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The Classic Maya Ceremonial Bar

Introduction

THE CEREMONIAL BAR is an ancient Maya icon that has accumulated a history of many and various iconographic interpretations, none of which is the result of a focussed study. This essay addresses the icon directly by describing its formal history and by structurally assessing its iconography. The conclusions, both deductive and adductive, reveal the allegorical character of the ceremonial bar.

The conventional ceremonial bar is rigid and symmetrical: a central bar with two serpentine heads at each end (figure 4b). It was depicted in ancient images as a hefty, but thin, item of regalia. Most representations show the central bar constructed with two parallel and narrow bands joined by cross-strappings knotted or twined to create a segmented design. The short ends of the bar are capped by decorated plugs which in turn bear the distinctive and large serpentine heads with jaws agape to display the manikins or disembodied head within them. The serpent heads, rendered in a variety of ways, are never realistic snake heads.

The gestures used to display the bar are distinctive and iconographically meaningful. The first known Classic Period¹ representation of the bar, on

1. See figure 1 for the basic outline of the archaeological history of Mesamerica. In the following discussion dates are given in the ancient Maya and Gregorian forms. The Maya date given is the Long Count recording the number of elapsed days since the beginning of that ancient calendar (August 12, 3113 B.C.). A vigesimal count, a value place-system, and the use

Stela 29 of Tikal, shows the honored figure cradling the ceremonial bar in the crook of his right arm with the hand cupped and drawn to the chest. Whether one or both hands were used to support the bar, the cupped hand gesture is significantly related to the ceremonial bar.

Previous Scholarship

The ceremonial bar has always been assumed to be an especially important ancient Maya icon. That it has not been the focus of any recent studies may have to do with the fact that both archaeology and the ancient historical texts have revealed little, almost nothing, about it. Arlen Chase reports the finding of a “huge chert bar” in a royal burial (Structure 7-3rd) at Santa Rita Corozal, and suggests it is a ceremonial bar.² Despite this possibility, given the number of representations in the ancient arts of the Maya, the ceremonial bar is remarkably absent in archaeological records. Its mention also seems to be absent in texts that accompany its image, although such a perception could change at any time given the developing and protean nature of Maya epigraphy. At this writing, however, the ceremonial bar cannot be reliably connected to a particular glyph or glyphic clause.³

of zero are important factors in a Classic Maya date. In modern texts it is written as 9.12.0.0.0, for example, with nine having the highest place-value. The reader interested in a clear account of Maya calendarics is referred to Anthony Aveni, *Skywatchers of Ancient America*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1980, pp. 133ff.

2. Arlen F. Chase, “Elites and the Changing Organization of Classic Maya Society,” in Diane Z. Chase and Arlen F. Chase, eds., *Mesoamerican Elites. An Archaeological Assessment*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1992, pp. 30-49, p. 36. As far as I know, Chase’s finding is the only report of an actual bar found archaeologically, but my reading and retention of all archaeological project reports are not exhaustive... However, Chase’s description of the chert bar and its placement in the burial certainly allows for the possibility that it may been a ceremonial bar.

3. Linda Schele, “A New Fragment from Altar J,” *Copan Notes No. 74 of the Copan Mosaics Project*, n. p., Copan Acropolis Project-Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia, 1990, has identified a glyph she believes denotes the ceremonial bar in the inscriptions of Copan, Honduras. The glyph is unusual, appearing, as far as I know, only twice in Copan’s texts on Stelae 7 (at s-12) and on Stelae P (b-12), and never at other sites. See also Linda Schele and Alfonso Morales, “Some Thoughts on Two Jade Pendants from the Termination Cache of ‘Ante’ Structure at Copan,” *Copan Notes No. 79 of the Copan Mosaics Project*, n. p., Copan Acropolis Project-Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia, 1990.

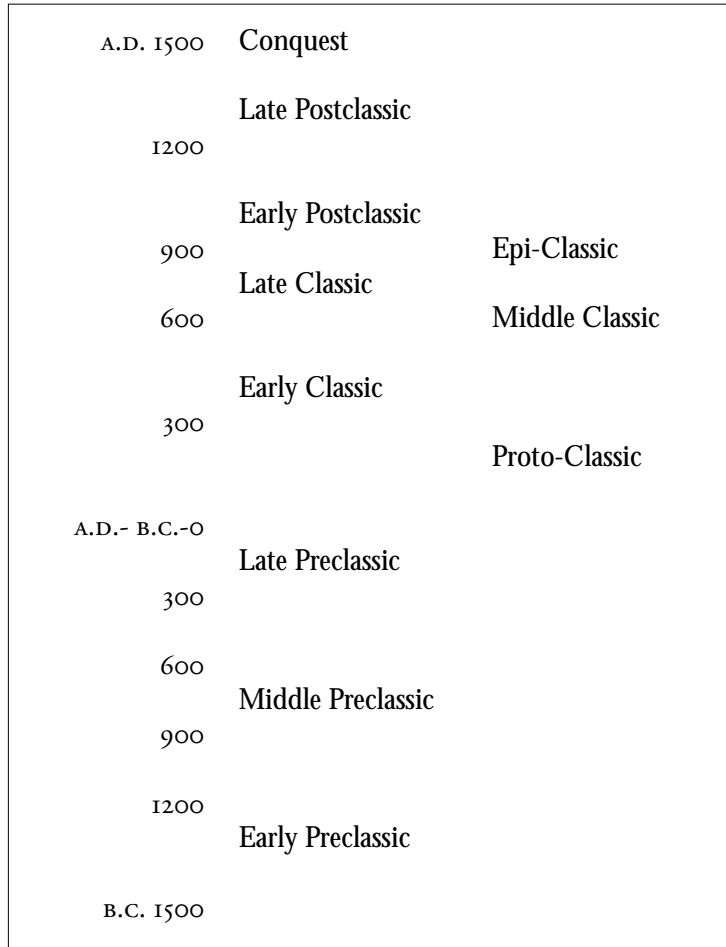


Figure 1. Archaeological Periods in Maya History.

It is not clear where and when the term, ceremonial bar, was introduced into the literature. Teobert Maler first described it as an "ornamental beam" in his discussion of its appearances on Stela 1 from Yaxchilan, Chiapas (figure 5),⁴ but five years later he used the term, cremonial bar, in his description of the regalia depicted on Stela 9 at Seibal, Guatemala.⁵ When Herbert Spinden published his great work, *A Study of Maya Art*, he also used the term ceremonial bar,⁶ as did Thomas Joyce.⁷ Eduard Seler variously called it the Double-headed Serpent, the Lightning Serpent, and the Fire Serpent.⁸

Spinden discussed it at great length, concerned with how it was represented and what its formal variations and substitutions may have been. He did not speculate on its meaning, saying only that it is, "an object of unknown use that is commonly held in the arms..."⁹ Joyce believed it to be a symbol of the sky and the figure who held it a *bacab* or deity.¹⁰ Walter Taylor studied the ceremonial bar in the same manner as Spinden, that is, as an iconographic complex with substitutions and variations. However, he believed its general meaning had to do with water symbolism.¹¹

When Sylvanus Morley's ever-useful book, *The Ancient Maya*, was republished in 1956, a caption to a drawing of various ceremonial insignia described the bar as, "a Double-Headed Ceremonial Bar, symbol of highest religious rank during Classic times."¹² In the 1983 edition of Morley's work,

4. Teobert Maler, "Researches in the Central Portion of the Usumasintla Valley," *Memoirs*, Peabody Museum, Harvard University, vol. 2, no. 2, 1903, p. 128.

5. Teobert Maler, "Explorations in the Department of Peten, Guatemala, and Adjacent Regions," *Memoirs*, Peabody Museum, Harvard University, vol. 4, no. 2, 1908, p. 21.

6. Herbert J. Spinden, *A Study of Maya Art*, New York, Dover Publications, 1975 (first edition 1913), pp. 49-60 (Memoirs of the Peabody Museum, vi).

7. Thomas Joyce, *Mexican Archaeology. An Introduction to the Archaeology of the Mexican and Maya Civilizations of Pre-Spanish America*, New York, G.B. Putnam's Sons, 1914, pp. 235-238.

8. Eduard Seler, *Beobachtungen und Studien in den Ruinen von Palenque. Observation and Studies in the Ruins of Palenque*, translation by Gisela Morgner, Pebble Beach (Cal.), Robert Louis Stevenson School, 1977 (first edition 1915), pp. 28-29.

9. Spinden, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

10. Joyce, *op. cit.*

11. Walter W. Taylor, "The Ceremonial Bar and Associated Features of Maya Ornamental Art," *American Antiquity*, Society of American Archaeology, vol. VII, no. 1, 1941, pp. 48-63.

12. Sylvanus Morley, *The Ancient Maya*, third edition, revised by George W. Brainerd, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1956, p. 147, figure 6.

the same drawing is labelled, "two-headed ceremonial bar, the symbol of supreme authority in the Classic period."¹³

Adding to these possible symbolic meanings of sky, water, religious rank, and power, recent scholarship has suggested a multiplicity of more specific meanings. These can be grouped into two general points of view about the iconographic meanings of the ceremonial bar. One view, based on contextual evidence, considers the bar to signify that its holder is deceased: a mortuary motif held by persons honored in posthumous "portraits."¹⁴ The other view is based on what the ceremonial bar looks like and sees the bar as a cosmological icon.¹⁵

The reasoning behind the contextual observation comes from the ceremonial bar's representation at the important Classic site of Yaxchilan and from its appearance with calendaric dates of evil omen.¹⁶ On an early, if not the earliest, stela carved and erected at Yaxchilan (Stela 14), the human figure is portrayed cradling a ceremonial bar. It never again appears at this site as the regalia of main figures carved on stelae, but it is shown carried by small, secondary figures, generally considered to be "portraits" of ancestors, placed in the supernal regions of the stela's composition (figure 5). Hence, because of its early and then later appearances, the bar is nicely explained as a symbol held by ancestors. By extension, and with other contextual iconographies that appear to justify this interpretation, the circumstances at Yaxchilan have

13. Morley, *The Ancient Maya*, fourth edition, revised by Robert J. Sharer, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1983, p. 109, figure 4.10 h.

14. Clemency Coggins, "Painting and Drawing Styles at Tikal: An Historical and Iconographic Reconstruction," Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, Department of the History of Art, 1975, pp. 204-206; and Tatiana Proskouriakoff, *Maya History*, edited by Rosemary A. Joyce, Austin, Texas University Press, 1993, p. 24.

15. Terence Greider, *Origins of Pre-Columbian Art*, Austin, Texas University Press, 1982, pp. 73-76; John R. Sosa, "Maya Concepts of Astronomical Order," in Gary H. Gossen, ed., *Symbol and Meaning Beyond the Closed Community: Essays in Mesoamerican Ideas*, Albany, State University of New York, Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, 1986, pp. 185-196 (*Studies on Culture and Society*, 1), pp. 195-196; Linda Schele and David Freidel, *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya*, New York, William Morrow and Company, 1990, pp. 415-416; and David Freidel, "The Tress of Life: *Ahau* as Idea and Artifact in Classic Lowland Maya Civilization," in Arthur A. Demarest and Geoffrey W. Conrad, eds., *Ideology and Pre-Columbian Civilization*, Santa Fe, School of American Research Press, 1992, pp. 115-192, p. 133, n. 12.

16. Proskouriakoff, *op. cit.*

been argued for a few other sites displaying the ceremonial bar, most notably for the monuments from Tikal, Guatemala.¹⁷

Terence Greider was the first to propose that the ceremonial bar identified its holder as a personification of the “world tree” or the *axis mundi* thereby directly connecting the holder to cosmic deities and the celestial realm.¹⁸ The reasons for celestial connotations are found in the bar itself when glyphs or emblems thought to denote celestial bodies substitute for the more usual knotted sections.¹⁹ The well-known homophony between the Yucatec Mayan words for snake (*chan*) and sky (*caan*) is an important part of this argument.²⁰

Several cognate interpretations belong to the world-tree/*axis mundi* and celestial meanings attributed to the ceremonial bar. Carlson and Landis²¹ and John Sosa²² have suggested that the two-headed bar represented the ecliptic, which Sosa considers an important organizing principle within Maya cosmology.²³ When rulers held the bar, they did so to symbolize their divine right to political power. Freidel, Schele, and Parker consider the ceremonial bar to be both the ecliptic and a heavenly umbilicus connecting the mundane with the celestial.²⁴ Karen Bassie believes serpents were personifications of a cave passage; that cave tunnels were the “sky” of the underworld; and that the small heads or manikins depicted in the gaping jaws of the ceremonial bar serpents were deities born from the cave.²⁵

As might be expected, the present study fails to provide such precise or singular meanings for the ceremonial bar. Because of its importance, it held

17. Coggins, *op. cit.*; Proskouriakoff, *op. cit.*

18. Greider, *op. cit.*

19. John B. Carlson and Linda C. Landis, “Bands, Bicephalic Dragons, and Other Beasts: The Skyband in Maya Art and Iconography,” in Merle Green Robertson, gen. ed., Elizabeth P. Benson, vol. ed., *Fourth Palenque Round-Table, 1980*, San Francisco, The Pre-Columbian Research Institute, 1985, vol. VI, pp. 115-140, p. 128.

20. See Schele and Freidel, *op. cit.*, pp. 415-416, 418; and Linda Schele and Mary E. Miller, *The Blood of Kings*, Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum, 1986, p. 72.

21. *Op. cit.*, p. 129.

22. *Op. cit.*, p. 96.

23. *Ibidem.*

24. David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos*, New York, William Morrow and Company, 1993, pp. 105, 208.

25. Karen Bassie-Sweet, *From the Mouth of the Dark Cave*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991, pp. 128, 137, 152.

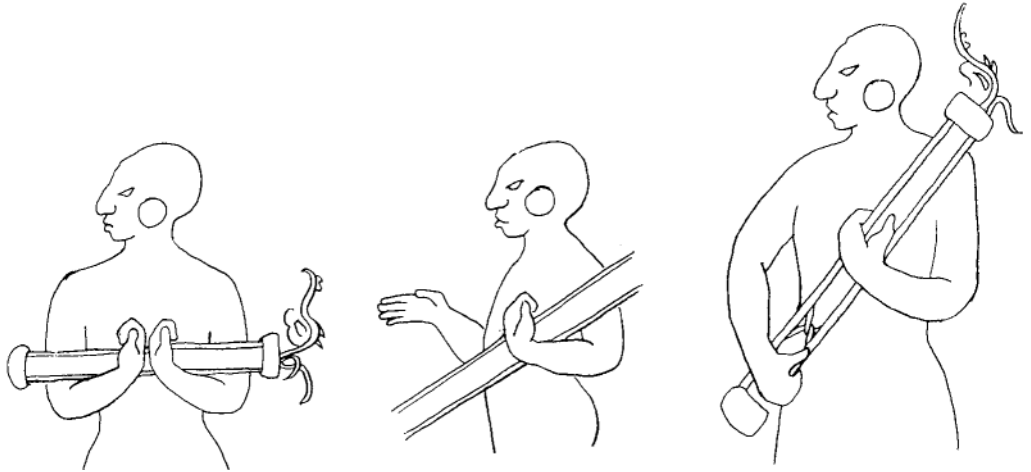


Figure 2. Gestures used to hold the ceremonial bar: A. symmetrically cupped-hands; B. asymmetrical gesture; C. grasping gesture.

many meanings; its iconographic content shifting in response to the various emphases or reinterpretations imparted by particular artists and their patrons. The goal of this essay, therefore, is to define the graphic functions and the range of ceremonial bar's iconographic potential. The ceremonial bar was consistently associated with primordial energy, with shamanic performance and transformation, and with confliction. It represents an allegory about origin and initiation.²⁶

26. Allegory, as it is used in this essay, refers to a process wherein, "one text is *read through* another" (Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New York-Boston, Museum of Contemporary Art-David R. Godine Publisher, 1984, pp. 203-235, p. 204; original emphasis). Owens's essay is critically concerned with contemporary art. To illuminate his subject, however, he emphasizes allegorical process and structure, and in doing so provides an exemplary representation of how allegory works

I have no idea whether the ancients had a term akin to allegory, but I do assert that the way they used symbol and icon in controlled compositions required intellectual, religious, and philosophical thought; and the ancient imagery looked at in this essay could not be the result of traditional or spontaneous folk-ways.

Formal History of the Ceremonial Bar

Because the gestures used to hold the ceremonial bar are as important as the bar itself, this “history” begins with their descriptions.

Gestures

There are a limited number of gestures associated with the holding of the ceremonial bar (figure 2). The best known gesture is the symmetrical “cupped-hand gesture” that renders the two arms bent at the elbows and the hands, fingers curled over or around the thumb, drawn to the chest (figure 2a). The gestures used to hold the diagonally presented bar are necessarily asymmetrical (figure 2b). While the cupped-hand, whether symmetrically mated or not, is always chosen to support the ceremonial bar in the Early Classic Period and its use continues throughout the Classic Period, during the Late Classic it no longer represents the exclusive manner with which to hold the bar.²⁷

The most significant difference in Late Classic gestures used to hold the ceremonial bar is that it also can be grasped rather than just being supported and cradled (figure 3c). The bar is first depicted as grasped in 9.8.0.0.0 (593 A.D.) on Stela 9 of Lamanai, Belize, and on Stela 38 of El Naranjo, Guatemala. The difference between the gestures of cradling and grasping has to do with attitude. For us, something cradled or embraced implies solicitude and relatedness, while grasping suggests control and a hierarchical relationship. That the ancient Maya made a graphic distinction between the two gestures is sure, but the authentic intentions behind this distinction are not certain. The grasping gesture does not replace the earlier gesture. It is used in addition to it, and does not represent an evolution, but an extension, of iconographic meaning.

Varieties

By far, the most common variety of the ceremonial bar is the conventional one described in the Introduction and it is used as the descriptive norm against which the other varieties take their definition. Since no ceremonial

27. I do not have the control necessary to discuss the much larger varieties in the Late Classic treatment of the hands. Differences in the ways in which fingers are articulated are so various that one is tempted to consider this a stylistic trait. Nonetheless, these *mudra*-like gestures probably contained iconographic meaning.

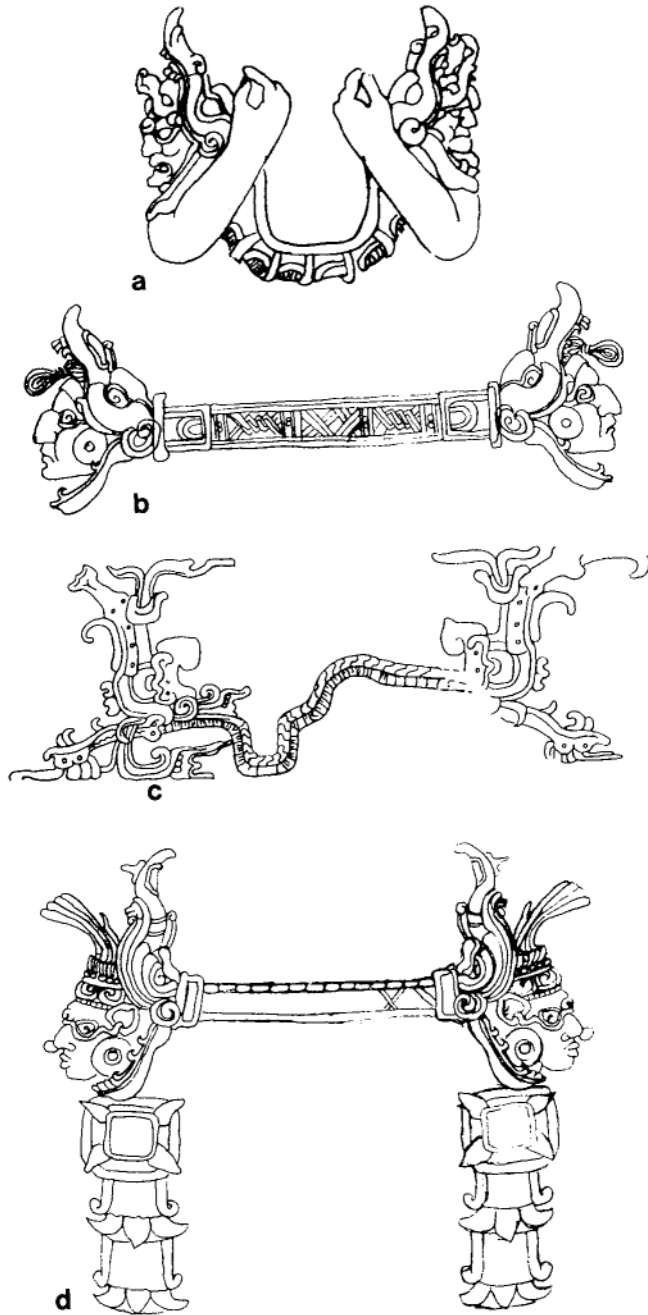


Figure 3. Varieties of the ceremonial bar: A. conventional bar; B. flaccid bar; C. undulant bar; D. fancy bar.

bar is like another in its details, the varieties represent general classifications, and are: the normal or *conventional* bar, the *flaccid*, the *undulant*, and the *fancy* ceremonial bar (figure 3).

The designs within the bars of the conventional and fancy varieties may include, besides the crossed-bands, rows of knots along one edge, hachured triangles, and celestial signs or glyphs known to denote star or Venus, Sun, night or dark, and Moon.²⁸ Regardless of how the central bar is designed, all the designs are sectioned to imply the segmented pattern of the serpent's scaly skin. By the beginning of the Late Classic Period things other than heads or manikins may appear in the jaws of the serpents attached to the conventional ceremonial bar. While rare, the substitutions are glyphs, weapons, scrolls. The weapons are usually knives that look like tongues within the serpent jaws. Stela 25 of El Naranjo (9.9.2.0.4; 615 A.D.) displays this for the first time.

The flaccid ceremonial bar is depicted as curving or drooping between its two serpent heads as they are cradled in the arms of the honored person (figures 3b, 4). It is always held by the symmetrically cupped-hand gesture, and is usually designed with small, repeated segments, evoking the description of a skeletal snake-body.²⁹ The first notable occurrence of this version is depicted on the Leiden Plaque (8.14.3.1.12; 320 A.D.; figure 5), and thus it has often been described as an early variety.³⁰ It is undoubtedly early, but both the conventional and undulant varieties appear before it does. More distinctive than duration are its areal limitations which, so far, confine it to the eastern and southeastern regions of the ancient Maya, and only at Tulum, Quintana Roo, and Copan, Honduras.³¹ After 9.13.15.0.0 (706 A.D., Copan Stela 5), it is no longer represented in the corpus of ancient Maya stelae.

28. See Carlson and Landis, *op. cit.*

29. Proskouriakoff, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

30. Tatiana Proskouriakoff, *A Study of Classic Maya Sculpture*, Washington, D.C., Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1950 (Publication no. 593), p. 98; and Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1993, p. 59.

31. Stela 28 of Calakmul, I believe, is generally thought to depict the flaccid variety, but as best as I can make out, it shows the figure holding two disembodied heads with the symmetrical cupped-hand gesture, as does Stela 88 of the same site.

The Leiden Plaque is almost universally accepted as having been carved at Tikal, Guatemala. This, then, would be an exception to the flaccid bar's areal restriction. However,

The undulant bar is the most ancient variety (figure 3c), first detectable as a piece of regalia on the Late Preclassic Stela 5 from Abaj Takalik, Guatemala (8.4.5.17.11?; 126 A.D.), where it is held by symmetrically cupped hands. Rather than the conventional curve that denotes the flaccid variety, the undulant ceremonial bar depicts multiple curves and more closely illustrates the energetic and sinuous movements of a serpent. Its first lowland appearance may be on the fragmented Stela 4 of El Mirador, Guatemala, another Late Preclassic monument, or on the unprovenienced Seattle Stela.³² The undulant variety was seldom used in the Classic Period and is found only at the sites of Xultun, Guatemala (Stelae 20, 23, 24, 25), and Yaxchilan, Guatemala (Hierolyphic Stair 2, steps II, III; Stela 37; Lintels 13, 14, 38, 39, 40, 51).³³

The fancy ceremonial bar is decorated with pendants of rondels and lappets hanging from either end of the bar (figure 4d). Beginning sometime in the late 8th baktun (*ca.* 350-400 A.D., Sufricaya, Guatemala, Stela 1), the pendant motifs denoting the fancy ceremonial bar continue throughout the Classic Period. Early on, lappets are depicted alone, but after 9.4.0.0.0 (514 A.D.), or at the beginning of the Middle Classic Period, they are more often paired with rondels (Stela 23 of El Perú, Guatemala). The fanciest bars have, additionally, complex pendants called “serpent poles”: vertical pole-like shapes that end themselves in serpent heads. The serpent poles are best exemplie-

it was originally found in the southeastern Maya region, near Puerto Barrios, Guatemala. Its assumed provenience of Tikal can be questioned.

32. Because of the calendarics carved on this piece are equivocal, Linda Schele, “The Hauberg Stela: Bloodletting and the Myths of Maya Rulership,” in Merle Green Robertson and Virginia Fields, eds., *Fifth Palenque Round-Table*, 1983, San Francisco, The Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute, 1985, pp. 135-149 (The Palenque Round-Table Series, vol. VIII), opts for a Preclassic date on stylistic grounds, 8.8.0.7.0.3 Ahau 13 Xul (199 A.D.). Her reading requires assuming the scribe/carver made a mistake in the month number, carving 13 when 12 was required. I prefer the later date she rejects, 8.15.7.5.3.3 Kan 12 Zotz (344 A.D.) also for stylistic reasons, but obviously different ones, as well as for the fact that the month number agrees with the one inscribed. The truth is that there are not enough known monuments from the Late Preclassic and early Early Classic Periods to be confident about any stylistic assessments.

33. Its appearance in a “scene within a scene” carved on the front edge of the throne depicted on the back of Stela 3 of Piedras Negras, Guatemala, is an interesting exception to its restricted use (see note 57 below).

Stela 11 of Uxbenka, Belize, may display an undulant bar, not a flaccid one, but it is difficult to be certain given the condition of the monument. Stela 11 is also difficult to stylistically date with any precision. Its style date is 9.3.0.0.0 + 5 katuns; that is, ranging from 396-593 A.D., and the best that can be said is that it is an Early Classic monument.

fied on Stelae 1, 2, and 28 of Tikal, dated between 9.1 and 9.2.0.0.0 (455-495 A.D.). Serpent poles, however, are also found at Caracol, Belize (Stelae 5, 14, 16), El Perú (Stelae 24, 30), and Quirigua, Guatemala (Monuments 1, 3, 8), and possibly on Stela B of Copan.

Two changes, one formal, one iconographic, can be detected within the varietal history of the ceremonial bar. The more active, undulant variety, is the earliest illustration of the ceremonial bar and the more regular forms of the conventional and flaccid bars appear at the beginning of the Early Classic Period (Stela 29 of Tikal, 292 A.D.). While the undulant ceremonial bar does not disappear, it is clear that most Early Classic patrons and sculptors conceived the bar in a more static form, and in more conventional terms, than their Preclassic predecessors.

Despite the singularity of each ceremonial bar, a generalized iconographic difference, or change, can be detected in the Late Classic Period: images other than disembodied head or manikins, glyphs, scrolls, and weapons, appear in the jaws of the serpents at the same time the ceremonial bar is grasped as well as cradled. While the glyphs and scrolls may be more abstract restatements of the traditional meanings attributed to the heads and manikins, the weapons, depicted as knife blades taking the place of the serpent's tongue, are an iconic change; one that more clearly illustrates the association of conflict with the ceremonial bar.

Presentation

As depicted, the conventional ceremonial bar is presented either diagonally or horizontally relative to the person holding it (figures 2 and 5). Both ways were equally popular choices. However, the horizontal bar makes its appearance only after the beginning of the 9th baktun, *ca.* 445 A.D. (Bodega Stela at Tikal; Stela 26 from Uaxactun, Guatemala). There are no diagnostic differences for the areal distribution of diagonal or horizontally held bars.

Women hold the ceremonial bar; they are not depicted as often as men, but significantly account for approximately 20 per cent of the charted examples in this study, a higher percentage than their monumental representation in general. In charting what sex held the bar, the distinction was made on the basis of costume. Figures dressed in short kilts are male, in long skirts, female, but all figures wearing a costume overlaid with a distinctive network of beads were identified as feminine (figure 12). This costume device has



Figure 4. Leiden Plaque. Drawing by John Montgomery.

been shown to be worn by women over their huipils, or blouses, and long skirts,³⁴ but it also can be worn by men dressed in feminine costume for ritual purposes.³⁵ The female, or the female costume, is associated with the ceremonial bar in the Early Classic Period only after the turn of the 9th baktun (Tikal, Stela 1; Tres Islas, Guatemala, Stela 2). It is during the Late Classic Period, however, that the greatest number of women, or figures dressed in feminine costume, are shown holding a ceremonial bar.

That the ceremonial bar could be held horizontally or diagonally, by female or male, are meaningful distinctions in presentation. At this time, however, it is difficult to determine what were the original intents behind these distinctions. When the bar is shown to be held horizontally, the resulting composition is more static, verging towards the symmetrical, and conversely, a diagonal bar creates a dynamic composition suggesting greater movement and action for the figure that holds it. Dynamic and asymmetrical compositions support the representations of narrative and stories of action and deed, while static and more symmetrical compositions support descriptive connotations of the godlike, the atemporal, and the atopic.³⁶ Because of its formal conspicuousness as a large hand-held object within the monumental image, the ceremonial bar visually emphasizes this compositional distinction. It can be speculated, then, that the diagonally held bar connotes the action of manifesting and the horizontally held bar represents the completed act—the manifestation.

34. Tatiana Proskouriakoff, "Portraits of Women in Maya Art," in Samuel K. Lothrop, ed., *Essays in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1964, pp. 81-89.

35. Linda Schele, "Genealogical Documentation on the Tri-Figure Panels at Palenque," in Merle Green Robertson, ed., *Proceedings of the Tercera Mesa Redonda de Palenque*, Palenque, Pre-Columbian Research Center, 1979, pp. 41-70; and Flora S. Clancy, "Text and Image in the Tablets of the Cross Group at Palenque," *Res. Anthropology and Aesthetics*, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, no. 11, 1986, pp. 17-32. Freidel, Schele, and Parker, *op. cit.*, pp. 273-274, believe this is the costume of the First Mother and First Father, worn by rulers emulating them in ritual circumstances. The First Father is also identified by the authors as the Maize God. See also Karl Taube, "The Classic Maya Maize God: A Reappraisal," in Virginia Fields and Merle Green Robertson, eds., *Fifth Palenque Round-Table*, 1983, San Francisco, The Pre-Columbian Art Institute, 1985, vol. VII, pp. 171-182.

36. Flora S. Clancy, "The Compositions and Contexts of the Classical Stelae of Copan and Quirigua," in Gordon Willey, ed., *The Southeastern Classic Maya Zone*, Washington, D.C., Dumbarton Oaks Center for Pre-Columbian Studies, 1988, pp. 195-221.

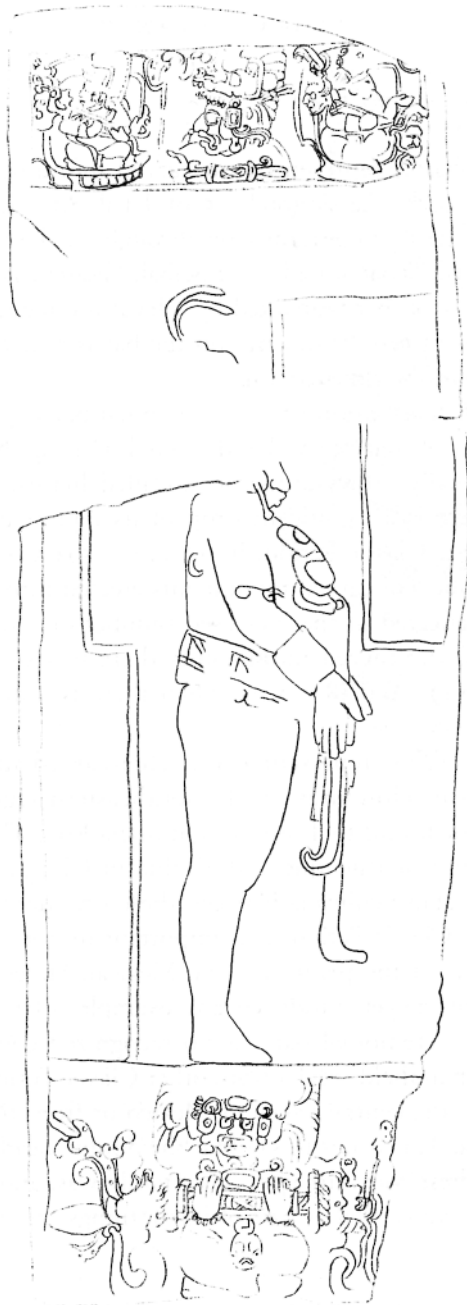


Figure 5. Stelae 1, Yaxchilan. Drawing by author from photo (courtesy of Ian Graham).

Distribution in Time and Space

The ceremonial bar is represented on carved monuments from the very beginning of the Early Classic (Stela 29 of Tikal, 8.12.14.8.15; 292 A.D.) and remained a consistently important icon throughout the Classic Period until 10.1.0.0.0 (849 A.D.; Stelae 9 and 10 of Seibal, Guatemala). Each representation of the ceremonial bar is marked by a local uniqueness in style and design, but in terms of general description the bar is remarkably consistent in its form throughout the times of its use.

The temporal distribution of the ceremonial bar is positively related to the actual number of stelae carved and erected. During the Early Classic Period its use gradually grows until the so-called hiatus, or Middle Classic Period, when there is a significant drop of its representations. At the beginning of the Late Classic Period, in 9.8.0.0.0 (593 A.D.), a sudden resurgence in the numbers of carved monuments erected throughout the ancient Maya region is reflected in the increased number of ceremonial bars being represented. Like the carved monuments there is a steady increase in its depiction until 9.19.0.0.0 (810 A.D.) when there is a dramatic decrease in numbers.³⁷

The ceremonial bar represented on relief-carved monuments can be found from Copan, Honduras, in the southeastern region of the ancient Maya territory, northward to Tulum in Quintana Roo. The western extent is marked by the sites of Palenque and Tonina in Chiapas. A rough triangle drawn on the Yucatan peninsula between these sites describes the bar's areal extent during the Classic Period. It is important to note that the north and northwestern parts of the peninsula (the Mexican States of Campeche and Yucatan) have not, as yet, produced any examples of known provenience. Furthermore, the ceremonial bar has no recognized cognate image in the iconographies of handheld regalia from other Classic Period cultures, such as at Teotihuacan in the central valley of Mexico or from the ancient Zapotec culture of Oaxaca. This is not to say that the double-headed serpent was not a major icon in these Mexican areas. It certainly was, and surely the ancient Maya ceremonial bar carried as part of its meanings the strong connotations

37. An anomaly occurs during the 17th katun (771-779 A.D.) when only five monuments have been found to depict the ceremonial bar. I have no information with which to explain this odd hiatus.



Figure 6.
Jade Plaque, dancer, Tikal.
Drawing after William Coe, *Tikal. A
Handbook of the Ancient Maya Ruins*, p. 64.

of this ubiquitous Mesoamerican (indeed American) icon. Still, the ceremonial bar as an image of regalia is unique to the Classic Maya, both in its areal and temporal dimensions.³⁸

The majority of sites erecting monuments to display a person holding the ceremonial bar do so only once. Because the archaeological record of carved monuments is incomplete, it can only be of speculative interest that of these sites more than half display their only ceremonial bar on the first recorded monument they erect. Actually, this fact is also true for sites erecting more than one monument depicting the bar; this is, the first monument erected most often portrays the ceremonial bar.

³⁸. The exceptional appearance of the ceremonial bar in the Epi-classic murals of Cacaxtla (Tlaxcala, Mexico) is of interest. As an item of regalia foreign to Mexico, its presence in the murals confirm that their patron's intentions in using an obvious Maya graphic style went beyond just an aesthetic choice.

Four Classic Maya sites erected more monuments carved to show figures holding ceremonial bars than others, and they show an areal concentration in the eastern Maya area: El Naranjo and Caracol in the central eastern region, Coba in the northeast, Copan in the southeast, and Yaxchilan, exceptionally, in the western region along the Usumacinta River.³⁹ Although the western sites do depict the ceremonial bar, it is characterized within a narrative scene: that is, with recognizable iconography, but not gathered together into the image of the honored person holding the ceremonial bar as is the case for the central and eastern sites.⁴⁰

A Regional Distinction. While monuments of the central and eastern sites depict the main figure holding the bar, it is a rare occurrence at western sites. Yaxchilan, in the west, displayed the ceremonial bar held by a main figure only once at the very beginning of its history of monument carving (Stela 14). Otherwise, ceremonial bars are held by small figures depicted in the supernal and basal sections of the stelae that frame the main figure (figure 5). The supernal figures are paired, man and woman, each holding a diagonal bar, and sitting within a cartouche. They are generally described as representations of deceased ancestors. Freidel, Schele, and Parker consider the enframing cartouche as representing a portal to the Otherworld.⁴¹ Stela 1 (figure 5), besides depicting this supernal pair, also displays its basal image a seated daimon or “other” holding a conventional ceremonial bar with knives emerging from the gaping jaws. At Yaxchilan, the ceremonial bar was not regalia for the ruler; it was held by “others.” This explicit restriction is a trait of the western Maya living along the Usumacinta River during the Late

39. The number of examples determining which sites possessed the “most” representations of the ceremonial bar is 13. It is a poetic, but arbitrary, number. Given all the Classic representations collected, Caracol, Coba, and El Naranjo each have 13 examples, and both Copan and Yaxchilan have 24. These numbers are dependent on archaeological recovery and cannot be made to mean anything. Tonina, according with my collection, shows nine examples, but I suppose further excavation will turn up more. The next number of examples from one site is six (Quirigua) and after that, five (Altar de Sacrificios, El Perú, Tikal, and Uaxactun).

40. This is true for the major sites of Palenque, Yaxchilan, and Piedras Negras. At the less well-known sites of La Florida and Morales the ceremonial bar is represented as it is in the central regions, but only once. At Tonina, figures are portrayed holding a bar with no ends attached: only two monuments show the serpent heads, Monument 26, a stela-like figure carved in columnar fashion, and a pedestal, Monument 114.

41. Freidel, Schele, and Parker, *op. cit.*, pp. 215-218.

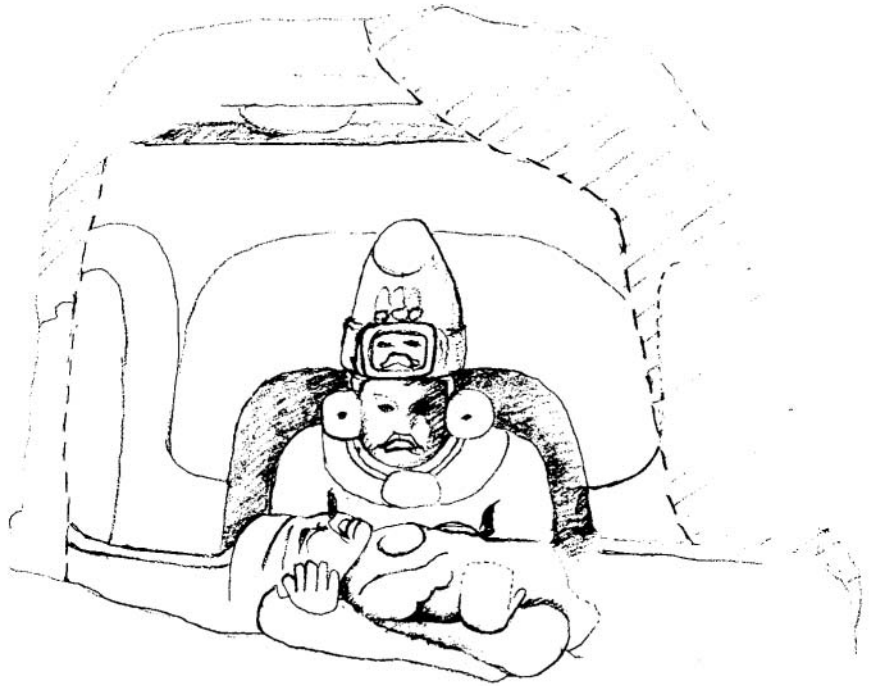


Figure 7. Altar 5, La Venta. Drawing by author.

Classic Period. No monuments at Piedras Negras or Palenque represent rulers holding the ceremonial bar.

A Distinction in Medium. The ceremonial bar is represented in various media, but the usual medium is the stone stela, a public monument carved in relief set upright in the plaza and terrace floors in front of a pyramidal platform. As represented on stelae, the ceremonial bar, cradled by the main and human figure is understood as an item of royal regalia. When it is depicted on other media such as jade or painted on pottery its holder is most commonly a daimon, a dwarf, or a dancer (figure 6).⁴² The miniature scale of these pieces and the depicted contextual associations stress the mythic and connotative aspects of its meanings rather than its political and denotative

42. The incense burner stand published by Gordon Ekholm as part of *The Maremont Collection of Pre-Columbian Art*, Jerusalem, The Israel Museum, n.d. (publication no. 87), is a unique exception to the above characterization. The clay stand depicts a standing female figure wearing a long skirt with the beaded net overlay holding a diagonally presented, conventional ceremonial bar, which Ekholm mentions is partially restored. I only have seen the published photograph but I suspect more than the ceremonial bar has been restored in this piece.

meanings seen on the public monuments. The same interpretation may fit the small holders of the ceremonial bar depicted in the basal and supernal areas of the Yaxchilan stelae.

Genealogy for the Ceremonial Bar

The symmetrically cupped-hand gesture and the holding of a serpent are two Preclassic iconographic themes that have separate histories. They are first joined together at Abaj Takalik on Stelae 1 and 5 at the end of the Late Preclassic Period (ca. 125 A.D.).⁴³ The symmetrically cupped-hand gesture originates in the ancient Olmec culture of the Middle Preclassic, while holding the serpent is first illustrated in the narratives of the Late Preclassic.

The symmetrically cupped-hand gesture is first used to hold an anthropomorphic baby depicted with a realistically chubby body and the unrealistic face of the so-called Olmec “were-creature.”⁴⁴ On the great pedestals or thrones carved at San Lorenzo, Veracruz (Monument 20), and La Venta, Tabasco (Altars 3 and 5; figure 7), an adult figure, carved in high relief, is depicted sitting within an arching niche with both arms bent at the elbows and extended over the lap. The palms of the adult hands are turned upwards and the fingers curl to embrace the supine body of the baby. The usual interpretations of this image have to do with the birth of a deity, or the manifestation of a deity held like a child in the arms of a priest or shaman emerging from a cave and the underworld.

A variation of the symmetrical gesture is used to hold a rope as well as a bar shaped like a rolling pin. The holder is again seated, but the arms are extended to the ground in front of the body and the hands grip the bar or rope with one set of fingers over it and one set under it.⁴⁵ Altar 4 of La Venta

43. See Richard E.W. Adams, *Prehistoric Mesoamerica*, revised edition, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1992, fig. 4-4.

44. Like a were-wolf of European myth, the Olmec baby’s face combines human and animal features. The identity of the animal is a matter of debate. The reader not familiar with this debate may be interested to know that the two major contenders are the toad and the jaguar—creatures from radically different phyla. I think we should credit the brilliance of ancient Olmec imagination for our present indecision.

45. See San Lorenzo’s Monument 11 and the sculpture from San Martin Pijiapan. This is probably the gesture depicted on the newly found sculptures from El Azulul, near San

and Monument 14 of San Lorenzo both depict a figure seated in a niche grasping a rope by the reversed cupped-hand gesture. The rope runs to the lateral sides of the pedestals where it is shown connecting with another seated figure rendered in thin relief. This person may be, in fact, bound by the rope, suggesting conflict as well as connection. Iconographically, the anthropomorphic baby and the binding rope are related because they are displayed in the same context of a niche, and the gestures are related through complementary reversal: one grasps and one embraces. Thus, the symmetrical Olmec gesture of embrace probably carried the latent implications of connection and conflict.

In the Late Preclassic Period (*ca.* 400-300 B.C.), the symmetrically cupped-hand gesture is depicted in the rock carving (Monument 1 from Chalcatzingo, Morelos; figure 8). Carved in thin relief, a figure, possibly feminine, is seated on a block-pedestal engraved with a reversed spiral. She embraces a thick bar engraved with the same reversed spiral. The figure is shown seated within a conventionalized serpent's mouth; a scene that has suggested to all who study it, the entrance to a cave.⁴⁶ A thematic comparison to the earlier, Middle Preclassic niched pedestals is obvious, and implies that the reversed spiral bar may be conventional substitute for the anthropomorphic baby.⁴⁷

A reversed spiral is an ancient and pervasive symbol with Palaeolithic origins. In general, it is considered to hold earthly and feminine meanings, while its contexts in the ancient Americas has suggested feminine, but cele-

Lorenzo. Two almost identical sculptures depict human-like figures by the same pose, gesture, and costuming as they faced a larger sculpture of a feline creature. See George F. Stuart, "New Light on the Olmec," *National Geographic*, vol. 184, no. 5, 1993, pp. 88-115, p. 105.

46. See David C. Grove, "Olmec Altars and Myths," *Archaeology*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1973, pp. 129-135.

47. David C. Grove, *Chalcatzingo. Excavations on the Olmec Frontier*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1984, p. 158, has characterized the Chalcatzingo reliefs as a "frontier art style" wherein Olmec iconography from the Gulf Coast is represented in a simplified fashion for peoples not familiar with its esoteric meanings.

Two ceremonial axes (celts) from Río Pesquero, Veracruz, depict figures holding a bar-shaped staff by the cupped-hand gesture. See Peter D. Joralemon, "The Olmec Dragon: A Study in Pre-Columbian Iconography," in H.B. Nicholson, ed., *Origins of Religious Art and Iconography in Preclassic Mesoamerica*, Los Angeles, University of California at Los Angeles, Latin American Center Publications, Ethnic Arts Council, 1976, pp. 28-71.



Figure 8. Monument 1, Chalcatzingo. Drawing by author from photo (courtesy of David Grove).



Figure 9. Stelae 19, Kaminaljuyu. Drawing by author.

tial, meanings.⁴⁸ Thus, if the meanings of the baby were capable of being expressed by the emblematic reversed spiral, then the baby's authentic meanings had something to do with feminine and celestial realms. It is not hard to imagine how a baby was associated with things feminine. Celestial connotations, however, are less easy to imagine as both the Olmec baby and the double spiral are represented in, or at the mouth of, a niche/cave—a more chthonic than heavenly context.

A human figure holding a serpent-like creature is an iconographic theme that can be first documented at the beginning of the Late Preclassic Period (ca. 600 B.C.), a time when narrative scenes were depicted in relief.⁴⁹ Monument 63 from La Venta is a basalt column carved with a human figure wearing an elaborate headdress facing a gigantic serpentine creature that appears to engulf or enframe him. The human has raised one arm to embrace the enormous body of the creature whose head, rendered in profile and showing imposing teeth, looms over the human's. Milbrath considers this a confrontation scene between "human and supernatural forces," and compares its imagery to that of San Lorenzo's Monument 56.⁵⁰ This monument is also a basalt column; its thin relief badly worn, and while it clearly displays the same scene, the gigantic creature is hard to identify. It is called a jaguar by Beatriz de la Fuente.⁵¹

This narrative theme next appears on Stela 19 of Kaminaljuyu, in the Guatemalan highlands, dated by Parsons to the Late Preclassic Period (figure 9).⁵² On this monument, the figure, rendered as an anthropomorphic, clawed-footed "deity," crouches with bent knees and raises both hands above its head to grasp a coiling and energetic serpentine body that arches over and around him, again, like a frame. The serpent has two heads: one is almost

48. See Greider, *op. cit.*, p. 116 ff.

49. Flora S. Clancy, "A Genealogy for Maya Monuments," in F.S. Clancy and Peter D. Harrison, eds., *Vision and Revision in Maya Studies*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1990, pp. 21-32.

50. Susan Milbrath, *A Study of Olmec Sculptural Chronology*, Washington, D.C., Dumbarton Oaks Center for Pre-Columbian Studies, 1979 (Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology, 23), p. 39.

51. Beatriz de la Fuente, *Escultura monumental olmeca*, Mexico, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1973, p. 234.

52. Lee A. Parsons, *The Origins of Maya Art: Monumental Stone Sculpture of Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala, and the Southern Pacific Coast*, Washington, D.C., Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1986 (Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology, 28), p. 30.

realistically snake-like; the other is a “deity” head. Stela 4 of the same site is a fragment, but apparently depicted a similar scene. This serpent, while certainly of imposing and energetic mien, is not as gigantic and overwhelming as in the earlier Olmec illustrations.

The convergence of the ancient, symmetrically cupped-hand gesture with the narrative of grasping a serpent occurs on Stela 5 of Abaj Takalik, an ancient site not too far from Kaminaljuyu. On this monument, two figures are represented, one holding an animal or manikin by the symmetrically cupped-hand gesture, and the other holding an undulant serpent by the same gesture. No longer depicted as large, or as energetically forceful as its earlier counterparts, this serpentine creature is best described as an undulating rather than looming or coiling. Between the two figures on Stela 5, a column of glyphs show two dates, the latest being 8.4.5.17.II? (126 A.D.), and thus this monument belongs to the late Late Preclassic Period. No clear record exists to explain why the great serpents of Preclassic narratives were “tamed” into the ceremonial bar, but the history of the symmetrically cupped-hand gesture assures us that this is what happened: the hands that held the baby now hold the serpent. The old gesture implies that the baby was somehow meaningfully linked to a memorable struggle with a serpent.

We know that the result of this linking or joining of the two “stories” was the ceremonial bar, but we can only speculate about why and how the conjunction was made. This conjunction may have had a long oral history but graphic evidence for it does not occur until just before the great cultural flourishing of the Early Classic Period. On Stela 5 of Abaj Takalik, we do not see the struggle and we do not see the baby: we see a revisioned serpent held by the old gesture that cradled the baby and the double spiral. Rather than substituting for the baby/spiral, the serpentine ceremonial bar itself “gives birth” or brings forth small “deities” from its mouth(s) and the gesture now embraces both the bearer and the born (or the “mother and her children”). This suggests the kind of restatement, that produces allegories, wherein “one text [or story] is *read through* another...”:⁵³ that the ancient iconographic complex of presenting a baby is being “read through” the story about a struggle with a large serpent, or vice versa.

For an allegory about origins (sources, birth), the serpent is a perfect symbol. Its symbolic capabilities extend from the celestial to the chthonic realms, and therefore does not, in itself, allow us to specifically conclude

53. Owens, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

where these original events took place. Actually to be so specific would transform the allegory back into a narrative or story. The meanings associated with the unchanged gesture may or may not have changed; it is difficult to tell. In the following section, however, it is shown that the Classic Maya used this gesture as a metonymic illustration for dance.

Reflections of the Ceremonial Bar

During the Maya Classic Period the icons that made up the ceremonial bar and its associated gestures can be detected in other circumstances and forms. As reflections, these iconic identities are drawn together differently, but share or reflect the meanings of the ceremonial bar. The cupped-hands can be depicted as a meaningful gesture by themselves, or used to cradle manikins and disembodied heads, anthropomorphic babies, and tripartite staffs rather than the ceremonial bar. Another reflection is signalled when the ceremonial bar is supported by dancing dwarves or by non-human entities such as trees, or daimons. The first reflection to be considered, however, is the cosmic (or celestial) monster, the iconographic twin of the ceremonial bar. It too is rendered with opposing heads, however, they are not the same as with the ceremonial bar: one is serpentine and the other, anthropomorphic.⁵⁴ Its iconographic history originates in the same looming and coiling serpents traced for the ceremonial bar.

The Cosmic Monster

The cosmic monster is a more ubiquitous icon than the ceremonial bar (figure 10). Cognate creatures can be found throughout ancient Mesoamerica and are referred to as double-headed serpents. It shares many, if not most, of the iconographic features associated with the ceremonial bar—the two opposing heads, cosmological signs, and the general, but important, serpentine aspect. Clearly for the ancient Maya, the two icons represented similar concepts and evoked similar connotations. The function of the cosmic monster, in graphic terms, however, is to support, to frame, and thereby to contextualize whatever is depicted on top, beneath, or within it, while the

54. Joyce, *op. cit.*, p. 234; Schele and Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

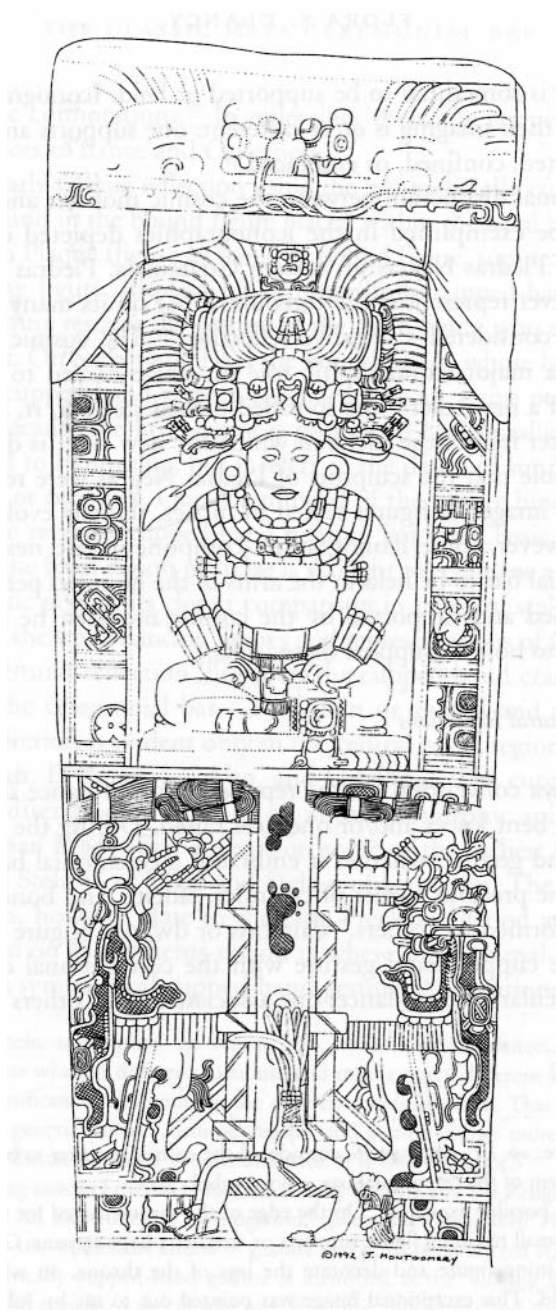


Figure 10. Stela 11, Piedras Negras. Drawing by J.M.

ceremonial bar is something to be supported or held. Iconographically, they are similar but their imaging is quite different: one supports and defines; the other is supported, confined, or embraced.⁵⁵

The functional distinction between the cosmic monster and the ceremonial bar may be exemplified in the iconographies depicted on the public monuments of Piedras Negras in western Guatemala. Piedras Negras, as far as we know, never represented the ceremonial bar on its many carved stelae. This could be considered a negative reflection.⁵⁶ The cosmic monster, however, played a major iconographic role on stelae carved to celebrate the inauguration of a new ruler—the so-called niched stelae 6, 11, and 14 (figure 10). The monster frames the niche in which the new ruler is depicted as sitting. It is possible that the sculptors of Piedras Negras were referring to the ancient Olmec images of figures seated in niches, thereby evoking historical authority. However, these iconographic components are never assembled into a ceremonial bar to be held in the arms of the honored person. The new ruler is enframed and supported by the cosmic monster: he does not presume, himself, to hold or support these icons.

Early Classic Gestural Reflections

An ancient Maya convention for the representation of dance shows a standing figure with bent knees and/or one heel raised. During the Early Classic, the cupped-hand gesture, whether it embraced a ceremonial bar or not, was illustrated in the precious media of ceramics, jadeite, and bone, as a gesture in a dance performed by “others,” daimons or dwarves (figure 6). The combination of the cupped-hand gesture with the conventional dance posture signifies a particular kind of dance; one associated with “others” and likely to

55. Thomas Joyce, *op. cit.*, pp. 235-236, considered the cosmic monster to be an earth monster, the complement of the ceremonial bar, a sky symbol.

56. There is one possible exception. On the edge of the throne carved for the scene on the back of Stela 3, a small reclining figure supports or wrestles a large serpent. Glyphic emblems surround the reclining figure and decorate the legs of the throne, on which is seated a woman and a child. This exceptional image was pointed out to me by John Montgomery (personal communication, 1993), and is comparable to the reclining figures carved on the risers of hieroglyphic stairways, such as those from Tamarindito, Copan, and Yaxchilan.

have shamanic connotations.⁵⁷ In reflection, then, the cupped-hand gesture carries references to dance and Otherness.⁵⁸

Another Early Classic reflection using the symmetrically cupped-hand gesture can be found in the bound figure placed within the basal images of stelae. On the Leiden Plaque (figure 4) the little bound figure, supine behind the feet of the standing figure, displays his symmetrically cupped-hands tied at the wrists. His gesture restates the gesture of the main figure who cradles a flaccid ceremonial bar. On Stela 39 of Tikal the bound figure, whose hands have been tied into the cupped-hand gesture is rendered in an active posture with one knee raised. Because the little figure is positioned horizontally, the posture is usually likened to swimming, but it refers to the dance of similar little figures carved in jade or ceramics. One is reminded of the Olmec binding rope associated with the reversed cupped-hand gesture. For the Classic Maya, the bound figure in the basal region of stelae is thought to represent a captive, but in the Early Classic period, its closest comparison in terms of scale, posture, and gesture is with the small dancing figures and representations of Others.

Another gestural reflection illustrates the cupped-hand cradling other regalia besides the ceremonial bar—a manikin or animal and a disembodied head. This reflection is evident only in the central Maya region at the sites of Tikal, Uaxactun, El Zapote, Xultun, and Calakmul. The cupped-hand used to cradle the disembodied head of an anthropomorphic spirit or daimon—never a human head—first appears on some of the earliest Classic monuments, such as Stela 36 of Tikal and Stela 9 of Uaxactun. The first examples of the manikin, however, date to the Late Preclassic Period at Abaj Takalik and can be seen on Monuments 14 and 15 where small animal-like characters are held by the symmetrical cupped-hand gesture. As mentioned earlier Stela

57. Freidel, Schele, and Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 260, understand the dance as engendering a transformative state wherein different costumes and regalia signal different kinds of dances. I add gesture as significant in determining the different kinds of dance. That is, the posture is conventional and generic dance. Costume, regalia, and gesture impart more particular information about the dance. All dance is transformative. It is why we dance.

58. In a intriguing article, Felicitas Goodman, "Body Posture and the Religious Altered State of Consciousness: An Experimental Investigation," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1986, pp. 81-118, studies the effects of gesture and posture on altered states of consciousness. The symmetrically cupped-hand gesture is identified as the "singing shaman" (*Ibidem*, pp. 90, 98-100), and associated specifically with rhythmic movement and dance, and stimulation in the head. Goodman claims that taking certain postures or gestures (the "induction technique"), like the singing shaman, produces the same effects across cultures (*Ibidem*, p. 83).



Figure 11.
Tripartite Staff. Drawing
by author after Tatiana Proskouriakof,
A study of Classic Maya Sculpture, figure 34g.

5 of Abaj Takalik displays two figures each gesturing with symmetrical cupped-hands, one holding the undulant ceremonial bar and the other an animal/manikin of some kind. Stela 5, then, illustrates a complementary relationship between the ceremonial bar and the manikin; they are different symbols conceptually linked by the ancient gesture.

The connection between these different things was perceived as a strong one because it is the manikin and the daimon head that appear in the jaws of the serpent heads of the conventional ceremonial bar. The ancient Maya, however, maintained a distinction between what it meant to carry the full ceremonial bar or just the creatures that emerged from the mouths of its serpents. The means by which they were engendered, however, are implied by the cupped-hand gesture which refers to the transformative dance or the ceremonial bar, or, more likely, to both.

In the Late Classic Period, gestures used to hold the ceremonial bar are more diverse than those of the Early Classic and cannot be as clearly associated with any particular kind of ritual or ceremonial movement or perfor-

mance. Nonetheless, two icons, a baby and the tripartite staff, can be identified as reflections because they are presented as ceremonial bars.

Late Classic Iconic Reflections

The hand-held piece of regalia known as the tripartite staff qualifies as a reflection only when it is held like the ceremonial bar; most often it is held vertically, like a staff or spear. It was constructed with two or three flexible withes tied together at their ends and at several points along their length. Between the ties, the withes are bent or curved to form rough losanges. Usually the ties are depicted as knots, but at either end the withes are joined or capped serpentine heads or scrolls (figure 11).

During the Early Classic Period it is held vertically like a staff. It is held diagonally in the manner of a ceremonial bar only in the Late Classic Period, and first at El Naranjo on Stela 38 (9.8.0.0.0; 593 A.D.). Following El Naranjo's new use of the tripartite staff, Tikal's Late Classic stelae, beginning with Stela 30 (9.13.0.0.0; 692 A.D.) consistently represent the staff held as a ceremonial bar. At El Naranjo, the actual ceremonial bar is represented after 9.13.0.0.0, not the tripartite staff, while at Tikal the actual ceremonial bar does not appear again after this date. Only one other site, Ixlu, uses ceremonial bar gestures to hold the staff, and this is very late, on Stela 1 at 10.1.10.0.0 (859 A.D.).

The tripartite staff held vertically is represented many more times than its apparent reflection as a ceremonial bar,⁵⁹ and is commonly depicted as a weapon, a spear, by the inclusion of knives-as-tongues within the serpent heads. This is surely related to the ceremonial bar as weapon that also appears at the beginning of the Late Classic Period (on Stela 25 of El Naranjo), indicated by the same iconography of knife-tongue. The reflection between the tripartite staff and the ceremonial bar, having to do with weaponry

59. So far, the tripartite staff can be found at Bonampak's Stela 1, Copan's Stela a, Itsimte's Stela 1, El Naranjo's Stelae 8, 16, and 38, Polol's Stela 2, the Piedras Negras' area stela in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection in Washington, D.C., Tamarindito's Stela 3, Tikal's Stelae 3, 6, 7, 8, 11, 15, 16, 19, 21, 22, 24, 27, 30, and as a graffito in Stairway 6f-27 (Temple of Inscriptions), Uaxactun's Stela 6, Xultun's Stela 2, Yaxchilan's Stela 5, Yaxha's Stela 6, and El Zapote's Stela 5. It is also represented on a stela of unknown provenience in museum collections in Belmopan, Belize, in Denver, and Zurich.

seemingly draws on, or alludes to, the allegorical struggle embedded in the imagery of the ceremonial bar.⁶⁰

At Palenque, babies are represented as if they were ceremonial bars cradled in the arms of the four stuccoed figures, each decorating one of the central piers at the entrance to the Temple of the Inscriptions (figure 12). By costume, the figures represent three men and one woman. The babies they hold are rendered with one chubby leg bent at the knee and one serpentine leg ending in a serpent's head where the foot would be expected. The current interpretation of this image is complex: the Palenque "baby" is thought to be a representation of the ruler of Palenque, Chan Bahlum,⁶¹ in the guise of God K, or GII of the Palenque Triad, a member of the ancient Maya pantheon associated with the divinity of rulers.⁶²

With this display of holding supernatural babies it appears the Palencanos revived the ancient Olmec them by "deconstructing" the allegory of the ceremonial bar. Monuments associated with Chan Bahlum demonstrate that he was actively engaged in creating unique representations to illustrate events from the very beginnings of the present great cycle.⁶³ And he did so by inserting himself and members of his dynasty as actors in the "original" dramas. What is evident is that Chan Bahlum could not have "restored" the ceremonial bar as he did without a precise knowledge of its iconographic history.

There are two other reflections of the ceremonial bar at Palenque wherein actual conventional and the flaccid varieties of the ceremonial bar are imaged but are held by unusual characters. Both the carved tablet from the Temple of the Cross and the famous sarcophagus lid from the Ruz Tomb in the Temple of Inscriptions display the flaccid, segmented variety cradled in the arms of the cross-tree. The curve of the flaccid body is reversed, in that it arches rather than droops between the cross-tree branches, but its varietal configu-

60. Justin Kerr, "The myth of the Popol Vuh as an Instrument of Power," in E. Danien and R. Sharer, eds., *New Theories on the Ancient Maya*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, The University Museum, 1992, pp. 109-121, believes the ceremonial bar to be an enlarged blowgun, the weapon of the hero-twins, thus connecting the ruler to the myth of the twins to "show his control of the universe." (*Ibidem*, p. 114.)

61. Freidel, Schele, and Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 193-194.

62. See Miller and Taube, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

63. The relief-carved tablets from the Cross Group of Palenque, famous for their scenes with cross-trees, textually record the birds of deities of heroes from before and just after the turn of the great Baktun Cycle that marked the beginning of the ancient Maya calendar and, according to the texts, the ruling dynasty of Palenque.

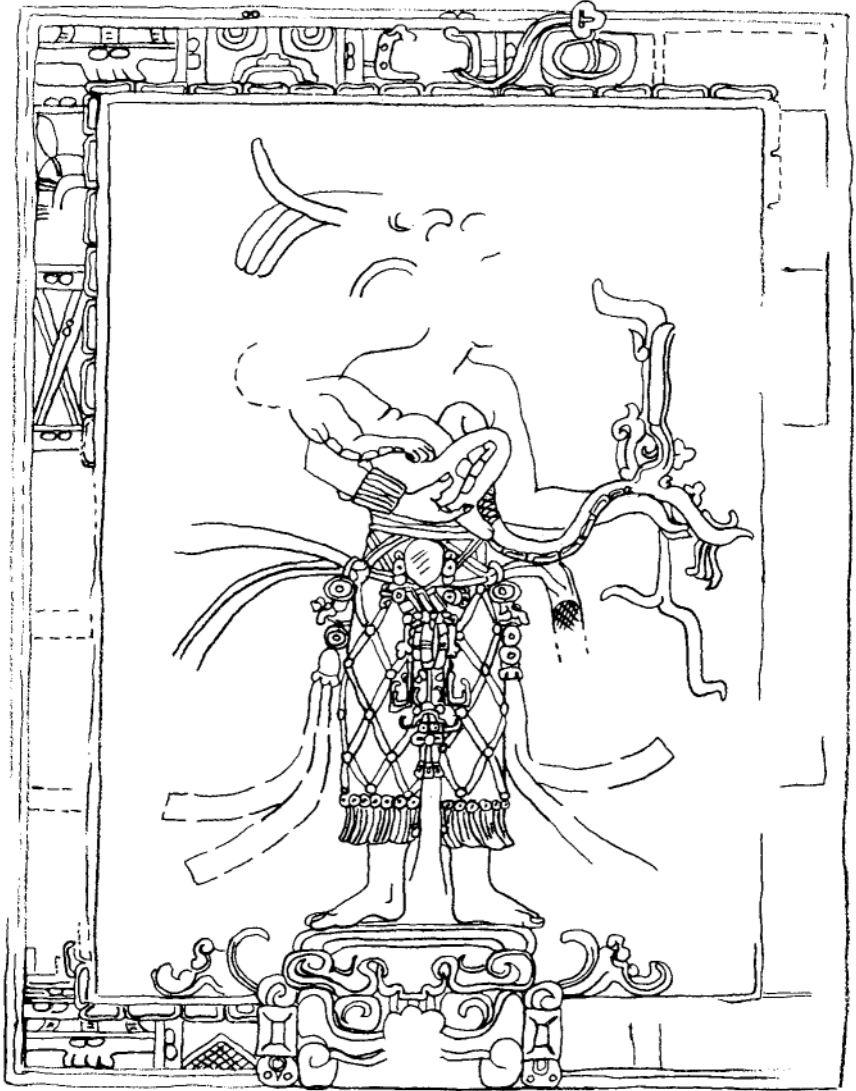


Figure 12. Pier C, Temple of Inscriptions, Palenque. Drawing after Alfred P. Maudslay, *Biologia Centrali-Americana: Archaeology*, vol. IV, pl. 55c.

ration is clear. The implied equivalence between the cross-tree supporting a ceremonial bar and the more expected honored person belongs to the argument that the ruler holding a ceremonial bar stands as the *axis mundi* or world tree.⁶⁴ It also fits the characterization of Palenque patronage that tried to illustrate “original (mythic) events” through vivid composition and unusual combinations of iconography. The cross-tree draped with the ceremonial bar was proper for Pacal’s sarcophagus lid, that is, proper funereal imagery, and was appropriate for Chan Bahlum’s Cross Group that superimposed dynastic history into or onto the beginnings of time and the births of deity/heroes.

The conventional ceremonial bar is included in the emblematic display of regalia depicted on the tablet from the Temple of the Sun, the central temple in Chan Bahlum’s Cross Group. It is shown supported by two anthropomorphic deities who carry its weight on the backs of their heads and balance it by one hand each. The ceremonial bar in turn supports the more bellicose regalia of rulership; a shield hung in the center of two crossed spears. The bar’s graphic position as mediator between “others” and weapons suggests it was understood (or used) as an explanation for connecting them. Perhaps the equation, well-known in ancient Mexica philosophy, was being drawn between the liminal struggles involved in birthing and in warfare.

Discussion

The descriptive history of the Classic ceremonial bar allows for classification and delimits its contexts. In itself, such a history does not provide much insight into authentic Classic meanings and functions. Meaning comes from difference and distinction, and these were found in the ceremonial bar’s genealogical histories, in regional differences, and in distinctions made apparent in its reflections.

The bar’s genealogy reveals its embodiment of two different, ancient narratives; the cradling of a baby and the struggle with a serpent. The combination did not produce a thick mixture of all ingredients, but rather precipitated, like mercury from hematite, an allegorical image referring to original, creative events. This image, the ceremonial bar, alluded to the ancient stories but, essentially, reinterpreted them as attributes of royal power.

64. Greider, *op. cit.*

Regional differences in the way the ceremonial bar was depicted are revealed in the western Maya propensity for carving narrative scenes against the central and eastern Maya focus on iconic representations. For the latter peoples the ceremonial bar was an item of regalia, while it was a character (or characterization) in the narrative scenes of the west, where, in fact, there seems to have been some kind of resistance or injunction against its use as handheld regalia for public display on stelae. Put in essential terms, the earlier ideas about the allegorical ceremonial bar as represented by the central and eastern Maya showed a concern for its intransitive, iconic being, like a sculptural personification of Hope as a beautiful woman. This was recast by the western Maya who illustrated its story, its transitive causation, how it came to be; similar to depicting Pandora opening her box to release all the world's evil, but also Hope. At the major sites of Yaxchilan, Piedras Negras, and Palenque we find iconographic and narrative substitutions that are reflections, but also rejections of the allegorical ceremonial bar.

Identifying and examining the iconographic reflections of the ceremonial bar allowed for a closer interpretation of its authentic Classic meanings. At the beginning of the Early Classic Period the central and eastern Maya created an allegorical serpent that interconnected ancient stories about origins and birth (creation) with the performative powers of dance and struggle (the shaman and the bound figure). A ruler who cradled the ceremonial bar with the shaman's gesture stood as a visible supporter and engenderer of the transformative energies behind or within creation. Later, in the west, the allegory was deconstructed and refocussed to "explain" creative power. The narrative images seem to be in response to such questions as why and how things began and why and how they continue. The "answers" depict daimons, dancers, ancestors, and tree-crosses associated with the allegorical meaning of the ceremonial bar, not the ruler. The western ruler did not presume to personify himself within the allegory, but rather identifies with its history (an "other" story) as an actor, but not as agent. Thus, the Late Classic emphasis on conflict and weaponry may be "explained" by the transformative powers of the ceremonial bar mediating, connecting, and equating the realms of daimons and others with warfare.

The Early Classic iconography of personification, common to the central and eastern Maya regions, was recontextualized and deconstructed in the Late Classic west to provide narrative explanations congruent with dynastic power and goals. These narratives, in turn, were reflected back into the

meanings of the ceremonial bar as it continued to be depicted as hand-held regalia. This complexity of iconographic history and representation befits the importance properly assumed for the ceremonial bar. The ceremonial bar represented an eloquent allegory that explained how the powers of rulership and dynasty could be interconnected with, or the same as, the profound energies in the original events at the beginning of time and the world. ♣

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