

“Ceramic” Support for the Identity of Classic Maya Architectural Long-Lipped (Corner) Masks as the Animated *Witz* “Hill, Mountain”

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In recent years there have been several attempts to unlock the identity and function of long-lipped (corner) masks in Classic Maya architecture (cf. Baudez 1999; Schele and Mathews 1998; Stuart 1997; Taube 2002) (note 1). In this short essay certain depictions on ceramics of the fully animated or zoomorphic variant of a hill or mountain, *witz* in Classic Mayan, will be presented in support of the recent identification of these architectural masks as indicators of buildings as (artificial) mountains. Additionally, based on these depictions some common stone mosaic patterns in Puuc-style architecture will be tentatively identified as the geometrical variant of the hill or mountain, further indicating that many stone buildings were envisioned as (artificial) mountains or hills.

Recent Proposals on Long-Lipped (Corner) Masks

Some of the earliest architectural studies provided a rather neutral description of the architectural long-lipped (corner) masks; Maler (1903: 123), for instance, referred to them as “serpent head decoration”, while Spinden (1975 [1913]: 118-124) simply described them as “mask panels”. It was Seler (1916) who identified these “mask panels” as Quetzalcoatl, while Thompson (1973) suggested that the Yucatecan façades contained the iconographic representation of Itzamná. Until some years ago the long-lipped (corner) masks, especially when part of Puuc-style buildings, were interpreted as the portrait of the Maya rain god Cha[ah]k (e.g. Andrews 1986; Gendrop 1983, 1985a, 1985b; Pollock 1980; Sharp 1981). In recent years there have been several attempts to unlock the correct identity and to clarify the function of long-lipped (corner) masks in Classic Maya architecture.

In 1997, David Stuart published a short essay in *Symbols* with the title “The Hills are Alive: Sacred Mountains in the Maya Cosmos”. In this essay he discussed the importance of hills and mountains in present-day Maya cosmology, his 1986 decipherment of the *witz* “hill, mountain” glyph (also see Stuart 1987), and his identification of the *witz* hill or mountain in several iconographic and architectural contexts. The T529 hieroglyph for *witz* was characterized by a curved and indented outline, while so-called T528 *cauac* markings (after the day sign “Cauac”; in new orthography Kawak) defined the interior of the glyph (Figure 1). Occasional phonetic complements (**wi-HILL/MOUNTAIN**) as well as complete phonetic substitutions (**wi-tzi**) indicated that the HILL/MOUNTAIN sign was to be read **WITZ** (Stuart 1987: 18).

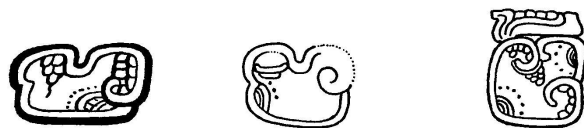


Figure 1: The T529 **WITZ** Glyph (drawings by David Stuart [1987: Fig. 28 & 1997: Fig. 2])

Witz is a common word for “hill, mountain” in many Lowland and Highland Maya languages (cf. Dienhart 1989: 434-437). Stuart further identified the animated version of the *witz* hill or mountain (aka “Cauac Monster”), for instance on the Tablet of the Cross at Palenque (Figure 2). The animated version of the *witz* hill or mountain sign has reptilian or ophidian characteristics (hence Maler’s description of the masks as “serpent head decoration”). The top of the animated version of the *witz* hill or mountain has a curved and indented outline (compare to T529 in Figure 1), while T528 *cauac* markings can be found on its forehead and attached to the bottom of its nose. The eyes contain two glyphic collocations (by the present author read as Yaxhal[il] Witznal “First True Mountain Place”) that present the sequence **wi-tzi-na-la** for *witznal* “mountain place”.

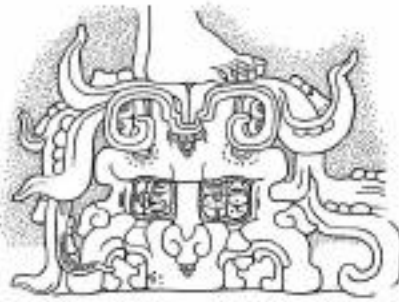


Figure 2: The Yaxhal[il] Witznal “First True Mountain Place” at Palenque
(drawing by David Stuart [1987: Figure 27, 1997: Figure 5])

The animated version of the *witz* hill or mountain has a prominent and elongated upper lip or jaw, visually incorporated both in a frontal and in a profile or side view (note the small and inwards curled nose in both a frontal and profile view). More importantly, Stuart also discussed Copán’s Temple 22. Each of the outer four corners of this building were once decorated with three stacked long-lipped corner masks; based on the so-called *cauac* markings, as well as the “long curling noses”, he identified these masks as the animated *witz* hill or mountain character. With its central doorway decorated as the large, opened mouth of the same hill or mountain character, Copán’s Temple 22 was identified as an artificial mountain (Stuart 1997: 15).

In 1998, Linda Schele and Peter Mathews presented a new interpretation of the long-lipped masks in Chapter 7 of their book *The Code of Kings*. This chapter (on Uxmal) contained a short discussion of the long-lipped masks, which they identified as the avian manifestation of the creator-god Itzamná, named “*Itzam-Ye* or *Mut Itzamná*” (Schele and Mathews 1998: 267-268; compare to Thompson 1973). In 1999, Claude-François Baudez published an essay in *Arqueología Mexicana* entitled “Los templos enmascarados de Yucatán”. In this essay he identified the long-lipped masks of Copán’s Temple 22 and the long-lipped masks common to Puuc-style architecture as “*mascarones cauac*” (Figure 3), based on the fact that these long-lipped masks contained specific elements of the hieroglyphic sign T528 *cauac* (with regionally differentiated internal markings within the T528 *cauac* signs). Unfortunately, Baudez did not apply Stuart’s 1986 decipherment of the T529 *witz* hill or mountain sign, but both authors tried to identify the same long-lipped corner masks. Unlike

Stuart, Baudez did extend his argument to include the long-lipped masks as contained in Puuc-style architecture (note 2).



a



b

Figure 3: Long-Lipped Corner Masks at a) Copán, Temple 22, and b) Chichén Itzá (photographs by Claude-François Baudez [1999: Figures 5 & 6])

Although the Schele and Mathews proposal had certain merit at the time, it is superseded by the proposals presented by Stuart and Baudez. Only these two proposals include the correct identification of the most important iconographic details of these long-lipped masks as being diagnostic of the T528 *cauac* sign. It was Stuart's proposal that identified the long-lipped masks as the animated *witz* hill or mountain character at Copán, while Baudez extended the identification to the long-lipped masks in Puuc-style architecture.

In 2002, Karl Taube presented a paper at the Seventh European Maya Conference in London entitled "Heaven and Hell: Portals, Xibalba, and the Flowery Paradise". He followed Stuart's argument in identifying these long-lipped masks as animated versions of the *witz* hill or mountain character and the buildings and temple mounds as artificial hills or mountains. He added the identification of certain details of the headbands of these long-lipped masks as flowers (note Seler 1915 [1908]: 210, Abb. 15) and identified buildings and mounds

containing those long-lipped masks with flower headbands as flower mountains. Here I add that different headbands may actually identify different mountains.

The proposals by Stuart and Baudez indicate that the long-lipped (corner) masks can be identified by the frequent inclusion of the T528 *cauac* markings. It was Stuart who suggested that the long-lipped masks at Copán Temple 22 are representations of the animated *witz* hill or mountain character (note T529) and that the temple-structure that incorporated these long-lipped masks as an architectural feature could be identified as an artificial hill or mountain.

The Animated or Zoomorphic *Witz* Hill or Mountain on Ceramics

Two Late Classic polychrome ceramics provide intriguing examples of the animated or zoomorphic *witz* hill or mountain character.

Kerr No. 1398 was produced in the Late Classic, as its scribe refers in the rim text to Naranjo ruler K'a[h]k Tiliw Chancha[ah]k (who ruled ca. A.D. 693-728). The surface of the vessel is painted with scenes in which the main characters are standing or seated on the animated or zoomorphic representation of the *witz* hill or mountain character (Figure 4).



Figure 4: The Zoomorphic Hill on Kerr No. 1398 (photographs by Justin Kerr)

The panel on the left illustrates the animated or zoomorphic *witz* hill or mountain character looking to the right. The forehead contains the characteristic (southern lowland) T528 *cauac* markings, while the double outline that defines the top of the head is curved inwards on both sides of the large eye. This eye contains a small black curl (note 3). The upper lip of the animated or zoomorphic *witz* hill or mountain character is long and spirals upwards as well as inwards to its forehead. Only the upper jaw and elongated lip are visible, while the nose (placed upon the horizontal part of the elongated upper lip) is very small and has an attached small boney tube (compare to Figure 2), while certain markings around the teeth of the upper jaw are reptilian or ophidian in nature. The panel on the right illustrates the animated or zoomorphic *witz* hill or mountain character looking to the left. The double outline that defines the top of the head is curled inwards in the middle as well as on the level of the large eye. This head has the same characteristics as the other *witz* hill or mountain character on this vessel, but now its upturned and spiraling upper lip is replaced by a deer head possibly encircled by two centipedes (of which the chevron pattern is indicative). A serpent emanates

from its mouth, the lower jaw of which is missing. In sum, Kerr No. 1398 depicts two clearly recognizable animated or zoomorphic *witz* hill or mountain characters with typical upturned and inwards spiraling upper lips or noses.

Kerr No. 5166 illustrates a scene connected to the story as depicted on Kerr No. 1398 (cf. Boot n.d.). Three of the most important characters in the scene are seated on a fully abstracted depiction of the animated or zoomorphic *witz* hill or mountain character (Figure 5).



Figure 5: The Fully Abstracted Zoomorphic Hill or Mountain on Kerr No. 5166
(photograph by Justin Kerr)

The upturned and inwards spiraling upper lip is easily recognizable and can be compared to the upturned and inwards spiraling upper lip in the depiction of the animated or zoomorphic *witz* hill or mountain character on Kerr No. 1398 (left panel). The remaining fully abstracted, upturned and inwards spiraling band is painted in a dark red and is set with small light colored disks (the whole scene is framed by a dark red band with light colored circles, probably indicating that the scene took place inside a cave up on a mountain).

A beautifully modeled ceramic incense burner of unknown provenance is modeled as the animated or zoomorphic *witz* hill or mountain (Figure 6).

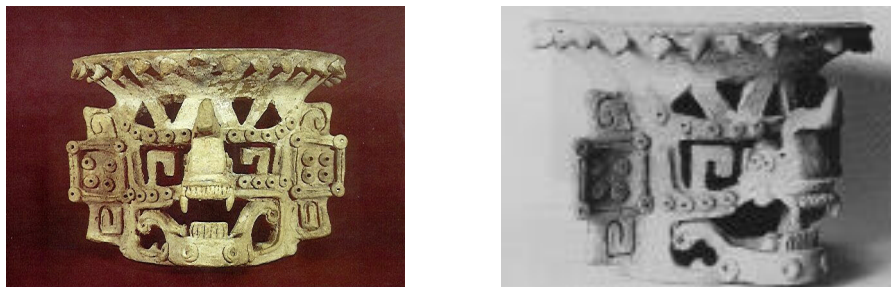


Figure 6: Incense Burner Shaped as Animated or Zoomorphic *witz*
(photographs by Orlando Cedrino [Galerie Wolfgang Ketterer 1988: cover, 36])

Clearly recognizable is the upturned and upwards spiraling upper lip (note the row of teeth as set within the upper jaw and the prominent elongation of the lip). The eyes are defined by a simple curl (compare to eyes of the animated or zoomorphic *witz* on Kerr No. 1398), while part of the face as well as the sides of the nose are decorated with rows of small disks (compare to Kerr No. 5166).

This incense burner was illustrated in a 1988 auction catalog published by Galerie Wolfgang Ketterer, Munich, Germany. In the catalog entry (page 38), written by Ferdinand Anton, the head itself was identified as “Chac” and a comparison was made with the corner masks of Puuc, Chenes and Río Bec style buildings, a comparison illustrated in the catalog with three examples (Figure 7). Thus some 10 years before the identifications by Stuart and Baudez, this depiction of the animated or zoomorphic *witz* hill or mountain character (but without this specific identification) was compared to the architectural long-lipped masks.

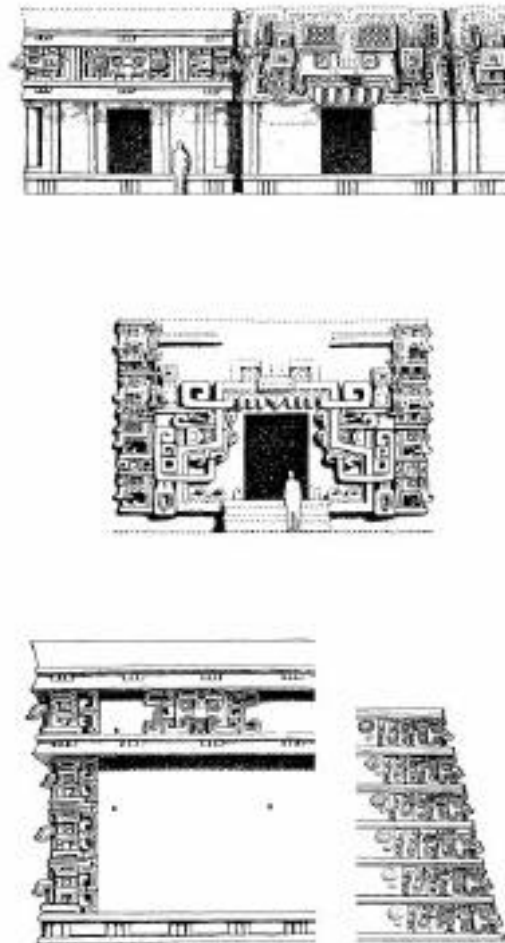
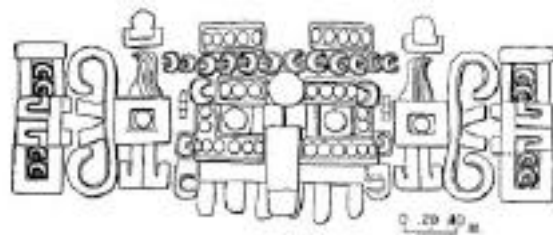


Figure 7: Architectural Masks Used as Comparison to Incense Burner
(drawings by Paul Gendrop [1983])

The Ceramics and Long-Lipped Masks: A Comparison

The three Late Classic ceramic examples of the animated or zoomorphic *witz* hill or mountain illustrated in this essay contain important diagnostic characteristics, which make it possible to present a comparison with architectural long-lipped masks.

Foremost, as already noted by Stuart and Baudez, is the inclusion of (regionally differentiated) T528 *cauac* markings. The examples on Kerr No. 1398 clearly contain these characteristics, which are also included in the corner masks at Copán (as noted by Stuart and Baudez) as well as in Puuc style architectural masks (as noted by Baudez). The upturned and inwards spiraling lip on Kerr No. 1398 is most important, and it is a feature also to be found on Kerr No. 5166. The fully abstracted *witz* hill or mountain character on Kerr No. 5166 and the portrait incense burner contain ornamental rows of small disks on both the face as well as the sides of the upturned and upwards spiraling lip. Small disks like these are already included in the stacked animated *witz* masks on Kerr No. 2796 and 7750 (Zender, personal communication, December 8, 2003). These rows of small disks can be found on the front of the face and on the sides of the upturned and spiraling noses of many of the Puuc-style architectural long-lipped masks (Figure 8).



a



b

Figure 8: a) Sayil, Structure 2B1, mask (after Pollock 1980: Figure 202a), b) Xlabpak, Structure 1, side view or nose (after Pollock 1980: Figure 126c)

These specific characteristics of the masks indicate that the architectural long-lipped masks in Classic Maya architecture, both in the Southern Maya Lowlands (e.g. Copán), the Central Maya Lowlands (e.g. Río Bec region), and the Northern Maya Lowlands (e.g. Puuc and Chenes regions) are indeed representations of the animated or zoomorphic *witz* hill or

mountain, as suggested by Stuart and, indirectly, by Baudez. The inclusion of these masks, either on outer corners or integrated into the lower and upper wall façades of buildings indicates that these buildings were considered to be (artificial) mountains.

The Step-Fret Motif: The Fully Abstracted Mountain Sign

A very specific feature of the T529 *witz* hieroglyph (Figure 1) is the inward curl or (stepped) indentation on top of the sign. The stepped indentation is specifically clear in the animated or zoomorphic *witz* hill or mountain character at Palenque (Figure 2). A common architectural motif within the sometimes abundantly ornate stone mosaic lower and upper wall zones in the Chenes region and especially in the Puuc region is the single or double (opposing) step-fret motif (Figure 9) (note 4).

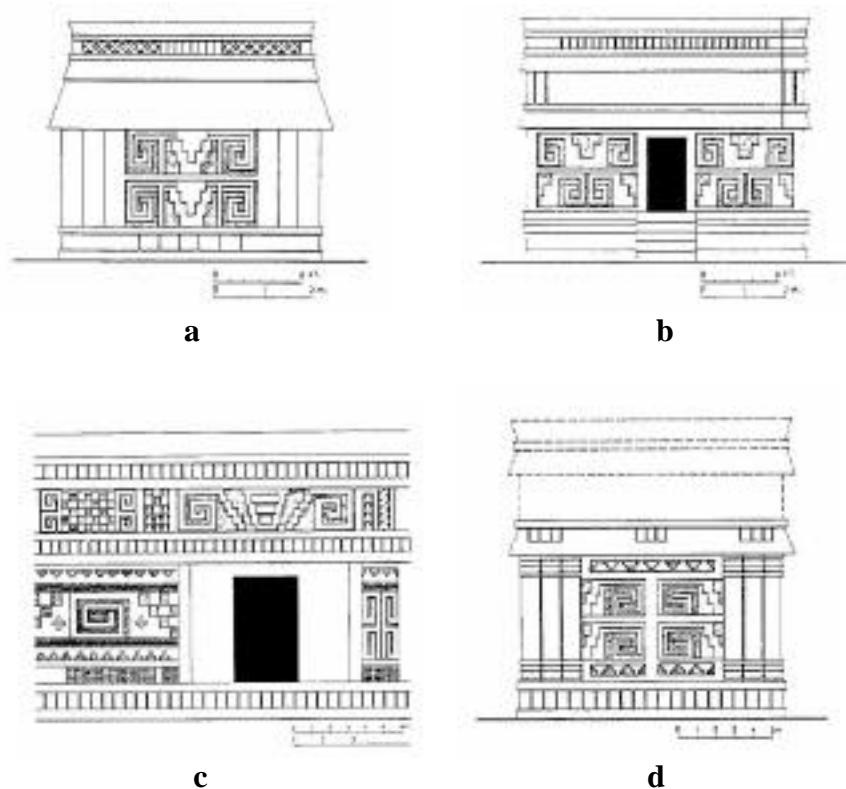
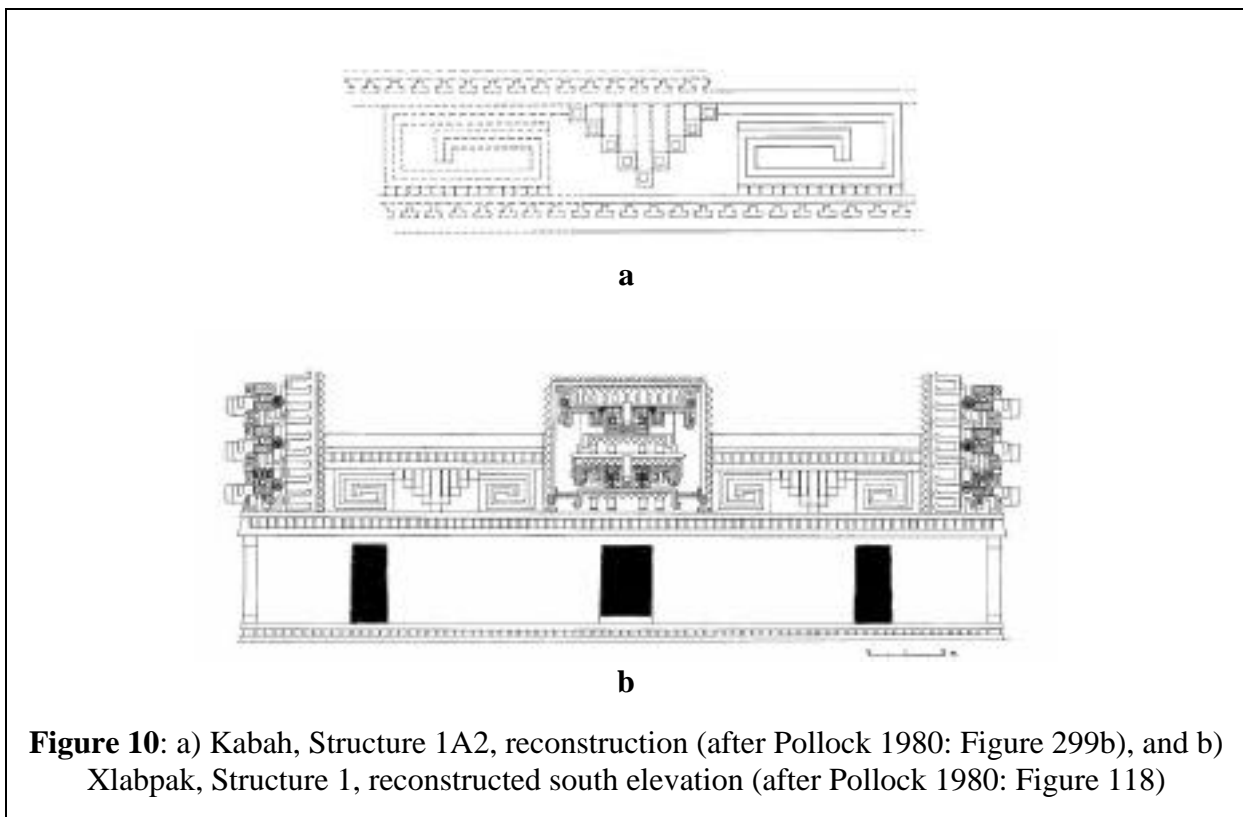


Figure 9: Step-Fret Designs at a) Dzibiltún, Elevation of Palace (side), b) Dzibiltún, Temple (side), c) Rancho Pérez, Structure 1 (front), d) Xkichmook, Structure 6 (drawings by George F. Andrews [1985: Figs. 24, 34, 53 & 54])

Tentatively, I identify these step-fret motifs as representations of the fully abstracted hill or mountain, the origin of which can be found in the stepped indentation with inwards curved

and spiraling sides on top of the *witz* hill or mountain sign. These stepped indentations and outside curves still can be found defining the top of the head of the frontal *witz* hill or mountain masks as integrated into the two false stairways at Xpuhil, Structure 1 (cf. Pollock 1965: Figure 38). The stepped indentations with inwards curved and spiraling sides of the *witz* hill or mountain are particularly clear in the lower wall zone at Dzibiltún (Figure 9a) and above the doorway in the upper wall zone at Rancho Pérez (Figure 9c). Cutting this double step-fret motif in half (thus the single regular step-fret) and turning it outwards and back-to-back leads to mosaic stone motifs as at Dzibiltún (Figure 9b) and Xkichmook (Figure 9d) (note 5). The continuous repetition of the step-fret motif in ornamental bands on other buildings (e.g. basal platform of the East Annex at the Las Monjas Building, Chichén Itzá; cf. Marquina 1990 [1951]: Fot. 415 & Seler 1915 [1908]: Abb. 31 & base molding of main and adjacent palace, Chunchuhub; cf. Pollock 1980: Figs. 670, 673) may be another abstracted reference to the *witz* hill or mountain (although it should be noted that not each step-fret motif may have had the same origin either in the Maya area or in Mesoamerica) (note 6). It seems that specifically in Puuc style architecture the stepped indentation with inwards curved and spiraling sides and the mask representing the animated or zoomorphic *witz* became separated; both were to be employed as independent but complementary architectural ornaments identifying the building on which they occurred as *witz*, hill or mountain.

The upper wall zone, between medial and cornice moldings, on buildings at some of the larger Puuc sites also contains the double step-fret motif to indicate a fully abstracted *witz* hill or mountain. These buildings, if correctly identified, are indeed envisioned as hills or mountains, incorporating either the masks (Figure 3 & 7), the double (opposing) step-fret motif (Figure 10a) or both, as at Xlabpak (Figure 10b).



Final Remarks

Two Late Classic polychrome painted ceramics and a modeled ceramic incense burner may provide important iconographic characteristics to support the identification by David Stuart of the long-lipped corner masks at Copán as depictions of the animated or zoomorphic *witz* hill or mountain. These ceramics also support the identification by Claude-François Baudez that the long-lipped masks in Puuc-style architecture represent the same character (although only referred to by Baudez as “mascarones *cauac*”). By extension, the profile masks of the long-lipped character, which are especially typical of Chenes and Río Bec architecture (e.g. Gendrop 1987: Fig. 7), also are representations of the animated or zoomorphic *witz* hill or mountain. These masks thus seem to identify the buildings on which they are placed as (“man-made”) hills or mountains (note 7).

Frontal and more anthropomorphic versions of these masks may be found at several Classic Maya sites, for instance in the frieze decoration of Structure 6 at Yaxchilán. The one stucco mask that survives of the original three has several typical features, most important among them is “a cleft form between the eyebrows” (Tate 1992: 160) (Figure 11).

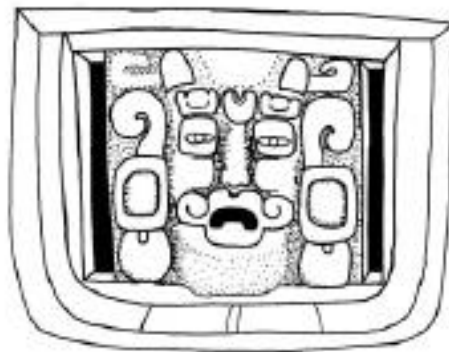


Figure 11: Stucco Mask from Frieze Decoration at Structure 6, Yaxchilán
(drawing by Carolyn Tate [1992: Figure 54a])

The “cleft form” in this monumental stucco mask is but a variant of the typical curl or (stepped) indentation commonly found on top of the animated or zoomorphic *witz* hill or mountain (compare to Figure 2). Most interesting is the fact that this stucco mask is placed in front of a hollow space; this space may have been used to burn incense, in the same manner as the incense burner modeled in the form of the animated or zoomorphic *witz* hill or mountain (Figure 6). This building, a “man-made” hill or mountain, then literally would have been breathing (the emanating incense smoke indicative of such action) and thus alive (see note 5).

Based on the characteristics of the animated or zoomorphic *witz* hill or mountain in this essay, the double (opposing) step-fret motif was identified as the fully abstracted representation of a

hill or mountain. Further research into Classic Maya iconography may substantiate my suggestion that the step-fret motif within most Classic Maya architectural and iconographic contexts is also a fully abstracted representation of the animated or zoomorphic *witz* hill or mountain.

Acknowledgments

I thank David Stuart-Fox, head librarian at the Museum of Ethnology, Leiden, the Netherlands, for providing permission and the opportunity to the author to scan the relevant images of the incense burner as illustrated in the 1988 Galerie Wolfgang Ketterer auction catalog. I also thank Joel Skidmore and Marc Zender for their comments and suggestions in regard to an earlier draft of this essay. As always, unless stated otherwise, the opinions expressed in this essay are mine.

Notes

1) Throughout this essay I refer to these masks as “long-lipped”, while the denomination “long-nosed” or “long-snouted” seems to be more prevalent in the older literature on this subject (as it also was in earlier versions of this essay). As can be seen in the example of the animated *witz* on the Tablet of the Cross, it is the upper lip or even the complete upper jaw that is elongated; the nose is small and curled and rests on the elongated upper lip or jaw (as such I do not use “muzzle” as that would indicate the whole region of the mouth, while only the upper part is elongated; specifically note that in many examples the lower jaw is substantially reduced in size). This fact has been noted by other Mayanists and has entered the description of such “long-snouted” or “long-lipped” entities in iconographic studies, for instance in the work of Parsons (1988: 12, 38-39) and Freidel and Schele (1988: 51-55) (Skidmore, personal communication via e-mail, December 8, 2003) (also note Zender, personal communication via e-mail, December 8, 2003, who refers to these masks as “prognathous corner masks” or “long-muzzled mountain masks” in an upcoming essay to be published in “Understanding Maya Art”, edited by Andrea Stone and Marc Zender [Thames and Hudson, 2004]).

2) It should be noted that Schele and Mathews describe a large number of architectural features that identify specific buildings as mountains. For instance, they illustrate the stacked zoomorphic or animated corner masks from Copán’s Temple 22 and identify the “pyramid” as a mountain or *witz* (Schele and Mathews 1998: 42-43, Figure 1.13). Unfortunately, they do not apply the existing epigraphic and iconographic evidence collected earlier by Stuart (1987) nor do they extend their identification to the mask panels in Puuc architecture (hence their suggestion on the identification of these mask panels as the avian manifestation of Itzamná, as noted in the main text of this essay).

As a side note, interestingly, in the same issue in which Baudez describes and identifies the “mascarones *cauac*” the magazine illustrates such a stack of masks from the High Priest’s Grave at Chichén Itzá with a caption reading “Mascarones de Chac” (see *Arqueología Mexicana*, Vol. VII, Núm. 37, p. 74). These *witz* masks identify the High Priest’s Grave as a mountain.

3) As described by Stuart, sometimes the eyes of the animated or zoomorphic *witz* hill or mountain can be filled with the portraits of a (male-female) pair of deities or possibly deified important ancestors, for example as is the case on Piedras Negras Throne 1 (Stuart 1997: Figure 11) or Kerr No. 8756 (posted October 20, 2003 at <http://famsi.famsi.org:9500/dataSpark/MayaVase>).

- 4) Marc Zender (personal communication via e-mail, December 8, 2003) directed my attention to a short study by Cirerol Sansores (1943), who built on Maler's "serpent" identification but also extended it to the step and fret lattices common on Puuc style façades. As Zender further noted, this essay by Cirerol Sansores provides the first good summary of façade masks.
- 5) In many of these examples one can identify the step-fret motif (either double and opposing or double but back-to-back) being associated with rows of (inverted) T- or **IK'**-signs (Figure 9c,d & 10a). As noted by Sharp (1981: 5-6, Figure 14; cf. Marquina 1990 [1951]: Lám. 192), this combination already occurs, for instance, at Palenque (Palace, House B, rear wall). There, a double and opposing step-fret motif is associated with several **IK'**- or "wind, breath" signs. Also in this case I suggest that the step-fret motif is a fully abstracted *witz* hill or mountain, while the **IK'**-signs may direct to a very specific quality of caves. Some caves, as found up hills or mountains are known to breathe, to literally inhale and exhale wind. This quality has a natural origin; either branches of the same cave complex communicate with the outer world at different places in the landscape or an underground river serves as the engine behind (rapid) air movement. During my fieldwork periods in Yucatán (1986-1989) I have had the fortune to experience several of these caves. This very special quality of caves up on hills or mountains may thus indicate that the hills indeed are alive.
- 6) The step-fret motif also occurs in specific architectural and iconographic contexts in Teotihuacan, Oaxaca, and El Tajín (cf. Sharp 1981). Future research may unravel the origin of these step-fret motifs and identify them either as distinct from or parallel to the Maya step-fret motif as a fully abstracted animated or zoomorphic hill or mountain, as suggested in this essay.

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