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THE PATHS OF A RITUAL

Rituals and Ceremonies of the Maya Civilization

One of the Maya sites that has provided numerous studies is Bonampak, no matter the ceaseless astonishment it causes when its mural paintings (the origin of Bonampak's fame and characteristics) are under revision. As is known, the murals preserve almost completely in the inner chambers of Structure 1 or Templo de las Pinturas. In its three rooms, the depicted scenes show a close relationship to different passages related to the last period of the city, namely by its ruling family and under the government of *Chaan Muan II*.

The richness and polychrome palette of the images offer quite many themes, but also there are more themes throughout the painted glyphs. These exceed 100 clauses, in agreement to grammatical ordering and accordingly to linguistics and epigraphy. Nevertheless, just but two clauses are complete ones; that is to say: we find a temporal indicator, an event and a subject. The rest of them are Nominal clauses: they concern with the names and titles of noble men and women.

In other words, the pictorial complex of Bonampak offers a big amount of material for new researches to acknowledge a better and best understanding of Maya civilization. This paper deals with the main theme of Room 2, violence, as seen through two aspects: iconography and epigraphy.

There is little doubt on the important proposals of both branches of knowledge, when applied to Bonampak. On the one hand, iconography studies have led to different assortments. Thus, together with the formal richness of the depicted characters (as seen in dresses, hairdresses, corporal positions, composition, golden ^{mean} rule) there is a complex symbolic content (social hierarchies, religious involving, antagonism or oppositions). On the other hand, a good amount of dynastic history of Bonampak was redone thanks to the speedy development of epigraphy in the past years, according to the stone inscriptions of the site as compared to the painted ones. Throughout these we know that the city was not a "minor category site", as stated many times, but it had a relevant role in its surrounding area.

Following such proposals, here we reunite those data that could restate the theme of violence in the Classical Maya period as seen from Bonampak's point of view. That is to say accordingly to the postulates of iconography and epigraphy, applied -as we said- to this archaeological site.

Then, we can make the question: What does display the murals of the very Room 2 of Structure 1?

II

Our point to begin with is Room 2. Let us remember that the mural paintings of Room 2 (east, south and west walls) realistically display a battle. Enemies face one another: they throw weapons each other, they protect themselves with shields, they wrestle, grasp one another by

✓ the hair or by the arms or the torso. Some characters also withdraw, as if astonished because of the development of war; some others seem to scream.

In the noisy fight, the luxury of clothes and hairdresses is evident. Some warriors call our attention, those who wear trophy heads, yet the battle is not bloody; some of these still keep their flesh and hair, some other is fleshless. At this point the first questions arise: if the main theme of Room 2 is a war episode, why is it bloodless? Was it a real or a mythical event? Do the actors are historical characters or are they intervening gods?

As a possible answer we can look for a quotation in Landa's *Relación*. Within his data there are some clues that can be applied cautiously to Bonampak's case, no matter the span of time between the events at Bonampak and the information of the bishop:

...and guided by a high banner they came out silently of the town and so they went to face their foes making loud out cries and cruelties and so succeeded unpolitely.

After victory they took away the mandible of the dead ones and clean of flesh they wore it in the arm. For their war they did a great amount of offerings with the spoils and if they captured some distinguished man they sacrificed him immediately... The rest of the people was kept captive in the power of the captor... (Landa, 1982: 52).

As the war finished, the soldiers did many vexations in their towns as lasted the smell of war and in this they made themselves to be served and presented; and if somebody had killed some captain or lord, he was quite honored and feasted (Landa, 1982: 53).

That is to say, data written by Landa appoint to some of war characteristics, namely: development of battle, facts of physical violence, and the fate of prisoners. Also we can recall the ceremonies of month *Pax*, as they were performed by warriors and in honor to their own gods (Landa, 1982: 83-84).

The humiliation of the defeated ones is shown on the north wall of Room 2. Some captives sit in an imploring attitude facing the vanquishers; some others show signals of blood shedding from the tip of their fingers. There is also a head that lays cut off its body. A lying figure, at the middle of the scene, exhibits a great wound on his right flank. Both his lax position and closed eyes had led to the conclusion that he is a soulless body, specifically a carcass.

We ought add, also, two peculiarities of violence as unfolded in the murals.

The first one is that war doesn't claim a great weight on the main theme. Even if battle seems terrifying there are not dead nor wounded figures, although trophy heads are clear in the whole.

The second one lies in effective torture of the prisoners. Blooding hands, a head cut off its body, and a ^{detached body} carcass. All of them are doubtless elements of physical violence that the conquerors practiced on their victims.

If we recall the quotation to Landa, the apparent contradiction of compared events springs out. Cruelties

referred to for the development of the war had nothing to do with the murals; nevertheless there is a reference related to vexations and humiliations as the war finished.

Before we propose an affirmative answer, we consider necessary to attend for the epigraphical analysis.

sent a replica in the native language to make public my gratitude for his help to his Alfonso Quintero III young and outstanding epigrapher

Even though the painted inscriptions of Bonampak do abound, the epigraphic study points out to a single clause (Room 2, south wall) which indirectly refers to the war.

Its paraphrase goes as follows:

1 2 7 10 11
3 4 8 12 13
5 6 9 14
21
21 22
22 23

It was (9.18.1.15.5) 13 ¹chicchán 13 ²yax [Aug. 2, 792 AD] when he was³ captured: the lord ⁴Yibah-G III, he of the lineage, the captive to the one who seized lord Four Sun. It happened in the land of the lord⁷ of five captives, Sky⁹ Harpy II, holy lord, lord of² lords, divine lord of the lineages of Bonampak and Lacanhá, holder of the Earth.
_{21 22 23}

In other words, yet the capture of an individual is clear, the verb for the action is ³chucah, meaning "to seize". To date, in Bonampak glyphic texts do not appear the war verbs, i.e., "star-earth", "star-conch shell" or "star-over-site". Nevertheless, the seizing of Yibah-G III should occur as last a battle.

Concerning the north wall another clause refers one of the results of the warlike event. It mentions in a general form to the vanquished persons as *u bak*, meaning mainly "his captive".

In the one hand, the bloodless war is synthesized by the capture of a single *ahaw*. At the precise moment of the

seizure of lord *Yibah-G III* at the hands of *Chaan Muan II*, the whole battle seems summarized to a fight between two rivals: both armies become represented by their own lords, in such a way that when one of them falls the event turns itself into an exemplary one. The winner, *Chaan Muan II*, boasts his titles "captor of Four Sun" and "lord of five captives".

Besides, the mention to the seized ones is quite brief, impersonal. However, we can think of the individual next to the glyphs as a special or outstanding captive.

On the other hand, Bonampak's inscriptions carved on stone offer us data dealing with the theme of our attention. The three lintels of Structure 1 tell -by means of iconography and epigraphy- the seizure of a different individual by a different lord, namely Knotted Eye Jaguar and Sky Harpy II, lords of Bonampak, and Shield Jaguar II or *Chel Te'* of Yaxchilán. As in the murals, the defeated lords are not dead; instead they stumble in the very moment of their capture (*exempli gratia* Five Skull captured by Sky Harpy II).

IV

Back to the murals, likewise, the upper register shows scenes related to warfare. Each cartouche displays an anthropological figurine; some have infixed *lamat* signs and menace with darts. Because of their placement within the whole composition, there is little doubt about their

identification as gods. Their association with Venus is also evident according to additional sources.

The last assertion finds support in the *Anales de Cuauhtitlán* and pages 46 to 50 of *Dresden Codex*, amidst many other references. Thanks to the first example, we now know that the apparition of Venus in heavens is coincident to the ^{to give} heliacal rising of the planet on certain days; the god throws his darts on Earth delivering unlucky influences, in a similar way as shown at *Dresden Codex* and Bonampak murals. We must also remember that the day when lord Yibah-G III was captured was August 2: on such a day Venus arose in the sky as Evening Star, that is to say the heliacal rising and therefore spearing its holy prisoners.

Hence the anthropomorphic figurines depicted on the upper register are gods who act to provide their blessing to the terrestrial events, and to remind of sacred and ancient events, as well as exemplary facts. Thus, we have here the first ties between the spheres of mundane and sacred.

V

It is worthy to point out that numerous events like that of Bonampak occurs in the Maya area, accordingly to epigraphic analysis.

One common practice among the royalty was to perform a long series of rituals brought up by the birth of an heir, his or her designation to the throne, or by the enthronement of the *ahawob* (kings and queens).

When a child grew up to ten years old, he or she was strong enough to grow older. Accordingly to anthropological studies dealing with death rate 75% of the born ones died before their teenage, so the survivors could reach easily maturity.

Such an opportunity gave pace to propitiate the gods by different means, in close relationship each, for example: wars, capture, game ball, sacrifices, building and sculpture dedication, besides economical benefits implied through victory. That is why the murals of Bonampak display from the designation of the heir (whose age could be 10 least) to the triumphal feast.

If the designation of the heir is true, the event deserved a commemoration by way of a war; its goal was to obtain captives for sacrifice. There lays the reason for the coincidence of Venus' movement with the battle: the apparition of the god-star as Evening Star was useful to confirm the well disposition of gods by the acts of *Chaan Muan II*.

About the famous heir, do not exist to date any inscription that makes us know his identity. Painted and sculpted glyphic texts don't name him. It is also said that the murals remain unfinished, because Bonampak go into its decadence as soon as *Chaan Muan II*'s reign concluded.

We don't intend to solve this troubles, but we can produce a hypothesis in view of certain facts.

First, thanks to epigraphic analysis we know that one of the last rulers of the site was *yahaw* (i.e., "his lord") to a king of Toniná. In other words, Bonampak's lord was a subject to Toniná's in the likeness of a vassal. This happened *circa* IX century, subsequently to the government of Sky Harpy II (Maricela Ayala, personal communication, 1994).

Second, the child depicted in Room 1 as if presented to the court could succeed to his father. He could also have a son of his own, who in time became the king of Bonampak and the vassal or *yahaw* to the king of Toniná.

On third place, we ought to say that when a ruler fell as a prisoner to another lord, *élite* activities ceased in the city that lost its king. An example comes from Palenque's brief hiatus originated by the defeat of *Kan Xul* II or *Kan Hok' Chitam* II at the hands of Ruler III of Toniná.

Therefore it is possible that something similar occurred at Bonampak after the death of *Chaan Muan* II, in a way that his son or his grandson lost power in the presence of Toniná. And so the murals remained unfinished.

May stay this hypothesis waiting for new analysis that shed light to confirm it or reject it.

VI

Now we want to reiterate several ideas.

Accordingly to the canons of Classical Maya *élite* thought, by the time of the heir's designation (namely of Bonampak), the most convenient thing was to prepare a war at

least. In such a way, it was possible to obtain captives. This is why the apparition of Venus as Evening Star on August 2, 792 AD was attended. In other words, some god-stars preside from Heavens terrestrial accounts and menace their own captives with darts.

The war, bloodless but realistically represented, was glyphically stated through a single clause, particularly as the seizure of a ruler at the hands of *Chaan Muan* II. This one also appears as stated before: "captor of Four Sun" and "lord of five captives", data that make doubtless the bellicose temper of the king, as many other Maya rulers alike.

By the way we want to point out one of many titles worn by depicted individuals in the murals. With its presence, the previous characteristic gets confirmed. We mean the warlike: *batab*, "ax lord".

It is a common opinion that the battle scene shows the Bonampak lords fighting their enemies. The only one named or personified is *Yibah-G* III, who became "the prisoner par excellence".

Thus, based on previous points, we suggest the following possibilities for interpretation of violence depiction at Bonampak:

- The study of such a theme involves to define the foes and the origins of battle.
- At the same time, some questions arise: against who, how, when and why war was made.

- It is not easy to distinguish between a real or historical fight and a mythical one, in the case of prehispanic people.
- The imagery of the event could be or not realistic; anyway the battle exemplifies trophy heads worn by some warriors. However there is no bloodshed.
- Even if a crowd attended the war, epigraphically the event is converted into a fight of two individuals; one fall captured by the other one.
- Blood must only be shed in ritual; on the contrary it provokes a cosmic disorder that in consequence ought to be restored to avoid the return of Primigenial Chaos. Therefore the humiliation scene is bloody. Blood spurts from the fingers of some captives, the head of another one, and a wounded and lifeless body; all of those stay as signals for ritual and real violence.
- War arises comparatively as part of a "life style". It associates to the authority of the ruler, the glorification of mundane power. It takes on account the approval of gods as they themselves are warriors, even by darting their prisoners. Here is the reason for a necessary ritual preparation of actors: war is a sacred affair.
- The presence of historical people seems to have a didactic goal. They become an example to follow within the canons of expected social behavior. Their acts and their consequences do reflect through all society: if a

ruler is imprisoned, his/her people (mainly the *élite*) arrived to a cease of activities.

- As the ruler is the example, so the captives and dead ones become models when glyphically written "his captive". That is to say the dead or the prisoner par excellence, neither stating names nor individuals.
- The spheres of sacredness and mundane erase their boundaries. Both mix each. The records of scenes allow to differentiate the realm of gods and the world of men. Nevertheless overlapping of some motifs establishes visual and discursive ties: anyone at summit unites him or herself into supernatural. Therefore, holy and human becomes the same thing: as happens in Heavens, thus happen on Earth.

Another proposal stands in the comparative analysis. We must remember that there are murals related to war events, namely Mul Chic, Chichén Itzá and Cacaxtla, among others. Such an analysis is necessary to provide a complete study in the long term, and is worthy of another paper. Still, our objective could be satisfied with the following notes.

Let us remember that in the Maya examples of violence is not as brutally displayed as in Cacaxtla. In this city the war scene shows dismembered human bodies, people that suffer wounds in their face, their arms, legs or torso, or hold up their intestines, when they are not bleeding at a deadly speed...

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All the previously expressed assortments shall be easily perceived in the following comparative chart. We have put on the elements that according to our thought offer the guide lines for an initial analysis on violence. The left column contains those data qualified as "historical", that is to say made by humans. The right one contains those in which the role of gods is evident.

TERRESTRIAL AND HEAVENLY
EVENTS: SIMILARITIES AND
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THEM.

Historical account	Mythical account
• Men as actors	• Gods as watchers
• Bloodless war	• Bloodless war
• Bloody humiliation or surrendering of captives	• Presence of G III (from the Triad) associated to ritual bloodshed
• Human captives (banquette and north wall, Room 2)	• Divine captives, with star glyphs on body (upper register, Room 2)
• Hierarchical selection of captives for their bloody sacrifice?	• Tied captives: preparing for sacrifice?
• Epigraphic reference: "his captive"	• Sacred-astronomical reference: Venus darts individuals

- Human time: date as Calendar Round; day of appearance of Venus as Evening Star
- Recalling and actualization of a sacred warlike event
- Spatial placement of events: "in the land of *Chaan Muan II*"
- Relationship between dynasties: Bonampak, Lacanhá, Yaxchilán
- Glorification and deification of humans: overlapping of registers thorough details of scenes
- Holy moment (timeless)
- Periodical bellicosity marked by Venus movement (synodic movement)
- Spatial placement of gods: the three levels of Cosmos, mainly Heavens
- Gods as patrons (totem, in Durkheim's thought?)
- Pleasing of immortals: overlapping of registers thorough details of scenes

One last datum can afford to the understanding of the present theme. In Room 3 a personage was portrayed; he carries on his clothes the phrase *ta u tz'ibal*. Its common translation can be "the painter" or "his painting" but also, in a wider sense, "his transcription, his account or history". *Section by Alberto Castellanos*

That is to say that the facts had a great deal with reality for *Chaan Muan II*. We know that prehispanic societies had in the same esteem historical and sacred value of any events, as demonstrated by abundant studies. Thus the theme of violence gets insertion in both spheres: it is real in the same way that the lord of Bonampak made captives through a battle; it is mythical as the gods intervened and

make contemporary the wars past *in illo tempore*. The Mural paintings of Bonampak were just the material mean to unite and make present that events; sacred and mundane united.

Lastly we want to say that if Bonampak is one of the most known Maya sites thanks to its murals, information provided to scholars do not restrain to actual data. Also the murals offer valuable data inserted in a complex called "prehispanic Maya history". This we tried to express in the present paper.

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Según J. Eric S. Thompson (*Maya hieroglyphic writing. An introduction*, 1950: 217) Venus tiene varios momentos destacados como la deidad *Quetzalcóatl*, a través de algunas referencias de los *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*. El autor informa que Venus, según los *Anales de Cuauhtitlán*, aparece por primera vez en el cielo (horno heliaco) en las fechas y sucesos siguientes:

1 *cipactli/imix*.- Flecha viejos.

1 *océlotl/ix, mázatl/manik, xóchitl/ahau*.- Flecha niños.

1 *ácatl/ben, miquiztli/cimi*.- Flecha señores.

1 *quiáhuítl/cauac*.- Flecha lluvia: no llueve.

1 *ollin/etz'nab*.- Flecha mozos y doncellas.

1 *atl/muluc*.- Flecha todo: sequía general.

El mismo autor considera que cinco de las nueve apariciones venusinas se encuentran registradas en las láminas 46 a 50 del *Códice de Dresde*, pues en los dos tercios inferiores pueden observarse cinco diferentes personajes en actitudes muy dinámicas, con ricos atavíos, escudos y armas (dardos o grandes flechas), y otros tantos seres a manera de cautivos. De ello se desprende que los personajes guerreros son advocaciones de Venus, y que los otros individuos son sus cautivos.