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ISSN 1531-5398

The PARI Journal

A quarterly publication of the Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute
Volume V, No.2, Fall 2004

New Year Records in Classic Maya Inscriptions

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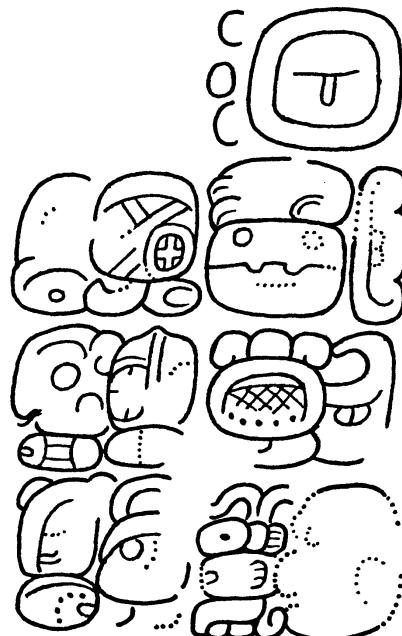


Figure 1. Passage from Stela 18 at Naranjo.
Drawing by David Stuart.

Throughout Mesoamerica the first station of the 365-day calendar saw the arrival of the "year bearer," a day named for the corresponding position of the 260-day count. Only four day signs could fall on the opening day of the year, and in Postclassic Yucatan these were K'an, Muluk, Ix and Kawak. In combination with their particular numerical coefficient (1 K'an, 2 Muluk, and so on), these gave name to each year in a lengthy 52-year cycle. Although there is ample evidence of the year-bearer system in the calendar of the Postclassic Maya of Yucatan (Taube 1988) and even also among some modern highland communities (Tedlock 1982), Mayanists of the last century saw no evidence of year bearers in the records of the Classic period. Bowditch (1910:81) believed that the year-bearer calendar simply did not exist in the Classic period, whereas Thompson (1950:128) opined that if it did, it was not recorded on the monuments. In this essay I sketch out the evidence for a different view: that the year-bearer calendar was ritually important for the Classic, and possibly even Preclassic Maya, and that indications of it do indeed appear from time to time in the earlier textual record.

We begin with the inscription on Stela 18 from Naranjo. Its badly weathered incised text includes a fascinating record of the date "1 Ik' Seating of Pop," corresponding to the Long Count 9.14.14.7.2 (Figure 1).¹ Two event phrases follow, the first consisting of the curious "paw-and-pillow" verb that, on the basis of other examples, may signify accession to office.² The subject of this verb is simply written as *ch'oktak* (**ch'o-ko-TAK-ki**), a plural noun meaning "the youths." A second, longer sentence then offers a more descriptive account of what transpired on the same day:

¹ The drawing of the Stela 18 passage presented here shows slight modifications from Graham's rendering from the *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions* publication (Graham 1974). The shallow incised lines make the text particularly difficult to draw and analyze.

² Only a handful of examples of the "paw-and-pillow" logogram exist, and as yet it remains undeciphered. The best case for its function as an accession verb comes from the Site Q panel published by Coe (1973:28), where it takes the affixes *-na-ja*, possibly indicating an anti-passive construction (Lacadena 1998). Although the chronology of the panel's inscription is notoriously troublesome, the date accompanying this verb is probably cited again on another Site Q panel, where the event is clearly accession.

tz'a-pa-ja LAKAM-TUUN U-CHAB-ji-ya K'AHK'-ti-li-wi-CHAN-CHAHK

tz'ahpaj lakamtuun u-chabjiiy K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Chahk

The stela is erected; K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Chahk oversees it.

Stela dedications are commonplace on Period Ending dates, of course, yet Stela 18 offers a rare exception to this pattern. While “1 Ik’ Seating of Pop” seems a strange day to mark with the erection of a *lakamtuun*, I wonder if its proximity to a New Year—that is, the “seating” of the initial month—may go some way toward an explanation.

I find Stela 18’s mention of a stela erection on a “seating of Pop” to be highly reminiscent of the New Year rites attested several centuries later in Yucatan. In Postclassic Yucatan, each New Year ceremony centered on the



Figure 2. Upper registers from the *Dresden* New Year pages, depicting the “arrival” of the year on the days Eb, Kaban, Ik’ and Manik. (a) D25a, (b) D26a, (c) D27a, (d) D28a.

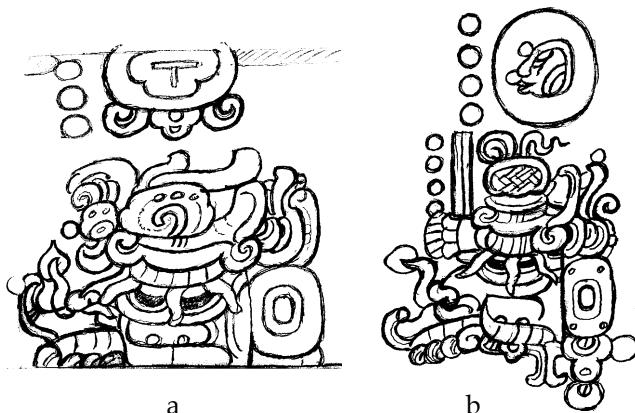


Figure 3. Two wall paintings from Rio Azul Tomb 2, depicting 4 Ik' and 4 Kaban days above emblems for directional mountains. Field drawing by Ian Graham, Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

erection of an *akantun*, a marking stone (or stones), at one of the four cardinal directions surrounding a community (Tozzer 1941:139, 141 n. 669, Coe 1965). These *akantuns* are widely seen as Postclassic survivals of an earlier stela tradition of Classic and Preclassic times, and vestiges of the same practice can be found among some communities in modern-day Yucatan (Sosa 1989). Might we have, therefore, a Classic period record of similar rituals associated with a year bearer?

Even if we do entertain the likelihood that the Naranjo ceremony foreshadows later New Year rituals, we are confronted with a thorny numerological problem. Conventional wisdom notes that the Classic Maya year bearers fell not on the "seating" of Pop, but only on the

first day of the month, 1 Pop (Thompson 1950:124-126). In Postclassic Yucatan the four year-bearer days were the so-called "K'an set" (K'an, Muluk, Ix and Kawak) (see Tozzer 1941:135), and the ritual documents of the Colonial era often refer to the particular year through a number and one of these day signs. In the codices the year-bearer days are thought to be shifted back one position to the "Ak'b'al set" (Ak'b'al, Lamat, Ben and Etz'nab), and this has long been seen also as a reflection of an earlier system used by southern sites in the Classic period. To posit that the Naranjo passage is an actual year-bearer record necessitates proposing yet another shift to a new set of days (the "Ik' set") that fell on the seating of Pop. This, I admit, would be a rash conclusion to draw from the Naranjo evidence alone.

Nevertheless, it is significant that among the Kiche, Mam, Ixil and Pokomchi Maya the true year bearers correspond (with obvious local variations in the names) to Ik', Manik, Eb, and Kaban (Tedlock 1982:92)—the very same system I propose may be in use at Naranjo and other lowland sites in Classic times. Thompson (1950:127) saw little significance in this pattern, however, and was insistent that the original bearers of the years for the Maya had to fall on the first day, or 1 Pop. In his view the highland Maya usage was a confusion of Pop's seating for the first day of the month: "...it would not be difficult for the two events to be confused or merged by a people not overly strict in the preservation of the old ways" (Thompson 1950:127). This is a strange statement, given that these Maya communities were among the most traditional and ritually conservative into the twentieth century.

In the four New Year pages (25-28) of the *Dresden*

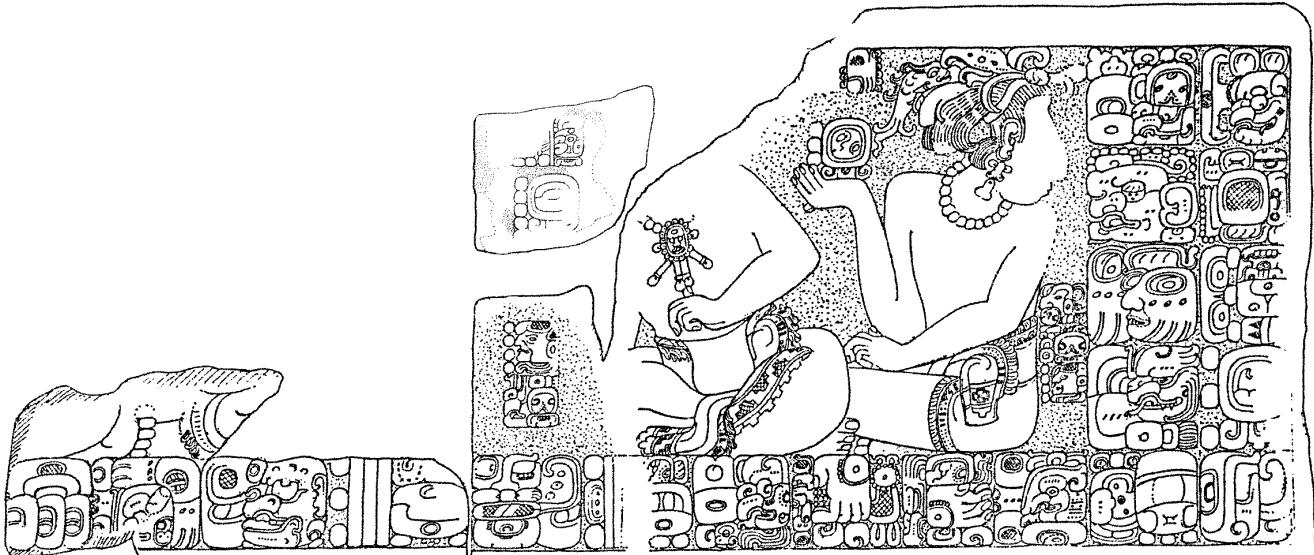


Figure 4. Pomona Panel 1. The two seated figures at right, named and adorned as "Pawahtuns," hold the day signs 4 Ik' and 4 Kaban. Two other individuals were originally at left. Composite field drawing by Ian Graham and David Stuart, courtesy of the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Peabody Museum, Harvard University.



Figure 5. Late Classic red ware plate depicting the Maize God, with four sets of day signs arranged along the inner border. Each set begins with a day sign of the “Ik’ set” (From Whittington 2001:Fig. 95).

Codex (Figure 2a-d) we find that the “Ik’ set” of days is repeated thirteen times at the upper left margin of each page, before the striding possum (or is it really a raccoon?) who carries a patron deity of the New Year to one of the four world directions. The event in each case seems to be *tal-iiy*, “he arrived” (Bricker 1986:110). Although the shifted “Ak’bal set” of traditional Yucatecan year-bearer days are given in the lower left margin of these same pages (again in a line of thirteen signs) this does not demonstrate that the *Dresden* conforms to the Postclassic system; if anything, the upper registers may offer evidence that the arrival of the new year fell on the seating of the first month. However, in the *Paris Codex*—clearly a later document than the *Dresden*—we find the Yucatecan system well represented in its own New Year pages.

Turning again to the Classic period, we find more indications that Ik’, Manik, Eb and Kaban were the year-bearer days of that era. Tomb 2 from Rio Azul shows on two of its walls the day signs “4 Ik’” and “4 Kaban” above large mountains, where they clearly have directional associations similar to those of the Postclassic year bearers (Figure 3). These Rio Azul examples are no doubt related to the similar glyphs held by impersonators of “Pawahtuns” on Panel 1 from Pomona (Figure 4). There were originally four such

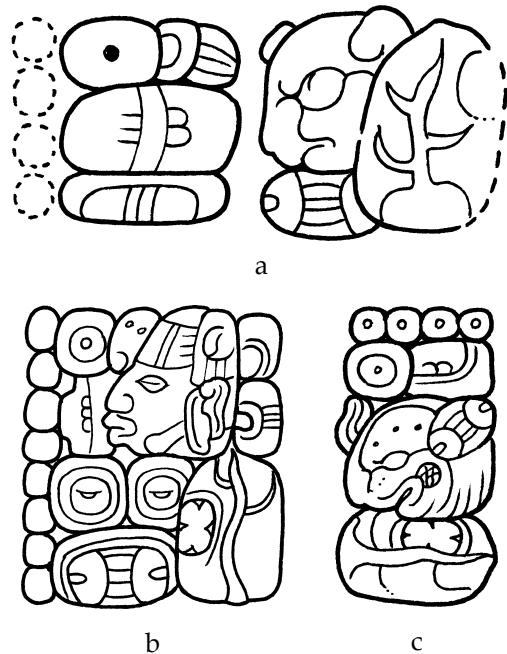


Figure 6. Mentions of the “four youths” in inscriptions at Palenque and Copan: (a) Palenque Tablet of the Sun, caption, (b) Copan Stela 6, (c) Copan Stela I, C2b.

figures on the panel, and I would tentatively suggest that they are the closest Classic correspondence to the year bearers of the Postclassic. They are shown holding, or bearing, the days associated with the seating of the first month. The “four” on each day sign is perhaps used to convey the quadripartite system at work, as well as provide a necessary number prefix.

The structure represented in the iconography of Rio Azul and Pomona reflects the basic Classic Maya subdivision of the twenty days into four units of five days, each associated with a cardinal direction. This arrangement is clearly shown on a decorated plate (Figure 5), where the four five-day sequences begin with Ik’, Manik, Eb, or Kaban. This can be taken as good evidence that the year itself began with one of these four days, establishing them as the Classic Maya year-bearer days.

The “youths” (*ch’oktak*) mentioned on Naranjo Stela 18 assume an office or position on the day 1 Ik’ Seating of Pop, and it is tempting to think that they relate to the four directional gods so closely associated with the year bearers in Mesoamerican cosmology. In fact, in the inscriptions at Copan and Palenque, as well a few other sites, the same term *ch’oktak* routinely takes the numerical coefficient “four” (Figure 6). The contexts of most if not all these cases strongly suggest

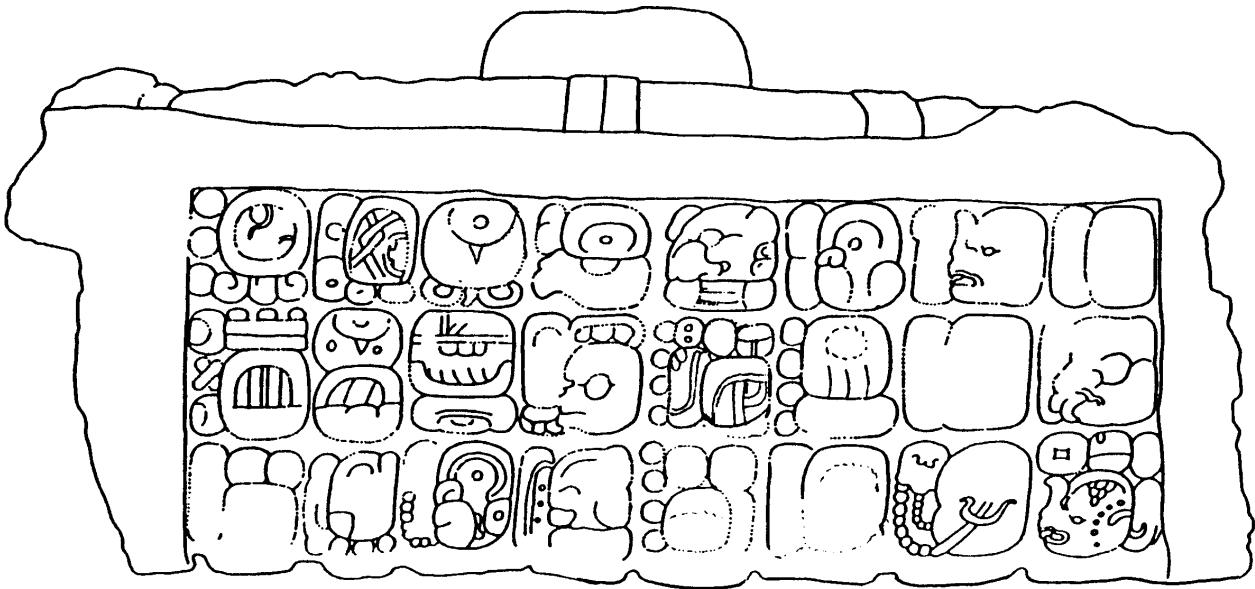


Figure 7. Top of Copan Altar U. Drawing by Linda Schele.

that “four youths” refers to a set of deities. Stela 6 at Copan, for example, mentions the four youths at the close of its opening passage describing the rites of 9.12.10.0.0 (Figure 6c). The relevant glyph (4-CH’OK-ko-TAK) follows directly after *chan te’ ajaw*, “the four lords,” who are likewise named as witnesses of the scattering ceremony on the Period Ending. On Stela I (Figure 6d), we read *i-tzahkaj K’awil u-chabiyy chante’ ch’oktak Bolonte’witz*, or “K’awil was conjured, overseen by the four youths (at) the nine hills place.”

Altar U at Copan strengthens the connection between New Year dates and a set of four deities. The top of the altar (Figure 7) bears an inscription opening with the Calendar Round 3 Kaban Seating of Pop, corresponding to 9.18.2.5.17. This is stated as being the precise thirteen-year anniversary “in the rulership” of an enigmatic character or deity named (at least in part) Yaxk’amlay (at this time, the ruler of Copan was the famous Yax Pahsaj Chan Yopaat), and indeed his own seating in office is recorded elsewhere on the altar and in a few other texts as 9.17.9.2.12 3 Eb Seating of Pop. True haab anniversaries such as this are rare in Maya texts, and it seems as though the New Year on the “Seating of Pop” is the dominant idea connecting the two dates. At least one other (likely) deity was also seated on the 3 Eb day, named K’anujolk’uh (“Precious is the Head of the God”), and he too is named in connection with the anniversary atop Altar U. What I find most interesting in the same inscription, however, is the later mention that these deities are related if not equivalent to “the youthful gods, the four lords.” Because “the four youths” or “the four lords” seem to be collective terms for gods, and given their strong associations with the New Year both at Copan and Naranjo, I tentatively suggest that they are designations for the Classic Maya year bearers, established, re-ordered and renewed on the seating of Pop. Several quartets of gods, including the supposed “Pawahtuns,” are key in the iconography of spatial cosmology in the Classic period, and in colonial Yucatan their categories as sky bearers, year bearers, rain makers and guardians overlapped in fundamental ways (Thompson 1970; Taube 1992). I suggest the same was true in the Classic period.

There are other “seating of Pop” dates mentioned in Maya inscriptions,

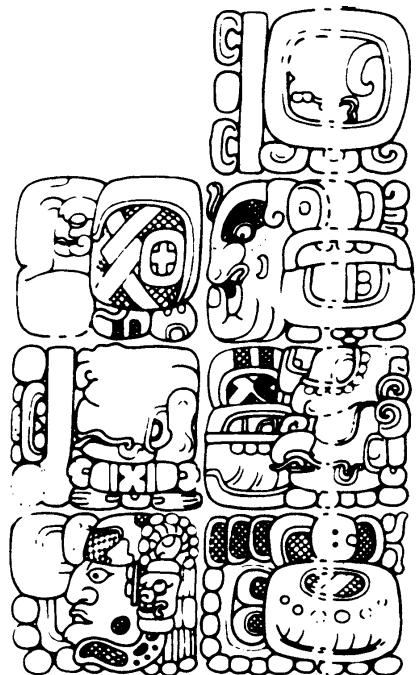


Figure 8. Passage from Tikal Temple IV, Lintel 2.

and not all are explicitly linked to the New Year. For example, we find in the inscription of Lintel 2, Temple IV from Tikal a mention of the date 9.15.12.11.12 6 Eb Seating of Pop (Figure 8). The verb is obscure, and the associated protagonist is Yik'in Chan K'awil (Ruler B). The episode comes just a day before the "star war" with Naranjo (see Martin 1996), suggesting that a New Year rite is not necessarily the rhetorical focus of the inscription. Also, the text on a looted stela now on display at the Hudson Museum in Orono, Maine, may mention a New Year date. This monument records a K'atun ending overseen by a ruler, and the short inscription closes with a Distance Number linking the K'atun ending to the day 7 Manik' Seating of Pop, possibly 9.17.0.0.7. No explanatory statement accompanies this second date, strongly suggesting that its significance was self-evident as a chronological anchor, much as Period Endings are in the discursive structure of many texts. I suggest that the closing date records a New Year station, and is linked to the Period Ending.

Turning from the hieroglyphic inscriptions, finally, there is new and compelling confirmation that the year-bearer system was prominent in some of the very earliest Maya art and writing. The recently unearthed Preclassic murals of San Bartolo, Guatemala, display a dizzying representation of gods and divine settings, and feature on the west wall a series of sacrificial rites associated with world trees in the four cardinal directions (Taube, Stuart and Saturno, in preparation). As Karl Taube has just recently shown (personal communication 2004), these are direct antecedents to the similar sacrifice scenes from the New Year pages of the Dresden Codex, painted some 1500 years later. The main hieroglyphic text of the west wall, placed in the precise center of the composition, prominently displays the day 3 Ik'. Given the theme of the surrounding painting, I suggest this is a year-bearer day 3 Ik' Seating of Pop. It is difficult to pin this down in the Long Count, but given the present archaeological evidence for the dating of the murals (William Saturno, personal communication 2004), these placements seem closest:

- 7.11.6.9.2 3 Ik' Seating of Pop September 9, 131 B.C.
- 7.13.19.4.2 3 Ik' Seating of Pop August 27, 79 B.C.,
- 7.16.11.17.2 3 Ik' Seating of Pop August 14, 27 B.C.

Much more needs to be done on the texts and iconography surrounding year bearers, but I hope to have at least demonstrated that the year-bearer concept was important enough to the Classic Maya to have been mentioned in several monuments and paintings. In no small way the evidence points to the Classic Maya having yet more in common with their Mesoamerican neighbors.

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Signs and Symbols of the Maya

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Ethnoarchaeology has consistently produced unexpected and even surprising benefits for archaeologists. This is especially true in Mesoamerica where social anthropologists have worked intensively, but have often neglected topics of central concern to archaeologists, such as the persistence of metate manufacturing using stone tools (Hayden 1987), craft learning habits (Hayden and Cannon 1984a), abandonment and scavenging behavior (Lange and Rydberg 1972), refuse disposal (Hayden and Cannon 1983), and variability between households (Hayden and Cannon 1984b).

There are many elements of Classic Maya culture which appear to have persisted as disparate elements in isolated and unconnected parts of the modern Maya world. These include types of traditional dress, hairstyles and headpieces (e.g. men's long belts, huipiles, the expanding-band headdresses of Santiago Atitlan which are identical to depictions on various Classic sculptures), ceramic types, house types, underground storage pits, sun and moon worship, the use of the Maya calendar, and, as recorded here, the use of the Saint Andrew's Cross and spiked ritual vessels. Where such traditions are manifest in a number of different Mayan language communities and involve similarly structured symbolism and epithets, it seems reasonable to infer that they represent continuous traditions extending far back into prehistory that were probably part of Classic Maya culture. On the other hand, where there are unique or isolated examples of specific features, such as the crossed bands motif, it is more difficult to determine whether any significant changes may have taken place since prehispanic times when they were more current, or even whether there is an unbroken continuity of use at all.

This article presents important data on Maya symbolism which were unexpectedly encountered in the course of ethnoarchaeological work with other objectives. I will deal specifically with the use of the Saint Andrew's Cross and spiked incense burners.

The Saint Andrew's Cross

The Saint Andrew's Cross, or crossed bands motif, is one of the most prominent and enigmatic symbols associated with elites, deities, and objects of power in the Olmec and Classic Maya cultures. In 1979, during the course of ethnoarchaeological work at Chanal, Chiapas, the crossed bands motif was observed in use on staffs of office. Although our research was not oriented to the symbolic systems used by Maya communities, the



Figure 1. Staffs of authority used by *mayores* (*s-nabte' mayol*) displayed around one of the principal ritual crosses of Chanal during the summer solstice rituals in honor of San Juan.

use of this cross was briefly mentioned (Hayden and Cannon 1984b: Fig. 100). The occurrence of this motif was considered important enough to warrant the more detailed discussion presented below.

Today in Chanal, crossed bands are carved on the top of the staffs of office (*s-nabte' mayol*) of the *mayores*. These cargo holders are charged with carrying messages and commands of the top cargo officials to those for whom the messages are intended. The staffs of office that *mayores* carry differ from the usual staffs of cargo holders in that they are full height, are of very white and unfinished wood, lack metal caps and ribbons, and are displayed together around sacred crosses at important religious events (Figs. 1 & 2). In overall



Figure 2. A close-up of the St. Andrew's Cross motif on the *s-nabte' mayol*.



Figure 3. A staff held by the ruler of Tikal on Stela 9 (photo by B. Hayden).

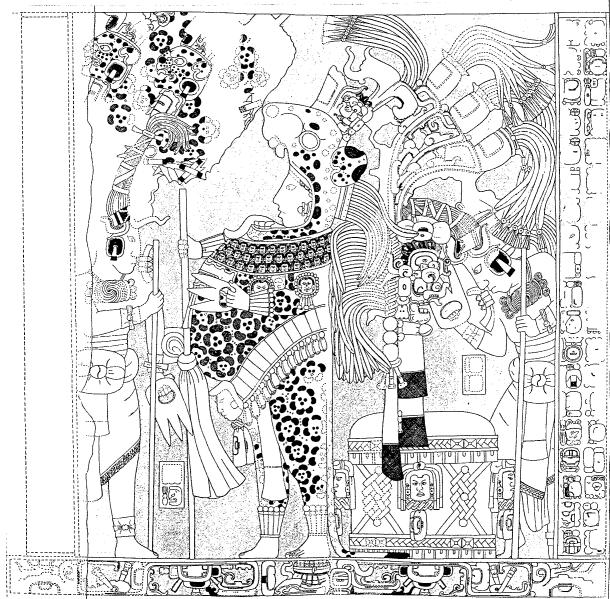


Figure 4. Staffs similar to those of Chanal held by the ruler of Tikal and his attendants, as depicted on Lintel 2 of Temple III (from Coe 1967:76).

appearance, they are much closer to depictions of staffs held by Classic Maya elites (Figs.3 & 4) than the shorter silver-tipped canes currently used by the highest ranking cargo leaders (e.g. Vogt 1969: Figs. 98 & 99).

All individuals in Chanal who were interviewed about these staffs indicated that the cross was a symbol of authority and associated it with Christ. Chanal, however, was established about 200 years ago as an offshoot community from Oxchuc. While Oxchuc has undergone dramatic changes since the 1950's when it was heavily missionized, as well as being impacted by road access in 1960, it was intensely traditional until that time, and many of the older people remember elements of the more traditional life. *S-nabte' mayol* are no longer used in Oxchuc (located, incidentally, between the Maya Highlands and the Tabasco lowlands), but they were used within living memory, and they were identical to those still used in Chanal.

I was fortunate to talk with Don Manuel Gomez Lopez (Mantic) from Oxchuc and to be able to ask him about the Saint Andrew's Cross. Don Manuel Gomez Lopez is the only surviving son of the most important *rezador* and *curandero* of Nabil (an aldea of Oxchuc), and he is now 73 years old and a prominent *principal* of Oxchuc. He was the Presidente Municipal in 1971. In his youth, he took a keen interest in traditional curing, ritual, and symbolism and learned much from his grandfather and father. Prior to the missionizing of 1948, a Catholic priest only visited Oxchuc once a year. The outlying community of Nabil still adhered to traditional religious practices, worshipping the sun (Nuestra Señor, *ch'ul ta tik*, lit: holy or ancient father our) and the moon (Nuestra Madre, *ch'ul me' tik*, lit: holy or ancient mother our). According to Don Manuel neither Christ, nor the Virgin, nor the saints were worshipped in his youth, although the mountains were revered as powerful spirits.

Don Manuel immediately recognized a description and drawing of the Saint Andrew's Cross on the Chanal *s-nabte' mayol*. He said it was formerly used in Oxchuc and that it symbolized traditional religion and the prevention of sickness, death, and misfortune. Asked for its name, he readily identified it as the *cruz estrella* (star cross). In Tzeltal, he referred to it as *krus muk'ul ek'* (lit: cross big star). *Muk'ul ek'* is the name for the planet Venus, as I was able to confirm with Don Manuel in the evening when Venus was particularly prominent. "Big star" or "bright star" is the most common term for Venus in Maya languages (Thompson 1960: 218). The Mopan term that I collected for Venus, *nnoch xílab'* (lit: very big star), can be added to Thompson's list.

An alternative suggestion is that the cross being referred to may not be an actual star or object, but may refer to a "crossroads" or intersection in the sky, possibly involving Venus and another celestial aspect such as the Milky Way. For instance, Girard (1949: 459, 573-4; 1962:

45, 81, 164, 186, 211) suggests that among the Chorti, the cross represents a cosmic crossroad formed by the intersection of the Milky Way and the ecliptic. While it is conceivable that something of this nature may have been involved in Oxchuc symbolism, nothing of the sort was ever mentioned. There is one other report of the emic meaning of the crossed bands motif that I am aware of. Brian Stross (personal communication, 1989) relates that crossed bands are still used in the *ch'a chaak* ceremony of the Yucatec Maya. In this context, the meaning of the motif is "sky," rather than Venus; however, all the ethnographically recorded cases (including the Oxchuc case) have one feature in common. They all are related to astronomical phenomena. This general association is also suggested by the prominent occurrence of crossed bands in Classic sky-band motifs. Sky-bands are composed of compartments filled with symbols for particular stars, constellations, or planets (Schele and Miller 1986: 47).

In order to explore a few implications of the identification of Venus with the crossed bands motif in Classic times, it is useful to situate Venus in Maya mythology and culture. In traditional Tzeltal cosmology, Venus is viewed as the offspring of the Moon. This agrees with Thompson's (1960: 230) general construct of the Sun/Moon/Venus myth, but goes on to argue that preconquest Maya traditions identified the Sun and Venus as brothers, and that Hunahpu (one of the two hero brothers of the Popul Vuh) was identified with the Venus god (Thompson 1960: 218). The Venus god was also significantly associated with the jaguar in Thompson's view. More recent research by Schele and Miller (1986: 48, 51, 278, 303-4, 306) and the authors they cite indicates that there is considerable variability in the ethnohistorical identification of mythological twins and various celestial bodies. This same variation seems to characterize Classic representations. Hunahpu could be associated with Venus or the sun or the moon; in some accounts his brother was Venus. In some accounts Hun-Ahau was Venus, in others, the twins could represent Venus in its evening and morning aspect. Similarly, in some versions Hunahpu appeared as a jaguar; in another context Venus appeared as one of the heads of the crocodilian celestial monster (where the crossed bands are prominent motifs). As Schele and Miller (1986: 306) point out, it is unlikely that each celestial object was associated with a single god; the images and symbols are much too complicated. Therefore, it is not surprising that there might be other symbols for Venus just as there were several ways of portraying most gods—a characteristic of classic Greek gods as well. If the crossed bands did refer to Venus prehistorically, they may have referred to a specific aspect of Venus or a specific relation of Venus with other celestial phenomena. Under modern

Christian influence Venus has become associated with the Star of Bethlehem in Chanal.

These observations prompt speculations at several levels. At the most general level, the use of crossed bands as a symbol of kings and their sacred authority seems entirely consistent with its occurrence in archaeological contexts. These include crossed bands as a major element in Maya elite pendants, belts, head-dresses, earspools, the two-headed Celestial monster representing the sun and Venus, sky bar scepters, cloaks, and sandals. Crossed bands also occur on the eyes, bodies and in the mouths of jaguars, the feathered serpent, and other deities, as well as in the borders of mythical or royal scenes.

At a still more specific level, it appears possible that Venus, or a special aspect of Venus, may have been intimately associated with the expression of royal sacred power and authority on earth. Because of the king's close relationship with Venus (the Guardian, or brother, or son of the Sun—Aveni 1980: 83), they could portray themselves as messengers of the deities, or perhaps as actual offspring of the deities, especially of the jaguar-associated Venus. Chiefs often claim this type of intermediary role between ancestral gods and the general populace. When viewed in this context, the potential importance of Venus for Classic Maya royalty is readily understandable. Venus could epitomize the role and position of kings: they precede and follow the powerful deities, just as Venus precedes and follows the sun. In this regard, the association of Venus with jaguars (e.g. in Dresden Codex 48e) and its credited potential for beneficial as well as harmful effects makes a great deal of sense, as does the unusual importance of Venus for the Maya, and the important sacrifices made to Venus (Aveni 1980: 184).

Ritual Vessels

As in the case of the *s-nabte' mayol*, I originally observed spiked incense burners and ritual flower holders resembling Classic forms while collecting data for other purposes (Fig. 5; see also Deal 1982). These spiked forms occur in the Tojolabal area north of Comitan, Chiapas, specifically in the communities of Jotana (Plan de Ayala), Bajucu, Buena Vista, and San Antonio. Except for the Yucatecan community of Lerma (Thompson 1958), no other Maya area produces spiked Tojolabal-style ritual vessels that I am aware of, although spikes do occur on some Highland incense burners with strap handles. In the Tojolabal area, the type of vessel shown in Figure 5 may only be used as a flower holder. I did not obtain any information on the significance of these spikes on my first visit to the Tojolabal area. However, a later visit provided additional information. As Deal (1982) demonstrates, archaeologists have speculated



Figure 5. A spiked flower holder from the Tojolabal church in San Miguel. These vessels are commonly used as ritual flower holders but strongly resemble prehistoric forms assumed to be incense burners.

that the spikes on Classic and Postclassic ritual vessels may have simply functioned to enable handling while incense was burning, or the spikes represented the thorns of the ceiba tree sacred to the Maya, nodules of *copal* incense, the rays of the sun, the spikes of the maguey, or that they had other religious significance.

On my return to the Tojolabal area, I was unable to locate a potter who still made spiked incensarios and ritual flower holders in the short time I was there. However, I was able to speak with the *comisariado* of Jotana who was about 50 years old and who had one of these spiked vessels on his family altar. While he did not attribute any overt significance to the spikes, he told me that they do have a specific Tojolabal descriptive term, as did other parts of the vessel. The spikes are termed *y-ala mix* (its little breasts), the base is *y-ala ok* (its little foot), and the body is *niwan lek ha yohol i* (a good and big interior—my informant made an analogy with a bag or a womb). The entire vessel therefore takes on a number of feminine qualities. That this is not an isolated view, but one general to the Maya, is indicated by information Don Manuel provided on incense burners. Referring to the spikes on the strap handle variety, he gave the Tzeltal term for them *x-chu' h-me'tik* (Our Mother's breast(s)). As in the case for the terms for Venus, such a convergence in terminology from two separate Mayan languages (Tojolabal and Tzeltal), may indicate a common prehispanic origin, reflecting an original symbolism and meaning, although in this case there has been considerable interaction between the two language groups. Moreover, the resemblance of the Maya terms to European terms for pottery elements (mouth, body, foot, neck) raises the question as to whether such descriptive terms arose independently among Maya and Europeans, or whether such terms were introduced by the Spanish and spread through-

out the area. Given the general lack of Spanish loan words involving traditional Maya pottery forms in these communities, and given the lack of spiked forms on Spanish pottery and the peripheral role of locally made pottery in the Spanish economy, as well as the relatively intuitive analogy between clay working or pots and human anatomy, I am inclined to believe the terms I recorded have pre-Hispanic roots. Certainly the use of human body terms to refer to parts of pottery vessels is a relatively common metaphor developed independently in many parts of the world (e.g., David et al. 1988). However, only further comparative linguistic or epigraphic work will be able to confirm the suggestion of independent origin for the Maya.

Don Manuel, with his substantial knowledge of Tzeltal ritual also told me that white is the color of *huipiles* that women wear after the birth of a child when it is presented at the church for naming. The amniotic sack at birth is white, and this is kept and dried to maintain good luck and health. The inner leaves of maize ears are also white, as are the insides of bean pods. Don Manuel said that in Oxchuc, white-slipped incensarios are used by women, while unslipped, reddish incensarios are used by men. In using the incensario in their personal rituals, Oxchuc *rezadores* place the incensario on the ground with candles and some alcohol. They rub a potent tobacco-lime paste (*pilico*) around their neck, burn incense (*pom*) and drink the alcohol as part of the ritual. Don Manuel described a third type of incensario used exclusively in the *milpa*. This was much smaller than the other types and had different types of crop seeds (maize, beans, squash) painted in a horizontal band on the outside. Only tree resin (*pom*) was burned in all incensarios. It is unclear to what extent white-slipped incensarios were used exclusively by women in Oxchuc or other Maya areas. In some Maya communities, white slipped incense burners are now the only ones used in public, while in other communities, publicly used incense burners are never slipped. Nevertheless, the possibility that such a distinction may have been important in rituals should be kept in mind in future ethnoarchaeological and archaeological work.

Gourds

Because the role of ritual gourds has been dealt with elsewhere (Hayden and Cannon 1984b: 173, Figs. 99, 100), these will not be discussed in detail here. However, it is worth noting briefly that ritual gourds appear to play the same role as polychrome vessels in preconquest communities. Like polychrome vessels, ritual gourds are often decorated, either with bichrome or polychrome symbols laden with ideological significance. The size range of both gourds and polychrome

vessels is about the same, and both are associated with "cloth bundles" placed on them and attached with cords (Hayden and Cannon 1984b). Today, ritual gourds are used for the serving of ritual *atol* at important ritual feasts such as lineage celebrations and community solstice ceremonies.

Conclusion

There are a number of criteria that can be used to argue for continuity in meaning from prehispanic to modern contexts. Perhaps the strongest of these involve widespread distributions of specific beliefs concerning symbolic representations, particularly where the associated terminology is clearly of autochthonous origin and where the intrusive culture lacks similar forms or beliefs. Occurrences of beliefs in several different autochthonous languages each with their own distinct terms reflecting a common belief or concept renders such interpretations even stronger. I have used this last approach in reconstructing indigenous terms for obsidian and other highly lustrous rocks (Hayden 1987: 184). Terms for these rocks from widely separated areas refer to them as excrement from celestial bodies (e.g., "star excrement," and "moon excrement"). The lack of any remotely equivalent metaphor in Spanish, and the occurrence in Tojolabal, Tzeltal, and Nahuatl of this same metaphor is a strong indication of prehispanic origin. I believe that the use of body part names for parts of vessels, and in particular the viewing of "spikes" as breasts may constitute another example, especially given the insignificant role these types of Maya ceramics held in the Spanish system. The occurrence of similar metaphors in European terminology tends to cloud the issue, however. The association of crossed bands with celestial phenomena occurs in such linguistically and spatially distinct communities that this general association should be considered as highly probable using the above criteria. More specific associations, however, with Venus or the Milky Way are more difficult to evaluate on the basis of this criterion.

Another criterion that can be used to argue for continuity in meaning is the identification of an unbroken, continuous tradition from prehispanic times to the ethnographic present. Baerreis (1961) argues that continuity must be established in using either the direct historic approach or the synthetic ethnic approach for inferring prehispanic behavior or beliefs from historic observations. Unfortunately, this criterion is difficult to evaluate in the examples presented in this paper, due to the lack of continuous or adequate descriptions about these topics during most of the post-conquest period.

A third criterion that can be used to argue for continuity is the coherency of complexly associated elements

of a motif or complex over time. If there are three or four distinct elements that exist in a structured relationship in prehispanic contexts (such as a *goggle eyed head* with *fangs* and a *handle bar moustache* associated with *water symbols*), and if ethnohistoric documents can be found that also refer to this same configuration together with an interpretation of its meaning, one might argue that the complexity of the image would constrain changes in meaning. As long as the motif complex retained its integrity, there would be a strong probability that the meaning associated with that motif complex would also be relatively stable. Unfortunately, in most of the cases presented above, relatively simple and independent motifs are involved. Simple and independent motifs are much more prone to recombination and alterations in meaning. Thus, this criterion does not advance an evaluation of the cases presented above, although it might be argued that the occurrence of *spikes* and *ritual vessels*, or *crossed bands* and *authority roles* constitutes a minimal configuration that appears to have remained stable over time.

A fourth criterion that can be used to evaluate interpretive claims of prehispanic remains based on ethnographic observations, is the general compatibility with what is known from previous interpretations of the prehispanic culture involved. In the case of the crossed bands, their close association with community leaders, gods, and other celestial objects (e.g., in skybands), certainly lends support to the interpretation of these bands as representing Venus, or some aspect of Venus. In Chanal and Oxchuc, the basic associations between crossed bands, community power figures as messengers of divine will, and celestial (especially Venus) symbolism appear to be the same as among the Classic Maya. On the other hand, little has been inferred about spikes on vessels other than the fact that they occur on ritual vessels in prehispanic contexts, and still less is known about the colors of incense burners.

A fifth criterion in evaluating claims of continuity involves geographical and probable ethnic proximity of the prehispanic to the ethnographic observations. The greater the distance, the less likely continuity in meaning will be present. The same can be argued for temporal distance. Thus, the fact that staffs of office with crossed bands carved on them occur in contemporary communities in geographical proximity to the Classic Maya regions of Tabasco where these features commonly occurred, incline me to accept their current usage as part of an unbroken tradition which has maintained the central meaning of the crossed bands. However, sound procedures of inference require that unique features be treated less conclusively. The inferences generated by ethnoarchaeological investigations of features unique to a single community (or group of closely related communities) ought to be viewed as

provocative and tantalizing suggestions whose value must still be established through the assembling of more observations and the testing of resulting hypotheses.

The primary value of the observations presented in this article lies in the insights which may reveal relationships or meanings in the archaeological (and ethnographic) record that may have been previously overlooked, e.g., in sculpture, epigraphy, distributions, and artifacts.

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to Don Manuel Gomez Lopez and the other individuals in the communities that I visited who generously shared their knowledge and understanding. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the members of the New World Archaeological Foundation for their hospitality, their logistical support, and their interest in this project. John Clark, Ronny Lowe, Maria Elena Gomez de Lowe, and Thomas Lee, Jr. were particularly supportive in this respect, while Ronny and Maria Elena Lowe helped enormously in introducing me to Don Manuel Gomez. I owe a similar debt of gratitude to Rob Gargett who serendipitously noticed a Chanal Mayores' staff in Oxchuc and urged me to ask about it. Lyle Campbell, Otto Schumann, and Paul Healy generously commented on an earlier draft and helped refine various aspects. Brian Stross and other reviewers were extremely helpful in sharing their own observations and data and I am grateful for their help. The Simon Fraser University Committee for Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Small Grants generously supplied funding for this research.

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Return to the Great Forests

FRANS BLOM'S LETTERS FROM PALENQUE

December 1922 - March 1923

Translated and with an introduction and notes by Jesper Nielsen & Tore Leifer



Figure 1. Frans Blom in Waxaktun, Spring 1924. Courtesy of The Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University, New Orleans.

Editor's Note

As explained by the translators in their introduction to this series in PARI Journal 4(3), the Maya archaeologist and explorer Frans Blom carried out one of the first scientific investigations of Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico, from December 14, 1922, to March 14, 1923. This issue concludes the publication of his letters from the site.

February 21, 1923.

It rained for three days, mostly a fine drizzle. Nonetheless, I rode a trip to the village on Monday. Almost all the families there were important people at the time when there was a kind of serfdom, about fifteen years ago. But those days are now over, and people who used to have twenty or thirty Indians as a kind of slaves now have to work themselves. They aren't used

to this, and consequently they just scrape through as best they can. They own rich lands which would with very little effort yield more than enough in order for them to live well. But work? No, thanks! I dismissed a man hired as an attendant here. He earned four pesos a day, which is a lot of money in these tracts. In return for that money he was supposed to live here at the ruins and supervise two workers hired to keep the vegetation from covering the ruins altogether. But this fine gentleman kept on living in the village and had not been out here for three months. So he was kicked out and couldn't at all understand why. No sooner did the rumor spread in the village that there was a chance of earning four pesos a day without doing anything than I had a whole migration of people out here. They all told me how honest and hard-working they were, at the same time slighting the rest of the population. That they had to live here at the ruins they might accept, though they were much more willing to come out here a couple of times a week. I explained to each and every one of them that they were supposed to work as hard as the two workers; likewise that I would send a man out here once a month to inspect whether they did get any work done; and finally that they would not get their pay until his report had been received. Well, that they didn't like. Then I insisted that they come out here for one trial week each. By now I have quite a reputation for advancing hard through the forests; the village Indians can hardly follow suit. Those who dared accept a trial week worked more during those days than in their whole previous life. Not one of them lasted for a full week. They suddenly got busy attending to their sick horse or wife and disappeared. So here I sit with a job at four pesos a day and no one to take it. The two workers here are real forest Indians, they are all right.

The village doesn't really care for me, on the whole. The man I dismissed had not done a thing for two years. I sentenced him to either pay a fine of one month's salary or build me a palm house out here. He is now building the house. It is to be used as lodgings for travellers. Another chap who had been employed as a worker here and been paid, while at the same time attending to another job four days' journey from here, was apprehended by me. He is now building me another house. This is for a museum.

A village "gentleman" used to be an inspector here some years back. He quietly carried off several very valuable stone tablets with inscriptions; they were to be sold secretly to Americans. I apprehended him too.

He was a wily old bird. He kept bringing me one insignificant artifact after the other. I knew that he had the tablets hidden somewhere and finally spotted a large tablet under a cupboard. I had by then become quite mad at him. Then I fetched the only policeman in town and four boys, and together we invaded the house. The boys pulled out the stone tablet, and sure enough it was a wonderful tablet covered with inscriptions. Then followed a little search of the house, and what we found were no mere trifles. I suggested that he take a trip to jail in order to ponder whether he might not have some more. That he didn't like, and he produced a fine little mask carved in obsidian, a very hard volcanic glass. He had buried it under the dirt floor of his bedroom with all his savings. As he now had the money out I let him pay the workers, and let him off with that. Some nice robbers these fellows are. The same old chap has the reputation of having tormented and bullied his Indian

serfs in the old days; furthermore he has six legitimate children and twenty-two illegitimate ones.

February 27, 1923.

No mail for me this week either, but there's a reason for that. Some bandits boarded the river steamboat about a week ago, and they are said to have taken the mail with them ashore. It is known that they searched all the goods aboard, both those in crates and those in bottles, and that they extorted quite an amount of money from the passengers. Nothing is known for sure about the mail, but probably a few of my letters are now lying about somewhere in the forest. Darned annoying. I won't know for sure, though, until the end of the week.

Today—Tuesday—we rode by automobile to Montecristo, and that was where we heard about the bandits and the mail. On the way I saw a sight new to me: migrating swarms of locusts, the plague of the locusts. Only now do I understand what that means. Whole fields of maize had been eaten, all the trees were like beech trees in December, without a single leaf. Millions of locusts buzzing in the air. When we drove through the swarm, they lashed against our faces, and the bottom of the car was soon covered by locusts. Around four we were back in Palenque village, and soon I was heading back to my little Eden. Eden—yes, it is beautiful, hot and filled with serpents; the only thing missing is Eve and her kind—luckily so. This is why it is so nice and peaceful. My joy was doubled when I saw that my people had, in my absence, cleared the scrub and brushwood off a large piece of land that I particularly wanted cleared. They must have started early and worked till late during the two days I had been gone. It delighted me to see that I could go away without their profiting from my absence to idle, as is so often the case here.

February 28, 1923.

Another beautiful day. It is spring, i.e. the season of flowers. Oranges and lemons are in bloom and fill the air with their heavy scent. The wild begonias, which cause me no end of trouble as they cling to the buildings everywhere, are in full bloom. Large clusters of white and pink flowers nod from their long stems. The days are hot, but the shady forest is near; and as evening falls a cool breeze rises from the lowlands. When morning approaches it may even be quite cold. And what nights! Once more it is moonlight, and temples and palaces shine silvery white in the pale light against the dark forest. When I put out my lamp, everything in my hut is striped. The walls are made of sticks, and between them there is plenty of room for light and air.

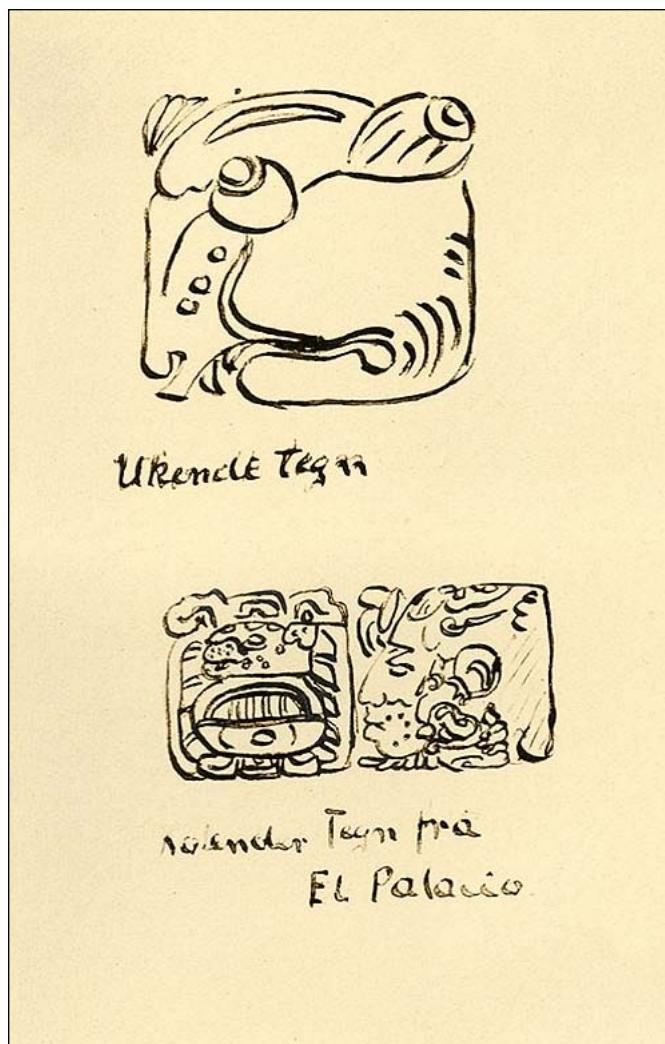


Figure 2. Glyphs from the Palace, Palenque, 1922-23. Sketchily drawn by young Frans Blom, from the M.A.R.I. typescript. Courtesy The Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University, New Orleans.

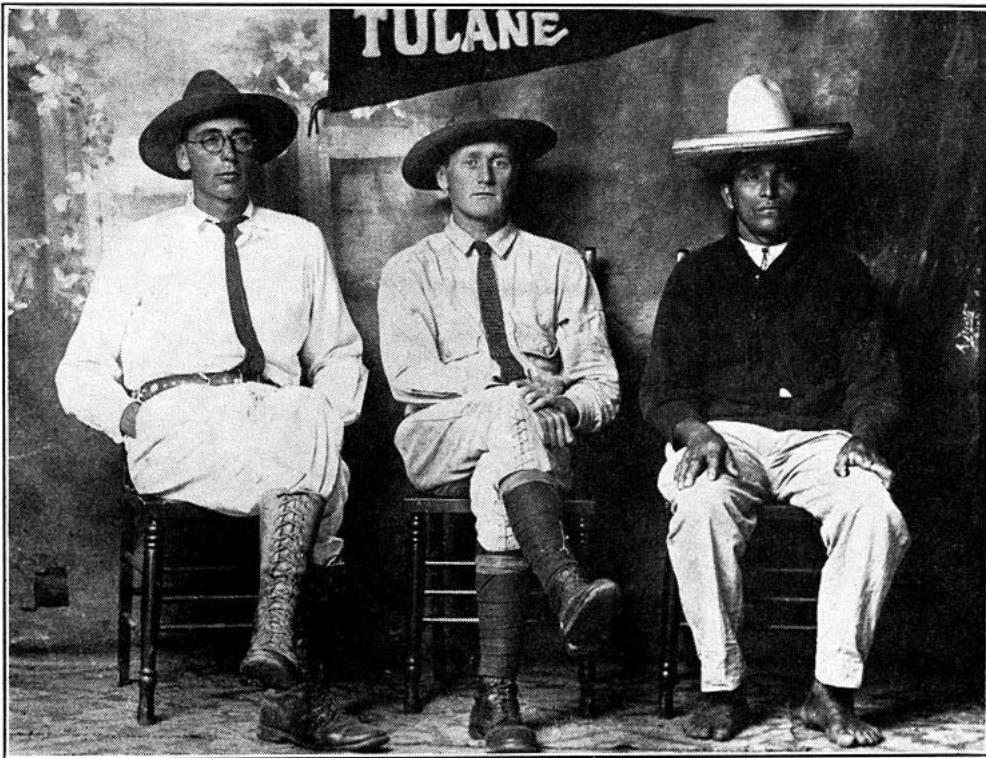


Figure 3. Oliver La Farge, Frans Blom, and "Tata" Lazaro Hernandez. After *Tribes and Temples* Fig. 374.

Windows are unheard of in this kind of house, nor are they needed. You live so to speak in the open air.

March 5, 1923.

Have I told you about my little friend "Nando", a little Indian boy with black hair and black eyes? His father works for me, his mother cooks for me, his elder sister does my laundry, and a brother and younger sister serve my food. The whole family live off me and do their best to make me comfortable, they are quite touching in their own way. Nando is four years old and is really named Hernan or Fernando, and he is the funniest and happiest little boy. At the beginning he was somewhat shy. His brother and sister collected small clay figurines and arrowheads for me. There are plenty of those lying about on the ground here, and each new downpour brings out more. Nando quickly learned the trick. At first he came rushing into my hut with his chubby little hand stretched out at me. "Take", he said, emptied the contents of his hand into mine and hurried off with all possible speed. All sorts of small things, fine little round pebbles, snail shells, lumps of clay, everything that his little head thought I could use. By and by he became more confident, and now he walks in and out and makes himself at home. Babbling and chatting he walks around my little room while I work, he examines everything, and he is bright. He is tremendously

amusing, and whenever he becomes too vivacious it is so wonderfully easy to send him back to his family.

His attire consists of as little as possible. On Sundays he is dressed in trousers with pockets, and then he calls himself a "señor". One day he found a piece of string and suddenly appeared in my museum swinging his lasso. With the most sincere eyes he looked at me and explained that the rope—the piece of string had become one in his imagination—was good for catching bulls, and asked me whether I would sell him the rope. But the most amusing thing about him is that he sings, and sings well, in the purest little voice, quite in tune. He has heard his elder sister sing, and performs the whole repertory. One or two words from the songs are true enough, the rest he fills with funny sounds resembling the words he doesn't know. He looks like a little angel painted by Murillo, and Nando and I are friends and converse very seriously and sensibly with each other.

Nando's elder sister is 17 and should by local standards have been married a year or two ago. She has a boyfriend, and she is nicely fat. Chubby and fat is all that counts around here. If you wish to flatter a man you tell him he looks fat. If you ask how such and such a person is doing, you receive the answer that he is "muy gordo", very fat, meaning that he is wonderfully well. If two men talk about a woman you often hear them saying, "how pretty and how fat she is".

My museum has now been completed. It is the common local style, "château de palm tree," several inches between the planks of the walls, light and airy. And this morning I asked my men to make boards for the tables. This too takes place in a way that seems unusual to the outsider. First the Indians disappear for quite a while into the forest, and when they show up again they come proudly marching with three or four logs, each a foot wide or more. It looks formidable, but it is not the work of special strongmen. The timber they have sought out is as light as a feather and shiny white. They throw off their load, grab a log, place it upright, and with swift slashes they soon have the boards all done. They do not use axes but their machete, the long sabre-like knife that follows them everywhere, even to their balls and dances. And you should see those fellows slash. I would maintain that they can hold a pencil in their outstretched arm and sharpen it with their machete. It may sound like a lie, and it may be partly one, but it is definitely not one altogether.

There is not one iron nail in the whole museum building, and all the building material comes from the forest. Everything has been tied together with lianas and bast. The doors consist of two sticks on top and two at the bottom tied to the door posts, and in the space between them the door sticks are placed. Very simple. Here nature gives us everything. Even my wash stand comes from the forest. A young tree with three branches, placed close together, growing upwards and a little outwards. In the cleft between the branches is placed the clay vessel serving as washbowl. My bookcase is not quite that natural, but no less practical. Kerosene crates, one piled on top of the other, this is what is so fancily called a "section bookcase". Besides being practical and cheap, these bookcases have one more advantage. The crates are usually soaked in kerosene, and this is not to the liking of the white ants—the ruin of all books.

You get frugal and clever as the years go by—and thrifty as well.

I suddenly happened to look at my clock, it has now been hanging on a nail for a month, resting. Well, what do you need a clock for? It is time to get up when the sun gets up. In the middle of the day, you get hungry—and again in the late afternoon. When the sun sets, it is probably evening, and then of course there is our rooster. It is a very fine rooster which crows on the stroke of nine and at midnight.

Of other zoological oddities we have here a hunting dog, of more than mixed breed, with a fine nose for armadillos and burial chambers. But since armadillos like to live in caves, I guess that the latter fact is closely connected to the first—though I would of course like to make people believe that I've trained the dog to find burial chambers.

Then there is a tame mouse which eats my soap every night—well, whether it is really tame or just unusually cheeky I don't know. The latter, I guess. And close to a million ants eat my sugar. Moreover, I feed the mosquitos and other insects. They feed off me, though their chances have now been considerably diminished, since I have grown a beard over my whole face.

Fair is beholding the sight of the beard,
Red and ruffled and warm.
Hairy and hardy, the head of the hero
Has met the mosquitoes' murderous swarm.
Hung now hangs the harrowing horde,
Hooked in the beard in the wood.
Dying now drop the damaging devils,
Gone while the going was good.
Moral: leave your stubbles to grow in the jungle!

Ancient Norse Skaldic Poem?

Well, after this poetic outburst I guess I had better stop for tonight.

March 10, 1923.

I have already little by little begun packing my stuff, in order to have it all ready for the day of departure. My clothes have been reduced to rags, my boots have no soles, I've read all the books I'd brought and I've barely any more paper to write on, so it is high time I should leave. If only the aforementioned matters were in order, I would love to stay on for another three months. Well, the mailman is at my door, so this is all you'll get.

March 19, 1923.

This will be my last letter here from the ruins. In a couple of hours my pack animals will be loaded, and tonight I will ride the 60 km [37 miles] to Montecristo. But before I leave I will make another round through the beautiful ruins where I have now spent three months with studies and joy. At the beginning of April I will probably reach Mexico [City], and I will stay there, as far as I know, until October.

Now my workers come to get the crate I am sitting on to load it onto the mules. I am anxious about my eight crates, and wish that I had safely arrived in Mexico [City]. All my finds have been wrapped, and I am afraid something should break on the way.

The sun shines over the forest and the ruins, a joyful period of my life draws to its end. I repeat the final words of the prologue to Tiefland ["The Lowlands"]: "Wir gehen ins Tiefland herunter, da streiten sich die Menschen." ["We descend into the lowlands, where humans quarrel."]