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The Birth Vase: Natal Imagery in Ancient Maya Myth and Ritual

Over the past several decades, a vast number of Late Classic Maya vases have been published, and it is now possible to describe regional schools and even the hands and names of individual artists. Nonetheless, it is clear that scholars have studied only a minute fraction of the vases created during the Classic period, and a great many surprises are still ahead. At times, a new vase comes to light that is quite unlike any example previously known. The subject of this study is one such vase. Unfortunately, the origins of this object are poorly known. However, the vase received sudden recognition on December 6th of 1991, when it was featured in a *New York Times* article. The article notes the similarity of its unusual flat-sided format to ancient Maya codices, and suggests that this vessel constitutes the first reliable evidence for screenfold books among the Classic Maya. Although the vessel sides do closely resemble Maya screenfold books, codices were already well-documented for the Classic Maya.

In a masterful iconographic study, Michael Coe (1977) identified codices and their scribes in Classic Maya vessel scenes. Moreover, damaged but identifiable remains of Maya screenfold books have been recovered from excavations at Classic Maya sites (Lee 1985:28). Rather than representing a screen-fold codex, the vessel refers to the four-sided Maya house, and presents a uniquely intimate view into Classic Maya customs and belief concerning birth.

Approximately 25 cm. high, the vase is composed of four rectangular panels of equal dimensions. Although a rare form, other examples of quadrangular ceramic vases are known for the Classic Maya. Coe (1973:Nos. 79, 80) describes two lidded carved vessels of quadrangular form. Whereas these vases are both Late Classic, an Early Classic example is also known (Parsons et al. 1988:No. 61). All three of these vessels were originally supplied with four-sided sloping lids, and in the case of the second example illustrated by Coe, there are two Principal Bird Deities placed on opposite sides of the lid. The Principal Bird Deity is commonly depicted on the roofs of buildings in Classic Maya art, and it is quite possible that with their sloping lids, these quadrangular vessels allude to the basic structure of a roofed four-sided house.¹

¹ Epigraphic evidence also indicates that lidded or stoppered vessels were conceived of as houses or *otot* by the Classic Maya (see Houston et al. 1989:724). Among the contemporary Lacandon, the ceramic “god pots” are considered as houses for the gods (Davis 1978).

The four-sided house also appears with ceramic cache vessels at Quiriguá and once again the lid serves as the gabled roof (see Strömsvik 1941:81-83, Figs. 25-27, 31, 32). Another similar cache vessel was excavated at Guaytan; in this case even the doorways are represented, here with pairs of vertical red lines (see Smith and Kidder 1943:Fig. 41c).

Both the carved vases and cache vessels were supplied with sloping lids to resemble roofs. The rough and unpainted beveled rim of the polychrome vase under discussion suggests that it was also lidded. Considering the birth iconography associated with this vase, it is quite apt that the originally lidded form resembled a roofed house, the essential place of Maya birth.

Aside from the carved-ware vessels, there are also examples of such quadrangular vases in painted polychrome. One such vase appeared on the cover of *Mexicon* (Vol. VII, No. 6, 1985), and a description of this piece was subsequently published by von Winning and Dütting (1987) in the same journal. Dorie Reents-Budet (personal communication, 1993) notes that fragments of Late Classic polychrome quadrangular vases have recently been excavated at Ixtonton, Guatemala, and Buenavista, Belize.

The quadrangular polychrome vase under examination, here referred to as the Birth Vase, contains elaborate painted scenes on all four panels, each of these accompanied by a hieroglyphic text. Save for the unpainted vessel lip, each panel is bounded by a red border. With their planar surfaces, dimensions, red borders, and accompanying texts, the four panels are notably like the extant Maya screenfolds. The scenes are especially similar to Dresden page 74, long-interpreted to be a representation of the cosmogonic flood (Förstemann 1906:266) (Figure 1).

Both the Postclassic page and Classic ceramic panels are dominated by highly narrative mythological imagery, with the text being reserved to only the upper portion of the scene. It is noteworthy that Dresden page 74 is one of the few Maya codical passages that appears to narrate a mythological event. It is possible that in contrast to the fairly cramped passages in divinatory almanacs, codical references to mythology may have frequently been accompanied by highly narrative scenes.



Figure 1. Dresden Codex page 74 (Förstemann edition, courtesy of FAMSI).



Figure 2. Late Classic cylindrical vase first published by Coe (1978:No. 12). Photograph K595 © Justin Kerr.

The scenes painted on the Birth Vase fall within the style of Late Classic polychromes from the central Maya lowlands. The vessel is especially similar to a cylindrical vase published by Coe (1978:No. 12) (Figure 2). Thus the Bearded Dragon head appearing on this cylindrical polychrome is notably similar to the example on Side II of the Birth Vase (Figure 8). In both cases, the face is marked by fine lines of diminutive circles, a fairly rare convention in Late Classic polychromes. Given this stylistic affinity, it is interesting that both vases are fashioned from chemically similar clays (Dorie Reents-Budet, personal communication, 1993). However, Reents-Budet notes that the Birth Vase clay is especially similar to samples taken from vessels in the vicinity of Ramonal, Tikal, and Uaxactún. Although the ultimate origins of this vase are still unknown, the data provided by Reents-Budet suggests that it derived from the central Peten region.

The Birth Vase has suffered some damage by breakage and erosion. Along with the probable lid, some small portions of the vessel body have been lost. In several areas, these gaps have been filled and repainted. The noteworthy restored regions appear below the face of the standing goddess of Side II, the midsection of the standing goddesses of Side III, and in the middle of the dividing horizontal black line of Side IV. The differential erosion appearing on the vessel fragments reveals that it was broken in antiquity. Thus much of the surface deterioration occurred after breakage, with some fragments suffering more erosion by their particular placement in the soil.

The Hieroglyphic Text

The text found upon the Birth Vase is unusually long and elaborate for a Maya ceramic vessel. There were originally some fifty three glyphic blocks on the four vessel sides; of these, eight are virtually effaced. The text is painted with skill and precision, and promises to offer profound insights into Classic Maya myth and ritual. However, the text is difficult to decipher for several reasons. For one, it has suffered considerable erosion, with some portions being obliterated or illegible. The glyphs themselves also present a major challenge, since many are rare or poorly understood. In addition, the reading order of the four sides is by no means certain. The highly narrative attendant scenes are a major aid to decipherment,

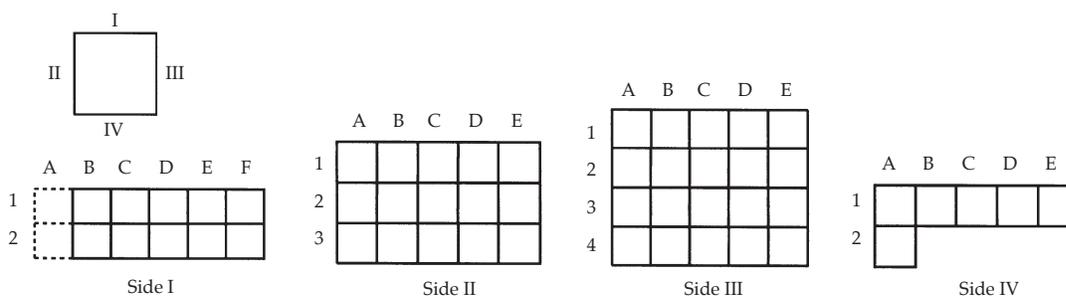


Figure 3. The four sides of the Birth Vase text and orientation of the numbered sides.

and for this reason, this initial study will be primarily iconographic rather than epigraphic. Nonetheless, it is also clear that the text has direct bearing on the interpretation of the scenes.

Rather than accompanying specific individuals, the text is limited to the uppermost portions of the vessel sides. The four sides are labeled in Roman numerals according to their suggested order of reading, but it should be stressed that this order is only provisional. Rather than being labeled in a single consecutive order, each glyphic block is referred to by the particular side on which it occurs (Figure 3). Thus should the sequential order of the four sides change by subsequent research, this would not severely alter the numbering of the glyphs. The distance number on Side II indicates that the reading order follows the typical form of Maya hieroglyphic writing, that is, left to right and top to bottom in columns of two. For Sides II and III, the final fifth column is read vertically as a single column. The small text of Side IV seems to be first read vertically through column A and then horizontally to end with the sign at IV:E1.

The vessel side labeled Side I is so designated for several reasons. For one, it will be seen that this side illustrates the primary birth event of the vessel. However, the text itself provides the strongest evidence that this constitutes the first side. Although all of the other sides have a horizontal row of only five glyphic columns across the top, Side I was supplied with six. However, the red border marking the right edge covers over half of the sixth column. It would appear that this text was written before the red edging obliterated much of column F. When it became clear that more room was needed to accommodate the red border, the scribe used only a row of five columns for the following three sides. The contents of the Side I text provides a still more compelling reason. At I:E2 there is the Kin variant used in distance numbers, here referring to 6 Kins. The following glyph at I:F2 seems to have a numerical superfix. Given the fact that distance numbers typically present the Long Count units in reverse order, beginning with the lowest unit of Kins rather than the highest, it is quite possible that I:F2 refers to the next highest unit, the Uinal. This distance number then continues on Side II, here starting with 16 Tuns at II:A1, and ending with a reference to the Calabtun unit at II:A3.

Although the first four glyphs of Side I are virtually gone, the main sign at I:B1 is accompanied by a numerical coefficient, quite probably nine. Thus the text may well have started with a calendar round expression, with I:A1 referring to the Tzolkin and I:B1 to the twenty-day Haab month. The sign at I:C1 is clearly the “upended-frog” glyph for birth, surely referring to the scene illustrated below. It is unfortunate that the immediately following glyph is missing, as this would refer to the individual being born. The following sign is a portrait glyph of a probable young woman at I:C2. A second portrait glyph, in this case

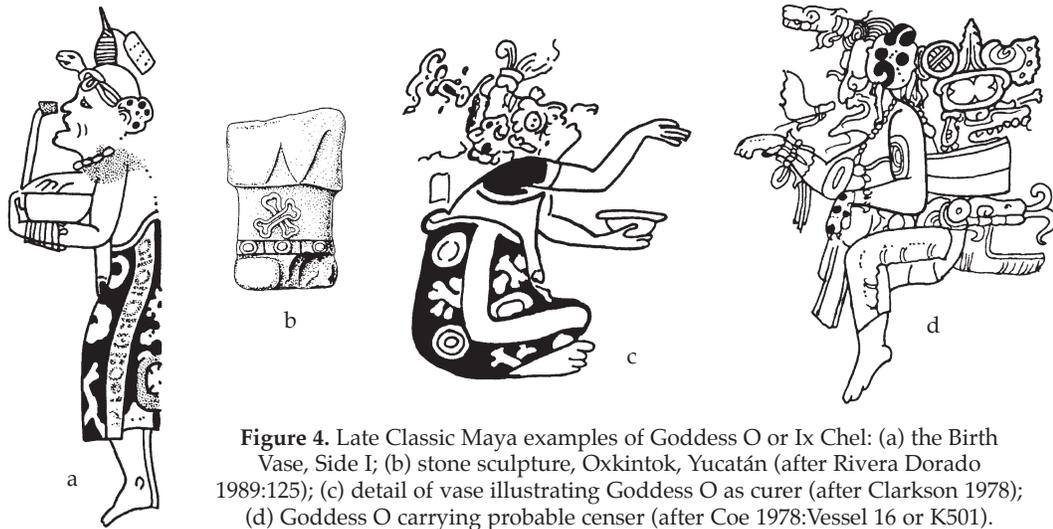


Figure 4. Late Classic Maya examples of Goddess O or Ix Chel: (a) the Birth Vase, Side I; (b) stone sculpture, Oxkintok, Yucatán (after Rivera Dorado 1989:125); (c) detail of vase illustrating Goddess O as curer (after Clarkson 1978); (d) Goddess O carrying probable censer (after Coe 1978:Vessel 16 or K501).

an aged being, occurs at I:F1. This sign probably refers to old Goddess O, who frequently appears with similarly craggy features (e.g. Figure 4d).

Continuing with the distance number begun on Side I, the Side II text begins with the expression 16 Tuns, 15(?) Katuns, 16 Baktuns, 8(?) Pictuns, and 1 Calabtun. Since the coefficients for the Uinals, Katuns and Pictuns are not entirely clear, the actual date is uncertain, and no calendar round date is presented. Nonetheless, the vase text undoubtedly concerns mythological time, since it continues two placements beyond the Baktun to the Calabtun, which is 160,000 360-day Tun periods. Stephen Houston (personal communication, 1993) suggests that this distance number refers to a date after the birth event described on Side I, with the “upended frog” glyph at II:B3 referring to the same birth mentioned on Side I. Given the vast temporal span of the distance number, it is possible that the Side II text could partly concern actual historical figures of the Classic period. However, there is no indication of known historical individuals or places in any part of the Birth Vase text.

At II:C1 there is a zoomorphic face with a ring around the eye, a curl in the corner of the mouth, and a three-dotted circular ear element often found in representations of frogs and turtles. This name may refer to the probable Pauhtun figure emerging from the serpent mouth in the accompanying scene, since the turtle was one of the more common zoomorphic forms of this aged being. However, the portrait glyph is also quite like the old woman facing the serpents on Sides II and III. In these scenes, the old woman has a ring around the eye, and on Side III, it is also evident that she has a large curl emanating from the back of the mouth. It is also possible that rather than referring to turtles or toads, the dotted circular ear element represents the jaguar ear worn by the old woman.

The logographic form of the *way* glyph (T539) identified by Houston and Stuart (1989) appears on the Birth Vase at II:C2, an Ahau glyph, spotted on the upper right side. Although badly eroded, the prefix may have been an *u* sign, creating the reading *u-way*, or “*way* of...”. Although the portrait glyph at II:C1 could refer to the *way*, the particular name of the spiritual co-essence could well be the virtually destroyed glyph at II:D1. The meanings of the next two compounds are unknown. The first at II:D2 is composed of a burning *le* sign prefixed by a phonetic *ya*, and the following sign at II:C3 seems to be a profile of an old woman’s face prefixed to a phonetic *ho*. The glyph at II:D3 appears to be a Pauhtun name glyph, here with

a personified form of the Cauac glyph providing the *tun* value. The accompanying coefficient of four is often found with Classic and Postclassic Pauahtun name glyphs (e.g. III:A2).

The final column of Side II begins with the “sunrise glyph”—the solar Kin sign splitting apart the glyphs for the sky and earth. The following compounds at II:E2 and E3 can be phonetically read as *xabil(i) yalab(i)*. The meaning of this remains obscure, although the root *al* in the second compound signifies “child of mother” in many Mayan languages. In Quiché, *alab* signifies “boy, unmarried son” (Edmonson 1965:7) and in Chol, *alob* is “child” (Aulie and Aulie 1978:29). It is possible that the phrase *yalab* or *uyalab* signifies something akin to “her offspring.”

The text of Side III is especially long, and contains twenty glyph blocks. However, much of the text is poorly preserved, with the first two glyphs of column E being essentially erased. Nonetheless, the text does contain several recognizable deity names. At III:A2, there is the name of Pauahtun prefixed by the coefficient of four. The skeletal head of God A, the death god, appears immediately below at III:A3. At III:A4, there is another deity portrait head, in this case too eroded to identify. Finally, the head of a jaguar deity appears at III:D4; although this may represent old Goddess O, the features more closely resemble the male Jaguar God of the Underworld.

The first compound of Side IV contains a portrait glyph with the same three-spotted circle appearing on the saurian head at II:C1. However, here the damaged glyph appears to be of a human face and in addition, has a prefix. Given the present condition of the compound, it is uncertain whether it refers to the three Pauahtuns illustrated in this scene, or to the accompanying young woman. Barbara MacLeod (1990:339-340) has deciphered the compound below at IV:A2 as *hulah*, or “arrived.”² Thus the column A glyphs seem to describe the arrival of an individual, possibly the young woman in the scene below.

The compound at IV:C1, a T506 Kan glyph with a T280 *o* prefix, may refer to the burning censer in the lower center of the Side IV scene. Citing independent investigations by Nikolai Grube and Stephen Houston, Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993) note that the Kan sign appearing in the glyph for the month Cumku was probably read *ol*. With the phonetic *o* prefix, the IV:C1 compound seems to be also read *ol*. Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993) use the *ol* reading of Cumku in reference to a class of ritual bowls and censers which they also suggest are labeled as *ol*. The examples illustrated in Figure 14 are entirely comparable to the large censer at the lower center of Side IV (Figure 14a).

With its blackened eye and the trace of a beard-like tuft on the cheeks, the glyph at IV:D1 can be identified as an opossum face. This sign may refer to the Pauahtun figures in the accompanying scene, since the Pauahtun frequently appears in the form of an opossum (see Taube 1989c:354-357).

Although the Birth Vase text still awaits a detailed and thorough decipherment, several important points may be gleaned from this preliminary review. For one, the text seems to refer twice to a birth event. From this birth, the text moves forward through a vast expanse of time, indicating that the text concerns mythology rather than only mundane historical events. The mythological content of this text is indicated not only by calendrics but by the presence of known deity names. Among the gods mentioned are the old Goddess O, Pauahtun, the death god, as well as probable references to the young birthing goddess at I:C2 and the Jaguar God of the Underworld at III:D4.

² I am indebted to Stephen Houston for pointing out this reading to me.

The Iconographic Scenes

The four sides of the Birth Vase provide wonderfully detailed views into Classic Maya ritual and mythology pertaining to birth. The vessel scenes isolate and identify a number of motifs and rites found in Maya art as being specifically involved with the act of human birth. Although the four scenes portray mythological events performed by gods, it is clear that they are directly related to actual Maya birth practices, many of which are still being performed in the ethnographic present. However, although many of the actions are based on actual Maya birth practices, the vessel scenes also appear to supply a mythical charter or rationale for certain rituals performed at birth.

Side I

The Young Goddess

The primary vessel side from which all other scenes unfold depicts a young woman accompanied by at least two old females (Figure 5). She stands, wearing a long skirt cinched to the level of her exposed breasts. Two knotted sashes encircle and delineate the region of her waist. Quite possibly, this unusual detail of dress relates to her pregnant condition, and may have served to constrict the abdomen at birth. Thus among the contemporary Tzotzil of San Andrés Larrainzar, the husband stands behind the woman and tightens her sash to speed delivery (Holland 1962:218).³ Although it would be tempting to identify this young woman as the Classic period moon goddess, she bears no common lunar features, such as the lunar crescent, a rabbit, or the beaked facial element commonly found with the Classic goddess (see Taube 1992b:Figs. 30-31). The remains of a jaguar ear can be discerned behind her head; however, it is not clear whether this belongs to her or the adjacent old goddess. On Side IV of the Birth Vase, there is another skirted woman, probably the same young goddess. In this case, she clearly displays a spotted jaguar ear. It has been noted that her name glyph may appear at I:C2, a youthful female face with a possible death spot and jaguar ear.

The Old Goddesses

On Side I, the young woman is surrounded by several old women. One of the aged ladies stands in profile holding a bowl (Figure 4a), while another embraces the young woman from behind. Quite possibly, a third old woman stood opposite the figure in profile, but extensive erosion prohibits firm identification. These aged women are but aspects of a specific goddess who appears at least seven and possibly nine times on this single vase. To indicate her advanced years, she usually displays a chapfallen and wrinkled face and long, pendulous breasts. A spool of cotton and a twisted snake headband serves as her headdress. An entity with strong jaguar attributes, she often has jaguar ears, jaguar paws or mittens, and the three-spotted jaguar eye serving as the hieroglyphic sign for the day name Ix.

Although relatively rare in Classic Maya art, the aged goddess commonly appears in the Dresden and Madrid codices of Postclassic Yucatán. In an emendation to the Schellhas system of deity classification, Günter Zimmermann (1956) termed the codical figure Goddess

³ The contemporary Mixtec of Juxtlahuaca also place a wide sash around the woman while embracing her at birth. Immediately after delivery, the cloth is tightened: "If the sash is not put on tightly and adjusted properly, the woman could get sick and die, since it is thought to prevent the blood and placenta from rising and is said to help expel the placenta more rapidly (Romney and Romney 1966:93)."



Figure 5. The Birth Vase, Side I.

O. Like the earlier Classic form, the Postclassic goddess is an old woman wearing a serpent headdress and displaying jaguar attributes. At times, the Postclassic form also wears the cotton spool in her snake headdress (e.g. Taube 1992b:Fig. 51a). In the codices, she is phonetically named *chak chel*, clearly a reference to Ix Chel, the famed Yucatec goddess of curing and childbirth (see Tozzer 1941:9-10, 129, 154-155). Although Ix Chel is commonly, and erroneously, identified with the youthful and comely Goddess I, she is actually the old and barren Goddess O.

Aside from the vase under discussion, Goddess O occurs in several other Classic contexts. Recent excavations at Oxkintok uncovered a Terminal Classic sculpture of Goddess O (Figure 4b). Rivera Dorado (1989:125) identifies the stone sculpture as Goddess O, or Ix Chel, by her pendulous breasts and crossed-bone skirt. In both Classic and Postclassic Maya art, Goddess O often wears a skirt with crossed bones. In one Late Classic vessel scene, the old goddess displays the jaguar ear and Ix eye along with the crossed-bone skirt (Figure 4c). Although previously identified as a male god, Goddess O appears on yet another Classic vessel. Along with jaguar mittens and a prominent jaguar ear, the goddess wears a skirt and a bound serpent headdress; yet another serpent appears at her waist, probably serving as a belt (Figure 4d).

M.A. Ciaramella (n.d.) has recently noted that the twisted serpent headdress of Goddess O has a clear analogue in contemporary costumes of highland Maya women. In the Tzutuhil mythology of Santiago Atitlan, one group of old goddesses have actual snakes as their head ribbons (see Tarn and Prechtel 1986:178). Citing Pettersen (1977), Ciaramella also notes that the twisted cloth headdress crossing the brow of married Pokomchi women symbolizes a coral snake. Although in cloth, the form of this headdress closely resembles the intertwined serpent headbands appearing on the Birth Vase. The actual twisted cloth headdress is also found in Classic Maya art, and is relatively common on Jaina style figurines. At times, an old woman with sagging breasts wears this headdress (see Piña Chan 1968:Figs. 56, 61). Given the serpent significance of this headpiece, these cited figurines can also be tentatively identified as Goddess O. A third Jaina style figurine depicts a skirted old woman displaying jaguar ears as well as the twisted cloth headdress (see Miller 1975:Cover, 44). Although she appears as a warrior wielding a weapon and shield, her age, headdress and jaguar ears identify this figure as Goddess O.

According to the sixteenth century account of Diego de Landa, Ix Chel is “the goddess of making children” (Tozzer 1941:129). Although Ix Chel may in fact be the mother of the gods, the supreme genetrix of creation, her primary role is not as a fecund mother, but as an aged midwife, one whose social function is to produce children. Among contemporary peoples of Mesoamerica, midwives are typically old, post-menopausal women (Cosminsky 1977:307).

Side I of the Birth Vase provides striking evidence that the Classic Ix Chel also has the role of midwife. The scene of the young woman holding a pair of twisted serpent cords while Goddess O embraces her from behind is an explicit representation of birth, as is commonly performed in the Maya region today. Among many Maya peoples, the pregnant woman holds onto a cord hung from a house beam while giving birth. The use of the birth rope is recorded for the modern Yucatec (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:181), Tzotzil (Guiteras Holmes 1961:107), and Pokomam Maya (Reina 1966:241). Writing for the Tzotzil of Chenalho,

Guiteras Holmes (1961:107) notes that while the pregnant woman holds onto the hanging rope or a chair, “the midwife stands behind her and grasps her by the waist with encircling arms.” This description of the assisting midwife is identical to the Classic vessel scene, where an aged Goddess O stands behind the woman and squeezes her abdomen. Whereas this Goddess O is probably helping to push out the birth, the second midwife seems to be awaiting the child or the afterbirth, which will be placed in her bowl.

The Birth Rope

The use of a hanging rope for support at birth is not limited to the Maya area, and is probably of great antiquity. The birth rope is also known for the contemporary Tarascans of Michoacan (Beals 1973:166), the Mixtec of Oaxaca (Ravicz and Romney 1969:397), and the Mayo of northwestern Mexico (Beals 1945b:56). Although the Birth Vase provides the only explicit prehispanic representation of the suspended cord used in birthing, images of similar twisted serpentine ropes are common in Maya art. One exquisite black background vase depicts an elaborate twisted white cord terminating in a pair of serpent heads. The primary event mentioned in the accompanying text is birth, and it is reasonable to interpret the twisted rope as the birth cord. However, the twisted serpent rope is also thematically related to an even more basic element of birth, the umbilical cord. A number of researchers have noted that the umbilical cord can be represented as a snake in Maya art (e.g. Miller 1982:94-95; Stone 1988:82; Gutiérrez 1990; Bassie-Sweet 1991:153-155; Freidel et al. 1993). According to Miller, the twisted serpent motif found in the murals of Late Postclassic Tulum is to be understood as the umbilical cord. However, I suspect that there is considerable thematic overlap between the birth rope and the umbilical cord, not only by their shared presence in birth events, but also by the particular placement of the rope within the Maya house. Suspended from the central interior of the structure, the birth rope is essentially the umbilicus of the house. The parallel is particularly striking when one considers that in Yucatec and other Mayan languages, the term *na* signifies both house and mother.

In Maya thought, the house constitutes a basic metaphor for the cosmos, with the four world trees serving as the corner posts of this great structure. Among the modern Chorti, each of the cosmic corner posts is termed *oi*, “one of the four tree trunks set in the ground to support the roof and walls of a house (Fought 1972:433).” According to the Tzotzil of Zinacantan, the universe is “like a house, like a table (Vogt 1976:11).” For the Classic Maya, the Pauahtun world bearers can be found in the corners of structures, as if they are corner posts as well as cosmic world bearers (e.g. Copán Structure 11). Just as the birth rope is hung from the center of the Maya house, there is also the cosmological concept of a cord hanging from the center of the sky. Citing the work of José Fernández, Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993) note that the contemporary Quiché conceive of a celestial umbilicus linking the center of the sky to the underworld. Sosa (1985:346) records a recent Yucatec altar that had a ring *xtabka’anil* [štáabka’anil] vine hanging from the central intersection of a pair of crossed arches. In Yucatec, *xtabka’anil* signifies ‘cord of the sky,’ and it is probable that the placement of the *xtabka’anil* vine denotes the cord hanging from the center of the sky. According to the presiding *hmen* and the participants, the entire four-legged altar represented the world, with the hanging ring denoting *u hol Glorya*, a cosmic hole or conduit in the center and zenith of the sky (Sosa 1985:346). The colonial Yucatec Book of the Chilam Balam of Chumayel makes

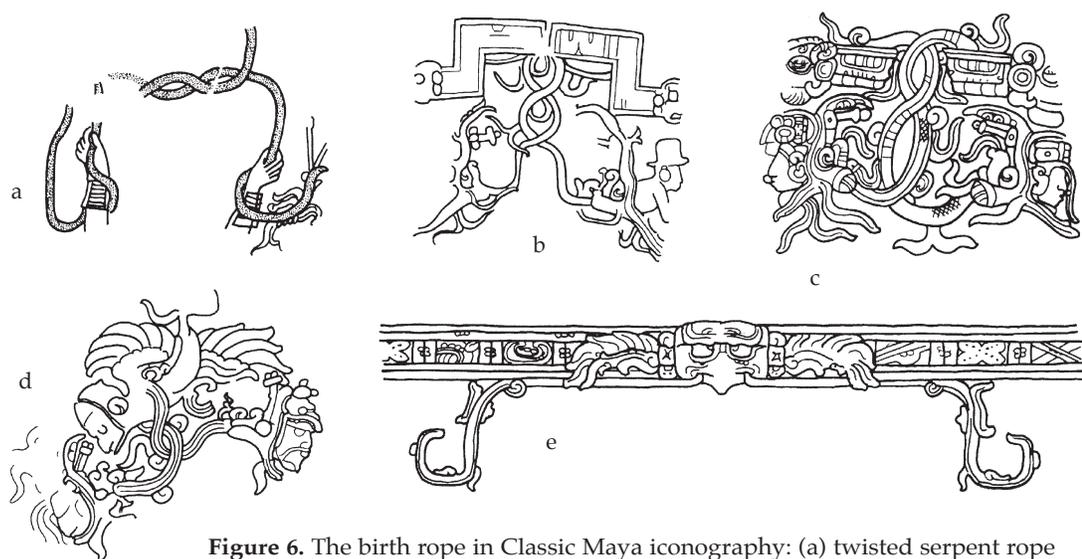


Figure 6. The birth rope in Classic Maya iconography: (a) twisted serpent rope held by young goddess, Birth Vase, Side I; (b) birth rope suspended from cleft sky, Caracol Stela 3 (after Beetz and Satterthwaite 1981:Fig. 3); (c) birth rope passing through jagged cleft sky, Caracol Stela 6 (after Beetz and Satterthwaite 1981:Fig. 8); (d) probable Principal Bird Deity with birth rope, Caracol Stela 5 (after Beetz and Satterthwaite 1981:Fig. 6); (e) Principal Bird Deity with birth rope in beak, House E, Palenque (after Maudslay 1889-1902:4:Pl. 43).

mention of a celestial rope (*sum*) or cord (*tab*) that descends with the “word of heaven,” that is, it serves as a means of bringing divine powers to the earth (see Roys 1967:82, 155).

Several stelae from the site of Caracol, Belize, illustrate a pair of intertwined serpents descending from the top of the monument (Figure 6b–c). In form and placement, they are like the twisted serpent ropes appearing on the Birth Vase (Figure 6a).⁴ Anthropomorphic figures, probably of conjured ancestors, can be seen emerging from the mouths of the twisted serpents. On Caracol Stelae 6 and 3, the serpents descend from a cleft sky, and it is likely that this cleft represents a prehispanic form of *u hol Glorya*, a celestial conduit for the gods and ancestors to be born into this world.⁵

On Caracol Stela 5, the twisted serpents descend not through a sky hole, but by a diving supernatural bird, quite probably the Principal Bird Deity (Figure 6d). In many instances, the Principal Bird Deity appears with twisted serpents in its craw (e.g. Hellmuth 1987a:Figs. 489-491, 516, 549-550; Coe 1989a:Fig. 14). It has been recently argued that in ancient Maya ritual, the Principal Bird Deity served as a powerful vehicle for bringing supernatural powers, such as gods and ancestors, into the human plane (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993). The twisted serpents often carried by the Principal Bird Deity allude to this conjuring ability in a specific way. Whether as umbilical cords or as the birth rope, the snakes are a clear

⁴ In the Nuttall and Vindobonensis codices, the Mixtec form of Quetzalcóatl (9 Wind) descends from a markedly similar jagged cleft sky. In his descent, 9 Wind stands upon a rope that descends directly out of the celestial cleft (see Nuttall pp. 18, 19; Vindobonensis p. 48). Probably, this rope alludes to both the umbilical cord and the birthing rope suspended within the Mixtec house during birth.

⁵ An excellent Early Classic example of the celestial twisted serpents appears in the upper portion of Stela 1 of Corozal, a site approximately 5 km. east of the center of Tikal (see Jones and Miguel Orrego C. 1987).

metaphoric reference to birth, that is, the ritual summoning of supernatural beings into the human realm was considered as a process of birth.⁶

At times, the Principal Bird Deity can appear on structures holding the twisted serpent cords. On the north sides of Quiriguá Stelae A and C, the Principal Bird deity is atop a sky band roof from which descend long, twisting ropes to flank the dancing individual below (see Maudslay 1889-1902:2:Pls. 8, 20). On Piedras Negras accession stelae 6, 11, and 14, the Principal Bird deity holds the twisted serpent rope while perched on the roof of a scaffold hut (Figure 15a). In House E at Palenque, the Principal Bird Deity and the serpent rope appear above the doorway of an actual building (Figure 6e). The twisted snake ropes identify these structures as “birth houses,” and in this specifically architectonic context, the cords can be identified with the birth ropes hanging from the ceilings of actual Maya houses.

The Basal Elements

On Side I, the figures stand upon three devices. The largest appears in the center of the Side I scene, where the youthful goddess and her attendant midwife stand upon a frontally facing zoomorphic head commonly referred to as a Cauac Monster. Epigraphic research by David Stuart (1987:17-23) demonstrates that the Cauac Monster is actually a personified mountain, or *wits* in Mayan languages. Serpent bodies emerge out of the mouth of the zoomorphic mountain; their heads can be discerned on Sides II and III. The snake bodies are marked by a convoluted rope-like device, which Stephen Houston (personal communication, 1993) notes is very much like a human umbilicus. Although rare in Classic Maya iconography, a similarly marked bicephalic serpent appears on a stone censer from the region of Palenque (Figure 11a).

The other two virtually identical platform elements flank the central mountain (Figure 7a). The better-preserved example can be seen to be a spotted bone segment topped by a black hooked device. Together, the two elements form the U-shaped bone device serving as the upper portion of the Uayeb sign (Figure 7b). In zoomorphic form, this element occurs as the jaws surrounding Pacal upon the Sarcophagus Lid at Palenque. Freidel, Schele and Parker (1993) note that this skeletal U-shaped device denotes an entrance to the underworld, or Xibalba. Thus Side I portrays both conduits to the heavens and the deathly underworld.

The combination of the twisted sky ropes and the skeletal underworld maw is by no means limited to the Birth Vase, but is a relatively common theme in Maya iconography. A ceramic censer from the region of Teapa, Tabasco, depicts a Maya lord seated upon a probable mountain flanked by twisted cords containing human figures; the U-shaped maw surrounds the body of the king (see Westheim et al. 1969:Fig. 251). The sides of Copán Stela N also depict twisted ropes containing figures as well as the hook-shaped skeletal maw. Much like the Teapa censer, the ropes and U-shaped devices flank depictions of the ruler on the north and south sides of the monument. On the south side, the rope and skeletal maws

⁶ For the ancient Maya, penitential bloodletting served as a basic ritual means of communicating with the gods and ancestors. For males, the penis was a preferred organ for bloodletting. Although this act has been often interpreted as an imitation of menstruation, it almost surely refers to the pain and copious blood occurring at birth. In addition, the rope often pulled through the wounded genitalia probably represents the bloodied umbilicus emerging from the loins. Stuart (1988:192) notes that the birth of the Paddler Gods mentioned in the text of Dos Pilas Stela 25 seems to be a metaphoric reference to the ritual conjuring of the two gods by bloodletting.

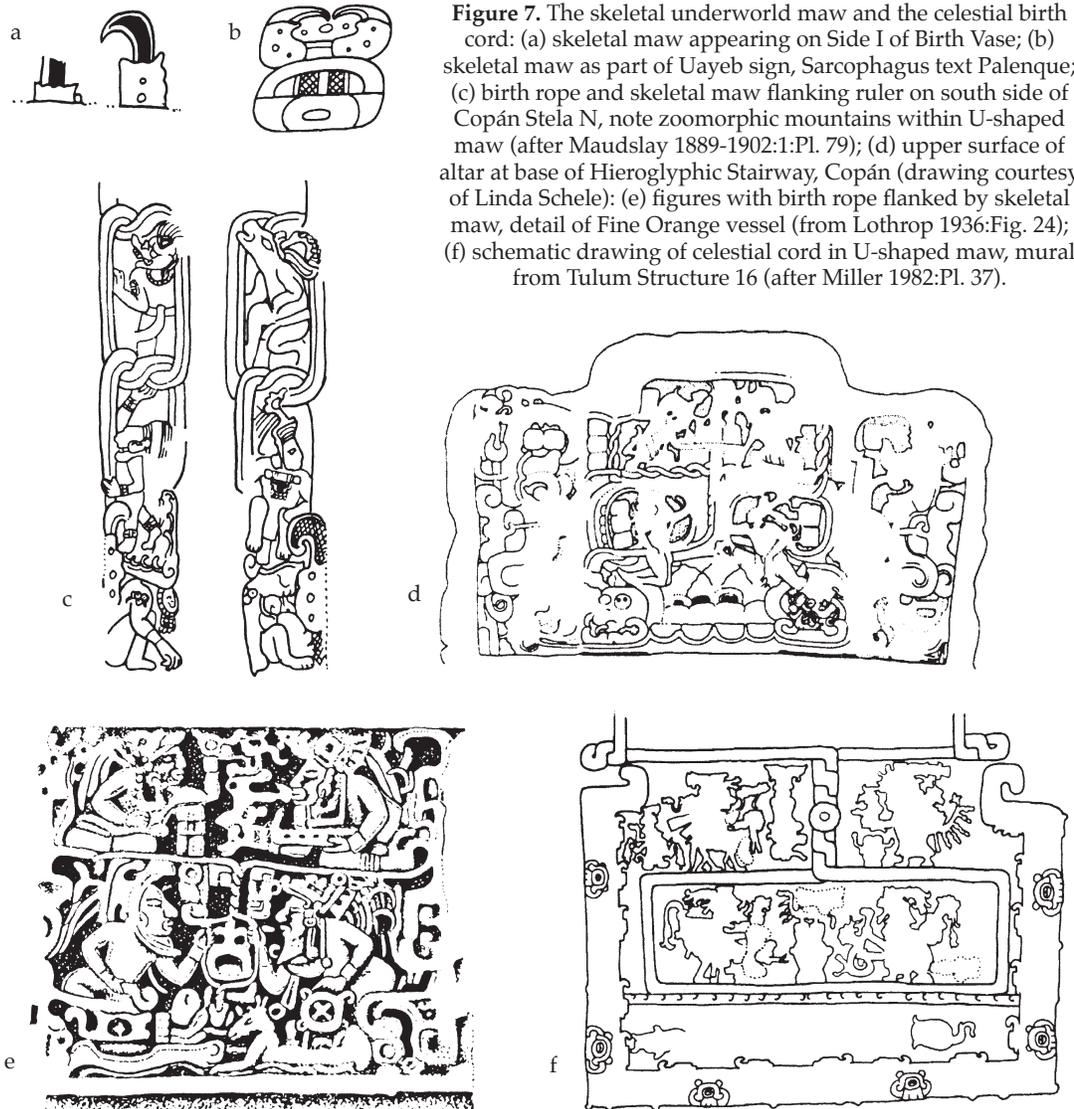


Figure 7. The skeletal underworld maw and the celestial birth cord: (a) skeletal maw appearing on Side I of Birth Vase; (b) skeletal maw as part of Uayeb sign, Sarcophagus text Palenque; (c) birth rope and skeletal maw flanking ruler on south side of Copán Stela N, note zoomorphic mountains within U-shaped maw (after Maudslay 1889-1902:1:Pl. 79); (d) upper surface of altar at base of Hieroglyphic Stairway, Copán (drawing courtesy of Linda Schele); (e) figures with birth rope flanked by skeletal maw, detail of Fine Orange vessel (from Lothrop 1936:Fig. 24); (f) schematic drawing of celestial cord in U-shaped maw, mural from Tulum Structure 16 (after Miller 1982:Pl. 37).

are accompanied with zoomorphic mountains marked with Cauac signs (Figure 7c). Thus as in the case of Side I and probably the Teapa censer as well, the south side of Copán Stela N contains sky ropes, mountains, and underworld maws. As either the pregnant woman or the Maya king, the central figure is portrayed in the attitude of birth, surrounded by basic elements of the cosmos.

The twisted celestial ropes and skeletal maw also appear in instances without the mountain or a single central figure. On the upper surface of the altar at the base of the Hieroglyphic Stairway at Copán, the skeletal maw contains a tortoise shell and the twisted cords (Figure 7d). The ropes form a net-like support and platform for four actively interacting individuals. This scene is quite similar to one appearing on a Fine Orange vessel from Zacualpa, Guatemala (Figure 7e). Here four individuals confront one another amidst the twisted ropes. One hook-shaped half of the skeletal maw can be observed to the viewer's

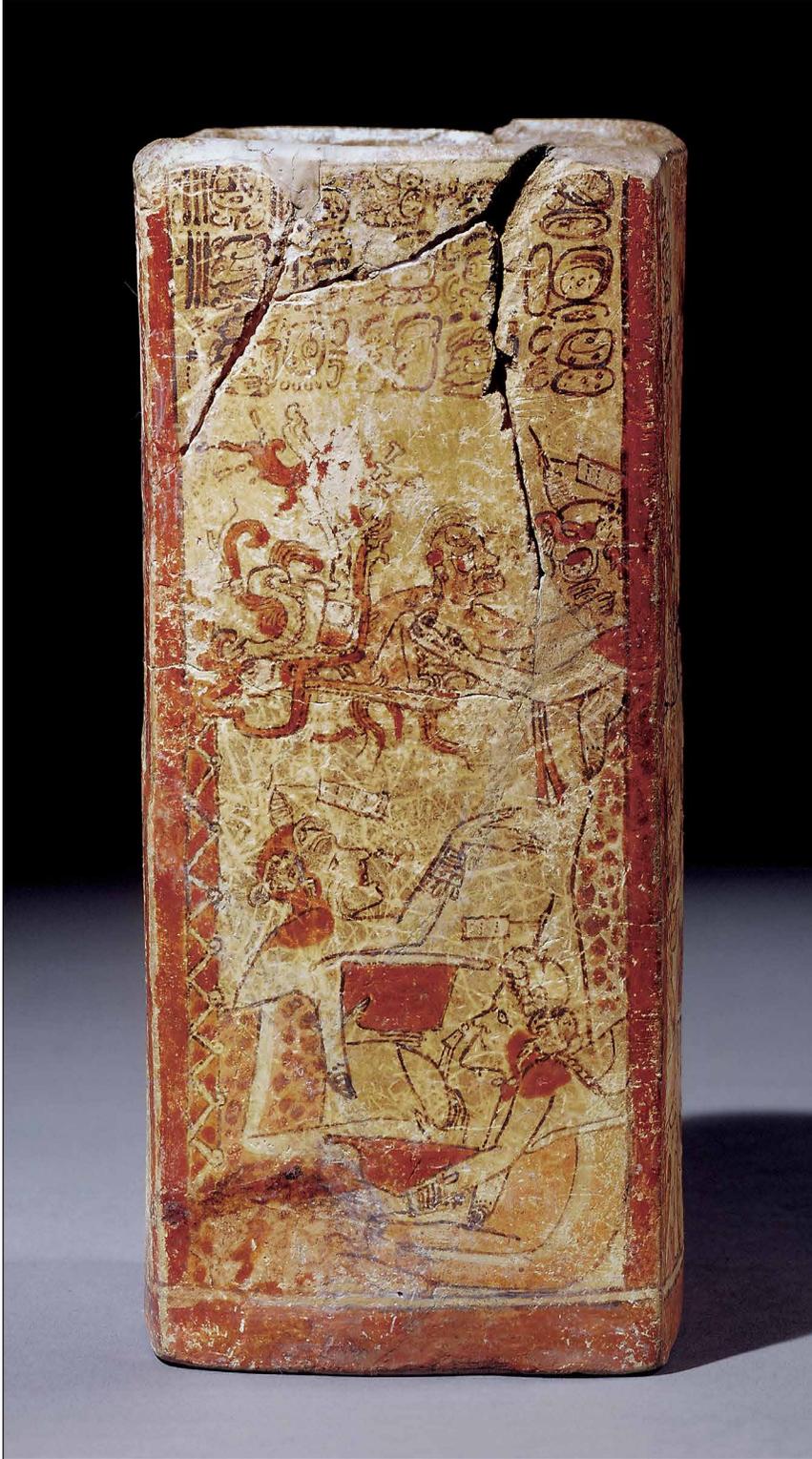


Figure 8. The Birth Vase, Side II.

right. Perhaps the most elaborate version of the sky cord and U-shaped maw occurs in the Late Postclassic murals of Temple 16 at Tulum (Figure 7f). The scene again encompasses four figures suspended on twisted rope within a U-shaped zoomorphic maw. Although the significance of the sky cords, hanging figures, and skeletal maw combination remains to be established, it seems to refer to creation or conjuring in the metaphoric sense of birth.

Side II

The Old Women

Three forms of Goddess O appear on Side II, and like the Side I examples, they are old women with sagging breasts, jaguar ears, cotton spindle whorls in their headdresses, and zones of red paint on their shoulders, necks and cheeks (Figure 8). Although two of the three figures wear the twisted serpent headband, the lowest woman wears a segmented headband in its place. This individual stands out for another reason as well. Whereas all of the other headdress spindles are swollen with spun thread, hers is but a stick tipped with a short length of cotton. Like the three fates of Classical antiquity, the thread might allude to the development of the womb or the future “lifeline” of the individual. Since weaving and childbirth are among the most essential creative practices of Mesoamerican women, it is not surprising that they overlap considerably in native thought. Sullivan (1982:14) notes that for the Aztec, the growth of the cotton spindle was compared to the development of the fertilized womb. According to the modern Sierra Totonac of Veracruz, the spider of the east weaves the newborn’s umbilicus (Ichon 1973:74, 173-174). The contemporary Huichol compare the lifetime of an individual to a great weaving, begun at birth and ending at death (Shaefer 1989:191). Similarly, the Tzutuhil Maya of Santiago Atitlan refer to the rope connecting the loom to the supporting post as an umbilical cord (Tarn and Prechtel 1986:176).

The pair of Goddess O figures seated at the base of the scene hold large basins. One of these women appears to be putting a cut gourd bowl into her vessel, as if to scoop up liquid contained within. This scene may refer to bathing or aspersing associated with birth. The standing Goddess O differs in several ways from the examples seated below. She possesses a large Ix jaguar eye ringed by the “cruller” device typically found with the Jaguar God of the Underworld. Jaguar paws substitute for the human hands found with the other women in the scene. It will be seen that this same form of Goddess O appears on Side III, where she again faces an open serpent mouth. But although the Side II figure is a distinct, less human form of Goddess O, she still possesses the sagging breasts, snake headband, and cotton spool headdress found with the other goddesses, and it is clear that the two forms are closely related. On Dresden page 67a, Goddess O is also found with the Ix eye and jaguar paws.

The Bearded Dragon and the Old God

The standing Goddess O faces toward a serpent figure, an entity first labeled as the Bearded Dragon by Michael Coe (1975a:19). The nose of the snake terminates with the Jester God, a curious but common feature of the Bearded Dragon. A small anthropomorphic figure emerges from the mouth to touch the face of the goddess, who in turn touches the figure with her paw. It is difficult to ascertain whether this illustrates a tender embrace or a struggle between adversaries. Although the significance of this scene is poorly known, it does clearly

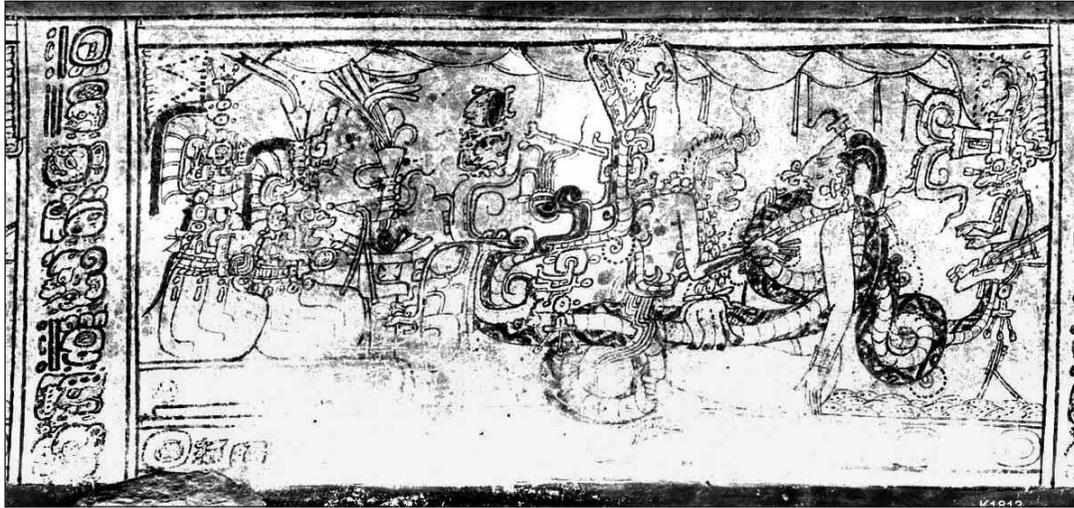


Figure 9. The old *Mam* and young woman theme, here concerning the birth of Chac and the Patron of Pax. The old Pauhtun with his diagnostic netted headband emerges out of a serpent in the center of the scene. The pair of swaddled infant gods appear to the left—note burning braizer in front of pair (Kerr no. 1813 in Robicsek and Hales 1981:Vessel 12a).

concern birth. In Classic Maya art, emergence from a serpent mouth frequently denotes birth. Houston and Stuart (1989:7) note that on Yaxchilán Lintel 13, the birth of a historical individual is represented metaphorically as a figure rising out of a snake mouth. Two closely related codex-style vessel scenes illustrate God K emerging out of a yawning serpent maw (see Robicsek and Hales 1981:Vessel 142; Kerr 1992a:389). In the more elaborate version published by Kerr (*ibid.*), this event is epigraphically described as the birth of God K.

Although Yaxchilán Lintel 13 and the two codex style scenes suggest that the emerging Side II figure is being born, this is no ordinary baby. Instead, the figure appears as an old man, with a protruding chin and chapfallen mouth. This figure is closely related to a theme commonly occurring on codex-style vessels in which the emerging old man confronts a young woman wrapped in the coils of the serpent (Figure 9; see Robicsek and Hales 1981:Vessels 8-13; Parsons et al. 1988:97; Kerr 1990:210). In a number of instances, this figure is clearly an old Pauhtun; the Side III example is probably the same god. Where texts are present, these codex style scenes refer to birth. However, rather than referring to the old emerging god, the texts refer to the birth of two bundled gods, Chac and the patron of the month Pax (see Stone 1988:83-84). According to Stone, the two gods are portrayed as swaddled newborns.

Rather than constituting the primary individual being born, the old figure emerging on the Birth Vase and in the codex-style scene probably represents a god ritually conjured in association with the actual birth. The prehispanic Pauhtun or God N has been frequently compared to the *Mam* of highland Maya lore, an old god of mountains, thunder and the sacred calendar (see Taube 1992b:92-99). Tarn and Prechtel (1986:179) describe a Tzutuhil birth ceremony during which the *Mam* and protective female goddesses are conjured:

At a birth, the midwife receives the *Mam* in the center of the house with incense and candles, and the quality of the reception and duration of offerings will determine the ease of birth. When the *Mam* is installed, the *ixok ajawa* (women lords) arrive, also known as the guardian persons (*chajalbe winak*). They come to receive the child and are very much feared.

Among the Quiche of Chichicastenango, the infant is ritually presented to the earth god Dios Mundo 260 days after birth, that is, on the first Tzolkin anniversary of his or her birthday (Schultze-Jena 1954). The Side II scene of the emerging figure and standing Goddess O may represent divine forces summoned at the birth of a child

In Mesoamerican thought, the birthdate in the 260-day calendar has a profound bearing on the nature of the individual and frequently determines his or her spiritual co-essence, often referred to as *tonalli* in Central Mexico and *way* among the Maya. Among the Aztec, the baptismal bathing of the newborn was performed on the day of birth, binding the infant to its *tonalli* determined by the 260-day calendar (see Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 6:167-177; López Austin 1988:1:88-89). Among the Zinacanteco Tzotzil, the individual and the animal co-essence both come into being at the moment of birth. After birth, the Zinacanteco midwife bathes the child and afterwards performs a ceremony to socialize the infant and strengthen the tie to its innate soul, or *c'ulel* (Vogt 1976:19-20). In the Quiché community of Chichicastenango, the naming of the newborn is performed by the midwife as she ritually bathes the child; this naming rite performed at birth is entirely distinct from the public Sunday baptisms celebrated in the community church (Bunzel 1952:96, 154-162). Bunzel (1952:96) notes that the birth date in the 260-day calendar is an important means of determining the fate of the child. This is also true for the Quiché of Momostenango, where the 260-day calendar birth date still determines the spiritual co-essence and character of an individual (Tedlock 1982:110). Side II may represent the bathing ceremony associated with the character and fate of the newborn. Whereas the seated midwives hold the containers used for the ritual bathing, the standing midwife is in the act of receiving the co-essence, or *way* from the old god. Although its relevance to the scene is far from certain, it will be recalled that the logographic sign for *way* occurs in the text immediately above.

The Tzotzil Maya of Chiapas have detailed beliefs concerning the origin and locality of the animal spirit co-essence, or *wayijel*. The Tzotzil widely believe that these animal spirits live in sacred mountains (Holland 1963:105; Gossen 1974b:15; Vogt 1976:19). Spero (1991:188) notes that these spirits are frequently under the care of the mountain-dwelling Earth Lord, who merges with the Tzotzil form of Chac, god of rain and lightning (see also Hermitte 1970:91). Among the Quiché of Momostenango, the *Mam* is the caretaker of the animals at the sacred mountain of Quilaja; one form of this being is a red dwarf possessing lightning powers (Tedlock 1982:147-148). The Tzotzil earth lord, *yah'val balamil*, and the Quichean *Mam* are contemporary forms of Pauhtun, a mountain god associated with thunder and lightning (see Taube 1989c:372, 1992b:94-99). The contemporary ethnography suggests that the Classic period Pauhtun, or an aspect of this being, possessed the *way* spirits as his charge.

Side III

The Jaguar Snake

Occurring on the opposite side of the vessel from Scene II, Scene III is virtually a mirror image (Figure 10). Once again, a standing Goddess O confronts a rearing serpent. However, in this case, the serpent head has the ear and spotted pelage of the jaguar. Although the name of an important Palenque king appears to be Chan Bahlum, or "Snake Jaguar," images of jaguar serpents are fairly rare in Maya art. One example appears on a limestone censer from the region of Palenque (Figure 11a). Whereas one end of the bicephalic serpent is a snake, the other is a jaguar. The body of the serpent is covered with the curious folded cord device

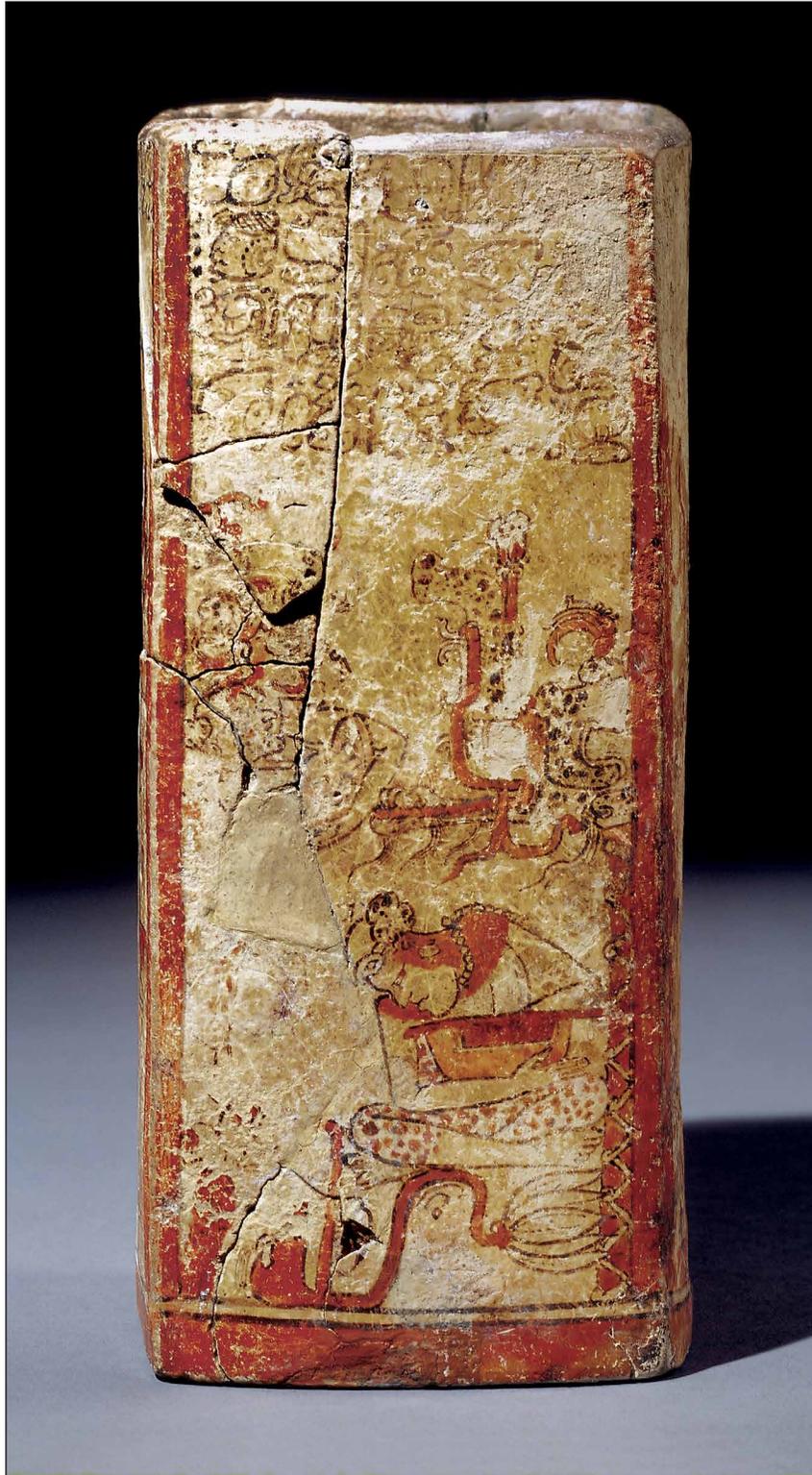


Figure 10. The Birth Vase, Side III.

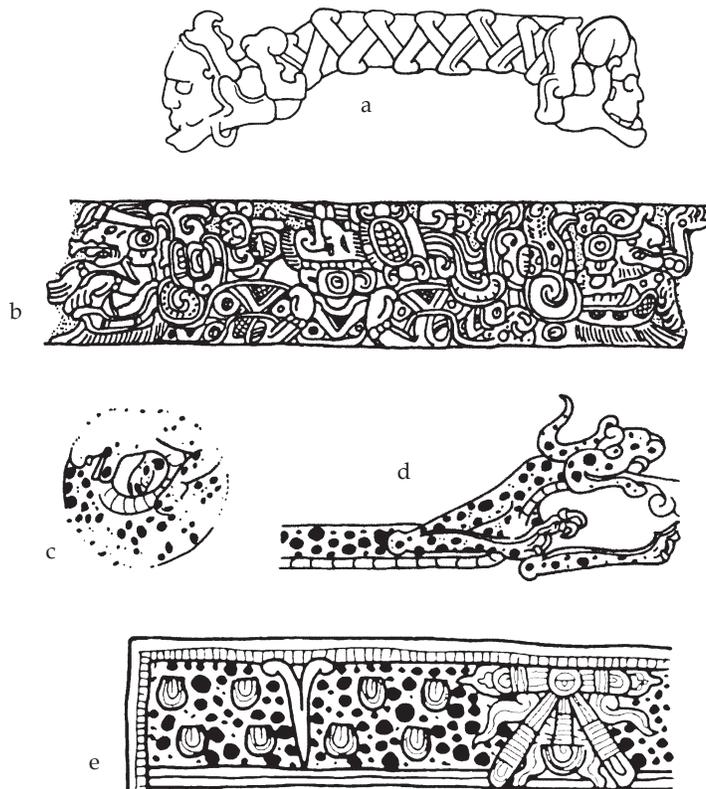


Figure 11. Jaguar serpents in Mesoamerican iconography: (a) bicephalic serpent with snake and jaguar heads, compare body patterning to Birth Vase serpents (after Easby and Scott 1970:No. 175); (b) Maize God holding bicephalic serpent with snake and jaguar heads, Early Classic Tikal (detail of drawing courtesy of Linda Schele); (c) jaguar snake at base of codex style bowl (after Robicsek and Hales 1981:Vessel 48); (d) jaguar snake, north wall panel of Structure A, Cacaxtla, Tlaxcala (after Kubler 1980:Fig. 3); (e) starry night sky with jaguar pelt, detail of Late Postclassic mural from Tulum Structure 5 (after Miller 1982:Pl. 28).

found on the Birth Vase serpents, and this figure can be considered as a conflated version of the two snakes appearing on Sides II and III. A ceramic vessel from Tikal displays an Early Classic version of this bicephalic creature (Figure 11b). Whereas the left head is the Bearded Dragon, the opposing right head is the Waterlily Jaguar, although here with the beard commonly found with Maya representations of serpents. It has recently been noted that this scene represents the cosmogonic act of raising the heavens (Freidel et al. 1993); in other words, the bicephalic serpent denotes the sky.

A jaguar snake without the opposing bearded serpent head appears coiled at the base of a codex style bowl (Figure 11c). This creature is quite similar to the jaguar serpent from the north panel of Building A at Cacaxtla (Figure 11d). Here the jaguar snake is paired opposite the plumed serpent, or Quetzalcóatl, appearing on the south panel. The two snakes support the two warring sides appearing in the nearby battle mural, with the jaguar serpent being accompanied by a Mexican jaguar warrior, and the plumed serpent, a Maya bird warrior. It is thus possible that the jaguar snake denotes the western region of highland Mexico, whereas the plumed serpent alludes to the Maya lands of the east, the direction *par excellence* of Quetzalcóatl. However, the pairing may go further, as Quetzalcóatl may represent the blue day sky and the jaguar serpent, the dark nocturnal hours. Of course, the identification of jaguars with the night and darkness is widespread in Mesoamerica, and the Mexican deity Tepeyollotl and the Maya Jaguar God of the Underworld readily come to mind. At Late Postclassic Tulum, the starry night sky is depicted against the background of the spotted jaguar pelt (Figure 11e). Whereas the Side II side may refer to a dawning or diurnal rite, Side III may depict events occurring in the darkness of night.

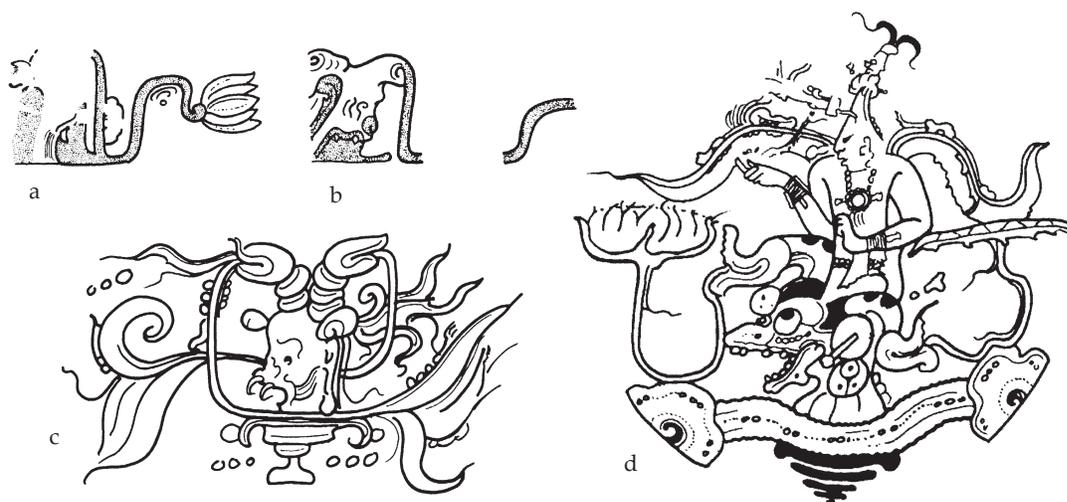


Figure 12. The water lily skull motif: (a–b) water lily skull elements appearing on Sides III and IV of Birth Vase; (c) water lily skull, detail of codex style vase (after Robicsek and Hales 1981:Vessel 75); (d) Tonsured Maize God sprouting out of split water lily skull (after Robicsek and Hales 1981:Vessel 116).

The Old Goddess

It is extremely unfortunate that the region in front of the jaguar serpent has suffered extreme erosion, as it is among the most interesting scenes found upon the Birth Vase. Originally, two figures seem to have faced the jaguar snake, only the uppermost portions of their bodies are preserved. It is likely that they represent the two forms of Goddess O appearing on Side II, the human version and the more zoomorphic variant. As in the case of Side II, the more jaguar-like form is the principal figure confronting the snake. The jaguar paw of the goddess can be seen just in front of the snake's lower jaw. Her face, tipped with a tasseled nose bead, has a ringed eye and a red element curling out of the back of the mouth. As in the case of most of the Goddess O figures, she has red paint at the back of the cheek and a prominent jaguar ear above. This individual holds a smaller, more anthropomorphic Goddess O, who has the typical sharp facial features of the old goddess. She seems to be clutching an undetermined object, possibly a bowl or cloth, before her. The scene is unusually emotionally charged, and with their open mouths the figures appear to be yelling, perhaps even screaming, at the jaguar snake.

Below the snake, a third Goddess O sits in stolid detachment, curiously oblivious to the events immediately above. This scene may represent a relatively simultaneous but distinct episode. The seated goddess holds a large basin in her lap and gazes intently toward an entity also found on Side IV. Her left hand is within the bowl, as if she is preparing to offer something to the form below.

The Basal Element

The device appearing at the base of Sides III and IV is a fanged skull sprouting two phallic-like elements, quite probably roots of the water lily (Hellmuth 1987a:191, 360) (Figure 12a–b). Although only a long red tendril can be seen sprouting out of the Side IV head, the example from Side I is supplied with a white water lily flower. The allusion to water is explicit, as the

flowering red vine has the “stacked-canoe” element denoting standing water in Maya iconography. Although possessing upper curving fangs, the lower jaw of the skull is removed. Instead, the mouth has the red, lolling tongue found with the patron of Pax. A very similar creature appears on a codex-style vessel, although here the Pax tongue is missing (Figure 12c). However, aside from possessing the curving fangs, “stacked canoe,” and water lily elements, the skull also has the small beard found on the Side III example. Hellmuth (1987a) has stressed the widespread association of the water lily with the watery underworld, and these water lily skulls probably denote a specific watery place of the underworld. Similar although more zoomorphic water lily skulls appear as basal elements in the stucco scenes of Piers C and F of Palace House D at Palenque (see Maudslay 1889-1902:4:Pls. 35, 37).

The Birth Vase water lily skulls are also clearly related to a human water lily skull, in this case with the lower jaw intact. In codex style vessel scenes, this head frequently occurs with the Tonsured Maize God, who can appear rising out of its cleft brow (Figure 12d). In one vessel scene, the Tonsured Maize God substitutes directly for the human skull (Robicsek and Hales 1981:Vessel 74), and it would appear that this skull is closely identified with corn. According to the *Popol Vuh*, maize originated at *pan paxil*, *pan cayala*, which could be glossed as “at the broken place, at the bitter water (Tedlock 1985:328).” The frequently split water lily skull could well refer to this underworld place. Among the Classic Maya, the term *pax* also signified split or broken, since the logographic form of the month Pax is marked by a prominent split at the top. It will be recalled that the bloody, jawless mouth of the Birth Vase skull is a trait of the Classic patron of the month Pax, and it may also serve as a reference to *paxil*.⁷

Side IV

The Young Goddess and the Pauahtuns

Unlike the other sides of the Birth Vase, the Side IV scene is broken into two distinct registers (Figure 13). In the upper portion, a youthful figure faces towards an old man, clearly the god Pauahtun. Although the breasts are not prominent, the young individual can be identified as a woman by her dress and long queue of hair running along her shoulder. She is richly adorned in jewelry, and wears a beaded headband, necklace, and wristlets. In addition, a spotted Jaguar ear appears at the back of her head. It has been noted that she is probably the same young goddess giving birth in the Side I scene; her name glyph may appear at IV:A1.

In the lower register, the youthful goddess faces towards an old man wearing a bound cloth headdress; three other old men with simple knotted headdresses sit in the scene below. These figures can be securely identified as quadripartite aspects of the old god Pauahtun, who typically appears with a folded cloth headdress bound with a knot across the brow. The Pauahtun facing the young goddess holds a ceramic bowl containing two lenticular forms, one black, the other white, tipped with red. The objects are sacrificial bifacial blades, one of black obsidian, the other flint; in Mesoamerican iconography, flint is often depicted as white and red. Another bowl and an obsidian knife are held by one of the Pauahtun figures below.

⁷ In a similar vein, Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993) interpret the cleft *witz nal* mountain on the Tablet of the Foliated Cross as a Classic form of *pan paxil*, *pan cayala*.



Figure 13. The Birth Vase, Side IV.

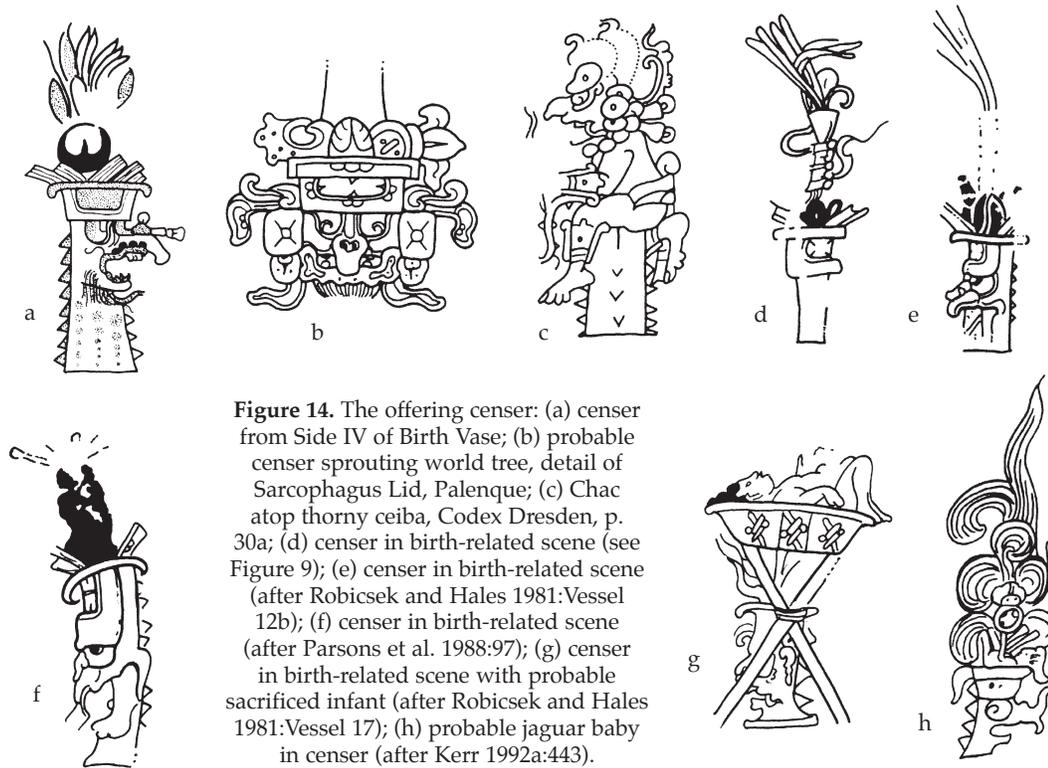


Figure 14. The offering censer: (a) censer from Side IV of Birth Vase; (b) probable censer sprouting world tree, detail of Sarcophagus Lid, Palenque; (c) Chac atop thorny ceiba, Codex Dresden, p. 30a; (d) censer in birth-related scene (see Figure 9); (e) censer in birth-related scene (after Robicsek and Hales 1981:Vessel 12b); (f) censer in birth-related scene (after Parsons et al. 1988:97); (g) censer in birth-related scene with probable sacrificed infant (after Robicsek and Hales 1981:Vessel 17); (h) probable jaguar baby in censer (after Kerr 1992a:443).

The headdress worn by this individual is identical to that of the Pauahtun in the scene above, and is formed of pink spotted cloth bound with a red headband. The lower figure is probably the same Pauahtun, who now has placed the sacrificial offering in the burning censer.

The Censer

The three Pauahtuns in the lower register of Side IV surround a burning censer with a prominent beaked head. Linda Schele (personal communication, 1992) notes that this zoomorphic censer is identical to the Quadripartite God appearing at Palenque on the Temple of the Cross and the Sarcophagus Lid. According to Schele, these heads represent the central place, often referred to as *ol* in Mayan languages. As an indication of this middle place, both Palenque examples have a world tree growing out of the center of the heads. It has been noted that the term *ol* appears in the accompanying text above, but it is also likely that the Side IV censer itself alludes to a central world tree, in this case the ceiba, the essential *axis mundi* of the Maya. Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993) note that the spikes on the sides of censers probably refer to the thorns on the trunk of the young spiny ceiba (Figure 14c). Although this is not to say that all spiked censers in Mesoamerica allude to this tree, many Maya examples do resemble ceiba trunks (e.g. Figures 14e–f).

Clearly, the elaborate ceramic censer appearing on Side IV would not occur in birth rites of the average Maya household. Instead, it may correspond to a formal, ritualized form of the family hearth, the central place of the Maya house. Just as the rope hanging from the ceiling is the navel of the heavens, the hearth in the middle of the house marks the earth navel, the center of the world. Among Maya and many other Mesoamerican peoples, including the

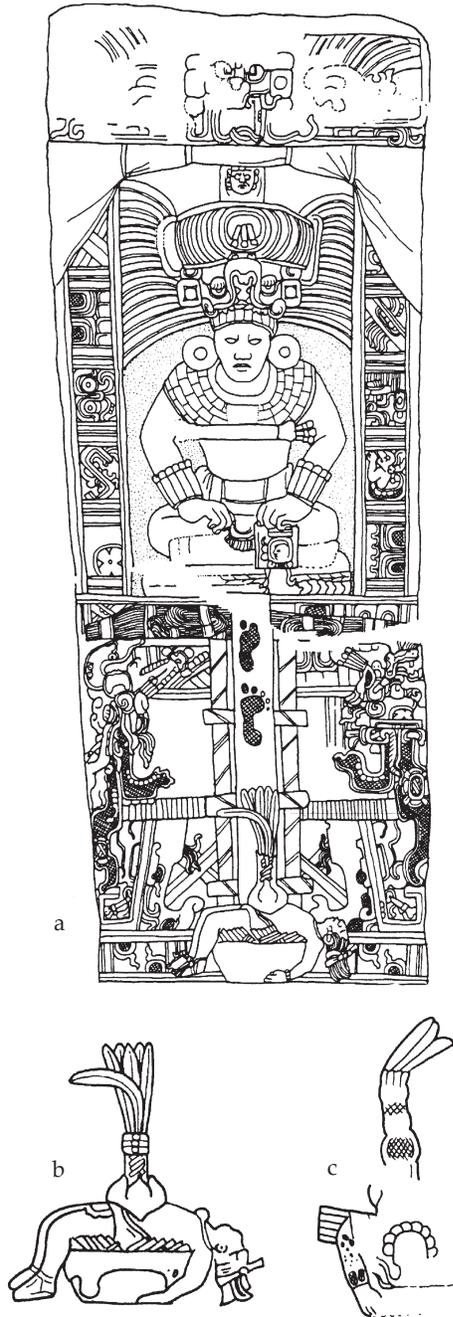


Figure 15. Accession iconography and sacrifice at Piedras Negras: (a) Stela 11, Piedras Negras (drawing courtesy of Linda Schele); (b) detail of Stela 11 victim, note jaguar pelt and faggots within basin; (c) victim at base of accession scaffold, Piedras Negras Stela 14, note jaguar pelt markings on arm (from Taube 1988b:Fig. 12.5c).

Tarascans (Beals 1973:169), the Popoluca (Münch 1983:125), and the Central Mexican Nahua (Redfield 1930:136), the afterbirth is commonly buried under the hearth. One passage in the colonial Yucatec *Ritual of the Bacabs* describes placing the placenta under the central pit of the earth caiman (*uhomtanil itzam cab*). Roys (1965:Note 127) interprets this central pit, or *homtan*, as the household hearth. Quite probably, both the elaborate censer and the simple mundane hearth serve as symbolic conduits to the Underworld.

Along with holding cut faggots, probably of *ocote* wood, the censer bowl contains a round element marked with a trefoil pattern topped or pierced by a vertical device tipped with long feathers. A markedly similar combination of faggots, bulbous trefoil element, and a long, plumed form occurs on Stela 11 at Piedras Negras (Figure 15a–b). Although somewhat eroded, Piedras Negras Stela 14 also seems to display the same devices (Figure 15c). In both cases, the plumed element is centered atop the abdomen of a slain human victim. Quite probably, this plumed form represents the handle of a sacrificial knife, with the round element denoting the excised heart. A Late Classic polychrome depicts a very similar knotted and feathered handle on a sacrificial blade (see Coe 1978:Vessel 10). In the aforementioned codex style birth scenes of Chac and the patron of Pax, there are censers containing the probable knife and heart offering (Figure 14d–e). In both form and content, the censers in the codex style birth event scenes are clearly related to the example appearing on the Birth Vase, and here again human sacrifice is implied (Figure 14d–g). One codex style bowl scene depicts the old god, serpent, and young woman with the spiked censer (Figure 14f). Although the text explicitly refers to birth, a bound victim with a ripped-open abdomen lies at the base of the scene (see Parsons et al. 1988:97). In another scene illustrating the bundled Chac and Pax figures, an apparently lifeless baby lies in a bowl above the burning spiked censer (Figure 14g). Since the primary epigraphic event in these codex style scenes concerns the

birth of Chac and the Pax patron, this infant is probably a victim sacrificed as part of a birth ritual. Although not part of the codex style corpus, a similar victim appears in another spiked censer; in this case, the infant has a long, hanging tail (Figure 14h).

The K'ex Sacrifice

In Side IV of the Birth Vase and the codex style birth scenes under discussion, there is a curious combination of birth and death imagery. Side IV contains several representations of sacrificial blades, and clearly, the censer and victims illustrated in the codex-style birth scenes allude to sacrifice. The theme of sacrifice is reiterated and underlined by the aforementioned stelae at Piedras Negras, which depict what were probably actual people slain in historical ritual events.

The Quichean *Popol Vuh* and contemporary ethnography may provide an explanation for the role of sacrifice at birth. It will be recalled that in one *Popol Vuh* episode, the underworld lord Cuchumaquic discovers that his daughter Xquic is pregnant. The enraged father tells the owl messengers to cut out her heart with a sacrificial knife and place it in a gourd bowl. However, the clever Xquic tricks the underworld lords by substituting copal incense—the blood of trees—for her heart. Entranced by the burning copal, the underworld lords allow Xquic to successfully escape and give birth to the Hero Twins on earth (see Edmonson 1971:78-80; Tedlock 1985:115-117). Side IV may show a Classic version of this mythical event. In the top scene, the underworld Pauahtun presents a bowl of sacrificial blades to the maiden, quite possibly informing her of the necessary sacrifice. In the scene below, this same Pauahtun seems to have taken the offering from the sacrificial bowl and placed it in the burning censer. Both he and his companions appear to gaze intently at the brazier, as if in rapture from the burning offering. With the acceptance of this offering, the well-being of the maiden and her offspring are ensured.

In the *Popol Vuh*, Xquic makes good her escape by presenting a substitution to the gods of death, referred to as a *k'exel* in the Quichean text (Edmonson 1971:78, 80). In many Mayan languages *k'ex* signifies 'substitute' or 'exchange' and is also used in modern curing ceremonies to refer to the act of substituting a sacrificial offering for the patient. Love (1989:337-338) records several such ceremonies, termed *k'ex*, among the contemporary Yucatec. The offerings are special forms of ritual tamales offered to supernatural beings. Love (personal communication, 1992) notes that one of the cited *k'ex* rites was for curing a baby infected with dangerous winds. Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993:Chapt. 4) also describe a modern Yucatec *k'ex* curing rite in which offerings of maize drink (*sakha'*) and alcohol substituted for a baby. In both of these sources, the malignant forces were believed to follow the offerings from the home into the bush to be buried in a hole. In both cases, the offering served as a virtual decoy for the endangered infant.

Forms of *k'ex* curing rites are commonly performed by the Tzotzil of highland Chiapas. In San Andrés Larrainzar, chicken sacrifice constitutes one of the most important ritual means of restoring the stolen spiritual co-essence of the injured individual (Holland 1962:254-255). In this ceremony, the black chicken should be of the same sex and approximate age as the patient and is considered to be a substitute for the lost supernatural animal companion; "the spirit of the chicken is offered verbally to the gods in exchange for that of the patient (Holland 1962:255)." Although Holland does not use the specific word for this substitution,

this is recorded for the nearby Tzotzil of Zinacantan. Here the sacrificed chicken is referred to as the *k'exolil*, and is offered to the underworld Earth Lord in exchange for the animal spirit co-essence of the patient (Vogt 1976:78-78, 91-92). A *k'exolil* chicken is usually sacrificed on the sacred mountain of Kalvaryo, the preeminent home of the ancestral gods (Vogt 1976:78; Fabrega and Silver 1973:183, 261). Within a stone chamber on the west side of the shrine, the sacrificed chicken is placed on a plate with its head facing east (Vogt 1976:78; Fabrega and Silver 1973:261). It will be seen that this position—head towards rising sun—is the same as for unbaptized children, that is, newborns.

One of the most elaborate forms of the Zinacanteco *k'ex* sacrifice occurs in the dedication of a newly created house. In this case the shaman makes an offering of *k'exoliletik* to placate the Earth Lord. Following the placement of the patio house cross by the shaman, the chickens are sacrificed while suspended from a rope in the center of the house:

An assistant then hangs a rope from the peak of the house, the end of which marks the center of the floor, where a hole is subsequently dug. A number of roosters and hens corresponding to the number and sex of the family members are hung by their feet from the end of the rope, with their heads concealed inside the hole. With the exception of one black rooster saved for later burial in the center hole, their heads are cut off with a knife and the blood is allowed to drain into the hole. The bodies of the chickens are scalded with hot water and plucked and prepared for eating; their heads and feathers are buried with the blood as an offering to the Earth Lord. The shaman then censes the remaining black rooster... He then buries the entire bird in the center of the "grave," head toward rising sun—the position of burial for unbaptized children (Vogt 1976:52).

This contemporary house dedication ceremony evokes several previously described pre-Hispanic motifs. Perhaps the most striking is the combination of the hanging rope and the pit offering access to the underworld, recalling the combination of birth rope and skeletal maw occurring in ancient Maya art (Figure 7). Just as the Zinacanteco house pit represents a deathly conduit, the hanging rope probably refers to celestial birth. Not only do the live chickens hang head down, the typical Mesoamerican birth position of infants, but the one intact victim is buried in the same position as an unbaptized infant. It has been suggested that the Classic juxtaposition of the sky rope and death maw alludes to birth and creation, and this also holds true for the Tzotzil ceremony, which concerns the dedication of the newly fashioned house. To the Zinacantecos, this ritual probably has cosmic overtones beyond the basic house, since it will be recalled that the house serves as a basic model of the Tzotzil universe.

Like the substitution performed by Xquic, the contemporary *k'ex* ceremonies are a means of tricking and assuaging malignant, underworld beings of death and illness. It is quite possible that the *Popol Vuh* episode provides a rationale for actual *k'ex* ceremonies performed at birth. It is noteworthy that *k'ex* sacrifices concern offerings to the underworld, the region of the *Popol Vuh* gods of death. Just as the new child is brought into the world, something must be given in return to the gods of death and the underworld, to maintain equilibrium

Throughout Mesoamerica, there is no more dangerous time for an individual than at the newborn stage. During this period, the infant is exposed to dangers both magical and real, and for this reason, the mother and child are often sequestered away for weeks at a time. The performance of *k'ex* rites could serve to assuage malignant underworld powers that threaten to take the spirit and ultimately the life of the infant. For most births, such a

k'ex offering could be food, copal, animals, or even the afterbirth.⁸ However, it appears that for the Classic Maya elite, something more was required. It seems that in this case, infants or other human victims were offered to the netherworld demons in place of the endangered child. The Classic depictions of sacrificed infants carried by jaguars, death gods, and other underworld denizens are probably *k'ex* offerings. Their frequent placement in offering bowls recalls the contemporary Tzotzil *k'ex* chickens, which are ritually presented to the underworld in dishes as if they were infants.⁹

The K'ex Offering and Maya Kings

In the Classic codex style birth scenes, the *k'ex* offering appears as a human sacrificial victim. The same could be said for the victims appearing at the base of accession Stelae 11 and 14 at Piedras Negras. In a previous study, I noted that the Piedras Negras “niche stelae” represent scaffolds, and that much of the attendant iconography concerns the hunt (Taube 1988b). Although scaffold sacrifice and the hunt are important symbolic themes in these accession monuments, yet another is birth. On accession stelae 6, 11, 14, the scaffold is surmounted by the Principal Bird Deity holding the serpentine birth rope in its beak, thereby identifying this structure as a form of birth hut (Figure 15a). For some time, Mary Miller (personal communication, 1981) has identified the victims at the base of Stelae 11 and 14, as babies (Figure 15a–c). Although in the actual sacrifice, adult captives may have been used, the victims do appear to be portrayed as diminutive infants, far smaller than the rulers enthroned above. In accession and other rites of passage, the participant typically goes through a transition from symbolic death to eventual rebirth into the new status (van Gennep 1960). It would appear that at Piedras Negras, the accession of the king was a form of birth, and as such, it required a *k'ex* offering.

On close inspection, it may be seen that the Stela 11 infant lies upon a spotted jaguar skin (Figure 15b). In the case of the Stela 14 victim, the spotted skin actually appears on his arm, as if he wears a jaguar suit (Figure 9c). It will be recalled that in one vessel scene, the *k'ex* baby has a tail, and it is quite possible that this infant also refers to the jaguar.¹⁰ The sacrifice of anthropomorphic jaguar infants immediately brings to mind the codex-style scenes of Chac sacrificing the jaguar baby upon a *wits* mountain (Figure 16) (see Robicsek and Hales 1981:Vessels 19-27; Kerr 1990:220, 221, 1992a:450-451, 459, 485). These vessels are

⁸ The Quiché of Chinique, Guatemala, carry the afterbirth in a bowl to a mountain cave where it is deposited (Freidel et al. 1993:92). Although the details of this rite are not described, it may well constitute a form of *k'ex* offering to the netherworld gods. Among the Western Mixe of Oaxaca, the afterbirth is buried in a graveyard; Beals (1945a:53) notes that in the past this was performed in conjunction with the sacrifice of a young rooster in a cave near Ayutal. Beals (1945a:90) reports that this mountain cave is believed to be the home of lightning and wind, and also received offerings at the finishing of a new house, for curing, or when a child was wanted.

⁹ The use of human victims in curing is recorded for the 16th century Yucatec. Thus there are reports that pairs of boys were sacrificed for the ailing Juan Cocom, a principal informant for Diego de Landa (Tozzer 1941:Note 217). It is likely that these sacrifices constitute forms of *k'ex* curing rites.

¹⁰ This infant is placed in front of a structure that shares many similarities with the Piedras Negras accession scaffolds (see Kerr 1992a:443). Although more a masonry building than a bound wooden frame, the structure is topped by the Principal Bird Deity and has a sky band basal platform supported by S-shaped serpent heads and diagonal wooden beams, elements also appearing on the Piedras Negras scaffolds. Quite probably, this vessel scene represents a form of *k'ex* sacrifice.

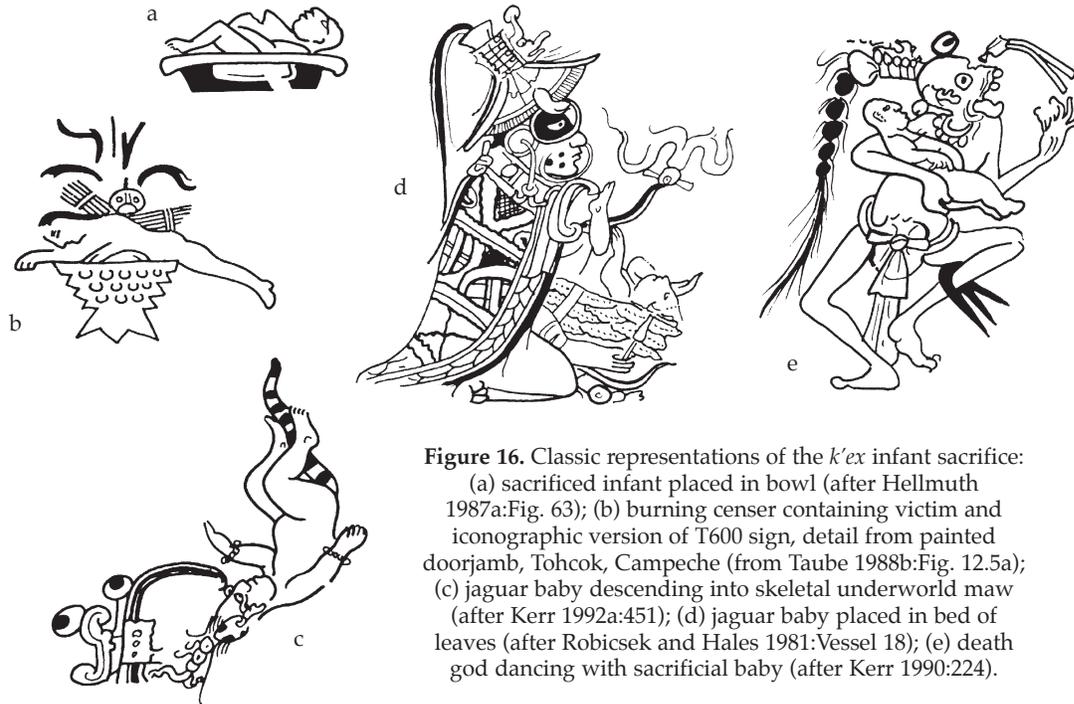


Figure 16. Classic representations of the *k'ex* infant sacrifice: (a) sacrificed infant placed in bowl (after Hellmuth 1987a:Fig. 63); (b) burning censer containing victim and iconographic version of T600 sign, detail from painted doorjamb, Tohcok, Campeche (from Taube 1988b:Fig. 12.5a); (c) jaguar baby descending into skeletal underworld maw (after Kerr 1992a:451); (d) jaguar baby placed in bed of leaves (after Robicsek and Hales 1981:Vessel 18); (e) death god dancing with sacrificial baby (after Kerr 1990:224).

clearly related to the birth scenes of the swaddled Chac and Pax god infants, since their name glyphs frequently appear in the accompanying texts (e.g. Robicsek and Hales 1981:Vessels 21, 27; Kerr 1990:220-221, 1992a:450-451, 459). In a detailed study, Lounsbury (1985) identifies the codex sacrificial scenes as the mock sacrifice of the Hero Twins in the form of GI and GIII of the Palenque Triad. However, not everyone agrees with this interpretation (e.g. Coe 1989a:165-166; Spero 1991:190-193; Kerr 1992b; Taube 1992b:24, 52). Coe (*ibid.*) cites a number of problems with the mock execution interpretation, yet another is that there is absolutely no indication that this *is* a mock sacrifice; in no scene is there any hint that the jaguar baby is brought back to life. Instead, he is being received by the skeletal death god, at times plunging head downward to be swallowed up by the underworld (see Robicsek and Hales 1981:Vessels 19, 24; Kerr 1992a:450-510).¹¹ The codex-style scenes of the jaguar baby sacrifice portray a mountain *k'ex* offering to the underworld.

Piedras Negras Stelae 11 and 14 portray the actual human corollaries of the jaguar baby sacrifice, individuals who plainly did not enjoy the immediate resuscitation experienced by the divine Hero Twins in their sacrificial dance. The remarkable dedication offerings underlying Copán Altar Q constitute still another example of actual elite *k'ex* sacrifices. The masonry pit underlying Altar Q contained the remains of fifteen jaguars, including two juveniles (Fash 1991:169-170). Fash (*ibid.*) notes that the fifteen jaguars correspond perfectly in number to the fifteen ancestral kings portrayed on the sides of Altar Q. Each of these jaguars denotes the *k'ex* substitute or succession of the Copán dynasty. It is possible that each deceased king

¹¹ One of the most detailed and explicit Central Mexican portrayals of the afterlife journey of the victim appears on Codex Borgia page 42. After being swallowed headfirst by the caiman earth, the victim is greeted by Mictlantecuhtli in the underworld. All three themes, the headlong descent, the swallowing by the earth, and the awaiting skeletal god of death appear on the codex style scenes of the jaguar baby sacrifice.

was metaphorically considered as a *k'ex* sacrifice, an offering to the underworld that would allow the succession of the following king. Among the Yucatec and Tzotzil, the two Maya groups with the best contemporary documentation of *k'ex* sacrifices, the term *k'ex* also refers to generational succession. This meaning of the term is recorded for Zinacanteco Tzotzil (Laughlin 1975:191), and in Yucatec, *k'exul* signifies "hijo, sucesor y heredero" (Barrera Vásquez 1980:398), that is, the child as the generational replacement of the parent. Carlsen and Prechtel (1991) note that among the highland Tzutuhil of Santiago Atitlan, the term *k'ex* denotes generational change and succession. The authors point out that in the Quichean *Popol Vuh*, the spittle by which Hun Hunahpu impregnates Xquic also alludes to the concept of generational *k'ex*, since the Quichean word for spittle, *k'axaj*, derives from the same root as exchange or substitute, *k'exoj* (Carlsen and Prechtel 1991:31). In this well-known passage, Hun Hunahpu describes his spittle as containing the seeds of death as well as life: although everyone born must die, life continues through the offspring (see Tedlock 1985:114-115). This dual nature of generational change, containing both death and life is also embodied in the nature of *k'ex* substitution. Whereas Carlsen and Prechtel focus upon the concept of the child being the *k'ex* of the parent or ancestor, this is in terms of the world of the living. Bringing the newborn into this world also requires a replacement in the world of the dead; in this case, the deceased ancestor destined for the underworld is the *k'ex* for the newborn child.¹² The *Popol Vuh* explicitly describes both forms of *k'ex*, the engendering spittle of Hun Hunahpu, and the netherworld sacrificial offering by his wife Xquic.

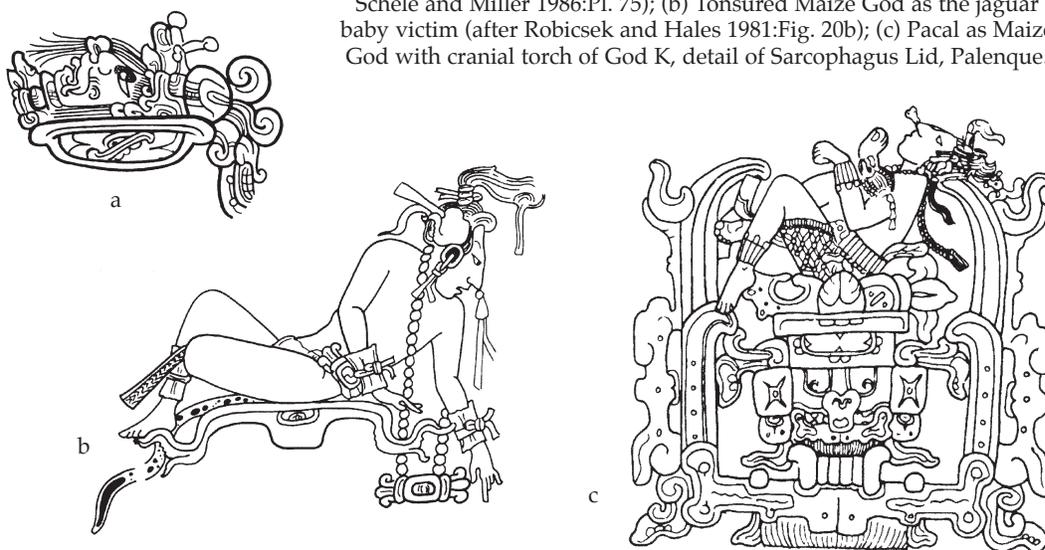
It has been noted that the Classic form of Hun Hunahpu is the deified personification of maize (Taube 1985), a plant which embodies both mortuary and engendering aspects of generational succession. Thus, like Hun Hunahpu and the deceased ancestor, the plant is buried in the underworld much like a *k'ex* offering. However, just as the netherworld head of Hun Hunahpu contains the spirit of the Hero Twins, the buried seed contains the germ for future generations on the surface of the earth.¹³

In Classic iconography, the Tonsured Maize God is at times portrayed as a sacrificial *k'ex* offering in its journey to the underworld. On one Early Classic cache vessel, the severed head of the deity is placed in the sacrificial offering bowl (Figure 17a). Freidel, Schele and Parker (1993:Chapt. 2) suggest that the handsome, youthful figure on the aforementioned black background vase is the maize god (Figure 17b). With his jaguar tail and ears, the Maize God is here portrayed as the jaguar baby *k'ex* placed within a sacrificial bowl. Villela (1989) notes that there is considerable thematic overlap between canoes and sacrificial bowls in Classic Maya iconography, both constitute means of passage into the watery underworld. Either in his sacrificial bowl or in his canoe, the Maize God is portrayed as a slain victim in his underworld journey. An especially fine example of the Maize God as the *k'ex* victim occurs on the Sarcophagus Lid of Pacal (Figure 17c), where the deceased king is portrayed

¹² An interesting version of this concept is recorded for the contemporary Huastec Maya. According to Huastec belief, the unborn fetus requires the death of a living person, to be born. In some cases, particularly aggressive and dangerous fetuses can cause mortal illness to otherwise healthy individuals: "In order to develop and be born the fetus must gain access to a spirit already on this earth. At this child's birth, another must die. Fetuses can use spirits of those destined to die but some elect to take spirits from those whose time isn't "up" yet (Alcorn 1984:157)."

¹³ Carlsen and Prechtel (1991:28) note that the agricultural metaphor for human death and regeneration is found not only in the *Popol Vuh* but also among the contemporary Tzutuhil. Thus the birth of an infant can be described as "sprouting."

Figure 17. The Maize God as *k'ex* sacrifice: (a) severed head of Maize God in sacrificial bowl, detail from Early Classic cache vessel (after Schele and Miller 1986:Pl. 75); (b) Tonsured Maize God as the jaguar baby victim (after Robicsek and Hales 1981:Fig. 20b); (c) Pacal as Maize God with cranial torch of God K, detail of Sarcophagus Lid, Palenque.



as a composite of God K and the Tonsured Maize God (Taube 1992b:48) Justin Kerr (1992b) notes that Pacal is here shown in the same position as many of the jaguar babies in the codex style sacrifices. Lying in the sacrificial offering bowl in the skeletal maw of the underworld, Pacal is portrayed as the supreme *k'ex*, the underworld offering that will ensure the succession and survival of the Palenquano line.

Conclusions

Since the pioneering epigraphic work by Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1960), it has been recognized that birth is among the more commonly cited events of Classic historical inscriptions. David Kelley (1965) noted that in the texts of Palenque, the act of birth extends to the gods as well. Recent work by Stephen Houston (1993b) has enriched our understanding of the birth of the Palenque Triad of gods. Houston notes that the sanctuaries inside the three temples of the Cross Group appear to have been referred to as sweatbaths, or *pib na*, structures widely identified with birth rituals in Mesoamerica. However, although birth was clearly an important theme in Maya history and religion, there has been little study of the attendant iconography. In large part, this is because until the appearance of the Birth Vase, there were no explicit scenes of birth in Classic Maya art.

The four sides of the Birth Vase contain unique portrayals of Classic Maya ritual and mythology pertaining to birth. Side I depicts a young woman in birth position assisted by aspects of Goddess O, the old deity of midwives. Standing upon a central, pivotal mountain, the pregnant woman holds the celestial birth cord with the skeletal maw of the underworld near her feet. The following scene on Side II appears to illustrate ceremonies pertaining to the bathing of the child and the bestowal of the *way*. The significance of Side III remains poorly known, although it is possible that the Jaguar Serpent refers to a nocturnal event, with the scene below depicting an offering to a watery netherworld place. It has been suggested that Side IV represents a Classic version of the sacrificial substitution, or *k'ex* performed by Xquic in the underworld. It would appear that this Classic episode provided a rationale for

underworld *k'ex* offerings performed at birth and other periods of life crisis.

Although the Birth Vase depicts deities engaged in mythological events, many of the scenes are strikingly similar to contemporary Mesoamerican birthing customs. The use of the birth rope and embracing midwife is still common among the Maya and other Mesoamerican peoples. The probable scene of bathing and the bestowal of the *way* on Side II recalls birth rites recorded for the Aztec and contemporary Maya groups. In addition, many of the recently recorded *k'ex* rituals contain parallels with Classic Maya sacrificial practices.

The many similarities shared between contemporary and Classic Maya birth practices suggest that birthing constitutes a very old and conservative tradition, one that appears to be shared in many regions of Mesoamerica. Aged midwives were probably common in Mesoamerica by at least as early as the Formative period. Joralemon (1981:178) suggests that the old woman and infant theme in Formative Olmec sculpture may represent a shamanic curer engaged in birth rituals, in other words, a midwife. Clearly, much of the ritual lore surrounding midwives did not end with the Spanish conquest and the colonial period. Instead, as practitioners engaged in the everyday necessity of delivery, midwives continued to perform their duties in the privacy of the native house. But although native birthing is a vigorous tradition continuing to this day, the ethnographic accounts concerning birth customs and beliefs are all too often superficial or spotty in coverage. What are especially needed are ethnographic investigations focusing on native terminology—such as words for the birthing rope—and such attendant rites as bathing and sacrificial offerings.

The significance of Classic Maya birth imagery is by no means limited to the biological act of actual birth. Instead, the ritual acts and beliefs associated with parturition were directly concerned with such profound matters as the origins and nature of the soul and the relationship of the individual to the gods and ancestors. The prevalence of the Principal Bird Deity and the celestial birth rope suggests that at least part of the vitalizing force or forces that we call the soul derived from the heavens, a belief also recorded for the Aztec (see López Austin 1988:207-210). However, the importance of underworld imagery and *k'ex* offerings suggests that the individual was also directly tied to the netherworld. It is possible that like the contemporary Tzotzil, one's *way* derived or resided in the interior of the earth. The practice of *k'ex* sacrifices is tied directly to the concept of payment and retribution, a recognition of a literal blood-debt to the gods of death. In addition, the concept of *k'ex* sacrifice seems to have also embodied generational succession in a manner similar to reincarnation.

As a basic and profound act, birth was also used metaphorically to describe such acts as the conjuring of gods and ancestors through bloodletting, royal accession, and even such abstract concepts as the origin and nature of the cosmos. In short, the imagery surrounding human birth was an essential means by which the Classic Maya perceived themselves and their surrounding world.

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