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Archaeology Films - Copán, 1985. El Mirador: A Preclassic City, 1985.

Marshall Joseph Becker

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ARCHAEOLOGY FILMS

Copán. 1985. Produced and directed by William Uricchio. Color, 15 minutes. Purchase \$250 (16mm), \$145 (video); rental \$15 from The Pennsylvania State University, Audio Visual Services, Special Services Bldg., University Park, PA 16802 (814) 865-6314

El Mirador: A Preclassic City. 1985. A film by Ray T. Matheny. Color, 30 minutes. Purchase \$355 (16mm), \$145 (video) from Brigham Young University, Audio Visual Services, 101 F.B., Provo, UT 84602 (801/378-4261)

Two of the most impressive ancient cities of the Maya are Copán in Honduras and El Mirador in Guatemala. Both cities were thriving at some point during the long Classic period of Maya civilization (ca. A.D. 200-900), but the differences in their patterns of development and decline offer us valuable comparative information. These impressive ruins hold answers to many questions regarding the achievement of the Maya. The huge structures and many carved stone monuments at both of these sites continue to amaze us as we learn more about why they were built and what they mean.

But the two short films being reviewed here lack the range of information which would enable a viewer to understand all of the details without some background knowledge.

Copán, located at the extreme southern edge of the Maya culture area, has been the target of archaeological research for nearly a century. Mirador, in the heart of a vast forested area, has only recently become known to the scientific world. Some unusual characteristics of Maya cities found at Mirador have generated considerable archaeological excitement, among them the impressive Preclassic public buildings and the earliest known examples of several architectural traits, such as decorative masks on building façades. Mirador may have been far ahead of cities such as Tikal and Copán, where these features are known only at much later dates. Since the development of the Classic period is defined by the rise of great cities with vaulted buildings, hieroglyphic writing and carved stone monuments (stelae), the presence of these characteristics at Mirador before A.D. 200 is quite exciting.

As explained in this film, Mirador remained almost entirely unknown until the intrepid Ian Graham made a rough map of the site in 1962. Very little archaeological work beyond the mapping and very limited test pitting have been done, due to the inaccessibility of the

site. But a team of scholars brought together by Ray Matheny of Brigham Young University has begun to make some progress toward understanding this extraordinary series of ruins and opening Mirador to further investigation. The recent construction of an airfield has accelerated the pace of research, but the archaeologists working at Mirador have barely begun to probe the huge platforms and structures that spread out through the rain forest. For this reason, very little of the site has been exposed and the reconstruction of buildings (an enormously expensive and time-consuming activity) has yet to begin.

All of these factors created considerable difficulty for the producers of a video cassette lasting 30 minutes. There is very little to see at this site—beyond the forest and the archaeologists in it. The problem of providing visuals has been overcome here to some extent by clever use of a model reconstruction of the city, based on preliminary maps, and extremely talented use of still photographs. Nevertheless, looking at the dense and murky forest background of Mirador, we see the challenge that attracts explorers and archaeologists, and developers as well, to the area.

On the whole, this film offers us a good history and progress report on the excavations of Mirador, with a useful summary of what has been learned to date. Given the vast numbers of theories concerning Classic Maya society and its development, the text of this presentation generally avoids controversy. The emphasis in the narration focuses on the data and leaves conclusions to the viewer. While the use of stills and camera angles in this difficult environment is extremely skillful, the color does not seem bright nor the focus sharp. Movement of the camera obscures the fact that only a small area of the site has been sampled. What we see is a lot of activity, but little that is of value to the viewer.

Possibly the best feature of this film is the use of excellent background music—guitar music extremely well performed and well integrated with both the visuals and the narration. The soundtrack text is well written and clearly presented, but the live comments by various archaeologists, although interesting, do not work well into the flow of the text and may not make sense to someone unfamiliar with Maya archaeology. For example, it is not clear that the commentator on the general interest in the site's "development" is referring to two different processes. The archaeologists are concerned with the new perspectives on the origins of the Classic period,

while the Guatemalan government is concerned with the economic development of the region. The importance of this kind of archaeological research in fostering economic development is rarely noted, and this brief statement has an importance which is not pursued in the film.

The archaeological site of Copán provides information about the other end of the Classic period, when the Maya city-states were in decline. At that time Copán was at its greatest peak of activity, while Mirador seems to have long passed its prime. The brief film about Copán, however, has time to do little more than use the site to provide background for a narration by William Sanders, whose theory of the decline of Classic Maya civilization is the best presented portion of this film. Sanders, the second director of the Copán Archaeological Project sponsored by the government of Honduras, focused his research program on the settlement areas beyond the center of the site. The Sanders program is probably the most extensive exploration of residential areas of the non-elite ever conducted at a Maya site, but the value of these excavations to Maya archaeology may be difficult to understand in the context presented. While Sanders's ideas sound reasonable for the well-watered river valley of Copán, they do little to explain the economic history and possibly the population decline at such sites as Mirador or Tikal, within their different ecologies.

The brevity of the film also prevents the gorgeous scenery, outstanding reconstructions and spectacular monuments of Copán from being shown to any advantage. No note is made of the numerous excavations preceding those under the direction of William Sanders (1980-1983). Sanders's research at Copán began as part of a program primarily supported by a World Bank development loan to the government of Honduras—a loan noteworthy for specifically identifying archaeological research as one aspect of a program to stimulate tourism in the region. Copán has become more accessible to tourists in recent years, just as Mirador will in the near future.

The introductory remarks to the Copán film seem very dated. For example, the idea that occupation of Copán ended in A.D. 800 is in error, since buildings erected after that date are known from the center of the site. Str. 10L-18, for one, was built in A.D. 805, and additions and renovations were made possibly as late as A.D. 1000. No evidence of actual population decline is presented.

The technical quality of the Copán film is excellent, but the time spent on any specific view is too brief to do more than illustrate a point in the narration.

Too much of the limited time is used on dull visuals of the excavations, rather than an organized and smooth presentation of what has been found and could be illustrated so well. Since this film is only a pilot for a projected series of detailed films on Copán, the situation may be rectified in the near future.

Good films, whether produced by Hollywood or at an academic institution, are quite rare. Like a good short story, a 15-minute film must be very well written and tightly constructed to be successful. The Copán film has not done justice to the research of William Sanders or to the beauty of the site and its setting. While Maya archaeology provides all of the elements needed to create a good film, the necessary production team has yet to be assembled. This is not to detract from the scholarly abilities of the many people who made these two films or the considerable value of their research. A translation of all their work into a coherent visual statement using the sites as a background would be a valuable addition to any film library.

Marshall Joseph Becker, Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA □

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