"Off with his head!" A Heretofore Unknown Monument of Tonina, Chiapas

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In 2013, the Institute for Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies at the University of Copenhagen moved from its earlier location to become part of a large new campus for the entire Faculty of Humanities on the island of Amager in the southern part of Copenhagen. As part of the moving process, various archives containing personal papers, photos, slides, and publications pertaining to the Department of American Indian Languages and Cultures and its former employees were reorganized. During this task a collection of black-and-white and color photographs surfaced, and our initial research made clear that they were taken in 1966 (although the extant copies were probably printed a few decades later). These photographs document the production process of two documentary films, wherein some were used as stills. One of these was a film recording the visits of the then heir apparent to the Danish throne, Her Highness Crown Princess Margrethe (Queen since 1972) to Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina from February to April, 1966. During her time in Mexico (February 17–24), the Crown Princess, who herself had studied archaeology and art history, visited several archaeological sites, including Teotihuacan, Monte Alban, Uxmal, Chichen Itza, and Tulum, and some of the photos show her touring the latter three sites (Figure 1). The film, directed by Ole Gammeltoft and Ole Roos, and filmed by Rolf Rønne (1926–1997), premiered in late 1966.

Another set of photographs derive from the shooting of another documentary the same year (and presumably in continuation of the first). Here Rønne once again served as the lead cinematographer, but the directors were Børge Høst (1926–2010), an acknowledged movie director, and Arild Hvidtfeldt (1915–1999). Known for his
study of Aztec impersonation rituals Tlaloc and Toci (Hvidtfeldt 1958). Hvidtfeldt was a historian of religions and in 1970 was one of the leading forces in establishing the Department of American Indian Languages and Cultures at the University of Copenhagen (Nielsen and Fritz Hansen 2008:35-37; Nielsen 2019). The resulting film, Mellem to kulturer (Between Two Cultures)—centered on highland Chiapas Tzotzil communities such as Zinacantan and San Juan Chamula—sought to document and explore how indigenous groups came to respond to and engage with foreign development aid projects. The film was released in 1967. Presumably Hvidtfeldt’s role was to provide the necessary historical and ethnographic background to the region, and he undoubtedly took notes on religious traditions during the film recordings although he never published any of this research. Several of Renne’s photos from Chiapas are excellent, sometimes evocative images of daily Tzotzil life (Figure 2) from a period when the Harvard Chiapas Project, led by Ervon Z. Vogt, was already well underway in its documentation of how Maya culture changed in those pivotal decades (see Vogt 1994).

What immediately caught our attention, however, was a sequence of photographs showing ancient Maya archaeological sites and monuments in Chiapas. In one photo Hvidtfeldt is standing in front of a structure at Tonina, and others show several sculpture and stela fragments lying scattered about the Great Plaza at the base of the towering Acropolis (Figure 3). From these photos it is possible to identify Monuments 12 and 20 and a sculpture representing a decapitated individual (Monument 33) replete with circular spots on his arms and upper thighs, possibly as an emulation of the mythic hero Juun Ajaw—now on display in the Sala Maya of the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City (Blom and Daby 1957:81, Fig. 25; Becquelin and Baudez 1982:654-658, 663-664, 835-836, 3:1258, Fig. 71, 1351).ura 2006; Martin and Graube 2008:176-189), and although it must have been present when Frans Blom visited the site in 1922, 1925, and 1948 (Blom 1923:169-172; Blom and La Farge 1927:259-308; Blom and Daby 1957:71-84; 1 According to Blom, Pestac is situated 2 km north of Tonina (Blom 1935:191), but in the map published by Becquelin and Baudez, the two small sites of Pestac Bajo and Pestac Alto are located roughly 1 km to the southwest of Tonina (Becquelin and Baudez 1982:194-195; Fig. 2; see also Taladère 2016:Map 1) and in the information that accompanies this monument in the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Ian Graham indicates that Pestac is 1.5 km south of Tonina (Graham and Mathews 1999:181).

Figure 2. Tzotzil Maya couple shelling maize (Zinacantan, Chiapas), photographed by Rolf Rønne in 1966.

Figure 3. Monuments and sculptures in the Great Plaza at Tonina, 1966. The lower part of the Pestac Stela can be seen in the photograph on the left and Monument 12 in foreground of the photograph on the right (photographs by Rolf Rønne).

Figure 4. Arild Hvidtfeldt (kneeling) and Børge Høst (standing) examine the newly discovered stela fragment at Tonina, 1966 (photographs by Rolf Rønne). Note the damaged upper left corner of the stela.

Fig. (163). Also visible is the lower half of the Pestac stela, which had been moved to Tonina—sometime between 1928 and 1948—from the eponymous site, located less than 2 km away (see Blom 1935; Blom and Daby 1957:84; Becquelin and Baudez 1982:646-648).

What was unexpected were the two following photos showing Hvidtfeldt (kneeling) and Børge Høst (standing) on either side of a carved stela, lying exposed and on its back, presumably in the uncleared bush in the vicinity of the other sculptures (Figure 4). Another surprise was the stela’s relatively early style, since even a quick perusal of the monument’s sculpture suggests that it was raised sometime between 600 and 800. The well-preserved stela fragment does not appear in any of the more recent publications documenting or describing the inscribed monuments of Tonina (Becquelin and Baudez 1982:194-195; Mathews 1983; Yadeun 1992, 1993; Graham and Mathews 1996, 1999; Graham et al. 2006; Martin and Graube 2008:176-189), and although it must have been present when Frans Blom visited the site in 1922, 1925, and 1948 (Blom 1923:169-172; Blom and La Farge 1927:259-308; Blom and Daby 1957:71-84; see also Leifer et al. 2017:81-83, 132-133), there is nothing to suggest that he saw it, just as we know that Ian Graham fails to mention this monument despite his two-day visit to the site in 1959 (Graham 2010:469-470). Yet photographs taken during Graham’s visit show the same area as that examined by the Danish visitors a decade later, giving us a sense of the site’s appearance at the time (Figure 5).

In fact, a possible explanation for the Danish explorers’ interest in this particular monument and for the taking of photographs at this location, and not any of the other parts of the plaza, could be that the monument had only just been discovered by the local residents and guides. When the French Mission Archéologique et Ethnologique Française au Mexique carried out their long-term project at the site from 1972 to 1980 there is no mention of the fragmentary monument, and it appears to have been removed before the project was initiated. Consequently, the fragment is also absent in the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions publications of the Peabody Museum (Mathews 1983; Graham and Mathews 1996; 1999; Graham et al. 2006). We therefore conclude that the fragmentary stela must have been illegally removed from its findspot sometime between 1966 and 1972 and possibly very soon after it had been presented to Hvidtfeldt and his travel companions.

We were delighted that a more thorough search among unprovenienced Maya monuments revealed that the fragment is now part of the collections of the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia, to which it was donated by a “group of friends of the
Nielsen et al.

### Description

When found in 1966, the stela was discovered lying on its back in one large fragment, which constitutes the upper half of the monument. This large fragment measures c. 63.5 cm wide by 119.4 cm high (see Mayer 1984:Pl. 44; National Gallery of Victoria 2017). According to Mayer, the monument allegedly originated from the Yucatan, something that we can now say with certainty is not the case.

### Description

**Figure 5.** The appearance of the plaza in 1959 (photograph by Ian Graham; gift of Ian Graham, 2004 © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM# 2004.15.1.774.1).

**Figure 6.** The fragmentary stela as curated in the collections of the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne (photograph © National Gallery of Victoria).

"Off with his head!"

Whereas the two lateral fragments each depict a glyph, much like the Melbourne stela they are rendered as a circular medallion, of comparable size and placement. As such, it is clear that these are lower fragments of the same stela. Unfortunately, they do not directly conjoin with the Melbourne stela, making it clear that several more fragments of the same monument await discovery at Tonina. Assuming that this monument had similar proportions to those represented by other early stelae of Tonina (i.e., Mons. 106 and 168) we can suggest that the original stela had a height of circa 1.85 m (although it may have been slightly taller). Based on the surface area of the extant fragments (excluding the lost upper left corner) we can thus say that a little less than 70% of the stela has been discovered.

What is all the more startling is the iconography of the basal fragments, since we can see a decapitated human head along the right margin. The way the hair is pulled upwards suggests that the king depicted on the stela grasps this decapitated head by the hair in his left hand, completing his grim appearance, embodying one of the more noxious death deities. Together, this confirms the use of trident eccentrics as instruments of sacrifice and makes for a very menacing depiction of a king who was not to be trifled with.

It bears mention that representations of decapitated heads are virtually non-existent in Maya sculpture, making this stela all the more exceptional. Before this monument, the one salient example is that depicted, in a very similar way, on the large stucco frieze decorating

**Figure 7.** Fragments of the Melbourne stela discovered at Tonina (photographs by Jorge Pérez de Lara, reproduced with permission of the Coordinación Nacional de Conservación del Patrimonio Cultural, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia).
the acropolis of Tonina. There, in an underworld scene a nefarious and skeletal watery creature, or ghoul-like companion spirit, named Ahk Osh Kamay (“turtle foot death”), holds a decapitated human head by the hair, tongue lolling from the open mouth (Yadeun 1993:114-115). It cannot be ascertained with certainty by any means, but these examples are so similar that one might be tempted to suggest that this particular detail of the Late Classic stucco was in fact inspired by the iconography of what is now the Melbourne stela. In contrast, it also remains possible that such overt, grisly imagery of decapitation on public monuments is more a local and long-standing defining feature of Tonina’s iconography.

Historical Context

In terms of style and dating some general comments can be made regarding the Melbourne stela in light of its historical context (Figure 8). For one, it is clearly carved in a more traditional format, as a square slab and in relatively low relief as is the standard across much of the Maya lowlands. The earliest known monument of Tonina to be carved in the site’s hallmark three-dimensional style and high relief is Mon. 168 (Graham 2006:111-113) (Figure 9). This monument prominently features a lord whose name has only been partly read to date (Martin and Grube 2000:178). Part of the name includes the head of a tapir. As such, some have suggested that the lord’s name should be read Bahlam Yaxuun Tihl (Martin and Grube 2008:178, 179). Yet, a closer inspection reveals that we are looking at a bipartite animal name, wherein the first part is written K’INICH (B1) sa-na-va (B2) BALAM (B3) for K’inich Sanaw Bahlam and the second is written ya-YAXUN (B4) TIL-la (B5) for Yaxuun Tihl (Figure 9). Thus his name would, in the first instance, qualify a particular type of resplendent jaguar that may be said to be “crouching” or “stretching,” whereas the second name focuses on a tapir that is qualified by a cotinga. For the sake of simplicity, we will refer to this ruler by the second of his names.

The dating of this monument also requires some commentary, since it only bears a Calendar Round at the onset. This date is written 7 Ik’ (A1) end of Muwan (A2–A3) (Figure 10). Via a distance number (A4–A6) this date goes on to refer to an accession (A7) and provides the names of Yaxuun Tihl. As a result, it is generally thought that this is the accession monument of Yaxuun Tihl (Martin and Grube 2000:179). With these parameters we can thereby either go forward or backward from the Calendar Round specified at the onset, by the temporal interval provided by the distance number, which in

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2 Based on Ch’orti’ sarar “acostado estirado; lying down stretched out” (Hull 2016:360) and sar “to stretch” (Wisdom 1990:827).
Nielsen et al.

this case amounts to 15 haab (360-day ‘years’), 9 vinal (twenty-day ‘months’), and 13 kin (‘days’). It is un-
clear from context which of these segments corresponds

to the accession, leaving the other event as unspeci-
fied and implicit. Based on the presence of a temporal
marker below the accession statement we are inclined
to think that it is the accession that ties into the number
of days, leaving the 7 Ik’ date as the unspecified event.

The accession statement – we take it to be that of K’inch
Bahlam Chapaaht, according to its monuments, arranged in chronological order by dated events.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monument</th>
<th>Latest Date</th>
<th>Gregorian Date</th>
<th>Event Date</th>
<th>Gregorian Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mon. 160</td>
<td>9.4.0.0.0</td>
<td>514</td>
<td>9.3.6.15</td>
<td>501</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon. 106</td>
<td>??</td>
<td>514</td>
<td>5.4.0.0</td>
<td>514</td>
<td>Period Ending of Ruler 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emiliano Zapata Panel</td>
<td>9.7.19.0.0</td>
<td>592</td>
<td>9.7.16.4.8</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>Tomb ritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Altar</td>
<td>9.8.0.0.0</td>
<td>593</td>
<td>9.7.18.0.0</td>
<td>591</td>
<td>Period Ending of K’inich ‘Muk’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emiliano Zapata Panel</td>
<td>9.7.19.0.0</td>
<td>592</td>
<td>9.7.19.0.2</td>
<td>592</td>
<td>Fire ritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Altar</td>
<td>9.8.0.0.0</td>
<td>593</td>
<td>9.8.0.0.3</td>
<td>590</td>
<td>Stela erection by K’inich ‘Muk’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon. 168</td>
<td>9.9.1.2.2</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>9.8.6.11.9</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>Accession of Yaxuun Tihl?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon. 169</td>
<td>9.8.9.1.3</td>
<td>602</td>
<td>9.8.9.1.3</td>
<td>602</td>
<td>Raising of the stela of K’inich ‘Muk’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon. 173</td>
<td>9.0.0.0.0</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>9.8.19.17.9</td>
<td>612</td>
<td>Subsidiary installed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon. 168</td>
<td>9.9.1.1.2</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>9.9.1.12.2</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>Death of Yaxuun Tihl?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon. 175</td>
<td>9.9.1.1.11</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>9.9.1.13.1</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>Accession of K’inich Bahlam Chaahk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Summary of the early history of Tonina, according to its monuments, arranged in chronological order by dated events.

it clear that the stela is not tz’ahpaj “erected,” using
the more traditional phraseology, but is instead
nsal-bak’tunun k’inich muk’tik “it is the stela of K’inich
Muk,” suggesting perhaps that is a reference to a
re-erection of the monument of an earlier ruler by a later
king. This is entirely plausible, given that the successor
appears to have acceded in AD 600, which is to say two
years before the ostensible re-erection of Mon. 74 (Table
13).

With the accession Yaxuun Tihl in AD 600 we are
to see a clear line in the stylistic development of the
stela. As we have already noted, this is the first well-dated monument to show
what would become the hallmark style of Tonina’s
royal portraiture. A continuity with the past, however,
is the use of the circular mediad of the glyphs that
were rendered in intaglio on the sides of the monument
(Figure 10). This is a clear continuity with Mon. 74 and,
importantly, also with the Melbourne stela, indicating
that these monuments are broadly contemporaneous,
with the latter dated to sometime before the end of the
sixth century. Supporting this temporal assignment is
Mon. 173, which commemorates the accession of a sub-
sidiary figure, a ritual specialist to be precise, bearing
the title of ajk’uhu’n (lit. ‘worshipper’) (Jackson and Stuart
2001, Zender 2004:156-157, 342, Fig. 35). The same monu-
ment also records the witnessing of the reign of 9.9.0.0.0 Period Ending of AD 613. What is noteworthy is the format of
the stela, raised as a square slab of fine sandstone and
rendered in low relief (Miller and Martin 2004:88-89).
Once more this is a direct continuity with the earlier monuments and one that persists until the accession
of Yaxuun Tihl, the majority of monarchs would be raised in the round, in the style that would come to identify Tonina for the three
centuries following. This is the inscription that is
inscribed on the back of the stela, which portrays the
inurna portrait of K’inich Bahlam Chaahk (Mon. 28),
which is rendered in the round and thereby follows the
precede

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>600</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>615</td>
<td>9.9.1.12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>615</td>
<td>9.9.1.13.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This scenario allows us to account for the placement of K’inich ‘Muk’ in relation to his successor Yaxuun Tihl. If we assume that
the AD 602 reference on Mon. 74 is a contemporaneous reference to the dedication of a stela, presumably Mon. 74 itself, we are left with
a two-year overlap in the reigns of these two kings, which seems implausible. As such, Mon. 74 either depicts K’inich Muk and the
was added at a later date to account for its re-erection, or
naturally it is Yaxuun Tihl that is depicted and the text records a good
deed towards his predecessor.

2 The last segment of the name is not entirely clear and although it broadly resembles a MUK iconography it may prove to be another

sign, which is why we provisionally present this segment in quota-

tion marks.

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Blackman Eddy Stela 1). The relatively late date of the monument is betrayed by the text that bears on its back, which is presented in typical seventh century style and records the birth of K'inich Bahlam Chapaaht and other ambiguous events.

Putting it all Together

Based on the above historical review we can see that the Melbourne stela is one of the earliest monuments of Tonina and depicts one of its initial rulers. This is also made clear by what remains of the glyphic text (Figure 8). Whereas the first two glyphic medallions are now missing (pA1 and pB1), what remains is the head-variant of the logogram CH'EN (pC1), read ch'een, (lit. “cave,” but also “settlement” by extension) here represented as the head of an owl, paired with what may be an unlit torch (Vogt and Stuart 2005:157-160; Helmke 2009:543-551). This is followed by the agency expression ukabij (pD1), read ukabij, “it is his doing” (Grube and Martin 1998). Based on syntax we can see that the end of an initial clause is preserved, which is followed by a sub-clause that is initiated by the agency expression. Typically, the initial clause provides a record of an action, whose subject is frequently the patient of the verb. The sub-clause that follows is a means of introducing the agent of the verb, the actual protagonist of the account, or at least the individual to whom credit is given for an action. Based on these syntactical parameters we surmise that the end of the initial clause records either the name of a human subject, whose name ends with Ch'een, or the name of a locality that was affected by a presumably adverse action (to judge from the iconography). Assuming that an anthroponym was originally recorded in the initial clause, we can think of comparable royal names such as We'om Yoh Ch'een “the devourer of settlements” of Xultun and Yulkin’s Yoh Ch’een “the uniter/shaker of settlements” of Calakmul (see Martin and Grube 2000; Colas 2004; Esparza Olguín and Velásquez García 2013), but perhaps most relevant is the mention made of a figure named Muyal Ch’een on Mon. 160, the early altar of Tonina (see Grube et al. 2002:10). Whether this is an earlier namesake or the same individual referred to on the Melbourne stela is unknown.

Most interesting to the case at hand are the two glyphs that follow ukabij in the base of the scene, framing the standing figure on either side of his knees (Figure 8). The first (pE1) records part of the regnal name of the early Tonina king, since this figure is the syntactical agent of the glyphic text. Although the glyph in question has suffered some erosion the outlines of an avian head can be made out, which is preceded by a distinctive diadem. Together these are defining characteristics of the great avian deity, referred to in the literature as the Principal Bird Deity (see Bardawil 1976; Nielsen and Helmke 2015). The second part of the name is provided in the last glyph (pF1), representing the head variant of the so-called Water Lily Serpent, the personification of turbulent waters, known as witz’’ in the Classic period (see Schele and Miller 1986:44; Stuart 2007). As such, we see a typical western Ch’olan regnal name (see Colas 2006), juxtaposing two supernatural entities, namely the great bird deity and the personification of running water.

Fascinatingly, a close inspection of the early altar raised by Ruler 1 (Mon. 160) records his name with two portrait glyphs, the first being the head of the Principal Bird Deity, atop another head (Figure 11). Although this second glyph resembles a so-called personification head, it may in fact record part of the logogram WITZ’ (see Schele and Miller 1986:44, Fig. 21; Graham 2006:100; Martin and Grube 2008:178). Likewise, the witz’ portion of the name may precede the Emblem Glyph that closes the glyphic caption on Mon. 106 (see Ap1–Ap2).

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Figure 11. The name of Ruler 1 as it appears on Monument 160 (photograph by Ángel A. Sánchez Gamboa, drawing by Christophe Helmke).

Figure 12. Monument 159 raised by Ruler 8 and commemorating a tomb re-entry ritual in AD 799 (drawing by Marc Zender).

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the early monuments of Ruler 1 (Mon. 106 and 160) and before those raised by his successors, K’inich “Muk” and Yaxuun Tiil. As such, we surmise that the stela must have been raised sometime after 514 and before 591. This then raises the question of how this early ruler was related to Chak Balun Chaahk. On stylistic grounds alone we have been able to posit that Mon. 74 is later than the Melbourne stela and as such must date to the gap after the latest monument of Ruler 1 and before the accession of Yaxuun Tiil (Martin and Grube 2008:178). This is now confirmed with the identification of K’inich “Muk” as an intervening king (Sánchez Gamboa and Beláez 2018). This in turn leaves a gap in the first half of the sixth century as the most likely placement for the Melbourne stela, a span that perfectly fits the style of the stela and the known dates of Ruler 1. Whereas much remains open to scrutiny, based on present evidence we conclude by suggesting that the king depicted and referred to on the Melbourne stela may well be Ruler 1, who raised this stela later in his reign close to the mid-sixth century.

Acknowledgements

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translations of the Nahuatl texts, ending his review by stating that Hvidtfeldt’s “translation forces the Mexican material to fit the theories he outlines” (Dibble 1961:408). It may also be said that one of Hvidtfeldt’s concepts of the Aztecs and their culture, namely that they represented a transition from what he called “a primitive culture to urban culture” and that the religious practices would reflect this, is problematic today in the sense that the Late Postclassic Mexica were the inheritors of a long tradition of large urban societies in Highland Mexico going back at least to Early Classic Teotihuacan. Nevertheless, Hvidtfeldt’s careful and groundbreaking study continues to inspire scholars and provide a basic framework for the discussion of Mesoamerican religions and deity impersonations in particular. Thus, Teotl and *Ixiptlatli is still cited in works on central Mexican as well as Maya religion (e.g., Miller and Taube 1993; Houston and Stuart 1996; Monaghan 2000; Houston et al. 2006; Boone 2007; Nehammer Knub et al. 2009; Townsend 2009) and Hvidtfeldt is considered the first to have pointed out that “the Aztec used the word ixiptla or teixiptla (“representative” or “holy representative”) to refer to all material manifestations of the gods, whether statues, human impersonators, or inanimate bundles and wooden armatures masked as the deity” (Klein 2001:34). Yet, references to this seminal study are also absent from some publications on Mesoamerican religion, perhaps partly due to the fact that the volume has been out of print for decades and thus no doubt out of reach for many interested scholars, perhaps particularly so in the Spanish-speaking parts of the world. With the forthcoming digital facsimile at Mesoweb, Hvidtfeldt’s study will be more easily available, and it is hoped that it will make even more Mesoamericanists aware of this important piece of research.

Hvidtfeldt also produced a translation of Sahagún’s twelfth book into Danish (Hvidtfeldt 1963), and he later wrote a well-informed supplementary volume on Latin America in a series on world history, also in Danish (Hvidtfeldt and Amstrup 1974), as well as a few other brief overview articles on Mesoamerican topics (e.g., Hvidtfeldt 1992), but he did not again pursue in-depth research on Mesoamerican religions and devoted most of his research and popular writings to broader comparative issues in the history of religions (e.g., Hvidtfeldt 1961, 1994; see also Warburg and Warmind 1985).

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