

A MATERIALISTIC PERSPECTIVE ABOUT THE COURTLY MAYA ELITES: CONTRAST WITH EVIDENCE FOUND IN TEXTS

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Recent studies on Maya hieroglyphic corpuses have yielded new details about the composition and nature of the high ranks within the hierarchy of the ancient Maya: that of the courtly or non-royal elites. These elite occupations are known through the procedures used in successions, the connections with family structures, the sources of their high rank, and through their activities. The next step is to connect these courtly elites identified through the text, with physical spaces and material objects, with the purpose of:

- Placing them within the sites where they lived and worked
- Investigating the materials that correlate with the high status they show according to the written record.

The purpose of status investigations in the material record is to refine the complexity of the traditional list of social markers, such as the height of mounds or the occurrence of luxury items. Major research works, such as that conducted by Joel Palka at Dos Pilas (1995), have shown that only through material evidence it is possible to create a hierarchical profile with many levels, or possibly, a continuum of social ranks. This conclusion is not consistent with that which is understood in virtue of text records. Is it adequate to use only material remains to outline the subtleties of rank? An alternative method consists in using elite behaviors, known through texts and material remains, as a starting point. Such an approach involves a different methodological insight to record status, and points to the possibility that status may have been achieved based on causes other than merely material goods. In this paper, several examples are being considered to test this notion. Results obtained make it possible to give some thought to the emerging comprehension of elitism among the ancient Maya.

CATEGORIES OF ELITE BEHAVIORS

As of some specific verbal phrases in hieroglyphic texts, direct evidence on elite behaviors and activities may be derived. Passages in texts point to four categories of activities for the courtly elites:

- Ritual activities (dances, incantations, impersonation of gods, rituals of spreading, ball game)
- Warfare (the capture of prisoners)

- Political activities (accession to office)
- Dedication activities (in structures and monuments)

Such activities involve requisites –such as special locations, tools or teams (dance and ballgame, for example), and by-products or residues (such as burnings in rituals or the burial of caches for offerings). But many of these specific behaviors are problematic, be it because they took place outside the enclosure of the group itself, or because a very poor amount of remains were left.

However, these activities suggest some categories and broad characteristics of elite behavior (Figure 1). The first category is public ritual and political action. Many of these activities need a specialized space, suggesting the need of spatial differentiation within a given elite group. Besides, it would seem that a clear separation between public and private space is necessary for executing daily functions (such as sleeping), and public aspects of the courtly office (such as entertaining visitors or sponsoring ritual events).

In the second place, written information suggests that courtly elites interrelated through social networks both with the rulers (grammatically described as elite “owners”), and with subordinate individuals. The link with royalty –and the responsibilities it entailed- may indicate proximity or a direct physical connection of the courtly elite groups with the site center (for example, through a *sacbe*). In the case of connections of non-royal elites with individual of a lower status, the hieroglyphic evidence suggests that there were levels of internal rank even at the heart of the courtly elites. It is probable that a residential grouping of non-royal elites could show examples of status differentiation with respect to the immediately adjacent structures of the group, where group members or subordinate individuals were located. The large or vaulted architecture is also an indication of their capabilities to control manpower.

An additional kind of apparent behavior observed in glyphs is the associated status ascribed to many of these positions. Text evidences show that kinship bonds played a significant role in the succession of these positions and that often, the offices remained for a long time at the heart of a same family; dynasties of courtly elites may be seen carrying the same name, for example at El Cayo and Sak Tz’ ĩ. One similar case regarding the bonds among the lineage and the official elite position could be the extended, high rank occupation of a specific residential area.

The importance of the ability to control texts and images is another indication of the status behavior implicit in hieroglyphs. Less formal texts than the monuments, such as portable objects and even architectural iconography, could be major indicators of this category.

In short, the typical traits in elite residential areas are presented here based on the categories of activities and behaviors suggested in the hieroglyphic record. Whether or not material remains indicating wealth are present (in burials, for example), the concurrence of all or several of these categories has the potential to identify high rank elite groups.

THREE KNOWN CASES OF COURTLY ELITES

The clearest way to prove this idea consists in examining examples showing an elite complex identified in the texts as belonging to an elite member. The known examples are but a few:

- Some of them are found in Copan, in Groups 9N-82 (Webster *et al.* 1986; Webster 1989), and 9M-18 (or, CV-43; Leventhal 1979; Willey and Leventhal 1979), where benches with hieroglyphs describe the owner of the structure as *ajk' uhun*.
- In Palenque, the Palace Panel in Group IV (Rands and Rands 1961), features Chak Sutz, *sajal*, *bah ajaw*, and *yajaw k'ak'* (Schele 1991).
- In Xcalumkin (Becquelin and Michelet 1992), two different structures are marked as being owned by *sajals*.

The examples from Copan have been the ones excavated with the greater detail, while the examples from Palenque and particularly those from Xcalumkin have been poorly examined, from the archaeological point of view. The examples from Copan and Palenque will serve as test cases to ascertain whether the behavioral characteristics of the elite set forth are useful for already identified elite groups.

This table shows the results of this type of examination (Figure 2). Both groups in Copan –clearly of a domestic type- show as well a structure which seems to be remarkably different in use (non-residential, probably). The limited excavations at Group IV in Palenque make of it an undefined case. The examples from Copan – combining central and lateral rooms as well as enclosed spaces- point to the presence of different public and private areas, similar to the example from Palenque with a second enclosed floor that undoubtedly marked an area with a restricted access.

A direct connection with the site center as well as with the ruler is present in both cases at the Copan groups located adjacent to, or nearby, the *sacbeob*, which departs from the Main Group. The Palenque group is located on the west side of the main plaza.

The long-term occupation indicated by burials that date back to earlier times, is a remarkable feature of Group 9N-82 at Copan (dated to the Early Classic period) and of the group at Palenque, where occupation extends, at least, throughout 350 years. These examples support the idea that a high rank family lived in these areas for a significant period of time. Group CV-43 at Copan features at least one earlier phase, but shows, in general, a scarce temporal depth –the occupant may have accessed that position at a more recent time.

Finally, the internal ranks, or the abilities of these elites to command other people, are evident at both groups in Copan, where there is a number of low and small structures around the central plaza of the elite group –probably for partisans and the extended family, used like service structures. The case of Palenque is not that clear. These groups include structures that involve a significant investment in construction.

The text and image control is very clear in all these areas; in addition to the monuments that describe the elites, each case included architectural sculpture and/or portable texts. Several remains in this area –part of a mirror featuring the Gulf Coast style, hidden in front of the Palace Panel at Palenque, and utensils for ball players found in one structure of Group 9N-8 at Copán, are directly related to the ritual activities of the elites known through the texts. Besides, a significant amount of utilitarian pottery was found, perhaps because these were residential areas. It is important to remember that even in those areas of a high social hierarchy, large amounts of the material found are of utilitarian character.

In short, these test cases indicate that altogether, the suggested characteristics are those expected to be encountered in elite residential areas like markers of elite behavioral categories.

TEST CASES: PIEDRAS NEGRAS AND CANCUEN

Having examined the examples where the residential groups appear clearly marked, we shall now examine two test cases that lack written evidence regarding the participation of these groups in non-royal elites. The hypothesis is that the combination of the suggested behavioral characteristics of the elite will help to ascertain whether a plaza group may have been used by the elite, or possibly, by elites with a title. Any deviation from these characteristics would suggest a different characterization of the group.

The first example is a residential group from Piedras Negras (Figure 3, Guillot *et al.* 1999; Jackson 2001). This is a plaza with three structures placed in a “U” shape. The group is oriented west, with a large entrance stairway outside Structure C-10, which provides direct access to the inner plaza of the group through the building. This western access was possibly created due to the localization of this group adjacent to the path that enters the site from north. This path may have extended to the heart of the city. On the other hand, the patio group also presented a remarkable visual connection with the acropolis. Although Structure C-10 combined public access with closed private rooms and with benches, it seems unlikely that a building with an access that crossed it from one side to the other was just a domestic dwelling. Structure C-12, on the north side of the plaza, with large benches and rooms partially or completely closed would appear like a more adequate candidate for a residential construction. Structure C-13 is a different type of structure, possibly the funerary monument of a lineage head, with benches and with such a narrow upper surface that supporting a superstructure would have been impossible. Three altar-columns were found on the benches, with a rich burial placed below (with six vessels, six jade beads, one stingray spine, two shell ear flares, and one prismatic blade). This was probably a funerary structure, possibly of a lineage founder and a focal point for the entire group.

Other burials were also found at the plaza, which was dated to the Early Classic period, suggesting an extended time span for the use of the place. There were no significant concentrations of typical household refuses (for example, kitchen utensils, or utensils for preparing meals, lithic refuses, etc.); the lower mounds, probably,

located immediately at north, were the supporting structures where these activities unfolded. Some other artifacts found are directly associated with elite ritual behaviors. They include a dedication cache under the stairway of C-12 and several offerings inside the rooms, with vessels, drums, and a carved bone with a hieroglyphic text. There was also a number of peculiar ceramic animal heads, probably used in public activities (of a political or ritual nature –perhaps as upper ends of banners, or puppets). Altogether, this group is consistent with the criteria defined for identifying the behaviors of elite activities, and it is very similar to elite groups clearly identified through hieroglyphic texts. The major difference is that while the mounds are large and include masonry, the construction of superstructures corresponds to a lesser high rank: there are no vaults and no complete masonry walls.

A second example of an excavated site that lacks any written confirmation of occupation by courtly elites is Group M9 at Cancuen (Figure 4, Jackson 2002, 2003). This group, located at the banks of the Río Pasión, was probably connected with the port immediately at south. This area is divided by a *sacbe* that communicates straight with the site center. The group is located around a large palace type structure, M9-1, which combines an open side at east, and a remarkably enclosed side at west; it also includes an enclosure for the throne, or meeting area. At east of M9-1 there are several smaller and low structures. Structure M9-15 is the largest of the structures at east, facing directly M9-1. The collection of different artifacts and the large number of individuals buried in a midden at the back of the building, suggests this was a residence. The other structures found in the area were related to domestic production, including the preparation of meals and the manufacture of lithic tools; such activities were focused on a floor built with slabs. Two of the structures at east date to a slightly earlier date; however, the occupation of this group did not exceed one hundred years (the lack of temporal depth is common in Cancuen). It could be presumed that the top ranking individual in this group was buried at M9-1; a cyst was found on the central axis of the structure, but it was empty. Inside M9-1 two infants were buried, and quartz crystals were included in the interment. Probably, these were offerings deposited at the time of construction and associated with dedication rituals.

On the other hand, the richest burial was found in one of the more humble structures (and one of the earliest ones as well). This individual was interred with two vessels and one jade ear flare, and four of his teeth featured jade inlays. Although no hieroglyphic texts were found in this group, M9-1 had elements of painted and molded stucco, suggesting the public control of iconographic representations. Besides, the finding in the plaza located on the east side of M9-1 of a pestle and a polisher for jade ear flares, suggests activities connected with elite production. The production control of such special materials may have been part of the supervising sphere of the individual who lived here. The garbage pits associated with this high ranking structure included a significant amount of utilitarian wares.

Group M9 seems to correspond to an elite group for different reasons, and satisfies some of the criteria which point to elitist behavior. However, there are two distinctive differences: the first is the absence of a different structure for a special use; the second is that the status differentiation of the structures is very obvious, although of a different type. The buildings at east –based on household activities and domestic

production- are consistent with the type of support structures. This leaves M9-1 like an elite self-sustained structure (as opposed to an integrated group of structures). The characteristics of elite behaviors in this case suggested a different type of household or community organization, one that needs a different model of explanation. One hypothesis could be that the members of the royal family lived here –most of the family lived at the palace, and therefore no additional buildings were necessary here, and the special structures for rituals or official matters may have been located at the site center as well.

CONCLUSIONS

This work has considered the possibility of examining status and hierarchy in the archaeological record based on written records of elitist behavior that can be traced in the material record. This method could be a complement or an alternative for depending only on material markers such as the presence or absence of luxury goods or grand architecture, which have proved to be highly problematic in the correlation with the sociopolitical hierarchy indicated in the texts. The result is the identification of several categories of behavior-material correlations fit to be related with elite residential groups. Although it may seem that these categories are not too surprising –and fit to be applied to elite groups with no title-, they represent a major methodological possibility to fill, through the analysis of elite activities and behaviors, the voids between written and material evidence.

This analysis of behaviors, and not merely of objects, is also important because both types of evidence, the written and the material ones, suggest that material wealth is only one part in the comprehension of status foundations for these non-royal elites. While the groups examined here are materially rich in several ways, there is not a remarkable abundance of prestige goods, while an important proportion of utilitarian ceramics with domestic and daily use objects was present. In addition to the control and ownership of material wealth, other issues were clearly related to the high level of the elites and with the importance of these high ranking individuals; in fact, texts explicitly describe a variety of other sources of elite status, for example, the roles played by members of these courtly elites as *pahuatuns* or paddlers.

In short, issues of status, material and non-material, have contributed to the achievement of hierarchy by the elites. The written and material evidence studied together cast some light on the foundations of the concept of elitism among the ancient Maya, and suggest new directions to identify social and political hierarchy in the archaeological record.

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Behavior	Correlated material expected
Ritual/political public action	Presence of a specialized/differentiated structure
Ritual/political public action	Clearly differentiated public and private space
Office control by lineage	Occupation by the group for an extended period of time
Personal/official close link with ruler	Physical connection or proximity to site center
Control of individuals of a lower rank	Rank/differentiation of structures adjacent to the group
Control of individuals of a lower rank	Manpower for the construction of large/vaulted architecture

Figure 1. Categories of elite behavior.

Correlated expected material	9N-82, Copan	9M-18, Copan	Group IV, Palenque
Occurrence of a specialized/differentiated structure	Yes	Yes	Unknown
Differentiated public and private space	Yes	Yes	Yes
Occupation by the group through an extended period of time	Yes	No	Yes
Physical connection or proximity to site center	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rank/differentiation of structures adjacent to the group	Yes	Yes	Unknown
Large/vaulted architecture	Yes	Yes	Yes

Figure 2. Categories of elite behavior: Known cases of non-royal elites.

Correlated expected material	Group C, Piedras Negras
Occurrence of a specialized/differentiated structure	Yes
Differentiated public and private space	Yes
Occupation by the group throughout an extended period of time	Yes
Physical connection or proximity to site center	Yes
Rank/differentiation of structures adjacent to the group	Yes
Large/vaulted architecture	Yes

Figure 3. Categories of elite behavior. Test cases (Piedras Negras).

Correlated expected material	Group M9, Cancuen
Occurrence of a specialized/differentiated structure	No
Differentiated public and private space	Yes
Occupation by the group throughout an extended period of time	No*
Physical connection or proximity to site center	Yes
Rank/differentiation of structures adjacent to the group	Yes*
Large/vaulted architecture	Yes

Figure 4. Categories of elite behavior: Test cases (Cancuen)