Crosses, Flowers, and Toads: Classic Maya Bloodletting Iconography in Yaxchilan Lintels 24, 25, and 26

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Crosses, Flowers, and Toads: Maya Bloodletting Iconography

in Yaxchilan Lintels 24, 25, and 26

Kirsten Rachelle Steiger

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

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The lintels of Yaxchilan Structure 23 seem to be a demonstrable case wherein specific symbols are singled out and deliberately used in an ordered sequence. Taken together as a unified series, Yaxchilan Lintels 24, 25, and 26 summarize the multi-step process of royal autosacrifice. An iconographic study of the huipil patterns depicted on these lintels yields a better understanding of complex bloodletting iconography and the way in which depictions of ceremonial autosacrifice reinforce Classic Maya beliefs relating to the divine role of Maya elite in eliciting communion with the gods and the subsequent rebirth of the cosmos. The rich iconography of the lintels gives depth to our understanding of importance of royal bloodletting on a cosmic level. Their detailed imagery clarifies what seems to have occurred during each step of the ritual process. The events and symbolism depicted on the three lintels build from each other to form a unified iconographic whole centered on the rebirth of the gods and the cosmos through royal autosacrifice. Iconographic changes from one lintel to the next communicate the pervasiveness of cycles of death and rebirth in Classic Maya cosmology. The symbolism of each lintel communicates the interrelatedness of death and rebirth, while underscoring the role of the ruler in initiating cosmic renewal through autosacrifice. As Yaxchilan Lintels 24, 25, and 26 present themselves in an interrelated series, the subtle differences within the iconography from one lintel to the next represent important progressions within cycles of death and rebirth, elucidating the significance of certain steps within the royal bloodletting ritual and the cosmic rebirth that takes place as a result. As a set, the combined iconographies present on the queen’s huipil—crosses, flowers, and toads—epitomize the objective of the ritual, namely rebirthing the cosmos and the gods through the sacrifice of divine blood.

Keywords: Maya, Yaxchilan, bloodletting, lintels, iconography, ritual
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Brigham Young University

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Yaxchilan lies on the southern bank of the Usumacinta River, surrounded by a large horseshoe bend in the Chiapas region of Mexico. Anciently the city was known as Pa’ Chan or Split Sky; its emblem glyph consists of a split device (Fig. 1.1), which “undoubtedly represents a portal for the birth or rebirth of deities in Maya iconography” (Martin 2004, 6). Portals to the Otherworld and the ritual rebirth of deities and ancestral spirits are fundamental concepts in Maya religious thought, discussed at length throughout this paper.

With a dynasty originating in the fourth-century C.E., Yaxchilan is an ancient Maya city that flourished during the eighth-century, near the end of the Classic period (Martin and Grube 2008, 117). Yaxchilan is best known for its sixty carved lintels, most of which depict Maya rituals of autosacrifice with a detail and explicitness unique to that site (Tate 1992, 3). The site’s art is also unique in its common portrayal of royal Maya women participating in ancient ceremonies.

Itzamnaaj Bahlam III ruled Yaxchilan during the greater length of its fluorescence, from 9.12.9.8.1 5 Imix 4 Mak (20 October 681 C.E.) to 9.15.10.17.14 6 Ik’ 12 Yaxk’in (15 June 742 C.E.) (Martin and Grube 2008, 123). During the sixty-one years of his reign, he commissioned at least eight carved lintels, five stelae, and six hieroglyphic steps (Tate 1992, 38). During the first half of that time, he commissioned only stelae. By about 9.14.0.0.0, however, Itzamnaaj Bahlam began to commission lintels in sets of three, reviving an ancient tradition that had not been employed in Yaxchilan since the reign of K’inich Tatbu Skull II nearly two centuries earlier (Ibid., 118-119). The most famous of these lintels were originally located within the doorways of Yaxchilan Structure 23, dedicated in 9.14.15.0.0 (726 C.E.) in honor of Itzamnaaj Bahlam’s
principal wife Lady K’abal Xook. According to Sharer and Morley, sculpture at Yaxchilan “reached its highest level” in Lintels 24, 25, and 26 of Structure 23 (Sharer and Morley 1994, 651). In fact, Yaxchilan Lintels 24, 25, and 26 are considered by many to be among the best stone sculptures ever created by the Maya (Tate 1992, 42). Tate expounds on the artistry of the lintels, pointing out their appeal to European tastes through their unity, the depth of their high-relief carving with its multiple planes, the unique balance they strike between sumptuous detail, clarity, and simplicity, and the use of diagonals that draw the eye throughout each composition (Ibid., 42-44).

Furst suggests that Lintels 24 and 25 “may be read in sequence, the one a function of the other” (Furst 1976, 187). Others such as Schele, Miller, and Freidel support this claim, adding Lintel 26 to the sequence. While the rituals depicted in each lintel are separated by several years, each “portrays different points in the same ritual that compose a narrative whole” (Schele and Miller 1986, 177). In this way, “the sculptors let us understand the action sequence of the bloodletting rite and simultaneously that this ritual took place at three different points in time” (Schele and Freidel 1990, 478 no. 17). Tate challenges the idea that the lintels may be read together as a sequence, basing her argument largely on the lintels’ separation by time, the subtle artistic differences among the lintels,¹ and what she claims are “discontinuities of iconography of the entire program of Structure 23” (Tate 1992, 90).

While it is true that the lintels were carved several years apart, perhaps even by different artists, I disagree with the claim that the iconography of the lintels is discontinuous. The artists of all three lintels employ recognizable symbols and innovations drawing upon the cosmological

¹ Analyzing the stylistic differences among the images and texts with the lintels of Yaxchilan Structure 23, Tate identifies at least two or three different hands at work (Tate 1992, 42-47).
importance of royal autosacrifice and the ritual’s intimate relationship to the cycles of death and rebirth in the Maya world. The iconography of the crosses, flowers, and toads—set in a visual sequence in the lintels of Yaxchilan Structure 23—gives order to the references to both death and rebirth present in each lintel. In the following chapters, I will show how the events and symbolism of the three lintels build from each other to form a unified iconographic whole centered on the rebirth of the gods and the cosmos through royal autosacrifice. The lintels’ unity as a set expands our knowledge of the sequential nature of bloodletting rituals. Their detailed imagery clarifies what seems to have occurred during each step of the ritual process. The rich iconography of the lintels gives depth to our understanding of importance of royal bloodletting on a cosmic level.

According to Schele and Miller, “The imagery of art was a symbolic language that depicted both the historical actions of kings and the supernatural framework of the cosmos that gave those actions sacred purpose” (Schele and Miller 1986, 41-42). The artists of Yaxchilan Lintels 24, 25, and 26 employ multiple levels of meaning. Textually and visually they refer to three separate ritual acts performed by Itzamnaaj Bahlam III and his wife Lady K’abal Xook. On a cosmological level, they refer to the original primordial ritual enacted by the gods *illo tempore*, the initial creation of the world, which each bloodletting ritual seeks to recreate. Iconographically, both as a series and as individual lintels, they refer to Classic Maya understandings of cyclical death and rebirth. By being able to understand ancient Maya imagery and its inherent patterns, one comes to appreciate the central, godlike role of Maya rulers as intermediaries between the world of the mundane and the world of the sacred, or between life, death, and resurrection.
An iconographical analysis of the Late Classic Maya depictions of autosacrifice displayed on Yaxchilan Lintels 24, 25, and 26 leads to a better understanding of the central role of royal autosacrifice in Classic Maya religion and how it relates to Maya cosmology. It is on these iconographic and cosmological levels that my research contributes to previous scholarship on the Yaxchilan lintels. While others have recognized the lintels’ exquisite beauty and their unity as a set—based on their placement together above the entrances of Structure 23 and the ritual phases portrayed in the lintels—my contribution consists mainly in my analysis of the symbolic unity of the three patterns of Lady K’abal Xook’s ceremonial huipils as they relate to cycles of death and rebirth. I explore how, when considered as a whole, this sequence of symbolic patterns gives meaning to the multiple references to death and rebirth within each lintel.

In Yaxchilan Lintels 24, 25, and 26, death and rebirth are not two dichotomous events; rather, they occur simultaneously and interdependently. In these lintels from Yaxchilan, images of death are always accompanied with the potential for regeneration. Each lintel contains symbolism relating both to death and to rebirth while simultaneously giving order to the cyclical process through the iconographic changes of Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil patterns. If my findings are correct, then we may gain a deeper appreciation for the ability of Classic Maya artists in Yaxchilan to fluently communicate complex theological concepts of death and rebirth on multiple levels using a rich iconography and an impressive array of artistic devices.

The zigzagged diamond field decorating Lady K’abal Xook’s ceremonial huipil in Yaxchilan Lintels 24 and 26 is a common huipil pattern worn during bloodletting ceremonies. Similar patterns adorn other Maya art forms, such as pottery and architectural façades. Inside each diamond of the rhomboidal field are usually variations of symbolically charged icons, such
as the crosses and toads of the Yaxchilan lintels or the flowers and concentric squares of the West Building façade at the Nunnery Quadrangle in Uxmal. Understanding these patterns and icons is requisite to understanding the rituals for which they were used, and thus, are essential for understanding Maya cosmology with its unique conception of death and rebirth. According to Taylor, “Woven garments on monuments are coded with glyphs which, if they can be deciphered, reveal information about the figure of the event depicted” (Taylor 1992, 5). In this way, textile motifs are much more than artistic embellishments. They signify concepts that are fundamental to ancient Maya religion, directly relevant to the ritual enacted within the monument.

As Lintels 24, 25, and 26 from Yaxchilan present themselves in an interrelated series, the subtle differences within the iconography from one lintel to the next represent important progressions within the mythological creation process, a process originating in the primordial chaos of the Maya Underworld and resulting in the birth or creation of the cosmos. An iconographic study of the huipil patterns depicted on these lintels yields a better understanding of complex bloodletting iconography. Understanding the iconography used in depictions of ceremonial autosacrifice reinforces Classic Maya beliefs relating to the divine role of Maya elite in eliciting the rebirth of the gods, divine ancestors, and the cosmos. Specifically, I contend that the iconography found within the lintels of Yaxchilan Structure 23—especially the textile patterns on Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil—can be read in reference to the ruler as the *axis mundi* and source of creation in Lintel 24, the ability of the ruler to transcend the world of the mundane and communicate with gods and divine ancestors in Lintel 25, and the power of the rulers’ blood to rebirth the gods and the cosmos in Lintel 26. Taken as a whole, these concepts are central to
the ritual logic of royal autosacrifice and reinforce the imagery relating to death and rebirth within each lintel.

According to Carlsen, “Indigenous ceremony and ritual can be a window into the cosmic order of the Maya world and, in turn, on the ceremonial maintenance of that world” (Carlsen 1997, 178). Carlsen’s insight gives modern inquirers ample reason for seeking to understand the role of ritual to the Maya. Since so much of what we know of ancient Maya ritual and cosmology is delivered through visual art (stelae, lintels, pottery, architecture, codices, etc.), it is vital to understand the artistic representation of Maya ceremony and ritual. The iconography of Classic Maya art gives cosmological meaning to what might otherwise be mistaken as arbitrary figures and patterns. Within the lintels of Yaxchilan Structure 23, the iconography informing the patterns of Lady K’abal Xook’s ceremonial huipil reveal fundamental ideas about the role of bloodletting in the creation and maintenance of the world.

Ceremonial bloodletting is a frequent subject of all ancient Maya art forms. As stated by Schele and Miller, “Blood was the mortar of ancient Maya ritual life” (Schele and Miller 1986, 14). For a Maya ruler, bloodletting rituals marked “every stage in life, every event of political or religious importance, every significant period ending [. . .]. When buildings were dedicated, crops planted, children born, couples married or the dead buried, blood was given to express piety and call the gods into attendance” (Schele and Miller 1986, 176). Coe summarizes the relationship between blood sacrifice and royalty: “The Classic elite were obsessed with blood, both their own and that spilled by high-ranking captives. Hieroglyphic and iconographic studies have shown the supreme significance of ritually shed blood by the Classic Maya rulers and their families” (Coe 1999, 223). The Maya believed that their kings and queens were literal
descendants of gods. It was not their wealth, eloquence, charisma, or capability which set them apart from others, but their divine blood and its ability to rebirth the gods and the cosmos.

According to Maya thought, all organic fluids contain the powerful life-giving force called *itz*. Schlesinger explains, “Dew, human sweat, rust, blood, a mother’s milk, tears, and resin are all substances called *itz* through which the Maya gods become manifest. Itz is the life-giving force and a gift from the gods” (Schlesinger 2001, 119). No other organic fluid is so saturated with *itz* as blood, and no blood contains as much *itz* as the divine blood of Maya kings and queens. Within the blood of the Maya ruler is contained the essence of gods and deified ancestors. Through autosacrifice, the ruler is able to rebirth these deities and conjure their presence in a more accessible form.

The sacred nature of blood dates back to the time of human creation. According to ancient Maya mythology, “man was formed by the gods from maize. Maize and blood were identified as the most potent substances by the Maya. Man’s flesh was maize, transformed by the blood offerings of deities into human substance” (Schele and Miller 1986, 144). The *Popol Vuh*\(^2\) records the creation of men: “It was from within the places called Paxil and Cayala that the yellow ears of ripe maize and the white ears of ripe maize came. [. . .] Thus was found the food that would become the flesh of the newly framed and shaped people. Water was their blood. It became the blood of humanity” (Christenson 2007, 193-194). Only royal blood contains the essence of the gods, with sufficient *itz* to renew the earth and resurrect the gods and deified ancestors.

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\(^2\) The *Popol Vuh* is a sacred K’iche’ Maya text written during the Colonial Period, but whose stories are recorded on Maya art far back into Preclassic times.
The bloodletting iconography present in Classic Maya art has been identified in Mesoamerica as early as the Late Preclassic era (Stuart 1988, 221). The practice of bloodletting thrived throughout the Classic and Postclassic eras and continued until the Spanish Conquest. The *Popol Vuh*, the sacred book of the Maya, describes several acts of autosacrifice: “Then they pierced their ears and their elbows before the faces of their gods. [. . .] They rejoiced for the blood of the bloodletters and sacrificers” (Christenson 2007, 236). Maya rulers sacrificed their own blood to the gods—whose initial efforts and sacrifice had led to the creation of mankind—believing that “by so doing they returned a portion of their life force to the powers of the cosmos” (Ibid., 190 no. 501). The practice of autosacrifice by Maya rulers, depicted on the Hauberg Stela as early as 199 C.E., “was the earliest kingly action to be documented in a public forum” (Schele and Miller 1986, 179) and is perhaps the act most often depicted in Maya art and writing (Stuart 1988, 175).

During times of accession, episodes of peril, or calendrically important days, it was the duty of Maya royalty to sacrifice their own blood for the sake of the community. These rulers willingly participated in excruciating bloodletting ceremonies, involving perforation of vascular body parts—tongues, ears, or genitals—often with stingray spines, bone awls, or thorn-studded cords, which had been ritually adorned and deified before the event (Coe 1999, 223). Because royal blood was sacred, containing the potentially powerful effect of regenerating the world through autosacrifice, Maya rulers had a sacred obligation to sacrifice their life-giving blood. The consequences of their sacrifice included not only the sustenance and regeneration of their community but of the gods and the entire cosmos.

By spilling their own blood, Maya rulers released the essence of the gods and offered their own life force as a means of regenerating the cosmos. The iconography contained within
monumental depictions of these autosacrificial ceremonies communicates this fundamental principle of Maya ideology. Taken together as a unified series, Yaxchilan Lintels 24, 25, and 26 plainly summarize the multi-step process of royal autosacrifice. As a set, the combined iconographies present on the queen’s huipil—crosses, flowers, and toads—epitomize the objective of the ritual, namely rebirthing the cosmos through the gift of divine blood and the metaphorical descent into the Underworld and the subsequent ascent to new life.
CHAPTER 2: CROSSES

The modern Tzotzil Maya of Zinacantan erect crosses at sacred locations. Each cross serves as a “channel of communication to some deity in the cosmological system” (Vogt 1981, 120). While the cross is recognized as a Christian symbol of the Crucifixion, adopted as such by the Maya since Spanish Colonialization, “These crosses represent more than is implied by the Catholic-Christian symbols” (Vogt 1976, 6). The iconography of the cross has played a significant role in Maya religious thought for thousands of years. Associated symbols abound in ancient Maya art, including crossbands, the k’an cross, quatrefoils, World Trees, the resurrecting Maize God, and the open maws of sacred serpents. All of these cross symbols relate—whether directly as a ritual centering device or indirectly as a simple cosmogram—to the ritual of royal autosacrifice described above and to the resulting contact with the Otherworld and regeneration of the cosmos.

Even under the auspices of the Catholic Church, the Maya continue to project ancient ideas onto the cross symbol. Besides symbolizing the Christian cross of Jesus, “the Zinacanteco cross is also a doorway to the homes of the ancestral gods, marking the boundary between social and supernatural spaces and providing entrance into and exit from these spaces” (Ibid., 11). It is through sacrificial offerings that this doorway is opened. While the modern Maya offer sacrifices of candles, incense, liquor, and chickens, the most effective form of sacrifice in ancient times would have been royal blood.

The Maya cross identifies the location at which one could communicate with ancestral deities and replenish the world through ritual. It marks a doorway, a locale beyond which lay the world of the ancestral deities. The cross marker takes on the significance of the sacred
otherworldly space which it demarcates. As a boundary between the Maya world and the world of the gods, the cross marks a sacred center around which space was oriented and sacralized.

Ideologically related to the symbol of the cross is the fundamental idea among the Maya of a sacred center. While the term “center” is used rather loosely among Maya archaeologists and scholars, the term has an extremely significant meaning for the Maya, both ancient and modern. Tate, for one, advocates a more careful use of the term: “In the 1970’s, archaeologists used the term ‘center’ to avoid calling Maya cities either ‘city’ or (vacant) ‘ceremonial center.’ However, ‘center’ as a concept is too significant among Native American civilizations for the term to be used as an avoidance tactic” (Tate 1992, 26). For the Maya, a sacred center, or *axis mundi*, is located at any sacred site or ritual location, such as a sacred mountain, tree, temple, cross, body of water, or even in the person of a semi-divine ruler. The cross pattern repeated in Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil in Lintel 24 may be read as an iconographic reference to the orientation of the cosmos around a sacred center, perhaps in the person of Lady K’abal Xook herself as she stands at the crossroads between death and rebirth, carrying out the sacred ritual of autosacrifice.

**LINTEL 24**

According to Sharer and Morley, “In its harmony of composition, balance of design, and brilliance of execution, Lintel 24 is the most outstanding example of sculptural art at Yaxchilan” (Sharer and Morley 1994, 651). Lintel 24 (*Fig. 2.1*) was the first of a series of three lintels adorning the entranceways of Yaxchilan Structure 23. It would originally have been located above the structure’s left doorway, visible to the ritualists passing through underneath. Tate suggests that “the placement of the lintels inside the doorways of the temples was probably a simile for the placement of the ruler (his image) inside the aperture of the Axis Mundi or, in other words, at the opening between cosmic realms” (Tate 1992, 101). Lady K’abal Xook
assumes a liminal position between the realm of the living and the Otherworld as she passes through the temple doorway into the dark temple interior, representative of a cave, a womb, or the watery Underworld. She stands at the deathly aperture from which new life springs, the center of the Maya universe.

Skillfully carved onto the lintel, Lady K’abal Xook kneels, pulling through her tongue a thorn-studded cord as an act of pious autosacrifice. Other depiction of autosacrifice omit the thorns, indicated either a heightened degree of detail in Lintel 25 or a greater degree of piety in Lady K’abal Xook’s sacrifice (Schele and Miller 1986, 178). The cord falls onto a woven basket holding blood-stained strips of bark paper. Itzamnaaj Bahlam III, the king of Yaxchilan (also known in some literature as Lord Shield Jaguar, based on the hieroglyphs that form his name), illuminates the scene with a fiery torch held above Lady K’abal Xook, his principal wife. The queen seems to be performing ritual autosacrifice within the darkness of a Classic Maya temple, perhaps Yaxchilan Structure 23 itself.

Among other royal accouterments, Lady K’abal Xook wears an elaborately woven ceremonial huipil, characterized by a zigzagged diamond pattern common on huipil patterns worn by queens during bloodletting ceremonies (Looper 2000, 52-83). The dotted scrolls on her lips and cheeks signify blood streaming from her pierced tongue. Atop her head is a Tlaloc headdress: “Her headdress, with its tassels, bar, trapeze and Tlaloc signs, signals that she is engaged in a very special bloodletting rite that will eventually include captive sacrifice” (Schele and Miller 1986, 177). This later phase of the ritual is more directly referenced in Lintel 26, the last lintel in the three-part series of Structure 23.
All three lintels were carved in elaborately detailed high relief, probably by multiple artists (Tate 1992, 42-27). In Lintel 24, traces of red paint can still be seen on the queen’s huipil and bordering the uppermost hieroglyphic texts. Several places in the background still retain their original blue color, a vivid Maya Blue (Fig. 2.2). According to Arnold, the Maya produced several brilliant pigments from mineral sources, rarely mixing pigments. Red ochre was created from iron oxides. The intense blue so unique to Maya art was derived as early as 300 C.E. from indigo chemically bound to attapulgite or palygorskite clay, had in abundance among the ancient Maya. The pigment is “resistant to diluted mineral acids, alkalis, solvents, oxidants, reducing agents, moderate heat and biocorrosion and shows little evidence of colour deterioration even after centuries of exposure to the harsh tropical climate of southern Mesoamerica” (Arnold 2008, 151-152). For this reason, much of the color is still visible on ancient Maya artifacts. Based on recent research, the blue pigment’s production seems to have included a burning process, considered to be part of the sacrificial ritual itself (Ibid., 153-154).

In Maya art, each color is imbued with symbolic meaning. On the Yaxchilan lintels, rather than serving to differentiate forms, color is used for its cosmological valence. As stated by Schele and Miller, “Color could be used naturalistically to signal the inherent color of materials, as in the clothing of a king, but it also had symbolic value. Sometimes the color that appears on monuments bears no relationship to the naturalistic representation of particular objects, as in Yaxchilan Lintel 24” (Schele and Miller 1986, 36). Blue seems to be the dominant color of Lintel 24 and is visible in the spaces forming the lintel’s background. Close observation of the lintel also reveals remnants of what appears to be red paint on the female figure’s huipil. Red is significant in that it symbolizes blood, sacrifice, and death, as well as birth and powers of cosmic renewal (Looper 2003, 17). It is the color directionally related to the east, or to the rising sun.
In ancient and modern Maya thinking, colors are often associated with one of the four sacred cardinal directions. Blue and green are not differentiated from one another in Mayan languages; they form the single color *yax*. The word *yax* alternatively signifies “green,” “blue,” “first,” or “new.” Directionally it is associated with the center. As it relates to water, the color blue can alternatively represent the watery Underworld as the realm of death or as the primordial sea from which life springs. Blue is also closely associated with the god Chaak—a deity with aspects relating both to the Underworld and the Overworld, responsible for agriculture, rain, and the fertility of the earth.

In pre-Conquest times, blue pigment was often used in ritual sacrifice. During the early twentieth-century, Edward Thompson described a fourteen- to fifteen-foot layer of blue silt at the bottom of the Sacred Cenote at Chichen Itza from the proliferation of sacrificial artifacts—often painted in Maya Blue—that the Maya had offered as sacrifice and thrown into the sink hole over the centuries (Arnold 2008, 157). Sixteenth-century writings by Spanish priests claim that blue paint was applied to anoint sacrificial objects, altars, and prisoners (Tozzer 1941, 117–119). Red, too, was associated with blood, death, and sacrifice. At least during the period just prior to the Spanish Conquest, sacrificial victims were often depicted in red in the Maya codices (Vail and Hernández 2007, 146). Additionally, the walls of the tombs of kings were often “painted the color of blood or in blood symbols” (Schele and Miller 1986, 15). These symbols of blood, however, not only represented the death of the king, but also his potential for rebirth from the womb symbolized by the tomb.

The hieroglyphic text on Lintel 24 dates it to 725 C.E., during the Late Classic era of Maya history. According to the lintel’s main textual clause, the sacrificial scene depicted dates back fourteen years earlier, to 28 October 709 C.E., or 9.13.17.15.12 5 Eb 15 Mac in the Maya
calendar (*Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions* 2007). While it is relatively unusual to see a Maya queen playing such a dominant role in Maya art, “lavish documentation [was] given to Lady Xoc during Shield Jaguar’s reign” (Tate 1992, 124), which lasted from 681 to 742 C.E. (Martin and Grube 2008, 123). The lintel’s hieroglyphic text states that the event occurred during the fourth *k’atun* of Itzamnaaj Bahlam’s life, when he was in his early to mid-sixties (Schele and Miller 1986, 187; Martin and Grube 2008, 122). It also occurred only sixty-two days after the birth of Itzamnaaj Bahlam’s heir through Lady Ik’ Skull, although any reference to this event is not apparent on the lintel itself. The date marks the twenty-eighth accession anniversary of Itzamnaaj Bahlam III and the eightieth anniversary of the accession of his father Bird Jaguar III. It also falls on a rare stationary conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn (Tate 1992, 120). None of these events, however, are mentioned in the lintel’s hieroglyphic text.

The main text of the lintel, located at the upper left corner, not only specifies the exact date on which the ritual occurred but also lists what was done, and by whom. Following the calendar round date 5 Eb 15 Mac is the verb for autosacrifice, *ch’ab*, meaning “penance” or “creation” (Stuart 2008): “On 5 Eb 15 Mak it is his image in penance with the fiery spear. It is the penance of the four *k’atun* lord, Shield Jaguar III, captor of Aj-?, holy lord of pa’chan” (*Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions* 2007). The text names Itzamnaaj Bahlam as the subject of the verb (Schele and Miller 1986, 187), despite the fact that the image does not show him in the act of bloodletting. While the main clause gives no reference to the queen, she is the protagonist of the image. Stuart addresses the in congruency between the lintel’s text and image by stating that while the text may not be an exact description of the image depicted on the lintel, it is useful in providing some general information and putting the image into a thematic context (Stuart 1988, 176).
Lady K’abal Xook is, however, mentioned as letting blood—the act of *ch’ab* or “penance,” or “creation”—in the lintel’s secondary clause, just to the right of Itzamnaaj Bahlam: “It is her image in penance, Lady Ak’in? Xook, Lady K’abal Xook, Lady Kaloomte” (Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions 2007). That the sacrifice of Itzamnaaj Bahlam referred to in main clause may refer to an earlier event seems unlikely, as a new date would typically have been provided for the autosacrifice of Lady K’abal Xook if such were the case (Schele and Miller 1986, 187). It is assumed then, that both Itzamnaaj Bahlam and his wife performed bloodletting rituals on the same date, even though only Lady K’abal Xook’s sacrifice is depicted. The fact that Itzamnaaj Bahlam wears a rope collar around his neck, cloth knots around his ankles, and is depicted with his hair tied back “in the style of penitents” (Ibid., 186) gives additional evidence that Itzamnaaj Bahlam also let blood during the event depicted in Lintel 24.

Both Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil and Itzamnaaj Bahlam’s cape are characterized by a diamond-like field. Tate refers to these motifs as “star patterns,” citing them as evidence for the lintel’s symbolic reference to the astronomical conjunction that occurred on the same day as the bloodletting rite portrayed in the lintel (Tate 1992, 120). Such patterns, however, have since been identified as aquatic rather than stellar and are extremely common on ceremonial huipils used in bloodletting rituals. The zigzag is a common aquatic form on ceremonial textiles, and the serration that appears in the diamond-like field of the huipils of Lintel 24 and 26 is a simplified version of the aquatic zigzag motif (Looper 2000, 24). Although the Maya did identify the night sky with the watery Underworld, the symbolic reference to a specific astronomical occurrence is probably impossible to prove and may be purely coincidental.

The textile’s relationship to the Underworld and aquatic imagery is more likely due to its relationship with blood sacrifice—opening the portal to the watery Underworld—than with any
astronomical event. Water imagery is repeated in the flower-motif of Itzamnaaj Bahlam’s belt and cape, the king and queen’s flower-shaped earflares, and the water stacks and stepped frets decorating the basket into which Lady K’abal Xook lowers her thorn-studded cord. The relationship between flowers and aquatic Underworld imagery will be further discussed in the next chapter.

CROSSBANDS

Perhaps most pertinent to this study is the iconographic pattern repeated within the diamond-like field of Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil in Lintel 24. The area within each rhomboid space on Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil is filled with a small cross or crossbands (Fig. 2.3). Crossbands serve as a centering symbol, symbolizing the four sacred cardinal directions while marking the new axis mundi established through the bloodletting rite. They may also be indicative of the ruler’s ritual position as the axis mundi or center of the universe. Crossbands are also represented on a ceremonial huipil in the context of bloodletting on Yaxchilan Lintel 15 (755 C.E.), where Lady Wak Tuun, wife of Bird Jaguar IV, the son of Itzamnaaj Bahlam III, conjures a vision serpent after autosacrifice (Looper 2000, 62). Likewise, represented wearing a similar huipil on Yaxchilan Stela 4 (775 C.E.), Lady Great Skull, another wife of Bird Jaguar IV, performs autosacrifice with her son Itzamnaaj Bahlam IV (Ibid., 75).

The sacredness of the cross in Mesoamerica predates not only the Christian era, but also the Classic Maya era by centuries. Olmec artists commonly depict crossbands or the related quincunx motif in portraits of gods and rulers. Both patterns symbolize the orientation of the cosmos around a sacred center and can be seen in Maya art from its very beginnings, through the Classic era, and beyond the Conquest era into modern times. On one Olmec celt (Fig. 2.4), a
divine or royal figure wields a serpent and takes the central position in the quincunx, the place of the *axis mundi*. An ear of corn marks each of the four corners, representing a cosmogram oriented around the sacralized central figure. The symbol of the quincunx remained significant for the Maya throughout their history. The sacred quincunx can be seen again several times within the Dresden Codex ([Fig. 2.5](#)), often in relation to bloodletting. On page fifty-nine of the Dresden Codex, for example, barbed bloodletters floating in scrolls of smoke or blood form a cross as they emerge from the mouth of a serpent, similar to the serpent in Lintel 25. The quincunx motif is still employed today in the layout of modern Maya ritual offerings.

The crossbands in Lintel 24 may be related to a Maya glyph represented by crossed weaving sticks. Looper notes, “Spinning and weaving were important metaphors for the events of cosmogenesis in Classic mythology. As recorded on several Classic monumental texts, a key event of Creation, *ha’laj k’ojb’a*, is related to weaving” (Looper 2002, 12). The Classic Maya word *ha’l*, hieroglyphically represented by crossed weaving sticks, means ‘weave,’ ‘manifest’ and ‘declare’ (Ibid., 12), all words involved in creation.

Outside of a hieroglyphic context, the crossed sticks may retain their signification of creation and manifestation of the divine. Christenson explains that “Maya goddesses are often depicted weaving on a cosmic loom,” since woven threads signify “the divine order of the universe” in Maya cosmology (Christenson 2007, 136, n. 304). The crossbands on Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil, then, may connote this same cosmic order denoted by crossed weaving sticks, marking her as an embodied *axis mundi*, the source of creation and the physical locus through which sacred manifestations occur. Modern Maya weave in much the same manner that they did in ancient times, and they still associate the weaving act with creation. In Santiago Atitlan, “cloth is believed to be not merely woven but, in fact, born in an ancestral form” (Carlsen 1997, 181).
Just as in ancient times, Maya women weave using a simple back-strap loom made up of a simple array of sticks and string, attached to a post or tree, called a *r’tie chie* or “mother tree” in Tz’utujil (Fig. 2.6). The post is iconographically equivalent to the World Tree, or *axis mundi*, the sacred center of the universe from which creation springs and around which the cosmos are oriented. The rope securing the loom to the tree is called the *yujkut*, which, according to Carlsen, “local Maya recognize as synonymous with the umbilical cord and hence a connection with the ancestors” (Ibid., 181).

Less important than what the crossbands visually represent is what they iconographical contribute to the ritual portrayed in Lintel 24. Essentially, when a ruler sacrifices his or her own blood to the gods, he or she establishes a new *axis mundi*, a new central location that gives order to the universe and from which the World Tree or the regenerated cosmos may emerge. The World Tree is a common motif in bloodletting imagery, depicted, for example, in Palenque on the central panels of the Temple of the Cross and the Temple of the Foliated Cross as well as on the Sarcophagus Lid of K’ihnich Janaab Pakal I. The cruciform design of the World Tree is common throughout the Maya lowlands (Stanton and Freidel 2005, 235). The cruciform is also used in representations of the resurrection of the Maize God (Fig. 2.7), symbolizing the annual renewal of vegetable life and the regeneration of the world through ritual.

THE CLASSIC MAYA COSMOGRAM

The Maya universe was divided into three major levels: the Overworld, the Middleworld, and the Underworld. The Middleworld was the setting for the everyday life of mortals, oriented by the four cardinal directions. Each direction was associated with a color. According to Schele and Miller, “The principal direction was east, the point of the rising sun; its color was red. North,
the direction of the ancestral dead, was white. West was black and associated with death and the
Underworld. South was yellow and the right hand of the sun” (Schele and Miller 1986, 42). Yax,
or blue/green, was the color of the vertical orientation, or the center.

It is not clear whether the ancient Maya thought of north, south, east, and west as cardinal
directions, the way we think of them in Western culture. According to Tate, “Ethnographic
evidence clearly suggests that the Maya ordered their world from the point of view of the sun in
its travels over the earth, which shift seasonally” (Tate 1992, 12). Vogt reports, “There is no way
of saying, abstractly, north, south, east, and west in Tzotzil. The directions are conceived by their
relation to the path of the sun” (Vogt 1976, 16). Vogt cites the Tzotzil linguistic equivalents of
the cardinal directions to support this observation: “East is therefore approximated by lok’eb
k’ak’al, the ‘rising’ or appearing’ or ‘emerging’ sun, west by maleb k’ak’al, the ‘setting’ or
‘disappearing’ or ‘waning’ sun. [ . . . ] North and south are designated as xokon vinahel (the sides
of the sky or heavens). These two are differentiated by whether they are on the right hand or the
left hand of the path of the sun” (Ibid., 16). The same principle differentiates the north from the
south among the Maya throughout the highland area (Christenson 2010). Among the Mam-
speaking Maya, directions are also based on the path of the sun across the sky: “Okni ‘east’
comes from the verb ook ‘enter’; elni ‘west’ is derived from eel ‘go out’; jawni ‘north’ comes
from jaaw ‘go up’; and kubni ‘south’ is related to kub ‘go down”’ (Watanabe 1983, 712).

East, as the approximate direction from which the sun emerges, “holds by far the greatest
directional significance” (Vogt 1976, 16), at least among the Maya of Zinacantan. It may seem
coincidental that the color for east, the color of the rising sun, is also the color associated with
blood. In the Maya mind, however, it is appropriate that the “birthing of the sun” be
accompanied by blood. The idea that the sun is “born” is communicated several times in the
*Popol Vuh.* At the creation of mortals, for example, “Many people arrived in darkness in the days of their increase, for the sun was yet to be born” (Christenson 2007, 205). The Chorti Maya of eastern Guatemala believe that “the sun is ‘born’ at dawn, grows until noon and then ‘dies’ in the evening, leaving the night an ambiguous period during which the sun is between death and birth. Night might thus be interpreted as a period of cosmic ‘gestation’” (Watanabe 1983, 723). The red sky that accompanies the rising and setting of the sun, then, is metaphorically related to the blood that accompanies birth and death. For the Maya, it is also related to sacrificial blood. The first dawn of the sun, as recorded in the *Popol Vuh,* was accompanied by blood sacrifices (Christenson 2007, 228-232). Similarly, the Aztecs believed that the sun would cease to rise if they did not nourish it with blood sacrifice; for them, “the sun was nothing else than a mass consisting of blood and heart stemming from human sacrifices” (Oesterdiekhoff 2008, 51).

Whatever the modern or ancient Maya conception of directional space, it is evident that the ancient Maya divided the universe into four parts. In *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel,* written after the Spanish Conquest, the gods planted trees at the four quarters of the world, whose branches supported the sky” (Christie 2005, 277). Translations of the *Popol Vuh* make clear a fourfold division of the earth and the sky at the time of its creation: “Great is its performance and its account of the completion and germination of all the sky and earth—its four corners and its four sides. All then was measured and staked out into four divisions, doubling over and stretching the measuring cords of the womb of sky and the womb of earth. Thus were established the four corners, the four sides” (Christenson 2007, 65). The crosses on Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil may very well represent this fourfold division, centered on the primordial point of creation.
Even today, the Zinacanteco Maya visualize the universe “as a large quincunx” centered on a small mound of earth located in the ceremonial center of Zinacantan. According to Vogt, “The world extends outward from this navel; even Mexico City is regarded as a remote place off toward the edge of the universe” (Vogt 1976, 13). The sky as well as the Underworld are similarly oriented in the form of a quincunx. The sky rests upon the shoulders of the “sky-bearers,” or the “four-corner gods” (Ibid., 16), important deities throughout ancient Mesoamerica. Similarly, the Maya of Chan Kom think of their fields, their village, and the earth “as squares oriented to the ‘four winds’” (Watanabe 1983, 721). Within the K’iche’ Maya community of Momostenango is a sacred hill, Paclom, “which is understood to constitute the ‘heart’ or center of the world, and which is ‘spiritually connected’ to the four surrounding hills representing the world’s four corners” (Carlsen 1997, 184). The prayer of a Maya priest in Momostenango, recorded by Tedlock, petitions: “I am giving my wax candle, my stake toward the legs arms of God at the rising of the sun (east), at the setting of the sun the four corners of the sky (south), the four corners of the earth (north)” (Tedlock 1992, 241).

Figures 2.8 and 2.9 depict petitioning ceremonies among the Maya of two separate Maya towns. Both employ candles and other offerings arranged in the shape of a cosmogram, with candles and other offerings pointing outward toward the four cardinal directions and central candles pointing upward. The first is a ritual in Chichicastenango in which a female shaman petitions for the health of a supplicant, praying over a cosmogram of incense, sugar, honey and other food items, and colored candles oriented toward the cardinal directions. In the second figure, a Tz’utjil Maya man from Santiago Atitlan prays over a cosmogram of white candles, symbolic of purity, as he prays for the sanctification necessary to gain access to a sacred cave. Cigarettes and liquor are also offered for the gods’ enjoyment. A vertical bundle of candles
marks the center, and single vertical candles spread in a grid pattern mark a cosmic field around the cross made of horizontal candles and cigarettes. Both of these rituals utilize a cosmogram of four directions oriented around a vertical axis. In both instances, the cosmogram is employed in order to recreate and recenter both the cosmos and the petitioner, as they communicate with supernaturals (Christenson 2010).

The layout and iconography of modern Maya homes reveal the cosmological significance of domestic space, a microcosm of the Maya universe. The Maya home is four-cornered and built around a sacred center, marked by a cross: “Atop the house is a cross, which Diego [a Tz’utujil Maya] insisted is not a Christian motif. It symbolizes the four cardinal directions, marking the peak of the house as the center point of the world” (Christenson 2001, 152). Furthermore, the erection of the everyday living space is sacralized through ritual:

In past traditions, when an important house was dedicated, an *ajkun* sacrificed a hen at each of the four corners and sprinkled their blood on the posts to feed them. He also tied a special type of plant on each of the corner posts and offered incense, alcohol, and candles to guard against evil. The *ajkun* then sliced a lemon in half and squeezed out the juice at each of the house corners to cleanse the path for divine personages to approach from their mountain homes at the edges of the world. Finally, he would bury an offering of blood, bones, or chocolate at the center of the house to provide the dwelling with its ‘soul.’ (Ibid., 152)

While sacrificial blood has been substituted with copal smoke in modern Tz’utujil house dedication ceremonies, the placement of offerings at the center and the four corners of the building is still a common practice.
On a small scale, the Maya home symbolizes the organization of the cosmos around a sacred center. All Maya homes are made sacred by the ancient Maya conceptualization of the universe as a house: “The four corners represent the cardinal directions while its walls and ceiling form the vault of the sky. The foundation posts thus form the boundaries of the underworld” (Christenson 2007, 160 no. 375). Maize is often depicted in Maya art and literature as the center of this domestic cosmogram, marking “a divine axis mundi standing at the center point of the universe with its roots extending downward into the underworld while its stalk reaches into the sky” (Ibid., 160 no. 375). In the Popol Vuh, the Hero Twins plant maize plants in the center of their grandmother’s home before their descent into Xibalba. Tz’utujil Maya still set up effigy maize stalks as symbols of the Maya World Tree, or axis mundi, at the center of ritual houses (Ibid., 164). An alternative symbol for the divine center of the Maya universe is the ceiba tree.

Like most World Trees of other religions, the branches of the Maya World Tree grow up into the Overworld; its roots reached down into the Underworld, or Xibalba. The Maya Overworld and Underworld were further subdivided into thirteen and nine levels respectively. Only at “the Centre Axis of the World, the point of communication between the three cosmic regions” can “a break-through [...] occur, a passing from one cosmic zone to another” (Eliade 1996, 111). The World Tree, called yaxte’, “the center/first/blue-green tree” by the ancient Maya (Stuart 2007) or yax che’il kab, “the World Tree of the Center,” by the Yucatec Maya at the time of the Conquest (Freidel et all 1993, 39), acted as an axis of communication between these realms (Tate 1992, 12). Through this axis, deities and the souls of the dead could travel from one layer of the cosmos to another (Schele and Miller 1986, 42). The Maya of Santiago Atitlan claim that before the creation of the world, “a solitary deified tree stood at the center of all that was. As
the world’s creation approached, this deity became pregnant with potential life” (Carlsen 1997, 180). On its branches grew all things in existence, which eventually became too heavy for the tree to support. This “fruit” eventually fell to the ground, bursting a scattering their seeds. The resulting seedlings were protected and nourished by the sacred tree, and their growth lead to the creation of the world we know today (Ibid., 180).

The ceiba is an appropriate symbol for the Maya *axis mundi*, as its branches often grow horizontally in four directions, representing the four-fold orientation of the universe (Fig. 2.10). A young ceiba will bulge near the base of the trunk, making it look pregnant (Van Stone 2008, 20), an appropriate metaphor for the World Tree as the source of life. Perhaps because of its prickly surface, the trunk is sometimes represented as an inverted crocodilian, as in Stela 25 of Izapa (Fig. 2.11), which dates back to 50 B.C.E. during the Maya Preclassic or Formative period. The sap of the ceiba tree is a deep red (Schele and Miller 1986, 277-78). In many Mayan languages, the word for sap means “the blood of the tree.” Cosmologically, “the sap of the tree is the medium through which the gods and the souls of the dead can pass” (Ibid., 284), likening the sacrificial blood of the ruler to the sap of the World Tree.

According to Eliade, “The idea of ‘centre,’ of absolute reality—absolute because it is a repository of the sacred—is implied in even the most primitive conceptions of the ‘sacred place,’ and [. . .] such conceptions always include a sacred tree” (Eliade 1996, 271) located “at the heart of the universe” (Ibid., 286). He outlines two methods whereby primitive peoples would cosmicize a space: “by the projection of the four horizons from a central point or by the symbolic installation of the *axis mundi*” (Eliade 1987, 52). The Maya utilized both methods, and both are inherent within the sacred ceiba tree.
World Tree symbolism can be observed today in the popular tradition of the Mesoamerican *voladores*. In the open plaza in front of a church or a temple, where many ritual events occurred anciently, four performers, called *voladores* or fliers in Spanish, spiral down a tall pole. They fly apart from one another in the formation of a cross (Fig. 2.12), rotating downward around the pole thirteen times before reaching the plaza floor. The thirteen revolutions are reminiscent of the thirteen levels within the Overworld. A fifth performer plays the flute while he dances in the center (Van Stone 2008, 37). For the ancient and modern Maya, dance is one of several means whereby creation occurs; in addition, creation always originates from a center. The symbolism inherent in the location of the performance, the formation of the performers, and the thirteen revolutions around the pole parallel Classic era World Tree symbolism.

In his comparative study of ancient religions, Eliade describes some of the characteristics of a tree which might qualify it as a valid axis mundi: “[I]f the tree is charged with sacred forces, it is because it is vertical, it grows, it loses its leaves and regains them and is thus regenerated (it ‘dies’ and ‘rises’ again) times without number, because it gives out latex, and so on. By simply being there (‘power’) and by its natural laws of development (‘regeneration’), the tree re-enacts what, to the primitive understanding, is the whole cosmos” (Eliade 1996, 268-269). No wonder, then, that the tree is so ubiquitous a symbol of the center of the universe. While the Maya envisioned a great cosmic World Tree, such a belief does not preclude the idea that multiple centers could exist simultaneously. To the Maya, sacred space allows for a multiplicity—even an infinite number—of centers. Each individual center replicates, even becomes, the cosmic center. Any heirophony—any manifestation of the sacred through vision, ritual, erection of a temple or even a home—reorients the world and gives rise to another *axis mundi*.
THE RULER AS *AXIS MUNDI*

Just as trees are symbols of power and regeneration, ritual bloodletting manifests the power of the ruler to regenerate the cosmos. The World Tree, then, is a fit symbol for the regeneration that takes place as a result of autosacrifice. According to Schele and Miller, “The sap that flows through the tree is blood” (Schele and Miller 1986, 304); both blood and sap are referred to by the same word *kik’* in K’iche’ (Christenson 2007, 132 no. 287). The *Popol Vuh* tells of a heart made from red sap of a croton tree, or the “Sacrifice Red Tree,” given to the lords of Xibalba in place of the heart of Lady Blood, the mother of the Hero Twins: “The sap of the red tree was thus like blood when it came out. It was the substitute for her blood” (Christenson 2007, 124-125). Despite the substitution, the sacrifice was pleasing to the gods of the Underworld, who failed to detect the difference.

As the means whereby cosmic renewal occurs, the Maya royalty are at the center of the recreated universe, symbolized by the sacred World Tree from which new life springs. Maya rulers were both mortal and divine, with blood more sacred and potent than any other regenerative substance. Thus, the Maya ruler served as the intermediary between man and the gods (Schele and Miller 1986, 110). Through the sacred rite of autosacrifice, the ruler’s divine blood opened the portals from the Middleworld to the Otherworld, allowing the king or queen to communicate with otherwise inaccessible layers of the universe. Through his sacrifice of blood, the king regenerated the cosmos, rebirthed the gods, and drew upon the power of the supernatural realm.

For the modern K’iche’ Maya of Momostenango, the human body is representative of the entire universe, in which “biological time [. . .] flows from the ancestors to the descendants, who
in turn correspond to the spatial categories of east and west and to the dawning, or ‘birth’ of the sun and the setting, or ‘death’ of the sun each day” (Tedlock 1992, 140-142). This contemporary tradition may stem from an ancient tradition of the ruler as *axis mundi*. During rituals of autosacrifice, the ruler not only established a center for the regenerated universe, but he or she actually becomes the *axis mundi*. “The king was this axis and pivot made flesh. He was the Tree of Life” (Schele and Freidel 1990, 90). This idea complements a statement by Tate: “The concept of the tree or axis as the medium for the attainment of immortality persists as indicated by the gloss for the Spanish word *inmortal* in the Alfa Hurley Vda. de Delgaty and Agustín Ruiz Sánchez *Diccionario tzotzil*. The word is translated *yoyal balumil, eje de la tierra*, literally, ‘axis of the earth’” (Tate 1992, 59). As a semi-divine ruler, with post-death expectations of immortality and deification, the ruler metaphorically became the center of the Maya universe.

According to Christenson, “The ancient Maya often erected colossal stone monuments of their revered kings decorated with tree and maize elements to emphasize the rulers’ identity with this sacred living center” (Christenson 2007, 160). The Sarcophagus Lid of K’inich Janaab Pakal I of Palenque, for example, features a World Tree growing from the body of the king as he descends into (or arises from) the Underworld through the jaws of a giant serpent ([Fig. 2.13](#)). The World Tree is marked by various blood symbols, marking it as the *axis mundi*, brought into being by the sacrifice of royal blood, in this case, by the death of K’inich Janaab Pakal (Schele and Miller 1986, 277-78).

In Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 ([Fig. 2.14](#)), dating to the Late Preclassic period, a ruler is depicted with a stylized tree growing from his headdress. Also apparent are the crossbands in his earflare, a motif that can be seen even in Olmec art. The same vegetal headdress motif is repeated on the back of one green stone Olmec pectoral ([Fig. 2.15](#)). The face carved onto the
front of the pectoral represents the Olmec version of the Maize God and displays prominent
crossbands infixed in square earflares. The small cleft on its forehead is reminiscent of the cleft
atop mountains often portrayed by Olmec and Maya artists from which the World Tree or the
resurrecting Maize God emerges. Carved by a later Maya artist into the back of the Olmec piece
is the portrait of a Maya ruler, again with a World Tree sprouting from atop his headdress.
Schele and Miller explain the implications of these images as “an early form of the World Tree
at the center of the Maya cosmos. Both rulers, then, declare themselves to be this tree, the axis
mundi, of the Maya world” (Schele and Miller 1986, 108-109).

In the Hauberg Stela (Fig. 2.16), an unusually small Early Classic monument, Chak T’ul
performs his yax ch’ab or “first penance” or “first creation,” probably his first bloodletting rite as
a child (Stuart 2008). Slithering through his arms and looming up above his head is a serpent,
through which the king makes contact with the supernaturals. Beneath the serpent, arching out
from behind the king’s right shoulder is a tree. While miniature gods climb up the body of the
snake, several sacrificial victims fall down the tree to Xibalba. Through blood sacrifice, Chak
T’ul identifies himself “as the axis mundi, the central axis of the world” (Schele and Miller 1986,
179).

The verticality of both the Hauberg Stela and Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 is immediately
apparent to the viewer. The vertical emphasis of so much Maya monumental art may indicate
that the ancient Maya considered their monuments and artistic subjects to be, like the sacred
World Tree, pathways to the Otherworld. One form of monumental art popular during the
Classic era is the stela: “Other objects that have a similar shape—basically long and thin—also
reach between the levels. From its iconography it is clear that the stela, the sculptural form used
most frequently in Maya monumental art, was also viewed as linking the realms” (Tate 1992,
12). Stelae and other *axes mundi* were thought to be a kind of sacred umbilicus that unites the earth to the heavens, whether carved with images of rulers or not. One case in point is the stela standing in front of Yaxchilan Structure 33. A natural stalactite brought from a cave, covered in glyphs like ancient graffiti, it is believed by contemporary Maya to have formed inside the womb of the earth and forms an umbilical cord that ties the earth to the sky (Christenson 2008).

Stuart proposes that stelae embody the body or essence of the figures which they portray, supporting this claim with a translation of the common portrait caption found on stelae, *u-bah*, as “his body” or “his self” (Stuart 1988, 162). He explains, “Such captions do not simply label an image or identify the person acting out some episode or event but may convey the understanding that the image embodies that figure” (Ibid., 164). He further emphasizes that stelae act as an avatar of the ruler in perpetual ritual action: “The sprinkling of blood, the dancing in a godly guise, or the conquest of a rival are frozen in time as ever-present documents of royal power and divinity. Portrait stelae stand quite literally as rituals in stone” (Stuart 1996, 165). He interprets them to be “‘substitutes’ for, or extensions of, the royal person engaged in a ritual activity” (Ibid., 165). Stuart supports this view with evidence that the Maya often placed their stelae in locations where rulers were likely to perform sacred rituals. This interpretation of Maya stelae emphasizes the role of the king as the source of regeneration, himself acting as a unique *axis mundi* just as the stone on which he is depicted is rooted into the Underworld and reaches up into the Overworld.

One stela that emphasizes the ruler as *axis mundi* through yet another method is Stela 14 at Piedras Negras ([Fig. 2.17](#)). Like most other stelae, the emphasis is vertical. The ruler, K’inich Yo’nal Ahk III, is located in a central niche of a sacrificial scaffold, his *acante* or place of personal bloodletting (Taube 1988, 346). Skybands border the niche above and below, implying
that the king is the center of the cosmos. Dated 758 C.E., the stela was erected in celebration of the accession the ruler. Underneath him is his mother, holding a feathered bloodletter. She is dressed in a huipil marked by crossbands inside of floral quatrefoils, an amalgamation of the huipil motifs in Lintel 24 and Lintel 25. Concentric diamonds like the ones in Lintel 23 and 26 border both edges of the garment (Looper 2000, 67). Stuart explains how the stela’s iconographical emphasis of ‘centrality’ underscores the ruler as the axis mundi, for it “place[s] that ruler within the cosmological framework, where he takes a central position” (Stuart 1988, 195). Other ‘niche’ or ‘accession’ monuments seem to convey the same message of the ruler as the center of the cosmos.

Other forms of monumental art also depict royal persons in ways that emphasize their role as embodied axes mundi. According to Tate, “Human figures represented in monumental art were traditionally erect, their verticality emphasized by towering headdresses. As such the body itself was like a tree, a vascular system through which energies ran between the Underworld and the sky” (Tate 1992, 12-13). It is unclear whether the vertical rendering of the human body would have been limited to royalty, or whether all human beings were portrayed in the same vertically emphasized fashion. Usually only Maya kings and deities were honored to have their likenesses portrayed in monumental art, and not all of them were vertical, such as K’inch Yo’nal Ahk III in the stela just discussed above. Perhaps the centrality of the ruler and the verticality of the stela—along with the conflation of the stela and the royal personage—make up the difference. Besides rulers, one group of people who were often depicted in art would be royal captives, who are usually shown naked and bent over or crushed beneath the feet of their captor. In these images, the ruler is juxtaposed with the groveling captives, emphasizing the verticality and grandeur of the king.
Today, as in ancient times, Maya ritual often consists of processions around some sacred center. Talking about the “grammar of ritual movement and the definition of the sacred center through such movements,” Demarest says, “Events and rites were repeated according to the ancient Maya canons of movement and ritual reenactment, the physical tracing of the Maya cosmogram. [...] The motion of all such pageants, processions, and rituals and the cosmic patterns that they emulated rotated around the ‘sacred center.’” (Demarest 2003, 42). Modern examples of such center-conscious ceremonies among the Tzotzil Maya, processions enclosing sacred space, have been described and analyzed in detail by Vogt, who explains that “when the ritualists face ‘sacred space’ and set off to ‘enclose’ it, they start off to the right, thus creating the counterclockwise circuit” (Vogt 1976, 2). He explains that the Zinacantan and the Chamula Maya almost always walk in a counterclockwise circuit when encircling sacred space, acknowledging the priority they give to the right hand over the left hand and to the rising sun over the setting sun. There is, in addition, “evidence from the Dresden Codex, from the Chilam Balam, and from the Uayeb rites described by Landa that the pattern was a pre-Conquest one” (Ibid., 2), and it is only coincidental that sixteenth-century Catholic processions were likewise counterclockwise. Alternatively, the Tzotzil Maya may walk in a clockwise direction, proceeding around sacred space or a sacred object, deliberately keeping it on their right-hand side (Ibid., 4). When counterclockwise, the movement extends power from the center outward; a clockwise procession focuses power to the center itself (Christenson 2010). Both patterns enclose sacred space and recognize the power of the sanctified center.

In ancient times, these ritual processions would reinforce the fundamental concept of the Maya ruler as the axis mundi. Demarest explains, “In Maya political, cosmological, and ritual performance, [...] the ruler appropriated for himself that position in the sacred center,
embodying and becoming the axis of the universe” (Demarest 2003, 142). The spatial layout of ancient cities and the carefully placed locations of temples, monuments, and palaces would have contributed to this objective. A case in point can be found at Dos Pilas, a site located on the Usumacinta River, upriver from Yaxchilan. At the Murciélagos Complex, the abode of the regent of Dos Pilas, the spatial organization of the complex is carefully planned to underscore the central role of the ruler and his family. At the center of the east-west ceremonial axis of Dos Pilas,

The ruler sat atop the sacred mountain, cave, and spring—a holy place through which processions would pass. [. . .] This position as the pivot of ritual was enhanced by the placement along the procession corridor of restricted imposing entrances, ancestor shrines, presentation palaces, and the throne room. The ruler and his palace literally sat astride the site’s axis which also corresponded with the east-west axis of the subterranean cave system and, of course, the east-west movement of the sun itself. (Ibid., 142)

Demarest makes the point that even though they would have been excluded from royal processions, the common people were well-aware of the central position of the royal palace and the implications of the events therein. Thus, the centrality of the ruler may have served as a political tactic to underscore his vital importance in the minds of the Maya people. Any of the monuments discussed thus far in this chapter may have served the same political purpose.

THE MOUNTAIN-TEMPLE

Sacred bloodletting rituals would have been performed in pyramidal temples; one of the ancient Maya terms for these temples was *witz* or “sacred mountain” (Tate 1992, 26). The
liminality of mountain-temples between the Overworld and the Underworld is apparent in the Maya belief that mountain-dwelling ancestral spirits “are sometimes conceived as in the celestial realm, and sometimes below, in the place of burial” (Ibid., 12). Temple shrines are perceived as Underworld caves, and yet they sit atop the mountain-like temple structure, penetrating the celestial realm. For these reasons, Maya pyramid temples are especially significant as localities where the rulers may make contact with the Otherworld through ritual.

Archaeological finds have shown that the tombs of dead ancestors were often contained within the core of the temples, transferring their own sacred energy to the structure built over them. According to Coe, “Interred inside their mausoleum-pyramids, [the elite caste] would continue to be worshipped as divine ancestors by their descendants, nourished with the blood of their own royal lineages” (Coe in Schele and Miller 1986, 4). Inscriptions within the temples or carved into their stairways often record the ancestral history of the rulers buried beneath them. Both because of the sacred personage buried inside the temple and because of the temple’s nature as a cosmic mountain or cave, the Maya temple manifests characteristics of the *axis mundi* or World Tree. Schele and Miller explain the consequence of this connection: “Since they were the gates between separate levels of the cosmos, every Maya temple had its own tree, brought forth by ritual. Thus, the Maya cosmic landscape was a forest of World Trees rising from the heavens from the hundreds of temples that dotted the earthly landscape” (Schele and Miller 1986, 269). The symbolism of mountains and trees conflate to represent their more fundamental role as sacred centers or *axes mundi*.

One carved bone from the Early Classic period (Fig. 2.18) combines the images of the World Tree and the temple pyramid. Carved along the length of the bone is what has been interpreted by Schele and Miller to be a World Tree, culminating in the head of a serpent, the
conduit by which gods and ancestral spirits would be reborn from the Underworld to the Middleworld. Next to the tree is a temple pyramid. At the base of the pyramid are sacred scrolls and a *k’an* cross. The *k’an* cross is the Mesoamerican equivalent of a Greek cross (Stanton and Friedel 2005, 225) and was established as a symbol for the center of the world as far back as Middle Formative times in Olmec art (Ibid., 234). Stanton and Freidel helpfully summarize the various meanings associated with the *k’an* hieroglyph and its linguistic equivalents: “We believe that the word K’an, which means yellow and precious, is linked with a series of other religiously powerful words and ideas in Maya cosmology. First, it is linked to *k’aan* (cordage as in umbilicus) being a near homophone. Second, *kan* (snake), *ka’an* (sky), and *kan* (the number four), another set of homophones are connected to this first set iconographically [and] conceptually” (Ibid., 237). The *k’an* cross is also seen at the base of the foliated World Tree at the Temple of the Foliated Cross at Palenque. Another mountain is marked by a *k’an* cross in the murals at San Bartolo, where a snake emerges from the base of the mountain-temple. The *k’an* cross both at San Bartolo and on the carved bone mark the mountain-temple as an Axis Mundi, the meeting point between the three cosmic realms, where “the trunk of the World Tree enters the Underworld through the Maya temple.” (Schele and Miller 1986, 269).

According to V. Garth Norman in an interview with Vogt, evidence exists that the ancient site of Izapa was oriented around two volcanoes, Tacaná and Tajumulco, and possibly three other mountains. The site originated approximately 400 or 500 B.C.E. or earlier, showing that mountains have played a role in orienting the Maya world for well over two millennia (Vogt 1981, 141). Speaking specifically of mountains as “centers” among many ancient cultures, Eliade explains,
[T]he symbolism in question expresses itself in three connected and complimentary things:

1. The ‘sacred mountain’ where heaven and earth meet, stands at the centre of the world;
2. Every temple or palace, and by extension, every sacred town and royal residence, is assimilated to a ‘sacred mountain’ and thus becomes a ‘centre’;
3. The temple or sacred city, in turn, as the place through which the Axis Mundi passes, is held to be a point of junction between heaven, earth and hell.

(Eliade 1996, 375)

According to Eliade, mountains, temples, palaces, and other places are considered sacred “because they are given the attributes of the ‘centre’” (Ibid., 101). The Maya often specify sacred centers through ritual. These may be embodied by geographical features like mountains, caves, or bodies of water, man-made temples, palaces, or thrones, or in man himself, specifically the Maya ruler. Indeed, the mountain-temple serves as the ultimate axis mundi, where the semi-divine Maya elite were able to communicate with their ancestral deities through bloodletting rituals.

To the Maya today, the sacred nature of mountains seems to be related to the Classic Maya notion of temple pyramids as sacred centers. After studying the ritual behavior of the modern Tzotzil Maya worshipping on and near their sacred mountains, Vogt concludes that “there may be a conceptual relationship between mountains and pyramids among the Maya” (Vogt 1981, 122). As evidence he cites “[t]he shape of these steep-sided sacred mountains in Zinacantan and the ritual procedures that probably resembled the behavior of the ancient Maya
praying before stelae at the foot of pyramids and then climbing the steps to pray before idols in the temples on top” (Ibid., 122). The Zinacantecos have identified a low, rounded mound in the eastern part of their city center as the *Mishik’ Balamil*, “The Navel of the Earth,” the umbilicus or center of the Zinacanteco universe. Nearby is a cross shrine where the Maya may go to pray and leave offerings of candles, incense, chickens, or liquor during important tribal ceremonies (Ibid., 125). In fact, every mountain within five kilometers of the Zinacanteco city center has been sacralized by cross shrines and is frequented by Maya ritualists (Ibid., 131), although the “largest and highest mountains are always singled out for special treatment in the ceremonial life” (Ibid., 132).

Sacred caves, trees, and waterholes have likewise been marked by cross shrines by the Tzotzil Maya. Vogt mentions one particular sacred cave, marked by cross shrines at its multiple entries, where a small silver cross was once found. The cross was installed in a church in the city center was considered by the Zinacantans to be the most important object found within the cave (Ibid., 128). The sacred nature of the cross for the modern Maya goes beyond the influence Christianity has had on their beliefs since the Spanish Conquest; the association of crosses with mountains, caves, and other sacred sites must be heavily influenced by the ideology of their ancient Maya ancestors. For the Maya today, cross shrines act as both a means of communication to deity as well as boundary markers between the nature world and the world of the supernaturals (Ibid., 135-37), just as crosses and quatrefoils did for the ancient Maya.

CONCLUSIONS

The Maya cruciform, whether represented as crossbars, weaving sticks, a World Tree, a resurrecting Maize God, or a *k’an* cross, is associated with a complex of concepts, all relating to
the idea of a sacred center. Each relates in turn to the orientation of the universe, the central role of the Maya ruler in regenerating the cosmos, and the identification of the ruler, the World Tree, and the mountain-temple as *axes mundi*. Given the central role of the Maya ruler and the ideological importance of the sacred center in Maya thought, it seems likely that the crossbands in Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil serve as an iconological equivalent to other centering symbols, referring to the role of *axis mundi* that the queen and her husband assume through autosacrifice.
CHAPTER 3: FLOWERS

Modern Maya from all over the highlands of Guatemala gather on the shores of a particular caldera lake for an initiation ceremony for new shamans. They consider this site to be one of the most sacred places in Guatemala, and Maya from all over Guatemala make the pilgrimage to gather here for these ceremonies. On the shores of the lake, the Maya form cosmograms aligned toward the four cardinal directions, meant to lay out the orientation of the world. The ritual cosmogram shown in Figure 3.1 is made up of flower petals whose colors symbolize the four sacred cardinal directions. At the center and at each cardinal point of the cosmogram, sacrificial incense is burned as an offering to the gods (Christenson 2010). In Classic Maya art, flowers are often represented as quatrefoils, open passages into the Otherworld. On a cosmic level, flowers act as a means of communication between the Maya and their gods and ancestors.

In the last chapter, we discussed the importance of the cross or cosmogram, which marks the center or axis mundi “where there is the possibility of communicating with the gods” (Eliade 1987, 172). It is through the sacrifice of blood—metaphorical death or entrance into Xibalba—that an open channel of communication is established between the Middleworld and the Otherworld, making possible the regeneration of the cosmos. Maya artists use a variety of symbols to represent this passage between worlds. The flower, the quatrefoil, and the serpent are all ancient symbols denoting passage to the Otherworld in Classic Maya art. All three of these symbols are manifest in Yaxchilan 25, and each one confirms the vital role the Maya ruler plays in opening the channel of communication with gods and ancestral deities.
Serpents, quatrefoils, and flowers all act as cosmic portals, liminal spaces between the Middleworld and the Otherworld through which the gods and ancestors, present within royal blood, could be made manifest and reborn. Each of these portals symbolizes the means by which Maya royalty could communicate with their deceased ancestors inhabiting Xibalba. According to Schele and Miller, “The Xibalba of the Classic period [. . .] was a watery world that could only be entered by sinking beneath water or by passing through a maw in the surface of the earth” (Schele and Miller 1986, 267). The iconography carved onto the lid of one Early Classic brown-ware bowl from the Rio Hondo area illustrates the state of two deceased Maya as they grasp onto a waterband in the watery depths of Xibalba. The waterband circles the entire periphery of the lid, bordered by water-stacks, fishes, snails, and other aquatic creatures. Waterlily Monsters occasionally interrupt the continuation of the waterband. The deceased figures lay horizontally, as if passively riding along the flow of the water surrounding them. Cosmic serpents flank either side of each figure. The serpents are open-mouthed, with individual faces emerging from the jaws of each one. These serpents provide an open channel of communication between the dead and their living descendants (Ibid., 267), giving those who have passed on into Xibalba an opportunity for rebirth into the world of the living.

The Maya—both ancient and modern—believe that the dead continue to influence the lives of the living in both positive and negative ways (Schele and Miller 1986, 265-266). Within the blood of their living descendants, they are ever-present, capable of being reborn through ritual. While the gods and deified ancestors demanded nourishment and reverence through blood sacrifice and other rituals, they reciprocally bless the lives of their compliant descendants. In the Popol Vuh, the gods of creation endeavor to create beings able to glorify the gods with their language and nurture them with their sacrifices: “A provider and a sustainer have yet to appear—
a child of light, a son of light. Humanity has yet to appear to populate the face of the earth” (Christenson 2007, 192). The divine creatrix and creator—“Heart of Sky and Heart of Earth, Framer and Shaper, She Who Has Borne Children and He Who Has Begotten Sons”—cycle through three failed attempts to create such beings, saying to one another, “Thus, let us try again to make one who will honor us, who will respect us; one who will be a provider and a sustainer” (Ibid., 70). All three previous creations are destroyed due to their inability to properly praise and nourish their creators. Finally the Framer and Shaper successfully create four suitable beings with flesh of maize and blood of water. These first humans, the first “maize people” (Ibid., 197 no. 483), would eventually grow into the K’iche’ Maya civilization.

Maize and blood continue to play important roles in the sustaining the Maya world. Today, the Maya diet is substantially based on maize; the Lacandon Maya believe that ritual foods made from maize represent human flesh (Vail 2007, 152). The K’iche’ Maya “consider that they are literally of a different flesh than those who do not eat maize,” referring to themselves as qas winaq, or “true people” (Ibid., 194 no. 460). Chicken blood continues to play an important role as a substitute for human blood in Zinacanteco rituals (Vogt 1976, 91-94), and the Lacandon still use red pigment in rituals that anciently would have employed blood (Vail 2007, 152). In the time of the ancient Maya, royal blood sacrifice was one means whereby Maya rulers could honor, nourish, and communicate with their ancestral dead (Schele and Miller 1986, 266). In making contact with spiritual beings, the ruler is able to rebirth gods, divine ancestors, and the entire cosmos.

LINTEL 25
Wearing a skull and skeletal serpent headdress, a striped sash commonly worn during bloodletting events around her waist (Tate 1992, 121), and a huipil marked with royal quatrefoils, Lady K’abal Xook rebirths a divine ancestor through a cosmic blood serpent in Yaxchilan Lintel 25 (Fig. 3.3). Lintel 25 is the second lintel of Yaxchilan Structure 23’s three-part series of limestone lintels. It was originally located above the middle doorway of the temple’s front façade. In Tate’s efforts to identify the various hands at work in the creation of the monuments of Yaxchilan, she identifies Lady K’abal Xook herself as a major participant in the creation of Lintel 25. While various artists would have participated in the design and creation of the lintel, “a ‘lu-bat’ or ‘its writing’ phrase on the front edge of the lintel claims that Lady Xoc herself did the carving” of the lintel’s glyphs and figures (Ibid., 120). Such a claim is supported by the idea that scribes and artists were usually from the elite class. Schele and Freidel, however, suggest that Lady K’abal Xook was the patroness rather than the sculptor of the lintel (Schele and Freidel 1990, 269). Whoever the artist, while their artistry and execution is masterful, he or she did not carve any other known monuments at Yaxchilan (Tate 1992, 120).

Although the image represents a subsequent phase within the ritual begun in Lintel 24, the ritual depicted on Lintel 25 precedes that of Lintel 24 by nearly three decades. Lintel 24 celebrates the twenty-eighth anniversary of Itzamnaaj Bahlam III’s accession in 709 C.E. while the ritual shown in Lintel 25 celebrates the accession itself, which occurred on 20 October 681 C.E., or 9.12.9.8.1, 5 Imix 4 Mak. Though not mentioned in the text of the lintel, the fact that this was the accession day of Itzamnaaj Bahlam is known from other monuments. Lintel 25 was not erected until 1 August 723 C.E or 9.14.11.15.1 3 Imix 14 Ch’en, more than four decades after the bloodletting ritual it depicts was performed (Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions 2007).
Rather than mention the accession of Itzamnaaj Bahlam III, the main text of the lintel states that he performed a bloodletting or conjuring rite (Stuart 1988, 183), indicated by the fish-in-hand verb *tzak* (Boot 2003, 14). The verb accompanies the king’s name, identifying him as its subject: “On 5 Imix 4 Mak he conjured the (lightning-)power of the flints and shields of the god Aj K’ahk’ O’ Chahk. It is the god-spear-conjuring of the four katun lord, Shield Jaguar III, the master of Aj-?, the holy lord of ?, the baahkab” (*Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions* 2007). Just as in the previous lintel, Lady K’abal Xook is depicted as the primary ritualist rather than her husband. It is interesting to note that Lady K’abal Xook’s name may somehow be related to the fish-in-hand verb *tzak*, the verb of bloodletting and conjuration. Before the original Mayan pronunciation of her name had been determined, she was widely known in scholarship as Lady Fish Fist (Mathews 1988, 171) based on the visual elements of the glyphs making up her name: the female marker *ix* followed by glyphs representing a hand and a fish or shark. If the connection between Lady K’abal Xook’s name and the verb *tzak* was deliberate, this name choice would suggest the importance of autosacrifice to Maya royalty.

Unlike the other two lintels incorporated into Structure 23, Itzamnaaj Bahlam III does not appear in this lintel, unless he is the masked Teotihuacan warrior whose head and shoulders emerge from the maw of the bicephalic serpent. The warrior wears a Tlaloc mask in front of his face and carries a shield in his left hand and a spear in his right, which he points downward toward Lady K’abal Xook. Elements of the Teotihuacan warrior outfit may have been borrowed from earlier monuments in Piedras Negras (Tate 1992, 82). The warrior wears a jaguar pelt headdress, also described by scholars as a puff-ball textile turban (Satterthwaite et al 2005, 122) or a balloon headdress (Tate 1992, 72). Schele and Miller identify the markings on the headdress as the bead and bone signs of blood and the hairs of a jaguar pelt (Schele and Miller 1986, 187).
The headdress appears to be the same as those which appear on Piedras Negras Lintel 4 dedicated around 9.11.7.0.0. The first known use of such a headdress in the Maya world occurs on Uaxactun Stela 5 as early as 8.17.0.0.0. Lintel 25 is the first instance of the jaguar pelt headdress at Yaxchilan (Tate 1992, 72).

The lintel’s main text seems to indicate that this warrior is Aj K’ahk’ O’ Chaak, the patron god of Yaxchilan, also known as the Teotihuacan Storm God Tlaloc (Martin and Grube 2008, 125). By the time Yaxchilan Lintel 25 had been erected, Teotihuacan art and styles had long been integrated into Maya art, possibly as a way of espousing the ancient civilization’s power and grandeur. Teotihuacan influence is apparent in Maya artwork centuries after the collapse of the ancient Mexican city. A useful parallel is the modern use of Classic Greek and Roman architecture and art forms in the design and decoration of prominent American institutions. The Teotihuacan Tlaloc mask that the warrior wears over his face is repeated in the lintel’s bottom-left corner, where a Tlaloc figure wearing a simpler version of the jaguar pelt headdress emerges from the mouth of the serpent’s secondary head. Attached to the front of both headdresses are bloodletting knots and a Tlaloc complex of feathers and ray and trapeze signs. Both the Tlalocs in the lintel feature large goggle eyes, and scrolls of blood emerge from their mouths (Schele and Miller 1986, 187).

It is possible that the Teotihuacan warrior represents Itzamnaaj Bahlam III as the defender of Yaxchilan, dressed in the guise of the patron deity. Many Mayanists support this viewpoint, including Tate, Stuart, Martin, and Grube (Tate 1992, 120; Stuart 1988, 183; Martin and Grube 2008, 125), as the monument was erected for the king’s accession, and his name appears in the text above the Teotihuacan figure (Tate 1992, 89). Tate cites the Yaxha Vase as a precedent wherein the ruler emerges from the jaws of a vision serpent (Ibid., 72). As additional
evidence for this viewpoint, Stuart states that the bloodied instruments in Lady K’abal Xook’s left hand, a stingray spine and obsidian lancet, look as though they would have been used by Itzamnaaj Bahlam rather than his queen. Her bloodletting utensils appear in the basket placed on the floor of the scene. Stuart explains the appropriateness of the idea that the figure is the king rather than any other figure: “The ruler comes from the serpent mouth just as blood does, and he is wrapped in the S shape of his own blood. On the day of his accession, ‘Shield-Jaguar’ expresses the definition of his new office: upon inauguration, the king literally occupies the blood of his ancestors” (Stuart 1988, 215). To the Maya, such an image would have been “expressive of the definition of kingship. In the real world, this is expressed through bloodletting, but in art it can be expressed in the rich symbolism of this sculpture” (Ibid., 215). As for the war symbolism of Lintel 25, Stuart conjectures that it underscores the king’s role as a warrior king and its relationship to his sacred blood. He concludes, “Lintel 25 may be one of the clearest documents explaining the meaning of bloodletting in relation to Maya political power” (Ibid., 215).

Zender, on the other hand, claims that the text of Lintel 25 may indicate that the warrior figure represents Lady K’abal Xook herself, dressed in the guise of Ixik Yohl, or “Lady Heart,” a goddess with connections to Teotihuacan (Zender 2006, 43). The secondary text of Lintel 25 text states, “She is the likeness of Lady Yohl, the ch’ahoom of Wite’nah, Lady K’abal Xook. She is the pillar before the waters at pa’chan” (Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions 2007). Elsewhere, Lady K’abal Xook is associated with the Teotihuacan god Aj K’ahk’ O’ Chaak. Underneath Yaxchilan Structure 23, archeologists discovered a tomb containing numerous elite vessels and ritual objects. Eight of the eleven incised objects found in the tomb—including carved bones and stingray spines—bear the name and titles of Lady K’abal Xook (Zender 2006,
The hieroglyphs incised onto the front of one bone bloodletter found in the tomb identify the instrument as the *baakel bahlam* or “jaguar bone” of Lady K’abal Xook. The name Aj K’ahk’ O’Chaak is carved into the back of the instrument (Ibid., 50). Considering the information written in the texts of Lintel 25, it seems likely that Lady K’abal Xook, in the guise of Ixik Yohl, envisions her own husband in the guise of the god Aj K’ahk’ O’Chaak.

Still others, including Schele and Freidel, have defended the idea that the Teotihuacan warrior emerging from the cosmic serpent in Lintel 25 is the spirit of an ancestor called forth from the Otherworld. According to Tate, “it is generally accepted that the Maya believed that their forebears continued to interact with them after death” (Tate 1992, 15), and autosacrifice was one way in which this communication was enacted, through the rebirth of the ancestors present within the sacrificed blood. Schele and Miller describe the apparition as a Teotihuacan Tlaloc warrior “who may have been a dead ancestor or a symbol of the king’s role as warrior in this cult” (Schele and Miller 1986, 177). Schele and Freidel identify the figure as Yopaat Bahlam I, the Yaxchilan lineage founder, and claim to recognize a reference to him among the glyphs next to the serpent’s primary head (Schele and Freidel 1992, 478 no. 18). This third interpretation works well in the context of the cosmic serpent acting as a portal to the Otherworld to facilitate communication with deceased ancestors. Considering the fact that the Maya believed their gods and deceased ancestors to be present within their blood, it seems equally consistent to identify the figure as Aj K’ahk’ O’Chaak or Yopaat Bahlam. To simultaneously consider the apparition to be a vision of Itzamnaaj Bahlam is not inconsistent with Maya theology.

Tate concedes that the figure may represent both Yopaat Bahlam I and Itzamnaaj Bahlam III dressed in the guise of the founder (Tate 1992, 89). As the ritual depicted occurs on the accession day of Itzamnaaj Bahlam, the figure may represent his new role as the replacement or
The children and grandchildren of the Maya were considered to be the *k’exol*, or the “replacements” of their ancestors. Likewise, kings were the *k’exol* of the gods (Schele and Miller 1986, 266). Maya rulers could take on the personae of their divine ancestors and metaphorically rebirth them through ritual, justifying their role as a divine ruler of celestial heritage. Autosacrifice was a ritual in which the deified dead participated, sanctioning of the rule of the Maya king or queen, connecting the ruler and their deified ancestors in one continuous tradition. Through autosacrifice, Itzamnaaj Bahlam resurrects Yopaat Bahlam and takes on the divine role first assumed by the lineage founder.

Interestingly, the name Yopaat Bahlam literally translates to “Penis Jaguar,” the hieroglyphs for which are carved within the main text of Lintel 25. The literal rendering of the founder’s name, however, is often obscured in modern texts by more delicate references to him as Progenitor Jaguar. The literal translation of the name, however, is much more indicative of the founder’s role as perceived by his contemporaries. The name Penis Jaguar relates him directly not only to the idea of virility but also to bloodletting, as male Maya rulers would usually perform autosacrifice by piercing their genitals. The penis hieroglyph was not uncommon within the names of Maya kings (Closs 1988, 804-805).

Any part of the body could be pierced during autosacrifice; the most common areas included the ears, the tongue, and the genitals (Fig. 3.4). The most sacred areas pierced for the most important rites were also the ones which produced the most blood—the tongue for males and females and the genitals for males (Schele and Freidel 1990, 89). Bloodletting was at the heart of Maya life during the Classic era, occurring on all sacred events, including birth and death. This reflects not only the reliance on the gods felt by the Maya throughout their lifecycle but also the significance of blood as it relates birth, death, and intermediary events. Blood
accompanies birth, sustains life and its activities, and even in death, it contains the potential for rebirth.

The bark paper bloodletting baskets depicted in Lintel 25 are speckled with blood, implying that a bloodletting rite like the one depicted in Lintel 24 has already taken place. Both the basket in Lady K’abal Xook’s hand and the basket on the ground in front of her contain the bark paper and instruments of autosacrifice also shown in Lintel 24. Both hold what appear to be obsidian or bone bloodletting tools similar to ones found in Yaxchilan Tomb 2, the tomb of Lady K’abal Xook. Inside the basket on the ground is a cord much like the one used by Lady K’abal Xook in Lintel 24, commonly used by females in bloodletting ceremonies. The basket in the queen’s hand contains a stingray spine, often used by males to pierce their genitals during autosacrifice. This basket may contain the sacrifice of Itzamnaaj Bahlam, which Lady K’abal Xook holds as she burns her own sacrifice containing the cord. Alternatively, the two baskets may actually be one and the same, shown in some kind of time sequence. The difference of bloodletting implements within the two baskets could be in this case a stylistic choice, similar to the substitution of one symbol for another equivalent symbol in Maya hieroglyphic writing or iconography.

An s-scroll entwines the body of the bicephalic serpent floating above Lady K’abal Xook. Stuart identifies the scroll as the blood of the ruler rising up in smoke (Stuart 1988, 183). Unlike the s-scroll on Yaxchilan Stela 15, this scroll has no dotted border, the usual iconographic symbol for blood. Instead the scroll is marked by other motifs often used in representations of blood, a k’an cross and a completion glyph (Stuart 1988, 182). Both symbols denote the sacred nature and immense value of the ruler’s blood (Schele and Miller 1986, 48). No floaters are carved into the blood; the rebirthed deity is instead manifest as the Teotihuacan warrior figure.
The ceremonial huipil Lady K’abal Xook wears during this phase of the bloodletting ritual appears to have a bluish hue, perhaps the remnants of what used to be a brilliant Maya Blue. The background still has residues of red paint, best seen in the area just above the apparition’s turban-like Jaguar headdress (Fig. 3.5). Visually, the red background may represent the haze of burning blood that would have filled the interior of the temple at this point in the ritual. Lady K’abal Xook’s royal blood rises up in whorls of smoke and takes on a new form as a blood serpent and an ancestral deity. In this respect, the temple interior at this point in the ritual would closely resemble the Maya Underworld with its darkness, stench, and hemic atmosphere. Even with its deathly characteristics, however, it is from this world of death that new life comes. The metaphorical death experienced by Lady K’abal Xook is the catalyst for renewal and the rebirth of the gods, specifically in this case, the rebirth of the ancestral deity dressed as a Teotihuacan warrior.

The red background and blue huipil present a reversal from the blue background and red costume still easily detectable in Lintel 24. This is not the only example of reversal apparent in Lintel 25. The glyphs on this lintel are also reversed, as if they appeared in a mirror. Such a glyphic reversal on monumental art is rare yet not unknown in the Maya world. One other example of reversal is apparent in what appears to be the signature of a Maya noble on the left flange of an earlier Olmec portrait pectoral. The two glyphs making up the signature are written backwards, toward the right, in order to face toward the royal portrait. The text was made to be read from the exterior inward, toward the Olmec figure’s portrait. Perhaps this was done in order to pay honor to the royal person depicted in the stone (Schele and Miller 1986, 107), emphasizing the Olmec figure’s power and importance. The same reasoning, however, cannot be applied to the reversal of Lintel 25 as it is located in the central doorway of Structure 23,
nothing of particular prominence is known to have been located at either side of it besides Lintels 24 and 26.

Another much more complex example of hieroglyphic reversal is found in Copan, a Maya site in Honduras near the eastern border of Guatemala. Like Yaxchilan Structure 23, Copan Structure 11 has implicit connections to bloodletting. The carved hieroglyphs on the sculpted bench panel refer to the king to whom it belonged as the “blood lord of Copan” (Schele and Miller 1986, 124). The northern and southern entrances are designed as the gaping mouth of a skeletal serpent, through which one had to pass in order to enter the temple. The iconography marks these entryways as portals into the Maya Underworld where the souls of the dead await rebirth. Entering the temple becomes a metaphorical decent into Xibalba through an Underworld cave or through the jaws of a cosmic serpent (Schele and Freidel 1990, 327). Half of the hieroglyphic wall panels within the four entryways of Copan Structure 11 are written in reverse. At one side of each entryway the text is read in the normal left-to-right direction, while the text opposite it is read from right-to-left. Schele and Freidel suggest that only the gods and divine ancestors may read the panels in the correct order from an exterior vantage point, since only they have the ability to see through stone (Schele and Freidel 1990, 326-327). This would imply that the events described on the panels are thought to occur inside the walls of the structure itself.

Schele and Miller apply this same reasoning to Lintel 25, proposing that the hieroglyphic reversal is meant to suggest that the actions the lintel describes occurred within the walls of Structure 23: “The text is written in a mirror image, as if it should be read from the other side of the stone; we believe this mirroring to be an ingenious device to signal that this activity takes place inside an architectural space” (Schele and Miller 1986, 187). As the lintel faces downward above the doorway into the temple, the appropriate view from which to read its text would be
from above, from the celestial realm of the Upperworld. Schele and Miller argue that this may serve as additional validation of the absence of Itzamnaaj Bahlam in the image. They claim that Lady K’abal Xook witnesses the vision alone, while her husband remained outside for this portion of the ritual. Only he and the gods have the divine ability to witness the scene from outside the walls of the temple (Ibid., 187). Just as the text of Copan Temple 11 is intended for the eyes of the gods—the only audience who could properly read the texts through stone from an exterior vantage point—the king is likewise credited with these divine powers.

I propose that the reversal of Lintel 25 may also be symbolic of the reversed states of being as one moves from ritual phases depicted from Lintel 24 to Lintel 25. From the initial stages of the bloodletting process to actual contact with divine ancestors, one passes from the Middleworld to Xibalba, from the realm of life into the realm of death. By performing autosacrifice in the temple, Lady K’abal Xook has symbolically entered into the watery Underworld to nourish the gods and to commune with deceased ancestors. She figuratively experiences death as she communes with the ancestral deity emerging from the mouth of the cosmic serpent. Not until actual contact with the Otherworld takes place is the reversal complete. The main topic of the next chapter will be the reversal from Xibalba back to the realm of life—from death to rebirth. This occurs as one passes from Lintel 25 to Lintel 26, the background of which reverts back to the blue pigment of Lintel 24.

SERPENTS

After setting the blood sacrifice aflame, Lady K’abal Xook sees in the smoke above her the armed Teotihuacan figure, emerging from the long open jaws of a double-headed serpent. The serpent’s twisting body rises high above the queen’s kneeling figure. According to Schele
and Miller, “The great rearing serpent—the physical manifestation of visions arising from blood loss and shock—was the contact between the supernatural realm and the world of human beings” (Schele and Miller 1986, 177). Within the mouth of the cosmic blood serpent is the Teotihuacan warrior discussed above, the supernatural being rebirthed into the world through Lady K’ab'al Xook’ autosacrifice.

Usually serpents in Maya art serve as cosmic markers characterized by glyphs and signs that place the events depicted in celestial space. Another Yaxchilan monument, Stela 1, makes use of this ancient motif of the snake as a cosmic serpent. On Yaxchilan Stela 1, skyband symbols mark such serpents as celestial entities. Often depicted in the space above scenes with cosmic skyband markings along its body, the serpent is a very old iconographic element that may possibly have originated as a symbolic representation of the Milky Way (Stuart 1984, 15). Most images of these cosmic serpents also have dotted streams of blood flowing from their open mouths (Ibid., 16). Stuart surmises that any alternative object seen emerging from the cosmic serpent serves as a symbol of or a substitute for blood (Stuart 1988, 212).

Figures emerging from the jaws of zoomorphs—including both one-headed or bicephalic snakes—are a recurring image in Maya art. The headdresses of rulers would often draw from this motif. The main symbol of these royal headdresses was a zoomorphic head, fixed just above the face of the ruler. Schele and Miller explain, “These zoomorphic heads usually lacked a lower jaw, so that the face of the wearer appears to emerge from the mouth of the zoomorph, although in some very early representations, the chin strap doubled as the animal’s lower jaw” (Schele and Miller 1986, 68). In this way the ruler distinguishes himself as the divine, physical manifestation of the gods and deified ancestors present within his or her blood.
One example of the ruler-in-mouth motif is seen in a monolithic sculpture-in-the-round from Quirigua (Fig. 3.6). Quirigua Zoomorph B represents the body of a cosmic serpent. At the back of the monument is the head of the Quadripartite God, a significant figure discussed in detail in the last chapter. At the front of the sculpture is the upper body the king K’ahk’ Tiliw Chan Yopaat within the beast’s open mouth. The monument celebrates the Period Ending of 9.17.10.0.0 12 Ahau 8 Pax, probably accompanied by the autosacrifice of Quirigua’s ruler K’ahk’ Tiliw Chan Yopaat (Stuart 1988, 205). The emerging king replaces the streams of blood normally emitted from the mouths of cosmic serpents. Stuart argues that “a semantic substitution is involved with these ruler-in-mouth scenes: the blood so commonly seen gushing from the mouth of the serpent is, at Quirigua, replaced by the personification of that royal blood—the ruler” (Stuart 1984, 16). Royal blood was “the prime substance of the world” and “the rulers were themselves embodiments of the blood of the Cosmos” (Ibid., 16).

With blood running through and out from its body, the serpent functions as a cosmic umbilical cord, connecting the physical realm to the spiritual realm, nourishing both with the blood of the king. The idea that the serpent is actually composed of blood is nowhere more apparent than within the polychrome image of K688 (Fig. 3.7), featuring a lord descending into or ascending from Xibalba on the snout of bearded dragon. He is accompanied by the mutilated corpse of an Underworld owl and two bloodied Underworld Lords who sit among twisted umbilical cords. The long twisted cords end with serpentine skulls, jaws agape, and form the thin, twisting body of a bicephalic cosmic blood serpent.

The carving above the doorway of Temple 22 of Copan (Fig. 3.8) is also effective at illustrating the hemic makeup of serpents in Maya iconography. Based on the temple’s iconography, it was most likely used for royal bloodletting rituals. Here, a bicephalic serpent
frames the upper portion of the temple’s inner doorway. Both ends of the serpent are supported by *bacab* figures, deities who hold up the heavens. Thus, the cosmic serpent is representative of the Upperworld or the sky realm. skulls line the step beneath the doorway, representing the Maya Underworld. The body of the serpent is made up of seven s-curves rather than the typical skyband motif. Stuart recognizes these as blood scrolls, similar to the large blood scroll from which the serpent appears in Lintel 25 (Stuart 1984, 15-16). This blood likely represents the blood sacrificed by the ruler within this building, given for the purpose of nourishing and giving birth to the gods. This coincides with the Classic Maya belief that snakes served as metaphoric umbilical cords made up of royal blood, connecting the earthly plane with the invisible world of spirits and deities. Intertwined within these blood scrolls above the entrance of Temple 22 are small deities, reborn from the blood offered during royal autosacrifice. The blood and serpent iconography of Copan Temple 22’s monumental entrance would indicates that “in so performing these acts the Copan rulers were, in effect, giving birth to, nurturing, and/or sustaining the cosmos” (Ibid., 16). When passing beneath these images into the temple sanctuary, the ruler essentially enters into the Underworld, undergoing death in order to bring about the birth of the gods and deified ancestors present within his or her sacred blood.

Lintel 25 marks the first usage of the snake as a vision serpent in Yaxchilan. The use of this motif in Maya monumental art, however, dates back to the earliest known Maya stela (Tate 1992, 120). With the erection of Lintel 25, the vision serpent was to become an important icon in monuments commemorating important royal events such as “accession to the throne, a transformation from human to divine status, and birth” (Tate 1992, 91). The motif lasted well into the Late Postclassic era, with several appearances in the Dresden Codex ([Fig. 3.9](#)). One of
these serpents is shown emitting a set of barbed stingray spines, showing that the connection between the cosmic serpent and bloodletting was still strong during this late period.

Nowhere is the association between bloodletting and resulting visions more apparent than in the monuments at Yaxchilan (Kubler 1969, 167). Cosmic serpents appear in six Yaxchilan monuments (Tate 1992, 88), usually in Early Classic monumental art as an accession image (Ibid., 45). Supernatural serpents are consistently associated with bowls of bloodletting paraphernalia but are never depicted during the actual letting of blood. They are usually depicted floating above the ritualist, rising from the speckled bark-paper basket that holds the smoldering blood sacrifice.

Schele and Miller define vision serpents as symbols of “hallucinatory visions central to Maya ritual” (Schele and Miller 1986, 46). Schele was the first to call these supernatural snakes from whose wide-open jaws divine entities emerged “vision serpents.” The moniker has since become common-place in Maya scholarship. It implies that an actual vision had taken place within the temple after autosacrifice. The vision would have been brought on by the physical effects of bloodletting, such as preparative fasting, the disorienting darkness of the temple sanctuary, the possible use hallucinogens during the ritual, and the loss of what was often a large amount of blood. According to Schele and Miller, the purpose of the bloodletting rite was to cause such visions to materialize (Ibid., 177). If the serpent is in fact meant to represent a literal vision, then the ubiquity of the vision serpent motif would indicate a very deeply and widely shared Maya belief in serpents as conduits to the Otherworld. Whether or not the vision serpent represents an actual cosmic serpent seen in vision, it remains a powerful artistic symbol of royal blood and the capacity of autosacrifice to conjure the gods and deified ancestors present within that blood.
Some Mayanists are reluctant to interpret the open-mouthed serpent motif too literally and thus have had issue with Schele’s designation. Stuart, for example, prefers to see cosmic serpents “as key symbols in the art of transformation and supernatural contact” (Stuart 2008, no. 3) rather than actual hallucinations consequent of bloodletting. He prefers to refer to vision serpents as “cosmic serpents” or “blood serpents” (Stuart 1984, 16-17). He states that supernatural serpents in Maya art “had many multi-layered meanings, as celestial symbols, and as conduits for the conjuring and ‘birthing’ of deities and ancestral spirits. Seeing them as ‘visions’ and ‘hallucinations’ takes away [. . .] their important and internally logical role in Maya art and iconography” (Ibid., no. 3).

The serpent, whether perceived as a vision or a metaphorical symbol, originates from blood. The serpent is often double-headed, as in Lintel 25, but sometimes the secondary head can be replaced by a flint knife, a smoking *ahau* glyph, or most commonly by the skeletal personification of blood, seen on the smaller double-headed serpents in Lintel 25 perched on Lady K’abal Xook’s wrist and rising up from her headdress. The skeletal serpent headdress appears three times in Yaxchilan, only in the context of bloodletting (Tate 1992, 88). In Lintel 17 (Fig. 3.10), carved a generation after Lintel 25, Itzamnaaj Bahlam III’s heir Bird Jaguar IV wears the same headdress during autosacrifice, presumably in order to emphasize a special relationship with his father’s powerful principal wife, although the two were not biologically related (Schele and Miller 1986, 178). Bird Jaguar performs autosacrifice through penis perforation as his principal wife Lady Mut Bahlam of Hix Witz pulls a cord through her tongue. The couple lets blood in honor of the birth of an heir through Lady Great Skull, another of Bird Jaguar’s wives (Tate 1992, 130). Lady Mut Bahlam wears the same ceremonial huipil, albeit more simply depicted, as that worn by Lady K’abal Xook in Lintel 25. The repetition of Lady K’abal Xook’s
huipil and skeletal headdress may underscore the prominence of ancestor worship as well as the importance of noble heritage to Classic Maya royalty.

The completion glyph earflares worn by the skeletal heads of the skeletal serpent headdresses are a symbol of blood (Stuart 1988, 182). A stream of blood emerges from behind the skull of one of the skeletal serpents into Lady K’abal Xook’s half-open hand. These skeletal personifications of blood indicate the origin of the vision or the medium through which the vision is obtained. “When the personified symbol of blood is absent, the Vision Serpent rears up from a blood scroll instead” (Schele and Miller 1986, 46-47), as does the primary serpent of Lintel 25.

On Yaxchilan Lintel 14, Lady Great Skull and her brother, the sajal Great Skull, wield bloodletters and other bloodletting paraphernalia. Together they conjure a large serpent from which emerges the queen’s child, the future ruler Itzamnaaj Bahlam IV. The lintel’s main text refers to the serpent as the Chanal Chak Bay Kaan, or the “towering red thorn snake,” the way or spiritual animal companion of Lady Great Skull: “On 4 Imix 4 Mol, K’awiil Kab?Muwaan Chanalchakbaykaan is conjured. He/it is the wayjalay (or waylajay) of the holy woman, Lady Chak Chami, lady sajal, the mother of the king” (Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions 2007). This designation relates the serpent to the blood of the queen in several ways. Just as Lady Great Skull rebirths the gods and the cosmos with her blood, it is from her blood that the future king is born. As the way of Lady Great Skull, the serpent has an additional connection to the queen as her spirit animal companion. Lastly, the label “red thorn snake” relates the serpent directly to blood and autosacrifice. Thorns were common autosacrificial paraphernalia, as illustrated by the thorn-studded bloodletting cord used by Lady K’abal Xook in Lintel 24. The color red is a recognizable symbol for blood in Maya culture just as it is in our
own, carrying associations with death as well as life and birth. According to Vail, the Lacandon Maya still employ a red dye (k ’uxu) made from annatto seeds in the same ways that their pre-Columbian ancestors used blood, such as in the anointing of ritualists and ceremonial objects (Vail 2007, 152).

Serpents were often associated with rulership in Maya monumental art. Sharp surmises that this connection may have evoked thoughts of “the ‘great and potent power’ which both deadly serpents and elites have despite their size. The need for and value placed on power by such elites was expressed through the symbol which represented a deadly snake” (Sharp 1972, 75). To emerge from the maw of the deadly serpent was to emerge from Xibalba, to metaphorically defeat the powers of death. This myth is as old as the Maya legend of the Hero Twins who descend into Xibalba, gain the power of resurrection, and with it defeat the Lords of the Underworld.

The bicephalic serpent bar is another common way in which serpents are used in Maya monumental art to emphasize the sacred nature of the ruler’s blood and his or her power over the cosmos. Bonampak Lintel 4 depicts a Late Classic Maya king holding a serpent bar in his hands (Fig. 3.12). Mat interlace patterns adorn the body of the serpent, identifying it with the royal blood of the king. Small K’awiil figures—anthropomorphic symbols of the divine lineage of deceased ancestors (Tate 1992, 92)—emerge from the open jaws of both serpent. This composition is typical of serpent bars elsewhere in Classic Maya art, which depict portraits of deities or the ruler’s divine ancestors emerging from both ends of the bar. Serpent bar imagery conveys the divine nature of the ruler as the one who can both connect with and control the supernatural realm. Stuart classifies such imagery as a basic concept behind royal autosacrifice (Stuart 1988, 212). With the symbol of the heavens in his hands and with the divine blood
necessary to both propitiate and propagate the gods, the serpent bar motif underscores the vital and powerful role of the king in ancient Maya thought.

QUATREFOILS

The quatrefoil is a common symbol of passage into the Underworld. Classic Maya texts refer to quatrefoils as ol, Mayan for “heart” or “opening” (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993, 215). According to Tate, “The quatrefoil functions as a depiction of the opening of the cosmic central axis at the crossroads of the four directions” (Tate 1992, 94). Specifically, quatrefoils provide passageways into the watery Underworld through the center or axis mundi. This iconographic function has ancient roots in the art of the ancient Olmec civilization, where quatrefoils and half-quatrefoils were used to represent the open mouth of a crocodilian earth monster, symbolizing the passage into the Underworld through a cave (Looper 2000, 19). The quatrefoil is first used in Maya art as early as the fourth- or fifth-century C.E., becoming a prominent, well-established motif at Piedras Negras. As a textile motif, it was first used in Piedras Negras during the sixth-century C.E. Its first appearance at Yaxchilan was in 726 C.E. on Lintel 25 (Ibid., 18).

The concept of a watery portal to the Underworld derives from fundamental concepts of Maya cosmology, wherein the earth is conceived as a turtle or crocodile, floating on a vast ocean” (Looper 2000, 19). According to Schele and Miller, “The Xibalba of the Classic period [. . .] could only be entered by sinking beneath water or passing through a maw in the surface of the earth” (Schele and Miller 1986, 267). Even today for the Maya of Zinacantan, “the Earth Lord(s) are ever-present just under the feet of the Zinacantecos and may be communicated with via the caves and waterholes” (Vogt 1981, 133). Quatrefoils are a symbolic representation of
such passageways. Visually, they can symbolize the entrance of a cave, a body of water, or the open mouth of a serpent or earth monster.

The quatrefoil appears at Yaxchilan only in textiles (Tate 1992, 62). The quatrefoil motif on the queen’s huipil replaces the zigzagged diamonds with their infixed crossbands on Lintel 24. Lintel 25 is the first known use of the quatrefoil motif on a huipil pattern in Yaxchilan. It later became by far the most commonly depicted huipil motif throughout the Maya world, “encountered in more than one third of the monumental examples, often distributed evenly across the field in a unified composition” (Looper 2000, 18). Quatrefoils can either be rounded or angular, with infixed elements such as crossbands or mat designs. Items such as bifurcated scrolls are often attached to the outside edges of the quatrefoil.

On Lintel 25, each quatrefoil contains a mat or interlace pattern. The mat is a common Maya symbol for royalty, referring to the braided mat upon which a king would sit atop his throne. Schele and Miller explain, “Because kings and nobles sat on mats in addition to wearing the ubiquitous braid we call the mat sign, they were called ‘lords of the mat’” (Schele and Miller 1986, 71). According to Morris, the geometric mat design in the center of a quincunx or quatrefoil may symbolize the emergence of royal ancestors from the Underworld (Morris 1985b, 75). Tate refers to this pattern as “an ‘ancestral royalty’ quatrefoil” (Tate 1992, 120). The design was commonly used on clothing worn during ritual bloodletting, “when the ancestors and gods are ‘fed’ the ruler’s blood or are invoked by it. Through this woven design on the clothing, the ancestors are shown to be present at these important ceremonies” (Morris 1985b, 75). The mat pattern is often used in conjunction with quatrefoils, usually with a mat interlace inset within the quatrefoil, as in Lintel 25. The inverse of this pattern can be seen in one polychrome vase, K5179
Looper recognizes the possibility that the interlace design set inside quatrefoils may alternatively represent “a geometricized reduction of the twisted-cord motif” (Looper 2000, 23). The twisted cord motif is an important cosmological representation of an umbilicus connecting the physical and supernatural realms (Ibid., 27). Thus, the twisted cords within the quatrefoils on Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil may represent the rulers’ duty to nourish the gods through autosacrifice. To extend the maternal analogy further, bloodletting rituals were believed to enable the birth of divine ancestors. Quatrefoils, serpents, and twisted cords often symbolize a metaphorical birth canal through which deities are reborn. Looper explains, “Analogous to the umbilical cord and the ropes used in traditional Maya birthing practices, the cords also functioned as the means by which gods were born into the world” (Ibid., 21).

Yaxchilan Lintel 15 (Fig. 3.14), a lintel created a generation after the lintels of Yaxchilan Structure 23, is iconographically and stylistically parallel to Lintel 25. In matters of detail and composition, however, Lintel 15 is much less complex. Again, the fish-in-hand glyph indicates that a bloodletting rite has occurred, conjuring a cosmic serpent here referred to as “the Waterlily Serpent [. . .] the nagual of K’awiil” (Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions 2007). Lady Wak Tuun, one of the wives of Itzamnaaj Bahlam III’s successor, Bird Jaguar IV, acts as the ritualist in both the lintel’s text and image. Lady Wak Tuun holds a basket—here containing blood-spattered bark paper, a cord, and a stingray spine—and gazes at an unidentified figure emerging from the open jaws of a cosmic serpent. This time, the serpent is one-headed rather than bicephalic. According to Schele and Miller, the figure emerging from its open mouth “may embody the idea of sacrifice, just as the Tlaloc warrior on Lintel 25 personifies sacrifice and the
Tlaloc war complex” (Schele and Miller 1986, 178). The serpent floats among dotted blood scrolls and emerges from a second spotted basket filled with blood-spattered bark paper.

The ceremonial huipil Lady Wak Tuun wears in Lintel 15 is iconographically indistinct from the huipil worn by Lady K’abal Xook in Lintel 24, even though its pattern has been simplified in Lintel 15. She wears the huipil rather clumsily, however; the huipil looks slightly too large for her figure, with extra folds of fabric swathed around her knees. Nevertheless, the crossband motif set within a zigzagged diamond field is the same. The reuse of Lady K’abal Xook’s ceremonial huipil may indicate the ritual’s close regulation by tradition, as Schele and Miller suggest (Schele and Miller 1986, 178), or it may be indicative of the importance of ancestor worship and rebirth in Maya ritual. By wearing Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil and offering her own royal blood, Lady Wak Tuun not only communicates with the deceased queen. She rebirths Lady K’abal Xook through imitation and ritual.

The crossband symbol is related to serpentine symbolism in Maya ideology through the function both often play as axes mundi. However, the quatrefoils of Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil in Lintel 25 seem to have a closer relation to serpentine symbolism due to the explicit function of both quatrefoils and serpents as portals to the Otherworld. Crossbands may also mark the border between the Middleworld and the realm of spirits, as discussed in the previous chapter, but their primary function is as a centering device around which the cosmos are oriented. Thus, the quatrefoil pattern of Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil in Lintel 25 seems more appropriate to the conjuration phase of the bloodletting ritual than the crossband pattern depicted in either Lintel 15 or 24. The crossband motif serves its purpose best in Lintel 24, where it marks Lady K’abal Xook as the axis mundi around which the cosmos are oriented and through whose blood the world is recreated through autosacrifice.
FLOWERS

Looper states that “it is clear that the [quatrefoil] motif represents a flower. The four-petalled arrangement is itself typical of Maya representations of flowers” (Lopper 2000, 18). Quatrefoils of many ancient huipil patterns are marked by double marks along their edges, identifying them glyphically as nik, or “flower.” Fragrance is often symbolized by bifurcated scrolls emanating from the flower (Ibid., 18). Quatrefoils and their twisted cords are directly related to aquatic images of the flowers and twisted tendrils of waterlilies and waterlily deities. “The aquatic aspect of the quatrefoil [. . .] is consonant with the floral identification of the motif on ancient textile renderings. The unifying concept in this array of images is birth, for the Maya conceived of the watery underworld as a matrix of fertile energy referenced by flowers” (Ibid., 20). In this sense, quatrefoils serve as more than mere portals between worlds. Rather, “the quatrefoils represent a floral form that is specifically associated with the watery underworld and the powers of procreation that it symbolized” (Ibid., 21). While serving as portals into the Underworld, flowers are potent reminders of powers of rebirth from the realm of death.

Flowers may be not only representative of the Underworld, but of the Overworld as well. For the modern Tzotzil Maya, “Flowers, because of their brilliance, structure, and vitality, are associated with the sun. Each is in effect a miniature sun” (Vogt 1976, 132-133). Conversely, the Classic Maya sometimes conceived of the sun as a flower. The sun glyph, pronounced k’in, is arranged in the same four-petalled orientation as flowers (Looper 2000, 18). With reference to the sun, the quatrefoil “may refer to the shape of the opening where the sun is swallowed nightly and burped out daily” (Tate 1992, 95). The sun is a common symbol in Maya art for death and rebirth; after its quotidian rebirth, it makes its journey across the sky until its death at sunset, after which it passes through the Underworld again until it is reborn at dawn. The Maya
conceptualized the rising and setting sun and other celestial bodies that travel below the horizon as emerging into and reemerging from water. Likewise, it is through the quatrefoil that the Maya ruler may emerge and reemerge from the depths of the watery Underworld.

Like the sun, plants and flowers have their perennial cycle of death and rebirth with the changing times and seasons. Maize seeds are sometimes represented as small skulls, which are reborn as living “heads” of corn after burial in the Underworld, such as the small heads of the Maize God sprouting from the World Tree depicted on the Tablet of the Foliated Cross at Palenque. The connection between floral and solar imagery is apparent in this ritual cargo prayer: “May he [cargoholder] walk in thy [Sun God’s] sight, / May he walk before thy flower-like face” (Vogt 1976, 132). It is the shared association with cycles of death and rebirth that most markedly links the sun to flowers and other plant life. The flower as a portal to the Underworld serves to strengthen this relationship.

The two Tlaloc figures of Lintel 25 may be additional floral symbols. While Tlaloc masks are usually associated with militarism and the grandeur of ancient Teotihuacan, they are often used in conjunction with floral imagery (Looper 2000, 24), especially when they appear on textiles such as in Bonampak Stela 2 (Fig. 3.13). In this stela, a royal lady of Yaxchilan, Lady Yax Rabbit, probably the sister of Itzamnaaj Bahlam IV, is married to Yajaw Chan Muwaan, the ruler of Bonampak and Lacanha (Martin and Grube 2008, 135). A bloodletting rite was carried out in honor of the royal event in 789 C.E. Both Bonampak and Lacanha were under the allegiance of Yaxchilan at the time, so one may assume a heightened degree of continuity within the iconography and artistic practices of the sites. The proximity and political relationship of the sites contribute to the similar artistic usage of bloodletting iconography. Three figures are depicted in the stela: the Maya king Yajaw Chan Muwaan in the center, flanked by Lady Yax
Rabbit of Yaxchilan on left and Yajaw Chan Muwan’s mother on the right. Both royal women hold bloodletting bowls which they hold toward the king. Yajaw Chan Muwaan’s mother also holds a bloodletter in her left hand. She wears a huipil marked by quatrefoils with bifurcated scrolls. The huipil’s border is made up of twisted cords, half quatrefoils, and a snake skin repeat pattern. Lady Yax Rabbit wears a huipil decorated with a field of quatrefoils, each inset with a simplified interlace pattern. The vertical border is made up of a repeated snake skin pattern, while the bottom is dominated by a horizontal band of Tlaloc masks bordered underneath by a thin band of half quatrefoils (Looper 2000, 78). The Tlaloc pattern appears in this instance to have floral associations, with no apparent connection to militarism. Iconographically, the patterns depicted on these huipils offer a condensed version of the same motifs found within Yaxchilan Lintel 25.

The quatrefoil motif as a symbolic portal to the Underworld is closely related to the function of serpents in Maya iconography. Flowers, quatrefoils, serpents, caves, and bodies of water were all common Classic Maya symbols for open portals to the world of spirits and deities. It is thus especially appropriate that the floral quatrefoil motif is represented in Lady K’abal Xook’s clothing while she performs this step of the bloodletting ritual, wherein she rebirths an ancestral deity through the medium of a blood serpent.

Flowers may also serve an additional, less conspicuous role in the iconography of Lintel 25. The eyebrow, nostril, and lower jaw of both heads of the bicephalic serpent are flanked by what Schele and Miller refer to as a beard of feathers (Schele and Miller 1986, 47). Kerr, however, has recently determined these to be instead the flowers of the hallucinogenic datura plant (Kerr 2007). The genus *Datura* belongs to the Solanaceae or Nightshade family and includes fifteen to twenty species, all of which appear to have originated in the New World.
Datura plants are widespread in North and Central America from coast to coast, from southern Utah and Colorado down through Central America into South America (Huckell and Vanpool 2006, 147-148). While the dangers of the poisonous plant are apparent to those familiar with it, “the plant’s ability to mediate between worlds would have made it invaluable to practioners” (Ibid., 158).

Datura plants are most distinguished by their white or purple trumpet-shaped blossoms and spiny seed capsules (Fig. 3.16). The flowers, seeds, leaves, and nectar of datura can be eaten, brewed into a tea, or smoked, resulting in “delirium, delusions, hallucinations, disorientation, and incoherent speech” caused by the alkaloids atropine and scopolamine contained within all parts of the plant (United States 1998, 1). According to Stross and Kerr, the hallucinations caused by datura often involve serpents, referring to the plant as “the potent producer of ophidian visions,” evoking visions of serpents “with more surety and more safety than the letting of blood” (Stross and Kerr 1997, 353). However, the “compulsive restless movement, extreme physical symptoms, anxiety, and often unpleasant and frightening hallucinations comprised by the experience have contributed to widespread respect for and fear of the plant, at least among traditional societies” (Huckell and Vanpool 2006, 150).

Mayan vocabulary reveals the attitude the modern Maya have toward the datura plant as well as the ties it has to ancient bloodletting rituals. The Yucatec word for datura is tohk’u, literally “true god” (Stross and Kerr 1997, 353). According to Stross, this word is closely related to tok’, a word used in several Mayan languages translated as “to pierce,” “to let blood,” “to stab,” “flint,” all suggestive of bloodletting (Stross 1989, 213).
Kerr recognizes the datura flower on several ancient Maya pots. Codex Vase K4644 (Fig. 3.17), for example, displays the flowers atop the heads of serpents marked with Tlaloc war symbols, much like the figures emerging from the serpent in Lintel 25. The flower also appears on K1819, K3229, K1351, and K5007 among others. The image of K5007 features a cosmogram of flowers, opening out toward the four cardinal directions around a *k’in* glyph. The flowers painted onto all of these vases look strikingly similar to the objects growing from atop the brow, snout, chin, and jaw of both serpents in Lintel 25 (Fig. 3.18). In the lintel, the skeletal serpent in Lady K’abal Xook’s hand seems to be reaching up to sniff the contents of one of the flowers. The same flower-like growths emerge from the brow and snout of the cosmic serpent depicted in Yaxchilan Stela 34.

Drug use was not uncommon among Maya royals. The Maya were familiar with intoxicating beverages and inebriating enemas. Plants such as tobacco, also of the Nightshade family, were sometimes directly ingested or inhaled. Datura may have been inhaled, or it may have been an ingredient of fermented drinks or of enemas among the Classic Maya (de Smet 1985, 92-93). One carved conch shell features a seated Maya ritualist who smokes a thin cigar (Fig. 3.19). Schele and Miller identify the man as a Maya courtier (Schele and Miller 1986, 145). He wears a deer head headdress, his face is marked by dots of blood or face paint, and flower-like quatrefoils with fixed crossbands mark his chest. While he smokes, he gestures to the serpent emerging from the conch shell in front of him. While this kind of image is unique in Maya art, it shares many of the same elements as other conjuring ceremonies, such as the one depicted in Yaxchilan Lintel 25. The use of hallucinogens may be one such common element between these two pieces of art.
It is possible that Maya ritualists may have been sufficiently disoriented to have actually seen the cosmic serpent without the use of hallucinogenic substances. Psychologically, ritual participants such as Lady K’abal Xook would have been culturally conditioned to expect such a vision. Physically, a ruler performing autosacrifice would have already been disoriented through preparatory fasting, the public hysteria of the ritual event, the darkness of the temple in which autosacrifice offered, the loss of blood, and the dizzying effects of burning blood and incense. Schele and Miller speculate, “The rising clouds of swirling smoke provided the perfect field in which to see the Vision Serpent; gazing into the smoke, the celebrants may have actually seen it” (Ibid., 178). Even without the use of hallucinogens, these conditions may have produced enough endorphins in the brain to induce such a vision: “Today, scientists acknowledge that endorphins—chemically related to the opiates and produced by the brain in response to massive blood loss—can induce hallucinogenic experiences. But the Maya also knew that drawing large amounts of blood would, without the help of other drugs, produce visions that were the raison d’etre of their rituals” (Ibid., 177). Whether or not the datura plant played a role in the Maya ritual depicted in Lintel 25, bloodletting rituals provided the context within which Maya rulers came into contact with their gods and ancestors.

CONCLUSIONS

Uxmal is a Terminal Classic Maya site miles to the north of Yaxchilan in the Puuc Hills region of the Yucatan. According to Martin and Grube, “Uxmal represents the pinnacle of Puuc style and was the seat of a dynasty modeled fully in the Classic tradition” (Martin and Grube 2008, 227). While Uxmal was ruled by foreign ruler, Lord Chaak, during 850 to 900 C.E., the iconography of the temples erected during his reign still reflects traditional Maya forms. Schele and Miller state that “ethnically foreign rulers tried to use the traditional symbolism of Maya
kingship to support their reigns” (Schele and Miller 1986, 28). The imagery of Uxmal’s Nunnery Quadrangle effectively summarizes the message communicated when one looks from Yaxchilan Lintel 24 to Lintel 25 and finds meaning in their iconographic differences.

Undulating across the architectural façade of the North Building of Uxmal’s Nunnery Quadrangle are several serpents, symbolic portals to the Maya Underworld. The smooth, smoky s-scrolls of Yaxchilan Lintels 15 and 25 are replaced by angular spirals. Geometric serrated diamonds almost identical to the ones on Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil on Yaxchilan Lintels 24 and 26 form the latticework behind the spirals and the serpents. Only the serpents, marked by rattles and feathers, are carved in a realistic, organic manner.

One serpent in particular stands out for the purposes of this study. The patterns embedded within the zigzagged diamonds are not the same on either side of the snake (Fig. 3.20). On the serpent’s left, each diamond encircles a set of concentric diamonds, which may serve as an alternate type of centering symbol, comparable to the crossbands on Yaxchilan Lintel 24. On the right of the snake, the concentric diamonds are replaced by flowers, symbols of an open portal to the world of the gods. The division of the two motifs by the snake implies that it is the snake, or more precisely the blood it symbolizes, which initiates the opening of the portal to the Otherworld.

The serpent of the Nunnery Quadrangle’s North Building façade thus functions in the same manner as the hallucinogenic datura flower or the cosmic blood serpent in Lintel 25. All serve as the conduit whereby Lady K’abal Xook and other royals are able to communicate with deities and divine ancestors. In both contexts, whether on the architectural façade of a bloodletting temple or woven onto a ceremonial huipil worn during autosacrifice, the open portal to the Otherworld is symbolized by a floral quatrefoil. These images epitomize an important
objective of royal autosacrifice—to open the portal to the Otherworld and thus release the divine spirits present within the sacrificial royal blood.
CHAPTER 4: TOADS

For the Maya, “the anticipation of death must have been sharp. Life expectancy was shorter than it is today, infant mortality was higher, and everyone, elite as well as commoner, lived with warfare and sacrificial ritual as ever-present realities” (Schele and Miller 1986, 265). Schele and Miller explain that anciently, this propinquity with death “led the Maya to dedicate much of their ritual and art to the defeat of death’s final grip on their lives. Depictions on objects of all types treat the whole process of death, from the soul’s entrance into the Maya Hell, called Xibalba, to a final apotheosis or rebirth” (Ibid., 265).

Like other ancient traditional societies, the Maya sought to tame or conquer death through ritual action. According to Eliade, “Generation, death, and regeneration (rebirth) were understood as three moments in a single mystery, and the entire spiritual effort of archaic man was exerted to show that there must be no intervals between these moments” (Eliade 1987, 196-197). Ancient Maya bloodletting rituals were effective in closing the ideological gap between life and death. Through symbolically passing into the Underworld to spill their own blood, the rulers rebirthed themselves, the gods, and the entire cosmos.

Often, ritual practice within ancient cultures imitated a primordial, divine action—often the Creation—performed by gods, ancestors, or cultural heroes. In the case of the Maya, rituals of death and resurrection have both natural and legendary origins. The Popol Vuh outlines the journey of the Hero Twins into the Underworld and the trials they suffered under the Lords of Death. Their trials and death eventually led to their resurrection and the creation of the cosmos. Likewise, the souls of deceased Maya commence a journey of arduous ordeals, death, and eventual resurrection.
This cycle of death and rebirth was likely inspired by its manifestations in nature, including seasonal agricultural cycles and the quotidian death and rebirth of the sun as it descends into and ascends from the watery Underworld below the horizon. According to Looper, “The ancient Maya modeled human life on this cosmic cycle, viewing birth as emergence out of water, and death as a submersion in water” (Looper 2000, 19). Entrance into an underground cave or into the inner sanctum of a temple were equivalent passages into the realm of death in Maya thought, but such metaphorical death was accompanied by potential regeneration. Burial in a tomb, entrance into a cave or temple sanctuary, or immersion under water all mimic a return to primordial time before existence, or a return to the womb, preparatory to rebirth. When these acts are ritualized, the entire cosmos awaits renewal with the ritualist. In Maya creation myths, it is common to see rituals of sacrifice involving either actual or metaphorical death as necessary prerequisites to acts of creation.

Before the creation of the Maya Middleworld, there existed the primordial watery chaos of the Underworld, symbolized by water or even by blood—an appropriate symbol for the Underworld primordial sea considering blood’s association with death as well as the necessity of blood for creating and sustaining life. For the Maya, the immersion into water that accompanies death comes with the potential for a renewed, glorious reemergence. The regeneration that results from sacrificial reemergence from water would not be limited to the ritualist. The accompanying recreation would be cosmic, resulting in a new creation. This cosmic regeneration may occur through the sacrificial death and resurrection of the ruler as he or she participated in bloodletting rituals or at the apotheosis of a Maya ruler after experiencing physical death and defeating the Lords of the Underworld. Because of the watery nature of Xibalba and the
generative powers of water, references to the watery Underworld and its denizens—such as the toads on Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil—often accompany images of bloodletting.

Schele and Miller delineate three functions of autosacrifice among the Maya. First, “nature’s bounty was ensured through bloodletting rituals” (Schele and Miller 1986, 182). Bloodletting was vital in effecting a successful harvest of maize and other agricultural products. Secondly, bloodletting “maintains the domesticated world of man” (Ibid., 182). These first two functions are closely connected by the fact that maize “is the ultimate symbol of the social world” (Ibid., 182), since domesticated maize relies completely on human cultivation in order to reproduce. Furthermore, the Maya believe that maize is the substance of man’s flesh and thus the foundation of society. At the eve of creation, the gods gave shape and life to maize by grinding it finely, mixing it with water, and performing sacrifice, resulting in the creation of humankind: “Thus was found the food that would become the flesh of the newly framed and shaped people. Water was their blood. It became the blood of humanity. The ears of maize entered into their flesh” (Christenson 2007, 149). Among the Tojolab’al Maya, the word altzil describes both a ripe kernel of maize or the inner core of an ear of corn as well as the heart, animating life force, or soul of a person (Bayles 2008, 231).

Blood from autosacrifice is necessary both to satisfy the gods and to ensure the survival of maize, and thus the survival of the Maya. Because of the Maya people’s reliance on god-given maize and their role in maintaining a bountiful harvest (both through agricultural production as well as through ritual sacrifice), “man cannot exist without gods, nor gods without man” (Schele and Miller 1986, 182). This brings us to the third function of bloodletting, which was “to bring the gods into man’s presence” (Ibid., 182); although the gods were considered ever-present within the blood of the ruler, bloodletting initiated their rebirth and made them manifest in a
more accessible form. Of Schele and Miller’s three functions of bloodletting, this last function is
the most apparent in the lintels of Yaxchilan Structure 23, especially in Lintel 25. In letting her
blood and burning it as an offering to the gods within the temple, Lady K’abal Xook opens a
portal into the Otherworld and rebirths the ancestral deities within her blood.

The anuran iconography of Lintel 26 draws its meaning from all three of Schele and
Miller’s functions of bloodletting—ensuring nature’s bounty, maintaining the domesticated
world of man through the recreation and regeneration of the cosmos, and bringing the gods into
man’s presence. Nowhere is the connection between toad imagery and rituals of death and
rebirth more evident than in the monumental imagery of Izapa, an early Maya site in Chiapas.
Here, toads are used as portals between worlds, similar to snakes or quatrefoils elsewhere in
Maya art. Toad imagery is apparent on stelae and altars throughout the site. At least four toad
altars ([Fig. 4.1]) have been discovered in Izapa (Altars 1, 2, 53 and 54). Similar toad altars have
also been discovered in Tak’alik Ab’aj, Kaminaljuyu, and other Maya sites. Rising from behind
these toad altars were stelae portraying Maya rulers and deities. If observed from a frontal
position, the figures in the stelae appear as though they “were ‘reborn’ from the altars at their
feet” (Kappelman 2004, 116). Kappelman explains, “The toad altar is a dynamic participant in
the ritual depicted, and literally signifies the platform—or in this case portal—from which the
ruler emerges” (Ibid., 116). Like the serpent, flower, or quatrefoil discussed in the previous
chapter, the toad sometimes acts as a portal to the Otherworld in Maya cosmology. Perhaps toads
symbolize this passage through their ability to comfortably inhabit both the Underworld (in
burrows and bodies of water) and the Middleworld (during the rainy season).

Other monuments at Izapa give further evidence in support of this observation. Izapa
Stelae 11 and 6 ([Fig. 4.2]) both depict figures emerging from the open jaws of what have been
identified as *Bufo marinus* toads. This is the same species of toad represented in the altars, identified by its characteristically large parotid glands. The poison emitted from these glands—called bufotenin—is thought to have had hallucinogenic properties like the datura flowers depicted in Yaxchilan Lintel 25. It is uncertain, however, whether this toxin was used as a hallucinogen by the ancient Maya (Schlesinger 2001, 267). Stela 11 depicts a god or ruler emerging from the mouth of a *Bufo marinus* toad. The figure’s arms are outstretched in the form of a cross, marking him as an *axis mundi* around which all creation is reoriented. His wrists are encircled by cloth knots, indicating that he has performed autosacrifice. It was this sacrificial ritual that led to his rebirth—and the rebirth of the cosmos—from the mouth of the toad.

The toad in Stela 6 opens its mouth and extends its tongue to catch a small canoe. The canoe is probably a reference to the Paddler deities, sometimes used as visual substitutes for blood in monumental art related to autosacrifice. In Mayan hieroglyphic texts, references to the release or rebirth of the Paddlers signify “a metaphorical reference to bloodletting, a substitution for the less metaphorical ‘scattering’ verb [. . .]. The ‘scattering’ act not only released the blood, but, to the Maya, it also releases (i.e., gave birth to) the ancestral gods who were part of that blood” (Stuart 1988, 192-193). In this instance, however, the canoe seems to be entering rather than exiting the mouth of the toad. The toad’s tongue has latched onto the bottom of the canoe and seems ready to pull the canoe inside its open jaws. While Paddlers are often shown in images of rebirth through autosacrifice, they are also sometimes depicted entering or sinking down into the watery Underworld, often with figures of the newly-dead riding within their canoe (Fig. 4.3). They are variously shown accompanying the Maize God both in his death and in his rebirth.

Like the Paddlers, the toad can sometimes be interpreted as a symbol for death as well as rebirth. Taking both Stelae 11 and 6 into account, the toad may act as an entrance into as well as
an exit from the watery Underworld. It operates as a two-directional portal, much like the more common portals represented by open-mouthed serpents. The duality of toad imagery, then, is indicative of the two-way cycle of death and rebirth or the liminality of these states of being between the Middleworld and the Otherworld.

DEATH AND REBIRTH IN MAYA MYTHOLOGY

Toad imagery is only one manifestation of a diverse range of symbols and traditions relating to cycles of death and rebirth in Maya mythology. According to Christenson, “The cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, is one of the most prominent motifs in ancient Mesoamerican art and literature” (Christenson 2007, 130 no. 278). Several narrative examples of cyclical death and rebirth survive within the Popol Vuh. This sacred record describes the deaths of two generations of Maya deities, leading to the creation of mankind and the cosmos. Although the Popol Vuh was not written in its current form until after the Spanish Conquest, ancient artwork illustrates the stories told therein, indicating their ancient origins and their fundamental role in Maya theology.

One of the central stories of the Popol Vuh describes the defeat of One Hunahpu and his brother in Xibalba. After failing to beat the Lords of Death in a game of ball, the brothers are sacrificed by the Underworld deities. All that remains of One Hunahpu is his skull, which is placed in the branches of a tree by his conquerors. Later, the skull of One Hunahpu impregnates an Underworld princess, Lady Blood, by spitting into her hand as she approaches the tree. Containing sacred itz (the spiritual essence present within any organic substance), One Hunahpu’s saliva holds the potential for new life, “which transcends individuals to include the ancestral dead” (Christenson 2007, 128 no. 274). Since blood is the most precious of these revitalizing substances, it is appropriate that Lady Blood be the name of the woman through
whom One Hunahpu is able to produce new life from death. One Hunahpu and Lady Blood bring forth two sons Hunahpu and Xbalanque, commonly known as the Hero Twins, who defeat the gods of death and resurrect their father.

The Maya believed that through one’s posterity, one could have the opportunity for rebirth and immortality. When first coming in contact with Lady Blood, One Hunahpu speaks to her about the nature of death and the possibility of rebirth through one’s descendants: “The head of a truly great lord has good flesh upon his face. But when he dies, the people become frightened because of his bones. In like manner, his son is like his saliva, his spittle. He is his essence. [. . .] He will go on, and once more become complete. The face of the lord will not be extinguished nor will it be ruined” (Ibid., 129). Coggins explains that the Maya held “a philosophy of death that was apparently prospective and possibly optimistic. It focused on a complete cycle that culminated just before rebirth [. . .] rather than on death, darkness, and the submerged half of the cycle, when men, like their mythical ancestors, awaited a new creation” (Coggins 1988, 81). Rather than an end, death was seen as the beginning of a new spiritual existence. Death was only a transitional period, the preliminary condition for rebirth.

The Maya tradition of cyclical death and rebirth is further embodied by the adventures of the Hero Twins, illustrated on ancient pottery and recorded in the Popol Vuh. The Hero Twins are often depicted on funerary pottery enacting a dance of death and rebirth in which they sacrifice themselves and, according to the written account of the story in the Popol Vuh, straightaway bring themselves back to life. Like their father One Hunahpu before them, the Hero Twins are killed by the gods of death. Afterward, the brothers gain the ability to resurrect themselves and subsequently cheat death: “Then again they sacrificed themselves. One of them would die, surely throwing himself down in death. Then having been killed, he would
immediately be revived” (Christenson 2007, 180). The Hero Twins are called before the Lords of the Underworld to exhibit these marvelous powers. When the gods eagerly ask to be killed and resurrected themselves, the Hero Twins take advantage of the opportunity to avenge themselves and their father by slaying the Lords of the Underworld without bringing them back to life. The victory of the Hero Twins is followed by their resurrection of their father, the Maize God. The *Popol Vuh* also recounts the subsequent appearance of the sun, moon, and stars, followed by the creation of men. By linking the creation of humanity with the cyclical revival of the gods, agriculture, and celestial bodies, the *Popol Vuh* gives hope that mortal men too may achieve regeneration.

According to Christenson, “The Maya saw death as a necessary part of life. For maize to grow and produce, a seed must first die and be buried in the earth. It was thus necessary for One Hunahpu to descend into the underworld to die before a new generation could appear and be capable of overcoming death” (Christenson 2007, 130 no. 278). A cob of maize is referred to as a head of maize in Mayan languages, a reference which harkens back to the decapitation of the Maize God in the *Popol Vuh*. The kernels, the part of the maize considered dead yet capable of producing new life, are referred to as bones. Among the Tzutujil Maya, maize kernels are not only referred to as bone but as *muk*, “interred ones,” and *jolooma*, “little skulls” (Bassie-Sweet 2000, 7). Maya farmers sow maize kernels, or bury the maize skulls, as though they are dead. With the seasonal rains comes the resurrection of the maize. Likewise, human bones are sometimes referred to as seeds in highland Maya languages, “the source of new life as expressed in succeeding generations” (Christenson 2007, 129 no. 277).

The emergence of the Maize God from the Underworld is a common metaphor among the Maya for the sprouting or rebirth of maize and other plant life. A familiar motif in Maya art is
the emergence of the Maize God from a split in the surface of the earth, or cosmic turtle (Fig. 4.4). In the *Popol Vuh*, Paxil and Cayala are listed as the two sources of the maize from which man was created: “It was from within the places called Paxil and Cayala that the yellow ears of ripe maize and the white ears of ripe maize came” (Ibid., 193). *K’ayala’* means “bitter or stagnant waters,” perhaps in reference to the primordial sea or Underworld from which creation first emerged (Ibid., 193 no. 455). The Maya believed that Paxil was the name of a mountain, the interior of which was filled with the maize that would form human flesh (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993, 138-139). According to Christenson, the word *paxil* means “broken, split or cleft” (Christenson 2007, 193 no. 454). In Maya art, “[t]he split device undoubtedly represents a portal for the birth or rebirth of deities in Maya iconography” (Martin 2004, 6), most often the Maize God.

The death of the Maize God and the subsequent regeneration of life through his posterity is a symbol for the cyclical manifestations of death and rebirth in agriculture, a process with which the Maya would have been intimately familiar. Speaking of the cyclical death and rebirth of corn deities so prevalent in the religions of ancient cultures, Lewis states, “In this descent and reascent everyone will recognise a familiar pattern: a thing written all over the world. It is the pattern of all vegetable life. It must belittle itself into something hard, small and deathlike, it must fall into the ground: thence the new life reascends. [. . .] Death and Rebirth—go down to go up—it is a key principle” (Lewis 2001, 180). The metaphor of the death and resurrection of the Maize God—although the Maya certainly would have thought of it more as a reality than a metaphor—would have been particularly appealing to the Maya, to whom the agricultural cycle of death and resurrection would have been apparent in everyday life.
As stated by Garrard, “All non-secular agricultural societies ascribe religious significance to key agricultural practices” (Garrard 2004, 109). For the Maya, agriculture is more than a profane skill; “it deals with powers and life forces that dwell in the seeds, furrows, rain, and sunshine. Human society and the agricultural process are viewed as set within and dependent upon the dramatic and tense cosmic cycles that insure the vital process of plant fertilization, ripening, harvest, decay, death, and rebirth” (Carrasco 1998, 98-99). Fertility and agriculture are closely linked to the practice of ritual autosacrifice. According to Joralemon, “Whatever other symbolic meanings bloodletting and sexual mutilation might have had in ancient Maya thought, there was a strong association of sexual self-sacrifice with rituals of agricultural fertilization during the Classic Period” (Joralemon 1974, 67).

Not only is the vitality of the earth renewed through rituals such as royal bloodletting, but the earth and its natural elements are thought to have characteristics of life in and of themselves. The natural forces associated with agricultural activity are often personified and even deified in Maya thought, and thus, agricultural practices are ritualized. Plant life is deified as the Maize God, rain as the god Chaak; even the earth is zoomorphized and attributed with life, depicted as a cosmic turtle or crocodile. All of these living things are in need of regeneration through death and sacrifice. According to Carrasco, “the Maya not only considered the plants and seeds as in need of regeneration, but the entire cosmos depended on various processes of rebirth” (Carrasco 1998, 99). This would have been accomplished through the cosmic regeneration brought about through royal autosacrifice.

An example of the intimate relationship between birth and death in Maya thought can be seen in birthing rituals of the modern Tzotzil-speaking Maya town of Zinacantan. While in the womb, the fetus awaits birth in a death-like state. After the birth of a Zinacanteco child, the baby...
is considered ‘cold,’ dangerously near death with very little of the ‘heat’ or vitality necessary for life. It is immediately given a bath of warm water and is presented with three red chili peppers.³ For several weeks following the birth, the mother is treated as though she is recovering from a life-threatening illness; her condition is considered by the Tzotzil to be an actual sickness (Vogt 1976, 20). Likewise, among the Tojolab’al Maya, pregnancy is referred to as niwak chamel or the ‘great illness’ (Bayles 2008, 229). To give birth is jtojb’itikon sok niwak chamel, to ‘recover from the big/many illnesses of pregnancy’ (Ibid., 230). The highland Maya refer to pregnancy as ‘people sickness’ (Christenson 2010). Treatments among the Tzotzil include a period of confinement and rest from labor and a series of three sweat baths with the midwife. The new mother is to keep her body warm and to maintain a diet of ‘hot’ foods (Vogt 1976, 20), such as oatmeal, bread, chocolate, eggs, beans, coffee, and herbal teas (Bayles 2008, 230). These ‘hot’ foods provide energy, vitality, and equilibrium and prevent the ‘coldness’—niwan che’e, translated literally as ‘Big/Great Cold’ (Ibid., 230)—that accompanies illness and death.

A particularly interesting part of Maya birthing rituals includes the burial of the umbilical cord and placenta. After being used to divine and influence the number and sex of children the mother will have in the future, the afterbirth is buried behind the parents’ house (Vogt 1976, 20), preferably in a hot, dry place. This is done in order to avoid the “rotting” of the umbilicus, just as the roots of a maize plant may rot when exposed to an excess of rain. Bayles explains, “The placenta and cord retain an intrinsic connection to both the mother and the child throughout their lives. If the afterbirth is placed in a cold, wet, or windy place, therefore, the mother and child can both suffer illness” (Bayles 2008, 231). An alternative ritual for the burial of the umbilicus is to

³ Metaphors of hot and cold are commonly attributed to people, foods, plants and flowers, etc., throughout the Maya lifecycle. Generally, a newborn child is born ‘cold’ and accrues ‘heat’ throughout its lifetime. An imbalance of ‘hotness’ or ‘coldness’ often results in sickness or even death and may be resolved by the use of appropriate combinations of ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ plants and foods (Vogt 1976, 19-24).
first burn it and then to bury it beneath the kitchen hearth. This ensures that the mother and the new baby will not suffer from illnesses caused by too much dampness.

The burial of the afterbirth may also be indicative of a hope for a future regeneration, just as a dead seed is buried with the anticipation that it will sprout into living maize. For the Maya individual, this regeneration would occur through the immortalization and eventual deification of the Maya soul. Anciently, the regeneration of man, agriculture, and the entire cosmos was enacted through rituals of royal autosacrifice. This relationship is made clear within the imagery of Copan Temple 22, within which the king would have performed ritual bloodletting. The previous chapter discussed the motif above the temple’s doorway, featuring small gods floating within blood scrolls making up the Celestial Monster, the zoomorphized universe. In addition, eight sculptures of Maya kings originally decorated the building, along with sculptures-in-the-round of the Maize God emerging from Cauac Monsters (stone or earth zoomorphs with cleft foreheads from which the Maize God emerges). As stated by Schele and Miller, “While the nobility let blood in the inner sanctum, maize flourished on the exterior of the building, suggesting that the king’s most potent substance, his blood, flowed to fertilize and regenerate nature itself” (Schele and Miller 1986, 144). Stuart emphasizes the structure’s effectiveness in illustrating the relationship between royal blood and cosmic regeneration, labeling it “the most explicit in showing the integration of blood—and ancestry—with a general picture of the Maya cosmos” (Stuart 1988, 203). The ruler’s blood, offered in autosacrifice, defined and regenerated the Maya cosmos. Stuart notes, “The sculpture of Temple 22 [. . .] was meant to put in a mythical and cosmic context the act performed by the ruler as a duty of his office” (Stuart 1988, 204). The regeneration that followed the bloodletting of the king reenacted the original creation of the world by the gods in primordial time.
The autosacrificial ritual illustrated in Yaxchilan Lintels 24, 25, and 26 likewise illustrates the Maya conception of cyclical death and resurrection, highlighting the ruler’s ritual role in that process. After having passed through the ordeals of fasting, disorientation, and blood loss, as illustrated on Lintel 24, the Maya ruler metaphorically passes into the Underworld and communicates with gods and deified ancestors, an act frozen in time within Lintel 25. As Lady K’abal Xook prepares her husband for battle in Lintel 26, the anuran iconography within her huipil pattern points to subsequent rebirth in ways which will be discussed below. Through ritual bloodletting and warfare, the Maya ruler propitiates the gods and ritually rebirths the world.

**LINTEL 26**

Yaxchilan Lintel 26 ([Fig. 4.5](#)) depicts the final scene of the ritual sequence begun on Lintels 24 and 25. When Lintel 26 was first discovered, it had long been broken in half. What remained of the lower half of the lintel has continued to erode since the lintel’s discovery. The upper half was in near-perfect condition, still showing traces of blue paint, and has since eroded only slightly (*Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions* 2007). The dominant blue color of the lintel completes the transformation from the colors of blue, red, and back to blue as one progresses from Lintel 24 to Lintel 26. The unique coloration and glyphic reversal of Lintel 25, as well as Lintel 26’s return to the initial color pattern and composition of Lintel 24, support the argument that the iconography and rituals depicted in these three lintels form a symbolic progression from life, to sacrificial death, and back again.

More than anything else in Lintel 26, it is the toad motif in Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil that emphasizes the concepts of rebirth and rejuvenation, even in a lintel depicting the ritual preparation for deathly warfare. The lintel depicts Itzamnaaj Bahlam III and his wife Lady
K’abal Xook engaged in a dressing ceremony before the king goes off to battle. According to Schele and Miller, accession rituals were always accompanied by the sacrifice of at least one human captive; “Such offerings not only satisfied the constant demands by the gods for repayment of the blood debt incurred by man at his creation but tested the mettle of the new king as well” (Schele and Miller 1986, 220). Often in Maya art, monuments dealing with warfare and the taking of captives predate accession monuments by only a few weeks.

In Lintel 26, Itzamnaaj Bahlam III wears quilted cotton armor over a woven mat jerkin or xicoli (Ibid., 211), an essential martial garment used throughout Mesoamerica (Anawalt 1981, 211). Presumably, the dressing event depicted on Lintel 26 precedes the taking of war captives for ritual blood sacrifice, as recorded on the lintels of Yaxchilan Structure 44. Schele and Miller suggest that the dressing and presentation of the king previous to battle was an event that probably took place outdoors where all could witness it, unlike the bloodletting and conjuration rituals shown in Lintels 24 and 25 (Schele and Miller 1986, 211).

In Lintel 26, the text above the king is dated 9.14.12.6.12 12 Eb 0 Pop (7 February 724 C.E.), when the king would have been seventy-eight years of age (Tate 1992, 121). The text seems to mark the date the lintel was erected: “On 12 Eb 0 Pop, it is elevated, the carving of K’awiil Chahk of Sak Ook” (Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions 2007). No text, however, marks the date of the dressing ritual depicted in the lintel. Another date may refer to the king’s accession or to some other ritual activity, but it has been too badly damaged to decipher completely.

As in Lintels 24 and 25, Lady K’abal Xook wears a ceremonial huipil. On it we see the familiar zigzagged diamond pattern, slightly altered but recognizable as an alternative to the
huipil pattern of Lintel 24. Again, the pattern is aquatic, representing both the watery Underworld as well as the primordial sea from which all creation sprang. In this case, each zigzagged diamond surrounds a small toad or hocker figure (Fig. 4.6). Lady K’abal Xook’s headdress features a bundle of flowers, each attended to by a hummingbird. This particular headdress is sometimes worn by kings after 9.13.0.0.0 at other sites in the area between the Central Peten and the Pasián and Usumacinta Rivers. In every case, the bird and flower headdress is accompanied by an *ajaw* (ruler) pendant such as the one Lady K’abal Xook wears around her neck (Tate 1992, 72), linking royalty with the qualities of life and fertility. The fauna and flora of the headdress coordinates well with the toad figures featured on the queen’s ceremonial huipil. As living organisms, the birds, flowers, and toads are all appropriate symbols for life and rejuvenation.

Just as in Lintel 24, Itzamnaaj Bahlam III wears his hair pulled back and a rope tied around his neck, indicating autosacrifice (Schele and Miller 1986, 187). He appears to be wearing sacrificial cloth knots around his ankles, although the image is too heavily eroded to tell for certain. Lady K’abal Xook is more certainly wearing such cloth knots, and unlike her husband, her face is smeared with blood from a bloodletting ritual such as that depicted in Lintel 24 and 25. Since both Itzamnaaj Bahlam and his wife wear the trappings of autosacrifice, it can be deduced that both of them performed bloodletting rituals previous to the dressing ceremony depicted on Lintel 26.

Playing a primary role in the dressing and presentation ceremony, Lady K’abal Xook presents to her husband a waterlily jaguar war headdress and a flexible shield of woven mat material (Ibid., 211). Already in his hand is a long flint knife. The weapons given to Itzamnaaj Bahlam in Lintel 26 may be the same ones wielded by the divine ancestors conjured by Lady
K’abal Xook in Lintel 25. If the artists meant for these two sets of weapons to be the same, then this equivalence would mean that these weapons had been “rebirthed” from the Underworld for the purpose of nourishing the gods with the blood of Itzamnaaj Bahlam’s captives. Ironically, weapons of death and destruction delivered from Xibalba would empower Itzamnaaj Bahlam to rebirth the world through warfare. Whether Lady K’abal Xook actually presumed to receive the implements of war from the deity during her vision or whether the vision was requisite to the dressing ritual for other purposes is unclear. Either way, it seems apparent that the dressing and presentation of the king before battle was an important step in many bloodletting rituals, especially those associated with rulership and accession.

Other depictions of the dressing and presentation ceremony include a polychrome vase, K2695, excavated from Mundo Perdido at Tikal and Lintel 41 from Yaxchilan. The polychrome vase ([Fig. 4.7]) is believed to be a portrait of Yax Nuun Ahiin II, an important ruler of Tikal. In the image he dresses for a battle which took place in 794 C.E. (Martin and Grube 2008, 51). The king faces his wife and is accompanied by two other courtiers. The queen wears a ceremonial huipil decorated with four flowers surrounding what appear to be two toads. Looper alternatively describes these toad figures as flowers from a frontal view, surrounded by flowers in profile. The pattern, however, looks more like the toad pattern on the Lintel 26 huipil, the only significant difference being that each figure has a rounded rather than a rhomboidal body. Toad and floral imagery symbolize not only animal and agricultural life, but more importantly, the passage between worlds. This shared symbolism is made more apparent when the toad and floral designs are used together, as in this polychrome vessel.

Yaxchilan Lintel 41 ([Fig. 4.8]) depicts a similar dressing ceremony, this time with Itzamnaaj Bahlam’s son Bird Jaguar IV standing with his wife as he prepares for war against his
rival Sak Nahb’ Juk’ in 757 C.E. (Looper 2000, 66). The composition of the lintel is a near-exact mirror image of Lintel 26. The king’s wife Lady Wak Jalam Chan Ajaw of Motul de San José wears a blood-spattered headdress and a rope around her neck, signaling that the ceremony was preceded by bloodletting. She hands her husband the armaments necessary for battle. All we can see in this image is a spear, although more may have been included within the parts of the lintel that are either too heavily eroded or have never been recovered. Bird Jaguar wears the same cotton armor that his father wore a generation before. In addition, he wears a jaguar pectoral, perhaps in honor of his lineage or more specifically in honor of his father (Schele and Miller 1986, 211). He also wears strips of cloth spattered with blood within his headdress and over his chest and shoulders. The bloodletting elements present in both Yaxchilan Lintels 41 and 26 support the idea that bloodletting was an important prerequisite to the dressing ceremony depicted in both lintels. This implies that the dressing ceremony of Lintel 26 and 41 is one of many steps in a longer bloodletting ritual of multiple phases. Schele and Miller suggest that the captives taken during the battle that was to follow the dressing ceremony may have been sacrificed as a final step in the bloodletting rituals depicted in the Yaxchilan lintels (Schele and Miller 1986, 178).

TOADS

Just as Lady K’abal Xook’s sacrifice of blood (Lintel 24) and her subsequent communion with the other world (Lintel 25) symbolize death, the objective of such a sacrifice is the renewal or rebirth of the ritualist, the community, the gods, and the entire cosmos. Likewise, the death that would result from the battle following the dressing ritual of Lintel 26 would lead to new life for the community of Yaxchilan.

4 The word bahlam in Mayan translates to jaguar.
Because of the close association of life and death in Maya thought, the gap between life and death in Maya ideology is often ambiguous. In Classic Maya art, iconography associated with death is often accompanied by symbols associated with life, as in Lintels 24, 25, and 26 at Yaxchilan. Often these symbols come to have multivalent meanings, such as the toad, which is associated with both life and death. An example of the dual symbolism of toads is apparent in their usage with the Mayan birth glyph $siyaj(a)$, a verb that includes what Proskouriakoff called an “upended frog” (Sharer 1994, 606), although others have identified the figure as a toad (Coggins 1988, 73). In different glyphic spellings of the word for birth, the upended toad is often used in conjunction with a split device like the one used in the emblem glyph of Yaxchilan, a symbol for the portal to the Otherworld from which the gods are ritually reborn (Martin 2004, 3). Coggins proposes that the birth glyph was read $muchah$. This word is related to the Mayan word $much$, meaning toad and female pudenda in Yucatec (Coggins 1988, 71) and “to draw up the legs and to shrink” in Tzotzil (Ibid., 74), perhaps a reference to the prenatal fetal position. The Tzotzil Maya use the word $amuch$ or toad (Laughlin 1975, 45) to refer to a human fetus (Morris 1985b, 73). According to Coggins, $muchah$, “was born,” was used in a complementary pair with $mukah$, “was buried” (Coggins 1988, 74). This observation links the upended toad glyph to both ends of the cycle of birth and death. According to Morris, toad textile imagery is a manifestation of powers of both life and death (Morris 1985b, 72).

While toads are closely related to ideas of life and fertility, they also have close ties to death and the Underworld. The ancient Maya believed them to be guardians of Xibalba (Tate 1992, 121), while modern Maya associate them with caves, believing that they guard the underground cave-house of the Earth Lord and the god of rain (Morris 1985b, 72). Because toads call forth the rain at the beginning of the rainy season, anyone who kills one is cursed with
consequential sickness and death (Laughlin 1975, 45). For the Maya, the association of these animals with life-giving water as well as with the watery Underworld creates an interesting web of meaning linking toads and other aquatic life to both life and death.

As a living creature, the toad symbolizes new life, which, for the Maya, inevitably follows death. The amphibian is an especially appropriate choice for this multivalent symbolism, since it passes freely between the Middleworld and the watery Underworld where the Lords of Death reside. According to Campbell, toads and frogs were “important to the Mayas as symbols of life-giving rain and fertility” (Campbell 1999, 13). Perhaps due to the fact that some species can produce tens of thousands of eggs in a single season, frogs and toads are also associated with fertility symbols and rites (Velázquez Cabrera 2003). The connection between water, aquatic life, and birth or fertility is rather straightforward. Snakes, fish, amphibians, and so on are all emblems of water, “infused with the sacred power of the abyss; lying quietly in lakes or swimming across rivers, they bring rain, moisture, and floods, thus governing the fertility of the world” (Eliade 1996, 207). The belief persists among the Maya that the distinctive sound of toads, most commonly heard at the onset of the rainy season, attracts the rain (Barrera Rubio 1980, 253). The link between anuran imagery and concepts of fertility and rebirth becomes clear when one considers the extent to which the Maya sacralize water and the role of the toad as a harbinger of the rainy season.

Beliefs persist among the Maya that that toads are the children, pets, and musicians of Chaak (Thompson 1990, 258), the god of rain, fertility, and agriculture. The primary color associated with water and Chaak, the god of rain, fertility, and agriculture was $yax$, or blue/green—the Maya make no distinctions between blue and green in their vocabulary. $Yax$ is the color associated with the center, or the vertical axis that passes through and connects the
Overworld, the Middleworld, and the Underworld. It is also the primary color of Yaxchilan Lintel 26. The ritual use of sacred and highly-valued Maya Blue pigment “materialised the presence of the rain god Chaak,” symbolizing “the most valued commodity required to sustain human life–water” (Arnold 2008, 154). In addition to its practical use in sustaining life, water is also associated with the watery Underworld and with the powers of primordial creation.

For the Maya, any body of water is viewed as a sacred portal to the world of the gods (Schlesinger 2001, 46). Among the Maya of Zinacantan, “water sources are without exception marked by cross shrines at their edges, which are the focus for elaborate waterhole ceremonies performed by the hamlet shamans” (Vogt 1981, 129). Anciently, the Maya treated their water sources with a similar amount of reverence. Throughout the Puuc region, the Maya marked their chultuns—small artificial cisterns used to collect and temporarily store rain water—with sacred iconography related to water and fertility. Chultuns feature a narrow opening and a wide storage area below ground level, the insides of which were lined with stucco or plaster to prevent leakage into the porous limestone bedrock. Modeled onto the stucco walls of chultuns throughout the Puuc Region of Maya lowlands are ancient images of animals, most often toads. The images represent “the expression of popular beliefs rooted in the rain cult” (Barrera Rubio 1980, 258). These anuran images seem to represent the powers of regeneration inherent in rain, water, and aquatic life.

Hocker figures such as those depicted on Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil in Lintel 26 are a ubiquitous image in the Maya codices, pottery, and monuments. Many Maya scholars, such as Schele, Miller, and Morris, identify the figure as a frog or toad (Schele and Miller 1986, 211; Morris 1985a, 322), although Looper contends that it may in fact represent several different types of animals. He points out instances in Cuautitlan and Veracruz in which the motif seems to
represent a lizard and an insect, respectively. In both of these instances, the hocker figures are marked by additional identifying characteristics, such as an elongated snout, neck, and tail, or wings and antennae (although Looper’s classification of the latter figure is dubious since insects consistently have six or more legs, whereas the hocker consistently has only four). Without these additions, however, the hocker seems to be consistently representative of toads or frogs. Looper admits that the image is often associated with aquatic imagery: “[I]t is not absolutely clear that this figure represents a frog or toad. It may be significant, however, that outside of textile contexts the figure is usually associated with water imagery, as dots, scrolls, stacks, or circles” (Looper 2000, 29). Furthermore, he mentions a seal in Veracruz where “the figure indeed seems to be a frog or toad, distinguished by bulbous eyes” (Ibid., 29). Surrounded by an aquatic diamond field, and without any features to distinguish them as any other animal, the hocker figures of Lintel 26 seems almost certainly to represent toads.

This toad symbol is also used on Yaxchilan Lintel 25, where it is easily overlooked by the casual observer. In Lintel 25, the hind quarters of a toad are seen within the open jaws of the skeletal serpent resting on the queen’s arm (Fig. 4.9). Whether the toad is emerging from or immersing into the mouth of the serpent is unclear. While a serpent would be most likely to ingest rather than spit out a toad in the natural world, it is a common theme within Maya art to show figures emerging from the jaws of a serpent, as seen in Lintel 25. Emergent figures, however, are consistently shown with their head coming outward from the body of the serpent. The toad in Lintel 25, then, seems to be entering rather than exiting the body of the skeletal serpent, symbolic of death and entrance into the Underworld.

In the image of Lintel 25, Lady K’abal Xook symbolically dies as she opens the portal to Xibalba and makes contact with the Otherworld, just as the hocker dies as it is gulped into the
body of the skeletal serpent. In Lintel 26, however, Lady K’abal Xook has been reborn, having successfully rebirthed the gods and regenerated her community with an increase of divine force. It is appropriate, then, that she is dressed with symbols of life and rebirth—the hocker motif framed by the diamond field, an aquatic symbol of the primordial sea, from which all creation emerged.

As the immerging toad symbolizes death, or entrance into the watery Underworld, an emergent toad, would symbolize rebirth. The same symbolism applies to any form of immersion into or emergence from the watery Underworld: “[I]mmersion in water signifies regression to the preformal, reincorporation into the undifferentiated mode of pre-existence. Emersion repeats the cosmosgenetic act of formal manifestation; immersion is equivalent to a dissolution of forms. This is why the symbolism of the water implies both death and rebirth” (Eliade 1987, 130). Perhaps the use of the toad as a symbol for both immersion and emergence was inspired in part by the underground hibernation and subsequent resurfacing of the wo toad each spring throughout the lowlands of the Yucatan at the beginning of the rainy season.

Coincidentally, the wo toad (Rhinophrynus dorsalis)—also known as the Mexican burrowing toad or woj much in Yucatec (Schlesinger 2001, 273)—bears a striking resemblance to the toad pictured on Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil. Tozzer and Glover point out the unusual pointed front and back ends of many of these frog images. Toads in Maya art are often depicted as a geometric rhombus with thin limbs emerging from the edges, as in the pattern of Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil, only a small part of which has been preserved on Lintel 26. The wo toad is flat, fat, and somewhat rhomboidal with a flat pointed snout and posterior, resembling the textile pattern with its diamond-shaped body ([Fig. 4.10]).
The *wo* toad can be found throughout most of central and northern Peten, Belize, and the northern Yucatan Peninsula. It is relatively small, only five to nine centimeters long; females tend to be larger than males. Its distinctive calloused snout and flattened chin are probably adaptations for its methods of burrowing and foraging. Most of the toad’s feeding would be done underground, as the *wo* toad only emerges after the year’s heaviest rains and during a short breeding season thereafter (Campbell 1999, 47).

The *wo* toad, according to Campbell, “inhabits just about any location where there are aguadas or other semipermanent or temporary water for several months a year” (Campbell 1999, 47). Perhaps this association with water and the toad’s adaptivity for living underground, in conjunction with the connection of toads in general to both life and death, are some of the factors that link the *wo* toad to the watery Maya Underworld. Furthermore, the coloration of the *wo* toad may have been significant to Maya ritualists. The skin of the *wo* toad is of a rubbery texture, with coloration ranging from grey to maroon-brown. An orange-red line runs down its back, surrounded on either side by spots of the same color. Perhaps this pattern was significant to the ancient Maya, who may have recognized the spots’ resemblance to spattered blood.

Tozzer and Glover point out that *wo* means “frog” in Mayan languages. *Wo* is also the second twenty-day month of the Maya calendar, which according to Landa corresponds to the height of the rainy season (Tozzer and Glover 1910, 309). The word also replicates the mating call made by the males toads at the beginning of the rainy season, a long-winded *uoooooooh* (Schlesinger 2001, 273) that can be heard for kilometers (Ibid., 275). The sound is mimicked today by Maya boys in many villages during the *ch’achac* ceremony, or the “summoning the Chacs” (Thompson 1990, 258). After months without substantial rain, the Maya build an altar to the rain god Chaak and call upon the god with offerings of incense, chicken, and maize. The men
present at the ritual make booming thunder noises and pour water from gourds onto the dry earth. Young boys squatting at each corner of the altar imitate the call of the wo toad (Schlesinger 2001, 275).

On page thirty-one of the Madrid Codex (Fig. 4.11), frogs labeled with the four world directional glyphs surround Chaak. Water pours out from the rain god’s lower quarters and from the mouth of each frog (Thompson 1990, 258), catalyzing the regeneration of the natural world. In this particular image, Chaak is illustrated in a hocker-like position associated with birth and fertility. Also illustrated within the Madrid Codex is a god with knob-like fingertips and two stripes running behind its eyes. Tozzer and Glover identify this as a deified Hyla eximia, a tree-toad endemic to Mexico. This particular species is especially conspicuous at the beginning of the rainy season, when it “repairs to pools of water to breed and is then very noticeable from its loud voice” (Tozzer and Glover 1910, 310). Perhaps this tree-toad’s association with rain is one reason why the codex links it to agriculture. Like the wo toad, the tree-toad would have been an important symbol of regeneration for the Maya because of its connections with water and fertility.

Specifically at Yaxchilan, artistic images of toads seem to be closely related to ideas of rain and regeneration. Velázquez Cabrera analyzed eight clay whistles found in the complex the West Complex of Yaxchilan dating to the Late Classic period (Velázquez Cabrera 2003). Three of the whistles resemble toads (Fig. 4.12), all of which hold their heads erect in the act of “singing,” as if heralding the rains of the rainy season. The throats of two of the toads are bulged, mimicking the process by which toads create sound in nature. Although the mechanism has been damaged on one of the whistles, all three of the toad whistles were at one time functional in producing musical sound at two different volumes, each whistle having two tonal holes and a
dual mechanism for creating sound. Furthermore, the frequency of the sound created by each whistle is unique. Perhaps the frequencies were meant to be played together during an ancient *ch’achac* ceremony or some other ceremony related to rain, fertility, or regeneration, just as a chorus of toads would have sung together in nature at the beginning of the rainy season.

Interestingly, two of the toad whistles are characterized by a smaller, simplified toad sculpted onto the backside of the toad figure. This addition represents a newborn toad riding on the back of its mother, a realistic representation of the way many species of toads care for their young in nature. The inclusion of the baby toad figure alludes to the procreative properties of toads in Maya ideology.

**REBIRTHING THE WORLD**

The upended frog glyph mentioned above—usually read *siyaj(a)* (Sharer 1994, 606) but alternatively translated as *muchah* (Coggins 1988, 73-74)—refers to the Maya verb “to give birth.” According to Coggins, the toad is a symbol for birth in many cultures throughout the world (Coggins 1988, 73). Kennedy reports that the poison from the glands of the giant marine toad has been used in Oaxaca to increase the contractions of the uterus in childbirth. She states, “Toads must have been one of the more obstreperous items in the midwife’s bag of tricks and a sovereign tool at the lying-in” (Kennedy 1982, 276). Additional examples of the connection between toads and birth exist throughout Mesoamerica, such as the Aztec goddess of lust and childbirth, Tlazolteotl (Coggins 1988, 73). The Aztec goddess is shown on page eleven of the Codex Borbonsicus giving birth to the god of corn. She is portrayed with her arms bent outward and her knees up in a hocker-like birthing position ([Fig. 4.13](#)). The fact that she wears the flayed skin of a sacrificial victim combines elements of death and birth within a single image.
The upended frog glyph is also used metaphorically during bloodletting rituals, during which the ruler ‘gives birth’ to the gods. The Maya believed that the act of bloodletting literally gave birth to the ancestral gods who inhabit the blood of the ruler (Stuart 1984, 14). “The Maya believed that bloodletting brought the gods as well as their ancestors into physical existence in human space and time” (Schele and Miller 1986, 183), at least for the duration of the ritual. When that ritual was carved into stone, however, the ritual enactment and the presence of the gods would continue on ad infinitum. On Ixlu Stela 2 (Fig. 4.14), four deities float in blood scrolls above the head of the ruler as he performs autosacrifice. Two of these gods have been identified as the Paddlers, the Old Jaguar God and the Old Stingray God, who “paddle the canoe of life” between the world of the living and the world of the dead (Schele and Miller 1986, 181), drawing attention to the open channel between life and death that bloodletting generates. As long as the stela remains standing, that channel remains open for the Maya community.

References to water iconography—paddlers and canoes, sea shells, sea creatures, etc.—are a common theme in Maya funerary iconography. This seems to signify a preoccupation with a return to the primordial watery chaos in anticipation of rebirth. “Thus all the shells and remains of other sea creatures in burials associate the dead with this primal maritime source of life. [. . .] This is the womb, another watery environment” (Coggins 1988, 77). The convolution of sea and womb symbolism is prevalent in Maya funerary art, such as in the great tomb of K’inich Janaab Pakal I in Palenque. Specifically at Palenque, the rulers, as the ritual enactors of autosacrifice, sometimes possessed “an epithet in which they are dubbed the literal ‘mothers’ or ‘nurturers’ of gods, probably in the sense of blood being a nurturing substance” (Stuart 1984, 15). Perhaps these associations with blood and motherhood are one reason why the king’s sarcophagus is shaped like a uterus and painted red on the inside (Fig. 4.15). The body of the
king, when discovered, was covered in bright red cinnabar, mimicking the nourishing blood inside the womb. While within this funerary womb, the king remains in a death-like state but is empowered with the potential for rebirth. During bloodletting the ruler and the cosmos dissolve into primordial chaos in order to stimulate new life and regeneration. Bloodletting and death for the Maya seem to initiate a reentry into the primordial sea—or into the womb—from which life originally springs.

Stuart mentions that “it is very common to see Maya rulers dressed in female costume when they appear in association with a bloodletting theme” (Stuart 1984, 15), such as in Copan Stela H. Maudslay initially identified the stela’s figure as a Maya queen or priestess because of its long skirt, a typical clothing item of Maya women. It wasn’t until Maya hieroglyphs became legible that the ritualist was identified as Waxaklajuun Ubaah K’awiil, a male ruler of Copan (Looper 2002, 171). Stone explains the connection between male penis-perforation and feminine fertility in practical terms. Male autosacrifice “conceptually transformed the male genitalia into a doubly potent agent of fertility, capable of shedding two life-giving fluids: semen and blood. The shedding of blood from the male sexual organ also mimics the female menstrual cycle. Through this and other ideological constructs, Maya kings appropriated female fertility symbols to strengthen the power of their political office” (Stone 1988, 75-76). Stone contends that sacrifice performed by a female ruler was considered secondary to that of a male ruler, since male sacrifice encompassed the fertile powers of both masculinity and femininity. There is no question, however, that the Maya would have considered the sacrifice of Lady K’abal Xook in Lintels 24, 25, and 26 to be divine and vital to the regeneration of the community and the cosmos. In fact, the appropriation by male rulers of feminine modes of fertility may be evidence of their immense power and sacredness in the ancient Maya mind. In contemporary Maya
communities, male lineage heads and certain high status ritual specialists are called *chuchkajaw*, or mother-father (Bassie-Sweet, 2000, 2; Tedlock 1981, 321), combining the powers of both genders under male leadership.

The ruler takes on a nurturing role as he or she sacrifices divine blood for the nurturing of the cosmos, much as a pregnant woman would undergo the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth to create new life. As stated by Schele and Miller, “The king is the mother of the gods because he gives them birth and nourishes them through his gift of blood” (Schele and Miller 1986, 184). At its essence, autosacrifice was an expression of the motherly, generative relationship of the ruler toward nature and the community. The conjuration of spirits following the sacrifice of blood is sometimes referred to in Maya texts as “the ‘birth’ of the god” (Stuart 1984, 14-15). Numerous images show small, newly reborn gods floating in scrolls of blood or afterbirth (Looper 2000, 20), such as the gods swimming through the blood serpent above the doorway of Copan Temple 22, mentioned above, or the Paddler Gods floating in blood above a Maya lord in Stela 25 at Dos Pilas, which reads, “They were born, his lords, the Paddlers” (Schele and Miller 1986, 183). This birth imagery reinforces the feminine nature of autosacrifice.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering the associations of toads with both death and rebirth in ancient Maya ideology, it is highly probable that the toad motif of Lady K’abal Xook’s ceremonial huipil has cosmological valence as a symbol for the regeneration of the cosmos through autosacrifice. The toad, whether represented on ceremonial textiles, molded inside chultuns, or mimicked during a *ch’achac* ceremony, is a multivalent symbol. At once the toad represents both life and death, inseparable ideas in Maya ideology. Given the central role of the toad as a fertility symbol and as
a portent of the rains, it seems likely that the toad figures on Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil serve as an iconological symbol for the ability of the Maya ruler to rebirth the world through autosacrifice. In combination with the cross symbols of Lintel 24 and the flower quatrefoils of Lintel 25, the toads of Lintel 26 complete the process of descent into the watery Underworld and a regenerative ascent, catalyzed by divine blood.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

The iconographic progression depicted within Lintels 24, 25, and 26 of Yaxchilan of centering, opening the divine portal, and rebirthing the world and the gods are directly related to sacred Maya theological principles. The iconography of these lintels draws from an ancient and unifying theological system wherein sacred rituals were believed to draw on the divine, life-giving powers wielded by the gods during the creation of the world. Through sacred iconography, the artists of the lintels of Yaxchilan Structure 23 highlight the cosmic significance of the ritual events they memorialize in stone. This iconography reinforces Classic Maya beliefs of the divine nature of the ruler and his ability to rebirth the gods and generate the cosmos through sacrifice and metaphorical death.

If one assumes a degree of realism in the images depicted in the Yaxchilan lintels, then one can deduce that Lady K’abal Xook wears a different ceremonial huipil in each of the ritual events depicted in Yaxchilan Lintels 24, 25, and 26. This change of costume implies that the events depicted in each lintel were not enacted within one uninterrupted incident. The dates carved onto the lintels confirm this assumption, as the dates of the lintels’ execution and the dates on which each of the rituals occurred are separated by several years. As the event depicted on each lintel is associated with some phase of royal autosacrifice, the lintels represent three separate occurrences of the ritual. Furst suggests that Lintels 24 and 25 “may be read in sequence, the one a function of the other” (Furst 1976, 187). Schele and Miller include Lintel 26 in this sequence, identifying the dressing and presentation of the king preparatory to battle as an important step in the bloodletting ceremonial sequence. They claim that the scenes on each lintel portray “different points in the same ritual that compose a narrative whole, much like sequential frames in a comic strip” (Schele and Miller 1986, 177). The lintels represent separate steps in a
A unified ritual sequence, however separated in time each part of that sequence may be. Each lintel embodies a pivotal phase in the autosacrificial ritual. Judging by the ubiquity of the bloodletting motif in Maya art throughout the Classic Maya region, the ritual was recurrently performed by Maya rulers in order to bring about cosmic regeneration.

The iconography present on Lady K’abal Xook’s huipils in Yaxchilan Lintels 24, 25, and 26 was not chosen arbitrarily from the variety of symbols associated with bloodletting. The iconographic significance of each huipil pattern harmoniously underscores the cosmological principle underlying each ritual phase of Yaxchilan Lintels 24, 25, and 26. The iconography within each lintel underscores the ideas of death and regeneration and unites these two seemingly disparate concepts into one unified whole as they relate to royal autosacrifice. When iconographically analyzed as a set, the lintels signify much more than could be expressed by each lintel taken in isolation. To my knowledge, no one has analyzed the sequence of Lady K’abal Xook’s costume designs in this manner. My research, therefore, contributes to existing research by exposing ways in which death and rebirth are expressed within the lintels and showing how the iconography of Lady K’abal Xook’s ceremonial huipils gives order and depth to those concepts and further unifies the lintels as a sequential set.

To claim that ancient Maya iconography was employed in a three-part sequence in Yaxchilan Lintels 24, 25, and 26 is not to say that such deliberate sequencing of Maya symbols occurred often elsewhere in the Maya world, or even in Yaxchilan itself. Often, Maya artists combined multiple related symbols within the same piece of art rather than dividing them sequentially. One such example is depicted on a Late Classic panel from Calakmul, where various icons related to bloodletting and aquatic imagery are used in what seems to be no particular organized order on the uniform of Chak Ak’aach Yuk, a ruler from La Corona posed
as a ritual ballplayer (Martin and Grube 2008, 110) (Fig. 5.1). His uniform includes iconographic symbols such as birds, toads, crossbands, quatrefoils, and stepped frets elaborately accompanied with knots, tassels, and feathers (Looper 2000, 5). Many of the major icons of Yaxchilan Lintels 24, 25, and 26 are combined here into one image. Such a mélange of sacred symbolism is often seen on ancient Maya ritual clothing throughout the Classic Maya world. The lintels of Yaxchilan Structure 23, however, seem to be a demonstrable case wherein specific symbols are singled out and deliberately used in an ordered sequence. In this manner, the artists elucidate the significance of certain steps within the royal bloodletting ritual and the changes that take place as a result of these rituals.

Elsewhere in the ancient Maya world, another instance of the deliberate ordering of iconography to communicate ritual change has already been discussed in chapter three. At Uxmal, on the façade of the North Building of Uxmal’s Nunnery Quadrangle, symbols also present within the Yaxchilan lintels were constructed in a sequential manner in order to represent the cosmic significance of bloodletting. A stone serpent slithers across the aquatic rhomboidal field of the North Building’s façade, dividing a cluster of concentric squares on the left side of the snake from a group of carved flowers on the right. This unique combination of symbols seems to refer to the power of autosacrifice to open the portal to the Otherworld.

A more common combination of symbols—those making up the Quadripartite God—are also combined in a structured arrangement in order to communicate the cosmological effects of bloodletting. Each representation of the god is replete with bloodletting imagery, and the symbols making up the figure are highly ordered in a way that can be read sequentially, much as the symbolic set of crosses, flowers, and toads in Yaxchilan Lintels 24, 25, and 26.
A stone tablet from Temple 14 at Palenque (Fig. 5.2) portrays the deification of K’ínich Kan Bahlam II, who was already deceased when his brother had acceded to the throne and erected the tablet. The tablet provides the exact date of the king’s apotheosis, along with the amount of time it took for him to defeat the Lords of Death—exactly three years and 260 days since the date of his death. This degree of specificity supports the claim by Schele and Miller that “[t]he finale of the journey after death, the soul’s triumphal exit from Xibalba, was a clearly defined concept to the Maya” (Schele and Miller 1986, 274). Like the Hero Twins, K’ínich Kan Bahlam has successfully defeated the Lords of Death and emerges victorious from Xibalba. With one leg bent at the knee and slightly raised, he performs “the dance of rebirth” (Ibid. 267) as he stands above two bands of water, symbolizing emergence from the watery Underworld. His position above the bands of water also signifies his triumph over Xibalba, significantly placed below the king’s feet, much as a captive after battle would be depicted crouching under the feet of the king. Within the king’s headdress is a variation of the Quadripartite God, an important symbol of the transformative, cyclical process of death and rebirth in nature through bloodletting.

The Quadripartite God (Fig. 5.3) represents a zoomorphized sacrificial offering plate (Mathews and Garber 2004, 52). It is appropriately named for the four distinct symbols combined within representations of the god. These four symbols all relate to the rite of letting blood and its role in rebirthing the world. The primary symbol or main sign of the god is a zoomorphized image of the sun as it sits halfway above the horizon. The lower jaw of the Quadripartite God is made of bone, as if the sun were half-immersed in the Underworld, at the mid-way point of rising or setting. The cyclical rising and setting of the sun serves as an obvious
symbol within nature for death and regeneration. Like the toad halfway swallowed up by the skeletal serpent in Yaxchilan Lintel 25, it is difficult to say if the sun figure is immersing into or emerging from the watery Underworld. Perhaps the directional ambiguity of these images is deliberate, intended to underscore the cyclical progression from life, to death, and life again. For the viewer, it certainly obscures the actual differences between life and death, combining the two in a single symbol to show the inseparability of the two states of being.

The *k'in* glyph set within a flat bloodletting bowl on the god’s forehead further marks it as a sun deity. Schele and Miller point out that the combination of the bowl and the sun glyph may also be a clever pun combining the Maya glyph for bowl, *lac*, with the word *k'in*, forming the word *lak'in*, “east” or “next sun” (Schele and Miller 1986, 194), marking the god as a rising rather than a setting sun. If this is the case, then the figure’s emphasis on rising rather than setting gives added weight to the cosmic regeneration caused by bloodletting rather than the ritual death necessary to instigate it. This is parallel to the lintels of Yaxchilan Structure 23, the artistic and iconographic reversals of which conclude with the revitalizing toad iconography of Lintel 26 juxtaposed against the iconography related to death in Lintel 25. The reversals of direction and color within Lintel 25, and the return of Lintel 26 to the status quo established in Lintel 24 further emphasize this process of death and rebirth.

Beyond the bloodletting bowl atop the Quadripartite God’s forehead, bloodletting directly relates in multiple ways to the iconography within the image of the Quadripartite God. The set of four symbols evinced by the Quadripartite God make direct reference to bloodletting and its effects on the cosmos. The three symbols fixed above the bloodletting bowl atop the god’s forehead incorporate the act of bloodletting into the regenerative progression from death to rebirth. One of the most prominent symbols within the image of the Quadripartite God is the
stingray spine centered on top of the god’s head. As a primary bloodletting tool, the stingray spine is an explicit symbol for autosacrifice.

The stingray spine atop the Quadripartite God is placed between a spondylus shell and a maize sprout. Shells were often left in funerary offerings as a symbol of the watery Underworld. The shell is an important symbol in depictions of Underworld deities and settings. On the opposite side of the perforator is a young leafy sprout—perhaps a maize sprout—emerging from a set of crossbands. At Palenque, as depicted on Pier C of House D (Fig. 5.4), this sprout has grown into a small World Tree, emerging from the top of a Quadripartite God held in the arm of a Maya lord. The sprout of the Quadripartite God represents the World Tree in miniature, and the crossbands from which it springs may signify its central location as the center of the universe, or axis mundi. On the sarcophagus lid of K’ínich Janaab Pakal I in Palenque, the crossbands have been replaced by a cimi or death symbol, probably in reference to the king’s death and the rebirth that will inevitably accompany it (Fig. 5.5). Typically the sprouting plant is symbolic of life; this may be manifest as the sprouting of maize, the regeneration of the Maize God, or the sprouting of the World Tree.

A World Tree emerging from the top of a Quadripartite God also appears within the central panel of the Temple of the Cross at Palenque (Fig. 5.6). The World Tree grows straight up from the stingray spine atop the Quadripartite God, flanked by a spondylus shell and a small sprout emerging from crossed bands. On the left panel of the Temple of the Cross, K’ínich Kan Bahlam II scatters blood from a small inverted Quadripartite God held in his lowered hands. Opposite him, carved within the panel furthest to the right, is God L, one of the leading gods of the Underworld. The juxtaposition of these two figures on either side of the World Tree in the
central panel is an appropriate analogue for death and regeneration. Presumably, the king’s sacrifice led to the growth of this World Tree, or to the rebirth of the cosmos.

In total, the Quadripartite God appears three times on the panels within the Temple of the Cross. In the frieze set above the Temple of the Cross’s three panels is the Quadripartite God, placed at the tail of the Celestial Monster (Fig. 5.7). Here, the body of the Celestial Monster is represented as a skyband with crocodilian limbs, bisected by a Celestial Bird. Alternatively, the body of the Celestial Monster is represented as blood scrolls or the body of a serpent or crocodile. In this case, the Quadripartite God is inverted to show that it is a burden carried by the Celestial Monster (Schele and Freidel 1990, 408). The k’in symbol marking the Quadripartite God is complemented by a Venus symbol within the head of the Celestial Monster. Together, the two entities form a symbol of the movement of Venus and the sun across the sky. Stylized blood falls from the open maw of the Celestial Monster and from the Quadripartite God. Perhaps this blood represents the divine blood of the ruler as it is ingested by the gods or the cosmos. Alternatively, it may act as a substitute symbol for gods and other divine figures that emerge from serpentine portals, rebirthed by bloodletting ritualists.

One Late Classic polychrome plate, K1270 (Fig. 5.8), was probably used as a bloodletting bowl. The image painted on the plate reiterates the equivalence of the message communicated by the lintels of Yaxchilan Structure 23, the snake at Uxmal’s Nunnery Quadrangle, and the Quadripartite God. Painted in the center of the plate is a bloodletting bowl atop the head of the Quadripartite God. The centrality of the bloodletting bowl emphasizes its function in what appears to be a clever visual pun. A blood serpent emerges from the bowl, replacing the stingray spine, the shell, and the sprout normally placed atop the head of the Quadripartite God. The serpent takes on cosmological significance as the bridge between the
world of the death and the world of the living through bloodletting. It is the blood of the ruler, ancienctly spilled into this plate, which conjures the blood serpent, a portal to the Underworld. Out of the serpent’s mouth comes the head of a deity, similar to the ancestral deity rebirthed by Lady K’abal Xook in Yaxchilan Lintel 25.

The three symbols atop the Quadripartite God—the spondylus shell, the stringray spine, and the maize sprout lined up within a bloodletting plate above an image of the sun—form an iconographic set of symbols for centering, death, and rebirth through the bloodletting ritual. The placement of the sprout emerging from the crossbands directly opposite the spondylus shell, with the stingray spine at the center, symbolically places bloodletting as the bridge between death (the shell) and life (the sprout, or World Tree). It is through the letting of blood that a divine ruler may descend into the Underworld, rebirth gods and divine ancestors, and regenerate the cosmos. The symbol of the Quadripartite God, then, seems to communicate the same process of centering, death, and rebirth as the sequence of lintels on Yaxchilan Structure 23 and the snake at the Nunnery Quadrangle.

COSMOLOGICAL REBIRTH

Carved in intricate detail on the surface of Vase K2776 (Fig. 5.9) is a vision of the universe created through divine autosacrifice. The horror vacui of the vase’s outer decor symbolizes a dynamic cosmos filled with life and interaction. The main figure of the image carved onto the vessel is a god or Maya lord, holding a blood serpent in each arm. One serpent releases from its jaws the sun, with night at its tail, representing the Overworld. Creatures of the Middleworld—birds, turtles, crocodiles, and humans—entwine themselves within the undulating body of the day serpent. The other serpent represents the watery Underworld. This death serpent is flanked by images of the Underworld—Lords of Death and water imagery—and opens its maw to release
a zoomorphic sacrificial flint, a symbol of death and autosacrifice. The two opposing halves of Middleworld and Underworld—life and death—make up the universe created by the king or deity through bloodletting: “[H]is sacrifice of blood creates a mirrored vision, and from that vision are created day and night, birds of the sky, the waters of the primordial sea in which the world floats, the plants of the earth, death and sacrifice” (Schele and Miller 1986, 181). In short, the entire cosmos is rebirthed through the symbolic death enacted through autosacrifice.

According to Schele and Miller, “Ritual was conceived as the bridge between the supernatural and the mundane worlds, and the king was the agent of power who made the transition from the sacred to the mundane” (Schele and Miller 1986, 41). This statement seems especially true of the autosacrificial bloodletting performed by divine Maya rulers, which actuated cosmic regeneration through ritual death. Whether the cycle of death and rebirth is symbolized by the icons surrounding an undulating blood serpent, by the Quadripartite God, or by the progression of the cross, the flower, and the toad as in the lintels of Yaxchilan Structure 23, the message of death and rebirth through royal bloodletting is the same.

The interrelatedness of the three lintels of Structure 23 as a series facilitates iconographic comparisons within the set. The changing iconography within this series of lintels, moving from left to right5 (from Lintel 24, to Lintel 25, ending with Lintel 26), communicates beliefs that were fundamental to ancient Maya ideology. The subtle iconographic changes in the huipil pattern from one lintel to the next symbolically represent the cosmological significance of each stage of the bloodletting ritual. The changing symbols of Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil pattern as one moves from Lintel 24 to Lintel 26 directly parallel the ancient ritual concepts and processes of centering, opening the portal to the other world, and rebirthing the cosmos present within each

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5 Like us, the Maya generally read from left to right as well as from top to bottom.
lintel. The huipil iconography on Lintel 24 emphasizes a cross motif set within an aquatic field, referencing the cosmic role of the Maya ruler as the *axis mundi*. The floral quatrefoils of Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil on Lintel 25 represent open portals to the Underworld, portals opened by autosacrifice. The symbolism is echoed in the otherworldly messenger emerging from the open maw of the blood serpent hovering above the Maya queen. The toad pattern of Lady K’abal Xook’s huipil on Lintel 26 refers to new life emerging from sacrificial death. These three symbols combine to offer the viewer a more complete understanding of the role of autosacrifice for the Classic era Maya and how it relates to ancient Maya conceptions of death and rebirth. Through the sacred blood sacrifice and metaphorical death of the Maya ruler, the gods were brought into contact with the world of the living; the entire cosmos, gods and mankind included, were reborn, with the ruler as the center and source of creation.
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