

# COURT DWARFS – THE COMPANIONS OF RULERS AND ENVOYS OF THE UNDERWORLD

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Many of the colorful painted clay vessels found in burial chambers dating from the Classic period depict the daily court life of the Maya princes. These ceramics feature hieroglyphic texts, indicating that they were mainly produced for the upper political and social strata, because only the elites and not the ordinary Maya people could read.

These representations provide us with insight into daily court life. The people employed to look after the physical and spiritual well being of the royal family and their guests included “human curiosities” such as court dwarfs (ill. 438) and hunchbacks, who entertained the nobility with comical dances and burlesque performances, as was the case in royal courts in Europe. Culinary services were also part of the duties of court dwarfs. They served exquisite dishes and sampled the quality of the drinks.

A colorful piece of pottery of unknown origin shows a scene at the residence of the ruler Siyaj K'awiil (ill. 437). He is receiving gifts in his function

as *k'uhul ajaw*, “divine ruler,” of Motul de San Jose. His dark complexion, position, elegant clothing, and impressive headdress clearly distinguish him from the other people. On the right-hand side of the picture, a corpulent court official is seated at the foot of the throne holding a fan, with the hieroglyphic folders for which he was responsible laid out in front of him. The gesticulating ruler looks at his profile in a mirror which is held by a kneeling court dwarf. A second dwarf appears to be testing the quality of the drinks in the calabashes and clay jugs. The hunchback next to the two dwarfs can be identified as an official of the royal court by his characteristic headband. Illustrated vase and hieroglyphic texts show that the court dwarfs also carried out administrative duties. They offered gifts to guests, dowries for weddings (ill. 439), accepted tributes, and checked the quality of products. These included fans, bundles of feathers, tripod plates, calabashes containing cacao or beans, mirrors, and other prestigious objects. As the ruler's



servants, they often carried a scepter with the image of K'awiil, one of the most important gods for the ruling classes of the Classic period.

The dwarfs were not only employed to entertain the court, they also helped to create stone monuments. The signature cartouches on a sculpted stela of unknown origin show that the artist must have been a dwarf.

According to Spanish sources, dwarfs, hunchbacks, cripples, and albinos also lived at the Aztec courts, where they entertained and looked after the physical well-being of their rulers as well as serving as mirror bearers (ill. 436). Dwarfs also acted as servants and underlings for the Inca princes of South America.

The divine Maya kings represented the center of the universe and could even be personified as gods and achieve contact with them through rituals (see Grube/Martin, p. 153). Because of their physical shape, dwarfs, hunchbacks, and other malformed figures were seen as supernatural beings in a human form. They were also considered, like the Maya kings, as messengers and contacts with the transcendental world of the gods, and for that reason rulers often chose these people to be their companions. The Maya may have associated this idea with the belief that the presence of a superhuman being could call forth a medium through which the gods could participate in earthly



436 Back of a mirror depicting a dancing dwarf. Provenance unknown; Late Classic, 600–900 A.D.; slate, dia. 9 cm; Cologne, Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum  
The sculpted back of this slate mirror shows a dwarf in a feather costume performing a ceremonial dance. Spanish chroniclers reported that dwarfs and hunchbacks were often appointed to entertain the court, often as actors wearing costumes in which they were able to imitate the flapping of wings and other movements of birds, particularly herons.

437 Dwarfs at court. Photograph of a colorful painted ceramic vessel (detail); provenance unknown; Late Classic, 600–900 A.D.; private collection (Kerr 1453)  
Court dwarfs had a range of functions. Here one is shown kneeling before the king holding a mirror, whilst another tests the quality of the food in the calabashes and jugs.



life. This also explains the numerous representations found on vases and stone monuments which depict court dwarfs as spectators of profane, ritualistic acts. In order to emphasize their absolute social power and religious authority, rulers were portrayed in the company of low-ranking groups such as vassals, court officials, and prisoners, but also in the company of gods and other supernatural beings, including court dwarfs.

Dwarfs were also associated with the underworld, which was seen as a kind of parallel world. The Maya believed that they came from beyond the natural world and embodied the lives and manifestations of divine beings and other supernatural figures. For the Maya, the boundaries and entrances to this world were to be found in holes in the forests and in dark caves and deep ravines. Shimmering water surfaces covered with dark green waterlilies or dark cenotes (underground water courses) were also believed to be entrances to the underworld. This kingdom between the real and supernatural worlds was inhabited by frogs, water-serpents, and scorpions, and also by gnomes, forest spirits, and small people. This explains why dwarfs appear in the iconography in scenes relating to the underworld.

Dwarfs also played an important role in Maya mythology. According to Classic Maya beliefs, four dwarfs were given the task of raising the vault of heaven. The Olmecs also believed that the heavens were held up by four dwarfs. This belief survived



438 Clay figure representing a dwarf: Jaina, Campeche, Mexico; Late Classic, 600–900 A.D.; fired clay, painted; H. 11.1 cm; Mexico City, Museo Nacional de Antropología

This clay figurine represents a dwarf with the typical characteristics of chondrodysplasia, the most common variation of over 200 types of microsomia: short, thick extremities, a large stomach, a disproportionately large head, thick drooping lower lip, and a flat nose. The dwarf wears a headdress in the form of a bird's head and a wrap-around apron. A shell hangs by a string at its chest, probably symbolizing the underworld.

until the Postclassic period, when dwarf-like stone figures with raised arms served as supports for altar structures, which may have represented the vault of heaven. The Maya even saw two dwarfs in the firmament representing an undiscovered constellation. Dwarfs are often depicted as companions and servants of the Sun and Maize Gods. Numerous stelae show the ruler with a decorative waistband on which the face of the Sun God is portrayed. This also explains why regents were often surrounded by dwarfs, who were depicted with them in stone sculptures. It appears that by being accompanied by court dwarfs and wearing a specific costume, the king was able to slip into the role of the Sun God and thus embody both the center of the real world and the world beyond.

439 Carved ceramics depicting dwarfs. Provenance unknown; Late Classic, 600–900 A.D.; clay, incised; H. 16.5 cm, dia. 15.4 cm; private collection (Kerr 8076)

The left-hand scene in the sequence shows a *coati* or hog-nosed coon accompanying a ruler as his animal spirit or alter ego. The hieroglyphic text states that "few tributes are paid." The dwarf standing on the right of a nobleman is saying: "Receive the visit, beautiful lady!" This may be an appeal for her to marry the young man. The animal spirit may be advising against marriage for material reasons.

