

Chapter 6 Death Comes to the King

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Experts acknowledge that death is a process, not an event. In some cases, it begins with discomfort and disorientation, a somnolent state at times jagged with pain (Nuland 1993). Then comes clinical death. From a potentially reversible condition, it passes to a biological demise from which there is no return. Decay sets in. Under harsh circumstances, after rotting and reduction to bone, the corpse becomes nothing at all, at most a faint stain in the soil. Other than the problem of embalming or preparing the body in its tropical clime, however, such physical facts of death are less relevant to Burial 9 than the sustained actions or ritual pauses reflected in the tomb.

Burial 9 provides strong evidence of mortuary preparation and its sequelae. The motivation, a royal death, could not have been surprising for an older, arthritic male, even if the passing was sudden. His successors soon commissioned an open cavity to receive the body. Defined by plastered walls, this chamber lay within an elevated platform. In front, at waist height, stood a theomorphic altar. Still thick with waxy residue, its top served as a place for burning incense and making sacrifices. How long it took to complete these offerings is unknown. Perhaps burial required an auspicious day set by calendrical or celestial conditions. Some lag could also have been practical. Time was needed to assemble goods or to invite distant guests; other delays arose from the grim tasks of finding infants and small children to accompany the deceased or hacking at adult slaves or war captives for their fingers, toes, and teeth. These body parts found their way into caches placed before and after the interment. Meanwhile, the body was slathered with red paint, perhaps padded with textiles or some other perishable material. Presumably, along with the removal of abdominal organs, this retarded putrefaction or diminished odor, although there were likely to have been more esoteric reasons for this bundling and application of viscous specular hematite and sprinkling of powdered cinnabar. The tomb was

then filled and sealed. Masons covered the altar and crypt with a low, step-up platform. The final steps at this stage, doubtless planned from the start, were the far bolder constructions of the Temple of the Night Sun. Eventually the smaller, simpler Shrine rose above the tomb itself. As proposed in Chapter 5, the Temple and the Shrine were at once mortuary, calendrical, and accession-related.

Despite the effort that went into its construction and elaboration, however, the Temple soon proved unstable. Its over-heavy stucco, poorly attached to masonry, cracked and slid off. It seems probable that successors at El Diablo had insufficient access to a talented sculptor capable of repairing the damage. A raised floor level, bringing the Temple to the level of the main El Diablo plaza, posed new problems of drainage. This was only slightly deterred by thin berms and narrowed doorways to keep water out. The first phase of the Temple was also off-kilter, prompting efforts—awkward ones—to buttress its shifting bulk. Such improvisations were insufficient, and, after an episode of intense burning, builders encased the whole within the tidier phases of Strs. F8-1-2nd and F8-1-1st. Most likely, this episode of partial destruction was a ritual necessity, done by locals, consistent with the studied mutilation of the noses, mouths, and diadems of the Temple's cornice stuccoes, though it might have come from an attack on such a prominent building and dynastic shrine. At this later stage, Str. F8-1 was no longer an assemblage of distinct shrines and multiple entrances and exits, but a single chamber with what appears to have been simpler iconography. The ambitious programs of the Temple of the Night Sun seem not to have been replicable. Later architects may have been no longer willing to invest heavily in its ornament or, perhaps, that outlay went into frontal masks that remain only as ruined outsets to either side of the structure's front stairway. Scattered visitors came at a later date, but the construction and use of the pyramid must have been relatively brief—perhaps a

century, but probably less than that. The El Diablo sector itself seems to have been in the middle of a building spurt, accompanied by ritual interments of buildings, when all such activity suddenly ceased (Román Ramírez 2011). The reasons for this are obscure, yet they may have included a severe blow to the ruling family or a marked translation of royal activity to the lower landscape of El Zotz, where new tombs and mortuary pyramids were constructed during the final years of the Early Classic period.

That the occupant of the tomb was a ruler is highly probable. The architectural investments described in Chapter 2 and the mortuary furniture reported in Chapter 3 leave little doubt of his singular importance. What continues to frustrate is the absence of glyphic evidence for the ruler's identity. Tiny glyphs on the back of his hematite mirror tantalize, but reveal almost nothing other than a probable tag of possession. An early lord of El Zotz is mentioned in Stela 2 of Bejucal, position B6, ca. AD 381—the name is much like those of later kings, **CHAK-FISH-DOG** [otter?]-**AHK**—and the dates are congruent with the approximate age of the tomb (Figure 6.2).

The presence of a stylized “*ojo de reptil*” on one ceramic object (see Chapter 3) offers compelling evidence that the date of Burial 9 occurred close to or just after the so-called Teotihuacan “*entrada*” of January 15, AD 378 (Martin and Grube 2008[2000]:29-31). Karl Taube (personal communication, 2014) has also observed that the interments of children and infants in ceramic vessels strongly recall a practice known at Teotihuacan (e.g., Sempowski and Spence 1994:248-249). What can be said is this: the tomb dates to the final quarter of the fourth century AD, and it correlates roughly with momentous changes in the central Maya Lowlands. There is no earlier ruler attested with any firmness in the glyphic record. Most likely, but not certainly, the tomb held a dynastic founder. The Temple of the Night Sun was clearly of intense interest to the royal family for several generations, perhaps mentioned as far away as Tikal, on Tikal Stela 31

Figure 6.1. Mask 2 from Burial 9 ruler's chest. Photo: Tessa de Alarcon.

(glyph H5). There, in what appears to be a toponymic statement, a location linked to the Jaguar God of the Underworld is mentioned at approximately the same time as the active period of the Temple (Figure 6.3). That it refers to El Diablo, drenched with such imagery and likely visible from Tikal, seems a strong possibility. In any case, the overall pattern of El Zotz accorded with solar alignments that centered on the Temple (see Chapter 1), though the chronology of the Early Classic at El Zotz is too unclear to posit an exact, year-by-year staging of these developments.

The Diablo tomb can be understood by sequence, as above. But, in final analysis, it represents varied propositions about kingship and a normative summation of royal roles:

The Great Sacrificer. An attribute of rulers is their authority and ability to enforce the ultimate sanction, that of taking human life for reasons perceived to be legitimate. The bodies of infants, small and vulnerable, along with parts of adults, went into the tomb and deposits nearby. The right hand of the principal occupant likely held an obsidian object that sawed and mangled bone (see Appendices I and II).

The Great Consumer. The tomb presents ample evidence of large appetites, with bowls for tamales, birds, and an *olla* for an *atole*-like liquid steeped with lime powder. As with many such offerings and in depictions of them, the intent seems less to highlight feasting and the generous sharing of food and drink, than to center on unilateral consumption by the ruler. In this instance, the dining came after death, by magical means. The jade bead in his mouth, the highest quality stone in the crypt, may have been inserted with maize dough, by analogy with practices documented in the early Colonial period (see Chapters 2 and 3).

The Assembler of Wealth. The jade celts and chest or belt ornaments (Figure 6.1), the shaped, indented balls of specular hematite, the jade jewels with now-fragmentary pearls, *Spondylus* beads threaded into a many-stranded necklace, bundled cloth, and lavishly adorned bowls and lids underscore the sheer, nonpareil richness of kings, on an order vastly

disproportionate to most other people in their kingdoms. The bundles of cloth and balls of hematite were likely placed in the tomb in the same way that they would have been packaged for long-distance trade, reflecting the ruler's place at the pinnacle of the economic landscape.

The Exemplary Dancer. Mortuary furniture in the tomb is not only about abundance or visual effects, but also concerns sound and performance. The jade celts and *Conus* shells with tinklers of dog teeth—even the large *Spondylus* shells had small beads to strike their surface—correspond to the dress worn by royal dancers in images of the Classic period.

In short, the tomb contained someone who kills, consumes, accumulates, and performs, a checklist of behaviors thought suitable for those claiming kingship. Yet, from a broader perspective, the link is to a far grander statement: that the ruler participated in cosmic cycles. Various bowls in the tomb attest to celestial beings of the sun on cosmic journeys. Monkeys bellow as harbingers of the dawn, while Old Gods blend into turtles that float as islands in ancient seas. In the Temple of the Night Sun, the overall imagery reinforces a bond between rulers and resurgent, recycling suns, with perhaps even a hint of seasonality in the positioning of the deity masks. Its solar beings might have been related, in as-yet-undiscerned ways, to seasonal horizon points or to some segmentation of the diurnal cycle. The message is hopeful and potent. Like the sun, the most dominant feature of the daytime sky, rulers will return from their nighttime travel over jeweled heavens. They might crave, at least symbolically, the blood desired by the Sun God, as smeared around the mouths of at least three masks on the Temple cornice (see Chapter 5). At each dawn, each setting of the sun, the Temple would blaze with red color, repeating its performance and reinforcing its message every morning, each late afternoon.

Although far distant in time and place, there are telling parallels in the Postclassic Mixtec sources of Oaxaca, Mexico, and in cultural regions nearby,

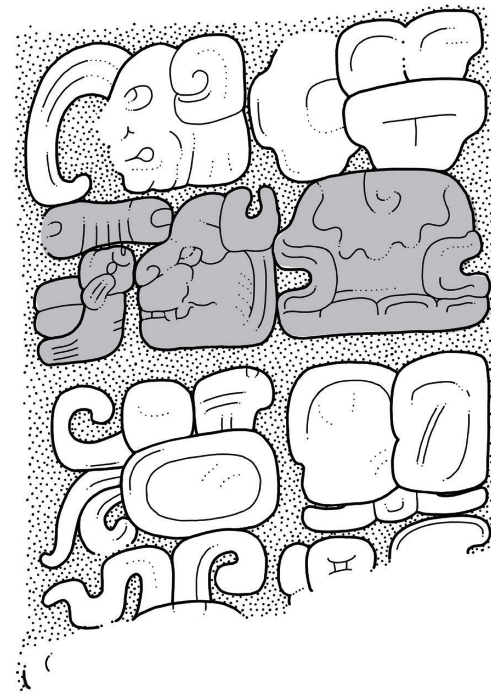


Figure 6.2. Bejucal Stela 2 passage (glyphs B6-B7), with name highlighted. Drawing: Stephen Houston.



Figure 6.3. Tikal Stela 31 (G5-G6). Drawing: Stephen Houston.

some Nahuatl-speaking, others extending into the highlands of Guatemala (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2013; Díaz Balsera 2008; Jansen 1997). In these areas, the birth of new dynasties fused with images of nascent suns, times of darkness now lit by lambent fire. Some such suns levitated from bloody temples. On page 23 of the Codex Vienna, for example, solar disks rise with bloody trails from a red-streaked smoking building (Figure 6.4; Anders et al. 1992:148; Boone 2000:90, 94; Furst 1978:216, 219-220). One disk even holds the day sign 1 Flower, the same name,



Figure 6.4. Solar disks from the Codex Vienna, p. 23; Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna. Photo: ADEVA, Graz.

perhaps not a fluke, used by “1 Ajaw [Flower],” one of the Hero Twins of the Classic Maya and the embodiment of lordship. The other disk in the Vienna contains the Mixtec Sun God. The Vienna further emphasizes the role of creator couples, a pattern recalling the pair featured on the roofcomb of the Temple of the Night Sun (Boone 2000:91-92, Fig. 47).

On page 21 of the Codex Nuttall, another Mixtec source, the appearance of new dynasties correlates,



Figure 6.5. Emergent solar disks from the Codex Nuttall, p. 21; British Museum. Photo: Trustees for the British Museum, ET Am1902, 0308.1, Add. Mss. 39671.

too, with the emergence of solar disks above streaming bands (Figure 6.5; Boone 2000:99; Hamman 2002:Fig. 4; Pohl 2005:114). Marked by stars, a celestial enclosure or place of emergence hovers directly above. Such themes play out equally in the Arroyo Group at Mitla, Oaxaca, whose Postclassic paintings commemorate the foundation of “leading kingdoms” (Pohl 2005:112). The announcement is that “solar cycling...interconnect[s]...with notions of place and production, self and community” (Hamman 2002:Note 5; see also Hanks 1990:353-355; Watanabe 1992:34-42). Earlier still, the birth of the sun was tethered to Teotihuacan, where primordial sacrifice led to the orb's ascent from the Pyramid of the Sun (Sahagún 1950-1982:Book 7:3-9). Although that myth surely dates to much later than the urban florescence of Teotihuacan, it still raises the question of whether the “*entrada*” of AD 378 reinforced solar concepts of kingship at El Diablo and elsewhere.

In such a light, by audacious claim, the tomb and attendant iconography in Str. F8-1 celebrate the origin of one dynasty in particular, though couched in the broadest possible frame. The Temple and tomb propose a sweeping merger of human and divine attributes. An emergent sun, setting time and possibly the seasons in motion, coincides with a new-fledged dynasty. It sweeps away a dark, pre-dawn past, as noted elsewhere in Mesoamerica (Hamman 2002:356-357), to initiate later reigns in the fullness of day. The story is not unique to El Zotz. When the Copan dynasty resurges after the death of its king in conflict, the Hieroglyphic Stairway of that site calls it a “dawn,” *pas*, the arrival of a new sun, possibly a new royal line (David Stuart, personal communication, 2006).

At El Diablo, high seat of the El Zotz sovereigns, the theme of continued calendrical celebrations and the accessions yet to come show that patterns had been set. The Temple could serve later rulers as a dynastic memorial and as the locus for future enthronements. The building itself, resting on the body of a deceased lord, seemed even to resemble a perishable scaffold for accession or the first Period Ending of a reign. Affixed with emblems of war, it showed the seated ruler looking towards twilight; seen from the front, where celebrants might gather, it received the halo of each new day. Death had come to the king, but kingship, like the sun, blazed on and on.

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