

Press Statement on 'Apocalypto' (University of Bonn)

In his latest movie 'Apocalypto', director Mel Gibson creates an image of the Pre-Hispanic Maya as a brutalized and religiously misguided society whose bestiality seals their demise, and whose only salvation is the arrival of the Spanish conquerors and Christian missionaries. While Gibson uses the Maya simply as an analogy for today's Western society and its inescapable faith, he creates a distorted picture of the Mesoamerican civilization which is historically largely unfounded.

The lack of a challenging story-line is compensated by an orgy of scenes of futile violence, which are in most cases invented or disconnected of their socio-political or religious context that we can reconstruct scientifically. As in other cultures, war raids served the purpose of acquiring external resources. Blood as well as human sacrifices were – just as in all antique societies – part of a complex religious system; the mass slaughtering shown in the movie lacks any grounded evidence. Here, the author mixes a – likewise distorted – Colonial Spanish devaluating propaganda of conquest-time Aztec culture with the presentation of Classic Maya society which had collapsed 300 years before.

Cultural achievements of the civilization, such as the evolution of a totally independent writing system and a calendar system which is based on arithmetics which included the concept of "zero", go unmentioned. Classic Maya astronomical expertise is even denied with the brutes in the movie reacting seemingly surprised to a solar eclipse which – without doubt – their actual historical prototypes knew to calculate precisely.

Not only that this disqualification creates an image of the Pre-Hispanic Maya as an uncivilized and primitive people; the movie has moreover potential to provide new grounds for racism affecting approximately 8 million Maya in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras and El Salvador.

The civil war in Guatemala, in which more than 200.000 people lost their lives – most of them Maya – and in which more than a million Maya were displaced, ended just ten years ago. In a country shaken by violence the indigenous population manages only slowly to find their cultural identity and live without fear. To identify with the achievements of ancient Maya culture contributes to and furthers this process which is supported and accompanied by scientists and NGO's alike. Piles of sacrificed bodies – which may not be just a casual visual reminiscence of images from the nazi concentration camps of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen – undermine this newly formed identity by reversing reality: victims become offenders. Offenders, who deserve their demise, the Christian mission, and 500 years of Colonial oppression – and victims who justify their own genocide.

The scientists and students of the Institute of Anthropology/Pre-Columbian Studies at the University of Bonn distance themselves from the image of Pre-Hispanic Maya culture that is drawn in 'Apocalypto'. This movie can provoke damage.