Person and Place in Preclassic Maya Community Ritual (400 BC – AD 300)

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Abstract: Preclassic Maya centers were vibrant stages of performance where communities gathered to reaffirm and redefine themselves. Ceremonial pyramids and plazas were tangible and powerful receptacles of past and present forms of community identity. Archaeological remains enable us to develop a multi-generational sketch of public ritual life in the Maya lowlands from 400 BC to AD 300. Transformations in public performance and community participation corresponded with a series of modifications to ceremonial precincts. Public architecture in many communities became increasingly less accessible to a large audience of observers. The artistic imagery associated with these buildings also changed markedly—initially depicting zoomorphic or masked beings and ultimately culminating in the portraiture of real historic personages. Concomitant with these changes were pronounced innovations in ritual interment as certain community members began to be entombed in and around public architecture. Taken together, these features suggest Preclassic Maya communities altered their ritual practices to accommodate emerging social realities and inchoate political identities.

INTRODUCTION

Community rituals provide opportune moments to express identity, social values, and political agendas. Material settings encapsulate notions of personal and communal identity and are thus expressive of prevailing social themes and practices. Alterations to these settings reveal shifts in the way people established, maintained, and perceived their interpersonal relationships. Our aim in this paper is to explore how changes in ritual settings signal alterations in the perception of self and community by presenting a trans-generational sketch of public ceremonial life among the Preclassic Maya of Central America.

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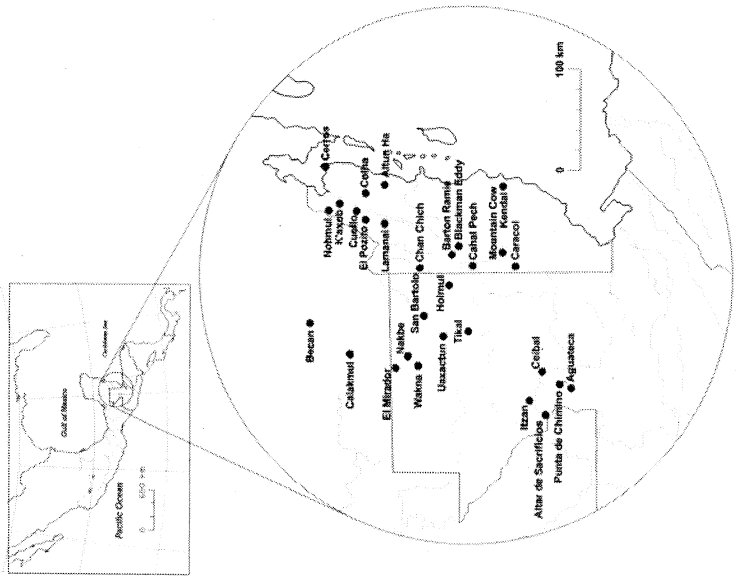

Figure 1 Map of the Maya Lowlands showing sites discussed in the text.

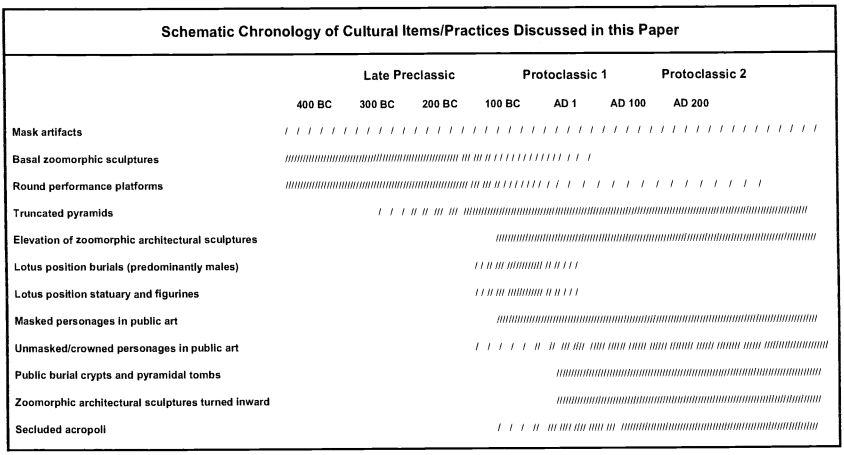

Table 1

The region we discuss is a semi-deciduous tropical forest located in the heart of the Yucatan Peninsula. The majority of sites described in this paper are located in the Petén district of modern-day Guatemala and the neighboring countries of Belize and Mexico (Figure 1). Topography, rainfall, and natural resources vary substantially throughout the region, but the climate is generally hot with humidity near 100% in the rainy season. The people we describe are conventionally called "Maya," but no conclusive evidence exists for a pan-regional cultural identity of this sort in pre-contact times.

Our discussion partly focuses on the practice of "masking" or masquerading. We believe the practice of masking, which allows people to project certain aspects of their identity while concealing others, provides a viable avenue for theorizing community transformations in Preclassic Mayadom. The partially scripted, yet unfinalized and indeterminate nature of masked performance, provides a medium in which personal and community identities can transform themselves by altering their expressive qualities in minute and subtle ways.

We briefly examine how changes in masked ritual performance appear to correspond with community redefinements, as evidenced through changes in architectural spaces, visual imagery, and burial practices. We discuss the

entombment and subsequent memorialization of select individuals in and around public architecture, and interpret this evidence by citing ways communities remember and apotheosize their dead (Jackson 1977). Table 1 presents the surmised distribution of these social practices through time.

The following assumptions are made in examining the Preclassic evidence: (1) central plazas were venues for community rituals, (2) pyramids within and along these plazas had ceremonial functions, (3) Maya people oriented their lives around rituals and ceremonies that engaged the supernatural world of ancestors, spirits, and possibly even deities, and (4) leadership and governance were often legitimated, challenged, and affirmed in public ritual settings. These assumptions are empirically valid for the Classic Maya and have become axiomatic in Maya scholarship (Coe 1999; Martin and Grube 2001; Schele and Freidel 1990; Schele and Miller 1986; Sharer 1994; Thompson 1954). Nevertheless, our comments are broad characterizations of the pre-Classic record. Practices, behaviors, and beliefs attributable to the Classic Maya may not apply to Preclassic societies. We also recognize that some Maya communities did not take part in the trends discussed herein. The reasons they did or did not participate are important and will hopefully be better understood as more field research comes to focus on the Preclassic.

COMMUNITY RITUALS AS FORUMS FOR IDENTITY EXPRESSION

Communities are symbolic constructions that exist in the minds of their members, yet they arise through shared life experiences and rituals in the physical world (Anderson 2000). Because communities are symbolic they are flexible enough to accommodate their members without compromising their individuality or personality. Indeed, rather than strictly confine identities, communities provide additional referents for individual personae (Cohen 1995). In this sense, the material

phenomena associated with community ritual are properties that "add to" each individual's particular history of experiences. Traditions, bodily practices, and rituals performed communally are physical articulations of the prevailing conditions of sociality (Turner 1967). Hence, the physical settings of rituals reciprocally exhibit qualities of communal identity and practice.

Rituals are future-oriented and attitudinally directed toward the advancement of personal, factional, and communal interests (Jackson 1998; Scott 1985). Rituals involve promises or pledges for future action, upon which the social order depends (Halpin 1983:223). However, because social orders are always incomplete, unfinalized (Bakhtin 1990), and indeterminate (Barth 1987; Moore 1975), rituals can never be precisely repeated. Rituals thus persist by a variable balance between loss and accretion (Barth 1987:26-27). Thus, every time a ritual is performed elements are lost, modified, or added. Ritual innovation is the product of small changes taking place incessantly. In the throes of daily life, the very familiarity of such innovations makes them difficult to perceive or understand (Morson and Emerson 1990:23).

Community rituals are also collective experiences, and while they may minimize certain social distinctions on the surface (Turner 1967; 1969), they necessarily involve a blending of subjective understandings (Cohen 1995; Crapanzano 1992:262). Rituals do not equivocate, and so they conceal divergences of opinion and varying degrees of belief (Halpin 1983:220-223). As plenums of experience, community rituals abound with sights, sounds, sensations, aromas, bodily movements, and emotions. A kinetic symbolism obtains among physical acts, dialogues, architectural spaces, and imagery. Participants introduce a situational awareness into each ritual engagement, an understanding of what came before and a hope for what was to come. The pronounced and sometimes subtle modifications crafted in architecture and iconography, not only in scale but also in form, reflect substantive changes in the way

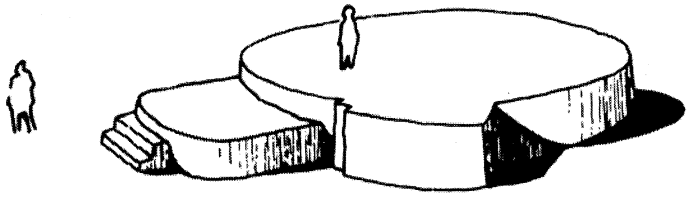

Figure 2 Structure C-13, 3rd, a round performance platform dating to the Middle Preclassic period (c. 600 - 400 BC) from the site of Altun Ha, Belize (Redrawn from Pendergast 1979).

Maya people perceived themselves socially and individually. Indeed, these changes altered the way people experienced ritual and articulated their identities.

EXPERIENTIAL QUALITIES OF PRECLASSIC MAYA ARCHITECTURE

Our cursory examination of Preclassic ritual begins around 400 BC at the end of the Middle Preclassic period. Round performance platforms were commonplace during this time (Hendon 1999, 2000; Aimers et al. 2000). Three phenomenological features characterize these early platforms: (1) their ambientality; they could be viewed on all sides by an audience of observers, (2) their proximity to ground level, and (3) their placement among household compounds (Figure 2). We believe the physical accessibility of these platforms rendered them conducive to the expression of household identities and interests. These structures lacked iconographic embellishments

plastered in stucco or carved in limestone.[1] Also absent at this time were public stone monuments in the form of statuary, stelae, or altars.

In the following century, the Maya constructed more massive architectural forms upon these small domestic plazas. Principal among these was the truncated pyramid (Figure 3). These pyramids typically lacked an apical superstructure or 'temple,' hence the term truncated. Truncated pyramids were often radial in form, having four sets of stairs, one on each side (Harrison 1999).[2] The earliest truncated pyramids were low enough to the ground to permit observation of events taking place on their peaks. At a number of centers, truncated pyramids were built directly over round platforms

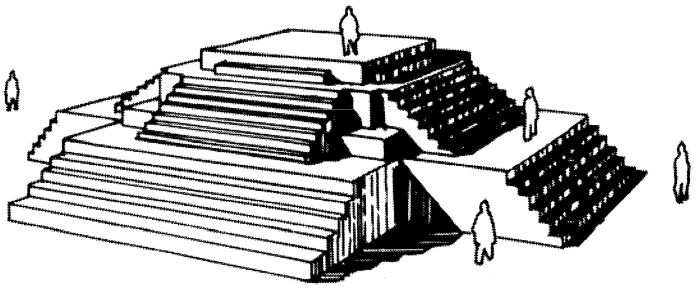

Figure 3 Structure C-13, 2nd, a Late Preclassic truncated pyramid superimposed upon Structure C-13, 3rd, a round platform, at the site of Altun Ha, Belize (Redrawn from Pendergast 1979).

[1] Two centers, Nakbe in northern Guatemala and Blackman Eddy in central Belize, were precocious in this regard. Both have produced the earliest zoomorphic architectural sculptures thus far discovered in the Maya lowlands.

[2] Some radial pyramids were truncated (e.g., Tikal's Lost World pyramid, Structure 5C-54) while others supported thatched wooden pavilions (e.g., Uaxactun's E-XII-Sub). Radial pyramids with perishable superstructures probably succeeded truncated forms, but the available data are currently too imprecise to verify this.

(Hendon 1999:113). Like their round predecessors, truncated pyramids were often located in the immediate vicinity of domestic buildings. Actions performed on them thus remained visible from nearby domiciles.[3]

Another salient feature of truncated pyramids is the presence of lime plastered façades depicting large grotesque, zoomorphic faces (Figure 4). The late Maya scholar, Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1979:113), suspected that the sculpted zoomorphic faces of the Preclassic period were probably "composite signs," rather than mere depictions of supernatural beings. She believed such images quite likely derived from ancient masked dances and secular dramas, events that entailed

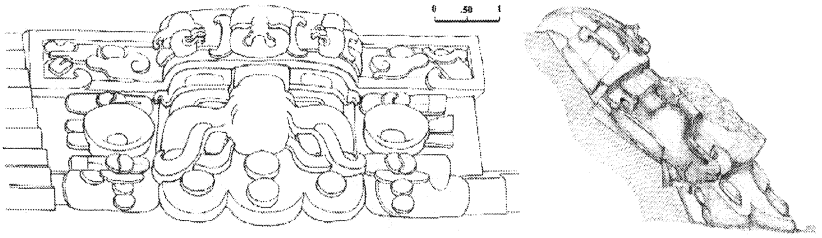

Figure 4 Stucco façade at the base of the Group H platform, Uaxactun, Guatemala. (Adapted from Valdés 1992).

[3] There is good evidence from Cerros, Cuello, Colha, K'axob, Barton Ramie, Cahal Pech, Uaxactun, San Bartolo, Altar de Sacrificios, Aguateca, Itzan, and Becan that Late Preclassic residents built their domiciles in a rather unrestricted manner within the site core in close proximity to monumental architecture (an observation made poignantly by Potter 1985 and Scarborough 1980:305). It remains to be determined whether this pattern occurred in Late Preclassic metropoli like Nakbe, El Mirador, Wakna, and Calakmul. At centers such as Tikal, Ceibal, Punta de Chimino, and possibly Lamanai later construction may have erased evidence of such a residence pattern. By Early Classic times, only elaborate residences, many of which are corbel-vaulted palaces, were allowed to be built near monumental architecture.

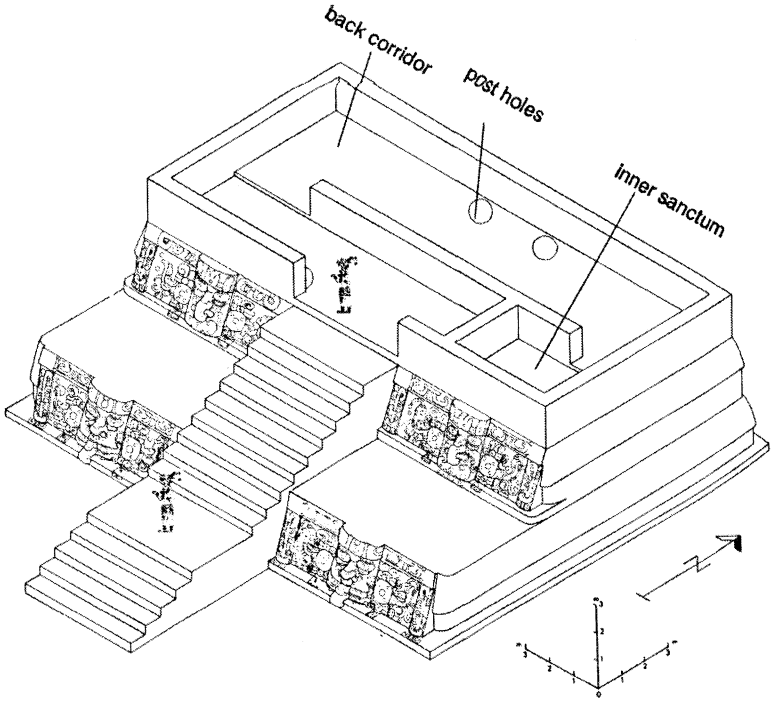

Figure 5 Structure 5C-2nd, a "terminal" Late Preclassic structure (c. 50 BC) from the site of Cerros, Belize. (Schele and Freidel 1990:figure 3:6; Reprinted with permission of Harper Collins Publishers).

the repetitive dispensation of secular and sacred knowledge via signs and symbols. The physical properties of these early ritual spaces are conducive to rituals choreographed and performed by a broad sector of the community. For example, Late Preclassic architectural faces normally dwarf an adult person, making their composite elements easily visible to observers standing level with them. The earliest buildings equipped with such representations were of low elevation; the zoomorphic heads were approachable from plaza level.

Around 100 BC the Maya began to erect taller buildings with masonry superstructures, some of which had multiple

rooms or chambers (Figure 5). These designs introduced exclusivity to public ritual that had not been evident before. Would be observers were now alienated from certain "sites" of ritual action. Rituals that affected or impacted the community were now carried out in full or partial seclusion. Most importantly, community members permitted select individuals to carry out these rituals on their behalf.

As the Late Preclassic continued, communities began to design segregated public settings. By terminal Late Preclassic or Protoclassic times (c. AD 100) the inhabitants of Nakbe, El Mirador, Uaxactun, Tikal, and Cerros erected pairs of inward facing temples on higher pyramidal platforms. The zoomorphic mosaics on these temples now faced inward across a smaller plaza area or 'acropolis.' These triadic complexes are comprised of two pyramidal structures of equal size flanking a third, more prominent pyramid. Triadic arrangements are found on the apexes of the largest truncated pyramids, becoming a common feature of ceremonial architecture by the end of the Preclassic period (Hansen 1998:77). Sculpted faces on these buildings were no longer visible to audiences in the main plazas below. William Coe (1990:904) describes how masked panels disappear from lower levels of Tikal's Northern Acropolis at the end of the Late Preclassic. Such masked panels are subsequently found only on well-elevated structures. They were clearly meant to be seen and interacted with by a select group of ritual performers in more confined spaces or 'stages' atop pyramidal platforms. One of the earliest instances of this practice occurs on the central temple of Mundo Perdido's E Group (Laporte 2000:4). The sculpted jaguar faces on Structure 5D-86 were placed in the interior space away from the plaza. At centers such as Lamanai, substructure zoomorphs continued to look out upon open plazas, but they were tiered on a series of terraces elevating them to heights that significantly diminished their visibility and proxemic interactivity. In many Maya communities, earlier buildings with ground-level zoomorphic façades were entombed in later

pyramids lacking this type of basal ornamentation. At Cerros, although structures with zoomorphic basal sculpture continued they were relegated to the peripheries of the main acropolis (Figure 6; see also Schele and Freidel 1990:103). Hence, a variety of strategies aimed at shifting and controlling the observable perspectives of monumental sculpture were integrated into Terminal Late Preclassic architectural design. An advanced phase of Group H at Uaxactun exhibited many of these strategies simultaneously (Figure 7). The flexible, transitional, and experimental nature of Late Preclassic sculptural proxemics leads us to believe that each community orchestrated its rituals in its own way, extracting symbols from a general representational canon to address local relationships. In large urban communities like El Mirador, monumental zoomorphic faces were probably elevated for a practical reason; to make them visible to a larger audience. Yet at smaller centers, elevation and concealment were hardly necessary, which leads us to question the motives and purposes behind the

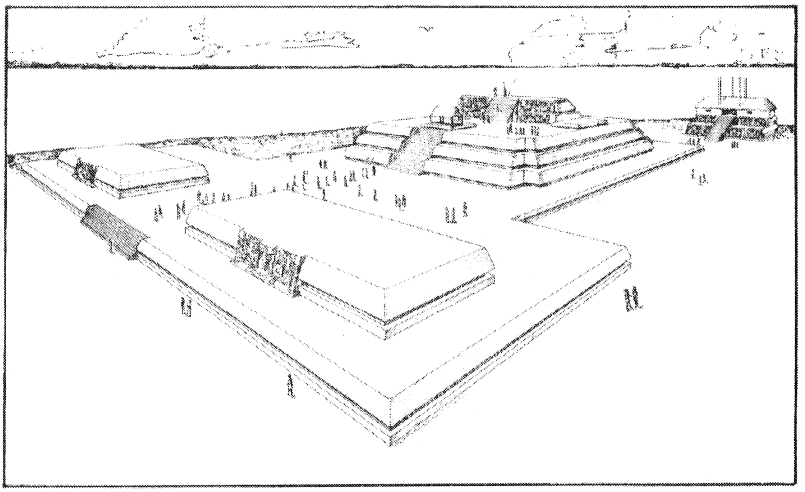

Figure 6 The Structure 6 Acropolis at the site of Cerros, Belize. This was the second temple complex built at Cerros, erected sometime in the first century AD. Structure 5C-2nd, an earlier pyramid shown in the background, was relegated to the periphery of the ceremonial center (Schele and Freidel 1990:figure 3:17; Reprinted with permission of Harper Collins Publishers).

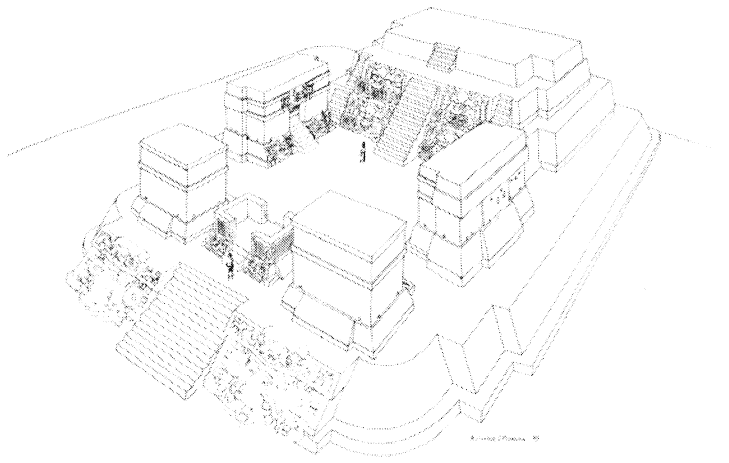

Figure 7 Appearance of Uaxactun's Group H by the end of the Late Preclassic period. (Hansen 1999; drawing by Terry Rutledge and Dave Morgan; Reprinted with permission of Dumbarton Oaks).

manipulation of these ritual settings.

The above architectural modifications coincided with decisive changes in the way protagonists were publicly depicted in stone. For the first time, human faces appear without masks (Figure 8). We believe this unveiling of the face in public art signals an important alteration in Preclassic Maya politics, ritual practice, and community identity.

FROM MASKING TO CROWNING

Throughout most of the Preclassic, governance may have been partly (and perhaps heavily) validated through public masked performance.[4] Through masks, social distinctions could be muted and political power euphemized (Bourdieu 1994). In short, the architectural, mortuary, and iconographic records

[4] For an engaging discussion of mask use in a very different social context among the Aztec see Klein (1986).

strongly intimate that Late Preclassic leader identities were blurred and diffused through masked rituals of enchantment deriving perhaps from broadly effective social guards against political self-promotion.

A "skull mask" fragment cut from an adult person's frontal bone and perforated for attachment or suspension was recently discovered in a Middle Preclassic context at Cuello (Hammond et al. 2002). The Cuello find attests to the antiquity of masking in the Maya lowlands and implies a transfer of abilities or powers from dead to living. The Cuello mask may explain other peculiar findings, such as the adult human skull with missing frontal bone recently excavated by the first author in a dedicatory cache along the central axis of a Late Preclassic E Group building at Punta de Chimino. Aside from these findings, there are admittedly few salient indicators of masking during the Middle and Late Preclassic periods. Rarer still are iconographic representations of individuals (masked or unmasked) in public art.

The earliest public representations of individuals appear during the Terminal Late Preclassic/Protoclassic period, and these depictions are normally of masked individuals. Like previous periods, mask artifacts are rarely found. One plausible explanation could be their perishability. Ethnographically, ritual masks are typically constructed of lightweight organic materials such as cloth, leather, wood, fiber, bark, hair, or gourds—all of which rapidly disintegrate in tropical environments. Known examples of Classic Maya masks are typically made of durable materials such as greenstone or shell. However, a pair of delicate (2-3 cm thick) ceramic masks was recently excavated in a burned royal palace at Aguateca (Beubien 2000; Inomata et al. 2001). The masks were made by coating gauze-like textiles with a viscous clay solution, then pressing the mixture into a mold before firing. Lightweight clay masks of this nature are

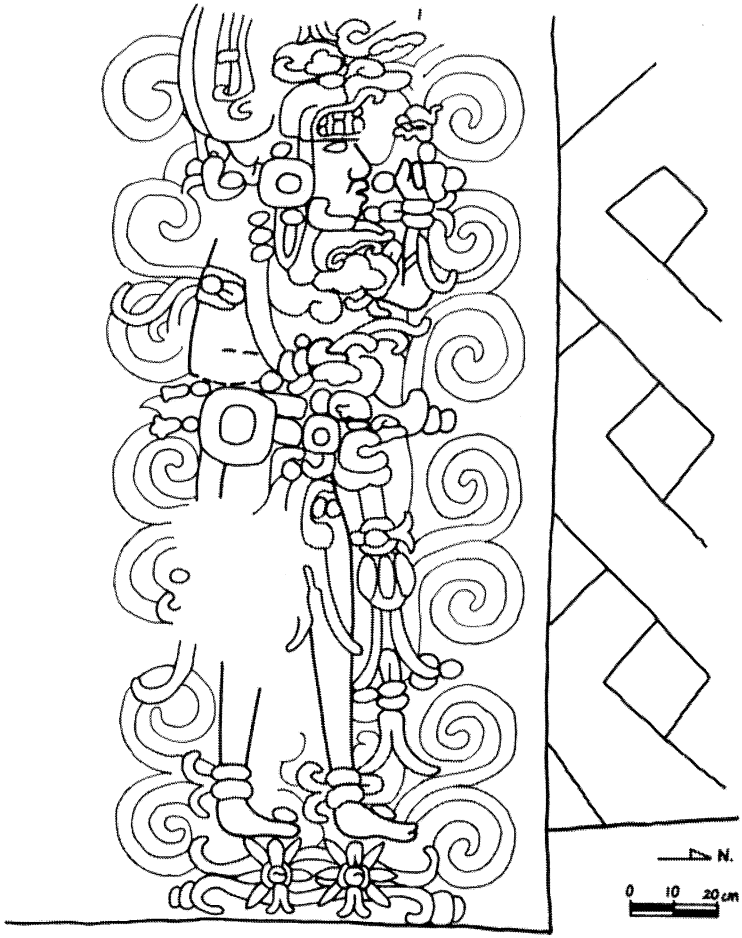

Figure 8 Low-relief carving of an unmasked human figure on the doorjamb of temple-structure H-Sub-10 at the site of Uaxactun, Petén, Guatemala. (Redrawn from Valdés 1993).

ostensibly more versatile for ritual performance than the heavy greenstone mosaics often found in Classic Maya royal tombs, (the latter also typically lacked apertures for the wearer's eyes). Most Preclassic masks may have been made of similar

lightweight, perishable materials. The practice of deliberately destroying or burning masks, costumes, and other ritual paraphernalia is also culturally widespread (Babcock 1986:133) and may explain the paucity of mask artifacts.[5]

Identities continued to be concealed in public art as the first temple rooms and acropoli were built toward the end of the Preclassic. The first public stelae date to this time and exhibit the importance of masks and masking (see Hansen 1991a:figure 4; 1991b:14; Schele 1985). A striking stone monument from Nakbe, Guatemala portrays two masked individuals facing each other with the protagonist on the left pointing to a mask above (Figure 9). The scale of this monument is unusual. Most Terminal Preclassic monuments are small (about a meter tall), despite the occasional prodigious size of Terminal Preclassic public buildings (cf. Hansen 2004:32).

Unmasked individuals are publicly depicted for the first time at the very end of the Preclassic circa 100 BC. One of the first examples is a series of stucco friezes embellishing the doorjambs on Uaxactun's H-Sub-10 vestibule (Figures 7 and 8). The depicted individuals have generic countenances and duplicated costume elements. Nothing clarifies or distinguishes their identity, either as separate historical characters or a single protagonist whose image is repeated.

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[5] Currently, there is no direct evidence for symbolic mask destruction among the Preclassic Maya. Curious, however, is the discovery of a number of "empty" Late Preclassic pits at the site of Lamanai (Pendergast 1998:56). The pits were paired with pottery caches placed in plazas near the primary axes of large pyramids. These pits most likely had a special function because they occurred multiple times in the same plazas. Some were lined by a "thin basal stratum of organic decay product" possibly resulting from burning. Pendergast believes the pits contained offerings entirely composed of perishable objects, either artifacts or unmodified natural materials. Deposits of this nature may have contained perishable items such as ritual masks.

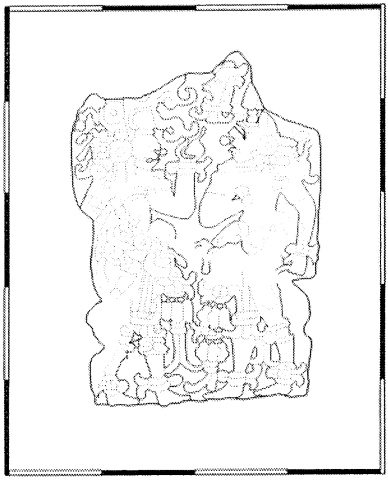

Figure 9 Stela 1 from Nakbe, Guatemala. Scale increment equals 1.00 m (Redrawn from Hansen 1991b:14).

The recently discovered painted mural on San Bartolo's Structure 1 exhibits transitional, Preclassic to Protoclassic representational practices (Saturno and Taube 2004).[6] The mural wraps around the upper-half of the large interior space of a plaza-level hall building with multiple front entryways. The liminality of this space is of great interest: not too restrictive and private to prevent entry from the plaza, but certainly not openly public, since the images were viewable from the inside only. The mural is divided thematically into multiple scenes which blur mythical and temporal realities. The central male figure in the main scene wears a bucal mask similar to the one dangling above on Nakbe's Stela 1. He is surrounded by two unmasked

[6] Ceramic, stratigraphic, and iconographic evidence suggest a Protoclassic 1 (75 BC-AD150) date for this mural, a conclusion that would be in line with the social practices described in this paper. Unpublished radiocarbon dates from the underlying plaster surface suggest a date of c. 100 BC for the San Bartolo mural, although it remains conceivable that the mural was painted sometime thereafter.

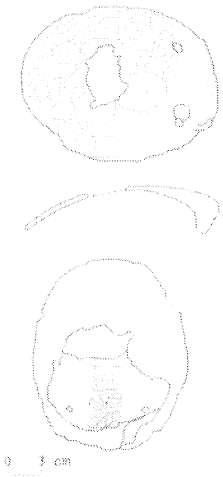

Figure 10 Incised *Spondylus* pectoral from Burial 21, Mundo Perdido, Tikal, Guatemala (Redrawn from Laporte 2000:figure 5a).

female personages and one unmasked male, whose body paint and attire clearly differentiate them. This scene attests to the continued importance of shielding the face of prominent community leaders in public art. Significantly, this scene is the earliest known depiction of Lowland Maya women in public monumental art. A separate scene, however, portrays a man seated on a throne-like chair as attendants place an elaborate headdress on his head. This image is quite likely the earliest known representation of a crowning event in the Maya lowlands.

Well into the Protoclassic, before rulers were portrayed naturally and named hieroglyphically on freestanding "outdoor" monuments, attention began to be directed away from the symbolism of the mask and channeled toward the person wearing it. An incised drawing on the dorsal side of a Spondylus pectoral from Tikal's vaulted Mundo Perdido tomb (c. AD 250) illustrates a cut-away of a man wearing a mask (Figure 10). The person dons the mask of a grotesque creature—whose long snout, furled brow, and cleft upper gum are all reminiscent of the zoomorphic creatures depicted on Late

Preclassic pyramidal façades. The mask is rendered in cross-section to display the human protagonist within (a technique that becomes convention in Late Classic ceramic and parietal paintings). Most importantly, this pectoral would have been worn on the chest. The representation on this bodily ornament essentially reveals or unmasks the protagonist but only in face-to-face interaction.

Cross-culturally, masquerades are known to be "complex and multifaceted events, regularly involving many cultural domains—initiations, funerals, feasts, wealth distributions, healing and entertainment, among others" (Halpin 1983:224). According to McCarty and Nunley (1999:484), "masks are the most ancient means of changing identity and assuming a new persona." In many societies masks are used in rites of transition, moving participants from one social circumstance to another (Tonkin 1989:484). Masks are easily employed as vehicles for modifying, reversing, or transcending one's everyday status. In many native cultures, masked performance provides an acceptable forum for subverting or reaffirming the social order. In governmental arenas, ceremonial masks communicate a philosophy of order and justice. The earliest Maya stelae are found in public monumental spaces and depict masked individuals, suggesting masked performance played a central role in the enactment and negotiation of community identities. Still, as Halpin (1983:226) reminds us, the essence of masquerade is that "those who commit their life to the maintenance of the traditional order are given the privilege of breaking it." It stands to reason that some masked performers transformed their identities by manipulating the symbolic meaning of their dramaturgical actions. We believe this practice occurred with greater frequency and success during the Late Preclassic-Protoclassic transition from 100 BC to AD 100.

Protoclassic 1 imagery and material culture reflect a discursive interplay between masking and crowning. The faces of crowned human personages gradually appear alongside, or

substitute for, the zoomorphic faces found on Late Preclassic buildings. The masks become literally incorporated into crowns or headdresses worn on top of the head. By Protoclassic 2 times, the depiction of crowned leaders on stelae is firmly established and greater numbers of jadeite masks begin to appear in tombs in association with other exquisite bodily ornaments.

In his study of the relationship between personal adornment and leadership in African kingdoms, Christopher Steiner (1990:437) discovered that in centralized polities the "arts of display" tend to "make visible the leader and the wealth and power of his court" while "the arts of uncentralized African political systems tend to be arts of masking that function to conceal rather than reveal a potential locus of authority." Steiner insisted that "while crowns and masks may both be classified as decorations of the head, they are in fact very different from one another. The secrecy afforded by the mask protects "those engaged in judicial and policy-making deliberations against pressure from their various lineages" (Steiner 1990:438). The Maya evidence accords well with Steiner's conclusion:

> ...there exists a continuum of body ornamentation associated with political authority which ranges from adornments that help the leader be seen to those that serve the leader as screen. In societies with uncentralized political organization it has been demonstrated that masking disguises the source of authority. In some cases masks allow lawmakers to remain anonymous (and presumably impartial) while carrying out the enforcement of rules. In others, masks permit those in subordinate positions to criticize superiors without risking punishment or retaliation. In societies with centralized political organization *crowns make visible the locus of authority*. Crowning can be divided into two separate categories. The first, which falls somewhere in the middle of the overall continuum, partially masks the wearer. In a divine kingdom, this type of crowning hides the secular form of the leader in order to focus full attention on the sacred office which he represents. The second type of crowning draws attention to the individual in power. Characteristic of administrative kingdoms like that of the Asante, this sort of crowning frames the leader in a panoply of regalia: a stool at his feet, a state umbrella above his head, and a ring of attendants all around. (Steiner 1990:442)

For the Preclassic Maya, faces of authority had a powerful and possibly volatile symbolic potency. Socially, the shift from masking to crowning in the Protoclassic appears to have been uneasy and tense. Exposition of the face was not taken lightly. Representations of humans were decommissioned or terminated by intentionally obliterating the face or eyes or removing the head completely (e.g., Figures 10 and 12). In addition, heads of the entombed were frequently concealed by ceramic vessels or removed post-mortem (Hermes 1999) and substituted with other objects (Andrews 1981:323; Harrison 1999).[7] In some cases human heads were also ritually "cached" in vessels beneath the largest community residences (Hammond 1999:60) and in the vicinity of pyramidal buildings (Chase 1983; Chase and Chase 1987). The earliest hieroglyphic writing is contemporaneous with these incipient Protoclassic practices. The writing style is decidedly logographic and comprised mainly of beast and humanoid heads, reflecting once again a social preoccupation with the head and face.

CRAFTING IDENTITIES: CACHE PLACEMENT AND ENTOMBMENT

Caching events and public entombment were aspects of community ritual that paralleled and intersected masked performance. The ancient Maya repeatedly marked or commemorated public spaces by inserting objects of collective value into them. During Middle Preclassic times, public or "communal" caches and burials were preferentially placed beneath plazas (Adams 1999:52). Many of the round Middle

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[7] Hammond (1999:59-60) describes how skull caching acquired a more public ceremonial function in the Late Preclassic at Cuello. The practice of covering the face with a ceramic vessel was widely practiced from Middle Preclassic times onward. Here, we draw attention to the fact that an attempt was made to retain this time-honored practice in the face of radical social changes.

Preclassic structures mentioned previously contained burials and caches. Most late Middle Preclassic round structures with burials have been excavated in Belize. Examples are Structures 14 and 15 from Cahal Pech (Powis and Hohmann 1995), Structures C-13 3rd and C-17 from Altun Ha (Pendergast 1990), Structure 1 at Colha (Anthony and Black 1994), Structure 305 at Cuello (Gerhardt and Hammond 1991), and Structure 1D at K'axob (McAnany and Lopez Varela 1999). All ages and sexes are represented in these circular platforms and burial items are diverse, but equally represented across age/sex categories. These practices suggest a conscious effort by community members to minimize social distinctions and emphasize commonalities. In addition, the location of these structures near domiciles, the energy invested in their construction (hard, thick plasters), their special, yet austere decoration (red paint), and the absence of a secretive superstructure suggest they were collective, communal creations (Hendon 1999:112). The rituals associated with these offerings most likely transpired at or near ground level with few, if any, architectural obstructions. At the beginning of the subsequent Late Preclassic period, caches began to be inserted into the basal elements of pyramids, particularly beneath their central stairways. Toward the very end of the Preclassic, a considerable degree of caching began to occur on the tops of pyramids, especially in secluded temple chambers.

Throughout most of the Late Preclassic period only some community members were interred below ceremonial plazas and platforms. Fewer still were buried in pyramidal bases.[8] McAnany et al. (1999) have proposed that for a brief time in the latter half of the Late Preclassic (Protoclassic 1) period (c. AD 100) a few communities experimented with rituals that involved

[8] The earliest example of this practice may be a double burial at the base of Nakbe's Structure 32 (López 1993:99-110). The interment is believed to date to the end of the Middle Preclassic period c. 450 BC. The interment may be sacrificial in nature, which would explain its anomalous location for this time period.

the display of a deceased personage. Venerated subjects were wrapped, "bundled," and eventually buried in seated cross-legged positions below imposing domiciles or the basal stairs of prominent edifices (Figure 11).[9] A miniature limestone sculpture redeposited beneath a Protoclassic plaza surface at Uaxactun portrays a male individual in the seated position (Figure 12). This three-dimensional carving, a rarity in Preclassic Lowland Maya art, had its head removed prior to deposition.

By Protoclassic times, burials began to be placed in the fill of pyramids themselves—beneath stairways and below sanctuary floors. As always, there were local deviations from this burial practice. Known exceptions, such as the sub-plaza "tomb" at the base of Structure A-15 at Chan Chich, reflect an acknowledgement of earlier mortuary practices (Robichaux in Houk 1998; Valdez 1998). Nevertheless, the new trend at most centers was to place select individuals in tombs at the tops of pyramids. Slate box tombs also appeared in eastern Belize at this time at sites such as Kendal (Price 1899). Prime examples of Protoclassic pyramids with mortuary crypts or vaulted tombs are Mundo Perdido's Structure 5D-86 (Laporte and Fialko 1995)

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[9] According to McAnany et al. (1999), seated burials, or, more precisely, corpses seated in cross-legged lotus positions, were indicative of Late Preclassic mortuary rituals involving the display of the dead prior to interment. Protracted funerary rites are common in many cultures. In such societies final burial is often synchronized with auspicious community events, some of which may entail a transfer of leadership. These authors note that in early Mesoamerica "the body language of the seated position is an unequivocal statement of status and authority." Elsewhere, McAnany (1999) states that "a seated burial reproduces the regal position of a headman, chief, or lord seated on a stool, mat, or throne." Seated lotus burials appear at a limited number of Preclassic Maya sites—K'axob, Cerros, Cuello, Nohmul, Mountain Cow, Barton Ramie, Tikal, and Altar de Sacrificios are some. Preclassic occurrences of seated lotus burial in public architecture appear confined to a brief chronological period, possibly spanning less than 100 years at the very end of the Late Preclassic period. Wrapping the corpse with twine, cotton, or some other fibrous material often retained the seated posture.

and the various temple-pyramids on the Northern Acropolis at Tikal (Coe 1965; 1990), Structure A6-1st and Structure B-34 at Caracol (Chase and Chase 1996); Structures B-II and B-III at Altar de Sacrificios (Smith 1972), Structure 3 at Wakna (Hansen 1998), Structure F-8 at Altun Ha (Pendergast 1971), Structure B at Holmul (Merwin and Vaillant 1932), Structure 277 at Nohmul (Hammond 1985; Anderson and Cook 1944), a building in Group F at El Pozito (Case 1982), and an empty, preparatory tomb in Structure 4B at Cerros, the first pyramid at Cerros to face away from the village (Schele and Freidel 1990). Curiously, pyramidal tombs appeared 500 years after the Maya began living in large urban communities. This modification corresponded with the appearance of additional unmasked

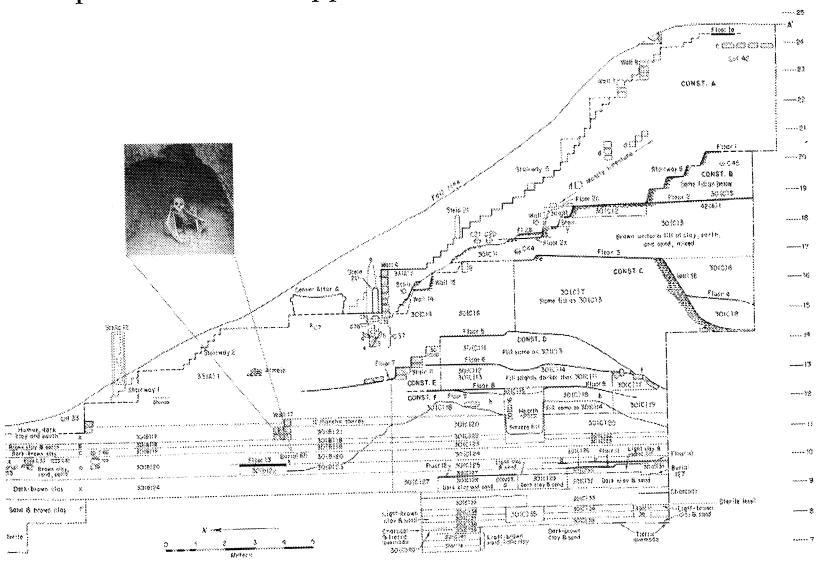

Figure 11 A seated burial placed in the basal stair of Structure B-I, Construction E at the site of Altar de Sacrificios, Petén, Guatemala. (Modified from Smith 1972; Originally published as figure 31 [or figure 80f] in A. Ledyard Smith, Excavations at Altar de Sacrificios, Papers of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, vol. 62, no. 2. Copyright 1972 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College).

Figure 12 Limestone statuette discovered beneath the South Plaza in Group H at Uaxactun, Guatemala (Redrawn from Valdés 1992:figure 20).

imagery in murals painted on tomb walls (Coe 1965) and temple interiors (Saturno and Taube 2004).

Before the advent of Protoclassic tombs, there was widespread parity in the quantity, quality, and kinds of grave items found with people buried in small and large structures (Krejci and Culbert 1995). Despite this equality, the rituals surrounding a person interred at the base of a public pyramid were probably more ceremonious than most rituals affiliated with persons buried beneath house platforms. Why then was an equivalence in grave items maintained throughout most of the Preclassic? Although we cannot be certain, we suspect that it resulted from a conscious effort by community members to neutralize practices of social, economic, and political privilege.

However, communities begin to condone interment of select individuals in public spaces by the onset of the Protoclassic, opening the door to new levels of social division. Protoclassic tombs appear to represent initial attempts to enshrine or memorialize celebrated community members. Jackson (1977) states that apotheosis is a community process of 'induced amnesia' that normally takes three generations, the

time required for all those who knew a particular individual to die. Interestingly, an apotheosis process lasting 100 to 150 years approximates the amount of time separating the first Late Preclassic bundle burials and the earliest Protoclassic tombs. The question arises, however, whether entombed individuals had assumed suprahuman, extra-communal qualities during their Late Preclassic lifetimes.

In his exploration of twentieth-century religious institutions in the West, Thorstein Veblen (1994:121-122) observed that a certain degree of austerity prevails when religious leaders are not accorded equal status with deities. According to Veblen austerity is a distinction that can be quantified. Veblen's concept of austerity may have relevance for understanding processes of identity formation among Preclassic Maya leaders. We can, for example, compare or measure the fittings and trappings of sanctuaries from one time or place with those of another. Likewise, we can observe how vestment and bodily ornamentation draw attention to personal identities over time. The monuments, imagery, architectural openness, and paucity of formal tombs at the start of the Late Preclassic period appear to be indicative of identity "types" or governing styles that are not equated with deity imitation, but firmly anchored in everyday identities that were perhaps kin or association-based. This austerity is also strongly evident in other forms of Late Preclassic material culture, especially in pottery decoration and stone tool shapes. Conversely, toward the end of the Preclassic, we begin to witness the construction of private sanctuaries, iconographic images of elaborately adorned leaders, formal tombs in ceremonial buildings with ever greater numbers and varieties of grave items, including finely-crafted bodily ornaments and accoutrements. In Veblen's view, spatial exclusivity coupled with unprecedented flamboyance in personal ornamentation and vestment equates with the emergence of identities that are symbolically, if not literally, god-like. At the very least, the Maya evidence suggests ritual

performance was increasingly drawn to one or two persons, rather than diffused among multiple performers or actors. These focal agents were simultaneously adorned in ever-finer garb.

CONCLUSION

Available evidence suggests that certain Preclassic Maya community rituals, especially those concerned with governance, shifted from an emphasis on shared, corporate performances (possibly masked ensembles) to an acceptance of proxy performance by soloists. The possibility of masquerade in the early half of the Late Preclassic period is inferred from an iconography that privileges masked imagery and facial concealment. In addition, the "openness" and accessibility of earlier building designs were more conducive to ritual events that required active participation of a broader cross-section of the population. As Ottenberg (1982: 151-152) discovered in his survey of West African masquerades:

> ...few masquerades are held in secret; they most often involve contact with large numbers of the community....the audience is as much a part of the event as are the masqueraders...they may clap, respond vocally, sing, ululate, dance, and give presents to the maskers, as well as follow them about. Without the audience the performance has little purpose; the audience forms a qualitative opposition to the performance.

Indeed, the gestures, utterances, and movements of the masked dancers, themselves, may have been more significant, in a communicative and symbolic sense, than the masks they donned (Tonkin 1989:484). In any case, we believe masquerades are well suited to environments that encourage sensory proximity, such as open plazas.

The emergence of personified or unmasked ritual is inferred from the appearance of figures with naturalistic human features in place of masks or masked personages. Contemporaneous with these are architectural modifications that confined or channeled physical movements and obstructed

viewpoints, preventing many community members from approaching the loci of ritual action. There also appears to have been an amplified preference for placing caches in secluded areas such as temple chambers and vaulted tombs. Nevertheless, some rituals probably continued to be performed within the public domain in and around large monumental structures at the center of the community. Even if the actors or events were not always within view, the enormous ritual edifices certainly were. Though it is much more difficult to envision how these exclusive rituals engaged the community or reified its identity, we note that the increased exclusivity of ritual acts may have intensified their symbolic meaning, making alienation a necessary, if not desirable, circumstance in the minds of vicarious participants and performers alike. While community rituals became more exclusive they also became personified or associated with specific members of the community. Indeed, through processes of apotheosis, some individuals attained qualities that made their own identity a symbol of community reference.

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