

of authorial (narrative) voice and the ethics and politics of anthropological knowledge, it also presents an interesting source for social theorists to discover alternative models of how the world works.

**Mesoamerican Writing Systems: Propaganda, Myth, and History in Four Ancient Civilizations.** By Joyce Marcus. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992. xxii + 495 pp., preface, illustrations, tables, appendix, references, index. \$49.95 cloth.)

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Among the New World civilizations, only the peoples of Mesoamerica developed writing. Four major systems of writing (or near-writing) are known—Aztec, Mixtec, Zapotec, and Maya—surviving primarily on stone monuments but also on native paper. While the decipherment of the pictographic and phonetic texts has been progressing for many decades, the focus of this book is on the continuing controversy over the interpretation of their information. The debate among recent Mesoamerican ethnohistoric and epigraphic scholarship centers on determining what component of the ancient writings and recorded oral traditions is to be considered true, or “history,” and what is false, or “myth.”

In tackling this conundrum, Marcus has taken a novel approach by distinguishing a third conceptual category: “propaganda,” defined as a simplified history based on “idealized models and stereotypes” (11). This is crucial to her formulation of an “anthropological theory” to account for the origins of writing, the timing of its initial appearance, and its subsequent changes. The author believes that writing developed in concert with the evolution of chiefdoms to further the political purposes of the nascent elite in their competition for leadership and in their domination of the nonliterate commoners. Thus “writing was a propaganda tool of the state” (7). In her comparative analysis of the four writing systems, Marcus concentrates on their historical content while emphasizing that these records constitute “a manipulated history in which the facts are altered to meet successive rulers’ changing political and ideological needs” (143).

Introductory chapters provide a brief background on the technical aspects of the four writing systems, the different calendars they incorporated, and their cultural contexts. Chapter 5, “Rewriting History,” sets the stage for the treatment of writing as propaganda, with apt comparisons to the analogous Egyptian case. Just as the Egyptians are known to have destroyed monuments and changed written records, so Marcus cites the instance of Itzcoatl, the fifteenth-century Aztec ruler who (according to

documents written over a century later) burned all the history books in order to invent a new past for his people. (A nagging question is whether this episode itself wasn’t later propaganda, or even myth.) The “political manipulation of history” (152) is further detailed by an examination of surviving writings according to different themes. Each theme is treated in a separate chapter with information derived from all four writing systems supplemented by historical and archaeological data, the author indicating which statements are to be accepted as written and which should arouse our suspicions as to their veracity.

The first two themes are personal and place names, which are among the earliest known written symbols. Toponyms, for example, are shown to designate a polity as coincident with its capital and ruler. The following chapters deal with familial concerns of the elite as targets for propaganda. Marcus proposes that hypogamous marriages of nobles were overemphasized in the written record because they served to elevate the status of a subsidiary lord by marrying the daughter of a superordinate. Elite ancestors were apotheosized as divinities in the rewriting of history, a euhemeristic process by which those in power rationalized their right to rule over subordinate peoples. It was this process, Marcus believes, that generated the multiple “deities” in Mesoamerican religions.

The final themes considered—accession and warfare—were particularly subject to propagandistic manipulation. Usurpers or those with dubious claims to succession are believed more likely to have fabricated records to support their accession. In the author’s view, the surviving texts dealing with warfare are so exaggerated that archaeological research is necessary to sift the truth out of the many claims of conquest of one city by another. The last chapter is a cross-cultural summary of all these writings, demonstrating an unexpected degree of similarity in content despite differences of chronology, language, method of writing, and medium.

With her many years of research on the Maya and Zapotec as an ethnohistorian and archaeologist, Marcus is perhaps uniquely qualified to present a detailed comparative and synthetic treatment of all these writing systems, in which epigraphic interpretation must be weighed against archaeological information. This book will be of interest to ethnohistorians in general because it addresses the larger question of how knowing the original purposes served by writing should influence its interpretation. Marcus’s own clear writing, the exhaustive comparative treatment, and the many illustrations will be greatly appreciated by Mesoamerican specialists desirous of owning a single authoritative reference on the different writing systems.