Palaces and Courtly Culture in Ancient Mesoamerica

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Palaces and Courtly Culture in Ancient Mesoamerica: An Introduction

Julie Nehammer Knub, Jesper Nielsen & Christophe Helmke

This volume brings together recent studies on aspects of high elite culture and royal courts in ancient Mesoamerica. This research has been undertaken by graduate students and staff of the onetime Department of American Indian Languages and Cultures of the Institute for Cross-cultural and Regional Studies at the University of Copenhagen. Although the Department and Institute have now been re-designated, we continue as the American Indian Languages and Cultures studies of the Department for Cross-cultural and Regional Studies at the same university. More specifically this monograph aims to provide novel insights on a variety of facets of courtly culture that to date have not been the subject of other academic treatments. As such, with this volume we hope to present new interpretations and findings in this growing field of research. The contributors make use of archaeological, iconographic, epigraphic and linguistic material in their analyses and the volume thereby reflects the inter- and multidisciplinary approach to research that is encouraged as part of the curriculum of American Indian Languages and Cultures studies. The monograph comprises chapters that focus on different Mesoamerican cultures from time periods spanning from the Early Classic (after A.D. 200) until shortly after the Spanish conquest (after A.D. 1521), and references are made to Native American cultures in the modern nations that now extend across the Mesoamerican culture area. The first half of the volume focuses on the cultures of the Central Mexican Highlands, starting with that of the Early Classic metropolis Teotihuacan (A.D. 200-550), going on to the Epiclassic site of Cacaxtla (A.D. 600-950), followed by Early Postclassic Tula (A.D. 900-1100), and ending with the Late Postclassic Aztec (A.D. 1300-1521). The second half of the volume concentrates on aspects of courtly life among the ancient Maya, a cultural area that extends from the southern half of present-day Mexico to the western portions of Honduras and El Salvador, thereby encompassing the entirety of Guatemala and Belize as well.

The chapters that constitute this volume provide new insights and recent research on courtly life and customs in two key regions of Mesoamerica. Still this volumes leaves room for studies of many aspects of courtly life and several fascinating Mesoamerican cultures that fall outside of the scope of the present work. Thus, while there is a growing interest in palace structures and courtly life in the Maya area (*e.g.*, Inomata & Houston 2001; Joyce 2003; Miller & Martin 2004), as well as Classic and Postclassic central Mexico (*e.g.*, Evans & Pillsbury 2004), fewer publications treat these topics for Early and Middle Formative Mesoamerica (1500-400 B.C.). Several factors may explain this, the more obvious being that the majority of Formative communities were presumably not of a size and socio-political complexity that would allow for the construction of the type of architectural entities that we today recognize and classify as "palaces". Other possible explanations would be that potential palatial structures were either constructed from perishable materials or engulfed by the architecture of subsequent occupations or reused as core materials in such later structures. With regard to what is usually referred to as the first civilization of Mesoamerica, that of the Olmecs of southern Veracruz and Tabasco, it is well-known that major sites such as Early Formative San Lorenzo and Middle Formative La Venta displayed both monumental architecture and sculpture. Traits such as these are normally taken as indicative of a hierarchical, stratified society with a strong ruling elite, and in recent years archaeologists have excavated what they believe could be the residence and palace of Olmec rulers at San Lorenzo. Thus, based on Ann Cyphers' work (Cyphers 1997) Christopher Pool (2007: 100) describes the assumed residences of rulers on the San Lorenzo plateau as follows:

> The elites of San Lorenzo lived in large structures raised on low clay platforms amidst the monuments that legitimized their authority. One such platform (D4-7) measures 50 x 75 m. twenty post-molds on the platform mark the walls of an apsidal structure 12 m long and 9 m wide […]. The earthen walls and floor of another elite residence, dubbed the "Red Palace", were plastered with sand stained by hematite.

The "Red Palace" may thus constitute evidence of some of the earliest palatial structures in Mesoamerica, but there are other Formative sites that may challenge the idea that the Olmecs were the first to build palaces. On the Pacific Coast of Mexico possible elite residences dating to the beginning of the Early Formative period have been excavated at sites such as Paso de la Amada (*e.g.*, Lesure 1997; Clark 2004; see also Pool 2007: 184-195). Whether these Formative platform structures should be designated as palaces or more neutrally as high-status residences in large measure depends on the criteria and definition of a palace.

Another region that is not discussed in detail in the present volume is the state of Oaxaca and the Oto-manguean cultures of the area, with the Zapotec and Mixtec prominent among them. This omission is the result of the contributors' research interests, and should not be taken as a sign that this region was somehow of lesser importance when it comes to palaces and elite culture. Quite to the contrary, there is evidence of elite residences or early "palaces" in Middle Formative Oaxaca (Spencer & Redmond 1983, 2004; Clark 2004) and the famous Zapotec capital of Monte Albán plays a key role in our knowledge of the emergence and development of states in Mesoamerica from the Middle Formative period and onwards. Of particular interest are also the valuable ethnohistorical descriptions of Zapotec royal palaces (*quihuitào*) and their diverse functions (see Flannery 1983; Spencer & Redmond 2004). Central contributions and further references to the study of royal palaces and courtly life in Oaxaca can be found in Flannery (1983), Marcus & Flannery (1996: Chap. 13), González Licón (2004), Spencer & Redmond (2004: 442-445), whereas for a discussion of Late Postclassic Zapotec palace structures and courtly rituals in Mitla, see Pohl (1999). As a result it is clear that palatial culture in Mesoamerica has a bright future as a subject of study. Let us now review the eight contributions that constitute this volume.

The first chapter of the volume, by JESPER NIELSEN, is a discussion of palatial compounds of the ancient metropolis Teotihuacan in Central Mexico, and addresses our current understanding of social differentiation and rulership at Teotihuacan and the intriguing possibility of a multi-palatial city. Thus, one of the best-known characteristics of Teotihuacan is the amount of large residential compounds, the remnants of which comprise the bulk of the archaeological site. Many of these compounds display richly painted murals, have their own 'private' temple structures, or shrines, and contained rich graves of apparently high-ranking individuals. As a consequence, several of the excavated compounds have been described as palaces, such as the so-called Quetzalpapalotl Palace located near the Moon Pyramid. Recently, excavations at the large compound named Xalla in the north-eastern section of Teotihuacan have prompted archaeologists to suggest that this is the most likely candidate for an actual palatial compound. After reviewing the criteria that define palaces and that can be used to identify them, Nielsen focuses on the Xalla compound and provides a critical review of the evidence that has been used to suggest that this was the principal palace of Teotihuacan.

In the second chapter, CHRISTOPHE HELMKE and JESPER NIELSEN present comparative analyses of select iconographic elements found at Cacaxtla, Central Mexico. Whereas it has long been recognized that the murals of the site of Cacaxtla exhibit a distinct style that reflects strong Maya influence, to date no attempt had been made to provide precise stylistic dates or to define the origins of these features within the Maya area. Through the evaluation of the iconographic elements that find their origin in the repertoire and canons of Maya art the authors are able to demonstrate that several iconographic elements indeed find their source in the iconography of the ancient Maya. Since the Maya examples are well-dated, given that monuments are paired with calendrical notations, it is possible to propose independent temporal intervals to which the various murals belong. On the basis of discrete iconographic elements, it has also been possible to identify the specific area of the Maya heartland from which the influence stems. In identifying Cacaxtla as a court complex, and the seat of a distinct polity, we are now in a better position to gauge the timing and source of the Maya influence that is so prominently displayed in the murals of the site.

Thereafter, HELLE HOVMAND-RASMUSSEN examines the relationship that the Mexica Aztecs, inhabitants of Tenochtitlan (c. A.D. 1325-1521) maintained to the preceding Toltec civilization that once thrived at what is now the archaeological site of Tula, Hidalgo. The Mexica held in high esteem the past civilizations of Central Mexico, which were their cultural predecessors, and some of which were referred to in the early colonial period and in matching documents under the broad heading of "Toltecs". This chapter looks into the relationship that the Mexica maintained to one of these Toltec civilizations, which flourished around A.D. 900-1100 at Tula, Hidalgo. Three approaches will be used: Firstly, a summary of how the Toltecs in general were portrayed in the early colonial documents from the Aztec heartland will be provided. Secondly, examples from the archaeological finds in Tula that show how the Mexica presence at the site is evident in the Late Postclassic period will be drawn, and thirdly, Hovmand-Rasmussen demonstrates how the Mexica employed iconography and architecture from Tula in the sacred precinct of Tenochtitlan. She also argues that this use partly had the purpose of emphasizing that the grandeur of the Mexica was in line with the former Toltec civilization, in keeping with sites such as Teotihuacan, Xochicalco and Tula – which thereby helped to entitle the Mexica in their right rule over the Aztec empire.

The following contribution by CASPER JACOBSEN discusses the hierarchical structure of the court of Tenochtitlan and focuses on its function, as the paramount institution, in Mexica society. He defines the nature of the Mexica court and its role through an overview of its institutions and members, as well as their main areas of responsibility. Jacobsen argues that the political power of Tenochtitlan was contained in the courtly offices and institutions. By centering the political power in the court and at the same time setting forth strictly controlled paths of access to its offices, the highest political tier ensured that the objectives of the polity were pursued by commoners and nobles alike through their efforts to obtain important and prestigious posts at the court.

Bridging the two parts of the volume is a comparative chapter by ROSA-MARIA WORM DANBO and CHRISTOPHE HELMKE on courtly etiquette, or the formalized forms of address that dictated speech and interlocutions between individuals within the confines of Maya and Aztec palaces. In the pursuit of the past one of the greatest challenges is the study of the intangible, that which does not preserve in the archaeological record. Thus, whereas we can study ancient palaces and associated material culture, the manners, demeanours and civilities of the courts remain essentially mute to the modern researcher. As a means of addressing precisely this, the chapter engages courtly etiquette, as attested in two major sources, namely the early colonial *Florentine Codex* (c. A.D. 1540-1585) and Classic Maya glyphic texts (c. A.D. 292-909) from a variety of sites, most notably from Palenque. The Florentine Codex – a twelve-book encyclopaedia of Aztec culture written in a Spanish and Nawatl and compiled by Fray Bernadino Sahagún – is of particular interest since Book 6 is entirely dedicated to rhetoric and eloquent oratory used for addressing regal figures and the divine. Although the Maya examples are few, they preserve highly revealing captions of first and second person orations exchanged between subordinates and superiors. Since certain idiomatic expressions and orations are shared between the Maya and the Aztec, despite the great temporal depth and spatial distance that separates the two cultures, it seems plausible to suggest that at least some features of courtly etiquette were much more widely shared in Mesoamerica than has heretofore been recognized. These findings ultimately have implications as to the origins and dissemination of courtly etiquette across Mesoamerica and its relation to the advent of socially-stratified and complex societies.

Next the focus turns towards the Maya, with the chapter by JULIE NEHAMMER KNUB, which centres on the types of body paint employed in the royal court, a cultural feature that served as an important social and symbolic expression. Although it has long been recognized that body painting was part of the aesthetic repertoire of the royal court of the ancient Maya, virtually no research has focused on the symbolic meaning, significance or patterning of this art form. Many examples of body paint have been documented – depicted on Classic period (c. A.D. 300-800) polychrome ceramics – and subjected to a comparative study, in order to determine how different types of body paint were employed in the royal court of the ancient Maya. Body paint was used a means of displaying social identity, and as a consequence the choice of colour and patterning was dependent on social context, gender, status and

occupation of the adorned. In addition, the symbolic meaning of the body paint found in the royal court of the Maya was underlined by visual references to the supernatural world as well as being imbued with notions cued by the explicit usage of particular colours. As such, the chapter examines the manner in which body paint was used at court, and served as a marker of identity within this specific social sphere.

In the following chapter MADS SKYTTE JØRGENSEN and GUIDO KREMPEL relate the rediscovery of the ancient Maya court of *Namaan*, Guatemala, on the basis of glyphic references to several key rulers, which in turn also provide clues as to its dynastic history and the interactions it maintained with neighbouring courts. Several Classic Maya individuals carrying royal titles are known from references in the glyphic corpus, but the corresponding archaeological site from which they hail, in many cases, remains unknown. However, during the 7th and 8th centuries A.D., rulers bore the Emblem Glyph title of *Namaan*, a toponym that has now been matched to the archaeological site of La Florida, in north-western Guatemala. The site of La Florida is located on the banks of the Río San Pedro Martír, a major tributary to the Usumacinta River. The history of *Namaan,* as well as the archaeological site, have yet to be investigated thoroughly. Due to intense looting and erosion of the surviving monuments, the historical record remains poorly understood. Nevertheless, historical figures carrying the *Namaan* title are cited in the texts of adjacent sites such as Piedras Negras, Yaxchilan and Motul de San José. It is on this basis that several of the rulers of *Namaan* can be identified, demonstrating not only the existence and autonomy of the *Namaan* court, but also providing telltale clues as its dynastic history and the interactions it maintained with neighbouring courts, both friends and foes. As such the role of the *Namaan* court in the geopolitical landscape of the area can be partially reconstructed.

In the final chapter RIKKE MARIE SØEGAARD closes the volume by focusing on royal binding ceremonies. She poses the questions "how did the Late Classic royal court at Yaxchilan use the bundles depicted on six carved limestone lintels at the site? What role did the bundles play in those ceremonies? And is it possible to come closer to an understanding of what the contents of the bundles were?". Here, Søegaard presents what we know of these bundles from several decades of academic research. She explores images, hieroglyphic texts, archaeological finds, historical sources and ethnographic material in an integrative approach, and by addressing all available data she draws conclusions on these enigmatic bundles. She takes on a regional approach focused on the ancient Maya, as opposed to the Mesoamerican or cross-cultural approach often employed in research on ritual bundles. In light of this collective sample of data, she suggests new interpretations of the monuments and offers a hypothesis on the ritual function of the bundles at Yaxchilan.

Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to David Davison of Archaeopress for his assistance in preparing this volume for publication. We are also incredibly grateful for the financial support offered by the publications committee of the Department for Cross-cultural and Regional Studies, and in particular to Denise Gimpel and the head of the department, Ingolf Thuesen, whose help ensured the publication of this volume.

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