



The PARI Journal

A quarterly publication of the Ancient Cultures Institute
Volume XVI, No.3, Winter 2016

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Marc Zender
Editor
marc@ancientcultures.org

Joel Skidmore
Associate Editor
joel@ancientcultures.org

The PARI Journal
202 Edgewood Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94117
415-664-8889
journal@ancientcultures.org

Electronic version
available at:
www.precolumbia.org/
pari/journal/1603

ISSN 1531-5398

Death Gods in Cotzumalguapa Sculpture¹

OSWALDO CHINCHILLA MAZARIEGOS

Yale University

GILBERTO CRUZ GÁMEZ

Universidad del Valle de Guatemala

Eric Thompson (1948:19) was correct in observing an “excessive preoccupation” with death in the art of Cotzumalguapa. Skeletal beings and death gods outnumber all other figures portrayed in the corpus of over 200 sculptures known from the city and its region. The number constantly increases, and several examples of great interest have turned up in recent years. In this article, we describe four sculptures found in the last decade that have enriched the repertory of mortuary depictions known from Cotzumalguapa. At the same time, we present an iconographic review of these and other representations in an

effort to explain the symbolism of death and of death deities in Cotzumalguapa.

El Baúl Monument 76

Monument 76 (Figure 1) was found during agricultural work in 2008, about 400 meters to the east of the acropolis of El Baúl (Figure 2). The exact location is unknown, but a verbal report obtained in

¹ This is an expanded version of a paper presented in the XVII Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala (Chinchilla and Cruz Gámez 2014).



Figure 1. El Baúl Monument 76. Museo de El Baúl, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa. Photo: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

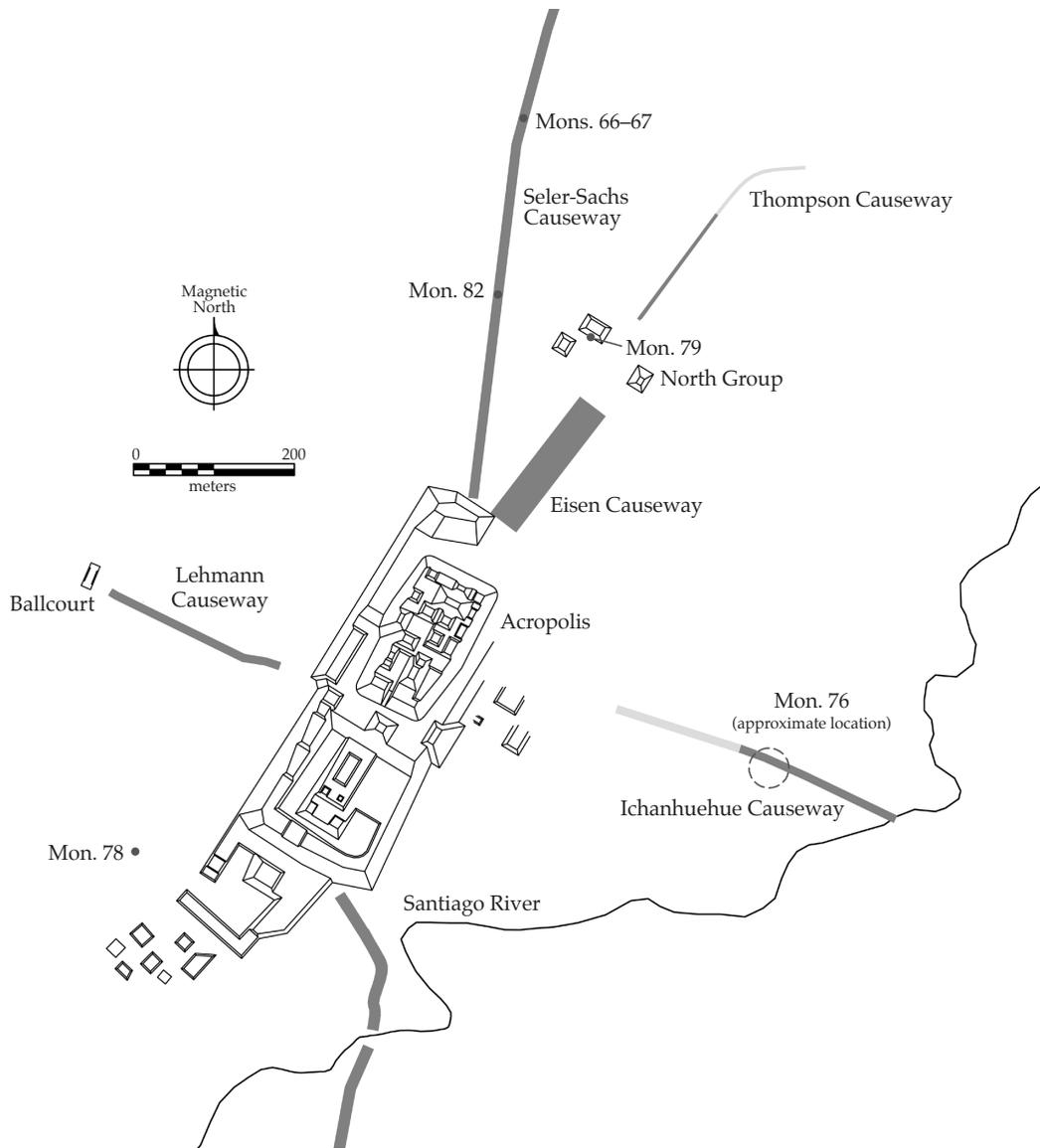


Figure 2. Map of El Baúl, Cotzumalguapa, showing the provenance of the recently found sculptures, Monuments 76, 78, 79, and 82. Drawing: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

January, 2009, provided an approximate indication of the sculpture's provenance.² Monument 76 is a fragment of a sculpture that by comparison with others of its type must have been rectangular. The monument measures 1.40 m by 0.96 m by 0.37 m in thickness. The surface has been well smoothed, but the relief is minimal and barely perceptible without raking light. It was carved with lightly incised lines forming the face of the Death God, viewed frontally. In spite of the breakage, the monument

² The report came from Edwin Orlando Galindo. Over the years, Mr. Galindo has demonstrated a sense of responsibility and interest in the recovery of archaeological remains in El Baúl. In our experience, his report provides a trustworthy indication about the original location of the monument.

is well preserved except for an area around the mouth. The skeletal face is topped by abundant hair, and the tongue hangs out between the clenched teeth. Pointed projections on both sides of the head are described herein as "horns," with the proviso that their nature is uncertain. In three-dimensional representations, their form is polyhedral rather than conical. The sculpted figure wears a necklace tied in front with a bow or sash, and earflares defined by undulating lines that appear to be made of a fluffy or spongy material, uncommon in depictions of the Death God. The god wears a banded collar with a small frontal knot.

Monument 76 was likely part of the paved surface of the Ichanhuehue Causeway, discovered by reconnaissance with ground penetrating radar in 2011 (Chinchilla

Mazariegos 2012a) (Figure 2). In previous work, four similar sculptures depicting the Death God were reported, all of which were part of the pavements of various causeways (La Gloria Mons. 1 and 2, El Baúl Mon. 67, and El Castillo Mon. 67). The find spot of Monument 76 is located at or near the Ichanhuehue Causeway, leaving little doubt about this association. In previous work, Chinchilla Mazariegos et al. (2008) concluded that these carvings were set horizontally as part of the pavement of the causeways.

El Baúl Monument 78

Monument 78 (Figures 3 and 4) was found on March 24, 2011, during paving work on Third Street in Santa Lucia Cotzumalguapa, in the Colonia Maya neighborhood that encompasses a large section of the site of El Baúl. Municipal workers found the monument while trenching to lay a pipe for rainwater runoff. It was found at the intersection of Third Street and Fourth Avenue, near the Colonia Maya school. Oriented north-south, it was approximately five meters from the southeast corner of Structure 35, a long platform that closes the south side of the Second Precinct of El Baúl. Various sculptures had been found previously in this complex, including El Baúl Monuments 56, 58, and 71. The monument was removed from its original location before its context and associations could be fully documented, but it was possible to establish its provenance with certainty. Regrettably, it suffered damage, particularly to its lower part, when the municipal workers removed it in order to continue their trenching. It was moved to the facilities of the Museo de El Baúl on March 25, 2011, with the collaboration of personnel and equipment from Pantaleón



Figure 3. El Baúl Monument 78 near its original location in the Colonia Maya, El Baúl, Cotzumalguapa. Photo: Gilberto Cruz Gámez.

S.A, and with the consent of the Comité Comunitario de Desarrollo (COCODE) of Colonia Maya.

Monument 78 consists of an irregularly shaped stone measuring 0.88 m in height, 2.32 m in width, and 1.40 m in thickness. It displays the full body of a human skeleton carved in deep relief. Dominating the composition is a massive ribcage carved in the most prominent part of the rock, with the sternum aligned along an edge. The extremities are disproportionately short. The right arm is extended while the left is flexed and appears to be resting on the chest. The legs are spread with the knees bent. The bones of the extremities have narrow grooves marking the medular cavity, with rounded condyles. The hands and feet have skin, a characteristic that



Figure 4. El Baúl Monument 78. Museo de El Baúl, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa. Photo: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

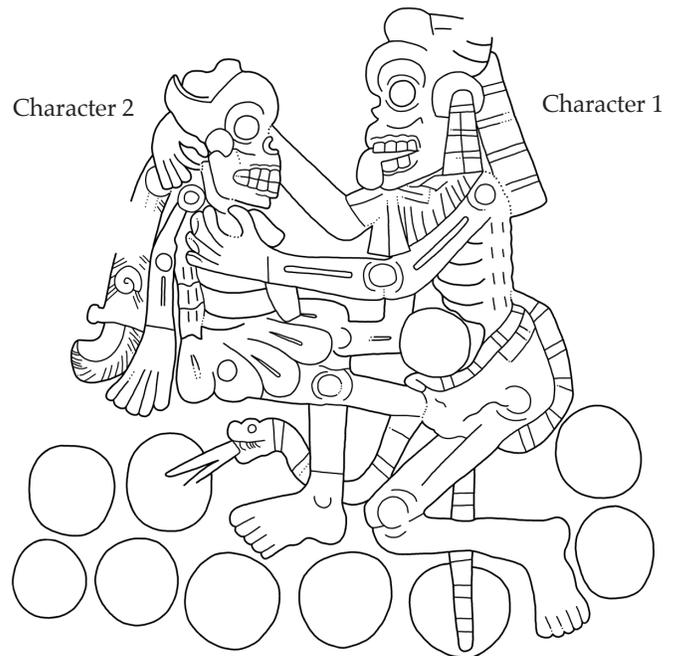


Figure 5. El Baúl monument 79. Museo de El Baúl, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa. Photo and drawing: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

skeletal depictions at Cotzumalguapa share with other artistic traditions of Mesoamerica. The skull is carved in profile on a facet of the rock, turned to the right and upwards. The abdominal area has three lobes hanging down that probably represent the intestines or viscera. The combination gives the impression of movement, and the skeleton seems to be dancing. Given its horizontal position, however, it may represent the remains of a human body thrown on the ground in disorder.

El Baúl Monument 79

Monument 79 (Figure 5) was found on December 17, 2012, during agricultural ploughing. Mr. Edwin Orlando Galindo was present and noticed the carving when a tractor operator was about to remove the stone. As in the case of Monument 78, the archaeological context was not documented in detail, but it was possible to note the monument's point of origin before it was moved to the El Baúl Museum. Monument 79 was located in the North Group of El Baúl, approximately 300 meters north of the Acropolis. The group is formed by three structures arranged around a small plaza linked with the Acropolis by the Eisen Causeway. The Thompson causeway extends north of the group, leading to the former location of Thompson's Bridge (which

fell down in 2010) (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011a, 2012a). Monument 79 was discovered on the southern facade of the structure that closes the north side of the complex. According to Mr. Galindo's report, it was upright when found, and it is probable that it had been associated with masonry architectural elements; scattered stones in the area were probably part of a building facade or plaza pavement.

Monument 79 is oval in shape, measuring 1.50 m in height, 1.10 m in width, and 0.66 m in thickness. The relief carving is shallow and of poor quality, but the iconography is quite interesting. It shows two skeletal figures face to face, in profile. For purposes of this description, we will call them Character 1 and Character 2 (from the observer's right to left respectively).

Character 1 shows the attributes of the Death God, including the protruding tongue and two "horns" on the headdress. The skeletal figure wears earflares and a necklace knotted in front. By comparison with other examples, the serpent between the legs can be identified as a sort of belt or loincloth. The abdominal cavity is indicated by means of a circle, an attribute that reappears in other representations of the Death God. Character 1 holds the smaller Character 2 with both arms. Their legs are entwined, and the arms of Character 2 hang loosely. Like the skeleton of Monument 78, there are three lobes in

the abdominal area, probably denoting viscera.

Character 2 seems to have a rudimentary “horn” but also wears an ornament that hangs to its waist, formed by a ribbon or long tail adorned with beads and shells, bordered with hairy edges arranged diagonally. Near the end is a tubular bead that ties it and separates the tip, which has only one hairy side and is slightly turned back. Many characters wear this ornament in the sculptures of Cotzumalguapa, hanging from the shoulder or rolled up. Examples include Bilbao Monuments 1, 3–6, and 8; El Baúl Monuments 18, 27, and 30; Palo Verde Monuments 1 and 3; and Linda Vista Monument 1. Death gods wear it on El Baúl Monument 18 and La Vista Monument 3.

The lower part of Monument 79 is occupied by a series of nine circles—one of several ways to express units in the Cotzumalguapa numbering system (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011b). There are seven units aligned beneath the skeletal bodies, with two more next to the feet of Character 1. Taken together, they may represent the number nine, although they may also be separate numbers, each associated with one of the figures—the number two would be associated with Character 1 and the number seven with Character 2. In that case, the skeletal figures would function as full-figure, animated glyphs, a format that is well documented at Cotzumalguapa (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011b). If this interpretation is correct, the monument could be understood as an inscription containing the calendric notations “7 Death” and “2 Death.”

El Baúl Monument 82

This finely preserved carving was found during excavations conducted by Gilberto Cruz Gámez and Oswaldo Chinchilla in March, 2015, on the Seler-Sachs causeway, 260 meters north of the El Baúl acropolis. The excavation (operation EB12) was prompted by the discovery of Monument 81, a large, oval-shaped rock that depicts a mythical animal combining feline and reptilian features (Cruz 2015). Monument 82 (Figure 6) was turned upside down, next to Monument 81, and it may have been intentionally overturned in antiquity. Like Monument 76, it shows a frontal portrait of the Death God with all his characteristic attributes—skeletal visage, a diadem with crossed bands at the center, horn-like projections on either side of the head, long hair adorned with circular beads, pointed ear pendants, hanging tongue, and collar with a composite jewel.

The shape of the sculpture suggests that it originally formed part of a step in the causeway, parts of which were revealed by excavation. The step may have functioned to divert water runoff away from the stone pavement into a drainage channel that was uncovered on the west side of the pavement, perhaps preventing erosion of the causeway. Adequate drainage was probably necessary at this location, which corresponds to the upper part of a steep slope, as the causeway rose over a natural elevation. The excavations showed that the slope was extensively modified by terracing (Cruz 2015).

Monument 82 is the second carving of its kind to be documented along the Seler-Sachs causeway. Another portrait appeared in 1997, 220 meters north of the location of monuments 81 and 82. It was formed by Monuments 66 and 67, which respectively show the Death God and the numeral four—perhaps forming the calendric collocation “4 Death” (Chinchilla Mazariegos and Medrano 1997).

The new sculptures exhibit salient features of Cotzumalguapa death gods: a skeletal body but with hands covered in skin, abundant hair adorned with multiple round beads, and “horns” that could be part of a hairstyle or headdress. They frequently wear a diadem with crossed bands in the center. The tongue sticks out between the clenched teeth. When the full body is shown, they often wear a serpent tied like a belt. The belly is often marked with a circle, in some cases substituted for by lobes that likely represent intestines hanging down.

The abundance of depictions makes it possible to explore the range of variability present in the iconography of the Death God. The god’s variable attributes might correspond to different manifestations or epithets, but they also suggest that several death gods may be represented. In the following paragraphs we describe the iconographic contexts in which death figures



Figure 6. El Baúl Monument 82. Museo de El Baúl, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa. Photo: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

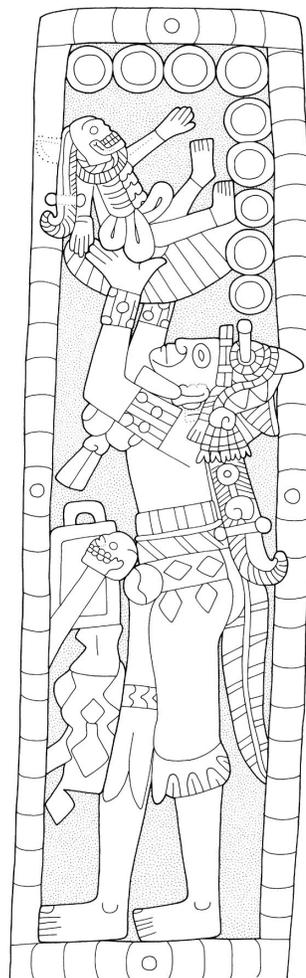


Figure 7. Palo Verde Monument 3. Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala. Drawing: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

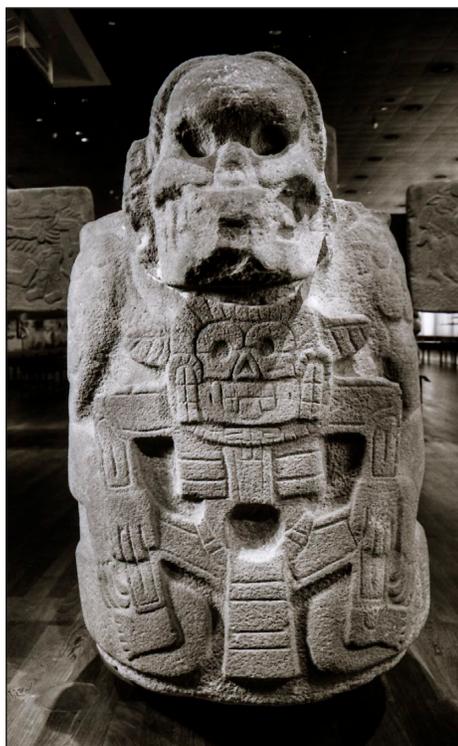


Figure 8. Bilbao Monument 26, front and side views. Ethnological Museum of Berlin, Germany. Photos: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

appear, and we discuss their connotations in the art of Cotzumalguapa.

A Child?

A frequent characteristic of the Death God is his short stature, apparent in scenes in which he interacts with other figures. Examples include Bilbao Monuments 3 and 13, as well as Palo Verde Monument 3, whose protagonist holds the Death God in his hands as if he were a baby (Figure 7). This depiction is particularly close to Character 2 of Monument 79, who also appears to be an infant in the arms of Character 1. In addition to the infantile aspect, the Palo Verde figure wears the hanging ribbon worn by Character 2 on Monument 79, and his guts are protruding.

Because of the Death God's small stature, Thompson (1948:19-20) coined the nickname "death manikin," a term also employed by Parsons (1969:124). Thompson (1977) came to consider him a type of *duende* or hobgoblin. It was also in consideration of the being's small stature and the fact that on occasion he appears to be carried or manipulated by others that Chinchilla Mazariegos referred to him as "Manikin Death God" in

previous work. We now consider this label inappropriate, because there is no evidence that the deity fulfilled the functions of a mannequin, doll, or puppet in the context of dramatic performances.

The god's childlike aspect is evident on Bilbao Monument 26 (Figure 8), currently in the collection of the Ethnological Museum of Berlin. The sculpture is shaped as a large, shallow vessel. It originally stood in the center of the Monument Plaza at Bilbao (Chinchilla Mazariegos 1996). The reliefs on the surface depict a kneeling figure whose three-dimensional head projects out from the rim. The body is not skeletal; the figure wears a short cape that covers its shoulders and back and a heavy belt of plaited cord. The fingernails of the hands are long and sharp, giving it a menacing aspect. The head is fleshless, but it has ears and hair. The jaw is prognathous, with a central projection that is partially destroyed. The same character is portrayed on Bilbao Monuments 31 and 76 (Figure 9), which represent prognathous skeletal beings with claws. The death god is seated like a little boy on the knees of this fearsome being. The god's pose—with arms and legs extended and angled downwards—verges on the ludicrous.

Bilbao Monument 26 and El Baúl Monument 79



Figure 9. Bilbao Monument 76, front and side views. Ethnological Museum of Berlin, Germany. Photo: Oswaldo Chinchilla,

seem to indicate that the Death God was conceived of as a baby in the arms of other beings that also have skeletal or mortuary features. Conceivably, these portraits show two generations of death gods, although it is unclear whether the larger characters were conceived of as the Death God's mother, father, or perhaps even a grandparent holding the child.

Warrior and Sacrificer

In some depictions, the Death God has a bellicose character. The best example is Bilbao Monument 48 (Figure 10), a large silhouetted relief that shows the Death God armed as a warrior, with shield and club. Both the shape and the subject matter of this sculpture are unique in the art of Cotzumalguapa, which does not abound in representations of warriors.

Bilbao Monument 4 presents a skeletal figure in the role of sacrificer. He holds a bleeding heart in his right hand and possibly a knife in his left. Four victims of heart sacrifice are falling down around him, while a severed head lies at his feet. The identification of this character as the Death God is not certain, since details of the clothing and headdress are different than usual. The character may be an officiant portrayed with the appearance of the Death God. In earlier work (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011b), the tongue-like scrolls that emerge from the mouth were identified as representations of "fiery speech," and the whole scene is surrounded by undulating flares that probably represent fire.

The Death God and Royalty

On El Baúl Monument 4, the officiant wears a headdress

composed of a rectangular device crowned by a large tassel. This headdress is worn by prominent individuals in the art of Cotzumalguapa, among them three large busts with horizontal tenons from El Baúl (El Baúl Monuments 1 and 12 and Pantaleón Monument 1). Judging by the scale and dignified aspect, these are probably royal portraits. Another finely carved sculpture of unknown provenance, now in the collection of the Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología in Guatemala City, shows the Death God wearing the same headdress (Figure 11). The use of this headdress would seem to indicate that he is being accorded attributes or insignias associated with royalty or the high nobility.

Bilbao Monuments 82 and 83 are panels that represent, respectively, a living individual and the Death God, both wearing tasseled headdresses (Figure 12). The combination relates to the concepts of opposition and complementation between life and death, but at the same time the use of the headdress casts both characters in the same category, as high-ranking



Figure 10. Bilbao Monument 48. Photo courtesy of the Ethnological Museum of Berlin, Germany.



Figure 11. Sculpture of unknown provenance. Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala. Photo: Oswaldo Chinchilla.



Figure 12. Bilbao Monuments 82 and 83. Museo de la Cultura de Cotzumalguapa, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa. Photo: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

rulers or nobles. The pair is similar to Stela 1 of Los Cerritos Norte, where a skeletal figure interacts with another individual (Figure 13). The composition of the stela parallels Bilbao Stela 18 and El Castillo Stela 1, which were interpreted by Hatch (1987) as representing the exchange of symbols of political power. As in the case of El Baúl Monument 4, there is no certainty about whether the skeletal character is the Death God himself, or an individual wearing the god's attributes. Nevertheless, the scene suggests that the Death God was related to political rituals.

Bilbao Monument 59 is a stone throne with an incised figure of the Death God on its surface. The occupants of the throne would literally sit on the god's portrait, a situation that might relate to metaphors involving the relationship between death and political power.

The Death God and Flower World

As noted in previous studies, the Flower World is one of the most important themes in the art of Cotzumalguapa (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2008, 2012b, 2015). The Death God participates in scenes that allude to the invocation of Flower World by means of song, dance, and sacrifice. An example is found in Bilbao Monument 3, where the Death God sings and dances together with another dancer. A severed head is located in a frame on top of both. On Monument 85, vines full of sprouts emerge

from the Death God's mouth, again suggesting song and the evocation of Flower World. The most impressive example is Bilbao Monument 21. The head of the Death God forms part of the torso of the principal figure, and his song is represented by an enormous vine that surrounds the entire scene. In previous work, Chinchilla Mazariegos (2012b, 2015) argued that this song evoked and recreated the Flower World.

An Earth Lord?

The Death God frequently appears in sculptures that were placed at ground level. Examples include the relief portraits that served as pavement stones or steps in the causeways (Chinchilla Mazariegos et al. 2008). Eight such examples are known, among them El Baúl Monument 76, associated with the Ichanhuehue Causeway, and El Baúl Monument 82, on the Seler-Sachs Causeway. The latter is the only example that has been fully documented in situ, although it was dislodged from its original location in ancient times. As noted, several examples were in fact oversized hieroglyphic collocations with the date "4 Death." There is no satisfactory explanation for the presence of these reliefs in the causeways. However, the placement of the Death God's face at ground level, looking upward suggests an association with the earth, in addition to its obvious relationship with the causeways.

Ichon and Cassier (1985) first reported Bilbao Monument 85. Judging by its shape, the sculpture functioned as a step, carved on its tread and riser with a relief depicting the torso, head, and arms of the Death God. The vines growing from his mouth suggest a relationship with fertility, but also with singing and the evocation of the Flower World. The flame-like elements on both sides are probably fire. In the step's original location, the Death God appeared in the act of emerging from the earth or the floor of the patio in which the sculpture was located.

The reliefs of Bilbao Monument 93 show the death god looking upwards from the surface of the rock, very close to ground level (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2014). The Death God seems to be looking up or emerging out of the rock itself.

Final Observations

These comments do not exhaust the inventory of depictions of the Death God and other skeletal characters in Cotzumalguapa. As in the case of El Baúl Monument 78, in many cases it is difficult to distinguish between specific representations of this deity and other skeletons that lack his attributes, or present only some of them. In short, some representations have unique characteristics and are difficult to understand.

For instance, how do we explain the finely carved skeletal torso of Bilbao Monument 80 (Figure 15)? The trachea, rib cage, sternum, pelvis, and bowl-shaped stomach are clearly visible, but the question is whether this should be regarded as a representation of the Death God. What is the meaning of El Baúl Monument 10 (Figure 16), a rock carved with an enormous skull and two coiled serpents, one of which emerges from the nostrils? Much remains to be explained about the concepts of death and the representation of the death gods in Cotzumalguapa.

This review has reaffirmed the importance of the Cotzumalguapa Death God. Related to royalty, war, and sacrifice,

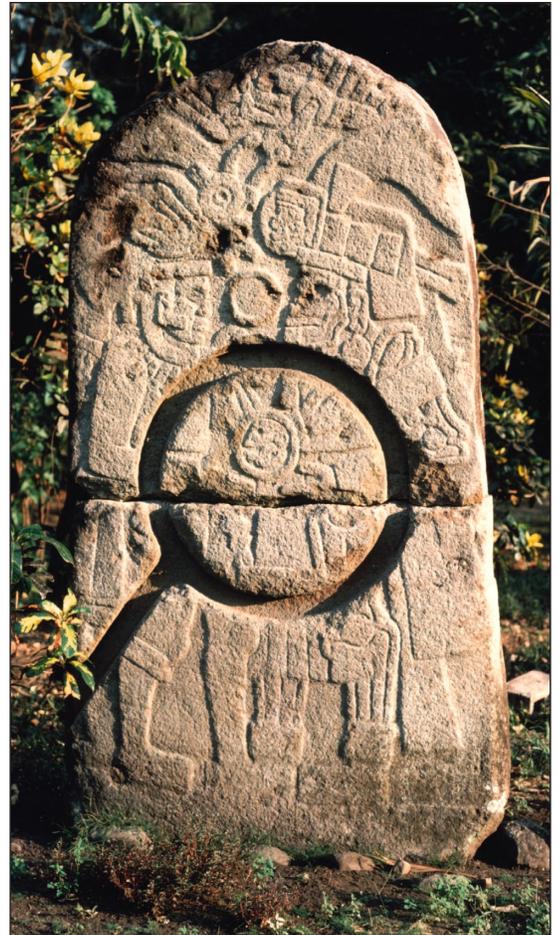


Figure 13. Los Cerritos Norte Monument 1.
Photo: Frederick J. Bove.

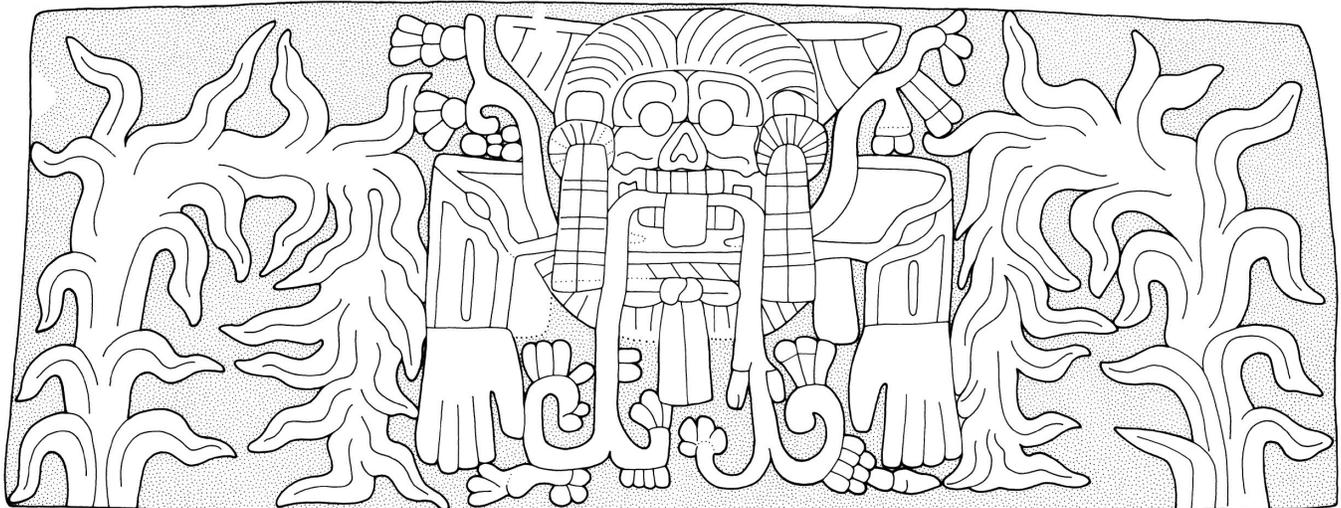


Figure 14. Bilbao Monument 85. Museo de la Cultura de Cotzumalguapa, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa
Drawing: Oswaldo Chinchilla.



Figure 16. El Baúl Monument 10. Museo de El Baúl, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa. Photo: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

Figure 15. Bilbao Monument 80. Museo de la Cultura de Cotzumalguapa, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa. Photo: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

the earth, and Flower World, this god of playful and perhaps infantile appearance condensed important aspects of the religious thought and world view of the creators of the Cotzumalguapa style.

Acknowledgments

Excavations in the Seler-Sachs Causeway were made possible by a grant from the National Geographic Society and further support from Yale University. The agricultural company Pantaleón S.A. collaborated in many aspects of field research and contributes to the rescue and conservation of the sculptured monuments from El Baúl. Research at the Ethnological Museum of Berlin was conducted thanks to a fellowship from the German Academic Exchange Office (DAAD) in 1995.

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A Classic Maya Plate in the Collection of the De Young Museum, San Francisco: An Analysis of Text, Image, and “Kill Hole”

ERIK BOOT

The collections of the De Young Museum of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco contain a large number of important Classic Maya objects, from the Early Classic (ca. AD 300–600) to the Late Classic period (ca. AD 600–900). Many of these objects were either gifted or bequested to the museum by well-known private collectors. This short note features a plate formerly in the collection of Gail and J. Alec Merriam (Figure 1).¹

The vessel, a medial ridge tripod plate with rattle supports, measures 10.5 (h) x 40.6 (w) x 40 (d) cm. It is currently on exhibit in the Gail and J. Alec Merriam Gallery at the De Young Museum. It is painted in the style typical of ceramics (cylindrical vessels, bowls, and plates) of the greater El Zotz area in Guatemala, an area located directly west of Tikal (Houston 2008a:Fig. 1), a consideration also supported by the color scheme with dominant reds and oranges. It is clearly Late Classic in style.

The inside rim features a stylistically well-executed and distinctively individual example of a Late Classic dedicatory formula on ceramics (also known as the Primary Standard Sequence; see Coe 1973; Boot 2005d). A provisional epigraphic analysis is as follows:

A: ‘ALAY?-ya

alay(?) “here(?); this one(?)”

Note: In this example the “Initial Sign” is not prefixed with ‘a, as is normally the case. The main sign is a variant of the common “mirror” sign that is employed as main sign of this compound. The reading of the sign as ‘ALAY is tentative (see Boot 2003a, 2003b, 2005b).

B: K’AL-ja

k’a[h]laj “presented is”

Note: This is an allograph of the common “Flat Hand” composite sign group, the actual hand sign of which can be reduced to the lower of the two elements of K’AL, as in this example. The “hand” points to the left (one may even recognize the abstracted fingers and the segmentation).

C–D: yi chi

y-ich “the surface of”

Note: The scribe employed “head variants” for the signs **yi** and **chi**, changing the outer shape into a human head. At present I follow the original proposal by MacLeod (1989) that Classic Maya *-ich* is a cognate to early Colonial Yucatec *jech* “surface.”

E–H: ‘u tz’i ba li

utz’i[h]bal “the writing of”

Note: Each of the four signs to spell *utz’i[h]bal* is written with head variants taking up a full glyph block each. It opens with a common sign for ‘u, followed by the “bat” variant for **tz’i** (see Boot 2009), common to dedicatory texts from the greater El Zotz area. Scribes from this area (that is, working for courts belonging to the lower, higher, and highest elite within this area) also employed a specific set of variants for writing **ba**. In this case the scribe employed a “skull” sign (compare K7147, a very clear example for the use of the “skull” sign) for **ba**, most probably acrophonically derived (the last consonant of a CVC root is dropped to arrive at a CV syllable) from **BAK**, “bone.” As such the “skull” would refer to the “bony” state of a skull instead of specifically targeting a word for “skull.” Note as such

¹ As far as I could go back in available auction catalogs, this plate was offered for sale at a Sotheby’s auction in New York in May, 1983 (Sotheby’s 1983:Lot no. 207).



Figure 1. Plate from the El Zotz area, FAMSF-De Young Museum inv. nr. 2010-70-12, gift of Gail and J. Alec Merriam. Photo © Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

the following selection of entries on “skull (*calavera*)” in various Mayan languages: *ubaker* “calavera” (Ch’orti’), *bakel awich* “calavera” (Mopan; “bone of your face”), *bakel upol* “calavera” (Itzaj; “bone of the head”), *sb’aqil jolomej* (Q’anjobal; “bone of the head”), and *xbaquel jolom* (Q’eqchi’; “bone of the head”) (Kaufman 2003:360-361).

The root of *utz’i[h]bal* is *tz’ihb-*, a noun meaning

“writing,” to which an *-al* derivational suffix is added. Final *-li* in this spelling could potentially target a possessive suffix *-il*, which often is abbreviated. In Mayan languages multi-syllabic constructions are reduced to either tri- or disyllabic constructions; thus **utz’i[h]balil* is reduced to *utz’i[h]bal*. (This reduction may be due to a shift in stress, which is not on the last syllable.²) Also

note the reduction of the intermediate *-a-* when *chu[h]kaj* obtains an *-i[i]y* suffix, as in *chul' [kji[i]y* (**chuhkaj[i]y*).

I-K: 'u la ka
u-lak "his plate"

Note: Three glyph blocks provide the three signs used to spell *ulak* (Figure 2), the first of which is the defining compound of the El Zotz polity Emblem Glyph, "Broken or Split Sky," which can be read Pa'chan (see Boot 2004 on T209 PA'; Houston 2008a, 2008b; Martin 2004). Many texts on ceramics produced in this regional style contain the SPLIT.SKY-**na** ([PA']CHAN-**na**) collocation prefixed to spellings such as **ja-yi** and, on plates, **la-ka** (Boot 2003c).³ This is thus a signature of sorts for this style; it identifies the plate and its dedicatory text as inherently associated with the El Zotz polity. However, this SPLIT.SKY-**na** compound most probably is not read *pa'chan* in this context (although I have suggested this in the past; Boot 2003c, 2005a); it operates as syllabic 'u (see Houston 2008b). In a number of examples the SPLIT.SKY-**na ja-yi** (e.g., K5465, K5509, K6618, K7979) spellings are substituted by 'u-**ja-yi** (e.g., K2023, K4551) employing the "closed eye" 'u variant, lending support to this identification (e.g., Boot 2014:226, Fig. 6). Now also note that the thick outer line with which the *pa'chan* sign for 'u is written is continuous. The small area in the upper center provides the "break"; it is scratched out by the artist (observation based on photographs provided by Michel Quenon, December 2015).

L-N: 14 CHAN? [K'IN]NAL?
chanlaju[u]n [...]

Note: Instead of providing the referent to the food contents of the plate, I presume that the sequence **14 CHAN? [K'IN]NAL?** directs to a personal name, more specifically the name of the owner. This suggestion may find support in the final collocation at O.

O: K'UH
k'uh[ul] [pa'chan ajaw]

Note: The sign **K'UH** is commonly employed in these dedicatory texts to open the paramount title sequence that refers to the highest elite of the El Zotz polity (as the plate is executed within the style of this tradition, this would not be a surprise). As such I suggest that this is the case here as well and thus **K'UH** is employed to spell *k'uh[ul]* "god-like; godly," a qualitative adjective which would introduce Pa'chan Ajaw "Pa'chan king" (e.g., K6080, K8393). Note that the text on K6618 simply records Pa'chan Ajaw (spelled [[PA']CHAN-**na**]AJAW).

In full, the dedicatory formula can be given as *alay(?) k'a[h]laj y-ich utz'i[h]bal ulak chanlaju[u]n [...]* *k'uhul [pa'chan ajaw]* or, in a provisional translation, "here presented is the surface (and) the writing of the plate of Chanlaju[u]n [...], the God-like [Pa'chan king]."

Other plates produced in this regional tradition identify the plate not just simply as *ulak* (in which *lak* means "plate" and probably at the same time refers to "clay," the material of which it is made) but also as *uwe'ib* "the eat-instrument" (*we'* "to eat"; *-ib* "instrumental suffix") (e.g., K6080, a plate in the collection of the Gardiner Museum in Toronto). Plates identified as

² In Classic Mayan, word stress (with stress defined as relative syllable prominence in a word; Van der Hulst 2002:246) may be a clue to many patterns of "underspelling" or "incomplete spelling" (e.g., final possessive suffixes like *-il* or absolutive suffixes like *-ij*). The following idea is currently under investigation, through researching word stress patterns in Colonial and present-day Mayan languages. Note for instance the short remark by Wisdom (1940:x) for Ch'orti' that "[s]tress is always on the last syllable," while Hofling (2011:5) for Mopan provides a description of word stress (lexical stress) but not phrasal stress. My hypothesis regarding Classic Mayan stress is as follows. In word stress one needs to make a distinction between isolated word stress (a word spoken in isolation; in those cases stress would be on the final syllable) and phrasal word stress (words spoken within a phrase; in those cases stress would be on the first syllable unless the word is phrase-final, in which case the stress would be on the last syllable). As the corpus of Maya texts provides phrases, short and long, and combinations thereof, it is phrasal word stress reconstruction that is under investigation. There are cases in Mayan languages in which word stress is fixed (e.g., in Colonial Yucatec the word /maya/ can be found, which specifically is given as *máya*, even in isolation); Wisdom's remark for Ch'orti' may thus be an oversimplification when considering Classic Mayan. In other cases of "underspellings" or "incomplete spellings" one may invoke shorthand, especially when a word and its context is clear. Note as such spellings such as **chu**, **chu-ka**, and **chu-ja** for *chu[h]kaj* (which through phrasal word stress probably would have been **chú[h~]'kaj* > stress boundaries: *chú[h~].kaj* > spelling: **chu.ka-ja**). The reduction of polysyllabic words to either disyllabic or trisyllabic constructs may be derived from shifting stress as well, in which vowel reduction (deletion) could be a result of the shift in stress (and the fact that the now-center-positioned *-a-* in **chu[h]kaj[i]y* was without stress); it could be the explanation for **chu[h]kaj[i]y* to be reduced to *chul' [kji[i]y* > **chul' [kji[i]y* (this particular conjugation is also subject to the reduction of a potential triconsonantal group *-hk-j-* to *-k-j-*), as the reconstructed long vowel may attract the stress (note that possibly the *-i[i]y* suffix is a contraction of **-ij[i]y*). Tentatively: stress boundaries: *chu' [k.ji[i]y* > spelling: **chu-ku.ji-ya**. That any research on stress (be it word stress or phrasal stress) in Mayan languages to ultimately arrive at some idea for Classic Maya will be a difficult one (but very intriguing) can be seen in the overview of stress systems in a selection of Mayan languages in Van der Hulst et al. (2010:283-298). Other issues involving stress will be under consideration as well, such as pitch accent, tone, and prosody (e.g., Hyman 1977; Haraguchi 1991; Van der Hulst 2014). As vowel quality is of importance in studying stress systems, tracking the evolution of the five syllable nuclei (V, VV, Vh, Vj, V'; V=a, e, i, o, u) has potential, as well as tracking the change of (complex) vowel quality in syllable nuclei due to morphosyntactic and phonological principles and considerations through the hieroglyphic spellings that provide them.

³ Within the dedicatory phrase on ceramics *ulak* refers to the plate on which it is written. Two clay bricks at Comalcalco are also referred to as *ulak*, which may mean that *lak* refers to various (large) flat objects of which the material used to make them is clay (compare Kaufman 2003:986, pM **laq*).

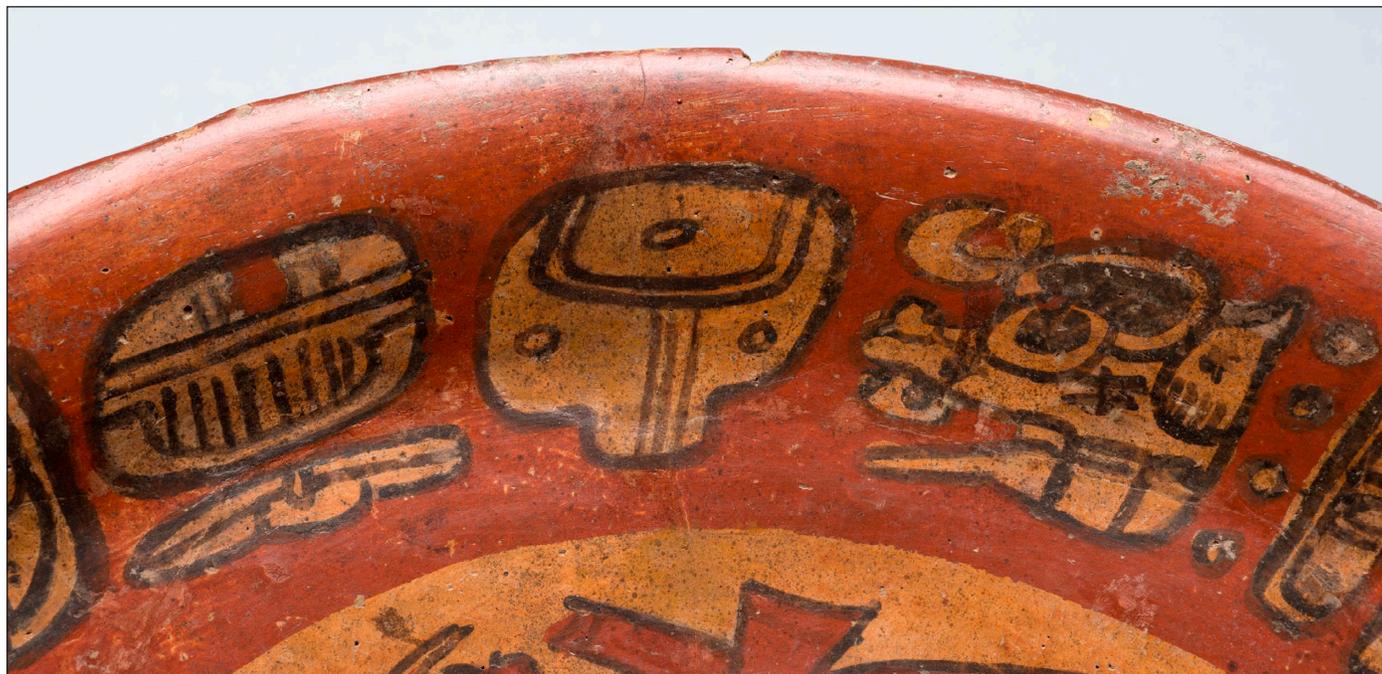


Figure 2. Glyphs I-K: ‘u la ka u-lak “his plate.”

we’ib can contain reference to their potential food contents like *sak[il] chijil wa[al]* “white venison bread” (see Zender 2000). The plates identified as *ulak uwe’ib* thus contain a paired term, in which I identify a typological component (*lak* “plate,” i.e., “object of clay”) and a functional component (*uwe’ib* “eat-instrument”) (see Boot 2005c).

The plate at the De Young Museum only contains *ulak* and, as I suggest here, no referent to food. This could be a case in which that specific part of the dedicatory formula is fully abbreviated as the scribe wanted to include the name of the owner of the plate and his paramount title but ran out of space. However, the stylistic tradition in which it was produced and the employment of the trigraphic SPLIT.SKY-*na* compound for ‘u makes it quite easy to identify the final title sequence as *k’uhul pa’chan ajaw*.

The center of the plate is elaborately decorated with a fish. The long (perhaps exaggerated) maxillary barbel, the flattened snout, the feather elements on the upper and lower body (standing for “feathery” dorsal and pelvic fins), as well as the long elements that define the forked tail identify the fish as some kind of catfish. Various species of catfish are native to the Maya region (in coastal areas, rivers, streams, and lagoons). The speckled surface of the fish skin may provide an additional clue to the species (most probably it is a bullhead catfish), or perhaps the age of the catfish (at various stages of their life, certain species of catfish have different skin patterns; note that while catfish do not have scales, they may have plates, e.g., catfish of various suckermouth species; Evers and Seidel 2005:22).⁴ These are not jaguar

spots as has also been suggested (Sotheby’s 1983:Lot no. 207). Jaguar spots are shaped very differently, commonly (but not always) one or more small spots in the middle encircled by an outline of larger spots or hook-like elements (Figure 3).

Before final deposit (most probably in a tomb or grave located in the greater El Zotz area, but alternatively from a secondary deposit, as the original context in which the plate was found is unknown), the plate was apparently ritually enhanced through the small hole that was drilled slightly off-center. Besides being drilled, holes can also be found to be pecked, punched, or gouged out. These holes are generally referred to as “kill holes,” and before these “kill holes” were identified in Maya ceramic objects, they had been identified in ceramics from South America, the American Southwest (e.g., Fewkes 1914:6, 11, 37, 43, on Mimbres pottery), and Florida. It is from a short study on pottery from Florida that the current concept of “kill holes” is derived, and it was introduced by William H. Holmes (1894:108-109). He described the drilled holes in ceramics as well as the custom of depositing broken ceramic vessels in graves for which he presented two explanations. The first

⁴ In May-July of 2015 various news items were released in the Guatemalan and Mexican press in which the large-scale death of fish in the Pasión and Usumacinta rivers was reported. According to testimonies, the death of the fish is related to the dumping of chemical waste by the REPSA company that exploits African palms in Guatemala, some 120 km upriver from Sayaxché (e.g., Escobar et al. 2015; Paredes 2015). Judging from photographs posted on the web, among the variety of species of affected fish are catfish.

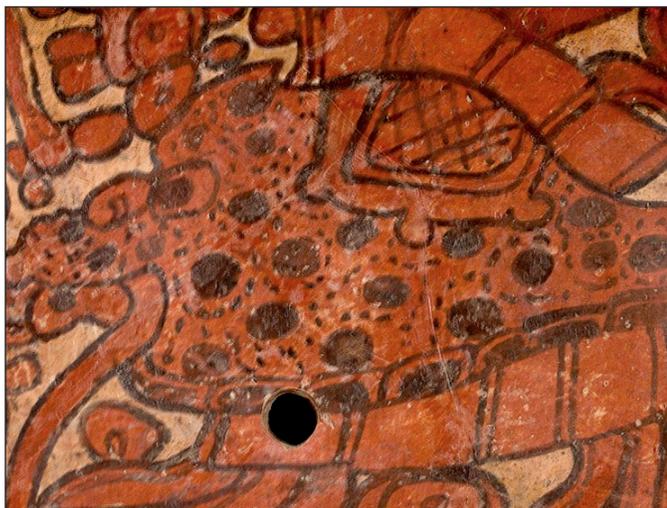


Figure 3. Comparison of the catfish skin pattern and an example of jaguar spots (jaguar spot image: detail of photo 436896 at www.alphacoders.com).

explanation Holmes presented reads:

...since the vessel was usually regarded as being endowed with the spirit of some creature of mythological importance, it was appropriate that it should be “killed” before burial that the spirit might be free to accompany that of the dead person. (Holmes 1894:108)

An interesting phenomenon developed, for instance, among the inhabitants of Kolomoki, Georgia, who participated in the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex. Here ceramics were drilled before firing and thus seem to have only been manufactured for mortuary purposes (Power 2004:54). The custom of “kill holes” survived into the twentieth century, for instance among the Isleta Pueblo (Ellis 1979:359, Fig. 11), and up to the present day in Pecos ceramics (Dods 2015:24, “[p]ottery was (and is) considered to have life, there not being a division of animate from inanimate as we know it”). In a recent study Scherer (2015) doubts that these drilled holes in Maya ceramics are “kill holes” and that the plates are ritually terminated. He offers an alternative explanation in which the plates represent the surface of the earth and the holes are drilled to establish the axis mundi within the burial place (Scherer 2015:117; compare Scherer et al. 2014:212-213). His explanation is derived from, for instance, the conceptualization of the seven layers of the heavens and the holes in them through which a giant ceiba tree grows to finally reach “El Gran Dios,” as voiced among early twentieth century Yucatec Maya commoners (Tozzer cited in Scherer 2015:108-109).⁵ This is an interesting alternative that merits more research. Intriguing as well, as I found in my research on the phenomenon of “terminating” (transitioning) ceramics, is the custom among the Panare, who live in the middle of the Orinoco valley in southern Venezuela, in which ceramic pots are ritually broken at mourning rituals

“which reestablishes the future agricultural abundance once threatened by death” (Dumont 1976:141). The ritual termination of the ceramics is thus part of the perpetuation of the cycle of life and death.

What I would like to add to this discussion on the “kill holes” is that a hole in a ceramic in a mortuary setting within one cultural context (such as Mimbres, Pueblo, Pecos in American Southwest, Florida, or the ritual breaking of ceramics among the Panare in southern Venezuela) cannot necessarily be extended to have the same meaning in a mortuary setting within another cultural context (such as Maya), unless additional affirmative information can be presented from that particular context. The intentional drilling (pecking, punching, gouging) or complete destruction by breaking of ceramic containers of many sorts (e.g., plates, tripod plates, bowls, tripod cylinders)⁶ within a mortuary context stands in a much wider ideological (and thus cosmological) context than the strict functionality of final deposit with the deceased (either in the burial or mounted and/or deposited somewhere else). Note additionally that among the Maya one can find drilled (pecked, punched, gouged) holes in the base of various types of ceramics (at the center, or slightly off-center, near the outer margin of the base, e.g., Tikal, Burial 92, slightly outcurving-side bowl, see Culbert 1993:61, Fig. 62b), or even in the wall of a cylindrical vessel (e.g., Caracol, S.D. C193B-3, fluted incised vase;

⁵ For the original text, see Tozzer 1907:154, and note the small adjustment in text citation by Scherer and the removal of *yaštše*, Tozzer’s spelling of *yaxche’*, as the indigenous name for the ceiba tree.

⁶ Note also that non-ceramic objects can be transitioned in this way, e.g., metates.

Chase and Chase 2013:9, Fig. 23b [“kill holes” are rare at Caracol]). Plates in particular are intentionally damaged (though not always), not only by means of a hole, but by the legs being broken off before deposit (e.g., Tikal, tripod plates in Burials 83 and 96; see Culbert 1993:44, Fig. 43). At various Maya sites ceramics were deposited in burials either whole, broken, with parts removed (i.e., rimless), or drilled and placed either under or over the head of the interred individual or next to the body (e.g., for Blue Creek, see Guderjan 2007:77; for Caracol, see Chase and Chase 1987:Figs. 21, 73; for the Piedras Negras-Yaxchilan area, see Golden et al. 2008:264-265; for Saturday Creek, Belize, see Lucero 2010:145-147). It would be interesting to see an in-depth study of these kinds of intentional and purposeful modes of destruction (termination, transition) within the Maya area (or the whole American continent, if time would permit) and the range of ceramic containers in which they can be found (as well as other classes of objects, again time permitting; compare Adams 2008 for the American Southwest) and the location they are assigned to in a mortuary context.

This short note introduced a plate painted in the style of the greater El Zotz area tradition, and it presented an analysis of its hieroglyphic text, an example of the dedicatory formula on ceramics. This hieroglyphic text contained some uncommon signs and sign compounds and represents a good example of a highly individually designed and executed dedicatory text painted by an accomplished scribe but still within the parameters (calligraphy, sign inventory, syntax) of a well-known regional variant. The floor of the plate features the image of a stylized catfish, and the plate was enhanced with a drilled hole, possibly to transition it from one realm (of existence) to another.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank the De Young Museum of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and curator Mathew Robb for providing the photographs of the plate that are published here with their kind permission. I thank Michel Quenon for sharing with me his photographs of the plate during the European Maya Conference in Bonn, December 12-13, 2015, which led to improvements in some of the observations made prior to this. As always, unless otherwise noted, the opinions expressed in this essay are mine.

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The Further Adventures of Merle (continued)

MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON

Cross Group Project

In 1996, we started working at the Cross Group at Donald Marken's suggestion and with much of his supporting capital to do this. Don was an attorney interested in archaeology, and the father of the young budding archaeologist Damien Marken. He wanted to investigate the Cross Group at Palenque. We were doing Ground Penetrating Radar with Bill Hanna and Pete Patrone in charge. The Project was sponsored by PARI, the GeoOntological Development Society, the National Geographic Society, and the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico. Calibration and subsurface testing was recorded, and reconnaissance low-frequency electromagnetic measurements were made at Stevens Plaza, with the focus being on the Temple of the Cross. All the lines on the southwest hillside exposed cavernous sections where a stalactite or stalagmite fragment was found. On the

west-central side of the temple there was suggestive cavernous terrain. The most intriguing feature on the west side was a bedrock spine or column flanked by voids, that showed on the radar as being either a man-made or man-fashioned septum. The southwest side of the temple appears to be cavernous nearly from top to bottom.

Later still, starting in 1998, we excavated and restored Temple XIX, with Alfonso Morales, Christopher Powell, and Kirk Straight in charge. This proved to be an example of how good archaeology could both preserve the past and at the same time allow tourists to safely see what the Maya did so brilliantly. To be preserved for posterity is the masonry pier just inside the one entrance to the building, portraying the Palenque ruler K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb; the tall polychrome stucco relief, on the adjacent side; and the altar-like platform with its sculpted panels on the west and south faces with scenes of figures and lengthy hieroglyphic texts that record



Figure 1. Replica of platform and walkway. Photo: Joel Skidmore, 2000.



Figure 2. One of the nine mural figures inside the Temple XX tomb.
Photo: Alfonso Morales and Pete Patrone, 1999.

mythical and dynastic events. The dates go back into the reign of K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb (formerly known as Chaacal III). The original masonry pier and the platform are in the Palenque museum. Exact replicas have been placed in Temple XIX. The structure has been preserved, even the original red-plastered floor. To make this available for tourists to see without damaging the original Maya work, Alfonso has constructed a wooden walkway within the temple, making it very easy for tourists to walk through and see the original work of the Maya without stepping on the original painted floor (Figure 1).

And finally, our last effort at the Cross Group was Temple XX with

Maureen (Mo) Carpenter in charge. Mo, a Navy brat, got her degree in Greece, where her dad was in charge of the Mediterranean Fleet during the war and was stationed in Athens. Mo was our best archaeologist at Palenque, a hard worker, wonderful at directing the crew under her, and loved by everyone. When not doing archaeology work at Palenque or in Peru or Alaska, she is being called on by the U.S. government to check out everywhere some new pipeline is being planned. She is really good. Temple XX was financed by my grandchildren Carolyn Petree, Annette Pitcher, and Jim Metzler, in honor of their mother Barbara Metzler, who had herself long supported our Palenque work. Although we have not actually entered the tomb in Temple XX sub, we have recorded everything there with digital cameras (Figure 2). It has been published in *The PARI Newsletter* (No. 31) and by Beatriz de la Fuente in her impressive set of volumes on Prehispanic mural painting in Mexico (*La pintura mural prehispánica en México, II, Área maya, Tomo IV, Estudios*; UNAM, Mexico, 2001).

With Maureen in charge, platform after platform was discovered under Temple XX, but most surprising of all was that the platforms were a separate structure altogether with a passage separating Temple XX from the platform, and the passageway was a collector of Maya garbage. As the archaeologists moved upward, a large staircase began just to the north of the end of the platform, and ran along for eight meters. After investigation of this whole mound, which indicated that Temple XX was one of the largest temples in the city, it was found that the Maya themselves were trying to build a building with dangerous support. The substructure was shored up with planks. Why the Maya were so careless with this, when everything else they did was done so perfectly, is a mystery.