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Potential Artistic Representations of the Snake Hemipenis In Mesoamerican Art

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Abstract

This work is the result of the use of ethology, the observation of animal behavior, to gain special insight into the mind of the ancient indigenous Mesoamerican¹. Through this mechanism, I have sought to understand how Mesoamericans might have seen the unusual characteristics of the snake, particularly the rattlesnake, and why they seem to have used the snake hemipenis in their artwork. I discuss and display several examples of this art, such as clay figurines and the Maya ruler's loincloth apron. I discuss possible reasons why Mesoamericans would have thought that the snake and its phallus were important icons and how they may have multiple meanings. I suggest that additional work should be done to identify why the Maya might have considered breath and the snake hemipenis as related. To my knowledge, there has been no previous documentation in the literature about the use of the hemipenis in ancient Mesoamerican art or in any other artworks throughout the world.

Introduction

During the later months of 2006 while browsing Justin Kerr's online photo archive database (2006), hosted by the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI), I happened upon an unusual clay figurine from Xochipala (Figure 1). As described on the website, the figurine was dressed in "padded cotton armor" wearing a "headdress of horns" (Kerr 2006) with reddish or pink tips. At that time, I had been doing extensive ethological research regarding the neotropical rattlesnake,



Figure 1

Kerr 6134, courtesy of Justin Kerr

¹ I wish to thank those people who helped me in the preparation of this research including Brian Stross, Julia Guernsey, D. Bruce Means, Travis James LaDuc and Carl Calloway. Their encouragement and professional insights were invaluable. I also wish to express my appreciation to Justin Kerr for making his images so easily available.

scientifically named *Crotalus durissus tzabcan*. This species is the most widely spread rattler in Middle America and is found in parts of Mexico including Northern Chiapas, Oaxaca, and in Belize and Guatemala (Schlesinger 2001) and it may have been a species most frequently represented in Maya iconography. Seeing the figurine caused me to remember reading a passage elsewhere about how the serpent had a bifurcated hemipenis². The hemipenis, meaning “half-penis”, got its name from early herpetological researchers who mistakenly believed that the two bifurcated hemipene were drawn together during copulation, but now it is known that each hemipenis on either side of the snake is fully functional without the other, although only one set (two) is extended while copulating. I had never seen a photo of this organ, but with a hunch that the figurine’s “horns” might depict it, I began searching for a photograph of the male rattlesnake’s gonads on the Internet and quickly found one. Figure 2a is my drawing of that photo (all drawings are by the author unless otherwise stated). To my delight and surprise the photo bore a striking resemblance to the pink “horned” headdress of the figurine. I then searched in the professional journals and found drawings such as the one in Figure 2b.

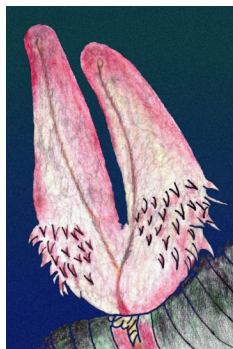


Figure 2a

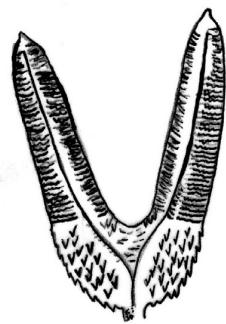


Figure 2b
(after Klauber 1972:694)

In addition, a figurine in the same Kerr database (2006) labeled “Veracruz Warrior” (Figure 3a) has a removable mask and headdress with a decorative top projection that also looks

² The word “hemipenis” is used in the singular and “hemipene” is used in the plural.

very much like the snake hemipenis.³ My curiosity spurred me on to begin reviewing Zapotec effigy vessels, all drawn by Adam Sellen, also found at the FAMSI website (2006), and discovered that many of the figurines have appendages in their headdresses that also seem to be representations of this male snake organ.



Figure 1
(Kerr 6134, courtesy of Justin Kerr)



Figure 3b



Figure 3c



Figure 3d

Figures 3b, 3c and 3d, courtesy of Adam Sellen.

As for the Zapotec figurines, it appears that the artists primarily placed the hemipene representations in a “bubbly bonnet” with small raised dots that may be the “feathered” flounces that decorate the shoulders of the appendage. After reviewing many potential Mesoamerican iconographic representations of this organ and over 200 Maya loincloth aprons, I have come to the conclusion that there are a variety of creative ways that scribes and artists probably displayed it. The snake hemipenis is likely carved upon Early and Classic Maya ruler loincloths hanging between their legs. See Figure 4a, the Hauberg Stela; Figure 4b, Tikal Stela 10; Figure 4c, Xultun, Stela 12; Figure 4d, Copan, Stela P; and Figure 4e, Tonina Monument 69.

³ Several sources, primarily located in professional journals, have yielded photos of snake hemipene and I have been impressed with the varieties and the many embellishments that they display. See Zaher 1999 for a study on South American varieties, which are closely related to those found in Central American. Appendix 2 begins on page 100 and contains 100+ photos: <http://digitallibrary.amnh.org/dspace/handle/2246/1646>

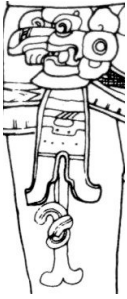


Figure 4a
(L. Schele 1993:104,
Figure 2:34)



Figure 4b
(after unknown artist)

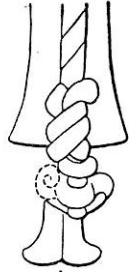


Figure 4c
(after Proskouriakoff
1950:73, Figure XA-1b)



Figure 4d
(Maudslay & Hunter
1889–1902, Plate 87)

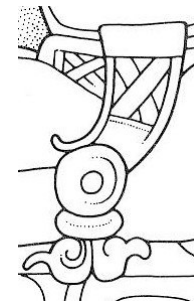


Figure 4e
(L. Schele 1993:373,
Figure 8.27)

With the passage of time the icons may have even evolved into the elaborate serpent frets found upon Classic Maya loincloths and first documented by Proskouriakoff in her 1950 book called *The Study of Classic Maya Sculpture*. One of the most impressive aspects to the organ is the similarity it shows to the double ears of corn (Figure 5a and 5b). Dr. D. Bruce Means, a professor of biological science who specializes in herpetology, was the first to bring this resemblance to my attention (personal communication 2006). This “twin” cob anomaly in maize is regarded by Mesoamericans as the ultimate sign of fertility and is treated with special care. “In parts of Guatemala they [double ears of corn] are regarded as the spirit of the corn and assurance of a good crop for the following year” (Thompson 1970, p. 286).



Figure 5a



Figure 5b
(after Klauber 1972:694)

In a many of the images, the hemipenis is shown directly upon the snake itself, such as on a Classic Maya conch shell trumpet inscribed with the image of a person who appears to be in an ecstatic trance while caressing a “vision” serpent (Figure 6a). Other examples are from Chichen Itza, the Upper Mural of the Temple of the Jaguar (Figure 6b) and another from Itzimte Stela 1 (Figure 6c). Maya scholars have identified these appendages on the snake body as “breath volutes” (Saturno, Stuart and Taube 2007), perhaps not realizing that the snake actually does have bifurcated appendages on both sides of its body, with only one set appearing during copulation. I do not claim these scholars are wrong in the identification of the appendages as “breath”, but I am proposing that there is more meaning in these serpent phallic icons than is currently recognized. More research is needed to understand why the Maya would have seen breath volutes and the snake hemipenis as related. As for now, I put forth a few brief possibilities to explain why the Maya would have displayed the serpent hemipenis on kingly loincloths.

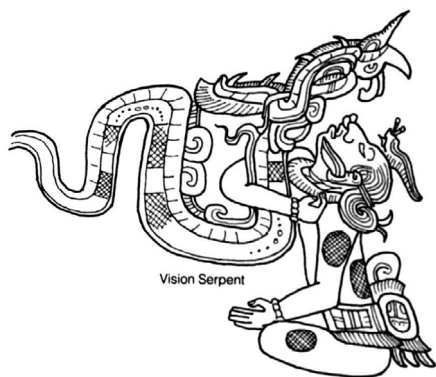


Figure 6a

(L. Schele 1986:309, Notes on Plate 121)

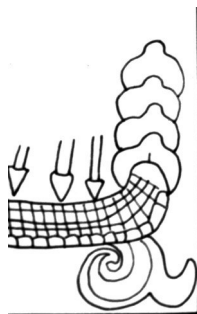


Figure 6b

(L. Schele 1998:241, Figure 6.38.B8)

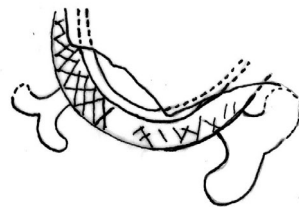


Figure 6c

(after Von Euw 1977:4:5)

Perhaps the answer lies in the ancient Mesoamerican ideas about procreation and regeneration. Throughout history, the snake has been a powerful fertility symbol (Wake 1873; Opler 1945; Mundkur 1978; Chao 1979), due to the resemblance of the snake body to the phallus, which of course fertilizes the female ovum. The snake is associated with re-generation

and fructification, but the use and display of the hemipenis in ancient or historical iconography, to my knowledge, has never been documented.

There is a possibility that these diverging points on the loincloth are in fact the forked serpent tongue (breathing from the tongue?) such as the one seen on the Oxtotitlan, Painting I-C (Figure 7a). Figure 7b is a photo of a serpent's forked tongue. Since the serpent hemipenis is also forked or bifurcated (Figure 7c), it is conceivable that the Maya may have combined these two physical characteristics of the snake to come up with one symbol, (Figure 7d, Tikal Stela 10). The close resemblance of the snake's tongue to its hemipenis would not have escaped the attention of the ancient Maya.

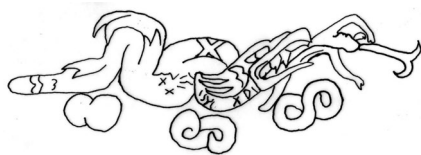


Figure 7a
(after Joralemon 1971:89,
Figure 262)



Figure 7b
(courtesy Steve Thompson)

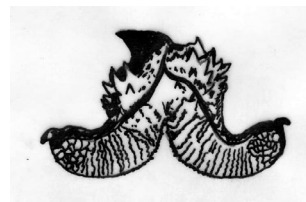


Figure 7c
(after Dowling and
Duellman 1978:114.8)



Figure 7d
(After unknown artist)

A word of caution is warranted in the interpretation of these volutes due to their ubiquitous presence in Mesoamerican art and thus I have tried to limit my discussion of them to those on the snake itself or those found on the Maya ruler loincloths. If these bifurcations are reptile genitalia and/or if they are the serpent tongue then it would be a symbolic substitute or perhaps an enhancement to the royal penis that is charged with powerful magical and primordial meaning due to its snake association. In addition, there is evidence to support the notion that the loincloth symbolism represents the ruler's nurturing of corn, blood sacrifice, abundance and the fertilization of the world tree (Newsome 2001).

Penis bloodletting has been likened to creation and conception (Davletshin 2003:2) and the cutting of the penis is analogous to the cutting of the umbilical cord (Roys 1965:174-80; Miller 1974). Letting blood from the genitals was a “painful instigative act of creation” (Houston, Stuart and Taube 2006:213), as can be witnessed by the murals at San Bartolo where graphic paintings of the rite are displayed. I posit that in that portion of the mural (Figure 8) the right side of the mural is a metaphor for the left. We can see that the tree apparently has severed the head of the serpent. The lord is using a sharp branch of a tree to bring forth blood from his penis (i.e., snake), as if imitating what the tree has done. Next to the serpent body blood stream is the hand or branch of the tree reaching around the end of the un-severed compound bifurcated serpent tail, while the principal bird deity holds the serpent cords. It might be surmised that the tree has cut the neck of the snake-rope just as the lord has cut his penis with a tree branch.

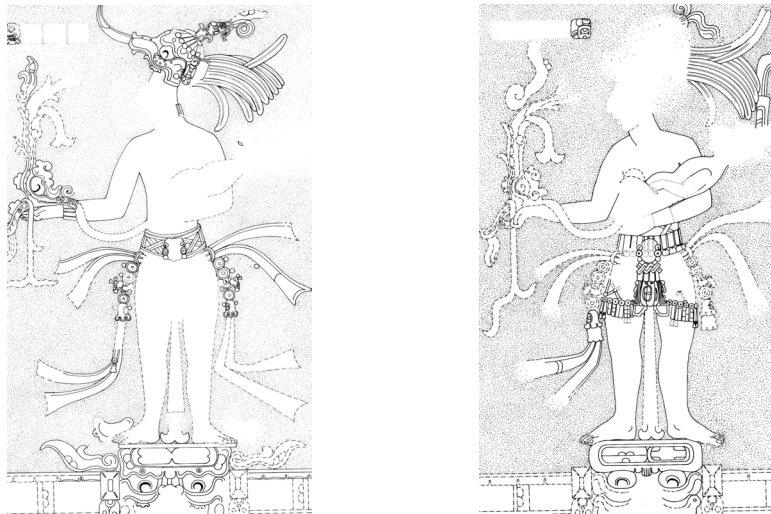


Figure 8
(after Hurst and from Saturno
2006:74)

By cutting his penis, is he also metaphorically cutting the umbilicus snake and/or its hemipenis, thus giving birth to abundance? The concept of the umbilicus serpent, sometimes called the ecliptical snake is well-know Maya cosmological and astronomical ideology elaborated upon by many scholars including Miller (1974), Freidel, Schele and Parker (1993),

Clancy (1994,) and Looper and Guernsey-Kappleman (2001) and the above image adds evidence to the possible existence of the cosmic umbilicus and its association with trees, the Principal Bird Deity⁴ and with blood letting.

Two additional images that may give us a clue for understanding the presence of the bifurcations on the loincloths are drawings from piers D and E on the Temple of Inscriptions at Palenque. Figures 9a and 9b show royal personages holding infants with sprouting feet, standing upon severely eroded Quadripartite Badges⁵ and the stingray spines are placed strategically between the legs as if they were loincloths, clearly a reference to bloodletting and yet the bifurcated ends resemble the hemipenis. Stingray spines in reality do not have bifurcations such as these. I do not deny that these are stingray spines, but believe that there are multiple meanings for them in this case.



Figures 9a and 9b
(courtesy of Merle Greene Robertson 1983, Vol. 1, Figures 64 and 78, respectively)

⁴ The term “Principal Bird Deity” was invented by Bardawil (1976) to describe a zoomorphic bird/serpent creature with specifically defined characteristics.

⁵ The “Quadripartite Badge” is a term first coined by Merle Green Robertson (1973). It is a flat bowl meant to hold bloodletting symbols and is usually marked with the *kin* sign, meaning sun. In the bowl are cross bands, a stingray spine and a spondylus shell. It is found in the iconography at Palenque and in many of the lowland sites of the Maya region.

Conclusions

Throughout recorded history, people have noticed the resemblance of the male member to the bodies of serpents. They have commonly used slang terms such as dragon, schlange, schlong, lizard, and trouser-snake, along with other expressions that reference the penis. Arbor vitae, baby-maker, gardener and husbandman of nature, all terms that denote fertility, are also casually used. Deification of the serpent and its unusual body characteristics was a worldwide phenomenon in ancient history. "It has even been said that this form of worship was more widely and universally distributed than any other" (Mendelieff 1886). Evidence also suggests that the first deities were reptiles. According to Waterbury (1952), the snake was probably the first god, due to its universal appeal. Its veneration is found in the historical cultures of China, Japan, Borneo, Sumatra, Indonesia, North America, India, Australia, Egypt and Africa (Martinengo-Cesaresco 1909; Chao 1979). In the Western hemisphere, snake veneration by Native Americans was almost universal (Wake 1873; Waterbury 1952). The Hopi, Apache, and Algonquin Indians claimed to have been descended from snakes. The snake was also a world symbol of eternity because of its ability to shed its skin, thus renewing itself instead of dying. From a more practical viewpoint, Spinden (1975:33) observed, "The peculiar form of the serpent's body was able to furnish a richer theme and one with more obvious possibilities of artistic development than could that of any other animal in the early list of totemic divinities." When the snake is depicted with its tail in its mouth it forms a continuous eternal circle, a round form like the shape of the sun or when placed round the individual, it can represent protection or vast power. The continuous circle can express the idea of time eternal or cyclical time (Chao 1979). It moves magically without legs, sheds its skin (as if in renewal) and swallows its prey whole. Other attributes of the serpent include wisdom, cunning and health (Klauber 1972).

Add to this list of admirable qualities, the bifurcated snake hemipenis. The virility of the snake is unmatched, in that he has 4 penises - two on each side. Because of the inefficient system by which the rattlesnake sperm is delivered, the male and female neotropical rattlesnake must copulate for hours, sometimes as long as 12 in the delivery of the sperm into the female⁶. She carries the eggs for 8 to 9 months (Schlesinger 2001) and then usually in the middle to late part of the rainy season (Campbell 1998), she gives birth from her anus to between 20 and 50 live baby snakes, with tiny umbilical cords. I believe and suggest that more research should be done to understand the apparent ancient Maya association of the snake penis with the human penis and with associated bloodletting, breath, life, death, flowers, and sprouting procreation.

⁶ The hemipenis has no internal ducts, but instead sends the sperm over the external grooves of the organ.

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