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Abstract: In the last five years, dramatic advances in deciphering ancient Maya writing have unveiled the Classic Maya as, above all, a people of faith. The Maya gloried in their closeness to the supernatural. They worshiped many gods, built temples to house images of supernatural beings, developed complex theologies of spirit and matter, and envisioned a world permeated by living essences. Now many of these beliefs and practices lie open to our gaze. Decipherment of Maya hieroglyphic writing allows us to begin to understand the Classic Maya concept of the nature of human existence, their system of morality, and their religious practice and how such practices melded with political or dynastic concerns.



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Classic Maya Religion: Beliefs and Practices of an Ancient American People

Stephen D. Houston

Though difficult to decipher, Maya religion permeated a complex ancient world with an overriding sense of the sacral nature of all things and reveals much about how those people lived and why they vanished.

In the last five years, dramatic advances in deciphering ancient Maya writing have unveiled the Classic Maya as, above all, a people of faith. The Maya gloried in their closeness to the supernatural. They worshiped many gods, built temples to house images of supernatural beings, developed complex theologies of spirit and matter, and envisioned a world permeated by living essences. Now many of these beliefs and practices lie open to our gaze. Decipherment of Maya hieroglyphic writing allows us to begin to understand the Classic Maya concept of the nature of human existence, their system of morality, and their religious practice and how such practices melded with political or dynastic concerns.

Not all of the Mayan beliefs are easily understood, completely documented, or, from our viewpoint, morally defensible. However, they do testify to a people's quest for the divine in a small but crucial corner of pre-Columbian civilization.

The Classic Maya, an ancient American people, flourished from about A.D. 250 to 850. The study of their beliefs and practices represents a natural point of interest for those of us who participate in lives that are intensely and vividly involved in matters of faith and practice, agency, and worldview. We anchor our lives in the proposition that the secular and the spiritual are not so very distant from each other. We believe that faith and moral conscience should not be restricted to moments of collective worship or other formal observances; rather, they should enrich all activities, regardless of nature or setting. The quest for the divine, the anticipation of its life-giving light—these lie at the heart of what it is to be human.

This intimate communion of spiritual and secular lives is not an unusual state; such a religious life was the common condition of humanity before the modern period.¹ Our new understanding of the writings of the premodern Maya of Central America and Mexico reveals them as people who lived this religious life, and their history is instructive for many



Location of the Maya and their language families (based on Michael D. Coe, *The Maya*, 6th ed. [London: Thames and Hudson, 1999], fig. 6).

reasons. It illustrates how scholars reconstruct something so fleeting and insubstantial as ancient belief. It serves as a reproach to those who would compartmentalize or trivialize the influence of sacred propositions. And it stands as a moving testament to the human spirit and its need for answers to difficult questions: Why are we here? What is expected of us? Why is the world as it is?

We have just begun to unravel the answers to these questions as the Maya understood them. By sheer luck, I was a graduate student at Yale, the ground zero of decipherment in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Maya hieroglyphic writing began to unveil its secrets (fig. 1, plate 1). The ride these last few years has been an intellectual roller coaster—breath-taking, frustrating, taxing in ways I could scarcely have imagined. At times I have felt capable and bright, at others despondently inadequate before the challenge of decipherment. Yet the breakthroughs are so new that much of what I have to tell you could not have been said even five years ago.²

The Maya, Ancient and Modern

The Maya are a group of Native American peoples numbering into the millions, living today throughout southern Mexico and northern Central America. Most citizens of Guatemala, Belize, and the Mexican states of Chiapas, Campeche, Quintana Roo, and Tabasco probably have some Maya blood. If all those who are genetically related are counted, the Maya exist in even larger numbers. Some estimates place their tally as high as five million.³ At the end of this century, the Maya continue to speak close to thirty languages, some with only a few remaining elderly speakers who await the extinction of their language with utter certainty.⁴ (See map.) We know of many more dialects that died out long ago. These languages descend from an ancient tongue known as Common Mayan, which was probably spoken many centuries, if not millennia, before the time of Christ. John Robertson, professor of linguistics at BYU, and I have collaborated closely in attempting to understand the relation of modern Maya speech to ancient writing.⁵

Maya culture remains robust if forever shifting, as it did in the past (culturally, there are no unchanging people, anywhere, at any time—the unchanging society is a myth we occasionally hear with respect to non-Western or preindustrial societies⁶). For the Maya, some of the changes arise from the legacy of terrible violence, both Colonial and modern, that has scourged them, especially during the last twenty years. The wounds from such conflicts, from the destruction of families, of young and old, will heal completely only with the death of memory.⁷

The Classic Maya were the ancestors of some modern Maya. The Classic Maya civilization flourished in the so-called lowlands of the Yucatán



Fig. 1. Roll-out of Late Classic vessel; photograph © Justin Kerr, file no. K1728 (Michael D. Coe and Justin Kerr, *The Art of the Maya Scribe* [New York: Harry Abrams, 1997], plate 28).



Fig. 2. The Usumacinta River near the Maya ruins of Piedras Negras, Guatemala; photograph by Stephen Houston.

peninsula, which is, in fact, an area of highly diverse geography and climate (fig. 2). Tourists visiting the luxurious resorts of Cancún and Cozumel, or the island paradises off the coast of Belize, sun themselves just miles from buried cities, some of which have never been visited by archaeological expeditions. The maids cleaning rooms and serving drinks speak Yucatec Maya. Their ancestors beyond recall built those ruined cities.

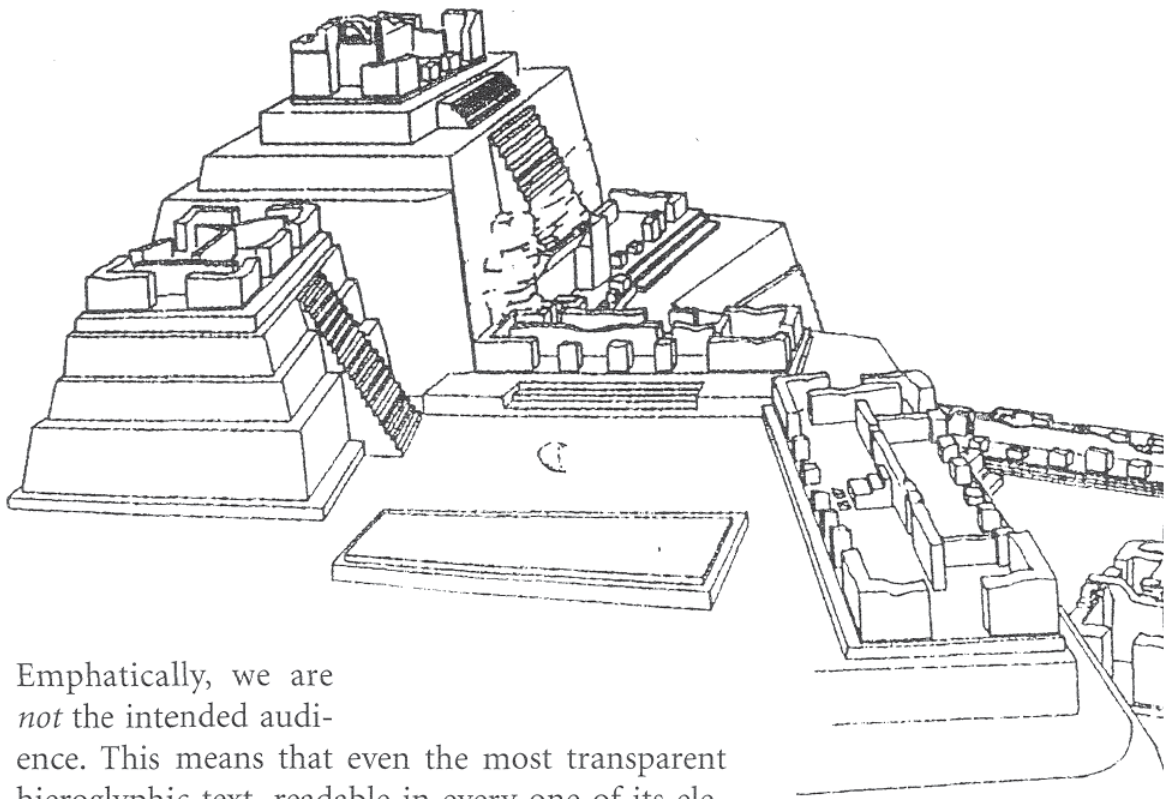
Scholars of the Classic period are often accused of overstatement and emotional excess when they discuss this people. I confess to this weakness and will freely indulge it: Maya cities are immense, staggering confections of buildings atop buildings (fig. 3). Also, they were, metaphorically speaking, great machines for religious living. Where tropical birds flit today, populations in the tens of thousands occupied palaces, small hovels, middling buildings. In high temples, the Classic Maya worshiped gods and burned incense to ancestors (plates 2–4). They raided, grew crops aplenty, held court, formed large-scale alliances, and raised families whose outlines and organization yet remain unclear. They lived earthy, real lives but lived them within a sacred worldview. Brigham Young University and its research institute, the New World Archaeological Foundation, have been international leaders in understanding these ancient and modern lives.⁸

The Problem of Accessing Ancient Thought

The powerful appeal of the ancient Maya is not only in their practical achievements, however. They were also deep thinkers, capable of expressing ideas on large stone monuments known as stelae, as well as on panels, altars, portable objects, sculpted facades, ballcourt markers—anything that could display a hieroglyph or an image. For many, the appeal of the Classic Maya lies precisely in the possibility of engaging ancient minds. It is our task and joy to learn how to read the messages they left.

This task is not, however, a trivial challenge. In the first place, there exists the overriding difficulty of deciphering a hieroglyphic text. We can read a good deal of these inscriptions written during some centuries, especially around A.D. 700–800. About forty years ago, specialists discovered that the glyphs recorded the history of kings, queens, and nobles.⁹ Names such as Pakal the Great (plate 5) or Jaguar Paw have expanded the history of pre-Columbian America and peppered it with celebrated personages. The recent decipherment of grammatical clues has led John Robertson and me, in collaboration with David Stuart at Harvard, to propose that Maya writing contains a kind of archaic, prestige, or liturgical language.¹⁰ A suitable analogy might be medieval Latin, spoken by priests, scholars, and nobility, which was not closely linked to the language of peasants in the fields.

Yet a decipherment of hieroglyphic writing takes us only so far. Remember that we are, in a profound sense, eavesdropping on ancient conversations.



Emphatically, we are *not* the intended audience. This means that even the most transparent hieroglyphic text, readable in every one of its elements, is fundamentally impenetrable in other ways. We do not have the beliefs or experiences to give broader meaning to those statements. Consider some ancient Roman or early medieval texts that are relatively difficult to interpret: we might be able to read Latin, but so much else is missing of what it was like to have been born and to have lived in these cultures.

Archaeologists, iconographers, and epigraphers (the latter two specializing in the interpretation of art and writing, respectively) bridge past and present worlds in a number of ways. Some approaches are naive and unreflective, others self-conscious and burdened with the intellectual agonies of epistemology—of understanding how we know what we know. One general strategy serves the scholar well: hermeneutics, or the discovery of meaning through interpretation. Hermeneutics is not itself free of variety or eclecticism, nor does it guarantee certainty of result. It can be romantic, involving a near-mystical empathy with past thought. Or it can derive from the hermeneutic circle of Hans-Georg Gadamer, for whom meaning derives from the interplay of ancient or foreign ideas and the concepts held openly or unconsciously by the interpreter (hence the “circle” and its to-and-fro motion).¹¹

Both approaches affirm that we can understand the past. They reserve a place and role for evidence and for its patient marshaling in favor of particular arguments. But we are not sponges that merely absorb ancient, imperishable thoughts. Gadamer believes it is a philosophical impossibility ever to fully restore the past. Rather, ancient realities must be engaged through our very beings, from the vantage point of who we are and of how we experience the world.

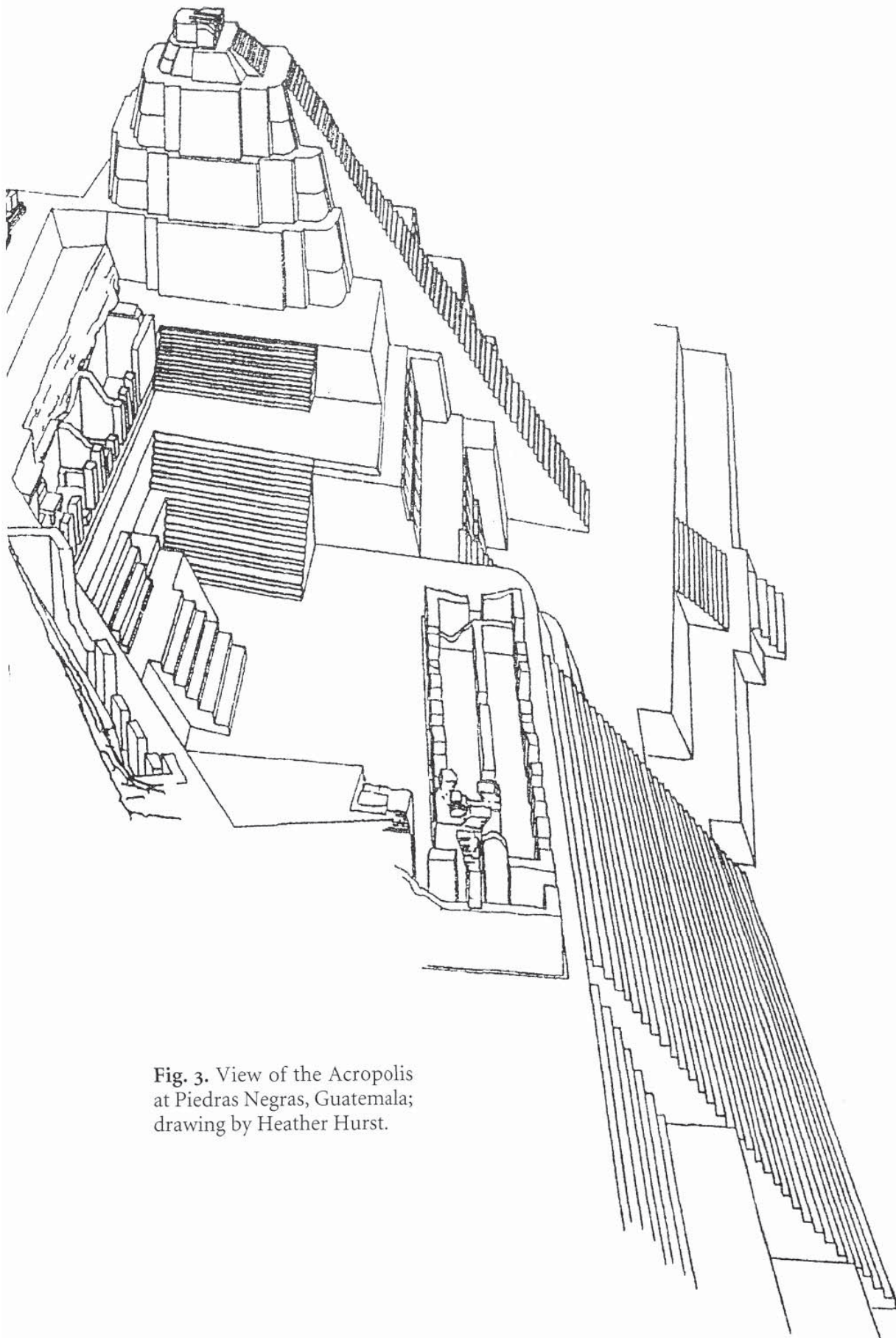


Fig. 3. View of the Acropolis at Piedras Negras, Guatemala; drawing by Heather Hurst.

For this reason, we will, indeed must, put a little of ourselves into reconstructing the grooves and pathways of Classic Maya thought. It is unavoidable that the very terms we use, such as *religion*, reflect our own mindsets, since we can describe foreign realities only with our own language. For the Maya, I suspect *religion*, as we use the word, fails to capture the centrality of belief and practice in the conduct of Classic society. For them, religion was not a matter apart from everyday life but rather one that explained it, undergirded it, enveloped it, and provided an idiom for appropriate behavior. As John Monaghan points out, we, in our time, compartmentalize ritual as a formalized, sacred act, but what does one make of a society in which planting corn or building a house is as much a ritual as the burial of the dead?¹² Terms we take for granted become downright misleading. If we follow Gadamer, precision of interpretation—the reduction of intellectual distance between past and present—will come about only with greater attention to our own premises as “eavesdroppers.”¹³

The permeation of society with sacred and supernatural propositions, the interweaving of the divine with the mundane, compels us to reflect on another, common view of religion (regrettably, one that dominates much archaeological discussion): the view that elites—royalty, nobles, the privileged in general—usually engineer faith and practice so as to confuse, exploit, and terrorize dim-witted, gullible peasants. State religions of this sort involve elites who invest priesthood in their own sons and relatives, perhaps even appropriating commonly held concepts but adapting them for political objectives.¹⁴ Their goal is to make social differences seem natural and preordained.

There are two varieties of this view, one deeply cynical, the other more subtle. The openly cynical argument—I call it the school of suspicion—equates Maya religious practices with propaganda, a deliberate attempt to sway people by manipulating information.¹⁵ All elite statements, on stelae and other sculpted monuments, can be reduced to Madison-Avenue campaigns or impostures that sell, not jeans, but reasons for inequality and subordination, while royalty rubs its hands over ill-gotten bounty.

The more subtle view holds that religion attends to elite needs but in unconscious or incremental ways—such a process gradually comes to pass because of strong forces operating on it.¹⁶ Nonetheless, there still lurks in either interpretation the same goal of making the rich and powerful better off than they were before. Both views, the cynical and the subtle, have answers for everything.

It is difficult to deny that some beliefs and practices do stem from royal preoccupations, but it is unclear whether religion can be reduced to an instrument for purely social needs. Such explanation can, in the worst cases, adopt the tone of precious little stories that drip with cross-cultural

condescension. According to these theories, the content and overall conception of the sacred is unimportant and extraneous to its core social functions.

As scholars, we are professionally enjoined from lobbing personal remarks. In the spirit of this postmodern age, which addresses both human motive and historical situation, let me do so anyway. A survey of scholars promoting these negative views of religion would show, I strongly suspect, a total agnosticism, leading them, for reasons of private disposition, to “discredit revealed religion,” as the great anthropologist (and devout Roman Catholic) Evans-Pritchard suggested almost fifty years ago.¹⁷ Religion has no power for such people, and they must explain its appeal to others in purely pragmatic or instrumental terms.

In this instance, Gadamar might say that these scholars have injected their own mind-set but to a naive and unreflective degree. Their academic readership, which generally esteems the ideas of the agnostic scholars, is not about to question their underlying premises. Yet Gadamer’s hermeneutic circle is, in their hands, unacknowledged but very much present.

The agnostic point of view strongly attracts some archaeologists, whose subjects are long dead. Archaeologists cannot easily exhume religious sentiment or holy passion. Ethnographers, who work with living peoples and who see, in the Maya region, daily acts of devotion, know far better.

Religion for the Classic Maya must be understood, then, in a way that explains why it mattered so much to them. Rather than focus on the supposed consequences of the Maya religion—the mistake of the school of suspicion—we should focus on the subjective feelings of the faithful: Did religion among the Classic Maya reduce feelings of chaos, helplessness, and personal isolation? Did it, in short, give meaning to life and guide relations with other people, regardless of status or class? We can presume that it did, or religious devotion would not have had its tenacious purchase on the Maya.

A method of approaching religious devotion more systematically is to adopt a theological perspective¹⁸ that allows us to look at the Classic Maya according to a formalized body of ideas that tell us about human relationships to divinity and the supernatural. Theology concerns subtle but grand and comprehensive premises that organize belief. There is, as we shall see, evidence that many of these ideas were held by the Maya people collectively but always in local ways that expressed local needs.

Classic Maya Religion

There is no evidence in the Classic Maya belief system of unifying orthodoxy or coherent creeds. The Classic Maya did not, apparently, have ecclesiastical authorities to enforce such matters across the Maya lowlands (however, there may have been cult or oracle centers in caves that attracted pilgrims from long distances, across political boundaries [plate 6]).¹⁹ Yet,

there is a remarkable commonality of underlying concepts. In a deeply insightful essay, anthropologist John Monaghan has itemized major themes that exist to this day among native groups in Mexico, Belize, and Guatemala.²⁰ Monaghan's evidence is largely ethnographic, and his themes exist among other groups as well as the Maya, but some of the themes advanced by Monaghan and others reveal much of interest as they relate to the Classic Maya.

Monism and Its Implications. Chief among the themes is what might be called monism. Monism involves the belief that a single divine principle suffuses the universe.²¹ Imagine a world where something like a stone or a hill may be as alive as a human being or where the carved image of a god may, in fact, *be* that god (plate 7). The world of hard substance that we take for granted, in assumed dualistic separation of the spiritual and the material, between what is alive and animate and what is not, seems invalid for Native Americans in this region.²² Among the Classic Maya, this concept expresses itself abundantly. Images of hills (*wits*) sprout eyes; carved altars have mouths and noses (fig. 4); buildings need to be fed, and doorways speak quite literally as mouths.²³

In this belief system, whatever essence makes an individual or deity distinct can extend to depictions of that being: a portrait would be more than

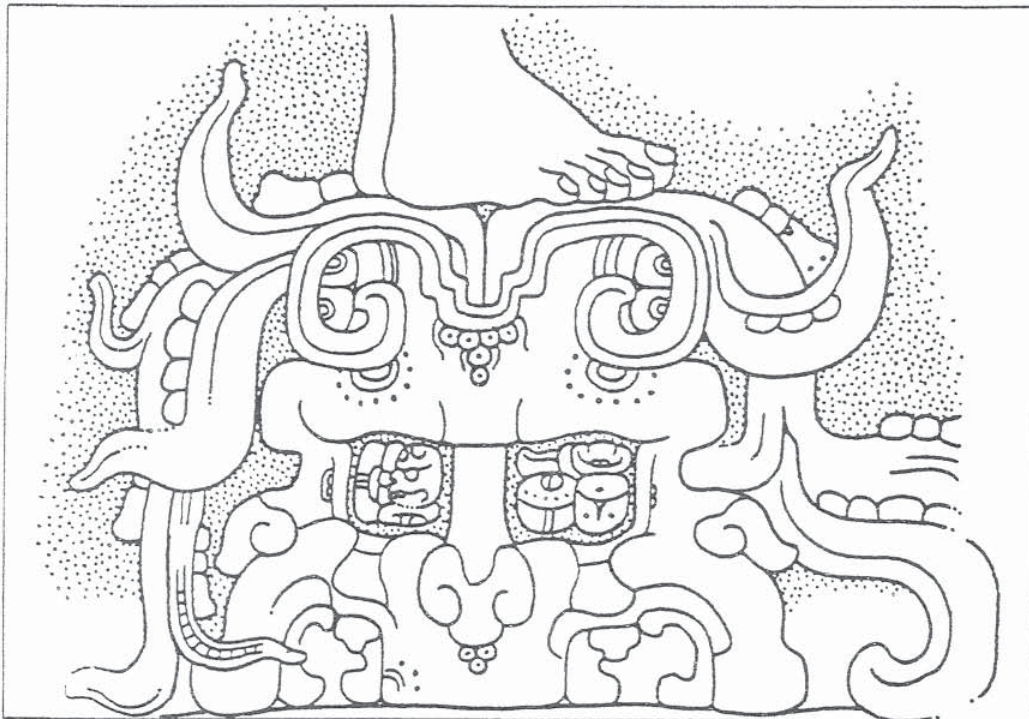


Fig. 4. Hieroglyph for *wits*, "hill"; from drawing by David Stuart (David Stuart, "The Hills Are Alive: Sacred Mountains in the Maya Cosmos," *Symbols* [spring 1997]: fig. 5).

just a representation as we understand it—“the eyes look fine, but the nose, well, it just isn’t right.” In Classic Maya art, the representation, whether of king or captive, is not, as the Greeks might see it, a counterfeit of reality.²⁴ Rather, it forms *part* of that reality and shares in the identity of the thing it pictures. For the Maya, a portrait captures part of the soul-essence of the person being shown. So the sculptures in the great plaza of a Maya city do not stand silently. As parts of the king, they still dance or pose in glorious splendor, awaiting worshipful attendance from vanished subjects (plate 9).

More strangely, to ancient Maya mentalities, the hieroglyphs truly speak (plate 8). As a sculpture shares in the identity of the king, so do the glyphs, which reverberate with phrases off Maya lips. To Maya eyes, the glyphs exist physically. To Maya ears, the glyphs crackle with the audible power of royal rhetoric.²⁵ The result is a distinct perception or experience of the world as a place with multiple manifestations of the divine.

Gods, Holiness, and Local Religion. This sense of general vitality, of animate energy in hieroglyphic texts that both depict speech and *are* speech, takes us only so far. Two concepts prevent us from viewing monistic energy as so much white noise—the life spirit extended every which way, without individual identities or specific instantiations. First, for the Classic Maya this vitality never seems to have existed on its own, floating about like so much cosmic smog: it had to have a material manifestation in specific things, beings, or tangible forces. Second, they clearly conceived of holiness as a pure distillation of that spirit that did not pertain to everyone or everything but only to two kinds of beings—gods and royalty.

Individualized gods were known to the Classic Maya as *k’uh* (fig. 5); the very term for such beings reflects an archaic label from earlier stages of their language. Two kinds of gods existed or, to put this more accurately, two dimensions of gods. There were major gods, often expressing natural forces such as rain or the sun (fig. 6). These beings rejoiced in names like *Chaak*, *K’awiil*, *K’inich Ajaw*, and *Ik’ K’uh* and represented primordial forces and creative agencies. In themselves they can be traced to the earliest periods of Maya civilization, well before the time of Christ (fig. 7). Their actions and properties, told as stories often narrated on scenes from Maya ceramics, explain why the world is as it is.



Fig. 5. Hieroglyph for *k’uh*, “god”; from drawing by David Stuart.



Fig. 6. The major god *K'awiil*, as spirit companion; photograph © Justin Kerr, file no. K5164 (Dorie Reents-Budet, *Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period* [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994], 107).

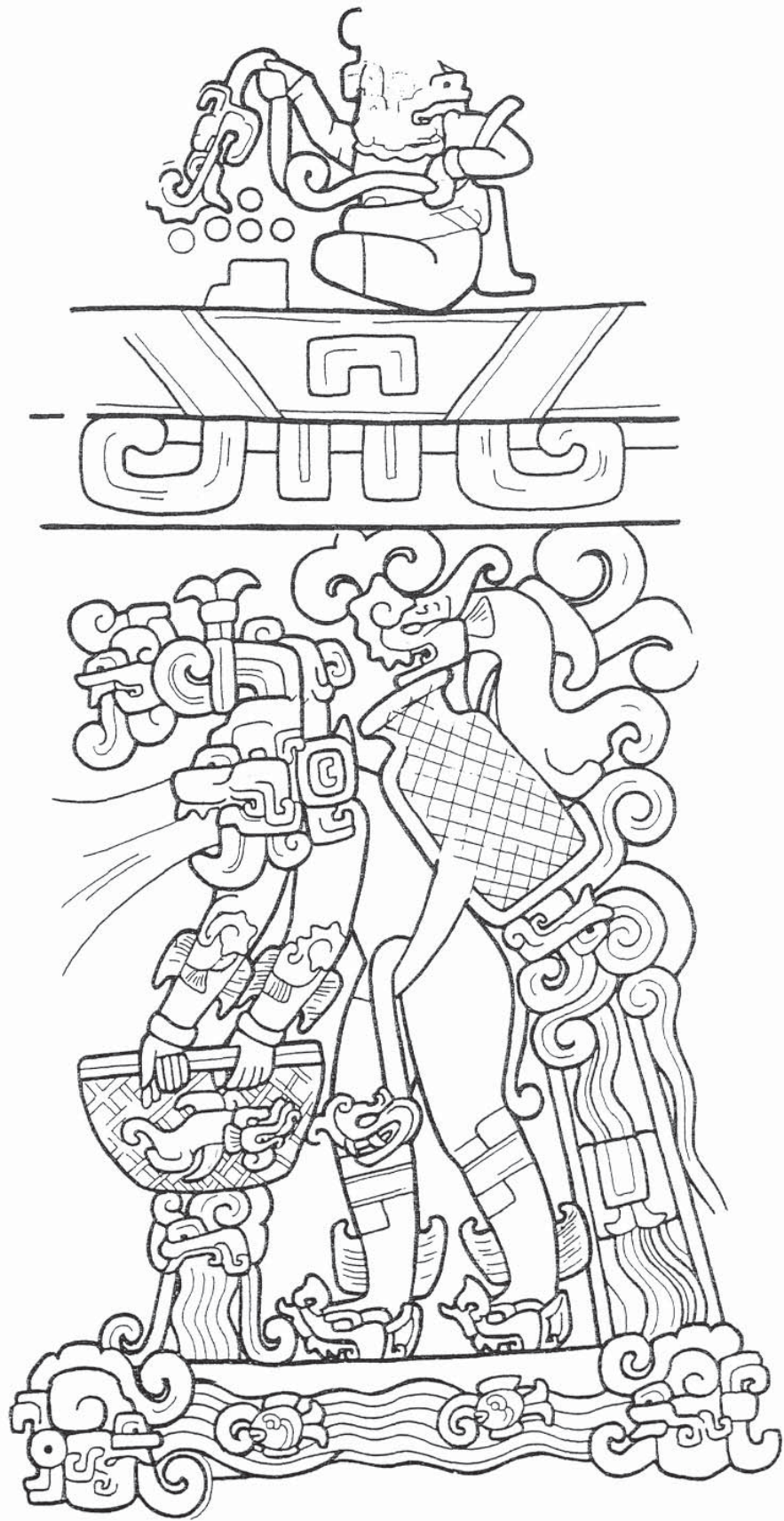


Fig. 7. Late Preclassic depiction of Maya rain god, *Chaak*; Izapa Stela 1; drawing by Ayax Moreno, courtesy New World Archaeological Foundation.

Also, we have recently learned of a plurality of other gods, usually of a localized sort. They remain in shadow and mystery, but do play a role. These local gods lived tangibly among the Maya; their carvings—recall that images were living things to the Maya—occupied temples, where they could be entreated and even bullied. The local, city-based deities seem to have been *aspects* of major gods lodged in particular places to suit local needs. More to the point, these tutelary gods were tended carefully by rulers, who served as intermediaries between their subjects and these almost tribal deities. In a few instances, the relationships between ruler and god seem entirely personal—that is, the gods pertain only to one ruler and are enthroned at the same time he is.

The parallels between Mayan gods and those of some other ancient religions, particularly of ancient Greece, are striking: Zeus could, for example, adopt a near infinity of guises, and cults to certain gods could be introduced and extinguished as a city changed.²⁶ We see a similar pattern in Classic Maya cities like Palenque, Mexico, where cults dedicated to certain gods sprang suddenly into existence, either as local theological innovations or as borrowings from elsewhere. The paradox here is that, in their identities, gods could be multiplied, subdivided, regrouped; they could reside simultaneously now and in the deep past, at this city and yet at another. Indeed, the unresolvable paradoxes and ambiguities are what partly give power and mystery to the system, as in the question of the Trinity for some Christians.²⁷ More than a hint of secrets unfold just beyond, yet irremovably distant from, human grasp. Monism or a general monistic orientation implies a vast arena that outstrips our capacity to see at one time its immensity and its majesty.

The role of the rulers is complex. I've portrayed them as intermediaries and caretakers, finding no evidence that they were regarded as gods themselves. Rather, rulers were labeled *k'uhul*, “godly” or “holy”—sacred as priests might be sacred. When they came to the throne, they were figuratively wrapped (*k'ahl-aj*), much like a sacred bundle might be in Native North America or in community rituals of modern Maya.²⁸ In hieroglyphic texts, kings are described in almost godly detachment: to a very curious extent, they seldom *do* much of anything but instead supervise, oversee, and occasionally dance (an ancient American form of prayer and stylized, ritual movement)—like Maya gods, it is their mere presence that is important, not so much their overt activity.

Rulers could absorb divinity in only one way: through wearing god masks they impersonated deities, an action with some of the same overtones as the sacred Kachina dances of Pueblos in Arizona and New Mexico. Such masks, devised of thin fabric soaked in clay and painted, have been found recently in a palace at the site of Aguateca, Guatemala.²⁹ Imagine the awesome

quality of these solemn impersonations: rulers would ascend into temples and palaces to descend as gods that proclaim, dance, and palpably come to life in fulfillment of the special bond between the people and their gods. It is well to remember that theater in much of the ancient world, especially in Greece, had sacred components.³⁰ The performance not only entertained but also inspired wonder before the presence of the divine, since the performance literally functioned as an act and mystery of creation.

Covenants and Community. We have established, then, that the Classic Maya interacted with gods who were not abstract but tangible beings. However, these gods were not exactly supernatural, at least not in our sense of that word: to the Maya, godly nature combined a material presence with powers beyond human capability, if not beyond human control. It seems that the gods of the Classic Maya were at once revered and confined. They were beings who, at some point in Maya conceptions of history, came from other locations, perhaps remote mountain homes where cults now operate among modern Maya.³¹

After being “lured” and “captured” in this fashion, the gods were housed under the care of particular dynasties. Monaghan discusses one indigenous community where uncooperative gods, whose effigies stand in churches, were hung upside down or placed in the sun until they decided “to play ball.”³² He argues persuasively that gods were not above humans but were directly involved in “a single moral community,” as members of the same civic society.³³

Both humans and gods held responsibility for maintaining order and balance. Chaos, the opposite of order, led to illness, either social or personal. Acts of both gods and humans were not so much concerned with personal salvation or the attainment of some exquisite level of heaven as they were with the here and now.³⁴ These arrangements can be understood in terms of a covenant, a binding agreement or pledge undertaken in the remote past and renewed continually. As part of this covenant, humans received, most strikingly, physical life and physical form. In the Maya region and neighboring zones, humans were thought to be fashioned by gods from corn dough after earlier, botched experiments with mud and sticks. The willowy, beautiful, and succulent maize god was the primordial human (fig. 8, plate 5). This god’s cycle of planting, growth, and consumption as a foodstuff was the story of humans, a hopeful narrative of the human cycle, ideally suited to agriculturalists.

But herein also lay a sinister consequence—Who would eat the men of corn? The earth and, indirectly, the gods consumed bodies laid to rest. To pay their body debt, humans had to feed the gods with other foods; they had to nourish them with incense smoke, praise, blood, and, for the Classic Maya, high-ranking captives. The debt had to be paid eventually and in

full, but it could be deferred through exchanges or sacrificial payments. Karl Taube has identified the sacrificial payment by the Maya word *k'ex*, the first of which is that which allowed the infant to survive and grow to adulthood.³⁵ Birth and moments of illness were dangerous and threatening of established order. It took the clever and ritually adept priest, shaman, or midwife to intervene and postpone the devastating payment required of all human beings.

Postponement could be accomplished through Maya medicine, as practiced in the royal sweat baths that we are now excavating at the Classic city of Piedras Negras, Guatemala. The sweat baths were considered to rectify dangerous imbalances in the human body. Taube makes a good case that other practices of deferral involved some trickery, for the gods could be inattentive and, strange to say, somewhat unintelligent. This *k'ex* represents what anthropologists call reciprocity, namely, parts given in joint exchange. In a way, it placed humans and gods within a web of mutual, explicitly developed expectations. The gods had mighty powers, but so too, in quiet, sly ways, did humans.

I believe the tribute economy of the Classic Maya, in which cotton robes and great bags of chocolate beans flowed to kings from their subjects, followed the same notions of covenantal sacrifice. There are some images that show captives being given to lords, perhaps for eventual dedication to the gods' "table" (plate 10). Morality was respect for one's obligations according to the covenants that interlaced the Classic community of humans and gods. This, fundamentally, is what separated men and beasts. The Classic Maya lived within a moral ecology that rested on order and the dutiful, if negotiated, recycling of the human body.

Before leaving this topic, let me explode the myth of the unremittingly violent Maya. For many years, the Classic Maya were regarded as peaceful and time-worshipping, a view replaced more recently by their characterization as incessantly brutal, much diverted by bloodletting and hideous tortures of war captives.³⁶ There is truth to these accounts, and the general public seems to love this image of benighted savages. Yet, this violent image has also become a caricature that fails in two ways to do justice to the ancient Maya. First, it provides no context for such sacrifices as acts of *k'ex* exchange. Second, it is not at all clear the Classic Maya needed to do much actual bloodletting. If substitutes (*k'er*) are possible and if the representation of something is potentially like the original it depicts, then real blood would be superfluous. Red paint and incense (the "blood of trees") could do in a pinch, as they do in some rituals of modern, ethnographic Maya.³⁷

The End of the Classic Maya Civilization

It is interesting to speculate whether the Maya had crises of belief. It would be odd, even inhuman, if they did not. I see the end of Classic



Fig. 8. The maize god; photograph © Justin Kerr, file no. K1185 (Dorie Reents-Budet, *Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period* [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994], catalog 4).

civilization rather differently from some colleagues. To many, it is a time of drought, political instability, explosive and destructive population growth, and environmental destruction.³⁸ Those things probably happened. Most readers will have heard of the famed Maya “collapse,” when cities crumbled and populations disappeared, never to return. But, if the sacred and the profane were so tightly intertwined among the Maya, if covenantal exchange solidified and bound their society, surely one cannot ignore this singular event as a crisis of faith. Why feed and sustain local gods who do not keep their promises? Why support kings who listen to useless deities?

The mechanistic practices I have described, of feeding gods in exchange for assistance and for life itself, hinge on notions of *quid pro quo*. The failure of some gods to keep promises could lead to relations with new, more helpful gods, but what if all covenants faltered? The modern materialist scholars, focusing only on food and politics, have prevented us from comprehending the absolute moral disaster of the Maya collapse. There are clues that the Maya ritualists tried to remedy whatever plagues were affecting their cities. Some of the latest sculptures display scenes with deities floating in clouds

above rulers. I believe these monuments show rainmaking. The accompanying inscriptions refer explicitly to watering (*y-ati-ih*) by gods. It is tempting, if speculative, to link such rituals with the droughts or water needs that may have contributed to the collapse of the civilization.³⁹

Conclusion

This short paper has not discussed many aspects of the Classic Maya civilization, including the immensely complex Maya notion of multiple souls, some of which roamed at night, or Maya beliefs about death and its aftermath.⁴⁰ Deliberately omitted was any review of shamanism, an ecstatic, individualized communion with the supernatural. This topic is mired in controversy, not least because it is unclear whether any high-ranking priest or divine king could truly be called a shaman, as anthropologists understand this feature of nonstate or prestate religious practice.⁴¹

What is clear is that in the study of the Classic Maya there remains so much to do and so few people to undertake these exciting encounters with the past. Intellectually, the study of a people's faith forces us to engage a foreign theology in ways that modify and transform our own words and thoughts. In essence, the search for what humans do and do not share is both the challenge and the reward of anthropology. It enlarges us; it makes our souls, our beings, bigger than they were. And it allows us to understand, in respectful ways, the religious quest of humanity, regardless of place, time, or setting.

Stephen D. Houston is University Professor of Anthropology at Brigham Young University. An earlier version of this paper was given as a forum assembly address at BYU on January 26, 1999. John Welch provided encouragement and helpful editorial advice. In its initial stages, the paper was also improved by comments from John Clark, John Hawkins, John Monaghan, and John Robertson. Nancy Dayton Houston and Karl Taube contributed useful advice, making this a better essay.

1. Recent work on evolutionary psychology emphasizes the origins of "religion" as part of a profound shift in human cognitive processing from about sixty thousand to thirty thousand years before the present. See Steven Mithen, *The Prehistory of the Mind: The Cognitive Origins of Art, Religion, and Science* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 162, 164–67, 175–76. At root here is a new, suddenly acquired capacity for establishing and manipulating symbols and for developing an ability to perceive metaphorical links between different domains of thought. This "cognitive fluidity" is, for Mithen, the feature that fundamentally separates modern humans from Neanderthals and other archaic members of the genus *Homo*. As a species, we are neurologically disposed to religious experience. Mithen sees "religion" itself as three things: a belief in nonphysical beings that can survive death or transcend the human body; an affirmation of ritual as a means to effect change; and an assertion of reciprocal communication between humans and supernatural agencies. For similar views, see Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness*

of *Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); and Pascal Boyer, "Cognitive Constraints on Cultural Representations: Natural Ontologies and Religious Ideas," in *Mapping the Mind: Domain Specificity in Cognition and Culture*, ed. L. A. Hirschfeld and S. A. Gelman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 391–411.

2. My remarks result from a forum, not a devotional. I am not a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, although I have been blessed to teach at Brigham Young University and to benefit from its many freedoms. For this reason, I have refrained from addressing current theories relating the Book of Mormon to ancient America. That enterprise I leave to readers individually, as a matter of faith and personal inquiry. For LDS views, see especially the works of John L. Sorenson, such as "The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1997), 391–521. Fuller arguments appear in John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1985).

3. Kay Warren tabulates a population of at least 3,000,000 speakers in Guatemala alone. Kay Warren, *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 8; see also Nora England, "The Role of Language Standardization in Revitalization," in *Mayan Cultural Activism in Guatemala*, ed. Edward Fischer and R. McKenna Brown (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 178–94. Other estimates, courtesy of John Monaghan, include 750,000 Yucatec Maya in Campeche, Quintana Roo, and Yucatán; 120,000 speakers of Huastec, a Mayan outlier in Mexico; 840,000 Maya in the Mexican state of Chiapas; and under 50,000 in Belize (Honduras and El Salvador seem no longer to have any evidence of Maya speech). Such numbers are likely to be unreliable, since tallies of native speakers inherently serve political purposes. Cultural activists, who are increasingly vocal in Guatemala and in foreign academic circles, naturally wish for high numbers: these figures lend support to claims for national attention. Their antagonists, the cultural assimilationists, either ignore high tallies or argue for lower estimates.

4. Itsaj is one such language, now "spoken by less than a hundred older adults in Petén, Guatemala." Charles Andrew Hofling, *Itzá Maya Texts, with a Grammatical Overview* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1991), 1. Activists put this number as high as three thousand, a highly improbable figure. Warren, *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics*, 16.

5. Robertson's earlier research on Common Mayan offers a rigorous and indispensable foundation for such comparative studies. See John S. Robertson, *The History of Tense/Aspect/Mood/Voice in the Mayan Verbal Complex* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992).

6. For a withering critique of views on ahistorical or "fossilized" non-Westerners, see Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

7. Testimonies of this period may be found in Robert Carmack, ed., *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988). There seems little doubt that the Guatemalan army and its supporters generated much of this violence, although the guerrillas, too, engaged in massacres and brutality. Recent research by David Stoll on the life of Nobel laureate Rigoberta Menchú has questioned the myths of the left as well as the right in their struggle for the Guatemalan soul. See David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1999).

8. A large selection of this research may be consulted in W. K. Howell, D. Ranae, and E. Copeland, *Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation* (Provo, Utah: New World Archaeological Foundation, Brigham Young University, 1959–95).

9. Michael D. Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992).

10. Stephen Houston, John Robertson, and David Stuart, “The Language of the Classic Maya,” *Current Anthropology*, forthcoming.

11. An excellent review of these ideas may be found in Robert W. Preucel, “The Philosophy of Archaeology,” in *Processual and Postprocessual Archaeologies: Multiple Ways of Knowing the Past*, ed. Robert W. Preucel (Carbondale: Center for Archaeological Investigations, Southern Illinois University, 1991), 17–29. Gadamer’s contributions are discussed in William Outhwaite, “Hans-Georg Gadamer,” in *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences*, ed. Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 21–39.

12. John Monaghan, “Theology and History in the Study of Mesoamerican Religions,” in *Handbook of Middle American Indians: Supplement 6, Ethnography*, ed. John Monaghan (Austin: University of Texas Press), 62–63.

13. In the last twenty years, some archaeologists have advocated a new kind of interpretive archaeology termed “cognitive processual archaeology.” A. Colin Renfrew, “Towards a Cognitive Archaeology,” in *The Ancient Mind: Elements of Cognitive Archaeology*, ed. A. Colin Renfrew and Ezra Zubrow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3–12. Aside from the jargon and disciplinary posturing, it is hard to understand how this approach differs greatly from traditional concerns with concepts and theologies in Mesoamerican studies. Influential scholars who have published on “cognitive archaeology” often acknowledge the power of thought and belief. Yet, they also remark on the “laziness” and “charlatanism” of those who study such matters without also undertaking “tedious and time-consuming [and] strenuous” surveys and excavations. Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, “Cognitive Archaeology,” in *Contemporary Archaeology in Theory*, ed. Robert Preucel and Ian Hodder (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 361. Presumably, if I understand the logic, hard work of the brain must, for full moral effect, be accompanied by sweat of the body.

14. Joyce Marcus and Kent V. Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization: How Urban Society Evolved in Mexico’s Oaxaca Valley* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 14–22.

15. Joyce Marcus, *Mesoamerican Writing Systems: Propaganda, Myth, and History in Four Ancient Civilizations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 10–12, 437; Elizabeth Brumfiel, “Huitzilopochtli’s Conquest: Aztec Ideology in the Archaeological Record,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 8 (April 1998): 3–13.

16. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review, 1971), 127–86.

17. This essay by E. E. Evans-Pritchard still has the power to delight and instruct; see E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Essays in Social Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1962), 35.

18. Monaghan, “Study of Mesoamerican Religions,” 50.

19. Andrea J. Stone, *Images from the Underworld: Naj Tunich and the Tradition of Maya Cave Painting* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 7, 12.

20. Monaghan, “Study of Mesoamerican Religions,” 62–63.

21. J. Jorge Klor de Alva, “Christianity and the Aztecs,” *San Jose Studies* 5 (1979): 6–21; Louise M. Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), 36–37. Monism plays a strong role in the thought of, among others, Benedict Spinoza. It is quite wrong to think of Spinoza as commenting on pre-Columbian thought, since he knew nothing about it. Nevertheless, his philosophizing provides an orientation. For Spinoza, there

was only one comprehensive substance, which he called “nature” or “God”—mind and spirit indissoluble from body, possessed of an infinite number of attributes. The greatest knowledge of “God,” in Spinoza’s special sense of the Creator, would come from union with his essence (*scientia intuitiva*), a union, in fact, eternally present but only intermittently understood by meager human perception. Jonathan Bennett, “Spinoza’s Metaphysics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 61–88. (One suspects that Spinoza’s globalizing and universalizing notions reflect his early years as an observant Jew imbued with monotheism.) See also David Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 136. John Monaghan points out to me that a term more appropriate than *monism*, with its totalizing properties, might be *monistic*, since Mesoamericans frequently subdivided unities into dualistic or multiplicitous parts. John Monaghan, conversation with author, December 1998.

22. The term *animism* might be applied to such notions, but for the problem of its use in anthropology. *Animism* springs from the work of Edward Tylor (1832–1917), who saw it simply as a belief in souls and spirits. See Brian Morris, *Anthropological Studies of Religion: An Introductory Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 100. For Tylor, monotheism was also a form of animism, as, indeed, were all religions. Freud regarded animism less as a common denominator of religious concepts, than as a precursor to religion and science, in that order. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1938), 144. Such evolutionary baggage makes it best to avoid the term altogether.

23. David Stuart, “The Hills Are Alive: Sacred Mountains in the Maya Cosmos,” *Symbols* (spring 1997): 13–17; David Stuart, “‘The Fire Enters His House’: Architecture and Ritual in Classic Maya Texts,” in *Function and Meaning in Classic Maya Architecture*, ed. Stephen D. Houston (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1998), 373–425.

24. Stephen Houston and David Stuart, “The Ancient Maya Self: Personhood and Portraiture in the Classic Period,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 33 (1988): 73–101.

25. Stephen Houston and Karl Taube, “An Archaeology of the Senses: Perceptual Psychology in Classic Maya Art, Writing, and Architecture,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, forthcoming.

26. Louise B. Zaidman and Pauline S. Pantel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*, trans. Paul Cartledge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 177–78, 212–13.

27. Gilbert Lewis, *Day of Shining Red: An Essay on Understanding Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 30–31.

28. Stephen Houston and David Stuart, “Of Gods, Glyphs, and Kings: Divinity and Rulership among the Classic Maya,” *Antiquity* 70 (June 1996): 289–312; David Stuart, “Kings of Stone: A Consideration of Stelae in Ancient Maya Ritual and Representation,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 29/30 (1996): 148–71; David Stuart, “Accession Rites,” in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*, ed. David Carrasco (Oxford: Oxford University Press, in press).

29. Takeshi Inomata and Daniela Triadan, “Estudio de los grupos domésticos en el sitio Clásico de Aguateca, Petén” (paper presented at the XII Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala, Guatemala City, July 1998).

30. W. R. Connor, “City Dionysia and Athenian Democracy,” in *Aspects of Athenian Democracy*, ed. J. Rufus Fears (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 1990), 7–32.

31. Richard Wilson, *Maya Resurgence in Guatemala: Q’eqchi’ Experiences* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 51–61.

32. John Monaghan, conversation with author, 1995.

33. Monaghan, “Study of Mesoamerican Religions,” 65.

34. Hugo Nutini, *Todos Santos in Rural Tlaxcala: A Syncretic, Expressive, and Symbolic Analysis of the Cult of the Dead* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 52–53.
35. Karl A. Taube, “The Birth Vase: Natal Imagery in Ancient Maya Myth and Ritual,” in *The Maya Vase Book: A Corpus of Rollout Photographs of Maya Vases*, ed. Justin Kerr, 5 vols. (New York: Kerr Associates, 1994), 4:652–85.
36. Linda Schele and Mary Miller, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art* (Fort Worth: Kimbell Art Museum, 1986).
37. R. Jon McGee, *Life, Ritual, and Religion among the Lacandon Maya* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1990).
38. T. Patrick Culbert, “The Collapse of Classic Maya Civilization,” in *The Collapse of Ancient States and Civilizations*, ed. Norman Yoffee and George L. Cowgill (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988), 69–101.
39. David A. Hodell, Jason H. Curtis, and Mark Brenner, “Possible Role of Climate in the Collapse of Classic Maya Civilization,” *Nature* 375 (June 1995): 391–94.
40. For decipherments of a term for an aspect of the “soul,” see Stephen Houston and David Stuart, “The *Way* Glyph: Evidence for ‘Co-essences’ among the Classic Maya,” *Research Reports on Ancient Maya Writing* 30 (Washington, D.C.: Center for Maya Research, 1989); also Nikolai Grube and Werner Nahm, “A Census of Xibalba: A Complete Inventory of *Way* Characters on Maya Ceramics,” in *The Maya Vase Book: A Corpus of Rollout Photographs of Maya Vases*, ed. Justin Kerr, 5 vols. (New York: Kerr Associates, 1994), 4:686–715.
41. For a Mayanist perspective, see David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman’s Path* (New York: William Morrow, 1993). More subtle, historical views may be found in Nicholas Thomas and Caroline Humphrey, eds., *Shamanism, History, and the State* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).



PLATE 1. Maya deity painting a codex (a manuscript book), depicted on a Classic-era plate. Photograph © Justin Kerr, file no. K5824 (Michael D. Coe and Justin Kerr, *The Art of the Maya Scribe* [New York: Harry Abrams, 1997], 88).

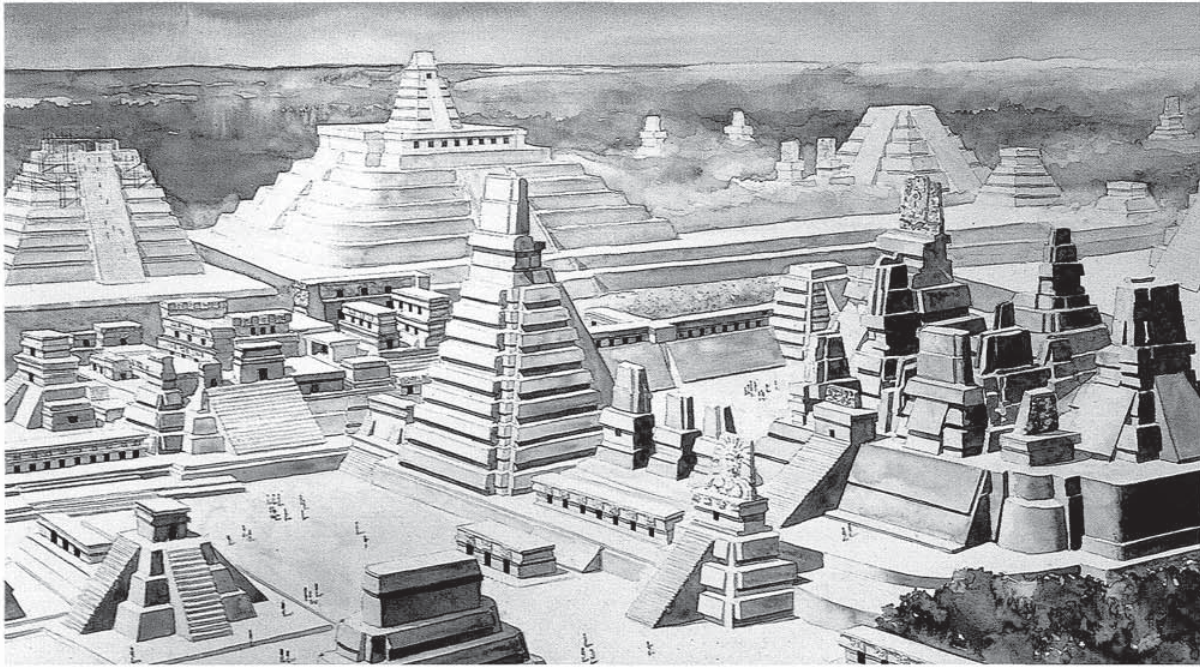


Illustration by Rob Wood of Wood Ronsaville Harlin, Inc.

PLATE 2. Reconstruction of the city center of Tikal as it would look around A.D. 700. Note the center's immense size.

PLATE 3. The Pyramid of the Magician at Uxmal. Trees now cover most of the original urban area, which was home to thousands of Maya.



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PLATE 4. Temple 1 at Tikal. In high temples such as this, the Classic Maya worshiped their gods and burned incense to their ancestors.



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PLATE 5. In this image on his tomb cover, Pakal the Great represents a new-born maize god sprouting from the underworld.



PLATE 6. Cueva de Tigre, Guatemala. Photograph by Stephen Houston.

PLATE 7. Wooden sculpture of a dwarf, probably used as a support for a circular mirror. For the Maya, this portrait is more than just an image—it forms part of the man's reality and shares his identity.





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PLATE 8. Portrait of a Maya queen.



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PLATE 9. Bas relief sculptures in a courtyard at Palenque. In the Maya worldview, the soul-essence of each of these individuals has migrated to these portraits. The Maya did not distinguish as we do between the animate and the inanimate—between people and their representations.



Photograph by Daniel Bates, courtesy David A. Palmer and S.E.H.A.

PLATE 10. Maya nobles and their captives from a neighboring city, as painted in a mural at Bonampak, Chiapas, around A.D. 800. The captives likely became slaves or were used in a sacrificial *k'ex* exchange, where their bodies substituted for those of their victors as payment to the gods. Copy of A. Tejada version of Bonampak mural in INAH Regional Museum, Tuxtla Guitierrez, Chiapas, Mexico.