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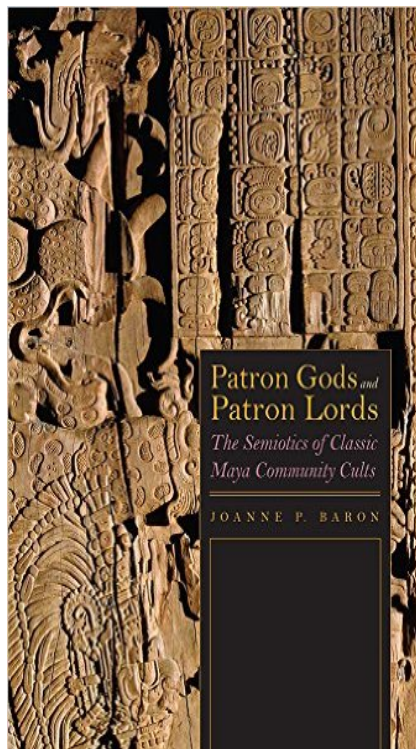
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Patron Gods and Patron Lords

The Semiotics of Classic Maya Community Cults

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Joanne Baron

Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, December 2016. 208 pages. \$52.00. Hardcover. ISBN 9781607325178.

For other formats: [Link to Publisher's Website \(http://upcolorado.com/university-press-of-colorado/item/3064-patron-gods-and-patron-lords\)](http://upcolorado.com/university-press-of-colorado/item/3064-patron-gods-and-patron-lords).

Review

In *Patron Gods and Patron Lords*, Joanne P. Baron proposes the use of a semiotic approach to the study of ancient Maya political organization and governing institutions in an effort to systematize the “vast collection of uniqueness” inherent in them (5). This approach is novel to the author's field and allows archaeologists to move beyond questions of context and into a complementary analysis that views available data in new ways. Baron here presents an analysis of the interplay of Classic Maya politics and religion at the site of La Corona, Guatemala. The final result is a compelling example of the relationships that patron Maya lords had with the patron gods of their people.

After a brief introduction to Classic-period Maya culture, political structure and the importance and use of patron gods, Baron presents the argument for a semiotic approach to the analysis of the relationship between lords and patron gods. This methodology is then exemplified in the following chapters, in which Baron uses the sister methods of semantics and pragmatics to explain both the definition and use of patron deities among the Classic Maya. Finally, the analysis presents a case study: patron deity veneration at the site of La Corona, Guatemala, where Baron has excavated. The argument is presented and unfolded step by step in a way that makes Baron's argument clear and easily understood.

In introducing a less common methodology, Baron is aware of the need to thoroughly explain the antecedents and possible applications of this method. The semiotic approach has its roots in Saussurean and Peircian methods, which the author explains in satisfying detail. Although the use of a linguistic model is relatively uncommon in archaeology, Baron shows that “through comparative information (analogy), [...] using historical records, or both,” semiotic archaeology can complement archaeological context and provide additional information on past societies (40).

The full potential benefits of semiotic anthropology are revealed in Baron's case study. Using the information presented in previous chapters, Baron applies the methodology to the site of La Corona, Guatemala, beginning with an introduction to the site that includes data from multiple excavations as well as historical data found in the inscriptions at the site. Viewing the information from a standpoint of truth or fiction, Baron says, provides us with a semantic analysis—that is, it focuses on the meaning of the information. However, when analyzing the texts contextually, within the situation that would have been contemporaneous, the reader confronts their pragmatic meaning: the purpose of the inscriptions and their political and religious implications (125).

Armed with this methodology, Baron guides the reader through the discovery of a historical narrative that portrays a competition between multiple elite families for the right to rule at La Corona; one lineage supported by the great Kaan dynasty at Calakmul, and the other, a “more self-reliant line of rulers” from the local area (126). Baron highlights the arrival of new patron gods as indexical of the re-establishment of a previous regime under the auspices of the Kaan dynasty—when the local lineage is replaced by the lineage with closer ties to Kaan, they repurpose the ancestor veneration temples of the previous lineage in order to use them as wayibor “sleeping places” for new patron gods, thus signifying a new regime under the protection of these new gods. These wayib would continue to be used in the same way long after the site had been abandoned.

Throughout this book, Baron shows how using a semiotic approach to combine both archaeological data and historical records can increase the information available to researchers by providing new lenses through which to view it. Baron's methodical approach is both careful and clear and provides an excellent example of the benefits of semiotic analysis in archaeology.

About the Reviewer(s):

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Joanne P. Baron is Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania and a consulting scholar at the Penn Museum. Her research, which has been funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the National Geographic Society, and others, investigates ancient Maya politics. She is the director of the La Florida Archaeology Project, based in northwestern Guatemala.