



Glyph Dwellers

Report 94

December 2025

The Inscribed Ceramic Mask: An Altered Xipe Totec?

Martha J. Macri

Professor Emeritus, Department of Native American Studies

Research Professor in Linguistics, University of California, Davis

Paul A. Metivier

Department of Art: Ceramics, Green River College

Chair, Fine Arts Division

A small ceramic mask held in the Yale University Art Gallery (accession no. 2018.12.20) bears one of only a few known examples of the Isthmian script (**Fig. 1**). Earlier publications focused largely on the Isthmian text with minimal discussion of the mask's other features (Méluzin 1995:5–30; Strauss 2018:195–199). Stephanie Strauss refers to the mask along with several other unprovenienced objects bearing Isthmian texts as "chronologically unmoored," "adrift in time." Previously referred to as the *O'Boyle Mask* (Méluzin 1995) and the *Epi-Olmec Monkey Skull* (FAMSI Kerr Pre-Columbian Portfolio #1780), it measures approximately 12 cm from top to bottom, 9 cm across, and 6 cm in depth.¹ Dark brown to black in appearance, the mask has a dusting of reddish pigment, in addition to traces of blue-green, red, and blue paint.

Once thought to be a monkey skull, the mask shows unmistakably human traits. The nose, fully fleshed,

¹ 11.7 cm x 8.9 cm x 6.1 cm (Méluzin 1995:5). See also **Figure 1**.



contrasts sharply with the flat-nosed features of New World monkeys, whose sideways-facing nostrils define the Platyrrhini parvorder. The lips are fuller and more sculpted than any simian mouth, and the eye openings are too small to be skeletal simian orbits, but suggest the empty sockets of a human. While the right ear is minimized, the left remains intact and human in form. The cheeks and the contours around the eyes slope gently, suggesting not a skull, but the presence of flesh—further evidence that this is the face of a human.



Fig. 1. *Mask with Incised Design in Epi-Olmec Script*, 300 B.C.-A.D. 250, incised and black slipped ceramic, 4 5/8 × 3 1/2 × 2 1/2 in. (11.75 × 8.89 × 6.35 cm), Yale University Art Gallery, 2018.12.20, Gift of Peter David Joralemon, B.A. 1969, M.Phil. 1974: **a.** right side; **b.** left side.

Macri (2026:20) points out similarities to depictions of a deity celebrated by the ritual wearing of the skin of a sacrificed victim to honor the deity known to the Aztecs as Xipe Totec. The Nahuatl name means "Our Lord the Flayed One," or from Alfredo López Austin, quoted in González González (2012) "Our Lord the Owner (Wearer) of the Skin," and refers to a deity associated with corn, agricultural rituals, spring and rebirth, and, in Tenochtitlan, with military conquest (González González 2012; González González et al. 2016). A feature on the ceramic mask that is not typical of Xipe images is the depiction of lips and teeth (Figs. 1, 7a, 12). Even when teeth are present on a figurine or in a painting, a full set of teeth belonging to the wearer of the flayed skin is shown.

In this report we suggest that the lips and few teeth on the mask were added after firing and after the designs on the cheeks; that is, they—like the text—were not part of the mask's original appearance. The deep groove on the upper lip and the teeth appear to have been carved on what in other Xipe figures are



the inner lips and mouth of the wearer of the flayed face. At several points in its apparently complex life history, the mask appears to have been altered, possibly out of ignorance of its origin, or possibly in a deliberate effort to change its identity. Our observations are based on visual inspection of nine high-resolution digital photographs from the Yale University Art Gallery by senior photographer Richard House in 2021 and 2022. In Spring 2023, Matthew Looper took 196 digital photographs, close-up views of the text, facial features, ears, and back under various lighting conditions. The initial purpose of this photographic record was to provide a more accurate drawing of the glyphic text for a study of the Isthmian script (Macri 2026). But in the process, we observed several details that point to a complex history for this object. Certainly, the information thus gained is incomplete, and our observations are tentative.² It remains for researchers using a variety of non-invasive technologies to determine precisely the composition of the clay and surface treatments of the mask. The physical history of the mask and its modifications can provide unique insight into the artistic practices of Mesoamerican artists.

Surface

The mask was created with a coarse-tempered, buff-colored clay. Evidence of brushstrokes indicates that a black slip was applied. Carving around the lip, visible in **Figure 2c**, exposes evidence of further layering, suggesting that a tan undercoat was added before the black slip. The surface on the left side of the mask is a brown color, likely the result of uneven temperature when firing, resulting in uneven oxidation of iron in the slip (**Figs. 1b, 4a, 11**). After firing, the surface was lightly burnished, which accounts for the shine, the glare, visible in many of the photographs.

At least four depths of carving can be seen on the mask, all of them post-fire, each likely executed with different tools and techniques, and probably by different hands. The gouged lines on the forehead just above the nose and the alar grooves at the base of the nostrils are the deepest (**Fig. 2a, b**). The outline of the upper lip, and the lines on the upper lip and the teeth are slightly less deeply carved, but like the forehead lines, are deep enough to reach into the lighter undercoat. Even less deeply carved are the shallow and carefully incised designs on both cheeks (**Fig. 2c**). Since the outline above the lips appears to impinge upon the cheek decorations, it is likely that the lip line and the teeth were added afterward. The glyphs scratched on the top and sides of the head represent the shallowest incisions (**Fig. 2d**). They were added after the holes were drilled and were likely the last feature carved.

² Digital publication offers the opportunity to include multiple color photographs illustrating our observations and questions. However, images displayed on digital screens vary. Details that are clear on one monitor may be difficult to see on another.



Fig. 2. Surface carving on Mask: **a.** gouged lines on the forehead; **b.** gouge around the left nasal alar-facial groove; **c.** carved lines on the lip and vertical lines indicating teeth; slip on the left upper lip showing brushstrokes; layering of the black slip over the lighter under-coat; **d.** incised text on reddish-brown slip on the left side of the head.

Drilled holes

Three conical holes (**Fig. 3**) were drilled from both front and back sides of the mask to the center, beginning with the smaller holes on the front of the mask, followed by the larger off-center holes drilled from the back. The lack of slip around the holes on the front shows that they were drilled, as with the other carving, after the mask was fired.



Fig. 3. Drilled holes (images not centered) on Mask: **a.** front right; **b.** front center (with insert); **c.** front left; **d.** back right; **e.** back center; **f.** back left.

Ears

Sylvia Méluzin (1995:5) mentions that the ears are "a bit damaged." We initially questioned whether the right ear had never been fully modeled or if it had broken off. Photographs of the back of the mask show slip on the back edges of both ears, and photographs from the front show dark edges of slip around the right ear (**Fig. 4**). The right ear had clearly been modeled, but the helix, the outer edge, had broken off, evidently before the application of the slip. That is, before firing.



Fig. 4. Ears of Mask: **a.** left ear; **b.** both ears from back of mask; **c.** right ear.

Isthmian Text

On the head and forehead of the mask seven columns containing three to four signs each record a text in the Isthmian script (**Fig. 5**). They were incised after firing, after the three holes were drilled, but before the blue-green paint was added, and before the mask appeared to have been dusted with a reddish pigment, both of which appear inside the lines of the glyphs. Sixteen of the signs can be found in other Isthmian texts, although some of those appear to be variant forms (Macri 2026). Three signs are unique to the mask, and seven are partially eroded. Hopefully as more texts are discovered it will be possible to identify some of these. The MS numbers identifying each sign are listed below the line drawing, see Macri (2017).

The text has no examples of the bracket-like "ending sign," suggesting that it is later than the Chiapa de Corzo sherd, La Mojarra Stela, and Tuxtla Statuette, all of which include it. Without bar-dot numbers, and any obvious calendrical signs, the text does not appear to be historical. Some scholars suggest it may be ritual in nature (Justeson and Kaufman 2018:203; Strauss 2018:300). Column B has three examples of a long-lipped deity followed by a crescent possibly representing the moon. The last sign in Column C occurs on several stelae as a base that rulers stand on, and on the La Mojarra text is paired with a "sky" glyph suggesting a reading of 'earth; land'. The text is currently undecipherable.³

³ For an early attempt at decipherment see Kaufman and Justeson (2001:83–85)

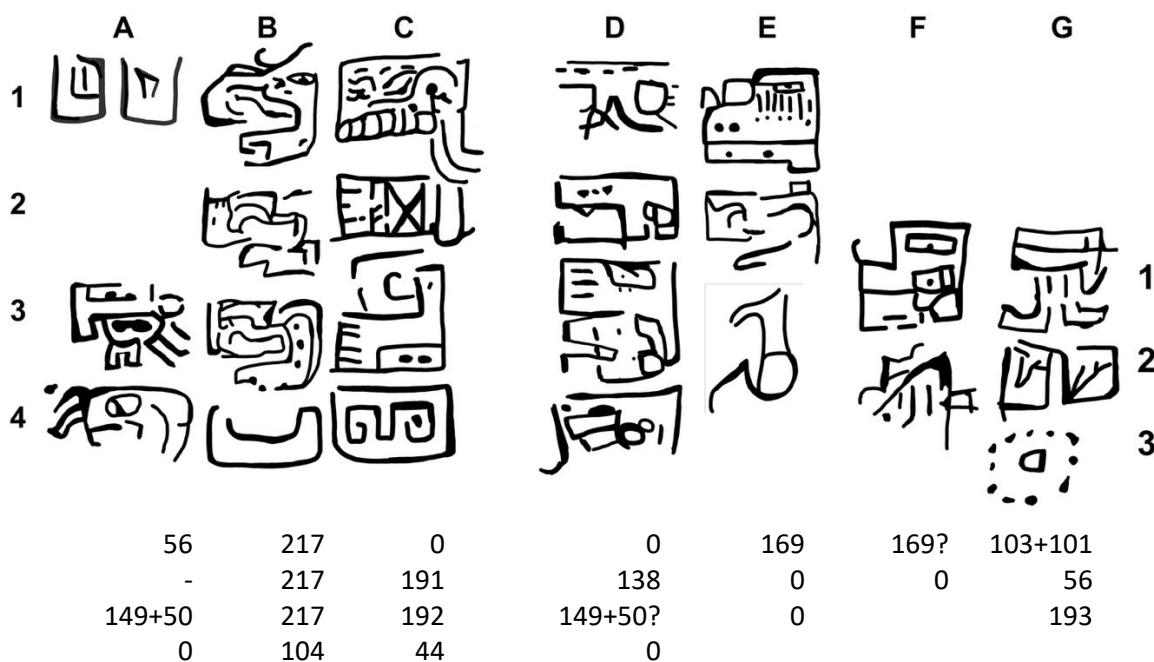


Fig. 5. Isthmian text on Mask: **a.** photograph, columns B-E of the text; **b.** line drawing: columns A-G; **c.** MS numbers.

Color

Regarding color on the mask, Méluzin notes only that "damage marks and glyphs are in some instances filled with red pigment" (1995:5). The dusting of a red-orange pigment, likely hematite (Fe_2O_3) or cinnabar (HgS) or a mix of the two was the color added last. It fills the incised lines of columns B, C, and D of the glyphic text, as well as the incisions on the upper lip and the right cheek (**Fig. 1**). The lack of reddish pigment on columns A, E, F, and G and the right cheek may represent the loss of pigment that was initially

applied to the entire surface. Other traces of paint probably represent earlier decoration on the mask, but in some cases they could have been acquired from contact with other painted objects.



Fig. 6. Paint on Mask (photo rotated 90° counter-clockwise). Blue-green paint on B2 and B3 of the text, and red line visible to the left of column B and across the top of columns B, C, and D.

Blue-green paint can be seen inside the lines of glyphs B2 and B3 of the text (**Fig. 6**), and at both corners of the mouth (**Fig. 7**). This was added after the text and cheek designs were incised but before the reddish pigment was added.

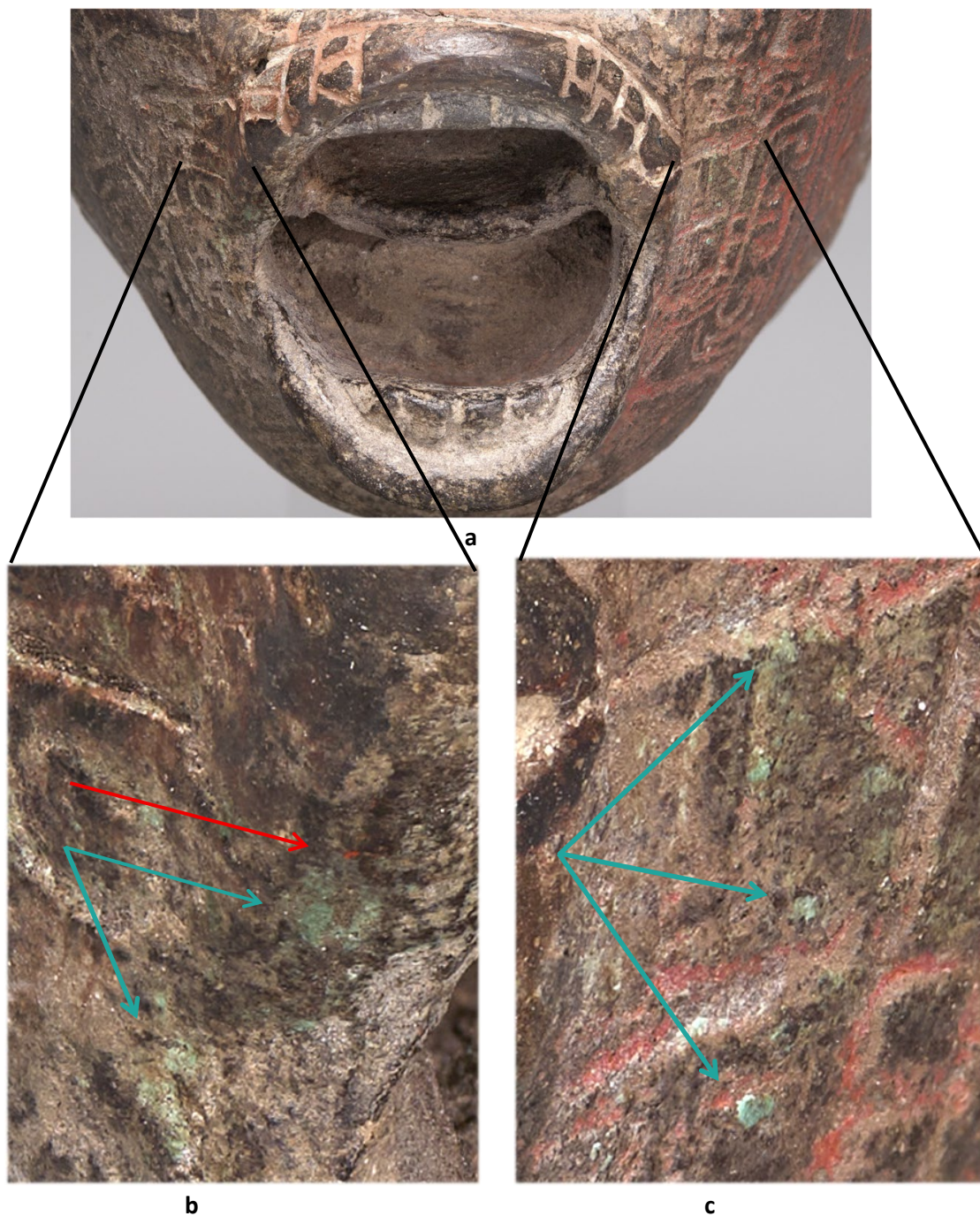


Fig. 7. Paint details around mouth of Mask: **a.** mouth; **b.** right edge of mouth with blue-green paint and a deep red fleck; **c.** edge of mouth with blue-green paint and reddish pigment.



Flecks of deep red paint occur in several places; three examples include flecks on the nose (**Fig. 8**), on the right side of the upper lip (**Fig. 9**), and above the left brow (**Fig. 10**). Scattered evidence of this paint suggests that several sections of the mask were originally painted red.

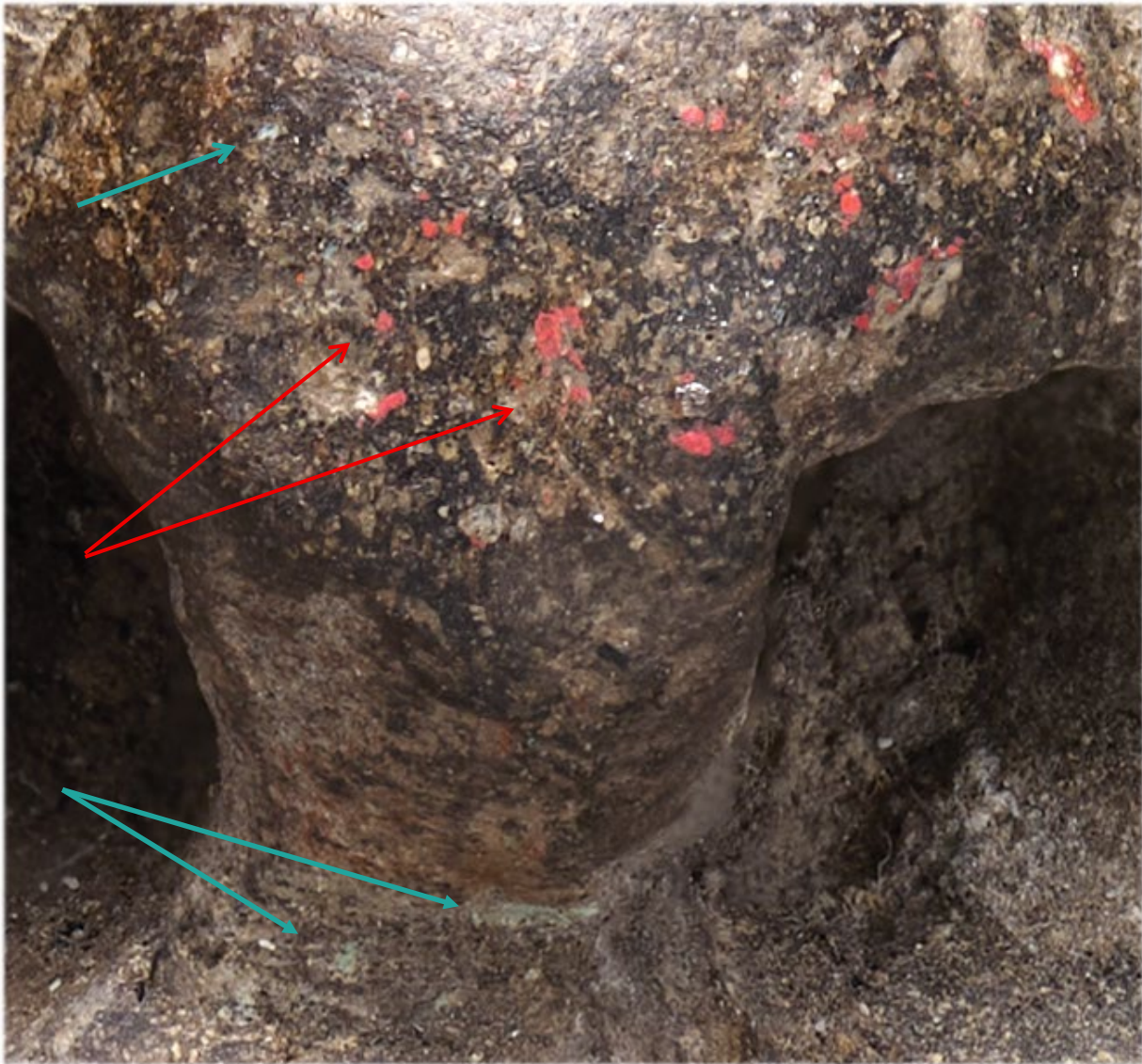


Fig. 8. Paint on Mask. Note flecks of red paint on the tip of the nose, and flecks of blue-green paint at the philtrum (base of the nose).

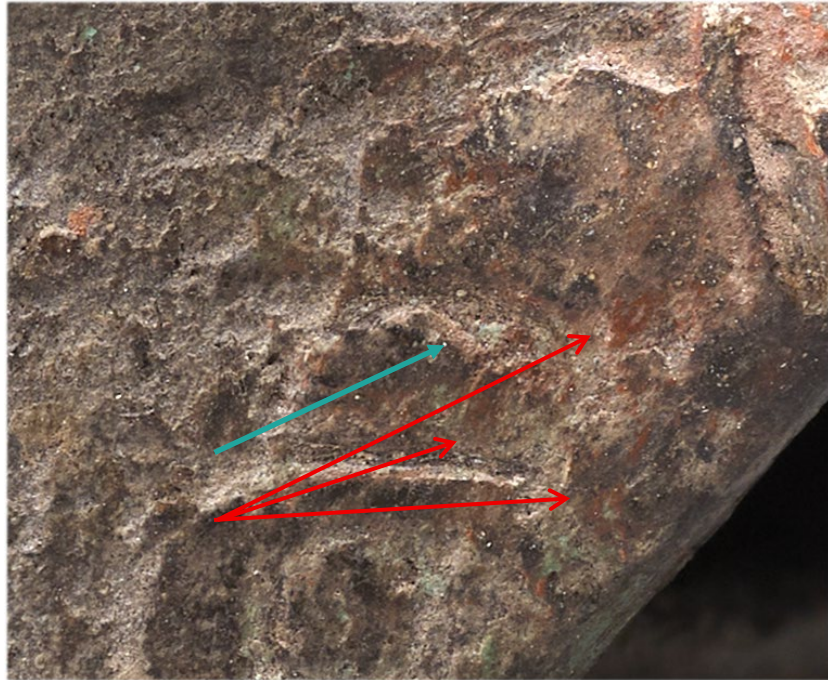


Fig. 9. Paint on Mask. Note red and blue-green on the right side of the upper lip.

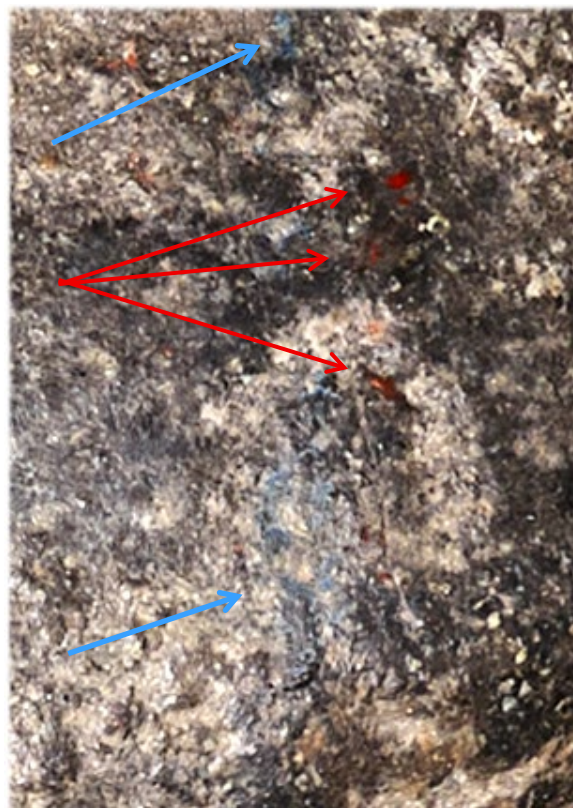


Fig. 10. Paint on Mask. Note traces of blue and bright red above the left brow.



Tentative Sequence

The following sequence remains hypothetical and requires confirmation or contradiction from more detailed physical inspection and scientific analyses. The remaining traces of paint do not indicate how much of the mask was painted with each color.

First, the object was modeled in clay. Then it was covered with a tan undercoat before the outer black slip was brushed on. The outside edge of the right ear appears to have broken off before the black slip was applied. Then the mask was fired. Uneven temperature and uneven exposure to air would account for the brown color of the slip on the left side. It suggests the presence of iron (hematite) in the slip.

Each of the following activities was finished after firing, but in an undetermined order. Deep red and blue paint were added. Three deep lines were gouged on the forehead and around the nasal alar-facial grooves (**Fig. 2a, b**). Designs were added to the cheeks (**Fig. 11**). The lips were outlined, and the lips and teeth were carved (**Fig. 2c**). Differences in the depth of carving suggest three or four separate carving events prior to the carving of the text. Deep red and blue paint was added after firing. The text was incised before blue-green paint was added, and a red line was drawn that still shows between columns A and B and across the top of Columns B, C, D (**Fig. 6**). This does not appear to be the same paint as the flecks of bright red added earlier. Finally, the dusting of the reddish pigment was added.



Fig. 11. Left side of Mask. Note the various depths of carved features. The design on the cheek is too shallow to expose the light undercoat.



Fig. 12. Xipe figures: **a.** *Brazier*, Zapotec, Entrance to Tomb 58, Monte Alban, Oaxaca, Monte Alban IIB-V, 500-800 C.E., ceramic, Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, México; **b.** *Mask*, ceramic, Yale University Art Gallery, 2018.12.20; **c.** *Head of Xipe Totec*, Aztec style, Remojadas, Veracruz, 1428-1521, earthenware, 16.5 x 14 x 14 cm, Gardiner Museum, Toronto, G83.1.7; **d.** *Deity Figure*, Aztec style, Texcoco?, mid. 14th century-1421, stone, pigment, 46 x 26.3 x 27.4 cm, Museum der Kulturen Basel, IVb 647.

Xipe Totec

The ritual of wearing the skin of a flayed victim was known throughout ancient Mesoamerica (Mendoza et al. 2024; Miller and Taube 1993:188–189). **Figure 12** illustrates the ceramic mask alongside stone and ceramic figures recognized as Xipe Totec. Identifying features include hollowed or closed eyes, a slack mouth with outer lips around an inner mouth with lips and tongue. Some figures have facial decorations; many show evidence of red paint. Descriptions of Aztec rituals of the deity come from sixteenth century sources including Durán (1971:172–184) and Sahagún (1970:39–40; 1981:3–4). Tiesler and Olivier (2020) explain that for the Aztecs the Xipe ritual involved removing the heart through the sternal bone (**Fig. 12d**). At least two examples of full-figured Xipe Totec hold a skull or severed head in one hand: **Figure 12a** and a stone seated figure from Bowers Museum (Labbé 1982:Cover); a stone sculpture from Kaminaljuyu holds a femur in its left hand (**Fig. 13b**).

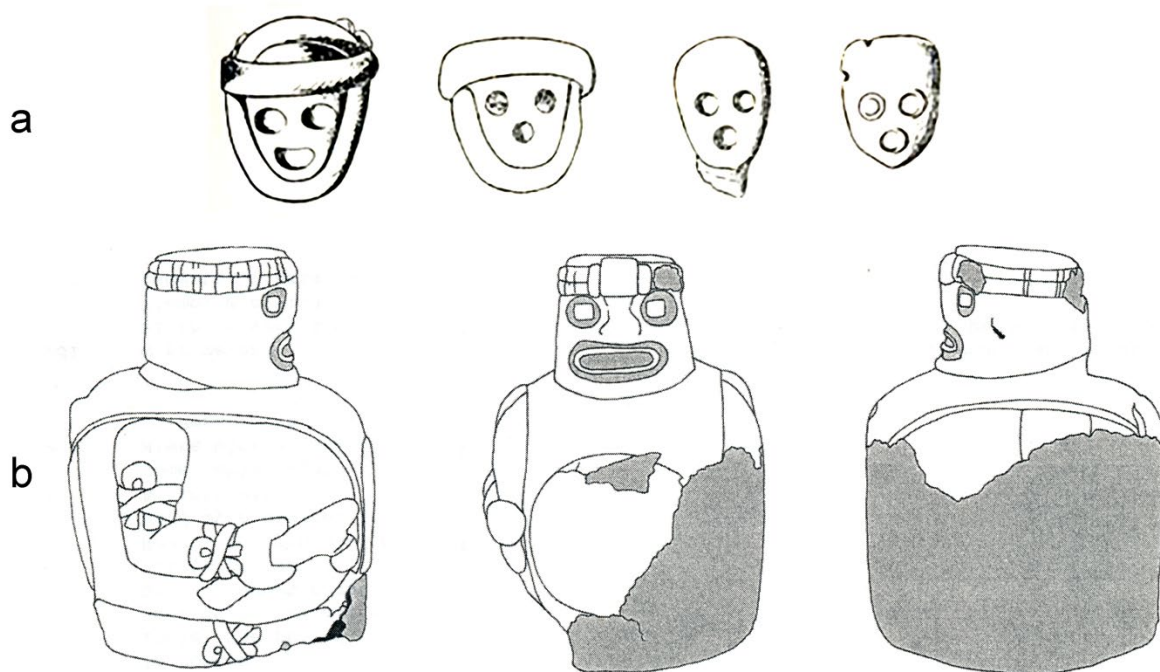


Fig. 13. Pre-Aztec Depictions of Xipe Totec: **a.** Teotihuacan, modeled clay figurines (Séjourné 1959:99); **b.** Kaminaljuyu Anthropomorphic Sculpture 61, Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Ethnología, Guatemala (Lambert 2013).

Wilkerson (1984:107) notes that the Xipe ritual had "considerable time depth in south-central Veracruz," a source of Xipe figurines as early as the Late Formative. Early examples from Late Preclassic Kaminaljuyu and Classic period Teotihuacan (**Fig. 13**) have large, rounded eyes and a band around the top of the head. On one example from Teotihuacan the eye orbits are carved out.⁴ In *The Major Gods of Ancient Yucatan*

⁴ See Baudez (2012) for summary of the debate on the identity of these figurines.



Taube (1992) includes a discussion of Xipe Totec in the chapter *Foreign Gods of Post-Classic Mexico*, but images of the Maya God Q with wrist and ankle bows tying on the flayed skin, seen often in later Mexican depictions (Taube 1992:106, fig. 53g) leave little doubt that Xipe Totec was equivalent to God Q.

Concluding Remarks

All relics have a story to tell. We modify or renew objects passed down over time to mirror our current time and place, our changing aesthetics. In today's world, old-growth milled wood decorates remodeled offices, sandblasted bricks ornament upscale apartments, foreign coins are used as medallions and earrings. Humans adapt objects to reflect changing sociopolitical environments and current aesthetic values. The ceramic mask apparently underwent several stages of such renewal. The motives for the alterations we describe may have been simple embellishments, or they may reflect efforts to bring a new identity to the mask, either out of ignorance of its original purpose, or deliberately, to represent some other mythical being or human actor. Today the mask illustrates the skill of ancient people whose scribes wrote texts we cannot yet understand, whose artists fashioned a face we are not sure we recognize. It remains an object of awe, curiosity, and study.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank Yale University Art Gallery and Matthew Looper for detailed photographs that made this report possible. We would also like to thank Jessie Ann Owens and Matthew Looper for valuable suggestions.

Image credits: Images modified by Martha J. Macri after: Yale University Art Gallery: **Figures 1; 2a, b, c; 3; 5a; 6–10; 12b**; Matthew Looper: **Figures 2d, e, f; 4; 11; 12a; Figure 12c**. Gardiner Museum, Toronto: CC0 1.0; **Figure 12d**. Museum der Kulturen, Basel, used with permission; **Figure 13a**. Séjourné (1959:99); **b**. Lambert (2013:fig. 1).

References

- Baudez, Claude-François
2012 Beauty and Ugliness in Olmec Monumental Sculpture. *Journal de la société des améicanistes* 98(2): 7-31.
- Durán, Diego
1971 *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar*. Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden, trans. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- González González, Carlos Javier
2012 The Xipe Tótec Cult and Mexica Military Promotion. In *Fanning the Sacred Flame*:



Mesoamerican Studies in Honor of H. B. Nicholson. Matthew A. Buxt, Brian D. Dillon, David Carrasco, and Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, eds. Pp. 333-354. Boulder: University Press of Colorado.

González González, Carlos Javier, Juan Alberto Román Berrelleza, Luis Manuel Gamboa Cabezas, and Martha García Sánchez

2016 *Xipe Tótec y la regeneración de la vida*. México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Secretaría de Cultura.

Justeson, John S., and Terrence Kaufman

2018 The Epi-Olmec Text on a Teotihuacan-Style Mask with Special Reference to Ritual Practices Referred to in Epi-Olmec Hieroglyphic Texts. In *Tiempo detenido, tiempo suficiente: ensayos y narraciones mesoamericanistas en homenaje a Alfonso Lacadena García-Gallo*. Harri Kettunen, Verónica A. Vázquez López, Felix Kupprat, et al., eds. Pp. 183–263. Wayeb Publication 1. Belgium: European Association of Mayanists.

Kaufman, Terrence, and John S. Justeson

2001 Epi-Olmec Writing. In *The Proceedings of the Maya Hieroglyphic Workshop, March 10-11, 2001, University of Texas at Austin*. Phillip J Wanyerka, ed. Austin: Phil Wanyerka.

Labbé, Armand J., ed.

1982 *Religion, Art, and Iconography: Man and Cosmos in Prehispanic Mesoamerica*. Santa Ana, CA: Diana Drake Long, Bowers Museum Foundation.

Lambert, Arnaud

2013 Preclassic Maya Representations of Xipe Totec at Kaminaljuyú. *Wayeb Notes*, No. 44. <http://wayeb.org/wayebnotes.php>, accessed January 1, 2025.

Macri, Martha J.

2017 A Sign Catalog of the Isthmian Script. *Glyph Dwellers*, Report 51. <http://glyphdwellers.com/pdf/R51.pdf>, accessed February 28, 2018.

2026 *The Isthmian Script: Deciphering an Ancient Mesoamerican Writing System*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press (in press).

Méluzin, Sylvia

1995 *Further Investigations of the Tuxtla Script: An Inscribed Mask and La Mojarra Stela 1*. Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation, 65. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University.

Mendoza, Rubén G, and Linda Hansen, eds.

2024 *Ritual Human Sacrifice in Mesoamerica: Recent Findings and New Perspectives*. Conflict, Environment, and Social Complexity, 11. Switzerland: Springer Cham.

Miller, Mary Ellen, and Karl A. Taube

1993 *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion*. New York: Thames and Hudson.

Sahagún, Bernardino de

1970 *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain. Book 1: The Gods*. Arthur



J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, trans. Monographs of the School of American Research, No. 14, Part 2. Santa Fe and Salt Lake City: School of American Research and University of Utah Press.

1981 *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain. Book 2: The Ceremonies.* Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, trans. Monographs of the School of American Research, No. 14, Part 3. Santa Fe and Salt Lake City: School of American Research and University of Utah Press.

Séjourné, Laurette

1959 *Un palacio en la ciudad de Los dioses (Teotihuacán).* Mexico, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

Strauss, Stephanie Michelle

2018 *Sculpting the Narrative: The Material Practice of Epi-Olmec Art and Writing.* Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin. <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/85080>.

Taube, Karl A.

1992 *The Major Gods of Ancient Yucatan.* Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology, 32. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Trustees for Harvard University.

Tiesler, Vera, and Guilhem Olivier

2020 Open Chests and Broken Hearts: Ritual Sequences and Meanings of Human Heart Sacrifice in Mesoamerica. *Current Anthropology* 61:2(April): 168–193.

Wilkerson, S. Jeffrey K.

1984 In Search of the Mountain of Foam: Human Sacrifice in Eastern Mesoamerica. In *Ritual Human Sacrifice in Mesoamerica*. Elizabeth Hill Boone, ed. Pp. 101–129. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.



Glyph Dwellers is an occasional publication of the Maya Hieroglyphic Database Project at California State University, Chico, California. Its purpose is to make available recent discoveries about ancient Maya culture, history, iconography, and Mayan historical linguistics deriving from the project.

Funding for the Maya Hieroglyphic Database Project is provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, grants #RT21365-92, RT21608-94, PA22844-96, the National Science Foundation, grants #SBR9710961 and IBSS1328928, the Department of Native American Studies, University of California, Davis, and the Department of Art and Art History, California State University, Chico.

© 2025 Matthew G. Looper. All rights reserved. Written material and artwork appearing in these reports may not be republished or duplicated for profit. Citation of more than one paragraph requires written permission of the publisher. No copies of this work may be distributed electronically, in whole or in part, without express written permission from the publisher.

ISSN 1097-3737