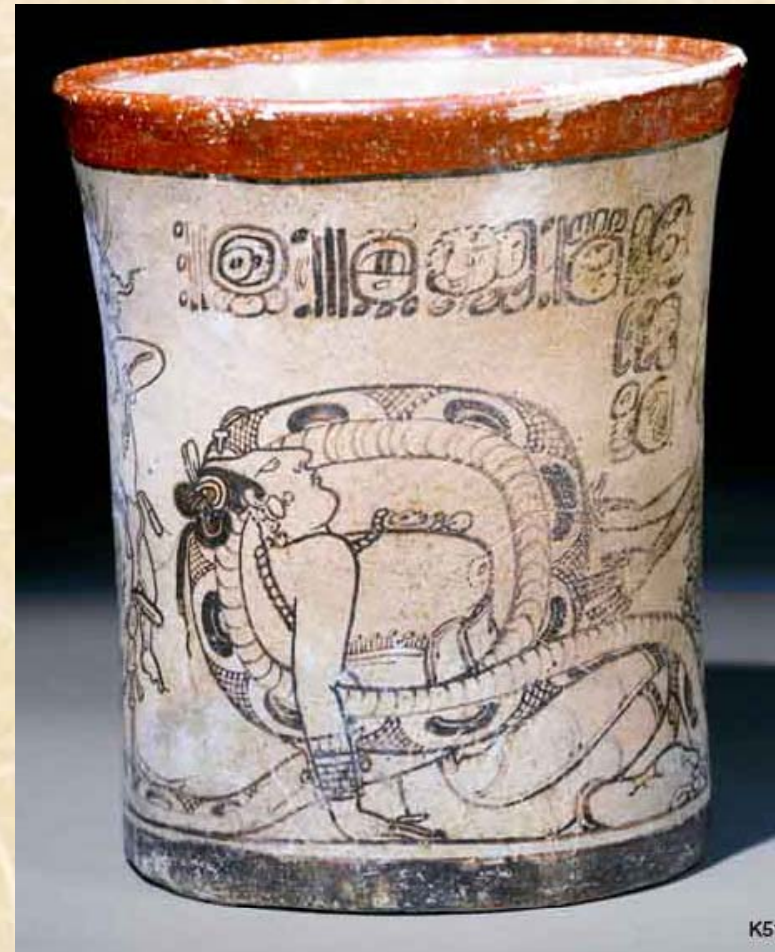


# The Maya conception of Time itself Is very different from ours:

The Codex-Style “Snake-Lady” vases illustrate a mythical event, expressed in “mythic time” or “outside of time.”





# Can we always trust Maya Dates?



Maya codex-style vase (K5164) portraying  
the “Snake-Loop Lady and the Old Lecher,”  
ca. 700 AD/CE

—rollout photographs by Justin Kerr, from website <http://research.famsi.org/kerrmaya.html>



We shall here examine a set of vases painted with nearly-identical scenes, accompanied by nearly-identical texts, painted by a close-knit group of artists, all copying almost certainly the same original illustration. The artists were probably all working in the same shop, with no doubt some friendly rivalry.





The scene consists here (K5164) of a bosomy topless woman sitting in the loop of a huge serpent, which grows from the foot of K'awiil (here on the left). I've artificially colored K'awiil blue, and the head of this enormous snake green. The snake's jaws are wide open, and out pops an old man who entreats the lady to come a little bit closer. She seems to recoil, and texts comprising about 15 glyph-blocks surround the scene.



On this vase (K6754), she faces the other way, but the other two characters are in much the same position. However, now the scene is set indoors, in a curtained interior; the main text seems painted on the central house-post, and a mummy of the 'Te'-God' is enthroned on a dais to the right.

K6754





Vase K1081 reverses the positions of the three, and puts them on a dais adorned with tobacco leaves. K1081  
 The 'Te'-God' mummy is joined by a mummy of 'Chaak,' both seated on large round bundles.







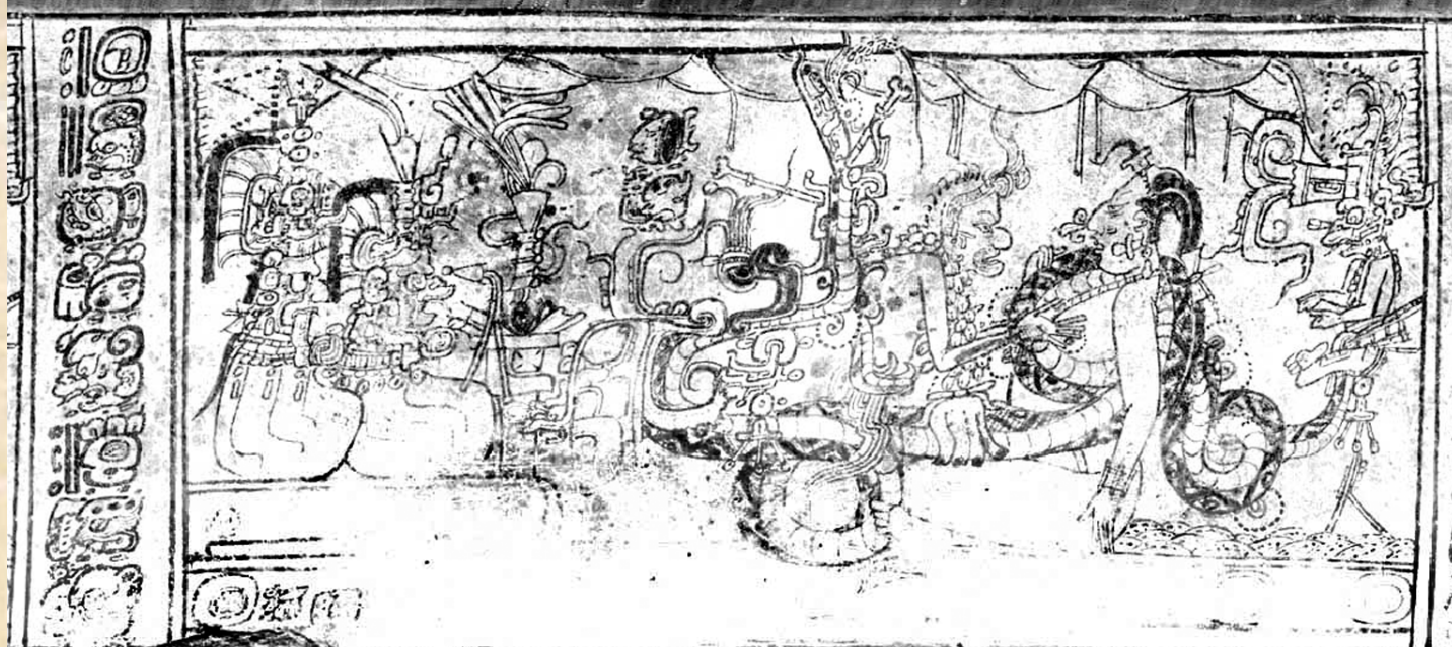
K1198

Vase K1198 has the actors in precisely the same positions as K6754. Here, however, the snake's enormous deer-ear hides the mummies. K1198 also shows ancient stitching-holes which presumably allowed the sewing up of some cracks. In all these, the main text adorns a column.



K6754





K4485

Two more Maya codex-style vases portraying the “Snake-Loop Lady and the Old Lecher.” In K1813 and K4485, the Lecher is actually fondling the Lady, cushioned on a layer of tobacco leaves, with mummies witnessing the scene. K4485 has an extra character, who seems astonished at the mummies. These both have the usual inscribed column. ca. 700 AD/CE

—rollout photographs by Justin Kerr, from website <http://research.famsi.org/kerrmaya.html>





K0719

K0719 (with no inscription at all) seems to copy the big-eared Snake of K1198, but the other two characters change position again.



K1198





K1382

K1382 shows yet another arrangement, and its text has drifted off the column into the sky above the lecher-lady pair.



K1198





A plate  
(K3702)  
portraying the  
same scene as  
the previous  
vases.

*Note new features:*  
Incense burner (right),  
Reclining guy (below)

Photographs of these plates and  
vases are by Justin Kerr, from  
[http://research.famsi.  
org/kerrmaya.html](http://research.famsi.org/kerrmaya.html)

K3702





*Tzolk'in*  
day

*Haab* Date

K1081,

K6754,

K5164,  
K1813,

K1198,

Comparing the five clearest texts from these nearly-identical vases, we see that they are not quite identical. The *Tzolk'in* day is almost always **Muluk**, with a coefficient of 7, 9, 12, or 13. The *Haab* dates vary a little more, but still seem restricted, as if the artists were picking numbers and month-signs at random from a few favorites.





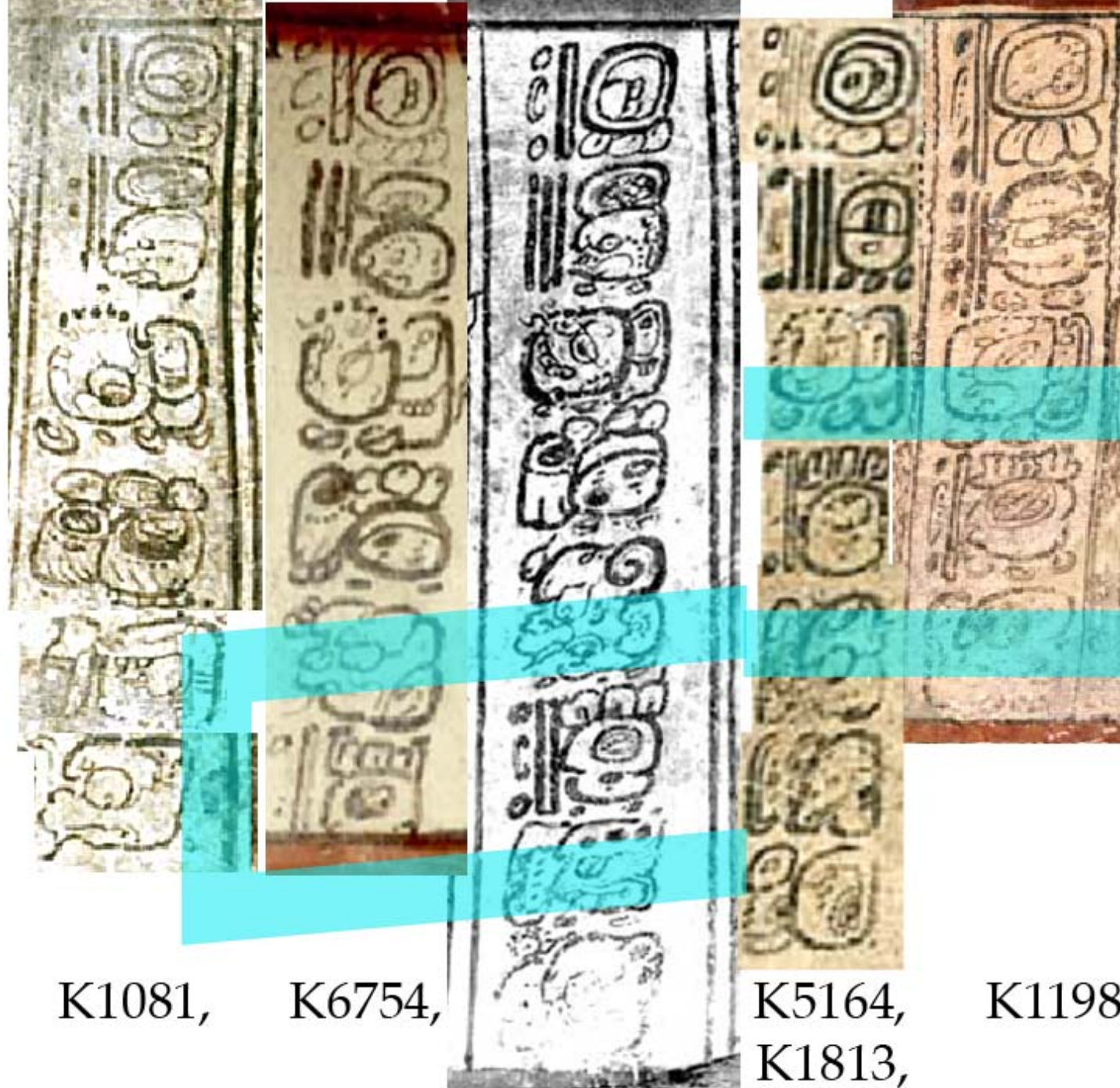
The verb is constant: *Siy-Ya-Ja*, “was born.”





The Actors vary among three names, some of which may combine to identify a single individual.





K1081,

K6754,

K5164,  
K1813,

K1198,

The Actors vary among three names, some of which may combine to identify a single individual.





K1081,

K6754,

K5164,  
K1813,

K1198,

Chaak is the most recognizable of these names.



# Mysterious Dates assigned to the 'Snake-Coil Lady and the Lecher' "birth" event:

K 5164: 13 Muluk 17 Pax

K 6754: 7 Muluk 15 Yax

K 1081: 12 Muluk 14 Zak

K 1198: 7 Muluk? 14 Zak

K 1813: 7 Muluk 15 Pax

K 4485: 7 Muluk 10 Keh

K 1382: 13 Muluk 1 Pax

K 3702: 9 Muluk 18 Zak

When the *tzolk'in* falls on a Muluk, the *haab* coefficient is always the **2nd, 7th, 12th, or 17th** of the Haab month.

Why is there such deliberate variation in the dates??



# Mysterious Dates assigned to the 'Snake-Coil Lady and the Lecher' "birth" event:

K 5164: 13 Muluk 17 Pax	Possible date
K 6754: 7 Muluk 15 Yax	Impossible date
K 1081: 12 Muluk 14 Zak	Impossible date
K 1198: 7 Muluk? 14 Zak	Impossible date
K 1813: 7 Muluk 15 Pax	Impossible date
K 4485: 7 Muluk 10 Keh	Impossible date
K 1382: 13 Muluk 1 Pax	Impossible date
K 3702: 9 Muluk 18 Zak	Impossible date

When the *tzolk'in* falls on a Muluk, the *haab* coefficient is always the **2nd, 7th, 12th, or 17th** of the Haab month. A date like "7 Muluk 15 Pax" cannot exist. It would be like saying, "Wednesday February 30, 2008."

The most plausible explanation for this deliberate and calculated variation between "impossible" dates? Does an unworkable date signify "Myth time," a time beyond our reckoning?



# The Maya understanding of Symbols is very different from ours,

“Cultural icons” were not at all sacrosanct.  
Symbols were subject to revision,  
Symbols were “open-source”,  
The Maya altered dates, interpretations,  
Whatever suited their purpose at hand.

The Maya were not as restricted to specific interpretations or specific details as we are today. We live in a milieu permeated by Judeo-Christian and Muslim tradition, whose Scriptures strictly define every aspect of, say, Good, Evil, the Deity, and Creation myth, etc. We forget what it is to have one's cultural mythology be flexible, mutable, adaptable. Mesoamericans, like ancient Greeks and Romans, had no such God-given Scripture, and consequently left us some very-different, even contradictory, versions of their myths.

Ex. 1: World Trees

Ex. 2: The Three Stones



# Ex. 1 - The Precolumbian World Tree: Metaphor with a Thousand Faces

*Ajaw* /King = Tree = Ceiba = Maize = a Celt  
= Milky Way Galaxy  
Snake = Sky = Ecliptic

World trees communicate to heaven, give birth, or support the corners of the cosmos.

Tree-symbolism is a prominent area where we find Mesoamericans manipulating and transforming religious symbols to fit their numerological, astrological, and political agenda.

Note how the iconography and interpretation is not constant.

Evidence of Maya manipulation of their narrative makes unreliable any precise prediction about what could happen in 2012.





This tree, sacred to the Maya, would grow to be King of the Forest.

In its youth, it is distinctively studded with thorns, and often bulges as if pregnant.

Note how the branches arrange themselves, shooting straight out from the trunk to the cardinal points.

“Pregnant” Ceiba trees

[Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena]





Tree image from the Late Formative (about 100-50 BC/BCE), exhibits the bulging trunk of a Ceiba, and supports a large mythical bird.

Interpretation: a Directional Tree. Before this tree the Maize God (not shown) lets blood and makes an offering of a deer (greyed out). Atop the tree perches the Bird deity, wings outstretched, with a bleeding, twisted serpent in its mouth.

West wall, *San Bartolo Murals*, Petén, N. Guatemala.  
ca. 50 BCE.

Drawing: Heather Hurst





Tree image from the Late Formative (about 100-50 BC/BCE, from Izapa, SE Chiapas, México, near Guatemalan border), exhibits the bulging trunk of a Ceiba, and is part crocodile. It supports a mythical bird with smoke or mist curling up from its head. Echoing it is an artificial tree, a standard or scaffold upon which perches a larger bird, wings outstretched, wearing a Bird-deity mask. The two are linked by a twisted rope, which Karl Taube likens to the rope ladder hitched around a *Volador* pole (see Slide 36). Interpretation: Plays a part in the *Popol Vuh* myth of the Hero Twins and Vucub Kaqix, The Macaw Who Claimed to be God.

*Izapa Stela 25, S.E. México.*  
ca. 50 BCE.

Drawing: Linda Schele

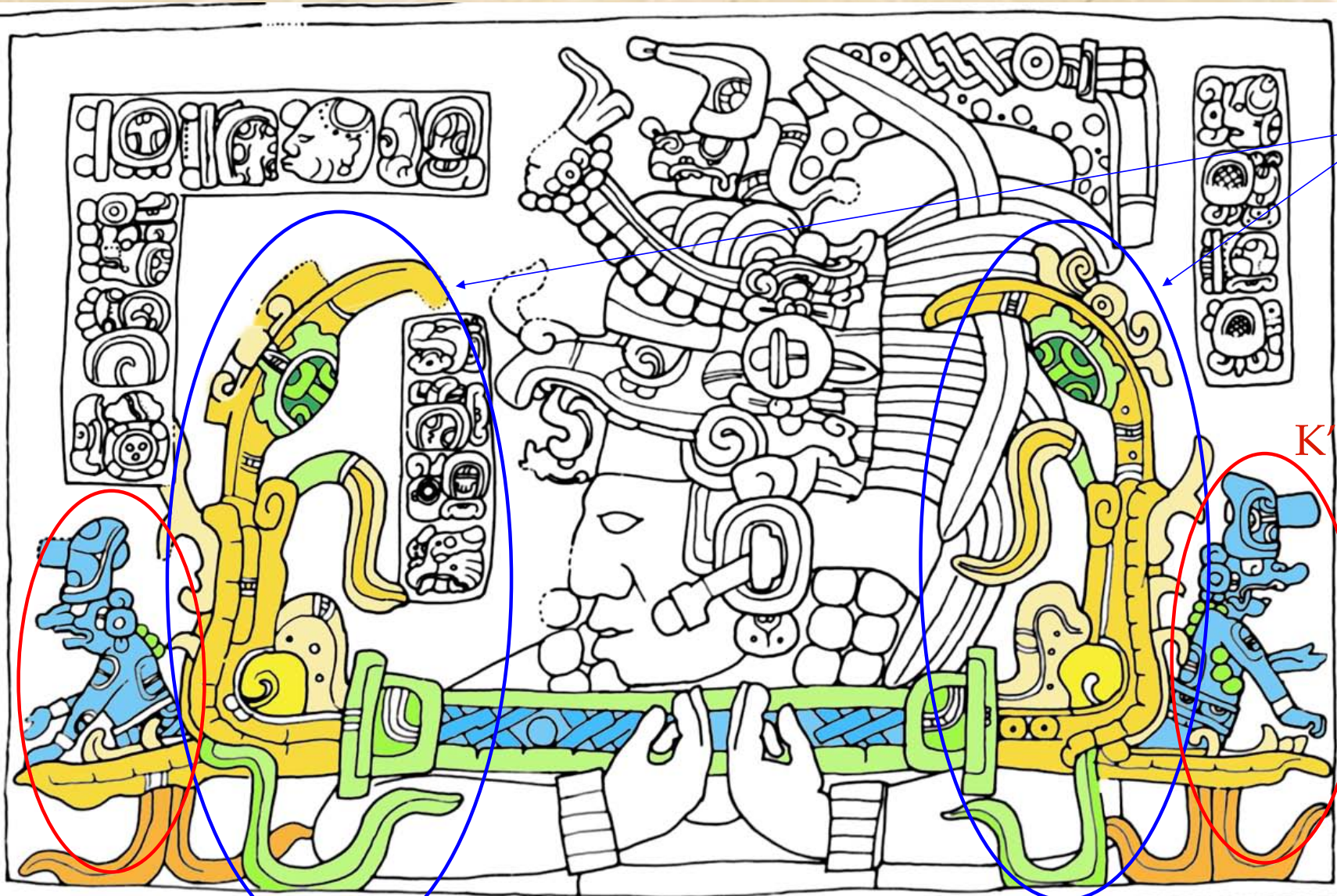


A **World Tree**, present in virtually every mythic tradition, connects the Underworld (roots) with Heaven (branches) and the Earth (trunk).

Possibly the *most important function* a Maya ruler could perform was a ceremony where he assumed the role of the World Tree, connecting his people to the gods. Innumerable Maya monuments portray a ruler standing erect, holding a double-headed “Serpent Bar” tightly across his chest.

The serpents’ mouths *open wide and belch forth Visions* in the form of gods. The lord’s costume and his visions change, but his pose remains quite consistent.





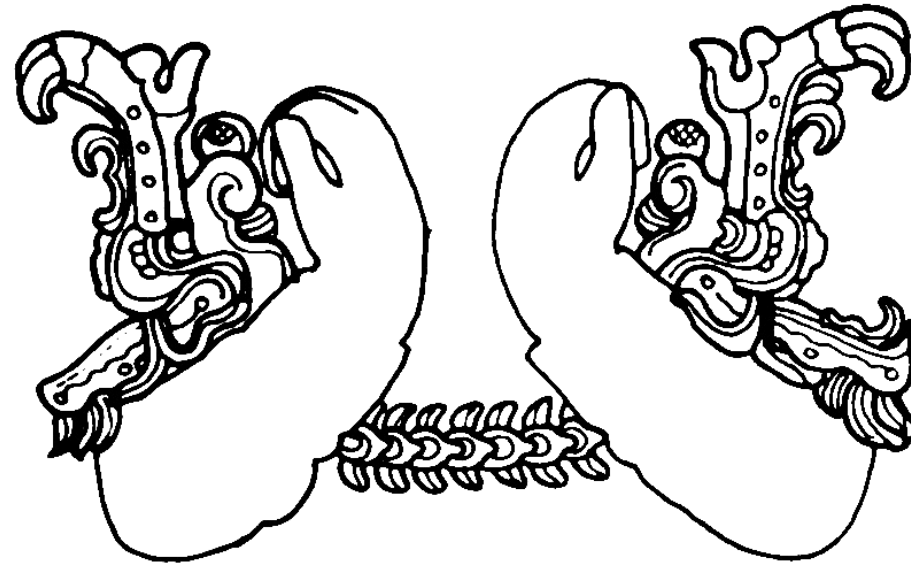
Snake head

K'awiil (God K)

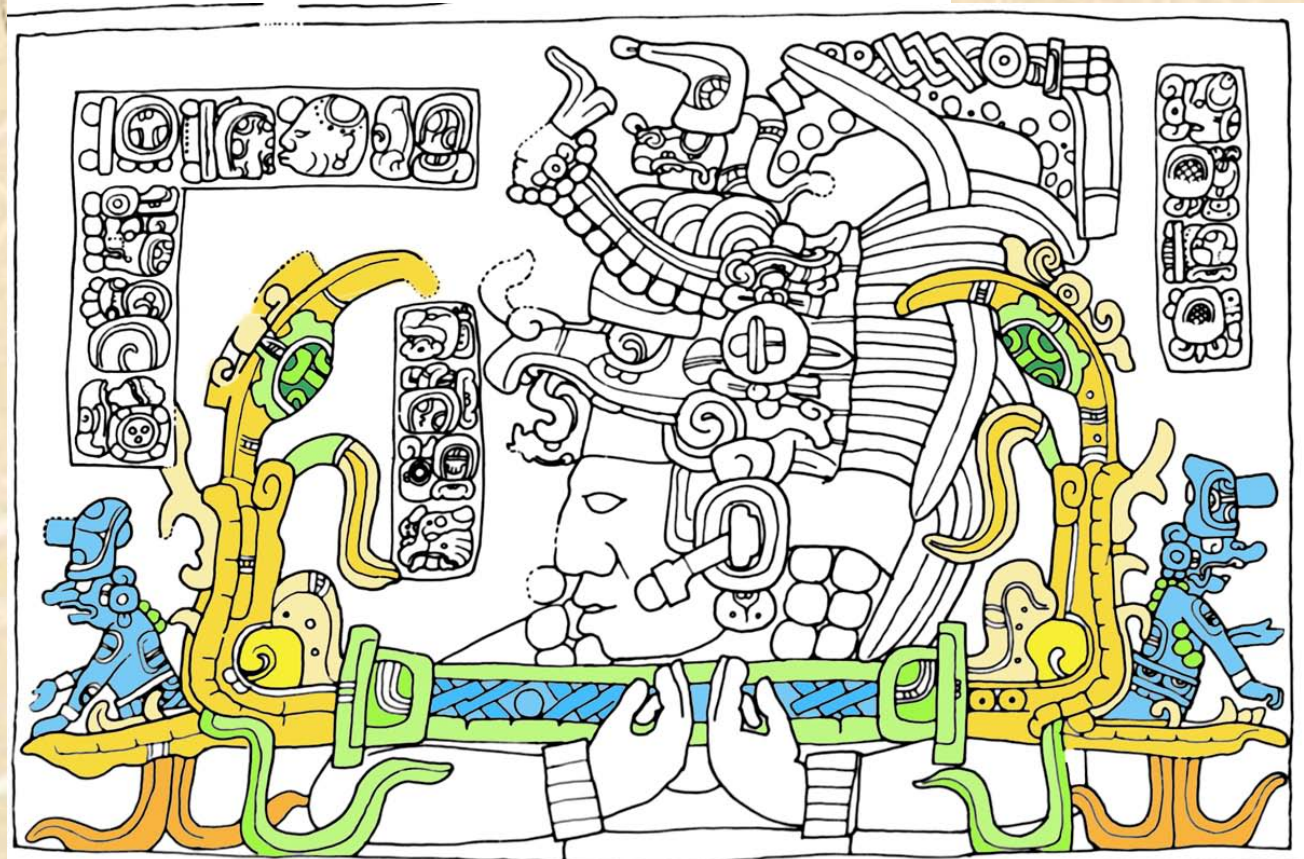
K'awiil (God K)

Typically, the ruler stands erect, holding a *Serpent Bar* tightly across his or her chest. This regalia is an effigy of a double-headed snake, mouths agape, and from each mouth emerges a god. This snake was the standard Maya delivery system for a hallucinatory Vision. Most often the god so invoked is *K'awiil* (or *God K*), the Maya patron of rulers and abundance, as here, but the Vision could be any of several characters in the Maya pantheon.





The Serpent-Bar can take three or four forms. Sometimes, it can be “living,” as below, or fleshless, as at left. Both visions shown here (blue) are *K'awiil* (God K), god of royalty and abundance.



## Typical Maya Vision-Serpent-bars: Copan St. H , Bonampak Lintel 6

*Typical interpretation: Maya king is Milky Way/World Tree; Vision-Serpent-bar is ecliptic. Drawings by Linda Schele.*



## Copan Stelae A and B, 8th Century AD.

The king in  
ceremonial pose  
as a World Tree,  
holding a  
Serpent-bar  
across his chest.

The Serpent-Bars are  
colored blue. Note the  
characteristic “grip:”  
the ruler appears to  
*avoid touching* the  
Serpent-Bar; his hands  
form a peculiar back-to-  
back ‘crab-claw’  
gesture, and he seems  
to hold the Bar with his  
wrists, or the edges of  
his palms. This weird  
hand pose is consistent  
across Maya  
iconography; it must  
have a clear meaning,  
but nobody has offered  
a convincing  
interpretation.





## Copan Stelae A and B, 8th Century AD.

The king in  
ceremonial pose  
as a World Tree,  
holding a  
Serpent-bar  
across his chest.

The Serpent  
opens its mouth  
wide to emit  
the Vision  
(colored red),  
which is a  
different  
character for  
each occasion.  
At Copan, the  
Maya named  
each stela for  
its Vision.







## Copan Stela A, Sun god vision, ca. 731

All photographs of Copan  
Stelae by Linda Schele;  
hand-tinting by MV

A close-up of *Stela A*, showing the emerging Sun God. In our usual interpretation of this ceremony, the Ruler becomes the Tree. At the same time, the Tree appears in the sky as the Milky Way, which stretches from north to south; and the Serpent-bar represents the Ecliptic, the path through the firmament of the sun, moon and planets. Occasionally, the serpent-bar is decorated as a *Skyband*, adorned with glyphs reading "Sun," "Star," "Moon," "Sky," "Night," etc., but more often it simply carries a 'mat' motif, the woven-mat pattern of a royal throne-cushion.





Copan Stela N,  
two different  
vision gods

It is likely that the woven mat motif also represents the sky; its simplest form, as here on *Stela N*, is a diagonal cross. Any cross, whether upright or slanted, invokes the celestial intersection of the Ecliptic with the Milky Way. Here the lord, wearing a ridiculous pair of shell ear ornaments, invokes two different gods. The 'collar' from which each snake-head emerges is a typical bell-shaped jade bead, its high polish indicated by a semicircular "mirror-mark."





Copan  
Stela P  
(Early  
Classic,  
6<sup>th</sup> Century)

This stela's Serpent-Bar is flexible, composed of jade-bell-bead 'vertebrae,' each 'mirror-marked.' The gods invoked are our old friends the 'Paddler Twins,' who planted the Jaguar Throne Stone on Quirigua *Stela C*.





Copán Stela H's vision (at left) is the usual K'awiil, (his standard color, like Krishna, is blue, with red flames from the torch in his forehead) here elbowing his way out of a [yellow] skeletal Vision Serpent.

On right: a woman stands in the costume of the Moon Goddess, casually invoking a baroque Vision Serpent.



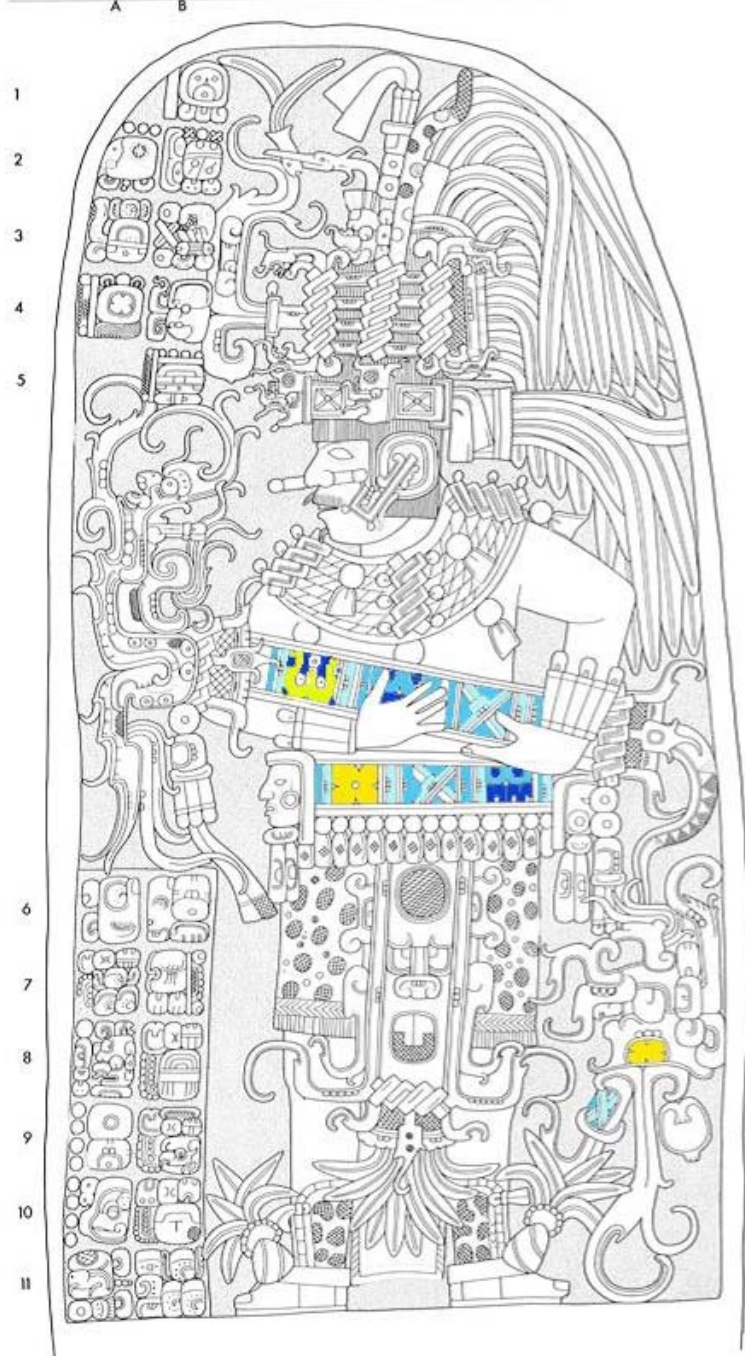
*Left: Copan Stela H, Vision: K'awiil*  
*Right: San Francisco Stela, Vision: K'awiil*





*Enlargement:* Her scaly Serpent spills out of its thighbone-shaped Bar, coiling around her body and towering over her. The head (at top) spits out a hooved K'awiil, whose head is the same size as hers.



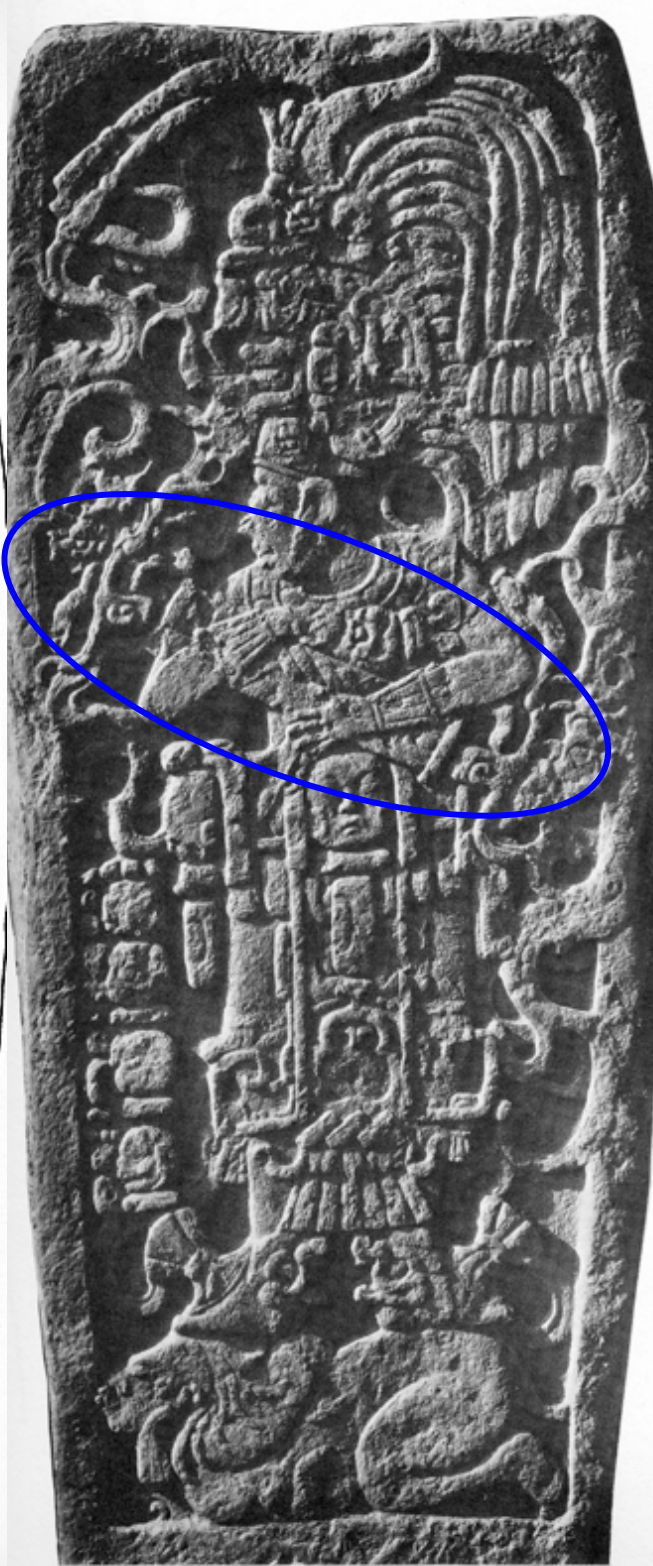
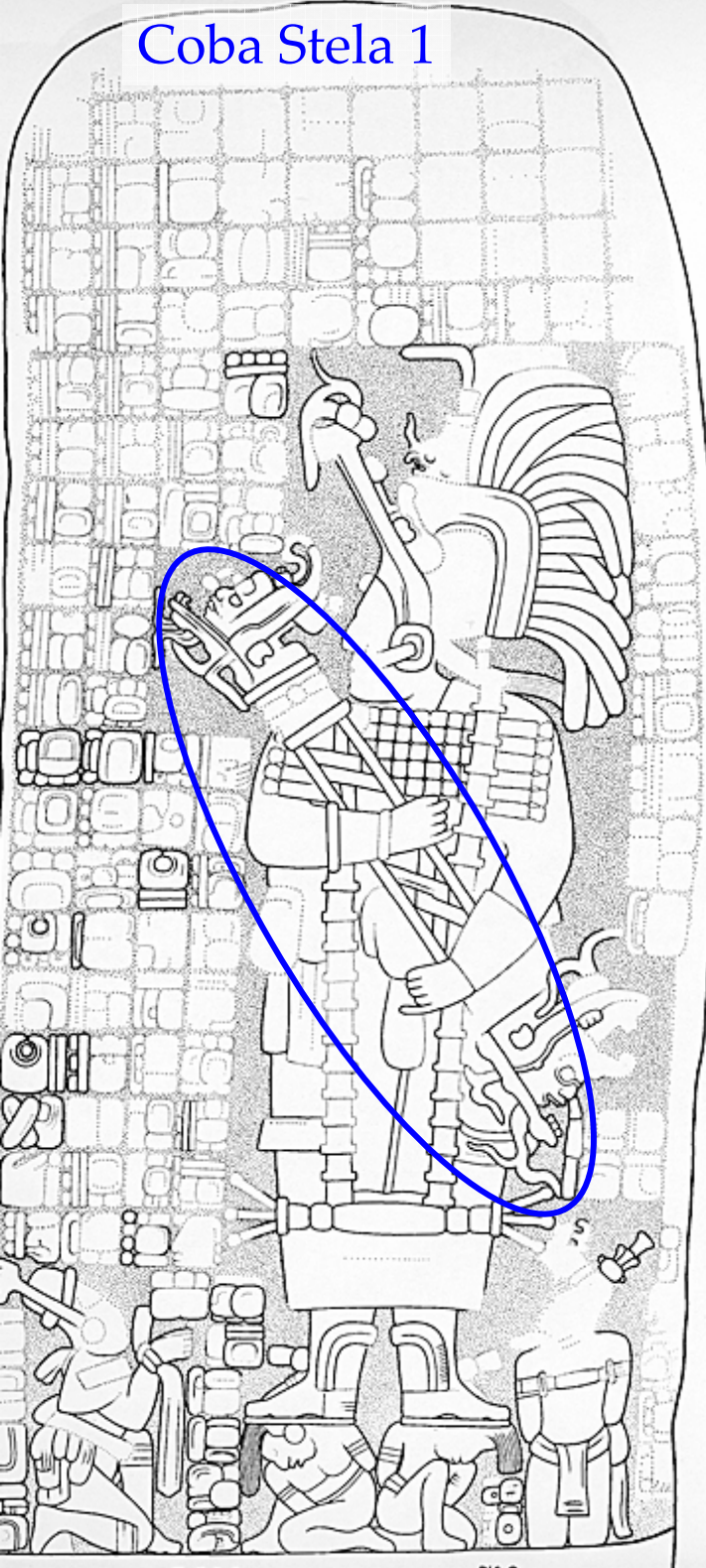


Seibal  
Stela 10  
900 AD/CE

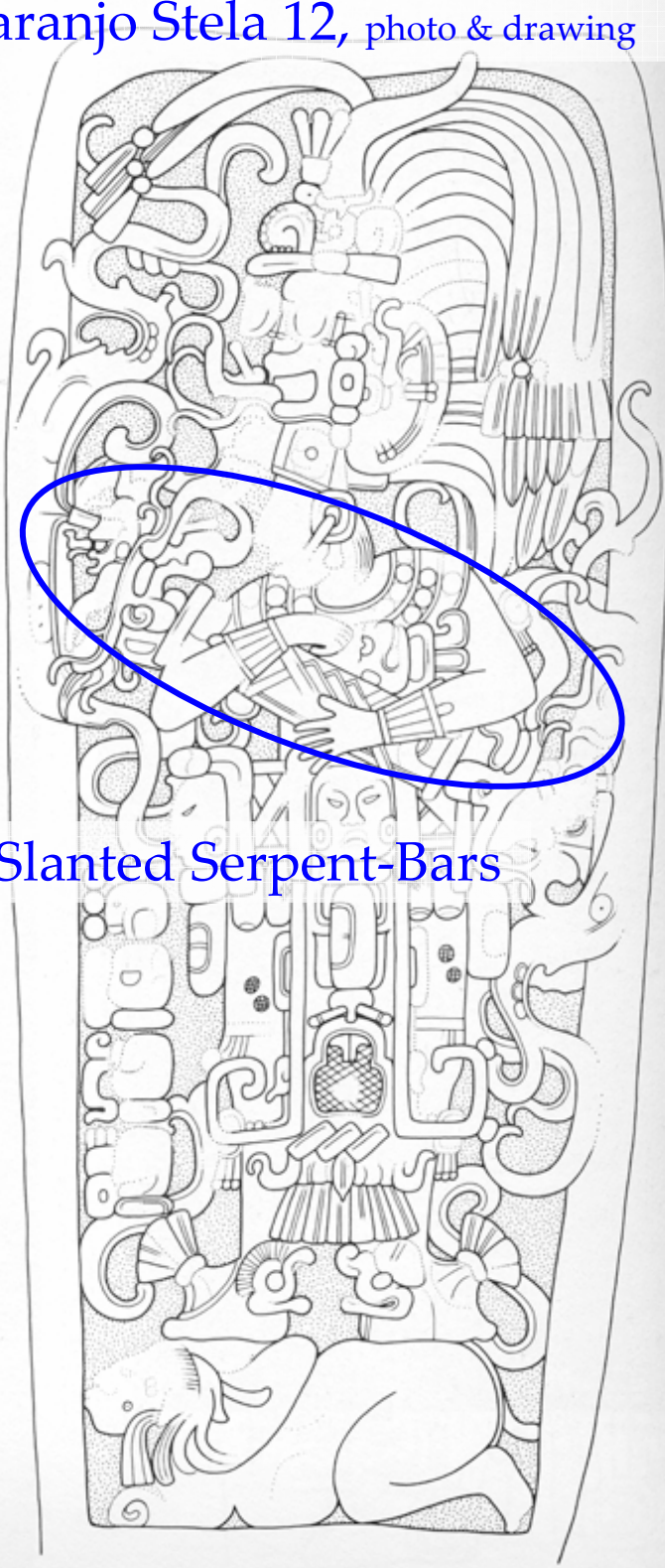
To confirm our cosmic interpretation, note that some World-Tree-Sky stelae portray the ruler holding the Serpent-bar at a jaunty angle. Seibal *Stela 10* is one of these. Both his Serpent-Bar and his belt are portrayed as Skybands; their glyphic icons (colored in shades of blue and yellow) respectively read “star-night-sky” and “sun-sky-night.”



Coba Stela 1



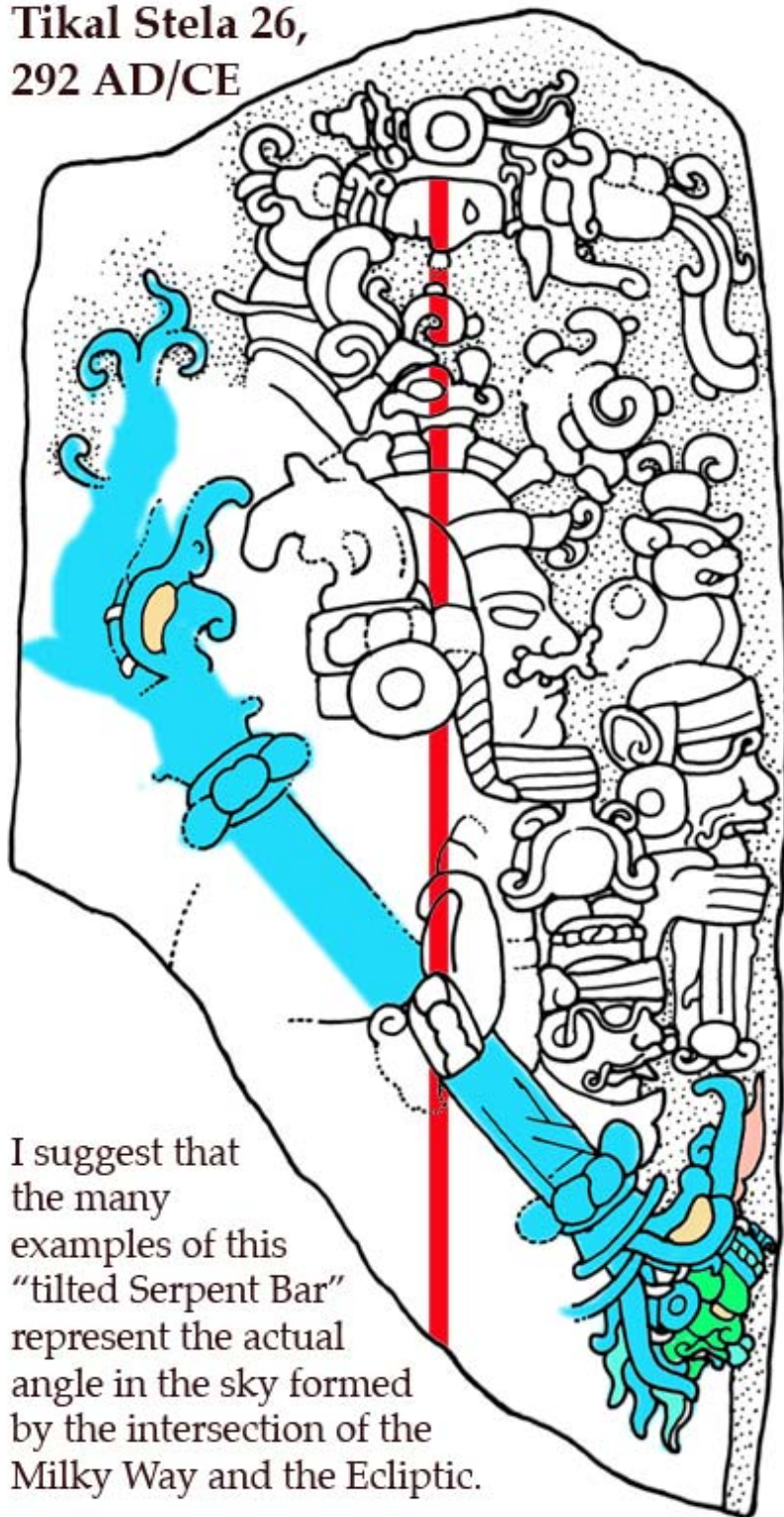
Naranjo Stela 12, photo & drawing



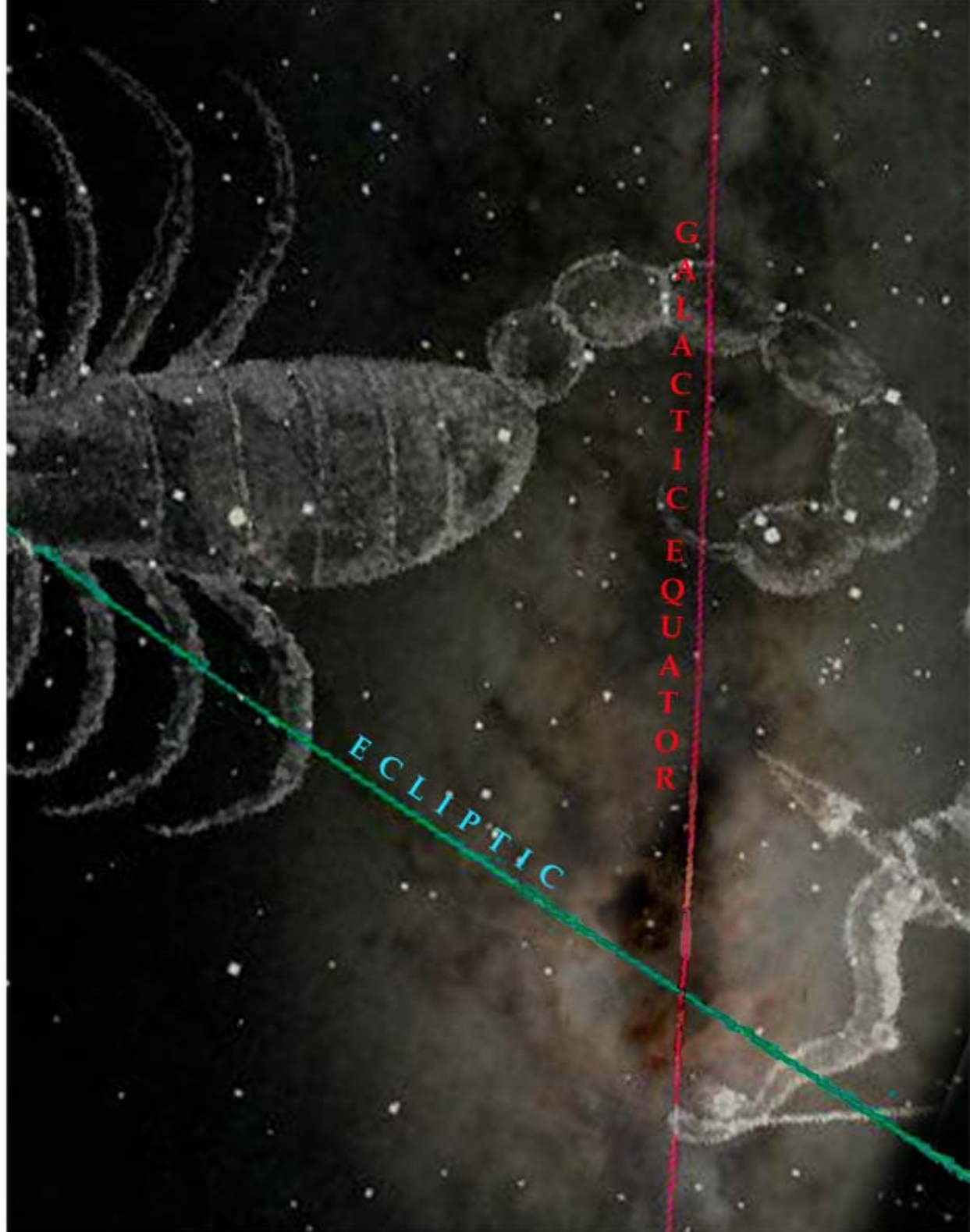
Slanted Serpent-Bars



Tikal Stela 26,  
292 AD/CE



I suggest that the many examples of this "tilted Serpent Bar" represent the actual angle in the sky formed by the intersection of the Milky Way and the Ecliptic.





# The Maya conception of Mythic Symbols and Mythic Scenes is very different from ours:

## The World Tree

Recently, the popular film *The Da Vinci Code* caused an uproar among orthodox Christians by suggesting that Jesus fathered children. This indicates our culture's narrow and fixed interpretation of the Bible. Imagine a more radical example: Suppose Satan tempted Adam to bite the apple, while Eve refused complicity in his Sin. Such a "heretical" inversion is barely thinkable.

Yet we tolerate some divergence. The parallel accounts of Abraham's Sacrifice in Jewish and Muslim tradition provide an example. (Abraham nearly sacrificed his own son. In the Biblical version of the story, the son was Isaac, later to father the Jewish race. In the alternate version, his half-brother Ishmael had the close call, and went on to father the Arabs.) The Mesoamericans were not bound by an inerrant scripture the way we are; we encounter enormous variation in different Mesoamerican reflections and representations of their gods, myth, and history.

Mesoamericans had *very* different concepts of history and reality.

Again, we must be very, very careful not to project our own values and attitudes onto Maya myth, propaganda, and art.

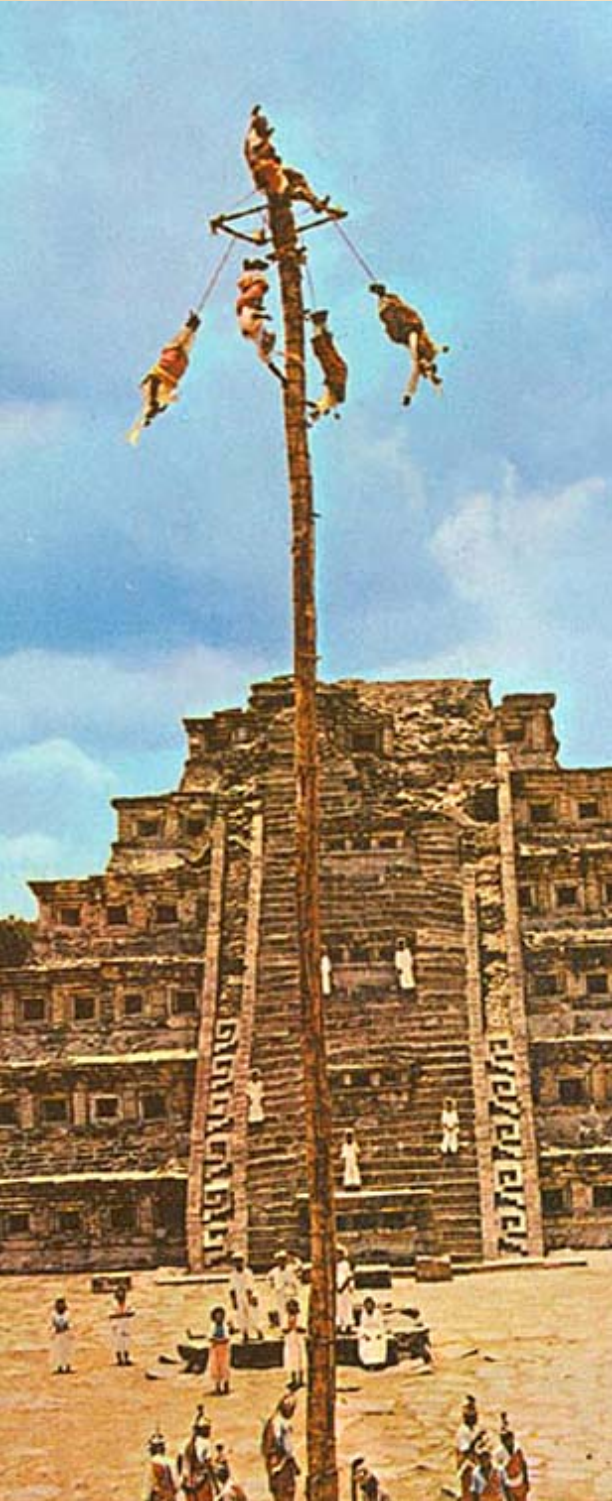
We find a vast landscape of meanings associated with the Tree, from Mother, Sky-Supporter, Nourisher, Divine Homeland Indicator, to national symbol.



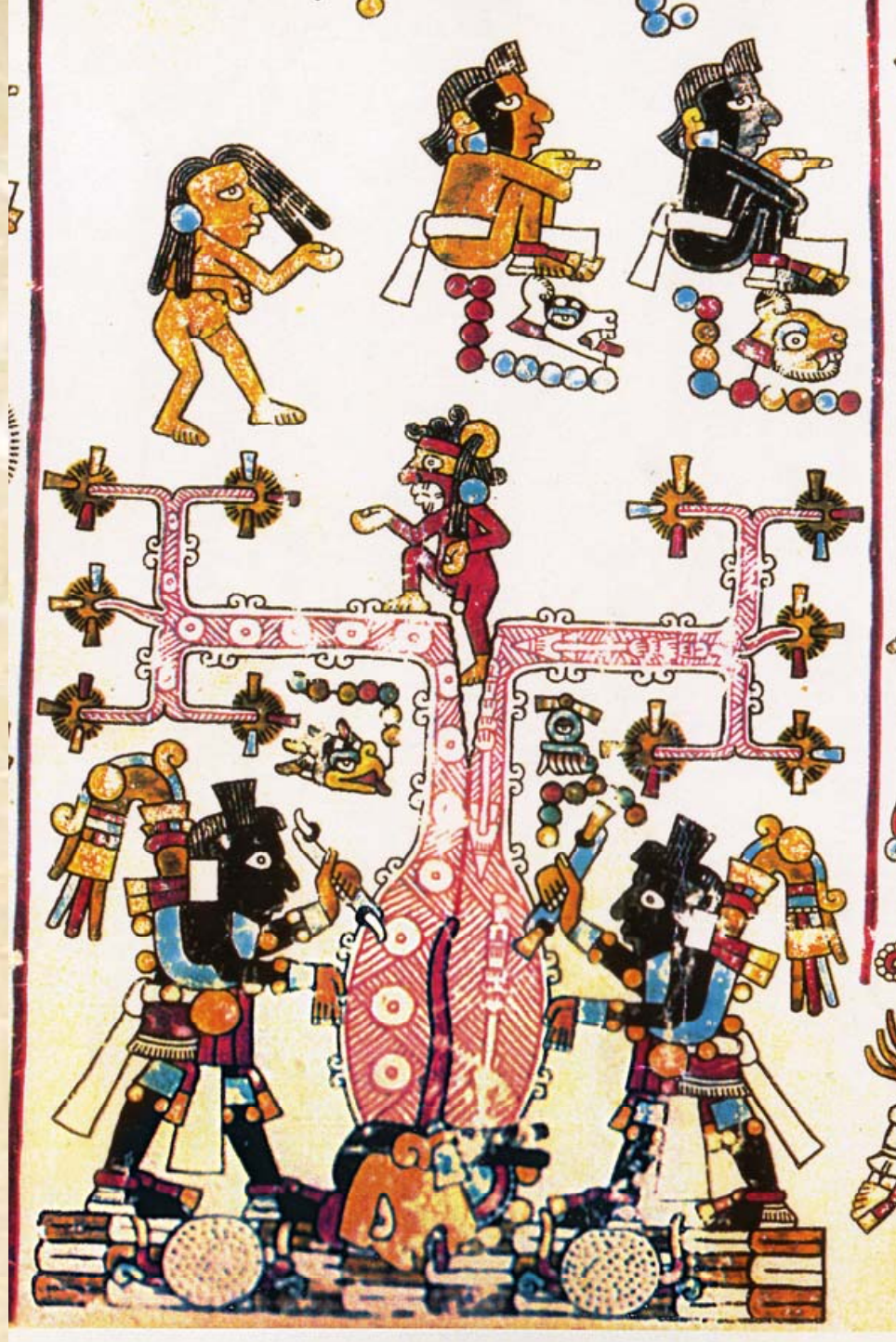
## *Voladores, Tajin, Veracruz, & Cuetzalan, Puebla*

The popular Mexican *Voladores* ("flyers") have ancient roots. This performance traditionally takes place in a sacred plaza before a temple, as at left (or its modern analogue, the church, as at right). The low platforms with four radial stairways that anchor the plazas of many great archaeological sites may have been the sockets for performances such as these.

Note that the flyers represent the four cardinal directions, thus by extension the Universe. They make thirteen revolutions as they spiral out and down around their sacred Tree, while a fifth performer dances at the Center, playing a flute. These numbers have cosmic significance, of course: the thirteen levels of Heaven,  $4 \times 13 = 52$ , the number of years in a Calendar Round, etc., etc.





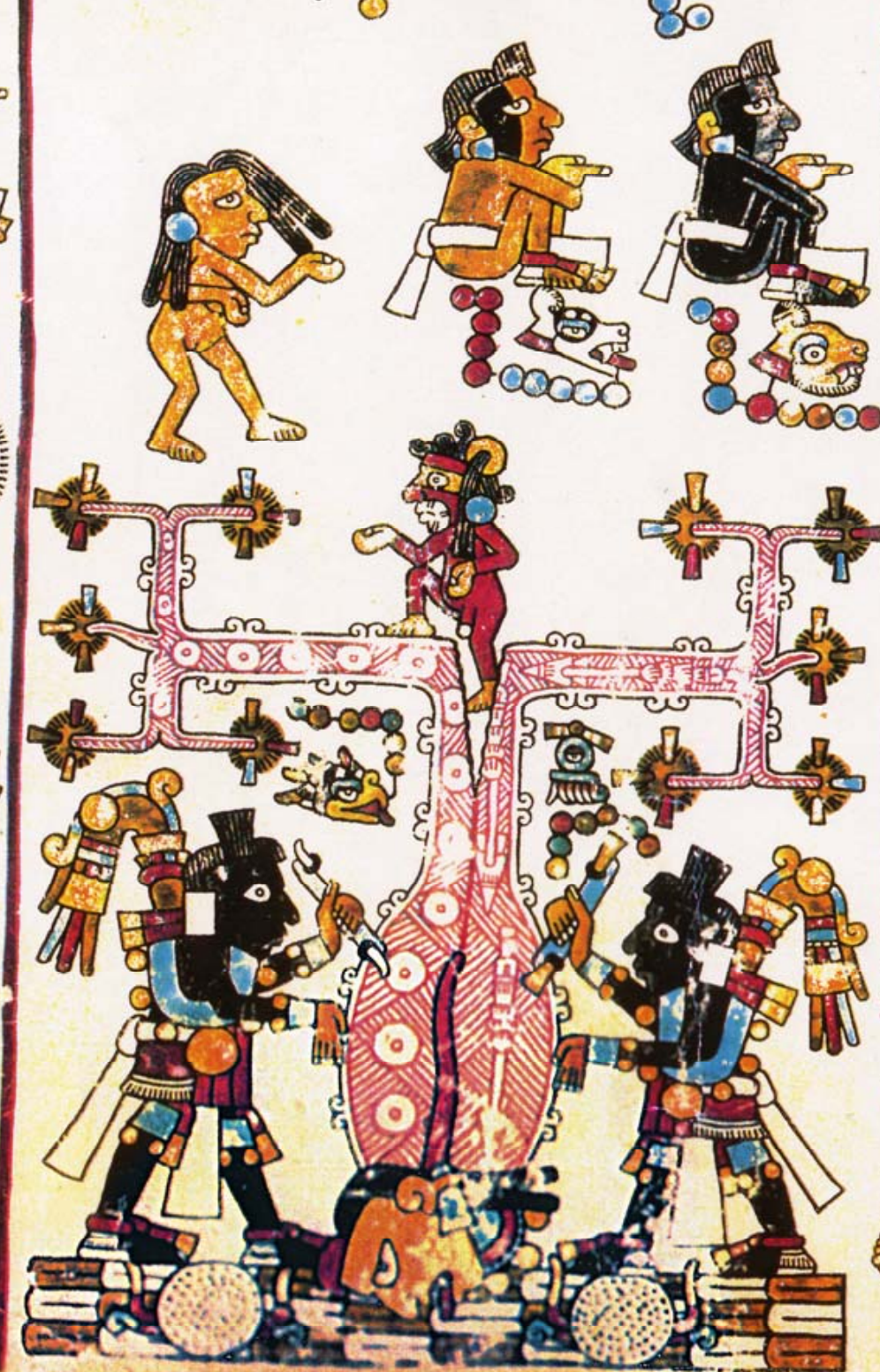


These two manuscript illustrations date from just before the Conquest, ca. 1500 AD/CE. The left is from the Nahua-Puebla-style book known as *Vienna Codex* or *Codex Vindobonensis*, and the right from the *Maya Dresden Codex*. Both show a 'pregnant' tree with people chopping at it.



*Vienna Codex* p. 37 (above)    *Dresden Codex* p. 69a. (right)  
Both Late Postclassic, ca. 1500 CE/AD





In this example, the two hero-deities (with the calendric names 7-Eagle and 7-Rain) do the cutting, and a naked human couple, an Adam-and-Eve, emerge.

It is labeled: the disks are spindle-whorls, indicating a woman's role as spinner, and the darts signify the male warrior.

The rectilinear branches resemble those of a ceiba. The curled bumps on the tree here usually indicate that it is made of stone. The young woman's head substituting for the roots is drinking from the toponymic-land-glyph of Apoala, the local Place of Creation.





In this example the lightning god Chaak chops his own way out of the tree. The emerging figure take the place of the Celestial Birds perched in the first trees we saw.

Like the *Vindobonensis* Tree we just saw, this is a Duality symbol: the half-and-half coloration is non-specific, though it might also be interpreted as Male-Female.

Note also: It may be no accident that this image is directly adjacent to the blue-background Creation texts we examined earlier.





The Chaak tree grows from a crocodile head suckling from the earth, like the Izapa Tree; the Apoala Birth Tree from a young woman's head.





L. Tepantitla Murals, Teotihuacán, *Great Goddess Tree*, with acolytes. Early Classic, ca. 500 CE. Butterflies are the souls of dead soldiers; Spiders are spinners. This is a *Male-Female* or *Duality Tree*.

Around 500 AD/CE, in the great city of Teotihuacán, the *Tepantitla Murals* portray the Great Goddess as an abundant Mother, ringing yet another change on this symbolism. Abundance streams from her hands and from her womb, flocks of birds sing and sup in her branches, and the twined trunks, yellow and pink, are again male and female: Spiders who spin, and butterflies, the souls of warriors.

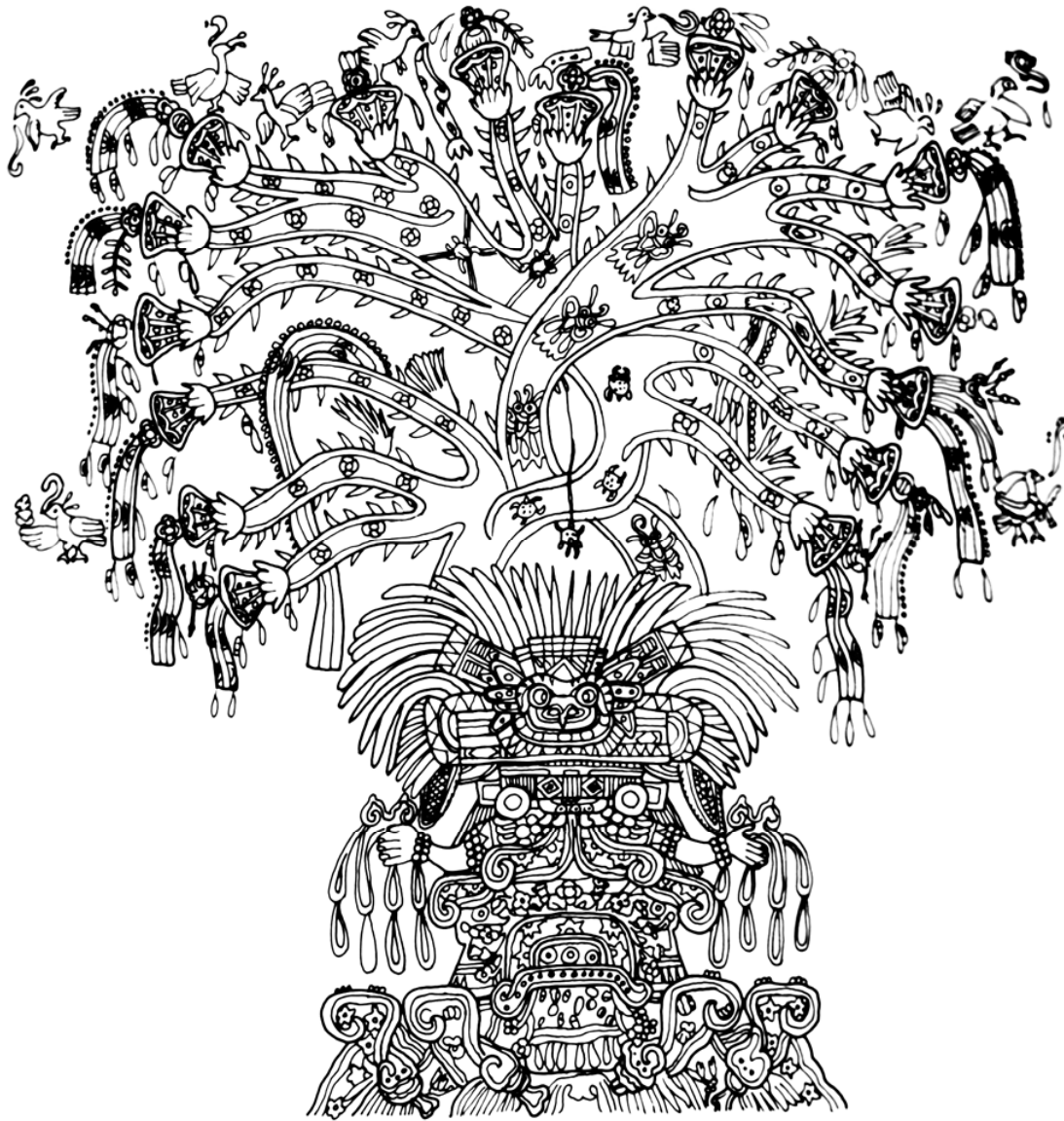




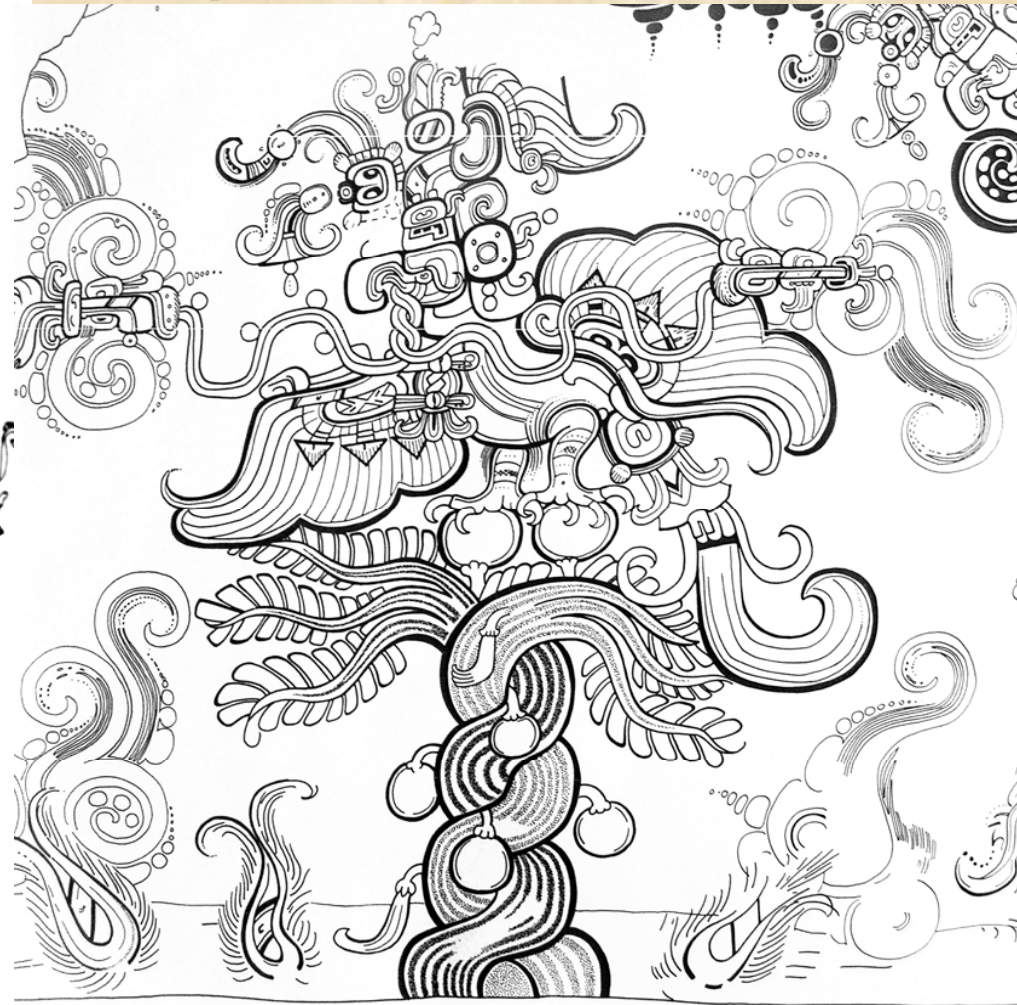
The acolytes who attend her also pour forth wealth; her face and body are so burdened with symbolic clothing that only her arms are visible.



L. Tepantitla Murals, Teotihuacán, *Great Goddess Tree*,  
Early Classic, ca. 500 CE. **Male-Female** tree, like *Vienna* p. 37.



R. San Bartolo, West Wall, *Tree of the Center(?)*, Late  
Preclassic, ca. 50 BCE. Twinned, twined fruit trees,  
Bird atop.



The twin trunks are twisted like an umbilicus; another symbol of nourishment,  
repeating the Duality Tree of San Bartolo, 500 years earlier.

Drawings: (L) Linda Schele, (R) Heather Hurst



The San Bartolo Murals portray five trees. Specific species of trees associate with the cardinal directions throughout Mesoamerican art, we saw 1500 years later in the *Fejervary-Mayer* diagram of the 260-day cycle (Part 1). Another late Postclassic book, the Nahua-Puebla *Borgia Codex*, presents an even more complex diagram of the symbols of each Direction.





This example shows the South, which portrays a scarlet Macaw perched in a spiky red celestial Ceiba, whose fruits are suns. His foot is down in the split of the tree, as if emerging from it like the “Adam” figure in the *Vienna Codex*. His position is carefully echoed by the other Birds in their respective Trees...

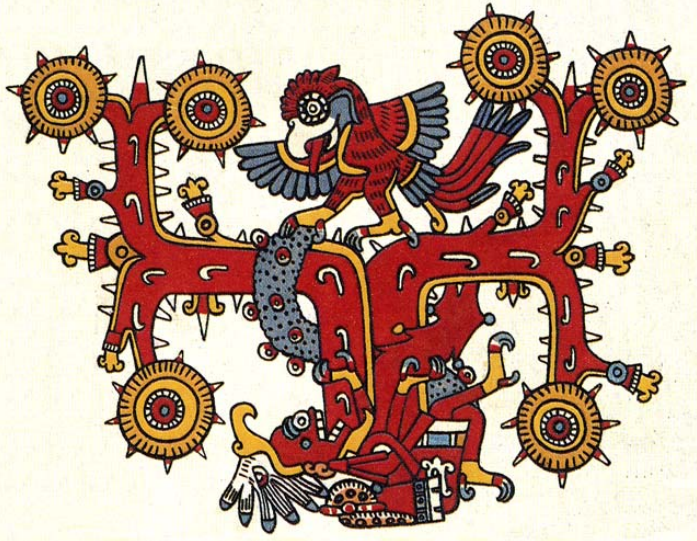




West



East



In the East the Quetzal, patron of the jungle-bound Maya (in a hard-to-identify arboreal species with jewel fruits); in the West a hawk or other raptor perched in flowering Young Maize. Each Tree sprouts from a supine skeleton which represent aspects of the Earth God; they are variously dressed but in the same peculiar position.





The Tree of the Center is abundant, mature Maize, ready for harvest. Another Quetzal, tail feathers like maize leaves, perches above, while two gods kneel and pierce their penises, fertilizing the Tree with streams of blood.

*Borgia Codex*  
late Postclassic,  
ca. 1500 CE,  
p. 53.



This arrangement strikingly resembles the famed *Sarcophagus of Pakal* (ca. 682 CE, shown here), as well as another carving at Palenque that we'll see in a moment. The two compositions have long been interpreted in terms of the World Tree, but usually as unique statements, rarely as part of a continuum.



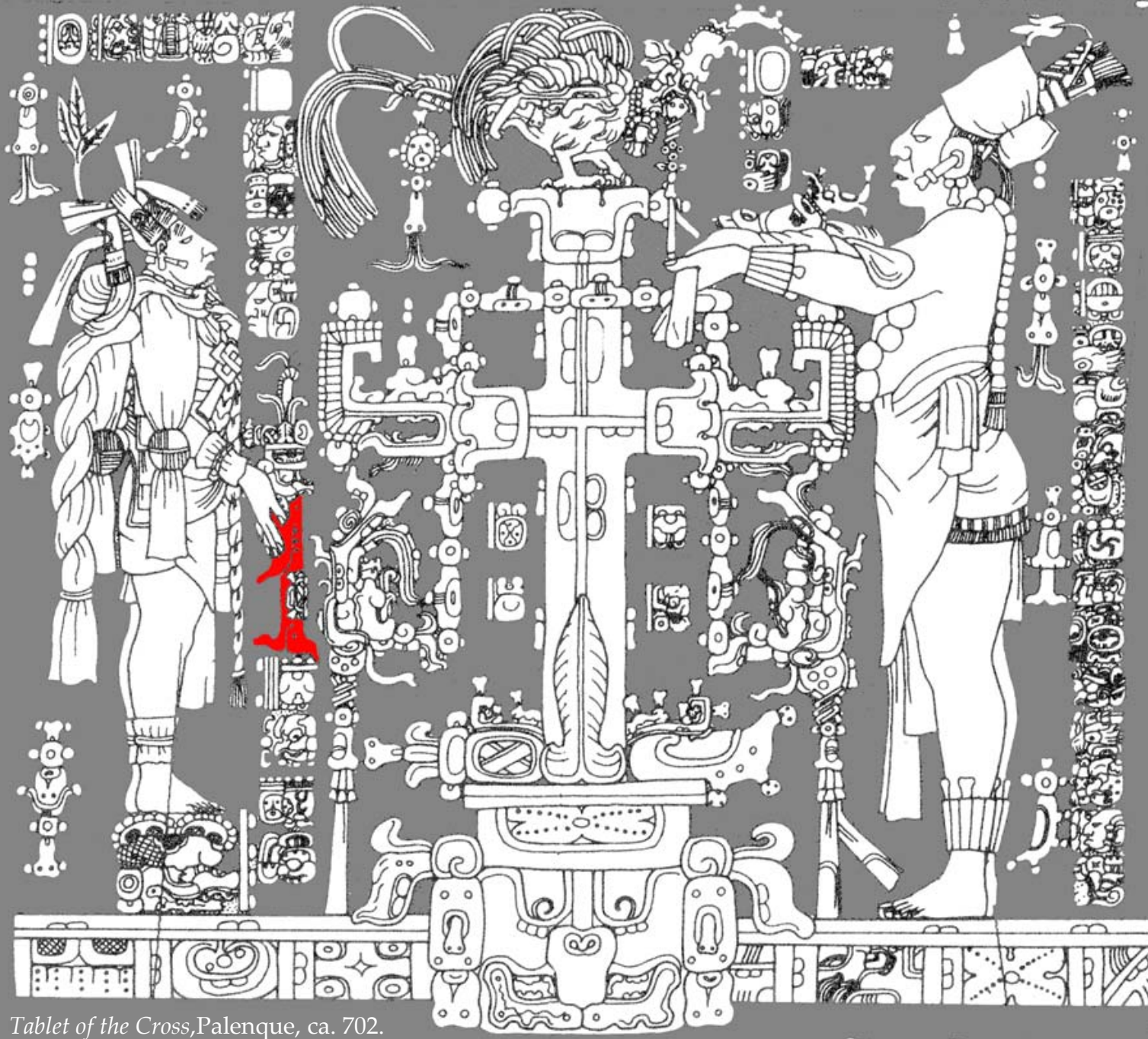


Here Pakal as an 'Infant K'awiil' (one of Palenque's patron gods) strikes the pose of the skeletal woman at the base of the Tree (here posed as if falling, with his legs spread as if letting blood). The tree seems to be a Ceiba. The Segmented Vision Serpent threads through the arms of the Cross, spitting K'awiil and the 'Jester God'. Perched at the summit of the Tree, as usual, is a *Celestial Bird*, a Quetzal-like god.



A closely comparable illustration appears a generation later on the *Tablet of the Cross*, erected by Pakal's son *Kan-Balam* (or *Chan-Bahlum*, "Snake-Jaguar") around 702 AD/CE. The Tree takes the same form as on *Pakal's Sarcophagus*, with slight differences.





Tablet of the Cross, Palenque, ca. 702.

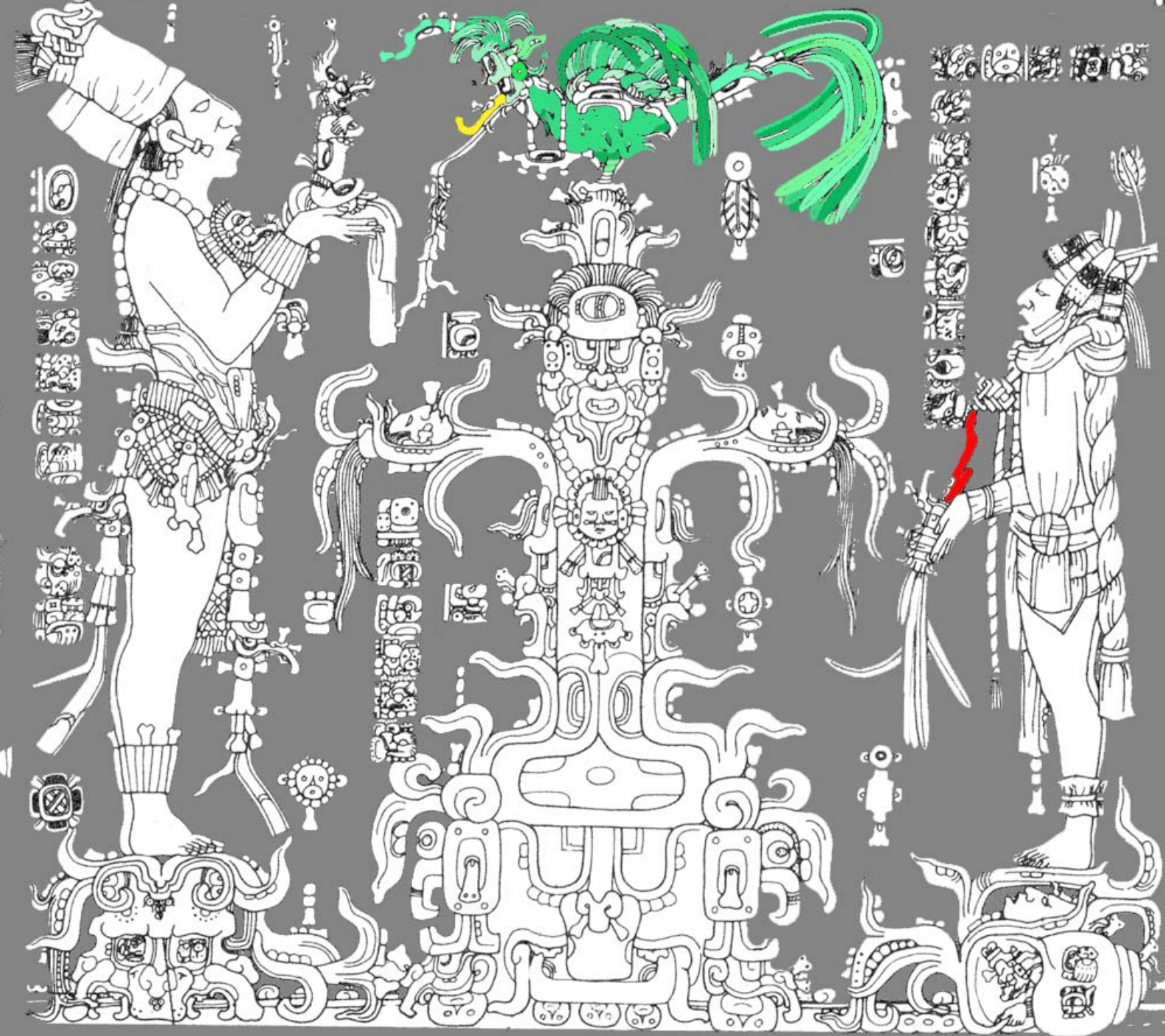
In this version, the sacrificial body at the Tree's root is replaced by a personified Bowl of Sacrifice, nicknamed the 'Quadripartite Badge'. The prominent spike rising from its center is a *stingray spine*, used by the Maya to pierce the body for bloodletting. The same Bird perches in the summit, a slightly different Segmented Vision Serpent threads through the Cross (its segments are glyphs representing "jade" and "green"/"new," and its lower jaw echoes that of the Celestial Bird.)

Flanking the Tree, two celebrants echo the sacrificing pair in the *Borgia Codex*; but instead of explicitly squatting and piercing, one on the left holds a bloodletter (red, crowned with the same *quadripartite badge*), streaming blood. The elder holds a statue of the 'Jester God.'



This Tablet is the centerpiece of the eponymous *Temple of the Cross*, which itself is the head of a trio of pyramids. The three pyramids reflect the *Three Stones of Creation* that we saw earlier on Quirigua Stela C. Kan-Balam has here combined iconography of the Three Stones with the World Trees of the Cardinal Directions.





*Tablet of the Foliated Cross,  
Palenque, ca. 702*

**Bloodletter marked red**  
**Celestial Bird green**

His *Tablet of the Foliated Cross* from the same architectural group replaces the Ceiba with a Maize stalk, sprouting from a personification of Wealth. (The ears of corn are personified as heads of the Maize God.) Though the Serpent is missing, the Bird sits in the branches, the same Celebrants present the same offerings.



In the center of the Plaza of the Cross Group stands a low platform with four stairways. This may have been a socket for a World Tree; perhaps *Volador*-type ceremonies were held there, or some other ritual Tree-erection. Or it may have held a gnomon for marking the Zenith Passage, as in Yucatán. (At Kabah and Uxmal, for example, the focal platforms-of-four-stairways still have such a gnomon: a tapered pillar, slightly wider at top, whose rim would shade all of its sides when the sun was at Zenith.)



We have examined four of the *Borgia* Trees. The Eastern and Central ones closely correlate to Maya Trees from Palenque, but the Northern Tree is strikingly like another, more familiar cultural icon. The bird here is an Eagle, with flint-knife-tipped feathers, perched on a Cactus. He offers grey tobacco from his claw, like the Bird of the South, and from his mouth issues a stream of blood. The Dual trunks, blue and green, grow from a supine blue skeleton.



To emphasize the many points of comparison, here are the Mixtec Duality/Birth Tree, and *Pakal's Sarcophagus*, whereon the hand gesture of the Young God at the bottom exactly prefigures that of the supine skeleton.



*Borgia Codex, Page 50, the (dual) Tree of the North. Ca. 1500 AD/CE*







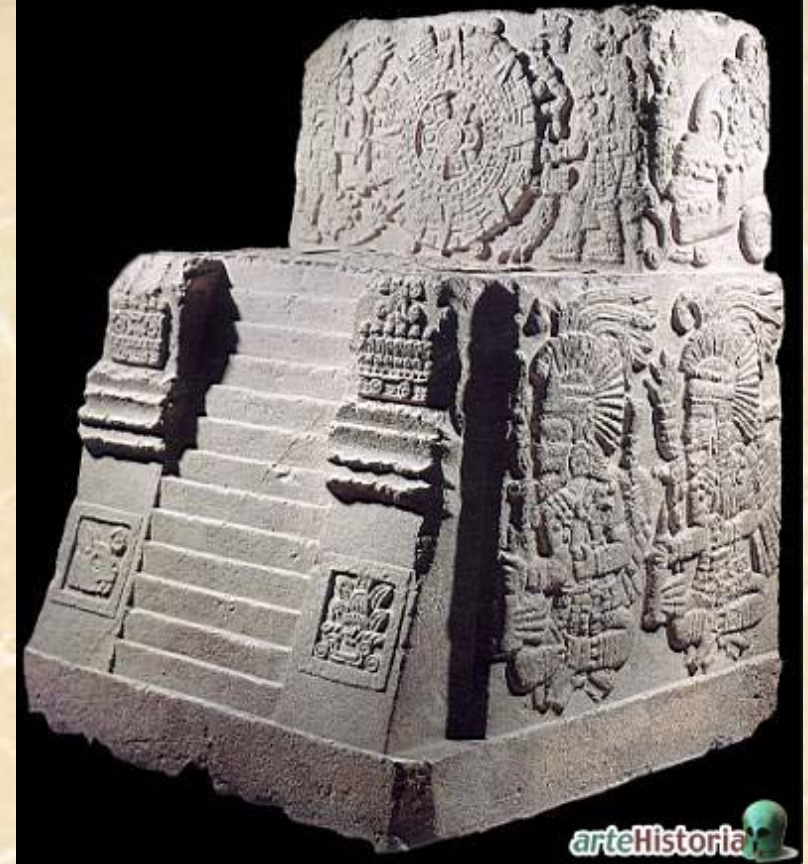
Flag of  
Mexico

The Sign-of-Tenochtitlán adorns the Mexican flag: An Eagle eating a Serpent, perched on a cactus growing from a stone in the water. In other words, the symbol of their Homeland, supposedly granted uniquely to the Aztec people, was borrowed directly from older icons of the cardinal directions. “But wait,” you are thinking, “that wasn’t exactly the Aztec vision. Where is the snake?”



The Aztecs themselves portrayed the Vision in various ways. Here, on the *Teocalli de la Guerra Sagrada*, the Serpent was replaced by *Atl-tlachinolli*, dual streams of fire and water. (To be precise, *tlachinolli* means “burned fields,” but its symbolism is pretty much the same.)





*Teocalli de la Guerra Sagrada,*  
an Aztec temple effigy-  
throne, 1502-1520.  
Eagle with *Atl-tlachinolli*  
“water & burning fields” =  
“water & fire,” instead of snake









Here is the skeletal Earth god, from whose mouth the cactus grows, like the supine skeleton we saw in the *Borgia* Tree-pages.





Here on the backrest of the same *Teocalli* throne, two gods flank a Sun-disk; the same dual streams of fire and water spew from their mouths. (The serpent-footed god on the left, by the way, is *Tezcatlipoca*, Aztec descendent of the Maya *K'awiil*.)

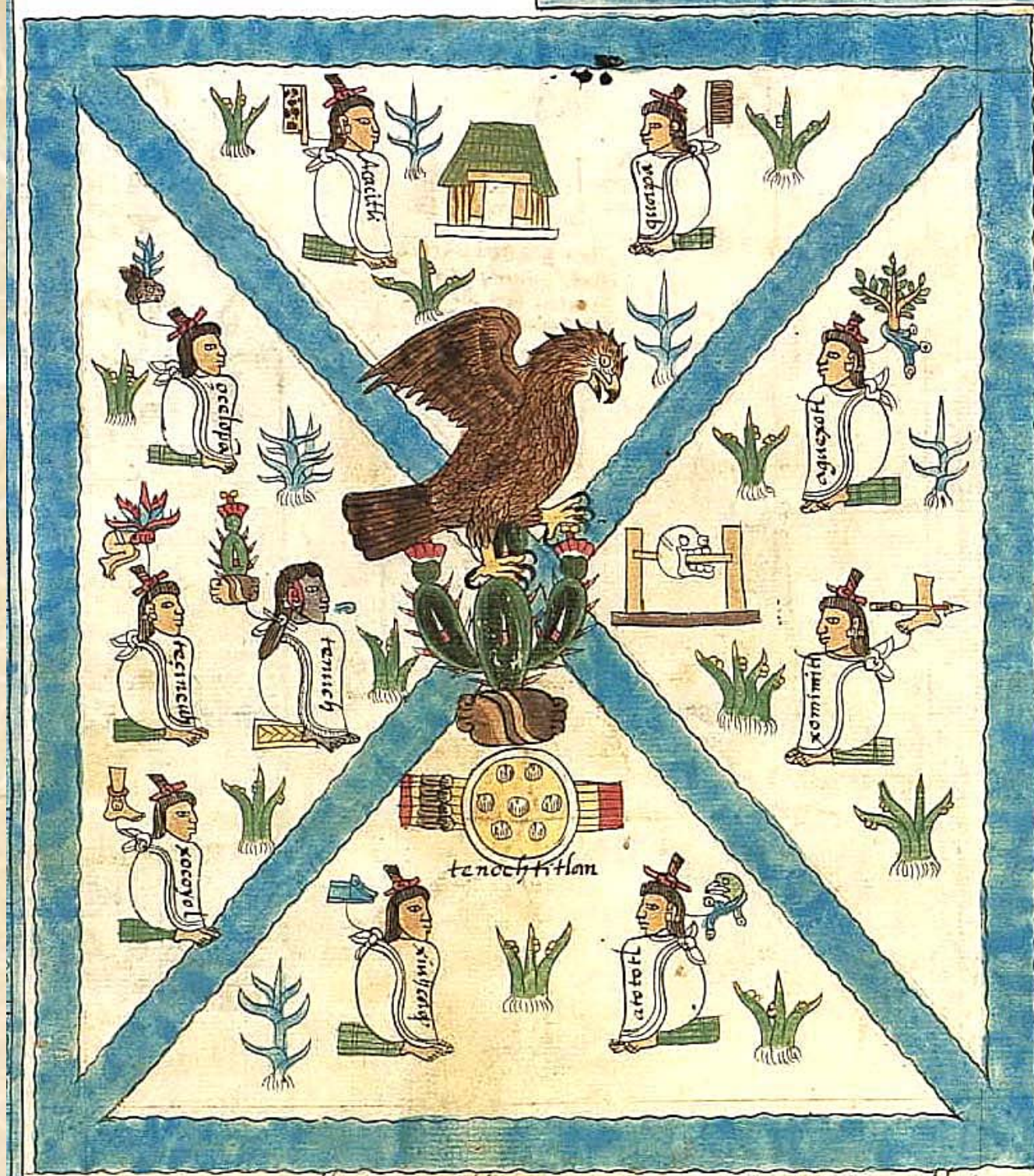




The Aztec date 1-Death (also from the *Teocalli de la Guerra Sagrada*) also spits fire-and-water.

Above: Date 1-Death, from side of *Teocalli de la Guerra Sagrada*





The painting on the left is a Map of the Aztec Capital (labeled in Spanish *Tenochtitlán*), in which the Eagle's beak is empty.

In other words, the Aztecs were not at all fussy about the precise composition of their most sacred image, why should *we* be?



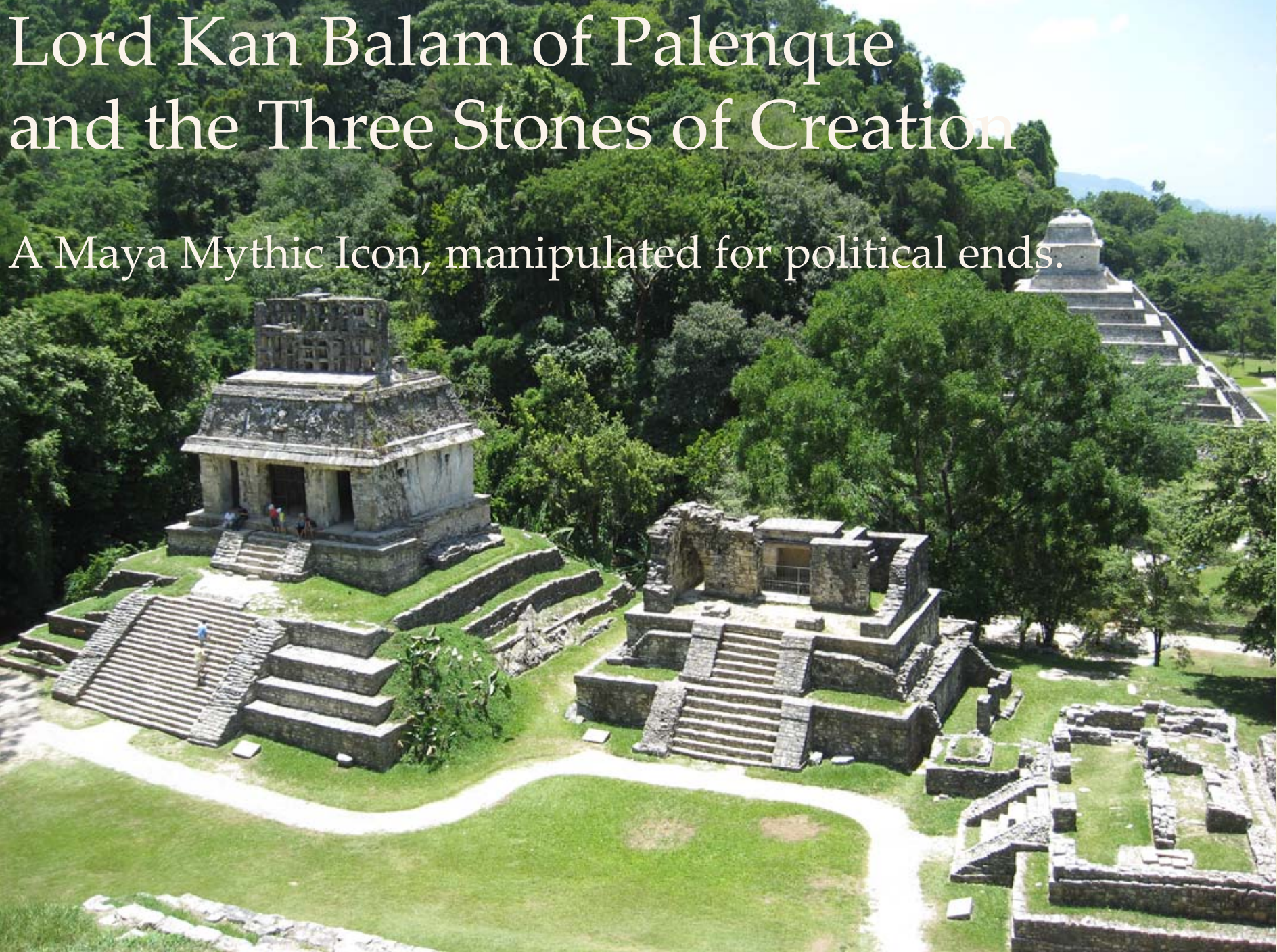
And, after examining a veritable forest of World Trees, we see that neither composition nor meaning of this ubiquitous icon was *at all* “cut in stone,” as it were. Once again, Mesoamericans remind us not to interpret their myths by our standards. I shall close with one more example of this distinctly *un-*dogmatic flexibility in Maya art and literature.



# Lord Kan Balam of Palenque and the Three Stones of Creation

—Photo  
by Linda  
Schele

A Maya Mythic Icon, manipulated for political ends.



The view here from the top of the *Temple of the Cross*, shows the *Temple of the Sun* on the left and farther away to the right, his father Pakal's *Temple of Inscriptions*.



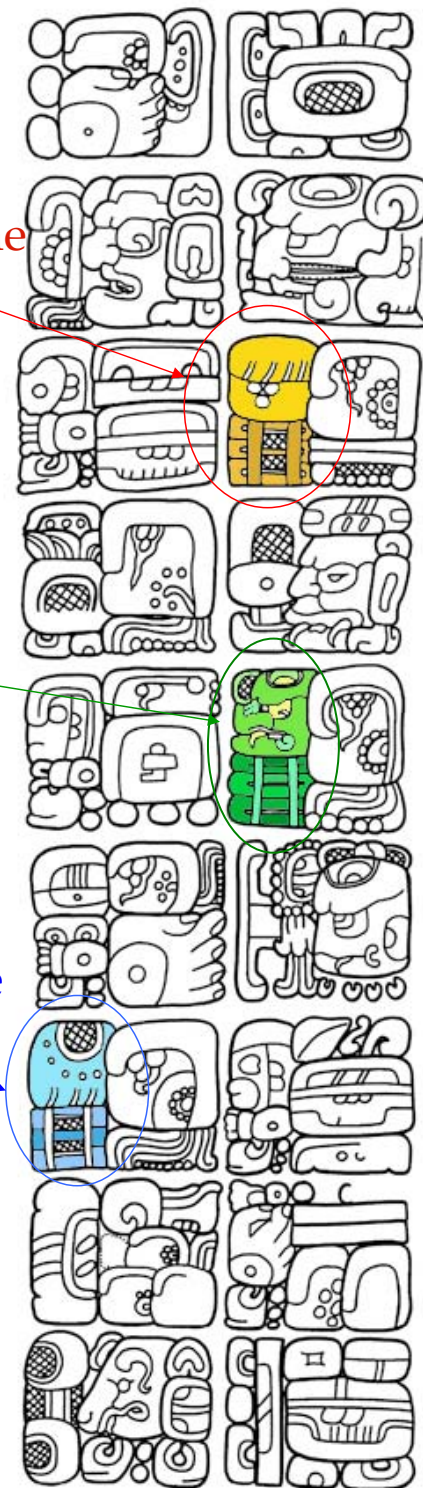


Quirigua Stela C,  
east side text of Creation

Jaguar Throne-Stone

Snake Throne-Stone

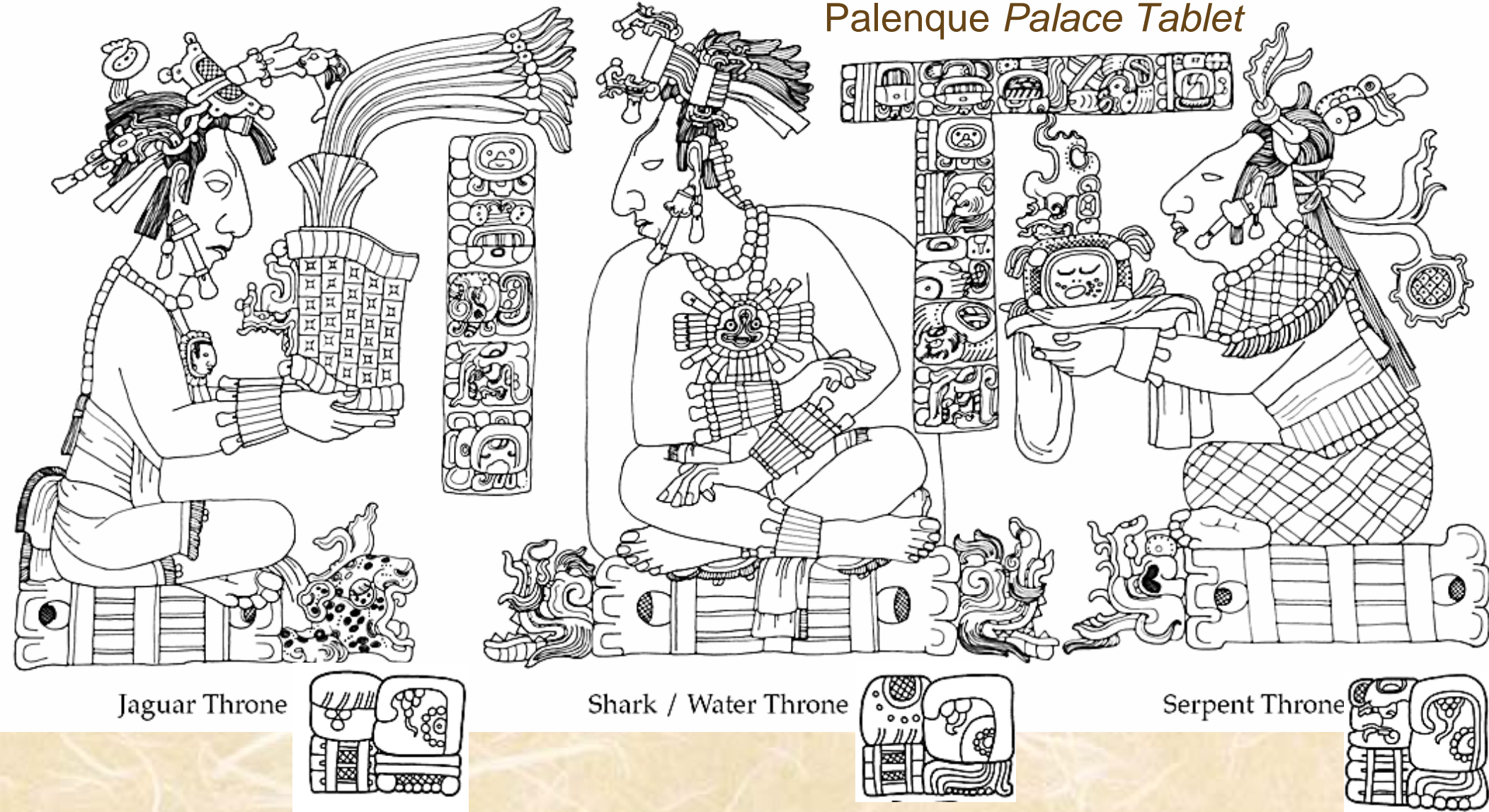
Water Throne-Stone



You will recall that the *Cross Group* pyramids correspond to the *Three Stones of Creation*, mentioned at Quirigua: the Jaguar Throne-Stone, the Snake Throne-Stone, and the Water Throne-Stone.



## Palenque Palace Tablet



Parents present regalia to their son at his coronation, ca. 720 CE/AD.

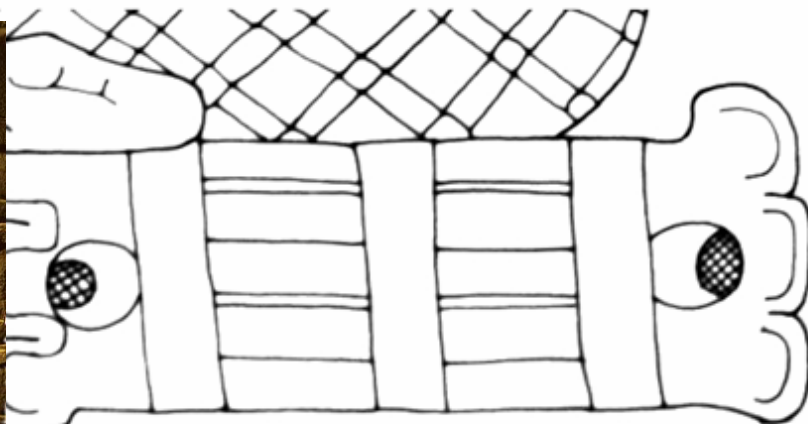
The Palace Tablet, also from Palenque, portrays a coronation with the three participants sitting on precisely these thrones. The Quirigua glyphs for comparison: the glyph for “throne” represents a bundle of sticks or leg-bones. The “water” throne in the middle has finny shark-heads.



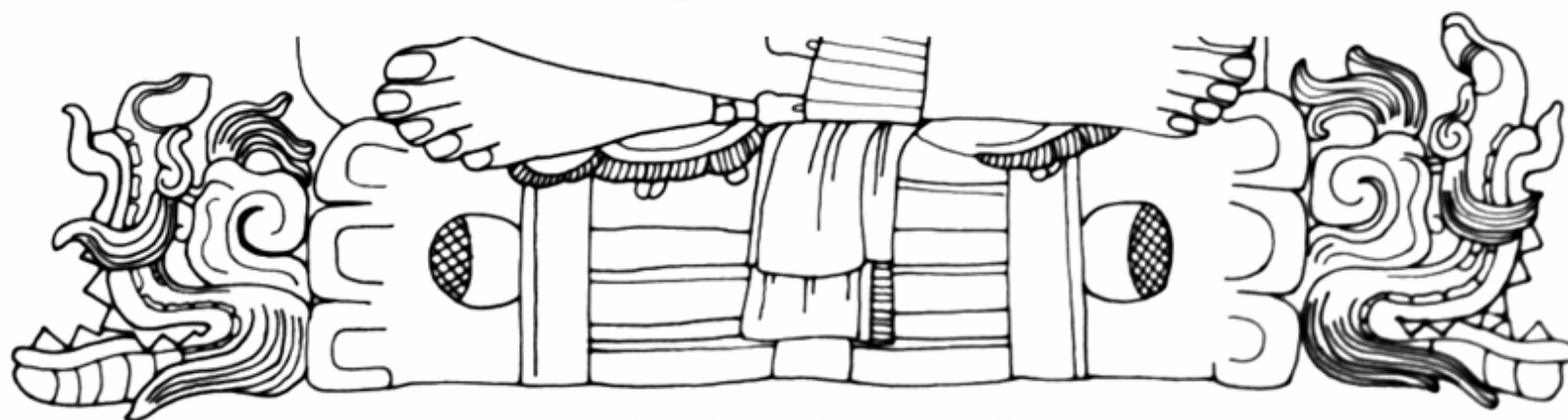


Photograph of the Palenque *Palace Tablet*

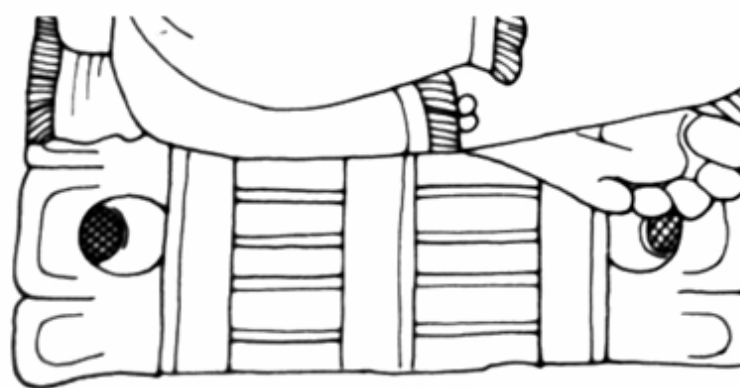




Serpent Throne



Shark / Water Throne



Jaguar Throne



*Palace Tablet,  
detail of the  
bone-  
thrones  
of  
Creation.  
ca. 721.*

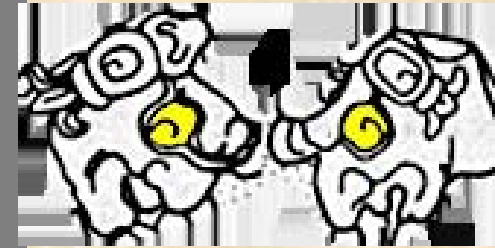




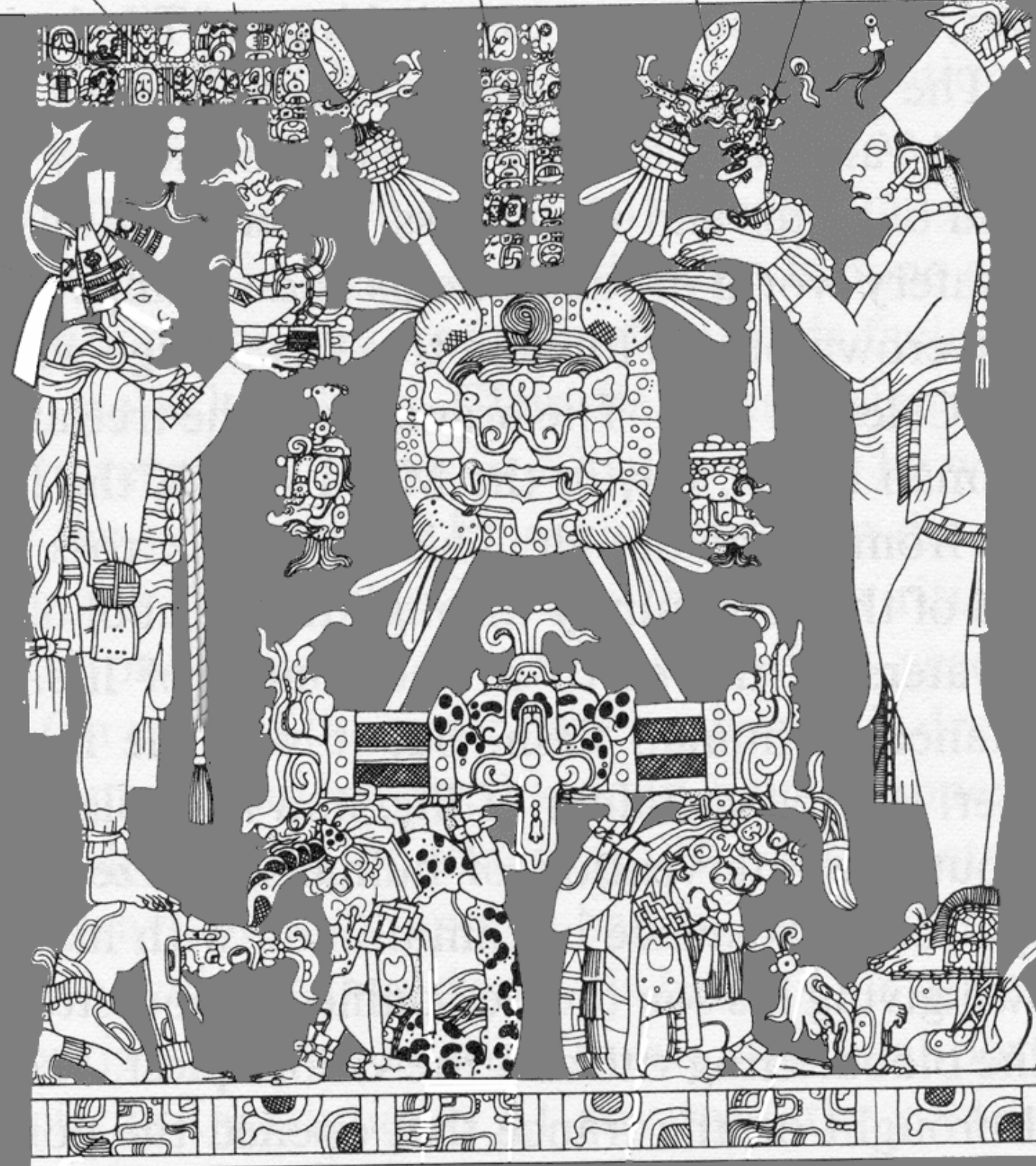


Palenque, *Tablet of the Sun*,  
ca. 702 CE/AD

Note  
that  
nearly  
everyone  
has  
“serpent  
eyes.”

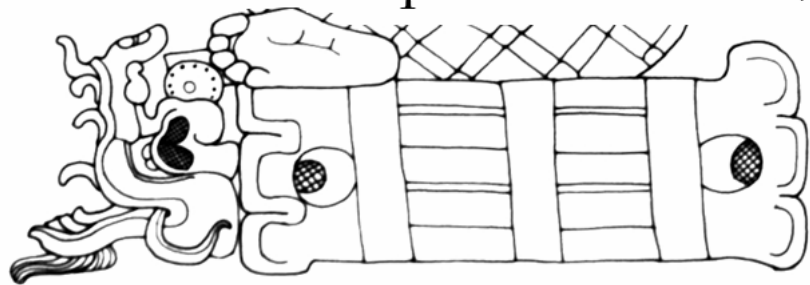


The Bird is missing, but the same celebrants offer statuettes of K'awiil and the Jester God to a *Took'-Pakal* Altar, or Altar of (Sacred) War. *Took'* means “flint,” as in “flint blade,” *Pakal* means “shield,” decorated as usual with the ‘cruller-eyed’ ‘Jaguar God of the Underworld.’ It sits on a throne that seems to combine the three god-headed thrones we saw before. Note that there are 14 figural faces in this picture, and that 11 of these have ‘serpent eyes.’

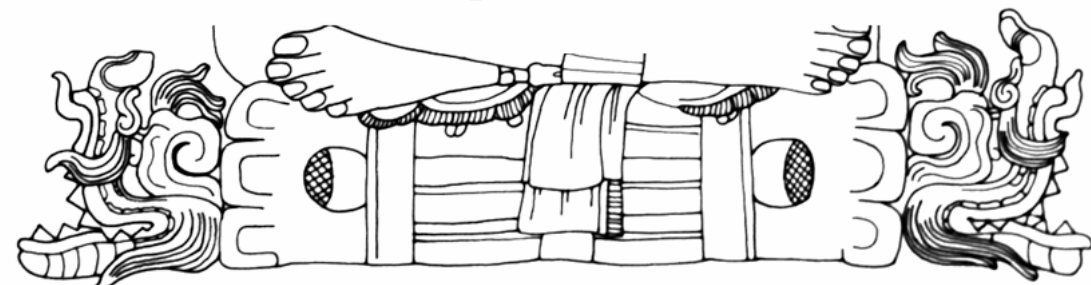




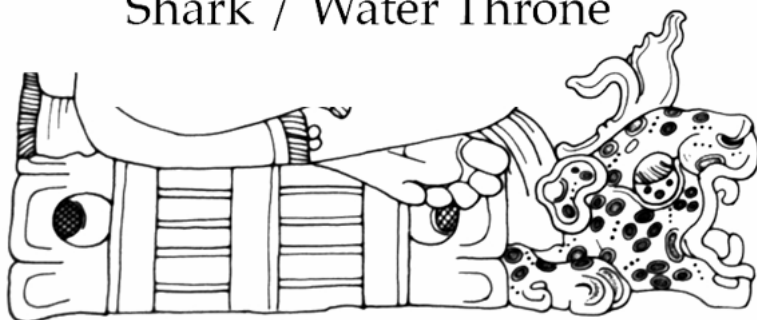
(three from Palenque *Palace Tablet*, ca. 720)



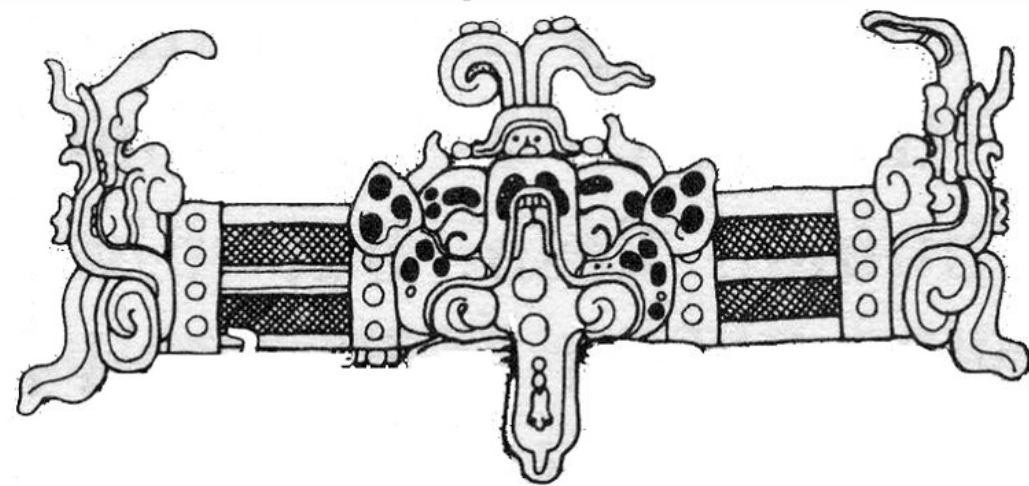
Serpent Throne



Shark / Water Throne

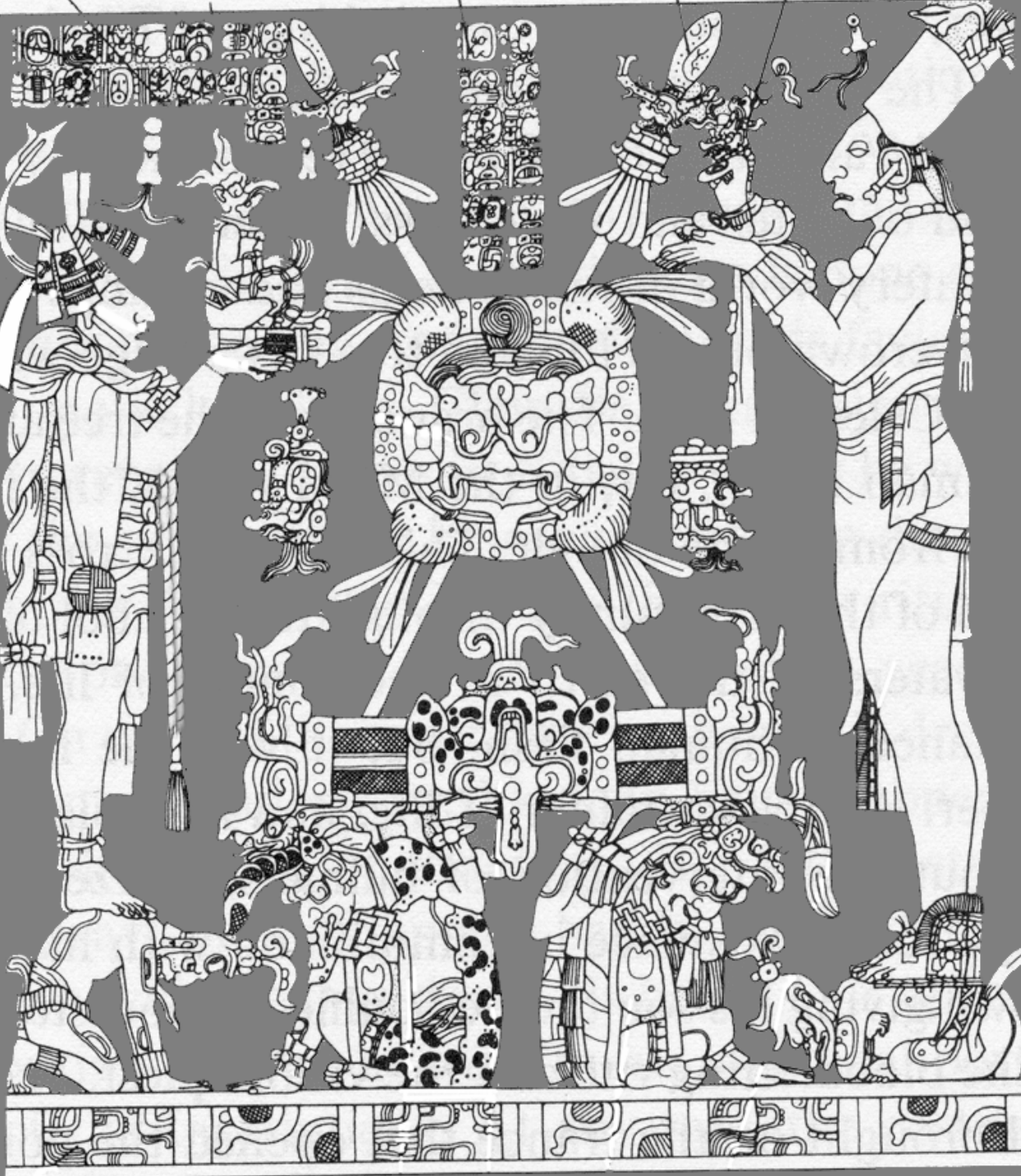


Jaguar Throne



But if we examine the triple throne closely, we see the prominent Jaguar head in the center, and a snake head on the side, but find instead of the expected shark-head on the other side, an identical snake head. (These look exactly like the Vision Serpent we saw on *Pakal's Sarcophagus*.) What is going on? Why replace the Third Stone of Creation with a duplicate of the Second Stone?





I believe I know the answer:

*Kan-Bahlam* means “Snake-Jaguar.” The king has replaced the sacred Triad of Creation with icons of his own name!

There are snake-eyes everywhere on this *Tablet*, even on the jaguar heads. The shield not only bears the usual effigy of the Jaguar God of the Underworld, ringed for good measure with jaguar spots; even God L’s armadillo cape has been replaced by a jaguar skin.



Portrait and name-glyphs of Lord Kan-Balam, or "Snake-Jaguar." The head conflates Jaguar spots, nose, and ear with Serpent chin-scales, teeth, and eye.





**Lord Snake-Jaguar appropriated the “Three Throne-Stones of Creation” as an icon of political propaganda.**

A comparable act in our time would be for a politician named “Fatherson” to adopt as his personal symbol a caricature of the Holy Trinity —  
— with an extra Christ replacing the Holy Spirit.

The Ancient Maya were deeply religious, like Medieval Europeans, but indulged in a high level of satire, or manipulation of their most potent religious symbols.



*To sum it all up,*

What will happen in 2012?

Keeping in mind the Maya *never* specified that anything spectacular would happen, and that life would go on as before, and because their conception of the future was *very* malleable, and particularly because our evidence is in tatters at best...

Deducing from a few shreds of evidence...

It's up to us...

**I say, we party!**