

The Principal Bird Deity in Maya Art – An Iconographic Study of Form and Meaning*

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INTRODUCTION

The long-lip complex in Maya art encompasses all iconographic forms that have depicted a supernatural face with a characteristic long extended snout-like upper lip. The corpus of representations of long-lipped figures is overwhelming but it is their variability of form which presents the particular problem to the iconographer interested in classifying, isolating, and identifying individuals within the complex. Long-lipped figures appear in full form, both anthropomorphic and zoöomorphic, while the head often exists independently. However, it would be futile to instigate an investigation by grouping motifs into these three general forms unless one were willing to devote an extended period of time to a study of the complex as a whole, because of its immense dimensions. On the other hand, immediate advances and readily available information may be obtained by investigating major motifs of the complex individually. The latter methodology was employed in studying the Principal Bird Deity, a constituent of the complex, in Maya iconography. The study, a consideration of form and meaning of this relatively unnoticed but extremely important creature, is presented in an attempt to delineate and differentiate further the great complex of long-lipped figures.

The Principal Bird Deity motif is, by itself, a dynamic iconographic complex which has undergone a major developmental and stylistic evolution beginning in the Late Formative at Izapa, during the Miraflores phase (300 B.C. - 150 A.D.) and ending in the Late Classic (600 - 900 A.D.). The motif does not persist into the Post Classic though there is evidence that suggests the continuance

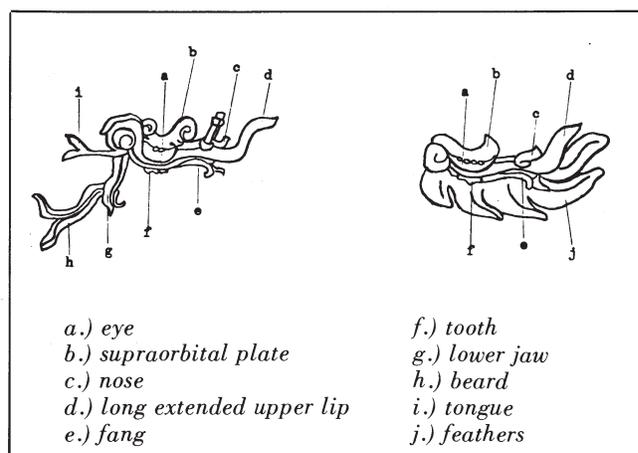


Fig. 1 Illustration demonstrating the correlation between the essential facial components of the Late Classic serpent head (left) and the Late Classic serpent wing (right). (From Maudslay, 1, Plate 46; 4, Plate 43.)

of the concept it relates through a variation of form. (This occurs on page eight of the Paris Codex with the depiction of a creature that has the body of a bird and the head of Itzamna.) There are three elements which compose the Principal Bird Deity, — the full figure, wing, and head. The latter two elements are essential in identifying and defining the Principal Bird Deity. It will become apparent later that although these forms may vary developmentally or stylistically, over a time span of approximately 1100 years, their intrinsic identity remains constant.

*Maudslay called the creature under investigation the Serpent Bird, on the basis of Late Classic examples with the long-lipped head which, he wrote, resembled a stylized serpent's head. Since I believe this creature to hold the most prominent hierarchical position of the several avian supernaturals expressed in Maya iconography, I am proposing the new term, the Principal Bird Deity.

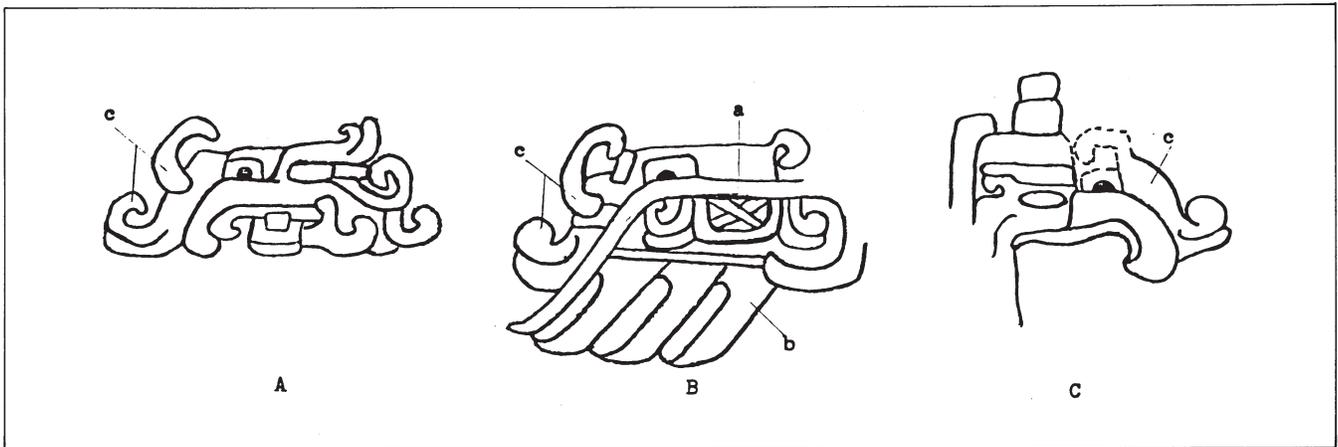


Fig. 2 Izapa long-lipped figures (A, C) flanking an Izapa serpent wing (b). (From Norman, Plate 4.)
 a.) cross bands bordered by upturned scrolls
 b.) feathers
 c.) triple scroll element

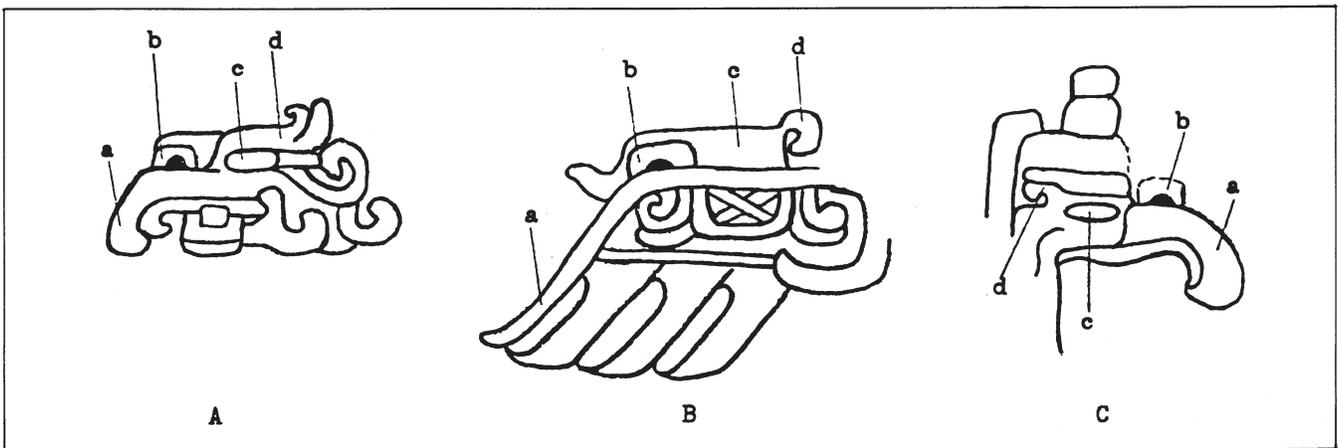


Fig. 3 Examples from Fig. 2 without the triple scroll element associated with long-lipped faces at Izapa. (From Norman, Plate 4.)
 a.) long extended upper lip
 b.) nose
 c.) eye
 d.) supraorbital plate

Initially, a study of the form, the development of the individual elements that compose the Principal Bird Deity complex, will be presented. This will be followed by an examination of the creature in the Late Classic, — where it appears and how it functions and interacts with its iconographic environment.

THE SERPENT WING

The most prominent feature of the Principal Bird Deity is what Maudslay called the serpent wing, a conventionalized bird wing which has its feathers secured to the mouth of a jawless stylized serpent's head anatomically substituting for the wing's long bones. (Oftentimes this head appears upside down, particularly with examples of outstretched wings.) Figure 1, which shows a

typical Late Classic profile of such a serpent's head next to an isolated serpent wing, demonstrates the correlation between the essential facial components. By the Late Classic, however, as is evident in Figure 1, the motif has attained a level of artistic sophistication indicative of having undergone an evolution of form. The origins of the motif, or rather its earliest appearance as an element that later becomes a pure Maya art form, occur at Izapa, where the iconography represents a stylistic transition from Olmec to proto-Maya. (Attempts to discover a possible Olmec serpent wing have been futile though it may be that the form evolved from such a tradition as the Olmec paw-wing motif.)

The Izapa wing, in Figure 2, has been isolated from the diving bird-man on Stela 2 (Fig. 4). If indeed this is an

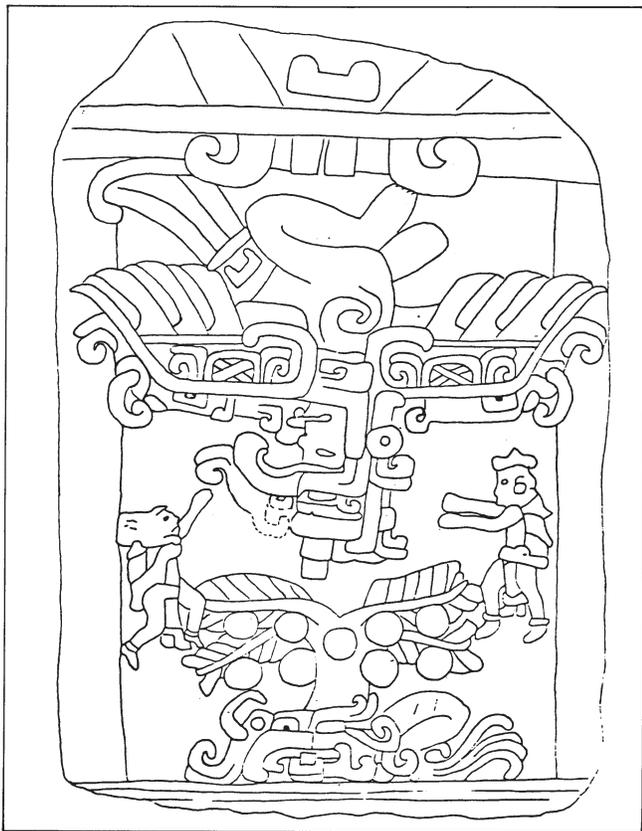


Fig. 4 Drawing of Stela 2, Izapa. (From Norman, Plate 4.)

early form of the serpent wing, it should contain a developing or developed long-lipped serpent-like figure whose identity can be validated. Clearly identifiable are a.) cross bands bordered by upturned scrolls hanging from what would be the long bones of the wing but which hypothetically have been transformed into the long upper lip of the serpent head and b.) the feathers of the wing. For convenience of observation, the isolated wing appears right side up.

A discerning feature on the wing is the triple scroll element (Fig. 2,c) which appears over the hypothetical long lip. In accounting for this, while attempting to validate a facial motif on the Izapa form, two examples of long-lipped figures from the same stela were isolated and placed on either side of the wing (Fig. 2, A and C). The first example (Fig. 2, A) is the head in profile which is depicted at the bottom of the stela (Fig. 4). Rising from it is some type of fruit bearing tree. The second example (Fig. 2, C) is the diving bird-man's headdress, the profile which, though long-lipped, suggests avian qualities. The triple scroll element on the wing also appears on these two examples and is, in fact, associated with long-lipped faces at Izapa. It is a stylistic facial component variable that need not be there much as nose plugs need not be applied on all Late Classic long-lipped figures.

In Figure 3, the integrity of the three forms has not

been affected by the removal of the element. The facial components of the long-lipped figures represented in these examples remain constant throughout the Maya period. Though an eye is lacking on the Izapa wing, the illustration of Stela 2 (Quirarte 1973, Plate VI) reveals that the relief area where one would expect the element is worn and damaged. Yet there can be no doubt that it originally existed within the space indicated in Figure 3, B because of the presence of the nose and the remains of the brow or supraorbital plate.

In the Early Classic, a major developmental change occurs to the serpent wing with the elimination of the Izapa nose and the introduction of the prototype to the flaring nose common on Late Classic long-lipped figures, as well as an overall evolution towards an unquestionable Maya style. Figure 5, which is the reverse side of a pyrite mirror from Zaculeu, depicts a man with extended arms, wearing a long-lipped (beak-like) mask. Hanging from each arm is a serpent wing. This motif can be verified by following the same procedure used to validate the Izapa wing, that of locating an acceptable example of a long-lipped figure from the same art style and comparing components to discover whether one is dealing with a facial motif on the wing. An excellent example is the undamaged head of what must be an early representation of a bicephalic serpent from the same object. Upon isolating the wing and serpent head, an exact correspondence between facial components becomes distinctly obvious (Fig. 6), both depicted with a.) an elaborate supraorbital plate, b.) an eye, c.) a swirling nose, and d.) nose ornaments, and e.) the long extended upper lip.

Sometime towards the end of the Early Classic period, the serpent wing undergoes a final developmental change to take on the form which is so typical of the Late Classic (Fig. 7). Though Figure 7, which is an early instance of the motif existing independently, comes from a stuccoed cylindrical tripod vessel of Teotihuacan style, the form is uninfluenced by Teotihuacan iconography. It is unquestionable that this form is the serpent wing with the long extended upper lip, the vestigial nose with nose ornament, the u-shaped supraorbital plate over the eye, a tongue, tooth, and feathers.

Figure 8 is a chart illustrating the development of the serpent wing with examples from Izapa in the Late Formative, Zaculeu and Kaminaljuyu in the Early Classic, and the Peten in the Late Classic. All of the examples, with the exception of those from Kaminaljuyu and Zaculeu, are taken from monumental sculpture.

Figure 8,a from Altar 3 at Izapa, shows the outstretched wing of a bird-man. It is included so as to show the general form of the wing prior to any transformation and development. The Izapa serpent wing, Figure 8,b, introduces a fill between the upper lip and the feathers. Often appearing in the fill, as in this instance, are cross bands. Late Classic examples of the serpent wing that have this element show a great range of stylistic variants within the gap, such as cross bands, double cross bands, and cross hatching. Figures 8,i-o are instances of the serpent wing from the Late Classic with a fill both void of

and containing an interior motif. Figures 8,e-h are instances of the serpent wing from the Late Classic that have feathers emerging directly from the upper lip, much like the Zaculeu example (Fig. 8,c). Though Figures 8,e-o are representations that vary stylistically within themselves, the variation is restricted to the Late Classic Maya style and one has no difficulty in identifying the motif.

THE HEAD

The long-lipped head of the Late Classic Principal Bird Deity, and the serpent wing, are the two essential motifs which define the creature as a member of the greater long-lip complex. It is perhaps tenuous to propose a developmental scheme for the head of the Principal Bird Deity for although the long upper lip is prevalently associated with the creature throughout its development, the Late Classic long-lipped head is the product of an evolution that involved a great array of creatures. Also, as will be discussed presently, the Late Classic Principal Bird Deity has several head variants. Yet observations can be made by the study of the head element which suggest trends in the appearance of the creature.

Figures 9,a-e represent a chronological progression of heads from creatures wearing or directly associated with the serpent wing from the Late Formative through to the Early Classic. Figures 9,f and g are two examples from the Late Classic.

Figures 9,a and b from Izapa are human heads which wear headdresses with long-lipped profiles. (It is interesting to note the cleft on the headdress of Figure 9,a.) Figure 9,c is a bird's head which wears a similar headdress. The appearance of a long-lipped face about the area of the head becomes increasingly important to the peoples of the Early Classic resulting in the expression of the motif as a mask which is placed directly over the figure's face. In Figure 9,d, the human head wears a long-lipped mask with nose ornaments and what will be called the jeweled headband, an element worn frequently by the Late Classic Principal Bird Deity. Finally, in Figure 9,e, the dramatic reduction of form concludes with the human face actually transformed into the long-lipped face. The long-lipped head element remains unchanged in the Late Classic which leads one to conclude that the human head associated with the Principal Bird Deity is an expression which is suppressed before Late Classic times.

THE FULL FIGURE

The progression of heads in Figure 9 implicitly suggests an elimination of human features by the Late Classic, a trend which is supported by the chronological development of the full figure (Fig. 10). In Izapa, two creatures exist which represent the same concept. The first of these (Fig. 10,a), an avian creature wearing a serpent wing (worn and damaged by time) and a long-lipped headdress, is an archaic example or prototype of the Late Classic Principal Bird Deity form. The second example (Fig. 10,b), is a variation on the same creature,



Fig. 5 Bird-man on the back of a Zaculeu pyrite mirror. (From Woodbury and Trik, Fig. 131.)

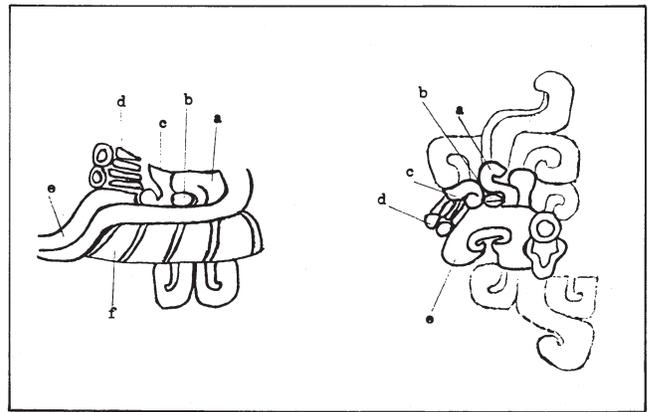


Fig. 6 Comparison between facial components of an Early Classic serpent wing (left) and Early Classic long-lipped head (right). (From Woodbury and Trik, Fig. 131.)

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|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| a.) supraorbital plate | d.) nose ornaments |
| b.) eye | e.) long extended upper lip |
| c.) swirling nose | f.) feathers |

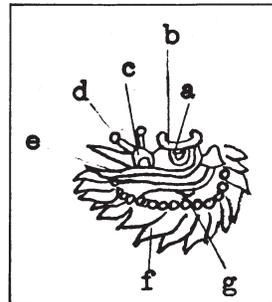


Fig. 7 Late Early Classic serpent wing. (From Kidder, Fig. 205, f.)

- | |
|-----------------------------|
| a.) eye |
| b.) supraorbital plate |
| c.) nose |
| d.) nose ornaments |
| e.) long extended upper lip |
| f.) feathers |
| g.) tooth |

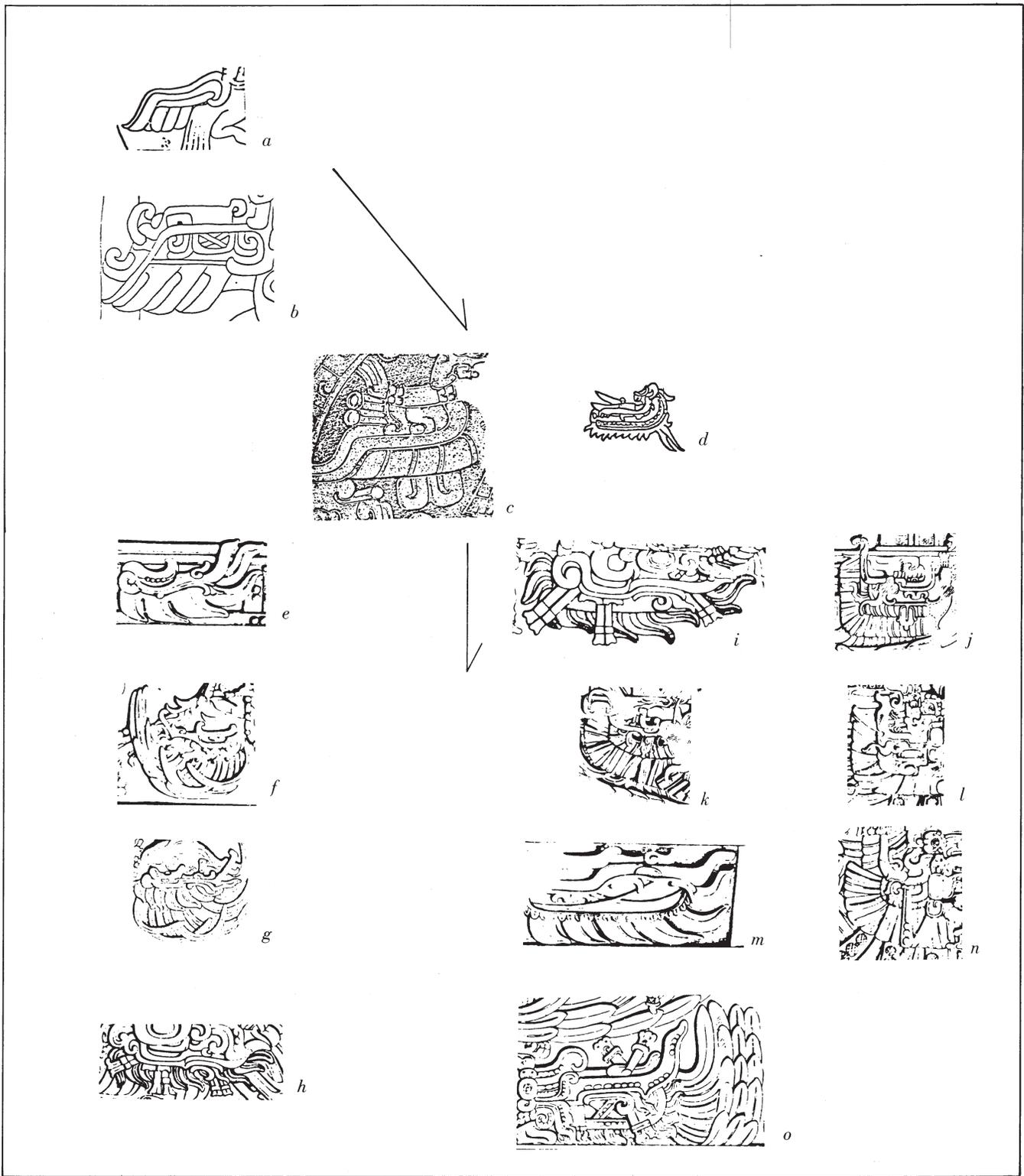


Fig. 8 The development of the serpent wing from the Late Formative (a, b), Early Classic (c, d), and Late Classic (e-o). (a: From Norman, Plate 58; b: From Norman, Plate 4; c: From Woodbury and Trik, Fig. 131; d: From Kidder, Fig. 205, f; e: From Maudslay, 4, Plate 43; f: From Maudslay, 4, Plate 81; g: From Maudslay, 4, Plate 76; h: From Maudslay, 1, Plate 61; i: From Maudslay, 1, Plate 82; j: From Maudslay, 2, Plate 8; k: From Maudslay, 2, Plate 20; l: From Maudslay, 2, Plate 36; m: From Maudslay, 4, Plate 68; n: From Maudslay, 2, Plate 36; o: From Maudslay, 3, Plate 78.)

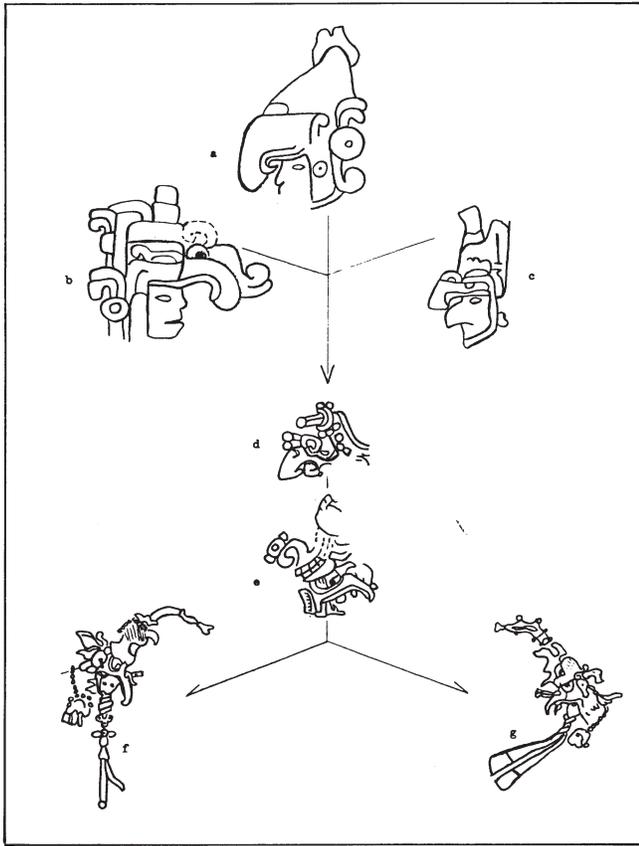


Fig. 9 Examples of the Principal Bird Deity head from Late Formative through to Late Classic. (a, b, c: From Norman, Plate 58, 4, 42; d: From Woodbury and Trik, Fig. 131; e: From Kidder, Fig. 207, e; f: From Maudslay, 4, Plate 76; g: From Maudslay, 4, Plate 81.)

as is the third (Fig. 10,c). (Figure 10,c, originally diving, has been turned right side up for convenience of viewing.) In both of these examples, the elements which compose the creature are very similar except that Figure 10,c wears the serpent wing while Figure 10,b does not. Represented is a human-headed bird-man with a zoomorphic body.

In Izapa, then, there is depicted a creature which varies in form, having either an avian or human face, wearing a long-lipped headdress, and having either an avian or combined avian-human body. The initial form or earliest Principal Bird Deity in Izapa might have been zoomorphic, derived possibly from the Olmec eagle. Developmentally, the creature adopts anthropomorphic characteristics which become, for the next 400 - 600 years, the dominant stylistic presentation of the concept.

In the Zaculeu example (Fig. 10,d), the creature has evolved into a composite bird-man. There has been a drastic reduction in avian qualities yet it is the serpent wing and long-lipped mask, which replaces the headdress and which is later replaced by the long-lipped head, that identify and define the creature as a member of the Principal Bird Deity complex. By the end of the

Early Classic and throughout the Late Classic (Fig. 10, e and f), the full figure reverts back to its zoomorphic frame, suppressing the human aspect, but it is still the serpent wing and long-lipped head that identify the creature. The situation in the Late Classic does not remain this easily defined, however, because of the complex nature of Maya art.

There exist few forms in Late Classic Maya art composed of one or several elements which remain constant each time those forms are expressed. In most instances, a complicated iconographic statement such as the Principal Bird Deity, is composed of many elements which, rather than being fixed, are variable and become interchangeable with other related elements. These elements, which have little to do with style, serve to define the concept presented as adjectives do in a written language.

An appropriate example which illustrates this system of interchangeable variables is the long-lipped motif in the Late Classic. Though the full figure form serves to distinguish one creature from the greater complex, the head frequently exists independently, represented frontally or in profile. If one isolates an example, removes ear ornaments and any devices that appear in the forehead or worn above the head, and assumes the depiction of the lower jaw to be the "normal" instance, one has created a template which has no identity (Fig. 11). It is an archetypal long-lipped monster composed of those basic elements which characteristically define the motif: a.) supernatural eyes, b.) supraorbital plate (or forehead), c.) vestigial nose, d.) long extended upper lip, e.) fang, f.) teeth, and g.) lower jaw. Elements within this definition vary stylistically but are usually constant. Variable elements are those which are applied above the eyes and below the upper lip to specify and define an individual and its various aspects. Types of variable elements above the eyes include headdresses, headbands, forehead inlays, and hairstyles, while below the upper lip they include a lower jaw, a fleshless lower jaw, both with or without a beard, and the absence of a lower jaw. Ear ornaments which also vary may be another identifying element.

While presenting a development of the elements which together compose the Principal Bird Deity, the subject of their variability in the Late Classic was neglected. The Late Classic Principal Bird Deity need not be identified by both the long-lipped head and the serpent wing together yet it always bears either of the two forms.

The long-lipped head, which is a constant element in the Late Formative and Early Classic, becomes an interchangeable variable that is substituted by other heads which define the different aspects of the complex. The same is true for the serpent wing, which may either have its feathers substituted by certain specific stylized feathers, or the entire wing replaced by one composed of these feathers.

Prior to isolating and defining each variable, significant appearances of the Principal Bird Deity in the Late

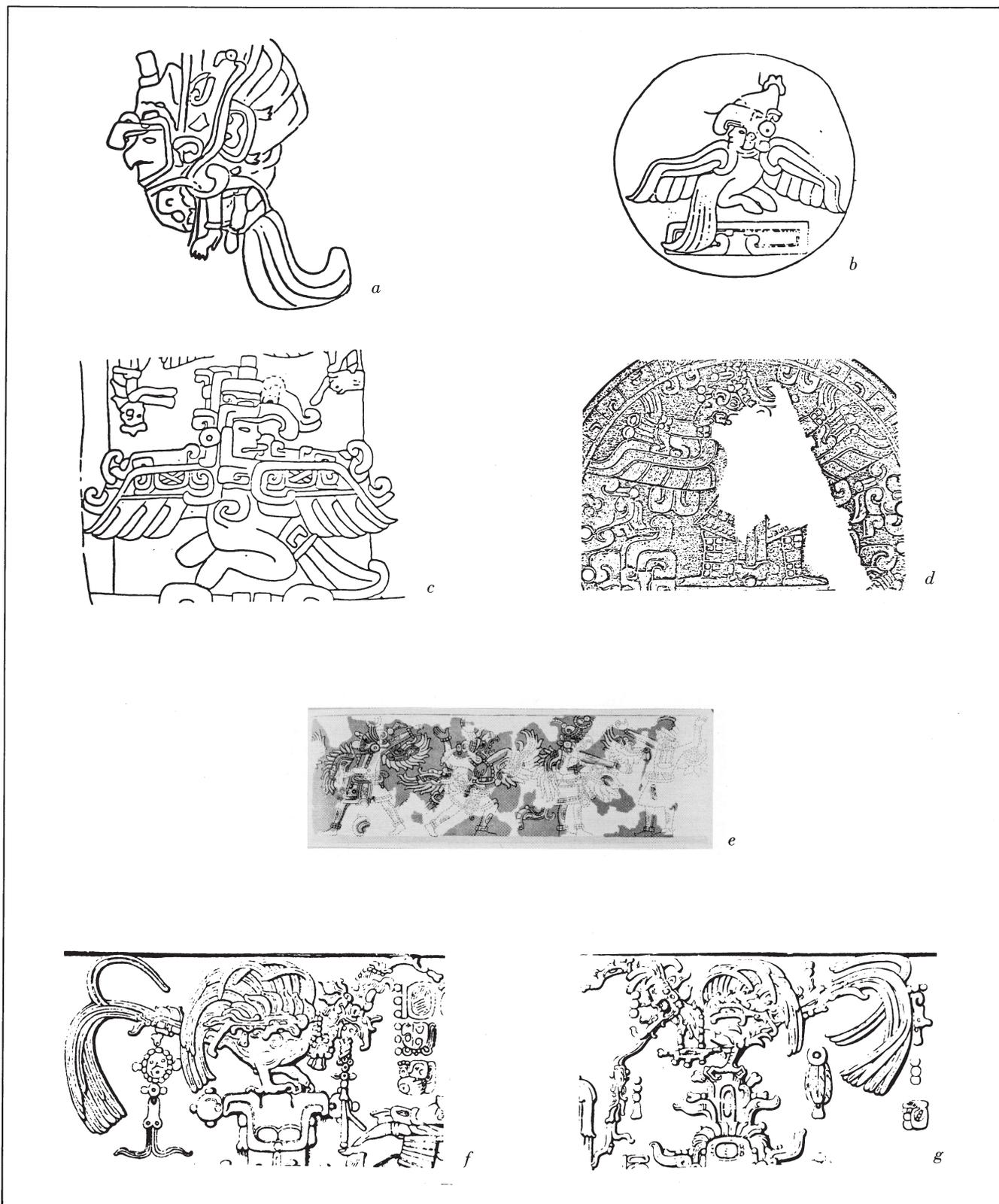


Fig. 10 Examples of the Principal Bird Deity from the Late Formative (a, b, c), Early Classic (d, e), and Late Classic (f, g). (a: From Norman, Plate 42; b: From Norman, Plate 58; c: From Norman, Plate 4; d: From Woodbury and Trik, Fig. 131; e: From Kidder, Fig. 207; e, f: From Maudslay, 4, Plate 76; g: From Maudslay, 4, Plate 81.)

Classic will be reviewed so as to examine the manner in which the complex interacts with its various iconographic environments. This exercise facilitates defining the individual elements, as well as the composite creature, by supplying a small corpus of relevant examples from which to support conclusions.

The Principal Bird Deity in the Late Classic appears both in full profile and frontally with the head flanked by two serpent wings. In the latter case, the chest and feet are occasionally expressed below the head.

The most familiar examples of the full figure profile come from Palenque where three instances of the form have survived, one on each of the tablets from the Temple of the Cross (Fig. 12) and the Temple of the Foliated Cross (Fig. 13), and one on the lid of the sarcophagus in the Temple of the Inscriptions (Fig. 14). There is a possible fragment of a fourth profile of the bird in the Palace (Fig. 15).

The bird on the Temple of the Cross tablet is perched on the central cross-like element (whatever it may represent). It is recognizable by the long-lipped head and serpent wing. The bird also wears a beaded necklace and what possibly might be a mirror device in its forehead (which may be the same device worn by God K). Directly under the bird is a bicephalic serpent which has an element falling from its mouth which will affectionately be called "goo." This same "goo" falls from the mouth of the bird. The figure on the right who is Chan-Bahlum, the second of the two great Palencaño rulers, is offering or presenting the Jester God to the Principal Bird Deity.

In the example from the Temple of the Foliated Cross, Chan-Bahlum duplicates this ritual. Here again the bird appears with the same identifying and/or defining elements that are applied to the first example from the Temple of the Cross.

The bird on the sarcophagus lid is, like the bird in the Temple of the Cross, perched on a cross-like element under which is a bicephalic serpent. "Goo" falls from the mouth of the bird.

At Copan, the Principal Bird Deity appears twice in profile (Fig. 16 and 17). Unfortunately, both examples are very damaged. In one instance on the north side of Stela C (Fig. 16), it rests perched on what might tenuously be called sky bands. Though the area of the head is worn, a portion of the crown has survived verifying the depiction of the head. The central figure on the stela, in a dancing pose, is extremely similar to the figure on Stela A, where a second example is found (Fig. 17). Perched above this figure on a doubled over sky band (though this is the better example of the two, the identification is still tenuous) is the bird. Here, the area of the head is completely worn, however examination of Maudslay's photograph strongly suggest its depiction (Maudslay 1889-1902: Vol. 2, Plate 8). Feet may plausibly have been originally carved.

A unique instance of the Principal Bird Deity in full profile occurs on Stela 5 at Piedras Negras (Maler 1901: Plate 15). The central figure of the stela is seated on a throne canopied by a Cauac monster. Falling from the

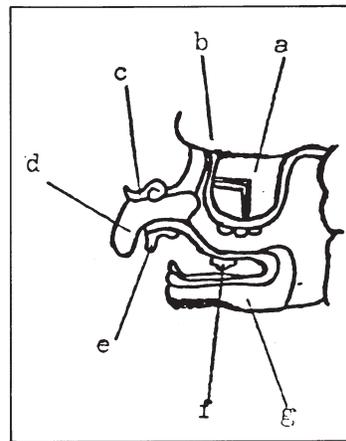


Fig. 11 The archetypal, long-lipped head.
a.) supernatural eye
b.) supraorbital plate
(or forehead)
c.) vestigial nose
d.) long extended upper lip
e.) fang
f.) tooth
g.) lower jaw

jawless mouth of the monster and emerging from the eye are underworld figures, the jaguar lord of the underworld, a sinister monkey, and a creature with a smoking tube. Perched on the supraorbital plate of the Cauac monster is the Principal Bird Deity with the substituted head of the jaguar lord of the underworld.

Occasionally depicted on polychromed funeral pottery, particularly on tripod bowls from Campeche (Fig. 18) is an unconventional representation of the Principal Bird Deity, with the long-lipped head but lacking the serpent wing.

The frontal view of the Principal Bird Deity is far more frequently portrayed on monumental sculpture than is the profile. One of the finest examples is the three-dimensional representation of the creature protruding from the back of Stela H at Copan (Fig. 19). Flanked by serpent wings, it has "goo" falling from its mouth and wears a necklace, the jeweled headband, and an inverted u-shaped device on its forehead, and is very similar to the example on the back side of Stela I at Quirigua where the bird is perched on a sky band (Morley: Plate 172,d). On the front side of Stela H, the bird serves as the headdress for the female figure depicted. It wears the inverted u-shaped element.

In House E at Palenque, there is expressed an iconographic unit or theme which is repeated many times in the Peten, the association of the Principal Bird Deity with sky bands (Fig. 15). Here the sky band is bicephalic with one head a zoomorphic monster and the other a bearded long-lipped figure wearing the tri-partite badge. (Note what appears to be a fraction of a full figured bird below the frontal view of the bird.) Tendrils, which turn into serpent profiles, exude from the sides of the Principal Bird Deity's mouth. The bird is depicted over a doorway — a placement which the Maya must have considered significant since it appears relatively often over other entryways. The remains of a second example at Palenque are found over the entrance of the Inner Sanctuary in the Temple of the Cross (Fig. 20). And Catherwood draws the remains of another over a doorway of a structure at Ococingo (Stephens 1949: Fig. 5).

Piedras Negras exhibits this theme of the Principal Bird Deity with sky bands on four important stela, each

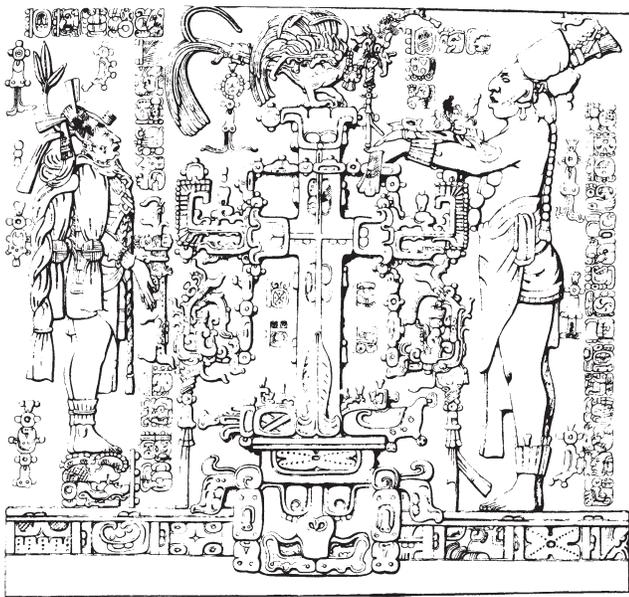


Fig. 12 Scene on the tablet from the Temple of the Cross, Palenque. (From Maudslay, 4, Plate 76.)

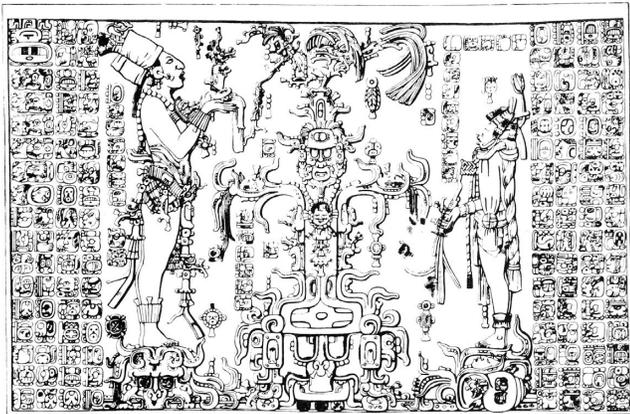


Fig. 13 Scene from the tablet in the Temple of the Foliated Cross, Palenque. (From Maudslay, 4, Plate 81.)

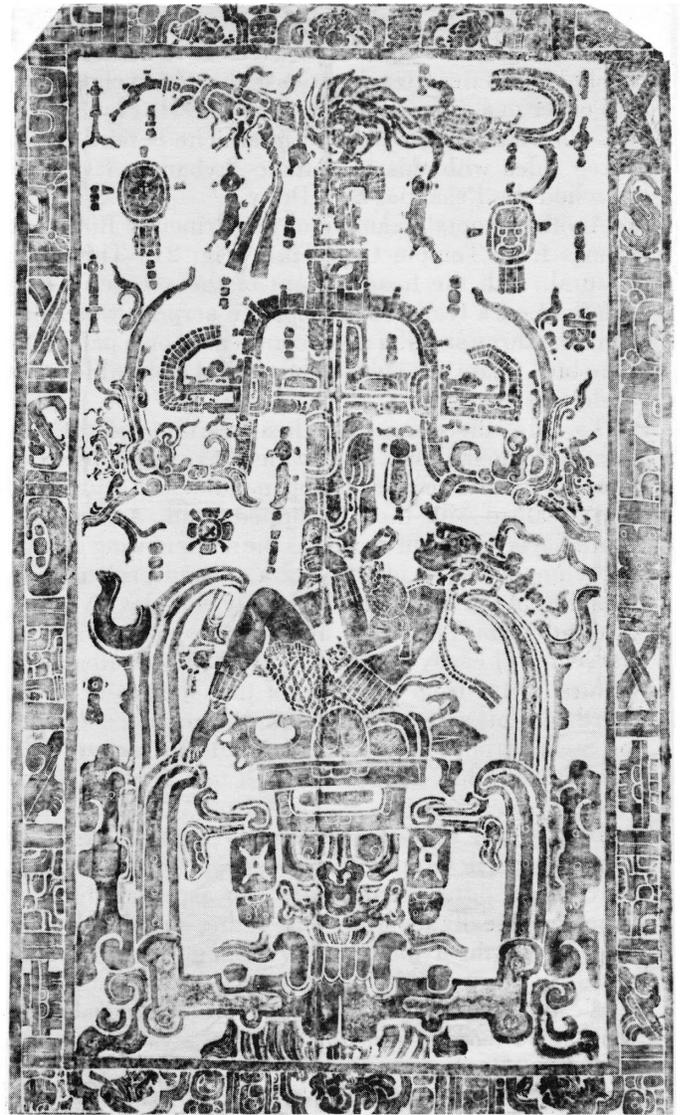


Fig. 14 A drawing of the scene on the sarcophagus lid in the Temple of the Inscriptions, Palenque. (Rubbing by Merle Greene Robertson.)

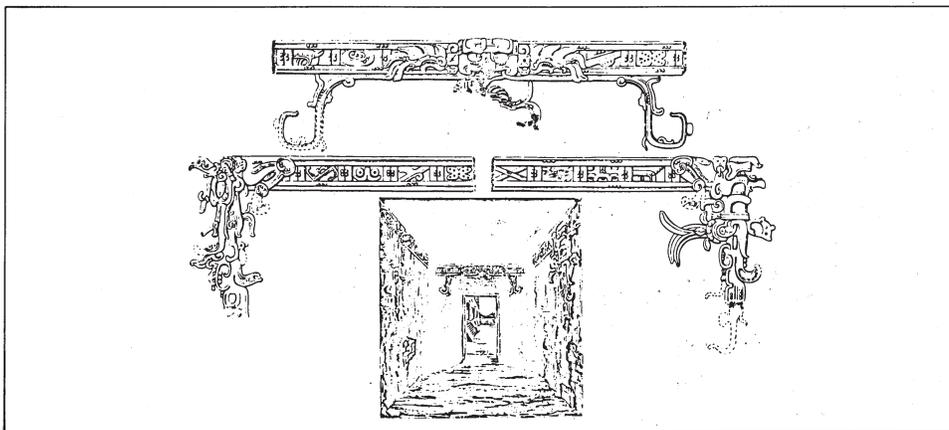


Fig. 15 The Principal Bird Deity over a doorway in House E, the Palace, Palenque. (From Maudslay, 4, Plate 43.)

bearing the “ascension motif.” These are Stela 25 in Series 1, Stela 6 in Series 3, Stela 11 in Series 4, and Stela 14 in Series 5 (each series dedicated in chronological order to a different ruler) (Maler 1901: Plate 15, 15, 20, 20). A young lord seated in a niche is bordered on three sides with this bicephalic skyband on which is perched the Principal Bird Deity.

Another frontal example of the Principal Bird Deity comes from Temple C at Tikal (Fig. 21). The supernatural, with the head variant of the screech owl, is perched on a feathered bicephalic serpent which borders, on three sides, a nobleman seated on a palanquin. The bird wears the jeweled headband from which protrude two feathers.

To date, there are three head variants of the Late Classic Principal Bird Deity which have been identified. Most frequent in occurrence on monumental sculpture is the creature with the long-lipped head. As has been stated, it is this motif as well as the serpent wing which is most important in identifying a winged creature as a member of the Principal Bird Deity complex. A second variant, from Temple C at Tikal, is the head of the screech owl easily recognized by the two feathers that naturally rise from the head of this species of owl. A third variant, extremely rare, and appearing only once, on Stela 5 from Piedras Negras, finds the jaguar lord of the underworld’s head connected to a serpent-winged avian body.

By the Late Classic with the development of a more complex Maya pantheon, the concept of the Principal Bird Deity differentiates into two aspects which are iconographically separate. One of these aspects governs the world of the living while the other governs that of the dead, in other words, one governs the here and now, while the other governs the underworld and afterlife. The Maya iconographically define the two aspects by several methods, one of which employs the use of head variables. Understandably, the long-lipped head and serpent wing designate the Principal Bird Deity as a supernatural, negating any possible identification with the quetzal bird or parrot. The head of the screech owl defines the underworld aspect of the creature.

The screech owl, according to Maya lore, is the harbinger of death. There is an abundance of iconographic materials that support an underworld association with the bird. Perhaps of greatest significance, however, is its appearance as the central element of the headdress of God L, one of the two principal lords of the underworld (Fig. 22). In the Aztec system, the screech owl is also related to ill omen, death, and the underworld, frequently appearing next to Mictlantecuhtli in the Mexican codices (Codex Borgia: 50, 52).

By “borrowing” the head element from an underworld motif that is clearly defined and attaching it to the body of a supernatural creature, as expressed by the serpent wing, the Maya succeed in relating the underworld aspect of the dual natured deity. Certainly the example from Temple C at Tikal represents this aspect. Though there is no underworld iconography represented on the lintel aside from the Principal Bird Deity motif, it may be

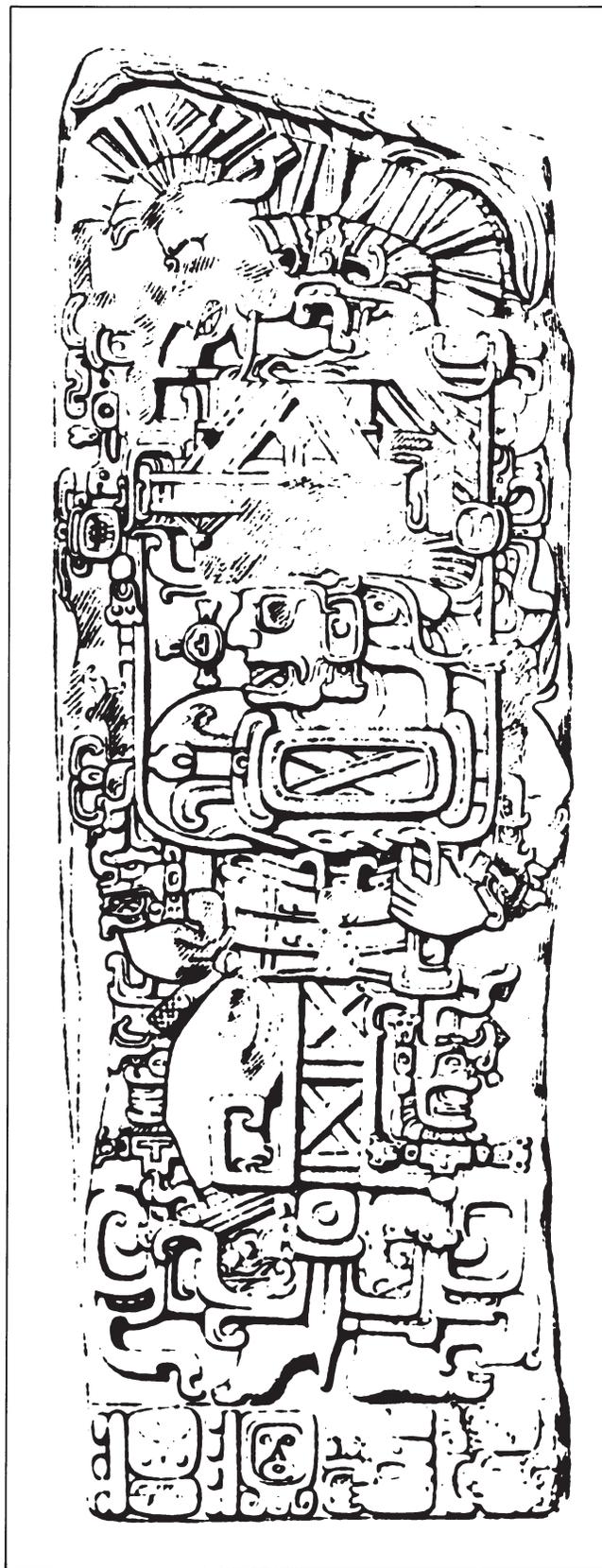


Fig. 16 Stela C, Copan, drawing of the north side. (From Maudslay, 2, Plate 20.)

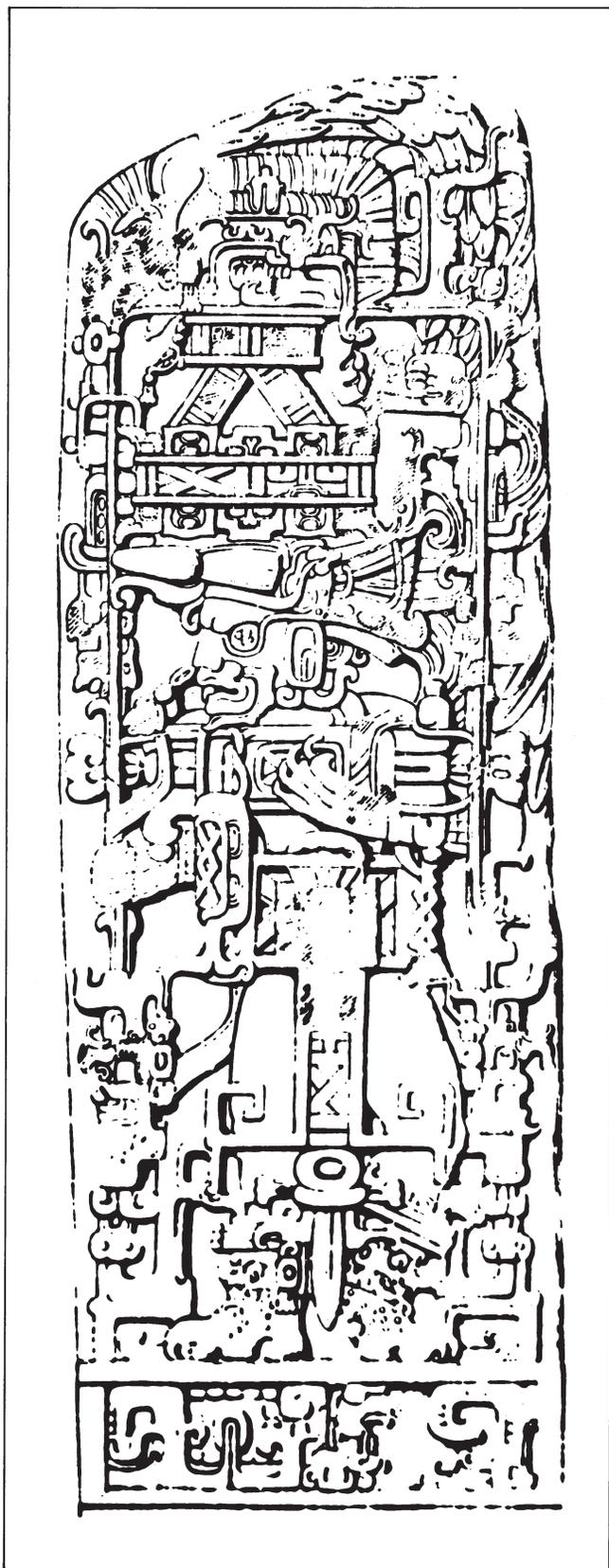


Fig. 17 Stela A, Copan, drawing of the north side. (From Maudslay, 2, Plate 8.)

that the throne scene is a projection into the afterlife of the ruler to whom the temple was dedicated.

One might expect to find the head of the screech owl on the creature in the tomb of the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque because of its obvious funerary context. However, the scene of the young (dead) lord falling into the gaping skeletonized jaws of an earth monster represents a state of physical and mental transition from the world of the living (above the lord) to the world of the dead (below the lord), and so the creature who watches over the event is correctly depicted.

Because of the nature of interchangeable variables, the head of the screech owl does not have to serve as the head element of the Principal Bird Deity when associated with the underworld. The substitution for the head of the jaguar lord of the underworld, another of the major underworld deities, on Stela 5 at Piedras Negras, supports this assumption, affiliating the Principal Bird Deity with the night sun.

A second method for iconographically defining the underworld aspect of the Principal Bird Deity is accomplished by discretely varying the feathers that emerge from the facial motif on the serpent wing or substituting the wing with one which is stylized and specific in defining properties. The application of this method is only found on full figure representations of the creature.

Ample representations of Late Classic stylized feathers on serpent wings are illustrated in Figures 8, e-o. All of the examples are simply depicted with none, one, or several lines running medially up the feather. Yet there is another type of feather which appears with the wing element that also characteristically borders the rim of God L's headdress as well as substitutes for the two tufts of feathers on the forehead of the screech owl (Fig. 23). (The screech owl's head from the Tikal example of the

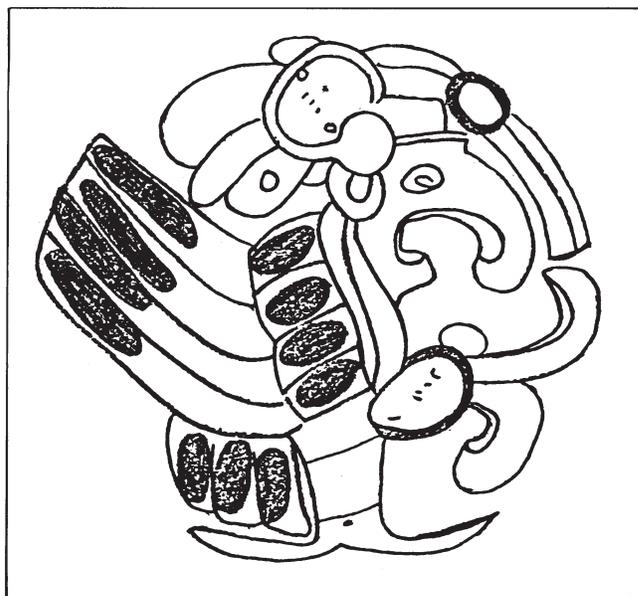


Fig. 18 An example of the Principal Bird Deity with the underworld defining wing variant.

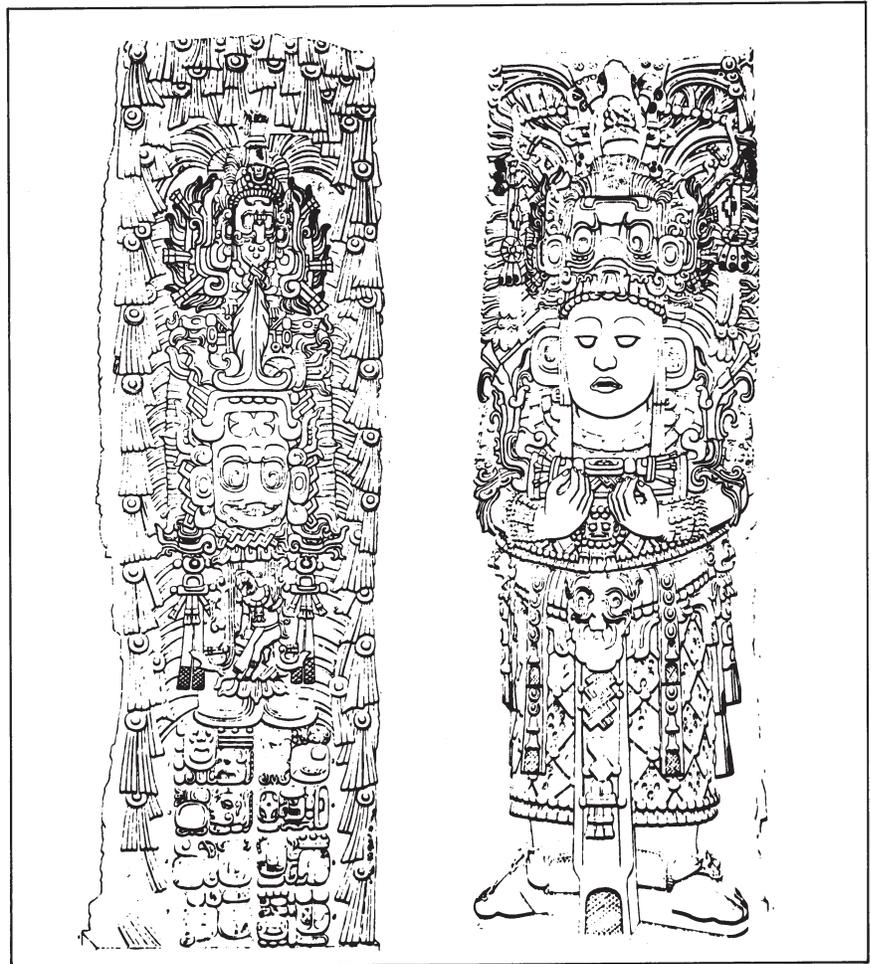


Fig. 19 Front (right) and back (left) sides of Stela H, Copan. (Front and back respectively from Maudslay, 1, Plate 82, 61.)

Principal Bird Deity is an exception since it wears two typical stylized feathers.) The upper part of the feather is black, which when not colored is represented by cross hatching, while its length is often spotted. It is always associated with underworld iconography.

Though the serpent wing is the single most important element which identifies the Principal Bird Deity, it is on occasion substituted by a wing composed of these feathers (Fig. 18). Such instances only appear on polychromed funeral pottery, with the bird always identified by the long-lipped head. The hypothetical underworld associations of this creature are enforced by M.D. Coe's discovery of the nature of the images and scenes on painted Maya funerary ceramics (1973).

The Principal Bird Deity in its role as an underworld god is expressed on full figure Baktun, Katun, and Tun signs. Excellent examples of Baktun and Katun signs from Palenque (Anton 1968: Fig. 133, 136) show a long-lipped creature with the underworld defining feather emerging from the forehead and the underworld defining wing. Interestingly, the creature has an anthropomorphic body but with claws replacing hands and feet.

Monolith B at Quirigua has the underworld defining feather streaming from the serpent wing, which as a

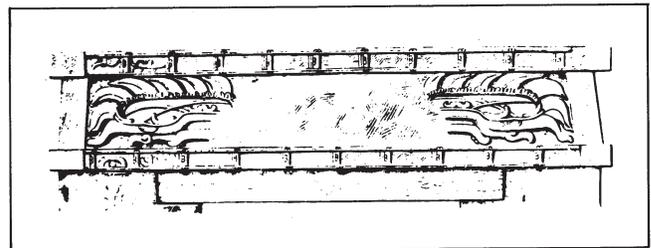


Fig. 20 Drawing of the frieze (note serpent wings) over the Inner Sanctuary of the Temple of the Cross, Palenque. (From Maudslay, 4, Plate 68.)

defining motif here has the same value as the previously discussed wing, on full figure Baktun, Katun, and Tun signs (Fig. 24). Tozzer and Allen (1910: p. 334) want to see the creature representing the Baktun as a zopilote or vulture yet, except for the hand which substitutes for the lower jaw, it is identical to that creature representing the Katun, both with long extended upper lips, flowing hair, and wearing the jeweled headband. Thompson (1971: 145) identifies the Tun figure as a Moan bird, which supposedly is the screech owl, yet it too is long-lipped and supernatural, bearing no similarity at all to that bird.

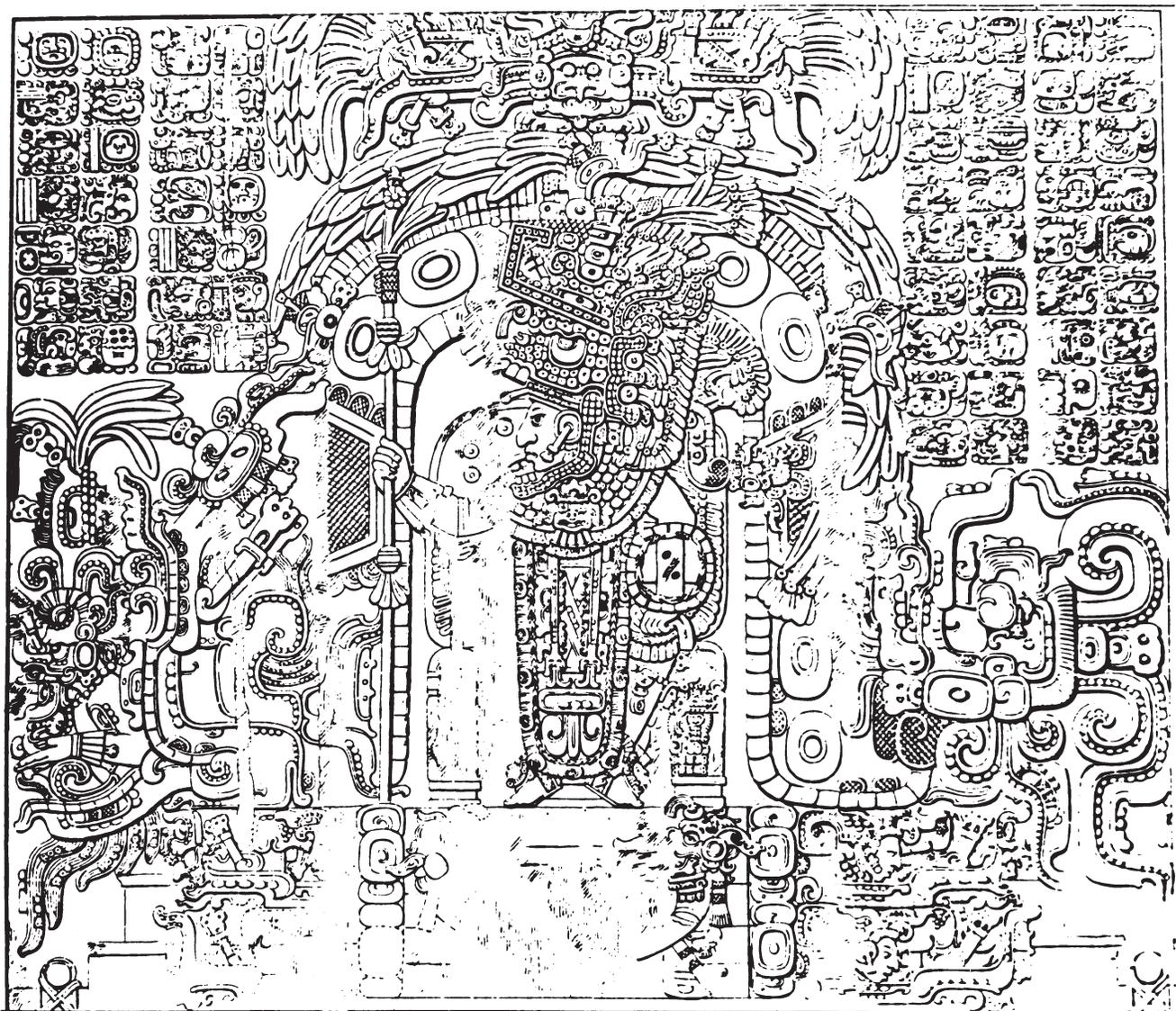


Fig. 21 Scene on the wooden lintel from Temple IV, Tikal. (From Maudslay 3, Plate 78.)

One wonders whether the confusion in the literature based on the Moan bird's benevolency or malevolency, whether the creature dwells in the thirteenth heaven or the lowest level of the underworld, might be a misunderstanding of the double natured concept of the Principal Bird Deity. The Moan bird or screech owl (not vulture) which rarely is expressed with any supernatural endowments other than gods' eyes is a nocturnal, malevolent, underworld oriented creature from all iconographic indications. The confusion arises when one does not differentiate between this creature and the Principal Bird Deity who certainly has a benevolent, celestial component.

The Principal Bird Deity has been defined as dual natured, yet remains to be placed in the elaborate Maya pantheon. At Piedras Negras, the bird occurs only in conjunction with the "ascension motif" (except for its unique appearance on Stela 5), exemplifying its impor-

tance in this particular kingship ritual. Perched on bicephalic sky bands and situated on the highest register of each stela, the Principal Bird Deity symbolically looks down from the heavens, overseeing the ceremony. The example perched on a sky band over the doorway at House E at Palenque functions in the same manner as overseer of events. Again, at Palenque in the Temple of the Cross, Foliated Cross, and Inscriptions, the bird occurs associated with very important rituals which represent significant aspects or events in the life and death of the nobility.

It becomes obvious that the Principal Bird Deity should be included into the family of deities associated with the nobility and ruling class. As overseer of significant events both in this world and the underworld, the creature must be an extremely important concept. Certainly this is the case at Izapa where the early forms of the complex are dominantly repeated relatively often

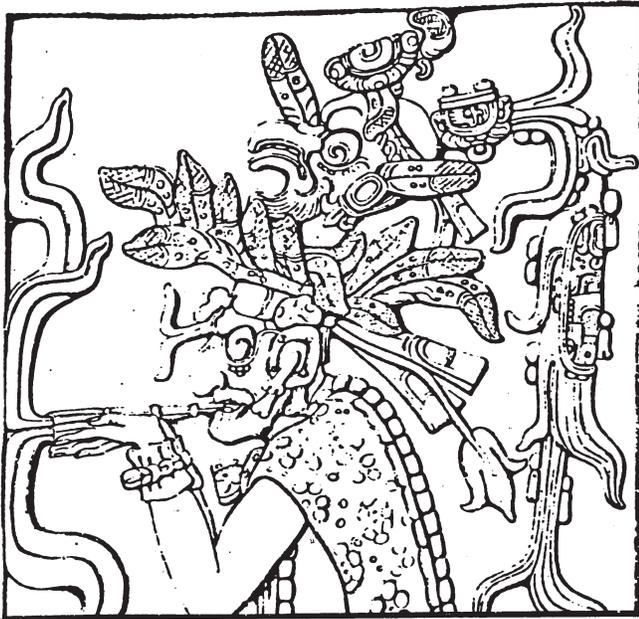


Fig. 22 God L, from sculptured panel from the east side of the doorway to the Inner Sanctuary of the Temple of the Cross, Palenque. (From Maudslay, 4, Plate 72.)

on stela. By the Late Classic, however, the Principal Bird Deity becomes incorporated into one of several expressions of a multi-natured concept, thus its appearance, while still significant, becomes subordinate to other abundantly represented motifs.

Itzamna, the supreme Maya deity, is iconographically depicted in the Late Classic as a bicephalic bearded dragon, according to Thompson, frequently portrayed on the ceremonial bar carried by members of the nobility. Recent studies suggest the Late Classic association of a fish monster (Fig. 25) with the concept of Itzamna (David Joralemon, personal communication). By including an avian manifestation of Itzamna, and thus depicting three creatures one terrestrial, another aquatic, and another aerial, all members of the long-lip complex, the Maya ingeniously define the omnipresence of the concept. It is known that Omoteotl, the Aztec counterpart of Itzamna, embodies a complex of deities which express the various aspects of godhead (Nicholson 1971: Table 3). According to Sahagun (1946), Omoteotl or Lord Duality, the cosmic creator and destroyer, is also omnipresent dwelling in the heavens, on Earth, and in the land of the dead. The double natured character of the Principal Bird Deity can be explained, then, by its identification as one of the deities in the Itzamna complex justifying its existence in both the domain of the living and the dead.

This identification of the Principal Bird Deity accounts for the abundant appearance of the serpent wing in so many iconographic contexts, particularly headdresses. Isolated, it acts as a digital expression of the Principal Bird Deity and conveys, in the instance of the headdress, the connection or association between the noble and his supreme god. Its depiction hanging from

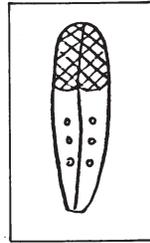


Fig. 23
Example of a Moan feather.

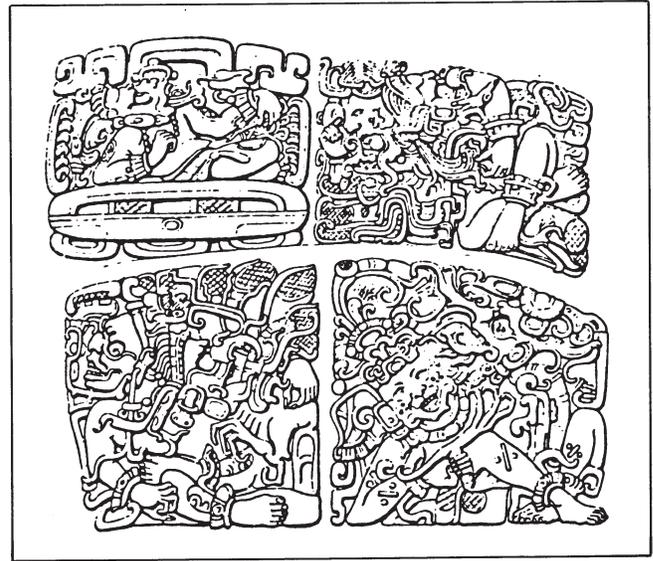


Fig. 24 Introductory glyph, Baktun, Katun, and Tun signs from Monolith B, Quirigua. (From Maudslay, 2, Plate 14.)

the arms of anthropomorphic figures (Coe 1973: 79) that are not Itzamna; on Late Classic pictorial ceramics and monumental sculpture, and its rare association with zoöomorphic creatures that are not constituents of the Principal Bird Deity complex are perplexing yet, in these instances, it must act as a variable defining element relating the creature, in some manner, to the Principal Bird Deity.

This article has attempted to define a continuum, beginning in the Late Formative and lasting through to the Late Classic, in the form and meaning of the Principal Bird Deity in Maya art. As an iconographic motif, the Principal Bird Deity, a member of the long-lip complex, is a composite form made up of two essential identifying elements — the long-lip face and the serpent wing. Though there is periodic developmental and stylistic change in the appearance of the creature, it is the long-lip face and the serpent wing which identify the creature.

In the Late Formative and Early Classic both of these elements were applied to the full form to identify the creature. However, by the beginning of the Late Classic with the flourishing of an elaborate Maya art style, either of these two elements would suffice in identifying the creature such that a variability in form existed with the

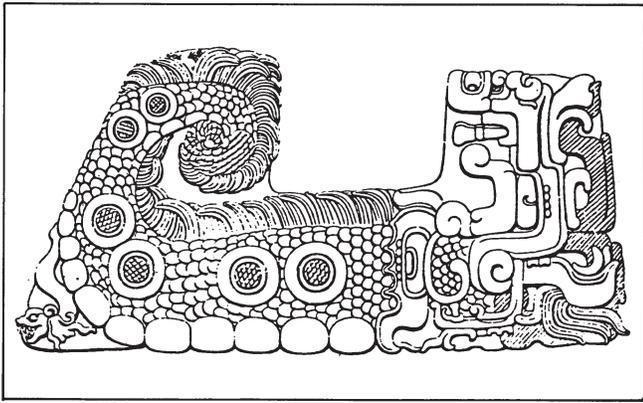


Fig. 25 Example of the Maya fish dragon, Altar O, west side, Copan. (From Maudslay, 1, Plate 85.)

important identifying elements occasionally replaced by new equally important defining elements. The concept of interchangeable variables in the Late Classic was presented to satisfactorily explain the problem of the variation of these identifying elements.

It was postulated that the Principal Bird Deity may possibly be the avian manifestation of Itzamna. Certainly, in the Late Classic, it is a dual natured deity of the nobility who presides in both the world of the living and the world of the dead.

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