

A BLOOD-DRAWING CEREMONY PAINTED ON A MAYA VASE

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THE SCENE to be discussed is painted on a polychrome vase in University Museum, Philadelphia, to which institution I am indebted for permission to reproduce it (fig. 1). This piece has been published a number of times (e. g. Mason, 1927:375; 1943, fig. 22; Vaillant, 1935:94; Gordon and Mason, 1925-28:27, 28; Kidder and Samayoa, 1959). It is said to have been found near Huehuetenango, Guatemala, but certainly was not made there. The upper half of the vessel carries a design of two groups of persons separated by hieroglyphs. A band of 14 painted hieroglyphs separates this scene from the lower part of the vessel which is decorated with a pair of heads of the long-nosed god with Imix headdress and without lower jaw (Glyph 1031 in the Thompson catalogue). These are separated by heads of the same god in horizontal position, but without Imix signs.

The individuals are in an unusual position for they squat with left knees at what in real life would be about 25 cm. above the ground; right legs are not shown. Each person holds in his right hand a long narrow implement, the upper end of which is decorated with feathers and wrapped with bands; the lower end points between the man's thighs. This implement, as we shall see, is almost certainly a bone awl or dagger, a conclusion reinforced by the fact that all are shown as white.

Beneath each person's knee is a bowl, presumably of pottery, containing strips of what, from evidence to be produced, is almost certainly bark paper. They are white with black edgings. All figures are male and appear to impersonate gods, for one has the features of the sun god. The three persons on the far side of the bowl have daggers pointed downward and

lack the receptacles, as though preparing for the ceremony. One with Caban on cheek impersonates the god of number 11.

The clue to the scene is the bowl and its contents beneath each squatting figure. On Lintel 17, Yaxchilan, which represents the sacrificial drawing of blood from the tongue, a similar bowl with similar contents is on the ground before the individual engaged in drawing blood from his tongue (Maudslay 1889-1902, Vol. 2). On the companion Lintel 15, in the same building, this or a similar bowl, with the same contents, is deposited, clearly in offering, at the base of a serpent deity, strictly speaking a human head issuing from the open jaws of a serpent. Opposite, the same supplicant or another person holds a basket with more of the same strips.

The same scene of drawing blood from the tongue is the subject of the beautiful Lintel 24, now in the British Museum, but there the strips are in a basket. On the companion Lintel 25 a bowl with the strips is again at the feet—if one may use the Irishim—of the serpent deity and a second is held by the supplicant. On these Yaxchilan lintels, the strips are decorated with black spots (hatched, the Maya way of representing black in sculpture).

On the murals of Bonampak, where a scene shows blood-drawing from the tongue, the receptacle is a spiked vessel of a common archaeological type. It holds the same strips, painted white and with a black line down the center. An attendant holds a white implement, presumably a bone dagger (Ruppert, Thompson & Proskouriakoff, 1955:54). Stela 19, Naranjo, also portrays drawing blood from the tongue. The sculpture is badly worn, but Maler (1908:103), who saw the original, says that the vessel is visible at the base.

Before reaching any conclusion on the subject matter of the Huehuetenango vase, a brief survey of the data obtainable from literary and archaeological sources is in order. There is much variation in the rites, an excellent summary of which was made over half a century ago by Zelia Nuttall (1904). Blood was drawn from various parts of the body; the blood-stained implements might be offered in sacrifice or the blood collected and smeared on the idol or allowed to drip on some absorbent material which was offered to the deity. Indeed, Motolinia (1914, *Trat.* 1, ch. 6) remarked that different areas had their special way of performing this rite so that often it was

possible to tell what province a person was from by observing in what part of his body the scars of blood-drawing were visible. Readers are referred to the paper by Nuttall, but I shall supplement this with data bearing directly on the vessel from Huehuetenango, which, to anticipate, surely portrays the drawing of blood from the penis and allowing it to drop on strips, probably of paper, which were placed in pottery vessels. One must bear in mind that Mrs. Nuttall was concerned with Central Mexico, whereas now it is necessary to present the comparable Maya data.

Implements for drawing blood in self-sacrifice were usually the points of maguey leaves, thorns of unspecified plants, flint or obsidian points, and bone awls or daggers, and the bones of sting rays. These last were not, apparently used in Central Mexico, but Landa says they were thus used by the Maya of Yucatan. Sting rays found in the neighborhood of the pelvis in burials indicate that this practice was widespread in the Maya lowlands and highlands. They have also been found, together with a jade implement shaped as a sting-ray sting, with a burial at La Venta (Drucker, 1952:162-63). Quetzalcoatl, to whom is attributed the introduction of this rite of blood-drawing, usually has the implement, a bone dagger, stuck in his headdress or held in his hand, and often the maguey point is also one of his attributes. In several sculptures or paintings of Aztec and Mixtec origin the ear is being pierced with bone daggers or maguey thorns are stuck in the cushions used in this rite, as described in literary sources. The implements are sometimes tipped with a flower, a symbol of blood, or with a jade symbol, the meaning of which is discussed below.

Sometimes the blood-stained implements or reeds passed through the holes were offered in sacrifice; sometimes the blood was collected and smeared on the idol; often it was allowed to drip on ritualistic objects of a semi-absorbent nature which were then offered to the god. At Yaxchilan and Naranjo cords or ropes set at intervals with thorns were drawn through the tongue; the famed relief of Huilocintla shows what appears to be a long stick being passed through the tongue. Short sticks were passed through the pierced holes in some parts, and were subsequently burned.

Frequently in Central Mexico, the implements used for piercing or those passed through the hole were laid on a sort of cushion of reeds (e. g. Sahagún, 1951, App. to Bk. 2, Section 5), and of these there are many representations in the codices, but there is no evidence of such cushions in the Maya area.

The collecting of blood in a vessel for offering to the idol or smearing on the idol was fairly common in Central Mexico. The Otomi of Temazcaltepec, as noted by Carrasco, collected the blood from self-sacrificial rites in small pottery vessels, and left them before the idol of their god, Quequex (Papeles de Nueva España, Ser. 2, vol. 7, p. 21). A variant form of this was performed until recently by the Lacandon. Blood from the piercing of the ear with a stone arrow-point was allowed to drip on the braseros containing the (jade?) idols (Tozzer, 1907:136; cf. p. 87). The use of pans as receptacles for the blood is also reported from the Alta Verapaz (Tovilla, bk. 2, ch. 3).

As the amount of blood obtainable in self-sacrifice is limited, it was customarily allowed to fall on some material, preferably of an absorbent nature, which was then offered in sacrifice. Most generally this was paper (made from the inner bark of trees of the *Ficus* family). There are many references to this custom in Central Mexico (e. g. Motolinia, 1914, Trat. 1, ch. 5). We are told, for instance, that the priests of Chimalhuacan made offerings of paper reddened with blood (Papeles de Nueva España, Ser. 2, vol. 6, p. 74). Serna, (1900, ch. 10, Section 1) states that in the third movable feast [1 Mazatl] husbands and wives offered blood drawn from below the left breast or below the eyes. This was caught on strips [*tirillas*] of paper. These were mixed with the rest of the blood and were thrown in pottery vases and were burned before the goddesses Cihuapipiltin.

In Oaxaca, according to Burgoa, the blood was allowed to drip on maize husks which were placed in a basket; the Chorotega allowed the blood to drop on bundles of maize (Oviedo y Valdes 1851-55, bk. 42, ch. 11).

For the Maya area we must depend on illustrations. Codex Madrid, p. 95a portrays the piercing of the ears, the blood from which falls on an unidentified oval object. The strips



FIG. 1. VASE FROM HUEHUETENANGO

Blood-drawing ceremony on one side of the vase. After the painting by M. Louise Baker. Courtesy University Museum, Philadelphia.

of material in the vessels or baskets of the Yaxchilan lintels and in the spiked vessel at Bonampak have been mentioned. In the light of the material from Mexico cited above and comparing the Maya representations with pictures of paper in the Mexican codices and in Sahagún, we can assume with some certainty that the strips depicted on Maya sculptures also represent paper. The black spots or lines on them conceivably represent drops of dry blood; alternatively, they may indicate drops of rubber which were frequently spattered on sacrificial paper in Central Mexico. In Mexican pictures these rubber stains are depicted as black crosses, lines, or splatters on the white of the paper. Actually, the Yucatec Maya word *kik* means both blood and rubber (Roys, 1931, cure 103; see also p. 255), and the same is true of Quiché (Recinos, 1950, p. 122, note 16), and there is no doubt that in Maya thought the two were closely associated.

Blood was drawn from almost every part of the body in Middle America. The penis was a common source both in Central Mexico and in the Maya area, and as far distant as the Guaymí of Panamá (Requejo Salcedo, 1908:98). Landa reports the custom in Yucatán; it existed among the Manché Chol (Thompson, 1938:594), among the Mopán Maya (Ximénez, bk. 5, ch. 58, quoting Cano), and in Guatemala (probably the Verapaz) according to Las Casas (1909, ch. 177). Three pottery figurines of Mayapan type from a cache at Santa Rita, northern British Honduras, represent this ceremony. Gann (1918:60; pl. 9) thus describes them: "Each is seated upon a low four-legged stool, and holds in one hand by its greatly enlarged spatulate glans the projecting penis, on which he is seemingly performing some sort of surgical operation with a long knife held in the other hand." The seated figures are about six inches tall and are painted red, white, and green. They wear mitre-like headdresses reminiscent of the *copilli* crown.

Passing a cord through the penis, as described by Landa, may be represented on Codex Madrid p. 82*b*. God B and the death god, or their impersonators, enact the ceremony which is associated with days with coefficients of 13. On the other hand, drawing blood from the ear (Madrid, p. 95*a*) is associated with the day coefficient of 4, and drawing blood

from the tongue (Madrid, p. 96 *b*) with day coefficient of 1. Supporting the identification of the scene on Madrid, p. 82 *b* as a blood-drawing rite is the fact that in all three cases the associated days are Ik, Ix, Cimi, Etz'nab, and Oc. The almanac on page 82 *b* is, however, a double one (i. e. of 520 days) and has as its second group of days Kan, Cib, Lamat, Ahau, and Eb. The pattern established by these almanacs is significant, but the Yaxchilan lintels do not conform to it.

After this brief survey of rites we can turn again to the Huehuetenango vase. From the attitudes of the persons, gods or their impersonators, with one hand invisible between the thighs and the other holding the bone (?) dagger pointing down at the same region, it is a reasonable supposition that they are drawing blood from the penis, as in the case of the Santa Rita figurines and the deities on Madrid, p. 82 *b*, where, however, a cord replaces the dagger. This surmise is confirmed by the presence of the receptacles and the strips in them, clearly placed to catch the dripping blood. We conclude that drawing blood from the penis was prevalent in the late classic period, whereas the earliest certain dating of the rite previously rested on the figurines of the Mayapan period found at Santa Rita.

Finally, an interesting conjecture can be made about the decoration of the receptacles on the Huehuetenango vase. This is not too clear in the photographs of the original or in the painting by Miss Baker, but it may be the symbol which serves as one variant of the day sign Muluc, and which Beyer (1926) identified as the sign for jade. Jade is the symbol for water and precious objects (Thompson, 1951:31), but there is evidence that it was also a symbol for blood (the precious thing), for it sometimes appears on the ends of the blood-stained implements used in drawing blood (Seler, 1902-25, vol. 2, pp. 722, 725, 765). Again, the solar disk is surrounded with jade symbols in Mexican sculpture, whereas in painted reproductions, the sun is often surrounded with blood, a reference to the sacrifices made to sustain it. It is, therefore, possible, but far from certain, that the symbol on the side of these bowls refers to the blood offering in them.

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