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research ARTICLE

The Relationship of the Maya and Teotihuacan: A Mesoamerican Mystery

—Keith Ferguson (Edited by Ian Pajer-Rogers)

Located in the jungle of El Peten, Guatemala, the ancient Maya site of San Bartolo features amazing two-millennia-year-old pyramid temples, writings, and murals. In 2005 I spent four months at a field school in San Bartolo studying archaeological techniques and unlocking some of the mystery of ancient Maya culture under the guidance of Dr. Bill Saturno. Of great interest to me was the puzzle surrounding the possible connections between certain Maya sites and a powerful city in central Mexico known as Teotihuacan. My research into this topic formed the basis of my senior thesis, which focused on a classic Mesoamerican subject: the nature of the relationship between the Maya and Teotihuacan. Here I will share with you my observations and findings.

Ancient Relationships

During the Early Classic period (A.D. 250-450), the Maya of Central America flourished, with their population reaching a peak during the Late Classic period (A.D. 450-700). They inhabited sites in southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and western Honduras. Unlike the Aztecs of central Mexico during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Maya were not an empire under the rule of a single king. They were divided into many kingdoms and would often engage in warfare and trade with one another.

The Maya also interacted with other societies in Central America during the Early Classic period. One such civilization was located in central Mexico, west of the Maya region, at a site known as Teotihuacan. Even before most Maya sites had been established, Teotihuacan had established itself as a dynamic cultural center. Material culture, including architecture, ceramics, art, hieroglyphics inscriptions, and other artifacts found at Early Classic Maya sites, clearly reveals a connection between Teotihuacan and the Maya. However, the presence of central Mexican material culture at Maya sites has raised more questions than it has answers about the relationship that existed between the Maya and the inhabitants of Teotihuacan.

David Stuart, a leading Maya expert, suggests that there are two possible scenarios to explain the interaction between the Maya and Teotihuacan. The *externalist perspective* portrays Teotihuacan as a dominant center that forced its culture onto the Maya region by conquering various sites. The *internalist perspective* proposes that the Maya were active participants in their relationship with Teotihuacan and they willingly appropriated central Mexican art and ideas for their own purposes (Stuart, 2000). I hoped that considering the interaction between the Maya and Teotihuacan in three distinct categories—cultural, political and economic—might help to clarify the two sites' relationship.

A cultural relationship may occur when certain imagery and ideas are adopted by a group, such as the Maya's adoption of Teotihuacan cultural imagery and ideas, which can be seen in the Maya's architecture and art styles. A political relationship may occur when one group assumes the identity of another in order to advance itself politically. This can be seen in the Maya's adoption of Teotihuacan war imagery to assume a central Mexican identity and then use this identity to further their political ambitions. An economic relationship may form simply by the exchange of physical goods and resources, evidence of which exists between the Maya and Teotihuacan. In this context I examined four Maya sites—Kaminaljuyu, Copan, Tikal, and Balberta—to better understand Maya-Teotihuacan interaction. Taking an internalist perspective, I ultimately concluded that the Maya were independent from Teotihuacan rule and had affable relations with this central Mexican site.

Evidence of a Cultural Relationship

Kaminaljuyu is located southeast of Teotihuacan in the highlands of southern Guatemala. The material evidence at Kaminaljuyu suggests that its Maya inhabitants developed a cultural relationship with the inhabitants of central Mexico. Objects discovered at the site indicate that Teotihuacan artistic elements were adopted and then incorporated into buildings and ceramics to create a fusion of two cultures. Evidence of the central Mexican architectural style known as *talud-tablero*, as well as ceramics and stone material from a Teotihuacan source, was found in the archaeological record of Kaminaljuyu and dates to A.D. 200-550 (Laporte, 2003).

Some scholars have argued that the pyramid temples at Kaminaljuyu were built by militaristic Teotihuacanos who traveled there and conquered the site (Kidder et al., 1946; Sanders and Price, 1968). However, the central Mexican architecture at Kaminaljuyu does not completely conform to the principles used in Teotihuacan. The Maya may have deliberately chosen to include only certain central Mexican elements while leaving out others for their architectural program. This incomplete emulation of *talud-tablero* architectural style demonstrates the borrowing of Teotihuacan culture.

It is also important to note that central Mexican ceramics were present at Kaminaljuyu long before the first *talud-tablero* structure. One would expect Teotihuacan ceramics and architecture to arrive simultaneously if brought by a military invasion. However, the construction phases of pyramid temples, known as Mound A and Mound B, demonstrate that Teotihuacan architecture was gradually incorporated into their structures.

The earliest phases of Mounds A and B were built in local Maya fashion. The mounds consisted of a succession of building stages, one structure built over the other. The earliest structures would be found inside with the most recent on the outside. The original structures of Mounds A and B consisted of earthen platforms with shrines erected over burials. The ensuing buildings had a single large *talud* (inclined slope) but without a *tablero* (horizontal rise), and stairs flanked by balustrades but lacking a finial block. According to Juan Pedro Laporte (2003), Early Classic pyramids at Teotihuacan had pairs of *taludes*, framed *tableros*, and stairs with balustrades capped with finial blocks. The two final phases of Mounds A and B, however, conformed even more to the architectural principles employed at Teotihuacan by adding a framed *tablero* on all sides as well as using *piedrin*, a material made from ground stone and water used as a protective coat on pyramids (Braswell, 2003). From studying the chronological construction phases of Mounds A and B, one can see a slow progression from Maya to Teotihuacan architecture, though not a complete transformation. The result is a hybrid pyramid with the characteristics of two cultures.

The burial goods of Mounds A and B also illuminate our understanding of Kaminaljuyu's relationship to Teotihuacan. The ceramics found in the twelve burials within Mounds A and B can be misleading. Most of them look like cylindrical tripod vessels from Teotihuacan, but based on paste analysis, only eight out of hundreds of ceramic vessels could be traced to those produced at Teotihuacan (Foias cited in Braswell, 2003).

The manner in which vessels were arranged within the mounds is also significant. The tripod vessels and cream pitchers in the Kaminaljuyu tombs are often found in pairs, something rarely seen in Teotihuacan burials. This implies that Maya mortuary practices, even though using central Mexican style ceramics, had not been influenced by a Teotihuacan invasion. Another burial good connecting the Maya highland site to central Mexico is the green Pachuca obsidian found with the entombed individuals. There have been eighty-five pieces of green obsidian sourced to Pachuca, Hidalgo, located north of Teotihuacan. This could be evidence of trade but perhaps should not be given too much importance because the Maya of Kaminaljuyu had their own obsidian source to exploit at nearby El Chayal.

By examining the Teotihuacan-Kaminaljuyu relationship in this cultural context, the architecture and ceramics at Kaminaljuyu clearly show a diffusion of cultural styles from Teotihuacan to the Maya highland site. In addition, the gradual incorporation of such foreign elements discredits the theory of a sudden militaristic intrusion of Kaminaljuyu by a group from Teotihuacan, further reinforcing the existence of a cultural relationship between the two.

Evidence of a Political Relationship

Situated in western Honduras, Copan is an important Maya center over one thousand kilometers from Teotihuacan. Until recently the majority of scholars believed that a Copan king named K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' was a Teotihuacan vassal sent to govern the Honduras site in A.D. 426. Although his origins are still debated by Mesoamerican scholars, the idea that Yax K'uk' Mo' was an important monarch is based on an interpretation of Copan's historical and archaeological record. However, based on my interpretation of the evidence, I argue that he was a Maya individual and that he may have been a catalyst for a political relationship with Teotihuacan.

There are many examples throughout Copan where Yax K'uk' Mo' is wearing typical Teotihuacan dress. For example, Altar Q, a stone monument dedicated to the kings of Copan, depicts him wearing *Tlaloc* eye-goggles (Teotihuacan war goggles made from shells) and holding a war serpent shield in his right hand. However, portraits like this one were made well after his reign and cannot be assumed to be completely accurate.

The Hunal structure, a small building in Copan, is the only monument commissioned by Yax K'uk' Mo' that has Teotihuacan connotations. Since all his other buildings were constructed in Maya styles, one could assume he was Maya in origin. Strontium isotope analysis done on the remains of the king indicate that he grew up within the Maya area but outside of Copan, demonstrating that Yax K'uk' Mo' was not a Teotihuacano. I argue that all of the references showing Yax K'uk' Mo' in association with central Mexican imagery result from his traveling to Teotihuacan at some point in his adult life as an important political figure.

Because Yax K'uk' Mo' was not a Copan native, he had no connections to the royal lineage there. One can surmise that although he could not become king through bloodline, Yax K'uk' Mo' was potentially an important political figure among the elite class in the Maya area and Teotihuacan. To position himself as a candidate for

the kingship, he could have maintained amiable political ties with the central Mexican site and assumed an intimidating central Mexican identity by borrowing its war imagery. Through this, and by marrying a native Copan woman, he may have found a legitimate way to propel himself to the Copan throne. All of the central Mexican-style objects at Copan made post Yax K'uk' Mo' could be tributes to Teotihuacan imagery that made his political endeavor possible.

A similar story occurred at Tikal, in the Maya lowlands of northern Guatemala, in A.D. 378. Tikal's archaeological data possibly points to a political connection with Teotihuacan. Externalists have argued that Tikal was invaded by Teotihuacan the same day that a Tikal king, Tok Chak Ich'aak, died (Martin and Grube, 2000). That day, an individual known as Siyaj K'ak', whose origin is still unknown, arrived at the site but installed a man named Yax N'un Ayhiin as king. Although scholars do not know why Yax N'un Ayhiin was named king, Stuart has translated glyphic inscriptions on stone sculptures which state that Siyaj K'ak' traveled to Tikal from the west, presumably from Teotihuacan. The inscriptions also say that Tok Chak Ich'aak did die that same day but failed to say how and why (Stuart, 2000).

Because the hieroglyphic texts at Tikal do not paint a clear story of past events, we need to turn to other archaeological evidence to determine Maya and Teotihuacan interaction.

A ceramic vessel recovered at Tikal seems to portray the journey and hostile arrival of Siyaj K'ak' (Martin and Grube, 2000). The pot shows individuals standing in a line holding central Mexican weapons; however I believe these people to be an escort for the last two people in the procession. These two people carry pots in their hands as if they are ready to present them as gifts to an individual shown sitting on top of a Maya pyramid. If my interpretation of this scene is correct, it would imply that the people of Tikal and Teotihuacan coexisted peacefully. However, Yax N'un Ayhiin's association with Teotihuacan imagery at Tikal must also be explained to support my argument.

Yax N'un Ayhiin was the son of an unknown father which makes it difficult to determine his origin. In his burial, he is accompanied by ceramics that display Teotihuacan art. There are also carved sculptures of him at Tikal and other sites, where he is strongly associated with Teotihuacan garb and handheld objects. Yax N'un Ayhiin's son and grandson, however, returned to traditional Maya art in their sculptural programs (Borowicz, 2003). Therefore, it can be suggested that Yax N'un Ayhiin could have adopted central Mexican imagery to become a politically important icon at Tikal. Once this new regal line was established, perhaps Yax N'un Ayhiin's descendants and future kings did not think it necessary to continue central Mexican styles and reverted to their native Maya style.

Evidence of an Economic Relationship

Quite a different relationship with Teotihuacan can be seen at Balberta, a Maya site along the Guatemalan coast. Talud-tablero architecture is absent, and there is no record of any strangers arriving at the site. Instead of a cultural or political connection, there is evidence of an economic one.

Obsidian, a fine grained stone material that is comparable to glass, was an important material for the inhabitants of Balberta. Objects made from this material have been recovered from the site in domestic contexts and show wear patterns that indicate food processing (Bove et al., 1989). Knives made from obsidian

account for most of the stone material at Balberta; however there is an absence of waste material left from producing these prismatic blades. It is suspected that much of Balberta's obsidian blades were produced at and imported from a foreign locale. Some of the obsidian was traced to other Maya sites in Guatemala, but there was a surprising amount of Pachuca obsidian recovered in the 1980s from the Hidalgo source, located near Teotihuacan. There must have been a significant value in the Pachuca obsidian objects at Balberta because all 124 pieces, with the exception of one, were found in association with elite residences (Bove et al., 1989). If the Pachuca obsidian at Balberta came from central Mexicans, then what did the elite of Balberta give to Teotihuacan in return?

Caches of objects made from Pachuca obsidian and ceramic vessels showing cacao imagery were also found in purposeful groupings at Balberta (Bove and Busto, 2003). The Maya highlands and Pacific Coast areas were known for fertile lands on which cacao grew, and cacao may have been traded to Teotihuacan in exchange for their precious green stone. Other Maya highland resources that central Mexico lacked were salt, shell, cotton, rubber, and quetzal feathers. The feathers and shell were highly prized objects while salt was a necessity for a site so far inland as Teotihuacan. The need for raw materials absent in their respective areas may have led to a mutually advantageous economic relationship between the Maya of Balberta and the people of Teotihuacan.

More to Answer

Kaminaljuyu, Copan, Tikal, and Balberta are only four of many Maya sites that contain central Mexican influences. By examining archaeological evidence and records of these four, I have shown that Teotihuacan and the Maya may have coexisted peacefully with mutually advantageous relationships. The fact that there are no written records or pictorial scenes of conflict between Teotihuacan and the Maya only strengthens my internalist argument. However, there are still some unanswered questions.

Did the Maya leave any traces of influence at Teotihuacan? This is a difficult question to answer because research has focused on looking for central Mexican artifacts in the Maya region. Researchers do not seem to be as interested in looking for Maya influences in central Mexico. There are, however, many instances where Maya and Teotihuacan iconographic elements are found side by side at Teotihuacan (Taube, 2003). From this evidence, I would like to think that there was a mutual and multidirectional relationship between the Maya and Teotihuacan. More efforts should be made to identify a Maya presence in central Mexico; perhaps this will further advance the internalist perspective on interaction between the Maya and Teotihuacan.

I would like to thank Dr. William Saturno for his advice and support while I wrote my senior thesis about Maya-Teotihuacan interaction. I would also like to thank Sarah Jackson, now a lecturer at the University of Toronto, for her very helpful suggestions as I completed my thesis, which made this article possible.

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Author Bio

Keith Ferguson was born in Ireland and grew up in Franklin, Massachusetts. He graduated from the University of New Hampshire in 2006 with a Bachelor of Arts in anthropology. This article represents research conducted while Keith was studying at a field school for archaeologists in Guatemala. While he acknowledges the difficulty of integrating original ideas with research and keeping a logical argument intact, Keith says that the challenge of writing for *Inquiry* helped him learn not to rush the writing and research processes and how to better manage his time. Currently Keith is working for Archaeological Services at the University of Massachusetts. He is applying to graduate programs to study Mesoamerican archaeology.

Mentor Bio

Dr. William Saturno is an assistant professor of anthropology and has been at the University of New Hampshire since August 2003. He specializes in Mesoamerican archaeology, and is the director of the San Bartolo Regional Archaeology Project in Guatemala. This was Dr. Saturno's second experience serving as a mentor; in 2005 he worked with Caitlin Walker, another UNH anthropology student whose article in *Inquiry* '06 may be viewed [here](#).