

A Study of two Maya Tenons from Corozal

By

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This paper concerns two Maya tenons that reside in the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA). One, with accession number 1870.1.1 shows an anthropomorphic face with a peaked headdress, while the other, 1870.1.2., sports a zoomorphic face with humanoid head emerging from its jaws. These two sculptures were collected by Williams students during a trip to Honduras and Belize in 1870-1871, sponsored by the Williams Lyceum. Beyond this, very little is known about these sculptures due to the same reason that they are in the museum's possession. While these students were in Central America two of the students went on a short trip to the small agricultural town of Corozal where they acquired these two stone tenons and brought them back to Williams College. The detail we are given on the acquisition of these pieces is both frustratingly vague and very telling for the times:

Among the collections from Corozal were two stone heads, or images, exhumed near that town. They exhibit great antiquity, and are evidently of the same origin as the sculptures found amid the ruins of the ancient temples and cities scattered throughout Central America, and are viewed with such intense interest by all travelers to this seat of fallen civilization.¹

The only real useful information we get from this passage is that these tenons come from a Maya site near the town of Corozal.² There seems to have been no interest in the sculptures' true origin point and it is not even stated whether these statues were bought in Corozal or taken by these students directly from a site. It is clear that they only viewed these as interesting trinkets of a forgotten civilization. However, now that these artifacts have been taken out of archeological context, this researcher will do their best to give these pieces some

context. This paper will discuss the most likely origin points of these statues, as well as what they most likely represented and what they were used for in Maya society.

The Maya were a Mesamerican civilization that lasted from c. 900 B.C.E. through 1500 C.E. The period known as the Preclassic lasted from about 900 B.C.E-300 C.E, while the Classic lasted from 300-950 C.E. and saw the height of Maya culture and influence. However, their civilization continued until the 1500's when the Spanish conquest came, and there are multiple examples of flourishing Maya sites in this late era, known as the Terminal Classic and then the Postclassic. Finally, the Maya people and their culture continues into modern times, with over 5 million speakers of Maya languages spread throughout Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras.

Their civilization was highly monarchical, ruled by shaman-kings as the unity of the religion and political power created the foundation of control over the rest of their people. These rulers, however, only ruled over their own polities as the Maya were not an empire but a group of states that were connected through culture and religion. The elites were the ones who went to war against rival Maya states and most often engaged in religious ceremonies. Unfortunately, it is from these elites that the most abundant sources of archeological evidence can be recovered, so it is much easier to understand the upper echelons of Maya society than that of regular people. However, we know that they were an agrarian based people and that maize was a staple crop of their diet. They also ate domesticated animals such as dogs and turkeys. They had merchants and craftsmen. Their homes, unlike the magnificent stone palaces and temples left behind by the elites, were made of perishable materials. For all classes however, religion dominated their lives.

In order to understand the Maya, and the statues in the Williams College Art Museum collection, it is important to understand their religion and outlook on the world. When it comes to understanding Maya religion, it is important to realize that they did not just view their gods as anthropomorphic beings who lived in the same way as the Greeks viewed their gods. Instead, the Maya had a much more complex view of their gods and their relationship to the natural world that blurred the lines of the natural world and the divine. To the Maya, the landscape itself embodied the gods, and they believed that the earth itself was “. . .an animate and supernatural being” and that “. . . the supernatural was perceived as dwelling within the natural rather than having been the creator of the landscape. . ..”³ To them, the rivers were the veins, the mountains the heads, the caves the mouths and the swamps the heart of this supernatural entity.⁴ This is very different to how the Western world views religion. In the West, the earth was created for people to live whereas the Maya viewed the relationship with the supernatural to be a much more intimate one, where they interacted with the divine on a daily basis. Predicated on this belief was the idea of original debt, which was based on the view that through daily interactions between humans and the earth, people were taking from the earth and accumulated debt. Activities like eating, drinking, digging, and plowing were seen as taking from the divine, and therefore the gods must be re-paid for giving this part of themselves to humanity. This debt was repaid through rituals, worship, offerings, and sacrifice.

While this debt toward the gods was essential to understanding Maya religion, the concept of animacy was also an imperative concept for the Maya. Animacy could be imbued into objects representing gods, ancestors, and other supernatural denizens. In the same way

that when the Maya harvested and ate corn they considered this as the act of eating the corn god himself,⁵ Maya effigies of gods or ancestors were seen as possessing the spirit of the being. This can be seen among modern Maya people who still practice similar rituals as their ancestors. In their book *Maya Cosmos* David Freidel and colleagues talk about their own experiences with the modern Maya religion and sculptures writing: “When we found that *K’awil* meant “statue,” we realized why the Vision Serpents are the *way* of the *K’awil*. *K’awil* refers to an object made of wood, stone, or some other material while the *way* is the spiritual being who resides within it.”⁶ Understanding this part of Maya religion is key to understanding the significance of statues in Maya society; these statues were not just representations of these beings; rather, they actually were the beings themselves, and the Maya saw no distinction. Statues allowed deities to be present for specific rituals and events that were important to Maya religion and the cosmos. This all holds true for the two tenons that reside in the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA). However, to fully understand these two particular statues, it is important to discuss where they most likely come from and what they represent.

Location

In determining the origin site of these statues, the only starting point we have comes from the aforementioned recount of the Williams Lyceum trip to Central America where it is stated that these statues came from a site “near” the town of Corozal in northern Belize. However, this poses a bit of a problem due to the fact that there are numerous archeological Mayan sites surrounding the town of Corozal, including a site in the town itself called Santa Rita de Corozal. Because of the numerous sites in the area surrounding the town of Corozal and because of the limit amount of information we are given on how the Williams Lyceum students

obtained these statues it is near impossible to pinpoint the exact location from where these statues hail. Despite this, given the information we have on these statues and the archeological sites surrounding Corozal, it is possible to significantly narrow down the options.

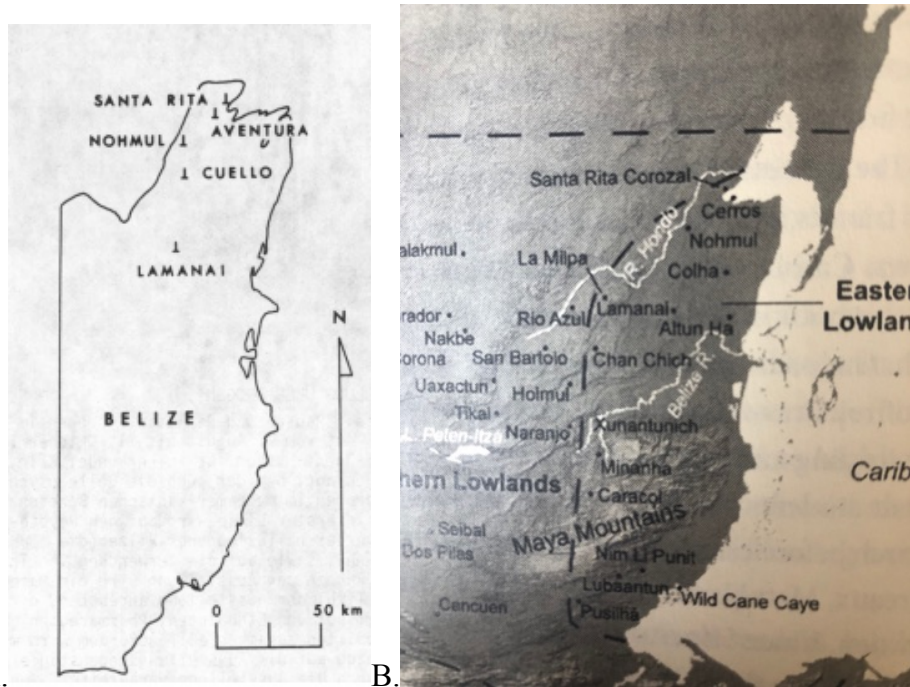


Figure 1 (A. From Arlen and Diane Chase, Archeological investigations at Nohmul and Santa Rita, Belize:1979-1980. B. From Houk, Ancient Maya cities of the eastern Lowlands.

There are eight Maya archeological site in the eastern lowlands that are near to the town of Corozal and therefore could be the original place of these statues. The most obvious of these is the site of Santa Rita Corozal, located on the outskirts of the town of Corozal. However, this city saw its height during the Late Postclassic era (1300-1524 CE), and, for reasons that will be explained later in this paper, the WCMA tenons seem to come from an earlier period, the Terminal Classic-Early Postclassical (600-1000 CE) which makes this site too late in the Maya timeline to have produced these statues. The sites of Cerros, Cuello, Colha, all fall within the Preclassic era, which is far too early to have produced these statues. Altun Ha is

both geographically distant from Corozal, and also saw its peak during the Early Classic period, and so too early to have produced the two tenons.

The site of Lamanai is the same distance from Corozal as Altun Ha, but it did see its heyday in the Late Classic period and continued into the Postclassic era. Lamanai is also near “The New River” which drains into the ocean very near the town of Corozal, meaning that these statues could have been taken from Lamanai and transported up the river to Corozal to be sold by locals. This, however still seems very unlikely as the statues are both rather large and considerably heavy and it would have been more trouble than it was worth to transport two worn tenons to a small town with no guarantee of profit. These combined factors make it an unlikely candidate as the mother-site of WCMA’s artifacts.⁷ This leaves the archeological sites of Aventura and Nohmul.

Nohmul is a site relatively close to Santa Rita that saw its peak during the Late Classic through the Early Postclassic period, which makes it contemporary to the time it is believed these statues were created. It is also close enough to Corozal to be a viable option. However, Norman Hammond, an archeologist who has worked extensively on this site, was contacted about these tenons and he reported that he had seen no similar artifacts in the area. This does not entirely rule the site out, as it is possible that the tenons that were at this site were scavenged in the same manner as the ones that currently reside at WCMA. It is, however, not encouraging evidence and leaves this site in a state of ambiguity where it cannot be ruled out, but nor can it be pointed to with certainty. The same can be said for the site of Aventura. This site falls within the Late Classic period and is very close to Corozal. However, there has been very little archeological examination of this site and so without further information about the

specific objects and buildings found there, it is very difficult say with certainty that this was the origin point of the statues. That being said, the fact that it is nearer to Corozal than any of the other sites, and the fact that there is no evidence saying that it is an unlikely site, means that it may be the strongest candidate present at this time.

To summarize, out of the eight sites that are the WCMA's tenons may have hailed from, only Lamanai, Nohmul, and Aventura, fall within the time period in which these statues were most likely created. Out of these three Nohmul and Aventura are the closest based on geographical location and between these two only Aventura has no evidence working against it, although this has more to do with a lack of evidence than anything else. Essentially, we can narrow it down to these final three with great certainty, but any assertions past that point offer significantly lower degrees of certainty. Additionally, the possibility of these tenons coming from separate locations should not be ruled out. Either way, both heads most likely hailed from one of these three sites mentioned above.

Deciphering the Anthropomorphic Tenon, WCMA No. 1870.1.1



Figure 2a



Figure 2b



Figure 2c

Figure 2. WCMA Accession No. 1870.1.1 (All images taken from Williams College Museum of Art online archives, object number 1870.1.1)

We will first look at the tenon which features an anthropomorphic head with a peaked headdress. This statue poses a bit of a challenge because it is very worn and broken on the sides of the head and the nose. The only true defining characteristic of this statue is the peaked headdress that extends upwards and curves slightly forward. The distinct aspects of this headdress seem to associate it with the Maya Foliated Maize God, where this peaked headdress denotes a growing ear of corn. This section of the paper will discuss the evolution of the Maize God, the Foliated Maize God, and the aspects of its representation in Maya society that links it to the WCMA's tenon.

The Maize God protected maize, which was a staple crop of Maya society. Thus, the Maize God was probably amongst the most important Maya deities. A major myth surrounding the Maize God is the story of his rebirth, which is connected to the Hero Twins story. In this myth, the Maize God, known as Hun Hunahpu, enters Xibalba, the underworld, where he and his brother are captured by the Lords of the Underworld and sacrificed; the Maize God's head is placed in a calabash tree. In this tree, the Maize God's head speaks to a maiden (daughter of one of the gods of the underworld) and his spittle impregnates her. This maiden then births the Hero Twins who achieve victory over Xibalba and are able to bring their father, the Maize God, back to life. This cycle of life and death is relived in art and it is said that water, sun and jade (he wore jade jewelry) are needed to bring him back to life.⁸ In this way, we can see a connection between the Maize God and the crop itself since the maize plant also goes through cycles of rebirth, growth and death. Through this myth and its connection to the maize crop, we can see how closely the Maize God was associated with the crop itself. He wasn't just the

god of maize, he was the maize, and by sacrificing to the Maize God, the Maya were ensuring his rebirth and the growth of the crop simultaneously. He was one of the few gods that were depicted completely in an anthropomorphic style and his likeness was associated with the pinnacle of beauty in Maya culture.⁹

Representations of the Maize God differ over time and areas of Central America but the constant in all these images is the maize growth affixed to the top of the head. In the Early Classic era, there was only one representation of the Maize God as a single unitary deity. However, in the Late Classic era we see a departure from this singular concept of a Maize god into two different deities, the Foliated Maize God and the Tonsured Maize God. This makes sense and is most likely connected to both his myth of being reborn as well as to the maize crop itself as it grows and matures. Karl Taube was the first to notice the differences between these two deities in and described them as such:

. . . the Tonsured Maize god as a young healthy lord with an elongated head and a tonsured coiffure. 'Corn curls' are placed prominently on the god's brow, or are infixed into the parietal region of the head. . . the Foliated Maize god, by contrast, is characterized by "a maize cob curling down from the back of the head: (Taube 1985: 171), though it occasionally curls up and forward as well, lying flat atop the head." (Zender, 2014, 4).

As the WCMA tenon has none of the qualities associated with the Tonsured Maize God, it is the Foliated Maize God that concerns this paper. One of the best known sculptural examples of the Foliated Maize God comes from Copan and currently resides in the British Museum (Fig. 3a). In this sculpture, an almost identical headdress to the WCMA tenon can be seen. The God's headdress shows a long ear of corn curling up and forward from the god's head. Additionally, this young maize plant seems to have a larger curl coming from the back and then a smaller curl holding over almost completely in front of it. The WCMA statue also shows evidence of a larger

curl coming from the back and then a smaller curl coming forward in the front. While these are partly broken and worn on the WCMA tenon, the similarity in overall outline and shape is unmistakable. Very similar representations of the Foliated Maize God are depicted in an image of the Foliated Maize God from Stela H in Quirigua, and a tenon also from Copan(Fig 3c, 3b).¹⁰ All these images of the Foliated Maize God sport an anthropomorphic head with an appendage coming from the back of the head and curling forward, just like the WCMA tenon.



B.



C.



Figure 3 (A. From The British Museum online archives, object number 1932.8. B. From Spinden, *A Study of Maya Art: its subject matter and historical development*, Tenon from Copan. C. From Taube, *The Major Gods of Yucatan Peninsula*, Stela H from Quirigua, 45.)

Quirigua is a Maya site in southeastern Guatemala, near the border with Honduras. At the height of their power, they controlled the Motagua trade route and significant expansions. This rise to power corresponds with Quirigua breaking off from the state of Copan under the rulership of a leader named Cauac Sky, resulting in a military dispute which Quirigua won.¹¹ This is significant because Copan is where the other two images of the Foliated Maize God are from, so it appears these states are linked. From excavation done on the Acropolis in Quirigua clear changes in materials can be seen over the 300 years it took to build, showing an increase

of influence towards the end of its construction. In the first years of the buildings' construction, local materials were sourced from local areas, while the later stages of building show imported materials such as rhyolite and marble. This upgrade in materials shows that Quirigua experienced an increase in political and economic power, being able to acquire new and better materials from farther away, as well as more labor to move these materials. Additionally, renovations to the Great Plaza at Quirigua that sits just outside the Acropolis were completed during the latter half of what is defined as "stage 2" of building which lasted from 740-810 CE, so the latter half of the Late Classic. The fact that Quirigua greatly expanded its area of influence and built new structures during the Late Classic/Terminal Classic period suggests that this is when they rose to power. It is also most likely during this time period that the image similar to the WCMA tenon was created.¹²

Copan is located in western Honduras and is recognized as one of the most important Maya sites in the southeastern lowlands. This is partly because it has unusually well preserved architecture available for study, but it is also clear that in its heyday, it is one of the most powerful Maya cities of its time. The dynasty that ruled Copan was firmly established in 435 CE, and appears closely related to the Classic Maya world of the time in elite culture, trade, and world views.¹³ It also seems that the first ruler of Copan helped to start Quirigua, which explains their close relationship before Quirigua broke off. It also appears that the mother of Copan's twelfth ruler, the ruler credited with consolidating Copan's power, was from Quirigua, further strengthening the connection and rivalry between the two powers. Copan's greatest period of building came during the reign of its thirteenth ruler who renovated the Great Plaza at Copan between 711-736 CE. This ruler was then captured and sacrificed by Quirigua. After

his death the next two rulers had relatively short reigns of power. Copan's 16th and final ruler did some significant building in the first half of his rule (between 750-800 CE). However, after this he appears to have been relatively dormant and died in 820 CE, bringing Copan's power into decline. From the dates of these rulers and the constructions seen during their reign it seems likely that the statue of the Maize God taken from Copan was a product of the Late Classic period, similar to the images seen at Quirigua.¹⁴

Given how closely linked these two sites were both culturally and geographically, an argument could be made that the imagery for the Foliated Maize God seen from these two locations may not be indicative of the imagery seen at other sites throughout Maya civilization. It is important to remember, however, that both states were prolific traders and they both were influenced and influenced many other sites throughout Mesoamerica. The possibility that this representation of the Foliated Maize God existed only at these sites seems unlikely.

Both Quirigua and Copan saw the height of their power during the Late and Terminal Classic periods. This is most likely when the images we see from these sites were created. This, combined with the fact that earlier representations of the Foliated Maize God often have Olmec style upper lips and incisors projecting out of their mouths and whiskers, (neither of which are present on WCMA's tenon) point to the WCMA Tenon being a Late Classic/Terminal Classic representation of the Foliated Maize God.

While the peaked forward-facing headdress on the WCMA tenon provides a very strong connection with the Maya Foliated Maize God, there are some key discrepancies between known representations of the Foliated Maize God and the WCMA tenon that must be addressed. The differences between the usual representations of the Maize God and the

anthropomorphic WCMA tenon are: the lack of a long sloping forehead; the lack of luxurious hair; and the fact that the maize is not visibly coming out of the peaked headdress. The long, sloping forehead is often found on both the Foliated and Tonsured Maize God imagery and represents the maize cob itself (Fig. 3a and b). This imagery was so prominent that members of the Maya elite would practice cranial deformation on infants, stretching out their cranium so that their heads would look more like the Maize God and thus the epitome of beauty.¹⁵ However, as we see in Fig 3c, this imagery of a long sloping forehead, while prominent, is not always featured. Fig. 3c, like the WCMA tenon, seems to have its maize curl coming out from a helmet or headband on its head.

This is curious because most depictions of the Foliated Maize God show the Foliation coming from the God's hair, not from a helmet or headband. It could be argued that the statue is simply too worn to tell if the area between the face and the Maize stock is hair or if it is a device to fix the maize to the cranium. However, there are hard ninety-degree angles that form at the corners of the forehead transitioning into straight plates down the side of the face. Similarly, the band across the forehead seems very rectangular and points straight back, less like hair and more like a headband attached to the head. Essentially, the whole area around the face itself seems too angular and geometric to have represented hair at any point. Taube has noted that most representations of the Foliated Maize God in Late Classic art show the Maize curl coming straight out of the head itself, and that the maize curl being affixed to the head through another device is more closely connected to earlier representations of the Maize God.¹⁶ And yet, the WCMA tenon has no other features to connect it to the earlier period of

Maize god representations. There are, however, some possible solutions to explain these discrepancies.

The most obvious possibility is that this was a stylistic choice from the area and/or time when this tenon was produced. Variations in Maize God representations exist between regions and time periods. However, the omission of the sloping forehead and the addition of the headband combined with the lack of similar imagery from earlier time periods. Additionally, the WCMA tenon comes from the Maya Lowlands, same as the images from Quirigua and Copan, and while found in Northern Belize and not Honduras, the WCMA tenon is not from a Maya site spectacularly far away from these images. Given these facts, a simple stylistic difference is possible, but unlikely.

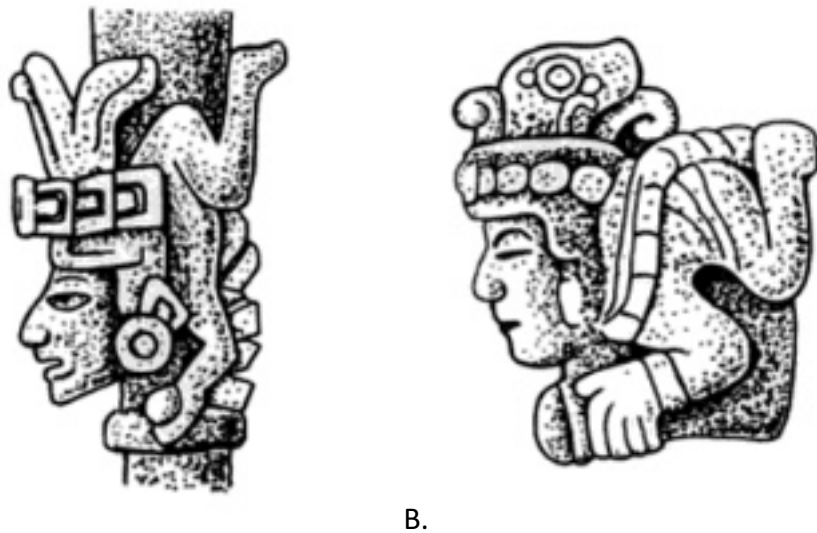


Figure 4. Diving Maize God: a. from Chichen Itza; b. from Mayapan (Both A and B are taken from Taube, *Ancient Gods of Yucatan Peninsula*, 43)

Another possibility is that this is a representation of God E/the Maize God as a Diving God. This god was prominent in the Postclassic Yucatan (Fig. 4, A and B). It was originally

thought that God E was a separate Deity, connected with life, fertility, and flowers and Roys identified these Diving gods as bee gods. Taube, however, has recognized that this god was directly connected to the Maize God due to both the foliage on its head, and the fact that it was associated with life and death, prosperity and fruitfulness which links God E with the agricultural cycle of the maize plant and the harvest. Additionally, the Maize God is also strongly connected with flowers throughout Mesoamerica, further strengthening this connection between God E and the Maize God.¹⁷ This Diving God E can be seen on a detail of a wooden staff as well as on a sculpture from Mayapan (Fig. 4); in both cases he is depicted with a foliated peaked headdress and lacks an elongated forehead. Both examples also wear a headband on the forehead, similar to the WCMA tenon. The possibility that the WCMA tenon represents the Diving Maize God could account for both the similarities and dissimilarities between the WCMA tenon and the Copan and Quirigua representations of the Foliated Maize God.

Mayapan was a Postclassic site that overlapped with, and eventually took over as the seat of power from Chichen Itza in the Yucatan. Its rule was dominated by two families, the Cocoms and Xius, who jostled for power. The fact that Mayapan is closely related to Chichen Itza is significant, as Chichen Itza plays has an important relationship to the zoomorphic WCMA tenon, which will be discussed later in the paper. Since connections can be established with the zoomorphic tenon, it makes sense that related imagery can also be found with the anthropomorphic tenon discussed in this section.

The WCMA anthropomorphic tenon shows an unmistakable connection to the Foliated Maize God and/or the Diving Maze God through its peaked headdress and the stylization of a

forward curving appendage on its head. The similar representations of the foliated maize cob along with a lack of earlier Maize God characteristics link this image to the later representations of the Maize God. The discrepancies in this piece can also be linked to either stylistic differences or to a representation of a variation on the Maize god that was prominent in the Terminal Classic or Early Postclassic periods. All of this is based on evidence drawn from other Maya cities such as Copan, Quirigua, Chichen Itza, and Mayapan, that are closely linked to the Maya cultures of northern Belize. Without precise representations from northern Belize to compare to the WCMA tenon, we cannot offer a more definitive idea of its origins than what is presented. However, the visual analysis described above provides a strong stepping stone for further research. This is also the case for the second Tenon that requires identification.

Deciphering the Zoomorphic Tenon WCMA Accession 1870.1.2



Fig. 5a



Fig. 5b



Fig. 5c

Figure 5. WCMA Accession No. 1870.1.2 (All images were taken from Williams College museum of Art online Archives, object number 1870.1.2).

The next tenon to be discussed is the Maya Zoomorphic tenon which depicts a zoomorph with a human head protruding from its open jaws (WCMA Accession No. 1870.1.2). This piece is more complex and harder to understand than the previous. The identity of the zoomorphic creature that makes up the bulk of the tenon is still debated. Then, there is the human head inside the jaws of the zoomorph, and his identity is also difficult to pin down. To understand this statue, we must identify both what the statue represents and what the significance of the human head in its jaws.

The zoomorph itself seems most similar to Maya representations of the serpent, a figure that has held many different religious meanings throughout Maya history. There has been, however, some debate about whether this creature really is a serpent, or a centipede, or perhaps even an alligator. While this is a valid academic debate there is an overwhelming amount of imagery connecting the serpent to heads with open jaws from which supernaturals emerge. Because of this connection to the WCMA zoomorphic tenon, this section will focus on the image of the Maya serpent and the possible meaning(s) behind the human head protruding from its mouth.

The serpent is a widely-known figure in both Maya and Aztec mythology and takes on many different names. While their presentations vary, these serpents originate from the Preclassic Maya vision serpents (Fig. 6) that were used in religious ceremonies of bloodletting to conjure up ancestors and gods to the world of the living. In these ceremonies, a person, usually a priest, ruler, or member of the elite would pierce a part of their body like the tongue or the genitals and let the blood drip onto paper. This blood-soaked paper would then be burned and from the smoke the Vision Serpent would appear. The Vision Serpent allowed the

person completing the ritual to communicate with the supernatural. The vision serpent was usually depicted with open jaws from where a god or ancestor emerged, with whom the mortal individual could communicate.¹⁸ This concept of the Vision Serpent went through multiple transformations and survived in both Maya and Mexica cultures up through the Spanish conquest. Therefore, it is important to note that while the Vision Serpent originated in the Preclassic, it survived and is depicted in the Terminal Classic and Postclassic periods as well.



A.

Figure 6 (From Friedel, *Maya Cosmos*, 178, God K with serpent coming out of his foot expelling a deity.)

There are a few notable later versions of the Vision Serpent: the War Serpent, the Fire Serpent, and Quetzalcoatl (also known as the Feathered Serpent). Quetzalcoatl was a dominant god of the Aztecs, but also found a place in Postclassic Maya civilization. As an Aztec god, Quetzalcoatl was associated with a range of things including creation myths, wind, rain and fertility. Its Aztec name tells us that it was seen as a feathered serpent and often depicted as such.¹⁹ The War Serpent is an earlier entity linked to Teotihuacan, and possibly related to the later Quetzalcoatl. This serpent is most commonly found on temples associated with war and was often worn as a headdress by Maya rulers. The War Serpent is often depicted with mosaic patterned skin and large goggle like eyes which is closely related to the armor and eye

protection worn by warriors at Teotihuacan. Because of this iconography, it is associated with warriors and war. While these two serpent entities did overlap for a period of time, most notably seen in Teotihuacan's Temple of the Feathered Serpent (Fig. 7), Quetzalcoatl was more dominant in the Postclassic than the War Serpent but both probably originated during the Early Classic at Teotihuacan.²⁰ The Fire Serpent was another god originally associated with central Mexican civilizations and is associated with War Serpent. The Fire Serpent is often denoted by its backcurved snout and a rectangular tail.²¹ This is important because we also see an upturned snout on the WCMA tenon. The Fire Serpent is clearly associated with Postclassic Aztec culture, but it may also be the Late Postclassic Aztec version of the War Serpent. The mix of Aztec and Maya features of the three serpent supernaturals described above, in the WCMA tenon, is very complex and hard to parse out and it may be due to the Late and Terminal Classic migrations that took place at this time.²²



Figure 7 (A. From Taube, *The Temple of Quetzalcoatl and the cult of sacred war at Teotihuacan*, 54. On the left, the mosaic War Serpent, on the right Quetzalcoatl)

It is unlikely that the WCMA zoomorphic tenon is a representation of Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent, for the simple reason that it contains no feathers.²³ This could be due to

the fact that they have broken off as the tenon is not in great shape. However, there does not seem to be any evidence of breakage except from where the head would have connected to the back extension. Because of this lack of feathers, we must assume that this is either a depiction of the Vision Serpent, the Fire Serpent, or the War Serpent.

The War Serpent is depicted as a mosaic scaled reptilian with goggle eyes. However, Taube also says that these serpents could take a more naturalistic form as well (Fig. 8).²⁴ This means that while two very different images of the war serpent can be produced, they both denote the same deity. Taube speaks to this difference:

“In classical Maya iconography, the two forms of the [war] serpent may differ slightly in context. The mosaic version appears primarily as an object worn in the context of rulership and impersonation, whereas the other, more animate form can occur in isolation, as if it were a living mythical entity”²⁵

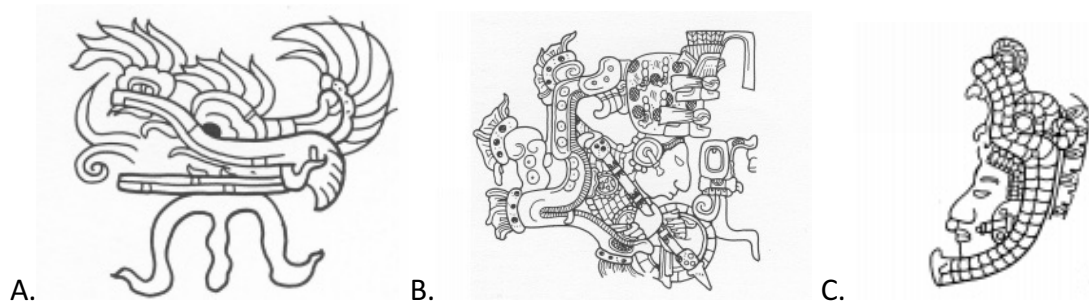


Figure 8. (A, B and C From Taube, Temple of Quetzalcoatl, 61. A. Shows what Taube describes as the naturalized war serpent, Jaina Burial, Late/Terminal Classic. B. shows a warrior emerging from the mouth of the war serpent, Yaxchilan Lintel 25, Late Classic period. C. shows Mosaic war serpent as headdress taken from a Lamanai Stela, Terminal Classic period.)

If this distinction is to be believed, it could apply to WCMA’s zoomorphic tenon. The mosaic-scaled version of the serpent is primarily associated with rulers, especially when they are wearing it as a headdress. This can be seen in multiple representations of the War Serpent, including on a stela that comes from Lamanai in northern Belize (Fig. 8c). This is important because we know that at the very least the Maya of northern Belize knew about the War

Serpent and had him as one of their supernaturals. When Taube defines the War Serpent in both its forms in his article “The Temple of Quetzalcoatl and the Cult of Sacred War at Teotihuacan,” he gives no evidence as to why images of a more naturalistic serpent relate to the War Serpent, rather than another reptilian supernatural. He simply states that it has more naturalistic depictions, without connecting the imagery at all. This means that while it is possible that the WCMA tenon depicts the War Serpent in its naturalistic form, it is more likely depicting the Vision Serpent (or even the Fire Serpent). Essentially, without any detailed description of the naturalistic War Serpent, it is hard to apply Taube’s argument, especially within the context of this paper.

The WCMA serpent contains no mosaic patterns or goggles and veers more closely to the naturalistic depiction of a serpent than a mosaic style pattern. Additionally, the human head is situated much further out within the jaws than it does when the serpent is simply conveying a headdress, another common depiction of the War Serpent. Rather than the serpent being worn by the human head, the human head seems to be emerging from the serpent’s mouth.

The head emerging from the mouth of the serpent is key to understanding the WCMA tenon. This image harkens back to the powers of the Vision Serpent, allowing the living to communicate with gods and ancestors. Freidel and colleagues tell us this power survived and evolved into the War Serpent, and they argue that an image of Lady K’abal-Xok on Yaxchilan Lintel 25 conjures a War Serpent to speak to an ancestor (Fig 8b). However, this image seems very closely related to another image of a serpent being conjured and expelling an anthropomorphic being which Freidel et al. associate with the Vision Serpent. It is unclear here

if Freidel et al. are corroborating Taube's view that the War Serpent can appear in naturalistic form or if they are saying that the War Serpent is a type of Vision Serpent only associated with warriors. Along the same thread, the Fire Serpent is also often associated with the War Serpent. However, there is very little iconographic evidence to support the idea of a head emerging from the Fire Serpent's mouth, but the upturned snout found on the WCMA tenon and typical of the Fire Serpent still makes this a possibility. Essentially, the identity of the serpent featured in the WCMA tenon is difficult to pin down, and while it is possible that it is depicting either the War Serpent or the Fire Serpent, it is most likely depicting the Vision Serpent.

It is well documented that the conjuring of the Vision Serpent was used as a way to communicate with the supernatural, but it is unclear if that is being depicted in this tenon. The Vision Serpent was used to communicate with either gods and ancestors. We suggest that the humanoid head in the mouth of the WCMA's tenon is an ancestor rather than a god. This is because the anthropomorphic head in the WCMA tenon is depicted with closed eyes, which in Maya imagery often denotes the dead.²⁶ This image can also be seen in Chichen Itza where there are numerous depictions of a man's head emerging from a serpent's mouth (Fig. 9a). It is speculated that this imagery is honoring an important ancestor possibly an important warrior or the founder of the city.²⁷ The repeated image of an ancestor emerging from the open jaws of a (legged) serpent at Chichen Itza confirms its importance to the Terminal Classic Mayas of the lowlands.



Figure 9. (A. from Marvin Cohodas, *The Warrior Temple at Chichen Itza* fig. 64. Warrior emerging from serpent. B. from Freidel, *Maya Cosmos*, 208. Vision serpent, Yaxchilan Lintel 15. C. from Gordon Willey, *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, Fig. 19. Ballcourt marker in Mixco Viejo, Late/Terminal Classic).

The most similar image to the WCMA tenon is from Mixco Viejo, a Terminal Classic site in highland Guatemala (Fig. 9c). The Mixco Viejo sculpture is also a tenon rendering a serpent with open jaws from which emerges a human head. The serpent has the same profile as the WCMA tenon, with a line inscribed around its mouth. We also see a set of four teeth above the anthropomorphic head just as is depicted in the WCMA tenon. The raised profile of the

serpent's eyes is also depicted in a similar way on both tenons. The Mixco Viejo tenon seems cruder, as the carving of the brow is less pronounced and only the top four teeth of the serpent are depicted, while teeth can be seen all along the mouth of the serpent in the WCMA tenon. These depictions of the Vision Serpent with an ancestor protruding from its mouth were so common because of the centrality of the Vision Serpent in rituals of communication with ancestors. Alternatively, this common image may be linked with the idea of the *way*.

The Maya believed that the *way* is one of several human souls, and it was an individual's animal co-essence or avatar. Houston writes "Increasingly, we know more about Classic²⁸ concepts of vitalizing energies, including the well documented belief in *way*, or companion spirits- aspects of the person that could move independently of the body but which shared its bonds, only breakable at death (Grube and Nahm, 1994; Houston and D. Stuart 1998)." Because the *way* separated from the body, the Vision Serpent may have been used to communicate the *way* and other souls of the ancestor to the living. Alternatively, the serpent may represent the *way* of the ancestor emerging from its mouth. The Vision Serpent is included in the depiction of the ancestor because after death the Vision Serpent is one with the *way* of the deceased, and so to have the Vision Serpent included in this image is to have the tenon imbued with the *way* of the ancestor. Another explanation of the Vision Serpent is that it was seen as the "umbilical cord" that connects the living with the supernaturals in the otherworld.²⁹

The serpent has a long and complicated history in Maya religion, but it is important to remember that different iterations of reptilian supernaturals often built on past interpretations and combined old elements with new ones, possibly adopted from other Mesoamerican

cultures. Although different in details, Quetzalcoatl, the War Serpent and the Fire Serpent were all associated with the ruling class and, for the last two serpents, with warfare. While the Vision Serpent remained an important deity throughout Maya culture, the War Serpent also had an important role in the Late and Terminal Classic. In contrast, the Fire Serpent was most significant to the Postclassic Aztec civilization. By looking at all the different aspects of these deities along with their relationship to ancestors we can begin to piece together what the WCMA tenon is trying to show us.

Function of the WCMA Tenons

Now that the imagery of both of these tenons have been discussed individually and asserted that they depict supernaturals, it is now possible to discuss their function. Since they are both tenons from the same area, it is reasonable to assume that these tenons served similar purposes. Since they were taken out of their archeological context so long ago it is impossible to say definitively what purpose they would have served. Most likely, these tenons were placed in the walls of temples, probably on their exterior. The role of these tenons was to bring the spirit of the gods or ancestors close to the religious site. It is possible that they were even for communication with the specific deity, the Foliated/Diving Maize God, depicted on WCMA tenon no. 1870.1.1, or with the ancestor depicted in the second WCMA tenon no. 1870.1.2 during bloodletting ceremonies. We see such tenons still in place on the facade of the Temple of Warriors at Chichen Itza (Fig. 9a).

However, it is also possible that the zoomorphic tenons were used as ballcourt markers for the Maya ritual sport. This is only a possibility because a tenon that is almost identical to

the WCMA zoomorphic Tenon was found at the site of Mixco Viejo (Fig. 8c).³⁰ Additionally, it has been noted that all the sites mentioned as likely candidates to be the origin site of these tenons contain ballcourts.³¹

Houston and Stuart also note the significance of these tenons on the temples in his text

“Of Gods, Glyphs, and Kings: Divinity and Rulership among the Classic Maya”:

Secondary inscriptions located outside the inner shrines of the temple give important dedicatory information on the construction of the temples and the ‘housing’ of the gods within. Significantly, the inner shrines of these temples are explicitly ‘owned’ by the deities themselves. This concept is reflected throughout Mesoamerica, where temples are almost universally considered ‘god’s houses’.³²

Here Houston and Stuart are arguing that these temples aren’t just built to honor the gods, they were housed to hold the gods themselves. With this interpretation, the animated spirit of the deities and ancestors that temples were dedicated to lived inside the temples. This means that the statues and tenons on these temples weren’t just representations of gods and ancestors, they were the god’s and ancestor’s spirit living in the temples. This holds true to what we already know about Maya use of statues and adds further significance to their placing if the WCMA tenons were originally placed on temples.

Conclusion

Maya religion is still under much scrutiny among Mesoamerican scholars throughout the world. It is a field that contains much uncertainty and here, this uncertainty is compounded by the lack of contextual evidence to help unlock the secrets of the two tenons that reside in the Williams College Museum of Art. However, because these were taken from their home and

originally viewed as trinkets of amusement by the Williams Lyceum trip to Honduras and Belize, it seems only right that this damage is now undone to the best of this researcher's ability.

It has been determined that these pieces most likely came from the Northern Belize sites of either Nohmul or Aventura, and perhaps even as far as from Lamanai. Using current knowledge of Maya religion and symbolism, I was able to establish that the anthropomorphic tenon represents the Foliated or Diving Maize God of the Late to Terminal Classic period. In regard to the second WCMA tenon, I established a connection between its reptilian zoomorph and the Vision Serpent, embodying the materialization of the ancestor that is emerging from its mouth.

Finally, it is important to recognize and remember the significance of these statues to the Maya. To them these statues were animated bodies of the gods themselves within a religion that is still being practiced by the modern Maya today. While this may seem unrelated to the paper at hand, it is important to keep Maya cultures alive so that the significance of this research will not be lost.

¹ Williams College Museum records

² Williams College Museum records

³ McAnany, 2010, 64.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Houston et al., 2006, 127.

⁶ Freidel et al., 1993.

⁷ Houk, 1996, 46.

⁸ Miller and Samayoa, 1998, 56-57.

⁹ Cynthia Richards Carroll, 2005.

¹⁰ Jennifer Ahlfeldt, 2001, 24-25. This shows us the reconstruction of a tenoned statue of the foliated Maize God's head. Karle Taube, *The Major Gods of Ancient Yucatan*, 45. This source gives the image of the Foliated Maize god from a stela at Quirigua.

¹¹ Sharer, 1978.

¹² Webster, 1999.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Karen Bassie-Sweet, 1999, 16.

¹⁶ Taube, 1992, 46.

¹⁷ Ibid., 43-44.

¹⁸ Friedel et al., 1993, 208.

¹⁹ Folan, Bolles and Ek, 4

²⁰ Taube, 1992, 53-61.

²¹ Ibid., 63.

²² Demarest and Foias, 1984, 173-176.

²³ This may seem like an oversimplification, but Taube notes it as a very distinct character difference between the two serpents, which seems even more vital when discussing the more naturalistic versions of the War serpent mentioned later in this paper.

²⁴ Taube, 2003, 61.

²⁵ Ibid, 64.

²⁶ Houston et al., 267. Fig. 8.19 b.

²⁷ Folan et al., 2016, 296-298.

²⁸ Houston et al., 1996, 79.

²⁹ David Friedel et al., 1993, 206-214

³⁰ Demarest and Foias, 1984.

³¹ Houk, 2015, Chapter 9.

³² Houston & Stuart, 1996, 294.

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