
10 *SNAKES ON PLANES: SINUOUS MOTIFS IN THE ART OF LAMANAI*

James J. Aimers

After the Late Classic a suite of sinuous motifs become very pronounced in the art of Lamanai. Although some of these motifs are rather abstract or conceptual (e.g., braids and guilloches) others appear to be references to reptiles, especially crocodiles and snakes, and vegetation. The motifs show the connections of Lamanai to other important sites, particularly in the Postclassic period. In this paper I discuss the possible socio-political and religious meanings of this imagery on ceramics from burials and caches at the site. I relate the use of the motifs at the site to Lamanai's role as a cosmopolitan trade centre in the Postclassic period.

Introduction

In the Postclassic period a suite of sinuous motifs become quite pronounced in the art of Lamanai. Although some of these motifs are rather abstract or conceptual (e.g., braids and guilloches) others appear to be references to vegetation and reptiles (Figure 1). Here I focus on the Maya serpent motif, which is probably a combination of elements representing snakes, lizards, iguanas, and crocodiles and/or caimans (Rice 1983). The presence of this motif indicates the connections of Lamanai to other important sites and regions. In this paper I discuss several alternative socio-political and religious interpretations of this imagery on ceramics at the site and present some preliminary ideas of my own.

Sinuous Motifs in Mesoamerica

The designs found on Lamanai pottery in the Postclassic period (ca. A.D. 950 to ca. A.D. 1492) resemble those of Silho (or "X") Fine Orange, and serpentine and scroll forms depictions are important elements of these incised designs (Figure 2). These elements were not new; they had been present in Mesoamerican art from the Olmec period through Izapa to the Aztecs. The presence of these motifs on Fine Orange indicates stylistic linkages to the Gulf Coast and, I think more interestingly, to Veracruz

which may be their ultimate origin (Aimers 2007). Other important parallels are to the pottery of the Mixtec and Zapotec areas, particularly the Mixteca-Puebla or Cholulteca styles and the black-on-orange ceramics of the southern Valley of Mexico (the Aztec I and II styles which date to about A.D. 900-1200, an era that partially overlaps with Buk Phase ceramics at Lamanai) (Rice 1983, 1985).



Figure 1. Sinuous motifs at Lamanai (Lot 95, vessels 7, 6 and 8, drawings by Louise Belanger).

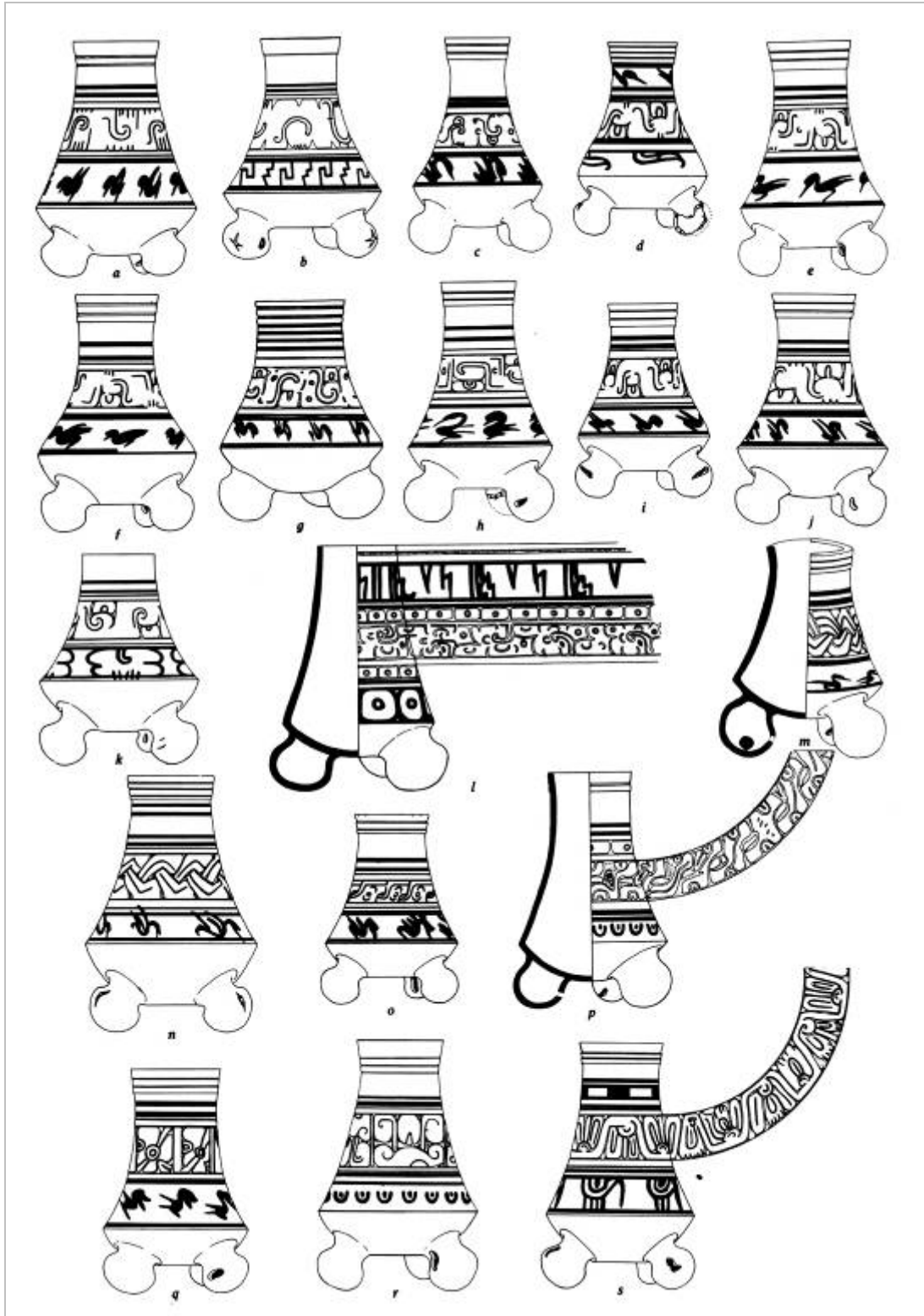


Figure 2: Kilikan Composite of the Silho Fine Orange Group (Smith 1957: Fig 11).

“Mexicanized Maya” ?

The most important interpretations of these motifs and styles is that they represent the movement of “Mexicanized” Maya people from the Gulf Coast and Campeche into the Maya heartland during and after the Terminal Classic (Thompson 1970), or some sort of vaguely defined “influence” of Mexicanized groups from the Gulf Coast or Yucatán (McVicker 1985). The Mexicanized group usually discussed in this light are the Chontal or Putun Maya.

For example, in a discussion of the early ninth century Xcocom phase at Becan, Ball (1977:173) argued that Fine Orange pottery was part of a package of innovations associated with ethnic change: "It is difficult to see Xcocom as anything other than the ceramic reflection of warrior elite groups invading Rio Bec from the northwest." In Ball's model the Putun (sometimes also called the Itza) moved northward up the coast inland to the Puuc region, then south to Chenes, Rio Bec, and eventually the Petén and Pasión drainage. Others, however, see the same elements as evidence of more localized change without invasion. In this alternative view, local status rivalries provoked interregional alliances that could be quite far flung. For example, in a discussion of the ceramics of the northern lowlands, Stanton and Gallereta Negron (2001:231) note: "Elite factions and, we may suspect, other members of the social hierarchy developed large-scale alliance networks that cut across polity boundaries... a prestige-goods economy, including ceramics, appears to have played a major role in alliance networks."

Style and Ethnicity

I use Weissner's definition of style as “a form of non-verbal communication through doing something in a certain way that communicates information about

relative identity” (Weissner 1990:108). Ethnicity is a much more problematic concept. Ethnicity may elude “translation into archaeological terms, particularly in non-state societies” (Stark 1998:20). This is an important point to which I will return. Nevertheless, anthropologists generally agree that ethnicity is a purposeful expression of group identity: "ethnicity does not simply exist; it is something that people do"(Hegmon 1998:272).

Archaeologists might profitably abandon the word ethnicity altogether but whatever term one uses; the concepts of style and ethnicity are strikingly similar: ethnicity is a style of being. Although we are all born into an ethnic group we may chose to stress it or ignore it at different times and in different contexts, and we can indeed change our ethnicity. I am inclined to think of Madonna, who ever since she moved to England has been speaking and to some degree acting as English as crumpets and tea. Identity is malleable and situational - it is not fixed now and it probably never has been.

Us versus Us: Foreign as Status

So, what do the stylistic changes of the Buk phase at Lamanai represent — migration or even invasion of an ethnic group to the site or the adoption of exotic motifs by indigenous people there? In an influential paper, Kent Flannery, (1968) made the case that Olmec style artefacts may not have marked actual movements of ethnically distinct people, but the adoption of a exotic style by Preclassic social climbers throughout Mesoamerica.

For Terminal Classic-Early Postclassic Yucatan, Stone (1989:166) noted that virtually all the powerful groups in this period are identified as foreigners, namely, as Mexicans. The Itzá were considered foreign even after hundreds of years in

Yucatán. Stone (1989:167) shows that this process was in place in the southern lowlands by at least the Late Classic as evidence in the stelae of Piedras Negras. Thus, there is a thread of "foreignness" that seems to wind through Mesoamerican history, making it very difficult to separate assumed identity from historical identity. Freidel (1983:303) has called this a "cult of foreignness" but it seems to have a fairly simple meaning: power.

Class as Ethnicity; Style and Religion

It may be useful, then, to look at an elite as a sort of ethnic group, or at least as a special interest group (Graham 2006, Hodder 1979:452). If the adoption of a "foreign" style represents not ethnicity but status, then "foreign" motifs represent not ethnicity but socio-political and economic identity (that is, class). The issue for me is that class almost always crosscuts ethnic groupings. Further complicating things is religion. In the cases I mentioned above, the adoption of a foreign religious style in burials and caches may have identified "the ruling elites with the supernatural" (Earle 1990:75). Thus, style may mask relationships of inequality and domination as part of a religious world view.

Population Movement and Ceramics

Because of the unreliable connection between foreign styles and foreign peoples in Mesoamerica, archaeologists sometimes assume that migration or invasion can only be inferred if we find large quantities of imported or foreign-style ceramics (this is Ball's argument above). Thus, trade has been a favourite explanation for small amounts of imports. However, even this seemingly conservative assumption has to be questioned. Examples such as the Aztec and Spanish conquests of the Mixtecs make it apparent that only a few foreign ceramics might indicate full blown conquest (Lind

1987:114). This is the case at Lamanai, where the introduction of a few Spanish types does little to disrupt existing ceramics patterns at conquest. So, associating a foreign style with either population movement or elite emulation is problematic if even small amounts of new pottery in an area may reflect large migrations or even invasion.

The Serpent Motif and Elite Identity

Rice (1983, 1989) has discussed in detail the possible significance of the serpent motif found at Lamanai, Tipu, and the Central Petén Lakes. For Rice, as well as Kepecs (1994), serpent motifs were "Symbols of deities such as Quetzalcoatl/Kukulcan [and]. . . were pan-Mesoamerican markers of elite identity"(Kepecs, et al. 1994:145). The mat motif that also appears on these incised vessels may also be associated with rule and power (Robicsek 1975). The resemblance of intertwined snakes to a woven mat and the actual juxtaposition of serpent and mat motifs on some Postclassic pottery (e.g., at Topoxte) further suggests the association of the serpent motif and socio-political power.

The Serpent Motif and Religious Identity

Other explanations more strongly stress the religious significance of the snake-scroll motifs. The reptile eye motif in Central Petén and at Lamanai resembles the Late Classic Zapotec Glyph C and may represent a version of "composite reptilian creatures" such as the Maya Itzamna, Nahautl Cipactli or Zapotec Chila (Rice 1983:872). Glyph C appears on the headdresses of Mixtec censers, and clearly had important social and religious significance. Its use on chalices at Lamanai which were deposited in burials and caches reinforces this idea. As Pendergast (1998) has noted for Lamanai and Altun Ha, caching behaviour seems to be related to

empowering and rejuvenating specific ritual loci. Since we also find fragments in rich middens in the site core they may also have been associated with feasting. They may have been exchanged as gifts—perhaps to forge or reinforce alliances-- and then might have been broken during ritual feasting (Stanton and Negrón 2001:233).

Miller (1982: 93- 94) notes that serpents were used as intertwined borders in late Teotihuacán murals and on the facades of many Maya structures from the Classic period (Miller 1982:95). He presents evidence that the Maya made a symbolic connection between these snake borders and umbilical cords, for example in the Ritual of the Bacabs, on Stela 50 from Izapa (Norman 1973: Plate 50) and on a stucco panel from Palenque's Temple of Inscriptions. Miller concludes that "the cosmic umbilical cord is a visual metaphor for a link between death and life and between the supernatural and natural worlds" (Miller 1982: 95).

Ringle et al. (1998:266) have suggested that the serpent motifs were adopted as part of the spread of a "Cult of Quetzalcoatl" and thus these motifs express not an ethnic identity but a religious one which might crosscut ethnicities. However, this cult would still have been a source of political power. There are interesting hints of this supposed cult of Quetzalcoatl at Lamanai. For example, the step terrace flange can be seen as an *Ik* sign that means wind which is associated with Quetzalcoatl/Kukulcan in his manifestation as the wind god Ehecatl. Ehecatl is also represented at Lamanai (Figure 3).

Serpents as Lineage Symbols

Masson (2000:248-9) noted that serpent imagery on murals and stuccos at Mayapán, Tulum, and Santa Rita linked historical individuals, deified ancestors and gods through calendrical ritual: "Serpent imagery has long been linked to lineage

descent. . . Postclassic political iconography . . . portrays elements of divine kinship that have their roots in past traditions along with newly redefined institutions that celebrate the importance of lineage power and the integration of multiple factions within communities and regions."



Figure 3: Quetzalcoatl elements at Lamanai? Top: Ik flanges, Lot 247, Bottom: Ehecatl, Lot 390

The Mesoamerican World System

Whatever their significance (ethnicity, status, religion, or lineage), the serpent motifs were part of a stylistic lingua franca understood throughout most of Terminal Classic and Postclassic Mesoamerica, but with clear and specific ties to Central Mexico through Veracruz, the Gulf Coast and Campeche. Although Thompson drew attention to the Gulf Coast in his Putun hypothesis, by 1468 the Aztec

empire extended as far as southern Veracruz with an enclave as far east as Campeche Tozzer (Tozzer 1941:32) so Central Mexico was no doubt involved. Masson (2003: Fig 25.8) has also illustrated the similarity of Palmul Incised motifs to those of the Aztec Codex Borbonicus. We also know that there were overland routes from the Gulf Coast to the Peten and on to the Caribbean in the early 16th century (Rice 1983:874).

Two models have been discussed above: In one, serpent and scroll motifs are equated with foreign invasion or migration. In the other, pottery in exotic or “foreign” style is equated with status or ideology with no substantial migration needed to explain it. To conclude I will review some variations on these arguments:

Invasion

Some people have suggested that Lamanai was invaded or taken over by Itza people in the Terminal Classic-Early Postclassic. This is untenable for a number of reasons. The Maya serpent motif is hardly new at Postclassic Lamanai. Its prominent place on the Early Classic masks of Structure N9-56 shows that the religious or political significance of reptiles at the site named submerged crocodile has a long significance at Lamanai and was not a foreign concept introduced in the Terminal Classic or Postclassic. More importantly, other key Itza marker are rare or absent at Lamanai, including round temples, large amounts of Fine Orange pottery, Plumbate, and other Sotuta ceramic styles. Overall, Lamanai shares striking stylistic similarities to Mayapán and later, Tulum, but not many with Chichén Itzá—the absence of clear Chichén markers at Lamanai is in fact much more interesting than the few that are present.

Contact and Hybridization

Rice notes that the international style elements of the Maya serpent motif are “expressed within regionalized elite substyles” (Rice 1983:876). The scroll motifs at Lamanai are looser and more curvilinear than the Mexican versions at Chichén Itzá and later at Tulum and they incorporate a particularly southern Maya sense of movement. I think they represent the fusion and hybridization of style that is typical of spatial liminal areas. This hybrid quality suggests what Fry (1985:296) has proposed for Chichén Itzá: “a mutual assimilation of lowlanders and outsiders” in the Terminal Classic. Early Postclassic Buk style at Lamanai seems to me to be the physical manifestation of the elite of a powerful trading and pottery-producing site expressing their sophistication, power, and international reach through an important international art movement.

Population Movement

For the Belize Valley, I have argued that the appearance of griddles and grater bowls (both of which originate in Central Mexico) suggest that there were new people living there after the Classic (Aimers 2004). Cuisine, like language, is intimately associated with identity, and changes are rarely adopted casually. We also have griddles and graters at Lamanai. Igneous rock inclusions in griddles at Lamanai are exciting because they suggest that the large, friable, certainly fragile griddles may have been produced in the Maya mountains (Linda Howie, personal communication 2007). If so, they did not walk to Lamanai on their own-- they may be the physical manifestation of population movement but, so far, anyway, we have absolutely no evidence that this population movement was anything other than peaceful at Lamanai. In fact, artefacts and osteological analysis of the Late Postclassic “Loving Couple” burial

from Structure N11-5 by Christine White suggests that people of different geographical origins—in this case from West Mexico—lived, died, and were buried in rich burials in the site core of Lamanai. We are starting to have evidence from multiple artefact categories that Lamanai was a cosmopolitan, multiethnic site. So I do not think that the Postclassic style that Lamanai developed represents either ethnic change or simply stylistic emulation by elites. What does it mean then? I think the answer at a site like Lamanai has to be linked to trade.

Lamanai, Mesoamerica

I suspect that the Maya serpent motif at Lamanai is religious iconography linked not to ethnic change but to merchants and trade, the kinds of interaction that existed centuries before the Postclassic period. Merchants in ancient Mesoamerica, the best known example being the Aztec *pochteca*, were simultaneously an ethnic group and a class, and they also had patron gods. They travelled widely and freely yet they were also warriors and spies. They simply do not fit into our categories (Bittman and Sullivan 1978).

We know that all kinds of people were moving through Lamanai along the New River, and although this was not new to the Postclassic period, it is certainly clear at that time. The great diversity of stylistic types Linda Howie, Stephen Merkel and I examined from deposits directly adjacent to the lagoon in 2007 are almost the perfect material signature of what would result from a busy port where people of all sorts were stopping to rest, to eat, to trade, to worship, and perhaps to fall in love. Whatever their exact activities it was not just people and goods moving along the river, it was ideas. But, the fact that later Postclassic deposits at Lamanai are rich with Red Payil group ceramics from the east coast suggests that connections made in the early part of the

Postclassic led to much more intense trade and interaction in the latter part of the era.

Conclusions - Lamanai, Belize

In my opinion, Lamanai succeeded where Chichén Itzá failed. It also succeeded where, somewhat later, Mayapán failed. Both of those sites attempted to share power among different lineages and ethnic groups but neither was more than a flash in the pan compared to Lamanai. After a few hundred years, both of them collapsed in war and chaos. We have no good evidence of violence and certainly no evidence of collapse at Lamanai. Somehow, Lamanai - like a precursor to modern Belize - made diversity work.

Acknowledgements I would like to thank Dr. Jaime Awe and the staff of the Belize Institute of Archaeology, Dr. Elizabeth Graham, Dr. Marilyn Masson, and Stephen Merkel. I would also like to thank the British Academy for funding my 2007 research at Lamanai.

References Cited

- Aimers, J. J.
2004 Cultural Change on a Temporal and Spatial Frontier: Ceramics of the Terminal Classic to Early Postclassic Transition in the Upper Belize River Valley. BAR International Series No.1325, British Archaeological Reports, Oxford.
- 2007 The Impact of Fine Orange Ware on the Postclassic Ceramics of Lamanai, Belize. Paper presented at the Society for American Archaeology 72nd Annual Meeting, Austin, TX.
- Ball, J. W.
1977 The Archaeological Ceramics of Becan, Campeche, Mexico 43. Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University, New Orleans.

- Bittman, B. and T. D. Sullivan
1978 The Pochteca. In *Mesoamerican Communication Routes and Cultural Contacts*, edited by T. A. Lee and C. Navarette, pp. 211-219. Publication No. 40, New World Archaeological Foundation, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.
- Earle, T.
1990 Style and Iconography as Legitimation in Complex Chiefdoms. In *The Uses of Style in Archaeology*, edited by M. W. Conkey and C. A. Hastorf, pp. 73-81. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Flannery, K. V.
1968 The Olmec and the Valley of Oaxaca: A Model for Inter-Regional Interaction in Formative Times. In *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Olmec*, edited by E. P. Benson, pp. 79-110. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington DC.
- Freidel, D. A.
1983 New Light on the Dark Age: A Summary of Major Themes. In *The Lowland Maya Postclassic*, edited by A. F. Chase and P. M. Rice, pp. 286-309. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Fry, R. E.
1985 Revitalization Movements among the Postclassic Lowland Maya. In *The Lowland Maya Postclassic*, edited by A. F. C. a. P. M. Rice, pp. 126-141. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Graham, E.
2006 An Ethnicity to Know. In *Maya Ethnicity: The Construction of Ethnic Identity from Preclassic to Modern Times*, edited by F. Sachse, pp. 109-124. Vol. 19. Acta Mesoamerica 19, Verlag Anton Saurwein, Markt Schwaben.
- Hegmon, M.
1998 Technology, Style, and Social Practice: Archaeological Approaches. In *The Archaeology of Social Boundaries*, edited by M. T. Stark, pp. 264-280. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington.
- Hodder, I.
1979 Economic and Social Stress and Material Culture Patterning. *American Antiquity* 44:446-454.
- Kepecs, S., G. Feinman and S. Boucher
1994 Chichén Itzá and Its Hinterland: A World-Systems Perspective. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 5:141-158.
- Lind, M.
1987 The Sociocultural Dimensions of Mixtec Ceramics. Vanderbilt University Publications in Anthropology, Nashville.
- Masson, M. A.
2000 In the Realm of Nachan Kan: Postclassic Maya Archaeology at Laguna De On, Belize. University Press of Colorado, Boulder.
- McVicker, D.
1985 The "Mayanized" Mexicans. *American Antiquity* 50:82-101.
- Miller, A. G.
1982 On the Edge of the Sea: Mural Painting at Tancah-Tulum, Mexico. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.
- Norman, V. G.
1973 Izapa Sculpture: Part 1. Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation 30, Provo, Utah.
- Pendergast, D. M.
1998 Intercession with the Gods: Caches and Their Significance at Altun Ha and Lamanai, Belize. In *The Sowing and the Dawning: Termination, Dedication, and Transformation in the Archaeological and Ethnographic Record of Mesoamerica*, edited by S. B. Mock, pp. 55-63. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.
- Rice, P. M.
1983 Serpents and Styles in Petén Postclassic Pottery. *American Anthropologist* 85:866-80.

1985 Reptilian Imagery and Vessel Function in Petén Postclassic Pottery: A Preliminary View. In *Fifth Palenque Round Table*, edited by M. G. Robertson and V. M. Fields, pp. 115-122. Pre-Columbian Research Institute, San Francisco.

1989 Reptiles and Rulership: A Stylistic Analysis of Petén Postclassic Pottery. In *Word and Image in Maya Culture*, edited by

- W. F. Hanks and D. S. Rice, pp. 306-318.
University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City.
- Conkey and C. A. Hastorf, pp. 105-121.
Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Ringle, W. M., C. Gallareta Negron and G. J. Bey III
1998 The Return of Quetzalcoatl: Evidence
for the Spread of a World Religion During
the Epiclassic Period. *Ancient Mesoamerica*
9:183-232.
- Robicsek, F.
1975 A Study in Maya Art and History: The
Maya Mat Symbol. Museum of the
American Indian, New York.
- Smith, R. E.
1957 The Marquez Collection of X Fine
Orange and Fine Orange Polychrome
Vessels. Carnegie Institute of Washington
Department of Archaeology Notes on
Middle American Archaeology and
Ethnology No. 131, Washington, D.C.
- Stanton, T. W. and T. G. Negrón
2001 Warfare, Ceramic Economy, and the
Itza. *Ancient Mesoamerica* 12:229-245.
- Stark, M. T.
1998 Technical Choices and Social
Boundaries in Material Culture Patterning:
An Introduction. In *The Archaeology of
Social Boundaries*, edited by M. T. Stark,
pp. 1-11. Smithsonian Institution Press,
Washington.
- Stone, A.
1989 Disconnection, Foreign Insignia, and
Political Expansion: Teotihuacán and the
Warrior Stelae of Piedras Negras. In
*Mesoamerica after the Decline of
Teotihuacán A.D. 700-900*, edited by R. A.
Diehl and J. C. Berlo, pp. 153-171.
Dumbarton Oaks, Washington.
- Thompson, J. E. S.
1970 Maya History and Religion. University
of Oklahoma Press, Norman.
- Tozzer, A. M.
1941 Landa's Relacion De Las Cosas De
Yucatán. Papers of the Peabody Museum of
Archaeology and Ethnology 18, Harvard
University, Cambridge.
- Wiessner, P.
1990 Is There a Unity to Style? In *The Uses
of Style in Archaeology*, edited by M. W.