

## The Iconography of Lamanai Stela 9

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LAMANAI STELA 9 (Fig. 1) depicts Lord “Smoking Shell” dressed in the royal regalia associated with such major life events as accession to the throne. The representational style corroborates the monument’s proposed date of 9.9.12.0.0, which falls near the end of the Middle Classic Period (9.2.0.0.0 to 9.12.0.0.0, or A.D. 475-672). The period is characterized artistically as a transitional period, wherein hieroglyphic and iconographic traditions that developed in the Early Classic Period (8.10.0.0.0 to 9.2.0.0.0, or A.D. 237-475) are being reformulated, and which presage the standard Late Classic canons of Maya art.

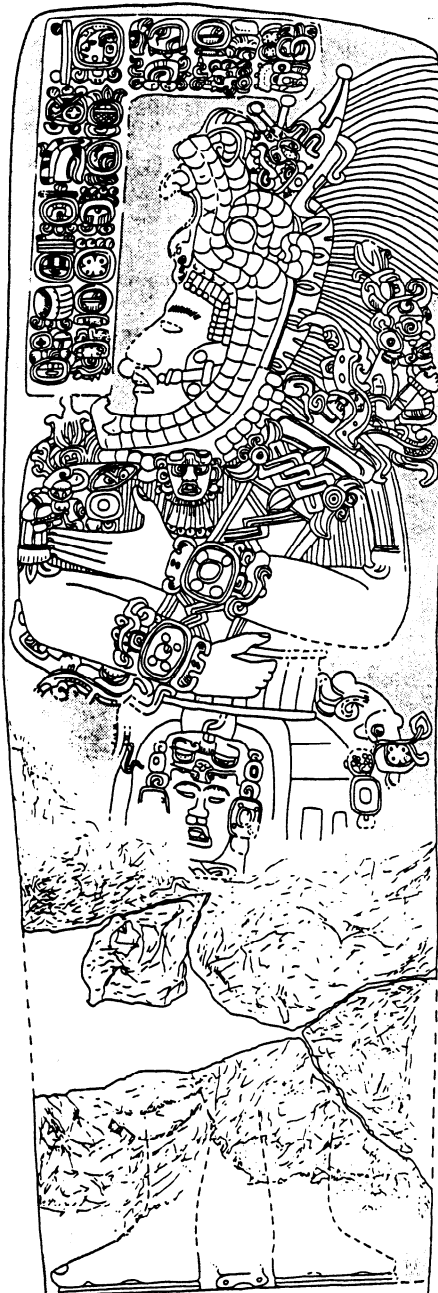
The monument’s spatial format, iconography, and low relief carving with fine-line incised details recall the contemporary sculptures at Caracol, Belize (Fig. 3). Like the Caracol monuments, Lamanai Stela 9 blends both Early and Late Classic traits, providing visual confirmation of the cultural continuity that bridges these two periods. Two other stylistically similar stelae are known from Lamanai—Stelae 1 and 2 (Fig. 2), both of which most likely date from the same period.

Early Classic traits found on Stela 9 include the headdress with projecting “chin strap,” wristlets whose large central element resembles Early Classic earplugs, and the ruler’s carrying an emblematic head in one hand and a double-headed ceremonial bar in the other. Yet most Early Classic monuments are characterized by a plethora of imagery that fills the available pictorial space, and wherein the figure becomes secondary to the iconography. Examples of this include Tikal Stela 1 (Fig. 4c) and Caracol Stela 16 (Fig. 3a). Lamanai Stelae 1 and 2 (Fig. 2) exemplify this earlier more elaborate imagery, and thus probably predate Stela 9. On Stela 9, however, empty pictorial space surrounds the figure, and its pictorial program is less visually complicated than that of Tikal Stela 1 or the other two Lamanai stelae. This simplified visual format illustrates the Middle Classic trend towards reduction of imagery, a trend manifest on Late Classic monuments throughout the Maya Lowlands as may be seen, for example, on Tikal Stela 16 (Fig. 4d) (Note 1).

The format and iconography of Stela 9 are discussed in detail below, with particular attention to the blending of Early and Late Classic traits that characterizes the Middle Classic Period.

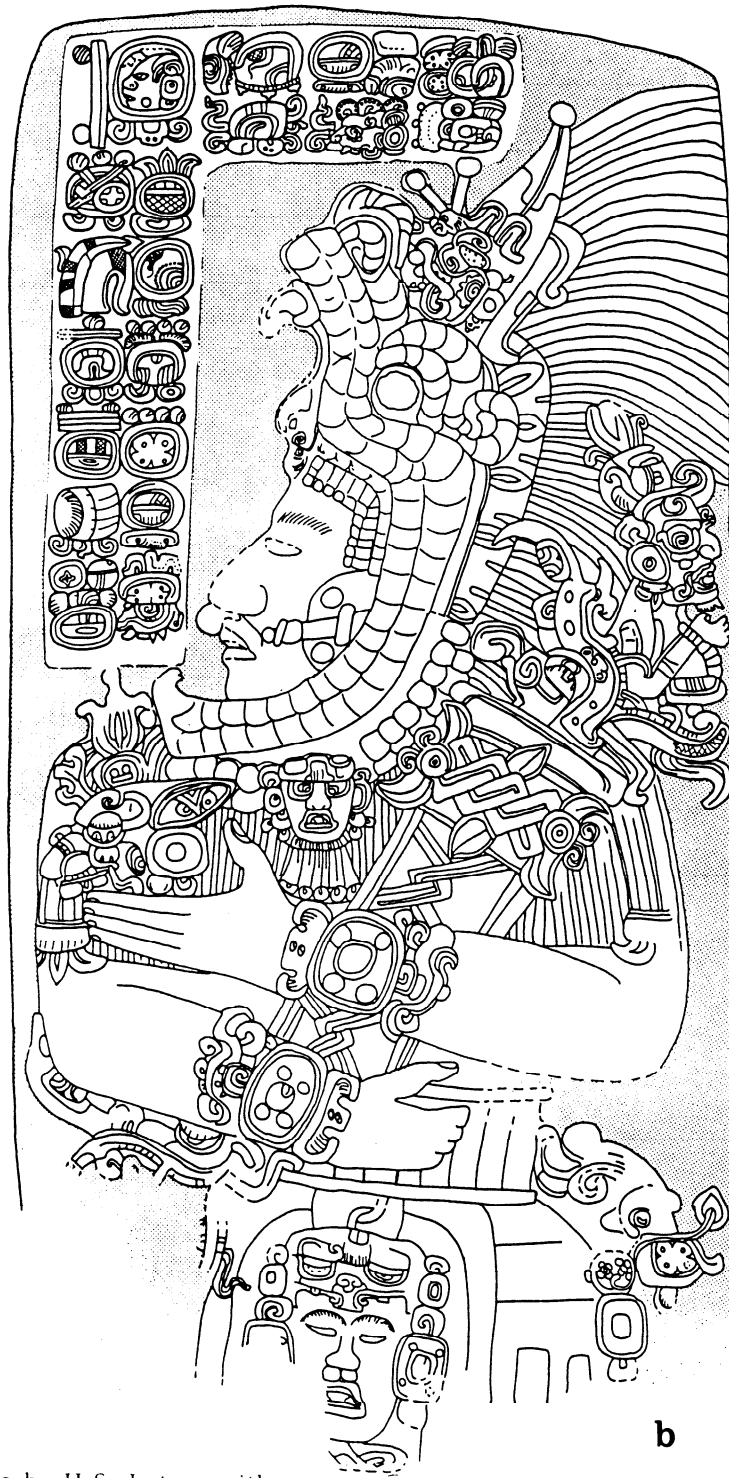
### FIGURAL POSITION

Like the figures on Stelae 1 and 2, Lord Smoking Shell is depicted frontally with his head in profile. Although the lower portion of the stela carving was all but destroyed in Prehispanic times, remains of the figure’s outwardly turned feet and ankles can be discerned. This leg po-



Height: 3.1 meters

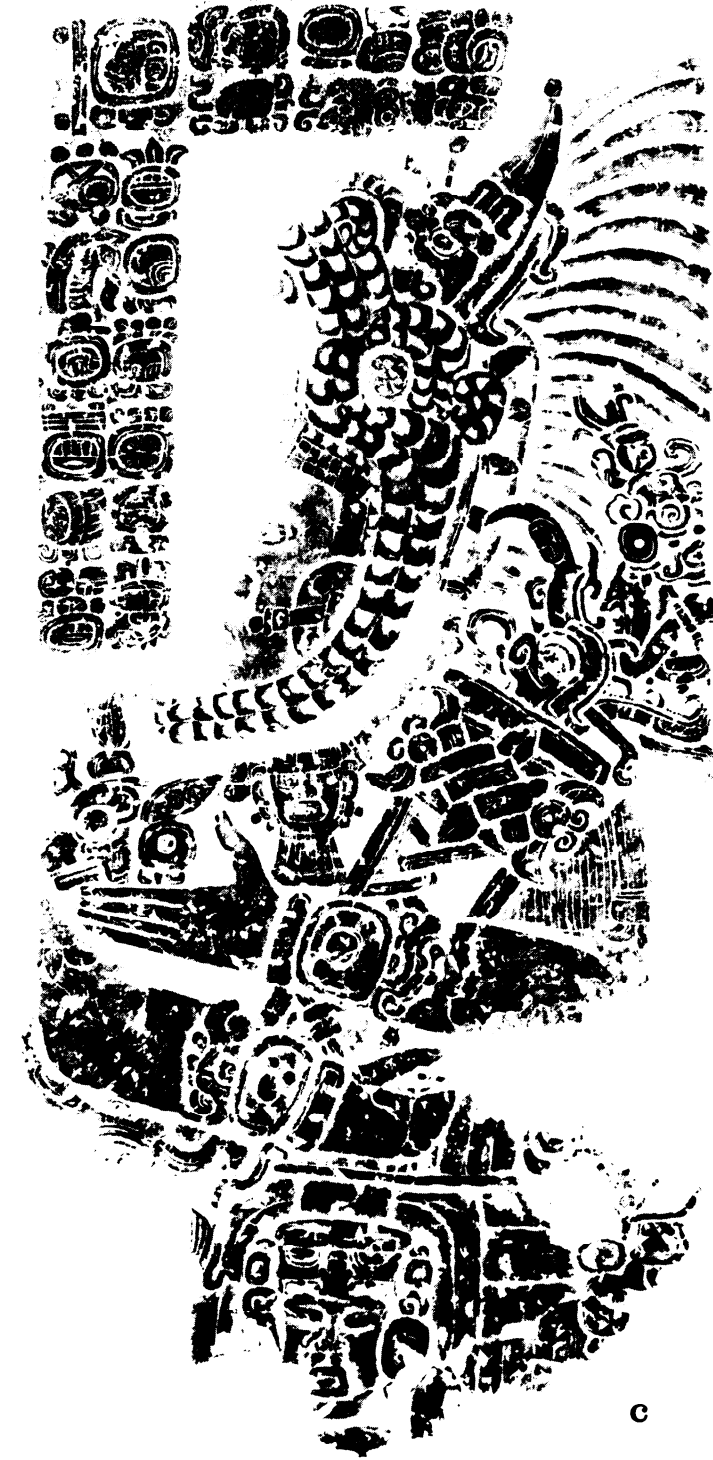
a



b

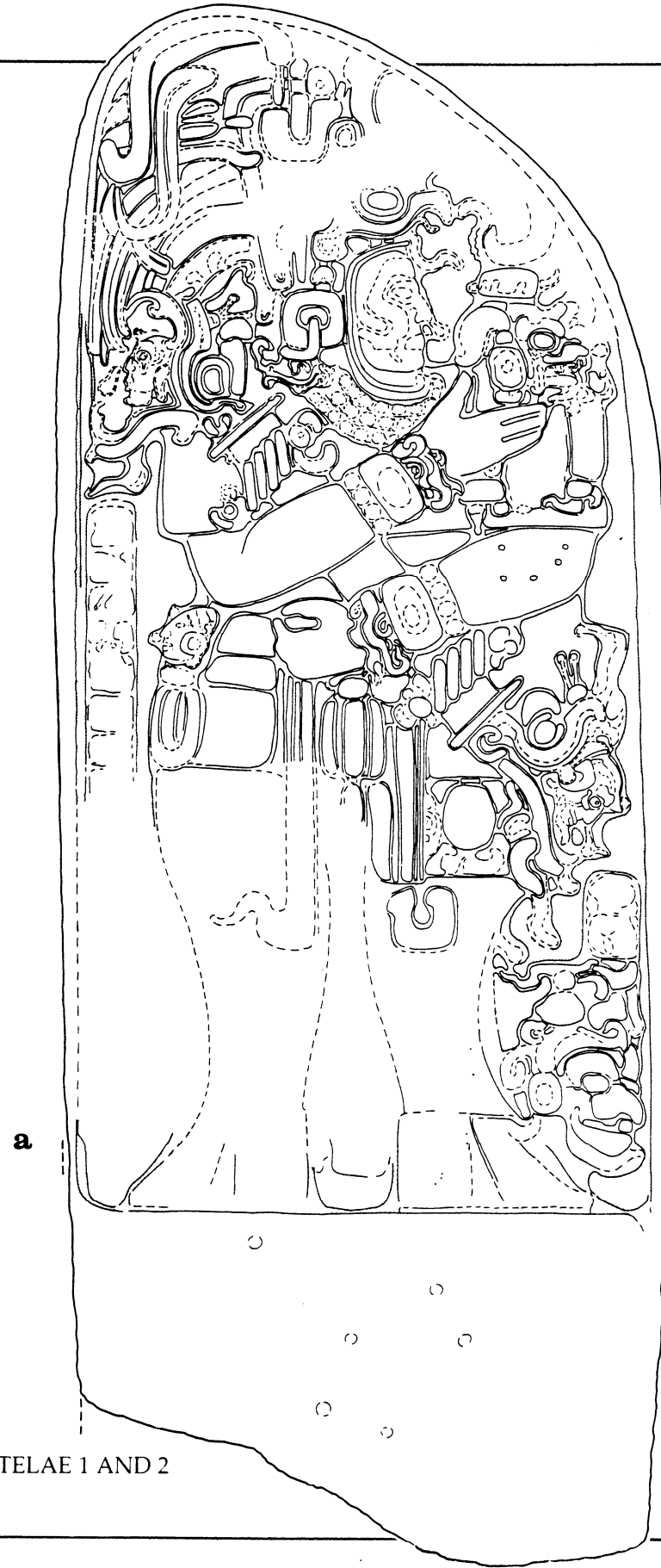
Drawing by H.S. Loten, with emendations by the author.

FIGURE 1. LAMANAI STELA 9



c

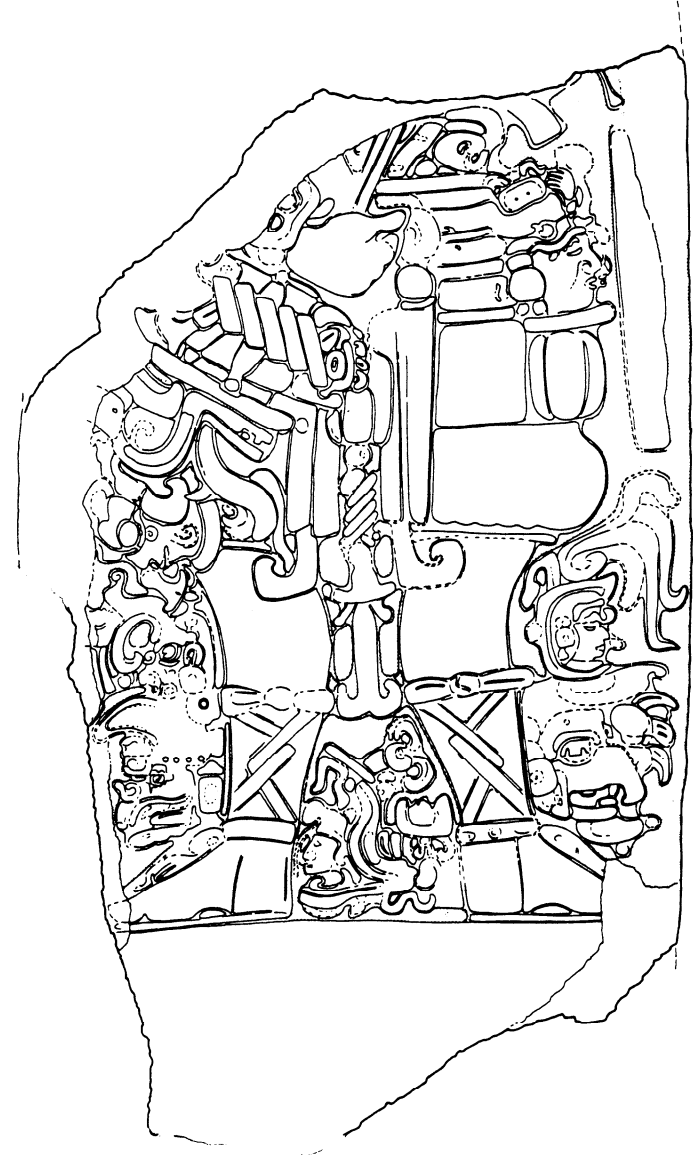
Rubbing by Louise Belanger, courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum



a

a: LAM Stela 1  
b: LAM Stela 2

FIGURE 2. LAMANAI STELAE 1 AND 2



b

Both drawings by H.S. Loten.

sition departs from the Early Classic tradition of depicting lower legs and feet in overlapping profile (Proskouriakoff 1950: Figs. 7 and 8). Figural positions like those found on the Lamanai monuments first appear during the Middle Classic Period, and become standard for Late Classic stela portraits (Proskouriakoff 1950:22).

#### THE HEADDRESS

The Stela 9 headdress follows Early Classic headgear canons (see Tikal Stela 31 in Figure 5), which continue throughout the Middle Classic Period (see Caracol Stelae 5, 6, 16 in Figure 3). Lord Smoking Shell's head emerges from an open-mouthed serpent headdress which is decorated with small plaques of jade or shell. The lower jaw of the serpent forms a chin strap resembling that worn by "Stormy Sky's" father on the right side of Tikal Stela 31 (Fig. 5), which bears the Early Classic date 9.0.10.0.0. This early headdress type is revitalized on the Late Classic Period warrior monuments at Piedras Negras (Proskouriakoff 1950:51; Stone, n.d.). The serpent's eye on Lamanai Stela 9 is raised slightly above the plane of the headdress and has an uneven roughened surface to which something may have been attached, perhaps obsidian inlays like those in the serpent eyes on the Temple of Quetzalcoatl at Teotihuacan.

The headdress carries two important royal emblems. A small "jester god" is attached to the ruler's forehead just below the upper jaw of the serpent. This motif may be repeated by the large curving triangular element at the top of the headdress. Schele (1974:42) has shown that the jester god can substitute for *ahaw* and marks rulers throughout the Classic Period.

As noted by Closs in his epigraphic analysis (see the accompanying paper), the nominal glyph at B8 is also found in the headdress atop the serpent's forehead. I agree with Closs that this glyph/icon (along with those at C2-D2) is an analogous titular nominal for Lord Smoking Shell, following the pattern seen on early monuments from other sites (see Tikal Stela 31 in Figure 5, where Stormy Sky wears his name glyph in his headdress).

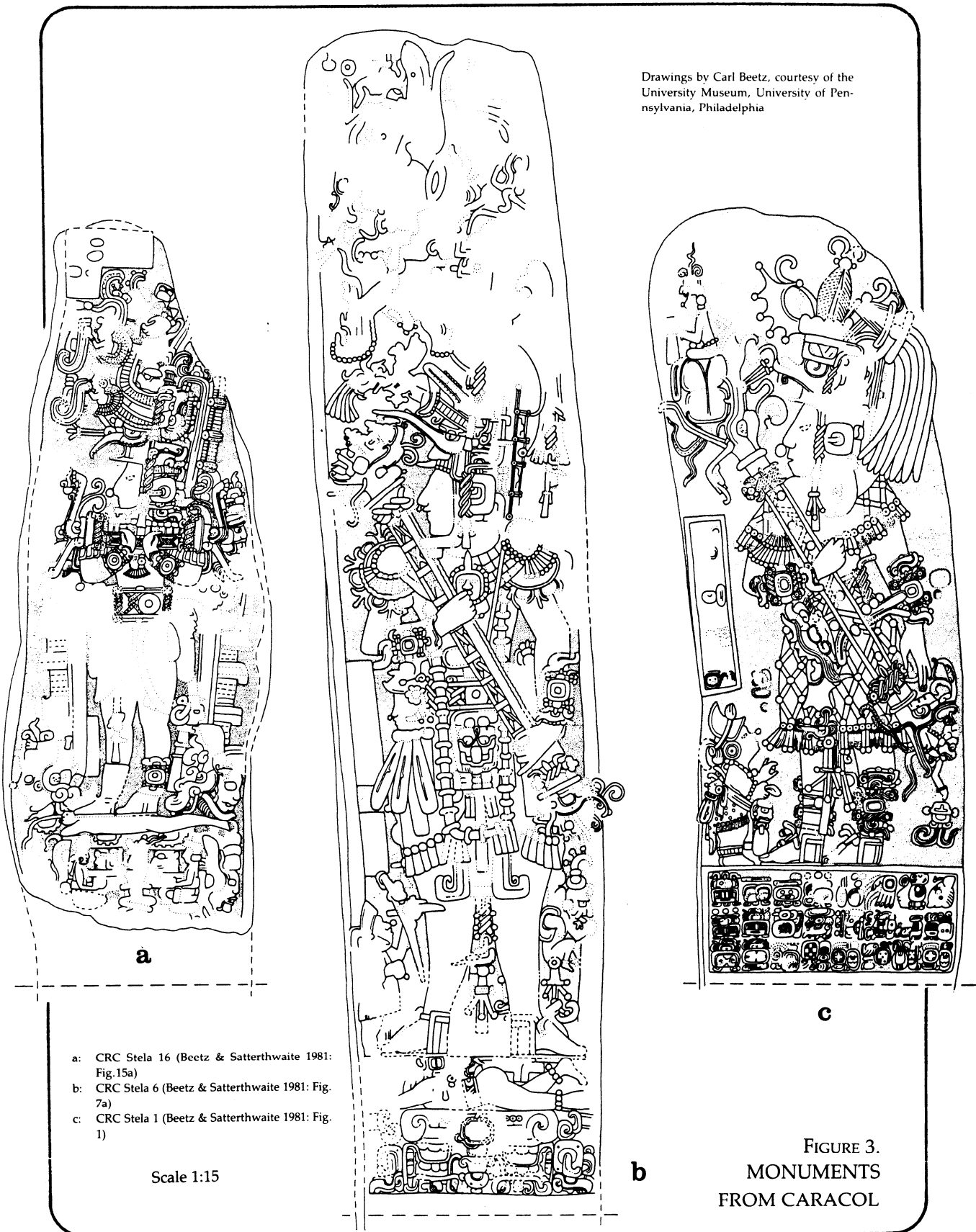
The fan-like arrangement of feathers emerging from the rear of the headgear shown on Lamanai Stela 9 recalls other Middle or Late Classic monuments such as Naranjo Stela 20 (Fig. 6a). The secondary position of the feathers within the overall design and the carving of the individual feather shafts are both characteristic of Middle Classic representations of plumage (see Caracol Stelae 5 and 6 in Figure 3). Lord Smoking Shell's forehead is outlined by small tubular beads, presumably of jade, and he wears the standard large quincunx earplug with protruding cylinder counterweights. Rather than being attached to the headdress as is usual in Early Classic Period depictions, the earplug follows the Late Classic canon of being shown as an independent unit, probably inserted into Smoking Shell's earlobe. The small bead suspended beneath the ruler's nose septum, however, is characteristic of Early Classic stelae.

#### THE CEREMONIAL BAR AND EMBLEMATIC HEAD

Lord Smoking Shell is represented holding a double-headed ceremonial bar diagonally across his body and resting on his left shoulder, much like the figure on Naranjo Stela 25 (Fig. 6b), which is the earliest appearance of the bar at Naranjo. That monument is dated at 9.9.2.4.0, less than ten years prior to the dedicatory date of Lamanai Stela 9. Ceremonial bars are infrequently seen during the Early Classic Period, and do not become common until after 9.5.0.0.0.

The supernatural GIII of the "Palenque Triad" emerges from the mouth of the serpent heads at each end of the bar. This being, identifiable by the eye cruller, jaguar ear, and Tau-shaped tooth, is the second-born of the Hero Twins (Xbalanque) and also is associated with the sun, in particular the Underworld sun, according to Schele (1976:11, after Thompson

Drawings by Carl Beetz, courtesy of the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia



- a: CRC Stela 16 (Beetz & Satterthwaite 1981: Fig. 15a)
- b: CRC Stela 6 (Beetz & Satterthwaite 1981: Fig. 7a)
- c: CRC Stela 1 (Beetz & Satterthwaite 1981: Fig. 1)

Scale 1:15

FIGURE 3.  
MONUMENTS  
FROM CARACOL

1950:234). Although the lower end of the bar on Lamanai Stela 9 is lost, the presence of a small jaguar ear just above the break in the stela suggests that GIII emerged from this end as well. Furthermore, the ceremonial bar closely resembles that on Stela 1, where GIII clearly is seen emerging from the bar's lower end.

The glyph surmounting GIII's head is the Early Classic version of the T518 title, with a superfixed vegetal motif much like that on Tikal Stela 4 [Fig. 4b]). David Stuart (personal communication, 1984) has shown that this glyph substitutes for the *ahaw* ("lord") component of Emblem Glyphs, and he suggests a general reading of "lord" for T518. The T518 title as well as other royal titles, including Emblem Glyphs, are commonly found on GIII's head on Early Classic monuments, examples of which include Caracol Stela 1 and Tikal Stela 31 (Figs. 3c & 5).

The designer of Lamanai Stela 9 placed the ceremonial bar diagonally across the body of Lord Smoking Shell so that it rested on his shoulder. This served to free the ruler's left hand to hold an emblematic head—a zoomorphic form marked by a long inward-turning snout; lidded eye with an infixed Venus sign; a deer antler affixed to its forehead; and a large deer ear, also with an infixed Venus sign. These attributes clearly identify this emblem as the front head of the celestial monster first noted by Spinden (1913:56). An enigmatic glyph surmounts the monster's head, with a main sign that resembles the bar-dot numeral for the number seven.

The holding of emblematic heads is characteristic of Early and Middle Classic monuments, although to my knowledge Stela 9 is the latest appearance of this feature. Moreover, most Early Classic emblematic heads represent GIII rather than the front head of the celestial monster (Note 2).

Lounsbury (1985), Freidel and Schele (1988), and Stone (1985) have demonstrated a structural analogy between Venus (the front head of the monster) and GI of the Palenque Triad (Hun Ahpu, the first-born of the Hero Twins of the Popol Vuh). These authors go on to identify a similar structural analogy between the rear head carried by the celestial monster, the sun, and GIII of the Triad. It would seem, therefore, that Lord Smoking Shell here holds in his arms the Classic Period model of the cosmos, with the front head of the celestial monster (Venus) in his left hand and, cradled in his right arm, the ceremonial bar from which emerges GIII as the underworld sun. Further connecting himself with these cosmic entities, Smoking Shell wears a sun god pectoral.

Although the "cosmogram" discussed above constitutes a standard symbol of power for Classic Period rulers, its rendition on Lamanai Stela 9 is innovative. The cosmogram first appears in the archaeological record during the Late Preclassic Period in platform facade stuccos such as those on Cerros Structure 5C-sub (Freidel & Schele 1988). It seems that from the known examples no actual portraits of rulers appear until the Early Classic Period, although the issue is clouded by a general lack of standardization in rendering of forms. In the Late Classic Period, however, the cosmogram is both consistent and recognizable in the representation of the celestial monster who arches above or frames the ruler, perhaps best exemplified in the Piedras Negras "niche figure" stelae. Such a representation is semantically separate and distinct from that contained in the ceremonial bar from which God K usually emerges, as seen in the stucco carving on the north side of the Palace at Palenque. On Lamanai Stela 9, however, the ruler holds in his arms the cosmogram whose form is merged with the ceremonial bar. This treatment demonstrates Lamanai's innovative manipulation of the royal symbols that were being reconfigured during the Middle Classic from the extant Early Classic repertoire.

#### THE LOINCLOTH AND BELT ASSEMBLAGE

I assume that Lord Smoking Shell was dressed in the usual Maya loincloth and overskirt, but details of these costume components were lost when the monument was broken. The figure wears the traditional wide belt to which are attached four large pendant heads (the rear

head is not visible in frontal portrayals). Wide, apparently heavy belts of this very type characterize early Maya monuments, as does the low position of the front head on the belt (Proskouriakoff 1950:65). Yet, the belt's composition of tubular beads with undecorated upper and lower edges is a trait generally associated with Late Classic costuming (Proskouriakoff 1950:65, Fig. 23), and the deliberate curving of the belt as it passes around the waist is another characteristic of fairly late monuments (Proskouriakoff 1950:63, Fig. 23,B2). Oblong jade plaques of the type represented by the famed "Leiden Plaque" probably hung from the belt heads. The belt head on the [ruler's] left side is that of a "waterlily jaguar" with a *k'in* sign infixed in its forehead. A duplicate head may have been present on the ruler's right side, although the surviving diagnostic jaguar ear probably belongs to the GIII figure who emerges from the ceremonial bar. The front belt head depicts a fully anthropomorphic frontal sun god-*ahaw* face wearing a saurian monster headdress. The visage is particularly unusual in its depiction of eyebrows, represented by finely incised lines that indicate the individual hairs. The showing of eyebrows is rare in Maya sculpture, where usually only the brow ridge is marked by a change in the angle of the carved surface. Similarly depicted eyebrows appear on Lord Smoking Shell, whose portrait is marked by the round nose ornament and the quincunx earplugs which also distinguish the large frontal belt head. It seems, then, that the artist of Lamanai Stela 9 sought to make a visual analogy between the supernatural sun god-*ahaw* belt head and the ruler himself as a cosmic *ahaw*.

#### THE DAMAGED LOWER PORTION OF STELA 9

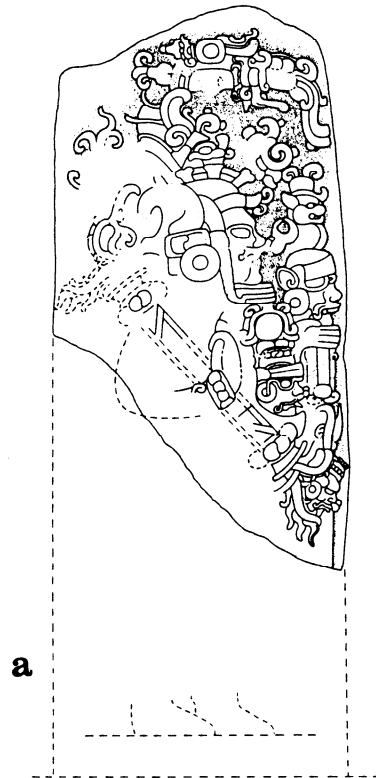
Although the ankles and outwardly turned feet of Lord Smoking Shell survive on the nearly-destroyed lower half of the Lamanai Stela 9, the area flanking his legs is so heavily spalled that no carving remains. The corresponding portions of Lamanai Stelae 1 and 2, however, are filled with stacked anthropomorphic and zoomorphic heads whose positions suggest that they represent the ends of elaborate backracks of the type worn by figures on such Early and Middle Classic Period monuments as Caracol Stela 16 and Tikal Stela 1 (Figs. 4a & 5c). On Stela 2 a profile monster head with an anthropomorphic head emerging from its mouth can be seen between the legs of the standing lord. The only similar surviving detail from that area of Stela 9 is a skeletal jawbone that rests on the base line between Smoking Shell's feet. Unfortunately, its upper portion has been destroyed. In verbal expressions, the jawbone glyph (T590) is known to substitute for the "scattering hand" (T710) of sacrificial bloodletting expressions (Grube & Stuart 1987:2). The jawbone is also a component of personal names at Chichén Itzá and other lowland sites such as Yaxchilan. It is tempting to suggest that the jawbone on Stela 9 is the remnant of the name of the artist-sculptor of the monument. However, the loss of the upper portion of the imagery precludes such a specific interpretation. Moreover, the Stela 2 imagery suggests that this area should instead contain iconography rather than glyphic data.

By comparing the areas on Stela 9 above Smoking Shell's feet and flanking his lower legs to those portions of the other two Lamanai stelae, it can be seen that insufficient space is left on Stela 9 for any elaborate display of stacked heads or backrack ends, although minor imagery here would not be inconsistent with the style of the monument. The apparent absence of an elaborate display on Stela 9 follows the Middle Classic Period trend towards the reduction of imagery, and thus lends support to earlier Middle Classic date assignments for Lamanai Stelae 1 and 2.

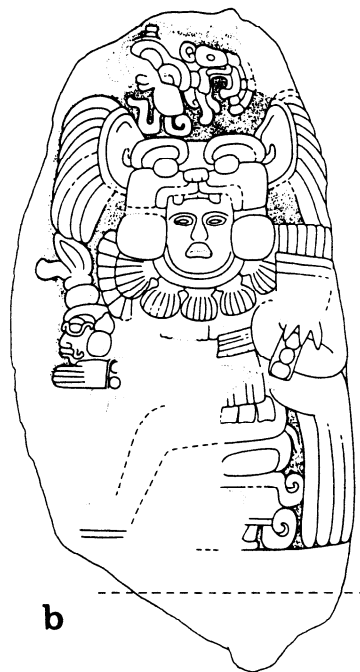
#### THE DEFACEMENT OF THE STELA

Of interest is the intentional defacement of the left eye of Lord Smoking Shell's portrait on Stela 9, an action which was apparently done in ancient times. Intentional defacement of this kind is known from other sites, but is apparently not restricted to any particular period of Maya

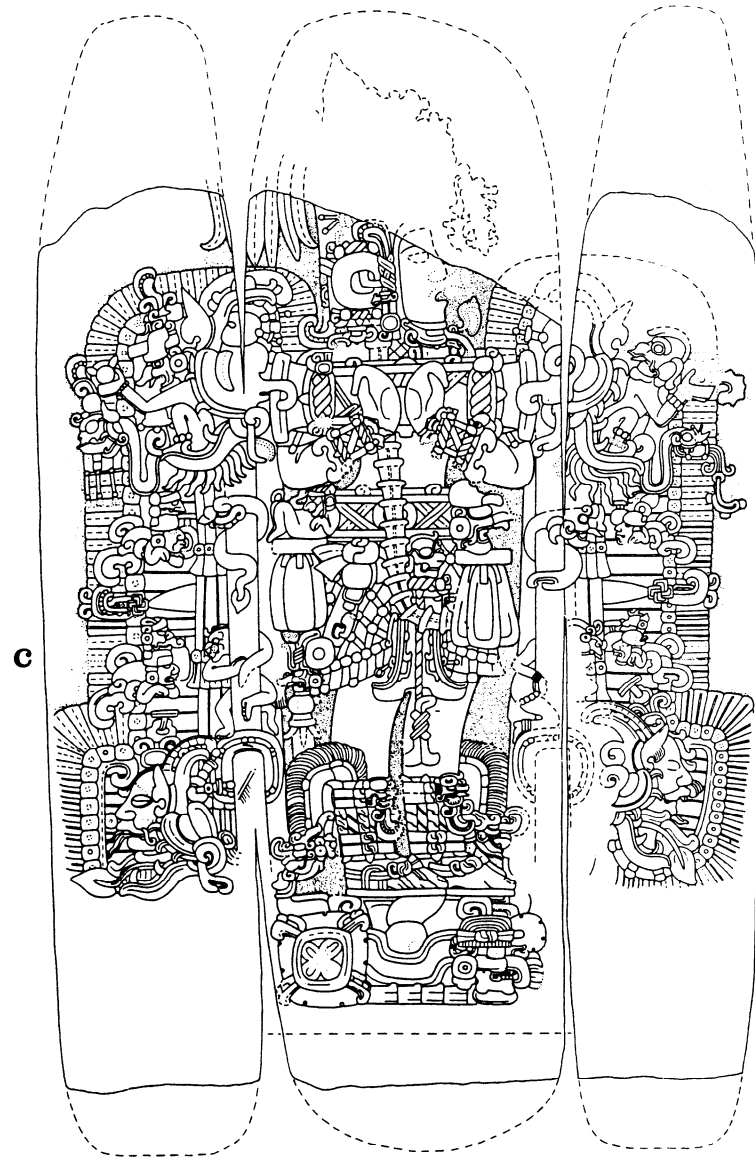
Drawings by William R. Coe, courtesy of the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia



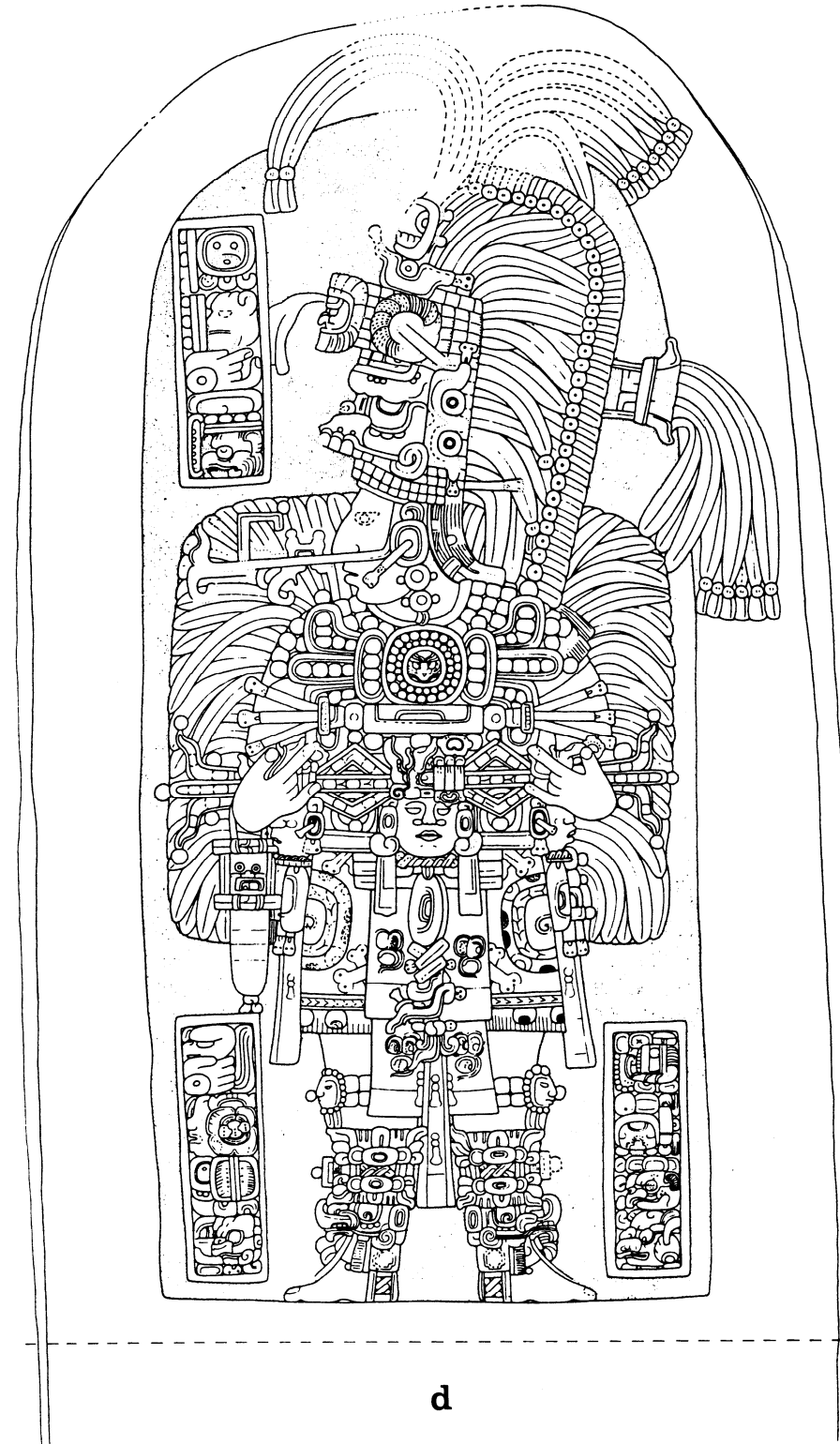
a



b



c



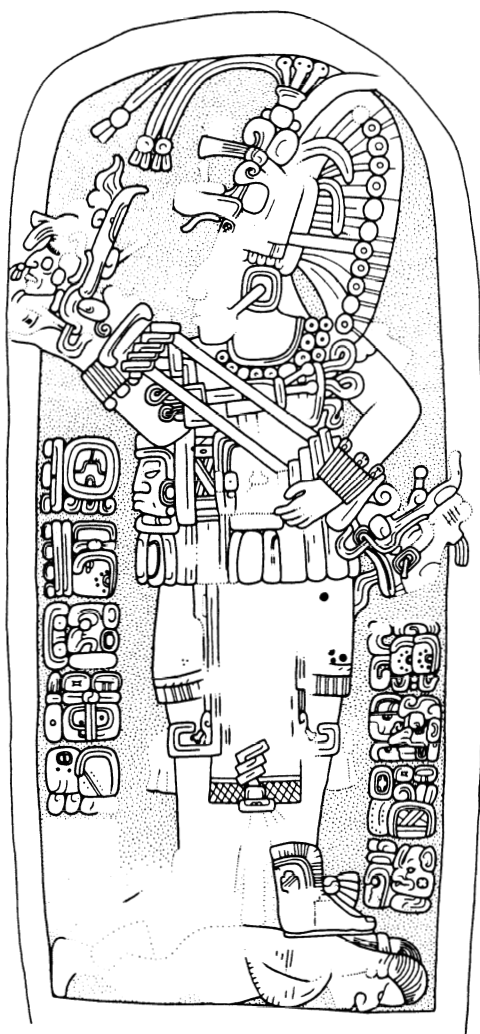
d

- a: TIK Stela 29 (Jones & Satterthwaite 1982: Fig. 49a)
- b: TIK Stela 4 (Jones & Satterthwaite 1982: Fig. 5a)
- c: TIK Stela 1 (Jones & Satterthwaite 1982: Fig. 1a)
- d: TIK Stela 16 (Jones & Satterthwaite 1982: Fig. 22)

FIGURE 4. MONUMENTS FROM TIKAL

Scales: a-c, 1:18; d, 1:12.5

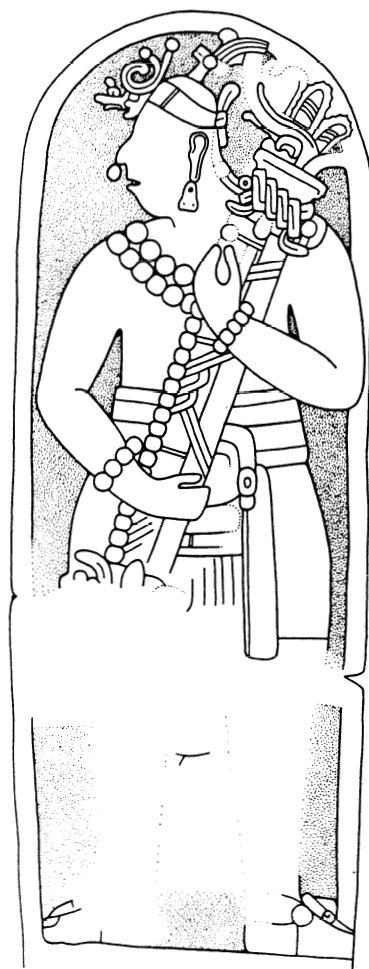




a

- a: NRJ Stela 20 (Graham & Von Euw 1975  
[CMHI 2:51])  
b: NRJ Stela 25 (Graham 1978 [CMHI 2:69])

Drawings by Ian Graham, courtesy of  
the Peabody Museum of Archaeology  
and Ethnology, Harvard University,  
Cambridge, Massachusetts



b

FIGURE 6. MONUMENTS FROM NARANJO

culture history. It occurs, for example, at Cerros on the Late Preclassic stucco masks on Structure 5C-2nd where the left eyes were ritually smashed before the whole facade was carefully interred (David Freidel, personal communication, 1982). Proskouriakoff (1950:107) describes comparable defacement of Early Classic Period Uaxactun Stela 26 (9.0.10.0.0), and a similar fate befell the Late Classic stone incensarios from the Temple of the Foliated Cross at Palenque (Freidel & Schele 1988:64).

The ocular defacement of Stela 9 may represent a ritual "killing" of the monument (and/or the power of the lord depicted), similar to that reflected in the small "kill holes" frequently found in funerary ceramics and cached vessels. It is probable that the defacement of Stela 9 occurred at the same time as the breaking and moving of the monument (see Pendergast's discussion in the accompanying paper, [pages 6 & 7], above).

#### THE MIDDLE CLASSIC PERIOD AT LAMANAI AND CARACOL

The contemporaneous monuments of Lamanai and Caracol share many formal canons and iconographic motifs that characterize Middle Classic Period Maya monumental art. Yet the Lamanai stelae differ iconographically from their Caracol counterparts in two ways, both of which represent early appearances of Late Classic traits.

First, the Lamanai stelae do not have mythological ancestral figures floating above the ruler. Such figures are diagnostic of Early Classic monuments, and exemplified by Tikal Stelae 29 and 31 (Figs. 4a & 5). These figures are rarely seen on Middle and Late Classic stelae, and appear only sporadically on monuments of Terminal Classic date such as Tikal Stela 11 (10.2.0.0.0) and Ixlu Stela 1 (10.1.10.0.0) (see Jones and Satterthwaite 1982: Figs. 16 & 80). The Middle Classic monuments from Caracol, for example Stelae 6 and 3 (Fig. 3b; and see Beetz and Satterthwaite [1981: Fig. 3]), retain this early trait, whereas the artist of Lamanai Stela 9 replaced the floating figures with a hieroglyphic text, thus tying Stela 9 to Late Classic monumental trends, best exemplified by Tikal Stela 16 (Fig. 4d).

The second major distinction between the Lamanai and Caracol stelae is the absence of carved basal panels on the Lamanai monuments; here the ruler stands on a simple ground line (Figs. 1 & 2). In contrast, the Caracol figures stand on basal panels that contain captive figures, "cauac" monsters, ancestral figures, and hieroglyphic texts. Basal panels all but disappear from use during the Late Classic Period—a trend which is particularly notable at Tikal (Note 3).

#### CONCLUSIONS

The sculptural style, representational format, and iconography of Lamanai Stela 9 confirm a Middle Classic Period date for the monument. As seen on contemporaneous monuments from Caracol, Stela 9 exhibits Early Classic traits fused with developments that become standard in Late Classic Period monumental art. Together, the stelae of these two sites provide concrete evidence for a cultural continuum between Early and Late Classic times, and thus contradict the suggestion by Proskouriakoff (1950), reiterated by Coggins (1975:258), that the Middle Classic Period represents a cultural hiatus—a contention ultimately rooted in the lack of carved monuments of that period from the central Peten lowlands. As a period of continuity, the Middle Classic is thus characterized by experimental reconfigurations of extant symbols and "mainstream" Maya motifs, wherein regional types appear and the antecedents of Late Classic standard formats can be discerned. Stela 9 is witness to the fact that, although Lamanai lies outside the central Peten lowlands, the community was participating fully in Classic Maya culture, creatively manipulating the shared symbol system within the standard cultural configurations of the times.

## NOTES

1. This trend towards simplified imagery is also found on the contemporaneous Middle Classic stelae from Caracol. Compare, for example Stela 16, dated 9.5.0.0.0 (Fig. 3a) to Stela 3, dated 9.11.0.0.0 (Beetz and Satterthwaite 1981: Fig. 3).

2. To my knowledge, the earliest example from the Maya lowlands of the carrying of an emblematic head is that on Tikal Stela 29, dated 8.12.14.8.15 (Fig. 4a), where the ruler carries both a GIII head and the double-headed ceremonial bar in the same angled position as that seen on Lamanai Stela 9. Other contemporary appearances of the emblematic GIII head (but minus the ceremonial bar) include Tikal Stela 36 (ca. 8.12.0.0.0) (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982: Fig. 56a); Tikal Stela 4 (8.17.1.16.17) (Fig. 4b); Uolantun Stela 1 (ca. 8.18.0.0.0)

(Jones and Satterthwaite 1982: Fig. 76); and Tikal Stela 31 (9.0.10.0.0) (Fig. 5).

3. Clancy (1980) has observed that the late Tikal stelae without basal panels are accompanied by carved altars that, in effect, iconographically replace the carved lower registers of the stelae. Following the Tikal pattern, it is possible that the altars recovered at Lamanai originally were paired with the stelae, particularly Stelae 1 and 2. However, the 15th century resetting of these two monuments renders proof of this impossible. Yet it is certain that Stela 9 was not accompanied by an altar, either within or in front of its enclosing room. Therefore, the absence of basal panels on the Lamanai stelae may simply be part of the Middle Classic artistic trend of imagery reduction that included the loss of carved basal panels.

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- JONES AND SATTERTHWAITE 1982: Fig. 76); and Tikal Stela 31 (9.0.10.0.0) (Fig. 5).
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