

Figuring Authority: Men, Women and Ancestors in Classic Maya Monuments

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Professor Rosemary Joyce demonstrated how she approaches the study and teaching of Mayan art. As an anthropologist, she tries to understand how we can acquire knowledge of the Maya using the documents we have to illuminate social relationships and other elements of Mayan society and culture. For ourselves and our students, we have to understand the contexts in which those documents were produced and used.

This understanding is made more difficult by several persistent misconceptions and misleading scholarly conventions to which Professor Joyce drew special attention.

(1) Although the decipherment of the Mayan writing system in the 1950s was a major triumph, the books that it made possible have tended to refer to the "classic Maya," as if the unified Mayan writing system and artistic style reflected a similar homogeneity in Mayan politics and culture, which in fact did not exist. There was no "Mayan empire"; Mayan politics was local, organized around city-states ruled by noble families who allied with each other for military purposes, and different regions used distinct spoken languages.

(2) The newly deciphered Mayan texts, many of which refer to chronology and royal lineage, have tended to be interpreted, misleadingly, as chronicles of Mayan history. Insufficient attention has been paid to the fact that these texts refer only to a small, *male* subset of the Mayan population, and that these texts were carved for the purpose of making political claims on behalf of particular royal families, and therefore cannot be accepted as statements of historical fact.

(3) Various conventional ways of reproducing Mayan images—as line drawings in the case of carved panels and stele, and as rolled-out, flat scenes in the case of pots—obscure the fact that no one actually saw the images this way. Line drawings are interpretations, and they obscure the differences in degrees of visibility of different texts and other features in a carved panel; and rolling out the image on a pot makes figures on all sides visible at once.

By way of demonstrating how Mayan art can help us understand Mayan society in spite of the difficulties above, Professor Joyce drew on a series of examples, each of which she used to make a number of points:

A wall panel from Guatemala (*figure 1*), itself a large-scale reproduction of a rolled-out image from a pot, is a prime example of how the Mayans portrayed political history. It depicts a single ruler, framed by a text whose caption refers to the lord of Piedras Negras, visited by "Bird Jaguar" of Yaxchilan (perhaps the man in the image), presumably a greater ruler, whose visit was meant to prop up his weaker colleague. The context in which an image like this was displayed—the interior rooms of a palace—may elucidate why images like this one contain things that rulers may not have wanted to have available to public view.

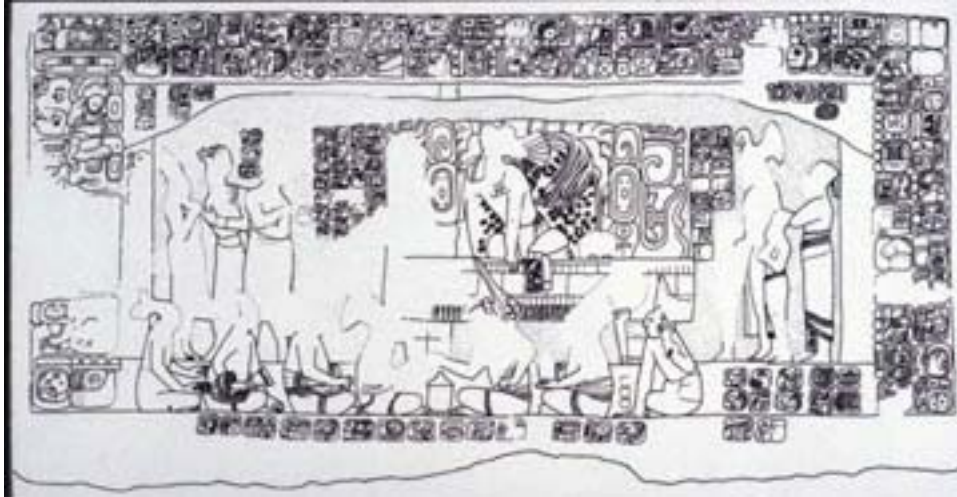


Figure 1



Figure 2

A pot (*figure 2*) depicting two rulers (identifiable as such because each is in a frontal pose, which signified preeminence) on opposite sides was also used in the context of palace life, possibly as part of a political ceremony in which one ruler shared chocolate with another.

In several images from carved panels, women are depicted in ways that reflect rulers' need to portray themselves as the most recent generation of old, preeminent families (in many cases the family of a ruler's mother) that had ruled a particular place continuously for many generations. Such self-portrayal by rulers was almost always a deliberate attempt to claim legitimacy and shore up a prerogative to exercise power by obscuring the reality that Mayan politics was fragile, continuity of government unusual, and control over cities hard to maintain. Placing royal palaces and pyramid-shaped mortuary shrines commemorating dead royal ancestors in a highly visible place at the center of Mayan cities served a similar purpose. A mother from a royal family is portrayed presenting her ruling son with ceremonial implements of war; a "mother-father" figure is presented (probably) as a sign of a royal house's long ancestry; and the large breasts of a serpent-woman figure (*figure 3*) draw attention to the intergenerational nurturing from which a ruler has benefited.



Figure 3



Figure 4

Other images are equally informative about Mayan political culture, when examined with an awareness of their contexts. A large statue of a "healthily fat" noble from Copan, for example, is a reminder that noble families reaped luxuries from the labor of farmers whose descendants exist, in Guatemala and elsewhere, to this day. It is a mistake to say that the Mayans "collapsed" or "disappeared" simply because noble families declined.

Various images of women in panels, on pots, and as figurines show aspects of women's identities in different parts of society: they are expert weavers in royal households, sexually attractive, and mothers (*figure 4*). A depiction of a man in a carved panel (*figure 5*) can be understood as a reflection of the ideal male body, demonstrating power and vitality.



Figure 4

Summarized by Simon Grote.