



Figure 1. Río Azul Tomb 1, south wall. George Stuart on ladder and National Geographic editor Bill Garrett at base. Detail of photo by George F. Mobley, courtesy of George Stuart.

Maya Archaeology [Articles](#)

Royal Death, Tombs, and Cosmic Landscapes: Early Classic Maya Tomb Murals from Río Azul, Guatemala

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In the Maya region, as well elsewhere in Mesoamerica, it is well known that the interment of high-ranking members of society frequently took place in elaborate tomb chambers. Social hierarchy is quite apparent in ancient Maya burial contexts, as Michael Coe (1988:222-223) clearly noted. There is a marked difference between commoner burials in households and patios directly in the ground and sub-floor, cists and small irregular chambers in various contexts, and elaborate masonry chambers in pyramidal temples (see also Chase and Chase 1994:5,12; Coe 1975:88; Welsh 1988:215). In addition to their use as funerary monuments, whether housing a tomb or as cenotaphs (see Freidel and Guenter 2006), Classic-period Maya buildings also served as “instruments of state” and contained valuable information regarding identity, religion, and history (Schele and Mathews 1998:13). As such, they are a clear examples of how ancient Maya religion and politics were merged in the constructed landscape.

In cosmological thought, pyramidal buildings were often metaphors for mountains, as parts of sacred natural landscapes replicated in the culturally constructed landscapes of cities (Freidel and Schele 1988; Miller and Taube 1993:120; Reilly 1999:18; Stuart 1997; Stuart and Houston 1994:82; Townsend 1991; Vogt 1964:501; Vogt and Stuart 2005:156-157). Worshiping the sacred natural landscape and associating it with myth, religion, and politics are practices that survived the Colonial period, as the majority of modern Maya populations still view mountains as sacred entities and ritual shrines (Carlson and Eachus 1977; Tedlock 1982; Vogt 1964, 1969, 1973). Indeed, Classic Maya references to ritual architecture indicate that the buildings in the ceremonial centers were called *witzob*, “mountains” (Stuart 1997:15; Stuart and Houston 1994:82).

Culturally constructed landscapes, according to Cosgrove (1998:15), are the ideological way in which social groups experience the world around them. Evidence of how the

Maya perceived or imagined their supernatural landscape is found in iconographic scenes, hieroglyphic texts, and in their built environment (Pope 2006:28). The relationship between pyramids and mountains bears directly on Maya notions of cosmogonic (original and precedent-setting) landscapes and the destiny of the royal dead, as I shall illustrate with examples from Classic Maya buildings at Río Azul in northeastern Peten, Guatemala. These notions are deeply embedded in the enduring religious sensibilities of the millions of people who speak one of twenty-four living Mayan languages (Freidel et al. 1993:29-58; Leventhal and Gossen 1993; Vogt 1969; Vogt and Stuart 2005). Thus, ethnographic data help explain the importance of mountains in ancient Maya religious thought, as evidenced in the archaeological, iconographic, and epigraphic records.

Cosmic Mountains and Maya Religion

In indigenous Maya worldviews, features of the natural landscape such as mountains, caves, and water play a significant role (see Brady 1997:603; Prufer and Kindon 2005:26). The earth deities of the highland Guatemalan Q'eqchi' are called *tzuultaqa'*, or "Mountain-Valley" (Adams and Brady 2005:301; Carlson and Eachus 1977:41). Among the Q'eqchi' and most other highland Mayan speakers (e.g., the Zinacanteco Tzotzil speakers of Chiapas; Vogt 1969), important hills have names, animating the landscape. For modern Zinacantan inhabitants, for instance, the center of the world is represented by a small mound just off the center of town and surrounded by specific mountains that serve to "center" it (Freidel et al. 1993:124, 134). Like the Q'eqchi' and other groups, the Zinacantecos name these surrounding mountains, which they believe to be the dwelling places of the ancestors and associated with creation (Adams and Brady 2005:304; Vogt 1964:498-499; Vogt and Stuart 2005:180). A specific mountain that has three peaks symbolizes the three hearthstones of the cosmic place of rebirth or resurrection of the maize god in Prehispanic Maya creation myths (Freidel et al. 1993:127, 426 n. 2; Taube 2004b:81).

Historian of shamanic religion Mircea Eliade (1959, 1961:41-47) highlights the general importance of the axis mundi represented by the primordial sacred mountain that connects the heavens, the earth, and the underworld. Caves serve as the entrances or portals into the center of these sacred mountains (Brady 1997:603). Caves are also places of creation and symbols of fertility (see Brady and Prufer 2005:367; Miller and Taube 1993:56). Maya pyramids, as mountains, are intersecting points between life and death, serving as conduits into the cosmic landscape (Freidel et al. 1993:123-172).

Maya mortuary practices relate directly to this built and conceived sacred landscape. In hieroglyphic texts, the ancient

Maya evidently called the center of a city **CHAN CH'EEEN**, "sky-cave" (Stuart and Houston 1994:12; Vogt and Stuart 2005:160), a conceptual conjoining of axial opposites echoed in the Q'eqchi' division of the universe into Sky-Earth (Carlson and Eachus 1977:38). Vogt and Stuart (2005:160) suggest this spatial opposition may have been a Classic-period idea of the "world." Early Classic hieroglyphic examples, such as the texts on Stela 11 from Uxtenka and Stela 5 from Uaxactun, indicate that the "sky-cave" couplet was commonly part of toponyms and established a hierarchical locative order (Montgomery and Helmke 2007).

William Coe (1990) suggested that ancient inhabitants considered the North Acropolis at Tikal to be the "heart" of the city, based not only on its centrality but also the extraordinary rebuilding of its shrines and temples over time. Coe and his colleagues documented that it was the principal burial place for kings from the beginning of the dynasty in the second century CE through the seventh century (Martin and Grube 2008:43). Even after that, the tombs of kings were in pyramids surrounding the North Acropolis, and, like Tikal, funerary temples were a pattern at many Classic Maya sites (Ruz 1991; Welsh 1988). It can be surmised that the *chan ch'een* of Maya cities was the center, the place of pyramids, with temple sanctuaries on their summits and tombs inside. More evidence supporting the constructed landscape as reflecting the sacred, cosmogonic landscape is the analogy made between caves inside mountains on the one hand, and sanctuaries and burial chambers inside pyramids on the other (Brady and Prufer 2005; Freidel and Suhler 1999). Contemporary Maya like the Tzotzil of Zinacantan and Q'eqchi' of Alta Verapaz, believe that their tutelary deities and ancestors dwell inside mountains (Adams and Brady 2005:304-305; Carlson and Eachus 1977; Vogt 1973). Classic Maya burial chambers carved out of bedrock have an even closer relationship with the earth, as they are directly within it, providing archaeological evidence sustaining the antiquity of the association of caves/mountains with burials/pyramids.

As the existing ethnographic work underscores, the concept of *center* did not exist in a spatial vacuum; it was framed by the four directions that made up the quadripartite scheme of the universe. Yet, for the ancient Maya, spatial orientation was different from modern western directions provided by the reading of a compass. Cardinal points represented much more than mere directions, as they frequently were associated with specific places, often determined or characterized by features of the natural landscape, terrestrial or celestial (Freidel et al. 1993; Hanks 1990:299; Vogt 1973).

The results of my research, outlined here, refer to the importance of directionality and describe how the tombs of Río Azul and their painted murals were actually representing that

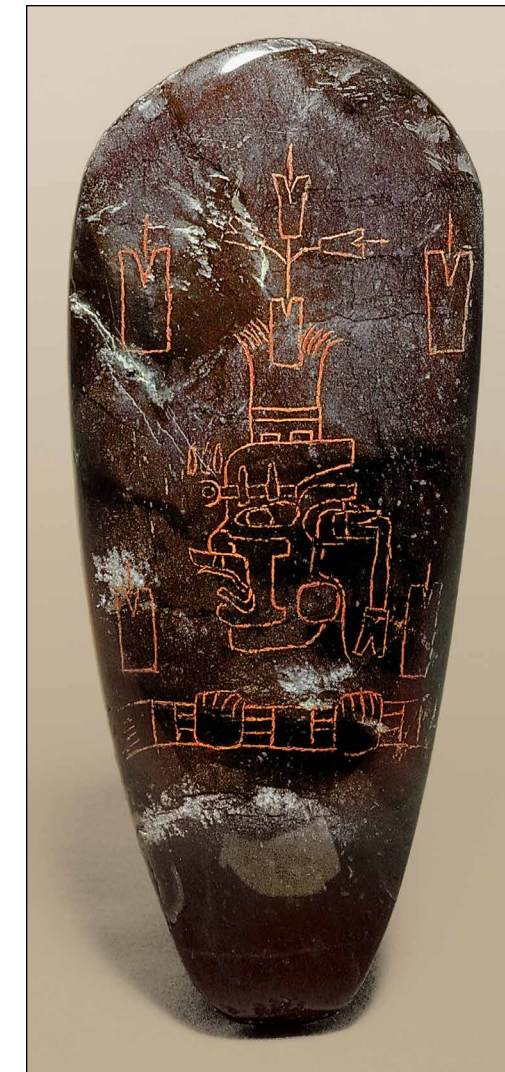


Figure 2. Olmec representation of the quincunx incised on a celt from Río Pesquero, 900-600 BCE. Photo © Justin Kerr.

"imagined world defined by specific landmarks, or landmark places, where the dead were reborn and the body itself is considered the center from which the referential features are projected" (Acuña 2007:47). The center plays an important role in Maya cosmology, but in the context of the tombs, and in particular the Río Azul tombs, I suggest that the interred principal individual represents the fifth and center direction. This is where a deceased individual needed to be to access the axis mundi conduit to the heavens and

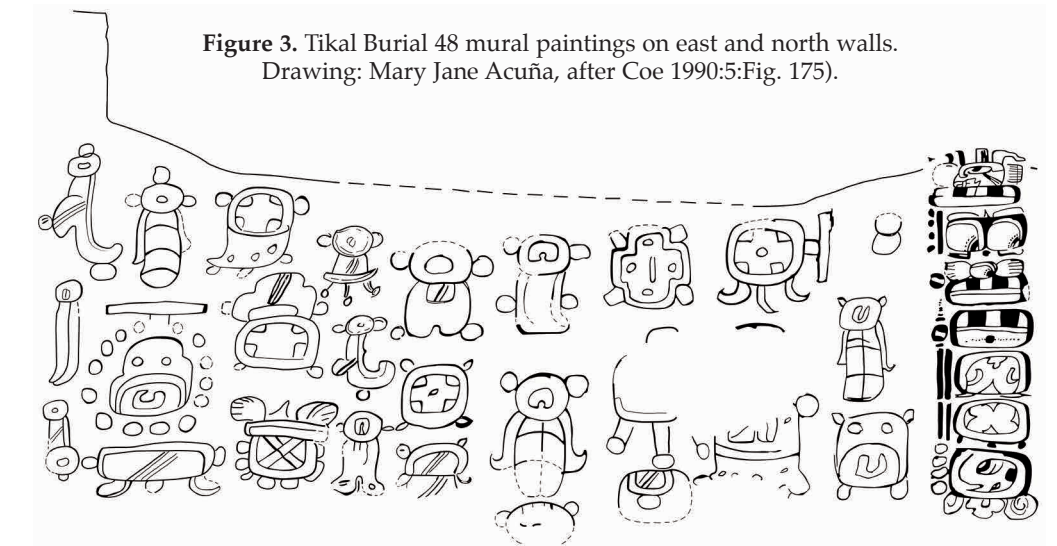


Figure 3. Tikal Burial 48 mural paintings on east and north walls. Drawing: Mary Jane Acuña, after Coe 1990:5:Fig. 175).

be reborn (see Reilly 1995; Taube 2004b). This is directly related to the notion of the quincunx, a widely known concept among Mesoamerican populations, dating as far back as the Olmec. Stone incised celts found at Río Pesquero illustrate the four corners represented by seeds or kernels, and the center is occupied by the Olmec maize god with a sprouting tassel (Freidel et al. 1993:136-137; Joralemon 1976; Guernsey 2006:83; Reilly 1991, 1995) (Figure 2). Adding to Reilly's identification of the central maize god as the center of the cosmos, Schele (1995:107) confirmed the notion that the "Olmec defined their ruler as the embodiment of the world tree." The direct analogy between sprouting vegetation, the center, and the rebirth of the maize god bears directly on the proposition that the individual in the tomb is placed in the center for that same reason. In the tomb, the deceased emulates the position of the maize god as the center of the cosmos, and he is in the axis mundi. In the case of the Río Azul tombs, the interred individual is the center of a sacred landscape defined by mountains named on the tomb walls.

When comparing tombs from across the Maya area, it becomes clear that the Río Azul tombs are not only exemplary in calligraphic writing on plastered walls, but also unique in their expression of religious ideas related to the afterlife of kings, or high-ranked members of society. Some of the painted tombs from Río Azul are a good source for understanding these concepts and bringing forth the interpretive link of tombs and pyramids with cosmic landscapes.

Early Classic Painted Tombs of Río Azul

Outside of Río Azul, only a few tombs with painted walls dating to the Early Classic (250-550 CE) are known in the Maya area. For example, Tikal Burial 48 is a tomb dated to the Manik ceramic complex (200-550 CE) based on the 27 vessels that were part of a complicated assortment of offerings (Coe 1990:1:118-123). The burial chamber walls were elaborately painted with a single hieroglyphic column on the north wall, and the east and west walls were painted with what Karl Taube (2004b:83) has called "floating jewels and flowers" (Figure 3). The calligraphic style of the north wall glyphic column resembles that of the tombs at Río Azul. The jewels and flowers are connected to

the concept of Flower Mountain, which relates to the celestial paradise of the sun and the sky, the watery underworld, and the earth. As the axis mundi, it represented the home of gods and venerated ancestors, but more importantly it was the pathway to the supernatural (Taube 2004b).

At the site of Río Azul in northeastern Guatemala there are several elaborate chamber tombs, many of which date to the Early Classic period (250–550 CE). Most of these tombs are exceptional in that they portray exquisite examples of calligraphic painting on plastered walls. It was precisely the discovery of these tombs, following a period of intensive looting after the site's discovery in 1962, that prompted archaeologist Richard E. W. Adams to begin research in 1983 to salvage and record the tombs and carry out formal archaeological investigation of the site as a whole (Adams 1999:5-7). The five-year project resulted in the discovery of additional tombs, bringing the total of decorated tombs dating to the Early Classic to eleven (Acuña 2007; Adams 1999; Adams and Robichaux 1992:415; Hall 1989:33; Robichaux 1990:20).¹

Contrary to other known Early Classic painted walls, for instance at Uaxactun (e.g., Str. B-XIII) and Tikal (e.g., Group 6C-XVI), or even the Temple XX tomb at Palenque (see González Cruz and Balcells González, this volume), the murals at Río Azul are distinct in that the main elements represented are not human figures (see Lombardo 2001:101); instead the theme throughout is textual, or a combination of both text and image (but without naturalistic human figures). The information recorded in the texts of most of the Río Azul tombs is concerned primarily with the names of specific mountains and with directionality. I propose that these mountains are landmarks of a cosmic or mythic landscape, a supernatural place to which divine rulers traveled after death to become venerated ancestors (Acuña 2007).

Substantial evidence supports the notion that deceased royalty transformed from historical figures to venerated and divine ancestors upon their death (McAnany 1995; Schele and Miller 1986; Taube 2004b). This is represented in a variety of media, for example on the facades of buildings (e.g., the “House of the Four Kings” at Balamku [Baudez 1996]), on carved monuments (e.g., Pakal’s sarcophagus lid at Palenque [Schele and Miller 1986:282], Tonina Monument 160 [Graham et al. 2006:Fig. 9:97]), and painted vessels (e.g., the Berlin “Death Vase” [Grube and Gaida 2006; Reents-Budet et al. 2004]). Yet Río Azul presents us with an unprecedented opportunity to explore the supernatural world perceived to be the dwelling place of ancestors and the manner in which the deceased got there, through a completely different medium, namely tomb paintings. The murals describe a place where rebirth and resurrection take place, and the tombs themselves may be metaphors for the path



Figure 4. East wall of Río Azul Tomb 25. Photo: George F. Mobley, courtesy of George Stuart; drawing: Mary Jane Acuña.

into the heavens, where the pyramid housing them symbolically represents Flower Mountain, as the evidence from Tomb 1 suggests (see also Taube 2004b).

Other tombs in the Maya lowlands also have evidence of ancestor veneration painted on their chamber walls. For instance, Tikal Tomb 166 is a Late Preclassic interment with images of what may have been ancestral figures depicted on its walls (Coggins 1975); however, the style and temporality are different from the examples at Río Azul. Yet the context exemplifies the early relationship between tombs and ancestor worship/veneration, as does the Early Classic tomb in Temple XX at Palenque that has nine figures painted on its walls (Robertson 2001:381-388).

The Río Azul tombs discussed in this article include Tombs 1 (Str. C-1); 2, 6, 7, and 12 (A-3 Complex); 5 (Str. C-7); and 25 (Str. B-56).² Five of 11 tombs at Río Azul name specific mountains of a cosmological or mythical landscape (Tombs 2, 5, 6, 7, and 25). Tombs 6 and 25 are very similar and share three mountain

¹ This number is from Adams and Robichaux (1992:415). Hall (1989:33) lists the total Early Classic painted tombs as twelve. Tombs 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, and 12 had been heavily looted and were the focus of salvage work (Adams 1984). Subsequent archaeological field research resulted in the discovery of Tombs 9, 17, 19, 23, and 25 (Adams 1986, 1987, 2000).

² For a map with the location of the structures housing the tombs see Adams (1999:Fig. 3-12). Original descriptions of tombs can be found in the Río Azul reports, specifically the chapters by Grant D. Hall (1986), David Stuart (1987b), and Erick Ponciano (2000). Hall (1989) also completed a dissertation on the mortuary traits of tombs in Str. C-1. In his M.A. thesis on the hieroglyphic texts of Río Azul, Hubert R. Robichaux (1990) presents an interpretation of the texts in the tombs. Adams and Robichaux (1992) published an overview article on the eleven Early Classic tombs, reiterating interpretations made originally in the field reports. Adams (1999) included descriptions of the tombs, as they were relevant to understanding the site's history, but maintained original interpretations.



Figure 5. East wall of Río Azul Tomb 6. Photo: George F. Mobley, courtesy of George Stuart.

names. Tomb 2 also shares at least one mountain name, but in addition to the primary glyphs it has secondary glyphs making interpretations more complex and perhaps associating the mountains with directionality. Tomb 1, on the other hand, contributes rich data on the concept of Flower Mountain as Taube (2004b) presented it, and its relation to the resurrection of ancestors.

I will begin with the east walls of tombs because they are distinct. The glyph on the east wall of Tomb 25 is very eroded, and in an original interpretation Hugh Robichaux (1990:69) suggested that it represents the numeral nine followed by the sign for “black” or perhaps a version of the month Mol. Robichaux (1990) went on to suggest that it was possibly the name of the occupant of the tomb—“Nine Black?” (Figure 4). Given that there are no other examples of personal names written in this fashion and in similar contexts at Río Azul, it is difficult to suggest with any certainty whether it is a name, but it is most likely not a day or month. It is too eroded to make a precise identification. The hieroglyphic text on the east wall of Tomb 6 is comprised of four glyphs that read **YAX-AK-*la*(?) NAAH u-K'ABA' ya-ATOOT** (Figure 5). Following Stuart's (2006b:135) identification of **AK** as “grass/thatch,” the text would translate as “green thatch house is the name of his/her dwelling.” It remains unclear what exactly this text is naming, whether the individual's house, the building itself, or the tomb (similar to Tomb 23; see Acuña 2007:18).

Tomb 7 is distinct in that its only text is on the east wall, composed of a single glyphic column including a Calendar Round date of 3 Ik' Seating of Yax, followed by a short supplementary series and the verb **OCH-HA'** (Figure 6). The verb is a metaphor similar to *och bilh*, “enters road,” referring to the “celestial ascent into the road of the sun” (Taube 2004b:80-81), meaning death (Freidel et al. 1993:76-78; Montgomery and

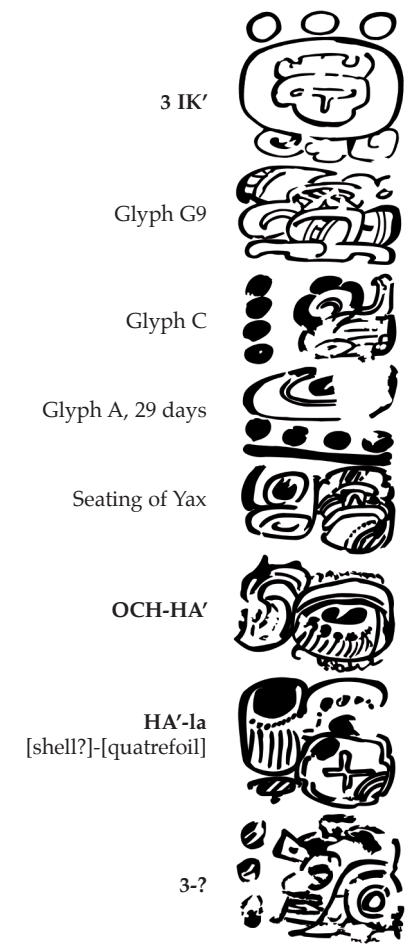


Figure 6. East wall of Río Azul Tomb 7. Drawing: Mary Jane Acuña, after photo by George F. Mobley, courtesy of David Stuart.

Helmke 2007). *Och ha'*, “enters water” (Montgomery and Helmke 2007), may be a specific reference to the watery underworld where the deceased kings go to be reborn as venerated ancestors. The next glyph reads **HA'-*la***-[shell?]-[quatrefoil], where the first element, *ha'al* translates as “watery, rain” (Houston et al. 2001:32-35; Lacadena 2004a:89). The two other elements have not yet been securely identified. Although incomplete and eroded, the sign following *ha'al* could possibly be the glyph for “shell,” as it is a common part in the name of a

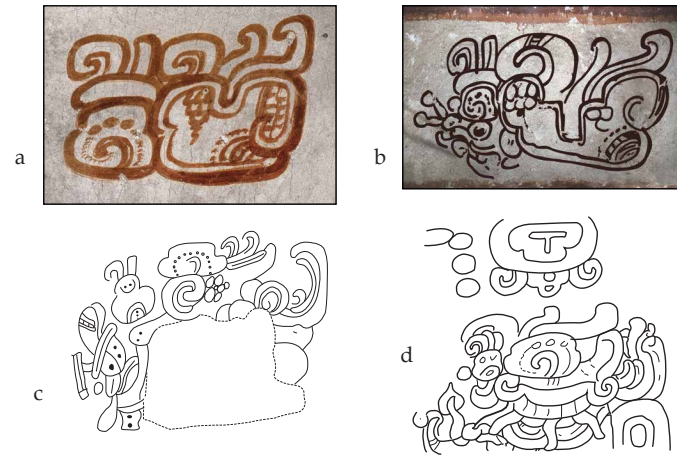


Figure 7. SAK-'shell'-WITZ-NAL: (a) north wall of Río Azul Tomb 25; (b) south wall of Tomb 6; (c) east wall of Tomb 5; (d) north wall of Tomb 2. Photos: George F. Mobley, courtesy of George Stuart; drawings: Mary Jane Acuña after Barbara Cannell in Adams 1984:Fig. 11 (c) and sketch by Ian Graham, courtesy of David Stuart (d).

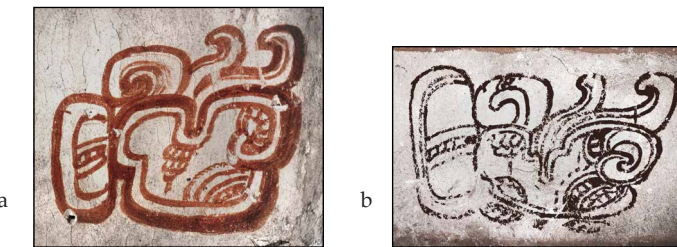


Figure 8. LEM?-WITZ-NAL: (a) south wall of Río Azul Tomb 25; (b) north wall of Río Azul Tomb 6. Photos: George F. Mobley, courtesy of George Stuart.

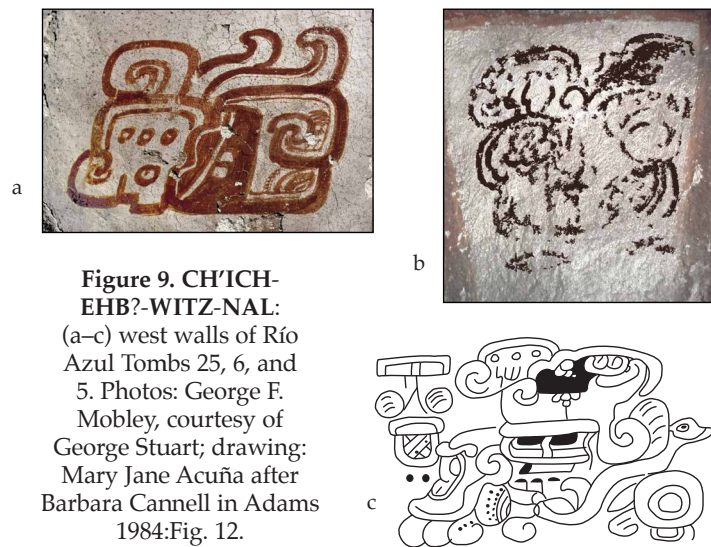


Figure 9. CH'ICH-EHB?-WITZ-NAL: (a-c) west walls of Río Azul Tombs 25, 6, and 5. Photos: George F. Mobley, courtesy of George Stuart; drawing: Mary Jane Acuña after Barbara Cannell in Adams 1984:Fig. 12.

mountain painted in Río Azul Tombs 2, 5, 6, and 25, and other contexts, namely the “white shell? mountain place.”³ The sign that looks like a quatrefoil beneath it also has connections with the general theme, as it is the Preclassic symbol for cave or opening into the otherworld (Freidel et al. 1993:215; Guernsey 2006; Joralemon 1976: 37-40; Love and Guernsey 2007:296). Tomb 7’s text, therefore, is likely recounting the death of a ruler, possibly named in the very last glyph of the column (3-?), and referencing his entry into the watery underworld through the portal represented by the quatrefoil.

Painted on the north wall of Tomb 25 and the south wall of Tomb 6 are the glyphs for **WITZ-NAL**⁴ preceded by the conflated signs for **SAK** and ‘shell,’ reading “white shell mountain [place]” (Figure 7). This glyph is also painted on the north wall of Tomb 2, and the east wall of Tomb 5. In Tomb 2, incidentally, it is accompanied by the year-bearer 4 Ik’ (Stuart 2004a:1-4), and near the corner is an unidentified glyph (see Acuña 2007:29). On the south wall of Tomb 25 and north wall of Tomb 6 appears the mountain sign **WITZ-NAL** preceded this time by the undeciphered ‘celt’ symbol possibly reading **LEM**, which as an adjective means “shiny” (David Stuart, personal communication 2007) (Figure 8).

The west walls of Tombs 5, 6, and 25 all share the same mountain name (Figure 9), with slight distinctions in their representation. In Tomb 25, *witz* is conflated with a stepped element, perhaps **EHB**, painted red; *nal* appears as an affix in front of which is the glyph for “blood.” Stuart (2005c:76) has suggested a reading for “blood” as **CH'ICH'** or **K'IK'**, providing a full reading as *ch'ich' ehb witz nal* (for iconographic associations of the “blood” glyph see Houston et al. 2006:93-95). While the names for the mountains are the same, they are represented differently. For example, Tombs 6 and 25 have completely logosyllabic spellings, whereas Tombs 2 and 5 use a combination of epigraphic and iconographic elements and motifs. In the latter cases, *witz* is represented by the animated mountain head in profile, with *kawak* teeth and eye tendrils, similar to the medallion glyphs in Tomb 1 (see Figure 15). In this same iconographic style, Tomb 2’s other preserved glyph

³ Some may question the identification of this scroll sign as ‘shell’ and would suggest it is simply a water scroll. Unlike the well-known water scroll, all the examples at Río Azul identified as ‘shell’ have two notches, one on each side towards the upper edge of the scroll. Similar examples appear referenced as shell scrolls elsewhere (e.g., Schele and Miller 1986:Fig. 28).

⁴ The logogram for **NAL** represents a stylistic form of corn on the cob. It appears in a variety of iconographic contexts and in text, where it serves as a locative suffix marking toponyms and meaning “place” (Houston and Stuart 1994:21; Montgomery and Helmke 2007; see also Taube 1985).

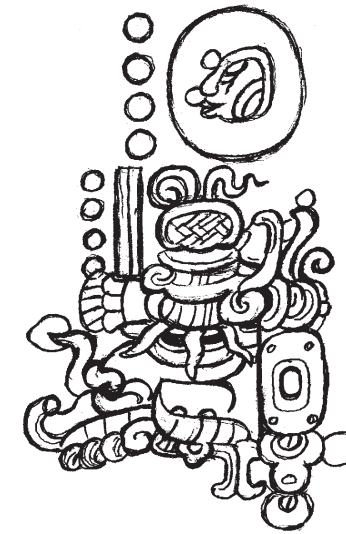


Figure 10. East wall of Río Azul Tomb 2. Digital trace by Mary Jane Acuña of drawing by Ian Graham.

is on the east wall (Figure 10). Unique to Río Azul, although mentioned on the facade of Balamku’s “House of the Four Kings” pyramid (see Figure 20d), it is composed of an inverted vessel preceded by the number nine, with the year-bearer 4 Kaban floating above it (see Stuart 2004a for discussion on Classic-period year-bearers). Incidentally, while Tomb 2 mentions mountains its additional glyphs are concerned with directionality, as the year-bearer glyphs indicate, a concept that is clearly expressed in the murals of Tomb 12 (Acuña 2007:32-36; Stuart 1987b).

Tomb 12 is well known for the representation of cardinal directions painted on its walls, in addition to secondary glyphs in the corners and a longer text along the upper red band of the east wall (Stuart 1987b) (Figures 11 and 12). Each direction corresponds precisely to our modern knowledge of north, east, south, and west, and each one is also associated with a specific lord or patron (Acuña 2007:33). Interpretation of the secondary



Figure 11. East wall of Río Azul Tomb 12. Photo: George F. Mobley, courtesy of George Stuart.

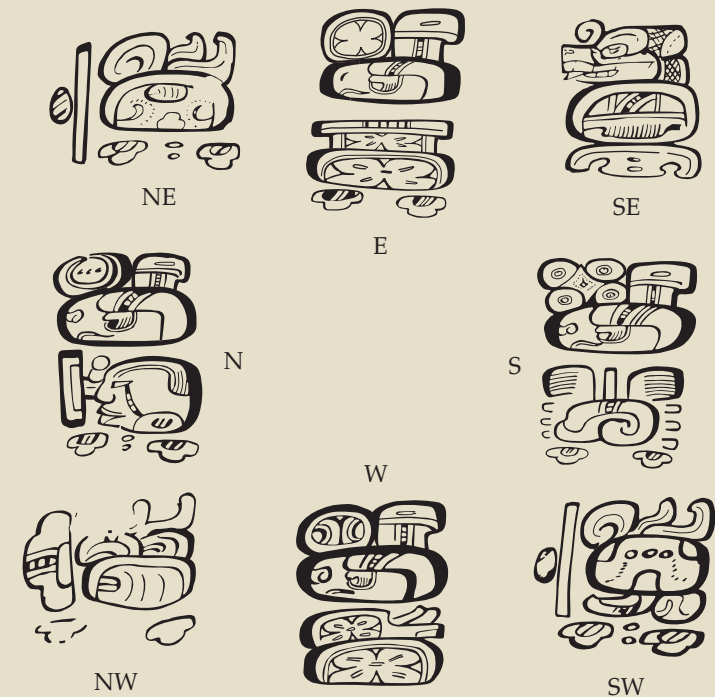


Figure 12. Río Azul Tomb 12: directional glyphs and secondary glyphs painted on tomb corners. Digital trace by Mary Jane Acuña of drawings by David Stuart (1987b:Figs. 41, 44).



Figure 13. Río Azul Tomb 12: text on upper east wall. Digital trace by Mary Jane Acuña of drawing by David Stuart (1987b:Fig. 45).

glyphs in the corners remains elusive, but they might be naming midpoints between the directions, as pages 76 and 75 of the Madrid Codex indicate (Acuña 2007:35; Paxton 2001). The text on the east wall of Tomb 12 starts out with the Calendar Round date 8 Ben 16 Kayab, followed by **mu-ka-ja 6-MUYAL-CHAN-NAL-ia ? ?** (Figure 13). There are two possible Long Count dates for this Calendar Round, 9.0.14.8.13 and 9.3.7.3.13, where the former is the more likely candidate because it corresponds to the year 450 CE, which fits not only with the building construction chronology but also the style of the murals. The verb in the text,

muhkaaj, “was buried,” likely corresponds to the burial event of the individual interred in the tomb, certainly a ruler of Río Azul. Stuart and Houston (1994:44-47) suggested that **6-MUYAL-CHAN-NAL** was a variant spelling of *wak chan muyal witz*, or “Six Sky Cloud Mountain,” where the scribe omitted the word for mountain. A full example appears on El Zapote Stela 5 (Stuart and Houston 1994:Fig. 52). While the name that follows is undeciphered, part of it may be **CHAN/KAN**, or “snake.”

At the time of its discovery, Tomb 1 was exceptional given the quality and preservation of its murals (Figure 14). Today, sadly, after



Figure 14. Río Azul Tomb 1: view towards the east. Photo: George F. Mobley, courtesy of George Stuart.

over two decades of being exposed to tourists, bats, and air, the murals have deteriorated markedly. Fortunately there is a fairly good photographic record dating to the time of discovery, which allows for an analysis of the mural’s symbolic and glyphic content. The east wall appears to be the most important and contains a double-column hieroglyphic text (Figure 15). It starts at the top with the Initial Series Introductory Glyph that has Ak’bal as patron of the month. This is followed by the Long Count date 8.19.1.9.13 and the Calendar Round 4 Ben 16 Mol (9 September 417), with a short version of the Supplementary Series between the day and the month. The last two glyphs, in positions A8 and B8, are the verb and the subject. The verb is that for “birth,” **SIH-ji-AJ-ya**, preceding an unidentified name. Usually the names of historic kings are accompanied by a royal title identifying them as divine kings of a particular polity. In this case there is only a name, perhaps reflecting the individual’s deceased status.

Flanking the hieroglyphic column are four large medallions, which have elements indicating they should be read as glyphs (e.g., the *na* as phonetic complement to **AHIIN**, on the SE corner) (Figure 15).⁵ To the viewer’s left, the medallion glyph is comprised of two basic elements, the profile animated *witz* with eye tendrils and *kawak* teeth, and below it the conflation **CHAN-CH’EEN**, a couplet commonly associated with toponyms (Montgomery and Helmke 2007; Stuart and Houston 1994:12, 58; Vogt and Stuart 2005:160). Taube (2004b:83) suggested that this mountain was in fact Flower Mountain. I concur and argue that the Río Azul evidence further reinforces the sky-cave couplet. *Chan-ch’een* represents the center, the axis mundi, and therefore its use in this context suggests that the mountain is the center,

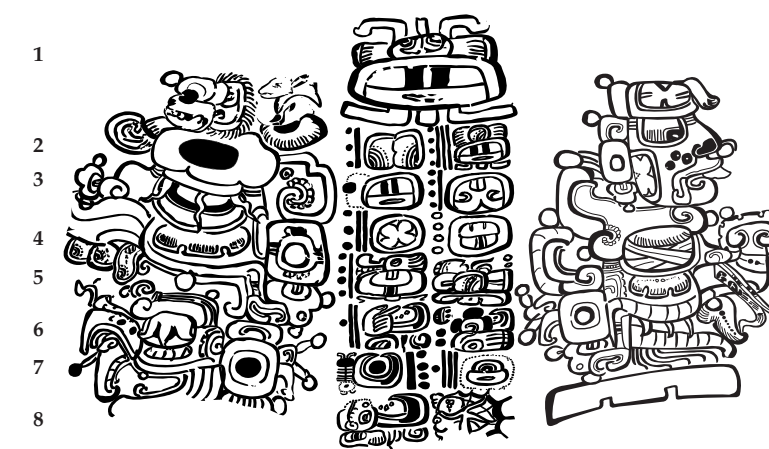


Figure 15. Río Azul Tomb 1: drawing of glyphic column on the east end of the tomb with glyphic medallions to its sides. Drawing: Mary Jane Acuña based on photos by George F. Mobley.

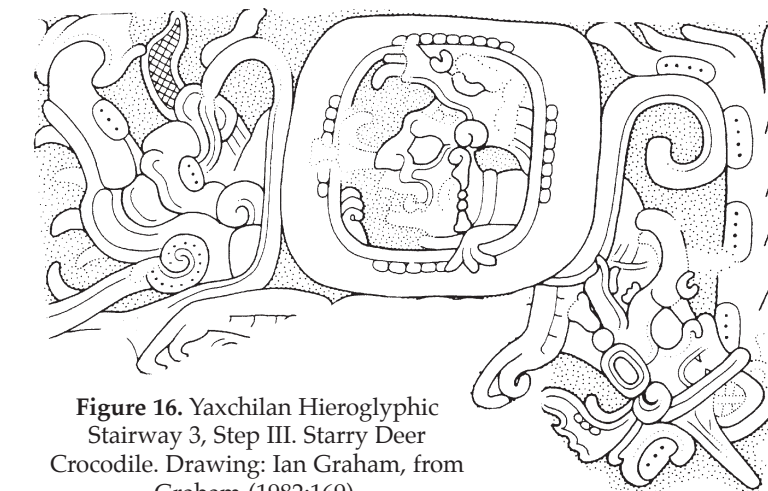


Figure 16. Yaxchilan Hieroglyphic Stairway 3, Step III. Starry Deer Crocodile. Drawing: Ian Graham, from Graham (1982:169).

reinforcing the idea of Flower Mountain as the axis mundi and the pathway to the supernatural.⁶ Incidentally, Tomb 1 is located on the axis of Structure C-1, the center of the building, and by extension the center of the mountain, the axis mundi. Enhancing this argument further is the glyphic medallion to the viewer’s right of the text column on the east wall of Tomb 1, composed of two main components (Figure 15). The lower portion is the crocodile head in profile that reads **AHIIN-na**, and resting above it is a deity in profile with the symbols for *k’in* on the cheek and forehead, most likely the sun god (Taube 1992b:50-56). There are a few interesting and important aspects about this portion of the mural that tie into the overall proposed theme. I find that there is a close connection between the sun god and crocodile here with what Stuart (2005c:70-74) has proposed as the Starry Deer Crocodile, possibly representing the darkened underworld sky and the earth. On Yaxchilan Hieroglyphic Stairway 3, Step III, is an example of the Starry Deer Crocodile carrying the sun god in a cartouche in its stomach, and toward the tail is the Quadripartite Badge (Robertson 1974; Stuart 2005c:164-167) (Figure 16). The Quadripartite Badge (Freidel et al. 1993:215; Robertson 1974) represents the portal to the sky and is a metaphor for birth (Freidel and Suhler 1999:256). While still only a hypothesis, this combination of elements suggests that the overall theme on the east wall of Río Azul Tomb 1 is concerned

⁵ For **AHIIN** “crocodile” see Stuart 2005c:64.

⁶ Vogt and Stuart (2005:168) suggest that *chan-ch’een*, by analogy with contemporary Chamula Maya thought, represents the sanctuaries in Classic Maya temple pyramids, including those that are either literally or metaphorically subterranean, as a metaphorical “window” between the planes of living and supernatural beings—that is to say, as a communicative portal. Such a locality, for both the ancient and contemporary Maya, functioned as axis mundi and pathway to the supernatural.



Figure 17. Río Azul Tomb 1, south wall. Note iconography of water above and below rectangular niche. Detail of photo by George F. Mobley, courtesy of George Stuart.

with the deceased king traveling to the supernatural world through Flower Mountain. The Río Azul mural does not have the Quadripartite Badge. Instead the link to birth is made explicit in the hieroglyphic text, which specifically indicates that the subject is born, as I argue, into the afterlife, as a rebirth.

On the north and south walls of Río Azul Tomb 1 are painted motifs that primarily illustrate a watery place. The painted water bands are comparable to well-known examples painted on pottery that represent the watery underworld (see Hellmuth 1987b:113) (Figure 17). Additionally, other motifs closer to the western end of the tomb include vertical panels painted with mat, or *pop*, designs symbolizing rulership and authority. Adjacent to them are stacked elements of reptilian heads with dangling jewels (Figure 18), reminiscent of what Schele and

Miller (1986:44) called “personification heads,” which they propose are objects with accumulated sacred power. I suggest the mat motifs and jewels confirm the status of the individual as a king or divine ruler with sacred power. Furthermore, the jewels are similar to those painted on Tikal Tomb 48 (see Figure 3), which Taube (2004b:83) has convincingly linked to the symbolism of royal tombs, Flower Mountain, and celestial ascent.

Discussion

The analysis of the Río Azul tombs suggests that with the exception of the two tombs flanking Tomb 1 in Structure C-1, Tombs 19 and 23 (not discussed here), all other painted tombs dating to the Early Classic have murals that focus on two principal and related themes: sacred mountains

and directionality. We know from ethnographic research in the Maya highlands that sacred mountains are associated with the cardinal directions and with the landscape of creation (Taube 2004b; Tedlock 1982); therefore, while there are two different programs, their meaning is connected within the broader cosmological concepts discussed in this article.

To date, available evidence from Río Azul presents a list of specific mountains painted on tomb walls, some of which are repeated in various tombs and others mentioned only once. There does not seem to be a rigid pattern in the location of each mountain in relation to others, or to specific directions. Among the known mountains named, the most frequent is “white shell(?) mountain place,” appearing in Tombs 2, 5, 6, 25, and possibly 7. It appears twice on a north wall (Tombs 2 and 25), once on a south wall (Tomb 6), and once on an east wall (Tomb 5). “Blood-step(?) mountain place,” on the contrary, only appears painted on the west walls of Tombs 5, 6, and 25, representing thus far the only consistent placement in relation to a direction. Unfortunately, the image painted on the west wall of Tomb 2 remains undeciphered due to poor preservation. As described above, “celt/shiny mountain place” only appears on the north wall of Tomb 6 and the south wall of Tomb 25. On the east wall of Tomb 2 is a mountain that so far has only appeared once at Río Azul but is also mentioned at the site of Balamku. It consists of an inverted vessel with the symbol for *pop*, “mat,” and the number nine preceding it (see Figure 20c). The exact name of the mountain remains elusive, especially since the scrolls above the vessel indicate a possible reading of



Figure 18. Panels on the south wall of Río Azul Tomb 1. Detail of photo by George F. Mobley, courtesy of George Stuart.

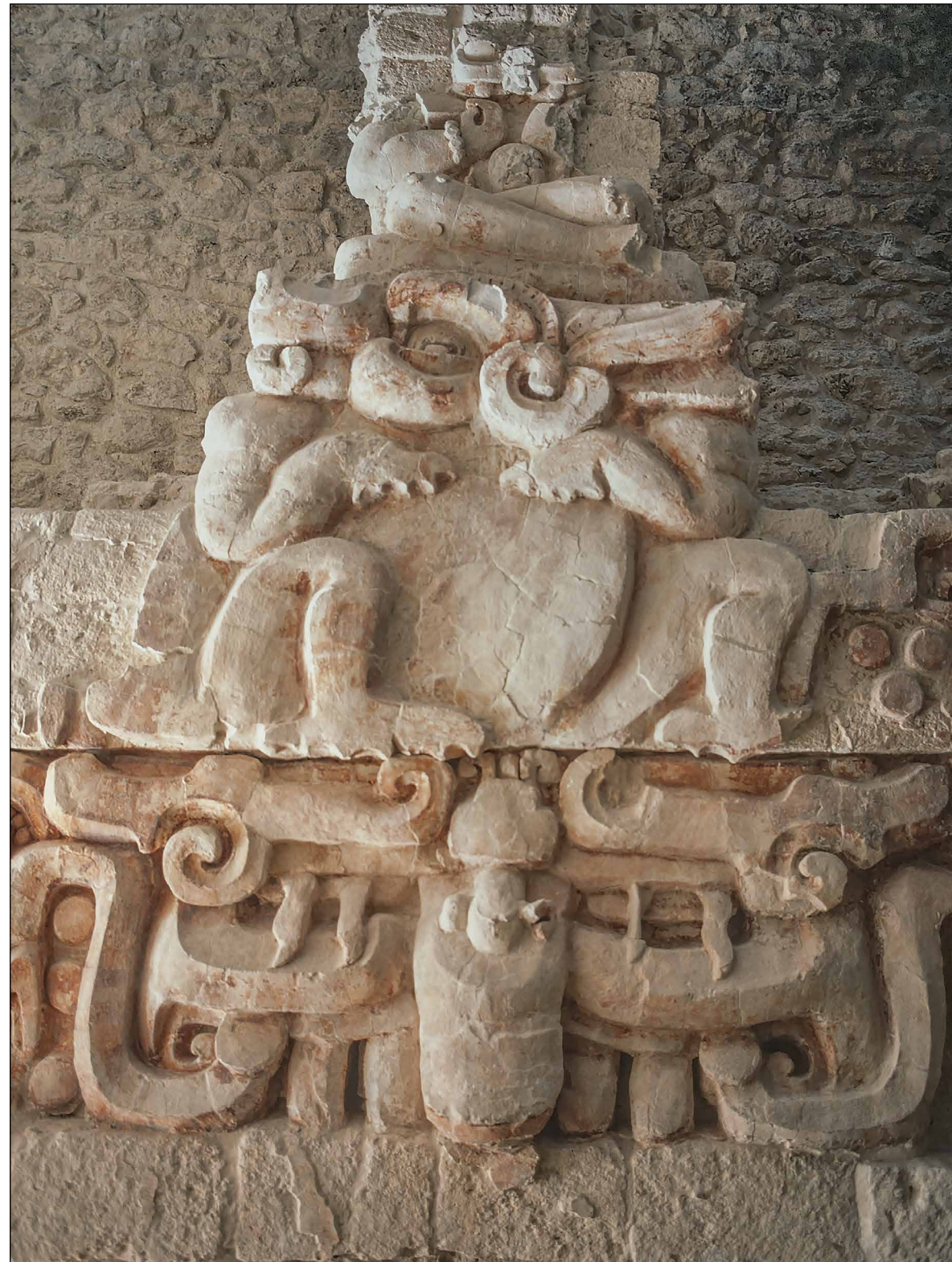


Figure 19. Human and zoomorphic figures atop mountain on facade of the “House of the Four Kings” at Balamku, Campeche. Photo: Jorge Pérez de Lara.

k'ahk' (Montgomery and Helmke 2007). At Balamku the vessel is also inverted, but contrary to the example from Tomb 2 at Río Azul the fire scrolls are at the bottom, as though emerging from the vessel itself.

Outside of Río Azul we find several comparative examples that make the conceptual representation of cosmic landscapes, rebirth of venerated ancestors, and cycles of life and death a more widespread practice within the lowland Maya region. Strengthening the metaphor that exists between mountains and pyramids are the many structures throughout the Maya lowlands decorated with symbolism of mountains, often in the form of stacked *witz* heads at the corners. Clear examples include Structure 10L-22 at Copan (Fash 2005:117) and the site of Hormiguero in Campeche, Mexico (Andrews 2000). Mountain symbolism appears frequently in iconographic programs and hieroglyphic texts in a variety of contexts and media. Mountains are often referenced in scenes associated with the death of an important individual, whose afterlife transformation clearly takes place in a cosmic environment. *Witz* is often found as part of emblem glyphs, suggesting an important reference to mountains as places, often sacred places. Rulers were



a



b



c



d

Figure 20. Close-up of Balamku facade mountains with nominal glyphs: (a) *ch'ich' witz*; (b) conflated *sak* “shell”(?) *witz*; (c) undeciphered name; (d) inverted vessel with number nine.

frequently depicted on carved monuments standing atop large *witz* representations or masks, identified as places by a glyphic reference in the cleft mountain forehead. Depending on the context, the reference of a place may be mythical or historical (Stuart and Houston 1994).

At the site of Balamku is a building known as the House of the Four Kings (Baudez 1996). The name was assigned to the building on account of the elaborate stucco facade exhibiting four alternating scenes, said to be depicting kings (Figure 19). While the facade at Balamku merits its own study, I find significant iconographic and ideological parallels to the references to mythical landscapes and concepts of death and the afterlife discussed in this article. The facade is dominated

by a composition of four animated mountains in frontal view, identified with nominal glyphs located in the forehead cleft. On top of each mountain sits a toad or a crocodile, two on the left and two on the right, respectively, with upturned open mouths. On top of each creature sits a human figure (possibly a king), with crossed legs over jaguar pelt cushions and hands in the “crab-claw” position typical of the Early Classic. According to the glyphic signs in the mountain clefts, the names of the mountains are, from left to right, “blood mountain” (**CH'ICH'-WITZ**), “white-shell(?) mountain” (**SAK-shell?-WITZ**), a sign formed by a peccary head over a half moon, and, the very last one, an inverted vessel with the number nine and the scrolls of the “fire” sign, **K'AHK'** (Acuña 2007:51) (Figure 20). This last

one is interesting because rather than occupying the space of the mountain cleft, the inverted vessel with emerging fire scrolls replaces what would normally be the muzzle of the mountain. The number nine is placed horizontally above it. **CH'ICH'-WITZ** and **SAK-shell?-WITZ** appear multiple times at Río Azul. The inverted vessel mountain appears once, in Tomb 2.

The two central figures depicted on the facade of the building at Balamku are the best preserved and wear very elaborate headdresses featuring sun god iconography. Since it was a common practice for kings to include their names and those of deities in their headdresses in artistic programs (Houston 2004; Schele and Miller 1986:68), it seems likely that the figures at Balamku are being deified as sun lords. My analysis indicated that these kings were reborn from the open mouths of the toads and crocodiles as venerated ancestors (Acuña 2007). The relationship with the sun god may be connected to the nocturnal journey of the sun through the underworld to re-emerge or be reborn. Tomb 1 of Río Azul associates the sun god with a crocodile that I have interpreted as a reference to the nocturnal passage of the sun through the earth, which is the crocodilian sky of the underworld (see Stuart 2005c; Taube 1989a). This concept is also related to the Starry Deer Crocodile (Stuart 2005c), which carries the Quadripartite Badge, the portal to the sky and symbol of birth or rebirth (Freidel et al. 1993:451; Robertson 1974).

At Balamku at the base of the facade, the surviving iconography alternating with the mountains indicates that it is a watery location through the representation of water lilies and other aquatic motifs. In the alternating spaces between the mountains are three jaguars with reptilian features and skeletal lower jaws. Jaguars are associated with the underworld, and their presence in the scene, in addition to the mountains of the cosmic landscape, underscores that the base of the facade is the watery underworld (see Miller and Taube 1993:102-104).

In the mythic landscape, the mountains serve as conduits for the rebirth of kings from the world of the dead into the living as ancestors. They are each a representation of Flower Mountain (Taube 2004b). The appearance of specific names at more than one site and conceptual similarities showing up in various contexts also indicate a regional knowledge of the cosmic landscape, where ancestors were reborn. Three of the mountains at Balamku are also mentioned at Río Azul. Although the representation at Balamku is in a single plane, wrapping the scene around the building would place each scene in a particular direction, conforming to the quadripartite scheme of the universe and leaving the center of the pyramid as the primordial mountain, the axis mundi (see Freidel et al. 1993; Reilly 1995; Taube 2004b). A similar pattern is identified at Río Azul through the distribution of mountains on the walls of the tombs and the interred individual in the center.

This reminds us of the cosmic composition of the Olmec quincunx with the maize god at the center (see Reilly 1995; Stross 1991).

On the Death Vase, a looted Early Classic tripod ceramic vessel currently housed at the Museum für Volkerkunde in Berlin (Grube and Gaida 2006; Reents-Budet et al. 2004; Taube 2004b), there are two important scenes that combine cosmic landscapes with ideas of death and rebirth (Figure 21). On one side, the deceased is wrapped in a bundle on top of a dais on a surface clearly depicted as watery. Behind the bundle is Flower Mountain with a solar cartouche that carries the sun god (Taube 2004b:81). Additionally, it appears that this is a three-faced mountain, alluding to the hearth of creation and places of rebirth, similar to the one on the main tablet of the Foliated Cross at Palenque (Stuart 1987a; Taube 1998). On the other side, the deceased is represented as sprouting from the ground as a tree, accompanied to his sides by what are likely to be his ancestors, directly in front of a pyramid. Here the lower platform of the pyramid shows the deceased in skeletal form lying at the watery level, alluding to tombs or burials within pyramids. On the vessel the pyramid also has iconographic elements of a mountain, directly tying to the metaphorical relationship between mountains and pyramids, and these as burial locations and portals to the afterlife. The connection with Río Azul is in the overall concept and presence of elements in association with each other to represent a related event, the rebirth of a king in a cosmic place, in addition to highlighting the symbolism of pyramids as metaphors for mountains.

It is worth noting that the three-faced mountain on both the Berlin vase and Palenque's Tablet of the Foliated Cross may have a symbolic meaning represented in some of the tombs at Río Azul. Taking into account the limitations of the sample from Río Azul, it is possible to identify the names for three mountains that are repeated in the mural paintings in several tombs: **SAK-shell?-WITZ-NAL**, **CH'ICH'-EHB WITZ-NAL**, and **LEM?-WITZ-NAL**. These mountains are perhaps making reference to the three-stone hearth of creation, metaphorically represented with three mountains, although there is insufficient evidence to sustain this interpretation.

In a slightly different context, a vessel known as the Regal Bunny Pot, or K1398 in Justin Kerr's catalogue (Figure 22), depicts a scene in which a rabbit is standing on top of a mountain and taking the "clothes" and "tribute" from God L (Stuart 1993a:170), a deity of the underworld in addition to water and agricultural fertility (Taube 1992b:79-88). On the opposite side of the vessel is God L once again, this time deprived of his regalia, standing in front of the sun god, who is sitting on top of a mountain (Figure 23). A speech scroll emanates from the sun god, directing the viewer to a floating hieroglyphic text

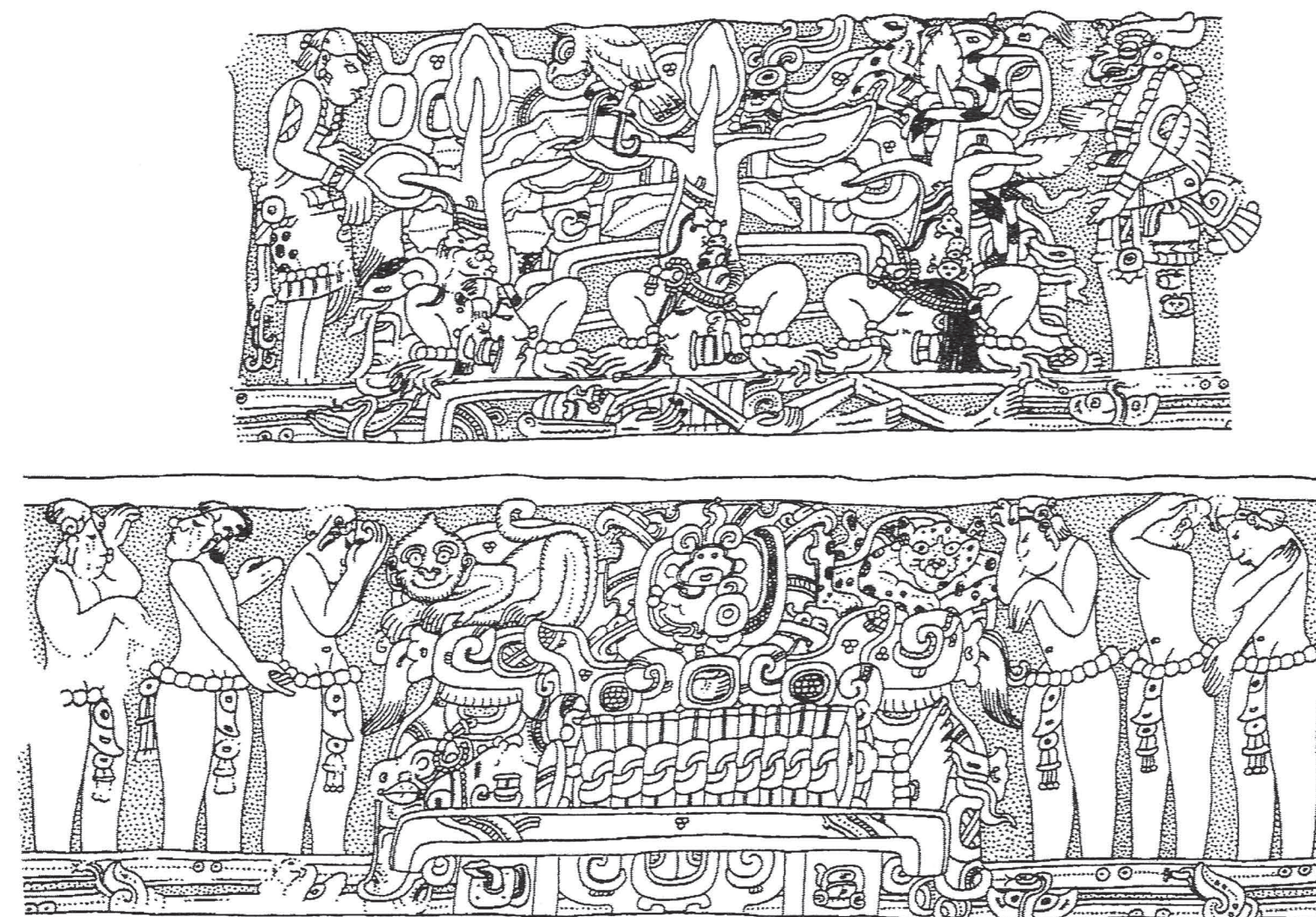


Figure 21. Berlin Death Vase depicting the death and resurrection of a king. Drawing: Stephen Houston.

comprised of four glyphs in a single column. The text begins with a shell sign affixed to the sign for *sak*, which we can identify as the "white shell." The following glyph is a vulture head, known to be another form for writing *witz*, or mountain (Stuart, personal communication 2007). Next is the glyph for north using the logosyllabic spelling, **xa-MAN-n(a)**, *xaman*. The eye of the mountain on which God L sits is painted using the symbolism for shell, but could also be a water scroll indicating the watery underworld. Thus the scene painted on the vessel clearly takes place at the "white-shell mountain," the same mountain place mentioned at Río Azul and Balamku. It is hardly a coincidence that, with the exception of Balamku, all references to this mountain are associated with the north, epigraphically spelled out on vessel K1398 and painted on the north walls of tombs at

Río Azul. Based on style, this vessel came from the area around the site of Naranjo in the eastern lowlands of Peten, Guatemala, and contributes further evidence for a mythic landscape marked by particular mountains and a dwelling place of ancestral kings. This mythical space bears a close relationship to matters of death and rebirth, but the vessel just described might indicate that it was also a venue for other types of mythological events.

In conclusion, the texts and images painted on the Río Azul tomb walls increase our understanding of the concept of cosmic and/or mythical landscapes in ancient Maya religious thought. Through the interconnected analysis of iconography and hieroglyphic text it is possible to delve further into the ancient Maya view of death and the afterlife in a supernatural place. As the modern Maya perceive the natural world around them and



Figure 22. "Regal Bunny Pot" depicting mythological scene. Photo K1398 © Justin Kerr.

give meaning to it in their worldview, so did their ancestors who embedded their culturally constructed landscape with ideological concepts. The examples discussed in this article are suggestive of an ancient Maya common knowledge about a cosmological landscape where deceased royal individuals were reborn into the afterlife. While the evidence discussed here reflects strictly the afterlife of elite members of ancient Maya society, ethnographic studies with modern Maya populations suggest the worldview of sacred mountains and ancestor dwelling places was widespread among the general population (Carlson and Eachus 1977; Tedlock 1982; Vogt 1964, 1969, 1973). The corpus of painted pottery and other iconographic representations provided scholars long ago with some understanding of the different myths and worldviews of the ancient Maya. The analysis of the Río Azul tomb murals is a direct contribution to that corpus, and provides a more nuanced description of the ancient Maya understanding of the afterlife.

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Figure 23. Detail of "Regal Bunny Pot." Photo K1398 © Justin Kerr.



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