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The Memory of Stones: Ancient Maya *Spolia* in the Architecture of Early Colonial Yucatan

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The time of the Spanish conquest and the arrival of Christianity in southern Mesoamerica was one of the periods of history that most dramatically affected Maya culture, language, and life ways. Although the conquest of the Maya area was a highly variable process, from the Guatemalan highlands, to northern Yucatan, and finally to the pacification of the last, independent Maya strongholds of the central Peten in the late seventeenth century, this prolonged and violent episode of conquests, relocations, rebellions, and refuge was no doubt a time that must be characterized as a profound crisis. However, as shown by Inga Clendinnen (1987), Matthew Restall (1998), and others, some Maya also benefitted socially and economically from the dramatic changes, and it has become clear that the Maya were not merely passive victims, but also active participants, both in terms of opposing and assisting in the conquest itself (e.g., Jones 1989, 1998; Matthew and Oudijk 2007; Restall and Asselbergs 2007), as well as in the conversion process and in reinterpreting and appropriating new elements of Euro-Christian culture (e.g., Collins 1977; Miller and Farriss 1979; Bricker 1981; Farriss 1984:286-351; Nielsen and Reunert 2009, 2015; Knowlton and Vail 2010; Graham 2011; Christensen 2016). The purpose of the present article is to examine and cast further light on how the Colonial-period Maya coped with the past, with the memories and meanings still attributed to old religious sites and structures on the one hand, and the new imposed culture, religion, and world view

on the other. How did they manoeuvre in and survive what Nancy Farriss has described as a crisis in the “cosmic order” (Farriss 1984:286; see also Early 2006; Cecil and Pugh 2009). We can seek possible answers to such questions through a number of different kinds of data and sources, important among them are written documents like the Books of Chilam Balam as well as other types of records, such as land claims and testaments (Chuchiak 2001; Restall 1997; Knowlton 2010; Christensen 2016). Another set of data, which has generally received less attention, is Early Colonial Maya art and imagery, as found not only as illustrations in written documents, but also in the churches and monasteries across most of the Maya area, but in particular in the northern part of Yucatan. These paintings and sculptures are more often than not the product of local Maya artisans, and they offer us a unique insight into the process of crisis and resilience in terms of religious beliefs and practices. Constance Cortez has described colonial art as an example of a specific expression of a cultural discourse (Cortez 2002), and in the Colonial imagery we indeed see how the Maya strived to incorporate the old, sometimes very literally, within the new. This includes the practice of embedding fragments of Precolumbian sculpture into churches and monastery walls. Old and abandoned Maya temples and other structures provided easy access to finely cut stones to be reused in construction work, but I suggest that stones with iconographic motifs may at times have been embedded with a specific purpose,

and allowed for a certain degree of semantic continuity between the old and new religious structures.

In this preliminary survey of Precolumbian Maya iconography embedded in Christian architectural contexts, I hope to demonstrate the potential for further studies, and I have chosen to narrow my focus to northern Yucatan, well aware that additional and relevant examples may be found in Chiapas, Guatemala, and Belize (e.g., Perry 1994; Christenson 2001:49-51). As we shall see, the practice of embedding ancient reliefs and sculptures into churches and chapels continued even into the twentieth century.

Background and Previous Research

Recent research by John Chuchiak (e.g., 2001, 2009) and others has revealed how Maya religion continued to thrive in northern Yucatan in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including the continued production of codices, god effigies, and incense burners (see also Clendinnen 1987), that is, well after Landa's infamous *auto da fe* in Mani in 1562. These are strong indications of cultural continuity and of a dynamic colonial society, and are in stark contrast to George Kubler's somber remarks in his article on the colonial extinction of Precolumbian art, in which he compared the postconquest indigenous culture to a shipwreck and a corpse (Kubler 1961:15):

In the sixteenth century the rush to European conventions of representation and building, by colonists and Indians alike, precluded any real continuation of native traditions in art and architecture. In the seventeenth century, so much had been forgotten, and the extirpation of native observances by the religious authorities was so vigorous, that the last gasps of the bearers of Indian rituals and manners expired unheard.

The field of colonial art and architecture studies has always revolved around central Mexico, Oaxaca, and Michoacan, where churches, chapels, and monasteries displaying masterworks of Indio-Christian art dot the landscape. The seminal and massive works by Kubler on the sixteenth-century architecture of Mexico (1948) and by John McAndrew on the open-air churches (1965) laid the foundations for later studies of Indio-Christian art by Constantino Reyes-Valerio (e.g. 1978, 2000), Jeanette Peterson (1993) Christian Duverger (2003), Jaime Lara (2004, 2008), and Alessandra Russo (2014). However, all these important works largely ignored examples from the Maya region. Miguel Bretos's volume from 1992 on the churches from Yucatan (1992) along with that of Richard and Rosalind Perry (1988) are useful but far from complete guides to a selection of colonial churches and missions of Yucatan. Far better coverage is provided in the two volumes by Jürgen Putz and his co-authors in which numerous churches and their interiors are beautifully documented photographically (mainly façades and *retablos*), and which also include several examples

of embedded Maya stonework (Putz et al. 2009). The two volumes give next to nothing, however, in terms of analysing and interpreting the art and architecture. The book *Theaters of Conversion* by Samuel Edgerton (2001) includes a separate chapter on the open chapels of Yucatan, and along with Amara Solari's recent work on Izamal (Solari 2013) and Elizabeth Graham's comprehensive treatment of Maya Christians and churches in sixteenth-century Belize (Graham 2011), thus far provides the best discussions of the topic and contextualizes the role of the Maya in the construction and decoration of Christian architecture.

Another recent study, to which I will refer frequently, is by the late Eleanor Wake, entitled *Framing the Sacred: The Indian Churches of Early Colonial Mexico* (Wake 2010). Wake also centered her research on central Mexico (and Ixmiquilpan, Hidalgo in particular), but several of her ideas and suggestions can be applied to the situation in Yucatan. Most importantly, she provided a valuable overview of examples of Precolumbian iconographic elements embedded in the churches and monasteries of central Mexico (2010:139-169), and a detailed discussion of the repertoire of motifs, their location and positioning in the churches. Another important contribution is the late Andrea Stone's fascinating article on Colonial Maya cave art from northern Yucatan, in which she shows how European symbols like the double-headed Hapsburg eagle and personification heads were "likely assimilated into a colonial native iconography" (Stone 2009:117). According to Stone (2009:117), "it seems unlikely that the Maya would have deployed the image of the Hapsburg eagle to link themselves to the Spanish hierarchy," and she suggests that the bird may have been related to the winds or appropriated by the Maya elite as a symbol of power. Interestingly, the eagle is also found as graffiti on stucco walls in Precolumbian ruins at Hochob and Xkichmol (Prem 1997:109, 157, Figs. 36.10, 16.13), and it also featured prominently in colonial church decoration at Uayma and at the hermitage of Oxkutzkab (Perry and Perry 1988:124; Putz et al. 2009:1:165), just as it appears at the smaller churches at Tepaka, Popola, and Kanxoc (Putz et al. 2009:1:263, 2:52-53, 68-69). Considering the crucial role played by supernatural birds in Maya mythology, in the form of large birds descending from the sky in creation narratives as well as their function as messengers for the gods (e.g., Houston et al. 2006:227-251; Taube et al. 2010:29-57; Nielsen and Helmke 2015; Nielsen 2019), we can speculate that some of the same meanings may have been attributed to the newly arrived two-headed Euro-Christian avian.

Iconographic Syncretism: A Case from the Written Records

Before turning to some examples of Maya iconography embedded in Christian churches, I will briefly mention

what must be considered a classic example of a hybrid, Colonial image from northern Yucatan. This is the drawing that appears in one of the documents of the Xiu Family Papers (now in the Tozzer Library, Harvard University) dating to around 1560 (Morley 1934). Both text and image are the work of Gaspar Antonio Chi (c. 1532–1610), a Yukatek Maya of noble birth who

was educated by Franciscan missionaries (Karttunen 1994:84-114). Chi is well-known for his collaboration with Bishop Diego de Landa as interpreter and informant, but he also wrote a number of documents and reports for the Spanish secular authorities, one of which is accompanied by the drawing known as the Xiu Family Tree (Figure 1). In the words of Cortez, Chi

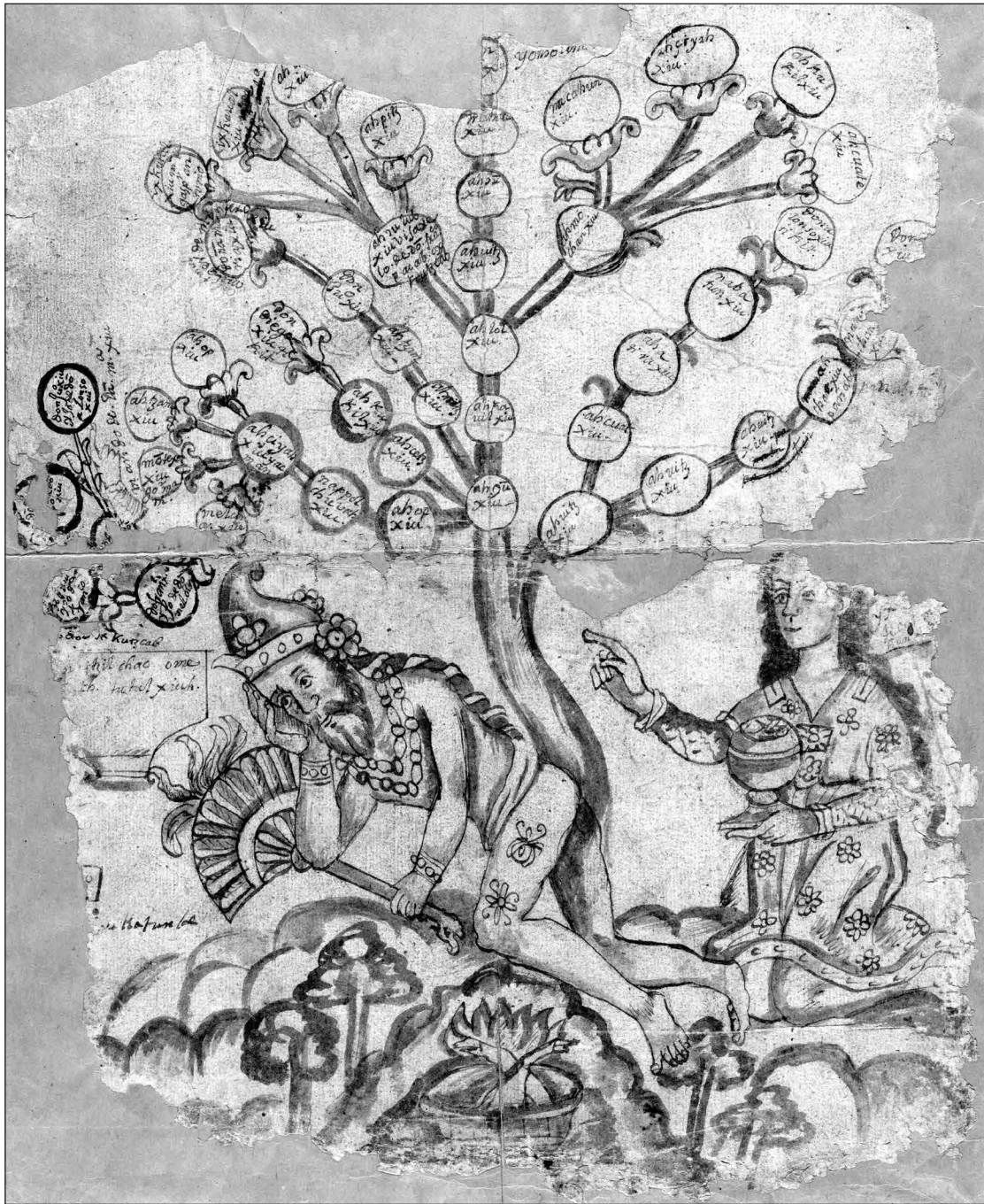


Figure 1. The so-called *Xiu Family Tree* by Gaspar Antonio Chi (c. 1560) showing an early Colonial Maya re-interpretation of the Christian image of the Tree of Jesse (photo courtesy of the Tozzer Library, Harvard University).

was indeed a person who could create a “document that could be visually and mentally accessed by both cultures” (Cortez 2002:200; see also Restall 1998:144-148). In the minds of some earlier Mayanists the tree and the person from which it grows, were seen as an image that represented an essentially Precolumbian Maya idea of the ruler being an embodiment of the world tree, supporting the heavens, in other words, the king as a living, human *axis mundi*. However, there is another important and much more likely template for Chi’s family tree. His rendering thus clearly represents an interpretation of the Tree of Jesse, a relatively common motif in Christian iconography from the twelfth century onwards (Watson 1934; Schiller 1966:26-33). Images like that of the Tree of Jesse were used by the friars in the religious instruction of the native elite, and were in some areas a key tool in the process of conversion and evangelization (Lara 2008:48-52; Wake 2010:77-80; see also Williams 2013). A well-educated *indio-ladino* with access to Christian books and imagery, Chi probably first saw an image of the Tree of Jesse, which later came to serve as the template for his illustration, at the Franciscan convent at Mani. As Peterson notes: “The mendicant orders borrowed the medieval motif of the Tree of Jesse to display and authenticate their own genealogy” (Peterson 1993:159). Saint Augustine is thus shown in church and monastery murals in central Mexico replacing Jesse, the founder of the house of David, as the reclining figure from whom the tree grows. In Chi’s version it is Tutul Xiu, the founder of the Xiu lineage, who replaces Jesse, the genealogical tree sprouting from his loins carrying the subsequent generations, their names inscribed in the flowers of the tree. A comparable image is found in the *Relación de Michoacan*, an extensively illustrated document (44 colored drawings by a local native artist or *carari*) that in all likelihood was authored by the Franciscan Jerónimo de Alcalá in the 1540s (Stone 2004; Alcalá 2010). The *Relación* describes the culture and history of the Tarascans (or P’urhépecha) and their empire, west of the central Mexican highlands and the Aztec Empire. Although the images generally only display limited European influence, Plate 27 shows Thicátame, the founder of the Uacúsecha dynasty of Patzcuaro, lying with a tree merging from his torso (Roskamp 2000a:253, 2000b:546-547). His descendants are shown seated in acorn cups, emphasizing their genealogical relation to the founder. While Chi was unquestionably copying a Christian image, in the process he also deliberately drew on Precolumbian traditions that associated trees with ancestors, rulers, and the center of the cosmos. As Cortez first pointed out, there are other elements connecting the imagery to Precolumbian Mesoamerican traditions, namely the offering of crossed, burning legs of a deer placed in the opening of a cave in the hilly landscape below Tutul Xiu (Cortez 2002). These are clearly not a part of the Christian repertoire of motifs, and show that Chi

was equally well versed in the iconographic tradition of pre-Conquest Maya culture. Caves are thus frequently associated with origin myths and seem to underscore the role of Tutul Xiu as a founding father figure. Other comparable examples can be found in the Books of Chilam Balam where European-derived cosmograms are integrated into religious narratives that are otherwise predominantly of Maya origin (e.g., Heninger 1977; Bricker and Miram 2002; Díaz Alvarez 2011). It is exactly this ingenious and meaningful blend of new and old visual forms and meaning we must expect to encounter, and it is important to continue familiarizing ourselves with the Euro-Christian visual heritage and its inclusion in the majority of Early Colonial pictorial sources (Díaz Alvarez 2015, 2020; Nielsen and Reunert 2009, 2015).

The Power of the Past: *Spolia* in New Spain

At the very end of the sixteenth century Franciscan friar Gerónimo de Mendieta wrote: “Who but the Indians have built so many churches and monasteries as the religious have in this New Spain, with their own hands and sweat, and with the same will and joy as they built houses for themselves and their children, and begging the friars to let them construct larger ones?” (Mendieta 1973:2:45). Clearly, the indigenous population was deeply involved in the construction of churches in New Spain, and in the decades from 1530 to 1590 hundreds of monasteries, churches, and smaller parish and *visita* churches were erected (Wake 2010:85-86; Roys 1952). In addition, the decorative programs, in sculpture and wall paintings, were predominantly carried out by native artists because, “New Spain saw no real intake of painters and sculptors from Europe until the last decades of the sixteenth century” (Wake 2010:171). As has been pointed out by several scholars, the choice of location for the new religious buildings was far from incidental. Churches were frequently placed nearby or directly upon temple platforms, or, as in the iconic case of Cholula in Puebla, on top of the ancient pyramid. McAndrew (1965:186) noted:

A convenient way of raising the church dominatingly above the level of the rest of the town, as royal building ordinances suggested, was to set it on an old platform, or a new platform made of the rubble of old wreckage. It may be that since the pyramid or platform was but a *base* and not, like the shrine on top, a religious *building*, the former could be appropriated for Christian religious use without impropriety, while the latter could not.

In a vein similar to that of Kubler, McAndrew also wrote concerning the decoration of churches: “one finds only a few small decorative items of Indian character, relegated to subordinate positions where they could awake no dangerous ideas in insecure converts” (McAndrew 1965:188). He went on to conclude that it

was surprising not *how much* but *how little* Indian motifs survived (McAndrew 1965:201). Such views have been challenged by Reyes-Valerio, Peterson, and Duverger, and more recently by Wake (2010). In her meticulous study of the religious art and architecture of sixteenth-century Indian central Mexico, Wake thus shows how the embellishment and location of the churches in many cases reflect a cultural environment where Euro-Christian ideas mingled with native perceptions. She notes that: “the art and architecture [...] expresses this interactive process [and] its reformulation in Indian hands fell under the cultural traditions and perspectives of the Indian world” (Wake 2010:7).¹

First of all, the construction of Christian buildings took place at locations that in Precolumbian times were related to and formed part of a sacred geography. Prime examples of such Christian appropriations of Precolumbian sacred sites are Chalma in Morelos, Cholula in Puebla, Chichicastenango and Santa Cruz Quiche in the highlands of Guatemala, and numerous sites in northern Yucatan as first discussed by Ralph Roys (1952). Such practice of appropriation had a long history in the spread of Christianity in the Old World, and is commonly referred to as *Interpretatio christiana*. Aiming at reformatting or reinterpreting previously pagan sacred sites and making them suitable for Christian worship this strategy was first sanctioned by Pope Gregory I in the sixth century (Eberlein 2000; Bayliss 2005; Hahn et al. 2008; see also Saradi-Mendelovici 1990). While this undoubtedly was intended to signal a Christian triumph over the pagan past and ease the conversion process, there is much to suggest that the indigenous populations may have perceived the situation differently, and in colonial towns like Izamal and Acanceh temple pyramids continued to tower over the surrounding colonial buildings, as they still do today. Thus, the insistence on re-using the former sacred site allowed for continuity in the beliefs or the *genius loci* associated with the site itself and its relationship with the surrounding landscape. Furthermore, excavations at the Spanish-Maya chapel at Tzama (near the Precolumbian site of Tancah) north of Tulum, revealed a foundation cache in front of the altar that “clearly suggests the survival of Pre-Conquest traditions in a Post-Conquest context” (Miller and Farriss 1979:235). A similar dedicatory practice is known from the first church, dating to the 1540s, constructed at Lamanai where Maya workmen deposited a Maya effigy figurine (Pendergast 1993:120-124; Edgerton 2001:84, 309; see also Graham 2011:211-224), just as traditional Maya dedicatory offerings have been found in the foundation of the church in Santiago

Atitlan in highland Guatemala (Christenson 2001:49-50). These observations indicate that we should not dismiss the possibility that embedded Maya iconography could have continued to have a particular significance to the local Maya who erected and used the buildings.

A crucial art historical concept relevant to this discussion is that of *spolia* (e.g., Kinney 2006; Brilliant and Kinney 2011). The examples from Yucatan that I will present can all be categorized as *spolia*, although the term is rarely used in the literature on Colonial Mesoamerican architecture (e.g., Edgerton 2001:47). A Latin word meaning “spoils” or anything “stripped” from someone or something, the term was first used to refer to re-used pieces of ancient Roman monuments and buildings, such as the second-century imperial reliefs on the fourth-century Arch of Constantine. The first volume on the subject, *Delle cose gentilesche e profane trasportate ad uso ed adornamento delle chiese*, by the Italian priest Giovanni Marangoni is from 1744, and according to Kinney the priest sought “to demystify the presence of pagan and profane objects in Christian sacred spaces” (Kinney 2006:239). Today, art historians “use the word *spolia* more loosely, to refer to any artifact incorporated into a setting culturally or chronologically different from that of its creation” (Kinney 2006:233). Interpretations of *spolia* generally alternate between the *pragmatic/practical* and the *non-pragmatic/meaningful* or *ideological*. Pragmatic interpretations emphasize the immediate utility of materials for re-use: If there is a ready supply of old marble columns available, for example, there is no need to produce new ones. Non-pragmatic interpretations, on the other hand, tend to emphasize that the re-use of art and architectural elements from former cultures or powerful empires and dynasties served to signal either a triumphant conquest or a proud revival. However, such re-use may seem harder to explain when “the re-used objects seem to contradict the message or purpose of the new setting” (Kinney 2006:234), such as pagan imagery re-used in Christian contexts (see discussion in Saradi-Mendelovici 1990:50-56). Examples of exactly this kind of *spolia* as a cultural practice are encountered in Denmark and southern Sweden, where runic inscriptions and pre-Christian sculptures are frequently found inserted into the foundations or walls of church buildings or kept nearby (e.g., Øeby Nielsen 2004). Furthermore, early churches were in many cases placed on top of or between ancient burial mounds or other sacred locations, in essence a kind of spatial, topographic *spolia* in itself. As Günter Bandmann suggested, *spolia* could also serve to empower a new building “by transferring to it pieces of a holy site that had existed elsewhere” (Kinney 2006:241; see also Bandmann 1951). The question now arises whether the colonial Maya were re-using ancient sculpture fragments predominantly in a pragmatic or in a non-pragmatic manner. Surely, some building materials were re-used pragmatically, but

¹ See also the article by Verónica Hernández Díaz on Tarascan stone carvings, known as *janamus*, with iconographic motifs incorporated in Early Colonial Christian architecture at Tzintzuntzan in Michoacan (Hernández Díaz 2006).

the examples I will be focusing on show iconographic elements placed both visibly and prominently, and thus seem to suggest a potential non-pragmatic or ideological re-use. But were they integrated in church architecture in order to signal the victory of Christianity, the Precolumbian past literally blown to pieces, stripped from their context and merely left as vague visual referents to the pagan past? Were they, as Kubler suggested, embedded only as “skeletal” fragments of no inherent meaning? Or, should they rather be seen as Maya artisans’ ingenious incorporation of old sacred stones in a new setting, that not only empowered the new Christian structure, but also allowed for a continuity in beliefs? Here it is worth emphasizing the Precolumbian practice of embedding earlier structures within later architectural complexes, just as we have numerous examples of monuments that were carefully buried within structures at Classic-period Maya sites such as Tikal and Copan, partly to bury them in an appropriate manner, but probably also to empower and dedicate the new construction built on top. Although I cannot offer a conclusive answer to these questions, and while the Maya undoubtedly perceived these embedded stones in a variety of ways, it bears keeping in mind the religious power that is still attributed to features of the sacred landscape (such as caves, cenotes, and mountains), ancient archaeological sites (such as Uxatlan and Iximche) and to archaeological artefacts encountered during work in the field and incorporated into household shrines and altars (Allen Christenson, personal communication 2013; Brown 2000, 2004; Pieper 2002:64-65, 124-125). With these general considerations on *spolia* along with the historical context of the Early Colonial period in northern Yucatan in mind, we can proceed to examine some examples in more detail. I begin at one of the most well-known Franciscan monasteries in Mexico, Diego de Landa’s spiritual fortress at Izamal.

The monastery and church at Izamal is built among the impressive ruins of the Precolumbian city and pilgrimage center of Izamal, and came to function as Bishop Landa’s “headquarters” and the center for much of the missionizing efforts in northern Yucatan. As Solari notes, Landa recognized the site’s “potential for religious redirection” (Solari 2013:131), and according to the friar himself it was the Maya who requested the monastery to be built at the site of the former temple pyramid of Ppap Hol Chac:

The Indians obliged us with importunity to establish in the year 1549 a house in one of these edifices, which we call St. Antonio, which has been of great assistance in bringing them to Christianity. (Tozzer 1941:173)

The murals of the passageway or *porteria* from the church to the cloister show three faded and partly eroded polychrome murals (c. 1560–1580) including a “procession of friars holding books and crosses accompanied by two converted Maya [that] advance toward an image of the



Figure 2. Carved stone with the Maya logogram for “fire” embedded on the central axis in front of the final step before entering the great atrium of the church and Franciscan monastery at Izamal (Yucatan) (photos: Emily Burns).

Virgin Mary” (Williams 2013:98; see also Solari 2013:135-138). On the south wall, red, devilish creatures attack peaceful individuals clad in blue. Thus, the murals set the scene for the missionizing program against the dreaded pagan demons, a battle led by Landa, and guarded and overseen by the Virgin. However, in contrast to central Mexico, nowhere do we detect a Maya artistic influence (stylistically or in terms of subject matter) in the murals; a pattern common throughout the Yucatan peninsula.

Izamal is rightly famous for its enormous walled atrium and the open chapel designed to preach to large numbers of natives; what Lara called “architecture of conversion” (2004:17). Of special interest here, however, are the examples of carved stones embedded at various locations of the monastery. In at least two cases they represent the Maya logogram for “fire,” *k’ahk’*.² One is placed prominently on the central axis of the complex, at the western entrance to the atrium, to be seen by all who enter (Figure 2), whereas the other is embedded in the floor of the colonnaded arcade, closer to the church. Two other embedded elements are more difficult to identify, but one may represent shell-like elements, the other possibly a head in profile. We lack documentation as to why the stones were placed exactly here, and while the friars may not have attributed any deeper significance to them, completely out of their original contexts as they were, Edgerton interpreted the placement of the

ancient stones as symbols of “the old religion having been vanquished by the new” (Edgerton 2001:47). Other readings are possible, however, and I would argue along the same line as Solari. As she points out, once inside the atrium, the visitors would commence a ceremonial route that would take them to the four *posas* at the corners of the walled patio, and as she remarks, “by utilizing this ceremonial route, pilgrims accessed a series of carved Precolumbian stones, embedded into the matrix of the Itzmal [sic] monastery during its construction so as to be visible upon completion” (Solari 2013:149). While it is difficult to ascertain whether the fragmented motifs carried any specific semantic content, their mere presence almost certainly did mean *something* to the Maya. It is also impossible to ignore the fact that the *k’ahk’* element formed part of the name of K’inich K’ahk’ Mo’, the most important deity and founder of ancient Izamal (Tozzer 1941:19, 144, 173), and also the name given to the large pyramid still standing in Izamal. Passing and seeing the carved stones allowed for a continuity in the Maya perception of the sacred site and for constructing a meaningful connection and overlap between the Maya and Christian ritual activities that unfolded at the old temple platform. As Solari aptly expresses it, “The clean fissure from ancient memories the Franciscans hoped to achieve was impossible” (Solari 2013:143).

At one of the other major Precolumbian Maya cities of northern Yucatan, Dzibilchaltun (Folan 1970), we encounter another excellent example of how the Franciscans appropriated a former sacred site and how ancient elite artwork was embedded into the new

² Edgerton (2001:47) and Solari (2013:149) erroneously identified the flames as the fangs of the Maya rain god Chaahk or the glyphic sign **AKB’AL** (“darkness/night”).



Figure 3. Dzibilchaltun’s *visita* chapel was built in the middle of the large ceremonial plaza of the Precolumbian site, using cut stone from the surrounding structures (photo: Jesper Nielsen).



Figure 4. The ruin of the open *visita* chapel in the ceremonial plaza at Dzibilchaltun (Yucatan). One of the stone blocks in the lower right corner is a Classic period stela fragment (photo: Jesper Nielsen).

religious structure erected at the site. Thus, an open *visita* chapel was constructed at the center of the old ceremonial plaza, and is thus literally surrounded by a mass of standing Precolumbian architecture. Dzibilchaltun is one of the sites where it is most difficult not to imagine that some degree of continuity in terms of non-Christian beliefs and notions of the sacred landscape did not occur (Figure 3). As noted by Edgerton, the chapel is situated on the same axis and is oriented towards the sacred cenote (Edgerton 2001:85).³ William

³ Wake discusses the alignments and placement of churches in central Mexico and notes that some seem to divert from the expected pattern according to European traditions, which may suggest a native orientation (Wake 2010:130-137). This is also the case with the open chapel at Calkini (Yucatan) which faces south towards the Precolumbian settlement's former ceremonial plaza (Perry and Perry 1988:80).

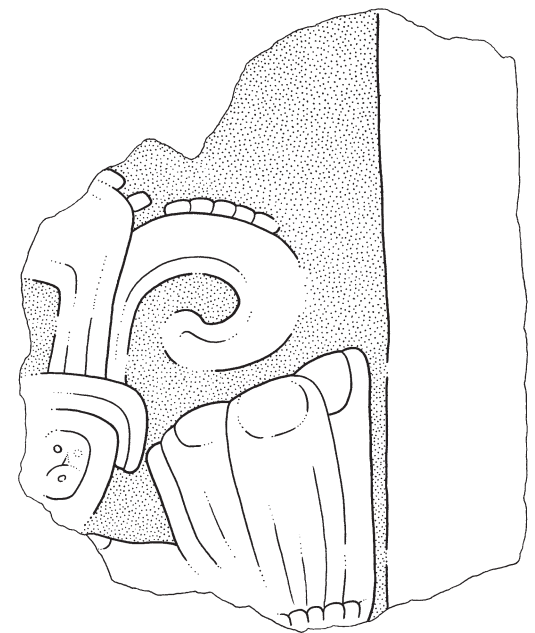


Figure 5. Photograph and drawing of the stela fragment re-used in the construction of Dzibilchaltun's *visita* chapel showing a "flaming ajaw" and a spray of feathers, possibly originally part of a headdress (photo: Jesper Nielsen; drawing: Christophe Helmke).

Folan remarked that a "few stela fragments were re-used" (1970:187) in the construction of the chapel, but he did not illustrate or discuss them further. One of these pieces is embedded in the row of stones that mark the unwallled nave of the chapel (Figure 4) and is a beautiful fragment of what appears to be a Late Classic stela showing a so-called "flaming ajaw" and a row of feathers (Figure 5). The fact that the fragment is not from the final phases of occupation at Dzibilchaltun raises the interesting possibility that it was already in a fragmented state at the point when it was incorporated into the chapel



Figure 6. Spolia embedded in the floor of the now ruined church in Pixila (Yucatan) (photo: Jesper Nielsen).



Figure 7. Detail of the façade of the church in Telchaquillo (Yucatan) showing various fragments of Puuc-style mosaic masks (photo: Karl Herbert Mayer).

floor. Perhaps it was discovered in the process of dismantling one of the nearby structures for materials to build the chapel. Still, it is quite possible that the Maya workmen made a deliberate choice when they placed the carving so to be easily visible. It may well have been perceived as a special stone due to its elegant carving, and hence received special attention and put in its prominent position. As such, this could be an early example of the practice of the use of ancient heirlooms, Precolumbian artefacts found in the field to be incorporated into new sacred contexts, such as household altars.

In the small church in Pixila (near Izamal) elements of what could be part of a shield with darts or a feathered rim and possibly the tail part of a *xiwkoootl* or “fire-serpent” is embedded in the floor near the apsis (Bretos 1992:13; Edgerton 2001:100) (Figure 6). Other great examples are from the sixteenth-century Santa Inés church in the village of Akil (Putz et al. 2009:1:166; Heck 2012), and

Telchaquillo (Edgerton 2001:82-83, Fig. 3.6; Putz et al. 2009:1:90), where some of the *spolia* can readily be identified as fragments of Puuc-style mosaic masks (Figure 7). What is worth emphasizing is the placement of the fragments: They are not hidden away, but deliberately displayed on the façade of the church—to be seen by all who come to attend the services and rituals taking place here. At Piste, just outside Chichen Itza, several sculpture and relief fragments adorn the small chapel (Perry and Perry 1988:188; see also Putz et al. 2009:60), including sculptured human and serpent heads, what seem to be striding human figures, as well as other motifs (Figure 8). In spite of being situated so close to the famous ruins of Chichen Itza, these fragments are not very well known, and from the perspective of Maya scholars, *spolia* may in fact constitute a somewhat neglected source of new data. Additional examples of *spolia* are known from Merida



Figure 8. The small chapel in Piste (Yucatan) has a large number of sculptures and reliefs from nearby Chichen Itza embedded in its exterior walls and façade. Several can be seen on the corner here (photo: Christian Heck).

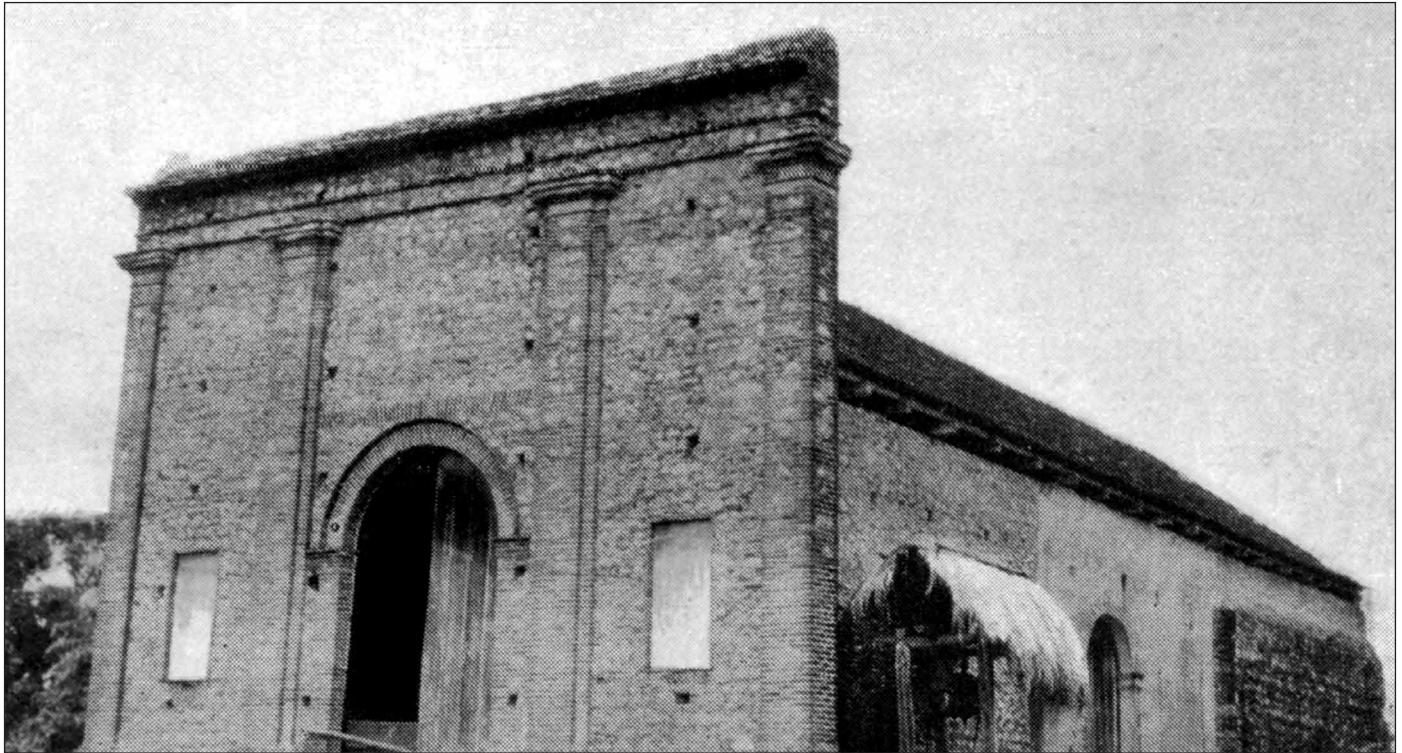


Figure 9. Frans Blom's photograph of the Santo Domingo church in Palenque in 1922. Reliefs from the Temple of the Cross had been placed in the wall on either side of the entrance to the church (after Blom 1923:186).

(Putz et al. 2009:1:38), Muna (Putz et al. 2009:1:132-133), the church façades at Ticum (Mayer 1995:70-72, Pls. 246-247), Oxkutzkab (Prem 1997:208-209, Figs. 3.3-3.8), Tixcuytun (Putz et al. 2009:84), Chablekal (Putz et al. 2009:141), Uayma (Perry and Perry 1988:186-187), and several other sites.

***Spolia* and Secular Buildings: Pragmatic and Meaningful**

The practice of embedding remnants of ancient architecture and carved stones into new structures was not limited to the Colonial period. It continued into the nineteenth and twentieth century, although we now find fewer examples of *spolia* in church construction work and more frequently in secular contexts. At the hacienda of Paraíso in Yucatan, for example, carved columns, hieroglyphic capitals, and iconographic elements from the nearby archaeological site of Santa Bárbara were cemented into the local chapel (Stanton 2002:3; see also Breton 1992:153-156; Putz et al. 2009:1:247-250). Their relocation is said to have occurred in 1893 and around 1920. A comparable situation was previously found in Palenque in Chiapas where two reliefs from the Temple of the Cross had been placed in the wall on either side of the entrance to the village church of Santo Domingo, presumably sometime between the mid-nineteenth century and the early twentieth century

(Blom 1923:185-186, [1923]1982:74-75; Stuart and Stuart 2008:90-91) (Figure 9). As with the case of Paraíso it is unclear what motives lay behind the practice and how the reliefs were perceived by the local church as well as secular authorities and churchgoers.

The re-use of ancient Maya stonework in secular contexts, such as ordinary houses, can be found not only in Mexico but also in Guatemala and Honduras. Sculpture fragments occur in the walls and floors of haciendas, schools, or, in rare cases, as prominent sculptures in public spaces (Mayer 1984:48, 198, Pls. 73, 198, 1987:Pls. 45-47, 1989:46, Pl. 191, 1991:36-38, Pls. 168-170; Heck 2012:26). In 1925 Frans Blom and Oliver La Farge were literally on a hunt for monuments reused in houses in Ocosingo, and they were able to track down several monuments from nearby Tonina and other sites in the valley (Blom and La Farge 1926-1927:2:249-251). As Blom remarked:

During the evening we talked with many of the inhabitants, and were told of several more carved stones to be found in other parts of town. Previous Municipal Presidents had paved the streets with cut stones from the Toniná ruins. As a matter of fact, it appears, that from the very founding of the Spanish town of Ocosingo, the inhabitants have occupied themselves mainly with hauling rocks from the ruins to the village. Our search for carved monuments led us into strange places, and amusing situations. In the corner of a house belonging to the German, Dr. Schilling, was a stone with rows of hieroglyphs... (Blom and La Farge 1926-1927:2:249-250)

In one case three large “stone figures, two of them with inscriptions” were even found in a pigsty behind the church (Blom and La Farge 1926-1927:2:250). In Mani, Puuc-style fragments have been built into a house wall opposite the convent (see Prem 1997:207-208, Fig. 3.1) and in Akil carved stones were included in a marketplace wall. Such examples may suggest either a pragmatic reuse, or a fascination with the curious, perhaps coupled with a more conscious historically oriented reuse, but nevertheless still fundamentally different from the ideological reuse in churches in the early decades of the Colonial period. When Precolumbian sculptures, stelae, or the like are put on display as centerpieces in town or village plazas across Mesoamerica today, a different social attitude towards the ancient remains seems to be at play, probably reflecting a growing concern for cultural heritage issues coupled with an interest in and awareness of the economic potential of the past in relation to tourism.

A final example of *spolia*, in a non-pragmatic but somewhat idiosyncratic reuse, is from Dzilam Gonzalez (Silan) in northern Yucatan. The site’s enormous temple structures were long used as quarries, and fragments of two Classic-period stelae with hieroglyphic inscriptions were also reused, one in the north wall of the church patio, the other in the Casa de la Municipalidad or *cabildo* building (Figure 10). As for the latter, Sylvanus Morley once noted: “the fragment is built into a back wall of the cabildo, on the southern side of the plaza, and some local artist has modelled in stucco the missing parts of the legs, torso, head, and arms, reconstructing the figure as that of a Mexican or German (?) soldier, helmet on head, and gun, with fixed bayonet in hand” (Morley 1920:577; see also Gann 1924:166-167; Thompson et al. 1932:181; Roys 1952:175-176). In this way, the feet of a Classic Maya king trampling his defeated captives ended up serving as the lower part of a nineteenth-century military person standing on his enemies. Although the reuse of the stela fragment could be said to signal the same fundamental message of military power and superiority, it is still quite obvious that the motivation behind and the perception of *spolia* had changed considerably since the Colonial period.

Concluding Remarks

Perhaps the most characteristic cultural survival strategy of the Maya was through the means of mediation, hybridization, and by reconciling the old with the new (Farriss 1984). *Spolia* in the context of religious structures can be seen as part of this process of resilience and reconciliation. As Wake put it, “We are perhaps talking about a gradual



Figure 10. The lower part of a Classic-period stela from Dzilam Gonzalez innovatively reused in the town’s *cabildo* building (postcard from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, unknown photographer).

resemanticization of the iconography of both cultures that reflects native attempts to reinterpret their world within Euro-Christian dimensions” (Wake 2010:155); or as Stone formulated it in her study of colonial Maya cave art, the artistic expressions reflect a “process of acculturation” (Stone 2009:130). Thus we encounter Mesoamerican motifs in the churches and Euro-Christian motifs in the caves. Solari suggests that in the case of Izamal the embedded carved stones “functioned as an embedded text that forever spoke to those who were culturally literate” (2013:150). Culturally literate, perhaps yes, but not necessarily literate in Maya glyphic writing or Precolumbian iconography. The fragments, often carrying only parts or elements of writing and imagery

must, even to the Maya, have been difficult to decipher and thus grasp their original content and message, but therein lay not their most important role. They were recognized as the work of their ancestors and provided a link to the past regardless of their specific content. What can be noted is that the carvings usually take prominent positions, and when appearing on church façades they occupy a similar prominent place oriented towards the public gathered in the atrium or plaza in front—as did much of ancient Maya art and sculpture. Finally, one may wonder why the corpus of *spolia* from the Maya area is so relatively small when compared to that of central Mexico. Possible answers may be that the Maya region was a distant and much poorer region of colonial New Spain, with fewer resources spent on decorating churches in general; or perhaps the friars chose to employ different strategies with regards to the embellishment of the churches and the role of the local Maya artisans. Surely more research needs to be done on the topic, and more examples of *spolia* in the Maya area undoubtedly await discovery, not least because so many churches and chapels were partly destroyed during the Caste War and since abandoned and left today in a state of ruin, often covered by vegetation. What is clear, however, is that the use of *spolia* can be regarded as a meaningful practice in a situation of crisis, as a means of reconciling the old with the new. Incorporating indigenous motifs into church art is still ongoing, as discussed in detail by Allen Christenson in his study of the altarpiece of Santiago Atitlan (Christenson 2001). Alongside figures and images of saints, angels, the Virgin Mary, and Christ, these fragments of the past continue to form a whole and to give meaning to the modern Maya.

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