

Toward a Poetics of Maya Art and Writing

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This article identifies large-scale chiasmic and bracketing structures in contemporary, colonial and Classic Maya verbal art and literature. These structures are composed of the repetition of lines, verses and stanzas that frame sections of texts and sometimes images. Initially, the argument focuses on an ethnopoetic analysis that directs attention to such forms in modern and colonial narrative and presents an extended contemporary Yucatecan story to illustrate key forms. Second, it turns to similar structures in Classic Mayan narrative written in Maya hieroglyphs to examine the way rhetorical and linguistic tropes intertwined with corresponding features in visual compositions to craft highly sophisticated artistic programmes. By tracking how specific structures are deployed and in what contexts, this article defines an aesthetic that not only sheds light on verbal narratives, but also elucidates visual programmes and their interrelationship with text to reveal a fundamental principle in Maya world conceptualization. This literary and visual analysis develops a cross-medial Maya aesthetics comparable to other global poetic traditions.

Introduction

From approximately the third century BCE, the Maya wrote extensively on stone, ceramic, shell and architecture, guaranteeing the preservation of the verbal genres specific to those media. Since the 1990s, advances in the linguistic decipherment of Maya script (Houston 2000; Law & Stuart 2017; Wichmann 2004) have allowed us to examine Classic Maya poetics, genre and prosody (Hull 2003; Hull & Carrasco 2012; Josserand 1988; 1991; 1995; 1997; 2007) to discern broader aesthetic priorities that, as Nicholas Hopkins (1995, 5) has observed, open ‘the door to the literary analysis of Classic Maya texts’. In this paper, I attend to these issues, specifically poetics, by identifying the repetition of lines, verses and stanzas that frame sections of texts and sometimes images. I call these forms large-scale parallel structures to distinguish them from the couplets, triplets and other parallel compositions that occur at the level of the line. The repetition of stanzas and verses within a specific narrative create chiasmic¹ bracketing structures of

the shape *a-b. . b-a*. These are similar to parallel structures, such as extended chiasmus, found at the level of the line in Maya literature that take the shape of *a-b-c, c-b-a* yet do not frame another portion of narrative (Gossen 1974; 1989; Hull 2003; Lacadena 2012). These rhetorical forms occur elsewhere in world literature (Friedrich 2001; Wiseman & Paul 2014); however, their function within a specific literary tradition can differ and therefore one goal of this study is to offer a reason for their use in the Maya context beyond their basic effect of drawing attention to the central element of the chiasm—*c* or the ellipsis in the example schema given above.

Although these large-scale parallel structures occur in all periods of documented Maya verbal art and speech genres, they are a largely overlooked aspect of Classic Mayan poetics (but see Carrasco 2012a, b, c; 2017; Hopkins 1995; Josserand 2007) and only recognizable when entire narratives are considered through an ethnopoetic lens. I suggest that these forms play a greater role in colonial and contemporary Maya verbal art than has previously been discerned. Furthermore, I relate these poetic

devices to Classic Maya visual compositions to show how they were meant to work in tandem with iconography and architecture (Bassie-Sweet & Hopkins 2018) and how chiasmic structures go beyond simply being a rhetorical device to shed light on a core ordering principle in Maya thought. When considered together, these different media conjoin to craft highly sophisticated artistic programmes and speak to the significant role that balanced juxtaposition played in visual and verbal poetics and rhetoric, the features of which should be built into the translations of such texts.

Ethnopoetics

In the 1960s, the work of Jerome Rothenberg, Dennis Tedlock, Dell Hymes (1962) and others coalesced into what Rothenberg (1969) called ethnopoetics (Quasha 1976, 65). This mode of verbal and textual analysis and presentation strove to contextualize narratives, preserve their performative elements and transcribe the ineffable aspects of performance into the linear permanence of a written text. One might think of it as a transmutation of spoken verbal art and extralinguistic features into the textual conventions and script of the printed page (Jakobson 1959, 233; Moore 2013, 14; Tedlock 1987; Uzendoski & Calapucha-Tapuy 2012; Webster 2009). In tandem with this emphasis on recapturing performance, Hymes rejuvenated the performative vitality of narratives, which survive only in historical transcriptions and recordings, through a focus on structure (stanza, verse, line, etc.) that revealed recurrent grammatical and narrative patterns (Moore 2013). These patterns and their thwarting form the basic definition of poetics (Webster 2015, 4).

Collectively the focus of these scholars and others fell on those literatures that western discourse had either been unaware of or had actively marginalized. Thus, ethnopoetics and the ethnography of speaking and communication (Bauman & Sherzer 1989; Hymes 1962; 1981; Tedlock 1983) recognized that Euro-American aesthetic ideals were not universal and that traditional modes of analysis often failed to attend to the world's myriad traditions (Carrasco & Hull 2012). The decipherment of Maya hieroglyphs presents us with an opportunity to examine a Pre-Columbian literature written in an indigenous script as well as its evolution from approximately 300 BCE to the present. We can see how authors in this tradition sought to fuse verbal art with visual forms to craft a complex expressive culture based on the entanglement of word and image. While these text-and-image relationships were greatly

eroded, if not terminated, during colonization, the continuation of inscriptional and historical poetic and literary forms in contemporary narratives attests to an enduring tradition (Hull 2003; Hull & Carrasco 2012; Tedlock 2010). I compare Classic-period poetic forms with those expressed in these later narratives to reveal a longer and more complex record of Maya poetics.

The presence of poetic structures quickly became evident to scholars deciphering Maya hieroglyphs even before they could read them phonetically because they noted the repetition of the same glyphs in close succession (Thompson 1950). This repetition suggested that these passages might represent couplets that were known to be an important feature of contemporary formal Mayan language. Since then, the critical roles couplets, triplets, chiasms and other parallel structures play in Maya poetics have become increasingly evident and we now see these forms as core features of Maya literature and verbal art in the past and present (Hull 2003; Hull & Carrasco 2012; Lacadena 2010; Tedlock 2010). In Classic Mayan, such poetic devices entwine with recurrent patterns in textual conventions, grapheme choice and imagery (Bassie-Sweet 1991; Bassie-Sweet & Hopkins 2018). Accordingly, an ethnopoetic analysis of Classic Mayan narratives and their translation resists a straightforward approach. Simply treating transcribed inscriptional narratives as equivalent to the spoken verbal art normally studied by ethnopoetic research ignores the medium of their presentation and the material issues particular to writing, art and context, none of which are transparent (Carrasco 2012a; Jackson 2020). Therefore, in applying an ethnopoetic analysis to glyphic narratives embedded in iconographic and architectural programmes we must also interrogate how poetic language interacts with these equally self-conscious modes of aesthetic expression. This holistic approach pushes the boundaries of an ethnopoetics based on the verbal arts of oral traditions, whether current or those preserved through ethnographic fieldwork and documentation, such as in the Boasian tradition (Boas (1911) 1966), to the poetics of writing (Basso 1989). An ethnopoetic analysis also expands the scope of Maya epigraphy that has been more focused on grammatical issues or the extraction of historical information than on textual form, with some notable exceptions (Houston 2000; Hull 2003; Hull & Carrasco 2012; Josserand 1995; 2007; Tedlock 2010; 2012). Finally, it expands poetics to include text-image relationships and the iconicity of the Maya script tradition. In other words, recognizing that poetic verbal forms and iconographic composition

are equally significant when isolating meaning and that their interplay is indeed co-constitutive of meaning helps us comprehend more content.

In this essay, I return to one of the founding goals outlined by Rothenberg and Tedlock (1970, 1) in the introduction to the first volume of their magazine *Alcheringa*, when they declared that poetics should be investigated ‘as values in themselves rather than as ethnographic data’. This intrinsic value, as an index of a particular aesthetic system, is itself a kind of untapped anthropological data (Friedrich 2001, 219). Building on this and following Roman Jakobson’s (1960, 356) notion that poetry is a class of language that focuses on the structure of language for its own sake, I show the benefits of elevating narrative and textual form to a position equal to or contiguous with its content. I also probe the utility of a visual and textual poetics that likewise turns to those moments when visual composition and textual conventions become enmeshed in the structure of poetic language.

The dance between visual and verbal narrative is perhaps most clearly seen in the frame provided through chiasms and the syntactical and visual interruptions of these symmetrical structures. Chiasms bracket narratives to focus attention on a central element of significance or a similarly critical image. As discussed previously, they may take the form of *a-b-c*, *c-b-a* in which each line is adjacent to the next, or a set of lines may bracket a portion of narrative as in forms such as *a-b...b-a*. In both these instances, these constructions work to emphasize the central axis. These regular patterns may be repeated throughout a narrative and, as is often the case, can be interrupted for poetic effect. Kathryn Josserand (1995) has associated this narrative moment and its disruption with Robert Longacre’s (1985) peak/climax and zone of turbulence, but such rhetorical patterns may also be read in connection with Paul Friedrich’s (2001) ‘lyric epiphany’ or the establishment and then breaking of pattern (Webster 2015, 4). In all such cases, as Anthony Webster suggests, a motif is established and then interrupted. However, in the case at hand, the breaking of a pattern might also form a pattern. In other words, this interruption may itself produce a pattern that takes us from simply documenting instances of chiasms to noting different uses of this rhetorical device in distinct literary traditions or its interaction with imagery. While documenting patterns of regular irregularity—in this case, the specific ways in which chiasmic structures are interrupted—goes beyond the bounds of this paper, one of my goals is discerning the particulars of Maya literature at

specific times and locations to point to the appearance and significance of such ‘irregular’ patterns in addition to those normally discussed.

Another of my goals is to show how the interaction between text and image can be analogous to the extralinguistic features of verbal performance. For example, applying this lens to the *Vase of the 88 Glyphs* (K1440) (Fig. 1), a low-sided dish in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, allows us to discern not only the importance of turning the vessel to read its images and text, but also the role of textual bracketing in directing attention to specific images that become the central axis of the narrative. By tracking how specific structures are deployed and in what contexts, I define an aesthetic that not only sheds light on verbal narratives, but also elucidates visual programmes and their interrelationship with text.

Viewing verbal structures as intentionally related to artistic and architectural features widens translation to include the contextual features without which various significant aspects of the original message would be lost. By original message, I mean the compositional structure of text and image interaction that interlocks with poetic features in systematic ways to produce a fuller meaning, similar to how the two stichs of a couplet or terms of a diphastic kenning produce a different meaning than either line or term would outside a dyadic construction, or how the gestures in a performance add meaning to the spoken narrative.

Poetic, textual and imagistic synergy shows the intentionality of the Maya scribe and hints at complex aesthetic and philosophical principles that remain largely under-examined. Reading and viewing text and imagery requires physically moving through spaces and around monuments (O’Neil 2012), or bringing various types of objects and the images that they present into conversation. On one hand, this is the nature of intertextuality and intermediality (Carrasco & Wald 2018); on the other hand, when seen through parallelism, such acts can themselves be viewed as set in parallel with the poetics of language. Thus, a cylindrical vessel such as the *Rabbit Vase* (K1398) (Fig. 2) must be turned to read both its imagery and text, which interconnect along a number of lines (see Carrasco & Wald 2018). In this case, the division of the composition into two scenes by columns of texts creates a visual parallel and fictive space within the image and also references architectural space. It is no mistake or coincidence that Rabbit’s staff points directly to the glyph *ay* (‘there is’) in the text encircling the rim, signalling the beginning of both the vessel’s textual and visual



Figure 1. Vase of the 88 Glyphs (K1440). Rollout photograph and drawing. (Photograph: Justin Kerr; drawing: Sebastian Matteo.)

narratives. This example, representative of many others, illustrates the interpenetration of text and image in the Classic period context.

However, before addressing questions of meaning, script, and imagery, I demonstrate my ethnopoeitic approach by presenting examples of Maya literature and poetics from the contemporary Yucatec Maya and colonial contexts. I analyse their structures both at the level of the entire narrative and between lines, and then apply this analysis to Classic period Maya narratives from the city of Palenque during the reign of K'inich Janaab' Pakal and his son K'inich Kan B'ahlam II (hereinafter Pakal and Kan B'ahlam, respectively), which present similar structural patterns, to show how these verbal patterns weave back into those found between text and image.

The first narrative is the Yucatec story of Juan Tuyub which is about a man who disliked his dog and animals in general. Don Hernán Perera Novela, a respected elder in the community, recounted it to me in the summer of 2004, while we were recording stories to be transcribed and translated for a project for the Santa Elena municipal museum (Carrasco 2008). Juan Tuyub is a story that his grandfather had told to him and he chose it in particular to share with this project. Although space does not allow for the reproduction of this story here, a full translation and transliteration of this narrative can be found in the online Supplementary material.

The subject of this moralizing story about a man who comes to appreciate animals when his dog speaks to him has the advantage of being more familiar to the contemporary reader than many of the Classic period texts that deal with esoteric subjects. In terms of poetics, it evidences parallel constructions similar to other contemporary and colonial narratives, such as the *Popol Vuh* discussed below, as well as presenting large-scale parallel structures that have often been overlooked in analyses of Maya discourse from all periods. In its spoken form, the context of the narrative encompasses a range of features that the transcription and translation of the story alone do not capture. Thus, Don Hernán's reenactment of movements from the story are only verbally indicated in the use of the word *beyo'* ['like that'], referring to his gestures. However, for the viewing audience, his acting out the movements of Juan Tuyub adds substantially to the texture of the story's performance. Likewise, One Chaak, the setting for much of the story, is a farmed milpa still in use not far from Santa Elena. Ethnopoeitics attempts to capture these extralinguistic features by contextualizing discussions and

ay



Scene One:
Rabbit holding/taking God L's regalia

Scene Two:
God L complaining to K'inich Ajaw, the Sun God

Figure 2. Rabbit Vase (K1398). (Photograph: Justin Kerr.)

specific textual representations of narrative. I consider these features equivalent to the interaction between text and image in glyphic narratives and include the textual context as part of the extralinguistic field in which meaning is made.

Beginning with an opening passage, Don Hernán's narration unfolds through a series of sections that provide the story's chronological frame, lists the characters and sets the action in a location near Santa Elena. After this opening, Don Hernán recounts how Juan Tuyub goes to the milpa with his dog whose name is Lol Yax Nik [Plumeria Flower]. At dusk Juan prepares his meal. While he is eating, he hears a voice seemingly coming from his dog that asks him to share his food. The first day that this happens he does not pay the petition any heed. On the second day, he realizes that it is his dog who is speaking, and shocked, he feeds it and then returns home to tell his wife. Initially, she is supportive, but once she hears that the dog has spoken, she chastises Juan for mistreating his dog and animals more generally. Finally, seeing the errors of his way, he humbles himself and apologizes to Lol Yax Nik.

The story moves from the opening statement to the 'problem' and location, before moving to the diegesis of the narrative, when—within the world of the

narrative—the wife reiterates the narrator's opening observation that Juan disliked his dog, and back to a metadiscursive closing. Parallel structures are found throughout the narrative in individual couplets, triplets and chiasms. However, the structures also occur across different, non-adjacent sections of the narrative, specifically the story's beginning and end. Thus, the chiasm that introduces Juan Tuyub as a man who hates his dog is mirrored in his wife's reprimand. These two constructions bracket the narrative.

Chiasms in the opening to Juan Tuyub:

- a **Another story** I'm going to tell
 - b you all,
 - b you all
 - a who are my friends **is a story,**²

 - a a little, ancient story about **an old man**
 - b who really hated animals,
 - b who really hated his dog.
 - a The name of this **old man was Juan Tuyub**
This old man was a farmer.
- (Lines 1–7 scanned to show chiasmic structure)
- a The place where he **made milpa,**

b *The name of that forest was*
 c One Chaak.
 c One Chaak
 b *was the name of the forest*
 a where he **made milpa.**
 (Lines 11–14)

The semantics and *a-b*, *b-a* structure of the second verse introducing Juan Tuyub are mirrored in his wife’s chastising speech immediately before the closing (Lines 74–79):

a I have told you for a long time **not to insult that dog.**
 It’s not good, not good at all.
 b They have guardian spirits,
 b they have protecting spirits.
 a I have told you every day **not to insult dogs.**
 Why do you hate that dog of yours?

A simplified presentation of this structure, at the level of the different major parts of the story, takes the following form:

[A–B_[a-b, b-a]]–C...C–[B_[a-b, b-a]–A]

In this schema, Section B is partly composed of a chiasm describing Juan Tuyub’s disdain for animals. This repeated verse frames the entire narrative. Section C (Lines 15–60), which describes each of the two days spent in the milpa, is linguistically marked in a different way. For instance, most sentences in this section begin with *le kan* or *ka’a, ka’* [when] or [and, and then]. These terms push the linear narrative forward and contrast with the use of linked chiasm and couplets, advancing the narrative in the opening and closing (A-B) of the story. In this text, enveloped parallelism and chiasmic structures concentrate attention on a central axis of focus. Verses wrap around these central axes to create patterns and variations on these patterns as part of the verbal play that oscillates between fulfilling and thwarting expectations.

Allen Christenson’s (2003; 2012) work on the *Popol Vuh* and other highland documents reveals the significance of chiasm in colonial texts. As in the last example, this trope focuses the reader’s attention on the central axis of the frame. However, in the *Popol Vuh*, the central axis works within the line-for-line mirroring typical of chiasms. The following example presents an *a-b*, *b-a* arrangement (Christenson 2003, II.14, ll. 32–35), in which ‘Xmucane’ is the name of the midwife and ‘Xpiyacoc’ is the name of the patriarch.

a **Midwife,** I’yom,
 b Patriarch, Mamom,
 b Xpiyacoc Xpiyakok,
 a **Xmucane,** [were] their names, Xmuqane, u b’i,

Failing to recognize this chiasmic structure results in a different reading and understanding of the passage, as in earlier interpretations (Edmonson 1971) that identified ‘midwife’ and ‘patriarch’ as a couplet followed by another couplet of ‘Xpiyacoc’ and ‘Xmucane’.

Similar to structures in the *Popol Vuh*, the highly poetic language in the beginning and ending of the Juan Tuyub story invokes a kind of verbal bundling—a way of positioning or centring a narrative—that has a material parallel in the pan-Mesoamerican interest in bundles and wrapping (Bassett 2014; Guernsey & Reilly 2006). Chiasmic structures focus attention on the central axis of the construction, as they also slow down the narrative pace, guiding the reader to linger on this axis (Lacadena 2012).

Vase of the 88 Glyphs (K1440) presents an exceptional example of chiasmic frames and the conjunction of narrative structure and imagery from the Late Classic Maya. Possibly originating from the Naj Tunich-Nimili Punit-Pusilha region of Guatemala based on epigraphic evidence (Robicsek & Hales 1981; 1982), K1440 depicts two main scenes and two smaller vignettes (Fig. 1) accompanied by the longest extant ceramic inscription. The first major scene shows two figures dressed as wind gods anointing a fire-nosed figure who is enthroned in the second main scene (Fig. 3). Occupying only the top half of the side of the vessel, the two smaller scenes each portray supernatural figures. The imagery of the main scenes parallels the iconographic programme of Palenque Temple 21 and several other vase scenes (K1229), all of which appear to concern rites of passage.

Previous research on K1440 has yielded important insights into the use of independent pronouns (Hull *et al.* 2009), the first-person quotative particle, *chehen* (Grube 1998) and the complex poetics discussed here (Carrasco 2012a, b; 2017; Sheseña 2016). The vessel’s narrative and artist signature present a highly poetic genre of literary discourse nearly absent in the monumental corpus. However, as the above synopsis of the vessel’s narrative suggests, its imagery is equally intriguing, especially when viewed in light of our relatively clear understanding of the second portion of its textual programme.

While not unique, the use of a Long Count date on K1440 is rare in ceramic inscriptions, but here I put aside issues surrounding this dating to focus on the narrative. I believe that the two main scenes on the vessel feature the same person. The word *ay* (B5)³ ‘there is’ begins the first sentence, followed by the verb *sihyaj* [to be born], which also includes the semantic range of ‘to be manifested’ or ‘arrive’, as well as its more direct reference to actual ‘birth’. This initial phrase is the first stich of a large couplet pattern

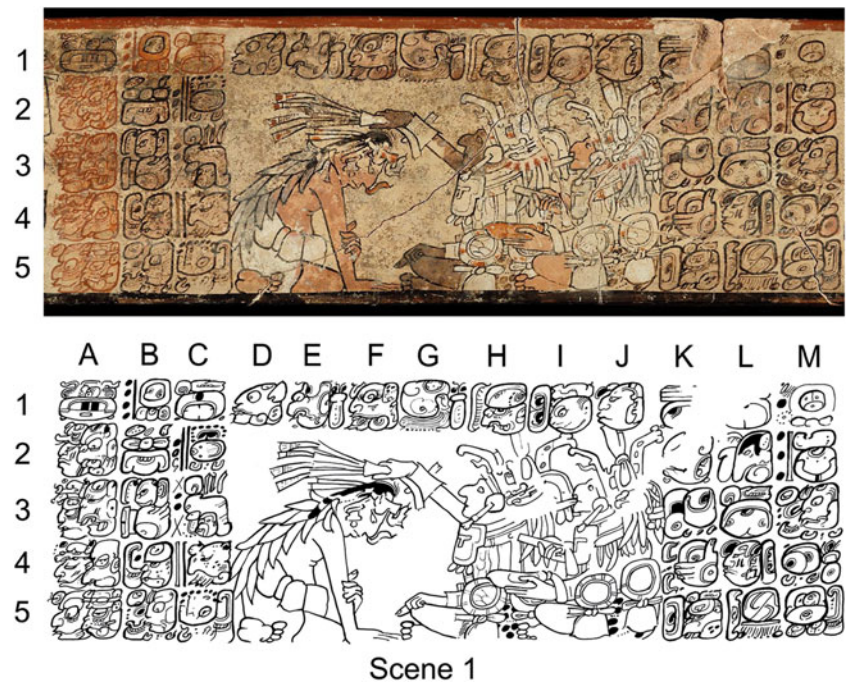


Figure 3. K1440 detail. First major scene and associated texts. (Photograph: Justin Kerr; drawing: Sebastian Matteo.)

mirrored by the ‘touched earth’ glyph at K1, possibly read as *yuhk-kab’* [joining of earth] (Esparza Olguín & Velásquez 2013), which refers to arrival in the *Temple of the Cross (TC)* inscriptions at Palenque. That inscription contrasts the glyph *yuhk-kab’* with *huli* [to arrive]. Therefore, the entire passage describes the manifestation of an entity pictured in the associated image. This is likely a metaphor for a change in state or rite of passage, possibly into the position of *ch’ahom*, based on the resemblance between the headdress worn by the youth and one of the versions of the glyph for *ch’ahom*. As such, although this passage has yet to be fully deciphered, its general meaning is clear: On the Calendar Round date 9 Eb’ 10, Muwan,⁴ a person or entity was born, manifested, or arrived. After a restatement of his arrival, additional information is provided, specifically about his maternal parentage. Positioned directly above the fire-nosed youth, phrases including the terms *t’is* [mouth] and *b’aas* [head, face] illustrate an initial moment of connection between text and image.

The Calendar Round date of 1 Ajaw 8 K’umku (M1–2) and *ay* (M3) begin the next section of the narrative associated with the second major scene (Fig. 4). This section describes the enthronement of the fire-nosed individual from the first scene and pictures this figure sitting on a bone-throne and flanked by a rodent and bat attendant in an underworld environment, most likely a cave (Sheseña 2016; Stone 1995, 169). The inscription names this location as the Speared Earth (*julan kab’* or *jul kab’ na* [O4]) and

the Black Portal Place (*ihk’ way nal* [O5]), which is described as the cave of the Wind and Sea gods. The Black Portal Place is known from other mythological texts, such as the Creation Vase (K1609), and from the inscriptions of Naj Tunich (Drawing 66, C1) (MacLeod & Stone 1995, 168–70; Robiscek & Hales 1982). It is unclear whether its mention here refers to a mythological location or the Naj Tunich cave, but the possibility that this toponym could refer to both suggests that mythological locations might be given specific physical manifestation in sacred geography or the built world.

After the seating event, the passage describes the placement of offerings before the fire-nosed figure’s throne and his installation upon the throne, followed by a couplet likely referring collectively to the entities involved in these actions as the gods and lords, and a final set focused on four and eight roads, which is a reference found in several other inscriptions (Carrasco 2005, 218–19). The narrative concludes by returning to the location of the cave from which the Wind God sings, alluding to the Maya conception that the movement of air in caves signals their vital spirit or the spirit who inhabits them (K. Bassie-Sweet pers. comm., 2006).

Poetic structure

An *a-b. . . b-a* frame brackets the entire second section of the narrative on K1440. Four syntactic and semantic couples compose the framed narrative. The

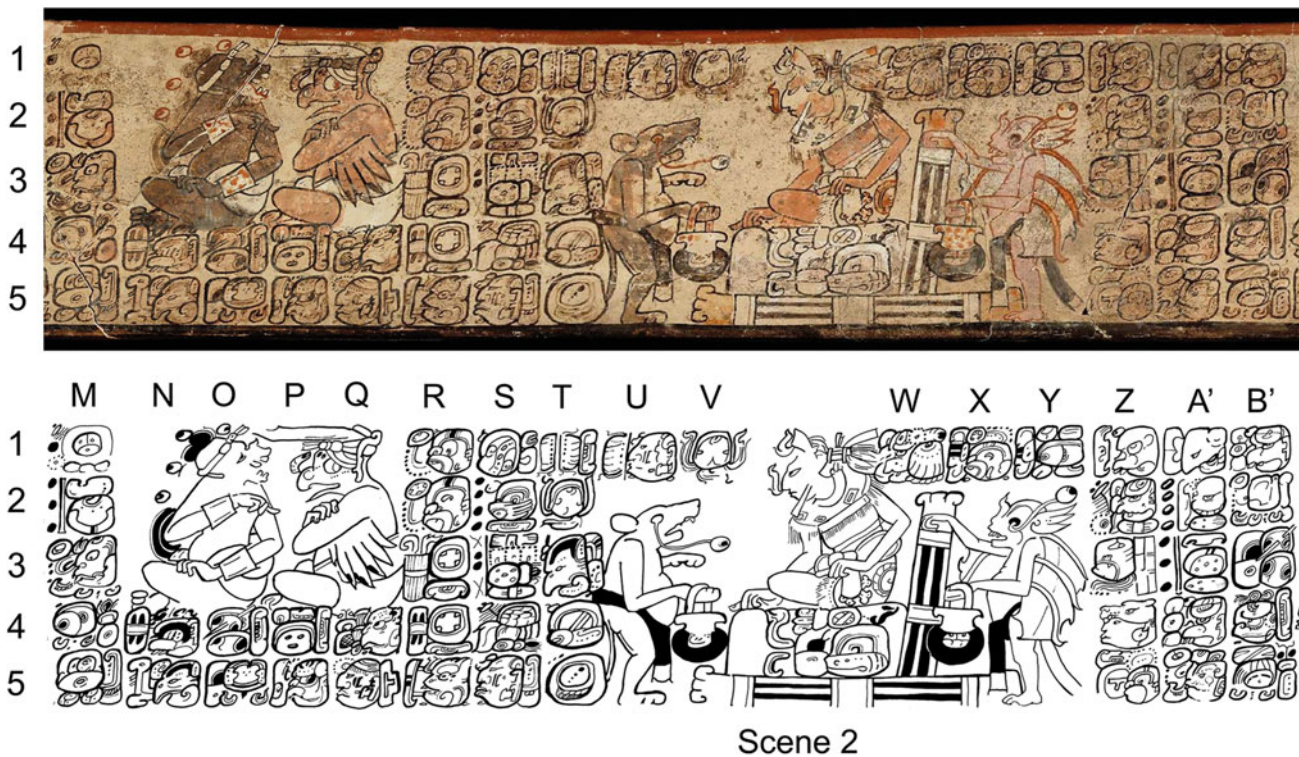


Figure 4. K1440 detail. Second major scene and associated texts. (Photograph: Justin Kerr; drawing: Sebastian Matteo.)

passage may be diagrammed as $a^1-b^1-c^1-c^2-c^3-c^4-b^2-a^2$ in which each c is composed of a semantic couplet and speaks to a discrete issue. For example, c^1 deals with offerings, while c^2 describes the enthronement of the fire-nosed figure. The common thread between each is their focus on this person.

Poetic scansion (M1–F'5):

On 1 Ajaw 8 Kumk'u it happened that

a^1 he sat in rulership in the Speared Earth,
the root of the Black Portal Place,

b^1 in the cave of the Wind God,
the God of the Sea.

c^1 Four are the *Mim*[?]-offerings at the bench,
seven are the *Matobitk*[?]-offerings at the
bench,
in his house.

c^2 The *San Winik* was installed,
the *San Winik* appeared on the throne.

c^3 They [*ha'ob*] are the First Gods,

the First Lords,
the head and the body.⁵

c^4 With/for you [*ta ha'at*], four are the roads
of the K'inich,
eight are the roads of the
[Maize?] God.

b^2 It is he [*ha'i*], the Wind God who shouts,
 a^2 it is he who sings [in] the black speared
earth.

d^1 It is I [*hiin*], [the scribe of the K1440],
 e^1 who said it,

e^2 it is the writing
 d^2 by [the scribe of K1440] the vassal of the Sahal.

The enthronement of the fire-nosed figure lies at the central axis of the chiasm and serves as the narrative's focal point. His head intrudes upon the inscription at this central axis in the narrative and at the precise point at which the text describes him. Thus, the image interpenetrates the inscription to emphasize the pivot that has been already verbally expressed. The entire ensemble of text and image

may be schematized by treating the pictorial component as another major section of the narrative.

$$a^1 - b^1 - c^1 - c^2 - [\textit{image}] - c^3 - c^4 - b^2 - a^2$$

The signature found at the end of the narrative also takes the form of a chiasm (Fig. 5). It is significant that in the two stichs of this passage, the verb *chehen* (D'4) for 'I say/said' contrasts with a glyph (C'5) likely read as *tz'ihb'* [writing], possibly giving a rare indication that the narrative was also composed by the scribe of the vessel. If we see the string of independent pronouns—*ha'o'b'*, *ha'at*, *ha'i*, and *hiin* [they, you, he, and I]—initiating c^{3-4} , b^2 , a^2 and d^1 as a poetic effect, we find the narrative linked to the meta-discursive section of the signature through a parallel between a specific type of speech—independent pronouns—rather than semantics.

$$a^1 - b^1 - c^1 - c^2 -$$

$$[\textit{image}] - [ha'o'b']c^3 - [ha'at]c^4 - [ha'i]b^2 - a^2, [hiin d^1] - e^1, e^2 - d^2$$

In this way, a grammatical element links sections in the narrative that are otherwise functionally distinct.

To use a musical metaphor, these patterns establish a base melody, while the harmony is generated by the text's resonance with the imagery. Along with the text–image interaction, the need to turn the vessel to read it functions as the visual equivalent to the pauses, tones and extralinguistic features central to ethnopoetic approaches to textual analysis (Bauman 1977; Bauman & Sherzer 1989; Hymes 2003; Kataoka 2012; Sammons & Sherzer 2000; Tedlock 1983; Uzendoski & Calapucha-Tapuy 2012) and likewise nearly eludes capture in any standard translation of this narrative. K1440 presents a rich text, but the lengthy narratives of Palenque frequently exhibit far greater complexity. I now turn to two texts from this site.

Parallel and chiasmic structures at Palenque

Temple of Inscriptions

The funerary monument of the ruler Pakal, the *Temple of Inscriptions* (TI) (dedicated 6 July 690 CE), preserves a narrative that describes rituals performed at the end of a 20-year period known as a K'atun (*winikhaab'* in Classic Mayan) and pays particular attention on the three period endings rituals performed by Pakal during his reign. I have previously presented a translation of this material (Carrasco 2012a), but I now focus on the final two period endings to highlight poetic structures like those found on K1440. These sections (Middle Panel (Fig. 6) A1–West Panel A8) describe a series of rituals in which

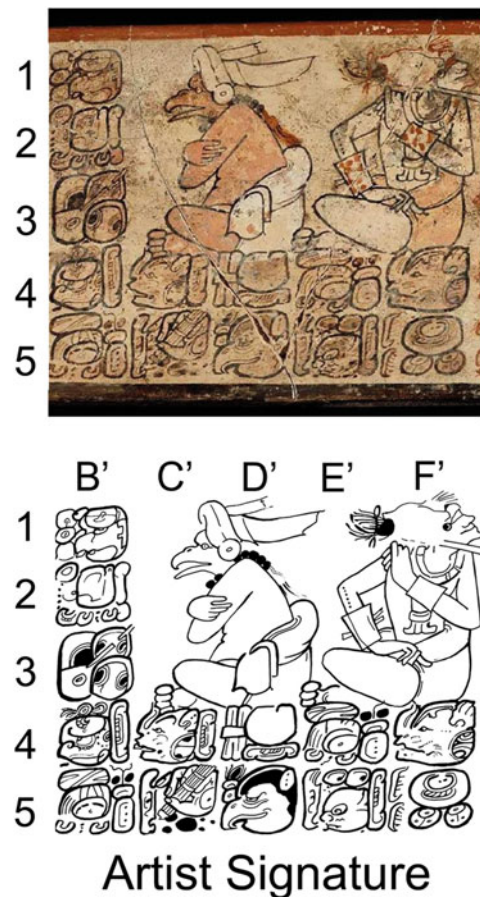


Figure 5. K1440 detail. Artist signature (B'4–F'5). (Photograph: Justin Kerr; drawing: Sebastian Matteo.)

Pakal gave (*-ahk'aw*) bundles (*pih*), or possibly clothing (*piik*, from proto-Ch'olan **pik* 'enagua' [skirt]), belonging to the patron gods of Palenque. This portion of the narrative divides into two major stanzas organized by Eleventh (12 Ajaw K'atun) and Twelfth (10 Ajaw K'atun) period endings. In both the 12 and 10 Ajaw Stanzas, there are three and four offering statements, respectively, followed by a final summation passage stating that the bark-paper wrapping or tying (*k'al hu'un*) of the altars of the patron gods was Pakal's diligent service (*juntahn*). The three offering statements of the 12 Ajaw Stanza give the proper name of the headdress first and then state that this was the headdress of the 20 bundles (1 WINAK-ki u-pi-hi, *jun winaak upih*) of the named deity. The 10 Ajaw Stanza presents a nearly identical structure, but the order of the elements within the offering statements is inverted, so that bundles are given, followed by a list of their contents and the proper name of the headdress. Nevertheless, the name of the patron deity concludes each offering

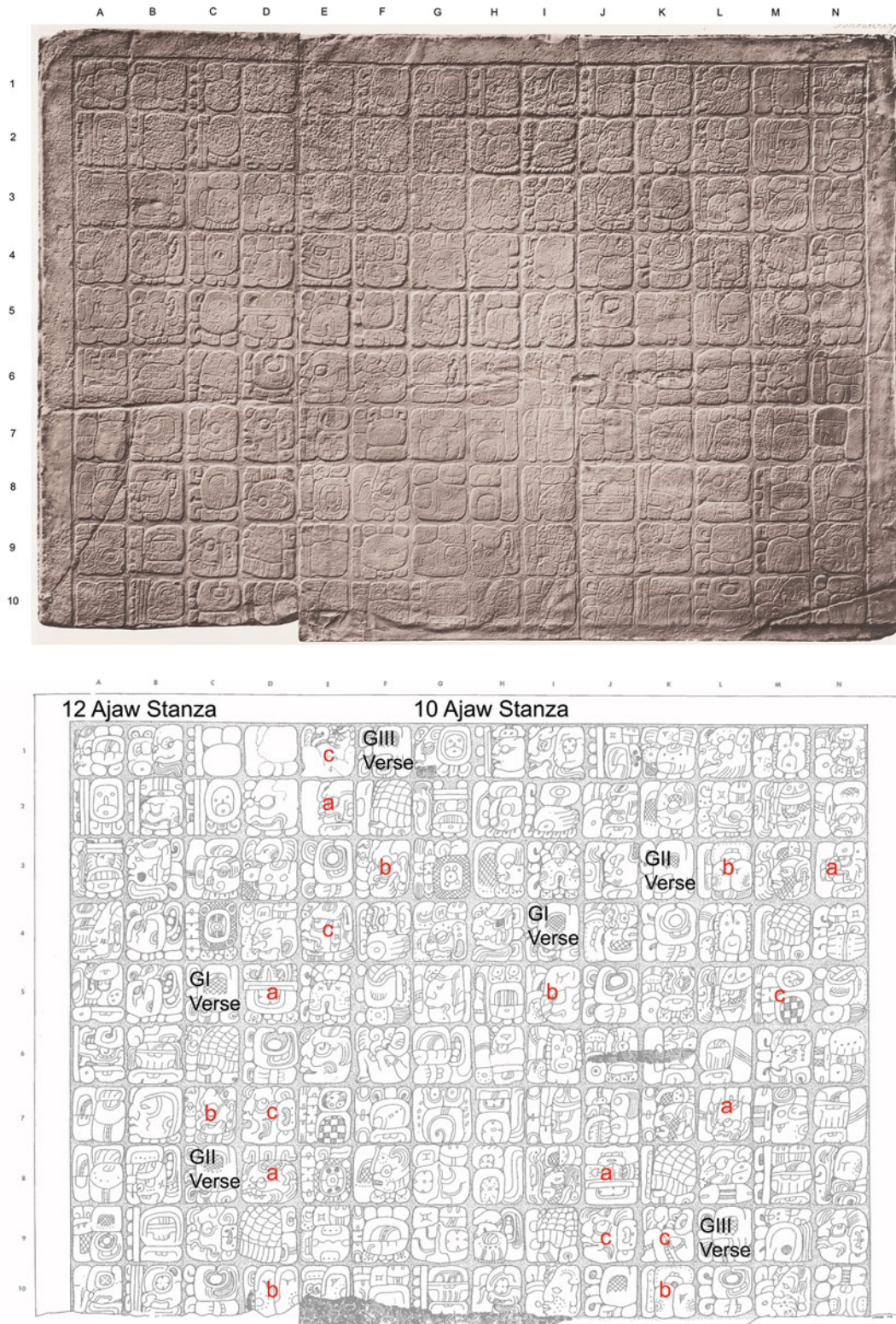


Figure 6. Temple of Inscriptions, Middle Panel. (Photograph: A.P. Maudslay, 1889, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; drawing: Linda Schele.)

event in both stanzas. The pattern revealed here could be thought of as an *interversion*, a term borrowed from musical analysis that describes constructions of the form *a-b-c*, *b-a-c* and similar permutations of three or more terms. The full pattern could be represented as the following, in which each *a-b-c* unit corresponds to the offerings made to a specific patron deity:

a-b-c, a-b-c, a-b-c, ...b-a-c, [pakalgives], b-a-c, b-a-c...

In this case, *a* corresponds to the proper name of the specific deity headdress, *b* refers to the god bundle or dressings and *c* is the name of the deity. Of particular syntactical interest is the placement of the deity at the end of the section, in a location normally reserved for the agent/subject of a transitive sentence. Here the deity possesses the bundle, *pih*. However, the agent performing the action is clearly Pakal, a point that the author made explicit by stating that Pakal gave these objects immediately after the first *b-a-c* verse, indicated here in subscript.

- 12 Ajaw Stanza, GI verse (Middle Panel C5–D7):
- a He gave the **'Quadripartite badge'**,
 - b it was headdress of the 20 bundles of
 - c GI...
- 10 Ajaw Stanza, GI verse (Middle Panel I4–I10):
- b He gave its divine bundle,
 - twenty wrappings were its white paper necklace,
 - the first fire god? was its earspool,
 - a the divine **'Quadripartite badge'** was the headdress of
 - c GI...

The final verses of the 12 and 10 Ajaw Stanzas together form a chiasmic frame specifically centring the 10 Ajaw Stanza, which exhibits the most structural complexity and includes the greatest amount of information about Pakal.

- 12 Ajaw Stanza (Middle Panel F4–E9):
- d **The wrapping of the altars** of the triad gods [*ux lut? k'uh*], GI, GII, and GIII,
 - e [was] the diligent service of K'inich Janaab Pakal, the Divine Palenque Lord ...
- 10 Ajaw Stanza (East Panel A1–B6):
- e The diligent service to the gods of the Winikhaab' Ch'ahom K'inich Janaab' Pakal,
 - d [was] **the wrapping of the altars** of his gods, GI, GII, GIII, the triad gods [*ux lut? k'uh*].

The Tying and Juntahn verse of the 12 Ajaw Stanza employs 'standard syntax', where the action of wrapping (*k'al*) the altars in paper (*hu'un*) or placing a headdress on them is positioned before a second clause that restates this action as the diligent service (*juntahn*) of Pakal. However, the same statement in the 10 Ajaw Stanza reverses the order of the clauses, which required the use of the preposition *ta*, here contracted with the third-person ergative pronoun *u* for *t-u-k'uh-il* [to his god(s)] (Carrasco 2012a, 140–41). This large-scale structure is like the hyperbaton (a rhetorical disruption or inversion of normal order) identified by Alfonso Lacadena (2012) at the level of the line. In the present case, the constituent parts of the construction are only visible when comparing stanzas and other larger organizing structures.

Accounting for the chiasmic frame and the interversion passages, the following pattern emerges in the *TI* narrative:

...[a-b-c, a-b-c, a-b-c, [d-e...b-a-c, [Pakalgives], b-a-c, b-a-c]...e-d]...

The *d-e...e-d* chiasmic bracket resembles the *a-b...b-a* frame found in the K1440 narrative. In each of these inscriptions these bracketing chiasmic structures focus attention on a moment of central significance in the narrative and, in the case of K1440, on the image of the enthroned figure.

Examining this narrative further reveals additional complexity. For example, as previously mentioned, in the 10 Ajaw Stanza, instead of listing only three offering events, as in the 12 Ajaw Stanza, another element was inserted to highlight that the giver of these objects was Pakal. This is an instance of poetic redundancy that casts him as the agent. The insertion of this additional statement represents another instance in which the pattern is established and then broken. This statement's position at the fulcrum of this balanced construction also divides the narrative similar to the way in which the fire-nosed figure's head interrupts the text on K1440. Finally, at A7–A8 of the first two columns of the West Panel, a concluding statement describes Pakal's devotional acts as pleasing the hearts (*utimiw yohl*) of his gods (B. Macleod pers. comm., 1998), which contrasts with the narrative preceding Pakal's reign when the patron gods were not treated appropriately. Building on this statement, the narrative enters a new section that moves forward in time and then finally returns at the very end of the narrative to describe the ritual care (*juntahn*) that Kan B'ahlam gave to his father's tomb.

As these examples show, the use of chiasm highlights the importance of the acts described. It is also significant that while this text is structured by the chronological framework of the 20-year K'atun—certainly one of the main engines for advancing the narrative—poetic devices crosscut this framework to focus attention on the central axis of the 10 Ajaw K'atun, which is also spatially presented nearly entirely on the Middle Panel. The wrapping of the 10 Ajaw Stanza, the structural complexity of the Middle Panel in general, and the entire narrative's poetic intensity suggests a positive, indexical relationship between poetics and the importance of specific content.

Temple of the Foliated Cross

The *Temple of the Foliated Cross* (TFC) is dedicated to the patron deity Unen K'awiil or GII and is one of the main structures within the *Temples of the Cross Group* (TCG) complex. The TCG was completed in the early 690s (dedicated on 10 January 690) during the reign of Kan B'ahlam in advance of the CE 692 period-ending celebrations of the Thirteenth K'atun on 8 Ajaw 8 Woh (March 692). These temples appear to have housed the icons of the patron gods referred to in the *TI* narrative and the location of the TCG might have been the original location of past K'atun completion events (Carrasco 2012a). In the TCG, Kan B'ahlam continues a line of royal rhetoric begun in the *TI* to describe his own service to his gods (*juntahn*) and interweaves this with Palenque's dynastic record and his youth and accession rituals. This complex narrative message is all placed in an aesthetically refined and symbolically rich architectural and sculptural programme that suggests that he fulfilled the trajectory begun by his father by emphasizing his steps on the path toward kingship and anticipating his ritual role in the K'atun period-ending rituals.

The main text of the TFC (Fig. 7) uses a calendrical bracket of a Calendar Round date to frame the narrative. In contrast to the *TI*, Kan B'ahlam in this instance plays more fluidly with the interconnectedness of text, image and architecture. Like the *TI* narrative, the TFC text breaks into discrete stanzas. The first, Stanza One, includes the text concerning the birth/manifestation of the patron god Unen K'awiil (GII) on 1 Ajaw 13 Mak in the deep past or 'mythological' time to the left of the main image, which depicts two images of Kan B'ahlam at different ages, presenting a sculpture and a blood letter, respectively, to a personified cruciform maize tree. The text to the right of the image, Stanza Two, records the Calendar Round date of 2 Kib 14 Mol,

which is the first day in a ceremonial cycle. It concluded with a record of the completion of the 8 Ajaw K'atun. The other temples of the Cross Group also record the 2 Kib 14 Mol ceremonial cycle and 8 Ajaw K'atun completion though in different locations in the textual program. A period of approximately 2947 years (7.7.7.3.16) connects the two stanzas, and as with the focal texts of each temple, deep-time events parallel the historical ones performed by Kan B'ahlam (Carrasco 2012a, 142–8). Although I lack the space for a full analysis of this narrative, the structure of each of these stanzas presents similar large-scale structural parallels like those found in the *TI* or on K1440.

Stanza One opens and closes with the Calendar Round date of Unen K'awiil's birth on 1 Ajaw 13 Mak. However, the position of the date in the final statement is inversed, and it appears at the end of the clause rather than the beginning, which is the normal position for temporal information in Classic Mayan syntax. Here again an *a-b*. . . *b-a* is employed. The focus here is on the birth of K'awiil, which is also described as conjuring. This action in turn is linked to the completion of the second B'ak'tun, a large cycle composed of 20 k'atuns (approximately 400 years), that is the central axis of the chiasmatic frame. Here I present an edited version to showing these basic parallels:

A [On] 1 Ajaw 13 Mak . . .

B third born was Ut/Lem Yax Muut, . . .

34 years, 14 months and 0 days
after the Sprout, the Infant
K'awiil had arrived at Matwiil,
the second B'ak'tun was then
completed on 2 Ajaw 3 Wayeb'

B the god conjuring of the prime progenitor, the
divine Matwiil Ajaw, occurred at the Green
Mountain. . . [i.e. Temple of the Foliate Cross]

A [On] 1 Ajaw 13 Mak.

Stanza Two employs a similar structure in which the Calendar Round date 2 Kib 14 Mol frames a narrative describing a series of events involving Kan B'ahlam's rituals, including the censuring of the shrines, wrapping of altars, his accession, and the 8 Ajaw period ending, among others. As in the first half of the TFC panel text, this one has an *a-b*, *b-a* frame composed of the date 2 Kib, in this case the censuring event. While this frame contains a considerable amount of information, the central axis of focus



Figure 7. Temple of the Foliated Cross Tablet. (Photograph: © Jorge Pérez de Lara; drawing: Linda Schele.)

again appears to be the manifestation of deities and devotional acts directed at them.

A [On] 2 Kib 14 Mol...

B Censed were the shrines of the Three Gods ...

C On the night of 3 Kab'an 15 Mol
dedicated was the K'inich K'uk' House ...

D Third, was the god-conjuring of
the Great Sky Lord of the Eb'e't by
his darkness-creation,

D It was the Bark-Paper
[headdress]-tying of the gods of
K'inich Kan B'ahlam, the Divine Mat
Lord.

C It happened at the Lakam Ha' Chan Ch'een ...

B K'inich Kan B'ahlam gives...

A then 2 Kib' happened.

A final line reiterates the B actions when it states that Kan B'ahlam's diligent service was performed:

*i patlaj ujuntahn k'inich kan b'ahlam,
k'uhul b'aakal ajaw.*

and then the diligent service of K'inich Kan B'ahlam,
the Divine Palenque Lord, was performed.

Stanza 2 parallels the chiasmic structure of Stanza 1, the mythological portion of the inscription. Here, the 2 Kib frames a longer period of several days that focuses on the conjuring of a god and their adornment. Also of note, the final statement echoes Pakal's own service to the patron gods at the end of the 12 and 10 Ajaw Stanzas in the *TI* texts, as well as the closing lines of the *TI* text that records Kan B'ahlam's diligent service to his father's tomb. This closing stands as the final element of a triplet, the first two lines of which appear in the closing passages of the *Temple of the Sun* and *Temple of the Cross*, respectively. This suggests an imperative to read the *TFC* narrative in relation to the narratives of the other shrines in the complex, which the overall integrity of the narratives and imagery between them encourages. The entire text of the *TFC* may thus be roughly schematized as:

A-B, B-A [image] A-B-C, C-B-A, summation.

The summation returns to the central axis of the Stanza 2 (D) and links the text to a larger programme that extends into the narrative of the *TI*. Although this scansion of the narrative fails to exhaust the complexity of the Cross Group textual programme, it illustrates the need to generate holistic analyses of textual structure to reveal large-scale patterns. The pattern seen here in texts, composition and imagery suggests three axes of significance: one in the first mythological section, a second in the image that stands between the two textual panels, and the third in Kan B'ahlam's own deity manifestation in the second stanza. Yet because the patron deities were conjured in these temples, the narrative, imagery and architectural position suggest another axis between viewer and scene, one specifically keyed to Kan B'ahlam's own presence in the shrine during the completion of the 692 K'atun period ending, thus continuing the series of ritual actions begun by his father and recorded in the *TI*.

Conclusions

These examples of Classic-era, colonial and contemporary Maya narrative illustrate patterns of verbal complexity and parallelism that extend beyond the couplets, triplets, quatrains and other adjacent structures that have usually figured in discussions of Maya poetics. I have shown that chiasmic forms structure larger parallel patterns that are not always adjacent, and I identified some of the ways in which these patterns are regularly broken or interrupted. In the Classic period, these forms worked in tandem with architecture, imagery and spatial contexts to create sophisticated compositions united by a common poetics or aesthetics. Consequently, these compositions are often only intelligible by considering the entire context of the inscription. I have focused on the narrative, visual and textual structures that frame a central axis focused on a key narrative moment or visual element. As seen in examples of contemporary and colonial narrative, this structuring occasionally takes the form of a traditional chiasm. However, there are larger patterns that are not immediately apparent unless the entire narrative is considered, and in such cases, larger framing or bracketing devices emerge that I would describe as chiasmic structures at the level of the entire narrative. Comparative examples can be found in other literary traditions around the world, from *The Book of Genesis* (Shea 1982) to *Beowulf* (Niles 1979, 924–35).

I have detected these structures by mapping patterns similar to the way that Hymes approached a number of Native American languages that have

survived only as texts. Lacking speakers, he turned to internal structures to understand style and poetics, which are fused with semantics. Through examining these structures in Classic period narratives, I have defined an aesthetic that not only sheds light on verbal narratives, but also begins to elucidate the inter-relationship between texts and visual programmes. The presence of certain textual features, especially large-scale narrative structures, signals a kind of compositional planning similar to the composition of a sculpture or a painting. Large-scale structures, like other criteria including self-referentiality, intertextuality and the density of narrative tropes, serve to mark a narrative as special speech or writing. The fact that poetic devices cross-cut different narrative genres suggests that they are not the single defining criteria of specific genres, but rather intrinsic to Maya fine speech and likely poetics across much of Mesoamerica.

Recognizing such structures in these narratives underscores that they were perceived by their original audiences as literary genres of marked importance. What is less certain is the extent to which their presence in Classic Maya narration is distinct from or similar to the use of chiasmic structures in other literatures. In other words, given the ubiquity of chiasmic structures in world literature, we might ask whether their identification in Classic Maya narration is simply another instance to add to the list, or if their presence registers cultural specificity. While showing Classic Maya literature's shared features with other world literatures is important in its own right, there are other intriguing reasons to be interested in chiasms and other formal tropes specific to this tradition. For example, parallel structures and chiasm are fundamental rhetorical forms in Classical Chinese literature, where they intensify the underlying message of reciprocity central to Chinese society (McCraw 2006) and often help to advance an argument or deconstruct commonsensical views (McCraw 2006, 90). In the Chinese context, the form of chiasm demonstrates relationships of balance and reciprocity, and in this way, chiasmic forms are iconic or even indexical of the argument itself. A similar hypothesis might be hazarded for the Maya, who also valued reciprocity and balance. However, unlike the use of chiasm in Classical Chinese to construct or deconstruct a premise—to present positive and negative points—the Maya use these forms to focus on the creation of meaning through the triangulation of concepts of greater abstraction than the constituent parts, in addition to directing attention to the subject of the central axis of the construction. In this way, at a more philosophical level, chiasmus might be

thought of as an ontological folding wherein contiguity or identity and difference between the two inversed elements can be expressed simultaneously, which in turn jointly provoke a concept that is greater than the sum of its parts. For the Classic-period Maya this is likely keyed to time and the repetition of specific rites within the flow of a calendrical system in which specific dates reoccur and therefore are conceptual equivalents, yet are tied to specific historical moments. This idea is also found in discerning and revealing the commonality between items that might at first appear to be dichotomies, yet are really extremes within a higher-order classification. Thus the unification of these apparent opposites is used to denote this more abstract category.

We see this triangulation functioning most clearly in diphrastric kennings (Carrasco & Englehardt 2015; Hull 2003; 2012; Knowlton 2002), or the oppositional signs used to write the glyph *tz'ak* (Stuart 2003). In each of these cases, the paired terms invoke a third, generally more abstract concept. For example, the Tzeltal Mayan term for 'animal', *kanbahlam*, composed of the words 'snake' and 'jaguar', conveys the sense of those creatures that fall between serpents and jaguars, or in the Chol expression *tyaty-ñā'-ül-ob'*, which means 'our father-mother-s', but more accurately denotes 'ancestors' (Hopkins 1995, 2), or in the term *k'anal yaxal* [lit. yellow-green] that is used in the Morán Manuscript to translate the Spanish theological term *gracia* [grace] into colonial Ch'olti' Mayan (Law 2012). Through this process, concrete constituent terms form a third, more abstract concept.

A similar meaning-making process is at play in the large-scale parallel structures that I have discussed here. For instance, in the Cross Group texts, Kan B'ahlam has no need to call himself a god or connect his dynasty to founding patron deities because through the use of juxtaposition he mirrors his own actions with the those of these entities. The equivalency of the ritual actions performed by Kan B'ahlam and the founding figures and cultural heroes indicates a shared functional identity that transcends a symbolic representation of a particular deity or a mimicry of a historical entity, though this may also be the case. Rather, it points to the necessity of the actions that each god and ruler perform. This is a point clearly suggested in the fact that juxtaposition of mythological and historical rituals recorded in the Cross Group anticipates Kan B'ahlam's own ritual actions precisely at the location centred between the balancing of mythic, historical and present time in the sanctuaries of patron gods. Just as the fire-nosed

figure enters textual space when he is named, the iconographic and textual programmes of the TCG position Kan B'ahlam's presence in the space of original mythological actions and anticipate his own conjuring actions at the completion of the 8 Ajaw K'atun period endings on 9.13.0.0.0 (18 March 962). Correct action that produces expected results confirms the contiguity between the divine and human. The idea of the ontological fold attempts to capture this complex formulation and offers a way of considering the rhetorical form of the chiasmus within a larger aesthetic and philosophical system.

Finally, the interplay between text, narrative, imagery and architectural context functionally mirrors the extralinguistic features of verbal performance. Just as Don Hernán's gestures give extralinguistic meaning to the Juan Tuyub story, iconography, textual placement and orthographic choices in Classic Maya inscriptions enhance the content of the narrative. By delineating textual structure and comparing it with similar structures in other media, an ethnopoetic approach renders these associations and their larger conceptual underpinnings more visible. This approach also shows that, while chiasms and similar parallel structures are cross-cultural phenomena, their purposes and effect are quite distinct to a given culture, and their analysis in this context adds critical insight into Maya expressive culture.

Notes

1. Chiasmus or chiasm (the source of the adjective chiasmic), from the Greek *χίασμα*, *chiasma* [crossing], which in turn originates from the Greek *χιάζω*, *chiázō* [to shape like the letter X], are terms for a rhetorical construction that creates symmetry and balance in texts by repeating elements in an inverted or nested order. This can be a repetition and inversion of words, concepts, or grammatical elements. Sometimes a distinction is made between chiasmus and antimetabole, wherein the former speaks to the inversion of concepts whereas the latter refers to the repetition and inversion of the exact words. Here I use chiasm and chiasmus as general labels for all these rhetorical forms. Matthew 19:30 offers a good example from the Bible: 'But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first'. A modern instance is found in John F. Kennedy's famous command from his 1961 inaugural address: 'Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.' In these instances, the function of the inversion is to emphasize a meaning opposite the first statement. In other cases, chiasm is used to focus attention on a core element or for other purposes (Paul 2014).
2. Here, I use **bold**, *italics* and underlining to show parallel passages in the specific chiasms. The underlined elements are the central axis in each instance.
3. This alphanumeric designation is used to refer to a specific glyph block within Maya hieroglyphic texts. Each glyph block may refer to a word, or a word may be spread across two or sometime even three glyph blocks.
4. The Calendar Round is a date formed from the interlocking of the Tzolk'in and Haab calendars in which a specific date only repeats every 52 years. The Tzolk'in is the ancient 260-day ceremonial count composed of a count from 1 to 13 combined with one of 20 days the same number. A day within the Tzolk'in repeats only every 260 days. The Haab' consists of 18 months of 20 days combined with a count from 0 to 19 plus five 'unlucky' days known as Wayeb', yielding a 365-day year.
5. The glyphs in this line are damaged and perhaps painted over.

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Supplementary material

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