



Figure 3. Stela 31, Tikal. Drawing: John Montgomery.

# Late-fifth-century public monuments in the Maya lowlands

FLORA S. CLANCY

In A.D. 475 (9.2.0.0.0)<sup>1</sup> something happened at Tikal that forever affected its public art and that of many other Maya sites subsequently erecting public monuments.<sup>2</sup> The great graphic traditions, the wonderful complexities of imagery and composition of the fourth and early fifth centuries (essentially the eighth *baktun*), gave way to a reduced simplicity in the public presentation of an honored person carved on stelae.

A comparison between two Tikal monuments, the famous Stela 31 (fig. 1) and the forgettable Stela 13 (fig. 2), shows the extreme change in form, composition, carving style, and iconography that took place in less than twenty years.<sup>3</sup> The first difference is size: Stela 13 is not quite two meters in height, whereas Stela 31 stands

almost two and one-half meters tall (2.43 m) in its fragmented state. One can look directly at the image of the human figure carved on Stela 13, whereas one must look up to the representation of the figure on the front of Stela 31.<sup>4</sup>

More telling, perhaps, are the differences in composition and carving style. The image of Stela 31 wraps around three sides of the stone shaft and presents attendant figures in profile as if they were the left and right sides of one figure (fig. 3); no frame is carved to outline the scene. In contrast, the composition of Stela 13 comprises a single panel outlined by a frame within which is carved one figure: there are no allusions to a narrative context supplied by attendant figures or other imagery.

Such a reduction of imagery and simplification of composition was achieved by a different carving style. On Stela 13 the outlines are carved with sharply angled cuts from foreground to background. The quality of the outlines seems stiff and awkward, exemplified by the tightness of the curved lines. Nonetheless, the line is descriptively functional. The present condition of this monument makes it somewhat difficult to read iconographic detail, but originally there was nothing confusing about the image of Stela 13.

Whereas a generous amount of plain background sets off the figure on Stela 13, adding to its easy comprehensibility, little background space shows through the intricate display of imagery on the front face of the earlier Stela 31. Here the main figure, whose complex costume is rendered in obsessive detail, takes an active, extroverted pose with one upraised arm holding a piece of regalia. The front image of Stela 31 is complex, visually equivocal, and perceptively executed.

The carving style employed on Stela 31 is as complex as its iconography. A thin planar relief implies spatial dimensions, and when the relief is too shallow to allow planar distinction, as in the foremost planes of the image, cushioning is used to create spatial distinctions.<sup>5</sup> The

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This paper was written for the College Art Association Meetings held in New York City, February 1990. It was presented at the session "Precolumbian Art: Reconstructing History from the History of Art," chaired by Mary Miller. I am very grateful to Clemency Coggins for her careful reading and thoughtful comments.

1. 9.2.0.0.0 is a transcription of a Maya date and represents the count of days beyond a base, or zero, date calculated as 3114 B.C. Maya counting is a twenty-based, or vigesimal, system. For this date, the highest place-value is a *baktun* of 144,000 days; thus nine *baktuns*, or 9 x 144,000 days. The second place is the *katun*, or 2 x 7,200 days. The succeeding places are the *tun* (an approximate solar year of 360 days), the *uinal* (a month of 20 days), and the *kin* (or day). As in all Mesoamerican dating systems, the year consisted of eighteen months (not twenty as expected in a vigesimal system) of twenty days and one "month" of five days to equal the solar year: (18 x 20) + 5 = 365. The five-day "month," called the *Uayeb* by the Yucatec Maya, was a time to stay home and not venture much. In this article I refer to the Maya time periods of the *baktun* and the *katun*. Using the above date as an example, it could be referred to as representing the second *katun* of the ninth *baktun*.

2. See Clancy (1985) for a definition of Maya public art as a distinct category within ancient Maya imagery, and Clancy (n.d.) for a study of Maya public sculpture of the Early Classic period. Stelae and pedestals (altars) are the most common public art forms.

3. Stela 31 carries an Initial Series date of 9.0.10.0.0 (A.D. 446) and represents the eighth-*baktun* tradition of public imagery. The last monuments at Tikal to be carved within this tradition are Stelae 1, 2, and 28, none of which is surely dated, but they were probably carved between 9.0.0.0.0 and 9.2.0.0.0. (A.D. 436–475).

The date of Stela 13 is not known, but the main person mentioned in its inscription is the Tikal ruler Kan Boar. For this reason, Stela 13 could be dated between 9.2.0.0.0 and 9.2.13.0.0 (A.D. 475–488). The change in public imagery discussed in this essay occurred sometime between the carving of Stelae 1, 2, and 28 and Kan Boar's first public monument, Stela 9, dated 9.2.0.0.0 (A.D. 475). Stela 13 is here considered Kan Boar's second monument, although Clemency Coggins (personal communication, July 1990) argues with good reasons that Stela 13 is Kan Boar's first monument.

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4. Jones and Satterthwaite (1982: 64) estimate the height of the carved image on Stela 31 to have been 2.45 meters. I suspect that the main figure would have stood atop a basal image, increasing the height of the carved image by approximately 20 to 30 centimeters. This reconstruction is based on the other Early Classic period wrap around stelae from Tikal, Stelae 1, 2, and 28. These monuments display the main figure, supposedly Stormy Sky, standing on a basal image.

5. I am not the first to notice this distinctively Maya method of relief



Figure 1. Stela 31, Tikal, front and side face. Photo: John Montgomery.

relief-cuts outlining the images are lightly abraded, and a pervasive use of modeling within the relief enhances a sense of organic plasticity. Additionally, an engraved line supplies rich, interior detail to every item depicted.

The same method of carving, along with the same qualities of grace and precision in the outlining of the forms, is used for the attendants on the sides of the stela. The compositional design of these lateral carvings, however, is very different from that of the front; indeed, it is comparable to the simple presentation of a single figure surrounded by a fair amount of plain background found on Stela 13.

A historical connection can be made between the two rulers depicted as the main figures on Stelae 31 and 13. Stormy Sky, presumably the main figure of Stela 31, is believed to have attempted to unify two different groups

of peoples either from different Maya lineages or different Mesoamerican cultures, or both. Stela 31 is often understood as a symbol of this unification wherein the front face embodies the longstanding traditional ruler image seen on other eighth-*baktun* monuments (Coggin 1975: 186, 187), and the sides, showing two warriors, represent the new, the intrusive, or the nontraditional.

Kan Boar, Stormy Sky's successor and possibly his son (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982: 33, 34), is the supposed patron and protagonist of Stela 13. For his monuments Kan Boar chose to emulate the peripheral composition used for the nontraditional warrior figures depicted on his "father's" stela. The iconography newly depicted here as Kan Boar's regalia (the bag and the staff) embodies a restatement of the warrior iconography seen on Stela 31, rather than the hoped-for integration of old and new.

In A.D. 495 (9.3.0.0.0), Kan Boar's son, Jaguar Paw Skull, erected three Tikal monuments (Stelae 7, 15, and 27) to honor the third *katun* and himself. These monuments follow with seeming redundancy the simple formula for public monuments established by Kan Boar (fig. 4).

Although Tikal erected three monuments at the beginning of the third *katun*, few other Maya sites did so

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carving. Donald Robertson (1974: 105) calls this type of relief carving "shaved silhouette." I use the term "cushioning" here because Robertson's choice is awkward to use and not as precise as I would like: it is not the silhouetted image that is shaved here but the form or shape "on" which the image is placed—for example, the arm beneath the wristlet. The plane of the arm is lowered (cushioned or shaved) to meet the silhouetted wristlet, giving the effect of overlap.



Figure 2. Stela 13, Tikal, front face. Photo: Flora Clancy.

at this time. Three new stelae (Stelae 20, 22, and 3) were dedicated sequentially during the third *katun* at the nearby site of Uaxactun, perhaps in emulation of the same number of Jaguar Paw Skull's monuments. These three Uaxactun stelae, however, do not emulate the new iconography of regalia continuously reasserted on the Tikal stelae; they maintain steadfastly the traditional presentation of the honored figure. Two more sites set up monuments during this *katun*: Stela 13 and Pedestal 3 at Altar de Sacrificios and perhaps Caracol's Pedestal 4 can be dated to this period. These three monuments, however, are glyphic and display no imagery.

During the third *katun*, then, only two sites, Tikal and Uaxactun, are known to have raised public monuments

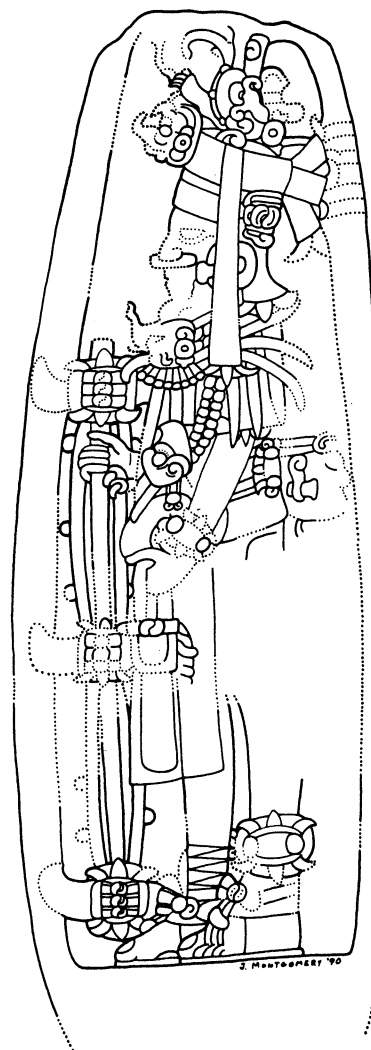
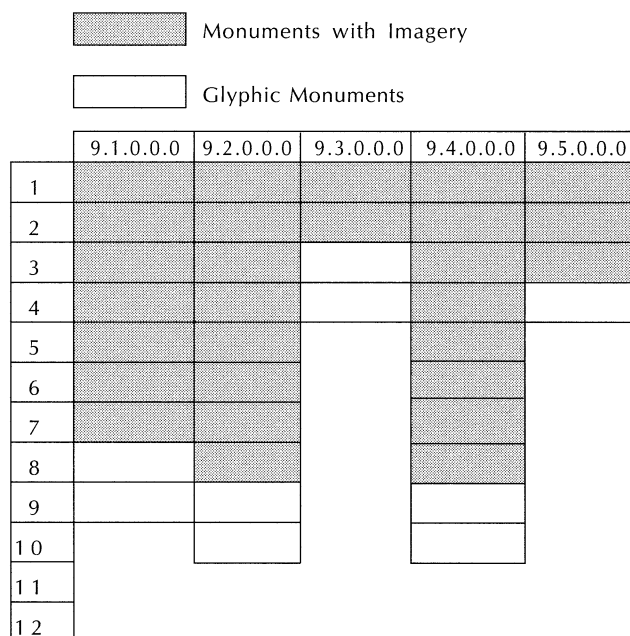


Figure 4. Stela 7, Tikal, front face. Drawing: John Montgomery.

with imagery.<sup>6</sup> This list of two, possibly four, sites can be compared to the nine sites known or supposed to have erected public monuments with imagery during the first *katun* matched by ten sites dedicating public monuments during the second *katun*. This interpretation of present archaeological data, however, is not usually given. Charts, such as those published by Peter Mathews (1985: 25, 26), typically illustrate the number of monuments or the number of inscribed dates belonging to this period.

6. Stelae 20 and 18 of Xultun may be attributed to the third *katun* on the basis of style, but it is more likely these two monuments bracket the time period under discussion: Stela 20 being earlier and Stela 18 probably carved during the fourth *katun*. Stela 6 of Yaxha may be from the third *katun*, but here it is relegated to the second *katun*.



Number of Sites Erecting Monuments 9.1 – 9.5.0.0.0

Figure 5. Bar graph representing the total number of known sites erecting monuments, 9.1.0.0.0 (A.D. 455) to 9.5.0.0.0 (A.D. 534).

Because Tikal and Uaxactun each erected several stelae during the third *katun*, monument production looks respectable. However, if one charts the number of sites that actually set up monuments and then reduces this to the number of sites producing public imagery, the third *katun* begins to look like a major low point for public art (fig. 5).

The fourth *katun* (9.4.0.0.0, beginning A.D. 514) makes a remarkable comeback with at least ten or twelve sites raising monuments, and many of these sites doing so for the first time. But the renaissance is short-lived: the fifth *katun* (beginning A.D. 534) reduces the number of sites setting up monuments to the low of the third *katun*, and although it is generally acknowledged that the fifth *katun* is well within the so-called hiatus of Maya monument production, the third *katun* is not.

Can the paucity of public images in the third *katun* be linked to the introduction of the warrior into public imagery? The warriors pictured on the sides of Stela 31 belong to the new or intrusive aspects of Maya elite life that Stormy Sky tried to integrate with traditional public displays—which in broad terms were the presentation of a human figure holding disembodied heads or heads displayed within the ceremonial bar. The appearance of the warrior on public monuments of the Maya lowlands is relatively late and attributable to the time of Stormy Sky's

father, a man given the name of Curl Nose and associated with Stela 4 of Tikal. It is not possible to say at this time whether the image of the warrior and his iconography was a foreign intrusion into the Maya area (Coggins 1975: 140ff.) or the result of local choice (Laporte and Fialko 1990; Schele and Freidel 1990: 146ff.). What is clear is that the warrior holding a bag or *atlatl* and wearing a large medallion on his belt and ruffs around his knees belongs to a large group of like images appearing throughout Mesoamerica at the end of the fourth century.

The Maya, however, may have been the first Mesoamericans to consider the warrior's image appropriate for public display: it is first seen on Stela 5 (circa A.D. 375) at Uaxactun, next embodied as the lateral attendants on Tikal Stela 31 (fig. 3), and then on the monuments of Tres Islas (Stelae 1 [A.D. 475] and 3 [A.D. 455]) in the Pasion area. During the same time (that is, between circa A.D. 375 and 450), this warrior is pictured as an attendant or a member of a procession at Teotihuacan and Monte Alban, and is usually represented on murals in private, interior spaces (fig. 6). At Kaminaljuyu, his image is painted on ceramics.<sup>7</sup>

The images of this warrior have been characterized by Clara Millon (1973: 305), Esther Pasztory (1974: 20), and myself (1980: 48ff.) as evocations of a religious sect with militaristic overtones because they appear posed not as warriors but as attendants or members of processions. In these images warriors carry regalia that look like weapons but are not handled as such. For example, *atlatls* look like ritual bags;<sup>8</sup> staffs or spears are not held defensively; and shields look decorative, unwieldy, or too small.

The public monuments sculpted in Tikal's new, reduced style embody major innovations perpetrated by an elite patron of the site. The image exemplified at Tikal, however, does not become generally popular in the Maya area, although it can be detected later throughout the Maya area when it is integrated into Late Classic ideals. It is therefore possible that Tikal's reduced, human-scale images were seen as a radical departure by the fifth-century Maya and that their existence depended on a charismatic patron—much like the Amarna style associated with the rule of Akhenaton in the Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt.

At Tikal, the change in public monument style brought

7. The iconography of this warrior has a long life lasting well into the post-Classic Period in both the Mexico and Maya areas, and can be shown to be associated with the ballgame at El Tajin and at Chichen Itza (Clancy 1980: 48ff.).

8. In this period, A.D. 375–450, *atlatls* and bags are often depicted as identical in form; it is only in the different manner in which these items are held that their iconographic distinction is made. This is especially true at Monte Alban and Teotihuacan. See Clancy (1980: 45, 46).



Figure 6. Mural on three walls of Tomb 104, Monte Alban (after Caso, "A Comparison of Highland Zapotec and Lowland Maya Graphic Styles," in *Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Study of Mesoamerican Highland-Lowland Interaction*, Arthur Miller, ed., pp. 223–240, lamina 1. Dumbarton Oaks, Center for Pre-Columbian Studies, Washington, D.C.). Drawing: Flora Clancy.

about by Kan Boar was the re-presentation of the warrior with ritualized weapons: the *atlatl* as bag and the spear as staff. This was not an integration of old and new but a restatement of the new: hence the new, straightforward, life-size images of the ruler shorn of any pretentious regalia, garb, or mythical context. Our present understanding of the history of this period takes us thus far. The explanation developed below is necessarily speculative.

The warrior sect had popular appeal in the Maya area, partly because membership did not entirely depend on lineage and promised social mobility,<sup>9</sup> and partly because of the group's tenets of austerity and self-sacrifice (which was the most enduring aspect). These reasons for its popularity may have been true throughout Mesoamerica, but outside of the Maya area, as noted above, much of the warrior sect's imagery is to be found in private, rather than public, contexts.<sup>10</sup> In the Maya area, the sect either gained the support of a ruling dynasty at Tikal or achieved enough power to compete with the ruling elite. It is likely that incompatible ideals or philosophies created a conflict between the new warrior sect and the traditional dynasts. Stormy Sky's efforts of integration were probably meant to ameliorate the excesses of certain demands the new sect made on the life of the Maya elite. It was his "son," Kan Boar, who fully supported the warrior sect and elevated its philosophies to those of rulership.

This hypothesis urges one to consider that the demands

of austerity and self-sacrifice also would have involved prohibitions against displays of luxury and would have encouraged strong convictions about the roles icon and image played in public/religious life. If followed to their extremes, these convictions would become iconoclastic. In other words, the warrior sect may have followed ideals akin to what we know as fundamental conservatism.

Most Maya were probably aware of the tenets of the warrior sect because iconographic evidence for it occurs about seventy years previous to Stormy Sky's reign at Tikal. Perhaps many Maya centers followed Tikal in raising the sect to leadership status: if several centers were sympathetic to its strictest prohibitions against the arts, this would explain the lack of public imagery during the third *katun*.

The warrior sect's fundamentalist restrictions were short-lived in the Maya area because, as noted above, its power was probably related to a charismatic leader, such as Kan Boar, and did not long outlast him. By A.D. 514 (9.4.0.0.0), in terms of dictating public display, the movement is over. Disembodied heads and ceremonial bars are reinstated as the major regalia of display, and mythical contexts are denoted by the reinstatement of attendant figures and supernal and basal imagery on the stela-monument.<sup>11</sup> It is quite possible, however, that the

9. See Kenneth Hirth (1989: 69) for a similar description of Epiclassic (A.D. 700–900) warrior sodalities at Xochicalco, Morelos.

10. The addition of the *adosada* that covered much of the exuberantly sculptured face of the Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl at Teotihuacan with the distinctive but plain *talud/tablero*, and done around this time (Rene Millon 1973: 57), should be related to the tenets of austerity held by the warrior sect. See Taube (1992).

11. Monuments displaying the ceremonial bar were erected during the fourth *katun* at the sites of Caracol, El Peru, Yaxchilan, and Calakmul. Tikal erected Stela 6, which follows the presentation of the restated warriors, as well as Stelae 23 and 25. These last two monuments clearly revert to the public image associated with Stormy Sky. If Stelae 10 and 12 of Tikal were also erected during this *katun* (their dates are uncertain), they also express this return to the older public presentation. It is not clear how the figure is posed on Stela 18 at Altar de Sacrificios, and it is hard to guess what regalia he carries. But Altar de Sacrificios begins to add imagery to its public monuments only during the fourth *katun*.

conservative tenets of the warrior sect provided a major counterplot that continually challenged the traditional ideals and philosophies behind Maya power and rulership and its expression in public monuments.

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