

PURPOSEFUL AMBIGUITY IN *THE PRESENTATION OF CAPTIVES TO A MAYA RULER*
AT THE KIMBELL ART MUSEUM

by

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INTRODUCTION

The Kimbell Art Museum's carved limestone panel (115.3 x 88.9 cm), entitled *The Presentation of Captives to a Maya Ruler* (hereafter called the *Kimbell Panel*) and dated around AD 785, is a fine example of the complex multivalence of Late Classic (AD 600-800) Maya art (Figs. 1 and 2). Many Mayanists have been attracted to this panel for numerous reasons. While earlier scholars, such as Karl Herbert Mayer, focused their research on how this panel embodies the calligraphic and gestural artistic style of the Maya, others such as Mary Ellen Miller, Linda Schele, Simon Martin, Nikolai Grube, and David Freidel, have expanded our knowledge of the panel by using the glyphic texts as their primary source for working out the iconographic meaning of the subject matter depicted.¹ These latter scholars relied on a close correspondence between the text and image, assuming an explicit relationship between the two. Yet, in many ways the imagery of the panel defies precise historical interpretation based exclusively on a direct correlation of the glyphs and imagery.

The text of the *Kimbell Panel* describes a historical transaction, the presentation of captives from a tertiary elite to a secondary ruler. Likewise, the inscription indicates a hierarchical relationship between the two figures. The imagery, however, conveys more ambiguity about this political event and, accordingly, the politics of the region. Therefore, to understand the meaning of the panel, one must not evaluate the imagery as just an illustration of the textual record, but as conveying a different meaning than the inscription. The imagery has

¹ Karl Herbert Mayer, *Maya Monuments: Sculptures of Unknown Provenance, Supplement IV*, trans. by Sandra Brizee. (Berlin: Verlag Karl-Friedrich von Fleming, 1984), 28-30. Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art*, (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1986), 226. Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 135. Mary Ellen Miller and Simon Martin, *Courtly Art of the Ancient Maya*, (San Francisco: Thames and Hudson 2004), 31. Linda Schele and David Freidel, *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient May*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1990), 287.

embedded more complex connotations about the turbulent politics of the Maya in the lowland Usumacinta region (Fig. 3).

Indeed, one of the more striking aspects of the *Kimbell Panel* is the contradictory or ambiguous relationship of the subjects depicted in the work, which I explain by examining the panel within the larger socio-political context of Late Classic lowland Maya civilization. I suspect that the *Kimbell Panel* was not meant to be just a record of events that glorified one ruler over the other, but a monument that gave both subjects equivalent power of authority in their depiction. The figures appear to be purposefully arranged in a way that allows the panel to be interpreted to give both elite subjects, the secondary Yaxchilan ruler (on the upper left) and the *sajal* (the tertiary ruler, on the right), equal agency. To support this argument, I will examine the encoded meaning of the gestures in the panel and look at the significance of reversed orientations to show how an inverse viewing of this panel changes the significance of the figures' status. Moreover, I will look at the *Kimbell Panel* from the perspectives of both a secondary and tertiary polity, in order to highlight the ambiguous relationship depicted between the enthroned ruler and the *sajal*. The final focus of my essay will be on how the gestures and spatial organization in this panel convey the viewpoints of the Maya subgroup at Laxtunich (the site where the *Kimbell Panel* was attributed) and their unstable political circumstances in the Late Classic period.²

² The *Kimbell Panel* has been attributed to the location of Laxtunich because the *sajal* mentioned in the text, Aj Chak Maax, was from a Northern Lacanha site, probably Laxtunich. In addition, Stephen Houston, in a letter of September 24, 1985, has related the stylistic features of the *Kimbell Panel* to other monuments found at Laxtunich. Moreover, the panel does not stylistically resemble panels and lintels at Yaxchilan. The smaller site of Laxtunich has not been extensively excavated, therefore scholars know very little about this city. The site was originally dubbed "Lashch-tu-nich" (phonetic spelling for "The Place of Carved Stones") by two adventurers, Dana and Ginger Lamb, who documented their travel throughout Central America and their eventual rediscovery of this archaeological site in, *Quest for the Lost City* (1951). Since this book, there have been no major publications about Laxtunich..

The system of over-lordship among primary, secondary, tertiary cities in Maya culture required the loyalty and submission of lesser royals and non-royal elites, such as *sajals*. *Sajals* were typically designated as military chiefs and provincial governors, and they were usually named in hieroglyphic texts only in conjunction with name of a superior ruler.³ The term *sajal* derives from Yucatec term, *cahal*, or “kah,” which stands for village or locality. As the primary centers became more reliant on resources from secondary and tertiary centers, the tensions between Maya cities increased, and the traditional system of royal rulership (which was reserved for royals who claimed to be blood descendants of the creator gods and ancestors) was expanded to include lesser, non-royal members. For example, some scholars argue that the collapse of Copan in the early 9th century may be partly attributed to the pressure created by an increasing number of nobles competing for control.⁴

The larger site of Yaxchilan is referenced in this paper as a secondary site in relation to larger primary cities such as Palenque, Caracol, and Tikal in the surrounding lowland region. The site of Laxtunich is also located in the lowland region and is considered a tertiary center in comparison to bigger nearby secondary cities such as Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras. Although much is known about the secondary ruler, Shield Jaguar III, of the *Kimbell Panel*, very little is known about this “tertiary ruler” and, more generally, how *sajals* were represented in Maya art. An understanding about the relationship between the secondary ruler and the tertiary *sajal* is beneficial not only to gain more knowledge about the socio-political organization of Maya polities, but the investigation into such an affiliation, as depicted on the *Kimbell Panel*, also yields equally valuable knowledge about Maya monumental artistic practices and displays in which art was a political tool used to facilitate diplomatic affairs.

³ Peter Schmidt, Mercedes de la Garza, and Enrique Nalda. *Maya*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1998), 324.

⁴ Martin, *Chronicle of the Maya*, 213.

I. THE KIMBELL PANEL

Within a plain narrow frame, the *Kimbell Panel* (115.3 x 89 cm.) formally depicts the presentation of captives to a Maya ruler (Figs. 1 and 2). During the removal of the panel from its original location, the panel was cut into four pieces (one horizontal cut through the middle, and two other cuts divided the upper and lower halves) and sawed down on all four edges, so the original size and thickness is unknown.⁵ The scene in the panel takes place within the context of a palace where curtains hang above the interior throne room, which is elevated on the highest platform. The secondary ruler, Shield Jaguar III (*itzamnaaj b'ahlam*) of Yaxchilan, is depicted sitting on a royal bench/throne in the upper left side of the panel. On the right side, the tertiary elite or *sajal*, He of Red Monkey (*aj chak maax*), from the northern Lacanha site, Laxtunich, takes up one third of the space within the entire composition. The *sajal* appears to be halfway kneeling before the ruler as he climbs up the steps toward the ruler's throne to hand him an unidentified object that appears (perhaps a rubber ball) to wrapped in cloth. The three figures in the lower left register are identified as captives. The two captives closest to the *sajal* are named. The captives have been stripped of any adornments and are only minimally clothed. The cloths pulled through their ears are suggestive of bloodletting rituals, in which the captives' ear lobes were punctured and their blood was absorbed into the fabrics that were later burned.⁶ The ropes binding their arms further emphasize their captive status.

GLYPHIC TEXTS

The inscriptions on the *Kimbell Panel* clearly convey a more straight-forward historical meaning than the imagery of the relief shows. In 1977, Linda Schele was the first scholar to

⁵ Mayer, *Maya Monuments*, 28.

⁶ Schele, *A Forest of Kings*, 289.

analyze the texts on the panel.⁷ Since Schele's initial interpretation of the glyphs, however, several other epigraphers, such as Mary Ellen Miller, Simon Martin, and Nikolai Grube have also worked out the meaning of the text, and elaborated on her first translation.⁸ The text of the panel is composed of twenty-eight glyphic blocks. All of the glyphs, except the blocks under the ruler's throne, can be read from left to right (the traditional reading order of Maya glyphs). The inscription under the ruler's throne is unusually organized in reverse order, to be read from right to left. The most comprehensive explanation of the glyphs was published in Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller's 1986 exhibition catalogue, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art*.

According to this decipherment, the reading of the text (A1-7) begins with the reversed caption on the front of the throne, which provides the seated ruler's titles (to distinguish his name from earlier rulers) and hieroglyphic name, Shield Jaguar III (itzamnaaj b'ahlam III) of Yaxchilan (Fig.4). The caption (glyphic blocks B1-C2) in between the two elites starts out with the date, August 23, AD 783 (long count date: 9.17.12.13.14) and mentions (B3-C5) that on this date, a lord named balam-ahau was captured (B3 shows the "capture" glyph, C3 shows a name glyph which is repeated in the script F1-3 and refers to the foremost captive) by the *sajal* depicted on the right, Aj Chak Maax.⁹ The text then goes on to say in the last four blocks that three days later, the captives were dressed, and blood was let under the patronage of the enthroned lord depicted on the left (Fig. 5).¹⁰ The texts, however, do not specify exactly where the blood-letting took place, whether at Yaxchilan or at Laxtunich.

⁷ Mayer, *Maya Monuments*, 30.

⁸ Schele, *The Blood of Kings*, 226.

⁸ Martin, *Chronicle of the Maya*, 135.

⁹ Mayer, *Maya Monuments*, 29.

¹⁰ Schele, *The Blood of Kings*, 226.

The low relief glyphic blocks (D1-4) under the *sajal*'s arm begins with the expression T-61.756, which according to Eric Thompson occurs frequently at the beginning of subsidiary inscriptions.¹¹ Michael Coe argues that the low relief inscriptions on Maya sculptures indicate the names of the artists responsible for the work.¹² Schele argues that the text may describe the secondary elite with the traditional term for a Maya priest, Ah K'in. Ah K'in translates as "he of sun-water" and is considered a religious title because the priests/prophets usually represented the solar deities (Fig. 6).¹³

The short text (E1-2) of the two glyphic blocks on the left edge of the panel, to the left of the ruler is a repetition of the B5 glyph in the central text (between the ruler and secondary elite) which describes the enthroned lord (Fig. 7). The text (F1-3) at the lower right corner of the panel names the foremost captive who is from an unknown site (therefore his name has not been completely deciphered) (Fig. 8). The inscription (G1-2) between the first and second captive names the second captive who is also from an unknown site (Fig. 9). The third captive, who was purposefully cropped in the depiction by the artist, is not named in the texts.

To summarize, the inscriptions state that the capture of a lord titled Balam-Ahau by another lord, Aj Chak Maax, occurred on August 23, AD 783. Three days after this, a sacrifice of bloodletting was performed on behalf of the enthroned ruler. All of the figures, except the leftmost captive, are named with glyphic captions. The prominent inscription on the throne front is ordered in reverse, to be read from right to left. The inscription on the throne lists the titles of the enthroned ruler named Shield Jaguar III in the glyphic texts.

¹¹ Mayer, *Maya Monuments*, 29.

¹² Michael Coe and Justin Kerr, *Art of the Maya Scribe*. (New York: Harry Abrams, 1998), 147.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 30. Based on the observation by Eric Thompson that the glyphic text opens with the expression "T-61.756" which occurs very frequently at the beginning of subsidiary inscriptions, Linda Schele contends that the text identifies the secondary elite.

SAJAL AND ENTHRONED RULER REPRESENTED WITH EQUIVALENT AGENCY

The apparel of the subjects on the *Kimbell Panel* was not selected arbitrarily, but was chosen to define their different roles. As such, the figures' clothing served as uniforms that revealed each subject's rank and affiliation. In the *Kimbell Panel* the ruler is shown less elaborately dressed than the secondary official. The enthroned lord is depicted wearing only a loincloth, a jade beaded necklace, jade pectoral, jade wrist guards, jade earflares, and a simple headdress, which consists of a few feathers that extend out toward the front and longer plumes sticking out in the back. In contrast, the *sajal's* more detailed headdress (a scalloped petal hat with jade beaded plumes that is depicted on other secondary rulers in other works), cape, and jewelry (jade ear ornaments, jade necklace, and jade jaguar pendant) indicate that he was a man of high status. Substantial remnants of blue-green, black, and red-orange paint left on the panel show where the artist wished to distinguish and emphasize forms. The more varied polychrome of the *sajal's* dress further emphasizes his higher status. Green-blue pigments left on the jewelry and embellishments flanking his cape also indicate that the *sajal* wore significant amounts of precious jade in this depiction, perhaps more jade than the enthroned lord. Moreover, the blue-green on the feathers of the *sajal's* headdress show that he was wearing valuable blue Quetzal feathers.

Like the primary ruler, the *sajal* is depicted in a partially frontal view, with his chest facing forward and his face turned in profile. Interestingly, the weight of the *sajal* on the right counterbalances the preponderant weight of the four figures (the ruler on the top left, and three captives at the bottom, left side of the panel), giving this figure equivalent space in the overall composition. Thus, the focal point is split equally between the primary ruler and *sajal*. The panel is organized in such a way that the viewer is given a prescribed pathway for reading the

composition. As a Kimbell author pointed out in the museum's 1987 catalogue of the collection, the subjects are arranged in a pattern of subliminal geometry of parallel diagonals.¹⁴ The angled lines in the *Kimbell Panel* are designed to direct the viewer's attention toward various focal points, such as the gaze between the primary ruler and *sajal* and the line that draws attention to the expressive action of the captives' hands. The angles form a trapezoidal path, which appears to lead from the captives, to the *sajal*, over to the enthroned ruler, and back down to the captives.

SIGNIFICANCE OF GESTURE IN THE KIMBELL PANEL

The ruler on the upper left holds himself confidently as he looks at the *sajal*. While the *sajal* is represented halfway kneeling, in a somewhat subservient position, he still remains strong and dignified in his actions and facial expression. In Maya art the austere, composed appearance of the subjects emphasized the virtue of self-control, in contrast to less virtuous emotional displays. The figures are clearly expressing themselves in different ways according to their gestures. The foremost captive figure is seated in an erect, meditative posture, holding his left hand up to his chest with the palm of his hand exposed. Different from the more dignified and graceful gestures of the enthroned lord, *sajal*, and seated captive, the other two captives are depicted with more excited gestures. The second captive is shown bowing down, silently protesting with his left hand upraised to his head. The third captive is gesturing his left hand toward his mouth, perhaps signaling vocal protest.¹⁵ The lord and *sajal* are undisturbed by the actions of the captives, which references their refined status and composure, and also differentiates them from the less poised captive subjects.

¹⁴ *The Kimbell Art Museum 1972*, 322.

¹⁵ *The Kimbell Art Museum, 1972*, 322.

CAPTIVES AS SCRIBES

Michael Coe and Justin Kerr suggested that the three captive figures at the bottom of the *Kimbell Panel* were scribal artists.¹⁶ They determined that the seated subject at the forefront of the panel is wearing the “hun” knot in his headdress and is holding a “stick bundle” in his right hand, which resembles a pack of quill pen writing implements typically shown in conjunction with Maya scribes.¹⁷ The other two captives have similar “hun” knots in their headdresses, and the second captive kneeling behind the figure holding the stick bundle is wearing the netted Pawahtun head cloth that was also worn by scribes (Figs. 10 a-b). “Pawahtun” was one of the supernatural patron gods of scribes and was considered to be a secondary god in relation to “Itsamna,” the primary scribal patron deity (Fig. 11).

In the lowland Usumacinta region, depictions of scribe capture were used in secondary cities or in weakly centralized polities, as competitive displays that were prompted by political objectives and justified as ceremonial acts by dominant polities as “fission-dampening integrative mechanisms,” to hold together the loyalty of subordinates upon whose allegiance, labor, and resources the primary center depended.¹⁸ According to Kevin Johnston’s study, the capture of a scribe was particularly harmful to a city’s artistic program and diminished the subordinate ruler’s power to create ritual displays that would perpetuate the socio-political ideas of the elites.¹⁹ To these subordinate elites, the depiction of captive capture and sacrifice sent a

¹⁶ Coe, *Art of the Maya Scribe*, 97.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁸ Kevin J. Johnston, “Broken Fingers: Classic Maya Scribe Capture and Polity Consolidation,” *Antiquity* 75:373-381 (2001), 373.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 374.

clear message that reminded these individuals of the rewards of subordination and the ramifications of failed insubordination.²⁰

As Joyce Marcus points out, competition among elites led to the advancement of Maya art and writing.²¹ Bearing this crucial logic in mind, it is apparent that the scribe was used as a political tool, to perpetuate the agendas of their patron rulers. The severe consequences that resulted with the prized capture of a scribe highlight the level of status that these officials afforded. Looking at the scribal captives in the *Kimbell Panel*, one could also argue that the captive subjects depicted may have also been of the *sajal* elite. Moreover, one of the scribes depicted could have been the tributary artist of the panel, glorifying their captor, the *sajal* of Laxtunich, and also representing their own virtuous skills and ultimate demise with dignity.²²

HIERARCHICAL ORGANIZATION

The orderliness of the gestures may reflect the hierarchical procedures of ceremonial court life. Maya art clearly reflected the cultural beliefs of both its patrons and audience, serving as a template for proper conduct and as an embodiment of the actions of ritualistic performance (including gesture and speech).²³ Line and pattern, or what some scholars refer to as a painterly/calligraphic technique, appear to lie at the core of Maya art and design. The calligraphic gestural characteristics of Maya paintings, sculpture, and inscriptions are also viewed by some scholars, such as Adam Herring, as having more significant poetic and semiotic functions.²⁴ Herring also mentions that Maya gestural technique is described by a specialist of

²⁰ Johnston, "Broken Fingers," 380.

²¹ Joyce Marcus, *Mesoamerican Writing Systems: Propaganda, Myth and History in Four Ancient Civilizations*. New York: Academic Press, 1992, 68.

²² This idea has also been proposed for Structure 12 at the nearby site of Piedras Negras.

²³ *In Pursuit of Quality*, 126.

²⁴ Herring, Adam. *Art and Writing in the Maya Cities, AD 600-800: A Poetics of Line*. New York: Cambridge

the Yucatec language and performance as the “highlighting the representational form itself for aesthetic purposes.””²⁵ As such, the Maya calligraphic style served as a “cultural symbol of performativity, action, and lived experience.”²⁶ Therefore, the relationship of the subjects depicted in the *Kimbell Panel* also reflected the hierarchical organization of socio-political and religious rituals that took place in this area.

At first glance, the imagery does appear to be arranged according to traditional Maya hierarchical standards, in which the panel is read from left to right, starting at the top and ending with the captives at the bottom, or vice versa, making the primary ruler the focal point (at the beginning or end of a reading) of the panel in both situations. Upon closer inspection, however, certain aspects such as 1) the reversed glyphs on the throne front, read from right to left (a nontraditional reading order), and 2) the prominent position of the better dressed *sajal* on the right side of the composition, who is importantly represented taking up the majority of the space in the panel, may indicate a deliberate obfuscation of the meaning by the patron. Visually, more emphasis is placed on the role and power of the tertiary elite depicted.

LEFT/RIGHT HANDED SYMBOLISM IN MAYA ART

The *Kimbell Panel* is unusual because of the nontraditional arrangement of its figures. Looking at statistical evidence based on iconographic analyses of Maya art, primary rulers are typically depicted on the right side of the picture plane. Moreover, ethnographic research and cross-cultural investigations indicate that the right side was the designated location for rulers and may have also connoted power and perhaps religious authority.²⁷ According to colonial and

University Press, 2005), 26.

²⁵ Ibid., 26.

²⁶ Ibid., 106.

²⁷ Joel Palka, “Left/Right Symbolism and the Body in Ancient Maya Iconography and Culture,” *Latin American*

modern Maya language dictionaries the word “right” is defined as great, large, principal, and true, while the “left” is described as lame, subordinate, and untrue.²⁸

The tendency of Maya art to show prominent rulers on the right side of the composition may also indicate that the ancient people too subscribed to similar beliefs about handedness. In addition, the movement of the sun, with the sun rising in the east possessing the greatest energy, often influenced the organization of Maya cities, art, and even social order. Therefore, it is important to note that the position of the most important figure may have been informed by the location of the panel, whereby the subject on the right would have been viewed on the side of the rising sun. As Carolyn Tate points out, the Chamula believe that “the sun deity’s first ascent into the sky ...provides the categories of the credible, the good, and the desirable...”²⁹ Tate also observes that lintels were displayed at Yaxchilan to show the rulers facing out toward the northeast side of a building, representing the ruler on the east side or the proper right side.³⁰

Joel Palka surveyed spatial orientation and gesture in Maya art (ranging from ceramics to stone monuments) to determine the significance of placement on the left or right side of the picture plane.³¹ Palka concluded that in the large majority of works he evaluated there is a strong trend of left/right symbolism in lowland Maya art based on hierarchical social organization.³² Typically, superior figures are shown in Maya art on the viewer’s right, so that their proper gesturing hand (the right hand) would be seen at the zone of contact among the subjects depicted,

Antiquity, vol. 13, no. 4 (Dec., 2002), pp. 419-443.
419-443.

²⁸ Ibid., 420.

²⁹ Carolyn Tate, *Yaxchilan: The Design of a Maya Ceremonial City*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 37.

³⁰ Ibid., 37.

³¹ Palka, “Left/Right Symbolism,” 429-443.

³² Ibid., 432.

while the ruler was positioned in the standard frontal view.³³ Thus, the Maya culture may have perceived the right hand/side of the body to be a symbol of superiority, purity, and power, and the left hand/side as a symbol of weakness and inferiority.

Significantly, out of the vast number of examples (n=448 ceramics, n=349 monuments) that he analyzed from various lowland Maya sites, Palka determined that approximately ninety-percent of Maya art works show peak figures (the primary ruler or protagonist) oriented on the right side of the composition.³⁴ Moreover, Palka speculated that if the site of Yaxchilan (which yielded multiple examples of right-to-left inversions in their monuments) were removed from the sample, the number of right-oriented, high status figures would go up to ninety-five percent.³⁵ That means approximately 70 percent of the art works tested within the pool of 797 specimens that depicted left-handed imagery (ruler figures were left-oriented and texts reversed), were from Yaxchilan. This percentage is particularly relevant to the interpretation of the Kimbell Panel, as it sheds light on the radical and innovative artistic practices of Yaxchilan and its subsidiary centers, such as Laxtunich, which utilized reversed imagery to express the changing ideas that came about towards the end of the Late Classic period in this region. During this time there was a proliferation of the noble class, and *sajals* achieved greater prominence in the Maya social hierarchy. Moreover, the distinction between dominant and subordinate among larger and smaller cities in the Usumacinta region began to fade as lesser nobles became more competitive with greater rulers in the production of monuments.

³³ Palka, "Left/Right Symbolism," 429.

³⁴ Ibid., 435.

³⁵ Ibid., 430.

VIEWING THE KIMBELL PANEL IN LIGHT OF HANDEDNESS THEORY

In the *Kimbell Panel*, all of the captives gesture with their left hands, which accordingly denotes weakness and subordination. Each captive figure seems to express himself more revealingly through hand gesture than through facial expression, which again highlights the significance of handedness symbolism in Maya art. In contrast to the captives, the ruler and *sajal* show their right hands as dominant. The ruler is pushing off of the right hand on his knee to make eye-contact with the *sajal*. His left elbow rests on his left knee. The *sajal* is more directly positioning his right arm in the central zone of contact between himself and the ruler. Furthermore, the *sajal* is holding a special object in his right hand to suggest that he is the focus of the primary activity depicted. This emphasizes his role as the central protagonist of the scene.

In most Maya artworks, the primary ruler is plainly represented on the right side of the composition. For example, an earlier work, *Lintel 16* (AD 752) from Yaxchilan, clearly shows the ruler, Bird Jaguar IV, in the dominant position over the defeated and captured *sajal* of the secondary kingdom of Wak'ab (Fig.12). In contrast to *Lintel 16*, the Kimbell Panel shows the more important Yaxchilan ruler on the left side of the sculpture, while the *sajal* or secondary ruler is depicted on the right side. The *sajal* presented on the right is the primary focus of the panel, which is befitting to the location of the panel in his provincial seat at Laxtunich. The reversed figural organization of the *Kimbell Panel*, which appears to have flourished in the lowland Usumacinta region, defies the typically orthodox and unified programs of earlier Maya art.

The significance of the reversed imagery and text in the *Kimbell Panel* is more apparent once these features are framed within the socio-political context of this region, where we see art

of a more experimental nature. More specifically, as I argue, the trend of reversed imagery may be attributed to the political instability of this region at the end of the 8th century, at which time subsidiary and tertiary kingdoms used art in a more subversive manner to attain authority and reclaim autonomy. Moreover, the increasing number of non-royal population, including bureaucrats, craft specialists, and artisans, in proportion to the noble class, indicates a great level of individualism. As evidenced by the innovation of design in artistic monuments and the autographing of public art, there was more motivation in the Late Classic by patrons to commission works that benefited the individual above the overall community.

SAJAL AS SCRIBE

Another intriguing feature of the *Kimbell Panel* is the questionable role of the *sajal* as both political and religious leader of the tertiary site and the scribal artist of the monument. As Linda Schele suggested, the *sajal* may be the designer based on the location of the signature glyph under his outstretched arm.³⁶ Maya scribes were from the elite classes, typically younger sons or daughters of rulers, or the offspring of secondary wives and concubines.³⁷ Therefore, as scholars have observed in other Maya works, scribes could also be rulers (Fig. 13).³⁸ Accordingly, it is possible that the *sajal* depicted in this panel was the patron of the work and even its artist. If the *sajal* was indeed the artist, this would support the conclusion that the monument was commissioned for the tertiary city's benefit, to aggrandize their *sajal* over the Yaxchilan ruler.

Michael Closs discusses how difficult it is to differentiate scribes and rulers, because in many cases they both had sacred and secular duties.³⁹ Furthermore, the boundary between the two may

³⁶ Linda Schele in written communication to former Kimbell Museum Director, Ted Pillsbury, on April 11, 1990.

³⁷ Coe, *Art of the Maya Scribe*, 36.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁹ Michael Closs, "I Am a Kahal: My Parents Were Scribes," *Research Reports on Ancient Maya Writing*, vol. 39.

have been dictated by matters of state and prestige.⁴⁰ When the religious functions were deemed to be important to the state or useful for political propaganda, they were probably carried out by the local rulers or appointed priests, but in some instances they were also carried out, or at least supervised, by scribes.⁴¹ Nonetheless, Closs does underscore that in most cases the scribal and ruling classes maintained a clear separation between state and religious duties, although there was most likely a symbiotic relationship between the two.

Rulers, however, were commonly educated as scribes, and the children of scribes could attain political office. Significantly, Closs highlights the mobility of the scribal class and the ability of the scribe, “like bureaucrats everywhere,” that could be drafted into new political conditions, while the ruling class would be more easily taken out of power by internal revolution or external conquest.⁴²

The name of the artist responsible for sculpting the *Kimbell Panel* appears on the vertical relief of four glyphs under the *sajal*’s outstretched arm. Michael Coe and Justin Kerr first noted that the glyphs on the *Kimbell Panel* in low relief under the *sajal*’s arm identify the name of the sculptor who designed the monument.⁴³ Looking at other examples of sculpted monuments that bear an artist’s signature, Coe and Kerr highlighted the trend of Maya scribes to inscribe their names in low relief and depict the titles of more prominent figures, such as rulers, in high relief.⁴⁴ The column of text under the *sajal*’s arm begins with the “yuxul” expression which denotes “the carving of...” (Fig.14). The last two block glyphs in the column mention the sculptor’s name, and according to Mary Miller and Simon Martin the caption (D1-4) “tells us

(Washington DC: Center for Maya Research, 1992), 18.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁴¹ Ibid., 18.

⁴² Ibid., 20.

⁴³ Coe, *Art of the Maya Scribe*, 197.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 194.

that he was a native of “Sun Water” (k’ina’), who also executed panels that come from this unknown subsidiary of Yaxchilan.”⁴⁵ Linda Schele, however, suggests that the low relief glyphic blocks (D1-4) under the *sajal*’s arm describe the scribe with the traditional term for a Maya priest, Ah K’in, which translates as “he of sun-water” since the priests/prophets usually represented the solar deities.⁴⁶

The attribution of the artistry of the panel to the *sajal* would add significance to the understanding of how this work may more implicitly represent the views of a tertiary polity. If the panel was indeed created by an artist from a tertiary site, as Miller and Martin suggest, the panel might be read as more subversively representing the ideas of a more provincial polity in an ambiguous or indirect way. Moreover, if the inscription denotes a priestly title, as Schele pointed out, the scribe could have been a higher ranking official, such as the *sajal*, who might have also carried out religious duties.

⁴⁵ Miller, *Courtly Art*, 30.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 30. Based on the observation by Eric Thompson that the glyphic text opens with the expression “T-61.756” which occurs very frequently at the beginning of subsidiary inscriptions, Linda Schele contends that the text identifies the secondary elite.

II. HISTORIC CONTEXT

During the Late Classic period (AD 600-900), Maya civilization reached a point of fluorescence, arriving at a height of intellectual and artistic achievement around AD 750. After AD 750, the Late Classic Maya began to struggle with the stress of overpopulation in many of its cities. As a result, competition for scarce resources led to increased tensions between smaller and larger cities. Furthermore, as subsidiary polities became more powerful the number of monuments commissioned in these areas increased. According to Simon Martin, in AD 790, more secondary sites erected stelae than at any other time, which implies that larger cities were losing centralized power and authority.⁴⁷ The proliferation of artistic commissions seems to indicate that there was a necessity to promote a city's legitimacy, unique identity, and claim to the resources of the region.⁴⁸ Between AD 800-900, many lowland Maya cities were slowly abandoned.

Maya texts and iconography suggest that kings exercised authority primarily through ritual display rather than administrative domination.⁴⁹ Scribes were key in the creation of these displays; therefore, they maintained significant power in their respective kingdoms by using their artistic abilities to represent the ideologies of their patron. Primary polities often created art as competitive display used to dampen fission and thus maintain the primary center's (i.e. Yaxchilan) power and authority over the ruler of a more weakly centralized polity (i.e. Laxtunich).⁵⁰ It is not hard to believe, however, that during the turmoil of the late 8th century, a tertiary city could have attempted to exercise a certain amount of control in the depiction of its

⁴⁷ Martin, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings*, 135.

⁴⁸ Johnson, "Ancient soil resources," 2. A scientific study on the composition of ancient soils in the region between Piedras Negras and Yaxchilan shows that this area was agriculturally important to surrounding centers.

⁴⁹ Schele, *A Forest of King*, 165.

⁵⁰ Johnston, "Broken Fingers," 374.

rulers and beliefs, by manipulating the subjects in its art to place more emphasis on its ruler's status and relationship to the ruler at the larger secondary center.

LATE CLASSIC POLITICAL INSTABILITY AND INCREASED INDIVIDUALISM

Similar to the way in which the contemporary Maya of western Guatemala fight to preserve an independent sense of culture in the face of increasing globalism in present-day Central America, during the Late Classic period, smaller lowland Maya cities may have struggled to maintain their own identity. Towards the end of the Late Classic period, larger Maya cities began to ally or dominate smaller sites, to bolster their diminishing strength, as drought and deforestation may have increased competition to control the thinning supply of natural resources. The most drastic collapse of Classic Maya civilization transpired in the southern lowland region starting in the mid-8th century, when the institution of kingship and monumental art disappeared and a devastating loss of population occurred in this area. Maya warfare appears to have peaked just before the collapse, as each city pursued their own self-interests, fighting to obtain resources from each other for their own local benefit.

Nikolai Grube and Simon Martin have underscored that as the power of Yaxchilan's control over other nearby tertiary sites in the region, such as the Bonampak and Lacanha Kingdoms (encompassing Lixtunich) increased under the reign of Shield Jaguar III, the distinction between the kingdoms began to "fade with the emergence of a single paired emblem [twin royal titles] glyph."⁵¹ The emergence of shared emblem/royal titles glyphs between Yaxchilan and smaller cities first came about during the reign of Shield Jaguar II (AD 681-742), which may represent a sort of political transition and union between two sites. However, by the

⁵¹ Martin, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings*, 135.

time of Shield Jaguar III's reign, the paired emblem became a more common convention among Yaxchilan and other "allied" cities. Yet prior to the point of integration of smaller cities within the Yaxchilan realm, there may have been protest and resistance from some of the secondary or tertiary sites who wished to maintain a local sense of autonomy. To protect their own interests and minimize the resistance of smaller cities, Yaxchilan patrons would have sought to show themselves in alliance with important or threatening subsidiary polities.

Throughout history, many civilizations, typically less powerful polities, have used symbols and subtext to imply meaning that would inspire a sense of freedom or control to the sub-group (to empower the people, sometimes in anticipation of a revolt) without the ruling party's knowledge. In most cases these connoted themes can be traced to areas where there was political instability, which often resulted from dramatic shifts in power within the ruling classes. Within the Maya culture, the hierarchical artistic traditions of the elite remained prominent in Maya monumental works for hundreds of years. As a result, there may be only a few examples of art from the Late Classic lowland Maya region that show a subgroup's perspective. For instance, there are only a few works in other tertiary lowland Maya cities, such as La Pasadita, Pomona, and Bonampak, where tertiary elites, for the first time in the history of Maya art, were depicted in monumental works.

PATRONAGE

In the sacred traditions of Maya monumental practice, patrons sought to inform history, to depict the order of the cosmos, and to provide a template for prescribed ritual behavior, which mimicked the supernatural world. More importantly, as Linda Schele and David Freidel write, "to the Maya, it was not only what the text said that counted, but also how the scribe chose to say

it: and not only how it was said, but also where and on what it said.”⁵² As Schele and Freidel, pointed out with Maya art the role of patron was significant in the formation and interpretation of art works. The degree of innovation in the Kimbell Panel and the fact that the artist’s signature is depicted on this work indicate that the Maya scribe had more influence in the way that the subjects were represented. While Maya art, like the texts, was designed according to the perspective of one patron who had the power to dictate the commission of monuments, in the *Kimbell Panel* it seems as though the scribe exercised a considerable amount of control in emphasis and articulation of forms and subject matter. In most cases of Maya art, the winner’s side was the only voice recorded, but as we see with the *Kimbell Panel*, towards the end of the Late Classic period, artists began to increasingly represent the views of smaller parties.

The interpreting audience of scribal art was almost exclusively aristocratic, a point that illuminates the limited extent of the socio-political influence of such monuments in the Maya realm.⁵³ Moreover, in traditional Maya art (prior to the Late Classic period) scholars usually view the art object as something made to express community ideals, rather than the views of the individual, and these works were usually “intended to attract the powers of the supernatural rather than appeal to the particular psychological state felt by the artist and perhaps empathized with by the viewer.”⁵⁴

I argue, however, that the *Kimbell Panel* is an unusual example of a Maya monumental art work that discreetly shows the perspective of a tertiary patron towards the end of the Late Classic period, when the political power and legitimacy of larger cities came into question, and competition and warfare challenged the status quo. Following postcolonial or subaltern theory, I

⁵² Schele, *A Forest of Kings*, 55.

⁵³ Coe, *Art of the Maya Scribe*, 37.

⁵⁴ Tate, *Yaxchilan*, 30.

suspect that the people of Laxtunich tried to maintain an independent identity by using the artistic language of the more powerful Yaxchilan for their own purposes and self-aggrandizement.

MAYA SOCIAL STRUCTURE

From the mid-1980's, epigraphers began to recognize that monumental Maya sculpture not only depicted primary rulers and their immediate families, but also nobles of varying ranks.⁵⁵ As a result, scholars have begun to reassess the nature of political and social relations among the ancient Maya. The political organization of Maya kingdoms may be compared to the feudal state system, in which nobles "controlled the lands and resident vassals."⁵⁶ However, most scholars today view the political organization of the Maya as resembling the city-state, in which subordinate sites had obligations to its superordinate centers. The Maya also adhered to religious systems of organization in which they sought to replicate the order of the cosmos in their activities and environment.

In the lowland Maya region near the Usumacinta River, there are several examples of monumental sculpture depicting tertiary rulers at sites such as Piedras Negras, La Pasadita, Bonampak, and Pomona (see Fig. 3). This concentration or emphasis on secondary rulers thus reflects the region's politics and hierarchical organization. In the Late Classic period, Yaxchilan had reciprocal agreements with several Lacanha kingdoms (such as Laxtunich, north of Yaxchilan), the powerful secondary city of Bonampak, and the tertiary site La Pasadita, where Yaxchilan kings were portrayed on carved lintels. Yaxchilan rulers were also represented on some monuments at other secondary cities such as Piedras Negras, El Cayo, and the larger

⁵⁵ Schmidt, *Maya*, 324.

⁵⁶ Tate, *Yaxchilan*, 22.

primary center of Palenque commemorating their visits to those sites.⁵⁷ However, there is no convincing evidence for a division of the area into regional capitals.⁵⁸

During the Late Classic period, Yaxchilan made no mention of foreign lords in their monuments, and therefore did not seem to need to substantiate their political authority by referencing other alliances or affiliations.⁵⁹ They began to powerfully influence smaller cities, and the iconographic references to Yaxchilan became more abundant in smaller tertiary cities such as Laxtunich, La Pasadita, Bonampak, and Pomona.⁶⁰ During the Late Classic, it also appears as though Yaxchilan competed intensely with other large secondary Maya cities, such as Piedras Negras and El Cayo.⁶¹ Historians are not entirely clear on why conquest warfare intensified and alliances increased among the lowland Maya through the Late Classic period; however, in general most agree that they were fighting for scarce resources as the region became overpopulated.

LINTELS 1, 2, 3 AT LA PASADITA

Of particular interest to this study is the role of Shield Jaguar III and the king's relationship to the *sajal* in the *Kimbell Panel*. To better understand the relationship of the *sajal* and primary ruler from Yaxchilan (Shield Jaguar III) depicted in the panel, it is helpful to look at the nearby, better known and excavated tertiary site of La Pasadita that was also subject to Yaxchilan (located 8 km west of La Pasadita) and investigate similar sculptures that resemble the Kimbell Panel. The relationships between the tertiary ruler, Tilom, at La Pasadita and the secondary rulers, Bird Jaguar IV and Shield Jaguar III, at Yaxchilan appear to parallel the social

⁵⁷ Tate, *Yaxchilan*, 22.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁶⁰ Martin, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings*, 135.

⁶¹ Golden, *La Pasadita*, 24.

dynamic depicted in the Kimbell Panel from Laxtunich. La Pasadita, perhaps like Laxtunich, was controlled as a tertiary polity in a system of over-lordship, by the larger secondary kingdom Yaxchilan. Some of the monuments from this city that share similar features with the Kimbell Panel are Lintels 1, 2, 3.

Yaxchilan Rulers	Dates of Rulership
Shield Jaguar II	AD 681-742
Interregnum Period Ruler thought to be “Yoaat B’alam II,” Progenitor Jaguar II	AD 742-752
Bird Jaguar IV	AD 752-768
Shield Jaguar III	AD 769-800

Table 1. Dates of Rulership in Yaxchilan between AD 681-800.

Lintel 1 from La Pasadita (dated AD 759) depicts Bird Jaguar IV (who reigned over Yaxchilan from AD 752-768) receiving a captive from the secondary ruler of this site named Tilom (see Table 1). Tilom’s title is mentioned in the glyphic text above the offering bowl that he holds (Fig. 15). Tilom in *Lintel 1* wears similar adornments, such as a beaded helmet, ear spools, necklace, and footwear as the *sajal* in the Kimbell Panel. The *sajal* on the Kimbell Panel, however, is depicted wearing a caplet and shorter sarong that more closely resembles the clothing on Bird Jaguar IV in *Lintel 1*, thereby suggesting the *sajal*’s high status. Tilom is also holding an offering bowl in his left hand and an instrument in his right hand that resembles the mace that the Kimbell *sajal* holds in his left hand. On the right side of the lintel, Bird Jaguar IV is depicted in full frontal pose and dressed in royal regalia, holding a staff that appears to pierce the head of the captive and looking down on the captive. The organization of this panel, aside from the inclusion of a tertiary elite, adheres to traditional Maya representations of rulers, in which the ruler is shown with his torso frontal and his head in profile, in formal regalia, and on

the right side of the picture plane. The ruler is also depicted as the largest figure in the composition. Given the instability of Bird Jaguar IV's claims to the royal throne after a ten-year interregnum period, it makes sense that the ruler would more firmly assert his authority as the powerful ruler on the right side of the picture plane, to assert his power at the tertiary site of La Pasadita.

Lintel 2 from La Pasadita shows the period-ending celebration by Bird Jaguar IV and Tilom in AD 766 (Fig. 16). What is most interesting about this panel, formally speaking, is that the primary Yaxchilan ruler, although he is shown better dressed, is not depicted frontally and is shown on the left side of the panel (in contrast to *Lintel 1*), while the *sajal* is shown on the right. Both subjects are shown in profile and dressed in full royal regalia. As time progressed and the lowland Maya were confronted with increasing political instability, the power of Bird Jaguar IV was questioned more and more by Maya elites. By the end of his reign, traditional modes of representation appear to have been reconfigured to give *sajals* more power in their own depictions on local monuments. Such an acknowledgement of *sajals* in monumental art in this area reflects the increasing divisiveness among lowland polities. Based on the differences between *Lintel 1* and *Lintel 2*, I suspect that *Lintel 2* was patronized by the secondary ruler from La Pasadita.

Lintel 3 (no specific date) from La Pasadita depicts the *sajal* of La Pasadita, Tilom (who ruled AD 759-771), and Shield Jaguar III (who reigned over Yaxchilan from AD 769-800) although it is unclear whether or not Shield Jaguar III was the chief ruler of Yaxchilan at the time this monument was commissioned (Fig. 17).⁶² Tilom is depicted in profile on the left side of the composition, offering a beaded helmet and copal incense to the clearly superior enthroned ruler

⁶² Charles Golden, *La Pasadita Archaeological Project*, (FAMSI, 1999), 2.

(Shield Jaguar III) shown frontally on the right. Shield Jaguar III's clothing resembles the adornments shown on Shield Jaguar III in the *Kimbell Panel*. Also, with both the *Kimbell Panel* and Lintel 3, the rulers are shown wearing similar headdresses, jewelry, and pectoral shields. The organization of the composition of *Lintel 3*, however, is more traditional, with the ruler shown on the right, and the hierarchy of the figures is more implicitly depicted. Peter Mathews suspects that the artist of this relief was a craftsman from Yaxchilan and was also patronized by a ruler from Yaxchilan.⁶³

Looking at Lintels 1, 2, and 3 at La Pasadita, we can observe how the art of this city reflected the changing socio-political environment of the Late Classic lowland Maya. Following the actions of these monuments we see a transformation in representation, in which a primary ruler, Bird Jaguar IV was moved from his traditional location on the right in earlier works, and placed on the left in the later work, giving the *sajal*, Tilom, the more prominent location in the composition. Moreover, during times of political stress, it appears as though rulers were forced to ally with smaller kingdoms, and seemingly the price of such an alliance, was often shared power and standing among elites, as is evidenced with the depiction of shared authority in *Lintel 2*.

All three of the above mentioned lintels from La Pasadita depict a *sajal* in a prominent location in relation to the ruler. In addition, it appears as though the three lintels show different artistic approaches to the depiction of the subjects. Perhaps the changing methods of representation reflect the shifting political beliefs of the people of La Pasadita and Yaxchilan. Following the cycle of artistic representation at La Pasadita, in accordance with my view that reversed imagery in Maya art may represent the perspective of a tertiary patron, I would argue

⁶³ Mathews, "Tilom," *Who's Who*, 1.

that at La Pasadita there was a moment in time when the rulership of Bird Jaguar IV was less stable, and it may have been that during this time the *sajal* at La Pasadita more boldly represented himself on the prominent *right*-side of the composition as in Lintel 2.

In the majority of the above-mentioned monuments at La Pasadita, Bird Jaguar IV is depicted, though in a few instances his successor Shield Jaguar III is also shown. The number of monuments dedicated to Bird Jaguar IV at Yaxchilan and other surrounding sites is probably indicative of his struggle for the throne and his efforts to prove his political legitimacy after a 10 year interregnum.⁶⁴ To prove himself as a potent ruler of Yaxchilan, Bird Jaguar IV first needed to publicly validate his rule, and then second to cement his relationships with those supporters who helped him to the throne, to ensure their continued support.⁶⁵ There may have been an abundance of monuments depicting both Bird Jaguar IV and Shield Jaguar III in the Yaxchilan realm because these rulers were facing opposition to their claims of divine kingship; therefore, they had to assert their power otherwise, by showing their strength as warrior kings.

The enthroned lord on the *Kimbell Panel*, Shield Jaguar III, the son of Bird Jaguar IV of Yaxchilan, ruled for approximately thirty-one years, and it was recorded on the hieroglyphic staircase at Yaxchilan that during three years of his reign, he captured twenty opponents.⁶⁶ The majority of Shield Jaguar III's rulership was spent in combat. In addition, Shield Jaguar III deliberately sought alliances with Bonampak, La Pasadita, and perhaps Laxtunich to gain support (labor supply and agricultural subsidy) during his reign when heightened tensions with kingdoms such as Piedras Negras had reached a climax and warfare had increased markedly. As Carolyn Tate comments, after so much political turmoil in the area around the central Usumacinta, it is

⁶⁴ Schele, *The Blood of Kings*, 226.

⁶⁵ Golden, *La Pasadita*, 2.

⁶⁶ Martin, *Chronicle of Maya Kings*, p. 63.

not surprising that Shield Jaguar II's stelae were damaged.⁶⁷ Moreover, it is also important to highlight that Yaxchilan sculpture and text are known for their numerous depictions of war related images. Based on this tendency, Late Classic Yaxchilan's (as at other Maya sites during this time) artistic programs may be better understood as more overtly political and less sacred. The majority of art works commissioned at the end of this period, throughout the entire Maya realm, were used to legitimize and reinforce the warrior status of the ruler and were less about the sacred origins of the kingdom, as they were in the past.

During the Late Classic period, auxiliary sites and tertiary elites began to erect glyphic monuments for the first time.⁶⁸ Yet, it is only in the western Maya lowlands, in particular the Usumacinta Basin, that this new socio-political standing was expressed in text with the advent of a new noble title: *sajal*.⁶⁹ The *Kimbell Panel* shows how the Maya interpreted the role of *sajal* and began to reconstruct a new paradigm for representation of elite subjects. The *Kimbell Panel* is particularly interesting viewed in light of the context of its late date of AD 785 and lowland political environment.⁷⁰ The period around AD 800 marked an era of drought and downfall for the majority of lowland Maya civilizations.⁷¹ Before this time, leaders appear to have increased the number of monuments that they produced, perpetuating a sort of monumental art competition with one other to obtain a larger stake in the political system and a bigger claim on resources.

As warfare continued to threaten the independence and identity of certain lowland kingdoms, the artistic programs at sites near Yaxchilan became more complex and multivalent. Moreover, traditional modes of representation were turned upside down. The reversed glyphs

⁶⁷ Tate, *Yaxchilan*, 139.

⁶⁸ Fash and Stuart, 1992.

⁶⁹ Golden, *La Pasadita*, 12.

⁷⁰ Tate, *Yaxchilan*, 139.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

and inverted positioning of the ruler and noble depicted on the *Kimbell Panel* in many ways exemplifies the new experimental nature of lowland Maya art in the years preceding the collapse and later abandonment of these cities. The variation may therefore be attributed to each kingdom's struggle to maintain a unique identity when larger polities may have threatened their individual independence. Throughout the history of Maya art, experimentation and innovation in artistic practice was very rare. Maya patrons typically commissioned artworks that adhered to a system of standardization that was supposed to reflect the ideals and beliefs of a city. In general, the Maya preferred cohesion in their society and art. As we see with the *Kimbell Panel* and other works from the Late Classic Usumacinta region, however, more traditional programs for artistic production began to change.

III. SIGNIFICANCE OF REVERSED ORIENTATIONS

The reversed glyphs and subverted positioning of the secondary ruler and tertiary ruler may best be explained by the prospect that the panel was created by a provincial patron wishing to promote himself as the protagonist of the events described in the glyphic texts and pictorial representation. Linda Schele and Mary Miller suggest that the reversed glyphs on the Kimbell Panel are inscribed in reverse order, from right to left, perhaps to name the depicted ruler without emphasizing his authority.⁷² Another interpretation suggests that the glyphs are “written in reverse to follow the desired reading order from noble to master.”⁷³ While both of the aforementioned readings are plausible explanations, I find that neither of these understandings have a precedent in the history of Maya art. In order to truly make an accurate statement about the meaning of iconography and glyphic texts, a close comparative analysis of various works with similar features is necessary. Unfortunately, because of the rarity of reversed imagery and glyphic texts in Maya art, there are few examples to compare. Furthermore, there are few other known works that closely resemble the *Kimbell Panel*.

LINTEL 25 AT YAXCHILAN

The nearest comparison thus far to the *Kimbell Panel* may be *Lintel 25* from Yaxchilan Temple 23 (The house of Lady K’ab’ al Xook) that depicts the principal wife of Shield Jaguar II (Fig. 18 a-b). *Lintel 25* depicts the aftermath of a bloodletting ritual by Lady Xook in which she becomes entranced and sees a vision of Shield Jaguar II emerging from the maw of a serpent-centipede. The reversed text in *Lintel 25* is not very well understood, nor do scholars know the intended audience for this sculpture. Was the sculpture meant to communicate with an elite

⁷² Schele, *The Blood of Kings*, 226.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 30.

and/or a supernatural priestly audience? The location of the monument, within the House of Lady K'ab al Xook, may provide a clue to answering the question of who the patron and audience for this sculpture might have been. The patron of this work was likely Lady Xook, who sought to be depicted with equivalent authority with her consort, Shield Jaguar II.

Lintels were frequently used at Yaxchilan, where they recorded dynastic events with inscriptions, similarly abbreviated as in the *Kimbell Panel*. Lintels were set horizontally in low doorways, which are almost impossible to see unless one crouches or lies in the entrance.⁷⁴ As Linda Schele points out, “one assumes that their placement, dedication, and existence as dynastic statements at the transition point between an outside more secular world and inside, more sacred world was of primary importance.”⁷⁵ The *Kimbell Panel*, while it is frequently referred to as a “panel” was probably in all actuality a lintel. Its rectangular shape and dimensions (as compared to other lintels in the lowland region) suggest that it was a lintel, which would have been placed within the inner side of a doorway that opened directly onto the exterior.⁷⁶

Yaxchilan *Lintel 25*, like the *Kimbell Panel*, should be read as a private monument, which most likely would not have been viewed by the public, but by only a small number of select elites, who were believed to have ancestral connections with the creator gods, and allowed to enter her temple. An alternative interpretation about the reversed glyphs may be associated with Maya beliefs about the supernatural. Mesoamerican scholars agree that Maya kings often presented themselves as nodes of communication and exchange between the supernatural and

⁷⁴ *In Pursuit of Quality*, 126.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

human realms.⁷⁷ Therefore, viewing the reversed imagery and glyphs as having supernatural connotations may not be farfetched. As Joel Palka suggests,

...some reversed images in Maya and Mesoamerican art may represent either ritual reversals, events associated with the supernatural and the Otherworld, or scenes reflected in ceremonial mirrors. Direction of movement, behaviors and actions, symbolism, and hand use are often reversed during sacred rituals and for invoking the supernatural ancestors, and death in many cultures, including those of indigenous North America and, specifically of Mesoamerica.⁷⁸

In this way the mirrored glyphs were meant to communicate with the gods in the otherworld and mirrors were necessary for showing the reversed supernatural realm and the contradictions of the otherworld.⁷⁹

Applying this interpretation to the Kimbell Panel and Yaxchilan Lintel 25 helps to unscramble some of the contradictory or puzzling features of these works. Viewing the Kimbell Panel as a mirror image changes the meaning of the texts and imagery (Fig. 19). The monument mirrored corrects the reversed texts which name Shield Jaguar III and shows the ruler as right-oriented and the secondary ruler on the left. The same effect occurs when the text of Lintel 25 is mirrored (Fig.20); the glyphic texts, which name Shield Jaguar II are reversed to place emphasis on the male ruler, instead of his wife. In addition, Yaxchilan Lintels 24 and 26 from the same building, the House of Lady K'ab al Xook, show reversed figural orientation in which the male ruler, Shield Jaguar II is depicted on the left (Figs. 21 and 22). Interestingly the female subject, Lady K'ab al Xook, is also referred to as *sajal*, which indicates that this was used to designate not only male governors and war leaders, but also certain female elites.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Schele, *The Blood of Kings*, 143.

⁷⁸ Palka, "Left/Right Symbolism," 431.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 431.

⁸⁰ Schmidt, *Maya*, 236.

MIRROR IMAGES

This aspect of mirroring appears to be a relatively common convention in Yaxchilan artistic programs, in which monuments were commissioned by the subordinate noble to glorify their own activities and/or depict a reversal of Maya hierarchical roles.⁸¹ Moreover, mirrored imagery may have been associated with mirror ceremonies in which observers watching the ritual reversal could “also channel sacred power” to gain greater religious knowledge about life mirrored in the sacred realm.⁸² The Maya believed that mirrors gave priests access to the Otherworld.⁸³ Mirror ceremonies essentially made ritual acts more powerful and meaningful and impressed upon the people the divine sanctions for proper behavior.

In a similar way the contrived movements of the *Kimbell Panel* may have also reflected the ritual reversals that were enacted in sacred ceremonies and reminded the viewer of proper conduct. Most importantly the reversed imagery made the subjects appear more powerful, as they were shown to be in closer contact with the sacred realm. Interaction with the sacred world would have also reinforced the depicted ruler’s legitimacy, which may have been a necessary pronouncement during the unstable and turbulent wartimes of the Late Classic period. If the *Kimbell Panel* is an example of mirror writing, the reflected images, and left/right reversals may have also highlighted the special sacred abilities of the scribe/artist.⁸⁴ In several depictions of supernatural scribes, the subjects are depicted left-handed, to mark their reversed or opposite abilities in the Otherworld.

Based on the similarities of the *Kimbell Panel*, with regard to the reversed imagery and texts, it is reasonable to suggest that the panel may have come from a patron who was familiar

⁸¹ Palka, “Left/Right Symbolism,” 436.

⁸² Ibid., p. 431.

⁸³ Taube, “The Iconography of Mirrors,” 172.

⁸⁴ Palka, “Left/Right Symbolism,” 431.

with Lintels 24, 25, and 26 and their reversed glyphs/imagery or the ideas behind these works. Moreover, it seems probable that these sculptures were made by artists who sought to purposefully depict the subject matter in an ambiguous manner to less conspicuously depict the *sajal*'s authority. The subject of patronage also takes on a wider meaning when the specific role of the tertiary figure depicted is brought into question. For example, could this person have been both the *sajal* and scribe? The *Kimbell Panel* is also ambiguous in the sense that the panel shown in reverse (or mirrored) gives the enthroned ruler, from the larger site of Yaxchilan, more authority in this depiction. Therefore, the panel appears to be purposefully arranged in a way that allows the subject matter to be interpreted to show both elite figures, the Yaxchilan ruler (on the upper left) and the *sajal* (the secondary ruler, on the right), with equal agency.

CONCLUSION

The façade on the House of the Bakabs in the south side plaza at Copan (a Maya site located in the Copan Valley, much further south from Yaxchilan in the present day country of Honduras) reflects the highly revered noble status attributed to a scribe at this site (Figs. 23a-b). According to Michael Coe and Justin Kerr,⁸⁵ on the façade, to either side of the central doorway, there are now-headless busts each holding a conch-shell inkpot in the left hand, within the framing jaws of a monstrous serpent, which they argue must be the ophidian avatar of the great scribal god Itsamna (Fig. 11). The honor of patronage for this building project goes to the superior Copan ruler, Yax Pac, as is made clear on the scribal bench on the façade. However, despite the primary credit given to the Copan ruler for patronage, the prominent scribe mentioned on the central texts of this building, Mak Chanal, must have played a significant role in the social politics at Copan and perhaps was even second in command to the primary ruler, Yax Pac.

Yax Pac was one of the last documented rulers of Copan before the city collapsed. Evidence of a growing elite class among the local nobility at Copan, in which many royals were commissioning large-scale building projects (e.g. the House of the Bakabs), shows that this city may have overstressed the labor supply of peasants, who were already struggling with the shortages that occurred as a result of deforestation and drought. The growing prominence of *sajals* and other elite noble classes (including scribes) put pressure on rulers and challenged traditional ranks of hierarchy. It is also interesting to note that the same tendency to mass produce monumental art transpired toward the collapse of the lowland Maya in the areas such as Yaxchilan.

⁸⁵ Coe, *Art of the Maya Scribe*, 102.

As we see in the *Kimbell Panel*, the common understanding about the close relationship of text to image may be more divergent than scholars originally suspected. As a result, Late Classic lowland Maya art may be viewed as creating a sort of chasm between the traditionally rigid adherence of historical record and imagery. In other words, the imagery in the Kimbell Panel should not be interpreted as a mere illustration of the historical events in the text, but rather as a more complex example of the multivalence of Late Classic Maya art. Unfortunately, much of the symbolism of the Maya art is lost because it must be interpreted on the basis of their beliefs about cosmology and traditional thought, for which there is little evidence. And even though many symbolic associations may be explained according to our present knowledge of Maya social history and cosmology, in many other cases the evidence can lead us to cosmological or ceremonial combinations which we can not fully understand or appreciate.

Viewing the *Kimbell Panel*, however, as it is framed within the larger socio-political context of the Maya in this time period, reveals that as competition among Maya cities intensified, patrons and artists sought out new ways to reinforce their legitimacy, while at the same time they had to create works that were seemingly more diplomatic. The subjects depicted in the *Kimbell Panel* needed to be represented in a purposefully ambiguous manner, showing the two elite subjects with reciprocal power or status, so that the monument, if mirrored, would also please the audience at Yaxchilan.



Figure 1. *The Presentation of Captives to a Maya Ruler*, AD 785, limestone.
Image reproduced by the The Kimbell Art Museum at www.kimbellart.org

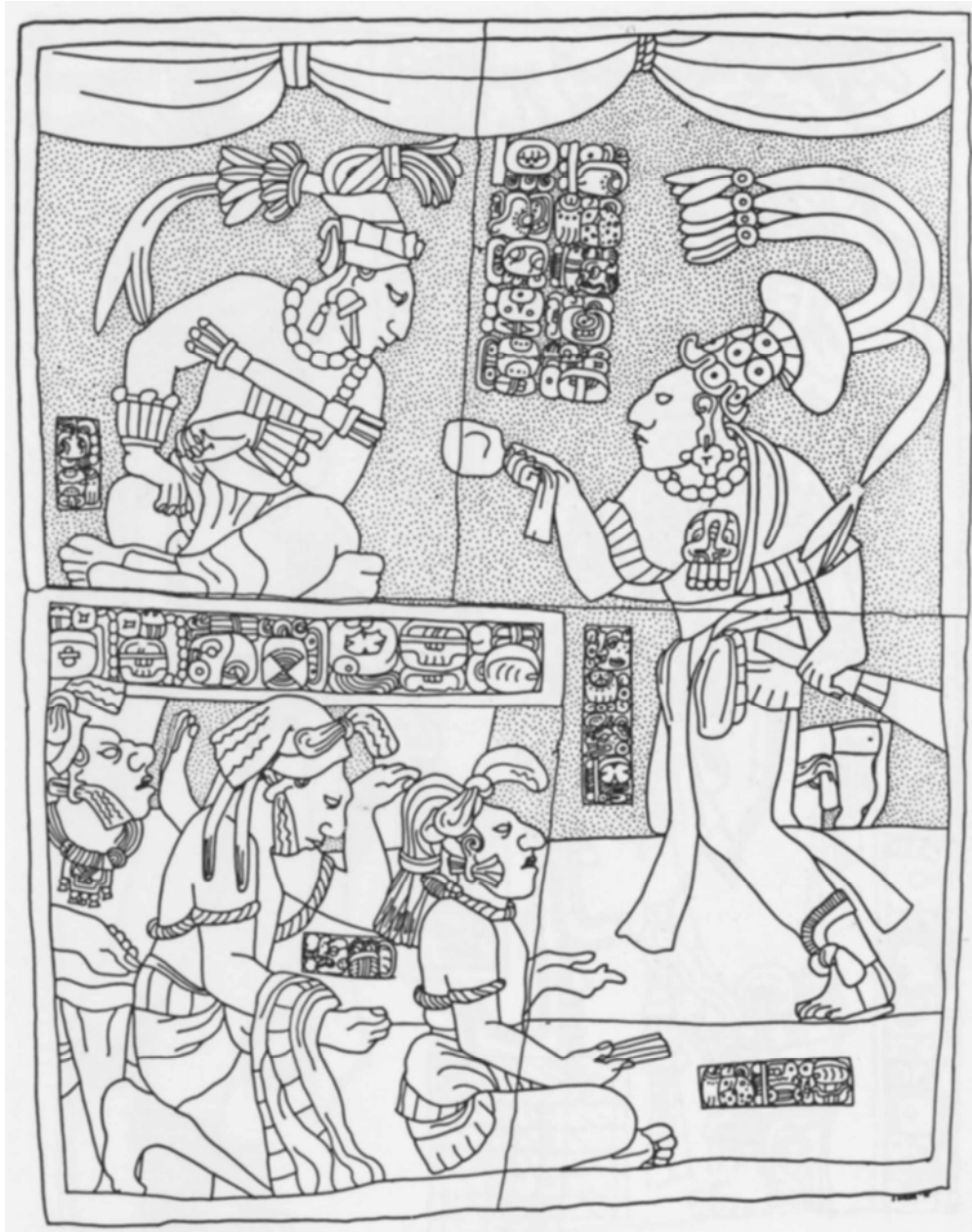


Figure 2. *Presentation of Captives to a Maya Ruler.*

Drawing by Linda Schele.

Reproduced in *Blood of Kings*, p.96



Figure 3. Map of Maya Realm
Image reproduced in *Maya*, p. 48.

(*Kimbell Panel* Inscriptions. Drawing by Linda Schele. Reproduced in *Blood of Kings*, p. 114).

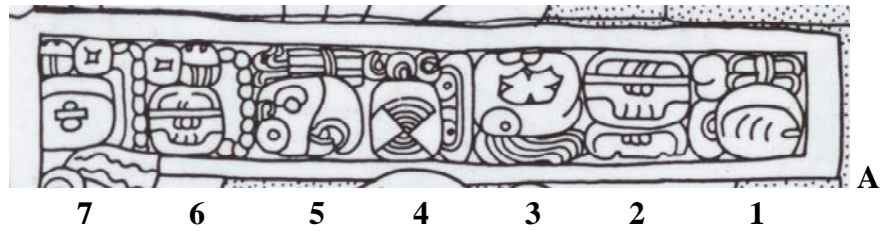


Figure 4.
 Glyphic Texts: A1-7
 The texts are read in reverse from right to left.



Figure 5.
 Glyphic texts: B1-5 on the left and C1-5 on the right.
 The texts are read from left to right (e.g. B1 to C1 to B2 to C2).



D

Figure 6.
Glyphic Texts: D1-4



E

Figure 7.
Glyphic Texts: E1-2



F

Figure 8.
Glyphic Texts: F1-3



G

Figure 9.
Glyphic Texts: G1-2



Figure 10a. Pawahtun teaching mathematics, wearing a netted headcloth with a brush pen.
Image reproduced at www.kimbell.org.



Figure 10b. Ruler-scribe shown on 8th century vase wearing the stick bundle tied on his Pawahtun netted head cloth.

Image reproduced in *Art of the Maya Scribe*, p. 72.



Figure 11. Itsamna emerging from serpent maw.
Image reproduced in *Art of the Maya Scribe*, p.121.



Figure12. *Lintel 16* from Yaxchilan.
Image reproduced at www.britishmuseum.org



Figure 13. Enthroned Tikal king with his wife; both figures are wearing scribal stick bundles in their headdresses

Image reproduced in *Art of the Maya Scribe*, p. 46.

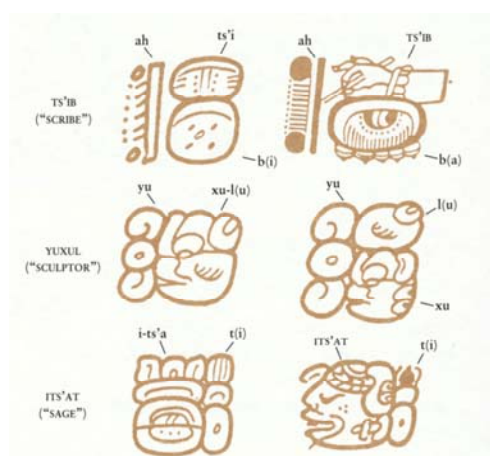


Figure 14. "Yuxul" imagery.

Image reproduced in *Art of the Maya Scribe*, p. 140.

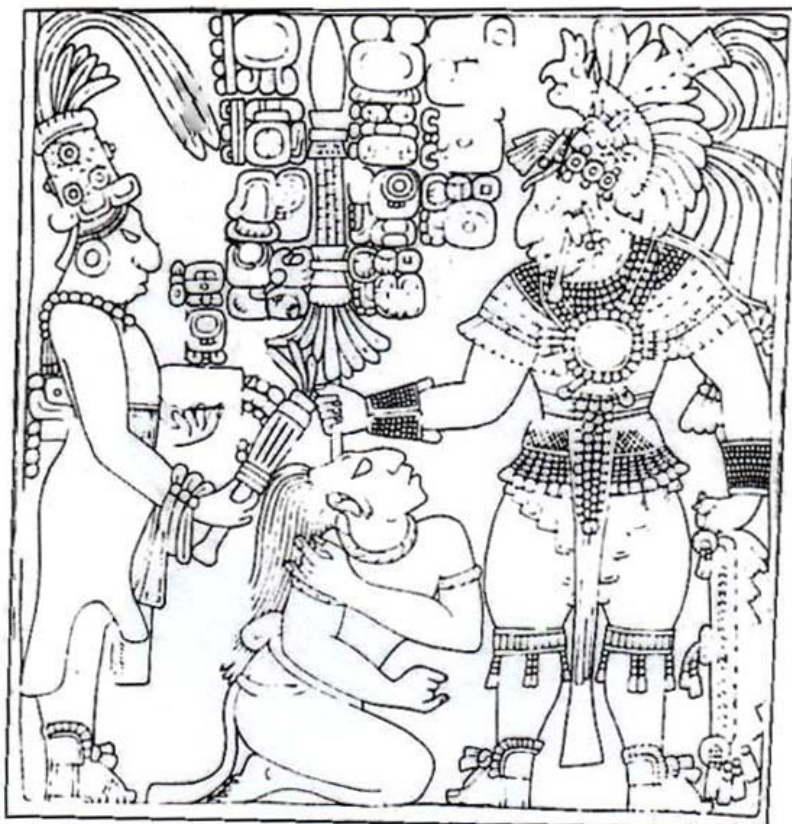


Figure 15. *Lintel 1* from La Pasadita.

Drawing by Stephen Houston

Image reproduced in *La Pasadita Archaeological Project*, www.famsi.org

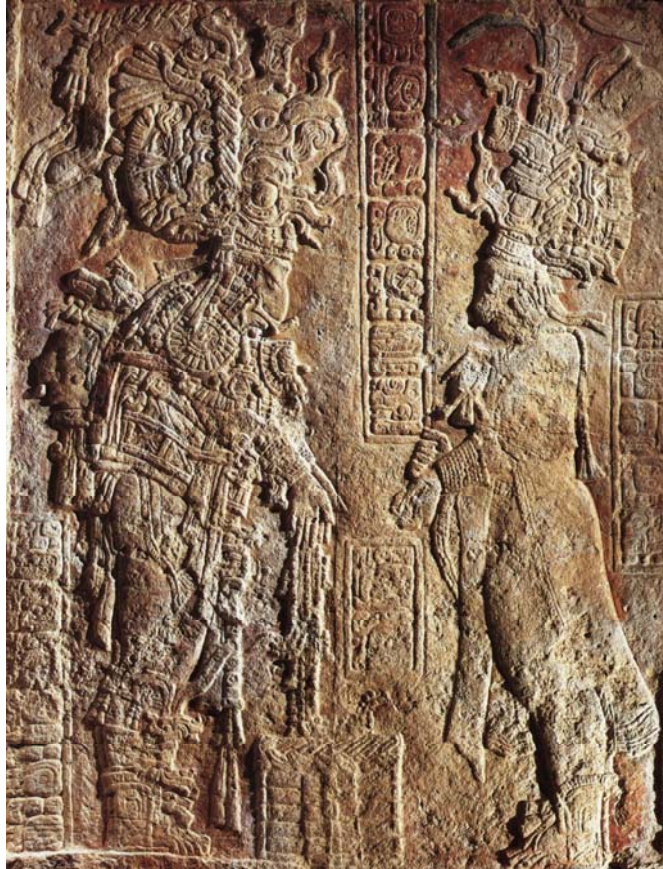


Figure 16. *Lintel 2* from La Pasadita.
Image reproduced at www.famsi.org

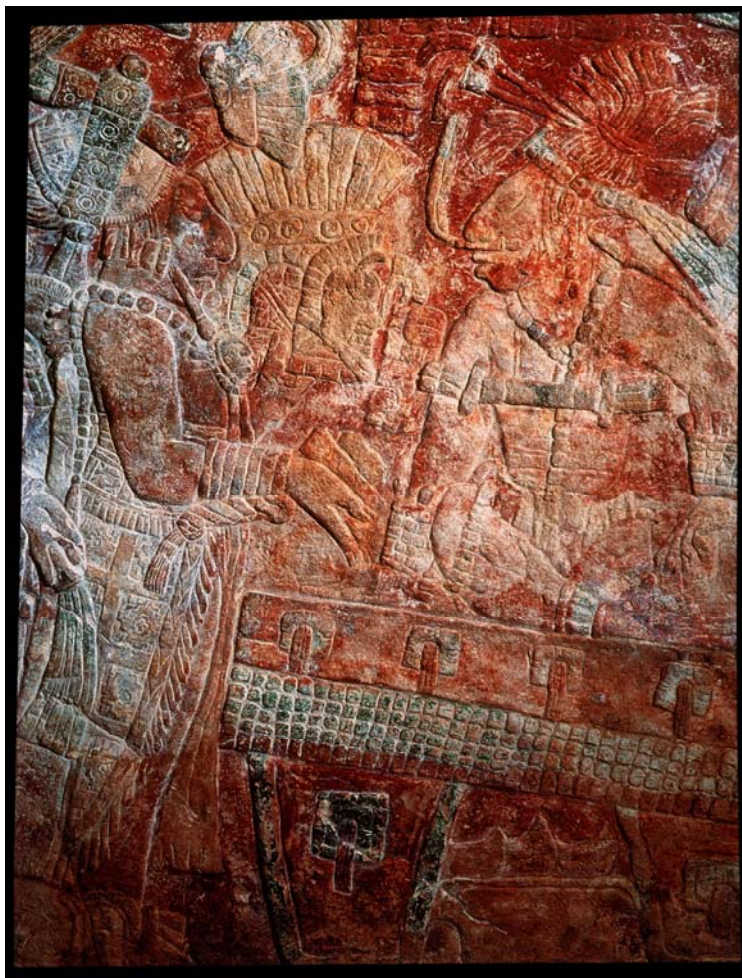


Figure 17. *Lintel 3* from La Pasadita.
Image reproduced at www.famsi.org



Figure 18a. *Lintel 25* from Yaxchilan.
Image reproduced in *Blood of Kings*, p. 26.

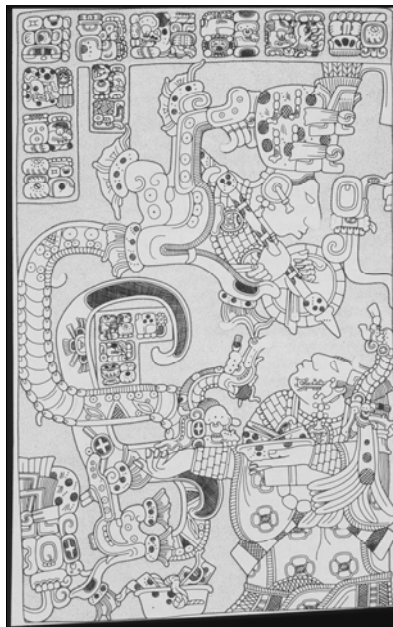


Figure 18b. *Lintel 25*
Drawing by Linda Schele
Image reproduced in *Blood of Kings*, p. 28.

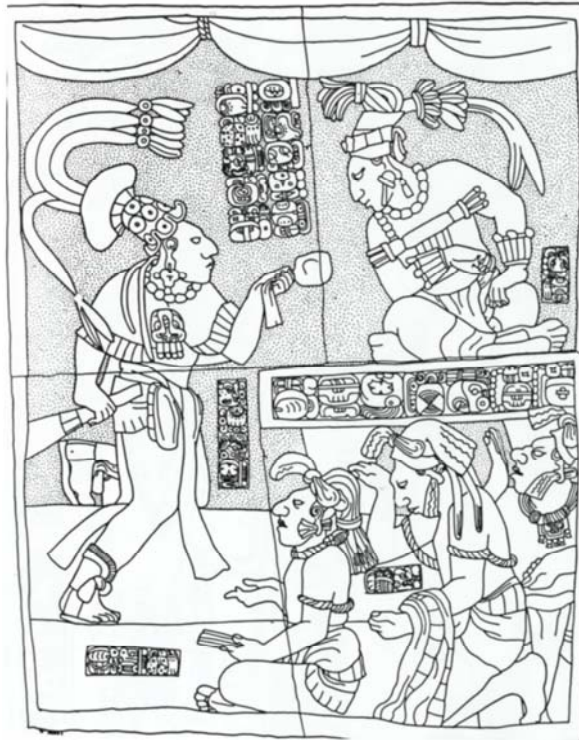


Figure 19. *Kimbell Panel* viewed in reverse.
Drawing by Linda Schele

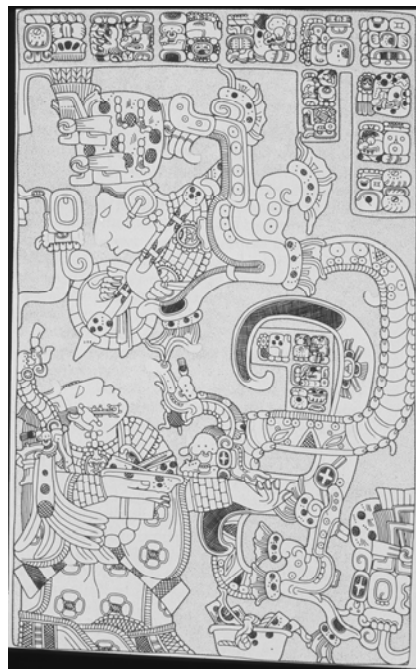


Figure 20. *Lintel 25* from Yaxchilan viewed in reverse.
Drawing by Linda Schele



Figure 21. *Lintel 26* from Yaxchilan.
Image reproduced in *Courtly Art of the Ancient Maya*, p. 37.



Figure 22. *Lintel 24* from Yaxchilan.
Image reproduced in *Courtly Art of the Ancient Maya*, p. 37.

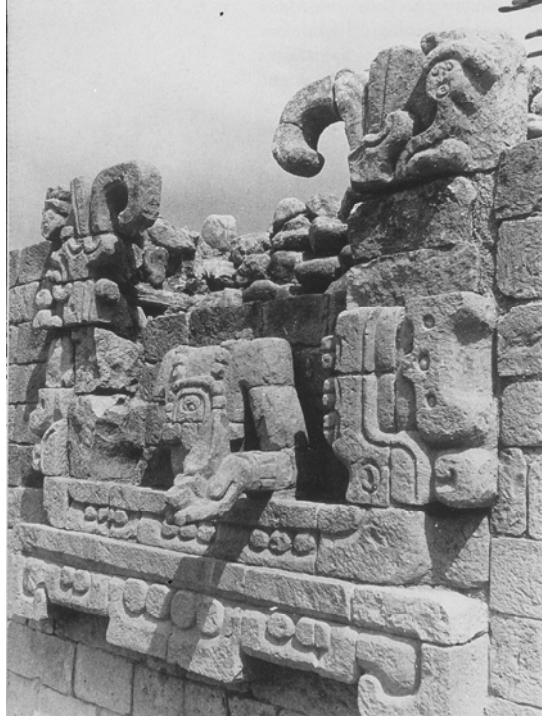


Figure 23a. Façade on the “House of the Bakabs” in the south side plaza at Copan.
Image reproduced in *Chronicle of Maya Kings*, p. 201.

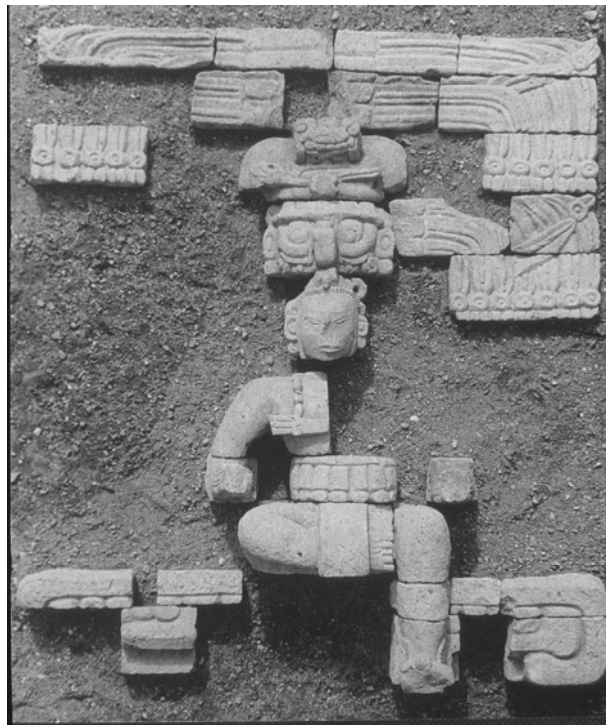


Figure 23b. Detail of a scribe sculpture from the façade on the House of the Bakabs.
Image reproduced in *Chronicle of Maya Kings*, p. 201.

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ABSTRACT

The Kimbell Art Museum's carved limestone panel, entitled *The Presentation of Captives to a Maya Ruler* (hereafter called the Kimbell Panel) and dated around AD 785, is a fine example of the complex multivalence of Late Classic (AD 600-800) Maya art. The panel depicts the presentation of captives (3 Figures, possibly scribes, in the lower register) to a Yaxchilan ruler (upper left) by a sajal (a tertiary military chief on the right). This panel is unusual because of the nontraditional arrangement of the figures. Typically in Maya art, rulers are depicted on the right side, the designated location for chief rulers, which indicates power and perhaps religious authority. In this piece the sajal, a tertiary leader, can be viewed as right oriented; a situation that in a more direct way honors this noble over the chief Yaxchilan ruler. Earlier scholars who have examined this work relied on a close correspondence between the text and image, assuming an explicit relationship between the two. Yet, in many ways the imagery of the panel defies precise historical interpretation based exclusively on a direct correlation of the glyphs and imagery.

The text of the *Kimbell Panel* describes a historical transaction, the presentation of captives from a tertiary elite to a secondary ruler. Likewise, the inscription indicates a hierarchical relationship between the two elite figures. The imagery, however, conveys more ambiguity about this political event and, accordingly, the politics of the region. Therefore, to understand the meaning of the panel, one must not evaluate the imagery as just an illustration of the textual record, but as conveying a different meaning than the inscription. The imagery has embedded more complex connotations about the turbulent politics of the Maya in the lowland Usumacinta region.