The Ideology of the Absent: The Feathered Serpent and Classic Maya Rulership

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The papers in this volume explore the various roles that long distance interaction and exchange played in ancient Maya life and concepts of value. Things, ideas and people from afar are novelties and imbued with unique and special qualities. And as Mary Helms has eloquently illustrated in several of her publications (e.g., 1979, 1993), political elites, through their connections with peers in other earthly realms, demonstrate to their subjects that not only do they have closer connections to the supernatural world, but also to foreign places (e.g., Demarest and Foias 1993; Stone 1989). Such ties serve to show their unique abilities and power, thus justifying their right to rule. This being said, why are some things foreign adopted by ruling elite and others not? This question is important because things ‘absent’ can be just as informative as things present. For example, sacred landscapes can be assessed by what is absent just as much as by what is present. Cara Blanca in central Belize is a case in point; only a few of the 23 lakes and cenotes at the base of a long range of steep hills and cliffs have associated buildings, likely ceremonial (Kinkella 2009; Lucero and Kinkella n.d.). With the abundant water sources and nearby good agricultural land, one would expect to find the Cara Blanca area to have been densely settled, especially given the annual 4-6 month dry season when water became critical. Cara Blanca, however, served as a sacred place to the Maya because of its concentration of natural and sacred features including ancestral lineage mountains and openings in the earth (i.e., portals to the underworld or Xibalba). Unlike at centers such as Tikal, Caracol and others, the Maya at Cara Blanca did not have to build artificial counterparts in the form of temples for mountains, temple entrances for caves (another kind of portal), and reservoirs for water bodies (Fash 2005; Lucero 2006; Scarborough 1998, 2003). Consequently, the Maya left this area relatively untouched and treated it as a place for pilgrimage.

The point we are trying to make is that things absent can be just as significant as things present. And this brings us to the current topic at hand, the feathered serpent and Classic lowland Maya political ideology. Specifically, we attempt to address the question as to why southern lowland Maya rulers did not adopt feathered serpent imagery during the Early Classic (c. A.D. 250-550) when rulers at some of the most powerful polities at the time adopted nearly everything from elite Teotihuacan but feathered serpent iconography. And there can be little doubt that the feathered serpent a vital role in political and religious life at Teotihuacan.

Helms (e.g., 1979, 1993) has shown that knowledge from afar instills in rulers a sense of power and mystery to the general populace. Access to such foreign/distant/esoteric knowledge indicates their abilities to rule. “One of the most essential rationales underlying all outside associations, acquisition, and transformations involves questions of political-ideological legitimation, verification, and authenticity” (Helms 1993:49). “Regardless of the media used, however, the underlying goal remains basically the same; command of aesthetics connotes command of the moral order, socially and cosmologically, and thus evidences capacity for proper rule” (p. 67). Further, “...cultural identity and especially political legitimation is located at the place of origin, wherever that may be” (p. 192). Thus, it is not surprising that Maya rulers adopted several concepts, symbols, and exotics from afar, including those from Teotihuacan over 1000 km away (Figure 1).

**Things Foreign: Feathered Serpent Imagery and Teotihuacan**

The archetype of the feathered serpent reared its head at the Feathered Serpent Pyramid at Teotihuacan (Millon 1993:24-25), as well as on other media throughout this Mesoamerican metropolis (Sugiyama 2000) (Figure 2). Outside of Teotihuacan, the feathered serpent, variably known as Quetzalcoatl in central Mexico, K’uk’ulcan in the northern Maya lowlands and Gukumatz in highland Guatemala, was one of the most widespread gods in Mesoamerica. Saburo Sugiyama (2000:119) defines feathered serpent imagery as “a creature with a serpent head, feathered eyes, a curling snout, a wide mouth with a series of inward-curving fangings without incisors or molars, a bifurcated tongue, eyebrows with curled-up ends, a feathered body, and a rattle tail.” One of the earliest depictions of serpent imagery is Monument 19 at the Olmec site of La Venta, which portrays a serpent, quetzal feathers, and a seated, costumed man (Baldwin 1998:16; Evans 2008:Figure13.4). While the serpent does not have feathers, the crest over its head is interpreted by some as feathers and thus ancestral to the feathered serpent (Bierhorst 1990:24).
In general, the feathered serpent deity represented, depending on the aspect, time and place, knowledge, rulership, the arts or creativity, wind, water, transformative fire and regeneration, trade, heart sacrifice, fertility, time “and structured space” (Sugiyama 2000:119), and militarism and Venus (Evans 2008: 257, 353; López Austin et al. 1991; Milion 1993; Nicholson 2000; Ringle et al. 1998; Sugiyama 2000; Taube 1992a:136, 140, 2000). Sugiyama (2000:120) noted that feathered serpent imagery painted on ceramic vessels at Teotihuacan are often depicted with “a heart and/or droplet signs, which probably allude to heart sacrifice and blood.” Taube (2003) further noted that feathered serpent imagery is often depicted with the woven mat, a Mesoamerican symbol of rulership from the Early Classic through Postclassic times (e.g., Maya, Aztec, etc.). The feathered serpent also was closely associated with militarism, which is not surprising given the spread of Teotihuacan’s influence during the height of their power in the 4th through 6th centuries (Evans 2008:297). And most significantly for purposes here, it was associated with political authority up through Aztec times (Sugiyama 2004).

After the fall of Teotihuacan somewhere between the 6th and 7th centuries, the feathered serpent still prevailed throughout Mesoamerica in some form or other until the arrival of the Spanish (e.g., Cholula, Cacaxtla, Xochicalco, and Tula) (Nicholson 2000; Sugiyama 2000). In the Epiclassic or Terminal Classic in the Maya area (c. A.D. 800 to 950), feathered serpent iconography is prevalent at Chichén Itzá (Taube 1992a:136-140; Coe 2005:179-192). In the Early Postclassic period (c. A.D. 950-1150), several Mesoamerican rulers and priests took on the name of Quetzalcoatl (Nicholson 2000). One legendary figure in particular was closely tied to Quetzalcoatl, Topiltzin Ce Acatl Quetzalcoatl (Our Prince One Reed Feathered Serpent), a 10th century Toltec ruler-priest (Coe 2005:179; Nicholson 2001). Other priests and leaders also used Quetzalcoatl/K’uk’ulcan as part of their title (Pasztory 1993:51). And in the Late Postclassic (c. A.D. 1150-1521), the feathered serpent, now referred to as Quetzalcoatl, “was regarded in some parts of Central Mexico as one of the creators of humankind at the beginning of the fifth, present world, and as the deity who retrieved maize from the underworld for mankind. Quetzalcoatl was one of the patrons of rulers, priests, and merchants, an association which no doubt has deep roots…” (Evans 2008:354). The feathered serpent is found at Mayapan and elsewhere in the Maya area (e.g., among the Pipil) (Coe 2005:193-196; Pugh 2001); it was also mentioned in the Popol Vuh, the 16th century K’iche’ Maya version of the origin story (Christenson 2007), and the Annals of the Cakchiquel from Highland Guatemala (Baldwin 1998:57-59; Coe 2005:174).

Clearly the feathered serpent was a major god or supernatural entity throughout Mesoamerica over a long time period—except in the southern Maya Lowlands during the Early and Late Classic periods (c. A.D. 250-850).

Teotihuacan

Teotihuacan, the “Place of the Cattails” (Stuart 2000), is located in the Teotihuacan Valley in central Mexico and was occupied from c. 1/100 B.C. to A.D. 550/650 (Figure 3). It was the largest city in Mesoamerica, encompassing 20 km² (Cowgill 2008); its leaders may have reached their tentacles to an area extending 25,000 km² (Headrick 2007:8). Its architects planned the city aligned 15.5° east of north surrounded by chinampas and mountains, including extinct volcanoes. The city reached its pinnacle between A.D. 300-500 with 100,000 multiethic inhabitants, over 75 temples, several palaces, and grided streets with elite compounds along the main avenues and everyone else beyond in over 2000 apartment complexes (Cowgill 2008; Evans 2008:253-258, 265-275; Manzanilla 2004; Milion 1981).

Scholars do not agree as to the number of palaces at Teotihuacan (Cowgill 1997). The fact that they are difficult to identify—and quantify—aligns with other indications that the political system de-emphasized individual leaders in favor of some sort of a collective leadership (Manzanilla 2004), or a type of leadership we have yet been unable to identify. Early on in their history before A.D. 200 it might have been a different story; this was when Teotihuacanos built the monumental architectural gems for which Teotihuacan is famous, indicating some kind of centralized authority. “Early Teotihuacan rulers may have been too powerful to need such public celebration [royal portraiture], and the immense pyramids they sponsored may have been all they required in the way of monuments” (Cowgill 2008:966). Later, leaders did not sponsor massive monumental projects per se, but only maintained and enlarged what their forefathers had built. The feathered serpent was one of the major gods at Teotihuacan, along with the Storm God Tlaloc and the so-called Great Goddess (Cowgill 1997; Sugiyama 2000). The feathered serpent came to symbolize the city’s political authority (Sugiyama 2004), and some have argued for its connection to war, perhaps even Venus-related warfare (Taube 1992b).
The Temple of Quetzalcoatl or the Feathered Serpent Pyramid (Millon 1993:24-25) is located in the Ciudadela Complex on the southeast end of the Avenue of the Dead in the center of Teotihuacan; it sits across from the Great Compound, an immense open area encompassed by two large, low platforms. Teotihuacanos began building it at c. A.D. 200 and completed it by c. A.D. 300 (Cowgill 2008). After the Sun and Moon Temples, the Feathered Serpent Pyramid is the largest temple at Teotihuacan (65 x 65 m, 20 m tall); “it is notable for the cut stone apron-and-panel (talud-tablero) façades on all four sides, with three-dimensional sculptures of feathered serpents and other motifs” (Cowgill 2008:964). Other motifs include shells, denoting the temple’s relationship to water. Teotihuacanos placed another type of serpent interspersed between feathered serpent heads (see Figure 2), which Taube (1992b:60, 2000) refers to as a war serpent headdress with “mosaic platelets” and two rings above their eyes representing goggles (not Tlaloc). The war serpent refers “to both fire and warfare, and demonstrate[s] the pivotal role of these two themes in Teotihuacan worldview” (Taube 2000:324). Sugiyama (2000:135) takes a different view and suggests that the headdress instead represents the Primordial Crocodile, indicating that the temple commemorated and materialized a mythical event, not to mention the “sacred authority of the specific ruler who orchestrated the erection of the pyramid.” López Austin and colleagues (1991:103) have proposed that the Temple of Quetzalcoatl may have been “dedicated to the passage of time,” that is, a structure with calendrical features. Similarly, it could have represented the cosmos based on the position and types of burials and caches (Sugiyama 2004). Whatever its main purpose, the Feathered Serpent Pyramid clearly played a central role in Teotihuacan’s political, religious, and social life.

Some scholars have suggested that one of the tombs within the Feathered Serpent Pyramid contained the remains of a ruler; unfortunately the empty, looted chamber leaves unanswered this tantalizing question (Cowgill 2008). Teotihuacanos consecrated the temple and/or leaders at c. A.D. 200 by sacrificing 260 people, including young and older men and young women (Evans 2008:258, 271; Millon 1993:25; Sugiyama 2005). While stable oxygen isotope analysis indicates that many of the sacrificial victims were foreigners, Cowgill (2008) proposes that they were elite guards for royals rather than captured warriors. Interestingly, sometime during the 4th century A.D., Teotihuacanos defaced, burned and blocked the front (west) side of the Feathered Serpent Pyramid with a platform (adosada), perhaps initiating a different kind of leadership (Evans 2008:267-268). Did the temple’s formerponents leave Teotihuacan and head east to employ their political abilities and ambitions elsewhere (Evans 2008:299, 313-314)? Some kind of political change is indicated; Teotihuacanos ceased building monumental public buildings c. A.D. 250 and instead focused their efforts on constructing apartment compounds (Cowgill 2008).

Rulers typically leave evidence of their reign and dynastic history via royal iconography. Unlike in other parts of Mesoamerica (e.g., the Maya), not to mention cross-culturally, royal portraiture is lacking at Teotihuacan (Sugiyama 2004). In murals found throughout Teotihuacan’s elite compounds, costumes are distinct, individuals are not, even though most are clearly elites (Evans 2008:271; Sugiyama 2004). Artists at Teotihuacan did not paint using a naturalistic style, but rather one that concentrated on “a series of repetitive figures, each seemingly shaped by the same cookie cutter. They march in groups wearing virtually identical costumes...” (Headrick 2007:14). Artists clearly knew of naturalism since it is represented by several Maya murals in the Teltitl compound (Taube 2003). Just as Maya rulers did not adopt feathered serpent imagery, Teotihuacanos did not adopt naturalism in their iconography.

The depersonalized depiction of elites signifies, according to Headrick (2007:15), a collective political ideology rather than an individual one. Rather than focusing on a hierarchy among mortals, the murals emphasize it among gods and offices (Cowgill 1997). Still, there may just have been a different concept revolving around rulers; “representations of Teotihuacan rulers may actually be present, but misidentified and unrecognized” (Cowgill 2008:966). Cowgill (2008) goes so far to suggest that early Teotihuacan rulers were so powerful that they had no need for iconographic display. There is also the possibility that there was some kind of shared or joint rule; perhaps various factions, represented at the major Temples of the Sun and Moon and others, kept each other’s power in check. Despite all of this, Headrick (2007:16) makes the point that not all societies with monarchs have royal portraiture (e.g., Aztec, Mixtec, Toltec, etc.).

Headrick (2007) proposes an explanation that takes into account the lack of royal portraiture juxtaposed to clear indications for rulership (e.g., centralized planning)—a shared power system whereby different factions kept each other in check. The three most significant factions were the ruling family, military groups or orders, and lineages. Power shifted throughout history among various elite lineages. Military orders, which cross-cut lineage lines, were the main force that maintained the political system.
Thus, the system focused on maintaining the political system/offices rather than on supporting one particular family line. "Instead of viewing them as absolute kings, we are better off seeing them as figures bounded by social constraints that forced them to share power with other social entities" (p. 43). Headrick also explains the remodeling of the Feathered Serpent Pyramid as a shift in political alliances (p. 95).

Whatever the political system was, it worked. Political leaders successfully organized the city’s urban planning and agricultural systems, exacted tribute, redistributed goods in markets and throughout Mesoamerica, policed long-distance trade and merchant barrios, sponsored public ceremonies, funded the military, and so on.

**Things Foreign in the Southern Maya Lowlands**

The Classic Maya (c. A.D. 250-950) in the southern lowlands are well known for many things, especially their pyramid temples, ballcourts, elaborate tombs and iconography, inscriptions, jade and other stone items, beautifully painted ceramics, and so on (Coe 2005; Sharer and Traxler 2006). Classic Maya rulers emerged in a tropical setting with noticeable wet and dry seasons, excellent agricultural soils, albeit dispersed, and enough human labor to support the hierarchical political systems found at the multitude of Maya centers (Lucero 2006). Before the fourth century when strangers came to the Petén and elsewhere in the Maya area (or at the very least foreign concepts), kings had been ruling their polities for nearly two centuries. The Maya lacked an over-arching monarch, though several rulers at Tikal, Calakmul, and a few other centers expanded their realm and subsumed other centers and their subjects to varying degrees of success (Figure 4). The political system thus was somewhat fluid and required rulers to continuously engage their subjects to attract them to their centers during the annual dry season when agricultural fields did not demand the labor of farmers like they did in the rainy season. Farmers flocked to centers during the dry season for access to the large artificial reservoirs located next to temples and palaces. Kings realized that farmers had choices to which center they came for access to royal reservoirs, exchange, social interaction, feasts, ceremonies, ball games, and so on. Monumental architecture served as stages to attract people via ceremonies, feasts, ballgames, and markets (Lucero 2007).

One strategy rulers at Tikal and other major capitals used to attract and keep supporters was to not only claim closer connections to supernatural forces, but also to distant places, knowledge and rulers. Central Mexican influences, in particular, have been much written about. Just as interesting as what foreign things leaders adopted was what they did not adopt. As mentioned, in the feathered serpent was quite important in central Mexico, but was something not adopted by Maya rulers. To illustrate the significance of the lack of feathered serpent imagery in the southern Maya lowlands, we focus on Tikal (Figure 5).

When the ‘arrival of strangers’ from Teotihuacan, over 1000 km distant, took place on January 15, A.D. 378 at Tikal, Guatemala, Maya royalty and nobility soon adopted many things foreign and added them to the other central Mexican traits they had been adopting since about the second or third century A.D.—the storm god Tlaloc, military imagery, talud-tablero architecture, Pachuca obsidian, E-Group complexes, Thin Orange wares, slab-footed ceramic vessels, and so on (Fash and Fash 2000; Martin and Grube 2008:28-33; Stuart 2000). Mexican influences had been flowing into Tikal from c. A.D. 250, embodied at Mundo Perdido where excavations have exposed buildings in “Mexican-influenced” talud-tablero style (Laporte 2003; Laporte and Fialko 1990, 1995). Martin and Grube (2008:29) go so far to suggest that this complex “ved with the North Acropolis as the focus of Early Classic Tikal and, between 250 and 378, might even have supplanted it as the royal burial ground.” In other words, “the earliest examples of such architecture appear 100-200 years before the arrival of ‘foreigners’ in A.D. 378" (Marcus 2003b:91; Laporte 2003). The idea for talud-tablero architecture, according to Cowgill (2003), may not have necessarily even come from Teotihuacan, but from Puebla and Tlaxcala, where this style appeared by, if not earlier than, A.D. 200. Further, many influences may have come from intermediary centers or via other Maya centers (e.g., Kaminaljuyu) (Marcus 2003a).

No matter the nature of the ‘arrival’ of Siyaj K’ah’k’ and his entourage/army/elite warriors/etc. at Tikal, political repercussions ensued (Stuart 2000). The same day, January 15, Tikal’s current ruler, Chak Tok Ich’aak’ ‘entered the water’—that is, he died. While no battles are recorded in the inscriptions (Braswell 2003), monuments were smashed and hidden (Martin and Grube 2008:29). The ‘New Order,’ as several scholars refer to this period, brought a new political ideology and iconography (Coggins 1975;
Kings in Mexican attire began to appear carved in stone and painted on ceramics (e.g., Stela 4, 31, and 32 at Tikal; Borowicz 2003; Stuart 2000). Siyaj K’ahk’, likely a representative for Spearthrower Owl, installed a new ruler on September 12, A.D. 379, Spearthrower Owl’s son, Yax Nuun Ahyi I. Spearthrower Owl himself had acceded to the throne, perhaps at Teotihuacan, in A.D. 374 (Martin and Grube 2008:31; Sharer with Traxler 2006:324) and reigned for 65 years until A.D. 439 (Stuart 2000).1 Whoever the players were and from where ever they came, the point is that there was an obvious influx of central Mexican iconography, prestige items, and political ideas (Braswell 2003). Interestingly, neither Siyaj K’ahk’ nor Spearthrower Owl are depicted in Maya iconography (Marcus 2003a); might this be related to their background role in instituting a new era at Tikal?2 Or might this trend mirror the tradition at Teotihuacan where royal portraits are lacking? That said, both of these principal players are mentioned in the inscriptions with the Kalomte’ title, on Stelae 4 and 31 for Siyaj K’ahk’, and on Stela 31 for Spearthrower Owl (Stuart 2000)—a claim only a few Maya kings could boast.

An obvious entity the Maya did not adopt was the feathered serpent (Nicholson 1987; Taube 1992b). As mentioned, it was a major force at Teotihuacan. The Feathered Serpent Pyramid leaves little doubt of this fact. Why didn’t Classic Maya royalty adopt this deity and its imagery? What it represented would have served Maya kings well—political authority, militarism, water, and so on (Miller and Taube 1997:141-142). Epiclassic and Postclassic Maya adopted it. Was it because it was associated with something that was not palatable to Maya rulers, even the new ones at Tikal? One would think that its association with Venus and warfare was something the Maya could appreciate since they, too, attached a significance to this pairing (Taube 1992b). That said, they adopted military imagery, and it would be interesting to postulate if it had anything to do with military orders, similar to what was found in Aztec society (Cowgill 1997). Interestingly, Maya rulers did adopt certain elements from the Feathered Serpent Pyramid—what Taube (1992b) refers to as the war serpent headdress associated with war and fire, and identified by the yawning serpent jaws and mosaic platelets (e.g., Lamanai Stela 9, a Nohmul cylindrical vase, Piedras Negras Stela 26, Lintel 2 of Temple I at Tikal, etc.). Not surprisingly, these examples are found in iconographic contexts of rulership and war at Tikal, Piedras Negras, Lamanai, Copán, Bonampak, and elsewhere in the Classic Maya world.

Elsewhere during the Early Classic in the Maya world, feathered serpent imagery is found at a few sites including Acanceh in the northern lowlands (Coe 2005:109), Kaminaljuyu in Guatemala (Valades 1995:20; VanKirk and Bassett-VanKirk 1966:97), Copán (Fash and Fash 1996; Sharer 2003), and as far east as the Usumacinta River drainage in Guatemala (Proskouriakoff and Joyce 1993). For example, Stela 26 at Piedras Negras depicts an armed warrior holding a feathered serpent staff (Schele and Grube 1994:111; Stone 1989). Fash and Fash (1996:132) describe two large stucco birds with a head of a macaw found on Ballcourts I and II at Copán. On their midsection, the “plumed reptilian would be nearly identical to the feathered serpent heads of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl at Teotihuacan were it not for the severed right forearm and hand that it holds in its jaws.” It is missing from most capitals, though, including Tikal, Calakmul, Caracol, and others. In general, evidence for other types of central Mexican iconography and goods is not evenly distributed across Mesoamerica (Cowgill 2003) (e.g., Altun Ha, Oxkintok, and Becan).

In contrast to the Early Classic period when there is evidence for direct foreign interaction, in the Late Classic (c. A.D. 550 to 850), there is little or no evidence for direct engagement (Stuart 2000), though rulers still relied on Teotihuacan icons, especially military imagery, to bolster their claims to rule (e.g., at Tikal, Rio Azul, etc.; Borowicz 2003; Martin and Grube 2008). As was the case during the Early Classic, there is little or no evidence of feathered serpent iconography in Late Classic Maya royal life. Rulers at Tikal, Copán and elsewhere also incorporated the central Mexican Storm God, Tlaloc (Fash 1998; Schele and Miller 1986:213). An additional rain god in a rainfall-dependent society not only helped farmers, but rulers’ legitimacy. For centuries after Teotihuacan fell, Maya kings evoked “Teotihuacan as both a place and an idea of political origin” (Stuart 2000:466). While it can be argued that gods are rarely

1 See Braswell (2003) for alternative explanations of who each player was in this political drama. For example, Siyaj K’a’ahk’ even may have been from Tikal originally.
2 Fash and Fash (2000) note that Copán’s founding ruler, K’inich Yax K’uk’ Mo’, another ‘stranger’ who also instituted a new era, did not commission any portraits of himself during his reign. His descendants, however, did not hesitate to depict him as their predecessor and ancestor. In fact, Copán’s rulers continued emphasizing connections to Teotihuacan until its political system collapsed in the ninth century.
depicted in the forefront of Late Classic Maya iconography to explain the lack of feathered serpent imagery, one still finds rulers and priests impersonating gods or wearing emblems and signs that represent certain gods (Houston and Stuart 1996; Kubler 1969:35)—except the feathered serpent deity, of course.

The Maya did not adopt feathered serpent imagery until the Epiclassic or Terminal Classic and Early Postclassic Periods. The Maya at Chichén Itzá, for example, built a temple dedicated to the feathered serpent, the Castillo, and emblazoned the wallcourt and the Temple of the Warriors with plumed serpent imagery (Baldwin 1998:61-69; Coe 2005:179-192; Ringle et al. 1998). Reasons why the Maya at Chichén Itzá adopted this and other central Mexican concepts and iconography can help explain why feathered serpent imagery was not adopted earlier in the Classic period further south. After rulers lost power by the A.D. 900’s in the southern Maya lowlands, population shifted in all directions, including north to Chichén Itzá and northern centers (Cobos 2004); people were attracted by better economic opportunities—and a new and different ideology centered around K’u’uk’ulcan. As a matter of fact, many Terminal Classic inscriptions no longer incorporated individual rulers or dynasties, but instead emphasized deities (Wren and Schmidt 1991). This should come as no surprise; southern lowland rulers had failed the Maya; why would people put their trust in gods associated with Classic Maya kings? They required something new and different to revitalize their faith in political authority. And if indeed the feathered serpent deity is associated with shared or joint leadership, the type of rulership found at Chichén Itzá and other Postclassic centers (Ringle et al. 1998), it would strengthen the case for why Classic Maya rulers did not adopt it—exactly because it was associated with shared power, a practice southern kings did not intend to adopt.

**Discussion and Concluding Remarks**

Selective adoption of things from afar clearly had political implications. This fact is indicated by what things foreign rulers did and did not adopt. They realized the power of symbols and what they meant to their subjects. This concept fits well with the Helms (1993:192) quote in the introduction that “political legitimation is located at the place of origin.” Thus, leaders only adopted icons/things that would support and justify their right to rule—not those that would question it.

In the southern Maya lowlands, elites adopted certain symbols from Teotihuacan, central Mexico, and other Maya sites. Interestingly, Cowgill (1997) notes that Teotihuacan’s elites did not adopt many foreign symbols at all—perhaps because symbols from elsewhere did not align with political ideologies at Teotihuacan. That said, was this avoidance of foreign symbolism due to the fact that polities elsewhere were hierarchically structured, and that this way of governing did not sit well with Teotihuacan’s leaders, who may have shared power amongst themselves?

Shared power is found in several areas of Mesoamerica, even among gods. This joint leadership is epitomized by the Aztec patron deities, Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli; they even share a temple, the Templo Mayor, in the ceremonial core of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. Tlaloc was the god of water and fertility, and Huitzilopochtli the god of war and death (Matos Moctezuma 1995:8). At Teotihuacan, the Feathered Serpent Pyramid illustrates another dual deity concept—the feathered serpent and the war serpent.

It is possible that the alternating serpent heads, Quetzalcoatl and the War Serpent, refer to dual aspects of rulership, the feathered serpent with fertility and the interior affairs of the state, and the War Serpent with military conquest and empire. This could partly explain why the War Serpent is of far greater distribution than the feathered serpent in Classic Mesoamerica. In contrast to the War Serpent, the feathered serpent is notably rare among the Classic Maya and Zapotec [Taube 1992b:83].

If the feathered serpent deity indeed was associated with joint, shared or dual rulership, which it very likely was, it is not surprising that Classic Maya kings did not incorporate this god into their pantheon. To support this notion, one only has to look at Chichén Itzá and other Postclassic centers (e.g., Mayapan), where the feathered serpent is everywhere royal portraiture is not. Whether or not the political system at Chichén Itzá and other northern centers involved joint or shared rule, the de-emphasis on individual leaders and emphasis on deities, as well as warrior cults, indicates a situation where the feathered serpent played a particular role that did not suit Classic Maya rulers in the southern lowlands.
The absence of feathered serpent imagery at major Classic period Maya sites and its prevalence at Teotihuacan also says as much about leadership at the latter than it does for the Maya—some type of shared or joint rule.

In conclusion, long-distance items and ideas are exotic and served to bolster rulers’ claims of special connections that their subjects did not have. It should come as no surprise that Maya kings would only adopt ideas and things that further supported their right to rule—and avoid anything that was an anathema to their political way of thinking.
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