

# Summary

## Role of an Artist in the Late Classic Maya Society

### Based on Epigraphic Analysis of Preserved Signatures of Scribes and Sculptors

The study discussed here aimed to show the role of artists in the Maya society of the late classical period (VI–IX AD). The time-frame was dictated by the availability of surviving source material, consisting of signatures left by the artists on a number of relics. Even so, the nature of the collected data enables only fragmentary reconstruction which is confined to Maya scribes and sculptors, who in fact accounted only for a proportion of the artists who catered to the needs of the court for luxury goods.

The fact that certain Maya artists used to sign artefacts they had created was an unprecedented phenomenon in the entire history of pre-Columbian America. The momentousness of the phenomenon owes to two reasons. First, making inscriptions was a privilege of the ruler and the narrow Maya elite, which they exploited to impose and uphold their vision of the world. One can therefore speak of appropriation and sacralization of relictual space (Stuart 1996). Consequently, minor texts become exceedingly important: the signatures of scribes and sculptors which to some extent dispel the veil of anonymity which obscured the artists as well as overcome the exclusive information monopoly held by the narrow Maya elite.

The first to draw attention to that kind of texts – specifically the later deciphered *yuxul* formula – was Herbert Spinden (1916, 443), who interpreted them as signs introducing a name of a given person. However, it was only since the 1980s and the 1990s that, thanks to advances in deciphering glyphic script, the signatures attracted much more interest (Grube 1990; Houston and Taube 1987; Stuart 1987; 1989). It is widely assumed that the beginning of systematic studies on the figure of the artist and their significance should be associated with the work of Michael Coe (1977). The researcher identified and demonstrated supernatural beings which had been represented as guardian entities of the Maya artists. Literature to date shows that scholars are inclined to adopt either of two approaches. The first focuses on epigraphic analysis of the preserved signatures, while the other places emphasis on stylistic analyses of the artefacts. Both methods are complementary and yield much valuable information. Still, thus far the discussion of the role of artist in the Maya society has tended to be fragmentary, being confined to the analysis of signatures from major Maya centres, such as Piedras Negras or Yaxchilán (Montgomery 1995; Tate 1992; 1994). A broader view was attempted only by Stephen Houston (2016), in the chapter entitled *Crafting Credit: Authorship among Classic Maya Painters and Sculptors*. This publication sets out to address that gap in previous literature and investigate the issue in a more comprehensive manner.

As previously noted, the basic source material consists of autographs that authors left on certain relics. These belong to a group of texts defined as name-tagging, which performed the function of self-referential expressions: usually concise formulas which defined the purpose of a given artefact

and its owner, structured along the following pattern: “[this is] X [type of item] Y [belonging to given person]”. As an example, one could quote: *yuk’ib ti yutal kakaw Ix K’an ? Ix Mutal Ajaw* – “[this is] a vessel to drink fresh cocoa [belonging to] *Ix K’an ? Ix Mutal Ajaw*” (K1941).

In the context of this dissertation, two tags deserve particular attention: *yuxul* – “this is his/her sculpture” and *utz’ihb* – “this is his/her writing/painting”, as well as the expression *chehe’n* – “it has been said”. It may be noted that the use of either of the two first labels was predicated on the technique in which an artefact was made: *yuxul* indicated that it had been carved, while *utz’ihb* suggested the use of a brush. The artist may have been identified by name, by title, or by the place of origin. The fairly unspecific structure of *chehe’n* may have been, though did not have to be, followed by the names of the sculptor or scribe.

Within the existing corpus, I identified at least 149 instances of signatures carved by at least 130 sculptors, while *utz’ihb* was used by 16 scribes in 22 cases. In contrast, *chehe’n* was a universal formula, though it was definitely more often employed by scribes.

Also, I observed certain structural modifications in the signature corpus as far as the usage of *yuxul* and *utz’ihb* was concerned. As regards the former, it did occur sometimes that the author had omitted it, replacing *yuxul* with the expression *ha’oob ajuxul* (“here are the sculptors”). This was the case with the authors of Panel 3 from Piedras Negras. Another signature variant consisted in using only the title *ajuxul*, as in the anthropomorphic artefact depicting the Pawahtun or in Stela 15 from Piedras Negras (signature Jun Nat Omootz). In two inscriptions (Lintels 24 and 26 from Yaxchilán), *yuxul* and the names of authors were preceded by the dedicatory verb *t’abaay* (“dedicated”). Similar structural variation is also observed with scribes. For example, ceramic vessel K791 bears the signature of artist **?-na-11-la-ja** who used the formula *utz’ihb*, but in artefact K793 not only did he forgo the formula but also abridged his name to **?-na**. Maker of the polychrome vessel K2784 did much the same, using the structure *utz’ihb kulu’b*, but his Throckmorton Vase shows only *kulu’b k’aba’?...m*. It is therefore extremely important to pay attention to the glyphic context and any other available information which help one identify Maya artists when tags *yuxul*, *utz’ihb* or their modified variants are absent.

Analysis of the corpus of signatures made it possible to distinguish four places where Maya artists applied their autographs. The most popular location was at the bottom of the composition, taking advantage of the artefact surface which had not been otherwise filled. The practice did not usually disrupt the perception of the inscription’s core communication, as the signatures could not be seen from a greater distance. Signatures would also be situated in the main text, usually towards the end. The method was more often employed with pottery, which was due to the structure of the Primary Standard Sequence. It must be noted, however, that signatures in such locations are also encountered in sculptures, e.g. in Lintels 3 and 4 from La Pasadita, but they represent exceptions among autographs of sculptors. The most sophisticated mode was integrating the signature into the iconographic elements of the composition. As an example, one could cite artist’s signature in Panel 4, also known as Lintel 1 from Laxtunich, where it became a detail of the sky supported by the Pawahtuns. The method undoubtedly manifested greater sensibility and innovativeness of the artist. Occasionally, signatures can be found outside the main visual space of a given artefact, i.e. at its edges, as in Stela 34 from Piedras Negras.

Having examined the locations where artists had put their signatures, a certain regularity became evident. In general, signatures tended to be placed in any place that the artist had deemed appropriate. However, no signature in the entire body of material proved to be situated on the body of a man or on his attire, unlike in representations of women (e.g. Stela 34 from El Perú-Waka’). It is therefore possible that the likeness of a man (chiefly rulers or other male members of the Maya elite) was considered a sacred space that should not be thus violated.

Analysis of the collected source material suggest that the practice of signing one’s works started with sculptors, as the earliest identified signature belongs to Chak Til Mo’, who belonged to that

very group of artists. The signature was placed on a figurine showing the supernatural Pawahtun. The relic, dated to ca. 550, is currently a part of the collection at the Princeton University Art Museum in the United States (Just n.d.). From that watershed moment until 864 when the Randall Stela was erected, numerous signed artefacts were made. Ongoing discoveries continued to add to their number.

As for the propagation of the phenomenon, one can distinguish four phases. The period from 550 to 614 marks the first stage, in which the onset of the practice is observed. Artists' signatures from that time originate from three areas: 1) Altún Ha, Los Alacranes and Champerico, 2) El Zotz and Arroyo de Piedra, 3) Bonampak and Lacanhá. I have not found any evidence of vectorial dissemination of the practice, which suggests that it emerged in an independent and dissipated manner. In consequence, one cannot identify one single location where the idea of forgoing artistic anonymity arose.

In the subsequent phase, from 651 to 702, this particular artistic practice took root and grew even more widespread. The period saw the appearance of the first yuxul formulas in Piedras Negras, which would later become emblematically associated with that cultural phenomenon, since the site yielded the majority of signatures of Maya artists discovered hitherto. Further rapid development ensued in 723–795: the third phase, which witnessed the peak of the practice. On the other hand, the years 800–864 were a kind of coda, which crowned the golden age of individuality of the Maya artist. In that period, signatures of sculptors slowly disappear. In all certainty, this was associated with the gradual collapse of the classical Maya culture, whose decline owed to multiple factors, such as ceaseless armed conflicts, tremendous deforestation, excessive demographic growth or climate change.

Such a long period of artefacts being signed by sculptors contrasts with the period of the practice among scribes, i.e. merely around 100 years, from 692 to approximately 790. The emergence and the intense development of the phenomenon took place in 692–735, a period to which most of the signed pottery is dated. For this reason, i.e. relatively brief occurrence and intensity of the phenomenon, a more detailed chronology of its propagation among scribes is hardly feasible.

Geographical distribution of the identified signatures is indicative of preference for particular forms of artistic expression among the Maya elite and the artists themselves. The tradition of inscribing names of sculptors was very distinctly present in the western regions of the Maya lands, whereas autographs of the scribes are seen chiefly in artefacts from their central part, currently on the territory of the Guatemalan department of Petén. These findings are in line with the original observations made by Mary Miller and Simon Martin (2004, 121).

Surviving inscriptions do not contain any direct information regarding the circumstances in which that exceptional cultural phenomenon emerged and grew increasingly widespread. Absence of such information does not help matters, but a careful analysis of history of the Maya in the late classical period may offer certain hints. It seems likely that a macro-factor which contributed substantially to the dynamics of the process was the global – from the Maya standpoint – conflict between Tikal and Calakmul (sixth-seventh cent. CE). Those long-running clashes caused numerous centres of the Maya to become involved in warfare. In turn, geopolitical upheavals resulting from the protracted conflict led to the fragmentation of the political landscape, manifesting in the establishment of many new kingdoms. A number of their rulers aspired to the title of the “divine lord” (*k'uhul ajaw*), which had earlier been reserved for the most outstanding individuals. This atomization also fuelled rivalry and demand for luxury goods among the then elites, thanks to which Maya courtly culture thrived. The increased demand boosted the role and importance of the artists, whose task it was to satisfy the growing needs of the expanding elite.

In certain cases – in the centres where a greater number of inscriptions have survived – one can discern several other, local factors, which either promoted or hampered the advancement of the signing practice. One of the eloquent examples is the reign of Itzamnaaj Bahlam II (681–742) from Yaxchilán, who embarked on extensive construction undertakings in his kingdom, aiming to restore its former power and prestige after a period of decadence and dependence from Piedras Negras. Such a situation favoured the custom of signing one's works.

It is also likely that the legitimacy of certain rulers may have played a considerable role in that respect, though the effect on the practice of leaving signatures may have been either negative or positive. One of the examples which illustrates the situation quite well is the ruler of Yaxchilán, Yaxuun Bahlam IV (752–768), who succeeded Itzamnaaj Bahlam II in what may be seen as dubious circumstances. For that reason, Yaxuun Bahlam IV would underscore his rights to the throne very often and quite forcibly. It should be noted that he was not the first-born son of Itzamnaaj Bahlam II, while his mother was not the principal wife of the latter (Martin and Grube 200, 128). Despite energetic building activity under Yaxuun Bahlam IV, one observes a decrease in the number of artefacts signed by sculptors when compared with the reign of his predecessor. It may therefore be surmised that the ruler guarded his position and restricted publicity opportunities for other persons, including the artists at court.

In contrast, Ruler 7 – K'inich Yat Ahk from Piedras Negras (781–810?) – adopted the opposite approach. He was not a descendant of the royal family from that centre, but the period of his reign saw the heyday of the practice of works being signed by sculptors (Martin and Grube 200, 152). In that case, the obscure origin and the intention to legitimize assumption of power caused Ruler 7 to take a different course. The lord intended to consolidate his authority through more liberal policies with respect to his subjects, members of the elite and artists alike. Though the examples represent two extremes, they demonstrate that artistic work was evidently manipulated to achieve particular political ends.

Despite appearances, the absence of signatures in particular centres sheds some light on the mechanisms behind the practice of artists signing their artefacts. Lack of autographs may have been due to the mode of governance that a ruler had adopted. If it consisted in centralization of power and consolidation of one's authority, then signatures are unlikely to have been used, as it may have been construed as an attempt to appropriate a sphere reserved for the privileged and an aspiration to be present as an individual in the public space. Such conclusions may be drawn with respect to Tikal, which after a period of humiliating inferiority strove to regain its position by concentrating power in the hands of one person and invoking old values in official ideology. Consequently, its elites were reluctant towards any innovations associated with highlighting artistic individuality.

In spite of meagre dimensions, the signatures of sculptors and scribes provide much interesting information, which enables one to situate those artists in a broader social panorama of the late classical period.

Surviving source material makes it possible to distinguish two main groups of titles denoting sculptors and scribes. The first encompasses terms describing actions performed by the artists: *aj tz'ihb*, *aj uxul*, *baah ch'ehb* and *baah uxul*. The second category comprises those titles which were shared with other members of the Maya elite, such as *aj bik'al*, *aj k'uhun*, *anaab*, *ch'ok ajaw* or *itz'aat*. The presence of the attribute *baah* (“the first”, “head”) attached to certain titles attests to a clearly defined stratification and hierarchy within that group of persons. Much the same is seen in the titulature of other representatives of the Maya elite, where one finds such appellations as *jak baah te'*, *baah took'*, *baah pakal*, *baah tz'am*, *baah kab* or *baah sajal*.

The most emblematic example is the title *baah uxul*, meaning “the chief sculptor”. It comes from a particular time and place, i.e. Piedras Negras during the reign of Ruler 7, and owes its exceptional status to the fact that the appellation – strictly a part of the signature – appears only once in the corpus of artists' signatures; it belongs to sculptor Wajat Naah Chahk, co-author of Panel 3 from Piedras Negras. It should be noted that Panel 3 is the first inscription funded by Ruler 7. Clearly, Wajat Naah Chahk must have been a major figure to have been distinguished with the title of *baah uxul*.

Interestingly, his signature is the first known instance of another title in the titulature of sculptors, namely *aj bik'al*. Thus far, the expression *aj bik'al* has not been fully elucidated. It is certain to have been a toponymic title, therefore *bik'al* must have referred to some location. In the light of the evidence obtained from the analysis of artists' signatures, it may be conjectured that the term denoted

an intellectual centre where sculptors and other persons of the Maya elite who bore such title had been educated. Relying on the collected and analyzed data, I have advanced that the centre named *bik'al* may have been situated in Complex U in Piedras Negras (South Group Complex).

Another interesting title is *baah che'hb* – “first scribe/painter” (lit. “head brush”), since it is encountered only in the signatures of sculptors. This is even more intriguing that, as far as the grammar of the autographs was concerned, one paid close attention to the vocabulary which corresponded to the technique used to make an artefact, be it sculpture or painting/writing. I have suggested that a person described in that manner may have been responsible for tracing the contours of the scene on the surface of the piece. Having a design thus outlined, qualified sculptors were able to carry out their task. The translation of the title as “first scribe/painter” would be equivalent to contemporary designer or architect who took care of the conceptual work which was subsequently put into practice by adept craftsmen.

The essential part of the dissertation examines the artist from the standpoint of information contained in the surviving signatures. However, one of the chapters discusses the Maya artist with regard to their skill – the artistry of writing and painting. This particular inquiry relies on a small fragment of the Dresden Codex, a post-classical manuscript whose part was copied from an earlier, classical document (Thompson 1988, 41). The analysis made it possible to identify stylistic traits that were specific to particular scribes. In consequence, I was able to demonstrate that previous assessments concerning the number of artists involved in the making of the Dresden Codex have to be revised. Furthermore, I reconstructed a considerably eroded fragment of that manuscript, and identified hitherto unknown Mayan term for “loin-cloth” (Jagodziński 2017, 2019).

The information contained in the surviving signatures of artists unequivocally indicates that they enjoyed a privileged status in the Maya society, making up the local elite. This was due to several factors; first of all, their activity was an indispensable adjunct to the policies of the rulers, supporting the position of the lord and spreading ideology which sanctioned the social and political order that the Maya elite wished to sustain. For this reason, artists may have been among court envoys dispatched to another political centre to carry out an important mission. This is likely to have been the case with artists travelling with Ix (Y)ook Ahiin or Ix “K'abel”, who were to be wed to local rulers in order to boost the standing of the kingdom of Pomoy and Calakmul.

Secondly, in view of their superior skills, artists were considered valuable and highly qualified workforce (Johnston 2005), as evidenced on Stela 12 from Piedras Negras, where among the depictions of captured prisoners there is also a likeness of a captured artist. Following armed conflict, the vanquished side did sometimes have to provide qualified sculptors or scribes as part of the tribute to the victors, as in case of erecting the Monument 122 from Toniná and Stela 1 from Palenque.

Thirdly, it is highly probable that certain artists were considered “scientists” of their era, persons who possessed the knowledge to produce the substances necessary to create the works. They were most likely responsible for obtaining and mixing the ingredients to make the required paints and dyes. None other but the artists developed the unique pigment formula for the lasting Maya blue tint. Its composition, a mixture of indigo with palygorskite, was identified only in the mid-twentieth century using state-of-the-art research methods.

Hence there can be no doubt that the high status of the artist in the Maya society owed to the conjunction of two factors: the potent artistic expression of the artefacts they created and the services of political nature, which furthered the interests of the Maya elite.