

The Dwarf Motif in Classic Maya Art

VIRGINIA E. MILLER

Among the curiosities of Moctezoma's court described by the early Spanish chroniclers were the dwarfs and hunchbacks who served as confidants and jesters to the Mexica ruler (Alvarado Tezozomoc 1878:669ff.; Cortés 1866:111; Durán 1967:364; Sahagún 1950- [1952], bk. 3:35, [1954], bk. 8:30). While little else is known about the role of deformed individuals in preconquest life, they are represented in the art of ancient America from very early times. The ceramic figures of West Mexico and of the Moche of Peru immediately come to mind, but the representation of human deformity is not lacking in the art of other pre-Columbian peoples.

Among the Maya, the physical abnormality most often portrayed is dwarfism. During the Late Classic, images of dwarfs occur throughout the Maya area in a wide range of media. They appear as clay and jade figurines, on incised jades and shells, on polychrome pottery, and in monumental sculpture. Over forty Late Classic monuments alone are known to depict dwarfs.

Small-scale figures of various types abound in Maya art, not all of whom are dwarfs. Prisoners, for example, are sometimes shown in smaller scale than their captors. These small captives are easily distinguishable from dwarfs by their normal physical proportions. Other short figures can be identified as supernaturals by costume, body markings, and nonhuman characteristics. Dwarfs, however, are decidedly human in appearance.

Most dwarfs represented in Maya art share the following physical features: small stature, abnormally short and fleshy limbs, a protruding abdomen, and a disproportionately large head with prominent forehead, sunken face, and drooping lower lip (Figs. 1 and 2). These traits are all diagnostic of the most common type of dwarfism, usually called achondroplasia but more correctly described as short-limb dwarfism. Some of the dwarfs depicted display other deformities, however. In certain types of dwarfism, the trunk is shortened rather than the limbs (Fig. 3). Spinal deformities may result in a barrel chest or hunchback (Fig. 4). Since there are now known to be over one hundred different disorders in which dwarfism occurs (William A. Horton 1978 and personal communication, 1980), it is not surprising that the Maya were aware of and carefully observed the various deformities.

That Maya artists accurately portrayed the physical characteristics of dwarfism suggests that real dwarfs existed among the population. Unfortunately, no skeleton has been excavated that has proved conclusively to be that of a dwarf. Although an abnormally short individual was found in Burial 24 on the North Acropolis at Tikal, his bones could not be salvaged; thus it was not determined whether he was a true dwarf (William A. Haviland, personal communication, 1980). Given that only a small number of Maya burials have been scientifically excavated and that dwarfs generally constitute only a tiny fraction of any population, it is not surprising that no firm evidence has come to light.

Whatever their actual numbers in the population, the large number of dwarfs represented in Maya art indicates that they had a special significance for the ancient Maya, as they have had throughout history in many parts of the world (Tietze-Conrat 1957). But, despite their prevalence



Fig. 1 *Jaina dwarf.*

in Classic Maya art, references to dwarfs are almost entirely lacking in both native and Spanish chronicles of the postconquest period. Since numerous myths about dwarfs are recorded in modern ethnographic studies of the Maya (J. E. S. Thompson 1970:326-327, 335, 340-341, 347), it is unlikely that dwarfs were absent or without importance during the intervening colonial years (Corson 1973:59).

Whatever the reason for this curious gap in the litera-

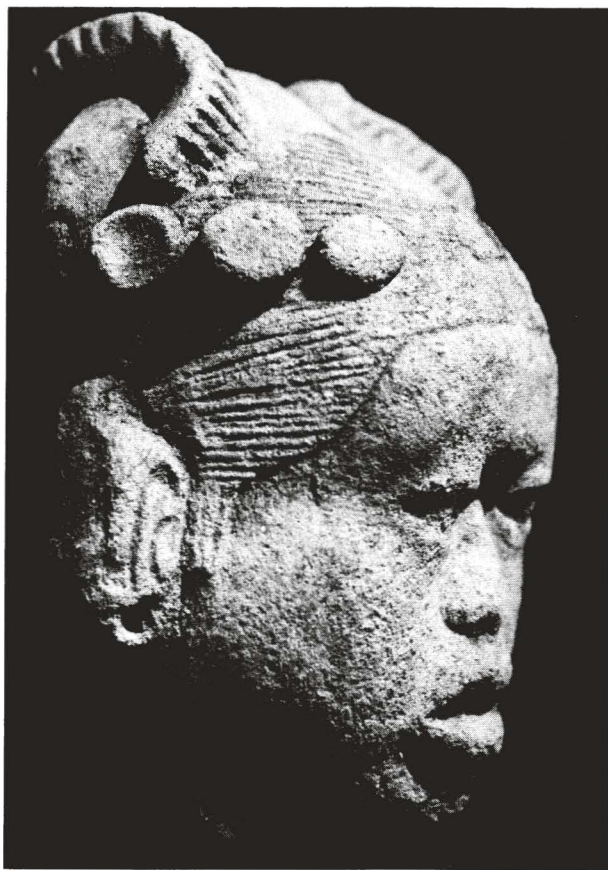


Fig. 2 Clay head from Palenque figurine.

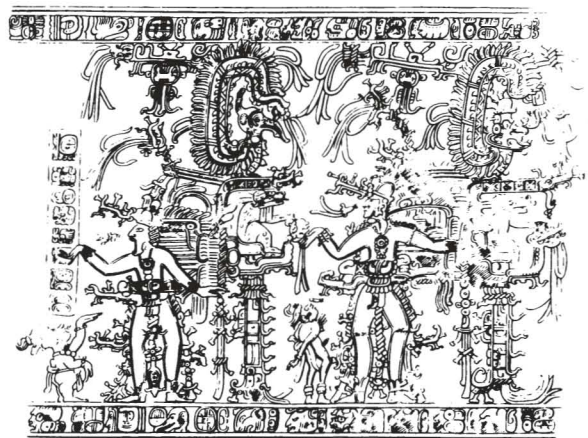


Fig. 3 Cylinder vase from Yalloch.

ture, the lack of early colonial sources on dwarfs limits the usefulness of ethnographic analogy in any attempt to understand their significance during the Classic period. Although most efforts at interpretation have relied to some extent on modern dwarf lore, twentieth-century myths generally shed little light on the earlier images. Furthermore, the few studies of Maya dwarfs deal almost exclusively with Jaina figurines, which are among the most difficult of Maya images to interpret (Cook de Leonard 1971; Corson 1973; Goldstein 1979). A recent article by Foncerrada de Molina (1976a), however, does bring together a selection of dwarfs from various mediums and provides a good general introduction to the subject.

Among the contemporary Maya, there are many different myths about dwarfs, and their role varies considerably from place to place. Given the variety of contexts in which dwarfs appear during the Classic period, it is logical to assume that they did not have a single function then, either. In examining the corpus of extant dwarf images, it became apparent that they could be grouped into categories according to the medium and provenience of the object, the activity represented, and the costume and accoutrements of the dwarf and of any participants in the scene.

Figurines from Jaina, coastal Campeche, and elsewhere in the Maya area comprise one such group. Dwarfs are one of the most popular motifs at Jaina (M. E. Miller 1975:18); a recent study of Jaina figurines lists forty examples (Goldstein 1979:163). Jaina dwarfs, like all those represented in Maya art, are invariably masculine or perhaps sexless like Olmec figures. Some display the facial features of achondroplastic dwarfs (Fig. 1), while others have a typically Maya profile (Fig. 5). While short-limbed and hunchbacked dwarfs often occur together in two-dimensional images, as figurines they belong to different time periods. Hunchbacks are typical of the earlier, hand-modeled Jaina I phase, while dwarfs are moldmade and date from the later Jaina II phase (Corson 1973:60).

On Jaina figurines, details like pectorals and headdresses, which show considerable variety, are usually added by hand (Cook de Leonard 1971:59). Some dwarfs wear deity heads reminiscent of the headdresses of principal figures in monumental art. Bird and animal headdresses are common, the deer being especially popular (Fig. 5). Animal heads may be placed sideways on the dwarf's head rather than facing in the same direction as the wearer, creating an asymmetrical effect unusual in Maya art (Fig. 6). This curious practice is shared with a few other figurine types, including hunchbacks (Goldstein 1979:64). It is perhaps significant that asymmetrical bird headdresses are also worn by figurines at Teotihuacán and can also be seen on Teotihuacán personages depicted in the Maya area (Clemency Coggins 1975:170-171 and personal communication, 1980). Since there is no strong figurine tradition in the Early Classic in the Maya area, the Late Classic production of clay figurines may have been an innovation from Central Mexico (Kubler 1962: 159). The asymmetrical animal headdress may

have been an imported motif as well. Another type of headdress commonly worn by dwarfs is a large turban decorated with small pellets (Fig. 7). This turban resembles those worn by secondary figures on polychrome ceramics, including the dwarf on a vase in the Villahermosa museum (Covarrubias 1957: pl. opp. p. 228).

The large number of Jaina dwarf figurines surely represents not an unusually large dwarf population but, rather, some widespread belief that the dwarf would be a useful companion during the journey to the underworld. When Tlaxcalan rulers died, their wives, slaves, dwarfs, and hunchbacks were buried alive with them (Herrera y Tordesillas 1726-1730, 1:165). A tableau from Jaina includes attendant dwarfs flanking an enthroned figure in ballplayer dress (Fig. 8). Since there would never have been enough real dwarfs to accommodate all those who wished to have one in attendance after death, dozens were manufactured in clay instead.

Modern Maya beliefs indicate that there is a strong connection between dwarfs, the earth, and the underworld. The Tzotzil conceive of the earth as a cube whose lower portion is inhabited by the dead and by dwarfs (Laughlin 1969:175). The mythology of both the Tzotzil and the Tzeltal describes a race of dwarfs living beneath the earth who assist in the sun's nightly passage through the underworld (Thompson 1970:347). These myths recall both Olmec and Toltec altars supported by dwarflike figures with upraised arms. The Chontal refer to dwarfs as "Lords of the Earth" (ibid:327). In Yucatec Maya, the less polite expressions *k'is kab* and *ciz lu'um*, both meaning 'earth-farther' and presumably referring to the dwarf's proximity to the ground, are in current use as terms for dwarf (Thom Smith-Stark, personal communication, 1980; Larry Mills, personal communication, 1980).

While most of the extant dwarf figurines, except those excavated at Jaina, are without provenience, one (Fig. 9) was found in a burial at Palenque (Ruz 1952:54). A broken clay head, also said to be from Palenque, has the features of an achondroplastic dwarf (Fig. 2). Palenque is perhaps unique in that dwarfs are represented there in at least three different mediums. In addition to the clay figurines, the remains of a hunchbacked dwarf in stucco can be seen in the Palace on the south side of Pier c, House C (Fig. 10). It was repainted at least four times, twice in red and twice in blue, a color normally reserved for divinities (Greene Robertson 1977:307). It is interesting to note that the serpent-legged infants on the Temple of the Inscriptions piers were also painted blue – the possible relationship between dwarfs and children will be explored in my discussion of monumental sculpture. Figure 11 illustrates what may be yet another dwarf, also in House C, who sits shaded by a parasol.

The third medium in which a dwarf is portrayed at Palenque is jade. Figure 12 is a rare example of a two-dimensional image of a dwarf in frontal view. In Maya art, dwarfs sit not cross-legged but with their legs flexed before them, soles nearly touching or turned out as they are here.

Dwarfs also occur on a number of Nebaj-style jade pendant plaques (A. L. Smith and Kidder 1951: fig. 59).

The same scene occurs on all these: a dwarf (sometimes two) sits in profile next to a seated ruler, with whom he appears to converse. The dwarf usually wears a simple costume and tied headdress like those of attendant figures on polychrome pots, and, like them, he may cross his arms over his chest.

Jade figurines depicting dwarfs were also made by the Maya (Fig. 13). Of the approximately sixteen representations of human figures tossed into the Sacred Cenote at Chichén Itzá, most were dwarfs (Proskouriakoff 1974:

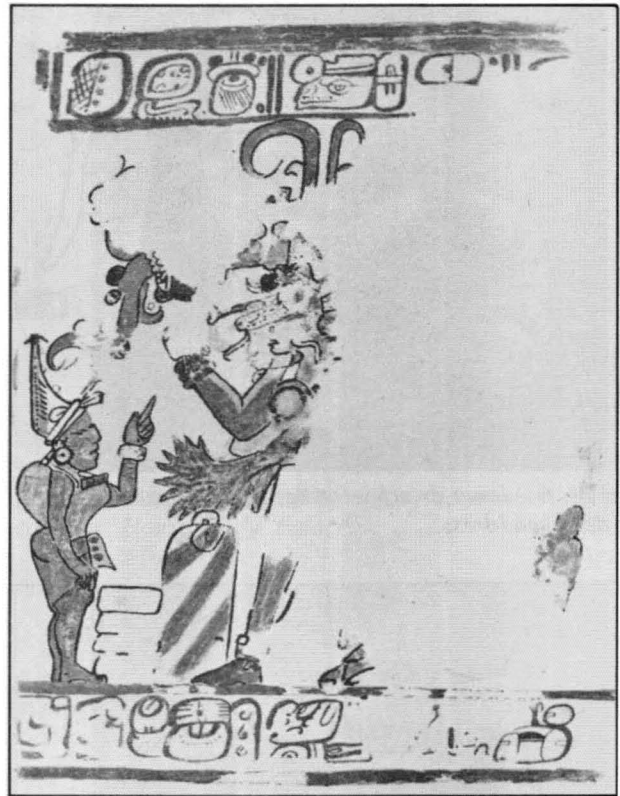


Fig. 4 Painted capstone depicting a hunchback. From Sacnicté, Yucatán.



Fig. 5 Jaina dwarf with deer headdress.



Fig. 6 Jain dwarf wearing asymmetrical deer headdress.



Fig. 7 Jain dwarf wearing turban.



Fig. 8 Jain enthroned ballplayer with dwarfs.



Fig. 9 Palenque dwarf figurine. From looted burial in Funerary Group 1.

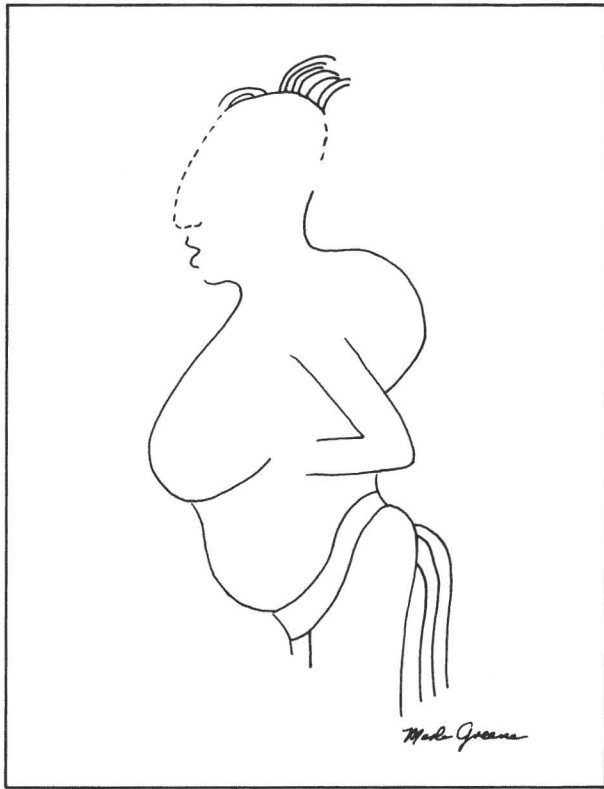


Fig. 10 Palenque, stucco hunchbacked dwarf. South side of House C, Pier c, the Palace.

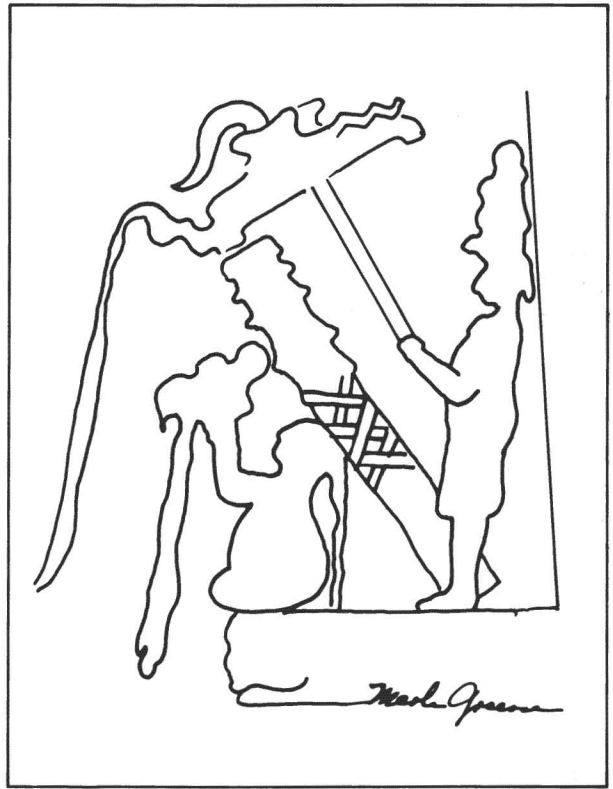


Fig. 11 Palenque, detail of stucco decoration. West corridor, House C, the Palace.



Fig. 12 Jade plaque from Palenque.

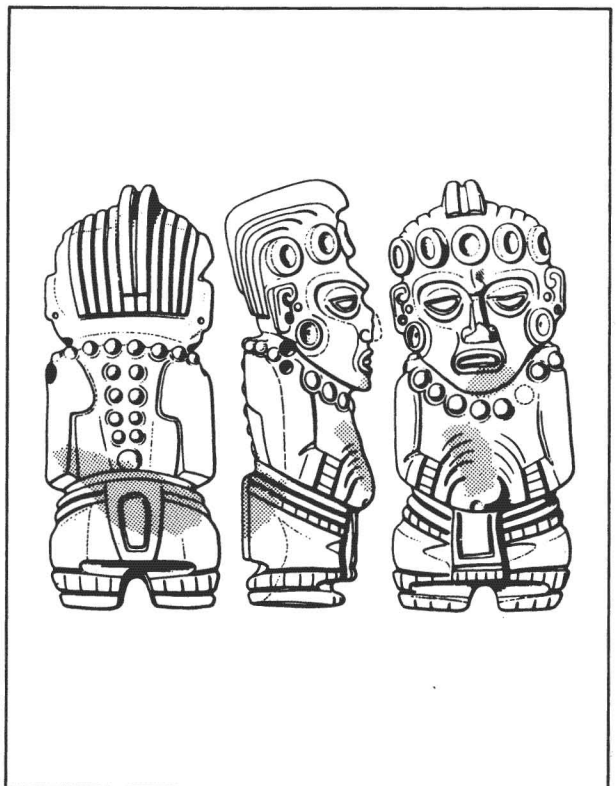


Fig. 13 Late Classic jade figurine. From the Sacred Cenote, Chichén Itzá.

102). Although these dwarfs have been assigned to the Late Classic on stylistic grounds, not one has been found in an excavation (ibid.:102-103). As a result, little is known regarding either their provenience or their function. Like the jade plaques discussed above, the dwarfs were pierced to be worn as pendants.

Although the Chichén Itzá dwarfs are simply dressed, like the others so far examined, they differ in certain respects. Their faces seem typically Maya, with none of the features of dwarfism. The most interesting aspect of these jades is the crested "Mohawk" haircut that nearly all the dwarfs wear. Bareheaded dwarfs in other mediums share this hairstyle, which occurs on Olmec, Veracruz, and Teotihuacán figurines as well. Its significance, however, is unknown.

Dwarfs are also represented in the monumental art of the northern Maya region, notably in the Puuc area. Small hunchbacks appear on at least two painted capstones, including the one from Sacnité, Yucatán, illustrated in Figure 4. Two dwarfs can be seen among taller figures on a panel from the Palace at Santa Rosa Xtampak (Proskouriakoff 1950: fig. 94). At least ten of the carved columns typical of the Puuc region may depict dwarfs (Larry Mills, personal communication, 1980). Most of these columns are no longer *in situ*; those at Sayil, however, flank the central doorway of a three-chambered building (Pollock 1980:121, fig. 253).

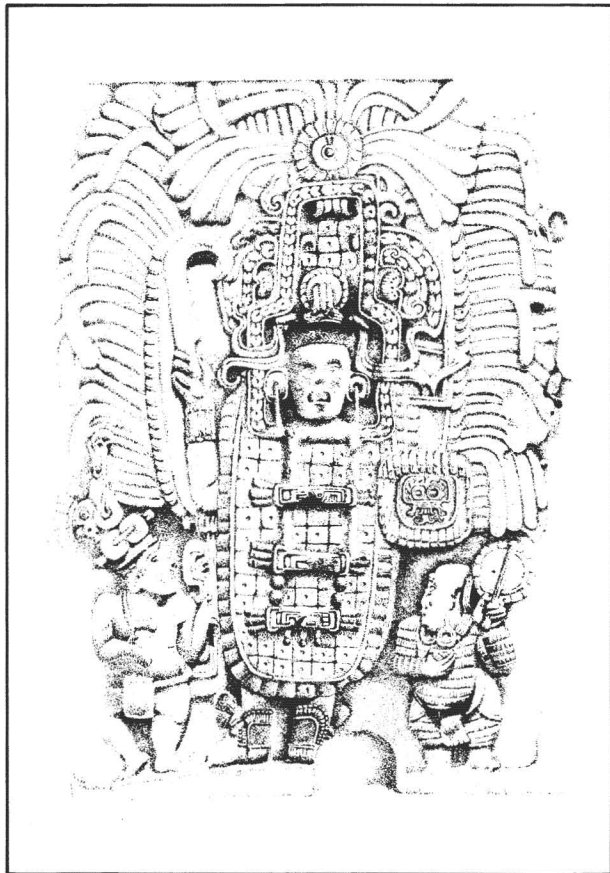


Fig. 14 Carved column from Campeche.

Figure 14 illustrates a typical Puuc column. On these columns, the large figure wears a heavy costume that completely obscures the body; he carries a shield and an eccentric flint or other weapon. He is usually shown frontally, with one or two dwarfs at his side. At least one of the figures on each column lifts one foot, as if dancing. An examination of dancing figures in the monumental art of the Petén indicates that they, too, are often armed and may be dancing in a sacrificial ritual.

The costume of the Puuc figures may also connect them to the theme of human sacrifice. In a recent paper, Schele (1979b) has proposed that Teotihuacán imagery appearing in Classic Maya costume may refer not to political connections with Central Mexico but to bloodletting rites. Several of the Puuc columns portraying dwarfs share a mixture of Maya and non-Maya traits that might be Central Mexican in origin. These traits include the extensive use of mosaic plaques in costume; the frontal, openmouthed animal headdress; and Tlaloc imagery (in Fig. 14, this is seen on the shield of the principal figure). Similar Central Mexican elements, which Schele (ibid.:17, and personal communication, 1979) believes are characteristic of a bloodletting complex, can be seen on Piedras Negras Stela 9 and Tikal Temple IV Lintel 3, for example.

Other connections with central highland Mexico are suggested on this column by the presence of the so-called

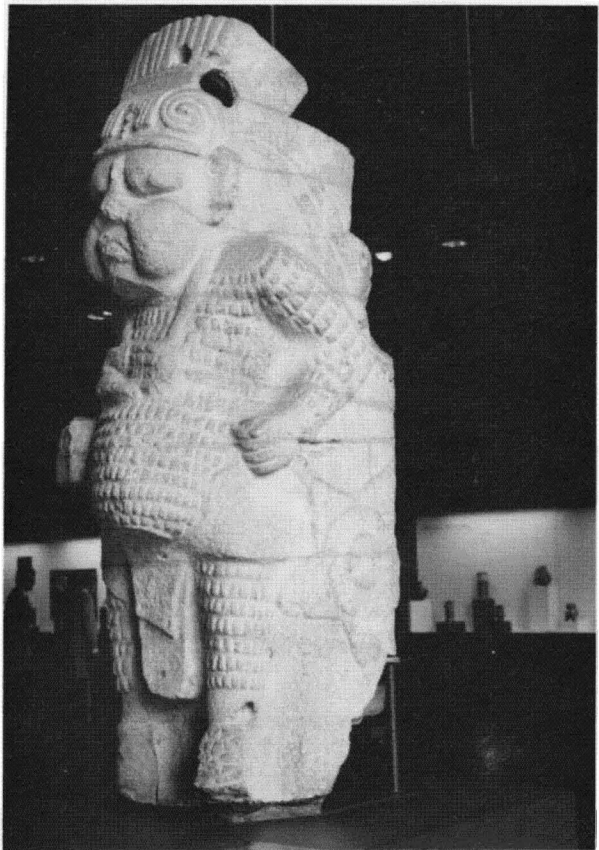


Fig. 15 Oxkintok, north column of central doorway, Structure 3C7.

fat god on the larger figure's left. The fat god was first identified by Beyer (1930), who recognized the type among figurines from both Teotihuacán and Veracruz. Although less common in the Maya area, the fat god does occur in Jaina figurines and in monumental sculpture, often in the round, in the Puuc region (Fig. 15). While the fat god and dwarfs share some physical characteristics, such as short stature and a potbelly, I had originally believed that they were not directly related. Dwarfs do not have the closed eyes, jowly cheeks, tight-fitting body-suit, and fan that are typical of the fat god. At Teotihuacán, however, dwarfs and fat gods do share one feature: both may wear what look like Tlaloc goggles over the forehead rather than over the eyes. If the dwarf and the fat god were somehow related at Teotihuacán, it is possible that they were connected in Teotihuacán-influenced Maya iconography as well. Of the columns I have examined, however, only one includes the fat god as well as a dwarf.

One Puuc column, unlike the others here, depicts a narrative scene that might have been taken from a cylinder vase (Fig. 16). A hefty dwarf dances before an enthroned lord, to the accompaniment of two kneeling horn players (just visible at the lower left) who may themselves be dwarfs. While at first glance this looks like a scene of palace entertainment, the presence of an ax, held over the head of the dwarf by a figure standing behind him, adds an ominous note. The relief recalls certain polychrome vessels depicting a sacrificial victim being dispatched with musical accompaniment (M. D. Coe 1973b: no. 33). It can also be compared to the Bonampak murals, where dance, music, and sacrifice are combined. In Room 3 of Bonampak Structure 1, in which the sacrificial dance occurs, a dwarf beating a drum is represented, borne on a litter by a group of deformed figures (M. E. Miller 1981:235).

It is possible that the dwarfs on the columns discussed above were themselves sacrificial victims. The Zapotecs were said to have sought small victims, including dwarfs, for sacrifice during the eclipse of the sun (Córdova 1886: 215). No such practice is recorded for the Maya but, given their apparent interest in novel forms of bloodletting, it is entirely possible that dwarfs were sought as special victims.

On Stela 31 from Yaxhá (Fig. 17), a nude, bound dwarf sits at the feet of a dancing figure whose ceremonial bar ends in flint blades aimed at the dwarf. In the text above, the glyph for 'capture' occurs, whether in reference to the dwarf or not is unclear. This is the only relief, however, in which a dwarf appears to be under an imminent threat of attack or sacrifice.

Dwarfs and dancing figures of a different type occur on cylinder vases of the Holmul style (Figs. 3, 18, and 19). On at least thirteen of these vessels (which include one tripod plate), dwarfs are paired with the taller figures. Of great interest is the fact that, when two or more dwarfs are shown, one is always short-limbed, while the other has a short trunk and usually a hunchback as well. Most of the short-limbed dwarfs have the sunken faces typical



Fig. 16 Carved column, Campeche.

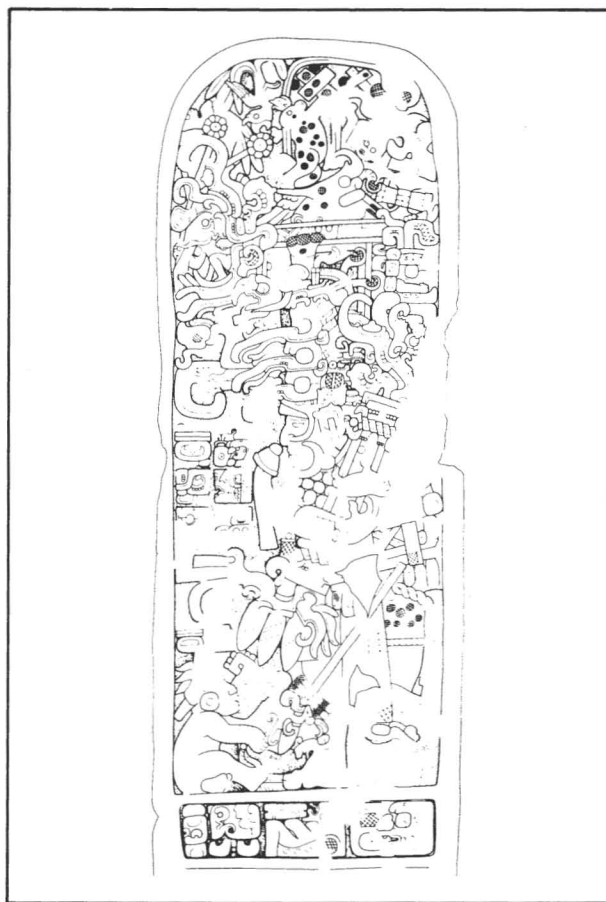


Fig. 17 Yaxhá Stela 31.

of achondroplasia. A few, however, have the characteristic alteration of head and nose practiced by the Maya (Fig. 19). Whether this difference reflects actual practice among the Maya or merely artistic license is, of course, not known. I suspect that some Maya artists, unfamiliar with real dwarfs, may have simply produced a short, chubby Maya. Like the dwarfs from Chichén Itzá and those on the Puuc columns, these dwarfs are simply dressed and have the characteristic “Mohawk” haircut.

The texts of a number of these vessels include emblem glyphs (Figs. 18 and 20). Naranjo, Tikal, Machaquilá, and El Peru are named on the vessels. At all these sites, with the exception of Machaquilá, dwarfs are also represented in monumental sculpture. The presence of water birds around the rim of the plate from Holmul illustrated in Figure 20 is of interest because similar birds, as well as a dwarf, occur on a Tikal lintel (Jones 1977: fig. 17). This plate may have a Tikal emblem glyph just above the outstretched hand of the larger figure.

As Coe (1978:96-99) has pointed out, there is some consistency in the relationship between the type of dwarf and the animal represented in the back rack of the dancer facing him. This short, fat dwarf is usually associated with the waterlily jaguar, for example, while the hunchback may face another type of quadruped (Fig. 18).

On one unpublished vessel, not illustrated here, a dwarf appears wearing a deer headdress that recalls those on Jaina dwarf figurines. Behind the hunchbacked figure on this pot stands a figure who may wield an ax, a reminder of the Puuc columns. But, on the majority of Holmul-style vases, there is no overt reference to sacrifice or death.

That so many vessels from one small area of the Petén illustrate variations on a single theme suggests the depiction of a now lost myth with strong regional associations. The meaning of the scene, and the significance of the two types of dwarfs, remains obscure, however. A tiny piece of jade from the cenote at Chichén Itzá, on which the remains of a dancer’s arm and part of a small hunch-

back are visible, indicates that the theme was not limited to vases (Proskouriakoff 1974: pl. 76a-3).

The first dated appearance of a dwarf in monumental art occurs on Caracol Stela 1 at 9.8.0.0.0 (Fig. 21); the last occurs on Xultún Stela 10 at 10.3.0.0.0 (von Euw 1978, 5:37). Other southern Maya lowland sites where dwarfs are represented include Tikal, Calakmul, Yaxhá, Dos Pilas, Yaxchilán, La Florida, Palenque, El Peru and possibly Naranjo. At some sites the dwarf is a recurring motif over a long period of time: at Caracol, dwarfs appear on stelae whose dates span eight katuns, while at Xultún the period is nearly ten katuns. Elsewhere, as at Tikal, the dwarf occurs within a more restricted time period or is present on only one extant monument.

While these dwarfs generally appear on stelae and lintels, some form part of architectural reliefs. The stucco dwarfs from Palenque have already been noted. At Tikal, the upper façade of a Late Classic structure in the Central Acropolis, now covered over, once displayed a large seated figure holding a ceremonial bar. On either side of the throne are a hunchbacked dwarf and a normally proportioned seated attendant, both with hands extended toward the central figure (Foncerrada de Molina 1976a: fig. 9; unpublished photograph, courtesy of Peter D. Harrison).

The dwarfs depicted in monumental sculpture, all of whom appear to be of the short-limbed type, are more elaborately dressed than the others discussed so far. Most wear jaguar-skin skirts, and their jade jewelry is comparable to that worn by the principal figures (Jones 1977: fig. 1). A tied cloth cap, however, is the typical headdress. Objects held by dwarfs include “incense” bags and manikin-head scepters (both present at Caracol only) and, more commonly, what looks like leaves or other vegetation (*ibid.*: fig. 17). Some appear to wear a partial mask over either the mouth or the eyes (*ibid.*).

The visual evidence indicates that dwarfs were of some importance at certain Maya sites. Other evidence suggests



Fig. 18 Painted cylinder vase, probably from Naranjo.

that they were close to, and perhaps even members of, the ruling families at sites where they are commonly represented. Reference has already been made to the burial of an abnormally short male at Tikal. This tomb was closely associated with a burial of another male who was short – although not abnormally so. Since the occu-

pants of tomb burials were generally larger than the rest of the population at Tikal, the small stature of these two individuals is unexpected (Haviland 1967:322). Nevertheless, if the Maya elite tended to intermarry, as recent work on the inscriptions of various sites suggests (e.g., Marcus 1976; Coggins 1975; Haviland 1977), this would increase the probability of hereditary defects in



Fig. 19 Holmul-style cylinder vase, detail. Central Maya Lowlands.



Fig. 20 Detail of tripod plate from Holmul.



Fig. 21 Caracol Stela 1.

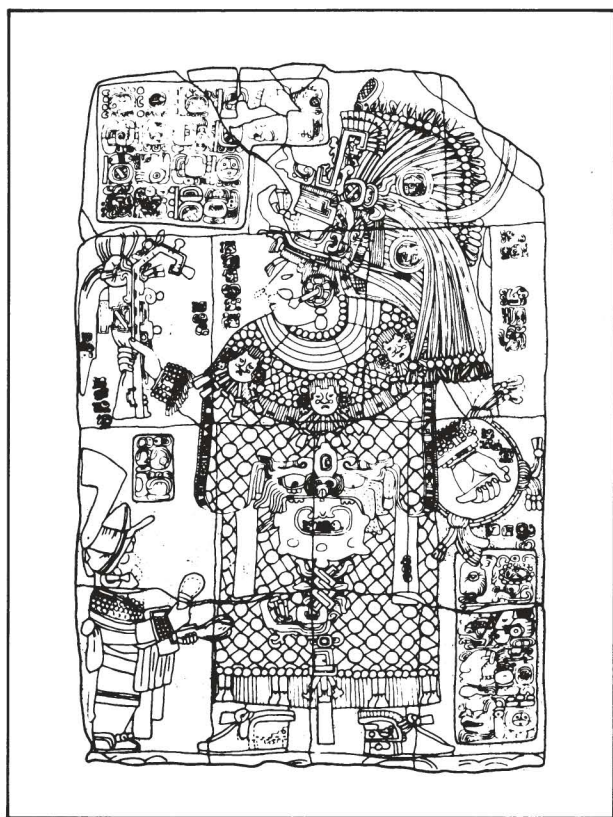


Fig. 22 El Perú Stela 34.

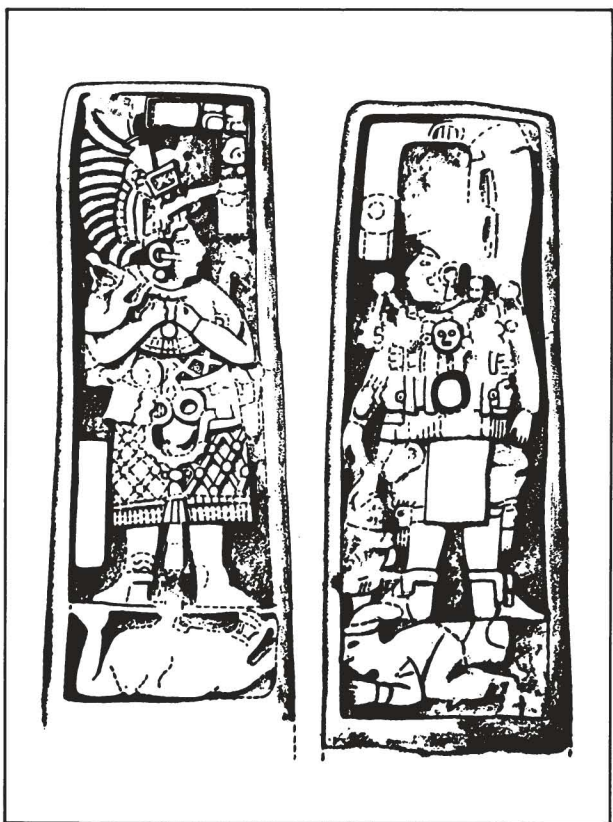


Fig. 23 Calakmul Stelae 28 and 29.

the noble line, particularly among later generations (Haviland 1967:322). An attempt has already been made to demonstrate that physical abnormalities represented in the art of Palenque were the direct result of inbreeding (Greene Robertson, Scandizzo, and Scandizzo 1976).

The representation of dwarfs at some sites over a long period of time suggests two possibilities. First, dwarfism was prevalent either within the general population or in the ruling family, and each dwarf represented is a different individual. Second, only one dwarf was born at the site, but he assumed such importance that subsequent rulers wished to include his portrait on their monuments. Even if only one dwarf was born into the ruling line, such an unusual being could have added special status to the hereditary elite. It is even possible that dwarfs born outside the ruling family were adopted because of presumed magical powers or other qualities that may have been attributed to them. This is not a farfetched possibility, considering that the Mexica supposedly deliberately deformed children for service in the emperor's court (Herrera y Tordesillas 1726-1730, 1:185), a practice also noted in antiquity and at even later periods in Europe (Linné 1943:182; Tietze-Conrat 1957:7, 14).

The short occupant of Tikal Burial 24 was buried in the most important possible location in Structure 5D-33, immediately before the door of the temple (Clemency Coggins 1975:382-383, and personal communication, 1980). The contents of the tomb were unusual for Tikal and suggest that the dead man had a specialized role (*ibid.*). Of course, it cannot be concluded that special treatment was accorded this individual because of his small stature, but it is evident that his height did not prevent him from holding an important position at Tikal. Coggins (*ibid.*:371) presents evidence linking this man to the southeast, particularly to Caracol, where the motif of the dwarf originated and endured for well over one hundred years. Shortly after Burial 24 (ca. 9.12.10.0.0), a dwarf was represented for the first time on a dated Tikal monument, Lintel 3 of Temple I (Jones 1977: fig. 1). The introduction of this motif seems to derive neither from Caracol nor from the possible dwarf burial but from yet another source.

Between about 9.11.0.0.0 and 9.15.10.0.0, Tikal displays close ties with sites in the Río Pasión region (Marcus 1976: 63-74). Tikal and Dos Pilas seem to have had the closest relationship, rulers at the latter site being titled with the emblem glyph of the former. The sites are also linked in their texts to a ruler from a third site, represented by the relief illustrated in Figure 22. Jeffrey Miller (1974) first proposed that this panel, now in the Cleveland Museum of Art, formed a pair with another relief in the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth and that they came from the site of Calakmul. The reliefs have since been identified as Stela 33 (the Kimbell relief) and Stela 34 (the Cleveland panel) of El Perú, Guatemala (Ian Graham, personal communication, 1983). A dwarf is featured on Stela 34. The glyph at A4 refers to the ruler Great Jaguar-Paw, whose name also occurs at Dos Pilas, Tikal and on numerous looted reliefs.

At Tikal, Dos Pilas, and El Perú, dwarfs occur on

monuments over a period of approximately fifty years, beginning with the El Perú reliefs dated 9.13.0.0.0. This sequence of dwarfs – and of paired monuments – may begin even earlier at Calakmul. Calakmul Stelae 28 and 29 (Fig. 23) have dedicatory dates of 9.9.10.0.0. On Stela 29, a dwarf is present at the (male) figure's right, barely visible below his hand. Proskouriakoff (1950: 185) has given Stela 29 a style date of 9.14.0.0.0, which, if correct, would place this half of the pair, at least, within the period under discussion. Because of the deteriorated condition of the inscriptions of these stelae, however, it is unlikely that much more information will be gleaned from them. Calakmul Stela 89, which also shows a dwarf, was dedicated at 9.15.10.0.0 but does not seem to have been paired with a female portrait (Ruppert and Denison 1943: pl. 53).

While there are stylistic and iconographic similarities between the El Perú and Calakmul stelae, the former also resemble reliefs of the Río Pasión area (see Fig. 24): the beaded tripartite pectoral, the fringed mask, and the fish-and-waterlily motif also occur on both El Perú Stela 33 and the Pasión monuments (Coggins 1975:400). Furthermore, the protagonist of Stela 34, Great Jaguar-Paw, is named at an earlier date at Dos Pilas. Persons from El Perú continue to be mentioned in Dos Pilas texts, including the ruler pictured in Figure 24, Shield God K of Tikal (Stuart and Stuart 1977:20). This newly discovered monument, Stela 25, is dated 9.14.0.0.0. It is the only Dos Pilas stela that depicts a dwarf. He is shown with a mythical water bird, a motif first introduced at Dos Pilas on Stela 1, dated five tuns earlier.

Meanwhile, the first Tikal relief representing a dwarf, Lintel 3 of Temple I, had been dedicated at 9.13.3.0.0 (Jones 1977: fig. 1). According to Coggins (1975: table 4), the personage represented here, Ruler A, may have been the brother of Shield God K of Dos Pilas. Although epigraphic evidence for such a relationship is lacking, surely the two sites were closely linked at this time, possibly ruled by two branches of the same family (ibid.: 300, 380, 445). Among the events discussed in the text of the lintel is some sort of war activity against the peripatetic Great Jaguar-Paw, in which he may have been captured and sacrificed (Schele 1979b:12).

The last Tikal monument with a dwarf is the lintel of Structure 5D-52, possibly dedicated by Ruler B at 9.15.10.0.0 (Jones 1977: fig. 17, p. 52). The water bird motif, last seen on Dos Pilas Stela 25 at 9.14.0.0.0, recurs with the dwarf. Coggins (1975:302), citing the presence of water birds on imported ceramics at an earlier period at Tikal, suggests that the bird may have somehow been an emblem of the Río Pasión connections of the Tikal ruling dynasty. Perhaps the dwarf, then, served as a symbol of a particular family, one with ties to Tikal, Dos Pilas, and El Perú.

Yet another example of this combination of dwarf and water bird occurs far away at Chichén Itzá. Figure 25 illustrates a jade plaque, clearly Late Classic in style, that was found in the cenote. Although the plaque was in fragments, it was possible to reconstruct the main elements of the scene: the bird, the large figure, and the

dwarf. The hieroglyphs on the back (Fig. 26) were reconstructed on the basis of parallel inscriptions from the cenote and elsewhere (Proskouriakoff 1974:207). Although the person and the place named here remain unidentified, perhaps someday they will be linked to one of the sites with dwarfs and water birds in its monuments.

To recapitulate: dwarfs appear at El Perú, Tikal, and Dos Pilas between 9.13.0.0.0 and 9.15.10.0.0. Tikal, Dos Pilas, and an unidentified site represented by the



Fig. 24 Dos Pilas Stela 25.

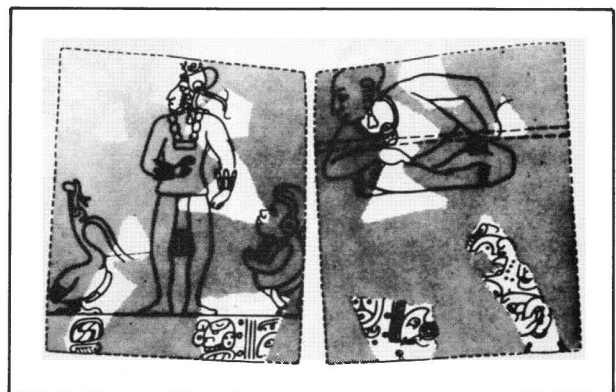


Fig. 25 Late Classic jade plaque. From the Sacred Cenote, Chichén Itzá.

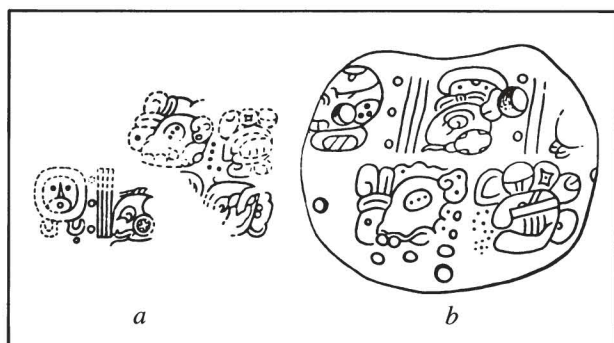


Fig. 26 Inscriptions from Classic Maya jades: (a) reconstruction of inscription on back of jade plaque illustrated in Fig. 25; (b) jade pendant from Guaymil, Yucatán.

jade plaque from Chichén Itzá also display the water bird. These places are linked not only by their shared iconography but by references in their texts to each other. Although the relationship between the three sites is not entirely clear, it is evident that their histories were somehow intertwined for a number of years. I have suggested that the dwarf may be symbolic of one family and its intersite connections.

There is other evidence that dwarfs may have been associated with lineage. They are often shown with women or with paired monuments of males and females that resemble family portraits. Clemency Coggins reminded me that small children are almost never represented by the Maya, despite their apparent preoccupation with documenting the family line. The dwarfs, then, may have served in some capacity as surrogate children. In a discussion of Olmec images, Coe (1973a:10-11) cites studies of human behavior in which the subjects showed a preference for large-headed, infantile images over normally proportioned figures. Perhaps the Maya, too, saw dwarfs as “superchildren.”

A dwarf, with the appearance of a child but the knowledge and training of an adult, could be expected to perform important rituals without the risk of error. One such

ritual may have been bloodletting, an activity with strong feminine associations. Males may have even donned female clothing to participate in autosacrifice (Ruppert, Thompson, and Proskouriakoff 1955:64). The first Maya stela to depict a dwarf, Caracol Stela 1, portrays not a woman but a male in female clothing (Stone, Reents, and Coffman, this volume), perhaps about to undergo a bloodletting ritual. Yaxhá Stela 31, discussed earlier, may indeed depict a dwarf about to be sacrificed (Fig. 17).

On one of the carved steps from Structure 33 at Yaxchilán, dwarfs appear, not as companions to a Maya lord but as participants or spectators in a ball game (Fig. 27). The presence of dwarfs with a figure in ball player attire at Jaina has already been noted (Fig. 8). Dwarfs also occur in ball game scenes on Late Classic polychrome vases (Nicholas Hellmuth, personal communication, 1980). The dwarfs on the Yaxchilán step have Venus signs on their bodies, and a Venus sign also occurs in a glyph in the panel between the ballplayers and the first dwarf. In Yucatec *ac* means both ‘turtle’ and ‘dwarf,’ and Gemini is known as *ac ek*, ‘turtle’ or ‘dwarf star’ (Martínez Hernández 1929). Since the inscriptions on this step record dates far into the past (Linda Schele, personal communication, 1980), the scene may represent a mythical event involving ball players and “astral” dwarfs. Whatever the meaning of the scene, it does not fit the historical mold suggested for the other reliefs on which dwarfs appear in southern lowland sculpture.

The dwarf, then, is a widespread motif in Classic Maya art, appearing from highland Guatemala to northern Yucatán, in nearly every medium and in a variety of contexts. Dwarfs apparently enjoyed a privileged status and played a number of important roles in Maya society. Their presence in palace scenes on pottery and next to rulers portrayed in monumental art is suggestive of the Mexica practice of employing dwarfs as court attendants. They may even have served as surrogates for royal children for important events like bloodletting. The Puuc columns and Yaxhá Stela 31 raise the possibility that dwarfs may themselves have been sacrificed. Nevertheless, there are indications that dwarfs may have been members of

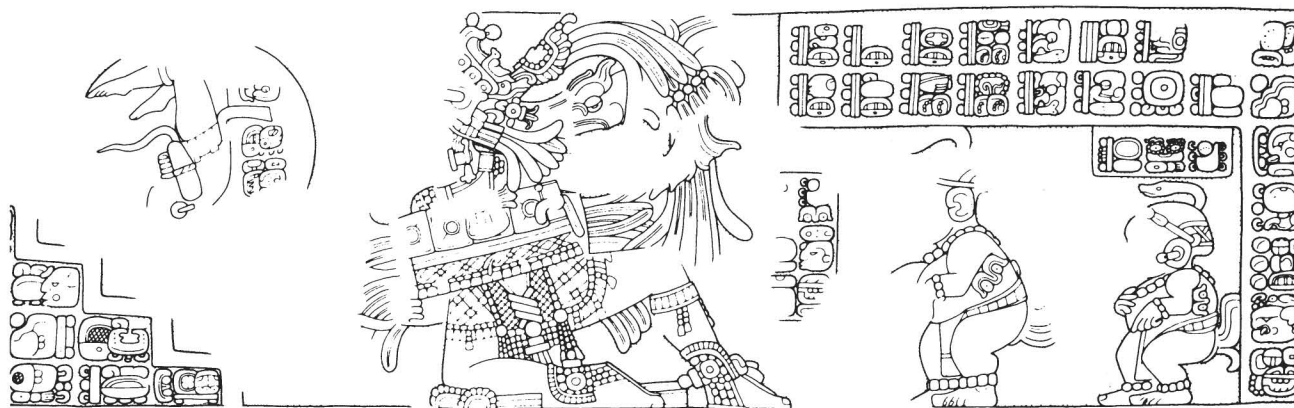


Fig. 27 Yaxchilán, Structure 33, Step VII. Detail center.

the ruling elite, the result, perhaps, of inbreeding. Some dwarfs may even have been emblematic of a ruling dynasty or of its connections with various sites.

Unlike many of the dwarfs depicted in monumental art, some of whom were very likely historical persons, those on Holmul-style vessels seem to be mythological. The great number of pottery dwarfs deposited in Jaina burials indicates that they had an especially powerful association with the earth and the underworld, a connection that persists today among the Maya.

The Maya, like many other peoples, singled out deformed individuals, particularly dwarfs, as special beings. Their significance for the Classic Maya may never be fully understood. It is hoped, however, that this introduction to this rich body of material will encourage archaeologists, art historians, ethnologists, and medical doctors to undertake further investigations of the motif of the dwarf in Maya art and society.

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and commenting on dozens of illustrations of Maya dwarfs. I am also grateful to numerous colleagues who have not only informed me of the existence of Maya artifacts on which dwarfs are represented but have also provided me with photographs and drawings of unpublished materials.

Note

Fig. 1, redrawn by the author, is from Cook de Leonard 1971. Figs. 2, 9, 10, and 11 are by Merle Greene Robertson. Fig. 3 is from Gordon and Mason 1925-1943. Fig. 4 is from J. E. S. Thompson 1973b. Fig. 5, in the Barbachano Collection, Mexico City, is from Rothmans of Pall Mall Canada 1978. Fig. 6 is from Corson 1976. Fig. 7 is from Groth-Kimball 1960. Figs. 8 and 15, in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, are by the author. Fig. 12, in the Palenque museum, is by Linda Schele. Figs. 13, 25, and 26 are from Proskouriakoff 1974; Fig. 26b is in the Elizabeth K. Easby Collection. Figs. 14 and 16 are by Larry Mills; Fig. 14 is in the Worcester Art Museum, Fig. 16 in the Campeche museum. Figs. 17 and 27 are by Ian Graham. Fig. 18, in the Marianne Faivre Collection, Dixon, Illinois, is by Justin Kerr. Fig. 19, in a private collection, is by Nicholas M. Hellmuth, courtesy of the Foundation for Latin American Anthropological Research, Los Angeles. Fig. 20 is from Merwin and Vaillant 1932. Fig. 21 is by Merle Greene Robertson. Fig. 22 is from J. Miller 1974. Fig. 23 is from Ruppert and Denison 1943. Fig. 24 is by George Stuart.