

GRAFFITI AT THE INITIAL SERIES GROUP: STRUCTURE 5C35, CHICHEN ITZA, YUCATAN, MEXICO

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Recent archaeological investigations conducted at the major structures of the Initial Series Group in Chichen Itza have provided a great opportunity to make progress in the study of Maya society. This essay represents an approach to the study of a group of graffiti found on the surface of a smoothed stucco floor, in association with the substructures of Building 5C35 of the Initial Series Group. The graffiti appeared during the excavation process conducted at the site by the archaeological project that INAH has been developing in the past several years, specifically, during the 2002-2003 field season. Among them, the representation of three *patolli* and one human face, dressed with feathers and with a tattooed or scarified face are worth noticing. We shall now present an analysis of the archaeological, iconographic, historic and social data involved in these graffiti, in an attempt to approach the sociological side of those who inhabited the site.

The word *graffiti* makes walls shake, and people usually gets very upset with the thought of a “magnificent monument” pitifully ruined by scribbles. However, the graffiti are nearly as old as man itself, who right after standing on their feet started to feel the irresistible urge to record whatever event could take place, or to simply leave “his trace” on the walls of their prehispanic homes, be it at Aurignac, Lascaux or Altamira. Ever since those ancient times, no wall has survived the inspiration of a hand that writes or makes a drawing. All around the world, there are traces of those ancient “graffiti makers”. As an example, there they are the lavish prodigies of Gizeh, the jungle temples in Tikal, the sandy labyrinths of Susa, as well as the palace walls of King Balthasar of the Chaldeans, or the “sinful” graffiti of Pompeii, not to mention the well-known “*letrinalia*” in Rome, the Berlin Wall, or the grand May 1968, in a phenomenon that continued to our days and our cities, where *graffiti* may be seen everywhere and have become one of the most representative forms of urban and popular art.

There are two approaches among researchers in regard to the first appearance of graffiti. One of them places the historical backgrounds of graffiti in Pompeii, where there were forms of pagan inscriptions in the surroundings of the Roman residencies. The other one focuses on the signs and figures found in the walls of the Lascaux caves, as a direct antecedent of writing. However, the second approach is not so broadly accepted, because the communicating nature of the representations

in the cave was of an internal character, for the group and by the group. For this reason, the Roman original approach is favored.

As far as the meaning of the word is concerned, consensus is wider, as it may originate in the Greek verb *graphein*, which refers to the action of writing, drawing, or engraving. Nonetheless, it has also been noted that it comes from the Italian *graffiare*, a verb that conveys a more insolent meaning, linked to scribbling. But, one thing that can be stated with total certainty and this is that *graffiti* are anarchical by nature, and that their authors in principle remain anonymous.

THE CONCEPT OF GRAFFITI AMONG MAYANISTS

A number of *graffiti* studies have been conducted in the Maya area: Tikal, Palenque, Comalcalco, Nakum (Andrews 1999; Hermes *et al.* 2002). To some authors, they are graphic expressions not forcibly artistic in nature, executed in most cases with a dry point, a pointed instrument, or with paint. Thus, Bolles defines them as lines on the stucco, often drawn with graffiti on the surface of floors or walls (1977:299).

According to Kampen (1978: 156-158), *graffiti* are a common feature in Maya centers, and they occur in almost all places featuring stucco walls, vaults, and the preserved surface of floors. This author refers to ten varieties of *graffiti*, and divides them in four groups: carved, painted, impressed, and composite. Among the carved ones there are incised, gouged, and punched examples. The painted ones are black and red; the impressed ones were made both in positive and negative. There are as well composite types: incised and gouged; incised and punched; incised and painted black; incised and painted red; gouged and punched.

In general, *graffiti* are not considered a work of art. The majority of those who have written about Maya civilization and art do not even mention them, while others, like Thompson (1985:23), have attributed them to bored novices who had not completed their ritual training. Other authors suggest that they are scribbles with no sense at all left by visitors in the centuries that followed the abandonment of sites. The *graffiti* may be the result of a momentary whim, of some off-time entertainment, or the pastime of a short break. It is, in fact, a yearning of man to be present expressed in the form of simple engravings, often times of a very easy execution. This is a plastic expression very frequent in childhood, though it is also seen in teenagers and adult individuals. Often times, *graffiti* are executed only for self-satisfaction.

The *graffiti* were carved, painted or impressed in almost every visible structural surface; approximately 95% of them are located on interior walls, around 2% on benches, and a scarce 3% occur on floors, vaults and roof-combed chambers. Many *graffiti* are found near the floor and grouped around the benches, probably in places where people were sitting. In general, they are not distributed in formal, discernible patterns deriving from the structural formats of their architectural settlements, and neither are they necessarily concentrated in areas of maximum exposure for those who enter the room or go through the internal areas.

Graffiti is the name given to all those working techniques that share two important features:

- They are found on the stuccoed surface of architecture, though they do not seem to be integrated in those architectural contexts.
- They are scattered on architectural surfaces and they are not organized by edges that could frame them such as columns or rows, and they do not reflect the guidelines of the architectural context (Kampen 1978:166).

In short, at each step of their conception and execution, they seem to lack the logical and organized construction principles that characterize other varieties of Maya art.

The Webster dictionary makes a difference between the archaeological definition and the artistic technique, and stresses that *graffiti* are coarse by nature, and that that which differentiates the *graffiti* from any other type of expression is the fact that they are never planned as a part of the structure where they were found, and that often times, they are associated with vandalism (1961:985).

LOCALIZATION OF THE *GRAFFITI*

As already noted, the *graffiti* examined in this study are located in Structure 5C35, known as "The Arch". This building, located in the northwest corner of the architectural group, dates to the Late-Terminal Classic period and corresponds to the Sotuta complex (850-1150 AD; Schmidt et al. 2004).

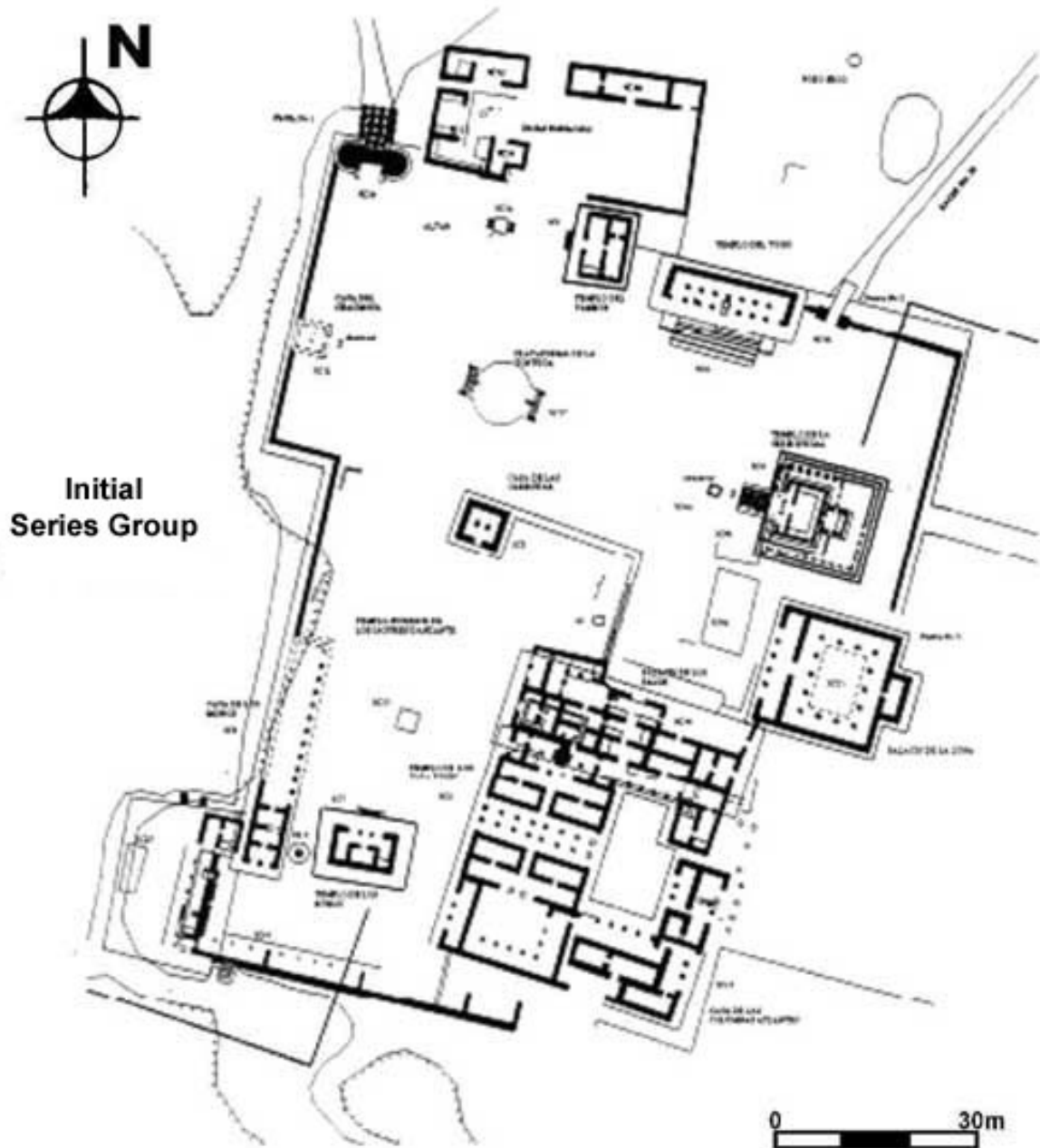


Figure 1. General plan of the Initial Series Group.

Structure 5C35 is the main large door that frames the entrance from *Sacbe 25* to the Initial Series Group (Figure 1). It is a building with an oval floor plan split in two semi-circles that leads to a paved corridor (Figure 2). The external surface is mostly plain up to the height of the tripartite molding. As its sole decoration, it exhibits a fret at the side of the beam of the central corridor (Figure 3). From the decoration of the upper portion of the large door, and mixed with the rubble, features of a large mask were found. Inside each body there was a smaller and more ancient construction, but with rectangular features at both sides of the central passage. They were covered with polished stucco featuring *graffiti* that depicted *patolli* games and the face of an individual. These constructions were denominated East Substructure and West Substructure, respectively (Schmidt et al. 2004).

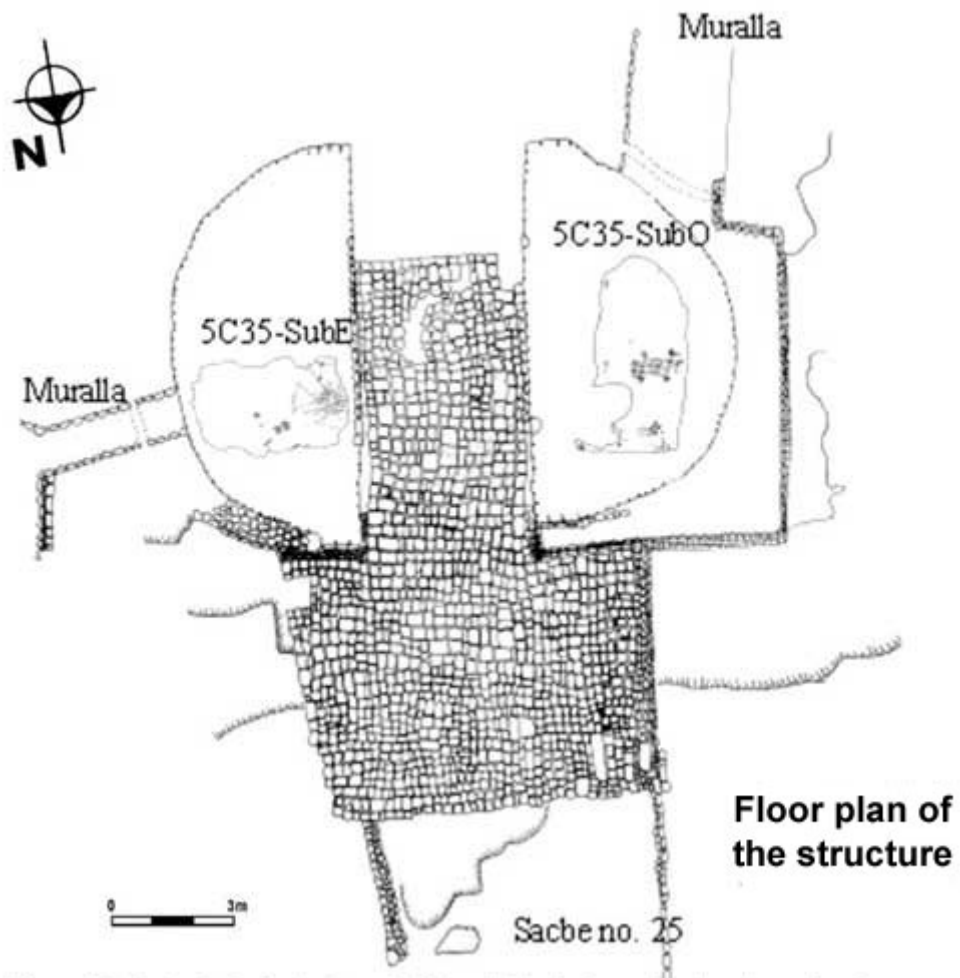


Figure 2. Floor plan of Structure 5C35, showing the substructures where the *graffiti* were located.



Figure 3. Structure 5C35, north façade.

THE EAST (5C35-SubE) AND WEST (5C35-SubO) STRUCTURES

The East (5C35-SubE) and West (5C35-SubO) Substructures, both located within the arched base, present a rectangular floor plan; however, they are not oriented in

the same direction. While the construction at the East side is oriented along an east-to-west axis, with a length of 3.50 m, a width of 2.10 m, and a height of 0.95 m, the West construction rises along a north-to-south axis, with a length of 3.55 m, a width of 1.60 m, and a height of 1.22 m (Figures 2 and 4). The *graffiti* were found on thin and well polished stucco floor. There were seven *graffito graffiti*, which will be described below (Figure 5).



Figure 4. East Substructure, showing the carved stones at the base, and the core of the construction system.

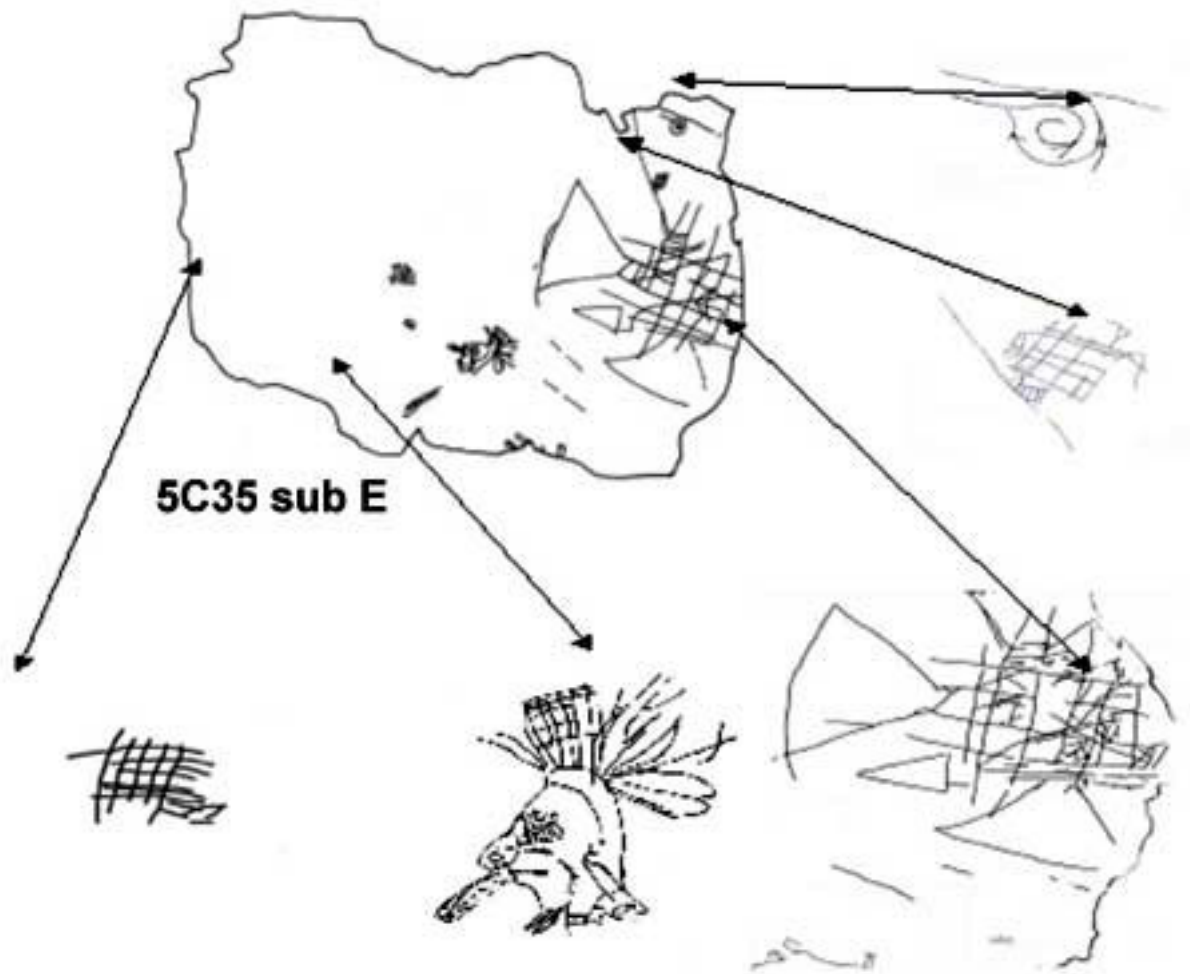


Figure 5. *Graffiti* found in Structure 5C35-SubE: 1) *Patoli*; 2) Face in profile; 3) Scroll or snail (?); and 3-4) Small grids.

Graffiti 1: this is probably a *patoli*, subsequently modified with additional graffiti lines forming an irregular grid. It has two large triangles, between which there is another, smaller one.

Graffiti 2: it consists of a quite realistic design of a human face in profile. It shows a flat forehead suggesting cranial deformation. The face is tattooed or scarified around the eye. The nose shows a hole for a nose plug. Something protrudes from the mouth, and this could be a tongue, or perhaps, and more probable, a chert knife, because of the lines that cross the interior of the artifact, simulating the carving of the edge. The paraphernalia is complemented with an elongated ear flare and a feather headdress fixed on the upper part of the long hair. This *graffiti* is well executed with firmly delineated strokes.

Graffiti 3: its shape resembles that of a scroll or a snail, as it presents a concentric design

Graffiti 4 & 5: they were made with small, crossed lines that form two little grids, much alike from one another

Graffiti 6: it represents another *patolli* that has been only partially drawn, as only part of it was found

Graffiti 7: this is a well made *patolli*, drawn with long lines that intertwine in the ends and go back to the center to form an oval, where the lines cross. In this way, the design reflects permanent motion, inasmuch as from the center and towards the four ends, the broad lines that rotate from the edges to the center and vice-versa, constantly come and go.

There were other *graffiti* documented, but as they consisted of mere small strokes or very small lines, they will not be described in this work. Nonetheless, they were included in the archaeological record.

AN INTERPRETATION ATTEMPT OF GRAFFITI AT 5C35

THE HEAD

The precise relationship of the head with the two *patolli* games is unknown; therefore, we have two possibilities in front of us: the head is connected with the game, or either, there is no connection between them. Both possibilities are being explored, starting with a premise common to both: the symbolic value of the head depicted on the floor of a building, imbued with the wish for permanence.

Continuance is intrinsically linked to plastic expression through the *graffiti*. Our attention was caught by the contrast between the face of a character which responds to the ideal of Maya beauty, additionally ornamented with tattoos and feathers, and the coarse drawing of the *patolli*. This detail may point to the presence of two *graffiti* with a different functional content. The *patolli* could have been working as boards for occasional games –even though the game had “sacred” or divinatory connotations-, while the head may have had a testimonial value similar to that of all the heads that have appeared engraved in buildings.

The head, the face, is the symbol par excellence of a person. The fact that the example presented here is wearing a peculiar ornament, gives an additional support to this concept. The data gathered by Andrews (1999) include 39 examples of human heads, in contrast with 118 full human figures. Eight of these examples were selected, as they present characteristics that are common to all the *graffiti* heads present in Maya and other cultures: firm strokes with symbolic details that personalize the *graffiti*, and coarse strokes, at times with ornamental details that personalize them as well. In this way, we have the profile of the Maya *graffiti*-maker: the one who is an artist and leaves his signature, the proof of his presence in a certain building, possibly as its architect and/or designer, as did the first Roman architects when only the name of the emperor could be shown, but they nevertheless managed to include a small *graffiti* on the walls as a symbol of their names; and the other one, the “amateur”, possibly someone who lived in those buildings, and who decided to leave behind, lacking any particular training, some evidence of his presence.

There is one such example at Dzibilchaltun (Maldonado 2001: 71-72), where several *graffiti* were found inside the third entrance of the south side of Structure 44. Most of the designs found are faces in profile with big eyes, long necks and a remarkable cranial deformation, some wearing a headdress. There were also designs in the form of grids, profiles, rhombuses, and one complete human figure.

The head in Structure 5C35 is inscribed in the first category, and shares stylistic similarities with the head of Comalcalco. In the same line of thought by which this could be the signature of the architect in charge of building the arch, the facial ornament and the feathers could come to support such notion, as well as the possibility that this was the face of one of the inhabitants of the Initial Series Group. The tattoo, and moreover the scarification, of a perennial nature, symbolize the identification of the individual with the sign he decided to stamp on his face, while this makes of him a co-participant in the group formed by other individuals who share an identical social identification.

But tattoos work as well as a symbol of magical and religious identification, through which the individual participates of the entire magical and mystical power of the being or object they stamp on their faces. He assimilates these powers, and in turn, they may make him immune to their malefic potential. If we were in front of the second possibility, the head could be linked to the *patolli* and the game may have been “played” as a divinatory instrument.

Both possibilities in regard to the symbolic value of the tattoo and the feather ornament may adapt to our example, and the election is conditioned to the design of the scarification. If the drawing refers to some symbol of the lineage that inhabited the Initial Series Group, it could be possible that its creator was a member of it, someone with artistic capabilities. And if it does not, we could be in front of an architect, a member of the “social class” of architects, who were able to identify themselves with certain external signs, and leave their indelible signature on the floor of their creation. Finally, we should not rule out the fact that it may be connected somehow with the *patolli* in its ludic facet –like in the Palenque example- and its esoteric facet as well, of which there is only one example in the Magliabecchi Codex; on page 60 there is a *patolli* game presided by the *Macuixochitl* god (Figure 6, taken from Smith 1977:351, fig. 1).

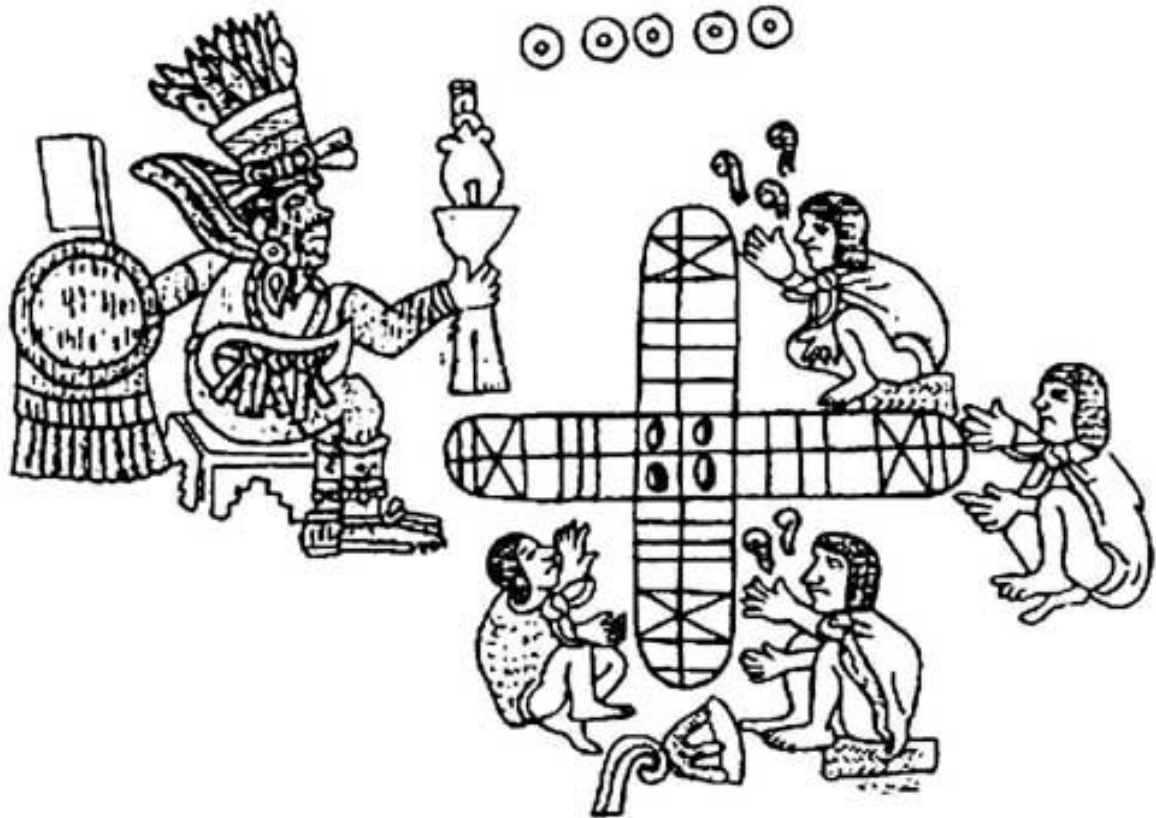


Figure 6. Magliabecchi Codex showing *Macuilxochitl*, the *patolli* game deity (after Smith 1977:351, fig.1).

Both motifs are present in other contexts and cities within the Maya area. At Palenque, they are associated with the heads –two incomplete and one complete– within the quadrants that form the crosses of the *patolli* (Smith 1977:354, fig. 8).

THE PATOLLI

This game –if it is in fact a game– was very popular in Mesoamerica and somehow resembles, in shape and in the way it was played, our “*parchis*”, the *parcheesi* that is also played in Nepal, India, and in the Asian area of Siberia, which is –interestingly– the remote origin of the first American peoples. The name *parcheesi* comes from the Sanskrit “*pañca vimsati*”, which stands for twenty-five.

The first evidence of its presence in the Mesoamerican area is a *graffiti* found on the floor of Patio A at Zacuala, Teotihuacan, which according to the description of Séjourné (1959:54, fig. 37), recalls to a larger extent other geometric motifs found in the form of *graffiti* in other sites like Holmul, Tikal (Structure 5D-33-second), Uxmal, and Dzibilchaltun (Structure 1-sub.) than the drawings usually called *patolli*. These form a cross made with little squares, “framed” in turn by other little squares, in such a way that the final board constitutes a square which contains the crosses of a “Saint Andrew’s Cross”, or a “Saint George’s Cross”.

The rules of the game in prehispanic times are now lost. The sole existing information for prehispanic times is the one provided by the Aztec codices, both from

before and after the Conquest, and the reports of the early chroniclers. As usual, it must be pointed out that it is dangerous to extrapolate information originated in a different culture and temporal frame than the one being studied; but the well accepted continuity presented by all games in general, and the similarity of the images of the Aztec quadrant or board with the Maya *graffiti*, allow for presuming that no major changes took place, if any, in their sacred or profane character (Eliade 1967).

It is quite possible that there were several forms of *patolli*, and that the one played in the Maya area, judging after the examples shown in the *graffiti* -the only available examples of their existence-, belonged to the same category, similar to the one that was played in Tula (*graffiti* of Chamber 5, Tula), and one that also preserved a coarse variant of the board present on the floor of Zacuala, Teotihuacan. The one known as the “Maya variant” is present in the *Tonalamatl Aubin* (plate 19).

The “Mexican variant” essentially shares the same form, and possibly also its meaning and the rules of the game, with the only variation of the concept of “corner” or “crossed” arms accomplished by drawing a loop, and the central square which is divided in four as shown in the following codices: *Vatican Codex B* (plate 67), *Codex Borgia* (plate 62), and *Codex Vindobonensis* (plate 20). In the latter, the central squares are occupied with the sign *ollin*, “movement”.

This “movement” symbol may be at the essence of the game we are now referring to, something that would not be too strange being in front of these squares, which although silent, are in fact occupied by seeds in the Mexican codices, and by many other objects with the capability of working as “chips” in all games involving successive spaces. It is still to be established whether it worked as a “dice”, as a promoter of one movement or the other, but the reports of the chroniclers mention other seeds marked with incised dots that functioned as such in the games of chance of the Aztecs.

This is an angle worth emphasizing: the nature of chance, rather than the confrontation among the opponents. As to how many these opponents were, in Mexican times there were two of them, with the possibility of being backed up by other players that would act as “reserves”. Torquemada (II: 554) reported these details, and called the punctuated seeds “pounce dices”, and the colored beads that were moved along the itinerary, “beads like those of the “Tables”. Diego Durán (II: 235) refers to the number of players and to the number of beads each player had, which were six.

With these data at hand, we still ignore how was it that the game was won, but we do know that it began on an equal footing, and that it lacked the spectacular nature and the possible bloody outcome of other major show-games known, such as the Ballgame and the Flying Pole. These reasoning leads to the origin of the *patolli* game, which like all games, had a sacred origin that may have been maintained both in Aztec and Maya times, played, though, in a ludic and entertainment version as may have been the case of the Ballgame.

Perhaps this is the case of the example we are now presenting, the *patolli* found on the floor of the entrance arch to a compound, a structure that most probably was guarded by warriors and by “porters”, who in their many idle hours may have played different games. The presence of three boards could be suggesting that the games, played by two players only, could have required additional boards for additional players (Figure 5).

Now, in regard to the comparison between the Maya *graffiti* and those left by other cultures, we could say that the only ones that maintain a connection with one another are those with an obscene content, possible to assimilate through identity marks, and the ludic ones, such as the *patolli* and the face under study. The *patolli* boards remind us of the “three in line” found in many of our cities. Interestingly, they are carved on the floor or on the walls, when one of the characteristics of this type of games resides in their immediate and spontaneous nature, as opposed to the permanent character of a carved drawing.

Perhaps this characteristic has something to do with the sacred character of the *patolli* game, as already stated; and even though the game may have acquired some degree of “profanity”, it may have maintained part of its sacred component, or either, they may have both lived together, using one or the other according to the circumstances. In this respect, it is advisable to recall the words of Bernardino de Sahagún when he stated that “this game was abandoned, as it was suspected to contain heathen superstitions” (Sahagún 1984:460, book VIII, chapter X).

As to its form like a cross, inside a quadrant and with a marked center, it would seem to be no doubt about the fact that this is a cosmogonic design, common to the conception of the world in Mesoamerica. If we add to this that this is a “game” in which movement is involved, possibly the product of chance, then we are dealing with an event in which both time and space intervene. Chance, and the reality of time and space combined, point to “divination”, which we could further refine whenever the way it was played by the Aztecs “turned into a Maya way”, by tossing *patol* seeds, which is not just a simple bean, but the red bean, the “*mescal bean*” of the Indians from the Southwest of the United States, the *Sophora Secundiflora*, a legume that contains an extremely powerful alkaloid that boosts convulsions and visions. It is also *tzite*, the red seeds present in the Popol Vuh as a divination instrument.

Perhaps when *patolli* achieves its “sacred” character, it is executed under the effects of the hallucinogen and acquires a divinatory dimension and one of contact with the other world, a constant in Maya culture based on the constant exchange between the world of the living and the world of the dead, where the ancestors and the divine forefathers reside. Two of them, *Ixpiyacoc* and *Ixmucane*, as stated in the *Popol Vuh*, created humankind out of wood and invented the calendar. They were both old female diviners, and although they belonged to the Maya-K’iche tradition, we know from Classic Maya iconography and epigraphy that one of their major deities, *Itzamnaaj*, was an old and prodigious magician.

The *patolli* seems to have been a game with destiny. Very possibly, those who occupied the substructure of the entrance arch to the Initial Series Group were

enjoying the ludic facet of the priestly method of divination, although with so few material remains it is hard to draw the line between a method of personal divination and a game of chance. Sahagún's comments point to the fact that it was probably a sacred method of divination executed by priests that had become popular and appropriated for the population without any priestly preparation, causing its banning by the rulers. Doesn't this fit with the private and personal character of the *graffiti*? And it is quite possible that a personal derivation of an easily executed method of divination may have become popular among the cultured Maya classes that lacked a priestly status. The "game of chance" would then be working as an occasion for destiny to manifest itself by consulting the sacred powers represented by the sacred space outlined by the *patolli* squares.

CONCLUSIONS

This work was intended to offer an interpretation of the *graffiti* present in a particular structure, and to establish the beginning of the systematic record of all the *graffiti* present at the site, including those already reported for the buildings of Chichen Itza in previous field works, and those involved in the present project. One such example would be the ones found at The Nuns (Bolles 1977: 131-132), the Market (Ruppert 1943: fig. 4c), the Palace of the Phalluses or the Akadzib (Archives of the Chichen Itza Project, fig. 10), to mention just a few.

What we have said up to now gives way to a reflection on the sociological issue underlying the *graffiti*. In our society, "graffiti makers" use walls, subway cars, and any other available support to denounce the failures of society, using sprays. Many "graffiti makers" have shown amazing skills with sprays and colors, and that which was initiated a social denouncement has now been assimilated, "swallowed" by the denounced society, and they have become the artists of the so called "popular culture". But in the *graffiti*, social criticism and the need to complain coexist, and ultimately, they create the awareness that popular classes also exist and have opinions of their own. The hands of our predecessors in the caves, the thousands *graffiti* present in classic cities like Rome or Pompeii, not to mention the walls of castles and the western public monuments, are witness to the need of denouncement and eternity of man.

Do the Mesoamerican *graffiti* have a similar function? As far as the Maya area is concerned, these do not seem to be expressions of social denouncement, as they depict moments of ceremonial life –processions, litters ornamented with serpents or jaguars, one Ballgame, sacrifices-, but never reflected with an air of denouncement or social criticism. For what it seems, they remained captured on walls and floors as snapshots of everyday life in a Maya city, and even more significantly, executed by individuals with drawing skills that ranged from the merely testimonial to sophistication, though perfectly avoiding the difficulties involved in outlining curved lines or complex compositions on very hard materials, a task accomplished with obsidian or flint awls –presumably- which do not admit the kind of correction paintings do. In other words, they were made by individuals with an advanced technical preparation who created them on the very hard materials of the elite structures, and where criticism of the social system was absent. Everything suggests

that they were made by their residents, the upper classes of Maya society, but created out of spontaneity, with no political intentionality, this being an added value for the researcher. They represent a “fresco” of everyday life in Maya cities, where ceremonial representations are blended with gods, inscriptions, and signs of a different nature.

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Figure 1 General plan of the Initial Series Group

Figure 2 Floor plan of Structure 5C35 showing the substructure where the *graffiti* are located.

Figure 3 Structure 5C35, north façade

- Figure 4 East Substructure showing the carved stones at the base and the core of the construction system
- Figure 5 *Graffiti* in Structure 5C35-SubE: 1) *Patolli*, 2) Face in profile; 3) Scroll or snail (?), and 3-4) small grids
- Figure 6 Magliabecchi Codex showing a *Macuilxochitl*, deity of the *patolli* game (after Smith 1977:351, fig. 1).