

## **BROKEN FINGERS: THE CAPTURE OF THE SCRIBE IN CLASSIC MAYA CULTURE**

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The fact that throughout time the Classic Maya ruling system varied in size, complexity, power and influence, reveals that this system was vulnerable to fragmentation through the formation of antagonistic factions, internal revolts and other political strains. In order to discourage the strains that threatened the internal cohesion of the ruling system and in turn, to preserve their power and authority, the Maya rulers used the techniques described by Gary Feinman (1998) as “integrated strategies” for discouraging fragmentation. This work examines one of those strategies: the capture during battle, and the disfiguration and execution of scribes at the service of the enemy royal families. The capture of Maya scribes illustrates how competitive exhibitions constitute a strategy of integration in the less centralized government systems.

### **POLITICAL DYNAMICS IN THE LESS CENTRALIZED STATES**

Judging by the investigation results of lesser centralized historic polities in south and east Asia –convincingly shown by Arthur Demarest (1992) to be analogous to the Maya polities- these entities were characterized by several organizational similarities:

- The control of the sovereign comprises mainly the primary centers and their surrounding areas. That is why the political power of the sovereign in the subordinate centers is not direct but instead, it is established through third parties in charge of those centers (Southall 1998; Tambiah 1976, 1985).
- The capability of the primary center to exert authority usually depends on the consensus of those in charge of the subordinate centers, who will not acknowledge the power of the sovereign through coercion (Montmollin 1989:19; Southall 1998: 61-64).
- The peripheral regions of the polities are susceptible to becoming detached from the rest of the political region of which they are a part; they may create new states or join rival factions (Montmollin 1989:27; Southall 1998:61; Bentley 1986: 292-293).

To rule, the sovereign of less centralized states had to achieve two things: (1) to diminish the forces that threatened the cohesion of the state, and (2) to maintain the

loyalty of those subordinates of whom his power was derived. Achieving these goals usually required competitive exhibitions of a military or ceremonial nature. For example, through ceremonies, the sovereigns represented situations where they played the role of central mediators in the relationship between the gods and man (Geertz 1980; Tambiah 1985; Bentley 1986). These ceremonies were competitive in nature because their goal was to improve the sovereign's access and control over the productive masses, which mainly resided in regions where the authority of the sovereign was not too prominent. A good deal of the sovereigns' efforts consisted in maintaining and expanding their ability to mobilize these masses (Geertz 1980; Tambiah 1986). This is the reason why they celebrated great ceremonies and built magnificent altars to that purpose. In this way, the power of the sovereign could be measured, in part, according to his success in the ceremonial field (Tambiah 1985: 273-274; Webster 1998:319).

A second form of competitive exhibition in these states was war, particularly those that broke against rival factions, as described by David Webster (1998, 2000). Victory in these battles confirmed the spiritual power of the sovereign and revealed his political and military power. These have a repercussion in his authority on the working masses and his ability to expand those masses by means of captures, encouraging loyalty and simultaneously discouraging insubordination and insurrection. Sovereigns would also promote state consolidation with a third form of competitive exhibition: writing. Concurring with Demarest (1992), the author believes that these political dynamics were instrumental to explain the political dynamics of the Classic Maya polities.

## **CLASSIC MAYA STATES: ORGANIZATION AND DYNAMICS**

The texts and iconography of the lowland Classic Maya states suggest that except for the capitals of the largest and more powerful states (e.g. Calakmul and Tikal), sovereigns exerted their authority through rituals and not through administrative power (Schele and Miller 1986; Demarest 1992). These rituals took place in the capital, in locations that displayed an impressive architectural presence (temples, palaces, plazas). Thus, the sovereigns exhibited themselves as essential communicational links between the human and the supernatural spheres (Schele and Freidel 1990: 66-73). One of the major ritual responsibilities of the sovereigns was war, and texts suggest that the major goal in wars was the capture of other sovereigns, to be subsequently sacrificed (Schele and Miller 1986: 109-222). Also, wars had political and economical motivations (Webster 1998, 2000).

Maya rulers went to war against two types of royalty: sovereigns from other states and insubordinate factions at the heart of their own states (Marcus 1993; Webster 2000:95). The Classic Maya states were susceptible to fragmentation, according to the hieroglyphic evidence on insurrection and intra-political segmentation, documented in texts presently available (Houston *et al.* 2000: 106-107; Martin and Grube 2000: 216-221; Webster 2000:97).

The Maya states were inherently unstable, and their prosperity and decay were made evident in the expansions and contractions connected with the construction of

public buildings (Montmollin 1989: 28-31; Demarest 1992: 139-141; Marcus 1993: 164-168; 1998; Webster 1998: 350; 2000:110). The level of construction activity was, in turn, an indication of the volume of the labor force under the control of each sovereign (Demarest 1992: 139-141). Only powerful rulers were in a position to gather the necessary manpower to carry out the construction of infrastructure, as well as competitive exhibitions and wars. From the point of view of both the supporters and the adversaries of the sovereign, the competitive exhibitions in which the ruler invested labor resources were persuasive and intimidating. Persuasive, because they promised rewards through conquest in the form of tributes and divine favour; and intimidating because they made explicit the punishment that awaited all those that failed in their insubordination. A key element in the power of the sovereign lied in his ability to produce, by means of the scribes, texts that documented the competitive exhibitions, together with other political practices.

## **MAYA WRITING**

Because Maya writing was an instrument of power that promoted the sovereign's authority by celebrating and perpetuating the memory of his deeds (Houston 1994; Coe and Kerr 1998), the scribes were active and visible actors in the preservation of that power. As their ability to promote the production of texts was a major component of the power of the ruler, the loss of such ability represented a major loss of power too. War and writing were so much closely related as a source of power, that they were both articulated in the competitive exposition described hereafter: the capture of scribes during the battle and the public destruction of their capability to produce texts. The capture of scribes was an integral mechanism designed to discourage the fragmentation of the lesser centralized Maya states.



Figure 1. Piedras Negras, Stela 12 (drawing by Linda Schele).

## SUGGESTED EVIDENCE REGARDING THE CAPTURE OF MAYA SCRIBES

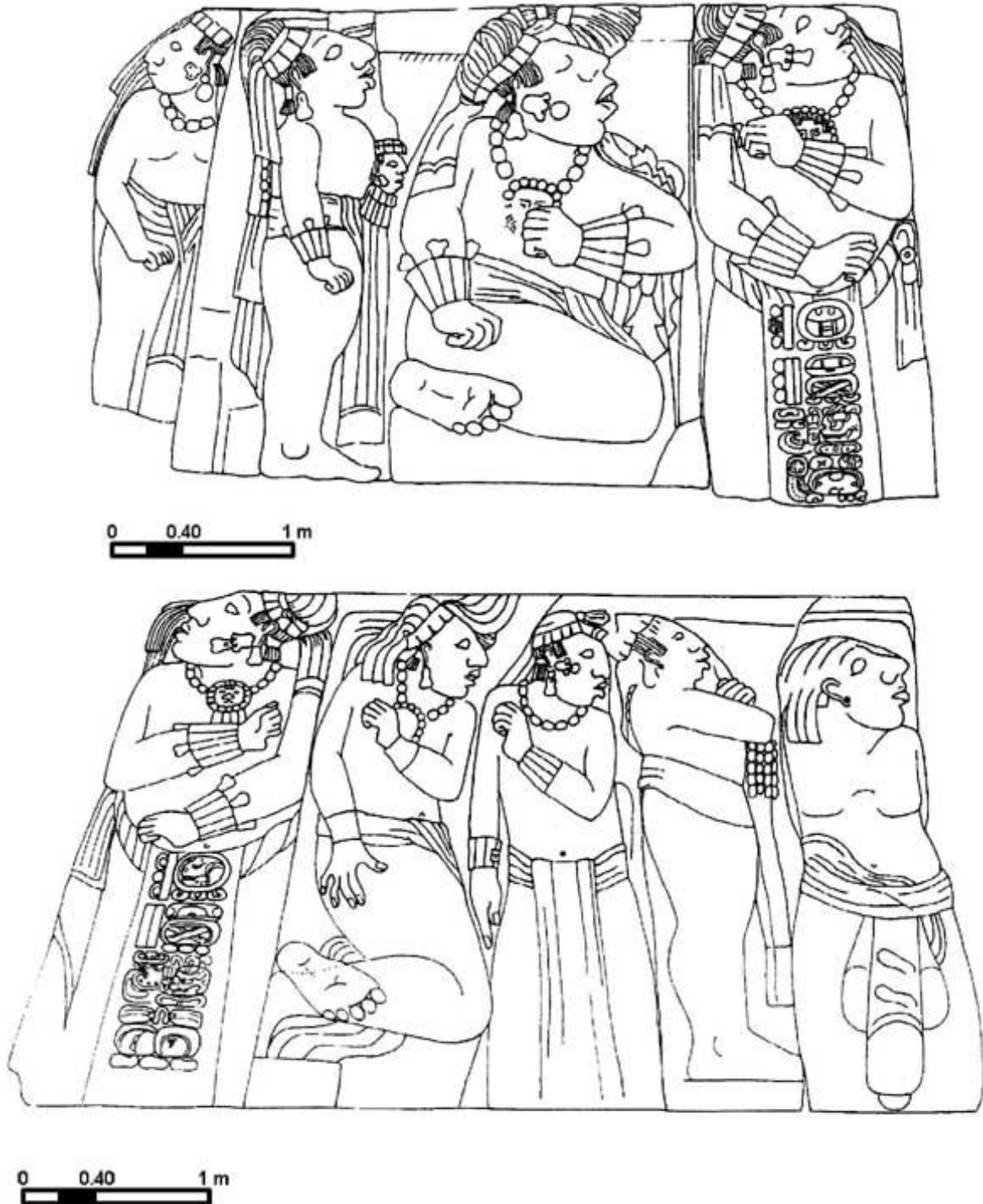
Important examples of scribes being captured may be found in three places. Stela 12 in Piedras Negras shows the local victorious ruler accompanied by two of his lieutenants exhibiting nine elite members captured in Pomona (Figure 1; Schele and Miller 1986:219). The glyphs and the iconographic details document the destiny and the political situation of the prisoners. They are all tied up and half naked—a sign of submission and humiliation (Schele 1983)—, and most of them were named as *sajal*, showing that before being captured, these prisoners were subordinates to the Pomona ruler. Several hieroglyphs in the thighs of the prisoner observed in the right lower side identify him as a high rank scribe —*ba cheb* or “principal pen person” (Nikolai Grube, cited in Coe and Kerr 1998:98). The fact that this individual was a scribe is indicated by the “pen bundle” of reed or codex (Coe and Kerr 1998: 98-99) he carries in his left hand. The prisoner at the center is also holding a bundle of pens in his right hand. These details suggest that all or almost all prisoners were scribes at the service of their captor’s enemy.



Figure 2. The Bonampak mural, Room 2, Structure 1 (drawing by Jarrod Burks).

In Bonampak, on the walls of Room 2, Structure 1, there is a similar scene (Figure 2). Again, nine prisoners are crouching at the feet of the local victorious ruler. The red paint shows that the prisoners have undergone two humiliations: their fingers were broken and they are bleeding heavily, and their nails were pulled off. Many of them make gestures of pain and fear, while the last prisoner to the left is having his fingers broken. A close-up picture illustrated by Fuentes y Cicero (1998) shows that the fingers of the sixth prisoner (from left to right) were bent in 180 degrees—the fingers feature a right angle with respect to the palm of the hand. This shows that at

times, the captors destroyed the fingers of the prisoner scribes bending them violently, breaking the ligaments in the knuckles or at their base.



**Figure 3. Sculptures of nine prisoners in the East Patio of the Palenque Palace. At left are the prisoners shown north of a hieroglyphic stairway. At right are the prisoners shown south of a stairway (Merle Greene Robertson, reproduced with her authorization).**

The hand gestures of the Bonampak prisoners –each one of them with his hands high so that spectators could see them- recall the hand gestures of the prisoners in

Stela 12 at Piedras Negras. This suggests that the hands of the Pomona prisoners were as well broken.

Even though none of the Bonampak prisoners was named in the texts that accompany the illustration, their political status is made evident with the iconographic details observed in a computerized reconstruction of the scene produced by *National Geographic* (Miller 1995: 51-52): the second figure at right has a raised hand holding a pen, as if he were documenting his own capture and execution. This gesture is a pictorial Maya convention to represent the activity of scribes (Figure 5; Coe and Kerr 1998: Figs. 64-65, 75-78). The Bonampak prisoners with their broken fingers were scribes.

While the monument of Piedras Negras shows the capture of scribes, the Bonampak mural illustrates two other ceremonial stages to which scribes were subjected to. Breaking the fingers of the prisoners represented the second, mutilation and bloodletting. The third stage, the execution through sacrifice, is represented by the central, reclining figure in the Bonampak mural, whose heart has been removed and his fingers are still bleeding. At his feet lies the decapitated head of the tenth prisoner. Although many of the prisoners captured during the battles were subjected to different tortures before they were sacrificed (Schele and Miller 1986: 218, 228), in the case of the prisoner scribes, the most prominent torture consisted in the physical destruction of their fingers.

Similar themes are documented in two places in the Palenque Palace. In the East Patio, the sculptures of nine prisoners are flanking the north and south sides of a hieroglyphic stairway, which illustrates combat scenes occurred in 662 AD (Martin and Grube 2000: 164-165; Robertson 1985: Figs. 289, 290). Altogether, the sculptures document the three ceremonial stages that followed the capture of scribes (Figure 3). The standing figures or the figures with their arms crossed on their chests represent the first stage, a public exhibition. At the south side of the stairways, the fifth figure at the right has undergone the second and third stages, mutilation and sacrifice: marks on his body show that his genitals were mutilated and his heart sacrificed (Robertson 1985: 65-66). As a representation of the second stage, the second prisoner from the left is shown, whose right hand, in Merle Greene Robertson's own words (1985:65), "*hangs at one side showing the fingers in an unnatural, almost grotesque position*". Robertson's picture (1985: Fig. 304), suggests that the fingers of his hand were broken by violently bending them. Again, the hand broken by the captors is the right one, or the hand used to write.

In other areas of the Palenque Palace, a group of sculptures (the Tablet of the 96 Glyphs and the two panels at the sides), depict the capture of scribes. The Tablet of the Scribe (Figure 4) illustrates a prisoner on his knees, with a pen in his right hand as a symbol of his office and status. The prisoner is bleeding through his ear, as shown by the dots on his cheek (Schele and Miller 1986: 48) but he has not suffered yet the mutilation of his fingers. The hieroglyphic text suggests that the figure in the opposite panel, known as the Speaker's Tablet, was the *sajal* to the Third Ruler of Piedras Negras (Stephen Houston, personal communication 2000), suggesting that before being captured, the speaker and the scribe were at the service of one of the enemies of the Palenque sovereign. Through the capture of his scribes, the winner

damaged his enemy. Similar illustrations showing the capture of scribes include the Palenque Tablet of Temple XXI, the bench of Temple XIX in Palenque, and the Kimbell Panel (Coe and Kerr 1998: Fig. 60, Plate 91).

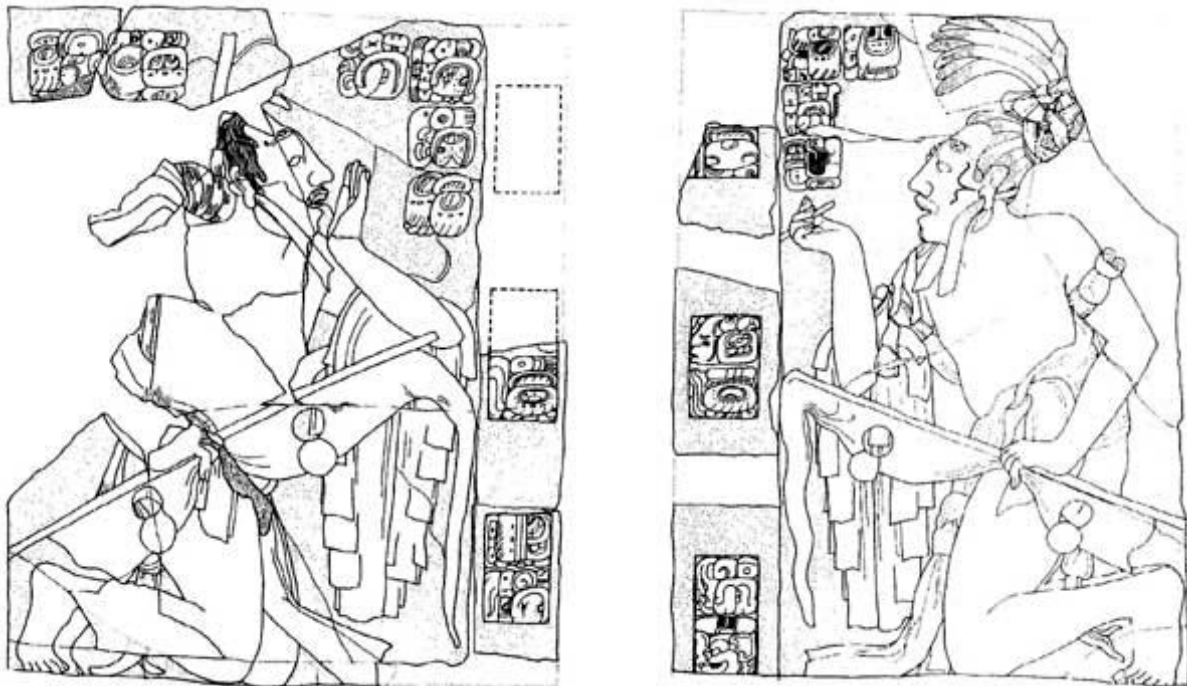


Figure 4. Tablets from the Palenque Palace: “The Speaker” is shown at left, and “The Scribe” is shown at right (drawings by Linda Schele).

## POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS REGARDING THE CAPTURE OF SCRIBES

These data reveal that warriors tried to capture not only enemy rulers and *sajal'ob*, but also the scribes that served them. Considering that the scribes played a significant role in the production of power for the rulers, they were a legitimate and strategic target for capture and termination. For this reason, the Maya artist did not focus on the execution of the scribes, which physically eliminated them, but in the destruction of their hands, which cut their ability to write. An explanation for such an emphasis is provided by the Maya pictorial convention of writing: a thin pen held with the extended fingers (Figure 5). To destroy the fingers of the captured scribes, the winners would break the ligaments and pull off the nails. What really mattered for a winning ruler, was the destruction of the enemy scribes –who were potential political rivals, and the impact that the termination of these scribes had in the ability of their competitors to generate politically striking texts.

The loss in the capability of a ruler to produce public monuments as a consequence of the capture of his scribes was very detrimental to his capacity of persuasion, authority and presence, even though the sovereign himself may have not been captured during the battle. The capture of scribes cut the number of followers, of whom a ruler could potentially extract tributes and manpower, the pillars of political power. The defeat also expressed weakness, and gave the discontented



subordinates the opportunity to rebel against the sovereign, as with each successful rebellion, his power decreased the more.



Figure 5. *Ah ts'ib*, title of the scribes. The central feature, a hand holding a pen, is the Maya pictorial convention for the activity of the scribes.

The fact that the Maya acknowledged the relationship between writing and the power of the sovereign provides a hint for a lamentation documented in the Motul Dictionary of the XVI century (Barrera Vásquez 1980:264). For the word “nails”, the dictionary provides a single definition: *xupi wich' ak ma'bal in lox t'an*, which translates as “*I no longer have nails, I am no longer the one I used to be, my power, authority, and money are gone, I am worth nothing*”. The lamentation describes that which the Bonampak mural is illustrating. As writing was an instrument of power, the destruction of it created weakness and revealed the absence of power.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the Maya ruling systems, writing was a promoter of political cohesion. To plebeians, texts and sculptures strengthened the fulfilment of divine rituals by the sovereign and explained how the fulfilment of such obligations benefited his followers. To the subordinate elites, the texts summed up the social relationships through which the material rewards of subordination were generated, as well as the terrible consequences of the failed insubordinations.

The texts were a means through which rulers reinforced and showed their power. That is why they and the scribes in charge of producing such texts represented a

target to be destroyed during warfare. Even though the captured scribes were tortured and executed, that which the captors sought to emphasize in public documents was not the physical termination of the scribes through sacrifice, but the destruction, through the mutilation of their fingers, of their capability to produce politically persuasive texts for their rivals. Fracturing their fingers was a significant political act, because it both produced and revealed the vulnerability of enemies and competitors.

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Figure 2 The Bonampak Mural, Room 2, Structure 1 (drawing by Jarrod Burks)

Figure 3 Sculptures of nine prisoners in the East Patio of the Palenque Palace. At left are the prisoners shown north of a hieroglyphic stairway. At right are the prisoners shown south of a stairway (Merle Greene Robertson, reproduced with her authorization)

Figure 4 Tablets from the Palenque Palace: "The Speaker" is at left, "The Scribe" is at right (drawings by Linda Schele)

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