

Lo que sí se sabe y lo que no se sabe de Bonampak

Mary Ellen Miller
Yale University

The story of exactly what one knows for certain about the Bonampak murals takes place on many levels. Even the question of the 1940s discovery of the paintings—was it Giles Healey or Carlos Frey?—has seemed to hang unresolved, although now John Bourne, who traveled with Frey, has explicitly written that they did not see the paintings when they visited what would come to be called Bonampak before Healey, presumably resolving the question at last (Bourne 2001). More important for my work here is that the response to a work of art is always subjective, but Bonampak has provoked particularly energetic and diverse interpretations. A work of art may be polyvalent, and I suspect that this is the case with Bonampak: on the one hand, aspects of the paintings must follow convention; others may subtly undermine that same convention, reaching out to different audiences that the painters could have never guessed. Perhaps more troubling to modern observers is the insufficiency of Maya hieroglyphic decipherment. A glyphic reading will have a great deal of bearing on imagery, and vice versa, but it isn't necessarily the answer to the question one seeks to have answered. That the hieroglyphic inscriptions were left unfinished in many places in the Bonampak paintings, while the figural work seems to be complete, suggests that texts were more vulnerable to revision or to cancellation altogether.

Early interpretations of the paintings focused on the unusual characters painted on the walls of Bonampak Structure 1 —the aquatic figures with hoods—rather than offering a narrative whole, although the question of sequence was key. Both Agustín Villagra (1949) and Eric Thompson (Ruppert, Thompson, and Proskouriakoff [RTP] 1955) commented on the internal organization of Rooms 1 and 2, and both believed that the scene of dressing on the North Wall of Room 1 preceded the dance scene on the South Wall, just as each argued that the battle of Room 2 led to the North Wall, where captives were “arraigned,” as Thompson put it (RTP 1955: 52). George Kubler proposed that the more obvi-

ous (to him) Room 1 sequence of North before South should also be applied to Room 2, and he read the bleeding individuals on the North Wall as the provocation of the battle on the other three walls (1969: 13). Whereas most scholars simply assumed a reading order of Rooms 1-2-3, Sonia Lombardo proposed that Room 2 should be read first, followed by Rooms 1 and 2 (Lombardo de Ruiz 1976: 376).

Subsequently, my own work, based as much as possible in hieroglyphic decipherment, introduced new interpretations and revived some old ones (Miller 1986; Miller and Houston 1998). I returned to one of the notions floated but not favored by Thompson, that is, that the child was a royal family member, not a sacrificial offering (RTP 1955: 48). I argued that the aquatic figures were secondary ones, by virtue of their marginal position on the wall itself. I tried to resolve the problematic relationship to the powerful city of Yaxchilán given evidence by the prominent Yaxchilán emblem glyph in the Room 1 initial series text, and by the presence of powerful Yaxchilán king Shield Jaguar III (acc. 769) on the Room 2 lintel.

Over time, some of the initial interpretations I proposed have come to hold a certain orthodoxy. But in fact, other interpretations may be equally reasonable. My proposal here is to open some questions about the Bonampak paintings, although there may not be adequate answers, at least at this writing.

First of all, let me address the question of the reading order of the rooms. Although I would continue to argue that Rooms 1, 2, and 3 are to be read in just that order, it is now completely conceivable that the Room 2 battle took place *before* the date of Room 1, as others have suggested (e.g. Rosas in Espinosa *et al.* 1991: 42). Maya texts often move both backward and forward in time; the Room 3 lintel also describes an event in the past, so that the lintel chronological sequence also steps back in time (Mathews 1981). But Room 1 is designed to be a more “here and now” depiction, probably made to commemorate the completion of the entire program, for the final hieroglyphic statement is a “ritual impersonation as the Sun God,” as Stephen Houston has proposed, suggesting a dedication of the building and its paintings, as well as the costumed impersonation in Room 3.

figura 1
Señor principal practicando un ritual de sacrificio,
en la escena central del muro sur, cuarto 3, estructura 1,
Bonampak.



figura 2
Grupo de personajes deformes con instrumentos musicales,
muro oeste, cuarto 3, estructura 1, Bonampak.



figura 3
Personaje que confirma la ceremonia de sacrificio,
muro norte, cuarto 3, estructura 1, Bonampak.



Within the individual rooms, the question raised by Kubler still remains a live one: is there a required reading order that is consistent from room to room? Michel Graulich has recently argued that there should be such consistency, and accordingly argues that the Room 1 “dressing” scene should, in fact, be thought of as an “undressing” scene, in order to have its North Wall follow the South, as he clearly believes to be the case in Room 2 (Graulich 1995). But do Maya artists do things consistently from one work to another? In fact, I would argue that they specifically do not. Additionally, the moment depicted in Maya art is usually the “pregnant” moment, just before something happens, rather than something as after-the-fact as undressing. But Graulich’s concerns do provoke another consideration. Rather than seeing the lords in white mantles in Room 1 as “first,” I now believe that one must read the very badly damaged dancers with their long hieroglyphic captions first. They dance, perhaps on the occasion of the dedication, although this, too, opens a slippery contingency: if this is the event described, then is the dedication describing an event in the recent past? Or is there an attempt, with the representation of the lifted foot, the sense of the momentary, the immediacy, to make the past the present? Was the work itself finished within days of the dedication? Can we see Rooms 1 and 3 as collateral events, contemporary to one another and of the completion of the project, while Room 2 delves back into the past?

If the dance, with all of the musicians, singers, and performers, is the event that must be read first, then is the rest prologue? Is the rest firmly anchored to the first event referred to in the hieroglyphic text? What remains enigmatic is the major reference to Shield Jaguar III, named at the center of the South Wall text. Furthermore, the captions remain unpainted for all but a few of the lords in white mantles and for the entire royal family, seated in the throne room. Simon Martin has recently proposed that the first figure in white on the East Wall bears a Chakha’ title, probably a toponym also known in the Petexbatun of Guatemala; he is a *yebet*, or “messenger,” and he “belongs” to an *ahaw*, as do the others with captions. As Houston pointed out to me as well, these figures are messengers, not liege lords in their own right. The white-mantled figures are

high-ranking courtiers rather than visiting nobles, and they may have come some distance.

As I have long noted, the first verbal event in the initial series text would seem to be an installation in office of someone related to Shield Jaguar (Miller 1986: 35-36). The text is gone and we will never know the name. There is *no* reason to believe that it must be the child presented above, as Alfonso Arellano H. correctly notes (1998: 285). In fact, when Heather Hurst was painting the new reconstruction, she determined that the child bears the red face paint most characteristic of females, and the draping robe, of course, also would be typical of a girl. What this would mean is that the king seated on the throne is surrounded only by women, suggesting some sort of crisis in the dynasty.

Hurst and I have spent hours together reviewing the reconstruction, and this has led to renewed interest in formal composition on the walls. We confirm that the composition of the family grouping in the throne room is clumsy (Miller 1986: 64). Hurst also found that the East and West walls, in general and throughout the program, seem to have received less attention in their very facture than the major expanses of North and South walls. But the family in the throne room seems the most awkward, without the remarkable overlaps, for example, of the family grouping in Room 3. What is clear is the reference to cacao, the “40,000 *kakaw*” statement on the large white bag (Miller and Houston 1998). Could it be that the entire first scene relates to this tribute presentation? and if there is any reluctance, could that be implicit in the awkward rendering, as well as the reluctance to include names?

Years ago I commented that the Room 1 paintings depict architecture absent at the site (Miller 1986: 69). Stephen Houston has recently suggested to me that perhaps this tribute-paying event does take place elsewhere. Given the prominence of Yaxchilán in the text, one might want to hypothesize that the scene of tribute transpires there, but that ancient Maya city, too, lacks the architectural references to palace quadrangles—in fact, the architecture depicted, with throne rooms, platforms, etc., can best be seen in this part of the Maya zone at Piedras Negras or Palenque. So this also remains unresolved.

Not only is the lord on the throne not named, but the three dancing and dressing lords are very specifically not Yahaw Chan Muwan, the lord named in the text as the king who dedicates the building (Miller and Houston 1998). What further complicates matters is that they bear titles with full emblem glyphs, as if indeed more than one of them was the king. This raises a problem about the political administration at Bonampak and neighboring Lacanja, just on the eve of the collapse of the southern Maya cities. The three dancing lords in Room 1 would seem to be the same three dancing lords on the pyramid in Room 3; they may also be the two jaguar-caped lords who attend Yahaw Chan Muwan in Room 2. The smallest of them does not appear in Room 2; if indeed Room 2 takes place in the past, he might have been too young to participate.

In Room 2, the problems of interpretation continue. Rather extraordinarily, the text within the battle names a single individual—Black Deer—captured by Yahaw Chan Muwan, rather than one of the greater warfare events. Are we to understand that the statement of capture of a single individual can mean staggering warfare in other instances? We cannot know, but we might well suspect that the answer is yes. The tradition of elite warfare may emphasize the capture of high-status individuals, while the reality of the situation may be that tens—as depicted in the Bonampak paintings, if not hundreds—of other individuals are involved. On the upper west wall, unarmed protagonists hold high what may be a box, or perhaps a throne. Are these individuals defenders, or some avant-garde warriors who have entered a shrine and now bear its booty? If, as Rosas and others suggest, this action took place about six years before the dedication, on 9.17.15.12.15, then the Room 2 North Wall text must also be in the past. The depiction of constellations rising over Bonampak does not then coincide with the heliacal rising of Venus, contrary to what I have written and as others have followed.

On the North Wall of Room 2, all individuals on the upper tier are named. Two women appear at right; the one closer to Yahaw Chan Muwan has long been identified as Lady Rabbit. To Lady Rabbit's right appears another woman, whom both Martin and Houston now believe is Yahaw Chan Muwan's mother, whose sta-

tus on Stela 2 exceeds the wife but here is diminished. To the left of the king himself is a powerful lord whose title proclaims him to be “grandfather,” or *umam*, but without a relationship glyph to describe just *whose* grandfather he is. Recent work has also revealed that the dead captive, long the subject of the greatest modern aesthetic attention, also bore glyphic cartouches with his name, although nothing more than the outline can be seen, even in the original Healey infrared photograph. At least two of the figures on the highest level to the left of the king had different headdresses painted, suggesting a change of identity during the painting process. Additionally, the painter changed his mind about the position of the elbow of the sole captive on the highest level, leaving a pentimento. The warrior at far left whose body is punctured by the cross-tie holes grabs the fingers of the captive directly, and he does not appear to use a tool, suggesting that he neither rips out fingernails nor cuts off the ends of the digits: rather, he may insert some sharp, tiny reed or blade into the fingers, resulting in the copious flow of blood down the arm and spurting from fingers. Who are these captives? I have hypothesized before that they may be captured artists, who, in making a painting so empathetic to the captives subvert its authority (Miller 2000). I think that this still may be the case.

On the subject of artists: there has long been speculation about the number of artists and the amount of time necessary to paint the Bonampak program. Lisa Senchyshyn carefully reviewed the painting of hands, ears, and other body details on the North Wall of Room 2, and she found two master painters, at least in terms of the final black outline used to complete the work (Senchyshyn n.d.). Teams of two may have worked efficiently in painting these walls, particularly in the detail necessary for the final outline. Despite awkward passages in composition, I remain convinced of a single master planner for the program, especially given its coherence, in which the royal family in the throne room is secured on an interior wall in both Rooms 1 and 3, while musicians appear on the exterior walls in the same rooms. The movement of the messengers in white mantles, from South in Room 1 to North in Room 3, would seem to me part of the coherence and rotation that both describe in the paintings and perhaps signal the temporal

adjacency or even identity of the two rooms. Room 3, in comparison to Rooms 1 and 2, bears relatively little paint, and seems more hastily painted, despite its brilliant composition of the wraparound pyramid.

Within Room 3, the “dancers’ wings” worn by the lords on the pyramid also defy easy explanation. Some of the lords have what would seem to be bloody spots on their loincloths, as if the “wings” perforated the penis, but the penis itself is never visible. The wings lack obvious means of attachment, and may have been much smaller than the representation. The tiny texts written at the scale of those in a Maya book that one sees under the central captive’s body, more or less directly in front of the viewer upon entering the room, remain problematic. Shield Jaguar III appears here once again, perhaps to assert that Bonampak lies within the larger Yaxchilán domain. Yet like many other details in the Bonampak murals, this reference to Shield Jaguar also remains pendant, without any single fixed interpretation.

Some of these matters may be able to be resolved in the future. Others may be controversial for years. The initiation of publication of a new reconstruction (2002) and the complete publication of the walls by the *Proyecto Pintura Mural* (Staines 1998) may raise more questions than these works answer. The entire field of Pre-Columbian studies owes Beatriz de la Fuente their gratitude for her never-ending efforts to document the original Maya painting.

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