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A Nose Piercing Ceremony in the North Temple of the Great Ballcourt at Chichén Itzá

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Chichén Itzá has fascinated students and travelers to the Maya region since the days when Yucatan was a Colonial backwater of New Spain.¹ The Great Ballcourt has been a particular focus of attention. Because the ballgame was viewed as a Central Mexican cultural marker, the Great Ballcourt proved to some that foreign forces invaded Yucatan in the Late Postclassic period (ca. A.D. 1100-1500).² For others, the Great Ballcourt provoked less scholarly activities. Sylvanus G. Morley held phonograph concerts there during the Carnegie Institution of Washington Chichen Itza Project, 1924-1940 (Brunhouse 1971). This essay addresses the sculptural panels found in the North Temple of the Great Ballcourt. We suggest that a nose piercing ceremony is portrayed in the upper register of the North Vault panels. Nose piercing

rituals figured prominently Late Postclassic and Colonial Maya society. As Tozzer noted sixty years ago, Mixtec and Aztec peoples also practiced nose piercing (Tozzer 1930:158). We now understand that Aztec and Mixtec nose piercing rituals accompanied both royal accessions and elevation to noble status. Recent evidence also demonstrates that the Highland K'iche Maya also practiced nose piercing at accessions and founding events well into the Colonial period. The Chichén Itzá North Temple nose piercing ceremony supports the identification of the structure's iconographic program as dealing with accession and founding events. The North Temple nose piercing, accession, and founding events are thus closely related to the founding-war portrayed in the murals of the Upper Temple of the Jaguars in the same ballcourt complex.³

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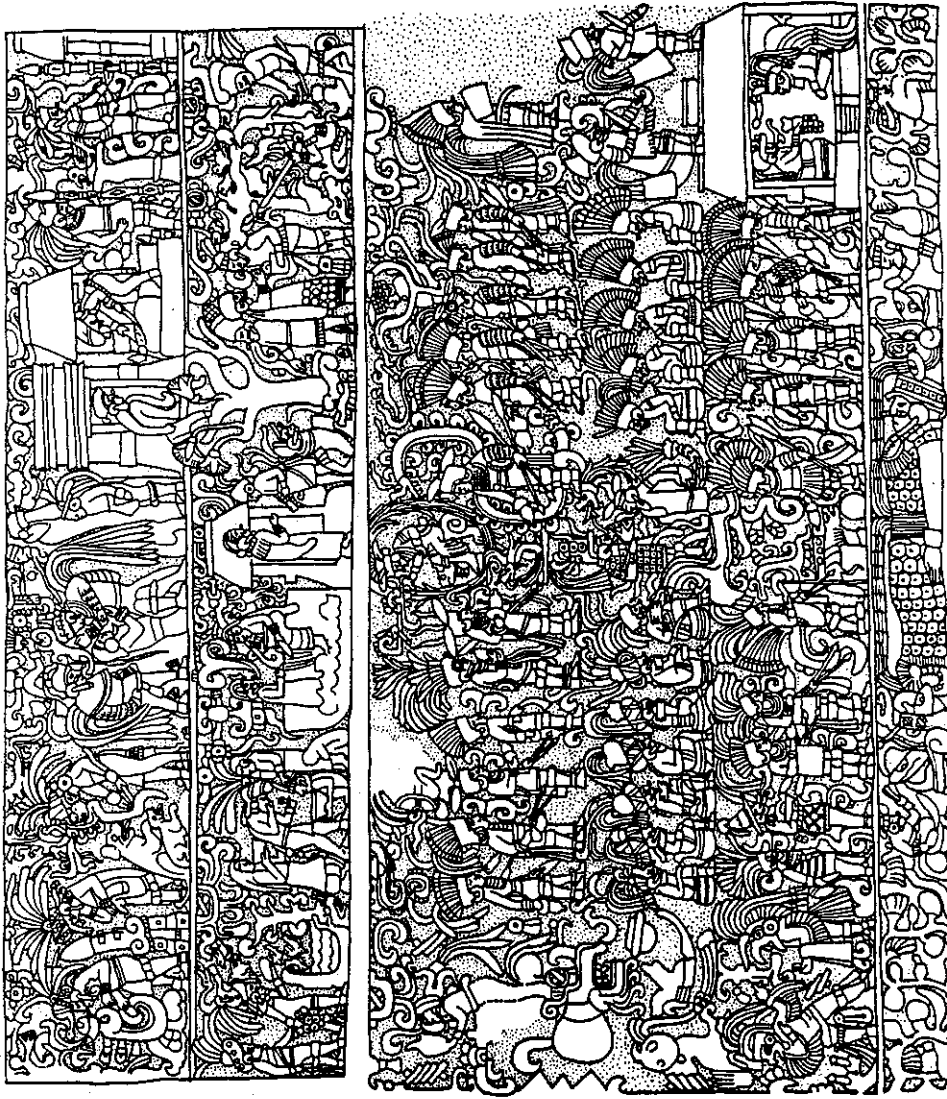


Figure 1. North Temple, North Wall and Vault Panels.
Drawing by Linda Schele

The North Temple Sculptural Panels

The North Temple scenes were carved on the North, East, and West walls of the structure's inner chamber. As at Bonampak, the North Temple vault also contains additional scenes.⁴ Few have trained scholarly expertise on the panels of the Great Ballcourt North Temple. Seler, Tozzer, and Linnea Wren published the fullest expositions on the iconography of the structure (Seler 1915; Tozzer 1930, 1957; Wren 1989; Wren and Schmidt 1991).⁵ Paucity of published drawings and photographs of the North Temple has similarly slowed interpretation. Fragmentary documentation appeared in Breton 1917, Totten 1926, Marquina 1950, and Tozzer 1930, 1957.⁶ Linnea Wren published drawings based on earlier renditions by Cochodas and Adela Breton (Wren and Schmidt 1991; Wren 1989).⁷ Finally, Schele recently prepared new renderings of the North Temple panels (Figure 1).

The North Temple reliefs depict activities associated with accession to office (Wren and Schmidt

1991:216). On the vault, these include penis perforation, vomiting rituals, gathering of *zuhuy ha*, or "virgin water," peregrinations to sacred and secular sites, and a dance re-enactment of the *Popol Vuh* myth (Figures 2 and 3). A diminutive character in the vault lower register shoots birds with a blowgun (Figures 1, 3). Michael D. Coe discovered such a re-enactment associated with a Kekchi Maya town foundation in 1543 (Estrada Monroy 1979:168-174, cited in Coe 1989:161-162).⁸ Accessions at Chichén Itzá apparently also featured recreations of the *Popol Vuh* cycle.

We argue a nose piercing ceremony accompanies the other accession rites depicted on the North Temple vault. The vault reliefs portray two small houses or temples in the center of the upper register (Figures 1, 2). Immediately to the left, three figures surround a partially prone individual. The central standing figure holds what may be a long bone awl. He aims it toward the prone figure's face. Rather than an example of captive sacrifice, we argue the scene shows a nose piercing ceremony. A tiny "floaters" hovers above the scene. Floaters elsewhere in Maya art are associated with



Figure 2. North Temple Vault. Drawing by Miguel Angel Fernandez, after Marquina 1950.

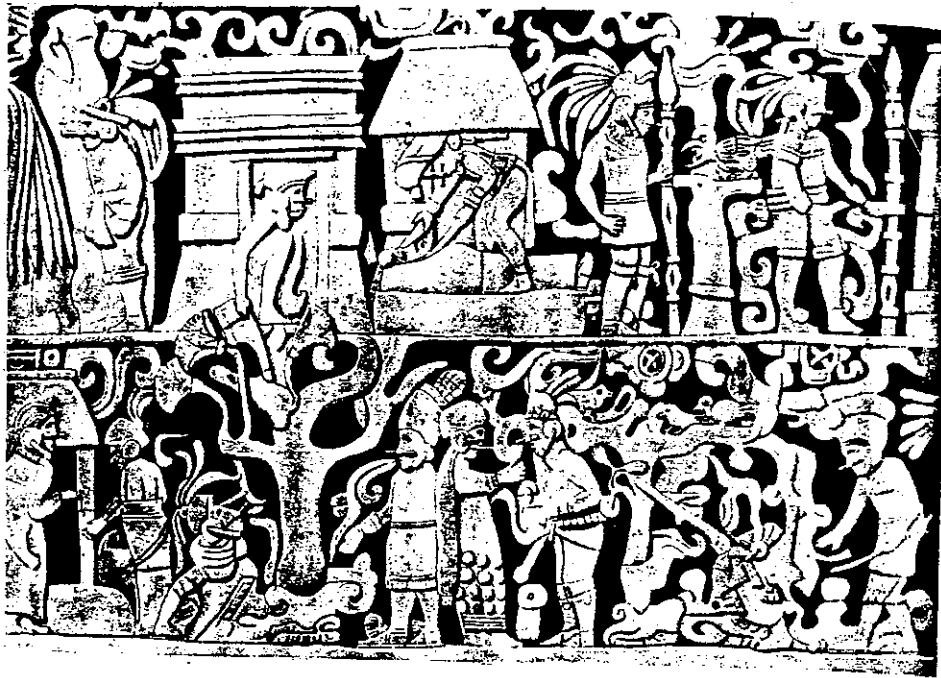


Figure 3. North Temple Vault. Drawing by Miguel Angel Fernandez, after Marquina 1950.

ancestors and deities materialized through ritual. Thus an ancestor or other god appeared at the Chichén Itzá nose piercing ceremony. Below we compare the North Temple scene with similar rituals depicted elsewhere in Late Postclassic Mesoamerica. But first, Colonial Spanish accounts documented nose piercing ceremonies in Yucatan.

Nose Piercing in Yucatan

Diego de Landa wrote that the Maya pierced the septum of the nose and inserted "amber" beads (Tozzer 1941:126). The "amber" stones were called *maat*, *matun*, or *zuli mat*, and were likely yellow topaz beads (Roys 1943:55; Vienna Dictionary ff. 13r, 98r, 162v). Oviedo y Valdés (1851-1855: Bk. 33, Ch. 6) and Herrera y Tordesillas (Tozzer 1941:219) also discussed nose piercing in early Colonial Yucatan. Incidentally, Jerónimo de Aguilar, shipwrecked Spaniard and interpreter to Cortés, reported that his crew-mate Gonzalo Guerrero would not join the Spanish party because he

had pierced his nose and become a Maya war chief (Cervantes de Salazar 1914, translated in Tozzer 1941:236). Finally, Sahagún recorded that the Aztec called the yellow topaz nose bead *apozonalli* (1938:2:355, 3:280).

Why did the Late Postclassic and early Colonial Maya pierce their noses? In 1930, Alfred Tozzer proposed that the two styles of nose beads depicted repeatedly in the art of Chichén Itzá corresponded to ethnic Mayas and Toltecs (1930:161). Whereas Toltecs wore a bead through the alae of the nose, Mayas pierced the septum with an oblong bead. Gold disks recovered from the Chichén Itzá Cenote of Sacrifice clearly show the two styles of nose beads in direct association (Figure 4).⁹ Whether the beads functioned as ethnic markers at Chichén Itzá remains unresolved. However, Classic Period Maya in the central Lowlands employed both bead and tube nose ornaments. Nose beads and the nose piercing ceremony in Yucatan reflected elevated social status.

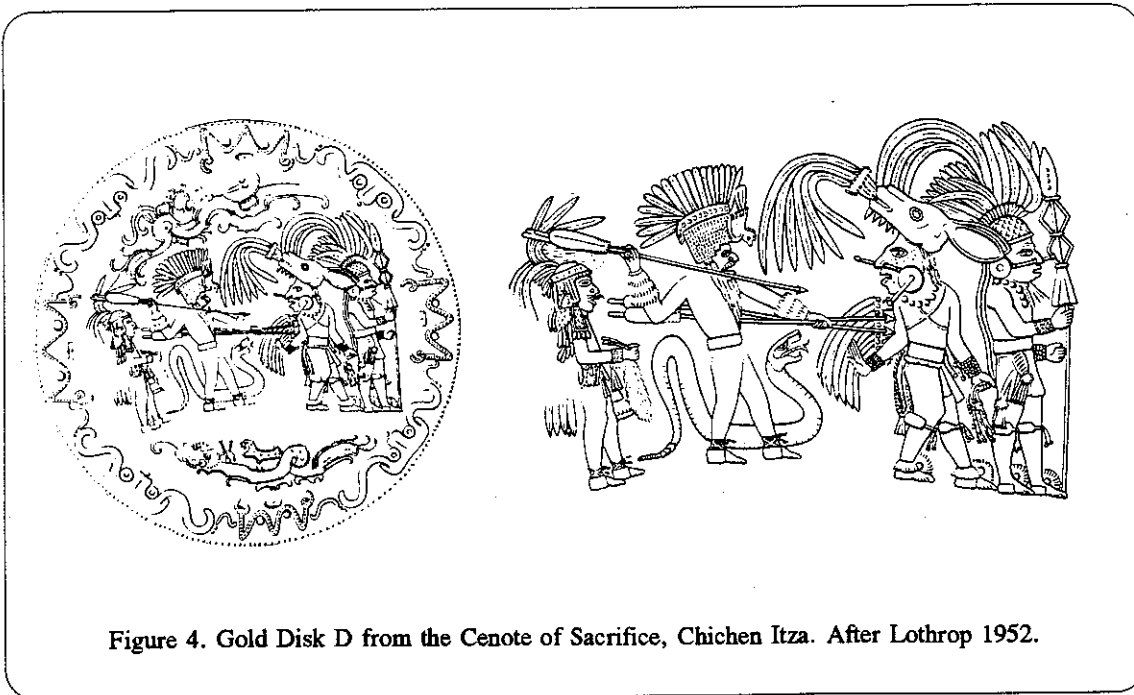


Figure 4. Gold Disk D from the Cenote of Sacrifice, Chichen Itza. After Lothrop 1952.

Nose Piercing among the Colonial Highland Maya

Nose piercing was crucial to the K'iche definition of rulership; the ceremony was foregrounded in the founding rituals for their ultimate capital, Q'umarkaj (Carmack and Mondloch 1983:195-196). The ceremonies began with the Dance of Tojil, in which each lineage danced holding its *k'abawil*, or patron deity image. Elaborate auto-sacrifice ceremonies were enacted followed by the activation of the royal palanquins. The ceremony climaxed with the nose piercing of the two most important K'iche lords, the Ajpop and the Ajpop K'ama. As described in the *Título de Totonicapan*, "the lords used precious stones to close the noses of the Ajpop and the Ajpop K'ama, who were opened and perforated here in K'iche, Q'umarcaj, in the nation of K'iche" (Carmack and Mondloch 1983:196, Koontz's translation).

In the founding event for a previous capital, Ismach, the K'iche danced the Junajpu and the Wukub Kakix Dances from the *Popol Vuh* cycle. We suggest an analogous founding dance is illustrated by the blowgunner scene in the North Temple vault (Figure 3).

Nose Piercing among the Mixtec and Aztec

Among the Mixtec, the Codices Nuttall, Bodley, and Colombino-Becker document Lord 8 Deer's rise to power. A crucial episode involves his investiture by outside forces with a nose plug (Figures 5 and 6). John Pohl (1984:129-130) noted that among the Aztec, the nose piercing ceremony conferred the status of *tecuhli*, or lineage head. This ceremony took place in nearby Tollan Cholula, and was presided over by two priests, the Aquiach, or sky lord, and the Tlachiach, or earth lord.

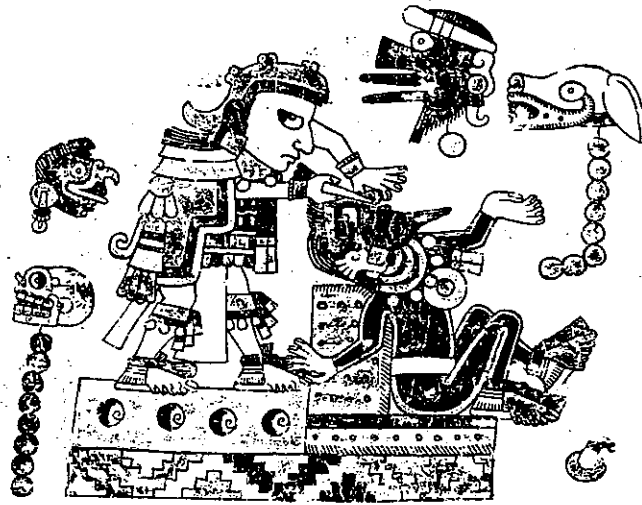


Figure 5. Nose Piercing of Lord 8 Deer, Codex Nuttall

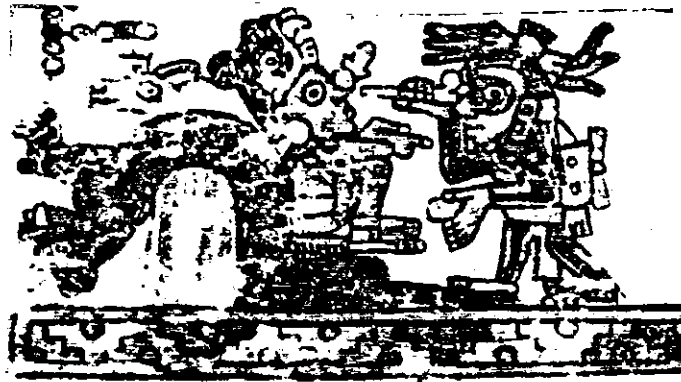


Figure 6. Nose Piercing of Lord 8 Deer, Codex Bodley

Conclusions

In this essay, we have argued that the sculpted panels of the North Temple portray a nose piercing ceremony in conjunction with accession rituals. These included dances and pageants drawn from the Maya *Popol Vuh* cycle. Analogies to ceremonies practiced by Mixtec, Aztec, and K'iche suggest that the murals also depict the accession rituals associated with founding cities and lineages. The Nose Piercing ceremony can be viewed as a Pan-Mesoamerican Post-Classic phenomenon.

Notes

1. For a good introduction to Colonial Yucatan, see Farriss 1984, Roys 1943, Chamberlain 1948, and Clendinnen 1987.

2. Ballcourts were not recognized in the Maya "Old Empire," the central Peten and surrounding areas, until the late 1920's. The Chichén Itzá ballcourt, a purportedly non-Maya architectural feature, proved that Mexicans or mexicanized Maya invaded Yucatan after the Classic period. For an early notice of ballcourts in the central lowlands, see Blom 1930.

3. In a recent essay, Koontz demonstrated that Mixtec warfare replicated war events associated with creation and lineage founders (Koontz 1991). He called this "paradigmatic warfare," and argued that historical war events pictured in the codices of the Nuttall Group were based on the template of the ritual warfare waged by founders and creator gods. With reference to Chichén Itzá, we would argue the murals of the Upper Temple of the Jaguars depict just such a paradigmatic war. Like the Mixtec kings, the Maya of Chichén Itzá legitimized their conquests by replicating the template. This explains the importance of Captain Sun Disc and Captain Serpent, who oversee war events as paradigmatic ancestral battle patrons.

4. Sculpted scenes also occur on the North Temple balustrades, entrance columns, and outer walls.

5. See also, Cohodas 1978.

6. Adela Breton prepared her drawings and tracings from excellent photographs made at the turn of the century by Teobert Maler. Unfortunately, most of Maler's Yucatecan photographs remain unpublished. Miguel Angel Fernández made the North Temple drawings in Marquina 1950.

7. Cohodas made drawings of the North Temple for his dissertation; Adela Breton in 1907 for her later article (Cohodas 1978; Breton 1917).

8. As Coe noted, the Kekchi *Popol Vuh* re-enactment both commemorated the foundation of a new village, San Juan Chamelco, and consolidated the authority of the local ruler, *Aj Pop'o Batz*, or Lord Howler Monkey (Coe 1989:161).

9. Incidentally, Edward Thompson was dredging the Sacred Well in 1902, when Alfred Tozzer first visited Yucatan. Tozzer carried several items back to the Peabody Museum at Harvard. For drawings of the gold disks, see Lothrop 1952.

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