

# ‘The Four Heavens’ Review: Mysteries of the Yucatán

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By Max Carter

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A sculpture of a Mayan god at the Copan ruins in modern-day Honduras. Alamy

History, like gossip, is only interesting if you know the players. A series of unfamiliar names, dates and events has little meaning without such

knowledge or, at least, an exceptionally wise and intuitive guide. David Stuart exemplifies the latter. In “The Four Heavens: A New History of the Ancient Maya,” he cannot possibly tell us everything we might wish to know about this mysterious and fascinating people. But he does tell us everything we do know, and how it came to be known.

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The Four Heavens: A New History of the Ancient Maya

**DAVID STUART**

# The Four Heavens



**A NEW HISTORY  
OF THE  
ANCIENT MAYA**

To say that our picture of Maya civilization—an interlocking network of kingdoms occupying the Yucatán Peninsula and swaths of present-day Guatemala, Belize, Honduras and El Salvador from roughly 1000 B.C. to A.D. 900—has been sketchy for centuries is no exaggeration. Until recently, Mayan script was indecipherable; Mr. Stuart is among the few who helped to unlock it.

Yet the barrier to our understanding is far greater than mere translation. A professor of Mesoamerican art and writing at the University of Texas at Austin, Mr. Stuart compares the challenges of 19th-century Mayanists and Egyptologists. “Antiquarians had no detailed sense of Egyptian history and civilization, either,” Mr. Stuart suggests. “But there was one key difference. As mysterious as it was, ancient Egypt was still seen to be *Egyptian*, linked in some way to the detailed accounts of pharaohs of the Old Testament. By contrast, nearly all the ruined temples and palaces of Central America had long been stripped of any cultural or historical identity whatsoever.” Absent any contextual identity, the names and dates Mayan inscriptions reveal are simply that: names and dates. (But what names! “The Four Heavens” stars such figures as Scroll Serpent, Spearthrower Owl, Fire Is the Mouth of Blood, and Eighteen Are the Bodies of K’awil.)

Why does the Maya world remain so alien, notwithstanding the extraordinary work of Mr. Stuart and his peers? When the American explorer John Lloyd Stephens encountered the magnificent, startlingly complex ruins at Copan (in modern-day Honduras) in 1839, he marveled at “the beauty of the sculpture, the solemn stillness of the woods, disturbed only by the scrambling of monkeys and the chattering of parrots.” He remarked that “the desolation of the city, and the mystery that hung over it, all created an interest higher, if possible, than I had ever felt among the ruins of the Old World.” Cities, according to modern Western convention, are not lost: they grow or are destroyed. The presumed disappearance of the Maya had no parallel.

At Copan, Mr. Stuart relates, Stephens was unprepared for “a lost city built by a people completely unknown to history.” (For his ignorance we can blame the Spanish, who wiped out the indigenous nobility and did more harm to future Maya study than centuries of neglect could.) Skeptical of the

aptitude of the local “savages,” but unsure who else might have constructed the city, Stephens asked the “Indians” who made it: “Quién sabe?” they replied. “Who knows?”

As Mr. Stuart points out, there are some five million speakers of Mayan languages today, making theories of disappearance absurd. Lacking clear written or archaeological evidence, however, we are left to speculate as to why the Maya story ended as it did. In Mr. Stuart’s view, between A.D. 800 and 850, the major Maya states “disintegrated rapidly,” owing to some combination—rather than one single catastrophic cause—of intensifying ecological stress, overpopulation and warfare. “Through abandonment,” Mr. Stuart writes, “the Maya were trying to adapt to a rapidly changing world.”

Whatever the case, the Mayas’ circumstances and worldview no doubt informed their response to these interrelated pressures. (Mayan sources are patchy, elite and subjective. Their value lies in an internal consistency across sites.) Water was scarce; wetlands and lakes turned into swamps through soil erosion and overuse. “Even today,” Mr. Stuart notes, “lack of reliable water around this region presents a major challenge for archaeological projects.”

The Mayas’ sense of time was cyclical; social and demographic ruptures were the standard rather than the exception. New Maya cities and communities—which were expected to have finite lifespans—emerged in proximity to abandoned places “that must have been understood as old yet still within historical memory.” A constitutionally cyclical outlook encouraged adaptability and sustainability rather than fatalism. “The Four Heavens” illustrates these and other core Maya philosophies.

Mr. Stuart is an outstanding, enthusiastic and refreshingly self-aware scholar. Yet, inevitably, his account is less successful by traditional narrative standards. In Mr. Stuart’s preface he wonders, quite reasonably, “if some readers might find the details of names and dates a bit dry or tedious. But on reflection it occurred to me that the very existence of such detail is a key takeaway of this book and that we should celebrate our ability to peer into it.” Both his concern and reflections can be true.

“It is hard to know their exact political or family relationship,” Mr. Stuart observes of the kings of the Classic period (around A.D. 150-900) Kanul dynasty, “but Scroll Serpent succeeded Sky Witness in the more prominent role as paramount k’uhulajaw and overseer of Kanul’s vassals, among them, still, Ajnumsaj of Naranjo.” He goes on to consider Kanul’s chief rival: “I have long debated the question of whether this is the same Nunujolchahk of the Mutul dynasty, the brother or half-brother of Bajlaj Chank’awil, but I now believe they are likely the same person.” One day, these dynastic annals may form part of the historically literate man or woman’s mental furniture—we are not there yet.

*Mr. Carter is the chairman of 20th- and 21st-century art at Christie’s.*

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