

Observations on Certain Visual Elements in Late Classic Maya Sculpture

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DUMBARTON OAKS

The number of themes depicted in Classic Maya sculpture is limited. These themes are expressed, in one way, by certain more or less interchangeable ritual objects that are held or worn by major characters. Palenque seems distinctive, in that its uses of these objects follow conventions rather different from those of other sites; it is, nevertheless, saying the same basic things with much the same kinds of objects. This paper will deal with some samenesses and differences in the uses of a few of these. It will dwell principally on the Temple of the Sun, for two reasons. The first reason is that the Temple of the Sun Tablet and Sanctuary Jamb, more than any other sculpture at Palenque, use the symbolic paraphernalia commonly found with major figures on monuments in other Maya sites, with the probable exception of objects associated with blood-letting; the second reason is that blood-letting paraphernalia on sculpture has been fairly well covered elsewhere (Benson 1974, 1976, n.d.; Joralemon 1974; Greene Robertson n.d.). Most of these objects that are common in other sites are rare or nonexistent in other sculptures at Palenque.

Schele (1974, 1976) has established that the “event of the Group of the Cross is the accession of Pacal’s successor, Lord Chan Bahlum” (1976:10). She has noted (1976) that there are three separate rites associated with the three Cross Group temples, and that there are particular Underworld associations with the Temple of the Sun. The present paper is in the nature of a footnote to Schele’s 1976 Mesa Redonda paper.

The central symbol of the Sun Tablet (Fig. 1) is a round shield with the face of the Jaguar-God of the Underworld. A shield is, of course, a frequent attribute of major figures on monuments, but it is used differently at Palenque than at any other site. The shield or shield-like object is generally shown held by a figure; only on the Sun Tablet at Palenque does it appear separately, although two stones at Copán, both of which are shields with Underworld-Jaguar faces (Spinden 1913: Fig. 1*b*; Proskouriakoff 1950: Fig. 32*o*), may also have been separate from figures. (Spinden describes the first of these as being a tenoned stone.)

In the stuccos on the wall of the Inscriptions Tomb, which Schele (1976:10) has noted as the iconographic equivalents of the Temple of the Sun, the figures carry, in a conventional manner, the same Underworld-Jaguar shield that appears on the Sun Tablet (Schele 1974: Figs. 2, 3). The Inscriptions shields, like the Sun Tablet shield, are framed with plaques of spotted material, presumably bits of jaguar skin, with a bunch of feathers at each “corner”. The feathers are common at other sites, but I do not find the spotted frames elsewhere, although Naranjo Stela 21 has hatched areas around the face. The Underworld-Jaguar shield appears nowhere else at Palenque, to my knowledge. The flayed-face shield, however, appears as an accession symbol on the Palace Tablet and the Tablet of the Slaves, as well as being held by Pacal on the Sun Tablet. The only other place where I have found the flayed-face shield is on Tzum Stela 3 (Graham and von Euw 1975-77, IV, Pt. 1:55), where it is held by a figure that may hold a manikin scepter in the other hand, and is in the “dancing pose” found on the Dumbarton Oaks Tablet (Coe and Benson 1966: Fig. 6); the House D, pier d, figure; and the Temple XVIII Tablet. The “dancing pose” is found elsewhere, but I do not know of another flayed-face shield; its use, even at Palenque, is limited.

Elsewhere, the shield with the Underworld-Jaguar face is common; although some shields have what seem to be other faces (e.g., Proskouriakoff 1950: Fig. 32*y-a*’); some may be plain

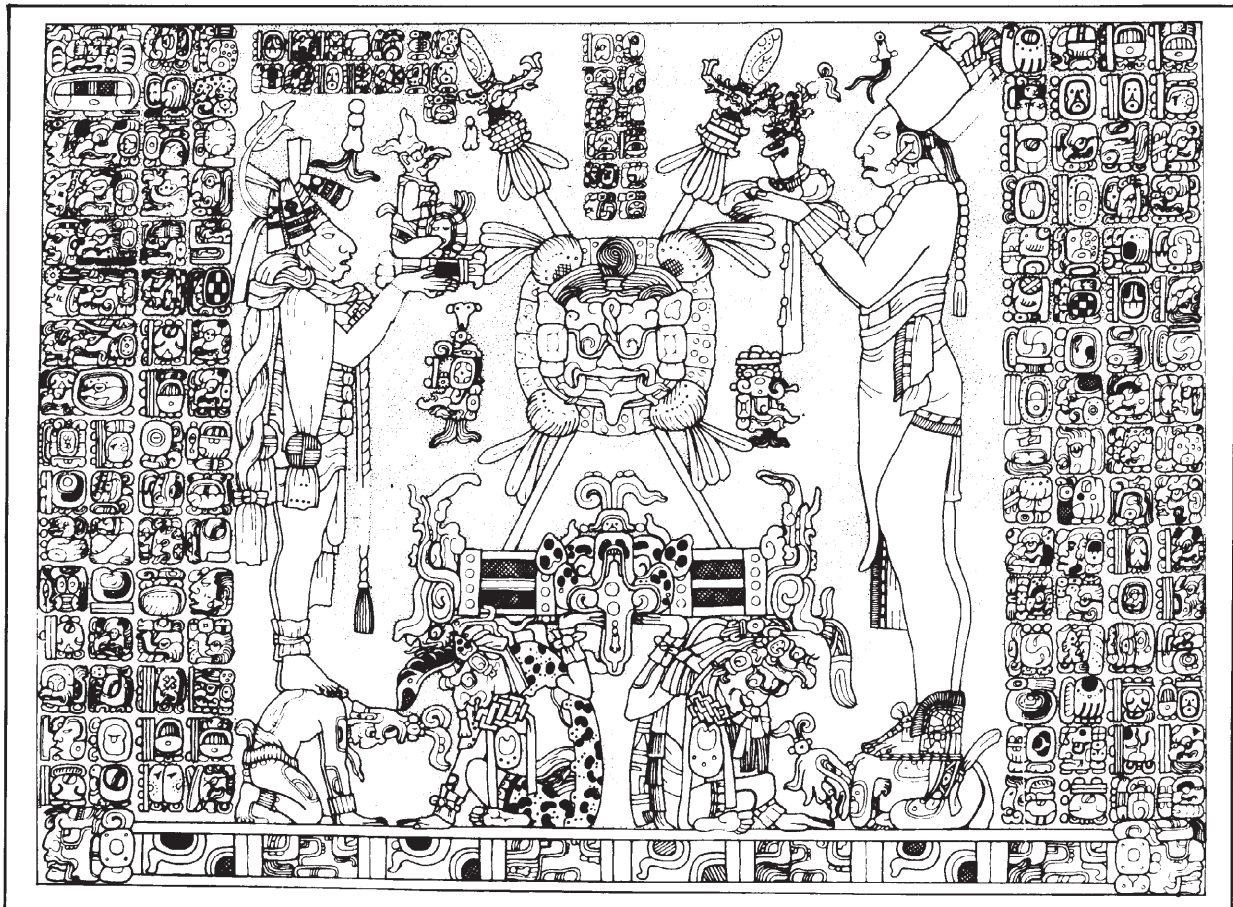


Fig. 1 Temple of the Sun Tablet, Palenque. Drawing by Linda Schele.

(Aguateca St. 3); some have a striped horizontal surface (Bonampak area relief, Greene et al. 1972: Pl. 75), undoubtedly reflecting construction; or some may have a glyphic design (e.g., Tikal Temple IV, Lintel 3). The shield is most commonly held in the left hand or attached to the left wrist of a major figure. It may be shown so that the design is facing outward and the holding device concealed; it may be shown to be held by a strap handle on the back, so that the design is turned away from the viewer; it may be tucked under the arm (Aguateca St. 3); it may be held downward and shown in edge view, as on Naranjo St. 13, which shows the feather edge (Fig. 2) or held outwards in edge view, as on Naranjo St. 28. A common small version, attached to the wrist, may be shown in profile, or, in at least one instance (Seibal St. 21), held pendant from a strap. One version of this, Yaxchilán Lintel 58, shows the profile Underworld-Jaguar face upside-down. The full-face version may also appear upside-down (Yaxchilán St. 11) or sideways (Ixkun St. 1; Tikal Str. 10 lintel); I believe that the shields that are not upright are always worn on the wrist. A shield-like form may also be encountered attached to a headdress (Chinkultic St. 9); incorporated into the clothing as a pectoral, bertha, or belt ornament; dangling from a ceremonial bar (Altar de Sacrificios St. 7); or, as at La Amelia, tied to the right leg of the major figure.

I would like to make brief mention of the rectangular shield form (Proskouriakoff 1950: Fig. 32*b, c, e, d'-g'*) which, at a number of sites, appears in frontal view, and which sometimes, notably at Yaxchilán, appears in profile view as a flexible object. It is a less common form than the round shield. To some extent, it may be interchangeable with the round shield, but there are also notable differences in the way it is held and used, and in its design. Figures at Piedras Negras, for example, may hold a bag or baglike pendant object in the left hand, along with the rectangular shield; at Naranjo (St. 2), a rectangular shield and a staff-spear may both be held in

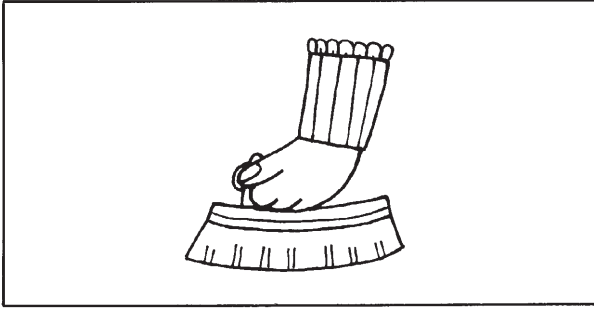


Fig. 2 Detail of Naranjo Stela 13. After Graham and von Euw 1975, 2, Pt. 1:37.

the left hand; on Yaxchilán Lintel 26, it is a woman who holds a flexible rectangular shield. The round shield is usually held by itself in the left hand, and is held by men. I believe that, with one exception (Aguateca St. 2), the rectangular shield probably never has the face of the Jaguar-God of the Underworld; it may have a variety of other faces and designs, including a standing figure holding a round shield (Lacanjá St. 1); most commonly it has birdheads. Whereas the round shield has a compact frame and often bunches of feathers at the four “corners,” the rectangular shield usually has long feathers, tassels, or fringe all around it. I have not found the rectangular shield on sculpture at Palenque, but Robert Rands tells me that it does appear on pottery.

Schele (1976: 26) has noted the common association of the shield with a manikin scepter or a staff or staff-spear, which is usually held in the right hand of the shield-bearer. The Inscriptions stucco figures, for example, hold manikin scepters. The Sun Tablet has, behind the shield, crossed staff-spears of a conventional type. Maya staffs are almost infinitely various, but this staff — a plain, thin shaft, with a bunch of feathers toward the top, then smaller or clipped feathers or some sort of wrapping, sometimes a serpent head, and a blade — does exist in other sites, either in identical form, or with close variations. On the North Jamb, Chan Bahlum holds a plain staff, but there is no way of knowing, in its present condition, what might have been at the top of it. He does not hold a shield. A photograph by Merle Greene Robertson shows a flint knife, which seems to be separate from its shaft, on the roof sculpture of House B, but, aside from these examples, I believe that the staff is nonexistent at Palenque. The House A staffs I will count as a form of manikin scepter. (The distinctions between scepters and staffs, and between staffs and ceremonial bars, are not always as clear as one might want them to be; see Seler 1976:28).

The manikin scepter is normally a full-figure deity, most frequently representing God K, that is held on a short stick which may be the deity’s serpent leg. This version does not appear at Palenque, where there are two other versions. One is a head on a long shaft, as in the House A stuccos. This form seems to combine the staff or spear–staff idea with the conventional manikin scepter. It is rarely found elsewhere. The second form is a full figure held on a cloth or a throne (as on the Cross Group Tablets), or in the lap (the Dumbarton Oaks Tablet) — or, if you wish to include the Temple of the Inscriptions stucco, in the arms. Deity manikins like this are rare elsewhere. Small deity figures are held in the arms at Xultún; on Yaxchilán Lintels 6 and

the left hand; on Yaxchilán Lintel 26, it is a woman who holds a flexible rectangular shield. The round shield is usually held by itself in the left hand, and is held by men. I believe that, with one exception (Aguateca St. 2), the rectangular shield probably never has the face of the Jaguar-God of the Underworld; it may have a variety of other faces and designs, including a standing figure holding a round shield (Lacanjá St. 1); most commonly it has birdheads. Whereas the round shield has a compact frame and often bunches of feathers at



Fig. 3 "The Scribe" alfarda, Palenque. Drawing by Linda Schele.

43, a manikin sits on a woven platform or throne that is supported by a pole. The earliest device of this kind may be on the eroded Tikal Pedestal 1 (Clancy 1976: Fig. 1), where the seated figure appears to be holding a similar device.

At Yaxchilán, the other object that is seen with the round wrist-shield is what Rands (in Greene et al. 1972: 120) has called a “torch staff.” I followed suit until a recent conversation with Floyd Lounsbury, for which I am most grateful.

When I mentioned that I was writing about ceremonial objects for the Mesa Redonda, Lounsbury asked what I was going to say about those “Palenque wind-socks.” I said, “the holy banners of Palenque? I’ve already said all I know about them” (Benson 1976: 49-51). But I had not observed what he had seen: that the end of the cloth seems to be doubled over, as if the end piece had been seamed (Fig. 3). When I said that I had always wondered why there were no versions of those things at any other site, he pointed out that there were similar objects at Calakmul on the stelae that Jeffrey Miller published in the first Mesa Redonda. The Cleveland and Kimball Stelae (Miller 1974: Figs. 2, 6) both depict shield-holding figures who clasp in the right hand an object that combines a serpent motif as stick or brace with a soft cloth that has a windsock end, a pull of cloth, and a kind of tied rosette; there is also a tabbed opening, which is reminiscent of the circular tabs in the Palenque banners, but here it is a tabbed square that reveals a tied, knotted, or mat motif beneath (Fig. 4). The moment I looked at that, I realized that the “torch staffs” of Yaxchilán are essentially the same object (Fig. 5).

The Yaxchilán versions appear held vertically on Lintels 9, 33, and 50, and on Stela 11. That it might be a torch is suggested by the soft, curling element that comes out of the end of the long cylinder; it had bothered me as flame, because it comes out of a cluster of feathers — which would have been much too close to the flame. The other possibility for the form might have been a long feather, but the end is not feather-like. It does, however, look like the end of the holey banners of Palenque. On the shafts of these Yaxchilán objects, there are from three to seven apparent openings, in which the surface covering seems to have been cut away (or, possibly, woven in this form, if cloth is involved here) in a T pattern, revealing a similar shape that seems to be an opening with a tied element showing through it. This flap extends stiffly outward, and seems to be hinged from the opening. The stiffness of the flap and the verticality of the object suggest that a substance like paper may have been used. Paper may cover something like a bolt of cloth that is tied beneath the paper with laced cording. Stela 11 seems to have a mat motif; some of the others suggest a simpler knotted tie. The Graham-von Euw (1977, III, Pt. 1: 29) drawing of Lintel 9 shows that there is a stick down the side of each of the two objects represented there, which recalls the stick of the Palenque banners. There seems to be a stiffer casing, however, on the outside of these objects than on those at Palenque.

An object very similar to the Yaxchilán one appears on El Cayo Wall Panel 1, in the right hand of the profile figure holding a full-face round shield. This object, looking rather like a shepherd’s crook, has a curved shape at the top and a step design repeated on the shaft. It does not have the tabs, but is otherwise very close to the Yaxchilán objects.

Toniná has both the circular tabs, like those of Palenque, and the cross-shaped ones of Yaxchilán.

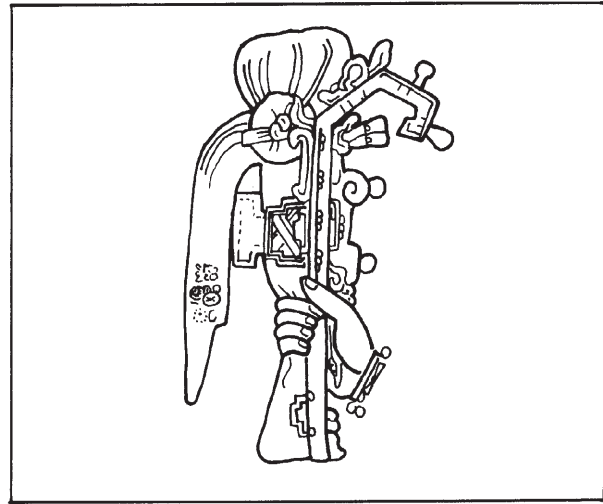


Fig. 4 Detail of the Cleveland Stela. After Miller 1974: Fig. 2.

The pot-bellied figure in the jaguar suit on Tikal Temple III, Lintel 2, holds a sticklike object with a swirl of cloth tied in its center (Coe et al. 1961: Fig. 18). This may be a related object, but it does not have the windsock end. It may be closer to the stick tied with perforator-god bands on Naranjo Stela 30, since cloth seems to be associated with bloodletting and the ritual bundle (Benson 1976: Greene Robertson n.d.). Both the Tikal and Naranjo figures hold tridentate knives in the other hand.

A pattern like that on the Yaxchilán objects — a double T or tabbed square with crossed bands or a mat motif inside — is found on textile garments at Yaxchilán, Bonampak, Piedras Negras and El Cayo.

The paper presented by Baudez and Mathews at the Mesa Redonda suggests that the cut-out areas are a form of mutilation, of “killing.” The figures at Palenque and Toniná may imply that this is the case, but the objects at Calkmul and Yaxchilán are held by major figures as major symbolic objects, and the holes are made with care, if not made as part of the basic structure of the object.

In Maya sculpture generally, an object that may substitute for the staff-spear, the manikin, or the round shield is the incense bag; it most commonly substitutes for the shield — if, indeed, substitution is the right word. At Palenque, the bag is shown on the North Jamb of the Temple of the Sun, where the figure holds a staff in both hands and has a bag hooked on a handle or strap over his left wrist; the bag is also shown held by figures who have a manikin staff in the other hand, on the House A stuccos (where, in one instance — pier e — a piece of cloth substitutes for the bag); and, apparently, that odd object on the thigh in the Palenque Tablet of the Slaves is one of these bags — it has the characteristic bound elements at the top and bottom — but it has no top strap, either to be held in the hand or placed over the wrist, which every other bag seems to have. (It is interesting that the incense bag, often interchangeable with the shield, is held or attached in the same manner as the shield, by a strap in the hand or over the wrist.) The Slaves bag is also the only one I know of that has a bird on it; but this is probably a glyphic reference (Schele 1976: 27). Unlike most bag-holders, this figure has nothing in the other hand.

Schele (1976) has noted the separateness of the three rites shown in the Cross Group temples, and the separateness of the iconography associated with them, and yet, in other sites, or at other times, there is an apparent mingling of different rites. The three Palenque figures that hold the holey banner, or windsock, are dressed in the garments associated with prisoners, sacrificial

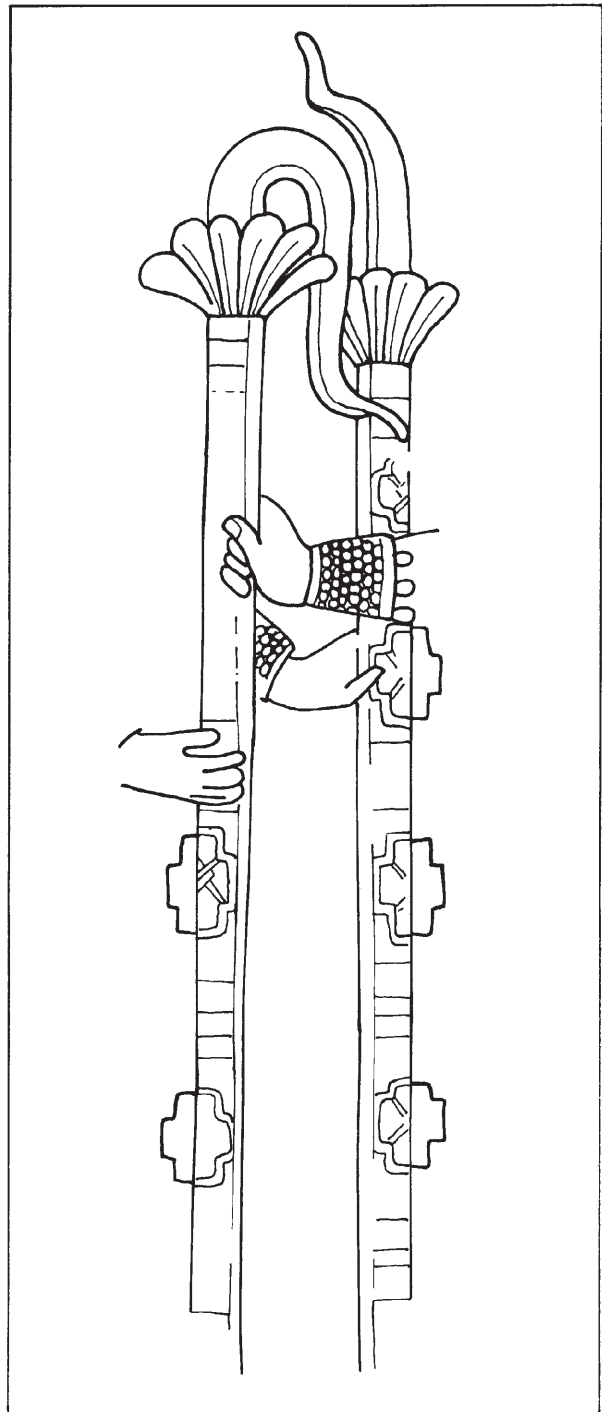


Fig. 5 Detail of Yaxchilan Lintel 9. After Graham and von Euw 1977, 3, pt. 1:29.

victims, or participants in the blood-letting rite, whereas the windsock staffs of Yaxchilán are always held by figures with the round wrist-shield; the El Cayo figure also has a shield. The incense bag is frequently seen at Piedras Negras, where it is shown in scenes involving blood-letting symbols (e.g., Stela 25); in scenes at Palenque and other places, it appears only with a shield and/or spear and/or scepter. At Yaxchilán, the holders of perforators do not have the wrist shield, but the shield sometimes appears with figures accompanied by the woman with the bundle, which, presumably, holds blood-letting equipment (Lintels 1, 53, 54). The staff-spear is often shown with perforator bows on it. All of this does not contradict Schele's premise that the three temples of the Cross Group are associated with three specific rites; the point is that, on many other monuments in other places, references are made to several different accession rites at the same time.

Another common attribute of monuments elsewhere is the ceremonial bar, held by a major figure. Something like this is seen in end view under the jaguar head on the South Jamb; otherwise, the bar does not appear at Palenque, unless one considers the device that supports the shield and staff-spears on the Sun Tablet. The form is also reflected in the thrones on the Palace Tablet and the support for the shield-holding Jester God manikin on the Sun Tablet. Because of its central element, I am hesitant to classify it unequivocally as a ceremonial bar (for ceremonial bars do not normally have a central element), although the heads at its ends suggest that it might be, as well as its association with the ceremonial objects above. Taylor (1941: 49), in discussing the interchangeability of various ceremonial objects, lists these forms as ceremonial bars, although he concedes that they are not "normal". The forms at Palenque seem to combine the ideas of bar and throne; they are used as supports for something powerful.

The use of something like a ceremonial bar or throne as the base for the spears and shield, and the fact that it is supported by two crouching figures, brings us to the question of bases for Maya monumental figures — and to some related questions. In some instances, there is no design below the major figures on monuments — The Temple of the Sun Sanctuary Jamb, for example. In some cases, there is an inscription below the feet of the major figure. Chan-Bahlum, in the Temple of the Cross Tablet, stands on a sky band. Two stelae from La Amelia show a jaguar in the panel below the figure, presumably relating to the idea of a jaguar throne, like that depicted in the House E Panel at Palenque, behind the standing profile figure in Tikal Stela 20, and, in reality, in front of the Palace of the Governors at Uxmal. A number of monuments show figures standing on god heads or masks (the Temple of the Cross and Temple of the Foliated Cross are examples); other figures stand on complex designs, as in the Temple of the Foliated Cross Tablet (Pacal).

The most common element is a "prisoner" figure that may be in a panel or directly under the feet of the major figure. These figures are often nude, although they may have a loincloth or flexible ear ornaments. They may be supine or prone, and some of them, notably at Naranjo, appear to be dead. They usually have long, prominent hanks of tied hair. The figures that stand on them may hold ceremonial bars, manikin scepters, staff-spears, bags, round or rectangular shields, and other, less common paraphernalia. The notable example of this kind of thing at Palenque, of course, is the Tablet of the Slaves, where the major figure sits on two of these "prisoner" figures, while the flanking figures sit on gods or monsters, one of which has god markings. For, at Palenque, not only do god heads appear under major figures; major figures stand or sit on full-figure gods, as figures at other sites stand on prisoners; the major figures on the Sun Tablet stand on crouching figures with god markings. Further evidence for this is Naranjo Stela 40, in which the major figure stands on the crossed-bands-glyph shoulders of an Etnab rabbit, whose head is between the major figure's feet. This sort of thing goes back to the Leyden Plate; I do not know whether the little figure that the major figure seems to walking over on the Leyden Plate is a prisoner or some prototype of the Jester God. Certainly, the interchangeability of the prisoner figures with supernatural figures suggests some special category for the prisoners

(Benson 1976).

Closely related to the prisoner figures used as bases are the figures that kneel beside major figures on the stelae at a number of sites; this is, however, a subject that is something of a digression in a discussion of ritual objects. Still, I would like to close by pointing out a relief sculpture from Chinajá, in the Alta Verapaz, recently published by Brian Dillon (1978). This shows a major figure with long hair that is dressed in the simple, tied style associated with prisoner figures; an ear ornament; a necklace; a scalloped or notched loincloth, the outline of which is reminiscent of the loincloth edging on the Temple XXI Alfarda figure at Palenque, as well as of the shape of the ear ornaments worn by the throne prisoner figures in the Slaves Tablet; and a knotted loincloth apron, comparable to that of the Scribe. The hands of the figure seem to be tied behind him. Dillon notes the non-Classic elements of the figure and compares it to Seibal Stelae 3 and 13 and Aguateca Stela 7, but I see this figure as more closely related to the Palenque alfardas and, perhaps, to Toniná Monument 108, some rare examples of single “prisoner” figures. Another example is Yaxchilán Stela 15, in which the major figure is simply dressed and has a simple, tied hairdress. He has flexible pendant ear ornaments and a kind of two-layered loincloth rather like that of the temple XXI Alfarda. He holds a staff-spear and flexible shield in his left hand; in the right, he holds the hair of an apparently kneeling figure (the sculpture is damaged in this corner). Here is both a “prisoner” figure and a dominant figure, but the dominant figure has attributes usually associated with “prisoner” figures. I would simply like to point these out as other examples of so-called “prisoner” attributes on a major figure. This is a subject that I would like to see pursued in depth by a number of people, glyphically and iconographically, for I think that these representations show more than the simple depiction of prisoners captured in war and possibly offered for ritual sacrifice. These figures often appear with the iconography of blood-letting, a rite that we are reasonably sure has to do with accession to kingly power. Moreover, these “prisoner” figures not only appear interchangeably with deities and supernatural creatures, but they are shown in three-figure compositions along with, or interchangeable with, individuals who must be ancestors from whom the king inherits power. On House A, pier c, for example, the central figure is flanked by two seated figures, one of whom has the simple tied hairdress and minimal clothing, and might be considered a “prisoner,” although he wears a jade necklace and belt; the other figure in this scene is probably a woman, wearing a jade-mesh cape and kilt, a jade belt, and a quadripartite-deity headdress, and surely depicts a royal ancestor. These seated figures are arranged around the major figure in the same manner as the God K-holding ancestral figures on the Dumbarton Oaks panel

To summarize briefly, it is in the use of “prisoner” figures that Palenque may have most in common with other sites. In the depicted use of ritual objects and the conventions for representing them, there is a tendency to be Palenque to be different. The Temple of the Sun Tablet is notable because it uses objects that are common at other sites, but extremely rare at Palenque, and it uses them differently than they are used at other sites. Objects that are held by major figures on monuments elsewhere are arranged by themselves on the Sun Tablet in a still life detached from human figures. The Underworld-Jaguar shield is the hub of the arrangement. It is, at least visually, supported by crossed spears, which, in turn, rest on a bar or throne; this bar is perhaps, then, the most basic element in the arrangement, except that it, in turn, is supported by two deity figures, who, like prisoners, bear the whole arrangement. By isolating the elements in this way, by abolishing the necessity of showing how they are held by stelae figures, the Palencanos may be telling us something about the relative values of the objects and their interrelationships.

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