

Seated Lord from a Relief Panel: An Object-Based Study

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DEDICATION

To my family: Vernon Archer, Susan Hines, Peter McClintock, Lucy Archer, and Roland Walker. Thank you for your unwavering support.

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ABSTRACT

Seated Lord from a Relief Panel, a Late Classic Maya panel from the Palenque region, is a fascinating object that, despite considerable scholarly interest, has yet to receive in-depth individual consideration. This panel fragment and its associated pieces—presently divided among multiple institutions—contain anachronistic iconography, references to a defunct foreign superpower, and unidentified Palenque elites. Through intensive object-based research, this thesis will unite *Seated Lord*'s disparate scholarship, analyzing the panel's iconography and the original relief's place within Palenque's tri-figure panel tradition. *Seated Lord*'s pivotal role in the Museum of Fine Art, Houston's 1960s expansion of their Ancient American art collection will be explored as well, along with the American museum context that made such expansion possible and desirable.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican objects in contemporary North American museum collections contain multiple identities: First, their original indigenous context, followed by their modern biographies. Due to looting, outdated archaeological practices, and missing archival materials, an object's narrative flow is often difficult to reconstruct. Provenience is lost to time, caretakers are unaccounted for with lost provenance, and object destruction or damage goes undocumented. Modern museum ethics condemn the aforementioned negligences, but the collections themselves still stand testament to past wrongdoings. Stakeholders—be they scholars, museum professionals, or modern descendants of the object's original intended audience—are left with innumerable questions, resulting in quests to reconstruct the orphaned object's shattered past and create a continuous narrative of its life, from creation to museum display. A quest for any holistic account of object meaning would take into account all these elements of an object biography.

This thesis is one such quest, dedicated to a Late Classic Maya panel, titled *Seated Lord from a Relief Panel* (Fig. 1). Acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) in 1962, the panel's history is generally opaque. The panel was likely created in the early 700s C.E., making it an excellent example of Late Classic low-relief sculpture from the Maya polity now called Palenque. Yet the iconography is unorthodox for the period: The quantity and explicitness of references to Teotihuacan, a foreign Central Mexican superpower that declined approximately 100 years prior to *Seated Lord's* creation, has no local precedent. Naturally, the lack of provenience increases the confusion, leading scholars to address bits and pieces of the panel's iconography while

rarely seeing those iconographic elements in relation to the rest of the panel's iconography. Scholars often also disregard other physical aspects of the panel that may help us better understand the panel, such as carving style, inlays, and other details. This thesis will attend closely to the immediate iconographic context of the panel as part of a larger composition done squarely in the context of Late Classic Palenque.

Seated Lord's provenance remains mysterious as well. Originally part of a building's elaborate relief, the complete panel was destroyed at some point in the past by nature, man, or a combination of both. Some pieces, like *Seated Lord*, were reassembled and made their way into contemporary collections. Records indicate the MFAH purchased the panel from a Houston-based collector and local interior designer, Higford Griffiths, in 1962.¹ However, exactly how Griffiths acquired *Seated Lord* in the first place remains unclear, leaving a 1000-year gap in our knowledge of *Seated Lord's* whereabouts. The panel's provenance history—its modern biography—is significant to the history of Ancient American art collecting, the MFAH's crafting of a collection, and increasing institutional transparency in the age of decolonization.

My thesis will endeavor to unite *Seated Lord's* disparate scholarship through object-based research, beginning with the object and expanding outward, analyzing the panel's iconography within the regional and then the Mesoamerican art historical tradition. Parallel to the ancient historical context of the panel, my research will reveal *Seated Lord's* pivotal role in the museum's 1960s expansion of their Ancient American art collection as well as the American museum context that made such expansion possible

¹ Anne Louise Schaffer, "Reassembling a Lost Maya Masterpiece," *Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Bulletin* 10, no. 2 (1987): pp. 11-13.

and desirable. Upon grounding the reader in the panel's visual and material attributes, the following chapters will address the history of the panel's origin and its relationship to Teotihuacan, the known characters featured in the larger relief, a thorough iconographic analysis, and a presentation of the provenance research as it stands today.

Object Description and Formal Analysis

Seated Lord from a Relief Panel

As an object-based research initiative, *Seated Lord* must be introduced before any archaeological, epigraphic, and anthropological sources are referenced. In order to ground the reader in the object(s) at hand, I will describe the panel in significant detail, calling the reader's attention to the many noteworthy details of *Seated Lord*. After constructing a complete mental image of the MFAH's pieces, I will briefly describe the other known pieces of the original relief: the central panel piece—presently located in LACMA's collection²—and *Seated Lord*'s mirror panel, the Museo Nacional de Antropología's Jonuta panel (Figure 2).

At approximately four feet tall and two feet wide, the low-relief panel is nearly life-size. Today the panel is predominantly a beige-white color, but hints of red paint suggest a previously colorful surface. The panel is divided into two pieces; although mounted together, the upper-third's lower line of demarcation communicates its physical separation from the lower two-thirds. However, they are mounted together as if they were a singular work, facilitating the viewer's ability to imagine the object as whole. Notwithstanding said horizontal jagged line and some minor chipping, the surface

² Pers. Comm., Rex Koontz.

generally retains its original buttery smooth texture. The surface image is rendered in low-relief: A man appears in profile, encompassing most of the composition. He is seated cross-legged upon a presently unornamented surface, possibly originally painted and decorated with patterns. The pad of his left foot faces outward towards us, revealing a touch of the red paint that likely originally covered his entire body. His thigh obscures the rest of his leg. To emphasize the three-dimensionality of the figure, the artist added a subtle crease near the knee, revealing the beginnings of a shin.

The lord wears a loincloth that wraps up past his waist, covering his slightly rounded stomach. Irregular lines create the illusion of creases in the fabric, suggesting a bunching effect from sitting down. A short fringe runs along the loincloth's bottom edge, visible on the lord's upper thigh. The loincloth's central flap cascades down the front, bunching slightly on the obscured left thigh before dipping down in his lap only to remerge, draped over the foregrounded thigh. By draping the central flap across the figure's thigh, the artist reveals an intricate geometric pattern at the bottom edge to the viewer. Delicate cross-hatching, framed by plain parallel lines, surrounds a floral motif near the bottom. The flap's bottom hem is either adorned with or cut into small, inverted stepped-pyramidal shapes.

A rectangular, slightly sloping structure peaks out from behind the figure. An unadorned, thick band marks the edges, framing the designs within. A row of vertically oriented lines emerges from a row of horizontal small circles, roughly in-line with *Seated Lord's* lower stomach. The vertical lines are interrupted by a swirl descending from the band directly above. Another two bands sit atop the swirls; any decoration has worn away, except for an ovular crosshatching section pressing up against the thick framing

band. A cacao tree branch, complete with a sprouting cacao pod, extends out from behind the rectangular form. The organic lines used to illustrate the lord and the tree emphasize the sloping rectangle's geometricity; it appears to be an architectural element, or at least a man-made background element. As we will see below, this motif references the metropolis of Teotihuacan, in the form of the Maya "puh" glyph, as well as the valuable cacao plant and the elite associations it had with chocolate drinking.³

Returning to our central figure, his shoulders slouch forward slightly, arms resting against his side as the forearm angles upward, forming a 45-degree angle. *Seated Lord* holds a bowl in a forward gesture. His visible hand is rendered gracefully, with his slightly bulbous thumb and elongated index finger supporting a bowl as his other fingers disappear from view to support the bowl's base. A presently unornamented fabric drapes across the bowl and downward on both sides, concealing most of the bowl's body; only a sky band symbol—a common Maya symbol that resembles a thick plus sign with a small circle in the center—escapes concealment before the panel's rough edge cuts the image short.

The bowl contains two objects—a headdress atop a mask—featuring characteristics of the Teotihuacan deity Tlaloc; they are vertically stacked and parallel to *Seated Lord*'s face. A jawless, jagged mandible with a curling mouth protrusion forms the mask's base. A large goggle eye, the quintessential Tlaloc characteristic, dominates the mask, its pupil directed upward towards the headdress. Another diagnostic Tlaloc element in the mask is the tri-lobed comb, facing forward towards the panel's edge. To the eye's left, the Tlaloc wears an earpool with a mat symbol, a common symbol of

³ Pers. Comm., Rex Koontz.

royalty that resembles two strings twisted together. Moving up to the headdress, a familiar mandible and curling protrusion forms the base, but with the inclusion of a scrolling vertical proboscis. Yet again, a large goggle eye composes most of the headdress. This Tlaloc's pupil, however, looks forward. Behind the eye, a vertical zig-zag pattern emits stylized butterfly wings. Long, thin feathers sprout vertically atop the headdress, although most plumage has been lost.

Seated Lord's face is level with the Tlaloc regalia—his upturned chin and diagonal gaze suggests he is looking beyond his offerings towards another figure. His elongated forehead and roman nose create the ideal Maya profile. The lips, slightly parted to reveal a single tooth—form a nearly imperceptible smile. A long necklace of presumably large jade or greenstone beads hangs around his neck as a long counterweight drapes down his back. A large earpool penetrates his earlobe. *Seated Lord's* hair, distinguished by incised lines, is swept up in a ponytail that floats above his head. A wide-brimmed headdress made of feathers—characteristic of God L, an important lord of the Underworld and deity of war, wealth, and death—sits on the crown of *Seated Lord's* head; due to the upward angle of his face, the headdress is parallel to the panel's left edge.⁴ An owl head, complete with a hooked beak and large goggle eye, nestles in the headdress' center. A scrolling stylized corn stalk appears to sprout from the back of the owl's head, hanging down by the necklace's counterweight.

The architectural element near the bottom of the panel repeats just above *Seated Lord's* forehead, implying space through foreshortening. At this point, the long horizontal crack separating the panel's upper and lower portions interrupt the viewer.

⁴ Schaffer, 12.

Directly above the long line of demarcation, *Seated Lord*'s ponytail floats in front of what may be the cacao tree's trunk, the identification bolstered by the fruits hanging from the trunk, which is a diagnostic characteristic of cacao trees. Another snake-like creature—referred to as *Waxaklajuun Ub'aah Kan* by the Maya—appears to the left and slithers to the right.⁵ Its body is marked by a pattern of horizontal lines plus cross-hatched vertical bands and circles. *Waxaklajuun Ub'aah Kan*'s head is only partially visible; the upper portion, including its eyes and most of its mandible, are missing. Nonetheless, its maw is clearly outstretched, revealing yet another Tlaloc head between its jaws. The remnants of a goggle eye and complete jagged mandible with an outer scroll mirror Tlaloc headdress and mask located directly below the *Waxaklajuun Ub'aah Kan*. What makes this Tlaloc unique, however, is the presence of both its jaw and mandible, marked with large fangs. The *Waxaklajuun Ub'aah Kan* long tongue extends out from its mouth, below the Tlaloc head, and perforates at the end.

***Seated Lord* and Related Fragments**

Although this thesis focuses on *Seated Lord* from a *Relief Panel*, it is impossible—not to mention unacceptable—to ignore the other known pieces known to be from the larger monument. In the context of a museum collection it makes sense to treat the fragment owned by the museum as a single piece, but for the ancient Maya *Seated Lord* was never intended to exist as a standalone work. Therefore, in order to establish

⁵ Karl Taube, "Turquoise Hearth: Fire, Self-Sacrifice, and the Central Mexican Cult of War," In *Mesoamerica's Classic Heritage: Teotihuacán to the Aztecs*, (Boulder, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2000) 269–340.

the most accurate mental image possible, we must turn our attention to the central piece and the flanking Jonuta panel.

The central panel contains the lower half of a forward-facing figure; this is the man to whom *Seated Lord* deferentially offers the Tlaloc regalia. (Fig. 3) His ensemble perfectly coordinates with *Seated Lord's* offerings; from his sandals to his tunic, the figure is covered in Teotihuacan-related iconography. Teotihuacan warrior serpents, with their scaled faces and menacing open maws, adorn the figure's sandals while vertical lines of glyphs frame him on either side. The figure's tunic, most specifically the central flap, is incredibly elaborate stylized butterfly wings, like those of the Tlaloc headdress, form the flap's bottom edge. A horizontal row of swirls sit above the wings, followed by a zigzag pattern framed by horizontal bands. A circular pattern—almost certainly meant to reference scales—envelops the remaining surface with delicate fringe decorating the vertical edges. Another open-mouth serpent emerges from the flap's center. Only one of the figure's hands is visible—his hand appears to rest on his hip. Near the upper left corner of the panel, the remaining edge of *Seated Lord's* bowl is distinguishable, unequivocally binding the two panels together.

The Jonuta panel compositionally mirrors *Seated Lord* (Fig. 4) The panel sustained significant damage, rendering the image less clear than *Seated Lord*. The glyphs in the panel's upper and lower left corners identify the seated figure as the Palenque king K'inich Kan Bahlam II.⁶ A cacao tree and Teotihuacan-inspired architectural structure with most of the puh glyph intact peaks out from behind the king—

⁶ Simon Martin and Mary Ellen Miller, *Courty Art of the Ancient Maya* (San Francisco, CA: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 2004), 85; Schaffer, 11.

identical to *Seated Lord's* background. Kan Bahlam II's positioning matches *Seated Lord* as well; he is seated on the ground while offering an unidentifiable object in a bowl, with his gaze angled slightly upward to look upon the standing central figure. Kan Bahlam II's costume, on the other hand, differs considerably from *Seated Lord*. Kan Bahlam II's loincloth is generally the same, although seemingly plainer: similar fringe runs along the garment's bottom edge, but the central flap is presently undecorated. Most of Kan Bahlam II's body has been destroyed, but jaguar pelt decorates his collar and forms a prominent triangular knot on his chest. He seems to be wearing a shirt or vest, but the panel is too damaged to identify the garment.

Kan Bahlam II wears an earspool with a crossband decorating the center. The earspool's overall shape resembles a cog, with multiple protruding lines extending from the central circle. Strips of jaguar pelt are tied into an elaborate coiffure. A matching jaguar pelt knot protrudes above his forehead, pointing upward and slightly to the left. A bird of prey—perhaps a hawk—ornaments the back of Kan Bahlam II's head. The bird's hooked beak is open and frontal claw is angled as if preparing to latch onto its prey. Despite incorporating familiar elements, Kan Bahlam II's costume is unorthodox for its geographic location and time period. Nowhere in the Palenque corpus do we find similar accoutrement.

When seen in the context of the full panel composition, *Seated Lord* is a peripheral figure attending to the unidentified central protagonist in unison with Kan Bahlam from the Jonuta panel. Although this thesis focuses on *Seated Lord*, an accurate formal analysis requires a holistic approach, which follows below.

The panel's balanced composition revolves around the central figure. Either side of the central warrior is loosely symmetrical, balancing the composition around its protagonist. Kan Bahlam and *Seated Lord* both gaze up towards the central figure, which inevitably returns the viewer's gaze back to the center. The figures form a triangular composition, with the central figure as the apex and *Seated Lord* and Kan Bahlam as the base angles. Both peripheral figures' arms form angles as well, the implied lines of which would meet along the central figure's hem and chest. This angularity compliments the zig-zag forms included in the Tlaloc headdress and the central lord's ensemble.

Of the formal devices, scale plays a particularly important role in the composition. As previously mentioned, both *Seated Lord* and Kan Bahlam are roughly symmetrical, implying a shared scale. Their shared proportions and identical posture suggest a similar status or function in the scene. The central figure, by contrast, appears slightly smaller than Kan Bahlam and *Seated Lord*. The central panel's state—and lack of comparative visual resources—somewhat obscures scale. However, based on the Hales's drawing (Fig. 2), the central figure's leg is approximately the same length as *Seated Lord's* thigh. Scale does not indicate importance in this case; the central figure's stature may indicate age or a myriad of other factors. Perhaps the original composition somehow created an illusion of proportionality, unlike its present fragmented state. Nevertheless, the available visual evidence does not provide a satisfactory meaning for the scale difference, which must remain undecided here.

Chapter 2: Panel Context and Iconography

Palenque History

Given the identification of Kan Bahlam on the Jonuta panel, we can say with confidence that the panel comes from the region controlled by Palenque—or *Baakal* in Maya. With consistent visitation since the 19th century, Palenque is among the most famous Classic Maya sites. Located in modern-day southern Mexico, the site we now refer to as Palenque (see map, Fig. 5)—named after the Spanish colonial town of Santo Domingo de Palenque—is surrounded by lush yet mountainous terrain (Fig. 6). Rainforest has reclaimed most of the site, draping architectural structures in verdant tropical vegetation. The city lies on an aberrational step of a high escarpment in the northern Chiapas highlands in Southern Mexico, which lies within Mesoamerica’s Maya lowlands. The Murciélagos, the Otolum, and various other small rivers descend from mountainous terrain into the rainforest that now envelops most of the city. Palenque’s elite center, which composes the ruins tourists visit today, is rather small: completed in 2000, the Palenque Mapping Project (PMP) revealed approximately 1,500 structures over an area of 0.8 square miles (Fig. 7).⁷

This chapter’s summary of Palenque history relies heavily on David and George Stuart’s *Palenque: The Eternal City of the Maya*, along with the second edition of Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube’s *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens*. Both resources are scholarly rigorous, widely cited, and easily accessible. If the reader desires a more in-

⁷ David Stuart and George E. Stuart, *Palenque: Eternal City of the Maya* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 19; However, recent implementations of LiDAR technology have reveal many Maya sites to be larger than archaeologists originally thought. LiDAR has yet to be implemented at Palenque, but the technology will likely reveal a more expansive urban landscape than scholars are presently aware of.

depth narrative of Palenque's ancient and modern history, including an authoritative account of the Palenque historiography, please refer to the Stuart and Stuart text. The Martin and Grube book, on the other hand, provides a comparatively concise Palenque history as it is understood today. *Chronicles of the Maya Kings and Queens* is particularly useful for contextualizing Palenque within the broader Classic Maya political network, as the book contains a chapter on all the major Classic Maya polities.

The aim of contemporary scholars and that of the ancient Maya scribe and painter are not identical. Scholarly attempts to reconstruct Maya history differ from the Classic Maya scribe entrusted with creating a communal conception of his polity's past. Archaeological evidence, with its adherence to scientific methodology and evidence, does not align with narrative left behind by Palenque's elite, as the latter begins in mythical time with potentially fictional actors.

To better understand Palenque's history as the creators of *Seated Lord* knew it, and thus to better understand the emic references in the panel, we may begin with the city's mythological beginnings. The elite Maya of Palenque obliquely traced their city's origin to 3309 B.C.E. with the ascendance of the deity GI the Elder to a cosmological throne in a spiritual monarchical system which presumably inspired those of earthly kings.⁸ Less than two hundred years later, the god named Muwaan Mat was born. This deity—probably male based on epigraphic translation—begot the Palenque Triad: GI the Younger, Infant K'awiil, and GIII. All three were born within a span of 18 days in 2360

⁸ Ibid., 159

B.C.E. Muwaan Mat was made a lord of Matwiil, a mythical location that Palenque closely identified with, in 2324 B.C.E.⁹

Classic-era Mayas knew the center of Palenque as *Lakamha*, meaning “Big Water.” The name likely references the many rivers that pass through or stagnate in the Palenque region.¹⁰ The glyphic texts reveal a mélange of mythical time and historical events. For example, the earliest recorded ruler—whose name loosely translates to “Snake Spine”—ascended the throne on March 28th, 967 B.C.E.¹¹ Scholars know this date predates the existence of the Maya civilization, aligning temporally with the Olmec just to the northeast. Snake Spine’s extremely early dates suggest he may be mythical, not historical, leader. Another early or mythical Palenque ruler referred to as “Chah Ruler”—his name glyph has yet to be deciphered—rose to power in 253 B.C.E., which also places him in pre-Maya times. Although these kings were likely mythical, the Palenque elite clearly believed they descended from an ancient royal lineage that stretched back centuries.

Scholars know of these early Palenque kings only through retrospective accounts created by later rulers to legitimize their authority. Consequently, the biographies of early Palenque kings remain murky at best. Scholars recognize K’uk’ Bahlam, or “Quetzal Jaguar,” as the founder of Palenque’s primary royal lineage and the first known ancestor to occupy historical time.¹² While no glyphic texts remain from K’uk’ Bahlam’s time period, the Tablet of the Cross states K’uk’ Bahlam was born on March 31st, 397 C.E. He

⁹ Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens: Deciphering the Dynasties of the Ancient Maya* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008) 159.

¹⁰ Stuart and Stuart, 17; Martin and Grube, 157.

¹¹ Stuart and Stuart, 109.

¹² *Ibid.*, 156.

assumed the throne in 431 C.E., but his rule lasted only four years. Other city-state dynastic lineages emerge around the same time, including Copan with rise of founder Yax K'uk Mo' in 426 C.E. It is also worth noting that K'uk Bahlam's rule coincided with Tikal ruler Sihyaj Chan K'awiil—a descendent of indigenous Maya royalty and Teotihuacan's enigmatic Spearthrower Owl—and the apogee of Teotihuacan's influence in the Peten.

K'uk' Bahlam's titles included "Holy Lord of Baakal" and "Holy Lord of Toktahn," but neither "Baakal" or "Toktahn" are readily-identifiable locations.¹³ Martin and Grube suggest "Baakal" was Palenque's dynastic name, equivalent to the British Royal House of Windsor, but Toktahn's significance remains ambiguous.¹⁴ Toktahn could refer to a specific area within Palenque, or another site all together. The Stuart text suggests Toktahn was the political and ritual center prior to Lakamha', so K'uk Bahlam perhaps never resided in Palenque at all. Regardless of his geographic origins, K'uk Bahlam was clearly a significant figure that marked the beginning of Palenque kingship.

Texts from Palenque's Temple XVII identifies Butz'ai Sak Chihk as the Palenque ruler who established Lakamha', a preexisting settlement, as the new political and religious heart of Palenque's Baakal dynasty in 490 C.E.¹⁵ After 14 years of rule, Butz'ai Sak Chihk died and the throne passed to his brother, Ahkal Mo' Nahb I. The next king was Kan Bahlam I, Ahkal Mo' Nahb I younger brother and K'inich Kan Bahlam II's namesake, who ruled for 11 years.

¹³ Stuart and Stuart, 113.

¹⁴ Martin and Grube, 157.

¹⁵ Stuart and Stuart, 115.

Kan Bahlam I's death in 583 C.E. marked an interesting yet instable period in Palenque's history. Under Palenque's first queen, Lady Yohl Ik'nal, the polity was attacked by Calakmul's Snake Kingdom in 599 C.E.¹⁶ Glyphic texts state that Palenque's Triad was "thrown down," which can be interpreted as representing the kingdom's defeat or the literal destruction of their effigies by the Snake invaders.¹⁷ Lady Yohl Ik'nal's successor, Ajen Yohl Mat, experienced the same failure in 611 C.E., when the Snake Kingdom once again attacked Palenque. This second defeat was followed by a strange period in Palenque's history: A mysterious ruler named Muwaan Mat—the same name as the divine progenitor of Palenque's patron deity triad—whose tenure was marked by ritual neglect.¹⁸

From this chaos arose Palenque's most famous ruler: K'inich Janaab Pakal, the father of the ruler K'inich Kan Bahlam II who appears on the flanking panel of our monument. Pakal's connection to the throne is unclear; born in 603 to K'an Hix Mo' and Lady Ix Sak K'uk', he came to the throne at the tender age of three. His father was probably foreign royalty, leaving Lady Ix Sak K'uk' as Pakal's most probable connection to the Palenque throne.¹⁹ Accession representation supports the maternal line theory. In the Oval Palace Tablet, Pakal's mother hands him the "drum-major crown" of rulership rather than his father or other relative. Considering Pakal began his reign as a toddler, his parents presumably held the reins of power until their son reached an age of majority.

¹⁶ Martin and Grube, 157.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁹ Stuart and Stuart, 148.

Pakal's mother continued to exert significant political influence long after Pakal entered adulthood, participating in major ceremonies and rituals.²⁰

The first few decades of Pakal's reign are conspicuously unremarked upon in remaining hieroglyphic texts, but 652 C.E. marked a sudden shift with the ending of the eleventh K'atun and subsequent revitalization of architectural projects, specifically that of the Palace.²¹ Pakal's investment of time, energy, and resources into elaborate architectural structures point to increased prosperity. Palenque's 659 C.E. military triumph over Santa Elena—an ally of Calakmul's Snake Kingdom and Palenque's long-time enemy—also bolstered the kingdom's success.²² Pakal's most significant contribution—at least to modern scholars trying to reconstruct the past—is arguably his mortuary temple, the Temple of the Inscriptions. Completed seven years after Pakal's death, his sarcophagus was concealed from modern eyes until Ruz Lhuillier discovered the elaborate subterranean chamber in 1952. The sarcophagus lid is now considered an iconic artwork that is often featured in scholarly texts analyzing Maya cosmology.

K'inich Kan Bahlam II—the Jonuta Panel's seated figure—was Pakal's eldest son and heir. Born in 635 C.E., Kan Bahlam II rose to power following the death of his father in 683 C.E. Despite ascending the throne at forty-eight years old—an advanced age, especially in comparison to his father's upon ascension—Kan Bahlam ruled Palenque for a total of eighteen years. His father's reign was a period of prosperity and stability after many years of chaos, so Kan Bahlam II needed to meet a high standard. Palenque's remaining monuments and archaeological record suggest he rose to the challenge. During

²⁰ Ibid., 150.

²¹ Ibid., 153.

²² Stuart and Stuart, 159.

his tenure, Kan Bahlam oversaw the completion of Pakal's mortuary temple in addition to his own spectacular monuments: Palenque's famous Cross Group. The group consists of three separate temples—the Temple of the Cross, the Temple of the Foliated Cross, and the Temple of the Sun—each dedicated to one of the Palenque patron deity triad.²³ Situated on an artificial terrace overlooking the Temple of the Inscription, each Cross Group temple contains a central panel depicting Kan Bahlam as both a youth and an adult. Despite each panel's compositional similarities, the iconography changes considerably based on the temple's patron deity. The Temple of the Cross and the Temple of the Sun will receive significant consideration later in this thesis.

The record left by Kan Bahlam's building projects immortalized him as a successful warrior. His early military success was recorded upon the Temple of the Sun; facing off with Palenque's long-time rival Tonina, Kan Bahlam triumphed over his enemy in 687.²⁴ The conflict may have resulted in the death of Tonina's Ruler 2, who disappears from Tonina's record shortly after the city's defeat. This military success was followed by a reestablishing of Palenque's influence over the Moral-Reforma—a city Pakal briefly dominated in c. 659 C.E.²⁵—as well as smaller polities like La Mar and Anaite. Palenque's dominion over these highland seats of power was short-lived; Tonina monuments dedicated in 699 reveal a series of conquests over their previous vassal states, replacing Palenque as early as 692.²⁶

²³ Martin and Grube, 169.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 170-181.

After decades of prosperity, Palenque entered yet another tumultuous period under Kan Bahlam's successor and brother, K'inich K'an Joy Chitam. Kan Bahlam probably had no surviving legitimate children, resulting in the throne passing to Pakal's next oldest son.²⁷ Although K'an Joy Chitam did contribute noteworthy architectural renovations to the Palace, he is mostly remembered for a crushing defeat at the hands of Tonina in 711 C.E.. The enemy power took the 66-year-old K'an Joy Chitam prisoner for an unknown period of time before returning him to Palenque between 714-718 C.E.

K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb III, Pakal's grandson and K'an Joy Chitam's nephew, became king upon his uncle's death in 720 C.E. Unlike his predecessors, Ahkal Mo' Nahb was not the son of a king: His father, Tiwol Chan Mat, was Pakal's third son and died during his Ahkal Mo' Nahb's infancy.²⁸ Despite his less prestigious lineage and the precarious political circumstances inherited from his uncle, remaining resources suggest Ahkal Mo' Nahb successfully elevated Palenque's fortunes. New temples and panels were commissioned, memorializing Ahkal Mo' Nahb's power and military triumphs. Temple XIX, an important structure to this study, commemorated Ahkal Mo' Nahb's accession to the throne.²⁹ This temple featured an experimental structure which unfortunately gave way in antiquity, never to be repaired. However, the comparatively smaller Temple XXI still stands and was likely designed in conjunction with its collapsed counterpart. Both temples contain multiple panels, indicating a strong interest in illustrating his royal lineage. Considering his father's princely position and Kan Joy

²⁷ Ibid., 171.

²⁸ Ibid., 173.

²⁹ Stuart and Stuart, 225-227.

Chitam's precarious tenure as Lord of Palenque, it is not surprising the king was concerned with visually demonstrating his royal pedigree.

In spite of Ahkal Mo' Nahb's successes, his death in c. 741 C.E. cemented Palenque's decline. The following rulers of Palenque left little behind in terms of monuments, artwork, and epigraphic script. Only another four kings ruled after Ahkahl Mo' Nahb's death. Tonina continued to plague the city-state: a monument from Tonina suggests they were victorious over Palenque yet again around 751.³⁰ The final record of a Palenque king from the site—an incised blackware vessel—mentions the accession of Janaab Pakal III, which took place in 799. This mysterious collapse follows the general pattern of the Late Classic Maya region, which is defined by the abandonment of many previously powerful cities. A diverse array of scholars have endeavored to explain the Classic Maya collapse, but there is no scholarly consensus (cite Webster 2000 here).

The Panel's Place in Palenque History

We do not have a firm creation date for *Seated Lord*, but comparable evidence at Palenque would suggest that portraits such as that of Kan Bahlam II on our monument were done either during his lifetime or relatively soon after his death (late 7th-early 8th centuries). However, as established in the formal analysis, Kan Bahlam II is not the panel's protagonist; as with *Seated Lord*, Pakal's eldest son is a supporting character. Generally, this would suggest Kan Bahlam is deceased because if he was indeed alive and Palenque's living leader, he would be receiving the offerings rather than giving them. Of course, in the absence of an epigraphic study and provenience records, situating

³⁰ Martin and Grube, 174.

Seated Lord and associated panel pieces post-Kan Bahlam II is conjecture. Not to mention Maya art regularly depicts deceased individuals interacting with the living—many tri-figure panels show deceased parents handing symbols of rulership to their heir. Thus, despite the panel’s concrete affiliation with Kan Bahlam II, it is difficult to propose a creation date with any level of certainty.

Seated Lord’s Identity

The earliest publication about *Seated Lord* and the panel’s connection to its fellow fragments is the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston’s magazine article by Anne Louise Schaffer, the museum’s curator of Ancient American art at the time. The 1987 article describes the circumstances that reunited *Seated Lord* with the upper portion of the panel, containing *Seated Lord’s* ponytail and the Tlaloc snake.³¹ It also discusses the other known pieces of the panel, the central figure and the Jonuta Panel in Mexico’s National Museum of Anthropology. Schaffer’s characterization of *Seated Lord* is closely aligned with this paper’s propositions: *Seated Lord* is likely an ancestor of the unidentified central figure.³² Schaffer does not suggest how *Seated Lord* might be iconographically related to the central figure or Kan Bahlam II, the composition’s sole identifiable figure. Subsequent publications simply refer to *Seated Lord’s* identity as “lord,” signaling his elite status without speculating upon the exact degree.

Karen Bassie-Sweet, on the other hand, has taken two different approaches to *Seated Lord’s* identity in recent years. In an unpublished manuscript from 2019, she

³¹ Schaffer, 10.

³² *Ibid.*, 12.

suggests that *Seated Lord* is a secondary lord, but the secondary label is not justified or explained.³³ Bassie Sweet also suggests that the central figure is the child version of Kan Bahlam II due to its comparatively small scale, and that *Seated Lord* is in fact kneeling before Kan Bahlam II of the Jonuta Panel rather than the central figure.

There are several issues with the series of hypotheses offered by Bassie-Sweet. Identifying the central figure as an adolescent Kan Bahlam II is unlikely because, despite Bassie-Sweet's reference to the Cross Group panels, these latter panels do not contain a human figure at their center, not to mention a juvenile. Yes, it is true that the Cross Group panels depict both an adult and child Kan Bahlam II, but both versions of the lord are divided into two distinct temporal planes by a central representation of a Palenque Triad deity.³⁴ There is no indication of a temporal divide in *Seated Lord*'s original composition: a central figure separates *Seated Lord* and Kan Bahlam II, which is more indicative of direct human interaction than events divided by time and space. The original panel was clearly part of Palenque's tri-figure tradition, in which the flanking figures present objects to or simply frame the central protagonist. This compositional convention also refutes the notion that *Seated Lord* and Kan Bahlam II are directly interacting, affectively ignoring the central figure, which would be the case if child Kan Bahlam II was indeed the central figure. I acknowledge the manuscript was not published, but its presence online makes it a worthwhile document to engage and critique.

Bassie-Sweet's manuscript likely came out of her research for *Maya Gods of War*, which was published in 2021. This recent publication also identifies *Seated Lord* as a

³³ Karen Bassie-Sweet, "Tlaloc Cult at Palenque" (unpublished manuscript, 2019), typescript. 10.

³⁴ Stuart and Stuart, 165.

secondary lord,³⁵ although minus the speculations regarding two Kan Bahlams. Once again, it is not clear why she believes *Seated Lord* is a secondary lord. Perhaps she identifies *Seated Lord* as secondary to the central figure to whom he shows subservience? Or is Bassie-Sweet identifying *Seated Lord* as a lesser noble? The reasoning is not clear in the text. There may be legitimate evidence for the secondary status, but it is difficult to know without citations, explanation, or reference to a glyph translation.

If the secondary lord designation is in reference to a lesser elite status, this theory may contradict Bassie-Sweet's identification of God L as the precedent for the Popol Vuh's Gathered Blood, the maternal grandfather of the Hero Twins. In the Popol Vuh—a post-Classic Kiche Maya narrative—Gathered Blood becomes the king of the Underworld after the Hero Twins execute One and Seven Death. Bassie Sweet proposes that God L, as the Classic era Lord of Xibalba, inspired the Post-Classic Gathered Blood.³⁶ Gathered Blood's grandson, either One Hanahpu or One Ajaw, was connected to rulership. Although the maternal line generally came second to the paternal among Classic Maya rulers, grandfather is still a close and powerful connection to a ruler, especially when the grandfather is a ruler in his own right. Not to mention K'inich Janaab Pakal's connection to the throne was likely through his matrilineal line—Janaab Pakal I was likely his maternal grandfather, Sak' K'uk's father and a Palenque king. K'inich Janaab Pakal's father, on the other hand, was probably distant royalty.³⁷

Glyph translation and formal analysis of the remaining panel pieces suggests a different story for *Seated Lord*. Returning to Donald Hales' drawing of the known panel

³⁵ Karen Bassie-Sweet, *Maya Gods of War* (Louisville, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2021), 181.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 267.

³⁷ Stuart and Stuart, 151; Martin and Grube, 160.

pieces reassembled, the central figure is clearly the panel's protagonist. He is framed by two kneeling figures and peripheral cacao trees. The flanking figures are the same general scale, both showing deference to the central figure by kneeling and presenting offerings. The figures essentially mirror each other compositionally, suggesting similar status or relevance to the figure. In other Palenque tri-figure panels, the ruler's parents flank him on either side, presenting him the *tok' pakal* and the drum-major headdress. The king has greater authority and importance than the queen; nevertheless, considering the consistent presence of both parents in tri-figure panels, including the mother and father in accession tri-figure panels was ideal. In fact, the Oval Palace Tablet notably excludes K'inich Janaab Pakal's father, K'an Mo' Hix.

Formal analysis and discernable visual characteristics of *Seated Lord's* original tri-figure panel suggest both peripheral figures—*Seated Lord* and Kan Bahlam II—were of comparable status. Scholars have long acknowledged K'an Bahlam II as the Jonuta Panel figure due to his diagnostic facial features and translation of accompanying glyphs. He appears in an uncommon costume, identified by scholars as the guise of Kukulkan, normally thought of by scholars as a more northern Mexican deity that became popular among the Post-Classic Yucatec Maya.³⁸ The figures' similar posture, scale, and purpose suggest *Seated Lord* and Kan Bahlam held a similar status or import to the central figure. One figure may be less significant compared to the other: in the Tablet of the Slaves, K'inich Janaab Pakal is of higher status than his wife, Tz'akbu Ajaw. However, since the

³⁸ Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (Thames and Hudson, 1993), 246.

central figure is unidentifiable, the list of possible identities for *Seated Lord* remains considerable.

Tri-Figure Panel Tradition

The political ramifications of the *Seated Lord* and the rest of the monument depend in no small degree on the structure of the composition. Palenque's tri-figure panels have long been identified as a specific sculptural tradition of the city. Linda Schele wrote about this Palenque sculptural tradition in her 1979 essay, "Genealogical Documentation on the Tri-Figure Panels at Palenque."³⁹ This scholarly work has been fundamental to understanding the tri-figure composition in the Palenque region and deserves a critical treatment here.

Let us recall that the complete panel, of which *Seated Lord* forms a part, was clearly envisioned as part of the tri-figure corpus. *Seated Lord* was the left figure, turning in towards the central figure who remains unidentifiable. K'inich Kan Bahlam II of the Jonuta panel appeared on the right, mirroring *Seated Lord*'s figure. Kan Bahlam and *Seated Lord*'s gaze and posture orients the viewer towards the middle figure, emphasizing his importance. Like other Palenque tri-figure panels, the peripheral figures present offerings—generally royal accoutrements—to the central figure: *Seated Lord* presents two vertically stacked Tlaloc masks while Kan Bahlam offers an unidentifiable object in turn. If we reconstruct the original intended form of these presently disparate objects, its place within this tradition is undeniable.

³⁹ Linda Schele, "Genealogical Documentation on the Tri-figure Panels at Palenque." In *Tercera Mesa Redonda de Palenque*, Vol. IV, 1979:1.

In her paper, Schele traces the origin of Palenque's tri-figure tradition and the program's relationship to dynastic history or genealogy. Schele proposes that tri-figure panels primarily served dynastic or genealogical purposes, representing a ruler's lineage and divine right bestowed by his ancestors in the form of an offered headdress or similar.⁴⁰ Some of her interpretations have not withstood the test of time, but the core argument remains highly relevant. Glyph revisitations, for example, have changed popular interpretations of various panels, specifically the Tablet of the Slaves and the Cross Group panels. Also very important is the way the corpus was defined. Schele limits the tri-figure depictions to those on low-relief sculpture, avoiding comparisons with stucco sculpture. If one allows the latter two types into the corpus, then the first sentence of Schele's 1979 paper is unequivocally false: Palenque's sculptural corpus contains tri-figure panels that are not clearly connected to genealogy or accession. These exceptions will be discussed in detail below.

These non-accession, stucco panels appear in Palenque's palace along the piers of House A. Pier B (Fig. 8), Pier C (Fig. 9), Pier D (Fig. 10), and Pier E (Fig. 11) illustrate similar compositional arrangements of three figures. All three figures appear in profile, but two are peripherally seated and turn inward towards the central standing figure. Pier B and E's central figures face the right, while Pier C and D's face the left. None of the piers contain accession-related iconography. Additional tri-figure panels have come to light in the intervening decades as well, including *Seated Lord* and its fellow fragments, which both compliment and complicate Schele's analysis.

⁴⁰ Schele, "Genealogical Documentation," 1.

Schele identifies the Oval Palace Tablet as the original inspiration for the tri-figure genealogical tradition (Fig. 12).⁴¹ The oval-shaped panel depicts K'inich Janaab Pakal receiving a crown from his mother, Lady Sak-Zut. Considering his mother is offering the crown in the accession ceremony, Pakal likely gained his royal lineage from his mother, not his father.⁴² Both figures are seated: Lady Sak-Zut appears in profile, cross-legged upon the floor while Pakal sits upon a double-headed jaguar throne. Pakal's mother, extravagantly dressed in a textured *huipil* with matching shawl and elaborate accessories, presents a crown—referred to by Mayanists as the drum-major crown due to its cylindrical body and vertical plumage—to her son. Depicted in twisted perspective and dressed in a simple loincloth with minimal jewelry, Pakal's gaze is angled slightly downward to meet his mother's. His right arm crosses his chest, the fifth digit slightly raised while the other fingers rest upon the thumb tip. His left hand rests upon his left thigh.

Subsequent lords adopted compositional and iconographic elements from the Oval Tablet when illustrating accession ceremonies. All known tri-figure panels depict the seated or kneeling peripheral figures offering elite objects to the central figure, reflecting Lady Sak-Zut's original positioning in the Oval Palace Tablet. The central figure's pose generally stays consistent, although later panels include deviations from Pakal's original pose. Iconographic elements reappear as well, most importantly the drum-major crown. Pakal's descendants continued to incorporate the drum major crown into the reliefs decorating temples and elite residences.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Stuart and Stuart, 157.

Schele suggests the Oval Palace Tablet influenced the Cross Group panels but she also investigates connections between the Cross Group and later tri-figure panels throughout her paper.⁴³ Although not investigated in depth, the Cross Group panels could have contributed through their emphasis on the number three. This is not to say Kan Bahlam invented the importance of three; three was presumably already crucial due to the three offices of Palenque kingship, which corresponded to the king's major points of authority (ancestors, agriculture, warfare), the Palenque Triad (GI, Infant Kawiil, and GIII), and the three cosmic planes (the celestial, the earthly, the underworld).⁴⁴

That being said, Kan Bahlam's overt highlighting of the number three perhaps influenced subsequent rulers' sculptural commissions. The Cross Group consists of three temples with three large-scale low relief panels, each maintaining the same general composition: young Kan Bahlam and adult Kan Bahlam stand opposite one another, facing the central representation of a single Palenque Triad deity. Of course, these panels differ programmatically from the subsequent tri-figure panels, as the Cross Group panels represent two different temporal planes within each individual work (young and older Kan Bahlams). Additionally, the central component is not the deity as scholars recognize them, but rather a representation or alternate manifestation. The Temple of the Cross (Fig. 13) central component is a "Shiny Jeweled Tree"—a known symbol of GI—while the Temple of the Foliated Cross's is an animated and jeweled maize plant (Fig. 14).⁴⁵ The Temple of the Sun's central panel features a very similar a large shield with two crossed spears—an elaborate tok'pakal—represents GIII in the Temple of the Sun. It may

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Stuart and Stuart, 194.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 198-200.

be, and this is speculative, that the manifestations of supernatural power in the center of these compositions may be interpreted as figural considering their close affiliation with particular gods. Although much has been written about the iconography of Palenque, the nature of these numinous motifs at the center of the Cross Group deserves further study.

An iconographic connection between the Cross Group—specifically the Temple of the Sun’s panel—and the tri-figure sculptures is a small tok’ pakal effigy. The Temple of the Sun’s young Kan Bahlam holds the effigy, which amounts to a small, circular shield and personified flint (Fig. 15).⁴⁶ This very effigy appears in three later tri-figure panels: the Palace Tablet (Fig. 16), the Tablet of the Slaves (Fig. 17), and the Temple XIX platform relief (Fig. 18). Notably, young Kan Bahlam is midst an initiation ceremony, presumably associated with his status as Pakal’s heir.⁴⁷ The exact meaning behind the ceremony is unclear, but the tok’ pakal—literally translating to “spear and shield”—has military connotations. Additionally, the tok’ pakal appears in multiple king accession images, which suggests a connection to rulership. Regardless, the combination of formal and iconographic continuities supports a possible connection between the Cross Group panels and the tri-figure program.

An important tri-figure composition is the Palace Tablet, depicting Kan Bahlam’s successor and brother, K’inich Kan Joy Chitam II, in the midst of a succession ceremony.⁴⁸ As the protagonist, Kan Joy Chitam is centrally positioned, seated in the same posture as Pakal in the Oval Palace Tablet. The new king is framed by his deceased parents, Pakal and Lady Tz’akbu Ajaw. Both parents offer their son symbols of rulership:

⁴⁶ Karen Bassie-Sweet, “Tlaloc Cult,” 10.

⁴⁷ Stuart and Stuart, 198.

⁴⁸ Martin and Grube, 171.

Pakal offers his son the drum major crown while his wife, wearing the same attire as her mother-in-law from the Oval Palace Tablet, presents a tok' pakal effigy like the one young Kan Bahlam holds in the Temple of the Sun panel. The reappearance of the drum major crown, Lady Suk's outfit, and the tok' pakal effigy brings together various elements of the aforementioned panels to create a new sculptural convention.

Most ensuing tri-figure panels maintain the emphasis on heritage by tying the central figure's legitimacy to his predecessors. The Tablet of the Slaves is a particularly well-known example. K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb III, Kan Joy Chitam's nephew and successor, appears as the central figure. For many years, the central figure was identified as Chak-Zutz, a lesser Palenque noble, due to the panel's associated script.⁴⁹ However, it is now clear that, despite Chak-Zutz's centrality to the glyphic narrative, Ahkal Mo Nahb is undeniably the protagonist of the panel itself.⁵⁰ The Tablet of the Slaves maintains the conventions set forth by the Palace Tablet, only instead with K'inich Ahkal Mo Nahb as the protagonist with his parents, Tiwool Chan Mat and Ix Kinuw Mat, presenting the headdress and effigy. A noteworthy difference is that Ix Kinuw Mat's outfit markedly differs from the previous matriarchs. Her huipil appears plain, decorated solely by fringe along her garment's perimeter. Her husband's tunic matches her huipil, as does their coiffures. Perhaps the disparity can be attributed to Ahkal Mo Nahb's parents' status as non-ruling members of the royal family, as his father was likely the youngest of Pakal's sons and never ascended the throne. Alternatively, the change in huipil could be

⁴⁹ Linda Schele, "The Demotion of Chac-Zutz: Lineage Compounds and Subsidiary Lords at Palenque." In *Sixth Palenque Round Table*, 1986, 1990:6-11

⁵⁰ Martin and Grube, 171.

attributed to Chak-Zutz commissioning the panel rather than the king. Chak-Zutz may have foregone the elaborate cross-hatching due to financial reasons.

Akahl Mo' Nahb commissioned many pieces himself, including plenty within or parallel to the tri-figure tradition. Researchers speculate the Dumbarton Oaks panel may be attributed to Ahkal Mo' Nahb, despite his exclusion from its composition: this panel, which presumably originally adorned the wall of a temple or other elite architectural structure, posthumously depicts his uncle and predecessor, Kan Joy Chitam, framed by his parents, Pakal and Lady Tz'akbu Ajaw.⁵¹ This representation of K'an Joy Chitam is peculiar because it follows the general structure of previous tri-figure panels—two figures turned inward to frame the central figure—but the glyphs suggest the protagonist is deceased. He is also upright with a lifted foot, a common signal for dance in Maya artwork. The dance posture in combination with his costume suggests he is impersonating Chaak, a widely worshiped Maya lightning and water deity.⁵² The purpose of the commission is unclear; establishing K'an Joy Chitam's legitimacy was no longer necessary, especially since he effectively communicated his royal lineage through his own panel, the Palace Tablet. Scholars have suggested that perhaps Ahkal Mo' Nahb wanted to honor his predecessor as a politically stabilizing measure, as K'an Joy Chitam's capture and subsequent return likely resulted in dynastic instability.⁵³ Nevertheless, Ahkal Mo' Nahb's confusing choice indicates a diversification of tri-figure implementation, or alternatively a revisitation of the stucco tri-figure reliefs at the Palace from his grandfather's rule.

⁵¹ Martin and Miller, 246.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 247.

Ahkal Mo' Nahb is also responsible for another tri-figure panel from Palenque's Temple XIX. Once again, he is the central figure, but this time wearing an extravagant bird costume (Fig. 19). Two attendants appear on either side: Ahkal Mo' Nahb's maternal uncle on the left and another minor lord, or *ajk'uhuunon*, the right.⁵⁴ Neither figure presents an object to their leader; both men assist the central figure with his costume instead. Despite serving a different purpose, both peripheral figures frame their protagonist—Ahkal Mo' Nahb—drawing attention to his majesty while expressing deference through their kneeling posture. Compositionally speaking, this panel has more in common with the Dumbarton Oaks panel, likely another Ahkal Mo' Nahb commission. The Temple XIX stone panel is even farther afield, as it does not seem to revolve around accession or royal lineage.

Temple XIX's sculpted relief platform takes inspiration from the tri-figure panels but departs from tradition in significant ways. The most obvious is the quantity of figures: the central Ahkal Mo' Nahb appears between two groups of three noble men. Ahkal Mo' Nahb adopts the now quintessential pose first displayed by Pakal in the Oval Palace Tablet, but his parents do not present a crown or effigy. Instead, Ahkal Mo' Nahb turns to face an elaborately dressed noble who offers him an unwrapped personified flint effigy, presumably the same as the one featured as in the tok' pakal effigy in previous tri-figure panels. The shield, however, appears to be missing. On the ruler's other side, the drum major crown sits on a support, flanked by another three nobles.

⁵⁴ David Stuart, *The inscriptions from Temple XIX at Palenque: a commentary* (San Francisco, CA: Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute, 2005), 31.

Ahkal Mo' Nahb's posture and the reappearance of royal heirlooms clearly place the relief within the same iconographic tradition, if not exactly following the tri-figure conventions. Nonetheless, I suggest that the inclusion of three figures on either side with an uneven total number of participants indicates the relief was intended to be categorized within the same tri-figure tradition. For an unknown reason, the lord wanted to maintain continuity with his ancestors while connecting court officials to royal authority through an unorthodox tri-figure panel. This divergence may be due to the political instability during K'an Joy Chitam's rule, which surely shifted the balance of power at Palenque. As noted by Martin and Grube, text and artwork from Ahkal Mo' Nahb's reign includes more nobles and court officials than any of his predecessors.⁵⁵ Did Ahkal Mo' Nahb divert from tradition to pacify an increasingly powerful nobility, or was their inclusion a calculated move, reminiscent of Emperor Augustus's manufactured "The First Citizen" title, to consolidate power by pacifying rivals? Whatever the case may be, Ahkal Mo' Nahb's commissions demonstrate programmatic change.

Seated Lord's tri-figure panel certainly falls under the scope of programmatic change. Beyond the unprecedented quantity of Tlaloc imagery, the panel contains no explicit accession iconography: The drum-major headdress and tok'pakal are completely absent. An important ceremony is clearly taking place, but it is likely of a military nature considering the nature of similar headdresses in contemporary Maya contexts. The panel may illustrate an initiation into the Tlaloc cult, but this is pure conjecture due to the largely destroyed epigraphic context.

⁵⁵ Martin and Grube, 175.

It is important to acknowledge contemporary scholars do not have access to every tri-figure panel Palenque produced. Other tri-figure panel fragments may lurk under our very noses: *Seated Lord* was not identified as part of a tri-figure panel until the 1980s.⁵⁶ Other examples were undoubtedly destroyed: Bodega Fragment 186 (Fig. 20) was almost certainly part of the tri-figure panel corpus, if not an actual tri-figure panel.⁵⁷ What remains of the fragment reveals a kneeling woman wearing Lady Suk's crosshatched style huipil, raising up her arms to present a now lost object. But what remains of the object resembles the edge of the serving implement (cloth) used by young Kan Bahlam to present the tok' pakal.

⁵⁶ Schaeffer, 10.

⁵⁷ Schele, "Genealogical Documentation," 22.

Chapter 3: Teotihuacan and Palenque

Teotihuacan

Whether the panel was done in Kan Bahlam II's own time or at some point thereafter, one of the main messages is the relationship of the Palenque dynasty with the once great metropolis of Teotihuacan, located near today's Mexico City. This relationship is especially noticeable in the presentation *Seated Lord's* Teotihuacan Tlaloc headdress offering, but is present in other iconographic elements, which is addressed later in the chapter. But what did Teotihuano imagery mean for the Late Classic Maya (600-900 C.E.) who, as explained below, did not experience the mighty city at its zenith?

Teotihuacan was a Mesoamerican superpower during the early-mid Classic period (or c. 150-600 C.E.). At the height of its power, Teotihuacan's population was at least eighty-five thousand inhabitants.⁵⁸ While Teotihuacan and the Classic Maya were contemporaries, a comparison of their respective artwork and material culture suggest profound socio-political and cultural differences. The Maya developed a complex, clearly identifiable writing system while Teotihuacan seemed to rely on sets of much more imagistic glyphs.⁵⁹ Since much information on political structure is gleaned from imagery, it is important to point out that highly individualized elite members of Maya society emerge from architectural panels and stele. Specific individual Teotihuacan elites, on the other hand, are difficult to discern due to the city's highly standardized depictions of the human form. Consequentially, researchers do not know the identities of the

⁵⁸ Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, *Teotihuacan* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1990), 15.

⁵⁹ Karl Taube, *The Writing System of Ancient Teotihuacán*, (Washington D.C.: Center for Ancient American Studies, 2000.)

influential central Mexican city's rulers, while we know much about Classic Maya individual rulers. Some scholars theorized Teotihuacan was a communal society lacking monarchical rule, while more recent scholarship suggests alternative, pseudo-oligarchical system based on distinct military groups.⁶⁰ They also worshiped a distinct Teotihuacano set of deities, although cross-over between the Valley of Mexico civilization and the Maya pantheon will be discussed in a later chapter.

Teotihuacan was a cosmopolitan city that exerted widespread influence during Mesoamerica's Classic period, from the polity's zenith and even during its decline. A sketch history of the Teotihuacan region begins with the first human settlements, dating to approximately 400 B.C.⁶¹ While the general region encompassing metropolitan Teotihuacan was occupied as early as 100 B.C.E., it was not until the first century C.E. that quintessential characteristics of the cosmopolitan city emerged. Between 1-150 C.E, the Avenue of the Dead—a central feature of the ceremonial center—was prepared.⁶² The Sun and Moon pyramids, built in the typical Teotihuacan talud-tablero style, emerged at this time as well, although both structures continued to be added upon for another few centuries. The city continued to grow in size and splendor for several centuries, reaching its apogee between 450-650 C.E. It is during this period of growth and prosperity that evidence of Teotihuacan's *entrada* appears in the Maya archaeological and epigraphic record.

⁶⁰ For more on the communal-based argument, see Pastorzy's 1997 publication, *Teotihuacan: an experiment in living*. See Annabeth Headrick's *Teotihuacan Trinity* for her alternative theory of the metropolis' political structure.

⁶¹ Moctezuma, 15.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 18.

Teotihuacan exerted tremendous influence throughout the Maya region during this period, but the nature of this influence varies based on the region and period in question. For example, Teotihuacan military leader Sihyaj K'ahk almost certainly deposed the sitting Tikal ruler in 378 C.E. in favor of a young Teotihuacano lord,⁶³ while the late Classic Yaxchilan corpus contains a noteworthy quantity of Teotihuacan-inspired iconography without any archaeological or epigraphic evidence to suggest a literal military presence of the western power. Trade, war, and political alliances—either with Teotihuacan or sites closely affiliated with the foreign city—are the more plausible conduits in many cases.

Regardless, Teotihuacan's arrival in the Peten region and subsequent subjugation of Tikal marks a turning point in the Classic Maya relationship with the west Mexican power. A stele from El Perú, a different site in the Peten, commemorates Sihyaj K'ahk's arrival on January 8th, 378 C.E.⁶⁴ The elite Teotihuacan general and his army arrives at Tikal eight days later, the same day Tikal's king dies, or "enters the water."⁶⁵ In light of the suspicious timing, the general scholarly consensus is the invading force killed the king in order to install a new Teotihuacan-derived regime. Yax Nuun Ahin I, son of the mysterious Teotihuacan lord Spear Thrower Owl, ascended Tikal's throne the following year.

The relationship between Tikal and Teotihuacan was a nuanced one that evolved over time. A new archaeological study of Tikal's Problematic Deposit 50 and related

⁶³ David Stuart, "'The Arrival of Strangers': Teotihuacan and Tollan in Classic Maya History," in *Mesoamerica's Classic Heritage: From Teotihuacan to the Aztecs*, ed. Lindsay Jones, David Carrasco, and Scott Sessions (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2002), pp. 465-514, 487.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 479.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 487-488.

features suggest Teotihuacan were not consistently popular among Tikal's elite. Hattula Moholy-Nagy's 2021 article in *Latin American Antiquity* offers a new interpretation of these deposits, which were excavated in 1959.⁶⁶ Deposit 50 included many objects with Teotihuacan connections, such as a stuccoed feathered serpent ceramic and a tripod vessel illustrating the arrival of Teotihuacanos at a Maya settlement.⁶⁷ Moholy-Nagy proposes this discarding of Teotihuacan related objects reflected a political changing of the tide at Tikal—the Maya elite rejecting references to their foreign oppressor in favor of indigenous motifs. Obviously, Tikal and Palenque have distinct histories, but this new interpretation does reveal Teotihuacan's influence in the Maya region did not exclusive grow or plateau; rather, the city's influence fluctuated depending on the region and context. Additionally, Tikal might not be the primary disseminator of Tlaloc imagery in the Late Classic Maya world, thus not influencing Palenque's interest in Teotihuacan, which also began around this time, as outlined below.

Tikal is the only generally recognized example of Teotihuacan asserting military and political dominance over a pre-existing site. Other sites interacted directly without evidence of violence; for instance, Piedras Negras documented the presence of an elite outsider with a Teotihuacan-linked title at an important political event in 510 C.E.⁶⁸ To complicate matters further, some places like Palenque and Yaxchilan adopt Teotihuacan-inspired iconography after the metropolitan city's decline. Teotihuacan's golden age

⁶⁶ Hattula Moholy-Nagy, "A Reversal of Fortune: Problematical Deposit 50, Tikal, Guatemala," *Latin American Antiquity* 32, no. 3 (2021): pp. 486-502, <https://doi.org/10.1017/laq.2021.13>, 487.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 492-496.

⁶⁸ Grube and Martin, 141.

came to an end between the 6th and 7th century, while Palenque and Yaxchilan's Tlaloc iconography appears during the late 7th and 8th century.

Teotihuacan at Palenque

Evidence of Teotihuacan-Palenque connection, in the form of Teotihuacan-related iconography and style, exists beginning in the Early Classic period (c. 300-600 C.E.) in Palenque, but the reasons Palencanos developed and used this iconography are unclear.⁶⁹ A large stucco façade, found in the substructure of Palenque's Temple II, is the earliest indication of Teotihuacan and Tlaloc's presence in Palenque visual culture (Fig. 21).⁷⁰ It is a Tlaloc warrior figure, rendered in a circular, medallion-like shape. The telltale circular goggles label him as a Tlaloc warrior, along with the darts he carries. It is worth noting the Tlaloc warrior's garb close resemblance to that of the damaged central panel, both of which feature the zig-zag lines and scrolling *puhs*.

The next Tlaloc-Teotihuacan references appear in the Late Classic during K'inich Janaab Pakal's reign (615-683 C.E.), the father of Kan Bahlam II who appears on the same monument as the *Seated Lord*. Pakal's oval-shaped tablet, located in House E of the central palace complex, contains a subtle reference in comparison to the goggle-eyed warrior. The low-relief tablet depicts Pakal receiving a cylindrical headdress, referred to as the drum major headdress, from his mother. Since 1981, some scholars have connected

⁶⁹ Stuart and Stuart, 120; Bassie-Sweet, *Maya Gods of War*, 198.

⁷⁰ Stuart, 120 and 137; Francisca Zalaquett, *Estrategia, Comunicación y Poder: Una Perspectiva Social Del Grupo Norte De Palenque* (México, D.F: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas, Centro de Estudios Maya, 2015) 233.

Pakal's headdress and Maya representations of Teotihuacan helmets.⁷¹ The drum-major headdress, which Bassie-Sweet deciphered as *ux yop huun* ("three leaf headdress"), includes the scales/tiles commonly decorating the surface of Teotihuacan headdresses.⁷² Similar scales are discernable on the helmets of Tikal's Stele 31 (c. 445 C.E.) (Fig. 22), as well as at Teotihuacan itself in the headdress repeated dozens of times on the façade of the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent (Fig. 23). Low relief figures on each side of the stele wear Teotihuacan warrior regalia, including helmets covered in circular scales. Similarly, in Palenque's Temple XVII, Kan Bahlam II is depicted wearing a warrior helmet that bears strikingly resemblance to those of the peripheral figures on Stele 31. The drum major headdress consistently reappears in subsequent accession images, signaling the king's legitimacy to the viewer while simultaneously referencing a foreign power.

Palenque's palace contains other noteworthy yet often unacknowledged Tlaloc-Teotihuacan references from Pakal's reign. In addition to the Oval Palace Tablet's drum major headdress, House E's murals contain Tlaloc iconography. Painted upon a thin layer of stucco, rows of painted symbols originally cascaded down the throne room's walls. A pair of disembodied Tlaloc goggle eyes adorn the upper left corner of Wall 4 (Fig. 24). These Tlaloc eyes closely resemble a similar pair at Piedras Negras—a city well-known for its Teotihuacan influence.⁷³

⁷¹ Hasso von Winning, "An Iconographic Link between Teotihuacan and Palenque," *Mexicon* 3, no. 2 (1981): pp. 30-32, 30.

⁷² Bassie-Sweet, *Maya Gods of War*, 181.

⁷³ Merle Greene Robertson, *The Sculpture of Palenque, Vol. II: The Early Buildings of the Palace and the Wall Paintings*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.)

Another Pakal-era building in Palenque's palace complex includes explicit Tlaloc iconography that directly connects to *Seated Lord*. House C was constructed by Pakal in celebration of his military success against Santa Elena.⁷⁴ On the building's western face, images of defeated Santa Elena elites frame the stairway. The exterior façades of the building's piers were decorated with stucco renderings of seated elites. Pier D's lord is of particular interest, as his headdress contains a clearly discernable butterfly Tlaloc (Fig. 25). Although damage has obscured much of the image, including the figure's face and most of his body, the headdress is comparatively well preserved. A round, Tlaloc goggle eye stares upward as a curved proboscis protrudes from the deity's visage. Behind Tlaloc's eye is a mat sign—a symbol of royalty and authority—close to where an earspool would typically be. Similarly, one of *Seated Lord's* Tlalocs wears a mat earspool. K'an symbols are commonly associated with Tlaloc earspools,⁷⁵ not mat symbols, which distinguishes both sculptures within the Maya Tlaloc corpus. Considering the close resemblance between *Seated Lord's* offerings and Pier D's Tlaloc headdress, I suspect both reliefs depict the same headdress.

Kan Bahlam II's Cross Group panels include discreet Teotihuacan references through adult Kan Bahlam's headdress. Although difficult to discern, close inspection of the top right corner of the panels reveal a Mexican year sign imbedded in the king's headdress (Fig. 26).⁷⁶ Mexican year signs are commonly included in Teotihuacan and Maya representations of Tlaloc imagery. The Temple of the Cross's depiction of Kan Bahlam's headdress illustrates the Mexican year sign particularly clearly; above the

⁷⁴ Stuart and Stuart, 159.

⁷⁵ Bassie-Sweet, *Gods of War*, 121.

⁷⁶ Bassie-Sweet, "Tlaloc Cult," 9-10.

tubular wrapped headdress associated with Kan Bahlam's accession rituals, a Mexican year sign emerges along with a plant sprig or flower. Adult Kan Bahlam's headdresses from the Cross Group panels were not created equal—levels of detail and clarity vary between the three panels. However, since each crown shares the same general characteristics—a wrapped tubular base with a symbol and protruding foliage on top—it is likely that all three contain the Mexican year sign.

Kan Bahlam II continued to include Teotihuacan references in his monuments. A panel from Temple XVII depicts Kan Bahlam in full warrior garb, standing in triumph before a bound enemy captive (Fig. 27). The king's resplendent warrior garb includes a scaled feline headdress, similar to the drum-major and Tikal Stele 31 headdresses. The feline's snout curls upward, mimicking the curled proboscises of Tlaloc butterflies. A stylized butterfly wing sits atop the curved snout, emphasizing the feline's butterfly imagery. Miniature wings upon proboscises are common in Maya depictions of Tlaloc butterflies,⁷⁷ so the insinuation was very clear to its contemporary audience. And, just in case the butterfly connection was not clear enough, the zig-zag pattern associated with Tlaloc butterflies and obsidian runs from the crown of the feline's head to the headdress' base. Kan Bahlam's spear includes a series of small triangular protrusions below the main obsidian blade, harkening to the zig-zag butterfly pattern in his headdress.

A stone censer stand, excavated near Palenque's Building 41, further illustrates Teotihuacan's influence at Palenque (Fig. 28). The stand depicts a stern-looking man with pursed, thin lips and a downcast gaze, framed by furrowed brows. The man wears a

⁷⁷ Ibid.

headdress, which Bassie-Sweet identifies as *yajaw k'ah'k*.⁷⁸ Two familiar circles encompass the majority of the headdress' base: they are a pair of Tlaloc goggle eyes. Above the goggles are short, vertically oriented feathers. Unfortunately, the creation date for this sculpture is unclear. The censer stand's provenience, however, suggests a creation date around or before the reign of K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb III, Pakal's grandson and Kan Bahlam II's nephew.⁷⁹

In fact, one of Ahkal Mo' Nahb's lords in the tri-figure panel from Temple XIX wears a *yajaw k'ah'k* headdress as well. This lord, kneeling on the right, gazes up at Ahkal Mo' Nahb while supporting his leader's massive macaw costume (Fig. 29). David Stuart's decipherment of the glyphs identifies the lord's name as "yo-ko-TAL"⁸⁰ with the title of *ajk'uhuun*.⁸¹ This title was used in many Maya courts, but scholars interpret its meaning differently. As Stuart lays out in his 2005 publication on Palenque's Temple XVII, Houston and Grube translate the title as "He of the Holy Books," while Coe and Kerr ascribe the title to bookkeepers and scribes.⁸² Stuart, on the other hand, suggests *ajk'uhuun* relates to protection, guardianship, and/or reverence within a military context.

This latter interpretation compliments the figure's Tlaloc headdress, as well as his "incense bag" or textile sack. Though often referred to as an incense bag, they regularly

⁷⁸ Martin and Miller, 258.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ There is some discrepancy in the spelling of the figure's name due to a different spelling in Temple XIX's alfarada tablet, so the exact name of the *ajk'uhuun* is not yet known.

⁸¹ Stuart, *The inscriptions from Temple XIX*, 31.

⁸² Ibid.

appear in military contexts as well.⁸³ A familiar avian decorates the small sack's exterior: an owl with a perfectly round eye composed of concentric circles. Behind the bird visage are swirling "puh" symbols associated with Teotihuacan and seen on our panel twice in the background architectural element, discussed above.⁸⁴ The many "puhs" actually create the illusion of a bowl, like the ones often incorporated in tri-figure panels.

In the absence of substantial archaeological evidence connecting Palenque and Teotihuacan, in addition to Palenque's conspicuous adoption of Teotihuacan imagery after the western city's decline, the Tlaloc imagery's florescence in Palenque can be attributed to political and social factors concerning the relationship of Classic Maya elites among themselves. Other Late Classic cities follow a similar path, such as Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras. In the case of Piedras Negras, Andrea Stone attributed the Late Classic adoption of the Early Classic's format of Teotihuacan military costume to a disconnecting strategy of kingship.⁸⁵ Rather than emphasizing a shared culture (or *connection*), *disconnection* elevates the ruler above the common population through his or her unique powers and qualifications, which often relate to warfare and restrictive elite status, such as a mythical or exotic lineage. In differentiating themselves from the common people via this symbolism, Maya elite may have also been cementing ties between each other. Elite deployment of disconnection strategy can be useful in the context of military expansionism and periods of political unrest, when groups of elites

⁸³ Andrea Stone, "Disconnection, Foreign Insignia, and Political Expansion: Teotihuacan and the Warrior Stelae of Piedras Negras," in *Mesoamerica after the Decline of Teotihuacan A.D. 700-900*, ed. Janet Catherine Berlo and Richard A. Diehl (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1989), pp. 153-172, 160.

⁸⁴ Stuart, *Arrival of Strangers*, 502.

⁸⁵ Stone, 153.

band together—situations that arose regularly in the Classic period. If these “disconnections” and elite-solidarity strategies via shared connections to Teotihuacan-related symbolism were in play in Palenque during or just after the reign of Kan Bahlam II, it would go some way in explaining the intensive interest in that ostensibly foreign symbolism.

There may have been good historical reasons for Palenque to lean on hoary connections to storied capitals. Military expansionism and political instability peppers Late Classic Palenque’s history. Inscriptions about Muwaan Mat’s reign (612-615 C.E.) and Pakal’s early years as king suggest disconcertment and instability.⁸⁶ Calakmul sacked the city twice; first in 599 and then in 611. Perhaps this dark period led to Pakal’s adoption of the Teotihuacan-inspired drum-major headdress, if he indeed initiated its use. Assuming the drum-major headdress had Teotihuacano origins, Pakal may have desired to illustrate a connection with the historically mighty and stable power. Pakal’s reign was indeed long and prosperous, so when he passed on, his son Kan Bahlam II needed to maintain said prosperity while making his own mark on Palenque. He accomplished this through building projects and expansionist warfare against Tonina, as documented on the Temple of the Sun and Temple 5. Temple XVII’s panel of Kan Bahlam in Tlaloc military regalia visually signals his might and superiority over his subdued Tonina foe.

Tlaloc imagery reappears under K’inich Ahkal Mo’ Nahb III with the tri-figure panel described above containing the *yajaw k’ah’k* headdress. Ahkal Mo’ Nahb ascended the throne after a period of great instability: Palenque was sacked once again by Tonina in 711. K’inich K’an Joy Chitam, Kan Bahlam’s brother and Ahkal Mo’ Nahb’s uncle,

⁸⁶ Stuart and Stuart, 146.

was abducted and eventually released. Ahkal Mo' Nahb succeeded his uncle in 721 and made noteworthy divergences from previous artistic conventions, specifically in the official representations of his ascension. The Temple XIX platform relief illustrates a connection strategy, in which Ahkal Mo' Nahb's accession is officiated by secondary lords instead of his parents. The Tablet of the Slaves—a panel illustrating Ahkal Mo' Nahb receiving the implements of rulership from his parents—follows the standard tri-figure panel accession conventions, but its location in the personal receiving room of a lord, not a public space, suggests a comparatively intimate audience. This change in official imagery can be attributed to Ahkal Mo' Nahb's lineage: his father was Pakal's youngest son who never reigned. Thus, Ahkal Mo' Nahb was the grandson of a king, not the son of a king. Elevating important nobility, giving them power—or the illusion of power—over accession was a strategic move. Yet, considering the instability of his predecessor's reign along with his less grand parentage, perhaps the Tlaloc imagery in Temple XIX's tri-figure panel was a slight disconnecting strategy. Granted, the king himself is not in Tlaloc garb; however, the lord in the Tlaloc-inspired *ajk'uhuun* headdress expresses subservient to Ahkal Mo' Nahb, implying the king's general authority.

Deities: Tlaloc and God L

We have discussed the goggle eyes and other attributes of the Teotihuacan Tlaloc above, but we have yet to treat that deity historically. Teotihuacan's goggle-eyed deity is referred to as “Tlaloc,” but the name is actually from an Aztec deity in their native language, Nahuatl. Of course, Teotihuacan predates the Aztec Empire by approximately

900 years, but contemporary scholars do not know what language was spoken at Teotihuacan, nor have the symbols identified as glyphs been deciphered. Rather than assigning a letter or number as Paul Schellhas did for Maya deities in the 19th century,⁸⁷ scholars noted the similarities between the Aztec deity Tlalocan and the round-eyed water god at Teotihuacan.⁸⁸ Mesoamerican scholars regularly incorporate synchronistic analysis due to limited direct resources from a given culture or group; for example, scholars reference the post-classic Maya, the later Aztec, and more contemporary indigenous practices when studying classic Maya material culture. While there was considerable debate over the legitimacy of this practice over the decades—George Kubler (1967) advised against conflation—the name “Tlaloc” for the Teotihuacano deity is widely employed by today’s scholars.

Visual evidence suggests Tlaloc—or a deity with shared characteristics—was worshipped in Mexico as early as 1st century BC.⁸⁹ While it is impossible to definitively prove the continuity, these early images probably inspired the later Tlaloc deity. His popularity grew over the centuries, as demonstrated by his ubiquitous representation at Teotihuacan. Based on parallels between Aztec and Teotihuacan religious iconography, not to mention Aztec belief in Teotihuacan as the city of the gods, many scholars hypothesize Aztec religion in part descended from Teotihuacan's beliefs, especially those relating to Tlaloc and associated iconography.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Miller and Karl, *The Gods and Symbols*, 146.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 167.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*.

⁹⁰ Annabeth Headrick, *The Teotihuacan Trinity: The Sociopolitical Structure of an Ancient Mesoamerican City* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007), 137.

Early scholarship based on colonial period accounts confined Tlaloc's dominion to water and associated natural phenomenon, such as storms and lightning. Aztec sources told the Spaniards that Tenochtitlan's major temples were dedicated to one of two major deities: Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli.⁹¹ Huitzilopochtli was a war deity, so Tlaloc was circumscribed to a purely watery significance. However, subsequent scholars identified the Tlaloc of earlier times with war associations through various iconographic indicators. Teotihuacan warriors often adorned themselves with goggles resembling Tlaloc's circular eyes, as illustrated on countless mural fragments and ceramic surfaces. First proposed by Nuttall in 1891, these goggle eyes reference the finger holes of the atlatl, the prevailing weapon of the age.⁹² If referencing atlatls via his eye shape was an insufficient signifier, depictions of Tlaloc carrying atlatls solidify the connection. Foreign representations of Tlaloc and Teotihuacano warriors further cement the deity's military significance; images of Yax Nuun Ayiin I, a Teotihuacano invader, on Tikal's Stele 31 include Tlaloc's visage upon the foreigner's shield.⁹³ Tikal Stela 31 was carved in the mid-5th century but recounts events going back to the famous Teotihuacan “entrada” into Maya territory of the previous century. Yax Nuun Ayiin's warrior regalia--which include two Teotihuacan-style warrior headdresses and atlatl darts—support Tlaloc’s militant associations.

While our earliest visual evidence suggests Tlaloc was commonly associated with serpents—often functioning as *pars pro toto* for lightning in Mesoamerican art—butterflies and birds have eclipsed snakes as close Tlaloc compatriots.⁹⁴ Teotihuacan did

⁹¹ Ibid, 127.

⁹² Zelia Nuttall, *The Atlatl or Spear-Thrower of the Ancient Mexicans* (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, 1891); Headrick, 129; Bassie-Sweet, *Maya Gods of War*, 120.

⁹³ Stuart, “Arrival of Strangers,” 539.

⁹⁴ Miller and Taube, 150.

not leave behind substantial written accounts of their history and beliefs, but their artwork undeniably implies a butterfly-Tlaloc connection. The esteemed art historian George Kubler identified the butterfly motif as affiliated with death in 1967.⁹⁵ Other scholars went on to propose butterflies were manifestations of dead warriors' souls.

Teotihuacan butterflies consistently share diagnostic and symbolic qualities with Tlaloc. Butterfly eyes are of particular note, as they are identical to Tlaloc's iconic goggle eyes. However, the duo share more than a similar eye shape; Annabeth Headrick identified a mutual connection with water in her book, *The Teotihuacan Trinity*. A frescoed ceramic from Teotihuacan suggests a mutual water connection between Tlaloc and butterflies (Fig. 30).⁹⁶ On the painted on the ceramic's façade, droplets of water fall from the bowl's decorated rim, framing a central butterfly figure. Not only does this butterfly feature goggle eyes, but its distinctive antennae bare a strong resemblance to atlatl darts as well. The combination of water, goggle eyes, and weaponry recall Tlaloc imagery, reinforcing the butterfly-Tlaloc relationship. As Headrick points out in her book, a mural fragment from Zone 5-A also Tlaloc water imagery with butterflies (Fig. 31). The fragment depicts a butterfly with the characteristic Tlaloc goggle eyes with a stylized proboscis emerging directly above. Below the eyes, liquid drips from a U-shaped mouth. Though we cannot definitively label the liquid as water—it could just as easily be blood—it is a justifiable inference based on the Tlaloc reference, as he was a water deity.

Butterflies and avian features were often merged together in Teotihuacan art, linking the two creatures which in turn connects back to Tlaloc. This butterfly-avian

⁹⁵ George Kubler, *The Iconography of the Art of Teotihuacán* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard Univ, 1967), 9.

⁹⁶ Headrick, 126-129.

combination was generally featured in ceramics and murals, either as a zoomorphic creature or as a costume. The zoomorphic creature is probably of spiritual or mythological import, as such creatures do not exist in the natural world, but the human-presenting figure's significance remains opaque. Archaeologist Zoltan Paulinyi⁹⁷ argues that figures in butterfly-avian accoutrement as a particular deity, while others believe them to be the spirits of deceased warriors.⁹⁸

Avian imagery, as with the butterfly, often appears alongside that of Tlaloc. As suggested above, bird references were often included in warrior garb. Indeed, warrior regalia was an amalgamation of butterfly, avian, and Tlaloc characteristics. While Teotihuacan's uniform representation of human figures general obscure social status and individuality, warriors are identifiable through their weaponry, which were generally atlatls and the necessary darts. Common features of Teotihuacano warrior headdresses include bird heads, butterfly wings, and proboscises. Feathers can also be seen on other costume elements, such as shields, backracks, and arm coverings.

Admittedly, avian is too general a term, as there are many types of birds native to Central America. However, the ubiquitous avian remains elusive since the exact type of bird has never been identified. In 1948, archaeologist von Winning identified the bird as an owl due to its curved beak, which Kubler agreed with in his 1967 publication, *The Iconography of the Art of Teotihuacan*. The owl theory has endured over the past several decades—Headrick acknowledged the strength of von Winning's hypothesis in her 2007

⁹⁷ Zoltán Paulinyi, "The Butterfly Bird God and His Myth at Teotihuacan," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 25, no. 1 (2014): pp. 29-48, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0956536114000054>.

⁹⁸ See Headricks, *Teotihuacan Trinity*, 2007; Hasso Von Winning, *La Iconografía De Teotihuacan: Los Dioses y Los Signos* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1987).

book. Paulinyi, on the other hand, identifies the bird elements featured in Teotihuacano art as belonging to macaws or quetzal-macaws.⁹⁹ In his 2014 article, he proposed that Teotihuacano figures dressed in butterfly/avian hybrid costume—predominantly depicted in ceramics—are in fact a deity, which he aptly refers to as the Butterfly-Bird God. However, considering the frequency at which Tlaloc and owl imagery are combined throughout the Maya region despite plentiful native quetzals and macaws, the owl theory remains a strong contender.

The exact bird species may remain elusive but its connection with Tlaloc is crystal clear. Like the aforementioned butterflies, many birds share Tlaloc's perfectly round, goggle-shaped eyes; various surviving Teotihuacano censers offer excellent examples of this characteristic. Taking this incensario from the Museo Nacional de Antropología for instance (Fig. 32). Two bird heads appear above the central human visage on what must be his elaborate, nearly architectural headdress. These identical birds feature perfectly round eyes, like that of Tlaloc. Another ceramic—this time a relief-decorated vase¹⁰⁰—features a frontal figure that combines bird, butterfly, and Tlaloc elements. Most of the body is discernably butterfly, especially the wings. However, the pointed beak and tailfeathers are clearly avian. Interestingly, the goggle eyes are turned upwards, just like the Tlaloc masks in the MFAH panel. Headrick suggests the avian's goggle eyes cements a butterfly connection, but a mutual Tlaloc affiliation is equally likely.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Paulinyi, 34.

¹⁰⁰ Headrick, 131.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 130.

Maya Tlaloc Cult

Tlaloc was introduced as a war deity among the Maya during the early Classic (250-500 CE), but ultimately amassed an extensive following among Late Classic Maya elites.¹⁰² Cities like Tikal, Copan, and Kaminaljuyu integrated Tlaloc imagery in the early classic through connections with Teotihuacan, either direct or indirect. Most cities, however, did not sustain the same type of relationship with the foreign power, only integrating Tlaloc and Teotihuacan iconography or references a century or so later. Andrea Stone argues that Tlaloc references were widely deployed as disconnections between subjects and elites, emphasizing an elite affiliation with powerful foreign entities—Teotihuacan in this case—separating the higher echelons of society from their subjects.¹⁰³ Tlaloc’s disconnection effect primarily served military purposes, uniquely situating late Classic rulers as particularly apt towards military conquest. Considering Teotihuacan’s successful entrada into Tikal in 378C.E.¹⁰⁴ Elite affiliation with Tlaloc—Teotihuacan’s god of war—was a pragmatic military strategy.

Schele and Freidel’s influential text, *Code of Kings*, connected Tlaloc’s assimilation into Maya cosmology with their theory of Venus Warfare. While the “star wars”/Venus-Tlaloc theory¹⁰⁵ that the Maya revolved warfare around the celestial

¹⁰² It is important to acknowledge that Maya art history primarily addresses the beliefs and practices of the elite, who commissioned these more durable works. While very little is certain in ancient Mesoamerican scholarship, non-elite religious practices and beliefs are particularly difficult to determine.

¹⁰³ Stone, *Piedras Negras*, 157.

¹⁰⁴ While Tikal is the only known example of Teotihuacan invading a city, this does not mean Teotihuacan never attacked, or at least intimidated, other cities. The epigraphic record is far from complete and many archaeological sites were damaged by looting or now-outdated archaeological practices.

¹⁰⁵ Footnote explaining Tlaloc-Venus wars here. I just don’t think its central to my argument, other than the importance of Tlaloc to the Maya.

movements of Venus and Jupiter was disproven¹⁰⁶, Schele and Freidel's assertion that the Maya not only adopted Tlaloc, but adapted the deity to their needs and conventions, remains prominent.¹⁰⁷ According to Bassie-Sweet, Tlaloc became a deity of lightening, meteors, and obsidian, all of which were associated with warfare.¹⁰⁸ Ethnographic evidence suggests the Maya interpreted lightening, meteors and meteorites as weapons of the gods, particularly darts, obsidian arrowheads, and spears. Furthermore, all three phenomenon are similarly classified in Mayan languages.¹⁰⁹ Taube suggests that meteors were believed to be the obsidian weapons of the gods across ancient Mesoamerica.¹¹⁰ Plus, the Aztec deity Tlalocan was associated with lightening based on various primary and secondary sources, which is pertinent if indeed the Aztec deity descended from Teotihuacan's goggle-eyed god.

The Maya maintained many Teotihuacan Tlaloc characteristics while adding additional elements to suite their purposes or preferences. The deity was represented as a skeletal being, specifically a skull without a mandible with a comb-like nose that resembles the number three or capital E, depending on its orientation. Perfectly round goggle eyes are consistent as well.¹¹¹ Adjacent to the teeth—or where teeth would ordinarily be—is a scrolling form, which appears to be an extension of his lip. This

¹⁰⁶ Gerardo Aldana, "Agency and the 'Star War' Glyph: A Historical Reassessment of Classic Maya Astrology and Warfare," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 16, no. 2 (2005): pp. 305-320, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0956536105050133>.

¹⁰⁷ Linda Schele and Charles Freidel, *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya* (New York: William Morrow, 1992); 164.

¹⁰⁸ Bassie-Sweet, *Maya Gods of War*, 112.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹¹⁰ Taube, "The Turquoise Hearth," 269-340.

¹¹¹ Bassie-Sweet, *Maya Gods of War*, 120.

feature is consistent with Teotihuacan's depiction of Tlaloc's mouth, though similar protrusions were common among Maya deities as well. Additional features were added by the Maya: Tlaloc visages often include the k'an or "yellow sign" as earrings, although there are noteworthy exceptions, including *Seated Lord*.¹¹² In Maya depictions of the foreign deity, the foreign deity often wears the "Mexican Year Sign" as a headdress, which is associated with war and/or violence, along with marigold flowers. These characteristics were all consistent with Teotihuacan's representations of Tlaloc.

Although the Maya and Teotihuacan Tlaloc share many visual characteristics and religious significances, the Maya altered aspects of the foreign deity to suit their own needs and preferences. The Maya Tlaloc cult, for example, regularly employed *Waxaklajuun Ub'aah Kan*, or "18 are the faces of the snake" in their artwork.¹¹³ *Waxaklajuun Ub'aah Kan* probably originated from the Teotihuacan war serpent that decorates the Temple of the Feathered Serpent's façade¹¹⁴ but the Maya reimagined the deity in its incorporation to their religious landscape. For example, on the famous Yaxchilan Lintel 25 (Fig. 33) *Waxaklajuun Ub'aah Kan* is double-headed—a quality not shared by Teotihuacan's war serpent. Maya *Waxaklajuun Ub'aah Kan* often merge caterpillar and serpent characteristics as well, which was not necessarily common in Teotihuacan depictions of the supernatural entity.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Ibid., 121.

¹¹³ Ibid., 123.

¹¹⁴ Taube, "The Turquoise Hearth," 326.

¹¹⁵ Bassie-Sweet, *Maya Gods of War*, 120.

The Maya maintained Tlaloc's butterfly and bird characteristics¹¹⁶, but jaguars were an addition to Tlaloc's list of affiliations. Olmec art, which regularly feature jaguars or jaguar zoomorphs, stands testament to the longevity of jaguar worship in Mesoamerica which remained in practice by the 1519 arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in Tenochtitlan.¹¹⁷ The Maya associated jaguars with power and royalty; consequentially, many deities assumed jaguar forms or incorporated jaguar pelts into their attire or surroundings. Jaguars featuring Tlaloc characteristics appear regularly in the Maya corpus. A prominent example is the La Corona Panel 6 (Fig. 34), which features a large anthropomorphic jaguar towering over a *Kaloomte*—an elite office dedicated to Tlaloc¹¹⁸—Maya woman. The jaguar in question features Tlaloc goggle eyes and a stylized, geometricized butterfly wing atop a scrolling proboscis-like snout. Additionally, Maya Tlaloc costumes worn by elite warriors—an image preserved in ceramic and stone—frequently incorporated jaguar pelts, further suggesting the connection between royalty, power, warfare, and Tlaloc.¹¹⁹

An important inclusion of jaguar pelts in Tlaloc-related costumes is through bundles, which often appear in headdresses along with Tlaloc imagery. Bundles regularly appear in religious contexts among the Maya and Mesoamerica in general. Jaguar pelts

¹¹⁶ Bassie-Sweet identifies the Tlaloc birds as various owl species, such as horned owls and the muwaan, depending on the work and diagnostic characteristics. Additionally, she identifies the butterfly as a Black Witch Moth. These identifications are documented in *Maya Gods of War*, Chapter 3: Classic Maya Tlaloc Deities and Their Obsidian Meteor Weapons.

¹¹⁷ Miller and Taube, 102-103.

¹¹⁸ Bassie-Sweet, *Maya Gods of War*, 162.

¹¹⁹ Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art* (New York: G. Braziller in association with the Kimbell Art Museum, 1986), 213.

were not exclusively used; deer pelts were common as well.¹²⁰ The pelt or cloth, often depicted as organic circular or semi-rectangular forms with rounded edges, held sacred remains of deities or ancestors. On the exterior, bundles were often adorned with masks. Vessel K3844 (Fig. 35) illustrates a bundle ritual: Participants proceed toward an elaborate platform or temple where an richly adorned masked bundle receives a burning sacrifice. Due to the region's humidity, no concrete examples of Classic Maya bundles remain. However, they regularly appear on Maya painted ceramics and sculpture, revealing the prevalence of bundles to Maya scholars. The longevity of bundle worship stands testament to the practice's significance: the *Popol Vuh*, a post-Classic text, speaks of sacred bundles. Accounts from Spanish soldiers, or *conquistadors*, suggests they encountered evidence of bundle worship in Cabo Catoche.¹²¹

There are examples of Tlaloc bundle headdresses from various sites, including Dos Pilas Stela 16 (Fig. 36) and Aguateca Stela 2 (Fig. 37). Both stelas are very similar in composition and iconography: the central Tlaloc impersonator, depicted in twisted perspective, wears a Tlaloc mask with a Mexican year sign wrapping around the front of a deer bundle headdress. The most renowned example, however, is Yaxchilan Lintel 25 (Fig. 32). Yaxchilan's lintels are replete with Teotihuacan and Tlaloc imagery, but Lintel 25's depiction of an ancestor emerging from a double-headed Waxaklajuun Ub'aah Kan is particularly noteworthy due to the ancestor's Tlaloc mask and Mexican year sign bundle headdress. A Tlaloc head—not an impersonator—emerges from the second Waxaklajuun Ub'aah Kan's maw in the bottom left corner of the lintel, wearing a nearly

¹²⁰ Bassie-Sweet, *Maya Gods of War*, 9.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

identical headdress to the ancestor's above. These bundle headdresses likely referenced ceremonial counterparts housed in sacred temple superstructures.

Tlaloc in *Seated Lord*

Tlaloc takes multiple forms in the *Seated Lord* panel. Of particular import is the Tlaloc head in the bowl featuring a sky band. Here, we see the quintessential characteristics of the adopted deity: the scrolling nose-comb, the missing mandible, scrolls emanating from the corner of the mouth, and, of course, the goggle eyes. Instead of the k'an sign, this Tlaloc's earspools feature a mat sign: a symbol denoting royalty in the Maya world.¹²² Yet this Tlaloc's gaze is turned upward towards yet another, distinct Tlaloc head. It is not unheard-of in classic Maya art for a Tlaloc head to rest upon another version of itself (Fig. 38). In this case, the upper Tlaloc is a butterfly Tlaloc. As previously established, Tlaloc and butterflies share a connection in Teotihuacano art that was carried over into the Maya region. A plumed proboscis emerges above a curled snout, rising towards the top of the piece, yet ultimately curling down and inward. In her recent publication, Bassie Sweet ties the triangular or zig-zag motif behind the top Tlaloc's eye to Teotihuacan's butterfly conventions, which feature vertical zig-zag lines on their butterfly wings as well.¹²³

¹²² Schele and Miller, 68.

¹²³ Bassie-Sweet, *Maya Gods of War*, 137-138; Bassie-Sweet further identifies the butterfly as the black witch moth—the Lepidoptera—based on similarities between the zig-zag and the Lepidoptera's wing markings. Despite her convincing argument, I will continue using the term “butterfly” as her publication is recent and I wish to maintain a continuity of terms with the pre-2020 texts.

A Tlaloc avatar appears to hover over *Seated Lord*. The long, serpentine body, in combination with the Tlaloc butterfly wings and Teotihuacan “puh” curls¹²⁴ firmly identify the creature as Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan. Plus, another Tlaloc visage emerges from the wide jaws, although this representation is odd due to the presence of a mandible and large fang-esque teeth. Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan’s forked tongue protrudes outward, featuring a forked tongue—suggesting this manifestation may be the rattlesnake avatar.¹²⁵

Another noteworthy reference to Tlaloc is in *Seated Lord*’s costume, specifically his God L headdress. The central owl head, typical of God L’s signature headdress, features a Tlaloc eye.¹²⁶ Using Tlaloc’s most diagnostic characteristic in God L’s headdress is interesting for multiple reasons. The most obvious one is how it unifies the panel through repetition of geometric forms, tying together the various goggle-eye circles to create a balanced composition. Another important point is that both gods have owl affiliations, which was discussed at length in this chapter. The artist is signaling to the viewer that Tlaloc and God L share crucial elements of their worldly manifestations. Their shared avian connection relates to the deities’ mutual affiliation with war and destruction.¹²⁷ By combining the most quintessential Tlaloc characteristic with God L’s signature headdress, the artist solidifies the relationship between both war gods.

¹²⁴ Stuart, “Arrival of Strangers.”

¹²⁵ Bassie-Sweet, *Maya Gods of War*, 123.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

Maya Deity God L

While he offers the headdress associated with Tlaloc, Seated Lord, on the other hand, is dressed as a distinctly Maya Maya deity, God L. Identified by the German epigrapher Paul Schellhas in the late 19th century, God L was a lord of the underworld.¹²⁸ God L's appearance is primarily communicated through ceramics—the elderly god of Xilbalba rarely appears in sculpture or architecture. Ceramics, such as the 7 Gods Vase (K2796) (Fig. 38) and the Princeton Vessel (K0511) (Fig. 39), depict God L presiding over a court from covered platforms or thrones. He is an elderly god, wrinkled and toothless, with a protruding roman nose. Maya artists often depicted him with swirling eyes, marking him as an otherworldly deity. God L's skin is regularly painted black; Taube suggests black signifies water or wetness, descriptors that are in line with the Maya's conception of a watery, cavernous underworld.¹²⁹ ¹³⁰ Bassie-Sweet, on the other hand, suggests the black references obsidian, which will be discussed later on.

God L's costume is an equally important visual diagnostic element. His unique headdress is central to his iconic look: a broadbrimmed hat made of black-tipped owl feathers with an owl's head emerging from the center. The exact type of owl has been the subject of considerable debate over the decades: many identify the owl as a *muwaan*¹³¹

¹²⁸ Miller and Taube, 146.

¹²⁹ However, Taube's hypothesis is based on contemporary Maya language and a single image from the Dresden Codex (82), which is a post-Classic example, thus the significance behind his black skin is disputable. Bernatz provides an interesting argument regarding God L's relationship with agriculture, specifically relating to underground water (Bernatz 2015).

¹³⁰ Karl Taube, *The Major Gods of Ancient Yucatan* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1992), 81.

¹³¹ Taube, *Major Gods*, 82; Bassie-Sweet, *Maya Gods of War*, 248.

while others assert the muwaan is in fact “kuy”¹³², insisting the muwaan bird is in fact a hawk. Joyce and Gillespie apparently clear up this confusion; kuy is simply the Yucatec word for muwaan. Regardless, God L’s owl features a hooked beak and black-tipped feathers. As a lord of the underworld who exerts power and prestige, God L often wears jaguar pelts—sometimes he is even depicted as a jaguar.¹³³ He regularly dons an elaborate shawl that drapes around his shoulders. Sometimes he is smoking a cigar or carrying a merchant pack.

God L was a multi-faceted god whose influence extended into the earthly realm; he was a god of trade, travel, tribute, and war. He was even depicted as a merchant himself, carrying a merchant’s pack upon his back with a staff in hand.¹³⁴ Bernatz (2015) argues trade, along with potential agricultural significance not discussed in this text, makes God L an “Earth Lord,”¹³⁵ whose domain included not only the denizens of the underworld, but resources vital to human life.¹³⁶ Through his position as an Earth Lord, God L’s dominion extended from the underworld to the earthly plane, reaching the celestial as well through his associations with lightning (discussed below). While Bernatz does not discuss warfare in depth, God L’s militant aspect could also be understood within this Earth Lord concept. Earth Lords, in a comparatively contemporary Maya

¹³² Linda Schele and Nicolai Grube, “**Kuy, the Owl of Omen and War,**” *Mexicon* 16, no. 1 (1994): 12.

¹³³ Taube, 86.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹³⁵ A term based on ethnographic research cited by Bernatz. Earth Lord means, “gods tied to indigenous beliefs about the structure of the universe and human obligations to sustain earthly resources through sacrifice and tribute.” See Bernatz, 154.

¹³⁶ Michele Bernatz, “Redefining God L: the Spatial Realm of a Maya ‘Earth Lord,’” in *Maya Imagery, Architecture, and Activity: Space and Spatial Analysis in Art History*, ed. Maline D. Werness-Rude and Kaylee Spencer (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2015), pp. 140-177, 153.

understanding, have immense amounts of wealth which they can choose to share or withhold.¹³⁷ Bernatz describes wealth from a natural resource and trade point of view, but those who triumph militarily also gain wealth through plunder or tribute.¹³⁸ Warfare is an earthly activity that we know the Maya engaged in regularly, in contrast to early interpretations of the Maya as peace-loving mystics.¹³⁹ Warfare and associated tribute/plunder is therefore an additional piece of evidence for the Earth Lord hypothesis.

Bernatz's Earth Lord theory compliments Joyce and Gillespie's (1998) reconceptualization of God L and Maya deities in general.¹⁴⁰ Joyce and Gillespie suggest that rather than identifying and categorizing deities as members of a pantheon that correspond to specific natural phenomenon or events, "we should attempt to demonstrate how gods, nature, and society signify categories that were defined in terms of their relationships within a larger structure and were organized with respect to other transformations of that structure."¹⁴¹ The authors use this framework to evaluate the connection between God L, God M, and Bolon Yokte, revealing God L's connection to travel. God L and similar affiliated deities—God M and Bolon Yokte—exemplify the spatial and socio-political landscape of the center and the periphery. God L, as a king, is closely affiliated with the center while Bolon Yokte and God M represent the periphery

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Kazuo Aoyama and Elizabeth Graham, "Ancient Maya warfare: exploring the significance of lithic variation in Maya weaponry," *Lithics: The Journal of the Lithic Studies Society* (2015): 5-17.

¹³⁹ Linda Schele and Mary Miller, *Blood of Kings*

¹⁴⁰ Susan D. Gillespie and Rosemary A. Joyce, "Deity Relationships in Mesoamerican Cosmologies: The Case of God L," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 9, no. 2 (1998): pp. 279-296, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0956536100001991>.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 281.

and beyond.¹⁴² Joyce and Gillespie identify Bolon Yokte as a separate deity, but there is glyphic evidence that may suggest Bolon Yokte—or Bolon Yokte Kuh—is in fact God L’s name.¹⁴³ While Grofe does not completely commit to this possibility by suggesting the two deities might alternatively be related, it is nonetheless possible that God L contained the center and the periphery in one, as he traveled the various cosmic planes in Bernatz’s Earth Lord hypothesis.

Another way of examining God L is through the Popol Vuh. While some important scholars¹⁴⁴ advise against interpreting classic Maya art retrospectively through post-classic literature (the Popol Vuh describes the beliefs of a Maya society existing more than 500 years after *Seated Lord*), others regularly employ the Popol Vuh as an interpretive framework. Bassie-Sweet believes the Popol Vuh originates from classic-era mythology; while it changed over the intervening centuries, she considers the text a useful tool for interpreting Classic Maya religious belief and deploys it regularly in her scholarship.¹⁴⁵ Based on her interpretation of the legend, God L is likely the classic Maya equivalent to the Popol Vuh’s Gathered Blood, the maternal grandfather of the Hero Twins.¹⁴⁶ Gathered Blood is a lord of the underworld, who Bassie-Sweet hypothesizes became the supreme ruler upon One and Seven Death’s executions.¹⁴⁷ This theory is far

¹⁴² Ibid., 292.

¹⁴³ Michael Grofe, “The Name of God L: B’olon Yokte K’Uh?,” *Wayeb Notes*, no. 30 (2009): pp. 1-19.

¹⁴⁴ Stuart, *The inscriptions from Temple XIX*, 159-160.

¹⁴⁵ For example, see Karen Bassie-Sweet and Nicholas A. Hopkins, *Maya Narrative Arts* (Louisville, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2019).

¹⁴⁶ Bassie-Sweet, *Maya Gods of War*, 249-250.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 256.

from proven, nor is it widely accepted. It is, nevertheless, a possibility with interesting implications, especially for the identity of *Seated Lord*.

Multiple manifestations of a single deity, or “avatars,” are a documented phenomenon in Maya religion as with many other polytheistic religions. Major Maya deities—including Itzamnaaj, Ix Chel, and Chahk—were known to have multiple manifestations based on their various aspects and domains.¹⁴⁸ A deity could take on different humanoid appearances as well as floral, faunal, or other natural phenomena. Itzamnaaj, a celestial creator deity, is a prime example of this: God D and God N are both manifestations of Itzamnaaj, who could also appear as in turtle, conch, or peccary manifestations.¹⁴⁹ All of this to say that God L could easily be Bolon Yokte and God M simultaneously. Aligning manifestations with the Earth Lord theory, the kingly manifestation of God L—the standard classification of God L—could easily surmise or reference his various manifestations while appearing in his most powerful or influential form.

Embracing nuance is vital if we are to comprehend the Maya—and more specifically Palenque’s—interpretation of God L. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the connotation many contemporary readers associate with the term “underworld”: a place of evil. The Popol Vuh’s story of the Hero Twins does construct a terrifying image in the reader’s mind, but that does not necessarily mean evil. Unlike Judeo-Christian conceptualization of “hell,” the Maya Underworld was a watery subterranean landscape. The underworld was indeed associated with death, but with

¹⁴⁸ Bassie-Sweet and Hopkins, 29.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

wealth, trade, and tribute as well.¹⁵⁰ This nuanced view may be attributed to the benefits of warfare, which frequently occurred during the Classic Maya period. If a city-state triumphed over their foe, the winner gained captives—often used in ritual sacrifice—and potentially tribute from the defeated party. Of course, defeat was a misfortune, but the religious and economic gains were an equally distinct possibility. The Classic Maya also had a different perspective on, or perhaps expectations of, their deities; as Michele Bernatz explains, Maya religion was not focused on morality.¹⁵¹ Gods were active participants in the earthly and cosmic realms, resulting in both positive and negative effects on human lives. This is certainly the case with God L, considering his association with trade and tribute as a senior underworld lord. Trade brought necessities and commodities to a community. Successful trading ventures contribute to prosperity, the lack of which were sorely felt.

The Relationship Between Tlaloc and God L

Both Tlaloc and God L are associated with obsidian and war. The Classic Maya used obsidian for weapons and ceremonial tools, such as penis perforators. As noted by multiple scholars, the night and/or darkness sign regularly appears in tandem with obsidian, often relating to blood sacrifice through penis perforation.¹⁵² Obsidian was also an integral element of darts and spears, essential to Maya warfare. In Teotihuacan, a major Mesoamerican extractor and distributor of obsidian, Tlalocs or Tlaloc warriors

¹⁵⁰ Bernatz, “Redefining God L,” 143.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 140.

¹⁵² Andrea Stone and Marc Zender, *Reading Maya Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Maya Painting and Sculpture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 145; Bassie-Sweet, *Maya Gods of War*, 119.

wore obsidian blades in their headdresses and as weapons, piercing bloody hearts. Obsidian weapons often featured zig-zag patterns, which the Maya incorporated into their depictions of Tlaloc.¹⁵³ Images of Maya Tlalocs and warriors in Tlaloc garb often include the zig-zag pattern in addition to literal obsidian as costume accoutrement.

Many of God L's attributes tie him to obsidian as well. God L's dark underworld domain would be a natural connection with the darkness of obsidian, which is emphasized through the superimposed glyphs discussed above. Some ceramics and remaining post-Classic codices illustrate God L and associated avatars with black skin, offering another shared formal connection. Owl feathers compose the rim of God L's headdress; feathers were used as symbolic representations of obsidian.¹⁵⁴ While obsidian flows easily into God L's war and underworld association¹⁵⁵, the medium equally compliments the deity's merchant aspect. Obsidian was a prized and rare material that was imported from distant sites. The major source of Palenque's obsidian—around 94%—is from El Chayal near contemporary Guatemala City.¹⁵⁶ El Chayal is approximately 380 miles from Palenque, so the obsidian traveled considerable distance to ultimately arrive in Palenque. Ixtepeque, also in present-day Guatemala, accounted for 1.5%. The rest came from the West Mexican sites Pachuca and Zaragoza.¹⁵⁷ Merchants and traders, with God L as their livelihood's patron deity, provided obsidian for the city.

¹⁵³ Bassie-Sweet, *Maya Gods of War*, 141.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁵⁵ Bassie-Sweet does not focus on God L's war deity attributes in *Maya Gods of War*. However, many other scholars (Miller, Taube, Grube, etc) have acknowledged a militant element to his persona.

¹⁵⁶ Flavio G. Silva de la Mora, "Obsidian Procurement and Distribution in the Northwestern Maya Lowlands during the Maya Classic, a Regional Perspective," *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 18 (2018): pp. 577-586, 581. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jasrep.2018.01.031>.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

God L and Tlaloc had overlapping domains that fed into one another.¹⁵⁸ When we take into account their shared iconography (owls, jaguar, obsidian) and purviews (war and obsidian), a God L impersonator surrounded by Tlaloc-related imagery is logical. Yet it is an uncommon pairing based on contemporary knowledge of the surviving material culture. Perhaps this pairing was unorthodox in its time as well. We will likely never know, but identifying shared characteristics between God L and Tlaloc help contextualize the artist or patron's choices in the creation of *Seated Lord*.

¹⁵⁸ Considering there is no evidence of a Teotihuacan invasion in Palenque, trade may have contributed to the Tlaloc cult's introduction to the elite.

Chapter 4: Provenance

Provenance, Provenience, and Object-Based Research

In The Menil Collection's recent publication, *Object Biographies: Collaborative Approaches to Ancient Mediterranean Art*, the introduction applies a pseudo-biological metaphor to museum objects.¹⁵⁹ The book is divided into eight chapters, each dedicated to the “biography” of a single ancient Mediterranean object in the museum's collection. A biography traditionally applies to people who have lived and will eventually die, if they have not already done so. The biography narrativizes their lives, sectioning off years into chapters based on an overarching theme. By applying the term “biography” to art objects, they are not only vivified; it suggests art objects change over time, entering different phases of existence.

Ancient art of the Old World, like that of the New, struggles with issues of provenience and provenance. The culprits? Forgers, looters, and poor record-keeping—all casting a shadow of doubt over the original contexts of the objects and thus complicating any contemporary interpretation. Without provenience—the object's “find spot”—it is difficult to truly determine an object's context, not to mention its authenticity. Without an assured origin or context through established provenience, an object is “ungrounded.”¹⁶⁰ Being ungrounded further obscures an object's origins, along with its passage from one owner to the next. Rather than ignoring these problems,

¹⁵⁹ John North Hopkins, Sarah Kielt Costello, and Paul Ramey Davis, *Object Biographies: Collaborative Approaches to Ancient Mediterranean Art* (Houston, TX: The Menil Collection, 2021).

¹⁶⁰ Elizabeth M. Marlowe, *Shaky Ground: Context, Connoisseurship and the History of Roman Art* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

consigning responsibility to past individuals, the authors of *Object Biographies* engage the histories of individual objects. By actively participating in solutions-oriented research instead of exclusively acknowledging past institutional wrongdoings, other important information emerges from these object-driven narratives relating to institutional and international histories, ultimately casting a wider net of significance beyond questions of authenticity.

Ancient American art faces similar issues to that of the Ancient Mediterranean. Contemporary Western museums—art and natural history institutions alike—contain objects without an archaeological find spot, and often with nebulous provenance. The Spanish and Portuguese arrival to the New World began the process of Westerners extracting ancient art and artifacts, which continued with the arrival of other European and United States explorers over the next few hundred years. Rarely were these exotic artworks properly cataloged and accounted for during the early period of collecting, and even well into the 20th century. Prior to the UNESCO Heritage law of 1970, many collectors and institutions did not consider provenance to be consequential, acquiring objects from dealers or directly from looters without any documentation.¹⁶¹ Objects were bequeathed, gifted, or sold to museums, oftentimes providing researchers with little more than a credit line to derive a provenance history.

Ancient Mesoamerican art has yet to receive a comprehensive treatment like *Object Biographies*. The delay is in part due to some scholars and cultural heritage professionals objecting to publishing or displaying unprovenienced objects.¹⁶² As

¹⁶¹ As is likely the case with Higford Griffiths and Ralph Fabacher, who did not provide any provenance information with Seated Lord upon the panel's sale to the institution.

¹⁶² Stephen Houston, *A Maya Universe in Stone* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2021).

previously acknowledged in this paper, probably most Ancient Mesoamerican objects in U.S. museums were originally harvested and brought into the United States by means generally considered unethical or illegal today.¹⁶³ Some scholars argue that acknowledging the existence of such objects encourage further looting, effectively growing the antiquities black market. This approach relegates artwork to perpetual storage, without use or significance.

An alternative strategy is a wholistic approach to object-based research, including research on these ungrounded objects. Of course, privileging an individual work cannot recover an object's destroyed provenience, but close engagement with ungrounded objects can reveal clues as to their origin. Distinctive artistic style or unique iconographic elements can at least situate an object within a geographic and temporal range. Ungrounded objects often lack strong provenance records as well, which further obscures an object's movements. Institutional investment in provenance research can retrace an artwork's journey, which may reveal both historic origins and modern significance.

Stephen Houston's recent 2021 publication, *A Maya Universe in Stone*, is an excellent example of how object-based study and provenance research can reveal previously overlooked insights. The book investigates the iconography, epigraphy, and provenance of four unprovenanced Maya lintels from the unidentified site of Laxtunich.¹⁶⁴ Although the book is described as the study of an individual Maya sculptor, Houston's text sheds light upon the panels' provenance and provenience through in-depth

¹⁶³ To be clear, *Seated Lord* is legally held by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, as it meets the regulations established by UNESCO in 1970. Not to mention the panel could have been looted and circulating in the U.S. antiquities market as early as 1881, potentially affiliated with countless other individuals before arriving at the MFAH.

¹⁶⁴ Houston, *A Maya Universe in Stone*.

archival study. Primary sources, in combination with glyphic translations and object-based research, permitted the author to broadly estimate Laxtunich's location, which may prove useful in finally discovering the site in the future. Through Houston's provenance research, a comparatively modern history emerges that illustrates mid-20th century American popular culture's relationship with Maya archaeology and exploration.¹⁶⁵ *A Maya Universe in Stone* hopefully signals the beginning of a trend towards increased investment in provenance research and an object-based approach to ungrounded, unprovenanced Ancient Mesoamerican art objects.

Provenance and *Seated Lord*

Seated Lord's Palenque past was its first context and identity. The patron who commissioned the relief, the artisans who designed and executed it, and the Palencanos who experienced the complete relief in its intended location compose *Seated Lord*'s original identity. However, upon the relief's destruction at an unknown date by unknown forces—either nature, man, or both—*Seated Lord* began a new existence as a separate object. When it was removed from its original location—the panel's provenience or "find spot"—and transformed into a modern possession of collectors and museums, a new chapter of its biography began. This new historical trajectory of *Seated Lord* continues to the present moment, requiring acknowledgement and study.

There are obviously pieces of the original panel that remain unaccounted for—a specter of past malpractice, revealing holes in our knowledge. How did a Palenque panel

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

get hacked up into pieces, transported out of Mexico, with a large portion eventually ending up at the MFAH? While this lamentable situation is unfortunately all too common, provenance is especially crucial when attempting to reconstruct the original context, not to mention an ethical imperative. Resources limit me to the provenance of the MFAH's *Seated Lord* panel exclusively, but surely this investigation will provide useful information to future provenance researchers interested in *Seated Lord* and the other fragments.

Earl Stendahl: The Gallerist

The MFAH website lists Stendahl Art Galleries as the first known owner of the relief—a gallery that opened in 1921 but only began collecting ancient American art in 1935.¹⁶⁶ Yet an archival document—presumably part of Schaffer's research for her 1987 article—indicates otherwise; typed at the top of Schaffer's report is the phrase, “Stendahl had nothing to do with this.”¹⁶⁷ This does cast doubt on Stendahl's participation in the panel's journey to the MFAH, but provocative research-based theories of his involvement will be elaborated on further. Meanwhile, Mr. Higford Griffiths of Houston and San Antonio, undoubtedly owned the panel before selling it to the MFAH in 1962, well before the November 1970 cutoff date that most major American museums now adhere to.

¹⁶⁶ April Dammann, *Exhibitionist: Earl Stendahl, Art Dealer as Impresario* (Santa Monica, CA: Angel City Press, 2011), 104.

¹⁶⁷ Typescript of curatorial notes titled “Palenque-Style Relief, Maya, Late Classic” by Anne Louise Schaffer, n.d., curatorial files, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

This timeline is admittedly vague—antiquities smugglers and dealers may have taken *Seated Lord* on countless circuitous routes before entering Griffith's collection. However, research into Higford Griffiths' biography and the history of Stendahl Galleries offer interesting possibilities. Once again, more research is necessary; the Getty archive holds Stendahl's documents relating to his ancient American collection and transactions. Accessing the archive would hopefully either cement or refute Stendahl's involvement with *Seated Lord*. Crucial information about Griffiths' timeline must be extracted from local archives in Houston and San Antonio. Instead of a definitive study, the following information serves as a guide for further research while historically contextualizing the choices of the characters involved.

In the winter of 1921, Stendahl Art Galleries opened in Los Angeles' The Ambassador Hotel.¹⁶⁸ Founder and gallery director Earl Stendahl would go on to open a standalone Los Angeles gallery along with seven other satellite locations in California. Initially Standahl focused on American landscape painting but became an early proponent of the modern avant-garde, introducing California to Marc Chagall in 1930.¹⁶⁹ Stendahl made his first trip to Mexico and Central America in 1935, "buying up truckloads of Pre-Columbian clay and stone objects and caches of gold and jade."¹⁷⁰ The UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property was not signed until 1970, so he was able to acquire what he wanted mostly unimpeded. Mexico did have laws forbidding foreigners from stealing cultural patrimony, but Stendahl was known to employ schemes,

¹⁶⁸ Dammann, 28.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 44-45.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 104.

including forging archaeological permits.¹⁷¹ If Stendahl did indeed hold *Seated Lord* at some point, he acquired it either during or after 1935.

Earl Stendahl is credited as one of the “tastemakers” for ancient American art in the United States, especially on the West Coast.¹⁷² Robert Bliss, founder of Dumbarton Oaks, was among his most long-term clients, alongside art critic Walter Arensberg.¹⁷³ Celebrities—including Charles Laughton, Irving Stone, and Kirk Douglas—were among his clients as well, purchasing ancient American art to decorate their Hollywood homes.¹⁷⁴

Stendahl organized exhibitions far beyond his Los Angeles gallery walls, displaying ancient American art as close as the Pasadena Institute of Art (now part of the Art Center College of Design) and as far as Europe.¹⁷⁵ A particularly noteworthy Stendahl exhibition took place in 1956, titled *Pre-Columbian Sculpture*. The Art Center of La Jolla was the first location, followed by The Art Club of Chicago and the McNay Art Institute of San Antonio.¹⁷⁶ The McNay exhibition is of particular import, as Higford Griffiths was at least a part-time resident of San Antonio at the time.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 140-141.

¹⁷² Elizabeth Boone, “Collecting the Pre-Columbian Past: Historical Trends and the Process of Reception and Use,” in *Collecting the Pre-Columbian Past*, ed. Elizabeth Boone (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2011), 315-350, 335.

¹⁷³ Michael Coe, “From Huaquero to Connoisseur: The Early Market in Pre-Columbian Art,” in *Collecting the Pre-Columbian Past*, ed. Elizabeth Boone (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2011), pp. 271-290, 279-281.

¹⁷⁴ Dammann, 129.

¹⁷⁵ Mary Miller and Megan O’Neil, “‘An Artistic Discovery of America’: Mexican Antiquities in Los Angeles, 1940-1960s,” in *Found in Translation: Design in California and Mexico, 1915-1985*, ed. Wendy Kaplan (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2017), 163.

¹⁷⁶ “Notes on Art and Artists,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 13 Jan. 1957, p. 18.

Higford Griffiths: The Collector

Higford Singer Griffiths was no infamous art dealer with an international reputation. Rather, he was British ex-patriot and World War II Royal Airforce veteran who immigrated to the United States via Mexico in 1946.¹⁷⁷ It is unclear why Griffiths chose to immigrate to the United States, or why he entered Mexico first before crossing the border at Nuevo Laredo. Nevertheless, Griffiths identified himself as an architect and was initially employed as such. His United States World War II Draft card identifies his employer as Ernest L. Schult, a local architect who designed the thirteen-room school for Orchard, Texas in 1941.¹⁷⁸

Griffiths had clearly established himself as an interior designer by 1953, when he was hired to decorate a conference room in the new Blaffer wing of the MFAH.¹⁷⁹ He went on to establish a Houston-based interior design firm with Ralph W. Fabacher, as documented in a 1956 *San Antonio Light* article announcing their consultantship on a major project.¹⁸⁰ The article states that Griffiths and Fabacher's firm—Business Interiors Ltd.—successfully completed noteworthy projects in Houston and the surrounding area, including residential contracts. Their partnership extended beyond interior design—they collected ancient Mesoamerican and modern Latin American art together as well.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ "Naturalization Record: Higford Griffiths," *Texas, U.S., Naturalization Records, 1852-1991*. Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.

¹⁷⁸ World War II Draft Card: Higford Griffiths, *U.S., World War II Draft Cards Young Men, 1940-1947*. Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

¹⁷⁹ James Clifton, *A Golden Age of European Art: Celebrating Fifty Years of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation* (Houston, TX: The Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 2016) 14.

¹⁸⁰ "Decorating Contracts Let by Bank," *San Antonio Light*, 18 Nov. 1956, pp. 16-A.

¹⁸¹ "Art Notes: Mexican Art Is Fall Highlight," in *The Austin American*, 26 Oct. 1958, pp. C-9.

Despite not being included in the object's provenance listing, Fabacher was at least tangentially involved in Griffiths' acquisition of *Seated Lord*.

The arrival of a new director in 1961—art historian and ex-Guggenheim director James Johnson Sweeney—seemed to instigate the MFAH's entrée into Ancient American art. Prior to his arrival, the museum's indigenous arts collection was practically non-existent, save for a few small figurines. A local trio of Ancient American enthusiasts—Maudie Bullington, Ralph Fabacher, and Higford Griffiths—seemed to leverage the change in leadership to their advantage, submitting an exhibition proposal, titled *Mexico Before Cortez*, for Sweeney's consideration.¹⁸² Although the proposal includes the names of all three contributors, Griffiths was the sole signature on the final page, suggesting he was the document's primary author.

I believe *Mexico Before Cortez* was the catalyst that inspired Sweeney—and thus the museum at large—to strengthen the MFAH's Ancient American art background, ultimately leading to *Seated Lord*'s acquisition in 1962. Although the museum never exhibited a show titled *Mexico Before Cortez*, the MFAH 1963 exhibition, *The Olmec Tradition*, parallels “Mexico Before Cortez” in noteworthy ways. In the *Mexico Before Cortez* proposal, Griffiths firmly stated the exhibition should be a collaboration between the MFAH and the Mexican government. As Griffiths outlined in the accompanying letter, “Assuming we only want a completely first-class exhibition, which does not cause any Mexican hurt feelings, we feel the only way to set about it is to start at the Presidential level and, above everything, show no exhibits from collections in this

¹⁸² Typescript exhibition proposal “Mexico Before Cortez” by Higford Griffiths, 1961, RG 2:3:1, James Johnson Sweeney correspondence, 1961-1967, Museum of Fine Art, Houston Archives.

country.”¹⁸³ This suggestion was based on international looting scandals and increasing negative sentiment towards U.S. collections of Ancient American art. Sweeney goes on to employ this diplomatic approach while planning *The Olmec Tradition*, as outlined in the exhibition’s catalogue.¹⁸⁴ Sweeney coordinated with the U.S. and Mexican government to exhibited objects from public Mexican collections exclusively. Plus, Griffiths was definitely involved in the exhibition planning, as he is identified as an advisory committee member in *The Olmec Tradition* catalogue.

Amidst planning *The Olmec Tradition*, the MFAH purchased *Seated Lord* from Griffiths in 1962. Other than the purchase record, no archival materials regarding this transaction were preserved. Perhaps Sweeney encountered *Seated Lord* while planning the 1962 Houston meeting of the International Association of Art Critics, which Griffiths participated in as well.¹⁸⁵ This is, of course, only one of possible hypotheses. Only three years after *Seated Lord*’s purchase, Griffiths and Fabacher decided to move to Mexico and sold their entire Ancient American collection to Mrs. Harry Hanszen. Hanszen then gifted Griffiths and Fabacher’s collection to the MFAH, which consisted of, “...clay, bone, and stone figures, vessels, and vases and jade ornaments comprising a group of more than 300 objects from Mexico that had been collected by San Antonio residents Ralph Fabacher and Higford Griffiths and authenticated by Gordon D. Ekholm of the American Museum of Natural History.”¹⁸⁶ Effectively, Griffiths and Fabacher amassed

¹⁸³ Letter to S.I. Morris, Jr. from Higford Griffiths, July 10th 1961, RG 2:3:1, James Johnson Sweeney correspondence, 1961-1967, Museum of Fine Art, Houston Archives.

¹⁸⁴ James Johnson Sweeney, “A Head from San Lorenzo” in *The Olmec Tradition* (Houston, TX: Museum of Fine Art, Houston, 1963).

¹⁸⁵ “The World’s Top Art Critics Here” in *The Houston Press*, September 28th, 1962.

¹⁸⁶ Kate Kirkland, *The Hogg Family and Houston* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009), 229.

the majority of the MFAH's original Ancient American art collection despite the "Mrs. Harry Hanszen" credit on object labels.

Three hundred objects are a staggering amount, begging the question: how did Griffiths acquire over 300 objects? What were the circumstances behind such a hefty collection? Flight records and archived correspondence with Sweeney suggests both Griffiths and Fabacher spent considerable time in Mexico, but that hardly explains such a large collection. A *New York Times* article offers a possible explanation. In 1973, journalist Robert Reinhardt wrote a three-part series of articles on ancient American antiquities trafficking. The second installment focused on the Maya and the profitable business of antiquities trafficking. Higford Griffiths makes an appearance on page twenty-eight of the March 27th issue:

"Another American in the middleman business was Higford Griffiths, a retired United States Air Force officer who used to live in San Miguel Allende, Mexico. He was arrested and convicted in Mexico last April for buying illicit pieces, and was imprisoned in Guanajuato jail. The assistant warden of Guanajuato jail is now a prisoner, convicted of helping Griffiths escape. The Mexicans are trying to extradite the American."¹⁸⁷

Some of this information is not fully accurate; Griffiths never served in the United States Air Force—he served in Great Britain's Royal Airforce during World War II.¹⁸⁸ Griffiths was indeed arrested in Mexico, however it was likely due to criminal accusations made

¹⁸⁷ Robert Reinhold, "Traffic in Looted Maya Art Is Diverse and Profitable," *The New York Times*, March 27, 1973, 28.

¹⁸⁸ "Naturalization Record: Higford Griffiths"

by Fabacher regarding their shared assets upon the couple's separation.¹⁸⁹ Despite some inaccuracies, the information closely parallels Griffiths's biography and highlights his interest in Ancient American art.

Griffiths wrote to *The New York Times*, which published a correction in early May.¹⁹⁰ Apparently, the print apology did not suffice as Griffiths went on to sue *The New York Times* and Reinhart for infringements on his civil rights that December.¹⁹¹ The ruling was not published, but it is likely recorded in Houston's 113 District Court files. Griffiths passed away in 1984 while Fabacher remained in Mexico, dying four years later in 1988.

These biographical narratives help situate Griffiths and Stendahl within the antiquities trafficking hierarchy. Michael Coe, the eminent Mesoamericanist, expertly summarized the system in his contribution to *Collecting the Pre-Columbian Past*. At the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder are the pick-and-shovel laborers who engage in often necessary manual labor.¹⁹² Laborers rarely encounter dealers; "runners" were often employed to acquire objects from the laborers, plus whatever pieces deemed worthwhile along the way. All the pieces deemed profitable would then go to the "resident" who, as the name suggests, was generally a resident of the country with bureaucratic connections.¹⁹³ Residents interfaced with the dealers while also managing logistics, including organizing object smuggling across borders. Dealers would purchase objects

¹⁸⁹ Typescript notes from an interview with Edward Mayo by Anne Louise Schaffer, 1986, curatorial files, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

¹⁹⁰ "Correction," *The New York Times*, May 05, 1973, 83.

¹⁹¹ "Higford Griffiths vs. The New York Times." *The Daily Court Review*, 17 Dec. 1973, 3.

¹⁹² Coe, 273.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 275.

from the resident and sell them in their galleries or directly to collectors, like Griffiths and Fabacher. As Coe acknowledges, the system was not absolute; Stendahl's archaeological documentary duplicity is case and point. Nevertheless, many did function within the socio-economic hierarchy of antiquities trafficking.

Despite his periodic tomb raiding, Stendahl was primarily a dealer—he primarily functioned out of California, selling ancient Mesoamerican antiquities to the biggest names in the trade. Griffiths, on the other hand, likely purchased from multiple dealers in Mexico and the United States. Fabacher, who collected Ancient American art alongside Griffiths, was also involved as well. Unfortunately, Fabacher was not as involved with the MFAH, so he hardly appears in the archive. Yet Fabacher and Griffiths somehow fit within the ancient American antiquities trafficking circle Coe describes; it is the degree of involvement that is in question.

An Ancient American Explosion: The National Climate, 1840s-1960s

These details beg the larger question: who appreciated the value of these objects in the 20th century, and why? These actors—Stendahl, Griffiths, and Fabacher—were participants in a history more powerful and influential than themselves—a story that involves the *Seated Lord* and hundreds of other monuments in the world's museums and great private collections. Stendahl's involvement undoubtedly effected the ancient American antiquities market and museum collections across the United States, but he was not the impetus for the growing interest in ancient American art objects. While the history truly began with Spanish and Portuguese colonization of the Americas in the

15th and 16th centuries, this paper will not attempt to trace the history of colonialism and its relationship to collecting from start to finish. Instead, attention will be turned to late 19th through 20th century America and its complicated relationship with ancient American art, but mostly that of Mesoamerica.

American explorers John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood's *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and the Yucatan* (1841) and *Incidents of Travel in the Yucatan, Volumes I and II* (1843) inspired an interest in ancient Mesoamerica among Western audiences in the United States and Europe.¹⁹⁴ Stephens's prose, accompanied by Catherwood's illustrations, captivated audiences; new enthusiasts traveled to Latin America and returned home with artifacts, many of which eventually ended up in today's museum collections.¹⁹⁵ Facsimiles, specifically casts, of ancient American objects grew in popularity as well. The 1893 Chicago's World's Fair featured casts of Aztec and Maya monuments from Mexico City, Uxmal, and other major archaeological sites. Chicago's Columbian Exposition was followed by the 1915 Panama-California exhibition in San Diego, which includes casts and replicas of various Maya monuments.¹⁹⁶

The United States—Los Angeles in particular—witnessed the emergence of ancient American-inspired architecture in the early 20th century. The first instance of ancient American-inspired architecture in the U.S. was the Pan-American Union Building in Washinton D.C., but the trend expanded to other major cultural centers—Chicago,

¹⁹⁴ Coe, 271-272.

¹⁹⁵ Boone, 323.

¹⁹⁶ Diane Fane, "Reproducing the Pre-Columbian Past: Casts and Models in Exhibitions of Ancient America, 1824-1935" in *Collecting the Pre-Columbian Past: a Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 6th and 7th October 1990*, edited by Elizabeth Hill Boone (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1993) pp. 141-176, 163-164.

New York, and Los Angeles.¹⁹⁷ In Los Angeles, Frank Lloyd Wright's textile block homes and the Mayan Theater were executed in the 1920s. The interior architectural designs matched the exteriors—the buildings were ancient American-inspired from the inside-out. In fact, Stendahl eventually became Wright's ancient American art dealer of choice.¹⁹⁸ San Antonio houses an example of ancient American-inspired architecture as well: The Aztec Theater, built in 1926. As an architect, interior designer, and San Antonio resident, Griffiths likely took notice of the eclectic building.

Pan-Americanism and Franklin Delano Roosevelt's version of the Good Neighbor Policy changed ancient American art collecting in the United States. In 1933, the Roosevelt administration announced their Good Neighbor Policy, which, "sanctioned and encouraged a flurry of national and international cultural activities designed to enhance hemispheric understanding during the most threatening years of World War II."¹⁹⁹ This policy influenced major cultural institutions in terms of their collecting agendas and exhibitions. The following year, the Brooklyn Museum acquired over 4,500 Costa Rican antiquities from the dealer John Wise, which was probably part of curator Herbert J. Spinden's effort to grow the museum's ancient American collection, not to mention a profitable venture for Wise.²⁰⁰ Spinden also organized a major exhibition of

¹⁹⁷ Ruth Anne Phillips, "Pre-Columbian Revival': Defining and Exploring a U.S. Architectural Style, 1910-1940." *City University of New York*, 2007, 16.

¹⁹⁸ Dammann, 159.

¹⁹⁹ Holly Barnet-Sanchez, "The Necessity of Pre-Columbian Art in the United States: Appropriation and Transformation of Heritage, 1933-1945" in *Collecting the Pre-Columbian Past: a Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 6th and 7th October 1990*, edited by Elizabeth Hill. Boone (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1993) pp. 177-207, 179.

²⁰⁰ Coe 282; Fane 165.

Maya architectural models in 1935.²⁰¹ While these projects were almost certainly initiated prior to the Good Neighbor Policy, the timing was fortuitous and reflective of the broader cultural environment.

The Good Neighbor Policy's most direct art historical contribution was the 1940 Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibition, *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*. Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller, head of the Good Neighbor Policy's the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA), was simultaneously president of MoMA.²⁰² In collaboration with artist Miguel Covarrubias and Alfonso Caso, Director of Mexico's Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Rockefeller facilitated an exhibition that garnered international fame; with between 5,000 and 6,000 objects, it was "the first and most elaborate exhibition promoting Pan-American friendship."²⁰³ One of the four sections was dedicated to ancient American art, which actually included the Museo Nacional's Jonuta Panel (Figure). The bilingual catalogue was distributed nationally.

That same year, LACMA opened an exhibition dedicated entirely to ancient American art. Some of the objects were loaned by Stendahl to the museum.²⁰⁴ Yet it was the *Twenty Centuries* exhibition that motivated collectors nationally to purchase ancient American art, ideally of the same caliber as the pieces at MoMA. In a letter to a potential business partner, Stendahl exclaimed, "Now who the hell are you or I to presume to get pieces as fine as the ones shown at the Modern Museum?"²⁰⁵ Considering Dumbarton

²⁰¹ Ibid., 168-169.

²⁰² Barnet-Sanchez, 180.

²⁰³ Ibid., 182.

²⁰⁴ Miller and O'Neil, 162.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

Oak's Teotihuacan mural and Jaina figures were acquired from Stendahl, perhaps *Twenty Centuries* motivated him to be more discerning.²⁰⁶

Both Stendahl and Griffiths were embroiled in the U.S. ancient American-inspired zeitgeist. Stendahl's reactions to historical events are discernable and often archivally preserved. There are no Higford Griffiths biographies—a fate which awaits most people. Yet the broader cultural goings-on, framed by archival documents, help situate Griffiths in a cultural milieu. Griffiths was an architect and interior designer, so he was likely familiar with trends, both past and present. While the heyday of ancient American architectural revival had come and gone by 1940, Ancient American art still constituted fashionable decor, as demonstrated by Stendahl's famous clientele. It is impossible to say with certainty what motivated Griffiths; however, reconstructing the broader cultural context situates these characters in a historical moment that directed their preferences and actions.

²⁰⁶ Coe, 280.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This study's close analysis of *Seated Lord* revealed its centrality to multiple Palenque art historical discourses—specifically the city's tri-figure tradition and the Tlaloc cult—as well as its more recent role in the development of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's Ancient American collection. By considering *Seated Lord* and its fellow fragments as part of the tri-figure panel grouping, a revisitation of Schele's 1979 theory was initiated. The panel's Tlaloc iconography incited in-depth research into Palenque's examples of Teotihuacan-Tlaloc references, revealing what may be another royal heirloom headdress connected to Palenque's Tlaloc cult. In addition to investigating *Seated Lord*'s historical meaning, an investigation into the panel's provenance revealed how Higford Griffiths—a British ex-patriot, World War II veteran, and interior designer—influenced one of the most historically significant American art historical figures to bring Ancient American art to Houston.

The aforementioned topics, however, require significant additional research. Although this study initiated a revisitation of the tri-figure panel tradition, it requires a more significant evaluation. I proposed the Palace stucco panels are part of the tradition, but perhaps they are in a category of their own due to the stucco medium. Also, a more in-depth study into God L and Tlaloc's relationship would be a valuable contribution to a further understanding of the panel. Bassie-Sweet dedicated a section of *Maya Gods of War to God L at Palenque*, but this is the sole source dedicated to the deity's relationship to Tlaloc in Mesoamerican scholarship. Additional perspectives—and ideally, an art historical one—would be a valuable contribution to the field. And finally, an

investigation of the MFAH's archival files on *The Olmec Tradition* might reveal additional information about Griffiths's involvement in the landmark exhibition.

Object-based research may initially appear limiting in comparison to a broader, topical study, but privileging an individual object can extend outward into numerable fruitful lines of inquiry. An artwork encapsulates elements of its time which we, as contemporary scholars, can tease out to reveal how an object's iconography, style, and provenance reflects the artwork's evolving meaning. This approach, in turn, emphasizes the dynamic nature of art; although many pieces are stationary, an artwork's meaning is dynamic, never static. Hopefully, this study of *Seated Lord from a Relief Panel* has effectively communicated the value of this approach in tandem with useful insights into the panel's intended meaning, historical context, and modern biography.

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FIGURES

Figure 1. Seated Lord from a Relief Panel. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. (Photograph by author.)



Figure 2. Seated Lord and associated panel fragments. (Drawing by Donald Hales. From "Reassembling a Lost Maya Masterpiece," by Anne Louise Schaffer, *Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Bulletin* 10, no. 2, 1987.)

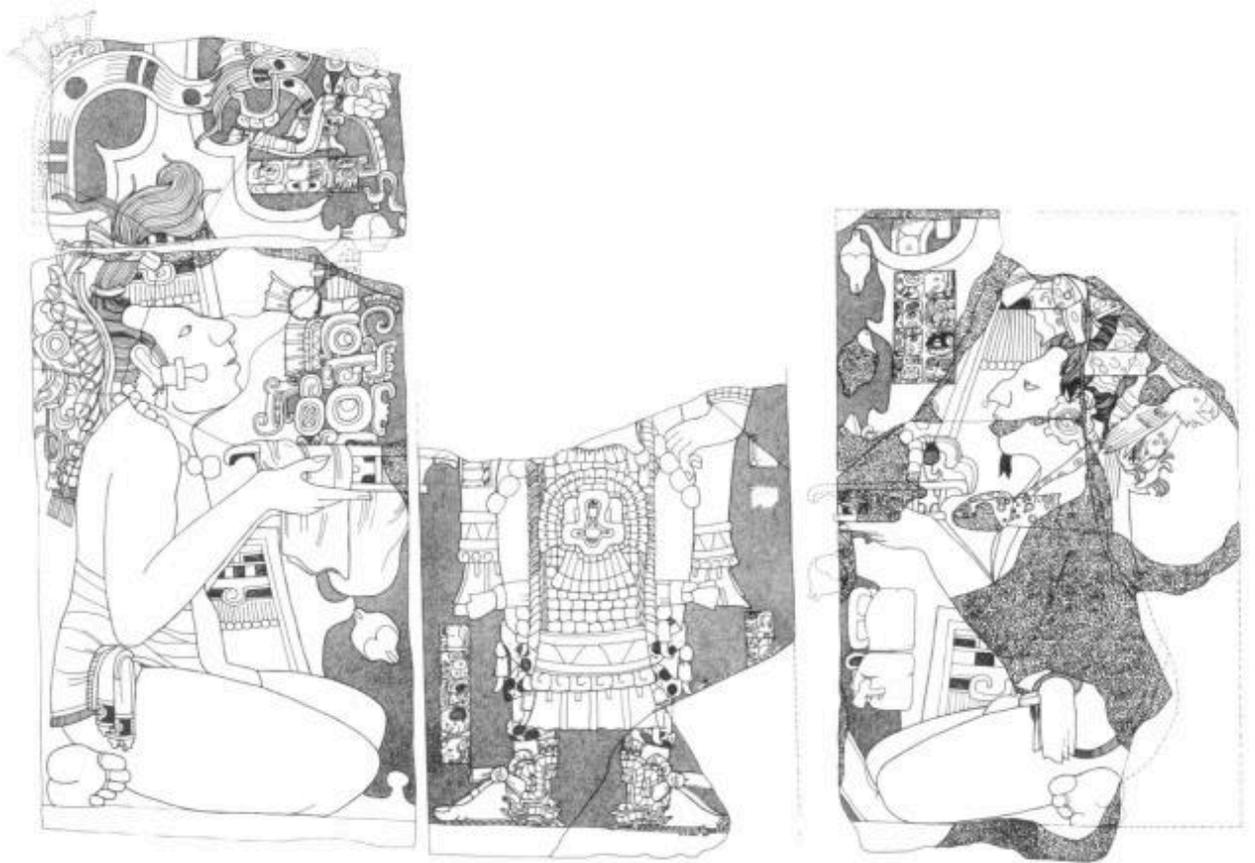
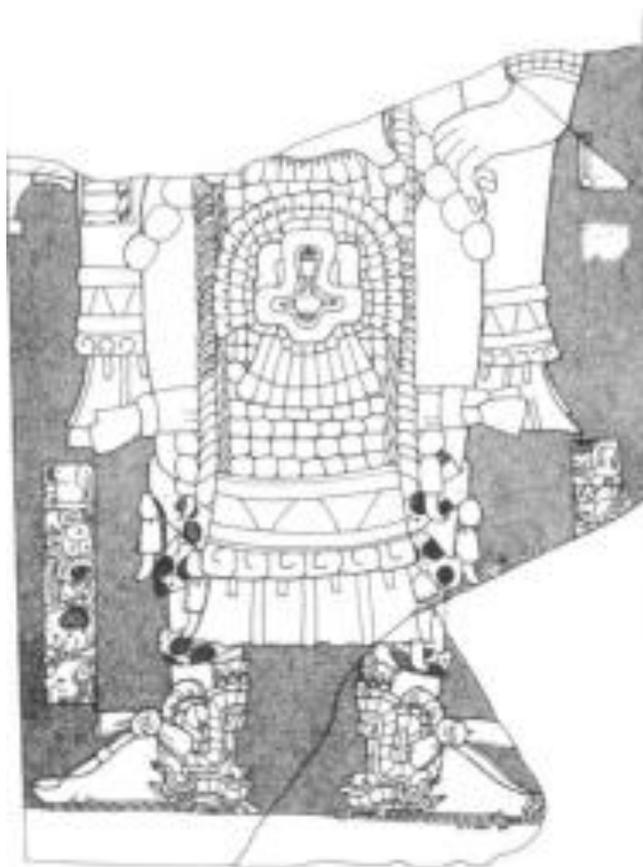


Figure 3. Close-up of the central panel. (Drawing by Donald Hales. From "Reassembling a Lost Maya Masterpiece," by Anne Louise Schaffer, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Bulletin 10, no. 2, 1987.)



*Figure 4. Close-up of the Jonuta Panel, Museo Nacional de Antropologia e Historia.
(Drawing by Donald Hales. From "Reassembling a Lost Maya Masterpiece," by Anne
Louise Schaffer, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Bulletin 10, no. 2, 1987.)*



Figure 5. Map of the Maya region featuring Palenque and other major Maya polities. (Map by Arianna Campiani. In “The Mausoleum Architectural Project: Reinterpreting Palenque’s Temple of the Inscription Through 3-D Data Driven Architectural Analysis” by Adrianna Campiani, Rodrigo Liendo, and Nicola Lercari. In *Ancient Mesoamerica*, March 2021.)



*Figure 6 Photograph of Palenque's ceremonial center and the North Group.
(Photograph by Michael Gray. From "The Pre-Hispanic City and National Park of
Palenque," UNESCO website.)*



Figure 7. Map of Palenque Archaeological Site. (Map by Ed Barnhart as part of the Palenque Mapping Project (PMP), 2000.)

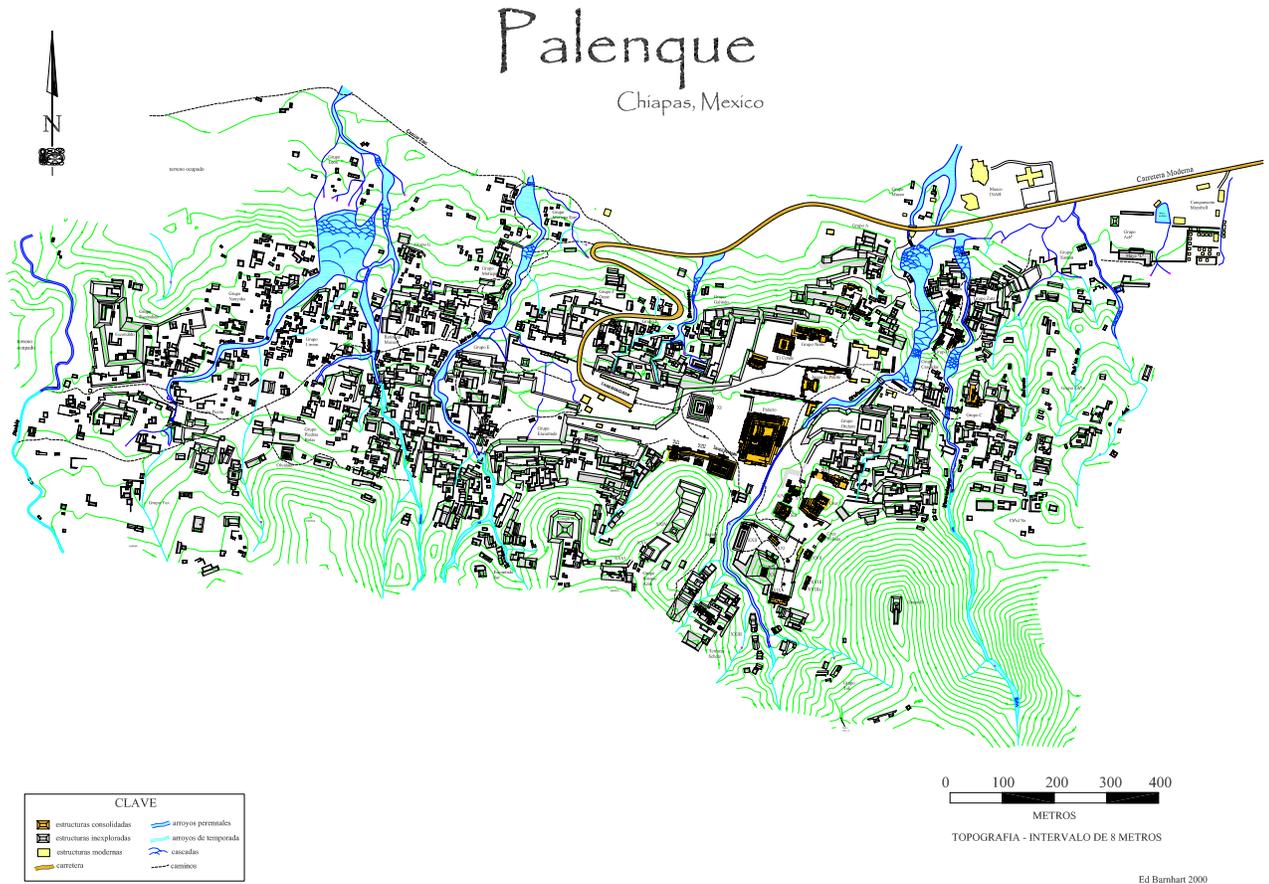


Figure 8. Drawing of House A, Pier B. (Drawing by Merle Greene Robertson. In *The Sculpture of Palenque, Vol. II: The Early Buildings of the Palace and the Wall Paintings*, by Merle Greene Robertson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.)

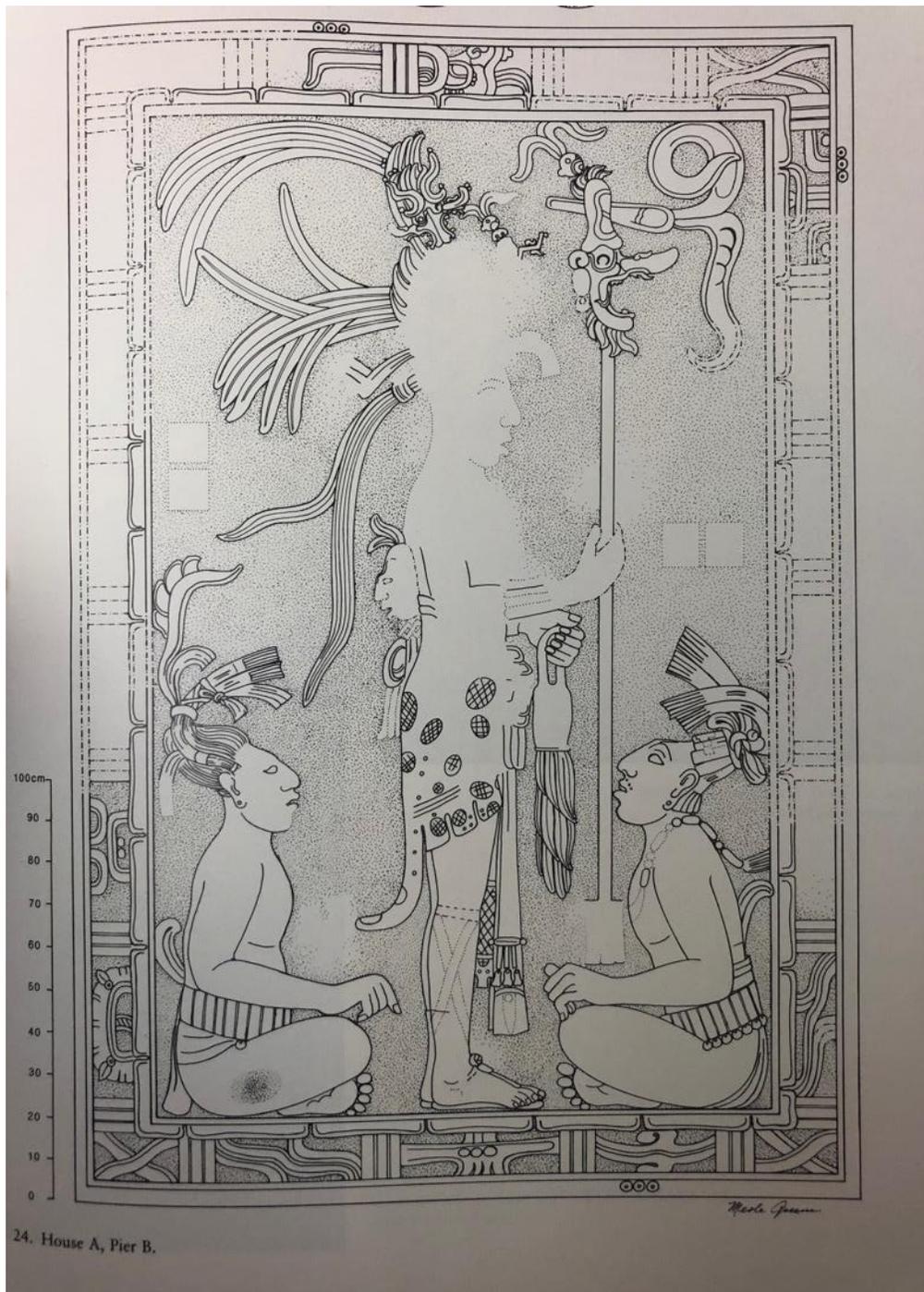


Figure 9. Drawing of House A, Pier C. (Drawing by Merle Greene Robertson. In *The Sculpture of Palenque, Vol. II: The Early Buildings of the Palace and the Wall Paintings*, by Merle Greene Robertson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.)

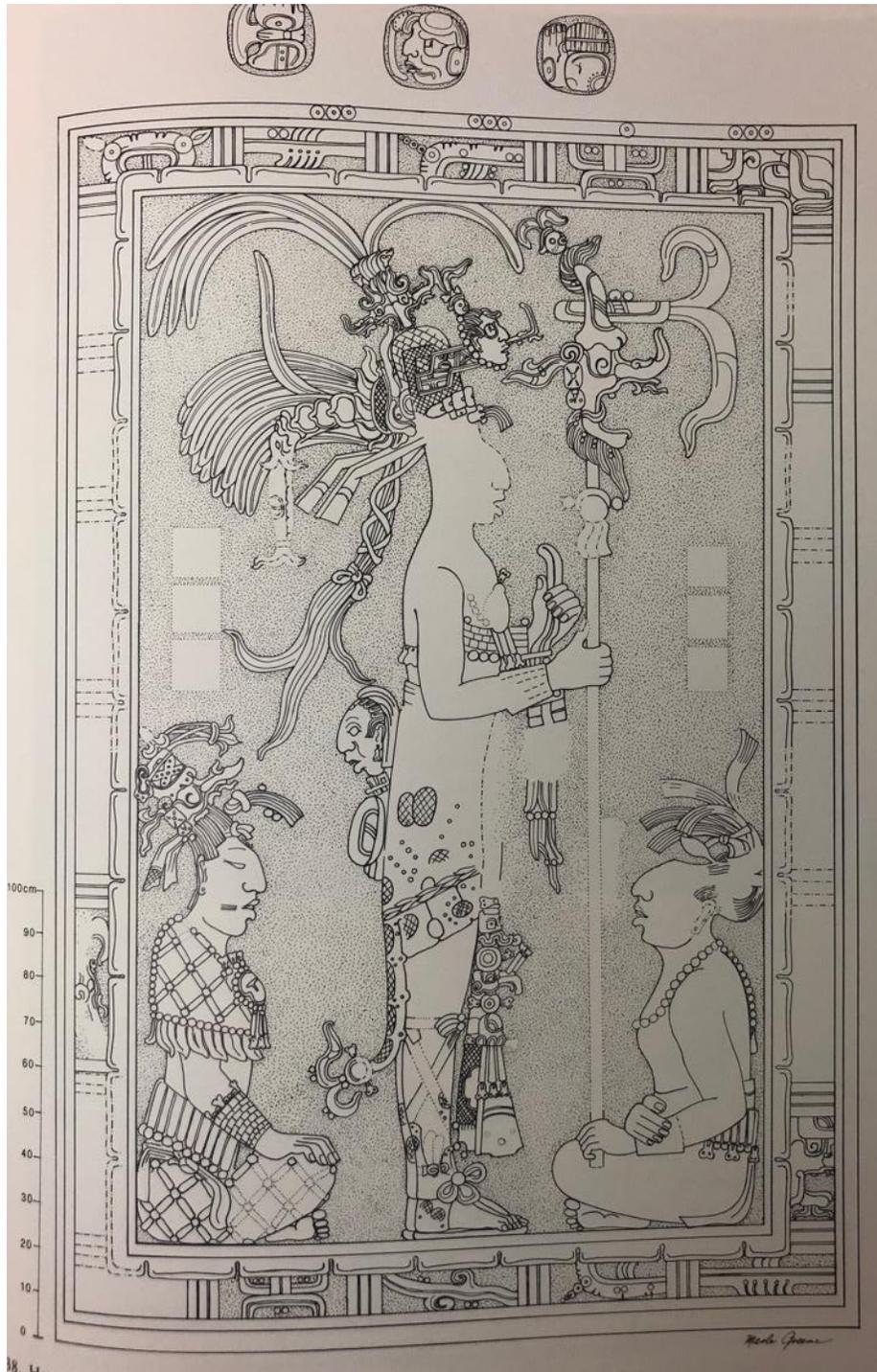


Figure 10. Drawing of House A, Pier D. (Drawing by Merle Greene Robertson. In *The Sculpture of Palenque, Vol. II: The Early Buildings of the Palace and the Wall Paintings*, by Merle Greene Robertson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.)

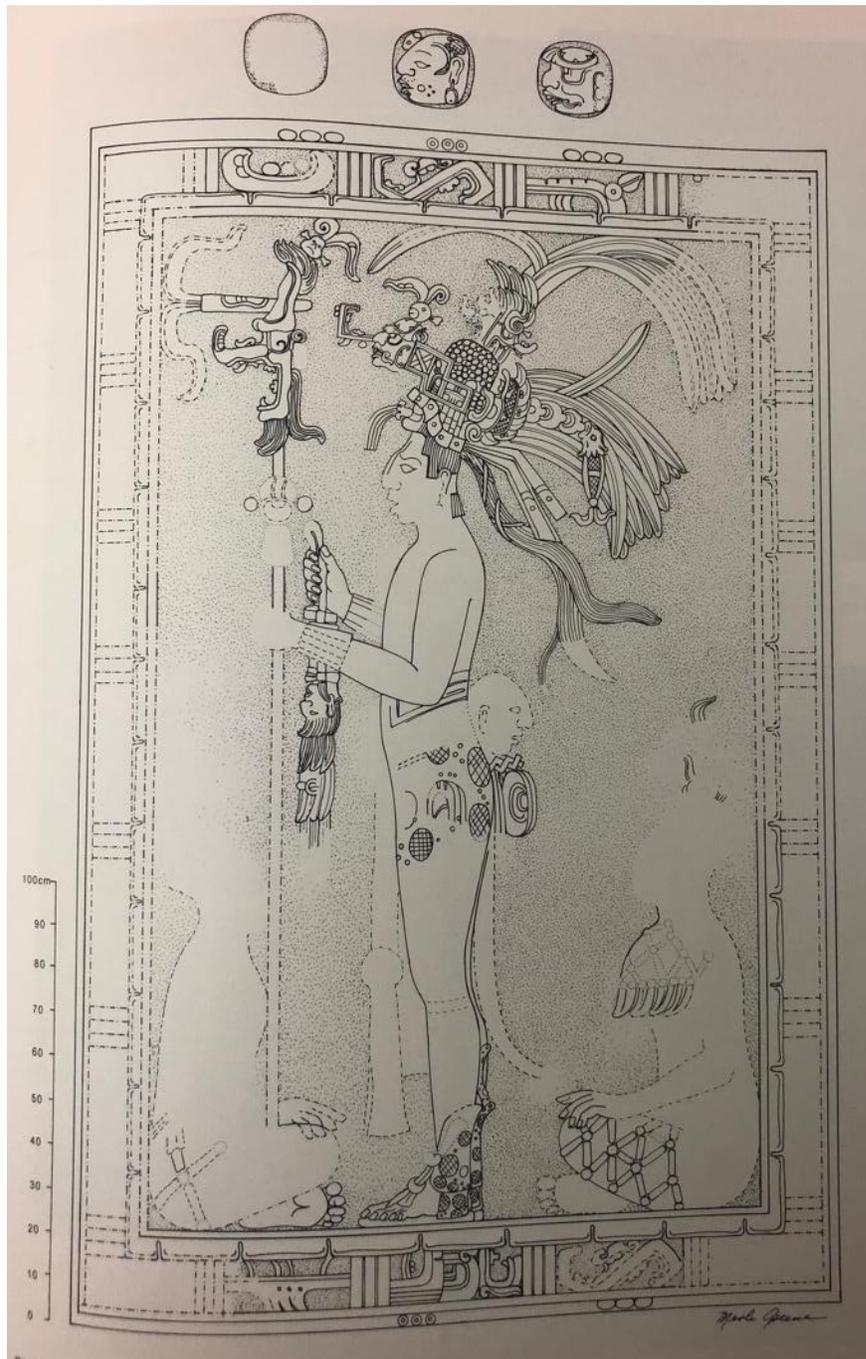


Figure 11. Drawing of House A, Pier E. (Drawing by Merle Greene Robertson. In *The Sculpture of Palenque, Vol. II: The Early Buildings of the Palace and the Wall Paintings*, by Merle Greene Robertson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.)

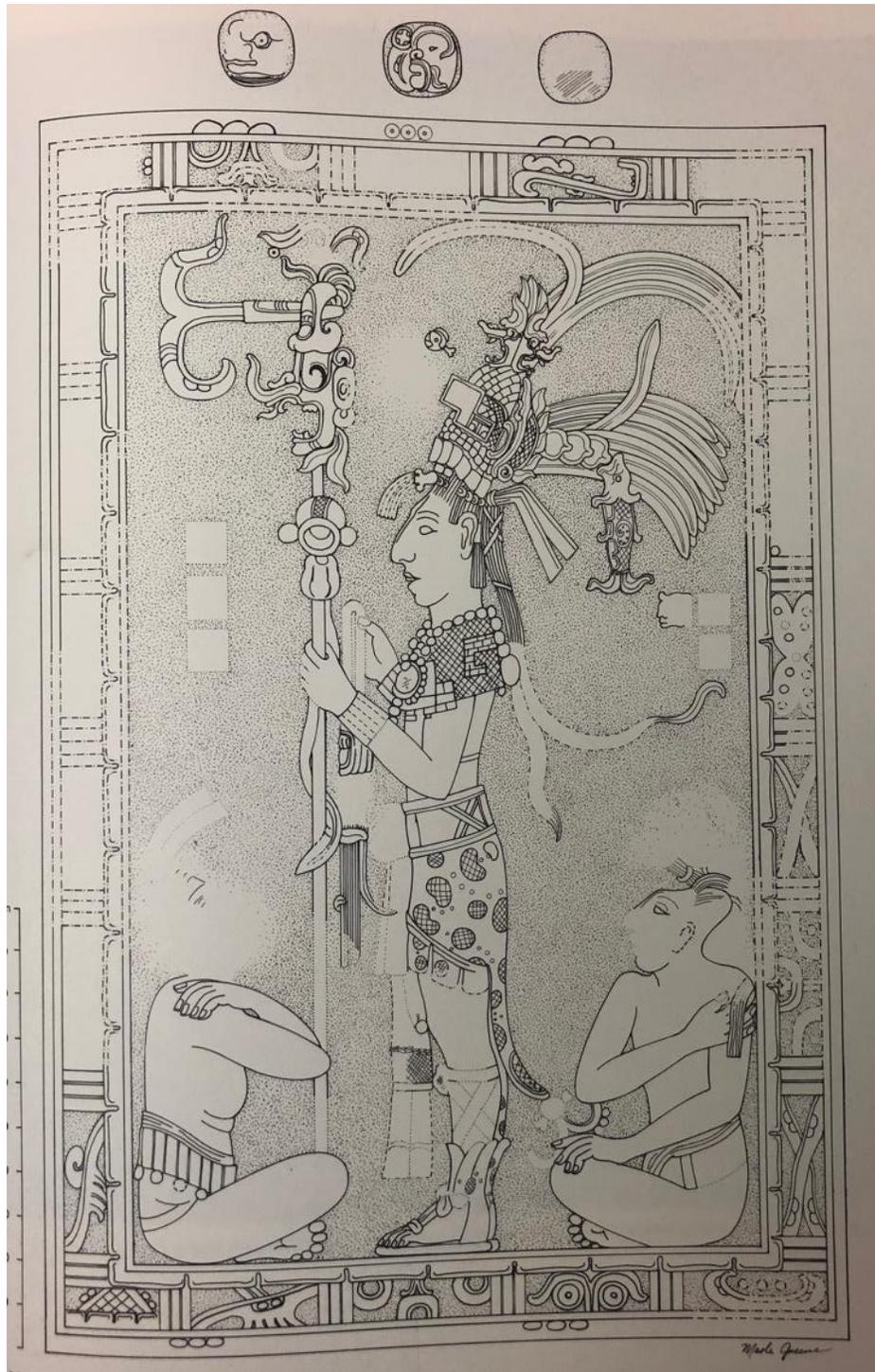
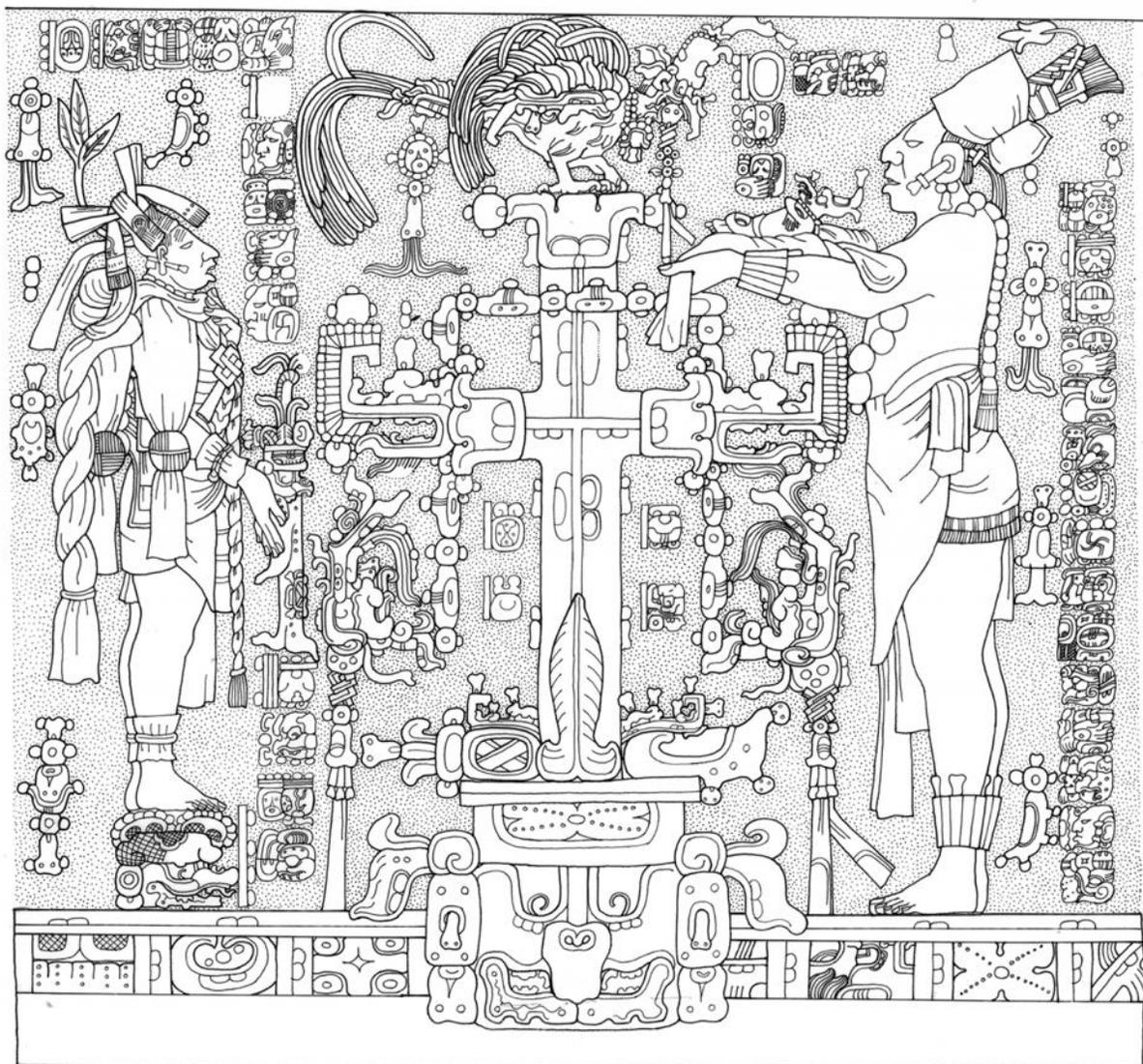


Figure 12. The Oval Palace Tablet. (Drawing by Linda Schele. From "The Schele Drawing Collection," Ancient Americas at LACMA website, 1975.)



Figure 13. Panel from the Temple of the Cross at Palenque. (Drawing by Linda Schele. From "The Schele Drawing Collection," Ancient Americas at LACMA website, 1975.)



SD 170 fig 6 Temple of the Cross

Figure 14. Panel from the Temple of the Foliated Cross at Palenque. (Drawing by Linda Schele. From "The Schele Drawing Collection," Ancient Americas at LACMA website, 1975.)

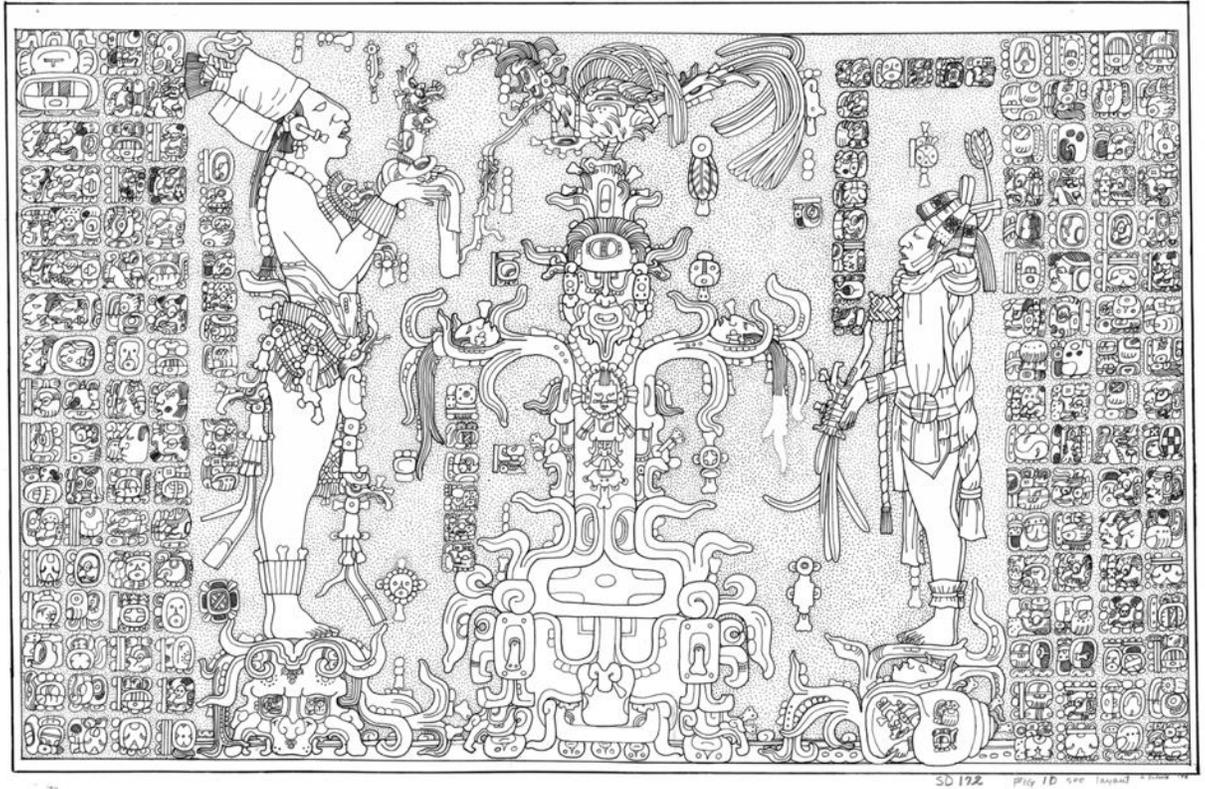


Figure 15. Panel from the Temple of the Sun at Palenque. (Drawing by Linda Schele. From "The Schele Drawing Collection," Ancient Americas at LACMA website, 1975.)

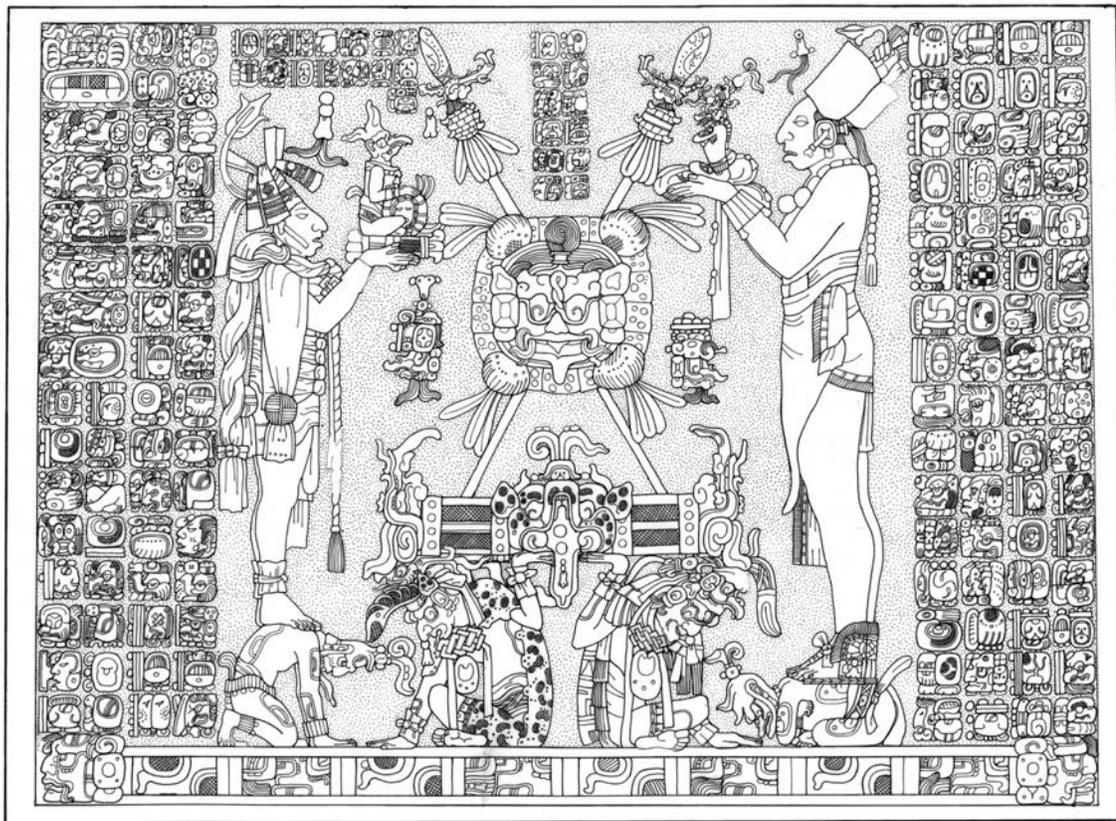


Figure 16. The Palace Tablet from Palace House A-D at Palenque. (Drawing by Linda Schele. In "Genealogical Documentation on the Tri-figure Panels at Palenque," in *Tercera Mesa Redonda de Palenque*, Vol. IV. Pre-Columbian Art Research Center, 1979.)



Figure 17. The Tablet of the Slaves (Drawing by Merle Greene Robertson. In "Genealogical Documentation on the Tri-figure Panels at Palenque," in *Tercera Mesa Redonda de Palenque, Vol. IV. Pre-Columbian Art Research Center, 1979.*)



Figure 18. Temple XIX Platform Relief. (Drawing by David Stuart. In The Inscriptions from Temple XIX at Palenque: A Commentary. San Francisco, CA: Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute, 2005)

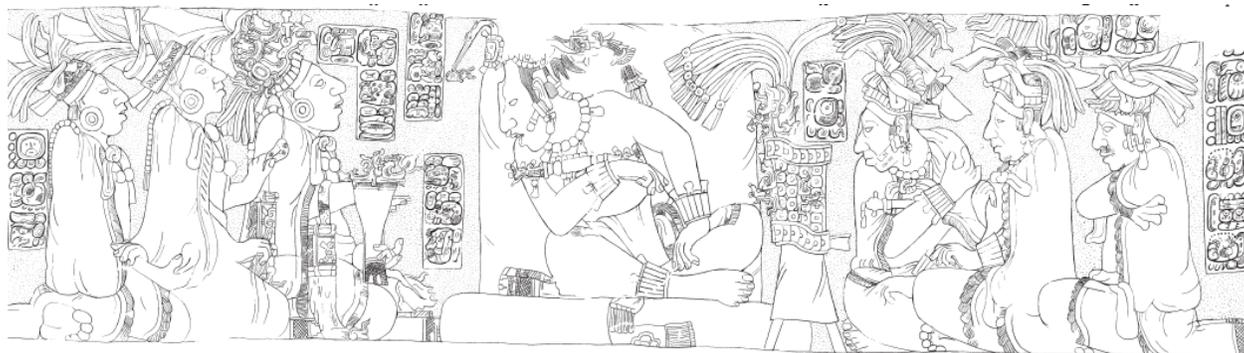


Figure 19. Temple XIX Jamb Relief. (Photograph by Jorge Pérez de Lara. In The Inscriptions from Temple XIX at Palenque: A Commentary. San Francisco, CA: Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute, 2005.)



Figure 20. Bodega 86 Fragment from Palenque. (Drawing by Linda Schele. In "Genealogical Documentation on the Tri-figure Panels at Palenque," from Tercera Mesa Redonda de Palenque, Vol. IV. Pre-Columbian Art Research Center, 1979)



Figure 21. Tlaloc Façade of Temple II at Palenque. (Photograph by Verica Ristic. In "Mexico and Central America 2008, part 12 (Palenque, San Cristóbal de las Casas)," <https://www.svudapodji.com>, 2008.)



Figure 22. Tikal Stele 31. (Drawing by David Stuart. In "Some Working Notes on the Text of Tikal Stela 31," Mesoweb, 2011.)

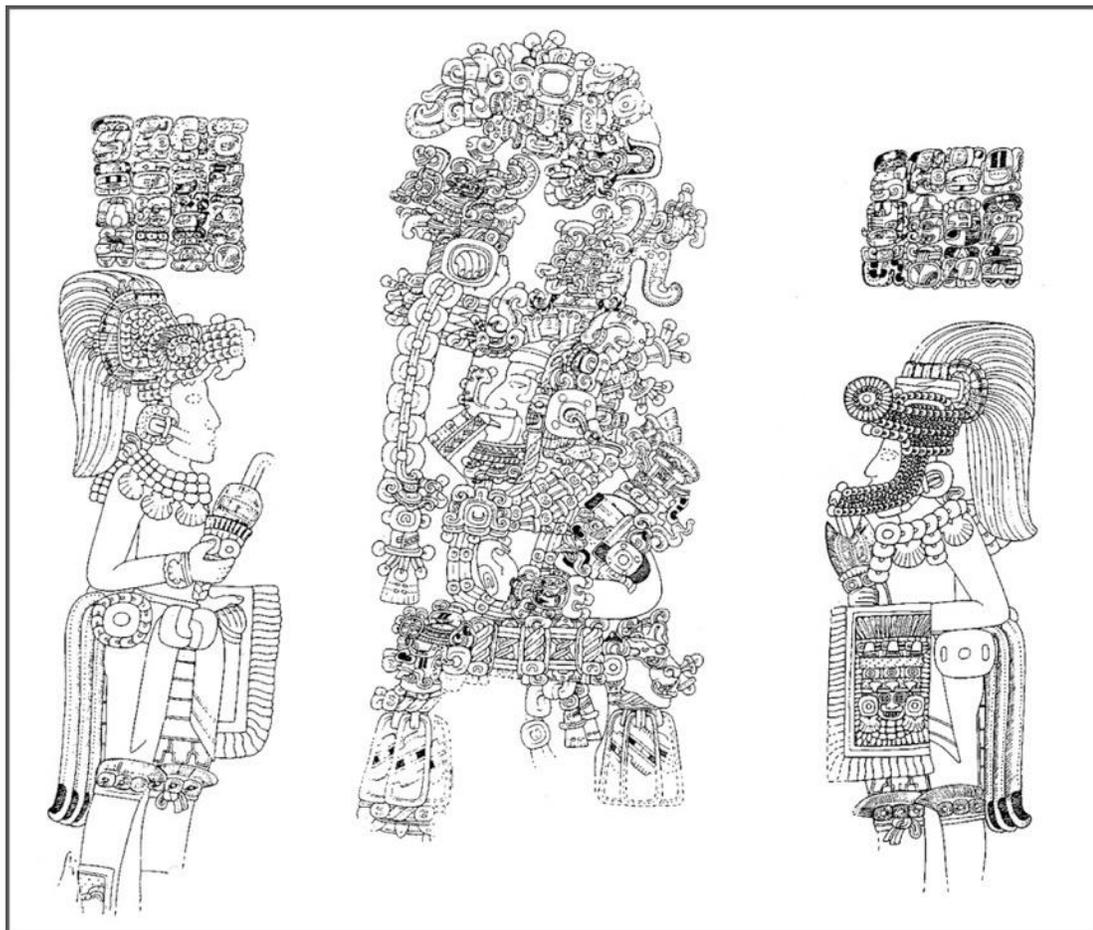


Figure 23. Tlaloc Helmet from the Temple of the Feathered Serpent at Teotihuacan.
From "The Schele Drawing Collection," Ancient Americas at LACMA website, n.d.)

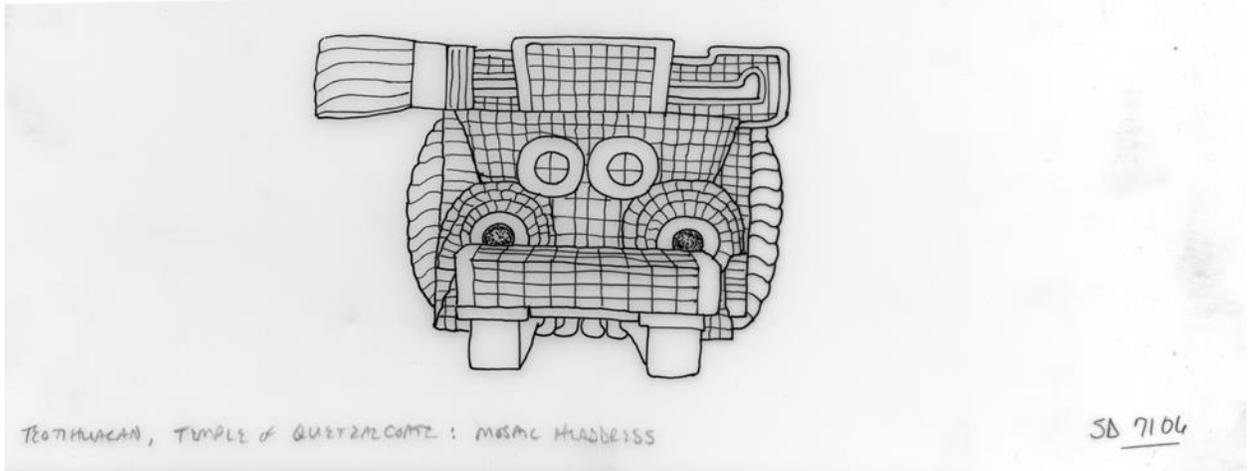
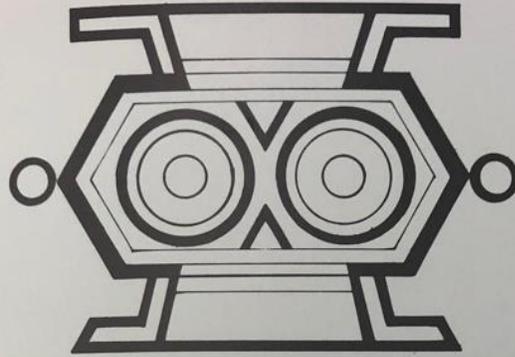
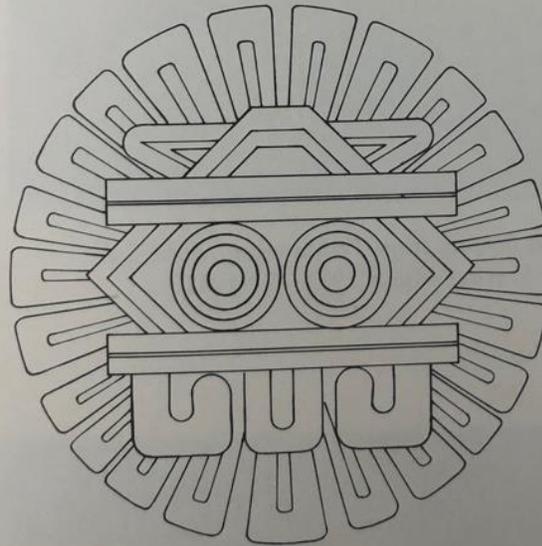


Figure 24. Palenque Tlaloc from Palace mural in comparison to an isolated element of a Piedras Negras headdress. (Drawing by Merle Greene Robertson. In *The Sculpture of Palenque, Vol. II: The Early Buildings of the Palace and the Wall Paintings*, by Merle Greene Robertson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.)



53a. Palenque Tlaloc, Wall 4, B1.



53b. Piedras Negras Tlaloc in a feather headdress.

*Figure 25. Headdress of Palenque Palace House C, Pier E. (Drawing by Merle Greene Robertson. In *The Sculpture of Palenque, Vol. II: The Early Buildings of the Palace and the Wall Paintings*, by Merle Greene Robertson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.)*

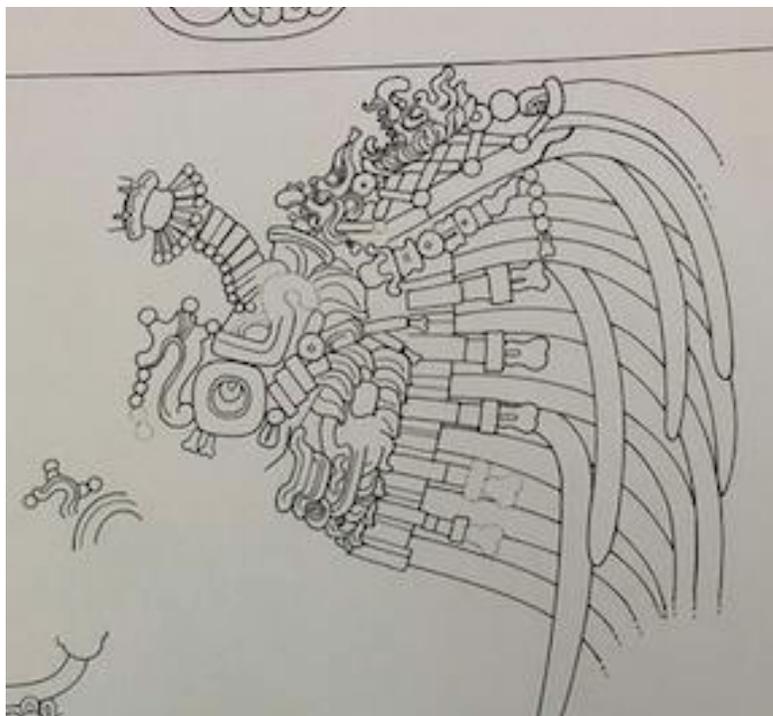


Figure 26. Close-up of adult Kan Bahlam II from the Temple of the Cross's panel. Note the Mexican year sign encircled in red. (Drawing by Linda Schele. From "The Schele Drawing Collection," Ancient Americas at LACMA website, 1975.)

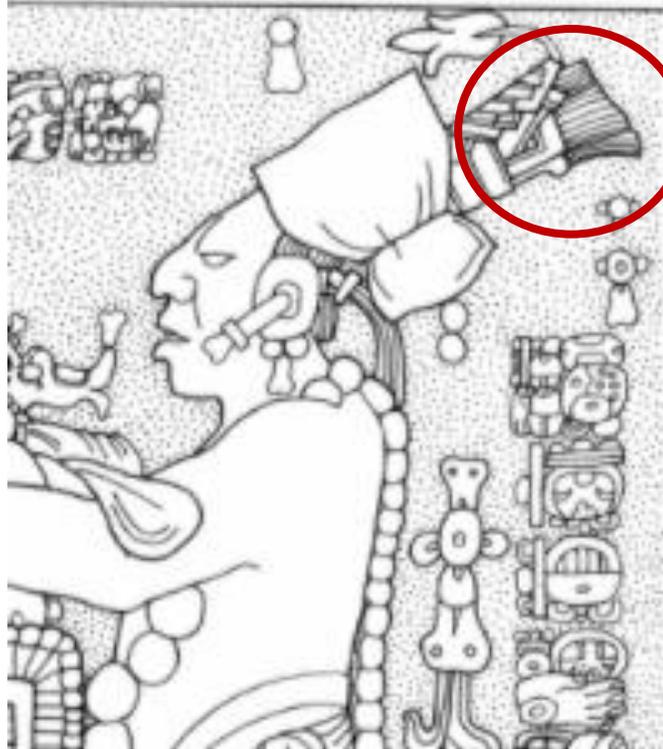
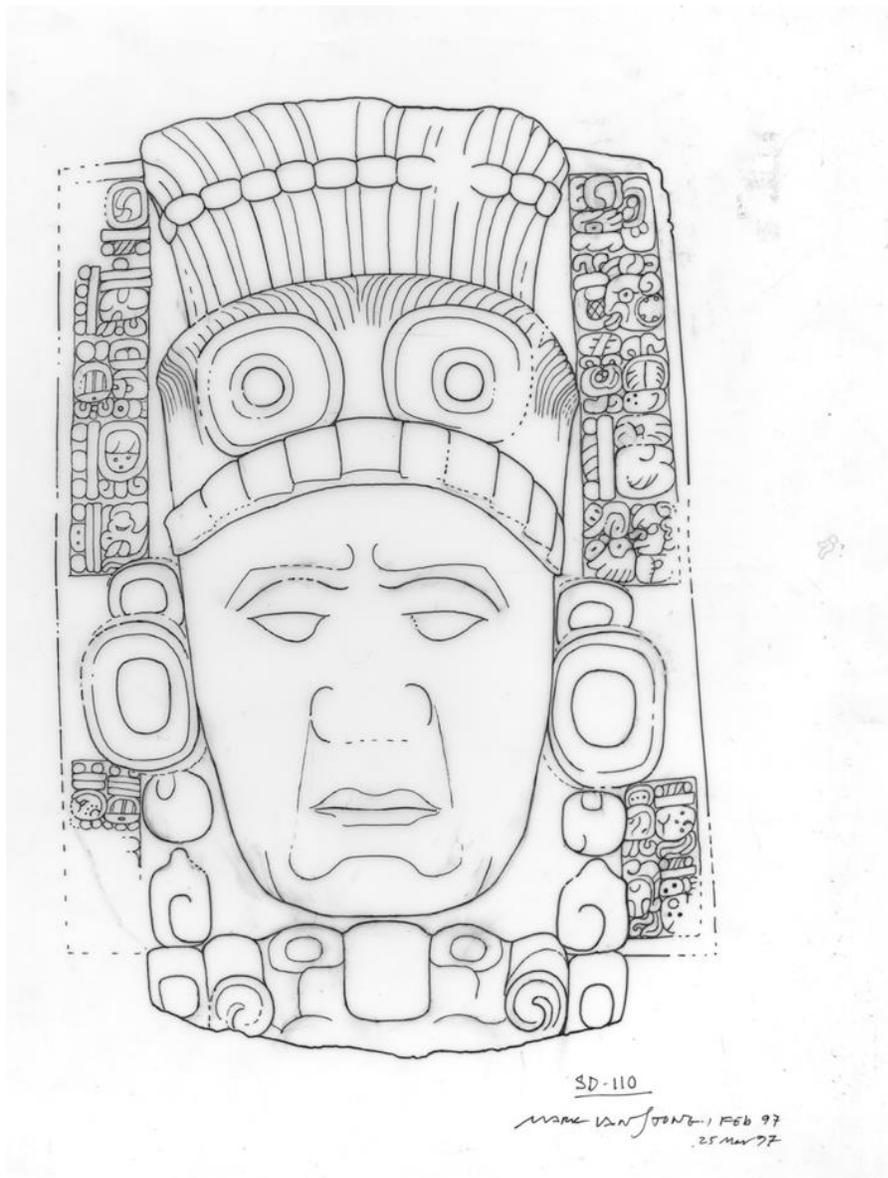


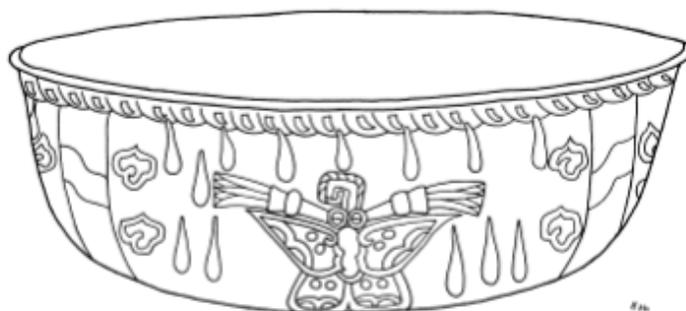
Figure 27. Panel from Palenque Temple XVII. (Photographer unknown. From K'inich Kan Bahlam II, Wikipedia.)



Figure 28. Stone Censer, Palenque Museo de Sitio. (Drawing by Mark Van Stone. From "The Schele Drawing Collection," Ancient Americas at LACMA website, 1997.)



*Figure 29. Frescoed bowl with Butterfly Tlaloc. (Drawing by Mareike Sattler after Laurette Sejourne, *Arqueología de Teotihuacán, la cerámica*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1966. In *The Teotihuacan Trinity* by Annabeth Headrick. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007.)*



*Figure 30. Tlaloc butterfly from a mural fragment, Room 12, Zone 5-A, Teotihuacan.
(Drawing by Jenni Bongard after Hasso von Winning, *La iconografía de Teotihuacan: los dioses y los signos*, Mexico: UNAM, 1987. In *The Teotihuacan Trinity* by Annabeth Headrick. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007.)*



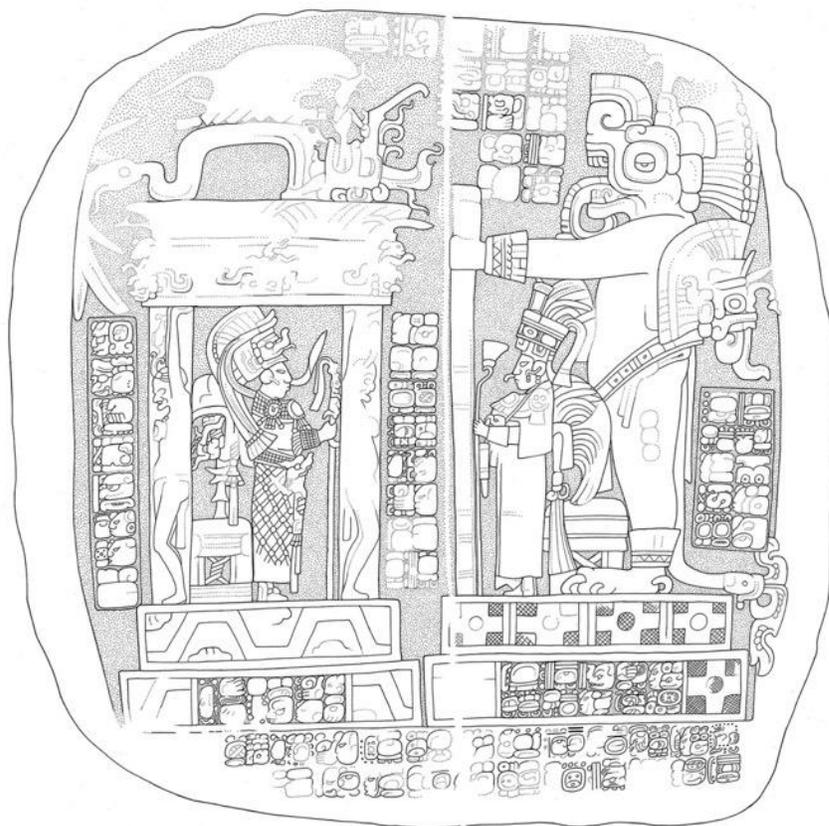
*Figure 31. Ceramic censer. Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico.
(Photographer unknown.)*



Figure 32. Yaxchilan Lintel 25, British Museum, London. (Photographer unknown. From British Museum website.)



Figure 33. La Corona Panel 6, Dallas Museum of Art. (Drawing by David Stuart. From "New Drawing of a La Corona Panel," by David Stuart, Mayadecipherment.com, 2013.)



Drawing by David Stuart

La Corona, Panel 6

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Figure 34. Vase with Mythological Resurrection Scene (K3844), Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. (Drawing by Linda Schele. From "The Schele Drawing Collection," Ancient Americas at LACMA website, n.d.)

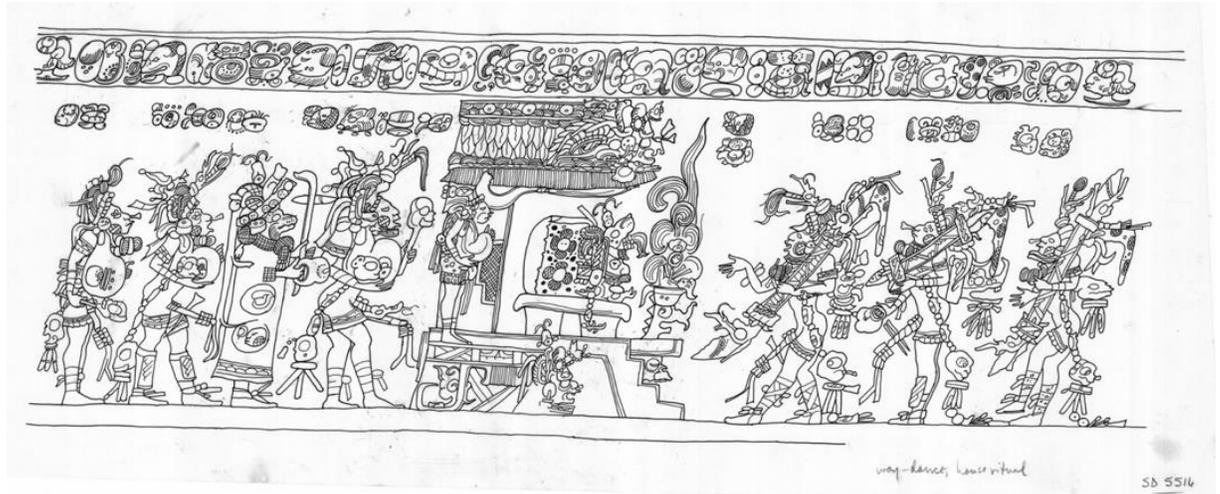


Figure 35. Dos Pilas Stele 16. (Drawing by Linda Schele. From "The Linda Schele Drawings Collection," FAMSI Resources, 1986)

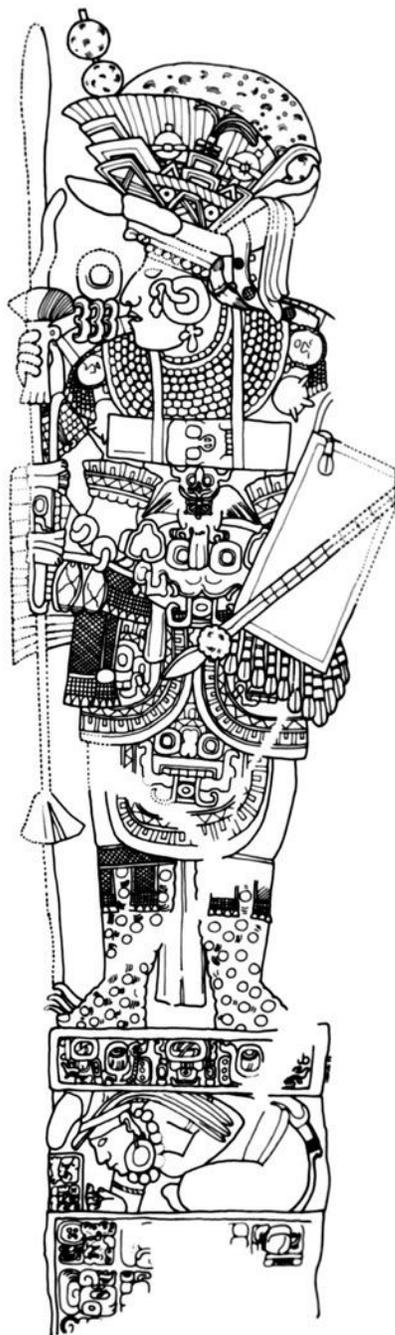


Figure 36. *Aguateca Stele 2.* (Drawing by Ian Graham. From *Mesoamerica After the Decline of Teotihuacan, A.D. 700-900*, edited by Richard Diehl and Janet Berlo. Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1989.)

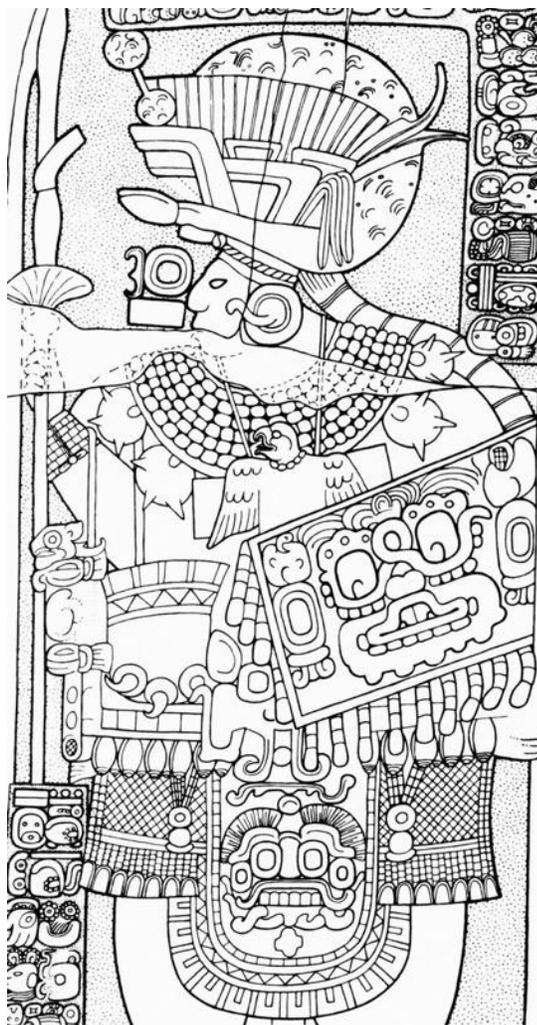


Figure 37. Rollout of polychrome vessel (K6809). (Photograph by Justin Kerr. From *The Maya Vase Database*, FAMSI.org, 2010.)



K6809

Figure 38. Rollout of the Vase of the Seven Gods (K2796). (Photograph by Justin Kerr.
From *The Maya Vase Database*, FAMSI.org, 2001.)

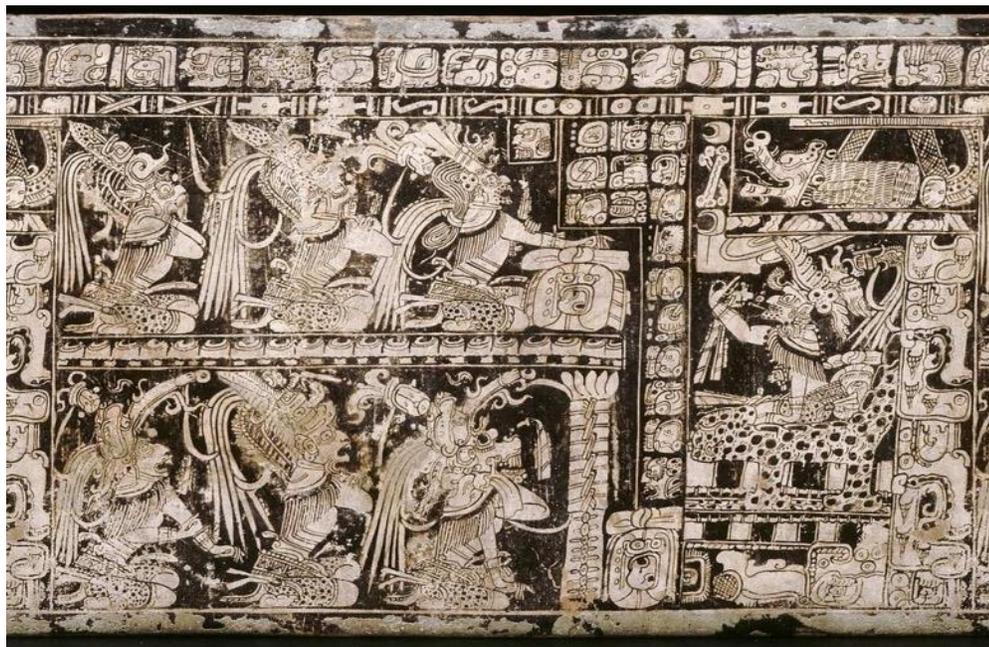


Figure 39. Rollout of The Princeton Vase (K0511). (Photograph by Justin Kerr. From The Maya Vase Database, FAMSI.org, 2000.)

