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## Power, Pathways, and Appropriations in Mesoamerican Art

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Analyzing the iconography of ancient art as a means of acquiring a more profound understanding of extinct cultural systems has proved to be particularly appropriate for the pre-Columbian peoples of Mesoamerica. Several civilizations once flourished in this culture area, which extends from central Mexico into the northern half of Central America (Fig. 3.1). While some of them developed written record-keeping systems, all of them placed far more emphasis on decorated objects — which we call art — than on writing as a means of communication (Miller 1986:71). These peoples clearly understood the utility of images for creating, disseminating, and even manipulating cultural constructs, and also for their emotive power, which transcends mere communication.

The cultural information to be gained from the study of this art goes far beyond aesthetic notions or religious beliefs to include economic and sociopolitical systems as well. In the holistic perspective of anthropology, all facets of culture are patterned, such that art must reflect society. Since the ancient peoples of Mesoamerica consciously used their decorated objects to communicate messages grounded in shared understandings, embedded within these objects are “the taxonomic and structural bases of the



Izapa on the southern Pacific coast. The Classic period, from A.D. 300 to 900, was characterized by the rise of urbanism and the state, as occurred at Teotihuacan in central Mexico, the Zapotec capital of Monte Alban in Oaxaca, and the various city-states of the Maya civilization in the lowlands of Guatemala, Yucatan, and adjacent areas. Finally, the Postclassic period rise of empires began at around 900 and lasted until the coming of the Spanish in 1519. Postclassic cultures include the Mixtecs and Aztecs of highland central Mexico, with Tenochtitlan as the premier Aztec capital.

Studies of the communicative role of Mesoamerican imagery usually focus on what can be called public or elite art, in contrast to domestic art produced by or for individual households.<sup>1</sup> Beginning with the development of complex society in the Formative period, the emerging elite group directed the production of artworks especially for their and the community's use. Some of these objects are large, such as stone monuments, painted murals, and decorated architecture, and were located in public or ceremonial places in order to disseminate certain messages to society at large. Elite art also includes smaller, luxury objects, often made of exotic materials, and painted manuscripts, which were usually the property of the upper level in society. Rarely have any of the items made of organic materials survived, so the corpus of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican art is necessarily biased toward objects and decorated structures of nonperishable materials, primarily stone and ceramic artifacts.

The elite artworks functioned at least partly to elucidate aspects of the state and cosmos that were based on a knowledge system, shared by the Mesoamerican peoples, about how their world was constituted. For this reason, the art is not merely representational but incorporates cultural constructs: "the Pre-Columbian artist did not generally represent what he saw, but rather what he knew to be true" (Quirarte 1977:54). Certain themes are manifest in the artworks of all these cultures, and in fact the commonality of these themes helps to define Mesoamerica as a culture area distinct from northern Mexico and southern Central America (Willey 1973:159). Thus their thematic similarities, which can be traced across time and space, do not necessarily suggest direct historical continuities but instead may locate their origins in a shared ideology.

One point of commonality in much of the elite-commissioned art is an emphasis on explaining the nature of rulership—the source or charter

of the ruler's power, his qualities as ruler, his relationship to the community he ruled, and his links to the cosmos. As outlined here, the ruling groups appropriated for depiction in the public/elite artworks certain natural features that both ancient and modern Mesoamerican peoples associate with access to supernatural power. That is, rather than introduce radical new images of power, the elite manipulated presumably preexisting symbols for their own purposes. Icons of these natural features, strategically positioned in the ritual landscape of ceremonial centers, thereby linked the power of the ruler with the powers of the cosmos in order to reinforce and even transform concepts concerning the right to rule. These artworks functioned to place the ruling hierarchy visually within the structure of the cosmos as the Mesoamerican peoples conceived it to be.

#### *The Mesoamerican Cosmos*

To comprehend Mesoamerican elite art as part of the visual charter for rulership, one must first understand the Mesoamerican view of the cosmos, for it was cosmic power upon which the rulers drew, and society and the cosmos were seen as parallel in structure and operation (excellent descriptions of the Mesoamerican cosmos are provided in Hunt 1977; León-Portilla 1963, 1988; Soustelle 1959; and Thompson 1970). The peoples of Mesoamerica understood the cosmos as being composed of discrete elements organized horizontally in segments oriented to the directions as defined by the daily movement of the sun from east to west and its annual alternation between north and south, and vertically into the upperworld, the middle world (the earth's surface), and the underworld. The upperworld and the underworld are equivalent in the sense of being the "otherworld," the world beyond daily experience and thus a realm of supernatural forces.

These spatial elements were also equated with temporal units such that periods of time were linked to the segments of space in endless cycles. For example, each day was associated with a different direction, time "moving" in a counterclockwise circle from east to north to west to south. Each such spatio-temporal segment was associated with specific qualities and symbolic markers. In addition, the future and the past were linked to the otherworld in opposition to the everyday world of the present on the earth's surface. For this reason, ancestors were often depicted in an otherworldly



location in the artworks. In summary, a key characteristic of the ancient (and modern) Mesoamerican view of the cosmos was its division into space-time segments defined by the movement of the sun and linked to one another in a dynamic way, which was the source of cosmic order as opposed to chaos.

The center of the cosmos was the place where all the different elements were conjoined—the horizontal divisions and the three vertical levels. It functioned as a place of balance among all the forces represented by these segments. Balance, and hence stability, was also achieved in a dynamic way by the alternation of the various directions around the center as a pivot or hub, as time rotated through the segments of space. Nevertheless, the center was also a place where opposites conjoined, where time and space were essentially unsegmented and unordered, and as such it was a place of ambiguity, instability, danger, and anomaly (Elzey 1976:324).

In keeping with these qualities, the center was a powerful place. In Mesoamerican thought, power (cognized as movement or force, and hence breath and life [Marcus 1978]) was generated here from the combination of opposites (León-Portilla 1974). Furthermore, it was the place where access was possible to the supernatural influences of the other vertical levels—the “point of encounter with foreign worlds” (Elzey 1976:327). As the sum of all these characteristics, the cosmic center was the quintessential focal point in both religious and political life. It was defined and redefined by each of the Mesoamerican cultures with the help of its art and architecture.

In addition to the center itself, certain transformational or mediating agents were considered to be capable of transcending the boundaries between the discrete cosmic segments and thus capable of uniting their opposed qualities. Some of these agents were gods, culture heroes, and kings, associated with the moving sun, but this category also includes geographic features and natural elements within the world, particularly those that appeared to link the vertical levels of the cosmos. These things were conceived of as mediating pathways whereby the people of the middle world could have access to the supernatural influences of the otherworld.

As shown in the pre-Columbian elite art and architecture, the important pathways are the *cave*, as an entrance into the underworld, the sacred *mountain*, which links the earth's surface and the heavens, and the world *tree*, with its roots underground and its branches in the sky. All three

pathways continue to be part of the “sacred geography” of Mesoamerica—among modern Highland Maya peoples, for example (Vogt 1981:119-20)—and they are still a focus of community ritual and folklore at the non-elite level of contemporary society (which one suspects reflects an original, very ancient situation). In addition to these three “static” pathways certain zoomorphs were thought to be capable of moving between the vertical levels of the cosmos as “dynamic” mediators. This category includes jaguars, birds, crocodilians, and serpents, especially feathered serpents, mythical creatures that combined features of both earth- and sky-dwellers.

These pathways and cosmic connectors can be rather easily depicted because they represent natural elements rather than vague abstractions. Significantly, from the earliest appearance of public monuments in Mesoamerica, among the Gulf coast Olmecs, the elite were already appropriating these mediating pathways to communicate something about themselves, and this perhaps was a rationale for much of Olmec monumental art. The rulers had themselves visually juxtaposed with a pathway to the other cosmic levels as a didactic device to explicate a more abstract idea: the rulers, by virtue of their qualities or their office, had access to cosmic supernatural forces. Furthermore, because the elite are the focus of this imagery, such access was either unique to them or of a highly special nature.

Using the medium of art to communicate these ideas allowed the elite groups in Mesoamerica to manipulate the concepts of their access to power by manipulating the images. Concentrating on the pathways as mediators in a survey of Mesoamerican elite artworks helps to reveal the divergent political ideologies they served. Although all of these pathways were utilized for similar purposes in the art of the various societies, they did not receive the same emphasis and were handled quite differently. These distinctions can be correlated in part with a variation in the constructs concerning the nature of rulership, seen at the most basic level in the contrast between personified and anonymous rulership as it was represented in artistic media. This difference is especially apparent when comparing the portrait art of the lowland Olmec and Maya peoples (in the Formative and Classic periods) with the more depersonalized artworks of some central highland societies, such as Classic period Teotihuacan and the Postclassic Aztecs.

While this dichotomy must be presented here much more simplistically than was the case in reality, this difference in the use of the images

among the Mesoamerican cultures is a clue to both regional and chronological variations in the conceptions of rulership that they held. The variation concerning how rulership was believed to be constituted should ultimately be related to the differences in the other aspects of these cultures, to the nature of the interactions that existed among them, and to the processes that resulted in the evolution of the state.

*The Cave as Earth Entrance*

Caves have been and still are viewed by Mesoamerican peoples as an entrance into places of wealth, abundance, and fertility (e.g., Brady 1988; Grigsby 1986). Rituals were carried out in caves, and it was widely believed that the water for rain was stored there, a critical necessity for an agricultural people. Since the earth was viewed as a source of life and fertility, the cave was like the birth canal leading into the earth as womb. To enter a cave was to return to the past, the place of origin, the time and space of the original cosmogony and the gods (Heyden 1981; Taube 1986).

Another metaphor for the cave as an entrance into the earth, as represented in art, was based on a different body opening: the mouth of a zoomorphic "earth monster." In Aztec pictographic manuscripts, the mouth is the image frequently used to depict the emergence of the original humans from out of the earth via a cave (e.g., Durán 1967: Vol. 2, Fig. 3). The incurving fangs of the earth monster carved above the doorway of many Zapotec tombs in the Valley of Oaxaca connote a similar meaning: a return into the mouth of the earth at death to join the ancestors. Similar representations of a monster's mouth were also placed around or above the doorways of temples or other sanctuaries of supernatural and royal space (Schávelzon 1980). As used in rituals, this imagery marked the threshold whereby officiants could travel to the otherworld, the otherworld, to mediate with the cosmic forces there.

The complexity of meaning of this icon, even at an early date, is seen in an Olmec-influenced "portable doorway" from Formative period Chalcatzingo (Fig. 3.2). Grove 1984).<sup>2</sup> This monument was made from a stone slab pierced with a cruciform opening, which formed the mouth of a face carved in bas-relief. The quatrefoil design around the opening refers not just to the mouth of the earth monster but also to the center of the earth,

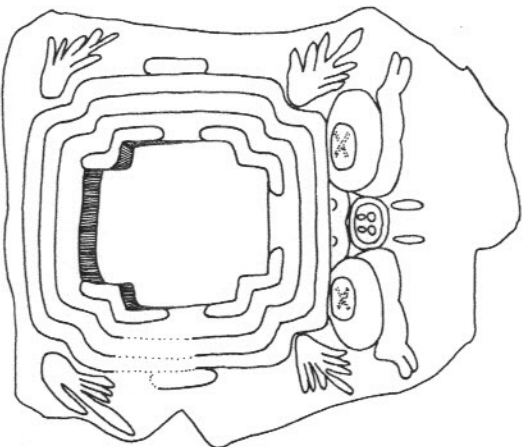


Figure 3.2. This bas-relief carving on Monument 9 from Formative period Chalcatzingo indicates that the opening through the free-standing stone slab is the cruciform mouth of an earth-monster (height: 1.8 m; width: 1.5 m). (Drawn from Grove 1984:Pl. 8)

since the four segments form a cosmogram, a model of the four directions (Schele 1987b:3). To go through this doorway was to enter the supernatural world at the cosmic center and to have access to the power and agricultural fertility that exist there (the latter quality apparently marked by the plants emerging from the four corners of the mouth).

The juxtaposition of a cave with a quadripartite diagram to mark a cosmic center may explain the location of another great architectural "pathway": the Classic period Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan in central Mexico. Tunneling under this huge pyramid revealed a natural cave with four chambers arranged in the quatrefoil fashion. Archaeological evidence indicates that rituals were held in this cave, and it apparently once contained water, matching the Mesoamerican belief that water was stored in the underworld (Heyden 1981:1-4). In these architectural examples — the cave/monster-mouth as the entrance to temples, and the siting of a pyramid

as coincident with the cosmic center—the emphasis is on using imagery to denote specific sacred places where access to supernatural power was possible.

Examples from Olmec and Maya art, however, while incorporating the general idea, reveal a major difference: underworld entrances were juxtaposed with particular identified rulers. By showing themselves in the elite art at this cosmic threshold, rulers indicated a source of their right to rule: their physical association with supernatural powers and with the realm of their deified ancestors. They also displayed their personal ability to mediate between the natural and supernatural worlds, a prime characteristic of sacred kingship.

Such portrayals appeared very early in Mesoamerica and were coincident with the rise of complex culture and an elite group. The Formative period Olmec culture of the lowland Gulf coast is well known for its stone monuments, especially three-dimensional colossal heads, statues, and altars. Many of these artworks incorporate true portraits, as determined by the depiction of individual physiognomy and the use of identifying or “naming” motifs in the headdress (Grove 1981:65). It is for this reason that the portrait is presumed to be that of the ruler (rather than a supernatural being or a generic human), and furthermore that these monuments are concerned with him personally, not just his office or position.

Some of the large altars show the ruler seated in a shallow niche, which represents the cave as earth entrance (Fig. 3.3; Grove 1973). On these, he is always shown seated halfway in and halfway out of the niche, indicating that he belongs to both the secular and the sacred worlds and that he can physically transcend and mediate between them. The ruler is an ambiguous being with both mortal and divine qualities, and thus incarnates great power. His ambiguity and power associate him personally with the qualities of the cosmic center.

These carved monuments must also be considered in their cultural contexts as functioning artifacts in Olmec society. As David Grove has shown, the “altars” actually served as thrones or seats of power of the ruler, equivalent in this sense to a South American “shaman’s stool” by which shamans and other individuals make contact with underworld forces (Grove 1973; Grove 1981:61–62). The ledge at the top of the La Venta Monument 4 altar carries bas-relief motifs, including the jaw row of the



Figure 3.3. This reconstructed front view of Altar 4 at La Venta, a Gulf coast Olmec center, portrays in three-dimensional sculpture a ruler sitting in a niche underneath motifs that represent the earth's surface, the jaw of a crocodilian. Named by his headdress motif, he holds a rope that leads to the portrait of another individual carved in relief on the side (height: 1.6 m). (Drawn from Grove 1973:Fig. 5)

crocodilian earth monster and a zoomorphic head, indicating that it represents the earth's surface. The ruler is shown below the ledge, in an underworld location. Thus, when the living ruler sat on top of the throne, on the surface of the earth, he not only made physical contact with the underworld, he again showed his dual qualities, for his “double” was sitting just below him, just below the surface of the earth (this being his own portrait or possibly that of an ancestor). The “twinning” of the mortal/supernatural aspects of the ruler repeats, in another form, the message of sitting halfway in and halfway out of the niche. In other words, this monument allowed for a certain redundancy of meaning by incorporating various images that all convey essentially the same concept.

The information communicated by these altars and other stone monuments is more complex than the simple commemoration of a particular ruler in an act of ritualistic mediation. The Olmec elite chose to portray themselves in ceremonial centers with the use of huge basalt boulders that had to have been hauled—by strictly human labor—to most of these sites from many miles away. The use of stone artworks is meaningful to the

consolidation of Olmec elite status in a number of permutations. Not only did they usurp for their imagery concepts their subjects already considered to be powerful in an ideological sense, but they also supervised the tremendous efforts required to construct the monuments, demonstrating more literal political authority (although it is doubtful that physical coercion was involved; see Grove and Gillespie n.d.). Furthermore, it is conceivable that the use of stone acquired from some distance gave the raw material itself an inherent "otherworldly" quality and added to the prestige of the elite who directed this work (see, e.g., Helms 1979 on the relationship between geographic distance and sacred authority).

While the altars, statues, colossal heads, and other monuments presumably depict only the rulers, it is likely that the ideological messages these artworks were meant to communicate served to benefit all the elite. Indeed, the ruler himself may have become a focus for the appropriation of power by an entire group. The elite used his image in legitimating their *de facto* position in society, and they continued to manipulate it after his demise.

Like a shaman's instruments of power, the altars and other portraits and objects associated with a ruler were often ritually mutilated and buried, actions which indicate that in one sense the medium was the message. Altars were frequently defaced by knocking off their corners; bas-relief and three-dimensional portraits, by obliterating the face and headress, by decapitation, or by removal of the power objects held by the rulers; and altars and colossal heads, by carving small depressions in them (Grove 1981). Archaeological evidence indicates that this mutilation occurred continuously, and Grove (1981) has hypothesized that it was an aspect of sacred rulership performed in order to "terminate" these objects, to neutralize the supernatural power they were believed to contain. He has shown that the destruction concentrated on the signficata of the ruler—his face and his naming motifs—which identified him and hence made reference to his unique persona.

These acts may have occurred with the death of the ruler, although his successors may have chosen to use their predecessor's monuments, at least temporarily, in order to transfer his power to themselves. This second scenario—in which the right to rule is tied in part to descent from a previous ruler, whose portrait is still required—may reflect the emergence of

succession to office via lineal relationships, an evolutionary development that was communicated via the monuments. Some evidence for the reuse of certain monuments, including the recarving of some altars into colossal heads (Porter 1989), as well as the usurpation of a probable ancestor's naming motif juxtaposed with that of the current ruler's name on his portrait (La Venta Stela 2; Grove 1981:67), could indicate a similar motivation.

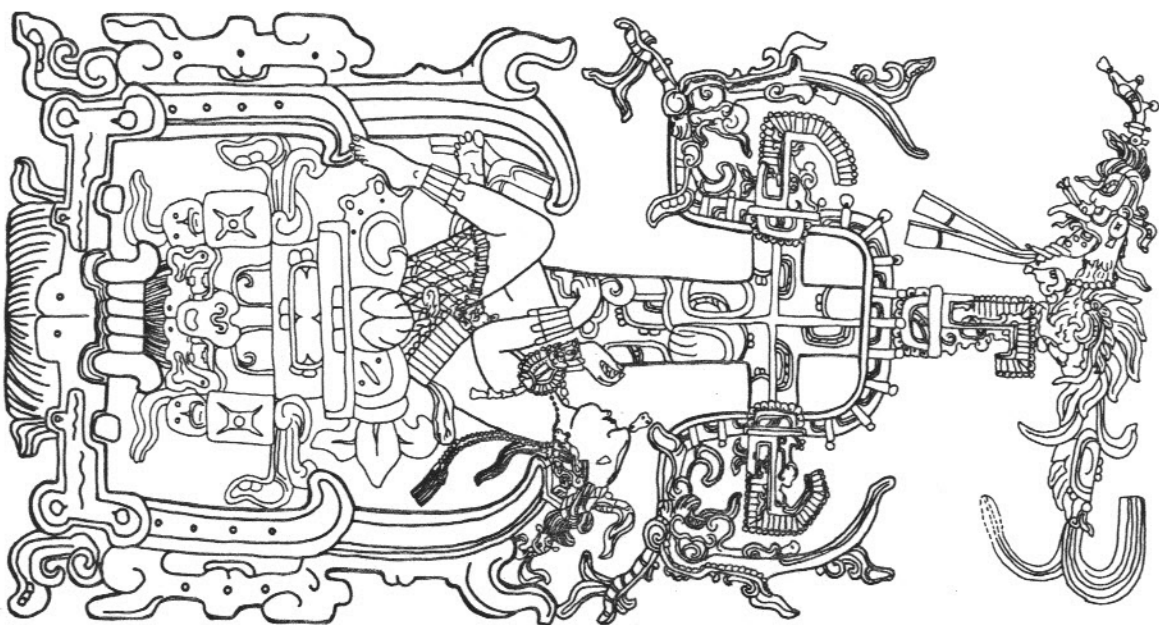
An Olmec-style carving at Chalcatzingo in central Mexico (Chalcatzingo Monument 1; Grove 1984:Pl. 5) probably portrays such a deified named ancestor seated fully (rather than halfway) within a more explicit profile monster mouth as cave. Billowing clouds and raindrops above the cave show the control over rain and agricultural fertility associated with this figure. The bas-relief depiction, carved high on a hillside, literally places the royal ancestor in a combination underworld/upperworld setting (cave/mountain), reflecting the dualism of the otherworld as well as locating this ancestor at the cosmic center.

More than a millennium later, the Classic period lowland Maya also used the earth monster mouth to indicate the apotheosis of named kings, for whom the mouth served as a threshold to the supernatural otherworld. A well-known example is the sarcophagus of Pakal, a Late Classic ruler of Palenque who was depicted in bas-relief on his sarcophagus lid according to Maya conceptions of his status at the moment of death (Fig. 3.4). He is shown poised just above the partly skeletonized mouth of the monster into which he is falling, indicating his transition from life and the natural world into death and the supernatural world (Robertson 1983:57). Rising more literally above him was an artificial mountain—the pyramid known as the Temple of the Inscriptions, which housed his tomb—indicating that this image, like Chalcatzingo's Monument 1 and the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan, is located at the juxtaposition of the upperworld and the underworld, the cosmic center, and that Pakal was placed forever precisely at that point.

#### *The World Tree as Axis Mundi*

Tropical trees can be very tall, massive, and impressive. Some trees have an extensive network of roots on the ground, while their branches form an umbrella-like canopy that blocks the sunlight. Yucatec Maya still believe





that the huge ceiba tree supports the sky and serves as the pathway used by souls of the dead to reach heaven, while a seventeenth-century Maya text states that the lineage founders emerged from the roots of the ceiba (León-Portilla 1988:136–39). Thus the ceiba, the cypress, and other great trees were perceived by the Mesoamerican peoples as vertical connectors between the upperworld, the middle world, and the underworld (Kolata 1984).

As such, great trees were the metaphorical *axis mundi*, the world axis separating the earth and the sky and thereby maintaining cosmic order. The complex design on an Aztec shield (Kolata 1984:12; Townsend 1979:38–39) locates the world tree at the center of the horizontal segments of the cosmos, for the solar disk appears in its middle section, with rays pointing to the four world-directions. In fact, four such trees, each with its own symbolic insignia, were thought to be located at each of the world quadrants, with a fifth tree at the cosmic center (see, e.g., central Mexican representations in the *Codex Borgia* 1963:Pls. 49–53; Maya beliefs are described in León-Portilla 1988). Trees were not merely supports, however. Located at the cosmic center, they were conduits by which supernatural powers and influences could be channeled from the otherworld to this world.

As a connector of the vertical levels, a channeler of supernatural power, and the support maintaining cosmic separations and hence world order, the *axis mundi* is a very powerful image. It, too, was appropriated by the state. For example, Aztec rulers were compared in formal speeches with the great trees, for the burden of the kings was the maintenance of social order and stability, while the function of the tree was the maintenance of cosmic order: "The ruler occupied the central position in the social structure, in the same way the ceiba or silk-cotton tree, it was believed, stood at

Figure 3.4. Pakal (died A. D. 683), ruler of Palenque, is shown here at the moment of his death in bas-relief on the lid of his limestone sarcophagus, placed in a tomb beneath the Temple of the Inscriptions. His ornaments are askew as he falls into the maw of a great monster. Above him rises a world tree with a supernatural bird on top and a double-headed serpent in the branches (3.72 m × 2.17 m). (Drawn from Robertson 1983; Fig. 99; surrounding motifs deleted)

the center of the universe" (Heyden 1986:40). In other words, the king was to the state as the tree was to the cosmos (Kolata 1984:14).

The icon of the world tree at the cosmic center is recognizable in Mesoamerican art as a tree or other plant with a bird in the branches representing the celestial sphere and a chthonic zoomorph or other representation of the earth at its base. A common variant was of the world tree as an upturned crocodilian with its head on the earth and its tail in the sky. One example comes from Late Formative Izapa, whose Stela 25 portrays an upended saurian with a bird in the "branches" formed from its tail (Fig. 3-5; Norman 1973). The crocodilian, a symbol of cosmic power in the Americas (Lathrap 1985), also represented the surface of the earth itself and so must be figuratively tilted 90 degrees upward to form the tree. This imagery thereby mimics the unfolding of the cosmos, the original cosmogonic separation between earth and sky that was effected in Aztec belief by gods who separated the crocodilian earth monster into two parts and lifted one part up to form the sky (see, e.g., *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas* 1941:210-11; *Histoire de la Mélique* 1905:29).

Moreover, the body of the crocodilian (as the earth) becomes the trunk of the world tree, meaning that the tree is like the earth's interior as the place of origin of peoples (Helms 1977:64). This meaning is apparent in Postclassic period Mixtec manuscript paintings and incised bones that depict the origin of human beings, especially of the ancestors of the rulers, as an emergence out of the trunk of the world tree (Fig. 3-6; Furst 1977; Kolata 1984; compare to Aztec mythology of the emergence of the peoples out of the earth via the earth-monster-mouth/cave). This imagery matches colonial and modern myths from the Mixtec region of a symbolically female "birth tree" (Furst 1977:198).

In contrast to the Mixtec birth tree as the origin place of the ruler's ancestors, their Aztec contemporaries used their own world tree symbol, an eagle perched on a prickly pear cactus growing out of a stone, to mark the location of the most powerful city, Tenochtitlan, at its founding in the past (Fig. 3-7).<sup>3</sup> Thus there is an association between the cosmic center as a tree and the city of Tenochtitlan itself, whose location was divinely marked by the world tree.

Maya rulers, however, showed themselves more individually associated with the world tree, just as the earlier Olmec chiefs and they were



Figure 3-5. Stela 25 from Late Formative Izapa, a Pacific coast lowland site, depicts in low relief an upturned crocodilian transformed into a tree. In its leafy, branching tail sits a bird. A snake's head lies in a vessel, while the snake's body wraps around the crocodile tree, curls around a staff held by a human, and then loops around another, larger bird perched on a staff (height: 1.28 m). (Drawn from Norman 1973:Pl. 42)

portrayed in the cave-like entrance to the underworld. The sarcophagus lid from Pakal's tomb at Palenque (Fig. 3-4) shows the dead king juxtaposed against the world tree, which has the celestial bird at the top and a monster head at the base within the chthonic realm. His successor had himself depicted standing next to similar images of trees on monuments relating his accession as king to the raising of the world tree (Schele and Miller 1986: Figs. II.6, IV.4).

Other Maya artworks reveal that the king himself could take the place

of the world tree (see especially Schele and Miller 1986; Freidel and Schele 1988a). Stelae and sumptuary objects were created which depict the ruler wearing a headdress with branching vegetation, such that he took on the characteristics, and hence the qualities, of the tree. This imagery begins early; it appears, for example, in the Late Formative period on Stela 11 from Kaminaljuyu, a highland Maya settlement (Parsons 1986:Pl. 169). On this upright stone the ruler is shown in bas-relief standing on an earth register represented by the incurving fangs of the earth monster. His body is like the trunk of the tree, his headdress has a polymorphic head with leafy branches, and above him is a stylized celestial bird. Late Classic period Maya kings often were shown wearing the abbreviated world tree on their aprons (Schele 1987a:2; Schele and Miller 1986:77).

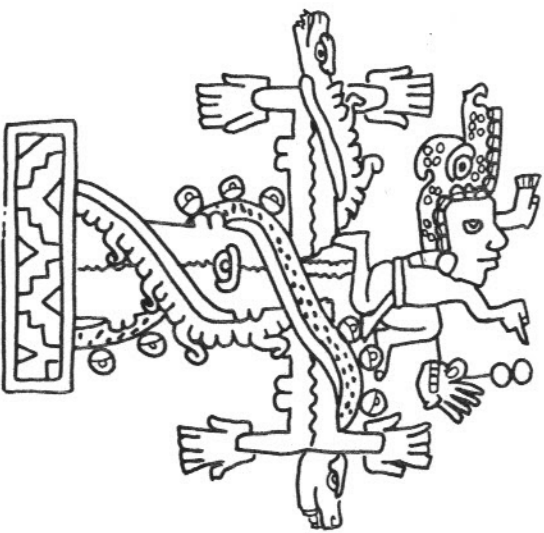


Figure 3.6. A Postclassic Mixtec painted manuscript, the *Codex Selden* (1964 p. 2, position 1), shows the origin of humans as an emergence from a "birth tree." The man coming out of the tree is still tied to it by an umbilical cord. Two snakes, one marked with spots and eyelike stars and the other marked with curls, are entwined around the tree.



Figure 3.7. This painted illustration of the founding of the city of Tenochtitlan, to accompany Diego Durán's sixteenth-century history of the Aztecs, shows the eagle with a snake in its mouth perched atop a prickly pear cactus, which grows from a rock in the midst of Lake Texcoco. (Drawn from Durán 1967: Vol. 2: Fig. 6)

Thus, whereas the Aztecs related the ruler to a tree by the use of simile—the king, by nature of his position as imposer of state order, is like the great tree—the Maya rulers had themselves individually depicted visually, and even directly referred to, as trees (see Freidel and Schele 1988a). Hieroglyphic texts indicate that Maya stone stelae, on which the rulers were portrayed, were called "tree-stone" (*te-tun*), an image of the ruler as a tree fixed for all time in stone (Schele and Stuart 1986). The artworks suggest that the king himself actually personified the world tree and that his body became a conduit for supernatural forces such that he could temporarily be possessed by them during rituals (Schele and Miller 1986: 183). This supposition fits well with a general model of the charismatic quality of Lowland Maya rulership, in which a key feature was "the ability of the king to confront personally the supernatural as a sorcerer, curer, and



prophet on behalf of his people" (Freidel and Schele 1988a:559).

The notion that the Maya ruler did indeed become a living world pivot and cosmic center is supported as well in the sacralization of space accomplished by the patterned layout of decorated buildings and plaza areas. From the Late Formative period on, there is architectural information concerning a modeling of the universe in which the Maya king played a dynamic and critical role. Archaeological evidence suggests that some early temple-pyramids served as great stages for the erection of four-part designs, often represented by huge stucco supernatural faces on the side of the pyramid or by four great wooden posts on top. The king, by standing in the fifth and central position, would have completed the design by his presence (Freidel and Schele 1988a:552, 561) and thereby established world order.

The Maya king was thus the hub of the cosmic wheel, and the sun and stars rotated around him. Another symbol associated with Maya kingship is a scepter representing the passageway of the sun and other celestial bodies across the heavens (Freidel and Schele 1988b:73). By holding this scepter, the king not only supported the heavens, like a world tree, but also maintained the cosmic spatio-temporal order established preeminently by the movement of these bodies across the sky.

The use of a tree image to depict the king as an animate mediating pathway can be related to the political situation of the Classic period Lowland Maya. The Maya were divided politically into numerous small rival territories, most of which were headed by independent rulers. Ideologically, these polities competed with each other for the claim of possessing the cosmic center in the person of their king. Especially in the Late Classic period, Maya warfare imagery emphasizes the capture of rulers and elite groups from other cities (Schele and Miller 1986:209ff). In the case of the capture and sacrifice of a king, it is as if one could thereby take away the *axis mundi*, the access to supernatural power, of one's rivals, and hence the symbol par excellence of their legitimacy as an independent polity.

#### *The Mountain as Access to the Heavens*

Mountains were, and continue to be, the focus of ritual activity in Mesoamerica as the dwelling places of gods and ancestors (Tedlock 1986:128). The pre-Columbian peoples also built artificial mountains, pyramids of

stone and earth with buildings on top (called temples), reached by stairways. Photographs of the now jungle-covered Classic Maya city of Tikal indicate an important feature of the five great temple-pyramids there: the bases of the temples lie approximately at the tops of the modern trees. Those temples are literally in the heavens, above the trees. The pyramid, like the Tower of Babel, connects earth and sky and links people to the gods and ancestors in the upperworld.

As a conjunction of upperworld/underworld pathways already described, several of the Maya pyramids are funerary monuments, particularly those with nine architectural levels, possibly symbolizing the layers of the underworld in Mesoamerican thought. They were built over the underground tombs holding the earthly remains of individual named kings (such as the Temple of the Inscriptions overlying Pakal's tomb at Palenque), who were believed to reside in immortal form within the temples at the summit (Miller 1986:56-57).

The use of a pyramid as a stairway to the upperworld and a stage for the rituals performed by charismatic kings began in the Lowland Maya area in the Formative period (Freidel and Schele 1988b:45). Some of these early pyramids are distinguished by the embellishment of giant stucco heads of supernaturals on their facades. The insignia of these heads were later directly appropriated by kings, who not only substituted their own faces for those of the supernaturals but also adorned themselves with the accoutrements of those earlier heads as part of their royal costume (1988b:55, 62). Thus the king was figuratively "wearing" — and hence becoming one with — the pyramid, taking for himself the markers associated with that sacred pathway to the upperworld (just as he also claimed to be the living world tree).

In other parts of Mesoamerica, however, pyramids are associated less with individual kings as sacred persons, who literally embody the power of the state, than with the mapping of sacred places. This contrast is apparent in the Classic period, seen in the very different media and messages in Maya art and in that of the great central Mexican city-state, Teotihuacan, best known for its massive Pyramid of the Sun and Pyramid of the Moon (these are later appellations).<sup>4</sup> Whereas the Maya elite art portrays named kings acting as cosmic pivots and world trees or directly contacting deified ancestors and gods via their sacrificial bloodletting, the art of Teotihuacan lacks

such portraiture, emphasizing animals, abstract symbols, supernaturals, and anonymous humans, some distinguished by insignia indicating an office or grouping not yet fully understood. These images are most apparent in the polychrome painted murals that are still preserved in several of the building interiors, as well as on architectural embellishments and portable decorated objects, but there are very few freestanding stone monuments.

The Tepantitla mural at Teotihuacan (Pasztor 1976) portrays what appear to be anonymous priests in the act of "addressing" a central image, interpreted as the cosmic center because a great tree grows out of it. This central image (e.g., Heyden 1981: Fig. 3) may actually represent an anthropomorphized mountain or pyramid (Schele n.d.) drawn with human arms and hands. The size and number of pyramids at this great city are such that the buildings themselves should have been a major focus of Teotihuacan ideology, and their sacred qualities may have been shown in this nonrepresentational and anthropomorphized form.

The lower part of this image is a "cave-like" inverted U from which liquid flows, and liquid also drips from the image's hands. Depicted immediately below this icon, and separated from it by a register marking, is a mountain made of water, which flows off to irrigate agricultural fields. In Mesamerican belief, as noted above, water was stored in the underworld and the Pyramid of the Sun was erected over a cave that once held water, so this mural may represent the same relationship of a pyramid over a "cave" in terms of its association with access to the water and other sacred qualities of the underworld (Heyden 1981: 3, 5). If so, it juxtaposes the pathways of the pyramid-mountain and the world tree, which connect to the upperworld, with an underworld (lower register) scene of watery abundance and agricultural fertility in the context of some ritual performed at that cosmic center by persons who remain anonymous.

The lower part of the Tepantitla mural thereby literally depicts a "water hill," an image that may represent an underworld-upperworld conjunction. In the Nahuatl language of the Aztecs, *altepetl* (Karttunen 1983: 9), meaning "it is water, it is a hill," was the major word for "city" and also referred to the territory ruled by that city and to its king (Marcus 1983a: 207). Other iconographic evidence indicates that mountain or hill symbols were used to represent particular towns or politics—such that this pathway to power connoted an entire community—as early as the Late Formative

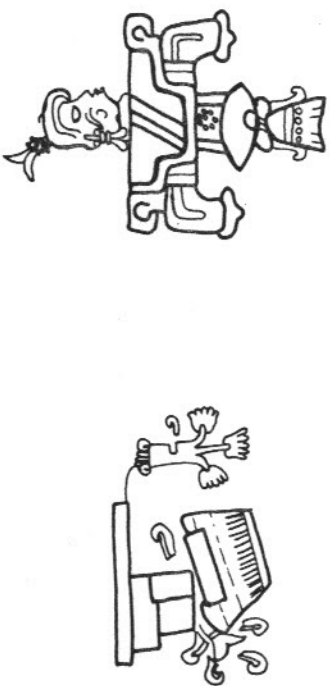


Figure 3.8. Two representations of conquest. On the left is the principal motif from a Late Formative low relief stone slab set into the wall of Building J at the Zapotec center of Monte Albán (drawn from Marcus 1983b: Fig. 4.14). The upside-down head under the stepped mountain glyph indicates conquest of a polity which is named by the glyph on top. The icon on the right, of a burning temple atop a pyramid, is from the sixteenth-century Aztec painted manuscript the *Codex Mendoza* (1980: fol. 6r). The "speaking tree" beside it is the glyph for the town of Quauhnahuac (modern Cuernavaca).

Zapotec culture in the Valley of Oaxaca. At their paramount city, Monte Albán, flat stone slabs were carved in low relief for architectural placement within the ceremonial center. The monuments presumably communicate the "conquest" of other communities. The central message of these monuments is composed of an inverted stepped U motif—a mountain—representing a polity, with a glyph on top naming the community conquered and an inverted head below to indicate conquest (Fig. 3.8; see other examples in Caso 1965 and Marcus 1976).

The use of mountain glyphs to represent named towns continued to the time of the Spanish conquest in Mixtec and Aztec painted art. In Postclassic Mixtec painting, the act of conquest was indicated by an arrow piercing the mountain glyph naming a place, or flames emerging from that glyph (Smith 1973:33). In some of the pictographic Aztec manuscript paintings, the conquest of a town was shown by a picture of a burning temple atop the pyramid as an artificial mountain and next to a glyph that represents that town (see *Codex Mendoza* 1980 and Fig. 3.8). These latter

depictions reflect the reality of warfare, in which the attacking side attempted to destroy the main temple-pyramid of a community, thereby neutralizing the place of access to its patron gods and signaling the defeat of the community itself. This means that the temple on its pyramid—the ritual focus of that polity as its access to supernatural power—represented the town and the group that lived there (Townsend 1979:54) in actual practice as well as in the art.

Thus, whereas the representations of Late Classic Maya warfare emphasized the capture of named rulers and nobles of rival cities, as if to represent those polities as deprived of their conduits to supernatural power, in highland central Mexico an image of the destruction of the temple-pyramid of a named community was used to communicate this same feat. Here again the contrast is present between the sacred person of the king and the sacred place associated with the community as the focus for both ritual and art.

While the sacred-mountain/temple-pyramid was an important concept and icon among the Late Postclassic Aztecs in highland Mexico, as it was for the earlier Classic Period Teotihuacanos, the Aztec kings are not entirely absent from this imagery. Very late in the pre-Hispanic period, named kings appear in the art, although they are more frequently shown dressed as priests rather than as kings (Klein 1987), making sacrifices and interceding with supernaturals on behalf of their people, as was the function of the separate priesthood. Unlike their earlier Teotihuacan counterparts (who may also have dressed as the priests depicted in the art), we know these individuals are kings of Tenochtitlan because name glyphs were added to their depictions. One example is the low-relief greenstone slab called the Dedication Stone, which portrays the kings Tizoc and Ahuitzotl (Pasztory 1983:150–51, Pl. 95). Dressed as priests, they are engaged in autosacrifice, drawing blood from their ears and legs. Their blood flows into the stylized maw of a great earth monster.

The detailed Aztec ethnohistorical documentation indicates why the kings are shown as priests—rather than in kingly regalia—when performing sacrifices, in contrast to Classic Maya ideology as known from their hieroglyphic writing. The Maya kings used their writing system and art to reiterate their contention that the living kings initiated the acts of the creator gods and thus became one with them. Because of this continuity in ritual action, the kings could contact the gods, often through autosacrifice.

Bloodletting rituals and paraphernalia were an integral part of the imagery of kingship (see especially Schele and Miller 1986). The king's role as the personified conduit to the otherworld is further revealed in Maya art and architecture, indicating that he was the living world tree, the living cosmic pivot.

In contrast, the kings of Tenochtitlan, the most powerful Aztec city, were said to have received the right to rule by being members of a particular ethnic group that acquired hegemony from its tutelary god following a long migration from the place of origin (a cave). In Tenochtitlan state history, elaborated in both ritual and art, the tutelary god, Huitzilopochtli, did not choose the king, nor was the king his lineal descendant. Instead, the god pointed out the sacred place where his chosen people were to build their temple-pyramid, the Templo Mayor (Great Temple), and thus have access to him through the intermediary of a priestly bureaucracy.

This place was marked by a world tree with a celestial bird on top, an eagle that was Huitzilopochtli himself in his solar aspect (see Fig. 3-7). The world tree, shown as a cactus growing from a stone, is actually the place glyph of Tenochtitlan in the pictographic writing system, meaning that this city, and more particularly the temple to its patron god, was the cosmic center. That this pyramid was to be used to contact the god is revealed elsewhere in the Aztec histories, for Huitzilopochtli was said to have been born on top of such a sacred mountain (e.g., *Codex Azcatitlan* 1949; see Fig. 3-9); that is, he originally traveled from the upperworld of gods to the world of mankind via this pathway.

The function of the Templo Mayor as a pivot for the celestial movements that defined spatio-temporal order is seen in its position and orientation in relation to the annual movement of the sun, especially for sighting the sun at equinox (Aveni et al. 1988). As the pivot and access point at the cosmic center, the Templo Mayor, a sacred mountain whose location was marked by the world tree, should metaphorically coincide with the cave-like entrance to the underworld. This may explain why the Dedication Stone described above, a monument thought to have been created to commemorate a major rebuilding of the Templo Mayor in 1487 (Townsend 1979:40), does not depict the pyramid itself but instead shows two kings as priests sacrificing their blood to feed the earth-monster mouth, indicating that the earth-entrance meaning was also associated with the pyramid.

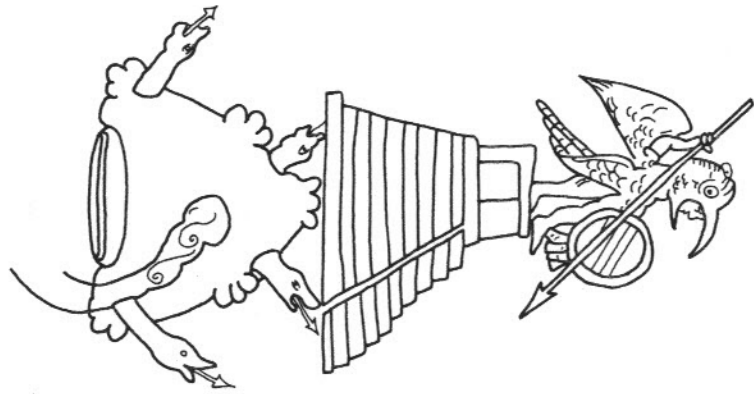


Figure 3.9. A postconquest Aztec painted manuscript, the *Codex Azcatitlan* (1949), shows the "birth" of Tenochtitlan's patron god, Huitzilopochtli, in his human-bird guise. He stands on a temple-pyramid that sits atop the mountain glyph adorned with serpents, naming this place as Coatepec, the "Serpent-Hill."

All three mediating pathways, but now with the addition of the identified king, coincide in a Late Aztec monolithic sculpture known as the Temple of Sacred War (Fig. 3.10; Townsend 1979:49–62). This sculpture demonstrates the conjunction of the concept of the sacred place with the personalized role of the king in Aztec art during the last few years before the Spanish conquest. It is a three-dimensional model of a temple-pyramid, carved in bas-relief on every surface but its base. It is marked on the back

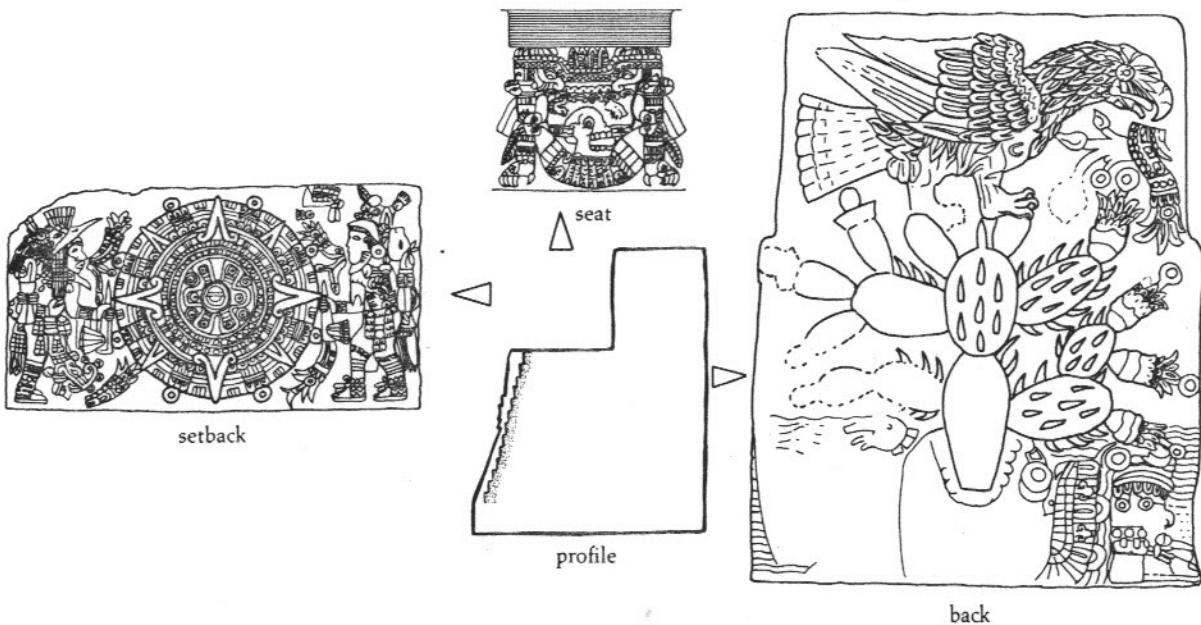


Figure 3.10. This three-dimensional Aztec stone model of a temple-pyramid, called the Temple of Sacred War, combines all three pathways to power, together with a king identified by a name glyph. Besides representing a sacred mountain, this monument is also a throne, as the side-view (lower center) shows. The stippled area indicates the approximate location of the thirteen nonfunctional steps on the front. When the ruler Motecuhzoma II sat on his throne, he leaned back against the solar disk (left), representing the sun and the world directions, on the right side of which he had himself portrayed. He sat down on the mouth of an earth monster (upper center), and behind him, on the eroded back side (right), is the world tree, the symbol of the city of Tenochtitlan at its founding (height 1.2 m). (Drawn from Townsend 1979:50–51 and Pasztory 1983:165–69; other designs omitted)



with the Tenochtitlan place glyph, the prickly pear cactus as world tree, which grows out of an earth monster, indicating that the pyramid represents the community of Tenochtitlan as well as the Templo Mayor at the cosmic center. The front shows the sun disk, its rays forming a cosmogram that also locates the cosmic center. Flanking the disk are two personages. The one on the left has the accoutrements of the patron deity of Tenochtitlan, Huitzilopochtli (Townsend 1979:55), and the one on the right has a name glyph identifying him as Motecuhzoma II, the last pre-Hispanic king of Tenochtitlan (Umberger 1984:73-78). A top view shows that below the solar disk and above the nonfunctional stairway on the pyramid front is an earth monster with a wide-open zoomorphic mouth.

These combined images become more meaningful in terms of the association of this sacred mountain model with kingship when the function of the monolith is considered. Its shape and size indicate that it is a throne (Umberger 1984), so it functioned like the Olmec altars. When Motecuhzoma sat upon it (it was found in the area of his palace [Umberger 1984:64]), he was literally sitting on the mouth of the earth monster, like an Olmec ruler in his niche or Pakal on his sarcophagus poised above the maw of the earth. When he leaned back against the solar disk, he juxtaposed himself with the moving sun, its rays representing the world directions emerging from the cosmic center. Furthermore, he aligned himself with the world tree (on the back), as Maya kings had centuries before. However, he was sitting on the symbol of his community, the sacred place, indicated by both the temple-pyramid/sacred-mountain form of the throne and the world tree denoting the city of Tenochtitlan and the temple that represented it. Thus his charter of rulership ultimately derived from his association with his people, his city, and their tutelary god.

The conjunction revealed in this late monumental work of what were elsewhere apparently two contrasting ideologies of rulership may reflect the growing interaction between the central highlands and the Maya area—the “grand Mesoamerican synthesis that was effected in the Postclassic period” (Willey 1973:158). It may also represent an evolution in the ideology of Aztec kingship, which was originally based on an impersonal office but which was acquiring the characteristics of a nascent personality cult, aided by the manipulation of imagery in state art.

### *The Serpent as Mediator*

The artworks described in this brief survey include certain animals that in the Mesoamerican worldview were thought of as cosmic connectors: the crocodilian as the world tree; the celestial bird, which links the upperworld and the earth's surface; and the jaguar, often associated with the underworld but which travels on the ground and sleeps in trees (Helms 1977:55). Nevertheless, among all the animals that appear as cosmic agents in the art of Mesoamerica, one stands out because it appears prominently with the imagery of all three mediating pathways: the serpent.

The nonhuman “monster” whose mouth serves as the cave-like entrance to the otherworld is sometimes identifiable as a serpent. An example dating back to the Formative period is a painting of a man in a bird costume seated on a great open-mouthed serpent head. The painting was placed on a hillside above an actual cave entrance at Oxtotitlan in western Mexico (Grove n.d.). The similarities this animal exhibits with the zoomorphic head above the niche on Olmec La Venta Altar 4 (Fig. 3.3) led to the identification of that animal as a serpent also (David Grove, personal communication, 1991). A serpent's mouth is painted around the doorway in which Classic period Maya kings sat at Palenque (House E; Robertson 1985:Fig. 432), placing them in the same setting as an Olmec ruler in his altar niche. The semiskeltonized maw receiving the Maya king Pakal at his death, carved on the lid of his sarcophagus, belongs to a serpent (Fig. 3.4). Many of the temple entrances that were marked as mouths, indicating that their interiors were the sacred space of the otherworld, can also be recognized as serpents (e.g., *Codex Borgia* 1963:Pl. 14; for other examples, see Schavelzon 1980).

As for the world tree, numerous depictions include a serpent or a doubled serpent wrapped around its trunk. For example, a serpent appears in doubled form on a Mixtec “birth tree” (Fig. 3.6). On Izapa Stela 25, with the “crocodilian-tree” (Fig. 3.5), there is a snake wrapped around the body of the saurian, rising from below the earth and wrapping around the celestial bird, linking these motifs to a staff held by a person who mimics the tree. Double-headed serpents loll in the branches of a world tree in some of the Maya artworks, such as on Pakal's sarcophagus lid (Fig. 3.4). On the

Aztec "cactus tree," which serves as the Tenochtitlan place glyph, the eagle on top is sometimes shown grasping a snake in its mouth (Fig. 3-7).

The third pathway, the pyramid as sacred mountain connecting the earth with the sky, sometimes has preserved serpent markings—especially in central Mexican cultures, but there are also some Maya examples. For example, Tenochtitlan's Templo Mayor and a Postclassic pyramid at nearby Tenayuca are decorated with three-dimensional serpent heads and full-figure serpents. Tenochtitlan histories and manuscript paintings collected after the conquest explain one particular relationship between snakes and pyramids in that the sacred mountain where the tutelary god, Huitzilopochtli, was born—that is, where he left the realm of the gods and entered the realm of mankind—is called "Serpent-Hill," the serpent again marking this cosmic pathway (Fig. 3-9).

This imagery appeared much earlier in central Mexico at Teotihuacan, where three-dimensional stone serpent heads with bas-relief bodies decorated the entire outer surface of a major Early Classic pyramid and serpent heads were placed at the tops and bases of many stairway balustrades. Similar serpent icons embellished some Maya pyramids in the Late and Terminal Classic periods, perhaps due to known interregional contact between central Mexico and the Maya area but also resulting from the shared pan-Mesoamerican cosmology. For example, the Terminal Classic Maya site of Chichen Itza in Yucatan has serpent balustrades very similar to those at the later central Mexican Aztec Templo Mayor (Molina Montes 1987:102).

The serpent-marked balustrades give the impression that the stairways that conveyed elite personages to the structures on top of the pyramids were akin to the body of a serpent. More literally, the Hieroglyphic Stairway at the Late Classic Maya site of Copan has been described as the body of a great serpent (Gordon 1902:10). Because the hieroglyphic text carved on its steps names the predecessors of a king, he could go back into the past as he went up the stairs into the upperworld. This serpent stairway was his personal conduit—via his royal predecessors—to otherworldly powers.

One reason why the serpent was linked with these other icons representing the transcendence of cosmic categories in Mesoamerican thought may be its natural characteristics, as these were observed. Different species of snakes live on land, underground, in water, and in trees, and hence seem

to link the vertical dimensions of the cosmos. Furthermore, they neither walk nor fly like other creatures of these realms and are ambiguous in this respect (see discussion in Hunt 1977:74–80). Some are poisonous and cause death, but their shape resembles the phallus, umbilical cord, and lightning, referring to fertility, birth, and rain—life-giving imagery. Thus serpents can also indicate a duality of life and death, or death and rebirth when they shed their skins. Most important, however, was the explicit belief that serpents were conceived to be "roads" (Sullivan 1986:14).

The Mesoamerican peoples developed variations on this theme of the transcendence of the serpent as a combined terrestrial and celestial phenomenon, frequently by juxtaposing a snake with a bird. For example, a birdman sits on a serpent head in the Oxtotitlan painting described above. Other combinations include a winged or feathered serpent, a bird with a "serpent-wing," as occurs on the Celestial Bird on Pakal's sarcophagus (Fig. 3-4; Robertson 1983:60), and a culture hero or deity named Feathered Serpent. Some pyramids at Chichen Itza and also at Tula, its counterpart site in central Mexico, are topped by three-dimensional feathered-serpent columns with their heads on the platform and their tails in the air. These columns served as the doorway into the temple on top so that the serpent is simultaneously the threshold into sacred space (the temple) and the earth-sky connector atop the pyramid.

In all of these cultures, serpents—as cosmic links and power channels—came to be associated with rulership in the elite artworks, which served to encapsulate and convey messages about the constructed reality. Objects decorated with serpents or made to look like snakes became instruments to denote the qualities of rulership, and as such they again reveal a difference between the more charismatic personified rulers of the Olmecs and Classic Mayas and the anonymous leaders whose status was tied to their office or to a sacred place rather than to personal qualities. In Olmec and Maya artworks, the rulers hold a serpent image to denote their position. For example, a small Olmec greenstone celt is incised with a design showing a man holding a serpent like a ceremonial bar (Joralemon 1976; Fig. 11b), analogous to Late Classic Maya kingship symbols, the double-headed serpent bar and the serpent-footed manikin scepter (Schele and Miller 1986:49).

The Maya kings, who performed blood sacrifice in order to contact

the otherworldly realm, expressed this ritualistic threshold status in their art with a giant snake whose body served as the conduit through which supernatural beings could travel to the world of mankind, emerging from the serpent's mouth (Schele and Miller 1986:46-47). The kings had themselves depicted holding these serpent icons to communicate their ability to transcend and connect the different spatio-temporal segments of the cosmos as a world pivot and support for the entire cosmic order. This use of serpents contrasts with the serpent-shaped handles of Postclassic Aztec and Mixtec incense burners. These objects had a similar function as instruments of supernatural contact but were held by anonymous priests (or by kings acting as priests), mediators on behalf of their community as part of an established state hierarchy of positions and functions.

The sacred histories preserved in Aztec exegetical texts of the Postclassic period, collected after the Spanish conquest, help to explain this nonpersonalized relationship between serpents and kings, a concept also found among the Postclassic (as opposed to Classic) Maya, perhaps as a result of interaction with highland Mexico. According to these documents, the founder of the office of kingship itself, from whence later kings derived their power, was a culture hero named Feathered Serpent. Feathered Serpent was both a man and a god, a duality that is reflected as well in his combined terrestrial-celestial name and in his establishment of kingship at the sacred locality that was conceived of as the threshold between the otherworld and this world. Ethnic groups competing for hegemony included in their own histories the story of a migration to the sacred place from which the right to rulership was derived (Gillespie 1989). Thus the serpent as a pathway to cosmic power in these late cultures was associated with the office of kingship, at the top of an impersonal state hierarchy, and not with the persona and ritual actions of individual charismatic kings.

To summarize, among the Mesoamerican cultures certain shared images were used to construct and communicate complex ideas about the state and the cosmos, especially ideas dealing with the nature of a king as a powerful being who transcended cultural categories, for "sovereign power itself partakes of the nature of the opposition, combines in itself the elementary antithesis" (Sahlins 1985:90-91). The decorated objects and architecture, the material manifestation of these ideas, took on a sacred quality, as demonstrated by the "termination" of some artworks and build-

ings, particularly those of the Olmecs and Mayas that were personally associated with individual kings (Grove 1981; Schele and Miller 1986:43-44). The manipulation of these icons facilitated the reworking of the concepts that shaped their creation. In this way the elite could expand their political power within society in part by modifying the visual expression of their charter of rulership, which was ultimately based on their access to supernatural power, by using these images in public ritual.

Examining the similarity and variety in the manifestation of the different mediating pathways to cosmic power in Mesoamerican art—the cave, the tree, the mountain, and the serpent—has demonstrated, first that these high cultures did share a unified ideological base, as seen in their adherence to common themes, and second, that major differences in the nature of rulership and the construction of state authority are revealed in the contexts of these images. These differences can be reduced to a dichotomy, which has been simplified here as a contrast between highland (central Mexico and Oaxaca) and lowland (Olmec and Maya) peoples. This dichotomy apparently dissolved at the end of the Classic period, when interregional interactions became more intense and more powerful state organizations extended their hegemonies.

By studying these images from an iconographic perspective, in the totality of their cultural contexts as we understand them, we begin to explore the operation and evolution of society in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. While we cannot fully decode the messages of these artworks, nor faithfully reconstruct the nature of the experience of creating and using them, we can at least appreciate the significance of art as a highly creative and meaningful medium for human communication, one that still speaks to us today.

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## NOTES

1. This usage approximates the distinction Silverman makes in Chapter 5 between "sacred" and "popular" art (following Kubler), although I do not see these two terms as opposed to one another and prefer the more general contrast — elite and non-elite artworks — based on the group in society which archaeologists presume directed its production or for whose use it was intended. Elite artworks are identified by their material, craftsmanship, and spatial context.
2. The figures in this chapter were drawn by the author, based on published versions of varying quality. Several of the stone monuments contain eroded or broken areas. In some cases, surrounding motifs have been eliminated to focus the reader's attention on the major icon under discussion.
3. This symbol has since been appropriated as the central element on the national flag of Mexico.
4. Recent evidence indicates that there were human burials under an early pyramid, the Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent, at Teotihuacan (Sugiyama 1989). These may be part of a complex that marked that pyramid as having some funerary aspects.

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