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Guatemala**

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Sounds in Stone: Song, Music, and Dance on Monument 21 from Bilbao, Cotzumalguapa, Guatemala¹

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The sculptures of Cotzumalguapa, on the South Coast of Guatemala, contain numerous depictions of ritual scenes related to human sacrifice, the evocation of ancestors, and the solar cult. Song, music, and dance play an important role in these scenes. Song is represented by elaborate sound scrolls that take the form of prodigious plants sprouting abundant flowers, fruits, jewels, and other precious objects. As interpreted in this article, the participants in these scenes performed songs and dances in the context of rituals that evoked

the Flower World, a mythological place inhabited by portentous beings including ancestors and the Sun God.

Bilbao Monument 21 is one of the most elaborate examples of the sculptural art of Cotzumalguapa (Figures 1 and 2; Chinchilla Mazariegos 2008;

¹ A version of this article was first published in Spanish in *Flower World: Music Archaeology of the Americas / Mundo Florido: Arqueomusicología de las Américas*, vol. 1, edited by Arnd Adje Both (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2012).



Figure 1. Bilbao Monument 21. All photographs and drawings by the author except as noted.



Figure 2. Bilbao Monument 21.

Parsons 1969:101-103). It is carved on the surface of an enormous boulder, otherwise unmodified. The carving fills an inclined surface of 4.02 x 3.38 meters. This rock must have been significant since ancient times; the Bilbao acropolis—one of the major architectural complexes in the Late Classic city of Cotzumalguapa—was built around it. Human presence at Bilbao goes back at least as far as the Middle Preclassic and increased during the Late Preclassic (Parsons 1967). At this time, the Monument 21 boulder stood at or very near to a moderately important

center, of which we know only a few construction layers that were covered over by subsequent Classic-period structures. As shown by excavations around the monument by Lee A. Parsons, during the Late Classic the level of the surrounding platform was raised, burying the larger part of the rock (Parsons 1969:38). Parsons supposed that the relief was carved before this construction, but a revision of the archaeological chronology of Cotzumalguapa suggests that it was carved during the Late Classic (AD 650-950; Chinchilla Mazariegos et al. 2009).

This was the era of maximum growth of Cotzumalguapa. The city covered an area of approximately ten square kilometers and boasted an extensive system of causeways and bridges connecting the principal architectural groups and peripheral zones of the city (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011a). The central sector was located in the north, around El Baúl and El Castillo, while Bilbao occupied an outlying position. Investigations have revealed a low density of settlement around this complex. Yet it was enlarged by a series of wide platforms that supported patios and buildings provided with a large number of monumental sculptures. Bilbao might have functioned as a cult location, constructed over an ancient center of the Preclassic period. Perhaps for this reason it was an appropriate place for the invocation of ancestors. The recurring sculptural themes of song, dance, and the evocation of Flower World are consistent with this interpretation.

There are three characters on Monument 21. The largest, in the center, dances and sings while brandishing a large knife, with which he cuts the fruits that sprout from his own song. The song is represented by a large vine that grows from his mouth, full of fruits, flowers, and precious objects. A similar vine sprouts from the mouth of a Death God on the dancer's stomach. To the observer's right, there is an old woman seated on a bench who also sings while holding fruits, seemingly placing them in a large sack below her bench. Behind the central character, a third figure employs a human bone to strike a composite object that hangs from his neck, here interpreted as a musical instrument. At the same time, this musician manipulates a small figure of human appearance, in the manner of a puppet. These three characters are described in greater detail below.

The Musician

The interpretation of this character is key to the understanding of the scene's musical connotations. His body is human, but his peculiar facial features are suggestive of a magical transformation or a non-human nature. Feather-like projections grow backward from his eye, and the strangely open mouth sprouts a pointed object, perhaps a sacrificial knife. The body position suggests energetic movement compatible with dance.

With the right hand, he manipulates a small figure that, by comparison with other characters in Cotzumalguapa art, can be identified as female (Figure 3a). In addition to her long hair—also seen in males—a distinctive feminine attribute is the flower on her forehead. This ornament is also worn by two women depicted on El Baúl Monument 50 (Figure 3b).

The tunic covering the musician's right hand suggests that he manipulates the small figure as a puppet. It was characterized as such by Parsons (1969:102), Carlos Navarrete (1984:59), and Marion Hatch (1987:478). It is

not possible to determine whether it was a rigid object of wood or ceramic with clothing added, or a flexible one with the head and hands attached to a fabric dress. Be that as it may, it is clear that the musician handles it while dancing, in theatrical performance. Considering the musical connotations of the entire sculpture, it is worth asking whether it was also a musical instrument, perhaps a rattle. However, the iconographic details of the monument provide no basis for this supposition.

Daniela Triadan (2007:289) and Juan Pedro Laporte (2009) have pointed out the theatrical quality of ceramic figurines in the Maya area and suggest that they could have been used in the context of theatrical performances, playing parts in various plots. The little woman of Monument 21 is a clear example, however uncommon, of the theatrical use of small figures manipulated as puppets, not only in domestic contexts but also important religious rituals. Navarrete (1984:59) pointed out a parallel in the stelae of Chinkultic, albeit in that case there is no indication of manipulation of the figures depicted.

An object of composite forms hangs from this character's shoulder, fastened by a double band that passes

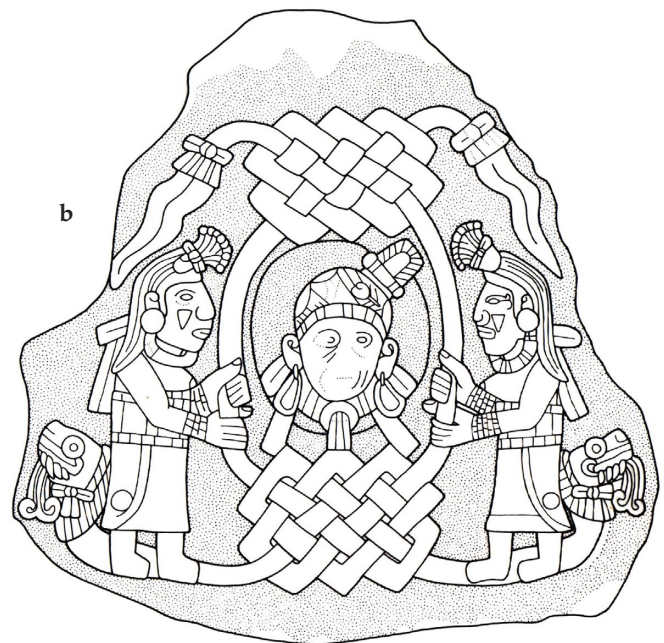


Figure 3. Women with flowers on their foreheads in Cotzumalguapa art: (a) Bilbao Monument 21, detail showing puppet; (b) women holding a mat serpent, El Baúl Monument 50.

around the arm (Figure 4). It has a hemispherical body with various ornaments (a concentric circle, a zigzag line, and four parallel lines) and a conical segment whose short end is covered with a flat strip. This strip is a little wider than the hemispherical body to which it seems to be attached by two bands or pegs. A tassel hangs from its lower edge, down to the level of the musician's ankles. In the present study, this object is interpreted as a musical instrument, although it remains unclear whether it is a membranophone—where the sound is produced by a membrane—or an idiophone, where it is produced by the whole body of the instrument. To strike it, the performer employs a cut human femur, held in the left hand. The superior epiphysis and femoral head can be clearly seen.

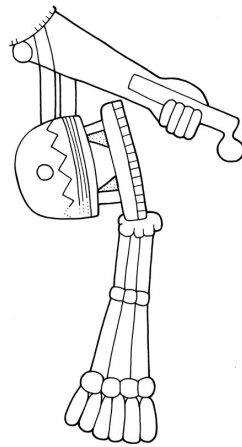


Figure 4. Detail from Bilbao Monument 21, showing an instrument hanging from the musician's left arm, and the cut human femur that he holds as a drumstick.

The form of the instrument is unusual, and therefore its identification must be considered tentative. In previous work (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2008), the author noted a parallel with Lacandon kettledrums, made of ceramic jugs whose mouths are covered with a leather membrane. However, the shape of the instrument is not the same. The materials from which the Monument 21 instrument was made are unclear, and they may have been perishable. No similar instruments have been found in archaeological contexts. The flat band on the upper edge suggests a membrane, but the possibility that it was an idiophone cannot be discarded.

Also worthy of comment is the apparent use of a femur as a drumstick, which has not been previously documented in Mesoamerican art or in the archaeological record. However, there are literary mentions. The *Relación de Michoacán* mentions a certain Maquihuasi, who “has a drum [made] from the thigh of a man, and he plays it, he plays with it and plays with an arm turned into a drumstick” (Alcalá 2010:65-66, author's translation). Matthias Stöckli (personal communication 2012) pointed out a poetic mention in the dynastic drama known as the *Rabinal Achi*:

Here also is the bone of my leg:
that would make a perfect stick to hit the *teponauaztli* drum
which would make the sky throb
would make the earth throb most admirably (Breton 2007:256)

The position of the object in relation to the instrument is suggestive, and moreover this is not the only example in which human femurs were used as musical instruments.

Examples of *omichichahuatzli*—the Nahuatl name of an idiophone that functioned as a rasp, made from a human femur with a series of transverse grooves along the diaphysis—have been found at various Mesoamerican sites (Pereira 2005). Many archaeological examples have been cut across the diaphysis, perhaps to amplify the resonance, as argued by Eduard Seler (1992:62). An example in the Codex Vienna, originally identified by Hermann Beyer, is cut in the same way; the *omichichahuatzli* is held on top of a skull, which may function as a soundbox (Pereira 2005:296). The Monument 21 femur is cut in a similar fashion, although it has no grooves, and its function was different. These examples point to a variety of forms of sound production using human bones in ancient Mesoamerica.

To summarize, there are grounds for interpreting this person as a musician who dances together with the central figure. At the same time, he manipulates a female figurine and strikes an object whose nature cannot be identified with precision for want of analogous examples, but which surely is a musical instrument. In fact, it can be affirmed that everything about this personage is extraordinary: his facial features; the small figure that he manipulates as a puppet (unique in Mesoamerican art); the unusual instrument that hangs from his neck; and the femur that he uses to strike it. The facial aspect of this individual contrasts with that of the central character—who is essentially human—highlighting the scene's fantastic nature.

The Dancer and Singer

To judge by his larger size, the central figure plays the principal role on the monument. His majestic aspect suggests that this might be the portrait of a historical person, perhaps a ruler, as proposed by Hatch (1987). His posture, with the face and feet turned in opposite directions, reappears in other depictions of dancers in Mesoamerican art, perhaps alluding to the revolving steps of the dance (Figure 5). His raised arms are also characteristic of dancers (Taube 2009).

In his headdress, belt, right foot, and sandals he wears a large quantity of bells that must have tinkled with each step of the dance. He is aptly summed up in the terms used by Marie Sautron to describe the Mexica dancer “whose body, under an armature of rattles, bells, and seashells, makes him a true musical instrument” (Sautron 2001:118-119, author's translation). From what material were these tinklers made? Given the probable date of the monument and the absence of metals in the archaeological record of Cotzumalguapa, it cannot be supposed that they were made of copper. A possibility is that they were ceramic, a material that was also used to make bells, although the documented archaeological examples are few. They could also have been made of some organic material. In any case, their

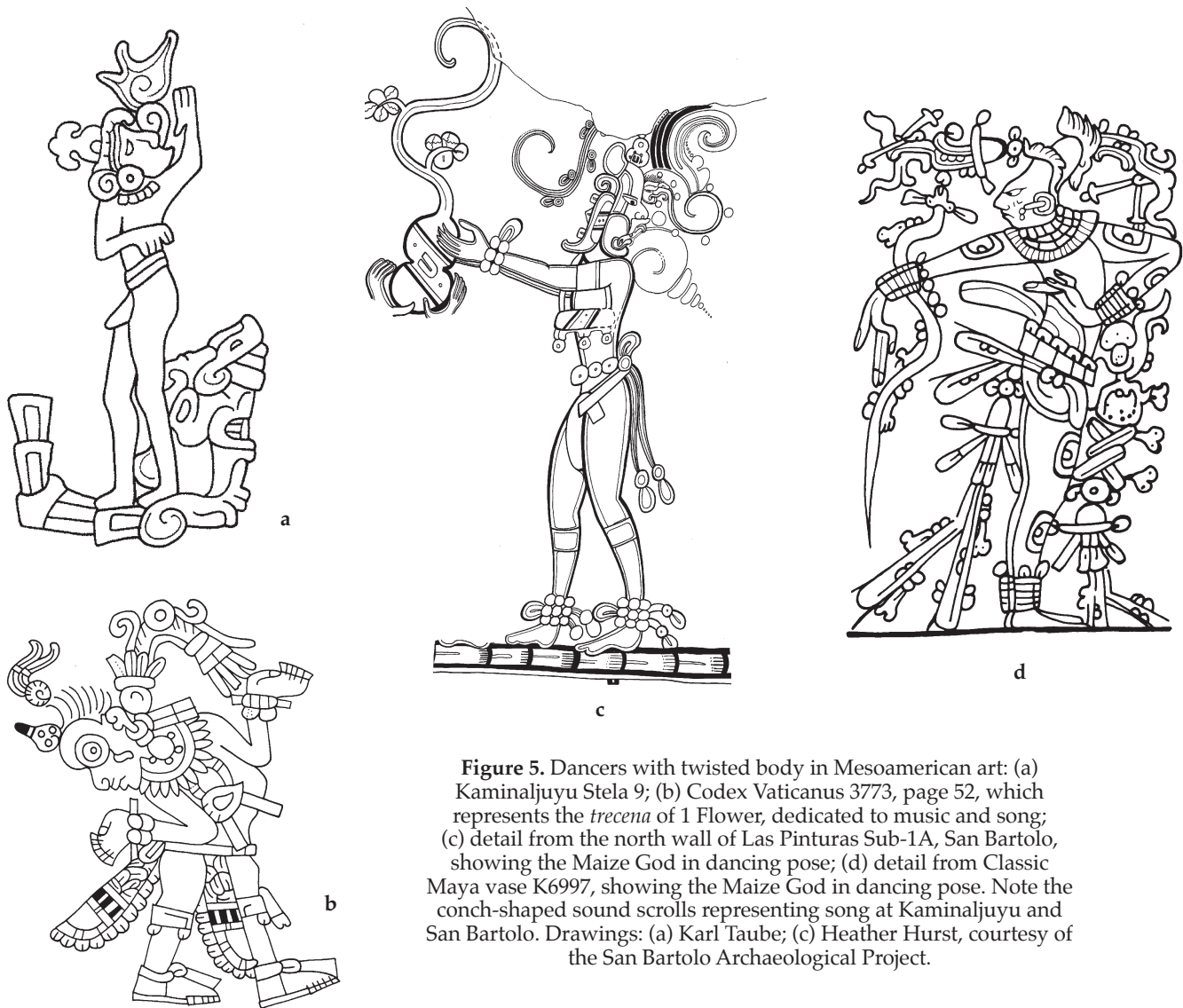


Figure 5. Dancers with twisted body in Mesoamerican art: (a) Kaminaljuyu Stela 9; (b) Codex Vaticanus 3773, page 52, which represents the *trecena* of 1 Flower, dedicated to music and song; (c) detail from the north wall of Las Pinturas Sub-1A, San Bartolo, showing the Maize God in dancing pose; (d) detail from Classic Maya vase K6997, showing the Maize God in dancing pose. Note the conch-shaped sound scrolls representing song at Kaminaljuyu and San Bartolo. Drawings: (a) Karl Taube; (c) Heather Hurst, courtesy of the San Bartolo Archaeological Project.

depiction in this and other Cotzumalguapa monuments points to the use of such instruments in the Late Classic.

A vine sprouts from the character's lips, winding toward the woman facing him. Human-faced fruits grow from this vine—one of them grooved like a cacao pod—as well as a double-bladed knife, a jewel, and a shell. The vine represents the vocalization of the figure and corresponds to the “speech scrolls” used to depict utterances in Mesoamerican art, which can be better characterized as “sound scrolls.” They appeared in southern Guatemala beginning in the Preclassic period, for instance on Kaminaljuyu Stela 9, whose protagonist adopts the dance position of the central figure of Monument 21, the face and feet turned in opposite directions (Figure 5a). Karl Taube (in Finamore and Houston 2010:236) suggests that this character is singing and dancing. Sound scrolls at Cotzumalguapa can be traced more closely to Teotihuacan art, where

they adopt vegetal shapes that are laden with flowers, jewels, and other precious objects. On the South Coast of Guatemala, there are examples of volutes in Teotihuacan style in Early Classic ceramics (Berrin 1988; Colas 2011; Taube 2000).

What kind of vocalization is represented by the sound volutes of Monument 21? In view of the flowers and precious objects that sprout from them, they can be characterized as representations of elegant speech or song, categories that are not distinguished definitively in Mesoamerica (King 1994). The dance pose of the protagonist reinforces the idea that he is singing. At the same time, he brandishes a large knife with which he harvests the fruits that grow from his own song. Judging by their human faces, these fruits stand for heads that the dancer cuts off. From this perspective, the monument represents a sacrificial dance in which human sacrifice is represented as a harvest of prodigious fruits that grow in the Flower World, materialized by the song

and dance of the protagonist.

This character sings not only with his mouth but with his abdomen; an enormous sound scroll issues from the mouth of a Death God that fills the dancer's torso. The Death God is recognizable by his skeletal aspect, abundant hair, and a device in the form of a horn that projects from the back of his head. More than a pectoral or item of clothing, the Death God seems to be fully integrated into the dancing figure, as if part of him. Carved in very low relief, it may represent a tattoo or body painting. However that may be, it is an animate being that sings. There is a significant parallel in a legged drum with an attached singing skull, depicted on a Postclassic mural painting from Santa Rita, Belize (Figure 6). In this case, the cords on the body of the drum suggest that the skull is tied to it.

On Bilbao Monument 21, the song of the Death God takes the shape of a vine that grows around the musician, and winds across the bottom of the relief, blossoming with flowers, fruits, and precious objects. In keeping with the arguments presented herein, the central character's sound scrolls represent songs that evoke the Flower World. In a highly explicit way, the songs create a landscape of beauty that pervades the entire scene. The plants with flowers and precious objects growing on them, and the birds with long feathers that sip the nectar and bite the fruits suggest that this landscape corresponds to the Flower World of Mesoamerican mythology.

The Old Woman

The third character on Monument 21 is also singing, but her sound scroll is short (Figure 7a). Parsons (1969:102) and Hatch (1987) characterize this character as masculine, but her clothing, which consists of a skirt and a cape, both with circular spots, appears to be feminine. Any doubts are dispelled by the cords that appear between the supports of the bench, which are apparently unrelated to other motifs. They find a parallel in depictions of the Mexica goddesses Xochiquetzal and Chantico in the Codex Borbonicus (Figure 7b-c). Both pertain to the complex of mother goddesses in Mesoamerican religion, strongly identified with the earth, sexuality, reproduction, and

weaving (Nicholson 1971:420-422). Another detail that pertains to this complex of goddesses is the snake that appears between the old woman's legs, with the tail winding in front of her bench. In the Tonalamatl Aubin, the goddesses Chantico and Tlazolteotl have snakes in the same position, while in the Codex Borbonicus, Xochiquetzal's seat has cords and a centipede beneath it (Figure 7b).

Based on previous studies, the snakes and centipedes between the legs of the goddesses or beneath their seats can be related to beliefs in mythical females with toothed vaginas of serpentine shape, documented in various contexts in Mesoamerican art and religion (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2010).

While her aspect is human, the old woman on Monument 21 is probably a goddess or a goddess impersonator. Taube (1992:103-104) noted her similarity with the Lowland Maya Goddess O, who characteristically wears a knotted serpent headdress. Like other old goddesses in Mesoamerica, Goddess O plays the role of a midwife. A similar connotation is suggested by the twisted cords under the seat of the old woman on Monument 21. In Maya art, twisted cords are commonly associated with childbirth, possibly evoking umbilical cords and actual cords that women grasp during labor (Taube 1994; Chinchilla Mazariegos 2013).

A more extensive discussion falls beyond the limits of this study, but from the musical point of view it is important to emphasize the key role of this woman, who participates as a singer while presiding over the ritual. She receives the fruits combined with human victims' heads, generated from the central dancer's song, only to be harvested and placed in her hands.

The Evocation of Flower World

On Bilbao Monument 21, music, song, and dance evoke and reproduce a landscape of abundant vegetation, full of flowers, fruits, precious objects, and beautiful birds. In Mesoamerica the belief in marvelous places characterized by brilliance and abundance has been repeatedly documented. These places are populated by

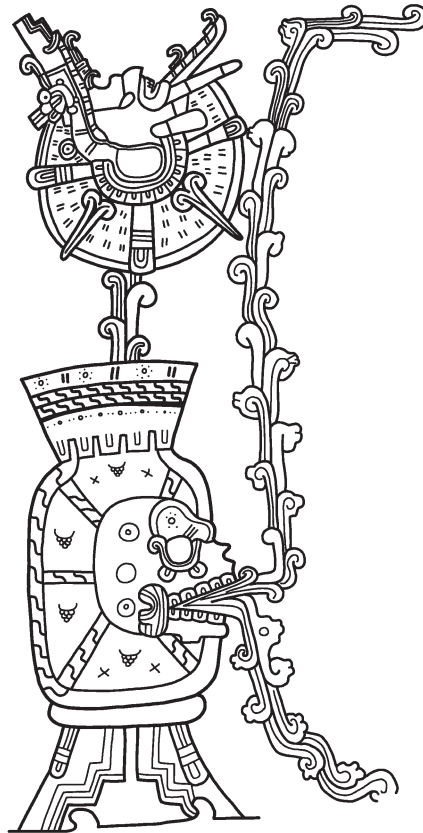


Figure 6. Detail of Postclassic mural painting from Santa Rita, Belize. A singing human skull appears to be tied with ropes to the body of a *huehuetl* drum. After Thomas Gann (1900).



Figure 7. Enthroned goddesses, with cords, serpents, and centipedes emerging below their seats: (a) detail from Bilbao Monument 21: an enthroned old woman—possibly a goddess or a goddess impersonator—receives the fruits that are harvested by the central dancer; note the cords under the throne and the serpent between her legs; (b) detail from the Codex Borbonicus: Xochiquetzal as patron of the *trecena* of 1 Eagle, with four colorful cords and a centipede under her seat; (c) detail from the Codex Borbonicus: Chantico as patron of the *trecena* of 1 Wind, with two thin cords and two thick cords, adorned with feathers and balls of down.

colorful birds and insects, which are commonly associated with the spirits of the dead. They are also linked with the daily course of the sun, sometimes described as a flowery pathway (Hill 1992; Laughlin 1962; López Austin 1994; Taube 2004)

The study of the Mesoamerican Flower World owes much to Taube’s work on “Flower Mountain” representations in Maya and Teotihuacan art (Taube 2004, 2005, 2010). The theme is also significant in the art of Cotzumalguapa, which emphasized the evocation of Flower World through song and dance (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011b). Noteworthy examples include Bilbao Stelae 1–8, originally set in the Monument Plaza, not far from Monument 21. In one of the earliest commentaries on this group, Seler (1892) characterized them as a “religious dance.” The officiants sing and dance while raising their faces and gesturing toward the personages depicted on the upper level of each stela. In Mesoamerican art, this space is frequently reserved for ancestral figures who reside in celestial locales. With the exception of the character on Stela 3, who is a sun god wrapped in flames, these characters are probably ancestors—masculine or feminine in gender—of the officiants who invoke them by means of dance and song. The ancestors appear in the guise of oversized flowers

that blossom in the midst of the abundant vegetation of Flower World

Musical instruments are prominent in this sculptural complex. On Stelae 4 and 6 (Figures 8 and 9) the figures in the upper register carry small tripod drums, apparently hanging from their necks. By analogy with examples from Postclassic sources, Arnd Adje Both (personal communication 2012) suggests that the instruments consisted of a spherical kettledrum with protruding mouth, placed on a tripod stand. The knotted bands at the base of the mouth represent the means of attaching the drumhead. The legs display a characteristic stepped shape, also frequent in *huehuetl* drums, and a cruciform design, probably cut through (Figure 10). They are similar to the larger instrument represented in the Santa Rita mural painting, with a singing skull attached (Figure 6). By their size and position, hanging from the necks of the figures, the drums depicted on Bilbao Monuments 4 and 6 bring to mind the use of similar instruments by the Mexica. Guy Stresser-Péan describes them as “small war drums, of *huehuetl* type, that some great warriors wear ritually tied to the back when they go into battle” (2011:160, author’s translation).

As on the Santa Rita mural, these instruments have sacrificial connotations at Cotzumalguapa. On Stela



Figure 8. Bilbao Stela 4. A performer sings and dances while presenting a headdress to a paramount character—possibly an ancestor represented as an oversized flower—who emerges from the prodigious vegetation of Flower World. The highlighted area on Simeon Habel's 1863 drawing, at right, shows the small kettledrum with tripod legs in the paramount character's hands.

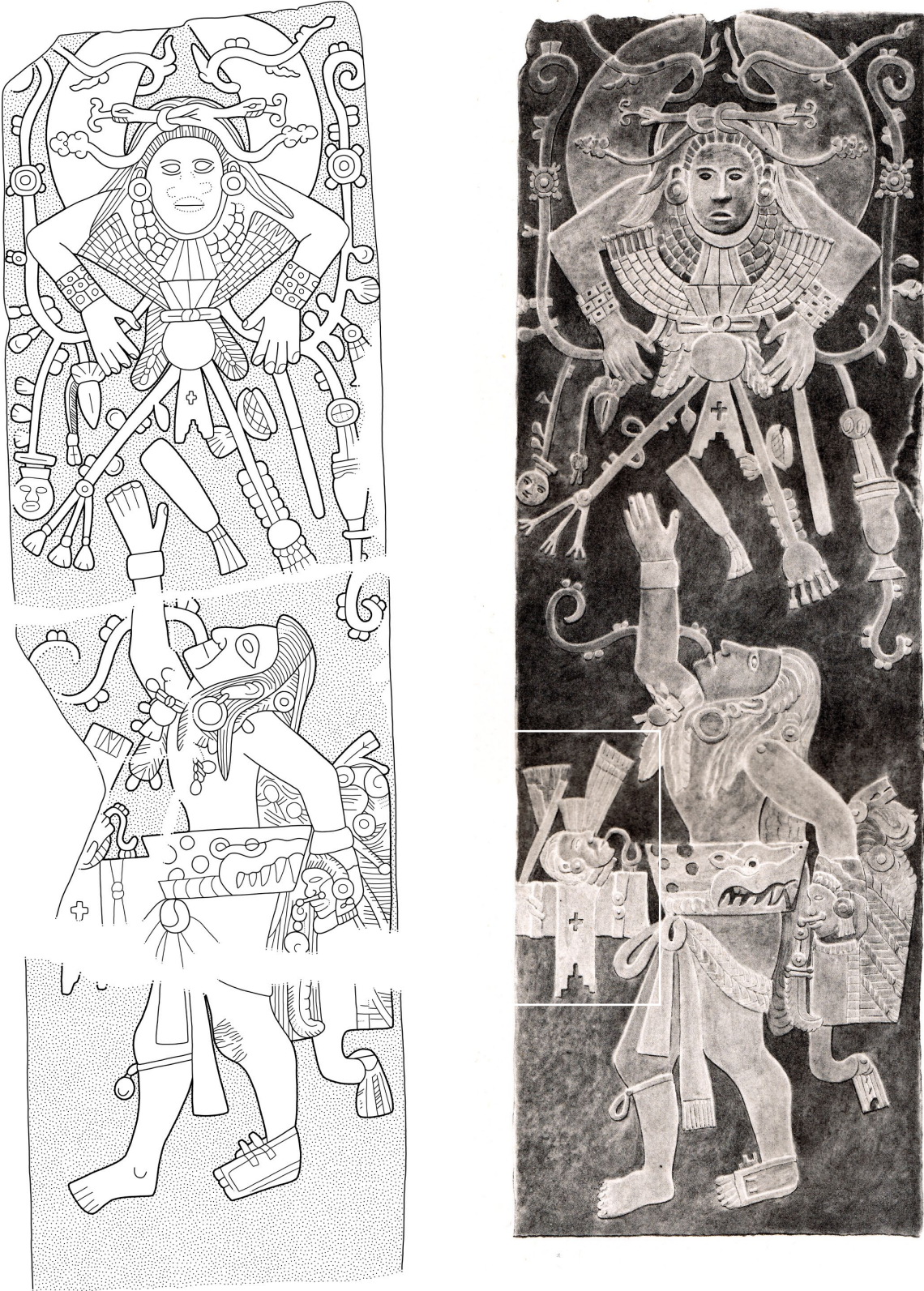


Figure 9. Bilbao Stela 6. The scene is largely similar to Stela 4. The highlighted area on Habel's 1963 drawing, at right, shows a singing severed head, which takes the place of a kettledrum on stepped tripod legs.

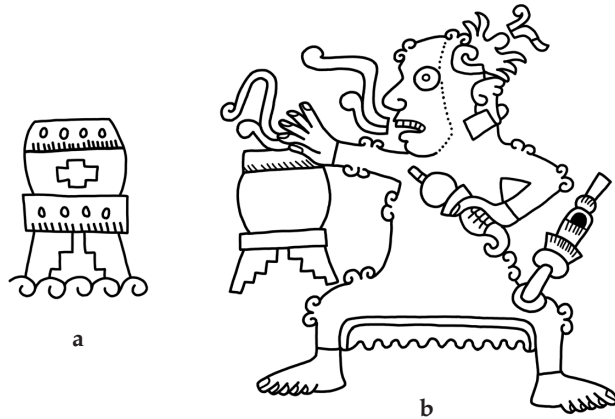


Figure 10. Small kettledrums on tripod supports with stepped legs, from Codex Zouche-Nuttall: (a) page 25, (b) page 73.

6 (Figure 9) there is a tripod of the same form in front of the officiant's belt. The instrument has been almost completely lost due to breakage of the monument, but it was still complete at the time of Simeon Habel's visit in 1863. In place of the drum, the tripod bears a severed human head that is singing, as indicated by the volute that emerges from its mouth. The substitution of the drum by a severed, singing human head recalls the singing skull from Santa Rita. The severed head takes the place of the musical instrument, and its song is akin to the sound of the drum. The small drums on the Bilbao stelae supplement other lines of evidence suggesting a strong association of human sacrifice with song and music, as part of the evocation of the ancestors in Flower World. The evocation of the ancestors is not explicit on Monument 21, but the prodigious vegetation is the same that grows around the characters on the Monument Plaza stelae. The severed heads on those stelae correspond to the human-faced fruits that sprout from the song of the central figure of Monument 21 and are harvested by him.

Jane Hill (1992) noted that song is the essential means for conjuring up Flower World images among the Uto-Aztecan peoples of the American Southwest. The evocation of the Flower World through songs has also been documented in various Mesoamerican regions. According to Alfredo López Austin (1994:72-73), sixteenth-century Mexica songs evoked Tamoanchan, a primordial place of abundance and beauty where grew a prodigious flowering tree. Dead kings transformed into colorful birds inhabited this paradisiacal place. Likewise, Sautron stressed the floral symbolism of the songs compiled in the *Romances de los señores de la Nueva España*, in which "floral species represent the melodious and eurhythmic sounds that issue from those instruments" (Sautron 2001:121, author's translation). John Bierhorst (1985, 2009) suggested that Mexica songs contained invocations of the spirits of the kings and

warriors of the past to whom they allude, metaphorically, as flowers and birds.

In her studies of the songs of the Tz'utujil of Santiago Atitlan, Linda O'Brien-Rothe has arrived at similar conclusions: "The idea is that the *b'ix* songs make real what is spoken, as in the song to San Martín, addressed to the lords of the clouds, believed to bring rain. The creative power of the *b'ix* is also seen in how the *b'ix* invoke the spirits of the dead and make them dance... The words 'come forth from the mouth' of the *ajb'ix* [man of songs], and they create the reality that they contain" (personal communication 2011, author's translation; cf. O'Brien, 1975:256). The concept of the Flower World is present in the traditional religion of Santiago Atitlan—a modern town that lies only 40 km from Cotzumalguapa as the crow flies. Robert S. Carlsen and Martin Prechtel (1991) have documented the belief in a mythological location known as *Kotz'eej Juyu Ruchulew*, "Flowering Mountain Earth." All manner of objects and living creatures, including human beings sprouted from the branches of a tree that once grew there. Unable to stand the weight, its branches finally broke, disseminating the fruits through the world. The stump is believed to remain to this day, and it is still worshipped. During Holy Week, this place of abundance is recreated on the main altar of the church, which is covered by a "monument" full of fruit (cf. Christenson 2001; Stanzione 2003). The vines heavy with fruits and objects of various classes in Cotzumalguapa art vividly recall the branches of the prodigious tree of Atiteco religion (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2013).

Bilbao Monument 21 is one of the most important works of Precolumbian art, and its analysis exceeds the scope of the present study, focused on the musical aspects. However, these aspects are essential for understanding the iconography of this and other sculptures at Cotzumalguapa, in which music, song, and dance are related to a complex of religious ideas focused on the evocation of Flower World and the gods and ancestors who reside in this transcendent place.

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