

Benches, Brothers, and Lineage Lords of Copan

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Interpretation of ancient Maya social organization must take into account variation in material culture. Constructions of ancient Maya society have changed over time, but explanations continue to be discussed in terms of two contrasting schema: a model of centralized, autocratic, elite kingship, or a model of lineage settlement patterns deliberately focused on non-elite kin groups. My interest in the functions of Copan's inscribed stone seats has been stimulated by the disjunction between these two discourses, which challenges current interpretations of Copan's ancient benches put forth by each of the opposed models: a model of center-city royals versus a model of suburban non-royals.

Certain texts, images, and objects from Copan that include images of benches have been interpreted by Linda Schele, David Freidel, Barbara Fash and William Fash, as signals of sociopolitical disturbance.¹

Three items are of specific importance for this interpretation:

1. the textual records of 'seating'/'*chumwan* for brothers of the ruler
2. the dedicatory texts and elaborate images on benches of suburban sites
3. the apparently innovative construction of a 'council house' *popol-na*.

Though once unswervingly convinced that these phenomena were hints of social discord, I now question whether they are sufficiently acceptable as indications of resistance to rulership, indications of intensified class conflict, or indications of revolt by the nobility (Fash 1991:175ff).

I am instead leaning toward a view of ancient Copan society as a less autonomous

and more interdependent sociopolitical organization that seems to have been based on mutually rewarding, reciprocal relationships between the center-city royal lineage and suburban non-royal lineages. As Richard Leventhal notes, large subsidiary sites presumably contained the most important lineage shrines for their respective sections of the valley, and as William Fash describes, dedicatory texts on suburban benches refer to interaction between lineage heads of the valley and the ruling lineage head of the Principal Group. (Fash 1991:160-162; Leventhal 1981; Wiley, Leventhal, and Fash 1978). Since bench and altar texts do not record 'seating' or 'appointment' for sisters, wives, or sons of the royal lineage head, the documented seating of the ruler's brothers indicates their function also as secondary lineage heads; in this case royal, but nonetheless secondary.

To account for my claims of royal and non-royal interrelationships I briefly describe the texts and images of Copan that are my concern, then compare them within the broader arena of lowland Maya texts and images of similar content and context, and finally, circle back to Copan and its surprising sculptural content and context.

First I discuss the references to brothers. On many so-called altars and steps the *yitah*/siblings, (brothers or cousins, perhaps) of the late eighth century ruler of Copan, Yax-Pas, recorded their participation in dedication rituals for these sculptures.² What once seemed curious is that up to four different royal siblings are mentioned on these altars, and that several sculptural texts include records of the royal siblings having been 'seated; placed-in-office'—Altar U for

example, and some fragments of huge stone containers.³ Furthermore, their seatings are recorded as occurring on the same date as inauguration of their regal relative, a fact which, when viewed in conjunction with other seeming aberrations, paved the way for suspicions of elite malcontents. These multiple seatings suggested to Fash and Schele (and to me) that there was perhaps something amiss in the affairs of Copan.

Strong backing for notions of elite resistance seemed to occur as well in suburban structures in the form of finely carved stone benches, most also recording associated dedicatory rituals enacted by non-royal lineage heads. The benches of outlying areas 9M-18 (fig. 1, aka the Harvard Bench), 9N-8 (fig. 2, aka the Scribe's Bench), an unpublished bench found at area 8N-11 by archaeologists from Pennsylvania State University, and a bench of area 10K-4, found just outside the Main Group (aka the El Grillo Bench) reinforced an opinion that persons other than the ruler were atypically engaged in commissioning of carved altars or seats, both in the site core area, and in secondary zones of Copan.

Structure 22-A in Copan's Principal Group (see Fash 1991:fig. 82-85), has been extensively analyzed by Barbara Fash and described as a probable *popol-na* or 'house for meetings of a governing council'. This

interpretation of function for a city-center structure has further contributed to an impression that Copan's later rulers worked at devising strategies to compensate for a presumed political predicament. This dilemma, as William Fash explains (1991:passim), may have involved a burgeoning group of elites who were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with their ruler's inability to overcome adverse ecological and economical conditions, thereby requiring pacification via inclusion in an experimental administrative council.

Three phenomena then are perhaps atypical:

1. the seatings of royal siblings;
2. the number and elaboration of monuments commissioned by persons other than the reigning ruler; and
3. the designation of a council house.

An exploration and comparison of bench contexts at other sites however, will allow for a more objective opinion of Copan's particular situation.

The seated siblings of Copan have been compared as like-in-kind to the apparent joint rule by brothers of *Kak-u-pakal* of Chichen Itza; which, though foiled at Copan, was successful for a later Maya society of Chichen. The difference is that there is no textual record of the presumed accessions of Chichen's brothers. On the other hand, seat-

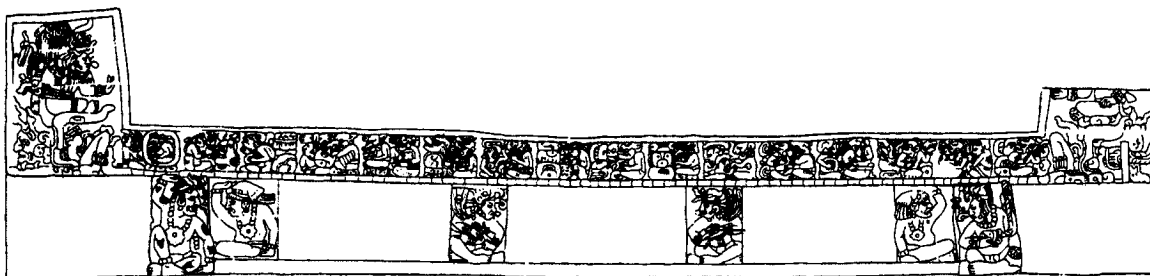


Fig. 1 Bench of site 9N-8, Copan, Honduras (from Schele and Freidel 1990:330-331).



Fig. 2 Bench of Site 9M-18, Copan, Honduras (from Schele and Freidel 1990:328-329).

ings of royal relatives are not atypical. *Kan-Hok-Chitam* of Palenque was designated as the *ba-chok* or first-heir, during his elder brother's inaugural ceremonies. Indeed, designation as *ba-chok* at Palenque seems to have authorized king-like participation in royal ceremonies. Textual records declare that in 9.10.10.0.0, at the first period-ending following his designation as heir, *Kan-Balam* had enacted the period-ending rite with his father the ruler. At Yaxchilan also the royal son and heir is portrayed performing with his father the ruler, in celebration of five tuns of reign, at 9.16.6.0.0⁴.

Copan's benches, dedicated by non-royals, are also frequently characterized as anomalous. For example Berthold Riese (1989) suggested that it was unusual that non-royal elites had access to impressive displays of iconography and epigraphy glorifying their persons. In fact, however, Copan's benches fit into an entire category of sculptures which, unlike stelae, could be erected by non-royal lineage heads as well as by rulers (see Hendon 1991). These vary by region, but an abundance of carved lintels, wall panels and stairway panels, three dimensional pieces, and entire structures throughout the Maya area attest to similar raising of monuments by non-royal lineage heads, both in urban and suburban regions of major cities as well as in subordinate or satellite polities. For example, on a wall panel, *Chac-Zutz* recorded his seating as a *sahal* of Palenque, thereby validating his authority within a particular section of the site and in relation to the downtown ruler, presumably his half brother. There seems no evidence that this action was a contestation of centralized power. Lintels in subsidiary compounds of Palenque and Chichen Itza, declaring dedicatory events, have other parallels in the Usumacinta region. At Yaxchilan, the lintels from Structure 23 are clearly dedicated by members of a non-royal lineage. The dedications on the main doorway lintels record Lady Xoc as the protago-

nist. Lintel 23, an elaborate all-glyphic genealogical statement above the side-door, may record a male head of the Xoc lineage as dedicator. The connection with the Xoc lineage is further supported by the identification of Lady Xoc's tomb under one of the rooms, and the central lintel of the adjoining Structure 24 which commemorates her death. Since all four rooms in Structure 23 contain beds with niches in the walls above each, (Tate 1992:204-205), there is no question that this structure served as a lineage residence and is in this way functionally comparable to 9N-82 in the 9N-8 residential complex at Copan (Cohodas personal communication and 1993).⁵

In my ongoing "bench-venture" I have found evidence of such structural counterparts, with benches frequently located centrally, within dominant residential structures situated directly opposite entrances to plazas at secondary sites. This evidence meshes well with models of Maya sociopolitical organization currently being investigated by Demarest and Houston, among others, wherein replication in peripheral units of aspects of the larger whole, are to be expected in less centralized/more segmentary organizations (Demarest 1992; Houston 1993). Although such seats of authority have been recovered primarily from Late Classic contexts, there is also evidence that benches had become one of the characteristic markers of Maya authority by the Early Classic.⁶ Late Classic polychrome vase paintings of the Peten region frequently show rulers and other lineage heads seated on bench/thrones. Combined with the evidence from Copan, it is clear that benches were a category of architecture/sculpture shared by both royal and non-royal lineage heads.

Benches have usually been described as either thrones or beds, according to their degree of elaboration and to their context. I wish to make a distinction between central/axial seats of authority (sometimes misnamed *thrones*), and non-central beds,



Fig. 3 Unprovenanced panel, presumably from Lax Tunich, (Panel 4).

keeping in mind that the person in greatest authority could also sleep upon the central seat, while males of lesser authority could also sit on the non-central beds. In other words, it is possible that the positioning of central versus non-central benches is not determined by function of seating versus sleeping, but by position of lineage head versus other males. Whether the benches are plain uncarved stone slabs, cantilevered assemblages in stone or painted depictions of same, designed to represent zoomorphs (jaguars or reptilians), carved from stone with glyphic messages, or representations of inscribed stones in ceramic or in mural painting, they are all seats of authority, the authority of whomever is seated upon them. They are validations of one's having been seated or appointed at some level of authority, royal or non-royal.

A vast data-base of Maya textual and figural references to seating occurs within all chronologically determined stages of Maya society. The *chum-wan*'seating' glyph itself, originates with the sketch of a seated figure,

as on the reused Olmec jade of Dumbarton Oaks.⁷ Small jades from many eras depict persons seated upon cushions, benches, and serpentine monsters. As interpreted from later and more lengthy texts, the ceremony of accession often involved several stages: announcement of one's having been appointed to some office; adornment with some regionally accepted symbol of authority; commissioning of some marker of the ceremony; and the dedication and setting-up of that marker.

An unpublished panel, presumed to be from Lax Tunich, a site subsidiary to Yaxchilan, illustrates several of these points (fig. 3).

1. It depicts Yaxchilan's ruler engaging simultaneously with his secondary lord, presumably the lineage head of the Lax Tunich polity.
2. Both officials share the same bench or seat of authority.
3. The bench carving is a representation of the pan-Maya image of origin, the supernatural source, the reptilian axis which connects all realms—the bicephalic cosmic monster.
4. Here, as with Copan's benches of subsidiary lineage heads, glyphs forming the body of the serpentine bench-monster record its dedication.
5. Here, as with Copan's suburban benches, the downtown bench of Structure 22, the accession benches at Palenque, and Piedras Negras, all display the same motif: the bench-monster, the bicephalic source of one's secular and sacred power, is held up by *pawatuns*, old ancestral gods of the underworld, or *bakabs* whose presence at the initial creation of the world, the separation of *chan*/sky and *caban*/earth, is implied via images of the bicephalic *chan*/serpent-*chan*/sky. These images are commonly found on benches, seats, daises, thrones, and altars from the Southern Lowlands to the Yucatan.

6. The Lax Tunich panel, and similar images and texts at Yaxchilan's other secondary sites, are not read as evidence of resistance to royalty. Rather, they are generally understood as documents of the validation of authority for non-royal elite, by the royal elite authority, a mutually rewarding situation.

The question then is why have suburban benches of Copan been construed to signal a breakdown of centralized, autonomous, royal control? Characteristic of Copan's benches is that the inscribed texts are short and to the point. They begin with a Calendar Round, not the Long Count date commonly used by kings to situate their events within cosmic cycles of time. They record dedication ritual, not period endings, sacrifices, warfare or other public rites. The actors receive only abbreviated mention with their name and some relationship to the ruler noted. They neither ignore the polity-ruler, nor usurp royal prerogatives for mention on the stelae, radial pyramids, and ballcourts Cohodas has found generally indicative of state institutions.⁸ So far then, there is little reason for interpretation of these benches as substantiation for contestation of kingship by suspect subsidiaries.

In contrast to the simplified textual

content however, the textual style is extravagantly executed, often with rare full-figure glyphs, wherein entire human figures are employed as syllabic signs. A similar juxtaposition of extraordinary stylistic expression with simplified content also occurs with the non-textual imagery of the benches. Unlike intricately carved royal portraiture, lavishly interwoven with frolicking deities and foliage, the benches include no portraits and no frills. Recognition is unmistakable. The seats are carved to represent a Maya-pervasive, two-headed, serpentine monster, whose body is formed here by an exquisitely carved inscription between the heads.

It appears that diagnosis of the inscribed seats as signals of social discord may derive not only from a presumed function of the benches, but also from a presumed innovative form of the benches. Even though benches themselves, and similarly sensitive carving occur through the reigns of several rulers of Copan, the suburban benches are too rarely understood as being consistent with, and typical of, the regional expression of texts and inscriptions.⁹ That they are aesthetically seductive for many viewers, has contributed to their acceptance as irregular replications of royal privilege.

I quote here from "Elites and Social

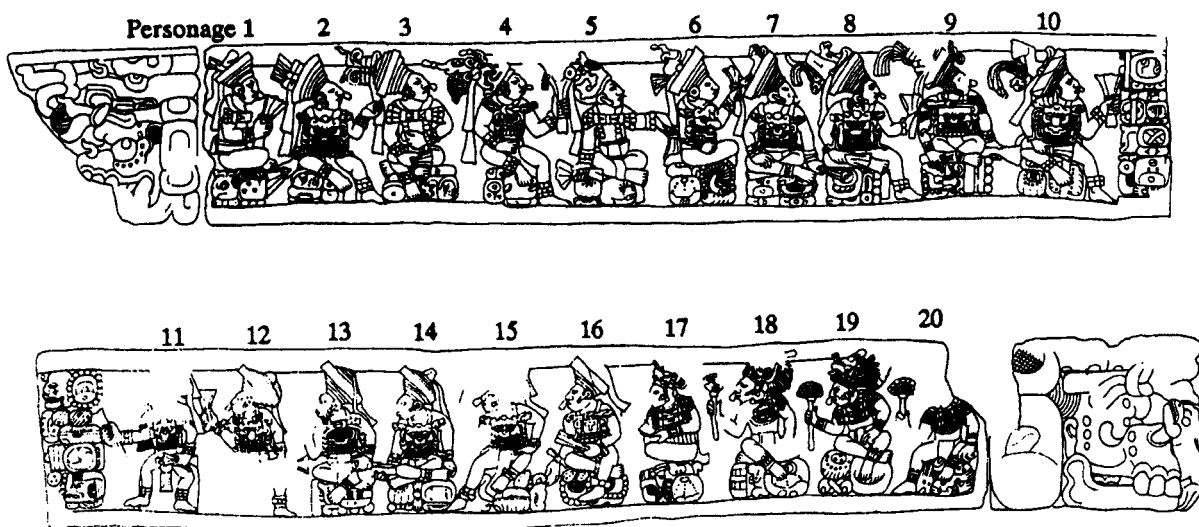


Fig. 4 Bench of Structure 10L-11, Copan, Honduras (from Schele and Freidel 1990:326-327).

Stratification:”

Archaeologists have identified the elite by possession of certain markers, and then they reify the markers by explaining elite power as a function of their possession.

It is equivalent to saying that the wearing of tuxedos is a marker of elite status; therefore, the elite get their power through wearing tuxedos. (Kowalewski, Feinman, and Finsten 1992:261-262)

Maya elite do not get their power by having elaborate benches. Benches do not identify royalty, neither do they identify contesting imitations of royalty by non-royals. Instead, the elaboration of benches is merely one way in which elite lineage heads demonstrate a position of authority among their own lineage members and a position in the administration of the state, in which they can in fact work out the ambiguities of this dual role.

A third structural feature at Copan that has been configured as exemplary of the power struggle between the royal house and non-royal lineage heads is Structure 22A, identified by Barbara Fash as a *popol-Na*/council house. Her identification is made on the basis of several elite figures in the facade sculpture and a series of different glyphs which include the place-indicator *nal* (see Fash 1991:fig. 84). While an administrative council likely did arise to include both the king, as head of the royal lineage, and non-royal lineage heads, (as depicted perhaps, with twenty seated lineage heads at Structure 11, fig. 4), there is nothing in the images or texts of Structures 22A or 11 that suggests a threat to royal authority. Indeed, Schele and Freidel have identified a *popol-na* in Late Preclassic Uaxactun (1990:159), and we may similarly identify House A at Palenque (Cohodas, personal communication).¹⁰ Again the institution represented by this type of structure appears to be integral to the established relationships articulated between lineage and the state, rather than a late-appearing symptom of imminent collapse.

For many years we have looked at data concerning the ancient Maya with underlying concern for explanation of the Maya collapse. The problem is, if we start with a model of presumed collapse, our interpretations may include subtleties of causality, often found as inherent weakness or flaws, especially when evolutionary and dichotomous pan-Maya comparison is employed, without sufficient regard for regional and temporal difference. Instead, maybe we need to focus less on causes of elite downfall and disintegration of specific sites, and look more for clues to what must have been a compelling interrelationship of royal lineage heads and their non-royal, yet royally required, subsidiary lineage heads.

Stephen Houston advocates a regional emphasis for epigraphic study, as the complexity and variability of Classic Maya history militates against a pan-Maya perspective. He maintains also though, that any study too narrowly focused on a single site is equally undesirable for attempts at reconstruction of political organization (1993:9ff.). That is, in order to test what is locally determined as significant or atypical, it must also be weighed within a broader scale or model that can account for regional components of complex patterns of autocracy and segmentation, rulers and subordinates, domination and resistance.

By drawing parallels of socio-political organization between officially appointed brothers at Copan and a joint-rule or *mutepal* of brothers at Chichen Itza is to insist on a parallel formulation spanning time and space, with no allowances for regional changes and choices. If however, Copan is seen without “collapse-colored-glasses,” then archaeological materials that once seemed to demonstrate sociopolitical deterioration, may instead demonstrate sociopolitical interrelationships expressed through distinctively localized renderings of a widespread and long-standing recognition for subsidiary lineage heads, whose support of,

and support by, royal lineage heads of the center-city was a necessary and expected aspect of Maya society.

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NOTES

1 See Schele and Freidel (1990), and W. Fash (1991).

2 Stuart (1989) first deciphered the glyphic compound *yitah* as a reference to “siblings.”

3 Detailed drawings, decipherment, and interpretation of such “altar” and “incensario” texts are found in Schele and Stuart (1986), and Bardsley 1990. Hieroglyphic texts record that *Yax-Pas*, the sixteenth successor of Copan’s founder, *Yax-Kuk-Mo*, was “seated” on 6 *Caban 10 Mol* (9.16.12.5.17). Glyphic records show as well that two siblings of *Yax-Pas* were also “seated” to some office, on the same date, 6 *Caban 10 Mol*, (Altar U and Incensario fragments-CPN #'s 22351, 22079, 22342).

4 Sculptural references to activities of these heirs are as follows: Palenque; *Kan-Hok-Chitam*, Palace Tablet, K12-K15, *Kan-Balam*, Tablet of the Cross, Secondary Text G1-L3, Yaxchilan; *Chel-te* with *Yaxun-Balam*, Structure 33 Lintel 2.

5 Marvin Cohodas personal communication 1992; and 1993, a paper presented at Annual Meetings of Canadian Archaeological Association and Canadian Association for Mesoamerican Studies, May 5-9, Montreal.

6 Early Classic ceramics frequently depict figures seated on benches, surrounded with imagery which later contexts show to be associated with social authority (Justin and Barbara Kerr archives).

7 See Schele and Miller (1986.)

8 Marvin Cohodas personal communication; and 1993.

9 Note that inscribed stair-risers, steps, altars, and other “seats” are evident throughout Copan’s history; 10L-16/Margarita step, 10L-26/Papagayo step, 10L-22/last riser-seat, 10L-11/sub, 10L-18 riser-seat

Exceptional carving style is also in long-standing evidence at Copan, a result of local materials and local preference.

10 The figural similarity between the seated figures of Copan’s Altar Q and the Structure 11 bench (figure 5) has suggested that Structure 11 may, like Altar Q, similarly refer to a dynastic succession of rulers. However, the figures of Structure 11 are not named as rulers and may represent instead a complement of twenty lineage heads. The medallions of Palenque’s House A may likewise represent a complement of thirteen lineage heads.