

# Introducing the Vase from Nebaj

## An Iconographic Examination

En este informe se compara el bien conocido vaso de Ratinlixul, ahora en el University Museum de Philadelphia, con el vaso de Nebaj, que se exhibe en el Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, Nueva York. Ambos vasos muestran una procesión de literas, como también lo hace un tercero que forma parte de una colección privada en California.

La discusión en torno al vaso de Nebaj es una aplicación del método iconográfico: los contenidos cuantitativos y cualitativos de la escena son aislados y cada imagen ubicada en el contexto maya. Muy pocas de estas imágenes poseen solamente un significado.

La comparación con el vaso de Ratinlixul es hecha básicamente en forma tabulada y refleja tanto cualidades como cantidades. El tercer vaso fue incluido en un esfuerzo por determinar motivos indispensables para la ceremonia, motivos relacionados con la historia relatada y motivos de uso local exclusivamente.

El significado que arroja la historia pintada en esos vasos es el siguiente: el jefe de una pequeña ciudad (Nebaj y Ratinlixul nunca jugaron un papel dominante en sus localidades respectivas) cayó en manos de guerreros, fue capturado y sacrificado y entra ahora en el submundo. Los vasos poseen dos funciones: a) son monumentos históricos en una región en la que nunca fueron hechos o erigidos monumentos de piedra; b) los descendientes son provistos de un ancestro deificado, su pretensión al liderazgo es legitimada.



## INTRODUCTION

The Vase from Ratinlixul (Fig. 1), now in the University Museum in Philadelphia, enabled Seler (1895) to identify fans as attributes of merchants and of ambassadors disguised as merchants. Fans among the Aztecs were identified by him as 'sign of rank'; later scholars seem to extend this designation to all Mesoamerican fans. Tozzer (1941:165) saw litters as 'signs of rank' conveying priests and noble merchants, a view supported solely by post-conquest sources. Since then fans and litters were labeled accordingly and the vases not examined any more.

It is little known that the Vase from Ratinlixul has two companion pieces, one in the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, in New York, called the 'Vase from Nebaj'; the other in a private collection in California (Figs. 3, 4). All three show litter processions. The New York vase, although on display, has not been discussed so far. Scenes that closely resemble each other are rare in Maya Art and detailed comparisons of such vessels have not been attempted. This paper will introduce the 'Vase from Nebaj' and compare it with the "Vase from Ratinlixul.

Since the publication of the latter additional Mayan studies have sharpened the eye for spotting details and distinctions. Barthel (MS in Prep.) and Coe (1973) pointed out that polychrome vases depict scenes from the Underworld. The 25 glyphs of the so-called Primary Standard Sequence which are repeated again and again on the vessels, recount the passage of the dead through the Underworld. Studies by Benson (1974) and Schele (1974) identified gestures, offerings, the use of ritual cloth and symbols for accession to, and exchange of, power - all of which relate to the two litter vases.

An examination of fans (Kurbjuhn 1977) revealed that they were ceremonial objects, that they signified a specific and imminent death of the bearer and that they cannot be regarded as indicators of status or profession.

Finally, the question of trade relations and related problems have been clarified (Thompson 1966, 1970; Rathje 1972) to a point where merchandise depicted in a trading scene can be identified. A litter shown on a vase is not necessarily an indication of trade.

So far, litters have never been studied in detail. They were rarely depicted and our knowledge of them comes from conquest period eyewitness accounts, such as that of Diaz del Castillo (1973). Of the litters I was able to locate only the figurine from Lubaantun (Fig. 4) shows some similarity to the vases under discussion. There is no indication that litters were the preferred transportation vehicle for merchants. Not once did Landa (Tozzer 1941:94-96) mention a litter in his description of the two merchant classes. He did, however, mention them as conveyances for idols carried in processions. That is how they are still used today.

Maya scholars will no longer uphold Seler's and Tozzer's interpretations mentioned earlier. This paper does not so much criticize them, but attempts to put the scenes on both vases into a new perspective. Their iconography shall be re-examined in terms of their meaning with consideration of the social status of the persons shown.

#### THE VASE FROM NEBAJ

A person in a basket-like litter is carried by two bearers. Under the litter stands a dog with a collar and a forked tongue. Seven persons follow. They hold these objects: a sacred bundle, a staff, a giant trumpet and a fan, a conch shell and a length of cloth, three trumpet and a fan. There are four large glyphs and three pairs of small glyphs.

#### Technical observations

The vase is  $6\frac{1}{2}$ " high and has a diameter of  $5\frac{7}{8}$ " (16,5 cm and 15 cm). The upper and lower rim is painted orange and set off from the cream colored background of the scene by two black lines. Figures and objects are outlined in black.

The style of painting is fluid but does not show the thin lines which have been called a mark of quality of Chamá vases (Goldstein 1973). The Nebaj painter shares the inability to draw hands properly with the Ratinxul painter, as well as a specific way of rendering mouths, eyes and feet. Both may have trained in the same artistic tradition.

Space on the vase is expertly used for the placement of figures and objects; there is no unfortunate crowding or accidental emptiness.

The shape of the vessel itself and its measurements do not conform to established Chamá sequences (Goldstein 1973). Nevertheless, there is little doubt about its late Classic date. Its unusual form may be due to accommodate the scene, which is probably an elaboration of the one on the Ratinxul vase.

#### Dress and social status

In Maya Art costume serves a specific occasion. Only few items are known that identify the individual who wears them, as, for example, 'Bird Jaguar's' pectoral ornament. The one most promising attribute in that respect has never been fully examined: the headdress. In many cases personal name or a lineage name seems to be contained in it in some form (personal communication by W. Haberland and M. Goldstein).

Since the scene on the vase shows a procession and the fans indicate a ritual occasion, the items of dress can be expected to conform to local customs for such occasions. Far from proclaiming social status these costumes may indicate religious offices and their insignia.

On the Nebaj vase all ten persons are similarly attired: over a scarf or cap perches a wide brimmed hat. A string of beads is clasped around the neck, one end hanging down over the back ending in a tassel. A loincloth with fringed hems is visible only in the back; in the front a short skirt-like piece of material hangs from the waist, either in folds, or in strips of two different kinds of cloth. Buckles or buttons hold the side of the garment. From the middle of the back and from the middle of the front (in three cases) a long strip of cloth with a decorated end pends to the middle of the calf. A loop of this strip shows above the waist.

Only three members of the procession wear sandals: the holders of the sacred bundle, of the conch shell and of the last fan. Although Proskouriakoff (1950:87) lists the different sandal styles we do not yet know their significance. On this vase the presence of sandals on some persons merely seems to distinguish them from others.

Aside from the bead necklaces and the simple round ear spoons of Haberland's "Ohrschmuck Typ 1-A" (1953) there is no jewelry.

Three of the hats show additional decorations, two with animal heads and one with what looks like a badge. All three decorations have strong glyphic elements; their position on the vase in a space otherwise occupied by glyphs suggests a connection. The litter-borne person's hat is topped by a peccary head with T 24 inserted in the forehead. The last fan holder's hat shows what may be a deer head. Forehead and antlers are replaced by something like a glyph (unfortunately so effaced that identification is impossible). The conch shell bearer's hat shows a white round object with a dotted rim and feathers (or cloth) flaring to the right. The white part in Lounsbury's 'mo', the red part taken as feathers, will then constitute a variant of the glyph for 'macaw' (Kelley 1962).

The grouping of peccary, deer and macaw as items of dress of participants in a ceremony also occurs on a vase from Lowland Guatemala (American Museum of Natural History 1971), which in turn shows the same ceremony as the one depicted on the vase from Chamá (Seler 1895: Taf. I). In other words, there are four vases closely related either by subject matter or by personnel.

What is conveyed by these animals? Peccary, deer and macaw can be seen as representatives of Underworld, Earth and Sky respectively, as a backdrop for this ceremony. The three animals could also be the personal or lineage names of the wearers. Or they could be titles of priestly offices: Peccary Priest, Deer Priest and Macaw Priest. A last possibility: the animals or their impersonators have an unknown role in the ceremony. At this time a preference for any one of these explanations is not justified and could be misleading.

In the absence of dress distinctions, objects establish social rank. In this case almost all objects are held for somebody else. They constitute the sacred baggage of the main person. His high position in the litter and the fact that all but one face him show who the main person is. The paraphernalia carried for him are those of a ruler; they are not mercantile goods. Moreover, the objects show that a transfer of power takes place (Benson 1974) and that the ruler is either dead or about to die.

To carry a litter was very likely an honorable and difficult task entrusted only to persons who had distinguished themselves. It can be deduced from Landa (Tozzer 1941:165) that not the litter per se is carried, but the idol in it. Transporting images of deities was one of the more important priestly offices. To view bearers merely as servants, or of a lowly social position, may therefore be wrong. Since a dead ruler could turn into a deity (Schele 1974), the passage from Landa is applicable. Litter-bearers then were priests or men of some standing in their community.

Sacred bundles and the short undecorated staff are more often shown in Maya Art lying on the ground, than being carried. On top of this bundle is a small gourd, which is known also from the codices as a vessel used only by priests, containing powdered tobacco or other ritual substances. Thompson (1970:168) called the owner of such gourd 'Ah Kin Mai', the highest ranking priest. It is difficult to decide if bundle, staff and gourd belong to the ruler, or if the gourd should rather be seen as the property of its holder. In any event, that person is probably a rather high ranking priest.

Trumpets and fans are often shown together, but only on this vase and on the murals of Bonampak does a fan-holder carry a trumpet as well. He holds the largest and most ornate of the four trumpets shown. Neither fan nor trumpets as such indicate profession or rank. This is possibly indicated by facial paint. Here it is black with a circular area spared around the mouth, suggesting a priestly role. In the absence of more certain identification marks, the five persons holding fans and trumpets may hold a ritual office for the duration of the ceremony.

The remaining person carries a huge conch shell on his back and holds a length of cloth in his hands. As he has no signs of old age and as the opening of the shell points to the ground, not upward, he clearly holds it for the ruler, not for his own identification. Particularly the cloth denotes assumption of power (Benson 1974) and the shell has been identified as an icon of the first stage of the Underworld (Barthel MS in Prep.). The holder's face paint is different from that of the others. The upper half of his face is black, ending in a straight line under his nose. Chin and cheeks are spotted. Therefore, and in view of the importance of the objects he holds he may be considered a high ranking priest.

If one places musicians in a middle stratum of society (Carmack MS 1974),

follows Landa in assuming electoral procedures for ceremonial offices, and suggests that litter-bearers are, at least, also of the middle class, the ranking of this scene's participants is as follows:

- Ruler
- 2 high ranking priests
- 1 Priest (fan holder with deer hat)
- 1 Priest (fan holder with trumpet) ?
- 2 elected dignitaries
- 3 musicians.

Expressed in more general terms: the Nebaj artist depicted only outstanding members of society as ritual office holders. His illustration tells us nothing about daily life, or a common event, such as trading expedition.

### The objects

#### a. The litter

Held by one, visible, straight pole with slightly flaring ends, and upholstered by three woven rings over each bearer's shoulder, the litter body consists of undistinguishable material decorated with woven basketry and tassels. The ruler sitting in it is visible from the shoulders upwards and holds on to the pole with his left hand. The right arm reaches across the pole into the basket's interior. He is carried sideways.

The only complete scene, featuring a litter, is Izapa Stela 21 (Norman 1976: 123f.) (Fig. 7). In it a priest decapitates a ball player. Norman suggests that the dead man's 'soul' is carried away in the roofed litter on which a snarling jaguar is crouched. On the litter body in the Tikal Graffiti (Webster 1963: 41) (Fig. 5) a trophy head is incised. In room 3, structure 1 in Bonampak a dance with fans is performed around the headless body of a sacrificial victim and a jaguar-skirted person (whom I believe to be the same victim), is carried on a platform to the Underworld, the realm of God K. While this is not a litter, the idea is the same.

The vases from Ratinlixul and Nebaj are the only Maya examples for a combination of a litter and a fan, elsewhere known from the cultures on the West Coast of Mexico. Fans signify a specific death, which frequently can be shown to occur by decapitation. A combination of fan and litter strengthens the assumption that the manner of death involved was decapitation. One has to remember as well that both fans and litters do not appear at major centers (if so, as at Tikal, it is in a manner not congruent with the local 'state' art). The reason for this may well be that major rulers were never captured and beheaded. But a minor ruler was more vulnerable by the risks he took.

It is difficult to test this hypothesis. Pending the discovery of new materials

and data it has to be kept in mind as the clearest discernible possibility.

Although both vase scenes contain Underworld symbolism, and death has occurred or is about to occur, there is reason to believe that they were painted in memory of a historical incident, and that they show the portraits of unlucky heroes. The question arises whether polychrome pottery had the same functions as the stelae in areas where these were not erected.

#### b. Fans

The two fans shown here are both made of feathers. An undecorated handle is visible, reaching into the center of the fan body and again projecting from behind a band, continuing beyond the rim. The depictions are highly stylized and remind of fans in the codices. Both fans are held pointing downward, one with the right, the other with the left hand. This is in keeping with Maya custom of handling fans; neither direction, nor the hand holding it, are of special significance.

Most Maya fans are closely connected with blood-letting rites, indicated by hand-to-shoulder gesture, rope around neck or arms, awls, and lengths of cloth (Benson 1974). Often the holders are old men and/or have a beard. The latter may indicate prolonged ritual preparation in seclusion, as described by Landa (Tozzer 1941: 160). Black body or facial paint and a bone used as a pectoral suggest a priest, but also mark a close proximity to death (Barthel 1964: 228).

The most significant source on painted fans are the murals of Bonampak where the entire ceremony seems to be presented. The ceremony shown in several parts, all in preparation and celebration of a decapitation, shows the full range of actions, sounds, smells and the accompanying objects.

There is no doubt that fans appear on the occasion of death by decapitation. However, not every time does a fan occur when there is a beheading. The problem may come closer to being solved once all the texts are deciphered.

#### c. Trumpets

During the course of this study I have designated as trumpets the long, decorated objects held on both vases. Thompson (1970: 137) thought first that they could be spare poles for the litter. Finally, in a discussion with Satterthwaite, they both agreed to call them paddles for shallow river travel, the indents on top (on the Ratinlixul vase) are attributed to wear from poking into stony river beds. Both authors do not seem to have known the Nebaj vase.

Paddles can be seen on Gold Disk G from Chichén Itzá's Cenote (Tozzer 1957: fig. 681), they look like paddles from all over the world and differ from our objects.

These are narrow in the bottom and have a small oval protuberance with a stem as an end. The conical body is covered half way up with a pleated yellow material, probably reed. The remaining space is painted red and often shows some decorations. On the Nebaj vase the upper rim shows two different ornaments, unique in themselves: the first are bells and tassels, the second I take for a relief-decorated ball with superimposed feathers, which look like a rattle. I hesitate to credit the Nebaj people with the invention of a new instrument. Moreover, there is some doubt if such a trumpet could be blown. I believe that the bulges on top of the objects may present a 'telescoped' statement referring to the full orchestra of sacred music.

On the murals of Bonampak musicians blow trumpets of two slightly differently decorated types. Coe's Vase Nr. 31 (1973) shows the same trumpets blown, and there are more examples. They all look so similar to our objects and so different from paddles, exchange poles, or staves, that doubt about their identification as trumpet is not justified.

#### d. Sacred Bundle

The bundle on the vase from Nebaj has the shape of a bee hive. Three quarters of its surface are covered with jaguar skin, which is held near the bottom with a pleated band that ends in a fringe. The unwrapped part is white and has a dotted line in its center. On top of the bundle perches the gourd already mentioned. The whole is carried with a tumpline. The bearer has a short, undecorated staff in his right hand.

Bundles abound on Maya vessels and a comparison shows that the Nebaj version is more elaborate than most. The short staff appears leaning against the bundle on the murals of Bonampak, elsewhere it is often missing. In my opinion the staff is not of ceremonial importance and is only used when the bundle is moved. In Bonampak its presence may indicate that this is to happen shortly.

Schele (1974) believes the bundles to contain the instruments of blood-letting rites. A bundle probably legitimized a ruler's claim to power and, as women had a part in wrapping it, elements related to lineage and ancestry are assumed to be contained in it (Benson 1974). Bundles were among the grave goods for rulers. They were never attributed to anybody else; depictions of women holding bundles are always interpreted as actions aimed at rulers. The 'Pizom Q'aq'al' in the Popol Vuh appears always closed and is said to contain the 'essence of the fathers'. The Cakchiquel disclose in their Annals that it contained a stone. Recinos (1950: 205) reminds of Torquemada's description of the Tlaquimilolli, which contained sticks inlaid with green stone wrapped in snake skin and jaguar pelt. The whole was sewn up in a mantle, the garment of a deity. Today bundles wrapped in white cloth are handed by women to the new office holders of a village during an inauguration ceremony.



Maya emphasis is on the wrap and on the hidden nature of the bundle's contents. For decades scholars have been plagued by curiosity to find out what these bundles contained; the outer material has aroused but little interest. Yet, it is the outside which the Maya saw and, surely, it conveyed a message or an explanation.

The ordinary final wrapping material is by no means always jaguar skin which, much more frequently, is used to cover cushion or thrones. The significance of its appearance on the vase's bundle suggests: a) it is a nocturnal or Underworld bundle, b) its owner is a priest, c) its owner is a warrior, d) its owner is a royal person. A choice among the possibilities may not even be necessary, they all fit well into my hypothesis that here is a minor ruler who tried his luck in a raid, was defeated, and is about to assume power as an ancestor and deity in the Underworld.

This bundle is not merely an item in his funeral procession, to be interred with him. His death is not the end, but accession to ultimate power. Therefore it has its place among the other symbols of the moment and describes both time and the person involved. It does so by its outer wrapping, its contents would not provide the same immediate, practical information.

#### e. Gourd

Gourds are often depicted in Maya codices and Thompson (1970, 1972) discussed and identified them. A gourd is recognized by its scalloped edge, by small or concentric circlets in the center, and a decorate handle. Often the gourd body does not form a full circle.

The acting High Priest of a Maya community was called Ah Kin Mai, 'Tobacco Priest', and had a gourd containing powdered tobacco as his badge of office (Thompson 1970:168). Mayan rulers were often High Priests as well, but usually rather inactive in this rôle, especially in late times. However, Thompson is emphatic about an active Ah Kin Mai. Who is the High Priest on our vase?

If the bearer of the bundle were that priest I would expect the gourd to be displayed more closely attached to his person, than it is. The fact that the gourd is perched on the bundle proclaims proximity of the two and may well suggest that the ruler was also the officiating High Priest of Nebaj. In that case one is led to believe that in the smaller centers concern with politics was not as strong as in the larger ones.

Actually, such discussions do not help in clarifying the situation because the Maya boundaries of offices or rank were apparently not as well defined as one might wish. Adjustment to life and its irregularities often prevents adherence to rules which were imperfectly conceived. It seems presumptuous even to assume that there were such rules.

To return to the vase: the ties of the gourd to the ruler are slightly firmer than those to the bearer of the bundle. However, this detail may or may not be of importance.

f. Cloth

The third litter follower holds a length of cloth slightly raised in both hands. The cloth is not very wide, of two colors, and seems to resemble the back hanging of all participants in the procession.

The handling of cloth, or the lifting of it, frequently out of a basket, occurs in ceremonies preceding the 'following', e.g. the assumption of power by the heir. It is connected with a period of humbling and blood-letting by that heir (Benson 1974).

g. Conch Shell

The Maya used the conch as a musical instrument. The whole shell, or more frequently a cross section of it, was used by Kukulcan and his priests as a pectoral and thus, as an identification mark. On vases and in the codices the conch is shown as the 'house' of God N, the old ancestor deity, who presides over the five Uayeb days. It often 'gives birth' to him or to the young goddess.

On the Nebaj vase the oversized shell is carried with its opening towards the ground, not towards the sky or the God. The bearer, moreover, has none of that deity's characteristics. Therefore I do not see bearer and shell as a unit. The shell by itself marks a time and a place: the first station of the Underworld voyage (Barthel MS in Prep.).

h. Dress

The wide-brimmed hats on the Nebaj vase seem to be a variant of headdresses on some Jaina figurines. The Maya used hats of various forms long before the conquerors arrived; they were worn both by men and women. The unique Nebaj feature of rounded crowns seems to be a mark of identification for that site.

There is nothing unique about the loincloth skirts worn by all participants to the procession. They appear on the Ratinlixul vase and twice on the vase from Lowland Guatemala (American Museum of Natural History 1971). All four priests in Codex Dresden pp. 25-28 wear them and in Bonampak they occur in Rooms 2 and 3, without clear distinction of the persons who wear them.

Color and material of these garments seem to vary freely, so their form is meaningful. On the Nebaj vase two differently colored materials are used, on the Ratinlixul vase the strips consist of jaguar skin. A possible relationship to

the 'buc' dress of the 'Fat Man' needs further study. I tentatively suggest that this is a priestly garment.

The importance of the wearing of sandals has already been emphasized.

#### i. The Dog

The dog's association with the Underworld is well established (Thompson 1970: 300f.).

While the Ratinlixul dog just snarls and has a saddle-like black spot with dotted outline on his back, the Nebaj canine wears a collar of death bells, has a spotted area on his head and a forked tongue. Peccary and deer have the same spotted markings.

According to our present knowledge one would have to call the Nebaj dog a mythical guardian of the Underworld's entrance, which the ruler just passes.

#### The Glyphs

Aside from some resemblance to T 501, to T 24, and possibly to a water or moon sign, the 'glyphs' on the Nebaj vase have nothing to do with the Maya writing system. Whoever painted them has probably seen hieroglyphs before but could not read them and had no idea what they meant. As the semblance corresponds to what one would expect on the vase a quick dismissal of the writing is not justified.

If the vase is not the work of a modern artist - the Museum staff is certain that it is a genuine piece of the Late Classic - the time has come to break the hesitant silence of scholars about a larger number of vessels, which satisfy in form and subject matter but fall short in their rendition of the glyphs. Not all of us are primarily interested in texts. To suppress second and third rate data may be dangerous when our aim must be to gain a FULL picture of those times. Quite to the contrary: in comparing copies of work from minor centers with the masterpieces of their time some important information about cultural interplay and indigenous emphasis will surface. This is one chance to shed light on aspirations, thought processes, and actual abilities of priests and artists, who had no place among the great minds of their time.

The following reasons suggested to explain non-mastery of glyphic writing still need thorough discussion:

- a) figure painting and glyph rendering were performed by two different specialists, the 'writer' in this case only pretended to know glyphs;
- b) the writing system was not used in minor centers;
- c) provided there was no division of labor for vase painters, the Nebaj vase may be a student product. It follows that drawing was taught before writing;

d) the vase may be a copy of a still unknown masterpiece. Then we have to recognize the existence of mere copyists among Maya artists, not versed in glyphic writing but familiar with its forms;

e) the historical viewpoint: the vase is a product of a phase in Nebaj's history prior to the establishment of temple and school. There was already a good artist, but no glyph expert. It follows that learned men and women (the Maya scientists) were only attracted to centers of political importance and wealth. Vases such as this one from Nebaj then can be used to date political development;

f) or - different steps of Maya intellectual development could be recognized by the establishment of criteria of stylistic competence in glyphic writing on ceramics.

### THE VASE FROM RATINLIXUL

Quantitative and qualitative differences between the two 'litter vases' will be shown later in this chapter. While it is obvious that the same ceremony is depicted an interpretation of these differences is not easy.

The litter is much simpler and looks like a wicker hammock on a straight pole. There are no flaring ends or shoulder padding.

The two bearers have simple white cloth headdresses fastened with a knot, the hair is not showing. Only they wear this scarf. They are also the only ones to wear sandals. Their skirt is of jaguar skin and has on wristlet. Both have the only frontal hangings, falling from the waist.

The main person seated in the litter holds the only fan on the vase. It is made of petate and the handle is wrapped with reed. Around his neck he wears a necklace of a double row of 'scales' hung with small bones. His headdress is basically the same as the other four, a scaled 'balloon' tied with a knot. In front an unrecognizable item sticks out and in the back a magnificent quetzal feather curves down. His two wrists are ornamented with Haberland's "Handgelenkschmuck Typ 3-1" (1953).

The first follower carries the sacred bundle on a tumpline. He is without any ornaments, his skirt is plain and he does not seem to have a headdress. The bundle is covered completely with jaguar skin and is fringed all the way down the bearer's back. It has the form of a cushion. On top sits an inverted T in white (1).

The following three trumpet holders are dressed identically like the ruler. In addition they have ankle ornaments. Each wears a rope around his neck from which hangs a shell. The trumpets can only be told apart by a different dot and line decoration on the upper half.

The last person in a jaguar skirt holds an object in his hand which I cannot identify. Two cloth strips seem to hang down from it. He makes the hand-to-shoulder gesture. Headdress, wrist and ankle ornaments are the same as those of his predecessors.

There are only three glyphs: T 504 ak'ab, T 503 ik, T 501 neab (Imix). These are the first three Maya days in reverse but in this case they can also be read as 'night - life - the First one'.

On the whole many items on the Ratinlixul vase are missing or are less ornate than on the Nebaj vase. Only in personal adornment, and in the one gesture, it depicts more.

The following table lists number and kind of all differences:

Items	Nebaj	Ratinlixul
number of personages	10	8
number of glyphs	10	3
number of trumpets	4	3
number of fans	2	1
number of shoes	3	2
number of wrist ornaments	-	8
number of ankle ornaments	-	4
jaguar skirts	-	3
1 litter	ornate	simple
1 dog	mythical	'realistic'
1 sacred bundle	beehive shape	cushion shape
neckornaments	beads	rope & shell
ruler's ornaments	"	scales & bones
trumpets	ornate	simpler
fan	feathers	<u>petate</u>
hand-to-shoulder gesture	-	yes
gourd on bundle	yes	-
handheld length of cloth	yes	-
conch shell	yes	-
staff	yes	-
animal hats	yes	-
face paint	yes	-
glyphic writing	-	yes

For a meaningful interpretation one would wish to have certainty about the age of both vases. While quality is a matter of cultural development and artistic skills the problem of quantity in the evolution of styles and contents of art has not been grasped fully in theory.

In the cultural development of the individual sites one tends to see in the Nebaj vase an earlier example. On the other hand this development may have taken place much earlier in Ratinlixul, thus placing the Ratinlixul vase first in time. In that case a larger number of items and elaboration on the Nebaj vase may be a case of 'one upmanship', provided the Nebaj artist ever saw the other vase.

If considerations of time are left out, in the absence of secure dating, the existing differences can be viewed as expressions of differences in the ceremony. It is possible to differentiate between items that are absolutely necessary and others that can be subject to change. For such a division more than just two examples of the same ceremony are desirable. Although the third vase cannot be discussed here I have included its elements for the following categories:

I. Present in all three vases:

Royal-priestly personnel  
litter  
dog  
trumpets (R = 3, N = 4, PC = 4)

II. Present in two vases:

fan (R = 1, N = 2) (Petate - feathers) (different holders)  
bundle (R = cushion form, N = beehive form with staff) (same holder)  
conch (N = on back, PC = blown) (different holders) (different shells)

III. Present once:

Raised cloth (N)  
Hand-to-shoulder gesture (R)  
gourd (N)  
dwarf with jaguar cub (PC)

As could be expected the first category includes only those elements that describe time, place, persons and the main tools of the event. The second category includes secondary hints that pronounce place and rank. It is the most interesting of the three: the Maya apparently liked to express an important point twice with different means. The establishment of such semantic pairs must aid further iconographic studies considerably, besides being a good test for the scholar. The third category contains 'frills', further aids to understanding, or local specialities.

## CONCLUSION

Because of the two pleated bands on both rims the Ratinlixul vase belongs to the 'Chamá Vases'. Although the Vase from Nebaj does not have these bands,

the artistic treatment of eyes, mouths and hands is the same on both vessels and proclaims at least closeness in training of the two artists.

The scene depicted attests to similar beliefs: it consists of a procession, after death, into the Underworld. The main person, carried in a litter, can be identified as a ruler by the objects held for him by several priests of different rank. The ruler is dead, just passing by a dog, the guardian of the entrance to the Underworld. The Maya did not distinguish clearly between life and death, so the followers need not necessarily be dead.

The various objects carried behind the ruler denote his rank, his imminent accession to power, and the necessary blood-letting rites. Fans and trumpets mark the occasion: a sacred ceremony. Facial paint and dress of the followers suggest that they are priests or that they function in a temporary priestly role. Conch shell and glyphs show that the first station of the Underworld journey will be reached: an ancestor is about to assume power in his new realm. For the living, who looks at the vessel, this means that a dynasty has a proper, legitimate ancestor.

At times the presence of fans, litters and a jaguar (here symbolized by his skin only) point to decapitation as the cause of death. I therefore suggest that both vases commemorate a local ruler's failure in a raid, his capture and sacrifice, and his glorious transformation to a powerful 'ruler' in the Underworld.

#### NOTE

- (1) In several discussions this bundle has been instinctively called 'cushion'. To my knowledge true cushions are never shown being carried in the Maya culture area, but always positioned on the ground. The meaning of such a seat is not apparent any longer when it is off the ground and I consider it highly unlikely that such an implement will ever be found depicted outside its proper place of function. In my opinion this bundle is rather misshaped in an effort by the artist, to fit it in the space available.

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#### ILLUSTRATIONS

- Fig. 1: Vase from Ratinlixul (Morley 1956:pl. 92b).  
Fig. 2: Figurine from Jaina (Robicsek 1975:fig. 101). A very similar figurine from Jaina was illustrated in the auction catalogue of the collection Monsieur X at the Palais Galliera, Paris 1974.  
Fig. 3: Vase from Nebaj (my own drawing from photographs).  
Fig. 4: Vase from a private collection, California (my own drawing from photographs).  
Fig. 5: Tikal, Graffito (Webster 1963:41). A similar Graffito was drawn by A. Seuffert in a cave near Rio Bec, recorded in the movie "The search for Tempel B in Rio Bec" by G. Griffin.  
Fig. 6: Holmul, Graffito (Mervin/Vaillant 1932:fig. 31).  
Fig. 7: Izapa, Stela 21 (Norman 1976:123).  
Fig. 8: Figurine from Lubaantun (Butler 1935:fig. 2d).

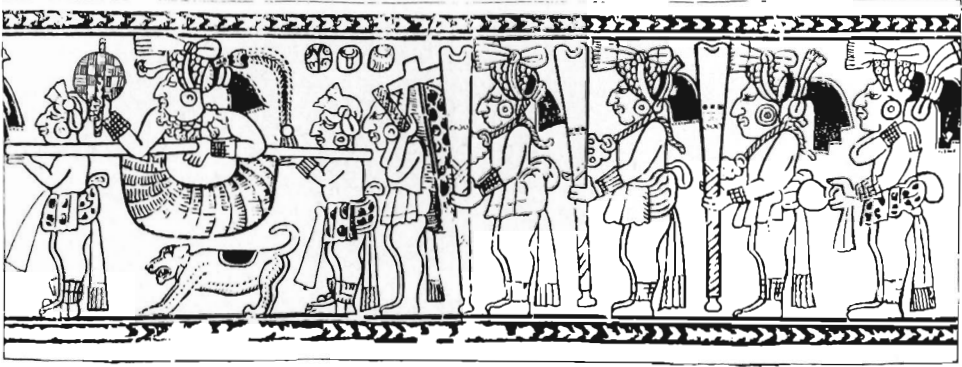


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

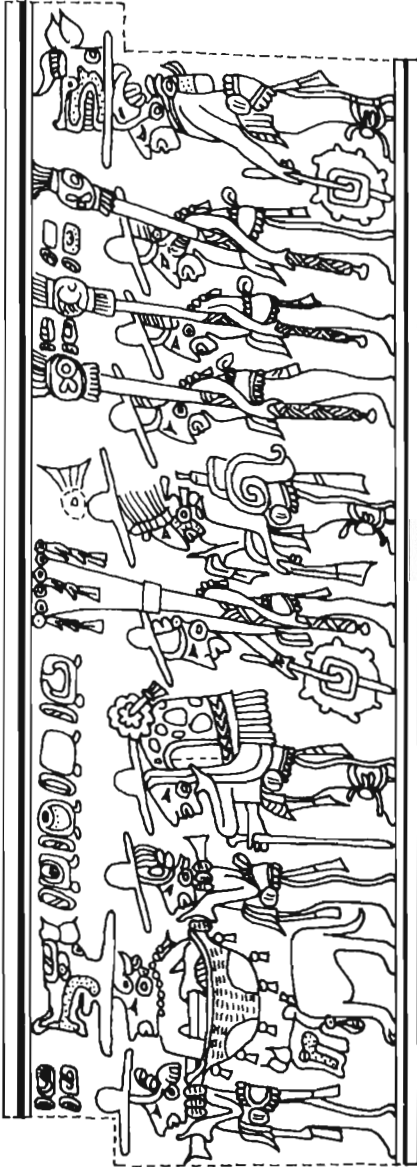


Fig. 3

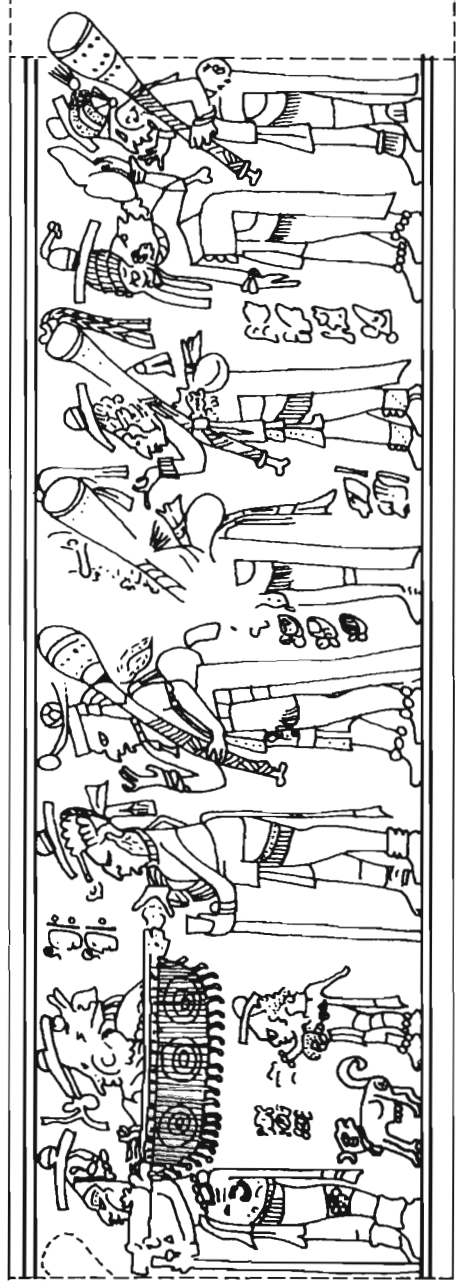


Fig. 4



Fig. 5

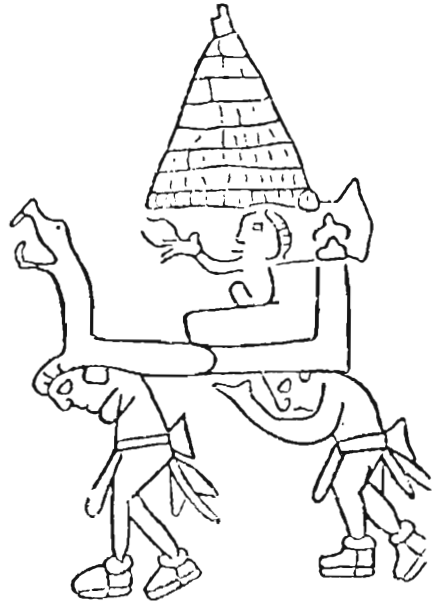


Fig. 6

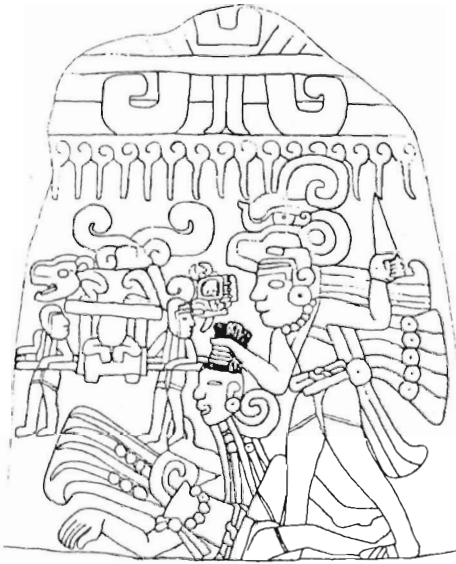


Fig. 7

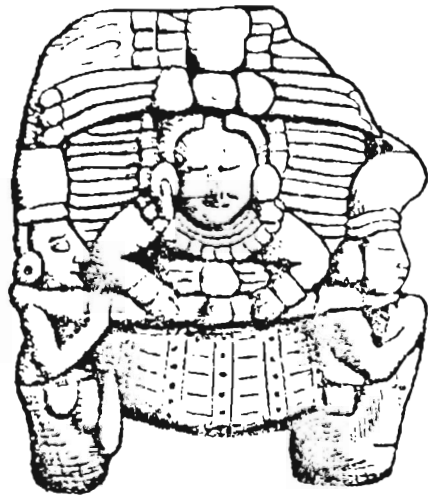


Fig. 8

