



ART AND WRITING IN  
THE MAYA CITIES,  
A.D. 600–800

*A Poetics of Line*

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# INTRODUCTION

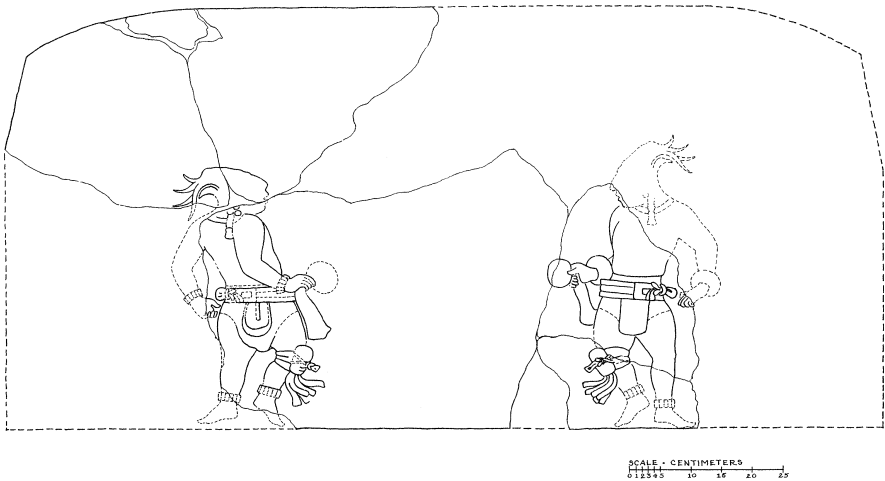
IN THE FIRST millennium A.D., the Maya civilization spread across the lowlands of southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras. By A.D. 600, the rain forests of this region had yielded to a busy patchwork of small and medium-sized cities: The irregular massing and quirky spatial geometries of Maya urbanism appeared along riverways, rose above swamps, and spread across denuded plains. Among these centers' pyramids, plazas, and palaces, fractious elites negotiated the finer points of status and power. Their speech favored archaisms and mannered vowel shifts. They admired the robust physicality that comes with eating rich food every day, at every meal. Their locution flashed with the apple green of jade inlay in their tooth enamel; their councils and banquets were renowned across Mesoamerica as occasions of stilted, refulgent civility.<sup>1</sup>

Maya art treated ball games, binges, conquests, visions, giftings, dances, speeches, parleys, censings, robings, bloodlettings. This visual work represented and embodied dynasty, ceremony, and the chilly impersonality of official discourse among the highborn and the able. It registered minutely observed accounts of the singular ritual occasion and the sustained routine, the artfully staged peak of ritual drama and the unthinking mannerism of the everyday. So too the art posed an extended meditation on the meaning of stubborn things, fleeting situations, and creatural sensations. Maya visual work was preoccupied with the moment of physical awareness in cultural discourse, with eyes that scan, fingers that point, and bodies that move. One particular index of human physicality – the calligrapher's touch – invested Maya art of this period with many of its characteristic visual forms: Calligraphic line coursed across drinking cups, tinklers of shell and bone, temple facades, and urban landmarks, ever reshaped and reshaping as it negotiated the surfaces of cultural experience.

The calligrapher's brush provided this visual tradition with what Mayanist Tatiana Proskouriakoff described as its "pure configuration: [its] preferences for certain shapes, proportions, types of curvature, and rhythmic



1. Piedras Negras “Miscellaneous Sculptured Stone 10.” (Photo: University of Pennsylvania Museum.)



2. Piedras Negras “Miscellaneous Sculptured Stone 10.” (Drawing: Tatiana Proskouriakoff, Courtesy University of Pennsylvania Museum.)

changes of their arrangement.”<sup>22</sup> In its most elemental manifestation, Maya line is little more than a painted curve, a hook of pigment. It may be described as an arc or moving angle, a fluid mannerism beholden to the easy motion and shifting weight of the loaded bristle across a prepared surface. Apparent enough in the pebblelike forms and winding details of Maya glyphs, this linear signature transcends the ordered trains or stacks of hieroglyphic text to course through the art in so many iconographic [CONT.]