures, and had a hieroglyph for dance, does not mean that their dance imagery is straightforward. The dance hieroglyph accompanies perfectly rigid figures who must be understood as dancers, and what is deemed “dance paraphernalia” is also present in depictions of kingship rites, processions, and warfare. The boundaries of dance iconography are therefore blurred, making it impossible to segregate dance from other performance arenas. Looper deals with this amplified corpus of “dance” imagery, as likely to include static or seated figures, or lines of hulking war monsters, as anything obviously resembling a dancer. The wide net cast and generous illustrations make the book an invaluable visual reference on Classic Maya performance.

In the theorized introduction, the author rejects older notions of dance as stylized movements enacted in front of an audience to convey information. He is equally critical of what has come to be received wisdom among Mayanists, based on Clifford Geertz’s notion of the “theater-state”: the Classic Maya were organized into “weak states” whose leadership relied on public spectacles to promote political unity. Looper sees this rationale for “dance as public spectacle” as an extension of an Aristotelian dramaturgical model which attributes a largely semiotic role to dance. For Looper, dance, more accurately, is social discourse that constructs social reality and has reverberating social effects, echoing agency theory and phenomenological notions of embodiment. Interestingly, the aesthetics of dance are viewed as a medium through which social discourse can take place.

Briefly summarized, six chapters use highly particularized case studies to cover diverse dance-related topics. Chapter 1 discusses epigraphic evidence for dance, hinging on Nikolai Grube’s decipherment of the ak’al’i dance glyph (a handy appendix lists known occurrences), and the political alliances suggested by the dance glyph’s dissemination during the seventh and eighth centuries. Chapter 2 reviews dance iconography, followed by a detailed exploration of the murals in Rooms 1 and 3, Bonampak. Chapter 3 considers the gestures and poses of dancers. Looper concludes that actual dance movements cannot be reconstructed owing to the conceptual nature of the imagery. Coauthored with Dorie Reents-Budet and Ronald Bishop, Chapter 4 focuses on dance themes associated with three pottery styles: Holmul, Tikal Dancer, and Ik’-style painted ceramics. The archetypal dancer, the maize god, is shown to assume different guises in Holmul and Tikal Dancer vessels, a fact with political implications. An important overview of Ik’-style pottery reveals some of the most intriguing ritual scenes in Maya art. Turning to art and architecture from Copan and sites in Yucatan and Campeche, Chapter 5 considers the spatial setting of dance. Looper reasserts that dance, sometimes performed in private spaces, was not always a public spectacle. Dance-related architecture is seen as a dynamic agent of social construction.

Chapter 6 moves into colonial and contemporary dance, offering a useful overview of ethnohistorical sources and the role of the cofradía. The analytical centerpiece is the Patzkar, a dance cycle still performed among highland K’iche’ in Guatemala. Rather than emphasizing ancient continuities, the author concludes that the Patzkar’s major themes resonate with late, foreign introductions: Spanish performances of Corpus Christi and the Aztec ritual of Atamalcautli, with some motifs, such as the centipede, having Classic Maya precedents. Looper’s distincs against the essentialism inherent in viewing dances like the Patzkar as mere survivals or syncretic pastiches, essentially ignoring transformative historical processes, are well taken. However, an inconsistency in standards struck me when reading the epilogue. Here, without explanation, the emotional content of Maya dance is likened to a shamansitic journey, and elsewhere the conception of the body in dance is said to be “rooted in the core practices of Mesoamerican shamanism” (p. 112). As one who does not accept shamanistic ascriptions at face value, I found these statements lacking the book’s usual rigor.

To Be Like Gods greatly advances our understanding of the evidence for Classic Maya dance and theoretical issues surrounding this artistic practice and its visual representation. Those with affection for Maya culture will certainly want a copy on their bookshelves.

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Archaeologists too often leave behind unpublished remnants that others must try to make the best of. We are very fortunate that, 35 years after the fieldwork, Jeffrey Parsons has published in such detail the survey he led in the Zumpango region, in the northwestern part of the Basin of Mexico, in 1973. This was part of the surface survey of most of the basin, a project begun by the late William Sanders in the 1960s and continued by him, Parsons,