A Splendid Predicament: Young Men in Classic Maya Society

Stephen Houston

The Classic Maya, like many peoples in the ancient world, paid keen attention to male youths as a key age/gender grade, and, in the Maya example, to those who would inherit a courtly world of privilege and domination. Detection of glyphic texts and images relevant to male youth reveals them to be a major interest of elite Classic society, participating in tribute, dances and battle. This transient status, marked by infancy and juvenility on one end, adulthood and ancestral status on the other, led to the production of drinking vessels and sundry goods owned by 'great youths', presumably those soon to marry or enter adulthood. Homosocial and homoerotic impulses conditioned male youth among the Classic Maya, if in ways that remain only faintly or intermittently visible. The probability nonetheless exists that this evidence represents a thin slice of Classic society, skewed by elite concerns with reproducing elite attributes across generations.

For the Classic Maya (*c.* AD 250–800), the exemplification of beauty was the Maize God and his female counterparts, the Corn Maidens. Almost androgynous in form, these deities had smooth skin, supple movement, and rounded and full flesh, evoking the properties of the maize plant and cob just before harvest (Taube 1985) and providing a set of criteria for aesthetic evaluation of the human body.[1] According to many Maya sources, past and present, human flesh was likened to maize dough. From this substance came the first humans, a literal case in which humans are what they eat (Christenson 2003, 194–5). A widespread term in Classic Maya texts, first identified in the 1980s, plays on this theme. It describes youths and especially young men as *ch'ok* or 'sprouts', among other labels, in allusion to the growth that leads eventually to fruition and productive harvest (Schele 1992, 141–2).

To date, such references have not been studied comprehensively (but see Stuart 2002). In its pattern of use, the *ch'ok* title deepens understandings of Maya objects, royal courts and architecture, and injects fresh materials for comparative research on adolescents in antiquity. This article attempts such a study by, first, reviewing the possibilities opened by comparative evidence of young men, second, addressing the evidence from historic Maya and their neighbours, and, third, presenting the textual settings for references to young men. Final sections explore the material vestiges of this basic category of Classic Maya society and the activities deemed appropriate for young men of royal or elite status.

Being and becoming a young male

Young men are at once useful and dynamic. They contribute valuable labour and exert muscular strength far beyond the capacity of younger children; their agility, too, only diminishes with later age (Bogin 1999, 207, 209; Worthman 1998, fig. 1). Yet adolescence presents many challenges as well. Marked by the acquisition of adult competences, this phase of the human career can be understood as a 'unique' passage involving 'simultaneous changes in physical maturation, psychological adjustment, and social relations' (Herdt & Leavitt 1998, 7).[2] As beings in flux, young men thus pose a predicament for adults, who require ways to facilitate the transition of male youths to adult roles and responsibilities.[3] The passage itself opens a potential zone of cleavage and conflict, especially at moments of societal stress (e.g. Comaroff & Comaroff 1999, 288–9; Graff 1995, xiii, 6–13). To become an adult is to acquire wider scope for action yet, at the same time, to bow

Cambridge Archaeological Journal 19:2, 149–78 © 2009 McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research
doi:10.1017/S0959774309000250 Received 19 Aug 2008; Accepted 11 Nov 2008; Revised 5 Jan 2009

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774309000250 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to duty and social expectation, some of it arduous, unpleasant or even painful (Ariss 1992). Cooperation cannot always be assumed, and a need exists for ways to assure culturally appropriate paths to adulthood.

Establishing a clear definition of 'young men' offers its own set of challenges. Definitions brush up against a larger, often argumentative and personalized literature on sexuality and the varied passages humans take through life (Brandes 1980; Durham 2000, 113; Gilmore 1990, 42–6; Butler 1990; 1993; Fausto-Sterling 2000, 22–9).[4] If there is any consensus, it is that what it *means* to be a man depends on what is taught by word and deed, and that the status and experience of being a male exists in relation to women and other kinds of men, some younger, others older or of the same general age (Gutmann 1997, 387). Thus, a 'young man', a liminal figure passing from one age-grade to the next, operates in necessary contrast to other categories of human being and to the expectations of what a young man should be and do (Gutmann 1997, 386–7; Kirkpatrick 1987, 385–8), as well as broader oppositions of the sort ably described by Bourdieu (2001, 7–11) for Kabyle society in Algeria. A category in flux, the state of being a 'young man' moulds itself to historical shifts and changing circumstances, flitting between ideal, exhortation and actual behaviour.

In some settings, 'youth' accords less with absolute age than a social determination of that age — whether someone proves dutiful and reliable; indeed, in some societies it might not represent a category of any great note (Bucholtz 2002, 526–7). There are two relevant distinctions here: (1) between an 'age-set' as defined in terms of itself, rather like the 'Class of 2008' at an American university; and an 'age-grade' understood in relation to groups coming before and after, through which individuals must pass;[5] and (2) between optional advance from one age-grade to another, often through achievement, and ascriptive transitions affecting all males, regardless of service (Moore 1979, 57).[6] As will be seen below, the Classic Maya evidence points strongly to an ascriptive age-grade for young men, as marked by *ch'ok* and other epithets, followed by an age-grade for adults that had 'zero-marking', i.e. no overt signage. The ultimate age-grade, 'grandfather' or 'ancestor', was signalled by the word *mam*, an age-grade that contained those who were not living in any conventional sense (Stuart 2007b). The distinction between different kinds of *ch'ok*, the very young and the adolescent or unmarried male, is not made obvious except by context, where the two are clearly separate.

Becoming a young male is often a complex matter. In some places, the shift is expressed by initiation, involving ceremonies of varying duress and duration, pain, seclusion, instruction. In Meyer Fortes's words, remarking on certain societies in sub-Saharan Africa, such rites recast a 'child in the domestic domain' into an 'actual or potential citizen in the political-jural domain' (Fortes 1962, 87; Schlegel & Barry 1980, 705; see also van Gennep 1960, for classic discussion). The actual nature of the transformation can be esoteric and localized. The evidence from some parts of New Guinea emphasizes the physical transmission of male essence through semen from older males, a mechanism by which men, who cannot bear children, 'create' other men (Ariss 1992, 144–5; Gutmann 1997, 402; Herdt 1981, 217–21; Wagner 1984, 152–4; see below for Classic Maya homosexuality). These initiations typically involve sacred music, revelations of cultic secrets, the polarization of genders, metaphoric invocations of hunting, and various stages of nurturance, ordeal and purification (Keesing 1998, 9–11)

Yet cross-cultural studies also suggest a number of common features. There is evidence that, in general, bonding and gender segregation play a more important role in male initiation ceremonies than in female rites but that, for both genders, there is a strong emphasis on the cohort, a group of people with a shared characteristic, in this case relatively well-defined parameters of age and gender (Schlegel & Barry 1980, 707, 711–12). Comparative claims, too, exist that societies in which males and females engage in different tasks are more likely to show increased aggression among young males (Korbin 2003, 438), or that, the more time children are segregated by sex, the greater the chance of competition and struggles for dominance (Whiting & Edwards 1988, 275–6). If there is one recurrent theme it is that, whatever the reality of actual physical strength — and it surely surpasses that of pre-adolescents — young men are widely understood to be vigorous but volatile in ways that need curbing, management and socialization (see Kirkpatrick 1987, 385–6, 388, for Marquesan notions of 'errant youth'). To clarify further: it is not important for this argument that such a property be seen as a hormonal or physical condition common to most young men (although this has yet to be proved or disproved, as suggested by a growing if still inconclusive literature: e.g. Anestis 2006; Newton-Fisher 2006; Rowe *et al.* 2004; van Bokhovena *et al.* 2006). Rather, such energies are widely thought to exist, and their presence and harnessing in Maya evidence should not be seen as an anomaly.

As a key point, cross-cultural studies indicate that buildings were often set aside for males and male youths, especially in parts of the Americas and insular

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774309000250 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Asia (e.g. Gregor 2005; Rodman 1985, 58, 63, 68). Most such structures have long since disappeared, but their clustering in certain regions invites comment, including the possible explanation that the regions shared historical connections and selective pressures. It is striking, for example, that in some of the Americas and insular Asia social identity was couched in metaphors that grouped people by 'building', perhaps at first literally to this or that structure, later in a more abstract expression for 'houses' that protected and sustained those inside, as joined by bonds of co-residence and food sharing (Gillespie 2000; Waterson 1995).

Yet the meaning and use of the men's buildings seemed to have varied greatly. The conditions that caused men's houses to appear, say, in Mesoamerica were unlikely to account fully for their later function in complex societies like those of the Aztec or Classic Maya. These need their own understanding. Some buildings were simply convenient places to gather, loaned from a member of the community; others could be regarded more abstractly, as 'wombs' for recreating males in adult form (Lattas 1990, 76–9). Among the Bororo of Brazil, men's houses lay at the centre of settlements, embodying the 'strength and virility' of a community, served by female 'associates' who satisfied the sexual needs of 'young unmarried initiated men' (Crocker 1969, 239–40). For the Igorot of the Philippines, the 'boy's sleeping house', the *dap-ay*, operated as 'a fighting unit of sorts and the training barracks for young warriors', as well as a work group under the control of adult males, a place of instruction and punishment for those who transgressed (Eggan & Scott 1963, 47–51). In southern China, comparable buildings housed unmarried male youths of extended families — there might be several in a community — along with men whose wives were pregnant and thus excused from intercourse (Spencer & Barrett 1948, 472–6).

In short, such houses were places where males reconfigure their relations to females, for a variety of reasons. The overt aim was to segregate the sexes, develop bonds within the families, provide energetic labour for family projects, house itinerants such as traders and, by the exclusion of perceived 'misfits', deny social participation to males who seemed unreliable or unproductive. One wonders whether, in accord with the cross-cultural observation by Whiting and Edwards (see above), the aim was precisely to foster both cooperation *and* aggression or competition. The operative term is 'homosocial', a useful descriptive for a social frame or physical space in which people of the same gender meet habitually and from which their gender counterparts are discouraged (see Sedgwick 1985, 1–2, for use of the term, without her emphasis, however, on social bonds rather than physical setting). In Ireland or Andalusia, this might be a pub or bar, the domain of males, or, in rural America, a room set aside, at least temporarily, for a women's quilting bee (see Brandes 1987, 364–6).

There are, in this diverse literature, several common themes: (1) the notion that young men require elective or compulsory segregation and special handling, and as cohorts in homosocial spaces and frames; (2) the linkage in certain parts of the world, at least historically, to actual physical structures; (3) cross-ties to older men who lead, punish, instruct; (4) concerns with sexuality of all sorts; and (5) harnessing of labour, containment or channeling of what is perceived to be youthful energy, in some cases for martial ends. Youth represent a transient phase of male experience for which consistent responses exist in many parts of the world and, at the same time, no small amount of variation. The value of comparative evidence is that it sketches a range of options and tendencies. But it is only in the particulars of a time and place that those possibilities apply.

Being a young male in Mesoamerica

A review of male youths in other parts of Mesoamerica — a region of intense interaction over millennia — provides useful comparisons with the Classic Maya, including a set of similar concerns that probably arose through historical connections as well as concrete differences in development. Not all evidence is solid. For example, the gathering of men and youths in buildings or spaces set aside for that purpose is well attested in the region (Joyce 2000a, 121, 139–40), although arguments for such practices in remote periods can only be speculative. One report on the ancient Zapotec assigns a central importance to 'men's houses' in part because of perceived commonalities between 'autonomous village societ[ies]', which use such houses as arenas for, and expressions of, competition over prestige and influence (Marcus & Flannery 1996, 78). The actual evidence is tenuous, consisting of 'non-residential architecture' used by a purely hypothetical group of 'full initiates … a sub-group of the men in the village' (Marcus & Flannery 1996, 87). The overt inspiration appears to be the anthropology of New Guinea, the 'type' region in some evolutionary archaeology for pre-'chiefdom' societies (Yoffee 2005, 27). That information is transposed to early settled life in Oaxaca, Mexico, yet with no mention of such structures for later periods. Presumably, according to such models, places for homosocial interaction were

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restricted to a societal type that existed before — and only before — the advent of pronounced and heritable hierarchy.

Yet it is precisely the later periods that provide the richest evidence, with increased likelihood that age-grades and homosocial buildings connected to age-grades were a common feature in Mesoamerican societies, at many levels of complexity. A key resource is the Florentine Codex compiled by Bernardino de Sahagún and his assistants in sixteenth-century central Mexico. This manuscript, an encyclopedic description of the Aztecs, an imperial group that extended into much of Mesoamerica, identifies houses in which the young were 'trained and reared' (Sahagún 1950–82, IV, 2, 49). The houses were known in part as *tēlpōchcalli*, 'house of youth' (Karttunen 1992, 221). Young males entered at 15, followed by three years of instruction, after which the men left to marry, sometimes as late as 20 or 22 years of age (Clavigero 1945, II, 199ff.). Dedicated to duty but also diversion, the *tēlpōchcalli* was a building where youths swept the house, tended fires and, at night, sang, danced and conversed (Sahagún 1950–82, IV, 2, 53–5). Sleeping together, youths were governed by a 'master of youths' or 'elder brother', a *tiāchcāuh*, who spoke for and punished his companions. During the day, youths appear to have been an important reservoir of labour, preparing mud for adobes, digging canals, operating as work parties of varying size. As with many Aztec practices, excessive drinking or other examples of poor comportment could be punished with surpassing severity, including execution (Sahagún 1950–82, IV, 2, 57). There is evidence for different kinds of houses for youths, some for those entering priestly service, with obligations to fast and let blood with maguey spines.[7] Among the Aztec, class strongly conditioned role, status, and life-path, whether of male or female (Kellogg 1995, 563).

In the early historic period, the Maya show ample interest in age-grades and places of a homosocial nature. The highlands of colonial Guatemala had specialized buildings where boys slept, issuing from time to time to run errands for priests (Orellana 1984, 205; Thompson 1958, 231). For the period just before and during the conquest, Bartolomé de las Casas and others report on similar 'long houses' where young men resided near temples (Miles 1965, 286). In general, this service seems to have been for a specified time, with the intent of introducing youth to civic duties and educating them under the supervision of older youth or priests (Miles 1965, 281, 283). The offspring of priests, rulers and scribes were targeted in particular, for training that would stand them in good stead when they inherited their father's offices and tasks. Such service and education took place over some years, in some cases delaying marriage.

Yet the buildings allotted to youths appear to have had varied functions, as barracks for guards or warriors, storerooms of sacred objects, arms and tribute, and lodgings for merchants or other visitors (Miles 1965, 278). In some examples the 'residences' were described as little more than doorways or alcoves where 'young lords eight years and older slept' while they received instruction in ritual and maintained the fires of temple braziers (Carmack 1981, 188–9). Such buildings could function as places where men of all ages retreated when enjoined to celibacy, especially when 'participating in religious activities' or, as among the colonial Ch'olti', when their wives became pregnant (Miles 1957, 769; Thompson 1938, 596). Young women also received training in a special 'seminary' (see below; Carmack 1981, 189); female segregation, while beyond the scope of this essay, needs its own study (see comparative evidence in Eggan & Scott 1963, 51–3; for the Aztec, Kellogg 1995, 566). The Maya lowlands record similar notices of homosocial buildings during the time of weak and erratic Spanish control over the region. One soldier, Nicolás de Valenzuela, mentions that the chief settlement of the Ch'olti' Maya, Sakbalam, had three main buildings, including a 'house of idols' and others of 'women' and 'men', all oriented around a central plaza (De Vos 1990, 131; see also Bernal 2008).

Las Casas deplored the supposed homosexual practices in such buildings, a feature that he interpreted as subversive to indigenous morality (Miles 1957, 763):

> They hold that sodomy is a great sin … and commonly the fathers despise it and prohibit it for their sons, but when they are instructed in religion they are ordered to sleep in the temples, where the older boys corrupt the children in this vice, and after they come out of there, they have bad habits and it is difficult to free them from this vice.

These claims are somewhat implausible. If the practice were as abhorred yet frequent as Las Casas claimed, there would be little incentive for the continued existence of such houses over the long-term, absent any move to reform. It is more likely that, if such practices took place, they accorded with a time of license and experimentation, of amity expressed physically or of more abstruct concepts involving the nature of emerging sexuality in males. Las Casas also referred to 'circumcision' in young men's houses, which the boys performed on each other, although the chance remains that this refers to penile blood-letting, well-documented among ancient and historic Maya

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peoples (Miles 1957, 764, 766, fn. 96; see Boon 1999 for comparative discussion).

The theme of homosexuality is repeated in descriptions of seventeenth-century practices of the Itzaj Maya, who flourished as an independent force in northern Guatemala until well into the colonial period. The main Itzaj settlement was said to contain *casas comunes nefandas apretiladas*, 'abominable public [collective] houses with railings around them', perhaps in reference to open structures that allowed breezes and light to enter over low walls of masonry or wattle-and-daub (Jones 1998, 333). One Spanish account insists that the walls were covered with symbols or hieroglyphs and 'sexual imagery' (Jones 1998, 334), and that the role of the youth was to prepare food for Maya priests and to have 'sexual relations' with them. Thus

> they had a walled-around large house of very decorous construction solely for the habitation of acquiescents, into which entered all of those who wished to have their sodomitic copulations, especially those who are very young, so that they could learn there, these ministers of the Demon wearing women's skirts and occupying themselves only in making bread for the priests and in their obscenities (Sigal 2000, 202, 290, fn. 90).

To the north, in Yucatan, Bishop Landa comments on houses for

> boys of marriageable age ...[;] in each town [they had] a large house, whitened with lime, open on all sides, where the young men came together for their amusements … [and where] they all slept together … until they married (Tozzer 1941, 124).[8]

Aside from sexual (mis)adventures, as perceived through Spanish filters, those amusements included games of chance, ballplay, and, as documented in 1543 among K'ekchi' of Verapaz, Guatemala, dances that drew on ingenious stage-craft, with false-doors, masks and make-up, burning of fake trees to the accompaniment of trumpets and percussion with shells and turtle carapaces (Estrada Monroy 1979, 172–3).

The age when youths first entered such houses — and the age-grade associated with them — may have been linked to notional puberty, although this is unclear in the sources. At the least there was a need for instruction in ritual and civic knowledge and obligations, and a pronounced sense that young males on the cusp of puberty needed special management. On the whole, departure from the age-grade was occasioned by marriage. According to Las Casas,

> some fathers are very anxious to marry their sons as rapidly as they can in order to separate them from such corruption [the sodomy mentioned above], although they marry youths against their will and by force; but they have the custom never to marry their sons until they are 30 or more years of age, because the old men say that in the times that boys engender and girls give birth, the end of the world is near (Miles 1957, 763).

However, the colonial Pokomam Maya probably determined age of marriage by class or social station, or could violate such mores through illicit, clandestine marriage (Miles 1957, 756, 762). This contrasts with what is known of parts of colonial Yucatan, where boys might marry at 10 or 12 and have carnal relations with women at an age earlier than Spanish custom (Chuchiak 2007, 89). A closer analogue exists with colonial Nahuatl-speaking groups of central Mexico, for whom young men about to marry were exhorted to leave behind the 'misbehavior of youth — drunkenness, laughter, and joking' (Sousa 2007, 35). Some Maya youth did not make it to this stage. They were, as supposedly among the Itzaj and Yukatek Maya of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a preferred item of sacrifice (Jones 1998, 332, who nonetheless questions some of these reports; also Tozzer 1941, 116, fn. 535).

Many of these elements — spaces or buildings set apart or intermittently targeted for use by men or young men; distinctions between the very young and adolescents; correlation with age-grades, with inevitable promotion to full adulthood; inculcation of specialized knowledge; cross-generational relations, perhaps sexual, perhaps not; frivolity and wildness, including sexual experimentation — can be found in ethnographic sources of more recent date, if enveloped in service to Roman Catholic sodalities. Most such practices and spaces provide a 'minimal public validation of manhood', but not all men pass through to levels of high authority (Moore 1979, 54, 57). Physical separation from other ages plays an important role; with successful completion of service, often lubricated by bouts of alcohol consumption, courtship and marriage increased in likelihood (Moore 1979, 58–9, 65, 70). In Chichicastengo, Guatemala, during the early 1930s, physical separation after conscription to public services could be intermittent, only one week out of four. This was often in uncomfortable conditions and under the supervision of an older man (Bunzel 1959, 108). Into the 1950s, such age-grades were also found among among non-Maya groups in Oaxaca, with a fair amount of consistency between villages (Weitlaner & Hoogshagen 1960, 184, 298–9).

Described in characteristic Mesoamerican fashion as 'seats' or 'benches' of particular duties to the community and higher, older authorities, the

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age-grades corresponded to well-defined civic and religious roles, association with particular buildings, and links between various age-grades; some young males, too, were elected to positions of authority over their cohort. There were usually two sets of youth, those just emerging from childhood, judged ready for limited service, and an older set, not yet married, with the right to dance and sing in public celebrations along with more onerous duties. Marriage was usually perceived as the validation of adult status, and those males who do not marry were thought, among Tzeltal Maya, to be 'shirking adult responsibility' and displaying 'lack of independence' (Stross 1974, 330). The placement and seating of the age-grades was worked out to a fine degree, if in flux during the 1950s when such ethnographies were written (Weitlaner & Hoogshagen 1960, 188, 194, fig. 3). To be a 'youth' was, ideally, to form part of a larger cohort of finite duration but intense interaction and to obey those of distinction among themselves and those at higher levels of age and authority. Punishments and fine, some levied by the cohort itself, awaited those who proved too disobedient. Psychological studies in Highland Guatemala reinforce the crucial role of such lateral, age-grade socialization (Rogoff 1981, 19, 30). Nonetheless, skills of varying sorts were transmitted effectively from older to younger generations without formally demarcated instruction or self-conscious deliberations about 'parenting' (Rogoff 1981, 33–4).[9] This was usually done by permitting youth to work alongside adults in gradual escalation of responsibility ('legitimate peripheral participation': Lave & Wenger 1991), with the proviso that, among the Classic Maya, the esoteric content of literacy and theology almost certainly required focused, formal teaching, along with imitations of adult behaviour while doing page service at royal courts (see below).

For Mam Maya of the 1970s and 1980s, first actual service by young males did not tend to begin until the age of 19 (Watanabe 1992, 97, 111–12). The aim was to establish a man in society and delimit a time of more-or-less licit drinking and carousing with age-mates of the same gender, with some kinds of service involving the possibility of opting 'out' — i.e. at some point relative age was displaced by other criteria having to do with disposition or ability (Watanabe 1992, 112, 113, fig. 7). Farther west, among the Tzotzil, the status of being a youth, *kerem*, a term attested in the hieroglyphs (see below), ended in the 1950s between 15 and 20, when marriage took place (Guiteras-Holmes 1961, 70, 71). Crucial to archaeologists, the physical setting of action is sometimes neglected by ethnographers, with one notable exception, a description of 'bachelor houses' or *posadas* in Guatemala (Adams 1952) or 'gangs' around Lake Atitlan (Paul & Paul 1952, 187). A boy enters such a *posada* between about 12 and 15, sleeping there but exiting during the day and remaining until marriage between 18 and 30. Membership was fairly constant when the *posadas* were documented in the early 1950s, and the home was usually loaned by an elderly widower — note the shared gender (Adams 1952, 590).

What is missing in these references is an historical treatment that charts such groups and settings over time, a matter that has not yet been probed in part because of patchy evidence. But it seems inescapable that, from the early Colonial period on, some highland Maya dealt with young men — transitioning them to productive adulthood and harnessing or mitigating what were regarded as the energies of youth — by physical separation, allowances for controlled transgression, and, above all, inculcation with the habits of service, including dances, a store of civic or religious knowledge, and judicious obedience to older males. Close attention to youth in Yucatan from the vantage of production and consumption makes it clear, too, why youth of all classes merited special treatment: this is the age (*c.* 15) when, as agriculturalists, young men begin to produce more than they consume (Kramer 2005, 34, fig. 2.1). For elites, where 'production' could involve work parties, war and more esoteric service, that transition was, it seems, crucial to the passage of juveniles to adult status.

Young men among the Classic Maya

Available studies on Maya youth, including a pioneering collection of essays on the subject (Ardren & Hutson 2006), tend to emphasize children as a group, not young men *per se*. For the Classic Maya, at least in the elite register of their imagery and inscriptions, older juveniles or adolescents appear to have been of greater interest than newborns or juveniles, in part because they were more fully operative as 'social' beings and had survived the many dangers of young age. The most revealing label is *ch'ok*, spelled in a variety of ways (Fig. 1; Ringle 1988, 12–4; Stuart 1987, 46). It was first isolated when formulaic expressions began to be detected in Classic Maya pottery texts (Coe 1973, 35–6). A common version combines two glyphic syllables, **ch'o-ko**, producing *ch'ok*, but there is also a rare, alternate form showing a stylized face with two, ringed eyes in frontal pose (Fig. 1f; Grube & Stuart 1987, 7–8, fig. 8). A third, unique example replaces the **ch'o** syllable with a human face, smoking torch where its eye should be (Fig. 1d). The plural form, which seldom appears, takes a *-taak* suffix,

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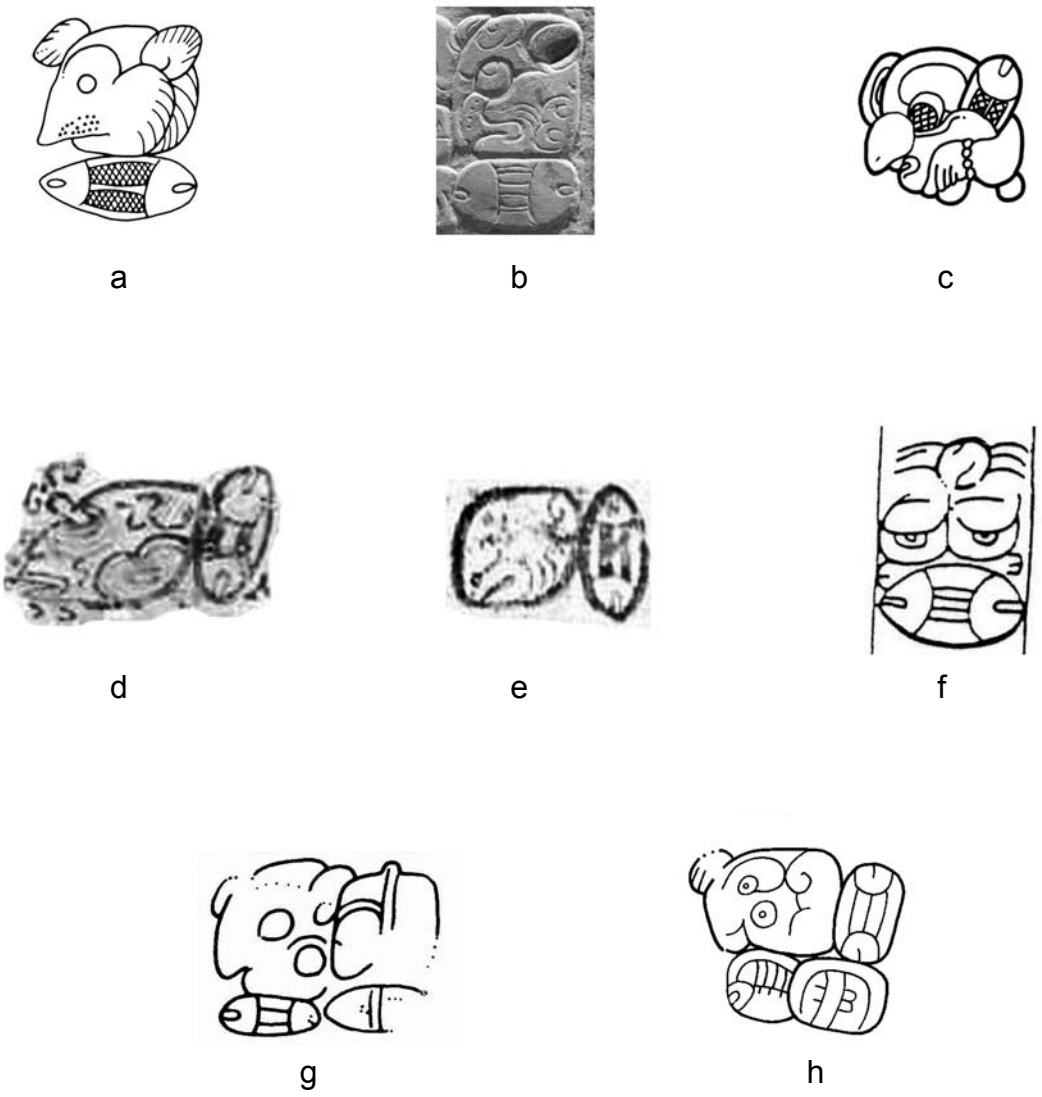


Figure 1. *(above) The* ch'ok *titles (a) Yaxchilan Lintel 18:B2 (drawing by I. Graham, copyright the President and Fellows of Harvard University); (b) Palenque Temple XII panel:A7 (photograph by S. Houston); (c) Copán, bench from 10K-4 group:G1(after drawing by B. Fash); (d) Late Classic vessel (K5452); (e) Dresden Codex 20b; (f) Caracol incised bone (drawing by N. Grube); (g) Naranjo Stela 18:G6 (drawing by I. Graham, copyright the President and Fellows of Harvard University); and (h) Oxkintok Ballcourt Ring 1:pR1 (after drawing by J.M. García Campillo).*

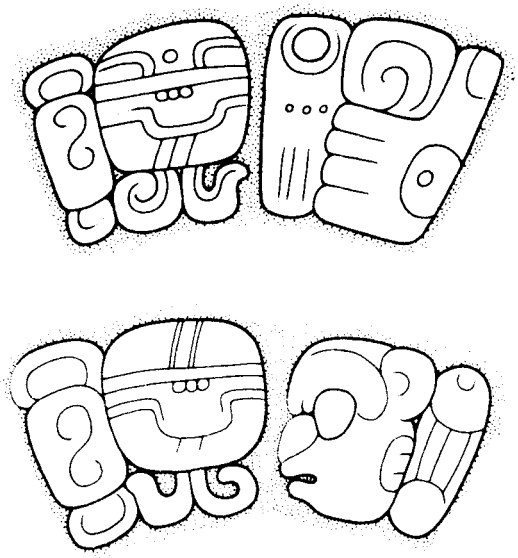


Figure 2. *(right) Young male as first-born of female, Tonina Monument 69:E1-F1 (top), O1-P1 (bottom) (drawing by I. Graham, copyright the President and Fellows of Harvard University).*

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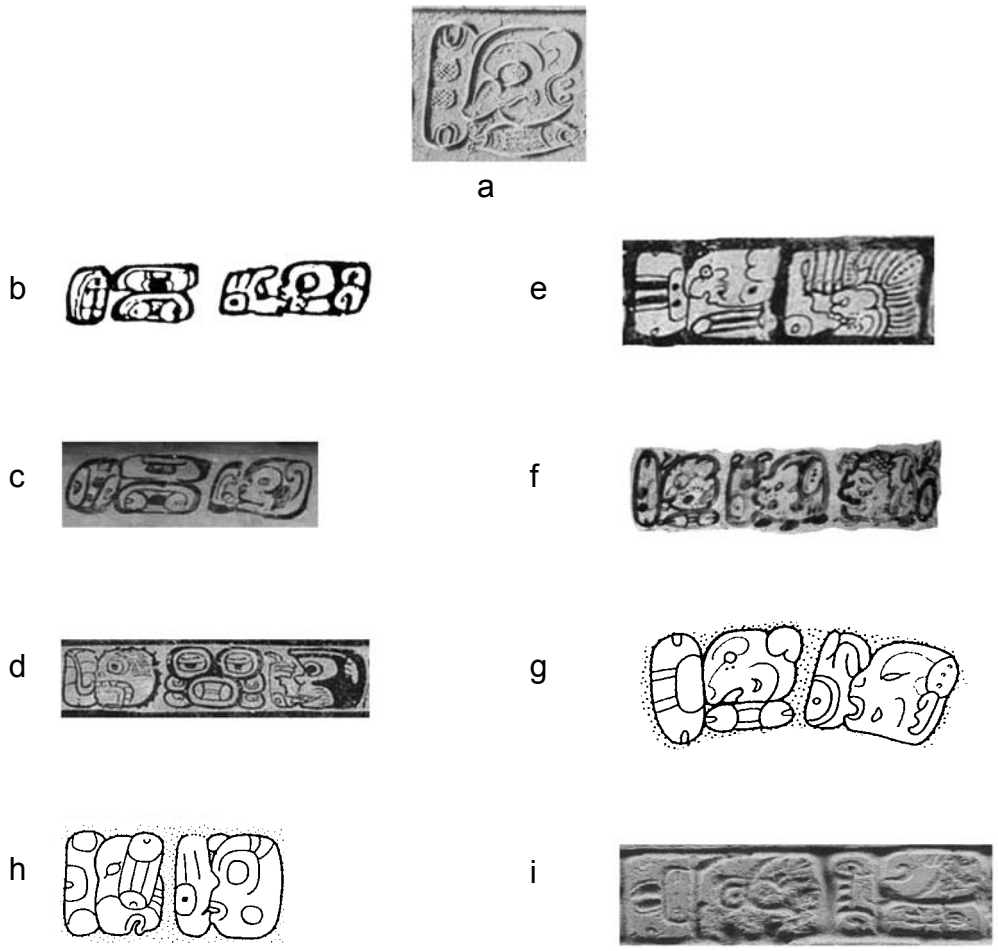


Figure 3. Chak ch'ok *on Maya vessels and monuments: (a) Palenque Creation Tablet:M1 (photograph by S. Houston); (b) Tikal MT 16 (drawing by V. Greene); (c) Late Classic vessel (K5042); (d) Late Classic vessel (K4976); (e) Late Classic vessel (K2796); (f) Late Classic vessel (photographer unknown); (g) Topoxte mirror back:G1-H1 (drawing by S. Teufel); (h) Hecelchakan museum, jamb:A5-B5 (drawing by N. Grube); and (i) Terminal Classic vase (Grube & Gaida 2006, abb. 33.1).*

rendered hieroglyphically as **TAAK**, **TAAK-ki** or **ta-ki** (Fig. 1g, h; Lacadena García-Gallo 1992, 183–4; Stuart 2004; 2007a, 120, for decipherment). A mortuary text from Tonina of a royal youth refers to him alternately as a *ch'ok* and, as David Stuart has pointed out to me, as a **ba-AL**, *ba-'al*, 'the first-born child of woman', suggesting that his importance came from a particular royal consort rather than status as the first-born of a king (Fig. 2).

It has been clear since the late 1980s that the *ch'ok* means 'youth'. This accords with words in Ch'olan languages for 'young, immature thing', not yet sexually mature but soon capable of reproduction, often in reference to plants (Kaufman & Norman 1984, 119; Kaufman 2003, 79). A *chocnal* [*ch'oknal*] is, in the colonial language Ch'olti' — a clear descendant of the language used in most of the Maya inscriptions — an unripe ear of corn, just before shucking (Ringle n.d.; the spelling has been rectified from a phonologically unreliable source; see also, for related Chontal Maya, *ch'oc bu'u*, 'unripe bean': Keller & Luciano 1997, 105). Other Mayan languages, such as Pokomchi, use different words for 'youth' but establish comparable linkages between descendants and sprouts or shoots, as well as a connection to those who are celibate or not yet married (Feldman 2004, 168; Miles 1957, 762, table 7).[10] Ch'olti' applies *ch'ok* to girls as well, *ixchoc ixic* [*ix-ch'ok ixik*], 'maid', *donsella* in Spanish, probably in the sense of 'virgin' or 'unmarried' rather than its secondary meaning of 'servant.' Ch'olti' records *chac-choc ixic* [*chak ch'ok ixik*] for 'maid', with *chak* for 'great', *ixik* for 'female'; another Ch'olan language, Chontal,

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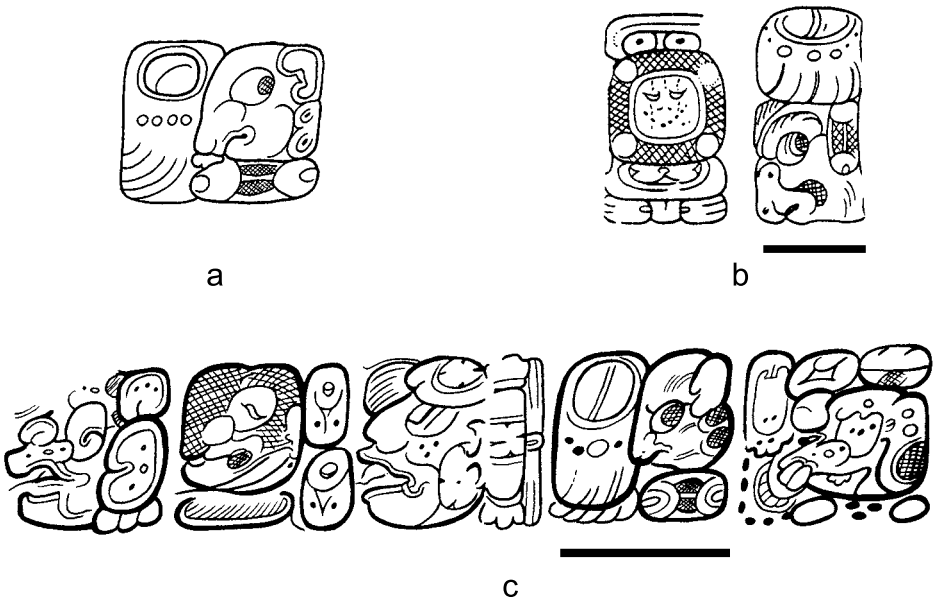


Figure 4. *'Head youth,* baah ch'ok *(a) Jonuta panel:pA4 (drawing by D. Stuart); (b) Palenque Temple XIX pier:D3-D4 (Stuart 2005, fig. 29c); and (c) Temple XXI platform: (Stuart 2005, fig. 29d).*

spoken in the area of lowland Tabasco, Mexico, has *chäcch'oc*, 'baby, infant' (Keller & Luciano 1997, 79; also Grube 2006, 81). In its most common usage, *chak* means 'red', which Mayan languages extended to convey the idea of intensification or enlargement. A frequent visitor on the rim-bands of drinking vessels, *chak ch'ok* is found in many glyphic texts, although monumental examples are mostly known from northern Campeche, Mexico (Fig. 3h). Usage in recent Mayan languages appears to highlight another form of intensification, of marked youth or infancy, and not the connotation of 'great' in earlier, hieroglyphic references.

A second variant of *ch'ok* is one with a *baah* prefix, spelled **BAAH** or **ba** (Fig. 4). The prefix carries the meaning of 'head, first', less as ordinal ranking — 'first, second, third' — than as a way of distinguishing one figure from others in that class (Houston *et al.* 2006, 62, fig. 2.5). Thus, *baah ch'ok* can be translated as 'head, first youth'. The fullest use of this title is in the site Palenque, Mexico, where, in the case of a figure known as *U pakal K'inich*, 'Shield of the Sun God', it was applied to the chief heir of a sitting ruler (Fig. 4b,c; Martin & Grube 2008, 174; Stuart 2005, 155). A reference on a fragmentary Late Classic panel coming from the site of Jonuta, Tabasco, associates a figure with the same title — although clearly not the same Palenque lord — with the payment (*tojil*) of tribute (*ikaatz*, Fig. 4a, a term deciphered by Karl Taube in 1987).

In addition, *ch'ok* can be used as an adjective, 'young', rather than a base noun, 'youth' (Fig. 5). Many of these references pertain to examples of exalted titles that are qualified for young men by the *ch'ok*. At Tonina, Chiapas, an exalted title meaning 'top of the earth', *bakab*, is often prefixed by 'young' (Fig. 5a,b; Houston *et al.* 2006, 62–4). But the more common practice, especially in sites near the Usumacinta and Pasión rivers, is to characterize a young male as the 'young' lord of a particular kingdom (Fig. 5f). The assumption, given the practice at Palenque (above), is that these youths were the presumptive heirs to dynasties, although, to a notable extent, all such youths at Piedras Negras, another at Dos Pilas, and two attested at Aguateca, cannot be shown to have ascended the throne — quite to the contrary, as in most instances they appear to have fallen out of the dynastic sequence. The reference at Aguateca is illuminating in other respects: it identifies the 'youth lord' as an *itz'aat* or 'wise person', a term, as shown by Stuart, often connected to scribes (Stuart 1989), a rare confirmation that royal males were characterized explicitly as literates.

There are other relevant terms for 'youths' in Mayan writing. Long accepted is a sign reading **XIB**, *xib*, for 'male youth' (Fig. 6, Barthel 1953, 92; Kaufman 2003, 138–40; Kelley 1976, 193). Somewhat rare in Classic inscriptions, it occurs in a description of a god, *Chak xib chahk*, a variant of the Rain God (Fig. 6e), and in a title for what can only be described as a Maya gladiator (Fig. 6c; K7749). Labelled *Aj chak xib*, 'he, the great youth', an aggressor gouges out the eye of another

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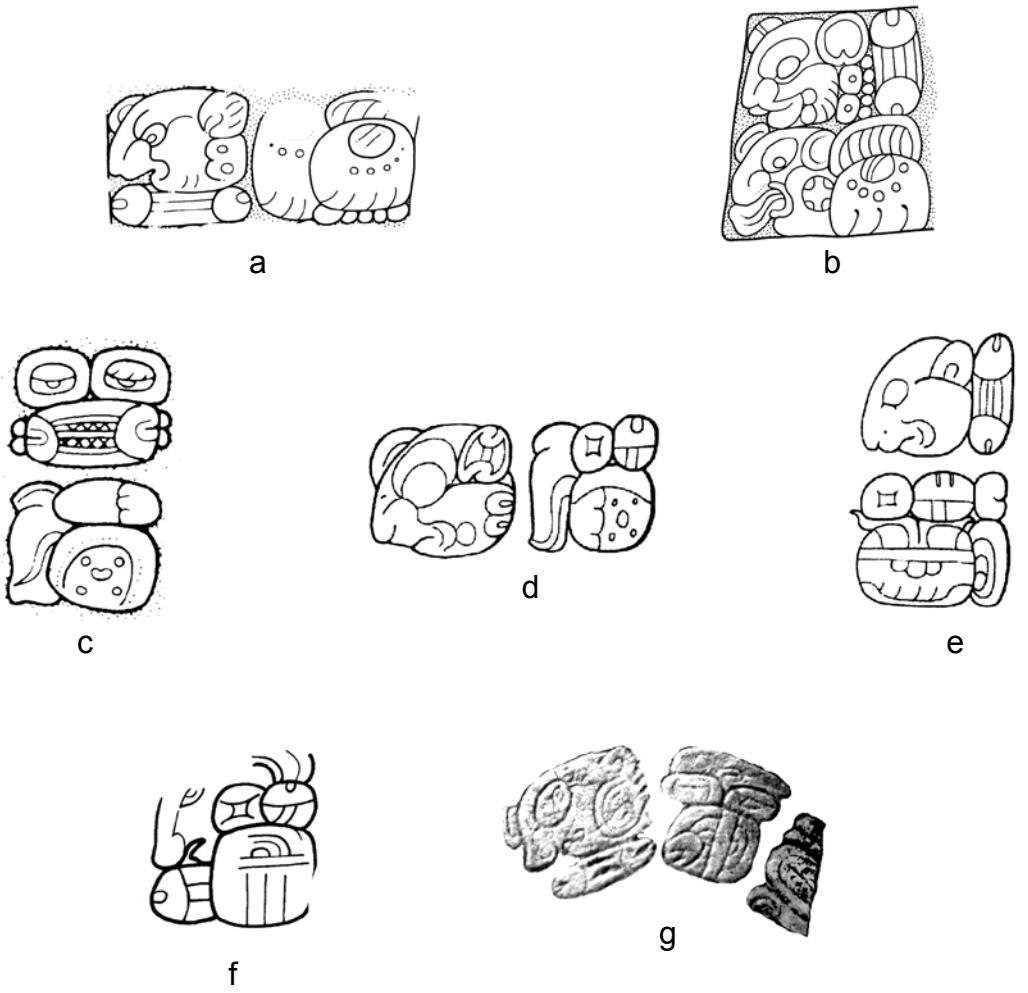


Figure 5. *(above)* Ch'ok *as an adjective: (a) Tonina Monument 142:Ap4-Bp4 (drawing by I. Graham, copyright the President and Fellows of Harvard University); (b) Tonina Monument 164:F1-F2 (drawing by I. Graham, copyright the President and Fellows of Harvard University); (c) Piedras Negras Panel 2:K'3-K'4 (drawing by D. Stuart); (d) Piedras Negras Panel 3: captions (drawing by A. Safronov): (e) Piedras Negras Panel 3:captions (drawing by A. Safronov); (f) Aguateca incised bone, Structure M8-4:A3 (drawing by M. Eberl); and (g) Aguateca incised shell, pD1-pE4 (photograph by T. Inomata).*

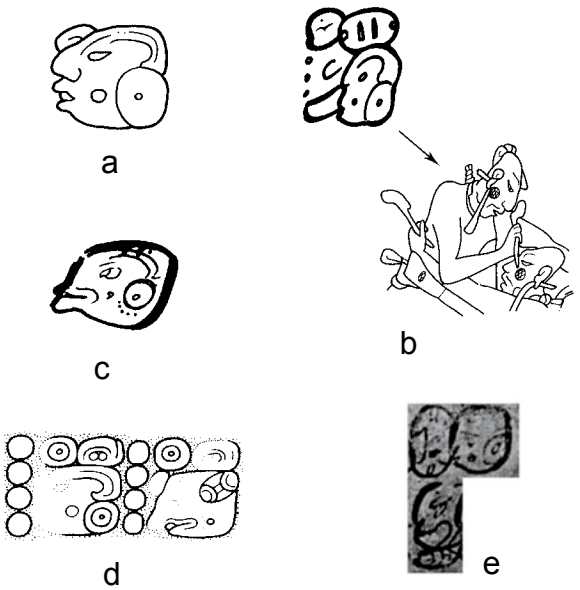


Figure 6. *(left)* Xib *as male youth: (a) Late Classic panel (after Mayer 1995, fig. 148); (b) Dresden Codex, 29c; (c) Late Classic alabaster vessel (K7749); (d) Naranjo Stela 35:C6-D6 (drawing by I. Graham, copyright the President and Fellows of Harvard University); (e) Late Classic plate (photograph by J. Kerr).*

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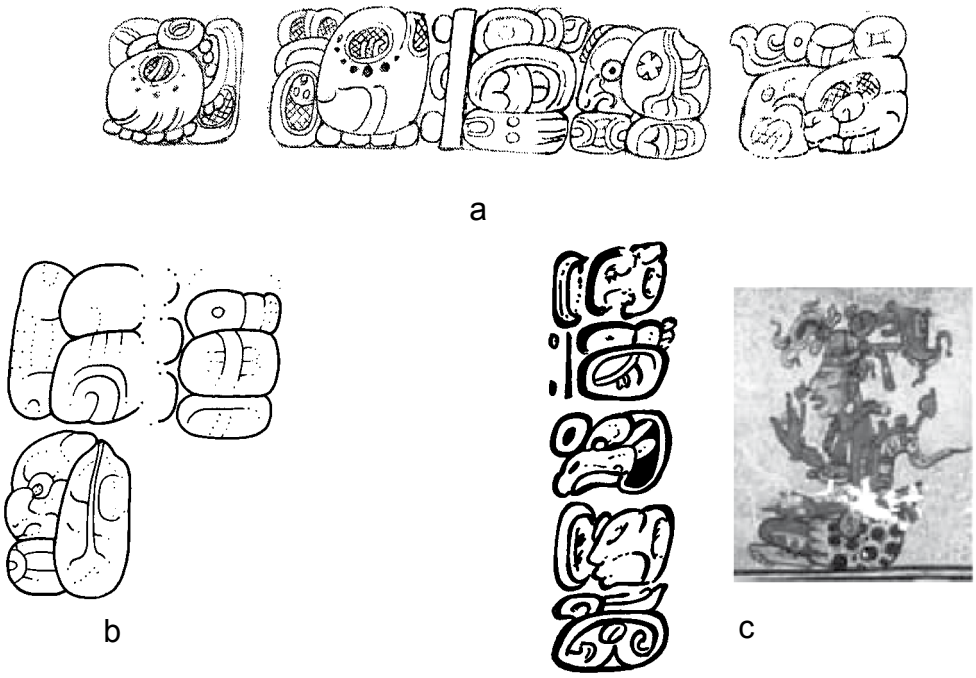


Figure 7. *The* tikil *numeral classifier with youths (a) La Corona Panel 1:H8-L1 (drawing by D. Stuart); (b) Palenque Tablet of the Sun:M1-M2 (drawing by S. Houston); and (c) Late Classic vessel (K8393).*

male with what appears to be a polished and sharpened bone. A more frequent glyph is **keleem**, spelled as **KELEEM**, **ke-le-ma** or **KELEEM-ma** (Fig. 3b–h, 9b; MacLeod & Reents-Budet 1994, fn. 19, a reading by Nikolai Grube). It, too, refers to males, with the added connotation in Yukatek Maya of 'strength', an evident attribute of youth (Kaufman 2003, 138). On one Late Classic vessel from the area of Río Azul, Guatemala, a courtier exclaims *ts'akbaj *keleem* [**ts'a-ka-ba-ja ke-le-*ma**], perhaps 'the youths arrange themselves'. In a scene nearby, four young men sit behind the throne of a ruler.

A more restricted term is *tikil*, attested as an element used in enumeration ('numeral classifier') in Ch'ol: *-tikil*, 'to count animated objects' (Schumann 1973, 31) or *-tiquil*, 'numeral suffix to count persons' (Aulie *et al.* 1999, 117). It is uncommon in the texts, with only a few occurrences (Fig. 7; Stuart 2007a, 119, for decipherment). A panel from La Corona, Guatemala, now under study by David Stuart, recounts a narrative that refers to the trip of a local heir, known as the 'older brother person youth' (*suku-winik ch'ok*), to the dynastic seat of Calakmul (Fig. 7a). Eighteen days later an event of uncertain nature takes place at Calakmul, evidently, involving *7 tikil ch'oktaak*, the '7 [numbered] youths', identified overtly as the sons (*yunen*) of the ruler of Calakmul. The lord from La Corona was already 28 years of age, hinting that, within limits, the *ch'ok* title either alluded to a fraternal relation among royal offspring ('oldest among the youths') or to unmarried status, a pattern already seen in other appearances of the *ch'ok* title. Another use of *tikil* appears on the tablet of the Temple of the Sun at Palenque, where three(?) youths 'fall down' (*jubuyi ?3 tikil ch'oktaak*), all of whom are likely to be the sons of the ruler of Palenque, in this case Pakal the Great, renovator of the local dynasty (Fig. 7b). Stuart (2006) proposes that the reference may relate to a 'pole dance' common in Mesoamerica, past and present, in which participants descend and spin from ropes attached to a central pole or *yookte'*. Such a scene appears on a vessel from the final years of the Late Classic period, in which a person dressed as an eagle sits atop a pole, attached by ropes to other supports and participants (K2356; Houston *et al.* 2006, fig. 1.49, original observation by Karl Taube).[11] In an influential paper, Linda Schele (1984, 288–95) demonstrated that the *yookte'* (*yoc te* in her spelling) was linked to rites involving young boys, including an eventual king who was then only six years of age. The *yokte'*, an object, could be generalized by means of a grammatical suffix to signify an office or status, *yokte'l*. The young lord, Kan Balam, was the

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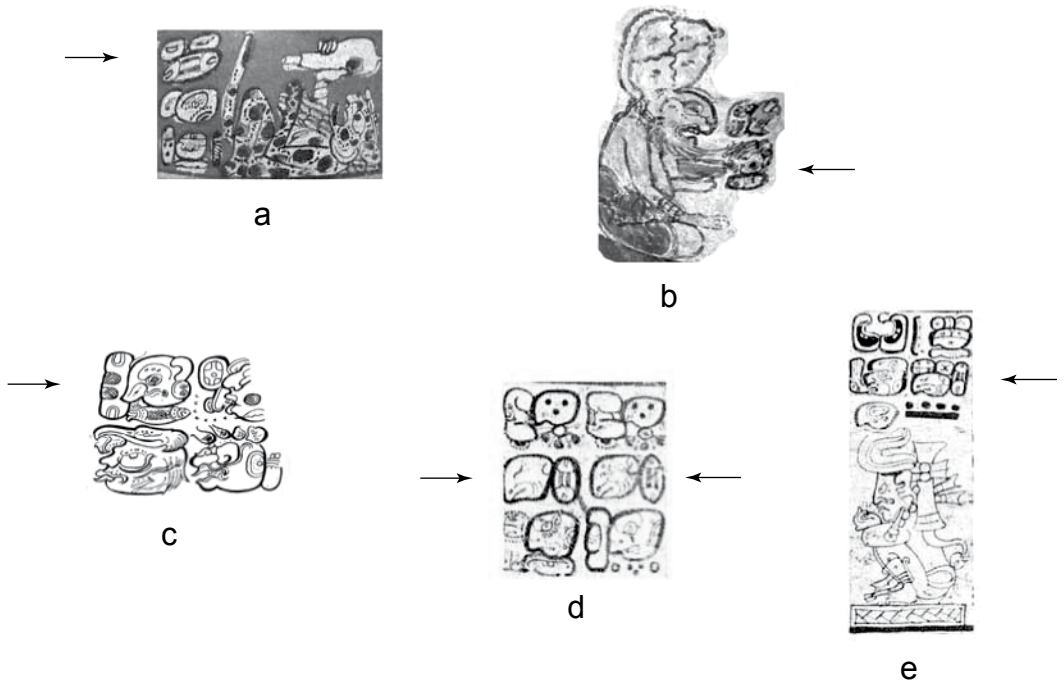


Figure 8. *Deities as young males: (a) Late Classic vessel (photograph by M. Zender); (b) Late Classic vessel (photographer unknown); (c) Palenque Creation Tablet:M1-N2 (drawing by M. Robertson); (d) Dresden Codex, 20b; and (e) Dresden Codex 20b.*

fifth to have received this status since the time of a distant relation over 140 years before.

There may be a supernatural resonance to the numbers, especially to '7'. Several deities, from the Sun God to a supernatural connected to ballplay, take this number as a prefix (Houston *et al.* 2006, fig. 8.24). More explicitly, one vessel from the early years of the Late Classic period (Fig. 7c; K8393) shows a deity connected to accounting and numbering who is also labelled as a *7 tikil*…, much like the youths at Calakmul. Yet others refer to the spouse of a mythic, voluptuous beauty as 7 *xib*, '7 youth(s)' (K1182, 2794, 8927). It may be that the notion of '7 youths' conflates historical personages with supernatural ones. The use of '7' with the *xib* head in the local title of Oxkintok, Yucatan, needs explanation, too, in that the concept of 7 youths may have applied to that site (see García Campillo 1992, 194–7, for the detection and discussion of this emblem).

The certainty that the Classic Maya understood some deities to be 'young males' as well is born out by a variety of texts and images. As already mentioned, aspects of the Rain god could be *xib*, and several *wahy* or fantastic 'co-essences' of elite souls are labelled as *ch'ok* (Fig. 8a). Anthropomorphic rabbits and tapir, also *ch'ok*, are depicted both as members of courts — in one instance as participants in enemas of *pulque* or maguey alcohol, *chih* in the texts (Fig. 8b). Even a few of the major deities, including the death god and a stately personage associated with court scenes, are labelled as *ch'ok* or *keleem* in the Dresden Codex from *c.* AD 1250 (Fig. 8d,e). That the gods are said to be in the act of 'descent', *emi*, suggests some understanding of their origin, perhaps a celestial one. A final set are the supernatural youths, usually in sets of four, that appear with particular frequency in the texts of Copán, Honduras, where they served as to 'watchers', *koknoom*, of the city (Bernal 2008; reading of 'watcher [guardian]' from David Stuart). These multiples, seemingly a pivotal attribute of supernatural youth, occur at sites like Naranjo, Guatemala, on Stela 35, C6-D6 — namely, of young males who act in concert, alluding to the grouped properties of youth. At the same site, the ritual account of the setting of stones at the beginning of a new year may also have involved multiples of gods, 'youths' or *ch'oktaak*, but whether of a supernatural nature is unclear (Stuart 2004). Finally, a very few gods were described as newborns. A deity at Palenque was described as a *unen*, 'baby', version of a particular deity, along with the sprawling, supine posture appropriate to babes (Stuart 2005, 141; also Martin 2002). This expression, applied in a few areas to humans in the context of

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Figure 9. *Early* ch'ok *and* keleem *titles: (a) Uaxactun murals, Str. B-XIII, figures with captions (photographs by Carnegie Institution of Washington, copyright the President and Fellows of Harvard University, 58-34-20/64860) and (b) owner of drinking vessel,* yuk'ib *(K5197).*

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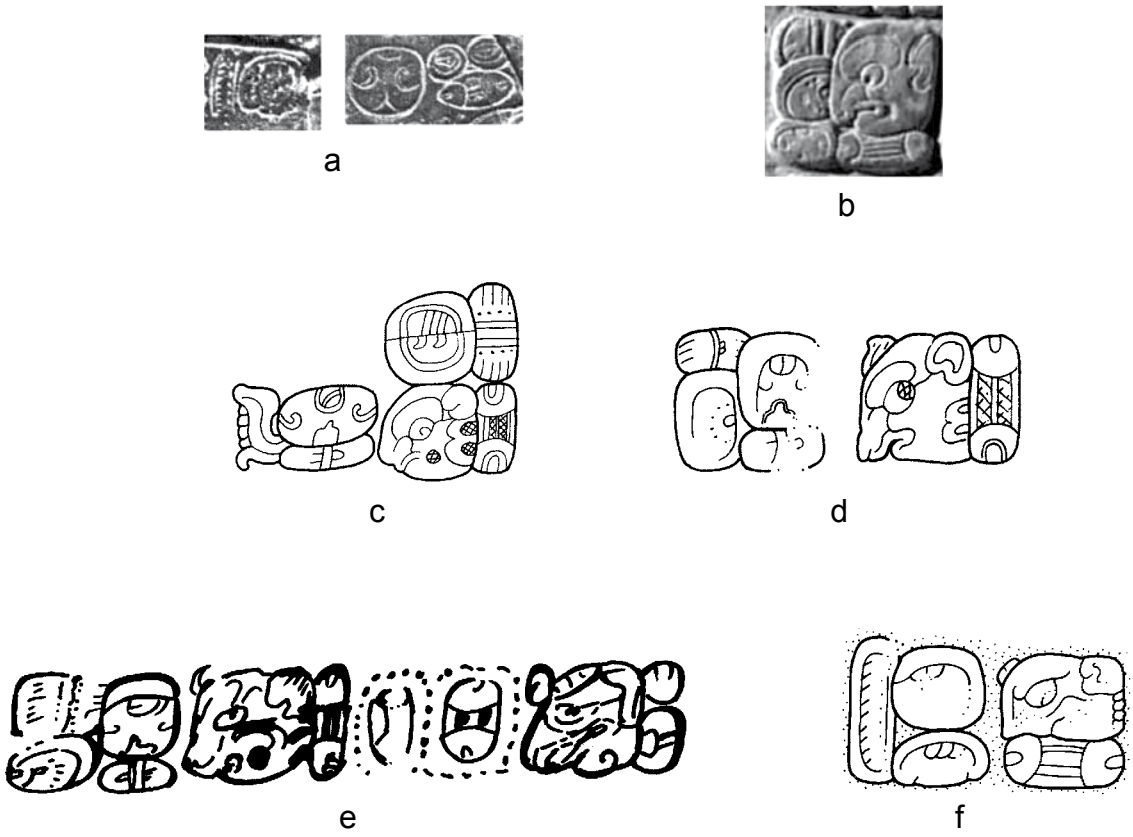


Figure 10. *Brothers as youths: (a) Mirror back (Berjonneau & Sonnery 1985, pl. 367); (b) La Corona Panel 1:G3 (photograph by D. Stuart); (c) La Corona-area panel:pB5-pB6 (drawing by S. Houston); (d) Palenque Palace Tablet: L7-K8 (drawing by S. Houston); (e) Late Classic vessel, Buenavista del Cayo (after drawing by J. Taschek); and (f) Late Classic moulded vessel:A6-B6 (K8732).*

relations with parents (e.g. K635), points to an age set prior to adolescence.

The chronology and distribution of terms for 'youth' is highly variable. The logographic version of *ch'ok*, the sign with two eyes, is the first to appear, at the beginning of the murals dating to *c.* AD 250–300 from Uaxactun, Guatemala (Fig. 9). At least two figures are identified by the title, both slightly grotesque, with extremes of difference in height, if of high rank: the dwarfish figure in the centre wears a royal diadem. Not long after, the owner of a stone vessel is described as *Aj ch'ok kan*, 'He, the young snake' (Miller & Martin 2004, pl. 33). By the Late Classic period, this spelling of *ch'ok* may have conveyed a certain archaic flavour. A full-figure example, with glyphs in place of a head, floats on the background of Naranjo Stela 43, from the late sixth century AD, holding an incense bag. The figure represents the animated name of Tikal lord Chak Tok Ich'aak II, a possible ancestor of the Naranjo ruler who dedicated the stela (Martin & Grube 2008, 37). It is uncertain why Chak Tok Ich'aak is identified as a 'youth' on this monument — perhaps because he acceded as a youth (Simon Martin pers. comm. 2008) — but what does seem clear is that the *ch'ok* tends in other contexts, such as inscriptions from Piedras Negras, Guatemala, and Palenque, Mexico, to be situational: a text or image specifies the notional age-status of the person at that time, whatever elevated age they might eventually reach. On Piedras Negras Stela 8:D4, Ruler 3 is said to be a *ch'ok* at the time of his marriage to a foreign princess, although it is known that he died at 65 years of age. Several such references are superfluous — a lord said to be a *ch'ok* at birth, as on a panel from El Cayo, Mexico, and another in the collection of Dumbarton Oaks.

The fact that lords can be both *ch'ok* and fathers, as on El Cayo Altar 1, and over 20 years of age, as was true for Ruler 3 at his nuptials, indicates two features: (1) that, at times, the title does not relate explicitly to sexual or married status, in that someone could be a

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newborn or a father; and (2) that it can apply to lords who have passed into their second 20-year span of life (i.e. 20–40 years of age), an important marker of age for Maya elites, who described life-spans in terms of numbered *k'atun* or twenty-year periods. Categorically, however, there is no clear evidence that the term could apply to anyone *beyond their twenties*. Where firm historical controls exist, the latitude for use of the title is a matter of a few years into the third decade, and those exceptions are quite rare.[12] In some places, the term might have had the meaning of 'unmarried' or 'not fully grown' (in a social sense), but, after a certain age, it no longer applied to men or women.

The contingent and diverse meanings of *ch'ok* are exemplified at Palenque. David Stuart rightly points out that the focus on various youths and relations between them reflects the fraternal succession that was a particular preoccupation of that dynasty (Stuart 2005, 151–4). Several possible heirs, with the reigning king much concerned with sorting out their relative order, are sometimes seen in retroactive images that record such decisions (Stuart 2005, fig. 118) — the reality that these images were made later raises questions as to how orderly this process was in fact. Implying mechanisms of regency, very young rulers, as at Palenque, Tonina, Naranjo (Guatemala), may have triggered scuffles at court. At Naranjo, this occasioned unusual prominence for the mother, a princess from another dynasty, and one king of Tonina came to the throne at two years of age, probably dying before he reached twenty (Martin & Grube 2008, 75–7, 162, 183, 186). The intrusive demands of brothers may account for the presence at some sites of overt markings of birth order, where 'older brother-person-youth' (**sa-ku-WINIK-ch'o-ko**) achieve special prominence (Fig. 10, see Stuart 1997, for detection of fraternal expressions).

A singular point about the *ch'ok* title is that it appears to describe a female in only two examples. The first involves the mother of a ruler of Palenque, K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb (Stuart 2005, 152, fig. 117). The text with this reference, the so-called 'Tablet of the Slaves', states that the woman and her husband are 'youths'. Yet the image below the inscription presents a view of both parents with their son in an impossible anachronism: K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb, is shown at accession, long after his father's death. Clearly, the ruler wished to emphasize the youth of his parents at his birth, perhaps to emphasize his own difficult path to the throne as the offspring of a younger son in the royal line. Another reference, again on Piedras Negras Stela 8, is to the mother of Ruler 4 as a *ch'ok*. The larger problem is why Maya texts pay so little attention to the age status of females, even at those sites where references to women are relatively abundant. To state the obvious, male youths received textual recognition because, as a group, they were important to those commissioning inscriptions and imagery. Or, to put it more subtly, as an age-grade, male youths constituted a key element in society; as a group, elite females did not, at least not in any way registered formally in glyphic texts.

Guardianship

A common statement of relationship in the glyphs is that between a lord and a war captive, a reference detected by Proskouriakoff in her pioneering explorations of Classic Maya history (e.g. Proskouriakoff 1963, 152; 1993, 102). The varying forms of this statement are complex, with patchwork distribution: common at sites like Yaxchilan, the expression seldom appears at others, for reasons that remain obscure. The statement, almost exclusively Late Classic in occurrence, consists of a prefixed pronoun (*u*) and a snake sign, read *kan* or *chan*, alternating towards the end of the Classic period with homophones or near-homophones, as communicated by glyphs for 'sky' (*kan*, *chan*) and the number 'four' (*kan*, *chan*) (Houston 1984). A final sign is sometimes a clear **nu** syllable or another glyph that remains poorly understood. The intended meaning may be related to a term in a reconstructed ancestral language, Common Ch'olan: *kanan, 'care', in the sense of vigilant or dutiful oversight (Kaufman & Norman 1984, 122; see also Lacadena & Wichmann 2004, 140–41).[13] Whatever the precise translation of the term, a matter not yet settled, this care usually involved attention to important captives, some of whom might have been kept at royal courts as hostages or prestigious human acquisitions.

A few such references to 'care' or 'guardianship' do not appear to be martial, however, and suggest Classic parallels to the Aztec 'master of youths', an adult, perhaps not of much greater age, who guides young men or women through maturation. A noblewoman is described on one vessel as the 'guardian' or 'warden' of a youth (Fig. 11a), and this relation is further noted on a vessel excavated in a palace structure, M7-35, at Aguateca, Guatemala (Fig. 11c,d). A scene of courtly reception, the image on the vessel highlights a ruler on his throne and just to viewer's right, in a position linked to service and subordination, stands a figure, jauntily smoking a thin cigar. The glyphs above likely refer to him as the holder of a courtly title, *Aj k'uhuun*, and as the 'guardian of the youth', perhaps over the figures seated before the king. An even more explicit example comes

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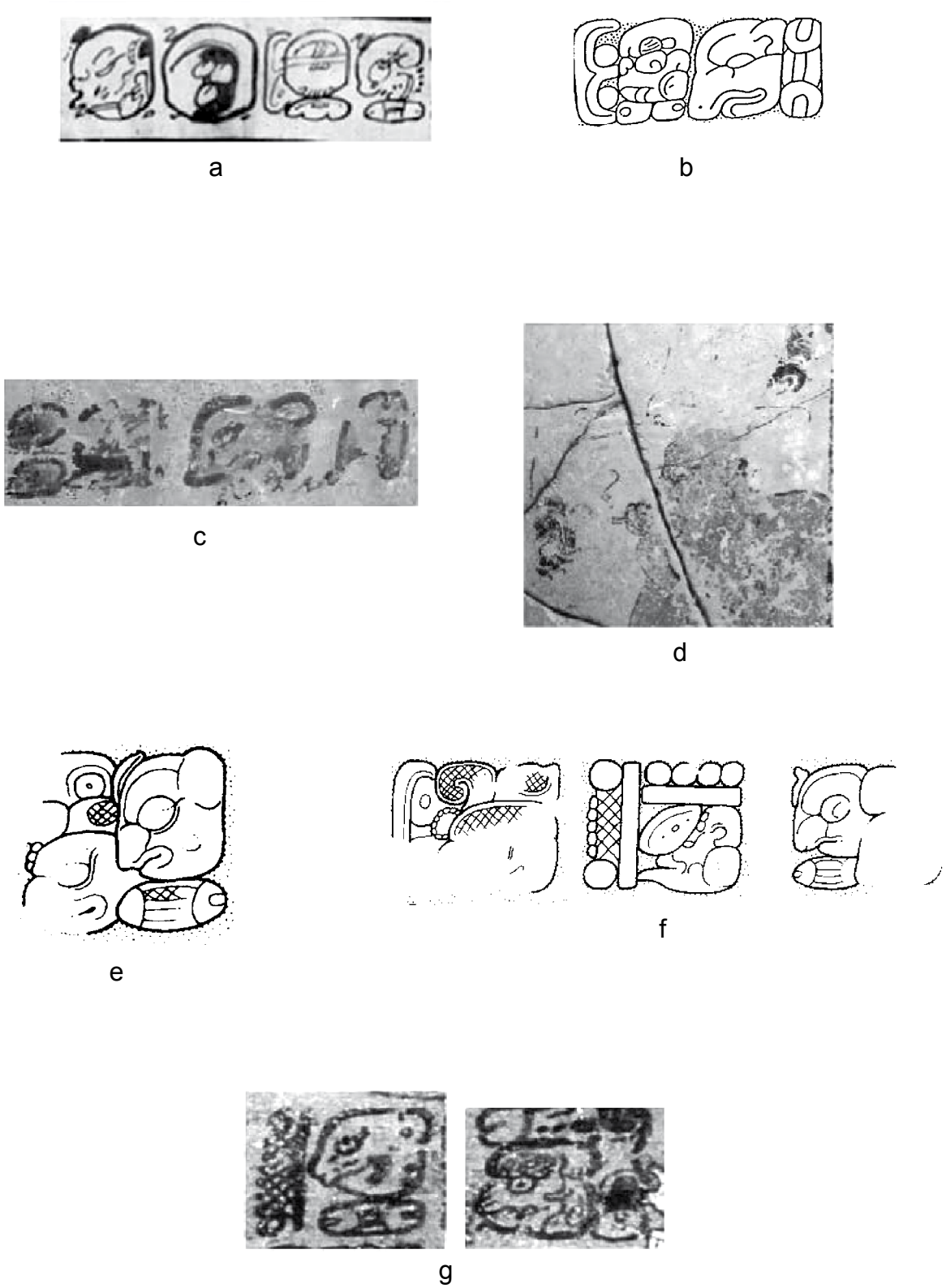


Figure 11. *Guardians of youths (a) Late Classic vessel (K7055); (b) Late Classic panel, Bonampak-region:pC5-pD5 (drawing by P. Mathews); (c, d) vessel, Aguateca Structure M7-35 (photographs by T. Inomata); (e, f) Dos Pilas Panel 19 (drawings by D. Stuart); and (g) Late Classic vessel (K625).*

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from Dos Pilas Panel 19, excavated in 1990 by Joel Palka (Fig. 11e,f; Houston *et al.* 1991). An image of ritual initiation, the panel highlights what is likely to have been the first blood-letting of a royal heir, as facilitated by a kneeling, priestly figure, overseen by the presumed parents, including the ruler, with two, plainly dressed figures to the upper right. These are labelled respectively as the 'guardian of the youth' and 'guardian of *Aj 9 Ti'* ('person of many tongues or languages'?), young lord of the local dynasty, *ch'ok mut ajaw*. A final text, also from a palace scene, captions a secondary figure with a twist on the title, 'he, youth-guardian', possibly for a person seated directly in front of him. In texts and imagery, the guardians or wardens do not appear to be rulers but rather served as courtiers in subordinate positions, dressed in comparatively simple manner. The youths under their care appear to have been of exalted station, not yet rulers but perhaps soon expected to be. They are present at what were clearly regarded as key moments in youthful lives, indeed, at what may have been their last acts as wardens: the imagery connotes a shift in status for the youth, full reception at court or first ritual activity in prefiguration of adult duties. The penile bloodletting at the centre of the image is itself an emphasis on a procreative organ.

Possessions of young men

Many Maya ceramics from the late Early Classic to the end of the Late Classic period contain statements of possession (Stuart 1989): the vessel and its contents are said to belong to a noble or royal male, more rarely a female. When the nature of these texts became clear, it was soon noted that the *chak ch'ok* and *keleem* titles made a frequent appearance in the name of the owner (Fig. 3b–g; MacLeod & Reents-Budet 1994, 133–4). The dominant view was that, although *ch'ok* meant 'youth', the intended meaning of these statements was to record 'the status of the person as closely related to, but of lesser status, than the king' (MacLeod & Reents-Budet 1994, 134). That is, the references were to 'members of the ruling lineage other than the king' (MacLeod & Reents-Budet 1994, 134). More recent discussions adjust this perspective slightly, suggesting that the use of *chak ch'ok* is to attribute 'youthful power' (*jugendlicher kraft*) to men of varying age who acquire that strength by imbibing drinks of invigorating chocolate (Grube 2006, 78). Or, in another view, that the titles refer specifically to ownership or production of ceramics because they most often appear on pots (Colas 2004, 154).

It may be simpler to take these statements at face value, accepting that they identify the owners of certain vessels as youths. If so, some of the most celebrated Maya ceramics — those vessels regarded by most scholars as unusually accomplished in execution — were commissioned for young men, either as 'youths' or as 'great youths' (K530, 595 633, 1256, 1485, 1728, 1775, 2695, 2796, 3026, 3395, 3444, 5453, 6394, 7459, 7821). There is also some idiosyncrasy, with a particular concentration for certain rulers, such as a king of Naranjo, Guatemala, at the beginnings of the Late Classic (K1558, 2704, 4562, 5042, 7716, 8245), including one example with a notation to the effect that the ruler had entered his second 20-year span of life (K7716). Not a few of the vessels display palace, hunting or dancing scenes, some specific to particular royal courts (K532, 767, 1775, 2695, 3026, 4477, 5062, 5390, 5453, 5746, 5857 7716, 6418); others show deities in supernatural palaces (K1485, 5847, 7821). Explaining such possession and such scenes implies a function in addition to gifting of such ceramics for feasts, as many have proposed (e.g. Reents-Budet 1994, 82), or, rather, a special form of gift: pots with such labels could have been bestowed in the setting of age-grade rituals or promotions, a recognition of feasting and expensive drinks as markers of adult status, even trophies and material honours while in page service, ballplay or war. At the least, possession is likely to have involved a special emphasis on the youth of the owner, a feature that places many Maya polychrome vessels in a new light, as key possessions of noble and royal young.

Other objects were said to belong to youths. An alabaster drinking vessel from the area of Palenque has a text that identifies its owner as a young ruler of Palenque (K4332). What may be a mace head of late Early Classic date is the possession of a *chak ch'ok* (K6631). From the Late Classic comes the backing of a mirror (*nehn*) excavated at the site of Topoxte, Guatemala (Miller & Martin 2004, 45). It makes use of the same phrase, *chak ch'ok*. At the other range of age-grade possession, a few vessels, especially those of the later years of the Early Classic, were said to belong retroactively to those who later became *mam*, grandfathers or 'ancestors' (Grube & Gaida 2006, abb. 11.1; see also Stuart 2007b), ready-made 'heirlooms' for ceremonies invoking figures that may not have been alive when the pots were used.

What young men did

A remarkable account from the city of La Corona, Guatemala, tells a story of what youths might do: leave home for the court of an overlord, perhaps as a quasi-hostage, perhaps in page service or attendance at a courtly school, returning home when one's father passed away (Martin 2001, 182–4). That kind of serv-

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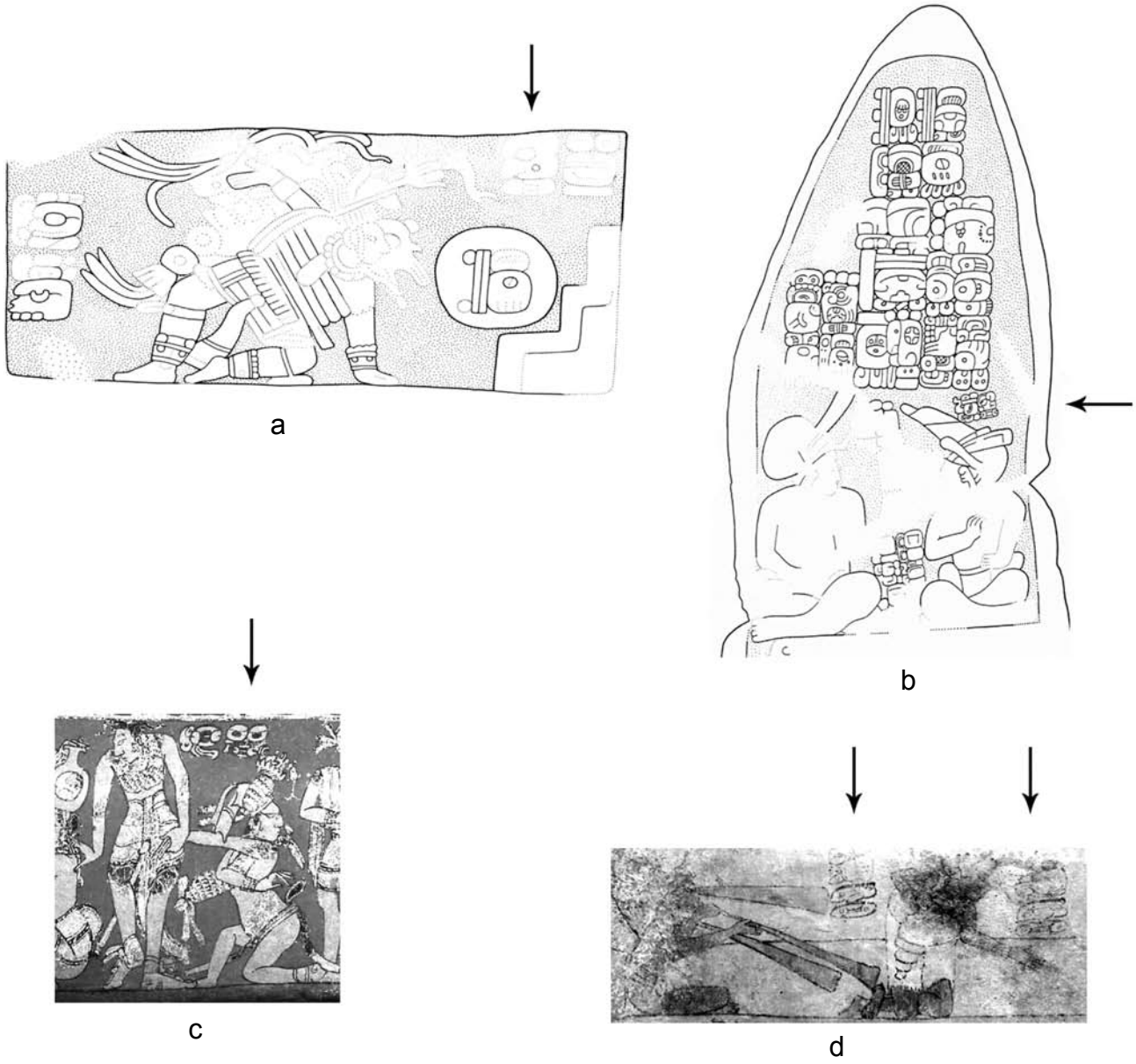


Figure 12. *Activities of young men: (a) Yaxchilan Hieroglyphic Stairway 2, Step XII:B1-C1 (drawing by I. Graham, copyright the President and Fellows of Harvard University); (b) Caracol Stela 17:F1 (drawing by N. Grube); (c) Late Classic vessel, scene of drunkenness (K1092); and (d) Late Classic vessel, with scene of music-making by youths (K3814).*

ice, of attendance at court, is the setting for much of what can be gathered about the activities of elite and royal *ch'ok*. Typically found in groups — a hint of the age-grades inferred from colonial and ethnographic accounts and the multiples of young gods — the youth might play ball, sit with the current ruler, get drunk and perform music (Fig. 12). The carousing and drunkenness resonate with accounts of later Maya. Others would bring tributary items to court, bags of chocolate, heaps of cotton mantles, perhaps slung over shoulders with sticks (Fig. 13). One is explicitly named as a 'youth', *ch'ok*, and 'he of the tribute-cloth', *aj yubte'* (Fig. 13b). Yet other youths were responsible for some of the finest sculpture known from sites like El Cayo, Motul de San José, Palenque, Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan (Fig. 14). At El Cayo, the sculptor is probably an offspring of the royal house, to judge by his personal name and title, and he has the additional property of

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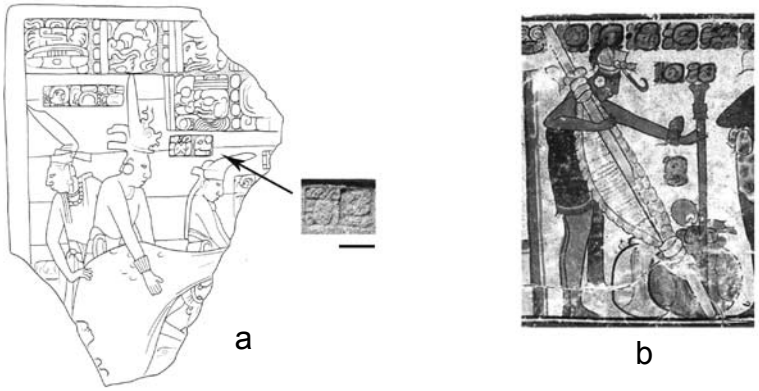


Figure 13. *Young men in scenes of tribute: (a) Palenque tribute panel, with caption highlighted (drawing by D. Stuart); (b) Late Classic vessel (K1728).*

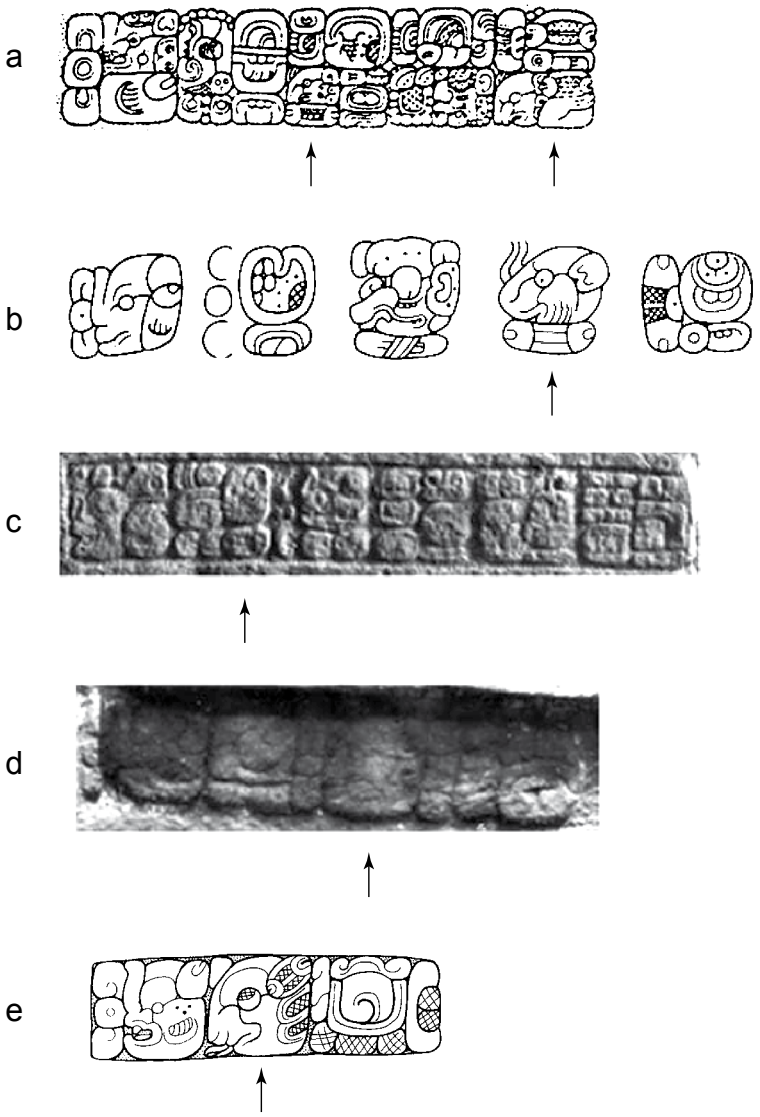


Figure 14. *Young men as sculptors: (a) El Cayo Altar 1:C1-G1 (drawing by P. Mathews); (b) Yaxchilan Lintel 45:D1-D5 (drawing by I. Graham, copyright the President and Fellows of Harvard University); (c) Naranjo Stela 12:H1-M1 (photograph by T. Maler); (d) Motul de San José Stela 1: C1-F1 (photograph by T. Maler); and (e) Piedras Negras Stela 12:L1-L2 (drawing by D. Stuart).*

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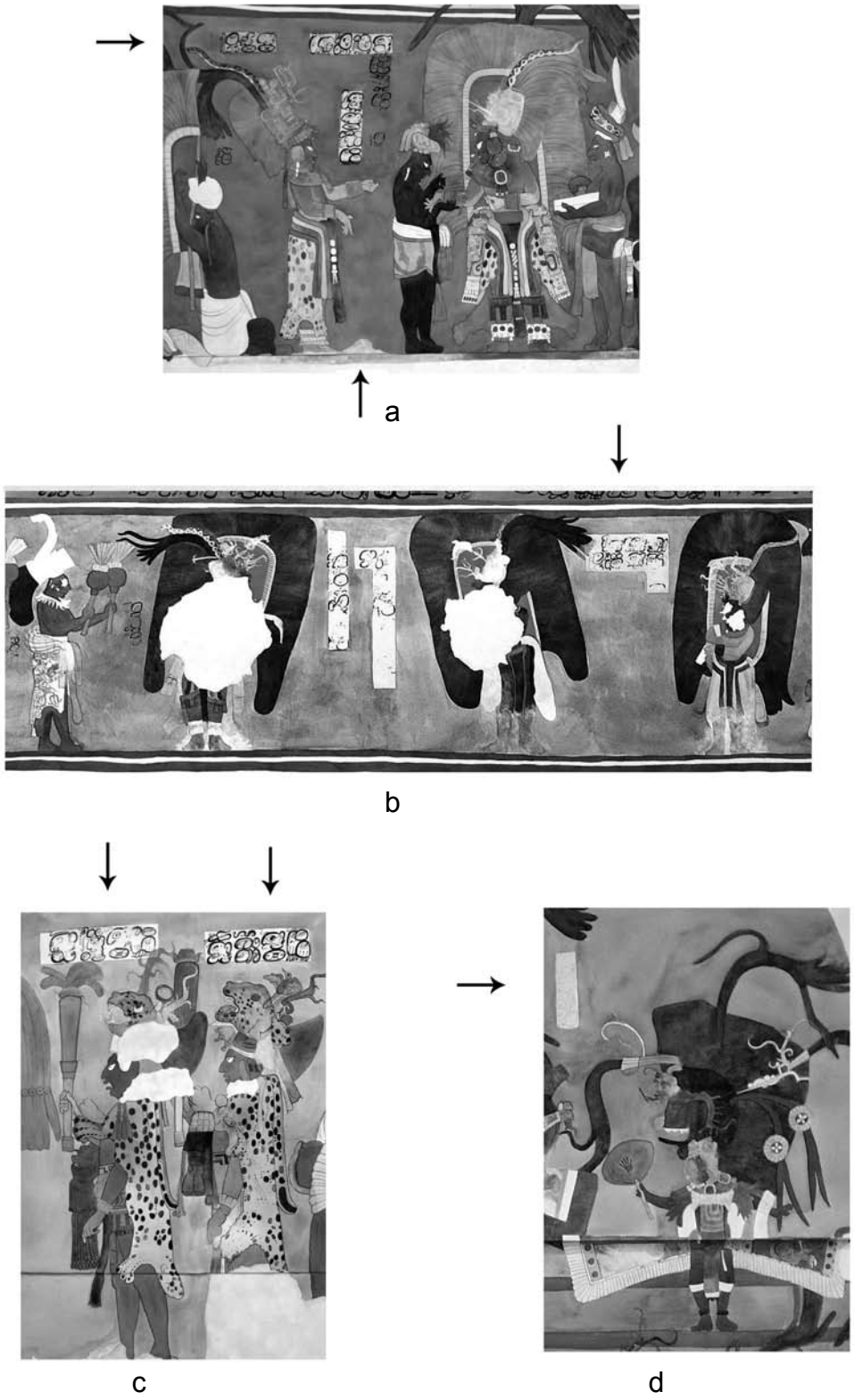


Figure 15. *Youths in dance and reception of captives, Bonampak murals: (a) Room 1, north wall; (b) Room 1, south wall; (c) Room 2, north wall; and (d) Room 3, south wall (all renderings by H. Hurst, with assistance of L. Ashby, Bonampak Documentation Project, M. Miller, Director, Yale University).*

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being accompanied in this task by another *ch'ok* (Fig. 14a). Motul, too, suggests that the young sculptor was the heir of a local dynasty (Fig. 14d).

But perhaps the most thorough set of imagery comes from the Bonampak murals, dating to the final years of the Classic period (Fig. 15) — the stress on youth itself savours of the tensions of the time and its scope for societal re-emphasis and fluidity at moments of change (see Comaroff & Comaroff 1999, 288–9). Indeed, it almost seems that, at the end, the court at Bonampak chose to highlight a generation that would fail in its charge to stabilize and maintain the kingdom. Royal youth forms a large focus of the paintings, beginning with, in Room 1, a scene in which youths are dressed for a 'Quetzal' (*k'uk'*) dance. These are princelings of the royal house of Bonampak or a site nearby, Lacanha, and the energetic, skillful dance recalls the expectations of later Maya for appropriate youthful action. In Room 2, two of those dancing youths, 'Man-eating feline' and 'Bird Jaguar' — the exact readings of their names remain elusive, although Marc Zender has suggested *kooj* or *chooj*, 'puma' for the first — reveal themselves to be key warriors attending the ruler during the display and mutilation of captives (Fig. 15c). The principal warrior to the left of the ruler emphasizes their importance by having in his name caption, **u-MAM-ma KELEEM**, *u mam keleem*, 'he is the grandfather of the youth(s)' (Fig. 16e). Room 3, the final chamber in the murals building, returns again to the role of youths as dancers (Fig. 15d). 'Man-eating-feline' and another youth mentioned in Room 1, *Aj balam chok ch'ok*, perform a solar dance that also involves the execution of a male, perhaps a captive. The vibrancy of the murals is underscored by the energetic performances of royal youth. It is in this connection that the occurrence of young males in a few royal tombs, just outside the sarcophagus chamber of Pakal the Great of Palenque and in at least three royal tombs at Piedras Negras, Guatemala, that the supposition arises that youthful 'service' might have continued into the afterlife (Ruz Lhuillier 1973, 50–51, fig. 179; Cucina & Tiesler 2006; Houston & Scherer 2008). A few texts hint that youths as sacrificers — not just the sacrificed — may have had a mythical template, of the 'four *xib*, four *ch'ok*', who burn and torture a jaguar deity, perhaps to death (Grube 2000).

The sacred dimensions of being a royal youth and the liminality inherent in this status are reinforced by the striking frequency of lords, often calligraphers, named as *ch'ok* in the Late Classic cave texts of Naj Tunich, Guatemala (Drawings 28, 30, 65, 66, 69: Stone 1995, figs. 7-5, 7-9). These references occur far into the 'dark zone' of the cave, away from surface light, and in textual references to acts of 'seeing' and, with one youth, the 'seeing of a road, seeing of a *wahy*', or companion spirit, as though by means of a vision quest into the recesses of the cave (Drawing 65:L4-M1, **IL-li-BIH, 'i-li-WAHY**: Stone 1995, fig. 7-9a). The cave is also well-known for its rare images of masturbation, phalli and homosexual, intercrural or interfemoral sex, along with ballplay, music-making, dancing and drinking, and numerous views of what appear to be head-banded young men (e.g. Stone 1995, figs. 8-17, 8-18, 8-20, 8-40). It may be that these scenes and texts reveal an unsuspected feature of caves among the Classic Maya, as places where liminal rites, sexual experiments and acts of self-discovery took place, somewhat analogous to the rites described for colonial Maya (see Prufer & Brady 2005, for recent work on cave ritual).

Of clear relevance to the archaeology of youth is what their bones and teeth have to say (A. Scherer pers. comm. 2008). The find of a young royal male in the Late Classic Burial 82 at Piedras Negras, Guatemala, showed several features: a text on a stingray spine that identified the owner as a *ch'ok* and as a probable member of the royal family; and clear osteological evidence for the adolescent or young adult age of the body (Fitzsimmons *et al.* 2003). In that burial the teeth had not yet been ground or jade or hematite inlays inserted, a feature of many royal burials. At the same city, the youngest person to have ground teeth was between 15 and 21 years of age, and there is a strong suspicion from other evidence of eruption and grinding that such dental modification took place, as an evident ordeal, during the passage through adolescence (Fitzsmmons *et al.* 2003, 460). The meanings attached to such modification almost certainly varied over time and space, although, in Classic Maya practice, it may have related to concepts of breath or even display and oratory (Houston *et al.* 2006, 146). Of broader interest is the use of tooth filing in age-grade ceremonies in Indonesia (Fischer, with Andarawati 1998) and the dental evidence for similar aging of modifications among the Classic Maya.

Classic Maya houses for youths

The evidence from Mesoamerica and later Maya points heavily to the presence of special houses for young men and their supervisors. A heavy challenge for excavators is to find such places. Parts of the royal palace at Tikal have been identified as young men's houses, in an insight, among the first such essayed in Maya archaeology, that is nonetheless difficult to prove (Harrison 1970, 304; Haviland & Haviland 1995, 306). In other contexts, such as columned halls at a

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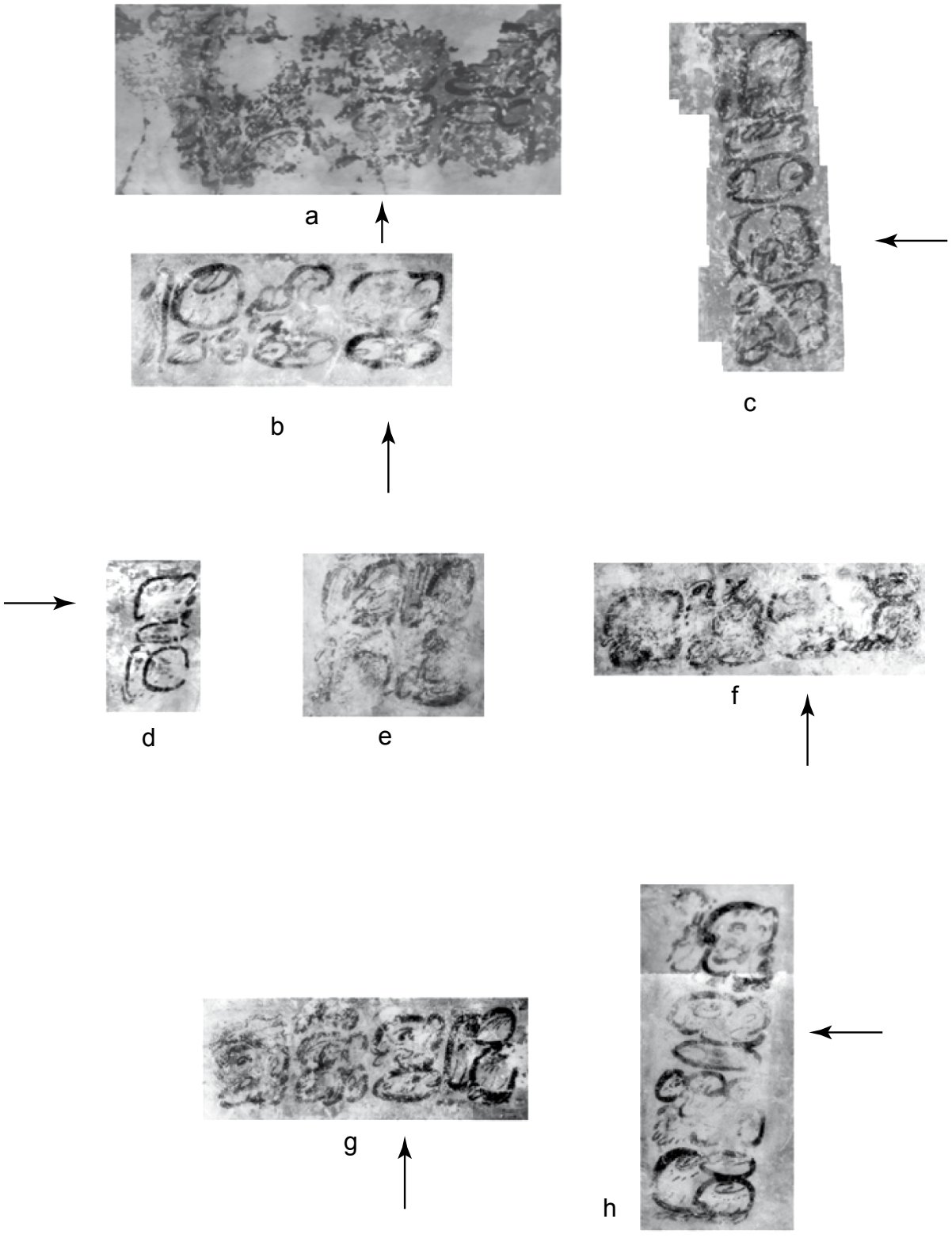


Figure 16. *Infrared images of young men's names, Bonampak murals: (a) Room 1, caption 42; (b) Room 1, caption 20; (c) Room 3, caption 7; (d) Room 1, caption 32; (e) Room 2, caption 31; (f) Room 2, caption 33; (g) Room 2, caption 34; and (h) Room 1, caption 23 (images by S. Houston and G. Ware, Bonampak Documentation Project, M. Miller, Director, Yale University).*

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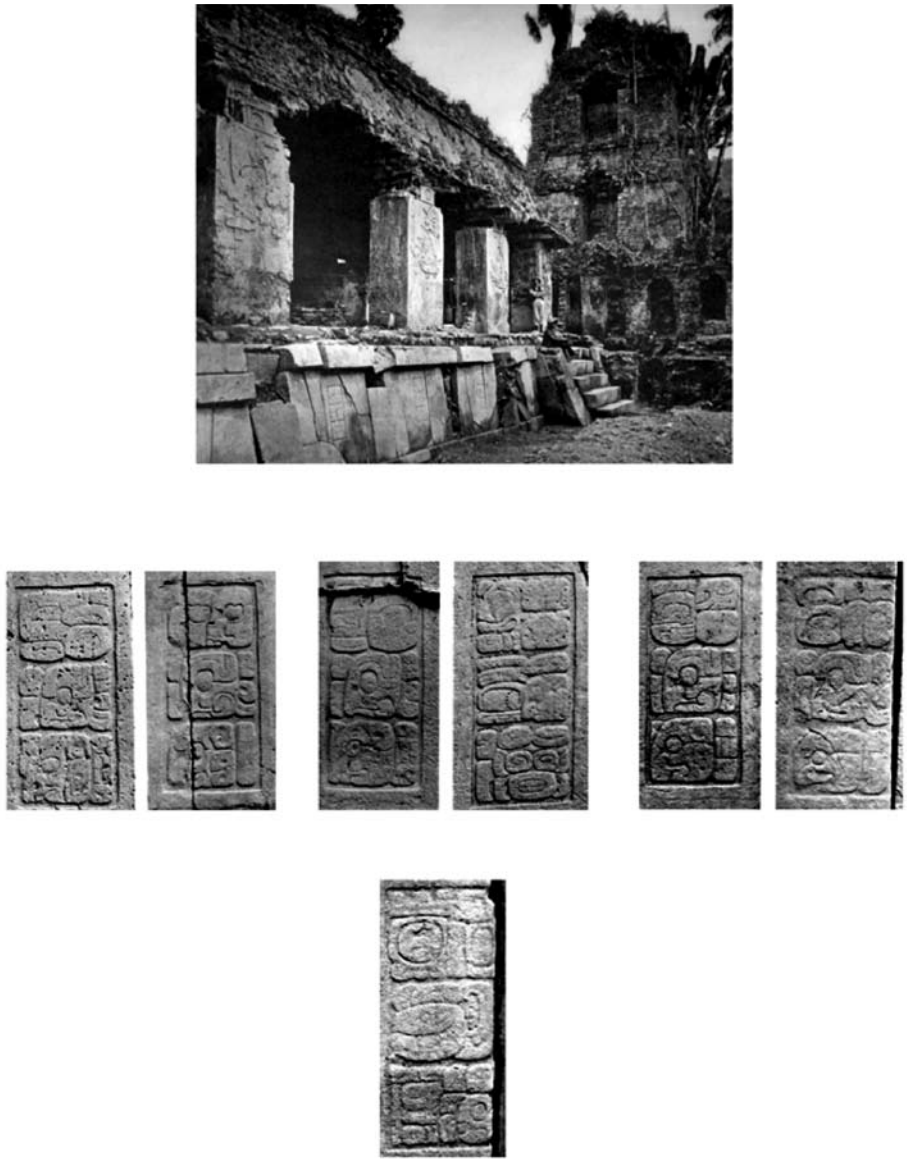


Figure 17. *Possible young men's house, House C, Palenque, with texts from lower portion of the building;* ch'ok *appears in final glyph of top row of columns (Maudslay 1889–1902, pls. 26, 29)*

number of Classic sites, such as Piedras Negras and Blue Creek, Belize, have been linked to such houses but ultimately rejected as likely candidates, although they recall the open structures mentioned among the Itzaaj (Driver 2002, 78).

The best candidates are not so much architecturally plausible as ones where ancillary information comes into play. Four such places come to mind. The first may occur at San Bartolo, in the room with Preclassic murals (*c.* 100–0 BC), low-doorways, and almost didactic scenes of key mythic events, a room of 'mysteries' for initiates, sequestered in an unusual location at the back of a temple (Karl Taube pers. comm., 2004; Saturno *et al.* 2005). The second is House C at Palenque, known to date to the time of Pakal the Great because of textual clues (Fig. 17, Martin & Grube 2008, 162). The courtyard to the west of the building displays a series of stones that refer to various youths, in statements that still contain difficult phrases. The lead text refers explicitly to the death of a lord from the site of Pomona, Tabasco, seat of a dynasty intermittently under the thumb of Palenque, sometimes violently so. The temptation exists to see House C as a young men's house, but the foreign references give pause, as they probably refer to visitors or captives. Without exception, the youths appear to have come from the

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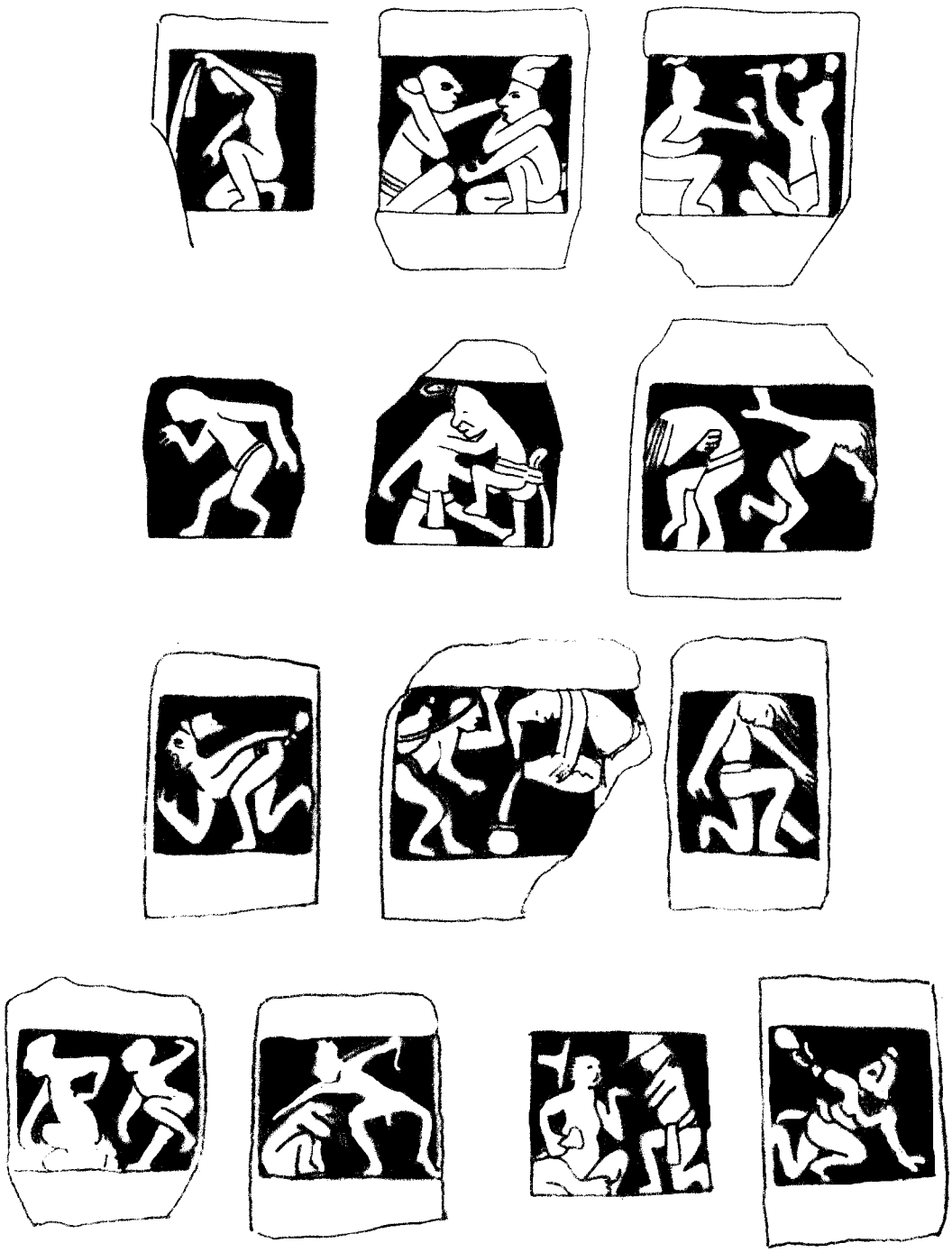


Figure 18. *Panels with young men in state of inebriation, homoerotic postures, and enema use, Rancho San Diego, Yucatan, most* c. *5 cm wide (sketch by Karl Taube).*

site of Santa Elena, Mexico, often an antagonist of the Palenque dynasty (Martin & Grube 2008, 165).

A third such house may have been the one in the area of Copán, Honduras, that supported *almenas* (roof ornaments) in the form of bats, wings spread wide: the text on back of the bat indicates that the *almenas* (the plural is signalled overtly) were the carvings of the 'hill' or *witz*, a common term for elevated buildings. In this case, that 'hill' belonged to *chak ch'ok*, 'great youth(s)' (http://www.popolvuh.ufm.edu.gt/murcie-

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lago.htm; Easby & Scott 1970, pl. 183).[14] The fourth example comes from the site of Rancho San Diego, Yucatan, from the later years of the Classic period (Fig. 18). Barrera Rubio & Taube (1987) linked a set of panels in the Barbachano collection in Mérida, Yucatan, with closely similar sculptures at Rancho San Diego itself, showing that these came from a rectangular structure on an elevated platform. The scenes on these panels, 13 in total, show scenes of drunkenness, enema insertion, revelry, stunned inebriation, dancing, homoerotic grappling — in short, many of the features attributed in historic accounts to Maya young men's houses. The Rancho San Diego find remains the most likely target for determining the material expression of a young man's house.[15]

Conclusions

The frequent mention of young men in Maya texts and their emphasis in certain imagery lead to several inferences. Viewed through an elite or royal focus, youths appear to have fulfilled important roles at court, from battle to dance, tributary displays to music and ballplay, often in company of other young men. Their appearances were largely homosocial, with evident supervision by older males for royal youth. At least for elite males, such supervision and sense of cohort, physically housed or situated, served as mechanisms for the transition to adulthood in Classic Maya society. Other youths had that status emphasized in relation to royal succession and the precedence and authority of older males. Even gods could appear as young men, and with the same connotation of tender, immature growth, of high regard to the ancient Maya, and an evident grouping by cohort. The isolation of a distinct age-grade, with its attendant rituals and housing implied by evidence near and far, carries some difficulties, however. Very young males were identified as *ch'ok*, a vegetative simile of the sort frequently employed by the Maya, but the majority had entered adolescence, to the cusp of marriage and beyond. In no case, however, can the label be securely attached to older men, at least in those instances where the references are contemporary and temporal controls in place. Homoerotic sexuality and consumption of alcohol sidle into the evidence in suggestive but unconfirmed ways — the Rancho San Diego panels, replete with a visual inventory of male abandon, contain no texts to confirm the youthful status of the participants. Yet the cave of Naj Tunich confirms that at least one such installation, an apparent target of ceremonial visits by people from some distance away, including royal youths, was devoted in part to liminal rites of 'seeing' in dark places and to rites of sexuality seldom depicted in Maya imagery.

What is also evident is that some of the most finely painted Maya vases were the property of male youth, perhaps 'great youth' who were soon to pass to full adulthood and, in great age and after death, to the age-grade of being a 'grandfather', *mam*, a category with its own set of prized objects. To be an adult was a 'zero-marked' category, meaning that it was the default and, curiously enough, extended to virtually all women, regardless of age — to be a *ch'ok* was largely a male attribute in the Classic sources. Nor was it comprehensively diffused, as not all sites refer to this age-grade. The Aztec evidence, which shows the transformation of what may have been a widespread, deeply rooted practice to an elite, even imperial idiom, highlights the probability that Classic Maya royalty and elites both shared and differed strongly from practices and notions current among non-elites, farmers, fisherman, craftsmen and their families. A state of strength, vitality, joy, and conflict, the time of being a Classic Maya youth accorded roughly with that status elsewhere, but always filtered through an elite focus on privilege, domination, extraction and impressive display.

Acknowledgements

A version of this paper was first presented at Copán, Honduras, in June, 2007, for the III International Copán Congress: 'The Art of Power in the Mundo Maya', at the kind invitation of Ricardo Agurcia and the Government of Honduras. I have benefited from stimulating conversation about this topic with David Stuart and Karl Taube, both of whom have contributed much of substance to this article. Andrew Scherer reminded me of the importance of tooth filing and certain osteological deposits; other helpful comments came from Nick Carter, Michael Coe, Simon Martin, Mary Miller, Joel Skidmore, and David Webster. Two reviewers provided serious and useful comments, as did the editor, John Robb. All 'K' numbers refer to the Kerr data base available online, at http://research.famsi.org/kerrmaya.html. Justin Kerr kindly allowed use of his images here, as did Takeshi Inomata. Helen Najarian, at the Peabody Museum, Harvard University, faciliated permission to include glyphs from the *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions* (*CMHI*), reproduced courtesy of the President and Fellows of Harvard College, and as scanned from the following volumes of the *CMHI*: 2:36; 2:47; 2:92; 3:45; 3:64; 3:99; 6:103; and 9:105.

Stephen Houston
Department of Anthropology
Brown University
Box 1921
Providence, RI 02912
USA
Email: Stephen_houston@brown.edu

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774309000250 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Notes

1. It is tempting to describe these criteria as 'ephebic' in nature, from Greek *ephebos*, 'upon early manhood', with the proviso that the desired feature was the fullness of youth, not male gender *per se*.
2. The phase and its results have been characterized as a 'choreography' of social and biological effects, including sexual polarization and differential onset of male and female fertility and physical growth (Bogin 1999, 214, 216; Worthman 1998, 38).
3. The study of early adolescence in the twenty-first century focuses on psychology and the developmental aspects of personality, but also, in general, on policies that promote the creation of 'engaged citizens' (Steinberg & Lerner 2004, 52). This focus implies a certain anxiety that the goal might prove difficult to achieve. Other scholars 'naturalize' such anxiety by asserting that male youths tend to risky behaviour and, on occasion, callous disregard for law, custom and kin (e.g. Le Breton 2004, 3, 6).
4. For constructionist views of Maya sexuality, as informed by feminist perspectives (see Ardren & Hixson 2006, 22; Joyce 2000a,b,c). Some of these discussions raise useful perspectives, others prove debatable on factual grounds (Houston *et al.* 2006, 207–18). A presiding body of theory comes from a professor of rhetoric and comparative literature, Judith Butler (1990; 1993), who asserts that humans enjoy a plasticity that is only lightly constrained by physical existence or makeup, and that the state of being a human is best understood as a kind of 'performative' stance, inherited disposition or self-willed claim, all part of an ongoing process of 'subject formation' (Houston & McAnany 2003). Whatever the merits of this approach — arguably, it is at once instructive and deeply misguided — there can be little doubt that young males and females were expected and guided to behave and dress in certain ways that prefigured adult status, and that these features varied over time.
5. Yet 'age-set' and 'age-grade' are not mutually exclusive: a sense of corporate identity, the essence of 'age-set', attends 'age-grade' too; and a sense of individual passage, the essence of 'age-grade', necessarily affects an 'age-set'. Consider also a university 'class', an exemplary 'age-set'. The identification is carried through life but always refers to a finite time in youth; it is not wholly reshaped as its members age.
6. Age-grades have been inferred from hairstyles of young males in Minoan and Theran imagery (Rutter 2003, fig. 23), yet the physical marking of male bodies may not accord with formal age-grades, only with age-suitable dress and ornament.
7. Elsie Clews Parsons (1933, 629) even found comparisons between such training and Puebloan practices surrounding ceremonial kiva of the American Southwest.
8. *…en cada pueblo una casa grande y encalada, abierta por todas partes, en la cual se juntaban los mozos para sus pasatiempos. Dormían aqui todos juntos casi siempre, hasta que se casaban* (Adams 1952, 590).
9. The encyclopedic Aztec sources provide moral exhortations in the form of dichotomies between 'good' and 'bad' kinds of people, not so much on an individual level, as according to placement in the social categories of indigenous society. Punishments of escalating pain and severity are specified for those who transgress established norms.
10. Still unexplained in Maya script is the ubiquity of exalted titles related to 'trees' or 'plants', as in *yajawte'*, 'the tree's lord', common in many Classic texts.
11. Alternatively, the *yookte'*, which means 'upright stick' to the Ch'orti' Maya who use it to rasp maguey leaves, could refer to perishable wooden supports of braziers: one vessel shows such a brazier with, nearby, a spelling of *yook*, 'its foot/support', along with *ch'ajoomtaak*, 'the incensers' who presumably use the brazier (K1645).
12. The lunar portion of Maya texts records an expression, *u-ch'ok-k'aba'*, 'its youth-name', in reference to another series of signs ('Glyph X') that pertain to the current lunation of either 29 or 30 days: i.e. '"Glyph X" is the youth-name of a particular moon'. Another text, from Itzan Stela 17 (positions I3-J4), refers to a building that also has a 'youth-name', *ch'ok-k'aba'*, perhaps expressing the fact that Classic Maya buildings could experience name changes when repurposed or covered by new layers of masonry.
13. This reading casts strong doubt on the use of word-initial *ch* in this set of terms; the shift from *k* to *ch* was variable and, in some cases, relatively late in the majority language of the inscriptions, a precursor of Ch'olti' attested in the colonial period.
14. To be sure, the text is slightly eroded, and the *chak* resembles another colour designation, *yax*, 'green/blue'.
15. Other such men's houses have been identified tentatively at Copán, in the northeast corner of the Main Group and the other is the western building in Plaza A of 9N-8, the former with sweatbath and dance masks, the latter with ballgame equipment, all suitable for use by vigorous young men (Cheek & Spink 1986; Webster 1989, 20–22). A hieroglyphic throne in Structure 10K-4 at Copán provides a more personal association (Baudez 1989, fig. 69). It identifies the owner as a youth, who also carried the epithet 'person of the road-house' (*aj-bih-naah*), probably in reference to a causeway or elevated Maya road nearby.

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Author biography

Stephen Houston is the Dupee Professor of Social Sciences at Brown University. A MacArthur Fellow, he is the author of many works on the Classic Maya and the philosophical underpinnings of sacred kingship and past experience. Houston has directed archaeological projects in Guatemala, most recently at the Classic Maya city of El Zotz.

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