MAYA FEUDAL SOCIETY AND THE FRESCOES AT BONAMPAK

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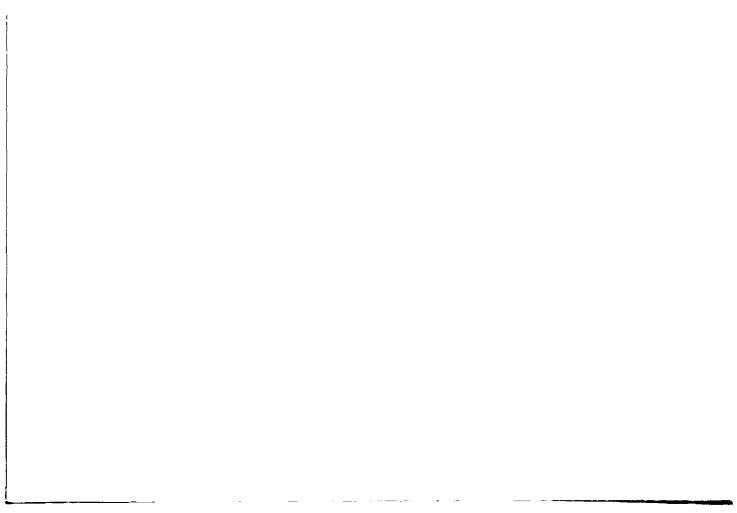

ABSTRACT

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The discovery of three rooms of frescoes at Bonampak in the Chiapas Highlands of Mexico was exceedingly significant, albeit disturbing, for it forced a reevaluation of the structure of Maya society. To pre-Columbian scholars, the murals' informal as well as ceremonial scenes, with their mixture of the peaceful and the violent, seemed to indicate that the Maya were not the gentle, peace-loving people they were so long considered. They appeared, rather, to be warlike and blood-thirsty as their neighbors. In addition, notions of Maya leadership also were subject to revisions. Once regarded as members of the nobility working in close cooperation with the priests, kings were now looked upon by some researchers as exercising their powerful rule in purely secular governments.

The purpose of this thesis is to consider the available evidence relating to Maya culture, with particular emphasis on the visual presentation in the

Bonampak frescoes, in order to arrive at the most valid view of Maya societal organization and the nature of Maya kingship. This thesis is concerned, then, with the content as well as the aesthetics of the murals at Bonampak.

MAYA FEUDAL SOCIETY

AND

THE FRESCOES AT BONAMPAK

By

Sherly F. Farness

A THESIS

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In 1946 three rooms of frescoes were discovered at Bonampak in the Chiapas Highlands of Mexico. It was a momentous discovery of Classic Maya painting, and the result of this find was a reexamination and reevaluation of the religious, political, and social organization of Maya civilization and of the products of its artistic output. The frescoes, dating from about 800 A.D., present a series of narrative scenes that seem to combine secular events with a religious observance, if such a clear distinction can be made considering that the civil and the religious in Maya culture are like the two sides of a coin, hardly separable. It is the content of these murals as an expression of the structure of Maya society and its leadership in particular rather than a pure concern with their aesthetic nature that forms the basis of this study.

Bonampak, located in the Central Highlands of eastern Chiapas between the Jatate and Usumacinta Valleys, (see Illustration 1), was not a major religious center and yet it was organized on a plan typical of Maya settlements.[1] Except for the core a Maya

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[1] Michael D. Coe, The Maya, Frederick A. Praeger, New York, 1966, p. 103.

Illustration 1

center is a rather loosely organized accretion of buildings and dwellings. The core, however, consists of plazas and courtyards around which are stone structures placed upon a series of stepped platforms. The most important architectural entities were placed on some high point or acropolis overlooking all below. Built of limestone blocks over a rubble core their few rooms were corbelled and plaster-covered.[2]

Bonampak followed this general pattern. Its large plaza measured 295 x 365 feet[3] and was surrounded by buildings (see Illustration 2). On the south side of the plaza rose the acropolis, 141 feet high, and built on a hill terraced in three parts. The temple containing the frescoes stands on the second terrace and, considering its dominant location, has been appropriately labeled Structure 1. The structure itself was excavated by John H. Bourne and H. Carl Frey in 1946, but the murals were discovered some three months later by Giles G. Healey, in May 1946, in the course of doing a film for the United Fruit Company.[4]

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[2]Coe, Op. Cit., p. 50.

[3]Karl Ruppert, J. Eric S. Thompson, and Tatiana Proskouriakoff, Bonampak, Chiapas, Mexico, Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1955, p. 11.

[4]Agustin Villagra, Bonampak: La Ciudad de los Muros Pintados, Anales del Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, Supplemento Vol. III, Mexico City, 1949,p. 9.

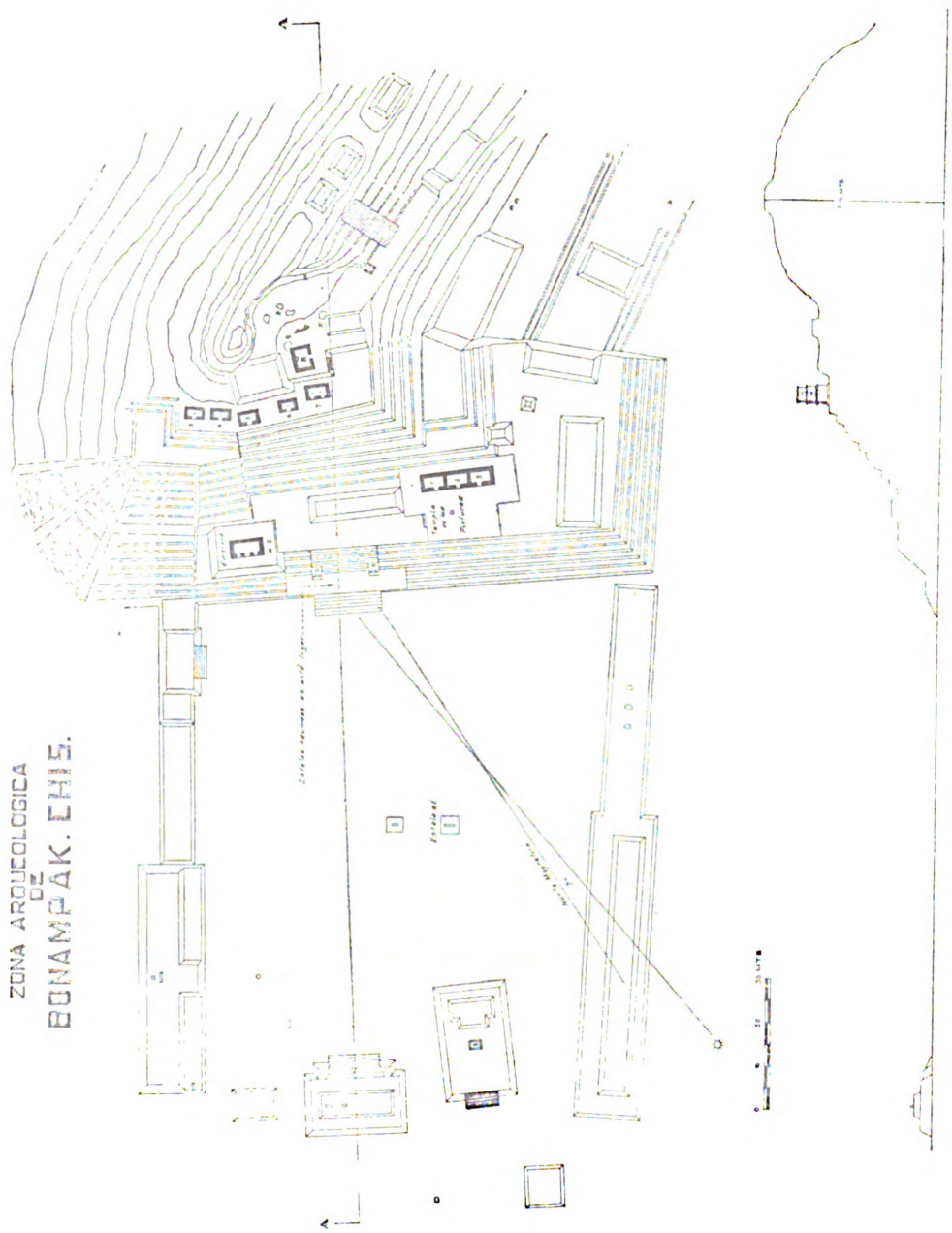

Illustration 2

Although Structure 1 is 55 feet long the three rooms within it measure about 15 x 8-½ feet each, their small size a necessary result of using the corbel vaulting system which does not structurally allow the spanning of great spaces. It was on the inward slanting walls of these small rooms that the plaster or white ground was laid for the frescoes. This ground was apparently the product of mixing a finely ground lime mortar with a dilute solution of the chichebe plant, a hard-finished surface being obtained by rubbing with a smoothing stone or ka.[5] There may even have been a pink or green tint added, which was occasionally done on backgrounds for mural painting.[6] Pigments were obtained from a variety of sources. Blacks, for instance, were ground from carbonized resins, copal incense, and the resin from the chacah tree.[7] The chacte tree provided red and brown colors by using the red splinters or the chips of the heartwood and the tinted tree sap itself.[8]

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[5]Edward H. Thompson, People of the Serpent, Capricorn Books, New York, 1965, p. 184.

[6]Ibid., p. 185.

[7]Ibid., p. 186.

[8]Ibid., p. 185.

Chacte pigment is very versatile for, when mixed with the sap and latex of the chucum and habeen trees, many shades and effects are possible.[9] As a matter of fact, the sap and latex of the chucum were used as an agent for hardening the lime surfaces of walls and platforms.[10] The beautiful blues of Maya paintings came from the anil family of plants although modified by the addition of certain saps, and the carrying agent for the pigments was either water and/or the white of the jungle pheasant's egg.[11] A primary source of yellow pigment was the achiote fruit, although pieces of fustics (from the Mulberry tree family) boiled and strained were another source.[12]

Each color had its symbolic as well as its decorative value. Virtue, chastity, the heavens (and thus religion) attach themselves to blue. The quetzal blue, with its greenish quality is the symbol of the Sacred Serpent, Kukulcan. Fertility, growth, and life are associated with green. In its symbolic value,

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[9]Edward H. Thompson, Op. Cit., p. 185.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid.

yellow moves in two directions at once, for it also represents gold.

> "It was the color symbol for anger, for the passions, for defiance and war and, by extension, for death. When corpses are depicted their color is always a pallid yellow. Gold was also depicted as yellow, but this was because it had the color of the sun. In fact, the word in Maya meaning gold pieces is X'Takin - excrement of the sun - which gives their idea of the origin of the metal."[13]

Of such materials, then, did the Maya artist create his fresco scenes at Bonampak, unfolding a sequence of events in an almost theatrical manner, which is emphasized by the illusionistically painted shallow space reserved for the figures. There seems to be no question as to their narrative nature and realistic presentation, giving the forms an uncanny immediacy. Mr. Tonkin maintains that this is "objective realism" as opposed to "subjective symbolism"[14] but there is every likelihood that neither is applicable. A more accurate phrase might be "objective symbolism," for the realistic representation of a form does not preclude a symbolic content.

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[13]Edward H. Thompson, Op. Cit., p. 185.

[14]Robert Tonkin, The Bonampak Murals, Thesis for M.A., Michigan State University, 1964.

Using bold, dynamic and expressive lines to define contours and filling the delineated forms with rich color, the artist has filled his walls with many figures and has documented four acts in what seems to be a commemorative drama. Shown are the preparations for a ceremonial dance, the capture of enemies, the arraignment of prisoners, and the performance of a final ceremony that is religious in nature.

The first room, devoted to Act One, has several scenes relating to the preparations for the coming ritual dance. The east and south walls show members of the nobility in floor-length white capes with the triple shell ornamentation symbolic of the earth placed in a triangle on their chests.[15] Two are conversing and the rest appear to be listening.

On the west wall the halach uinic, or high chief, is seated cross-legged on a raised dais, his wife and daughter to either side. The halach uinic issues commands to the male servant responsible for the care of the chief's son, shown on the south wall, while a female servant crouching before the throne listens intently. The royal family appear to be both spectators and participants in this ritual observance.

Three lesser lords or priests, batabs, seen on the north wall are shown in the process of dressing

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[15]Villagra, Op. Cit., p. 18.

with the aid of their personal attendants. Testifying to their high rank are their jaguar-skin loincloths, their quetzal-feather headdresses, the bracelets, anklets, earplugs and green collars. Green is significant here in that it suggests the jade so precious to the Maya, and to the Mesoamericans in general, and refers also to the color of the quetzal feather. Of the servants, attendants, and slaves, in varying number and rank, some are busy with necessary tasks, others engaged in conversation. Among this group a few are of noble blood which is indicated by their wearing of jaguar-skin clothing.

All of the above scenes appear in the upper register, the lower register of each wall being reserved for the representation of a large number of musicians and performers. The performers include three completely and ceremoniously clothed batabs flanked by twelve music makers, two parasol-bearers, and six impersonators of the gods. Two more parasol-bearers and a number of attendants appear in another area of the lower register almost as though waiting for a theatre cue. Among the music makers can be seen a whistler, a drummer, two trumpeters, three tortoise-shell beaters, and five rattle-shakers.[16] Grouped

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[16]J. Eric S. Thompson, Op. Cit., p. 49.

in front of these stand the six impersonators of terrestrial deities, identifiable by the water lilies in their headgear.[17]

In the lower register of the west wall the three batabs appear again flanked by many figures on either side, serfs, parasol-bearers, servants, and those of higher social rank as well. This group gives the distinct impression of being a reappearance of the similar group from the upper register, the simultaneous showing of the same people in different scenes.

Room two is devoted entirely to the enactment of the raid and to the judgment of the captives,[18] the north wall being reserved exclusively for the latter. The other three walls show warriors with wooden axes, stone-pointed spears, and some with trumpets and rattles to raise the furor that incites attackers to action and frightens the enemy. In rather naive fashion the opponents are shown with distorted bodies and without weapons, indicating at once their non-Maya status and their lack of fighting skill. Maya raiding practices were designed to

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[17] J. Eric S. Thompson, Op. Cit., p. 49.

[18] Villagra, Op. Cit., p. 21.

procure victims for their sacrifices to the gods, not to slay a dangerous enemy on the battlefield. Depicting the enemy being grasped by the hair by a Maya warrior was the simple indication of capture.

The judgment scene occupies the north wall. There the halach uinic as judge, juror, and possibly executioner, flanked by his nacoms, or warlords, is shown on top of a pyramidal structure at the base of which are armed guards. Between these two groups are nine prisoners, some pleading, some undergoing a ritualistic blood-letting.[19] There is a prone figure in a diagonal position, and a severed head on some leaves with no visible body around to which it might have been attached, and no sure indication of who might have been the executioner.

The final act occupies all of the third room. Again there is the pyramid with lords of high rank on top. Lords wearing jade pectorals are seated cross-legged in front and appear to be engaged in idle conversation.

The interesting practice of venesection is shown being performed by the royal family in the upper

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[19] J. Eric S. Thompson, Op. Cit., p. 54.

section of the north wall. Venesection is a ceremonial rite whereby the tongue is pierced by a sharply pointed bone or thorn and the blood is collected on bark paper.[20] This sign of self-sacrifice was probably a necessary preparation for certain religious rituals, rituals apparently climaxed by the dances that formed such an integral part of religious worship.

The wall opposite shows attendants with upraised clubs and litterbearers carrying an aged city chieftain whose facial distortions and jaguar apron suggest he is an impersonator of a deity, very probably Mam,[21] one of the terrestrial deities, since figural distortion is one of his attributes. In this way the god himself can witness the ceremonies in his and his confreres' honor.

This is, of necessity, only a partial description of the many figures and events represented in these frescoes. To go into greater detail would be to deviate from the main purpose of this study, an examination of the role of the halach uinic and of Maya leadership. It is important at the moment to consider

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[20] J. Eric S. Thompson, Op. Cit., p. 52.

[21] Ibid., p. 55.

that since these rooms were so small and narrow they must have functioned only on ceremonial occasions and were probably entered by a select group. And the very fact that such magnificent frescoes as those at Bonampak were painted in rooms not only rarely entered but so ill-lit as to make them barely visible, or only visible by torchlight, raises questions as to purpose. Why were they painted? For whom? Are they commemorative? And if so, of what? Commemoration of a specific event presupposes an historical consciousness at least to the extent of an awareness of specific happenings as epiphanic. But before attempting to suggest answers to questions that must relate to social and religious concepts it might be well to explore the archeology of the Maya, with particular emphasis on the aspects that influenced development in the Chiapas region.

* * *

Although the Maya followed an evolutionary path uniquely their own, they nevertheless shared some things in common with the other Mesoamerican cultures.

Among these are included:

> "...hieroglyphic writing, books of bark paper or deerskin which were folded like screens, a complex permutation calendar, a game played with a rubber ball in a special court, highly specialized markets in which chocolate beans were used as money, an emphasis upon self-sacrifice and mutilation, and a pantheon which included a rain god as well as a culture hero known as the Feathered Serpent."[22]

In addition, the Indians of Mesoamerica believed in a multi-level heaven and hell, in the orientation of the world to the four cardinal points, the four points as well as the center of this world having its specific color and god. These groups also had a particular way of preparing maize that is not found elsewhere in the New World.[23] To this extent, then, the Maya were like other groups of Central America.

Among the first to collect information on the Maya were Diego de Landa, a sixteenth century Franciscan bishop who wrote on all aspects of Maya life, and Fray Antonio de Ciudad Real, who kept an account of his travels in the last decades of the same century. According to Coe "real interest in Maya remains only began after the publication, in a London edition of 1822,

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[22]Coe, Op. Cit., p. 18.

[23]Ibid.

of the brutal 'explorations' which Captain Del Río had inflicted upon the site of Palenque in the late eighteenth century."[24]

From the archeological view, credit must be given to many people and institutions in successive stages. John Lloyd Stevens, diplomat and lawyer, and his friend Frederick Catherwood, a topographical expert, explored between 1839 and 1842; Ernst Förstemann studied the Maya calendrical script; Alfred P. Maudslay's publication of Maya inscriptions aided chronological studies; and a long list of museums, universities and institutes have excavated major Maya sites over a period of many years. To attempt to reconstruct the origin and development of Maya culture is to draw on many diverse, and sometimes questionable, opinions.

Since the Maya exhibit the epicanthic fold at the inner corner of the eye and, at birth, the Mongolian spot,[25] a bluish to purpolish patch at the base of the spine which fades or is gone by the tenth year, they have been identified with the Asiatics who migrated across the Bering Strait.[26] Coe refers to McQuown,

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[24]Coe, Op. Cit., p. 27.

[25]Sylvanus Morley, The Ancient Maya, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1958, p. 24.

[26]Gordon Willey, An Introduction to American Archeology, Vol. I, Prentice-Hall, Inc., New Jersey, 1966, p. 19.

who, because of linguistic studies, "believes that the very first Maya were a small Indian tribe of North American origin, distantly affiliated with some peoples in southern Oregon and northern California..."[27] It seems to be generally accepted, however, that by the third millenium B.C. the Maya, comprising a distinct language group, had settled in Guatemala. Of the earliest times little is known, but over the years many groups exerted an influence on their development, and some of these will be touched on.

One of the earliest known cultures in the Chiapas area, a farming culture, is the Ocós, dating back to the Early Formative period (1500-800 b.c.). Although it is an open question as to whether the Ocós were a Maya-speaking people, there seems little doubt, in terms of archeological studies, that they contributed heavily to Maya civilization.[28] Basic is the Ocós house, which is regarded as a possible precursor of the Maya pyramid, its pole walls covered with mud, white-washed, and raised on a low platform against flooding

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[27]Coe, Op. Cit., p. 32.

[28]Ibid., p. 45.

by the summer rains. It may indeed be that

> "All temples in pre-Spanish Mesoamerica, even the towering pyramids of the Maya Lowlands, are essentially nothing more than a magnification of the humble peasant dwelling - the simple rectangular house on its own flat mound."[29]

A significant aspect of agricultural communities and settled life is the seemingly inevitable specialization of labor, the priest or religious practitioner just as much a specialist as, say, the potter, and of infinitely greater importance, since his capacity to liaison between human and godly forces may have made all other activities possible. It is very likely that at first the houses of leaders of the community were used for priestly rites; with time greater structures were built for the purpose, rising ever higher toward the heavens on a larger and larger mound, finally becoming the temple that served many villages. Under the floors of the temple platforms great nobles were buried and"the evidence at hand suggests that this could have taken place already by Ocós times,"[30] i.e. by 850 B.C., indicating a strongly evolved ceremonialism. This may have been unique to the Ocós, for by the Middle Formative period, that is, from 800-300 B.C., the Highlands and Lowlands, though

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[29]Coe, Op. Cit., p. 32.

[30]Ibid., p. 45.

supporting heavy populations,[31] have yet to show proof of the existence of writing or architecture, art being confined to the production of pottery.

It is a matter of wonder, then, that in just this period the Olmec civilization, centered at La Venta on the Gulf Coast of Mexico, was at its height and produced in great numbers what is regarded as the first identifiable deity of the Mesoamerican pantheon, the rain god, whose form unites the snarling jaguar and the crying human child. But it was neither their deity nor their massive architectural complexes that were the primary influences on the Maya. It was the highly elaborate and accurate Long Count calendar and the development of writing that the Olmecs bequeathed, no small inheritance to be sure. Maya calendrics, as it pertains to religious ritual, is a subject that will be discussed in greater detail later in the course of this study.

Archeological investigation indicates that the foundation for Maya culture was only firmly established in the Middle Formative period when Maya-speaking peoples spread throughout Mesoamerica. But of true

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[31]Coe, Op. Cit., p. 46.

Maya civilization, with its "vaulted masonry architecture,...naturalistic painting and relief style, Long Count calendar, and hierogylphic writing"[32] there is no sign yet. It was between the Late Formative (300 B.C.-150 A.D.) and Proto-Classic (150-300 A.D.) that these characteristics of the Classic Maya evolved.

Of particular interest in the transitional period between the Late Formative and Proto-Classic is the Izapan civilization which centered in Chiapas also.[33] The cultural link between the Izapa and Maya is not linguistic, but the Izapa Long-lipped God can be discerned in Chac, the Maya rain god, though in somewhat altered form.[34] Also, the Izapan art style is "highly painterly" and "emphasizes historical and mythic scenography with great attention to plumage and other costume detail,"[35] characteristics which seem to carry over into Maya work.

Another Late Formative site equal in importance to the Izapa was Kaminaljuyú, a center for the Miraflores people "whose rulers must have possessed a

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[32]Coe, Op. Cit., p. 51.

[33]Ibid., p. 60.

[34]Willey, Op. Cit., p. 106.

[35]Coe, Op. Cit., p. 61.

formidable economic and political power over much of the Maya highlands at this time."[36] Tomb excavations indicate luxurious living on the part of the rulers. More significant, however, was their construction of the flat-topped stepped pyramids with broad front stairways; these served funerary purposes. This solidly establishes a pre-Classic origin for the pyramid as funerary architecture.

This brings us, rather arbitrarily to be sure, to the Classic Period (300-900 A.D.), supposedly a New World Golden Age, but like the Greek Golden Age not entirely tranquil. All evidence points to wealth, trade, prosperity and sumptuous living, at least for the nobility when they weren't in active combat. Suggestions by Coe would indicate war as a major occupation of the Maya,[37] which contradicts the more general notion that they were an essentially peaceful and harmonious-living people. Coe claims that contrary to previous assumptions, Maya government was completely secular; it was not a rule by priests.[38] This makes his a rather lonely voice, for

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[36] Coe, Op. Cit., p. 64.

[37] Ibid., p. 74.

[38] Ibid.

no other scholar seems to share this view. Nevertheless, the Maya were formidable warriors and the warlord a major governmental figure.

On the basis of archeological and cultural differences, the Classic Period is divided into Early and Late, with 600 A.D. being the approximate date separating the two. A major influence on the Maya at this divisional time was the culture at Teotihuacán in Central Mexico, a culture established by the first century A.D. and ending abruptly at the end of the seventh. By the fifth century, however, they had established their hegemony in the highlands of the Southern Area of Guatemala. In that area, at least, "Maya ways of doing things were replaced with Mexican."[39] But the Central Area, too, was very possibly under the domination of Teotihuacán, as revealed by excavations at Tikal. Of particular interest is a stela found there that dates from about 500 A.D., bearing a relief portraying

> "...a great Maya personage, loaded down with jade ornaments almost to the point of obscuring him, who carries in the crook of his left arm the head of a god wearing in its headdress the Tikal 'Emblem Glyph'. On either side is a standing warrior whose dress and ornament... brands him as a foreigner from Teotihuacán. One of the shields shows the face of the great Teotihuacán Rain God, Tlaloc."[40]

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[39]Coe, Op. Cit., p. 81.

[40]Ibid., p. 84.

All of this points to the likelihood that at this time even the Central Area of Guatemala may have been paying tribute to the lords of Mexico and not to their own.

It is not always possible to trace Teotihuácan influence at other Maya centers in the Central Area and it may have been restricted to the Tikal-Uaxactun section. However that may be, there was a period of great upheaval at the end of the sixth century, probably a result of internecine wars. By the seventh century Classic Maya culture seems to have been reestablished in full strength.[41]

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With regard to the organization of Classic Maya society, there is no documentary evidence. General conclusions have been drawn largely from the pictorial art of the Classic period and from what little is known of Post-Classic forms, although the latter must also be regarded as indirect evidence. It is remarkable,

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[41]Willey, Op. Cit., p. 137.

therefore, that so much seems to have been pieced together, as witnessed by the multitude of books on various aspects of Maya life.

The most recent studies have abandoned the concept of "empire" in relation to Maya civilization in favor of the "city-state" concept.[42] And it does, indeed, seem most appropriate considering the agricultural village life that formed its economic basis as well as its governmental form. The villages, in turn, "were organized into larger territorial units with leadership focused in ceremonial centers or politico-religious capitals."[43] These centers seem to have exercised control over lesser centers within a given region. Although paved roads and causeways connected many of these,[44] they were apparently for ceremonial purposes, and the primary paths of movement of ideas and knowledge, as well as goods, was by overland trails and by water routes. The pochteca, or merchants, served as a source of news as well as merchandise. Yet it seems more than likely that priests, too, moved between centers, for "ideas freely interchanged between

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[42]Willey, Op. Cit., p. 136.

[43]Ibid., p. 86.

[44]Charles Gallenkamp, Maya, Frederick Muller, Ltd., London, 1960, p. 79.

cities, as well as certain innovations in cosmology and ceremonialism."[45] This would also account for the fact that writing, calendrics, architecture and art were so homogeneous over such a large area, and "this argues for much travel and exchange of ideas among the ruling priests."[46]

The above quotation brings us directly to the question of Maya leadership. Morley is somewhat confusing, for he appears to contradict himself by making references to "ruling priests" and yet stating

> "It is probable, however, that when the Maya civilization was at its peak, leadership and administrative functions were confined to the nobility and the priesthood."[47]

If it is true that priest and noble conducted the affairs of state, the next seemingly logical conclusion is the apparent close tie between the royal and the theological representatives. This raises questions: are they indeed separate and distinct beings, the priest and the noble lord, or does one being, the ruler, embody both aspects in his one person? Is there a prescriber and an activator, someone who divines the

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[45]Gallenkamp, Op. Cit., p. 87.

[46]Morley, Op. Cit., p. 46.

[47]Ibid., p. 33.

secrets of the gods and transmits them to the temporal ruler of the city-state, who as leader and warrior sees to their fulfillment? In the actual working out of the Maya system this division holds true, and a variety of necessary activities were within the functional sphere of specialists, as we shall see. Yet, the question raised earlier as to whether the halach uinic was also the chief priest is answered by Morley also when he says "it is likely that the halach uinic was the highest ecclesiastical authority as well."[48] This would make Classic Maya government a theocracy, with the halach uinic embodying in his person both secular and sacred power, and

> "...there is every reason to believe that the priests of a highly organized and dogmatically inflexible religious cult ruled the central Maya area."[49]

This is further emphasized in art works, in which the symbols of the halach uinic vary depending on which of his aspects is being represented. The Manikin Sceptre in the right hand and the round shield in the left indicate the administrator. The Manikin Sceptre, in the shape

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[48]Morley, Op. Cit., p. 145.

[49]Ibid., p. 144.

of a small human form with a long curling nose and one leg ending in the head of a serpent.[50] The Double-Headed Ceremonial Bar, usually held in front of the breast, is the halach unic's priestly emblem, although on occasions he impersonates the deity by wearing his symbolic mask. A spear, throwing stick or club is the sign of the halach uinic in his military aspect.[51]

Halach uinic ("true man" in Maya) was defined in a sixteenth century manuscript as "king, emperor, monarch, prince, or great lord."[52] Another dictionary translates this as "governor or bishop."[53] At any rate, there is no doubt that the halach uinic was a territorial ruler endowed with considerable power. He ruled with the aid of a council of chiefs, priests, and special councilors, or ah cuch cabob.[54] The batabob, the local or village chiefs, were probably

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[50]Morley, Op. Cit., p. 145.

[51]Ibid., p. 146.

[52]Ibid., p. 145.

[53]J. Eric S. Thompson, The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilization, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1954, p. 81

[54]Morley, Op. Cit., p. 145.

appointed by him and these chiefs supposedly "stood in a sort of feudal relation to him, most of whom were no doubt his close blood relations."[55]

Moving from the upper to the lower portion of the social scale, the ordinary farmer stood in a feudal relation to everyone above him. He contributed to the support of the halach uinic, the village chief, and the priests by giving a percentage of what he produced and by working on the construction of the numerous buildings that comprised the ceremonial complex.[56] But many things were done for him in return, for it is in the nature of a feudal societal structure that the ruling class bears heavy responsibilities for the well-being of everyone in its domain, and the battle against all malevolent hindering forces is constant. It was necessary to know what circumstances would occasion good or evil action from the gods, and this knowledge resided with the priests.

> "Certainly they were custodians of the esoteric and scientific knowledge of the civilization. They were the astronomers, astrologers, and historians. They understood the hieroglyphic writing and manipulated the complex calendrical systems."[57]

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[55]Morley, Op. Cit., p. 145.

[56]Ibid., p. 158.

[57]Willey, Op. Cit., p. 131.

Man was entirely dependent on the gods, gods of time, the heavenly bodies, and agriculture. But Maya religion was dualistic in nature, benevolent gods opposing malevolent ones, and complex rites of prayer, fasting and sacrifice were absolutely necessary to prevent an evil or ill-timed event. Often the dualism of positive and negative seems to have resided within the same god.

> "They had gods of the rain - Chacs, who sprinkled the earth with water from gourds to cause rain or, if they were angry, emptied them all at once to cause floods..."[58]

Obviously the complexity of the Maya pantheon is abetted by having separate names for the light and dark sides of their deities. The struggle between the opposing forces of good and evil was not solely for control of the destiny of the world but also for the soul of man. To the Maya, the soul was immortal, and after death, went to heaven or hell, depending on the quality of the life lived.

> "The Maya Paradise was a place of delight, without pain or suffering, and with an abundance of delicious food and drink. Here the ceiba tree grew, under which warriors killed in battle, sacrificial victims, women who had died in childbirth, and suicides could rest forever. Others went to Mitnal, an underworld where demons tortured people with cold, hunger, thirst, and misery."[59]

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[58]Miguel Covarrubias, Indian Art of Mexico and Central America, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1957, p. 220.

[59]Frederick A. Peterson, Ancient Mexico, George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., London, 1959, p. 142.

The Maya had their creator god, Hunab Ku, but with his active work done in some remote past time, he seems to have retired in favor of his son, Itzamna, who stood at the head of the Maya pantheon. He shares the quadruplicity of other Maya gods by being associated with the four world directions and their colors. Yet his four-ness mystically merges into one-ness, a concept familiar in the Christian Trinity.

Itzamna is probably best regarded as Lord of the Heavens, Lord of the Day and Night. In another manifestation he also becomes the Sun God.[60] He is credited with being "the first priest and inventor of writing,"[61] and figured largely in New Year ceremonies. Yet Itzamna shared the dual aspect of other Maya deities. As Lord of the Night, he passed into the underworld, took on the color black and was associated with death.[62] But Itzamna never assumed the importance of the Rain God, Chac, whose good will was constantly sought through ceremony and sacrifice. For the farmer, rain is synonymous with creation and life, and for the "Maya

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[60]Morley, Op. Cit., p. 195.

[61]Ibid., p. 196.

[62]J. Eric S. Thompson, Op. Cit., p. 227.

farmer whose paramount interest was his cornfield, Chac was the all important deity."[63] But there was always the god of death, Ah Puch, standing behind Chac, the god of rain, and thus life, so great care was necessary in performing ritual; accuracy was sublimely important.

The Maya gods seem innumerable. There were sky gods and earth gods, gods of the underworld, gods of the trades, even gods of inanimate objects such as the god of the flint or obsidian blade.[64] Many of these gods shared the quadruplicity already mentioned in connection with Itzamna, and the duality of benevolent and malevolent. This was complicated further by the duality of age and sex, for a god could appear as young or old, male or female.[65]

Of paramount importance in Maya life was the deification of periods of time and of numbers. The uinals, the 20-day Maya months, were gods, as were the numbers assigned to the days. In fact, deification

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[63]Morley, Op. Cit., p. 197.

[64]J. Eric S. Thompson, Op. Cit., p. 232.

[65]Ibid., p. 233.

in this case is a fine example of the slippery quality of the gods of the Maya pantheon. Thompson sums it up nicely when he says:

> "The days were in a way embodiments of gods, such as the sun and moon, the maize deity, the death god, and the jaguar god, which were drawn from their various categories to be reassembled in this series. The numbers which accompany the days were also gods and perhaps correspond to the thirteen sky gods, though they are also in the same sequence as thirteen of the day gods. The fact that in this series of thirteen occur gods of the underworld or surface of the earth does not seriously militate against their identification as the original thirteen gods of the heavens, for Maya deities pass elusively from one region to the other. Similarly, all periods of time appear to have been regarded as gods, and Maya divinities form and re-form in bewildering aggroupments, thereby supplying the priest-astrologer with means to hedge on his prophecies..."[66]

Maya calendrics constitutes a study of major proportions. No less than five known calendars were in use at the same time: the 260-day calendar, the solar calendar, the lunar calendar, the Venus calendar, and the so-called Long Count calendar. Each of these combined a knowledge of astronomy, mathematics, and astrology with religious concepts and rites. The calendric symbols, too, may have been the sacred origin of the development of hieroglyphic writing. Maya time-period glyphs have a strange animation, most appearing to stand on feet, which serves to accentuate their "passage of time" quality. (See Illustration 3)

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[66] J. Eric S. Thompson, Op. Cit., p. 232.

Fig. 9. Signs for the months in the 365-day count

Illustration 3

While the Maya "shared certain calendric notions and principles with other Mesoamerican peoples..., they were outstanding elaborators in this intellectual field."[67] Yet with all the practicality that calendars and the measurement of time suggest, there is still a mythical and mystical strain that runs through Maya consciousness. Units of time were thought of as burdens bringing good or ill fortune, and the gods were the bearers. Time, too, was not just the time of this world, for the Maya believed that the world had incarnated several times before, and this may account for the mystical merging of past and future in their prophetic chants.[68]

Interestingly enough, the 260-day calendar was not based on the movement of heavenly bodies; it was a purely intellectual construction.

> "It works on a permutation principle of 13 numbers and 20 day names which revolve about each other so that the same number and name recur in combination every 260 days."[69]

This 260-day calendar constituted a sacred divinatory year, the Tzolkin,[70] which meshed with the solar calendar of 365 days in such a way as to produce a calendar round of 52 years, a complete sacred cycle.

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[67] Willey, Op. Cit., p. 132.

[68] J. Eric S. Thompson, Op. Cit., p. 14.

[69] Willey, Op. Cit., p. 132.

[70] Morley, Op. Cit., p. 38.

The Maya Long Count calendar, like the solar, lunar, and Venus calendars, was based on astronomical knowledge. In addition, it used the mathematical concepts of place enumeration and zero, along with the Maya vigesimal counting system which used the number 20 as a complete unit. The Long Count calendar counted days from a starting point in the mythical past and could be extended indefinitely into the future. It was a highly accurate system, and may have been initiated as a means of keeping chronological records,[71] but was apparently discarded shortly before the Spanish Conquest in favor of the less cumbersome Short Count method.[72]

If all these calendars were in use at the same time, it strongly suggests a Maya mind of anagrammatic inclination and a dire need for the clarification the priests might supply. The Maya were extremely superstitious and everything was fraught with omens: dreams, the flight of birds, and especially numbers. The number 13 that figures so importantly in the 260-day calendar and in the number of Gods of the Upper World, was regarded as a lucky number and appears in ceremonies

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[71]Morley, Op. Cit., p. 241.

[72]Willey, Op. Cit., p. 136.

in which "offerings of thirteen loaves of bread, thirteen bowls of food, and thirteen cakes made of thirteen layers each are prepared."[73] A God of the Upper World could not be offended by refusing him sustenance; calamity would surely result. This is almost the equivalent of the Grimm Brothers tale of Sleeping Beauty, and the dire consequences of not inviting the thirteenth fairy to the banquet.

As already indicated, the Maya used the calendar, particularly the tzolkin, for all aspects of life.

> "It includes the conditions of religious duties and religious conduct; it is a moral code, a social and agrarian order, commercial law, civil code, the Magna Carta of the Maya world, the rules governing relationships not only between the individual and God, but also the individual and the State. To a certain degree it also regulated taxes."[74]

A certain percentage of all monetary gain from business ventures was due the gods, the propitious days for such ventures having been determined by the priests.

The foregoing discussion should reveal the necessity for priestly stratification. The chief priest of a religious center, the Ahau Kin Mai, had duties that

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[73]Morley, Op. Cit., p. 38.

[74]Paul Westheim, The Art of Ancient Mexico, Doubleday and Co., Inc., New York, 1965, p. 178.

were both administrative and tutorial.[75] He assigned priests, after examination, to specific locations and work. But he also "taught hieroglyphic writing, genealogy, ceremonies for the cure of sickness, calendrical computation, astronomy, divination, and the ritualistic round.[76] He officiated only at major ceremonies. In addition, he acted as chief advisor to the halach uinic. Since celibacy was not required of priests, except prior to special religious observances, the Ahau Kin Mai married, had a family life, and his eldest son succeeded him in office. The Ahau Kin Mai was not only knowledgeable, but busy!

The Ah Kin, the common priest, performed the necessary daily rituals, made divinations from the hieroglyphic books, and it was he who received the heart of sacrifical victims from the hands of the nacon, who performed the actual sacrifice and removed the heart. The nacon, because of his function, was not particularly esteemed by the people.[77] Four chacs, aids to the nacon, held down the sacrificial victim. They had additional responsibilities, however,

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[75]J. Eric S. Thompson, Op. Cit., p. 249.

[76]Ibid.

[77]Morley, Op. Cit., p. 156.

helping at puberty rites, lighting the fire at the New Year festival, and anointing the idols with blood at the required times.[78]

Another group of priests were the chilanes, who were greatly respected for their visionary capacities. They were "prophets, astrologers, and soothsayers... and induced visions by narcotics."[79]

Maya religious ceremonies and rituals seem to have been ordered according to a pattern that included:

> "...(1) preliminary fasting and abstinences, symbolic of spiritual purification; (2) selection by priestly divination of an auspicious day for the rite; and at the ceremony itself: (3) an expulsion of the evil spirit from the worshippers; (4) incensing of the idols; (5) prayers; (6) the sacrifice, if possible, of some living thing, animal or human."[80]

Dancing, feasting, and drunkenness were looked forward to at the conclusion of the ceremony.

It has been generally thought that the use of idols and the need for human sacrifice was minimal among the basically peaceful Maya until the introduction of new gods and rituals by the invading Mexicans in the tenth century, A.D. The discovery and examination

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[78]Morley, Op. Cit., p. 157.

[79]Peterson, Op. Cit., p. 143.

[80]Morley, Op. Cit., p. 206.

of the frescoes at Bonampak have altered this older view and

> "...give us a new insight into the ceremonial life and culture of the ancient Mayas of the Classic period...and corrects many former dogmas, such as their abhorrence of warfare and human sacrifice, the low position of their women, and an overemphasis on religion. It shows that the Maya feudal class was as ruthless and military-minded as its contemporaries in the rest of Middle America."[81]

The attitude expressed by Covarrubias may be the result of an excessive evaluative swing to a relatively opposite pole of thought. Closer examination of the frescoes, especially since they have all the earmarks of a sort of mystery drama, may serve to negate the two extreme views and ultimately bring about a construct of Maya life falling somewhere in between.

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Because large areas of the murals at Bonampak were encrusted with lime, photographs of all the walls were not possible. By applying kerosene, however, the lime was rendered temporarily transparent and over a period of time two sets of water color copies were made. One set, by Agustin Villagra Caleti, is on exhibit in Mexico City at the Museo de Antropologia.[82] The other

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[81]Covarrubias, Op. Cit., p. 262.

[82]Ancient Maya Paintings of Bonampak, Mexico, Carnegie Institute of Washington, Supplementary Pub. #46, Washington, 1955, p. 8.

set was done for the Carnegie Institution of Washington by Antonio Tejeda Fonseca and is being preserved at Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology.[83] The reproductions of the Tejeda watercolors appended to this study are one-sixteenth the size of the original murals.[84] While they are in no sense accurate stylistic reproductions of the painted originals, they do catch something of their quality and their approximate color, and they do chronicle the full extent of the subjects and activities represented.

The two photographs, Plates I and II, were taken from Mexico - Pre-Hispanic Painting, published by the New York Graphic Society in cooperation with UNESCO. The originals were taken by Giles G. Healey. The photographs are included to show the nature of the present state of preservation of the frescoes, as well as to give a more accurate indication of their style.

In terms of making comparisons between the murals at Bonampak and other pre-Columbian paintings, not a great deal can be said. What remains of ancient "Mexican and Maya painting is still extremely meagre and sketchy."[85]

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[83]Supplementary Publication #46, Op. Cit., p. 8.

[84]Ibid.

[85]Jacques Soustelle and Ignacio Bernal, EDS., Mexico: Pre-Hispanic Painting, the New York Graphic Society by arrangement with UNESCO, 1958, p. 7.

Plate I

Plate II

It is more than likely that frescoes were used fairly extensively to decorate the many temples and buildings of the ceremonial centers, but under the relentless weather, with its bleaching sun and heavy rains, and the equally relentless hand of man, whether invading native groups or Spaniards, most have vanished.

Of the paintings that do remain, those at Teotihuacán and Monte Albán for example, and the illuminations in the few surviving codices from the post-Classic period, there are certain stylistic similarities that link them to the frescoes at Bonampak and, taken together, suggest a commonality of technical approach that makes them immediately identifiable as Central American. The dominating stylistic factor is a fluid, expressive line, an overwhelming attention to the silhouette, and the absence of concern with perspective and chiaroscuro. In spite of a splendid range of colors, the essence of the style seems to be calligraphic, or glyphistic. Yet there are distinct differences in the qualitative effect of paintings from area to area, and these differences suggest a corresponding difference in psychological outlook.

Religious motifs and a strong sense of the austere pervade the paintings at Teotihuacán and Monte Albán.[86]

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[86] Soustelle and Bernal, Op. Cit., p. 9.

Here the sacred and the formal go hand in hand. At Bonampak, on the other hand, there is an extraordinary mixture of the sacred and the secular, the formal and the informal. It may be as Westheim suggests, that for the Maya "the religious is not the exclusive goal and meaning of the artistic production; that along with the religious, relegating it to second place and at times substituting for it completely, rises the esthetic, the fascinating experience of the esthetic."[87] This would make the art of the Maya rather "baroque" as opposed to the "classic" art of Teotihuácan and Monte Albán where, supposedly, religion dominated all, where "the old and the traditional was the sacred..."[88]

Is it true that "respect for the sacred tradition did not exist in Maya art, or, if it did, it was easy to bypass it"?[89] How can this statement be reconciled with another by the same author saying that "The Maya people were filled with a profound religiosity, even more profound if possible than that of the peoples of the Central Plateau"?[90] If religiosity is a criterion, then perhaps Maya painting is more "classic" than

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[87]Westheim, Op. Cit., p. 155.

[88]Ibid.

[89]Ibid.

[90]Ibid., p. 177.

supposed.

What is it about the Bonampak frescoes that has provoked so much commentary, often conflicting commentary? Soustelle and Bernal sum up their provocative nature, stating the representational elements that are novel and that have resulted in extensive study and an attempt to reconstruct Maya life within the new framework revealed.

> "Bonampak is a sort of pictorial encyclopedia of a Maya city of the VIIth century; the city comes to life there again, with its ceremonies and its processions, its stiff and solemn looking dignitaries weighed down by their heavy plumed adornments, its warriors clothed in jaguar-skins. Lively or violent scenes are there displayed side by side with gracious, familiar pictures of daily life. A complete cross-section of society - women, children, servants, musicians, warrior chiefs, dying prisoners, masked dancers - that is what these painters...succeeded in depicting on those walls..."[91]

In addition to a liveliness of linear style, there is also an attempt at foreshortening and a naturalistic representation of forms that is generally acknowledged, admired, and considered as possibly unique in Maya painting. This, however, is purely speculative.

It is obvious that the most impressive aspect of the Bonampak murals has been their so-called "naturalism." It has been repeatedly stressed that the scenes presented were in all probability personally witnessed by

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[91]Soustelle and Bernal, Op. Cit., p. 9.

the artist[92], and that he did not hesitate to include vignettes of what went on behind the ceremonial scenes, so to speak, in a way that suggests an awareness of the aesthetics of form.[93] In addition, there is the informality of conversational groups, people dressing, orders being issued to servants, as well as a great sense of action, generated to a large extent by hand gestures. Many of the scenes and figures draw a strong emotional response as well. Yet the occasion must have been a serious one, for no one is seen even smiling.

In actual fact, the interpretation of what is being represented in these frescoes also lies in the speculative realm. Even on purely visual grounds there are questions. In Rooms 1 and 3, for example, there are several important people whose sex is impossible to determine.[94] In the large sense, there has been little difficulty in assigning general titles to the four basic acts and giving general descriptions to the scenes. To be anything more than broad, however, is exceedingly difficult. A case in point is in the scene of the arraignment of prisoners where three men

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[92]Proskouriakoff, Op. Cit., p. 42, and Supplementary Pub. #46, Op. Cit., p. 11.

[93]Proskouriakoff, Op. Cit., p. 42.

[94]Supplementary Pub. #46, Op. Cit., p. 17.

are shown whose hands drip blood. Did the rather well-dressed man near them do something to cause them to bleed? And, if so, how and why? No fingers seem to have been cut off, no bark-cloth paper to indicate the collection of blood for some ceremony, and there seems no evidence that the Maya removed fingernails for the fun of it.

The "what" and the "why" of many objects represented in the murals is discussed at some length by Thompson in his ethnological notes,[95] where it is evident that possibilities are being explored but definite identification is avoided. Since complete accounts of Maya ceremonies do not exist, a good deal of guesswork has gone into tentative explanations. Even though "no positive elucidation of the scenes can be offered,"[96] some of the guesses by Maya specialists seem to be solidly grounded. The nature of a man's clothing, or a glyph in his eye, may make him readily identifiable to an expert. On the other hand, some statements are questionable.

Particularly difficult to deal with is the insistence that esoteric symbolism is essentially absent

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[95]Thompson, Pub. #602, Op. Cit., pp. 60-64.

[96]Supplementary Pub. #46, Op. Cit., p. 17.

or unstressed,[97] forms being "presented by the artist as data of his observation rather than as symbols."[98] Yet in the descriptions there are constant references to the meaning of symbols. The appearance of the water lily evokes the comment that it "is the emblem of the abundant earth, both its surface and interior, and is worn by the gods connected therewith."[99] The sign in the eye of a god impersonator is referred to as "a symbol of germination and fertility."[100] If the artist recorded what he saw in this case, his vision was indeed extraordinary!

There is no reason to suppose that the Maya departed from ancient custom in the case of Bonampak. Traditionally, the artist was either under the direct supervision of a priest or was himself a priest. Westheim makes a direct reference to the community support of the artist "as a member of the clergy."[101]

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[97]Proskiourakoff, Pub. #602, Op. Cit., p. 41.

[98]Ibid., p. 43.

[99]Thompson, Pub. #602, Op. Cit., p. 49.

[100] Ibid., p. 50.

[101]Westheim, Op. Cit., p. 43.

As artists they were strictly regulated. They

> "...remained isolated while they worked... they were confined to huts built exclusively for this purpose, where no one was allowed to see them and where they underwent a peculiar ritual in which they burned copal, drew their own blood as an offering, fasted, and abstained from sexual intercourse."[102]

Surely as a priest the artist at Bonampak must have been aware of the meaning of his symbols and used them consciously. In spite of the naturalism and informality of the murals, then, it seems more than reasonable to concur with Covarrubias when he says that "Maya art was rigidly restricted to the representation of ceremonial and religious ideas. Consequently it is only natural that it grew into a symbolic, highly decorative art at the service of an urban priestly aristocracy."[103]

An examination of the frescoes reveals a definite hieratic organization. The halach uinic is always identifiable either by his position in a compositional group, by the magnificence of his clothing, or by the intensity and sternness of his expression. Each stratum of Maya feudal society is reflected in a similar manner. Indication of rank is often by

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[102]Westheim, Op. Cit., p. 41.

[103]Covarrubias, Op. Cit., p. 226.

placement in relation to the halach uinic, by dress, or by occupation. There is a definite chain of command. Orders are issued by the halach uinic and passed from person to person as indicated by the turned heads and the hand gestures.

Viewing the frescoes as the glorification or apotheosis of a priest-king,[104] each act would appear to stress one of his major functions. This is not altered by the possibility that the halach uinic was already regarded as divine in his lifetime,[105] and there is every chance that the genealogy taught by the Ahau Kin Mai was to establish a divine right to rule.

The scenes of Act One present the halach uinic in the role of overseer. His duty is to see that ritual preparations follow the required pattern so that the gods will not be offended. Simply garbed, he watches and commands from his dais where he must be looked up to and obeyed. Upon him depends the well-being of the people, for he is the mediator between them and the gods.

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[104]Covarrubias, Op. Cit., p. 227.

[105]Westheim, Op. Cit., p. 185.

Act Two appears to be the glorification of the military aspect of the halach uinic. He is elaborately costumed in a sleeveless jerkin of jaguar-skin, the heelguards of his sandals are of jaguar-skin, even the front end of his long spear is wrapped in jaguar-skin. If jaguar-skin clothing is a symbol of dignity, he is well invested. The king becomes the invincible warrior, an expression of the superhuman.

Part of the halach uinic's responsibility as king was his judicial function. In Act Three he appears on top of a pyramidal structure in the role of judge. His military costume has here been embellished by a large jade pectoral and a spectacular headdress with long quetzal feathers. With him rests the decision as to which of the captives will be sacrificed to the gods and which will become slaves.

In one scene of Act Four the role of the halach uinic becomes one of self-sacrifice. By his act of venesection he gives his precious blood to the gods. Another scene reveals him as the passive but majestic onlooker. Before him the ceremonial dance takes place, a dance that somehow stands in a symbolic relation to the sacred calendar,[106] and the rhythm of time becomes the rhythm of the dance. What could be more pleasing

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[106]Peterson, Op. Cit., p. 206.

to the gods of the tzolkin?

The building in which these murals were painted is undoubtedly a funerary monument. Granted that the artist painted what he had seen. But, rather obviously, he painted from memory, and there is little question that his memory encompassed a series of similar scenes that were repeated at intervals in the ceremonial cycle. That these scenes were chosen to be represented on the walls of such small chambers rarely entered and seen by few, suggests something other than the narrative commemoration of a single historical event. They appear, rather, to stand forever for the ceremony itself, a poetic reenactment stretching into infinity. There the divine ruler forever participates, forever stands before his people as lord and bishop in an eternal epiphany.

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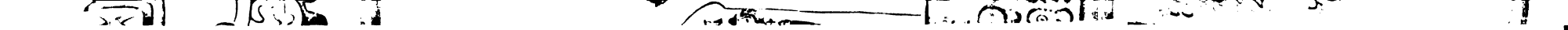

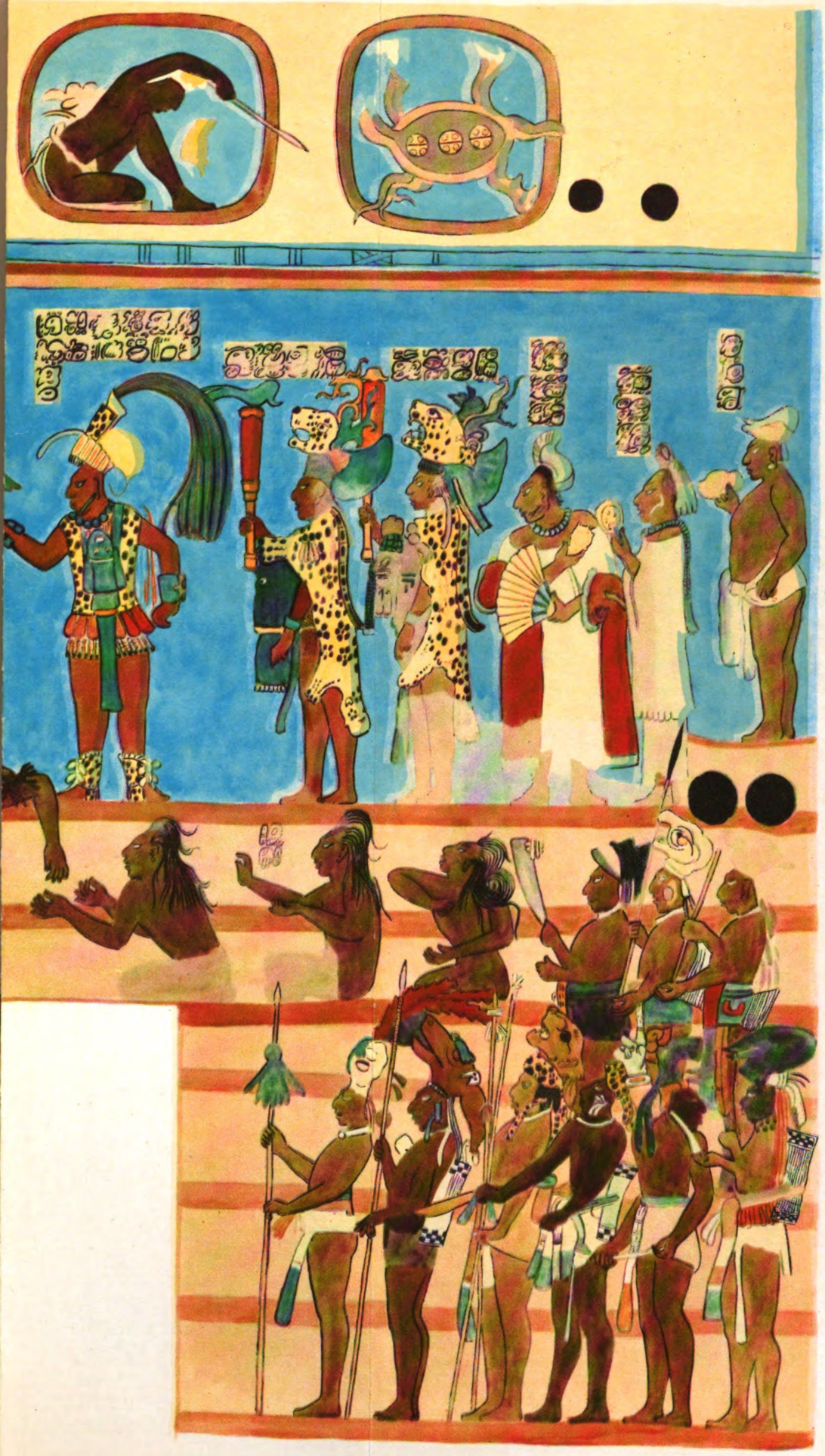

Painting by Antonio Tejeda of the mural in Room 2, Structure 1, Bonampak.

Carnegie Institution of Washington