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An Iconographic and Historic Analysis of Terminal Classic Maya Phallic Imagery



Research Year: 2000

Culture: Maya

Chronology: Terminal Classic

Location: Mérida, Yucatán, México

Sites: Chichén Itzá and Uxmal

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Introduction

I would like to begin by thanking FAMSI Board members, and FAMSI Advisory Board members for supporting final research for my dissertation "An Iconographic and Historic Analysis of Terminal Classic Maya Phallic Imagery." The financial assistance provided by FAMSI allowed me to conduct additional research in Mérida, Yucatán in May 2000 to document several phallic sculptures in the *bodega* of the Museo Regional de Antropología and to re-examine the House of the Phalli at Chichén Itzá. I also returned to Uxmal to take additional photographs and measurements of phallic sculptures at the site. Below is an abstract of the dissertation, summary of types of phallic images discussed in the

dissertation, and information gathered in the field with the assistance of the FAMSI grant.

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Dissertation Abstract

The dissertation presents an iconographic analysis of a collection of phallic images associated with 9th-century Maya culture of northern Yucatán México, a period commonly referred to as the Terminal Classic Period. Two related issues are considered within the dissertation. (1) Formal documentation of a significant number of prominent images, primarily sculpture, originally located in numerous large and smaller northern Maya sites. This documentation suggests that this imagery is a major art form and that it has been historically overlooked in the iconographic interpretations of Maya culture at these sites. (2) An iconographic analysis and comparison of this relatively late imagery to similar earlier Classic Maya imagery and iconography. This comparison suggests that phallic imagery evolved directly out of earlier traditions and that it was a significant part of ancient Maya spiritual life, cosmology, rulership, and lineage.

A brief historical analysis of Colonial and post-Colonial scholarship is included in the dissertation. Four general historic contexts are considered: "Hidden Phallus," "Romantic Phallus," "Documentary Phallus," and "Historic Phallus." An analysis of these different contexts reveals how scholarship has affected or continues to affect our understanding of ancient Maya culture and art.

Several iconographic contexts are considered such as "Gestures and Poses," "Trees and Pathways," "Bacabs and Stones," "Caves, Portals and Sacred Spaces," and "Names and Titles." The large-scale phallic sculptures that appear at sites such as Chichén Itzá are evaluated in the context of these themes in ancient Maya cosmology and mythology. An analysis of Classic Maya iconography suggests that ancient Maya concepts of lineage, rulership, and creation are manifested in the overt form of the phallus during the Terminal Classic Period. The appearance of such graphic or literal forms was in part a response to the cultural and political changes taking place in the northern Yucatán. Overt phallic images primarily served as community symbols that secured Maya religious and ritual practices during this period of drastic change. Phallic imagery served to sanctify sacred ritual space, order the community, and legitimize the authority of the ruling elite.

Types of Phallic Images

Over 130 phalli are documented in the dissertation from various contexts from over forty sites ([Figure 1](#) and [Figure 2](#)). Three general types are noted: large freestanding, detached phalli (i.e., phalli that appear separate from the human form); small portable phalli; and attached phalli (i.e., phalli that are attached to the human form, architecture or natural surfaces such as cave walls).

Many phalli may be characterized as "monumental" since they are large or massive in size and exaggerated beyond normal human proportion. Phallic images served to commemorate specific rituals and mark certain ancient cosmological or mythical events and, in this sense, they functioned as monuments. The visual impact and contextual placement of phallic images augments the commemorative and symbolic functions of Yucatecan phalli.



Figure 1. Map of sites documented with phalli. By Laura M. Amrhein and Dr. Walter Witschey.

MENTIONED SITES WITH KNOWN PHALLI

KEY: detached + attached A portable - P

| | | | |
|--------------------------|-----|--------------------------|-----|
| 1. Tulum | + | 27. Nohcacab | + |
| 2. Xcaret | A | 28. Uxmal | +AP |
| 3. Cozumel | +P | 29. Sayil | +A |
| 4. Cobá | + | 30. Labná | +A |
| 5. Ek Balam | + | 31. Yaxhom | + |
| 6. Chichén Itzá | +AP | 32. Xkobenhaltun | + |
| 7. Telantunich | A | 33. Kom | + |
| 8. Santa Rita | A | 34. Kabah | A |
| 9. Santa Rosa Xtampak | + | 35. Huntichmul | + |
| 10. Dzibilnocac | A | 36. Keiuc | A |
| 11. Kanalku | + | 37. Nohpat | + |
| 12. Xcalumkin | + | 38. Oxkintok | AP |
| 13. Almuchil | + | 39. X'burruntunich | + |
| 14. Edzná | + | 40. K'uxub | + |
| 15. Acamul | + | 41. T'zibilchaltun | A |
| 16. Xkichmook | A | 42. Isla Cerritos | + |
| 17. San Diego Buenavista | + | 43. Río Azul | P |
| 18. Pol-Yuc | + | 44. Nixtun Ch'ich | + |
| 19. Za-bacha | + | 45. Altar de Sacrificios | P |
| 20. Temax | A | 46. Aguateca | P |
| 21. X'ketpa'ap | + | 47. Naj Tunich | AP |
| 22. Fincas Las Palmas | A | 48. Rancho Nuevo Leon | + |
| 23. Chacmultun | A | 49. Xkipché | A |
| 24. Xunatunich | A | 50. Cumpich | A |
| 25. Nohoch Cep | + | 51. Pustunich | A |
| 26. Actun Ch'on | A | | |

Figure 2. Key to Map of sites documented with phalli. By Laura M. Amrhein.

Freestanding/Detached Phalli

The most prominent type of phallic images is freestanding monolithic sculptures known by Yucatec Maya as *xkeptunich*. Currently, forty-seven monoliths are documented from the Yucatán Peninsula. Most sculptures are made from limestone and exhibit a distinctive shaft and glans. As of May 2000, twenty-six pieces remained in their original supposed pre-Contact locations. Six examples of unknown provenance are in museums in Yucatán, Campeche, Quintana Roo or in private collections. The location of the remaining examples recorded in the literature is unknown; however, information about the pieces, such as size and location was recorded by archaeologists and scholars such as H.E.D Pollock and Karl H. Mayer.



Figure 3. Chichén Itzá stone phallus. Date: Terminal Classic. Photo from Peabody Museum photo archives, Harvard University CIW 31-0-64.

A large number of freestanding phalli were discovered in courtyards of temple complexes or in temple interiors. At Chichén Itzá two badly weathered monolithic sculptures are recorded from the site. Photographs of these phalli are in the Peabody Museum Photographic Archives, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts (CIW 31-0-64, CIW 46-8-90). One sculpture was found in the Group of the Hieroglyphic Jambs in the interior of structure 6E5 and another was documented on the north edge of a terrace supporting temples 3E6 and 3E7 ([Figure 3](#), shown above, and [Figure 4](#), shown below). The placement of these sculptures in front of or inside the temple indicates that they were conceptually part of the architectural program.



Figure 4. Chichén Itzá stone phallus from terrace of Structure 3E6-3E7. Date: Terminal Classic. Photo from Peabody Museum photo archives, Harvard University CIW 46-8-90.



Figure 5. Uxmal sculpted limestone phalli.

Uxmal contains the largest number of freestanding phalli recorded and photographed from one site. In May 2000, a total of twelve sculptures was documented from the site. Eight examples lie broken and scattered on the path between the House of the Old Woman and the Temple of the Phallus ([Figure 5](#), shown above). Two phalli were photographed in the Uxmal museum on site and one was photographed in the *bodega* of the Museo Regional de Antropología, Mérida, Yucatán ([Figure 6](#), shown below). Another example was recorded and photographed by Alfredo Barrera Rubio and Jose Huchim Herrera from fill deposit in the access stairway to the House of the Turtles. (See Barrera Rubio and Huchim Herrera, *Architectural Restoration at Uxmal, 1986-1987*, University of Pittsburgh Latin American Archaeology Reports, No 1., 1990.)



Figure 6. Uxmal sculpted limestone phallus. Height: 24" Date: Late Classic/Terminal Classic. Bodega of the Museo Regional de Antropología, Mérida, Yucatán.

Like the phallic sculptures at Chichén Itzá, the phalli at Uxmal were probably located in temple courtyards or near significant structures. In 1870 Alice Le Plongeon photographed a large phallic sculpture in the southeast corner of the Nunnery Quadrangle. This sculpture probably once stood in the courtyard on the path or *sak beh* leading into the complex.

Portable Phalli

There are twenty-seven known portable phalli sculpted in the round. They are made of a variety of materials including clay, stone, wood, pumice, and shell. Since these phalli are relatively small and are not attached to any particular structure, they were probably used as charms, jewelry, or by shamans in rituals. Portable phalli were discovered in shell heaps, caches, burials, and caves. One example from Oxkintok was photographed in the bodega of the Museo Regional de Antropología, Mérida ([Figure 7](#), shown below).



Figure 7. Oxkintok sculpted limestone phallus. Height: 7" Diameter: 2.4" Date: Late Classic/Terminal Classic. Bodega of the Museo Regional de Antropología, Mérida, Yucatán.

Attached Phalli

Attached phalli are exaggerated images attached to figures, architecture, or natural features such as cave walls. Most of these examples are of stone, with some examples made from stucco. The Temple of the Phallus at Uxmal, the Temple of the Phalli (or Structure 9) at Chacmultun and the House of the Phalli at Chichén Itzá contain phallic sculptures projecting from cornices and walls.



Figure 8. Uxmal Waterspout limestone phallus. Height: 24" Date: Late Classic/Terminal Classic.

The Temple of the Phallus at Uxmal has a phallic sculpture *in situ* extending from the exterior of the upper cornice sculpted with a long deep groove extending through its center ([Figure 8](#), shown above). Such sculptures, which are called waterspout phalli, were apparently used to carry water. They served practical and symbolic functions: carrying water away from the building and symbolically referring to the life-giving properties of water. Waterspout phalli were also documented in a modern structure in Rancho San Pedro near Dzitbalché, in the Museo de la Isla de Cozumel and the Museo Regional de Campeche.



Figure 9. Chichén Itzá limestone wall phallus. Height: 10" Date: Terminal Classic.

Sixteen known phallic images appear on the interior walls of temples, caves and chultúns. The House of the Phalli at Chichén Itzá contains eight three-dimensional limestone phalli that protrude from the middle of the wall surface; seven of these extend over elevated stone platforms ([Figure 9](#), shown above). The structure and surrounding buildings were being re-excavated and reconstructed by INAH during my May 2000 visit to the site. These recent excavations may reveal additional examples of phalli.

Phallic sculptures also appear attached to the human figure. These figures, with noticeably exaggerated penises, occur as three-dimensional sculptures, reliefs, petroglyphs, and painted figures. They range in size from 18" to over 56". Since many of the sculptures have been moved from their original location, the original pre-Contact locations of figural sculptures are often unknown and difficult to determine. However, examples have been found near significant structures or in courtyards. The facade of the West Building and the back of the North Building of the Nunnery Quadrangle at Uxmal has several examples of figures with noticeably exaggerated penises, which are apparently pierced with sticks or stingray spines ([Figure 10](#), shown below).



Figure 10. Figure with exaggerated penis. Date: Late Classic/Terminal Classic.

Conclusions

The dissertation attempts to understand phallic imagery in the context of Classic Maya iconography. An iconographic analysis suggests that graphic depictions of the penis were an artistic device for reasserting Maya concepts that had a long history in previous Maya art. Certain Terminal Classic iconographic contexts, such as gestures, poses and royal attire, and concepts, such as the *axis mundi*, have their basis in the Classic Period. The significant mythological concepts associated with the World Tree and ancient Maya creation stories known in earlier periods provide a context in which to understand the depiction of the later overt phallic images. The appearance of the overt and literal image in the Terminal Classic Period reflects several political and cultural changes occurring during the period.

While Terminal Classic phallic images have their basis in earlier Classic iconography, the style and form in visible ritual contexts reflects a significant shift in conception toward a more public art. Terminal Classic rulers used this imagery

to refer to their ancient ancestors and underscore their connection to sacred ancient Maya lineage. Although these formal changes may have been a response to a changing environment, the basic symbolic value and function already had a long history in Maya culture.

The contingency grant from FAMSI increased the number of phallic sculptures documented and/or photographed and allowed me to return to Chichén Itzá to see the newly re-excavated House of the Phalli. Several new examples from the site were recorded and several additional examples were photographed in the Museo Regional de Antropología, Mérida. The grant also allowed me to return to Uxmal to re-photograph and document phallic sculptures scattered on site. Additional analysis of 19th and early 20th century scholarship is being undertaken to determine the original context(s) of the Uxmal phalli and other significant pieces. This project may help to further elucidate historic scholarly approaches to the documentation and interpretation of these significant sculptures.

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