
3 *MAYA "TRAVELERS": ICONOGRAPHY, LIMINALITY, AND ANCIENT WORLDVIEW*

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One example of an iconographic theme that is incorporated into the surviving media of the ancient Maya, but that is neither mentioned in ethnographically-recorded myths nor represented in the iconography from most non-contextual objects, is denoted here by the term "travelers." "Travelers" are so named because they comprise an iconographic group of images that are gods, humans, and animals depicted journeying from one level or realm of the Maya universe to another. To accomplish this, they use objects that are capable of bridging more than one plane of existence at a time. Their iconographic journey is portrayed through their holding onto or riding objects that held other-world or afterlife symbolic significance for the ancient Maya; their portrayal is further associated with transitional events related to birth, death, and leadership. The iconographic recognition of these "travelers" provides insight and broadens what is currently understood about the ancient Maya view of life and death by providing iconographic representations of the permeable boundaries between worlds.

Introduction

Faced with two thousand years of change, much of it forced and revolutionary, ancient Maya worldview is a difficult topic to approach. Recently, however, there has been a concerted effort at gaining some insight into that ancient worldview (Cecil and Pugh 2009). While it is difficult to gain access to a vanished and eradicated cosmology through using archaeological, ethnographic, and ethnohistoric data, it can be accomplished, particularly through the careful use of iconography.

This study examines the ancient Maya iconographic use of subsidiary figures that are referred to here as "travelers." Travelers constitute an iconographic theme that featured prominently in ancient Maya art. They are a group of figures that are usually depicted in scenes depicting important human or community transitions and that are interpreted as having been capable of traveling through different levels of existence. For the Maya, travelers are widely distributed, both in terms of chronology and areal extent. These images are inextricably tied to our understanding of the ancient Maya worldview. They are liminal figures that were capable of crossing between the different planes of Maya existence. The extant iconography makes it clear that they were also very important in life's transitions. Taken as a whole, travelers broaden our understanding of ancient Maya views of life and death by showing how boundaries were transcended in the world of the living and the world of the supernatural.

Ancient Maya Underworld Symbolism

The ancient Maya believed that there were a minimum of three layers to the universe and that life followed a cyclical pattern of birth, death, and rebirth. The transition from death to rebirth was associated with the underworld (Freidel and Suhler 1999:255). Worldly humans were generally restricted to the surface of the earth during their natural lives. However, supernatural upperworld and underworld creatures could exist in or journey to more than one level. Maya rulers also appeared to have been imbued with the ability to navigate between levels (Clancy 2009). Thus, a central theme in Maya iconography is the use of "portals, thresholds, transitions, and co-essences" to transition between these three realms (D. Chase and A. Chase 2009).

The ancient Maya afterlife was associated with underwater imagery. One of the most prominent water symbols in Maya art is the blossoming lily pad. Water also may be represented in Maya art through water scrolls, shell scrolls, water stacks, and water lines (Schele 1988:301). Crocodiles, fish, snakes or serpents, turtles, sharks, water birds, standing water, oceans, lakes, swamps, and agricultural canals were also used to symbolize water and the underworld (Schele and Miller 1986:46). Additional symbols bridge multiple levels of the universe. The ceiba tree or world tree is representative of the earth's axis and is a portal; the roots, the trunk, and the branches bridge the underworld, the present world, and the upperworld (Freidel et al. 1993:7; Newsome

2001:199); Thompson (1970:195) found that for some Maya, the roots provided a path for ancestors to ascend into the world, and the trunk and branches allowed the dead to “climb to the highest sky.” Other symbols that may have been used to show connections between earthly and otherworldly existence included clouds, smoke, umbilical cords, and twisted ropes (Miller 1982).

A series of personages were more likely to be involved in conveyance or transmission across levels of the universe; these included various deities, the paddler gods, the bacabs, serpents, and the Celestial monster. Underworld and upperworld deities had features distinct from humans, often termed “grotesque” (Baudez 1989:74; Spinden 1970:49); in particular, they often can be identified by stylized or exaggerated skeletal features that display signs of death, such as black spots, closed eyes, or “death eyes” (Coe 1977:16).

“Paddler gods,” frequently shown as old men, are so named because they use paddles to navigate the surface of a transitional zone, transporting the dead to the afterlife. The ancient Maya likely equated death with sinking underwater (Schele and Miller 1986:268). The Paddler gods are also identified as the “Old Jaguar God” and the “Aged Stingray God” (Newsome 2001:28; Schele and Miller 1986:270). Another set of supernatural transitional characters, also often shown as wrinkled old men, are the Bacabs, who are credited with holding up the earth (Baudez 1989:78,266).

Serpents are among the most commonly displayed figures in afterlife activities. They are frequently depicted as being in motion, but are also quite stylized; they may be skeletal or two-headed and, significantly, they transcend all levels of the universe, being located in the sky, in water, on the earth, or even suspended in midair (Spinden 1970:36). When appearing as Serpent Bars, the heads that emerge from their mouths are thought to represent portraits of mythical or historical ancestors of the ruler (Stuart 1988:212) or, alternatively, Paddler gods (Schele and Miller 1986:46).

Finally, the Celestial monster, also called the Bicephalic monster or Cosmic monster, is depicted consistently in relation to images of transitional events such as birth,

accession, death, and rebirth. The body of this personage is often shaped like a crocodile, but with two heads and a single body.

Archaeologically, items connected symbolically to the underworld have been incorporated in caches or burials. Excavated caches at both Caracol and Santa Rita Corozal, Belize, include stingray spines, sharks teeth, coral and sea shells (A. Chase and D. Chase 2005; D. Chase and A. Chase 2005). Some caches also contained modeled ceramic figures of turtles, sharks, crocodiles, and Cauac or Earth monsters (D. Chase and A. Chase 2008) that are not only water or underworld creatures, but are also capable of moving above and below the surface of the water (Baudez 1989:74; D. Chase and A. Chase 2004:6). Arthur Miller (1982:90) argues that Mesoamerican supernatural beings are “transitory ... and on occasion occupy liminal states.” Miller (1982:91) calls the characters “complex, fluid, ever-changing” entities that “take on new identities.” The ancient Maya created a variety of scenes depicting transition or liminality, and we would argue that much of their iconography also dealt with this topic.

Liminality

Arnold van Gennep (1960:vii) theorized that major life crises are dealt with in similar ways in all societies. He calls the major life crises “rites of passage.” The rite of passage concepts expressed by van Gennep are divided into three stages: separation, transition (liminality), and incorporation (van Gennep 1960:vii). The separation phase is the first stage, which is signaled by an individual being removed from the community for any number of reasons, including death. Incorporation is the final stage, when the individual rejoins the group, but with significant changes in his or her appearance, role or status. Liminality is the middle stage in an individual’s rite of passage (van Gennep 1960:vii). People in the middle stage are acquiring the knowledge, overcoming obstacles, or completing tasks necessary to be re-connected with the group, which will result in a new role and status. Victor Turner (2000:494) suggested that the rites of passage were not limited to the individual – communities could also experience a “collective liminality” creating

a unity and sense of belonging between group members. Capturing the moments of transition iconographically seems to have been a topic of great interest to the ancient Maya.

The “Traveler”

The liminal beings depicted on the ancient Maya iconography can be aptly labeled “travelers.” Travelers in Maya iconography are able to move from the underworld to the earthly realm and into the upperworld with ease by embracing objects that can bridge the different levels. Travelers represent more than one type of entity engaged in a single behavior; travelers are diverse and use a variety of techniques to transition from one plane to another. The incorporation of the figures into various media shows their widespread application to narratives.

There were regional variations, as well as changes over time, in the role of the traveler in the Maya afterlife iconography. Some of the travelers appear to be dead humans, while others appear to be living gods or animals. Some are actively engaged in the event highlighted in the iconography, whereas others are seemingly unaware of their surroundings. There are, however, some commonalities, the most significant one being that all travelers are holding onto, riding, or associated with objects that have liminal properties-- smoke scrolls, blood scrolls, clouds, a tree, scepters, ropes, umbilical cords, the moon, canoes, or lily-pad stalks. They are also depicted emerging from the mouth of serpents.

Travelers are nearly always portrayed in motion. They sometimes have death marks or other indications of decomposition. Travelers are usually depicted with little or no torso coverage, although they wear jewelry and headdresses. They can be either the focus of the scene or a character on the periphery. When in the periphery, they are often located in the top part of the register, the area that David Stuart (1988:219) suggested was designated for ancestors; they are alert and appear interested in the ceremonial events being acted out. When on the periphery, travelers may also sit within elaborate headdresses of formally dressed rulers who stand on platforms or structures with elaborately dressed attendants and bound captives. Travelers can be located in the air

above the scene, floating on water, or placed underwater.

The traveler images come from a variety of media: codices, murals, a gold plate, ceramic and wooden vessels, stelae, decorated stucco, architectural elements, doorway lintels, façades of buildings, benches, and altars. There is no way to know the full variety of perishable media onto which the travelers were originally carved, inscribed, painted, woven, or molded.

They are found in all parts of the Maya region and represent large and small cultural centers. They are also found in all time periods, although the majority of the materials date to the Classic and Postclassic Periods. Travelers have been identified at a wide range of sites (A. Chase 1985; Freidel and Schele 1988; Kowalski 1999; Miller 1982; Thompson 1963) and have been given a variety of names: “ancestors” (Newsome 2001; Stuart 1988), “sky figures” (A. Chase 1985), “liminal lords, monstrous creatures” (Miller 1982), “floaters-in-blood” (Stuart 1988), and “revival or old sky gods” (A. Chase 1985). The variety of places, time depth, and media styles in which the traveler image is inscribed or painted supports the argument that the images represent a broad-based belief in ancestors and gods journeying from one dimension to another by using objects connected to liminal aspects of life and death. The event that the ancestor or deity is bearing witness to is often related to transitions associated with a liminal period in the individual’s life (death, accession) or commemorated by the community (cosmology or agriculture). The messages artistically represented in the iconography broaden the current view of the ancient Maya by recognizing that their afterlife did not include being permanently bound to the underworld; they were able to bridge time and space. Traveler iconography can be grouped into three “themes”: birth or cosmic events, dead or dying humans, and figures that are observing or participating in events.

Cosmic or Birth Event Travelers

The cosmic or birth event travelers have a distinctive appearance and behavior that set them apart from other travelers. Their imagery portrays figures with ambiguous transitional characteristics that are suspended in air or water



Figure 1. Iconographically decorated doorway from Copan Structure 10L-22 that contains numerous representations of travelers in the upper part of the assemblage (after Grube 2000:290).

or that hold onto twisted cords, possibly representing the cosmic umbilical cord. Cosmic or birth events are often framed in twisted cords or umbilical cords and can be found in codices, on architectural facades, on freestanding monuments, and on ceramic vessels. The beings may be associated with creation mythology, literal birth, or the underworld. The cords are usually attached to the traveler either on the stomach or on the head. Figures have a mixture of god and human features. They are often nude, but wear jewelry, headdresses, and other adornments. Cosmic or birth event travelers often form part of the main scene. They may also show signs of mortality and decay. The figures are associated with the afterlife or the supernatural, as represented by stylized serpents, lily-pads signs, caves, and cenotes.

Oral traditions collected during the first years of the 20th century in Yucatan told of a time in the past when a road was “suspended in the sky” (Miller 1982:92). An important part of the myth states that at one time there was a pathway between the sky and the land.

However, the gods cut this large “umbilical cord” so that it no longer joined the earth with the sky, disconnecting the beings on the earth from the supernatural. Travelers that are betwixt this severed link between the earth and the sky appear frequently in Maya iconography, suggesting that this mythology has great time depth. Examples of cosmic or birth event travelers may be found on the façade of Copan Structure 10L-22 (dating to A.D. 715), on a mural found on Tulum Structure 16 (Miller 1982:91), and in images from the Codex Paris.

Mayanists have long argued that Copan Temple 22 was a symbolic entrance to the underworld (Fash 2001:122; Freidel and Suhler 1999:258; Newsome 2001:70; Schele and Miller 1986:154; Stierlin 1997:64). Gods or ancestral deities ride astride a two-headed serpent that stretches from one Bacab to another Bacab over the doorway arch (Figure 1). The travelers appear to be nude except for jewelry (bracelets, necklaces, and head gear) and other adornments on their shins. They are attentive; some look directly at their audience. David Stuart

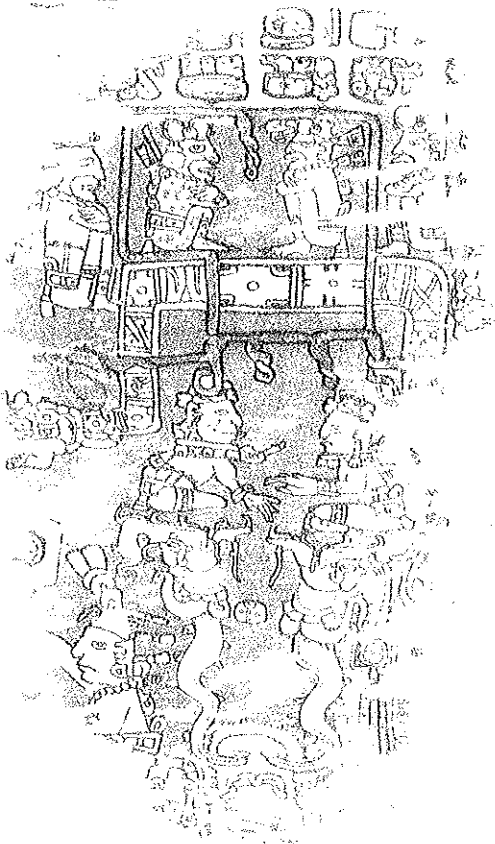


Figure 2. Page 22 from the Paris Codex, dating to the Late Postclassic Period, showing travelers associated with “twisted cords” (after Lee 1985:156).

(1988:199,203) refers to these beings as deities involved in an ancestor-related blood ritual. The smoke-scroll-riding deities are portrayed as being in the above world in this scene and have also been described as riding on clouds (Newsome 2001:70).

Cosmic or birth even travelers also occur in a Postclassic mural at Tulum, Mexico. Mural 8 in Tulum Structure 16 shows a human-like body, with a god-like head, in motion, apparently sliding along a conduit (Paxton 1999). Miller (1982:91) argues that the murals in Structure 16 portray individuals who are in “neither the world of the living nor the world of the dead” but who rather exist in “a liminal condition in between.”

Pages 19 and 22 of the Codex Paris also portray travelers. Paris Page 19 has been interpreted as a scene of “descending deities” or as a representation of a “cosmic umbilical cord” (Miller 1982:93). Page 22 shows two human figures - wearing decorative skirts, bracelets,

necklaces (possibly made of eyeballs), and head adornment - face each other with extended hands; the travelers heads are touched by twisted cords that wind throughout the scene, connecting each level of the image (Figure 2). Arthur Miller (1982:95) argues that the central figures are deceased and that the central section is “transitional, a liminal realm.” These figures hover just above the open mouths of the serpents and a section of the twisted cord is coiled on the neck of this serpent, whose body doubles as a skyband. The figure featured on Page 22 of the Codex Paris wears only jewelry and a headdress. This traveler is suspended with an umbilical cord emerging from his middle; the cord ascends into a damaged part of the page and was capable of sustaining “life through a passage from one state of being to another” (Miller 1982:95). Thus, both pages from the Copex Paris portray travelers that are related to cosmic or birth events.

Dead or Dying Travelers

The dead and dying travelers are portrayed in Maya art from the Early Classic to Postclassic Periods. Their images are found from Chichen Itza in the north to Quirigua in the south. They appear on murals, ceramic and stuccoed-wooden bowls, architectural facades, painted lintels, and stone monuments. Dead or dying travelers usually hold onto a rope, an umbilical cord, a Vision Serpent, a scepter, or lily-pad stalks as they journey from the here-and-now to the underworld. The object transporting the traveler may be smoke, blood, or water. They are centrally located in a scene and are typically human, although often with some deity characteristics. Because many faces have been damaged or eroded and other faces were stylized, it is often difficult to determine if the being was alive or dead. Just like the cosmic or birth travelers, the ones who are dead and dying have bracelets, anklets, and headdresses.

An excellent example of dead or dying travelers occurs on an Early Classic bowl found by Thomas Gann on the bank of the Rio Hondo in Quintana Roo, Mexico, just north of the Belize border (Figure 3). The iconography of the Rio Hondo bowl contains unmistakable references to the scene as taking place under water. The outer rim is composed of a series of water stacks divided by fish nibbling on water

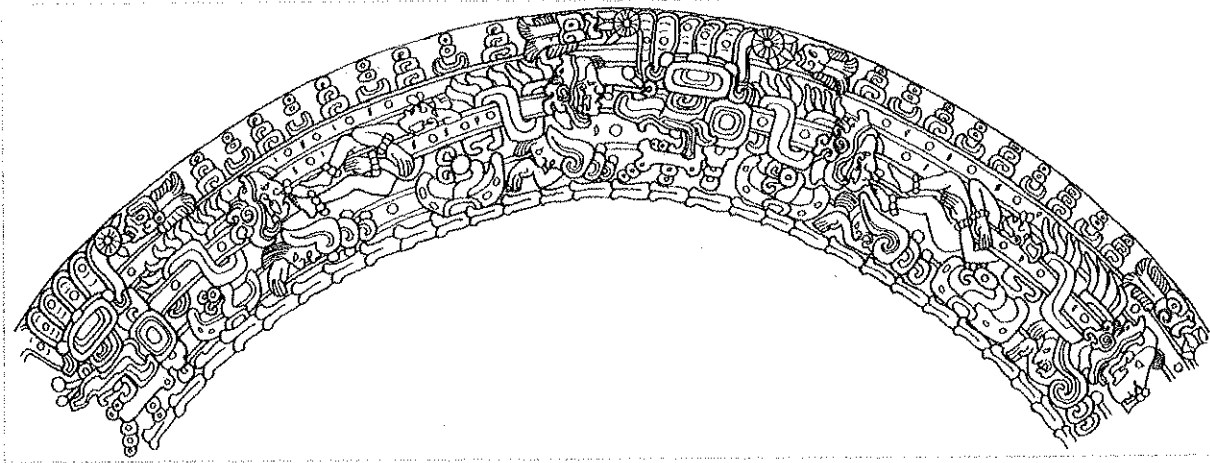


Figure 3. A decorated ceramic bowl depicting two travelers; the lidded bowl was recovered by Thomas Gann early in the 20th century from a deposit in Quintana Roo, Mexico; the vessel dates to the Early Classic Period (after Schele and Miller 1986:280).

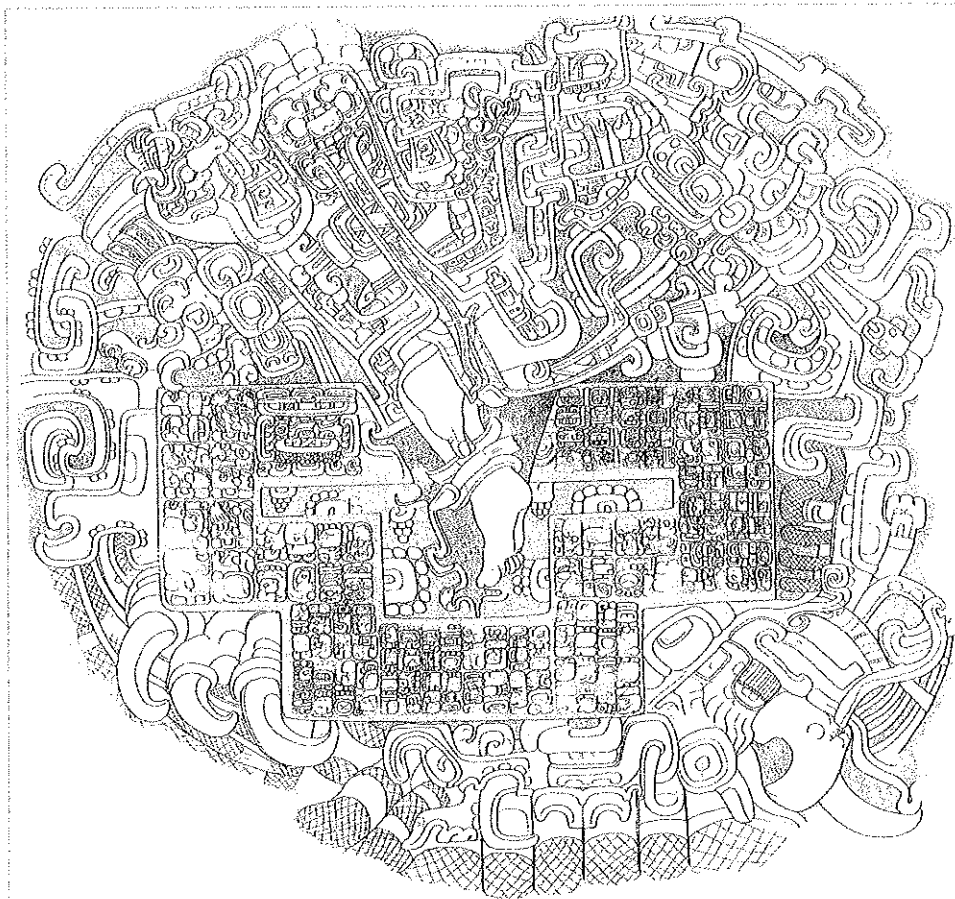


Figure 4. Quirigua Monument 24 showing a masked traveler emerging from the jaws of an earth monster (after Jones 1983).

lilies; the water stacks, fish, and water lily blossoms represent the upper level of the register. The central images are of humans who are nude, except for anklets, bracelets and “double beads on their noses” (Schele and Miller 1986:280). Their mouths are slightly open and they appear to be dead, but still cling to the central bar. On either side of the humans is a serpent with an ancestor emerging from the serpent’s mouth. Spaced evenly between humans and serpents are Cauacs, with skeletal heads and jaws, earflares, and god mirrors. The bottom register portrays shells with emerging heads, similar to images of the Maize god or Bacabs. The beings all have their wrists to their foreheads in a similar position to the main individual shown in the canoe carved on the bones from Tiakl Burial 116. Schele and Miller (1986:280) identify the imagery on this Rio Hondo/Gann vessel as “dead souls in the watery underworld.” Quenon and Le Fort (1997:890-891) argue that the images on this vessel represent the journey of the dead, moving from birth to death to rebirth.

Monument 24 at Quirigua may also portray a dead or dying traveler (Figure 4). Dating to A.D. 795, this stone altar may show an upside-down traveler wearing a mask and holding a scroll, emerging from the mouth of a serpent (Sharer 1990:63; Stierlin 1997:58). The border of the image displays the open maw of an Earth monster. Alternative interpretations of this scene argue that the figure is a masked human falling backward into the underworld (Sharer 1994:527) or the Storm god erupting from a T-shaped cleft in the earth (Newsome 2001:148).

Dead or dying travelers may also be identified in architectural elements found in northern Yucatan at Uxmal’s Temple of the Magician and Chichen Itza’s Temple of Jaguars (see Heine-Geldern 1966:283). The travelers depicted on the Temple of Jaguars at Chichen Itza are very similar to the figures detailed on a frieze in the lower inner temple of the Temple of the Magician at Uxmal. All these images wear headdresses and adornments around their ankles and wrists; one set has nose adornments. They hold onto lily-pod stalks and are in motion.

These are likely deceased humans on their journey to the underworld.

Travelers Observing or Participating in Events

Images of travelers observing or participating in events occur from the Preclassic through Postclassic Periods. They are shown as animals, gods, and humans that are sitting, hanging onto, or sliding along objects capable of transferring them from one realm to another. As opposed to the previous categories, the travelers belonging to the observing or participating theme appear alive, alert, and interested in the activities occurring around them. The images are found throughout the Maya region and in a variety of media: artifacts, stelae, murals, structural roof combs, and stucco relief. The travelers in this genre are mostly shown on the periphery of the scene. They play a supportive role in the narrative of the iconography, which usually portrays a single figure standing in a position of authority holding symbols of leadership. The travelers are shown in the air, in clouds, or in the headdress of the central figure. Sometimes they carry objects, but usually they are empty-handed.

Spirit companions are sometimes shown with Maya kings, climbing on their regalia or floating around them (Freidel and Suhler 1999:262). Stelae served as ancient propaganda used to promote, justify and authenticate a ruler’s power. As an intermediary between humans and deities, a ruler’s authority was sanctioned by the gods and was, thus, sacred (Hernández et al. 1999:190). One way of displaying the approval of the ancestors or gods was to depict them in the upper part of the register, in the ruler’s headdress, or as watching the event unfold. By showing the ancestors or gods participating in or observing an event, the ruler’s powers were legitimized and the ruler’s liminality was expressed (Benson and Griffin 1988:3; D. Chase and A. Chase 2009).

A recurring symbol of power is found in the double-headed Ceremonial Bar (Spinden 1970:49) or Serpent Bar (Schele and Miller 1986:268; Tate:1992:61). Schele and Miller (1986:268) define the Serpent Bar as a representation of the “authority of the king and



Figure 5. Chichen Itza Gold Disk B, dredged from the Sacred Cenote at the beginning of the 20th century, showing a centrally placed traveler (after Schele and Freidel 1990:395).

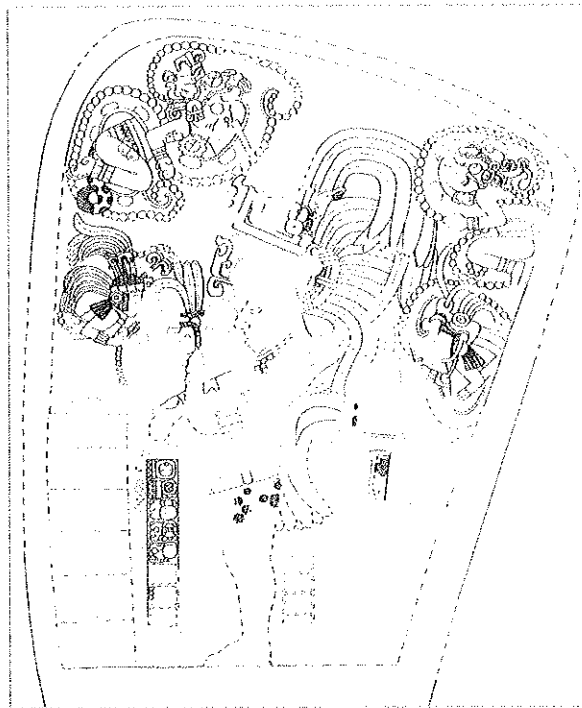


Figure 6. Ixlu Stela 2, showing four travelers in the register above the ruler (after Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:fig. 81).

the larger human community.” Sometimes the Ceremonial Bar is depicted with a “flexible, drooping body,” with wide-open jaws that have human or “grotesque faces” emerging from them (Spinden 1970:49). At other times, the bar is rigid with astronomical signs across the body. Carolyn Tate (1992:61) suggests that the Ceremonial Bar indicates that the ruler is a mediator between the three levels of the cosmos. The majority of the travelers represented in accession or leadership images are deities who are usually located on the periphery and dressed similarly to the central figure. The earliest known occurrence of this imagery occurs on the Hauberg stela, which portrays “small deities climbing or grasping poles, snakes, or plants” (Hellmuth 1988:164) to the sides of the central figure; the scene on this miniature monument is interpreted to be the inauguration of the ruler holding a Vision Serpent (Tate 1992:120).

Edward Thompson recovered several embossed gold disks from the Cenote of Sacrifice at Chichen Itza at the beginning of the 20th century (Schele and Friedel 1990:395; Thompson 1963:36). One of these disks, Gold Disk B, portrays four human figures, three standing and one bound, and a traveler, embracing a blood scroll (Schele and Freidel 1990:395) and suspended mid-air with a Vision Serpent (Figure 5). The traveler and the figure to the right of the bound captive are holding the same instrument. Similar imagery is found on Stela 4 at Ucanal, Guatemala, where a traveler holding an atlatl (A. Chase 1985:111) is intertwined with a cloud (McAnany 1995:44-45) or blood-scroll (Stuart 1988:183, 219) above two central figures. The dotted scroll motif is found additionally at the sites of Jimbal, Ixlu, and Tikal in Guatemala. On Ixlu Stela 2, four travelers are shown in dotted scrolls floating above the central scene (Figure 6); two of these have been identified as the paddler gods by Stuart (1988:187).

Roof-combs at Palenque may also show travelers. The comb on the Temple of the Sun portrays a ruler holding a Vision Serpent scepter; four travelers hold onto this scepter and umbilical cords are also associated with Temple 16 and 15 (Miller 1973:46), consistent with traveler imagery elsewhere. Travelers can also

be seen on the east side of Copan Stela 5, where they occur on the periphery of the main scene and emerge from shells (Baudez 1994:131). Other travelers may be found on Copan Stela D, where they hold onto the serpent in the center of the ruler’s headress (Baudez:1994:49), and on Copan Stela F, where multiple deity and human figures ride or embrace and enormous Vision Serpent or ceiba tree (Baudez 1994:39,40,49).

Conclusion

Travelers constitute a set of continuously repeated ancient Maya symbols. Symbols instigate social action (Turner 2000:488). To gain adequate meaning of a particular symbol, one needs to first examine the widest context of the symbol, to next consider what kinds of circumstances give rise to a performance of ritual, and to finally determine whether these rituals are concerned with natural phenomena, economic and technological processes, human life-crises, or the breach of crucial social relationships. These circumstances will most likely determine what sort of ritual is performed (Turner 2000:494). Travelers were clearly important in the ritual realm: they appear frequently in ancient Maya iconography; they have great time depth; and, they occur throughout the Maya area. They are present in representations of key times of transition such as birth, death, and accession. Thus, these images must relay information about the ways of life and belief systems of the ancient Maya.

Arthur Miller (1982:94) has suggested that art for art’s sake did not exist among the Maya prior to contact with the Spanish. Rather, each aspect of the image serves a purpose that goes beyond simple aesthetics. If Miller’s argument is correct, then no matter how small in stature or how peripheral the image of the traveler, it is an integral part of the narrative depicted. The participant or observer images were likely political propaganda used to prove legitimacy of rule, inspire political backing, or provide assurance of a leader’s knowledge and ability; such figures demonstrated “otherworld” and ancestral support for real-life actions. Accession or leadership events may have been attended by ancestors or deities, who would

participate, observe, supervise, or possibly only are there "in spirit."

These ancestors and deities – the travelers discussed here – are shown moving from one realm to another by using items that were easily accessible and tied to multiple worlds, suggesting that the afterlife was not a place where one was confined, but rather a locale with connector bridges from which one could return. The images also confirm that ancestors and deities were important members of the corporeal community, providing additional insight into the belief systems of the ancient Maya.

The ancient Maya communicated with each other, with ancestors, and with deities by embedding narratives in their architecture, stone monuments, ceramics, codices, and murals. The term traveler is necessary and appropriate to describe the beings detailed here, because they share key characteristics and behaviors related to the afterlife. The travelers display traits that are associated with liminality and transitional events in the lives of individuals and/or the community represented. Just as the traveler could move between realms, their iconographic recognition permits researchers to travel from the realm of the present to the realm of the past in a search for a broader understanding of the ancient Maya worldview.

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