



The Queen's Mirrors

Interpreting the Iconography of Two Teotihuacan Style Mirrors from the Early Classic Margarita Tomb at Copan

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One of the most hotly debated topics in Mesoamerican archaeology the past decades has been the role played by Teotihuacan outside central Mexico in the Early Classic period, and specifically Teotihuacan's influence in the Maya region (e.g., Braswell 2003; C. Millon 1988; Nielsen 2003; Stuart 2000). Much of this debate has focused on two great sites in Guatemala, Tikal in the lowlands and Kaminaljuyú in the eastern highlands. Another important Early Classic Maya city showing a number of intriguing references to Teotihuacan is Copan in present-day western Honduras (e.g., Sharer 2004; Stuart 2004; Taube 2004). Recent extensive tunneling and excavations in the Copan Acropolis have led to a series of new insights into the history of the city's founding and the life of the first ruler in the early fifth century. Thus, there are now several lines of evidence that suggest that the dynastic founder, K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo', whose bones reveal him as a foreigner to the Copan Valley, had close relations with the Petén area as well as Kaminaljuyú and apparently also the imperial capital of Teotihuacan (Bell et al. 2004a; Sharer et al. 2005; Andrews and Fash 2005).

The present article focuses on two specific objects that were found in the tomb of a high ranking woman placed in a temple structure

named Margarita. The woman most probably was the wife of K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo', and the objects in question are two Teotihuacan-style iron pyrite mirrors, both of which display characteristic Teotihuacan iconography on their stuccoed and painted backings. What does this little-studied imagery represent, and what significance can be attributed to the iconography? Does the presence of the mirrors and the iconography in any way offer new perspectives on the possible contacts between Copan and Teotihuacan? These are the questions of primary concern, but I will also briefly explore how the mirror iconography may help us to refine our understanding of the mural chronology of Teotihuacan.

The Founding Events: K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' and Hunal

Before taking a closer look at the mirror iconography a short reiteration of the current knowledge of the archaeological and historical context of the Margarita structure and its predecessors is necessary. As a result of the excavations beneath Temple 16 in the Copan Acropolis, archaeologists have located what is believed to have been the first royal temple complex at Copan (e.g., Sharer et al. 1999; Bell et al. 2004b). This includes a unique temple structure designated Hunal, built in *talud-table-ro* style (the predominant architectural style of Teotihuacan), which in all likelihood holds the tomb of the dynastic founder K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' (e.g., Bell et al. 2004b:132-136; Sharer 2004; Stuart 2004:232). Hunal was to become one of the most sacred locations in the Copan kingdom, and for centuries new temples would

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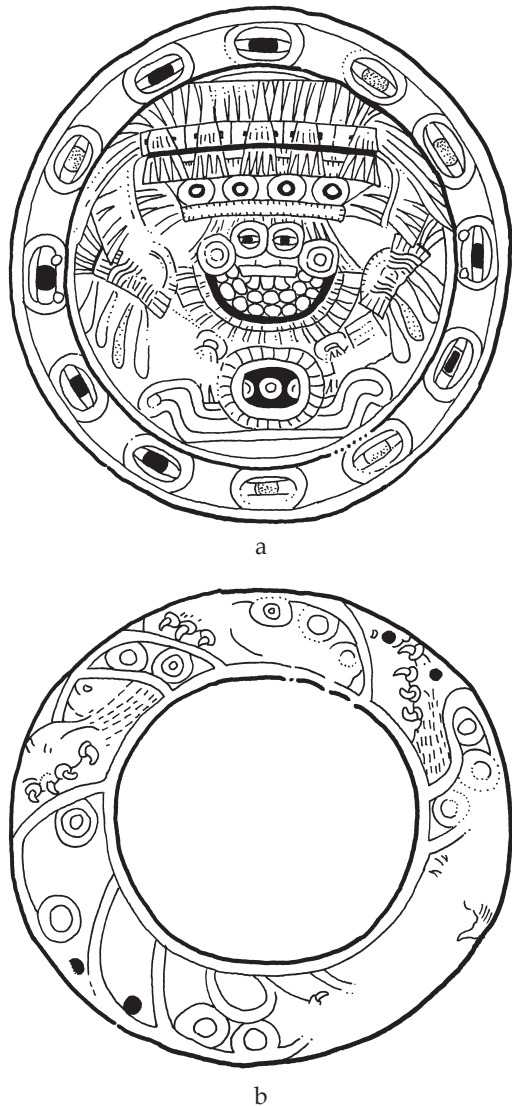


Figure 1. Examples of Early Classic mirrors from the Maya area showing Teotihuacan-style iconography: a) Kaminaljuyú, Tomb B-V; b) Tikal, Group 6C-XVI, Burial PNT-174 (redrawn from Kidder et al. 1946:Fig.175a and Laporte 1989:Fig.83).

be built on top of it, most of them decorated with images as well as texts that recalled the great founder and his apparent affiliation with the central Mexican superpower of Teotihuacan (Taube 2004).

The combination of the Hunal material and the rich hieroglyphic record of Copan provides us with a detailed view of the historical events surrounding the founding of the city and its dynasty. Thus, the famous Altar Q (erected in front of Temple 16 by the last ruler of Copan, Yax Pasaj Chan Yopaat, in AD 776) recounts how, “On 5 September 426 the founder...K’uk’ Mo’ Ajaw...took the snake-footed *k’awiil* sceptre and rose to kingly status” (Martin and Grube 2000:192). Three days later, he “set out from” a so-called *wi’té’naah* structure.¹ This, as Martin and Grube point out, was “a structure

especially associated with dynastic genesis and seemingly of Mexican origin [and] the location seems to have been a distant one. It was 153 days before Yax K’uk’ Mo’ and his party reached Copan itself [...] expressed as an ‘arrival here’” (2000:192-193). It is still debated whether Yax K’uk’ Mo’ made the journey to Copan from Teotihuacan or Tikal, but the reported duration of his trip does not seem to rule out the possibility that he had received his “right to rule” and insignia in Teotihuacan (Martin and Grube 2000; Sharer 2003a; 2003b; 2004; Stuart 2005).

What, then, happened when Yax K’uk’ Mo’ arrived in the Copan Valley? Robert Sharer has recently presented what seems to be a likely scenario:

Assuming that the Copan take-over was accomplished by force of arms, and in keeping with what little we know about Early Classic warfare, whatever force K’uk’ Mo’ brought with him to Copan was probably small and mobile. If a battle for Copan took place, it may have been limited in scope and the issue settled rather quickly. There is no evidence for fortifications at Copan, so that an armed strike aimed specifically at the local ruler and the heart of his capital could have been decisive. Advantages of speed and surprise, along with the same Teotihuacan-inspired militarism that propelled Tikal’s expansionism, could have insured the success of the invaders. (Sharer 2003a:323)

Apart from replacing the old dynasty, the arrival of Yax K’uk’ Mo’ and his followers also changed what had previously been a village center near the Copan River, perhaps the seat of a local lord, into a fast-growing royal city with close ties to other parts of Mesoamerica. There is evidence of a series of smaller, competing chiefdoms in the valley before the arrival of Yax K’uk’ Mo’, and most of these chiefdoms were subjugated by the intruders. One of them, however, seems to have entered some kind of forced alliance with the arriving party. It may have been from the ruling lineage of this chiefdom that Yax K’uk’ Mo’ chose a wife, since we know that the woman buried in Margarita was of local descent (Fash and Fash 2000:447-448; Bell 2002; Bell et al. 2004b:137; Buikstra et al. 2004). Such a combined strategy of military threat and conquest as well as elite intermarriage is identical to what is suspected to have happened at Tikal some thirty-eight years earlier at the time of the Teotihuacan *entrada* led by Siyaj K’ak’ (e.g., Martin and Grube 2000; Stuart 2000). From Late Classic retrospective inscriptions from nearby Quirigua we know that in AD 426, Yax K’uk’ Mo’ also played the leading role

¹ References to *wi’té’naah* structures are found in glyphic inscriptions in Copan, Tikal, and elsewhere. While the term can best be translated as “Tree-root House,” the *wi’té’naah* buildings seem to have been conceived of as “houses of origin” (Stuart 2000; 2004:235-239; 2005:377). In the Copan area structures named as *wi’té’naahs* are often embellished with overt Teotihuacan symbolism (Taube 2004:273-274; see also Nielsen 2003:89-90, 223-226, in press).

in establishing a (new) dynasty at the site that was strategically situated on the banks of the Motagua River. According to Martin and Grube, "Quirigua's first king [...] was crowned 'under the supervision' of Yax K'uk' Mo'" and there are "strong echoes here of Siyaj K'ak's New Order and the installation of a new political elite at a number of centres in the Petén" (Martin and Grube 2000:216).

Margarita and the Queen's Tomb

Some time after Yax K'uk' Mo's death in about AD 437 Hunal was completely covered by a new temple structure designated Yehnal (Sharer et al. 1999). This building stood only for about a decade before it was buried beneath a new and larger temple, today nicknamed Margarita. The iconography of the well-preserved stucco facade of Margarita surely holds important clues to the origins of the Copan dynasty and its self-perception,² but for now let us consider the interior of the temple and the tomb chamber beneath the summit floor of the temple. Placed on a burial slab similar to that of the Hunal tomb were the skeletal remains of a high status woman. In fact, the lowest courses of this burial chamber were laid at the same time as the Hunal tomb, and apparently the chamber was held "open and unused until it was modified during the construction of the Yehnal and Margarita substructures" (Bell 2002:95). Even though no known hieroglyphic text from Copan mentions a royal woman, it is currently believed that the woman buried here was the wife of K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' (e.g., Bell et al. 2004b:141). Her tomb is by far the richest female burial yet found in the Maya region, and among the offerings in the tomb were more than 9,000 jade beads and a number of ceramic vessels that can be traced to the Guatemalan highlands, the Petén region, and Central Mexico (Bell et al. 2004b:137-140). Detailed descriptions of many of the burial goods have recently appeared in print (e.g., Bell 2002, Bell et al. 2004b). This, however, does not hold true for what are arguably the most unusual objects recovered from the tomb: the two decorated iron pyrite mirrors. (A full description of the contents of the Margarita Tomb will be included in the forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation by Ellen E. Bell.)

The Iconography of the Mirrors

The two mirrors were found together inside a basket with a stuccoed and painted lid. According to the excavators the lid displayed a "fine-line polychrome design depicting a figure in profile wearing a decorated turban" (Bell et al. 2004:140). The mirrors seemed to have been wrapped in a "finely woven textile," and the offering was placed in the central area of the tomb together with a host of other offerings, including carved



Figure 2. Mirror 1 from the Margarita Tomb, Copan (drawing by Jesper Nielsen).

shell rings and bone needles. Each mirror is made of iron pyrite mosaic adhering to a stuccoed and painted slate backing, showing what has been described as "Teotihuacan-style designs." Such Teotihuacan-style mirrors have been found at several other sites that are believed to have been in more or less direct contact with Teotihuacan in the Early Classic period, and mirrors appear to have been closely associated with specific aspects of Teotihuacan culture in this period (Nielsen 2003; Taube 1992a) (Figure 1). So far, two different sets of preliminary drawings of the Copan mirrors have been published (Bell et al. 2004:Fig.8.5; Sharer 2000: Figs.6a-b). For the purpose of a detailed iconographic analysis, however, I have found it necessary to produce a new set of drawings based on digital photos of the mirrors in combination with the previously published drawings. I begin with the mirror that is now known as Mirror or Disk 1.

The back of this Mirror 1 is badly damaged, and the upper part of the central portion of the painting has weathered away almost completely (Figure 2). Previous descriptions of the iconography simply state that

² It should be noted that the facade is dominated by a large and very unusual glyphic variant of K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo's name. Its emblematic character and close resemblance to Teotihuacan writing has been noted by Taube who sees it as "an intentional allusion to the Teotihuacan style of mural texts" (Taube 2000:29). The knowledge of and reference to a different "font" of writing at Teotihuacan by the Copan scribes is also evident in the famous and much later Late Classic Temple Inscription that formed part of the interior design of the temple atop Structure 10L-26 (Stuart 2005:387-390).

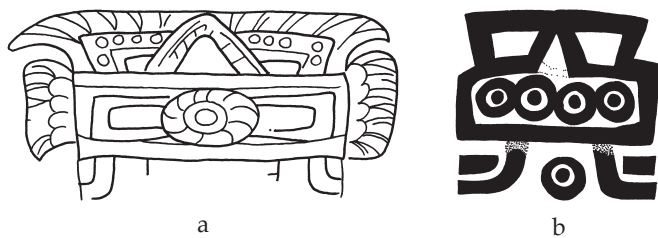


Figure 3. The “Mexican Year Sign”. Two examples from Teotihuacan (redrawn from Langley 1986:Figs.41f & 41c).

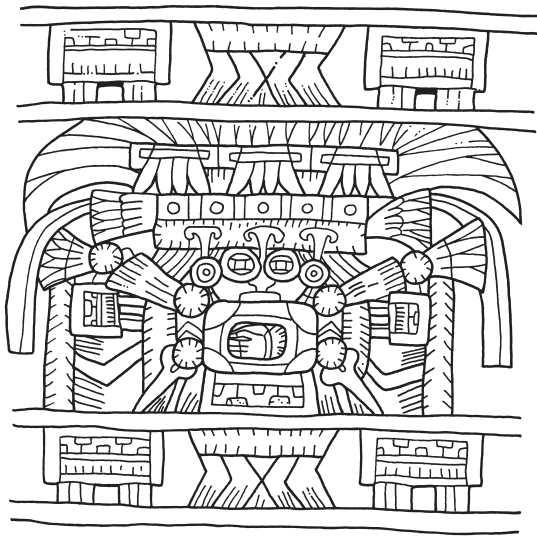


Figure 4. Possible iconographic reference to a “House of Darts” on a plano-relief vessel from Teotihuacan. Note the small house structures seen just below the butts of the two darts (redrawn from Séjourné 1966: Fig.87).

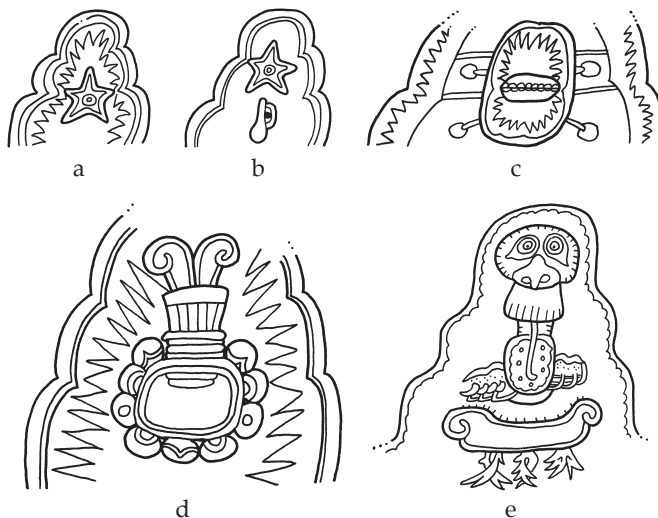


Figure 5. Possible place names in Teotihuacan mural art consisting of a standardized hill sign and variable specifiers, e.g. “Torch-mountain” or “Torch-place” in (d): a) Zacuala (Corridor 2, Mural 4); b) Zacuala (Room 2, Mural 5); c) Zacuala (Platform 5, Mural 1); d) Tetitla (Room 16, Mural 3) and e) Atetelco (Patio 3, Murals 2-3) (drawings by Jesper Nielsen).

the mirror has yellow dots and stars on the border and “a geometric design that may represent a Teotihuacan-style headdress” (Sharer 2000:6; see also Bell 2002:99; Bell et al. 2004:139-140). Despite the damage I believe it is possible to give a more accurate and detailed description of the surviving imagery. Thus, the central motif consists of the so-called Mexican Year Sign placed on top of a reed mat. The Mexican Year Sign is a common element in Teotihuacan iconography, and it appears to have associations beyond its basic calendrical meaning. Janet Berlo suggested that “it is as an element of warrior iconography that the sign was carried to southern Mesoamerica [...] Along with the RE-glyph, it is one of Teotihuacan’s most important glyphic emblems. They prominently displayed it abroad, and it may have been one of the emblems that identified them as Teotihuacanos” (Berlo 1984:112). In at least one example the Year Sign also forms part of a toponym. On a Teotihuacan-style stela from Acatempa, Guerrero, a Teotihuacano warrior stands on top of the Mexican Year Sign which has the “twisted root” locative attached to its base (Taube 2000:9, Fig.6d). Apparently the warrior was associated with or came from this “Mexican Year Sign Place.” On the Copan mirror the Year Sign is combined with a reed mat, a well known and widespread symbol of rulership throughout most parts of Mesoamerica (Figure 3). As seen elsewhere in Teotihuacan iconography mats are often depicted in combination with other glyph-like elements that together seem to represent a personal name or group affiliation (e.g., Nielsen 2003: Fig.C75). Above the Year Sign is a combination of elements that most unfortunately are very damaged, and it is difficult to identify any of them with certainty. Immediately above the Year Sign is an element that may be an example of what James Langley called “Object F” and which has been identified as the fringe of a tasseled shield (Langley 1986:313). On the extreme left is what seems to be a stylised “house.” Similar small and highly stylised houses placed around a central motif are known in other examples of Teotihuacan iconography, for example on a plano-relief vessel with a probable iconographic reference to a “House of Darts” (Garcia-des-Lauriers 2000:107, 141, Fig.3.3.) (Figure 4). Most importantly, on Copan Mirror 1 the Year Sign is placed inside and above a Teotihuacan-style mountain sign, and the adjoining edges of additional mountains can be traced on either side of the central sign. On the mountain edge to the right a sawtooth design marking the inner rim of the mountain can still be seen. Several examples of such sawtooth-marked mountains are seen in the corpus of Teotihuacan iconography, and they occur with highly variable elements, or glyphs, in the center (e.g., flaming bundle, star, water-drop, a mouth or, as in the most complex known example from Atetelco, a combination of several elements) (Figure 5; see also Cabrera Castro 1995:Fig.18.18). Mountain



Figure 6. Mirror 2 from the Margarita Tomb, Copan (drawing by Jesper Nielsen).

signs form a common part of toponymic references in Mesoamerican writing systems, and Teotihuacan is no exception in this regard (e.g., Angulo 1995; Nielsen n.d.; Taube 2000:8-10). Karl Taube prefers to see these elements as bodies of water rather than mountains (personal communication, February 2005), but I believe there are a number of good reasons to interpret them as representing stylized mountains, i.e. their tendency to contain variable elements, and the fact that similar mountain shapes occur in the North Patio of Atetelco (Murals 2-3) where they clearly form part of a larger landscape scene that in several respects is comparable to those found in indigenous documents and maps from the colonial period (Cabrera Castro 1995:Fig.18.18; Boone 2000; Mundy 1996; see also Nielsen n.d.). The aforementioned sawtooth design, however, does seem to denote "water" and often appears together with aquatic motifs, i.e., Tetitla Room 17 and the mural of Room 18, Zone 5A (Miller 1973:Figs.296, 128). This presence of "water" in mountains suggests a concept similar to that of the Aztec *altepetl*, literally meaning "water-hill," but carrying the extended metaphorical meaning of "town." The mountain signs with variable specifiers may thus well refer either to mythic place names or actual, historic locations within Teotihuacan or elsewhere in central Mexico. I therefore suggest that the "Year-Sign-Shield-House-Mountain" place shown on Copan Mirror 1, too, is a toponym. Whether it refers to a mythical place or an actual locale or building in Teotihuacan, Copan, or elsewhere, however, is impossible to say at the moment.

The second mirror, Mirror 2 (Figure 6), shows a person rendered in pure Teotihuacan style and according to Teotihuacan iconographic conventions. The male figure, rendered short and squat, wears an elaborate Serpent Headdress, a tri-paneled cape, a mirror on the hip, a feathered backrack, and tufted sandals, all of which are basic identifying markers of Teotihuacanos (Garcia-des-Lauriers 2000:67-68). In the right hand the person holds a bag and not a trophy head as has previously been suggested (Bell 2002:99; Sharer 2000:6). The bag is most likely to be an incense pouch similar to those frequently represented in Teotihuacan iconography, where we find the same characteristic handle with a mat-like design. Presumably the Copan example, like its Teotihuacan counterparts, was decorated with a rattler and/or a small animal head (Figure 7). Looking closer at the head of the individual, we find nearly identical figures with the same facial features and similar Serpent Headdresses in the murals of Tlacuilapaxco and Tepantitla in Teotihuacan (Figure 8). The similarities between these figures and Mirror 2 are striking even in minor details, i.e. the way the feathers of the headdress and backrack overlap and the way the earflares are depicted. The characteristic speech scroll with attached flowers emanating from the mouth of the person is encountered throughout the corpus of Teotihuacan iconography. Below one of the individual's legs is an almost completely eroded, squarish element that remains unidentified. Nevertheless, it could well have served as a name or titular glyph since these are often placed in front of or below the named individual (Taube 2000; Nielsen 2004). Finally, the two Feathered Serpents that encircle the central scene of the mirror have identical twins in the mural art of Teotihuacan. We find the exact same heads, water bands (marked by eyes) that flow from the mouths, and rattles on serpents in the murals of Tlacuilapaxco and Tepantitla (Berrin 1988: Fig.VI.25; Miller 1973:Fig.173). The Tepantitla example is particularly interesting since the Feathered Serpent here serves as a border encompassing a scene with

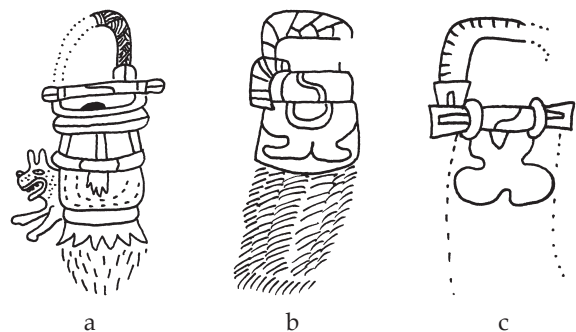


Figure 7. Examples of incense pouches in Teotihuacan iconography: a) Tepantitla; b) Tlacuilapaxco; c) Mural in Zone 11 (Room 2, Mural 2). Note the mat-like design on the handles (redrawn from Miller 1973: Fig.183, Berrin 1988:Fig.VI.25 and Miller 1973:Fig.149).

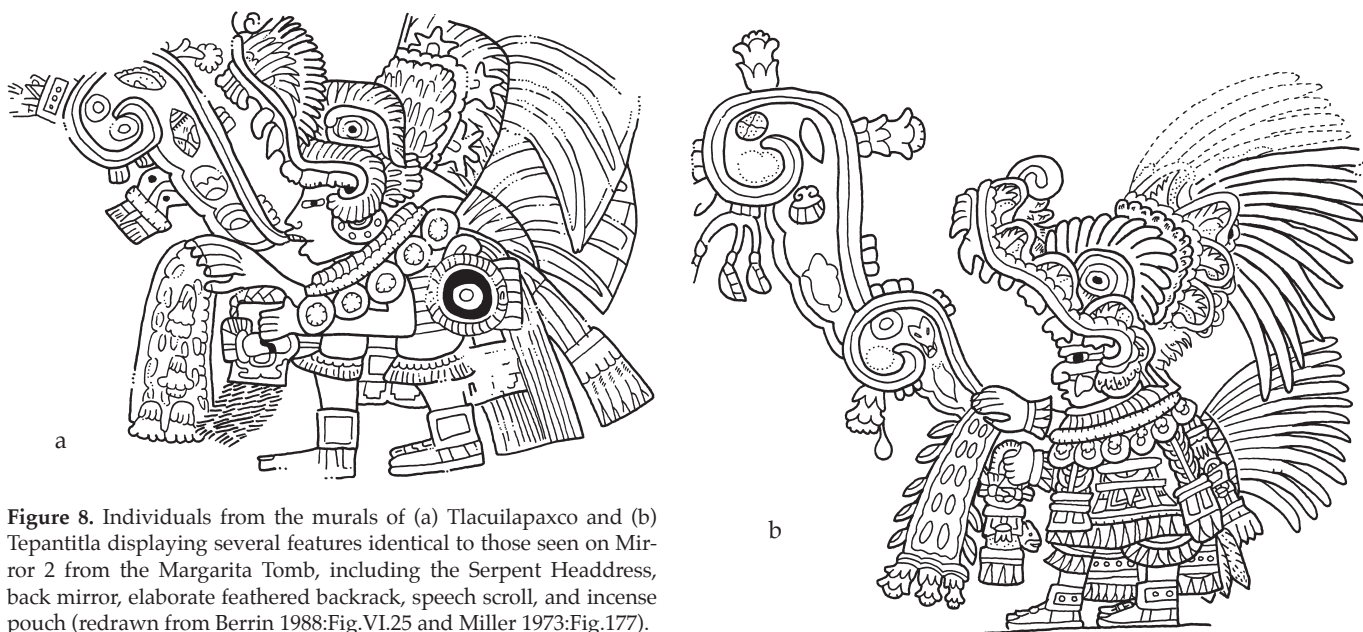


Figure 8. Individuals from the murals of (a) Tlacuilapaxco and (b) Tepantitla displaying several features identical to those seen on Mirror 2 from the Margarita Tomb, including the Serpent Headaddress, back mirror, elaborate feathered backrack, speech scroll, and incense pouch (redrawn from Berrin 1988:Fig.VI.25 and Miller 1973:Fig.177).

figures similar to the one on Copan Mirror 2. Thus, we find identical combinations of elements in Teotihuacan and Copan. But who, then, is the person depicted on the mirror? If we follow Garcia-des-Lauriers' assessment that the cape is a diagnostic part of high-ranking warriors' costume there seems to be little doubt that he represents a Teotihuacan warrior (Garcia-des-Lauriers 2000). Supporting this view is the Serpent Headaddress which represents the Teotihuacan War Serpent first identified by Taube (1992b). Interestingly, in her recent study of the warrior costume of Teotihuacan, Claudia Garcia-des-Lauriers points out that mirrors (aside from the multiple symbolic associations they carried) were also used as markers of rank and as identifying "emblems" among the military (2000:85; see also Taube 1992a). Mirrors worn on the hip or close to the back indeed form one of the standard elements of the dress worn by Teotihuacanos outside the central Mexican area, and these mirrors were probably considered status objects closely linked with the powerful central Mexican capital (Taube 1992a:198).

Possible Implications for Teotihuacan Mural Chronology

Identifying close similarities between the iconography of the mirrors from the Margarita tomb and Teotihuacan murals may also have implications for our understanding of the chronology of mural art in Teotihuacan and Teotihuacan history in a broader perspective. Previous datings of most Teotihuacan murals have been made mainly on the basis of stylis-

tic rather than stratigraphic analyses, and the majority of murals are grouped in the large time span ranging between AD 450-700 (Lombardo de Ruiz 1995:34-35; see also C. Millon 1972), that is, in the last centuries of the city's history. As for the two Copan mirrors, both displaying Teotihuacan iconographic themes executed in pure Teotihuacan style, we know that they were made no later than about AD 450. The murals of Tlacuilapaxco and Tepantitla, with which the mirror iconography shares so many minute details, however, are dated to ca. AD 600-750 (see Berrin 1988:202-203). This chronological gap either points to an exceptional degree of conservatism in Teotihuacan mural art (which is not unthinkable), or it may force us to reevaluate the suggested dates for the murals in question. Recently, Taube has shown that the murals of Tetitla date to ca. AD 450 (Taube 2003:285-287), and Cabrera Castro has argued that the Atetelco murals were made somewhere between AD 300-400 (Cabrera Castro 1995:203). Taken together, these studies not only call for a renewed attempt to place Teotihuacan's mural art in a chronological sequence, but they also change our view of Teotihuacan's history in Late Tlamimilolpa and Early Xolalpan times. It has been assumed that so-called secular and militaristic themes only entered Teotihuacan mural art at a late date, but this was not the case, as the walls of Atetelco clearly attest (Headrick 1995). Such themes, rather, seem to have entered mural art when Teotihuacan consolidated its position as a superpower in central Mexico, and iconographic references to the military power of Teotihuacan were also represented on a host of other

media, including mirrors, some of which followed the Teotihuacanos on their way to a number of regions throughout Early Classic Mesoamerica (e.g., Berlo 1984; Nielsen in press).

Concluding Remarks

To conclude this preliminary analysis of the mirror iconography an obvious question comes to mind: Why and how did the mirrors find their way to the queen's tomb? First of all, both Copan mirrors could well have been manufactured in central Mexico, and it is tempting to hypothesize that K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' brought them along from Teotihuacan, which he may have visited as part of his preparations to become a new dynastic ruler, before his so-called *entrada* into Copan. It is possible that it is there that he received his personal set of royal and military insignia, including a War Serpent helmet (remnants of which were found in the Hunal tomb, see Bell et al. 2004b:133) as well as the two mirrors and some of the ceramics discovered in his tomb (Reents-Budet et al. 2004:169-174). It was probably not accidental that one mirror featured a high-ranking military leader wearing a mirror, and the mirrors certainly underscore K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo's affiliation (whether actual or nominal) with Teotihuacan. Perhaps the two mirrors were presented to his new, local Copanec wife as part of the ritual gift-giving that was also a standard element of marriage alliance-building in Mesoamerica, or perhaps they were only handed over to the widow queen after K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' had died. At present we cannot know with certainty which scenario is most probable, but there can be little doubt that the mirrors signal a real and important contact with Teotihuacan, relations that may, however, have come via Tikal and its "bi-cultural" Teotihuacan-Maya ruling elite (Nielsen in press; Sharer 2004).

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