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Death Gods in Cotzumalguapa Sculpture¹

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Eric Thompson (1948:19) was correct in observing an "excessive preoccupation" with death in the art of Cotzumalguapa. Skeletal beings and death gods outnumber all other figures portrayed in the corpus of over 200 sculptures known from the city and its region. The number constantly increases, and several examples of great interest have turned up in recent years. In this article, we describe four sculptures found in the last decade that have enriched the repertory of mortuary depictions known from Cotzumalguapa. At the same time, we present an iconographic review of these and other representations in an

effort to explain the symbolism of death and of death deities in Cotzumalguapa.

El Baúl Monument 76

Monument 76 (Figure 1) was found during agricultural work in 2008, about 400 meters to the east of the acropolis of El Baúl (Figure 2). The exact location is unknown, but a verbal report obtained in

¹ This is an expanded version of a paper presented in the XVII Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala (Chinchilla and Cruz Gámez 2014).



Figure 1. El Baúl Monument 76. Museo de El Baúl, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa. Photo: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

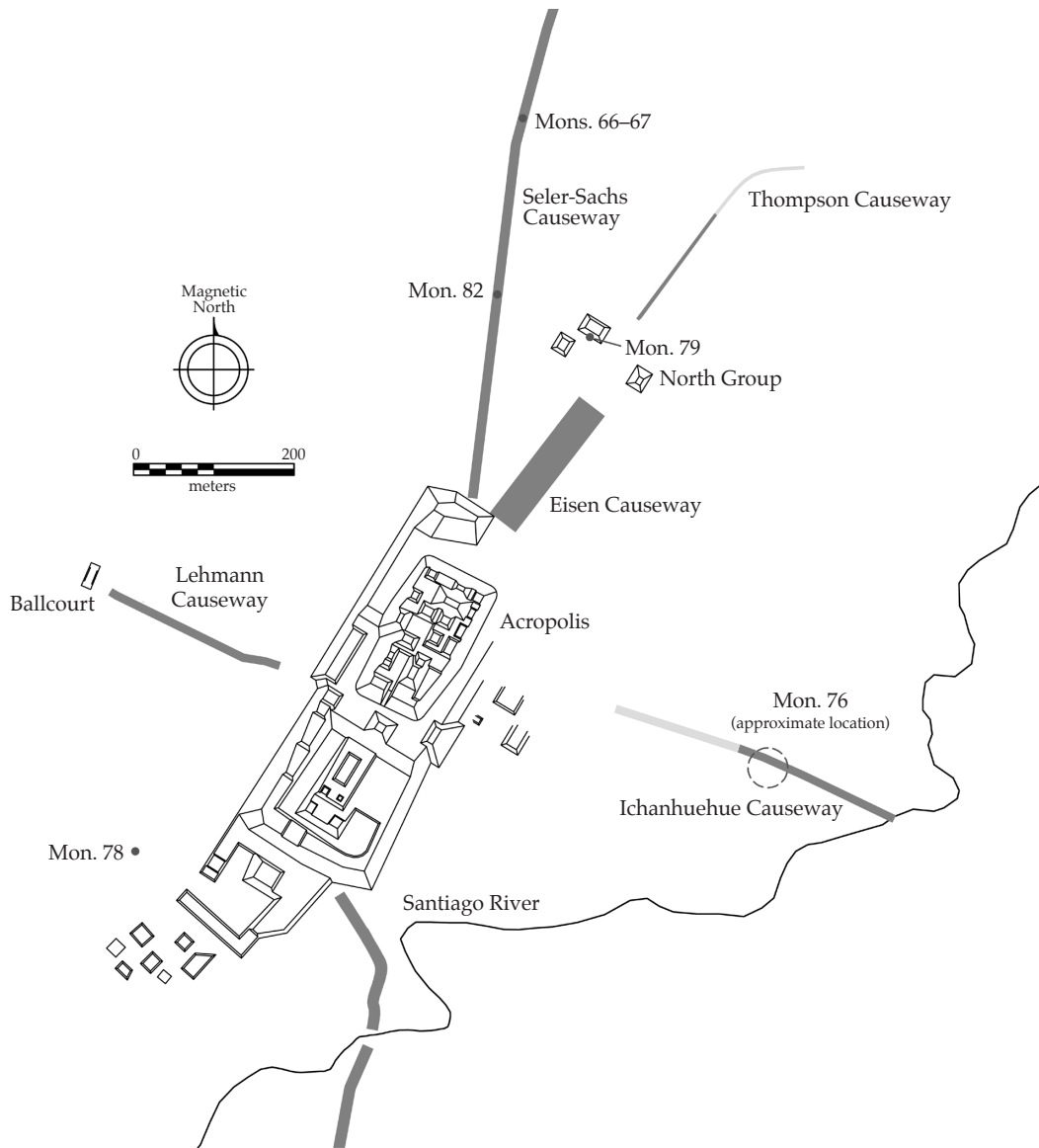


Figure 2. Map of El Baúl, Cotzumalguapa, showing the provenance of the recently found sculptures, Monuments 76, 78, 79, and 82. Drawing: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

January, 2009, provided an approximate indication of the sculpture's provenance.² Monument 76 is a fragment of a sculpture that by comparison with others of its type must have been rectangular. The monument measures 1.40 m by 0.96 m by 0.37 m in thickness. The surface has been well smoothed, but the relief is minimal and barely perceptible without raking light. It was carved with lightly incised lines forming the face of the Death God, viewed frontally. In spite of the breakage, the monument

² The report came from Edwin Orlando Galindo. Over the years, Mr. Galindo has demonstrated a sense of responsibility and interest in the recovery of archaeological remains in El Baúl. In our experience, his report provides a trustworthy indication about the original location of the monument.

is well preserved except for an area around the mouth. The skeletal face is topped by abundant hair, and the tongue hangs out between the clenched teeth. Pointed projections on both sides of the head are described herein as "horns," with the proviso that their nature is uncertain. In three-dimensional representations, their form is polyhedral rather than conical. The sculpted figure wears a necklace tied in front with a bow or sash, and earflares defined by undulating lines that appear to be made of a fluffy or spongy material, uncommon in depictions of the Death God. The god wears a banded collar with a small frontal knot.

Monument 76 was likely part of the paved surface of the Ichanhuehue Causeway, discovered by reconnaissance with ground penetrating radar in 2011 (Chinchilla

Mazariegos 2012a) (Figure 2). In previous work, four similar sculptures depicting the Death God were reported, all of which were part of the pavements of various causeways (La Gloria Mons. 1 and 2, El Baúl Mon. 67, and El Castillo Mon. 67). The find spot of Monument 76 is located at or near the Ichanhuehue Causeway, leaving little doubt about this association. In previous work, Chinchilla Mazariegos et al. (2008) concluded that these carvings were set horizontally as part of the pavement of the causeways.

El Baúl Monument 78

Monument 78 (Figures 3 and 4) was found on March 24, 2011, during paving work on Third Street in Santa Lucia Cotzumalguapa, in the Colonia Maya neighborhood that encompasses a large section of the site of El Baúl. Municipal workers found the monument while trenching to lay a pipe for rainwater runoff. It was found at the intersection of Third Street and Fourth Avenue, near the Colonia Maya school. Oriented north-south, it was approximately five meters from the southeast corner of Structure 35, a long platform that closes the south side of the Second Precinct of El Baúl. Various sculptures had been found previously in this complex, including El Baúl Monuments 56, 58, and 71. The monument was removed from its original location before its context and associations could be fully documented, but it was possible to establish its provenance with certainty. Regrettably, it suffered damage, particularly to its lower part, when the municipal workers removed it in order to continue their trenching. It was moved to the facilities of the Museo de El Baúl on March 25, 2011, with the collaboration of personnel and equipment from Pantaleón



Figure 3. El Baúl Monument 78 near its original location in the Colonia Maya, El Baúl, Cotzumalguapa. Photo: Gilberto Cruz Gámez.

S.A, and with the consent of the Comité Comunitario de Desarrollo (COCODE) of Colonia Maya.

Monument 78 consists of an irregularly shaped stone measuring 0.88 m in height, 2.32 m in width, and 1.40 m in thickness. It displays the full body of a human skeleton carved in deep relief. Dominating the composition is a massive ribcage carved in the most prominent part of the rock, with the sternum aligned along an edge. The extremities are disproportionately short. The right arm is extended while the left is flexed and appears to be resting on the chest. The legs are spread with the knees bent. The bones of the extremities have narrow grooves marking the medular cavity, with rounded condyles. The hands and feet have skin, a characteristic that



Figure 4. El Baúl Monument 78. Museo de El Baúl, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa. Photo: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

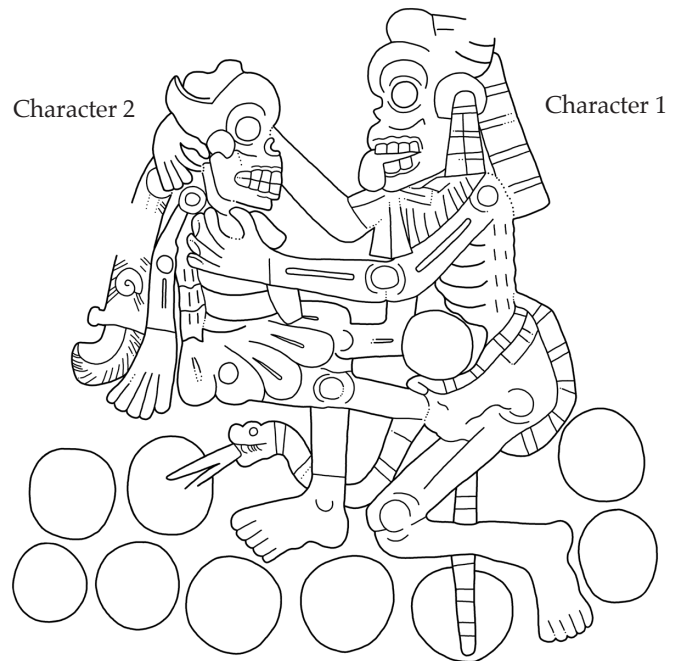


Figure 5. El Baúl monument 79. Museo de El Baúl, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa. Photo and drawing: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

skeletal depictions at Cotzumalguapa share with other artistic traditions of Mesoamerica. The skull is carved in profile on a facet of the rock, turned to the right and upwards. The abdominal area has three lobes hanging down that probably represent the intestines or viscera. The combination gives the impression of movement, and the skeleton seems to be dancing. Given its horizontal position, however, it may represent the remains of a human body thrown on the ground in disorder.

El Baúl Monument 79

Monument 79 (Figure 5) was found on December 17, 2012, during agricultural ploughing. Mr. Edwin Orlando Galindo was present and noticed the carving when a tractor operator was about to remove the stone. As in the case of Monument 78, the archaeological context was not documented in detail, but it was possible to note the monument's point of origin before it was moved to the El Baúl Museum. Monument 79 was located in the North Group of El Baúl, approximately 300 meters north of the Acropolis. The group is formed by three structures arranged around a small plaza linked with the Acropolis by the Eisen Causeway. The Thompson causeway extends north of the group, leading to the former location of Thompson's Bridge (which

fell down in 2010) (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011a, 2012a). Monument 79 was discovered on the southern facade of the structure that closes the north side of the complex. According to Mr. Galindo's report, it was upright when found, and it is probable that it had been associated with masonry architectural elements; scattered stones in the area were probably part of a building facade or plaza pavement.

Monument 79 is oval in shape, measuring 1.50 m in height, 1.10 m in width, and 0.66 m in thickness. The relief carving is shallow and of poor quality, but the iconography is quite interesting. It shows two skeletal figures face to face, in profile. For purposes of this description, we will call them Character 1 and Character 2 (from the observer's right to left respectively).

Character 1 shows the attributes of the Death God, including the protruding tongue and two "horns" on the headdress. The skeletal figure wears earflares and a necklace knotted in front. By comparison with other examples, the serpent between the legs can be identified as a sort of belt or loincloth. The abdominal cavity is indicated by means of a circle, an attribute that reappears in other representations of the Death God. Character 1 holds the smaller Character 2 with both arms. Their legs are entwined, and the arms of Character 2 hang loosely. Like the skeleton of Monument 78, there are three lobes in

the abdominal area, probably denoting viscera.

Character 2 seems to have a rudimentary “horn” but also wears an ornament that hangs to its waist, formed by a ribbon or long tail adorned with beads and shells, bordered with hairy edges arranged diagonally. Near the end is a tubular bead that ties it and separates the tip, which has only one hairy side and is slightly turned back. Many characters wear this ornament in the sculptures of Cotzumalguapa, hanging from the shoulder or rolled up. Examples include Bilbao Monuments 1, 3–6, and 8; El Baúl Monuments 18, 27, and 30; Palo Verde Monuments 1 and 3; and Linda Vista Monument 1. Death gods wear it on El Baúl Monument 18 and La Vista Monument 3.

The lower part of Monument 79 is occupied by a series of nine circles—one of several ways to express units in the Cotzumalguapa numbering system (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011b). There are seven units aligned beneath the skeletal bodies, with two more next to the feet of Character 1. Taken together, they may represent the number nine, although they may also be separate numbers, each associated with one of the figures—the number two would be associated with Character 1 and the number seven with Character 2. In that case, the skeletal figures would function as full-figure, animated glyphs, a format that is well documented at Cotzumalguapa (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011b). If this interpretation is correct, the monument could be understood as an inscription containing the calendric notations “7 Death” and “2 Death.”

El Baúl Monument 82

This finely preserved carving was found during excavations conducted by Gilberto Cruz Gámez and Oswaldo Chinchilla in March, 2015, on the Seler-Sachs causeway, 260 meters north of the El Baúl acropolis. The excavation (operation EB12) was prompted by the discovery of Monument 81, a large, oval-shaped rock that depicts a mythical animal combining feline and reptilian features (Cruz 2015). Monument 82 (Figure 6) was turned upside down, next to Monument 81, and it may have been intentionally overturned in antiquity. Like Monument 76, it shows a frontal portrait of the Death God with all his characteristic attributes—skeletal visage, a diadem with crossed bands at the center, horn-like projections on either side of the head, long hair adorned with circular beads, pointed ear pendants, hanging tongue, and collar with a composite jewel.

The shape of the sculpture suggests that it originally formed part of a step in the causeway, parts of which were revealed by excavation. The step may have functioned to divert water runoff away from the stone pavement into a drainage channel that was uncovered on the west side of the pavement, perhaps preventing erosion of the causeway. Adequate drainage was probably necessary at this location, which corresponds to the upper part of a steep slope, as the causeway rose over a natural elevation. The excavations showed that the slope was extensively modified by terracing (Cruz 2015).

Monument 82 is the second carving of its kind to be documented along the Seler-Sachs causeway. Another portrait appeared in 1997, 220 meters north of the location of monuments 81 and 82. It was formed by Monuments 66 and 67, which respectively show the Death God and the numeral four—perhaps forming the calendrical collocation “4 Death” (Chinchilla Mazariegos and Medrano 1997).

The new sculptures exhibit salient features of Cotzumalguapa death gods: a skeletal body but with hands covered in skin, abundant hair adorned with multiple round beads, and “horns” that could be part of a hairstyle or headdress. They frequently wear a diadem with crossed bands in the center. The tongue sticks out between the clenched teeth. When the full body is shown, they often wear a serpent tied like a belt. The belly is often marked with a circle, in some cases substituted for by lobes that likely represent intestines hanging down.

The abundance of depictions makes it possible to explore the range of variability present in the iconography of the Death God. The god’s variable attributes might correspond to different manifestations or epithets, but they also suggest that several death gods may be represented. In the following paragraphs we describe the iconographic contexts in which death figures



Figure 6. El Baúl Monument 82. Museo de El Baúl, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa. Photo: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

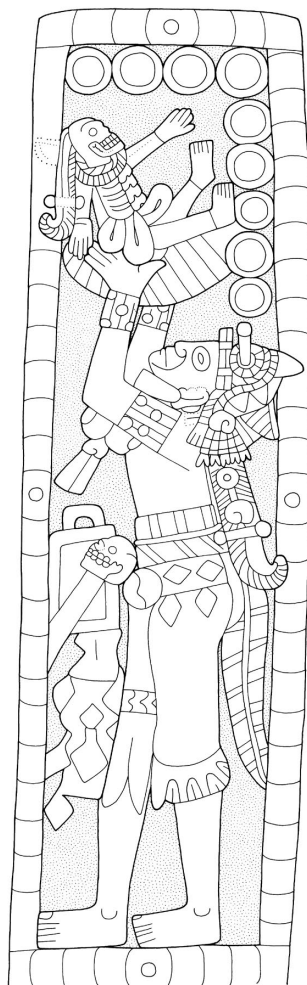


Figure 7. Palo Verde Monument 3. Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala. Drawing: Oswaldo Chinchilla.



Figure 8. Bilbao Monument 26, front and side views. Ethnological Museum of Berlin, Germany. Photos: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

appear, and we discuss their connotations in the art of Cotzumalguapa.

A Child?

A frequent characteristic of the Death God is his short stature, apparent in scenes in which he interacts with other figures. Examples include Bilbao Monuments 3 and 13, as well as Palo Verde Monument 3, whose protagonist holds the Death God in his hands as if he were a baby (Figure 7). This depiction is particularly close to Character 2 of Monument 79, who also appears to be an infant in the arms of Character 1. In addition to the infantile aspect, the Palo Verde figure wears the hanging ribbon worn by Character 2 on Monument 79, and his guts are protruding.

Because of the Death God's small stature, Thompson (1948:19-20) coined the nickname "death manikin," a term also employed by Parsons (1969:124). Thompson (1977) came to consider him a type of *duende* or hobgoblin. It was also in consideration of the being's small stature and the fact that on occasion he appears to be carried or manipulated by others that Chinchilla Mazariegos referred to him as "Manikin Death God" in

previous work. We now consider this label inappropriate, because there is no evidence that the deity fulfilled the functions of a mannequin, doll, or puppet in the context of dramatic performances.

The god's childlike aspect is evident on Bilbao Monument 26 (Figure 8), currently in the collection of the Ethnological Museum of Berlin. The sculpture is shaped as a large, shallow vessel. It originally stood in the center of the Monument Plaza at Bilbao (Chinchilla Mazariegos 1996). The reliefs on the surface depict a kneeling figure whose three-dimensional head projects out from the rim. The body is not skeletal; the figure wears a short cape that covers its shoulders and back and a heavy belt of plaited cord. The fingernails of the hands are long and sharp, giving it a menacing aspect. The head is fleshless, but it has ears and hair. The jaw is prognathous, with a central projection that is partially destroyed. The same character is portrayed on Bilbao Monuments 31 and 76 (Figure 9), which represent prognathous skeletal beings with claws. The death god is seated like a little boy on the knees of this fearsome being. The god's pose—with arms and legs extended and angled downwards—verges on the ludicrous.

Bilbao Monument 26 and El Baúl Monument 79



Figure 9. Bilbao Monument 76, front and side views. Ethnological Museum of Berlin, Germany. Photo: Oswaldo Chinchilla,

seem to indicate that the Death God was conceived of as a baby in the arms of other beings that also have skeletal or mortuary features. Conceivably, these portraits show two generations of death gods, although it is unclear whether the larger characters were conceived of as the Death God's mother, father, or perhaps even a grandparent holding the child.

Warrior and Sacrificer

In some depictions, the Death God has a bellicose character. The best example is Bilbao Monument 48 (Figure 10), a large silhouetted relief that shows the Death God armed as a warrior, with shield and club. Both the shape and the subject matter of this sculpture are unique in the art of Cotzumalguapa, which does not abound in representations of warriors.

Bilbao Monument 4 presents a skeletal figure in the role of sacrificer. He holds a bleeding heart in his right hand and possibly a knife in his left. Four victims of heart sacrifice are falling down around him, while a severed head lies at his feet. The identification of this character as the Death God is not certain, since details of the clothing and headdress are different than usual. The character may be an officiant portrayed with the appearance of the Death God. In earlier work (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011b), the tongue-like scrolls that emerge from the mouth were identified as representations of "fiery speech," and the whole scene is surrounded by undulating flares that probably represent fire.

The Death God and Royalty

On El Baúl Monument 4, the officiant wears a headdress

composed of a rectangular device crowned by a large tassel. This headdress is worn by prominent individuals in the art of Cotzumalguapa, among them three large busts with horizontal tenons from El Baúl (El Baúl Monuments 1 and 12 and Pantaleón Monument 1). Judging by the scale and dignified aspect, these are probably royal portraits. Another finely carved sculpture of unknown provenance, now in the collection of the Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología in Guatemala City, shows the Death God wearing the same headdress (Figure 11). The use of this headdress would seem to indicate that he is being accorded attributes or insignias associated with royalty or the high nobility.

Bilbao Monuments 82 and 83 are panels that represent, respectively, a living individual and the Death God, both wearing tasseled headdresses (Figure 12). The combination relates to the concepts of opposition and complementation between life and death, but at the same time the use of the headdress casts both characters in the same category, as high-ranking



Figure 10. Bilbao Monument 48. Photo courtesy of the Ethnological Museum of Berlin, Germany.

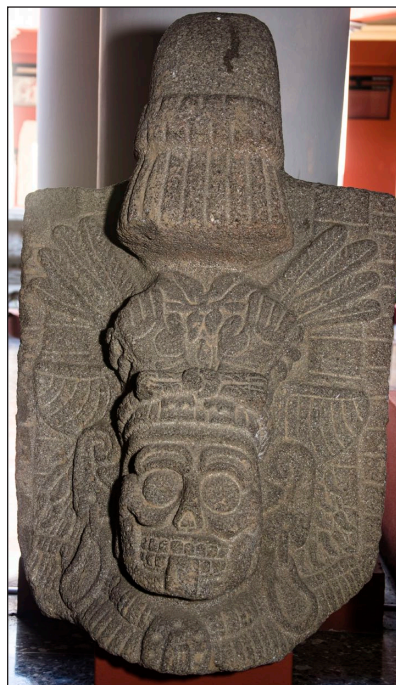


Figure 11. Sculpture of unknown provenance. Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala. Photo: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

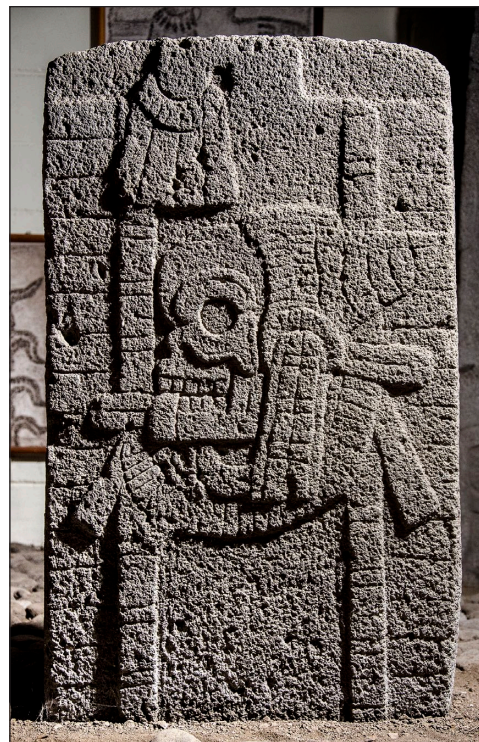


Figure 12. Bilbao Monuments 82 and 83. Museo de la Cultura de Cotzumalguapa, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa. Photo: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

rulers or nobles. The pair is similar to Stela 1 of Los Cerritos Norte, where a skeletal figure interacts with another individual (Figure 13). The composition of the stela parallels Bilbao Stela 18 and El Castillo Stela 1, which were interpreted by Hatch (1987) as representing the exchange of symbols of political power. As in the case of El Baúl Monument 4, there is no certainty about whether the skeletal character is the Death God himself, or an individual wearing the god's attributes. Nevertheless, the scene suggests that the Death God was related to political rituals.

Bilbao Monument 59 is a stone throne with an incised figure of the Death God on its surface. The occupants of the throne would literally sit on the god's portrait, a situation that might relate to metaphors involving the relationship between death and political power.

The Death God and Flower World

As noted in previous studies, the Flower World is one of the most important themes in the art of Cotzumalguapa (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2008, 2012b, 2015). The Death God participates in scenes that allude to the invocation of Flower World by means of song, dance, and sacrifice. An example is found in Bilbao Monument 3, where the Death God sings and dances together with another dancer. A severed head is located in a frame on top of both. On Monument 85, vines full of sprouts emerge

from the Death God's mouth, again suggesting song and the evocation of Flower World. The most impressive example is Bilbao Monument 21. The head of the Death God forms part of the torso of the principal figure, and his song is represented by an enormous vine that surrounds the entire scene. In previous work, Chinchilla Mazariegos (2012b, 2015) argued that this song evoked and recreated the Flower World.

An Earth Lord?

The Death God frequently appears in sculptures that were placed at ground level. Examples include the relief portraits that served as pavement stones or steps in the causeways (Chinchilla Mazariegos et al. 2008). Eight such examples are known, among them El Baúl Monument 76, associated with the Ichanhuehue Causeway, and El Baúl Monument 82, on the Seler-Sachs Causeway. The latter is the only example that has been fully documented in situ, although it was dislodged from its original location in ancient times. As noted, several examples were in fact oversized hieroglyphic collocations with the date "4 Death." There is no satisfactory explanation for the presence of these reliefs in the causeways. However, the placement of the Death God's face at ground level, looking upward suggests an association with the earth, in addition to its obvious relationship with the causeways.

Ichon and Cassier (1985) first reported Bilbao Monument 85. Judging by its shape, the sculpture functioned as a step, carved on its tread and riser with a relief depicting the torso, head, and arms of the Death God. The vines growing from his mouth suggest a relationship with fertility, but also with singing and the evocation of the Flower World. The flame-like elements on both sides are probably fire. In the step's original location, the Death God appeared in the act of emerging from the earth or the floor of the patio in which the sculpture was located.

The reliefs of Bilbao Monument 93 show the death god looking upwards from the surface of the rock, very close to ground level (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2014). The Death God seems to be looking up or emerging out of the rock itself.

Final Observations

These comments do not exhaust the inventory of depictions of the Death God and other skeletal characters in Cotzumalguapa. As in the case of El Baúl Monument 78, in many cases it is difficult to distinguish between specific representations of this deity and other skeletons that lack his attributes, or present only some of them. In short, some representations have unique characteristics and are difficult to understand.

For instance, how do we explain the finely carved skeletal torso of Bilbao Monument 80 (Figure 15)? The trachea, rib cage, sternum, pelvis, and bowl-shaped stomach are clearly visible, but the question is whether this should be regarded as a representation of the Death God. What is the meaning of El Baúl Monument 10 (Figure 16), a rock carved with an enormous skull and two coiled serpents, one of which emerges from the nostrils? Much remains to be explained about the concepts of death and the representation of the death gods in Cotzumalguapa.

This review has reaffirmed the importance of the Cotzumalguapa Death God. Related to royalty, war, and sacrifice,



Figure 13. Los Cerritos Norte Monument 1.
Photo: Frederick J. Bove.

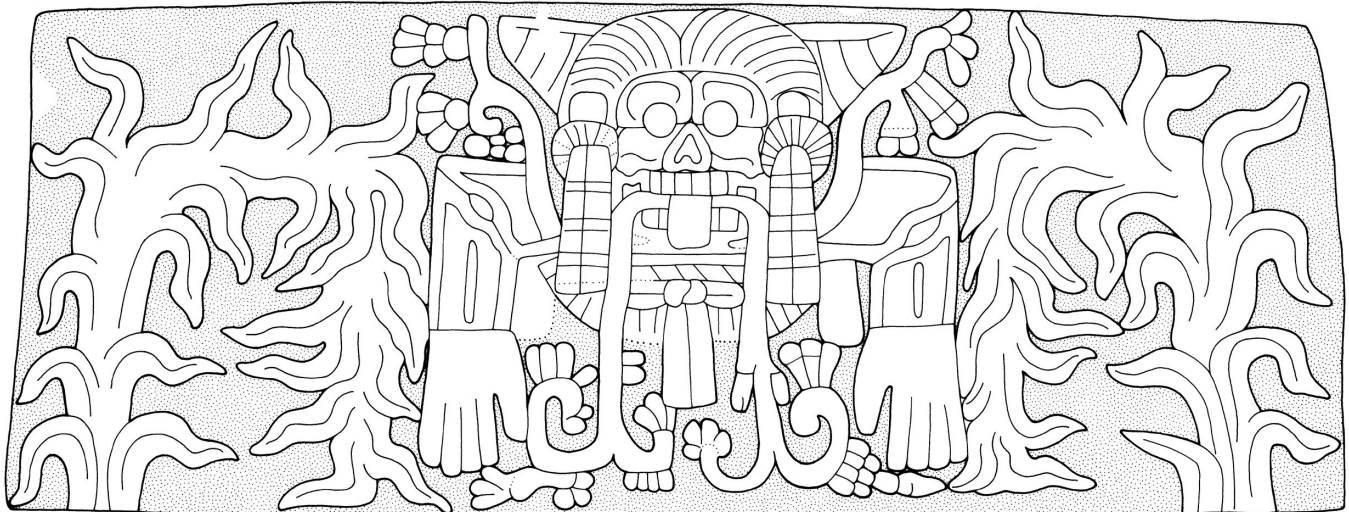


Figure 14. Bilbao Monument 85. Museo de la Cultura de Cotzumalguapa, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa
Drawing: Oswaldo Chinchilla.



Figure 16. El Baúl Monument 10. Museo de El Baúl, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa. Photo: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

Figure 15. Bilbao Monument 80. Museo de la Cultura de Cotzumalguapa, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa. Photo: Oswaldo Chinchilla.

the earth, and Flower World, this god of playful and perhaps infantile appearance condensed important aspects of the religious thought and world view of the creators of the Cotzumalguapa style.

Acknowledgments

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