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## The Sacred Tree of the Ancient Maya

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Figure 1. The “tree of life” stela, Stela 5, Izapa, Mexico, 200 B.C.–A.D. 100.

# **The Sacred Tree of the Ancient Maya**

Allen J. Christenson

**Abstract:** Sacred trees, representing the power of life to grow from the underworld realm of the dead, are a common motif in the art and literature of the ancient Maya of Mesoamerica. Such trees are similar in concept to the tree of life described in the Book of Mormon, as well as to the mythic traditions of many other contemporary world cultures. Hieroglyphic inscriptions and sixteenth-century highland Maya texts describe a great world tree that was erected at the dawn of the present age to stand as the axis point of the cosmos. In its fruit-laden form, it personified the god of creation who fathered the progenitors of the Maya royal dynasty.

Depictions of sacred trees in the art of ancient America have fascinated generations of Latter-day Saint scholars because of their possible association with the tree of life mentioned in the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 8:10–36; 15:21–2). One of many such trees may be seen on the famous Stela 5 from Izapa (fig. 1), a monument of great importance because of its early date (likely a century or two before the birth of Christ) and unusually complex imagery. Much has been written in an honest search for the meaning these artistic representations of sacred trees held for their ancient creators. The work of V. Garth Norman on the monuments of Izapa has been particularly thorough and insightful, and

I can add little to his interpretations.<sup>1</sup> Norman reiterates the long-held belief that the tree depicted on Izapa Stela 5 is related to the fruit-bearing tree of life mentioned in the Book of Mormon, a symbol that Nephi associated with the afterlife and the sacrifice of the Son of God (1 Nephi 11:4–7).

Following the decline and eventual abandonment of Izapa, the ancient Maya of Mexico and Central America continued to depict sacred trees in their art and refer to them in their literature. These ancient sources can enlighten our understanding of Maya concepts of creation, the afterlife, and spiritual rebirth. As it is in the Book of Mormon, the sacred tree of the Maya was associated with a great creator deity, who was sacrificed and subsequently reborn to new life.

One of the principal keys that helps us to understand the nature of Maya cosmology and the afterlife was discovered more than a century ago. In the mid-1850s, an Austrian traveler named Carl Scherzer stumbled across a long-forgotten manuscript copy of the *Popol Vuh* in the archives of the University of San Carlos in Guatemala City. This book is of inestimable value, since it is a transcription of a pre-Columbian text made by members of the ruling highland Maya lineage soon after the Spanish Conquest in the mid-sixteenth century. Because it was transcribed using Latin script, the contents could be read relatively easily and indeed had been translated into Spanish in the early 1700s by a Franciscan monk named Francisco Ximénez. Scherzer's publication of the Spanish translation of the text in 1857, as well as a rather flowery French version published by Father Charles Étienne Basseur de Bourbourg four years later, caused a sensation in Europe. The *Popol Vuh* is still the only known pre-Columbian Maya text that has survived in a form that has been transcribed in a Western script. It is available today in a number of English versions, the most recent by the ethnologist Dennis Tedlock.<sup>2</sup>

The first half of the *Popol Vuh* contains a collection of highland Maya legends concerning the creation of the world, the

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<sup>1</sup> V. Garth Norman, *Izapa Sculpture*, Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation Number 30 (Provo, Utah: New World Archaeological Foundation, 1973, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life*, rev. ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

nature of life and death, and an extensive description of the underworld and its perils. A miraculous life-giving tree is a major focus of the mythic section. The tale of this tree begins with the account of a hero named One Hunahpu who often spent his days playing an ancient Maya ball game with his brother. Unfortunately, the noise of the game disturbed the lords of the underworld (a place called Xibalba), who lived beneath the ball court. The chief lords of the underworld, named One Death and Seven Death, were determined to destroy the brothers and therefore summoned them to their realm. After a number of trials, One Death and Seven Death overcame One Hunahpu and sacrificed him by beheading him. Although they buried the body in the underworld ball court, they placed his head in the branches of a dead tree. Immediately, the tree sprang to life and bore a white fruit resembling the fleshless skull of One Hunahpu:

And when his head was put in the fork of the tree, the tree bore fruit. It would not have had any fruit, had not the head of One Hunahpu been put in the fork of the tree.

This is the calabash,<sup>3</sup> as we call it today, or “the skull of One Hunahpu,” as it is said.

And then One and Seven Death were amazed at the fruit of the tree. The fruit grows out everywhere, and it isn't clear where the head of One Hunahpu is; now it looks just the way the calabashes look. All the Xibalbans see this, when they come to look.

The state of the tree loomed large in their thoughts, because it came about at the same time the head of One Hunahpu was put in the fork.<sup>4</sup>

The lords of the underworld were so astonished and fearful of the power of the tree that they forbade anyone to approach it. Eventually, tales of the miraculous tree and the sweetness<sup>5</sup> of its fruit reached the ears of a daughter of one of the underworld

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<sup>3</sup> The calabash tree (*Crescentia cujete*) yields a large, whitish to light-green gourd with a hard, bonelike rind that is sometimes dried and used to make bowls. It is approximately the size of a human skull.

<sup>4</sup> Tedlock, *Popol Vuh*, 97–8.

<sup>5</sup> The K'iche' word used in this phrase is *q'us* (“sweet, delicious”).

lords. She followed the path to the tree and was about to pluck one of its fruits when the skull of One Hunahpu spoke to her, cautioning her to partake of the fruit only if she was certain of her desire. She assured One Hunahpu that this was indeed her wish. Before she could touch the fruit, however, she became miraculously impregnated by a drop of One Hunahpu's saliva, which he spat into her palm. The young woman was then admonished that by this action life would be renewed through her, never to be lost again. The maiden then climbed up to the world of the living where she bore twin sons, who eventually grew to maturity and defeated the lords of death and rescued the bones of their father.

### **The World Tree and the Ancient Maya**

The essential elements of the story of One Hunahpu and the miraculous underworld tree were well-known among the ancient Maya many centuries before the *Popol Vuh* was compiled. Indeed, the myth appears to have been the central focus of southern Mesoamerican cosmology since before the birth of Christ. Numerous painted ceramic vases discovered near the ruins of Maya cities in southern Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize show the great culture hero confronting the lords of death, his sacrifice, his head hanging in a fruit-laden tree, and his eventual resurrection as a god of life and abundance.

Although the *Popol Vuh* account of One Hunahpu ends with his restoration to life in the underworld, earlier hieroglyphic inscriptions provide additional information. Hun-Nal-Ye was the ancient lowland Maya version of One Hunahpu.<sup>6</sup> Like One Hunahpu, the sacrificed Hun-Nal-Ye is shown in Maya art with his head hung in a flowering tree in the underworld (fig. 2). With the aid of his two sons, he was able to arise from the underworld through the cracked carapace of a great turtle, representative of the earth floating on the surface of the primordial sea (fig. 3).

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<sup>6</sup> Mary E. Miller and Karl A. Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion* (New York: Thames-Hudson, 1993), 69–70; Francis Robicsek and Donald Hales, "A Ceramic Codex Fragment: The Sacrifice of Xbalanque," in *Maya Iconography*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson and Gillett G. Griffin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 260–76.

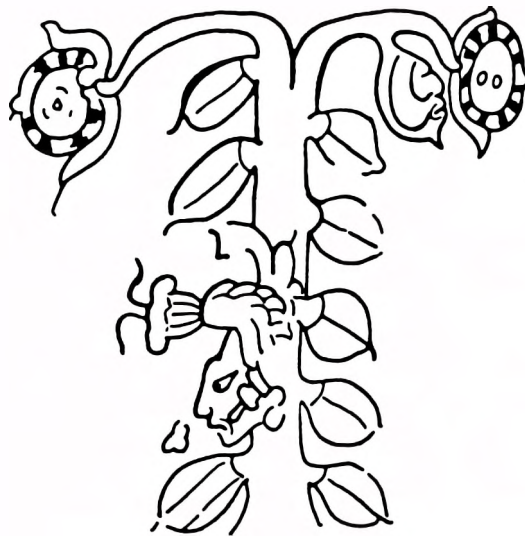


Figure 2. Head of One Hunahpu in a fruit-laden tree; detail from Late Classic Maya polychrome cylinder vessel, A.D. 650–820.



Figure 3. Resurrection of Hun-Nal-Ye; from the interior of a Late Classic Maya bowl, A.D. 650–820.

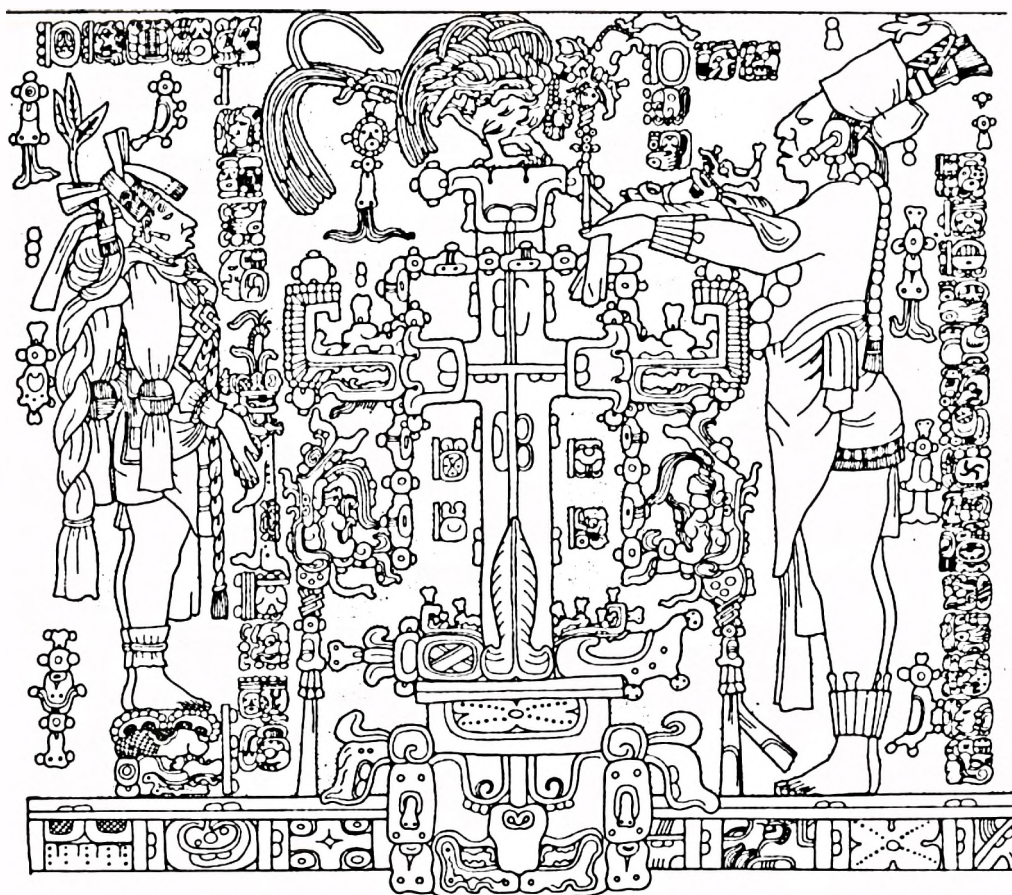


Figure 4. Temple of the Cross Sanctuary Tablet, Palenque, Mexico, ca. A.D. 685–90.

Having been reborn to new life, Hun-Nal-Ye was then conveyed in a canoe across the sky to the center place of creation. There he oversaw the setting of three stones, the hearthstones of the celestial fire which would quicken the cosmos and allow the world to emerge. Having done so, Hun-Nal-Ye then “raised the sky” by erecting a great world tree to support the arch of the heavens. According to Quirigua Stela C, a monumental sculpture erected in eastern Guatemala near the border with Honduras, this pivotal act took place at the beginning of the current cycle of time on 13.0.0.0.0 4 Ahaw 8 Kumk’u (13 August 3114 B.C.). The place of creation was called “Lying-Down-Sky, First-Three-Stone-Place” because there the sky once lay unsupported against the earth.



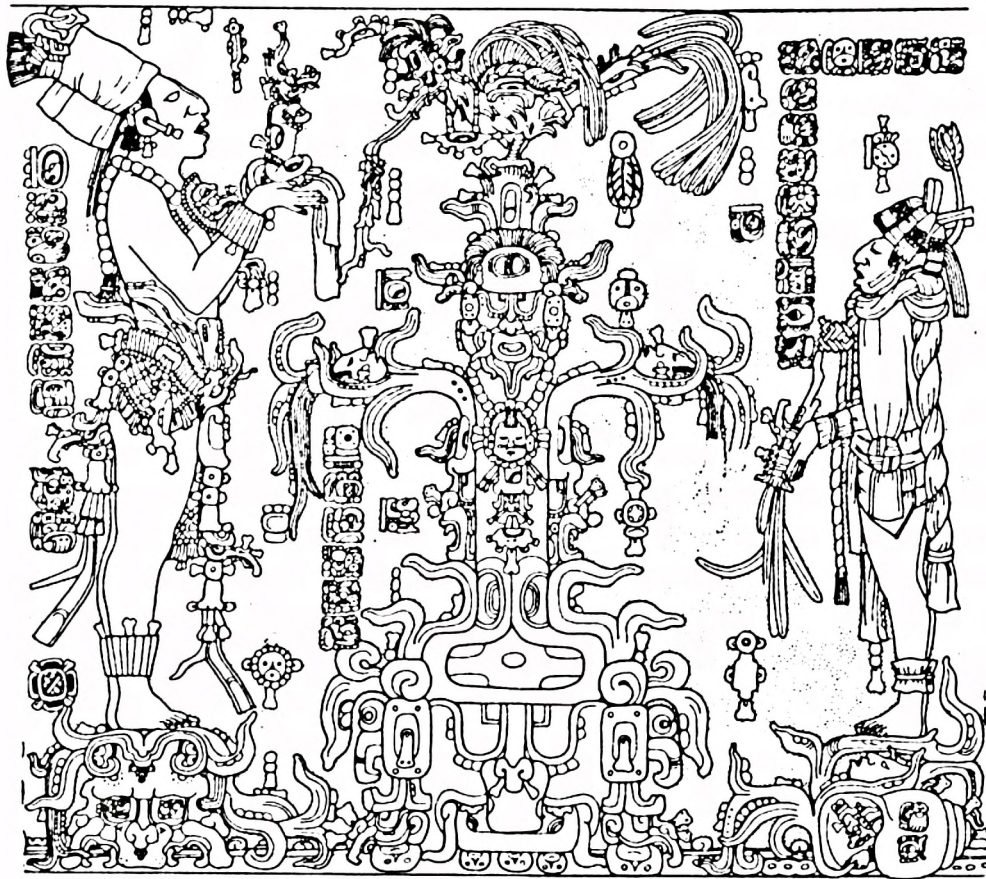


Figure 5. Temple of the Foliated Cross Sanctuary Tablet, Palenque, Mexico, ca. A.D. 685–90.

### **The Maya World Tree in the Art of Palenque, Mexico**

The central panel within the sanctuary of the Temple of the Cross at Palenque depicts a cross-shaped world tree with branches tipped with precious flowers growing from the center-place of creation (fig. 4). The tree is depicted at the moment just before its resurrection, its trunk still set in a sacrificial bowl resting atop a skeletonized head. Offerings are made to it of life-giving blood and tokens of royal power by the new king of Palenque (Kan-Balam) on the right and his recently deceased father (Hanab-Pakal II) on the left. The past and present kings thus commemorated the transfer of power by giving homage to the sacred world tree, which inaugurated creation at the beginning of their cycle of time.

The tree is definitively associated with creation in the accompanying text, which declares that on 4 Ahaw 8 Kumk'u (the first day of the Maya long count calendar, corresponding with 13 August 3114 B.C.), Hun-Nal-Ye initiated the creation, thus causing it to be "made visible, the image at Lying-Down-Sky, First-Three-Stone-Place." Five hundred and forty-two days later, on 5 February 3112 B.C., Hun-Nal-Ye then "entered the sky," completing his apotheosis as a god.<sup>7</sup>

The deified, fruitful manifestation of the world tree may be seen in the main sanctuary panel of the neighboring Temple of the Foliated Cross (fig. 5). There the tree is adorned with precious jade jewelry and abundant foliage, whose delicately curling leaves cradle tiny god heads. The upper branch is marked by a personified deity face with a mirror infixed into its forehead, indicating that the tree is resplendent, glowing with light as the sun is reflected off a shiny mirror.

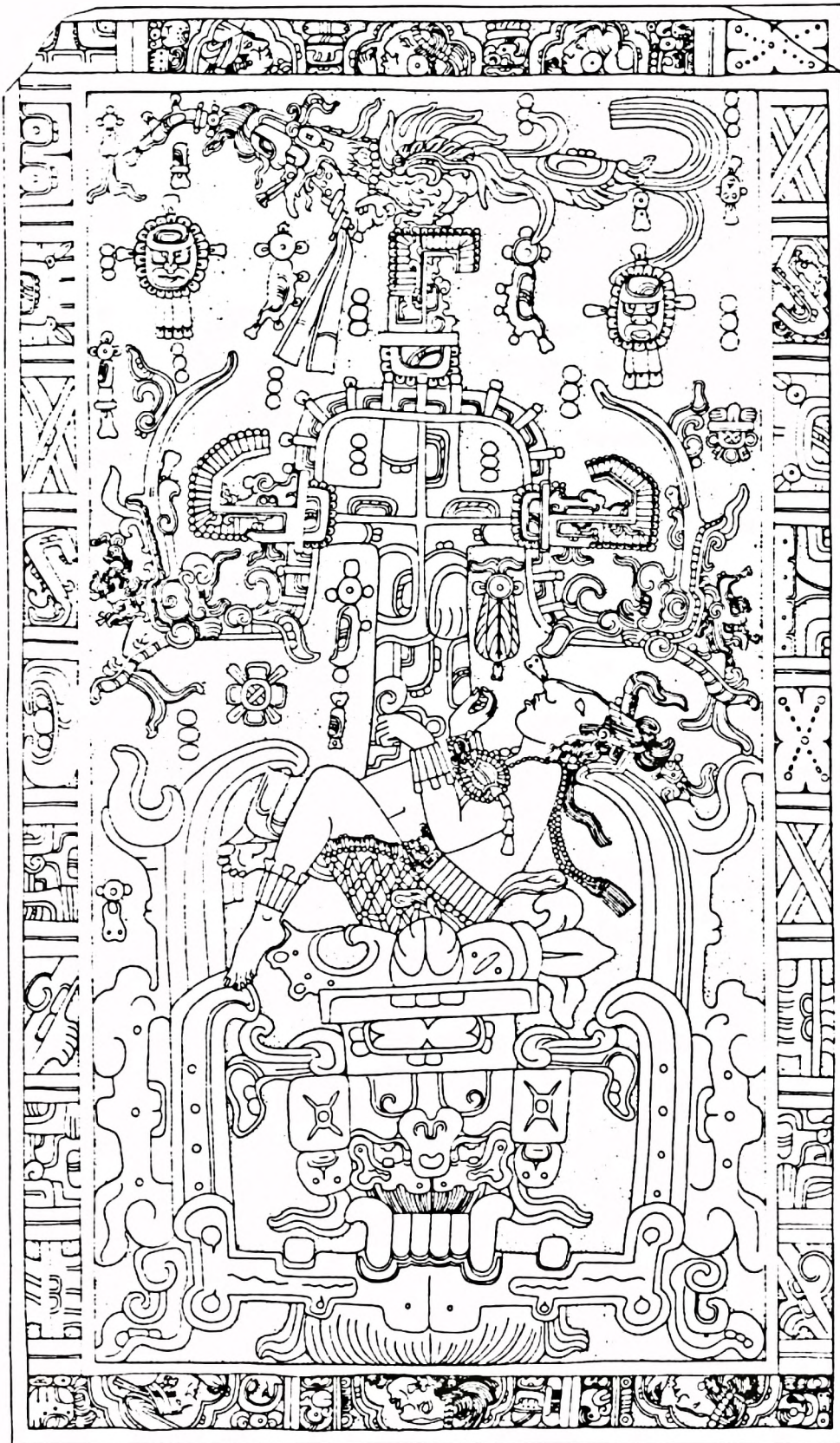
Perhaps the most impressive depiction of the world tree at Palenque may be seen on the carved sarcophagus lid of Lord Hanab-Pakal II (fig. 6), who ruled the city from about A.D. 615–84. His tomb was built deep within the heart of the largest temple pyramid in the main complex (fig. 7), called the Temple of Inscriptions because its upper sanctuary bears an unusually long hieroglyphic text devoted to the dynastic history of the city.

The tomb is constructed in the shape of a large I, the traditional shape of the Maya ball court, perhaps recalling the descent of One Hunahpu into the underworld ball court where he confronted the lords of death. The sarcophagus itself is meant to represent the center of the cosmos, the place where creation began. The right and left edges of the lid display columns of glyphs representing various celestial elements, known as sky bands. The body of the king is thus surrounded by a symbolic representation of the universe. The placement of glyphic elements on the lid parallel the orientation of the real world. The central glyph on the

Figure 6. Sarcophagus lid of Lord Hanab-Pakal II, Palenque. The following discussion focuses on elements of this panel (6a–k).

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<sup>7</sup> David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path* (New York: Morrow, 1993), 69.



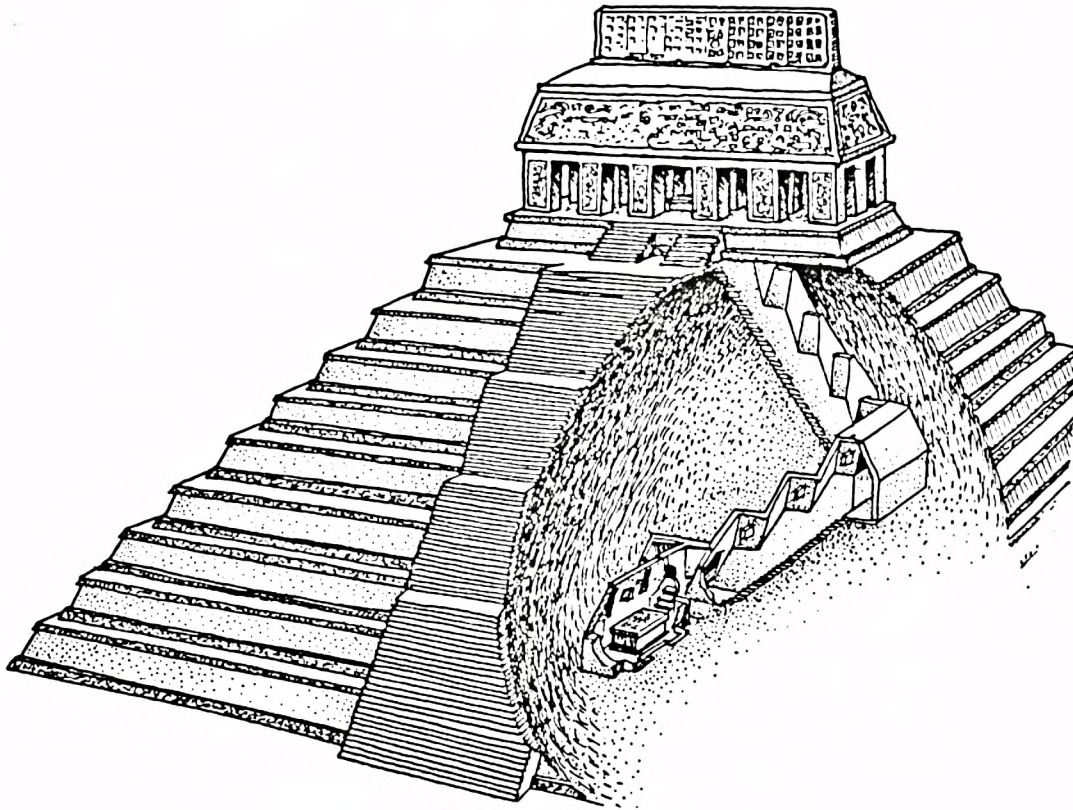


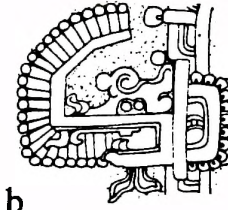
Figure 7. Cross-section of Temple of Inscriptions showing the tomb of Pakal, Palenque, Mexico.

right (east) side is the sign for “sun,” while opposite it on the left (west) side is the sign for “moon.”



The central panel of the sarcophagus lid is dominated by a cross-shaped tree, similar to those found in the nearby sanctuary tablets of the Temple of the Cross and the Temple of the Foliated Cross. The trunk of the tree is marked with the profile of a *tzuk* (“partition”) head (see fig. 6a; cf. fig. 6), identifying the tree as growing in one of the main divisions of the cosmos, in this case the center. The trunk and each of the three branches are marked with curving double lines with two attached beads, the glyphic sign for *te* (“tree”); they are also marked with shining mirror signs, indicating that the tree is glowing with reflective light such as the bright surface of highly polished jade, obsidian, or hematite. Such mirrors were used for at least 3,000

years in Mesoamerica as a means of prophecy and divination. In Maya art, such signs distinguish objects and deities as sacred, precious, and incorruptible. At the ends of each of the branches of the tree are jeweled serpent heads with squared snouts that curl back on themselves (see fig. 6b).



These represent sacred flowers, likely the flower of the ceiba tree, whose stamens and pollen cores double back in a similar manner.

In Mesoamerican theology, the world tree grew at the locus of creation, all things flowing out from that spot into four directions. The tree thus forms part of what Mircea Eliade refers to as the “symbolism of the center.” The center is, first and foremost, the point of “absolute beginning,” where the latent energies of the sacred world first came into being.<sup>8</sup> This source of all creation was often seen as a vertical axis, or *axis mundi*, which stands at the center of the cosmos and passes through each of the three major layers of existence—underworld, terrestrial plane, and sky. As the symbolic expression of this *axis mundi*, the world tree at once connected and supported heaven and earth while firmly fixed in the world below. In addition to serving as the vertical pivot point of the cosmos, the world tree also oriented the horizontal plane of the world by extending its branches outward toward the four cardinal directions. In ancient Maya inscriptions, the human soul was called *sak nik' nal* (“white flower thing”), referring to the white flowers of the ceiba tree. The implication is that the soul first came into being as a sacred flower on the branches of the world tree, thence to be clothed with flesh at birth.

The ceiba is an ideal symbol for this conception of the world tree (fig. 8). It is one of the tallest of trees indigenous to southern Mesoamerica. In areas of dense tropical rain forest, such as the Peten region of northeastern Guatemala, the ceiba soars to the very top of the jungle canopy, attaining heights of 175 feet or more. The trunk is remarkably straight, and its branches extend at

<sup>8</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), 36–42.

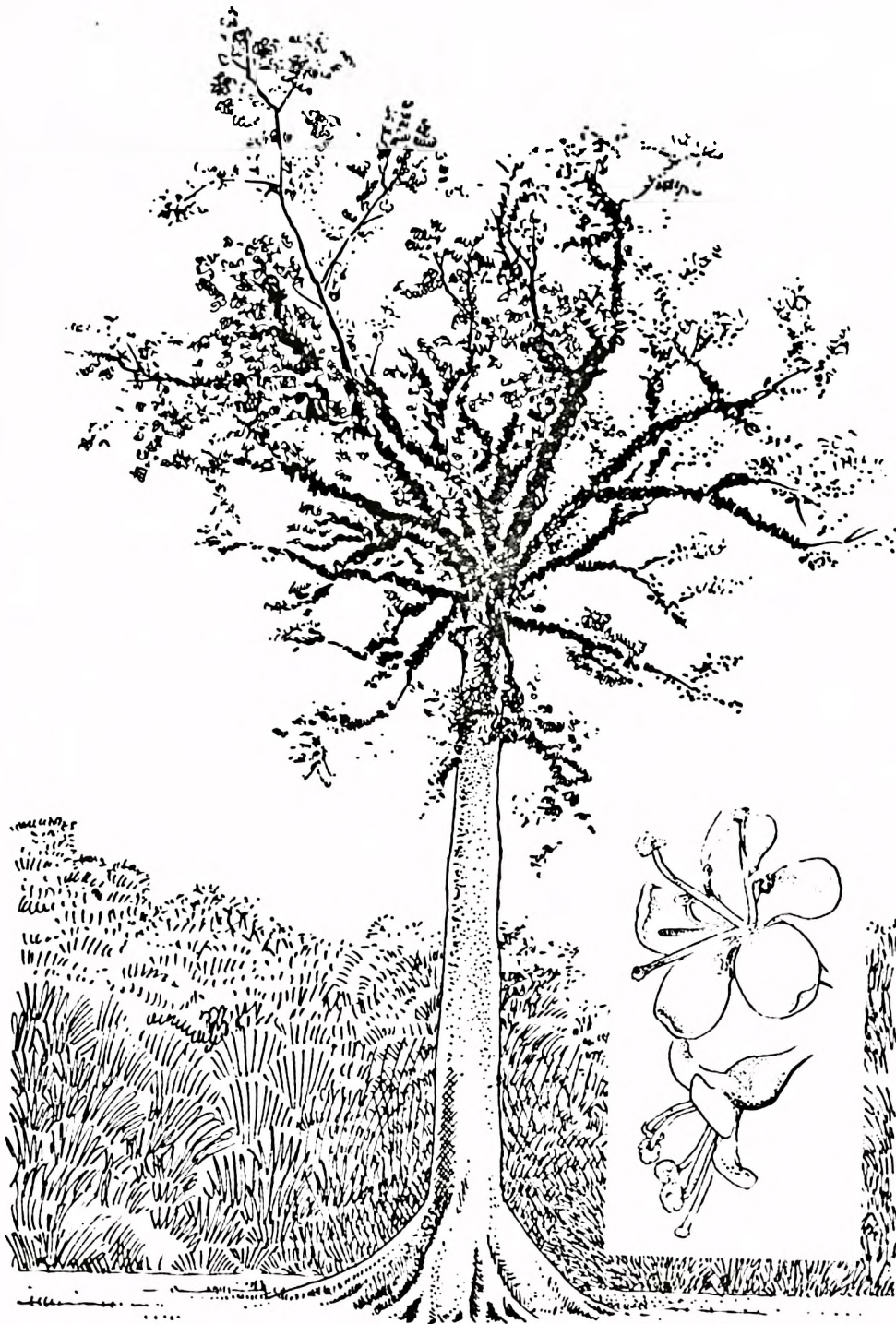


Figure 8. A mature ceiba tree and its flowers.

nearly right angles high above the ground, reminiscent of the cross-shaped trees seen in the art of Palenque.

The ceiba tree is still revered by the modern Maya as a manifestation of the world tree. Many villages have a carefully tended ceiba tree growing in their main plazas. This tree marks their homeland as the center place of the world. Inhabitants often refer to their village as *u muxux kaj*, *u muxux ulew* ("navel of the heavens, navel of the earth") because of the presence of the tree and other sacred objects that center their community in relation to the rest of the world. The Maya name for the tree reflects the importance it holds. The K'iche' Maya of the highlands call it *räx che'*, while the Yucatec Maya call it the *yax che'*. Both mean "first, green, new, or preeminent tree." The souls of the dead are said to follow its roots into the underworld, while ancestors may return in the same way to visit the living on special occasions.

The presence of the ceiba in the underworld is a very ancient concept throughout the Maya world. In the sixteenth century, Diego de Landa, first bishop of Yucatan, recorded that the souls of the benevolent dead entered "a place where nothing would give pain, where there would be abundance of food and delicious drinks, and a refreshing and shady tree they called *Yaxché*, the Ceiba tree, beneath whose branches and shade they might rest and be in peace forever."<sup>9</sup>

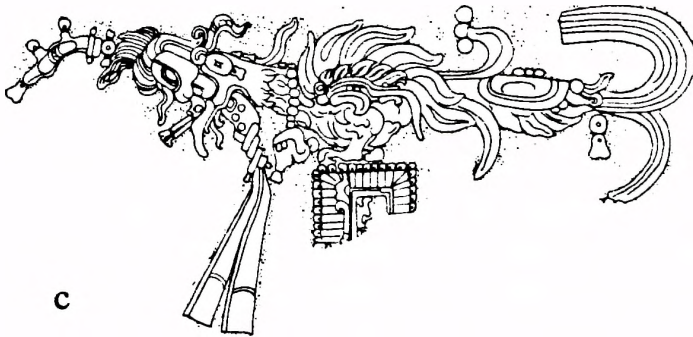
Such trees appear in the mythic traditions of a number of world cultures, including the various indigenous nations of North America. The shaman-chief Black Elk of the Oglala Sioux described it while in a visionary trance:

I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw the sacred hoop of my people was one of the many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter

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<sup>9</sup> Diego de Landa, *Yucatan before and after the Conquest*, tr. William Gates (Baltimore: Maya Society, 1937), 57.

all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.<sup>10</sup>



Atop the world tree on Pakal's sarcophagus lid is an odd-looking bird wearing a jeweled pectoral and bearing sacred mirror markings on his

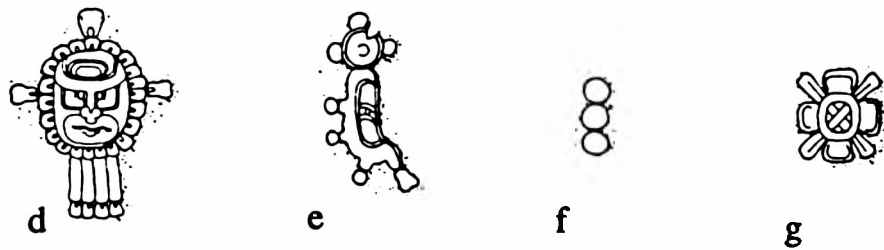
forehead and tail (see fig. 6c). The cut shell on his head and other deity markers identify him as Itzam-Ye, the avian form of one of the gods who helped set the last of the three hearthstones at the center of the cosmos on the day of creation. His name is derived from the word *itz*, a Maya concept that is difficult to translate into English. *Itz* is a kind of supernatural power that permeates the life-giving fluids of all things, both animate and inanimate. It may be found in blood, tears, milk, semen, rain, tree sap, honey, and even candle wax. Linda Schele refers to it as "cosmic ooze, the magical stuff of the universe."<sup>11</sup> Itzam-Ye was believed to wield the means to channel this supernatural power so as to give order to the cosmos and set the stage for creation. His presence atop the world tree depicted on the sarcophagus lid of Pakal indicates that the tree is alive with sacred power.

All around the tree's branches are symbols for flowers (see fig. 6d), cut shells (fig. 6e: the glyph for *yax*, meaning "first, pre-eminent, or new"), chains of three jade beads (fig. 6f), and the glyphic sign for zero (fig. 6g: an expression of the idea of "completion or wholeness" in Maya belief, rather than nothingness). These glyphic symbols all express the Maya concept of *k'ulel* ("sacredness"), indicating that the tree is surrounded by holy and divine space.

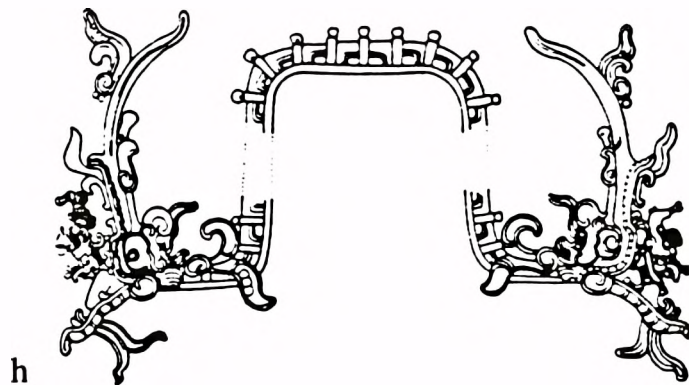
<sup>10</sup> Roger Cook, *The Tree of Life: Image for the Cosmos* (New York: Avon, 1974), 7–8.

<sup>11</sup> Linda Schele, seminar lecture on the "Maya Iconography of Death," University of Texas, Austin, 1996.



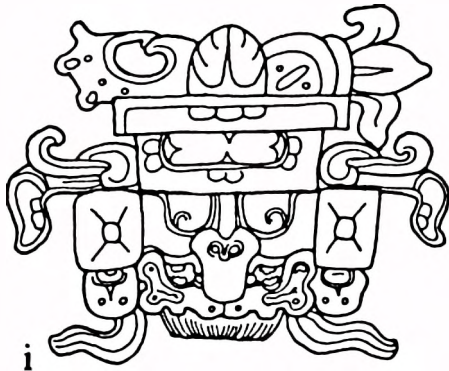


Winding through the branches of the tree is a great double-headed serpent with glyphs for “jade” all along its body (see fig. 6h). This is a “vision serpent,” a being that symbolized the pathway by which sacred beings passed from one world to another. The ancient Maya believed that sacred persons such as kings and other members of the royal family carried within them the divine spark of godhood. By drawing blood from their bodies, a portion of their divine nature was released, thereby giving birth to the gods. The symbolic representation of this birth was the opening of the maw of the great vision serpent, through which sacred beings emerged to bestow on the world tokens of power and life. Numerous inscriptions and carved panels show royal individuals letting their blood onto fragments of tree-bark paper. This paper was then burned in offertory bowls along with aromatic incense. The Maya believed that within the rising black smoke of such offerings could be seen manifestations of the world tree as well as undulating vision serpents, with supernatural beings issuing from them.



Emerging from the jaws of the left-facing serpent's head may be seen a god named K'awil, the embodiment of divine power itself. From the right-facing serpent's jaws the god Sak Hun, the patron deity of the royal family and divine kingship, comes forth.

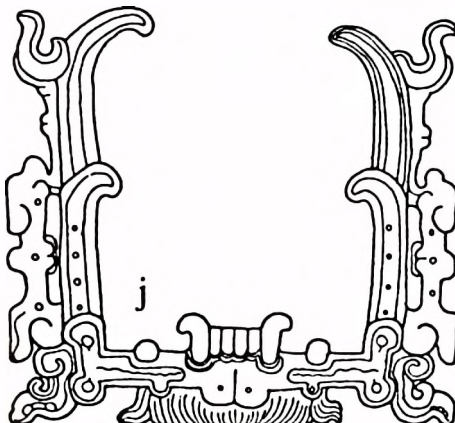
Upon accession, Maya kings had a white band tied around their foreheads with the head of this deity set over the brow.



A sacrificial bowl like those used for offertory blood may be seen resting on a skeletal head at the base of the tree on the sarcophagus lid of Pakal (see fig. 6i). It is marked with a large *k'in* (“sun, day”) sign, identifying it as the setting sun and indicating its power to overcome the darkness of death and the underworld at dawn.

Within the bowl are four articles associated with blood sacrifice. The central element is an upright stingray spine, the principal instrument used by the Maya to draw their own blood in ritual offerings. On the left is a sectioned spondylus shell, a bright red spiny seashell which marks the bowl’s contents as “holy or precious” and which is also symbolic of the entryway into the watery environment of the underworld. On the right is a glyph similar to a percentage sign. This is the *cimi* (“death”) sign, indicating that Pakal’s sacrifice is not one of simple bloodletting, but of his life. Growing from the death sign are three leaves, a glyphic element which reads *way* (“spiritual transformation”), attesting that this death allows the king to pass from one state of being to another. Maize leaves grow from the sides of the offering bowl indicating that the sacrifice engenders abundance and new life.

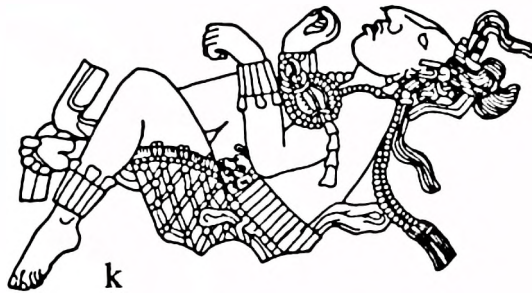
Pakal himself lies across the sacrificial bowl, indicating that it is the symbolic sacrifice of his body in death which invests the



entire scene with its life-giving power. Both he and the bowl are set in the immense jaws of a reptilian monster that rears upward to swallow them both into the underworld (see fig. 6j). The lower teeth of the great beast may be seen at the base of the composition, while its upper jaws and eyes may be seen framing the sides of

the lid as they curve upward and inward toward the left knee and neck of the falling king.

Pakal wears a net skirt, bound-up hair, and jade ornaments, identifying him as the embodiment of the great creator god Hun-Nal-Ye, who had also descended into the underworld, eventually to rise again to new life as the creator (fig. 6k). A



fiery torch is set into Pakal's brow, a symbol of deification that appears only on images of gods or deceased kings. In death, the king has become the principal god of life and organizer of the cosmos. Across his chest is a turtle pectoral, symbolic of the great earth turtle through whose cracked carapace Hun-Nal-Ye emerged at the dawn of creation.

Within the sarcophagus, the body of Pakal (fig. 9) repeats this imagery in physical terms. Over 700 pieces of fine jade adorned the body, including a heavy mosaic mask that completely covered his face, delicately carved rings on each of his fingers, and heavy necklaces, bracelets, and anklets. A jade Sak Hun god was found next to the head, originally worn affixed to the royal headband. Two large jade pieces, one carved into a sphere and held in the king's left hand and the other a cube in the right hand, remain an intriguing mystery. This interest in geometric shapes is unprecedented in known Maya royal burials, and its significance is still unexplained, although the sphere may represent the dome of the heavens and the cube the quadrilateral earth.

The arrangement of jade pieces about the waist and thigh bones indicates that the king once likely wore a net skirt similar to the one seen carved on the lid. Jade earflares with pearl counterweights, which were carved in the shape of ceiba tree flowers, were found about the head of the king. Across his chest was a carved jade piece representing a calabash fruit, the same fruit that hung from the world tree and mimicked the skull of One Hunahpu in the *Popol Vuh* story. At his feet was the carved jade image of the Pax god, the anthropomorphic personification of the world tree.

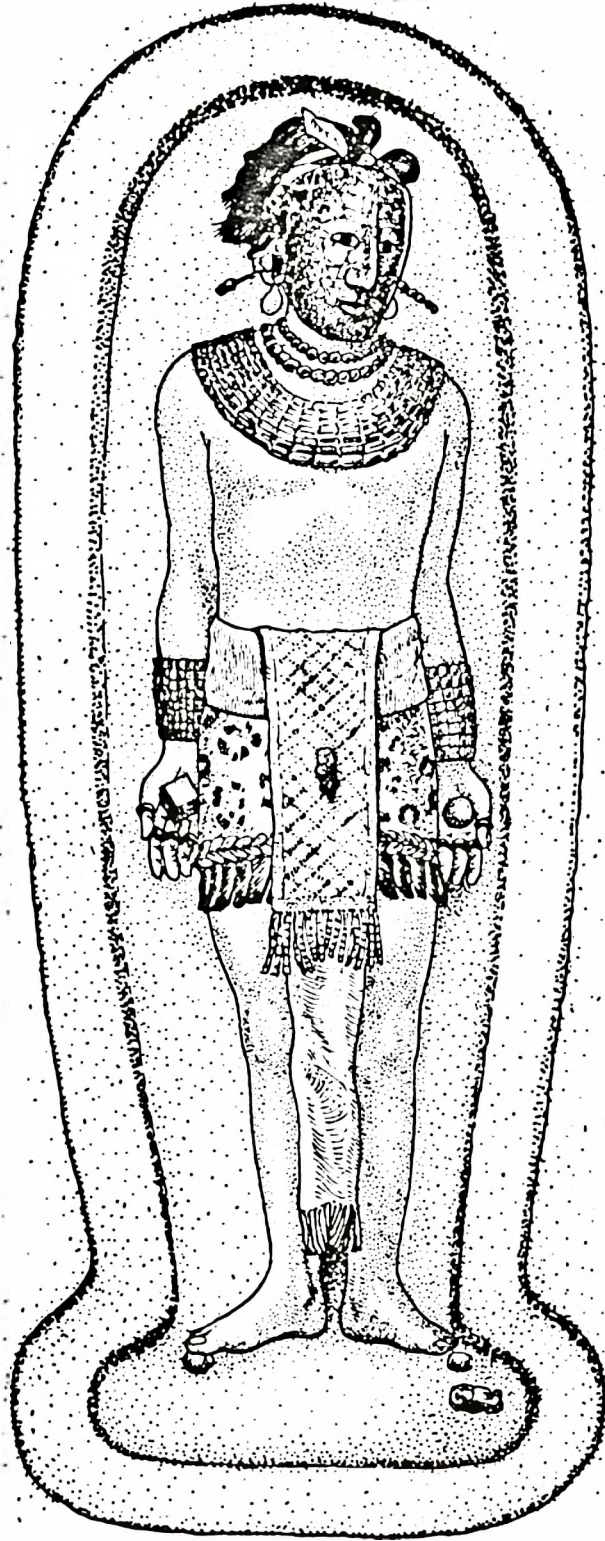


Figure 9. Reconstruction of the body of Pakal as found in his tomb, Palenque, Mexico.

The body of Pakal was thus adorned as if he were not only the creator god Hun-Nal-Ye, but the symbolic embodiment of the precious jade world tree itself.

The overall theme of the king's burial goods and the carved sarcophagus lid powerfully express the instant of transformation from death and mortality to godhood in the midst of the sacred world tree at the center of creation. In ancient Mesoamerica, kingship was an eternal office that, once held in life, persisted beyond the grave. Particularly in agricultural societies like that of the Maya, survival was dependent on the rhythmic flow of one aspect of nature into its complementary opposite. Life could not exist in the absence of death. The sun must rise in its time to bestow its light and warmth on the crops. The rains must fall in their season and in sufficient amounts or the crops will not grow to maturity and the community will die. The dry, seemingly lifeless maize seed must be buried in the earth before it can sprout new plants. The king represented the hope that these forces could be controlled and ensured through ritual. He was the guarantor that the cycles of the universe would continue to be predictable and benevolent. From their tombs, dead royal ancestors presided over and assisted the ritual acts of their living successors.

Royal burials were oriented as the central axis point of the universe, the place where worlds drew closest to one another. Sacred and precious things were placed in the king's tomb where they would come into contact with the life-sustaining power of the otherworld. The most precious offering was the blood and body of the divine king who, like the world tree, carried within him the seed of new life. Burial of the king's body within the bowels of a sacred pyramid symbolically returned him to the place of creation in the hope that proximity to its regenerative power would help his rebirth into godhood. The appearance of the sacred world tree growing from the underworld on the sarcophagus lid of Pakal was the symbolic expression of this concept.

It is evident that this journey was recapitulated at death by each ruler of Palenque. The sides of Pakal's sarcophagus are decorated with the images of ten individuals, identified by their hieroglyphic name signs as men, and a single woman, who preceded Pakal in the office of king. All are depicted in a very



similar fashion (fig. 10), emerging from a cleft in the ground line marked with *kaban* ("earth") signs. Behind each, a fruit-bearing tree grows, indicating that they are rising from their graves in parallel fashion to the sprouting of world trees.

Figure 10. Ancestor of Pakal, edge of sarcophagus lid.

### The World Tree and Divine Kingship

These ideas were not limited to the site of Palenque. Throughout the Maya world, kings were eager to identify themselves with the power of the world tree to bestow life and abundance on their people:

On public monuments, the oldest and most frequent manner in which the [Maya] king was displayed was in the guise of the World Tree. . . . This Tree was the conduit of communication between the supernatural world and the human world: The souls of the dead fell into [the underworld] along its path; the daily journeys of the sun, moon, planets, and stars followed its trunk. The Vision Serpent symbolizing communion with the world of the ancestors and the gods emerged into our world along it. The king was this axis and pivot made flesh. He was the Tree of Life.<sup>12</sup>

By portraying themselves wearing tokens of the world tree, rulers declared themselves to be the intermediaries between worlds at the center point of creation. An early example is Stela 11 from Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala, dated a century or two before the birth

<sup>12</sup> Linda Schele and David A. Freidel, *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya* (New York: Morrow, 1990), 90.

of Christ (fig. 11). This stone monument depicts a standing ruler with a world tree growing in his headdress. His earflares display crossed bands, a centering device which implies that the ruler stands at the pivotal juncture where this world was born out of the underworld.

At Quirigua in Guatemala and Copan in Honduras great plazas were set aside for the erection of immense limestone stelae bearing the images of kings wearing the heavy tokens of godhood. The same elements seen on Pakal's sarcophagus lid are abstracted and incorporated into the vestments of the king in many of these royal portraits. On Quirigua Stela F (fig. 12), the sacred bird Itzam-Ye, which perches atop the world tree on Pakal's sarcophagus, is worn as a headdress, with three panaches of feathers representing its wings and tail feathers cascading elegantly about the king's head. A personified tree appears on his loincloth, while earflares in the shape of ceiba tree flowers appear on either side of his head. The king holds in his arms the coils of the double-headed vision serpent, which winds about the branches of the world tree on Pakal's sarcophagus. Deities emerge from both of the serpent's open jaws. The stone portrait thus depicts the king as a personified world tree.

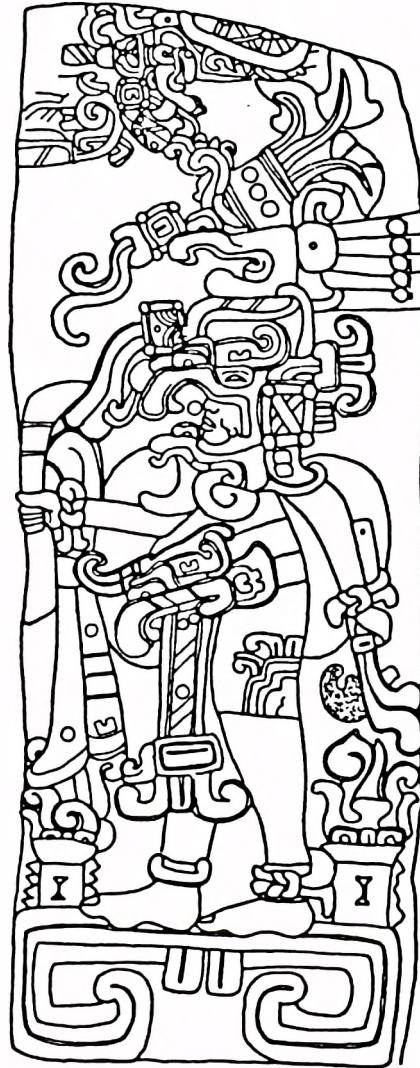


Figure 11. Stela 11, Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala, 200–100 B.C.

## Conclusion

Death is a crisis. It is the victory of unseen and little-understood forces over a member of the community. When death takes a king, particularly one considered a god as were Maya rulers, the crisis takes on universal proportions, threatening the very existence of the world and life itself. Royal tombs were constructed by the Maya as a desperate attempt to forestall this horror by ritually ensuring the king's triumph over death and darkness. At Palenque, and in numerous other Maya centers, the ultimate expression of this ability to escape the harrowing of the underworld was the world tree. It was the central focus of their journey into the afterlife. Its blossoms symbolized the purity of the human soul.<sup>13</sup> In ancient Maya art, this tree could be represented as a ceiba, cacao, or stalk of maize. For the K'iche' Maya who compiled the *Popol Vuh* it was a calabash tree, whose fruit represented the power of divinity to bestow new life. Such concepts are certainly in keeping with the trees of life recognized by numerous ancient cultures, including that seen in Lehi's vision as the symbolic expression of the love of God which gives eternal life.



Figure 12. Stela F, north side, Quirigua, Guatemala, A.D. 761.

<sup>13</sup> A common Maya hieroglyphic reference to the human soul after death was *sak nik' nal* ("white flower soul").



## Illustration Acknowledgments

Fig. 1: V. Garth Norman, *Izapa Sculpture*, Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation Number 30 (Provo, Utah: New World Archaeological Foundation, 1973, 1976), 165, fig. 4.1.

Fig. 2: Mary E. Miller and Karl A. Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion* (New York: Thames-Hudson, 1993), 135.

Fig. 3: Miller and Taube, *Gods and Symbols*, 69.

Fig. 4: Linda Schele and Mary E. Miller, *the Blood of Kings* (New York: Braziller, 1986), 115, fig. 11.6.

Fig. 5: David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos* (New York: Morrow, 1993), 282, fig. 6:21.

Fig. 6: Merle Greene Robertson, *The Sculpture of Palenque* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 1:pl. 99 (including details a–k).

Fig. 7: Redrawn by Michael Lyon from Gene Stuart, *Secrets of the Past* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 1979), 92.

Fig. 8: Redrawn by Michael Lyon from Juan Valdés, *Obras Maestras del Museo de Tikal* (Guatemala: Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes, 1994), pl. 4, and Freidel, Schele, and Parker, *Maya Cosmos*, 396, fig. 9:2.

Fig. 9: Redrawn by Michael Lyon from the reconstruction painting in the Museo Nacional de Antropología de México, in Mercedes de la Garza, *Palenque* (Palenque, Mexico, Chiapas Eterno, 1992), 89.

Fig. 10: Drawing by Linda Schele, from Schele and Miller, *Blood of Kings*, 284, pl. 111e.

Fig. 11: Virginia G. Smith, "Izapa Relief Carving: Form, Content, Rules for Design, and Role in Mesoamerican Art History and Archaeology," *Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Archaeology* No. 27 (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1984), fig. 41b.

Fig. 12: Alfred Maudslay, *Biologia Centrali-Americana* (New York: Milpatron, [1889–1902] 1974), vol. 2, pl. 36.