

# Reflexivity and Self-Referentiality in Image: An Analysis of Yaxchilan Panel VII Hieroglyphic Stairway

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**Hilda Landrove Torres**

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mesoamerican Studies Postgraduate Program | Ciudad de México, México  
lluviadearbol@gmail.com | <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0602-695X>

## ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of ‘image-within-image’ in Panel VII, Hieroglyphic Stairway 2, Structure 33 of the ancient Maya city of Yaxchilan, considering the position it occupies in the set of panels and its integration in the architectural setting. It will also examine the narrative registered in the embedded text and the subject of both text and image. It will argue that the recursive device of ‘image-within-image’ in the Panel extends to the totality of the staircase with the other twelve that compose it, and to the ritual activity celebrated on it. The analysis will provide an opportunity to explore reflexivity and self-referentiality and their implications for insights on ritual and personhood among Late Classic Maya. To do this, I will build on anthropology of art approach and its notion that visual devices may elicit ontological conceptions.

## KEYWORDS

Self-referentiality,  
Reflexivity,  
Image,  
Anthropology  
of Art, Maya.

## Reflexividade e Auto-Referencialidade na Imagem: Uma Análise da Escada Hieroglífica do Paineil VII de Yaxchilan

**RESUMO** Este artigo apresenta uma análise da ‘imagem dentro da imagem’ no Paineil VII, Escada Hieroglífica 2, Estrutura 33 da antiga cidade maia de Yaxchilan. Considera-se a posição que a imagem ocupa no conjunto de painéis e sua integração no cenário arquitetônico. Examina-se também a narrativa registrada no texto inserido no Paineil e o tema do texto e da imagem. Argumenta-se que o dispositivo recursivo da ‘imagem dentro da imagem’ no Paineil se estende à totalidade da escada com os outros doze que a compõem e à atividade ritual celebrada nela. A análise fornecerá uma oportunidade para explorar a reflexividade e a auto-referencialidade e suas implicações para conhecer o ritual e a personalidade entre os maias clássicos tardios. Para tanto, me baseio na antropologia da arte e em sua noção de que os dispositivos visuais podem extrair concepções ontológicas.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE**  
Auto-referencialidade,  
reflexividade, imagem,  
Antropologia da Arte, Maya

## INTRODUCTION

The ancient Maya city of Yaxchilan, aside Usumacinta River and in the current frontier between Mexico and Guatemala, flourished between the 2nd and 8th centuries. One of its most magnificent structures is the building on top of a long stairway that extends from the main plaza. Known today as Structure 33, it was established when the city was both at the peak of its power and the prelude of its demise in the second half of the 8th century, in the last part of the period known as Late Classic Maya (600-900 AC). Between the long stairway and the entrance of the Structure, there is a set of 13 panels or “steps”, known as Hieroglyphic Stairway 2. In the central panel, we can appreciate the visual device of ‘image-within-image’. The scene of a character in position and ball player attire waiting for a ball that seems to fall from a stair is central to the panel and is duplicated in the left superior part.

The existence of this visual device in the Panel, the position it occupies in the set of panels, and the integration in the architectural setting, reveals an opportunity to reflect about relational concepts revealed in the image, such as reflexivity and self-referentiality, and the implications for insights on Late Classic Maya.

To face the analysis of Panel VII, the text will part from the description of the Panel and will recur to previous studies on art history dealing with ‘image-within-image’ and similar visual devices, and anthropological reflections regarding reflexivity and self-referentiality. I will also consider Classic Maya Studies regarding aspects of personhood, ritual activity and the particular themes represented on the Panel. In the last decades, the knowledge of Classic Maya has been extended in relevant manner by considering their ontological conceptions<sup>1</sup>. The existence of written texts has favored them as the main source of data for these relevant results, while images use to be considered more for their iconographical information and as source for identification of particular gods, ancestors or historical characters. However, there is a growing tendency to explore image as source for information of social aspects of Classic Maya life (see for example O’Neil, 2014; Houston, 2014; Brittenham, 2019). I will attempt to add to this tendency focusing predominately in the logic expressed in the construction of image and in the relations internal and external to it and building on the anthropology of art approach (e.g. Levi-Strauss, 1963; Gell, 1998; Lagrou, 2011), that suggests that formal elements may reflect ontological considerations. This way, this case study intends to show the validity of such approach for the analysis of Classic Maya images as sources to reflect about ritual action, personhood, temporality and related issues.

The goal of this paper is to provide possible understandings of reflexivity and self-referentiality based on the analysis of ‘image-within-image’ in Yaxchilan Panel VII Hieroglyphic Stairway, considering also the embedded text and the relations of image to its material support and architectural setting.

1 | Probably by the shift involved in the understanding of previously interpreted ‘supernaturals’ as co-essences (Houston & Stuart 1989: 13, see also Velásquez 2011).

I will begin by a description of the Structure 33, where Panel VII and Hieroglyphic Stairway are situated, to provide the material context and a brief approach to the organization and visual subjects of the set of panels that conform the Stairway. The description will include a relation of the relevant topics on the text of Panel VII. After that, the paper will provide an examination of the subject of the image of the Panel and will argue that it can be considered as a metonymical representation of the ball game. Finally, the third and last part will analyze the existence of self-referentiality and reflexivity in the Panel and in the integration with the architectural setting and will provide possible interpretations.

### THE STRUCTURE 33 AND THE HIEROGLYPHIC STAIRWAY

Structure 33 was dedicated<sup>2</sup> on 9.16.16.0.0 (February 10<sup>th</sup> 767 CE) as a “monument to the genealogical legitimacy and ritual efficacy” (Tate, 1992: 224) of the accession of *Yaxuun Bahlam IV* (752-768 CE). It was probably the center of a construction program that helped to define the ritual territory of this *Ajaw* at the ceremonial center (*ibidem*), was set back from view of the plaza below.

The path to Structure 33 begins in Yaxchilan main plaza with a long stairway that leads to a small space of 15x30m on top of it. Another stairway, divided in two parts, begins there: the first one, of six steps, leads to a terrace of approximately 2m wide and, from there, another six steps arrive at the large space where the series of thirteen carved risers known today as Hieroglyphic Stairway 2 is placed. (Fig. 1)

Of the thirteen panels, eleven show scenes of ballgame (figs. 2, 3). The game is alluded by the image of a ball player resting on his knee with the opposite arm outstretched for balance in front of a stair with a falling ball. The players carry elaborated headdresses of fishes that feed on water lilies. In one of them (VIII), the player is seen from the back, and we can see the back rack with the ‘cosmic monster’. Some of them (IV, V, X and XII) are wearing ‘x-ray masks’ (as they are called now) (Velásquez, 2007). These masks allude to a ritual operation translated as ‘personification’, in which a human being takes on the person of an ancestor or a divine being (Houston, Stuart & Taube, 2006: 271). The mask suggests that the ‘personification’ is a concurrence of two entities in the same human body; it points to a complex identity. The panels I and IX depict women who observe a falling ball but are not dressed or positioned as players.



**Figure 1**  
Yaxchilan Structure 33, with Hieroglyphic Stairway 2 in front of the Structure.  
By Arian Zwegers from Brussels, Belgium (Yaxchilan, Structure 33) [CC BY 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

<sup>2</sup> | Dedication is recognized principally in the written records, and is the marking of “political, social, or ritual activation of an object or monument” (Stuart, 1998: 374).

Panels II and III show women holding two-headed serpents<sup>3</sup> from which K'awiil emerges. This visual theme is also an allusion to a ritual operation, which corresponds to what epigraphic writing describes as 'to invoke K'awiil'. This operation points to the manifestation of an otherworldly entity that may be K'awiil itself or a different one.

The panels do not seem to have been designed as parts of a unique work but as the placement of pieces previously executed or commissioned for the inauguration event. It looks like the panels surrounding the main three at the center (VI, VII and VIII) were meant to complete the image of ball game and support it with ritual actions of 'personification' and K'awiil invocation<sup>4</sup>.

Panel VII (fig. 4) is the visual and thematic center, with *Yaxuun Bahlam* as main character, fringed to the left (panel VI) by the image of his father, and to the right (panel VIII) by the image of his grandfather. Panel VII approximately doubles the size of the other twelve and is organized internally around the figure of *Yaxuun Bahlam* in ball player's attire. The left side shows a depiction of a mythical narrative embedded in the contour of a stair from which a ball with a captive inside is falling. The right side is the narrative of the dedication of the stair and the reenactment of a foundational act. It depicts also two dwarfs with star signs. Panel VII is the visual and thematic center of the set of panels. It divides the whole composition in two almost equal parts, and contains the main narrative, related to the origins of ballgame, the inscription of the dedication event and the foundation of the stairway itself.

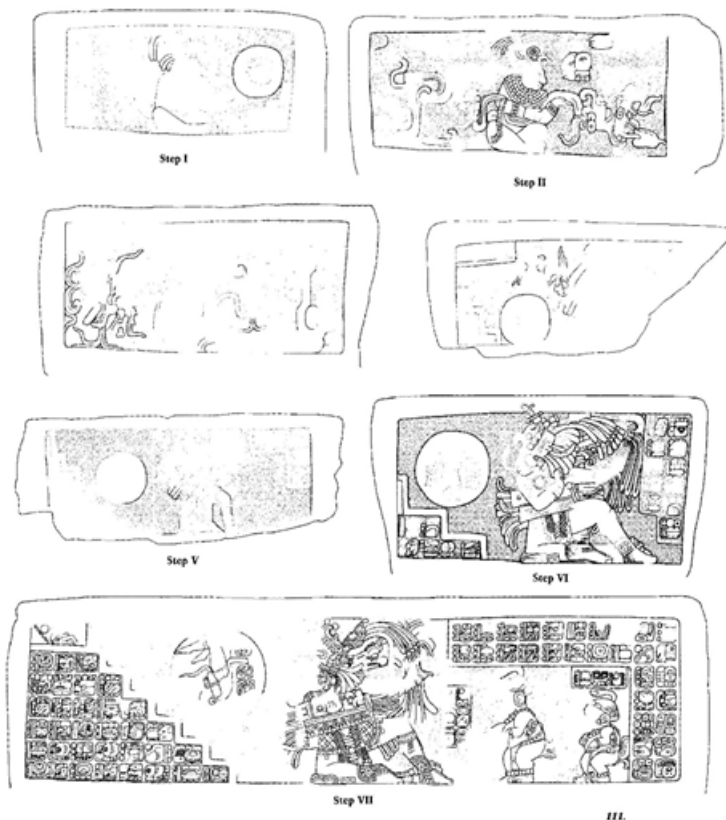


Figure 2  
Yaxchilan Hieroglyphic Stairway 2, Steps I-VII.  
Drawings by I. Graham  
(Graham 1982: 156-160)

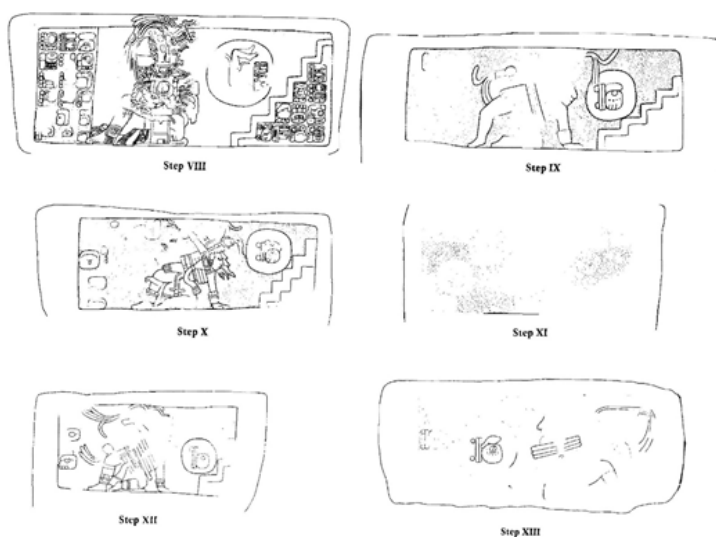
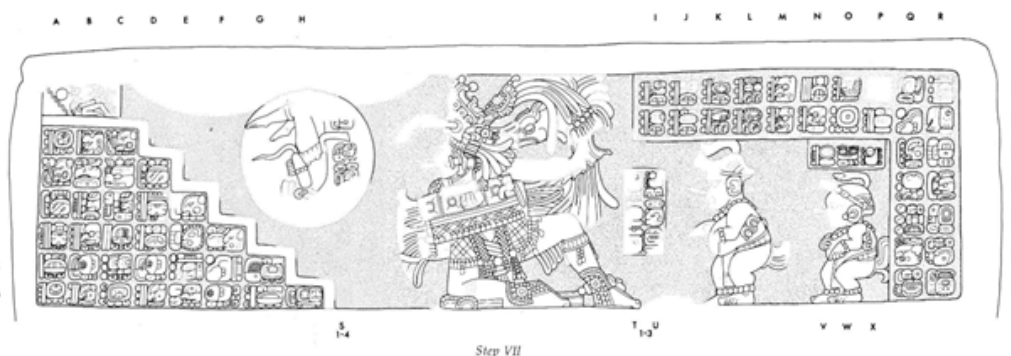


Figure 3  
Yaxchilan Hieroglyphic Stairway 2, Steps VIII-XIII.  
Drawings by I. Graham  
(Graham, 1982: 162-164)



**Figure 4**  
Yaxchilan Hieroglyphic Stairway 2, Steps VIII-XIII. Drawings by I. Graham (Graham, 1982: 162-164)

### THE TEXT ON PANEL VII<sup>5</sup>

The text on the panel is probably the most ancient account from Maya and from Mesoamerica referring (indirectly) to the ball game. The text on the left side of the panel begins with the decapitation of three primordial entities of no deciphered names, the first of which could be the Maize Deity. The episodes are separated by Distance Numbers<sup>6</sup> and narrated in a parallel structure. Each clause begins with a date in Calendar Round<sup>7</sup>, followed by the verbal phrase (*chak b'ah*, “his head was chopped”), the name of the entity decapitated and the statement that were first, second, and third conquest or creation. The verb used to refer to these primordial events is *ahaal* and there is a debate about what would be the most precise translation. The array of meanings for the word indicate a strong relation between “conquer”, “awakening” and “creation”, and probably the whole spectrum is alluded in the word<sup>8</sup>. After the events, the text names the place of the occurrences: a particular stairway (The Three Conquests Stair)<sup>9</sup>, of the Black-Water (Hole, Portal?)-Place (*Ik'-Way-Nal*) in *Wakminal* (Tokovinine, 2002: 3). The Black Water Place is a generic denomination for a mythical place with no geographical coordinates where several cosmological origin events occur<sup>10</sup>, more an ontological space of humidity, wateriness and darkness from which creation and creatures emerge. The whole segment ends by declaring that “it was completed”.

The second part of the text, in the right side of the panel, begins by stating an enormous amount of passed time; an iteration of 8 times 13 cycles of multiples of 20. The sum would place the original events billions of years in the past and conveys to a date correspondent to October 17th 744 CE. In this date occurs the dedication of the stairway, presumably the one where the 13 panels are placed. Its proper name is The Three Conquests Stair which is an obvious allusion to the events described in the first part of the text. The text concludes by saying that *Yaxuun Bahlam* is the ‘personification’ of *Yax Chiit Ju'n Winik Nah Kan*, “Waterlily Serpent”, “god of the wind, water and cenotes, and Classic Maya counterpart of Quetzalcoatl (Taube, 1992: 56-59)<sup>11</sup>. Finally, the subject of the dedication event, *Yaxuun Bahlam*, is mentioned with his titles.

3 | This entity is a very variable one. It appears in different images from Classic Maya in a gradient that goes from a rigid object (Copan Stela 6 would be an example) to a livelier ophidian being (like the one appearing in these panels or in Yaxchilan Lintel 25). This serpent being is more commonly known as ‘vision serpent’, a name given by Linda Schele (Schele & Miller, 1986), assuming that what appears in the mouth of the serpent is a vision resultant from bloodletting.

4 | The characters of the panels surrounding the central three panels are overlords of lesser social range. Their images, although thematically the same, vary in details, such as the content of the ball, or the headdresses they wear. Their appearance in a set of panels would correspond to a tendency (particularly explicit during the reign of *Yaxuun Bahlam* IV), to share the space of public representation, something that seems to rely on a more corporative distribution of power, as part of the changes occurring towards the end of Classic Period, ca. 8th century CE.

5 | I appreciate the collaboration of Dr. Felix Kupprat who helped me with the translation and indicated some interesting details. I consider also partial translations or observations from Tokovinine, 2002; Stuart, 2010; Zender, 2004.

6 | Distance Numbers is the name given in inscriptions to numbers that link one date to another by adding a determined time span.

7 | Calendar Round is one of the Maya counting time systems. It dates a day as the result of the combination of a day in a 260 cycle and another in a 365 days cycle.

## DECAPITATION, DISMEMBERMENT AND DISJUNCTION

The main scene in Panel VII depicts *Yaxuun Bahlam* at the foot of a Stairway, in ballgame position and attire. A ball, containing a captive inside, falls from the stair<sup>12</sup>. This is usually considered a particular form to express the decapitation of the captive (the ball being his head) and, in consequence, his condition of sacrificial object (see Miller & Houston, 1987: 47-48; Zender, 2004: 8). Several data can sustain this view and, at least in one case, *ch'ak baah* ("his head was chopped") refers directly to decapitation of war captive (see Orejel *et al*, 1990; Stuart, 2010: 177)<sup>13</sup>. However, I will consider other possibilities, following Gillespie's reflections (1991) on the relation between decapitation and dismemberment and cosmological creation.

Dismemberment is in Maya thought (and probably Mesoamerican), an operation that makes creation possible. The first events in the narrative of Panel VII are decapitations of three primordial entities, separated by enormous spans of time. The consequence of the decapitation is not explicit in the text; it is more a self-evident argument. Instead, it focuses on the place where it happened, the *Ik'-Way-Nal*, sometimes translated as "The Black Hole". As we saw before, this location is associated with cosmological creation in several others Maya narratives.

As Gillespie has pointed out, the body is conceived as an image of a primordial state of things. All phenomena are held together and the very existence is made possible by means of a dismemberment of an originally-unified body (Gillespie, 1991: 333). This kind of narrative is widely known, e.g. in the Aztec story about Tlaltecuhli, who is dismembered by being pulled in opposite directions by Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, to create Earth and Sky (Histoyre du Mechique; Taube, 1993: 69-70), but there is an analogous Maya story as well. In Palenque, Panel South of Temple XIX's Platform, the inscription narrates the decapitation of a character in the context of what seems to be the world's creation (Stuart, 2010: 68-77)<sup>14</sup>.

Dismembered bodies may also be understood as heterotopic bodies: bodies that, in Amerindian thought, can be (and in fact are), composed and decomposed. "The ontological function of bodies assembled and disassembled, (is) to give origin to a state of affairs, to carry transformations in the world" (Cesarino, 2016: 166). For Mesoamerica, López Austin has proposed that the divine entities are distinguishable by their capacity of getting involved in fission, fusion and re-composition in variable combinations and has explored social implications of such capacities. For example, the correspondence of the arising of particular manifestations of Gods with group's divisions (López Austin, 1983: 76-77).

Gillespie explores, considering not only Mesoamerican data but examples of mythical motif of Rolling Heads (see Levi-Strauss, 1974, 1978) extended throughout the Americas, the equivalence between chopped heads and balls used in ritual games involving changing seasons, astronomical movements and agricultural fertility<sup>15</sup>.

8 | Schele & Freidel suggested "creation" as a probable translation, considering the verbal root Aj, "awakening" (Schele & Freidel, 1991). Stuart points to the relation between "awakening" and "creation" by considering that the captives sacrifice in "fields of creation" represents "cosmological awakenings" (Stuart, 2010: 177). Tokovinine, in a different approach, proposes that "conquest" (or even "the conquered one") fits more with the military symbolism of ballgame sacrifice (Tokovinine, 2002: 1).

9 | I'll use this denomination for more transparency on the text but considering "conquest" the different connotations of the word.

10 | Is the place in the Cosmic Vase (K1609) (Wagner, 2001: 287, figs. 451 y 452) and the Vase of the Seven Gods (K2796) (*ibid.*, fig. 33, p. 84), describing the creation event of the Current Era (*ibid.*: 284). This habitat has other names as well but is always identified by its humid and dark environment.

11 | As Tokovinine remarks, 'personification' uses to be associated with ballgame (Tokovinine, 2002; see also Houston & Stuart, 1996). Other examples are in the Hieroglyphic Stairs at El Perú and Copan.

12 | Zender sees that *Yaxuun Bahlam* has rather struck the ball up, and that this scene corresponds to what the text describes as "the three conquests stair is struck", a modern eco of the decapitations of three supernatural beings in mythological time (Zender, 2004: 8)

13 | The text indicates a cosmological connotation to the decapitation. This occurs in The Black Hole location.

14 | This character (or two different aspects of him), is named by Stuart Crocodile-Starry Deer, and is an aspect of the Celestial Monster usually overlapped with "the more conventional concept of crocodile as symbol of Earth" (Stuart, 2010: 73).

15 | One important consequence of this approach is that decapitation does not

These three themes have in common their character of disjunction, equivalent to the one created in the body when is divided into parts. “Dismemberment of the human body into the discrete parts represent *par excellence* the introduction of discontinuity into what was once a unified whole...” (Gillespie, 1991: 333). Dismemberment is, more than the loss of life, what matters to the ballgame. The game puts at stake the production (and control) of disjunction in several levels, ranging from cosmological to social. Accordingly, the game was played in moments of social, seasonal and astronomical disjunctions<sup>16</sup>. In consequence, Gillespie proposes that the ball game court is a representation of the human body, whose head is the ball<sup>17</sup>.

“In all of the games that are thought to affect seasonal movements or climatic change, the result is obtained by playing the game itself, which repeats the disjunctive character of periodic cycles, and not by any “sacrificial death” as it is usually suggested for the Mesoamerican game” (Gillespie, 1991: 332).

As a game played between different segments of a society or between different parties, the idea of disjunction and consequent creation through dismemberment extends to the court itself, considered as a body, and to the game, as one that mirrors, and recreates the agricultural and astronomical disjunctions in the social level.

In Panel VII we see the body of the captive treated as a ball, as the dynamic center of the ball court. He is falling from a stairway which alludes probably to the ball game court<sup>18</sup>, and is waiting to be beaten. The text in Yaxchilan does not refer to the actions executed upon the ball but is informative that in another text from the site La Amelia, a captive in similar context is named “the wrapped thing” and that he “is thrown” (Tokovinine, 2002: 3)<sup>19</sup>. We may think of the captive turned into ball as the dynamic element involved in the game as generative combat. Considering all these, we can conceive the image in Panel VII as a metonymic representation of the ballgame itself, and not necessarily its supposed outcome: i.e. the sacrifice of the captive. The captured enemy is incorporated in the production and control of disjunction being transformed, via a set of visual and textual analogies and (probably) associations, mediated by the ritual action, into the ball played.

## REFLEXIVITY IN IMAGE

To this point, we have observed the Panel VII in its relation with the other twelve panels of the Hieroglyphic Stairway 2 and attended to the narrative in textual inscription. Besides, we have explored the subject of the scene of the Panel and have provided a possible interpretation for its meaning. Let's approach now the existence, in the left side of the image<sup>20</sup> (fig. 5), of an identical but smaller scene, containing the same elements. It is placed, on the Panel, on top of the stair with the embedded text, occupying

necessarily means death; in several accounts, the head that is chopped is alive and keeps playing. Among Classic Maya, the *wahy Ch'ak Baah* Akan is represented, in one of his manifestations, cutting his own head (Grube and Nahm, 1994: 708; Houston and Stuart, 1998; Grube, 2004: 63-64). He is neither dead nor alive; cutting his own head is perhaps more an ontological state than a particular event in a narrative, and probably a device to reflect and enact several disjunctions. He is the *wahy* of Matawiil, a mythological place where the Gods of the Palenque Triad emerge (Grube, 2004: 63-64).

16 | Maya scholars have indicated consistently the nature of the game as public ritual, tied to seasonal and agricultural renovation (see for example Cohodas, 1975 and Scarborough, 1991). In Yaxchilan the game represented in the Hieroglyphic Stairway was probably tied to the Venus cycle, indicated not only by the date of the event but also by the dwarfs with Venus signs in their bodies (Cohodas, 1991: 275). It's also probable that a ballgame could indicate a change in entire political hegemonies or a great victory over an important opponent or the instauration of a new lineage, as they were celebrated and established in ritual ballgame (Gillespie, 1991: 340)

17 | The image of the equivalence of ballcourt with a dismembered human body provide by Gillespie, is from Codex Borgia, Plate. 35, with his extremities laying on the four corners of the court. (Gillespie, 1991: 337, fig. 16.7).

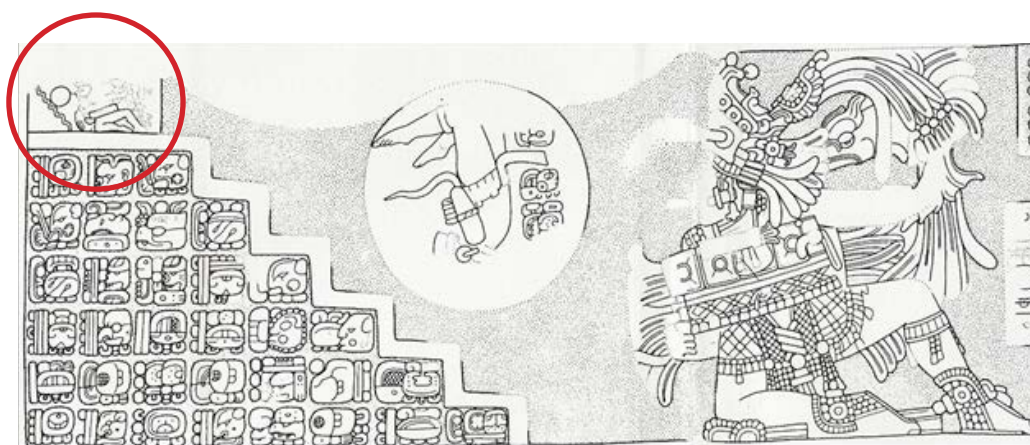
18 | There is a recurrence in Classic Maya art to depict ball game courts as stairways. Tokovinine describes it as 'similarity' (Tokovinine, 2002, note 4) and they might have been considered equivalents.

19 | In the same text of La Amelia there is an identification of the captive with a *wahy* in form of a ball (Zender, 2004: 6).

20 | The right side is occupied, as we saw before, by two dwarfs. It is probable that these are depictions of courtly dwarfs; they appear in several

all the space provided by the last step. She replicates not the whole panel but the main scene: the stairway, the falling ball and the ball player at the foot of the stair.

This could be considered as an example of what Gide named '*mise en abyme*'. The term is not transparent nor of unique definition, as diverse analysis have shown<sup>21</sup>. It could also be named after Chastel, who introduced the more descriptive denomination of 'picture-within-picture' and related it to the artist's self-expression (Chastel, 1978)<sup>22</sup>. Wirth (1988) introduced the concept of 'image-within-image' to surpass the limits of Chastel proposal. Bokody, who worked on this concept in his study of Italian painting defines it as "any kind of duplication of two-dimensional depicted surfaces" (Bokody, 2015: 20; see also Whatling, 2009). He proposes to retain the idea of artistic reflexivity as a possible sign of meta-image significance in the interpretation of such duplication. I will consider for the analysis of Panel VII both the idea of reflexivity and the mirror-like quality of '*mise en abyme*' because, as we will see ahead, the replication in the image of Panel VII involves no one but threes instances of the replica.



courtly images accompanying the *Ajaw*. They carry stars marks, what makes possible to think of them as astronomical assistants of the game, in his analogy with an astronomical battle.

21 | After Gide, [1926] 1973, several studies made the original observation more complex. Magny focused on the idea of endlessly reflection in mirror that introduces an inner space in the work (Magny 1950). Dällenbach on the other hand, sought to recompose Gide's original idea and proposed the notion of similarity of part to whole that would work, in a literary text, as a mirror metaphor (Dällenbach, [1977] 1989). After these seminal analysis, '*mise en abyme*' kept being referring to an array of complete different ideas. Those working on early-modern period saw in its inherent self-reflexivity an index of artistic "self-awareness". See for example Stoichita (1997) who sees it as a way to express the "disenchantment of the world" or Belting (1994) about the correspondence with the rise of the so-called "period eye" and modern thinking.

Figure 5  
Yaxchilan HS 2, Step (Panel) VII, Left Side. Drawing from I. Graham (Graham, 1982: 160)

Building on these concepts, I will also focus on the '*mise in abyme*' device as indicative of ontological processes elicited in image and its material support. The idea that visual devices may reveal ontological considerations is relevant for the anthropology of art. "There is an affinity between a seeing style and a thinking style" (Lagrou, 2011) or, the way Gell puts it: "the intuition that there is a linkage between the concept of style (as a configuration of stylistic attributes) and the concept of culture (as a configuration of intersubjective understandings) is well founded" (Gell, 1998: 156)<sup>23</sup>.

For Mesoamerican cases, there are few studies that attend to image's composition and visual devices to explore ontological constituencies. A relevant reference is Frassani (2016: 455). Her investigation approaches continuity of ritual expressions in Mesoamerica as a system of particular ways to transmit, preserve and transform secret knowledge. On that system, '*mise en abyme*' occupies a privileged place because of his recursive nature. Another revealing study comes from Neurath (2016), who has analyzed the image of the sacrifice of a sacrificial knife in Codex Borgia. In his

22 | One important problem involved in Chastel's study was the definition of 'picture', or 'tableau'. His analysis contemplated only art works from 16th century onwards.

23 | The Classic example of this approach is Levi-Strauss (1963) interpretation of split representation as expressing the person's unfolding (see also Wagner, 2012; Lagrou, 2011) or, for Mesoamerican cases, Pasztory (1998) in her analysis of abstraction in Teotihuacan art and O'Neil (2014) in the exploration of dynamics of visibility-invisibility in art and architecture in Piedras Negras.



interpretation, the sacrifice gives place to creation of beings with a differentiated, phantasmagoric ontological state. Such state can be recognized for their bi-dimensional and ambiguous images. For Maya cases, a relevant reference to consider is Gillespie (2007: 103). She studies how canons employed for representing spatial setting in two-dimensional images can provide clues to modes of social consciousness. In particular, she proposes that, attending to the prominence of verticality or horizontality in two-dimensional art works, is possible to distinguish two different modes of social consciousness that involve different ways to construct the political relations between capital and subordinates.

While Frassani situates recursivity, the quality of an object defined in terms of itself and expressed in terms of mirror like repetitions, as an important device of Mesoamerican thought (Frassani, 2016: 451), Neurath emphasizes the need to analyze images coming from pre-Hispanic sources. He suggests taking into account that—as several different studies have already demonstrated—the existence of a particular treatment of images elicits a form of presence, a relation, an ontological state (Neurath, 2016: 89). Gillespie, on her side, elaborates on the relation between artistic conventions and social relations (Gillespie, 2007).

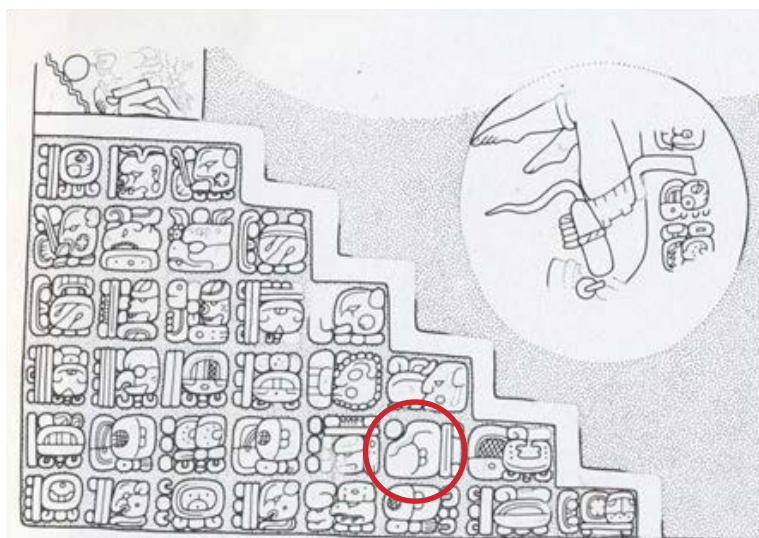
Severi analysis of Kuna chant provides a useful interpretation on the uses and consequences of a particular type of replication in Amerindian thought that might be helpful for the analysis of Panel VII (Severi, 2002). In the Kuna chant, the transformation of the enunciator is produced through a dislocated self-referentiality. The Kuna shaman talks about himself in the third person, narrating in present tense a series of actions already performed in the past and, in doing so, “the enunciators have become two, one being the ‘parallel image of the other’” (Severi, 2002: 32). The abyssal image is, in this interpretation, fundamental in the creation of ritual identity; the self is potentially replicable and capable to be transformed by accumulating identities in the process of replication.

In Panel VII, we observe in the image the duplication of a scene that involves two characters, *Yaxuun Bahlam* and the captive. We have seen that the captive is (probably in ritual action) transformed into the ball, central to the game metonymically represented, but his transformation is not depicted. The image is synthetic, showing a single image of a ball containing the captive. In the case of *Yaxuun Bahlam* something similar happens. He ‘personifies’ *Yax Chiiit Ju’n Winik Nah Kan*. He himself is this complex person with all the relational attributes that identify him as the Sacred Lord of Yaxchilan, He of the 20 Captives, Lord of Three *Katunoob*; the leading figure and ritual actor of the dedication event, and *Yax Chiiit Ju’n Winik Nah Kan* who is not present in the original narrative but is presumably the responsible of the primordial decapitations. Up to this point, the multiple persona is represented through a single image; when we see *Yaxuun Bahlam*, we are also observing *Yax Chiiit Ju’n Winik Nah Kan*. This is frequently attested in Maya images, in the particular case

of 'representation'. *B'aah*, the term for the textual utterance of this ritual operation, has a range of meanings going from head, body (or some part of it, like forehead or face), person and image, and bespeaks of a particular Maya notion of 'image' and 'being' (Houston and Stuart, 1998: 87). 'Image' involves the extension of being into a different corporeality, for example when it is put into a stone, and divisibility, when a unique body becomes the locus to different entities.

And then, adding up to the complexity of the person indicated in the main scene of the Panel and in the textual inscription, we can appreciate the duplication of the whole scene. In the duplicated smaller image in the superior left side, the characters are not identifiable. The respective positions of *Yaxuun Bahlam* and the captive inside the ball are occupied by the silhouette of a man in ball player position and attire at the foot of the stair and a ball falling from it. As they are not defined, we may ask for example if the ball player in the small version is *Yaxuun Bahlam* or a generic presentation of a man-god playing in the Three Conquests Stair to get the world in motion and primordial subject responsible of decapitation in the three subsequent creations of the world. This could be *Yax Chiiit Ju'n Nah*, and the statement of the text referring to *Yaxuun Bahlam* 'personifying' him would serve as confirmation to his identity. However, we do not see any entity in the textual narrative. The decapitation is told in passive form, so we have no clue of the subject of the action, if there is any subject. We might also say that *Yaxuun Bahlam* occupies the same paradigmatic position of a primordial character and the captive, in his condition of ball bounced and played and dismembered, occupies the position of the decapitated.

At this point we must consider that this small scaled image is not unique and is not limited to the carved image in the Panel but extended to the physical stair where the set of panels are placed. If we see the totality of the installment, we have a stairway leading to a final step, with panels in which the central image is a stairway with a ball player in game position waiting for a ball falling from a stair that, on top of it, shows another stair with a ball player waiting for a ball falling from the stair. If we see it this way, the small image in the panel is not just a duplicate but an iteration of an abyssal composition in at least three



**Figure 5**  
Yaxchilan HS 2, Step  
(Panel) VII, Left Side.  
Drawing from I. Graham  
(Graham, 1982: 160)

levels<sup>24</sup> (fig. 6). Is possible to conceive that the iterative replication extending into physical reality was also as a way to create the physical scenario for ritual action.

The relation between the three iterations of the abyssal composition may be better understood considering the mirror-like quality of '*mise en abyme*', a reflection of image itself that appears as infinite. The reflexivity involved in such device possesses the destabilizing effect of nullifying the prominence of a particular instantiation and with it, the particular identities of its leading characters. There is not an individual self any-more in a potentially infinite replication, although we can focus a particular utterance that corresponds to a point of view and select it as relevant to serve, in this case, to the memory of an event, the ritual inauguration of the Stairway.

This nullification also applies to the logical link between cause and consequence because in the abyssal composition, the image appears to generate itself, without a point of origin. As a result of placing the image as a set of scalar copies, the original narrative does not occupy the position of source for ritual reproduction. The ritual action, for which the set of panels and its placing on the stairway is designed, becomes the central focus of the composition. Hence the ritual may be seen as the producer of the several other iterations. This abyssal recursivity of the image is in contrasted dialogue with the linear form in which it is presented in the textual record, that narrates three original decapitations with the same structure but separated in time and then, after an enormous time span, presents the main event of the text: the 'dedication' of the Stairway.

Another relevant feature of the composition is that in each case the reproduction is marked by the stair, more than by the characters involved. The stair occupies all the iterations of the image. This idea is reinforced by the fact that the Stair is not only a main component of the image and the textual narrative on the panel, but the place where the main event occurs and the protagonist of the 'dedication' event. The stairway leading to Structure 33 is equated to the Three Conquests Stair in which the dismemberment of three primordial entities occurred.

This focus on location makes possible to connect directly the primordial event with the one happening in the present, not through a set of causal inferences, but more as a confluence or recurrence of specific conditions, being location the most relevant of them, led by human beings that 'personify' primeval deities or ancestors<sup>25</sup>. If we take seriously the consequences of this focus, we might understand creation not as an isolated event at the beginning of a time line, but as a potential that can be enacted in particular occasions. A relevant event would allow recreating the conditions for generative ritual action through the transformation of ritual actors in mythical characters and constructed locations in places of creation.

As it is quite common with '*mise en abyme*' and its recursive nature (Frassani, 2016: 451), the work offers a reflection of itself; coming to exist as another iteration of what is represented on it and introducing the issue of scale. In this case, the scales

24 | Perhaps we might consider the glyph *Ehb* (stairway) in the text inserted on the image of the stair, as another iteration, although this could be only a visual interplay (fig. 6). This glyph is written as a stair in profile with a falling ball, strikingly similar to the image in the panel. Additionally, this glyph is also the half of the glyph for ballcourt.

25 | In other cases, a different condition might be the dates. In Palenque, the association of K'inich Ahkal Mo' with G1 (one of the triadic deities) is through the realization of the same event (enthronization) in 9 Ik' date (Stuart 2010: 166)

allude to different orders of reality: the ritual action on purpose of the dedication of the Stairway; the set of panels (of which Panel 7 is the center) that creates the architectural setting for the ritual action and the small image inside the Panel 7 that alludes to the mythical instance of original events. Through these scales, in every iteration, subjects involved keep their identity, which is itself complex, and this complexity pervades every scale. This produces a “fractal type” effect (Dehouve, 2016: 523) in which what we observe in every iteration is the complexity of the whole composition.<sup>26</sup>

The sort of representation involved in iterative repetition, bring us close to the agentic quality of work arts in Classic Maya art. This is something attested in analysis from Stuart, 1996; Hendon, 2012; Gillespie, 2008 and Houston, 2014. One of his expressions is what Stuart names the self-referentiality quality of stelae lintels, vases and many other objects, the facts that the inscriptions refer to the objects themselves. For Stuart, this quality is so recurrent that it may be regarded as the central focus of Maya inscriptions, even more than the human biographies of the kings (Stuart, 1996: 151). In accordance to this observation, we may think the Three Conquests Stair as an entity that speaks of himself speaking of something else (the creation of the world) on purpose of itself. This would be an extended enunciation of self-referentiality which creates replicas and gains complexity accumulating traces of identities in the process. The Stair, *Yaxuun Bahlam*, the captive and the rest of ritual actors involved are transformed in a ritual sequence that remained instantiated in the text as a linear narrative where the original events of a distant past are evoked or reenacted in the present. In the image, however, the abyssal composition presents the events as iterations of a same image trespassing scales.

26 | Dehouve names “fractal type” to a type of repetition which procedure allows the miniaturization of a form by applying a reduction in each iteration, so she is concerned with the issue of physical scale (Dehouve, 2016: 525). I consider it fits what we see in Panel VII, considering that scale in this case refers to levels of reality.

## CONCLUSIONS

Considering the subject presented in the image of the panel, and with insights from Gillespie about the ball game and its relation with dismemberment and creation, this paper proposed that is possible to consider the central image of Panel VII as a metonymy for the ball game and not as a strict representation of its supposed outcome, the decapitation of the captive.

Taking into account the embedded text, the analysis of the panel’s placement and the subjects presented both in textual narrative and image in Yaxchilan Panel VII, Hieroglyphic Stairway 2, a few conclusions may be suggested. First, that the abyssal composition includes not only the image replicated in the panel but extends to the architectural setting in which the set of panels is placed. In that way, the installment works as a setting for the ritual action around the dedication of the Stairway. The Stairway itself is the central element in this composition, in which we can recognize several iterations of an image at different scales. The text identifies it as the place where three primordial decapitations occurred, and as the one protagonist of the

ritual event of dedication. This is evident in its name: The Three Conquests Stair. In the image, this identification is reinforced by the presence of the Stair in all the iterations of the image.

This leading position of the Stairway suggests that we can understand it in terms of self-referentiality. The Three Conquests Stairway speaks of itself by speaking of ancient decapitations occurred over her body on purpose of her coming into being as the Stairway that leads to Structure 33. The whole installment also suggests that self-referentiality may be understood as an extended enunciation that creates replicas and gains complexity in the process. In this sense, self-referentiality is an instantiation of reflexivity.

The analysis of the reflexivity device on the image and the installment, suggested three interpretations. First, reflexivity points to self-referentiality of the ritual action, established in the pivotal position of the Stairway around which, in its last presentation (the dedication of the Stairway leading to the Structure 33), ritual action occurred. Second, there is a collapse of the linear temporality presented in the textual record. As the narrative in the inscription is remarkably linear, the relation between original events (decapitation of three primordial entities) and current ones (dedication of the Stairway) is presented in the image in abyssal form, and this suggests not a linear continuity but scaled presentations of the same event. More than a reenactment of a mythical episode, the ritual seems to be the generative instance from which others emerge, one that may extend itself into any time, direction or scale. The way reflexivity is used in Panel VII reinforces the idea of the centrality of ritual action and objects as main interest of Maya inscriptions, a point established by Stuart (1996).

Third, the abyssal presentation has consequences in understanding personhood for Late Classic Maya or at list for this particular group in Yaxchilan that worked on the design, construction and dedication of the Stairway. 'Person' is complexified (through 'personification') and transformed (through chains of associations, like the one that makes the captive into the ball played). This complexity is revealed in the main scene of the Panel and in the inscription. Apart from that, the recursivity device indicates that 'Person' may become a replicated reflection of a scaled iteration of the self.

These suggestions derived from the analysis of the particular case of Panel VII, HS 2, are necessarily incomplete as to extend to all Late Classic Maya. The results need to be contrasted and expanded with other case studies from the same area (Usumacinta River) and time period (600-900 CE) and demand even a deeper understanding of all the elements involved in the architectural composition of the particular case study. However, these conclusions may enrich considerations already explored by Maya culture researchers (see Stuart, 1996; Houston, 2014; Houston & Stuart, 1998; Houston, Stuart & Taube, 2006; Gillespie, 2008 and Hendon, 2012), regarding complexities of

personhood such as the capacity to conflate, divide and extend into different corporeality, and 'person' quality of objects as they are presented as fully active agents.

To achieve these conclusions, i have built on considerations from anthropology of art, transposing the analysis of formal resources into ontological arguments, and giving a main focus to the internal logic structuring the images. This may be considered a valid and fruitful way to approach the images from Classic Maya and to reflect on their ontological conceptions.

Finally, the analysis of images, considering that in specific formal resources there are also ontological arguments, opens a field to explore ritual activity among Classic Maya. In the case of Yaxchilan Panel VII Hieroglyphic Stairway 2, ritual activity may be inferred by the textual references to 'personification' and 'K'awiil invocation' as well as from the logics in the recursive and iterative construction of the image, which have been the main goal of the present text. Hence, the inference of the existence of a ritual activity, reflected both in image and text, brings the question of how to visualize it: What sort of ritual activity is reflected on the presentation of the main event as transposing scales iterations? How was the set of associations put in motion? Was it perhaps in a chant through parallel utterance? Was it through mimetic devices that allowed to make sense of the inhabited reality and to achieve particular effects? (Tausig, 1993; see also Dehouve, 2016, for the uses of miniaturization in ritual contexts in Mesoamerica). These subjects may seem elusive, and they probably are, as we can't witness or experience Classic Maya ritual directly. However, we may build on what images reveal in their composition. The complex elicitations we observe in them -indicative of transformation, accumulation, ritual operations and assimilation of alterity- are not mere rhetorical devices to keep political power untouched and beyond dispute (see Zamora, 2016) but indexes of structuring ways to produce transformations on person and time for which ritual is a privileged space (Houseman & Severi, 1998: 167, 201-202; Houseman, 2005: 76). This way, the analysis of formal features with an anthropological approach, may provide clues to reconstruct the ritual life of Classic Maya, without renouncing to the incorporation of results coming from ethnographical and historical data, necessary themselves for a more integral analysis.

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**Hilda Landrove Torres** is Master in Mesoamerican Studies. PhD Candidate at Mesoamerican Studies Posgraduate Program, National Autonomous University of Mexico. Member of College Art Association of Latin American Art. Her research areas are political anthropology of Indigenous Peoples and Anthropology of Art.

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