

Ancestral faces: a Preclassic Maya skull-mask from Cuello, Belize

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Twenty years ago, one of us noted that ‘the extent to which ancestor veneration played a large part in Maya religion is only now beginning to be appreciated’ (Hammond 1982: 321), and that such veneration was explicitly portrayed in Classic Maya iconography (Hammond 1981). Since then, the extent to which the ancestors were used to underpin territorial claims, as a combination of increasing population size and density in an emergent agricultural landscape created an ‘archaeology of place’ in the Maya Lowlands — as elsewhere in Mesoamerica, and in Eurasia also — has be-

come more fully defined (McAnany 1995; see also Willk 1991).

Contact-period evidence for ancestor veneration was noted by Landa (Tozzer 1941: 131), who recorded that ‘they used to cut off the heads of the old lords of Cocom when they died, and after cooking them they cleaned off the flesh, and then sawed off half the crown on the back, leaving the front part with the jaws and teeth. Then they replaced the flesh which was gone from these half-skulls with a kind of bitumen, and gave them a perfect appearance characteristic of those whose skulls they were. They kept these together [with the inurned ashes of cremated ancestors] in the oratories of their houses with their idols, holding them in very great reverence and respect’. Kidder (1947: 57–8) cited this in noting at Uaxactun an Early Classic ‘frontal portion of adult skull, strong frontal deformation . . . coronal suture forms rear edge; this and sides worked smooth. At center of rear edge a 0.3 cm broken-through (not drilled) hole and what seem to be the beginnings of two drilled holes on inner surface 1.5 cm forward of center of coronal suture . . . If the facial bones once formed part of this piece, it may have served as backing for a human face modeled in stucco’.

We report here evidence from the Middle Preclassic period at the early Maya community of Cuello, Belize,

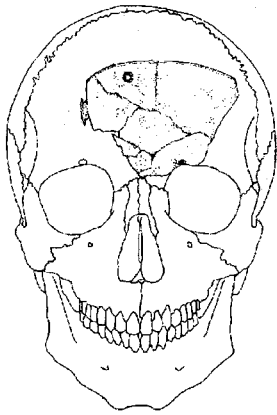


FIGURE 2 (left). *Position of the cut fragment on the frontal bone. (Drawn by FPS, inked by Jody Morris.)*



FIGURE 1 (right). *Exterior of the Cuello cut/perforated human frontal bone fragment. (left). Interior of the fragment: the midline ridge can be seen; two matchstick fragments have been used to rejoin the small section at right.*

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suggesting that this practice may be several centuries older, forming part of the complex behaviour involved in putting down visible roots in the landscape.

During the 2002 season of excavations at Cuello, the Middle Preclassic buildings enclosing a paved patio on its north and east sides were excavated (Hammond *et al.* 2002); the southern, and parts of the western and northern, structures had been excavated in previous seasons (Hammond 1991: figures 3.4–3.9, 5.4–5.18). Successive deposits of sheet midden were exposed to the northeast of the enclosed area, some of the earlier ones being sealed by subsequent extensions of the plaster patio floors (Hammond *et al.* 2002: figures 1 & 3). One such layer, 6186, was a dark, soft and artefactually rich deposit dating, on stratigraphic and ceramic evidence, to the transition between the Bladen and Lopez Mamom phases, close to 600 BC. Among the abundance of large sherds in excellent condition (such that a single event, such as feasting, generating much of the material is not implausible) were numerous chert bifaces, shell artefacts and bone objects, including a needle or awl tip and a carved tube, and the specimen (Q6186.09.01) which we discuss here.

It was recognized on discovery (by Nina Neivens) as part of a skull and probably human (FIGURE 1), and this was confirmed by us (JMS/FPS). We identified it as being from an adult, probably female, and to consist of the central lower portion of the frontal bone (FIGURE 2), extending down to just above the nose and including a portion of the top of the left orbit. No intentional cranial shaping is apparent. At the top, the frontal had been cleanly cut in a horizontal line; a cut just above the nasal bones is less certain. Old breaks delimit the right and left edges, with a small fresh break in the right upper corner. About 0.5 cm to the right of the internal frontal crest at midline and 0.9 cm down from the upper cut, a perforation 0.5 cm in diameter had been drilled through the bone, presumably to allow suspension or attachment. Drilling on the midline would have been more difficult because of the thicker crest of bone on the interior, and it seems likely that an axial perforation was intended. Bevelling indicates that this hole was drilled from both the outer and inner surfaces of bone, meeting to form a complete perforation. There are no other visible marks of working on the frontal bone, and whether the flesh was deliberately removed or cleaned through the natural processes of decomposition is unknown. It is worth noting that Cuello Burial 1, of Lopez Mamom date (Robin 1989: 155–7; Saul & Saul 1991: 150–51), had the cranium replaced by a block of tabular chert, although the presence of teeth beneath the block suggested that at least part of the skull had initially formed part of the otherwise primary inhumation: extraction of Q6186.09.01 from an extant burial is entirely possi-

ble. Kidder (1947: 58) notes that the Uaxactun Early Classic Burials A-20 and A-22 (identified by Valdés & Fahsen (1995: 212–16) as early 6th-century rulers) had their frontals removed, as had the Late Preclassic Burial B-12 (which also lacked both femora).

While many motives for working human and other bone by the ancient Maya may be proposed, including artefact manufacture (for instance the incised, drilled and openwork gorget in the form of a grotesque mask found with Cuello Burial 160: Hammond *et al.* 1992: figure 6; and the ‘apparently human’ bone spindle-whorl from Uaxactun: Kidder 1947: 56 & figure 84a3, for which there is also a parallel at Cuello), the careful removal of the front portion of the skull in Q6186.09.01 and its equally careful perforation to allow mounting or wearing suggests that display and/or veneration are likely motives. The parallel with the behaviour reported by Landa is striking, albeit not conclusive, and suggests that the atavism adduced by McAnany (1995) as part of emergent Preclassic communal identity and territorial possession may have been expressed in ways other than architectural construction and sepulture, but equally persistent in the Maya cultural record.

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