Two Trophy Skulls from Pacbitun, Belize

Gabriel Wrobel, Christophe Helmke, Sherry Gibbs, George Micheletti, Norbert Stanchly, and Terry Powis

Two modified skulls from Pacbitun, Belize, one with a glyphic text, match ancient Maya depictions of trophies fashioned from war captives and worn by elite warriors.

Keywords: Maya, trophy skull, Pacbitun, bone modification, iconography

Dos cráneos modificados de Pacbitun, Belice, uno con un texto glifico, coinciden con las antiguas representaciones mayas de trofeos de cautivos de guerra y usados por guerreros de élite.

Palabras clave: maya, cabeza trofeo, Pacbitun, modificación ósea, iconografía

An extensive array of peri- and postmortem modifications of human bones documented throughout Mesoamerica represent a wide variety of dedicatory, desecratory, and reverential behaviors, and their interpretation requires careful consideration of context (Berryman 2007; Chávez et al. 2015; Tiesler and Cucina 2007). Excavations at Pacbitun, Belize (Figure 1a; Powis et al. 2017) revealed two poorly preserved, carved human skulls (Micheletti and Stanchly 2014). After careful cleaning and restoration of the fragments, it became clear they were items of personal adornment, similar to others found at the nearby site of Pakal Na in the Sibun River Valley of central Belize (Harrison-Buck et al. 2007; Storey 2005, 2014) and farther afield at Xuenkal, northern Yucatan (Tiesler et al. 2010) and Copan, Honduras (Storey 2005, 2014).

The modified crania were associated with Burial 3 and placed at the apex of the main central stair of Structure 3 within the core of the final construction phase (Figure 1b). Burial 3–1 was a simple, primary interment of a young adult, arranged extended and supine with head to the south, arms at the side, and feet crossed. Placed directly around the individual's remains were four Late Classic ashware vessels belonging to the Spanish Lookout complex, one of which bears a partial glyphic text; two tubular and one rectangular perforated jade beads; and shell disc beads. The two trophy skulls were found south of the individual's head, alongside a fifth vessel.

The trophy skulls are only partially preserved, and most surfaces are heavily eroded. The backs of the skulls had been carefully removed and were not present in the grave. The majority of the remaining pieces belong to the parietals and

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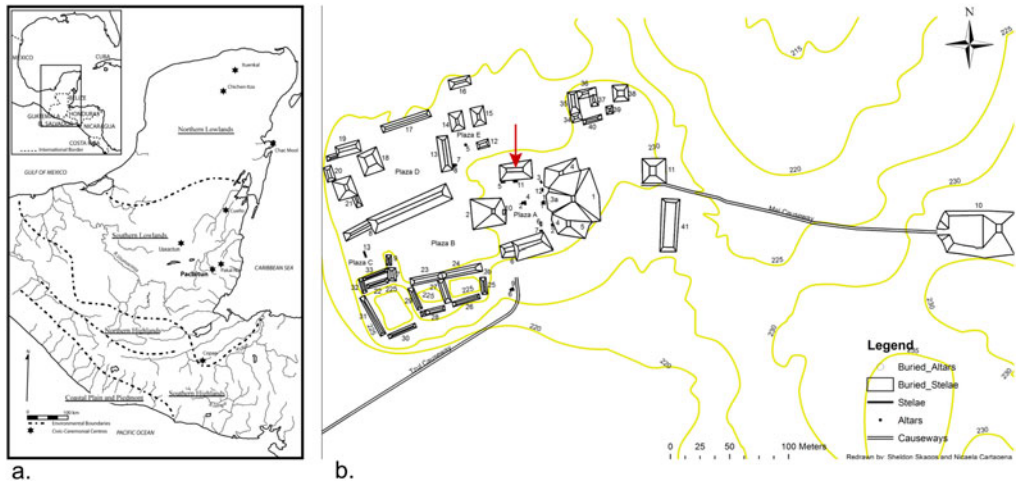

Figure 1. (a) Location of Pacbitun. (b) Plan view of Pacbitun's site core. Arrow indicates location of skull pectorals (Plan drawn by Sheldon Skaggs and Nicaela Cartegena).

show a polished and beveled edge following the coronal plane that would have intersected the mastoid processes. Trophy Skull 1, the better preserved of the two, has a complete beveled edge; the poorly preserved anterior and inferior portions of the skull consist only of isolated elements, which include the petrosal portions, teeth, and small fragments of the frontal and the face (Figure 2a). A single fragment of the right sphenoid is the only indication that the inferior skull was present. A hole drilled through the mandibular fossa of the right temporal and an adjacent pair of small holes drilled at the midline of the mandible indicate the mandible had been affixed to the cranium.

A right parietal fragment has a well-preserved surface that shows shallow cut marks and scrapes, indicating defleshing (Figure 2b). Two pairs of small, conical holes were drilled on the posterior parietals just anterior to the beveled edge, which would have anchored a rope to suspend the skull, possibly around the owner's neck or at the small of the back. A series of larger conical holes spaced 10–16 mm apart were bored into the lateral surfaces of the parietals and posterior frontal: they likely served to hold perishable adornments such as feathers, hair, or leather straps. Around the holes are deeply etched lines that form a geometric decorative pattern.

The extremely weathered surfaces of the mandible show clear evidence of red pigment and incising along the external body and on the right ramus that were part of a more extensive design (Figure 2c). Close inspection, with raking light and through artificial lighting in photogrammetric models, revealed parts of five medallions of comparable form and size; these appear to have been disposed of symmetrically, with three medallions on either side of the mandible: two on each side of the body and one on either ramus. There are three partially legible medallions on the right side, whereas on the left side only the outlines of the inferior borders of the two medallions on the mandibular body are present and the left ramus, which presumably bore another medallion, was not preserved.

The sequential reading of these medallions is complicated by partiality and erosion, but sufficient traces of the glyphs remain to transliterate these as **#-?** (pA1), **#-lo?-#-ko** (pB1), **ba-ki** (pC1), **ta-#** (pD1) … (# denotes eroded signs). Although partial, this clearly is part of a name tag that self-referentially names the object inscribed. The initial segment can be partly reconstructed as *u-lo…k baak* or "it is the … bone of" (with the initial third-person possessive *u* reconstructed here). We presume that the name, title, and place of origin of the original owner—either the person whose head this is or the person who forcibly acquired it—were recorded on the final, now-missing, and eroded medallions on the left side. Therefore, this remarkable text,

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Figure 2. (a) Articulated fragments of Pacbitun Trophy Skull 1 (Drawing by Shawn Morton); (b) Mandible fragments showing five glyphic medallions (Drawings by Christophe Helmke; photogrammetric model by Jesse Pruitt); (c) Preserved surface of fragment of Trophy Skull 1 showing evidence of postmortem processing (Photograph by Gabriel Wrobel).

although it is only partially preserved as *lo…k*, may provide us with the first recorded instance of the term for "trophy skull." A review of Classic Maya dictionaries and those of Lowland Maya languages did not yield productive matches for the term as preserved, but based on its form it appears to be polymorphemic and thereby either comprises a root with a suffix or a compound form of two lexemes.

The individual's age at death is estimated to fall in the young adult range, based entirely on light-moderate dental attrition. No indicators of the individual's sex were preserved. The relatively narrow width of the midcranium suggests a lack of frontal flattening, which tends to shorten and widen the skull.

Trophy Skull 2 consists only of fragments of the parietals. It is similarly bisected along the coronal axis, with holes near the polished edge for suspension. It does not appear to be decorated with carving.

Discussion

The Pacbitun trophy skulls share a number of similarities with examples reported at other Mesoamerican archaeological sites, strongly suggesting that they all had similar functions and symbolic and ideational meanings. The examples from Pakal Na, Copan, and Xuenkal were fashioned similarly by removing the posterior skull and polishing the exposed edges, and all

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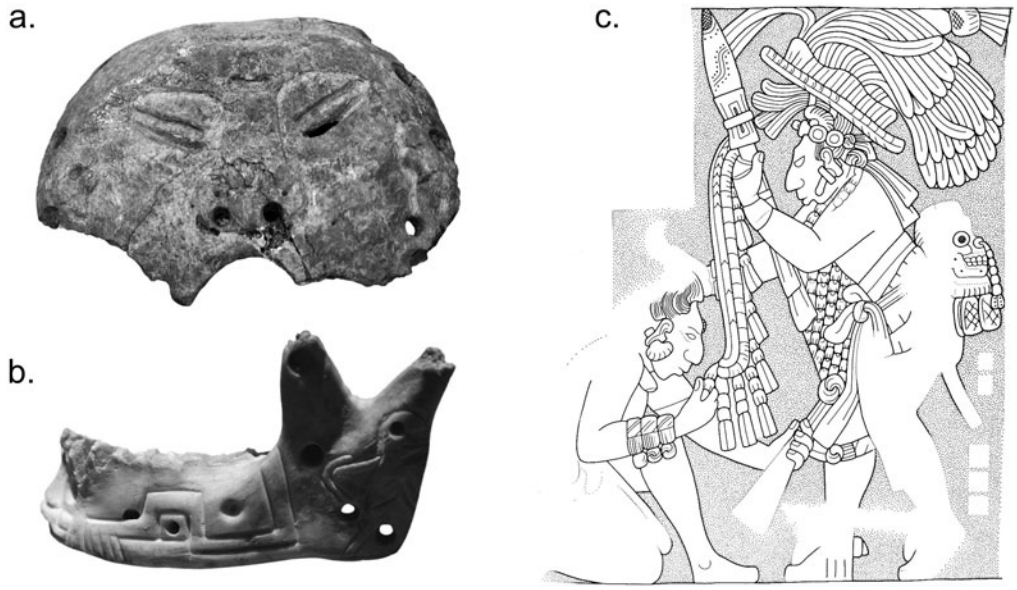

Figure 3. Epiclassic human trophies from central Mexico: (a) Carved cranium from Xochicalco, Morelos; (b) Carved mandible from Cacaxtla, Tlaxcala (Photographs by Christophe Helmke); (c) Detail of Lintel 45 at Yaxchilan, showing Shield Jaguar III subduing a warrior from La Florida in AD 681. Note the trophy skull worn at the small of the back (Drawing by Ian Graham).

have holes drilled to suspend the cranium and mandible. Preserved surfaces on several examples show cut marks or scrapes, suggesting they were made shortly after death, and some have holes thought to have supported decorative elements. Additionally, the context appears similar, in that the skulls all date to the Late Classic period, and the ones found interred as grave goods were associated with young- to middle-adult individuals buried within site cores. Although preservation at Pacbitun is too poor to estimate sex, the primary burials from the other sites were all males.

At Xochicalco in the central Mexican highlands, Hirth (1989; Figure 3a) describes a highly polished human occipital with a carved face, which was used as a pectoral. Around its edges were drilled holes that would have been used to attach adornments or to attach it to another object, and he interprets it as a war trophy. At contemporaneous Epiclassic sites, including Cacaxtla and Ñuiñe sites in the Mixteca Baja of Oaxaca, there are human mandibles, carved and modified to serve as partial face masks, possibly to emulate death deities and underworld entities (Helmke 2019; Rivera Guzmán 2014; Figure 3b). Importantly, these examples are all contemporaneous with the cases from the Maya area, including an inscribed plaque made of the mandibular ramus, found at the site of Pusilha (Wanyerka 2003:Figure 85). These continuities suggest that this form of mortuary behavior is part of larger pan-Mesoamerican phenomena.

Berryman (2007) cautions that many reports of sacrifice and trophy taking among the Maya presume that peri- and postmortem body manipulation indicates desecration, without including essential contextual information needed to distinguish such behaviors from the equally diverse and widespread set of reverential activities related to ancestor veneration (Beck and Sievert 2005; Scherer 2015; Tiesler et al. 2010). A widely cited example of such veneration practices comes from Colonial Yucatan, in which de Landa describes the practice of removing the heads of "old lords of Cocom" immediately after death. These skulls also were cleaned of flesh, had the back of the head removed, and were kept for display; however, they were distinctly decorated to resemble the living individuals. A skull matching this description was recovered from the Cenote of Sacrifice at Chichen Itza (Tozzer 1941:131).

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At some sites, rulers are depicted wearing the heads of ancestors as ornaments, though it is not clear whether these faces are symbolic emulations made of other materials. Illustrative examples of such images include Lintel 1 from La Pasadita, where the eighth-century king Yaxuun Bahlam IV is shown wearing the head of his predecessor and father, Shield Jaguar III, as a maskette at the small of his back (Houston et al. 2006; Scherer 2015:Figure 1.7b). Similarly, on Stela 5 of Caracol, the sixth-century king, Yajawte' K'inich II, is depicted wearing on his belt the head of K'ahk' Ujol K'inich, a fifth-century forebear (Beetz and Satterthwaite 1981:Figure 8).

In two examples of modified crania from Middle Preclassic Cuello, Belize (Hammond et al. 2002), and from Early Classic Uaxactun (Kidder 1947) the backs were removed and holes were drilled for suspension. Both authors argue that these modifications represent ancestor veneration, pointing to formal burials from other early contexts at Cuello and Uaxactun in which the heads and faces had been intentionally removed postmortem. Alternatively, these examples may indicate that this specific form of trophy manufacture began quite early in the Maya region.

Although the Pacbitun and other later skulls may be those of revered ancestors, we argue that the contextual evidence strongly points to their being war trophies. The decorative elements on these skulls (including carvings and flecks of red paint on Pacbitun's Trophy Skull 1, and the carvings and areas of scorching on the Pakal Na example) suggest that they were worn and displayed in their skeletal state, not covered by plastic materials that served to emulate human soft tissue (as in de Landa's Cocom example). At Copan and Xuenkal, the skull masks were placed on the chest of the primary individuals, suggesting they were probably worn around the neck as depicted in warrior iconography. Images of warriors wearing the heads, presumably of vanquished foes, are found at other sites, including in the Bonampak murals (Helmke 2019:Figure 5), on Bonampak Lintel 3 (Scherer 2015:Figure 2.62a), and on Yaxchilan Lintel 9 (which may be shrunken heads; see Helmke 2019:Figure 6). Individuals wearing trophy skulls are typically dressed as warriors and rendered in scenes of warfare or with martial themes. Lintel 45 at Yaxchilan depicts the local ruler forcing a subdued captive to kiss the shield of his captor (Helmke 2019; Figure 3c). At the small of his back, the victorious king wears a trophy skull decorated with a ruff of perishable material and shell tinklers below, and a string of beads emanates from the nasal cavity of the skull. As such, there is a clear separation between the depiction of ancestral figures, their countenances intact, versus that of decapitated captives who were preferentially displayed in skeletal form.

In central Belize, such military paraphernalia fits within a broader pattern of evidence of northern influence following the collapse of Peten-affiliated alliances at the end of the Classic period. Harrison-Buck and colleagues (2007) demonstrate that the imagery carved on the Pakal Na trophy skull—comprising a mat motif on the forehead, the glyph *k'ahk'* ("fire") centered on the brow, and paired medallions depicting animal imagery on the mandible—is consistent with military symbolism also found at Chichen Itza and sites in the Mexican highlands. Other evidence for northern influence includes the appearance of circular shrine structures in the region and perhaps two piriform-shaped vessels also found in the tomb (Harrison-Buck 2007; McAnany 2012). At Xuenkal, Tiesler and colleagues' (2010) analysis of strontium isotopes showed that, although the primary tomb occupant (Ind. 16-1-2e) had a local signature, the trophy skull matched ratios found in the southern lowlands. This discrepancy is consistent with the hypothesis that the skull represents a foreign enemy, rather than an ancestor, who more likely would also be local. Furthermore, the Late-Terminal Classic dates coincide with other evidence for shifting sociopolitical relationships with other parts of the Maya area and Mesoamerica as a whole. The presence of an object invoking martial prowess is among the first such evidence at Pacbitun and hints at the role of warfare in the site's late history.

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