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Three Unprovenanced Maya Stucco Masks

In 1927, archaeologists from the Carnegie Institution of Washington conducted excavations in the Maya ruins of Uaxactun, El Petén, Guatemala, and discovered a stepped temple platform in an excellent state of preservation under later erected structures and it immediately became apparent, that this structure represented one of the earliest evidences of Maya architecture in the Lowlands. This structure, presently designated E-VII-2nd, is a pyramidal, stepped masonry platform with a quadrangular plan and embellished with an architectural decoration of modeled white stucco. The four sides of the platform feature axially arranged main stairways which are flanked by monumental sculptured stucco panels. These large relief panels exhibit grotesque heads in front view and are usually referred to as "masks". The masks or face panels portray possibly mythological creatures and possess feline and saurian characteristics. The plastic decoration of Structure E-VII-2nd consists of eighteen grotesque mask panels (Ricketson and Ricketson 1937: 72-93). Chronologically, the stucco coated pyramid dates to the Late Preclassic Period, ca. B. C. 250-250 A. D.

For many years this structure in Uaxactun was recognized as the proto-type of a structure in the formative phase of the Maya culture, but recent archaeological excavations in northern Guatemala, in Belize, and in southeastern Mexico brought to light additional examples of this typical architectural style. The spatial and temporal distribution of Maya public buildings with sculptured plaster panels and mask decorations has not been investigated in detail yet, but present data indicate the utilization of this particular artistic form over a wide region and from the Preclassic to the Postclassic periods.

Similar, large buildings with colossal stucco masks, which were recently discovered in Uaxactun (Valdés 1986a, 1986b), Tikal (Valdés 1986a; Miller 1986), El Mirador (Gendrop 1983:18; Matheny 1986, Fig. 5, Pl. 3), and in El Zotz (Andrews 1986: Figs. 4,6) date from the Late Preclassic and the beginning of the Early Classic (ca. 250-550 A. D.); all these sites are located in the northern part of the Department of El Petén in Guatemala.

Even earlier structures with plaster decorations, which were probably erected in the first or second century B. C., have recently been unearthed in Belize, namely at Lamanai (Pendergast 1981, Fig. 9; see Fig. 8) and at Cerros (Freidel and Schele 1983, Fig. 3; Freidel 1985, Figs. 2, 3, 7).

The stucco mask decoration as a medium of architectural and artistic expression has also been used in later time periods, for example in the transitional phase from the Preclassic to the Early Classic at Tikal (Miller 1986), Altun Ha (Pendergast 1979; 1982), Río Azul (Adams 1986: 202), and at Kohunlich (Segovia 1969; Freidel and Schele 1983; see Fig. 7).

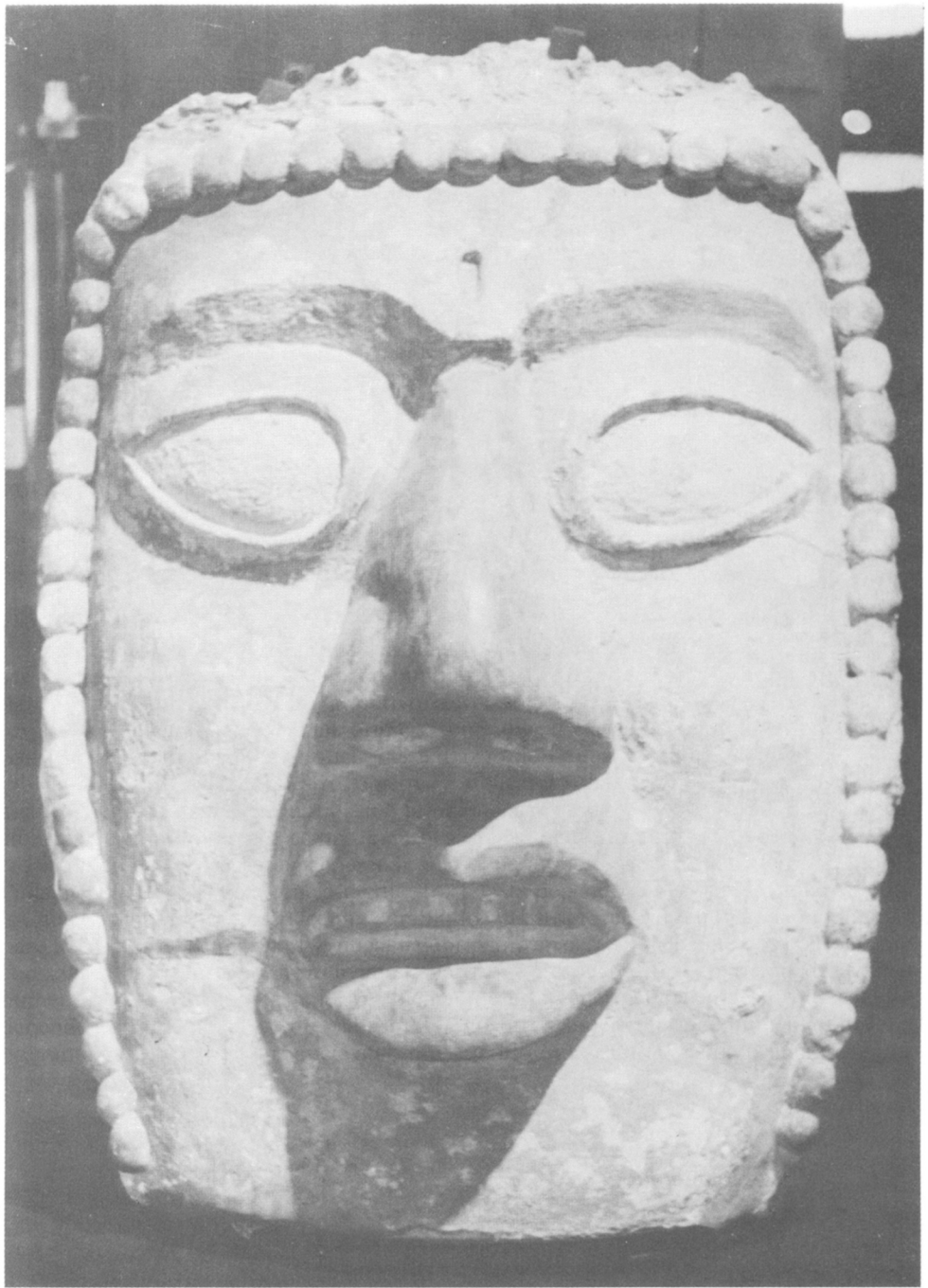


Fig. 1. Maya stucco mask. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico, D. F. Photograph by Karl Herbert Mayer, 1987

Public architecture, decorated with stucco masks, was also created in the Late Classic period (ca. 550–950 A. D.); there are well-known examples at the Maya centers of Piedras Negras, Planeque, and Comalcalco (Gendrop 1973 : 15, 22).

Anthropomorphic monumental stucco masks were also found in the Northern Maya Lowlands, for instance at Acanceh and Izamal (Gendrop 1973 : 13, 16), and this evidences the wide spatial distribution of this sculptural and artistic program, which characterizes Maya architecture during more than a millenium.

This brief overview concerning the geographical and chronological distribution of colossal stucco mask panels on structures in the Maya Lowlands focuses only on those sculptures that were found *in situ*, however, examples exist, whose exact provenance is unknown, which were found in the course of illicit excavations and which can only be assigned to an archaeological locus or region and to specific time periods on stylistic grounds, based solely on iconographical analogies.

In the following, three unprovenanced stucco mask fragments that are presently housed in museums in Mexico and Israel and which may possibly originate from the same archaeological site will be described.

STUCCO MASK 1

In spring 1986, this fragmentary mask was on exhibit in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City, lacking any label or description. In February 1987, this hitherto unpublished specimen was still on exhibit, now with a short description, stating it to be a restored piece, from the south of Campeche or Quintana Roo, donated to the museum by a private collector and dating from “700–900” A. D.

This plaster sculpture, here designated “Stucco Mask 1” (Figs. 1, 2) is 100 cm high, 70 cm wide, and 45 cm thick. Of the original panel, only a human face survives. The back of the sculpture is battered and cut off. Looters have broken or sawn the piece horizontally into three portions, possibly in order to reduce the weight and to facilitate its removal and transportation; respective fractures are recognizable along the mouth and just underneath the eyes. It can be surmised that during the restoration work the complete nose and parts of the mouth were restored. The sculpture depicts a naturalistic human face, with a strongly accentuated forehead, large, almond-shaped eyes, a large nose and a slightly opened mouth with thick lips, showing the upper row of teeth. On top of the forehead on both sides of the face there is an ornament consisting of small circlets, probably beads. In the middle of the pronounced forehead is a small, vertical indentation of unknown significance. The stucco is painted with a reddish-orange colored pigment, some of the teeth are white. The eyeballs are also white and the pupils are indicated neither by paint nor by carving.

STUCCO MASK 2

In 1979, on the occasion of the opening of the Arnold H. Maremont Pavilion of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, an exhibit catalogue was published, containing the description of a Maya stucco head, painted in red and white, 90 cm high, dating to 600–900 A. D. (Eban 1979 : 20, No. 88). Concerning the provenance, only vaguely “Quintana Roo, Mexico” was stated, indicating that the precise place of origin of the item is in question. As no illustration of this mask was given in the catalogue, I requested a photograph of it and in November 1984, the curator of Ethnic Arts of the Israel Museum, Dan Eban, kindly placed a black and white print of the sculpture at my disposal, which can be reproduced here. (Fig. 3.)



Fig. 2. The strucco mask in profile. Photograph by Karl Herbert Mayer, 1987

In an undated catalogue of the Israel Museum, issued approximately around 1985–1986 (Ekholm and Eban, n.d.: 76–77, No. 83), this particular sculpture was reproduced in color for the first time and accompanied by a more detailed description which is repeated here:

“Although its exact place of origin is unknown, this mammoth stucco face probably formed part of the facade of a temple platform in the region of the southern portion of the State of Quintana Roo. If it is like other examples preserved *in situ*, this would have been one of a row of faces decorating a terrace wall. Stucco or plaster, made of burned limestone and modeled in place as architectural ornament, is a medium widely used in Maya art. Stucco sculpture appears to have been usually painted, in this case in red, black and white, and was probably brilliant when freshly done.”

The large stucco face-panel was considered to date to the Late Classic period.

Obviously, this sculpture in Jerusalem matches the stucco mask in Mexico City, although it is less restored than the latter specimen. At present, the face shows red paint, only the pupils are painted in black and the iris is white.

Stylistically, the affinities of Stucco Mask 1 with Stucco Mask 2 are so strong, that there can be no doubt that they share the same provenance and may even originate from the same Maya structure. The eyes section and the pronounced forehead of both sculptures are modeled almost identically, both faces display the distinctive bead decoration and the presence of the unexplicable indentation in the forehead of both masks is of essential significance for an intimate connection.

STUCCO MASK 3

This stucco mask (Figs. 4–6), actually the tripartite section of a once complete temple facade of polychrome stucco, is on exhibit in the Sala Maya of the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City (Cárdos de Méndez 1986: 16–17). The modern history of this extraordinary and monumental architectural decoration remains obscure. The theft of this complex monument, measuring 840 cm in width and approximately 240 cm in height, was organized by an art dealer in the U.S.A., who, in 1969, offered it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City allegedly for a sum of more than U.S. \$ 400,000— (Meyer 1974). Following some interventions by the Mexican government authorities, the looted and destroyed facade was returned by plane to Mexico, an action that gave the mutilated colossal sculpture a special nickname: “The Winged Temple”.

After a thorough restoration, the stucco frieze was put on exhibit in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. To what extent the present condition concerning shape, composition and painting corresponds to the original condition is not known. The art dealer involved with the looting of the huge decoration has provided three differing origins of the frieze, including an archaeological site in the Mexican state of Chiapas. When first on exhibit in Mexico City, an unfounded provenance of “Kohunlich” was stated (Meyer 1974: 25).

The monumental frieze in its present state is composed of three pictorial entities, arranged in a horizontal format: the central icon with a human face in front view, surrounded by a rectangular, ornate frame (Fig. 5), flanked by two symmetrically arranged side panels, that portray two bizarre, aged deities. (Fig. 6). The complete architectural plastic decoration is modeled from white stucco and colored with red paint. There are some white spots visible, possibly due to erosion. The eyeballs of all three figures are white, the pupils are painted in black.

The striking resemblances between the images on all three mask panels described here are so great, that the similarity in concept, form, and details suggest a common origin



Fig. 3. Maya stucco mask. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Photograph courtesy of the Israel Museum.

of all unprovenanced facade masks and at least that all are part of a distinct sculpture complex. Stucco Mask 3, in strict contrast to the other masks, lacks the curious indentation in the middle of the forehead; on the other hand, it shows a nose ornament, composed of two spherical beads, a characteristic ornament of the stucco faces in Kohunlich (Fig. 7).

ON THE PROVENANCE OF THE STUCCO MASKS

Under the assumption that Stucco Mask 3 derives from the same location as the other two masks, the provenance of this frieze is highly important, but only differing assertions exist, not based on any facts. Some authors cautiously suggest a place of origin in a region in the south of Campeche or Quintana Roo, some writes state definitely Calakmul in Campeche or Kohunlich in Quintana Roo (see Meyer 1974; Mayer 1978 : 10) and Víctor Segovia (Romano Pacheco *et al.* 1981 : 293) attributes Stucco Mask 3 to La Muñeca in Campeche. There are no convincing arguments as to why a provenance of la Muñeca or Kohunlich has been given, although a Kohunlich provenance seems more plausible, because the four monumental stucco heads on Structure A-1 appear more related to the three unprovenanced stucco masks. The Kohunlich faces are anthropomorphic like the three discussed faces, but definitely portray deities. The scrolls around the edges of the mouth, features which identify the Kohunlich beings as deities and accordingly the Kohunlich representations have been identified as the Sun God, Kinich Ahau.

It should be explained here, that most of the monumental Preclassic and Classic Maya stucco mask panels portray deities or anthropomorphic-zoomorphic supernaturals, but there are several examples that are obviously portraits of historical rulers. The Preclassic sculpture at Lamanai (Fig. 8) very probably represents a royal portraiture, and the Late Classic heads on the Palace at Palenque certainly portray historical individuals. It has been suggested that the icon in the center of the Stucco Mask 3 pictures the Sun God (Cárdos de Méndez 1986 : 16), but there is no evidence supporting this hypothesis; I assume, that Stucco Mask 3, like the other two masks, depict individuals of the ruling elite.

Nicholas Hellmuth (1986 : 21; 1987 : 377) has recently proposed another provenance of the Stucco Mask 3; he mentions the site of Placeres and specifies his statement as follows (Hellmuth 1987 : 377):

“I thank Ian Graham and Juan de la Cruz Briceño for the suggestion that this upper zone facade came from Placeres. I had long disagreed with illustration captions that placed it at Kohunlich or Calakmul. A visit to Placeres in 1984 confirmed Graham’s and de la Cruz Briceño’s placement. All the local chicleros remember the looting quite well even though it was two decades ago, and fragments of ripped out polychrome stucco facade decoration still litter the gutted mound.”

Placeres has been visited by two expeditions of the Carnegie Institution and has been described as an abandoned chiclero camp (Ruppert and Denison 1943), but not as an archaeological site. Sylvanus Morley (1937, Pl. 139) and Florencia Müller (1959), however, published archaeological maps where Placeres is shown as a Prehispanic settlement.

Placeres is located in the border region of southeastern Campeche and southwestern Quintana Roo, approximately 40 km south of Becan, a region where the archaeological zones of Río Bec and Petén meet.

In case it can be verified that Stucco Mask 3 is definitely from Placeres, a site not investigated by archaeologists so far, this would imply, that Stucco Mask 1 and 2 also originate from Placeres and possibly even from the same temple structure.

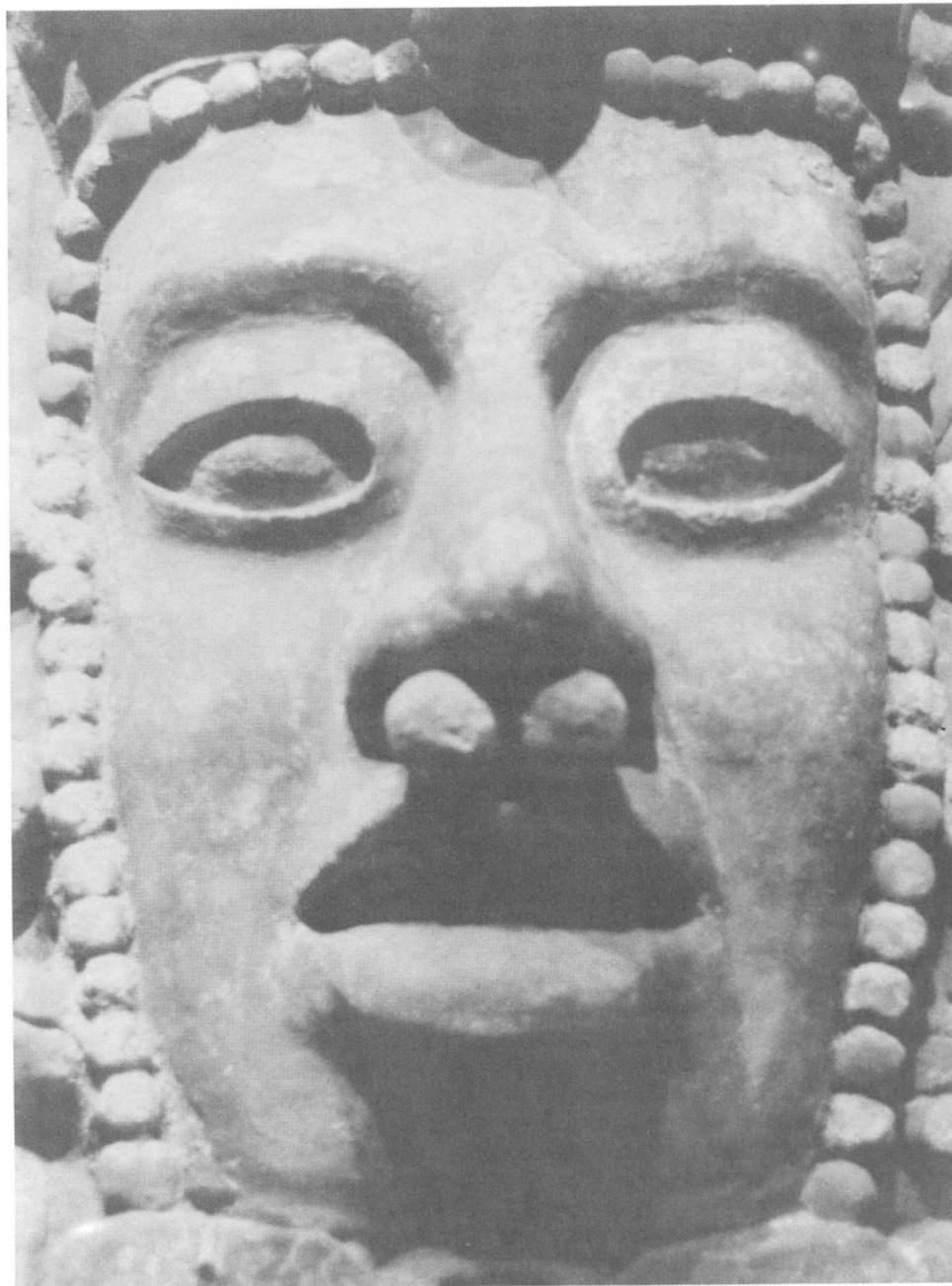


Fig. 4. Temple facade, detail. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico, D. F. Photograph by Karl Herbert Mayer, 1980



Fig. 5. The central panel of temple facade. Museo Nacional de Antropologia, Mxico, D. F. Photograph by Karl Herbert Maxer, 1976



Fig. 6. Temple facade decoration in the Museo Nacional de Antropologia, Mexico, D. F. Photograph by Karl Herbert Mayer, 1976



Fig. 7. Stucco mask on the north side of the stairway on Structure A-1 at Kohunlich, Quintana Roo, Mexico. Photograph by Karl Herbert Mayer, 1986



Fig. 8. Preclassic stucco mask on Structure N9-56 at Lamanai, Belize. Photograph by Karl Herbert Mayer, 1986

THE DATING OF THE STUCCO MASKS

Linda Schele (1985 : 44) has suggested that the Stucco Mask 3 shows an Early Classic style. The iconographically comparable masks at Kohunlich possibly date to the Late Preclassic or to an early phase of the Early Classic (Freidel and Schele 1983 : 6; Schele 1985 : 44); the chronological position of the Kohunlich panels is problematical, but a dating to the Early Classic period seems acceptable. Should Schele's assumption, that Stucco Mask 3 is in an Early Classic style, prove to be correct, then a Late Classic date of the other two masks would be illogical. Then, the museum labels of Mask 1 and 2, stating a Late Classic manufacture, would be erroneous.

The Early Classic features on Stucco Mask 3 can be compared iconographically with the much smaller representations of deities on the ceramic so-called cache vessels, which are mostly unprovenanced but are commonly described as Early Classic manifestations (see Hellmuth 1987, Figs. 32, 71, 87, 140, 269C, 270, and 271).

CONCLUSIONS

Monumental architectural decorations, executed in stucco and painted monochrome or polychrome, which occur primarily in the form of horizontal relief panels flanking stairways and featuring various images that are commonly known as "masks" as central icon, are a particular characteristic feature of the early art in the Maya Lowlands. The similarity in design and specific details of three looted and unprovenanced stucco masks in museums in Mexico and Israel has led to the assumption that they belong to a specific sculpture tradition and may derive from a single site or even single structure. Recent data suggest a place of origin in Placeres, an unexplored Maya site in the Petén zone of southeastern Mexico. It can be hypothesized that all three fragments originally decorated a single Early Classic structure at Placeres, however, not in the frequent form as slant side panels of stairways, but rather in the form of a frieze in an upper facade zone, similarly to the wide horizontal stucco frieze on the east side of Structure A-6 at Xunantunich in Belize (Satterthwaite 1950), or the sculptured friezes of the north facade of the Palace at Polenque in Mexico (Freidel and Schele 1983, Fig. 15).

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