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External Influences on the Preclassic Maya

As one of the greatest ancient Mesoamerican civilizations, the ancient Maya civilization is noted for its fully developed writing system, art, architecture, mathematics, calendar, and unique culture. Without a doubt, its achievements are so impressive that make it stand out from other ancient Mesoamerican civilizations. However, the ancient Maya civilization did not emerge and develop in isolation. Instead, the greatness of the Maya civilization is the consequence of the combination of the Maya local development and its interregional interactions. The early stage of the Maya civilization, the Preclassic Maya, essentially borrowed the concepts of hierarchical society, divine rulership, religious beliefs, and accompanying material symbols devised by other groups through its interaction with other contemporary Mesoamerican civilizations such as Olmec, Epi-Olmec, and Izapan cultures.

As one of the most significant materials for the Preclassic Maya, the well-developed pottery from the Preclassic Maya lowlands was clearly not invented by the Preclassic Maya itself. Instead, the early ceramics were possibly introduced from Maya's west neighbor –the Olmec civilization, which was the first civilization produced pottery in southeastern Mesoamerica. Cunil pottery in the Belize River Valley and around Holmul in eastern Peten represents the earliest pottery in the Maya lowlands, dating to 1,200 to 900 BC (Houston2009: 67). Regarding color, both the earliest Olmec Barra ceramics and Cunil pottery share the common use of dull red slips. Some of Cunil vessels even exhibit similar designs like *k'an*

crosses, flame eyebrows, and pointed motifs with Olmec pottery. Besides, LeRoy Joesink-Mandeville has suggested that the later Nabanche ceramics in the northern lowlands have more similarities with the pottery of the Olmec area than with the other Preclassic Maya lowlands. This discovery probably indicates that immigrants from other areas, especially the Gulf Coast Olmec area, brought their pottery and spread the corresponding ceramic technologies to the Preclassic Maya lowlands. However, many archaeologists believe that this is a bold guess because there is little direct evidence for such immigrations. J. E. Clark and David Cheetham speculated a more compromised theory based on the fact that no clear antecedents of early Maya lowland ceramics are found in the areas. They suggested that early Maya adopted new ceramic technologies from their neighbors but also applied the styles that shown on local perishable containers (Houston 2009: 75). Nevertheless, the external influence on the Preclassic Maya ceramic development is recognized by the majority, and it played such a significant role in the emergence of early Maya civilization as ceramics provided the Maya a necessary means of storage for long term sediment and served for ritual practices.

The appearance of social inequality in the Preclassic Maya civilization soon followed the adoption to pottery and the establishment of sedentary communities under the external influence. An important evidence of the early hereditary inequality is the Structure B-IV ioa-sub at Cahal Pech, Belize. This was a large structure that was placed on a high plastered floor with painted wall while other surrounding buildings were on lower platforms with earth floors. To perform such a collaborative work of construction, the presence of leaders was much needed so that the labor and the resources could be organized well. Also, this structure was also decorated with a lot of imported goods, such as jade, marine shells, and obsidian, which were likely from the Gulf Coast Olmec and Pacific Coast area (Houston 2009: 75-76). Notice that during the same period,

San Lorenzo, an Olmec site, was in power and had a complex political system involving control of the labor force and natural resources (Lecture Notes 9/6). For a relatively small site like Cahal Pech, leaders must have been selected to negotiate with the elites from the powerful San Lorenzo to obtain the imported goods they needed for construction. Through this asymmetrical interactions, the occupants lived in Cahal Pech learned and possibly borrowed the Olmec elite ideology to their society, which enhanced the existing the hereditary inequality at Cahal Pech. Other similar architecture evidence of social inequality could also be found in the Maya lowlands, but there was no overt expression of central political power in forms of tombs and monuments. Similarly, evidence of apparent social inequality in residences, burials, and stone monuments are scarce in the Middle Preclassic Chiapas highlands as well (Houston 2009: 86). Therefore, a reasonable speculation is that the Preclassic Maya had similar practices with their neighbors to the west under their influence.

The formation of the idea of kingship and religious beliefs was necessary with the emergence of the social inequality, and many pieces of evidence show that these political and religious ideology developments in the Preclassic Maya lowlands were also influenced by other neighboring civilizations. One notable evidence is seen in the cruciform caches at Ceibal and Cival. Many greenstone celts and Real-Xe ceramics were buried under the ground with the specific arrangement. Similar caches with greenstone celts that were involved with ritual offerings have been found at La Venta, San Isidro, and Chiapas. In La Venta Offering 4, celts with some figurines were placed vertically and orientated towards the middle, which depicts the Olmec ideology of kingship that the king represents the center of the universe (Houston 2009: 83). The specific arrangement of the cache indicates that the occupants of Ceibal and Cival shared certain religious beliefs with those of the Olmec areas and Chiapas highlands. Besides,

the layout of the Preclassic Ceibal central area is also evocative. The plazas and large platforms were around an E-Group complex along the north-south axis. This arrangement is highly similar to centers in highland Chiapas and represents an idea that occupants' religious and secular lives are bonded to the centers of sites. There is a cruciform cache with greenstone celts found in the E-Group plaza, which indicates that architecture layout in Ceibal was not casually arranged, but, instead, served for ritual practices and religious ideas paralleling to those of Chiapas and Olmec (Houston 2009: 83). Many Preclassic Maya sculptures and stela were associated with the ideology of kingship, and some of them were found to have Olmec style representations. The Sculptures on Substructure IIc-1 at Calakmul and Jaguar Paw Temple at El Mirador have down jaw facial feature, which was commonly found on Olmec masks (Lecture Notes 9/8). Also, Nakbe Stela 1 and Stela 2 both depicts figures in elaborate Olmec style attire and with facial features resembling those of Olmec imagery (Houston 2009: 90).

The most spectacular archaeological recent finds are the murals at San Bartolo in northeastern Peten. The murals strongly indicate a close relation between the Preclassic Maya and other contemporary civilizations in terms of the ideology of divine kingship and associated religious beliefs. The north wall shows a Preclassic Maya version of Maize God, which was associated with the divine kingship as maize was the major subsistence resource for the Preclassic Maya and represented the stability, wealth, and power. This Maize God shares similar facial features with the Olmec Maize God mask from Dumbarton Oaks that they both have down jaw and upturned upper lips (Lecture Notes 9/8). This similarities suggest that the Preclassic Maya probably borrowed the ideology and the appearance of the Maize God from Olmec civilization.

The west wall is 9.4 meters long and depicts the scenes of sacrifices offering and the mythic cycle of the Maize God. On the left part of the west wall, there are four similar scenes: one of the Hero Twins gives an offering of a fish, a deer, a turkey, and flowers, and engages bloodletting in front of a bird monster standing on a tree in each different section. This supernatural bird is also known as the Principal Bird Deity, the monster beaten by the Hero Twins in the Maya myths, and exhibits a sinuous cranium similar to the other portrayals of the Principal Bird Deity found at Izapa and Olmec areas. Specifically, a jade bloodletter and incised obsidian polyhedral core excavated at La Venta have the Principal Bird Deity with similar curving cranium as well as the long, down-curving break. The La Venta examples also have a capping feather crest, a trait identified on the San Bartolo west wall bird (Taube 2010: 34-38). Moreover, the tree that the Principal Bird Deity stands on is *axis mundi,* the world tree in Izapan culture, and the Stela 5 and 25 of Izapa portray scenes that bear strong affinities to the tree images of San Bartolo west wall. The Stela 5 has a detailed scene which the world tree is in the middle and be surrounded by many other deities, and the world tree in the Stela 25 is relatively on the left transformed from a crocodile, and there is the Principal Bird Deity above the tree and a male on the right. Both imageries suggest an idea of the world tree being the center of the universe and an associated worship, which also have been seen on the San Bartolo west wall (Lecture Notes 9/8). The fourth offering scene from the left is little different from the first threes. Besides the Principal Bird Deity standing on the world tree in the middle of the scene, there is another Principal Bird Deity to the north of the tree, diving from a cleft skyband in a swirl of smoke and cloud. For this scene, Izapa Stela 2 is a great parallel which sketches the Principal Bird Deity diving to his ground tree, believed to be the world tree, and been worshiped by the Hero Twin on two sides (Taube 2010: 42-44). Through the right part, it is clear that the

Preclassic Maya was influenced by Olmec and Izapan culture for the ideology attached to the Principal Bird Deity and the world tree.

Furthermore, on the right part of the west wall, the Maize God also unsurprisingly displays Olmec features. For example, the infant held by an unidentified figure is, without doubt, the baby Maize God. His sinuously curved cranium, slanted eyes, down jaw, and projecting upper lips are all Maize God features in Olmec style. Even though the lower part of the body of this baby Maize God is missing, depending on similar Olmec portray of baby Maize God there is a speculation that he might have a crossed-banded on his belt and (Taube 2010: 70-71). The rightmost scene of the west wall is a scaffold accession of a human king, which might be a historical event. The amazing find is that the final glyph in the accompanying text is clearly the sign of *ajaw*, which means "king." Apparently, the Preclassic Maya not only embed the ideology of kingship into its art but also coded it into its writing. Correspondingly, archaeologists have found the glyph that also represents similar meaning of "king" in an early writing system of Epi-Olmec, which at its time has complex political system and developed kingship (Lecture Notes 9/8). It's unclear that whether the occupants of San Bartolo borrowed the sign of "king" from Epi-Olmec writing, it's highly suggestive that they adopted to the usage of embedded ideology of kingship into writing, and in a same way to literally justify the kingship.

As one of the ancient Mesoamerican civilization, perhaps the most spectacular one, the Maya civilization did not develop in isolation in the Preclassic period. As what the evidence found at San Bartolo and other Maya lowland sites support, the Preclassic Maya was heavily influenced by its neighboring civilizations like Olmec, Epi-Olmec, and Izapa regarding hierarchical society, kingship, and religion. Therefore, it is fair to conclude that the development

of the Preclassic Maya is accompanied by a complex interplay between internal processes and external influences.

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