

Newsweek Magazine, Letters to the Editor (Dec. 13, 2006)

David Ansen's perceptive review of "Apocalypto" (Dec. 11) points out that the only part of Maya culture that seems to interest Mel Gibson is the practice of violent, grizzly human sacrifice. Gibson's movie is only the latest in a five-century line of racist interpretations of the Mayas and other Native American groups. The earliest Spanish conquistadors treated the Mayas and Aztecs as sub-human animals who could be enslaved and exploited. Nineteenth-century European and U.S. writers denied that the impressive ruins from the Andes to the American Midwest could have been built by the ancestors of the native inhabitants of these areas (and thus the sites could be attributed to seafaring Egyptians or the Lost Tribes of Israel).

As an archaeologist who specializes in the ancient peoples of Mexico, I have no quarrel with *Apocalypto's* numerous errors and bloopers (as pointed out by my colleagues in "Belief Watch," Dec. 11). It is, after all, Hollywood entertainment, not a PBS documentary. But I do object strongly to the racist cast of Gibson's portrayal of the ancient Maya people. By creating two extremes—bloodthirsty, violent city-dwellers versus ignorant noble savages of the forest—Mel Gibson not only distorts the truth, he misses an opportunity to educate people about this remarkable civilization.

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