


# The Maya Battle, 786–1519

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## Abstract

A careful reading of the battle in the Bonampak murals offers new insights into eighth-century strategies for warfare, and the importance of overwhelming force in both aggression and deterrence. These same two strategies were critical during the Spanish invasion, especially in defense of freshwater resources. The murals of Bonampak provide insights into the Maya battle, including the emphasis on teamwork in execution of battle tactics and the seemingly contradictory emphasis on the individual, in terms of hieroglyphics. Despite exhaustive study of the paintings, the potential consideration of color-defined and pattern shields also may reveal groupings of warriors previously unrecognized in both battle and presentation of captives. Sixteenth-century accounts by Spanish invaders confirm a practice that includes defense of water sources along the coast of Yucatan, with details that can be evaluated regarding eighth-century Maya practice.

## INTRODUCTION

It is tempting to read the nature of Maya society from eighth-century Maya art. And it is easy to deploy Maya art of the eighth century as exemplary of any given Maya practice, particularly warfare, in large part because Maya art conveys a historical and temporal sensibility. The character of representation in the last century of the Classic period reaches the greatest heights achieved in pre-Hispanic America, with an ability to seemingly catch the instant in which a ruler takes a captive on Yaxchilan Lintel 8, well known to modern observers but incidental in its mid-eighth-century context, or to render an intimate moment between a mother and child on Piedras Negras Stela 3, on the reverse of the monument and thus less visible. The murals of Bonampak seem to offer the greatest promise in this respect: they depict more humans in action and with one another than any other known work, and so the depictions—a royal family on a throne with piles of cacao beans, a troupe of musicians—seem tailor-made as answers to twenty-first-century questions. The modern viewer seeks to read the images as full-bore visual expression of otherwise laconic texts, windows into the lives of royal families and attendant elites. The epigraphic records, usually in the form of inscriptions from the monumental record, and most frequently executed in stone, are often removed from the larger work in order that scholars focus on the written work. But texts usually exist in a context, and nowhere is this clearer than at Bonampak, in the paintings preserved in Structure 1.

As lifelike as the paintings of Bonampak may seem, they are not a depiction of “what happened.” Probably painted in 791, the last date inscribed in Room 1, the battle of 786 depicted in Room 2 was by then in the realm of memory, allowing for a careful reconstruction of the events and with consideration of the conditions five years later. Nevertheless, the three walls of Room 2 carry both information and a message. Visual evidence *is* evidence, but

it needs to be accepted on its own terms, and to keep in mind who had control of its execution.

Representation at Bonampak is a curated and edited process, necessitating a supervisor or master to manage assistants and to make final decisions. Miller and Brittenham (2013:12–13) have written about the master’s hand that gives particular attention to the final black outline, a whiplash that brings faces and hands to life, and its juxtaposition with clumsy execution elsewhere. Some parts of the painting were simply valued more than others, as evidenced by careful attention and lavish pigments; some figures are valued more than others, underscored by their position in a scene and the open space around them. The paintings were programmed across all three rooms, attentive to where important individuals would be deployed, and required, first, mapping of the imagery from a small scale to the large one: if Structure 1 is a final draft, then there surely were preparatory materials that do not survive, perhaps executed on paper. Painting Structure 1 at Bonampak was also an expensive process, starting with the construction of the building itself, a rare construction with interior walls demonstrating that imagery was planned from the beginning. The viewing of the paintings was conceived from the beginning as something to be managed by the architecture itself. Although largely lost today, the exterior was painted below the soffit and stuccoed above, further evidence of conspicuous consumption. The execution required vast quantities of Maya blue pigment, so that beyond the visible effort lay a supply chain of trade and tribute. Painted months or years after the events portrayed, the paintings respond to what must have been the exigencies, power structures, and more that were of paramount concern in 791. There is much to learn from Bonampak, but the hardest part is letting the paintings speak to the twenty-first century: twenty-first-century investigators want to find what they are looking for.

Let us start by laying out some of the features of the Room 2 battle, which has suffered considerable damage and loss (Figure 1). The numbering system assigns individuals (labeling them “HF,” for human figure, as per Adams and Aldrich (1980) to a wall, not to the sequence of action, so the East Wall numbers

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Figure 1. Bonampak, Room 2. Battle scene, East, South, and West walls. Bonampak, Mexico, Maya, A.D. 791. Reconstruction, Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Bonampak Documentation Project, illustrated by Heather Hurst and Leonard Ashby.

run from 1 to 30; nonetheless, it is clear that HF 7 of the East Wall overlaps HF 35 of the South Wall; HF 55 is privileged by the space that opens up around him on this wall, identifying this individual to be the central figure of the battle. The narrative itself, however, runs across the upper register, from east to south to west: one starts at the upper, left-hand corner of the East Wall, and reads from left to right, pausing at HF 55, and continuing to the West Wall before doubling back. This is somewhat like reading one side of a screen fold manuscript, then turning it over and reading back the other direction. The entire West Wall presents an integrated part of the narrative, which then continues along the lower level of the South Wall, running west to east, before coming to a close on the lower segment of the East Wall.

Most of the battle can be read as an upper and lower register, divided by the physical vault spring about halfway up on the South Wall; a yet higher register of the South Wall pitches in sharply, rising to the corbel vault depicting a separate band of constellations that extends to the capstones that span the vault. With at least 46 individuals painted onto its surface, the South Wall presents remarkable complexity; multiple spears come at HF 43, whose body seems to be falling through a host of other bodies, for example, from at least three or four individuals surrounding him. Because it is the long wall that one sees directly upon entry, it is the most important wall of the battle.

There are about 30 inscriptions in the battle. Four are on the East Wall; not even one is on the West Wall. The inscriptions run in captions across the upper margin, mostly naming individuals underneath them; below, in the throes of the battle, texts both name individuals and tag shields. The single large inscription over HF 55 is a complete text of date, verb, object, and protagonist, unlike any other in the room. Yet its text, a date, the verb of capture, and the king, seems so modest when seen in comparison to the tumultuous painting of battle. That, in itself, is also telling: the inscriptions speak of individuals, and so many of them, whether in the tags on their shields or in the captions set against the battle: their purpose is to speak of individuals. If modern-day scholars can make history of these accounts, so much the better, but the history of cities is not their purpose. The best placement of the date of the

battle is A.D. July 19, 786 (Miller and Brittenham 2013: 67), roughly five years before the last date inscribed in the paintings, and the final date at the site itself.

The ruler who leads the battle and the protagonist of Room 2 is Yajaw Chan Muwaan, HF 55; he is also the subject of Stelae 1–3 at the site. It is likely that he had died by the time the paintings were completed, and the interred lord in the bench of Room 2 may be this famous ruler, which means that those who came to venerate his rule would have sat atop his very remains. There is a sense of motion and rhythm to the battle which converges at the point that Yajaw Chan Muwaan takes a captive, changing the pace of the battle, much like battle itself, in which there is preparation, a rush to engage, and then the moment of the first confrontation. That is when everything changes. Meanwhile, as argued elsewhere (Miller 2023) and discovered after the completion of the work of Miller and Brittenham in 2013, the West Wall depicts the burning of a temple, the first such depiction in the art of Mesoamerica, although it would become a trope of conquest and victory frequently repeated in sixteenth-century manuscripts. Painted on the badly damaged West Wall of Room 2, this image features a vanguard warrior (HF 74), who holds a torch over his head to catch the flame from the solar deity above him, painted against the yellow background of other heavenly forms (Figure 2). This scene of a burning building and looted treasure, in the form of a large box lifted on high to be spirited away from a sacred chamber, is a practice that neither archaeology nor textual records can attest to have taken place in this fashion, although Inomata (1997) proved conclusively that Aguateca was indeed burned to the ground. But here it is, the first visual conception of the destruction of one Maya polity by another. Furthermore, recognizing the import of the West Wall reveals to the modern day the power of fire as a weapon of destruction in the moment of hand-to-hand combat, much like the use of the Molotov cocktail today. Other warriors fall below, as if fleeing the burning structure, or grabbing a stone (HF 79) in an act of desperation.

The lower register shows the continued progress of battle. Although badly damaged, the register shows captives being driven to the ground; the upended posteriors of HFs 52a and 58



Figure 2. Bonampak, Room 2, Battle scene, West wall. Bonampak, Mexico, Maya, A.D. 791. Reconstruction, Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Bonampak Documentation Project, illustrated by Heather Hurst and Leonard Ashby.

on the South Wall might suggest rape; other figures fall to the ground, illegible until the gutted captives of Cacaxtla came to light in the 1970s. No viewer was prepared to see such body violence among the Classic Maya until it was manifested so explicitly in a painting roughly of the same time period. Some of the enemy fall in battle, presumably; others are captured and hauled away. The victors work in teams of two, three, or four to subdue their opponent. This is most legible at the join of East and South walls: HF 18, 21, and 26 take HF 27 to the ground together and, at

what seems to be the very end of the sequence, HF 10 and 13 secure HF 11.

The scene takes place against a smoky-blue background, and as Magaloni (Magaloni Kerpel 1998) has noted, carbon black has been added to the Maya blue, to underscore the darkness of the sky: this is probably dawn, not dusk, and the trumpet blasts announce a surprise attack to gain advantage. The dark green background with red striations presents a shorthand for vegetation, but the likely location of the battle is another Maya city, given the building put to the torch.



That is a sketch of the battle's subject matter and deployment on the walls. That relationship between the scene and the viewer expands along the lower register, where presumably anyone in attendance in the room would have sat, cross-legged on the large bench.

But at this scale, in which humans are depicted at just slightly more than half life-size, this reading is immediate and powerful, the experience immersive. Only in the early morning would nature sunlight have illuminated the room: there is no evidence that torches were ever used in the building. Given that it was probably dark inside the rooms, interpretation of specifics—a text high up and out of reach, for example—would have been very difficult. The interior bench occupies most of the floor space: individuals in the room would by and large have moved to this bench and looked back at the doorway, which, in turn, could be shaded or screened by drapes which would have been held in place by the built-in ties that survive directly alongside interior side of the doorway into Room 2. The very concepts that underpin the nineteenth-century panorama, in which the viewer stood in the midst of a world of distant peoples and places, sought to capture a sensorial experience much like that of eight-century Bonampak, a panorama of human bodies in motion.

Furthermore, as archaeologists have revealed, this very bench held within it the most important burial at Bonampak (Roach 2010), likely the bones of Yajaw Chan Muwaan himself. Knowing that, the seated elite viewers then reverently came as close as humanly possible to the body of the dead king, whose triumphant battle wrapped around behind them, an interactive experience of memory, victory, and veneration. The bench support depictions continue the experience: three bound captives, poorly preserved, are painted onto the riser of the bench, much like captives depicted at the base of stelae elsewhere. In sitting on the bench, then, the observer reenacts the victory, the same sort of permanent triumph performed on warrior stelae.

Once seated on the bench, however, the painted human panorama becomes complete, as the gaze is directed at the North Wall, the best-known scene of the entire program (Figure 3). There are 39 individuals rendered on the North Wall, one dead and eight living captives, along with one decapitated head; HF 119a, adjacent to the door frame, may also be a captive but is in very poor condition. The 10 captives and dead individuals, combined with the three captives from the bench riser yield 13, always an important Maya number.

Explicitly named in the text above him, Yajaw Chan Muwaan (HF 94) stands just off center atop the seven massive setbacks, backed by his closest kinsmen at right; at left, the highest-ranking warriors present him with the captives. For those seated on the bench, the eye focuses on the doorway: the warriors painted on either side stand at the ready to attack, if necessary. In this way, the room becomes fully operational, both a documentation of a past victory and a place for reenactment and renewal, potentially a site for affirming the political hierarchies established by the victory on the battlefield. For anyone seated on the bench, the steep inward pitch of the North Wall makes it more difficult to read the ruling elites: the eye, instead, focuses on the captive bodies, particularly HF 106, whose sprawling, sensual, dead, and damaged body along a diagonal line dominates the scene.

Miller and Brittenham (2013) argued that the single captive on the top riser, HF 105, is the same individual featured at least once in the battle, as HF 11, and can be recognized by his specific physiognomy; in this scene his pate hangs down as he raises his eyes to the ruler. But the North Wall sets up the tension among the dead and

the living: Yajaw Chan Muwaan does not meet the eyes of HF 105. The representation emphasizes that he looks straight at his lead warrior, directly in front of him. It is the artist who makes the spear visually pierce the eye of the dead captive, and who establishes that the bisection of the wall falls between these two individuals, as if to suspend the action's completion; this is a masterful deployment of human action and stasis, inviting the observer to look from one to the other, the image unresolved, and drawing the viewer into the moment. HF 105 has suffered arterial cuts to his body: blood spurts, goutts, and droplets are captured by the painter in midair, to underscore the moment and the sound of sacrifice. In both their beauty and their dramatic depiction, it is the captives who dominate the scene.

In fact, the depiction of the captives is so compelling that the viewer might neglect the warriors below and who frame the doorway. We turn to these warriors now. Unlike those on the uppermost tier, these warriors bear no captions, although their specific but hybrid animal headdresses may name them. Some can be recognized in the battle, as well: for example, HF 116 is probably HF 10, in the full skull headdress. Most wear their feather shields rolled up on their backs, out of use, a reminder of the flexibility of the defensive weapon that would have served as a bedroll when necessary for the warrior away from home. A close examination of the warriors as a group, however, reveals elements of a distinguishing identity. Those on the right carry a shield with a checkerboard trim; the ones on the left are green. In the battle itself, a single checkerboard can be spotted on HF 87; most show yellow feather trim against a reddish-brown surface, perhaps indicating animal hide. Such clearly distinguishing elements in a battle would have allowed allies to spot one another quickly in order to fall back or regroup. These rectangular feather shields are large, and in battle warriors hold them high, often to cover both face and vital organs. Feathers are strong and light, effective at repelling sharp points, and durable, as attested by their survival in sixteenth-century costume elements preserved in Europe and Mexico (Fillooy Nadal and Moreno Guzmán 2019). Although Yajaw Chan Muwaan bears an atlatl on Stela 3 at the site, confirming the knowledge of the weapon and its likely deployment at Bonampak, the principal weapon (other than a rock in hand) depicted in the paintings is the flint-tipped spear, which is regionally attested archaeologically (Aoyama 2005; Aoyama and Graham 2015). Fire, attested by archaeology (Inomata 1997; Wahl et al. 2019), can also be seen as a weapon at Bonampak. Carefully composed so many years after the victory, and seemingly with a priority to represent as many victors as possible, and in a flattering light, the Bonampak murals may only record the weaponry most prized by warriors who may have had some hand in how they were represented, and those who could still exert influence in that representation.

In this, one can see that visual conception of success on the battlefield at Bonampak is conveyed not by superior weaponry or defensive equipment unknown to the opposition. Rather, in this representation, the Bonampak lords show that the successful battle required strategy and overwhelming force, deployed with an element of surprise. From what can be gleaned from sixteenth-century sources, Maya warriors exercised such tactics and strategies against Spanish opponents over 700 years later. When European invaders recorded aspects of their experiences in battle with the Maya, one can see that the first encounters were bloody ones, with the foreigners surprised and defeated by Maya strategy and the overwhelming numbers of Maya warriors. But of these bloody



Figure 3. Bonampak, Room 2. Presentation of captives, North wall. Bonampak, Mexico, Maya, A.D. 791. Reconstruction, Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Bonampak Documentation Project, illustrated by Heather Hurst and Leonard Ashby.

battles there are no depictions, and no Maya records made within a decade of the events, unlike the Bonampak murals.

Written from a point of view designed to capture the strategic challenges of an unknown enemy, and perhaps to promote their own glorification, European accounts of Maya warfare from 1517 onward have little in common with an eighth-century visual account in which Maya battled Maya and in which the visual construction is designed to highlight great numbers of individuals, whether in text or in depiction. From the Maya's own records, we learn nothing about the actual numbers of warriors who led or proceeded in battle. The near 100 warriors of Bonampak should perhaps be construed to be "lots" or even without number. We learn something about the number of captives taken—this is a prominent feature of the shields with inscriptions on Bonampak's South Wall. But from the first Spanish encounters, there is much to learn, and resonance to seek in the practices of Bonampak and other eighth-century Maya. Can we connect the dots across 700 years?

### THE HERNÁNDEZ DE CÓRDOBA EXPEDITION

In 1517, Francisco Hernández de Córdoba captained the first sally along Yucatan that did not end in shipwreck; he led 110 Spaniards from Cuba to Mexico's Gulf Coast, making landfall on March 4 of that year. As the Spanish neared the most northeastern

reach of Quintana Roo, a region they named Cabo Catoche, 10 sea-going canoes approached them, each, Díaz (1908:14) recounts, with 40 warriors aboard. This reminds us that the Maya made their plan with the unit of 400 men, a logical count in the vigesimal system, as we know is the case for the Aztec (Hassig 1988:56). The Hernández expedition gave green and blue beads to the Maya who came aboard; Díaz (1908:15) noted that the Maya wore "cotton shirts made like jackets, and covered their persons with a narrow cloth which they call masteles..." (*mastlatl* is the Nahuatl term for loin-cloth, as Díaz would learn later); these shirts can be seen on Yaxchilan warriors, for example on Lintel 15 of the mid-eighth century. The next day 12 canoes rowed out to them, each with 30 men. Again, this is another convenient number in the vigesimal counting system: 360 equals the days of the tun, or what has been termed the "calculating" year. In short, the Maya knew to make a reconnaissance of these unfamiliar men and to keep track of their own men with standard counts.

Armed with crossbows and muskets but without horses, the European soldiers went ashore in search of fresh water, seemingly invited by the Maya to approach. Díaz (1908:16) recounts:

"We moved on in this way until we approached some brush-covered hillocks, when the Cacique began to shout and call out to some squadrons of warriors who were lying in ambush

ready to fall upon us and kill us. On hearing the Cacique's shouts, the warriors attacked us in great haste and fury and began to shoot with such skill that the first flight of arrows wounded fifteen soldiers."

Díaz (1908:16) went on:

"these warriors wore armour made of cotton reaching to the knees and carried lances and shields, bows and arrows, slings and many stones...After the flight of arrows, the warriors, with their feathered crests waving, attacked us hand to hand, and hurling their lances with all their might they did us much damage."

Nevertheless, Hernández and his men pushed through to the center of the community. There they saw the first evidence of elite Indigenous civilization, a group of three masonry houses on a plaza: "Within the houses were some small wooden chests, and in them were some other Idols, and some little discs made partly of gold but more than half of copper, and some necklaces and three diadems, and other small objects in the form of fish and others like the ducks of the country, all made of inferior gold" (Díaz 1908:17). As Clendennin (1987:8) has noted, the Spanish crowded at this discovery, and the news would drive the invasions of the next few years.

Fifteen days later Hernández's troops reached Campeche, which they dubbed Lázaro; perhaps they felt as though they were being brought back from the dead, like the Lazarus of Bethany in the Gospel of John. They made land, in search again of fresh water. While the men inspected the invaders, the "women moved about us, laughing, and with every appearance of good will" (Díaz 1908:19). Meanwhile,

...many other Indians approached us, wearing very ragged mantles [the torn cloth characteristic of penitents and captives] and carrying dry reeds, which they deposited upon the plain, and behind them came two squadrons of Indian archers in cotton armour, carrying lances and shields, slings and stones, and each captain drew up his squadron at a short distance from where we stood (Díaz 1908:19).

Then out came, from the house of idols, "[10] Indians clad in long white cotton cloaks, reaching to their feet, and with their long hair reeking with blood..." (Díaz 1908:19–20). Realizing that the "warriors who were drawn up in battle began to whistle and sound their trumpets and drums," the Spanish fled to their ships and sailed away, getting caught in a "norther" (Díaz 1908:20)—a nor'easter storm characterized by cold rain, before finally landing a few days later at Champoton, still hoping to secure fresh water. Unbeknownst to the invaders, the Maya knew, of course, like the Caribs and Tainos, how to read the signs of impending storms, whether the post-summer solstice season of hurricanes—which the Spanish had learned to avoid—or the winter season of "northers," which nevertheless took place in the drier season of winter (Schwartz 2015:7–11).

The Spaniards were filling their badly made casks with water when they were attacked by many

"...squadrons of Indians clad in cotton armor reaching to the knees, and armed with bows and arrows, lances and shields, and swords like two handed broad swords, and slings and stones and carrying the feathered crests which they are accustomed to wear. Their faces were painted black and white, and

ruddied, and they came in silence straight towards us, as though they came in peace..." (Díaz 1908:22).

In seeming response to Maya queries,

"we replied that we did come from the direction of the sunrise. We were at our wits end considering the matter and wondering what the words were which the Indians called out to us for they were the same as those used by the people of [Campeche], but we never made out what it was that they said" (Díaz 1908:22).

Once again, unbeknownst to the invaders, the Maya were keeping a close watch of them, and the Maya attacked with overwhelming force.

At Champoton (referred to also as Potonchan), the Spanish made camp on land:

While we were keeping watch during the night we heard a great squadron of Indian warriors approaching from the town and from the farms, and we knew well that their assembly boded us no good...On the other hand we could see that there were about two hundred Indians to every one of us...As soon as it was daylight we could see, coming along the coast, many more Indian warriors with their banners raised, and with feathered crests and drums, and they joined those warriors who had assembled the night before...they surrounded us on all sides and poured in such showers of arrows and darts, and stones thrown from their slings that over [80] of us soldiers were wounded, and they attacked us from hand to hand, some with lances and the others shooting arrows, and others with two-handed knife edged swords, and they brought us to a bad pass..." (Díaz 1908:23–24).

While the battle was raging, "the Indians called to one another in their language 'al Calachuni, Calachuni,' which means 'let us attack the Captain and kill him,' and 10 times they wounded him with their arrows...two of [the soldiers] were carried off alive, one named Alonzo Boto, and the other an old Portuguese man." The Spanish fled to their boats, with much loud cry and hissing of the Maya in pursuit, nearly sinking the boats altogether (Díaz 1908:25). The actual battle lasted only about an hour, according to Díaz, with heavy casualties, and Hernández de Córdoba himself died shortly after returning to Cuba.

What had the Maya learned from this experience? They demonstrated that massive and overwhelming force was a successful technique, especially when they could lure the Spanish well away from their ships, and especially when the Spanish ventured into architectural settings. They learned that the Spanish would seize on the flash of gold, and indeed, this would send reverberations across Cuba and beyond within a few months. The Maya would have paid close attention to the banners and any other visual signatures of the Spanish ships. In close battle, they would have learned that each European soldier was armed, but usually acting as an individual, and that this European strategy left the invaders vulnerable to the orchestrated and coordinated attack that the Maya warriors could execute. We should assume that this knowledge was quickly shared far and wide. That Indigenous exchanges were more widespread than usually recognized can be attested by archaeological deposits (Finamore and Houston 2010) and later shared knowledge (Doyle 2019), much of which became fractured through competing colonial occupations.



In subsequent encounters, the Maya executed on the knowledge of 1517: guard sources of water, lure the enemy into an ambush, and respond with overwhelming and thus unstoppable force, no matter what the cost in terms of drawing off warriors from other regions. Juan de Grijalva, the second invader to engage the Maya, had learned their practice, and he, too, returned to Cuba. Once again, the Maya strategy worked.

The 1519 expedition under Hernan Cortés is much better known but provides few new details of Maya warfare upon their landing in Cozumel in February. The Spanish were well aware that numbers could be quickly roused, as they were in Tabasco, when one of Cortés's captains found himself surrounded on all sides by warriors, and where Indigenous messengers ran to neighboring towns, to call for all hands to come to battle (Díaz 1908:114). As the battle renewed the next day, we learn that the warriors “wore great feather crests and they carried drums and trumpets, and their faces were coloured black and white, and they were armed with large bows and arrows, lances and shields and swords shaped like our two-handed swords, and many slings and stones and fire-hardened javelins, and all wore quilted cotton armor” (Díaz 1908:118). In this same rendering of the battle, Díaz recounts the role of the horses: they changed the dynamics of battle forever.

The words of Bernal Díaz provide additional insights into the tactics of Maya warfare. The Maya clearly sought to kill the Spanish on the battlefield, and occasionally to capture them: a high-ranking individual, the Halach Winik (“calachhuni” in Díaz’s recollection) would have been a valuable prize (see Earley [2023]). The Spanish, too, had capture on their minds, having initially planned to take slaves on the Hernández expedition. The Maya archers took aim from some distance, underscoring the value of maiming the enemy out of reach of hand-to-hand combat. If necessary, the Maya would attempt to trap and even to incinerate their enemy, a desperate tactic planned near the K’iche’ capital of Uxatlan, Guatemala, the practice at Bonampak; Mayapan, presumably the last capital city of Yucatan, was burned in its destruction. The squadron—the *escuadrón*, in Spanish—is clearly recognized by Díaz, notable for separate crests, banners, leadership, and organization, perhaps in the “squared” formation from which the word is derived. That this was present centuries earlier at Bonampak can now be recognized: as we have seen, the shields carried in the battle are specifically trimmed with red, green, or checkerboard patterns. Those with the checkerboard stand together in Room 2, rendered together and exhibiting the friendly gestures of teammates. One of the three parasols is also marked with a matching black-and-white pattern.

What the Spanish invaders sought in their journeys along the shores of Yucatan, in addition to the knowledge gained by the

reconnaissance itself, was a source of fresh water. It may well be that fresh water sources along the coast were loci of habitual conflict, scarce as they were. A practiced Maya ability to defend those sources may have contributed to keeping the Mexica at bay in the years before the Spanish began their assaults. The Spanish had not yet discovered the cenote, or sinkhole, often keenly protected in water-deprived Yucatan; at Mayapan, at least 40 cenotes were protected by city walls (Masson and Peraza Lope 2015). At Tulum, Structure 35 protects the cenote underneath; the water source, essentially built into the wall, probably determined the positioning of the wall for the entirely fortified site (Lothrop 1924: 109–110; Russell 2013). Chuchiak (2021) has recently described the value of proprietary sources of water, principally but not exclusively cenotes, in colonial Yucatan. As Martin (2020:280) has recently reminded students of the Maya, the first Maya cities to fail late in the eighth century (as marked by the cessation of inscriptions) are along the western waterways, suggesting the possibility that offensive and defensive strategy alike involved tactics related to water access. Additionally, the Maya would have learned to prepare for the seasonal arrival of foreigners, who traveled from Cuba in February, March, and February annually in 1517, 1518, and 1519.

Furthermore, it has been a commonplace that the reason the Mexica, or Aztecs, did not conquer the Maya before the Spanish invasion was that the fractured Maya political system had no central authority to bring to heel. In fact, there is no reason to believe that the tactics executed against the Europeans were different from those used by the Maya in 1500 or 1480. Good scouting combined with overwhelming force and protection of water sources may have been the rule in fending off central Mexico for centuries. Although the most obvious resources that Maya polities fought over in eighth century were foodstuffs, wood, lime, salt, and labor, access to fresh water may well have been of increasing value by the time of the Bonampak paintings, when the century-long drought may have settled in (Iannone 2014).

The twenty-first century knows how both these histories turn out. The outcome of the Spanish invasion was Spanish victory and conquest, at a terrible cost of Maya life and culture. At Bonampak, the sense of suspended animation in Room 2, both in the battle ongoing and in the presentation of bleeding captives, leaves the Bonampak story visually unresolved. But the outcome of the Bonampak victory is eventual loss, and probably defeat in battle, of the Bonampak lords themselves. The triumph painted on the walls may well have turned to defeat even as artists were still at work: the paintings were not completed—in every room there are unpainted captions, reserved sections framed of unpainted white wall—as if waiting for a last word that never came.

## RESUMEN

El espectador moderno busca leer las pinturas de Bonampak como expresión visual de textos lacónicos, ventanas a la vida de las familias reales y las élites asistentes. Los registros epigráficos, generalmente en forma de inscripciones del registro monumental, y con mayor frecuencia ejecutados en piedra, a menudo se eliminan del trabajo más grande para que los académicos se concentren en el registro escrito. Pero los textos suelen existir en un contexto, y en ninguna parte esto es más claro que en Bonampak, en las pinturas conservadas en la Estructura 1. Este artículo busca abordar tanto esta cuestión de texto e imagen, como también corregir la cuestión centrándose en aspectos

de las pinturas de Bonampak que rara vez se consideran, especialmente el despliegue de individuos en las cuatro paredes de la Sala 2.

Se presta atención a la pintura de batalla de la Sala 2, y se observa que la batalla se puede leer como un registro superior e inferior, dividido por el resorte de la bóveda física aproximadamente a la mitad del Muro Sur. Con al menos cuarenta y seis individuos pintados en su superficie, el Muro Sur presenta una complejidad notable; múltiples lanzas llegan a una figura en particular en la pintura, cuyo cuerpo parece estar cayendo a través de una multitud de otros cuerpos, dando una sensación abrumadora de la cantidad de guerreros en

la escena. Debido a que es la pared larga que uno ve directamente al entrar, es la pared más importante de la batalla. Los escudos de guerreros llevan ambas inscripciones de triunfo personal, pero también revelan evidencia de equipos codificados por colores. La concepción visual del éxito en el campo de batalla de Bonampak no se transmite por armamento superior o equipo defensivo desconocido para la oposición: en esta representación, los señores de Bonampak muestran que la batalla exitosa requería estrategia y fuerza abrumadora, desplegada con un elemento de sorpresa.

Yajaw Chan Muwaan, el rey de Bonampak, domina la batalla del Muro Sur y la presentación de los cautivos directamente al otro lado de

la habitación, en el Muro Norte. Para los que están sentados en el banco, la mirada se centra en la entrada del Muro Norte y la sala se convierte en un lugar de recreación y renovación, potencialmente un sitio para afirmar las jerarquías políticas establecidas por la victoria en el campo de batalla.

Luego, el ensayo analiza las prácticas documentadas para los guerreros mayas durante las oleadas de invasión española, donde la fuerza abrumadora y el despliegue estratégico de hombres armados, especialmente en lo que los invasores llamaban “escuadrones,” fueron efectivamente disuasivos hasta que los españoles pudieron introducir el caballo en 1519.

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