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**THE TREE OF LIFE SYMBOL; ITS SIGNIFICANCE
IN ANCIENT AMERICAN RELIGION**

**A Thesis
Presented to
The Department of Archaeology
Brigham Young University**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts**

**by
Irene M. Briggs**

June 1950

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THE TREE OF LIFE SYMBOL; ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN
ANCIENT AMERICAN RELIGION

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I

The Problem of the Thesis

When the Europeans arrived in the New World in the early sixteenth century, they were amazed to discover that the cross was extensively used by the natives as a religious symbol. Many fantastic hypotheses were advanced by the early explorers to explain its presence, some even postulating that St. Thomas had come to the New World and taught the Christian religion to the ancient Americans.

Since the time of its early discovery much has been learned concerning the distribution of this symbol in the New World. It was used in architecture, such as cruciform tombs, and was extensively employed in sculptures and hieroglyphic manuscripts as a decorative element. Its many forms included the Greek, Latin, St. Andrew, Maltese, and Tau crosses, as well as a conventionalized cross-shaped tree that has since been designated as the "Tree of Life."

The latter form of the cross, the so-called "Tree of Life," is one of the most interesting symbols in the ancient religion of the central "Mesoamerican" area of the New World (that is, central Mexico and northern Central America). The religious significance of this symbol has yet to be determined and constitutes the problem of this thesis.

Purpose of the Study

Not too much is known today about the religion of ancient Mesoamerica, and it will only be through an intensive comparative study of the various deities as presented in the hieroglyphic manuscripts and native writings, and of the symbolic religious art in the architectural and sculptural remains, that greater knowledge of the subject will be gained. The "Tree of Life," one of the most striking religious symbols of the area, may be one key to such knowledge.

There is also the possibility that such a study will give enlightenment on the origin of the high civilizations of this area. There are today especially two theories advanced to solve the problem of Mesoamerican origins, the first--maintained by nearly all Americanists--that the advanced Mesoamerican civilizations developed indigenously in the New World; and the second, that they were the result of diffusion or direct colonization from the Old World. In view of the

fact that the "Tree of Life" is also a prominent religious symbol in the ancient civilizations of the Old World, its occurrence in ancient America, if carefully studied and compared with that in the Old World, may constitute important evidence for solving this fundamental problem of Mesoamerican origins.

Many writers have mentioned the presence of the cross in the New World, but there have been few publications which have dealt with the symbol exclusively. In 1879 the Smithsonian Institute published Charles Rau's The Palenque Tablet ("Tablet of the Cross").¹ This, however, is an historical study which makes no attempt to interpret the symbolism of the tablet. In 1901 Adam Quiroga's La Cruz en America was published,² and in 1902 Societe Scientifique de Bruxelles published Les Croix Precolombiennes by E. Beauvois.³ These two publications also are of an historical and descriptive nature only. The writer knows of no publication or study other than the present one which concerns itself primarily with the important problem of interpretation of the "Tree of Life" symbol.

¹Charles Rau, The Palenque Tablet (Washington: Published by the Smithsonian Institute, 1879).

²Adam Quiroga, La Cruz en America (Buenas Aires: Editorial Americana, 1901).

³E. Beauvois, Les Croix Precolombiennes (Bruxelles: Publiée par La Société Scientifique de Bruxelles, 1902).

Method and Procedure

The "Tree of Life" is closely associated with a number of symbols in the great complex of Mesoamerican religious symbolism, as for example with the symbols of the four directions and associated four "Sky-bearers." It will be impossible in this preliminary study to include a discussion of such related symbols. The present investigation will be limited, therefore, to the cruciform tree and to those closely associated elements which must especially be considered in the interpretation of the symbol.

It will be necessary, also, to place the greatest emphasis on the "Tree of Life" in the Maya area, since in that region are found the clearest as well as earliest and most numerous representations of the symbol.

There will of necessity be weaknesses in the study. In the first place, the field of religious symbolism is vast and complex, requiring years of intensive study to acquire a basic understanding of the interrelationship of specific symbols. Then, too, until the hieroglyphic writing is fully deciphered, there must always be an element of uncertainty as to the actual meaning of certain signs and symbols. However, despite such handicaps, it will be possible to arrive at certain definite conclusions as to the meaning of the "Tree of Life" symbol.

Organization of the Thesis

The study will consist of eight chapters and an appendix. In the remaining part of this introductory chapter will be presented background information essential to a full understanding of the problem, and a survey of the religion of the advanced cultist civilization of ancient Mesoamerica. Chapter II will present the "Tree of Life" symbol as a whole. The next five chapters will discuss the main elements of the symbol involved in its interpretation. Chapter VIII will consist of a summary of the preceding material and interpretative conclusions. The appendix will discuss an intriguing significance of the "Tree of Life" symbol in ancient America, in view of its occurrence also in the Old World.

II

The Archaeological Setting

The Mesoamerican Area

The area of the New World embraced in this study comprises that portion of Mexico and Central America where, in pre-Columbian times, flourished the high civilization of those remarkable peoples known to us today as the Maya, Aztecs, Toltecs, Zapotecs, Olmecs, etc.; that is, the area comprising the states of Mexico lying south of roughly 22° North Latitude, including those in northern Central America, and the territory of Quintana Roo; also, in Central America, the republics of

Guatemala and El Salvador, the western parts of Honduras and Nicaragua, and northern Costa Rica (see Figure 1). In 1943 the term "Mesoamerica" was introduced to designate this area in place of the over-worked term "Middle America," which had been used by archaeologists to refer not only to the region occupied by these peoples of advanced cultures, but also to the entire territory from Panama to the Rio Grande, at times including even the Andean region of South America.⁴

The Ancient Archaeological History of Mesoamerica⁵

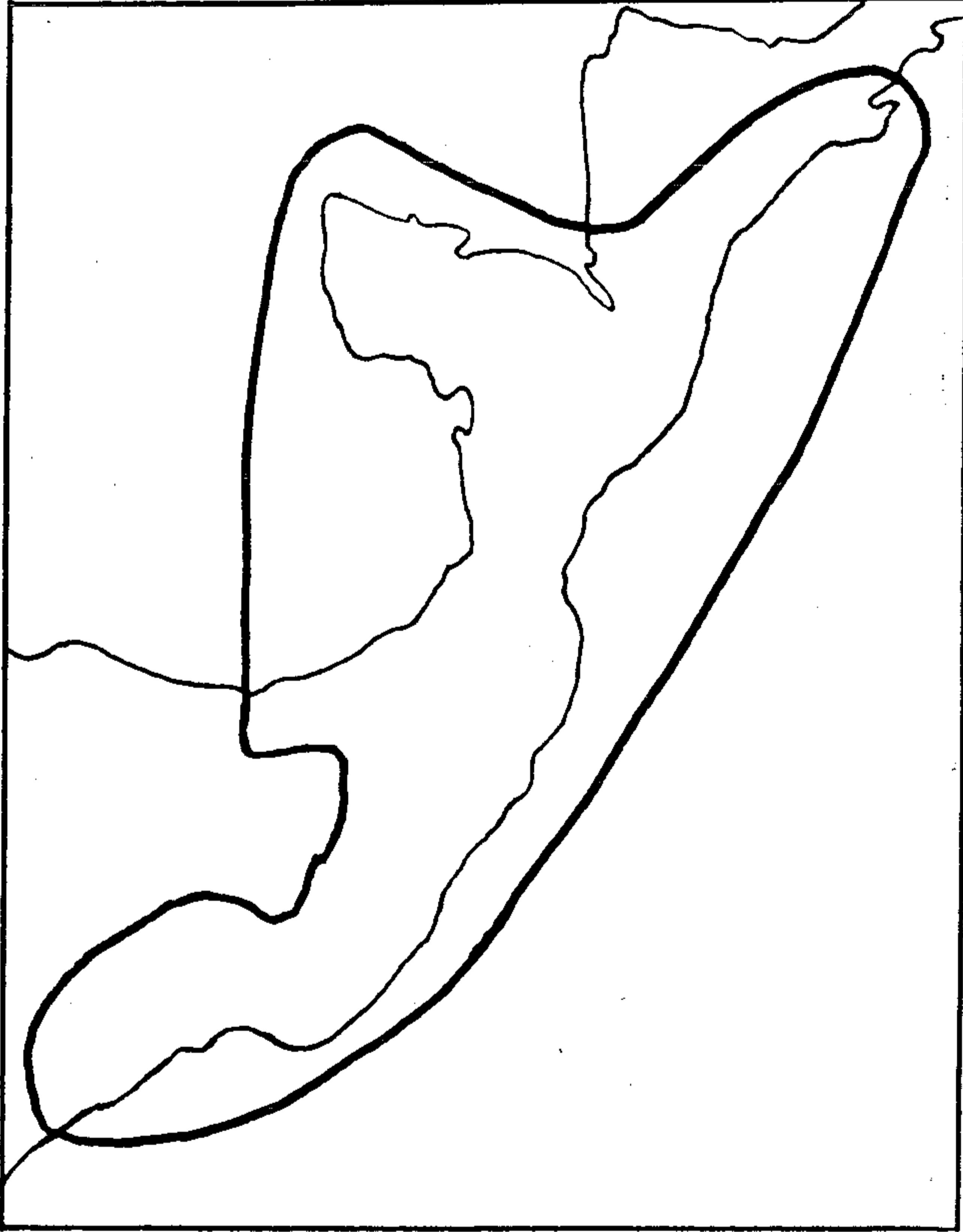
Of the first steps toward high civilization in Mesoamerica, very little is known. A few traces of early hunting groups dating from late Ice Age and early post-Ice Age times--that is, from a period about 15,000 years ago--have been found in the Valley of Mexico, but they apparently bear no relationship to the later peoples occupying that area.

Above the remains of these early "Nomadic Hunting" cultures there should be found the remains of primitive farming cultures, representing the rudimentary stage of civilization, including the beginnings of sedentary life based on

⁴For a detailed characterization of the "Mesoamerican area" see Paul Kirchoff, Acta Americana, Vol. 1, No. 1 (January-March, 1943), pp. 92-107.

⁵After M. Wells Jakeman, Class Lectures, course in Mesoamerican archaeology, Brigham Young University, 1949.

FIGURE I



Map 1 THE MESOAMERICAN AREA (After Kirchoff, 1943)

agriculture and the development of such arts as pottery-making, cloth-making, and house-building. Strangely enough, however, of this stage of culture growth no definite trace has yet been found in Mesoamerica.

The earliest advanced culture so far identified in the area may be said to represent a stage of development midway between the undiscovered and hypothetic "Primitive Farming" cultures and the "High Mesoamerican" civilization. As yet discovered only at sites in highland central Mexico (the "Lower Middle" or "Copilco-Zacatenco" culture of that region), this first ancient agricultural civilization of Mesoamerica dates probably, in its undiscovered beginnings, to the third millennium B. C. In this period the basic subsistence complex and handicraft technologies of ancient American civilization, such as maize agriculture, loom-weaving, pottery-making by the coil technique, and wattle-and-daub house construction, suddenly make their appearance. Numerous hand-made clay figurines apparently represent a mother goddess as votive offerings in a fertility cult. This first advanced culture may be designated (in view of its characteristic, simple figurine cult), the "Early Cultist" civilization.

The second advanced agricultural civilization of Mesoamerica, the "Advanced Cultist" or "High Mesoamerican," which was characterized by developed ritual, saw the flowering

of Mesoamerican culture. Although more complex and progressive, from the beginning, than the "Early Cultist" civilization, it was evidently not a direct outgrowth of the latter, and is, therefore, also of unknown origin. This period is marked by the "dominance of religion, or at least cultism, in nearly all activities, . . . centering in the worship or cult of a god of rain, fertility, or life, and featuring temple ritual and symbolic religious art."⁶ Its general characteristics include towns and cities, intensive agriculture (with irrigation in dry regions), true corn, fine cotton textiles, advanced pottery, mound-building, masonry and architecture, fine stone sculpture, metallurgy, hieroglyphic writing, advanced calendar system, theocratic government, craft specialization, and class distinctions.

This civilization had three main periods of development. During the earliest, the "Formative" or "Pre-Classic" period or culture, dating from perhaps 200 B. C. or earlier to about 350 or 400 A. D., the principal characteristics of the Advanced Cultist civilization were established. In the final phase of this earliest period, dating to about 200-350 (400) A. D. (the only phase of this period so far discovered to any extent), there emerged such regional cultist developments of the

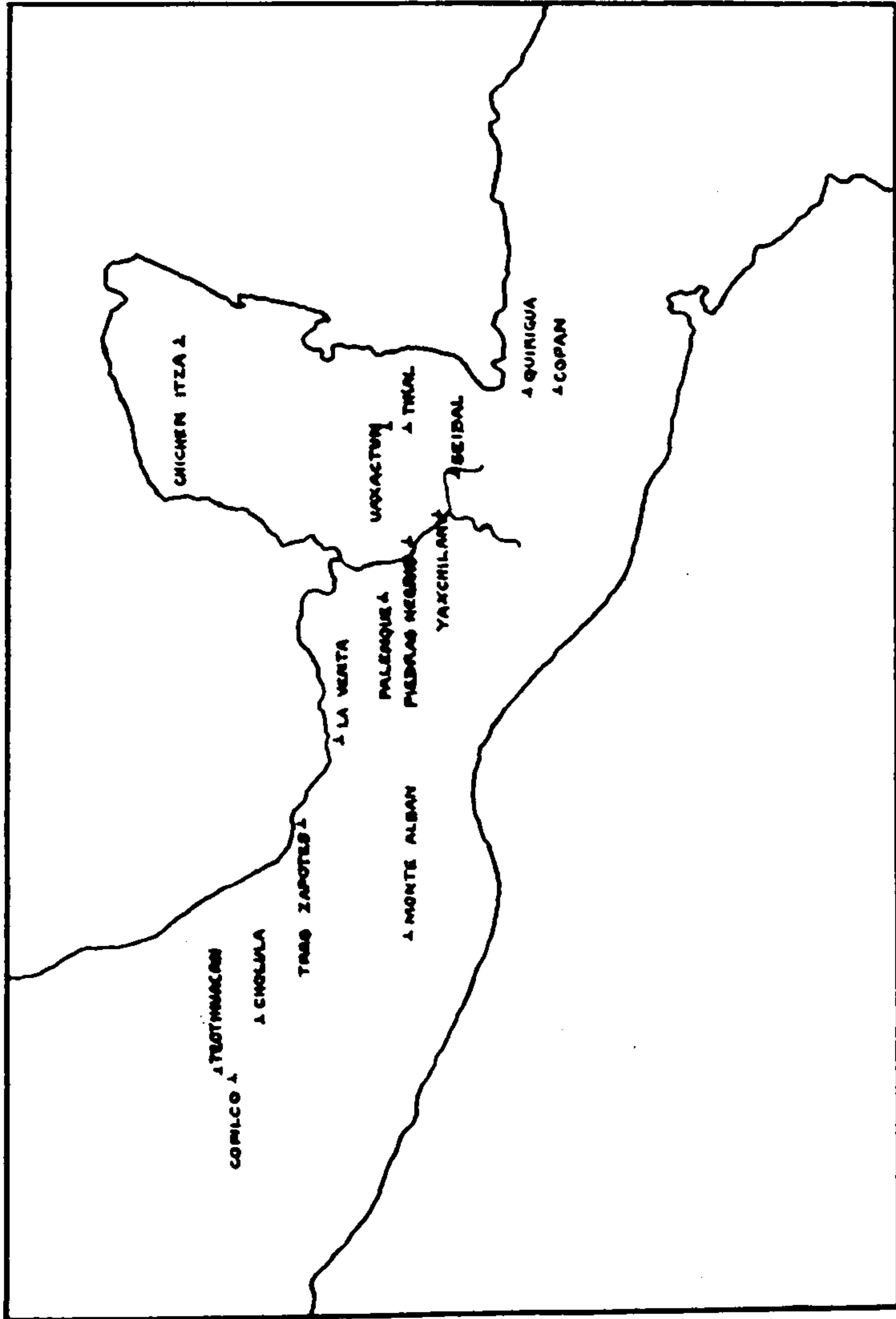
⁶Jakeman, loc. cit.

civilization as the "Early Olmec" in southern Mexico and the Gulf Coast region and the nearly identical "Early Maya" in Yucatan, the "Upper Middle" or "Cuicuilco-Ticomán" in highland central Mexico, and the "Miraflores" in highland Guatemala.

The second period of the Advanced Cultist civilization was that of the "Florescent Ceremonial" or "Classic" cultures, or advanced regional specializations (Classic Olmec or La Venta, Classic Maya, Teotihuacan, Classic Zapotec), dating from about 350 (400) to about 890 A. D. This was the period of full cultist development, featuring high pyramid temples, complex ceremonial centers, elaborate rituals occasionally involving human sacrifice, and a rich religious symbolism ("Jaguar mask," "feathered serpent," "tree of life," etc.). It was also the period of the classic achievements of ancient Mesoamerica in such arts as stone sculpture, stucco modeling, vase painting, and astronomy and chronology.

The Florescent Ceremonial or Classic period came to an end in change, unrest, and temporary retrogression; some cities fell into ruin or were abandoned, while others passed under alien domination. Following the disappearance of the ceremonial cultures, however, the Advanced Cultist civilization was again unified under militant cultists, such as the famous Teltec

FIGURE 2



GENERAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MAP OF MESOAMERICA SHOWING THE PRINCIPAL SITES

priest-king and conqueror Quetzalcoatl,⁷ and thus was ushered in the third or "Militaristic" period. War gods and militarism now became dominant, with conquest carried on for tribute and for victims for human sacrifice, and religious centers becoming walled or fortified towns. The period is marked, however, by a renaissance in art, and by the classic achievements of ancient Mesoamerica in architecture. Three phases mark the period. The first, a transitional phase lasting from about 890 to 1000 A. D., was one of barbarian invasions, and the conquests and "empire" of Quetzalcoatl or Kukulcan. The second, the "Toltec" phase, lasted from 1000 to about 1175 A. D. (epoch of Tula in central Mexico and "Mexican Maya" Chichen Itza in Yucatan). This was followed by the "Mixteca-Nahua" or "Aztec" period, dating from about 1175 to 1521/1545 A. D., which brought the Militaristic development to a climax in the Aztec Empire. With the fall of the Aztecs to the European invaders in 1521, and of the Maya in 1545, came the end of the decadent Militaristic cultures, and therewith also the end of the ancient Mesoamerican civilization.

⁷Not to be confused with the ancient god "Quetzalcoatl," whose bird-or feathered-serpent emblem first appears on the temples of the preceding Florescent Ceremonial period.

Survey of the Religion of the

Advanced Cultist Civilization of Ancient Mesoamerica

Religion or cultism dominated every phase of life in the Advanced Cultist or High Mesoamerican civilization. It included a pantheon of gods and developed theology, elaborate temple rites or ceremonies, a graded priesthood, and a complex symbolism.

The pantheon seemingly consisted of innumerable deities, some great, and others of lesser significance; however, study of the situation reveals that many of the gods were actually merely different aspects or manifestations of a few Great Gods, each being called by the name which best expressed the special aspect represented.

The Creator God.--At the head of the pantheon stood the Creator of the Universe, the God of Life and Sustenance. He was the sumprime, ineffable God, so far above the ordinary people that he played but a small role in their lives. In Yucatan this supreme Creator God was called Hunab Ku, "the One God." The seventeenth-century Yucatan historian Cogolludo describes him as "the one living and true God, who they said is the greatest of the gods, and who cannot be figured or represented because he is incorporeal. . . ." ⁸ In the Book of

⁸Diego López de Cogolludo, Historia de Yucatán (Madrid: Ivan García Infanzon, 1688), p. 192 ("Creían los Indios de Yucatan que avia un Dios unico, viuo, y verdadero, que dezizn ser el mayor de los Dioses, y que no tenia figura, ni se podia figurar por ser incorporeo. A este llamaban Hunab Ku, De este dezian, que procedian todas las cosas, y como a incorporeo, no le adoraban con imagen alguna. . . .").

Chilam Balam of Chumayel he is called Oxlahunti-ku which means literally "Thirteen God (or Gods)." Roys states that the "Thirteen Gods" are probably the gods of the thirteen heavens of the Maya cosmos, who are usually treated as a single god.⁹ Barrera Vasquez suggests that this name signifies that he was the "Infinite God."¹⁰

Turning to central Mexico, we find that the head of the Aztec pantheon was Floque Nahague, the Creator, "a supreme and ineffable god," whose worship was also restricted.¹¹ Below him, however, was a creative couple, Tonacatecuhtli, "Creator God, Lord of our Substance," and his wife Tonacacihuatl, who fulfilled the function of parents and origin for other divinities.¹² The Codex Telleriano-Remensis states that this god Tonacatecuhtli "when it appeared good to him, breathed and divided the waters of the heaven and the earth, which at first were all confused together, and disposed them as they are now."¹³ In southern

⁹Ralph L. Roys, editor, The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel (Washington: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1933), p. 99.

¹⁰Alfredo Barrera Vasquez, "Los Dioses Mayas," México Prehispánico (Mexico: Rafael Loera y Chávez, 1946), p. 512. The number thirteen was a symbol for completion or infinity in Maya numerology.

¹¹George C. Vaillant, Aztecs of Mexico (Garden City, N. Y.: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1940), p. 174.

¹²Ibid., p. 174.

¹³Lewis Spence, The Gods of Mexico (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1920), p. 87.

Mexico the Zapotec creator god equivalent to Tloque Nahaque and Hunab Ku was known by such names as Coqui-Xee, Coqui-Cella ("Lord of the Beginning"), or Piji-tao ("the Great Wind").

It was said of him that "he was the creator of all things and was himself uncreated."¹⁴ There also was a creator pair (like Tonacatecuhtli and Tonacacihuatl of the Aztecs), called Cozaana, "Creator, Maker of all Beasts," and Huichaana, "Creator, Maker of Men and Fishes."¹⁵

In highland Guatemala, the supreme god in the Creative Council of the Quiche nation was Hunahpu, who held a position similar to that of Hunab Ku of the Maya, and was associated with two other gods, Gukumatz and Hurukan, in the work of creation. A creator pair, Xpiyacoc and Xmucane, identical or closely connected with Tonacatecuhtli and Tonacacihuatl of the Aztecs, were the Quiche father and mother gods.¹⁶

The Rain, Fertility, or Life God.--The central deity of Mesoamerica was, however, the rain, fertility, or life god. In Yucatan his principal manifestation was that of Chac, the Rain God. "Chac was a rain-god, primarily, and by association, god of the wind, thunder, and lightning, and hence by extension, of

¹⁴Hartley Burr Alexander, in The Mythology of all Races, (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1920), Vol. XI, p. 87.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁶Popol Vuh, trans. Adrian Recinos (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1947), pp. 87, 96.

fertility and agriculture in a broad sense; that is the idea of growth and germination, and by still further extension, even of the cornfields."¹⁷ Chac was not only regarded as a single god, but also as four gods in one, a different Chac for each of the cardinal points. Closely associated with the Chacs and the four cardinal points were the Bacabs or "Sky-bearers":

Among the multitude of gods which this nation worshipped, they worshipped four, each of them called Bacab. They said they were four brothers whom God, when he created the world, placed at the four points of it, holding up the sky so that it should not fall. They also said of the Bacabs that they escaped when the world was destroyed by the deluge. They gave other names to each of them and designated by them the part of the world where God had placed him, bearing up the heavens. . . .¹⁸

Cogolludo states that the Bacabs were also gods of the winds.¹⁹ The close connection between rain and wind gods is to be noted in Morley's statement: "Chac seems to have been associated with the wind-god; . . . indeed the wind-god may again be only a special manifestation of the rain-god, and may have had no separate existence. . . ."²⁰ Roys points out that the native author of the sixteenth-century Maya Motul dictionary considers

¹⁷Sylvanus G. Morley, The Ancient Maya (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1946), p. 213.

¹⁸Landa's Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán, ed. and trans. Alfred M. Tozzer (Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. Cambridge: Published by the Museum, 1941), p. 136.

¹⁹Cogolludo, ed. cit., p. 197.

²⁰Morley, op. cit., p. 225.

the Chacs to be one person and states that Chac was a gigantic man who taught agriculture, whom they later considered the god of bread, water, thunder, and lightning.²¹ The Rain God was a benevolent deity, always the friend of man, associated with creation and life, and never his enemy; never is this god allied with the powers of death and destruction.²²

In highland central Mexico the Rain God (or gods) corresponding to Chac in Yucatan, was called Tlaloc. Tlaloc was the god who lived in the terrestrial paradise and who gave to men life subsistence. That he was unquestionably one of the most venerated gods of Mexico is apparent from the fact that five of the yearly festivals were celebrated in his honor. He was also an important deity of pre-Aztec times, being the principal god of the Toltecs. As in Yucatan, so in Mexico there were four "Sky-bearers" (compare the four Bacabs of the Maya), identical or closely associated with the Chacs, doubtlessly to be equated with them, namely, Tlauizalpantecuhtli, Oton Tecuhtli, Quetzalcoatl-Ehecatl, and Mictlantecuhtli. These Sky-bearers are the same as the Tzitzimime, gods of the air who brought the rain and water, the thunder and lightning.²³

²¹Roys, op. cit., p. 172.

²²Morley, op. cit., p. 225.

²³J. Eric Thompson, Sky Bearers, Colors and Directions in Maya and Mexican Religion (Contributions to American Archaeology No. 10, Washington: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1934), p. 229.

In southern Mexico, Cocijo, god of rain, thunder, and lightning, and symbolized by the jaguar, corresponds to Tlaloc and Chac. On the east coast of Mexico the Rain God was El Tajin, also symbolized by the jaguar. In highland Guatemala the equivalent deity was Tohil or Toh, god of rain, agriculture, and the cardinal points. Hurukan, god of wind, however, may also be considered a rain god.²⁴

The antiquity of the Rain-and-Wind God (or gods) is noted by the archaeologist Armillas: "In the Gulf coast of Mexico there lived in the time corresponding to the culture of La Venta, a type of ancestor of Tlaloc and his near relatives Chac, Cocijo, and Tajin."²⁵ Thompson also notes this antiquity:

Most typical. . . . is the worship of the rain gods of fertility--the Chacs of Yucatan, the Tlalocs of the Valley of Mexico. . . . Seemingly this was the religion which early sources inform us preceded the introduction of idolatry, and which has partly survived to the present day. . . .²⁶

The Great Priest God.--The great priest-god who introduced the arts and sciences (hieroglyphic writings and books,

²⁴Mateos Higuera, "Cuadro Sinoptico de los Panteones Mesoamericanos," México Prehispánico (Mexico: Rafael Loera y Chavez, 1946), following p. 541.

²⁵Pedro Armillas, quoted by Miguel Acosta Saignes, ed., Bernardino de Sahagun, Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España (Mexico: Editorial Nueva España, S. A., 1946), p. 23.

²⁶J. Eric S. Thompson, "The Moon Goddess in Middle America," Contributions to American Anthropology and History, Vol. V, Nos. 24-29 (Contributions to American Anthropology and History, No. 29. Washington: Published by the Carnegie Institute of Washington, 1939), p. 127.

the calendar and chronology, etc.), was a very important deity of Mesoamerica. In the Maya area this god was called Itzamna, Lord of the Heavens and Lord of Day and Night, the son of the Creator God Hunab Ku.²⁷ Itzamna was extensively worshipped under different names, such as Kinich Ahau, Yaxcocahmut, Kabul, etc., each being a different manifestation of the same deity. As Kinich Ahau, "Sun-eyed Lord," he was the Sun God or Lord of Light; as Yaxcocahmut, the Sky-God; as Kabul, the Healing God. But he also appears in one aspect to be the Rain or Life God, Chac (or the deity whom the Chacs or rain gods represent), since his most common name Itzamna probably means "the Moisture of Heaven," while another of his titles is Itzimt'ul Chac.²⁸ Moreover, he had a fourfold aspect like Chac, each aspect, as in the case of Chac, being associated with a world direction and a world color.²⁹ During the "burner ceremony" he was invoked along with the Chacs for rain making.³⁰ The early authority Lizana states that he was associated with the sky, and attributes

²⁷Morley, op. cit., p. 223.

²⁸Jakeman, loc. cit.; see also Thompson, "The Moon Goddess in Middle America," Contributions to American Anthropology and History, Vol. V, Nos. 24-29, op. cit., p. 161.

²⁹Thompson, "The Moon Goddess in Middle America," Contributions to American Anthropology and History, Vol. V, Nos. 24-29, op. cit., p. 160.

³⁰Ibid., p. 152.

to him the remark, "I am the dew or substance of heaven and the clouds."³¹ Itzamna's connection with rain is further emphasized in an account in the Relación de Campocolche y Chocola which states that in times of hunger (that is, when there was no rain), the Maya made sacrifices to Itzamna, saying, "Great lord of the sky, who art placed in the clouds and in the sky, give us a good year of maize."³²

Itzamna was a benevolent deity, never connected with destruction and never associated with the symbols of death³³ (compare Chac), as indicated also by his worship as the god of medicine and of healing, under the title of Kabul.

The priest- or culture-god in highland central Mexico corresponding to Itzamna of Yucatan apparently was Quetzalcoatl, "the Precious Bird- (or Feathered-) Serpent," also called Ehecatl, God of the Winds. Like Itzamna he was associated with the four quarters. When Cortés landed at Vera Cruz, Montezuma believed that the god Quetzalcoatl had returned, and therefore sent him "the dress that was appropriate to him," which consisted

³¹Bernardo de Lizana, Historia de Yucatán (Mexico, D. F.: Imprenta del Museo Nacional, 1893), p. 4.

³²Thompson, "The Moon Goddess in Middle America," Contributions to American Anthropology and History, Vol. V, Nos. 24-29, loc. cit.

³³Morley, op. cit., p. 222.

of the costumes of the four gods of the cardinal points.³⁴ Spence states that these four deities were dominant in the four quarters of the heavens, and that in the higher theology they had become fused in the conception of Quetzalcoatl, or were variants of him.³⁵ His association with rain is also to be noted in the fact that he wore a miter that was spotted like a jaguar skin³⁶ (the jaguar was a symbol of the Rain God³⁷). Saignes suggests that the Rain God of the Toltecs was also god of winds, hence both Tlaloc and Quetzalcoatl.³⁸

That Quetzalcoatl was a very ancient god of Mexico is indicated by the sculptured representations of his feathered-serpent symbol on the "Temple of Quetzalcoatl" at Teotihuacan, a center of the Teotihuacan civilization of the Florescent Ceremonial period preceding the time of the Toltecs and Aztecs.

The "Reincarnated" Priest-God.--It should be noted that this god Quetzalcoatl is not to be confused with his priest-representatives and "reincarnations" of later times who also

³⁴Bernardino de Sahagún, Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España, ed. Miguel Acosta Saignes (Mexico: Editorial Nueva España, S. A., 1946), Vol. 3, pp. 20-24.

³⁵Spence, op. cit., p. 119.

³⁶Sahagún, ed. cit., Vol. 1, p. 23.

³⁷The jaguar was a symbol of the Rain God in southern and eastern Mexico (see above). See also Herbert J. Spinden, A Study of Maya Art (Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. Cambridge: Published by the Museum, 1913), p. 77.

³⁸Acosta Saignes, loc. cit., p. 22, note 1.

bore the title "Quetzalcoatl." The most prominent of these later priest Quetzalcoatl's was the famous tenth-century hero Ce Acatl Quetzalcoatl, priest-king of the Toltecs at Tula in Mexico, also known in Yucatan as Kukulcan, and in highland Guatemala as Gucumatz, names equivalent in meaning to Quetzalcoatl in the Mayan languages of those lands. He is described as a tall, stately figure with a long beard and Caucasian features.³⁹ (An actual portrait in stone of this Quetzalcoatl or Kukulcan has been discovered in a carving at Chichen Itza in Yucatan, one of the cities he conquered [see above, page 12], in which he is clearly depicted with a long flowing beard.)

This tenth-century Quetzalcoatl or Kukulcan is said to have introduced idolatry into Yucatan. An early Maya account in Spanish states that:

The ancients say. . . that anciently, for nearly eight hundred years, they did not worship idols in this land. And after the Mexicans entered it and took possession of it, a captain who was called Quetzalcoatl in the Mexican language, which means. . . 'Feathered Serpent,' . . . introduced idolatry into this land and the use of idols for gods. . . .

It is said that the first settlers of Chichen Itza were not idolaters until Kukulcan, a Mexican captain, entered these parts, who taught them idolatry.⁴⁰

³⁹Juan de Torquemada, Monarquía Indiana, Vol. 2 (Mexico: Editorial Salvador Chávez Hayhoe, 1943), p. 48.

⁴⁰Gaspar Antonio Chi, "Historical Recollections," ed. and trans. by M. Wells Jakeman in his The Origins and History of the Mayas, Part 1 (Los Angeles: Research Publishing Company, 1945), p. 95.

Although Quetzalcoatl-Kukulcan brought cruelty and tyranny into Yucatan in his task of establishing his empire in that land, he also brought to the Maya a new era of peace and architectural splendor. During the time he reigned over his Yucatan empire, Chichen Itza reached the zenith of its glory in cultural achievement. After his departure from Yucatan a festival was celebrated in his honor:

There were among the Indians some who said that he had gone to heaven with the gods, and on this account they regarded him as a god, and fixed a time for him in which they should celebrate a festival to him as such, and this was celebrated throughout the land until the destruction of Mayapan.⁴¹

In Mexico Quetzalcoatl-Kukulcan was deified after his death as the god of Venus, the morning star.

The Mother Goddess.--Also important in the pantheon of gods was the Mother Goddess, apparently the Moon Goddess, and the wife, or sometimes sister, of the sun. She was also the patron of textile workers and the presumed inventor of weaving.⁴² She presided over generation and childbirth,⁴³ and was known as "Our Grandmother" and as the "Mother of the Gods."⁴⁴ In Mexican

⁴¹Landa's Relacion de las Cosas de Yucatan, ed. cit., p. 157.

⁴²Thompson, "The Moon Goddess in Middle America," Contributions to American Anthropology and History, Vol. V, Nos. 24-29, op. cit., pp. 29, 132. See also Lopez de Cogolludo, ed. cit., p. 196.

⁴³Sahagun, ed. cit., Vol. 1, pp. 26-28.

⁴⁴Thompson, "The Moon Goddess in Middle America," Contributions to American Anthropology and History, Vol. V, Nos. 24-29, op. cit., p. 137. See also Tozzer, op. cit., p. 10.

theology the Mother Goddess was also the earth goddess and mother of the maize god,⁴⁵ and in Maya theology she appears to have been the same.⁴⁶ She was also a goddess of divination, and was very closely connected with water.⁴⁷ In the Mexican area she had many titles or synonyms, among them Tlazolteotl, Toci, Xochiquetzal, Ixcuina, and Tetoinnan.⁴⁸ Among the Maya she was known as Ixchel and Ix Azal Uoh.⁴⁹ In all likelihood the innumerable female figurines that have been found in Mesoamerica were used in fertility rites in the worship of the Mother Goddess.

The God of Death.--One of the important deities of Mesoamerica was the god of death, known as Ah Puch or Hunhau among the Maya and Mictlantecuhtli among the Mexicans. From him, all evil, especially death, emanated. He was the ruler over the underworld or "Hell," and was thought of as the prince of all the devils.⁵⁰

⁴⁵Vaillant, op. cit., p. 182.

⁴⁶Thompson, "The Moon Goddess in Middle America," Contributions to American Anthropology and History, Vol. V, Nos. 24-29, op. cit., p. 141.

⁴⁷Sahagún, ed., cit., p. 27.

⁴⁸Vaillant, op. cit., p. 182. See also Thompson, "The Moon Goddess in Middle America," Contributions to American Anthropology and History, Vol. V, Nos. 24-29, op. cit., pp. 127-128.

⁴⁹Thompson, "The Moon Goddess in Middle America," Contributions to American Anthropology and History, Vol. V, Nos. 24-29, op. cit., pp. 129-132.

⁵⁰Landa's Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán, ed. cit., p. 132.

The Mexican War Gods.--Two very important Mexican deities were Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli. From the events recounted in the annals, it seemsthat the introduction of these two gods by the Aztecs largely replaced the old cult of Quetzalcoatl and Tlaloc.⁵¹ The war god Huitzilopochtli was chief deity of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital. Sahagún describes him as very warlike, a great destroyer of towns and the murderer of many people.⁵² It was especially in connection with the worship of this god that human sacrifice was practiced.

Tezcatlipoca is a god who is hard to define. Sometimes he appears as the adversary of Quetzalcoatl, the Toltec divinity. Sometimes, however, Quetzalcoatl was depicted as a white Tezcatlipoca. Vaillant states that under the name of "Feathered Serpent" but with the attributes and powers of Tezcatlipoca, he (Quetzalcoatl) presided over the destinies of Cholula, a central Mexican city in which was built a large round temple to the god Quetzalcoatl.⁵³

Tezcatlipoca was a widely worshipped god whose powers and attributes were shared by others. This god presided over the four directions.⁵⁴ Sahagun speaks of him as an invisible god who went

⁵¹Vaillant, op. cit., pp. 58-59.

⁵²Sahagún, ed. cit., Vol. 1, p. 19.

⁵³Vaillant, op. cit., p. 175.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 175.

about in all places, the sky, the earth, and the underworld.⁵⁵

The Lesser Gods.--There were also innumerable lesser gods in Mesoamerica. There were the gods of the upper and lower worlds, gods of the elements, the earth, the air, fire, and water; gods of mountains and volcanoes; gods of medicine and disease, gods of carnal vice; gods of the twenty days and of the numerals and the katuns or twenty-year periods of the calendar; tribal gods; gods of fertility; gods of flowers, dances, songs, and games; gods of potters, weavers, and mat-makers; gods of workers in wood, stone, and metal; gods of banquet and feasts; as well as many gods connected with sowing, ripening, and the harvest.⁵⁶

Cosmological and Theological Aspects of Ancient Mesoamerican Religion.--It was the belief of all of the people of ancient Mesoamerica that other worlds, each of which had been destroyed by a cataclysm, preceded the present order. One of these destructions was by a great flood.⁵⁷

An excellent account of the creation of the world is related in the Popol Vuh, national book of the Quiche Maya.⁵⁸

⁵⁵Sahagún, ed. cit., Vol. 1, p. 21.

⁵⁶Thomas A. Joyce, Mexican Archaeology (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1914), pp. 40, 46.

⁵⁷Landa's Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán, ed. cit., pp. 135, 136.

⁵⁸Popol Vuh, ed. cit., p. 89.

A Mexican account as given by a modern interpreter of an ancient pre-Columbian book of the Aztecs, the Codex Telleriano-Remensis, in speaking of the god Tonacatecutli states that this god ". . . . when it appeared good to him, breathed and divided the waters of the heavens and the earth, which at first were all confused together, and disposed them as they are now."⁵⁹

The world was conceived of as having thirteen heavens, arranged in layers, the lowest of which was the earth. These heavens represented the dwelling places of the gods, the Creator God being in the highest.⁶⁰ Also there were nine underworlds arranged in layers, each presided over by one of the "Nine Gods of the Lower World" (the Bolontiku of the Maya) or "Nine Lords of the Night" (in highland central Mexico).⁶¹ In the Maya area the lowest of the layers, Mitnal, was presided over by Ah Puch, Lord of Death.⁶² The nine underworlds in Mexico were called Mictlan, and were ruled over by Mictlanteenhtli and his wife, Mictlancihuatl.⁶³ Sahagun describes paradise and hell in his writings, and designates the type of people assigned to each "degree of glory."⁶⁴

⁵⁹Spence, op. cit., p. 36.

⁶⁰Morley, op. cit., p. 216. See also Vaillant, op. cit., p. 170.

⁶¹Reys, op. cit., p. 99, note 4.

⁶²Morley, op. cit., p. 216.

⁶³Vaillant, op. cit., p. 184.

⁶⁴Sahagún, ed. cit., pp. 313-319.

Although there was seemingly no knowledge of a resurrection of the body after death, the peoples of Mesoamerica believed in the immortality of the soul, and a judgement. There was a continual struggle between the powers of good and evil over man's destiny. The Maya belief is revealed by Landa:

They said that the future life was divided into a good and a bad life--into a painful one and one full of rest. The bad and painful one was for the vicious people, while the good and delightful one was for those who had lived well according to their manner of living.⁶⁵

The Priesthood.--The priesthood was a very influential class in Mesoamerica, being more powerful even than the nobility. The high priests held the keys of their religion in the Maya area and were succeeded by a son or other nearest relative.⁶⁶ The priests taught the sciences and wrote the books. Landa states of the high priest that:

In him was the key of their learning and it was to these matters that they dedicated themselves mostly. . . . He seldom dealt with matters pertaining to the sacrifices except at the time of the principal feasts or in very important matters of business.⁶⁷

Actually the priests impersonated the gods on earth. Valliant states that the priests were in charge of the worship, temple, and ritual of each specific god or goddess and that in

⁶⁵Landa's Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán, ed. cit.,
p. 131.

⁶⁶Ibid., pp. 27, 215.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 27.

the ceremonies they assumed the dress of the divinity, impersonating him on earth.⁶⁸ The same thing is noted in the Maya area:

There, in the Casa de las Cabezas in Itzamal, dwelt the priests of the gods, and they were revered to such an extent that it was they who were the lords and who punished and rewarded and who were obeyed with great fear and that which they asserted was believed in with such fear that there was nothing that would have been incredible.⁶⁹

Temple Ritual and Ceremonies.--Throughout Mesoamerica there were rites and ceremonies performed to honor and placate the gods for needs of all sorts, both individual and group. Some of the general features in such ceremonies included preliminary fasting and abstinences, and the selection by priestly divination of an auspicious day on which to celebrate the rite. On the designated day there was the expulsion of the evil spirit from the midst of the worshippers, the incensing of idols, the offering of prayers, the sacrificing of some living thing in order to smear with blood the image of the god in whose honor the ceremony was held, and general feasting and drinking.⁷⁰

The most important ceremonies centered around the commencement of the New Year. At this time the old ceremonial fires in the temples were extinguished and new fires were lighted.

⁶⁸Vaillant, op. cit., p. 186.

⁶⁹Lizana, ed. cit., p. 5.

⁷⁰Landa's Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán, ed. cit., p. 138. See also Morley, op. cit., p. 236.

Temples were renovated, houses refurbished, and new utensils made.⁷¹ There were also ceremonies in celebration of the eighteen months, each one having its special patron deity and peculiar rites.⁷² Ceremonies were performed in the Maya area at the erection of the katun stone or monument at the end of each of the thirteen katuns or twenty-year periods.⁷³ There was also an array of gods or goddesses presiding over the twenty days, who had to be honored and placated at the appropriate time.⁷⁴

Temples.--The priesthood conducted the most important religious ceremonies at places of worship or temples. Temple or religious architecture, therefore, was highly developed. A definite evolution can be traced from the low altar-platform of the Formative period into the high flat-topped pyramid or stepped tower temple of the Florescent Ceremonial and Militaristic periods, the pyramid serving as a pedestal base for the temple itself on top, raising the latter above the common dwellings. Associated buildings which presumably housed the temple staff paralleled this development of the temple. Thus came into existence the

⁷¹Vaillant, op. cit., pp. 200-201.

⁷²Landa's Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán, ed. cit., pp. 151-166. See also Vaillant, op. cit., pp. 196-197.

⁷³Merley, op. cit., p. 241.

⁷⁴Vaillant, op. cit., pp. 190-191.

"ceremonial center" with its temple pyramids and palaces of the priest-rulers grouped around plazas and courts, the whole placed on a great natural or artificial terrace or "acropolis."

The temples were not erected to house congregations, but rather as shrines of the gods. The principal ceremonies were conducted at the entrance to the temple on top of the pyramid, in full view of the spectators grouped below in the temple plaza.

Religious Art Symbolism.--Closely associated with the temple architecture was the sculptured religious ornamentation of the temples themselves and their pyramids. Sculptured figures and designs were essentially symbolic of the main god; that is, the Rain-Wind-Life-and-Light God. Symbolism was pictorially expressed on the walls of the temples, and also in the sacred books, on the robes and head-dresses of the priests, and on ceremonial vases. Every life-form entering into the embellishment of temples and palaces was employed for its significance in the religious symbolism of the builders, whether serpent, jaguar, bird, monster, or K'aman figure. The human figures were priests representing the principal deity, identified by their various masks or other symbolic emblems. Holmes stresses the significance of the symbolism of ancient Meso-american religion in the following words:

We may. . . .premise that very many of the purely conventional designs, the scrolls, the frets, the meanders and zigzags, had meanings hidden to the uninitiated, coming

down from their less conventional phases of development. It is pretty certain that even in the latest period of Maya history that various motives employed in decoration were not only significant, but that they were not used out of their traditional or appropriate associations, and when we see a life form or even a non-graphic device associated with a given structure we may fairly assume that it has, or had, a special significance and function in that connection.⁷⁵

⁷⁵William H. Holmes, Archaeological Studies Among the Ancient Cities of Mexico (Anthropological Series, vol. II, Chicago: Field Columbian Museum, n. d.), p. 52.

CHAPTER II

THE "TREE OF LIFE" IN ANCIENT MESOAMERICA

Distribution

The cross-shaped tree, designated by archaeologists as the "Tree of Life" (a symbolism which has yet, however, to be definitely established for its New World representations) occurs frequently in the religious art of ancient Mesoamerica. It is portrayed in sculptures and in native hieroglyphic manuscripts or codices, and is frequently referred to in the early non-hieroglyphic writings of the sixteenth century.

The sculptured representations of the ancient Mesoamerican "Tree of Life" are found especially in the Maya area. From Palenque, an ancient Maya city located in the Usumacinta Valley in the present State of Chiapas, come the two best known and also most complete delineations of this symbol. These are, first, the "Tablet of the Cross," discovered on the back wall of the temple since designated as the Temple of the Cross; and second, the "Tablet of the Foliated Cross," from the Temple of the Foliated Cross. Both of these remarkable sculptures date from the Middle Classic Maya period, more

precisely from about 692 A. D.¹ The original Tablet of the Cross is now on display in the National Museum of Mexico in Mexico City.² A plaster cast of this tablet is owned by the Department of Archaeology of Brigham Young University. The writer has received no answer to written inquiries regarding the Tablet of the Foliated Cross, but lack of written material on the subject would seem to indicate that it is no longer in existence.

Two other sculptured representations, less complete than the above-named but containing essential features of the symbol, are to be found in the Maya area. The first is on Lintel 2 at Yaxchilan, an ancient city also in the Usumacinta Valley, Chiapas. This also dates from 692 A. D. or shortly after.³ The second is found on the northern panel from the Temple of the Wall Panels, a building in the Monjas group at Chichen Itza dating from the "Mexican" or Toltec period; that is, from the eleventh-twelfth centuries A. D.⁴

Representations of the "Tree of Life" remarkably similar to these sculptured examples are to be seen in the

¹Morley, op. cit., pp. 63, 335.

²Jakeman, private communication.

³Morley, op. cit., pp. 335-336.

⁴Karl Ruppert, Temple of the Wall Panels (Contributions to American Archaeology No. 3. Washington: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1931), pp. 120-121, 130.

surviving Maya and Mexican hieroglyphic manuscripts or codices dating from the centuries immediately preceding the European conquest.

Of the three known Maya codices, two, namely the Codex Dresdensis and the Codex Tro-Cortesianus, portray the so-called Tree of Life. Unfortunately, nothing is known of the early history of these manuscripts. The Dresden Codex was discovered in Vienna, Austria, in 1839, and was given to the Royal Library, now known as the State Library, at Dresden, Germany, where it remains today.⁵ Although for many years believed to be an Aztec codex, it has now been established that it originated in the Petén region of Guatemala, specifically in the vicinity of Tikal, Seibal, and Piedras Negras, during the Classic Maya or Old Empire period, and was carried to Yucatan by Maya immigrants at the time of the fall of the Old Empire.⁶ Dr. M. Wells Jakeman believes that this codex "is very probably a copy or recopy of a late Old Empire or Transitional-period manuscript,"⁷ hence

⁵Morley, op. cit., pp. 297-299.

⁶J. Antonio Villacorta and Carlos A. Villacorta, Codices Mayas, Dresdensis-Peresianus-Tro-Cortesianus (Guatemala City: De la Sociedad de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala, 1933), pp. 8-9.

⁷M. Wells Jakeman, The Origin and History of the Mayas, Part I, (Los Angeles: Research Publishing Company, 1945), p. 18 ("from the evidence of its inclusion of full 'Long Count' dates, not found in the inscriptions later than the Transitional Period, and the Lunar Count, a feature of the later inscriptions of the Old Empire." Further evidence for this dating of the original Dresden manuscript is adduced by Morley, op. cit., pp. 299, 301. Spinden, op. cit., p. 154, states that this codex i.e. the extant copy "may with some assurance be assigned to northern Yucatan and to a date not later than 1200 A. D.")

dating from about c. 800-985 A. D.

The Codex Tro-Cortesianus was discovered in Spain in the 1860's in two separate sections ("Troano" and "Cortesianus" codices). The two sections, now rejoined, are in the Museum of Archaeology and History at Madrid. This codex is said by the Guatemalan scholar Villacorta to have been of Maya origin and to have come also from the Petén region of Guatemala.⁸ Although its actual date of origin is unknown, it is believed to be pre-Columbian, and probably a late copy of a manuscript of the Late Maya period.⁹

The symbolic tree as found in the ancient Maya manuscripts is actually quite different from that found in sculptured examples from the Maya area and in the Mexican codices; however, it is still clearly represented, and may be shown to carry the same significance as the other representations. In fact, the tree as depicted in these manuscripts is extremely important in determining the probable significance of this symbol.

There are in existence today over a hundred ancient hieroglyphic manuscripts from central Mexico, many of which have a primarily religious content. The most important of these belong to the "Codex Borgia Group" and include the Borgia,

⁸Villacorta and Villacorta, op. cit., p. 176.

⁹Jakeman, The Origin and History of the Mayas, Part I, op. cit., p. 18.

Fejérváry-Mayer, Bologna or Cospi, Vaticanus B (3773), and Laud codices. Facsimiles of the first four were reproduced and published at the expense of Joseph Florimond, Duke of Loubat.¹⁰ Of their origin nothing is known, but paleographic studies reveal that they probably originated in the Zapotec-Mixtec area of southern Mexico.¹¹ The Codex Borgia is preserved in the Ethnographical Museum of the Vatican in Rome; the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, in the Liverpool Free Public Museum; the Codex Bologna, in the Library of the University of Bologna; the Codex Vaticanus B, in the Library of the Vatican, Rome,¹² and the Codex Laud, in the Bodleian Library.¹³ Excellent representations of the "Tree of Life" are to be found in these ancient central Mexican manuscripts.

Component Elements of the "Tree of Life" Symbol

The most complete representations of the "Tree of Life" symbol in ancient Mesoamerica contain a number of associated

¹⁰Eduard Seler, Codex Vaticanus No. 3773, trans. A. H. Keane (Berlin and London: Published by the Duke of Loubat, 1902-1903), p. A.

¹¹Spinden, op. cit., p. 225. See also Edgar L. Hewett, Ancient Life in Mexico and Central America (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1943), pp. 133-134.

¹²Vaillant, op. cit., p. 304.

¹³Zelia Nuttall, Introduction to the Codex Nuttall, Facsimile of an Ancient Mexican Codex (Cambridge: Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, 1902), p. 11.

elements which include the tree itself, a bird, a monster, a serpent or serpentine details, and two personages. Some of the representations found in the sculptured works or in the manuscripts contain all of these main features, and the others always have at least two (see Figure 3, page 41). The most complete and best known example is the Tablet of the Cross from Palenque, which contains the following symbolic elements (see Plate I, page 39):

Tree. A conventionalized tree in the form of the Latin cross, with its branches somewhat conventionalized by reptilian details, rests on the head of a monster. The trunk of the tree is used for symbolic details, and symbols hang from the arms of the "cross" (that is, the cross-like branches). The tree itself forms the central figure of the group.

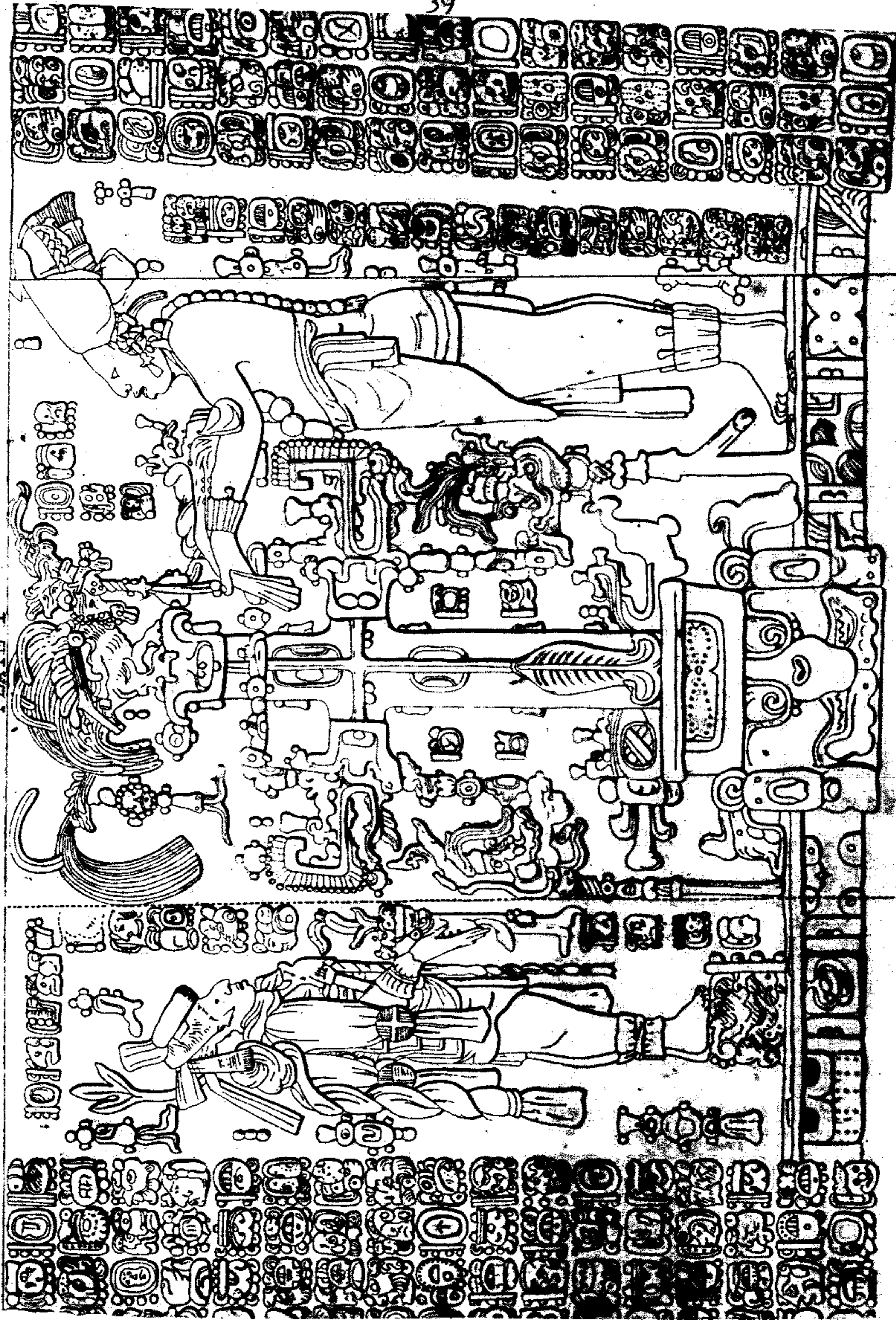
Bird. On the top of the tree perches a symbolic bird, a main feature in the composition of the "cross." In this case it appears to be a representation of the quetzal, the "precious" or sacred bird of ancient Mesoamerica. The bird appears to have a serpent's head, or a "serpent's-head mask." From its tail hang sun and wind emblems, and from the neck a thunderbolt symbol.¹⁴ On the underside of the wing is a conventionalized serpent's head.

Monster. The base upon which the tree rests is a grotesque animal's head or face mask, containing planetary symbols indicating that this is probably a celestial monster. This type of face is frequently referred to in studies of Maya art as the "Sun-god mask."

Serpent. On either side of the arms of the cruciform tree is a grotesque serpent's head, and serpentine features figure prominently in the foliage of the tree. The bird on top of the tree appears to have a serpent's head or to wear a serpent's-head mask. Also, as noted above, there is a conventionalized serpent's head on the under side of the wing of the bird.

¹⁴ Francis Parry, The Sacred Maya Stone of Mexico and Its Symbolism (London: Dulau and Company, 1893), p. 35.

PLATE I



THE TABLET OF THE CROSS, PALENQUE

Personages. Two personages, either priests or gods, stand on either side of the conventionalized tree. Each is supported by the body of the monster upon whose head the tree stands. The individual on the right is apparently offering to the symbolic bird an object similar to the "manikin scepter."¹⁵ The individual on the left holds a vertical staff in his right hand. Symbolic glyphs appear on his clothing.

¹⁵Manikin scepter: a small upright grotesque figure with a flexible appendage in the form of a serpent serving as a handle.

FIGURE 3
 OCCURRENCE OF THE ELEMENTS OF THE
 "TREE OF LIFE" SYMBOL IN ANCIENT MESOAMERICA

Source	Tree	Bird	Monster	Serpent	Personages
<u>Sculptures</u>					
Tablet of the Cross	X	X	X	X	X
Tablet of the Foliated Cross	X	X	X	X	X
Temple of the Wall Panel	X	X			
Lintel 2, Yaxchilal	X	X			
<u>Manuscripts</u>					
Codex Dresden	X			X	
Codex Tro-Cortesianus	X				X
Codex Fejervary-Mayer					
Tree of the East	X	X			X
Tree of the North	X	X			X
Tree of the West	X	X	X		X
Tree of the South	X	X	X		X
Codex Borgia					
Tree of the East	X	X	X		
Tree of the North	X	X	X		
Tree of the West	X	X	X		
Tree of the South	X	X	X		
Tree of the Center	X	X	X		X
Codex Vaticanus B					
Tree of the East	X	X	X		
Tree of the North	X	X	X		
Tree of the West	X	X	X		
Tree of the South	X				
Codex Laud	X		X		X

CHAPTER III

THE TREE ELEMENT

The Sacred Tree in the Present-day Native Religion and Folklore of Mesoamerica

The tree symbol figured conspicuously in ancient Mesoamerican religion, being given a prominent place in native rites and ceremonies. Even today the yax che, that is, "the green tree" (usually the ceiba), is revered. To the present-day Maya of Yucatan it is a sign of life and they honor it in much the same way as their ancestors honored the primal tree Yax Cheel Cab or "Green Tree of the World."¹ They believe that there are seven heavens above the earth, one directly above the other, each with a hole in the center. According to the myth a giant ceiba tree grows in the exact center of the earth, and rears its branches through the successive layers until it reaches the seventh heaven where the Great God lives. By means of this tree the spirits of the dead ascend through the several worlds until they reach

¹Daniel G. Brinton, The Myths of the New World (Philadelphia: David McKay, Publisher, 1896), p. 117.

the topmost one, where they remain forever.²

According to Maya folklore a ceiba tree grew in Valladolid. It was cut down, but it grew up again, having four branches, one for each cardinal point. It also had a cenote or well directly beneath it; and a hawk, the spirit of the tree, lived on its topmost branch.³

The Sacred Tree in the Ancient Religion

According to the Early Sixteenth-century Sources

That the "Tree of Life" played a prominent part also in the religion of the ancient Maya is evident from their sacred writings, known to us as the "Books of Chilam Balam" (Books of the Prophet Balam). Written in the Maya language in European script, these books contain prophecies, chronicles, fragmentary historical narratives, rituals, native catechisms, accounts of the creation of the world, almanacs, and medical treatises. It is believed that many of the passages which they contain were originally transcribed from older hieroglyphic manuscripts, some of which were in existence even as late as the close of the seventeenth century.⁴

²Alfred M. Tozzer, A Comparative Study of the Mayas and the Lacandonas (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1907), p. 154.

³Ibid., p. 155.

⁴Roys, op. cit., p. 184.

One of the most valuable of these sacred writings is the Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel, dating from the year 1782.⁵ This book, which is free of intrusive European material such as is found in the other Books of Chilam Balam written at this late date, contains an account of the symbol tree, in the sections dealing with the creation of the world the ritual of the four world quarters, and a prophecy of a new religion.

The following is an account in the Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel of a re-creation of the world after its destruction by a flood, and the setting up by the gods of the four "trees of abundance" in the north, south, east, and west:

Then the sky would fall [that is, a flood],⁶ it would fall down upon the earth, when the four gods, the four Bacabs, were set up, who brought about the destruction of the world. Then after the destruction of the world was completed, they placed a tree to set up in its order the yellow cock oriole. Then the white tree of abundance was set up. A pillar of the sky was set up, a sign of the destruction of the world; that was the white tree of abundance in the north. Then the black tree of abundance was set up in the west for the black-breasted picoy to sit upon. Then the yellow tree of abundance was set up in the south as a symbol of the destruction of the world,

⁵Ibid., p. 6. The editor notes, however, that although the book is dated as late as 1782, its language is much more suggestive of the seventeenth century.

⁶Interpretation suggested by the writer; cf. above, page 16, passage on the Bacabs and the destruction of the earth by a flood.

for the yellow-breasted picoy to sit upon, for the yellow cock oriole to sit upon, the yellow, timid mut. Then the green tree of abundance was set up in the center of the world as a record of the destruction of the world.⁷

The four cardinal points were very sacred in the religious beliefs of the peoples of Mesoamerica. A system of color symbolism was connected with these four directions, and the trees and their colors are spoken of in the ritual of the "four world quarters":

. . . .The red flint stone is the stone of the red Mucencab. The red ceiba tree of abundance is his arbor which is set in the east. The red bullet-tree is their tree. The red zapote tree. . . .The red vine. . . .

The white flint stone is their stone in the north. The white ceiba tree of abundance is the arbor of the white Mucencab. . . .

The black flint stone is their stone in the west. The black ceiba tree of abundance is their arbor. . . .

The yellow flint stone is the stone of the south. The ceiba tree of abundance, the yellow ceiba tree of abundance is their arbor. The yellow bullet-tree is their tree. Colored like the yellow bullet-tree are their camotes. Colored like the yellow bullet-tree⁸ are the wild pigeons which are their turkeys. . . .

In prophesying of a new religion, the prophet designates the "first tree of the world" as the sign of Hunab Ku, supreme Creator God of the Maya:

⁷Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel, ed. and trans. by Ralph L. Roys (Washington: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1933), pp. 99-100.

⁸Ibid., p. 64.

The prophecy of Chilam [or "Prophet"] Balam, the singer of Cabal-chen and Mani: On the day 13 Ahau the katun [twenty-year period] will end in the time of the Itzas, in the time of Tanchah Mayapan, [oh] lord. There is the sign of Hunab Ku on high. The raised wooden standard shall come. It shall be displayed to the world, that the world may be enlightened, lord. There has been [or shall be] a beginning of strife, there has been [or shall be] a beginning of rivalry, when the priestly man shall come to bring the sign of God, in [the] time to come, lord. A quarter of a league, a league away he comes. You see the nut-bird surmounting the raised wooden standard. A new day shall dawn in the north, in the west. Itzamna Kauil shall rise. Our lord comes, [oh] Itzas. . . . Let us exalt his sign on high, let us exalt it that we may gaze upon it today with the raised standard. Great is the discord that arises today. The First [or Green] Tree of the World is restored; it is displayed to the world. This is the sign of Hunab Ku on high.⁹

Landa's reference to the same prophecy makes clear that the raised wooden standard was actually a sacred tree:

In the same way that the Mexican nation had signs and prophecies of the coming of the Spaniards, and of the destruction of its power and its religion, so did the population of Yucatan, some years before the Adelantado Montejo conquered them; and in the mountains of Mani, which is in the province of Tutul Xiu, an Indian named Ah Cambal. . . . , which means he who has the duty of giving the answers of the god. . . . , announced to them publicly that they would soon be subjected by a foreign race, and that they would preach to them One God and the power of a tree, which in their language is called uahom che, which means a tree erected with great

⁹Ibid., pp. 167-168, with interpolated explanations and slight emendations by the writer, for clarification. The early Spanish missionaries believed that the raised wooden standard was the cross. The editor of the Chumayel (Roys) suggests that it was a mythological tree.

virtue against the evil spirit.¹⁰

A third reference to this prophecy is to be found in the account of the native sixteenth-century historian Antonio Chi:

A few years before the Spaniards came to conquer this land there was at Mani a . . . priest named Chilam Balam, whom they held to be a great prophet and diviner. And this personage told them that within a short time there would come from the direction of the sunrise a white and bearded people, and that they would bring a raised sign like this ✠ which their gods would not be able to approach, and would shun it; and that this people would master the land, and that to those who received them in peace they would render no harm, and those who made war on them they would kill; and that the natives of the land would abandon their idols and worship one God only, whom [this people] worshiped and would preach, and they would be tributary to them. And he had a cotton mantle woven, and told them that that would be the kind of tribute which they would have to give to them. And he commanded the lord of Mani, who was named Mochan Xiu, that he should offer that mantle to the idols in order that it might be guarded and preserved as a memorial. And he caused that sign of the cross and others to be made of worked stone, and to be placed in the courts of the temples where they could be seen by all; and he said that that was the green tree of the world. And many people came to see it, as a novel thing, and it appears that they venerated it from that time.¹¹

Contemporary reference to the sacred tree is made by the early Spanish missionary, Avendaño y Loyola, who visited the Maya Itzas of the Petén region of southern Yucatan in 1695:

¹¹Gaspar Antonio Chi, ed. cit., p. 104.

We continued our way to Petén Itzá, which is situated in the middle of the said lake, as well as in the midst also of other islands or peténs. On the shore of the landing place is situated the house of the said petty king at the distance of half of a quarter of a league, in the middle of which, open to the street, stands the fragment of a column of round stone, the circumference of each part of which is about three quarters of a yard across and one quarter high. It is made of stones placed on top of each other with mortar of lime and cah cab, which is usually used for that purpose; and the middle is filled in with bitumen, so that it is like a table, with a round pedestal, upon which, and set in the foundation of the said stone column, there stands out toward the West a stone mask, very ill-formed, which, together with the stone column, the petty king and the rest of his family worship. The said column is called, in the name by which they worship it, Yax cheel cab, which means in their language "the first [or green] tree in the world," and, as is understood in their old songs, . . . they wish to have it known they worship it because it was the tree of whose fruit our first father Adam ate, who in their language is called Ixanom. . . .¹²

We also read of the "Tree of Life" in the writings of Ixtlilxochitl, grandson of the last Aztec king of Tezcoco. In his Historia chichimeca he states:

There came to this land in ancient times a man whom they called Quetzalcoatl, and others, Huemac, for his great virtues, esteeming him to be just, holy, and good, [because of his] teaching them by works and words the way of virtue and helping them to avoid vices and sins, giving them laws and good doctrine; and to restrain them from unrighteous pleasures and dishonesty he instituted the fast; and he was the first that worshiped and set up the cross that they called Quiahuiteotlchuahualizteotl,

¹² Andrés de Avendaño y Loyola, Relación de los entradas que hizé al conversión de los gentiles Ytzaes, ed. and trans. by Philip Ainsworth Means, in his History of the Conquest of Yucatan and of the Itzas (Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Vol. VII. Cambridge: Published by the Museum, 1917), p. 135.

and others, Tonacaquahuitl, that is to say, "god of the rains and of health and tree of sustenance or of life". . . .¹³

Brinton states that in the Mexican tongue the cross bore the significant name "Tree of Our Life" or "Tree of Our Flesh" (Tonacaquahuitl), and that it represented the gods of rain and of health.¹⁴ It is the archaeologist Holmes' conclusion, after studying the cross-shaped tree in the sculptures and native writings, that the cross and the cross-like tree have a common origin.¹⁵ In discussing the origin of the early Olmec people according to the sixteenth-century sources, the Mexican scholar, Miguel Covarrubias, makes an interesting statement about the "Tree of Life":

The Olmecs supposedly originated in Chicomoztoc, the Place of Origin, literally "the Seven Caves," from which the ancestors of the seven tribes that populated the earth came forth. Their home was in Tameanchan, "Place of the Bird-Snake," which is interpreted either as a historical spot somewhere in the state of Morelos or as a mythical utopia, a sort of earthly paradise symbolized by the

¹³Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, Historia Chichimeca, ed. Alfredo Chavero, Obras Historicas de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, Vol. II (Mexico: Oficina Tip. de la Secretaria de Fomento, 1892), pp. 23-24 ("llego a esta tierra un hombre a quien llamaron Quetzalcoatl y otros Huemac por sus grandes virtudes, teniendolo por justo, santo y bueno; ensenandoles por obras y palabras el camino de la virtud y evitandoles los vicios y pecados, dando leyes y buena doctrina; y para refrenarles de sus deleites y deshonestidades les instituyo el ayuno, y el primero que adora y coloco la cruz que llamaron Quiahuiteotl-chicahualizteotl y otros Tonacaquahuitl, que quire decir: dios de las lluvias y de la salud y arbol del susteno o de la vida").

¹⁴Brinton, op. cit., p. 113.

¹⁵William H. Holmes, "Art in Shell of the Ancient Americans," Second Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology, 1880-1881 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1883), p.271.

bleeding Tree of Life, a tree that excreted a white juice, perhaps the rubber tree, from which the Olmecs derived their name.¹⁶

The Sacred Tree in the Ancient Hieroglyphic Manuscripts

The "Tree of Life" occupies a prominent position in the ancient hieroglyphic literature of Mesoamerica. In these writings the tree element is conventionalized in such a manner as to resemble a cross, and in many instances the branches terminate in clusters of symbolic fruit.

The Dresden Codex from the Maya area contains nineteen different representations of the sacred tree. Three of these depict it entwined by a serpent.¹⁷ Toward each approaches a god with a sacrificed bird-offering in his outstretched hand (see Plate II, Figure 1, page 51). The first deity to thus approach is identified by Schellhas as "God K" (possibly the deified Quetzalcóatl-Kukuleán), a benevolent deity well-disposed to mankind and closely related to "God B" (probably the great god Itzamná).¹⁸ The second deity is "God A," the

¹⁶Miguel Covarrubias, Mexico South (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1946), pp. 114-115.

¹⁷The Dresden Codex, William Gates edition (Baltimore: The Maya Society at the John Hopkins University, 1932), pp. 26-28.

¹⁸Paul Schellhas, Representations of Deities of the Maya Manuscripts (Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Vol. IV, No. 1. Cambridge: Published by the Museum, 1904), p. 33.

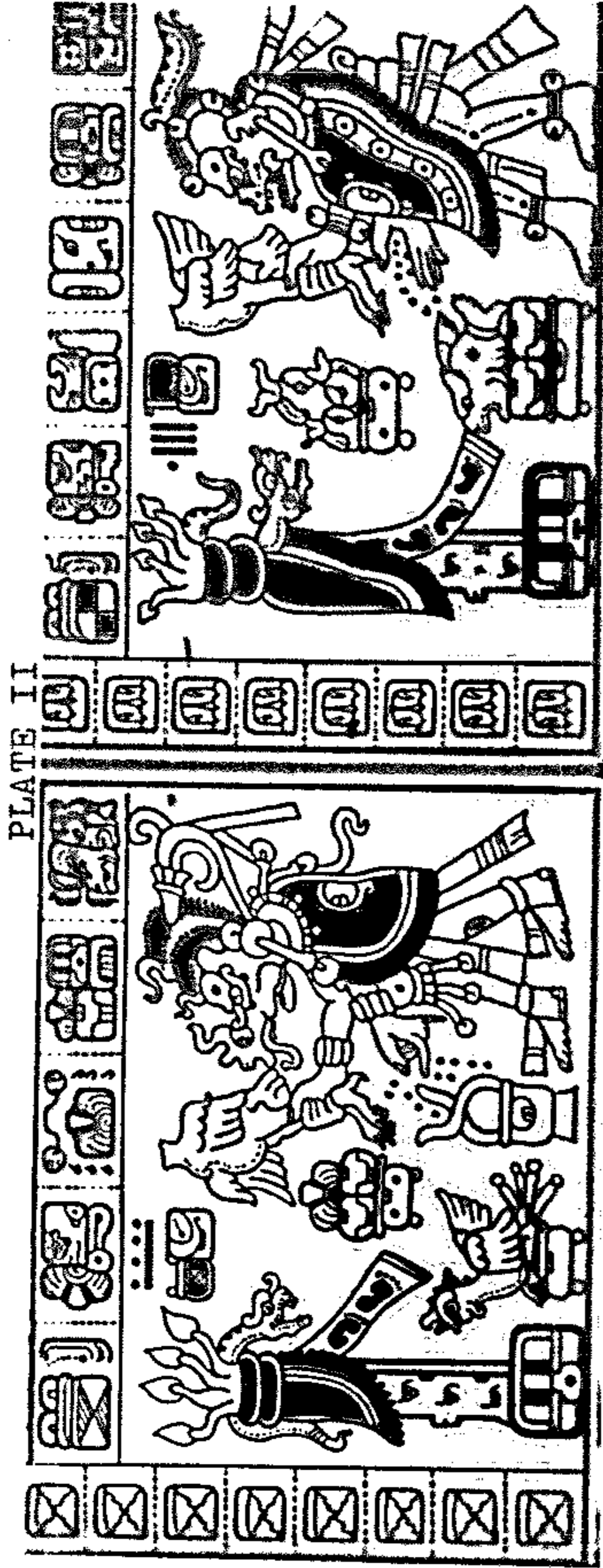


Fig. 1

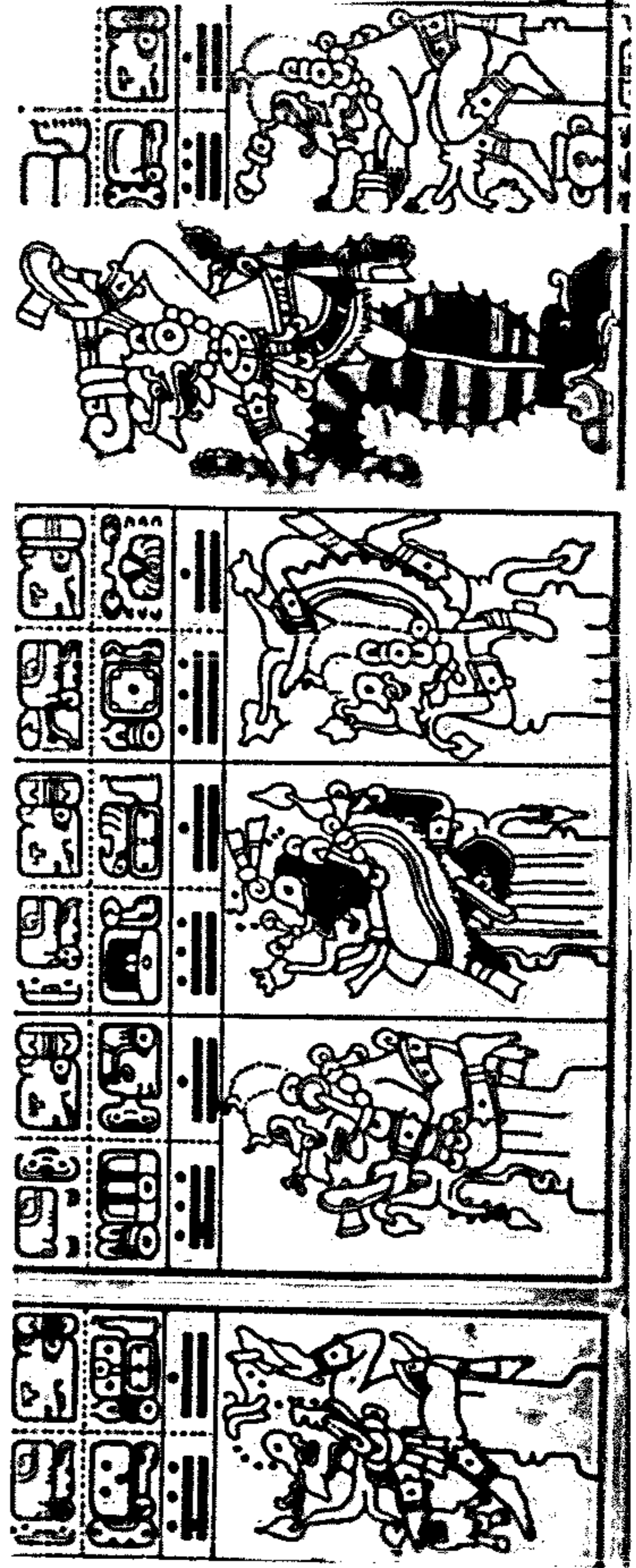


FIG. 2
THE TREE OF LIFE IN THE MAYA MANUSCRIPTS

Death God, who is represented in the Maya manuscripts with great frequency. His association with the "Tree of Life" is hard to explain unless it concerns his connection with birth.¹⁹ "God D", also connected with birth, is the third god represented. Fewkes considers this god to be Itzamná.²⁰ He is believed to be closely allied to gods "K" and "B", and "G" (Sun God), and possibly not to be separated from them as an independent deity.²¹ Thus it appears that "God B" was also (or in his "K" and "D" manifestations) closely connected with the "Tree of Life". This god is one of the most important of the Maya pantheon, and is probably also (like "D" to be identified with Itzamná.²² Schellhas states that "He must be a universal deity, to whom the most varied elements, natural phenomena and activities are subject".²³ He appears fourteen times in the Dresden Codex seated on the sacred tree (see Plate II, Figure 2, page 51). Associated with him are the

¹⁹Schellhas, op. cit., p. 11.

²⁰Ibid., p. 33. Gates states that the Gomesta manuscript gives an "unequivocal" identification of God B as Itzmaⁿ (William Gates, *The Gomesta Manuscript*, (Baltimore: The Maya Society Publication No. 2, 1935)). This manuscript, however, is of doubtful authenticity.

²¹Schellhas, op. cit., p. 23.

²²Ibid., p. 18.

²³Ibid., pp. 17-18.

serpent, or symbol of the early Priest-God Quetzalcōatl; also an ax symbol, and the hieroglyphic signs of the four cardinal directions.

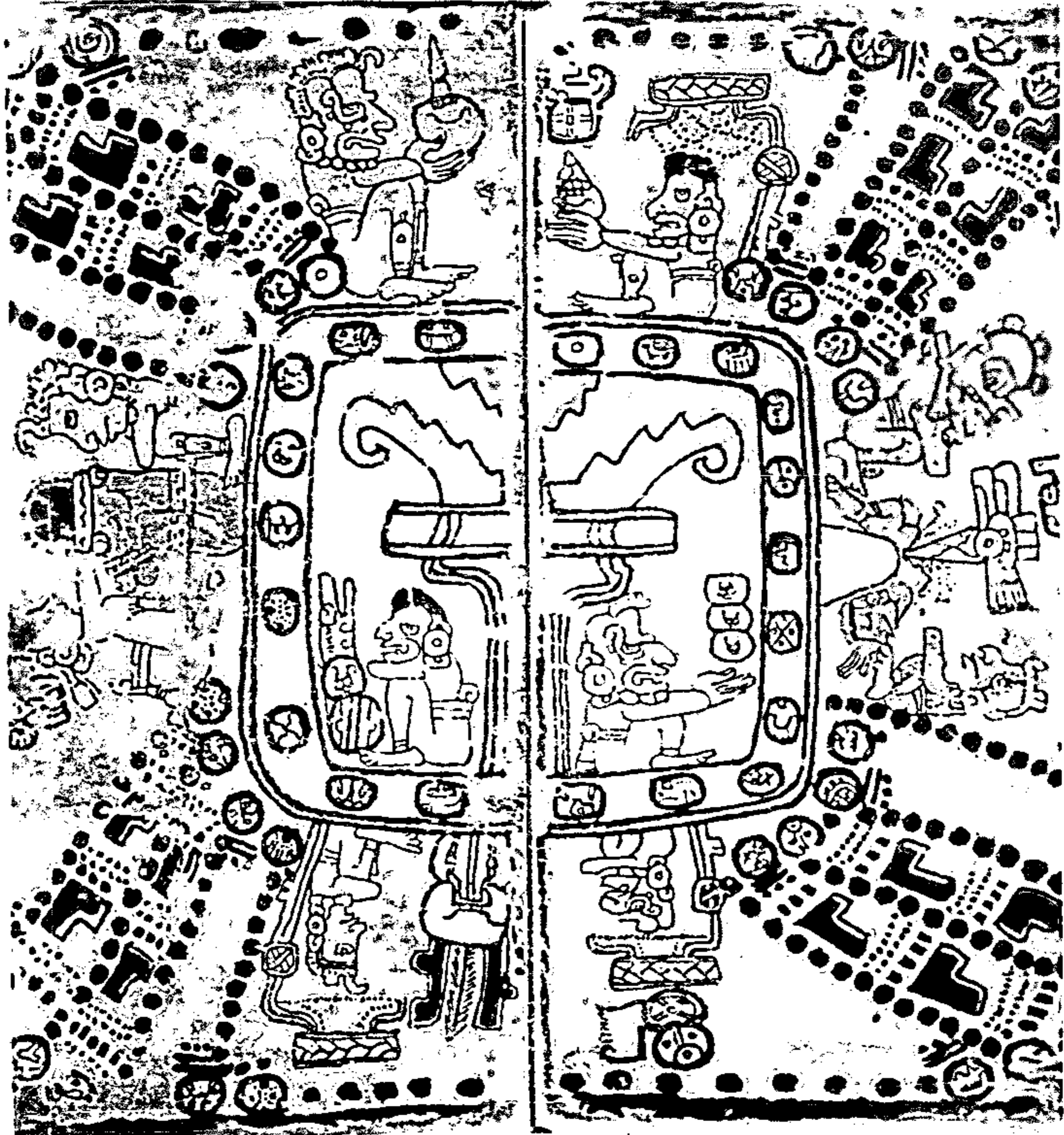
The "Tree of Life" is also depicted once in this codex in connection with the sacrifice of a human being. In this instance the tree itself has the conventionalized cross shape found in sculptured works from the Maya area. The writer is unable to explain the significance of this sacrificial scene.

An illustration in the Codex Tro-Cortesianus described as the "Tableau of the Bacabs" also shows the "Tree of Life". Here it is seen emerging from the "Celestial Vase," a symbol of the earth believed by the archaeologist, G. B. Gordon, to have derived from the serpent's jaw, and thus probably to be connected with Quetzalcoatl.²⁴ Two gods, possibly creative deities, are seated on either side (see Plate III, page 54).

Turning to the central Mexican hieroglyphic literature, we find the codices from this region containing a series of representations of the "Tree of Life" which suggest the "cross" tablets of Palenque, and the sacred tree of the Maya Codices.

²⁴G. B. Gordon, "The Serpent Motive in the Ancient Art of Central America and Mexico," Transactions, Free Museum of Service and Art, Vol. 1, Part 3. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1905), p. 140.

PLATE III



THE TABLEAU OF THE BACABS

Symbolic cruciform trees representing the four quarters of the earth are shown on pages 17 and 18 of Codex Vaticanus B, page 1 of Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, and pages 49 to 52 of Codex Borgia (see Plate IV, Figure 1 and Plates V and VI, pages 57, 58, and 59).

The "Tree of the East" in all three of these manuscripts is painted blue, or blue and green. In Codex Vaticanus B and Codex Fejérváry-Mayer the cross-shaped branches terminate with flowers, while in Codex Borgia they terminate in jeweled disks. There are also colored balls around the flowers in Codex Vaticanus B.

The "Tree of the North" in these manuscripts is also painted green, or half green and half blue, with additional black lines and circles in Codex Vaticanus B. In the Fejérváry-Mayer and Borgia manuscripts, the stem and branches in these two codices contain small flowers, while in the Vaticanus B the branches end in flowers and colored balls.

The third tree, the "Tree of the West", varies in color from the two previously discussed. In Codex Borgia it is yellow and brown, in Codex Vaticanus B it is white with red strips, and in Codex Fejérváry-Mayer it is white. The branches of this tree in Vaticanus B appear to bear fruit, while its stem is painted in the characteristic manner of painting the maize god. This is true also of the Borgia codex. The stem of the tree in the Fejérváry-Mayer has young

sprouts shooting up, and its branches are tipped with long pointed objects.

The "Tree of the South" is the fourth tree depicted in these manuscripts. In the Vaticanus B it is apparently a feathery palm. In the Fejérváry-Mayer it is blue and white, and its branches are tipped with flowers similar to those found on the "Tree of the North". In the Borgia the tree is painted red, and its stem is studded with branches and thorns similar to the "Tree of the North". Small flowers appear on various parts of the stem, and large round flowers terminate the branches. Even these flowers are crowned with thorns.

Codex Borgia also contains a "Tree of the Center" (compare the passage quoted above, page 3 in the Maya Book of Chilám Balám of Chumayel, describing the setting up of the four-direction trees of abundance and also a "green tree of abundance. . .in the center of the world!"), which rises from the body of the Earth Goddess who is lying among the spines of a crocodile or earth monster. The trunk emerges from a disk of water, and close to the foot of the tree are two large ears of maize, while at the end of the trunk and branches are other ears of maize.

There are numerous other representations of a conventionalized sacred tree in the Mexican codices. Some of these are shown in Plate IV, Figure 2, page 57.

PLATE IV

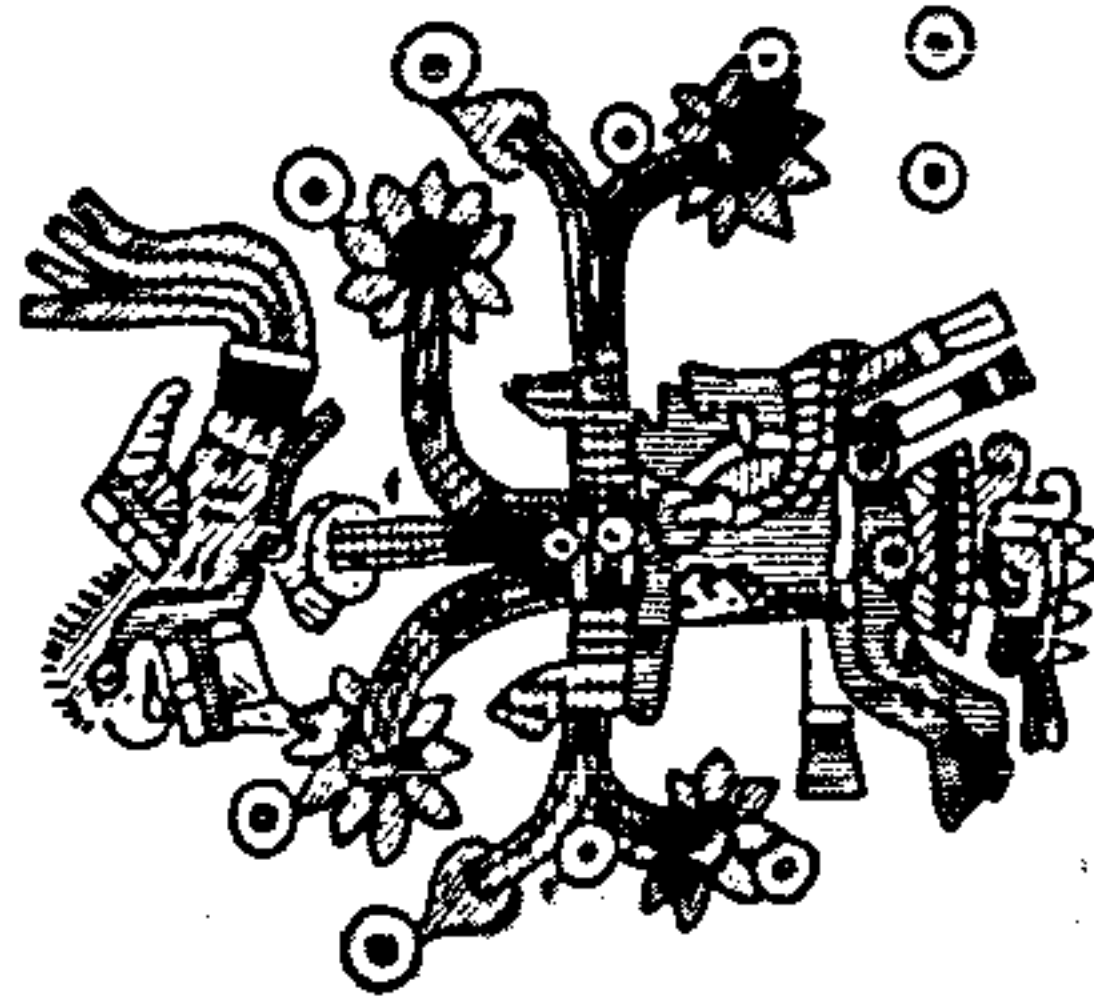
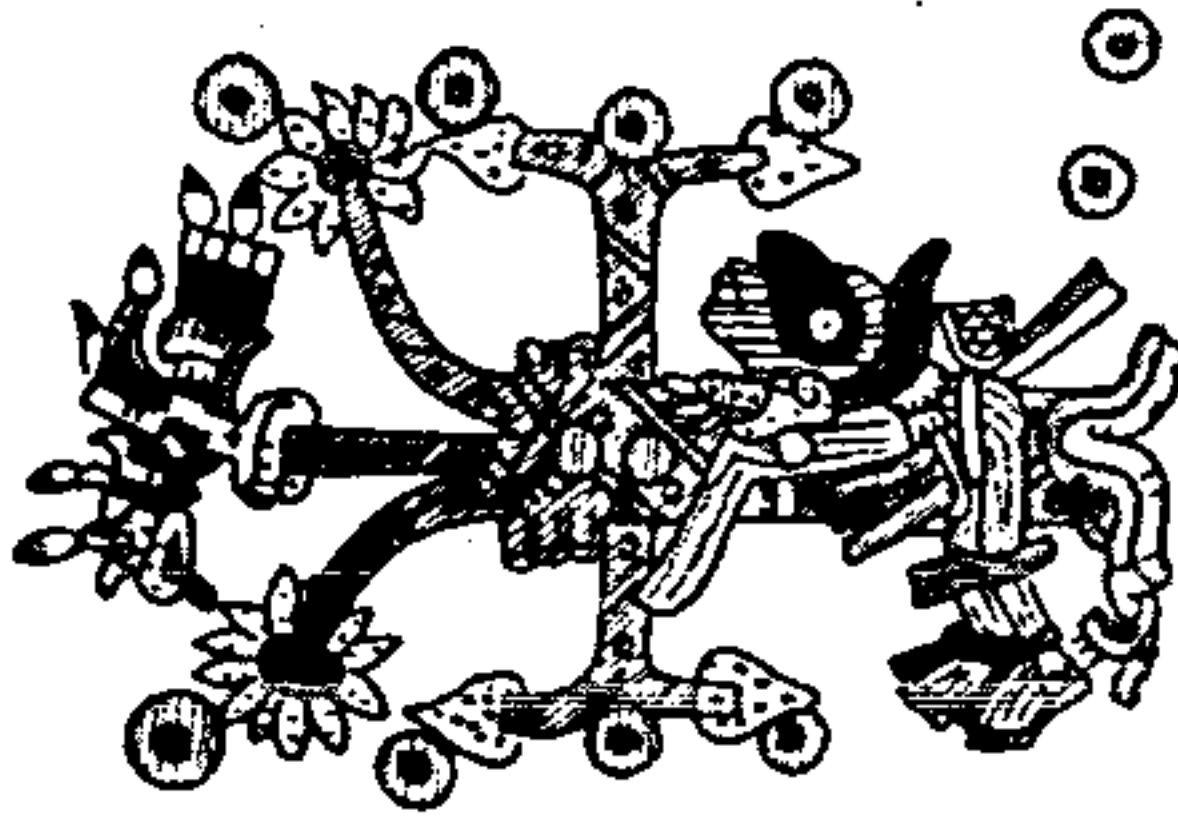
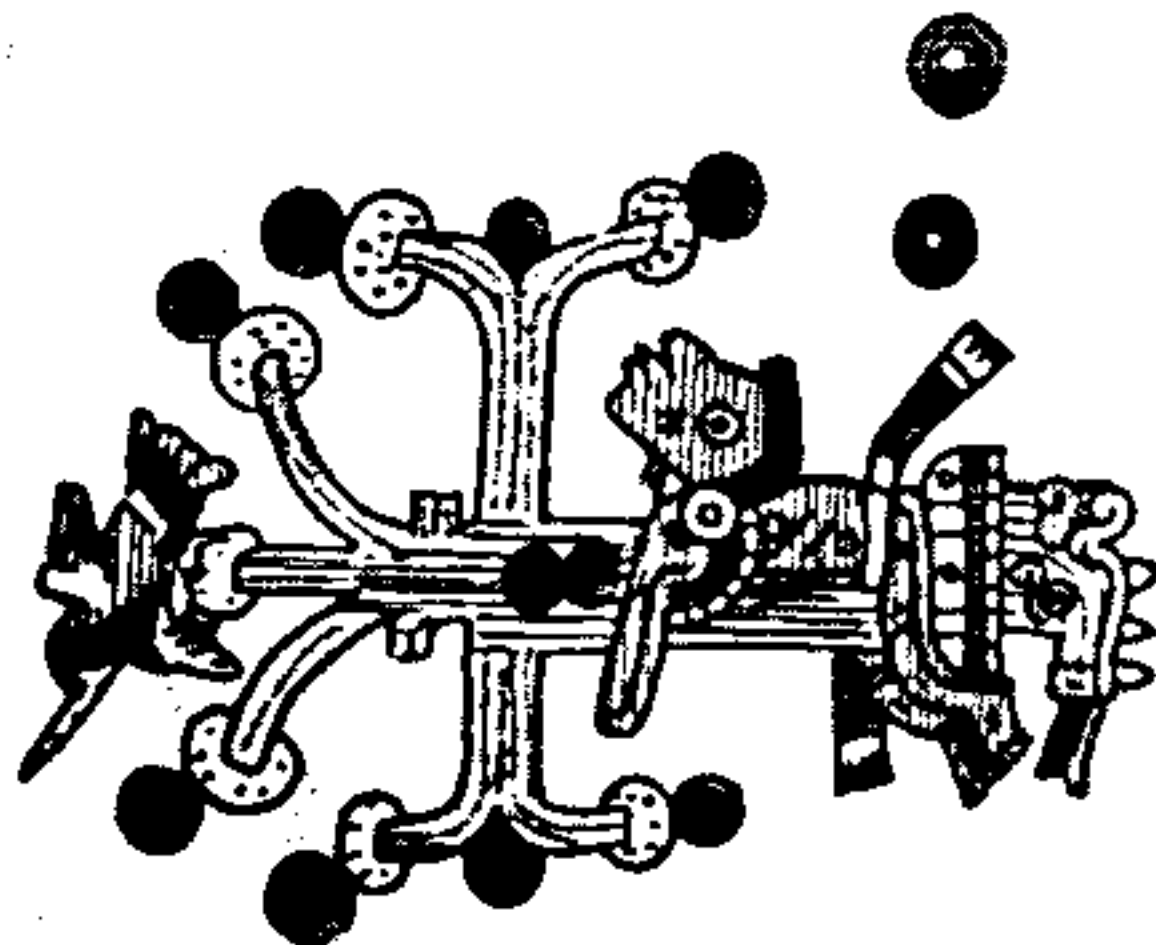
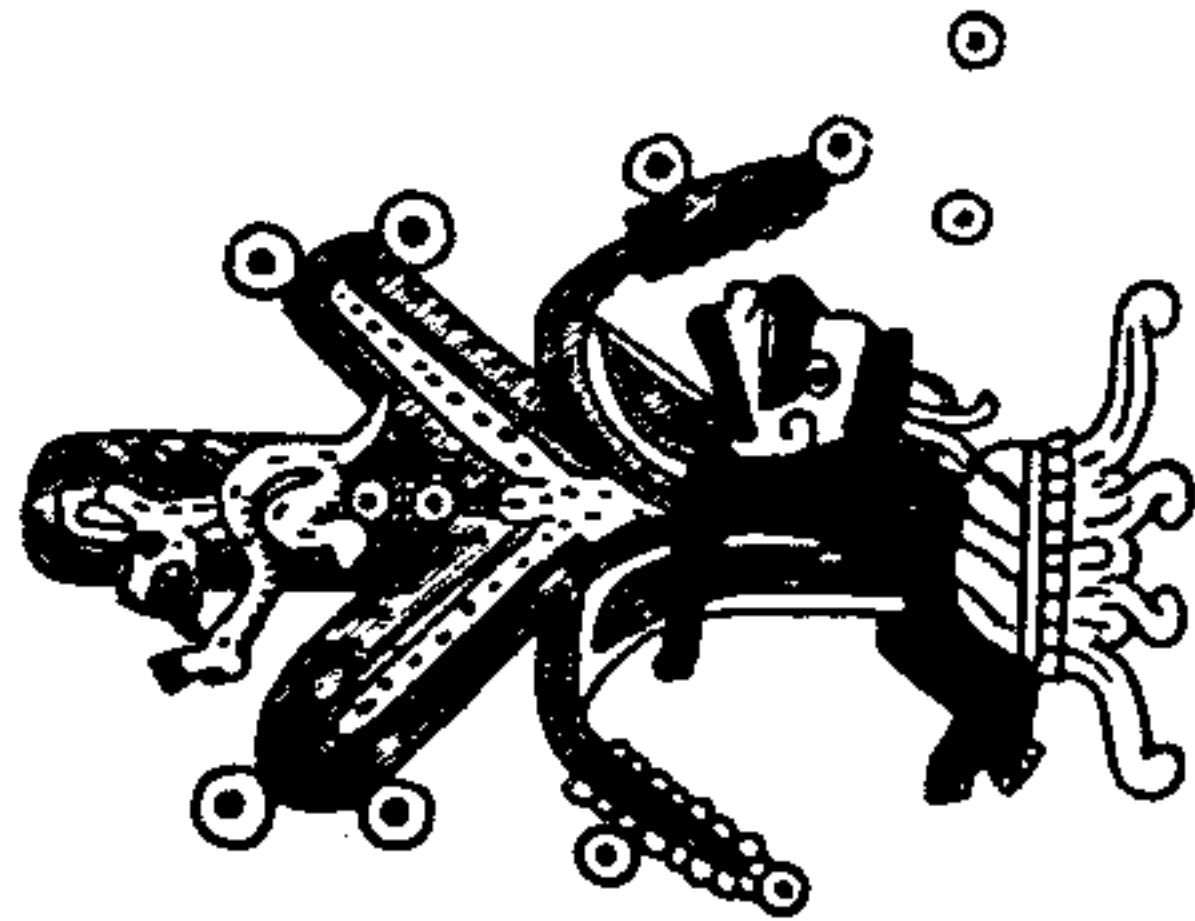


Fig. 1

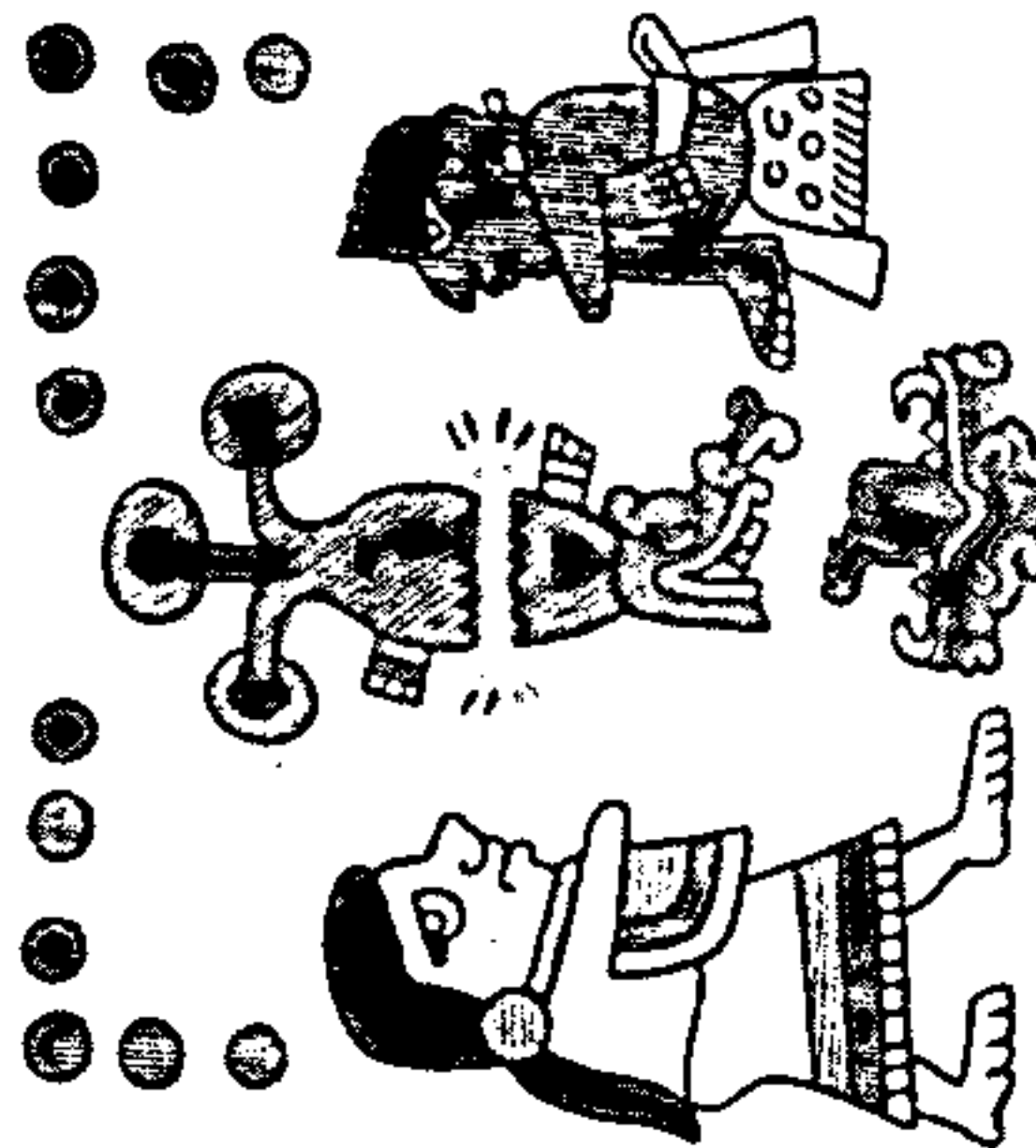


Fig. 2

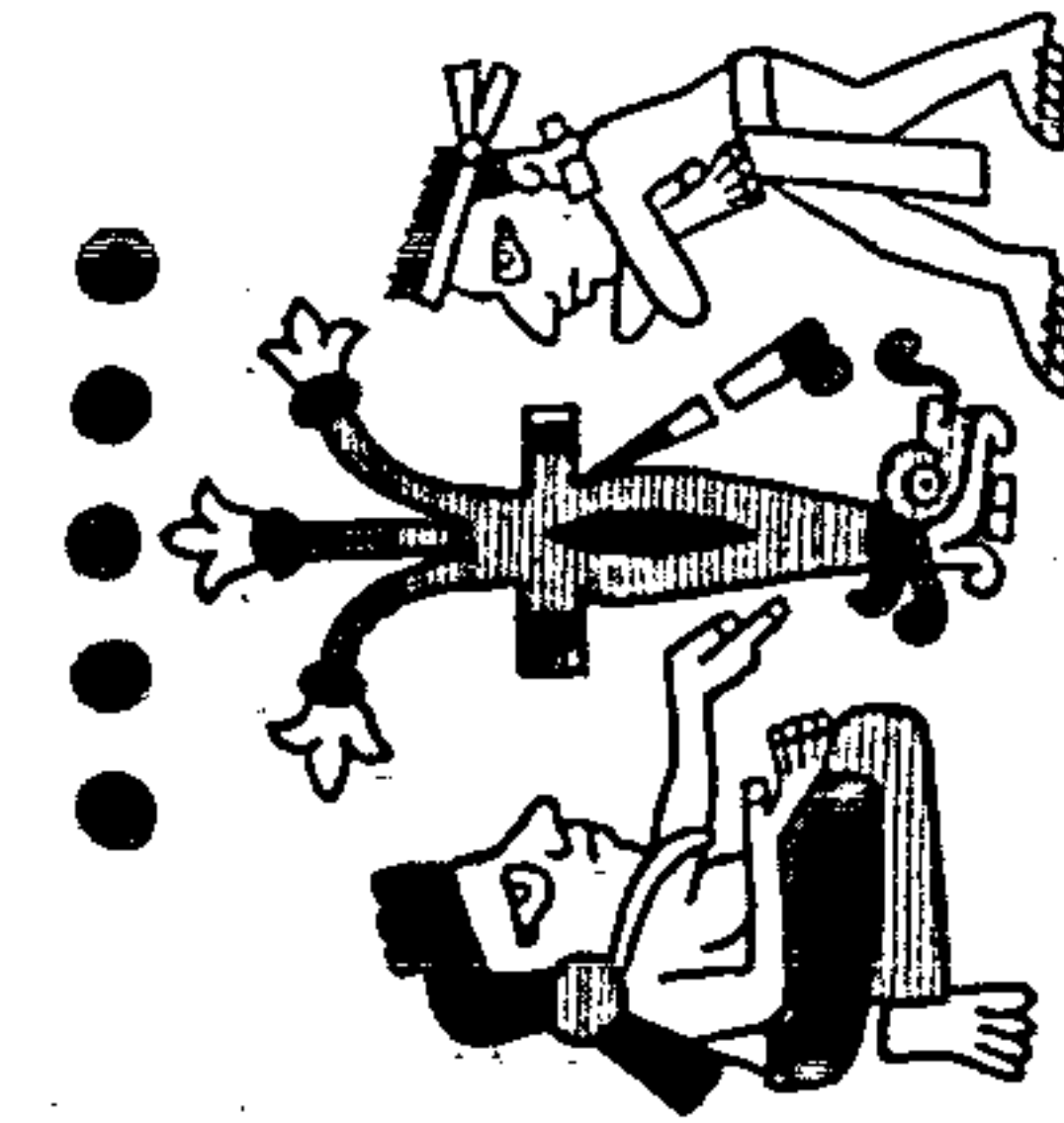


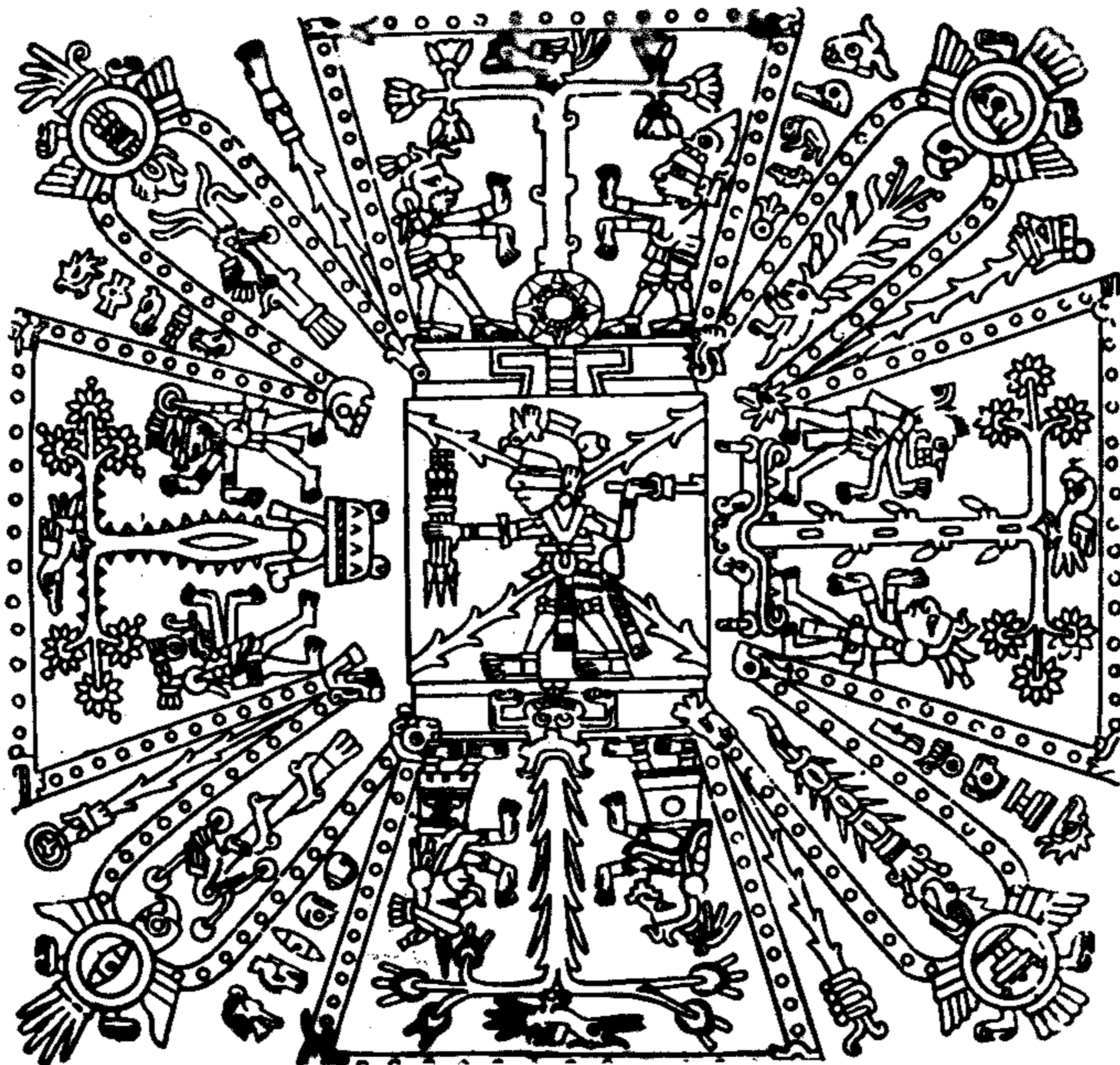
Fig. 3



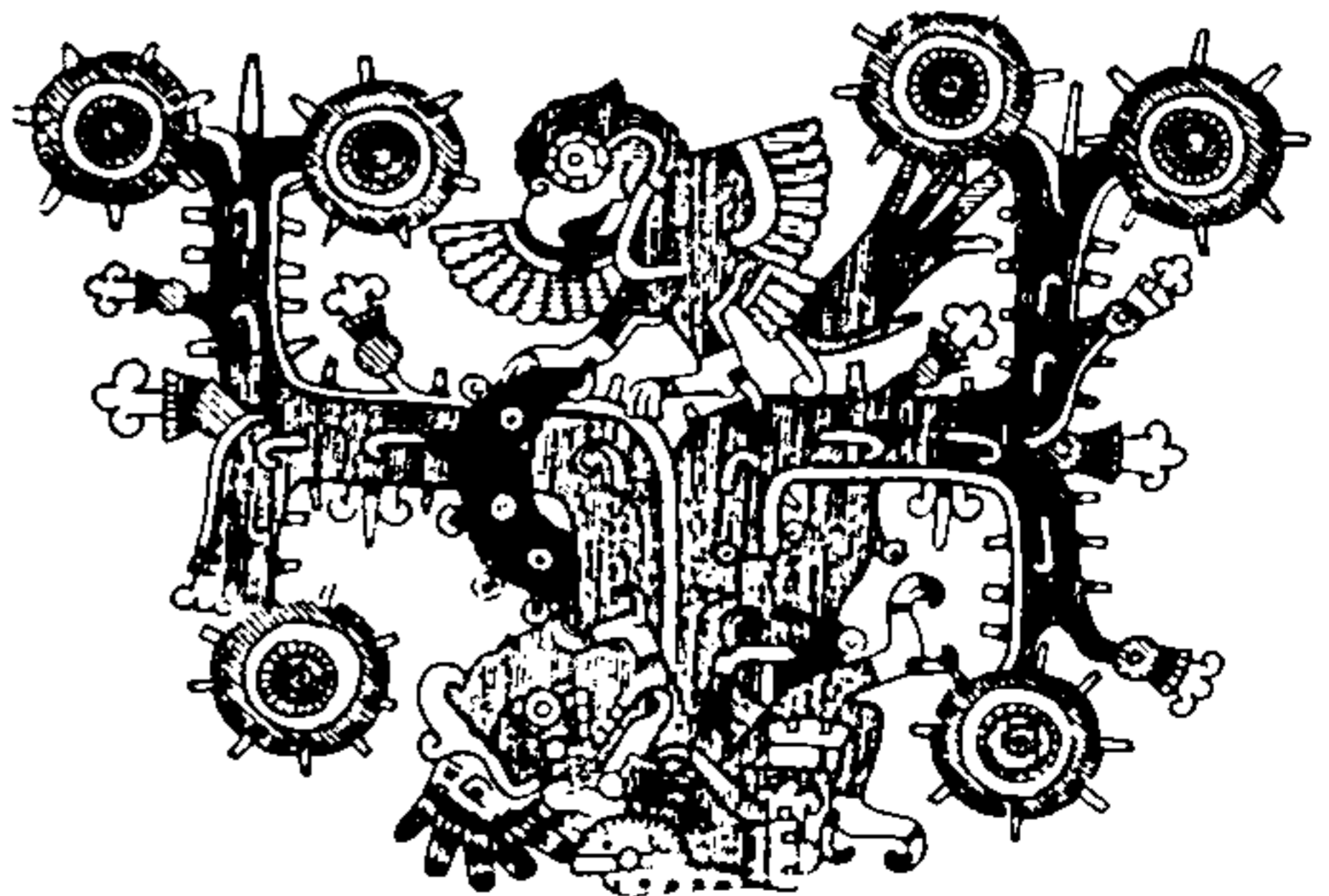
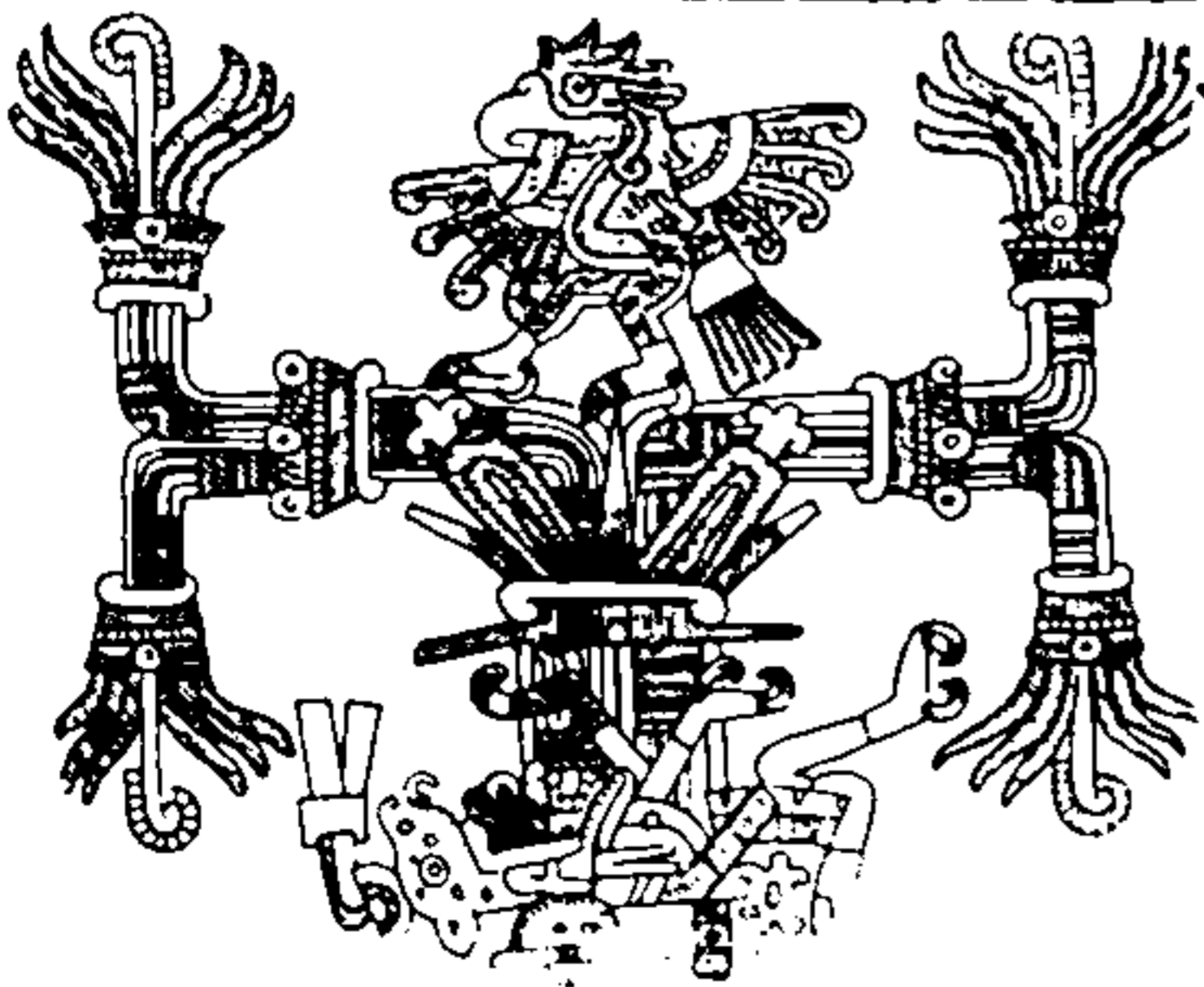
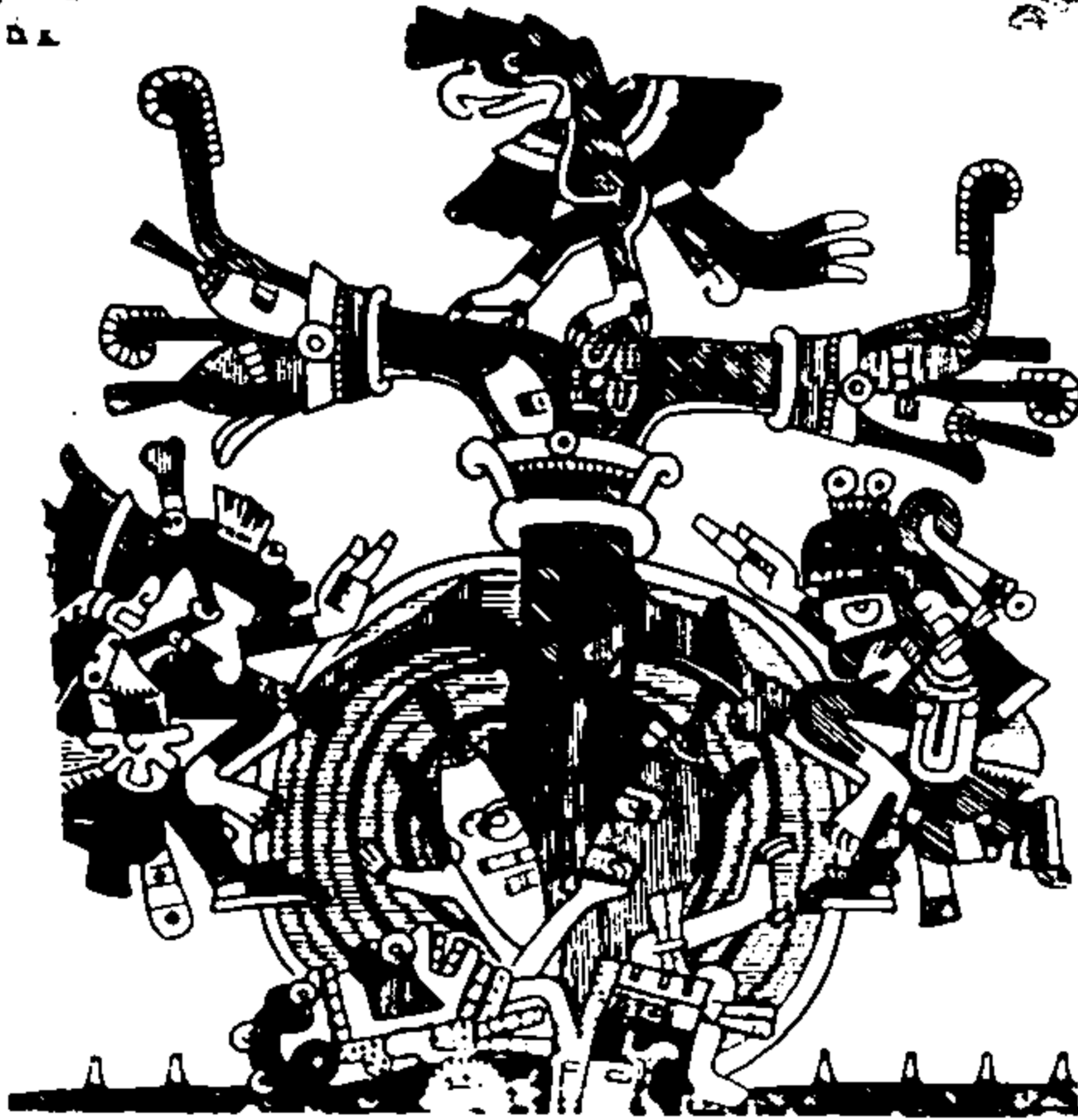
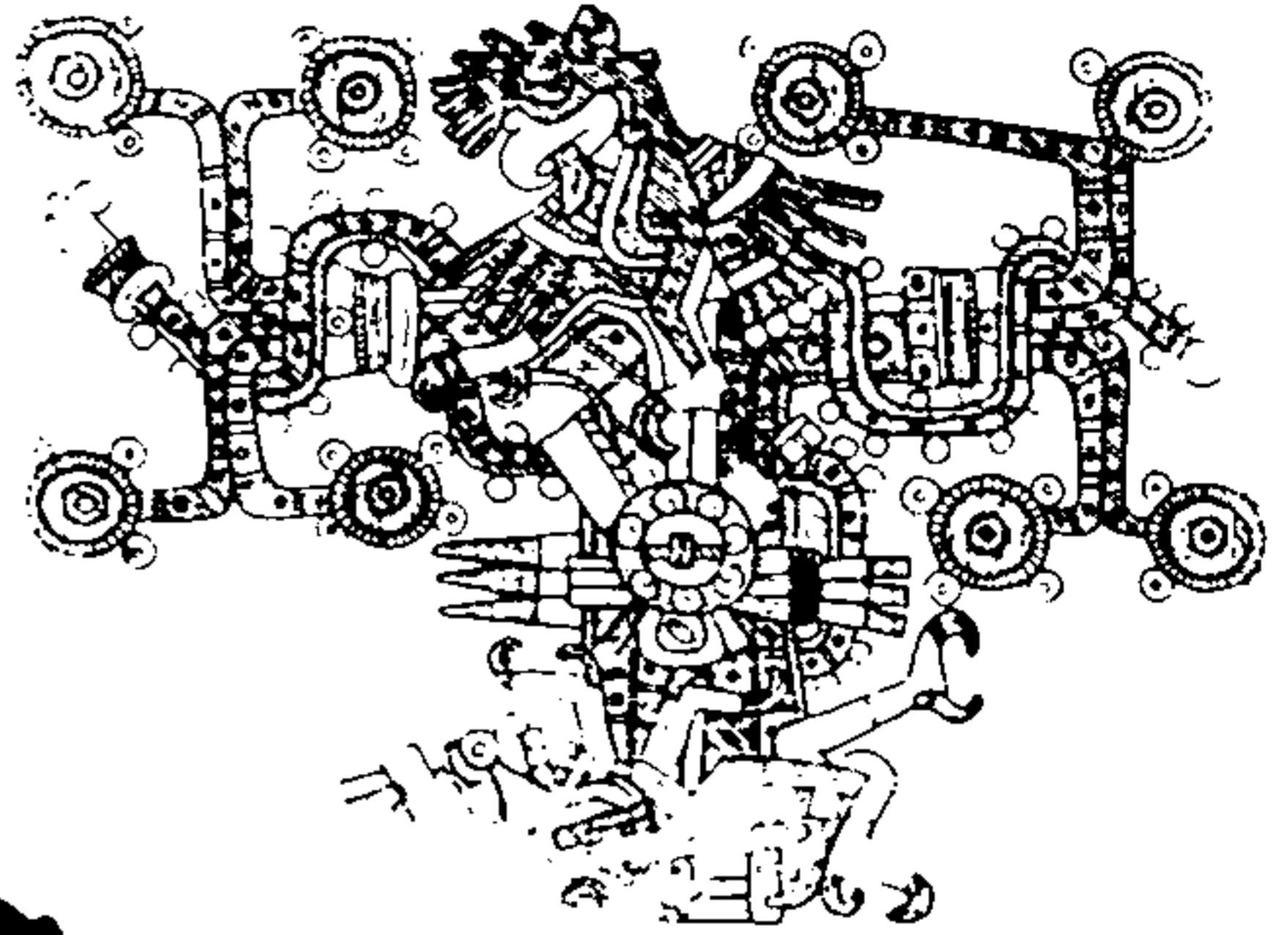
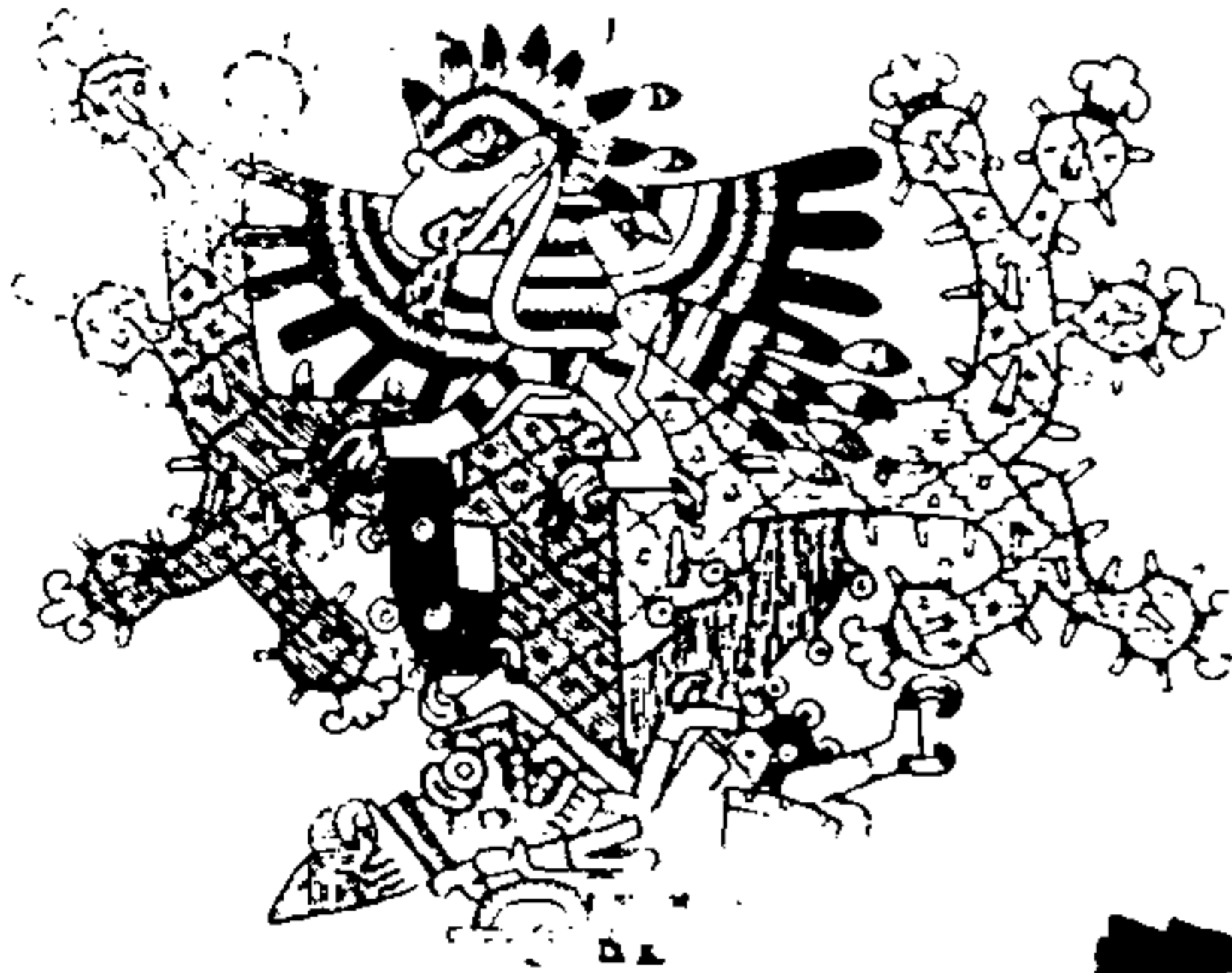
Fig. 4

CRUCIFORM TREES IN THE MEXICAN MANUSCRIPTS

PLATE V



CRUCIFORM TREES OF THE FOUR DIRECTIONS,
CODEX FEJERVARY - MAYER



CRUCIFORM TREES OF THE FOUR DIRECTIONS AND THE CENTER,
CODEX BORGIA

The Sacred Tree in the Sculptures

Of the many illustrations of the sacred tree in ancient Mesoamerica, the most outstanding examples are found in the sculptures from the Maya area.

The tree depicted on the Tablet of the Cross from Palenque is highly conventionalized, having a straight-sided trunk and cross arms in the exact form of the Latin cross. Its identity is further obscured by a profusion of symbolic ornaments (see Plate I, page 39).

The tree rests upon the head of a grotesque being, probably the celestial monster. The flower emblem of the sun is at the base of the tree on the monster's forehead.²⁵ On either side of the monster's head is the sign of Ahau, the last of the 20 named days of the Maya calendar. (This sign also means "lord", "king", or "ruler"). Parry interprets the hieroglyphics at the left base as indicating the heavens with clouds and rain, and those on the right, the starry heavens.²⁶ Leaves and seeds of the maize plant emerge at the base of the tree. Within the trunk of the tree is what appears to be a large maize leaf, and above it are probably kernels of maize.

The cross arms of the tree each consists of a highly

²⁵Parry, op. cit., p. 25.

²⁶Ibid.

conventionalized, grotesque serpent head from which issue what appear to be the stamens of a plant.

At the summit of the tree is perched the "Serpent Bird" with the sun and wind emblem hanging from its tail, and a thunderbolt emblem hanging from its neck.²⁷

On either side of the tree is a small masked figure on the top of a staff or pole made up of many symbolic elements. Maize leaves appear to emerge from the head of each of these figures, (Manikin scepters).

The sacred tree in the Tablet of the Foliated Cross is very similar to that in the tablet of the Cross, in that it is also highly conventionalized and composed of many symbolic elements (see Plate VII, page 62). Its foliage, however, definitely reveals that it is a representation of the maize plant. It stands on the head of a grotesque monster, and faces, emblematic of the sun, appear on the trunk and on the cross arms. The leaves of the maize plant are curled to give a serpentine appearance. The identification of this tree as a maize plant leads to the identification of the more highly conventionalized tree on the Tablet of the Cross as probably also a maize plant, since a few leaves do appear in connection with it.

The identification of these two trees as maize plants

²⁷Ibid., p. 34.

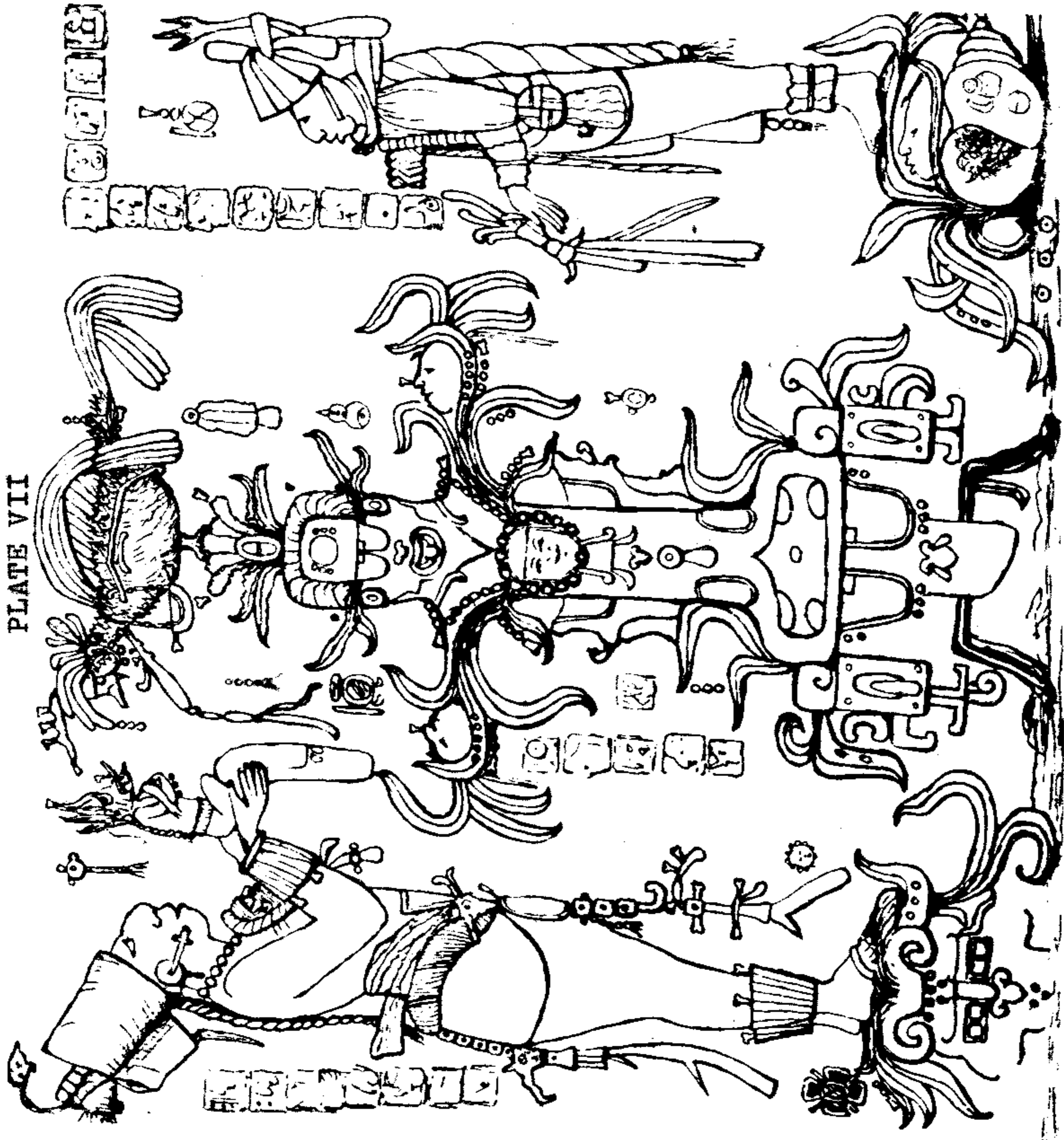


PLATE VII

THE TABLET OF THE FOLIATED CROSS, PALENQUE

is strengthened when they are compared with a foliated equal-limbed cross of maize leaves from a wall panel at Copan (see Plate VIII, page 64). The tips of these leaves, too, have a serpentine appearance. In front of the cruciform plant is a "long-nose masked" figure, evidently a priest or a god, holding a bowl of maize on one hand.

The Lintel 2 sculpture from Yaxchilan shows two priests holding cruciform wands for ceremonial staffs which, like the trees in the above named sculptures, contain symbolic fruit, serpent symbols, and a bird perched at the summit (see Plate IX, Figure 1, page 64). It seems evident that this wand or staff originated from the sacred tree symbol, and is but a representation of it.

The trees shown on the wall panel of the much later Mexican-Maya Temple of the Wall Panels at Chiehén Itzâ are quite naturalistically represented. They are not burdened down with symbols, nor do they bear symbolic fruit. They do, however, have a bird perched at the top of each, and a jaguar, probably to be identified with the grotesque monster of the Palenque tablets, is near by (see Plate IX, Figure 2, page 65).

PLATE VIII



CRUCIFORM MAIZE PLANT AT COPAN

PLATE IX

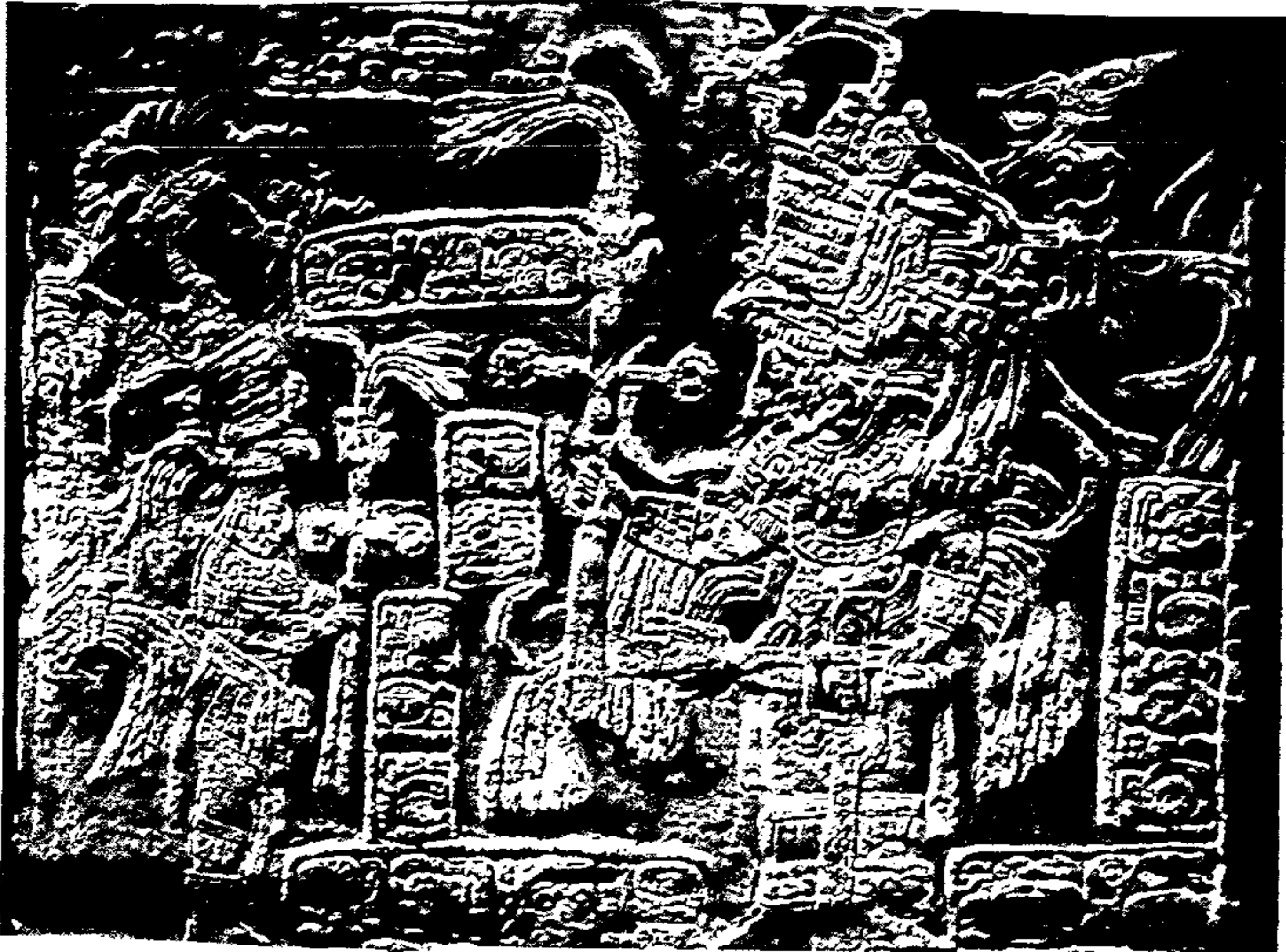


Fig. 1

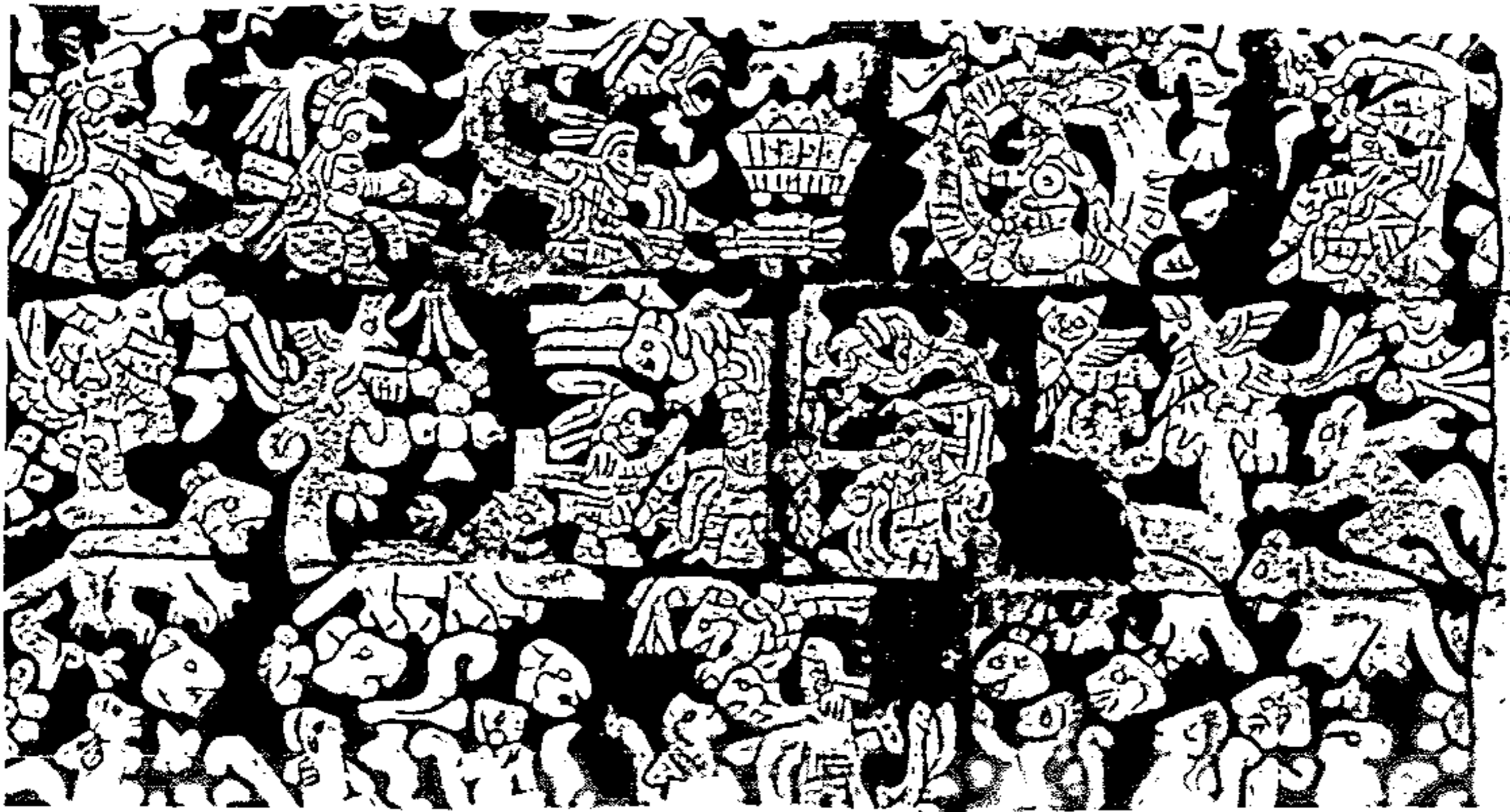


Fig. 2

CRUCIFORM CEREMONIAL STAFFS AND SYMBOLIC TREES

CHAPTER IV

THE BIRD ELEMENT

Birds were given a very prominent place in the religious symbolism of ancient Mesoamerica. They were represented in the glyphs and codices, and upon sculptured monuments for symbolic and decorative purposes.

The birds were sometimes shown naturally, but more often they were represented in a vague and grotesque manner, sometimes approaching the human, and sometimes the serpent type. In many instances they were supplied with ear plugs, nose plugs, and teeth.¹ The latter are identical with those shown in the serpents' jaw, and therefore, with the teeth of the Long-nosed God (God B) and the Roman-nosed God (God D), and also probably with the teeth of God K.² (It is of interest in this connection to note Spinden's statement that both God B and God D had the strongly deformed teeth which Cogolludo gives as the characteristics of Itzamná.)³ The curled object similar to that in the serpents' mouth often appears at the

¹Spinden, op. cit., p. 78.

²Ibid., pp. 63, 64.

³Ibid., p. 69.

back of the mouth of the bird and is also to be found in the mouth of God B.⁴

The Bird in the Native Mythology of the
Early Sixteenth-century Writings

The bird played an important part in the mythology of the people of ancient Mesoamerica. In Mexican legend Huitzilopochtli, the great tribal deity of the Aztecs, is described as leading his people from the northern country of Aztlan in the form of a little bird. When depicted in the manuscripts, this great god has the appearance of a humming bird, wearing a mantle made from its feathers.⁵ Macuilxochitl, god of song and dance, was represented with a bird headdress,⁶ and dead warriors who accompanied the sun on its journey were turned into humming birds.⁷

The Maya Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel gives a description of the creation of the world and the setting up of trees for different birds to sit upon. The following passage has already been quoted in Chapter III, but will be repeated here in part for the present connection:

⁴Schellhas, op. cit., p. 16. See also Spinden, op. cit., p. 64.

⁵Spence, op. cit., pp. 16-18.

⁶Thompson, "The Moon Goddess in Middle America," Contributions to American Anthropology and History, Vol. V, Nos. 24 to 29, op. cit., p. 141.

⁷Ibid. See also Torquemada, op. cit., p. 530.

Then after the destruction of the world was completed, they placed a tree to set up in its order the yellow cock oriole. . . . Then the black tree of abundance was set up in the west for the black-breasted picoy to sit upon. Then the yellow tree of abundance was set up in the south, as a symbol of the destruction of the world, for the yellow-breasted picoy to sit upon, for the yellow cock oriole to sit upon, the yellow timid mut. . . .⁸

The mut-bird is again spoken of by the Prophet Balam in the chapter dealing with the katun prophecies:

There cometh a white circle in the sky, the fair-skinned boy from heaven, the white wooden standard that shall descend from heaven. . . . You shall see the dawn of a new day, you shall see the mut-bird.⁹

That the bird was perched upon this standard in a similar manner to the birds on the Palenque tablets is evident from the prophecies of a new religion in the same book: "You see the mut-bird surmounting the raised wooden standard."¹⁰

Also recorded in this book is an incident in which the sun turned himself into a humming bird and sucked the flowers so that he could be taken to the house of the Moon Goddess, and thus have the opportunity of obtaining her for his wife.¹¹ The Moon Goddess later deserted her husband, the

⁸Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel, ed. cit., p. 100. The "mut" referred to in this passage means bird in the Mayan Chol. Chontal, and Tzoltzil languages. See Roys, op. cit., p. 148, note 6. (Note: Words or phrases enclosed in diamond brackets have been supplied by the translator, Roys, from another source).

⁹Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel, ed. cit., p. 148.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 167.

¹¹Ibid., p. 138.

Sun God, and eloped with a king vulture.¹²

Birds in the Hieroglyphic Manuscripts

The bird is prominently featured in the religious ceremonies dealt with in the ancient Mesoamerican hieroglyphic manuscripts, in association with a number of deities as well as with other symbolic elements.

It will not be possible in this brief study to discuss all of the numerous appearances of the bird in these manuscripts. The writer has chosen, therefore, to concentrate the greater part of the study on the bird symbol in the hieroglyphic writings from the Maya area, the main reason for this selection being that these writings are of an early date and treat of the religion in its relatively unelaborated form. The later Mexican writings treat of a corrupted religion, and the symbolism in them, therefore, is not so reliable for interpretative purposes.

Birds in the Maya Manuscripts

There are several varieties of birds represented in the extant Maya manuscripts. Some of these appear to be definitely associated with religious ceremonies or with the great gods, while others are of lesser significance. Many

¹²Thompson, "The Moon Goddess in Middle America," Contributions to American Anthropology and History, Vol. V, Nos. 24 to 29, op. cit., p. 135.

bird forms appearing in the manuscripts cannot be surely identified because of the obscurity of the representation, or because their characteristics do not conform to those of any known living species in the region. In the Codex Tre-Cortesianus the bird appearing on the top of the staff carried by God F, identified by Schellhas as the God of War and Human Sacrifice and closely related to the Death God A,¹³ is unidentifiable, as is also the bird appearing on the headdress of this same god.¹⁴

Birds identifiable in the Maya manuscripts include the heron, frigate-bird, ocellated turkey, king vulture, black vulture, harpy eagle, Yucatan horned owl, Yucatan screech owl or moan bird, the quetzal, and the blue macaw.

The heron, one of the few water birds shown in the Maya codices, apparently has religious significance since its head and neck appear in the Dresden Codex as a headdress of the unidentified God H (see Plate X, Figure 1, page 71),¹⁵ sometimes called the "young god" who is in some way related to the serpent.¹⁶ It also appears with God B, who carries a

¹³Schellhas, op. cit., p. 25.

¹⁴Codex Tro-Cortesianus, William Gates edition, Codex Madrid (Maya Society Publication No. 21. (Baltimore: The Maya Society, 1933)), pp. 20, 27.

¹⁵Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., p. 36.

¹⁶Schellhas, op. cit., pp. 29-30.



FIG. 1

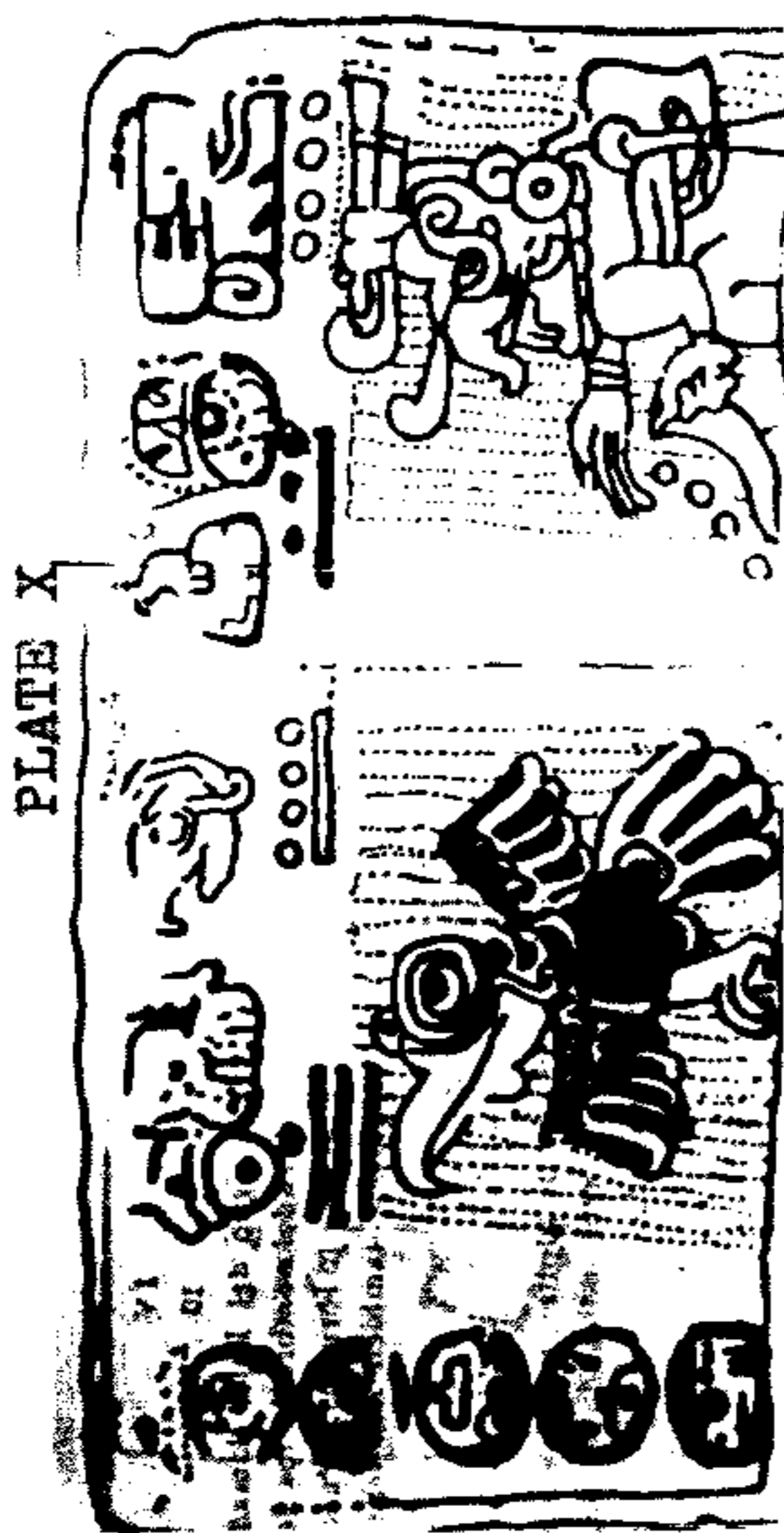


FIG. 2



FIG. 3

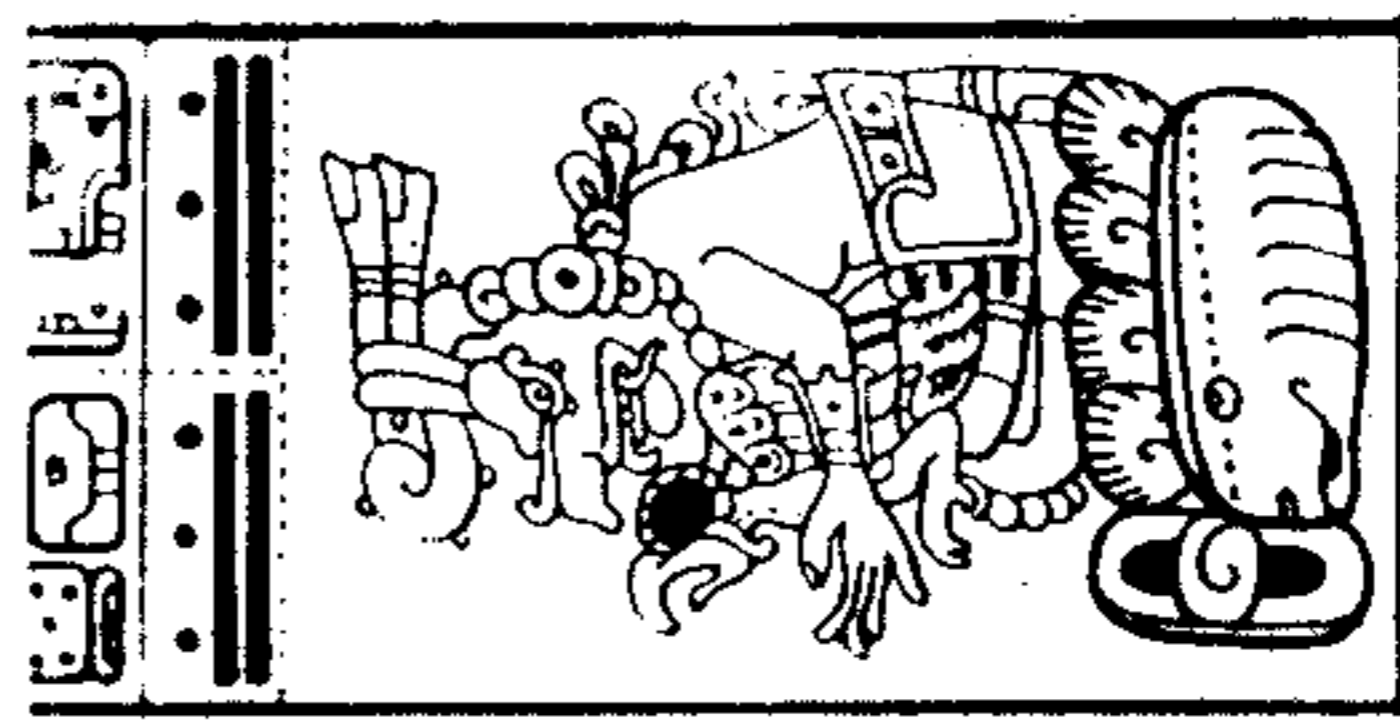


FIG. 4

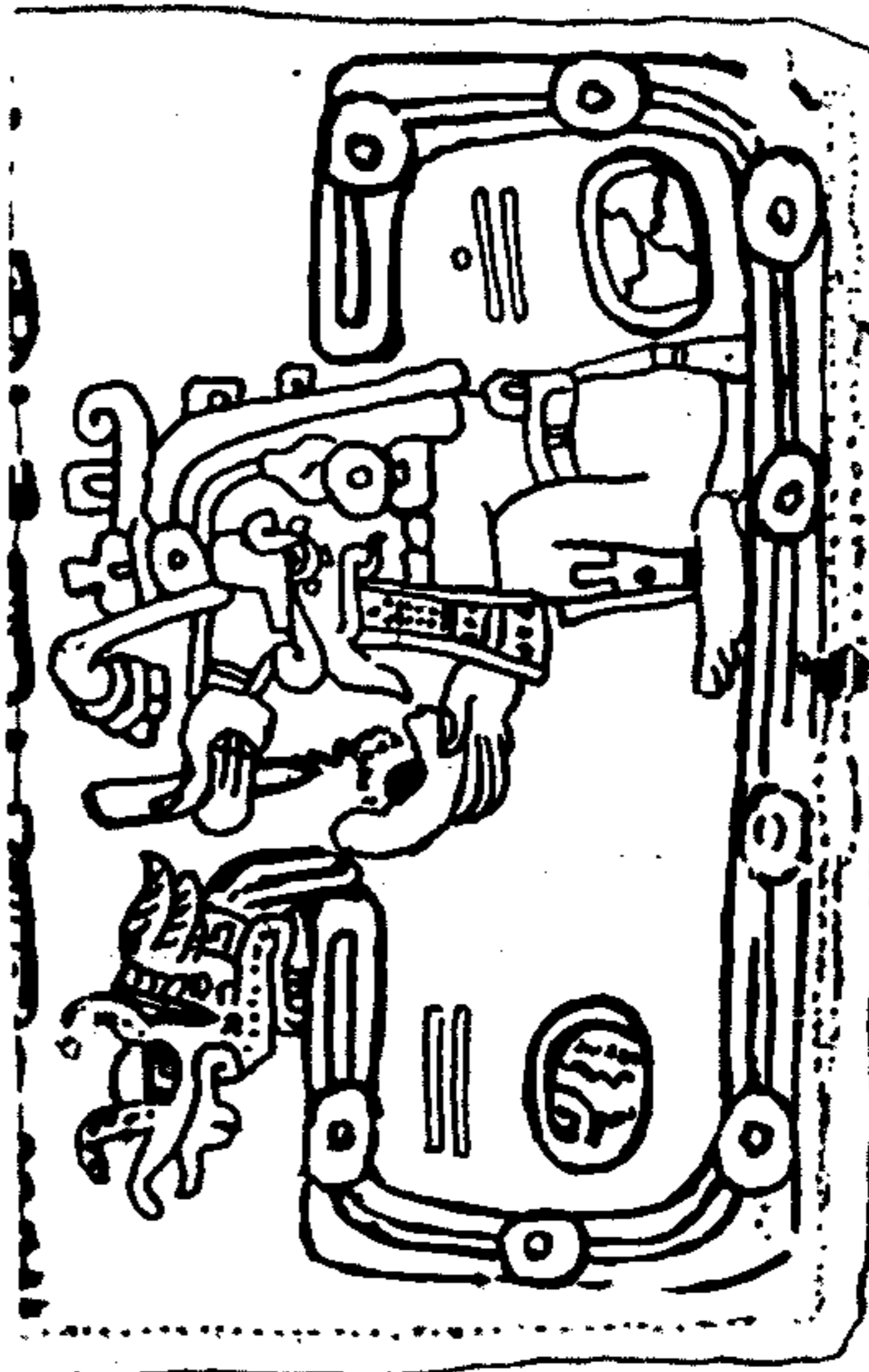


FIG. 5
BIRDS IN THE MAYA MANUSCRIPTS

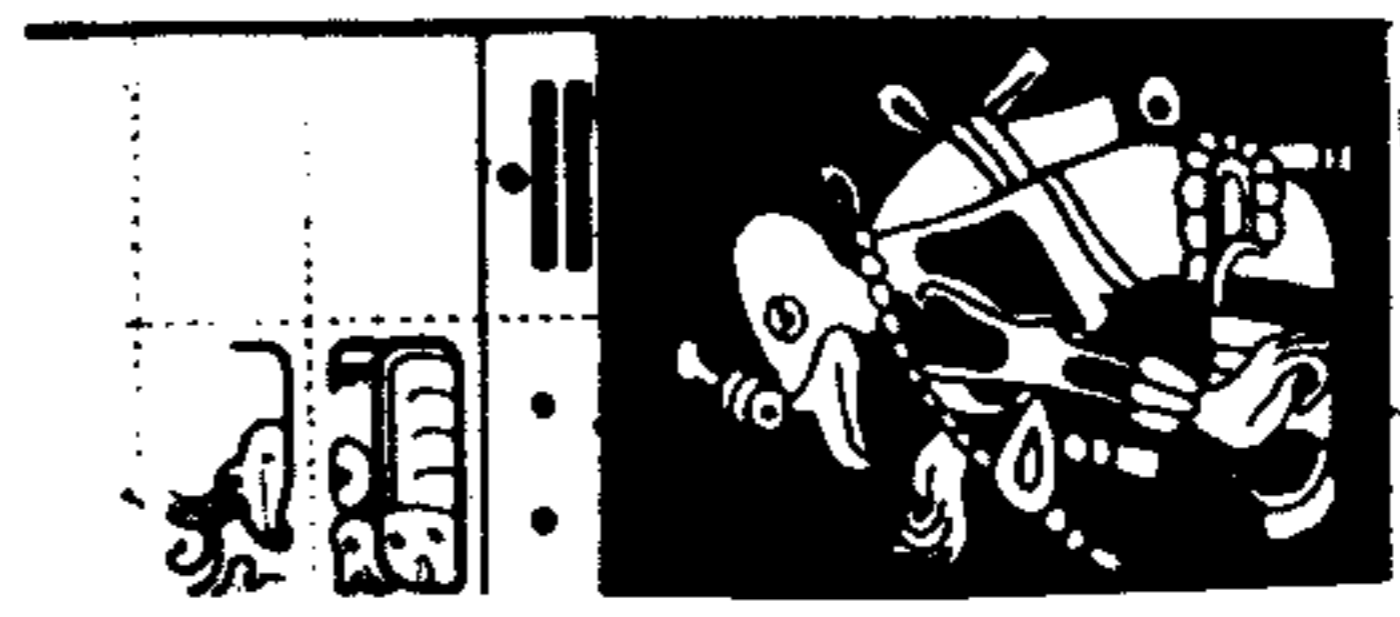


FIG. 6

lighted torch in one hand and an instrument or staff ending in the head of the heron in the other.¹⁷

The frigate-bird, a long-winged sea bird with a deeply forked tail and long beak, is twice pictured in the manuscript as an offering or sacrifice in place of the ocellated turkey, the usual sacrificial bird. In both instances the whole bird is given as an offering. In one representation it is on the kan sign, (that is, the sign for maize or bread, which accompanies every sacrifice),¹⁸ which in turn is on a bowl or jar, and in the second it is on a grotesque animal head which is over three kan signs and a bowl.¹⁹ Vaillacorta identified the person shown with this scene as a Chao, or Rain God, (see Plate XII, page 75).²⁰

Frequently seen in the manuscripts is the ocellated turkey, a smaller bird than the true turkey and characterized by curious erect knobs on the top of a naked head.²¹ This is the usual bird of sacrifice in the manuscripts, and it is to be noted that the head alone usually appears in this connection.²²

¹⁷Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., p. 37.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁹Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., p. 4.

²⁰Villacorta and Villacorta, op. cit., p. 293.

²¹Tozzer and Allen, op. cit., p. 326.

²²Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., pp. 28, 29, 34; Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., p. 12.

The head rests on the kan sign, meaning bread, and also on a bowl or jar. This offering of a head with bread is recorded in the writings of Landa: ". . .and to offer him [that is, Yax Cocah Mut (or Itzamna)] the heads of turkeys, bread and drinks of maize."²³ The decapitated bird held by a god who approaches the "Tree of Life" with the offering is also believed to be the ocellated turkey. Those taking part in these sacrificial scenes are God B, God K, God A, and God D,²⁴ all of whom have previously been identified (see Plates II and XII, pages 51 and 75).

The ocellated turkey is also used as a headdress, but in only one instance is the whole bird thus employed, and that is where birth and baptism are shown.²⁵ The headdresses of God A, the Death God; God C, so far unidentified; God E, the Maize God (a counterpart to Centeotl, the Mexican Maize God); and God H, also unidentified, consist of the head and shoulders only of this bird (see Plate XI, Figure 2, page 74 for bird headdresses of deities).²⁶

²³Landa's Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán, ed. cit., p. 145.

²⁴Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., pp. 25-28.

²⁵Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., p. 95.

²⁶Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., pp. 7, 11, 13, 23.

PLATE XI

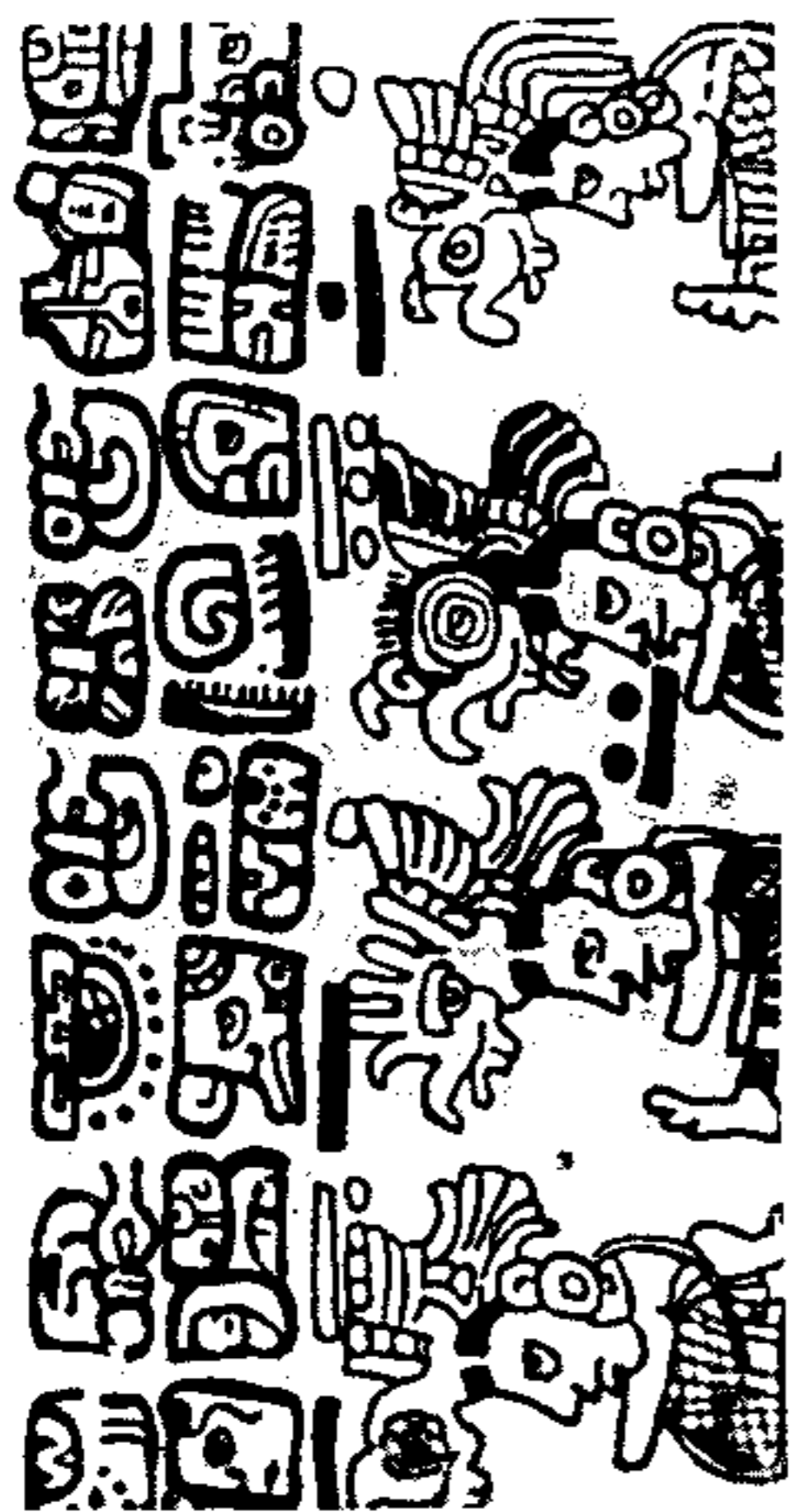


Fig. 1

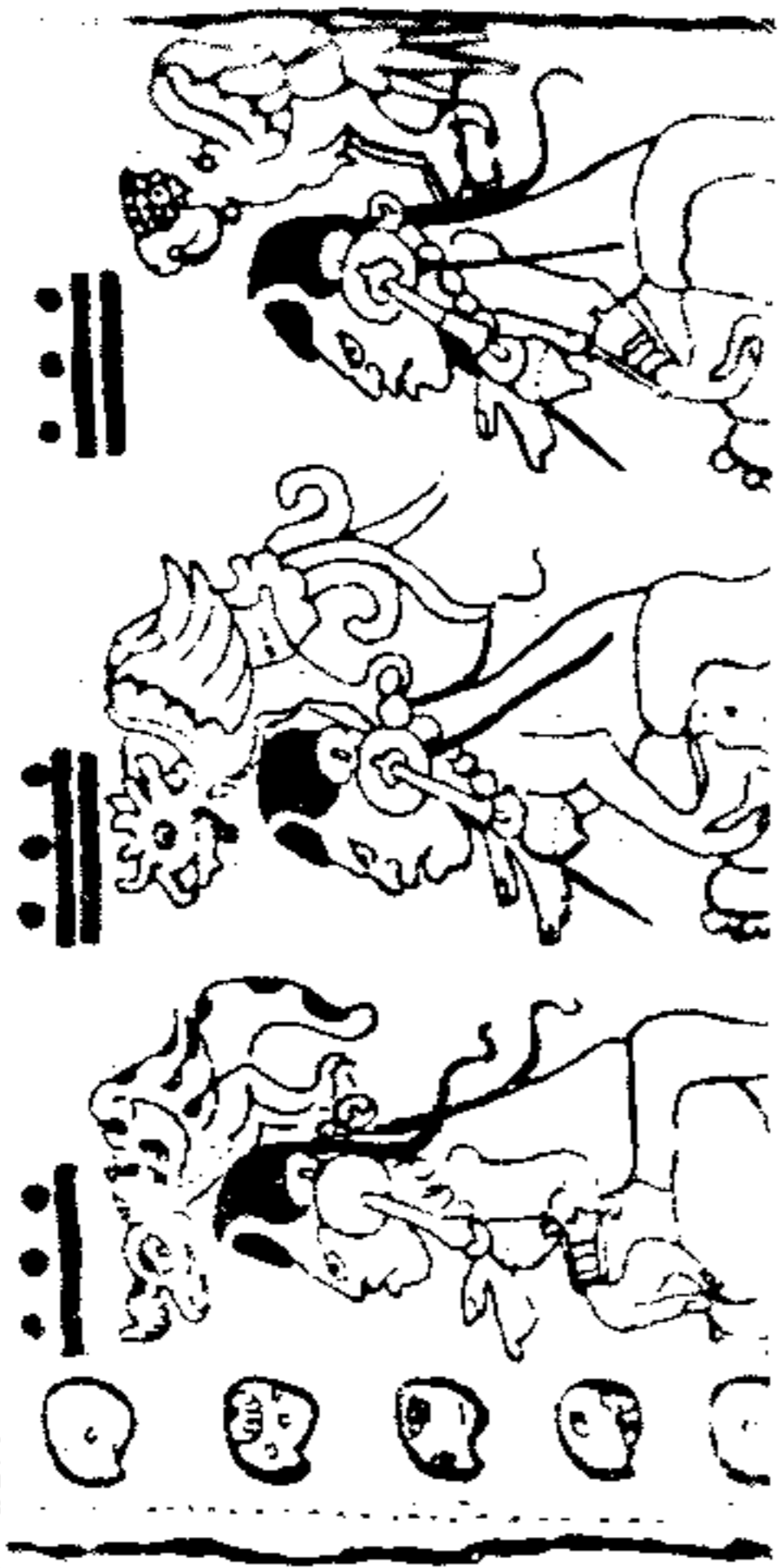


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

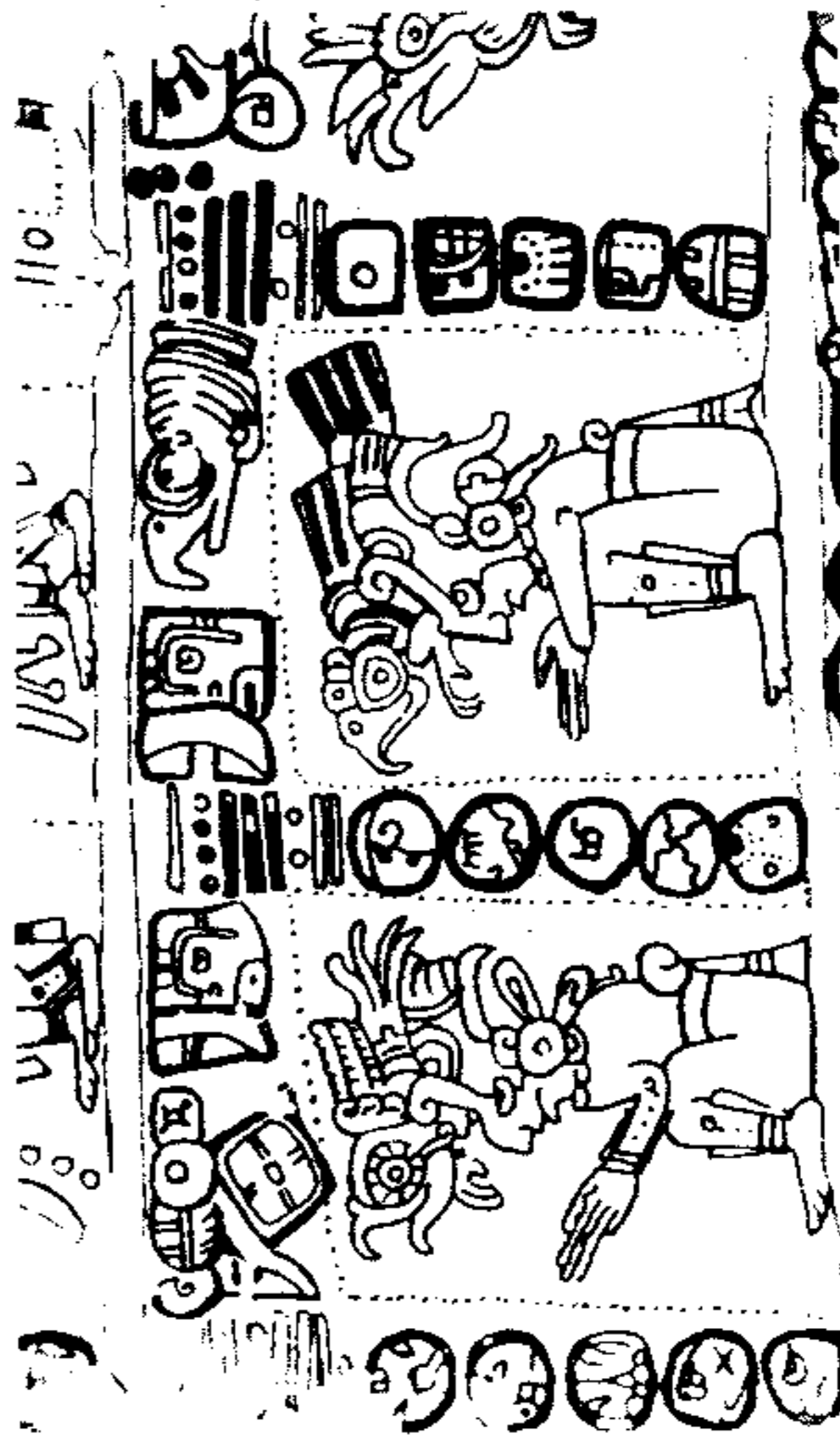


Fig. 4

BIRDS AS HEADDRESSES IN THE MAYA MANUSCRIPTS

PLATE XII

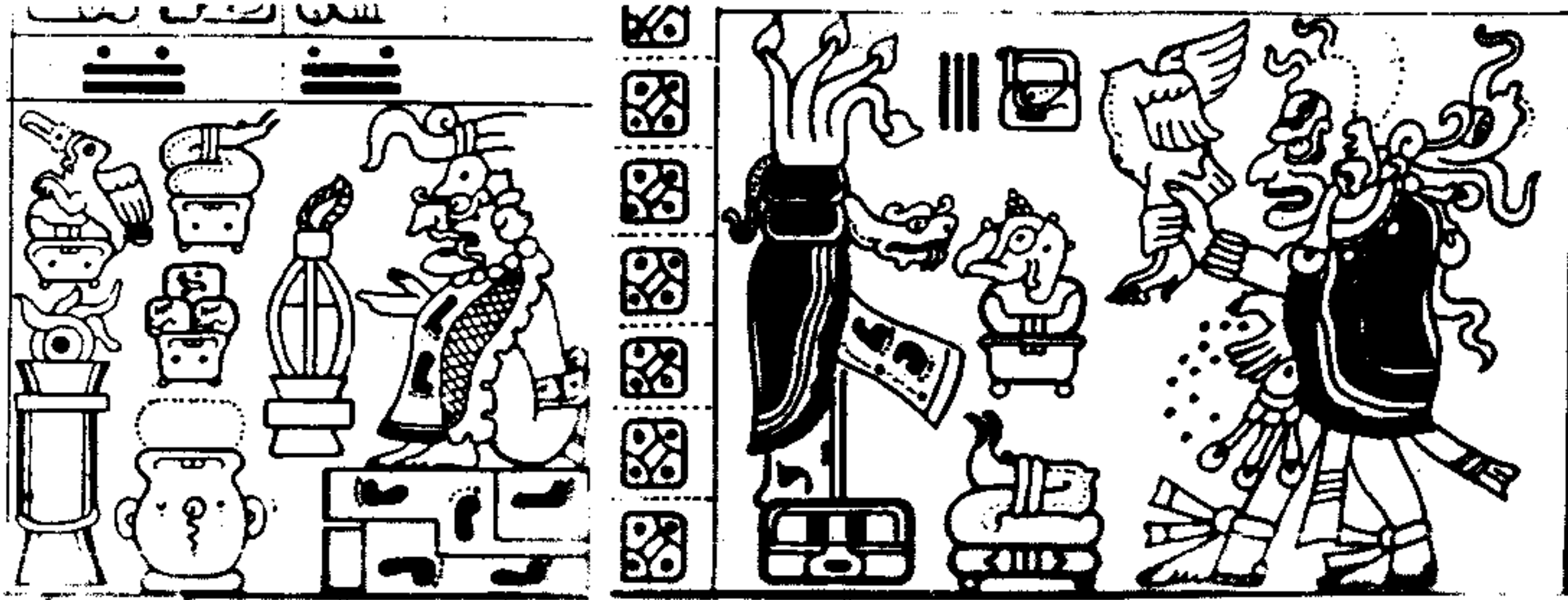


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

BIRDS AS OFFERINGS AND WITH DEITIES
IN THE MAYA MANUSCRIPTS

The ocellated turkey is also apparently connected with rain. In the Maya manuscript Tro-Cortesianus, it is pictured in the rain (see Plate X, Figure 2, page 71),²⁷ and in two Mexican manuscripts it is represented in the "House of the Rain,"²⁸ and as a disguise of Tlaloc, the Rain God.²⁹

The king vulture, one of the most common of the birds depicted in the manuscripts and elsewhere, is a large black and white bird, without feathers on the head and upper part of the neck, except for short bristle-like plumules. Its rostral knob serves as a ready means of identification in the conventionalized figures.³⁰

This bird is pictured on three occasions in the Dresden Codex as a God with a human body and vulture head (see Plate X, Figure 6, page 71).³¹ In one of these instances it is associated with rain in much the same manner as is the

²⁷Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., p. 10.

²⁸Codex Vaticanus 3773 (Codex Vaticanus B), ed. Edward Seler, Eng. trans. by A. Keane (Berlin and London: Published by the Duke of Laubat, 1902-1903), p. 28.

²⁹The Tonalamatl of the Aubin Collection, ed. Edward Seler, Eng. trans. by A. Keane (Berlin and London: Published by the Duke of Laubat, 1900-1901), p. 33.

³⁰Tozzer and Allen, op. cit., p. 329.

³¹Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., pp. 8, 13, 19.

ocellated turkey (see Plate X, Figure 3, page 71).³²

It appears three times as a headdress, once on God F, the God of War and Human Sacrifice, and twice as a whole bird on women in scenes connected with baptism and the naming of children (see Plate XI, Figure 1, page 71, for bird headdresses of women).³³

The black vulture is most readily recognized by its long reptorial beak and black color.³⁴ It is usually shown in connection with death and as a bird of prey.³⁵ It is perched upon the tree above the scene of human sacrifice in the Dresden Codex, and apparently consuming the victim.³⁶ That this bird was enemy of the harvest is evidenced by its eating of the kan sign, the sign of maize, which has apparently just been sown by God B, in one instance, and is held in the hand of God F in another instance.³⁷ Its attack on a serpent in the Dresden Codex is further evidence of its role as a bird of prey.³⁸

³²Ibid., p. 38.

³³Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., pp. 94, 95.

³⁴Tozzer and Allen, op. cit., p. 331.

³⁵Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., pp. 24, 26, 42, 86; Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., pp. 3, 86.

³⁶Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., p. 3.

³⁷Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., pp. 28, 36.

³⁸Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., p. 36.

The black vulture is used once as a headdress and that is on a woman in connection with the idea of birth.³⁹ It is once shown sitting on the knee of God B (see Plate X, Figure 4, page 71),⁴⁰ and on the knee of God D, although it is possible that this is a king vulture,⁴¹ and it is also seen with God M, the God of Traveling Merchants, and probably a War God as he is usually armed with a spear (see Plate XII, Figure 2, page 75).⁴²

The harpy eagle is characterized in its representation by the elongated feathers at the back of the neck which form a conspicuous crest. This bird is seemingly associated with warriors in the manuscripts. God M is twice depicted with an eagle headdress,⁴³ and the eagle is also used as a headdress for God L who is armed and in warlike attitude in one depiction in the Dresden Codex.⁴⁴ God D, however, also has this bird on his head.⁴⁵ In one instance the eagle is seen at the

³⁹Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 69.

⁴¹Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., p. 67.

⁴²Ibid., p. 70. See also Schellhas, op. cit., p. 36; Tozzer and Allen, op. cit., p. 335.

⁴³Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., p. 74; Codex Tro-Cortesianus, op. cit., p. 109.

⁴⁴Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., pp. 14, 46.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 23.

prow of a boat which is rowed by God B (see Plate X, Figure 5, page 71).⁴⁶

The screech owl or moan-bird has until recently been identified with death by all Americanists; however, at the International Conference of Americanists held in New York City, September, 1949, it was brought out by Mesoamericanist Thompson, that the Maya screech owl or moan-bird actually represents rain, and that another owl is representative of death.⁴⁷

The horned owl, which represents death, is very important in the Maya pantheon of gods, frequently representing the Death God A, known as Ah Puch and Hunhau. Like the king vulture, this bird appears on several occasions with a human body, occupying the space usually occupied by one of the regular gods.

As a headdress this bird is used only for women, and on those occasions where birth, baptism, and the naming of children are depicted.⁴⁹ The only occasion on which it is shown with a man is in the Tro-Cortesianus Codex, where it is found

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 43.

⁴⁷Jakeman, private communication.

⁴⁸Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., pp. 7, 10, 11; Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., p. 66.

⁴⁹Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., pp. 16, 18; Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., p. 95.

perched on a frame-like structure within which God B is sitting.⁵⁰

The sacred quetzal bird is readily recognized in the manuscripts by its erect head feathers and long tail feathers. At times these two features are used separately to represent the bird, the tail feathers especially being frequently used as plumes in the headdress of priests or warriors.⁵¹

This bird is used as a sacrifice in the rites of the four years.⁵² It is also seen eating fruit over God H, the "young god" (see Plate XII, Figure 2, page 75).⁵³ In one instance it is perched over the head of God C.⁵⁴ It is used as the headdress of God E, God F, and God H. In scenes showing birth and the naming of children, it is also used as a headdress for women (see Plate XI, Figure 1, page 74).⁵⁵

The blue macaw is characterized by "long narrow tail feathers, a heavy bill, and a series of scale-like markings on the face and about the eye."⁵⁶

⁵⁰Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., p. 73.

⁵¹Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., p. 20.

⁵²Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., p. 36.

⁵³Ibid., p. 70.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 100.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 94; Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., p. 16.

⁵⁶Tozzer and Allen, op. cit., p. 343.

This bird is used as the headdress of God F, God of War and Sacrifice, and is the only instance in the Maya manuscripts in which a whole bird appears as a headdress other than on women.⁵⁷ The macaw appears as a headdress also for God H, God E, God D and God F, and for women where children are born and baptized (see Plate XI, Figures 1 and 2, page 74).⁵⁸

Evidently, there is a great religious signification in connection with headdress, as they are worn by both male and female figures, the same bird often appearing for several different gods.

Birds in the Mexican Manuscripts

Birds also play a very prominent role in the Mexican manuscripts. Their appearance at the tops of the cruciform trees of the four directions and of the center in several manuscripts of the Borgia group, bears a startling similarity to the appearance of birds on the tops of the cross-shaped trees in the Maya sculptures (see Plates IV, V, VI, pages 57, 58, 59).

The birds in these manuscripts differ from those in the Maya sculpture, however, in that they are not conventionalized, nor do they bear symbolic emblems. In this respect

⁵⁷Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., p. 26.

⁵⁸Ibid., pp. 26, 94; Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., pp. 11, 12, 14, 16, 19.

they are similar to the birds on the trees pictured on the north wall panel of the "Mexican" period Temple of the Wall Panels at Chichén Itzá.

In the Codex Borgia, Codex Vaticanus 3773 (B), and Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, the birds perched in the direction trees correspond, except in two instances. The quetzal-bird, is represented in all three manuscripts on the Tree of the East, and the eagle on the Tree of the North. On the Tree of the West of the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer and Codex Vaticanus 3773, the humming bird is shown. On the same tree in the Codex Borgia, however, this bird, although the color of the humming bird, seems to have an eagle's head. The Tree of the South is topped by a parrot in the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, an arara in the Codex Borgia, and strangely enough, by a jaguar in the Codex Vaticanus 3773.

The most prominent bird in the Mexican manuscripts is the eagle. Among the Aztecs the eagle and the jaguar indicated brave warriors,⁵⁹ and in the Aubin Manuscript the Warrior God, Tlacochoalco Yaotl wears the eagle's head.⁶⁰ The sign of the fifteenth day in the Mexican calendar is the eagle, and that for the sixteenth the "ring eagle," also known as the king vulture.⁶¹

⁵⁹The Tonalamatl of the Aubin Collection, ed. cit., p. 13.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 32.

⁶¹Edward Seler, The Tonalamatl of the Aubin Collection, op. cit., p. 13.

FIGURE 4
 BIRDS IN ASSOCIATION WITH GODS IN THE MAYA MANUSCRIPTS*

Birds	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	K	L	M	N
Heron		X						XH					
Frigate-bird		X	X										
Ocellated Turkey	XH	X	XH	X	XH	X		XH		X			
King Vulture			X			XH							
Black Vulture		X		X								X	
Harpy Eagle				H							H		
Screech Owl						H							
Horned Owl													
Quetzal			X					X					
Blue Macaw				XH	X	XH		XH					

* H indicates that the bird was used also as a headdress.

FIGURE 5

FUNCTIONS OF BIRDS IN THE MAYA MANUSCRIPTS

Birds	As a Sacrifice	Headdress of Gods	Headdress of Women	Birth, Baptism and Naming
Heron		X		
Frigate-bird	X			
Ocellated Turkey	X	X	X	X
King Vulture		X	X	X
Black Vulture		X	X	X
Harpy Eagle		X		
Horned Owl			X	X
Screech Owl			X	X
Quetzal	X		X	X
Blue Macaw		X	X	X

FIGURE 6

THE BIRDS AND GODS OF THE
THIRTEEN HOURS OF THE DAY

Number	Bird	God
First	White (blue) humming bird	Tlauizcalpantecutli, God of the Morning Star
Second	Green humming bird	Ixtlilton (Death God)
Third	Falcon	Macuilxochitl-Xochipilli, the Flower Prince
Fourth	Quail	Xipe Totec, "Our Lord the Flayed One"
Fifth	Eagle	Tlacoachcalco Yaotl, "the Warrior"
Sixth	Screech Owl	Uauantli, "God of the Dead Warriors"
Seventh	Butterfly	Xiuhotecutli, the Fire God
Eighth	Striped Eagle	Tlaloc, the Rain God
Ninth	Turkey	Tlaloc, the Rain God
Tenth	Long-eared owl	Tezcatlipoca, a chief god of Mexico
Eleventh	Guacamaya	Macuilxochitl-Xochipilli, the Flower Prince
Twelfth	Quetzal	Cinteotl, the Corn God
Thirteenth	Parrot	Xochiquetzal, Goddess of Flowers

A series of thirteen birds serves for the thirteen hours of the day in the Codex Borboniceis, the Codex Borgia (already discussed), and the Aubin Manuscript (see Plate XIII, page 87).⁶² These birds in the Aubin Manuscript are a disguise of certain deities.⁶³ Seler's identification of them and the gods they represent is summed up in Figure 6, page 85.⁶⁴

Birds are represented in the Mexican manuscripts in numerous other instances. For examples of some of these, see Plate XIV, page 88.

Birds in the Sculptures

It is impossible to overestimate the ceremonial and artistic importance of birds in the sculptured monuments of ancient Mesoamerica. They are shown on altars, stelae, and wall panels, and in almost every instance in close association with the serpent, or with other significant religious symbols such as the sacred tree, the grotesque animal, the jaguar, or a priest (god) representing a deity.

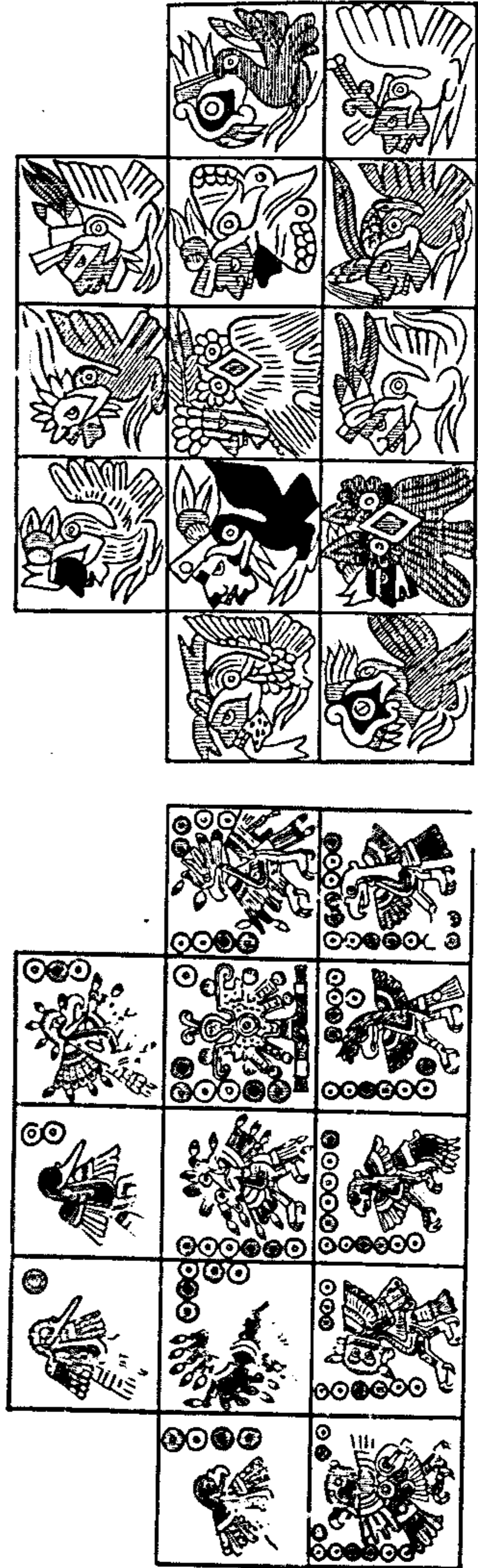
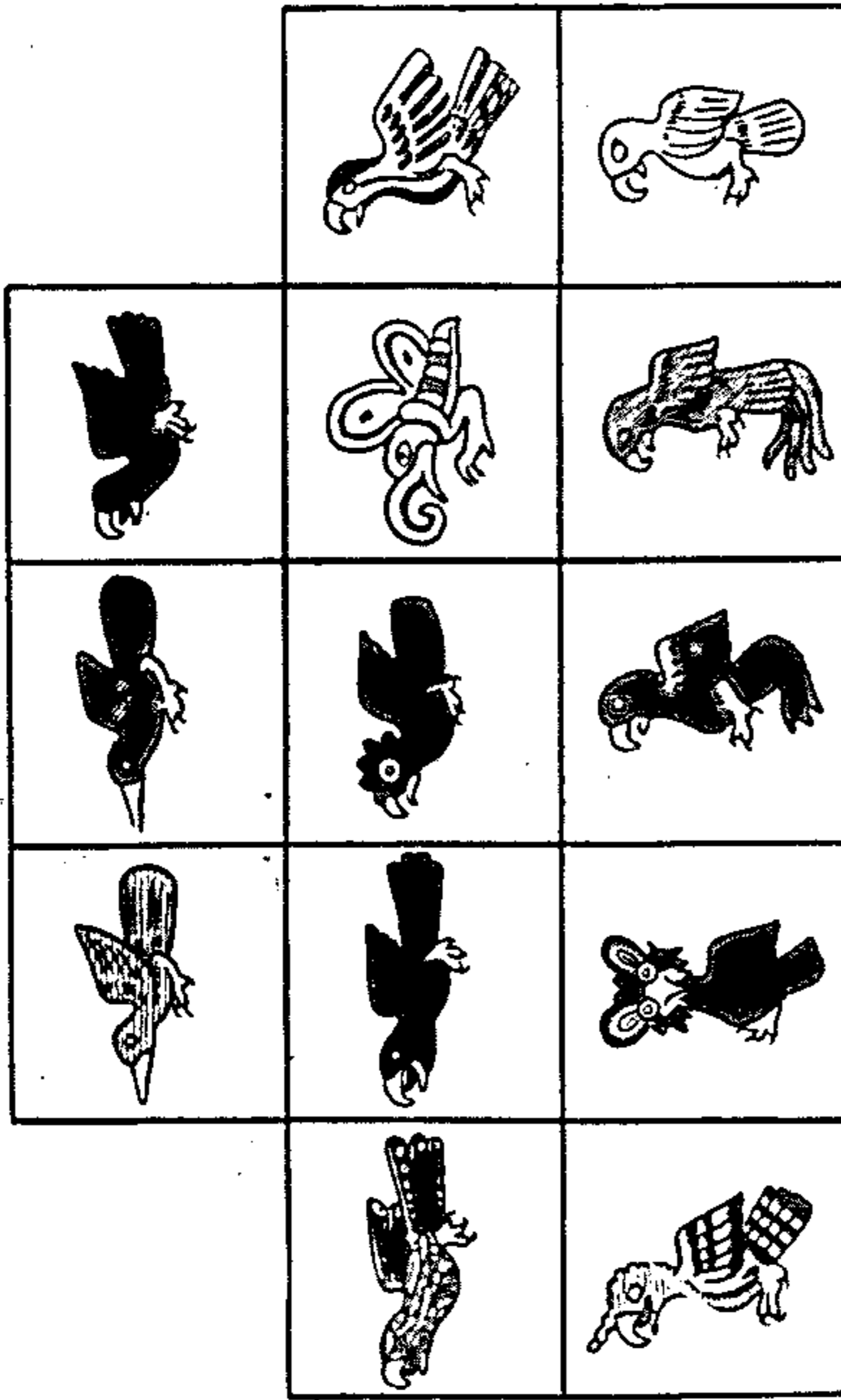
Several varieties of birds are shown in the sculptured art. On a stucco ornament from the Palace, House B, at Palenque is a long-necked bird with a crest and curiously con-

⁶²Ibid., p. 26.

⁶³Ibid., p. 31

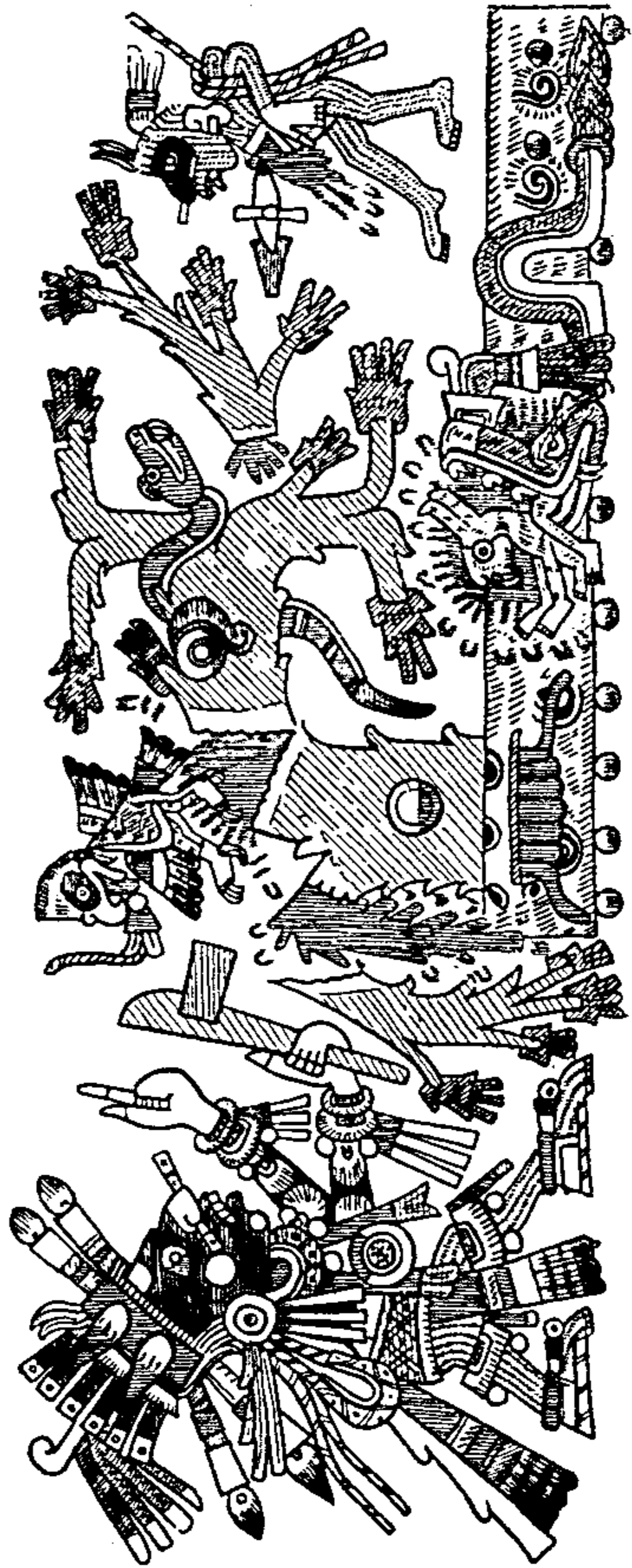
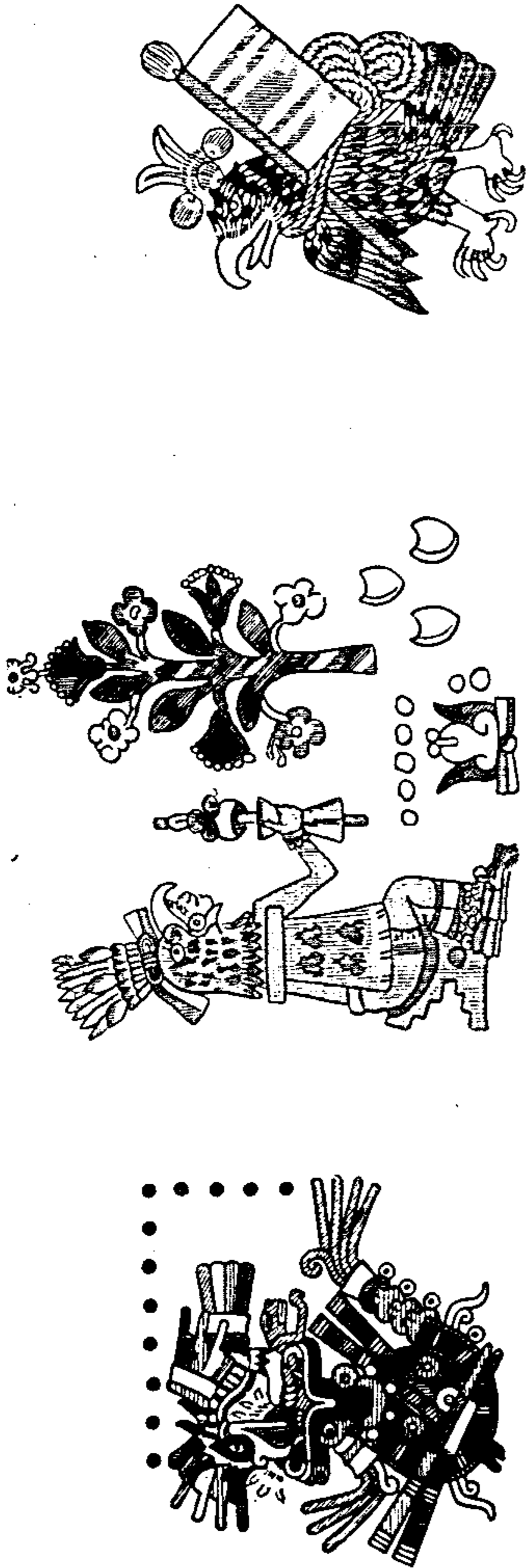
⁶⁴Ibid., pp. 31-34.

PLATE XIII



BIRDS REPRESENTING THE THIRTEEN HOURS OF THE DAY IN THE MEXICAN MANUSCRIPTS

PLATE XIV



SYMBOLIC BIRDS IN THE MEXICAN MANUSCRIPTS

ventionalized wings (evidently a heron). A crested heron standing on one foot and holding a fish in its bill is found on a carving from the Temple of the Cross at Palenque.⁶⁵ On a wall panel from the same temple a heron-like bird with a frog in its beak is the crowning ornamentation of a conventionalized face identical with the sun mask, Kinich Auhau, one of the names of Itzamná.⁶⁶ The heron is also used as a head-dress on one of the warriors pictured in the Mexican Maya Temple of the Tigers at Chichén Itzá.

Great bird heads and claws, probably representing gigantic parrots or macaws, formed part of a facade at Copan, a large ceremonial center in Honduras.⁶⁷ The ornaments on the balustrades of the hieroglyphic stairway at the same city were bird symbols which apparently alternated with serpents' jaws.⁶⁸ On Stela 12 at Piedras Negras, a Maya city in the Usmacinta Valley, a great personage (perhaps a god) seated upon a throne is wearing a cape of scales or short feathers, and a helmet

⁶⁵Tozzer and Allen, op. cit., p. 324.

⁶⁶Teobert Maler, Explorations of the Upper Usumatcintla and Adjacent Regions (Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Vol. IV, No. 1. Cambridge: Published by the Museum, 1908), p. 16.

⁶⁷George Byron Gordon, The Hieroglyphic Stairway Ruins of Copan (Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Vol. 1, No. 6. Cambridge: Published by the Museum, 1902), pp. 18-19.

⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 12-13.

which supports a large bird (see Plate XV, page 91).⁶⁹

The eagle is frequently represented in sculptures. On Stela 9 at Tikal, an ancient Maya city in the Petén region of Guatemala, it is pictured in association with a personage of high rank (probably a priest), a ceremonial staff and a quetzal-bird. Following is Maler's description of this monument:

The back part of the head is supported by the upturned claws and head of an eagle. . . Below the eagle's claws, which support the head, the feather mantle falls from the shoulders, displaying at intervals three eagle-heads . . . From each head proceeds a double scroll, which lies along the edge of the stela. . . The outstretched right hand, with two bands around the wrist, holds the staff of ceremony which is surmounted by the ketsal bird see Plate XVI, page 92 .⁷⁰

The eagle is frequently found also in Mexican sculptures. Large eagles associated with jaguars are depicted on the Mexican-Maya Temple of the Eagles at Chichén Itzá in northern Yucatan. A large eagle is shown attacked by serpents on a relief in the same temple (see Plate XVII, page 93). A bird-god sculpture, similar to the bird-god statuette from San Andres de Tuxtla, Vera Cruz, comes from the Mexican state of

⁶⁹Teobert Maler, Researches in the Central Portion of the Usumatcintla Valley (Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Vol. II, No. 1. Cambridge: Published by the Museum, 1901), p. 60, Plate XXI.

⁷⁰Teobert Maler, Explorations in the Department of Petén, Guatemala: Tikal (Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Vol. V, Nos. 1 and 2. Cambridge: Published by the Museum, 1911), pp. 77-78.



A BIRD HEADDRESS

PLATE XVI



THE EAGLE AND QUETZAL BIRD IN SCULPTURE

PLATE XVII



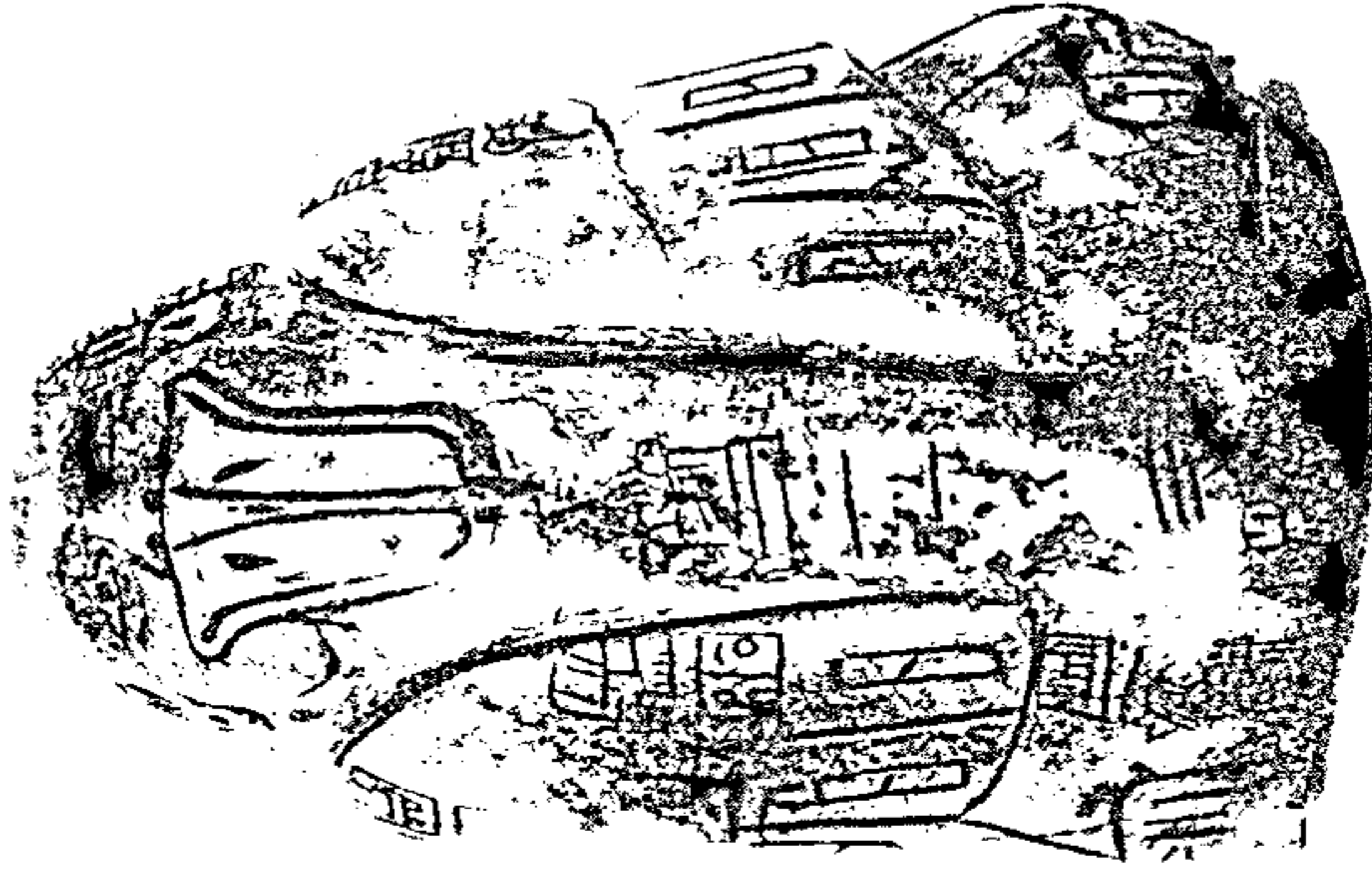
Fig. 1



Fig. 2

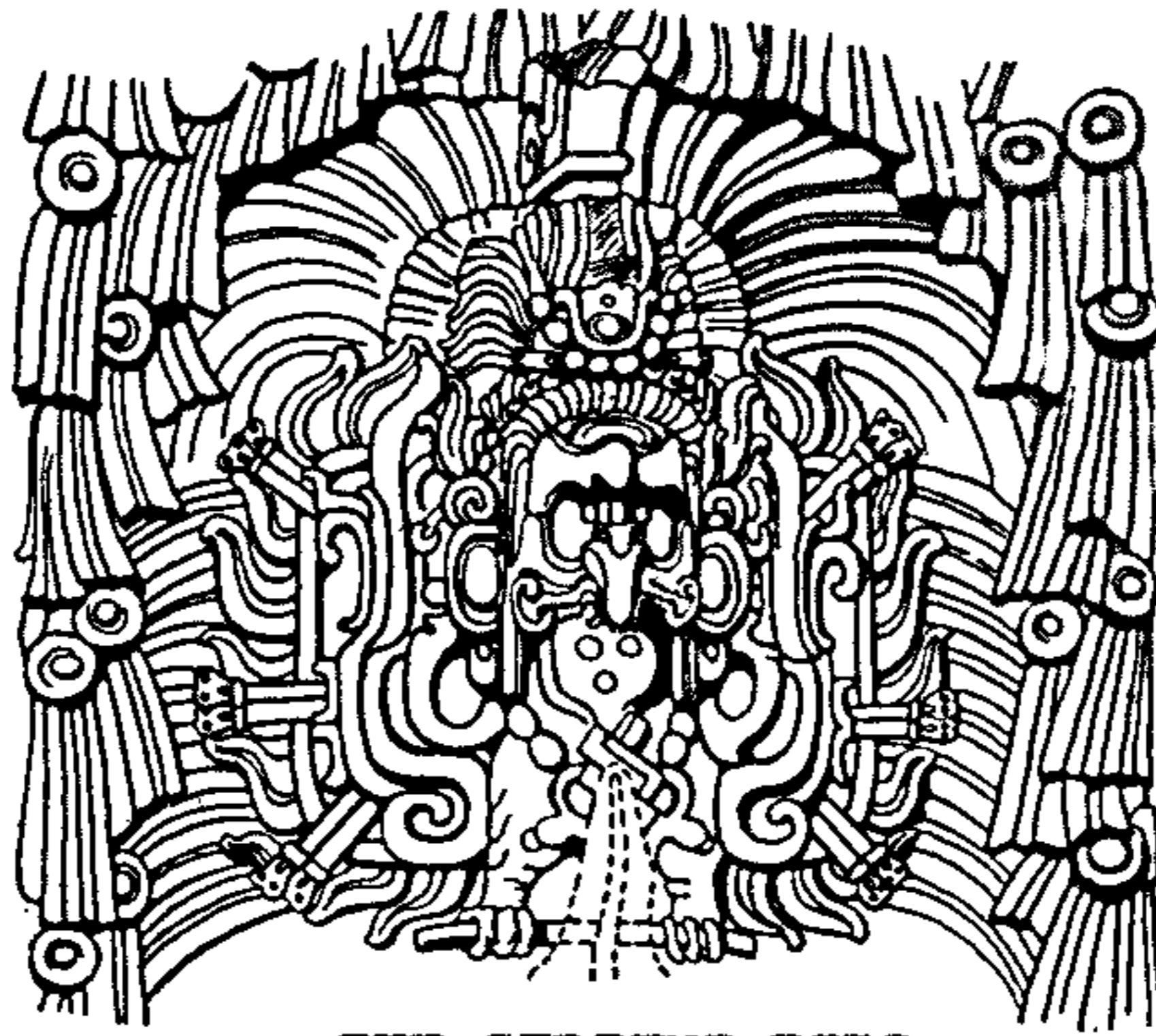
THE EAGLE AT CHICHEN ITZA

PLATE XVIII



BIRD SCULPTURES FROM SOUTHERN MEXICO

PLATE XIX



THE SERPENT BIRD

Chiapas (see Plate XVIII, page 94).⁷¹ Gods with bird head-dresses are also to be seen on frescoes at the ceremonial center of Teotihuacan, and at Tula.

The most important bird in the Maya sculptures, however, is the quetzal-bird with a serpent's head, known as the "Serpent-Bird," the principal symbol of the god Quetzalcoatl, that is, "The Quetzal-bird Serpent" (quetzal-and coatl, "serpent"). Maudslay states that "the most essential character of the design seems to be the presence of a conventional snake's head (without a lower jaw) in place of, or overlying, the bony structure of the birds' wing."⁷² The frequent occurrence of the Serpent-Bird indicates that in this conventional form it was invested with sacred attributes (see Plate XIX, page 95).

The finest examples of the Serpent-Bird are those on the tops of the cruciform trees in the Tablet of the Cross and the Tablet of the Foliated Cross. The bird wears a serpent's head (or mask), and under its wing is a highly conventionalized serpent's head (see Plates I and VII, pages 39 and 62).

Spinden is of the belief that there may be some

⁷¹Jose Pijoan, Suma Artis Vol. X (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, S. A., 1946), p. 261.

⁷²Alfred P. Maudslay, Biologia Centrali-Americana, Part IV (London: R. H. Porter and Dulau and Company, 1893), p. 63.

connection between the Serpent-Bird heads and the Roman-nosed god (God D), since on some of the sculptures from Copan this god takes the place of the Serpent-Bird (see Plate XX, page 98, showing the Roman-nosed god as head of the quetzal-bird).⁷³

Stela E at Quirigua contains as part of its design a grotesque mask from the mouth of which the head of the Serpent-Bird issues. This head may replace the head of God B or of God D, both of which are often seen issuing from the heads of serpents.

The Serpent-Bird is also found in association with the Two-headed Dragon or Celestial Monster. On a decorated door lintel of a temple at Tikal, it is perched upon the arched back of this monster. At Palenque the Dragon's body is conventionalized into a long band of astronomical symbols which stretch over a doorway or along each side, and the Serpent-Bird with outstretched wings is perched upon the center of this Dragon-band.

"Objects similar to the wings of the Serpent-Bird are widely found on stelae and other sculptures as lateral ear ornaments of the richly dressed human figures."⁷⁴ This device, known as the Wing Panel, is characterized by the serpent's

⁷³Spinden, op. cit., p. 73.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 61.

PLATE XX



THE SERPENT BIRD AND THE SUN GOD

head, tassels, a curtain, a short feather-fringe, and long wing-feathers.⁷⁵ The use of the Wing Panel in connection with the serpent and the Serpent-Bird is seen from the following excellent description of Stela F at Quirigua:

. . .on the pedestal is a large grotesque head or mask, and above it is the upper part of a human figure with hands raised and the palms turned outwards; above this human head is a grotesque mask with the wing of a serpent-bird on either side of it.

The human figure on this pedestal has the hands raised to grasp the breastplate. . .Round the upper arm is a band bearing a tasselled ornament similar to that on the shoulder, but decorated with a human instead of a grotesque full face. The head-dress is very elaborate. The head is surmounted by two grotesque masks bordered on each side by a chain-like band. . . Outside this band is the frequently occurring plaited ornament with the wing of the serpent-bird above and below (the upper wings reversed). Above the two grotesque masks is a third grotesque head, which in this case appears to be that of the serpent-bird with wings extended on either side of it, and probably the tail feathers spread out above. . . .⁷⁶

Mention should also be made of the extensive use of feathers for decorative ceremonial purposes. On Alter G at Copan are two grotesque dragon heads fringed with feathers. A serpent's head on Stela H at the same site is fringed with feathers and tassels, and the headdress of the woman carved in high relief on the same sculpture is surrounded by gracefully arranged feather work. A personage of high rank

⁷⁵Maudslay, op. cit., Part IV, p. 64.

⁷⁶Maudslay, op. cit., Part XI, pp. 12-13.

on Stela 9 at Tikal wears a feather-bordered loin cloth and a feather breast cape. The feathers of the quetzal-bird are used in association with the serpent, and they also play an important part in the headdresses of the priests and warriors shown in sculptures (see Plate XXI, page 101).

PLATE XXI



FEATHER DESIGNS

CHAPTER V

THE SERPENT ELEMENT

The serpent was one of the main elements in the religion, and consequently also in the art, of the peoples of ancient Mesoamerica. In architectural ornament, sculptured stelae and altars, dress and personal adornment of human beings, as well as in hieroglyphic writings, it was the dominant motive.

The prevailing serpent model was probably the rattlesnake, a rich yellow or pale olive snake with large brown rhombs bordered with light yellow extending along its back. However, it was usually depicted in a highly conventionalized manner, with many forms and variations, so that there remained practically no characteristic markings by which the original species could be identified.

Different parts of other creatures were frequently added to the body of the serpent. Most important of these were the feathers of the quetzal bird, which adorned its back, and resulted in its becoming known as the "feathered-serpent." Clawed feet of the jaguar, an animal of great

religious significance and closely associated with the serpent in the religious symbolism of Mesoamerica, were also seen in the more complicated representations. Human ornaments such as ear plugs, nose plugs, and headdresses, and the placing of a human head in the distended jaws, were also important additions to the serpent symbol. The serpent was further conventionalized by the addition of scrolls, spirals, undulating lines, and other essentially serpentine elements.

The Serpent in the Native Mythology
of the Early Sixteenth-century Writings

There is little recorded in the native mythology of the early sixteenth-century writings of ancient Mesoamerica which reveals the early significance of the serpent in the religious beliefs and practices of the peoples of this region.

That it entered into the earliest religious conceptions of the Maya is evident from the "writings of the Prophet Balám." In the "Ritual of the Angels," in the Book of Chilám Balám of Chumayel, it is stated:

Bolay was the name of the serpent of the second heaven. He was in the dust at the feet of Sustinal Gracia, as he was called. Then Lonmias was formed. The sharp stone was his stone, when these stones were fixed in their places. Three times they were set at the foot of Sustinal Gracia. These stones were born, they were beneath the one stone, the mighty pointed stone, the stone column, the mighty pointed clashing

stone. They were manifested all over the world by God the Father, the first ruler.¹

In the same section the serpent is referred to as Chac Bolay Balám,² a name which reveals his close connection with rain.

Although Mexican mythology is full of the exploits of Quetzalcóatl or "the Quetzal-bird or Precious-Serpent," it is almost impossible to separate the myths of Quetzalcóatl the god from those of the legendary culture-heroes who were named after him. It is equally difficult to discover the origin of the symbolism itself. Brinton believes that the serpent is a symbol of lightning. He reasons as follows:

As the emblem of the fertilizing summer showers the lightning serpent was the god of fruitfulness. Born in the atmospheric waters, it was an appropriate attribute of the ruler of the winds. But we have already seen that the winds were often spoken of as great birds. Hence the union of these two emblems in such names as Quetzalcóatl, Gugumatz, Kukulcan, all titles of the air in the languages of Central America, all signifying the "Bird-serpent."³

¹Book of Chilám Balám of Chumayel, ed. cit., p. 109. The editor, Roys, believes that Sustinal Gracia is a corruption of some form of the Latin sustineo and gracia, in which case it probably could mean "sustaining grace," that is, the maize plant which is our sustenance. See Roys, op. cit., p. 109, note 8. It is also to be remembered that in another prophecy, the stone column referred to the "tree of life." See this study, above, p. 48.

²Book of Chilám Balám of Shumayel, ed. cit., p. 111.

³Brinton, op. cit., pp. 140-141.

Perhaps, however, a truer interpretation is presented by Gordon:

Whence the ancient Mexicans and Mayas derived the symbolism of the serpent we shall probably never know; like all that belonged to these two peculiar cultures, its origin remains a mystery. Concerning the fundamental principles underlying that symbolism, its meaning in the minds of the initiated, its significance to the masses of the people, and the purpose which it served in the economy of the State, are all matters of speculation still. However, we may reasonably postulate two alternative explanations of the serpent motive. Either it indicates a belief in the divine nature of the serpent and is in itself a surviving evidence of serpent worship, or else the serpent image was employed to represent in a symbolic way some attribute of divinity or some set of abstract ideas connected with religion, popular mythology or philosophy.⁴

The Serpent in the Manuscripts

The serpent is very frequently represented in the hieroglyphic writings of ancient Mesoamerica, sometimes in a realistic manner, and at other times endowed with human attributes through the placing of a human head in its jaws. In both the Maya and the Mexican manuscripts it is to be seen in especially close association with certain important deities.

The Serpent in the Maya Manuscripts

In the Maya manuscripts the serpent appears repeatedly in close association with God B who, as mentioned before, has

⁴Gordon, "The Serpent Motive in the Ancient Art of Central America and Mexico," Transactions, Free Museum of Service and Art, op. cit., p. 160.

been identified by some scholars with Kukulcan, and by others with Itzamná or with Chac, the Rain God, counterpart of the Mexican Rain God Tlaloc.⁵ That the serpent and God B are intimately connected with water is apparent. God B emerges from the jaws of the serpent whose body surrounds a field of water.⁶ This same god appears as the head of the serpent which is immersed in water.⁷ He is to be seen sitting on the water and holding in his hand a serpent which is under water.⁸ In Codex Tro-Cortesianus God B assumes the body of a frog and is seen in a heavy rain in association with a large serpent.⁹ In the same manuscript he is standing on the head of a serpent and is in the act of pouring water from a jar (see Plates XXII and XXIII, pages 107 and 108).¹⁰

There are many other instances in which God B and the serpent are together though not in connection with water. He is to be seen kneeling over the open jaws of the serpent,¹¹

⁵Tozzer and Allen, op. cit., pp. 313-314.

⁶Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., pp. 33-35; see also Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., pp. 3-6.

⁷Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., pp. 35-36; Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., p. 10.

⁸Ibid., p. 37.

⁹Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., p. 12.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 30.

¹¹Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., p. 61.

PLATE XXII



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

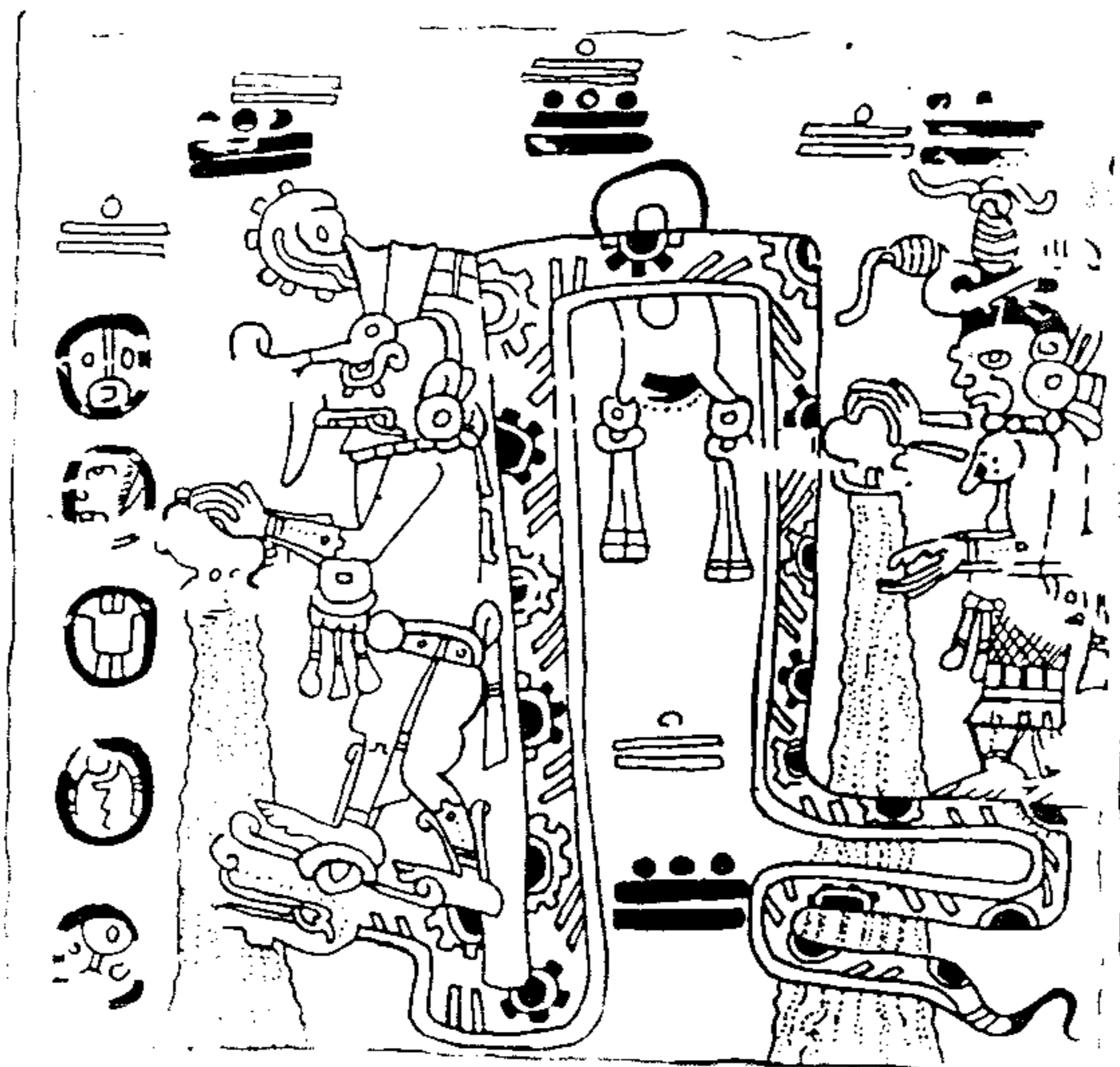
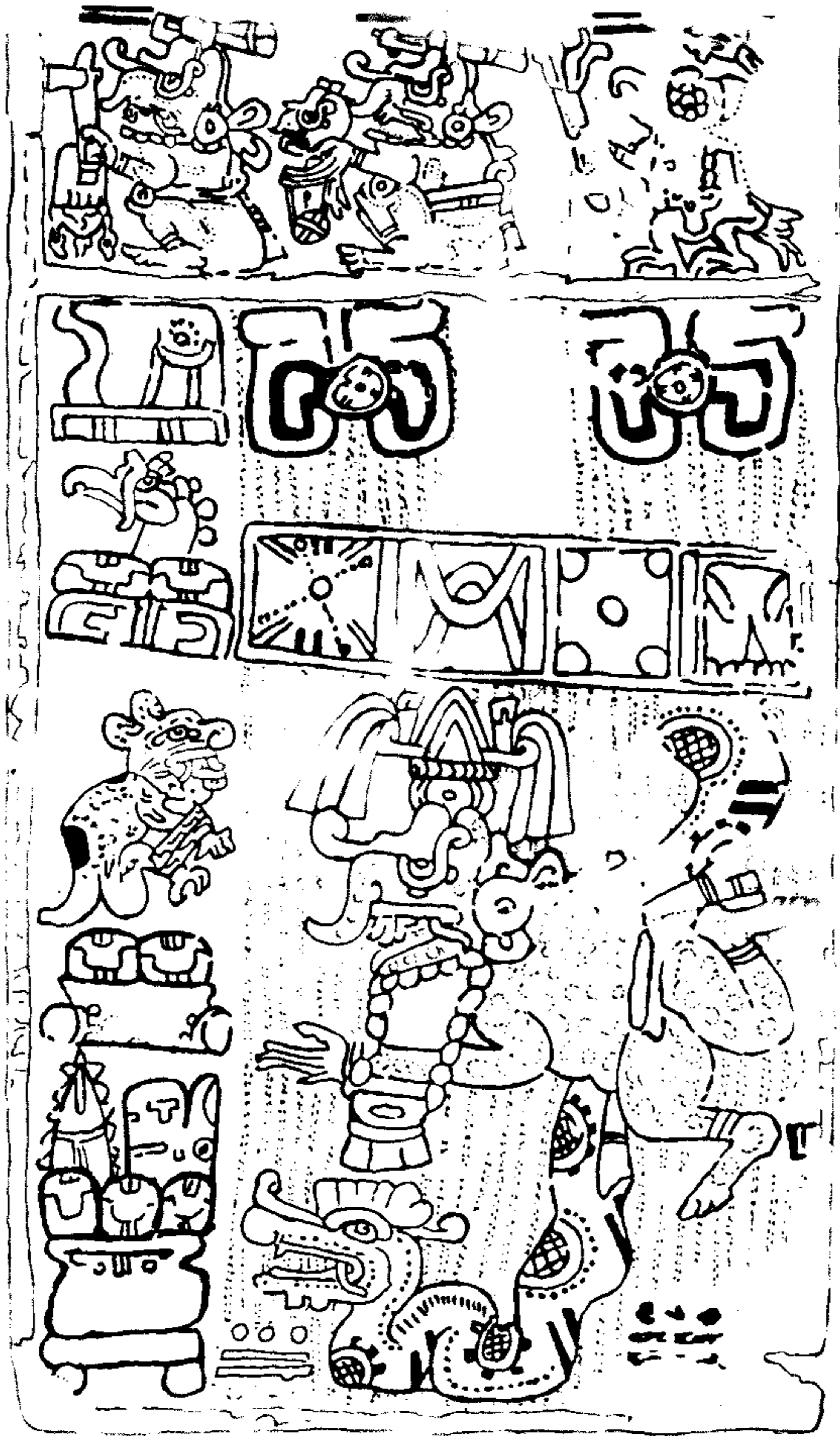


Fig. 4

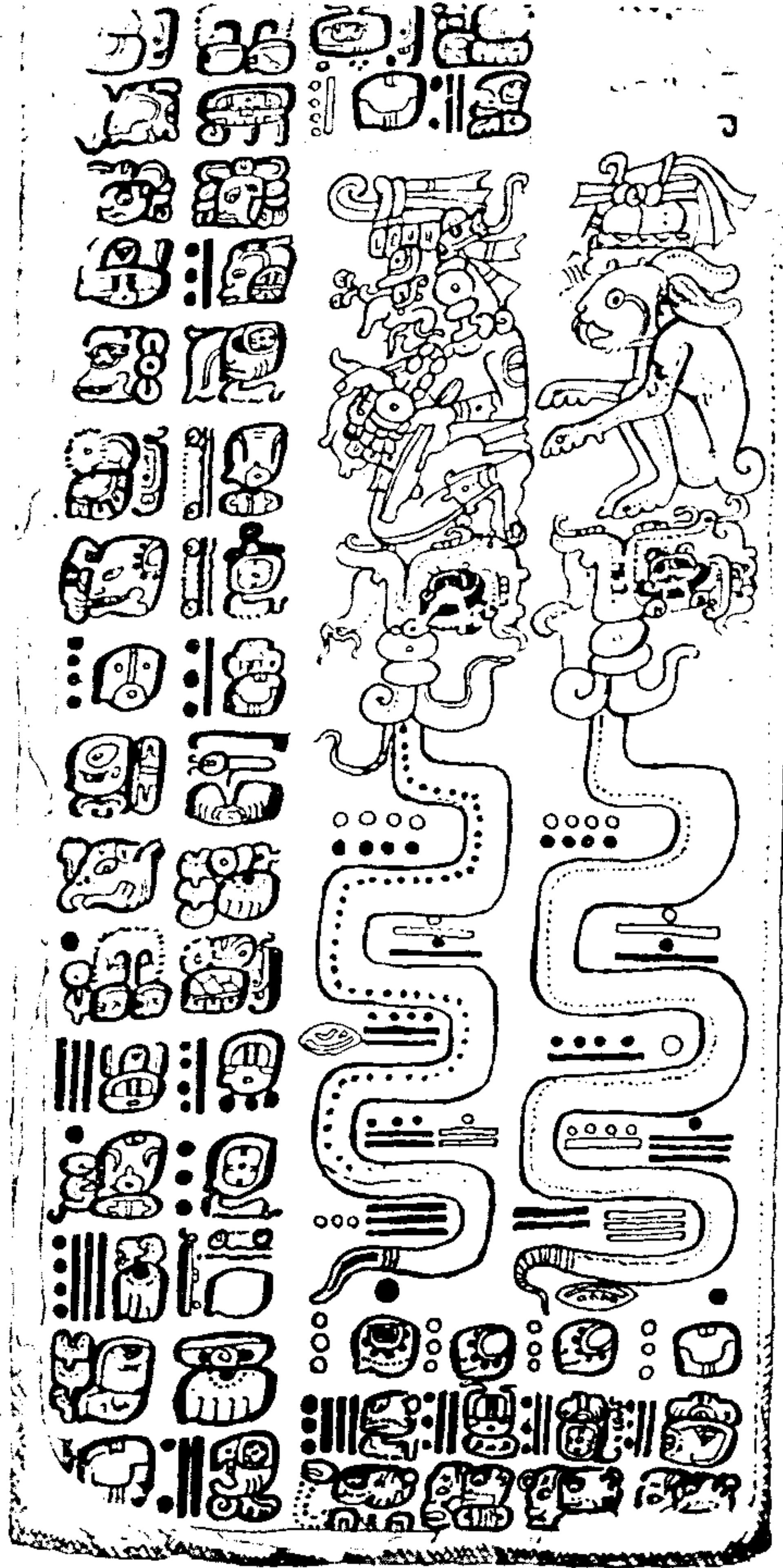
THE SERPENT, WATER, AND GOD B IN THE MAYA MANUSCRIPTS

PLATE XXIII



THE SERPENT, RAIN, AND GOD B

PLATE XXIV



THE SERPENT AND GOD B

PLATE XXV



THE SERPENT AND GOD M

sitting over its open jaws,¹² sitting over astronomical signs with a serpent in his hand,¹³ and sitting above a serpent that has three kan (maize or bread) signs on its head (see Plate XXIV, page 109).¹⁴

The serpent is also associated with other gods in the manuscripts. God A, the God of Death, and God M, the God of Traveling Merchants and of War are both pictured with the serpent in rain scenes (see Plate XXV, page 110);¹⁵ and God L, the black god who is associated with night is seen standing in the rain with a serpent near-by. God L also wears the serpent as a belt in two other rain scenes.¹⁶ God I, the Water Goddess, and the serpent are also seen together in Codex Tro-Cortesianus (see Plate XXIII, page 108).¹⁷

In some instances the serpent is employed as a headdress, but only with female figures. It is to be seen as the headdress of the feminized Gods D and H, who are both in the act of making an offering,¹⁸ and as the headdress

¹²Ibid., pp. 62, 69.

¹³Ibid., p. 40, 66.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁵Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., pp. 15, 16.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 32, 33.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 30, 32; Schellhas, op. cit., p. 31.

¹⁸Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., pp. 9, 15.

of women who are also making offerings.¹⁹ The feminized God B, representing the first woman weaving, also wears a serpent headdress (see Plate XXVI, Figures 1, 2, and 3, page 113).²⁰

The serpent is also to be seen entwined around the "tree of life," toward which a god or priest approaches with a sacrificial offering;²¹ and its body is used a number of times as the support of a jar containing various offerings (see Plate II, Figure 1, page 51).²²

Its association with time is apparent from its appearance with a long number-series,²³ and with many day signs (see Plate XXV, page 110).²⁴ That it also has astronomical significance is evident from its association with a line of constellation signs of which the kin (sun) sign is the most prominent (see Plate XXIV, page 109).²⁵

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 18-23.

²⁰Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., p. 79.

²¹Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., pp. 26-28.

²²Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., pp. 34-36.

²³Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., pp. 61, 62, 69.

²⁴Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., pp. 13-16.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 5, 12, 15, 67; Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., pp. 56, 57.

PLATE XXVI



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

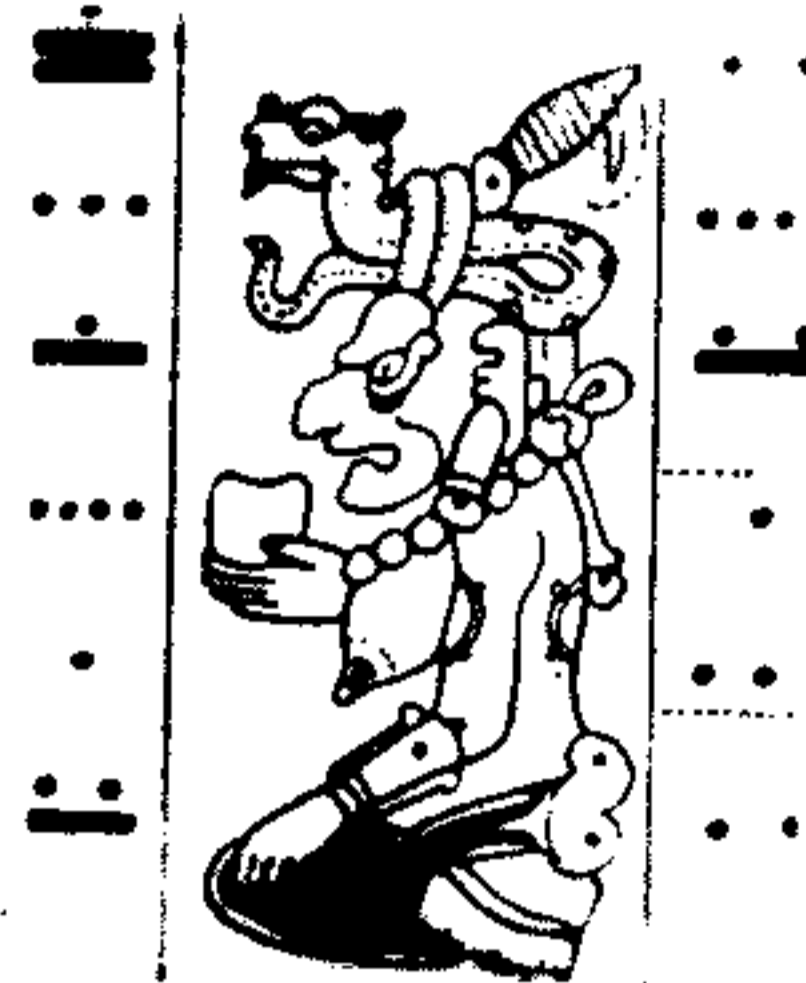


Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

THE SERPENT HEADRESS IN THE MAYA MANUSCRIPTS

The Serpent in the Mexican Manuscripts

The serpent is shown very frequently in the Mexican manuscripts in connection with rain, certain deities, and with the directions.

The rain gods of the six different directions, North, South, East, West, and the Lower and Upper Regions, hold serpents in their hands (see Plate XXVII, Figure 2, page 115).²⁶ It entwines the House of Rain wherein is housed the turkey, a rain symbol.²⁷ Tlaloc, the Rain God, is associated with the serpent.²⁸ The serpent cut in two in Codex Borgia symbolizes the ceasing of the rains.²⁹

The four quarters of the heavens are represented by four feather-snakes coiled up in a square (see Plate XXVIII, page 116).³⁰ The serpent is seen too on the head of Quetzalcōatl, God of Wind,³¹ and frequently with Tlacolteotl,

²⁶Codex Vaticanus 3773, ed. cit., pp. 43-48.

²⁷Ibid., pp. 14, 16.

²⁸Codex Borgia, ed. cit., p. 69.

²⁹Ibid., p. 3.

³⁰Codex Vaticanus 3773, ed. cit., p. 73; Codex Borgia, ed. cit., p. 72.

³¹Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, ed. cit., pp. 18, 32.

PLATE XXVII

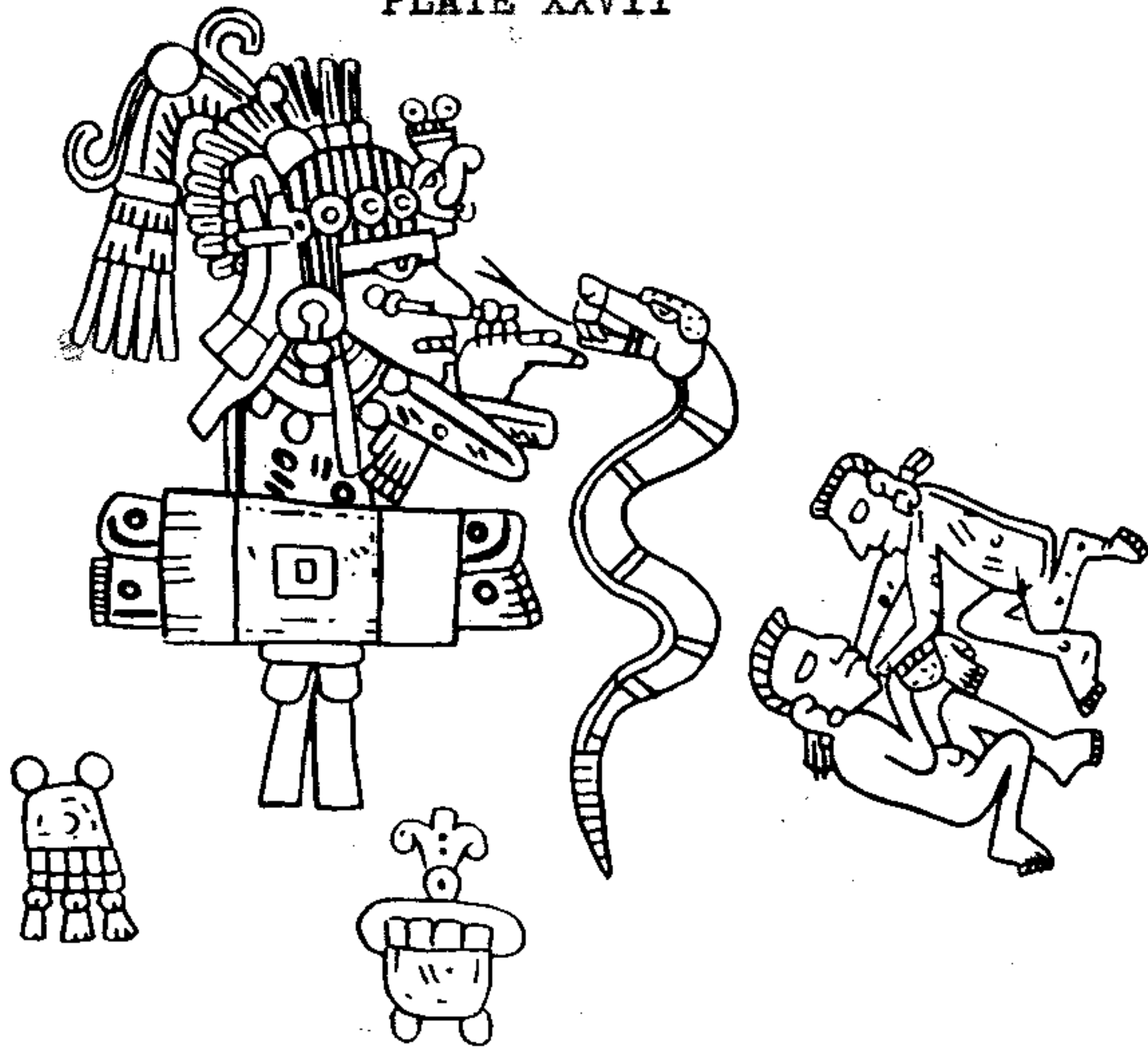


Fig. 1

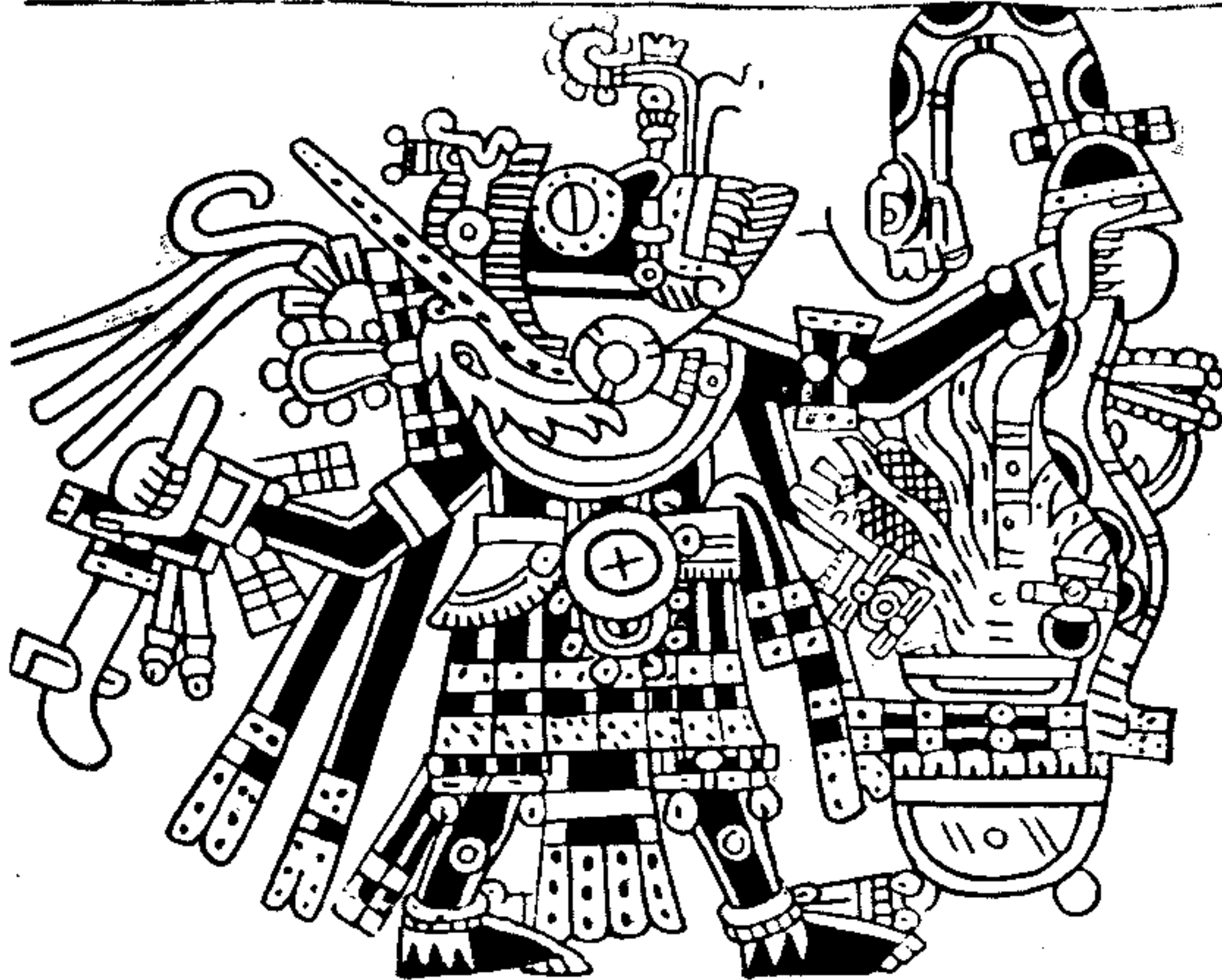


Fig. 2

THE SERPENT IN THE MEXICAN MANUSCRIPTS

PLATE XXVIII



THE FOUR FEATHER SNAKES IN THE MEXICAN MANUSCRIPTS

the Earth Goddess, as well as with Tlauizcalpactecuhtli, God of the Planet Venus.³² It is also seen with the God of Life and the first human pair (see Plate XXVII, Figure 1, page 115).³³

Other deities with which it is associated in the Mexican manuscripts include Tlatacacani, Digger of the Earth,³⁴ Xolotl; twin of Quetzalcoatl and representative of the Evening Star;³⁵ and Xipe, God of Seedtime and Planting.³⁶

The Serpent in the Sculptures

The serpent in one form or another is the dominant symbol in the sculptured stelae and altars and in architectural ornament in ancient Mesoamerica. Its main role is evidently symbolic, in connection with religious beliefs; however, it is also to be recognized that at times it appears to have been used for decorative purposes only.

The Maya had a number of ways in which they depicted the serpent head. In its simplest conventionalized form all scales were omitted except for the large scale above the eye,

³²Codex Vaticanus 3773, ed. cit., p. 50.

³³Ibid., p. 49.

³⁴Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, ed. cit., p. 28.

³⁵Ibid., p. 31.

³⁶Codex Borgia, ed. cit., p. 67.

which was greatly enlarged. The nose was elongated, and the upper jaw made longer than the lower one.³⁷ Sometimes the original features were made more complex by the addition of other elements. On Altar P at Quiriguá the serpent's tongue is itself the upper jaw of a serpent having a nose plug, and its nose is modified into a grotesque face.³⁸ At other times different features of the serpent head are omitted until only one or two details survive (see Plate XXIX, page 119).

There were many classes of objects and figures having religious import that were closely connected with the serpent. Although these classes at first appear to be distinct, they actually merge and blend into one another. Included among them are the Ceremonial Bar, the Manikin Scepter, and the Two-headed Dragon. The first two of these will be briefly discussed at this time.

The Ceremonial Bar "is the name given to a peculiar object of unknown use that is commonly held in the arms of the priest-like figures represented in the sculptures."³⁹ It usually occurs upon stelae in the southern part of the Maya area, and is particularly important at the ceremonial center

³⁷Spinden, op. cit., p. 40.

³⁸Ibid., p. 41.

³⁹Spinden, op. cit., p. 49.

PLATE XXIX



A CONVENTIONALIZED SERPENT HEAD IN SCULPTURE

of Copán. Strangely enough, it does not occur in any recognizable form in the manuscripts. (see Plate XXX, page 121).⁴⁰

The first phase of the Ceremonial Bar consists of a double-headed serpent with a flexible drooping body. A grotesque head is to be seen in the open jaws of each serpent head. The Leyden Plate, an early jadeite slab from Uaxactun, contains the most primitive example of this religious object.⁴¹ It is also found on early stelae from Copán.

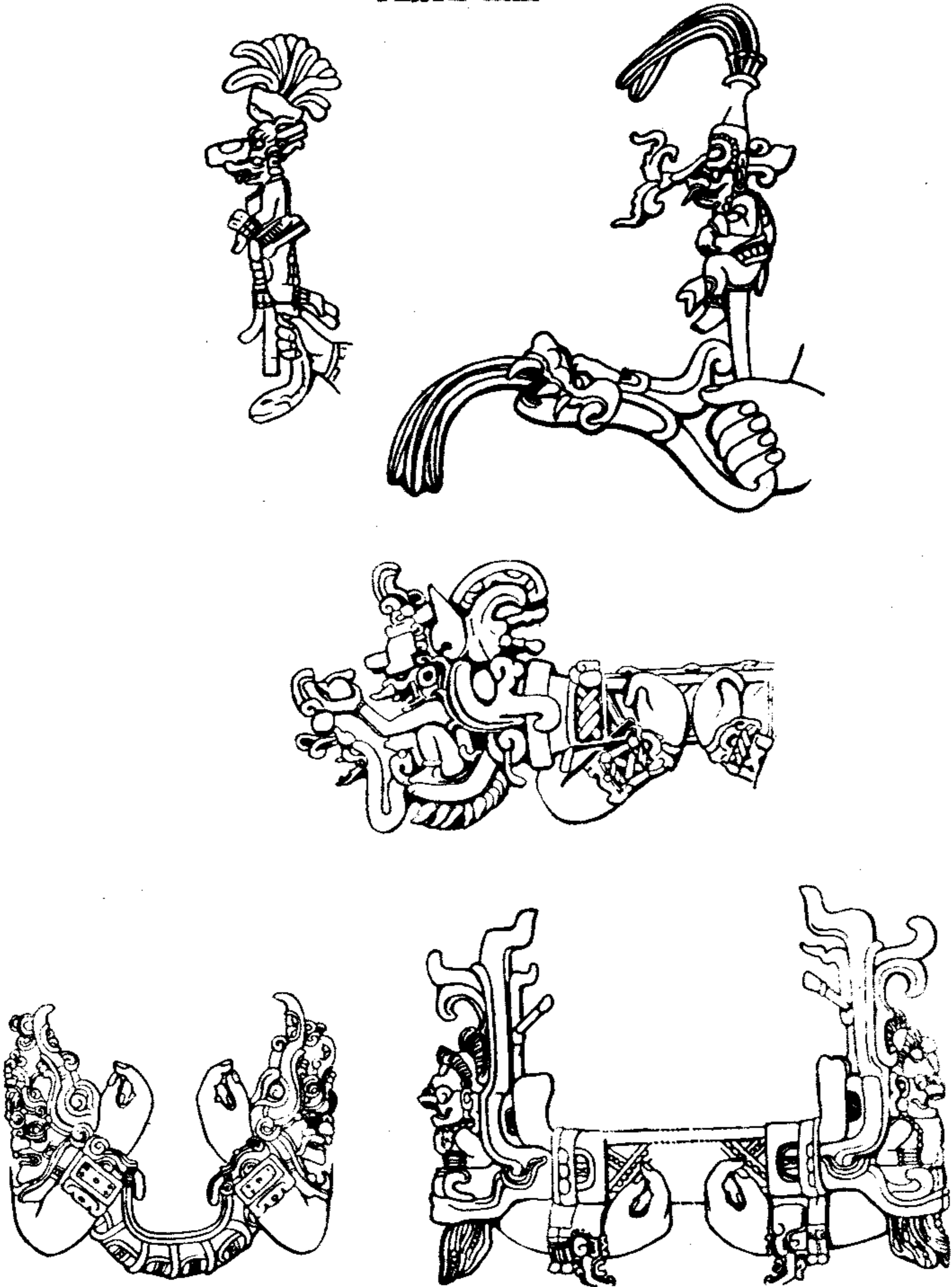
In the second phase of the Ceremonial Bar the serpent jaws are much enlarged and the central portion of the serpent's body is transformed into a straight panel which is usually decorated with astronomical signs. This type is of wide distribution, being found on the later stelae from Copán as well as upon stelae from Queriguá, Tikal, Yaxchilán and other Maya cities.

The Manikin Scepter, a second important ceremonial object, consists of a small grotesque figure attached to a flexible appendage in the form of a serpent. Although the face of the Manikin Scepter varies widely, it is nevertheless, characterized by a long turned-up nose, and a wide-open

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

PLATE XXX



THE SERPENT IN THE CEREMONIAL BAR
AND MANIKEN SCEPTER.

mouth which has a prominent flame-colored tooth in its upper jaw.⁴² The lower jaw (as with the serpent) is usually much shorter than the upper one, while the upper part of the face "will bear comparison part for part with the typical serpent heads."⁴³ (See Plate XXX, page 121.)

Manikin Scepters without the flexible appendages are seen on the Tablet of the Cross and the Tablet of the Foliated Cross from Palenque, where they are sitting or reclining upon a folded cloth supported in the hand of a priest. In its final stage the Manikin Scepter is to be seen as a head upon a staff, the lower end of which terminates in a serpent's head.

The Ceremonial Bar and Manikin Scepter, although appearing distinct, actually can be shown to be connected. On Stelae 1 and 2 at Tikal the Manikin Scepter is to be seen sitting on the lower jaw of the serpent terminating the Ceremonial Bar, thus replacing the head which usually appears in the serpent's mouth. It is to be noted, too, that the head that usually appears in the serpent's mouth on Ceremonial Bars resembles in a remarkable manner the physiognomy of the Manikin.

Serpents were also commonly used in the decoration of

⁴²Ibid., p. 51.

⁴³Ibid.,

the stelae, as the headdress of a warrior, ruler, priest, or god. On Stela 14 at Piedras Negras the personage who sits enthroned in Asiatic fashion has his head crowned with an elaborately executed serpent's head surmounted by a fantastic little human head.⁴⁴ On Stela 25 at the same site the headdress shown is a fantastic serpent's head which merges into plumes and feathers on the top and at the sides.⁴⁵ The helmet of the warrior-priest on Stela 1 at Seibal is adorned with four serpents which are intertwined in a double knot while another serpent writhes on the top of the helmet.⁴⁶ (See Plate XXXI, page 124.)

The most noteworthy characteristic of Maya facade decoration is the use of the mask panel which is essentially "a highly conventionalized face, represented in front view, with its details so modified as to fill an oblong space."⁴⁷ For the most part this mask represents the feathered serpent. The forehead and the lids of the eyes are often feathered, and the projecting curl represents the serpent nose (Spinden

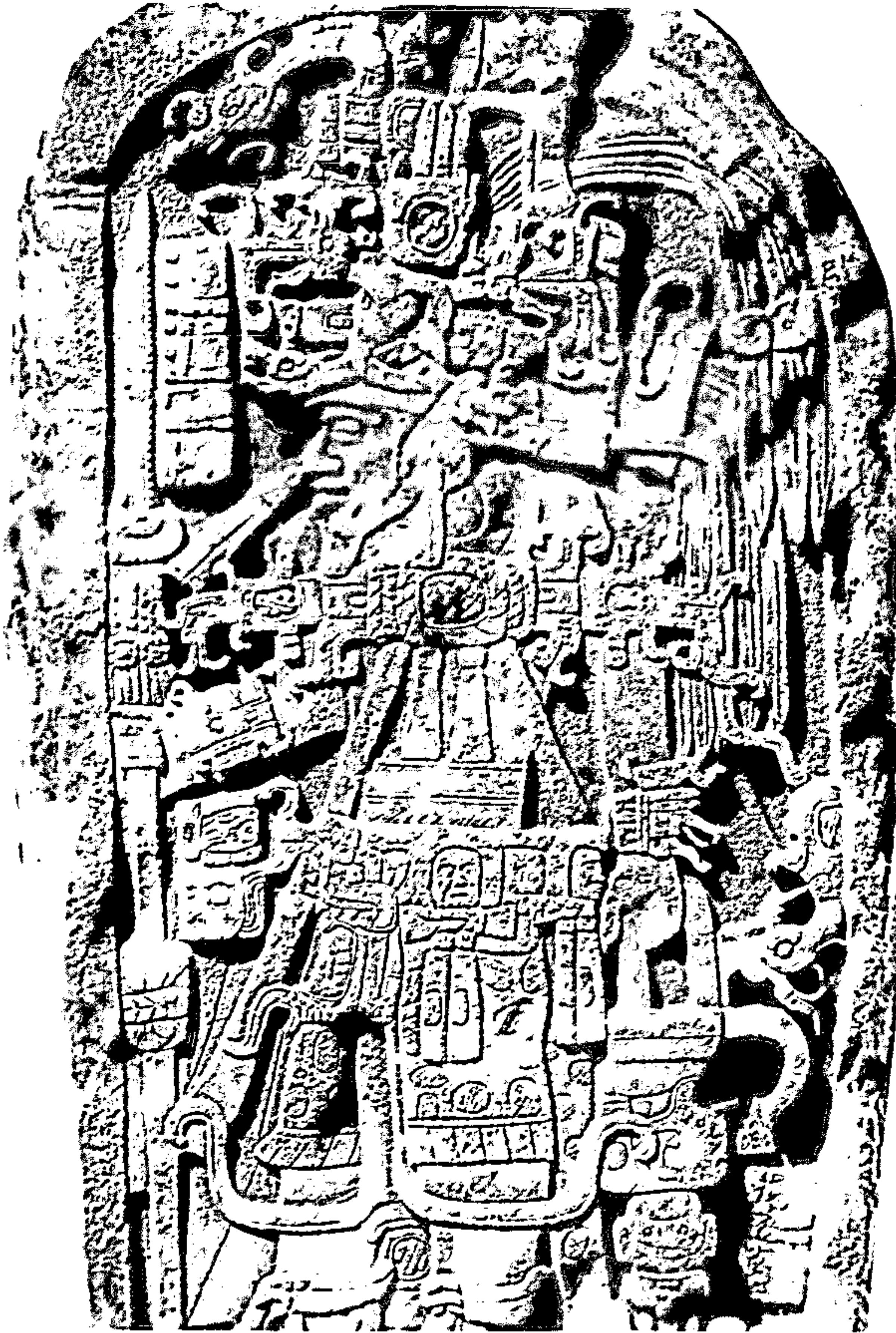
⁴⁴Teobert Maler, Researches in the Central Portion of the Usumatsintla Valley (Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Vol. II, No. 1. Cambridge: Published by the Museum, 1901), Plate XX.

⁴⁵Ibid., Plate XXII.

⁴⁶Teobert Maler, Explorations of the Upper Usumatsintla and Adjacent Regions, Vol. IV, No. 1, op. cit., Plate III.

⁴⁷Spinden, op. cit., p. 118.

PLATE XXXI



SERPENT HEADDRESS IN SCULPTURE

notes, however, that this serpentine head may have been intended for that of the long-nosed god).⁴⁸ Such mask panels were found throughout the Maya area on stelae, on facades of buildings, and on roof structures.⁴⁹ (See Plate XXXII, page 126).

The feathered serpent is the dominant decorative motive of the Temple of Quetzalcóatl at Teotihuacán in highland Mexico. Great rugged heads project from the balustrade and from the facades, alternating with those of a strange being believed by Vaillant to be Tlaloc, the Rain God. The undulating bodies of serpents decorate the walls. (See Plate XXXIII, page 127.)

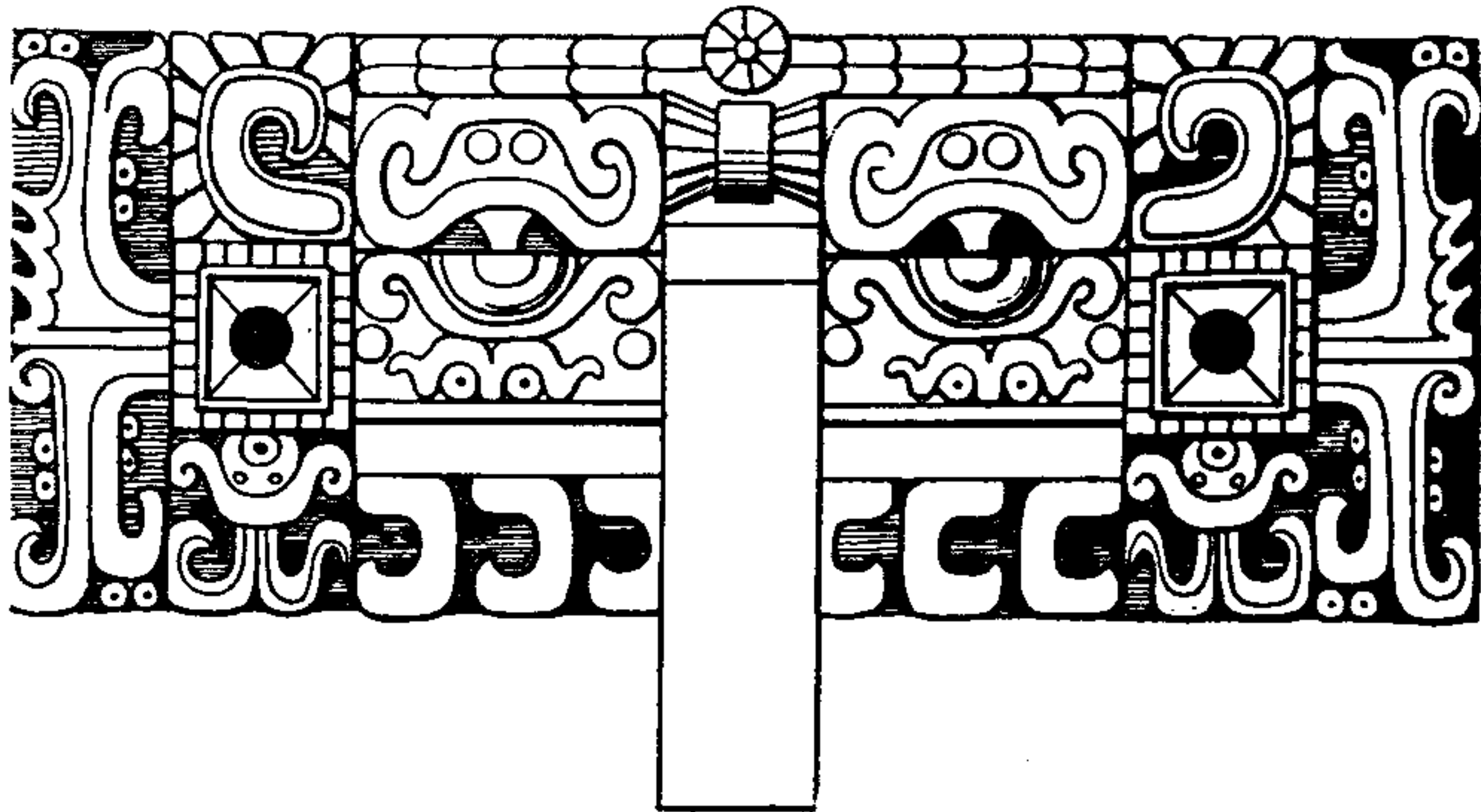
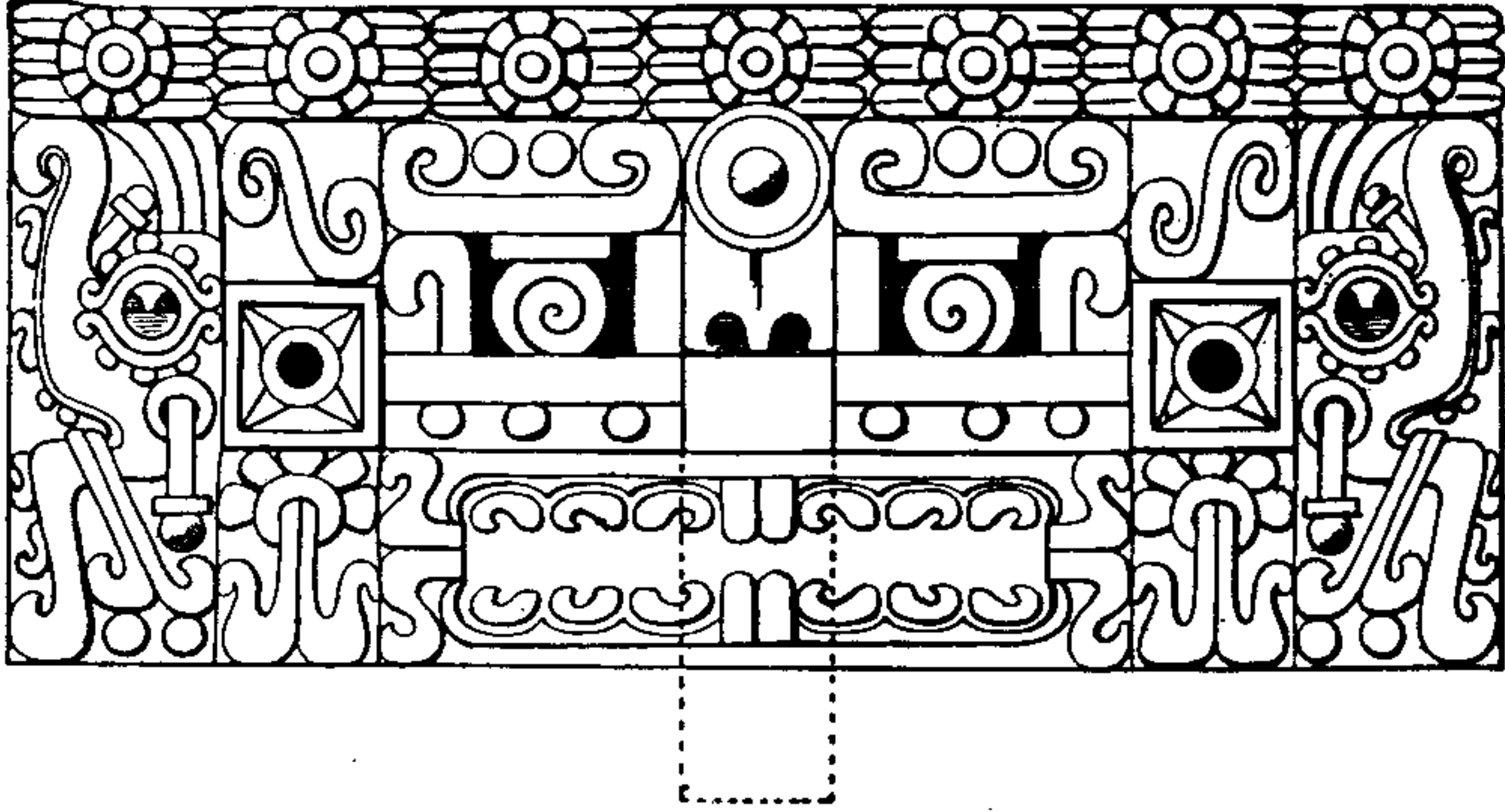
Many of the stairways which were constructed on one or more sides of the pyramids and platform mounds were elaborately decorated. A number of "serpent balustrades" found at Chichén Itzá show the head of the serpent extending outward at the base, while the balustrade itself forms the serpent body. It is interesting to note, however, that these serpent stairways are restricted to pyramids with stairways on all four sides.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 121.

⁴⁹A. P. Maudslay, Biologia Centrali-Americana, Vol. I (London: R. H. Porter, 1889-1902), Plate 17; Ibid., Vol. IV, Plates 20, 24.

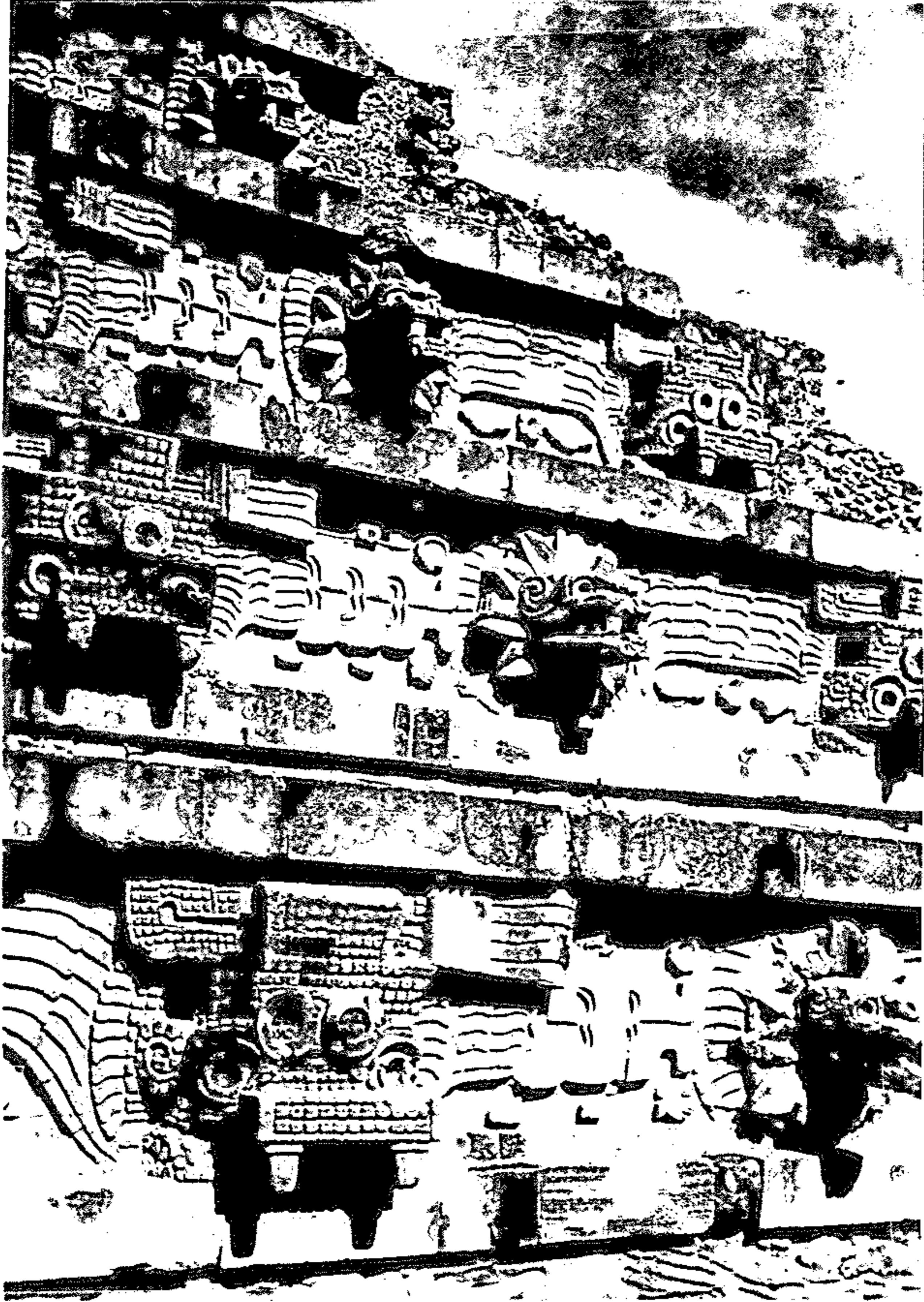
⁵⁰Spinden, op. cit., p. 107.

PLATE XXXII



THE SERPENT MASK PANEL

PLATE XXXIII



THE SERPENT FACADE

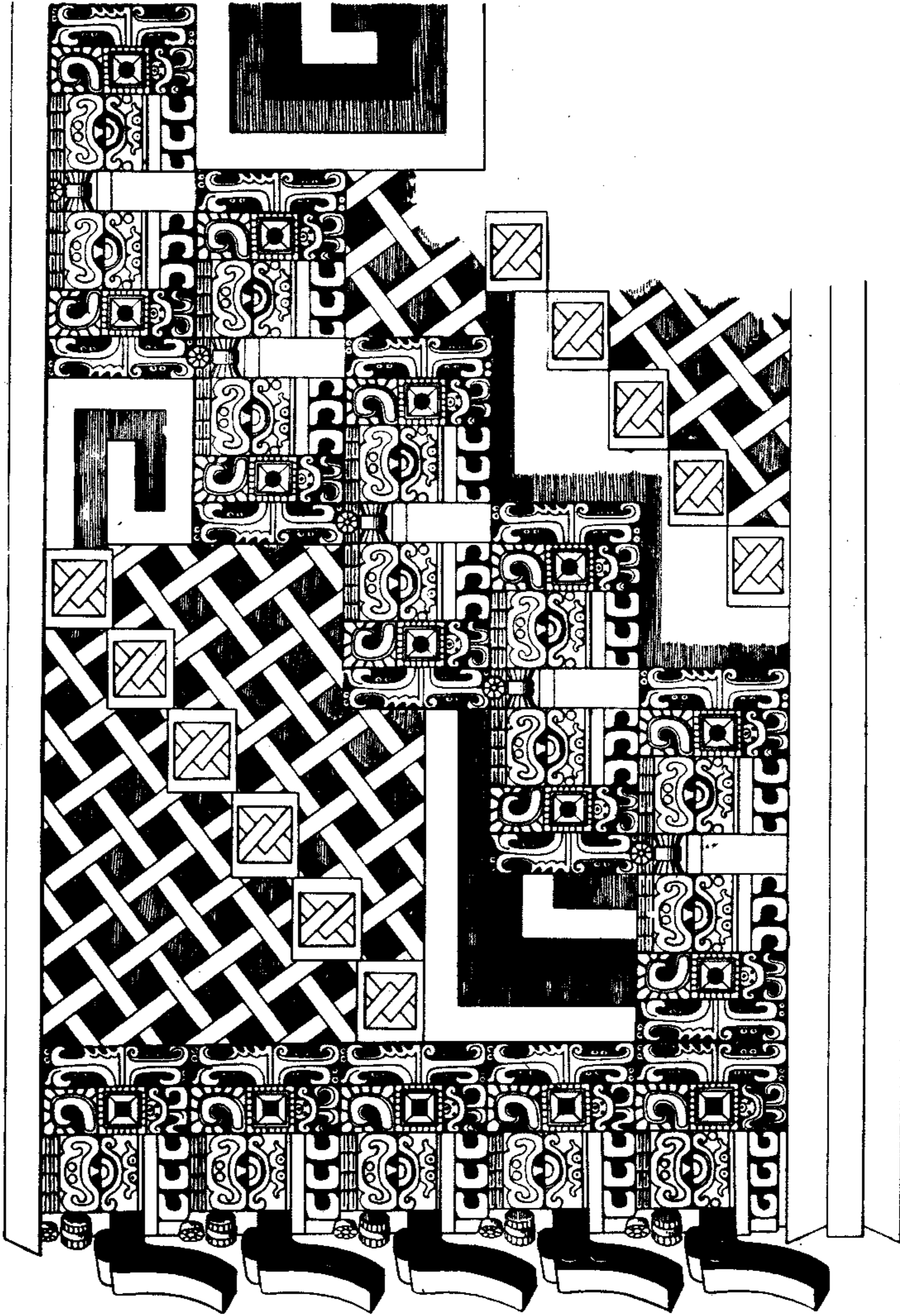
Mention should also be made of the great serpent columns of the Castillo, the Temple of the Jaguars, and the Temple of the Warriors at Chichén Itzá, which are used for roof support. These show the highest development of the column in Mesoamerica. (See Plate XXXIV, page 129.)

Innumerable other examples could be cited for the use of the serpent or the influence of serpentine forms in the religious art of Mesoamerica. Some of these uses are illustrated in Plates XXXV, XXXVI, XXXVII and XXXVIII, pages 130, 131, 132, and 133.



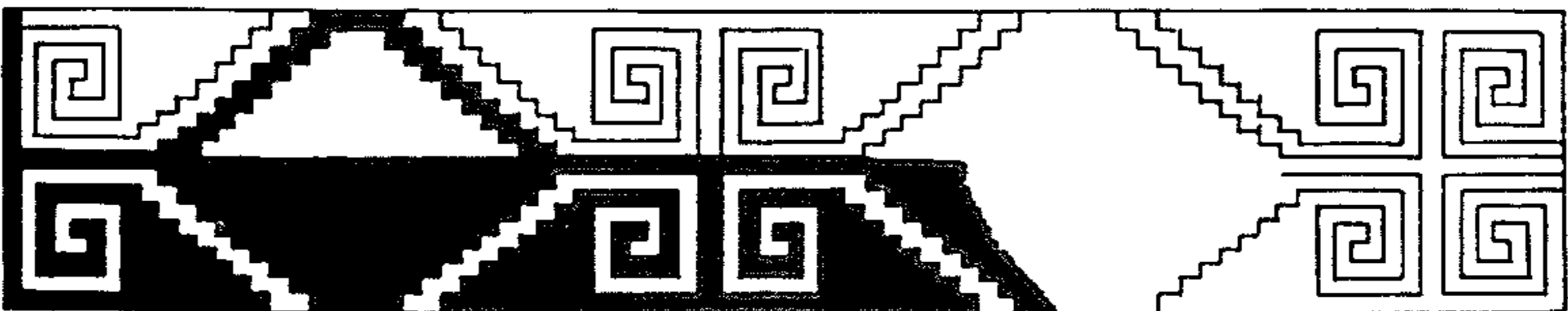
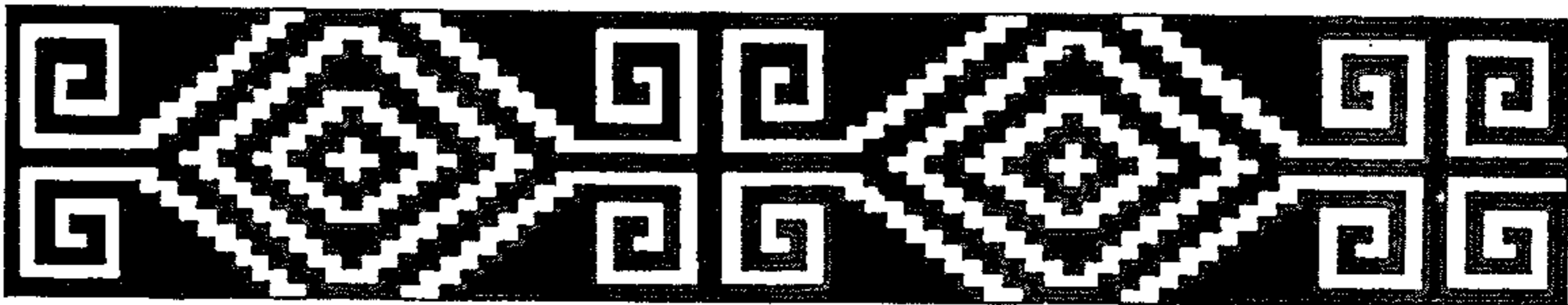
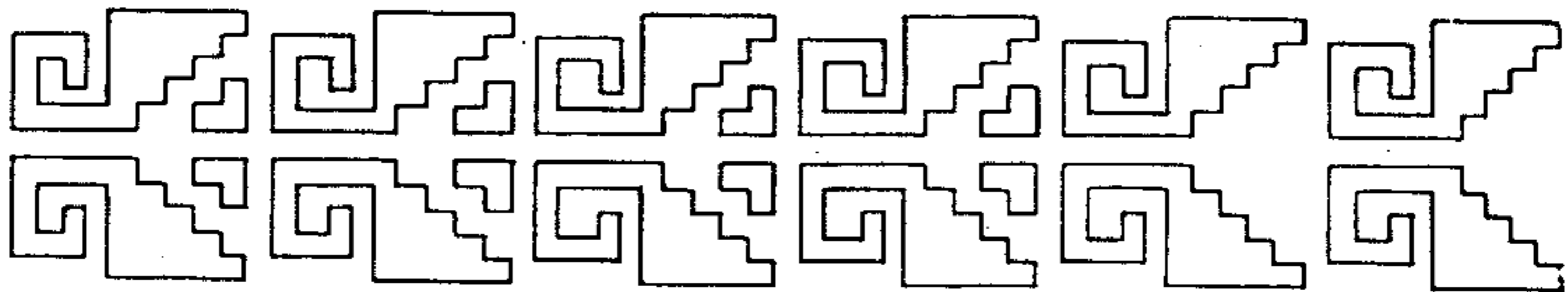
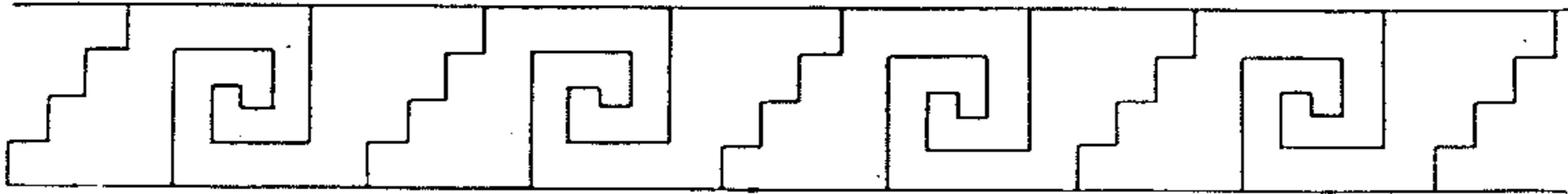
SERPENT COLUMNS

PLATE XXXV



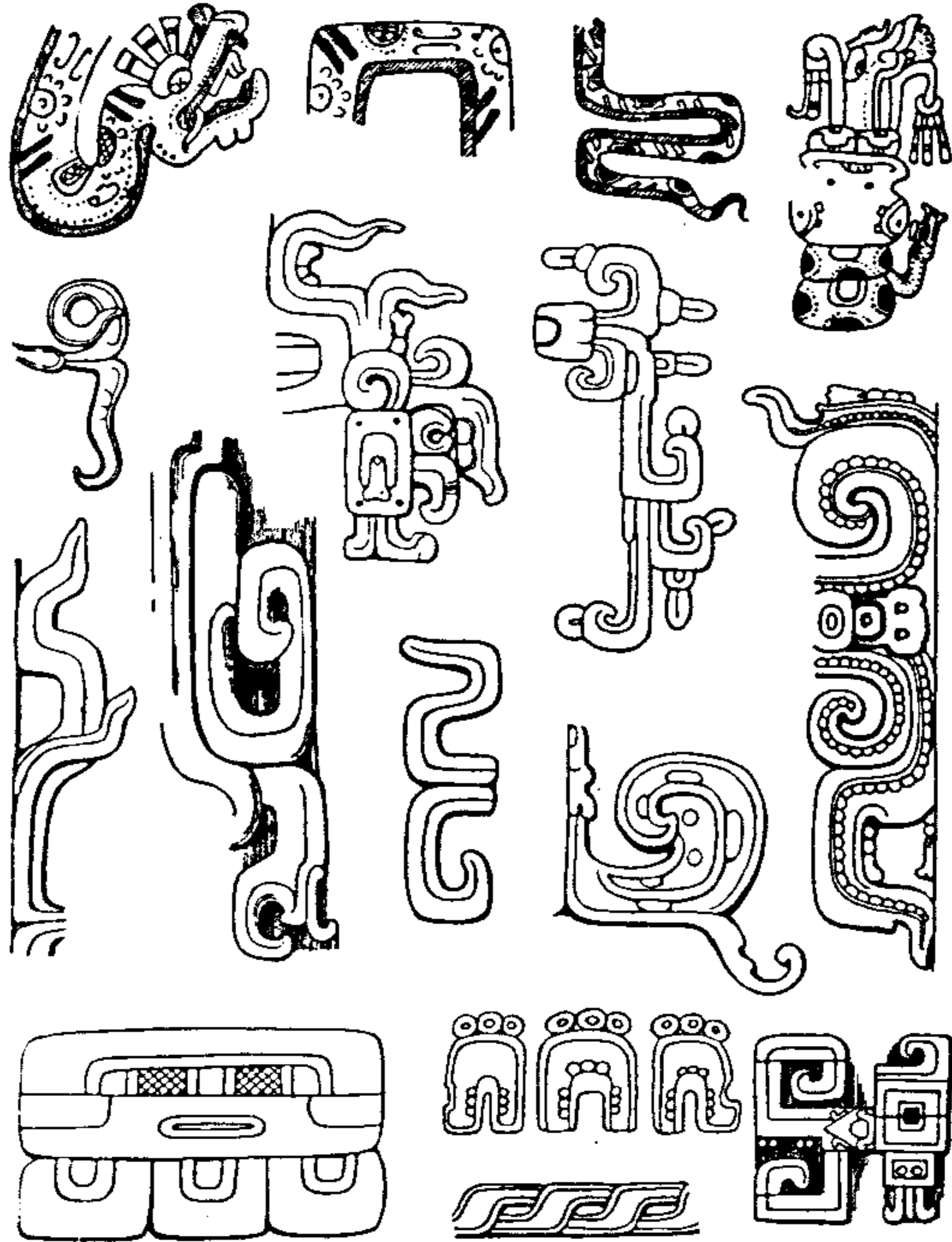
THE SERPENT IN DESIGN

PLATE XXXVI



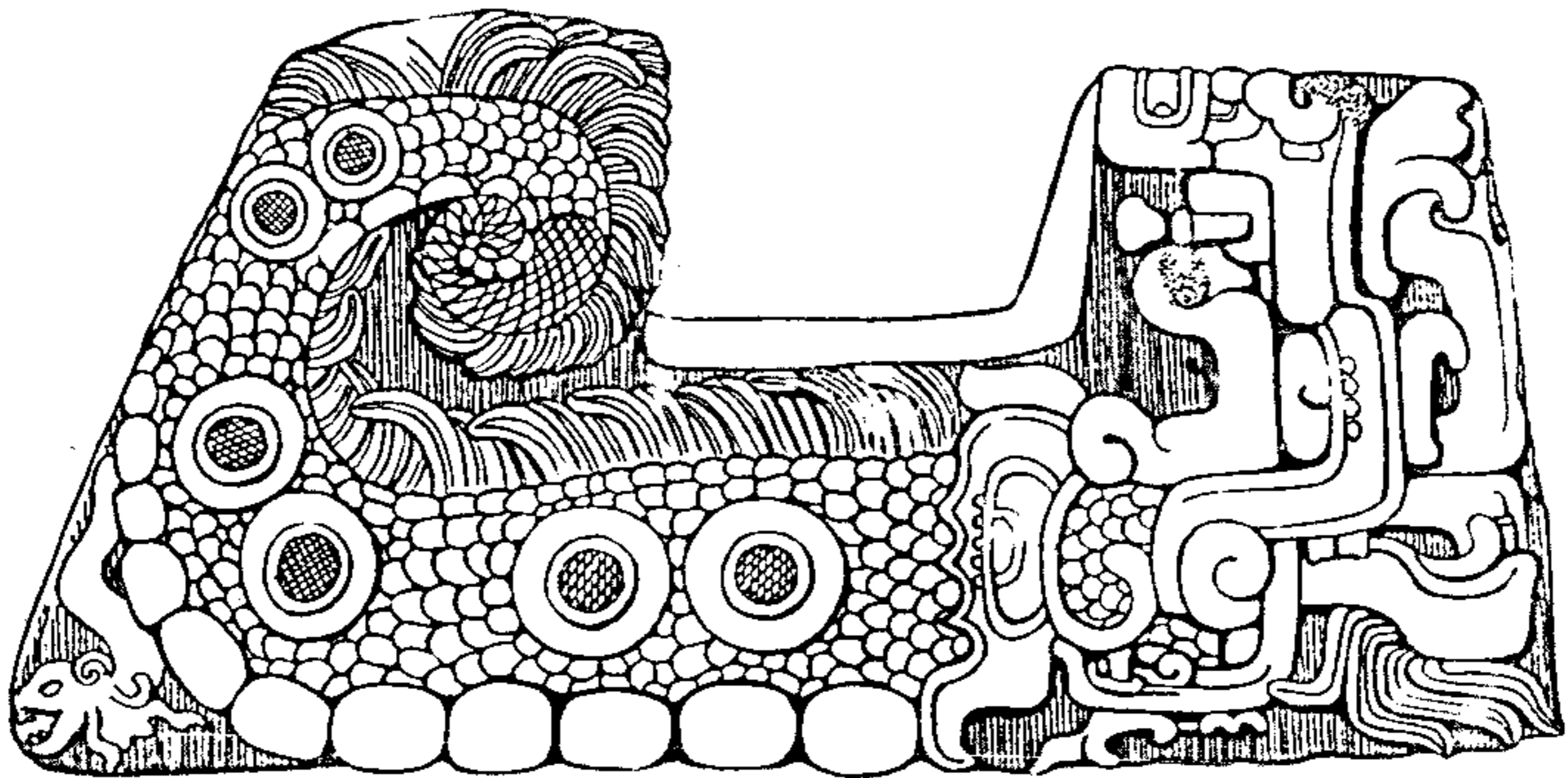
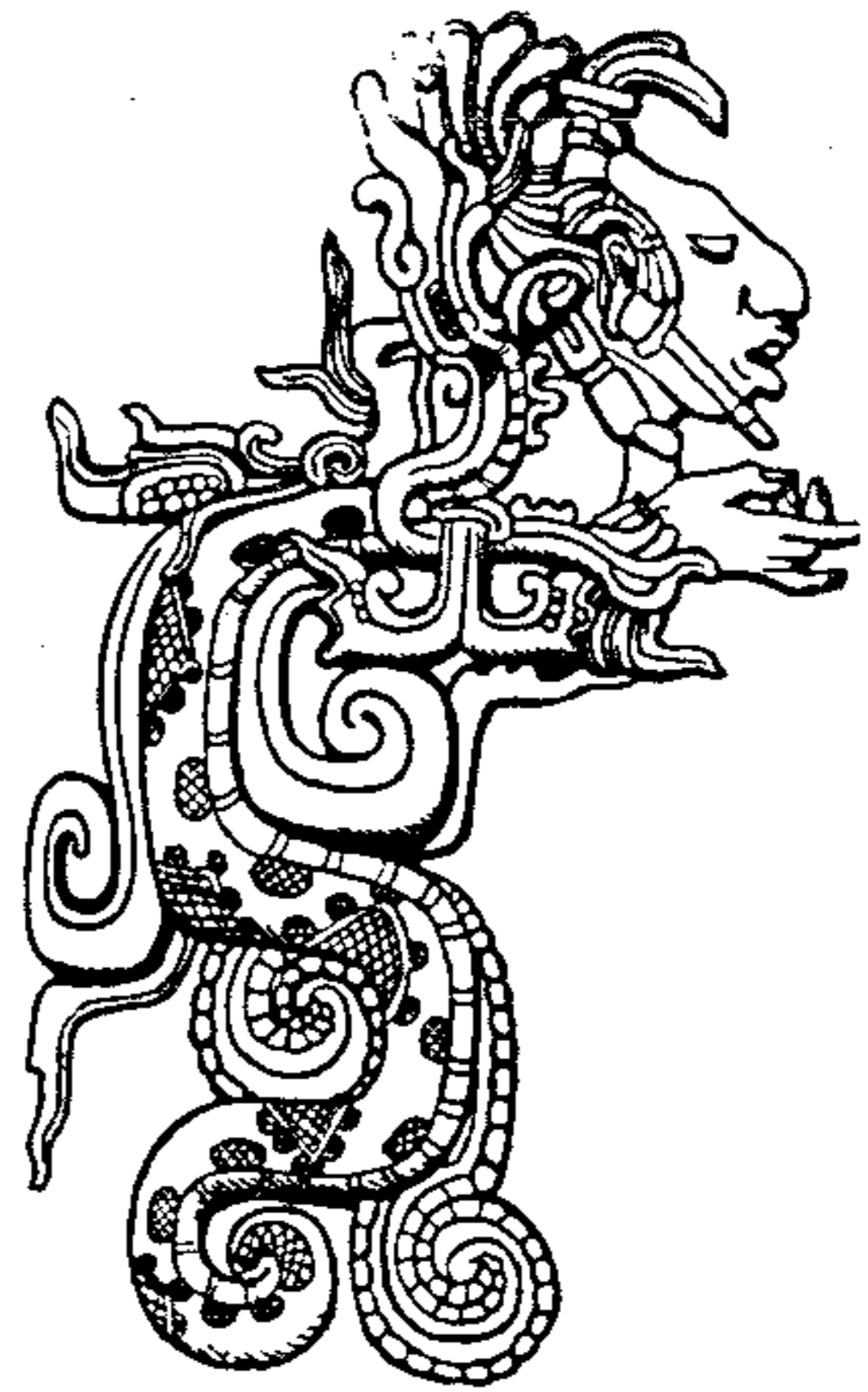
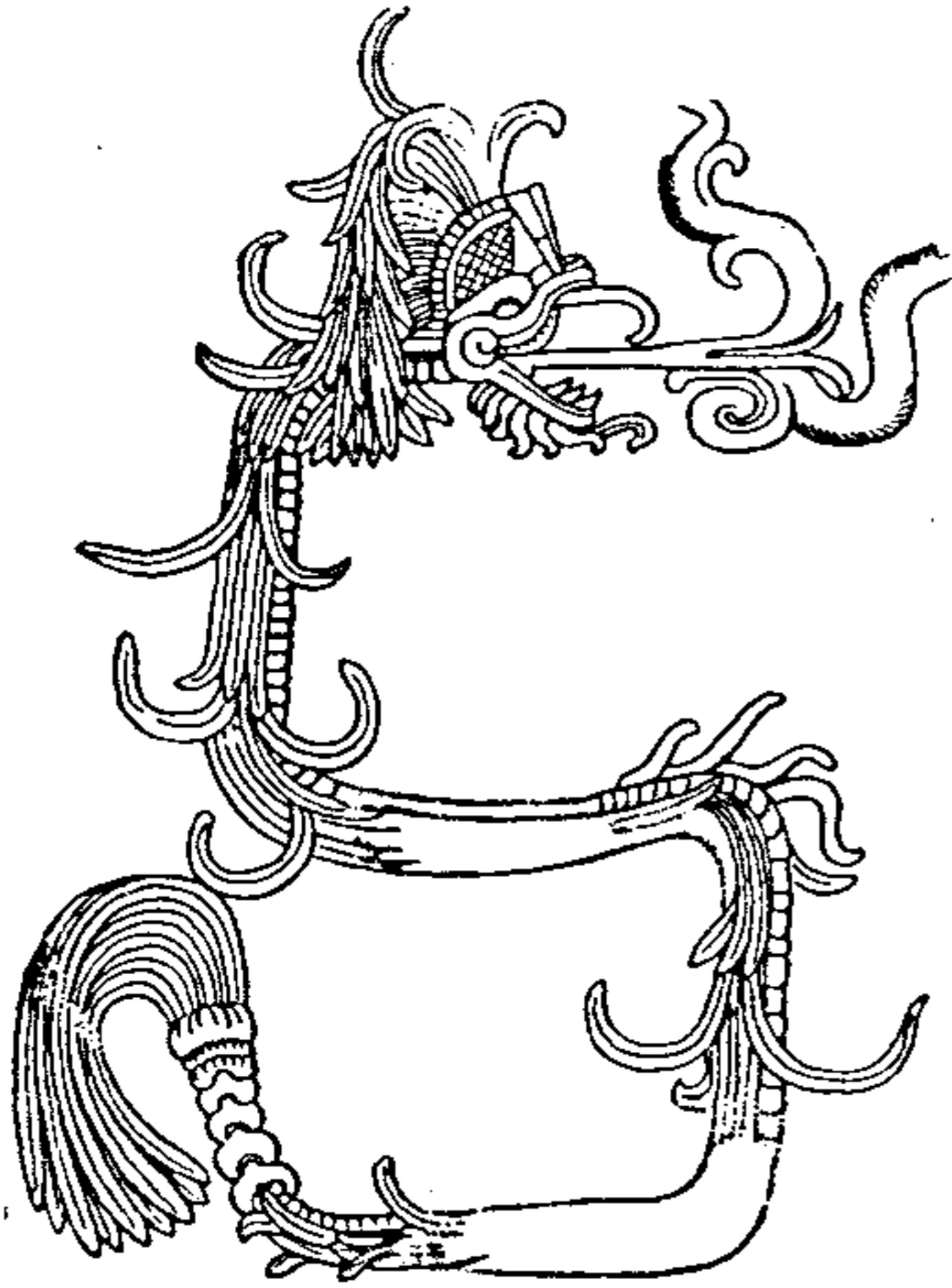
THE SERPENT IN DESIGN

PLATE XXXVII



SERPENTINE FORMS

PLATE XXXVIII



THE FEATHERED SERPENT

CHAPTER VI

THE MONSTER ELEMENT

In the religious art of ancient Mesoamerica there are frequently depicted monsters which appear to resemble crocodiles, serpents, or double-headed dragons. The bodies of these grotesque creatures are very commonly decorated with bands of planet symbols which seemingly indicate that they inhabited the sky, and were, therefore, celestial monsters. However, they are believed at times to be earth monsters, too. The role played by these symbolic creatures was a prominent and significant one.

Also prominent in the religious art of Mesoamerica was the jaguar, an animal possessing extreme religious significance, and second only to the serpent in symbolic importance. The jaguar seemingly played an identical role to that of the dragon and the serpent, and may have been but another manifestation of some great deity which all three represented.

The Monster in the Native Mythology of the Early Sixteenth-century Writings

According to Mexican mythology the Gods created in

the waters a great crocodile-like fish called Cipactli, and from this creature the earth was made.¹ It was believed that the irregularities in the earth's surface were really the scaly prominences on the Cipactli's back.² The earth goddess so prominent in Mexican mythology was actually a representation of the earth monster.

An earth monster called Itzam-cab-ain played an important part in the creation of the world in Maya mythology. In the Book of Chilám Balám of Chumayel we read:

But it was [over] the whole world that Ah Uuc Cheknal was set up. He came from the seventh stratum of the earth, when he came to fecundate Itzam-kab-ain, when he came with the vitality of the angle between earth and heaven.³

Among the ancient Mexicans the jaguar also was "an earth god, symbol of the interior of the earth and of the night, of darkness because jaguars were believed to swallow the sun and cause eclipses."⁴ Covarrubias adds, "He was the

¹Historias de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas, p. 130, cited by Eduard Seler; Codex Vaticanus 3773, op. cit., p. 134.

²Joyce, op. cit., p. 59.

³Book of Chilám Balám of Chumayel, ed. cit., p. 101. According to the editor, Roys, Itzam-kab-ain, means the whale with the feet of a crocodile. Beltran spells it Itzam-cab-ain and defines it as a whale, though it could mean literally Itzam-the-earth-crocodile. Ah Uuc Chek-nal means "he who fertilizes the maize seven times"; see Roys, op. cit., p. 101, notes 3 and 4.

⁴Covarrubias, op. cit., p. 78.

god of caves, the dark interior of mountains, the Atlantean god of earthquakes who supported the world upon his shoulders." He was known to the Mexicans as Tepeyollotl, meaning "Heart of the Mountain" or "Heart of the Land," while among the Maya he was called Votan, "Heart or "Innermost."⁵

Covarrubias states that the earliest "Olmec" people "cultivated the principle of fertility with an awed intensity and saw magic in the idea of birth." These people linked together the features of a newborn baby with those of an embryonic jaguar deity.

. . . Their gods were all jaguars: sky-jaguars, rain-jaguars, and earth-jaguars. The earth was symbolized by a jaguar's open mouth, the caves from which their mythical chiefs, the leaders of humanity had sprung.⁶

Monsters in the Hieroglyphic Manuscripts

The two-headed monster so frequently depicted on the sculptured monuments of Mesoamerica, does not appear in the manuscripts. There is, however, a celestial or earth monster which is seemingly the same.

The Monster in the Maya Manuscript

The earth or celestial monster appears in the Maya manuscripts on a very few occasions only. In one instance

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., p. 125.

the head of God D, principal aspect of Itzamná, emerges from its open jaws (see Plate XXXIX, page 138).⁷ In a second instance it is seen with a body composed of constellation bands (perhaps symbolizing the celestial monster), and with a torrent of water flowing from its mouth (see Plate XL, page 139). Goddess I, the Water Goddess, stands beside this creature pouring water from a jar.⁸ The crocodile head also appears on glyphs in the Dresden manuscript on two occasions.⁹

The jaguar in the Maya manuscripts is distinguished by rosette-like spots on its body, which are usually conventionalized as solid black markings, small circles, or as a central spot ringed by dots.¹⁰

There are a number of connections in which this animal appears in these manuscripts. It is the headdress of two gods (one of which is black), who are in the act of sowing kernels of maize.¹¹ It appears as a Sacred Almanac glyph corresponding to the day Ix which means jaguar.¹² The jaguar

⁷Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., pp. 4-5.

⁸Ibid., p. 74.

⁹Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., pp. 52, 53.

¹⁰Tozzer and Allen, op. cit., p. 356.

¹¹Codex Tro-Cortesiano, ed. cit., pp. 34, 36.

¹²Codex Dresdensis, ed. cit., p. 8.

PLATE XXXIX

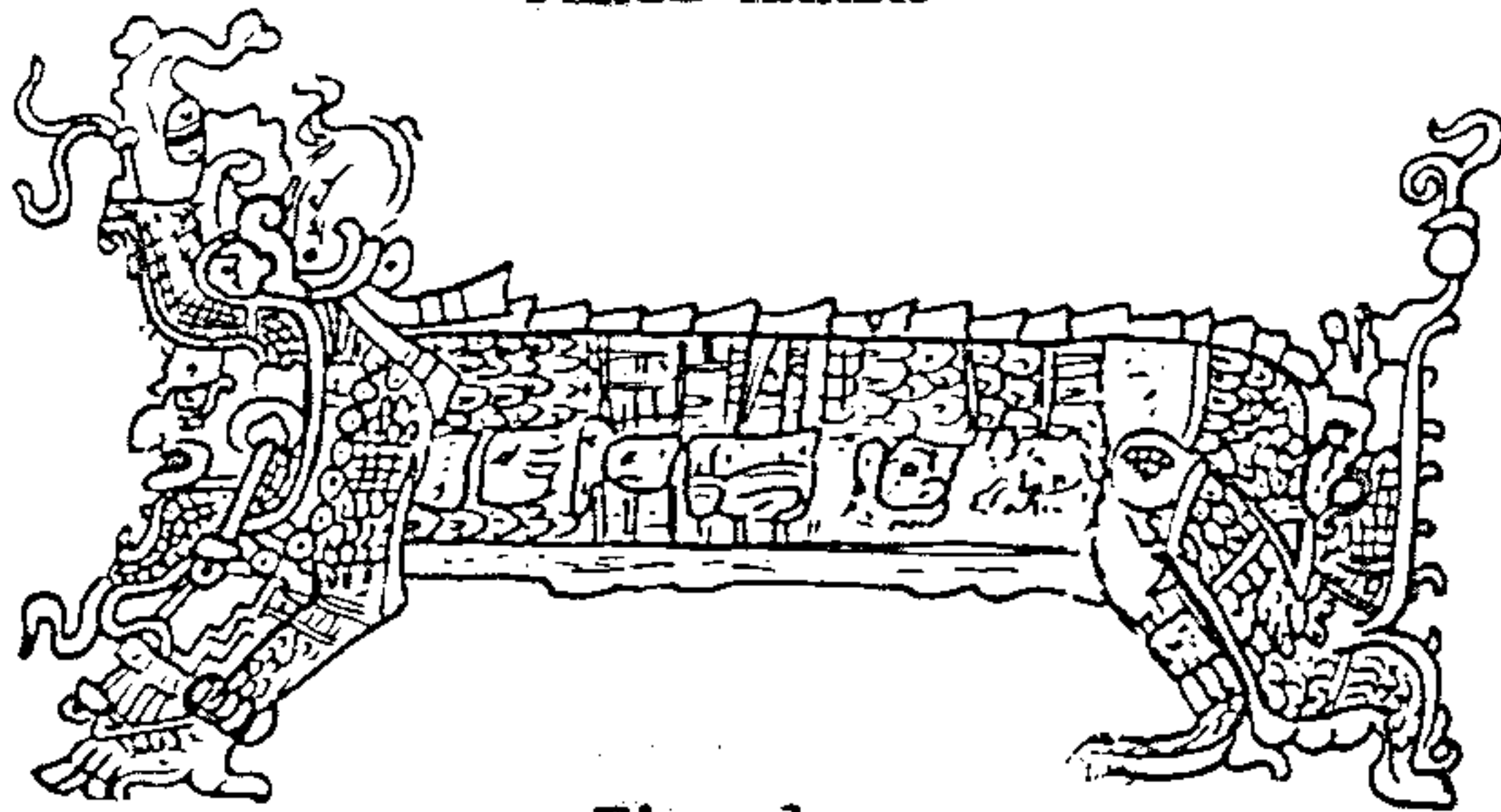


Fig. 1

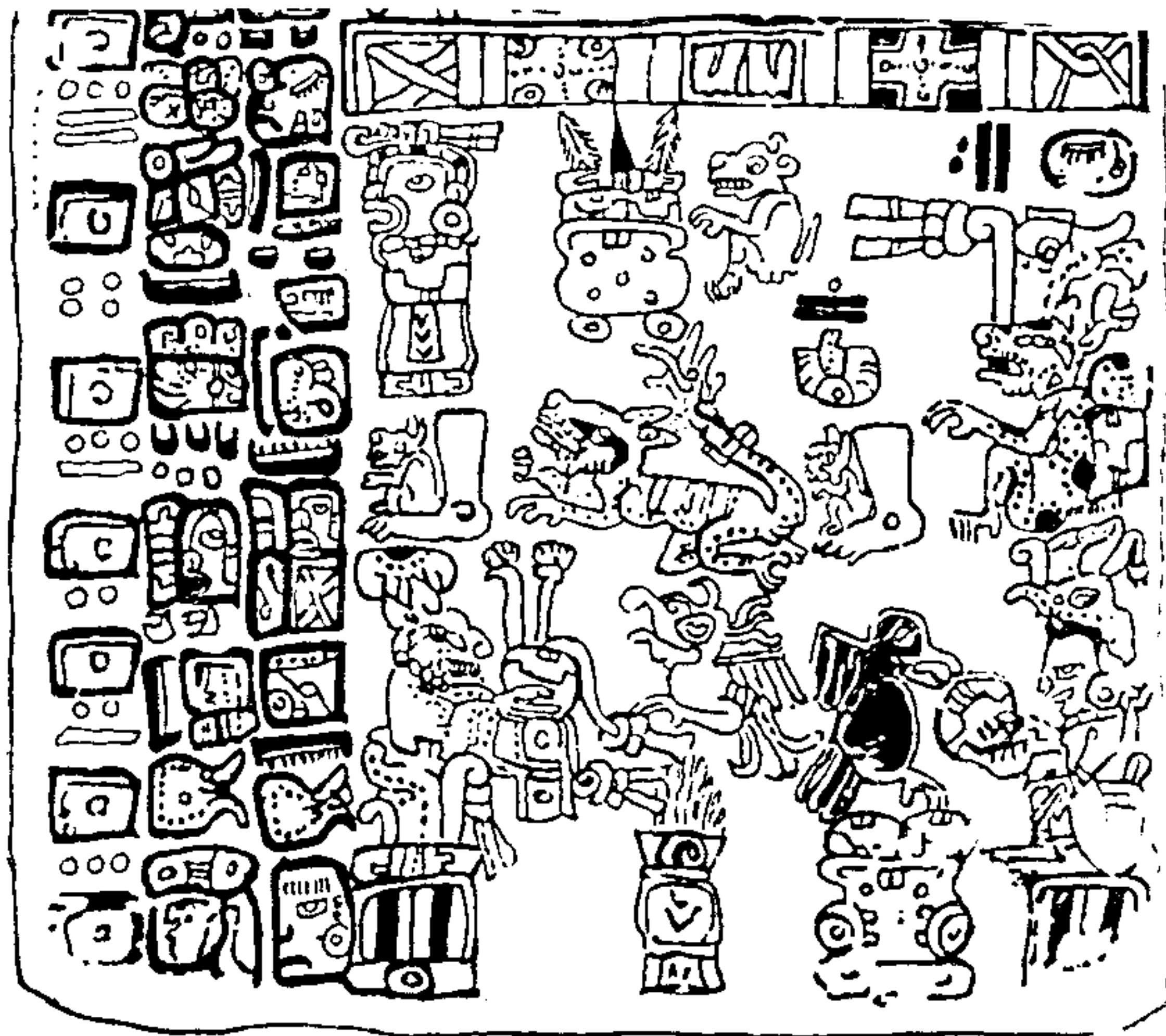


Fig. 2

THE MONSTER IN THE MAYA MANUSCRIPTS

PLATE XL



THE MONSTER AND THE WATER GODDESS

is carried on the back of a priest where ceremonies of the year are shown, in all probability representing a Year-bearer.¹³ The head of this animal also terminates caban signs which are shown over a flaming pot.¹⁴ (See Plate XXXIII, Figure 2, page 127.)

The jaguar appears in hunting scenes where animals are being snared for sacrificial offerings, but it never appears in these pictures as one of the animals to be sacrificed.¹⁵

The jaguar is also shown sitting on the right hand of the goddess from whom water is flowing. God B sits at her left foot.¹⁶

The Monster in the Mexican Manuscripts

In Codex Borgia the trees of the four directions spring from the body of the Earth Goddess, who is representative of the earth monster,¹⁷ while in Codex Vaticanus 3773 the trunk of the trees terminate in a monster's head.¹⁸

¹³Ibid., p. 26; see also Villacorta and Villacorta, op. cit., p. 63.

¹⁴Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., p. 64.

¹⁵Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., pp. 40, 41, 43.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁷Codex Borgia, ed. cit., pp. 49-53.

¹⁸Codex Vaticanus 3773, ed. cit., pp. 17-18.

From the bases of the trees of the four directions in Codex Fejérváry-Mayer emerge the heads of the Cipactli or earth monsters. (See Plates IV, V, VI, pages 57, 58, and 59.)

In the Mexican manuscripts the first day count Cipactli, "crocodile," was ruled by the Creator Deity, Tonacatecuhtli.¹⁹ The Cipactli or Crocodile-monster is pictured with the first human pair.²⁰ The Cipactli is shown as the earth monster below the Tlaloc or Rain God of the East.²¹ It is also pictured in the water with Tlaloc who is ninth of the Nine Lords of the Night Hours,²² and with the Rain God of the lower region.²³ This monster is also seen in the water with the third of the four forms of the planet Venus.²⁴ It is used, too, as the helmet mask of the god of the East.²⁵ (See Plate XLI, page 142.)

The jaguar also appears frequently in these manuscripts.

¹⁹Codex Vaticanus 3773, ed. cit., p. 130

²⁰Ibid., p. 87.

²¹Ibid., p. 69. Codex Borgia, ed. cit., p. 27; Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, ed. cit., p. 4.

²²Codex Borgia, ed. cit., p. 14.

²³Codex Vaticanus 3773, ed. cit., p. 48.

²⁴Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, ed. cit., p. 42.

²⁵Codex Borgia, ed. cit., p. 15; Codex Vaticanus 3773, ed. cit., p. 33.

PLATE XLI



Fig. 1

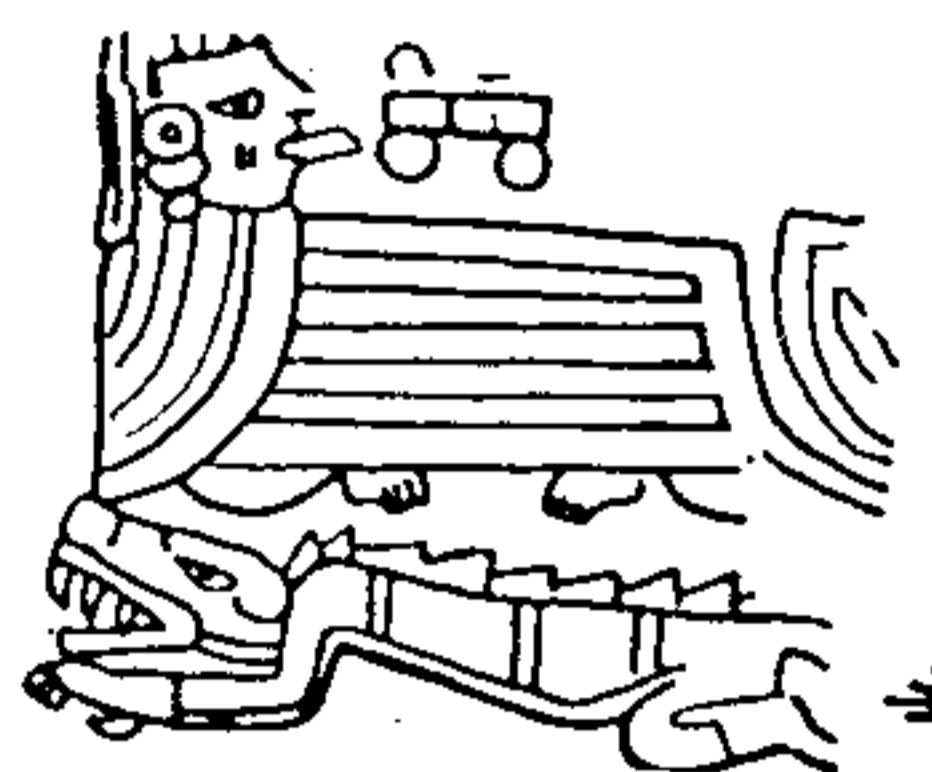


Fig. 2

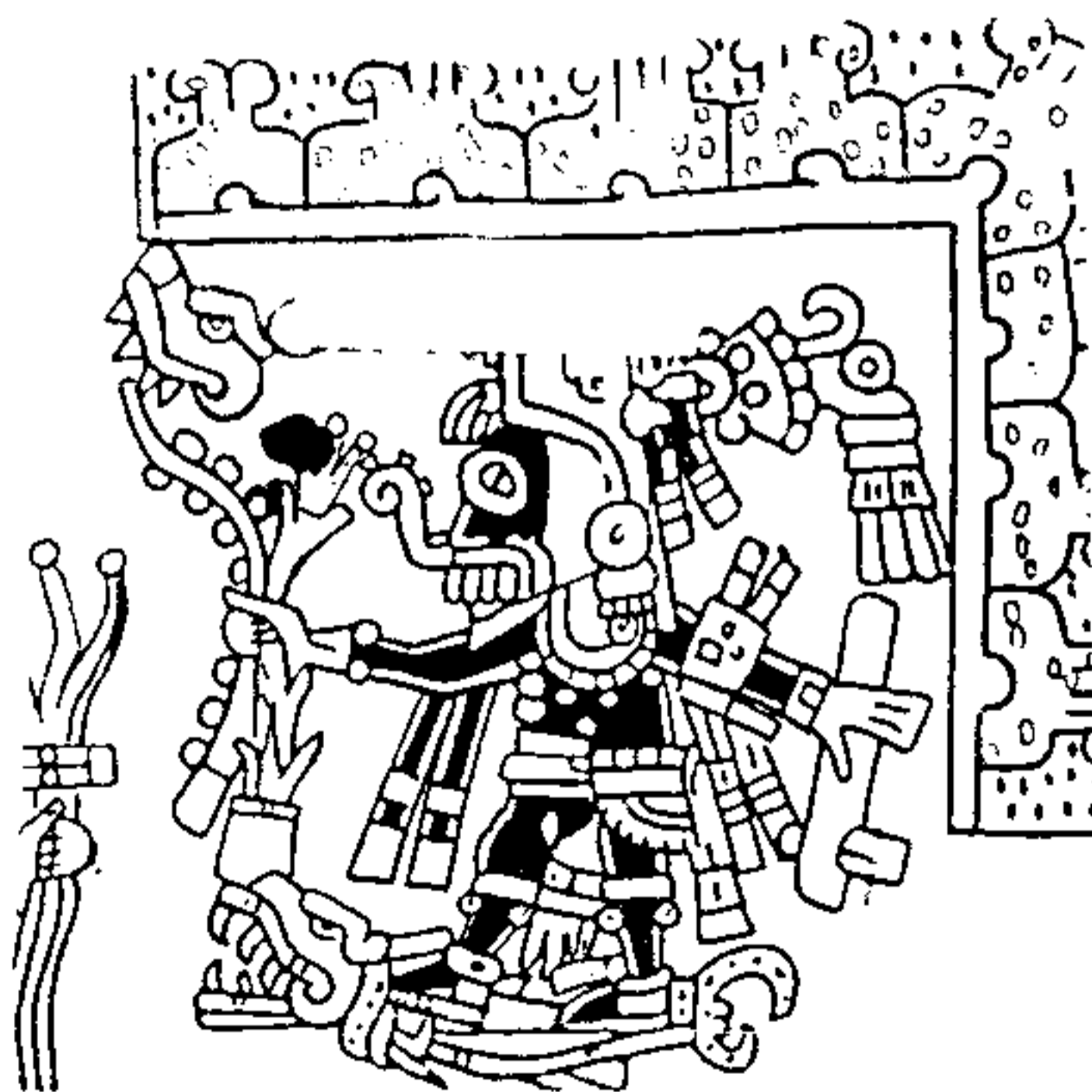


Fig. 3

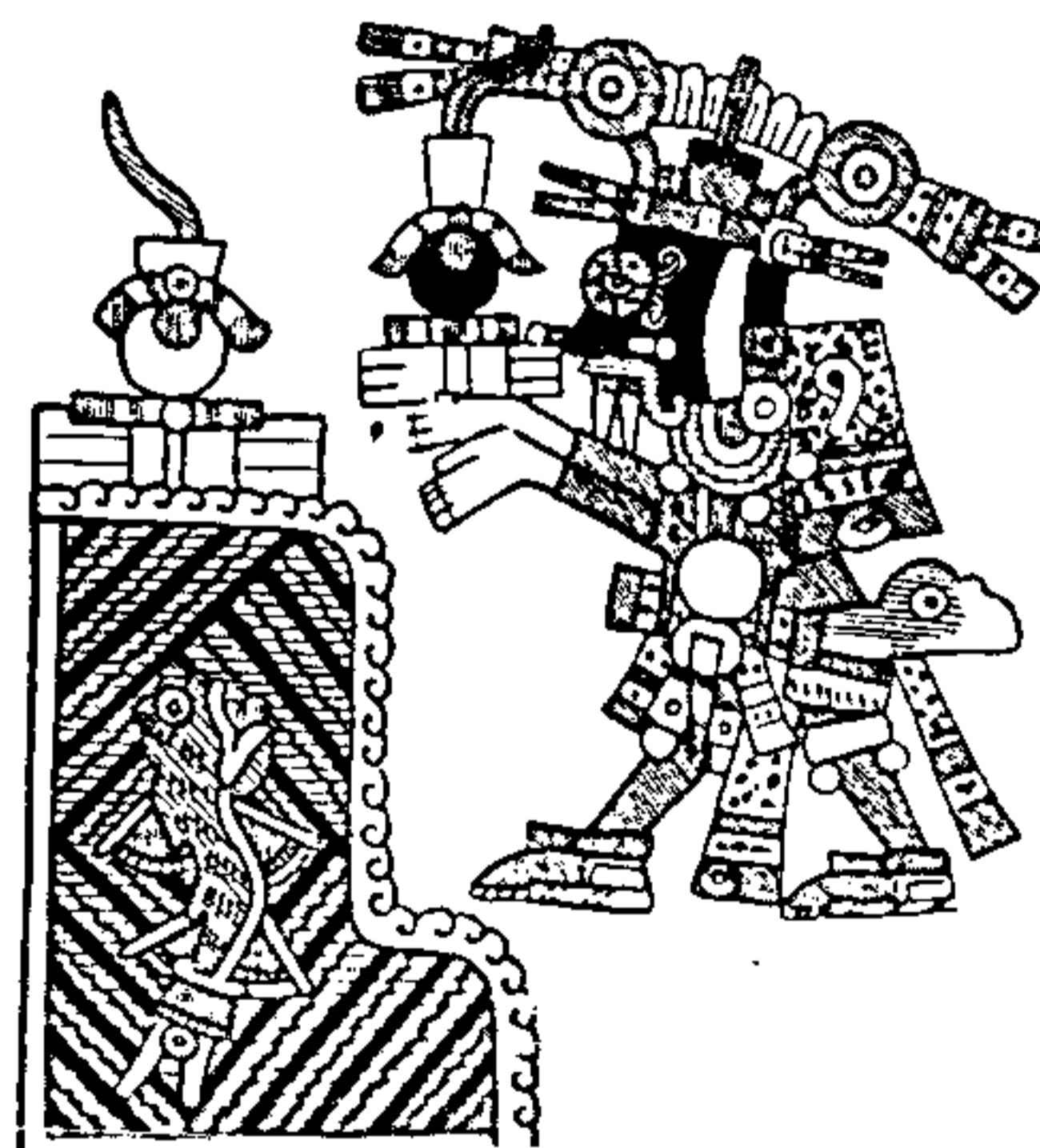


Fig. 4

THE MONSTER IN THE MEXICAN MANUSCRIPTS

The Mexicans believed that the jaguar was the animal that devoured the sun when a solar eclipse occurred. He thus denoted darkness to them and his image, the god Tepeyollotl, is a god of caves, of the dark interior of the mountains.²⁶ This belief is depicted in the Mexican manuscript Codex Vaticanus 3773 where the jaguar (Tepeyollotli, "Heart of the Mountain") is seen crouching in a cave (see Plate XLII, Figure 1, page 144).²⁷ Speaking of the god in this representation Seler states:

. . .there he presents himself in the form of a jaguar, and with badges of Tezcatlipoca, and by interpreters he is explained as "lord of the animals". . .and as the "Echo in the Mountains". . .And it is added that the name of jaguar is given to the Earth, because the jaguar is the wildest of beasts, and this echo in the mountains "dated from the Flood," . . .that is, the god of this name is declared to be one of the primal gods.²⁸

The eight of the Nine Lords of the Night, and the lord of the third Tonalpohualli or Sacred Almanac division is the god Tepeyollotl or Heart of the Mountain. He is not here figured as the animal form of the jaguar, yet he has feline facial characteristics with the jaguar-skin design around his mouth.²⁹

²⁶Seler, Codex Vaticanus 3773, op. cit., p. 144.

²⁷Codex Vaticanus 3773, ed. cit., p. 87; see also Codex Borgia, ed. cit., p. 10.

²⁸Seler, Codex Vaticanus 3773, op. cit., p. 103.

²⁹Codex Vaticanus 3773, ed. cit., p. 22; Codex Borgia, ed. cit., p. 14.

PLATE XLII

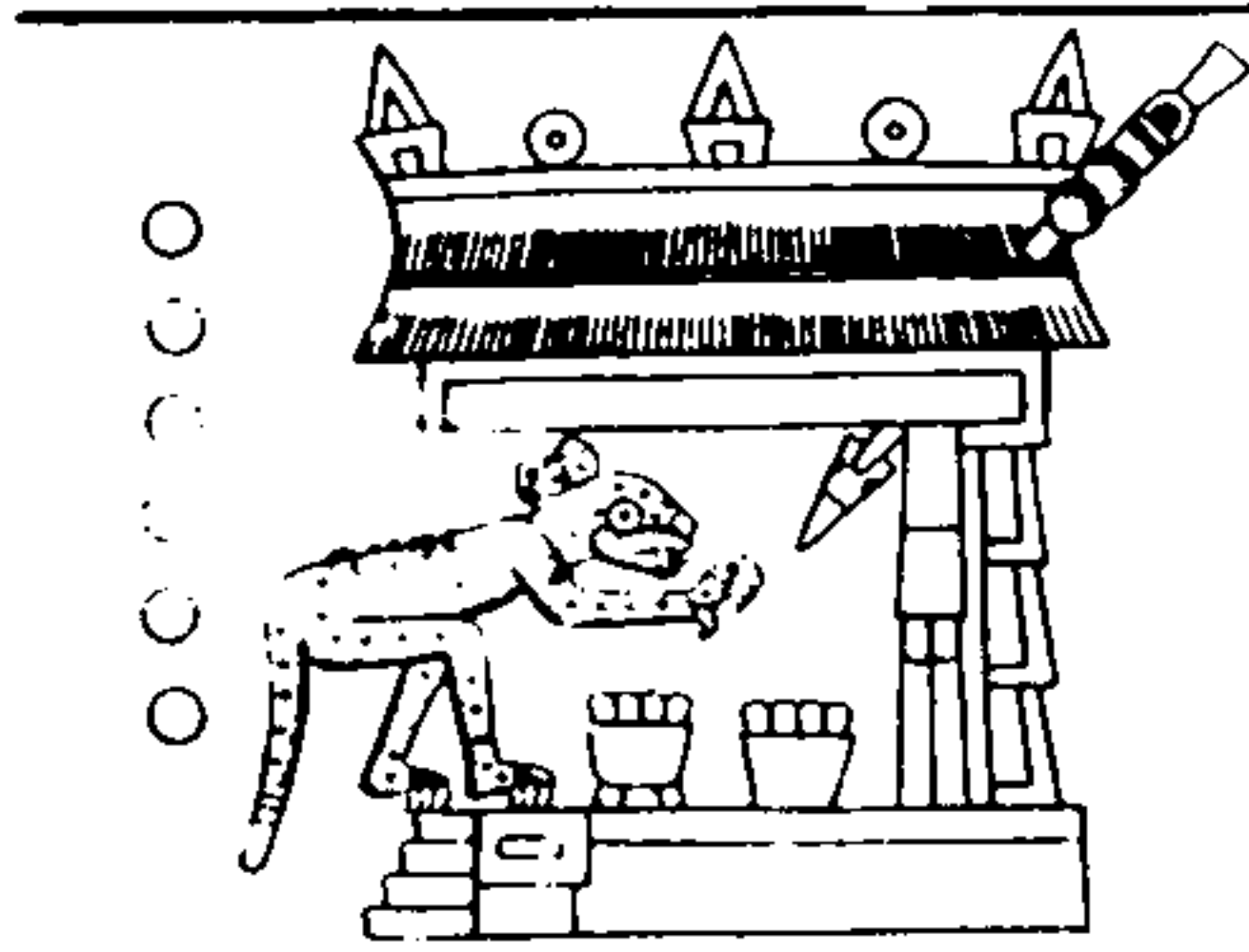


Fig. 1

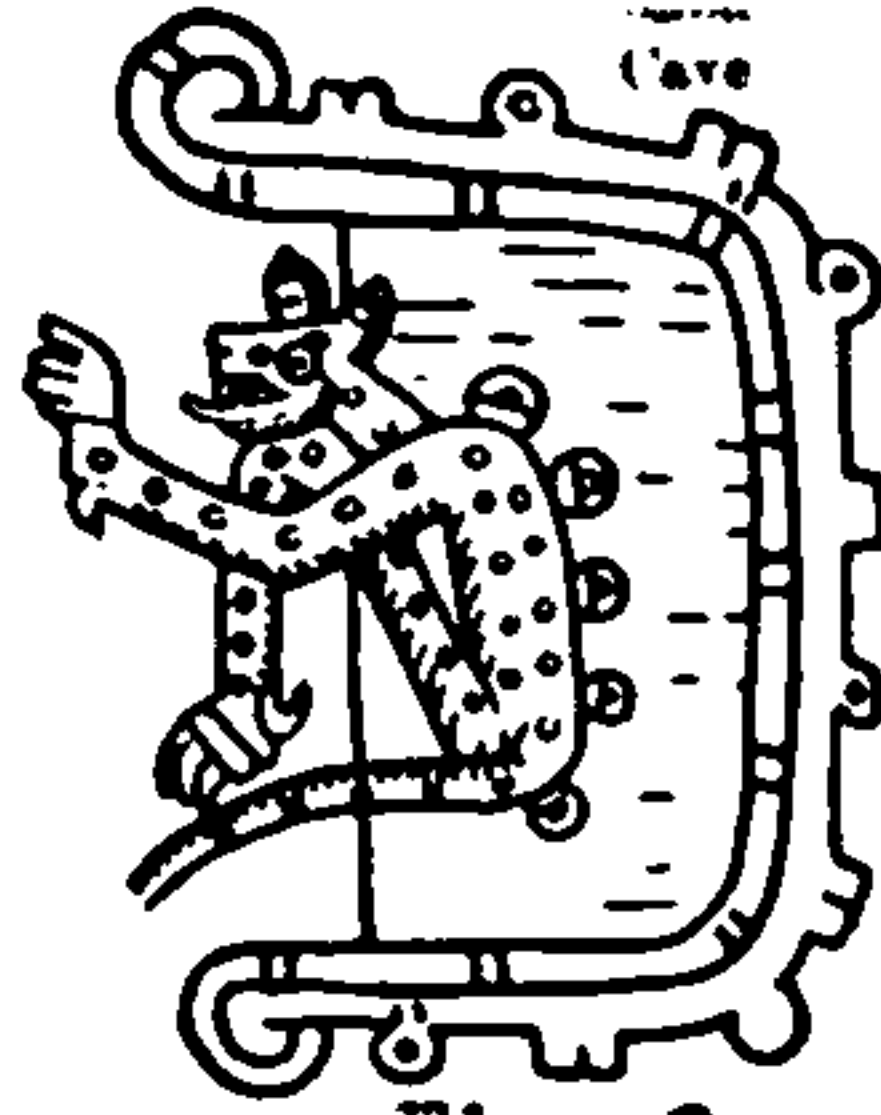


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

THE JAGUAR IN THE MEXICAN MANUSCRIPTS

The jaguar is also seen with Mixcoatl, God of the Hunt. In this instance the god is directing weapons against a jaguar who is standing on the prostrate figure of a man (see Plate XLII, Figure 3, page 144).³⁰ The fourteenth day, Ocelotl, that is, "Jaguar," is symbolized by the figure of this animal or by its head or ear.³¹ The Mother Goddess is shown in one instance with jaguar claws instead of hands.³²

The jaguar head is shown with the god Quetzalcoatl,³³ and its ear is in the throat of the snake which forms the helmet-mask of the Water Goddess Chalchiuhtlicul.³⁴ A jaguar is at the summit of the Tree of the South in one instance.³⁵ It is also seen entering the temple where there are votive gifts (see Plate XLI, Figure 2, page 142).³⁶

Monsters in the Sculptures

The monstrous creature named the Two-headed Dragon, or Earth-Monster, is found everywhere on sculptured monuments

³⁰Codex Vaticanus 3773, ed. cit., p. 25.

³¹Ibid., pp. 30, 31; Codex Borgia, ed. cit., p. 12.

³²Codex Borgia, ed. cit., p. 44.

³³Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, ed. cit., p. 30.

³⁴Codex Borgia, ed. cit., p. 14.

³⁵Codex Vaticanus 3773, ed. cit., p. 18.

³⁶Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, ed. cit., p. 26.

of the Classic Maya period. Its chief characteristics are two heads, one belonging to the front and one to the rear, and a crocodile-like body with reptilian markings on the legs and belly. The front head is somewhat like a crocodile's, yet the jaws are similar to those of the conventionalized serpent. The eye of this head is often feathered. In the open mouth is seen usually the head of the Sun God, although it is sometimes replaced by that of God B in the Maya area and of Tlaloc in the Mexican area.³⁷ The rear head of this monster is characterized by death symbols, the lower jaw being represented as a bleached bone, and the nose sometimes shown with a cavity indicating death. The kin or sun sign appears on the forehead. Very often aquatic markings, such as the Cauac water symbol, the water lily, or a fish motif are associated with the Two-headed Dragon (see Plate XLIII, Figure 4, page 147).

The earth monster is to be seen at the base of the Tablet of the Cross and Tablet of the Foliated Cross at Palenque. On the former, the head seems to correspond to the rear head of the Two-headed Dragon. It is depicted like a skull with fleshless bony lower jaws, and with the kin or sun sign on its forehead. The latter is the conventionalized monster head seen on many of the sculptures in the Maya area,

³⁷Joyce, op. cit., p. 233.

PLATE XLIII

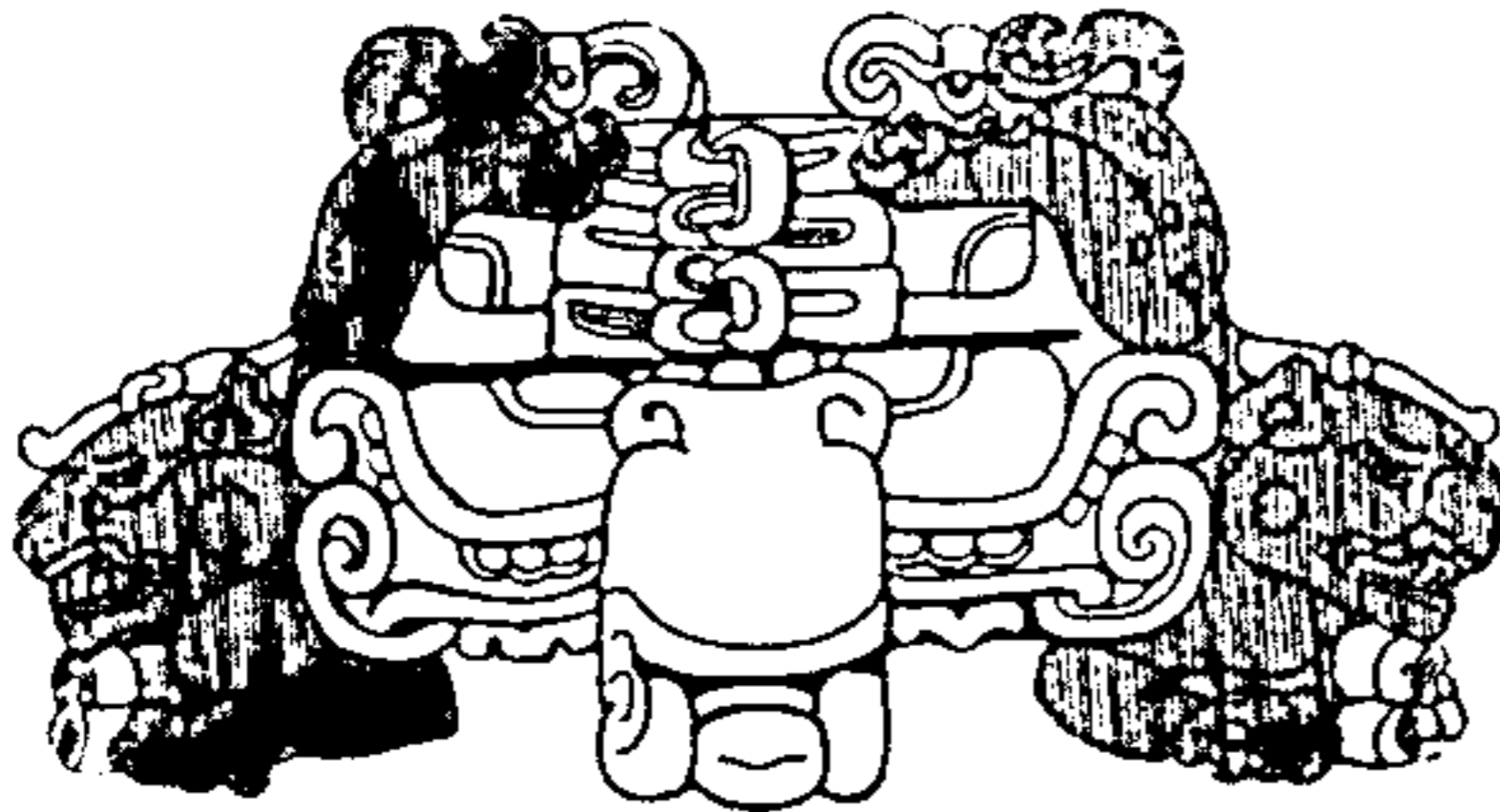


Fig. 1

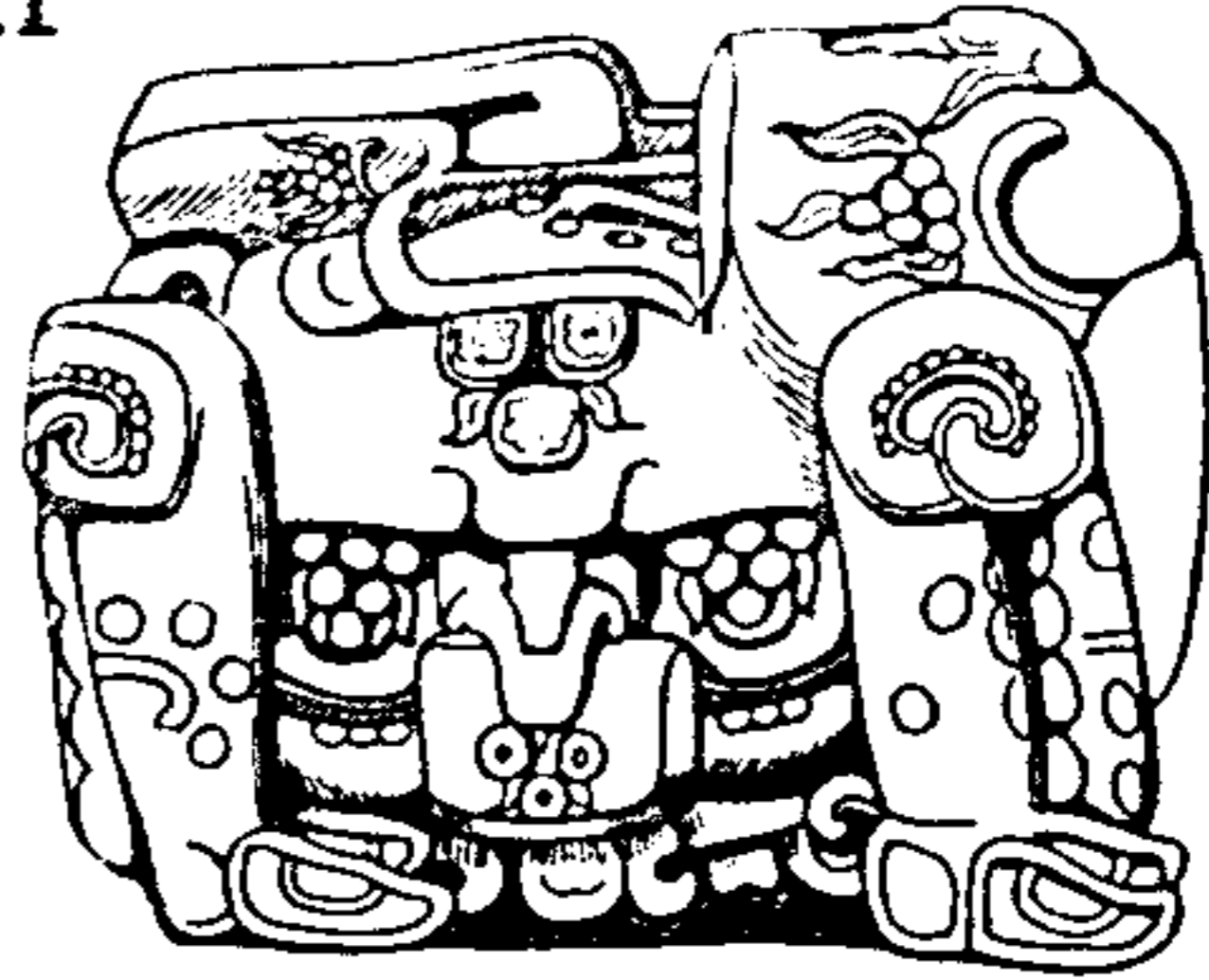


Fig. 2



Fig. 3

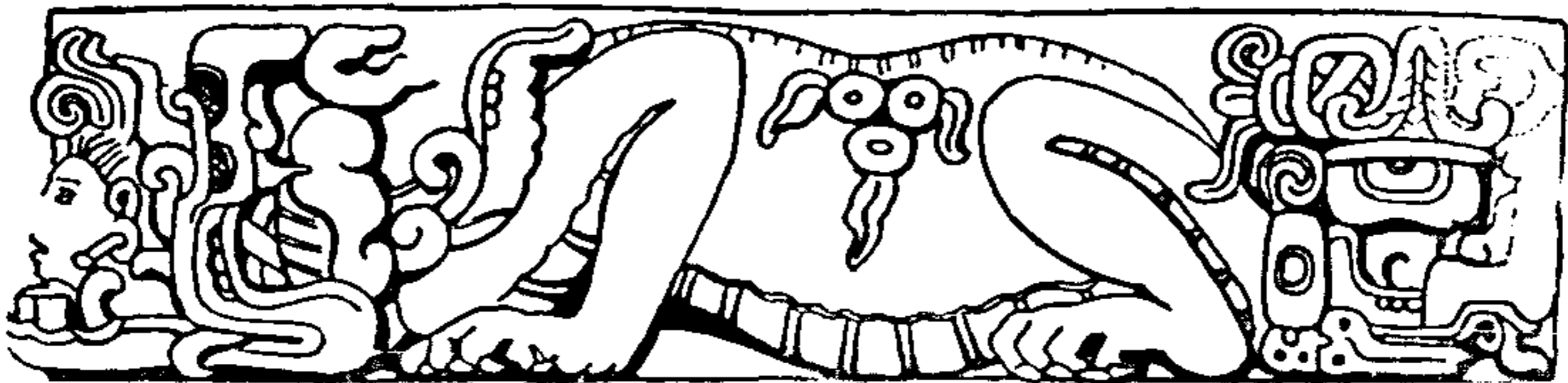


Fig. 4

THE TWO-HEADED MONSTER

probably a representation of the sun mask, that is the mask of Kinich Ahua the Sun God. (See Plates I and VII, pages 39 and 62; see also Plate XLIV, page 149.)

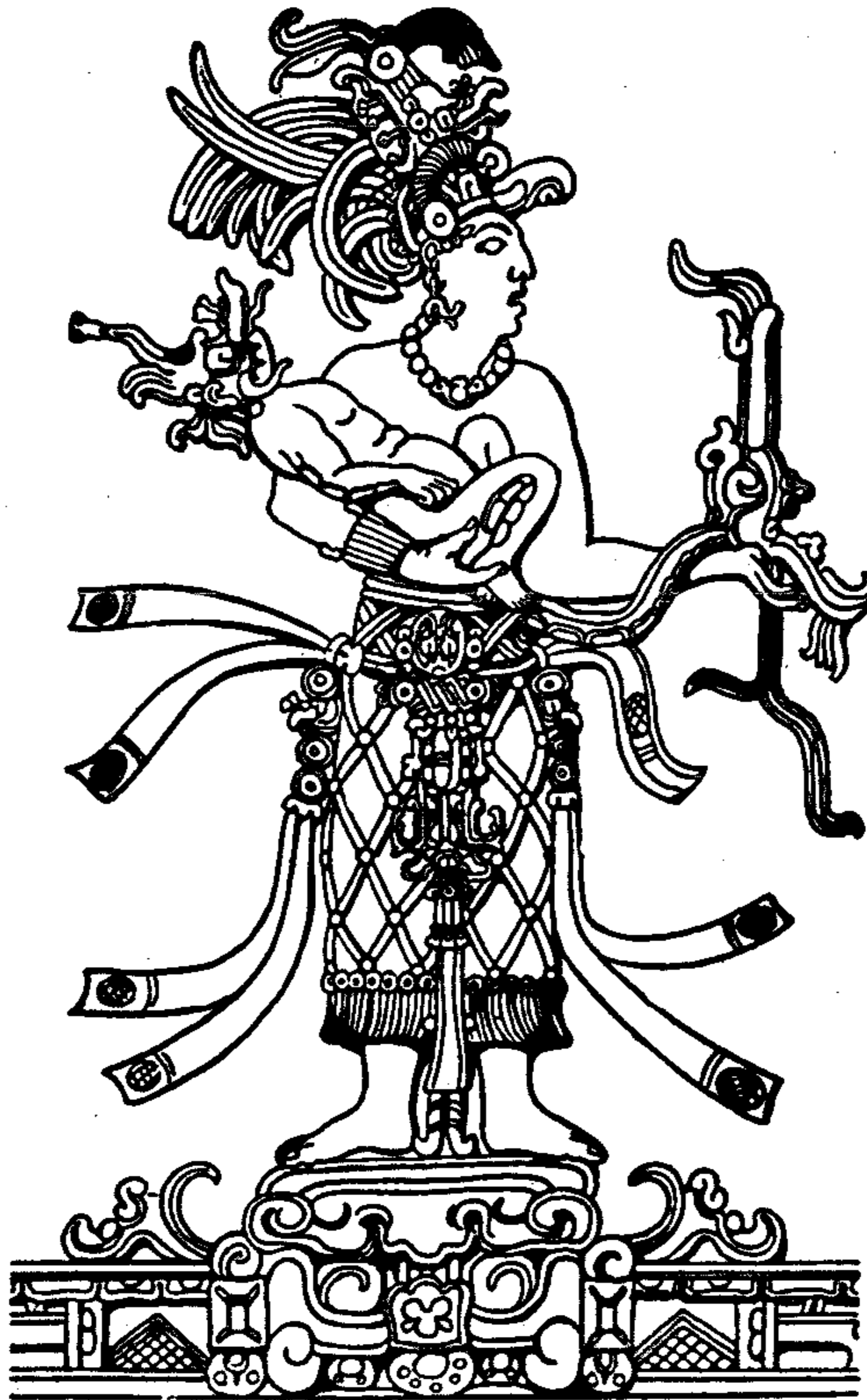
The most outstanding example of the Two-headed Dragon is that of Altar P at Quiriguá, also known as the Great Turtle Altar.³⁸ This is the most complicated but the best preserved piece of sculpture from the Maya area. The monster's body is almost concealed by layers of ornament. In the wide open mouth of the front head of the monster is seated a richly attired human figure holding a Manikin Scepter in his left hand. The eye of this front head is decorated with feathers and a diagonal cross. The grotesque rear head shows evidences of death, but it does not have the usual sun sign on its forehead. A head on top of the monument is marked by water symbols. Elaborately conventionalized serpent's heads hang down from the sides of the altar (see Plate XLIII, Figure 3, page 147).³⁹

This same monster is seen on a number of other altars at Quiriguá and Copán. In each instance it is two-headed, and bears the usual water symbols. At times the feet are cloven as on Altar M at Copán, and at other times they are

³⁸Maudslay, op. cit., Text, Vol. II, p. 3.

³⁹Maudslay, op. cit., Vol. II, Plates 53-64.

PLATE XLIV



A PERSONAGE ON A MONSTER HEAD

clawlike, as on Altar D at the same city.⁴⁰

The Two-headed Dragon motif is used to adorn the inner doorway of Temple 22 at Tikal as well as the doorways of rooms at Palenque. In this latter city the actual body of the dragon is conventionalized into a long band of astronomical symbols, perhaps symbolizing the Celestial Monster (see Plate XLV, page 151).⁴¹

That there is a connection between the serpent, the Two-headed Dragon, and the Manikin Scepter is evident. The jaws of the front head resemble those of the serpent. A Ceremonial Bar at Seibal has a head modified into the likeness of the rear head of the dragon, even to the bleached bone as a lower jaw, and the kin sign on the forehead. The physiognomy of the rear head of the monster is also very similar to the head of the Manikin Scepter, both of which probably represent a certain deity.

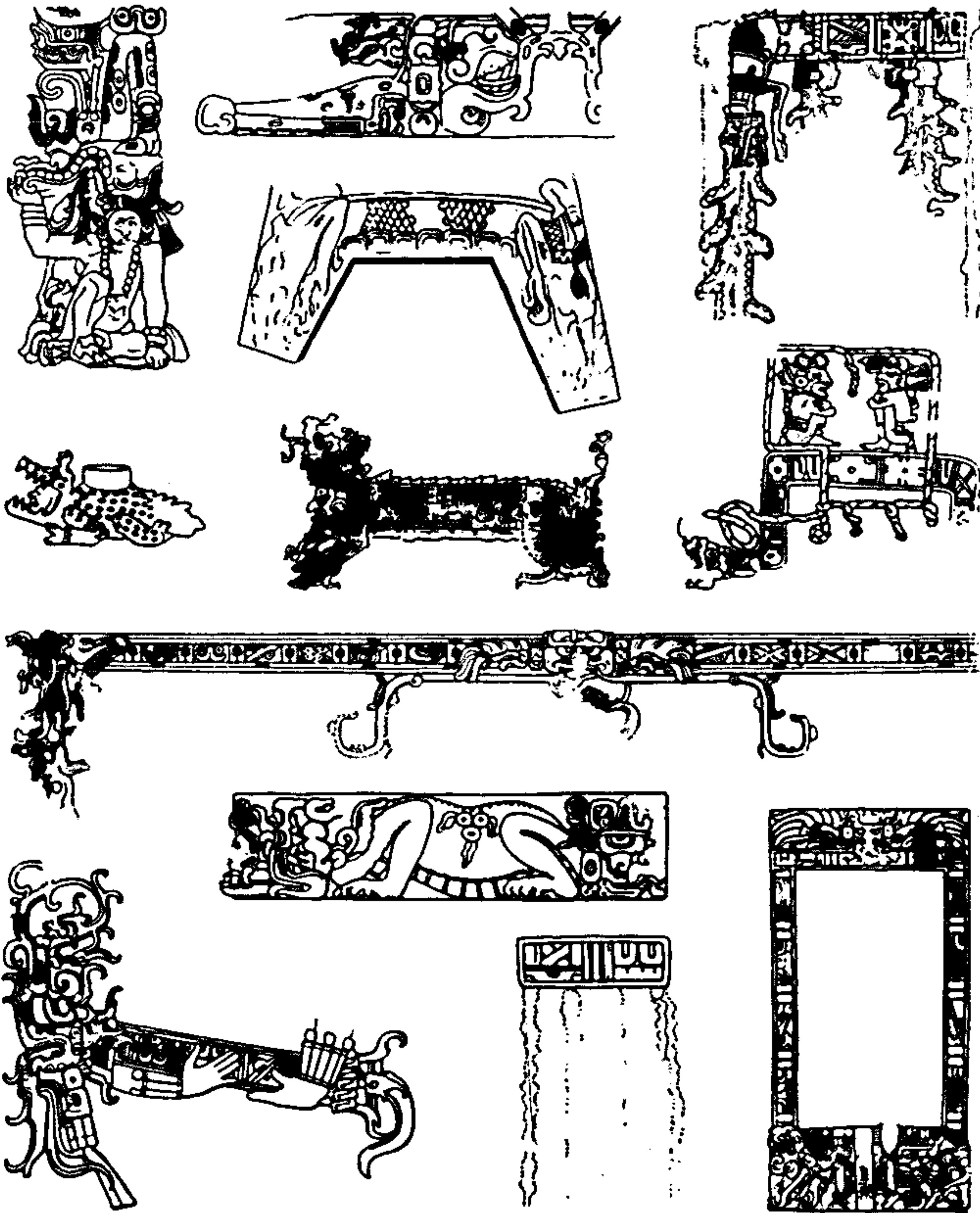
Some sculptures related to the Two-headed Dragon group, and also in part to the serpent, are seen in Altars G 1, G 2, and G 3, as well as Altar O at Copán (see Plate XLVI, page 152).⁴²

⁴⁰Maudslay, op. cit., Vol. II, Plates 9-15; see also Part IV, Plate 42; Vol. I, Plates 113-115.

⁴¹Maudslay, op. cit., Vol. I, Plate 12.

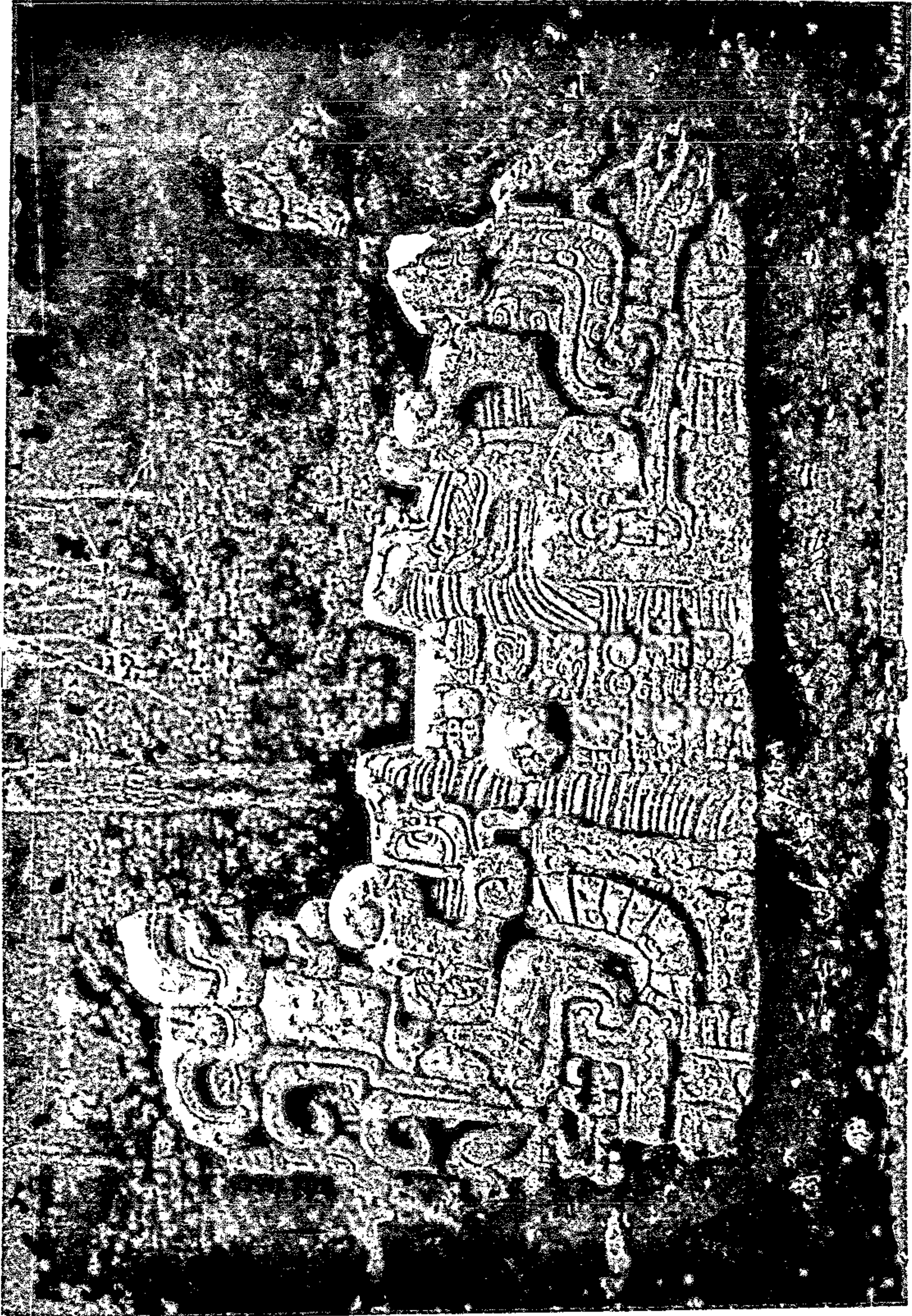
⁴²Maudslay, op. cit., Vol. III, Plates 13, 14.

PLATE XLV



THE CELESTIAL MONSTER OVER DOORWAYS

PLATE XLVI



ALTAR G AT COPAN

These altars are all representations of a double-headed serpent with an arched body having a mane of feathers, but no legs. The heads on Altar G 1 are of different sizes, the larger one having a bleached bone for the lower jaw, similar to that of the Two-headed Dragon. Similar representations of this monster are seen at Piedras Negras.⁴³

The jaguar is also frequently represented in the sculptures of Mesoamerica. Its head and claws serve as a headdress of a priest on Stelae 12 and 14 at Piedras Negras,⁴⁴ and on a richly dressed personage on Lintels 5 and 26 at Yaxchilan.⁴⁵ A beneficent deity or priest on Lintel 13 at Yaxchilan wears breeches made of the jaguar skin,⁴⁶ as does also a personage of priestly rank in Stela 5 at Naranjo.⁴⁷ On Stela 10 at Seibal a high priest wears jaguar paws as well as jaguar-skin leggings and breeches.⁴⁸

⁴³Spinden, op. cit., p. 55.

⁴⁴Maler, Researches in the Central Portion of the Usumatsintla Valley, op. cit., Vol. II, No. 1, pp. 60, 62.

⁴⁵Maler, Researches in the Central Portion of the Usumatsintla Valley, op. cit., Vol. II, No. 2, pp. 116, 152.

⁴⁶Maler, Researches in the Central Portion of the Usumatsintla Valley, op. cit., Vol. II, No. 1, p. 62.

⁴⁷Teobert Maler, Explorations in the Department of Petén, Guatemala and Adjacent Regions (Memoirs of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Vol. IV, No. 2. Cambridge: Published by the Museum, 1908), p. 86.

⁴⁸Maler, Explorations of the Upper Usumatsintla and Adjacent Regions, op. cit., Vol. IV, No. 1, p. 22.

At Seibal, too, is a so-called Tiger-paw-man, whose hands and feet are covered with tiger (jaguar) paws tied to the wrists and ankles. Inasmuch as several important symbols are found on the sculpture, the full description as given by Maler follows:

The hands and feet of the figure are covered with tiger-paws fastened by bandages to the wrists and ankles. The lower garment, reaching from the hips to the knees, consists of strips and shows a large flap in front, displaying that characteristic mask with goggle-eyes and open mouth (the two-stepped upper teeth distinctly visible) and finishing downward with scrolls, crossed bars, and an inverted tuft of feathers. At the right hip a medallion head in profile is attached to the girdle, which is invisible. The corresponding head on the left hip is doubtless covered by the tiger-paw resting upon it. A breastplate of peculiar form is attached to the collar. A tassel depends from the centre of one visible ear-disc. The nose-peg consists of a head with two feathers. . .

A ketsal i. e. quetzal-bird is attached to the front of the band encircling the head, and at an acute angle with the back of the head-dress rises a small ceremonial bar ending in front in elaborated open jaws holding a grotesque profile. The lower end of the ceremonial bar ends in a bunch of feathers. . .

This remarkable personage holds in his uplifted right hand a fierce mask of the kind probably worn by priests on certain occasions (see Plate XLVII, page 155).⁴⁹

A man with tiger paws is also found at Piedras Negras,⁵⁰ and on Stela A at Quiriguá the principal figure is shown in the same manner.⁵¹

⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 20-21.

⁵⁰Maler, Researches in the Central Portion of the Usumatsintla Valley, op. cit., Vol. II, No. 1, p. 57.

⁵¹Maudslay, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 8.



JAGUAR MAN AT SEIBAL

The jaguar was also used in stairway decoration. The central stairway of the eastern court at Copán is ornamented on each side with heroic-sized figures of rampant jaguars which have been carved out of several blocks of stone.⁵²

That the jaguar was the symbol of an important deity in very early times is evident from its many representations in the Olmec culture, a development of the Formative period of the Mesoamerican civilization. The most characteristic feature of Olmec statuettes is a large despondent mouth having the corners drawn downwards, and a "thick flaring upper lip like a snarling jaguars."⁵³ Many of their sculptures are jaguars, or a jaguar deity (see Plates XLVIII and XLIX, pages 157 and 158).

On Stela A at La Venta a site at which the jaguar was almost the exclusive art motive and dating from the Olmec period, the main figure is surrounded by six flying gnomes having grotesque jaguar faces, and Alter E at the same site is shaped like a jaguar's head.⁵⁴

Also at La Venta are beautiful polished floors of green serpentine slabs with a jaguar mask mosaic, and a great

⁵²Maudslay, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 29.

⁵³Covarrubias, op. cit., p. 78.

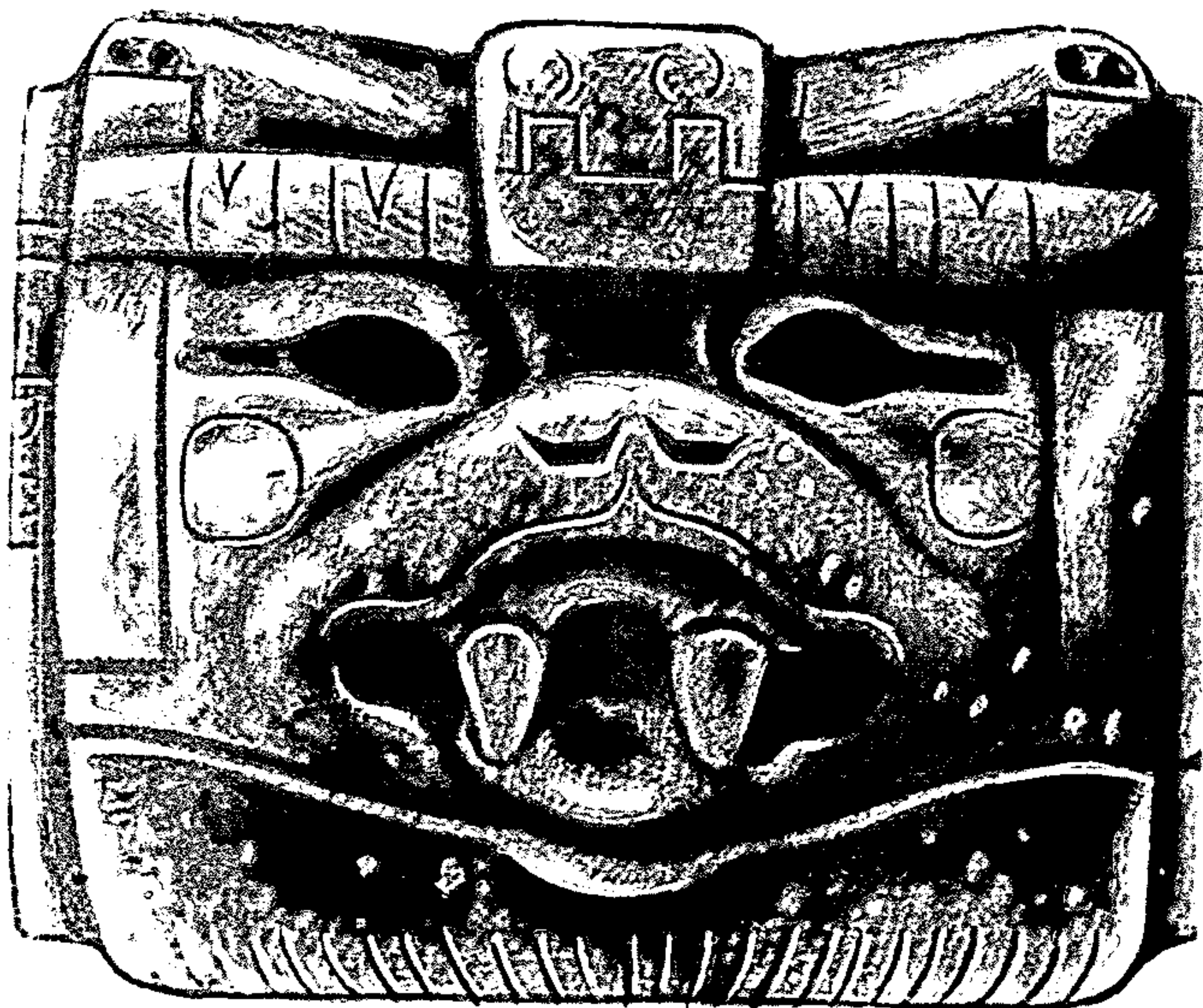
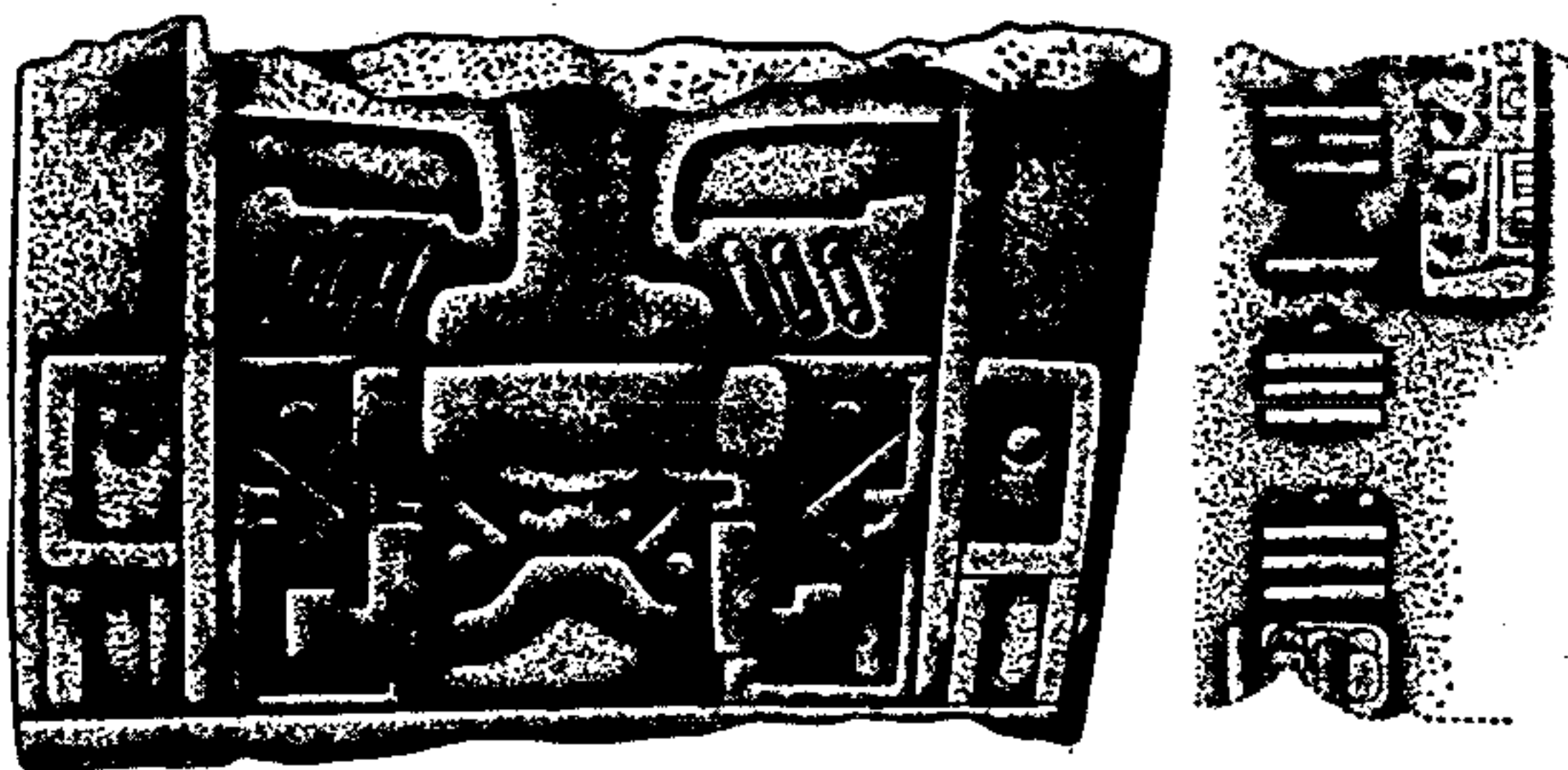
⁵⁴Ibid., p. 90.

PLATE XLVIII



THE JAGUAR DEITY

PLATE XLIX



THE JAGUAR MASK

sarcophagus carved in low relief like a crouching jaguar.⁵⁵ Representations of this jaguar deity are also found at Monte Albán.

Jaguar thrones representing life-sized jaguars with heads turned to the right or left, and with a flat back as a seat, are represented in sculptures at Tikal, Piedras Negras, and Palenque, while striking examples of the actual throne have been found at Uxmal and Chichén Itzá, those in the latter case dating from the Militaristic period.⁵⁶

⁵⁵Covarrubias, op. cit., p. 91.

⁵⁶Morley, op. cit., pp. 372, 373.

CHAPTER VII

THE TWO PERSONAGES

In sculptured works of art from the Maya area and in the Maya and Mexican hieroglyphic manuscripts, representations of the "Tree of Life" are accompanied by two personages, either priests or deities, standing (or in a few instances sitting) on either side of the tree.

The best representations of these figures are found on the two cross-tablets from Palenque. The Table of the Cross shows two personages, one considerably larger than the other, apparently in the act of making an offering to the Serpent Bird (or the deity it represents) perched on the summit of the cruciform tree. The personage to the left (the smaller of the two) wears a brief skirt or girdle, and a long-sleeved upper garment that seems to be pleated across the breast. Around his neck is wrapped a thick cloth which falls as a mantle down his side and hangs as a broad plait down his back. A thick tasseled cord hangs down the front of his garments, and pleated wristlets and anklets adorn his arms and legs. Elaborate ear ornaments and headdress complete his

attire. This personage stands on a shell-like object, and holds in his right hand a staff very similar to the Manikin Scepter. His gaze is directed to the bird on top of the tree.

The larger figure is more simply attired. He is girded with a partly fringed cloth which hangs in folds in front. A long string of large round beads is around his neck. He wears pleated wristlets and anklets, ear ornaments, and a tall headdress terminating in a sort of flower. Under his feet is a band of astronomical signs. In his hands he holds a reclining figure like a Manikin Scepter without the appendage. This figure is apparently being presented or offered to the Serpent Bird or deity.

The two personages on the Tablet of the Foliated Cross are dressed similarly to those just described. The smaller stands upon a large snail shell foliated with maize leaves. Upon this shell and just under the individual's feet is the head of a personage, perhaps a deity. The larger of the two priests or deities is girded with artistically worked chains from which hang, in front and back, two elaborate Manikin Scepter-like objects with grotesque faces. A similar grotesque face appears on his breastplate. This personage stands upon the head of a grotesque monster having the cauac sign (signifying rain, thunderstorm, or lightning) on its forehead. In his hands he holds a small erect figure like that of the

Manikin Scepter, but again without the appendage, which he is offering to the Serpent Bird.

The only representation of the "Tree of Life" in the Maya manuscripts showing two figures on either side is that known as the "Tableau of the Bacabs" in Codex Tro-Cortesianus. Seler believes they are a divine couple, the old god and the old goddess. Before them is the sign ik meaning "wind" or "breath,"¹ the symbol of life.² In the Maya area this couple may have been Hunab Ku and his wife, Ix Azal Uoh.

The personages shown with the "Tree of Life" in the Mexican manuscripts are attired in a manner similar to those in the Maya sculptures, although they are not so laden with symbolic elements. Those on either side of the Tree of the Center in Codex Borgia are girded with fringed loin cloths or skirts, and they apparently wear decorated breastplates. Bands encircle the ankles and knees. Large ear ornaments and fancy headdresses complete their dress. These two personages have been identified with Quetzaleóatl, God of Wind, and Macuiloxechitl, God of Feasting and Pleasure.³

The eight personages shown with the four cruciform trees in Codex Fejérváry-Mayer are also attired in fringed

¹Codex Tro-Cortesianus, ed. cit., pp. 75, 76.

²Seler, Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, op. cit., p. 30.

³Seler, Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, op. cit., p. 14.

skirts or breech clouts, and some have capes or other adornment around the shoulders. In most instances they wear bands around the knees, ankles, and wrists. The heads are adorned with large ear ornaments and decorative headdresses of various types. Several of these individuals appear to wear masks.

These figures have been identified as important Mexican deities. With the Tree of the East are Tenatiuh, the Sun God, and Iztli, "Stone Knife," a surrogate for Tezcatlipoca. Tlalec, the Rain God, and Tepeyollotl, "Heart of the Mountains" or the Jaguar God, stand on either side of the Tree of the North. Tlazeltteotl, the Earth Goddess, and Chalchihuitlicue, a very important Water Goddess, are with the Tree of the West. The two deities of the Tree of the South are Centiotl, the Maize God, and Mictlantecuhtli, God of Death.⁴

In the Mexican manuscripts are also shown a number of "divine pairs" and in several instances they are placed on either side of a tree.

⁴Seler, Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, op. cit., pp. 21-24.

CHAPTER VIII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The problem of the present study, as stated previously, is the religious significance in ancient Mesoamerica of the widely distributed cross-shaped tree symbol designated by archaeologists as the "Tree of Life."

The "Tree of Life" a Symbol of Life

Evidence will now be presented, by way of a summary of the preceding chapters of this study, to show that the several constituent elements of the "Tree of Life" symbol were all associated with the concept of life, and that the cross-shaped tree was actually, therefore, a Tree of Life!¹

The Tree

1. When the earth was created following the flood, four "trees of abundance," that is, trees of life sustenance, were placed at the cardinal points and a Green Tree of Abundance was placed at the center.
2. The stone column which was worshipped at Peten Itza represented the first tree in the world which was said to have sustained the life of the first man.

¹For the documentation of the following associations of these elements with the idea or objects signifying life, see the preceding chapters.

3. The cruciform trees on the Palenque tablets are conventionalized maize plants, the staple food plant of ancient Mesoamerica, and, therefore, the "staff" or "bread" of life.
4. The branches of the trees depicted in the manuscripts terminate in symbolic fruit.
5. The roots of the cruciform tree are often immersed in water, a symbol of life.
6. The cross in the Mexican tongue was called Tonacaquahuitl or Quiahuiteotl-chuahualizteotl, meaning 'God of the Rains or of Health' or 'Tree of Sustenance or of Life.' In Mexico this cross, that is, cross-shaped tree, was first set up and worshipped by Quetzalcoatl (apparently the Quetzalcoatl of the tenth century, representative of the Priest God).

The Bird

1. The bird is believed by the present Lacandon Maya to be the spirit, that is, the life of the tree.
2. The bird is seen in the manuscripts over kan or maize signs, that is, signs of the life-sustaining food-plant of ancient America.
3. In its occurrences as headdresses in the Maya manuscripts it has symbolic meaning in connection with birth, the beginning of life.
4. The bird was associated with the life-giving rains, as it is seen in symbolic rain scenes on several occasions in the manuscripts.

The Serpent

1. The serpent is associated with the life symbol, water, in innumerable instances in the ancient manuscripts, in rain scenes or immersed in water. It is also to be seen with the Water Goddess. Its body cut in two symbolized the ceasing of the rains.
2. It is shown with the kan or maize sign on its head.
3. It was said to be the god of fruitfulness, that is, of life.

4. In the Mexican manuscripts it is seen with the God of Life, Tonacatecuhtli, and the first human pair.
5. Like the bird, the serpent was symbolically important in birth events, that is, with the beginning of life.
6. It is associated with constellation signs, most prominent of which is the kin or ~~seen~~ sign, representative of the Sun God from whom comes the light of life.

The Monster

1. From the body of the Cipactli (a crocodile-like earth monster) the earth, from which springs life, was said to have been created by the Gods. This monster was represented by the ancient Mesoamericans as a crocodile, serpent, or Two-headed Dragon. In this connection it is interesting to note Antonio Chi's statement concerning the Maya:

They also had knowledge of the fall of Lucifer, and of the Flood, and that the world would be consumed by fire, and in signification of this they held a ceremony, and painted a lizard which signified the Flood and the earth. . . .²

2. Life-giving water is further to be seen closely associated with the earth dragon, since the monster carried water markings such as the Cauac symbol, as well as the fish or water-lily motif on its body. In the Maya manuscripts a torrent of water, that is, a life-giving element, pours from its mouth.
3. Like the serpent, it was associated with the first man and woman created in this life.
4. On its head was the kin or sun sign, emblematic of the Sun God, the giver of Life and Light.
5. Sometimes the jaguar is represented in the "Tree of Life" symbolism, signifying the Rain God and also the earth, both of which enter into the origin of life.

²Antonio Chi, ed. cit., p. 102.

The Personages

1. The two personages are closely associated with maize. The smaller individual on the Tablet of the Foliated Cross stands on a shell foliated with maize leaves, and the deity whose head is seen beneath his feet is believed to be the maize god.
2. The larger individual stands on a monster head bearing the cauac sign, which signifies life-giving rain.
3. It is believed that the two figures in the Tableau of the Bacbs are the old god and the old goddess. Before them is the sign ik which means "wind" or "breath," the symbol of life.
4. The personages on either side of the Mexican trees are all very closely associated with basic symbols of life since they have been identified as the Rain God, the Sun God, the Water Goddess, the Earth Goddess, the Jaguar (or Rain) God.

Conclusion

In view of the fact that every one of the main elements of the "Tree of Life" symbol, as shown in the above recapitulation--sacred tree, bird, serpent, monster, and associated personages--is associated with objects or ideas signifying life, it may now be definitely concluded that the primary meaning of this symbol is that of life.

Secondary Meanings of the Symbol

1. The Tree of Life was a symbol of good as opposed to evil, since it is said by Landa to have been a tree "created with great virtue against the evil spirit."
2. It was also a tree of knowledge. The Prophet Balam states that the sign of Hunab Ku, that is, the First or Green Tree of the World, or Tree of Life, should be displayed to the world that the world might be enlightened.

The Tree of Life an Emblem Especially
of the God Itzamna or Quetzalcoatl

The component elements of the Tree of Life symbol were closely associated with certain deities. A study of these deities reveals that they were, for the most part, one and the same god.

The Tree

1. The Prophet Balam states that the raised wooden standard, that is, the First or Green Tree of the World or Tree of Life, was the sign of Hunab Ku and his son Itzamna Kauil.
2. In sixteenth-century writings and symbolic representations, Itzamna is always revealed as a beneficent deity, that is, a God of Life, and therefore obviously a god associated with the Tree of Life, as opposed to the God of Evil or of Death.
3. Ixtlilxochitl states that Quetzalcoatl, that is, the tenth-century priest of this name, was the first to set up the cross or the "Tree of Sustenance or of Life" as the symbol of the God of the Rains and of Health, that is, the ancient Priest-God Quetzalcoatl whom he represented (here as elsewhere identified with Tlaloc the Rain God), the Mexican equivalent of the Maya Itzamna (or Chac).

The Bird

1. Birds were often supplied with ear plugs, nose-plugs, and teeth, the last being like those in the jaw of the serpent and of God B, the Long-nosed God (that is, Chac, the Rain God, probably one of the aspects of Itzamna); God D, the Roman-nosed God (probably the principal representative of Itzamna); and God K, the Wind God (probably still another aspect of Itzamna).³

³For these identifications see the description of Itzamna and his various aspects, above, Chapter I, pages 19-20

2. The head of the Roman-nosed God D, or Itzamna, sometimes replaces the head of the quetzal bird in sculptures.
3. Birds were offered to the Tree of Life in the manuscripts by Gods B, D, K, and A.
4. The one bird above all others that was invested with sacred attributes was the quetzal, also known as the "Precious Bird," which was symbolic of the god Quetzalcoatl (that is, Itzamna in the Maya area), whom Ixtlixlochitl associates with the Tree of Life symbol.

The Serpent

1. The serpent is intimately associated with God B in the Maya manuscripts, that is, probably the Rain God manifestation of Itzamna, and also with the same God in the Maya sculptures.
2. The serpent is also shown in the Maya manuscripts with God D, probably the principal aspect of Itzamna, and God H, the unidentified "Young God" both of whom are in the act of making an offering.
3. In the Mexican manuscripts it is most frequently seen with Quetzalcoatl the Priest God, with Tlaloc the God of Rain, and with Tonacatecuhtli, the Creator God, the first two of which are the Mexican counterparts of the Maya Itzamna and Chac.⁵

The Monster

1. The head of the Sun God, Kinich Ahau Itzamna, God of Light was usually placed in the open mouth of the monster. However, the head of Tlaloc, the Rain God of the Mexican sources, or of God B, the Rain-god manifestation of Itzamna in the Maya area, sometimes replaces the head of the Sun God.

⁴The serpent is also shown with God A, the Death God (probably signifying the force of evil against good), God M, the God of Traveling Merchants and of War, and God L, the God of Light, as well as with the Water Goddess.

⁵The serpent is also shown in the Mexican manuscripts with Tlacoteotl the Earth Goddess, as well as, on a few occasions, with certain other deities.

2. The head of God D, probably the principal aspect of Itzamna, appears in the Maya manuscripts in the mouth of the monster.
3. The Water Goddess is also seen with the monster, in the Maya manuscripts.
4. The monster is shown below Tlaloc, the Mexican Rain God, counterpart of God B or Chac in the Maya area (and, therefore, of Itzamna in his Rain God manifestation).⁶

The Two Personages

1. The two personages by the Tree of Life in the Maya sculptures and manuscripts hold objects or are ornamented with emblems symbolizing Itzamna-Chac, the Rain or Life God. (Seler identifies them as Itzamna and his consort.
2. In the Mexican manuscripts they are identified by their emblems as important deities, that is, Tlaloc the Rain God, Tonatiuh the Sun God, Tepeyollotl the Jaguar God, Tlazolteotl the Earth Goddess, Chalchihuitlicue the Water Goddess, and Centeotli the Maize God, that is, the beneficent life gods.⁷

Conclusions

The above recapitulation of the deities associated with the Tree of Life in ancient Mesoamerica brings forth the fact that this symbol was especially the emblem of Itzamna (or Chac or Kinich Ahau) in the Maya area, and in the Mexican area, of Quetzalcoatl (or Tlaloc). It was also the emblem

⁶ The monster is also frequently seen in the Mexican sources with Tonacatecuhtli the Creator God, as well as with Tepeyollotli the Jaguar, Mountain, or Earth God.

⁷ Tezcatlipoca and Mictlanecuhtli, God of Death, seem also to be represented occasionally, perhaps as representing the forces opposite to the life gods.

of the Creator God, Hunab Ku, father of Itzamna. However, it is to be noted that it was also at times associated with other deities of Mesoamerica.

The Tree of Life and the Cross Symbol

It is evident that the cross which so astonished the Europeans upon their arrival in the New World, was actually a highly conventionalized representation of the Tree of Life, the emblem (as shown in the preceding) of Itzamna-Quetzalcoatl the beneficent Priest- and Life-God, and that it originated in that symbol. The following statements from the sources establish this fact:

1. Ixtlilxochitl states that in the Mexican language the cross was named Tonacaquahuitl or Quiahuiteotlch-uahualizteotl, that is to say 'God of the Rains and of Health, and Tree of Sustenance or of Life.' This cross was first set up by Quetzalcoatl, the famous tenth-century priest-representative of the ancient god Quetzalcoatl.
2. Antonio Chi states that the Prophet Balam prophesied of the coming of a white and bearded race who would bring with them a raised sign of the cross that the people would worship. He said that was the Green Tree of the World, in other words, the Tree of Life.
3. At Copan is a maize plant in the form of a Maltese Cross. This plant is the one usually represented by the conventionalized cross-shaped tree element of the Tree of Life symbol.

Origin of the Symbol

We have shown above that the Tree of Life of ancient Mesoamerica was primarily a symbol of life, and secondarily

a symbol of good in opposition to evil, and a tree of knowledge. It was especially emblematic of Itzamna or Quetzacoatl, beneficent priest, God of Life and Light.

There still remains the important problem of the origin of this remarkable symbolism in ancient America. Suggestive evidence bearing on its ultimate origin will be presented in an appendix to this study. We should note here, however, in respect to the question of the period of its origin in ancient Mesoamerica, that the symbol was already well established in this area by 692 A.D. (the date of the Palenque tablets), that is, by the middle of the Florescent Ceremonial Period, as shown by its conventionalized form and wide distribution by this date. It is evident, therefore, that it must have first appeared in Mesoamerica at a much earlier date, certainly at least as early as the preceding Formative Period of the Advanced Cultist civilization, which dates back to the first centuries immediately preceding and following the beginning of the Christian Era.⁸

⁸This in turn, it should be noted, establishes a similar early date for the origin of the worship of the particular deity especially emblemized by this symbol, that is, Itzamna-Quetzalcoatl, as well as of the fundamental basic religious beliefs of ancient Mesoamerica associated with this deity and his Tree of Life symbol.

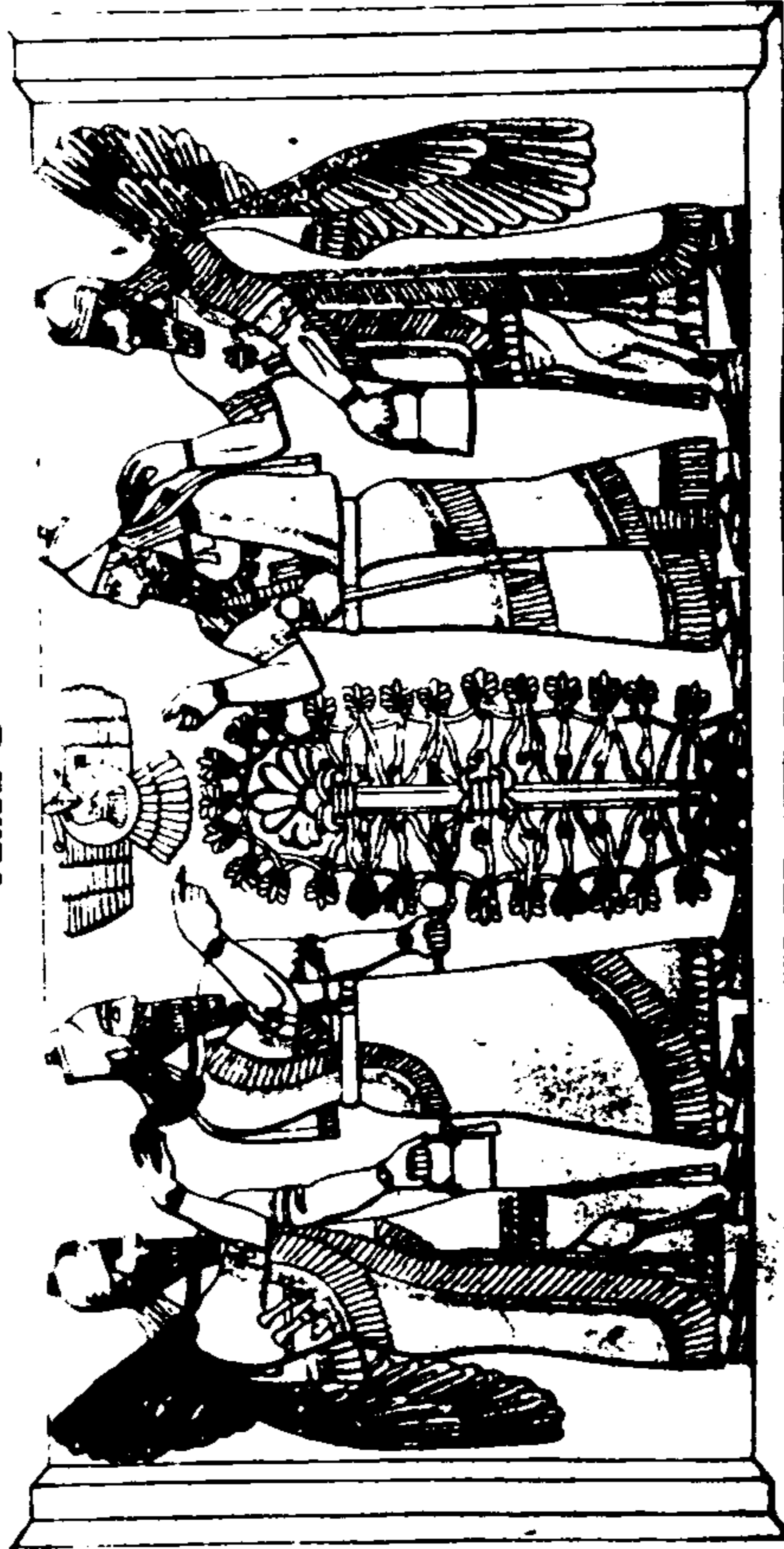
APPENDIX

As previously stated in this study, there are two general theories advanced today to explain the origin of the high civilizations of the New World; one, that they developed indigenously in the New World out of the early hunting cultures, and the other, that they were the result of diffusion of advanced elements or of direct colonization by a civilized people from the Old World.

For the latter theory to prove correct there should be found in the New World certain distinctive traits which reveal this former Old World connection. It is therefore of interest to note that the Tree of Life symbol which we have seen to be a prominent religious symbol in ancient America, was also a widespread religious symbol in the Old World. In fact, a comparison of the characteristics of this symbol in both world areas reveals startling similarities (for example, see Plate I, page 39 and Plate L, page 174). This similarity is further brought out in the writings of August Wunsche and of Graaf Goblet D'Aviella.

The following excerpts are taken from Wunsche's "Die Sagen vom Lebensbaum und Lebenswasser":

PLATE L



THE TREE OF LIFE IN ASSYRIA

Through all culture religions goes the legend of a tree of life which has concealed in it the powers of renewing life and youth. Depending on the time and place this legend appears in the most varied modifications--one time adorned in a wonderfully fantastic way, another in simple garb; however, the basic thought is always clearly evident: Whoever comes into possession of the fruit or juice of the tree of life has the power to renew the declining life or to call back the life that has just expired. The tree of life has its residence partly in this earth in a glorious garden, and partly on the other side where it serves to maintain the lives of the saved. In many religions it is a legendary tree of gigantic size and expanse which has no equal on earth. Its branches and twigs extend to gigantic distances and under its foliage the saved ones wander and rest. In many religions its fruit is much more portrayed than the tree itself (see page 1). . . .

It played a large part in the religious concepts of the Babylonians and Assyrians. The cuneiform texts represent it as a plant at one time like the palm, at another similar to the cedar. It stands in Eridu at the place of creation in a paradisiacal holy place through which two rivers flow. . . .

The tree of life is frequently represented in Babylonian cylinder seals and Assyrian palace reliefs in the form of a mixed-up firlike palm with banana-like fruit. Usually it stands between two winged geni, with faces of eagles, who hold the fruit in the raised right hand and a basketlike juice container in the lowered left hand.

The slender trunk, interrupted by knots goes out to a crown consisting of a sevenfold palm leaf. On the Assyrian cylinder seal in the British Museum the two geni are pressed back by two human figures. In a kindred connection with this Assyrian cylinder seal stands the Babylonian--the so-called fall-of-man-cylinder in the British Museum. The two figures in front of the tree, regarded by many to be Adam and Even, appear to represent heavenly beings, at least the horned head coverings of the figure sitting at the right, is indicative of that fact. Behind the figure sitting at the left a snake is clearly seen to rear itself up. . . .

We meet the tree of life as a cedar in the Tale of Gilgamesh. It grows in the Cedar Mountains in the holy places of Irvina, and is guarded by the Elamite Humbaba. . . .(see page 2).

The people of India venerate the tree of life in the Kalpavriksha. Its fruits impart immortality to those who eat it. The gods nourish themselves with it and keep themselves thus in eternal youth; they remain fresh and healthy and death has no power over them (see page 3). . . .

The Mohammedans call the tree of life Sidra or Tuba, and it stands in the seventh heaven in the middle of Paradise at the right side of God's throne. With its branches and twigs, which are covered with the precious Ambrosia fruit, and upon which angels and birds rest, it overshadows all palaces and canopes of the saved ones. . . .(see page 8).

According to the mythological conceptions of the Greeks, the apple tree is to be regarded as the tree of life, which grew in the farthest west part of the Garden of Hesperides. At the marriage of Zeus with Hera all the Gods brought the bridal couple their gifts. Gaa, the earth, let a tree with golden apples sprout from her bosom, and assigned the guarding of it to the Hesperides, the daughters of Hesperis, wife of Atlas. Because their protection proved to be inadequate in that they even partook of the fruit of the tree freely themselves, Gaa set the hundred headed, never sleeping dragon Ladon, the son of Syphon and of Echedna, up as watchman. Because of its horror inspiring form, as well as its terrible roar, it frightened away all those who wished to approach the tree. . . .(see page 9).

The Dutch author D'Alviella also makes some interesting statements in his book De Wereldreis der Symbolen, pages 115-117:

The tree is one of the oldest and appearing subjects in the Semitic images, especially in Mesopotamia.

Whatever the value of this symbol as decoration might be, it is sure, that it has especially a religious

meaning. On the carved work of the round pillars, the sculpture of the bas-relief, and the decoration of the dress of kings and priests, the tree is inseparably invested with religious subjects. Repeatedly the winged disc which represents the highest godhead. . .floats above the top. . . .It rises almost always between two personages with the faces turned to each other, sometimes priests or kings, in an attitude of worshipping, sometimes monsters as one can find often in the Assyrian-Chaldean symbols. . . .

The symbol of the tree between two human figures always turned with the faces to each other has travelled all around the world. . . .

Another characteristic peculiarity of the holy tree in different countries are the snakes, which twist themselves around the trunk. . . .

It is evident from the above that there is a remarkable similarity between the "Tree of Life" symbol of the New World and that of the Old World. This raises an important problem of correspondence in an arbitrary trait which must be explained by those who favor a completely independent origin of the ancient American civilizations.



Fig. 2 Assyria

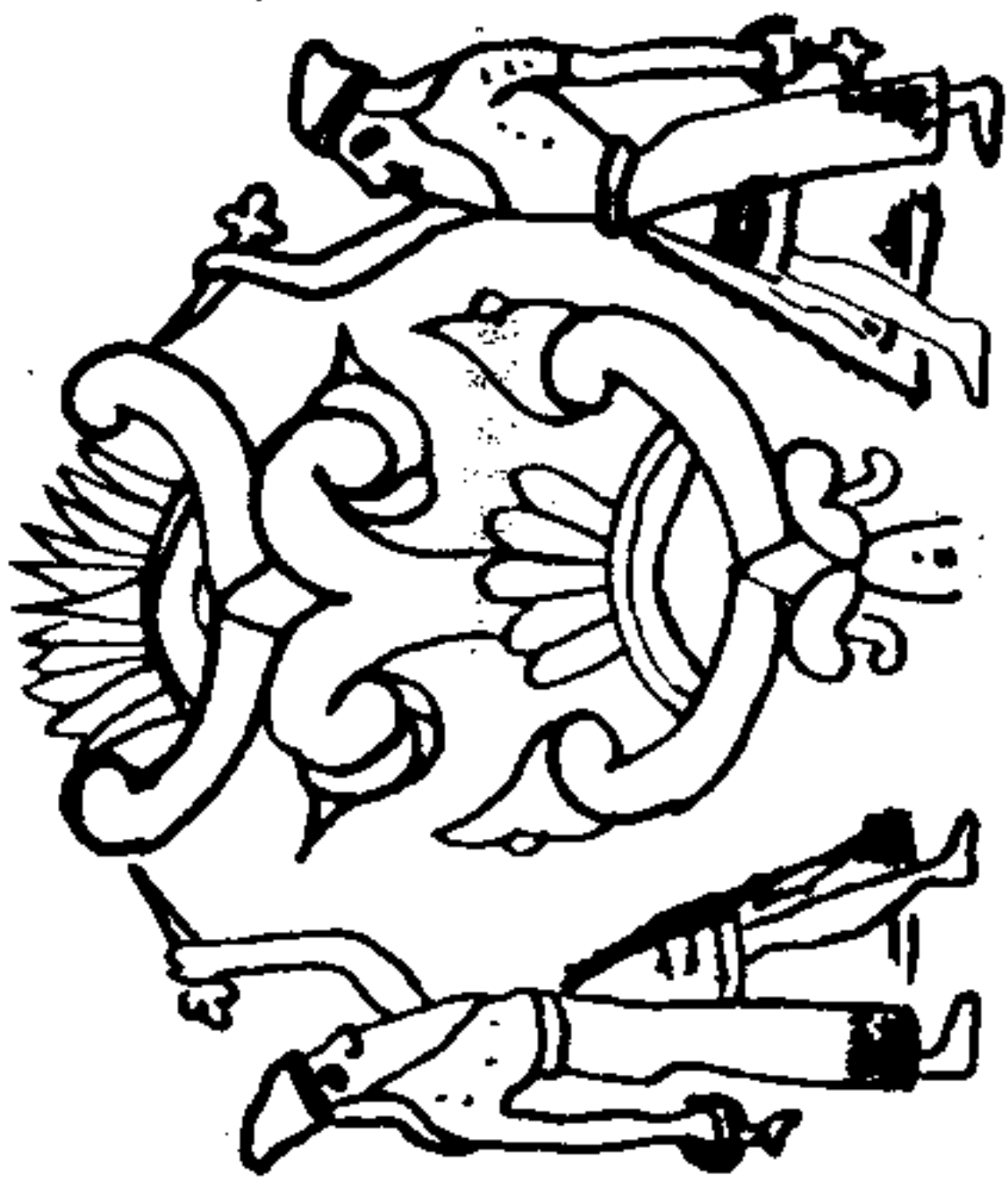


Fig. 3 Phoenicia



Fig. 4 Assyria



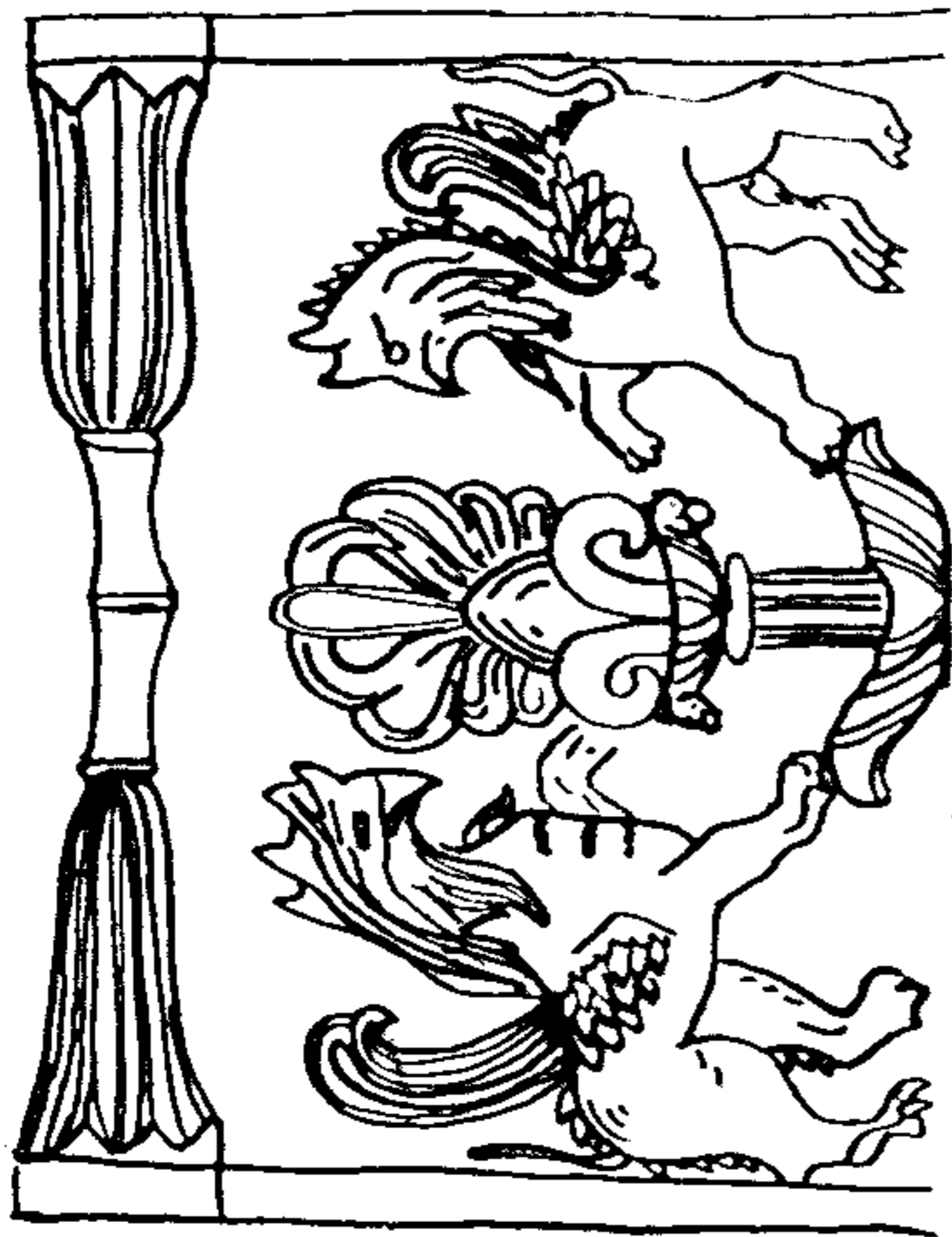


Fig. 1 Greece

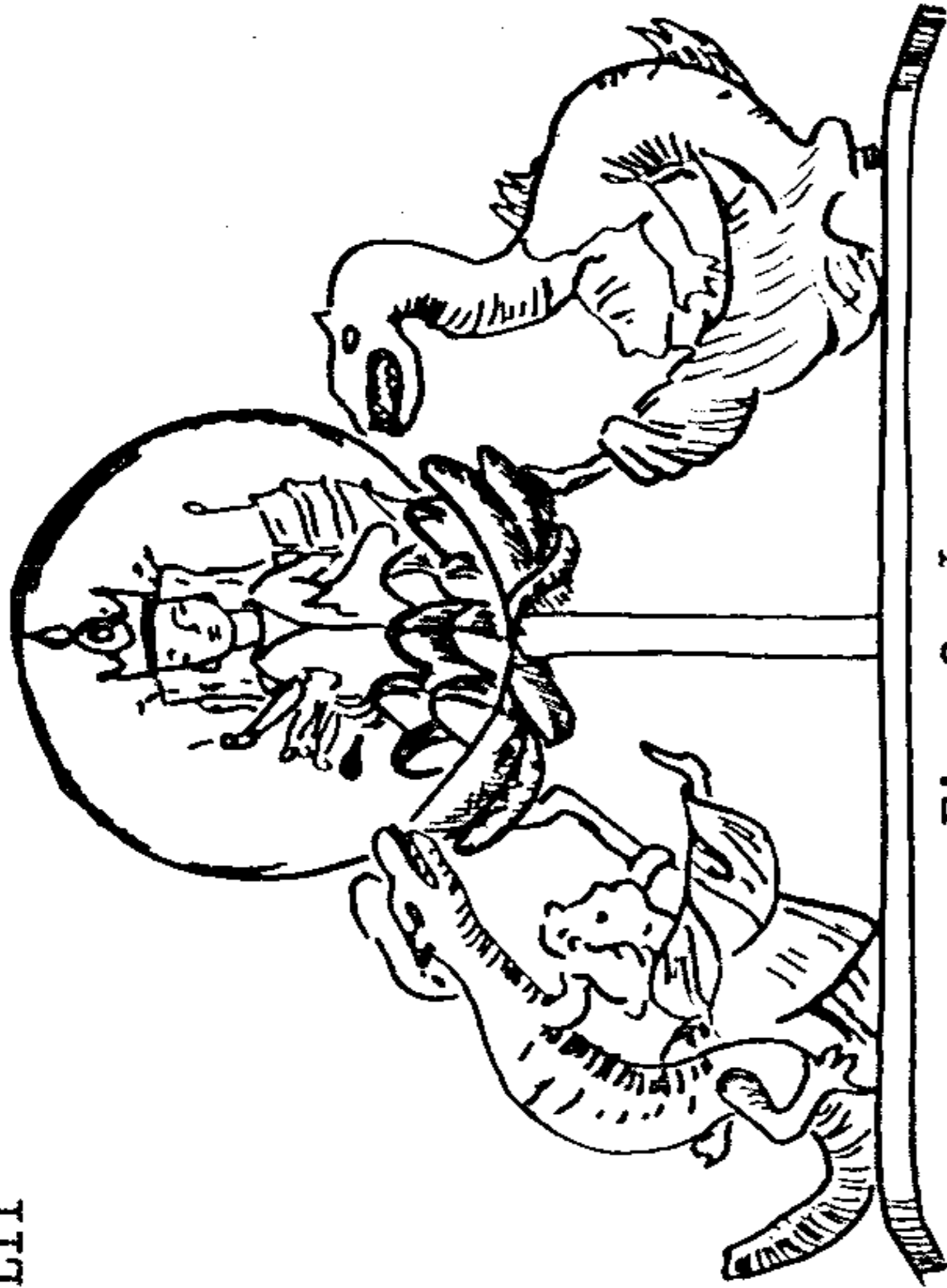


Fig. 2 Japan

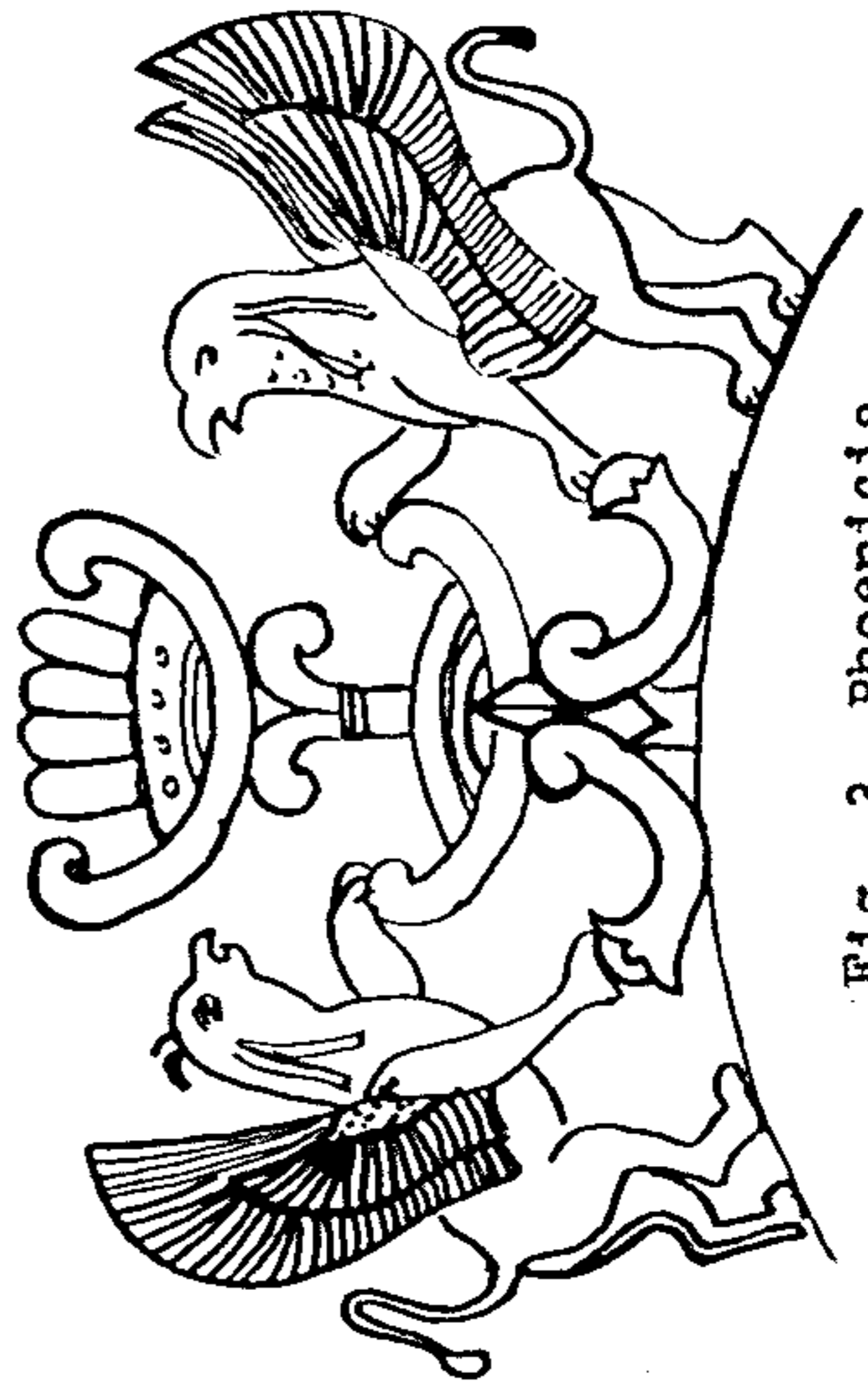


Fig. 3 Phoenicia

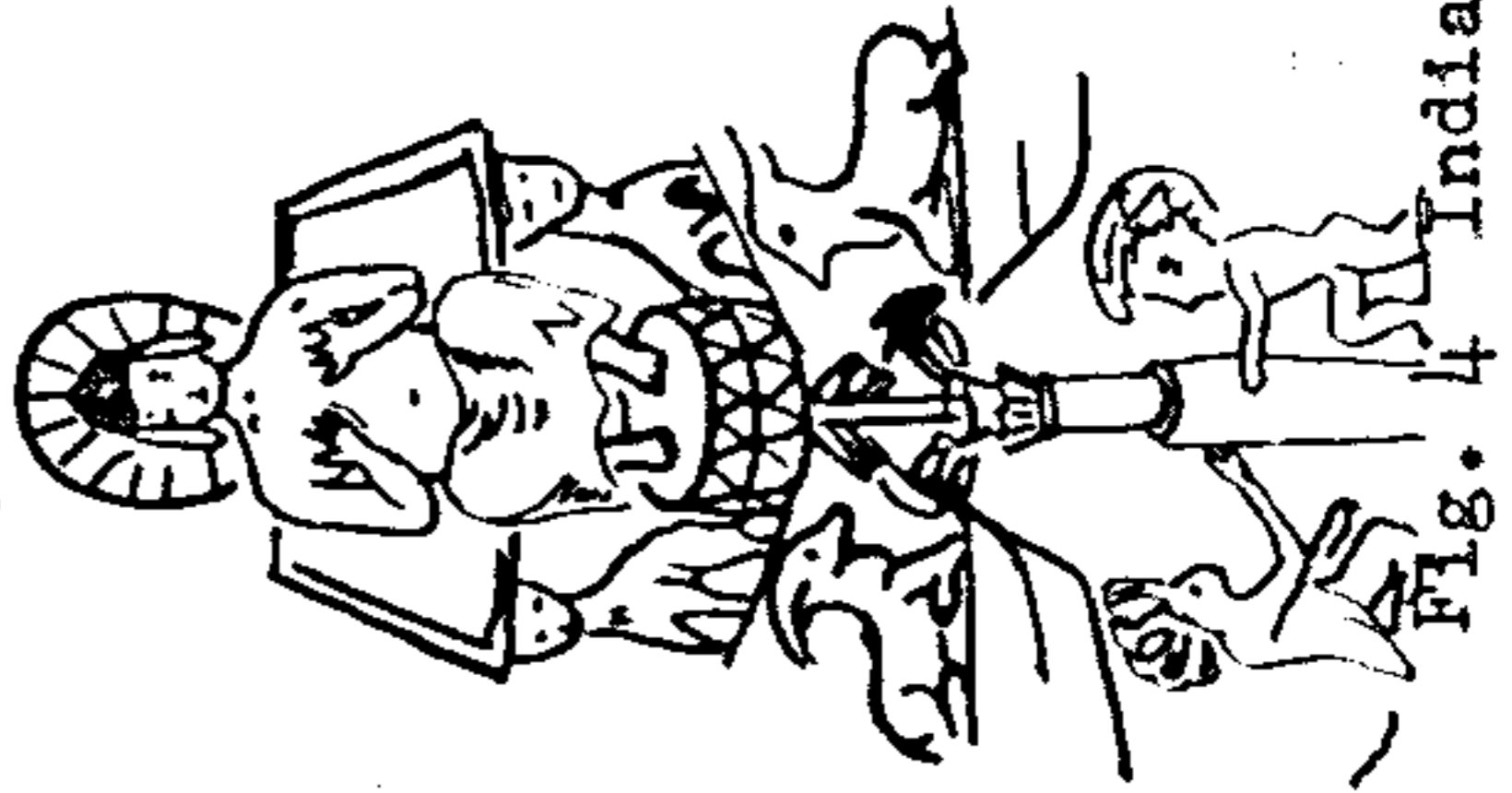


Fig. 4 India

PLATE LIII

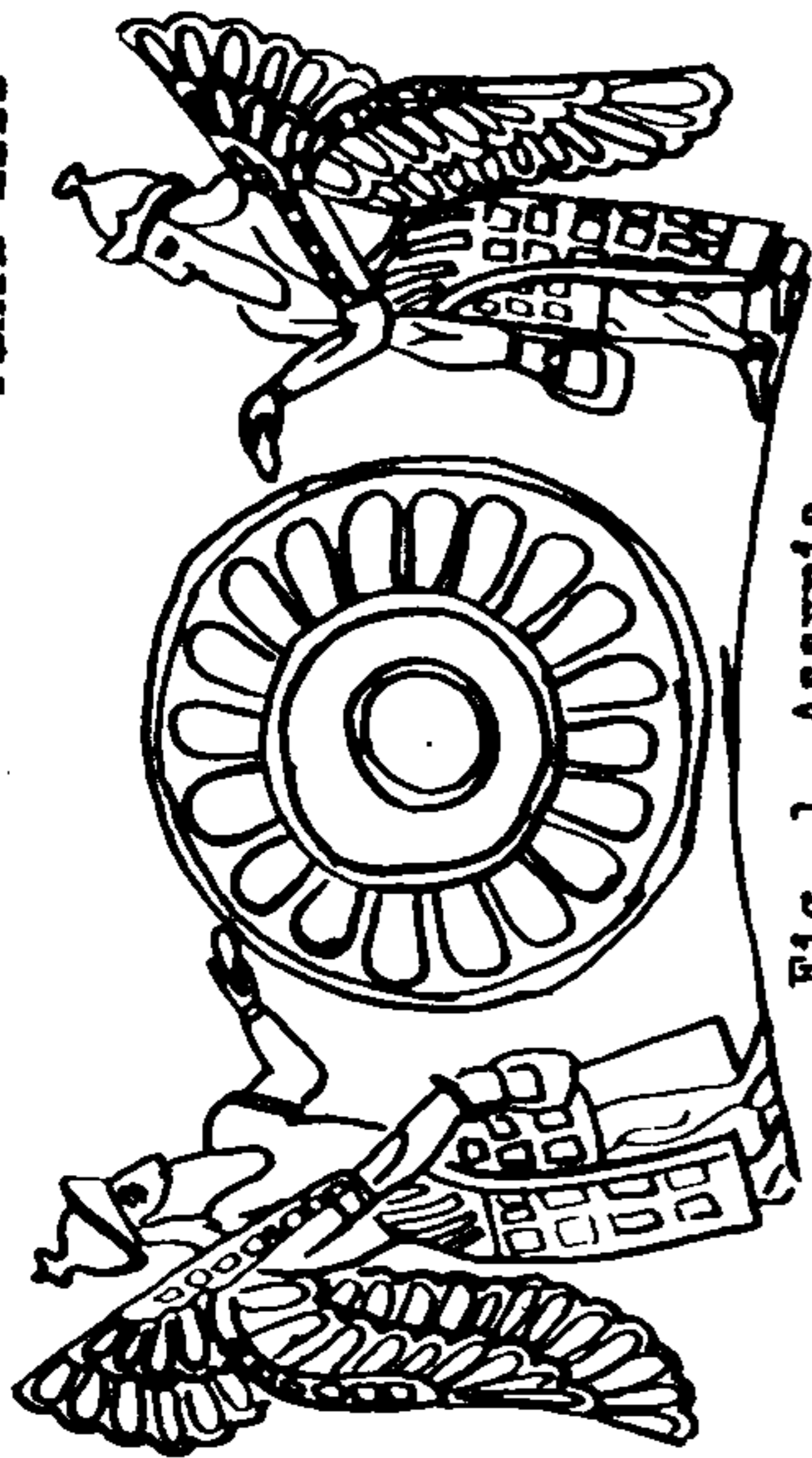


FIG. 1 Assyria

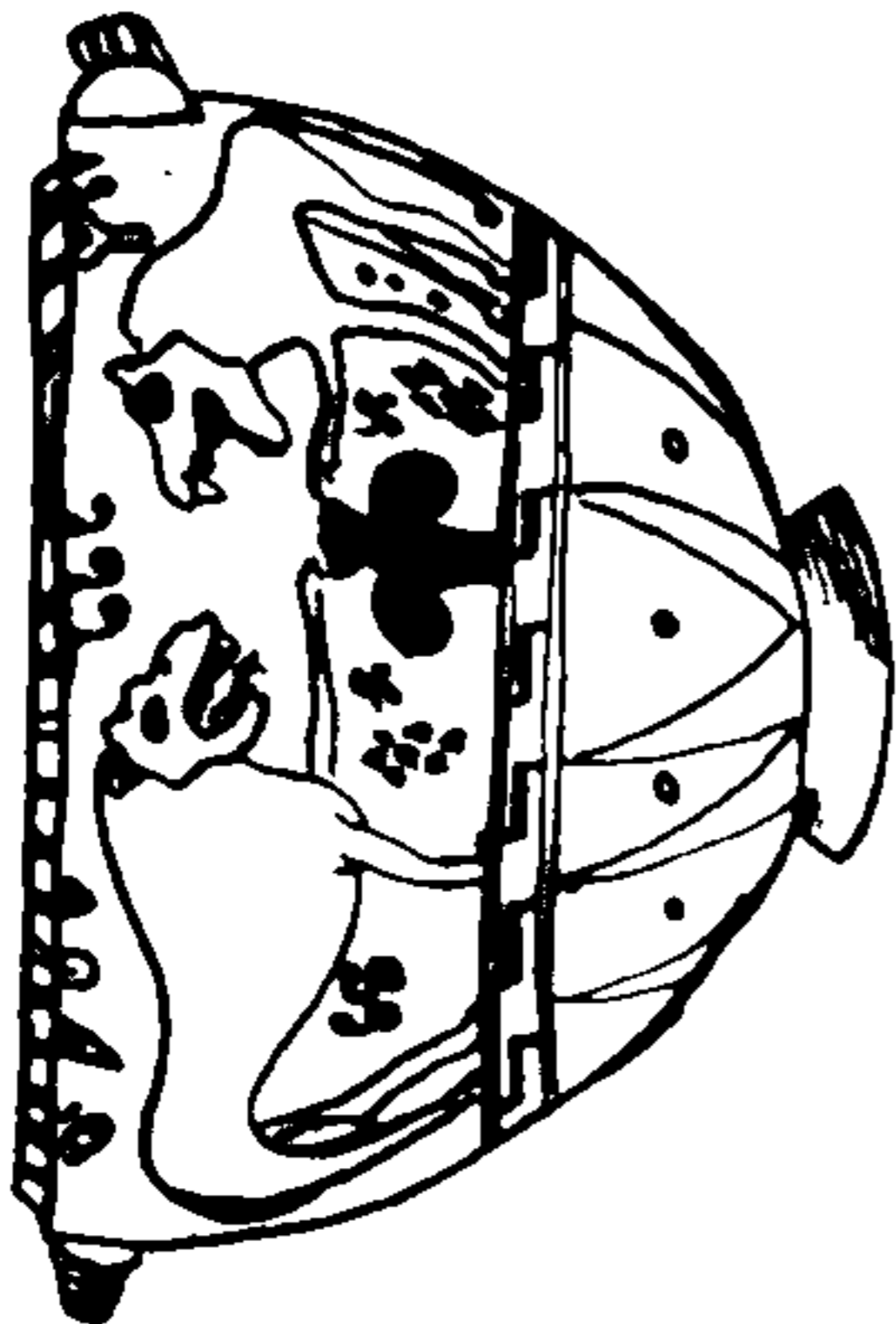


FIG. 2 Greece



FIG. 3 Persia

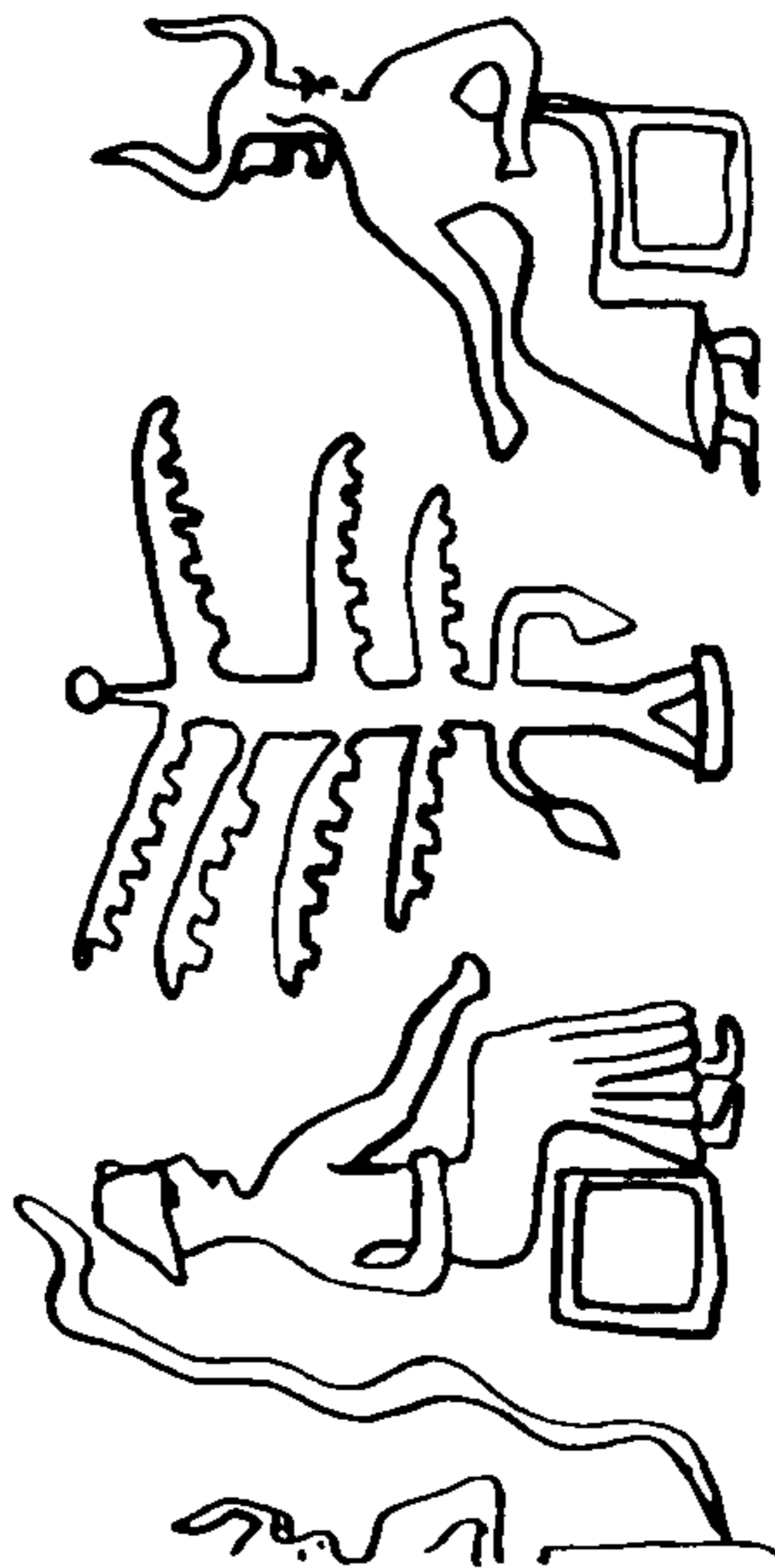


FIG. 4 Chaldaea

THE TREE OF LIFE IN THE OLD WORLD

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