

# AUTOREFERATY ROZPRAW DOKTORSKICH

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## **THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST IN THE MAYA SOCIETY IN THE LATE CLASSICAL PERIOD BASED ON EPIGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF THE SIGNATURES OF SCRIBES AND SCULPTORS<sup>1</sup>**

The principal objective of the doctoral dissertation was to demonstrate the role of the artist in the Maya society in its late classical period. This proved possible thanks to information contained in the signatures which the creators appended on a number of relics. That cultural phenomenon of signing the artefact one had made is an unprecedented one, as no similar practice is observed across the American continent in the pre-Columbian era. The surviving

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<sup>1</sup> This self-appraisal was delivered in the course of the public defence at the Institute of History, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, on May 30th, 2019. The dissertation had been supervised by dr. hab. Filip Kubiaczyk and dr Boguchwała Tuszyńska.

data enables one to remove – to a certain degree – the veil of anonymity with which history obscured Maya artists. For the present, the group includes scribes and sculptors, because it is their signatures that one finds in the preserved corpus of glyphic texts. However, the issue has not been thoroughly and comprehensively studied in the literature to date.

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 latter structure may have been, though did not have to be, followed by the names of the sculptor or scribe.

The autographs of the artists account for a minor part of the preserved inscriptions whose number is estimated at several thousand while new texts are discovered each year. Still, the value of potential knowledge yielded of the signatures does not lie in their quantity but in the quality of the cultural phenomenon. This is due to the fact that the space for the composition and its content represented a sacred sphere, which was exploited by the narrow Maya elite and, above all, the ruler, to impose his authority and the vision of the world.

Analysis of the collected source material shows that the practice of signing works began with the sculptors. The earliest signature identified to date is that of *Chak Til Mo’*, who belonged to that very group of artists. The autograph is to be found on a relatively small figure of *Pawahtun*, a supernatural entity. The relic is dated to ca. 550 and is currently held in the collection of the Princeton University Art Museum in the United States<sup>2</sup>. Since that water-

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<sup>2</sup> Just 2018.

shed moment until 864, when the Randall Stela was erected, numerous signed artefacts were made. The apogee of that cultural phenomenon is observed in the period from 723 to 795. The largest number of signatures of sculptors originates from localities in the Usumacinta River Valley, which chiefly remained under the influence of two kingdoms: Piedras Negras and Yaxchilán. Autographs of Maya artists in the inscriptions from the Yucatan Peninsula are extremely rare. In fact, there are only three examples: Lintel 1 and K8017 from Xcalumkin, as well as Stela 9 in Dzibilchaltún.

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.

The analysis of geographical provenance of relics bearing signatures of Maya artists yields interesting conclusions. It would be worthwhile to quote two such findings. First, 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. Such a distribution suggests certain preferences for a particular form of artistic expression among the Maya elite and artists. Second, the source material I have analyzed does not demonstrate any evidence of a vectorial propagation of that phenomenon, which warrants the inference that the process was independent and dissipated. In consequence, one cannot identify one, single location where the idea of forgoing artistic anonymity arose.

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<sup>3</sup>. 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<sup>4</sup>. 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.

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<sup>3</sup> Martin, Grube 2000, p. 128.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 152.

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”) attached to certain titles attests to a clearly defined stratification and hierarchy within that group of persons. Much the same is seen in the titlature 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 first 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<sup>5</sup> 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 titlature 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 Structure U in Piedras Negras (South Group).

Another interesting title is *baah che'hb* – “first scribe/painter” (lit. “first 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

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<sup>5</sup> The title has also been determined on a small shard discovered in Piedras Negras (Structure U-16). However, the preserved context is at odds with the standard signature formula as *yuxul* or potentially *aj uxul* is missing. It can neither be ruled out nor confirmed that one of those crucial elements of signature had originally been inscribed on the vessel.

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 literal translation of the title as “chief 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<sup>6</sup>. 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”<sup>7</sup>.

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 monarch 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<sup>8</sup>, 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

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<sup>6</sup> Thompson 1988, p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> Jagodziński 2017, pp. 129-147.

<sup>8</sup> Johnston 2005.

tribute to the victors, as in case of 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.

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