

DANCE OF THE DWARVES

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Among the many unusual figures depicted on Mayan funerary vessels are ones that can easily be missed or taken for granted. Every figure is a mystery to some extent, and we have few names for the lords and Gods depicted. In many cases it is unclear what purpose certain figures serve and what their significance is. Along this same thread, figures that can be noted but taken for granted are the elusive dwarves depicted on several funerary vessels. Who are these little people, and what role do they play in the Mayan world?

An important clue is gained from Houston (1992) when he quotes Taube (1980) that dwarves may be associated with “carnality, filth, or earth” (p. 527). Houston also suggests that dwarves seem to be in vessel scenes that are near katun or hotun endings. If dwarves are associated with the ending of time cycles, this may in fact be evidence for them representing earth, since the earth itself is used in cycles for agriculture. Houston also mentions that dwarves may hold some significance in Mayan society due to the frequency that they occur. A further identity is suggested for dwarves; Houston quotes Vasquez (1980) that elements of the Mayan glyphs in association with dwarves “appear to spell ‘goblin, fright’ in Yucatan Maya” (p. 529).

Michael Coe (1978) contends that two dancers who often appear on vases are in fact the Hero Twins. One such vase, Princeton 15 (p. 102), depicts two lords that each have a dwarf facing them. One dwarf is thin and hunch backed, the other plump and healthy looking. If, as Houston discusses, dwarves are associated with the earth, it would seem logical that they would dance with or have a close association with the Hero Twins. The animated Popul Vuh (Amlin, no date available) demonstrates that the Hero Twins themselves represent corn; the dwarves may represent the earth that corn grows from. As to why one dwarf is thin and deformed and the other one quite plump, the earth may have more than one aspect to its persona as so many other personalities do in Mayan myth.

Perhaps the plump dwarf represents the earth as it is when it is very fertile, when a fresh crop of corn is planted after a rested piece of land is cleared. The

thin dwarf would then be the earth after it is depleted of nutrients. The thin dwarf is also hunchbacked, this could be another association with the earth if the dwarf is actually not only “depleted” but aged, in a similar manner that aged and used soil would be crippled in the sense of being horticulturally useless. Another vase, Princeton 14 (p. 94), is very similar to Princeton 15 with the exception that a third lord is depicted, with a third dwarf that is not as plump as the dwarf in 15, and yet not as thin as the deformed dwarf. This could be a third personality, one resting somewhere in a cycle between the earlier two.

A nearly identical scene to the one depicted in Princeton 15 exists on a vase labeled MSII27 by Reents-Budet (1994) and photographed by Kerr. Unfortunately, a large portion of the scene on the right has not survived the passage of time, but the scene on the left clearly depicts a lord dancing with a plump dwarf, almost identical to Princeton 15. The scene that is lost on the right still seems to depict a headdress in the appropriate locations to where another lord and dwarf could have been situated. If this is the case, then it is clear that this particular scene is a very important reoccurring mythological event, since two more nearly identical renditions of this scene exist in Kerr’s (1981) photos of vases File No. 1837 and File No. 3400 with two figures dancing in front of dwarves; again, there is a plump dwarf on the left and a thin one on the right in each vase scene. If these two lords, as Coe believes, are the Hero Twins then their intimate relationship with the dwarves cannot be ignored.

A further vase photographed by Kerr (1989), File No. 4113, may also give us a clearer view of the dwarves association with the earth. A young lord sits with a dwarf sitting behind him, leaning towards him on the left and wearing a larger, more elaborate headdress than the lord himself and the lord gestures at a jar that has the face of a man on it. The jar appears to be completely full, with corn poking over its edge. Could the jar and the lord depict the Hero Twins? If so, this depiction of a bountiful supply of corn, along with the plump dwarf behind him, may indicate that the dwarf has given his blessing or is somehow partnered with, and approving of, the corn and the Hero Twins. The fact that he is plump may suggest that further bounty is ahead, since the fertility of the earth is still high if his degree of obesity is any indicator of fertility or reserves that the soil still possesses.

Another interesting depiction of our little friends occurs in figure 31b by Robicsek and Hales (1982). In this depiction, a lord lays dead on an altar. “The event occurs in the plaza of a twin palace complex” (p. 28). A monster is eating the lord being sacrificed, as another lord seems to be watching from a

throne on the left. Interestingly, Robicsek and Hales only mention the two dwarves that sit in a chamber under the observing lord in passing. This scene seems very significant because there is a throne on the right side with a young man sitting in it; he seems restrained behind a low barrier. There is a chamber below this throne as well, which depicts several mice in it. Could the person being sacrificed and the young man on the right be the Hero Twins again? The animated Popul Vuh associates mice with the Hero Twins. According to Robicsek and Hales, the date depicted on this vase places it at September 1, 775 A.D. The creature devouring one of the figures could represent the harvest or sacrifice of corn. If a harvest usually occurs around the month in the date depicted, this would make that scenario more likely. If these circumstances are accepted, then the dwarves below the observer on the right could represent the earth accepting the sacrifice. If the mice here are associated with the Hero Twins, then the anthropomorphic mouse holding forth a jar at the steps of the throne to the left could also represent an offering of the twin being sacrificed. In any event, the dwarves beneath the altar on the left may indeed be associated with the earth and filth since in actuality there would be debris and other middin material in the same location below platform mounds and other structures as filler. This is a compelling parallel.

The scenario above could shed light into why, as Houston mentions, the dwarves are associated with “carnality, filth, and the earth” as well as “goblin, fright” (p 527, 529). The scene on the vase may very well depict the sacrifice of corn that occurs as rats or mice take a share at each crop. That may not shed as much light on the identity of the lord that is overlooking the scene, but the dwarves that I am concerned with here would then be closely associated with the mice. The dwarves may be filthy due to their relationship with the mice in addition to them dwelling among middin material, and scary because they consume the Hero Twins through the offering to them made by the mice. The dwarves consume that which is also the very thing they nourish.

Perhaps another reason the dwarves are frightening is because they seem to hold a peculiar position between the living world and the Underworld. The dwarves are clearly alive, yet as representing the earth they consume the dead. They give and take in a balance. The earth can (in a particular location) become depleted so that crops cannot grow, but with rest that same plot of land is rejuvenated. This can account for the duality of the thin, twisted dwarf and the plump, healthy dwarf that exists in one place simultaneously.

In File No. 1560 by Kerr (1981) a plump dwarf and a hunchbacked dwarf are helping steal god L's headdress, according to Houston (1992). According to

Kerr (1989) this same scene is that of the resurrected Hun Hunaphu, and the dwarf (only the plump one is mentioned) is helping to steal the garments of the lords of the underworld. While neither of the two mentioned references address the crippled figure on the left, it seems clear when compared to other occurrences of the thin dwarf that this is the same figure. It cannot be certain exactly what the significance of this scene is, but the duality of the dwarves and their status of being not of the underworld or the living world seems somewhat clearer since they seem to be defying the lords of the underworld.

There are several vessels that depict a dwarf in the presence of lords. Kerr's (1981) photo File No. 532 depicts a dwarf standing before two groups of people, perhaps warriors, facing each other. The exact purpose of the dwarf is unclear, but his position in the middle might indicate a role of mediator or judge. He is facing the group on the left, so he may also be sided with the group on the right that seems to be addressing the other group.

The role that the dwarf has in Kerr's photo File No. 1453 is also obscure. He is on a throne facing a lord; a figure on the far left may be producing an offering. Two more dwarves are present at what appears to be offerings made to a lord in Kerr's photo, File No. 1498. In this depiction one dwarf is seated in the back of the line of people bringing offerings to a lord standing on the other dwarf. In all of these cases it is unclear what role the dwarves play. However, the fact that they seem to be frequently present during the offering of goods to lords may indicate that the dwarves are closely tied in to the goods themselves. Their presence may in some way account for approval or acknowledgement of the goods that are nurtured in the earth.

The frequent appearance of dwarves on vessels suggests their importance in Mayan myth. The duality of the dwarves is interacting in a dance with the Hero Twins on four of the vessels mentioned above. This number of occurrences surely must demonstrate that the event being depicted is one of significance to the Maya. If the dwarves are associated with the earth, as Houston discusses, and the two figures are in fact the Hero Twins, as Coe suggests, then it seems logical that the dwarves represent the interaction of the corn crop with the land. The dwarves have at least two distinct aspects. One aspect is a plump, fertile condition and the other a thin, used up and perhaps decrepit or aged condition. If dwarves appear at the end of certain time cycles, as Houston suggests, perhaps this reflects in some way the cycles associated with the clearing of a field and crop growth of one cycle, and the rest period of the land before it is reused as the second cycle, each corresponding to the plump and thin dwarf respectively. The dance between the Hero Twins and

the dwarves could represent the growth cycle of corn and its interrelationship with the fertility cycle of the earth.

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