
Book Review: *A Maya Universe in Stone*

A Maya Universe in Stone, edited by Stephen Houston. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2021. 192 pages. Hardcover \$50.00.

A Maya Universe in Stone focuses on Laxtunich Lintel 1, an ancient Maya relief sculpture. Such intensive examinations of singular works remain rare in publications related to the ancient Americas, yet objects as complex as this lintel, with layered iconographic and hieroglyphic content and a rich social life, warrant thorough exposition. The authors convincingly argue that this sculpture and three additional lintel reliefs were originally part of two buildings at a single site on the Guatemalan side of the Usumacinta River, that they were produced over a brief span, perhaps less than a decade, in the late-eighth century, and that they were carved by a single sculptor, Mayuy, who signed two of them. The rich, close analysis of Mayuy's sculptures is organized into four chapters, each crafted by different but overlapping groups of scholars and each approaching the carvings from a different perspective.

Chapter 1, "Orphaned Carvings" by the book's editor, Stephen Houston, frames the project's objectives before providing a brief consideration of the life history of the sculptures—from quarrying of the stone through carving and consecration to ongoing engagement thereafter and ultimate abandon. More attention is then granted to the modern circulation of ancient Maya objects, since three of the four lintel reliefs remain in international private collections and the fourth currently resides at the Kimbell Art Museum. Although monumental Maya sculptures have circulated internationally for well over a century, the 1960s through the 1980s witnessed a dramatic increase in their illicit and clandestine extraction. The specific locations where the works were encountered are typically unknown, intentionally obscured in the process of their trafficking. Houston uses the term *orphan* to characterize such works lacking precise provenience. Importantly, he acknowledges the entanglements of archaeological excavation and scholarly research in the antiquities market, including the cachet, and thus increased market value,

accrued through scholarly attention, as well as the unintended consequences of equipping archaeological crews with the very skills required for looting, priming them for such activity in the wake of a project's conclusion. The volume's position vis-à-vis this particular notion of orphan, applied to the subject sculpture, is made explicit: deeper knowledge about ancient objects is an "intrinsic good" that can, potentially, facilitate the ultimate restitution of such works to the modern nation-states within whose borders they were found.

In the second chapter, "Lamb's Journey and the 'Lost City,'" Andrew Scherer, Charles Golden, and Houston mine the archives of Dana and Ginger Lamb, self-fashioned explorers of the mid-twentieth century who serendipitously documented, albeit imprecisely, two of the lintels in situ in the fifties. The chapter seeks to discover the sculptures' original provenience, thus rendering them orphans no longer, but also aiding in our understanding of the objects as deeply situated in geopolitical space. The Lambs' 1951 *Quest for the Lost City*, which illustrated the lintels in situ, favored romanticized, imaginative travel narrative over documentary precision: it does not specify the location of the find site, which they call Laxtunich. The chapter's authors leverage the Lambs' archival ephemera, their extensive on-the-ground knowledge of the region, and their thorough familiarity with local political history to present an admittedly circumstantial yet convincing case that the Lambs' Laxtunich is the archaeological site known today as El Túnel. As the authors acknowledge, it is also possible two or all four of the lintels are from another nearby location. What is certain is that they were in Guatemala, which therefore has legitimate claim to them as national patrimony.

The chapter closes with brief and incomplete notes about the subsequent looting of the panels in the sixties and their consequent private ownership. Here and throughout the book, information about current

ownership is omitted, likely a condition of the access granted to the sculptures.

Houston, Scherer and Karl Taube's third chapter, "A Sculptor at Work," resituates the looted monuments in three primary frames: (1) political context, (2) the oeuvre of Mayuy, who signed two of them, and (3) a plausible articulation as paired lintels of two buildings. The core of the chapter considers the four lintels collectively to argue convincingly that they were all produced by a single sculptor, Mayuy, and made as pairs for two buildings, commissioned by two sequent, subsidiary lords of Laxtunich under the direction of the same regional king, Cheleew Chan K'inich of Yaxchilan, for whom Mayuy likely worked. The analysis leverages each monument's hieroglyphic texts, iconography, composition, use of color, and details of technique to support the work's articulation within space, time, and a network of specific actors, including artists and layered patrons.

Chapter 4, "Seasonal Gods and Cosmic Rulers," by Houston, David Stuart, and Taube, focuses intently on Laxtunich Lintel 1's sophisticated layering of themes and symbolism. Two standing figures flank the lower half of the scene, straining to hold aloft a horizontal element upon which two men sit. The Atlantean figures are named simultaneously as local vassals and as two of four supernatural old gods who separate earth and sky. The explicit textual reference to four implies two others behind, in a square arrangement aligning with both cardinal directionality and with the quartered stations of the solar year. The figures seated above portray the local lord, Aj Yax Bul K'uk', and his overlord from Yaxchilan, Cheleew. They assume additional identities through costume: Cheleew a solar deity and Aj Yax Bul K'uk', a supernatural associated with night and maize. The band on which they sit is at once the sky, a throne, and the very lintel upon which the relief carving appears, a self-referentiality Maya artists employed in several instances. The accompanying hieroglyphic texts tell of the rituals

associated with the vernal equinox, a moment of transition in dominion over segments of the solar year, which elides with the diurnal cycle through the day-night pairing. But it simultaneously depicts the creation of the lintel and the act of it being raised into place. Mayuy, the sculptor, is present at the center of the composition, his hieroglyphic signature appearing in the eyes of a front-facing visage of the stone lintel, as if he looks out to directly engage the viewer. The artist's clever positioning of his signature, whereby he situates himself within the political hierarchy of the remainder of the composition without contesting the importance of his patrons, is among the most intriguing aspects of the sculpture.

A Maya Universe in Stone is an exemplary contribution to a growing trend in which scholars are focusing attention on narrowly conceived artistic subjects, whether single objects, architectural programs, the productions of single workshops, or of individual artists. Given the state of Maya studies and the quality and complexity of Maya art, myriad works warrant such concentrated attention. These authors resourcefully assemble highly diverse lines of evidence to interrogate and explain the Mayuy lintels while simultaneously contributing meaningfully to broader topics in the field in numerous ways, from elaborating the political landscape of the Yaxchilan kingdom to exploring the long history of Maya attention given to the relationships between the vernal equinox and agricultural cycles. The layered meanings and political implications of such works require complex and culturally specific analyses, which may render this publication challenging to fully appreciate for those less familiar with Maya hieroglyphic writing, political history, and iconography. The lintels of Mayuy and, by extension, this study, deserve the reader's effort; that effort is rewarded with the revelation of Mayuy's artistic genius.

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