THE TREE OF LIFE
FROM EDEN TO ETERNITY

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The Maya believed that carved stone monuments, painted walls, and woven textiles were far more than mere decoration. They were living objects, each bearing a soul. Maya art, therefore, did not mimic reality; it was a sacred reality in itself, a kind of frozen ceremonial act created and given life by the artist in much the same way that the gods themselves created the world. The Maya conceived of their gods as artists. A beautiful incised bone from the royal tomb of Jasaw Chan K'awil I at Tikal (see fig. 16) depicts a delicate hand reaching out from the open maw of a vision serpent (symbolic of the portal leading to the otherworld, where sacred ancestors and gods live). The hand is holding a paintbrush, suggesting that sacred beings paint the world into existence, just as mortal artists paint or sculpt their art. The painted or carved images, with their accompanying hieroglyphic texts, perpetually carry out their part as if they were actually the thing they represent. Most often these are deities, rulers, or members of the nobility engaged in life-renewing rituals aimed at rebirthing the world.
or some aspect of its power. One of the principal symbols for this life-renewing power is the World Tree, conceived by the Maya as the first living thing to emerge from the waters of the primordial sea at the dawn of creation.

**The World Tree at Palenque, Mexico**

A spectacular example of this kind of “ensouled” art from the Classic Maya world is found on the sarcophagus and surrounding tomb chamber of another powerful Classic Maya king, K'ínich Janaab' Pakal I of Palenque (a major site in Chiapas, Mexico), who lived from AD 603 to 683. Palenque was a major city, one of the largest in the Maya world. A long hieroglyphic text from the site claims that its dynasty of kings extends back as far as 967 BC with the accession of a king named U K'ix Chan. There is no archaeological evidence that Palenque’s history dated back nearly that far into the past. Its first known historic king was likely K'uk' B'alam I, who reigned from AD 431 to 435. Nevertheless, the very fact that Palenque’s rulers claimed descent from a powerful ruler or deity from the distant past attests their confidence in the sanctity of the dynasty’s royal bloodline. The year 967 BC would fall well within Olmec times, the Olmec being the first great culture in Mesoamerica to have practiced a form of divine kingship. It is likely that the kings of Palenque saw themselves as the rightful heirs of Olmec power, which by the Classic Period (AD 250–900) had attained mythic status as the foundation of royal legitimacy. A number of Olmec jade objects have been found with the portraits or inscriptions of later Maya rulers. These were likely worn by the Maya as a token of their power long after the Olmec dynasties had died out in the fourth century BC. As late as AD 794, the last ruler of a site called Piedras Negras erected a massive stone monument, Stela 12, commemorating a short-lived victory over the nearby site of Pomona. The king, whose name is thus far unknown, is shown seated above a group of captives and wearing an Olmec jade deity around his neck. Even near the end of the Classic Period, the Maya continued to revere their Olmec predecessors as the rightful heirs of Olmec king had died.

The name *Palenque* is derived from hieroglyphic inscription: B’aakal (Bone), perhaps because of the Maya world of the sun. Skull and bone in fig. 17). Yet this is not to say that the Maya art and theology, both life. In most Mayan language: “skull” because it is the dry a living maize plant. The sowing and its subsequent germination comprises resurrection. Thus Palenque also occupies sacred ground.

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Fig. 17. Stucco skull from Temple XII, Palenque, southern Mexico.

t heir Olmek predecessors nearly twelve hundred years after the last Olmek king had died.

The name Palenque is derived from Spanish, but we now know from hieroglyphic inscriptions at the site that its ancient name was B'aakal (Bone), perhaps because it is situated at the extreme western periphery of the Maya world, a direction associated with the death of the sun. Skull and bone imagery are fairly common at the site (see fig. 17). Yet this is not to say that bones are associated only with death. In Maya art and theology, bones also represent seeds of potential new life. In most Mayan languages a grain of maize is also called “bone” or “skull” because it is the dry and seemingly dead remnant of the once-living maize plant. The sowing of this seed is associated with burial, and its subsequent germination and sprouting is considered a type of resurrection. Thus Palenque not only is situated in a place of death but also occupies sacred ground where life is potentially reborn.

K'inich Janab' Pakal became king at the young age of twelve in AD 615. He led a remarkably long life for a Maya ruler—ultimately
dying at eighty years old on the undoubtedly hot tropical day of 
August 31, 683. Pakal’s building of his own funerary pyramid-temple 
was somewhat unique because this was a task usually carried out by 
the king’s son. Today it is known as the Temple of Inscriptions (see
fig. 18), the name referring to the long hieroglyphic text within its 
sanctuary, one of the longest known from the Maya world. The three 
panels of this text give a detailed dynastic history of Pakal’s predeces-
sors, establishing Pakal’s right to rule and asserting his divine royal 
lineage (see fig. 19). The Temple of Inscriptions is one of the largest 
buildings at the site, located immediately adjacent to the massive pal-
ace complex. The elaborate nature of the tomb and the complexity 
of its theologic message likely reflect the king’s own heartfelt desire 
for regeneration after death—a task perhaps best done himself rather 
than left to one of his sons.

Although the site of Palenque has been known by non-Maya since 
at least the 1700s, it was not until after World War II that the inner 
tomb chamber was discovered by Mexican archaeologist Alberto 
Ruz Lhuillier. In 1949 he noticed that the rear wall of the temple’s 
upper sanctuary extended below the flagstones, somewhat unusual for 
Maya construction. In addition carved into one of the flagsto 
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carved into one of the flagstones. His workmen joked that perhaps
they were finger holes for a trapdoor—unlikely for a slab of limestone
weighing several hundred pounds. Nonetheless, the stone intrigued
him, and he succeeded in lifting it, revealing the upper tiers of a stair-
way that led deep into the pyramid’s interior. After four seasons of
digging out the tons of rubble that the ancient Maya had placed to seal
the passage, Ruz and his workmen were able to clear an upper flight
of forty-five steps (see fig. 20), as well as another flight of twenty-one
steps that doubled back toward the center of the pyramid’s ground-
level base. The actual crypt at the base of the stairway was opened on
June 13, 1952. The archaeologists discovered an elaborate tomb cham-
ber whose walls were adorned by stuccoed images of Pakal’s ancestors
dressed in full royal regalia. The crypt is dominated by a massive sar-
cophagus covered by a fifteen-ton slab of intricately carved limestone
(see fig. 21). This monument is so well preserved that one can still see
the slight incidental scratches and tool marks of its carvers. In some
ways it is as if it had been carved only the day before. The sculptors of
Palenque were masters, among the finest anywhere in the Maya world,
and the sarcophagus lid of Pakal is a masterwork justly ranked as one of the most beautiful Maya carvings to have survived from antiquity. It is also one of the most theologically rich in its depiction of the cycle of royal death and rebirth, particularly as it is expressed through the metaphor of the World Tree that occupies much of the lid’s surface.

The lid itself is oriented to the four cardinal directions, the east being marked with the four-leaf clover-shaped glyph for k’ìn (sun, day) in the center of the right-hand edge, and west marked with the crescent-shaped moon glyph in the same position on the left. In Maya theology the direction south is linked with the entrance into the underworld, and, indeed, the open jaws of the underworld are seen at the south-oriented base of the lid. The north is associated with the sky and rebirth, and the tree grows upward in this direction on the panel with a sacred bird nestled in its upper branch. Thus the reclined figure of the king and the cross-shaped tree above him occupy the center position, the place where the four cardinal directions meet.

The central panel of the sarcophagus lid is dominated by the World Tree itself, similar to examples found in the sanctuary tablets of the nearby Temple of the Cross and the Temple of the Foliated Cross, which were constructed soon after Pakal’s death by his son K’inich Kan B’alam II. The tree on the sarcophagus lid is no ordinary tree. It is marked with the profile head of God C, seen on the lower left corner of the trunk, a symbol that the Maya use to identify objects that are profoundly sacred. At first glance the tree looks like a cross, leading early Spanish priests who saw similar trees in the monumental art at the site to conclude that they were Christian crosses. But the Maya were careful to identify the motif as a tree. The trunk and each of the three branches are marked with attached beads, the glyphic shining mirror signs, the triplicating that the tree shines with surface of highly polished jade mirrors were used for at least Mesoamerica as a means of passage to the world branches of the tree are jeweled that curl back on themselves. The flower of the ceiba tree, whose in a similar manner.
sterwork justly ranked as one of the finest examples of Maya iconography that have survived from antiquity. It is through its depiction of the cycle of life and death as it is expressed through the placement of the lid's surface.

The cardinal directions, the east and west marked with the shape of the human head, and north and south marked with the shape of the face on the left. In Maya cosmology, the entrance into the underworld is associated with the sky in this direction on the panel. Thus the reclined figure above him occupy the central directions meet.

The World Tree and Maya Theology

Cross, which were constructed soon after Pakal’s death by his son K’inich Kan B’alam II. The tree on the sarcophagus lid is no ordinary tree. It is marked with the profile head of God C, seen on the lower left corner of the trunk, a symbol that the Maya use to identify objects that are profoundly sacred. At first glance the tree looks like a cross, leading early Spanish priests who saw similar trees in the monumental art at the site to conclude that they were Christian crosses. But the Maya were careful to identify the motif as a tree. The trunk and each of the three branches are marked with curving double lines with two attached beads, the glyphic sign for te (tree); they are also marked with shining mirror signs, the triple-lined motif with cross-hatchings, indicating that the tree shines with reflective light, analogous to the bright surface of highly polished jade, obsidian, or hematite mirrors. Such mirrors were used for at least three thousand years in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica as a means of prophecy and divination. In Maya art such signs distinguish objects and deities as divine, precious, or the means of passage to the world of the sacred. At the ends of each of the branches of the tree are jeweled serpent heads with squared snouts that curl back on themselves. These represent sacred flowers, likely the flower of the ceiba tree, whose stamens and pollen cores double back in a similar manner.
In Mesoamerican theology the World Tree grew at the locus of creation, all things flowing out from that spot toward the four directions. The tree thus forms part of what Mircea Eliade refers to as the "symbolism of the center." The center is, first and foremost, the point of absolute beginning, where the latent energies of the sacred world first came into being. This source of all creation was often depicted by the Maya as a tree or maize plant, forming a vertical axis, or axis mundi, that stands at the center of the cosmos and passes through each of the three major layers of existence—underworld, terrestrial plane, and sky. As the symbolic expression of this axis mundi, the World Tree at once connected and supported heaven and earth while firmly fixed in the world below. In addition to serving as the vertical pivot point of the cosmos, the World Tree also oriented the horizontal plane of the world by extending its branches outward toward the four cardinal directions. In ancient Maya inscriptions the human soul was sometimes called the sak nik' nal (white-flower-thing), referring to the white flowers of the ceiba tree. The implication is that the soul first came into being as a sacred flower on the branches of the World Tree, thence to be clothed with flesh at birth.


The ceiba is an ideal symbol for this conception of the World Tree. It is one of the tallest of tree indigenous to southern Mesoamerica (see fig. 22). In areas dense tropical rain forest, such as Chiapas (where Palenque is located), or the Petén region northeastern Guatemala, the ceiba soars to the very top of the jungle canopy, attaining heights of 175 feet or more. The trunk is remarkably straight, and its branches extend at nearly right angles high above the ground reminiscient of the cross-shape trees seen in the art of Palenque (see fig. 23, also pl. 5).

The ceiba tree is still revered and its principal manifestations of the underworld, while ancestors refer to their community the navel of the sky, navel of the trees or other sacred objects to the rest of the world. The Maya call it the yu'ikik'ik' in the preeminent tree." The souls of the underworld, while ancestors the living on special occasions: The presence of the ceiba concept throughout the Maya world benevolent dead entered a pla...
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The ceiba tree is still revered by the modern Maya as one of the principal manifestations of the World Tree. Many towns and villages have a carefully tended ceiba tree growing in their main plazas. This tree marks their homeland as the center place of the world. The Maya often refer to their communities as ri u muxux kaj, u muxux ulew (the navel of the sky, navel of the earth) because of the presence of such trees or other sacred objects that center their community in relation to the rest of the world. The Maya name for the tree reflects the importance it holds. The K'iche' Maya of the highlands call it räx che', while the Yucatek Maya call it the yax che'. Both mean “first, green, new, or preeminent tree.” The souls of the dead are said to follow its roots into the underworld, while ancestors may return in the same way to visit the living on special occasions.

The presence of the ceiba in the underworld is a very ancient concept throughout the Maya world. In the sixteenth century, Father Diego de Landa, first bishop of Yucatán, recorded that the souls of the benevolent dead entered a place dominated by this tree:

The delights which they said they were to obtain, if they were good, were to go to a delightful place, where nothing would give them pain and where they would have an abundance of foods and drinks of great sweetness, and a tree which they call there *yaxche*, very cool and giving great shade, which is the ceiba, under the branches and the shadow of which they would rest and forever cease from labor.⁴

Such World Trees appear in the mythic traditions of a number of world cultures, including the various indigenous nations of North America. The shaman-chief Black Elk of the Oglala Sioux described it while in a visionary trance:

I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw the sacred hoop of my people was one of the many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the centre grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.⁵

Atop the World Tree on Pakal’s sarcophagus lid is an odd-looking bird wearing a jeweled pectoral and bearing sacred mirror markings on its forehead and tail. The cut shell on his head and other deity markers identify him as Itzam Ye, the avian form of Itzamna, a sky god and one of the gods who participated in the creation of the world. His name is derived from the word *itz*, a Maya concept that is difficult to translate into English. *Itz* is a kind of life-generating power that permeates the fluids of all living things. It may be found in blood, tears, milk, semen, rain, tree sap, honey, and even candle wax. The great Mayanist Linda Schele liked to refer to it as “cosmic ooze, the magical stuff of the universe.”⁶ means to channel this supernatural cosmos and set the stage for the tree, as depicted on the sarcophagus lid, is alive with sacred, life-giving

On the sarcophagus lid of Pakal’s sarcophagus lid are symbols for flowers, cut shell meaning “first, new, preeminent” glyphic sign for zero (expressing in Maya belief rather than not) to express the Maya concept of k’. The tree is surrounded by an ambient serpents with glyphs for “jade” and “pent,” a being that symbolized the pass from one world to another. Persons such as kings and other within them the divine spark of their bodies, they released a por giving birth to the gods. The symbol for the opening of the maw of the tree is surrounded by an ambient inscriptions and carved panels of blood onto fragments of bark offertory bowls, sometimes comb ber to accentuate the scent, color, flames. The Maya believed that v could be seen manifestations of the vision serpents, with supernatural

⁶. Linda Schele, seminar lecture on the Maya Cosmos, 411.
Itzam Ye was believed to wield the means to channel this supernatural power so as to give order to the cosmos and set the stage for creation. His presence atop the World Tree, as depicted on the sarcophagus lid of Pakal, indicates that the tree is alive with sacred, life-giving power.

On the sarcophagus lid of Pakal, all around the tree's branches are symbols for flowers, cut shells (the glyph that in Maya reads yax, meaning “first, new, preeminent”), chains of three jade beads, and the glyphic sign for zero (expressing the idea of completion or wholeness in Maya belief rather than nothingness). These glyphic symbols all express the Maya concept of *k'ulel* (sacredness), indicating that the tree is surrounded by an ambient atmosphere of sacred space.

Winding through the branches of the tree is a great double-headed serpent with glyphs for “jade” all along its body. This is a “vision serpent,” a being that symbolized the pathway by which sacred beings pass from one world to another. The ancient Maya believed that sacred persons such as kings and other members of the royal family carry within them the divine spark of godhood. By drawing blood from their bodies, they released a portion of their divine nature, thereby giving birth to the gods. The symbolic representation of this birth was the opening of the maw of the great vision serpent, through which sacred beings emerged to bestow on the world tokens of power and life. For non-Maya the metaphor for such a portal between worlds would be a veil. For the Maya it was the open jaws of the serpent. Numerous inscriptions and carved panels show royal individuals letting their blood onto fragments of bark paper. This paper was then burned in offertory bowls, sometimes combined with aromatic incense or rubber to accentuate the scent, color, or volume of smoke rising from the flames. The Maya believed that within the smoke of such offerings could be seen manifestations of the World Tree as well as undulating vision serpents, with supernatural beings issuing from them.

A beautiful example of this concept may be seen on Yaxchilan Lintel 25, in which a royal woman, Lady K'ab'al Xook, has just completed a bloodletting ritual (see fig. 24). She may be seen looking upward in the lower right-hand corner of the panel. She holds in her left hand the offertory bowl with the blood-spattered bark paper and instruments of bloodletting visible within it. Immediately to the left is the same bowl with an immense vision serpent rising above it. From the open jaws of the serpent emerges a sacred royal ancestor bearing the tokens of divine warfare—a round shield and spear. This particular bloodletting was conducted in order to empower Lady K'ab'al Xook's husband, Itzamnaaj B'alam II, to accede as king in AD 681, two years prior to the death of Pakal in nearby Palenque.

Returning to Pakal's sarcophagus lid, emerging from the jaws of the left-facing serpent's head is a god named K'awil, the embodiment of divine power inherent in royal blood. From the right-facing serpent's jaws the god Sak Hunal, the patron deity of the royal family and divine kingship, emerges. Upon accession, Maya kings had a white cloth band tied around their heads with one or three jade images of this deity set over the brow. The god of royal blood thus emerges on the left (western) side of the sarcophagus lid as a token of the sacrifice of Pakal. Sak Hunal emerges on the right (eastern) side as a sign of the dawn or restoration of kingship himself or to the rebirth of kings, K'inich Kan B'alam II.

Also on the sarcophagus lid for offertory blood) resting on a stone platform is marked with a large, four-leaf sign, identifying the head as that of a fleshted, with the curled pupi deity. The lower half of the head bears the tiny holes, or foraminiferous, the bony lower half indicate that the head half below the horizon. This occurrence represents the question of which is implied—sunset (death and sacrifice)? From the open jaws of the serpent, the god Sak Hunal, the patron deity of the royal family and divine kingship, emerges. Upon accession, Maya kings had a white cloth band tied around their heads with one or three jade images of this deity set over the brow. The god of royal blood thus emerges on the left (western) side of the sarcophagus lid as a token of the sacrifice of Pakal. Sak Hunal emerges on the right (eastern) side as a sign of the dawn or restoration of kingship himself or to the rebirth of kings, K'inich Kan B'alam II.

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Also on the sarcophagus lid is a sacrificial bowl (like those used for offertory blood) resting on a head at the base of the tree. The bowl is marked with a large, four-leaf clover-shaped k'in (day, sun) glyphic sign, identifying the head as the sun. The upper portion of the head is flesher, with the curled pupils in the eyes characteristic of the sun deity. The lower half of the head is skeletal, however. The bony lower jaw bears the tiny holes, or foramina, where nerves and blood vessels once entered the mandible in life. The flesher upper portion of the sun and the bony lower half indicate that the sun is in transition, half above and half below the horizon. This occurs at both dawn and dusk. This begs the question of which is implied here—sunrise (rebirth, resurrection) or sunset (death and sacrifice)? From the standpoint of Maya theology, it is likely that both are implied simultaneously. The motif suggests that the sun is in transition, the critical moment when life and death are in balance. Death and rebirth are instantaneous, one flowing naturally into the other in endless cycles.

Within the bowl resting atop the sun are four articles associated with blood sacrifice as well as the regeneration of life. The central element is an upright stingray spine, the principal instrument used by the Maya to draw their own blood in ritual offerings. On the left is a sectioned spondylus shell, a bright red spiny seashell that marks the bowl's contents as holy or precious. It is also symbolic of the entryway into the watery environment of the otherworld. The cut shell is one of the versions of the yax glyph, representing the concept of “first, new, preeminent.” Thus this sacrifice is not just associated with Pakal; it is the first sacrifice carried out at the time of creation. In the Maya world nearly all major rituals are associated with creation and rebirth. Such actions have the power to fold time back upon itself, to transport its participants back to the moment of first beginnings when these actions were first performed. The sacrifice of Pakal is thus linked to the sacrificial acts of the gods themselves, carried out so that the world and life itself could be set in motion.
On the right is a glyph similar to a percent sign. This is the cimi (death) sign, indicating that Pakal’s sacrifice is not one of simple bloodletting, but of his life. Growing from the death sign are three leaflike motifs, a glyphic collocation that together reads way (transformation), attesting that death allows the sun, and by extension the king, to pass from one state of being to another. Maize leaves growing from the sides of the offering bowl indicate that the sacrifice engenders abundance and new life.

Pakal himself lies across the sacrificial bowl, indicating that it is the symbolic sacrifice of his body in death that invests the entire scene with its life-giving power. Both he and the bowl are set within the immense jaws of a dragon (with both serpent and centipede characteristics) that rears upward to swallow both the sun and Pakal into the underworld. The lower teeth of the great beast are seen at the base of the composition, while its upper jaws and eyes frame both sides of the lid as they curve upward and inward toward the left knee and neck of the king. Again, it is somewhat irrelevant to try to determine whether Pakal is descending into the underworld jaws in death or whether he is being reborn upward. It is the idea of transition that is important. A small bone may be seen on Pakal’s nose. As mentioned previously, bones are not only associated with death but also conceived as human “seeds” bearing the potential for new life.

Pakal wears a net skirt, tonsured hairstyle, and jade ornaments that identify him as the embodiment of the great creator god Jun Ixim, the Maize God, who had also descended into the underworld, ultimately to rise again to new life as a creator god. A fiery torch is set into Pakal’s brow, a symbol of deification that appears only on images of gods or deceased kings. A similar torch is seen in the forehead of K’awil, the god of royal blood and sacrifice who is seen emerging from the left head of the serpent winding through the World Tree. In death the king has become the principal god of life and the organizer of the cosmos. Across his chest is a turtle pectoral, symbolic of the earth through whose cleft surface Jun Ixim emerged at the dawn of creation.

Within the sarcophagus the adorned skeletal remains of Pakal repeat this imagery in physical terms. Over seven hundred pieces of fine jade adorn the body, including a heavy mosaic mask that completely covered his face, delicately carved necklaces, bracelets, and anklet to the head, originally worn at Pakal’s office as king. Two large and held in the king’s left hand remain an intriguing mystery. Shapes is unprecedented in human art and domes of the heavens and the cardinal directions.

The arrangement of jade indicates that the king once lived, seen carved on the lid. Thus, Pakal (the Maize God) himself, the principal god of life, pearl counterweights, carved found about the head of the king of the Pax God, the anthropomorph Tree. The body of Pakal was a creator god Jun Ixim but also cious jade World Tree itself.

The overall theme of the sarcophagus lid powerfully ex death and mortality to new life. World Tree at the center of existence is an eternal office that, once in agricultural societies, particularly the sacrificial office, the king must rise in its time to bestow eternal life, the rains must fall in their season; life must grow to maturity and the lifeless maize seed must be buried. The king represented the hope ensured through ritual. It was monies, particularly the sacrif
covered his face, delicately carved rings on each of his fingers, and heavy necklaces, bracelets, and anklets. A jade Sak Hunal god was found next to the head, originally worn affixed to the royal headband as a sign of Pakal’s office as king. Two large jade pieces, one carved into a sphere and held in the king’s left hand and the other a cube in the right hand, remain an intriguing mystery. This interest in dichotomous geometric shapes is unprecedented in known Maya royal burials, and its significance is still unexplained, although the sphere may represent the curved dome of the heavens and the cube the quadrilateral earth with its four cardinal directions.

The arrangement of jade pieces about the waist and thigh bones indicates that the king once likely wore a net skirt similar to the one seen carved on the lid. Thus the king was dressed as Jun Ixim (the Maize God) himself, the principal god of creation. Jade earflares with pearl counterweights, carved in the shape of ceiba tree flowers, were found about the head of the king. At his feet was the carved jade image of the Pax God, the anthropomorphic personification of the World Tree. The body of Pakal was thus adorned as if he were not only the creator god Jun Ixim but also the symbolic embodiment of the precious jade World Tree itself.

The overall theme of the king’s burial goods and the carved sarcophagus lid powerfully express the instant of transformation from death and mortality to new life and godhood in the midst of the sacred World Tree at the center of creation. In ancient Mesoamerica, kingship was an eternal office that, once held in life, persisted beyond the grave. Particularly in agricultural societies like that of the Maya, survival was dependent on the rhythmic flow of one aspect of nature into its complementary opposite. Life could not exist in the absence of death. The sun must rise in its time to bestow its light and warmth on the crops. The rains must fall in their season and in sufficient amounts or the crops will not grow to maturity and the community will die. The dry, seemingly lifeless maize seed must be buried in the earth before it can sprout anew. The king represented the hope that these forces could be controlled and ensured through ritual. It was his responsibility to conduct sacred ceremonies, particularly the sacrifice of his own blood, to empower the world
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The tomb of K'inich Janab' Pakal was oriented as the central axis point of the universe, the place where worlds drew closest to one another. Sacred and precious things were placed in the king's tomb, where they would come into contact with the life-sustaining power of the otherworld. The most precious offering was the blood and body of the divine king, who, like the World Tree, carried within him the seed of new life. Burial of the king's body within the bowels of his sacred pyramid-temple symbolically returned him to the place of creation in the hope that proximity to its regenerative power would assist his rebirth into godhood. The appearance of the sacred World Tree growing from the underworld on the sarcophagus lid of Pakal was the symbolic expression of this concept.

It is evident that this journey was recapitulated at death by each ruler of Palenque. The sides of Pakal's sarcophagus are decorated with the images of ten individuals, identified by their hieroglyphic name signs as ancestral men and women who preceded Pakal in the office of king. All are depicted in a similar fashion, emerging from a cleft in the ground line marked with kab'an (earth) signs. Behind each of them a fruit-bearing tree grows, indicating that they are rising from their graves in parallel fashion to the sprouting of World Trees. In a number of traditional Maya cemeteries today, graves are planted with a tree, representing the rebirth of the interred individuals to new life. In the Santiago Atitlán cemetery, there are long rows of graves bearing trees, giving the place the appearance of a great orchard or grove (see fig. 25, also pl. 6).

Fig. 25. Cemetery in Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala. See plate 6.

Other Maya World Trees
These ideas regarding the world of Palenque. Throughout the Maya world, the dead were reborn as maize.

On public monuments, the Maya portrayed themselves with the power of life-giving texts and images. At Quirigua in Guatemala, the Vision Serpent symbol of the ancestors and the gods of Palenque. By portraying themselves as the intermediaries between the supernatural and the earthly worlds, the Maya declared themselves to be the intermediaries of the supernatural world. The Vision Serpent symbolized the journey of the sun, moon, and seasons on the back of the Great Quetzal, the sacred bird that carried the Maya king and queen to the celestial realms.

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fig. 25, also pl. 6). Ximénez described a similar practice in highland Guatemala at the beginning of the eighteenth century and noted that persons were frequently buried in the maize fields, an indication that the dead were reborn as maize.7

Other Maya World Trees

These ideas regarding the World Tree were not limited to the site of Palenque. Throughout the Maya world, kings were eager to identify themselves with the power of the World Tree to bestow life and abundance on their people:

On public monuments, the oldest and most frequent manner in which the [Maya] king was displayed was in the guise of the World Tree. . . . This Tree was the conduit of communication between the supernatural world and the human world: The souls of the dead fell into [the underworld] along its path; the daily journeys of the sun, moon, planets, and stars followed its trunk. The Vision Serpent symbolizing communion with the world of the ancestors and the gods emerged into our world along it. The king was this axis and pivot made flesh. He was the Tree of Life.8

By portraying themselves wearing tokens of the World Tree, rulers declared themselves to be the intermediaries between worlds at the center point of creation. An early example is Stela 11 from Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala, dated stylistically to approximately the time of Christ, give or take a century (see fig. 26). This stone monument depicts a standing ruler with a leafy World Tree growing from his headdress. His ear jewels display crossed bands, a centering device implying that the ruler stands at the pivotal juncture where the world was first created.

At Quirigua in Guatemala and Copan in Honduras, great plazas were set aside for the erection of immense limestone stelae bearing

the images of kings wearing the heavy tokens of godhood. The same elements seen on Pakal's sarcophagus lid are abstracted and incorporated into the vestments of the king in many of these royal portraits. Copan Stela H depicts the king Waxaklajun Ub'aj K'awil (reigned AD 695–738) wearing the net skirt also worn by Pakal on his sarcophagus lid, in token of the Maize God (see fig. 27). On the back of this stela, the sun god is seen wearing his sacrificial bowl, and the sacred bird Itzam Ye is perched above it (see fig. 28). On Quirigua Stela F (see fig. 29), King K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoat (reigned AD 724–785) wears the image of Itzam Ye as a headdress, with three panaches of feathers representing the bird's wings and tail feathers cascading elegantly about the king's head. A personified tree appears on his loincloth, while ear jewels in the shape of ceiba tree flowers appear on either side of his head. The king holds in his arms the coils of the double-headed vision serpent, which winds about the branches of the World Tree, just as it is depicted on Pakal's sarcophagus. Deities emerge from both of the serpent's open jaws. The stone portrait thus depicts the king as a personified World Tree.

Fig. 26. Kaminaljuyu Stela 11, Guatemala.
images of kings wearing heavy tokens of godhood. The same elements seen on Pakal's sarcophagus lid are retracted and incorporated into the vestments of the king many of these royal portraits. Copan Stela H depicts king Waxaklajun Ub'aj Wil (reigned AD 695-738) wearing the net skirt also worn by Pakal on his sarcophagus in token of the Maize God (fig. 27). On the back of this stela, the sun god is seen wearing his sacrificial bowl, and the red bird Itzam Ye is perched on it (see fig. 28). On Quirigua Stela F (see fig. 29), King K'ak' Tiliw Chan Yoat (reigned 724-785) wears the image of Itzam Ye as a headdress, with three panaches of feathers representing the bird's wings and tail feathers cascading antly about the king's head. An personified tree appears on loincloth, while ear jewels are worn on either side of his head. The double-headed vision serpent of the World Tree, just as it emerge from both of the king's eyes, depicts the king as a per-
Conclusion

In the Maya world death was a crisis. It was the victory of unseen and little-understood forces over a member of the community. When death took a king—particularly one considered to be a divine being, as were Maya rulers—the crisis took on universal proportions, threatening the very existence of the world and life itself. Royal tombs were constructed by the Maya as a desperate attempt to forestall this horror by ritually ensuring the king’s triumph over death and darkness. At Palenque, and in numerous other Maya centers, the ultimate expression of this ability to escape the harrowing of the underworld was the World Tree. It was the central focus of the Maya’s journey into the afterlife and the principal token of the power to overcome death. Its blossoms symbolized the purity of the human soul. In ancient Maya art this tree could be represented as a ceiba tree, a cacao tree, a calabash tree, any number of other trees, or a stalk of maize. The actual species of tree makes little difference since each is a metaphor, representing the sacred power inherent in the fabric of the cosmos to allow kings, the sun, and all other mortal things to emerge from death to new life.

Allen J. Christenson has worked as an ethnographer and linguist in highland Guatemala since 1978, working principally with the K’iche’-Maya and Tz’utujil-Maya. His MA and PhD degrees are in Pre-Columbian art history and literature from the University of Texas, Austin. He has written numerous journal articles and book chapters as well as three books on the Maya, including Art and Society in a Highland Maya Community (2001) and a new translation and critical edition of the Popol Vuh (2000), an important ancient Maya text containing detailed descriptions of ancient theology, creation, and history. He is currently an associate professor in the Department of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature at Brigham Young University, where his research and teaching focus on the art and culture of the Maya.