

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE COMPOSITION OF MURALS 1 AND 3 OF STRUCTURE 1, LA SUFRICAYA, EL PETÉN, GUATEMALA

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Introduction

La Sufricaya is a small site that is located about 1,2 km to the west of the main plaza of Holmul (Fig. 1). The largest structure of this site is Structure 1 rising on the northwest corner of a raised court. A room with painted walls in an earlier construction phase of this building, designated as Room 1, was discovered during the 2001 season of the Holmul Archaeological Project when clearing the rubble of a tunnel dug by looters (Estrada-Belli 2001, 2002, 2003a,b). The murals covering the north and west walls of Room 1 were designated as Murals 1 and 3. The composition of these two murals is so far unique in the Maya area and therefore they are the focus of this short note.

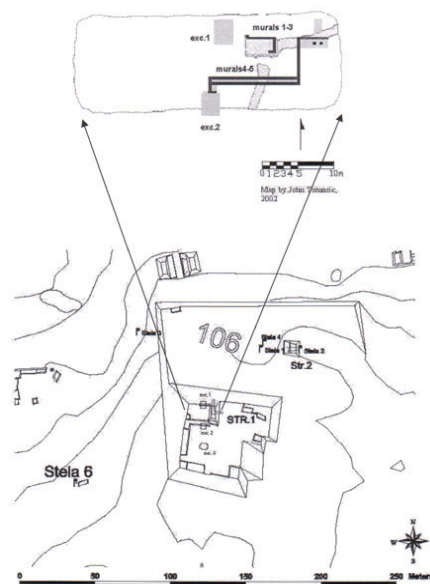


Figure 1: Map of Group 1 at La Sufricaya and sketch map of Str. 1 on Group showing looters' trenches, excavations and investigated mural-bearing walls (after Estrada Belli 2003a, Fig. 29)

The Murals and their Archaeological Context

Room 1 was originally a simple building resting on a 30 cm-high plinth on the north-western corner of a raised court and opening to the south. It represents Phase I of Structure 1 (Estrada Belli 2003a). Murals 1 and 3 were painted during this phase.

During Phase II another room, Room 2, was added. It has been hypothesized that the plan of the room was a wide C-shape open to the south, and that it may have had stone pillars or timber posts in the central area. As indicated above, wall SL06-10 later closed up the back of the room covering a wall (SL06-11) with another mural, painted during Phase II, while leaving part of the front of the building still in use (Phase IIb). It is possible that this wall was built to prevent the collapse of the vault.

In a later stage of construction, Phase III, the roof of Room 1 was razed, the room filled in and buried by a new floor platform. The new building built over it fully enclosed the earlier versions of Structure 1 (Estrada-Belli 2001, Figure 32, 2003a, Figure 30).

Dating

The ceramics associated with the fills of Phases II and III consisted of large quantities of Early Classic Tzakol 3-like types suggesting that the entire life of the building spanned the Early Classic period. Of particular interest is a fragment of a green Pachuca obsidian blade (Estrada Belli 2003a).

Composition and Content of the Murals

Mural 1

Mural 1 covers the north wall of Structure 1, Phase I which is about 3m wide and 2m. About one fourth of the mural is destroyed by the opening of the looters' tunnel (Fig. 2).

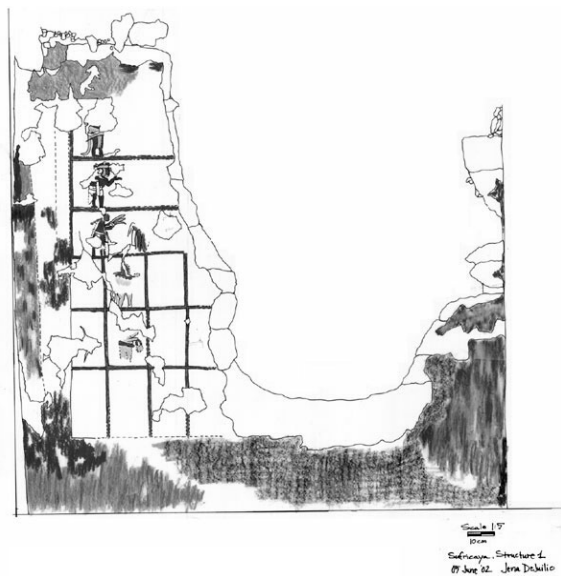


Figure 2: La Sufricaya, Structure 1, Mural 1 (drawing by Jena DeJulio, after Estrada Belli 2003a, Fig. 62)

Most of the painted area is divided in a regular grid of square “boxes” by lines painted in red colour on a white background. Obviously each of these boxes measuring approximately 20 by 20 cm contained the depiction of a standing individual facing right from which only a few are partly preserved. These figures are painted in the typical early Classic Maya style, but no glyphic texts or single name glyphs can be made out on the published photographs and drawings.

On the viewer’s right a set off panel is divided in seven registers from which 6 are about 20 cm high and the uppermost one about 40 cm. Five of these registers show groups of originally five seated individuals facing to the left. The upper- and lowermost registers are too eroded to precisely recognise the painted motifs. A seated figure with a feather headdress larger than the other figures can still be made out on the right of the uppermost register. Here the style and proportions of all these figures are not classic Maya, they rather show the characteristics of Teotihuacan art. In the area to the viewers left of the aforementioned seated figure a large portion of the original paint had faded away, but some red lines were still visible, perhaps outlining a human figure. Above this faded figure, one can still see large feather plumes descending from what appears to be a headdress. This would suggest the presence of a central, standing figure with a large headdress, painted twice larger than any of the other figures. Francisco Estrada Belli (2003b:40) assumes that the scene may depict a ceremony in which a lord or ruler is acclaimed or is addressing a gathering of Teotihuacan warriors and a group of Maya individuals. The depicted lord may either be a foreigner or the scene may depict a local ruler in front of a number of emissaries from Teotihuacan. Such scenario would be consistent with accession ceremonies to which foreign dignitaries were often present (Estrada Belli 2003). In sum, the mural may depict the accession ceremony of an Early Classic ruler from La Sufricaya attended by emissaries from Teotihuacan and/or Tikal (Estrada Belli 2001:110, 2002, 2003b:40).

Mural 3



The western wall of Room 1 also shows a painted grid which is divided in three horizontal registers of about the same heights as those on the right of the northern wall with three rows of boxes about 20 cm wide and 20 to 30cm high with the higher boxes in the bottom row (Fig. 3). All registers and boxes contained the images of standing figures in Early Classic style facing to the right. One of these figures wears a ballplayer’s yoke and another one wears a belt and jaguar tail (Estrada Belli 2003b:38) (Fig. 4). The other figures are only fragmentarily preserved.

Figure 3: La Sufricaya, Structure 1, Mural 3 (drawing by Jena DeJulio, after Estrada Belli 2003a, Fig. 63)

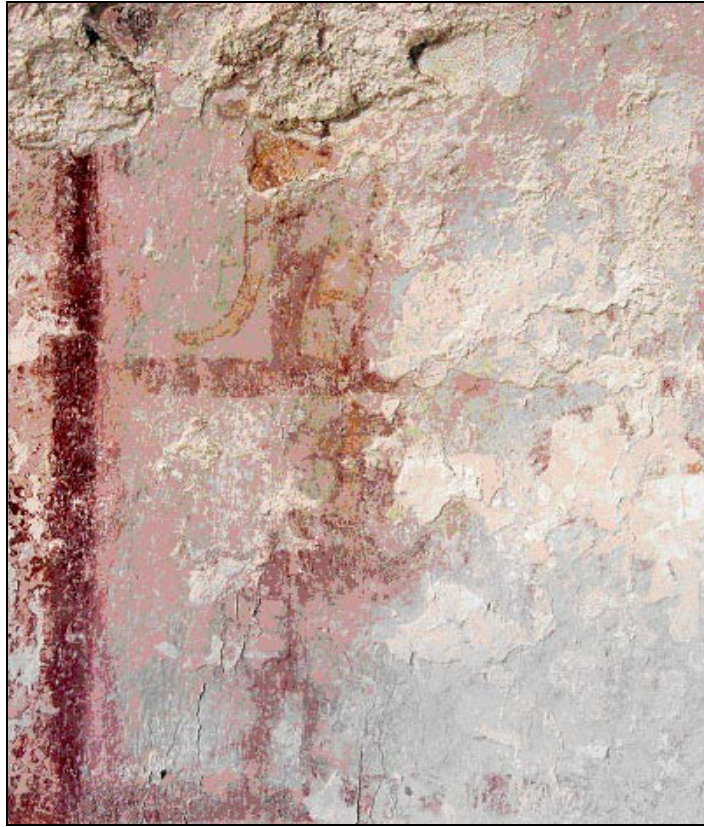


Figure 4: La Sufricaya, Structure 1, Mural 3, detail (after Estrada Belli 2003a: Fig. 37a)

Commentary on the Composition of Murals 1 and 3

If comparing Murals 1 and 3 with Mural 2 in Structure 1, Phase II, from La Sufricaya (Estrada Belli 2003a: Figs. 33-34) and other murals from elsewhere in the Maya area (A. Miller 1982, M. Miller 1986, de la Fuente 1998, 2001), their unusual format is striking.

This format differs completely from any other Pre-Classic (Kaufmann 2003), Early Classic, Late- or Post-Classic Maya wall paintings as well as from scenic depictions on painted or carved vessels (Kerr 1989-2000, n.d.) and monuments.

Although the iconography clearly indicates Teotihuacan influence it does not show the typical composition of the known Teotihuacan murals (Miller 1973, de la Fuente 1995). The La Sufricaya murals further lack the set of signs which have been discussed by Karl Taube (2000) as a possible Teotihuacan writing system.

The only painting at Teotihuacan that has some structural resemblance to the La Sufricaya murals is the floor painting of the Plaza de los Glifos at the La Ventilla palace compound at Teotihuacan (Cabrera Castro 1995), dated to the Late Tlamimilolpa/Early Xolalpan Phase corresponding to 300 to 450AD (Cabrera Castro 1996a:9, 1996b:39). A grid of red lines painted on the white stucco floor contains each one glyphic sign (Fig. 5) or groups of three signs.

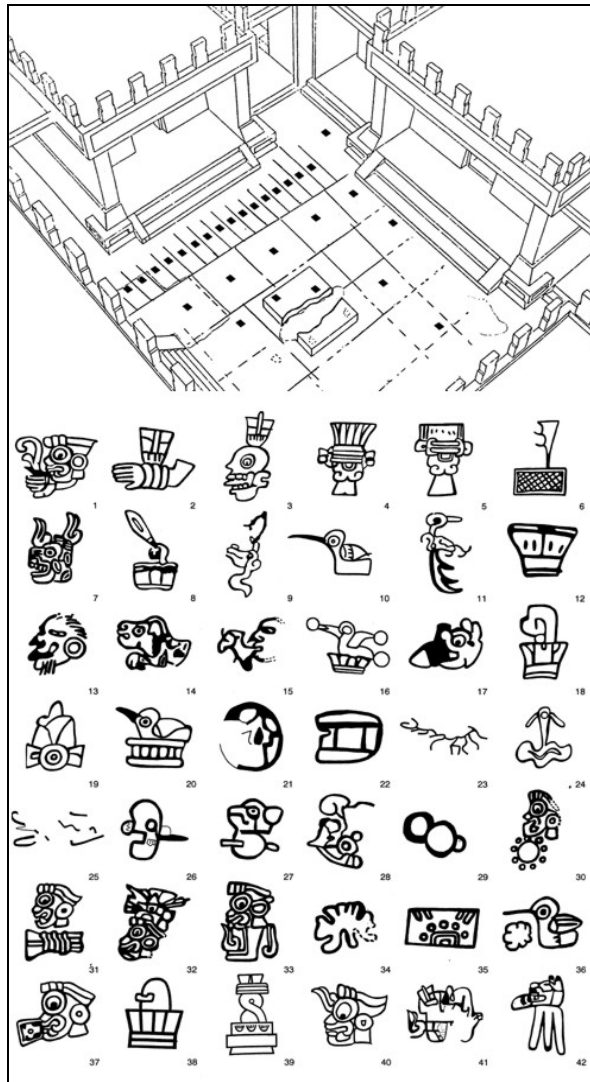


Figure 5: Teotihuacan, La Ventilla, Plaza de los Glifos, grid with glyphs painted on the floor glyphs (after Cabrera Castro 1996b:31, Figura 8) and drawings of single glyphs (after Cabrera Castro 1996b:33)

These glyphic signs have been assumed as predecessors of the signs in the later Post-classic Central Mexican codices (Cabrera Castro 1995:423, 1996a:6, 1996b:31, Taube 2000:13) Ruben Cabrera Castro (1995:427) assumed that the glyphs at la Ventilla represent the insignia of certain important individuals to mark their seats during an assembly. Other proposals include the interpretation of the glyphs as toponyms of locations either within or outside of Teotihuacan related in some way to La Ventilla – and even the idea of a place to teach writing (Cabrera Castro 1995:427). They are also similar to signs accompanying the depictions of certain individuals in the murals of Teotihuacan supposed as personal names and titles by Karl Taube (2000:15) and are also quite similar to nominal glyphs known from Terminal Classic Chichen Itza (Morris et al. 1931, Boot 1995).

This leads to assume that the glyphs on the La Ventilla patio floor represent the nominal glyphs of certain individuals who had been assigned to a specific position in the patio at certain occasions. The minimum width of the smallest “boxes” is about 50-60cm which is enough space for an individual to stand in a line. Other larger boxes show three glyphic signs and seem to refer to individuals distinguished from

the others by certain titles (i.e. the "Tlaloc head"), labelling the spaces for a specific group of individuals.

Interestingly the composition of the grid at La Ventilla is quite similar to the composition of the grid in Murals 1 and 3 at La Sufricaya. As at La Ventilla the grid at La Sufricaya has "boxes" containing only one individual and boxes/registers framing groups of individuals present at a certain event. The La Sufricaya murals appear as if depicting an event at a place like the La Ventilla plaza where people have lined up properly in their respective spaces marked by red lines.

Furthermore, the grid composed of square boxes and horizontal registers with red outlines in Murals 1 and 3 resembles strikingly the layout of Post-Classic and contact period Mixtec codices (Fig. 6).



Figure 6: Example of a Mixtec codex page: Codex Cospi, page 4*recto* (after Laurenchich Minelli 1992)

The section of the La Sufricaya mural on the viewers right has roughly the proportions of a typical Maya codex page, at least like the known ones. The central part of the mural resembles a double or triple page where one "scene" or "chapter" stretches over several pages.

The whole composition rather resembles the arrangement of Codex pages. One gets the impression that a codex could have been the template. If a codex or similar document was the template for the La Sufricaya mural, was it an Early Classic Maya codex or a Teotihuacano one ?

That codices were in use among the Maya of the Early Classic Period can be assumed with certainty if considering the precisely timed dynastic records we have on monuments from that era as well as from Late Classic monuments making reference to dated dynastic lists as well as other individuals and events way back in the past. Remains of codices in archaeological contexts dating to the Early Classic and Middle Classic were found in Mirador, Chiapas (Mound 9, Burial 1) (Angulo 1970:5) and Copan (Str. 9N-83, Burial VIII-36) (Fash 1991:92).

With regard to Teotihuacan, there is so far no archaeological nor iconographic evidence for any type of codices used by the ancient Teotihuacanos. One can only

speculate about the nature of the perishable media used for dynastic and historical records.

If looking at the La Sufricaya murals, one gets the impression that perhaps not only the glyphic signs used by the ancient Teotihuacanos (Taube 2000) were the predecessors of later central (Aztec) and southern Mexican (Mixtec) and hieroglyphic writing, but that also the layout of the codices from these areas may have continued a tradition already existent at Teotihuacan.

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