Visual Sources - Art and the Maya Elite

The ancient Maya world, writes a major scholar of the region, “was a world of Maya art.” In magnificent architecture, carvings, pottery, ceramic figures, wall paintings, and illustrated books, Maya culture was suffused by a distinctive style of artistic expression, more complex, subtle, extensive, and innovative than any other in the Americas. Commissioned by Maya rulers, that art centered on life at court, depicting kings, nobles, warriors, and wealthy merchants together with the women, musicians, and artists who served them. The many deities who populated the Maya universe also appeared frequently in Maya art, which represents a major source for historians studying that civilization. While the Maya had writing, their literature was less extensive than that of Eurasian cultures, and much of it was tragically destroyed during the early decades of Spanish rule. The images that follow provide a window into the life of the Maya elite during its classical era.

The source image below shows a royal couple from the Maya city of Yaxchilan in the year 724 C.E. with the king, Shield Jaguar, on the left, and his primary wife, Lady Xok, on the right. In helping him dress for a war-related ceremony or sacrifice, Lady Xok offers her husband his helmet, the head of a jaguar, an animal that was widely associated with strength, bravery, aggression, warfare, and high social status. The T-shaped frame at the center top, which contains a number of Maya glyphs (written symbols), indicates a doorway and thus set the action in an interior space. The king is wearing cotton body armor and carrying a knife, while his wife is clad in a huipil, a blouse similar to those still worn by Maya women in southern Mexico.

1. What elements to their dress and decoration serve to mark their high status?
2. What aspects of the physical appearance of this couple might represent ideal male and female characteristics in Maya culture? Pay attention to their hair, foreheads, and noses, as well as to the attitude suggested by their faces.
3. What might you infer about the relationship of Shield Jaguar and Lady Xok from this carving? Notice the relatively equal size of the two figures and the gesture Shield Jaguar makes with his left hand. Keep in mind that the carving comes from a temple in Yaxchilan dedicated to Lady Xok.
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Warfare was frequent among Maya cities and thus a common theme in court art. Fought with spear throwers, lances, clubs, axes, swords, and shields, Maya wars were depicted as chaotic affairs aimed at the capture of individual prisoners, who were depicted as chaotic affairs aimed at the capture of individual prisoners, where were destined for sacrifice or slavery. Those prisoners were often named in glyphs that accompanied the portrayal of battles along with the inscription “He is seized/roped.”

The next source, a reconstructed image, comes from a Maya archaeological site in southern Mexico called Bonampak, well known for its vivid murals. Depicting events that took place in 792 C.E., this mural shows King Chan Muwan of Bonampak (in the center) holding a staff and receiving prisoners of war from his victorious noble warriors. To the right of the king in this painting are two allies from the nearby city of Yaxchilan, followed by the king’s wife, his mother, and a servant-musician playing a conch. To the king’s left are six more high-ranking warriors from Bonampak, while lower-level warriors guard each side of the door at the bottom.

The prisoners hold center stage in the mural. Notice in particular the dead captive sprawling below the king’s staff as a severed head lies on a bed of leaves below him. The four small images at the top indicate constellations, showing the favorable configuration of the sky for this occasion. The turtle on the far right, for example, depicts the constellation Gemini, while the three stars on its back represent what we know as Orion’s belt.
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1. What can you infer about Maya warfare and court practice from this mural?
2. What do the various postures of the captives suggest?
3. Notice that a number of the captives have blood dripping from their fingers. What does this indicate? What might be happening to the prisoner at the far left of the painting?
4. What status distinctions can you observe among the figures in the mural? Notice the jaguar skins worn by the king and three other warriors.
5. What meaning might you attach to the presence of the king's wife and mother at this event?

The bleeding and ultimately the sacrifice of the captives in the next image was part of a more pervasive practice of bloodletting that permeated Maya religious and court life. Significant occasions - such as birth, marriage, death, planting crops, and dedicating buildings - were sanctified with human blood, the most valued and holy substance in the world. Behind this practice lay the Maya belief in the mutual relationship of humans and their gods. Two of the major scholars in this field explain: “The earth and its creatures were created through a sacrificial act of the gods, and human beings, in turn, were required to strengthen and nourish the gods.” The means of doing so was blood. The massive loss of blood often triggered a trancelike state that the Maya experienced as a mystical union with their gods or ancestors. The lancets used to draw blood - usually from the tongue in women and often from the penis in men - were invested with sacred power.

Kings and their wives were central to this bloodletting ritual, as the next image so vividly shows. Here we meet again Shield Jaguar and Lady Xok. The date of this carving is October 28, 709 C.E. The king is holding a large torch, suggesting that the ritual occurs at night, while his kneeling wife draws a thorn-studded rope through her perforated tongue. The rope falls into a basket of bloody paper, which will be burned with the resulting smoke nourishing the gods. Shield Jaguar too will soon let his own blood flow, for the glyphs accompanying this carving declare that “he is letting blood” and “she is letting blood.”

1. What details can you notice in the exquisitely carved work?
2. What significance might you attribute to the fact that the couple is performing this ritual together?
3. Why do you think Lady Xok is kneeling?
4. Notice the shrunken head in Shield Jaguar’s headdress. How would you assess its significance? How might it enhance his status?
5. To what extent is this pervasive bloodletting a uniquely Mesoamerican religious practice? What roles do blood and sacrifice play in other religious traditions?
Among the most well-known and intriguing features of Maya life was a ball game in which teams of players, often two on a side, sought to control a rubber ball, using only their thighs, torsos, and upper arms to make it hit a marker or ring. Deeply rooted in Maya mythology, the game had long been popular throughout the Maya territory and elsewhere in Mesoamerica. On one level, it was sport, often played simply for entertainment and recreation. But the game also reflected and symbolized the prevalence of warfare among Maya cities. As one recent account put it: “The game re-enacted the paradigms for war and sacrifice, where the skillful and blessed triumph and the weak and undeserving are vanquished.” The ball game was yet another occasion for the shedding of blood, as losing players, often war captives, were killed, sometimes bound in ball-like fashion and rolled down the steps of court to their death. Thus the larger mythic context of the ball game was the eternal struggle of life and
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death, so central to Maya religious thinking.

The last source, a rollout of a vase dating from the seventh or eighth century C.E., depicts the ball game in action. The two players on each side echo the Hero Twins of Maya mythology, famous ball players who triumphed over the lords of the underworld in an extended game and who were later transformed triumphantly into the sun and moon. The glyphs accompanying this image named two kings of adjacent cities, suggesting that the game may have been played on occasion as a substitute for warfare between rival cities.

1. What might the elaborate dress of the players suggest about the function of the game and the status of its players?

2. Notice the deer headdress on the player at the far left and the vulture image on the corresponding player at the far right. What do the headdresses suggest about the larger mythic context in which the game was understood?

3. Notice the heavy protective padding around the waist as well as the wrappings around one knee, foot, and upper arm of the two lead players. What was the purpose of such padding? Keep in mind that the rubber ball, shown here in an exaggerated form, was roughly the size of a modern volleyball but weighed perhaps seven or eight pounds.

4. How might you compare this ancient Maya ball game to contemporary athletic contests? Consider the large social meaning of the game as well as its more obvious features.