
The Unusual Sculptures of Telantunich, Yucatán: Phalli and the Concept of Masculinity among the Ancient Maya

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Recently discovered sculpture fragments from the area surrounding the important but little-studied site of Telantunich confirm a regional tradition of human portraiture quite distinct from the better-known canon of Maya stelae. Comparative material presented here shows connections between this tradition and a regional emphasis on depictions of masculine sexuality, especially depictions of human phalli. The authors present an analysis of this corpus that confirms that such depictions both reflect Classic Maya conceptions of masculinity and were deployed to convey and reify such conceptions within society.

A productive avenue of recent archaeological research has taken as its focus the examination of how identity was created and perpetuated in ancient cultures (McGuire 1982; Brumfiel 1992; Aldenderfer 1993; Wright 1996; Nelson 1997; Ardren 2002). One scholar calls the relatively new attention to categories of difference and self-definition such as ethnicity or gender, 'the archaeologies of identity' while simultaneously arguing that such categories have no fixed or rigid boundaries (Meskell 2001). The literature on conceptualization of the body in ancient cultures, and especially how the body was a locus for intersecting identities has grown tremendously as a result, in part, of interest in identities and the rich data archaeologists can bring to such an arena (Montserrat 1998; Meskell 1999; Rautman 2000; Joyce 2001). Identity is often described as 'grounded' in the materiality of the body, both by the state or formal culture asserting itself upon individual bodies through ideals of dress, adornment and behaviour (see Joyce 2000a on Aztec rituals of 'girling' and 'boying') and equally as an individual experiences on a personal level the fluid evolution of her or his own identity. Thus identity is understood as a discursive process, evolving differently for each individual and played out in important ways upon the canvas of the human body. It is this attention to the intentionality of how an individual actor experiences

the body that differentiates embodied anthropology from an anthropology of the body (Hodder & Hutson 2003).

A further outcome of interest in identity and its 'embodiment' is a burgeoning literature on the archaeology of sexuality (Montserrat 1996; Koloski-Ostrow & Lyons 1997; Schmidt & Voss 2000). Once the body is seen as a historic construct, sexuality, sexual behaviours, sexual mores, etc. become historical particulars as well, and one of the most powerful ways to see culture inscribed upon the body. This research has shown that the only constant in studies of ancient sexuality is its variety, not its uniformity, and scholars such as Rosemary Joyce (2000b, 268) have shown eruditely that earlier scholars viewed depictions of ancient Maya sexuality through a lens of Western morality, often misidentifying what they saw due to prevailing twentieth-century values. Male sexuality in particular, has been defined narrowly as procreative, heterosexual, and utilitarian. This imposition of Western mores upon a very non-Western culture has obscured the meaning of some Maya art and impeded the elucidation of Maya conceptions of masculinity.

The unusual carved monuments from Telantunich, a poorly known Classic period site in southern Yucatán, Mexico (Fig. 1), use sexually explicit imagery to demonstrate Classic Maya conceptions of



Figure 1. Location of Telantunich within the Maya area.

power, political relations, gender, and dominance. These monuments are part of a regional tradition of phallicism that has been acknowledged but rarely explained, due both to problems of provenience and scholarly reluctance to view depictions of sexuality as worthy artistic expression. Against a background of canonical Maya imagery and within a regional tradition that emphasized the depiction of male sexuality, the creators of the Telantunich monuments expressed dominant values of authority and masculinity and, in so doing, affected visual and cultural hierarchies of power.

Telantunich and its neighbours

The only substantive mention of the site of Telantunich is a 1939 article by E.W. Andrews IV, in which he describes a short visit to record the monuments first

reported by Sylvanus Morley. Andrews (1939) located Telantunich just across the border from Yucatán in the state of Quintana Roo, but subsequent examination of many maps of the southern cone area shows that the site appears in a variety of different locations on maps of the southern area of the Yucatán peninsula.¹ An important reason why Telantunich and other large sites in the region are imprecisely located is the lack of attention paid to this rich archaeological area since Andrews's visit. Until recently it has been very difficult to traverse this region owing to high rainfall and dense vegetation. The recent expansion of cattle and citrus ranching brought improved roads in the southern cone, and hopefully archaeologists will be encouraged to pursue more serious investigation of this important and relatively unexamined region.

The Telantunich sculptures were recently re-examined, *in situ*, not far from the cattle pens and small outbuildings of a modern ranch. Overgrown with secondary grasses, the exposed carved faces of Monuments 1 and 2 were broken in multiple places (Fig. 2). Fortunately the rancher considers the pieces interesting and authentic, and the site is well protected. The monuments are located near the centre of a low rectangular platform approximately 80 metres east–west by 40 metres north–south. The platform has three pyramids along the southern edge, the eastern two joined to form a small double pyramid. These three mounds range from approximately four and a half metres to seven metres in height and no standing architecture is visible, although a small abandoned looter's hole exposed a slab vaulted room on the easternmost pyramid. Andrews (1939, 71) mentions that columnette fragments were originally found in the collapsed debris along the slopes of the pyramids and, along with the slab vaulted room, these elements are consistent with a Late Classic date for these structures.

The sculptures are approximately 14 metres north of the pyramids, and originally faced toward the plaza, in a typical Maya arrangement that utilizes artistic symbols to anchor or accentuate monumental architecture. The sculptures are massive, each over four metres tall and nearly as wide (Figs. 3 & 4). Both demonstrate a highly unusual technique of manufacture that approximates sculpture in the round. The artist removed a significant amount of stone from the central arch as well as in and around the ancillary

figures, achieving a nearly three-dimensional quality that is rare in Classic Maya art. Monument 2 is less fully three-dimensional and relies upon a more common technique of bas-relief execution — surface stone is carved away without penetrating all the way through the stone, a technique used in much of the monumental sculpture of Piedras Negras. Details of the execution of the figures vary as well — on Monument 1 the upper left-hand figure is more completely executed than the others. Andrews (1939, 72) proposed that the massiveness of the Telantunich sculptures suggests they were carved *in situ*.

While their technique of execution is quite unusual, the artistic content is relatively familiar to scholars of Maya iconography, with certain exceptions. Both monuments portray a single individual, possibly a ruler, standing inside an archway or portal-like structure. Surrounding the arch are numerous ancillary figures. Most appear human although at least two animals are portrayed as well. The central individual lacks much of the normal iconographic indicators of status and rulership: the main figure

on Monument 2 is naked, while the main figure on Monument 1 may wear only a loincloth and a feather headdress. The upper body of the figure on Monument 1 is not preserved, so definite statements about royal insignia (or the lack thereof) are not possible.

The ancillary figures are better preserved and more detail was included in their representations. On Monument 2, all six ancillary figures are human,



Figure 2. Telantunich Monument 2 in situ (photo by Ardren).

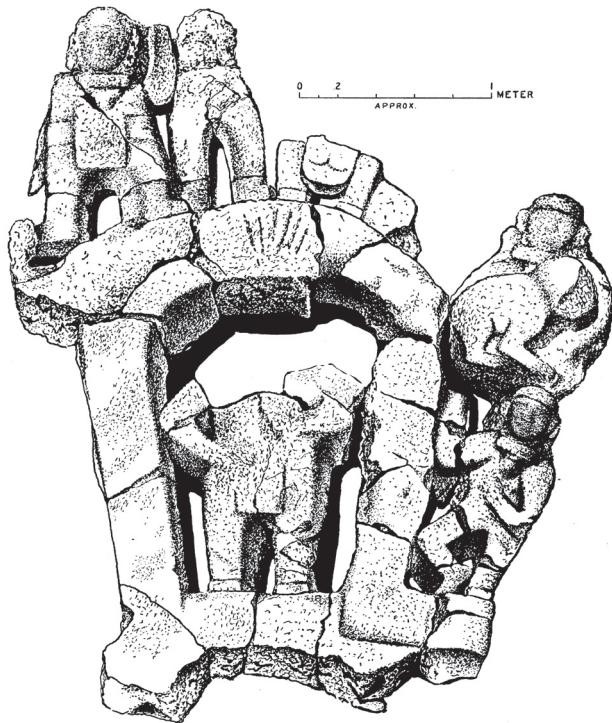


Figure 3. Telantunich Monument 1 (after Andrews 1939).



Figure 4. Telantunich Monument 2 (after Andrews 1939).



Figure 5. *Monument 1, lower ancillary figures. Note erect penis on lower figure (photo by Ardren).*

all are naked, and half are grasping their genitalia, a highly unusual stance about which more will be said shortly. Among these figures, the individual on the lower left side may be wearing a mask: the facial features are much more pronounced than any of the other individuals, including the central figure. Additionally, the features have an almost Olmecoid appearance, including an oval face, flaring nostrils, thick lips, and helmet — elements that led an earlier study to suggest a Middle Formative date (Joesink-Mandeville & Meluzin 1976).

The ancillary figures on Monument 1 are more diverse. The central figure is not well preserved, although it is possible to see that he originally stood with feet apart, one hand possibly on his right hip or his groin. His feet are carved not in typical Maya profile fashion, but straight on and are one of the most interesting examples of the nearly three-dimensional style of execution. Three figures stand above the arch, and two of them are well preserved. The right figure

is a squatting animal, a stance often used by Classic Maya artists to portray toads or dogs. The other two are human: the central one is poorly preserved, but the left one is clearly dressed in a loin cloth belt and wears a large tubular bead around his throat. He may have worn a helmet as well. Two figures are preserved on the right side of the archway, both human: one holds an animal in his arms while the other appears to have his hand on his groin. The small animal being held is clearly mammal, and recalls the way in which juvenile deer, jaguars, or monkeys are held in Classic art. Both these figures wear helmets and tubular beads as necklaces. The facial features of the lower one also suggest a mask is being worn. While the illustration for Andrews's 1939 publication does not make this explicit, first-hand observation of Monument 1 shows that at least one or perhaps two of these figures are also grasping their penises (Fig. 5).

Andrews also documented a third monument from Telantunich, located approximately one kilometre northwest of the first two, although its current location is unknown. His photograph and a published drawing by Karl Taube (1989) show that Monument 3 is similar in composition and stylistic execution, including at least two figures holding enlarged penises (Fig. 6). The archway is conspicuously absent, but there remains a central figure surrounded by auxiliary individuals with exaggerated facial features depicted in an unusually three-dimensional style.

Telantunich is located approximately eight kilometres south of the modern town of Catmis on a natural rise. Although often the only site that appears on maps of the southern cone of Yucatán, recent ground reconnaissance shows that practically every natural elevation in the surrounding 20 kilometre region contains mound groups with monumental architecture (Fig. 7). Local inhabitants report a high density of remains throughout the southern cone, and explain that apparently the only places without significant evidence of ancient occupation are the low-lying areas or bajos which are seasonally inundated in and between each of the natural hills. Very few of these sites have even been reported in the literature. One is the beautiful site of Witzinah, approximately two and a half kilometres from Telantunich, which has three major mound groups cut through by a paved highway and a tiny, dwindling village of the same name (de la Rosa 1988). Hurricane damage during the 1950s revealed a very well preserved Chenes-Puuc style facade on two of the largest structures at Witzinah. Other exposed architecture confirms a Late Classic (AD 600–900) date for at least the major architectural groups at Witzinah. Similarly, an unnamed site approximately

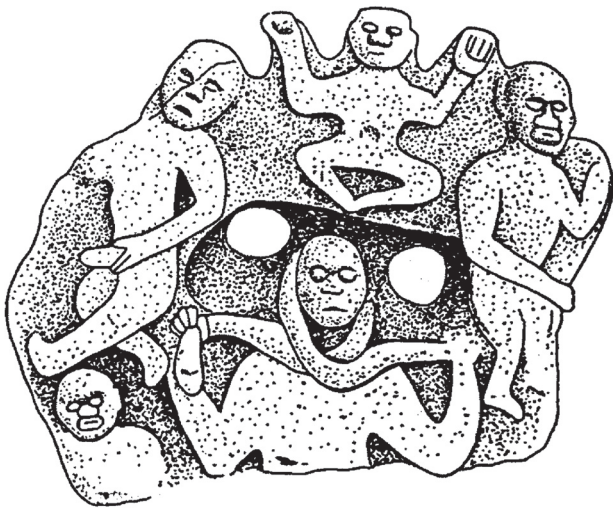


Figure 6. *Telantunich Monument 3 (after Taube 1989, fig. 24.16b).*

two kilometres to the northwest of Telantunich, called Los Reyes II because of its location near a ranch of the same name, has exposed architecture which suggests a Late Classic date. Diagnostic features include Puuc veneer stonework and slab vaulted structures. As far south as Othon P. Blanco, one can regularly encounter mounded architecture and numerous Puuc-style storage pits (chultuns). Preliminary evidence suggests a high density of occupation during the Classic period in the southern cone of Yucatán. This has significant implications for studies of the ancient population density of Yucatán, as well as the interaction between northern and southern lowland Classic peoples.

In 1997, two new monuments were discovered in the village of Kancabchen, approximately 20 kilometres southeast of Telantunich. Townspeople there uncovered two limestone figures that bear a strong resemblance to the Telantunich monuments in association with Late Classic pottery while digging a foundation for their elementary school. Both must be considered fragmentary, and possibly part of a single original work.

Kancabchen Monument 1 is the larger and more complete, measuring 117 cm in length, 45 cm in width, and approximately 25 cm in depth (Fig. 8a). The sculpture was carved in a stylistic variation of bas-relief, with the back uncarved, the front carved in deep bas-relief (up to 3 cm of relief), and the sides carved in the round.

The sculpture depicts a human holding a snake. The figure's leg is bent so that his knee is brought towards his chest. His right arm is similarly bent at the elbow with his hand extending in front of his chest. In this hand, the figure holds the snake's neck. The body

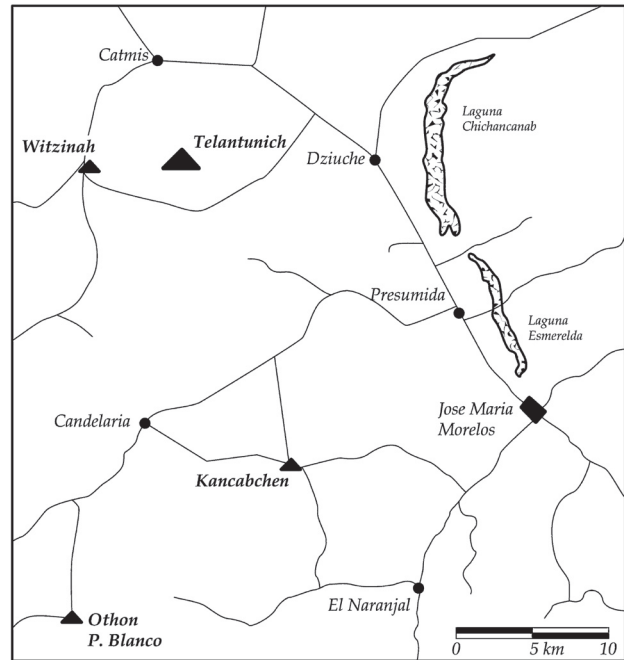


Figure 7. *Archaeological sites in the region of Telantunich.*

of this snake wraps around the figure's right shoulder. The detailed features of both the snake and the human have eroded over time. However, the human is clearly depicted with bulging cheeks, thick lips, a high rounded forehead, and a generally 'inflated' appearance, showing striking similarities to the monuments from nearby Telantunich. This is especially true of Telantunich Monument 3 (Fig. 6).

The second sculpture from Kancabchen is nearly identical to Monument 1. It depicts a human figure holding the neck of a snake (Fig. 8b). The distal ends of the figure are missing, including the shoulders and head, and the tips of his feet. What remains are the figure's torso, his left arm holding the snake, and his bent left leg. While more fragmentary than its companion, some details are clearer in this example, including the snake's open jaw. The local workers who found this monument said that they looked for other portions of it, but were unsuccessful.

Monument 2 is carved in the same fashion as Monument 1. The figure is carved in deep bas-relief on the face of the monument, the reverse is uncarved, and the sides approach sculpture in the round. The figure, however, is facing the opposite direction. If placed side by side, the two monuments would depict similar but opposing individuals. The serpent of Monument 2 is likewise in the opposite position. Instead of the snake being held up by the man's



Figure 8a.
Kancabchen
Monument 1 (photo
by Hixson).

chest, it is held down by his hip, upside down. The facial features, bodily proportions, and pose of these individuals clearly display similarities to the monuments from Telantunich and its surrounding region, discussed more fully below.

Content in context

A search for monuments similar to those from Telantunich yields very few results in the known corpus of Late to Terminal Classic Maya art. A more productive approach has been to examine the internal structure of the monuments using broad Mesoamerican themes that safely can be assumed to have been shared between artists and elites throughout the Maya area.

Despite the massive size of the Telantunich monuments, and the number of figures portrayed upon them, their composition can be distilled into three elemental structures. First, these monuments highlight a central figure by placing him within an archway. Second, the central figure is surrounded by others who are attached to, standing upon, or grabbing the archway. And finally, the figures were carved with a clear emphasis on the phallus.



Figure 8b. *Kancabchen Monument 2*
(photo by Hixson).

The first structural pattern, focusing a monumental sculpture on a central figure by placing him in the centre of the composition and framing him within an opening, archway or portal, is readily recognizable as a common theme of Mesoamerican art (Fig. 9a–c). Whether this archway represents an architectural entrance, a cave, a celestial serpent, an upturned vessel, or an open mouth, figures placed in such a central location have been uniformly understood as the focal point of the work, and elite members of their respective societies. An elite's placement in such an opening often references his close connection with the supernatural or mythical realms of Mesoamerican cosmology (Carlson & Landis 1985; Heyden 1981; Schele & Freidel 1990).

The addition of secondary figures attached to the archway on the Telantunich sculptures is structurally similar to other Maya monuments where the central elite is surrounded by ancestral or mythic figures, often clinging to a serpent or a scroll motif. Linda Schele (1985) related similar scenes, such as the Hauberg stelae, to various freestanding monuments where secondary figures float above a central elite clinging to s-scrolls (Fig. 10a–b). These s-scroll figures were further discussed by Andrea Stone (1996), who concluded that the s-scroll itself can be read not only as 'Muyal' (or 'Cloud,' after Houston & Stuart 1989) but also as a more general 'sky' or 'celestial,' and that 'Muyal' was considered the location of royal ancestors.

The newly discovered Kancabchen monuments show certain similarities with such ancestral or secondary figures. The bodies are depicted in identical positions and are entwined with serpents. In fact, due to their proportions and stylistic execution, it remains possible that the two Kancabchen monuments are fragments of a single large sculpture, such as those from neighbouring Telantunich, or part of a doorway embellishment, such as the figures from Temple 22 at Copan (Fig. 11). This would place the Kancabchen individuals clinging to serpents and to the archway or doorway surrounding a (now missing) central elite figure — possibly indicating their status as what we call ancestral or mythic figures. Schele (1985, 149), focusing particularly upon stelae displaying vision serpents and s-scroll figures, summarized the general thematic content of Classic period Maya monuments.

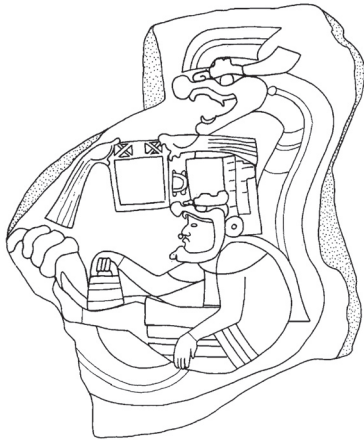


Figure 9a. Olmec ruler framed by serpent portal (after Stone 1995).



Figure 9b. Maya king in temple entrance, Piedras Negras Stela 11. (Drawing by Linda Schele. © David Schele, courtesy Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., www.famsi.org.)

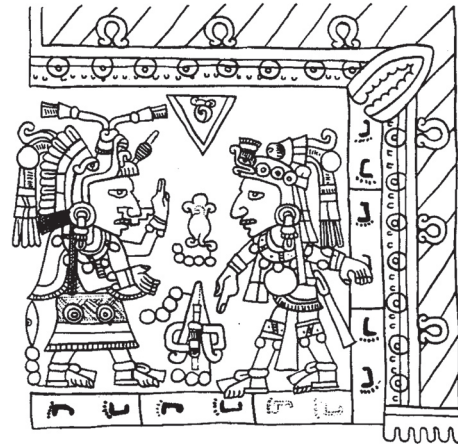


Figure 9c. Aztec lord in cave, *Codex Nuttall* (after Boone 2003).



Figure 10a. Secondary figures float above ruler, Hauberg stela (Drawing by Linda Schele. © David Schele, courtesy Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., www.famsi.org.)



Figure 10b. Ruler surrounded by floating ancestors, Ixlu Stela 2. (Drawing by Linda Schele. © David Schele, courtesy Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., www.famsi.org.)

Living rulers are shown flanked by dead ancestors; they stand on earth or underworld registers; they stand under registers marked as the arc of heaven; and they wear in their uniforms or hold in their hands objects of power and status that are symbols derived directly from those cosmological environments.

By reducing the Telantunich monuments to their most basic compositional elements, we conclude that these sculptures lend themselves to a similar interpretation. The ruler stands in the centre, a place of privilege and power, his feet on the earth, emerging from a portal, or standing beneath the sky, with ancestral figures from beyond surrounding him. The ruler is shown holding an object of power, his source of legitimacy — an object connoting status derived from those appearing around him. The new monuments from Kancabchen seem to follow a similar compositional pattern.

While such a long-standing theme of Maya sculpture does appear to match the composition of the Telantunich monuments, this opens the door to additional questions. Why, if the content of these sculptures falls in line with so many canonical works, were they executed in such a unique style? And why substitute the phallus in place of standard cosmological symbols of power and legitimacy?

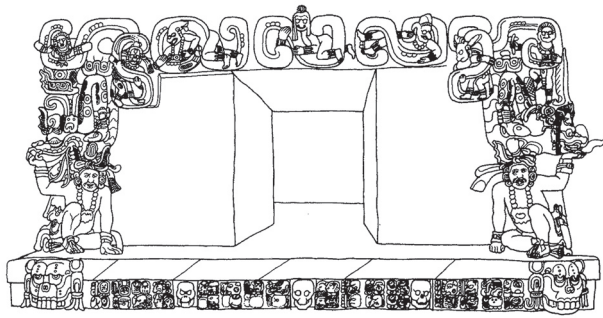


Figure 11. Copán Temple 22. (Drawing by Linda Schele. © David Schele, courtesy Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., www.famsi.org.)

Regional tradition

Andrews, Taube, and others have drawn connections between the Telantunich monuments and other massive human figures from the northern lowlands, a few of which are carved in a similar manner (Andrews 1939; 1943; Pollock 1980; Taube 1989). A monument from the site of Tabi housed in the Palacio Canton Museum of Anthropology in Merida, Yucatán, is carved in a truly three-dimensional style, more so than the Telantunich monuments, although its subject matter is different (Fig. 12). In this piece, two figures stand inside an archway and carry a deer slung on a pole. Clearly a depiction of a successful hunt, the monument also carries an important 'name tag' inscription that accompanies the image (Voss & Kremer 1998). A monument from the nearby Puuc site of Kabah is a closer stylistic match. Known as 'Mujer de la Culebra', this figure is comparable in size to the figures on the Telantunich monuments, and is crudely carved in the full round like the monuments from Telantunich (Fig. 13). No details of clothing are depicted, but the figure holds a long and elaborate snake. The closest parallels to the Telantunich monuments are in the facial features of *Mujer de la Culebra*, who also has a helmet-shaped head, broad nostrils and thick lips.

The recently discovered monuments from nearby Kancabchen also share this regional style. The monument from Kabah is nearly identical to the Kancabchen monuments in many respects, particularly the thick lips, helmet-like forehead, and the treatment of the hand and arm holding the snake (Andrews 1939, 76). Andrews thought that the Kabah monument was broken at the waist, but now that we have seen the better-preserved Kancabchen Monument 1, it appears that the Kabah monument may be in a bent-kneel position also. The technical execution of each monument is likewise very similar. For example, interior details

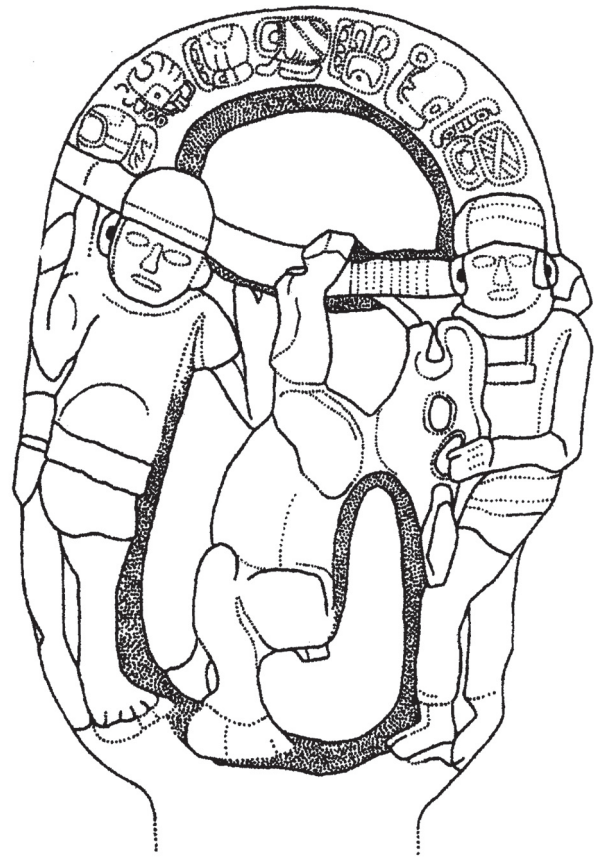


Figure 12. Hunting monument from Tabi (after Voss & Kremer 1998, fig. 1).

are most often executed in deep bas-relief, whereas the edges of the monuments show tendencies toward sculpture in the round. Along with the new monuments from Kancabchen, men of that village found Late Classic vessels in the fill underneath the school foundation. The exact association of the vessels with the monuments is certainly open to question, as the elementary school is now complete and the monuments have been moved. These vessels, however, combined with the knowledge that the dominant archaeological phases at sites like Kabah and nearby Sayil are Late to Terminal Classic, plus the distribution of phallic imagery at Late to Terminal Classic sites such as Uxmal and Chichen Itza (see below), indicate that a Late-Terminal Classic temporal placement for the Telantunich monuments should be considered the most likely hypothesis at this time (Killion *et al.* 1989; Carrasco 1992).

Karl Taube (1989) has written about the smaller Telantunich Monument 3, which bears a strong resemblance to the Kancabchen sculptures. He draws attention to the presence of serpents in associa-



Figure 13. *Mujer de la Culebra* monument from Kabah (after Andrews 1939).

tion with human figures on these and related monuments and suggests that a Classic version of the rain drawing serpent dance, known from ethnohistoric documents and contemporary Guatemalan ritual-theatre, is portrayed. On Telantunich Monument 3, and Kancabchen Monument 1, as well as on ‘Mujer de la Culebra’ from Kabah and iconographically related panels from the nearby site of San Diego, the central figure is wearing a snake around her or his neck and has facial characteristics Taube describes as ‘simian’ (Taube 1989, 372). The thick lips and helmet-like forehead conform to what Taube thinks is a regional version of God N, the aged earth lord associated with the Bearded Dragon, a serpent form associated with lightning and rain. In modern and Colonial period serpent dances, sexually explicit imagery is used to mock political office holders, especially in times of transition. Taube’s suggestion that the representation of overt sexual behaviour in association with serpent dancing may be related to ritual humour and the role of clowns in maintaining society could be a partial explanation for these monuments.

But perhaps more salient than ritualized inversion or clowning is the emphasis on the phallus in both the Telantunich sculptures and other sculpture of the northern lowlands. As documented in a recent



Figure 14. *Yum Kep* monument from Sayil (after Amrhein 2001).

dissertation by Laura Amrhein and in earlier work by Andrews, Pollock and others, in addition to the Telantunich figures, there are some 130 stone phalli identified from various contexts throughout the northern lowlands, with the vast majority from a zone around the Puuc hills (Andrews 1943; Pollock 1980; Amrhein 2001) (Table 1). The pervasiveness especially of free-standing stone phalli in the region has been noted since the earliest nineteenth-century explorations of northern Maya cities, when many of these pieces were deemed ‘perverse’ and rounded up from public view into piles or caches at the edges of sites or behind structures (Desmond & Messenger 1988).

Table 1. Register of stone phalli in the northern Maya Lowlands.

Site	Portrait	Sculpture	Architecture	Association
Acanmul		x		Str 8
Acumpich	x			unknown
Actun Ch'on Cave	x			cave
Almulchil		x		Str 3
Bilimkok	x			
Chacmultun			x	Str 9
Chichen Itza	x	x	x	
Coba		x	x	Temple of Paintings
Cozumel		x	x	
Cumpich	x			
Dzibilchaltun			x	
Dzibilnocac	x			
Edzna		x		
Ek Balam		x		
Fincas Las Palmas	x			
Hopelchen		x		
Huntichmul		x		Group E courtyard
Ichmac		x		Paintings Building
Isla Cerritos		x		
Kabah		x		
Kanalku		x		modern village
Kiuic	x			Str 4
Kom		x		Str 4
K'uxub		x		main complex
Labna		x		Str 4, Str 9
Loltun	x	x		cave
Nohcacab		x		
Nohoch Cep		x		courtyard
Nohpat		x		Temples III-3, -4, -5
Oxkintok	x	x		North Group stairs
Panaba		x		private collection
Pol-Yuc		x		Str 7
Pustunich	x			modern village
Rancho Nuevo Leon		x		
San Diego Buenavista		x		
Rancho San Pedro			x	modern village
Santa Rosa Xtampak		x		
Sayil	x	x		Str 3B2, Group C
Sihunch'en	x			
Telantunich	x			
Tekax	x			private collection
Temax	x			
Tulum		x		Shrines 39,40,41
Tzeme		x		
Uxmal	x	x	x	Temple of Phalli, Temple of Magician
X-kukican	x			cave
X'burrontunich		x		Str 1
X'ketpa'ap		x		courtyard
Xcalumkin		x		
Xcaret	x		x	cave
Xkichmook	x			pit
Xkipche			x	pit
Xkobenhaltun		x		
Xlabpak Lagarto	x			Str 4
Xunantunich	x			
Yaxhom		x		Str 4
Za-bac Ha Cave		x		near altar

Sources: Andrews 1939; 1941; 1943; Bernal 1969; Pollock 1980; Amrhein 2001

Consequently, few examples are now found *in situ*, although the extent of phallic imagery is such that several structures, such as the House of the Phalli at Uxmal, have permanent phallic adornments impossible for earlier and more modest visitors to remove or shield from view. Especially significant examples in addition to the structure at Uxmal include 'Yum Kep', a naked figure from Sayil that has an artistically exaggerated penis (Fig. 14) and Santo Pus from Pustunich (Andrews 1941). Some of these figures represent large free-standing sculpture of the naked human body such as one example from Uxmal housed in the Museo del Pueblo at Dzibilchaltun (Fig. 15), but the vast majority are non-attached phalli used in architectural settings like the drain spouts at Uxmal (Fig. 16), or the stone phalli that are found in unprovenanced locations at many northern lowland cities, such as the example photographed *c.* 1881 by Augustus Le Plongeon at Uxmal (Fig. 17) (Desmond & Messenger 1988, 81).

E.W. Andrews IV (1943) was the first to comment upon the phallicism prevalent in northern Maya art, in a discussion of the art and archaeology of southern Campeche that followed his original publication of the Telantunich monuments. Written during a period of intense debate regarding the chronology of newly defined regional traditions, Andrews and his colleagues strove to order the diverse artistic traditions of the northern Maya lowlands through comparison to other works from the ancient cultures of Mesoamerica. Andrews believed the Telantunich monuments, in combination with sculpture from Pustunich, Sayil, Kabah, and one or two others, formed an 'organically related group' due to their very distinctive style of execution (i.e. the nearly three-dimensional nature

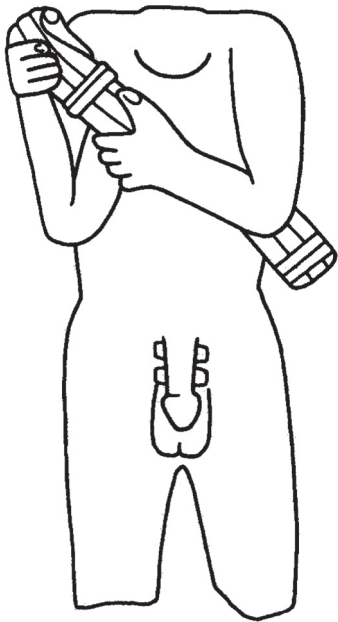


Figure 15. *Uxmal monument, note penile scars* (© Peter Mathews, courtesy Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., www.famsi.org).

of the carving), the proportions used for depiction of the human body (a shorter torso with hourglass form), and the strong phallic emphasis (Andrews 1943, 83). He believed these monuments shared a number of unique features that were not found in normal Maya sculpture, and thus represented the remains of a later, non-Maya culture (Andrews 1943, 82). As described above, all available archaeological evidence associated with these sculptures argues for a Late-Terminal Classic date, during the height of Maya occupation within the southern Puuc zone. Modern chronological techniques have resolved many of the issues with which Andrews and his colleagues struggled, and there is now no doubt the Olmec pre-dated the Maya, and that there was no foreign occupation of the northern Maya zone following the Classic period. Furthermore, a comparative study shows that phallic imagery is present throughout Maya art, and was an important indicator of masculine hegemony and elite ritual privilege. Yet, given the nature of the subject matter, few interpretive arguments have been offered about why the Classic Maya chose to commemorate this particular aspect of the human body.

Phallic imagery

A general principle of the Classic Maya corpus is that it rarely portrays human nudity, and even more rarely



Figure 16. *Phalli drain spout at Uxmal* (after Amrhein 2001).



Figure 17. *Uxmal carved stone phalli c. 1881* (after Desmond & Messenger 1988).

any intimate activities. A few notable exceptions occur, such as the depiction of captives and graffiti (Fig. 18). But these serve to underscore the main principle that, in the Classic period, individual features of the human body were sublimated to dominant artistic values (Houston 2001). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the portrayal of elites and rulers who often are covered in essential royal paraphernalia that all but obscure their human condition. Indeed, some have suggested that Classic art was most often used to document as well as indoctrinate the viewer in the transformation of mundane human individuals into

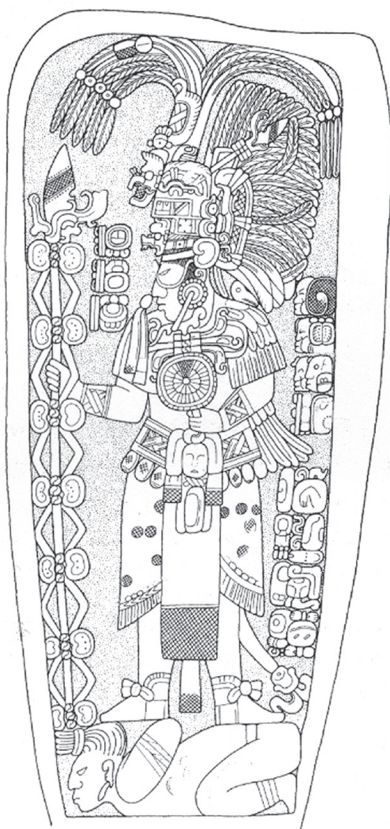


Figure 18. *Captive beneath ruler's feet, Naranjo Stela 8 (after Graham & Von Euw 1975).*

semi-divine spiritual leaders, a subject that served to justify royal privilege and transfer authority to the ruling corporate entity (Schele & Freidel 1990). Certainly, at many Maya sites, it is hard to distinguish visually one king from another, so canonical is the representation of power. Recent epigraphic advances have revealed individual rulers that the artistic record intentionally obscured.

What, then, does the commemoration in stone of the penis have to do with this serious canon of portraiture? In fact the depiction of the penis is a standard part of the canon, although one that appears in limited or specific contexts. The portrayal of prisoners, as mentioned above, is the most common arena in which human nudity was appropriate and, in this case, the emphasis is clearly upon the absence of royal insignia rather than on the depiction of the human body. Captured high-status individuals who were normally so dependent upon royal accoutrements for the communication of their status were literally stripped of these objects and were consequently seen as so unidentifiable that they were often labelled with

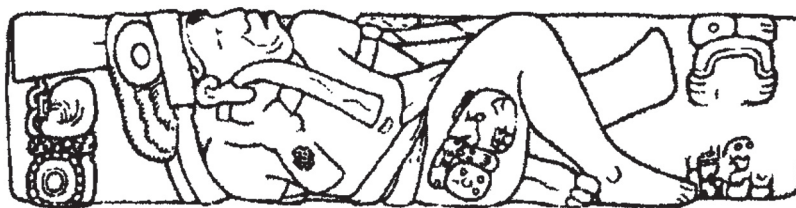


Figure 19. *Naked captive with name glyph, Tonina Stela 27 (after Baudez & Mathews 1980, fig. 4).*

glyphic captions (Fig. 19). The state of being nude was one of the humiliations of being a captive, and the depiction of the nude body in this case only rarely depicts genitalia. In the few cases where the genitalia of prisoners are depicted, it is often to identify them as elite individuals who bear the scars of penile bloodletting.

The Classic practice of bloodletting from the penis has been well documented for a long time and, while it is often treated as one of the most exotic aspects of ancient Maya culture, few careful explanations of this ritual practice have been made (however see Chase 1991; Stone 1995; Joyce 2000b). Offerings in the form of incense, blood, or other precious substances were clearly an essential part of Classic Maya religious practice, probably as a means to communicate with and perhaps nourish ancestors or the gods, and a glyphically corroborated part of en-souling important architecture or 'smoking' venerated bones (Stuart 1998; Ardren 2001). Archaeologists have documented the material remains of bloodletting, both in burial goods related to the act and in caches or offerings which correspond to ethnohistoric descriptions of bloodletting rites (Chase 1991; Garcia Moll 1996). Elites often chose to commemorate themselves performing this act, especially the offering of their own blood, in monumental art. Perhaps this is because monumental art served in part to legitimate Classic Maya royal culture and a central ideological aspect of royal privilege was the performance by kings and queens of the bloodletting act on behalf of their populations. Yet we may also see the individual sponsor of art at work in those same monuments and related inscriptions. Certainly there are texts that describe the offering of blood from his penis by Yax Pasaj Chan Yoaat and earlier kings at Copán, and famous texts and monumental art from Yaxchilan, as well as visual images of penile bloodletting by dancers at Bonampak and on certain ceramic vases (Fig. 20). The practice was so fundamental to elite identity that it survived in some form into the Postclassic period, as demonstrated by the Santa Rita cache figurines (Fig. 21) (Chase & Chase 1988). There

is even ethnohistoric evidence that penis perforation continued into the nineteenth century, as laws continued to be passed in Colonial era Yucatán outlawing the practice (Chuchiak 2000).

In the murals of Chichen Itza we see the only known depiction of penile bloodletting in conjunction with one of the free-standing carved phallus stones found so commonly in the northern lowlands (Fig. 22). In the North Temple of the great ballcourt, a series of elaborate murals cover the interior walls. Schele & Mathews (1998, 254) interpreted these as depictions of accession rituals associated with ballgame ceremonies, but much of the imagery is mythological and speaks to the underlying justifications of elite power at the city. On the north wall, in the upper left-hand corner, a series of rituals are portrayed that seem to concern preparation of the body. The first of these shows a royal man performing a bloodletting ceremony in front of a two- to three-metre high phallus stone, that itself is decorated with the scars of bloodletting.

The importance of auto-sacrifice from the penis is underscored by another common symbolic convention, the depiction of scarring on the upper glans of the penis. Shown as raised lines or diagonal hatches, these scars are the inevitable result of the perforation of the skin and appear to have been depicted proudly, as an indication of royal status, as well as a powerful example of the grounding of cultural ideals upon elite bodies. Individuals who are otherwise fully clothed in elite paraphernalia occasionally are depicted showing their scarred penis, as do warriors in an example from the Upper Temple of the Jaguars at Chichen Itza (Fig. 23). Likewise, scars were important details in the depiction of certain captives, such as the right hand individual on the panel in the palace at Palenque (Fig. 24).

Further elaboration on the practice of penile auto-sacrifice may come from glyphic inscriptions in which a title or god name of 'bled penis' or 'scarred penis' was used by kings. The glyph depicts a penis and scrotum in profile, and is often written in association with the element 'chan', often used to reference the supernatural, in the form of a sky glyph or a prefix that



Figure 20. Bloodletting scene from Dumbarton Oaks vase (after Amrhein 2001, fig. 44).

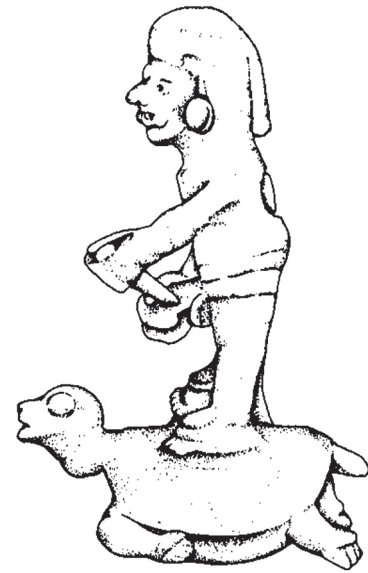


Figure 21. Santa Rita cache figurine (after Chase & Chase 1988, fig. 50).



Figure 22. Central figure shows penile bloodletting at carved phalli stone, Chichen Itza, north Temple of the Great Ballcourt. (Drawing by Linda Schele. © David Schele, courtesy Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., www.famsi.org.)

indicates seniority or age (Fig. 25). Earlier glossed as the 'progenitor title' by epigraphers who interpreted its use as an indication of an individual's claim to importance within a dynasty through statements of descent, Tom Jones (1994) was the first to point out that none of the then current translations of the title actually reference generative power or even sexual activity (Lounsbury 1973; Closs 1987; Young 1988). Instead, Jones saw the title as a testimony to sacrifices made on behalf of a kingdom and a promise to make such sacrifices in the future. Jones even suggested the occasionally infixed 'yax' element refers to the blue

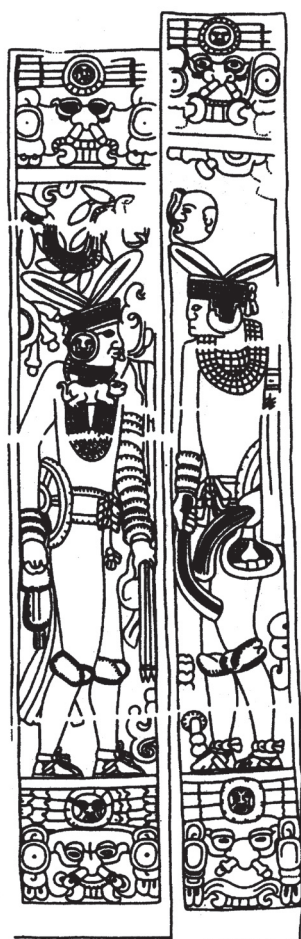


Figure 23. Warriors showing scarred penises, Chichen Itza, Temple of the Jaguars (after Schele & Mathews 1998, fig. 6.26).

this glyph contributes anything more to an understanding of its meaning than its phonetic value 'at', and suggest its full reading of 'yooat' may have little to do with actual penile bloodletting (M. Eberl pers. comm. 2003). Grube (2002a, 333–5) has recently interpreted the 'title' as the name of a deity that appears often in the names of Classic Maya rulers. Yet the glyph appears in the inscriptions of sites across the Maya lowlands and while epigraphers may argue over whether it is a title or a god name, most scholarship agrees that the imagery of a scarred penis is used in royal names as one of the justifications of royal prerogative.

This glyph is common in the inscriptions of Chichen Itza, where it is used by a series of family members, including women who held positions of

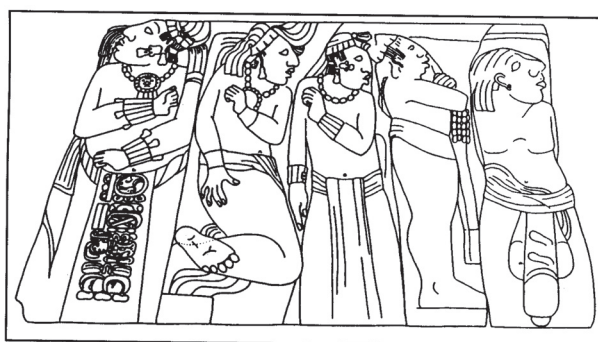


Figure 24. Captives with penile scars, Palenque Palace panel (after Robertson 1985).

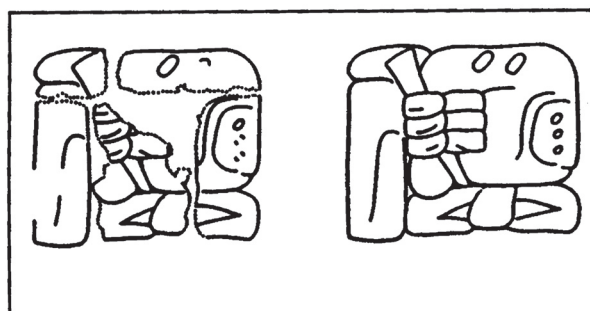


Figure 25. Penis title, Copan Temple 11 (after Jones 1994).

bruising that would result from this act (Jones 1994, 82). Recent shifts away from literal readings in epigraphic decipherment have questioned whether the penis imagery of

or supreme ruler (Stanley Guetner pers. comm. 2002). As female pharaohs who ruled in Egypt adopted the title 'king', certain Maya women seem to have appropriated titles and glyphic phrases used mostly by kings in the absence of parallel or equivalent female language. It is well documented that women let blood during the Classic period (usually through their tongues), and perhaps, at Chichen Itza, the epigraphic evidence indicates that the power derived from this activity was claimed by royal women who held local authority.

In a recent examination of male sexuality in Classic Maya culture, Rosemary Joyce has argued convincingly that there is a sexualization of the male subject in Maya art that derives from an emphasis on male/male sociality and competition (Joyce 2000b). Visible in the depiction of the penis and more common themes of partially clothed or unclothed young male bodies or all-male groups of young men in competitive activities such as the ballgame, warfare, or ceremonial dances, this artistic theme glamorizes the display of the male body to peers and re-emphasizes the definition of masculine gender roles and masculinity held by elite Maya culture. Joyce argues that the depiction

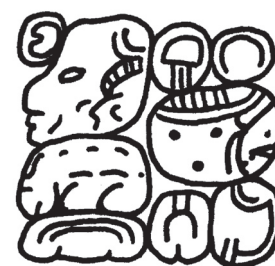


Figure 26. Scarred penis glyph in name phrase of Lady Ton Ahau, Chichen Itza, Temple of las Monjas (after Krochock 2002).

dynastic significance to the ruler Kakupakal (Fig. 26) (Krochock 2002). The use of this glyph by a woman is not as incongruous as it appears: recent translations have shown that very high-status women who held political power often assumed titles earlier thought to belong only to kings, such as 'kalomte'

of the erect penis, in cave art and graffiti but especially in the free-standing stone monuments of the northern lowlands which may have marked areas of all-male ritual (as suggested by Colonial descriptions of male houses for ritual training), is further evidence of a sexuality that included male–male interactions, not to the exclusion of heterosexual relations but in a fluidity of experience outside Western dominant values. Drawing upon earlier work by Andrea Stone on the erotics of cave imagery, Joyce suggests caves and certain temple structures like those with stone phalli may have been loci for male gender performance, where the male gaze was focused on other men, and the significance of youthful male beauty was reinforced (Joyce 2000b, 273; Stone 1995). Within this interpretive framework, the rare examples of male homoerotic and autoerotic figures from cave art (Figs. 27 & 28) could represent important windows into a world of largely undocumented all-male ritual behaviour, rather than comments on illicit or abnormal behaviour, as Stephen Houston has claimed (Houston 2001, 213). Such ritual behaviours may have served to underscore normative male/female gender complementarity practices in Classic culture, much as the use of humour described by Taube illustrates the inversion of dominant social roles. To characterize such depictions of sexual power and autoeroticism as ‘abnormal’ fundamentally limits our scholarly ability to view such art as meaningful information about ancient social values (and practices).

Contact period Colonial sources on Yucatec Maya culture describe a men’s house or discrete location for communal male interactions that existed in every town (Landa, in Tozzer 1941, 124). These were apparently locations where young men lived together for an extended period of time and perhaps were instructed in ritual activities. They also were visited by prostitutes and engaged in further sexual activities of which the Spanish ecclesiastical authorities disapproved. Pete Sigal (2000) claims that Colonial native language documents show that male sexual identity was not based on strict conformity to specific behaviours, as sexuality was contextualized within religious practices and principles. Archaeologists have attempted to match certain Classic Maya architecture to this description of an ethnohistoric period space for many years with varying success. The large galleried rooms of Postclassic Mayapan are the best match for Landa’s description of ‘large houses ... open on all sides’ (Tozzer 1941, 124; see also Proskouriakoff 1962; Pollock 1965; Webster 1989; Andrews V 2003). We can conclude, however, that at Spanish Contact, practices surrounding the performance of behaviours associ-

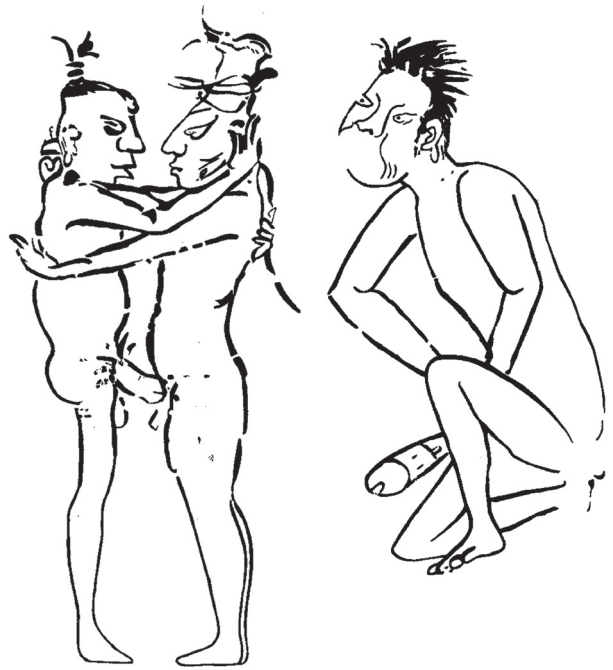


Figure 27. *Male homoerotic embrace, Naj Tunich cave art (after Stone 1995).*

Figure 28. *Autoerotic figure, Naj Tunich cave art (after Stone 1995).*

ated with the dominant masculine gender role were sufficiently established within Maya society that architectural spaces for such activities were maintained and widely used during the early part of Colonial occupation. This certainly suggests that such practices may have had deep roots in the Classic period, when performative aspects of identity were even more deeply engrained in Maya society.

Discussion

Having demonstrated that the phallus does in fact appear quite commonly in Classic Maya art, perhaps we can begin better to understand choices made by the artist of the Telantunich monuments. The repeated depiction of the phallus on the monuments in Terminal Classic art of the northern lowlands is additional symbolic information above and beyond what is normally communicated in royal monumental art. While penis perforation is rarely portrayed in Maya portraiture, the scarred penis is an important indicator of rank, and the erect penis or male genitalia outside the context of auto-sacrifice appear in caves and graffiti but almost never in monumental form. Why then do they appear in the Telantunich monuments?

Recent studies of gender in antiquity have shown that Western concepts of the inevitability of

gender and sex cannot be applied universally. While dominant Western culture sees gender, or the roles and expectations associated with being male or female, to derive from the biological reality of our bodies and especially our reproductive capabilities, modern (and ancient) non-Western cultures do not see gender or sex as inherent. As explained by Tim Yates (1993, 51), 'nature is not a fixed and inviolable process, it is already a text requiring a reading and an interpretation'. In New Guinea, where the process of instructing children in their gender roles has been studied intensely, infants are believed to be born with both male and female organs. For boys, inherent femaleness must be drained off by a series of rituals as well as the development of skill as a warrior (Herd 1987). In Inka society, androgyny was the natural state of being, and masculine identity was acquired during youth and adulthood by performance, becoming very unstable as old age prevented men from success in hunting and war (Dean 2001).

What this illustrates is that in certain cultures, gender and especially masculinity need to be deliberately marked or communicated because identity is acquired and experienced through actions and achievements rather than through birthright. The actions and achievements of men often dominate the artistic canon since masculinity and masculine gender roles are often a metaphor for the state, through which men perform their subservience to the state in order to reinforce a privileged status (Ardren *in press*). The most common themes in Classic Maya art are hierarchically structured ritual performance, warfare, and competitive gaming; themes which both define the masculine role and the power of the elite or ruling class over the rest of the populace.

Most Classic Maya art de-emphasizes the differences between male and female physical bodies, with some figures like the Maize God/dess and Itzamna exhibiting actual sexual ambiguity (Looper 2002). Each culture or state chooses how to construct and portray the body. Classic Maya culture did this through the use of distinctive costume and hair treatments, and occasionally through the display of the unclothed male body or genitalia. Other symbols such as weapons or agricultural tools could have been (and occasionally were) chosen as diagnostic markers of masculinity in Maya culture — symbols closely associated with masculine practices. But depiction of genitalia, within a canon that eschewed the uncovered body, and especially in association with a powerful act of self sacrifice, was one of the most evocative means available to demonstrate and establish masculine power.

Conclusion

Returning to the Telantunich monuments, surely the reason for the use of additional symbolic information in the form of repeated depictions of the erect penis was related to other representations of the phallus in Maya art. We have seen that one of the positive uses of the penis was to depict the ability of royal men to offer blood from the most intimate area of their body on the part of the body politic — in essence, the transmutation of the individual ruler into a stage where the fortunes of an entire population were played out and perhaps rectified. As one of the most profound acts performed by ancient Maya men, as well as perhaps by Maya gods, penis perforation was a dramatic and powerful way to demonstrate royal prerogative and the violence associated with masculinity and dominance in this particular ancient state. It is an artistic theme throughout the Classic Maya world, but seems to have had especial significance in the northern lowlands where many examples of the actual act or the scarred result are portrayed. Perhaps the less textually dependent elite culture of the north, seen by some as placing less emphasis on dynasty in favour of ritual, instead stressed that the right to rule was dependent upon willing self-sacrifice — and thus the graphic portrayal of self-sacrifice took on added importance (Ringle & Bey 2001, 292; Grube 2002b). The performance of subservience to the state and dominant conceptualizations of masculinity through the enactment of ritualized self-violence would have reinforced the power of such hegemonic values as well as the privileged status of those able to withstand such a performance.

We have also seen that the artistic record describes a meaningful part of Classic Maya men's lives consisting of all-male activities such as the ballgame and ritual events, and such images can be read today as part of the reinforcement of male identity and male hegemony within especially elite segments of society. The glorification of the male body in Maya art, and the participation of men in men's activities which offered opportunities for the appreciation of the male body and the performance of male sexuality, even perhaps for sexual encounters or experimentation, also seems to be relevant in the interpretation of the Telantunich monuments. Perhaps the archway the Telantunich figures surround is a portal to this ritual performance space, either underground in a cave or in an architectural setting. Perhaps rituals of masculine marking were more important in the northern lowlands, again as an area less textually dependent, and apparently less dependent upon the rules of lineal

descent. It is now well accepted that sexuality and sexual behaviours can be contextualized within ritual principles, and it is likely the depiction of autosacrifice on the Telantunich monuments was embedded within a complex set of beliefs at the intersection of gender and status that served to transform an intimate or personal act into a ritualized statement of power and authority in service to dominant values.

Much has been written about the influence of 'outsiders' in the northern lowlands, and while it is the opinion of the authors that most of the population of the north was culturally Maya, the southern cone region of Yucatán is a cultural as well as modern political border zone. Although not well investigated, the archaeological remains of the southern cone share traits common in the north and south, and architecture, ceramics etc. from this area show that the inhabitants of sites like Telantunich were on the periphery of major power centres, drawing from both areas and perhaps acting as crucial mediators. In this hypothesized social context, rituals of incorporation could take on even greater significance, as elites outside nearby dominant power centres, such as the cities of the Peten, Calakmul polity, or Puuc region, experimented with traditional canons to legitimize their power and mediate the cultural translations between these areas.

The unusual sculptures from Telantunich remain intriguing examples of a regional style that is distinctive within the Maya corpus both for its manner of execution and for its emphasis on one aspect of the masculine body. Further study needs to be made of the ways the Classic Maya inscribed meaning on the human body, for it was a favourite subject and its modes of depiction are certain to carry highly significant information about how the individual was affected by, and helped to shape, dominant values. These monuments show that the ancient inhabitants of Telantunich practised artistic creation within the broad traditions of the Maya corpus but left us a unique window into the role masculine sexuality played in the legitimization of royal power.

Acknowledgements

This article was originally presented at the First Annual Tulane Maya Symposium and Workshop, New Orleans, Louisiana, in November 2002, and subsequently at the 2nd Mesa Redonda de Poxila, Merida, Yucatán, Mexico, in January 2003. The authors would like to thank Rebecca Biron, John Chuchiak, Marcus Eberl, Scott Hutson, Bryan Just, Aline Magnoni, Matthew Restall, Travis Stanton, Karl Taube, Gabrielle Vail, and two anonymous reviewers for productive commentary and criticism. Thanks also to Michael C. Owens

for assistance with our illustrations. Additional thanks are offered to the village of Kancabchen, and to Alejandro and Pepe Patron Laviada.

Note

1. The Yucatecan rancher who owns the land on which the Telantunich ruins are found suggests that interminable legal dispute between the two states prevents a final interpretation of the border location, leading cartographers to use whatever information is current at the time a map is produced.

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