

Noble Savages versus Savage Nobles: Gibson's Apocalyptic View of the Maya

What are we to make of *Apocalypto*? From the first moments of the film, factual errors are numerous and probably familiar to readers of this journal, so we won't treat them in detail, but larger issues about the significance of this film for popular perceptions of the Maya deserve some comment here, even if *Apocalypto* is ultimately just another Hollywood chase film.

The action starts, appropriately, in a cornfield, but quickly moves to dense forest during a tapir hunt (already an odd choice since this animal is rarely found in Maya middens). The hunters return to a village that is surrounded by forest so pristine that a few minutes later the enemy can hide just meters away from the small, flimsy houses. The Classic southern lowland Maya world was one of the most orderly and densely populated pre-industrial landscapes on earth, but the people we first meet here are more Yanomamo than Maya. Many wear little more than jewellery and the impression is of Rousseau's noble savages, living in harmony with the forest and each other in a state of rustic simplicity. We know that even small Maya settlements were much more architecturally substantial, socially complex, and of course, agricultural.

The humour and practical jokes here are reminiscent of the Maya we know, and welcome since most of the Maya we see for the rest of the movie are deadly serious, one-dimensional villains. Gibson's choice to use Yucatec Mayan for the dialogue is effective in drawing viewers into the movie's world, although we suspect much less enjoyable for those who speak Mayan.

The cruelty of the subsequent village raid is excessive, but Gibson's statements suggest that he was making parallels with modern life throughout, and perhaps we should question our own motives for objecting to horrific violence in movies while so many of us tacitly condone it through our elected governments in the real world. The violence in this movie is much more random and excessive than it was in the ancient Maya world, but what Gibson may be saying here is that war is a nasty business and sanitizing does no one any favours. Nevertheless, the idea that a small, marginal village would be attacked by elite warriors is hard to accept. Similarly, the idea that any late Classic Maya person captured in a raid would have no idea of the fate that might befall them at the hands of their enemies is laughable. They would have been well aware that being captured alive could mean slavery or sacrifice.

In the city, Gibson portrays a teeming, dirty, decadent metropolis. The architecture is probably best described as "Mayanesque", but it was interesting to see the link between lime plaster production and deforestation in the film, even if the image of plastering with bare hands is absurd given the caustic nature of lime plaster. The jewellery, masks, tattooing, and scarification are impressive, but the textiles are much less so (where are the intricate, vibrant cotton textiles we know so well from the living Maya, and we see, for example, on the Yaxchilán lintels?) More disturbing is the depiction of a slave auction, again, of ordinary people. There is no evidence of this sort of slavery amongst the ancient Maya and this scene serves only to make the Euro-American slavery that most audiences will know seem more normal and less exceptional.

The overwhelming impression one gets of Maya urbanism is *weirdness*. The elite are decadent, even disgusting, and many seem stoned, but again this may be a metaphor for the corruption of contemporary elites. In that light, if the film is taken as an extended metaphor it works rather well, but if one is looking for an accurate depiction of the Maya it fails. In the city, an assembly line of human sacrifice (and a later scene of scores of victims strewn in a field) suggests sacrifice on a huge scale, for purely religious reasons, rather than the political reasons we know were central. Given Gibson's background it's hard to ignore what this implies about ancient Maya religion—it is simply irrational, destructive, and morally bankrupt. The deceitful elites, insane-looking priest, and a populace that delights in sacrifice but is surprised by an eclipse portray the ancient Maya as thoroughly bloodthirsty and either corrupt or stupid.

The arrival of the Spanish at the end of the film has as much historical credibility as if the crew of *Star Trek* had landed. The website for the film makes it clear that Gibson did his homework, in part with Richard Hansen as a consultant, so why this huge historical elision?

One explanation is simply dramatic effect, but this is where the authorial intent of Gibson, a tricky issue with any work of art, becomes tangled up with what we know about Gibson as a person. The protagonist tells his wife that they should return to the forest rather than greet the strangers, which is of course exactly what many of the Maya did, fleeing to remote peripheries like Belize throughout the early historical period. But here, at the end of the movie, we are reminded of the quote that opens it, by the philosopher Will Durant: "A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within." Could it be that a Maya society that is collapsing on itself in an orgy of decadence and violence will be in fact saved by the arrival of Catholicism at the hands of the Spanish? Do they need the civilizing influence of the church, however brutal its application? Do they, in fact, *deserve* what is coming in some cosmic sense? It is hard to see any other reason for their arrival, unless Gibson simply wants to imply that a sequel will show us even more horrendous misery at the hands of the Spanish, and this would match the violence-topping-violence structure of this film and his previous one.

How far this takes us from the Maya of Thompson and Morley, with their vision of peaceful astronomer-priests worshipping time in vacant ceremonial centers. Unfortunately, decades of work by so many Mayanists seems equally irrelevant in this version, put forth by a single ill-informed but powerful actor. We worry that these brutal new Maya will now become the standard pop-art reference on the Maya, with clips shown by well-meaning high school teachers in units on indigenous people. We also worry about what this means for the living Maya, heirs to one of the most artistically and intellectually brilliant civilizations the world has known, whose ancestors are dichotomized into bloodthirsty monsters or tribal people dancing around a fire. A more optimistic view is that this chase film will have an "Indiana Jones effect", drawing more popular attention to Maya studies and what is really known about the ancient Maya and their descendants.

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