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# Hero Twins: Explorations of Mythic and Historical Dichotomies

Bethany J. Myers

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*Hero Twins: Explorations of  
Mythic and Historical  
Dichotomies*

Bethany J. Myers  
Honors Thesis in Anthropology  
April 26, 2002

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## Introduction

Myths concerning the birth of twins are widespread throughout the western hemisphere. They occur nearly everywhere from Canada to South America (Sullivan 1988), including the Yuma, Skidi Pawnee, and Winnebago of North America, the Maya of Central America, and the Canelos Quichua of South America. This paper investigates the occurrence of twin myths in the Americas, with special focus on the myth of the Hero Twins from the Quiche Maya book of the Popol Vuh. In Mesoamerica the birth of twins is generally thought to be a sign of misfortune and danger (Miller and Taube 1993). The Aztecs, among other Mesoamerican groups, believed that one twin should be put to death at birth (Miller and Taube 1993).

Twin myths tend to be myths that recount a society's origin. Origin myths often complement the twin cycle, as the birth and existence of opposing forces is explained. The dualistic pairings include life and death, sky and earth, day and night, sun and moon, and male and female, among multiple others (Miller and Taube 1993). The duality that occurs between male and female is often seen in twin myths, as a male and female twin are sometimes born and represent the two sides of a single individual. Miller and Taube state that since duality is "one of the basic structural principles of Mesoamerican religious thought...there is a recognition of the essential interdependence of opposites" by Mesoamericans (Miller and Taube 1993: 81).

This paper focuses primarily on the Maya origin myths. According to Schele and Freidel (1990) "our understanding of their (Maya) literature and of the many forms such stories must have taken is severely limited" because the Maya wrote primarily on paper, which has been destroyed over the last several centuries (74). Versions of the creation

stories told in the Popol Vuh appear during all periods of Maya history, including on monuments from the Pre-Classic period, on pottery and public art from the Classic period, in documents from the Colonial period, and still exist today in oral tradition (Schele and Freidel 1990: 74).

Mythically twins are often portrayed as dualistic opposing forces, as previously described, or as heroes. Most of the myths discussed in this paper are myths concerning hero twins. In Mesoamerica, as stated above, the Hero Twins like these of the Popol Vuh are portrayed on ancient monuments, ceramics, and hieroglyphic texts, a likely signifier of twins being held in high esteem as sacred beings. Ethnographically, there is very little information on how twins are treated in Mesoamerican society. However, the reports I have found often state that twins are viewed negatively and as an unfortunate occurrence. This paper investigates the occurrence of myths of twins in North, Meso, and South America. It examines their similarities and evolution, and compares the myths, specifically the myths of the hero twins in the Popol Vuh, with native cultural conceptions of twinning.

The specific focus of this paper is to investigate the meaning of twin myth in a political context among the ancient Maya. The first half of this paper is dedicated to the examination of twin myths in North, Central and South America. Several myths are summarized, and then similarities and dissimilarities between myths of different geographic origin are explored. The next chapter contains a detailed introduction and summary of the Maya myth of the Hero Twins. The following chapter contains a comparison between North and South American twin myths with the Mayan myth of the Hero Twins.

The second half of the paper begins with an analysis of twin mythology in a political context. This is achieved through the examination of the last ruler of the Late Terminal Classic Maya site of Machaquila in South-Central Petén in Guatemala. This ruler personifies himself in a mythic context, specifically in the context of the mythic Hero Twins. Furthermore, there is evidence that the last ruler of Machaquila, Ruler VI, may himself be twins, meaning that there are two rulers who govern the site during the same or alternating terms. This question is specifically explored through thorough reexamination of the texts and iconography on the four stelae associated with Ruler VI. This includes a careful analysis of the human portraiture, and the symbolic implications of clothing.

Finally, interpretation of myth, with a specific focus on twin myths is considered. The significance of why ancient Mayan rulers would have chosen to personify themselves in a mythic context is the specific focus of this chapter. Multiple theories are first discussed, and then in an attempt to form a coherent conclusion, are employed in a collaborative manner to determine the role of twin myth among the ancient Maya. The last chapter then compares the ancient views of twins with modern views of twinning. The ancient and modern perception of twins has drastically changed over the last five centuries. The final chapter explores these differences and the possible roots that generated the transformation in perception.

## 1. Twin Myths in North America

### *Yuma*

The Yuma, of what is present-day southwest Arizona, have a myth called “The Good Twin and the Evil Twin”<sup>1</sup>. In this myth Kokomaht, the Creator, is a twin of Bakotahl, who is evil. The first, or good, twin rose out of the water and opened his eyes and named himself Kokomaht, meaning All-Father. As the second twin began to rise from the water he asked Kokomaht whether he rose with his eyes open or closed. Kokomaht lied to him and said he had opened his eyes underwater. Hearing this the second twin opened his eyes under water, and when he reached the surface he was blind and was named Bakotahl, or the Blind One.

Kokomaht then made the land and the first humans, the Yumas. Bakotahl tried making humans but they had neither fingers nor toes, so Kokomaht tried to show him how to do it correctly, and afterwards he mashed all of Bakotahl’s failed creations. Enraged by this, Bakotahl dove back into the water and sent up a whirlwind, the bringer of all evil, but Kokomaht stepped on it, destroying it. From beneath his foot a small piece slipped out and became all the sickness in the world. Next Kokomaht made the Cocopahs, Dieguenos, Mojaves, Apaches, Maricopas, Pimas, and Coahuilas, in all twenty four peoples. Finally he made the moon, stars, and Hanyi, the Frog. Hanyi the Frog envied Kokomaht’s power and wanted to destroy him. Kokomaht knew of Hanyi’s plan, and allowed himself to be killed to teach the humans about death. Meanwhile, Bakothal had formed the individuals without hands, feet, fingers or toes, and they became the fish and other water animals. Bakothal remained forever under the earth, doing evil.

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<sup>1</sup> See Erdoes and Oritz 1984 for the complete version.

### *Skidi Pawnee*

The Skidi Pawnee have a myth called "Long Tooth Boy"<sup>2</sup>. In this myth a woman dies in labor. When her husband finds her dead after coming home from a hunt, he cuts open her womb and removes a baby boy who is still living. He then takes the afterbirth and throws it into a creek. The child later meets another boy who lives in the water while his father is off hunting. The boy who came from the water has a long front tooth, and is actually his twin, who was hidden in the afterbirth that his father had thrown into the river. Long Tooth Boy only plays with his brother when their father is not around because he insists that his father did not love him since he was thrown into the river with the afterbirth. After the father had made many attempts to entice the boy to stay, he eventually catches the Long Toothed Boy. The boy bites his father and his father breaks off his long tooth so he can no longer fight, and the boy promises not to try to run away.

The two boys, already friends, become heroes and fight evil. First they kill a giant snake monster together. Next they kill a bear that was known for murdering young men and hunters. Then they tried to kill an old witch who had been known for killing and eating people. Long Tooth Boy made his brother attack the woman first, and he was killed. Long Tooth Boy then killed the witch and magically brought his brother back to life. Finally they kill a great elk that breathes and spits fire. The elk is a metaphor for evil and sickness, as the father tells his boys that the elk is responsible for killing the people who have died in their tribe, as well as causing the death of the twin's mother. After killing the elk their father rejoices and everyone lives happily and the little boys spend the rest of their time playing in both the water and on land.

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<sup>2</sup> See Dorsey 1969 for the complete version.



## 2. The Maya Myth of the Hero Twins

For the purposes of this paper only Part 2 and Part 3 of the Popol Vuh will be discussed, as they are the only sections with reference to twins. Part Two begins with the defeat of Seven Macaw by the hero twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque. The twins are referred to as gods and Seven Macaw is the personification of evil. Seven Macaw's family are introduced, Chimalmat, his wife, and his two sons Zipacna and Earthquake. Zipacna is the builder of mountains and is referred to as "the maker of the earth", and Earthquake has the power to move mountains and bring down the sky.

The twins defeat Seven Macaw by following him to the tree where he feeds. As he is eating, Hunahpu shoots him with his blowgun, breaking his jaw. In revenge Seven Macaw tears Hunahpu's arm off and brings it home to hang over a fire. The twins invoke a grandfather and grandmother, named Great White Peccary and Great White Coati respectively, to go to Seven Macaw's house and pretend that the twins were their orphan grandchildren. Acting as curers, the grandparents go to the house of Seven Macaw and he implores them to cure his aching jaw, which was broken by Hunahpu. They pull out Seven Macaw's teeth, promising to replace them with ground bone, but instead replaced the teeth with white corn which caused his face to droop, and he no longer looked like a lord. The grandparents went on to further "pluck around (his) eyes" removing what remained of his greatness. From this, Seven Macaw died and his wife, Chimalmat, followed him in death. Hunahpu's arm was taken back and replaced.

The next section discusses the orphan Zipacna who is found by the Four Hundred Boys, who plan on killing him because they feel he is no good. They make him dig a hole, planning on throwing down a big log to kill him after he has dug the hole deep and

is wedged in so that he cannot escape. Zipacna realized they were going to kill him, so he dug a separate hole for his own salvation. The Four Hundred Boys throw the log into the hole, and unbeknownst to them, Zipacna was hiding in the separate hole that he dug and was safe from danger. Three days later the Four Hundred Boys begin to drink in their hut in celebration of Zipacna's death. While they are celebrating, Zipacna brings their hut down on top of them, killing all.

The death of the Four Hundred Boys upset Hunahpu and Xbalanque and they wished to bring revenge against Zipacna. The twins construct a giant crab with the use of bromeliad flowers and a flagstone. They stored the crab in a rockshelter at the base of the mountain named Meauan. They find Zipacna who tells the boys he is hungry and they direct him to the mountain where the crab is lying in wait. After nearly being attacked by the crab on the first attempt to get it, he enters the overhang on his back and when he was tightly wedged in the crevice, he took a deep breath and when he released his breath the mountain moved (because Zipacna is the builder of mountains) and settled on his chest, turning him into stone.

In the final section of Part Two Hunahpu and Xbalanque defeat Seven Macaw's second son, Earthquake. They entice Earthquake by telling him that there is a giant mountain that is growing above all the rest. Earthquake asks to see the mountain so he can destroy it. Along the way the twins amuse Earthquake by killing birds with their blowguns. That evening they cook the birds, and cover them with earth (thus in the future becoming the cause for humans to desire meat) because Earthquake wanted to eat the bird meat. They fed him the bird and the following day he lost all the strength in his

arms and legs because he had eaten earth. Due to his weakness, he could not defeat the mountain. The boys bound his arms and feet and buried him in the earth, where he died.

Part Three begins with the story of Hunahpu and Xbalanque's fathers, who were themselves twins. Their names were One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu. One Hunahpu marries Egret Woman and has two sons, also twins, named One Monkey and One Artisan. One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu became great ball players and they played on the road to Xibalba, the Maya underworld, where One Death and Seven Death, the lords of Xibalba heard them. The lords felt that One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu were causing disrespect to them, and so they sent four owls to summon the twins to play ball in Xibalba.

As the twins, One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu, descended into Xibalba they crossed several obstacles, including Rustling Canyon, Gurgling Canyon, Scorpion Rapids, Blood River, and Pus River and were undefeated. They then came to a crossroads with four roads, Red Road, Black Road, White Road, and Yellow Road. They followed the Black Road, the road to Xibalba.

After arriving in Xibalba the twins met the lords of the underworld then retired inside the Dark House until the next day. The Dark House contained torches and cigars that the twins were told must return to the lords of the underworld intact, but the twins failed this test, and they finished the torch and cigars. In penalty for failing the test, One Death and Seven Death sacrificed and buried the twins in the Place of Ball Game Sacrifice. The head of One Hunahpu was cut off and placed in the fork of a calabash tree. This is why the calabash is called "the skull of One Hunahpu."

brothers to a tree where they had hung some birds. They asked their brothers to climb the tree and throw the birds down to them. One Artisan and One Monkey climbed the tree, and the trunk grew thicker. They became frightened and the twins told them to take their pants off and tie them around their waists to be able to move through the tree better. When they did this, their pants transformed into tails and the boys turned into monkeys. As monkeys the grandmother no longer loved the older boys.

Eventually the twins are introduced to the rubber ball and other ball playing equipment left behind by their fathers before they journeyed to Xibalba. Their grandmother had hidden these things from them since it was because of ball playing that their fathers had died. The boys learned to play ball at the ball court, and again the lords of Xibalba heard someone playing ball above them. Again the One Death and Seven Death summoned the ball players, this time Hunahpu and Xbalanque.

Unlike their fathers, Hunahpu and Xbalanque were not defeated in the Dark House in Xibalba. The next day they played a ball game against the lords of Xibalba for the prize of four bowls of flowers, one full of red petals, one full of white petals, one full of yellow petals, and one full of whole flowers. The twins lost the game and had to find the flowers for the lords of Xibalba. That night they entered the Razor House, but were not cut by the razors, again passing another test of the lords of the underworld. During the night the twins hired ants to claim the flowers that they owed as a prize to the winners of the ballgame.

The next day another ballgame was played, this time ending in a tie. The twins were sent to the Cold House overnight, as a test, and again they passed. Then they were sent to the Jaguar House, but were not eaten by the jaguars. Next they entered the midst

One day the daughter of Blood Gatherer, named Blood Moon, went to see the calabash tree. She wished to pick one of the fruits from the tree, which was forbidden, and One Hunahpu spoke to her and told her that she did not want one of the fruits. She refuted him and said that she did want one. He told her to stretch out her hand, and when she did, he spit into her hand, instantly impregnating her.

Six months later her father learned of her pregnancy and was outraged. When Blood Moon refused to tell her father who the father of the child she carried in her belly was, he ordered to have her sacrificed. He sends the Military Keepers of the Mat to return with her heart. She pleads for them not to kill her and she collects nodules of red tree sap and forms a heart and adds croton tree sap to serve as her blood. The Military Keepers of the Mat returned to Blood Gatherer with this heart made of sap and he burned it in sacrifice.

Blood Moon then arrives at the house of One Hunahpu's mother. This is the same house where One Monkey and One Artisan, One Hunahpu's twin sons, also live because their mother died when One Hunahpu was summoned to Xibalba. Blood Moon was made to prove that she carried the child of One Hunahpu in her womb by bringing enough food for everyone from the garden where there was only one corn plant. Blood Moon called upon the guardians of food and they turned a bunch of corn silk into a net full of corn.

Shortly afterwards Hunahpu and Xbalanque were born. One Monkey and One Artisan wished the newborn twins to die because they were jealous of them. The younger brothers were made to sleep on anthills and brambles and received no love from their older brothers or grandmother, and were not fed. One day the twins lured their elder

of the fire, but were not burned. Finally, they entered the Bat House, but were not bitten. Unexpectedly a snatch bat tore off Hunahpu's head while he was peering through his blowgun, looking for dawn. His head then rolled onto the ball court, where the lords of Xibalba rejoiced. Xbalanque summoned all the animals to bring him food, and the coati brought back a squash, which turned into a head for Hunahpu. The next day the lords of the underworld, unknowing that Hunahpu has acquired another head, played ball against Xbalanque with the decapitated head of Hunahpu. The ball bounced out of the court and a rabbit began running and all of the lords of Xibalba chased the rabbit and the ball, and Hunahpu took his head back. Xbalanque and Hunahpu called back to the lords, saying they had recovered the ball, and so the lords returned to the court.

Knowing that the lords of the underworld would soon kill them, the twins decided to give themselves up. The lords made a great stone oven and planned on tricking the boys into it, but the boys already knew how they were going to die and willingly jumped into the oven on their own. The lords were happy and ground the bones of the twins and dumped them into the river. Five days later Hunahpu and Xbalanque emerged from the water as catfish and the following day turned into two vagabonds. After this they were able to produce miracles.

Unaware that the vagabonds were really the twins; the lords of Xibalba invited them to put on a show for them. The boys danced for the lords' entertainment, and were then told to sacrifice a dog and bring him back to life again. When they did so they were told to set a house containing all the lords on fire, and the lords were not burned. Next the lords wanted them to kill a person and bring him back to life, and so they did. Then the twins sacrificed themselves and came back to life. Enthralled by this, the lords asked

the vagabonds to sacrifice them and bring them back to life. One and Seven Death were sacrificed, but the boys tricked them and did not bring them back to life. This is how the hero twins defeated the lords of the underworld.

When the twins were burned in the oven, the corn they had planted before they left their grandmother's house dried up. Their grandmother cried and the corn grew again. She burned copal as a memorial to the twins and the corn plants sprouted. The plants became a way for the grandmother to remember the twins.

The twins put their father, Seven Hunahpu back together and left him at the Place of Ball Game Sacrifice, where he would forever be prayed to. The boys then ascended into the sky and were followed by the Four Hundred Boys, who had been killed by Zipacna, the son of Seven Macaw, and became the stars in the sky, a metaphor for the Milky Way.

### 3. Comparison of Myths

Unlike the tale of the Maya hero twins, most North American myths regarding twins tell of a story of one good twin and one evil twin. Twin sets in North America can be both boys, both girls, boy and girl, or human and animal (Erdoes and Oritz 1984: 75). Twin myths occur in tribes all over the United States, including the Yuma, Menominee, Navajo, Seneca, Skidi Pawnee, Winnebagos, Creek, and Iowa, among many others (Erdoes and Oritz 1984; Bierhorst 1992; Hall 1989). I will discuss only a few of these for the purpose of this paper.

The Yuma myth of Kokomaht and Bakotahl is similar to the Maya myth of the hero twins only in that the twins of both tales arose out of a body of water, and Kokomaht gave himself up to be killed, as the hero twins had given themselves to the lords of the underworld. The similarities between these two myths are slight, but nonetheless existent.

This Skidi Pawnee myth has many similarities to the myth of the hero twins of the Popol Vuh. First, the twins of the Pawnee myth are not representing the duality of good and evil, as the twins of the Yuma myth were. On the contrary, they are both "good" and together fight the forces of evil, as did Hunahpu and Xbalanque in the Popol Vuh.

They are also similar to the Mayan hero twins in that both sets of twins experience living on land and in the water. Hunahpu and Xbalanque are killed then thrown into the water by the lords of the underworld and emerge five days later. Whereas in the Pawnee myth, the Long Tooth Boy was thrown into the river, and thought his father did not love him and was trying to get rid of him, or possibly kill him.



Emerging from the water after either being killed or being taken for dead is an obvious allegory for death and rebirth in both myths.

In a South American myth among the Canelos Quichua, twin heroes Iureke and Shikiemona avenge the death of their mother. Lawrence Sullivan in his book, "Icanchu's Drum" (1988) discusses this myth and many other stories of boys who kill a supernatural jaguar and avenge abuse endured by their mother (1988: 80). The supernatural jaguar seems to be a symbol of evil, and like Central and North American myths, the twins of South America manage to slaughter evil. In both the Pawnee twin myth and in Sullivan's generalization of South American myths, the twins avenge their mother by killing the representation of evil. Similarly Hunahpu and Xbalanque avenge their fathers, One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu, by defeating the lords of the underworld.

The Kamayura of South America have another myth about twins. In their myth a set of hero twins, Kwat and Yali, incubate and emerge from a calabash, where they had been placed after being torn from their murdered mother (Sullivan 1988). This myth of hero twins is very similar to the Mayan myth in that both sets of twins were born, so to speak, from a calabash. In the South American myth the twins gestated in the gourd. In the Mayan myth One Hunahpu's head was wedged in a fork in the calabash tree (*Crescentia cujete*) and he enticed Blood Moon to stretch out her hand to him. When she did this, he spit into her hand and she became pregnant with the hero twins.

Similarly in the eastern United States a myth of the "Bead Spitter" occurs in many tribes, including the Creek myth of Bead Spitter and Thrown Away (Hall 1989; 1997). In this myth a person known as Bead Spitter has a child with a woman who was killed, and had to have her baby removed from her womb. The afterbirth was thrown into a thicket

and a twin boy later appears, who had been thrown out with the afterbirth, also reminiscent of the Skidi Pawnee myth discussed above. In both the eastern United States and in the Popul Vuh hero twins are conceived from a spitter (Hall 1997).

A recurrent theme in North American myths is the idea of a twin emerging from a placenta that has been thrown away, or what Robert Hall calls, “the personified placenta or umbilical cord” (1997). It too is based mainly in the eastern United States, and has been demonstrated here in both the Creek myth of Bead Spitter and Thrown Away, and in the Skidi Pawnee myth of Long Tooth Boy.

Robert Hall states that sometimes this second-born twin has a flint association (1997). Aside from just the second-born being associated with twins, the birth of twins in general seem to have flint associations. In the Menominee myth Out of the Wind, a young girl who also had an immaculate conception gave birth to “triplets”, being Manabus, Muhwase, and a flint stone. When the young mother gave birth to the flint stone she was cut and she died (Bierhorst 1992). The Maya hero twins also have a flint association. According to Hall (1997) the twin’s father, One Hunahpu, has an implicit identity with flint. Also, the name One Hunahpu has a Quiche Maya calendrical name association to 1 Ajaw, which was the ritual name for a flint chip in Ralph Roy’s “Ritual of the Bacabs” (Hall 1997: 163).

Robert Hall, in his article “The Cultural Background of Mississippian Symbolism” (1989), discusses the similarity in mythic symbology between North America and the Maya. He relates the Winnebago myth of the hero Red Horn to that of the Maya hero twins. Red Horn, like One Hunahpu, is a personification of the planet Venus. In the Winnebago myth Red Horn plays a “ball-stick game” against a team of

giants. A ball game is an important element in both of the myths that lead to both One Hunahpu's and Red Horn's death (Hall 1997: 245). Red Horn is later killed by the giants and his head is hung on a pole in the center of the giant's village. This is very similar to the Mayan myth where the lords of the underworld kill One Hunahpu and his head is cut off and wedged in the fork of a calabash tree. In both myths the two sons of the men return to the place where their father was killed and avenge him.

Although the stories differ in that Red Horn's children were not twins, and were in fact born from different mothers, it is possible that the children were perceived of as twins anyway. In his book "Myth and Meaning" (1995), Claude Levi-Strauss writes about a myth of hero twins among the Indians of British Columbia. In this myth two sisters give birth, each to a son. Even though the mothers are different, the boys are perceived of as twins because they were born at exactly the same time, under the same circumstances (from a moral and psychological point of view), therefore making them twins (1995: 28). Levi-Strauss claims that this weakens the hero twin character because the twins are not biological brothers, but rather cousins. This does not, however, negate the intention of their being twins (*ibid.*).

Hall goes on to say that Red Horn is the "northern Mississippi valley equivalent of (One) Hunahpu" (1989: 244). One Hunahpu like Red Horn had two wives, and both men also had twin sons, at least intentionally. Hall equally equates the Winnebago element of the giants' village to that of the Maya underworld. He goes on to further state that One Hunahpu's second wife, Blood Moon, is the Maya equivalent of Red Horn's second wife, the "red-haired giantess" (1989: 244).

Hall also points out that One Hunahpu corresponds to the calendrical day of One Ajaw. The day name "Ajaw" is sometimes written hieroglyphically with a vulture, or what Hall refers to as "a head with a long nose" (see Figure 1). He equates the "head with a long nose" to the long-nosed masks and bi-lobed arrow motifs from the Mississippian era (see Figure 2) (1989). Although this is a weak argument, it should be taken into consideration.

Finally, Hall also concludes that in each myth a father is killed and avenged by his twin sons, and his sons eventually find and recover their father's bones and put them back together. In the Winnebago myth the sons find Red Horn's bones and they grind them into a powder and magically bring their father back to life. In the Mayan myth the twins dig their father's bones up from beneath the ball court, reassemble them, and bring him back to life. Again, there is an unmistakable correlation between the two myths (Hall 1989, Tedlock 1996).

Claude Levi-Strauss discusses the ubiquitous occurrence of twin myths in his book "Myth and Meaning" (1995). He allocates the intra-hemispherical distribution of myths of hero twins to be caused from contact between and borrowing from neighboring populations. Since these myths stretch from Peru to Canada, he asserts that the myths are not isolated occurrences, but are rather pan-American myths.

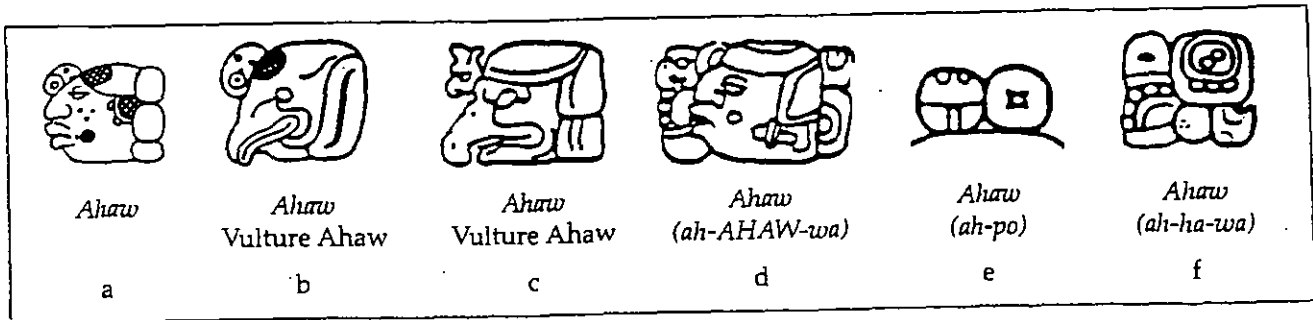
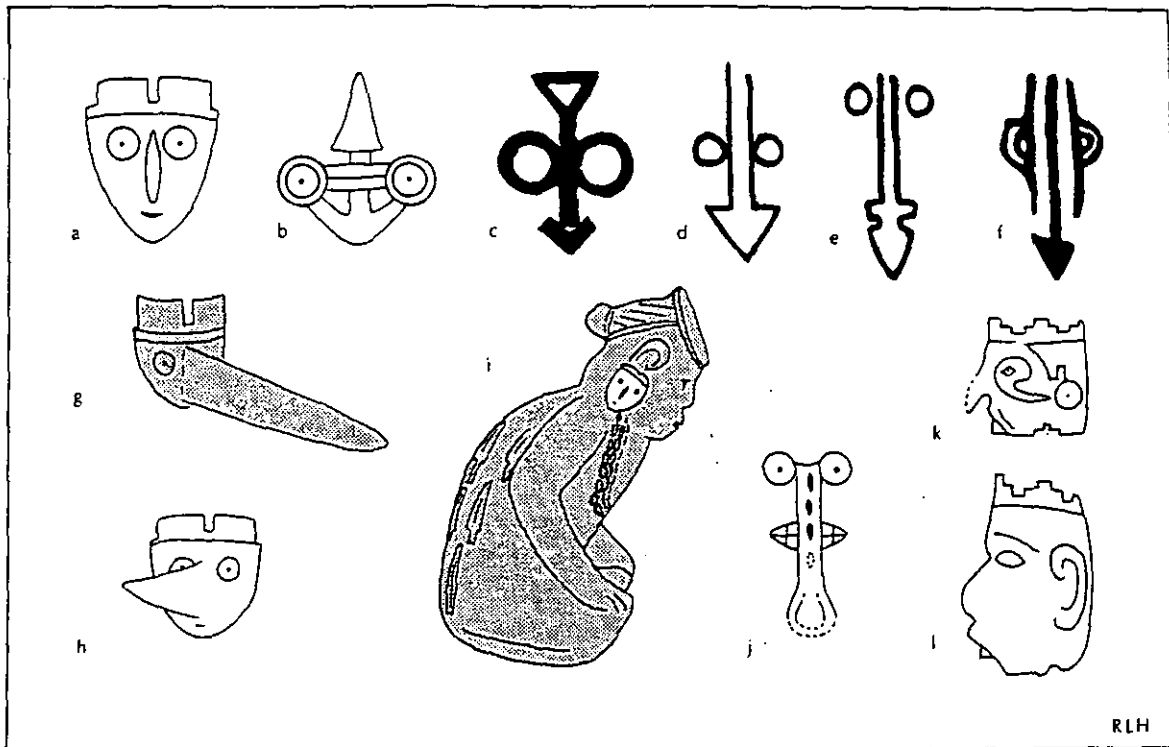


Figure 4:57 Glyphs representing Ahaw.

Figure 1  
Taken from Aveni 2001



1. Long-nosed god masks (*a, g, h*), bi-lobed arrow motifs (*b-e*), and related objects: *a, h*, shell masks from the Yokem Mound Group, Pike County, Illinois (after Bareis and Gardner 1968:fig. 2); *b*, from an engraved shell found in the Craig Mound at the Spiro site, Oklahoma (after Phillips and Brown 1984:plate 27; *c*, petroglyph, Jefferson County, Missouri (after Ellis 1969:fig. 45); *d-e*, petroglyphs from Washington

County, Missouri (after Howard 1968:fig. 2); *f*, atlatl and dart motif from a cylindrical stamp found at the Tlatilco site, Mexico (after Field 1967:fig. 29); *g*, copper long-nosed god mask from the Gahagan Mound, Louisiana (after Williams and Goggin 1956:fig. 12); *i*, "Big Boy" pipé from the Spiro site, Oklahoma, showing long-nosed god mask as earring (after Hamilton 1952:plate 10); *j*, spoonbill flute

nose detail from the Great Hare engraving, Mound 25, Hopewell Group, Ohio (after Willoughby 1917:plate 6b); *k*, agnathous long-nosed god detail from repoussé copper plate found near Malden, Missouri (after Howard 1968:fig. 6); *l*, agnathous wooden rattle from the Etowah site, Georgia (after Larson 1957b:fig. 1). Scale variable.

Figure 2  
Taken from Hall 1989

#### 4. Investigating Dual Rulership in Ancient Maya Politics

This chapter comprises the heart of this paper, as it investigates the possibility of simultaneous dual rulership at the Classic Maya site of Machaquila in Guatemala. Specifically, Ruler VI is examined in an attempt to verify the concept of dual rulership as opposed to the currently held notion of single rule. This research question will be explored through detailed examination of the texts and iconography on Stelae 5, 6, 7, and 8, including an analysis of the human portraiture, and the symbolic implications of clothing. Martha Macri's *Maya Hieroglyphic Database* (2001) is used as a basis for the hieroglyphic analysis, as it is the most recent and complete source of glyphic analysis compilations.

##### **Background**

The Maya site of Machaquila is located in south-central Petén in Guatemala. Machaquila was inhabited during the Late and Terminal Classic periods (600-925 AD) (Fahsen 1984). It lies on the banks of the Machaquila river, which is part of the Pasión River basin (see Figure 3). No records of archaeological excavations are known.

Machaquila was first discovered in 1957 when a group of petroleum geologists explored the Pasión River basin. Alfonso Escalante, a geologist of the Union Oil Company, was the first to see the site. From the published records it appears that the site was not again visited until 1961 when Ian Graham explored the site. On this trip he mapped and recorded only two stelae, but in the following year (1962) he returned to examine the rest of the monuments and make latex molds of the stelae. Graham describes the terrain as

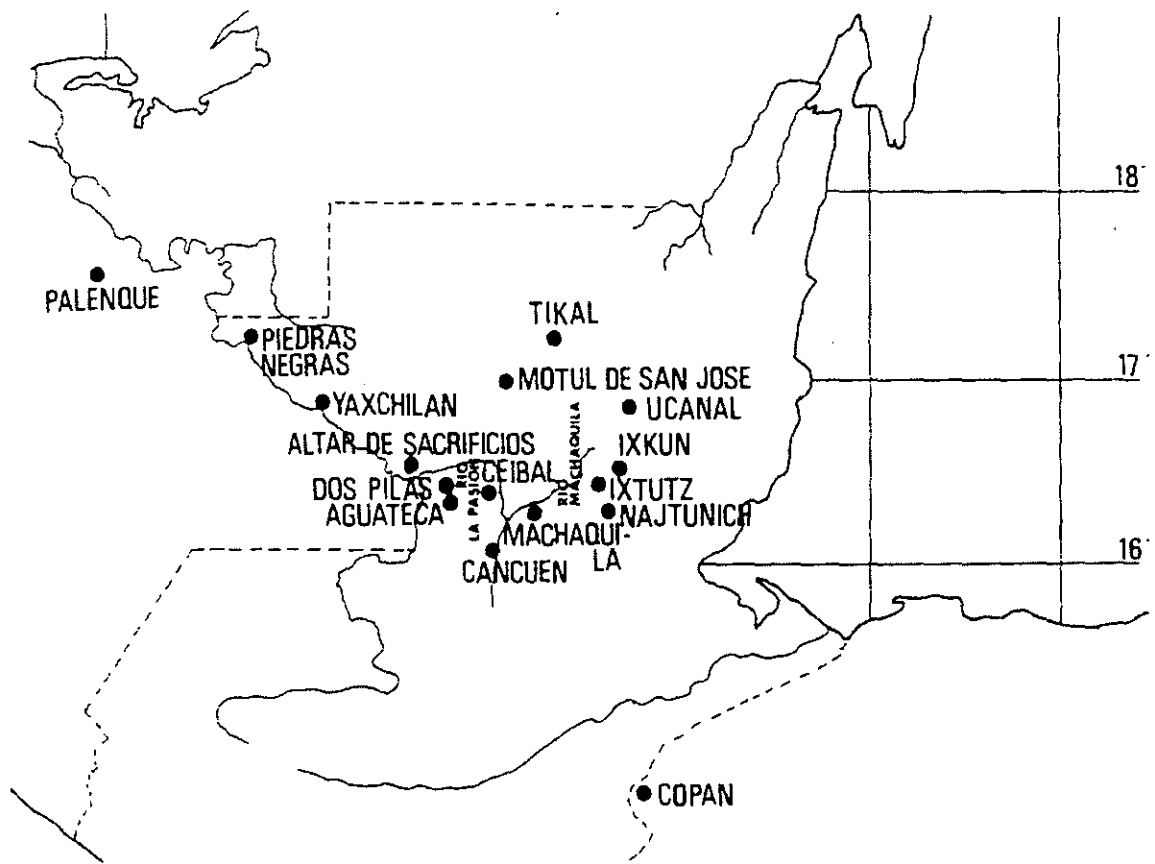


Figure 3

Taken from Fashen, 1984

“largely broken up into knobby hills (formed by buckling of the limestone cap due to sliding compression), made worse from the traveler’s point of view by subsidence of the upward folds into huge sinkholes. There are also areas of flat alluvial soil where corozo palms predominate. The ruins occupy a small area of flat ground with some corozo vegetation, surrounded by hills on three sides and open to the river on the fourth” (1967: 51).

Nineteen stelae have been found at Machaquila, five of which are blank. Fashen (1984) believes that these five uncarved stelae may have been left unfinished when the site was abandoned, as opposed to being intentionally blank monuments. Very little has been published on the site of Machaquila. The only complete published reference besides Graham’s 1967 monograph, was written by Fashen, who wrote on the dynastic sequences at the site (1984). Fashen himself reports that there was “incomplete published information” at the time he wrote the paper cited above, and he “owe(s) all the facts in this paper to Ian Graham’s publication of 1967 and his subsequent personal communications” (1984: 94).

Moreover, very little was written about Machaquila in the inscriptions of neighboring sites. Only two other sites in the Maya area mention the site of Machaquila in their inscriptions. At Tres Islas the Machaquila emblem glyph occurs on Stela 2. The passage where the glyph occurs reads, “Holy Machaquila Ajaw, he is the fourth successor,” and surprisingly the dedication date for this stela is May 14, 475, which is approximately 236 years before the supposed first ruler of Machaquila came to power (Macri 2001). Unfortunately the stela is so eroded that little more can be interpreted. The emblem glyph occurs again, further down in the same inscription, however the context is incomplete due to severe erosion. This suggests either that Machaquila may



have been a flourishing community without carved stelae, before the date of Ruler I, or that the emblem glyph name referred to another place.

The Machaquila emblem glyph also occurs at the site of Cancuen, on Panel 10, with the date January 16, 773. The text may be paraphrased, “and then it happened on 09 K’an 12 Kumk’u, it is witnessed the emergence of a mountain-*unknown glyph*-his burial place, Chan Ahk Wi-*unknown glyph*-by the causing of Tah Chan Ak-*unknown glyph* - holy Cancuen Ajaw, holy Machaquila Ajaw.” This occurs during the reign of Ruler III of Machaquila<sup>3</sup>, sixty-two years after the first stela was dedicated at Machaquila. By the readings at these two sites, Tres Islas and Cancuen, it appears that a ruler of Machaquila may have been an overlord at both of these sites during some period in time.

### **Machaquila**

The site is arranged with the ceremonial center placed in “the northeast corner of a flat area against the lower slopes of a hill” (see Figure 4; Graham 1967: 52). Areas of the site have been built up with large boulders, possibly to prevent flooding during the rainy season. Graham states that he located no source of water other than the Machaquila River in his several visits to the site, putting the nearest water source (during the dry season) nearly one kilometer to the west (1967). All except one of the stelae (Stela 17) at the site are located in a single plaza on the eastern-most part of the site (see Figure 4). Stelae 1 - 9 are aligned in a row along the northern edge of the main plaza, in front of Structures 19 and 20 (see Figure 5). Stelae 10 – 16 are aligned in a row along the eastern edge of the same plaza, in front of Structures 16 and 17. Altar A lies directly west of

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<sup>3</sup> See Fashen 1989 for a complete summary of the rulers of Machaquila.

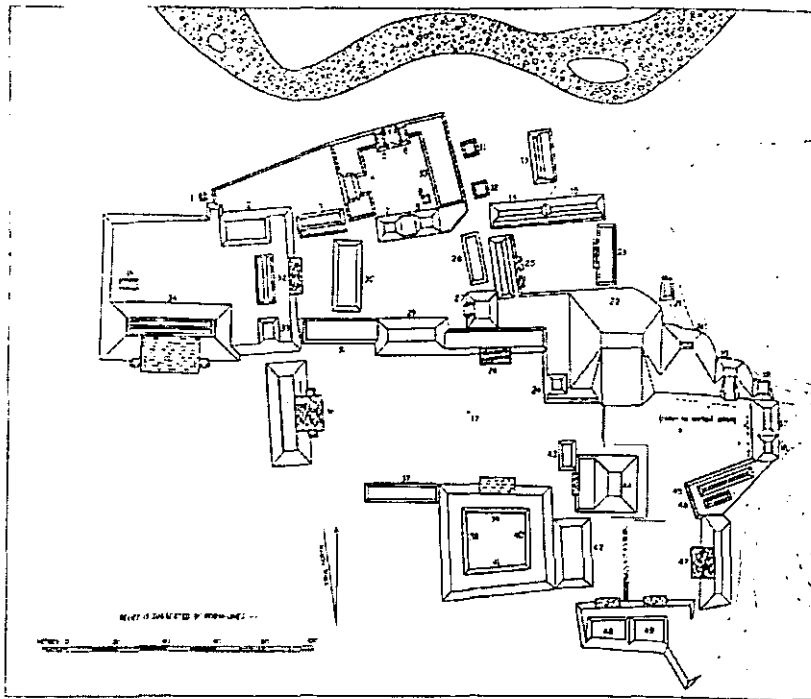


FIG. 33 — MACHAQUILA, GENERAL MAP OF SITE  
 Taken from Graham 1967

Figure 4

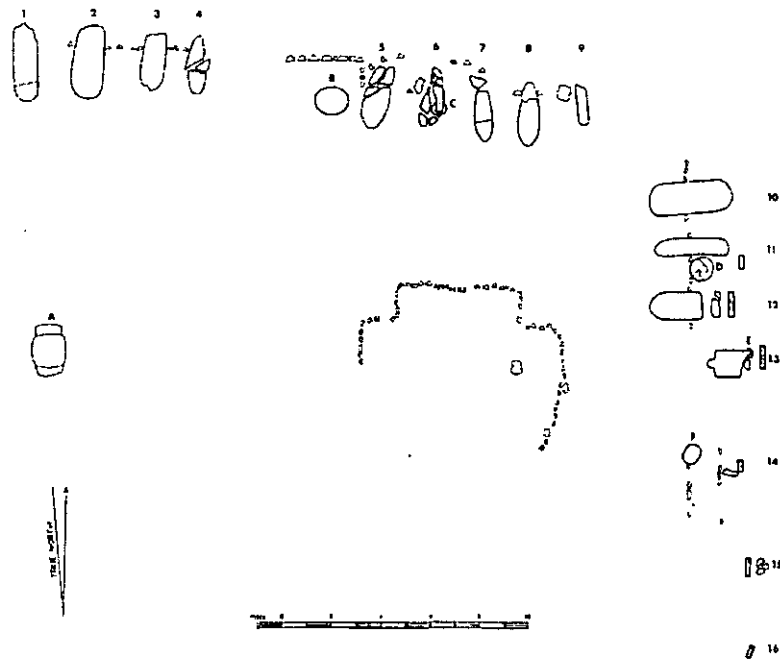


FIG. 42 — MACHAQUILA, LOCATION OF STELAE AND ALTARS IN MAIN PLAZA  
 Taken from Graham 1967

Figure 5

Stela 13 (about 27 meters). Stela 17 stands alone in the center of the plaza group west of the main plaza (see Figure 4).

Six rulers have been identified at the site of Machaquila to date. The time span indicated on the monuments begins on December 04, 711 AD and ends on January 21, 840, 130 tuns, or a half *may*. A tun is approximately one Gregorian year of 365 days. The *may* is a cycle of 13 k'atuns (260 tuns) (Edmonson 1982: 3). The inscriptions on the stelae between these dates mainly commemorate tun endings, a very important occasion for the Maya. Unlike most other sites, there are few inscriptions concerning ruler's accessions or births, and none written about warfare or death.

This chapter examines Ruler VI of Machaquila, as there appears to be considerable symbology used in the representative personification of him in a mythic context. Upon detailed analysis of Ruler VI's full body image and the symbolic nature of his clothing, he appears to be identified with the Hero Twins of the Popol Vuh. Furthermore, careful examination and reading of the hieroglyphs along with the iconographic analysis imply there may be two rulers serving during the term of Ruler VI, meaning Ruler VI alone is not being identified with the hero twins, but rather that there are two rulers who jointly project themselves as the twins through mythic iconography.

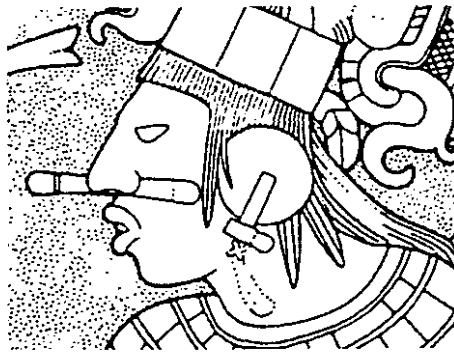
## **Ruler VI**

Ruler VI appears to be referred to us as *Lord Hun Tzak Tok' (One Conjures Flint) Captor of B'ohb' Tok' (Coyote Flint)*. Ruler VI is commemorated on four stelae, twice the number of any other ruler of Machaquila. In examining "Ruler VI" there appears to be an interesting variation of the rulers depicted in Stela 05, 06, 07 and 08, all of which

are associated with *Hun Tzak Tok'*. When Stela 05 and Stela 06 are closely examined (Figure 6), it seems clear that the men depicted in each stela are different. When Stela 07 and Stela 08 are closely examined (Figure 7), the difference can be seen again. However, the men in Stela 05 and Stela 07 appear to be the same man, and the same applies for the men in Stela 06 and Stela 08. The man that occurs in Stelae 05 and 07 (Figure 8) has large protruding lips and a receding chin, while the man that is on Stelae 06 and 08 (Figure 9) has small lips (without line definition on the upper and lower lips) and a normal chin. It seems possible that the men depicted on these four stelae are not all the same ruler, but perhaps a pair of rulers.

Stela 08 is the first stela dedicated under the rulership of *Hun Tzak Tok'*. It was dedicated on April 9, 825. The next stela dedicated at Machaquila under this ruler is Stela 07, which was dedicated on March 11, 830. Next is Stela 06, dedicated on February 16, 835. Finally, Stela 05 is dedicated on January 21, 840. If, in fact, the men depicted in the four stela are two different men, then their corresponding stelae alternate in dates (Figure 10), meaning they were both ruling at Machaquila during the same term.

The man depicted in Stela 06 and Stela 08 will be discussed first. For the purposes of this discussion (and in an attempt to prevent confusion) he will be referred to as "*B'alam*" because of the jaguar headdress he wears on Stela 06. In Stela 08 (Figure 11) the ruler is grasping the manikin scepter and wearing a headdress that contains two Jester God heads, looking in opposite directions (Figure 12). The Jester God is "the most ancient symbol of kingship" (Schele and Freidel 1990, 201), meaning that since "*B'alam*" is wearing the Jester God headdress, he is a ruler. Also, the GII or God K

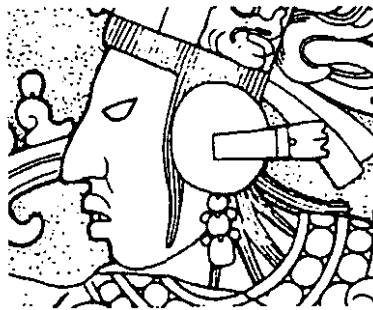


Stela 05



Stela 06

Figure 6

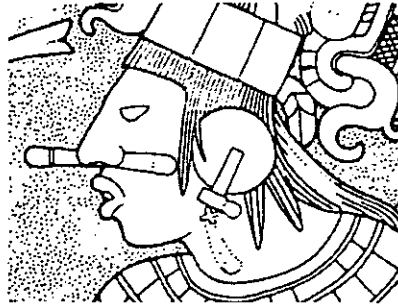


Stela 07

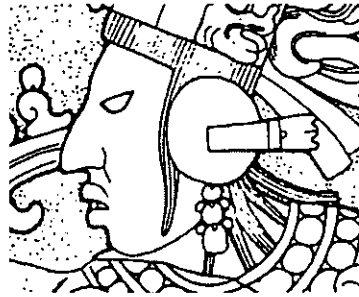


Stela 08

Figure 7



Stela 05



Stela 07

Figure 8



Stela 06



Stela 08

Figure 9

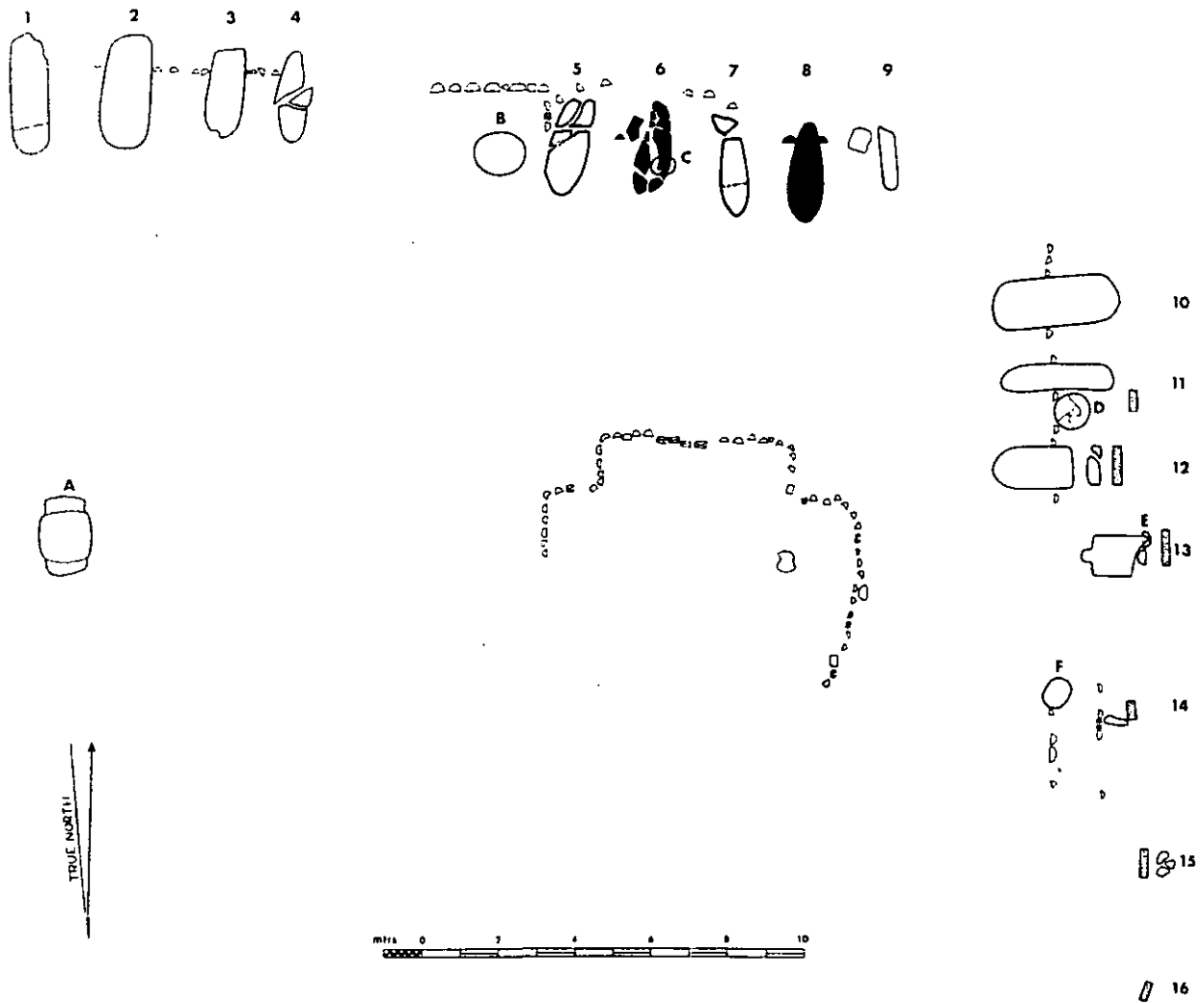


FIG. 42 - MACHAQUILA, LOCATION OF STELAE AND ALTARS IN MAIN PLAZA  
 Taken from Graham 1967

Figure 10

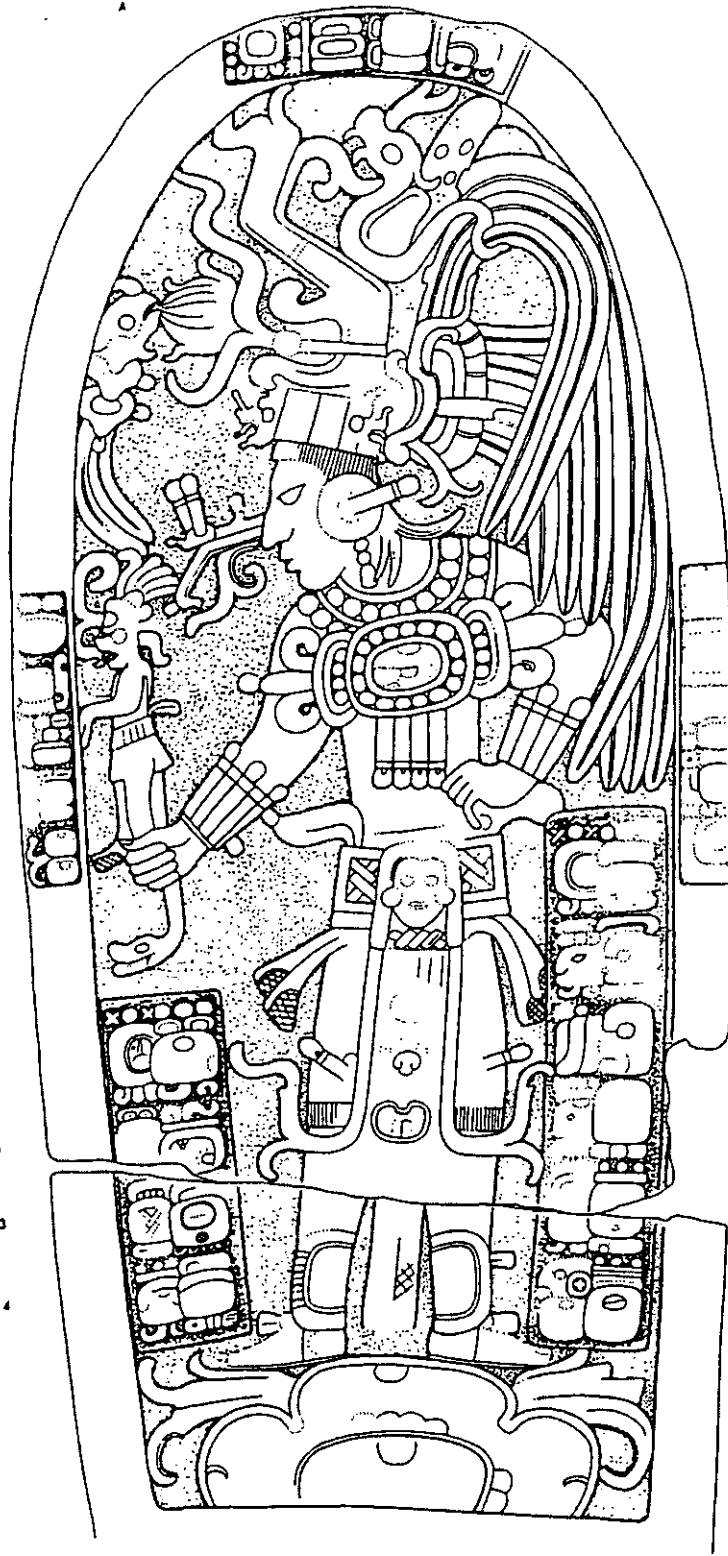
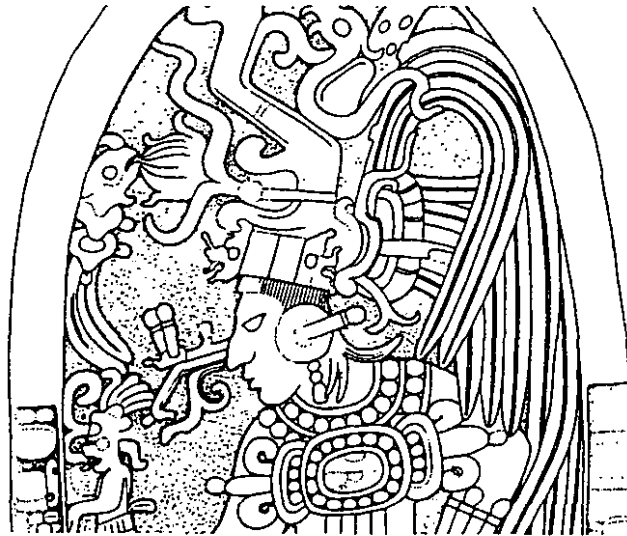


FIG. 59 — MACHAQUILA, STELA 8

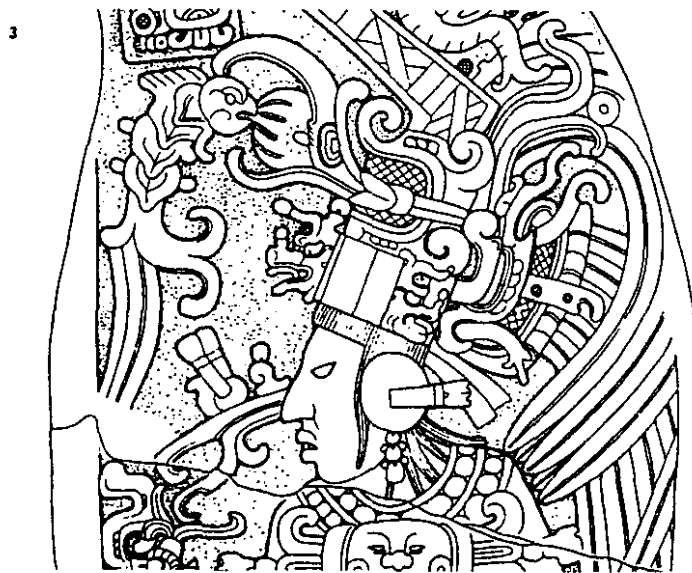
Taken from Graham 1967

Figure 11





Stela 08



Stela 07

Figure 12

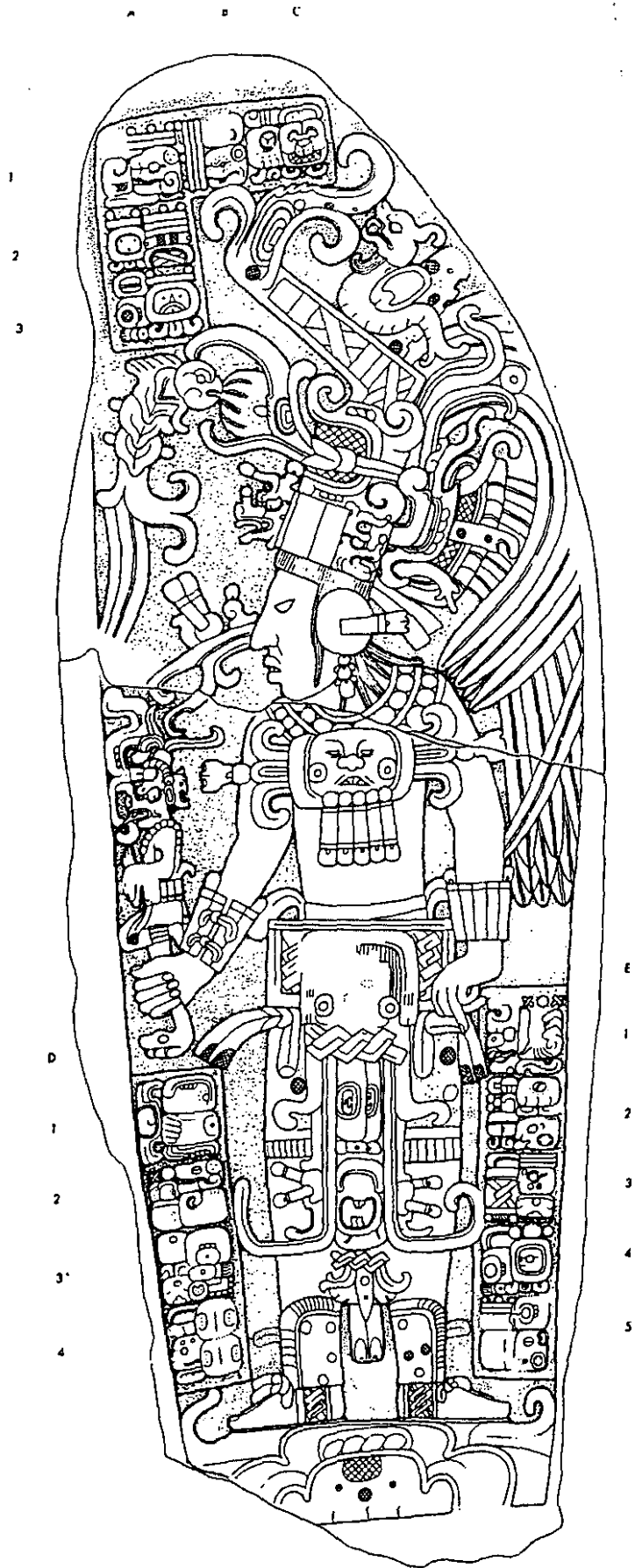


FIG. 57 - MACHAQUILA, STELA 7  
Taken from Graham 1967

Figure 13

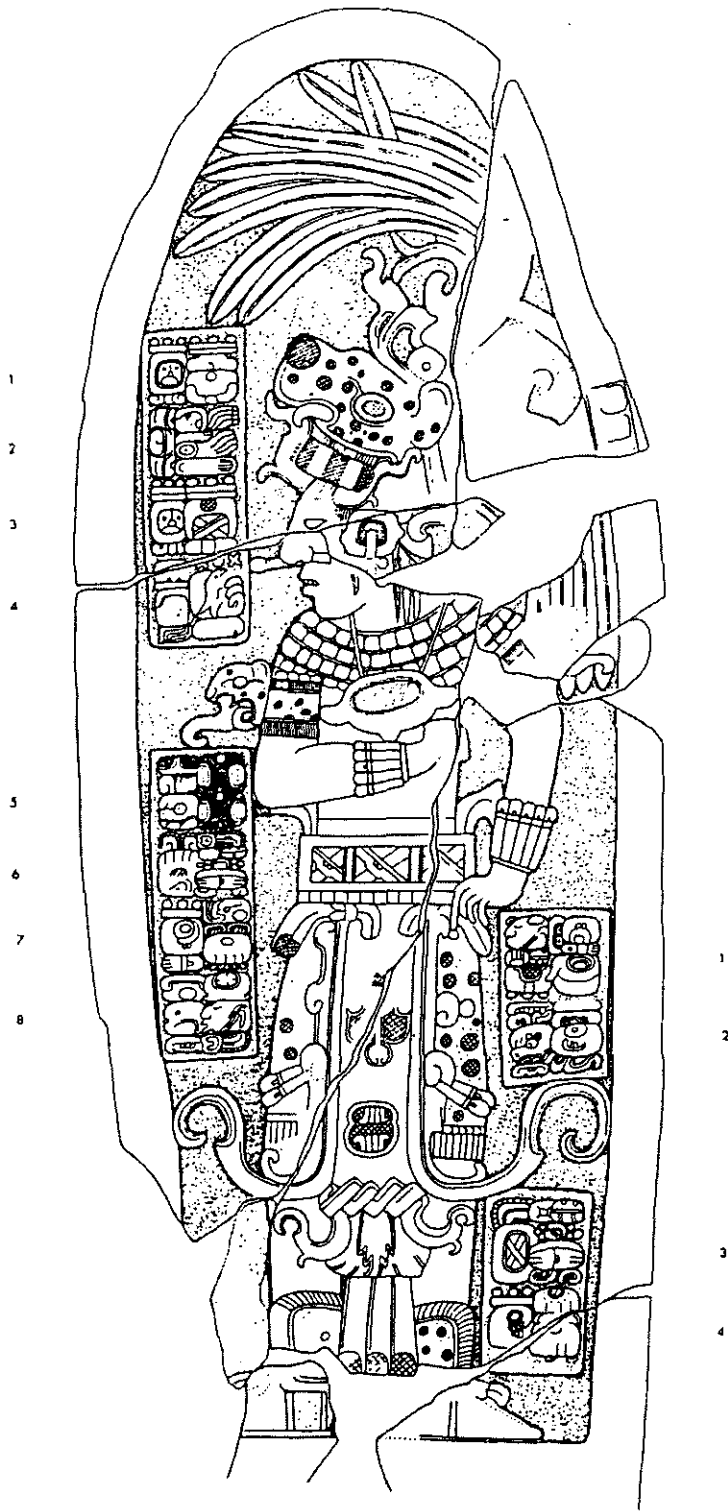


FIG. 55 — MACHAQUILA, STELA 6  
Taken from Graham 1967

Figure 14

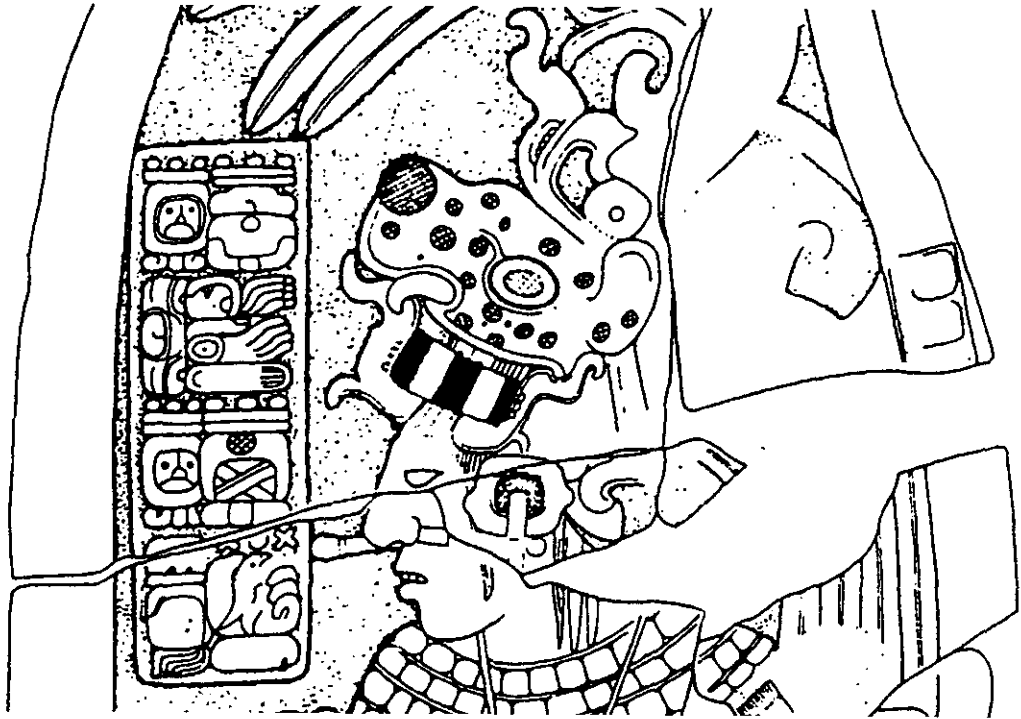


Figure 15

manikin scepter that “*B’alam*” is holding is held by rulers (Schele and Freidel 1990, 414).

In Stela 07 (Figure 13) the proposed “second ruler” of Machaquila is also wearing the exact same headdress as the ruler depicted in Stela 08 (Figure 12). Stela 07 was dedicated only 05 years after the dedication of Stela 08, however it appears that a different ruler is shown in the full body image. The person on Stela 07 is also a ruler, not only because of the Jester God headdress, but also because of the recurrence of the God K manikin scepter that he is holding in his right hand.

Stela 06 (Figure 14) is the next stela dedicated at this site, and again it appears to show the ruler “*B’alam*” in the full figure. He could possibly be depicted as a human representation of *Xbalanque*, or *Yax B’alam* in Yucatec, the second born of the Hero Twins in the creation myth of the Popol Vuh. Under the mouth of the jaguar in this ruler’s headdress, there appears to be a logogram for “YAX,” (Figure 15) a perfect literal translation of *Yax B’alam*. GI and GIII of the Palanque Triad often appear as twins (Schele and Freidel 1990; 414). GIII, the Jaguar God, is usually seen wearing a jaguar head on his belt, arm or shield. The Jaguar God is thought of as the second born of the twins, corresponding to *Xbalanque* (Schele and Freidel 1990; 414). As Schele and Freidel (1990; 142) state, GIII is the “prototype of the second born of the Ancestral Heroes, whose Classic name was Yax-Balam (‘First Jaguar’).” The man in Stela 06 is wearing a jaguar head on both his right and left arms, just above his elbows, more evidence that he is identifying himself with *Xbalanque*, the second Hero Twin. The jaguar pelt worn around his waist and the jaguar head headdress also support this theory.

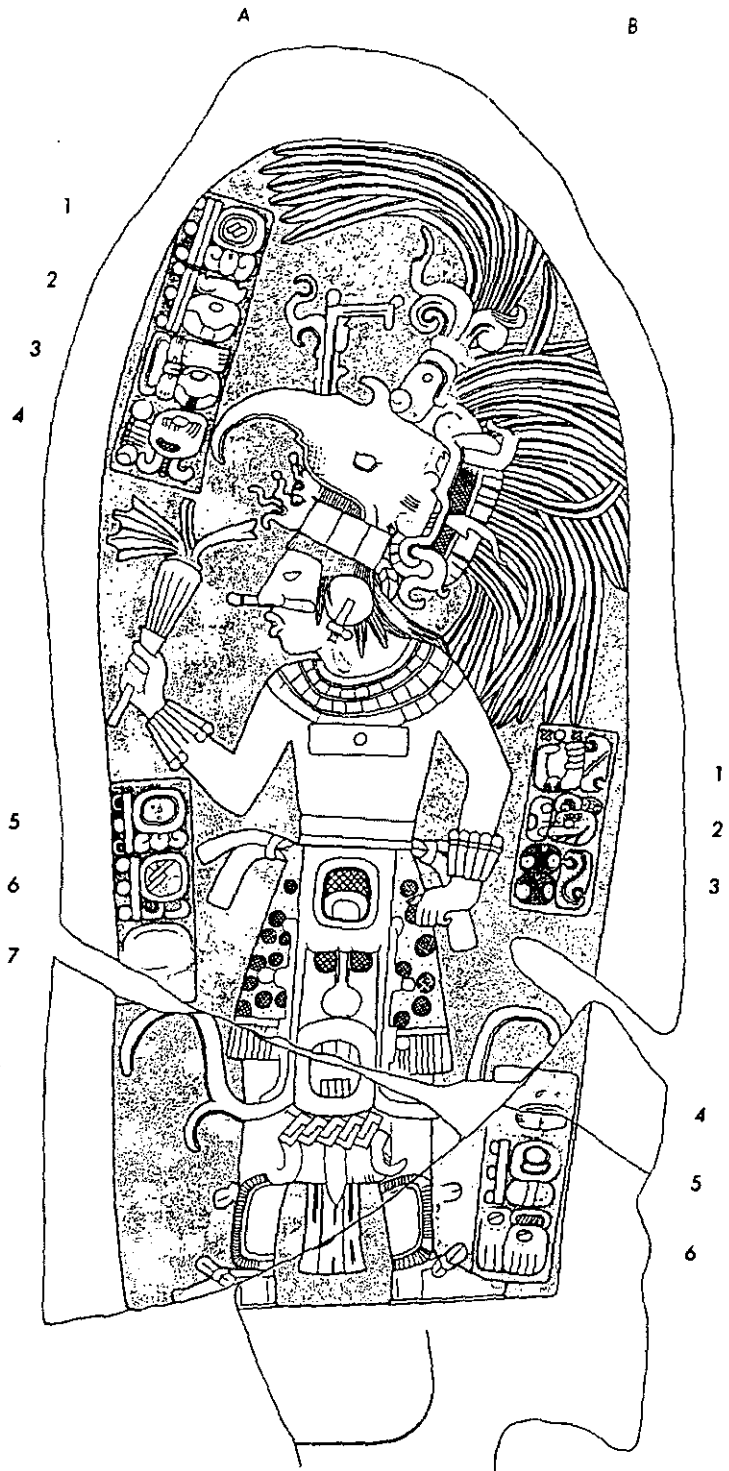


FIG. 53 - MACHAQUILA, STELA 5  
Taken from Graham 1967

Figure 16

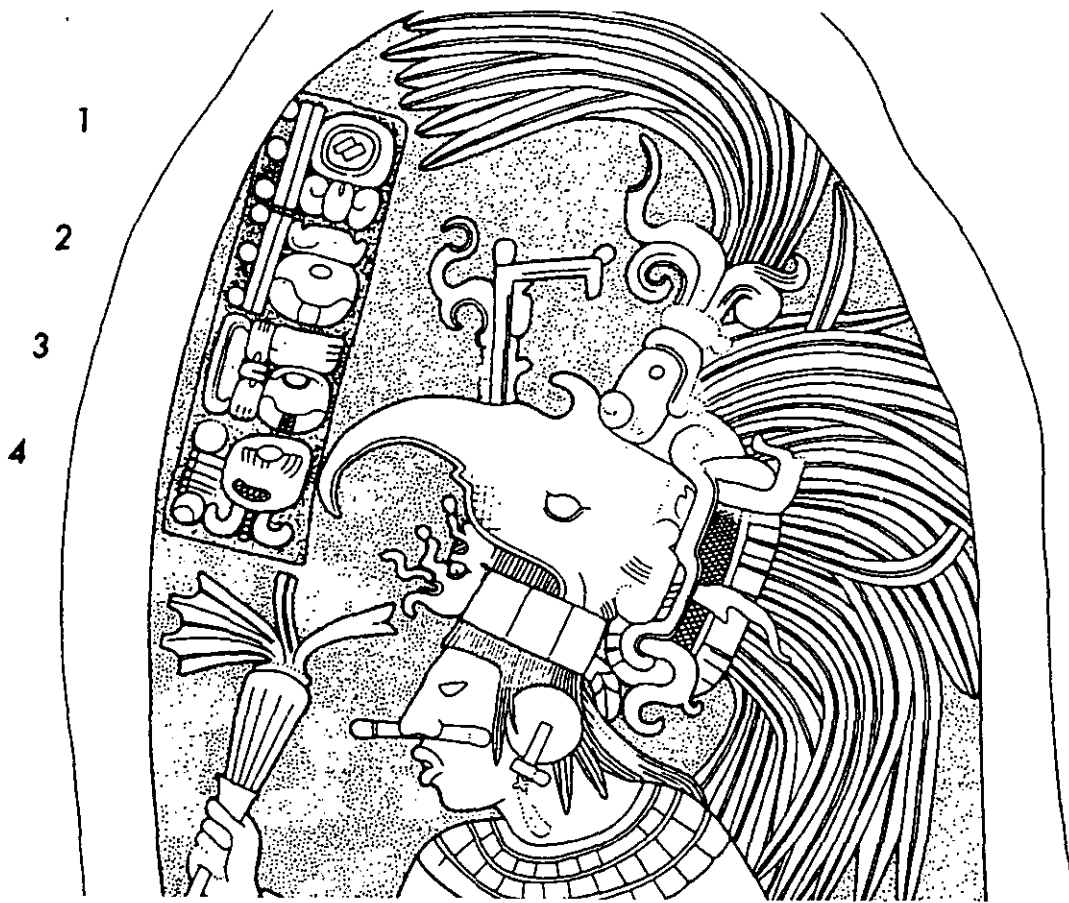


Figure 17

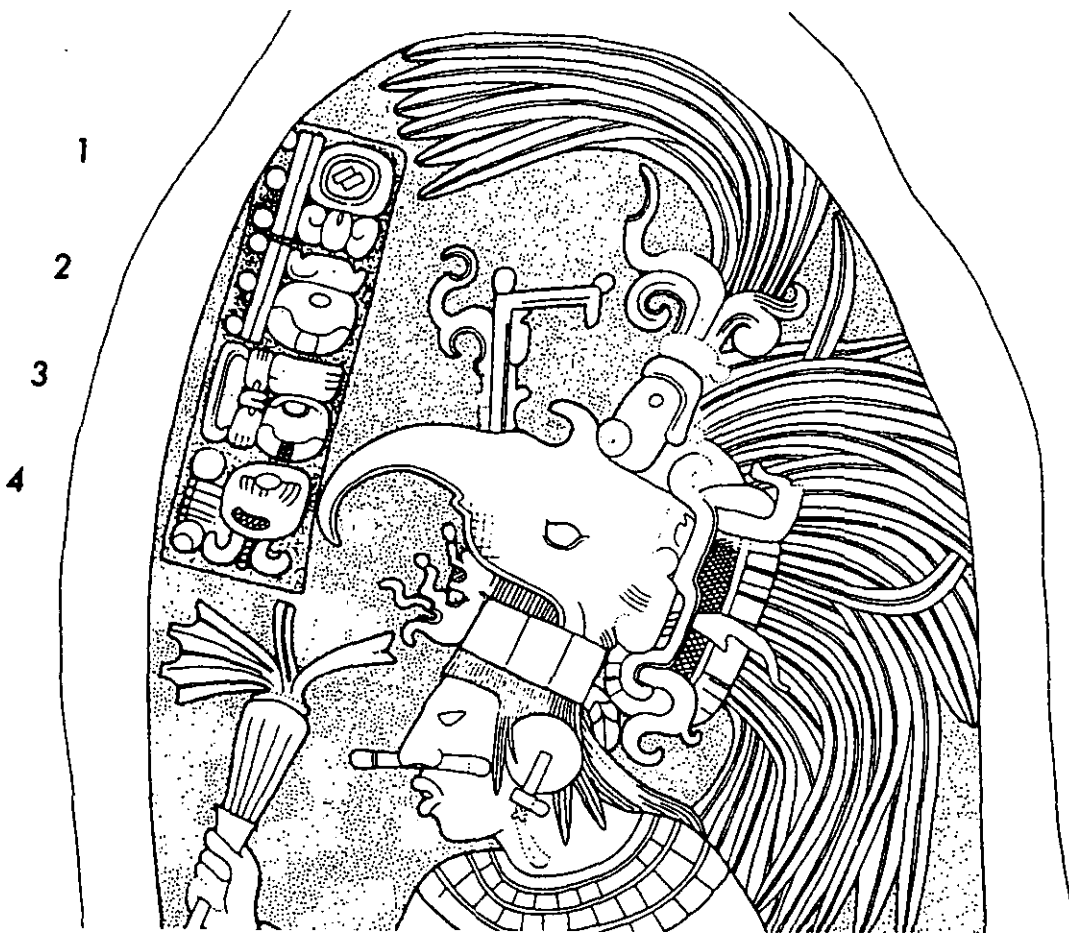


Figure 18

Stela 05 (Figure 16) is the last stela inscribed before the collapse of Machaquila. This stela shows the full body image of the proposed second ruler. In this inscription the ruler is wearing a vulture head headdress (Figure 17). On the ruler's forehead the Jester God head can be seen. When a vulture head appears with a Jester God symbol it translates to "*Ajaw*" (Aveni 2001: 67). On top of the vulture a *k'u* or *k'ul* sign appears (Figure 18), meaning "holy". By the headdress this ruler wears, he projects himself to be "holy *Ajaw*". Although this could obviously be taken as only a literal translation, it can also be looked at in another perspective, as the name for *Hun Ajaw*, the first born of the Ancestral Hero Twins.

Since the ruler depicted in Stela 06 may be identifying himself with *Yax B'alam*, the second born of the twins, it would make sense that if the man in Stela 05 is different than that in Stela 06, then he would associate himself with the first born of the twins, *Hunapu*, or *Hun Ajaw*. This is especially true if the two men were ruling during the same or alternating terms at Machaquila. In support of this theory a depiction of *Hunapu* from an offering plate will be used. In this depiction (see Figure 19) *Hunapu* can be seen emerging from the head the turtle on the left-most portion of the plate. In this picture he is wearing a vulture head headdress, similar to that of the ruler on Stela 05. He too may be trying to personify one of the Ancestral Twins. Also take notice of the *Yax* symbol that appears on *Yax Balam's* headdress, similar to that on Stela 06.

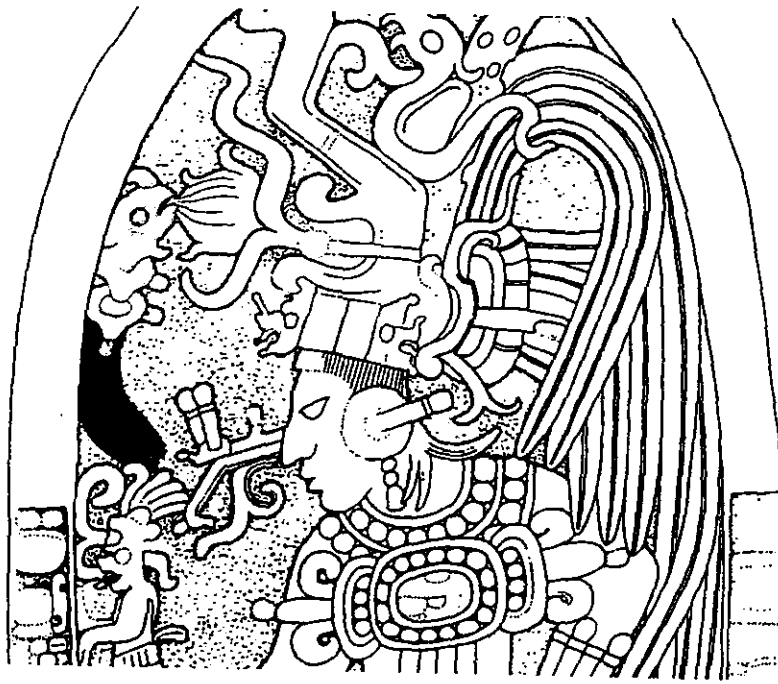
Also in support of the two men attempting to personify the Hero Twins, the headdresses worn in Stela 07 and Stela 08 can be more closely examined. On these headdresses the "Fish-and-Flower" image occurs (Figure 20). According to Tate (1992: 77), the fish-and-flower headdress "is worn by ball-players during ballgame scenes" at



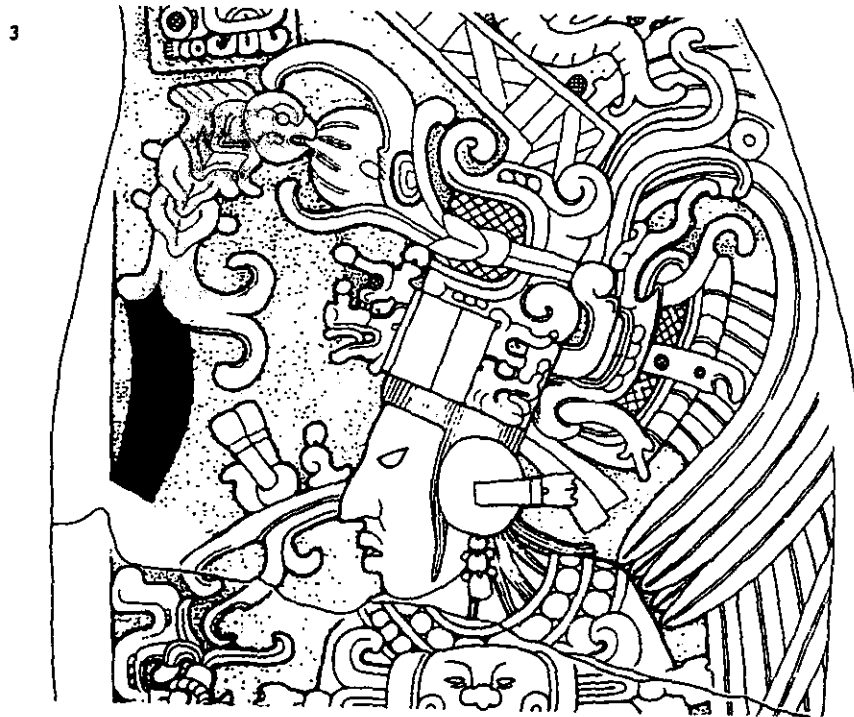


Taken from Friedel, Schele, and Parker 1993

Figure 19



Stela 08



Stela 07

Figure 20

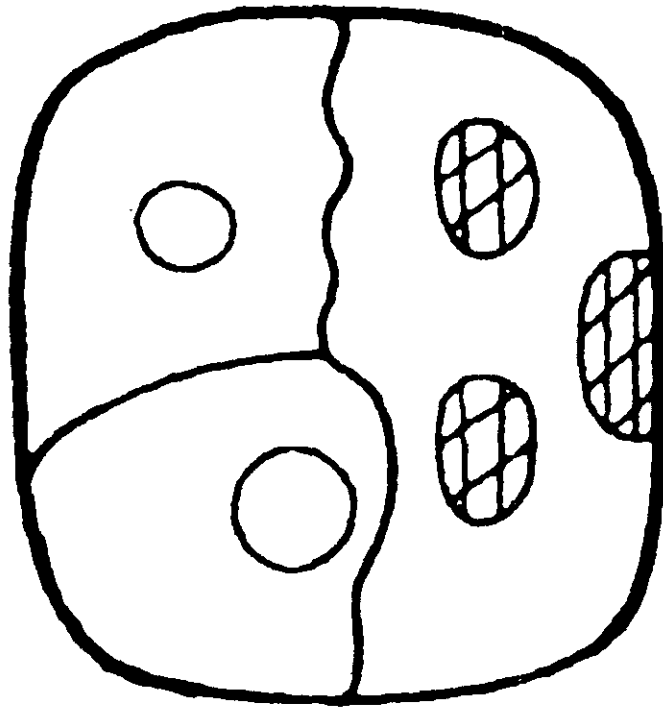
Yaxchilan. Another aspect of this the fish-and-flower headdress is the “fish nibbling a waterlily flower,” which according to Tate “is a pan-Maya symbol of the watery Underworld.” Again there is symbology relating to the Hero Twins, both of whom were ball-players who traveled to the Underworld to defeat the lords of Xibalba. This further supports the theory of the two men in these stela using Ancestral Hero symbology.

Another interesting fact is the name of Ruler VI, *Hun Tzak Tok'*. As discussed in Chapter 1, the second born of a set of twins is often associated with a flint, and twin births in many myths are generally associated with flints. *Hun Tzak Tok'* has a flint association with his name, translated as *One Conjures Flint*. The flint associated with this ruler could also, and perhaps more obviously, have a warrior association. However there is room for speculation. *Hun Hunahpu* has an implicit identity with flint (Hall 1997). Also, the name *Hun* (or *One*) *Hunahpu* has a Quiche Maya clandrinal name association to 1 Ajaw, which was the ritual name for a flint chip in Ralph Roy's “Ritual of the Bacabs” (1997: 163). This ruler may be associating himself with the first born, the second born, or as the iconographic evidence suggests, both of the hero twins. The two people depicted in Stelae 5, 6, 7, and 8 may be twins, two separate people, or perhaps brothers. This is especially true if the first ruler associates himself with *Yax B'alam*, and the second personifies himself as *Hunahpu*.

Furthermore, on Stela 06 it appears that *Hun Tzak Tok'* is described as being twins. The passage tells of the only instance of a birth event at the site of Machaquila. The passage reads, “the cherished one of holy companion Lady (unreadable) Ajaw, his/her twin harvest, the guardian of Eleven (unreadable), Holy Machaquila Ajaw.” This

may be direct evidence that *Hun Tzak Tok'* are not only two people, but indeed twin brothers.

The *way* symbol (see Figure 21), referring to a spirit companion, occurs on the clothing of both of the proposed rulers of Machaquila. It can be seen on Stela 06 and Stela 07, around the calves of both men. Of further interest, on Stela 07, *Hun Tzak Tok'* appears to be described as, "twin god, captor of *B'ohb' Tok'*." Here it is directly stated that *Hun Tzak Tok'* identifies himself with the Hero Twins, the only explicitly mentioned twin gods of the Maya mythology. The *way* symbols around the calves of the rulers may suggest companionship or guardianship over the rulers by the mythical Hero gods.



# WAY

Taken from Montgomery 2001

Figure 21

## 5. The Meanings of Myth

Myths that contain the adventures of twins occur from North to South America, as shown. Hall suggests that the twin-related myths “were possibly part of the oral literature of the earliest peoples in both North and South America, varying locally and through time” (1997: 161). He also interprets the meaning of the twin stories to possibly relate to the origin of death and mourning. He states “the death of the Maya twin Hun Hunahpu relates to mourning, as does the death of the related Winnebago Red Horn more implicitly” (1997: 162). In both of the myths the twin sons of One Hunahpu and Red Horn mourn their father’s death and avenge him by destroying their father’s slaughterer.

Mircea Eliade, in his article “Myth” (1997), explores the meaning of myth. He states that myth relates to sacred history. The individuals in the myth, although they may have lived on the earth, are not human to those who believe the myth; instead they are heroes or gods. Eliade states,

“The myth...is the history of what took place *in illo tempore*, the recital of what the gods or the semidivine beings did at the beginning of time...Once told...the myth becomes apodictic truth; it establishes a truth that is absolute...Hence it is always the recital of creation; it tells how something was accomplished, began to *be*”<sup>4</sup>(1997: 35).

He goes on to further state that mythical reality is actually a sacred reality, as opposed to the unsacred, or profane reality. Each myth then shows how a particular reality came into existence (i.e. total reality, the cosmos, etc.). In recounting Hall’s argument that the twin myths relate to the origin of death and mourning, indeed the Mayan myth has elements of actualization of death and deals with the twins mourning their father’s death. Perhaps part of the meaning of the myth of the hero twins is not only to relate to the profane

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<sup>4</sup> Eliade’s italic emphasis.

realities of death and mourning, but also, when taken a step further, it is to show how the realities of death and mourning came into existence.

Robert Sharer, in "The Ancient Maya" (1994), argues that the myth was also a metaphor for life after death (522). Sharer, as well as Linda Schele and David Freidel (1990) state that the myth of the hero twins was a central axiom of ancient Maya life and ritual. In the myth Hunahpu and Xbalanque entered the realm of the underworld, defeated the lords of Xibalba, and return to earth. Sharer argues that the myth then demonstrates "that rebirth is possible only through sacrifice (the twins were reborn after sacrifice by both fire and decapitation)...Sacrifice and rebirth was a theme specifically celebrated by the Maya ritual of human sacrifice, and in the Maya centers the ball-court was seen as the threshold between this world and Xibalba" (1994: 522). Again using Eliade's theory that myth is a means of explaining how a particular reality came into existence, then the Maya myth of the hero twins also explicates both the realities enacted on the ball-court and those of sacrifice, as well as death and mourning, as explained above.

Eliade also states that the meaning of myth is to remain in the sacred, or true reality, by imitating the actions of the gods (1997). By imitating the acts of the gods, man removes himself from the world of the profane and lives in the "*time of origin*"<sup>5</sup>(1997: 38). Sharer supports this theory, in relation to the myth of the hero twins in the Popol Vuh, when he discusses the act of human sacrifice among the Maya. He states, "The decapitation of a captured ruler was probably performed as the climax of a ritual ballgame, both as a reenactment of the military victory that made the defeated ruler captive and as a commemoration of the Hero Twins' defeat of the lords of Xibalba"

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<sup>5</sup> Eliade's italic emphasis.

(1994: 543). He also states “in the Maya centers the ball-court was seen as the threshold between this world and Xibalba, the arena for confrontation; the ritualized ballgame player therein reenacted the original contest between the Hero Twins and the gods of death” (1994: 522). In performing human sacrifice, the ancient Maya were reenacting the feats of the Hero Twins as they triumph over the lords of the underworld. By imitating the actions of the Hero Twins, they entered the sacred world.

David Bidney, who wrote “Myth, Symbolism, and Truth” (1955), discusses the meaning of myth somewhat differently. He takes a functionalist approach and states that myth is a “self-contained form of interpretation of reality” (1955: 4). Although this is similar to what Eliade hypothesizes (1997), it is not exactly the same. Eliade believes that the purpose of myth is to describe how certain realities came into existence. Bidney, on the other hand, considers the purpose of myth to be an interpretation of one’s present reality. He states that the “mythical mind is creative and gives expression to its own form of objective reality”, and that man “seek(s) to express this meaning in terms of objective representations” (1955: 5), explaining the portrayal and supernatural storyline of most myths. Mythic symbols, he goes on, “express...only the delusions of...human consciousness as it struggles to interpret the world of experience and reality” (1955: 6). Lawrence Sullivan, in “Icanchu’s Drum” (1988) supports this theory and gives the concept of death as an example. He hypothesizes that by “linking everyday death to mythic catastrophe, the language of revenge helps clarify the meaning of death. Retribution for some catastrophic event of the past explains an individual death and justifies further taking of life” (1988: 92). By relating death to occurrences within mythic history, the people receive a clarification of the meaning of death, the justification of the



taking of life, whether they the one in mourning because a friend's life was taken, or because they are the takers of life.

Returning to Bidney, he discusses Cassirer, Durkheim, and Malinowski's view that the function of myth is to promote social solidarity, and solidarity with nature during times of crisis. They believed that mythical thought is "especially concerned to deny and negate the fact of death and to affirm the unbroken unity and continuity of life" (1955: 7). He goes on to state that "myth objectifies and organizes human hopes and fears and metamorphosizes them into persistent and durable works" (*ibid.*: 8).

This functionalist approach can be fully applied to both the Maya myth of the Hero Twins, as well as to the previous discussion in this paper concerning the meaning of myth. The function of myth would therefore be to portray the origin of death and mourning, to explain how particular realities came into existence, and to serve as a way of remembering the past so that it may be reenacted for humans to re-enter the world of the sacred. Myth also helps humans cope with issues they are forced to confront within their reality. In particular, the understanding and justification of death. Myth serves as a means of denying that death is, so to speak, *the end*. One of its functions is to illustrate the meaning of death and reveal the "unbroken unity and continuity of life" (Bidney 1955: 7). It shows the process of life, death, and rebirth.

This is easily seen in the myth of the Hero Twins from the Popol Vuh. In the myth the fathers, One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu, are killed by the lords of the underworld, and were presumably eternally dead. Years later their sons, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, return to the underworld to avenge their fathers' deaths. The twin sons themselves are killed by being burned in a furnace, and then their bones were ground and

thrown into the river. Five days later the boys emerge from the water, illustrating the first lesson in rebirth. They go on to defeat the lords of the underworld by killing a volunteer person, and then each other, and each being brought back to life. They trick the lords of Xibalba into letting themselves become sacrifices, but this time the twins do not revive them, hence sentencing them to the worst death of all, eternal death without rebirth. The twins then dig up the bodies of their fathers from beneath the ball court and bring their fathers back to life. This myth can straightforwardly be interpreted as a metaphor for understanding and justifying the process of death, and giving hope through the explanation of life after death.

In as much as Ruler VI of Machaquila is concerned, many of these theories can be applied. Eliade's theory stating that myth relates to sacred history, and thus recounts how a particular reality came into existence (1997). The myth of the hero twins would be important to a ruler as it recounts one of the most important aspects of Maya tradition, the cycle. As discussed, the life, death, and rebirth cycle is explained through this myth. This is especially important to a ruler who must be able to transcend the three levels of the universe, which move in this cyclic pattern. In this cycle, death equals the underworld, life is equivalent to the middle earth level, and rebirth refers to transcendence from the heavens. Association with the myth of the hero twins, as well as the suggested guardianship of the twins, allows the ruler to not only demonstrate his ability to transcend these three levels with ease, but to do so with the companionship of the Hero Gods.

Eliade also states that the meaning of myth is to remain in the sacred, or true reality, by imitating the actions of the gods (1997). By associating themselves with and

imitating the acts of the Hero Twins, the rulers of Machaquila remove themselves from the world of the profane and live in the “*time of origin*”, using Eliade’s argument (1997: 38). The last rulers of Machaquila strongly associate themselves with the underworld and with the ballcourt, as can be seen not only by their association with the Ancestral Heroes, but by the “fish-and-flower” headdress that they wear, which is worn by ball game players. Sharer furthers this argument by illustrating that through the ballgame the ancient Maya were reenacting the feats of the Hero Twins as they triumph over the lords of the underworld. By imitating the personification of and the actions of the Hero Twins, the rulers entered the sacred world, perhaps not only for the public view, but also for self-gratification and aggrandizement.

This identification and thus aggrandizement is very important to a successful and powerful ruler. As Bidney, Cassier, Durkheim, Malinowski and others believe, an important function of myth is to promote social solidarity (Bidney 1955: 7; Cassier 1944: 84). Thus it would follow that to achieve social solidarity a Mayan ruler would engage the mythic heroes in his representation of himself. Bidney states that “myth objectifies and organizes human hopes and fears and metamorphosizes them into persistent and durable works” (Bidney 1955: 8). A ruler would be likely to try to shape human hopes and fears into persistent and durable works, in an attempt to manipulate the peoples trust in him as a ruler, thus the ruler would gain status and public esteem. This is especially important during the Late Terminal Classic period when the Maya civilization has already begun its decline. Bidney and others further state that myth is especially important in that it creates solidarity with nature during times of crisis (Bidney 1955; Cassier 1944). Although the Late Terminal Classic is not necessarily a time of “crisis”

for the Maya, there assuredly was some insecurity and increased fears as the Maya sensed and were aware of the beginning of the Classic period decline. There may have been increased warfare, decreased food subsistence, or a number of other factors that would have caused a feeling of apprehensiveness or uneasiness that a ruler would try to fight against and rebuild the social solidarity.

## 6. Twins in Ethnography

When the research for this paper first began, it was under the assumption that the conception of twins is viewed negatively amongst the Maya, as it is in many other parts of the world. To my surprise it was not as simple as that. Upon further research I found that there were very diverse opinions concerning twins throughout North and South America, including the Maya area. It should be noted that ethnographic studies of twins are lacking in the western hemisphere. Most of the reports are extremely brief, never expanding beyond two or three sentences per ethnography.

The birth of twins in the Americas often has a negative meaning. Although unable to find any substantive evidence for the treatment of twins in North America, in South America, among the Siriono, if twins are born it is the second of them that is usually killed (Sullivan 1988: 313). In Robert Redfield and Alfonso Villa Rojas' book *Chan Kom – A Maya Village*, the authors report, "the birth of twins is regarded, for practical reasons, as something of an unfortunate occurrence. It is thought unwise to make fun of twins, lest one himself become the parent of twins" (1934: 183). The Lacandon of the Chiapas in Yucatan do not accept the birth of twins, but on the same hand they do not believe in putting either of them to death. According to Boremanse, "they believe that if one of them was to be put to death, its soul would bring misfortune to the survivor" (1998: 78).

I have received a couple of accounts from an informal investigation amongst a portion of the Q'eqchi' Maya of southern Belize. Although data concerning ethnographic views is scant, reasonable conclusions can be formed from the material acquired. The first interview I conducted was of Mr. Don Owen-Lewis, who is a British expatriate who

lived in Belize since the fall of 1953. He moved to southern Belize, then called British Honduras, to learn Q'eqchi' language and culture and become a representative of the Indian community to the British. Shortly after he arrived in the town of Otoxha in southern Belize, his neighbor Lucus Chub, became the father of twins. Owen-Lewis recalled that twins were not treated in any way special, but were thought of as a "bit of a misfortune". He stated that twins were "a bit of a liability, as the Indian diet is short in protein and there's not enough breast milk. I think they (the twin boys) were a bit stunted, both of them" (Pers. Comm. 2001). When I asked him if he felt that the Q'eqchi' had always regarded twins as a misfortune, Owen-Lewis was quick to point out that the Indians "were westernized quick and what little bits of tradition they had is getting lost...most of their ancient culture was lost over the years" (2001). I will return to this point again later.

The second person I interviewed was a young man by the name of Magdaleno Che who lives in a Q'eqchi' Maya village in southern Belize. He was specifically asked about the perception of twins among the other Mayas that he knew. He said that his aunt had had a set of twins six years prior to our interview, in 1995. He believed that the actual birthing of twins was perceived of as misfortunate because of the increased difficulty in labor, as opposed to a single birth. But the birth of twins to a family was considered to be "an individual's own (good) luck" according to Che (Pers. Comm. 2001).

Recall that Redfield and Villa Rojas reported twin births to be an unfortunate occurrence, they prefaced it with saying that twins were thought unfortunate because of "practical reasons" (1934: 183). The authors did not go on to describe what these

“practical reasons” may be, but it is implied that twins are unfortunate because of the obvious increased difficulty in labor and demands of feeding them.

This further brings me to a discussion of the Northern Lacandon perception of pregnancy and labor. The Northern Lacandon say that a woman who is pregnant is *ma'uts*, or “not well,” “sick” (Boremanse 1998: 77). There are many rules or prohibitions that both the father and the pregnant mother must follow or it is said that misfortune will come to the mother and child during childbirth, including “the child will take a long time to be born, or the fetus may become too large to be expelled, or the woman may lose a lot of blood and eventually die” (Boremanse 1998: 77). Boremanse states that the “Northern Lacandon consider childbirth dangerous – probably because many of the women have died bearing children – and they are very afraid of it. Their feelings about childbirth are usually characterized by fear and resignation” (1998: 77). In the event that twins are born, neither is put to death for fear that the dead child will bring misfortune to the surviving twin. However, both twins rarely live because “the mother does not have enough milk for both” (Boremanse 1998: 78). Both the Lacandon and the Qek'chi, of southern Belize, recognize the lack of sufficiency of breast milk, which may be one of the reasons for seeing the birth of twins as misfortunate.

The birth of twins is regarded as negative because of the difficulty in childbirth and the difficulty in raising the children after they are born. Twins would obviously take more time and attention on the mother's behalf, and the lack of breast milk could result in a serious problem. When I first began this study it appeared that some found the birth of twins to be misfortunate (Lacandon, Siriono, Chan Kom), while others (the interview with Magdaleno Che and Chan Kom – discussed below) found it to be an act of luck. To

account for this difference I return to Redfield and Villa Rojas (1934). Although they stated that the birth of twins was unfortunate, they also stated, “old people speak of twins as ‘god children’ (*mehen kuob*), and treat them with especial respect” (183).

Here within the same village of Chan Kom there is a discrepancy among the young members of the community and the old members of the community. Obviously the young and the old have very different views about twins, as the young see them as an unfortunate occurrence, while the old treat them with “especial respect”. This is clearly the result of a change in cultural views. I suggest this change was caused by the infiltration of the Spanish belief system after the Inquisition. This is supported by Don Owen-Lewis’ statement that the Indians “were westernized quick and what little bits of tradition they had is getting lost...most of their ancient culture was lost over the years”. It is likely that the ancient Maya thought differently of twins than the modern Maya of today. Images of the hero twins can be seen in carved inscriptions, the codices, and painted on vessels. Consideration of twins in this regard does not appear to have negative connotations, but rather is a form of respect. This point becomes quite obvious when examples such as Ruler VI of Machaquila associating himself with the Ancestral Heroes are taken into account, as a ruler would not choose to associate himself with something of negative connotation, but with only something held in the highest respect.



## Conclusion

Twins occur in myths from North to South America. In Mesoamerica the myths tend to be of Hero Twins, such as the Hero Twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque from the Popol Vuh. The creation myths concerning the twins can be seen on carved monuments, painted ceramics, written texts from the Colonial period, and in modern oral history (Schele and Freidel 1990). The Hero Twins were clearly esteemed in ancient Maya society, and attempts were made to preserve the history of their myth.

Based on this, it could then be expected that the Maya people would value the birth of twins in their communities, but this is not the case. There are two very distinct perceptions of twin births. The first viewpoint is that twins are lucky and held in special respect. The opposing view is that twins are dangerous and their birth is considered misfortune. The reason for this discrepancy may be that indigenous views of twins have evolved through the centuries since Spanish arrival.

Diego de Landa reports that it was a belief among the Maya that women who had died in childbirth were held in high rank and ascended into heaven (Tozzer 1941: 132). This is proof that shortly after the Spanish arrival childbirth resulting in death was not feared, but rather the women who died were held in high esteem, because it was an honor. For a woman to successfully give birth to twins at all can be considered an honor, because of the increased difficulty in labor. The honor of women who die during childbirth is an added accreditation. Before the Spanish Inquisition, childbirth was honored and not feared, as it is now among many peoples, and in the extreme amongst the Lacandon. There has obviously been a change in values since Spanish contact concerning childbirth.

From this I have drawn the conclusion that there has also been a change in values since Spanish arrival concerning the birth of twins. Redfield and Villa Rojas' example of the older generations treating twins with special reverence, while the younger generations see the birth of twins as unfortunate, is clear support of this theory. I propose that the current belief of twins being a misfortune was not a value held by the Maya until after Spanish contact. This change has slowly spread through the Maya communities, not yet totally penetrating all of them. The birth of children may have been unwanted for fear that the children may be born "white," as many groups did not fully understand the process of conception. The Lacandon believe that children are conceived by god, and that intercourse has some unknown role in the matter (Boremanse 1998). Children as a product of rape may have also been a factor in the rise in fear of childbirth.

European ideals were also forced upon the ancient Maya, and with that may have come a fear of childbirth. With the seed of fear planted, the accession to fearing multiple childbirths becomes perfectly reasonable. Twins then change from being sacred mythical beings to feared causes of pain, danger, and death (to the mother and/or the children). Until further ethnographic studies have been conducted with both old and young generations, a single definitive theory cannot be embraced. The true ancient Maya perception of twins may never be ascertained, but given that the evidence we have of the view of childbirth shortly after Spanish arrival contradicts the present view, and the differing value of twins throughout the Maya region, it seems clear that the attitude towards twins has changed over the past five centuries.

## Political Structure and the Use of Myth

Twin myths play an important role in the political structure of the Maya.

Machaquila is a prime example of mythic hero iconography utilized as a source of power in a political framework. If the two men depicted in the stela associated with Ruler VI of Machaquila are not twins, they may be brothers or co-rulers. Each has very distinct facial features, and superficially they do not appear to be the same person. Yet, each man shows the signs of being a ruler, both wearing the Jester God headdress and holding the k'awil scepter in their right hands.

Both men also seem to be imitating one of the hero twins. One wears a jaguar head headdress, a jaguar head on each arm, and a jaguar pelt around his waist. The second wears a vulture head headdress, very similar to one worn by *Hunahpu*, with a Jester God head, turning the meaning of the vulture head to *ajaw* (or possibly *Hun Ajaw*). Even if the people in the four stelae are the same person, the use of the Hero Twin symbology seems apparent. The name *Hun Tzak Tok'* is also of interest and may indicate twin rulers by the flint association.

Finally, occurrence of the *way* symbol on *Hun Tzak Tok'*s clothing implies the translation of a spirit *way*. In one stela *Hun Tzak Tok'* is described as being a twin god, a definitive association with the Hero Twins, who may be serving as spirit companions or guardians to *Hun Tzak Tok'*.

Although the above stated theories concerning Ruler VI of Machaquila are speculative, they are supported when the full body figures of Ruler VI are examined in detail. Arguments supporting the reasons Ruler VI would have chosen to associate with mythic heroes are also very strong. The myth of the hero twins would be important to a

ruler as it recounts one of the most important aspects of Maya tradition, the cycle of life, death, and rebirth which are associated with the three levels of the universe. Association with the myth of the hero twins, as well as the suggested guardianship of the twins, allows the ruler to not only demonstrate his ability to transcend these three levels with ease, but to do so with the companionship of the Hero Gods.

Another important reason for associating himself with the Hero Twins is that Ruler VI may have been attempting to stabilize and regain social solidarity within his community. The time period that *Hun Tzak Tok'* served as ruler for Machaquila would have been in the midst of the decline of the Classic Maya civilization. This decline would assuredly have been noticed by the Maya people, thus perhaps causing a feel of uneasiness and apprehension. A ruler would unquestionably gain the support of his people if he could retain and stabilize social solidarity.

Further physical research needs to be conducted at this site, including major archaeological excavations, and a search for more carvings in archaeological investigations. Careful reexamination of the readings and iconography at other major Maya political sites needs to be conducted to determine if there are any other occurrences of possible twin rulership. Reexamination of possible mythic association in a political context needs to be conducted as well. A starting point for these reevaluations may be at sites that contain rulers with a name associated with a flint, or perhaps more importantly with a doubled name title. A doubled name title is rarely seen at any other site in the Maya region, although it does occasionally occur. The doubling of the sign perhaps is not part of a name sequence, but rather as a way of identifying two rulers. This has yet to be examined. Considerable evidence could be brought to support or disprove this dual

rulership theory. In a broader context, the method of looking at political organization should be given a more expansive interpretation to include the possibility and resulting effects and consequences of not only the function of myth in a political context, but also dual rulership at ancient Maya sites.

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