

## THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE WEST WALL FIGURES AT PINTURAS SUB-1, SAN BARTOLO, PETÉN

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**Keywords:** Maya archaeology, Guatemala, Petén, San Bartolo, mural painting, iconography, deities, Late Preclassic period

The magnificent mural paintings remarkably preserved inside the chamber of Pinturas Sub-1, in Guatemala, show promise to be one of the most significant archaeological findings in the Maya region. The paintings unfold a minute portrait of the Maya mythology of creation, and an exceptional antiquity, as they date to century I BC.

During the 2003 field season, the mural on the North Wall of Pinturas Sub-1 was exposed, and the interpretation of the scenes presented (Taube *et al.* 2004; Saturno and Taube 2004). This study is focused on the results of the 2004 excavations conducted on the West Wall of the chamber in Pinturas Sub-1. Alike the North Wall, a numeric system was used, and the varied images present in the mural from left to right, and from its upper portion to its base, were labeled. Like there are missing areas in the West Wall, as is the case with the characteristics of image 11 which were not fully identified, it was assigned the letter “P” in the sequence, which defines it as being of a provisional nature; consequently, there are other figures in a similar situation. Clearly, a good number of the interpretations could change at the light of subsequent reconstructions.

The south half of the West Wall represents the raising of five trees of life in a context of sacrificial offerings which include ritual bloodletting. The offering of blood towards the four directions once again returns to the creation of the scene in page 1 of the Late Postclassic Fejérváry-Mayer codex, which displays four trees of life and the dismembered, bleeding body of *Tezcatlipoca* evoking the corners of the cosmos.

In the mural of the West Wall, Images 1, 3, 5, and 7 are perforating their phalluses with sharp-pointed branches before the four trees. Despite the fact that the upper portion of Image 1 is missing, it has prominent stains in its body, while the other three figures show large stains on their cheeks. These four young men are quadripartite aspects of the twin heroes known as *Hunahpu* in the Popol Vuh and *Hun Ajaw* in Classic Maya texts. In Maya writing, this deity usually appears as a personified form of the day *Ajaw*, which means “God or King” in the Maya languages. In Classic Maya texts and in iconography, *Hun Ajaw* can also be identified by a white headband with a red strip that unfolds over the forehead, a device that may be seen in one of the best preserved figures of the young men, Image 5 (Figure 1a).

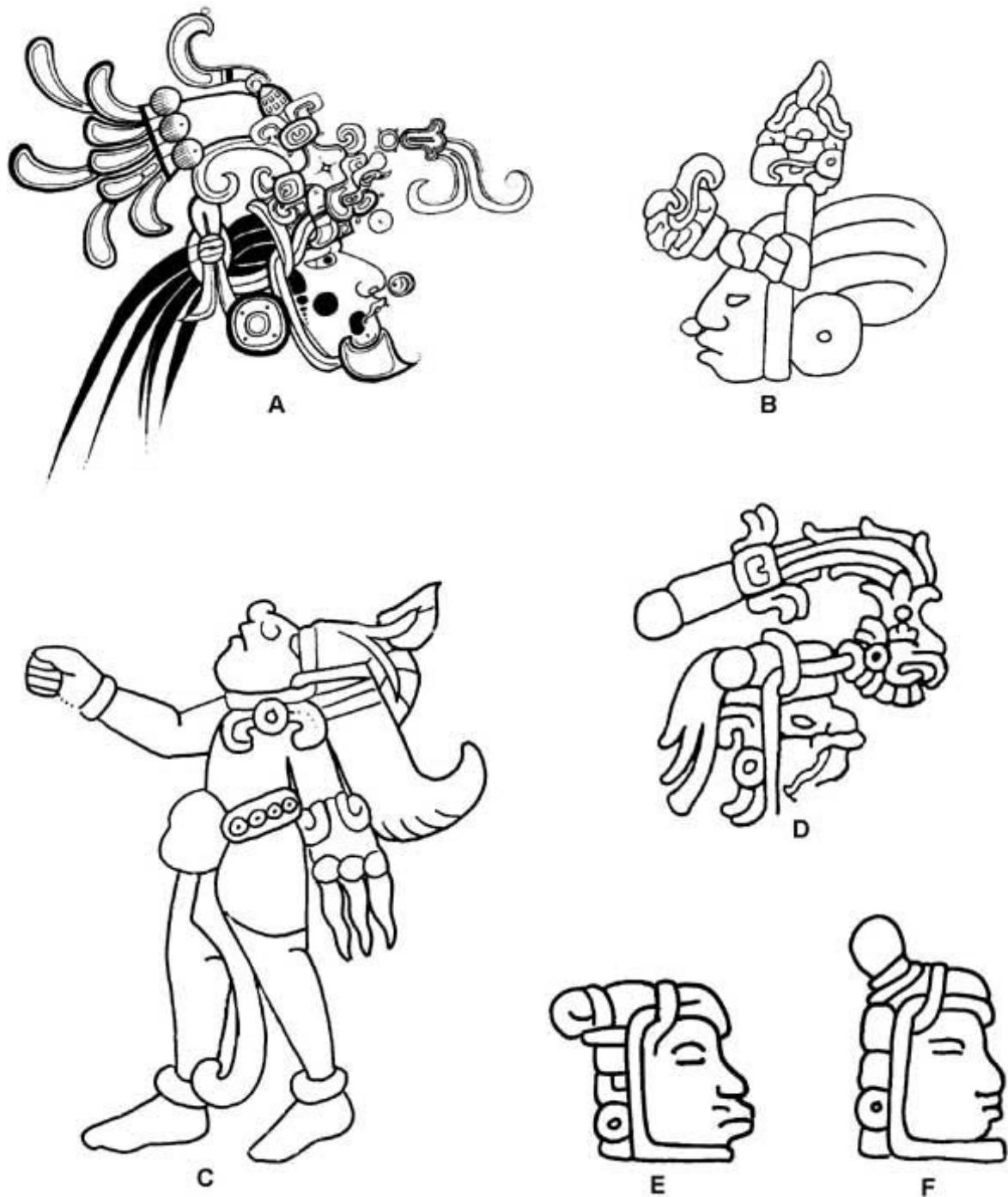


Figure 1. It shows the wrapped-up headband of Mesoamerican early art.

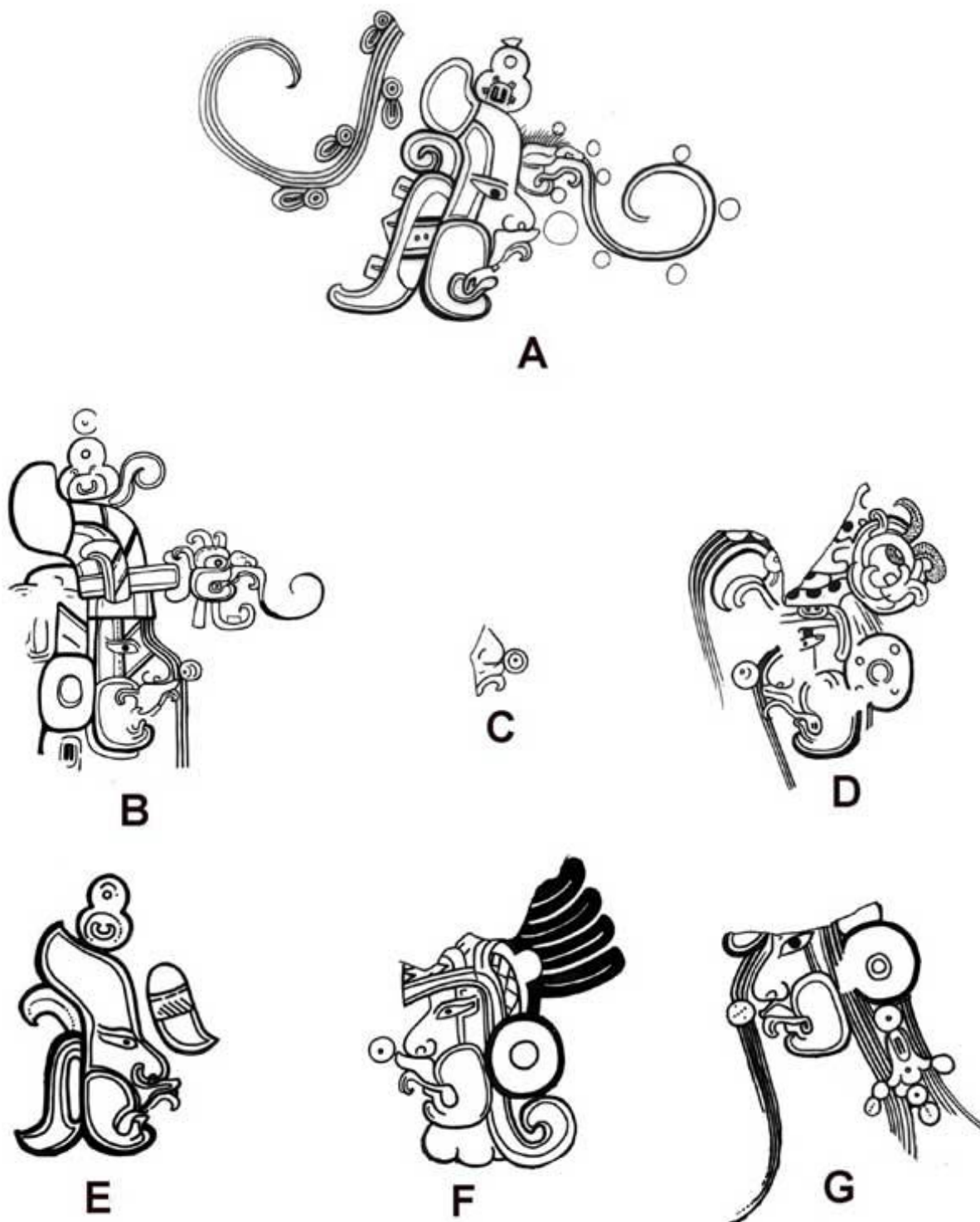
- a) Ajaw figure with the wrapped-up headband, Image 5, west mural (drawing by Heather Hurst);
- b) Early Classic Maya ruler with wrapped-up headband showing two jewels of the Jester God;
- c) Late Preclassic form of Hunahpu with headband; one of his arms is missing, Izapa, Stela 25 (Norman 1973: fig. 41-2).
- d) Late Preclassic Maize God with headband, Kaminaljuyu, Stela 20 (Parsons 1986: fig. 143).
- e-f) Heads of conquered Zapotec gods with wrapped-up headbands, detail of the conquest slabs from Mound J, Monte Albán (in Caso 1947: figs. 53-54).

The red and white headband in Image 1 is partially obscured by the jewelry features that have characterized the Jester God, a symbol of royalty, together with another elaborated headband that extends around his headdress and his chin, as well as along the back of his head and forehead (Figure 1a). A similar type of headband is shown in Image 7, and it would seem that the four individuals wore this kind of ornament in their heads. During the Late Preclassic period, this headband made with a knotted cloth was indicative of a high rank. Stela 25 of Izapa exhibits the Late Preclassic form of *Vucub Caquix* and *Hunahpu*, with the twin heroes wearing the wrapped-up headdress (Figure 1c). This same royal headband is present in many of the contemporary conquest slabs of Mound J in the Monte Alban monuments that depict defeated Zapotec gods under the toponymical signs of their communities (Figure 1e-f). In Alfonso Caso's *Corpus* (1947: 85-89), at least nine gods are wearing this wrapped-up headband.

In traditional Maya thinking, the four trees at the four corners of the world with four sides, denote the socially built space of straight lines, like in a house or a milpa, as opposite to the chaotic growth and the winding paths of the jungle (Taube 2003). The creation of this world scheme is the result of a sacrifice agreed upon with effort and work. In a similar way, the communities are as well considered to have four sides, due to their usual irregular form. Ángel García Zambrano (1994:219) notes that in colonial Mesoamerica, the political event of forming communities was expressed through the cosmogonic act of creating the four directions and the center of the world. According to Michael Coe (1965), the well-known celebration of the Maya-Yucatec new year during the period of contact, had to do with the annual rotation of some religious and political authority; with the shift of political power from one direction to the other in a given community, the new year celebrations of the Maya were the rebirth of creation, including the arrangement or placement of the world trees (Taube 1988b). The new year pages of the Dresden Codex illustrate the original raising of the world trees and the corners of the cosmos.

To the ancient Maya, the link between authority and ruling to the four directions was not merely limited to the community, but instead, it included the larger political and territorial domains. One basic duty of the Maya kings consisted in expanding their domains in the same old way that the K'iche' *Hunahpu* did, or in other words, expanding them to the four directions, as may be observed in the West Wall mural. According to the Colonial Title of Totonicapán, *Quik'ab*, the K'iche' king, launched a number of expeditions that were conceived from the starting point of a three-dimensional cosmologic theme (Tedlock 2003: 181, 331); however, another colonial document of Totonicapán, the Yax Title, provides a different revealing relation of rulers in an arrangement of the world trees. The initial passage of the text refers to five historic gods, *Quik'ab* [K'iq'ab'], *Majucotaj*, *Yewi Balam*, *Balam Ak'ab* and *Nima Yax*, who were still present when creation took place. "They were really the lords since the beginning. The truth is they were the lords since the foundation of the trees and the stones" (Carmack and Mondloch 1989:76). In this way, and by naming the personified form of kings or *Ajaw*, prior to the four world trees, the Late Preclassic artists of San Bartolo were depicting kingdoms as an already ancient institution, despite they were going back into the creation times.

Three of the four *Ajaw* figures are shown as fishermen or hunters who present their prey on a fire like a sacrificial offering to the world trees. All sacrificial creatures are in a supine position on tripod supports, with smoking pectorals on their abdomens. Moreover, the major part of Image 1 is missing; there is a fin and one part of the body of a fish that leaks black blood from a wound observed at its back, with a big fish on an offering dish before or in front of the tree. In Image 3, the hunter is carrying a deer, the same creature that is being offered before his tree. The pair of birds stuck to his woven pouch, identify Image 5 as a bird hunter. Finally, there is Image 7, standing in front of his tree. Instead of a sacrificial beast, the base of this fourth tree is covered with yellow buds that exhale some perfume, a bud similar to the one seen in the feathered serpent of the North Wall mural (Saturno and Taube 2004).



**Figure 2. Samples of the Maize God in the murals of Pinturas Sub-1:**

- a) Maize God of the North Mural, Pinturas Sub-1;**
- b) Maize God before the world tree or terrestrial tree, West Wall, Image11;**
- c) Maize God as an ascending god on the scaffold. West Wall, Image P12;**
- d) Maize God introducing the foliated Jester God. Image P12. West Wall, Image P13;**
- e) The Maize God as an infant. West Wall, Image P15;**
- f) Dancing Maize God, West Wall, Image P18;**
- g) Aquatic Maize God, West Wall, Image P21.**

It has been noted that the world trees appear in the new year pages of the Late Postclassic Dresden Codex. Before three such trees, on pages 26 and 28, there are identical animal offerings inside bowls, consisting of a turkey, a fish, and the hip of a deer. However, in the case of the east tree on page 26, there is a censer instead of an animal offering. The censer closely resembles the aromatic flowers present in the fourth tree of San Bartolo. Though they are not presented in the same order, the offerings and world trees in the new year pages of Dresden are remarkably similar to those of the San Bartolo series.

A big mythic bird holding a bicephalous serpent in its beak is perched on each one of the world trees. This creature constitutes an early form of *Vucub Caquix*, the monster bird defeated by the twin heroes. Also the art of the Late Preclassic and Classic periods contain explicit depictions of the mythical battle between the twin heroes and the monster bird. In the San Bartolo sequence, the four *Ajaw* exhibit offerings in front of each bird and the world tree. The fourth tree closely resembles the fruit tree on which *Vucub Caquix* is perched. In the XVI century *Popol Vuh*, the tree is a nance, while the large and rounded fruit identifies the plant of the Late Preclassic and Classic periods as a squash tree (*Crescentia sp.*).

Image 9 is observed at north of the fourth tree, and it is an additional representation of the Principal Bird deity. In view of its virtually identical attributes, there is no doubt that this is the same bird found on the squash tree, this time descending from the sky to its arboreal branches. Similarly, Stela 2 in Izapa shows the bird diving to its pumpkin tree, as well as resting at its foot (Taube 1993: 65).

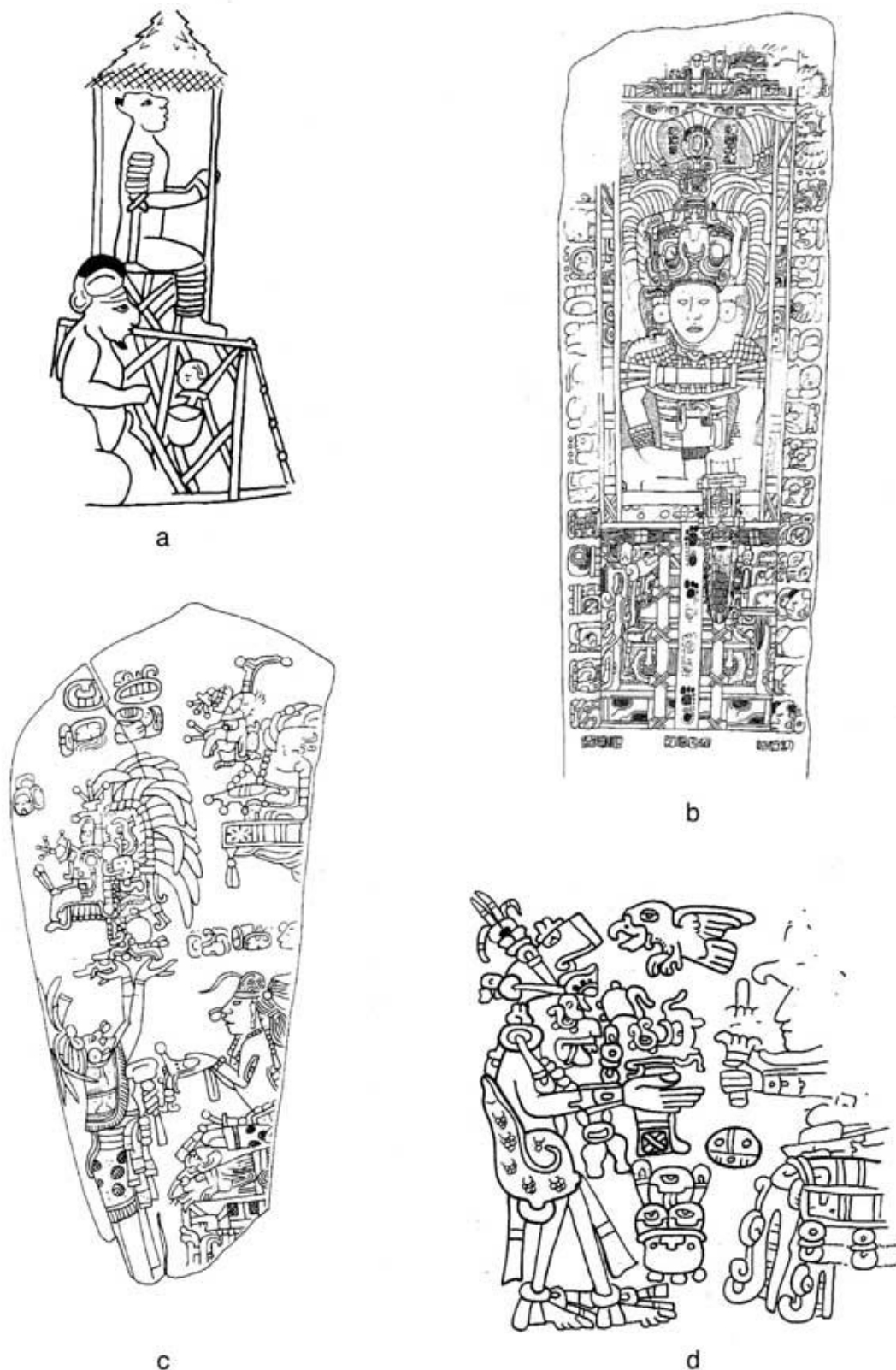
Under both the descending bird and the celestial band is Image 10, showing an image with a duck beak dancing and singing jointly with three singer birds. The physical proportions of this being are similar to those of the Tuxtla figurine dated to the mid II century BC. Both beings resembling ducks are probably early forms of the Aztec god of the wind, *Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl*, who usually wears a mask with a duck's beak. One carved step of Structure 33, in Late Classic Yaxchilan, shows in an epigraphic manner a being with a duck beak in the form of a IK' K'UH or "God of the Wind", and in Classic art, this deity may spread its wings with the *Ik'* sign present as marks on its body (Taube 2004:173). In Mesoamerica, the summer winds that bring water come from the east, and it is quite possible that this fourth tree is indicating this direction.

Jointly with the four world trees with the figures of the twin heroes and the mythic birds, there is a fifth tree accompanied by the Maize God (Figure 2b). This fifth tree is probably showing the center of the world surrounded by other directional trees. Among the Olmec, the Classic Maya and the Aztec, the maize deities were closely identified with the *axis mundi*. For the series of directional trees shown in pages 49 to 53 of the Borgia Codex, dated to the Late Postclassic period, the fifth and central tree is a maize plant.

Regarding the north half of the West Mural, the central scenes are flanked by two images of royal ascension, in at least the two more detailed examples known for such an early date. For the Classic period in Piedras Negras, Stelae 6, 11, 14 and 25

include identical concepts of rites regarding human sacrifice and royal ascension (Figure 3b; Taube 1988a).

The two ascending individuals in the West Wall –Images P2 and P22- define the central scene concerning the mythic cycle of the Maize God. Schele and Miller (1986: 119-120), noted that one incised plate in the Dumbarton Oaks collection displays a Late Preclassic text with a verb “sitting” referred to a royal ascension. Both the style and the iconographic content of the royal figure that accompanies this text, feature many similarities with contemporary San Bartolo figures P12 and P22, where the ascending ruler –Image P12- seats on a jaguar skin while he is given a royal jewel by a second individual, Image P13. This accompanying figure is clearly the Maize God (Figure 2c-d).



**Figure 3. Sample of ancient Maya gods in scaffolds and ascension:**  
 a). Human victims tied up to the scaffold; detail of vessels from the Classic period (Taube 1988: fig. 12, 11);  
 b). Stela 6, Piedras Negras (Stuart and Graham 2003:36);  
 c). Classic scene of supernatural ascension (Taube 1987: fig. 6b);  
 d). Ascending god from *K'atun 7 Ajaw* receiving the headdress.

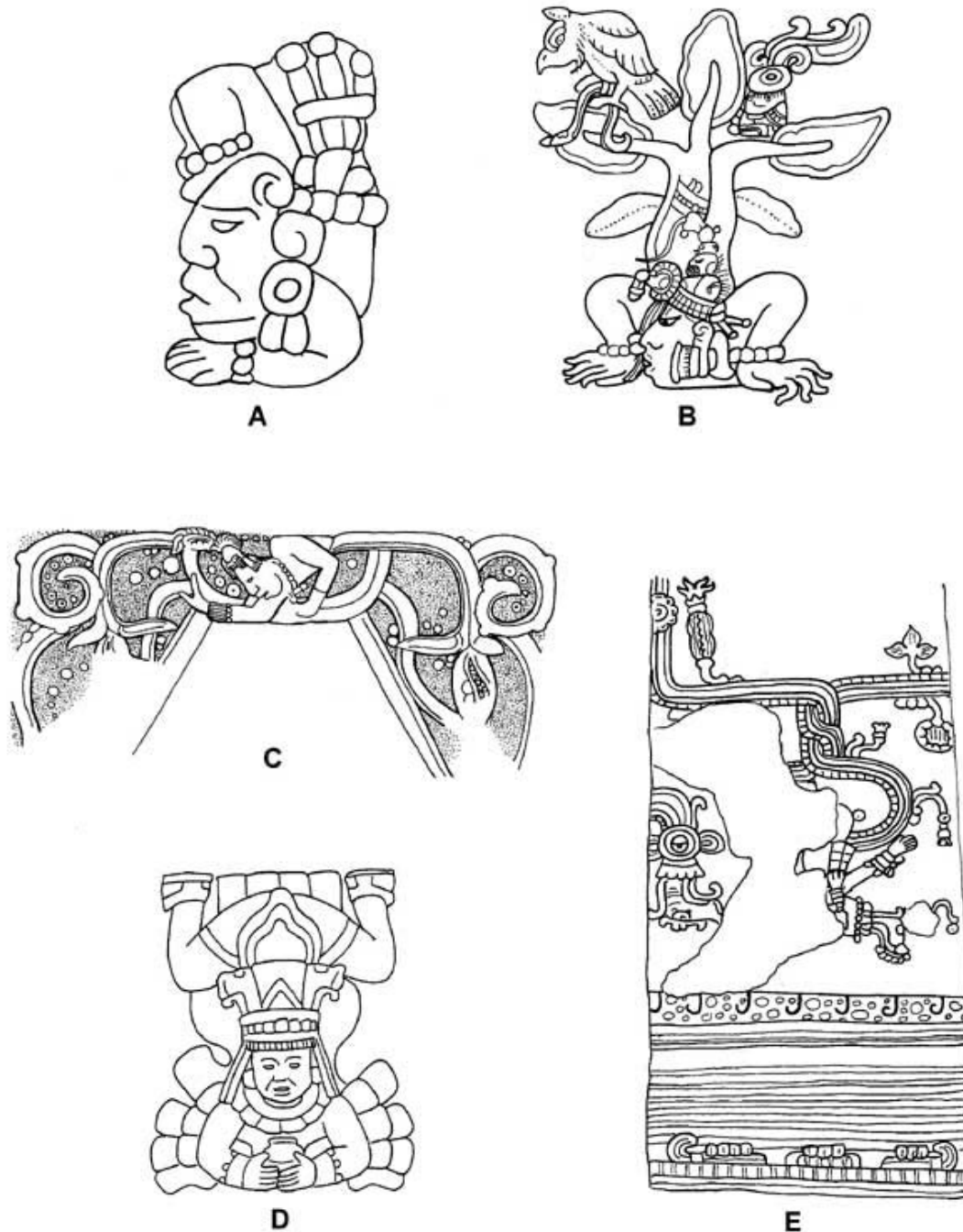


The northernmost scene on the West Wall is better preserved, and depicts a subsidiary figure which shows a royal costume to the ascending figure. In contrast with the pair of deities that appear in the succession scene, more to the south, Images P21 and P22 seem to be human, and this scene could be depicting not a mythic scene but rather, a historic event. The last glyph in the accompanying text is clearly the *Ajaw* glyph, but this could be the title of a god or a king. With this band in the chin of the Three-pointed Jester God and the features that hang from the band in his forehead, this headdress is very similar to the one used by the ascending god that appears in the Dumbarton Oaks plate (Schele and Miller 1986:119).

Images P15 and P16 represent an important scene of the Maize God as an infant, deposited in the arms of another individual who kneels down in the water. At the right of these figures there is a turtle with a curved beak and the motif of a quadripartite cave on its body. Images P17 and P19 are sitting around the turtle-cave. While the figure at the south side is a *Chaak*, the figure at north is the Terrestrial God of Water who appears in Classic Maya epigraphy as the personified forms of the 360 days *Tun* period, together with the numeral 13 (Taube 1993). Images P17 and P19 each feature a flexed arm or an arm extended towards the Maize God, who dances and plays a drum, an early version of an event corresponding to the Classic Maya mythology of creation (Taube 1993:66).

On the north side of the terrestrial turtle is Image P20, which represents the Maize God in a position with his legs over his head (Figure 4a-b); Taube 2003:461, fig. 26.2). In the case of this image, the deity descends from the sky with his extended arms. Right under the figure there is a black undulating vertical water band. This scene probably refers to the death of the Maize God, as an expression of Classic Maya death *och ha*, which means "he gets into the water". It is not common to find the aquatic Maize God, although it occurs in a vault that opens to several inner chambers in the Palenque palace (Figure 4a-b). However, some of the clearest examples of the aquatic Maize God occur during the Late Postclassic period, as is the case of Structure 16 in Tulum (Figure 4d and 4e).

In short, the West Wall shows one of the most significant known themes of creation and royalty for the Preclassic Maya period. Images 1 to 10 have to do with the arrangement of the directional trees for four aspects of the *Ajaw*, the personification of royalty. The following portion shows the mythic cycles of the Maize God, but again referred to royalty, given that the central portion is flanked by two coronation scenes. These scenes illustrate as well the cycle of human life on earth, our birth, death and resurrection; the latter being accompanied with dance and music even to this day, an action through which the Maya get in touch with their ancestors.



**Figure 4. The Maize God, contorted and in an aquatic position.**

- a) Early Classic jade showing the Maize God in a contorted position (in Bliss 1957: figure 64);
- b) Maize God in a contorted position, as world tree;
- c) Aquatic Maize God; note the maize and the water motifs; stucco sculpture from the Palenque Palace (Maudslay 1889-1902, IV, fig. 97).
- d) Chaak, in aquatic contortion; the text indicates his descent (uyeemi). Paris Codex, page 17;
- e) The Maize God in the aquatic position; stucco sculpture on the lintel of the doorway, Structure 16, Tulum (Miller 1982; fig. 37).

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- Figure 1 Showing the wrapped-up headband in early Mesoamerican art: a) *Ajaw* figure with wrapped-up headband, Image 5 of the west mural (drawing by Heather Hurst); b) Early Classic Maya Ruler with wrapped-up headband showing two jewels of the Jester God, and detail of carved shell from Dzibanche (Arqueología Mexicana 2004:69); c) Late Preclassic form of *Hunahpu* with headband; observe one missing arm, Izapa, Stela 25 (Norman 1973: fig. 41-2); d) Late Preclassic Maize God with headband, Kaminaljuyu Stela 20 (Parsons 1986; fig. 143); e-f) Heads of defeated Zapotec gods with wrapped-up headbands, details of the conquest slabs of Mound J, Monte Albán (in Caso 1947: figs. 53-54).
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