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A MAYA CARVED SHELL PLAQUE FROM TULA, HIDALGO, MEXICO

Comparative study

Donald McVicker[a,c] and Joel W. Palka[b,c]

[a]Department of Sociology and Anthropology, North Central College, Naperville, IL 60566, USA
[b]Department of Anthropology/Latin American and Latino Studies, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL 60607, USA
[c]Department of Anthropology, The Field Museum, Chicago, IL 60605, USA

Abstract

In the early 1880s, a finely carved Maya shell picture plaque was found at the Toltec capital of Tula, central Mexico, and was subsequently acquired by The Field Museum in Chicago. The shell was probably re-carved in the Terminal Classic period and depicts a seated lord with associated Maya hieroglyphs on the front and back. Here the iconography and glyphic text of this unique artifact are examined, the species and habitat of the shell are described, and its archaeological and social context are interpreted. The Tula plaque is then compared with Maya carved jade picture plaques of similar size and design that were widely distributed throughout Mesoamerica, but were later concentrated in the sacred cenote at Chichen Itza. It is concluded that during the Late Classic period, these plaques played an important role in establishing contact between Maya lords and their counterparts representing peripheral and non-Maya domains. The picture plaques may have been elite Maya gifts establishing royal alliances with non-local polities and may have become prestige objects used in caches and termination rituals.

One of the more significant pieces in the Field Museum of Natural History's Mesoamerican collection is a small carved shell plaque (9.5 × 5.8 × 0.8 cm) from Tula, Hidalgo, Mexico (no. 95075).[1] The low-relief image depicts a seated Maya lord looking to the viewer's left and wearing an elaborate, long-snouted reptilian headdress lacking a lower jaw. A band of hieroglyphs is incised on the reverse side (Figures 2, 3, 6, and 7). Its closest analogues are the well-known Late Classic Maya jade "picture plaques" depicting seated lords. This plaque is significant not only because of its aesthetic qualities, but also because it is the only known indisputably Classic Maya-style piece found at Toltec Tula. How its discovery at Tula may effect our understanding of the interaction between Maya and Toltec is discussed later.

The image on the Tula plaque can be compared with other Mesoamerican depictions of seated lordly figures dating from the Classic to Early Postclassic periods (for the sites discussed in this paper, see Figure 1). For the purposes of this article, the Maya Late Classic period will be dated ca. A.D. 600–800. In the descriptions that follow, a Terminal Classic period will be dated ca. A.D. 800–950, and the Early Postclassic period will be dated ca. A.D. 950–1250. These dates fall within generally accepted Mesoamerican chronological parameters (cf. Wren and Schmidt 1991).

HISTORY

The first published notice of the carved shell plaque appeared in Charnay's 1885 publication *Les anciennes villes du Nouveau Monde*. On page 74, Charnay illustrates the carved shell (in a reversed drawing), labels it, and makes the following comments:

> Parmi les autres antiquités que j'ai recueillies à Tula, figure une large coquille de nacre sculptée, qui représente un chef toltèque avec tous ses attributs et qui ressemable aux sculptures de la pierre de Tizoc à Mexico, mais mieux encore à certains bas-reliefs de Palenque et d'Ocosingo, dans l'État du Chiapas.

> Among the other antiquities that I collected at Tula was [figures] a large sculpted shell of nacre [mother-of-pearl], which represents a Toltec chief with all his attributes and which resembles the sculptures of the Tizoc stone in Mexico, but better still certain bas-reliefs of Palenque and Ocosingo in the state of Chiapas.

In the English translation (Charnay 1887:97), the piece is again illustrated and labeled "warrior's profile, found at Tula," but his comments are abbreviated:

> Among the objects which we found at Tula is a large curiously-carved shell of mother-of-pearl; the carving recalls Tizoc's stone and notably the bas-reliefs at Palenque and Ocosingo in Chiapas.

[1] Before he retired as a curator of anthropology at The Field Museum, Donald Collier discussed this plaque with Donald McVicker. Collier suggested that an invertebrate biologist should be consulted for identification of the shell itself; that a history of the piece should be written; that the remaining Maya hieroglyphic inscription should be translated; and that its provenance from Tula should be evaluated. The publication of this paper fulfills a long-standing obligation and is dedicated to Collier.

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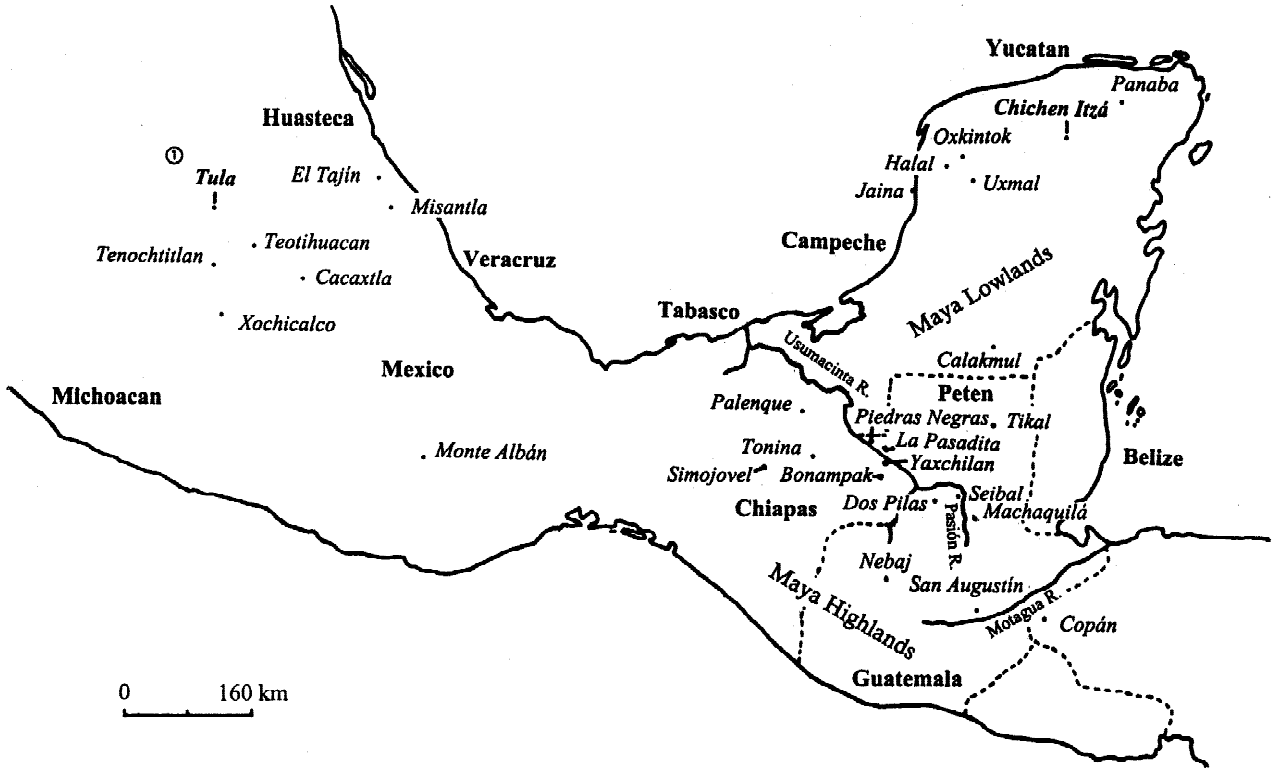


Figure 1. Map of Mesoamerica, with sites and localities referred to in the text.

In neither publication is the hieroglyphic inscription illustrated or referred to (Figure 2a).

The object next appears in Peñafiel's monumental volumes *Monumentos del arte Mexicana antiguo* (1890). In volume I of plates on page 169, the shell and its inscription appear in a colored plate and is simply described as "Relieve in Nacar . . . Propiedad del Sr. D. E. Macotela [Relief in Mother-of-pearl . . . Property of Mr. D. E. Macotela]. In 1899, Peñafiel (1900:Plate 80) again illustrates the shell, but not the inscription, and labels it

> Relieve Grabado en Nacar, De Fotografía Directa. Reverso con escritura parecida a la Maya, encontrado en las sementeras de Tula, estado de Hidalgo.
>
> Carved relief in mother-of-pearl directly from the photograph. The reverse has writing similar to that of the Maya, found in the planted fields of Tula, state of Hidalgo.

This is the only text known that gives any information regarding the shell being found in the cultivated fields of Tula (Figure 2b).

Sometime after the publication of *Monumentos*, Peñafiel obtained the plaque, for in 1898, Frederick Starr, professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago, purchased the plaque from Peñafiel (Frederick Starr Field Notebooks, University of Chicago Libraries, Special Collections 17:53), with William Powell, the first Southern Baptist missionary in Toluca, Mexico, acting as his agent. Starr published his prized new possession in the *Proceedings of the Davenport Academy of Sciences* (Starr 1899:108–110 [mispaginated 10]). For unknown reasons, he shifts the identification of the shell from mother-of-pearl to "a rather irregularly shaped fragment of *haliotis* [*sic*] shell [abalone]." He also notes that "[t]he workmanship is more Mayan than Aztecan or Zapotecan" and that "this Mayan character of the art is in keeping with the inscription on the reverse of the specimen." Starr recognized the significance of the inscription and observed that this was the feature most deserving of careful study" (Starr 1899:110 [mispaginated 10]). He also took a tracing over the photograph he had published, then "perfected it," publishing a line drawing. Unfortunately, despite the accuracy of his drawing, the hieroglyphs were published upside down (Figure 3b–c).

Starr reached two "startling conclusions: (a) That the calculiform characters were already developed and were in use at Tula, far outside of the recognized Mayan region, before the abandonment of the city—or (b) that relations of trade and barter connected Tula, at the time of its occupancy, with some Mayan region—presumably to the East, South or Southeast." Starr's second conclusion deserves consideration, because the relationship between Chichen Itza and Tula is still a matter of considerable debate.

In 1905 Starr sold his Mexican collections to the Field Museum. On the back of accession card no. 95075 for the Tula plaque, the following comments were typed:

> This is one of the finest and most beautiful specimens of shell carving ever found in Mexico. It is engraved on a haliotis [*sic*] shell (abalone). The figure is of very characteristic Mayan technique and art and probably represents a warrior with a great plumed headdress. . . . The object was evidently originally quadrilateral and rectangular and was subsequently trimmed smaller, parts of the figure being cut away in the process. The shell has also flaked away in places. It was perforated in several places

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Figure 2. Nineteenth-century renderings of the Tula plaque. (a) Charnay (1887:97 [image reversed]); (b) Peñafiel (1890:I:169, Plate 80 [inscription upside down]).

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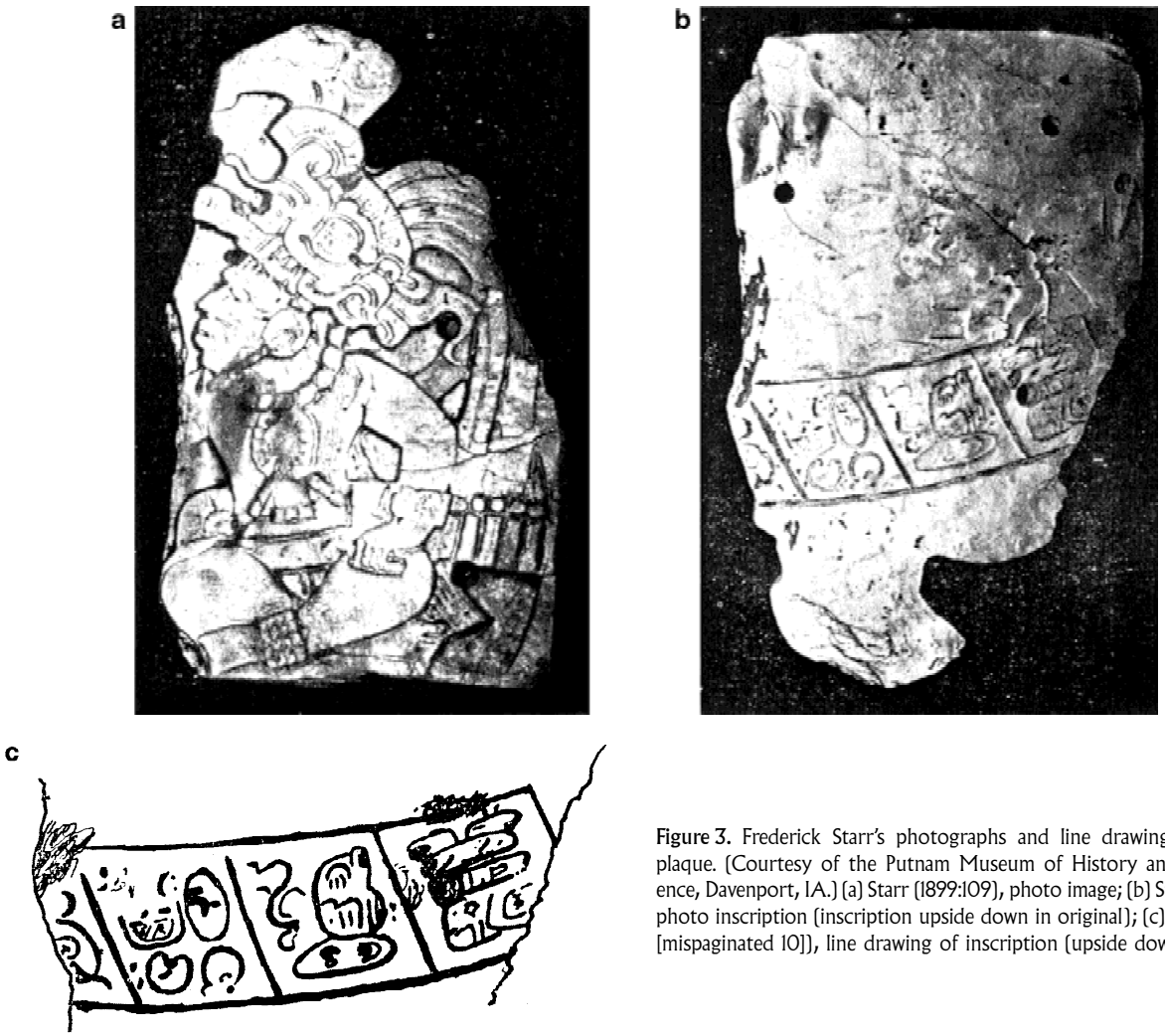


Figure 3. Frederick Starr's photographs and line drawings of the Tula plaque. (Courtesy of the Putnam Museum of History and Natural Science, Davenport, IA.) (a) Starr (1899:109), photo image; (b) Starr (1899:109), photo inscription (inscription upside down in original); (c) Starr (1899:101 [mispaginated 10]), line drawing of inscription (upside down in original).

> so that it could be worn as an ornament. On the reverse side is a band of hieroglyphic symbols which are very probably calendric, but which are difficult of interpretation as some of the inscription has also been cut away.
>
> The fact that the specimen, while typically Mayan, was found in the old Toltec city of Tula raises an interesting question. It is known that from about 1200 to 1350 A.D. there was great intercourse between the Toltec cities of Mexico and the Mayan cities of Yucatan and it is probable that this piece was carried from Yucatan to Tula at this period.

Donald Collier, curator at The Field Museum, thought these comments were by J. Eric S. Thompson, although the first sentences parallel those written by Starr.

Contemporary interest in the plaque was sparked by Linda Schele and Mary Miller when they borrowed the piece, which was then displayed in the museum's Mesoamerican hall, for their exhibition "The Blood of Kings." In the catalogue for the exhibition (Schele and Miller 1986) the piece is illustrated as Plate 5 ("shell ornament") under the section on "The Royal Person." It is identified (following The Field Museum records) as abalone shell, and the authors go on to speculate that it had to be imported and that Baja California was the closest source for the shell. On page 78, the authors question whether the glyphs and figural scene had been re-carved or simply broken. Schele and Miller do not, however, discuss the hieroglyphics on the shell.

Most recently, Ringle et al. (1998:207, Figure 20d [19]) illustrate the shell in their article, "The Return of Quetzalcoatl." Unfortunately, it is not identified as shell, but it is included as one of the "Leaning Lord" jade plaques. The authors interpret these figural jades as "some sort of religious token" symbolically referring to the cult of Quetzalcoatl. The authors also stress the parallels between the carved stone reliefs of lords at Xochicalco and jade plaques (1998:208, Figure 21) (Figure 4a, b).

ANALYSIS

Although the facts surrounding the discovery of the Tula plaque in a *sementera* will probably never be known, four avenues are available to further our knowledge of the shell, its chronological position, and its place of manufacture and function: (1) a reconsideration of the species and habitat of the shell; (2) a reading of the glyphs; (3) stylistic analysis and iconographic interpretation; and (4) comparison with jade picture plaques and distributional analysis.

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Engraved bas-relief or carved mother-of-pearl shell plaques with human figures are extraordinarily rare in the archaeological record of Mesoamerica. Only a few specimens have been identified that appear to be comparable to The Field Museum shell, and even most of these appear to be incised rather than carved.[2] One incised shell is illustrated by Covarrubias (1957:Plate LIII); no provenience is given, nor is its current location specified (Figure 5a). The second incised shell is illustrated by Hellmuth (1987:251, Figure 547). Again, no location or provenience is provided. A third, less comparable incised example, described as a mother-of-pearl shell plaque from Simojovel, is illustrated on page 61 in the Second Palenque Round Table (Robertson 1976:61, 68, Figure 9). The full figure in profile bears little resemblance to the lords presented on the plaques mentioned earlier.

A second category of carved shell that may be related can be referred to as a conch-shell "silhouette," produced using a cut-out carving and incising technique (Figure 5b). Two remarkable examples are from the Bliss Collection (Lothrop et al.1957:250, Plate LXIV [cat. no. 104]), and one is illustrated in Schmidt et al. (1998:590–91, Number 289). The latter example is said to be from Jaina and is in Mexico at the Museo Nacional de Antropología. The Bliss collection examples at Dumbarton Oaks also are said to have been found in the state of Campeche with six Jaina figurines in a large jar covered with an inverted Late Classic nubbin tripod polychrome dish.

A final example of this second category is in the Museum of the American Indian (MAI) collections (Fagan 1977:351). In the MAI's accession records it is described simply as "shell carving of a seated Maya man with elaborate feather headdress and a whole pearl in ear spool . . . [Once] entirely inlaid with precious stones." It is attributed to Palenque, undoubtedly on stylistic grounds. However, except for the posture and gesture, it displays few of the distinctive attributes of either the Tula plaque or the jade picture plaques discussed later. Clemency Coggins (personal communication 2000) proposes that, except for the obvious nose bridge, its iconography suggests Xochicalco rather than Palenque, and that it may have been carved in the states of Campeche or Yucatan.

These shell silhouettes belong to a different tradition from the Tula plaque and related jade picture plaques, and their distribution appears to be limited to Campeche and adjacent areas. Although the posture of the figures is similar, much of the iconography is not. The profiles are often non-Classic Maya, and the headdresses resemble those of typical ceramic Jaina-style figurines (Schele 1997). Furthermore, they are carved from conch rather than mother-of-pearl and once were inlayed with "precious" stones (Miller 1986:156, Figure 129). This tradition may be associated with the Chontal ("Putún") Maya inhabiting western coastal areas during the Terminal Classic period.[3]

Like the Tula plaque, some of these shell silhouettes appear to mention the kind of object and its owner; they are "name tagged" (cf. Houston et al. 1989). For example, on the silhouette plaque illustrated in Figure 5b, the second glyph from the left under the seated figure refers to throne and the fourth to "his seat."

A third class of carved/incised shell ornaments is exemplified by "Huastec" gorgets (Beyer 1933; Urcid 1999). They represent a northern Gulf Coast Late Postclassic international style that was widespread at the time of the Conquest. Most of them are incised, and their iconography is not comparable to that of the Tula plaque.

Finally, from Panaba in the northeast corner of the Yucatan Peninsula, near the coastal *concheros*, comes a bivalve shell carved with a miniature palace scene—including the seated lord (Schmidt et al. 1998:590–591, Number 288a). It is the only carved shell that approximates the style of the Tula plaque, although the seated lord's facial features are more "Classic" Maya. This presumably Late/Teminal Classic representation is quite similar to a scene carved on an alabaster (*tecalli*) vase recovered with a jade picture plaque from a cache at Uxmal (Ruz L. 1955:63, Figure 6).

Two published worked shells, presenting different scenes, also represent the Classic Maya shell-carving tradition. The first, from Pomona, Belize (Digby 1972:Plate VII; Kidder and Ekholm 1951) depicts two kneeling figures in a cave who once wore inlayed ear flares. The Early Classic image is possibly a rendition of the hero twins at the portals of Xibalba. The figure on the second (Coe and Kerr 1998:112, Plate 38) is described as "a woman appearing in a mountain cave."

Shell Identification and Current Condition

Rüdiger Bieler (Chair of Zoology, Field Museum) and Linda Nicholas (Adjunct Curator, Anthropology) have looked at the Tula shell and believe that it is most likely a pearl mussel (*Pinctada*). Because of its size, curvature, surface morphology, and iridescent coloration, Bieler is convinced that the specimen derives from a large-shelled species of the bivalve genus *Pinctada*, not a member of the gastropod genus *Haliotis*. Because the Atlantic–Caribbean species do not reach this size and thickness, the likely origin of the shell is in the Indo-Pacific region. There, three nominal *Pinctada* species reach the size exhibited by this fragment (*P. maxima*, *P. margaritifera*, and *P. mazatlanica*). Bieler suspects that the shell plaque was made from the *Pinctada mazatlanica* (Hanley 1856), a relatively common bivalve ranging in the eastern Pacific from lower California through the Gulf of California and south to Peru. (The other two *Pinctada* species mentioned are Indo–western Pacific forms.) Such a wide-ranging species offers little data for a pattern of procurement. In fact, Feinman and Nicholas (2000:127, Figure 6) found that *Pinctada* was the most commonly worked shell in Ejutla, accounting for more than 65 percent of the marine-shell assemblage.[4] It is clear that the shell is not *Haliotis* (abalone); why Starr came to that conclusion is unknown.

Apparently the shell was re-carved, perhaps more than once. Proskouriakoff's (1974:x) analysis of comparable jade plaques indicated that this was a common occurrence. When the seated person is viewed and the shell is turned around, the text is upside

[2] Etching lines on the surface of a shell is the most frequent style of incising. On nacreous shells, exterior lines may cut through to the mother-of-pearl underneath. Carved shells are done in bas-relief, with portions of the material removed. The Tula plaque is unusual in that the inside of the shell has been carved directly into the mother-of-pearl.

[3] A remarkable carved and incised silhouette shell is on loan to the Brooklyn Museum of Art (TL 1991.109.2a,b). The detailed image of the leaning lord is etched with an extraordinary fine line; his appearance is "classic," and he leans against a bar resting on his knee carved with seven glyphs. Several edges of this plaque appear smoke-smudged, and drilled depressions probably held inlays. The lord once wore a detachable headdress (now missing). The shell has not been identified but is flat and pale ivory in color. It may be conch. The back of the shell shows clear vertical ribbing. This piece has not been published. Photographs are not available, and no additional information is to be had at this time.

[4] Despite years of extensive work on shell from the Valley of Oaxaca, Feinman and Nicholas (1993, 2000) have not reported a single carved shell comparable to the Tula plaque. However, jade picture plaques discussed in the text have been found in the Valley and at Monte Alban (Caso 1965).

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Figure 4. Terminal Classic carved-stone images of the seated Maya lord. (a) Xochicalco-style carved stone plaque (after Covarrubias 1957:Plate LVI; cf. Batres 1902:24, Number 7); (b) Xochicalco, Temple of the Plumed Serpents, detail (A. C. Breton photo, Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland).

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Figure 5. Maya incised shell-plaques. (a) Incised-shell "gorget" (drawing by J. W. Palka, after Covarrubias [1957:Plate LIII]); (b) Dumbarton Oaks silhouette-carved conch-shell plaque (courtesy Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, Washington, DC).

down. This is not the usual Maya or Mesoamerican presentation of image and text on jades, shell, or other portable ornaments. The texts are usually matched with the orientation of the image. However, the pendant holes on the shell do not allow for the hanging of either the text or the image right side up. It is conceivable that the unfinished perforation near the headdress of the image indicates that the final carvers tried to have it suspended with the image right side up but then did not complete the work. However, many of these perforations may not have been intended for suspension at all, but for inlays.

Clearly, the Tula shell was larger originally; sections have been broken or sliced off on at least three sides. Part of the figure's feathered headdress and neck pendant have exfoliated since Charnay's drawings and Starr's drawings and photographs. The glyphs on the back have also been damaged, especially the "smoke/fire" glyph (third from the left), which is almost completely erased now. How much damage to the original piece may have been the result of 800 to 900 years in a field, and how much to deliberate reshaping, may never be known. When the piece was re-carved, was it reshaped without regard to the inscription? However, because it is likely that the plaque was never intended to be worn as a pendant, the orientation of the text may not have been essential. If it was a talisman possessed by foreigners who were unfamiliar with Maya texts, the inscription itself may have been of little significance.

Hieroglyphs

The band of hieroglyphs on the back of the Tula plaque is largely phonetic and difficult to decipher. This may be due to the shell's relatively late chronological placement and the possibility that the hieroglyphs represent a regional Mayan dialect (perhaps Chontal or Yucatec) that is not commonly found in the Classic Period inscriptions of the southern lowlands. Perhaps further comparisons with hieroglyphs from Classic to Postclassic times will help provide a decipherment of the Tula plaque's text and knowledge of its temporal and spatial provenience. What is also interesting about the hieroglyphs of the shell's reverse side is that they have

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raised features and fewer incised lines. Hence, it would appear that the shell was ground or carved away to leave the glyphs raised from the background. In addition, as stated earlier, the hieroglyphs on the reverse of the shell are upside down when the front of the shell is turned around. Also an eroded image appears above the text.

An initial reading and cataloging (from Thompson 1962) of the text on the back of the plaque from left to right is as follows:

> 1) eroded; 2) T692(854):19(or 24?):30/ **pumu**(**wa**) or **puli**-(**wa**); 3) T122 [smoke scrolls]:T669:102(or 103?) **K'AK'**(**ki**? or **ta**?); 4) T74(or 184?):114:62(?):606 (or 669?):607(?)/**maxa** ? **ta** or **ho** (or perhaps a version of **K'INICH** [mahkina])

This text may list the names and titles of a Maya noble (nobles often used "fire" in their epithets) or it may refer to a sacred burning or ceremonial fire. The second glyph from the left may read **pum** or **pumuuw**; if the affix is **mu** and not **li**, which Moran (1935 [1625]:61) lists as *pum* 'sign/exhale, pursing the lips.' Can this be taken as a description of someone smoking or blowing a flame? Because very few Mayan dictionaries have entries for *pum*, and the structure of these hieroglyphs do not follow other glyphic examples of verbs meaing "burn" in Classic Maya texts (Stephen Houston, personal communication 2000), the meaning is unclear. However, it may be possible that this sign is derived from the verb root **pul**, which can be glossed as "fire, or to be fired," especially because the next glyph is composed of **K'AK'** 'fire' and possibly **ta** 'torch.' The *Diccionario Ch'ol* (Aulie and Aulie 1978) gives *pul* 'to burn' and *mach mi lac pul jini cholel* 'it doesn't work to burn the field.' Sometimes burning in Maya texts refers to censing something, warfare, conquest, and the destruction of a town's temples; it may also refer to fires lit in agricultural fields and rituals (research by David Stuart and Nikolai Grube, as cited in Schele and Mathews 1998:148–149, 272, 379–380). Interestingly, the hieroglyph for fire on the Tula shell is similar to examples commonly found in the Late/Terminal Classic inscriptions at Chichen Itza, where smoke scrolls (**K'AK'** 'fire') are suffixed with the phonetic complement **k'a** (see Krochock 1988). The final hieroglyph may be a version of the **K'INICH** 'sun-eyed/faced one' title, or it may represent the syllables **ma sha** ? **ta ho**(?).

In addition, there appears to be a formerly unreported bejeweled hand touching the final hieroglyph on the reverse side. Prior to breakage and re-carving, there probably was a scene carved above the glyphs that more than likely describe this lost tableaux. It may have been another seated noble or a fire-starting scene (possibly with a fire drill like that on a looted panel from the Usumacinta region [Stuart and Houston 1994:76]). It is also possible that the now eroded image may have been a smoking lord like the one on the incised shell illustrated by Schele and Miller (1986:155, Plate 59).

On the front of the plaque, there are hieroglyphics above the figure's headdress, but they are now broken off or eroded and difficult to discern. Phonetic **hu** (?) and **chi** signs can be picked out. It appears to be the second part of T1:181:671/**u huuch** or **yuuch**, meaning "his/her shell," which is so common on Maya shell artifacts. These signs are analogous to the glyph on the incised shell shown by Hellmuth (1987:251) and the halved carved conch shell illustrated by Dorie Reents-Budet (1994:43, Figure 2.8), which she reads as **hach**. However, the **ha** sign often works as **hu** when it is a prefix, as in **huul**, or the arrival glyph. It is likely that the owner's name or title appeared at the end of the text, which is now broken off. The front text may have had the glyphs "type of shell" or "name of carved shell"; **u huuch** (his shell); "person's/owner's name."

Although rare, glyphs do appear on the back of various jade objects, including plaques from the Cenote of Sacrifice (Proskouriakoff 1974:207–210) (Figure 13c). They also appear on the picture plaque from the El Castillo cache (Carnegie Institution 1937:113), naming a ruler from Calakmul.

STYLE AND ICONOGRAPHY

The Tula shell plaque most likely dates to the Late Classic or Terminal Classic period and was perhaps re-carved as late as the Early Postclassic period. The seated male lord on the front of the Tula shell is depicted in low relief (1–3 mm.) (Figures 6a and 7a). He wears a "jawless zoomorph" headdress (cf. Schele and Miller 1986:78, 89, Plate 6) with feathered fans on its reptilian forehead and muzzle. Long, beaded headdress feathers reach the noble's waist, and he wears wristlets and anklets of beads; earplugs with tubular beads; and a beaded, mirror-shaped necklace pendant with three dangling bead tassels. These types of round beaded pendants, and particularly the one worn by the figure on the Tula shell, may actually be mirrors (following Taube 1992b, 1999).[5] The headdress feathers and pendant tassels are damaged and barely discernible.

The lord wears an elaborate hip- and loincloth, which is also eroded. He may be seated on a pillow, and he gestures with his right hand (which is now missing). Unlike the characteristic Classic Maya profile with receding forehead and chin, prominent nose, and elliptical eye, the Tula plaque figure's facial features are angular, his bangs are straight cut, and a tubular nose ornament passes through his septum. As a symbol of his royal status, he may display a jester god or god K (*k'awil*) on his headband.

Many of these features also appear on Terminal Classic carved and painted images in the Maya area (Schele and Freidel 1990:385–386, Figure 10.4b [Machaquilá Stela 5]; 391, Figure 10.8a [Jimba Stela 1]). A similar profile appears on Seibal stela 10 (Graham 1996: Figure 7:32 [Figure 12b]). These images are comparable to those found on bas-relief columns at Chichen Itza (Morris et al. 1931; Tozzer 1957:153, 166, 172 ["an anomalous Toltec" (Figure 512) and an "anomalous Maya" (Figure 652)]) (Figure 12c); on other stelae at Seibal (Graham 1996); and at other related Late/Terminal Classic eclectic sites. The profile and nose bar of the Halal (Campeche) doorjamb figure is particularly close, and he wears a headband and a stylized long-snouted reptilian headdress (Pollock 1980:Figure 925) (Figure 12a).

Close resemblances can also be noted between the Tula plaque and items of adornment worn by the battle-scene figures in the Cacaxtla murals (Foncerrada de Molina 1982; Diehl and Berlo 1989:Volume Figures 1–2). Many of the "feathered warriors" and the central image on the east talud wear tubular nose plugs similar to the one worn by the Tula plaque lord (cf. McVicker 1985:90–92, Figures 7–9). The mirrorlike pendants worn by figures 15, 24, and 47 are also comparable to that on the Tula plaque. These

[5] The Dumbarton Oaks plaque (Figure 9c) is badly stained by what has been identified as "iron rust," attributed to burial with an iron pyrite mirror. Although pyrite decays and leaves residues of various colors, further testing is needed to determine the exact source of the "iron rust" and distinguish it from burning. At Nebaj, pyrite mirrors were frequently encountered in Classic high-status burials, but they do not appear to be associated with caches containing jade picture plaques (Smith and Kidder 1951:46, 50).

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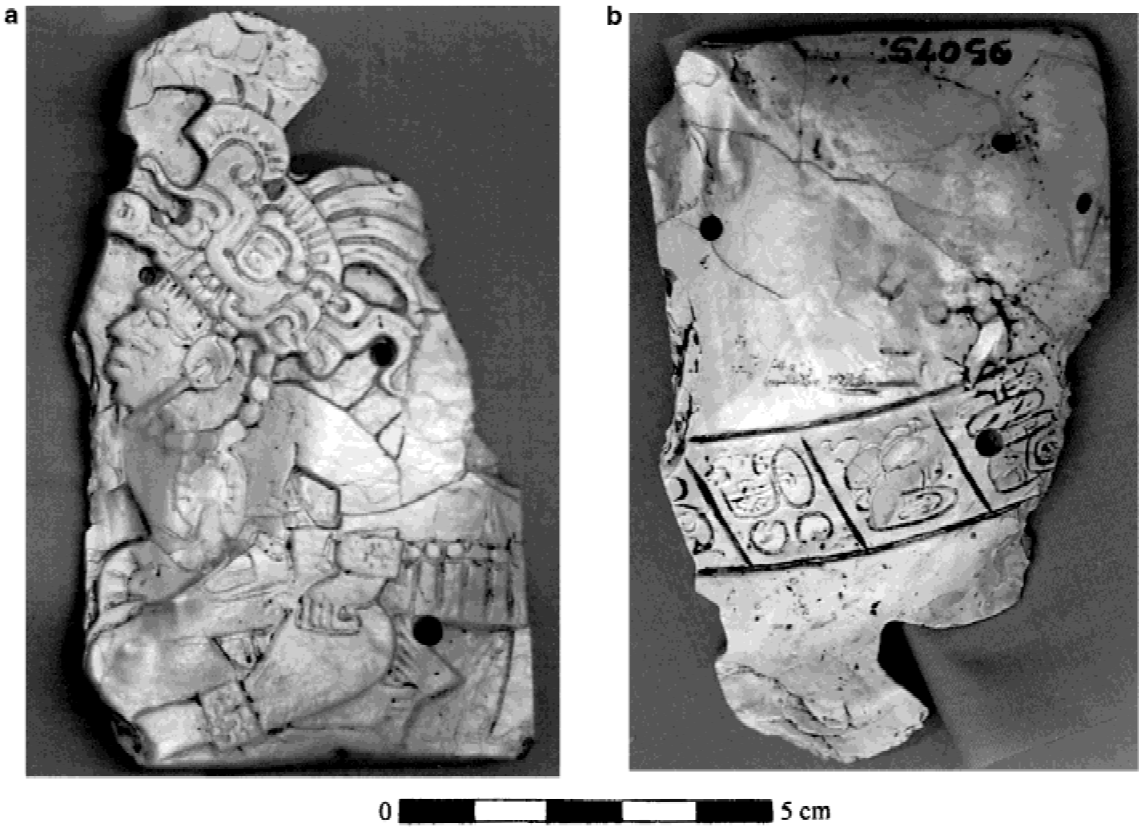


Figure 6. Photos of the Tula Plaque (by J. W. Palka). (a) Tula plaque image; (b) Tula plaque inscription.

likeness all reaffirm the placement of the Tula plaque in the Terminal Classic period, when styles shifted through encounters with populations expanding into both the highlands and the lowlands from the Mexican Gulf coast.

The noble images most closely related to the Tula Plaque figure were carved on jade "picture plaques" (Proskouriakoff 1974:175–192). To investigate the role played by the shell plaque in the dynamics of Classic Maya society, it will be assumed that the carved shell from Tula, unlike other carved and incised shells, is analogous to these objects, and perhaps served similar functions. This analogy is supported by the size and portability of these objects, their chronological placement from the Late to Terminal Classic period, the posture and gesture of the seated figure and its adornments, and the restricted range of headdresses, nearly all falling into the general category of long-snouted reptilians.

Discussing jade plaques comparable in style to the Tula shell, Tozzer (1957:183) speculates that "[t]he wide distribution of these jades seem to point to their center at Ocosingo [Tonina], Chiapas, and possibly at Palenque and neighboring sites on the Usumacinta extending to Piedras Negras." Unfortunately, with the exception of Tonina, not a single jade or shell plaque bearing the lordly image is documented from the entire Classic Maya southern lowland heartland. However, Gann (1936:38) claims that the famous plaque from Teotihuacan that bears his name (Figure 8c), was "almost certainly manufactured in the great Maya art centre of Palenque, as in that city was found a smaller plaque upon which was sculpted an almost identical design; moreover, the two were probably made from the same slab of jade." Unfortunately, drawings and photographs of this smaller plaque and its present location remain unknown.[6]

In general, the Tula plaque resembles the well-known carved-jade plaque from Nebaj (Smith and Kidder 1951:Figure 59b), which is usually considered the type specimen (Figure 8a). Specific similarities can be found in the carving of the left arm and hand and general similarities in the headdress and ear plug. Nine or more of these "Nebaj-type profile picture plaques" were recovered from the Sacred Cenote at Chichen Itza[7] (Proskouriakoff 1974:178–185, Plates 72–75). They were all broken, some

[6] Morley (1938) gives a brief history of the Gann plaque and affirms that it was found by a workman near San Juan Teotihuacan at "the time of Leopoldo Batres." He relates that Batres gave it to Finance Minister Limantour, who took it to Paris. Later, Limantour's heirs sold it to Weston, a curio dealer in Mexico City, who then sold it to Gann in 1923 for $250. For the story of how Gann took the plaque from Mexico, and the subsequent scandal, see Givens (1992:142–143).

[7] In his letters from the field (to his mother), A. M. Tozzer (Peabody Museum, Harvard University Archives, letter 20, April 20, 1905) describes the wealth being taken from the Sacred Centote and the secrecy surrounding the finds. After recounting the magnitude of gold recovered, he goes on to state, "And as for the jade, there is no end to it. There is probably more of this precious stone taken from the Cenote than all the museums in the country have in their united collections. The carving beggars description and there are hundreds of pieces." He also says that the utmost secrecy is being maintained for fear that the Mexican Government may try to regain it. Finally, in the last decades, many pieces have been returned to Mexico to form a collection comparable to that maintained by Harvard's Peabody Museum (Table 1:Jades 3, 5).

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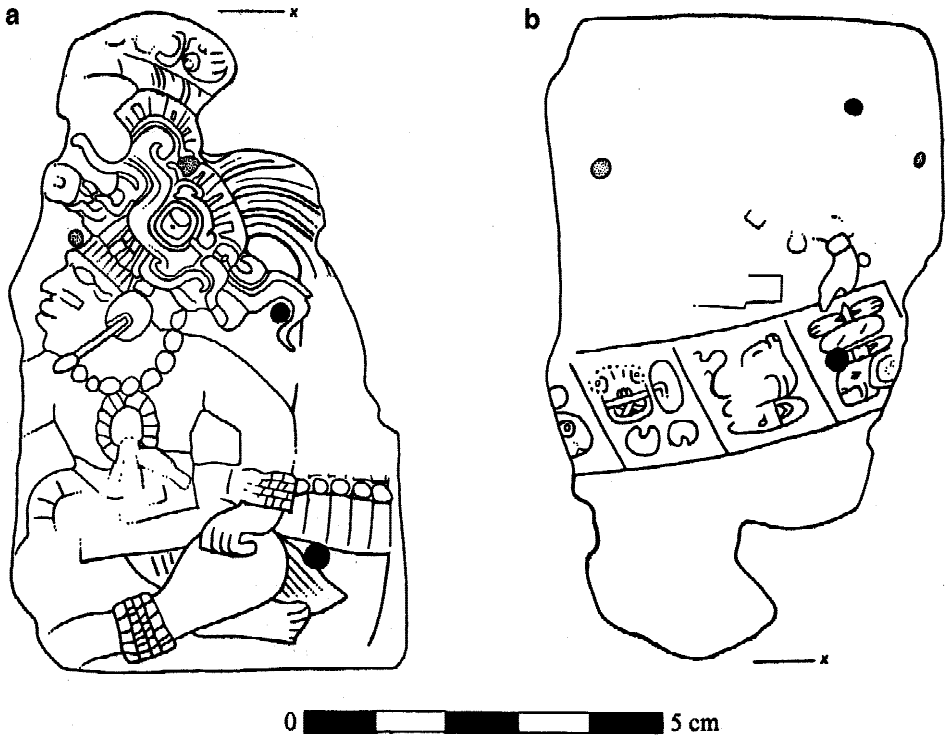


Figure 7. Drawings of the Tula Plaque image and inscription (by J. W. Palka). (a) Tula plaque image; (b) Tula plaque inscription.

shattered, and their surfaces suggest that they were burned as part of a ritual.[8]

All the Cenote jade profile picture plaques have Classic Maya profiles and eyes and wear a variation of the same reptilian headdress. Proskouriakoff suspects that the one exception represents a "prototype" of the later carvings (Proskouriakoff 1974:184–85, Plate 75a [Figure 9b; Table 1:Jade 9]). Stylistically Coggins (Coggins and Shane 1984:27–28) places the others in the first part of the Early Phase which is dated 800–900 B.C. She speculates that "[t]he jades, which represented the personal wealth of Maya rulers to the southwest, may have been tribute sent or taken to the new, foreign-dominated capital." The question of the concentration of jade plaques at Chichen Itza and their distribution throughout Mesoamerica will be taken up later.

The one jade picture plaque excavated at Chichen Itza, a front-facing seated lord, had been placed with other highly valued objects and jade plaques in a stone box cached in front of an earlier staircase inside the Castillo (Erosa Peniche 1939:241). It resembles numerous frontal plaques recovered from the Cenote (Proskouriakoff 1974:164–171, Plates 67–70) (Table 1:Jades 10–11; Figure 13c). However, Coggins (personal communication 2000) feels that these frontal images wear ill-defined headdresses, some of which may be birds rather than reptiles, and are not strictly comparable to the reptilian headdress worn on the Tula plaque.

It should be noted that no carved shell plaques were recovered from the Sacred Cenote. Many of the other shell artifacts that were recovered were "intentionally broken, burned or both, before deposition in the cenote" (Moholy-Nagy and Ladd 1992:142). In fact, Tozzer (Peabody Museum, Harvard University Archives, Tozzer to Putnam, December 3, 1904) finds it strange that "the shell ornaments and in fact every [*sic*] thing made of shell seems to show the effects of their long burial beneath the water full as much as those made of other materials." It is not surprising, if shell plaques were present and they were destined for a sacrificial pyre, that none of them survived.

COMPARISON AND DISTRIBUTION

In addition to the nine jade plaques from the Sacred Cenote, 11 jade plaques have been identified for comparison that closely resemble the shell plaque from Tula (Figures 8a–d; 9a–d; Table 1). There are certainly a number of others (Rands 1965).[9] One comparable plaque is from Uxmal (Ruz 1955:62–63, Lámina XXV), and the others with known locations range from Central Mexico (Digby 1972:30, frontispiece), through Oaxaca (Caso 1965), to the uplands of Chiapas (Easby 1964) and Guatemala (Smith and Kidder 1951). The aberrant Berlin plaque (Schmidt et al. 1998:588, Number 279) is recorded as coming from Colipa near Misantla in

[8] Many Maya jade and shell artifacts were often burned as offerings (Escobedo et al. 1990; Fash 1988:158; Freidel et al. 1993:242). When jade reaches a certain temperature, it "explodes" and produces jade "popcorn." This shattering is particularly intense when hot jade is thrown into cold water.

[9] For example, in the Guennol collection volumes, two jade plaques are illustrated (Rubin 1975:332, 1982:133). The former is on loan to the Brooklyn Museum, and the latter to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. They fall solidly within the range of standard posture-seated lords. They are both small (7.2 cm and 9.75 cm, respectively), and one faces left and the other right. The Metropolitan example has a clear long-snouted reptilian headdress; the Brooklyn Museum plaque's headdress is problematic. Provenience is unknown, although it is possible that A. B. Martin purchased at least the Brooklyn plaque from the "Michoacan cache" referred to in note 10.

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Figure 8. Examples of Maya jade picture plaques: standard posture (see Table 1 for dimensions). (a) Nebaj (Table 1:Jade 1) (Smith and Kidder 1951:Figure 59b; courtesy Michael Coe); (b) Cenote of Sacrifice (Table 1:Jade 4) (Proskouriakoff 1974:Plate 73:4; copyright President and Fellows of Harvard College); (c) Teotihuacan (Table 1:Jade 12) (Schele and Miller 1986:Plate 34; courtesy the British Museum); (d) Unknown (Table 1:Jade 18), University of Pennsylvania (Mason 1927:59, Figure 5; courtesy University of Pennsylvania Museum).

central Veracruz, and the Princeton plaque (Reents-Budet 1994:322, 17) is said to come from "Michoacan." [10]

As noted earlier, despite a close stylistic resemblance to Late Classic lowland Maya art, not a single documented plaque has been recovered from Piedras Negras (Coe 1959; Smith and Kidder 1951:47; Stephen Houston, personal communication 2000), Palenque (Ruz 1973) or other Usumacinta sites nearby; neither are they found at Seibal or Río Pasión sites nearby. Among all the highland Guatemalan jades examine by Kidder (1949), except for the Nebaj plaques, not a single one follows the canons of Late Classic southern lowland Maya art. However, provenience is often based on style, as would be the case of the Museum of American Indian conch shell silhouette described earlier and the "prototype" Cenote Jade 9, both attributed to Palenque (Figure 9b).

Obviously, the manner in which the plaques were recovered and recorded can not provide an adequate sample. Nevertheless, some common dimensions and iconographic attributes provide

[10] The provenience of the Princeton plaque (Table 1:Jade 20) is an example of the difficulties encountered in researching plaque provenience. Mathew Robb, assistant curator of pre-Columbian art at Princeton's Art Museum has provided the following information. "The Merrin Gallery purchased a group of jades in 1968 or 1969, said to be from Michoacan. There are indications that these jades were cached as heirlooms. The lot included three plaques and some beads. Gillett [Griffin] recalls a conversation about the group around the time of the 'Before Cortes' show, and [*sic*] included Ed Merrin, Ignacio Bernal, Gordon Ekholm, and Jose Luis Franco. Their theory was that the Maya jades had been looted in antiquity and had made their way to Michoacan through exchange and trade." It is unfortunate that today jades are still being looted and making their way into various collections through exchange and trade.

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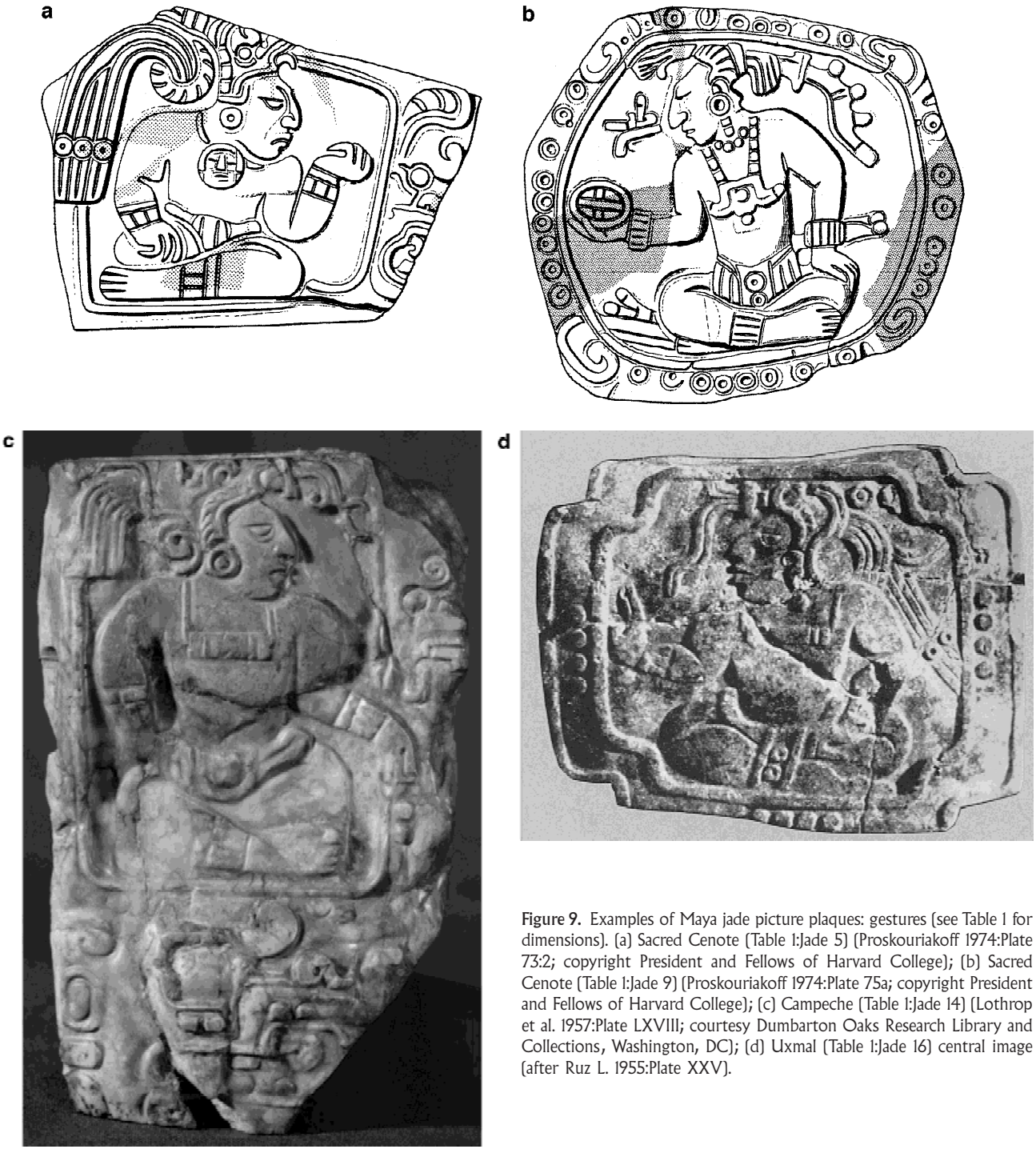


Figure 9. Examples of Maya jade picture plaques: gestures (see Table 1 for dimensions). (a) Sacred Cenote (Table 1:Jade 5) (Proskouriakoff 1974:Plate 73:2; copyright President and Fellows of Harvard College); (b) Sacred Cenote (Table 1:Jade 9) (Proskouriakoff 1974:Plate 75a; copyright President and Fellows of Harvard College); (c) Campeche (Table 1:Jade 14) (Lothrop et al. 1957:Plate LXVIII; courtesy Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, Washington, DC); (d) Uxmal (Table 1:Jade 16) central image (after Ruz L. 1955:Plate XXV).

suggestive comparisons. The jade plaques range in size from 6.1 to 14.1 cm in height and from 5.5 to 14.6 cm in width (Table 1). Because they are irregular in shape and often appear to be broken, a rough surface area was calculated for each plaque examined. They fall into three categories: nine are small (35–75 cm^2), three are medium (80–100 cm^2), and seven are large (125–196 cm^2). Cenote jades are distributed among all three categories. The Tula plaque, at 55.1 cm^2, falls into the small group.

There is less variation in depth. Except for the remarkably thin (0.3–0.7 cm) Cenote Jade 9 (Figure 9b), most cluster around 1.1 cm in thickness. Only three plaques are between 1.5 and 1.7 cm in depth (Table 1:Jades 14, 17, 18).

Nearly all plaque figures wear pendent pectorals and ear-flares and usually ankle and wrist cuffs, and are either seated on the picture frame or on a pillow, bench, or throne. These seats may be formed from human or zoomorphic heads. The only variation in posture and gesture is when one arm, rather than resting across the chest, is extended in a gesture. Little attention is paid to the carving of the hands. Most are simply indicated by incisions.

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Table 1. Comparison of features of the Tula shell plaque with 20 Maya jade picture plaques

Plaque	Dimensions	Provenience	Location	Sitting Position	Posture/Gesture[a]	Profile[b]	Headdress	Adornments[c]	Source
Tula Shell	9.5 × 5.8 cm	Tula planted field	Chicago, The Field Museum	on cushion?	Gesture left	non-Maya	LSR	A/C pendant, nose bar[c]	Starr (1899:109)
Nebaj Jade 1	10.6 × 14.6 cm	Nebaj excavated cache	Guatemala, Museo Nacional	on three heads	Standard left	Maya	LSR	A/C, collar (heads)	Smith and Kidder (1951:Figure 59b) (Figure 8a)
Cenote Jade 2	17.8 × 10.6 cm	Chichen Itza Cenote	Cambridge, MA, Peabody Museum	on two heads	Standard left	Maya	LSR	A/C, pendant	Proskouriakoff (1974:Plate 72:1, c/6669)
Cenote Jade 3	14.2 × 11 cm	Chichen Itza Cenote	Mérida, Museo Regional	on two heads	Standard left	Maya	LSR	A/C, beads	Proskouriakoff (1974:Plate 72:2, c/6661)
Cenote Jade 4	11.5 × 14 cm	Chichen Itza Cenote	Cambridge, MA, Peabody Museum	on picture frame	Standard left	Maya	LSR	A/C, bar	Proskouriakoff (1974:Plate 73:1, c/6668) (Figure 8b)
Cenote Jade 5	7.5 × 9.5 cm	Chichen Itza Cenote	Mérida, Museo Regional	on picture frame	Gesture right	Maya	LSR	A/C, face pendant	Proskouriakoff (1974:Plate 73:2, color Plate 1,e, c/6670) (Figure 9a)
Cenote Jade 6	6.1 × 5.5 cm	Chichen Itza Cenote	Cambridge, MA, Peabody Museum	on picture frame	Standard left	Maya	LSR?	A/C, bar	Proskouriakoff (1974:Plate 73:4, c/6663)
Cenote Jade 7	broken	Chichen Itza Cenote	Cambridge, MA, Peabody Museum	on picture frame	Standard right	Maya	LSR?	A/C, beads	Proskouriakoff (1974:Plate 73:5, c/6673)
Cenote Jade 8	9 × 10.2 cm	Chichen Itza Cenote	Cambridge, MA, Peabody Museum	on picture frame	Standard left	Maya	LSR	A/C, bar	Proskouriakoff (1974:Plate 74:1, c/6672)
Cenote Jade 9	12.0 × 13.5 cm	Chichen Itza Cenote	Cambridge, MA, Peabody Museum	on solar cartouche	Gesture left	Maya	not LSR	A/C, pendant	Proskouriakoff (1974:Plate 75:a, c/6667) (Figure 9b)
Cenote Jade 10	7.5 × 11.5 cm	Chichen Itza Cenote	Cambridge, MA, Peabody Museum	standing	Full face	Maya eye	LSR	Sandals/C beads	Proskouriakoff (1974:Plate 67:b2, c/6103A) (Figure 13c)
Jade 11	unknown	Chichen Itza El Castillo cache	Mérida, Museo Regional	seated	Full face	Maya eye	LSR?	?/C. collar	Morley (1946:Plate 93:c)
Gann Jade 12	14 × 14 cm	Teotihuacan planted field	London, British Museum	on carved bench	Standard left	Maya	LSR	A/C, wrist mask, bar	Schele and Miller (1986:Plate 34) (Figure 8c)
Jade 13	8 × 6 cm	"Oaxaca" unknown "collected"	Washington, DC, Museum American Indian	on throne or pillow	Standard right	Maya	LSR	A/C	Schele and Miller (1986:Plate 6)
Jade 14	14.1 × 8.6 cm	Unknown	Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks	in niche	Gesture right	Maya	LSR	A/C, bar	Lothrop *et al.*, (1957:Plate LXVIII) (Figure 9c)
Squier Jade 15	11.4 × 5.5 cm	Toniná burial cache	New York, American Museum of Natural History	on monster head	Standard left	Maya	not LSR	A/C, bar	Easby (1964:Figure 2c)
Jade 16	7.5 × 13 cm	Uxmal Governor's Palace cache	Mérida, Museo Regional	on picture frame	Gesture left	Maya	??	A/C, bar	Ruz L. (1955:Lámina XXV) (Figure 9d)
Jade 17	7.2 × 9.2 cm	"Central Veracruz"	Berlin, Museum für Völkerkunde	on picture frame	Standard right	non-Maya	not LSR	A/C	Schmidt *et al.* (1998:Number 279)
Jade 18	6.7 × 5.8 cm	Unknown	Philadelphia, University Museum	on picture frame?	Standard right	Maya	LSR	C, bar	Mason (1927:59, Figure 5) (Figure 8d)
Jade 19	5.8 × 7.5 cm	Unknown	London, British Museum	broken, unknown	Gesture left	Maya	LSR?	?/C, bar	Joyce (1938:Plate LIc)
Jade 20	8.2 × 6 cm	Michoacan?	New Jersey, Princeton Art Museum	on picture frame?	Standard left	Maya	LSR	A/C, collar	Reents-Budet (1994:322; Number 17)

LSR, long-snouted reptilian (see text for description and discussion); A/C, anklets and cuffs.

[a]Profile or gesture is from the viewer's perspective: standard posture is sitting with one leg tucked under; one hand on knee or hip and one arm across chest; when standard looking left, right arm across chest; when standard looking right, left arm across chest; figures often given the appearance of leaning. When gesturing, one arm is extended. Jade 9 holds an oval object; Jade 19 scatters "bead-like" objects.

[b]Maya profiles feature a smooth line from nose to hairline and an elliptical eye. Non-Maya profiles feature notable brow ridges and rounded eyes.

[c]Most figures wear anklets and cuffs; beads, pectoral bars, or pendants are common.

Despite strong resemblances in posture, gesture and adornments, these figures rarely wear the hairstyle of the Tula plaque figure, lack nose bars, and display an idealized Maya profile and eye. This may indicate that the majority of the Nebaj-style jade plaques were carved in a different place or places, and at a somewhat earlier time than the Tula plaque. However, it is likely that the Tula plaque was re-carved.

Except for their restricted range of headdresses, jade picture plaque figures are remarkably similar to seated "lords" depicted on Classic Maya polychrome vessels and carved on stone and even bone. This also suggests that the style of these figures predates the Tula plaque image. For example, the lord on the Zacatal Cream polychrome vase illustrated by Reents-Budet (1994:9, 90, 322) (Figure 10) is almost identical to jade plaque figures and, as an exception, even sports a similar headdress. She illustrates the "Princeton" plaque (Table 1:Jade 20) on page 322 as a comparable image. Other painted dignitaries highly similar to plaque figures are also illustrated by Reents-Budet (1997:22–23, Figures 4–5), Gallenkamp and Johnson (1985:147, 80), and Kerr (1989:460, File No. 4113)). Unfortunately, all these pots lack archaeological context and cannot be precisely dated.

Several of the stone carvings known from Palenque depict a palace scene with a seated lord—for example, the Oval Palace Tablet and the Palace Tablet (Schele and Miller 1986:114–115, Figures 11.5, 11.7). Bonampak Sculptural Panel 1 (Schele and Miller 1986:116, Figure 11.8) (Figure 11) repeats the scene, as does a relief carved on La Pasadita Lintel 3 (Schele and Freidel 1990:302, Figure 7:19c). As is generally the case with the polychrome vessels, none of these seated monumental bas-relief figures wears a headdress that falls within the range of those commonly worn by jade plaque figures.



Figure 10. Late Classic Zacatal Cream Polychrome vessel image of a seated lord (Reents-Budet 1994:9; courtesy Justin Kerr).

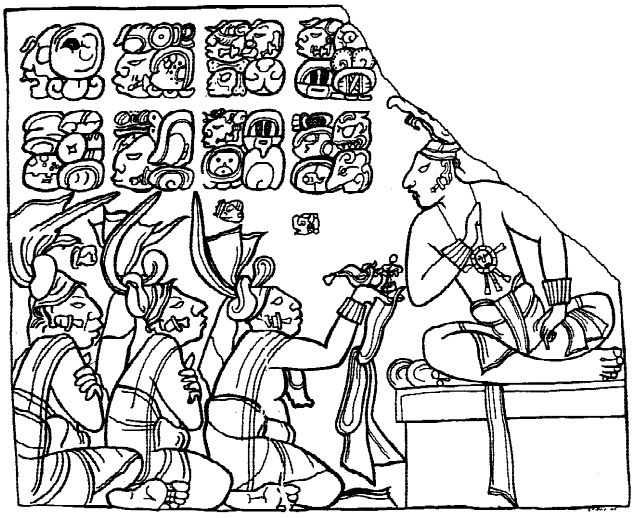


Figure 11. A Late Classic carved-stone image of a seated lord. Bonampak Sculptured Panel No. 1 (Schele and Miller 1986:116, Figure 11.8; drawing by Linda Schele).

A related set of carvings of seated lords from the northern Yucatan peninsula, although reminiscent of southern lowland panels and pots, are later than the Late Classic-style jades and in style closer to the Tula plaque. Examples are the seated "elite male" on the tablet thought to be from Oxkintoc (Gallenkamp and Johnson 1985:139, Figure 68) and the seated lordly figure on the carved Ak'ab Tz'ib lintel from Chichen Itza (Maudslay 1889–1902:Volume III, Plate 19).

Images from Xochicalco—most notably, the sculptures surrounding the base of the Temple of the Plumed Serpents (Hirth 2000:33, Photo 3.1; 36–37, Figures 3.5–3.6) (Figure 4b)—share a number of features with the Tula plaque. These seated bas-relief figures enclosed by serpent coils wear beaded necklaces (without pendants) and both wrist and ankle bracelets; their right arms are across their chests; and they wear saurian headdresses lacking lower jaws.

Another example is the tablet labeled by Covarrubias (1957:Plate LVI) "in the style of Xochicalco" (Figure 4a). This relief carving was excavated by Batres (1902) in his explorations in the Calle Escalarillas in Mexico City. Unless it was looted by the Mexica from Xochicalco, it is a prime example of Aztec archaizing (cf. Pasztory 1983:141).

Although there is little variation in posture, gesture, and costume of Maya seated lords regardless of media, the headdresses worn are an exception: Rarely do plaque figures wear anything other than a variation of a long-snouted zoomorphic headdress (Table 1). Schele and Miller (1986:78) note that the reptilian figure in the headdress worn by the figure on the Tula Plaque is marked by feathered fans on its forehead and muzzle and identify it as a vision serpent. Taube (1992a) argues that these headdresses are derived from the Teotihuacan war serpent (in Maya texts: **wax-aklahun ubah chan**) and are ancestral to the Aztec fire serpent. Andrea Stone (1989) also discusses the elite use of this Teotihua-

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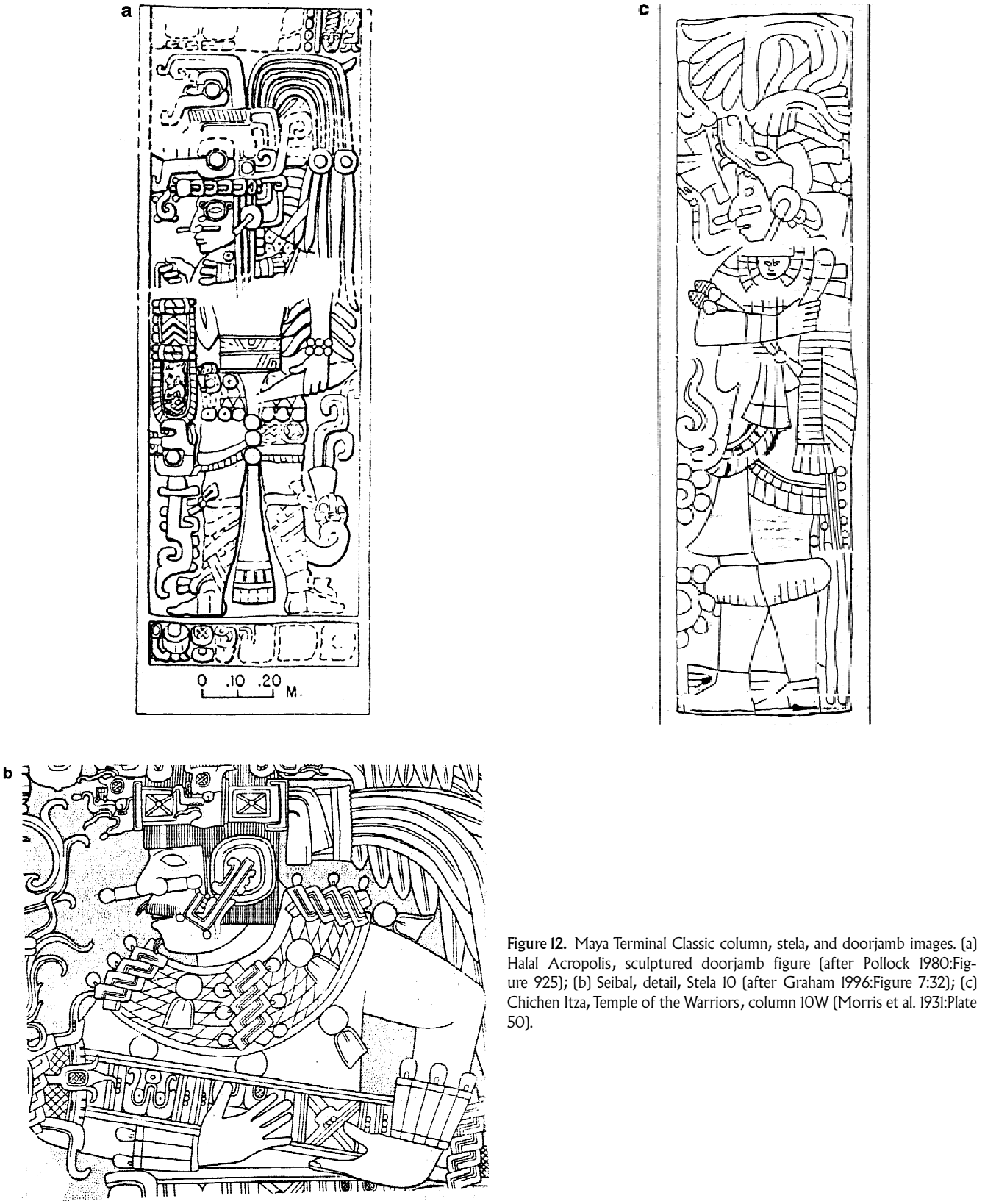


Figure 12. Maya Terminal Classic column, stela, and doorjamb images. (a) Halal Acropolis, sculptured doorjamb figure (after Pollock 1980:Figure 925); (b) Seibal, detail, Stela 10 (after Graham 1996:Figure 7:32); (c) Chichen Itza, Temple of the Warriors, column 10W (Morris et al. 1931:Plate 50).

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can headdress as a "foreign insignia" among the Classic Maya. In particular the "frontal mosaic dragon helmet" appears on at least three stelae at Piedras Negras (Figure 13a).[11]

Regardless of their specific iconographic lineage and identification as vision serpent, war serpent, or fire serpent, the resemblance between the Maya long-snouted reptilian headdress and those of the processional figures from Tlacuilapaxco and Tepantitla at Teotihuacan (Miller 1973:99–103; C. Millon 1988b) (Figure 14) is significant because both appear to signal contact among foreigners, enemies, or ancestors.

In the remarkable series of Late Classic ceramic figurines from Jaina illustrated by Schele, those wearing the headdress representing serpent heads without lower jaws are identified as war leaders (Schele 1997:91–92, Figures 34–35) (Figure 13c). Further on, in the section titled "Warriors and War" (*Los soldades y la guerra*), numerous examples of this headdress are worn by enthroned figures (Schele 1997:95–119). However, in these cases, the common convention is to have the seated figures depicted full front, with both feet on the ground or tucked underneath, rather than in the typical "leaning lord" position.

Practically all plaques have a number of perforations and holes. Some are drilled through horizontally and some even vertically. These various drill marks have often been interpreted as means of suspension, leading to the assumption that the plaques were worn as pectorals, pendants, gorgets, or amulets. There is little support for this assumption. Although the same profile lord is frequently presented on ceramics and stone, there is not a single depiction of this figure wearing one of these plaques (Proskouriakoff 1974:4). In fact, the larger plaques are so heavy they would be most uncomfortable to wear around the neck.

It is likely that many of the holes were not for suspension but for the attachment of additional adornments or the inlaying of semiprecious stones. This appears to be the case in other types of pendants worn by lords on painted pottery and stone reliefs (cf. Mason 1927:64; Proskouriakoff 1974:175). These perforations may also have been used to attach the plaque to a cloth or other material. The Squier plaque from Tonina (Easby 1964:Figure 2c [Table 1:Jade 15]) is a case in point. Although it is drilled through horizontally above the shoulders and could easily have been suspended, eleven additional holes were drilled at right angles from the edges to the back, an ideal arrangement for sewing the jade to a backing. Coggins (Coggins and Shane 1984:142) suggest that it is possible that they were hung within palaces as emblems of rulership and wealth. Again, not a single depiction of a plaque being displayed is known, even in palace scenes.

Remarking on a spondylus shell disc carved with a kneeling figure, Smith and Kidder (1951:54, Figure 88b) state, "The fact that none of the three perforations is so placed as to allow the object to hang right side up, as a pendant, suggests that it was designed for attachment to clothing." The Tula plaque is puzzling because, despite the numerous surviving drill marks, none appears suitable for attaching to a backing or for suspension. Perhaps the shell was too fragile to attempt perforations for either purpose and was intended to be held in the hand.

There is little agreement about the identification of the plaque figures. They are usually referred to as lords, although whether they are portraits of individuals or stylized types remains undetermined. Coggins (personal communication 2000) suggests that if the plaque images were self-portraits, they would not be worn. This would help explain why figures in Late Classic-period monumental and minor arts never wear or display them. Individuals appearing on plaques have also been considered cult representations of warriors, priests, and gods.[12]

Additional comments on the condition of the jade plaques may clarify the current state of the Tula shell. Plaques are frequently referred to as broken and/or re-carved. This assessment is based on the observation that many of the headdresses are incomplete and often appear sliced in half by a picture frame; the frames themselves sometime appear to have been re-carved. One Cenote jade (Proskouriakoff 1974:172, Plate 71:c3) is neatly sawed in half just below the figure's waist. Other images seem to be interrupted by the irregular shape of the stone. Some reshaping of plaques could have been deliberate, pieces being removed for other ritual purposes—much like potlatch coppers on the Northwest Pacific coast being "broken" during ceremonial feasts. It appears that the missing arm on the Tula plaque was the result of purposeful mutilation rather than natural breakage.[13]

CONCLUSIONS

Distribution

Jade and shell figural plaques have been described as objects of trade, pilgrimage offerings, and tribute. Their most remarkable distributional characteristic is their absence from Classic Maya

[11] Although a full discussion of frontal figurines on jade plaques is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that Proskouriakoff (1974:160–161, Plates 67b–70) illustrates a series of Late Classic Maya "stela" plaques from the Sacred Cenote, which are "dressed in the full regalia of a warrior figure that one might encounter at Piedras Negras, with the lower jaw of a monster headdress hanging on the chest, and the upper jaw sharply upturned with a double scroll above" (Figure 13b).

[12] Ringle et al. (1998:207) classify the figural jades as Quetzalcoatl cult objects. Their proposed association of plaques with Quetzalcoatl is rather tenuous, based largely on the relationship at Xochicalco between the feathered serpent and the lords enfolded in his coils. Because the Xochicalco carvings are later than most of the jades, and because these Xochicalco figures were probably modeled on the earlier jades, it seems more likely that the Terminal Classic Quetzalcoatl association was a later addition to the leaning-lord iconography. Miller and Samayoa (1998) have recently proposed that at least some of the earlier Chichen Itza jades were connected with the worship of the maize god.

[13] The deliberate mutilation of jade objects is well documented for the Olmec. For example, in the Guennol Collection (Rubin 1975:311) an Olmec jade plaque is described as having been "killed" by carefully sawing off an arm. It is possible that the missing arm on the Tula plaque was deliberately removed rather than broken.

Other factors that may explain the condition of the plaques under consideration are the hardness and preciousness of jade. It is possible that the irregularity of the green stone may have guided the completeness of the image. Jade is a remarkably hard mineral, and in many cases it may have been more practical to follow the irregularities and save the effort of completing the recognizable iconography. Rubin (1975:309) suggests that "the original [Maya] artisans often modified the original shape of the stone [jade] as little as possible, taking advantage of the natural forms to express their purpose." Jade is a remarkable precious commodity, and in many cases irregularities may have been preferable to losing any of the material. Easby (1968:15) remarks on how the surface imperfection of Maya jades, and "attempts of the lapidary to adapt the form to the original shape," offer evidence for the scarcity and high value placed on the raw material. How the fragility of shell, its relative availability, and bivalve form may have affected the carving of images on the Tula plaque is difficult to assess.

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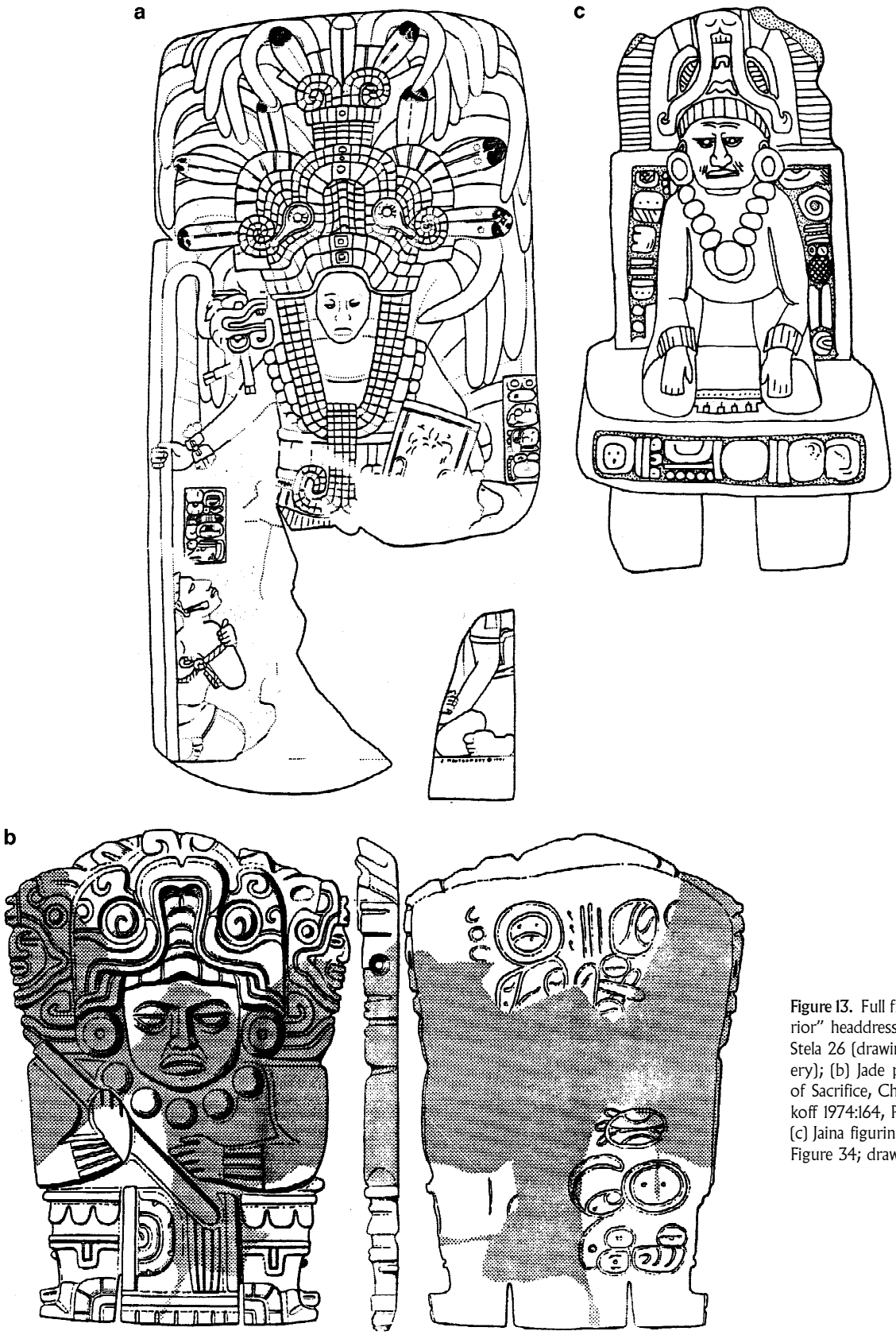


Figure 13. Full frontal figures with "warrior" headdresses. (a) Piedras Negras Stela 26 (drawing by John Montgomery); (b) Jade picture plaque, Cenote of Sacrifice, Chichen Itza (Proskouriakoff 1974:164, Plate 67:b2 [c/6103A]); (c) Jaina figurine (after Schele 1997:92, Figure 34; drawing by J. W. Palka).

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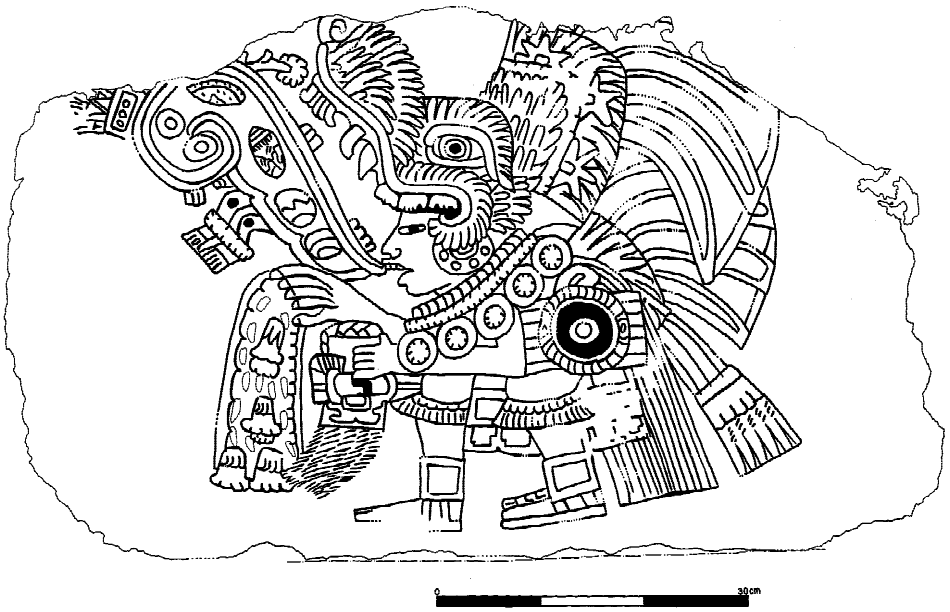


Figure 14. "War Serpent" headdress from Teotihuacan Tlacuilapaxco Processional Figures (C. Millon 1988b:204, Figure VI.25; tracing by Saburo Sugiyama).

sites in the central Peten and in the Usumacinta region (cf. Coe 1959). As portable objects, they are known to have been recovered from the central Mexican highlands (Tula, Teotihuacan), "Michoacan," Gulf Coast, southern highlands (Monte Alban), the northern Maya lowlands (Chichen Itza, Uxmal), and highland Maya areas from Chiapas (Tonina) to Guatemala (Nebaj). Where they were manufactured and how they were obtained before they were distributed are basic questions. Currently, there is no evidence to support Tozzer's (1957:183) speculation that they were produced in the central Usumacinta region or at Tonina. If they were manufactured in the style of Palenque and Piedras Negras, why are they absent from these excavated sites?

Proskouriakoff (1974:14) has suggested that jade plaques were items looted from graves and caches following the collapse of the southern lowland Maya cities in the ninth and tenth centuries. She bases her speculation in part on Aztec jade looters implied in Chapter 8 of Sahagún's book 11 (1963:221). Yet, a sufficient number of richly stocked, unlooted Late Classic Maya tombs have been excavated, and none has yielded a seated-lord picture plaque. If, with the disruption of trade routes in the ninth century, jade became such a rare commodity, it is more likely that some plaque carvers may have turned their attention to shell as a precious raw material.

How, why, and where plaques were deposited is unclear. Unfortunately, most are looted and unprovenienced. The few from excavated contexts are all from caches, and were frequently placed in jars or stone boxes (Chichen Itza [el Castillo], Nebaj, Monte Alban [votive deposits in the Temple of the Jaguar, Rands 1965:906], Tonina). Ruz (1955:62) interprets the deposit in which the Uxmal plaque was discovered as the scattered remains of a cache that had once been placed in the small platform supporting the double jaguar-headed throne in front of the Governor's Place.

The most striking difference between cached jades and those from the Cenote of Sacrifice is the condition of the plaques themselves. As discussed earlier, all comparable Cenote jade plaques show evidence of burning and are in a fragmentary condition. The cached jades are all in nearly perfect condition and show no signs of burning. The fragile Tula plaque, with the exception of the broken or deliberately removed left side, was also in excellent condition. Apparently, two or more distinctive rituals of disposal were involved, reflecting chronological and cultural differences.

It is significant that not a single comparable picture plaque, regardless of time or region, is known from a tomb and associated with a particular individual. Even the Tonina jades appear to be associated with secondary burials in cremation urns and had been placed in a separate jar (Easby 1964:60). Because the shift to cremation burials is a hallmark of the Early Postclassic period in the Maya highlands (Ruz 1968; Woodbury and Trik 1955), it would appear that these Classic jades, like the Tula plaque, also were heirloomed and cached at a time that Central Mexican ideologies had penetrated into Late Classic domains.[14]

Given the remarkable preservation of the Tula shell plaque, and the lack of known elite burials at Tula, it seems likely that what was found in the cultivated field was a cache containing the precious shell and other "treasures." It is unfortunate that we do not have more precise information on its provenience. Another remarkable *ofrenda* from Tula also contained mother-of-pearl, in this case the famous shell mosaic anthropomorphic censer lid in Toltec-style excavated at El Corral (Acosta 1974).

Most authors assume that the plaques were direct trade or tribute items but do not address the exchange system that might have

[14] The Tonina jades, discovered (but not excavated) by Squier in 1852 (Squier 1870), form the largest collection of jades recovered *in situ*. The three largest are a profile lord, a stela style, and a face plaque. Several smaller pieces were in the cache, including what appears to be a fragment of a second leaning lord. The large, seated profile figure (Table 1:Jade 15) is unusual in that he wears an elaborate headdress without the features of the long-snouted reptilian and is seated on a *cauac* earth-monster head. As discussed in the text, this jade had been perforated on all sides to be attached to a backing. Unfortunately, several of the smaller jades from the cache have disappeared. The remainder are in the collection of the American Museum of Natural History.

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been in operation. For example, Lothrop writes, "The finest Maya jades passed in trade or as tribute over great distances, and there is positive evidence that some were inherited for many generations before they were buried with their owners" (Lothrop et al. 1957:253). Referring to a "Nebaj-style" plaque from the Sacred Cenote, Coggins comments that "the plaque may have been traded or carried as spoils or as an offering to Chichen Itza from the southwestern Maya regions. However it traveled, similar events probably tied the Oaxacan center of Monte Albán to the Usumacinta region of its origin" (Coggins and Shane 1984:70). Ringle et al. (1998:207) propose that pilgrims may have carried the plaques as tokens of religious veneration.

Diehl (1983:114) explores the analogy with Aztec long-distance traders (*pochteca*) to explain extraregional items uncovered at Tula. Unfortunately, pottery and a few miscellaneous items, primarily Papagayo Polychrome and Plumbate from Central America, were all that he encountered in his excavations. A few pieces of Huastec trade pottery from the northern Gulf coast, wheeled toys (presumably from the Huasteca), and some jewelry and marine shell from the Pacific were also collected. Notable in their absence were other exotic goods from the central and southern Gulf Coast (e.g., Fine Orange) or any artifacts from the Maya marches or heartland. Although he had hoped to "uncover evidence of Huastec or other foreign residents in [his] Corral Locality excavations, nothing [he] found indicates the ethnic affiliation of the occupants" (Diehl 1983:143). It remains one of the Mesoamerican archaeological puzzles that architectural ideas and sculptural forms could have passed so freely between Tula and Chichen Itza, and that, with the exception of the Tula plaque, all portable objects were filtered out (cf. Wren and Schmidt 1991).

Of course, the presence of a single portable object at Tula, which may have originated in the northern Maya lowlands, need say nothing about any direct connection between the Toltecs and the Maya. However, the fact that the object was carved or recarved in "Mexicanized Maya" style and considered of sufficient value to be cached at the Toltec capital does suggest a conceptual connection between the two peoples.

It is obvious that the initial carving of the plaques considered here predated the establishment of Tula as a metropolitan power. In the Late Classic period, it is likely that the plaques were presented to high-status visitors or travelers to Maya domains and became symbols of alliance. It is even possible that the Maya lords carried carved plaques with them on their royal visits (Schele and Mathews 1998). As high-status items, they would have become heirlooms and been handed down through the generations. Later, they might have reached their final destination through a new network of indirect exchange, redistribution, or tribute among Terminal Classic eclectic centers such as Xochicalco, Cacaxtla, and El Tajín, and ultimately Tula and Chichen Itza.

Functions

If picture plaques produced as Late Classic presentation objects were carried to foreign realms as objects of veneration or insignia of political alliance rather than as personal possessions, they would not be entombed but would eventually be cached at the appropriate ritual moment. If carved picture plaques were intended to be given to establish external and peripheral alliances, then their absence from the southern Maya heartland would be explained.

The Tula figure, like its jade counterparts, is portrayed in the formal posture of Maya rulers giving an audience (Schele and Miller 1986:78). If a high-ranking foreign dignitary was granted an audience or received a royal visit, what better gift than a precious jade or shell representing kingly authority and possessing shared symbolic value?

The giving and accepting of highly valued gifts has long been recognized as the most fundamental symbol of alliance. Describing Germanic societies, Mauss (1990:60) summarizes the significance of the gift in essentially feudal and peasant societies:

> The clans within the tribes, the large undivided families within the clans, the tribes one with another, the chiefs among themselves, and even the kings among themselves—all lived to a fairly large extent morally and economically outside the closed confines of the family group. Thus, it was by the form of the gift and alliance, by pledges and hostages, by feasts and presents that were as generous as possible, that they communicated, helped, and allied themselves to one another.

Although marriage and lineage alliances were often sealed with feasts and gifts, the underlying function of the giving and exchanging of elite objects was often political and economic. The classic case would be Malinowski's analysis of the Kula Ring (1978 [1922]).[15] As Malinowski points out, the seemingly "irrational" exchange of shell armbands for necklaces was a chiefly activity that set the scene for active trade on the beach. Even today among many peoples of Mesoamerica the establishment of ritual *compadrazgo* kinlike relations accompanied by gift-giving is thought to be essential to the establishment of alliances and trading partnerships (Nutini 1984:23–28, "the mediating entity"; cf. Vogt 1969:236–238). Even though the present form of these exchanges is post-Conquest, their functions are ancient.

Gift-giving among and to members of the elite was common in Mesoamerica. Kepecs et al. (1994:141) discuss the significance of this pattern of gift giving and the "power that preciosities confer on elites who control them." They note that "the calculated distribution of these goods to secondary elites and middle-level groups establishes nets of obligations that contribute in many ways to the mobilization of energy."

Landa (Tozzer 1941:95–97) describes gift-giving among Yucatan Maya nobles at the time of the Conquest. Sahagún (1959, Book 9:8, 47, 55) records the tradition of gift-giving among the elite *pochteca*. Brumfiel (1987) reviews the evidence for both tribute and special-occasion gifts being received by Aztec elites from foreign nobles and rulers. When these foreign nobles attended the great dedication ceremonies at Tenochtitlan, they in turn were presented with high-status items as gifts (Lambertino-Urquizo et al. 1999). In his analysis of the role of interelite solidarity in achieving the aims of empire, Smith (1986:75) emphasizes the role of sumptuous feasting, gift-giving, and royal redistribution in promoting social solidarity. The dispersal of high-value items through the political economy of gift-giving may better explain the distribution of plaques than trade, tribute, or Postclassic looting (cf. Dietler 1999 ["commensal feasts" and "diacritical insignia"]).

[15] Mauss uses Malinowski's description of the Kula Ring and Franz Boas's description of the Kwakiutl potlatch as his basic examples of the socioeconomic importance of the gift.

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Luxury items from foreign lands carried with them a supernatural aura. As Kepecs et al. (1994:145; cf. Helms 1993[16]) point out, geographic distance often correlates with cosmological distance. The ability of the ruler to display and distribute prestige items was critical to maintaining his position of power. By using "these power-laden exotics" as gifts, core elites could create patron–client chains similar to the *compadre* networks referred to earlier. This exchange of "cultural diacritics" would facilitate marriage and trade alliances over long distances and create international supercultures (Kepecs et al. 1994:145).

Hirth (2000:264–266) reinforces this point in his discussion of cultural diversity, foreign influences, and elite interaction at Xochicalco. He claims that elite interaction helped to maintain political alliances important for ensuring the state's independence and that these communication networks provided the emerging dynast with access to multiethnic and pan-Mesoamerican symbolic systems. At Xochicalco, both the sculptured facade of the Temple of the Plumed Serpents (Figure 14b) and the three elaborately carved stelae (Sáenz 1961) are examples of elites striving to reinforce their social positions; they use a diversity of forms and symbols to show affinity and interaction with distant foreign societies. This interaction was publicly displayed not only in monumental sculpture, but also in the vast collection of imported portable objects cached throughout the site (Hirth 2000:200–201, Table 9.9). Of note among these are the seven "Mayoid" jade pendants depicting frontal figures wearing "serpent headdresses" (Hirth 2000:202–203).

The iconography of these headdresses and the profile reptilian headdresses of leaning-lord plaques may denote interaction with members of a foreign elite. Just as the "tassel headdress" has been identified as a signifier of high status and military association connected with Teotihuacan abroad (C. Millon 1988a), so these reptilian headdresses might be identified as having a similar iconographic significance (Stone 1989; Taube 1992a). At Tepantitla (Miller 1973:101, Figure 177) the processional figures in Room 2 are probably associated with the later murals of Patio 9, which display images of war, death and the Storm God (Miller 1973:106, Figure 193). The headdresses of these figures are almost identical to those worn by the many "Maguey Bloodletting Ritual" paintings now known to have come from Tlacuilapaxco (C. Millon 1988b) (Figure 14). This compound adjoins Techinantitla, from which were recovered an abundance of figures wearing the tassel headdress. Rene Millon interprets Techinantitla as "the long term residence of kinsmen with an enduring military tradition" (R. Millon 1988:107). He suggest that both Techinantitla and Tlacuilapaxco were residences within a powerful military barrio. These painted images represent the growing militarism and increasingly critical role of external relations that characterized seventh-century Teotihuacan.

Toward the end of the Late Classic period, when most of the jade plaques were carved, they signified external relations with Maya centers on the periphery of the southern lowlands. Given the history of contact with Teotihuacan, and the presence of the Gann plaque at that great metropolis, they may have reached as far as Central Mexico. By Terminal Classic times, as "merchant warriors, called the Putún, meddled in the affairs of Maya kingdoms and eventually established new hybrid dynasties that prospered at the expense of the traditional Maya governments" (Schele and Freidel 1990:380; cf. Thompson 1970:3–5), the southern cities were eclipsed, and heirloomed plaques moved on to the growing maritime centers of the southern Gulf coast. From these distribution points they were dispersed as trade networks and elite interaction expanded north to El Tajín and up into the central Mexican highlands. The desire for prestige goods symbolizing contact with the distant Maya increased among the Epiclassic "Mayanized Mexican" populations of Xochicalco and Cacaxtla and, ultimately, Tula. At this time of dynamic eclecticism the flow reversed, and the now-Mexicanized Maya style spread widely up the Usumacinta and into the northern Maya lowlands (cf. Thompson 1970:43: "The . . . hybrid Maya-Nahuat"). When Chichen Itza became the dominant Terminal Classic/Early Post Classic center, its lords contributed to the "Mayanization of Mesoamerica" (Schele and Freidel 1990:396; cf. McVicker 1985).

As plaques were passed down generation to generation, and as rulers and realms ebbed and flowed, they would naturally be recarved—whether to be appropriate to a new lord or to retain references to a hallowed past. This would explain the unusual features of the Tula shell plaque, such as its disregarded inscriptions, "non-Maya" features, nose bar, and straight-cut hair. The plaque's recarving probably reflects the shifting fortunes of the Itza and the new style of Tula and "Toltec Chichen." Like the carvings and murals at Xochicalco and Cacaxtla, the Tula carved shell may signal further interaction between the poorly documented "Putún Maya" of Tabasco or later Maya of Campeche and the Terminal Classic/Early Postclassic cultures of central Mexico. This is yet another example of the power of Chichen Itza as a center of "Mayanization" as its transactions stretched along the Gulf Coast–Tula axis, leaving "preciosities" in its wake.

With the ascendancy of Chichen Itza, a large number of plaques carved with the leaning-lord image were concentrated at that site. This is in marked contrast to their scarcity at other Mesoamerican sites. These objects may by this time have been incorporated into rituals used to proclaim new forms of political alliance. Schele and Freidel (1990:393) propose that the confederate lords of Chichen Itza "[t]ransformed kingship into an abstraction, vested in objects, images, and places." These lords then "terminated the office of king and the principle of dynasty that had generated it" (Schele and Freidel 1990:375). To acknowledge this disjunction publicly, carved plaques as emblems of ancient kingship may have been ritually killed and thrown into the Cenote of Sacrifice to signify the death of the older order.

Coggins and Ladd (1992:341) recognized that "most of the objects found in the Cenote were deposited in destructive cyclic completion or 'termination' ceremonies." Ball (1992:193) went even further and suggested a single massive act of ritual destruction that terminated Chichen Itza's religious and political domination of the northern lowlands. If such acts took place, vassal lords and allies throughout Chichen Itza's sphere of influence might have brought jades and other objects to be added to the most colossal cache of all. However, rather than terminating Chichen Itza's domination, these rituals would have symbolized the breaking of established elite alliances and the formation of a new world order.

[16] Helms (1993:4) elegantly sums up the significance of the circulation of prestige goods and their transformation: "By obtaining such goods [valuable resources] from afar, persons of influence, or elites, are involved in symbolically charged acts of both acquisition and transformation by which resources originating from locales outside society are obtained and brought inside society where they may be materially altered and/or symbolically reinterpreted or transformed to meet particular political–ideological requirements."

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RESUMEN

En este artículo reportamos sobre una concha tallada de estilo maya del período clásico tardío al clásico terminal que según Désiré Charnay (1885) fue hallada en Tula, Hidalgo, y que hoy se encuentra en las colecciones del Field Museum en Chicago. La concha muestra un maya noble-guerrero sentado y la inscripción jeroglífica probablemente contiene signos como "concha" y "fuego." Aquí discutimos la historia de la procedencia de la concha, su iconografía e inscripciones jeroglíficas, y su semejanza a las placas de jade grabado, a otras conchas talladas y algunas figuras del área maya y México del periódo clásico tardío al clásico terminal. El arte, los jeroglíficos, el material, y las implicaciones de la procedencia de esta concha no han sido examinados extensivamente hasta la fecha. También exponemos algunas teorías sobre el uso de las placas talladas de concha y jade, su contexto arqueológico y cultural y las implicaciones para los rituales de los mayas y tocamos temas sobre la interacción y el intercambio entre los mayas y otros grupos. Esta pieza es única ya que es de concha madreperla (nacár) pero es semejante en tamaño y diseño a las placas de jade con nobles sentador. La concha tallada de Tula fue grabada varias veces y fue deposito en el asentamiento de Tula. Entonces sugerimos que esta concha y las placas de jade eran adornos que fueron presentados o regalados a nobles de entidades políticas de afuera y que eventualmente fueron usados en escondites o ceremonias de teminación.

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