

Recent Investigations on the Unique Maya Wall Paintings from Chajul (Guatemala)

Investigaciones recientes sobre las singulares pinturas murales mayas de Chajul (Guatemala)

JAROSŁAW ŻRAŁKA

Universidad Jaguelónica

ORCID: 0000-0001-7641-729X / zralka.j@gmail.com

MONIKA BANACH

Universidad Jaguelónica

ORCID: 0000-0003-0532-2781 / mj.banach@gmail.com

VÍCTOR CASTILLO

Universidad Jaguelónica

ORCID: 0000-0001-8379-8043 / victor.aguilar@uj.edu.pl

KATARZYNA RADNICKA-DOMINIAK

Proyecto "Conservación de los Murales de Chajul" (COMUCH)

ORCID: 0000-0002-4987-6885 / Katarzyna.Radnicka@gmail.com

MARK HOWELL

Proyecto COMUCH

ORCID: 0009-0008-9812-7988 / mhrabinal@gmail.com

IGOR SARMIENTOS

Proyecto COMUCH

ORCID: 0000-0002-3570-6930 / igorsarmientos@gmail.com

ARKADIUSZ MACIEJ

Proyecto COMUCH

ORCID: 0009-0009-4450-6656 / arekmaciej@wp.pl

MARCIN BŁASZCZYK

Academia de Bellas Artes de Cracovia

ORCID: 0009-0000-7217-8770 / mblaszczyk@asp.krakow.pl

MARÍA LUISA VÁZQUEZ DE ÁGREDOS-PASCUAL
Universitat de València
ORCID: 0000-0002-4433-8850 / m.Luisa.Vazquez@uv.es

CRISTINA VIDAL-LORENZO
Universitat de València
ORCID: 0000-0002-8681-6494 / cristina.vidal@uv.es

BOLESŁAW ZYCH
Universidad Jaguelónica
ORCID: 0000-0003-3348-901X / boleslaw.zych@uj.edu.pl

LUCAS ASICONA
Proyecto COMUCH
ORCID: 0009-0001-2459-2800 / laraasicona73@hotmail.com

JUAN LUIS VELÁSQUEZ
Proyecto COMUCH
ORCID: 0009-0006-6226-1857 / jlvelasquez57@yahoo.com

EVELYN BÚCARO
Proyecto COMUCH
ORCID: 0009-0005-0451-6439 / evelynbucaro@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT: This article presents the results of interdisciplinary research encompassing conservation, archaeological excavations, ethnographic, ethnomusicological and historical studies on the Colonial murals documented in the Ixil Maya residences of Chajul (Guatemala). The Chajul murals are unique for several reasons. First, they were documented in what are now private family homes, whereas most examples of Colonial art in Latin America are found in churches and convents. Moreover, the later paintings focus on Christian religious themes, while the murals from Chajul are associated with socio-religious activities of local brotherhoods known as *cofradías*. These sodalities were established in Chajul after the Spanish conquest and their members were Indigenous people. As we demonstrate in this article, the wall paintings from Chajul depict local dances-dramas, some of which are pre-Hispanic in origin, while others were introduced by the Spanish. The murals of Chajul represent an interesting fusion of pre-Hispanic, Indigenous tradition and European influences. In this contribution, we present the results of our recent study focused on the conservation works of two Chajul houses with murals, as well as archaeological excavations conducted close to the houses. This research contributes to our understanding of the Highland Maya during pre-Hispanic, Colonial, and early modern times. Additionally, it enriches our knowledge of local, Indigenous artistic traditions and the artistic canons of Colonial Mesoamerica, as well as the persistence of a cultural identity blending pre-Columbian and European heritage in this region of Latin America.

KEYWORDS: Chajul, wall paintings, Colonial period, *cofradías*, Highlands of Guatemala

RESUMEN: En este artículo se presentan los resultados de la investigación interdisciplinaria que abarca la conservación, las excavaciones arqueológicas y los estudios etnográficos, etnomusicológicos e históricos sobre los murales coloniales documentados en las casas de los mayas ixiles de Chajul (Guatemala). Los murales de Chajul son únicos por varias razones. En primer lugar, se documentaron en lo que ahora son casas particulares de varias familias de la comunidad, mientras que la mayoría de los ejemplos de arte colonial en América Latina se encuentran en iglesias y conventos. Además, mientras que estas últimas se centran en temas propios de la religión cristiana, los murales de Chajul se asocian con actividades socio religiosas de las confraternidades locales establecidas aquí tras la conquista española, llamadas cofradías, cuyos miembros eran indígenas. Como demostramos en este artículo, las pinturas murales de Chajul representan danzas-dramas, algunas de las cuales son locales, de origen prehispánico, mientras que otras fueron introducidas por los españoles. Los murales de Chajul constituyen una interesante fusión de tradición indígena prehispánica e influencias europeas. En esta contribución presentamos los resultados de nuestro reciente trabajo, que se centró en las labores de conservación de los murales en dos casas de Chajul, así como en excavaciones arqueológicas realizadas cerca de ellas, y en observaciones etnográficas y etnomusicológicas. Esta investigación contribuye a nuestro conocimiento sobre los mayas de las Tierras Altas durante las épocas prehispánica, colonial y moderna temprana. También enriquece nuestra comprensión acerca de las tradiciones artísticas locales indígenas y los cánones artísticos de la Mesoamérica colonial, así como sobre la persistencia de una identidad cultural de carácter mixto precolombino y europeo en esta parte de América Latina.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Chajul, pinturas murales, periodo colonial, cofradías, Tierras Altas de Guatemala

RECEPCIÓN: 8 de enero de 2025

ACEPTACIÓN: 26 de febrero de 2025

doi: <https://doi.org/10.19130/iifl.ecm.2025.1/0Q27R1V054>

Introduction

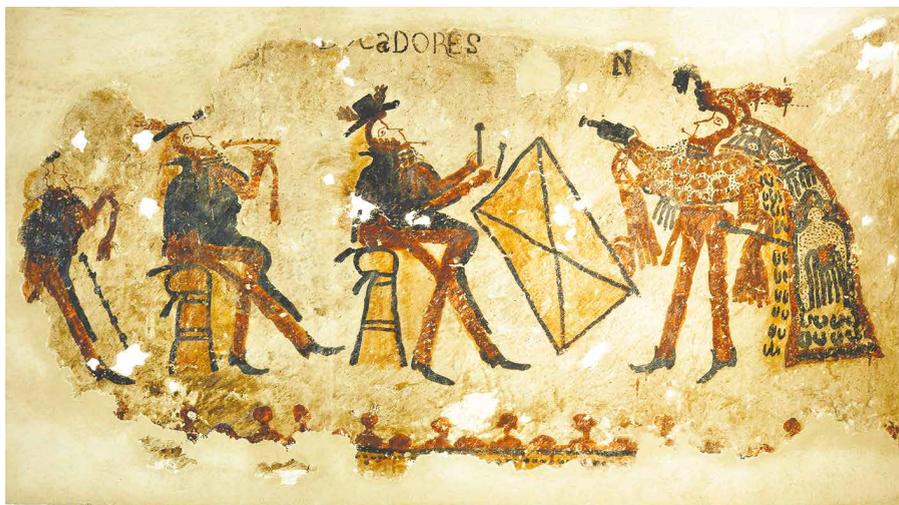
The town of Chajul, located in the western Highlands of Guatemala (Figure 1), features prominently on the map of Colonial Central America as a place with several adobe houses with rare wall paintings that differ significantly from the known examples of Latin American Colonial art. In 2015, a group of Polish scholars conducted the conservation and maintenance of one of these houses (House No. 3, belonging to the Asicona family), whose results have already been published (see Żrałka *et al.*, 2020). For decades, the paintings in the Asicona family residence remained hidden beneath layers of white paint covering the walls of the house. In 2003, Lucas Asicona, a local historian, uncovered the first fragments of these paintings during renovation work on his father's house.



Figure 1. A map of Maya area featuring the Ixil Region and the town of Chajul. Map by Dorota Bojkowska.

The painted scenes from the Asicona House depict various stages of a dance-drama, showing dancers wearing unusually rich costumes and headdresses, whose forms and ornamentation derive from Maya tradition. Accompanying them are musicians and other participants in the event, whose costumes are entirely European (Figure 2). The musicians play instruments such as a large drum and a *chirimía*—a double-reed woodwind instrument introduced by the Spaniards—which are still commonly used in the region today. One of the walls of the Asicona family’s house is also decorated with representations of flowers in vases that flank a small home altar. The altar holds crosses, images of saints, offerings of candles and incense, and photos of deceased family members.

Our recent research has shown that similar decorations once adorned the walls of other houses in the town of Chajul. Over the past few years, a team of scholars from Poland, Guatemala, the United States, and Spain has conducted conservation efforts and in-depth research on these paintings. Here, we present the results of our recent work, conducted between 2019 and 2021, on two houses with wall paintings belonging to the Zúñiga and Ramírez families. This research included conservation and restoration work, 3D documentation (scanning and photogrammetry), archaeological excavations in the vicinity of the mural-adorned houses, as well as ethnographic, ethnomusicological, and music archaeology research, along with studies of historical documents. The study contributes to our understanding of the Maya of the Ixil region during pre-Hispanic, Colonial, and early modern times. It also enriches our knowledge of local indigenous artistic traditions and the artistic expression of Colonial Mesoamerica, highlighting the practice of blending pre-Columbian and European influences in this part of Latin America.



a



Figure 2. Wall paintings from Asicona Family: a) western wall; b) northern wall.
Photographs by Robert Słaboński.

Chajul during pre-Hispanic and Colonial times

The Ixil region, which is the primary focus of this study, is located in the mountainous area of the Department of El Quiché in Guatemala. It is predominantly inhabited by the Ixil Maya, one of more than twenty distinct Maya groups. The region comprises three municipalities: Chajul, Nebaj, and Cotzal. Settlement in this area has been continuous since pre-Columbian times, but the population resettlements imposed by Spanish authorities after the Conquest shaped the town's present layout (Becquelin *et al.*, 2001). The distinctive houses, built of sun-dried adobe bricks and nestled on the slopes of the Cuchumatanes Mountains, surround the white church that towers over the town, creating a strikingly picturesque landscape in Chajul.

Despite the shared language spoken by the Ixil Maya, the region is not homogeneous. Differences in dialects, traditional attire, and customs are often emphasized by the Ixil people.

Chajul was once an important pre-Hispanic settlement during the Classic period (AD 250-900), as evidenced by many archaeological materials uncovered by local inhabitants, the results of our recent excavations, and also scant epigraphic data. One ceramic vessel, now housed in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, bears an inscription mentioning its owner, who is described as *u chan*, or “guardian,” of an individual referred to as “Chaju[l] ajaw” (Chajul lord) (van Akkeren, 2005: 52; D. Beliaev, pers. comm., 2019; Žračka *et al.*, 2020: 763). This text clearly demonstrates that, at least during the Classic period (to which the vessel dates), Chajul had its own dynasty of kings who held this prestigious Maya title.

It is also known that the Milwaukee Public Museum has a large collection of artifacts that were supposedly excavated from a tomb in Chajul in the 1950s or 1960s by a person named Dr. Lyle Clifford Armstrong. These items were then sold to the Hyatt family in 1963, who donated them to the Milwaukee Public Museum. Unfortunately, we do not know exactly where in Chajul the tomb was excavated. Based on the available information, it can be said that it is a Late Classic burial that was later reused during the Postclassic. From the notes that Armstrong left, it appears that it was a stone-lined chamber with a vaulted ceiling placed within a mound-structure. It contained the bodies of three individuals equipped with a large collection of artifacts made of ceramics, stone, and obsidian (Eisner, 2020). In terms of architectural form and equipment, the tomb was similar to burials discovered in Nebaj and Acul Valley (Becquelin, 2001; Eisner, 2020: 51; Smith and Kidder, 1951). For the Postclassic period (AD 900-1530), several settlements have been documented in the Ixil region, suggesting a substantial population on the eve of the Spanish arrival (Smith, 1955: 28-34).

After the Spanish invasion, Colonial authorities relocated the Ixil people into three newly established settlements or *cabeceras* (Colonial towns): Santa María Nebaj, San Juan Cotzal, and San Gaspar Chajul. The process of resettling indigenous peoples into communities designed according to Spanish ideals of civility and urbanism, known as *congregación*, created an arena in which new social dynamics emerged among the Maya in relation to the Colonial order (Lovell, 1983: 164-165). At the same time, the *pueblos de indios* created by the Spaniards allow for the observation of certain continuities in attachment to place and identity, spanning from pre- to post-invasion times, through Colonial realities, and into the present (Lovell, *et al.*, 2013: 145). In the case of Chajul, the town developed as a large, composite town where various groups were resettled, including the early failed *congregación* of Ilom located closer to the lowlands—a process overseen by the Dominicans (Remesal, 1619: 609; Lovell, 2015: 89-90, 94; Colby and van den Berghe, 1969: 52). Eventually, the people of Ilom were also resettled, Chajul and Ilom, becoming two distinct *cantones* (boroughs) within the Colonial town of Chajul, a division that has remained significant to this day. During the Colonial period, Chajul was a major settlement on the fringes of the Spanish Empire, bordering the unconquered lands of the historical Lacandones and

engaging in violent encounters with them (de Vos, 1988: 115-119). Although Chajul was the largest town in the Ixil region during this time, the parish seat was located in the nearby town of Nebaj, likely due to its closer proximity to the main roads.

Zúñiga House

One of the houses in Chajul that still has wall paintings is the residence of the Zúñiga family. In 2019, we received permission from Marcos Zúñiga and his family to carry out consolidation work on their property. Prior to this Jarosław Żrałka and Juan Luis Velásquez visited the house in October 2018 and assessed that it was in a very poor state of preservation. In March 2019, before conservation work could begin, we first replaced the entire roof. Currently, the house consists of one large room constructed of adobe bricks (Figure 3). However, according to the owners, it originally had two chambers; one of these has recently been destroyed and replaced with a new building made of blocks. Local inhabitants reported the discovery of ceramics containing human bones—most likely funerary urns typical for this region—at the site where the later structure was erected.



Figure 3. Reconstruction of Zúñiga House from Chajul. 3D model by Bolesław Zych).

Before restoration work began, the owners removed the last layers of plaster, partially exposing the paintings on the northern wall of the building. Conservation work conducted at Zúñiga's house in March and April 2019 revealed that all four walls had been decorated with three pictorial layers (Layers I, II, and III), which were subsequently covered by younger layers of plaster (whitewash) (Figure 4). Also, Layers I, II, and III are each separated by several layers of whitewash. Moreover, the oldest layer (Layer I) was painted directly on the adobe brick walls. The best-preserved painted layer is Layer II; however, it was covered with layers of whitewash and Layer III, the latter of which was found to be in a very deteriorated state of preservation.



Figure 4. Restoration of Zúñiga House. Work in progress, April 2019. Photograph by J. Żrałka.

Layer III had merged with later layers of whitewash, making it impossible to save. Hence, we decided to document and remove this layer and expose Layer II, which was in a much better state. This approach was also beneficial for understanding the composition of the wall paintings. The colours of Layer II are vibrant and clean, the brush strokes are clear, and all the details of the figures and their attires are easy to recognize.

Iconography of murals from Zúñiga House - general remarks

In the following section, we describe the iconography of Layer II from the Zúñiga House. Striking similarity to the house of the Asicona family restored by our team in 2015 (Żrałka *et al.*, 2020) indicates the existence of a shared art program, style and tradition that were copied and reproduced in many Chajul houses. It is also likely that some of the paintings were produced by the same artists or by people representing the same artistic school.

A procession of richly attired dancers is visible on the northern wall of the Zúñiga House, closely resembling those depicted on the northern wall of the Asicona House (see Żrałka *et al.*, 2020). The wall features six dancers grouped in pairs, with each pair arranged such that one individual stands in front of the other (Figure 5). They all wear the same outfit: long capes, rich headdresses adorned with flowers

and plumes, caftans, trousers, and heeled shoes. Each figure holds a long black object that can be interpreted as a *vara*—a symbol of power associated with *cofradías* (religious brotherhoods established here after the Spanish conquest; see below) and other authorities—or, alternatively, as a type of stage prop representing swords or hatchets. Although some of the representations are partially destroyed, we can observe that each dancer holds another long object pointing upward, whose function is difficult to determine. These might be musical instruments, such as rattles, or alternatively, feather fans, which are also seen in some Colonial paintings from Mexico depicting indigenous dancers (Katzew, 2011). Between two of the dancers there is a lower figure, probably a person of short stature (such individuals are also present in the Asicona House; see Żrałka *et al.*, 2020: 770). To the left of the scene described above, two people are seated on high stools, wearing distinctive head-dresses adorned with antlers. Moreover, on the western side of the northern wall, representations of several other individuals—including women in characteristic long dresses—have partially survived.

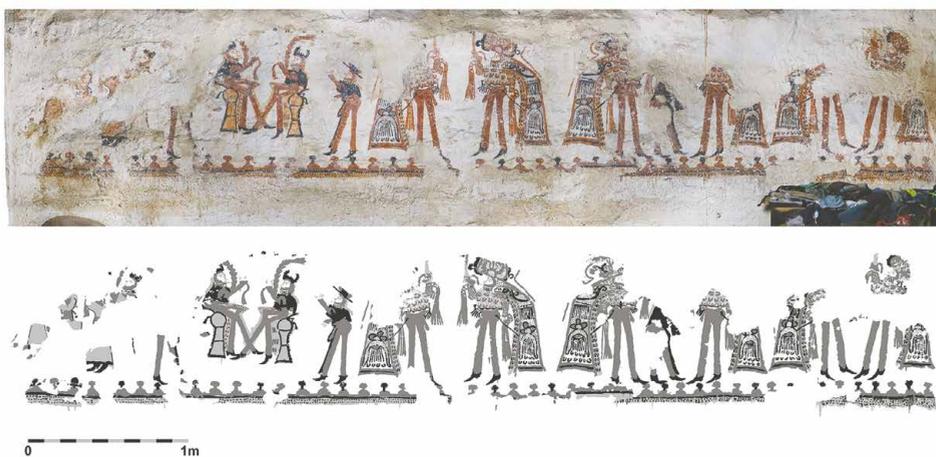


Figure 5. Photogrammetry and drawing of the northern wall of Zúñiga House after conservation. Photogrammetry by B. Zych, drawing by K. Radnicka-Dominiak.

All of the individuals featured in the northern (as well as southern and eastern) walls seem to be wearing masks and smoking pipes. Smoking tobacco and drinking alcohol were (and still are) activities associated with feasts celebrated by *cofradías* in the Ixil Region and other parts of the Maya Highlands (e.g. Vogt, 1976: 34-38). Moreover, tobacco continues to be an important medicinal plant for the Ixil, used in curative treatments and ceremonies. It is a plant with a rich tradition of use in the region, and is related to the hummingbird narratives that are central

themes of one of the most important dances of pre-Hispanic origin: Dance of the Baskets or Tz'unun (see Chinchilla, 2017; Loughmiller-Cardinal *et al.*, 2019).

The western wall of the Zúñiga House presents distinct iconographic elements that, nevertheless, still align with the broader iconographic program found in other houses: four vessels adorned with flowers (Figure 6). Ethnobotanical consultations with Miguel Torres and Mario Véliz of the University of San Carlos of Guatemala suggest that the plants depicted on this wall may represent an epiphytic cactus species (*Epiphyllum crenatum*), which is typical of humid or cloudy forests and native to Mesoamerica (Torres, 2022). Other proposed interpretations include plants of the Solanaceae family, such as tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*), Brugmansia (*Brugmansia suaveolens*), and *Datura* species.

The south wall of the Zúñiga House features a group of four individuals in long robes and large hats, seated on high stools, one in front of the other (Figure 7). The analysis of their attire allows for only a limited interpretation. However, considering details of their physical appearance and the context in which they are depicted, it can be suggested that they are wearing long, loose, brown garments resembling a friar's robe. Notably, on the northern extension of the eastern wall of the same house, there is a similar depiction of two individuals in long robes and large hats, also seated on high stools. Whether these figures represent Spanish friars or, alternatively, indigenous people dressed as Catholic priests playing roles in dance-plays or other ceremonial activities remains subject to further analysis. To the left of the "friars" on the southern wall of the Zúñiga House, there is also a depiction of a walking figure holding a stick.



Figure 6. Vessels painted on the western wall of Zúñiga House. Photogrammetry by B. Zych.



Figure 7. Depiction of “friars” on the southern wall of Zúñiga House. Photograph by A. Maciej.

Chordophone Players from Zúñiga House: Ethnomusicological Comments

What follows to the right on the southern wall of the Zúñiga House is a completely unique scene depicting two musicians playing guitar-like instruments (so-called long-neck fretted chordophones) (Figure 8). These representations are particularly notable because they are the only surviving depictions of people playing proto-guitars within the corpus of Chajul murals (Figure 5). Other wall paintings from Chajul depict musicians playing different instruments, such as the drum and *chirimía*. A careful analysis not only helps to identify the instruments being played but also provides insight into the possible dating of the Chajul murals. In particular, the characteristics of the chordophones allow for at least two possible conclusions to be drawn regarding the exact identification of the instruments and the dating of the murals.

The musicians exhibit several elements that are uncharacteristic of the other mural figures. Notably, they face the viewer, making this one of the very few known instances in the documented Chajul murals where individuals are not shown in profile. The person on the viewer’s left is the most clearly discernible (Figure 8). His head appears to be wrapped in broad red triangular shapes that could represent curled hair, largely covered by a black broad-brimmed hat with red tassels hanging from the brim. His fringed shirt or jacket is yellow with black dots, resembling the pelt of a feline.

The body of the chordophone instrument that this character holds has an hour-glass-shaped contour, with its interior outlined in thick red paint and its pinched waist positioned near the player's own waist. Near the bottom of the instrument is a half oval, probably representing the instrument bridge, where the strings would have been tied. Emanating from it are three lines, clearly denoting chordophone strings running up the length of the body and then the neck. The upper body has a circular sound hole with flower-like decorations also in red projecting from the circumference. The upper part ends with an elaborate headstock with six tuning keys or pegs. Three clearly painted and one gestural string post are depicted as points just opposite the lower two keys on each side of the head. The musician's posture is also interesting: he is left-handed and picks the strings with three fingers minimally indicated in red paint. His left elbow is crooked ergonomically for picking such an instrument while standing. The right arm is shown under the upper body of the instrument up to where the elbow bends in the anatomically correct position for fingering a fretted chordophone.

The second musician, to the viewer's right, cannot be as clearly perceived (Figure 8). What can be seen shows portions of a human figure positioned in a mirror image of the first one, and it is clear that this person also plays a similar chordophone. One assumes this musician plays a duplicate instrument in a similar way as the first, with the crucial difference being his fingering of the strings with his right hand while fingering the neck with his left. It is ultimately unclear whether the two individuals are meant to represent European or indigenous musicians, as they wear clothing characteristic of both.

According to American ethnoarchaeomusicologist and musician Mark Howell, the musical instrument they hold is an almost exact replica of one or more fretted long-neck chordophone types that were not uncommon in Europe from the fifteenth century onward. Its generic appearance closely resembles that of a modern acoustic guitar. Specifically, the instruments depicted are six-string proto-guitars with three courses of double strings. Broadly speaking, they belong to the lute family, resembling Spanish vihuelas or Baroque guitars, which were common in Europe during the Colonial period.

Guatemalan musicologist and composer Igor Sarmientos believes that the instruments depicted on the southern wall of Zúñiga House represent another guitar-family type, one that originated in Portugal in the fifteenth century, generically called a *viola* (not to be confused with the bowed instrument of the same name). Specifically, there are three types of violas that most closely resemble the instrument depicted in the murals: the *viola toeira*, *viola campaniça*, and *viola beiroa*. All three have pinched bodies, relatively short necks, and multiple courses of strings. However, none of them perfectly match the six tuning keys and three courses of strings shown in the mural. Despite their similarities, there are morphological differences among them, primarily for the *viola beiroa*, which typically had a set of double tuning keys at the lower end of its neck. With these two keys the instrument possessed seven double courses of 12 strings, and without them five double

courses of 10. The other two violas also predominantly featured five double courses of 10 strings (although some *viola campanica*'s have been found having six double courses of 12 strings). The tuning of the ten-string *viola campanica* is AADDGGBBEE, matching the letter names of pitches for the Baroque guitar, but the intervallic system is different, a critical distinction when comparing the instrument to certain modern Highland Guatemalan guitars (as discussed shortly). Along with this interpretation, the instrument most pictorially similar to the proto-guitars in the murals would be the *viola campanica*, which Sarmientos dates to the end of the eighteenth century in Guatemala (Ramos, Carvalhinho, and da Silva, 2017: 10). Accordingly, if a *viola* was copied for the murals, it likely arrived in the Chajul area sometime between 1770 and 1820.



Figure 8. Two guitarists depicted on the western part of the southern wall, Zúñiga House.
Photograph by J. Żrałka.

Another detail worth examining in this context is that the Baroque guitar had five courses of nine strings (all but the highest being paired), while the vihuela had five, six, or seven courses, with varying numbers of strings per course. The number of strings depicted in the murals is a multiple of the six-string vihuela, but

the exaggerated pinched body is not characteristic of that instrument. However, since appearance and string number are not consistent enough to form definitive conclusions about what is depicted, Howell suggests that a better identification may be achieved by comparing the proto-guitars in the paintings to fretted chordophones currently used in the Guatemalan highlands.

There exists a Highland Guatemalan repertoire of courting songs called *B'ix rxin sk'ul* (in Tz'utujil) or "Songs of the Ancestors," sung for certain ritual events, accompanied by a five-string guitar, made from a six-string one by removal of that instrument's lowest string (O'Brian-Rothe, 2019). The remaining five are tuned to the pitches ADGBE. Moreover, the bottom A, or fifth, string of the highland five-string guitar is tuned higher in pitch than the D that follows, a deviation in standard guitar tuning coincidentally matching the tuning and intervallic system found for Baroque guitars, according to the sixteenth-century treatise, *Guitarra Española* (Amat, 1626).

This interpretation, along with considerations of music history and theory in Guatemala, suggests that the mural chordophones were most likely copied from Baroque guitars, tuned in a manner that would later be adopted by Highland Maya guitarists for ritualized song cycles. Therefore, the paintings in the Zúñiga House are estimated to date to around 1700, the peak period of use for the Baroque guitar. Ethnographic observations further enrich this interpretation. Coincidentally, at a *cofradía* feast observed by our research team in January 2022, an Ixil music trio included a guitarist playing a five-string guitar with tuning that matched that used for the Tz'utujil "Songs of the Ancestors" and, by extension, the sixteenth- through eighteenth-century Baroque guitar. This documentation, along with other instances of present-day festivities where such instruments appear, confirms the continuation of a Highland Guatemalan tuning system that possibly dates back to the early Colonial period.

Finally, although the Chajul murals typically feature musicians playing drums and flutes, the use of the guitar has been confirmed in previous ethnographic studies conducted in this region. It was documented during the performance of the Tz'unun Dance or Dance of the Baskets (Hoyt, 1963: 68-69; Yurchenco, 2006: 94) (see below).

Animals and/or other non-human creatures

In the eastern section of the southern wall of the Zúñiga House, another element stands out from what has been uncovered previously. Although the paintings were in a very poor state, what survived here includes, among other elements, traces of a four-legged animal covered with stripes (Figure 9a). Once again, due to the state of preservation and the painting style, its precise identification is difficult.

In general, depictions of animals are part of the artistic program of the murals and are known from other Chajul houses. One such house, which has since been

destroyed, had its murals partially documented by the French scholar Jean Pierre Courau in the 1970s and by Benjamin Colby and Aquiles Palomino Ojeda, who investigated the Ixil region in the 1960s (Palomino Ojeda, 1972; Colby *et al.*, n.d.). Specifically, their findings on the murals are recorded in an unpublished monograph on the Dance of the Baskets, or Tz'unun, in Chajul (Colby *et al.*, n.d.). The latter dance is of pre-Hispanic origin and it was associated with the ritual of betrothal and marriage. The story that relates to this dance in Chajul is connected to the Mesoamerican mythical narratives that are referred to as the “hummingbird myths” (Chinchilla, 2010; Braakhuis, 2010). The Ixil variant talks about an interaction between ancestral beings that involves marriage and house-building themes. The first of them called Rey Oyeb' Achi, is a shapeshifter who turns into a bird, typically a hummingbird. He engages into an unsolicited flirt with another being, a creatrix and weaver called Marikita, who was the daughter of old Mataqtani. The narrative abounds in animal motifs and the type of dance such as the Tz'unun is also classified as hunting themed (Howell, 2009). In Colby and Palomino's report and Courau's photos, the four-legged creatures with striped bodies, long necks, ears or possibly horns, and rounded designs on their bodies are accompanied by a figure that may be interpreted as a hunter, given the object it carries, which resembles a gun or blowgun (Figure 9b). Moreover, Colby's report also features birds that may be interpreted as quetzals due to their characteristic long tails.

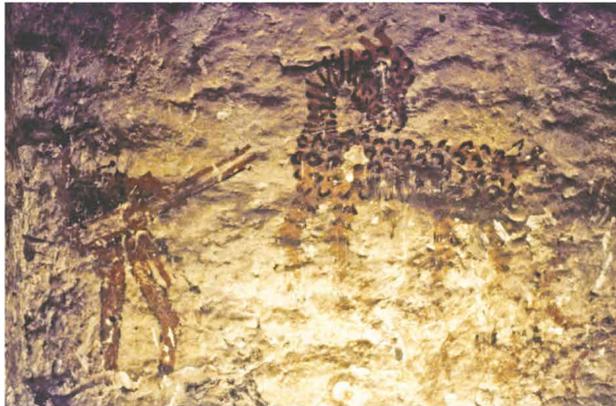
Another house that has not undergone conservation, belonging to Tomás Ramírez, was visited in 2018 by members of our team. This house also contains depictions of animals, including two feline-like creatures facing each other (Figure 9c). Based on the similarities between the paintings from these three locations, it can be assumed that they all represent the same feline creatures, possibly jaguars. Additionally, it is important to note that in the past, two animals—most likely monkeys—were painted in niches on the façade of the Catholic Church in Chajul.

Whether these murals depict literal animals and hunting scenes or represent some of the non-human creatures omnipresent in Ixil oral tradition remains an open question. In many Ixil narratives, humanity appears fluid, with human and non-human beings hunting, speaking, or engaging in relationships with one another, as well as transforming into animals (such as monkeys or bees), being pursued by them, or participating in their creation.

Some of the oldest dance-plays performed in this region are also based on hunting themes, suggesting that the depiction of animals or hunters on the murals may further support this interpretation. In this context, it is worth noting that the exterior façade of the Zúñiga House still bears wall paintings. In addition to floral decorations encircling the portal, it features two men with guns flanking the entrance—another element associated with the theme of hunting and the *Tz'unun* dance-play.



a



b



c

Figure 9. Feline creatures documented inside of several Chajul houses. a) Animal from the southern wall of Zúñiga House. Photograph by A. Maciej; b) Creature from J. P. Courau photograph; c) Two felines from the house of Tomas Ramírez. Photograph by J. Žralka.

Musicians from the eastern wall of Zúñiga House

When it comes to the eastern wall of the Zúñiga House, the paintings here have survived only to the north of the entrance. They represent a group of musicians (Figure 10). Two pictorial layers have been documented and partially restored to show scenes from two different chronological moments. Both layers depicted musicians playing a big drum and a flute or *chirimía* and two individuals wearing long robes sitting on high stools behind them, facing each other, holding some kind of garlands, feather fans or flowers in hands. The current state of the painting after intervention reveals two figures playing instruments painted on Layer II and two individuals sitting on high stools (who look like the “friars” described above) that are painted on the younger Layer III, but some elements visible here belong to the oldest Layer I. Central part of the scene, where all three layers merge with each other reveals how the composition was repainted over time on younger layers keeping their general elements but not all the details. We can observe differences in style of hats, long trousers or stools, but the main theme of the scene seems to be the same. Although the visibility of the layers distorts the perception of the whole scene, it also shows the technique of creating the paintings.



Figure 10. Wall paintings from the eastern wall of Zúñiga House. Photograph by A. Maciej.

Wall paintings from Ramírez family house

In this section we will describe the murals in the Ramírez House, which were consolidated and conserved in July and August 2021. One of the owners, 95-year-old Gaspar Ramírez Mateo, like many other Ixil elders, was a member of the *cofradías*—

religious confraternities responsible for the care of Catholic saint figures, established in this and other parts of Latin America during the Colonial period (see below). The house is a large structure with three spacious rooms, one of which contains wall paintings. When we began our research in 2021, these murals were in a very poor state of preservation. The paintings partially cover three walls of this room: the western, northern, and eastern walls (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Reconstruction of Ramírez House from Chajul. 3D models by Bolesław Zych.

The western wall is situated directly opposite the entrance, and at its center, there is a masonry altar flanked by a well-known motif: four vases containing what is proposed to be an epiphytic cactus, two on each side of the wall (Figure 12a). The best-preserved section is the southern part of the western wall, where we were able to uncover depictions of two vases separated by an unidentified element, on top of which perch two quetzals (Figure 12b). This element may represent a tree, and one possible interpretation relates to the narrative that forms the central theme of the *Tz'unun* dance. One of the versions of the narrative associated to this dance describes a transformation scene in which the eyes of the main female character, Marikita, turn into bees, and a beehive is constructed from the trunk or branch of a so-called “tiger tree” (Colby *et al.*, n.d.: 66). As previously mentioned, the main male character in the dance is believed to be a bird—either a hummingbird, a sparrow or other type of bird. Interestingly, the mural on the western wall of the Ramírez House features what appears to be a tree with an orange trunk covered in black dots, resembling jaguar fur. Additionally, at its center, the tree contains a clock-like feature. Similar

motifs can be found in murals documented in Colby's report (Colby *et al.*, n.d.). There are several possible interpretations of this clock-like feature, including musical instruments, dance props, mirrors, beehives, and botanical elements. However, if it is indeed depicted on a tree trunk, it may represent a quetzal or woodpecker nest, as these birds carve holes in wood for nesting. Once abandoned, these trunks are often repurposed for traditional Ixil beehives. A third quetzal is also depicted at the far right of the described panel. The presence of quetzals in the Ramírez family house is significant, as it may help to establish the meaning of the entire painted scene. As noted above, quetzals and other birds, such as hummingbirds, frequently appear in Ixil oral traditions, particularly in narratives related to the *Tz'unun* dance.

The whole scene from the southern extension of the western wall is encircled by decorative elements. The upper part has two sectors: one is situated just below the ceiling (and on the same level as the ceiling beams) and it features flowers similar to the cactus flower petals described above. Below them there is a second sector that features dangling elements most of which are similar to flowers. The bottom and sides of the mural panel are also encircled by decorative elements: the bottom part consists of a set of motifs with round or semi-round endings.

The northern wall of the Ramírez family house is poorly preserved. Only small fragments of Layer II are visible here. However, the surviving fragments do permit us to reconstruct—at least partly—the meaning of the whole scene. The central and eastern side of the northern wall is occupied by a procession of richly attired dancers with long capes, pants, heeled shoes and long props (*varas*, swords or hatchets) (Figure 13a). Their attire is similar to the clothing of other dancers represented on the walls of the Asicona and Zúñiga houses. However, the headdresses of dancers from Ramírez House are different. We can easily distinguish elongated black and red antler-like elements or plumes/flowers, but the whole of the headdress is somehow simpler. It may be the result of a different method used by the painter to render human figures and their details. Based on these differences, we can presume that the murals of Ramírez House were painted by a different person while those from the Asicona and Zúñiga houses were most probably executed by the same artist. Moreover, one of the dancers shown in the center of the northern wall is accompanied by an animal whose identification is hard to be established since it bears features that could be typical for several different species (canines, felines and monkeys). According to the present inhabitants, the destroyed part of the northern wall originally depicted a jaguar, as well as a hammock. To the left of this representation there are also some interesting depictions of two women in long dresses. Above their heads are some bent yellow shapes, possibly bananas hanging from the ceiling. Such banana motifs as well as depictions of a hammock with two persons laying there, potentially in a scene of intoxication, are also found in paintings from Colby's unpublished report (Colby *et al.*, n.d.). In the 1940s, Jackson S. Lincoln (an American anthropologist working in this region) reported in his unpublished ethnography of the Ixil region that bananas used to be hung from the beams in *cofradía* houses during feasts (Lincoln, 1945). This method of hanging bananas

is also present today and allows gradual maturation of green bananas transported from the warm to cold lands.

The eastern wall of the Ramírez House forms an iconographic continuity of the northern wall. Only the northern extension of this wall (situated to the right of the entrance) bears murals which were found in a fairly good state of preservation since they were covered by thin layers of whitewash. Our investigations indicate that the southern section of the eastern wall, as well as the southern wall, have no

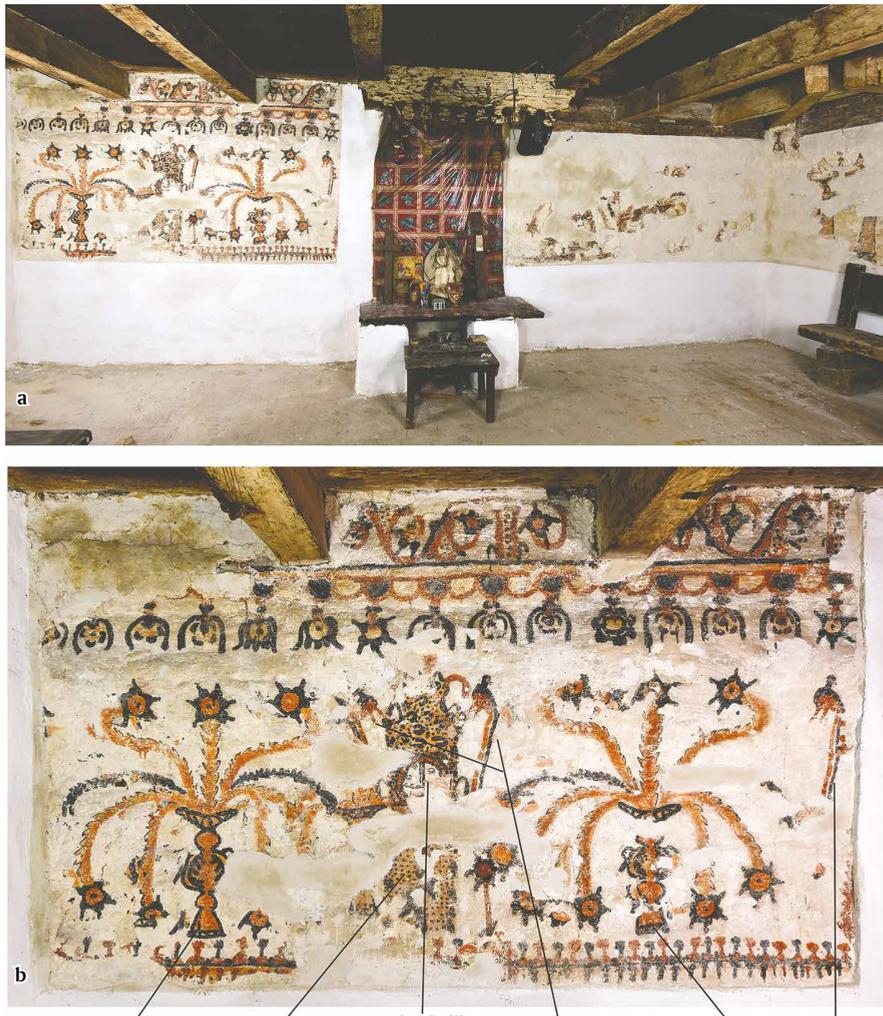


Figure 12. a) General view of the western wall of Ramírez House with an altar and representations of vases; b) detail featuring two vases from the southern part of the western wall of Ramírez House. Note representations of quetzals and “tiger tree”. Photograph by R. Staboński.

pictorial layers. According to the owners, these walls were subject to renovation that took place in 2003 when new limestone and cement plaster was applied, eliminating older layers that included murals.

However, the murals from the northern section of the eastern wall were exposed in 2021 during the process of conservation. They feature one dancer standing in front of a person playing a drum (Figure 13b). Behind the drummer there are only partly preserved depictions of at least two more individuals sitting on stools. The upper parts of these images did not survive but based on the similarities to the scenes from the western wall of the Asicona and Zúñiga houses we can be almost certain that one of these two individuals sitting to the right of the drummer was also a musician who was most probably shown playing the flute or *chirimía*.



Figure 13. a) Photogrammetry of the northern wall of Ramírez House; b) northern extension of the eastern wall of Ramírez family house depicting richly-attired dancer and musicians. Photogrammetry by B. Zych, photograph by R. Słaboński.

Religious Sodalities of Chajul

In the social memory of the Ixil of Chajul, the houses with wall paintings are remembered as belonging to community members who participated in the *cofradía* system. *Cofradías* are Catholic sodalities composed of lay individuals devoted to the cult of a Christian saint. Beyond their ritual functions, *cofradías* also played important socioeconomic roles within the local community, such as lending money to members and contributing to the sustenance of the parish church (van Oss, 1986: 89-92, 109-115; MacLeod, 1983; Hill, 1986; Farriss, 1980). *Cofradías* had a hierarchical organization, with their leadership being renewed every year when new *mayordomos* (administrators) took over the image of the saint and kept it in their house for the course of one year. The renovation of the office of *mayordomo* allowed the mobility of the *cofradía* seat across the town in different locations, as the image of the patron saint was cared for in different houses. This pattern is important to understand the presence of wall paintings in many houses in Chajul. *Cofradías* have caught the attention of ethnographers during the twentieth century, who described them as powerful nativist institutions (e.g. Vogt 1969; Reina 1967; Rojas Lima 1988; Bunzel 1969). *Cofradías* were always prominent local institutions, but it seems that their influence and power were boosted during the second half of the eighteenth century (García, 2008). Although it is tempting to project the ethnographic present to the *cofradías* of the Colonial period, case studies might reveal distinct local historical trajectories and enrich the existing sources that mention the *cofradías* of the Ixil region (e.g. Lincoln, 1945; Colby and van den Berghe, 1969; Colby and Colby, 1981; Deuss, 2018). For example, recent archival research has revealed that besides *cofradías*, other religious sodalities existed at Chajul during the Colonial period (Castillo and Banach, 2025). These included the *hermandad* (a confraternity that functioned only with authorization from the parish priest) and the *guachibal* (an intergenerational domestic devotion). Although *cofradías*, *hermandades* and *guachibales* had their own particularities regarding their canonical status and financial matters within the structure of the parish church, all of them were centered around the cult of the saints and the three sponsored festivities and celebrations in honor of their patron saints. It was in fact the cult of the saints, the social practice that provided the context for the performance of dances and dramas that are likely depicted in the murals of Chajul. The intimate connection between *cofradías*, the cult of the saints, and the performance of dances and dramas was noticed by European chronicles of the Colonial period. English Dominican priest Thomas Gage, for example, highlighted with great detail the importance of the representation of dramas as part of local manifestations of the devotions to the saints (Gage, 1958: 243-247). Gage noticed that dances and dramas were performed over the course of long periods in both public and private spaces, an observation also made by Francisco de Fuentes y Guzmán, who put special care in describing the setting of the dances that took place in domestic spaces, which included abundant and costly decoration (Fuentes y Guzmán, 2015: I: 604, 616, II: 617, III:15-16, 34, 46). Archival research

also suggests a great investment of *cofradías* in feathers and costumes used in dances and dramas as part of the festivities honoring the saints (Hill II, 1986).

The oldest known mention of *cofradías* in Chajul comes from church records dated AD 1688, when the Cofradía del Rosario was listed along other, unnamed ones (Ruz *et al.*, 2002: 506-508). Originally there were ten *cofradías* in Chajul, five for each of the two main *cantones*. Cantón Chajul, located to the west of the main plaza, typically considered as more prestigious, would manage the Cofradías of Virgen del Rosario Winaq, San Gaspar, San Pedro Apóstol, El Calvario (together with Cristo de Esquipulas), and Virgen Concepción (with San Jose). *Cofradías* from Cantón Ilom would carry Virgen del Rosario Ixoq, Sacramento Corpus Christi, Salvador del Mundo, Santa Cruz Ixoq and Virgen de Guadalupe (see Deuss, 2018; Castillo and Banach, 2025). Presently, they are united under a committee (*Comité de Cofradía*) and recognize the whole ten, but not all of these *cofradías* are active and some of those that are, carry multiple saints. Virgen del Rosario Winaq (one of the two gendered aspects of Virgin of the Rosary) is considered one of the most important and is held together with San Gaspar in the same *cofradía* house. The remaining *cofradías* continue to organize feasts in honor of saints, cultural events, and Ixil calendric ceremonies associated with the agricultural year, during which spiritual specialists called *Mama'* perform rituals known as *costumbre* and *ceremonias Mayas* (Banach, 2017). These ceremonies have always been considered an inseparable aspect of *cofradía* religious activity, which involved celebrations in “clubhouses” and sacred places, accompanied by music and dance (Lincoln, 1945; Colby and Colby, 1981). Although all *cofradía* ceremonies have traditionally been tied to Catholicism through the figures of saints, they are now often regarded as independent from the Catholic Church. Some owners of houses with mural paintings, such as Don Gaspar and Don Melchor Ramírez, retain memories of their elders' participation in *cofradías*. They recall the original division of *cofradías* between the two *cantones* and preserve oral traditions about the origins of saints. They also remember that Ixil calendar ceremonies were once part of the celebrations held in their homes. The activity of the *cofradías*, including those in Chajul, has declined over the years for various reasons, most notably due to shifts in religious affiliation toward Protestantism.

Material and technique of mural paintings

Since 2018, a line of research focused on the physicochemical identification and historical-cultural use of pigments, artistic techniques, and paint preparation has been carried out by members of our project. This approach was applied between 2018 and 2019 in an analysis of the Asicona House (Żrałka *et al.*, 2020) and between 2021 and 2022 during the study of samples from the Ramírez and Zúñiga Houses. The physicochemical analysis included microscopic, spectroscopic, chromatographic, and nuclear magnetic resonance testing, the later aimed a better understanding of the organic nature of the pictorial binders used.

The results of these investigations confirmed the presence of pigments that show continuity with those used by the Maya in pre-Hispanic times. These include lime white (CaCO_3), carbon black, and a wide range of earth-derived colors, such as reds of diverse chemical compositions, including hematite (Fe_2O_3). Moreover, a well-known pigment, Maya blue, was identified in the Asicona House (Żrałka *et al.*, 2020). This pigment is a composite of inorganic clay (palygorskite) combined with natural dye extracted from the leaves of indigo plants (*Indigofera* genus). During pre-Hispanic times, Maya blue was used in mural paintings, as well as for decorating polychrome ceramics, carved monuments, and books. The technology for its preparation dates back to the Late Preclassic period in the Maya area (ca. 300 BC-AD 250) (Vázquez de Ágredos *et al.*, 2011) and to the Middle Preclassic period (1000-300 BC) in other parts of Mesoamerica (Vázquez de Ágredos *et al.*, 2019). It was widely used, particularly during the Classic period, as evidenced in the paintings of Bonampak, Calakmul, Xultun, Chilonche, and other sites (Megaloni, 2014; Miller and Brittenham, 2013; Muñoz and Vidal, 2019; Saturno *et al.*, 2015). The presence of Maya blue at Chajul is significant; it not only indicates the survival of pre-Hispanic pigments in mural painting traditions that continued into the Colonial period in the Guatemalan Highlands but also attests to the continuity of manufacturing processes associated with the preparation of these pigments. This continuity validates an intangible cultural heritage through social identity, cohesion, and community development. Additionally, historical records indicate that during the Colonial period, this pigment was still produced in Guatemala and even traded to Europe (Erquicia Cruz, 2024).

Analysis of the mortar and plaster in all three Chajul houses that were subject of conservation (Asicona, Ramírez, and Zúñiga) revealed a composition based on calcium carbonate (CaCO_3) and clays, which corresponds to the materials characteristic of Maya mural painting in pre-Hispanic times (Vázquez de Ágredos, 2010). The only distinguishing feature of the lime technology used in the Chajul houses, compared to that of the ancient Maya, is the absence of any organic component (such as gum, gum-resin, or vegetable resin) linked to calcium carbonate and clays.

Finally, gas chromatography-mass spectrometry and nuclear magnetic resonance analyses conducted on samples from the three Chajul houses confirmed that, in all cases, the paintings were created using a dry technique, consistent with the tradition most characteristic of pre-Hispanic Maya mural painting. The binders identified in the three houses are of vegetable origin, with the exception of the Ramírez House, where formic acid was found in significant quantities among the components of the binders. While formic acid can be a degradation metabolite from microorganisms, it is also a natural component of honey, opening an intriguing avenue for future research into its potential use as a pictorial binder in the Chajul murals. This finding also suggests a possible link to painting techniques used during the European Renaissance and Baroque periods. Furthermore, the role of honey as a binder must be considered within its ritual significance for various Maya groups, both past and present (i.e., Braakhuis, 2010; Żrałka *et al.*, 2018; Pickands, 2019). Additionally, the importance of beekeeping and honey production in Ixil Maya oral

tradition presents valuable avenues for further research on the iconography of the Chajul murals and beyond.

The problem of dating

The exact dating of the murals in Chajul houses remains a subject of debate. Radiocarbon dating from three houses provides a broad time range between the 17th and 19th centuries (see Żrałka *et al.*, 2020: fig. 9). However, the musical instruments depicted in the murals may offer clues for a more precise dating.

The *chirimías* and drums, introduced by the Spanish at the beginning of the conquest, have remained in use in Guatemala to this day. Therefore, their presence does not help pinpoint a specific time period for the paintings. The proto-guitars depicted in the Zúñiga House, however, are more informative. The proposed types of instruments shown on the southern wall of the Zúñiga House correspond to distinct historical periods. The *vihuela*, a proto-guitar, was in use from the 14th to the 16th centuries; the Baroque guitar from the 16th to the mid-18th century; and the modern guitar was standardized in the late 18th century. Other candidates, such as Portuguese *violás* (guitar-family instruments), were only available in the Americas by the mid-18th century. However, the continuity of the tuning system in modern Highland Guatemalan guitar playing suggests that the instrument depicted in the murals is more likely a Baroque guitar. If this interpretation is correct, the instrument's period of prominence in Guatemala—likely the 17th or early 18th century—aligns with the radiocarbon dating results, reinforcing the estimated time frame of the murals.

Recent archaeological investigations at Chajul

During the 2021 season, we excavated several test pits near houses with murals, hoping that these investigations would help us to refine the dating of the wall paintings. Additionally, we aimed to determine whether these houses were built upon pre-Columbian architectural remains. Three test pits excavated beside the Ramírez and Zúñiga houses contained materials from pre-Hispanic, Colonial, and modern periods. However, most archaeological layers were disturbed, as they contained mixed materials from different time periods.

The most significant and revealing excavation was carried out near the church, in an elevated area where a house with wall paintings had once stood before being dismantled and destroyed several decades ago. This house is most likely the same one documented by Jean Pierre Courau in 1973 and by Benjamin Colby and his team in the 1960s, as mentioned above (Colby *et al.*, n.d.). Recently, the owners of this lot constructed a new building near the perimeter where the old adobe house with murals once stood. During the construction, they encountered human remains

and pre-Hispanic artifacts, including an impressive polychrome vase in the Chama style—typical of this part of the Maya Highlands (see Danien, 1998, 2009)—as well as fragments of a large ceramic urn. These findings indicate a burial site, most likely situated within a platform and dating to the Late Classic period (600-800 AD) (Figure 14a).

In a 1.20 by 1.20 m test pit excavated near the location of these vessels, our team identified six stratigraphic layers (Figure 14b). Excavations revealed that the three uppermost layers (from the surface to 0.60 m) contained mixed Colonial and pre-Hispanic materials. In contrast, layers 4-6 (from 0.60 to 1.25 m below the surface) represented an undisturbed archaeological context. These deeper layers contained a variety of artifacts, including blades made of green obsidian from Central Mexico and a vessel placed as part of an offering (Figure 14b). The findings suggest that these layers were part of a larger pre-Hispanic terrace or platform constructed several centuries before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors.

The structure excavated as part of Operation III was located very close to the church and may have been part of the monumental core of pre-Hispanic Chajul. The terrain in this area is uneven, sloping from north to south, making it likely that a series of architectural terraces were created here during pre-Columbian times. Where the church now stands, there may have once been the city's main plaza, surrounded by important buildings that were later covered by Colonial architecture. Part of Colonial Spanish practice associated with the creation of *congregaciones* was to build churches on top of important indigenous buildings and ceremonial complexes in order to erase local religious practices (Lovell, 2015: 140-142).

It was also during the Colonial period that *cofradías* were established in Chajul and other Highland communities. The first members of the Chajul *cofradías* may have been drawn from the local pre-Hispanic elite. The history of the *cofradías*, along with oral traditions associated with the figures of the saints, is closely intertwined with the establishment of *cantones*. These traditions also connect to pre-Hispanic sites regarded as sacred places with ceremonial altars (*k'at'chb'al*). Among the dozens of such locations surrounding Chajul, some have been overbuilt by modern architecture in the town center and are remembered as the dwellings of ancestors, such as Majob'al or the area near the Catholic Church of Chajul (Banach, 2024b).

Summary and conclusions

During our research in Chajul, we documented a total of nine houses with wall paintings, of which only three underwent conservation work. However, there were originally more; we know that at least four have been destroyed in recent years. Apart from Asicona, Ramírez, and Zúñiga houses, we received permission to access several other residences with paintings, which were documented in detail using 3D scanning and photogrammetry. Some additional houses are known to contain paintings, but we were unable to document them. Based on the conservation work

conducted so far and the documentation of other houses with murals, we can attempt to provide a general iconographic summary and identify specific patterns in the spatial organization and content of the Chajul paintings.



Figure 14. a) Chama-style vessel found by local inhabitants near the test-pit of Operation III. Photogrammetry by B. Zych; b) Test-pit excavated in the place close to which a house with wall paintings once existed (Operation III). Note the ceramic vessel in the bottom of the excavation unit, part of an offering deposited in the core of pre-Hispanic platform. Photograph by R. Słaboński.

One of the most significant features in the mural-adorned rooms is a wall displaying paintings of flowers in vases. These murals flank home altars, which, in some cases—such as in the Asicona and Ramírez houses—continue being in use. Elements of the altar, such as wooden crosses or figures of saints, have often been passed down through generations. Since these altars also held figures of saints carried by different *cofrades* during their annual turn, they must have been central elements in

each of these households in the past, just as they are today in *cofradía* ceremonies, where the figures of saints are placed on these altars. Families typically also used their home altars for private prayers or ceremonies, and according to interviews, most houses in Chajul once had such altars.

One altar remains in the Ramírez House, featuring a small figure of the Virgen Concepción. In the house of Baltazar Sanchez, where murals were only photographed and scanned, the owner maintains an altar where Catholicism interwaves with Protestantism and Maya ceremony. In the Zúñiga House there is currently no altar, the vase panels flank an opening in the wall that now leads to the kitchen and steam bath. According to the current owner, Marcos Zúñiga, this opening was made recently. Although the present family does not identify with a *cofradía*, the house itself was most likely involved in religious sodality activity through generations of previous owners. The new owners created an opening and installed a door in the wall where the altar was originally located.

The custom of placing vases with live flowers on both sides of altars continues today among families who maintain home altars, as well as among present *cofradía* members who hold the figures of saints, especially during *fiestas*. In adobe houses where this tradition persists, altars are always placed against the wall opposite the entrance. This practice has also been documented in drawings from the 1970s and 1980s (Palomino Ojeda, 1972: 107; Aguilar Arrivillaga, 1980). Similarly, in all documented cases of houses with murals, the altars and the flower vases flanking them are positioned directly across from the house entrance. On the entrance wall, directly facing the altar, all the houses feature scenes depicting musicians, suggesting that this area was designated for them. It is likely that musicians originally sat next to the entrance wall, playing various instruments, especially the drum and *chirimía*. This interpretation aligns with the widespread Ixil custom of assigning specific seating arrangements. According to interviews, *cofradía* members and elders would typically sit at the sides of the altar, with elders having their own designated seat. Some Ixil Maya explain that it is considered *txaa* (“a taboo”) for anyone else to occupy an elder’s seat. To conclude, ethnographic data supports the correlation between *cofradía* ceremonial practices and house arrangement patterns, which can be compared to those found in houses with murals. Even though many families have distanced themselves from Catholicism—and therefore from the veneration of Christian saints—in favor of Protestantism, the deeply embedded Catholic sodality tradition interwoven with Maya spirituality and *costumbre* (depending on the context) cannot be underestimated; especially since shifting religious affiliations and their ontological aspects have proven to be a complex subject in various Maya communities (Green, 1993; Samson, 2007; Banach, 2024a).

As we have shown, the houses with wall paintings belonged to the most important members of the *cofradías* (*cofrades*), possibly *mayordomos* or *cofradía* leaders, who were usually wealthy and influential figures within the local community. Not only could they afford to organize lavish feasts featuring dance performances, food,

and drinks, but they could also commission artists to decorate their homes with wall paintings. According to Colby, Palomino Ojeda and their collaborators, up until the 1970s, those houses were repainted during important family lineage ceremonies (Colby *et al.*, n.d.), which bring to mind Zinacanteco lineage ceremonies described by Vogt in his classic ethnographies written slightly earlier (Vogt, 1993). Presently, even the families whose membership to the religious sodalities belong to the distant past, recall fondly the *fiestas* and dance-plays that were organized by them. Parts of remodeled houses with murals (such as wooden beams, arcs) are sometimes preserved. What is also interesting, the contemporary *cofradías* managed to build a community museum made out of elements of old adobe houses that have been donated or sold to them. This apparent blending of ritual, ceremonial, and family spaces around the houses with murals may seem difficult to classify within the notions of private or public. However, by clearly revealing elements of the quadripartite cosmos, it reflects some of the intricacies of Maya ideas about time and space (see i.e. Astor Aguilera, 2020).

One of the major iconographic themes in the Chajul houses with murals is depiction of elaborately dressed dancers and people seated on stools in scenes reminiscent of conversations, parades, or dances. Many dancers are shown in pairs, and in ways suggesting performances during significant ceremonies such as *fiestas patronales* (saint patrons' days) and other key dates in the religious calendar. It remains unclear whether the murals represent a specific dance identifiable through costume details or other iconographic elements. However, it is important to highlight that the dance-plays most commonly associated with the musical instruments depicted in Chajul houses—the *chirimía* and the skin drum—are classified as “Conquest-type” dances, such as the Dance of the Conquest (*Baile de la Conquista*), which commemorates the Spanish invasion of Central America and the conversion of indigenous communities to Christianity (Howell, 2009). Additionally, as we have demonstrated, some paintings may be thematically linked to the Dance of the Baskets. Dances of the “*Tz'unun* type,” such as this dance, rich in hunting and animal themes, were typically performed with musical accompaniment from a slit drum, tortoise shell, and trumpet (Howell, 2009). Although these instruments have not been so far identified in the documented paintings, the use of the guitar in this context has been recorded ethnographically (Hoyt, 1963; Yurchenco, 2006).

It is also possible that the murals do not depict a single, specific dance-play but instead convey a broader concept of ritual activities involving dance. Notably, some of the elders we interviewed emphasized that certain dance-plays had been “replaced” over time due to religious transformations. For instance, one former dancer explained that the Vaquero dance-play replaced the *Tz'unun* dance-play. It is possible that similar replacements occurred with other traditional dances as well.

Chemical analyses of pigments and plaster from the houses of Asicona, Zúñiga, and Ramírez indicate that the paintings were created using traditional techniques and recipes characteristic of pre-Hispanic times. We argue that Indigenous artists were responsible for these murals, developing a distinctive and unique style that stands

apart from other known examples of Colonial mural paintings in Latin America. However, despite its rarity and distinctiveness, certain elements—such as the floral decorations found below the ceilings in the Ramírez and Zúñiga houses, as well as the vases with flowers—invite comparisons to similar motifs seen in the wall paintings of Colonial-period churches in Central America (e.g., the Catholic church in San Cristóbal de Totonicapán or San Andres Xecul). It is quite possible that the Chajul artists adopted and reinterpreted motifs they had seen in Catholic shrines, integrating them into the local artistic tradition. As a result, they created a highly characteristic iconography that represents a fusion of European and indigenous styles and painting traditions.

The Chajul wall paintings represent a continuation of the mural painting tradition that has existed in the Maya region since pre-Hispanic times. This is evident in the painting techniques, color palette, and artistic compositions. In pre-Hispanic times, mural painting was widespread in the Lowlands, where, thanks to masonry structures covered with stucco, paintings have been preserved on the walls of buildings in many Maya centers (see e.g., Saturno *et al.*, 2015; Miller and Brittenham, 2013; Muñoz and Vidal, 2019). However, the custom of decorating building interiors must have also been prevalent in the Maya Highlands. In this region, such artistic examples are scarce due to different construction techniques, which primarily involved the use of clay or adobe bricks. Nevertheless, a similar tradition likely existed. In the 1940s, a fragment of stucco covered with painting was uncovered in a tomb of Nebaj, which may have originally adorned an object or one of the walls (Smith and Kidder, 1951). Therefore, the Chajul mural painting tradition may have its antecedents not only in the Maya Lowlands but also in the Highlands.

Acknowledgements

The investigations at Chajul presented in this article were possible thanks to the grant from the National Science Centre of the Republic of Poland (under the agreement UMO-2017/27/B/HS3/00847). We are also very grateful to the the Project Prometeo-Mayatech CIPROM 2023/40, and PID2022-139889NB-I00/AEI/10.13039/501100011033/FEDER, UE, as well as the Guatemalan authorities (Ministry of Culture and Sport), and the Asicona, Ramírez and Zúñiga families for their permission to conduct conservation and documentation works at their houses. Thanks are also due to two anonymous reviewers of this manuscript who provided constructive comments.

References

Amat, Joan Carles

1626 *Guitarra Española*. Chicago: Newberry Library.
[1596]

- Banach, Monika
- 2017 "The Ancestors of the Ixil Maya of Guatemala: oral tradition and the pre-Columbian sites in Ilom". *The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture. New Series*, 6 (2/2017): 7-28.
- 2024a "Destiny's Saints: A Re-Emergence of Divination, Prophecy-Making, and Devotion to Saints in Chajul, Guatemala", *The Mayanist*, 5 (2): 63-80.
- 2024b *Dreaming with the Mountains. Maya Spirituality and Sacred Landscapes in the Ixil Region of Guatemala*. Kraków: Universitas.
- Becquelin, Pierre, Alan Breton, and Veronique Gervais
- 2001 *Arqueología de la Región de Nebaj, Guatemala*. Mexico City and Guatemala City: Centro Francés de Estudios Mexicanos y Centroamericanos, Escuela de Historia USAC, Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores de Francia.
- Braakhuis, Edwinus Maria
- 2010 *Xbalanque's Marriage. A Commentary on the Q'eqchi' Myth of Sun and Moon*. Leiden: University of Leiden.
- Breton, Alain
- 2006 *Rabinal Achi*. Guatemala: Artemis Edinter.
- Castillo, Victor and Monika Banach
- 2025 "Religious Sodalities of the Ixil Maya of Chajul, Guatemala: A Historical Perspective". *Ethnohistory*, 72 (2): 93-119.
- Chinchilla Mazariegos, Oswaldo
- 2010 "Of Birds and Insects: The Hummingbird Myth in Ancient Mesoamerica", *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 21: 45-61.
- 2017 *Art and myth of the ancient Maya*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Colby, Benjamin N., and Pierre L. van den Berghe
- 1969 *Ixil Country: A Plural Society in Highland Guatemala*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Colby, Benjamin N., and Lore M. Colby
- 1981 *The Daykeeper, the Life and Discourse of an Ixil Diviner*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.
- Colby, Benjamin N., Aquiles Palomino Ojeda, Pablo Mo', and Elaine Elliott
- [n.d.] *The Tz'unun Dance Drama in Chajul, Guatemala*. Unpublished manuscript in the possession of the authors.
- Danien, Elin C.
- 1998 "The Chama Polychrome Ceramic Cylinders in the University of Pennsylvania Museum", PhD Dissertation (Anthropology), Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
- 2009 "Painted Metaphors", *Expedition Magazine*, 51 (1).

- Deuss, Krystyna
2018 *Cofradías. Customs and Costumes among the Guatemalan Maya*. London: The Guatemalan Maya Centre.
- Eisner, Emma
2020 "Investigating the Contents of a Maya Tomb: an Analysis of the Milwaukee Public Museum's Ceramic Collection from Chajul, Guatemala", Unpublished M. A. thesis defended at the University of Wisconsin, *Theses and Dissertations*. 2370. Available at: <https://dc.uwm.edu/etd/2370>
- Erquicia Cruz, José Heriberto
2024 *Esplendor del oro azul: Añil, demografía y poder en San Vicente y San Miguel de la provincia de San Salvador del Reyno de Guatemala (1750-1810)*. El Salvador: Universidad Pedagógica de El Salvador.
- Farriss, Nancy M.
1980 "Propiedades territoriales en Yucatán en la época colonial: Algunas observaciones acerca de la pobreza española y la autonomía indígena." *Historia Mexicana* 30 (2): 153-208.
- Fuentes y Guzmán, Francisco Antonio de
2015 *Recordación Florida*. 3 vols. Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria.
- Gage, Tomas
1958 *Thomas Gage's Travels in the New World*, edited by J. Eric. S. Thompson. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
[1648]
- García, Paola
2008 "La Religiosidad del Mundo Indígena Guatemalteco del siglo XVIII: Espacio de Reconquista Política, Social y Económica". *Península*, 1 (9): 129-150.
- Hill II, Robert M.
1986 "Manteniendo el Culto a los Santos: Aspectos Financieros de las Instituciones religiosas del Altiplano Colonial Maya". *Mesoamérica*, 7 (11): 61-77.
- Howell, Mark
2009 "Music Syncretism in the Postclassic K'iche' Warrior Dance and the Colonial Period Baile de Los Moros y Cristianos.", *Maya Worldviews at Conquest*, pp. 279-297, edited by Leslie G Cecil and Timothy W Pugh. Boulder: University Press of Colorado.
- Hoyt, Edith
1963 *The Silver Madonna: Legends of Shrines, Mexico-Guatemala. La Virgen de Plata; Leyendas de Santuarios de México y Guatemala*. México: Editorial Letras.

- Katzew, Ilona
 2011 "Remedio de la ya Muerta América: The Construction of Festive Rites in Colonial Mexico", *Contested Visions in the Spanish Colonial World*, pp. 151-175, Ilona Katzew (dir.). Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
- Lincoln, Jackson S.
 1945 *An Ethnological Study on the Ixil Indians of the Guatemala Highlands*. Chicago: University of Chicago Library.
- Loughmiller-Cardinal, Jennifer, and Keith Eppich (eds.)
 2019 *Breath and Smoke: Tobacco Use Among the Maya*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Lovell, W. George
 1983 "Settlement change in Spanish America: the dynamics of congregación in the Cuchumatán highlands of Guatemala", *Canadian Geographer*, XXVII (2): 163-174.
 2015 *Conquest and survival in colonial Guatemala: A historical geography of the Cuchumatán highlands, 1500-1839*. 4th ed. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Lovell, W. George, Christopher Lutz, Wendy Kramer, and William R. Swezey.
 2013 *Strange Lands and Different Peoples: Spaniards and Indians in Colonial Guatemala*. Kindle edition. The Civilization of the American Indian Series, v. 271. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Magaloni Kerpel, Diana
 2014 *The Colors of the New World*. Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute.
- Miller, Mary, and Claudia Brittenham
 2013 *The Spectacle of the Late Maya Court: Reflections on the Murals of Bonampak*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Muñoz Cosme Gaspar, and Cristina Vidal Lorenzo
 2019 "El mural de Chilonché: estudio preliminar". *Revista Española de Antropología Americana*, 49: 77-96. DOI: 10.5209/reaa.64961
- O'Brien-Rothe, Linda
 2019 *Canciones que hacen bailar el camino: "Los b'ix rxin b'ey" de los maya tz'utujil de Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala*. Guatemala City: USAC Tricentenario and Dirección General de Investigación, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala.
- van Oss, Adriaan C.
 2002 *Catholic Colonialism: A Parish History of Guatemala, 1524-1821*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Palomino Ojeda, Aquiles
 1972 *Patrones Matrimoniales Entre Los Ixiles de Chajul, Guatemala*. Irvine: University of California.

- Pickands, Martin.
2019 "The Intoxicating Lady Tobacco and the Nature of the Moon Goddess", *Breath and Smoke: Tobacco Use among the Maya*, edited by Jennifer A. Loughmiller-Cardinal and Keith Eppich. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Reina, Ruben E.
1966 *The Law of the Saints. Pokomam Pueblo and its Community Culture*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill Company, Inc.
- Remesal, Antonio de
1619 *Historia de La Provincia de S. Vicente de Chiapa y Guatemala de La Orden de Nro Glorioso Padre Sancto Domingo: Escribense Juntamente Los Principios de Las Demas Provincias de Esta Religion de Las Indias Occidentales, y Lo Secular de La Gobernacion de Guat.* Guatemala: Francisco de Angulo, Biblioteca Ludwig von Mises, Universidad Francisco Marroquín.
- Rojas Lima, Flavio
1988 *La Cofradía: Reducto Cultural Indígena*. Guatemala: Seminario de Integración Social.
- Ruz, Mario Umberto (ed.)
2002 *Memoria Eclesial Guatemalteca. Visitas Pastorales 1*, vol. 1. Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- Saturno William, Heather Hurst, Franco Rossi, and David Stuart
2015 To set before the king: residential mural painting at Xultun, Guatemala. *Antiquity* 89 (343): 122-136. DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2014.11
- Smith, A. Ledyard
1955 *Archaeological Reconnaissance in Central Guatemala*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution.
- Smith, Ledyard, and Alfred Kidder
1951 *Excavations at Nebaj, Guatemala*. Washington D.C.: Carnegie Institution.
- Vázquez de Ágredos Pascual, Maria Luisa
2010 *La pintura mural maya. Materiales y técnicas artísticas*. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Centro Peninsular en Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales.
- Vázquez de Ágredos Pascual, Maria Luisa, Doménech Carbó, M. T. and Doménech Carbó, A.
2011 "Characterization of Maya Blue Pigment in Pre-Classic and Classic Monumental Architecture of the Ancient Pre-Columbian City of Calakmul" *Journal of Cultural Heritage*, 12: 140-148.
- Vogt, Evon Z.
1969 *Zinacantan. A Maya Community in the Highlands of Chiapas*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

- de Vos, Jan
 1988 *La Paz de Dios y del Rey. La Conquista de La Selva Lacandona (1525-1821)*. México D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Yurchenco, Henrietta
 1978 *Music of the Maya-Quiches of Guatemala - the Rabinal Achi and Baile de Las Canastas*. New York: Folkways Records and Service Corp.
 2006 "Etnomusicología en Guatemala", *Tradiciones de Guatemala*, Matthias Stöckli M. and Arrivillaga Cortés A. (dir.). Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Folklóricos USAC.
- Żrałka, Jarosław, Katarzyna Radnicka, Monika Banach, Lucas Asicona Ramírez, Maria Luisa Vázquez de Ágredos-Pascual, Cristina Vidal-Lorenzo, Lars Frühsorge and Juan Luis Velásquez
 2020 "The Maya wall paintings from Chajul, Guatemala", *Antiquity*, 94 (375): 760-779. doi: 10.15184/aqy.2020.87
- Żrałka, Jarosław, Christophe Helmke, Laura Sotelo, and Wiesław Koszkul
 2018 "The Discovery of a Beehive and the Identification of Apiaries Among the Ancient Maya", *Latin American Antiquity*, 29 (3): 514-531.