



Chapter 5

# Masks and Iconography

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The Early Classic stuccos from the Temple of the Night Sun (Strs. F8-1-Sub.1B and F8-1-Sub.1C) stand apart for their complexity and quality. In the past, their effect must have been overwhelming. Deep, volumetric relief offered a bold show at dawn and dusk. Depending on weather, raking sunlight would slant across the Temple's high location on the Buenavista Escarpment, a display enhanced by the saturated red color of the stuccos. It is surely no coincidence that the Sun God dominated the iconography of the Temple. Yet the high relief posed certain challenges, too. Excavations proved that portions of the elaborate façades had sloughed off even before the Temple's abandonment and burial. Ambitious in conception, the stuccos were poorly bonded to their backing. For some of their visible lifetime, they were as much examples of decay as triumphant, unblemished commissions of the local dynasty.

## The Program

Most of the exposed and documented stucco sculpture appears on the Temple's cornice, extending around all sides of the building. In addition, remnants of sculpture occur on the front of the Temple's roofcomb. Damaged by rainfall and slump since its exposure by looters, the roofcomb was nonetheless documented in situ by Martin Diedrich, who took photographs in 1980 (see Chapter 2). Diedrich's images, along with what

**Figure 5.1.** The Sun God (Mask 3), on the northeast corner of the Temple of the Night Sun, and Chahk (Mask 4), on the northern façade. Image: Katie Simon, CAST.

2015 In *Temple of the Night Sun: A Royal Tomb at El Diablo, Guatemala*, by Stephen Houston, Sarah Newman, Edwin Román, and Thomas Garrison, pp. 208-229. Precolumbia Mesoweb Press, San Francisco.



Figure 5.2. The extant masks on the upper frieze of the Temple of the Night Sun. For the individual masks see Figures 5.14–5.21. Drawings: Stephen Houston and Mary Clarke.

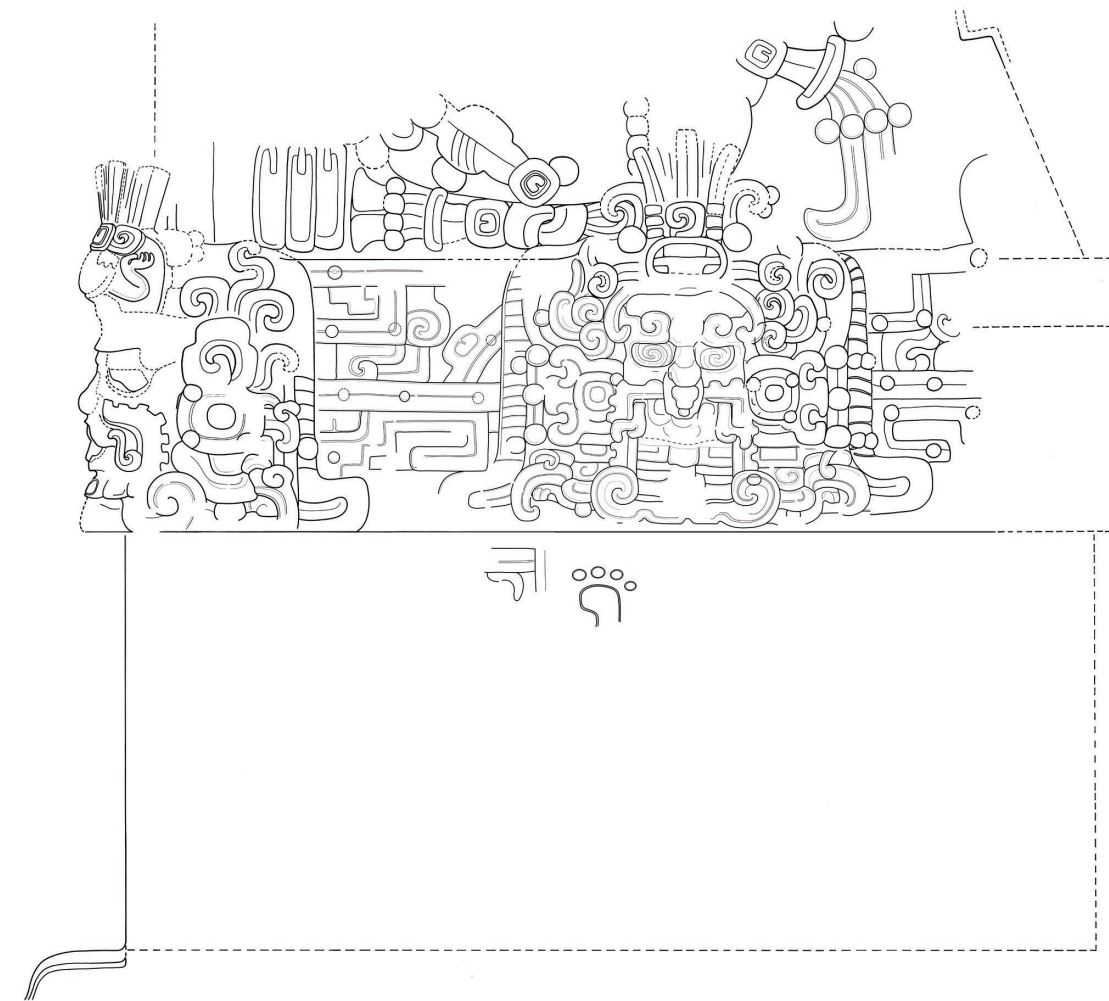


Figure 5.3. Forward-facing Chahk head (Mask 4) from the Temple's northern façade, with remains of seated male figure above. Drawing: Mary Clarke.

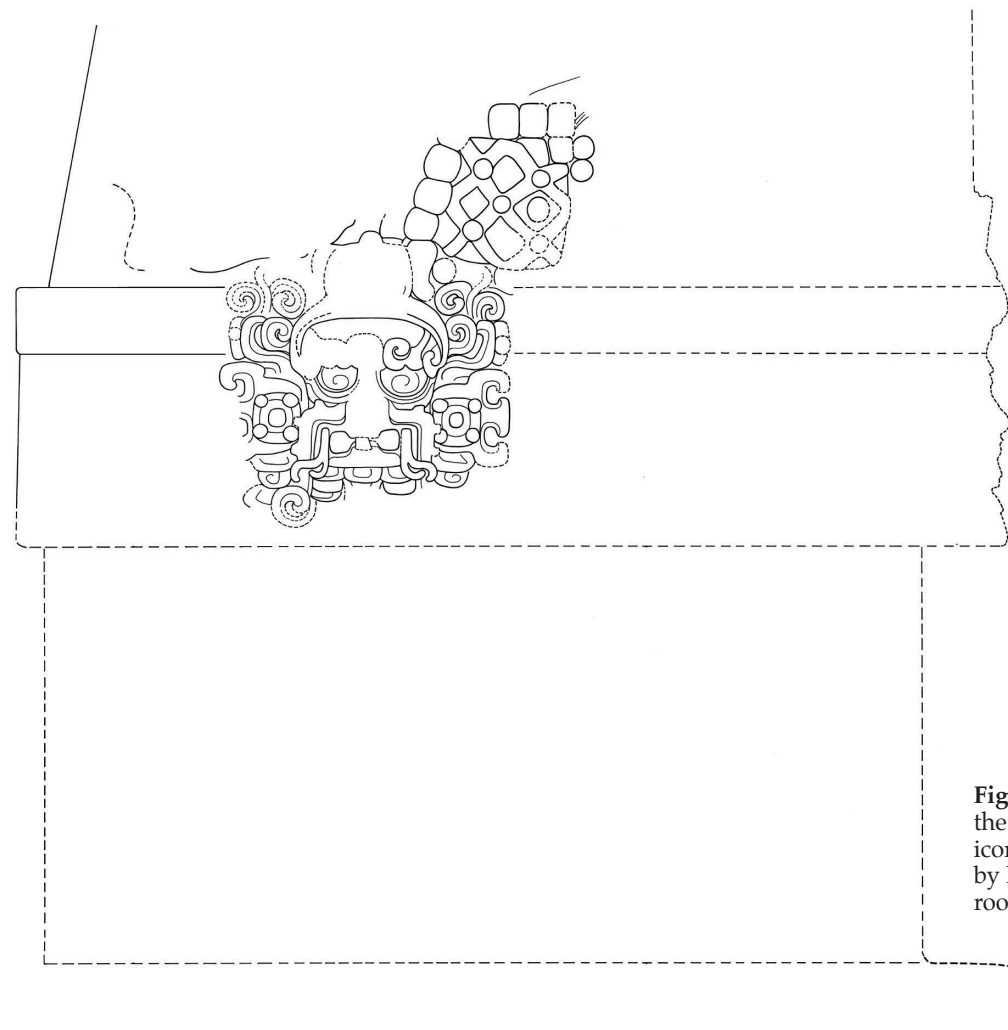
remains on view, show a central mask with large earspools on its main, east-west axis. Presumably, a seated body, not excavated because of structural instability, was linked to the mask, thus composing an entire figure. The mask was heavily affected by burning when Str. F8-1-2<sup>nd</sup> (the Middle Temple) was constructed; pieces of fire-darkened, red-painted stucco mix with fill in front of the mask. Vertical placement on the roof-comb suggests that the figure was seated, much like that on the recently discovered façade at Holmul, Guatemala (Than 2013). To the side, in fragments that have slumped a meter to the south since 1980, was a vertical element clutched by a deity, identified by the ovals or "god-markings" on the body. Similar beings are found on the Early Classic Stela 1 at Tikal, perhaps as part of a lateral backrack extension or as an element in some celestial tableau (Jones and Satterthwaite

1982:Fig. 1). The Hauberg Stela at the Princeton Museum of Art displays comparable deities holding a curving serpent (Figure 5.8b; Schele and Miller 1986:Pl. 66).

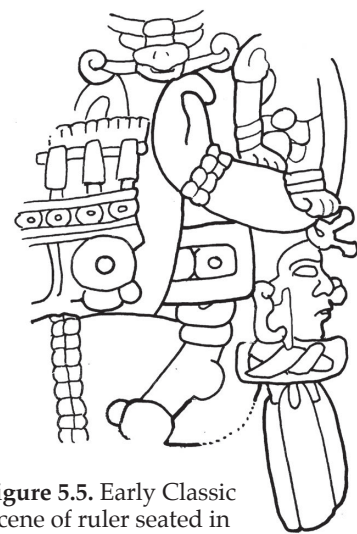
Among the most important motifs on the sloping cornice are massive, frontally facing deity masks. Ten are now attested, most by excavation but one solely by a Diedrich photograph. The overall number must have been 14, with only those on the southeastern and southwestern corners unaccounted for. To facilitate discussion, these are labeled in counter-clockwise order (Figures 5.2 and 5.14–5.21): Mask 1, eastern façade, at the back axis of the Temple; Mask 2, eastern façade; Mask 3, the Sun God, at the northeastern corner; Mask 4, the storm god Chahk, northern façade; Mask 5, a GI-semlant, northern façade; Mask 6, a largely destroyed sculpture on the western façade; Mask 7, western façade;

Mask 8, above the doorway to the Temple. Masks 9 and 10, on the western façade, are still in fill but must correlate, presumably in their content too, with Masks 6 and 7. Mask 11, attested in a photograph by Diedrich, appears to have the end of a twisting facial "cruller" passing through its earspool and matches Mask 5 on the northern façade in this respect. Mask 12 is another Chahk on the southern façade. Masks 13 and 14 are unexcavated but must have resembled Masks 2 and 3. Further, Masks 5 and 6 associate with niche-like features that call to mind the slightly later Shrine erected in front of the Temple (see Chapter 2).

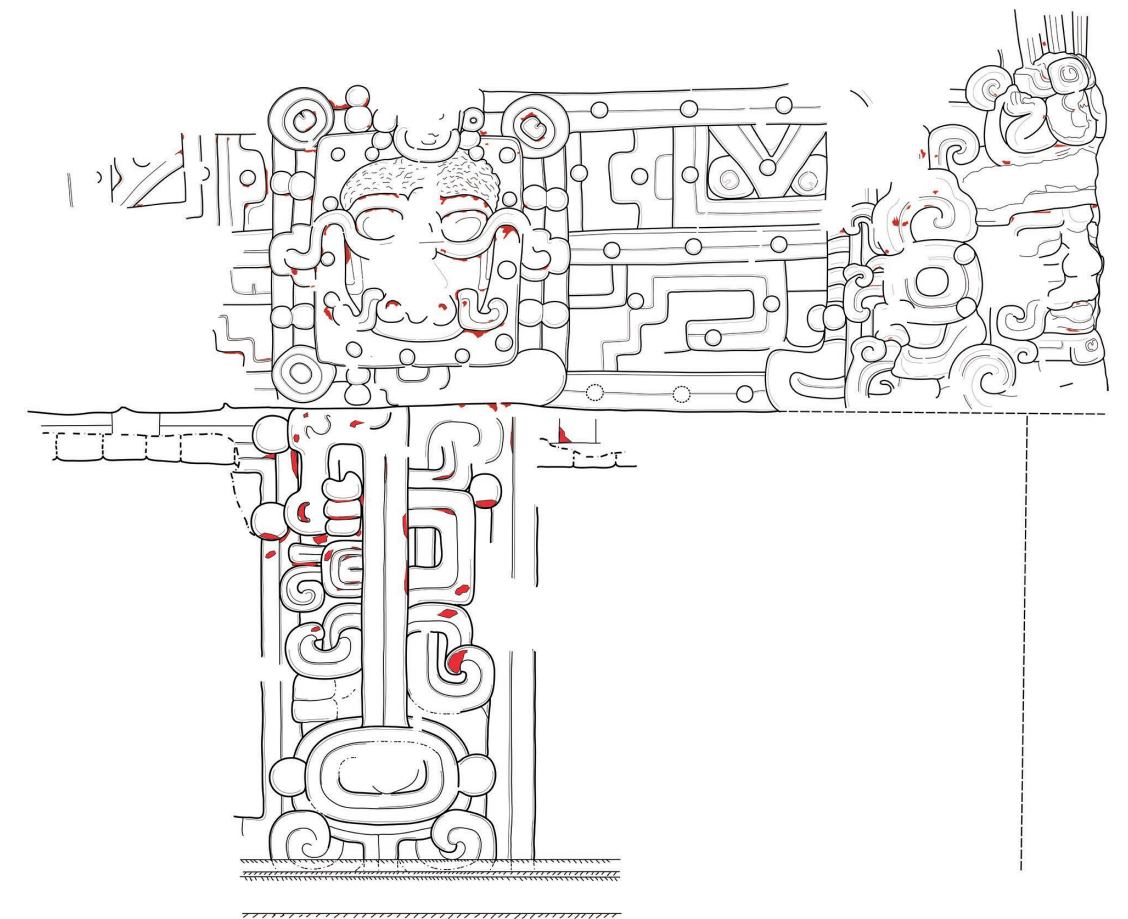
The likelihood is that the overall program was symmetrical, making it possible to understand the whole without complete excavation—the unexposed corners are too close to the surface to allow exhaustive work. Two Chahk heads (Masks 4 and 12) on the north and south sides of the temple appear to be virtually identical in form and placement, suggesting bilateral patterns on the cornice (Figures 5.3 and 5.4). Just above the Chahk heads, the lower portions of two seated figures can be discerned. The figure on the north side (Figure 5.3) wears triple belt celts on his back and a skirt bordered with beads. A diagonal element with a prominent *yax* sign crosses the thigh. The horizontal knotted element below could be either part of the same belt assemblage or his loincloth folded under his knees. The diagonal belt element is common in royal male costume and often has a pendant Chahk figure, as on the Early Classic Tikal Stelae 28 and 39, Uolantun Stela 1, and the Late Classic West Jamb of the Temple of Foliated Cross at Palenque (e.g., Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:Figs. 48, 76). The seated ruler on the fragmentary Stela 18 of Tikal is notably similar to the El Zotz figure, including the pendant belt



**Figure 5.4.** Chahk head (Mask 12) from the Temple's southern façade (remaining iconography and architecture largely destroyed by looting), beneath female with beaded skirt on roofcomb. Drawing: Mary Clarke.



**Figure 5.5.** Early Classic scene of ruler seated in profile atop zoomorphic mountain; Tikal Stela 18. Drawing: Karl Taube, after Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:Fig. 26a.



**Figure 5.6.** Deity masks (Masks 1, 2, and 3) on the sculpted band that encircles the Temple. Beneath the band on the lower façade is a downward-pointing serpent head. Drawing: Stephen Houston.

celts, diagonal belt element, and beaded skirt (Figure 5.5). A Teotihuacan-style headdress or more probably a deity head rests in the Tikal figure's lap. The pendant beaded element before the knee of the El Zotz figure could also form part of a headdress.

The opposite south façade features another seated figure, although in this case one that wears a beaded net skirt, a frequent costume element of royal women (Figure 5.4). We suspect the two figures constitute a royal couple. In this regard, the pattern would resemble Tikal Stela 40, which has the parents of K'an Chitam on the sides, the mother again with net skirt (Valdés et al. 1997). Below the two seated figures is a sculpted band with large deity masks that encircles the building (Figure 5.6). The lower half of the band has stepped frets that look like woven textile, but the upper portion represents a skyband, including a star or Venus sign of angular, archaic form on

the east façade between Masks 2 and 3. Excavations in 2013 exposed a massive serpent head with its snout pointing downward beneath Mask 2 on the northern portion of the east façade. There was surely another on the southern end. During the Late Preclassic and Early Classic periods, pairs of similar serpent heads often mark the ends of skybands, as on sculptures at Izapa, Takalik Abaj, San Bartolo, and Kohunlich. Many, too, have a circular blossom at the tip of the snout (e.g., Taube et al. 2010:Figs. 26, 30, 31). As will be noted, a pair of heads of the same creature, symmetrically oriented, flank Mask 7 on the excavated principal portion of the west façade to the north of the central doorway (Figure 5.10), with another probable pair on the other side of the doorway to the south. The long tabular element above Mask 7 could well be a skyband with the serpent heads descending at both ends.

As for the nine extant deity masks,

all have glyphic signs atop their brows, most likely an epigraphic convention for naming them. The practice is also attested on portrayals of Classic Maya royalty, as on Stela 40 of Tikal. However, since these are the uppermost, highly exposed portions of the masks, they tend to be poorly preserved. Most appear to be smaller heads with earspools, but three have partly legible signs. The Sun God—Mask 3—was labeled by a compound consisting of raised hands supporting a *yu* syllable, along with a schematic, inverted face in between (Figure 5.16). A remarkable feature is that the glyph was amended at some point. A face with deep mouth and sharply defined trefoil eye was covered by stucco to create a more stylized visage. Mask 4, a Chahk, recorded a sky sign, a bundle, and superimposed volute, perhaps a vocalization; the link with a resonant sky fits well with Chahk (Figure 5.17). A glyph for *ak'ab*,

“darkness,” may occur with Mask 8 above the front doorway (Figure 5.10).

Most of the masks denote aspects of the Sun God, with the majority alluding to the deity known to scholars as the Jaguar God of the Underworld (hereafter JGU). In Classic Maya calendrics, this god appears as the personified glyphs for the day Kib and the number seven, as well as the patron of the month Wo (Thompson 1950:Figs. 9.52, 22.8-10, 24.38-41). With his large eyes and profile, he displays some of the basic features of the diurnal Sun God, K'inich Ajaw, but with important distinctions. Although K'inich Ajaw can display jaguar ears, this is invariably the case for the JGU. In addition, he has spiral eyes, in contrast to the cross-eyed pupils of the Sun God. As noted in a previous publication (Houston and Taube 2000), the spiral motif designates darkness as distinct from the brightly shining eye of the day sun. The cheeks of the JGU often bear the so-called *ak'bal*, “night,”

sign. An especially important and diagnostic trait of the JGU is the facial element, often referred to as a “cruller,” that frames the lower portions of the eyes and twists above on the central brow just above the nose. At times, as in the case of an example on the front of Tikal Stela 31, the cruller is marked with a beaded water motif, which is also consistent with the spiral eye appearing in some water bands (Figure 5.7b; Houston and Taube 2000:Fig. 19h, i). In Classic Maya iconography, the underworld was an aquatic place, part of a sea sustaining the world (Finamore and Houston 2010; Taube 2010). Although the watery nature of the facial features is consistent with underworld symbolism, David Stuart (1998) notes that the JGU may well constitute the Classic Maya fire god, hence his prominence in censer supports at Palenque (Cuevas García 2007). In addition, the jaguar ears of the JGU commonly emit flames and smoke, as in the case of a massive JGU on the

lower west façade of the Temple (Figure 5.10).

With his attributes of darkness, water, and jaguars, as well as facial features of the sun deity, the JGU plausibly represents the nocturnal Sun God, perhaps at his midnight nadir in the underworld. Aside from the El Diablo façades, one of the most conspicuous examples of this being occurs on the Jaguar Stairway on the west side of the East Court in the Copan Acropolis, in that case flanked by massive star signs (Baudez 1994:Fig. 105). Moreover, William Fash (personal communication, 1996) notes that there is a similarly massive head of K'inich Ajaw that probably faced the JGU on the east side of the courtyard, placing them in a dyadic relationship as eastern and western aspects of the Sun God (Maudslay 1889-1902:1:Pl. 10b). This also suggests that the dawning sun would light the face of the eastern-facing JGU on the west side of the court while, conversely, the diurnal sun on

the east side faced to the west. The same pattern occurs on the stairway image of K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' from the immediately adjacent Temple 16 in the West Court of the Copan Acropolis, where he appears as the rising day sun facing west (Taube 2013). The orientation of the East Court sculptures at Copan indicates that, while K'inich Ajaw denotes the east and the diurnal celestial sun, the JGU represents the west and the sun in the dark underworld.

In the El Diablo Temple, the orientation is quite the opposite. The JGU as the night sun dominates the western doorway (Mask 8). As a prominent building at the western edge of El Zotz, the Temple also faces west, and its central theme might be the night sun orienting west to mark its descent into the dark underworld. The concept of a temple dedicated to the night sun also appears in Classic Maya iconography, including a Late Classic vase portraying a temple marked with eyeballs denoting darkness and the head of the JGU on the roof (K5538). Moreover, the concept of temples dedicated to the night sun can be traced to the Late Preclassic period (ca. 100 BC). Mural fragments excavated from the Ixim temple in the Pinturas Group at San Bartolo depict what appears to be a temple roof with the spiral eyes denoting darkness framed by the JGU cruller, a secure reference to this being, despite the fact that there are as yet no explicit representations of this god for the Late Preclassic (Figure 5.7d). This repetitive cruller motif also appears on a Late Classic panel from Pomona, Chiapas, portraying a shield rimmed with "death eyes" denoting death and darkness (Figure 5.7e). The shield center contains the cruller element atop a jaguar pelt, a probable allusion to the face of the JGU.

One of the striking and unusual traits of certain JGU heads, seen on the Temple and elsewhere, is that the twisted cruller element penetrates their earspools and even the jaguar ears in the case of the JGU on the lower Temple façade. The earliest known example appears on the San Diego cliff relief in the northern Peten, dating to roughly AD 300. The trait also appears on Stela 31 at Tikal, both in a belt piece worn by the ruler, Sihyaj Chan K'awiil, and a portrait

glyph of the JGU in the lengthy text on the back (Figure 5.7c). In fact, this glyph could be an epigraphic reference to the El Diablo Temple (see Chapter 6; Houston et al. 2013). While not the JGU, Mask 7 from the west façade has similar eye elements passing through earspools, although in this case descending from the brow. The undulating ends that rise through the earspools signal that they are probably serpents; indeed, a Protoclassic stucco mask from the North Acropolis at Tikal portrays a form of the JGU with the cruller clearly terminating in a pair of serpent heads (Figure 5.7a). The concept of serpent heads passing through earspools is commonly found with Early Classic portrayals of *witz* "hill" heads, although in this case they emerge from the corners of the mouth (Taube 2003b, 2004b). These beings constitute the "breath of the mountain," in other words, wind. In fact, Vincent Stanzione (personal communication, 2000) has noted that in Tz'utujil the term for wind is *xlaajuyu'*, meaning "mountain breath" (Saturno et al. 2005:25). If serpents emerging from *witz* maws denote breath, perhaps snakes terminating eye elements constitute an aspect of sight as a form of "vision serpent." Serpents of vision and sight would be entirely appropriate symbolism for imagery pertaining to aspects of the Sun God.

Directly above the massive celestial serpent head on the eastern façade, there is the face of the JGU within a square frame having four prominent bosses at its corners (Mask 2). Although this is the only example documented for the many masks constituting the upper frieze, it probably occurs as well on the unexcavated southern portion of the same wall (the hypothetical Mask 14). The square motif probably constitutes an early version of the JGU shields commonly wielded by Classic Maya kings. On Dos Pilas Stela 9, a shield not only shows jaguar pelage but is marked **u-[K'IN]-chi-NAL** (Greene et al. 1972:Pl. 93). Of uncertain meaning, it may read *u k'inichnal*, "his Sun God Place," or, parsed another way, *u k'in ichnal*, "his sun presence," in either instance referring to solar beings. One of the most elaborate and best-known examples of this shield appears on the Tablet of

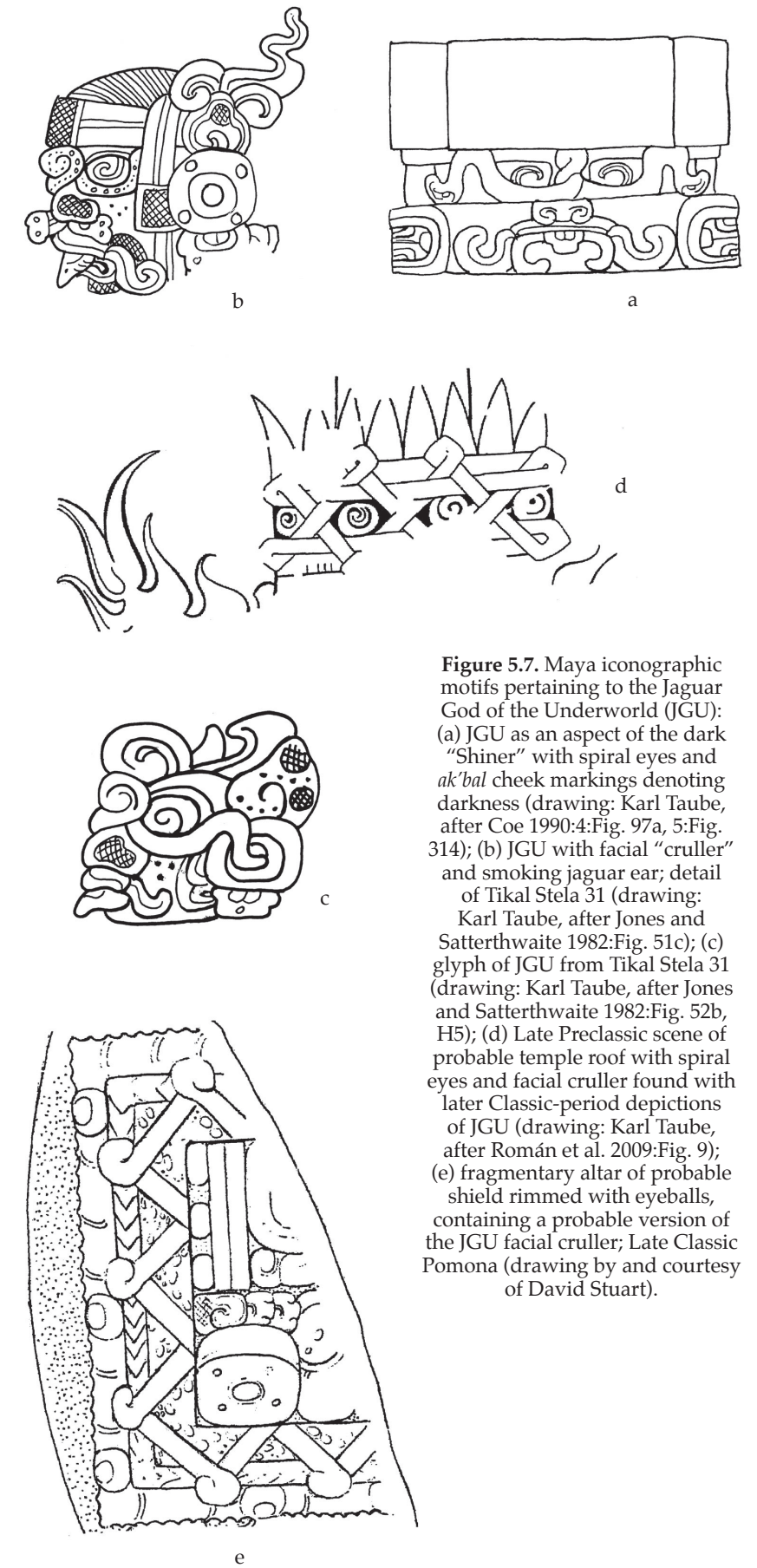
the Temple of the Sun at Palenque atop two crossed spears, again with four feathered bosses rimming the edge (Maudslay 1889-1902:4:Pl. 88). Although well attested in the Late Classic period, the El Diablo Temple motif would not be the only Early Classic JGU shield. A ceramic lid from a royal tomb in Str. IX at Becan, Campeche, portrays a central face framed by a circular device with four feathered bosses, a version of the Late Classic shield noted for Palenque (Campaña and Boucher 2002:69). In addition, this central face is rimmed by the same woven motif found with the Palenque example. As noted by Campaña and Boucher (2002:69), the central face portrays the night sun, in other words, the JGU. Although this is certainly the case, the visage is still more complex, as it has the fur and beaded elements found with the howler monkey scribe, as in the case of the two remarkable vessels discovered in Burial 9 (see Chapter 3). The left cheek of the Becan face is black, the other is red, and this could well allude to dusk and dawn. In this regard, it is possible that the JGU shields pertain to the concept of raising one's shield at dawn, when battle became possible. If so, the JGU shields of the El Zotz Temple are on the eastern side to receive the first rays of dawn.

In contrast to the probable JGU shield motif, the other deity masks from the Temple façades have elaborate earspool compositions at the sides of their heads. First known from Kohunlich in southern Quintana Roo, these earspool groupings are now widely documented for Early Classic stucco façades as well as ceramic urns, in most cases with aspects of the Sun God (e.g., Hellmuth 1987:75-78, 81-83, 86-87, 107-109; Taube 1998:Fig. 14a-b). The most common composition is a central earspool with profile heads of the Principal Bird Deity at the base and a fish or "Xok" head at the top, which seems a striking contradiction of the Principal Bird Deity as an embodiment of the sky and the fish as a basic reference to the watery underworld. Beaks often protrude from the sides of the central earspools, suggesting macaw heads with large, round eyes, but as of yet there is no secondary evidence, such as beading around the eyes, to suggest this attribution. Aside from the probable

shield motif, all of the other documented masks from the El Diablo façades share features of this program. In tight unison, the three traits appear in Mask 5 at the northwest corner, with Principal Bird Deity heads at the base, earspools with beaks, and profile fish heads above. The principal central mask above the western doorway, Mask 8, displayed all three elements as well, although only the upper portions of the lower bird heads remain.

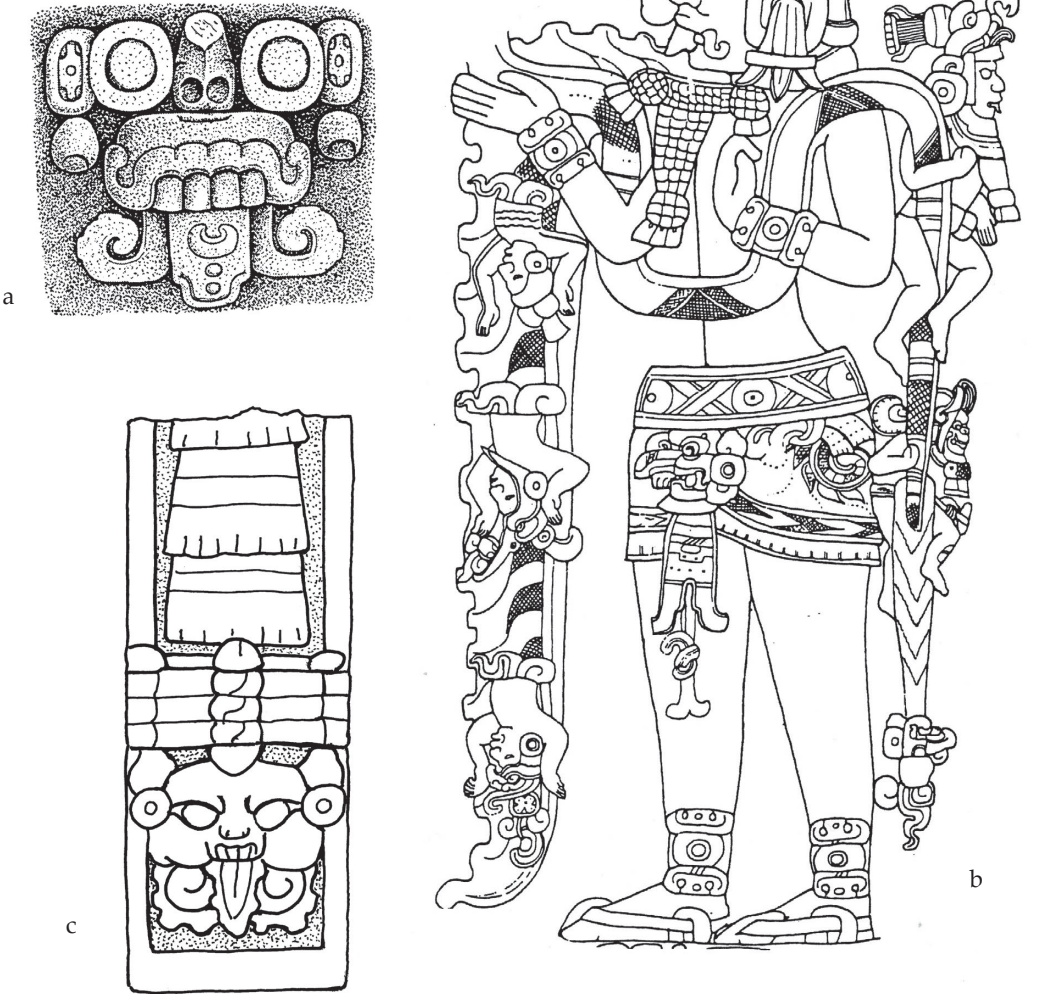
Another basic attribute of Early Classic deity masks as well as royal headdresses is a "chin strap" head just below the main portrait, as can be vividly seen with the headdress raised by Sihyaj Chan K'awiil on Tikal Stela 31 (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:Fig. 51). This convention is so central that it was copied at Teotihuacan as a ceramic *almena* mask of a probable Maya king, including the elaborate earspool assemblages as well (Taube 2003b:Fig. 11.1a). The meaning of this lower face remains obscure, although it could well signify the support and "vehicle" for the main face above. In many cases, the head is a serpent, the most widespread creature associated with the travel of supernatural beings, including bicephalic serpent bars as well as the great plumed serpent emerging from Flower Mountain in the Late Preclassic north wall mural at San Bartolo (Saturno et al. 2005).

A noteworthy trait of several of the Temple deity masks is a crenellated element encircling the mouth, much like a beard (see Masks 4, 8, and 12 in Figure 5.2). Rather than hair, this motif probably alludes to blood, and it appears on the Hauberg Stela falling from the mouth of GI—an aquatic aspect of the Sun God—in a stream that carries three dismembered human figures (Figure 5.8b). It is also marked by crosshatched undulating elements, rendered in red as an explicit blood band on an Early Classic vessel lid from Becan (Taube and Houston 2010:Pl. 82). At Tonina, in highland Chiapas, a pair of balustrades depict jaguar heads with similar crenellations bordering blood scrolls (Figure 5.8c). It is quite possible that this motif rimming the mouth of the Temple masks shows them to be "blood drinkers," which would be consistent with the sanguinary, war-like nature of the Maya Sun God (Houston et al. 2006:123, Fig. 3.21). However, aside from the diurnal sun and nocturnal JGU, the Chahk masks on the north and south sides of the Temple (Masks 4 and 12) also have this facial element. Although not known for Maya depictions of the rain god, Late Classic Maya depictions of the Central Mexican god of rain and lightning, Tlaloc, portray him with a trefoil blood scroll in the mouth, including a massive example from Temple 16 at Copan



**Figure 5.7.** Maya iconographic motifs pertaining to the Jaguar God of the Underworld (JGU): (a) JGU as an aspect of the dark "Shiner" with spiral eyes and *ak'bal* cheek markings denoting darkness (drawing: Karl Taube, after Coe 1990:4:Fig. 97a, 5:Fig. 314); (b) JGU with facial "cruller" and smoking jaguar ear; detail of Tikal Stela 31 (drawing: Karl Taube, after Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:Fig. 51c); (c) glyph of JGU from Tikal Stela 31 (drawing: Karl Taube, after Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:Fig. 52b, H5); (d) Late Preclassic scene of probable temple roof with spiral eyes and facial cruller found with later Classic-period depictions of JGU (drawing: Karl Taube, after Román et al. 2009:Fig. 9); (e) fragmentary altar of probable shield rimmed with eyeballs, containing a probable version of the JGU facial cruller; Late Classic Pomona (drawing by and courtesy of David Stuart).

**Figure 5.8.** The “spoked” blood motif in Maya iconography: (a) Late Classic Maya portrayal of the Teotihuacan rain god Tlaloc with trefoil blood scroll in mouth; detail of stairway sculpture from Temple 16, Copan (drawing: Karl Taube [2004b:Fig. 13.12b]); (b) Protoclassic Maya depiction of sacrificial blood falling from the mouth of a god; detail of drawing of Hauberg Stela (drawing: Linda Schele courtesy of David Schele); (c) stucco balustrade sculpture from Tonina of feline with trefoil blood scroll in mouth (drawing: Karl Taube, after Becquelin and Baudez 1982:Fig. 24).



with projecting tabs, a simpler form of the crenellation blood motif (Figure 5.8a).

The Temple masks pertain directly to its westerly orientation, with most depicting elaborate portrayals of the JGU, including Mask 8 above the west doorway of the Temple (see Figure 5.2). His headdress is topped with a glyphic element containing the sign for darkness, an element commonly found on the cheeks of this being. In addition, the profile fish heads above the earspools are surmounted by circular

cartouches containing diagonal bands, which denote shining reflective surfaces in Maya iconography. On one cartouche are the remains of curling vegetation to one side, and a more complete example from Mask 5, a JGU mask from the north façade, reveals that the cartouche and vegetation denote an ear of corn, or *nal*. In fact, many Late Classic masks and headdresses have *nal* maize signs above the earspools (Taube 1985:Figs. 2g, 9f). A fragmentary *nal* sign can also be discerned on Mask 6 on the northern end

of the western cornice, doubtless matched with an unexcavated southern counterpart (Mask 10). Below the *nal* elements, there are also the remains of the profile earspools and avian heads. Although of slightly different proportions, it is possible that Mask 6 and the hypothetical Mask 10 were versions of the same being above the western doorway (Mask 8).

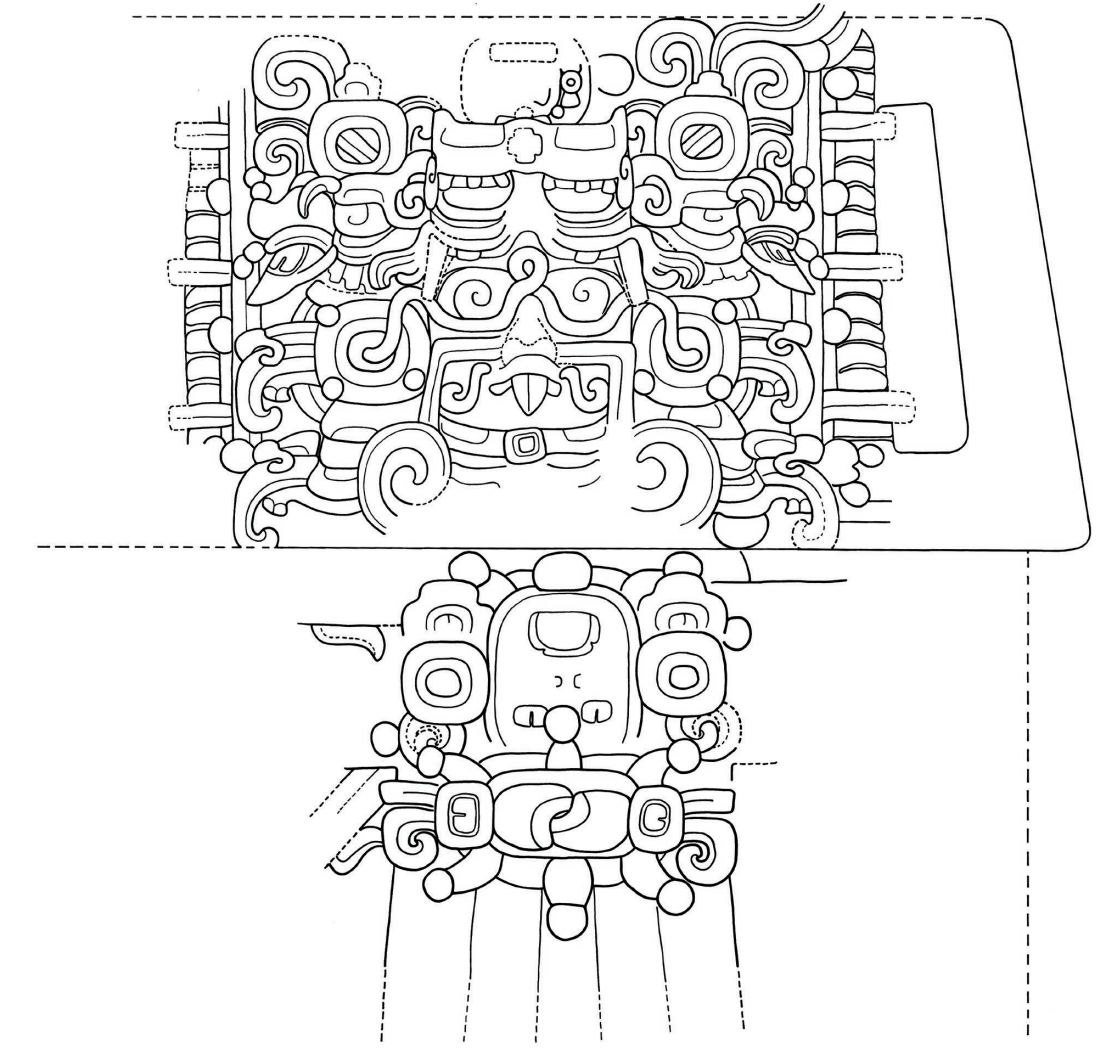
The north façade JGU, Mask 5, has a shark tooth as a central incisor, a convention common with GI but not with this being (Figure 5.9). However, the two gods do overlap in physical appearance, including the spiral eyes, the two major differences being the facial cruller and burning jaguar ears of the JGU, as well as the shark tooth and fish fins or barbels on the cheeks of GI. Although rare, there are other examples of the JGU displaying a shark tooth canine, including one from the front of Tikal Stela 31 (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:Fig. 51c). Although Mask 5 is the only JGU on the Temple displaying an intact incisor, the other examples may have also had the same shark tooth.

For the east side of the building, another feline being with jaguar ears, Mask 1, appears on the upper frieze south of the probable JGU shield, Mask 2, with another corresponding mask probably further south, the hypothetical Mask 14. Mask 1's sunken features and small pair of canines suggest an aged god with chapfallen face. Given the condition of the mask, the identity of this being remains elusive, but one possibility is the jaguar deity appearing as one of the two aged “Paddler Gods,” a dark solar being with jaguar attributes paired opposite an aspect of the diurnal sun (Stuart 1988:189-193).

The northeast corner of the Temple bore an image of the Sun God, Mask 3 (Figure 5.16), with one probably at the southeast as well, Mask 13. Although possessing the burning jaguar

ear commonly found with the JGU, he lacks the spiral eye of the nocturnal Sun God. Instead, he displays the cross-eyed pupils of the diurnal Sun God, appearing epigraphically as the patron for the month Yaxk'in and the personification of the numeral 4 (Thompson 1950:Figs. 22, 24). However, most Classic-period Sun Gods have crossed-eyed pupils delineated only by an incision. By contrast, Mask 3, the northeastern solar deity, has rectangular holes cut out, thereby creating sideways L-shapes. For the El Zotz mask, this is a decidedly archaic convention that is best known for the Late Preclassic period, including deities from the murals at San Bartolo, Guatemala (Saturno et al. 2005:Fig. 30). The meaning of the hollowed pupil remains obscure, but it could allude to a “passage-way” opening to the numinous place of gods and ancestors, and perhaps to the play of light and shadow on the Temple.

Just to the north of the central JGU above the western doorway, there is another deity, Mask 7, which lacks feline or sun god attributes (Figure 5.10). Given the clear bilateral symmetry in the façade program, this would have been paired with another on the opposite southern side of the doorway, the hypothetical Mask 9. As with JGU masks on the western and northern façades, facial serpents pass through the mask's earspools. However, in this case they are distinct from the JGU facial cruller, as they extend down from the brows rather than rise from the cheeks. It is possible that the pair of masks depict the howler monkey scribes, which in the Early Classic appear with similarly snarling muzzles and beaded beards, including the ceramic examples from the nearby royal tomb (see Chapter 3). In addition, a large-scale pair of southwardly facing masks on Str. 33-2<sup>nd</sup> from the North Acropolis at Tikal probably depict the same being and may relate to the monkey



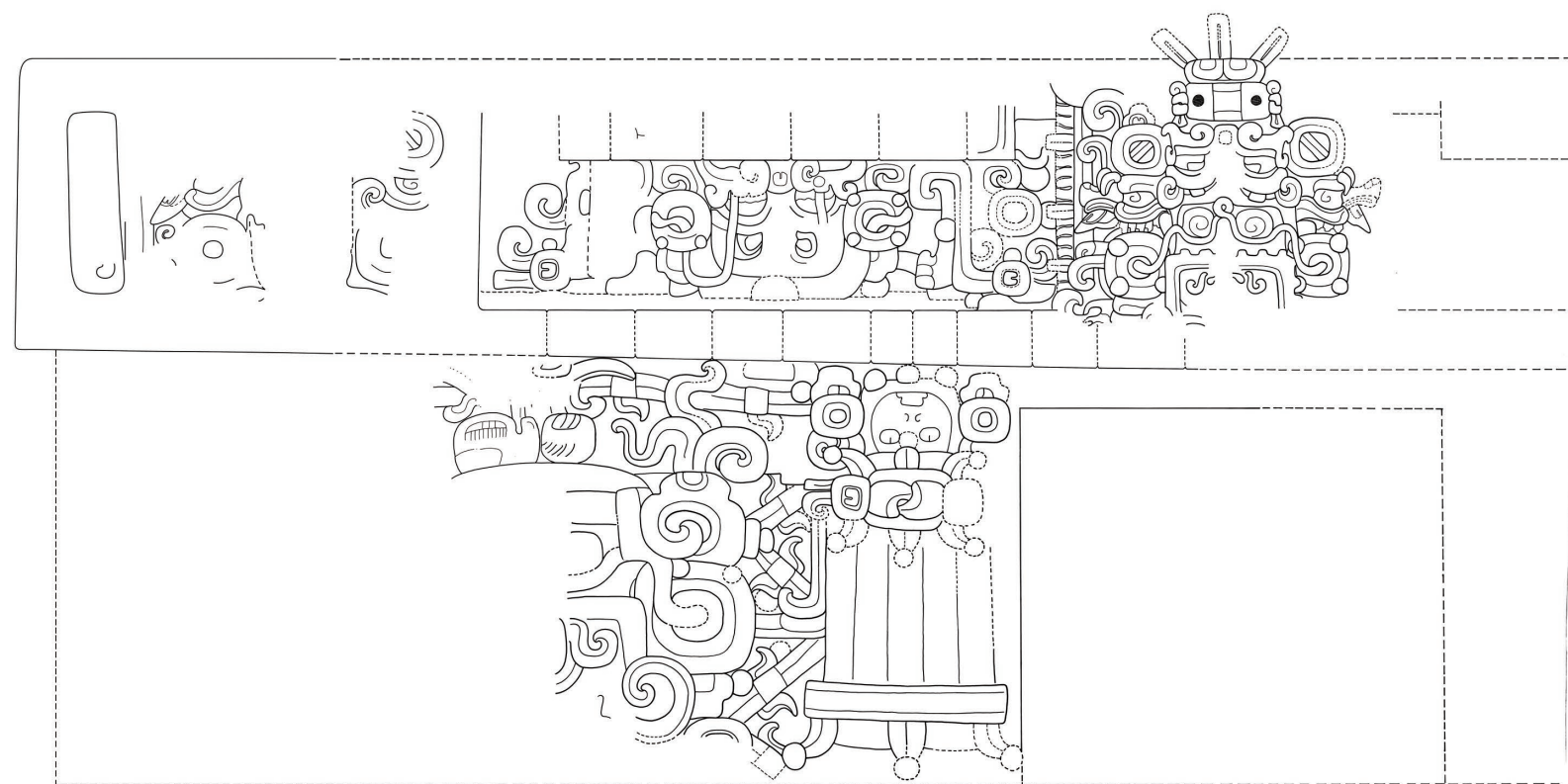
**Figure 5.9.** Mask 5, a Jaguar God of the Underworld, from the Temple's northern façade. Drawing: Mary Clarke.

scribe twins of the sixteenth-century K'iche' Popol Vuh (W. Coe 1990:5:Fig. 317; see also M. Coe 1978). It is likely that a still earlier building from the North Acropolis, dating to the third century AD, also bore masks of these beings (Coe 1990:4:Fig. 96). Two downwardly facing serpent heads with floral-tipped snouts flank Mask 7. Although the snouts are bent rather than straight, they are the same serpent on the lower façade of the east wall below the skyband (Figure 5.6). The horizontal rectangular element above Mask 7 and the serpent heads may also have been part of a celestial register.

Just below the seated royal couple on the north and south cornices of the Temple are the Chahks, Masks 4 and 12 (Figures 5.3 and 5.4), with the best preserved being the northern example, Mask 4. Along with the

feline-appearing snout and trefoil brows of Chahk, the masks also have *Spondylus* earpieces, a diagnostic marker of the Classic Maya god of rain and lightning. However, the earpieces also contain jade earspools, with jade often placed in *Spondylus* shells in Classic Maya caches (Finamore and Houston 2010:Pl. 89). The swirling elements directly above the earpieces are probably profile fish heads, although in this case oriented vertically. Mention has been made of the probable crenellated blood scrolls pouring from the mouths of some of the Temple masks; the Chahk examples are the best preserved. These blood elements may be personified with eyes or jeweled elements still visible on the better-preserved Mask 4.

Below the masks on the upper frieze, elaborate sculptural programs are also



**Figure 5.10.** Mask 6 (mostly destroyed), Mask 7, and Mask 8 on the cornice of the Temple's western façade. Mask 8 is centered above the door, to the left of which is an inverted human head and a massive Jaguar God of the Underworld. Drawing: Mary Clarke.

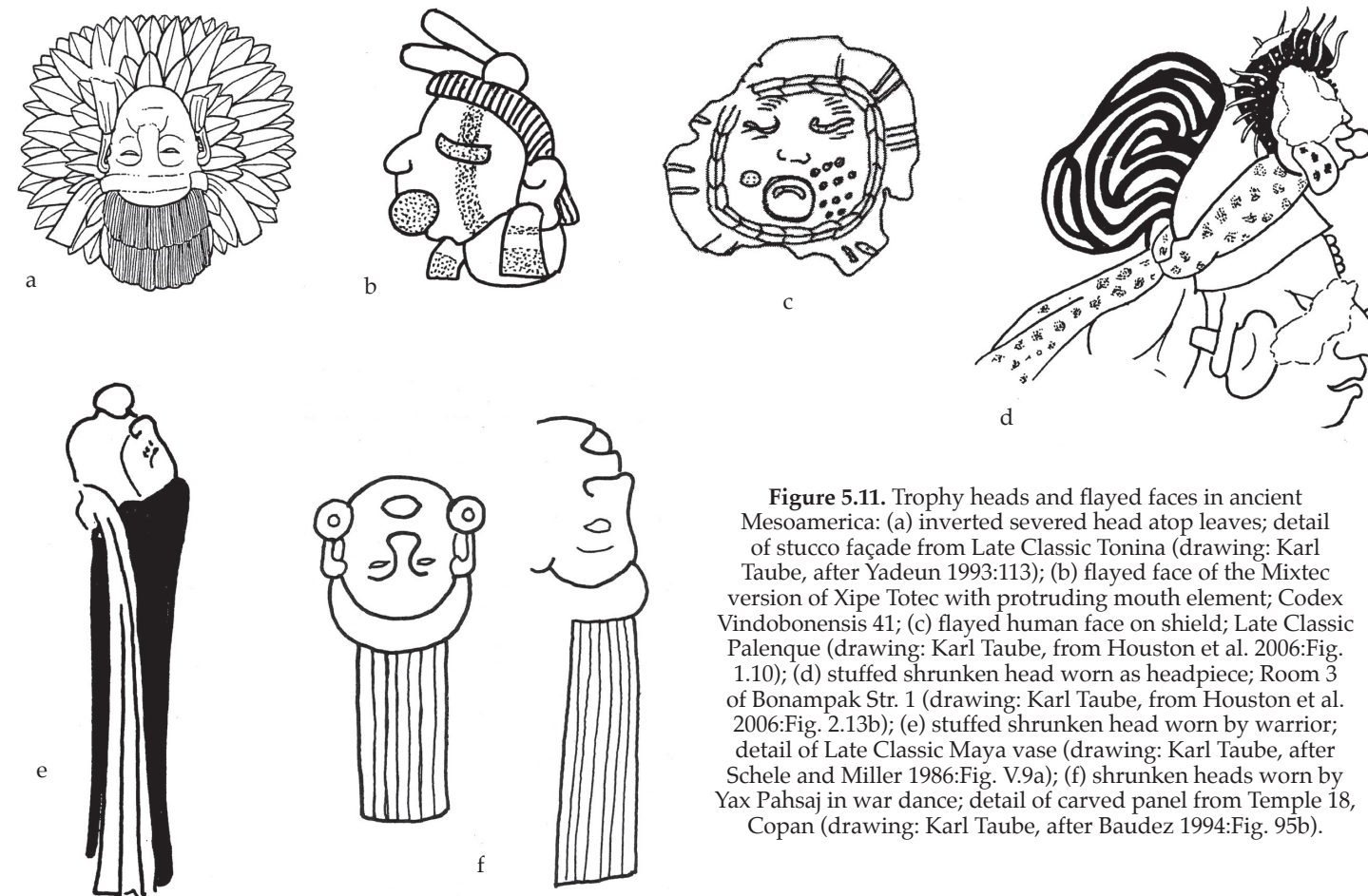
present on the lower Temple, especially its western façade. This wall features a massive head of the JGU with the burning jaguar ear and facial cruller (Figure 5.10). In addition, the headband is very similar to the being on Tikal Stela 31 that combines the JGU and GI (Figure 5.7b). Just to the south, there is an abstract inverted human head with earspools and a large pendant element next to the doorway; another was probably on the southern side of the doorway as well. These heads probably pertain to death and human sacrifice; similar pendant bands appear on the stucco balustrade sculptures from Tonina, in this case with jaguar masks having the trefoil blood motif in their jawless mouths (Figure 5.8c). The Temple heads likely refer to flayed human faces as war trophies. At Late Classic Palenque, flayed faces often appear on shields as a reference to warfare—the wide oval cut around the mouth does resemble the inverted El Diablo faces (Figures 5.9, 5.10, and 5.11c). The Classic Maya flayed faces recall Xipe Totec of highland Mexico, a deity who wears a flayed human skin over his torso and face. For the Late

Postclassic Mixtec of Oaxaca, Xipe Totec can appear as a head with white material protruding much like a tongue from his mouth (Figure 5.11b). However, aside from these Mixtec severed heads, highland Mexican Xipe figures never display this curious attribute.

With their white oral elements, the Mixtec heads probably represent flayed human faces wrapped over some sort of stuffing, quite probably unspun or woven cotton. In other words, they would be much like the well-known “shrunk heads” of the Jívaro of Ecuador, the one difference being that the Mixtec examples have the center core of cotton. Although not explicitly the flayed deity, very similar examples of trophy heads are common in Classic Maya iconography, often worn by armed men as tokens of victory, including Yax Pabsaj from Temple 18 at Copan (Figure 5.11d–f). Typically, the head hangs inverted with long locks of hair, recalling the long pendant elements below the heads appearing on the west and north sides of the Temple. However, these hanging devices may also be paper, which is related to death and sacrifice,

and also appears on the aforementioned bloody jaguar balustrades at Tonina (Figure 5.8c). If the inverted heads denote war trophies, their prominent placement at the western entrance to the Temple suggests a place of human sacrifice, as, probably, in the building at Tonina. This is certainly the case for the skeletal Tlaloc sculpture from Temple 16 at Copan (Figure 5.8a). Not only is it devouring blood, but it forms part of a macabre façade of massive human skulls surrounding the Tlaloc mask (Taube 2004a). This convention of marking structures as places of sacrifice can be traced to as early as the third century AD at Tikal, where the principal stairway of the North Acropolis had massive stucco sculptures of inverted humans severed in half, much like the Hauberg Stela (Figure 5.8b; see Coe 1990:4:Fig. 164, 5:Fig. 316). As with the contact period Aztec, human sacrifice was almost certainly performed on temple stairways by the Classic Maya.

For the north façade example (Figure 5.9), the inverted head appears atop crossed diagonal poles, quite like trophy heads at Tonina which appear on a



**Figure 5.11.** Trophy heads and flayed faces in ancient Mesoamerica: (a) inverted severed head atop leaves; detail of stucco façade from Late Classic Tonina (drawing: Karl Taube, after Yadeun 1993:113); (b) flayed face of the Mixtec version of Xipe Totec with protruding mouth element; Codex Vindobonensis 41; (c) flayed human face on shield; Late Classic Palenque (drawing: Karl Taube, from Houston et al. 2006:Fig. 1.10); (d) stuffed shrunken head worn as headpiece; Room 3 of Bonampak Str. 1 (drawing: Karl Taube, from Houston et al. 2006:Fig. 2.13b); (e) stuffed shrunken head worn by warrior; detail of Late Classic Maya vase (drawing: Karl Taube, after Schele and Miller 1986:Fig. V.9a); (f) shrunken heads worn by Yax Pabsaj in war dance; detail of carved panel from Temple 18, Copan (drawing: Karl Taube, after Baudez 1994:Fig. 95b).

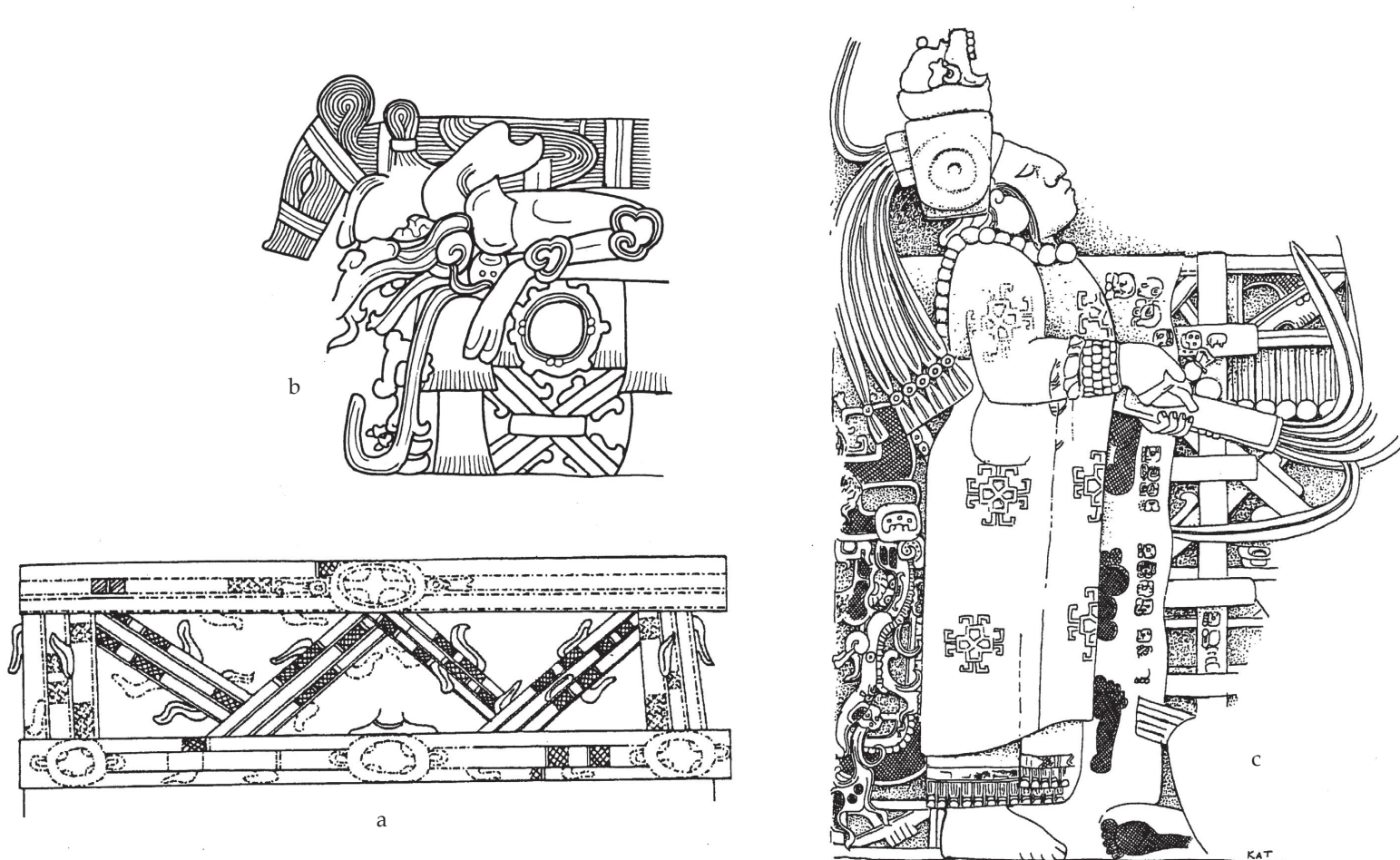
similar scaffold frieze (Figure 5.11a; see Yadeun 1993:108–115). A more intact portion of the diagonal scaffolding also appears on the northern portion of the western doorway adjacent to the inverted head (Figure 5.10), suggesting that parts of the lower portion of the Temple may have been “wrapped” with the motif of heads atop scaffolding. For this more intact portion, the scaffolding also has horizontal poles as well, suggesting a solidly constructed lattice. For both the west and north façades, the scaffold poles have a central line segmented by horizontal bands, along with pairs of curling elements at the sides. This rare motif is also found on the famed “niche stelae” at Piedras Negras first identified by Tatiana Proskouriakoff as monuments associated with royal accession (Figure 5.12b–d). As noted by Taube (1988), the niche stelae portray scaffolds for human sacrifice, with the “niche” simply being the vertical poles of the structure. The lower diagonal

poles of these scaffolds have the same curling elements on the sides of the poles, indicating the presence of vegetal growth.

The segmented pole motif with the outwardly curving forms on the sides also appears in the inner shrine as well as flanking *alfarda* panels of the Temple of the Foliated Cross at Palenque, sculptures thematically devoted to both maize and royal accession (David Stuart, personal communication, 2013; Stuart 2006:135–149; see Robertson 1991:Pls. 165–167). The *alfardas* and sides of the shrine roof are ornamented with the very same poles and vegetal growth found on the Temple, but also the *k'an* sign, a cross denoting concepts of yellow and preciousness (Figure 5.12a). In addition, David Stuart (2006:135) notes that the name of the shrine or sanctuary refers to the same plant as shoots rising from a *k'an* cross. For Stuart, the vegetal elements represented a form of grass. More specifically, a case can be made

here that this particular grass was bamboo, a plant fully consistent with the segmented poles and side shoots seen on the west and north sides of the Temple.

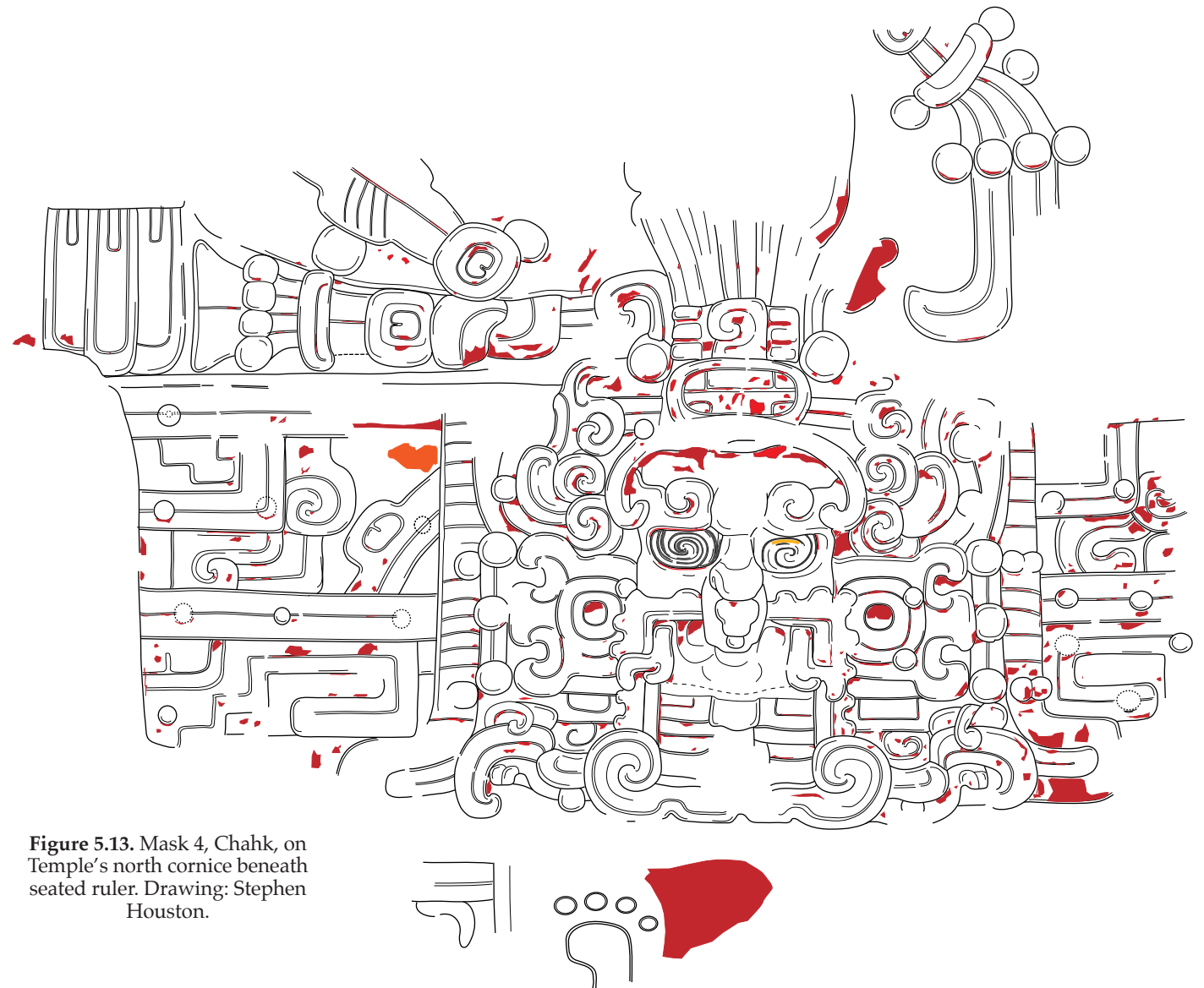
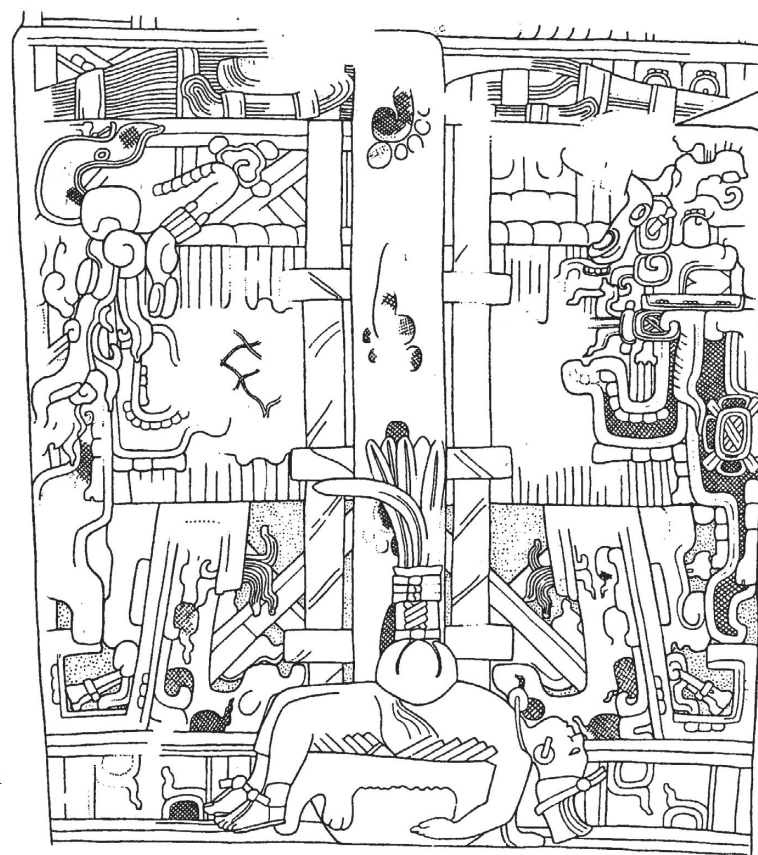
Asia is not the only area with bamboo, as there are many native species in the Maya region (Breedlove and Laughlin 2000:150–151, Pl. 10). Terms vary in Mayan languages: Tzotzil, *bix* (*Olmeca* sp., *Oatea* sp.), *ne kotom* (*Chusquea* sp.), *otot* or *taro* (*Bambusa* sp.; Breedlove and Laughlin 2000:150–151); Ch'orti', *har* (genus unknown; Wisdom 1950); and Ch'ol, *chejp* (genus unknown; Aulie and de Aulie 1998:171). Conceivably, the *har* in Ch'orti', descending from *hal*—probably a cognate of Ch'ol *jalal*, a flute made from reeds—links in some manner to the glyphic description of the Temple of the Foliated Cross. That building was labeled in part by means of a sign that sometimes ends, as in Tomb 6 at Río Azul, with a subfixed *la* syllable



**Figure 5.12.** Portrayals of bamboo scaffolding in Late Classic Maya art: (a) bamboo scaffolding with *k'an* crosses appearing on roof of interior shrine in the Temple of the Cross, Palenque (drawing by and courtesy of David Stuart, from Stuart 2006:135); (b) accession scaffold with diagonal bamboo poles; Piedras Negras Stela 33 (drawing: Karl Taube [1988:Fig. 12.14]); (c) base of accession scaffold with diagonal bamboo poles; Piedras Negras Stela 14 (drawing: Karl Taube [1988:Fig. 12.18]); (d) accession scaffold platform with diagonal bamboo poles near base; Piedras Negras Stela 11 (detail of a drawing by and courtesy of David Stuart [Stuart and Graham 2003:Fig. 9:57]).

(cf. Adams 1999:Fig. 3-17, upper left glyph, east wall; Houston 1996:135, Fig. 3). The poles appearing on the accession scaffolds at Piedras Negras are likely to be bamboo, which also relates to the far earlier scaffold scenes from the Late Preclassic murals from San Bartolo, Guatemala (Taube et al. 2010:Fig. 39). For the scaffold appearing at the north end of the San Bartolo West Wall murals, the platform is marked with *k'an* crosses, which also appear with the bamboo poles on the *alfardas* and roof of the shrine of the Temple of the Foliated Cross at Palenque (Figure 5.12a). Whether the *k'an* crosses refer to yellow bamboo or the concept of preciousness remains obscure.

In the entire El Diablo stucco program, a very important detail is the vertical strip below the seated ruler and Chahk mask on the Temple's north cornice



**Figure 5.13.** Mask 4, Chahk, on Temple's north cornice beneath seated ruler. Drawing: Stephen Houston.

(Figure 5.13). It features a human footprint with a small portion of the bamboo scaffolding just to the east. Human footprints are extremely rare in Maya iconography, with the most obvious examples being on the vertical strips on the ladders of the bamboo scaffolds at Piedras Negras (Taube 1988:Figs. 12.15, 12.18). Remarkably enough, this motif also appears in one of the Late Preclassic scaffold scenes on the West Wall mural at San Bartolo, where a human footprint is depicted atop a strip of cloth or paper hanging from the center of the platform (Taube et al. 2010:Fig. 39). The occurrence of the bamboo scaffold motif on the Temple's west and north sides suggests that the entire building may have been wrapped with this element, marking it as a structure devoted to the royal accession of a founding king

and queen or to the first major Period Ending after an accession. Such bamboo framework was common at all Classic Maya sites, referring to the basic elements from which Maya monuments and structures were created—one can imagine such light but sturdy scaffolding inserted into visible holes associated with buildings at Tikal (Coe 1990:5:Figs. 253a, c)—and to elemental concepts of human construction, founding, temporal shifts, sacred space, and royal accession.

### Conclusion

The stucco program on the Temple of the Night Sun is an ambitious compendium of themes, executed by stucco craftsmen of high skill. The focal imagery concerns aspects of the sun and a celestial companion, Chahk, with

evidence that both beings feasted on blood. Other clues, only partly revealed by excavation, point to something larger than an exposition of diurnal patterns. The trophy heads and shields express the martial underpinnings of rulership, while the presence of possible parents roots kings in legitimate bloodlines. Transition, too: the scaffolding suggests that the Temple of the Night Sun celebrates a moment of change, implied by the royal body in Burial 9, leading logically to other rulers of just lineage. Tombs can also serve the living, and the Temple may well have been, for later generations, a place of accession and calendrical ceremonies. It facilitated contact with founders, reminding the people of El Zotz that dynasties can begin but must, by continued ritual, strive to endure.



Figure 5.14. Mask 1, on the eastern cornice of the Temple of the Night Sun. Image: Katie Simon, CAST.

Figure 5.15. Mask 2, on the eastern cornice of the Temple.  
Image: Katie Simon, CAST.







Figure 5.16. Mask 3, on the northeast corner of the Temple. Image: Katie Simon, CAST.



Figure 5.17. Mask 4, on the northern cornice of the Temple. Image: Katie Simon, CAST.



Figure 5.18. Mask 5, on the northern cornice of the Temple. Image: Katie Simon, CAST.



Figure 5.19. Mask 7, on the western cornice of the Temple. Image: Katie Simon, CAST.



Figure 5.20. Mask 8, on the western cornice of the Temple. Image: Katie Simon, CAST.



Figure 5.21. Mask 12, on the southern cornice of the Temple. Image: Katie Simon, CAST.

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