
Eclecticism at Cacaxtla

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Among many surprises offered by the murals at Cacaxtla, one is their mixture of elements from the styles of figural art at Teotihuacán, Xochicalco, the Gulf coast, Oaxaca, and the southern Maya lowlands. They are all dated as being from periods before and after the era of the "collapse" of Mesoamerican societies, occurring during the period 750 to 900 (after Christ).

There are two groups of murals in the portico (Building II-1) and on the substructure at Building B. Diana López de Molina separates the portico murals from those of the substructure (1976: 5–6) as being of slightly later date, without however providing proofs other than the differences in subject matter between the commemorative character of the portico and the record of a battle on the substructure.

Another argument for the approximate contemporaneity of the murals is that the two buildings have identical vertical exterior wall profiles, decorated in the upper section with recessed rectangular panels between uprights, in varying depths of relief. These paneled wall treatments are at present peculiar to Cacaxtla, although a roughly similar laminated paneling is known on the terrace faces of Building B at Tula. The vertical wall profile, on the other hand, appears at Mitla (Church and Arroyo groups).

The portico building, moreover, resembles the dynastic temple structures at Palenque more than any highland designs. The other building, above the battle murals, is comparable to rectangular chambers, entered by three doors in the long façade, which are common in the Maya lowlands.

R. Abascal and others have assigned the paintings to 600–750, interpreting them as occurring during a "migration period" like that of western Europe following the fall of the Roman Empire,

which they compare to the eclipse of the power of Teotihuacán (1976: 47–49). This opinion was first expressed more hesitantly by Pedro Armillas (1946: 145), who also defined the strategic importance of the mountaintop siting of Cacaxtla and described its defensive moats as directed against attack from the south (p. 142). Armillas also compared Cacaxtla to Monte Albán in Oaxaca.

Marta Foncerrada de Molina (1978a: 92) prefers to date the murals as of the period from 700 to 900. Certainly the presence of glyphic forms in both groups, resembling those of Xochicalco, favors her placement in the period of two centuries she calls "Epiclassic," following W. Jiménez Moreno (1959, 2: 1072–1073).

The sixteenth-century historian of Tlaxcala, Diego Muñoz Camargo (1528/9 to ca. 1599; see Gibson 1950: 199–200), visited and measured Cacaxtla (1892: 22). He says that the ruination of the site by floods (*avenidas de aguas*) had occurred more than 360 years before the time he measured its earthworks at the end of the sixteenth century, or before about A.D. 1250. These earthworks and moats may belong to the Cacaxtla phase (Abascal et al. 1976: 52), from A.D. 600 to 850, when the Xochiteca-Cacaxtla complex was reoccupied and fortified.

It is not unlikely on internal evidence that the murals of both groups were painted during a brief period, without much pause between the substructure and the portico. In addition, the freshness of their condition on excavation, nearly intact except for exposure in places, suggests that their burial under new construction occurred not long after they were painted. The principal marks of ancient wear appear at the door jambs, where repairs were made. The same area of the north jamb shows pentimenti, where various parts of the original drawing were redrawn in a final form.

The ethnohistorical identification of the builders of Cacaxtla as the Olmeca-Xicalanca peoples was first made before 1600 by Muñoz Camargo, followed by Torquemada. Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl placed them as coming by sea from the east to Tabasco at Potonchan in the third creation (1891, 1: 19–20), whence they eventually appeared in the Valley of Puebla, according to him, near the Atoyac River. W. Jiménez Moreno (1959, 2: 1072–1073) identified Potonchan with Chontal-Maya territory in Tabasco, and he regarded the Olmeca-Xicalanca as emigrants from Copán whose travels to the northwest were part of the “collapse” of lowland Maya civilization in the tenth century. Much earlier, Jiménez Moreno (1942: 113–145) proposed the homeland of the Olmeca-Xicalanca as the Gulf coast, from Boca del Río in Veracruz, to Xicalanca near Ciudad del Carmen in Tabasco, during its domination by Maya influence after the eighth century (p. 127). The Maya traits in the style of the murals of Cacaxtla support Ixtlilxochitl’s remarks as well as the interpretation of them by Jiménez Moreno.

Foncerrada de Molina has referred to the Cacaxtla murals as displaying “eclecticism and syncretism,” without further discussion (1977c: 13). These concepts, which both have been important in Occidental thought since classical antiquity, need to be examined more closely for their relevance to Mesoamerican art and history. First, however, it is necessary to describe the murals before discussing their relation to other eclectic and syncretic phenomena.

The Wall Paintings Described

The murals at Cacaxtla form an integral context that came into being as a single unit of form and meaning held together by the recurrence of similar figures and glyphs. This holistic character distinguishes it from other archaeological entities, such as the contents of a tomb, which are often assembled from among discarded objects of daily use and heirlooms and are not intended to be perceived as coherently designed collections, conveying a specific message. The contents of most tombs cannot be considered as examples of eclectic taste, because of the absence from their arrangement of clearly defined choices.

The portico. In Building II-1, which resembles in plan (fig. 1) a Maya lowland dynastic temple, four mural panels stand nearly complete in the portico. They flank the central doorway opening to the west from an inner chamber bearing illegible re-

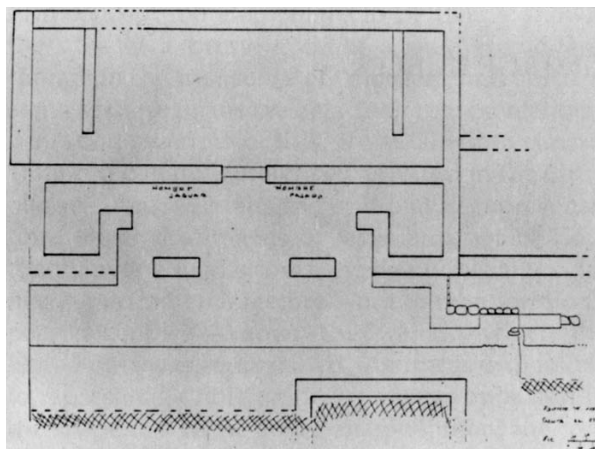


Fig. 1. Plan of Building II-1

mains of other murals. At the doorway the north and south jambs bear human figures looking westward. Each is like an acolyte to the adjoining cult figure on the wall panel beyond the jamb. The combination of each jamb and panel resembles a Maya vessel painted with principal and attendant figures (fig. 2; see color section).

The north panel (fig. 3) portrays a winged human in jaguar costume, standing on the back of a serpent-jaguar within a Teotihuacano-style frame of aquatic creatures (mollusks, turtles, serpents, crustaceans) among slanting waves. The adjoining jamb (fig. 4) bears another man in jaguar costume, from whose abdomen a flowering corn plant sprouts, bending downward, and recalling the intestines of the disemboweled warriors in the battle mural on the adjoining substructure. The same watery frame as on the panel marks the jamb base, but the apotheosized jaguar-warrior, who spills beneficial water from a vessel carried on his right arm, stands in front of the frame and outside it, with his jaguar feet on the groundline, bearing also one of the water snakes portrayed on the frame in his left hand.

The south doorjamb (fig. 5) bears another dancer, leaping upward in front of and outside the frame. Behind him his immense hairdress falls in jeweled strands, recalling at the head the emblem glyph of Tikal. He too wears black body paint, as in Classic Maya vase painting (Grieder 1964). Under his right arm a large conch like those in the watery frames contains a dwarflike human, richly jeweled, with a great mane of hair.

The south panel (fig. 6) shows another winged human wearing black body paint and a bird hel-

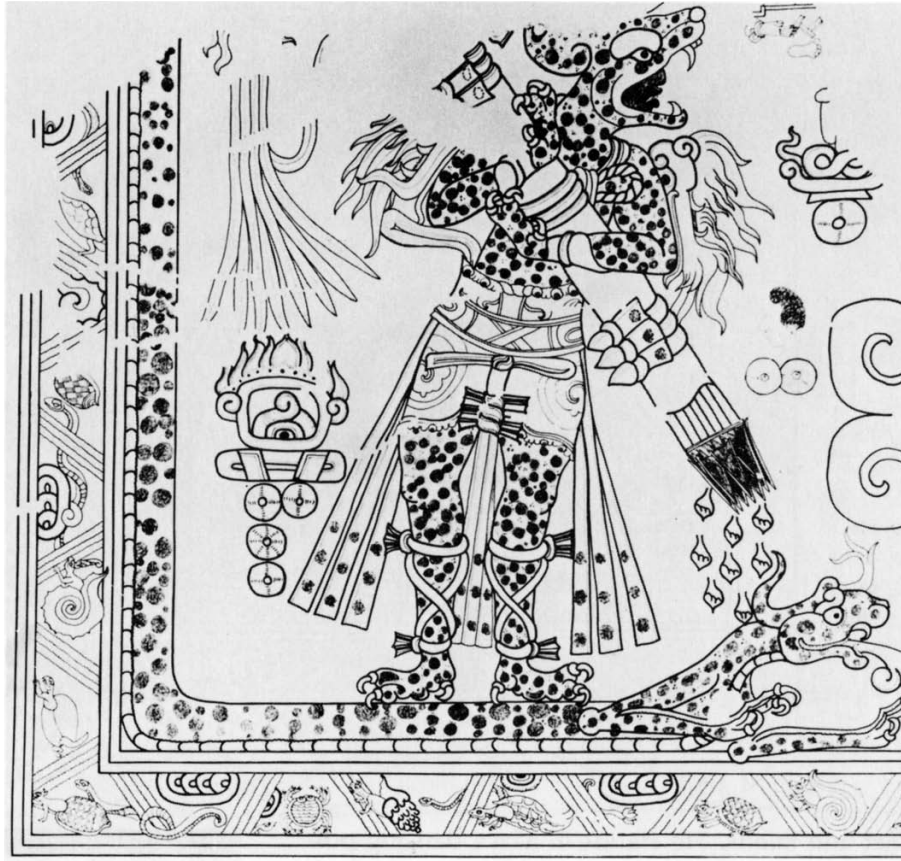


Fig. 3. North wall panel



Fig. 4. North doorjamb



Fig. 5. South doorjamb

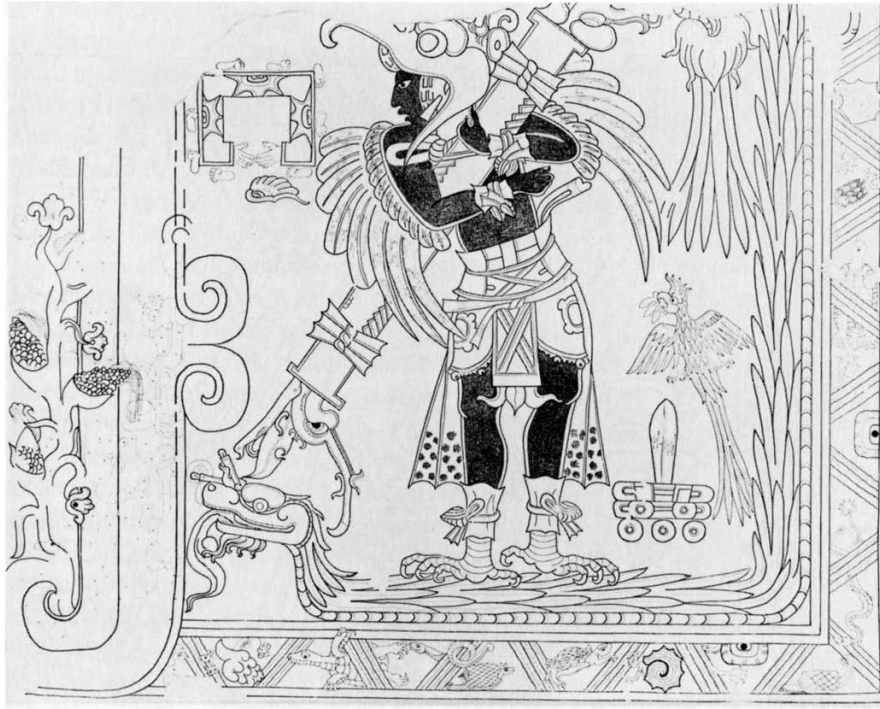


Fig. 6. South wall panel

met and talons. He stands in Maya dancing posture on a feathered serpent within a panel which was nearly square (perhaps H:W = 9:10, before ancient destruction of the upper wall). The watery frame repeats the marine fauna with variations. But the looters in 1975 destroyed the openwork stucco incrustation. This still adorns the north panel, revealing the original painted doorway frame, which depicted cascades or scrolls bearing upright corn plant forms with four ripe ears. This part of the doorway mural probably continued over the lintel in a lost mask design of Teotihuacano style that would have completed the watery frames of the north and south panels.

Other associations for these framed wall panels are at Palenque, where figures on the Palace pier reliefs stand on sky-serpent bodies. The red stucco overlay at the northwest doorway corner (and its lost pendant facing it) is carved in a manner recalling both Tajín stonework with double-outline scrolls and Pabellón modeled pottery from the southwest Maya lowlands.

The sole surviving figure of this door pair is seated like a ruler on the lintels at Tikal (Kubler 1973: fig. 1), but in the posture with foot on knee (fig. 7) seen at Tajín (Kampen 1972: 21). The Cacaxtla stucco figure sits on serpent-mask forms, wearing a serpent-helmet like that of the north



Fig. 7. Tajín, south ballcourt

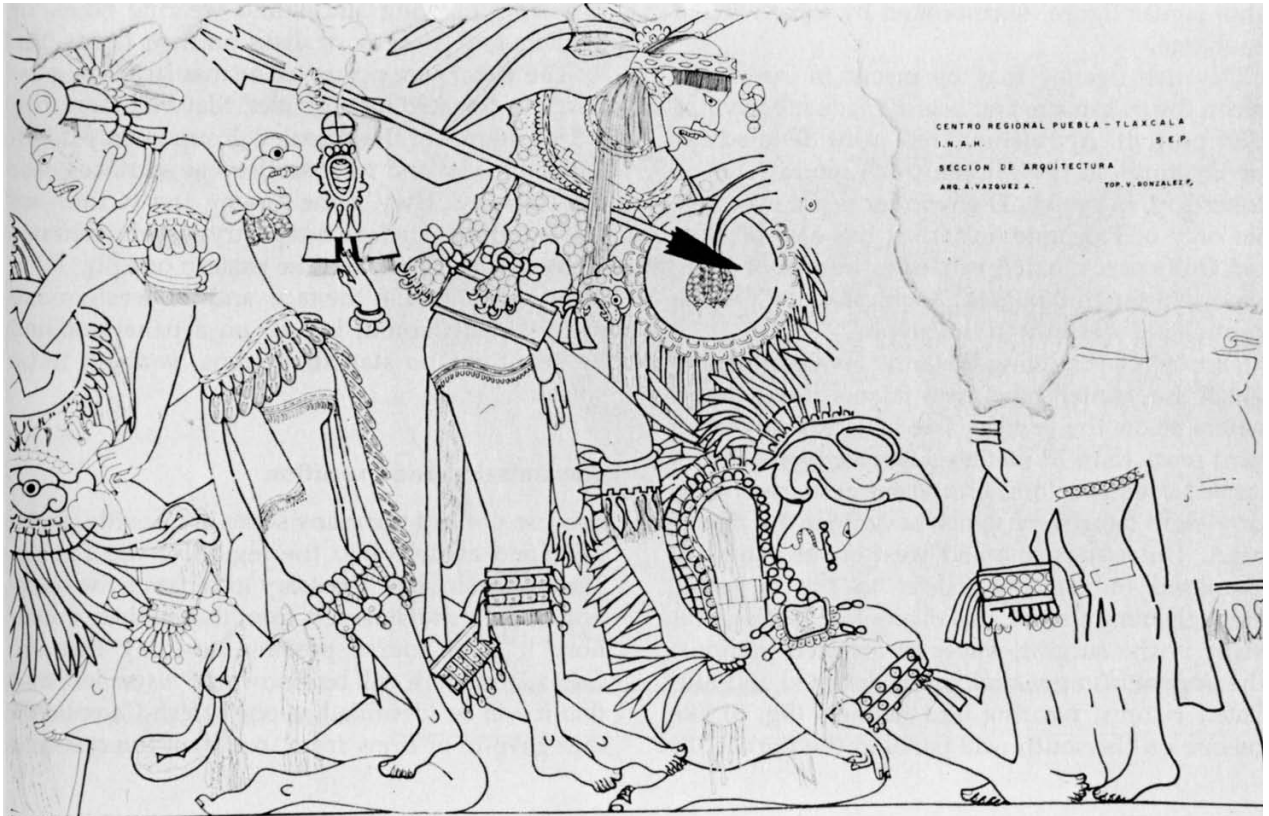


Fig. 8. Building B, talus, defeated warrior

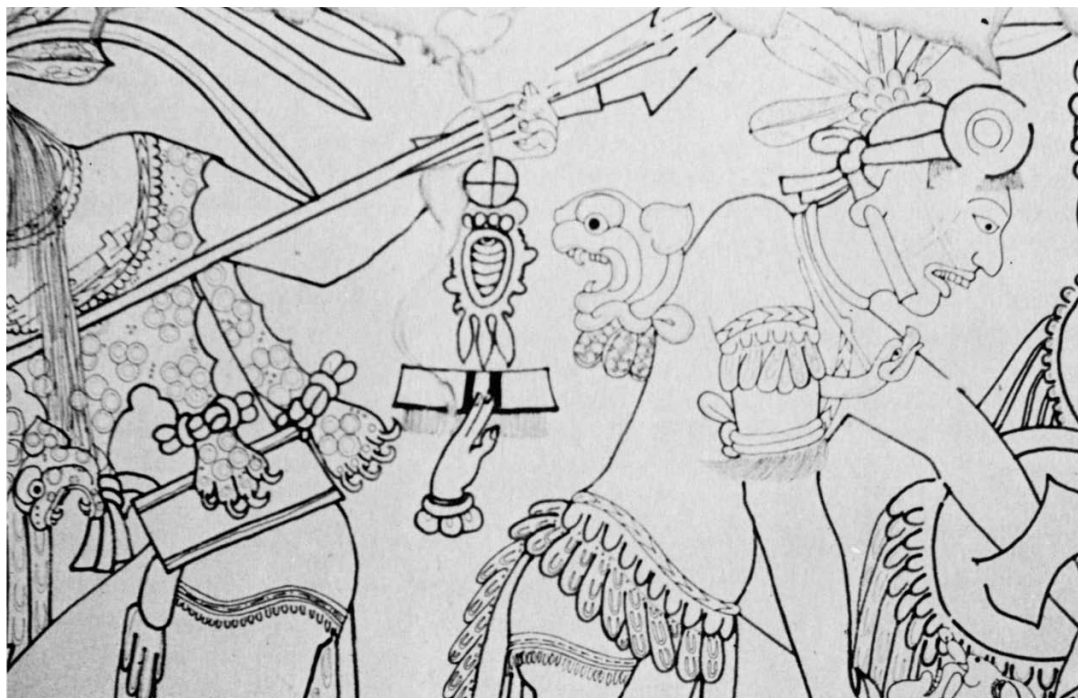


Fig. 9. Building B, talus, victorious warrior

jamb jaguar figure, surmounted by a bat-winged surcharge.

This rich overlay may be meant to insert, between the cult image and priestly jaguar-acolyte, a ruler portrait. At Palenque red paint denoted living creatures in the Middle (real) world (Greene Robertson, in press). The references are evocative not only of Palenque and Tikal but also of Tajín and Gulf coast molded wares, as well as of Teotihuacán in the framing and Xochicalco and Oaxaca (central and western) in the glyphs.

The platform. Building B stands on a platform of which the painted talus rises from a floor some 2 meters below the portico. The talus extends westward more than 20 meters. Life-size battle scenes painted in eight colors flank a central stairway with forty-eight figures, of which seventeen are nearly intact. The scenes east and west of the stairs are composed of combats mortal to the defeated, strangely reminiscent of Pollaiuolo's *Battle of the Nudes* in the surging waves of arrested motions. The opponents appear either as defeated and mutilated victims, wearing bird helmets (fig. 8) like the one on the south wall panel in the portico, or

as victors carrying lances and wearing bows, or feathers and flowers, or disks on their heads (fig. 9). The victors are portrayed as maniacally aggressive; the defeated have gentler, Maya-like features.

Two figures of the defeated group quietly dominate both east and west sections as sacrifices near the stairway. They alone among the victims are still standing. Their rich tapestry-weave costumes are nearly identical, but the eastern one (fig. 10) is shown wounded in the face, and the western one (fig. 11), with bound hands, on a panel outlined by Teotihuacano starfish designs, is about to be speared.

Transmission and Execution

Because none of the many styles at Cacaxtla can be identified as native to the region of the Puebla-Tlaxcala basin, it is necessary to separate the question of their transmission from that of their execution. It is of course possible any day that the Cacaxtla mixture will be discovered elsewhere and that it will be identified as one which Cacaxtla either gave to or drew from, but then the question

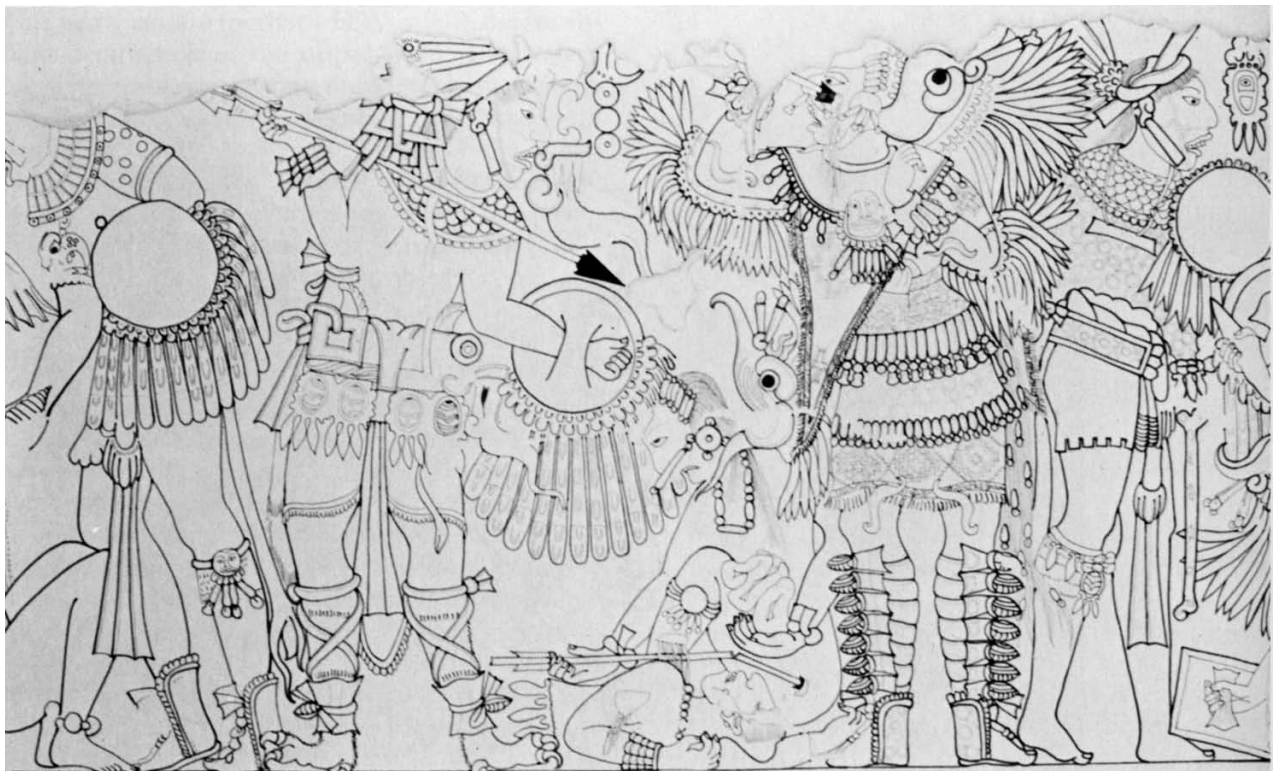


Fig. 10. Principal standing victim, east section

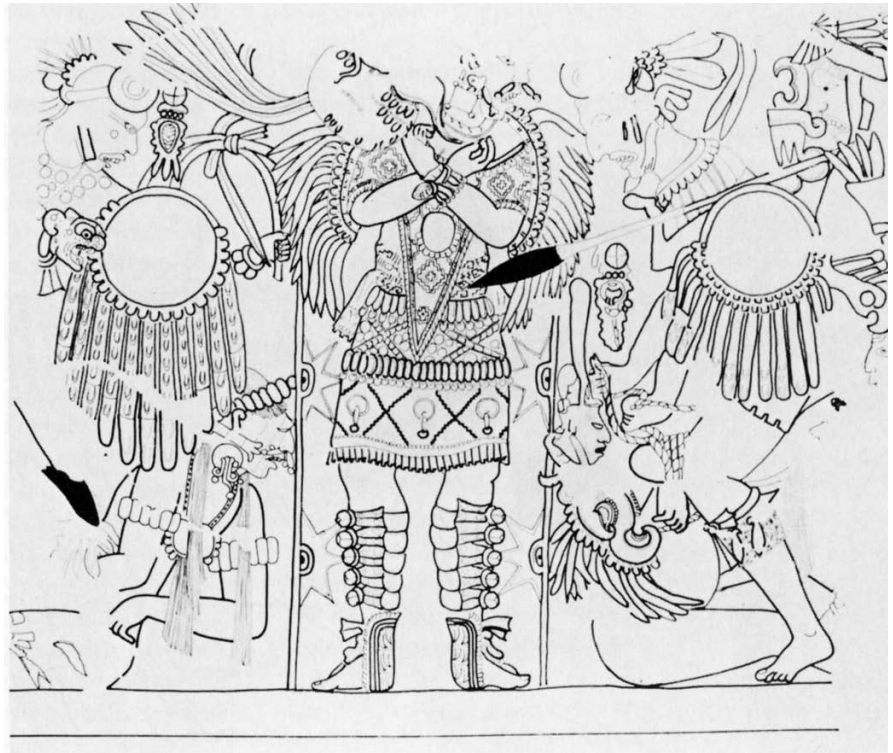


Fig. 11. Principal standing victim, west section

about the newer site's origins would still remain unsettled and in need of study.

As to Cacaxtla itself, nothing has as yet been surmised in public about the problems of transmission and execution in these murals. It is still unclear whether a local style is present or whether there are different local manners of different periods by different painters. All we know is that the wall panels resemble Maya commemorative scenes like those at Palenque, Yaxchilan, or Tikal. But the frames resemble painted murals at Teotihuacán. The doorjambs connect with Maya pottery painting of Late Classic date, as on the Altar de Sacrificios vase. The battle scene is related to similar scenes (of less gory aspect) at Bonampak and Mulchic. The red stucco overlay surrounding the doorway is like the Gulf coast scrollwork patterns of Classic Veracruz associations, and their redness recalls figures represented as alive at Palenque.

Several other observations also seem unassailable. Certain exaggerations are striking: the ceremonial bars held diagonally in the panels (figs. 3 and 6) are larger than usual in the Maya corpus (Chinikiha Stela 1 and the Yaxchilan ballcourt marker are comparable; see Greene, Rands, and Graham 1972). The floating glyphs (fig. 3) in these

panels recall those of the sarcophagus lid and tablets at Palenque, but they too are much larger than in Maya usage, and they resemble more closely the custom at Xochicalco.

Absences are also noteworthy: nowhere is there a Maya glyphic inscription, unless in the head of the north panel jaguar-serpent (fig. 3), resembling the lily-jaguar glyph (T751b, Thompson 1962: 336), or the south jamb headdress (fig. 5), resembling the Tikal Emblem Glyph (T569, Thompson 1962: 194).

In addition it is to be repeated that both sets of murals, in the portico and on the talus, share the presence of Teotihuacano motifs and Classic Maya figural designs, as on the lintels at Tikal (Kubler 1973: fig. 1). This fact establishes a tightly knit unity in the program as intended by its designers. Yet probably only a fraction of the whole program of decoration has survived or been excavated. The exposed designs nevertheless reveal at least eight distinct manners: the panel figures; the panel frames; two or three kinds of glyphic signs (Teotihuacano, Xochicalco, Oaxacan); the jamb murals; the stucco relief overlay; and the battle scenes (which may present at least four different hands).

Transmission. How to explain such variety is not

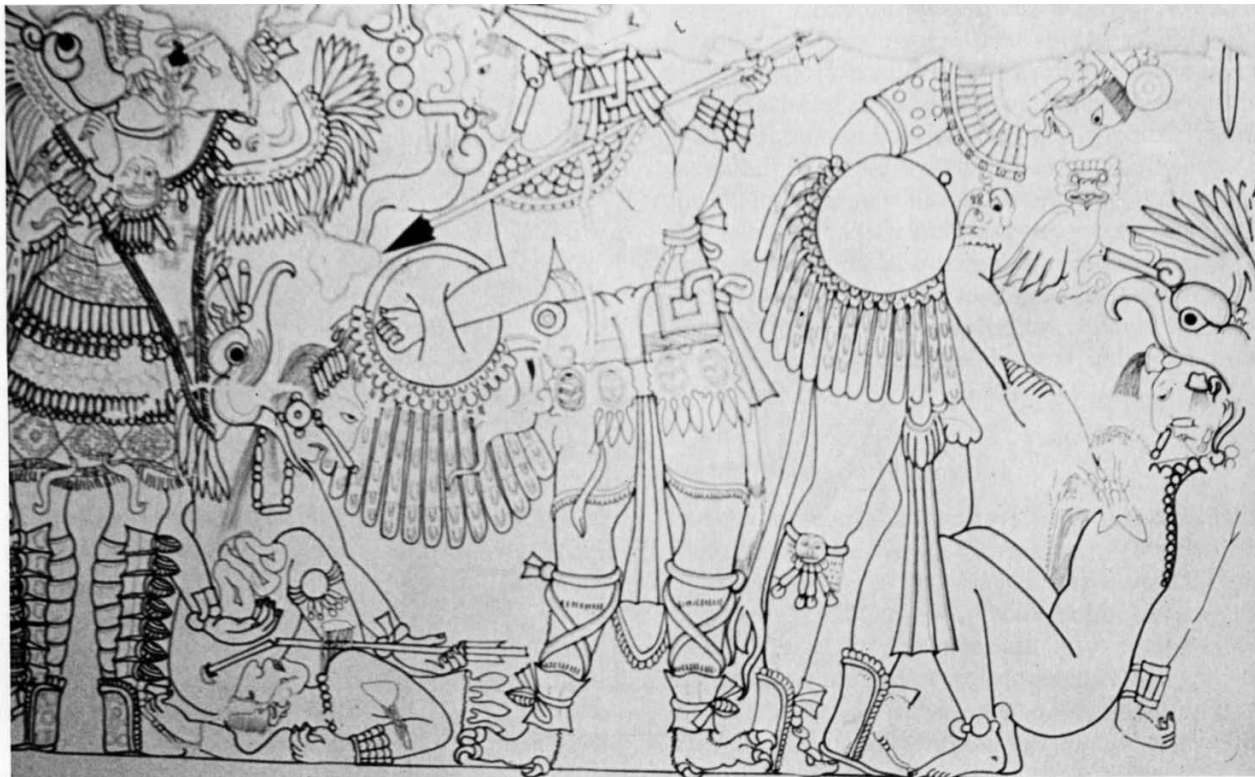


Fig. 12. Building B, talus, east section, near stair, drawing of wounds

easy: local artists using portable drawings? Migrants or captive painters? Painters accompanying trading parties or diplomatic missions? Proof for any of these guesses is lacking, but we can at least narrow the field by considering the painters in the context of the eclectic choices their works manifest (see the next section).

Nor can it easily be proven that the whole scheme of Cacaxtla was the work of only one designer, without presupposing that such a person had a collection of notes and sketches or drawings, assembled during extensive travels or from visiting artists, from which to extract the various components of the Cacaxtla designs.

Archaeologically, no portable sheet drawings or manuscripts on paper or hide are known of any date earlier than the thirteenth century. Until such older documents come to light, the evidence is limited to the use of designs incised or painted on bone, shell, pottery, wood, or small stones, as the vehicles of transmission we are discussing.

Execution. In the absence during excavation of photography suitable for art-historical study, it is not possible to comment in detail on the painters'

techniques. Having visited the site, however, I can set down a few observations on individual, or personal, differences in drawing and composition.

There is no visible evidence that more than one painter executed the doorway murals, in which the linear quality and variety are identical on jambs and panels.

At least four hands can be distinguished in the battle scenes, two of them on each side of the central stairway. The east end is marked by a vertical frame painted in red, blue, and tan stripes. The west end is undetermined. Both ends, east and west, are poorly preserved. The most intact portions adjoin the stairs. The least skillful work is at the extreme ends, and the finest drawings are near the stairs. To the east are the most vigorous and gory passages. To the west of the stairs are the most sensitive drawings, resembling more closely than the others the figural style of the portico murals.

At Cacaxtla the murals all were begun as drawings brushed in outlines with various pigments, mainly black or reddish brown, in many different widths of line, thicker for large forms and thinner

for small ones, but each line is of unvarying width throughout its length. The line never swells or tapers to suggest roundness or modeling in depth.

In the easternmost part of the battle scene, however, different hands are apparent. White outlining is used on a blue ground, and fine detailing is less abundant than elsewhere. Moving on westward, small white accents carry the eye from figure to figure, while the blue ground between the warriors makes a background pattern among the shapes left between the bodies of the fighting figures.

Approaching the staircase, the figures are more expertly drawn than at the end, and the surface pattern of the bodies is carried by narrow white sashes worn by the life-size victorious figures. These sashes (which resemble those worn on the portico panels) draw the eye to the body wounds of the fallen victims.

At the stairway end of the east wall (fig. 12), the bodies are drawn in black outlines with an anatomically sure hand that differs greatly from the ceremonial conventionality of the doorway murals. Two thicknesses of line are used, strongest for weapons and delineations of parts of costumes but finer for flesh outlines. Extruded bowels are stippled with red inside the strong and accurate outlines reserved also for parts of costumes. Wounds on arms and thighs are outlined in white with fine striations of blood shown as dripping in clots. White garments and sashes carry the surface pattern.

The principal figure in the east section (fig. 10) is represented in full frontal aspect, as receiving a face wound in an attack that jars his rich and heavy chest cloth out of place. This costume, including the suggestion of wings, closely resembles that of the principal figures in the portico panels. His leg armor shows fourteen shells, possibly suggesting a higher rank than the ten shells of his equal in the western section.

The west side of the stairway has fewer episodes of violent action. The drawing is less diversified as to width of line, and the distinction between costume and body line is almost absent.

Rhythmically placed accents of red flesh and costume carry the surface pattern, together with the white sashes seen at the eastern side. A more sketchy drawing of outlines in blue is used near the western end, where the body motions seem more static, although the general deterioration of the plaster at the west makes the outlining difficult to see.

Eclectic and Syncretic Aspects

The historical origins of both concepts—eclectic and syncretic—have from the beginning pertained to different spheres of human activity. Eclecticism originally described the efforts of ancient philosophers ca. A.D. 300 to select from various schools of thought the best elements, in an effort to resolve their differences by a search for harmony. Since classical antiquity, the term has also been extended to art and literature, and the attitude itself probably underlies modern historical research, in seeking to comprehend alien behavior (Crispolti 1961: col. 538).

Syncretism has been used since Plutarch to describe events in the history of religion and politics. Plutarch applied it to the coalition among warring peoples on the island of Crete who united in strife against a common enemy. Erasmus revived it in the Renaissance to describe religious sects seeking survival through hybridization. This usage has reappeared in modern ethnohistorical studies of Latin American survivals of ancient beliefs under missionary pressures, within the Catholic cult (Pettazzoni 1933: 829).

The idea of eclecticism thus appears as historically more relevant to the study of expressive objects, whereas syncretism is more general, or auxiliary in this context, being about religious and political systems.

The archaeological occurrence of artifacts betraying a possible eclectic origin, like the Cacaxtla murals, therefore raises an interesting possibility as to method. Usually syncretistic institutional conditions are assumed to have been the setting for products of eclectic character, as at Persepolis in the Achaemenid period, when Scythian, Central Asian, Median, Mesopotamian, Greek, and Egyptian forms were combined in a palace architecture expressive of universal empire.

Yet the reverse may also be supposed: the pressure of eclectic traits in objects points to institutional or cultural conditions of syncretistic character. In other words, eclectic objects point to syncretistic conditions and vice versa.

This proposition, however, has never been tested systematically. Only Enrico Crispolti (1961) has reviewed the whole spectrum of eclectic expressions, beginning with Saharan rock engravings with both prehistoric and Egyptianizing traits. But Crispolti notes that an art "cannot be described as eclectic unless historical conditions . . . have led to an intermingling of cultural streams that are complementary and reciprocally nourish-

ing" (cols. 544–545). Crispolti also associates eclecticism with ancient phenomena resembling renaissances and revivals. He speaks of a "diachronic" eclecticism (col. 546), when "older foreign elements reflower along with more recent ones" in neo-Attic sculptures. In these, archaic or Attic or Asiatic forms reappears in Rome at the beginning of the empire with syncretistic political and religious molds during several centuries, but mainly as "indications of a conventional, noncritical and muddled attitude toward the authentic qualities of artistic styles and personalities in the ancient world" (col. 547).

The late Renaissance after 1500 witnessed another modality of eclecticism in the relationships of individual artists to a variety of masters and teachers, whose "manners" were the object of study and synthesis.

The nineteenth century in its turn contained a consciously programmed movement of eclecticism, based on the historical studies of the preceding century. Other "historical styles," whether medieval, Renaissance, or non-European, were admitted as of equal value or superior to the classical tradition.

If we now review the many various kinds of eclecticism, it is clear that two types are relevant and inclusive: (1) the synchronic variety, in which the choices are limited to an extended present, and (2) the diachronic group, where more ancient models are selected for reuse. Diachronic examples include every renaissance of classical antiquity (Panofsky 1960), as well as the revivals of medieval forms in the nineteenth century. Synchronic are the Achaemenid and Roman recognitions of other geographical kinds of expression and symbol. But the appearance of neo-Attic sculptors in the early empire is diachronic.

The general implication is that synchronic choices among available expressions are syncretic in character, bringing into focus a message of unified strength in the coordination of peoples and beliefs. But diachronic choices suggest an aesthetic purpose liberated from concern with the cultural meaning of the forms chosen for retention.

Conclusion

A tentative explanation of the program underlying the murals might be the following. Victorious highland and defeated lowland warriors are

shown in battle, with the death in action and the sacrifice at a column of two lowland headmen (fig. 11). The other murals, at the dynastic temple, on framed panels and doorjamb, portray winged cult images of the patron deities of both the warring groups. The highland deity and acolyte on the north (fig. 3) have jaguar-serpent-bird attributes of Teotihuacano ancestry. The southern deity and acolyte wear black body paint (fig. 5) of "detached body contour" type (Grieder 1964) and other Maya attributes. Between them a seated figure was added in red stucco upon the painted doorframe. This ruler figure has both Classic Veracruz and Putun Maya characteristics, representing possibly the emergence of a third coastal power capable of resolving the differences between the victors and the vanquished, as shown in the battle mural.

Cacaxtla was probably the work of patrons, painters, and sculptors who were concerned with eclectic choices more synchronic than diachronic in nature. By hypothesis they were immersed in the aftermaths of the fall of Teotihuacán and the collapse of Classic Maya society. Their efforts would have been devoted to those representations and symbols connected with replacing large portions of the institutional systems that foundered between the eighth and tenth centuries. The services of artists from different parts of Mesoamerica, either direct or indirect, would have been needed in attempting to achieve any lasting new sense of union and common purpose. Whether this effort failed or not still remains to be seen, but it seems comparable to configurations of the kind known at the time of the breakup of the Roman Empire that were characterized as "disjunctive" by Panofsky (1960).

As noted above, diachronic eclecticism presupposes aesthetic choices from a distant past. But synchronic eclecticism is closer to the extended present, with the selection of political and economic objectives in a syncretistic ordering.

The narrow chronological range of selections at Cacaxtla makes it unlikely that an aesthetically motivated eclecticism was in play. On the contrary, the choices of portions of recent symbolic systems suggest to us that Cacaxtla was designed to express a syncretistic unification among the dominant religious and political views of that time in Mesoamerica, after the fall of Teotihuacán and before the Toltec emergence.

The following color plate was published facing Page 178.



Kubler essay, fig. 2. South doorjamb and wall panel

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Third Palenque Round Table, 1978

PART 2

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Jacket illustration:

LORD CHAACAL III

Birth: 9.12.6.5.8 3 Lamat 6 Zac

Accession to the throne of Palenque: 9.14.10.4.2

9 Ik 5 Kayab

Death: pre-9.14.11.12.14 8 Ik 7 Yaxkin

Drawings courtesy of Linda Schele