

The Cauac Monster

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Early students of the Maya noted the appearance of dragons or monsters in the art of the classic period (Maudslay 1889-1902: text; Seler 1902-1923: I: 670-675). They described these monsters as essentially reptilian but with animal features, human attributes and glyphic signs. Alfred Maudslay called attention to representations of a dragon with two heads that Herbert Spinden (1913: 68-70) associated with Itzamná, the supreme deity of postclassic Yucatán. The identification of the bicephalic dragon as Itzamná was further discussed by Eric Thompson (1970a: 205-233; 1973).

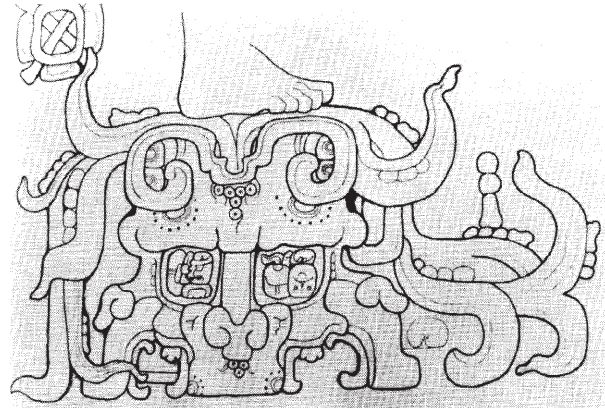


Fig. 1 Palenque, detail of the tablet, Temple of the Foliated Cross. Line drawing by Linda Schele.

Thompson also studied monsters with single heads (1971: 70-88, 274-277), which he perceived as manifestations or aspects of Itzamná (1970a: 210; 1971: 11-13; 1973: 63-66). The research of Thompson was based upon epigraphic and linguistic evidence. He identified monsters by their glyphic signs and interpreted their significance through linguistic associations. Thompson named the cauac monster after the glyph for the day *cauac* in the tzolkin of the Maya calendar (1971: 87). Both the glyph and the dragon are characterized by groups of circles drawn in clusters, triads and semi-circular rings (Figs. 1, 2).

Cauac is a Yucatec word that has cognates in other Maya languages (Chol: *chahc*; Tzotzil: *chauc*; Cholan: *chaac*; Chuh: *chauoc*; Pokoman: *cahok*; Kekchi: *caak*). It is usually translated as lightning or thunder and occasionally as rain (Seler, 1902-1923: I: 496; Thompson, 1971: 87). On the basis of this information, Thompson regarded the cauac monster as a rain god (1971: 87) and the circle motifs as rain drops or beads of water (1971: 49, 275).

Not discussed by Thompson, however, is the appearance of vegetation on cauac monsters. At Palenque and Copan, the circle motifs frequently have small leaves attached to them (Fig. 1). On a polychrome vase (Fig. 3), a tree seems to grow in a cauac head. Maize sprouts from cauac heads at Palenque on the tablet of the Temple of the Foliated Cross and on the jambs in the Temple of the Sun. Although Thompson recognized vegetation as symbolic of the earth (1971: 11-12), he emphatically identified the cauac monster as a sky dragon (1971: 10-11, 87, 274-275; 1973: 218).

The cauac monster is most often depicted as an isolated head, as are many dragons in classic Maya art (Kubler, 1969: 29). In addition to the circle motifs and vegetation, distinctive attributes of the dragon include an eccentric forehead or cleft head, eyelashes and trefoil or quatrefoil motifs (Figs. 1-6, 9, 10). The body of the cauac monster appears only at Copan, Quirigua and Palenque. It has circle motifs, eyes filled with crossed bands and trefoil patterned leg joints.

The present study examines the placement of the cauac monster in classic Maya art. One position shows the cauac head on the ground line of compositions where it functions as a pedestal or support for rulers and deities. It is more common, however, to find the cauac monster as an enclosure. The head becomes a niche for figures seated in the open jaws of the monster. Similar use of the dragon occurs in scenes where figures are protected by a latticework of repeated cauac

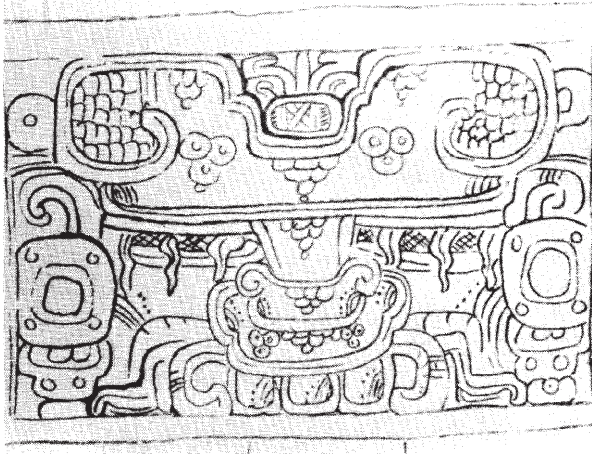


Fig. 2 Tzakol tripod. Line drawing after a photograph published by Dorsin角度-Smets, 1977: cat. no. 194.

heads. At Palenque and Copan, reliefs of the monster on temple roofs and façades suggest that the structures were intended as dragon shelters.

Representations of the caucac head are scarce in the early classic period. It occurs on cache vessels and on Altar 4 at Tikal. An early example (Fig. 2) comes from a blackware tripod (Dorsin角度-Smets, 1977: cat. no. 194). The vessel, now in a private collection, has a text which concerns an early Tikal ruler named Curl Nose (ca. 8.17.2.0.0-8.19.10.0.0). In the late classic period, numerous representations of the caucac monster are found on ceramics, monuments and architectural reliefs.

Published examples are tabled at the end of the paper.

THE CAUAC HEAD AS A SUPPORT OR PEDESTAL

On polychrome vases, deities usually sit on caucac heads (Figs. 5, 6). Chan-Bahlum, ruler of Palenque, stands on the head of the caucac monster on the tablet of the Temple of the Foliated Cross (Fig. 1). At other cities, rulers portrayed on stelae stand on mask panels of caucac heads. It has been suggested that basal mask panels represent small pedestals known as “altars” (Clancy, 1974). Monoliths and zoomorphs in the Motagua region probably served another purpose, but geometric stones with flat tops may have been pedestals. Cauac heads on pedestal sculptures are found at Tikal on Altar 4 and at Copan on Altar D.

Deities with heads that function as pedestals — the ix jaguar, the imix monster, the death god, the kan cross monster, the kin monster — are associated with the earth and the underworld (Thompson 1971: 70-73, 82, 275-277; Coe 1973: 98-99; 1975:19). The basal position of the caucac head signifies that the caucac monster was also earthbound. A terrestrial home for the monster is further indicated by the placement of caucac heads in hieratic compositions that are thought to symbolize the Maya universe.

Reliefs of deities around the inner doorway of Temple 22 at Copan seem to be metaphors for parts of the physical world (Thompson 1970b: 475; 1973: 215). The sky is symbolized by the bicephalic dragon over the doorway and the underworld by a row of skulls under the threshold. The sky and the underworld meet on the surface of the earth where two bacabs support the heads of the bicephalic dragon. Cauac heads shape the buttocks of each bacab (Schele 1976: Fig. 9). A similar relationship between the bicephalic dragon and the caucac monster exists on lintel 3 from Temple IV at Tikal and on the back of Stela I at Quirigua. All three presentations associate the caucac monster with the surface of the earth.



Fig. 3 Tepeu vase. Rollout drawing courtesy of Michael D. Coe: copyright M.D. Coe 1972.

THE CAUAC HEAD AS A SHELTER OR NICHE

Many dragon heads serve as pedestals or supports but that of the caucac monster is one of few heads that also functions as a niche. The caucac head is a shelter or niche for figures on polychrome vases (Figs. 7-9). In these scenes, the head is shown in profile with circle motifs around the open mouth. A monumental rendering of the profile head occurs



Fig. 4 Tepeu bowl, detail. Photograph courtesy of David Joralemon.

on Stela 5 at Piedras Negras. Stela B from Copan depicts a ruler standing inside the open jaws of a frontal head.

Carved monoliths from Copan and Quirigua also present figures in the open jaws of cauc heads (Copan: Altar N, Altar M and the stair riser to Temple 11; Quirigua: Zoomorph B and Zoomorph P). Most are bicephalic, combining the head and body of the cauc monster with the heads of other earth dragons. The cauc monsters have standard features: crossed eye bands, eyelashes, niche figures and reptilian bodies with circle motifs and trefoil patterned leg joints. These monoliths suggest terrestrial aspects of the bicephalic dragon.

Similar use of the cauc monster as a niche occurs in scenes where figures are sheltered by multiple heads. The Copanec ruler on Stela B is encased by cauc heads on the front, back and sides of the monument. Cascading heads create a niche for God L on a polychrome vase (Fig. 10). An openwork relief from the Usumacinta area renders figures against a lattice of repeated heads. The jambs on the Temple of the Sun are framed by cauc heads and another dragon series. At Tikal, a protective enclosure for the ruler on lintel 2 from Temple IV includes a column of cauc heads, a single head behind the throne and an object above the ruler's head, perhaps a flower, bearing cauc symbols.

The cauc monster acquired architectural importance at Copan in the construction of Temple 22. Although the exterior of the Temple is badly damaged, the facade can be reconstructed from excavation debris (Triak 1939: Figs. 10, 11). Mask panels recovered from the frieze are cauc heads, as are the extant masks on the corners of the building. The entrance was a dragon mouth, of which only the lower part remains. Cauac masks and tendrils of vegetation inside the teeth indicate that persons entering Temple 22 walked into the head of the cauc monster.

The façade of Temple 22 resembled those of Chenes and Puuc structures where friezes are encrusted with dragon masks and doorways become dragon mouths. The transformation of these temples into dragon shelters seems to play upon the theme of enclosure. At Copan, for example,



Fig. 5 Tepeu plate. Photograph courtesy of David Joralemon



Fig. 6 Tepeu vase. Rollout photograph courtesy Justin Kerr; copyright Justin Kerr 1973, member ASMP.

the inner sanctuary has its own doorway as if it were a temple within a temple. Recessed sanctuaries are found in the Cross Group at Palenque, where reliefs of the cauc monster decorate the mansard roof on the Temple of the Cross. Recent photographs taken by Merle Greene Robertson have revealed possibly another cauc monster on the roof comb of the Temple of the Sun.

CONCLUSIONS

The portrayal of figures within the open jaws of dragons has precedence in the art of the preclassic period. Dragon heads with niche figures are found at La Venta (Altar 4), Tres Zapotes (Stela D), Oxtotitlán (Mural 1) and Chalcatzingo (Petroglyphs 1 and 9). The suggestion that these dragons represent caves (Grove 1968; 1970), is particularly appropriate to the latter two sites, where dragon heads are represented on the walls of natural rock shelters and caves. The petroglyphs of Chalcatzingo are similar to later representations of the cauc monster.

Petroglyph 1 depicts a dragon head in profile with a niche figure (Joralemon 1971: Fig. 142). The head has a trefoil shape, vegetation appears at the corners of the mouth and the eye has crossed bands. The sky above is filled with clouds and rain drops in the form of pellets and circles. Petroglyph 9 renders the same head in frontal view as an open quatrefoil with plants, rain pellets and crossed bands (Joralemon 1971: Fig. 141). According to Easby and Scott (1970: cat. no. 32), this relief was probably carved around the entrance to a cave.

Preclassic themes of enclosure, rain and vegetation pervade representations of the cauc monster in the classic period. Specific features of the Preclassic dragon — eyes with crossed bands, circular water symbols, trefoil and quatrefoil motifs — are found on the cauc monster. While the survival of Preclassic deities may be questioned, religious concepts may have endured and spread to other parts of Mesoamerica. At least one Preclassic sculpture from Izapa, Miscellaneous Monument 2 (Norman 1973: p1. 64), depicts a dragon head with a niche figure. The cauc monster of the Classic period may represent a cave on the surface of the earth.

The cauac monster persisted as a configuration into the Postclassic period. In the Dresden Codex (39c, 41a, 66c), God B sits on cauac heads. God B, the rain god of the Postclassic codices, has been equated with dragon masks on temples in the northern zone (Covarrubias 1957: 235-238), where cauac heads do not appear. The relationship between God B and the cauac monster requires further study, as do dragon facades on Chenes and Puuc temples.

The association of rain with natural shelters is, however, well documented for the Postclassic period. In Yucatán, pure or “virgin” rain water was collected from the hollows of trees and rocks for rituals (Tozzer 1941: 105). The caves of Balankanché were probably used for rain ceremonies (Andrews 1970). Some highland Maya groups still worship rain spirits living in caves (Thompson 1970a: 265-270). As a place of enclosure, then, the cauac monster of the ancient Maya may not represent a cult deity, but rather a supernatural locale, such as a cave, on the surface of the earth.

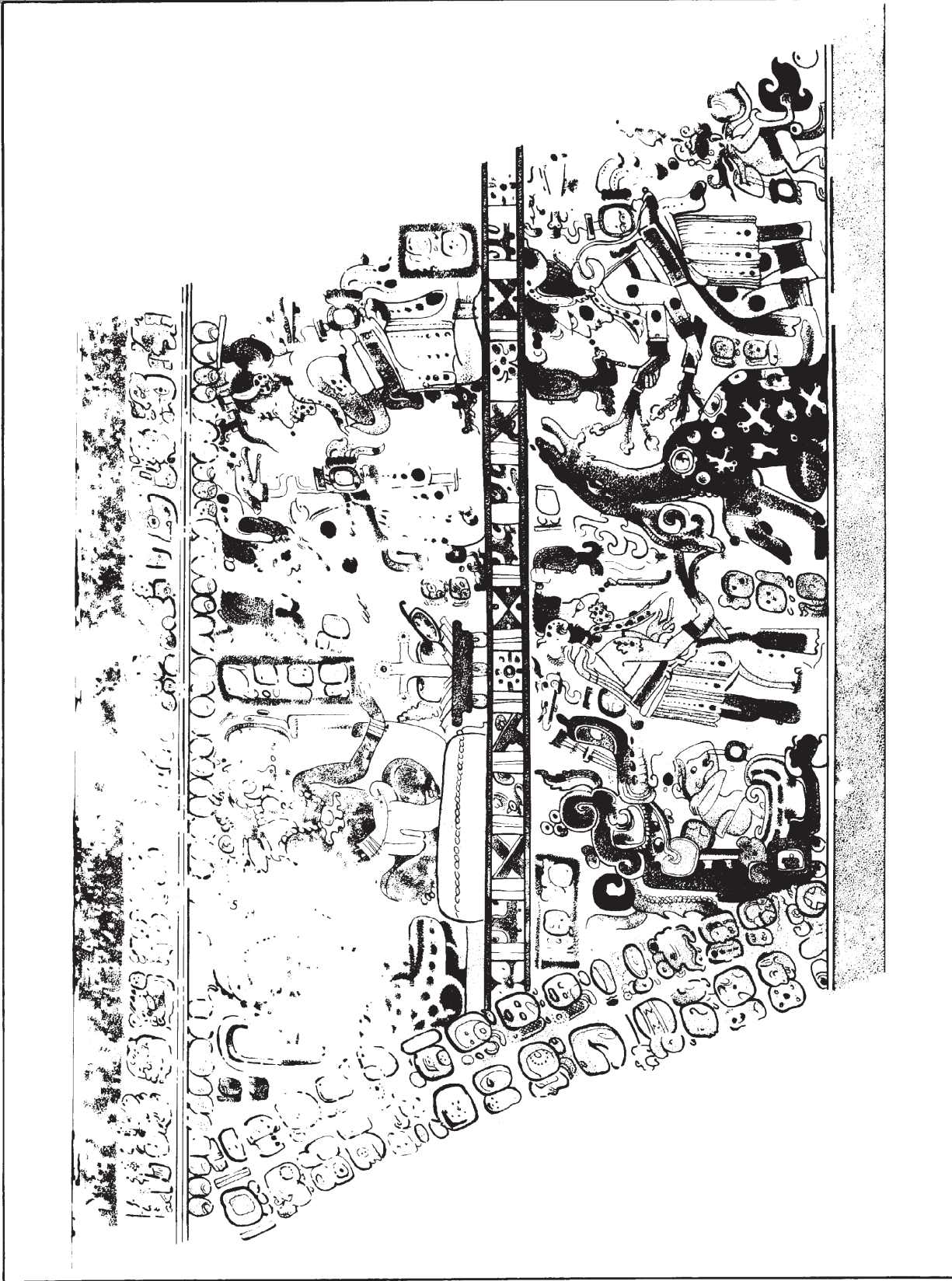


Fig. 7 Tepeu vase. Rollout drawing courtesy Michael D. Coe; copyright M.D. Coe 1972.

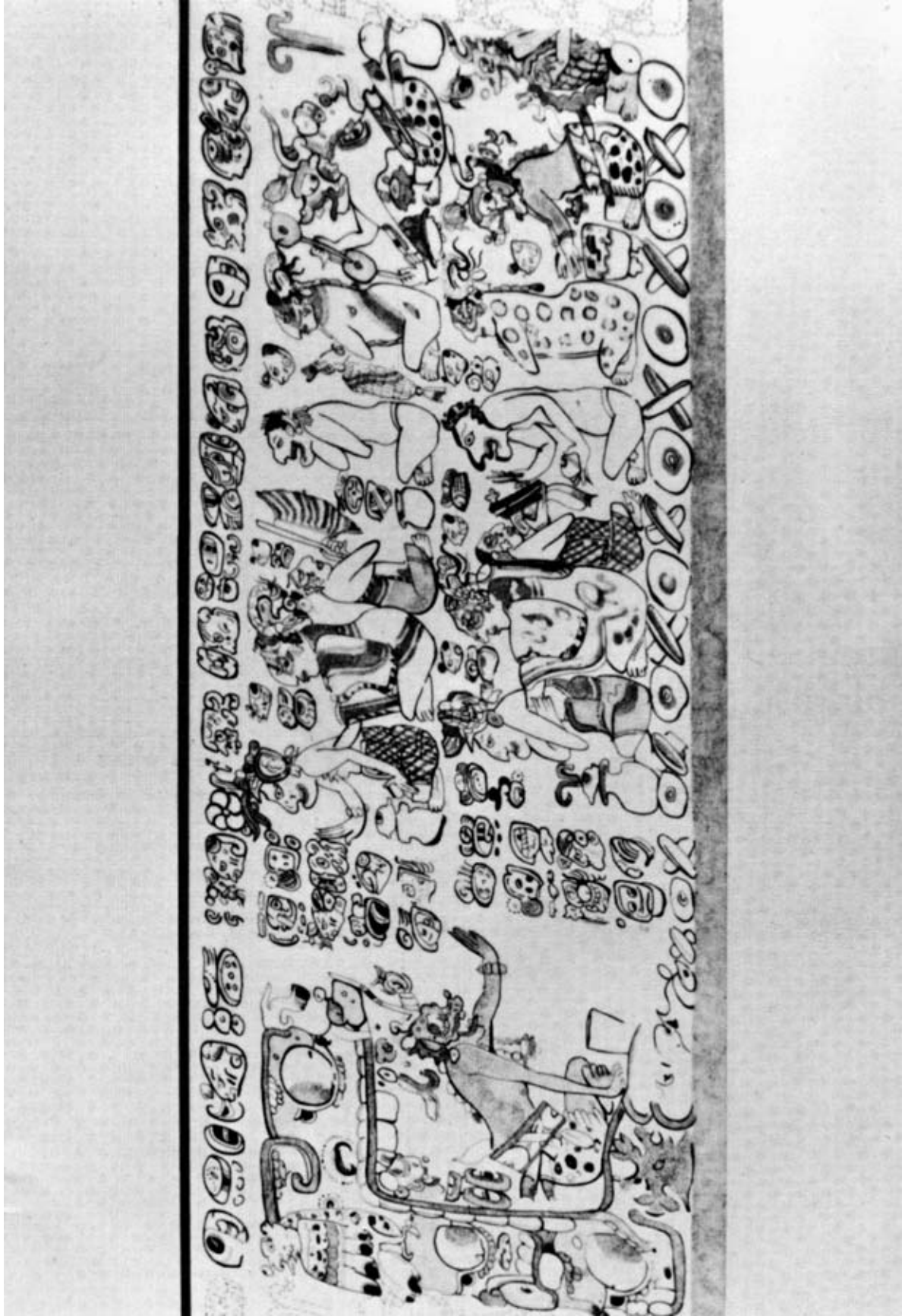


Fig. 8 Tepeu vase. Rollout drawing courtesy Michael D. Coe; copyright M.D. Coe 1972.

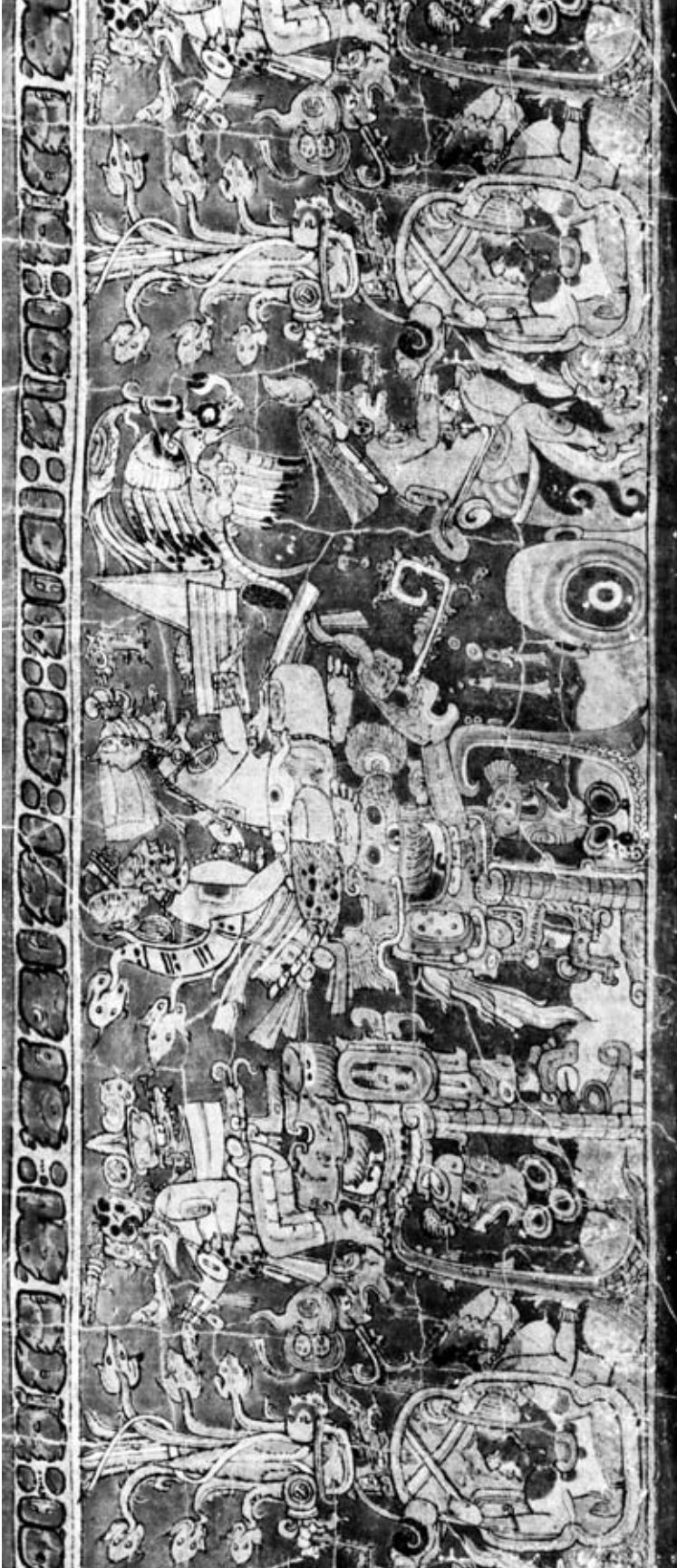


Fig. 9 Tepeu vase. Rollout photograph courtesy Michel D Coe; copyright M.D. Coe 1972.



Fig. 10 Tepeu vase. Photograph courtesy Justin Kerr; copyright Justin Kerr 1973, member ASMP.

PUBLISHED ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE CAUAC MONSTER

The Cauac Head as a Support or Pedestal:

BONAMPAK, STELA 1 (Covarrubias 1957: Fig. 108)
COPAN, INNER DOORWAY, TEMPLE 22 (Maudslay, 1889-1902: I: pl. 12)
COPAN, ALTAR D (Maudslay, 1889-1902: I: p1. 42)
DRESDEN CODEX, 39c, 41a, 66c (Thompson 1972)
LA HONDRADEZ, STELA 4 (Morley 1937-1938: V: p1. 11, e)
NARANJO, STELA 31 (Maler, 1908-1910: pl. 43)
PALENQUE, TABLET, TEMPLE CROSS OF THE FOLIATED
(Maudslay 1889-1902: IV: p1. 81)
PIXOY, STELA 1 (Euw 1977: IV: 35)
QUIRIGUA, STELA E (Maudslay 1889-1902: text to vol. II:11)
QUIRIGUA, STELA H (Morley 1937-1938: V: p1. 178,d)
QUIRIGUA, STELA I (Morley 1937-1938: V: p1. 172)
TIKAL, LINTEL 3, TEMPLE IV (Maudslay 1889-1902:111: pl. 78)
TZUM, STELA 1 (Euw 1977: IV: 51)
TEPEU VASE, CODEX STYLE (Coe 1973: cat. no. 45)
TEPEU VASE, UNDERWATER SACRIFICE (Coe 1978: cat. no. 12)

The Cauac Head as a Shelter or Niche:

COPAN, STELA B (Maudslay 1889-1902: I: pls. 34, 37-38)
COPAN, STAIR RISER, TEMPLE 11 (Maudslay 1889-1902: I: p1. 9)
COPAN, STELA J (Maudslay 1889-1902: I: pls. 66, 68)
COPAN, BALUSTRADE RELIEFS ON THE HIEROGLYPHIC STAIRWAY
(Marquina 1964: Fig. 25)
COPAN, ALTAR M (Maudslay 1889-1902: I: p1. 75 and Gordon 1896: p1. 17)
COPAN, ALTAR N (Maudslay 1889-1902: I: p1. 83)
COPAN, FACADE, TEMPLE 22 (Triak 1939: Figs. 3, 10, 11)
PALENQUE, MANSARD ROOF, TEMPLE OF THE CROSS
(Maudslay 1889-1902: IV: p1. 68)
PALENQUE, JAMBS, TEMPLE OF THE SUN
(Maudslay 1889-1902: IV: p1. 86)
PALENQUE, INTAGLIO RELIEF, PALACE, SOUTHWEST COURT
(Kubler 1969: Fig. 94)
PIEDRAS NEGRAS, STELA 5 (Maler 1901: pl. 15, no. 2)
QUIRIGUA, ZOOMORPH P (Maudslay 1889-1902: II: pls. 54-58)
QUIRIGUA, ZOOMORPH O (Maudslay 1889-1902: II: pl. 52)
QUIRIGUA, ZOOMORPH B (Maudslay 1889-1902: II: pls. 9-12)
TIKAL, LINTEL 2, TEMPLE IV (Maudslay 1889-1902: III: pl. 73)
USUMACINTA RELIEF (Easby and Scott 1970: cat. no. 174)
TZAKOL BLACKWARE TRIPOD (Dorsin角度-Smets 1977: cat. no. 194)
TEPEU VASE, ENEMA RITUAL (Coe 1978: cat. no. 11)
TEPEU VASE, SEVEN GODS (Coe 1973: cat. no. 49)
TEPEU VASE, ENTHRONED GODS (Coe 1978: cat. no. 16)

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