

New study explores role of theater in Maya political organization

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Stela from Copán, Honduras, that depicts the ruler with an elaborate headdress and ornaments. Credit: Courtesy Takeshi Inomata

Magnificent stone sculptures of Classic Maya culture (AD 250-900) have long fascinated archaeologists and the general public alike. But what did the scenes depicted in these monuments mean in their society? In an article to appear in the October 2006 issue *Current Anthropology*,

Takeshi Inomata (University of Arizona) argues that these images commonly show acts of public performance conducted by rulers, revealing the prominent role which state theater played in Maya political organization.

Analyzing plazas where many stone monuments are placed, Inomata suggests that extensive gathering places were a crucial concern in Maya city planning. The spaces were designed to accommodate all of, or a substantial part of, the entire kingdom's population.

Wearing ostentatious feathered headdresses and elaborate costumes, Maya kings danced in these large plazas in front of a large audience. These mass spectacles were occasions in which the general populace shared the experience of witnessing rulers engaged in culturally charged ritual performances, explains Inomata. However, this also meant that rulers were under constant evaluation by their subjects.

"Large-scale theatrical events gave physical reality to a community and helped to ground unstable community identities in tangible forms through the use of symbolic acts and objects," Inomata writes. "The centrality of rulers in communal events suggests that the identities of a Maya community revolved around the images of supreme political leaders. ... Large gatherings also gave the elite an opportunity to impose their ideologies and cultural values on the rest of society through performances."

Source: University of Chicago

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