



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL
<http://bookofmormoncentral.org/>



Religious Studies Center
<https://rsc.byu.edu/>

The Image of the Maize God in Classic Maya Art: The Ideal Aesthetic of Gods and Royalty

Author(s): Cynthia Richards Carroll

Source: *Studia Antiqua*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Winter 2005), pp. 43-61

Published by: Religious Studies Center

Abstract: No abstract available.



The Religious Studies Center is collaborating with Book of Mormon Central to preserve and extend access to scholarly research on the Book of Mormon. Items are archived by the permission of the Religious Studies Center.

<https://rsc.byu.edu/>

The Image of the Maize God in Classic Maya Art: The Ideal Aesthetic of Gods and Royalty

CYNTHIA RICHARDS CARROLL

In a religion as well defined as the Maya, a great specificity exists as to the purpose and function of particular gods and their attributes. Although each Maya god has a specially outlined role in Maya cosmology, it would be misleading to say that each deity is so specifically defined as to exclude the possibility of occasionally sharing attributes and powers. However, when it comes to the representation of their pantheon of gods, the Maya have very definite ideas of exactly how the gods' physical attributes dictated their powers. Why each god was given the characteristics he or she displays and how these characteristics potentially bear upon the particular power and function of the god is unclear. The deity known as the Maize God stands out from this varied group of gods in that he is the only deity consistently represented in a completely anthropomorphic form. Not only is he humanized, but he is also always displayed as the ideal of perfect male beauty. Although there could be many explanations for this exception to the rule, his unique human beauty most likely reflects the desires of the rulers for whom these images were often created. Indeed, to represent the Maize God as the ideal in beauty performed a vital function in establishing the ideal of the perfect king and ruler and created a visual parallel between the purposes,

functions, and powers of the Maize God and those of the ruling class.

The relationship between the Maya and their gods is a dominant factor in determining the way the gods are represented. Like most religions, Maya cosmology attempts to explain the mysterious forces of the universe by establishing a body of higher powers which controls the inexplicable elements of nature. Unlike traditional Christian beliefs Maya cosmology makes no distinction between natural and supernatural realms. In other words, of those things defined by science, the Maya would still consider imbued with the creative efforts of the gods. All elements of the earth and the cosmos, inanimate objects included, are considered to have a soul and to contain the spirit of divinity, which is essential to the survival of all life, making Maya deities embodiments of the sacred nature of the universe. Through their power these life forces are continually renewed.¹ However, it would be a mistake to assume that Maya gods had distinctive anthropomorphic qualities as did the ancient gods of Greece or Rome.² Maya deities often exhibited different manifestations as a way of defining the many facets of one particular god, making them nonfinite beings. Maya deities were complex and contradictory individuals, possessing aspects that often blended together or were not visually manifested at all. Thus we see that it is difficult to define and distinguish the specific origin or nature of any one Maya god.

The quest to explore with greater clarity the definition of Maya gods has fortunately resulted in a great deal of scholarship on the Maize God's foundational importance within Classic Maya religion. Before exploring the Maize God's deepest meanings, it is necessary to begin with a cursory glance at his most prevalent role: the god of the agricultural cycle. Even in his most basic function, the Maize God always played a particularly important role in Maya cosmology. The Maize God's primary occupation

1. Robert J. Sharer, *Daily Life in Maya Civilization* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 160.

2. Herbert Joseph Spinden, *Maya Art and Civilization* (Indian Hills, CO: The Falcon's Wing Press, 1957), 25.

was to be the protector and progenitor of the yearly maize (commonly known as Indian corn) crop upon which the Maya depended so heavily. Maize formed the basis of not only their main source of nutrition, but also an important foundation of their religion as well. The Maya recognized maize as a powerful symbol of life, creation, and, ultimately, rebirth. As demonstrated by their extensive cosmology, the Maya utilized the symbol of the maize cycle to perpetuate important aspects of their own creation. In the Maya version of the creation story recorded in the *Popol Vuh*, the process required to create the ideal progeny of the gods is carefully detailed. After failed attempts to create man out of mud, wood, and other such materials, it was determined that a last attempt to make man would be made, but this time utilizing the succulent maize dough as flesh and blood for man.³ The Maya believed that it was out of maize and the blood of the gods that they were created. This communicates the potential importance of the Maize God as the original progenitor of all Maya civilization. He was not only their original creator, but he was also the sustaining force that continued to renew their bodies and souls yearly with each new crop of maize. It is not surprising then that the Maize God is particularly popular in Maya artwork starting from the late Preclassic period (600 BC–AD 250) until the present. Like all subjects, the Maize God at times waned in popularity, but references to the Maize God and his accompanying accoutrements can almost always be found regardless of the period.

Representations of the Maize God vary according to location and period, but most seem to share one common factor: a striking humanity and beauty of form. One example is detailed over the entrance to the subterranean chamber in *Palace House E*, Palenque (fig. 1). Especially striking is the facial type of the Maize God: an aristocratic sloping forehead, long graceful nose, full pursed lips, and almond-shaped eyes. Though the Maya might have had features somewhat similar to these, the Maya often

3. Allen J. Christenson, ed., *Popol Vuh* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2000), 46–49.

enhanced these features through a process of cranial deformation. Interestingly enough, only persons of an aristocratic birth were allowed to practice the tradition of cranial deformation. Naturally this facial type would have been accepted as one of Maya leadership, not of the peasantry. Those of noble birth exaggerated the already tall, sloping foreheads of the Maya. "Heads of infants, born to certain noble families, were flattened in a press that reshaped the facial profile before the cartilage had hardened."⁴ Creating the ideal beauty was only one of many factors that separated the nobility from the peasant class.

That is not to say that ideal facial beauty was devoid of meaning for those of the lower class. Rather, it expressed their hope for a more agricultural ideal that was expressed in the form of well-formed young maize plants, the essence of perfect breeding. In a more abstract sense, the Maize God could also embrace the ideals of the benevolent gods, life, prosperity, and fertility.⁵ To express this idea, the Maya often portrayed the Maize God with fecund sprouts protruding from his head (fig. 2),⁶ with a cleft in his forehead to represent the maize seed itself in the act of sprouting and growing. This image is one that has deep-seated origins in the history of the representation of the Maize God. In fact, this tradition likely began with the Olmec, from whom the Maya believed their divine ancestry to have originated.⁷

The Olmec civilization was at its height during the early and middle Preclassic periods (ca. 1250–400 BC). While the nature of the relationship between the two cultures is somewhat ambiguous, the powerful Olmec civilization had a definite impact on their Maya neighbors.⁸ As is evidenced in various Maya artwork, the Olmec set an important precedent not only for Maya theology but for political structures as well. The similarities

4. M. E. Kampen, *The Religion of the Maya* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 27.

5. Sharer, 162.

6. Spinden, 88.

7. Michael D. Coe, "Olmec and Maya: A Study in Relationships," in *The Origins of Maya Civilization*, ed. Richard E. W. Adams (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1977), 187.

8. Sharer, 29.

between Maya and Olmec art and religious beliefs are of particular significance in the development of the Maize God. Though in the context of Olmec art the Maize God does not seem to have taken on his ideal human form, he is often represented as having a sprouted headdress and cleft forehead (fig. 3). While this may not support the Maya ideal of beauty, it does form an interesting comparison to images of Olmec rulers, as can be seen in *San Lorenzo Monument 1* (fig. 4). Very likely the image of a ruler, this monument expresses a more Olmec ideal of beauty. He, in common with the Olmec image of the Maize God, shares the down-turned corners of the mouth, thick lips, fleshy cheeks, and slightly slanted eyes. This fact establishes an important precedent for the role of kingship in the representation of the Maize God.⁹ While kings were not necessarily limited to being represented as the Maize God, there seems to be a predisposition to use the Maize God as the ideal or standard of physical beauty, a standard which is solely accessible to the king and other members of the royal family. This elitism and exclusion of the lower classes from forming deeper connections to the Maize God establishes the uniquely close relationship rulers felt to the Maize God and his representations.

One of the most powerful ways of establishing this relationship between the royalty and the Maize God was to promote it through readily visible physical similarities. After the rulers established the physical ideal of the Maize God, it became requisite that the rulers identify themselves directly with these physical attributes and powers. As discussed earlier, the way in which the ruling class was viewed and depicted was rather important in establishing and maintaining social stratification. As the kings sought to perpetuate the ideal of perfect beauty and ruling power, they turned to the Maize God as the model of these ideal virtues. As a result of this close kinship, it is not uncommon to see rulers being represented in the guise of the Maize God. This was not

9. Kent F. Reilly, "Olmec Art," from *The Olmec World: Ritual and Rulership* (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 1995), 32.

only practiced in the representation of kings but queens as well, when they can be seen. Such is evidenced by Yaxchilan Lintel 24 (fig. 5). In this scene both husband, Itzamnah Balam, and wife, Lady K'abal Xok, are depicted in the sacred act of bloodletting (which will be further discussed later in this paper). Noticeably, both are given the features of ideal beauty, including the sloped forehead, long graceful nose, full pursed lips, and hair bound away from the face. This kind of representation could be illustrated by countless images of the same kind; the Maya had definite aesthetic ideals concerning the representation of their rulers.

Another example that is particularly poignant can be seen on *Pier C*, from *Palace House D* at Palenque, which depicts the ruler, K'inich Janab Pakal (fig. 6). Here there is substantial evidence that rulers' physical appearances had been changed for the purpose of becoming the ideal in physical beauty and perfection. To the careful observer, a detail included in the representation of Janab Pakal's face reveals that the profile rendered by the artist was likely not the king's natural nose and forehead, but, rather, a prosthetic attached to artificially flatten the nose and forehead of the king. While this might seem to have little significance, the rest of the corpus of Maya art seems to omit this detail and show only the profile of the king after it has already been changed. This rare glimpse into the conscious alteration of the king's physical appearance further establishes the apparent connection between the representations of the royal class and the features of the Maize God.

These similarities were not limited only to facial similarities, but they were also communicated by the dress and demeanor of the king. One of the most common ways to indicate a connection to the Maize God was to don clothing, jewels, or even headdresses that referred generally or specifically to his attributes. One way of accomplishing this purpose was to dress in the guise of the Maize God. Referring back to *Pier D* (fig. 6), Janab Pakal not only adopts the physical appearance of the Maize God but also wears clothing associated with the Maize God and his powers. Like many others of these images, Janab Pakal is dressed in a net skirt, an emblem

which is associated primarily with the Maize God in his frequent representations (fig. 7). While the ruler might not have worn a net skirt everyday, he certainly would have donned one when participating in ceremonies in which he re-created the world—a principle role of the Maize God. The ruling family, and particularly the king, were responsible for the renewing of the world through re-creation ceremonies in which he conducted auto-sacrifice or the sacrifice of a captive.¹⁰ In this way, both the ruler and the Maize God filled similar roles. Just as it was the responsibility of the Maize God to create the earth and its inhabitants in the original creation, it was the responsibility of the king to continually renew them in the guise of the Maize God. This is another factor which influenced the physical representation of the Maize God. Not only were ceremonies responsible for commemorating the creation for historical purposes, they were also a reminder to the general public of the divine status of the chosen rulers. “These concepts reinforced the social and political order and were used by kings and the elite to maintain their power and control.”¹¹ Thus it was vitally important to remind those under the king’s rule of his divine abilities. As only the elite class was literate, the most effective way of accomplishing this would be through visual representations of the king as a commonly recognized deity, the Maize God.

As power was most often transferred from father to son in ruling families, it is not surprising that Maya accession monuments also feature Maize God imagery as part of the decorative program. This tradition probably stems from the connection of the Maize God’s own accession story of his power to his son. The Classic Maya version of this myth begins with the Maize God’s descent into the underworld where he is defeated by the lords of death. After he is decapitated and his head is placed into what would become the World Tree, he impregnates the daughter of

10. Mary Ellen Miller and Linda Schele, “The Blood of Kings: A New Interpretation of Maya Art,” *Gazette Des Beaux-Arts* 6.109 (April 1987): 131.

11. Sharer, 151.

one of the lords of death. This pregnancy results in the birth of the Hero Twins, who are known as Hun Ahaw and Yax Balam. The twins are ultimately able to return to the underworld to defeat the lords of death and resurrect their father. After he is reborn, the Maize God, or Hun Nal Yeh as he is known to the Classic Maya, is able to birth the world, thus initiating the sacred first creation.¹²

This story and its various elements are popular subjects for representation on ceramic vessels of the Classic period, exemplified here by the *Resurrection Plate* (fig. 8). The resurrection of the Maize God is the central decoration of the plate. In the center of the composition, the Maize God emerges from the clefted shell of a turtle, representing his transition from the underworld to the surface of the earth. He is flanked on either side by his two sons who aid him in his rebirth. As once the Maize God facilitated the creation of his sons, they now reciprocate, thus continuing the cycle of rebirth. The trio of the Maize God and his sons are a powerful symbol of the accession of power from father to sons that also alludes to the resurrection and continuance of the father's spirit through his son's birth. The connection of this story to Maya monuments that depict royal accession, can once again be seen by the net skirt worn by the king in his accession ceremony. Such an example is illustrated by the *Sanctuary Panel* from the *Temple of the Foliated Cross*, Palenque (fig. 9). This panel commemorates the accession of Kan Balam, son of Janab Pakal. On the left, Kan Balam dons the net skirt of the Maize god as he is about to receive the tokens of kingship from his deceased father, the smaller figure on the right. As an interesting parallel, the panel from the neighboring *Temple of the Cross* depicts a nearly identical subject and is dedicated to the god, GI, or the god of accession, commonly known as Hun Ahaw, the son of the Maize God and the recipient of his power (fig. 10).¹³

12. Miller and Schele, 131.

13. Stephen Houston and David Stuart, "Of Gods Glyphs and Kings: Divinity and Rulership among the Classic Maya," in *Antiquity* 70 (1996): 301.

The *Palace Oval Tablet* provides a rare glimpse at a different type of accession ritual (fig. 11). This tablet commemorates the accession of Janab Pakal, whose mother (lady Sak K'uk) rather than his father, was the ruler before him. Lady Sak K'uk was the only heir of her father and thus represents an exception to the norm of male rulers. Despite this, she was considered to be a divine creatrix through a clever twist of Maya mythology. As can be seen on this accession monument, she too wears the net skirt. As was established by the Maya cosmology, the only other individual who is represented as wearing a net skirt is the mother of the Maize God. By equating Lady Sak K'uk with the mother of the Maize God, the Maya are able to attribute to her the same divine power of creation that is commonly associated with her son. The fact that Janab Pakal's mother was associated with this type of deity is indicative of the Maya's need to proclaim her royalty imbued with the Maize God's divine power. This is yet another manifestation of the deep connection that exists between the representation of the Maize God and that of the royal class.

Powerful accession rituals were a popular subject for representation even in the Late Classic period. Such an example is illustrated by *Copan Stele H*, the accession monument of Waxaklahun Ubah K'awil (fig. 12). Comparable to the aforementioned monuments of accession, this stele is meant to be a record of the ceremony of the king's rise to power. In addition to wearing the aforementioned net skirt, he holds the sky band as an indicator of his status as a king with the keys to the divine power of creation, similar to the Maize God. Also on this stele are the names of the major cultural centers of the time that were invited to this momentous occasion. This stele clearly demonstrates that even to rulers in the late to terminal Classic period the Maize God, along with his specific and indefinite accoutrements, was still considered essential in communicating the aspects important to divinely appointed rulership.

Some of the deepest and most meaningful connections that can be made between the Maize God and the royal class are found in the imagery of bloodletting. This ritual is fundamentally

important in Maya theology as it is the process by which the royal class is able to continually rebirth the gods and, as a result, is able to rebirth the world. It is perhaps in this way that the connection to the Maize God holds the strongest similarity in roles and function. The practice of bloodletting was carried out only by the highest of the elite, because theirs was the only blood that contained the divine essence of the gods. The exact way in which the blood sacrifice was to rebirth the gods is complicated. At the simplest levels, the blood that is caused to flow is burned in order to release the gods, thus rebirthing them. In another way, the blood sacrifice can be seen as food for the gods. The *Popol Vuh* compares the offering of a sacrifice to the “suckling” of the gods.¹⁴ As was detailed earlier, the individuals created to nourish the gods were men of maize. In essence, the flesh and blood being offered to the gods is maize. Representations that either depict or allude to this subject abound in Maya art.

Examples of such illustrations were mentioned earlier, one of these including *Yaxchilan Lintel 24* (fig. 5) in which Lady K’abal Xok is represented in the act of bloodletting; and the next lintel, *Yaxchilan Lintel 25*, demonstrates the results of her efforts (fig. 13). Lady K’abal Xok is now visited by her ancestor, who brings with him, as a gift, the implements of sacred warfare. The carving visually indicates the portal she has opened by causing the ancestor to rise from a billowing stream of smoke that is similar in form to the body of a serpent. Essentially, it is through the sacrifice of her blood that ancestors are fed and are thus able to be reborn. The act of bloodletting becomes particularly significant when it is established just how frequently the Maize God appears in such imagery. To illustrate this point, we turn to a work mentioned earlier, the *Sanctuary Panel* from the *Temple of the Foliated Cross* (fig. 9). This temple is located at the east edge of a complex of temples, associated with the birth of the sun and life itself. The

14. Karl A. Taube, “The Maize Tamale in Classic Maya Diet, Epigraphy, and Art,” *American Antiquity* 54.1 (Jan. 1989): 38.

Sanctuary Panel is replete with references to life and rebirth. In the center of the composition is a cross-shaped tree which has been equated with the structural equivalent of the bloodletting motif.¹⁵ On the arms of this cross are the heads of the Maize God in all their idealized beauty, complete with lush plants sprouting from their heads to indicate the fecundity of life that rises out of death. The subject of this panel also reflects the belief that out of the death of the father, Janab Pakal, rises the new life of his son, Kan Balam. From death and sacrifice, the world is regenerated and reborn.

Another monument which demonstrates this concept in an even more compelling manner is the *Sarcophagus Lid of Janab Pakal* (fig. 14). Though the imagery of this sarcophagus lid is complex, the main theme seems to focus on the life which arises from the death of Janab Pakal. Centrally located in the composition, Janab Pakal reclines in a nearly fetal position, simultaneously indicating both death and life. His body rests on the Quadripartite God, a reminder of death as being the ultimate sacrifice. Just as the foliage springs from sacrifice, we are reminded that from death, life will spring anew. From Janab Pakal's body grows a cross-shaped tree similar to that seen in the *Sanctuary Panel* from the *Temple of the Foliated Cross*. It also refers to both the sacrificial bloodletting symbol and the growth of the world tree. At the death of the king it becomes a powerful symbol of the ability of the ruler to rebirth the world. In this moment of sacrifice and rebirth, Janab Pakal is the closest to the Maize God that any ruler could ever be. As such, he is represented dressed in the net skirt and has around his neck a turtle shell pectoral, a reminder of the Maize God's own rebirth. This monument forms one of the most convincing arguments that can be found for the direct link between the images of the rulers and the characteristics attributed to the Maize God.

15. David Stuart, "Blood Symbolism in Maya Iconography," in Elizabeth P. Benson and Gillett G. Griffin, eds., *Maya Iconography*.

Ultimately, the Maize God was a reflection of everything a ruler could ever aspire to be. While the Maize God was not completely void of meaning for those of lower classes, it was royalty that could identify more closely with his role in Maya cosmology. As far as other Maya gods and goddesses were concerned, it was not entirely uncommon for rulers to occasionally adopt a number of their features in certain representations. However, it was the Maize God whose attributes were adopted with the greatest frequency and regularity. He was the most intimate participant in the Maya's creation. It was from his divine flesh that humanity was fashioned, and it was his flesh that continued to sustain them. Crops continually renewed themselves with the help of the Maize God's own offspring. It stands to reason then that the incentive for representing the Maize God with such humanlike characteristics is that these were the characteristics the Maya themselves aspired to. His beauteous physiognomy is the projection of their ideals of a perfected version of their established aesthetic canons, as well as the embodiment of the perfect crop—life in its most perfect form. In functional Maya religion, the class of royalty formed the closest comparison to this ideal form, and only they were permitted to mimic the ideal beauty of the Maize God by altering their appearance, whether permanently or in artistic renderings. The emulation of the Maize God's perfect beauty allowed the ruling class to further establish their dominance over their subjects by the assertion of divine qualities. As is demonstrated in the artwork up to the Spanish Conquest of the Maya beginning in AD 1524, rulers not only aspired to the Maize God's beauty, but also took it upon themselves to mimic his duty of creation within their own society. This in turn establishes an inseparable bond between the image of the Maize God and the image of the rulers. As much as the ruling class is a product of the Maize God, the Maize God becomes a product of their divine blood. As was determined in the creation of man in the *Popol Vuh*, gods first created man with the knowledge that they would then be reliant on man to continue to

re-create them. Such is the case with the Maize God. In their depiction of the Maize God, the Maya respond in kind, not merely re-creating him but imbuing him with all the culture, grace, and beauty that were available to them in all the years of their great and prosperous civilization.

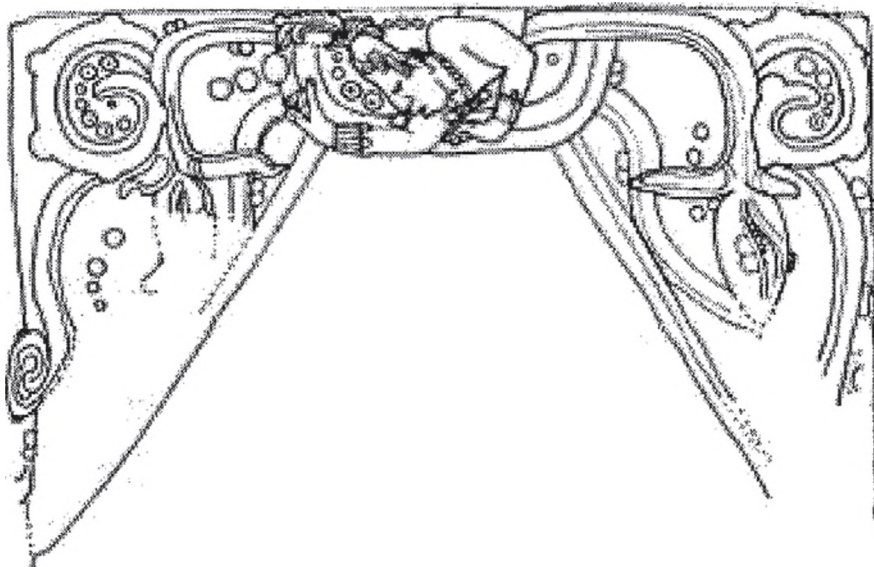


Figure 1. Subterranean Chamber, Palace House E, Palenque.
Drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele, courtesy Foundation for
the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., www.famsi.org.

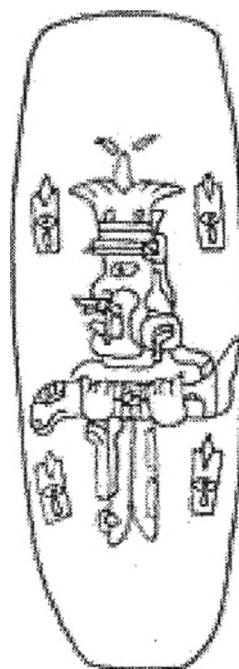


Figure 2. Jade Celt, Arroyo Pesquero.
Drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele, courtesy
Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican
Studies, www.famsi.org.

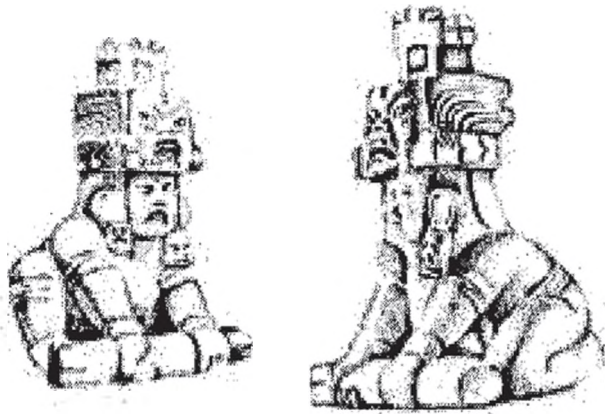


Figure 3. San Martin Pajapan Monument 1. Drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele, courtesy Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, www.famsi.org.

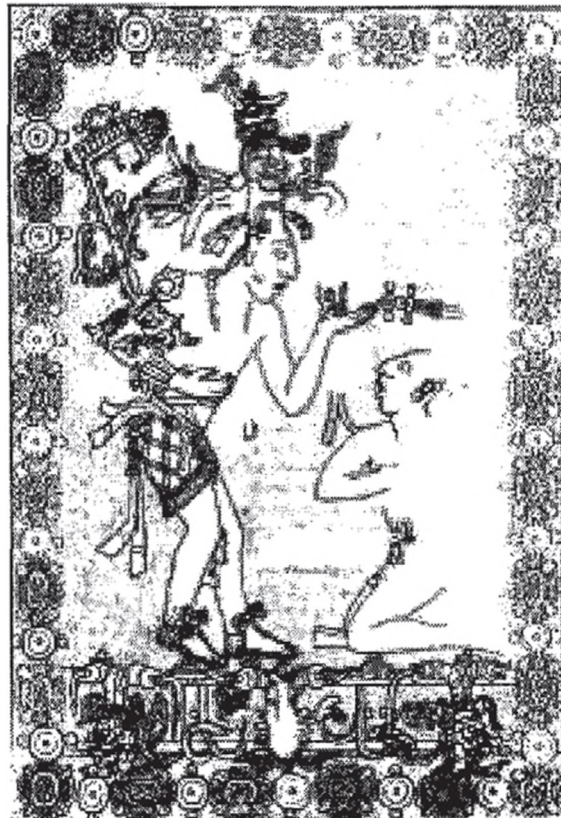
Figure 4. San Lorenzo Monument 1. Photograph courtesy JQ Jacobs, jq@jqjacobs.net.





Figure 5. Yaxchilan Lintel 24.
Photograph copyright Justin
Kerr. File no. K2887.

Figure 6. Pier D, Palace House D,
Palenque. (Drawing by Merle
Greene Robertson. Image from
David Stuart, "Blood Symbolism
in Maya Iconography," see at-
tached bibliography)



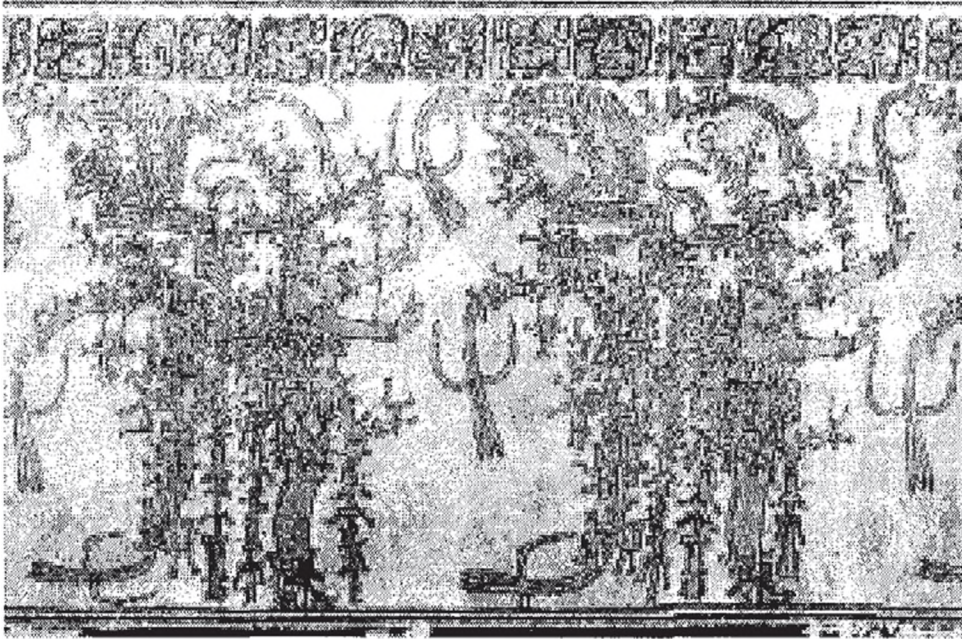


Figure 7. Buenavista Vase.
Copyright Justin Kerr. File no. K1416.



Figure 8.
Resurrection Plate.
Copyright Justin Kerr.
File no. K1892.

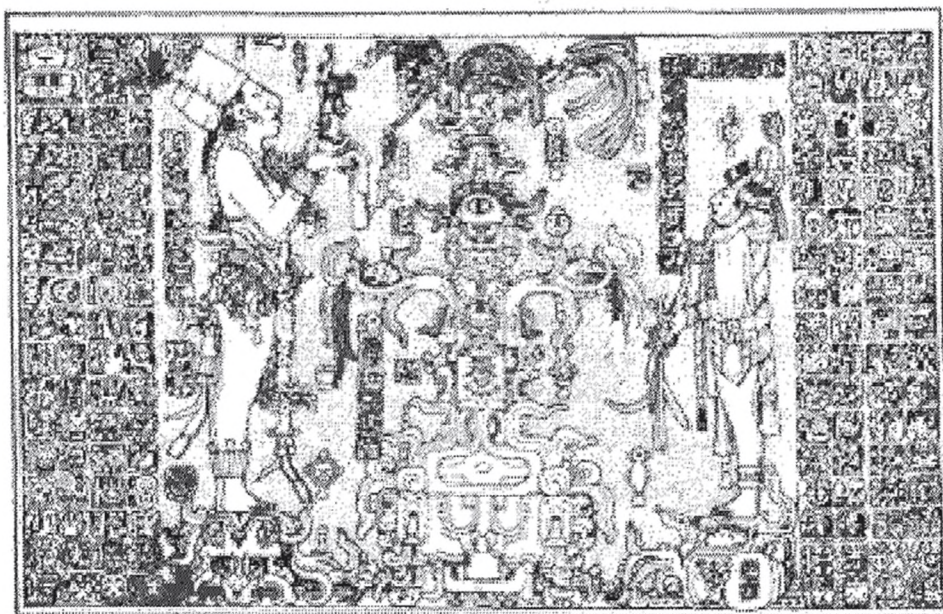


Figure 9. Sanctuary Panel, Temple of the Foliated Cross, Palenque. Drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele, courtesy Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, www.famsi.org.

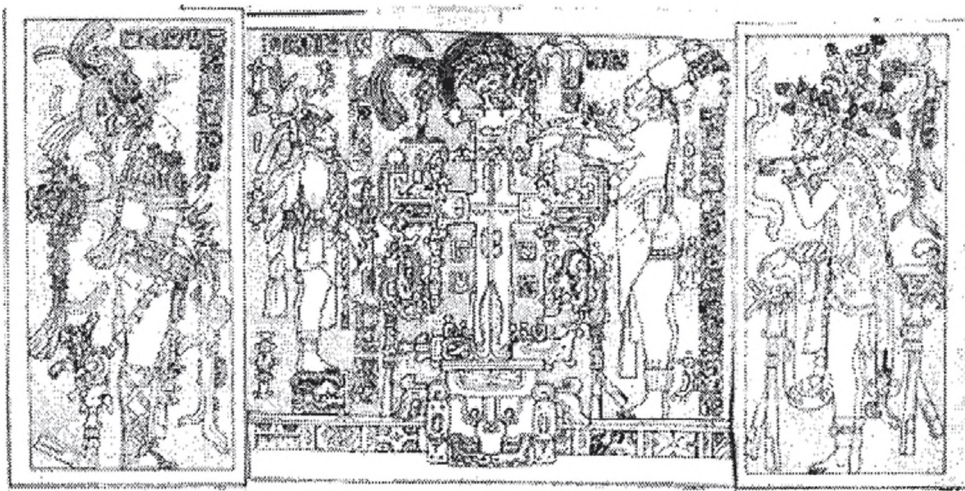


Figure 10. Sanctuary Panel, Temple of the Cross, Palenque. Drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele, courtesy Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, www.famsi.org.



Figure 11. Palace Oval Tablet, Palenque. Drawing by Linda Schele, © David Schele, courtesy Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., www.famsi.org.

Figure 12. Copan Stela A.
Image courtesy of Fotomaya.com



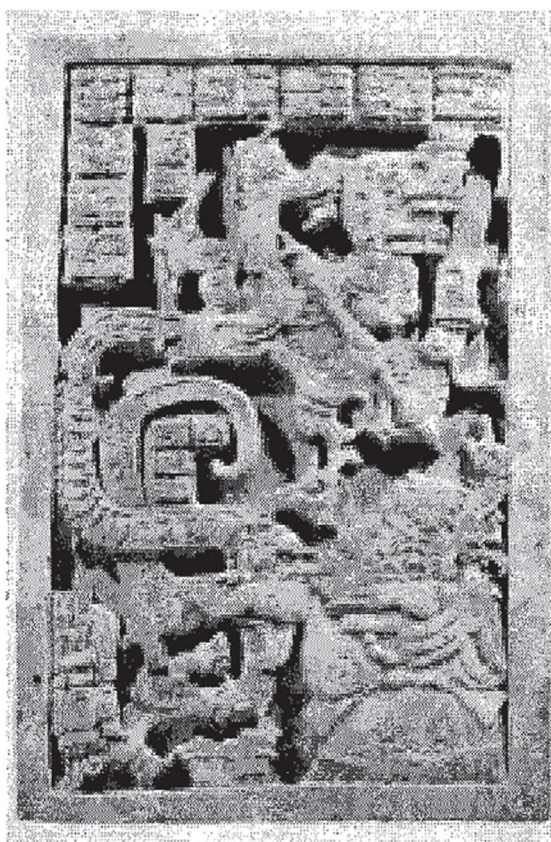


Figure 13. Yaxchilan Lintel 25
Copyright Justin Kerr. File no. K2888.



Figure 14. Sarcophagus Lid of
Janab Pakal, Temple of the
Inscriptions, Palenque. Rubbings by
Merle Greene Robertson ©Pre-
Columbian Art Research Institute,
1995, used with permission.