



INSTITUTO DE INVESTIGACIONES
ESTÉTICAS
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FONDO	BEATRIZ DE LA FUENTE
SERIE	007: ESCRITOS ACADÉMICOS
CAJA	019
EXP.	027
DOC.	002
FOJAS	8-12
FECHA (S)	2002

THE MULTIPLE LANGUAGES OF A SINGULAR RELIEF

BF7C19E27D2F8

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I. Introduction

Maya relief art of the Classic period is known for varying formal elements that have imbued it with a special, unmistakable excellence. Its profound humanistic sentiment, achieved through the portrayal of the human body in innumerable postures and attitudes, is particularly noteworthy. Similarly, the individuality of these works is underpinned by a clearly-defined historical awareness.

Palenque is the leading exponent of the Usumacinta style, as demonstrated by the esthetic ideal embodied in its complex and varied works, whether architectural, pictorial or sculptural. The artists of Palenque developed a style that stands out from the expressions of other contemporary cities and from those of the region as a whole. As an example, it is suffice to mention outstanding reliefs like the Oval Tablet, the Sarcophagus Lid, the panels at the temples of the Cross Group, the Panel at the Palace, the Panels of the Scribe and Orator, the Slaves and Creation. Consequently, what place would Panel 2 of Dumbarton Oaks, now occupy?

II. The art of Palenque and Panel 2 of Dumbarton Oaks

Even though the exact origin of Panel 2 is still unknown, it was no doubt rescued from Palenque for its artistic style and because it mentions three historical characters. I refer to lady *Ahpo Ts'ak* (on the right side of the relief) and lords *Kan Hok' Chitam II* (in the center) and *Pakal II* (on the left). It has been suggested that the Panel was once situated inside a building, like those of the Cross Group or Temple XIV, and that it was the central section of a tripartite composition (García Moll, 1994: 23).

Between the years 615 and 790 AD (the probable dedication dates of the Oval Tablet, the Panel of the 96 Glyphs and Panel of Creation) a wealth of art works were created, thus indicating the stages through which the art of Palenque, including Panel 2, evolved. This relief may be incorporated within an era that, some time ago, I referred to as the early naturalist-dynamic period (721-751 AD), due to its stylistic features (Fuente, 1965). I considered the following elements in its definition: the axial composition of the three characters shown in the scene; seated or moving figures, depicted frontally or profiled; a portrayal intention; the symbolism of their headdresses, offerings and the objects held in their hands; and, the commemoration of historical events.

A standing masculine figure is shown in the center; his head is profiled, although we are offered a frontal view of his body; the left heel is slightly separated from the ground. As a headdress, this individual bears the Quadripartite Insignia; he also wears valve ear decorations, bead necklaces and a large breastplate; bracelets, anklets; a sash is worn over the skirt, repeating the breastplate design, also shown in profile. In his right hand, he holds an "akba" bag, while the left, situated above his head, holds an ax fashioned from a serpent's body and incorporating an ellipse.

On either side, two seated, profiled people are shown viewing each other. They wear headdresses depicting long-nosed gods, together with ear decorations, necklaces, breastplates, bracelets and sashes simulating precious stones. On their laps they hold – as though large “mannequin scepters”– full body images of god K and the buffoon god (right side). Based on the portrayal intention and the reiteration of certain glyphs, we know who these characters are: they are portraits of the individuals depicted on the Panel at the Palace.

Panel 2 shows *Kan Hok' Chitam II* at the *Xibalbá*, as inferred by his posture, dress and decorations. These elements pertain to a deity known as G I of the Palenque Triad (Berlin, 1963), who is associated with the aquatic underworld and is one of its foremost inhabitants.

The lifting of heels is a recurring posture in Maya art, and is representative of a ritual dance. Governors performed this dance during the *descensus ad inferos* (descent into hell) to make contact with the gods, deceased and deified ancestors, or after dying themselves and entering the other world. This posture has been termed as the “dance of *Xibalbá*”, as shown in Stele C of Quiriguá; it was also frequently performed by those disguised as G I.

Based on posture and dress, we can deduce that *Kan Hok' Chitam II* descended to the underworld to speak with his deceased parents; alternatively, he himself may have died and was received by his parents in *Xibalbá*. One datum defining this event is provided by glyphic interpretation: the Panel was dedicated towards the end of AD 722, following the death of the governor; i.e., historical events are viewed retrospectively.

Kan Hok' Chitam II was crowned in AD 702, but was taken prisoner by lord *Baknal Chak* of Toniná; he died captive in that city around AD 721. With the succession to the throne of *Ah Kul Moo Naab III* that year (and with the help of his half brother *Chak Suts'*) renewed impetus was given to artistic expression at Palenque. The new ruler recommenced work to extend the Palace –House D– and ordered the panels now termed as the “Orator” and “Scribe” (AD 721) to be carved. At Temple XIX, two reliefs were carved on a pillar and throne, respectively, (AD 736). The governor also ordered the construction (c. AD 742) of Temples XVI, XVII –to commemorate *Chan Bahlum II*–, XVIII and its stucco relief –dedicated to his parents–, XVIII-A and XXI. It appears that *Ah Kul Moo Naab III* wished to produce a large number of artistic works as an affirmation of his power.

III. *The Messages of Panel 2*

This work reiterates the introduction of a new concept of mankind –a being moving from mythical to historical spheres– through the enrichment of plastic language. However, in terms of its crafting and formal treatment, Panel 2 differs from other contemporary works, as exemplified by the following factors:

The excessive number of works created during the reign of *Ah Kul Moo Naab III* (721-763 AD); after Pakal II, he is attributed the greatest number of works so far known (eleven). In comparison with the existing formal repertoire, Panel 2 seems more static than other contemporary reliefs. Relief works of this period are characterized by the

presence of new plastic modes: on the pillars at House D; the Panels of the Orator and Scribe; the Panel of Temple XXI; the stucco relief on the throne and pillar at Temple XIX; the "Bundle Panel" at Temple XVI; the stucco reliefs at Temples XVIII and XVIII-A, and Panel 2, as discussed here. The considerable number of works created and short space of time between them (barely 20 years) suggests that *Ah Kul Moo Naab* III was anxious to conclude them, meaning that some were naturally more refined than others; i.e., his artists were hypothetically overburdened. The historical or religious nature of such works may also have had a certain influence on the messages they transmitted.

Through its clear esthetic expression, Panel 2 of Dumbarton Oaks indicates the movement of Palenque in a new artistic direction. We see the governor at the height of his power, far beyond the limits of worldly existence, invested with the sumptuous and symbolic garments of a deity. Similarly, reminiscences of the timid emergence of certain features may be discerned in the plastic dynamism in effect at the time. The Panel subsequently stands as one of the pioneering works of a new formal language at Palenque.

IV. *Final considerations*

Due to its formal characteristics, Panel 2 is a transitional work situated between two defined moments in the history of Palenque. On the one hand, there are the creations dated between 610-692 AD, which underline the solid governments of Pakal II and Chan Balum II while, on the other, there are the efforts of *Ah Kul Moo Naab* III to enhance his prestige through the bellicose aid of *Chak Suts'*.

The originality of the relief art at Palenque highlights a solid esthetic proposal that conjugated an eloquent, clear, precise and ordered composition with divine and courtly themes. This work unites religious expression with the personality cult, while also consolidating this paradigmatic city in our historical and artistic consciousness. All of these elements are present in Panel 2 of Dumbarton Oaks, a work that also reflects a history we must strive to discover and comprehend.

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FIGURE VII.3
Carved limestone panel.

Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico
Late Classic period, A.D. 722
Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

With one foot raised, Kan-Xul dances out of Xibalba wearing the costume of Chac-Xib-Chac, which is identified by the string-knot belt, the shell diadem and the shell earflare. He also wields a serpent-handled ax and carries an *akbal* vase. His string pectoral is also associated with the gods of the Palenque Triad, the two Paddler Gods and Chac-Xib-Chac; when worn by a king, the pectoral signals the guise of one of those gods. His high-waisted undergarment is standard for high-ranking males, as are his jade wrist and ankle cuffs.

Lady Ahpo-Hel, seated on his right, is named by the small text above her head, as is Pacal, who sits on the opposite side. Lady Ahpo-Hel also wears a jade cape with Jester God medallions and a jade belt. Her headdress has an unidentified zoomorph, and she holds God K in her hands. Pacal holds a full-figure personification of a tree, perhaps the *axis mundi*. His headdress zoomorph, although unidentified, has a deer hoof as its muzzle. He wears a bead necklace and a bar pectoral hung on a leather strap. The leaf with three interior disks hung from his earflare identifies Pacal as a lineage ancestor of the deceased Kan-Xul.

When parents are shown with their offspring on other panels at Palenque, the father is always placed on the child's right, the mother on the left. In scenes of apotheosis, however, either the mother is shown without the father or she occupies the dominant position, to the right. The reversal of position signals that the mother is the more important parent at the moment of apotheosis, while the father dominates in contexts, such as the legitimate descent of the throne, where lineage is crucial.

