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A Key to Understanding El Tajin Iconography

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Introduction

Xibalba, the Maya Underworld, is a topic often explored in the monumental and ceramic art and iconography of the Maya. The preoccupation with the other world realm, reflected in the art of this culture, demonstrates the important position it held in Maya society and in its view of the cosmos. The purpose of this paper is to give evidence showing the vital relationship between water symbolism and the Underworld. Using the Maya vision and treatment of the Underworld as a basis to compare the Underworld symbolism of other Mesoamerican cultures, an attempt will be made to demonstrate that the Underworld in much of Mesoamerica was a watery realm.

The Maya occupied an area extending east into what is today western Honduras, almost all of Guatemala and the Yucatan Peninsula, and west into Mexico to include the area surrounding the site of Palenque (Figure 1)(Miller 1984:12-17). The period of time during which the Maya flourished, according to dated stone monuments and the archaeological record, spanned approximately nineteen hundred years, and is divided into three major phases: the Preclassic, the Classic, and the Postclassic (Schele 1986:11).

Early archaeologists thought the Maya were worshipers of time and interpreted the abundance of date and number hieroglyphs on stelae, other stone monuments and ceramics to be indicative of a complex system of calendrics (Schele 1986).
as dates is not untrue, but their meticulousness was not well understood until the 1960's when the deciphering of their writing system began. Before the early 'sixties, J. Eric Thompson and Sylvanus Morley were the foremost Mayanists, and were largely responsible for establishing the idea that the Maya were peaceful time worshipers (Schele 1986:27). Thompson was interested in interpreting glyphs which dealt directly with dates and celestial movements, and stated that their hieroglyphic writing system did not record the history of the Maya (Schele 1986:323).

The discovery by Tatiana Proskouriakoff in 1960 that much of the undeciphered hieroglyphic text dealt with the history of accession and rule of Maya Lords, along with contributions by Heinrich Berlin and others, led to what has been called a "revolution in Maya studies" (Miller 1986:9). Today, expanded knowledge and understanding of hieroglyphs has changed our view of what was truly sacred to the Maya, and what warranted such elaborate and permanent documentation. These were a people to whom rulership and all that it encompassed was of utmost importance.

The position of a Maya ruler was not one of simple lawmaker. Instead he was a figure who possessed the great power to communicate with the supernaturals. The many Maya gods controlled unexplained forces of the Universe, so that access to the supernaturals was vital in order to appease the gods (most often by blood sacrifice) and thus to have some degree of
control over nature (Schele 1986).

The important role of Maya rulership manifests itself in the symbolism of the ruler's dress (part of which will be discussed later) in his juxtaposition with supernaturals on various art forms, and in the great temples built to honor living rulers and their ancestors (Coe 1966). One of the most impressive images of a Maya Lord was when he stood in the symbolic jaws of the Earth Monster, half in the realm of the Underworld and half in the realm of the Earth, as in the depiction of the great Lord of Palenque, Shield Pacal, at the moment of his death (Figure 2) (Schele 1986). It seems likely that rulers always attempted to maintain the symbolic position of sacred power described above, and this feature of Maya rulership will be examined as it applies to the Underworld. Although the realm of the Maya Underworld is expressed in a variety of ways, the presence of water symbolism in association with it is prevalent. The hypothesis proposed is one whereby all symbolism relating to water, be it through color, symbols, iconography or even utility, is associated with the Underworld.

Elements of Maya Underworld

The manifestations of fish in Maya art are limited to expressions of supernaturals, death, or the Underworld. The fish is usually seen nibbling on a water-lily or in the headdress of a ruler or supernatural. The presence of fish, water-lilies, birds, and celestial motifs in glyphs describing gods such as those of the Palenque Triad (Figure 3) who
represent the ideal ruler (Schele 1986:48) could indicate the important attribute of rulers, to be able to communicate with and link the Celestial, Earthly, and Underworld realms. One form of God I (Figure 3) is seen most frequently in sacrificial death rituals occurring in the Underworld as well as on Earth (Schele 1986:49), and is covered with fish and shell motifs, which clearly demonstrates the water-Underworld connection.

Another depiction linking the Underworld with water is that of one of the Old Gods, God N, who probably ruled Xibalba with God I. and God D, emerging from a shell as seen in Figure 4. God N is also seen with a fish nibbling at his headdress or with a water lily headdress. God D wears a shell pectoral and head ornament, whereas God L does not appear to be associated with explicit water symbols (Schele 1986:54). The Water lily Monster (Figure 5) is a symbol for bodies of water, and is sometimes represented by a simple water lily blossom, pad or leaf (Schele 1986:46). The Water lily Monster has water stacks on its back which are a basic water marker and appear to form a part of the shell from which God N emerges in Figure 4. The shell is a natural symbol for water, and is found in burial caches as well as in artwork concerning the Underworld (Schele 1986:47).

Another water and blood symbol, the trilobal element prevalent in Teotihuacan (Figure 6) and Tula art, manifests itself in Maya art (Stocker 1973:197). Both water and death motifs are found together to mark the Underworld realm; therefore, a brief description of the major death symbols is necessary to complete
the imagery associated with Xibalba.

Death is most blatantly expressed by skeletal or fleshless body parts. The skull and the fleshless maw in particular are used to indicate the Underworld. This is exemplified by the maw of the Earth Monster (Figure 2), which signifies Shield Pacal's descent into Xibalba. The skulls at the base of the inner doorway to the Temple of Meditation in Copán (Temple 22) are placed in such a way to mark the lower band as belonging to the Underworld (Schele 1986:122), and probably to signify the symbolic entrance into the Underworld through the doorway.

The journey through the Underworld following death is described in the Ancient Maya Book of Council, or Popol Vuh, as a terrifying and trying ordeal. The Popol Vuh gives an account of this journey through the experiences of the Hero Twins, who together appear to represent the ideal Maya ruler (Schele 1986:32). The Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, outwit the evil Lords of the Underworld but must go through a series of trials and tests which represent hardships that the ruler and all others must face in the journey through the Underworld following death. To ease their fears and guide humans and other animals into the realm of the Underworld, the Paddler Gods (Figure 7) transported their passengers in canoes over the surface of water which represented the division between the earthly and lower worlds. Once the passengers fell through the membrane of the water's surface, they entered the Underworld (Schele 1986:271). Because of the Paddler Gods' close
association with both the Underworld and water, they became important symbols in relating the Maya ruler to the watery Underworld.

Ceramics

Classical Maya were a medium upon which the theme of the Underworld was exploited. According to Michael Coe (1978), who has examined several collections of Maya ceramics, all the Classic period pictorial vessels are funerary ceramics depicting the Underworld and its evil Lords. Some of the pots appear to be historical in content, but it seems that the subjects are already deceased in these cases (Coe 1978:12-13). Most of the vessels painted in the Codex style (which is the same style used to make the Maya codices) have a characteristic stucco coating on the upper band, painted Maya blue (Coe 1978:16). I propose that the blue band delimits the surface of the water, while the action taking place below the band concerns the Underworld. The stucco rim is badly chipped on most vases, but where it remains, the brilliant blue color of the paint and its position at the top of the vessel, strongly suggests that the band represents water below which is found Xibalba, a watery Underworld. On vases without an original stucco coating, the upper rim or band is red, not blue. The color red is significant because it is the color of blood sacrificed for the gods. The inside of burial tombs are often painted red to demarcate the Underworld where blood
(often interchangeable with water in the Underworld) flowed (Coe 1978). An analysis of the subject matter on the vase exemplar of this style will complete the watery Underworld imagery. The Widenman vase (figure 8) shows two scenes, both of which take place in the Underworld. The first is a scene in which God L, one of the three major gods of Xibalba, is attended by five females. The same God L can be identified in the Maya codices by his headdress of Moan bird feathers (Coe 1978:16). The second scene is one of sacrifice, performed by two lords of the Underworld, probably to appease them, as was the practice among the Maya (Coe 1978:16-17). The use of the funerary vessels to accompany the dead on their journey through Xibalba, combined with their Underworld themes and water symbolism (not to mention the fact that the vessels themselves can be used to hold water), make them an ideal medium on which to explicitly relate water with the Maya Underworld. Michael Coe (1978) states that "...the ultimate function of Maya funerary ceramics is clear: they comprise one great mythic cycle, along with an explanatory chant, to prepare the defunct for the dread journey into the Underworld..." Moreover, it is the pervasiveness of water symbolism on the vessels which validates Coe's conclusion.

Sculptures

When the Maya used stone as a medium of artistic expression, the subjects of the carvings were elements basic to their belief system, as was their view of the Underworld. This view is
evident in the sculpture of Copán. The site of Copán is located in the westernmost part of Honduras, and is best known for its magnificent stelae which depict the rulers of the site, adorned in royal regalia and often flanked by hieroglyphic texts. It was determined after examination of several stelae, that one major symbol of rulership is related to both the Underworld and the Earth realm. As mentioned before, the ability to represent and communicate with the supernatural and natural worlds was one of the most sacred and vital roles of the ruler since this established beyond any doubt his necessary position in society. Schele (1986:103) describes this position in Blood of Kings:

...The deep separation between the religious and civil that characterizes the contemporary western world view was an alien concept to the Maya for whom the King was not only a religious authority, but also the manifestation of divine in human space. He not only asserted supernatural sanctions to justify his actions and support his rule, but he also personified the supernatural.

The characteristic rulership belts on the personages carved on the Copán stelae (Figure 9) were decorated with a skyband much like the one in Figure 10 and almost all had olivio shells, marked by cross-hatching, hanging down from the skybands. The head of Ahau Pop, a god of rulership, was also included on the belt's decoration, usually in the front. The head could take the form of the Jaguar God of the Underworld as well (Figure 11) (Schele 1986:71). In the series of catalogues A Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphs and Inscriptions (Von Euw) which contains descriptions and drawings of the stone monuments from several
Maya sites such as Xultun, La Hontandez, and Cacactun, revealed the same motifs. Although stelae are less abundant at the sites of Palenque and Tikal, the same characteristics appear on the belts of their royal figures carved in stone.

The significance of this observation becomes clear when one realizes that the Maya ruler by representing the link between the supernatural and earthly worlds, sets himself up to be a model of the cosmos. The model of the cosmos set up by the ball court is similar. The center of the ball court often has a small depressor, circular marking (Gillespie 1987) which can be thought to represent an entrance to the Underworld since it delineates a hole in the earth membrane and is often marked by a skull (Figure 12). The two flares of the I-shaped ball court represent day and night, and the game was played out to resolve the struggle between the forces of darkness and light, that is, the rising and setting of the sun with the ruler determining the course of these celestial movements (Gillespie 1987). The central location of the belt is of great importance because this separates the body into an upper Earth register, and a lower Underworld register, in this case signified by olivo shells. A belt without a person occupying it forms a circle, a hole. The entrance into the Underworld as mentioned previously is represented by a hole. This means that the ruler, by wearing the belt described, creates a visual image of himself occupying the sacred position, half in and half out of the jaws of the Earth Monster. He emerges as the great transmitter of
otherworldly power and knowledge. The olive shells and Water-lily Jaguar God head are the main Underworld markers in this expression of the Maya cosmos and since they are also water symbols, they can be powerful symbols used to understand the watery nature of the Maya Underworld. Another indicator I found to support this conclusion is that on some stelae, the ruler has xoc fish carved at the level of his thigh. They lie below the olive shells and therefore are in the Underworld. The stone carvings of Quirigua in eastern Guatemala, are similar to those of nearby Copan. The rulers on the stelae wear the same ruler belt, and there exist interesting baroque monolithic altars. On one such altar, Zoomorph P (Figure 13), a spondylus shell jaw and additional water symbolism, such as a water-lily pad motif and water drops around the monster's eyes appear, which probably indicate that the sculpted stones belong to an Underworld of water.

The sculpture of Palenque differs from that of other Mayan cities in that it is either covered with stucco, or sculpted in bas-relief on stone tablets (Robertson 1983). The iconography of Palenque's sculpture is laden with Underworld and water symbolism. The abundance of Underworld imagery is probably due to the preoccupation of the rulers of Palenque with rites of accession and triumph over the Lords of Xibalba in death.

The sarcophagus lid of Shield Pacal's tomb (Figure 2) is probably the most well known sculpture of Palenque. The sculpture's meaning is described in the words of Merle Greene
Robertson (1983:56): "On this spectacular monolith ancient Palenque sculptors carved in stone for all posterity the iconographic statement of a belief system whereby a king dies, but a god is born." The symbols describing the Underworld into which the ruler Pacal enters are associated with death (skeletal) rather than related to a watery Underworld, although water markers exist to connect the two types of symbols and to further demonstrate the watery nature of Xibalba. The most important water symbol seen on the sarcophagus cover is the shell, which is present on the left side of the Quadripartite glyph upon which Pacal appears to sit (Robertson 1983:58).

Inside the crypt of the Temple of the Inscriptions, where Shield Pacal was buried, are nine life-sized stucco sculptures of rulers, warriors, or deities, one of which can be seen in Figure 14 (Robertson 1983:75). These figures have several identical features, yet each wears a different pectoral and each headdress varies in iconographic make-up. Whether the sculptures represent the nine Underworld Lords (one for each level of Xibalba) or not, cannot be determined because of erosion (Robertson 1983:75). Nonetheless, much of the water symbolism present on the figures and their location, on the walls of a crypt, support this view or at least suggest a strong association with the Underworld. Figure 15 shows the most common headdress element nine stucco sculptures, present on all but two of the identifiable figures. The Jaguar God of the Underworld which adorns the shields of the figures, gives
gives further evidence which helps to place the figures in the Underworld (Figur 16). The fish nibbling on the water lily or other plant elements found in the headdresses usually come in groups of three. The presence of these water symbols in the dress of the Underworld Lords who appear to guard the crypt, suggests that the fish are associated with death and the Underworld, and that the Underworld is a watery realm.

Much of the sculpture at the sites of Tikal and Palenque are located on temple structures, and therefore will be discussed in the context of the architecture of which they are a part, to give the full impact of the iconography.

**Architectural Art**

Temple II at Copán, a Late Classic structure located on the north end of the acropolis, has significant water symbolism on the low terrace, marked by three conch shells which are meant to indicate the surface of water (Schele 1986:122). Schele (1986:122) describes the terrace as follows:

The head of GI is carved on the top step as if the god were standing shoulder high in water. Two grotesque monkey gods holding rattles and poised in the posture of a dance flank him as he rises from the water. On the platform opposite the GI stairs, the water symbolism is completed by two sculptures of crocodiles that are set to appear as if they are floating on the same level as the stone conch shells. Below the GI stairs are three rectangular stones, defining the stairs as a symbolic ball court. Victims were dispatched on the terrace above the stairs and thrown down into the watery Underworld of the south court.

This description epitomizes the way in which the Maya
attempted to indicate the boundary into the lower realm without the use of hieroglyphic text (although they often did use hieroglyphs as well) to describe a change in setting. The Underworld was announced with seashells, which illustrates their important role in Maya art, since it is these markers which allow us (or in the case of the Maya, those who are permitted to view these works) to place a scene in its proper realm (Ferguson 1984:338). Again in Copan, on the facade of the Temple of Meditation (Figure 17), the inner doorway carving is filled with a mixture of Underworld symbols including skulls, shells, and stingray spines (Ferguson 1984:284). The skulls, which clearly separate the Underworld from the rest of the carved doorway, have dots above the eye sockets which may suggest water. If this is the case, these skulls are explicitly watery Underworld markers.

The Temple of the Cross in Palenque was a monument built in honor of the accession of one of Palenque’s rulers. Its tablets represent both the reemergence of a ruler from the Underworld, and the same symbolic pathway which the sun had to follow in order to rise each day. The tablet in Figure 18 exemplifies the theme of all the Temple of the Cross tablets.

In this tablet, the new king Chan Bahlum faces his father Pacal, who stands on what Linda Schele believes is a symbol for the state of death (1974:21). The symbol referred to is similar to the God K glyph in figure 4, with corn-fertility symbols added. The Underworld water connection is strong in this glyph, because not only is the large shell associated with the Underworld through the Lord Xibalba emerging from it, but it is also
related to the dead king Shield Pacal who probably had to journey through the Underworld in order to return to the earthly realm and assume his position atop the shell.

The monster upon which Chan-Bahlum stands is a Cauac variant believed to be associated with rain, the Underworld and possibly standing water (Schele 1974:22). That fact that a ruler stands on a symbolic representation of the watery Underworld, supports the idea that the ruler needed to link the Earth and Underworld realms. The tablet contains shell and skeletal motifs which when placed together, create an image of a death-ridden watery Underworld.

The sculpture on the temple structures at Tikal in Guatemala is related to the setting and rising of the sun, and its relation to the succession of kings. The sun passed through the Underworld as it followed its natural course, and it is the images of the sun in the Underworld, which incorporate fish motifs (Miller 1984:42) that further support the hypothesis that Xibalba was a watery Underworld. One such sculpture on Structure 5D-33-3rd (Figure 18.b), is described by Miller (1984:42) as a "skeletal head with fish barbels emerging from the side of [its] mouth." Once again, The Maya use the juxtaposition of water and skeletal symbols to demarcate their Underworld.

Natural Phenomena

The watery Underworld is manifested in nature by the Cenote
of Chichen Itzá. The Cenote is a natural well, into which it is believed the Maya threw the bodies of the sacrificial victims and offerings of shell, obsidian, and gold (Wren 1984). These offerings are similar to those found in Maya burial caches.

The Cenote is a deep well: a hole in the Earth’s membrane full of water. These qualities make the Cenote a natural manifestation of Xibalba, the Underworld depicted in the iconography of the Maya. As the victims or offerings fell into the water of the Cenote, they symbolically crossed into the realm of the Underworld. The offerings made to the Cenote often carried both water and Underworld symbolism. One type of offering is described by Linnea Wren in The Cenote of Sacrifice: "From the Cenote we find those [Copal and rubber] saps, the blood of trees, were shaped into balls and effigy forms, painted blue, and studded with rubber, jade, and shells before being offered to the Cenote" (1984: 19). The blue paint and shells on the effigy forms become watery Underworld markers since they are thrown into the Cenote, which is an entrance to Xibalba.

Another offering found in the Cenote was the gold disc in Figure 19. The band around the central scene shows skulls entwined with water-lilies (Wren 1984: 50). The combination of water-lilies and skulls surrounding the sacrificial scene on the gold disc, and the fact that this disc (and others like it) was found at the bottom of the Cenote, the symbolic Underworld, supports the hypothesis that Xibalba was a watery realm.
The Maya treatment of Xibalba can be used to suggest interpretations of the art of El Tajin in Vera Cruz, and thus can demonstrate this culture's similar view of the Underworld.

El Tajin began to flourish as a major urban center for the Huastec culture around 900 A.D. and declined about 1100 A.D. The site, located just inland of the Gulf of Mexico, north of the modern day city of Vera Cruz, is best known for its uniquely styled temples and numerous ball courts (Wilkerson 1980:215). The main ball courts have elaborate carvings upon their walls which often depict ritual activities such as sacrifice, that is probably related to the ball game itself. Some of the "ball game paraphernalia," especially the stone-carved yolks, carry significant symbolic meaning in relation to the Underworld when juxtaposed with a similar Maya vision. The critical position of being half in the Underworld and half in the realm of the Earth was demonstrated by these yolks. Ball players probably wore a thick, wicker belt-like yolk around their waists during play to protect their mid-torso (Schele 1986:248). Although the more sacred version of these U-shaped yolks were carved of stone. Stone yolks often had carvings of Earth Monsters, which meant that when a deity impersonator or ruler placed the yolk around his waist, he was standing in the mouth of the Earth Monster, halfway in the Underworld (Gillespie 1987). The same intermediate position was established by Maya rulers with the rulership belt, which delimited the Underworld with water symbols.
The best studied of the many ball courts of El Tajin is the South Ball Court which contains six elaborately carved stone panels, shown in Figures 20.a–20.f. According to Wilkerson (1986:22) the overriding theme of the panels is that of ritual sacrifice in association with the ball game. Scenes of sacrifice relate to the Underworld, since one purpose of sacrifice was to communicate with the supernatural beings dwelling in the Underworld. This relationship is explicitly demonstrated in the iconography of the South Ball Court panels. Figures 20.a–20.d can be grouped according to similar stylistic execution, whereas figures 20.e and 20.f are different. The panels shown in Figures 20.c and 20.d, located on the north wall of the ball court, depict scenes of priests or deity impersonators preparing for and performing a sacrificial ritual within the sloping walls of the ball court. The death symbolism is strong in both scenes as indicated by the skeletal figures on the sides of the two panels. The same skeletal figures are found on the panels in Figures 20.a and 20.b, located on the south wall. Each of these figures is seen emerging from a vessel submerged in water, meaning that these death figures observing the action must come from a watery Underworld. The vessels may also be interpreted as blood letting receptacles; however, the liquid nature of blood and water in the Underworld are interchangeable, according to Linda Schele (1986:310). The upper registers of these four panels all contain a feathered deity, while the lower registers are filled with scrolls which may be representative of a water band. The feathered serpent-like deity probably represents the
sky, since feathers are often sky markers in Mesoamerican iconography. The scrolls of the lower band are valid Underworld indicators, because they are the same type of scroll which surrounds the skeletal figures. They may however, be Underworld serpents as seen by the eye, eyebrow, and curly nose near the vessel in Figure 20.a. In either case, the scrolls are continuous with, or at least closely associated with, the watery Underworld from whence the skeletal figures came.

The Underworld iconography in Figures 20.e and 20.f is significant and incorporates a greater number of water symbols to demarcate the Underworld than Figures 20.a-20.d. In these central panels, watery serpent scrolls are again seen in the lower register and flanking the main action scenes. In addition to the serpent scroll water symbolism, an abundance of trilobed motifs appear on the outermost side bands which are indicative of water or blood (Stocker 1978:197). The body of liquid within what appears to be a brick structure (Figure 20.e) has been interpreted as a vat of pulque (Wilkerson 1980:220) into which a deity impersonator lets blood through self-mutilation to appease the God of Pulque who stands in the liquid wearing a fish headdress. The same observation is made in the case of the scene in Figure 20.f, where instead of a god, a victim prepared for sacrifice lies half in and half out of the brick structure containing pulque. Seen in both panels is a form of the tree of life, which connects the upper and lower realms (Schele 1986:108-109), one emerging from a maguey plant (Figure 20.f)
and another from a spondylus shell (Figure 20.e). The spondylus shells appear to be used in much the same way as were shells in Maya art: as markers signifying the Underworld. The brick structures resemble niches or caves because of their C-shaped single opening. I suggest that the structures represent openings in the Earth membrane below which lies the watery Underworld, depicted by the waves inside the structures. The victim in Figure 20.f may therefore be in the same sacred position as Shield Pacal on his sarcophagus lid, half in and half out of the jaws of the Earth Monster (Figure 2). The Underworld entered by the victim in Figure 20.f, is explicitly depicted as a watery realm, whereas Xibalba, Pacal's Underworld, is marked by skeletal jaws and blood symbolism. The character letting blood in Figure 20.e offers his blood to an Underworld Lord rising from the water through an opening in the Earth, rather than to the Pulque God standing in the vat of the substance. The fish headdress of this Underworld Lord may even be analogous to the fish on the headdresses of the nine Lords of Xibalba at Palenque; which appear to link death, the Underworld and water together.

The Maya perceived their Underworld to be a watery realm. The great variety of media exploited by the Maya in order to illustrate this vision were examined in this thesis, as was the iconography that was used to delineate the watery Underworld. In addition to this, some previously overlooked markers of
expressions of the watery Underworld were introduced, such as the blue rim around Classic Maya funerary vessels, and the imagery of the cosmos set up by the rulership belts on the stelae.

Although treatment of the Maya Underworld varies, several characteristic features of Xibalba remain constant. It is this consistency which allows the comparison of the Maya Underworld with that of the El Tajin Underworld to be valid. The use of shells, trilobe motifs and the critical position held by rulers, is explicit in the art of the Maya. At El Tajin, the same symbolism occurs in a similar context (that of sacrifice), so that relating the treatment of the Underworld by the two cultures was logical. Therefore it can be concluded that, with the prolific treatment of the Underworld by the Maya as a basis to compare the Underworld iconography of other Mesoamerican cultures, a more unified view of the Underworld can emerge.
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Figure 1

God I

God II

God III

Figure 1

God IV

Water-lily God

Figure 5