
Mural Paintings of the Puuc Region in Yucatán

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The objective of this study is to examine pre-Columbian mural art found in the hilly region of southeastern Yucatán known as the Puuc. These paintings, outlined and colored on the interior surfaces of ancient buildings, generally include a variety of motifs. Such artwork reflects the ideology of human cultures, delineating aspects of civic, religious, and political values that are usually accepted by members of society. Based on this assumption, we intend to suggest generalizations concerning content, function, and the ideology captured in these images of native American society.

We have classified the mural paintings of this region according to location within structures as follows:

Wall paintings: These are found on the vertical stuccoed walls of buildings, generally in the interiors and doorways of chambers. The subjects of the paintings vary from military actions (Mulchic and Chacmultun) to civic and ceremonial activities (Chacbolay and Xkichmol).

Vault paintings: These are encountered on the plastered faces of the characteristic Maya arch. The painted areas are usually divided into various registers by horizontal bands. Some simple scenes of daily Maya life are preserved in this type of painting at Dzúlá.

Paintings of vault capstones: These pictorial elements are found on the rectangular stones that span the center of the ceilings in vaulted buildings. The capstones are covered with stucco, over which the painting is applied. The representations, highly symbolic and esoteric, depict gods and personages of the hierarchy. Such drawings are commonly accompanied by hieroglyphic writ-

ings. These designs, consequently, were not for popular comprehension; rather, their interpretation and ideological function were under the control of the religious elite.

Vestiges have been found at Kewik, Kom, Xkichmol, Chacmultun, Santa Rosa Xtampak, Uxmal, Sacnichte, and even in locations outside the Puuc area, such as Xnucbec, Dzibilnocac, and Chichén Itzá.

All of the remains investigated consist of only one pictorial layer. (By contrast, Post Classic paintings encountered along the central coast of Quintana Roo commonly consist of several layers.) The scenes tend to be divided by horizontal bands in a manner similar to that of the Bonampak murals. Red was the preferred color in the vault capstone paintings.

Drawings on the vault and capstone seem more characteristic of the Late Classic Period in the northern Maya area, while wall painting appears to have continued into Post Classic times.

A descriptive catalog of mural art in the Puuc region is presented below. The studies are not detailed, particularly for those sites where exhaustive interpretations have already been published. Instead, the listing below constitutes a more general review.

Mulchic. At this site was found a wall painting in a chamber 8.4 meters long by 2.2 meters wide. The designs represent a battle between two groups, the taking of prisoners, a procession of priests and preparation for the sacrifice of the prisoners, and a scene showing their execution (Piña Chán 1964: 63) (see figs. 1–3). The battle is between Maya, which indicates the existence of hostility between communities within the region. The elation of the leader and his triumphant followers is symbolized.

Piña Chán points out stylistic similarities of the

Translated by Alice Callaghan



Fig. 1. Mulchic. Right section of the south wall.



Fig. 2. Mulchic. Left section of the south wall.

Mulchic paintings with those of Bonampak, as well as characteristics of the Puuc region and other Maya sites. The style dates from the period between A.D. 600–900 (Piña Chán 1964: 63, 77).

Chacmultun. Copies of the most important murals at Chacmultun were made by Edward H. Thompson, who completed his investigation in 1901 (1904: 10). However, some errors were detected, so new reproductions were made in 1977 by Martine Fettweis as part of the Uxmal project under the author's direction.

Originally all the walls were covered by paint-

ings. Now only a scene on the north wall of Building C, Chamber 10, remains. It is 4.6 meters long and divided in two scenes by three horizontal bands (fig. 4).

The lower scene, the most deteriorated, is 4.2 meters long and .84 meter wide. A red horizontal band 14 centimeters wide, composed of rectangular scrolls and stepped profiles and outlined by two thinner black bands, starts at the bottom of the scene and continues up the left side with other designs. At the upper part, the scene is bounded by a blue band 3 centimeters wide.



Fig. 3. Mulchic. North wall.

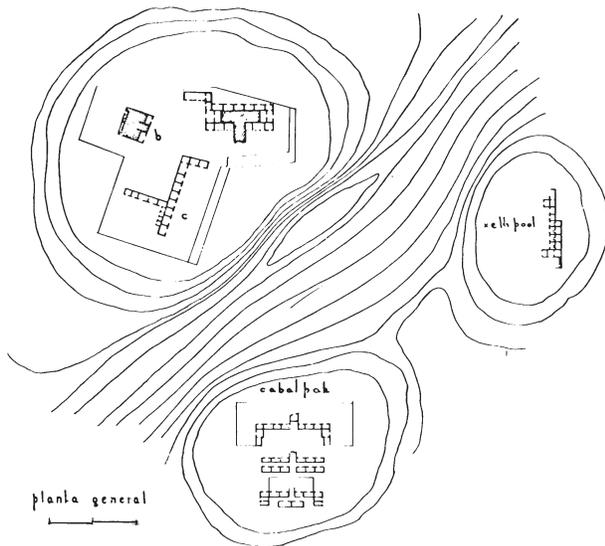


Fig. 4. Chacmultun. Plan (after Ignacio Marquina 1964).

A variety of skin tones, dark, rosy, natural, and tobacco-colored ochers, is evident among the figures. There are also carmine, orange red, blue, and green colors (Fettweis 1977).

The painting depicts warriors carrying decorated spears and standards and some men with trumpets, all of them inactive, except for one at the extreme left, who is throwing a spear. Almost everyone seems to be facing to this side (fig. 5; see color section).

At the right, one behind the other, are conical roofs fringed by green and yellow feathers, each with a horizontal band and columns. The roofs peak in disks of color, one red, the other blue.

The headdresses are generally of feathers, some very elaborate, particularly those on the left. The ear ornaments are simple disks, the necklaces of jade beads. Bracelets are simple and so are the loincloths.

Some of the subjects wear small beards, and at right center is an individual with a beaded jade band and pendants. In the same area, a little toward the upper left, is an irregular black design, which continues on the upper register.

The upper scene is slightly smaller than the lower, 3.6 meters long by .5 meter wide, but it is in better condition and is very impressive because of its coloring, realism, and dexterity (fig. 6; see color section).

The painting is of a military skirmish in which warriors on the left seem to be escorting two individuals who carry staffs of authority. The troops in the forefront, however, appear to be on the defensive, fleeing from the attack. Their enemy on the right has taken prisoners, giving the impression that they had succeeded in attacking by surprise.

The clash occurs in the center, above which appear to be a wall and bench, a continuation of the black design found in the lower scene.

Traces remain of fifteen individuals clustered at the left. Their headdresses are mostly simple caps, sometimes trimmed with feathers, such as the one in the form of a half-moon on the figure near the center. This style resembles that of the warriors of Room 2 in the murals of Bonampak. The headdress of the center figure is distinctive, formed by a series of disks of two sizes, but the remaining elements are incomplete.

Many of the figures wear their hair to the waist, and all have simple disk ear ornaments, with the exception of a retreating warrior whose ear ornaments are in form of flowers. He also wears a breastplate composed of beads and shells. The others wear necklaces of jade beads with bands and pendants similar to those in the lower scene; some have nothing around their necks.

Most wear simple bar nosepieces, a component found in Maya sculptures, such as Stela 9 of Oxkintok, the drawings of Mulchic, Stela 15 of Uxmal, and the reliefs of Chichén Itzá (Lower Temple of the Tigers). This is also characteristic of the Totonaca culture (fig. 7).

Almost everyone has his mouth open, and some are wearing beards. The eighth figure wears a bracelet on his forearm, and the last two have simple cloaks. All are dressed in loincloths, and one has added a sash at the hips. They carry plain and decorated spears, banners, curved sticks, and shields.

Those on the right are mostly soldiers moving toward the enemy. They have prisoners, but only the vestiges of one remain. A person in the lead carries an unrecognizable offering. There is little to distinguish them from their enemy. They wear similar headdresses; some wear none at all. Some wear nose bars and the same style of necklace. A few wear more elaborate necklaces with several strings of beads. They wear bracelets on their up-



Fig. 7. Oxkintok. Stela 9.

per arms and forearms, sashes around their hips, loincloths, and shields and carry plain and decorated spears and standards. A number of round blue and red objects, such as the stones that were used as arms in Mulchic, lie on the ground.

There is a notable absence of priests in these murals. Military figures predominate. Some of the elements and the style are similar to the Bonampak paintings, while other aspects are of a regional character, though within the Classic tradition of Maya painting.

Chambers 1, 2, 3, and 8 of Building C originally contained paintings, but they have disappeared (Thompson 1904: 15, 16), along with a stone from a painted vault capstone (Fettweis 1977). In the center room number 8, called "Xeth Pool" (Structure 4), are signs of painting over the supports of the inner door that opened to a higher chamber. Designs on the right and left supports are composed of bands (fig. 8).

There is an incomplete drawing of 60 by 60 centimeters on the left, and on the right there is a drawing 90 centimeters high by 35 centimeters in width. The only remaining color is black, used to outline the vertical bands and the plant and snake designs.

Chachbolay. Poorly preserved remains of a mural

that once had a great deal of color can be detected in the interior of one of the rooms of the building that Teobert Maler called the Castle (1902: 198). Traces of drawings of three people remain. All that is recognizable to the right is the profile of a head with a beard and a wavy line that resembles a moustache. Behind this there is a vertical band 4 centimeters wide. The headdress is incomplete and consists of a type of hat with crown and brim.

The next person is a priest, who wears a very elaborate headdress with many feathers and an earring of hanging ribbons and tubular pieces. There are also signs of a necklace and a wrist bracelet. He wears a long, fringed cape and holds part of a staff of authority in his hand.

Only part of a feathered headdress, the loincloth, and one leg remain as evidence of a third individual. The combination suggests ceremonial vestments.

The capstone was painted, but only a few red marks survive (Fettweis 1977).

Dzulá. The paintings of this site were first reported by Stephens in 1841, who described them briefly (1938: 61, 62). Later Edward H. Thompson made copies and photographs, which were published in 1904 by the Peabody Museum, Harvard University. As in the case of Chacmultun, the reproductions are not very satisfactory. For this reason, an attempt was made to obtain other copies with better detail, even though the originals have deteriorated considerably since Thompson's time.

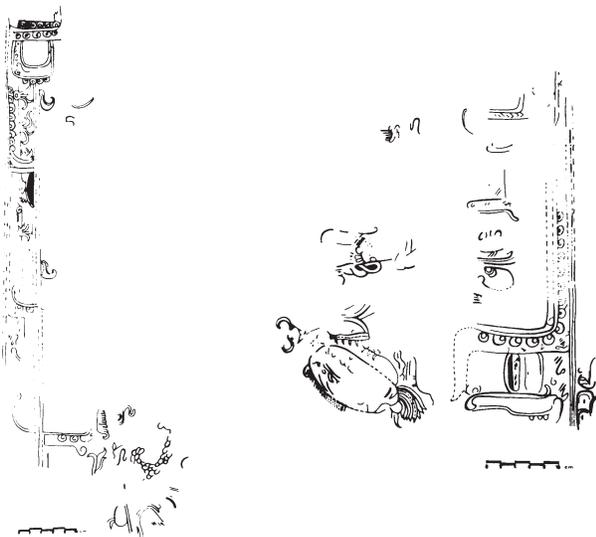


Fig. 8. Chacmultun. The bands around the entrance. Drawing by Martine Fettweis.

The most important remains of these paintings are found in one of the rooms of the main building, where half a vault stands. The scenes are divided by three horizontal bands from the bottom of the vault to the top. The images mostly represent daily life, such as village people carrying baskets, perhaps a market scene (Fettweis 1977). Their dress is simple. One person bears an authoritative appearance and a more elaborate dress, suggesting that he is a member of the ruling class. The contour lines are deft and beautiful, utilizing several colors, with ochre predominant for the bodies.

Three fragments of the lower scene, one each at either extreme of the east vault and one on the south wall, remain. Of the first two paintings, the one on the left shows a procession of several persons, five of whom are distinguishable. All of the body except the head can be seen on the first two images. The hands hold unrecognizable objects, probably baskets, similar to those in the upper scene on the same side of this vault.

Everyone is depicted in side view with bare feet shown in movement. These people are obviously of a lower class, since they wear only the "ex" (loincloth) and perhaps bracelets. Ochre was used to color the bodies and traces of blue can be seen on the loincloths. A 12-centimeter band of yellow with specks of green and outlined in black is the base upon which the scene is drawn.

The fragment on the right depicts a body in profile, larger than the others and with only the mid-section and lower extremities remaining. To the left are a yellow roof and a blue column, all that remains of a house.

On the south wall of the vault is another scene showing two people, one wearing a simple loincloth and sash with a red fringe and a bracelet. Only a part of the body of the person on the right can be detected.

The middle scene consists of a fragment on the north wall of the vault. In the center of the painting is a tall person with his head in profile and his body facing the front. His feet are separated, as in a Classic stela. His headdress is a simple cap and his ear ornament a circle. He wore a necklace, but it has vanished. His arms are bent and placed at his hips. On either side of him sits a figure with an emaciated face and an attitude of subordination. The one on the right is better preserved. Both wear elaborate dress, including a cap with red circles.

In the upper scene is found a fragment that continues from the intersection of the vault's northern and eastern walls. Here are depicted three couples. The person on the left front holds a basket,



Fig. 9. Xkichmol. The palace temple (after Maler 1886–92).

and the man on his right is kneeling in profile. The next figures are in a similar position with the person in front resting on his heels. Only the lower portions of the bodies remain of the last two, and there is an obvious lack of proportion in the last figure. They are dressed simply. Those who are accepting baskets wear plain sashes in addition to their loincloths. A few have wrist and ankle bracelets.

Xkichmol. Xkichmol was first explored in 1886 by Edward H. Thompson. He excavated, made maps of the structures, and copied the paintings (1898: 209–229). Teobert Maler visited the site between 1886 and 1892. Photographs of the main buildings, with handwritten comments by Maler, are still intact in the Crescencio Carrillo and Ancona Library in Mérida. These buildings are on an elevation and form a plaza with construction on all sides but the south. To the north is a structure which Maler named the palace temple (fig. 9) and which was called Building 1 by Thompson (fig. 10). One can reach this by a ladder from the plaza. At both sides of this construction are leaning structures with the building on the east where two halls remain, one containing half a vault and the other with two rooms, where the murals are located.

Room 11 (fig. 10) is 4.2 by 2.3 meters, and the keystone painting is 22 by 32 centimeters on a single layer of stucco. The only color used was red to outline and fill in spaces. Red is the color of the rising sun, of blood, fire, and, therefore, of the day,

which is when one performs work (Barrera Vásquez 1977: 2). It is significant that the painting is located in an obscure place, suggesting nature's duality.

The painting, which includes a text with a north-south orientation, is framed at the top and bottom by a horizontal band. Under the lower band are hieroglyphics related to the drawing.

There is no doubt that the image shown represents a deity, since the elements are highly symbolic and religious. It is, furthermore, a male god, seated in Oriental style on an animal-skin cushion, with a very elaborate garment and a headdress that reflect his dignity (fig. 11). The headdress includes a fringe of feathers, flowers, and leaves, symbols of fertility, just as the spots of the jaguar are associated with night and darkness. In addition, the jaguar is another example of duality, since it reigns both in heaven and on earth (Thompson 1970: 354) (fig. 12).

The eye forms a spiral characteristic of Maya gods. Beginning at the right, the upper part is a thin curved line which corresponds to the eyebrow. This character bears a great resemblance to Thompson's Glyph 578 (1962: 204) (fig. 12).

The hieroglyphic spiral can be interpreted in several ways, as a sun element in the short count, as a shell (Thompson 1962: 201), a moon symbol as related to Glyph 20, as well as Schellhas' Deity "D" (Spinden 1975: 92), which has been identified as Itzamná, god of numerous heavenly attributes.

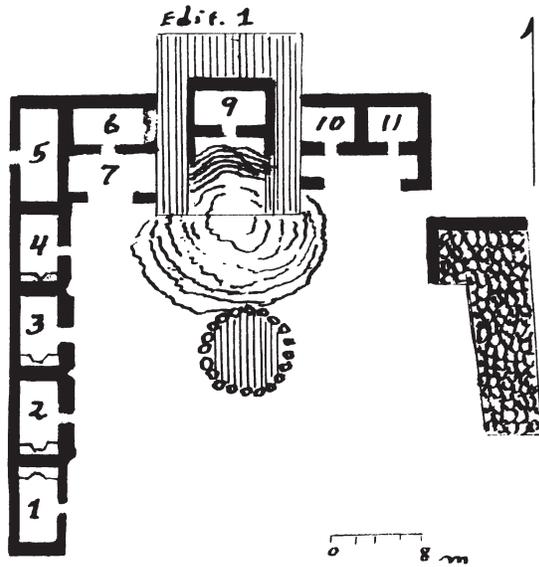


Fig. 10. Xkichmol. Building 1 (after Thompson 1898).

The god's earplug is intricate. His sinuous lips outline a toothless, semiopen mouth. Some elements of the nose, long and hooked at the bottom, are missing. The noses of Schellhas' God "B" and the God "K," associated with rain and torment (1904), had similar characteristics. The beaded necklace falls to the deity's shoulder and his breastplate is adorned with beads and feathers.

The figure wears a fringed cape and an ornament in the form of a centipede, a sign which is encountered in the codices next to the God "D," related to the moon or the night (fig. 12c), an insect that frequents dark places and has an affinity with death and destruction, like the owl (Tozzer and Allen 1910: 304). He also displays glyphs on his cape at the level of the lumbar region.

In addition, the moon is represented on the right (after Coe), and on the left is the sign of *ik*, the wind, air, and spirit (Barrera Vásquez 1976: 26). Other designs are evident but incomplete.



Fig. 11. Xkichmol. 1977. Drawing by Martine Fettweis.

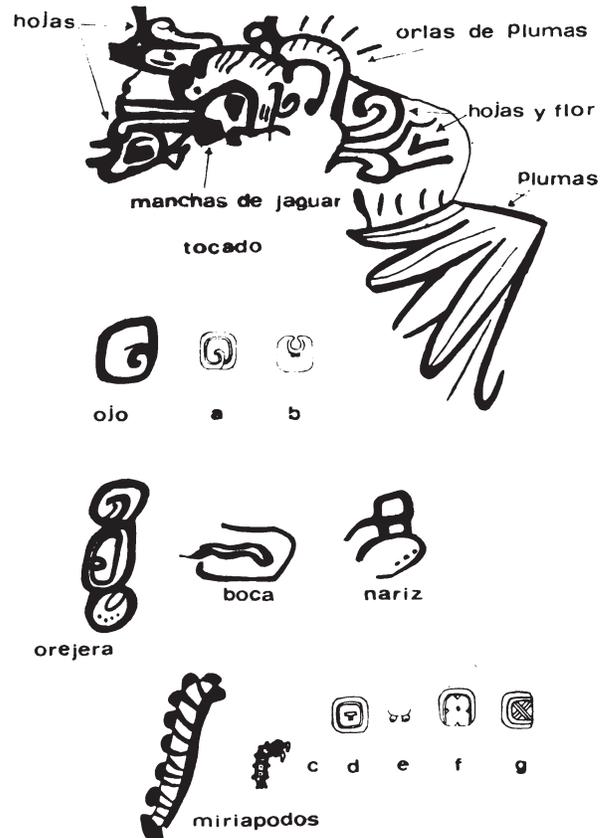


Fig. 12. Xkichmol. Glyphs.

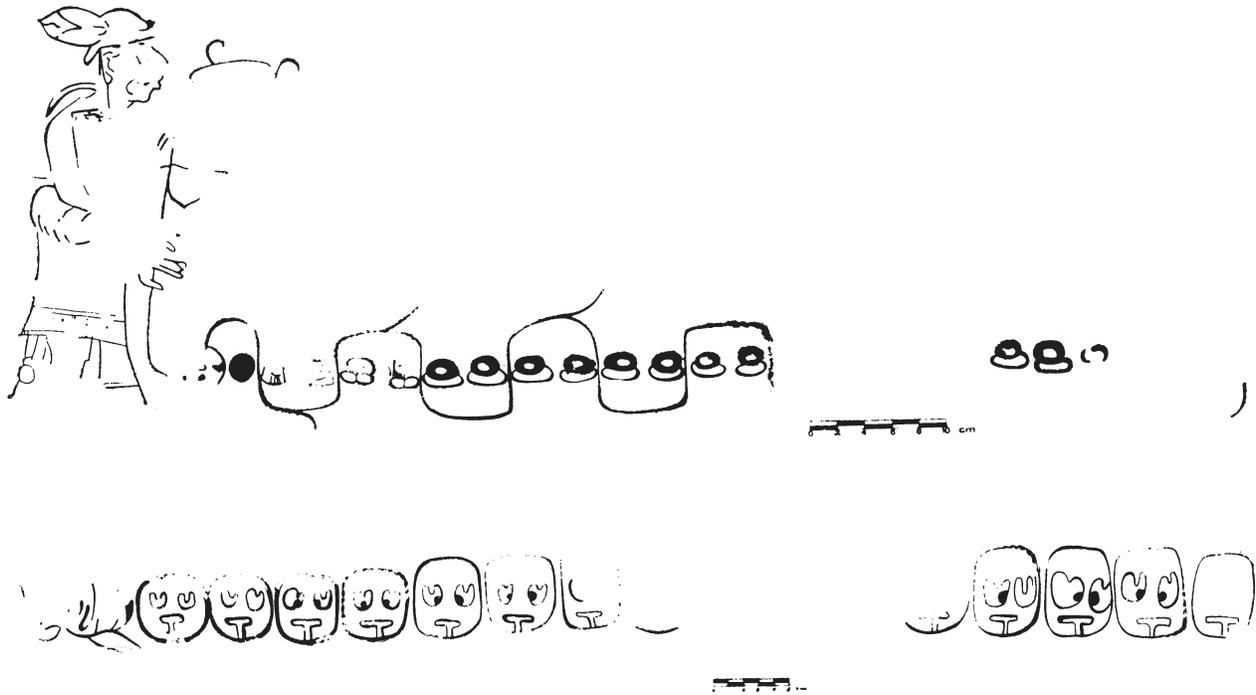


Fig. 13. Xkichmol. Painting. Drawing by Martine Fettweis.

Obviously, the Maya god embodied celestial qualities, particularly of the sun's phases, as the Maya conceived them. The color red expressed light and the sun rising in the east. During its course, it was accompanied by wind and the rain that gave life and fertility to the earth. The setting sun brought darkness and the moon and then renewed its course through the underworld to be reborn.

The hieroglyphic text, composed of three cartouches, confirms this. The left glyph is illegible, and the succeeding glyph is a combination of a principal sign and two affixes. The main sign and the superfix appear to intersect each other and bear a resemblance to Thompson's glyph 683 (moon) (fig. 12).

The left affix is similar to number 13 (fig. 12e). The main glyph of the next cartouche is glyph 619 (crossed side bands) and is frequently found in the celestial bands associated with the sky and the underworld (Thompson 1970: 240). There are four affixes. The lower and the upper left are similar to Thompson's Affix 13. The superfix is the sign of the sun, "Kin," which according to the Pío Pérez dictionary means sun, day, sacerdotal time, and clergy (1866–67: 176). The last affix on the right is illegible.

On the north wall of Room 10 in the same building are other designs representing a series of similar glyphs arranged in a continuous horizontal band. Of these images (fig. 13, below), thirteen incomplete figures remain and symbolize the hieroglyph of "Ahau," with the *ik* symbol in its mouth. The eyes form a U, a symbol associated with the moon, and the pupil is outlined. At the beginning of this band is a distinct but unrecognizable figure.

Ahau is the day of the sun god and also signifies ruler or great man, and *ik* is interpreted as breath of life (Thompson 1970: 89) and thus occupies the area of the mouth in the glyph.

There is another painting in this room of a person and a series of circular signs in a wavy horizontal band at the height of the figure's knees (fig. 13, above). Again red is used, and the subject is a young man wearing a simple cap with a feather on the side. The eye and ear ornaments are missing and the nose is incomplete. His lower lip hangs and he appears to be holding the bands at his knees. The band, which resembles a snake, has projections that suggest a serpentlike movement, and on the inside is a series of two circular signs. This person seems to be involved in some type of ceremonial activity.

Thompson (1898) reported other pictorial rem-



Fig. 14. Xkichmol. Figure painted on the ceiling of Room 11, Building 1 (after Thompson 1898).

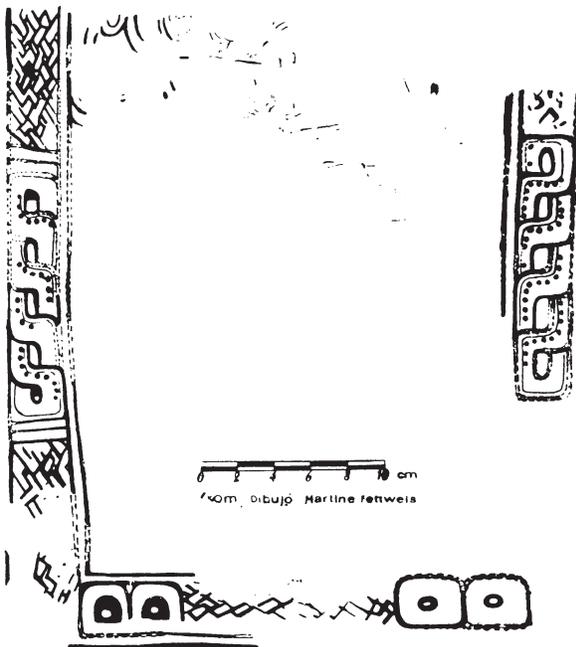


Fig. 15. Kom. Red-colored snake. Drawing by Martine Fettweis.

nants, including a blue handprint stamped on one of the walls of Room 9, Building 1, and a bird with a necklace of beads, plants, and glyphs (one of them the symbol of Kin) (fig. 14).

Kom. Faded remains of a painting appear on the vault capstone of the main building. Only part of a red mark is left (fig. 15). This measures 30 by 36 centimeters and is made up of ribbons 4 centimeters wide, in which interlaced and matted snakes alternate.

The lower band displays a mat pattern as the central element, and the astronomical symbols at the sides (Venus) relate to glyph 510 from Thompson's catalog (1962: 108). The highest mark and the central motif have disappeared. In spite of a paucity of information, we feel that the theme of the painting was not for the common person but only for the elite already initiated into the meaning of these symbols.

Other sites. Information exists of other paintings of this region, some of which have disappeared or have been damaged. Stephens found a vault capstone at Kewik with a drawing of a person and hieroglyphic texts in red. He removed the stone from its original site, intending to take it with him, but it was lost. He also mentioned a similar feature in Xtampak (Stephens 1938: 47, 48, 117). Thompson (1973: 59–64) described a similar painting at Uxmal and Sacnichte, and I found more at Kanahaleb.

General observations. The Puuc paintings exhibit features characteristic of the more widespread Classic Maya art tradition. Similarities of theme and style with the Bonampak murals, such as the division of scenes by horizontal borders, the head-dresses, the cap, half-moon (Chacmultun), and the animals (Mulchic), are evident. The position of the first figure with feet separated and the procession of individuals in profile (Dzulá) are also of Classic style. Military action, the taking of captives, and weapons are equally common. Such elements are to be found elsewhere in the Maya lowlands, represented in stelae, sculptures, and reliefs, as well as murals.

The nose ornament in the form of a bar is a late motif found on the Oxkintok stela and Seibal stela 10 and other sites. This element was extensively used in the Maya-Toltec art of Chichén Itzá during the Post Classic Period.

The pictorial tradition of the Puuc appears to have developed principally during the Late Classic, sharing cultural elements with both the central lowlands and places outside the Maya area. The contexts reflect dominant religious, military, and, occasionally, secular values and interests. The first

are found, as we have pointed out, on the capstones, although they are not restricted to this type of surface. Their social symbolism was subject to the ideological control of priests.

The military scenes depict more mundane historical events of direct social relevance. They were used to justify, glorify, and commemorate military triumphs of the dominant group. The frequency of such motifs suggests the existence of warlike societies that generated regional antagonisms and constantly upset the tranquility of Yucatán during the Late Classic Period.

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Barrera Rubio essay, fig. 6. Chacmultun. Upper register.
Drawing by Martine Fettweis, photography by Lee Hocher.



Barrera Rubio essay, fig. 5. Chacmultun. Lower register.
Drawing by Martine Fettweis, photography by Lee Hocher.

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Third Palenque Round Table, 1978

PART 2

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Jacket illustration:

LORD CHAACAL III

Birth: 9.12.6.5.8 3 Lamat 6 Zac

Accession to the throne of Palenque: 9.14.10.4.2

9 Ik 5 Kayab

Death: pre-9.14.11.12.14 8 Ik 7 Yaxkin

Drawings courtesy of Linda Schele