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Yaxchilan Lintel 25 as a Cometary Record

Carlos Trenary

As Taube has recently demonstrated, meteors and comets are an important feature of Mesoamerican religion and art.¹ Taube's independent investigation supports and expands upon proposals I made earlier.² I hope to demonstrate that based upon the recognition of the fact that meteors and comets may have played an important role in Mesoamerican religion, a new revised interpretation can be made of Yaxchilan's lintel 25 (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Lintel 25 from Yaxchilan. The Trustees of The British Museum, London. Dimensions: 130.1 x 86.3 x 10.1 cm. Photo by Justin Kerr.

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Clube and Napier have noted that comets may have disappeared from Babylonian art, not because they are not there, but because we don't see them as such. Comets are probably described as deities, humans who have achieved an apotheosis. 'If we accept this picture of comets as divine figures in the sky, we are obliged to see them as being among the most important and fundamental elements in the sky.'³

Without doubt, the well known Yaxchilan Lintel 25 is a masterpiece of Mayan art. Its deeply incised relief, the fine detail of features and its exquisite imagery and symbolism has fascinated both scholars and laymen. Detailed descriptions of the lintel can be found in Schele and Miller.⁴

The most commonly accepted interpretation of the lintel is the one provided by Schele and Miller. Briefly, they state that the lintel represents 'a ritually induced hallucinatory vision manifested as a huge rearing serpent. The day of this event is Shield Jaguar's accession, 9.12.9.8.1 5 Imix 4 Mac, or 23 October AD 681'. They go on to describe the scene which depicts Lady Xoc gazing up at the vision serpent, an event which they believe took place indoors, and state that the inscription refers to the ruler, Shield Jaguar, and that the lintel represents a monument commemorating his accession on that date. Stuart and Tate believe that the warrior figure emerging from the jaws of the serpent is in fact Shield Jaguar. In a later work, Schele and Freidel state that the figure emerging from the head of the serpent is the founding ancestor of the Yaxchilan dynasty, Yat-Balam, Progenitor-Jaguar, not Shield Jaguar, called forth by Lady Xoc.⁵

Tate comments:

Recently, Linda Schele and David Freidel have deciphered the text at G1 and G2 as the name of the lineage founder, Yat-Balam (Progenitor-Jaguar), and suggested that this is the identity of the figure within the mouth of the Vision Serpent. However, this event is still, after all, Shield Jaguar's accession day, when he performs the role set forth by Yat-Balam. The image of a warrior in the serpent mouth is a metaphor for the psychic transition from mere human to king. The metaphor recalls the spiritually charged transformation made by Yat-Balam and connects the two kings in a continuous tradition. Shield Jaguar becomes, in that moment, the sacred royal person and through his sacrifices, communicates with his lineage founder.⁶

After reviewing the descriptions of Lintel 25 by Kubler, Furst, Schele, Miller, Freidel, and Stuart, Tate summarily states:

In review, the Yaxchilan Vision Serpents occur on monuments illustrating important moments of transition in the life of a royal Maya: accession to the throne, a transformation from human to divine status, and birth. At these crucial moments Maya individuals gained ritual efficacy expressed in a metaphor of heat. The heat possessed by an individual and by ritual substances and speech rendered human activities and sacrifices more palatable to the supernaturals. In the *Popul Vuh* this was metaphorically illustrated by the exchange made by Tohil and humans. In return for the gift of fire, the people should nourish the gods with blood. It seems likely that as Freidel has suggested, this covenant was renewed between the Maya king and the gods, specifically God K, the First Ancestor and Tohil of the *Popul Vuh*, and the god named as the object of the bloodletting verb on lintels 25, 13, 14, and stela 35. Whether the Vision Serpent was the embodiment of form that ritually heated substances take, as I suspect, or a hallucination brought about by blood loss is still not proven satisfactorily.⁷

But as Taube has demonstrated, vision serpents or war serpents might in fact be iconographic representations of comets or meteors. Coincidentally, Lintel 25's imagery can be matched to events in China only 5 days prior to the date on the inscription. On 17 October 681:

Liu Ching-ning, a woman of Wan-nien Township [in Ch'ang-an], entered the office of the Grand Notariate. She was riding a white horse and was dressed in white clothing, with a suite of eighty or ninety men. She came up to the couch in the Director's audience hall, sat down, and asked if there had been any disaster or strange event recently. The Director of The Grand Notariate, Yao Yuan-pien, had her held for questioning. That night a broom-comet was seen within the Heavenly Market.⁸

Schaefer continues:

This asterism is a complex arrangement of stars in Hercules, Ophiuchus, and Serpens, and had authority over the basic

commodities of mankind, notably food and clothing. (Some said, however, that this event foreshadowed a change of capital city.) The comet's tail was 50 feet long- again, some texts say only five feet- and became shorter as it moved eastward across the sky to River Drum, a military constellation in Aquila. On 3 November it vanished.⁹

Because a comet was seen in China at nearly the same time as the date inscribed on Lintel 25, it suggests that the scene depicted on the lintel may depict the same astronomical event. Schele and Miller's interpretation of the scene is perhaps less hallucinatory than they believe, and the event recorded may have been an event taking place in the sky and fearfully observed by Lady Xoc. Tate says of the hieroglyphic inscription:

Early interpretations of the scenes with free-standing serpents were guided by the appearance of the human figures emerging from the serpent's upper heads. They were made before the event on Lintel 25 ...was recognized as the accession of Shield Jaguar. Proskouriakoff noted the warrior outfit of the emerging figure and dubbed it the 'spirit of a long deceased warrior...whose apotheosis is symbolized by the serpent and the mask.'¹⁰

Tate deciphers the hieroglyphic inscription on the lintel as follows :

The One Who Scatters Incense, Lady Xoc, during the vigil for the ceremony in the plaza at the Split Sky place.

On 5 Imix 4 Mac , its conjuring, its substitute spirit, its flint lance and war shield of He of Smoke, O Chac, its holy perforator to conjure the 4 Katun Shield Jaguar, the Guardian of Ah Ahual, the Holy Lord of Yaxchilan, Bacab.

It is recorded, [the] alter ego [in?] [of?] the house of the Founder of the Lineage.¹¹

From this inscription, and from Tate's and Proskouriakoff's description of the images, there is a general agreement that there is an apotheosis depicted on lintel 25. Lady Xoc sees the 'substitute spirit' of Shield Jaguar. If in fact this scene records the appearance of a comet, it would not be the first time an apotheosis had been associated with the elevation

of a ruler to the status of a god with the appearance of a comet. According to Sagan and Druyan:

It was hard not to take the comets personally. Nearly everybody did. This tendency to construe each apparition as a telegram to the locals from the gods permeates virtually every cometary record until the sixteenth century. Rarely have so many cultures agreed so well. In the history of the world, more societies have advocated incest or infanticide than have taught that comets were benign, or even neutral. Everywhere on earth comets were harbingers of unwanted change, ill fortune, evil. It was common knowledge.¹²

Sagan and Druyan continue:

As classical learning dwindled over the centuries, the triumph of superstition was symbolized by the death of two emperors. The comet of the year 79 was said to portend the death of the Emperor Vespasian, who had already found himself involved with cometary portent. Although a shameless contriver of divine omens to justify and authenticate his seizure of the empire, Vespasian in this case expressed a healthy skepticism. 'That hairy star does not portend evil to me', he said. 'It menaces, rather, the King of the Parathions,' his longtime adversary. 'He is a hairy man,' Vespasian explained, 'I am bald.' His skepticism did not save him, though, and he died the same year. By the early Middle Ages, the association of comets with the deaths of princes was so deeply ingrained that when a ruler died and nothing untoward was seen- as was the case at the death of Charlemagne in 814 -a fiery apparition, otherwise invisible, was generally acknowledged to be blazing in the skies: the Emperor's new comet.¹³

Throughout history, rulers have been given stellar appellations based upon the belief that the rulers are destined to rule because of their descent from an earlier ruler engendered in a mythical sexual union with one or both parents believed to be deities from the sky. The Chinese emperor, for example, was known throughout history as 'The Son of Heaven'. Julius Caesar was apotheosized after the appearance of a comet on the night of the beginning of games held in his honor soon after his death. The belief then, that Shield Jaguar was a god, was confirmed by the appearance of a comet which marked the beginning of his reign. The

comet of course was the founder of the holy lineage, Yat-Balam. The presence of Lady Xoc on lintels 24, 25, and 26, each of which it can now be seen have astronomic significance, hints at the possibility that she was a priestess-astronomer, or an astrologer-oracle.¹⁴

The Chinese record of the comet of October 17, 681 describes the path of the comet across the sky from west to east. Lintel 25 still contains problematic symbolism. Do the circles on the jaws and body of the serpent represent stars? Why do two of the large serpents have two heads? What is the role of the skull? What is the role of the goggle-eyed death's head with the year-banner? Do these symbols provide more evidence that would correlate with the astronomic position given by the Chinese with respect to the placement of the comet in the sky? Do the symbols on lintel 25 which are still not understood possibly represent Mayan asterisms? Because the Chinese asterisms are better understood than the asterisms of the Maya, it might be possible to match the symbolism on the lintel with specific regions of the night sky, provided of course that lintel 25 does in fact represent a cometary apparition.

An additional point to be made is that in their original positions, the lintels were to be seen by gazing up. The figures were carved on the underside of the lintels, with text also found on the front edge of the lintel. To appreciate the figures an individual had to stand beneath the lintel and gaze up, in a manner similar to gazing up at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, or more appropriately as though gazing up at the sky. This further strengthens the proposal that the events portrayed occur in the sky, the lintel's figures imitating what was seen outdoors in the sky.

As has been noted by Schele and Freidel, the event depicted on the adjoining Yaxchilan lintel 24 also occurs on the night of an impressive astronomical event. On Oct. 28, 709, there was a planetary alignment of Jupiter and Saturn in Gemini, with the planets only 2 degrees apart.¹⁵ But it is on the same night that the Pegasid and Andromedid meteor showers occur. Since this lintel depicts a torch, and torches are a symbol for meteors as demonstrated by myself and by Taube, one could argue that the meteor shower is the predominant astronomical event depicted and the alignment is secondary. This further strengthens Schele and Miller's argument that lintel 25 represents an astronomical event. It is likely that in the near future more cometary records will be recognized in Mayan art. They will not be described in terminology which is easily recognizable as such, but as deities.

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9. *ibid.*

10. Tate, *Yaxchilan*, p 89.

11. Tate, *Yaxchilan*, p 276.

12. C. Sagan, and A. Druyan, *Comet* (revision of 1985 edition), Ballentine,. New York, 1997, p. 14.

13. Sagan and Druyan, *Comet*, p 28.

14. Lintel 24 coincides with a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter. It also falls on the same night as the Pegasid meteor shower, the Andromedid shower, and very close to the night of the possibly spectacular and frightening Leonid shower. Lintel 26 records the summer solstice on 22 June 726. I have adjusted the dates Yaxchilan Lintel 25 as a Cometary Record of the showers to take account of the precession of the equinoxes by one day for every 71 years since the date recorded with respect to when the showers occur at the present time. If lintel 25 does in fact represent a comet, then all three of the major carvings from structure 23 coincide with astronomic events.

15. Schele and Freidel page 268. The event recorded on Lintel 26 is recognized as having taken place on the summer solstice, 26 June 726.