

# The “Copulating Couple” at Naj Tunich: A Critical Reexamination

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## Abstract

The discovery of a large corpus of Maya inscriptions and paintings in the cave of Naj Tunich in 1980 attracted the attention of scholars because of an explicitly drawn image of a naked couple locked in an embrace. The initial analysis identified it as part of a well-known scene portraying an old male deity with a young female goddess. With the passage of time, it has become increasingly popular to interpret the drawing as depicting a homoerotic ritual involving two men. This article reviews the iconography to show that there is no evidence to suggest that two men are present, especially since male genitalia are drawn on only one figure. Additionally, the homoerotic interpretation is inconsistent with what is known about cave ritual.

## Keywords

Maya, Cave, Homoerotic, Naj Tunich, Iconography

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## 1. Introduction

I was dismayed to read in Stephen Houston, David Stuart, and Karl Taube’s (2006: p. 43) interesting book, *A Memory of Bones*, that they seemingly accept as an established fact that Drawing 18 (**Figure 1**) at Naj Tunich depicts two males in a same-sex relationship. The authors do not discuss the drawing’s iconography, but simply cite Andrea Stone’s (1995: pp. 143-146) badly flawed analysis. Nor were they the first to do this. Pete Sigal (2000: pp. 203, 219-220) also uncritically accepts that both figures are male, and Matthew Looper (2009: p. 217) accepts the possibility. Before this interpretation hardens into accepted fact, a critical reexamination of Stone’s argument needs to point out the host of serious shortcomings.

## 2. Drawing 18 in Maya Iconography

Stone (1985) initially described the two figures in Drawing 18 as a male and a

female, and she identified the female as the moon goddess. She related the drawing to a large genre of Maya images of an ugly old god coupled with a beautiful young goddess. The sexual nature of the scenes is fairly explicit in some vase paintings, in which the old man is reaching for the woman's breast, and also in figurines from Jaina and many other sites, in which the woman is depicted as seated on the man's lap and he is fondling her breast (Sears, 2017: pp. 228-231).

Stone (1995) later reverses her position in *Images from the Underworld* and advances the idea that the drawing depicts two males. With Stone's later interpretation in mind, Gene Ware and I photographed Drawing 18 as part of a larger multi-spectral imaging project at Naj Tunich in 1998 in the hope that the accompanying hieroglyphic text would provide clues as to the identity of the individuals depicted (Ware & Brady, 1999; Ware et al., 2000, 2001). Unfortunately, attempts to produce a more readable image of the glyphic text using spectral classification enhancement were not successful, so this discussion must rely on the same data set used by Stone.



**Figure 1.** Photograph of Drawing 18 at Naj Tunich.

I agree with Stone on the majority of her points concerning the iconography of Drawing 18. Like Stone, I stress the fact that, physically, the two figures are radically different in all major aspects of bodily form. The sex of the figure on the viewer's left has never been questioned because of his prominently displayed penis and scrotum. His spindly legs, small, pinched buttocks, unmodified skull, and top knot of hair serve to mark him as ugly by Maya standards and probably old (also [Looper, 2009: p. 217](#)). The figure on the right, by contrast, has full thighs, a smooth, flowing line for the buttocks, and a modified skull that reflects the Classic Maya ideal of beauty. [Stone \(1985: p. 28, 1995: p. 145\)](#) also notes that the upswept eye and strand of hair down the back identify the figure on the right as female (also [Looper, 2009: p. 217](#)).

I strongly disagree, however, with Stone on several points. The most obvious flaw in her argument is that only one of the figures has a penis. I am boggled that no one has previously pointed this out and astounded that Stone never addresses why the figure on the right has no penis if, in fact, he is supposed to be male. While it might be argued that the figure on the viewer's right has his penis and scrotum tucked between his legs, those favoring this view must at least acknowledge that this is a huge leap of faith for which no supporting evidence has been mustered. [Stone \(1995: p. 145\)](#) also claims that the figure on the right "has no sign of breasts" and uses this as an indication that the individual is a female impersonator. [Looper \(2009: p. 217\)](#) describes the figure as having a flat chest. In reality, neither of these observations is accurate. The drawing simply does not show the breasts, which are obscured by the arms of the two individuals. This removes another major point in both Stone's and Looper's arguments.

Finally, Stone's assertions about the body of the individual on the viewer's right are naïve and ethnocentric. [Stone \(1995: p. 145\)](#) states, "Her solid physique, though admirable, is not particularly feminine." I disagree. Standards of beauty differ from one culture to another and over time. The slender frame that Stone associates with feminine beauty only came into vogue in the United States at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The slight pouch in the lower abdomen and the crease giving an impression of a waistline are both features typical of the female body. Mesoamerican standards of femininity are decidedly different from our own. This is clearly illustrated in the story in which Huemac, the last Toltec king, is supposed to have asked the Nonoalco for a woman four hand spans wide at the hips and is disappointed with the first candidate whose hips are just barely four hand spans wide ([Davies, 1977](#)). Mesoamerican figurines [for instance, Tlatilco ([Lesure, 2012: Fig. 18.3](#))] frequently depict women with large hips and thighs. [Houston et al. \(2006: p. 42\)](#) note as well that Maya women are depicted with more rounded forms. The old god/young woman pairing is depicted on a half dozen Maya codex-style vessels with the woman's figure being more corpulent ([Robicsek & Hales, 1981: pp. 32-34](#)). Interestingly, the old god is depicted on these vessels as being wizened and without a deformed skull. This leaves little doubt that Drawing 18 at Naj Tunich is part of this genre.

### 3. Discussion

So, how has Stone arrived at the conclusion that Drawing 18 depicts a same-sex pairing? She says that Drawing 18 represents a ritual performance rather than a mythological scene. Although she recognizes that “representations of deities” do occur in the cave, Stone (1995: pp. 148-154) never explains why Drawing 18 is treated as a ritual performance rather than as a deity representation. Drawing on Taube’s (1989) work on Classic Maya ritual humor, Stone proposes that Drawing 18 represents a humorous public performance in Naj Tunich. She attempts to buttress this claim by citing an ethnographic case of a public dance between a costumed male representing an old man and another costumed male impersonating a young woman as an analog. She characterizes the ethnographic examples as “amusing and bawdy satires”. “Amusing and bawdy satires” might be the subject of graffiti scratched on walls, but it seems highly unlikely that Drawing 18, produced by an elite scribe, is portraying such a thing. Although the accompanying text is unreadable, its very presence signals the serious nature of the subject.

The ethnographic example used in Stone’s interpretation of Drawing 18 only “fits” by featuring two men involved in behavior of a sexual nature. On even the most cursory inspection, there are major problems with this analogy, not the least of which is that the characters portray a man and a woman, making it clear that the performance is about heterosexual behavior. The antics between the performers are amusing because the performance is public and both actors remain fully dressed as males beneath their costumes. The public nature of the performance, in which the actors actually wear two layers of clothing, precludes any possibility of sexual contact, making the sexual aspect “safe”.

Additionally, Stone’s use of the ethnographic analogy to infer that the right-hand figure in Drawing 18 is a man uses a public farce to reconstruct what would probably have been a serious ritual performance in the cave. Secondly, in the ethnographic example, the primary actors are fully clothed and in public, while the figures depicted in Drawing 18, by contrast, are completely nude and in a more private setting. This would place the sexual aspect in a “dangerous” category. Considering the way that nudity was viewed in ancient Maya society, comparing the scene from Drawing 18 to the farce mentioned by Stone seems preposterous.

The problems with Stone’s use of this analogy do not stop there, as she employs the widespread contemporary prohibition (Brady, 1989: pp. 417-419) against women entering caves to support her argument that both actors were male. She says, “Secreted away in a vast cavern, an all-male audience might exhibit the good-humored camaraderie one would expect in a gender-restricted group... With the absence of public scrutiny in the cave, sexual innuendo gives way to brassy eroticism” (Stone, 1995: p. 145). Stone’s description sounds more like a drunken fraternity house party than any cave ritual that I have witnessed over the last 40 years. This interpretation is totally out of character with what we know of contemporary Maya cave ritual.

J. Eric Thompson (1970: pp. 172-173) notes that sexual abstinence is required

for participation in many rituals. Cave ceremonies throughout the Maya area require a period of sexual abstinence to be observed before entering a cave (Deuss, 2007: p. 142). Thompson (1970: p. 173) says that this can be as long as 40 days for the cave at Pecmo in Alta Verapaz. Sexual abstinence is not restricted simply to cave rituals but appears in other types of rituals as well. Among the Q'eqchi', a two-week period of sexual abstinence is observed before the maize planting ritual (Wilson, 1995: p. 63). Sexual abstinence prior to games also exists as a normative ideal in *ulama*, the Indigenous ballgame played in West Mexico (Garza et al., 2004: p. 31). If a man can offend the gods simply by having sex in his home several days before a ceremony, the idea of having sex as part of a cave ritual is fanciful indeed. Not surprisingly, no ethnographic cases of anything resembling this type of activity have been produced by proponents of the same-sex hypothesis. This evidence, once again, suggests that Drawing 18 does not depict an actual ritual performance.

The issue that neither Stone nor Houston et al. deal with is the point of rituals involving same-sex sexual behavior. There is a general concern with fertility in Maya religion, and fertility is always seen as resulting from the union of male with female. Tarn and Prechtel (1986: p. 173) state that "it would appear that Atiteco thought conceives of male and female as aspects of one original unit and that no unit can be other than both male and female. Certainly, nothing complete, nothing fully fulfilling its function in the world, can be other than this." A same-sex pairing is not fertile and, therefore, would not carry the same meaning.

Not surprisingly, the abundance of depictions of an old man with a young woman in Maya art stands in sharp contrast to the dearth of examples of homoerotic scenes. Houston et al. (2006: p. 212) produce only one badly eroded, inconclusive image, other than Drawing 18, as representing the entire corpus of Maya homoerotic art. Having said that, the obvious conclusion is that, at this moment, there is not a single clear image of homoeroticism in Maya art. If that is the case, it stands as further evidence that the figures in Drawing 18 were intended to represent a man and a woman.

Finally, in a more recent article, *Keeping Abreast of the Maya*, Stone (2011: p. 169) states that mythological scenes are the main context for female nudity. If, therefore, Drawing 18 does not depict a ritual but a mythological scene, the entire issue of the same-sex pairing essentially evaporates. Drawing 18 then becomes one among many depictions in the same vein and falls into a well-established genre of Maya images of an old male fondling a young woman, which appears to be part of a larger myth, but the exact point of the story is not known (Robicsek & Hales, 1981).

#### 4. Conclusion

This analysis of the iconography of Drawing 18 strongly suggests that it depicts a male and a female, and no evidence was found to support the idea that two males are represented. The sex of the figure on the viewer's left is male because his penis is clearly depicted. The individual on the right does not have a penis or visible

genitalia, which Houston et al. (2006: p. 51) associate with female figures. We note that all parts of the bodies of the two figures contrast at every point, which we interpret as identifying them as belonging to different sexes. I have shown that Stone's assertion that the figure on the right lacks breasts simply cannot be sustained, and that her characterization of the figure's form as unfeminine is ethnocentric.

Stone's interpretation of both figures being male is built on the unsupported assertion that the drawing depicts a ritual performance rather than deities. Stone suggests that the ritual was analogous to a modern Maya ceremony in which two fully dressed men perform a bawdy public farce, costumed as an old man and a young woman. I have drawn attention to the poor fit of the analogy in which a public ritual with fully clothed performers is used as a model for a private ritual with nude performers. I have also pointed out that Stone's proposed ritual is totally out of character with modern ritual, where sexual abstinence is practiced in preparation for conducting a cave ceremony.

Finally, both figures conform to physical characteristics exhibited by the old god/young woman pairings depicted on codex-style vessels and in figurines. There is not a similar corpus of homoerotic art, so the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that Drawing 18 at Naj Tunich depicts a male and a female.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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