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House of Death – Symbolic, Mediating and Transient Roles of Funerary Architecture

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This paper will present the symbolic, mediating and transient roles of funerary architecture. It will focus on the lengthy history of house tombs, where domestic images often symbolized the eternal house of the dead – a place often built not only to house the dead but also to materialize their lives and provide portentous bridges to the lands of the dead and revered ancestors. The paper will have a particular emphasis on the multiple and conflicting interpretations and explanations regarding Mayan tombs in general and those found on the Yucatan Peninsula specifically. The conclusion will suggest that the multifarious roles, symbolizations and materializations of funerary architecture often relied on domestic imagery and referrals to establish their potency and authority. This session may include some brief, interactive exercises.

Background

Sacred places, either believed to be revealed by the gods or consecrated in the hope that they would appear, were specific places clearly separated from their surroundings. The gods, in all their manifestations, symbolized eternal life and from the earliest building programs, architecture was put in service of embodying and representing their continuity. Placemaking acts established eternal places reserved only for the rituals of the clans, tribes or cultures that created them, but death, especially of rulers, represented an impermanence that needed to be reconciled.

Death and place are inextricably bound to the human experience and pose enduring existential questions pertaining to corporality and continuity. Deities first appeared as the sun and the earth, living and dying through days and seasons, but ever-present. Early in the history of religion, the god who dies and is reborn appears, and subsequently becomes an enduring type. Rulers -- chiefs, pharaohs, kings -- became earthly manifestations of deities and when they died their tombs, with often but not always carefully preserved relics (and often an array of accoutrements needed for their eternal houses), symbolized transcendence over death and the continuity of their authority.¹

Architecture, of all the art forms, has proven to be the most effective in commemorating the dead² and mortuary architecture is one of the earliest and most enduring of building types. Funerary architecture had multiple and multivalent roles of mediating between life and death (with inflections to each culture) -- permanence and decay – humans and their gods. It is arguably the most symbolically potent and diverse of sacred building types and includes some of its oldest surviving examples. They were built not only to memorialize the dead but as liminal places where contact with the dead (and all they represented), was often believed possible. In the case of deified rulers, funerary architecture assumed the role of sustaining the power of rulers beyond the grave and mediating between humans and their god-rulers. The architecture materialized the cultural components embodied by the ruler while serving as a medium by which the ruler and all he represented could be accessed.

Notes

¹ According to Lindsay Jones, the history of architecture contains a “fabulous abundance and diversity of extravagant religio-architectural manifestations of the fascination, fear and awe of death – tombs, vaults, sepulchers and sarcophagi, morgues, mausoleums, gallows and graves” Lindsay Jones, *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture, Volume 1: Monumental Occasions, Reflections on the Eventfulness of Religious Architecture*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000, p.153.

² Jones, op. cit., p. 180.