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Abstract

Orthodox analytical approaches to analyses of Maya stelae—monuments that celebrate Maya kings visually and in hieroglyphic texts (see fig. 1)—proceed as though each contains two distinct and only vaguely related elements: the text and the accompanying imagery. These features are most often conceptualized, analyzed, and interpreted separately in a methodological framework that has created a widely shared perspective in which text and context have become thoroughly divorced from each other but reified as distinct constituent elements. Epigraphic and art historical approaches to Maya monuments thus operate independently from one another, and they are rarely well integrated with archaeological analyses. One result of this separation is that studies of Maya monumental texts have become so intertwined with the practice of epigraphy that they are conceptualized in narrowly linguistic terms. This affords linguistic texts a privileged status disproportional to their total contributions to the textual whole and promotes a narrow understanding of how Maya texts should be read. This paper illustrates the problematic nature of this orthodoxy through an analysis of Copán's Stela J (see fig. 2), showing how Maya stelae were polyvocal, designed to be read in multiple ways.

Fig. 1:
Stela H, Copán, depicting Waxaklajun Ub'aah K'awil

1. Copán and Stela J

From the 5th through the 8th centuries AD, Copán was the capital of a sub-stantial regional state near the eastern edge of the Maya world (see fig. 3) (ANDREWS/FASH 2005; FASH 2001). Stela J stands on the eastern side of the

city's main plaza, the civic core of the polity. It was erected by Waxaklajun Ub'aah K'awil (see fig. 1), more colloquially known as 18 Rabbit, who reigned from AD 695–738 as the 13th in a line of succession from the 5th century founder, Yax K'uk' Mo (MARTIN/GRUBE 2008). The monument was one of the earliest components of a long-term building program that included the first version of the Hieroglyphic Stairway on temple 26, two stages of the ballcourt, and seven other stelae (NEWSOME 2001; SCHELE/MATHEWS 1998). Many of 18 Rabbit's buildings were extensively remodeled, but the array of stelae he commissioned to present his public personae remained in place and unaltered through the reigns of at least three succeeding kings; they were still standing when the kingdom collapsed in the early 9th century.

Stela J was the first of 18 Rabbit's stelae and—though it has the most thorough blend of imagery and text—it is the only one that does not bear his portrait. The eastern face of the monument (see fig. 2), which is oriented away from the plaza and towards the residential zone of Las Sepulturas, is completely covered by a long hieroglyphic text. The layout is not the standard paired-column format but instead consists of a series of glyphs laid out in a mat pattern. The west face of the stela also bears a hieroglyphic text (see fig. 4). This text, like the one on the eastern face, lacks the standard paired-column format and instead consists of several short columns and rows of hieroglyphs that frame a stylized face.

Fig. 2:
Stela J, Copán, east face

Fig. 3:
Maya world

The narrow north and south sides of Stela J are both carved with hieroglyphic texts in the standard paired-column form. The hieroglyphs used in these side texts are organized into spatially-demarcated sets of four: every set of four sequential glyphs is spatially set off from the set that follows it so that the two columns seem to combine into a single column of squares, each consisting of two rows and two columns of glyphs. No imagery accompanies the side texts, though they are framed by bands that set them off from the rest of the stela. These same bands bleed onto the eastern and western faces of the monument, however, so that they simultaneously demarcate each textual unit (including the sides) while also linking them together into a cohesive textual whole. The text on the north and south sides is continuous and refers to rituals and prophecies associated with a series of consecutive period endings, apparently after the date Stela J was dedicated. This passage is one of the few texts in the Maya corpus to refer explicitly to the future. The side texts are not considered further because in the absence of imagery, it is not possible to contrast denotative and connotative readings.

Stela J was accompanied by a separate sculptural element often interpreted as a kind of cap (see fig. 5). This feature is apparently unique in the corpus of Maya stelae. It has a broad base with sloping sides topped with a trapezoidal form and resembles a house roof in form. One side of the trapezoidal form is carved with a three-dimensional mask or face framed by lines radiating outwards from its center. The opposite side of the trapezoid is embellished with a crossed band within a cartouche similarly framed (see fig. 6).

Fig. 4:
Stela J, Copán, west face

2. Narrow Textual Reading

The style of reading most familiar to academics is based on the extraction of linguistic information from the medium of written texts. Such narrow readings involve »specialized, high-speed, automated lexical access« prompted by the interpretation of [visual] signs as described by Smith (2008: 10) and can occur on either a personal, individual or a social scale. This kind of denotative reading is based entirely on linguistic information; consequently, it privileges the linguistic content denoted by signs and sign combinations but does not consider metalinguistic components of a text's semantics. Maya hieroglyphs encode linguistic information; they stand for referents in the language of the text and thus denote specific meanings that can be used alone or in combination to express linguistic content. Although the issue of which language or languages is represented in Maya inscriptions is not fully resolved and beyond the scope of the present analysis, it is important to note that—regardless of the language being recorded—the denotative referents of the

signs (hieroglyphs) are directly encoded and not filtered through another medium of interpretation. The grammar that is required for interpretation of these signs is primarily a linguistic grammar, though it must be supplemented by knowledge of the script itself if the meaning is to be fully understood.

Standard analytical approaches to Stela J are denotative, focusing on narrowly linguistic epigraphic interpretations of its hieroglyphic texts. A complete decipherment of the texts found on the monument is not yet possible for several reasons: parts of the monument are heavily eroded; many of the glyph forms are unusual; and the syntax is peculiar. Enough remains legible and interpretable, however, to warrant a summary reading, and the following sections offer a partial denotative reading of the east and west faces of Stela J. The hieroglyphs comprising the text will be identified by location numbers as illustrated in figure 7.

Fig. 5:
Stela J cap, Copán, west side

2.1 East Face

The text on the east face of Stela J (see fig. 2) contains forty-eight distinct glyph blocks, many of which are uninterpretable due to heavy erosion, and is written so that the hieroglyphs appear as though they were painted on strips woven into a mat pattern. The text, (see fig. 7) which begins near the upper right-hand corner of the stela, has four sections. The first records the date on which the monument was dedicated (9.13.10.0.0 in the Maya Long Count, equivalent to 24 January AD 702) and the ritual activity performed by 18 Rabbit to celebrate the midpoint of K'atun 13 (i.e., the day that fell exactly midway between 9.13.0.0.0 and 9.14.0.0.0). The text then refers to an important round date—9.0.0.0.0, the turn of the B'ak'tun on 9 December AD 435—nearly three centuries in the past and to the taking of office by the dynastic founder Yax K'uk' Mo. The third section moves forward in time to record the accession of K'ahk' Uti' Witz' K'awiil, 18 Rabbit's predecessor on the throne on 9.9.14.17.5, 6 February AD 628. The final passage refers to 18 Rabbit's own accession on 9.13.3.6.8, 7 July AD 695.

A denotative reading of this text reveals a strong emphasis on calendrical information. It begins with an Initial Series Introducing Glyph (glyph 1), which marks the beginning of a date in the distinctive Maya Long Count calendar. The ISIG contains, in normal fashion, a glyph naming the patron deity of the solar year month in which the date falls; surviving detail is consistent

Fig. 6:
Stela J cap, Copán, east side

with the expected patron of Kumk'u. The Long Count date occupies the next five blocks (glyphs 2–6). It can be read as 9 B'ak'tuns, 13 K'atuns, 10 Tuns, 0 Winals, 0 K'ins—conventionally transcribed 9.13.10.0.0.—which implies that a Calendar Round date of 7 Ahau in the Ritual Almanac and 3 Kumk'u in the Solar Year should follow. Glyph 7 is badly eroded, but what remains is consistent with the expected 7 Ahau. Glyphs 8–12 name G9 as the current deity in a cycle of nine divinities known as the ›Lords of the Night‹, provide information about the phase of the moon, and end with the expected 3 Kumk'u, Solar Year day. Glyphs 13–17 comprise a rare example of the even more esoteric Maya calendar cycle consisting of dates spaced at intervals of 819 days. The clause specifies the date in this set that falls just before the dedication date, along with its associated deities, world directions, and colors. The relevance of the divinatory associations of the ›819-day station‹ to the primary date is very poorly understood, but it is clear that all of the text to this point serves to detail the celestial and augural properties of the key 9.13.10.0.0 date.

Glyphs 18 and 19 comprise a Distance Number, specifying the interval (13 K'atuns and 10 Tuns) that had elapsed since the end of the last B'ak'tun, 9.0.0.0.0, when Yax K'uk' Mo', the founder, was involved in some kind of accession ceremony (glyphs 20–21). After an opaque and only partly preserved section (glyphs 22–30) that may describe additional activities of the founder at this time and specify a Distance Number, the text refers to the accession of 18 Rabbit's predecessor, K'ahk' Uti' Witz' K'awiil on 9.9.14.17.5, 6 February AD 628 (glyps 34–38). The final section begins with a Distance Number (glyphs 39–41) connecting the dedication date of Stela J to the accession of 18 Rabbit (glyphs 46–48) some 6 years earlier.

The thrust of the linguistic content of the east text is to situate 18 Rabbit historically in a politically advantageous way. It connects him and his accession to the throne of Copán to the accession of his immediate predecessor. Perhaps more importantly, it places him in the context of Yax K'uk' Mo's seating in office and the political activities attending the dynastic founding in the distant past, at the time of the turn of B'ak'tun 9.
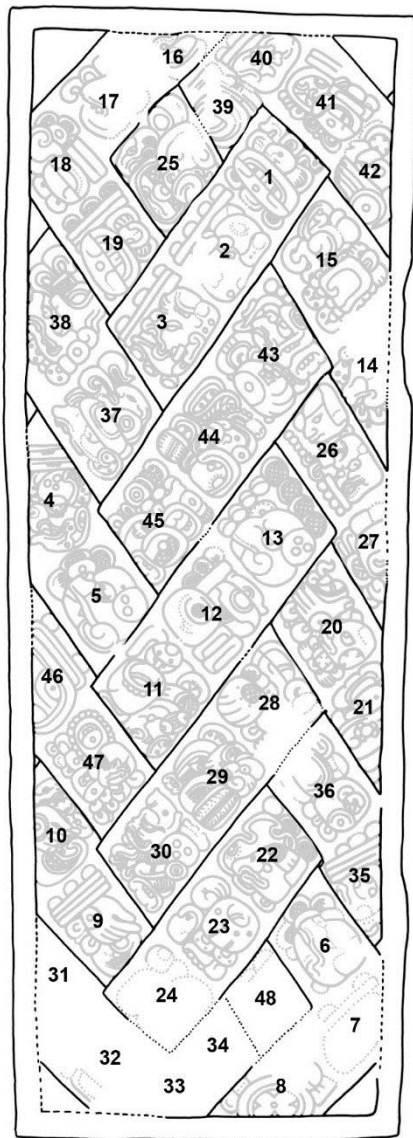
Fig. 7:
Stela J, Copán, east face, drawing indicating reading order

2.2 West Face

The text on the west face of Stela J (see fig. 8) also lacks the standard paired-column format and instead consists of several distinct sections composed of short columns and rows that together frame a face. The order in which the text segments are to be read is not clear, adding to the difficulties presented by what seems to be unusual syntax. A reference to a »scattering« ceremony (glyph B10), for example, was placed between the Ritual Almanac day and the Solar Year day, rather than in the expected position following the date.

The subject matter is distinct from that on the east face: apart from a possible oblique reference to the dynastic founder in what is likely the first passage (glyph E2), the text deals entirely with deities and with mythic times and places. Three passages name days that have the important ritual almanac position 1 Ajaw (glyphs A1, A7, D9). Two of them are concerned with the endings of very long time periods (13 and 14 B'ak'tuns, approximately 5129 and 5523 years respectively) and refer to deities and mythic places (glyphs A5–B9, D5–E9). The most straightforward section refers to the waning efficacy of deities at the time of the dedication of the stela, the midpoint of K'atun 9.13.0.0.0 (glyphs A10–E13). This passage is remarkably similar to sections of the much earlier text of Tikal Stela 31 (STUART 2011) that deal with deities who are ›diminished‹ at the midpoint of K'atuns and with rulers who tend to or, perhaps, renew them. Glyphs A12–13 on Stela J appear to name two of the
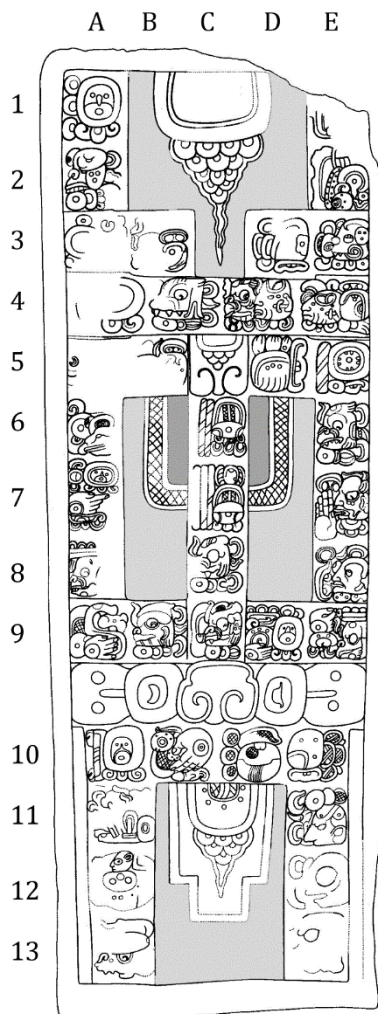

Fig. 8:
Stela J, Copán, west face, drawing

same deities and E12–13 are similar to the name glyphs of two more. The linguistic text thus serves to relate 18 Rabbit, who presided over K'atun 9.13.0.0.0, to ancestral deities and the mythic places they inhabited.

3. Broader Reading

A broader, connotative mode of reading based on the recognition and interpretation of implied meanings that are not linguistically specified is also possible and can be conceptualized as a way of decoding information beyond that which is explicitly (i.e., denotatively) stated. Knowledge of the linguistic grammar necessary to access the denotative meaning of a text is not required for a connotative reading, but familiarity with the relevant cultural grammar is essential. Cultural grammars allow things to be read when they pattern in culturally significant ways, though it is important to note that what can be read by one culture may be seen as semantically vacuous by another (cf. HUDSON 2015; HUDSON/MILISAUSKAS 2015). Smith (2008: 7) and other theorists would consider this kind of implicit encoding a »precursor to literacy« that resembles reading without actually embodying it, but this perspective stems from the false premise that reading is inextricably linked to language. As Baines (1988: 193) put it, »literacy is not a single phenomenon with a single range of effects«.

Smith (2008: 9), in citing this observation in support of his arguments concerning the distribution of early writing around the world, tacitly accepts this position; however, he does not pursue the implications of this and seems to assign the act of reading entirely to the linguistic realm. The root of Smith's reticence to expand on Baines' observation and explore how reading can be disentangled from language may lie in his approach to the notion of fluency. His is a complicated view that defines fluent reading »a technical term referring precisely to behavior, acquired through learning, involving ›high speed lexical access stimulated by signs‹« and touts it as part of the definition of writing (SMITH 2008: 10–11). He also suggests that fluent reading can be used to separate writing from non-writing and differentiate literates from non-literates (SMITH 2008: 11). The mental lexicons of non-literates are described as »not rapidly and predictably forced open« by attempts at reading and that the lexical access necessary for reading is said to support the belief that »writing is […] bound to spoken language« (SMITH 2008: 11–12). Such comments demonstrate that his conceptualization of reading inextricably links it with written language and suggest he sees literacy as a single phenomenon.

A narrowly linguistic view of reading fails to acknowledge that it is a process reflective of broader cognitive capacities of the human mind. The syntactic abilities behind the human ability to structure linguistic signs also underlie cultural grammars that allow these abilities to be productively real-

ized in non-linguistic frames (cf. HUDSON 2013). Smith's definition of writing as »the use (for any purpose) of a repertoire of discrete signs which stimulate specialized, high-speed, automated lexical access in ›fluent readers‹« (SMITH 2008: 10) does suggest that reading may occur without writing and thus grasps, at least implicitly, the existence of connotative reading, but this recognition was likely unintentional. Although his reference was to signs intended to represent speech graphically, his definition incorporates a description of reading that characterizes it as »specialized, high-speed, automated lexical access« prompted by the attempt to interpret signs (SMITH 2008: 10). Such a definition does not overtly reject the idea that signs can be read in a non-linguistic manner nor does it deny that the lexicon being accessed might exist at a para-linguistic (i.e., cultural) level. Rather, the factors limiting the definition stem from his assumptions about what can and cannot be read. Such an intuitive grasp of what can be read is correct in essentials, but orthodoxy restrains his application of the concept to non-linguistic processes.

Reading must therefore be redefined as the process of extracting semantic information from a series of signs that are syntactically structured by a linguistic or cultural grammar and housed in a mental lexicon defined by the language or culture of a particular group. This definition allows for recognition of the reality that reading does not have to be tied to written language and can incorporate both cultural and linguistic grammars as facilitators of fluent interpretation. The kinds of reading prompted by these two distinct grammatical systems are complementary and may be undertaken separately or simultaneously, depending on the competencies of the reader and the context of reading. Connotative reading is the manifestation of this process linked to cultural grammar and syntax; it can simultaneously occur alongside denotative readings that require knowledge of linguistic grammars and lexicons, but it does not depend on them for interpretation. Stela J has three distinct connotative readings: the mat on the east face, the mask on the west face, and the house form created when the stela is paired with its original cap. These will be discussed in turn.

3.1 East Face. The Mat

The east face of Stela J (see fig. 2) has connotative readings complementary to the linguistic information encoded in the text. Recognition and comprehension of these alternative meanings requires fluency in, or at least familiarity with, the cultural grammar extant at Copán at the time of the monument's creation. Although many nuances of this grammar have been lost through time, it is possible to ascertain some aspects of it. One of these is the importance of the mat, employed throughout Mesoamerica—the region from northern Mexico through upper Central America inhabited by the Maya and their western neighbors—as a symbol of power and legitimate authority. This significance was salient at every scale, from kingship to family head, and would have been known to all inhabitants of the region. The use of this

Fig. 9:
Popol Nah (Structure 10L–22A), Copán

symbol on the face of a royal stela directed toward the end of the formal causeway by which people from several elite residential zones—as well as the rest of the eastern valley and more distant areas—would have entered the civic center was not accidental. It is apparent that the use of this specific form was intended to facilitate reading of the monument even among those who might not have been literate in the hieroglyphic script.

A review of some of the most prominent occurrences of this symbol in Mesoamerica offers more nuanced indications of the intended connotative meaning. Another striking use of the mat symbol at Copán is the structure called the Popol Nah (see fig. 9) in the private area of the acropolis. This building was constructed adjacent to Structure 22, a palace of 18 Rabbit, between AD 738 and 749 by his immediate successor. Construction occurred during a time of political upheaval in the court of Copán: 18 Rabbit had met an unglamorous end at the hands of the Quirigua king K'ak Tiliw Chan Yopat, at least if the texts on several Quirigua monuments are to be believed. While the literal truth of these claims is uncertain, archaeologists do know that Copán experienced a sudden decline in building activity that has frequently been interpreted as indicative of political turmoil following the end of 18 Rabbit's reign.

The Popol Nah has been widely interpreted as a kind of council house in which representatives of powerful families in the kingdom met collectively to take part in governmental affairs (cf. FASH 1992). Such an institution would signal a radical break from the absolute authority afforded to previous Copán rulers, but it does appear to fit the kind of political upheaval likely to be

caused by the demise of 18 Rabbit. This interpretation also matches 16th century colonial accounts that describe a political institution from northern Yucatán in which heads of prominent families would meet in a mat house (/*popol nah/*) to review public affairs and advise the ruler. The use of mat motifs around the upper portion of the building's exterior supports this interpretation. The fish motif that occurs as one of nine emblematic elements in association with the mats provides further support. This fish also occurs on a building in the Cementerio, a royal residential complex adjacent to the civic core, indicating a connection between a specific elite family line and the Popol Nah. The mat can thus be seen as indicative of power and authority; the mat embedded in the layout of the text on the east side of Stela J and would have been widely interpretable in these terms.

Fig. 10:
Monument 10, Kaminaljuyú

Monument 10, an early throne from the highland Maya site of Kaminaljuyú, provides another clear example of the association between the mat symbol and notions of power and authority (see fig. 10). The seat of the throne bears a depiction of an individual wielding an axe along with a second figure in a kneeling position and a free-floating head positioned in the upper right-hand corner. Hieroglyphic inscriptions accompany the scene, but their content is disputed and not of primary concern for the present analysis. The frame that surrounds the imagery is of more importance. It has the form of a mat, and the implication is that the depicted scene involves the kind of royal authority suggested by the mat image. Additionally, and most significantly, the positioning of this mat means that the ruler would have been sitting on a

mat when he sat on the throne during political functions. The importance of this usage should not be overlooked. Images of rulers seated on such thrones can be seen in Kaminaljuyú monument 65, and the appearance of a king on a throne made of mats—whether literally or figuratively through the use of mat imagery—makes explicit the link between mats and power for the ancient Maya.

The hieroglyph used to represent Pop, the first month of the Maya Solar Calendar (the Haab') also incorporates a mat design that suggests the mat symbol was associated with notions of power and importance. This component of the Calendar Round was closely associated with several crucial components of life in ancient Mesoamerican, including the agricultural cycle and astronomical observations, and Bricker (1982) has proposed that the Haab' originally began on the winter solstice around 500 BC. Such a close link between the mat and a key celestial event can be interpreted as indicative of an equation between the mat symbol and very broad concepts of significance and power. These meanings were likely embedded in the connotative text of Stela J along with the concepts of power suggested by the Popol Nah building.

Images of Aztec emperors demonstrate that the mat conveyed the same meanings in western Mesoamerica. These rulers are very often depicted seated either on a mat or on a throne that is made from mats. The Nahuatl imperial title /tlatoani/ means ›speaker‹, and many depictions of these rulers include speech scrolls indicating that the individuals are speaking or otherwise connected to speech. Speech was widely perceived as powerful throughout ancient Mesoamerica, and this association is further evidence that mats could be connotatively read as meaning power, prestige, and authority. Imagery from the Aztec world also illustrates the relevance of the mat symbol for authority in more quotidian contexts, as in the case of Sahagun's image of the head of a merchant household presiding over a feast from a mat-covered seat.

3.2 West Face. The Mask

The west face of Stela J (see fig. 8) also encodes meanings beyond its linguistic textual content, and once again it is the form of the text that facilitates connotative interpretation. The layout of the hieroglyphic text on the west side of the monument creates the image of a face; a strikingly similar mask occupies the west (rear) face of Stela B (see fig. 11). Maya cosmology—like belief systems elsewhere in Mesoamerica—held that all things were animate and thus could be given faces. This focus on animacy is one reason for the widespread use of masks in Maya culture, and it does not require a large interpretive leap to conclude that Stela J itself was conceptualized as a living thing.

The inverted step pyramid seen on the top of the Stela J mask contains an empty outlined cartouche below which hangs an inverted triangle of scallops; this is likely akin to the demarcated area on the forehead of Stela B that contains an image of an elaborated figure. The two narrow rectangles at the center of the face form the eyes of the mask. The elongated ninety-degree angles filled with cross-hatching can be seen as analogous to the hanging hieroglyphs that constitute the pupils of the eyes in the mask on Stela B. The pupils of the eyes face upwards in a manner that may be evocative of depictions of the sun god, who is also sometimes depicted as cross-eyed. The nose of the mask has curls that swirl upward in a manner evocative of nostrils. A similar nose can be seen on Stela B, though its nose has the curls located on top of the nasal area. The open rectangle at the base of the face represents the mouth, and the inverted step pyramid may indicate a filed tooth similar to the one seen on many depictions of Maya deities.

Fig. 11:
Stela B, Copán, west face

The kawak sign on the wrinkled brow just above the eyes denotes stone, suggesting that the face is that of an animate mountain; on Stela B, the cleft would represent a cave. In Mesoamerica, caves are widely conceptualized as the dwelling place of the ancestors, and this aspect of the connotative reading

echoes the emphasis on ancestors—both human and divine—in the hiero-glyphic text. The mask might also represent an architectural form, since many Maya buildings were provided with facial features, often with the door form-ing a mouth. These features allow the reader to discern that the stela is deemed to be an animate entity worthy of respect. In combination with the mat found on the eastern face, the whole would undoubtedly have been per-ceived as powerful even by those who lacked literacy in the hieroglyphic script.

3.3 The House Form Suggested by the Cap Stone

The entirety of the monument also has a connotative reading whose signifi-cance is rooted in the form created by use of the associated cap. Positioning the cap on top of the stela would have created an overall form very similar to that found in depictions of Maya houses. Stone house models from Copán are an excellent illustration of what the overall form would have looked like (see fig. 12). The roofs of many of these models are removable, as is the cap of Stela J (see fig. 5), and some roofs have faces in relief. Many of the models are carved with hieroglyphs. The exact significance of the house form is un-clear. Schele and Mathews (1998) argue the house form was intended to re-mind visitors they were reentering a residential area when they left the public core. They further claim that the mat motif on the east face of the monument signaled entrance to a royal space while the overall house form signaled an exit from the space of royalty and return to normal residential life. In fact, however, the house form would have been just as apparent when the stela was viewed from the east as from the west, so the hypothesis that this form was somehow related specifically to the western view visible when exiting the plaza is unlikely.

Meanings associated with /na/ may provide clues to the intended sig-nificance of this connotative reading. The most common translation, ›house‹, is a good reflection of the overall form of Stela J, but uncertainty about the significance of particular house styles makes it difficult to extrapolate any additional significance on the basis of this translation. /Na/ can also mean ›first‹ and ›mother‹ or ›lady‹. Associations with broader concepts of primacy, dominance, legitimacy, and lineage may therefore have been intended when the house form was chosen for the stela.

Whether the cap actually sat on the stela is uncertain. It was provided with its own platform and a cache was placed beneath it, suggesting that its placement atop the stela was conceptual. Such placement may indicate that the site itself was conceptualized as a kind of house-like space with an en-trance marked by the woven mat depicted on the stela, and the presence of a roof near the stela may have been necessary to further reinforce the associa-tion of the site core with a house. In this interpretation, the placement of the roof on the ground over a cache rather than atop the stela can be viewed as a secondary marking of this house-like status, and its position atop a platform

covering cached materials may indicate that these offerings were intended for the royal household that was embodied in the site and its architecture. It is also possible that the separation of the stela and its roof-like capstone was intended to suggest a mat—and all of its associated significances—positioned in front of the royal household represented by the capstone and honored by the offering placed in the cache. This analysis is supported by the fact that, visually, the mat represented on the stela occurs in front of the capstone from the perspective of visitors entering the site, and by the conceptual placement of cached offerings inside of the house suggested by the capstone. In any event, in combination with the face and stone signs, likely readings of the monument as a whole include house/building and building on a mountain. Maya temples, always elevated on platforms, were conceptually buildings on mountains.

Fig. 12:
House model, Copán

4. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The act of reading is not as specialized as it may seem at first glance, since people read constantly, and texts are not always composed of written language. Processes of denotative reading focus on the extraction of linguistic information from signs intended to represent the particularities of a particular linguistic system while connotative reading involved the extraction of information from patterns of non-linguistic signifiers; both kinds of reading are required for the interpretation of Stela J. The hieroglyphic texts themselves denote linguistic meanings and can be read accordingly, while the form of the texts and overall form of the monument connote particular meanings when approached connotatively, through the proper cultural grammar. This analysis has explored both approaches to Stela J and argued that a full interpretation of the monument requires that both readings be considered.

The imagery of Stela J combines with the hieroglyphic texts to convey much richer and more complex meanings than either could alone. The monument was placed at the entrance to Copán's civic core from the Sepulturas residential zone, perhaps the main entry point from the valley to the east and more distant regions beyond. The mat, a pan-Mesoamerican symbol of power and legitimate authority, faces the formal entry causeway. The basic message—that Copán was a place of power and 18 Rabbit held legitimate authority there—would have been perfectly intelligible to all visitors, whatever their degree of familiarity with Maya city-state culture. It may be significant that the cache associated with the cap is the only stela cache that contained polychrome pottery vessels from the non-Maya Ulúa region to the east. Strong connections with the Ulúa region, including polychrome pottery, are also found in some of the Sepulturas residential complexes. It may be that a substantial fraction of the visitors arriving on the Sepulturas causeway were not culturally or linguistically Maya.

The text, with its clear emphasis on the dynastic and genealogical sources of 18 Rabbit's authority—his connection to his predecessor and to Yax K'uk' Mo, the dynastic founder—are inextricably intertwined with the image of the mat (see fig. 7), which symbolized legitimate authority. The representation of a mountain (see fig. 8), a building, or a building on a mountain that occupies the west face is likely to be another reference to the mythic places denoted linguistically in the text. Perhaps is it a graphic representation of one of those places or of a temple memorializing one. (Stela B is also an animate mountain with references to supernatural beings, mythic places, and the deep, mythic past.) The interrelationships of text and image made Stela J interpretable, and powerfully communicative, to all visitors, whatever their facility with Maya cultural norms and with the script itself.

It is worth noting that the combination of denotative and connotative texts made the overall message of the stela accessible to a considerably larger number of readers. This increased literacy vis-à-vis Stela J was a direct result of the incorporation of a connotative text, since this text facilitated the

extraction of meaning from non-linguistic signifiers and allowed individuals who were culturally literate but linguistically illiterate to access the intended meaning. Unlike many Maya stelae, whose messages were only accessible to those with knowledge of the hieroglyphic writing system, Stela J's juxtaposition of denotative and connotative texts caused the hieroglyphics to function as only one dimension of a broader semantic whole. This would have allowed non-elites to understand the significance of the site and its rulers, thus reinforcing the royal position; it would have also made the intended meaning accessible to visitors from other parts of the Maya cultural sphere who arguably spoke—and wrote—in languages different from the one dominant at Copán. Accessibility to such a wide audience was likely a significant motivating factor in the stela's composition and in the selection of a site for its placement. By orienting Stela J so that the mat-bearing side faced the residential zone of Las Sepulturas and the regions beyond the city, and by structuring the monument's text in a simultaneously denotative and connotative manner, 18 Rabbit guaranteed that individuals entering the city received the intended message.

Orthodoxy privileges the extraction of linguistic forms in a way that is disproportional to their overall contributions to meaning, and an emphasis on the linguistic dimensions of texts often causes semantic nuances to be lost in translation. We argue that full interpretations often require consideration of connotative extra-linguistic meanings as well as denotative linguistic readings; in the case of Stela J, it is necessary to consider the messages encoded in imagery and in the structure of the monument simultaneously with the significances of the hieroglyphic constructions. The most effective analytical approaches thus move beyond consistency with the polyvocality of Maya stelae to actually explore the multiple ways they were designed to be read.

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