
THE SERPENT IN PRE - HISPANIC ART

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THE SERPENT

IN PRE-HISPANIC ART



E d i t o r i a l

THE DREAMS OF THE SERPENT

Alberto Ruy-Sánchez Lacy

Few forms in Mexican art have been so vibrant and so charged with meaning over the centuries as the serpent.

This is not an exclusively Mexican phenomenon. In nearly all known traditional cultures, the serpent is an important symbol. Its impressive natural associations with life and death, the masculine and feminine, earth and water, the upper world and the underworld, have always inspired our imagination, fear or curiosity. Possessed of ambiguous powers, serpents can appear as benevolent beings as well as incarnations of evil, of darkness, of the terrible. Natural inhabitants of dreams, their forms are infinite. Some are so frequently repeated that they have become archetypal images such as the serpent that bites its own tail, symbol of the eternal return, eternal life and perpetual cycles. Another frequently seen incarnation is the serpent that arises from the Earth to devour the Sun, symbol of the dark or subconscious forces, including evil, that impose themselves on the world. At the same time the serpent provokes both fear and fascination, just as it awakens surprise and admiration. It is a mysterious symbol for everything beyond human reach. In our dreams, we have not only endowed the serpent with unique powers, but also given it the ability to combine with other species to extend beyond its natural characteristics. Thus there are winged serpents, symbols of united opposites, and of nature metamorphosed to become the supernatural.

In Mexico, the plumed serpent is one of these archetypal symbols. Without a doubt it is the most mysterious and frequently used of our serpent symbols. The



rupestrian art of Baja California, presents the stone surface of a cave wall covered with primitive drawings of human figures,

dancers and hunters around a serpent body with the head of a deer. The serpent, in combination with the attributes of other animals, becomes divine: an object of adoration that is also feared. The numerous pre-Hispanic serpents, in any of their manifestations, are a strong reminder of Paul Westheim's belief as to the nature of what we now call pre-Hispanic art, which he considered to be related not to beauty but rather to the terrible and the sublime. In this sense, the pre-Hispanic serpent represented in stone carvings or one-dimensional drawings becomes for us a religious object by its nature, that continues to fascinate and terrify. It occupies such an important place in our collective fears that centuries later, our national emblem includes an eagle devouring a snake.

We begin this issue of *Artes de México* with an exploration of the serpent as a privileged form to guide us through both the well-known and obscure regions of Mexican art. The serpent is the most malleable and mysterious of its axes, as well as one of its trapdoors. An ancient legend says that we only exist in the dreams of a serpent. The serpent, mother of all things, that man occasionally glimpses in his own dreams. According to that legend, all of our art (the painting, sculpting, drawing of those forces that are beyond our comprehension), may be an attempt to capture the image of the serpent that dreams us into existence. ▲

Translated by Susan Briante

S y m b o l i c D r e a m

A FASCINATION WITH THE SERPENT

Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant

Equal to man though his opposite, the serpent is distinguished among the animal species. If we situate mankind at the end of a lengthy genetic endeavor, we locate this cold creature, without feet, or hair, or feathers, at the absolute beginning of that effort. Thus, man and serpent are adversaries, complements, rivals. In this sense, there is something serpentine in man, something uniquely present in the part of him least controlled by reason. A psychoanalyst said that the serpent is a vertebrate that embodies the lower psyche: the dark, the strange, the unintelligible, the mysterious. And yet there is nothing more pedestrian than a snake, nothing simpler. But undoubtedly, there is nothing more shocking to the mind because of this very simplicity.

In the instant that it reveals itself, the terrestrial, visible serpent is an epiphany of what is naturally sacred—not the spiritual, but rather the material. In the diurnal world, it seems a palpable phantasmagoria, but one that slides through the fingers, in the same way that it slides through measurable time and space, and the rules of reason, to seek refuge in the underworld, from which it comes and where it seems timeless, permanent and unmoving in its plenitude. As fast as lightning, the visible serpent springs from the mouth of a shadowy cave, a fault or a crack to scornfully cast aside life or death, before becoming invisible. Or it abandons its masculine appearance to make itself feminine; it surrounds, embraces, envelops, smothers, swallows, digests and sleeps. This feminine serpent is the invisible Ur-serpent, inhabiting the deepest layers of the consciousness and the most profound depths of the Earth. She is enigmatic, secretive, her decisions are as unpredictable and sudden as her metamorphosis. She toys with the sexes as do all opposites: she is feminine and masculine, her own twin, just like so many creator gods that are always represented as cosmic serpents in their earliest manifestations.

The serpent does not represent an archetype, but rather an archetypal complex, linked to the cold, slimy, subterranean night of the origin. In the words of Keyserling: "Together, all possible serpents form a single primordial multiplicity, a primordial Thing that cannot be dismembered, that does not cease to unwind, to disappear and to be reborn." But what is this primordial Thing if not life in its latency?—or as Keyserling explains, "the deepest layer of life." It is the reservoir, the potential from which all expressions come.

Keyserling adds: "The life of the underworld should be accurately reflected in daily consciousness under the figure of the serpent." For René Guénon, "the symbolism of the serpent is related to this idea of life." In this way, the visible serpent is really nothing more than the Great Serpent. Invisible, catalytic and timeless, the master of the beginning of life and of all the forces of nature. She is an old primordial deity, found at the origin of all cosmogenesis, before the religions of the spirit cast her aside. She is that which gives life and maintains it. In the human realm, she is the double symbol of soul and libido. "The serpent," Bachelard writes, "is one of the most important archetypes of the human soul." ▲ *Translated by Susan Briante*

M y t h i c D r e a m

THE GIRL AND THE SERPENT

A short story by Dominique Dufétel

Plumed serpents spend most of their lives alone, away from humans. That is because, like hermaphrodites, their plenitude is bothersome to man. Some live twisted in the winter clouds, and they emerge when the spring sap begins to ooze from their bodies. You could say that they are one with this sap that inoculates all of nature, including men and women. The serpents share with the clouds the purest light of the heavens and weightlessness because of their feathers, instilling in them an air of superiority and their particular naive goodness toward the creatures that live in those spheres. They are thin and long and almost without substance in comparison to other serpents that sleep in the darkness of the earthly depths. Those serpents, like the earth itself, have grown accustomed to the inertia and heaviness that allows them to take advantage of sleep, their favorite activity. Although they seem good-natured because of their tranquil presence and plumpness, they are the best guardians of the treasures hidden by the earth and her unfathomable depths, capable, in a flashing instant, of unleashing their extraordinary force against the occasional intruder, those rash and self-sufficient humans who always believe in their unlimited capacity to dominate what surrounds them. Because of all this, it is very difficult to find a plumed serpent. However, it is well-known that their strange solitude comes naturally to them in adulthood after the completion of an entire cycle of metamorphosis. Before this time, in their imperfect stage, they appear much like any other snake and, therefore, water is their preferred habitat. It is the element with which the serpent has the most affinity, because it is equally androgynous. Situated carefully and with much determination both on the earth (that all-



Relieve en estela de piedra.
A los pies del personaje, una
barra en forma de serpiente
bicéfala. El Mesón, Ver.
Preclásico. Dibujo de Miguel
Covarrubias.

Página anterior:
Escultura de piedra
policromada. Serpiente
enrollada. Cultura mexica.
Posclásico tardío.
Basalto, estuco pintado.
29 x 55 x 70 cm.

too-feminine land) as well as beneath heaven (that all-too-masculine spirit), the water itself is a serpent. And the larva of the plumed serpent is an ordinary water snake, perhaps more playful than the rest because—undoubtedly foreseeing its reclusive future—it is more fond of relating with humans who still do not notice its hideousness. It is especially partial to little boys and little girls who it seems—although this has never been certain—have no determined sex and, like the snake, are in the process of their own perfection.

• • •

Since she left mankind, since she rose from the lustral waters to the ethereal spheres of the heavens near the solar star, the divine child only remembers her life from the time she met with her Quetzalcóatl, her plumed serpent. From that point on, she had left her innocuous humanity in order to enter the circle of the gods.

Blinded by the last rays of a sun about to plunge itself into the nocturnal waters, she felt the first call from the other world. She had played with the children of the *calpulli* all afternoon in the canals which surround the fields of ritual flowers at the city's entrance. She dallied in leaving. The other children started off away from her, they called for her to come along. Their voices continued to sound through the white willows, stained by the purple of the shadows. She was alone and she wanted her body to enjoy just a few more minutes of that profound invigorating feeling of newness that overwhelmed her. Blood-red rays bathed her head, bathed everything including the fields of flowers that soon became her own blood. Then something long and sinuous touched her from beneath the surface, something that gently wound around her, something that overwhelmed her. She felt her body tremble with fear. Then she saw what looked like a small water snake dance along the surface before diving down to embrace her once again. She took this as a sign and conceded to the games of the snake. She got out of the water, the reptile was wrapped around her arm, and she noticed that it was smaller than it had seemed in the water. She hid it between her white clothing and dark skin because she knew from that moment on this would be a secret between her and the serpent.

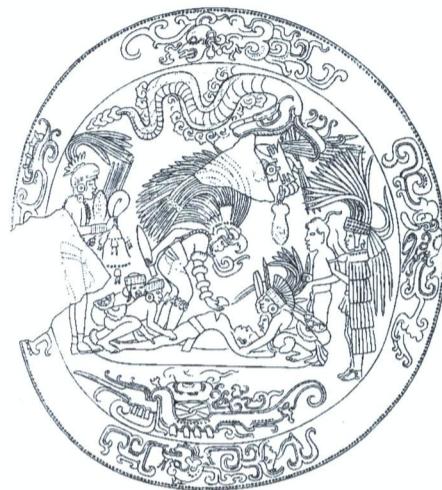
On the way back to the *calpulli*, choked in the violet weft of the city, she ran crazed with joy. Passing through the great deserted plaza, next to the temple of Quetzalcóatl, some men still worked at the stone they sculpted, inspired by the last flash of spirit. She wanted to pass unnoticed, but instead she stopped. She had always longed to take a close look at those strange heads of serpents enlarged by the artist and their necklace of feathers. The men also stopped, surprised by the presence of the little girl dressed in white on the edge of the darkness. They did not imag-

ine that hidden within the folds of her clothing, she carried the true god that they had tried with all of their strength to force out of the stone for so many days. Or perhaps they felt something intuitively, because they never once spoke a word to her: they said nothing to send her away from their work nor to welcome her into their fever. They let her go as one would let pass an apparition, unsure as to whether it was evil or benign, in those ambiguous hours of the twin sun and moon.

She passed through the alleys crowded with frightening shadows that brushed against her. At that moment she did not fear the dark maw that opens every night above the heads of everyone, she feared those from her clan. Mother, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins, all waited for the defiant little girl who had once again challenged the forces of solitude. How would she hide the serpent that had now become part of her? She entered the first courtyard, that of the temple and immediately hid there. An old priest squatted, stoking the fire of Huehuetéotl. He saw her enter but did not seem bothered, he remained silent despite the fact that the girl had just set foot in the sacred ambit of the temple. She, too, knelt down and searched for the protection of the gods. The old priest understood her heart. It was then that the serpent gradually unwound itself from her arm and slid down to the floor that glistened with the fire's sparks, searching for the gentle heat that was consecrated to the ancient god of fire. The man saw everything and he did not utter a word, nor would he ever speak of the secret that he now shared with the girl.

The days that followed were of a difficult apprenticeship. She had to take care that her brothers and sisters, with whom she spent the most time, would not discover her clandestine guest. At the same time, she had to learn to feed her new accomplice and to provide everything else that was necessary when needed. The she-serpent spent most of her time near the girl's straw mat in one of the baskets that the child had at her disposal, and behind the basket, a hidden vessel filled with water allowed the serpent to swim whenever she wanted, a recreation of the natural element that she had renounced in order to follow the girl. But what the serpent enjoyed most was when, unwatched and unrestricted, she could dive into the well that served as a mirror when the women adorned themselves, because the sun, which entered at certain hours through a hole in the ceiling, would plunge its sacred hand into the water to heat the transparent depth.

One day when everyone had left the house to attend an important ceremony and the girl was able to slip away in all of the confusion, both she and the serpent entered the square pool that was



*Relieve en un disco de oro repujado.
Escena de sacrificio humano con serpiente emplumada.
Cenote sagrado. Chichen Itzá.
Posclásico. Dibujo de Miguel Covarrubias.*

filled with the sacred water from the heavens, surrounded by the unusual silence of the house. For a few moments of madness they enjoyed playing in the element, and their frolicking resonated between the blind walls of the rooms which had been abandoned for the day. Later, still filled with playfulness, the girl walked naked into the heart of the temple, the ultimate forbidden enclosure, and there she discovered, beyond the softness of the jaguar pelts on which she stepped with fear, the unsuspected paintings which would confirm the divine nature of her companion.

On the red background of the wall she saw a myriad of trees like blossoming stars, but she quickly felt drawn to the slithering and fascinating figure of a rattlesnake that seemed to stare at her with its albino eyes. The entire figure was made of small green and blue feathers, separated by yellow stripes as if the earth over which the serpent slithered was caught between its plumes, recalling its terrestrial origin with each sinuation of its majestic body. The entire serpent exuded enormous drops of water that were like precious stones of jade and turquoise. The little girl felt she was oozing with sacredness and looked down at her feet at the impious puddle that she was leaving on the immaculate stucco of the forbidden temple. Through the half-opened jaws of the snake a stream of splashing water fell from the strange black eyes that watched her, innocent and inquisitive, but completely different from the ecstatic stare of the serpent. Its feathers made her slide gradually into another world, and it was pleasurable. But there was something in the painting that instilled in her a great fear. She had noticed in the face of the creature strange traces of another kind making themselves manifest: those of a feline nature. It seemed at this moment as the girl discovered this monstrous serpent that she should not have gone in there. Then suddenly screams erupted from outside and she felt that her heart would burst.

She came back to this side of the world and realized that everyone had returned to the house. She trembled with cold and fear. She didn't know

what to do. When the voices warned that the she-serpent had been discovered in the impluvium and that her brother threatened to kill her, the girl did not hesitate an instant. She grabbed an obsidian arrowhead that was on the stone altar, she thrust it into her own arm with an unexpected furor and ran out of the temple to throw herself into the water of the impluvium that suddenly turned to red.

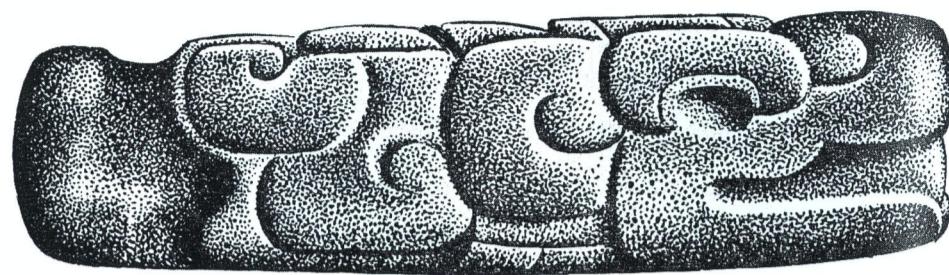
When she awoke, lying on her straw mat, calm but aching, it was night and the house was peaceful once again. She waited without thinking, only remembering how the red water flooded her body and how she slept, the clamor of the voices that surrounded her, becoming more and more distant. After a few moments she felt the snake, for the she-serpent had left its basket to seek refuge in the girl's lap as if to console her.

From that day on, time slipped by in a different way; it acquired the impetuousness of the landslides crashing down from the mountains of fire, there near the great valley of lakes. She could only remember one thing that had determined the end: the day when she began to notice how small, soft feathers grew between the scales of her serpent, who was now so long and thick that she no longer fit in the basket. They were feathers like those that grow on the breast of the turkey except these were of an intense jade green. The girl was filled with such sheer joy that she did not notice until later how the head of her divine sister-serpent was also being transformed and how her mouth was changed into that of a jaguar without losing the slenderness characteristic of a reptile. The girl understood then, just as she had felt in front of the painted serpent of the forbidden temple, that soon the she-serpent would no longer belong to her, that a superior force would call her until the girl could reach her sister once and for all. Then one morning, almost consciously, the girl left the basket open and her entire clan discovered the plumed serpent with the same fascination as if they had found a god in their own straw mat.

The priest took the she-serpent in his consecrated hands and carried her to the temple where

she remained from that day on, surrounded by all of the painstaking attention worthy of a being from another world. She became the patron goddess and protector of the clan and the ceremonies to celebrate that miracle did not cease until many moons had passed. As for the young girl—because the transformation of the serpent had strangely coincided with her own metamorphosis into a woman—she had to be secluded in a house where virgins who had been touched by the hand of the gods, who had direct experience with the sacred, were sent. Considered a demigod, she received special treatment. She waited, as if she were on the threshold of another reality which she yearned to enter, because she thought that was the only way to be reunited with her beloved sister. She lived in a hut made of sticks near the canals outside the city, and her greatest pleasure was, under the vigilant eyes of the priests, to submerge herself in the lustral waters and remember in her rejoicing body the twilight when she found the serpent.

At dawn one day, at that hour of whiteness, of absolute silence of the soul, at that hour of death that is the promise of new life, they gently woke the girl and she saw at her door an immense, multicolored entourage which came from the city. They carried her with hymns and a rain of white flowers to the banks of the main canal, and they brought her in a great canoe of flowers to the center of the waters. She was not frightened. She understood that the moment had come. Suddenly, all of that morning's occurrences brought peace to her ears that perceived everything, even the slightest splash of water beneath the sweet clamor of voices. And her enraptured eyes, albino like those of the painted serpent, told her the color of the new world toward which she proceeded. When she was finally plunged into the water she felt the strange sensation of floating almost weightless, which inspired a delicate tingling over all of her body. It was neither pain nor pleasure—it was pure sensation. Then, while the precious water unceasingly penetrated her motionless body, she felt her plumed serpent slither through her legs and turn her so gently it



seemed the plumed serpent was about to lift her, hold her and carry her off undulating in water that had turned to air, on a fresh breeze that caused her to wake from a long dream, a dream that had lasted all of her life. ▲ *Translated by Susan Briante*

Fertile Dream

THE SYMBOLISM OF QUETZALCÓATL

Enrique Florescano

Perhaps the most familiar representation of Quetzalcóatl is a snake with feathers or plumed serpent. In the Mesoamerican tradition, the serpent is associated with fertility and the earth's reproductive powers. It is the image of resurrection itself, as each year the serpent's skin is shed and regenerated. On the other hand, we know that "in indigenous mythology, snakes and rains are closely related; these reptiles are thought to be an image of lightning, which is why the messengers of the rain god Tláloc, the *tlaloques*—who bring rain, lighting and thunder—carry serpents in their hands." Inga Clendinnen notes that the imposing Mexica serpent sculptures accentuate the snake's large fangs, as well as its coiled body, which is similar to a seashell's interior spiral. In most sculptures and paintings the wrinkled skin and the scales of the serpent become a weft of feathers or imitate an overgrowth of vegetation, with ears of corn sprouting from its body. These representations masterfully unite fine stonework with the supernatural manifestation of the god.

For its part, the bird is an image associated with the sky and those beings endowed with the powers of creation who inhabit this region. But, due to their colors and size, the feathers that cover the serpent seem to be those of a specific bird: they are the long green feathers of the quetzal, the most beautiful bird in the tropical rain forest. To the people of Mesoamerica, the brilliant and colorful plumes of the quetzal were

synonymous with magnificence, splendor and riches. "The feather filaments are light, long and glossy, so that the smallest movement sets them shimmering. And their color, a gilded emerald haunted by a deep singing violet blue, is extraordinary: so that each sighting is its own small miracle." (Clendinnen)

Iridescent quetzal feathers were the principal decoration of the ruling class. Alone or in combination with other adornments, the green feathers of the quetzal were synonymous with something precious, and when they covered the vestments and royal insignia, they demonstrated the splendor associated with the highest offices.

The joining of the attributes of serpent and bird metaphorically referred to the earth's germinative capabilities and the creational powers of the heavens. The plumed serpent came to be synonymous with the Precious Twin.

From ancient times to the Aztec epoch, the significance of the plumed serpent seemed to refer to vegetal renovation. The green quetzal feathers that covered the serpent's body were a symbolic representation of the moment when the dry season ended with a green covering of vegetation. The earth, represented by the wrinkled skin of the serpent or the caiman, was covered by the green leaves of corn; and thus, this miraculous agricultural phenomenon took the form of the plumed serpent in the Mesoamerican imagination. The green shoots of corn, that always appear in the days following the first rains of the year, formed a carpet of green feathers in the cultivated fields—the most obvious image for these people of the blossoming of life.

The green of the first shoots of corn became the symbolic color of plant regeneration, and the color most valued by the Mesoamerican peoples. Its symbolic value was linked to jade, the most esteemed of the precious stones, symbol of vital energy and the badge that distinguished sovereign rank, as well as the members of noble lineage. Since the Olmec epoch, it has been customary to place a *chalchibuitl*, or round green stone, in the mouth of the dead as an incantatory talisman to insure their future reincarnation. And

*Escultura de piedra.
Serpiente-dragón del cielo.
Veracruz. Basalto. 37 cm.
Colección Arensber. Dibujo de
Miguel Covarrubias.*

this same stone of brilliant green tones was chosen to adorn the frontal sash of governors, signifying their link to corn and the vital energy that gives life to the cosmic and human order.

In the Temple of the Plumed Serpent in Teotihuacan, built around 250 A.D., this deity is represented with symbols that can be seen in the later monuments of such diverse sites and cultures as Xochicalco, Cacaxtla, El Tajín, Tula, Chichén Itzá, Cholula and México-Tenochtitlan. In the *tableros* of this temple, the undulating body of the rattlesnake appears to be covered by precious quetzal feathers. In the end section of the serpent body, a carved serpent's head appears from a circle of petals or feathers. Alongside this sculpture is another strange figure, in the form of a grotesque face, which has been the subject of many divergent interpretations. A number of authors, from different perspectives and with diverse emphasis, suggest that these representations allude to the alternation between the rainy and dry seasons, endowing them with a symbolism related to the celebration of plant rejuvenation. Even in cases of conflicting interpretations of these two figures, there is consensus that the plumed serpent is the symbol of this vegetal rebirth. The plumed serpent represented in the *tableros* and the sloping sides of this monument is surrounded by conches, seashells and *chalchibuites*—objects that refer to the reproductive property of the rains, and more exactly, the fertilizing conjunction of the powers of earth and the heavens.

Seeking to explain the feathers that cover the serpentine bodies in this monument, Pedro Armillas remembered a Nahuatl song dedicated to Xipe Tótec, the Mexica god of spring and plant renewal, that demonstrates the connection between quetzal feathers and vegetation. In this song, Xipe Tótec is asked to make the rain fall “so that the parched earth will change its fire disguise, *xicoanahualli*, to that of the quetzal-serpent, *quetzalcoanahualli*; so that the water of precious stones will flow, turning *xiubacóatl*, the fire serpent, or the drought, into Quetzalcóatl, the earth covered with vegetation.” In addition to this explicit identification between the feathers that cover the serpent's body and vegetal rejuvenation, there are Mexica sculptures of serpents in which ripe ears of corn sprout from the animal's scales. This significance of the green quetzal feathers on the body of the serpent seems to be demonstrated in another Nahuatl text that tells of the bet between the legendary Huémac, king of Tula, and the *tlaloques*, the purveyors of rain.

When Huémac faced the *tlaloques* in the ball game, he proposed that if they won he would give them his *chalchibuites* and his precious “*quetzalli* feathers.” The *tlaloques* agreed and added that Huémac would receive the same from

them. Huémac won the game, but the *tlaloques*, instead of giving him the green stones and valuable feathers of brilliant colors, offered him “green ears of corn and the precious green leaves in which they grow.” Huémac became angry and responded: “Is this what I have won? Are there no *chalchibuites*, no quetzal feathers? Take these away.” The story goes on to explain that the *tlaloques*, who represented ancient wisdom and the symbolic properties of Huémac's promised reward, decided to give the upstart Huémac the precious stones and rich feathers that he demanded. But they agreed to conceal the true wealth they had promised him in an act of revenge. As a consequence, drought and frosts reigned in the fields of the Toltec people for four years and “the fruits of the earth were lost.”

The telluric symbolism of the plumed serpent, clearly alluding to the sprouting of the first leaves of corn, was modified later, along with the symbolism of the ancient god of corn. During the Toltec efflorescence and the extension of their influence through different parts of the Mesoamerican world, the figure and the significance of the god of corn suffered many transformations. Most of the symbols and names that once referred to Quetzalcóatl, Kukulkán, Gucumatz or Náxcit were represented by the plumed serpent. But instead of referring to the agricultural cycle or the ancient god of corn, this figure seemed to be related to a high military or religious office. In the Cakchiquel and Quiché chronicles, the names Kukulkán, Gucumatz, Náxcit, Plumed Serpent or Quetzalcóatl refer to a leader who has supernatural powers, carries out conquests and warrior-like deeds, as well as founds cities that become the capitals of kingdoms for which he builds grandiose temples in his name. The origin of this figure, his emblem and attributes come together in Tollan, the fantastic city that, according to Toltec verse as disseminated by the Aztecs, brought together the symbolism of imperial grandeur, the strength of military power, the prestige of a holy place, an abundance of material objects and the splendor of a civilization.

In Nahuatl eulogies to the grandeur of Tula, Quetzalcóatl is the founder, king and high priest of the Toltec kingdom. It is evident that these stories transform the historical figure into a god, through a well-known process discovered by the Greek writer Euhemerus in antiquity. These texts state that upon Ce Ácatl Topiltzin's death, Quetzalcóatl became the Morning Star.

During the Postclassic period, the symbolism of Ehécatl, the Mixtec god of wind, is added to that of Quetzalcóatl. The Vienna Codex offers the oldest and most detailed information as to this deity, who is likened to the Mayan god of corn because of similar characteristics. As is the case with Hun Nal Ye, the Mixtec Ehécatl is a god who

creates and brings order to the cosmos. One of his first acts was to separate sky from earth and carry the vault of heaven. Ehécatl also brings civilized life to the terrestrial world, another attribute which is shared with the Mayan god of corn. In addition, he is protector of dynasties and noble lineage. Like Hun Nal Ye, Ehécatl is an anthropomorphic god, although he wears a beak-like bucal mask associated with the god of air and through which he scatters the winds to the different corners of the universe. According to this feature, he is clearly a deity of air, an attribute which does not pertain to the Mayan god of corn.

Finally, in Aztec culture, Quetzalcóatl joins the qualities and symbolism of the Mayan god Hun Nal Ye, of the Evening Star and of Ehécatl, to the prestige of Ce Ácatl Topiltzin Quetzalcóatl of Tula. A multiform and protean entity, he brings together the attributes of a creator god and of a culture hero, responsible for the benefits of civilization. Together with the wind god, he shares the power to create and to bring order to the cosmos. He also possesses the transformative qualities of the Evening Star and assumes the countless representations of the plumed serpent. He is the archetype of the exemplary priest and his name designates the highest dignitaries who occupied this office. But even when Quetzalcóatl seems to embody most of the attributes and symbols that distinguished him from his ancestors, it is evident that his divine abilities had diminished in the minds of the Mexicas.

It is noteworthy, for example, that Quetzalcóatl's attributes praised in Toltec verse which elevated him to the level of conqueror and founder of kingdoms have been erased from Mexica cultural memory. Among the Mexica, the characteristics of the Toltec image are remembered, but testimonies praising the qualities of such an image cannot be found in the verse, painting, sculpture or traditions of this people. On the contrary, the qualities of the victorious warrior and founder of kingdoms have been transferred to Huitzilopochtli. Like the Toltec god Ce Ácatl Topiltzin, this Mexica tribal deity has become the protector of his people and the model of the victorious warrior.

Quetzalcóatl's diminishing importance is also evident in Mexica cosmology and theology. It is true that the *Legend of the Suns* and other Nahuatl texts mention Quetzalcóatl and Ehécatl among the gods who participated in the creation of the suns which preceded the final creation of the cosmos. But it is also clear that the deity who created, arranged and set in motion the present era of the world is the Sun god, and thus, the current era bears the name Ollintonatiuh, or sun in movement. The Mexica pantheon familiar to Cortés and his men put Huitzilopochtli, Tonatiuh and Tláloc above Quetzalcóatl in terms of rank

and cult. And it is evident that many of Quetzalcóatl's attributes were in the process of being transferred to Mexica deities. Tláloc, for example, assumed the fertilizing and regenerative powers of the agricultural deities that had preceded him. In this way, Quetzalcóatl, the ancient Hun Nal Ye, experienced another process of adaptation to new historical realities upon the arrival of the Spanish on the coast of Veracruz. Neither the conquistadors, nor the Mexica, imagined that their meeting with this millenarian deity, a few years after the fall of Tenochtitlan, would produce another example of the profound transformation of Quetzalcóatl's personality and symbolism. ▲ *Translated by Susan Briante*

M e t a m o r p h i c D r e a m

THE AVATARS OF THE PLUMED SERPENT

Claude-François Baudez

The most celebrated creature of the American bestiary has had a long and capricious trajectory throughout Mesoamerica. Combining the earthly and the heavenly, this monster, has nourished the dreams of thinkers, poets and priests from the second century to D.H. Lawrence in the twentieth century. An unviable, antinomic hybrid, it has forgotten how to crawl but cannot yet fly; its role belongs among cosmic monsters, political chiefs and gods. Under the names of Quetzalcóatl and Kukulkán, it attracted a multitude of warriors and believers beginning in the eleventh century. But during the Preclassic and Classic periods, its image was charged with cosmological significance.

Some, eager to see Quetzalcóatl arise from the dawn of time, claim to discern him among the Olmecs, but all examples put forward have proved to be dubious. Nevertheless, relief N°5 at Chalcatzingo presents a hybrid composed of the head and wing of a bird of prey attached to a snake's body, in an early bid to express the alliance between heaven and earth. The first indisputable example of a plumed serpent is found on the sides of the so-called pyramid of Quetzalcóatl in Teotihuacan, dated toward the end of the second century A.D. This symbolization of the alliance between sky and land is completed by a reference to water, represented by the sea conches placed between the serpent's undulations. On the *tableros* we find a plumed rattlesnake, bearing a pseudo-Tláloc mask on its tail just above the cones of its rattle, of a saurian or feline nature. This beast, which heralds the Mayan two-headed cosmic monster, is similar to that carved on a bone from Chiapa de Corzo,

whose date has been estimated at the second half of the first millennium.

In southern Mesoamerica, the bird-snake appears several centuries before the plumed serpent proper, which is the same image in reverse. The head of this hybrid presents serpentine traits, but most importantly, the bone structure of its wings corresponds to a snake's bare jawbone. This characteristic formation is found during the last centuries before the common era at Izapa (stelae 2, 4 & 60) and Kaminaljuyú (stela 11).

In Teotihuacan, the plumed serpent features in paintings from the sixth century A.D., in compositions of a cosmic character; in Tepantitla, a procession of notables is framed by a plumed serpent with two intertwined bodies, studded at regular intervals with masks representing the monster's hindmost head. On the miniature temple of Atetelco, monocephalous as well as bicephalous plumed serpents are ranged in horizontal bands alternating with rows of conches, *kan* crosses and jade beads, reminiscent of the decoration of the pyramid of Quetzalcóatl at Teotihuacan.

After the fall of Teotihuacan, the late Classic centers (750-900 A.D.), located to the south of the Valley of Mexico, adopted the same tradition: on the base of the Pyramid of the Plumed Serpent at Xochicalco, this creature encircles both human figures and glyphs, and is also found on the staircase ramps. At Cacaxtla, a man-god is partially enveloped by a plumed serpent; a frieze with an aquatic theme surrounds the whole scene. At around the same time, the plumed serpent was making its appearance in Mayan territory. Lintel N°2 of Temple I at Tikal features a display of feather headdresses crowning jade serpents' heads; and on lintel N°3, Temple IV, the two-headed reptile which forms an arch over the governor is partly covered in feathers. At Copan, certain architectural elements designed to receive or support other elements represent the outline of the hybrid creature (altars G and O). Somewhat later, we find sculpted on the west building of the Nuns' Quadrangle in Uxmal a great plumed serpent whose meanders encompass the various decorative sections. This framing function, assigned to almost all the depictions of plumed serpents during the Classic period, recalls the Mayan cosmic serpent shown to form the celestial vault, above and around the governor. In these compositions, a different reptile (such as the *cauac* monster) represents the Earth. The snake with feathers is the cosmic monster which partakes of both orders. This hypothesis would seem confirmed by lintel N°3 at Tikal's Temple IV, where only the upper part of the cosmic serpent (corresponding to the sky) displays a coating of feathers, while the sides are bare. Other hybrids are known, of course: we may cite the

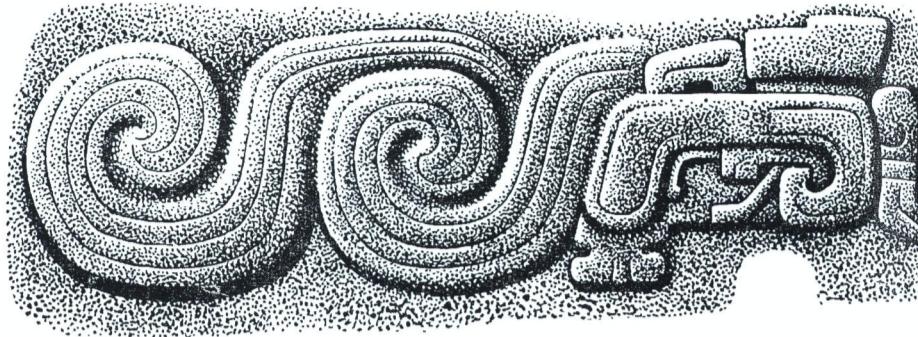
feathered seashells at Teotihuacan, and the birds with jaguar or serpent heads at Tula and Chichén Itzá. Before Tula became consolidated as the headquarters of the new Toltec civilization, the feathered snake functioned as a cosmic image which preceded Quetzalcóatl, the culture hero and deity.

The role of the cosmic serpent, as a mediator between heaven and earth, seems to persist in the Postclassic period at both Chichén Itzá and Tula, in the serpentine forms of columns and ramps. However, the plumed serpent is more often represented (on stone bas-reliefs or embossed gold discs) in an upright position, behind the Toltec or Maya warriors. Some scholars have sought to deduce from this a direct allusion to Quetzalcóatl. But this is by no means a certainty, for even here the hybrid may retain a cosmic significance and be used mainly to endow the scene with a sacred or universal dimension. Thus when a plumed serpent, placed behind the officiators, dominates an image of human sacrifice, nothing permits us to conclude that the sacrifice is in honor of the god Quetzalcóatl. Likewise, the figures carved on the *tableros* of the south ball court at El Tajín are often accompanied by grotesque creatures with spirals and plumes, which have nothing to do with Quetzalcóatl.

The problem is compounded when we find smooth-skinned serpents in compositions whose nature leads us to expect plumed ones: for instance, the numerous serpents and serpentine figures without feathers filling the spaces between the players on the frieze of the great ball court of Chichén Itzá. And on a gold disc from the sacred cenote well, depicting a Toltec sacrifice, the cosmos is illustrated by one celestial snake and one terrestrial one; neither is feathered. We do not know whether in these cases, the lack of plumage lends them a particular significance in opposition to the plumed versions.

It remains in question whether the plumed serpents of Tula and Chichén Itzá represent the chief or the god Quetzalcóatl. A carved stone found near Tula, showing a warrior accompanied by an erect plumed serpent, bears the inscription *ce ácatl*, One Reed, the calendric sign for the god in his aspect as Morning Star. This evocation as Venus is possibly illustrated in both examples in the form of the hybrid bird-snake, holding the divine face in its jaws. We do not yet know for sure whether the god and his associated priesthood preceded the hero and leader (Topiltzin Quetzalcóatl) or whether the secular figure was subsequently divinized.

During the Aztec epoch, Quetzalcóatl became one of the most important gods in the pantheon. His various aspects included the "cosmic" (Venus and the God of the Wind as Ehécatl) and



the "civilizing" (both creating and civilizing deity, patron of the priesthood and of self-sacrifice). In sculpture, the god is often conceived as a plumed serpent. The purely cosmic nature of the ritual did not vanish for all that; a *coatepantli*, or wall of serpents, surrounded the Tenayuca pyramids to form the ceremonial enclosure of the Great Temple in Tenochtitlan; but the elements that made up this cosmogonic framework had shed their feathers over the course of time, perhaps to avoid confusion with the images of the god.

Quetzalcóatl or cosmic monster, the plumed serpent experienced resounding fame during the Postclassic era. Treated with various degrees of stylization, it constituted one of the foremost motifs of the polychrome ceramics of the Pacific coast of Nicaragua and Costa Rica. ▲ *Translated from the French by Lorna Scott Fox*

Dream of Blood

Relieve en estela de piedra.

Detalle. Dragón del cielo.

Estela D. Tres Zapotes, Ver.

Preclásico. Dibujo de Miguel Covarrubias.

KINGDOMS OF SLUMBER

Dominique Dufétel

With the landing of Hernán Cortés on the beaches of the Gulf of Mexico, indigenous art—from that moment on called pre-Hispanic—would begin a new life as seen through a foreign perspective. First, the Spanish soldier is dazzled by everything different, but soon after, the sparkle of gold becomes chiseled into his greedy eyes. Later, Spanish friars see only blasphemy in the stone or clay “idols,” unsightly objects inspired by the devil, they subsequently shatter throughout their crusade.

The figure of the serpent slithers its way into the stone or wood cracks in the new promised land. As the incarnation of Evil, it invades, contaminating sacred space. The New World is literally in pandemonium. When Antonio León y Gama accidentally uncovers the great statue of Coatlicue, the goddess with the skirt of serpents, at the end of the colonial period, he examines it and proclaims it from another world, and as such

the statue is taken to the Royal and Pontifical University. Terrorized by its threatening presence, the church fathers shortly thereafter have it buried. Later, the scientist Alexander von Humboldt is authorized to study the statue for a few days. The statue is unearthed, but immediately buried again.

It is now an age in which ancient civilizations are being rediscovered. Adventurous and romantic explorers feverishly hunt for Mexican antiquities, which are brought freshly torn from the humid jungle to the desks of European historians to provide a basis for their outlandish theories. Archaeology is born and will forever change the course of aesthetic taste.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, antique works of art are once again made hostage, this time to justify a triumphant sense of nationalism. The serpents on Coatlicue’s skirt resurface: the monumental piece is exhumed once and for all to dominate the new museum of archaeology as a paradigm of the recovered mother civilization. In the rationality of archaeology, the antique work acquires a documentary value. It is analyzed, described, identified and classified, providing evidence for new theories, displayed in shining glass cases to await the astonishment or indifference of tourists and the curious.

The serpent biting its tail, the circular tale of Coatlicue’s tribulations, signifies a history of modern man’s emotional response to ancient works of art. As a manifestation of evil, an object of scientific interest, a sign of foreign influence, a means to justify a nation’s roots, or a simple source of knowledge, the ancient work of art is rarely seen, considered or commented on as an independent object.

Is this because art didn’t exist in the minds of those primordial civilizations, as it is sometimes said? True, the sacred realm in ancient societies was so vast that every act was a rite, and aesthetics was another way the gods manifested themselves, true epiphanies. Far from the Western conception of sacred art, pre-Hispanic art was

not an imagined representation of God. The Nahuatl concept of *ixiptla* is illustrative in this sense, as noted by historian Serge Gruzinski: "The following are all forms of *ixiptla*: the statues of god, the divinity which appears in a vision, the priest who represents it when he covers himself with its attributes, the victim who becomes a god destined for sacrifice. The Nahuatl *ixiptla* does not have a singular form; it designates the exterior it receives, the skin covering a divine force that grows from crossed influences that emanate from the cycles of time."

That idea of *ixiptla* provides us with a much broader reality than that of art in general as we conceive it. But at the same time we sense the complete way in which art participated in ritual apparatus, as the paraphernalia of a life believed to be essentially sacred. The archaeologist Laurette Séjourné has affirmed, "What separates us from the pre-Columbian world isn't so much the complexity of their symbols as our own distance from the sacred."

We will never be able to determine what the ancients felt as they beheld their art. Despite everything, civilizations die. Only an aesthetic vision of the works enables us to approach the truth of ancient art, aesthetics as the last bastion of the sacred. Our knowledge of the history, origin and cultural context of ancient art is invaluable, but it often blinds us. This knowledge should be a useful aid in delving deeper to achieve an overall understanding of art. It should not obstruct our sight, nor inhibit our senses. To forget about the god in the statue would mean seeing the statue as perhaps—how can we be sure?—the ancients never saw it. It should help to open fresh eyes on those works and as we learn to see them through our own subjectivity, innocence and above all, pleasure. Marguerite Yourcenar recovers Greek antiquities from the effects of time. Yves Bonnefoy speaks of the firm bond between the work of art and the half-closed space in which it is situated. As experience limits, so Michel Butor writes "illustrations" of paintings, giving new life to pictorial works which we

might never come to know. In this sense, art becomes writing.

♦♦♦

The body of the serpent becomes a framing device around the colored frescos in the palaces of Teotihuacan, Cacaxtla and Tulum. It is fixed in stone and makes stone seem to undulate in the high reliefs at Xochicalco, Uxmal and the pyramid of Quetzalcóatl. It straightens itself into a monster to form the columns of Chichén Itzá, becomes mystical in the lintels of Yaxchilán, multiplies and becomes entangled in the reliefs of El Tajín.

The serpent becomes two-headed in the art of the Mayan rulers. It is both dragon and cloud in Olmec stone carvings or is a torrent of water in codices. It is a monolithic head, crowning pediments and cornices in Uxmal, Teotihuacan and El Tajín. The initiated are reborn from its gullets, ancestors of the great men of Yaxchilán, and its open jaws form the fantastic entrance to Chenes temples. Obstinate and consistently, it is covered in feathers and becomes a primordial god, a perennial hero known as Quetzalcóatl. The serpent is uncoiled, becoming ever more geometric and scriptural in the mosaics of Uxmal and Mitla. It twists and works its way back into the earth, more magnificent than ever, in the solid rock of Mexica sculpture.

The serpent may be the animal with the greatest presence in Mesoamerican art. Nonetheless, its body is a slippery and changing form, located in the penumbra, more latent than manifest, fusing itself to such an extent that many times it becomes the aesthetic space itself: frame, edging, frieze, column, spiral, smoke, cloud, wave, pure ornament....

If the serpent as a divine symbol dominates the entire realm of the sacred in Mesoamerica, why does it rarely occupy center stage in Mesoamerican art? The history of religions has taught us that the serpent is not merely a god in Mesoamerica, but rather a sacred multiplicity, a vital principal, an energy which infects everything, even life, if it is considered the willingness to

accept death. The serpent frames the painted mural, envelopes the temple with a stone frieze, accompanies human and divine actors, is the obsessive leitmotif of ornamentation, it becomes a stone column or codex border. It almost never holds center stage, is almost never the subject; it is a nearly invisible presence, an aura, something that emanates from the work, something which leaves a unique mark without being the theme.

Like actors in the great myths, the Mexican serpent emerges from the deep layers of a dream. It is the perfect material for the dreams dominating the American mind, and permeates ancient art like a profound sleep that, upon waking, has left a dew of sweat on feverish skin.

A RELIEF FROM LA VENTA

On the irregular face of a basalt block almost a meter high, a man and a serpent travel along the meanderings of a dream (p. 41). They fill the space of the lightly-dotted Olmec stone, softened by its fleshy color and by its long voyage through thirty centuries of time. Man and animal, partners in a dream, look in the same direction and with the same determination towards a destiny unknown to us. She, the serpent, frames the scene as her feminine curves mold to the uneven contours. As if seated on his mother's lap, he adapts to the serpent's form. The center of the stone, and of the scene, is a human profile which seems to be an echo in miniature, the focus of the entire drama. (The helmet-crown of the serpentine head frames its face the same way the serpent wraps around a man whose body is painfully extended, while pleasingly curved with the grace of the gently twisted figures of lovers in erotic Hindu miniatures.)

Only in this case, it is the serpent—winding and surrounding—which forms the concentric ripples, amplifying the impact of the central point: the framed human face. Despite this, the relief's true center of attention is the serpentine profile, due to its position in the overall economy of the scene and, more importantly, on account

of the ferocity of its expression: a heraldic ferocity which heightens the ornament of the unnatural crest, which may be feathers; a ferocity directed at this common destiny of man and beast which we cannot see, which enigmatically links them through the power of fascination....

They seem to wander, to slip towards their destiny with a fixed and determined gaze, sleepwalkers, exhibiting their attributes as if to conjure up evil spirits. The bag which the person holds forth in his hand (the copal bag of priests in Mesoamerican art), the piece that crowns his helmet, the rattle which the serpent brandishes, in a way unlike that of any other snake, are other banners, shields and symbols of personal power to exorcise the dangers from their voyage. There is something almost amorous in the pair's evident shared energy that leads them into mirroring one another: the man's curves repeat those of the female serpent; the helmet that is a metonymy of the snake; the decoration of the serpent's helmet, imitating the man's and the extraordinary size of the snake compared to the human figure. She seems to protect him, yet without him, she is little more than a codified sign.

The extreme tension between their bodies, their gazes, and the lines they follow toward the focal point beyond the scene, makes the composition more dramatic as it unites the protagonists. All the force of the carved stone is there, in the "extra-mural" link between man and serpent.

FIGURE ON AN ALTAR VESSEL

A vessel was buried at the Altar de Sacrificios, Guatemala (p. 40). Together with other offerings, it accompanied the dead body of a Mayan man. On the vessel's painted surface, a sleeping man raises himself on tiptoes, extending an arm upwards. In the other arm, he holds an undulating serpent that encircles him from above, as if dancing with a mysterious live glyph.

More than a painted scene, more than a representation, we witness the vision of an exotic subconscious, we enter into the mental secrets of a man who died more than 1,300 years ago—and we are amazed. But beyond the symbolic codes of this Maya heraldry, what moves us at first sight are the infinitely elegant outlines, the equilibrium of several forms, a perfect image of the sacred: for this dance of man and serpent which glows on the thousand-year-old vase can be nothing less than sacred.

A step from an oneiric dance, a complicated glyph, this figure is everything but natural, in spite of its realistic elements. The man's balance is almost unsustainable unless we consider the false tail which functions as a third support and, more importantly, the serpent, which pulls the man forward, bringing him upright, according to

the scene's equilibrium. But who supports the serpent? The illusionism of Mayan art, the serpent's hypnosis of the man. The posture of the body about to fall recalls, with some distinctions, that of Pacal, the prince buried in the heart of Palenque's Pyramid of the Inscriptions. Etched in filigree on the slab of his sepulcher, he was immortalized at the moment he offered himself to the Underworld. Here the protagonist also has his eyes closed, absorbed in a sleepwalker's dream or, as in the case of the prince at Palenque, on the path towards a new life. Just as on the Palenque tomb, the acrobatics of the figure suggests a kind of tight-rope walking without sacrificing solemnity.

Is it mere representation? Perhaps, but unconsciously a fat man is depicted engaged in a playful rite with a fat snake. The semi-nude body, with a shaved head, barefoot and almost without ornament, shows off its corpulence, as well as the fineness of the man's face, arms and legs. There is an element of femininity and sensuality about the figure that resembles the aesthetic nature of the snake which encircles it. The man's legs constrained by a second-skin of leggings are of a roundness and a decoration—possibly a tattoo—that directly mirrors the serpent's skin which surrounds the man as a rainbow crowns a sun and rain-drenched mountain, reflected for an instant in the lake below. These two dream creatures are brought to life through a complex and enigmatic relationship: a serpent protecting a man who, because of his nudity and shaved head, is undoubtedly a priest, instilling in him all of her power; and a man who displays the snake with the gesture of a final dance, a delicious last breath.

CARVED FIGURE ON A CHICHÉN ITZÁ RELIEF

A jungle of people are carved into the sloped limestone walls, blackened by centuries of rain, that surround the court of the classic ritual ball game. They conduct rite after rite: the beheading, the most important blood sacrifice. The victim is a submissive player in warrior attire kneeling on one knee. A sheaf of serpents springs from his already-beheaded neck.

While we know the serpents are the sacrificed blood spilling out like precious, sacred water, and although we realize that it is a visual metaphor, we cannot help but see the gushing of those small insolent vipers from the already-severed neck as if from a mutilated body. It is not seen as an aching, bloody and tragic corpse, but rather as a receptacle, a vessel, like a hollow clay statue, containing magical attributes frozen into silence and immortalized in a death that is at once spectacular and anonymous: the anonymity of a decapitated body: no face, no direction, no

destiny. From our Western perspective, the tiny vipers which surge from this inert and empty corpse are inevitably associated with the decay of the flesh, although Mesoamerican symbolism would speak to us of precious water, fertility or resurrection from death.

RELIEF ON A YAXCHILÁN LINTEL

The somewhat coarse texture of the square limestone lintel demonstrates carving of extraordinary delicacy (pp. 42-43). The rock is situated above the door, acting as a small, flat roof. The relief is not displayed but rather awaits those who reach the temple and knowingly raise their heads to contemplate the scene for a few moments before stepping into the darkness inside. It is an intimate, hidden work, barely illuminated by indirect light as the great river gushes only a few steps away. The lintel scene is on the threshold, at the point of contact between blinding light and the dark interior, between the empty space and the carving.

Along this passage between two worlds, a woman raises one eye (devoid of iris) to examine a strange being, as does the visitor. In her hand, she carries a basket from which emerge papers and cords, wrapped and hidden in the excess of her *buipil*'s filigree decoration which demonstrates the weight of royal garb. Another basket lies next to her on the floor, from which rises an undulating serpent, equally decorated by fine carvings, surrounded by spirals representing the heavy and acrid smoke of the blood-soaked burning paper of the ritual. From the exaggerated mouth of the serpent's gullet (it is so wide open the profile is broken and the head of the serpent practically disappears) emerges the decorated head of a man who watches and speaks without looking at the woman. On first impression, the union of the human head with the reptile creates a single monstrous being, a serpent with a human head. It is a kind of Mayan sphinx that rises and stands over the contrite woman, a ritual hand delicately turned beneath its half-opened mouth in a gesture of self-revelation.

The very meandering of the snake brings to mind the curved back and the bent legs of the monstrous being in the act of becoming upright, of slowly unwinding itself as the litany of silent words are worn away. It is the image of a confessor explaining his rules for spiritual life to a grand lady, not an Edenic serpent seducing an innocent Eve.

The thick serpent is smoke, metamorphosed in a visionary dream of the noble matron, undulating in spirals—tentacles of an octopus hidden in the stone. It is the pillar of the scene but not its central theme. It is the invisible support of the divine apparition.

Lady Xoc, as scholars of inscriptions refer to the great woman of the lintel, died more than a thousand years ago, and the ritual of the blood gift which preceded the scene—where nobility spilled their own blood and later burned it to offer its essence to the gods—was lost in the passages of time.

These and other stones remain, relating a visionary, interior world, a world in which the serpent is the medium permitting us to see and hear the divine phantoms in the silence of stone.

▲ Translated by Sara Silver

Dream of Discovery

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE SERPENT



SACRED SERPENTS IN MAYAN CULTURE

Mercedes de la Garza

Animals have always occupied a central place in religious symbolism because of their vitality and physical power which surpasses that of human beings. After all, some have wings, and claws, and are able to survive underwater. Some animals in particular, such as bears, reindeer, large felines, birds and reptiles are viewed as mysterious, admirable and fearsome. Various magical and religious meanings are ascribed to them, elevating them to the realm of the sacred. Above all, these animals are symbols and incarnations of divine energies, bringing these forces into contact with human beings through such epiphanies.

The serpent stands out among all sacred animals. Because of its extraordinary qualities, it has been one of the principal religious symbols around the world. In human beings, the serpent provokes both admiration and fear, and it has a special psychological meaning. This can be explained in part by its speed and agility despite its lack of extremities, its forked tongue, its fixed stare (since it has no eyelids) and, most of all, by its remarkable vitality demonstrated by its skin's periodic molting, its ability to survive for long periods without food or drink, its lifetime of continual growth, its exceptional resilience when seriously injured, its very peculiar forms of mating, and especially, its resemblance to a phallus, the origin of life *par excellence*.

But some serpents are also bearers of death, truly dreadful deaths, due to their unpredictability as well as for the suffering they inflict. These are the poisonous snakes endowed with glands to produce venom and fangs to inject it.

The primary sacred serpents in Mayan culture were the venomous snakes belonging to the *sole-noglypha* group of the *Crotalidae* family, and possessing the most perfect apparatus for injecting their poison: grooved front fangs, jaws joined only by flexible ligaments permitting them to open wide and well-developed venom producing glands. The most noteworthy of these creatures considered a religious symbol is the *Crotalus durissus durissus* or the tropical rattlesnake, referred to as the *tzab can* and the *abau can* in Yucatec Mayan. It is the most dangerous rattlesnake because it rarely makes a sound. It measures about two meters long, with a very thick body, large scales and extremely long fangs. Its color is olive-green with a rhombus pattern on its back. Its venom is neurotoxic (producing death by asphyxia and heart paralysis) and contains blood toxins. It is ovoviparous (its young are hatched from eggs that develop while inside the female's body).

Among the non-venomous snakes, the *Boa constrictor constrictor*, or *ochcan* in Mayan, is also considered sacred. This remarkable snake measures up to four meters long and produces a terror mixed with fascination in its victims, who become immobile when caught in the gaze of its bi-colored eyes and who may even bring themselves right up to its gaping fauces.

It is because of all these characteristics that serpents became sacred symbols. In Mayan religion, the serpent is polyvalent: it represents life and death, good and evil, the masculine and the feminine, heaven, earth and the underworld. So while other animals symbolize concrete aspects of nature, the serpent seems to embody the great cosmic opposites as well as the natural harmony which makes existence possible. The serpent seems to symbolize a sacred energy in which both gods and men participate, which explains its omnipresence in works of art and in the codices, as well as its important role in myth and ritual.

The principal serpent symbol in Mayan religion is what has been called the Sky-serpent, inspired by the poisonous tropical rattlesnake which, transformed into a dragon—in other words, embellished with the qualities of a bird, an alligator, a jaguar and a deer—represented the vital celestial energy and was the supreme god of the Mayan pantheon, which the Yucatec Maya referred to as Itzamná. This deity was represented in different forms, as two-headed dragons and snakes, the plumed serpent and the bird-serpent, in many works of art in every Mayan city and ceremonial center.

As in most religions, the serpent appears in Mayan cosmogonic myths (that speak of the origin of the cosmos), linked to the earliest beings and acting in the beginning of time as the Creator or as the primordial chaos from which the cos-

mos emerged. In many religions, the serpent is the monster or dragon that is killed by the hero to bring order to the world. According to Mayan beliefs, the plumed serpent or the celestial serpent acts as the Creator. In the *Popol Vuh* of the Quiché Mayans, this god is known as Gucumatz and is presented as the primordial water, the vital aquatic energy of the group of creator gods. In this sense, the Quiché cosmogony coincides with many other cosmogonies in which the primordial water is a dragon.

In the cosmogony of the Yucatec Maya *Books of Chilam Balam*, the plumed serpent is known as Canhel, the celestial life source. It is aquatic like Gucumatz, and also symbolizes semen because of its fecundity.

By symbolizing the original and heavenly life energy, the serpent represents the water of lakes, seas and rivers that, when converted into vapor, forms clouds, and returns to the earth as rain. The Yucatec Maya called this water deity Chac.

But the serpent is not only associated with the primary gods symbolizing vital cosmic energy, the gods of the underworld are also linked to the ophidian. These gods symbolize death, perhaps expressing the ambivalence of the serpent itself, which represents both life and death.

In its relationship with the earth, the serpent represents the concealed generative powers of the soil, and is therefore linked to the god of death, who also resides underground, and to the jaguar, the symbol of the underworld, the heavens and the Sun during the hours of darkness. This is represented by an erect serpent with the god of death in its tail, and vegetation, blood and the Sun emerging from its jaws, which are opened upward. In works of art we also find the serpent in the roots of trees, injecting plant life. It is also considered to be the guardian of underground treasures: precious stones and seeds.

For the Mayans, the snake embodied the fertility of the earth; its location in the underworld symbolized the belief that this was the great uterus of Mother Earth, where life and death are united. The serpent is thus the power that integrates the silent kingdom of death with the vital universal cycle, thereby forming a unifying bond within the cosmos.

Since the main function of women in the Mayan world was to serve as procreators of life, women were also related to the serpent and the Moon, because of its association with menstruation and therefore with fecundity. The Moon and the serpent are also symbols of immortality: the first because it disappears and reappears periodically; the second, because it is able to regularly change its skin.

As cosmic mother, the serpent is associated with the cavern, which is the vagina or the corridor which leads to the uterus-underworld. This

chthonic nature of the serpent is one of its most important characteristics and, together with the changing of skin, it leads to the association between the ophidian and the initiations of men. The initiations signify the death of the profane life and the rebirth of a sacred life.

As the religious symbol *par excellence* in the Mayan world, the serpent is associated with many ritual practices. In some fertility ceremonies, the ophidian represents both the feminine deities and the penis, thus expressing one of the universal dualities of its religious symbolism.

In the codices, the feminine figures wearing serpent headdresses are always presenting an offering or emptying a vessel, obviously part of rituals involving the earth's fertility. In contemporary Mayan rituals, which are naturally derived from the pre-Hispanic period, male dancers place live serpents under the skirts of female dancers. In this case, the serpent clearly symbolizes the penis.

Other rituals involving serpents were purification rites, in which priests adorned the rattles of rattlesnakes, and rites of passage such as the puberty ceremony in which the young were blessed with an aspergillum made from *tzab can* or rattlesnake tails.

But one of the serpent's primary functions in rituals is to symbolize blood. The spirits of living beings reside in blood and it is the main nourishment offered by men to the gods. The snake can be seen on the bases of sacrificial stones and in various sacrifice-related rituals, but the clearest example is found in the ball court reliefs at Chichén Itzá. There, a human decapitation is depicted by six serpents and a plant emerging from the neck of the sacrificed, demonstrating the bond between man and nature, so fundamental to Mayan thought.

Blood is a life force, similar to that of semen and water. Thus, blood, semen and vegetation are mixed in the anthropozoomorphic figure of the serpent god K, Bolon Dz'ocab, which is associated with corn, the blood of nobility and the blood offered in self-sacrifice.

This god also symbolizes the onanistic rituals of offering semen as practiced by Mayan rulers, and it is often represented as a leg or penis transformed into a serpent. The snake also appears in the hands of monarchs as scepters or batons, indicating the sacred nature of these individuals.

In general, Mayan rulers are depicted with serpents, which are found in different parts of their attire: on headdresses, loincloths, belts, bracelets and sandals. The ophidian is also seen on thrones, and above all, on attributes of power such as the batons or *maniquí* scepters in the image of Bolon Dz'ocab, as well as on the so-called "ceremonial staffs" which represent the supreme god Itzamná, the celestial two-headed

serpent or dragon. These staffs are carried by the rulers against their chests, to signify that their power came directly from the celestial deity. The snake heads are represented in a very stylized manner, and the bodies are sometimes flexible or schematically designed in the shape of a rod. They usually contain glyphs of the sky or rhombuses which resemble the pattern on the *Crotalus durissus durissus*, or *ahau can*, which is the same name that the Yucatec Mayans give to their high priest.

The rhombuses on the staff signified that its bearer was the great priest (the ruler in the Classic period) who sustained the power of the gods before men and who understood the divine forces, and thus controlled them, giving him the right to govern over the rest.

But this deification of the rulers was not easily bestowed. Rather, it was acquired through a strict ritual of initiation and constant ascetic practices. In other words, just like many present-day healers and soothsayers, the Mayan rulers of the Classic period were shamans.

Many works of art, especially several lintels at Yaxchilán, depict monarchs emerging from between the fangs of large serpents. According to written sources, these are clearly expressions of certain initiation rituals practiced by ancient Mayans, which have survived to the present day among many Mesoamerican peoples.

The initiation rituals consist of the following: after a long apprenticeship, the initiate goes to a dark, remote location in the forests or mountains, and places himself near an anthill, from which several small serpents come out and enter his body. Then, an enormous boa appears and swallows him, grinds him up between its fangs and fauces and excretes him. In this way, the shaman appears. He is a man who has been made sacred, acquiring supernatural powers from the serpent which permit him to exercise control over other men. In this case, the serpent fulfills the role of the demiurge or "Master of initiation." Once made sacred, the shaman can now enter the ecstatic trance and use sacred plants (hallucinogenic and medicinal) to predict the future and to heal.

The boa or *ochcan* is symbolic, therefore, of the chthonic or earthly serpent, through which men attain transcendence, uniting themselves with the celestial serpent *tzab can*. This serpent can be seen coiled in the arms of Classic rulers. The boa was perhaps chosen to symbolize initiation because of its great size and its power to hypnotize victims before swallowing them.

But, basically, the initiation of those who held power—the ancient *balach uinicob* or "true men" as well as present-day shamans—is linked to the serpent because it is a chthonic animal of the underworld. It embodies both death and fecundity, hidden in the bowels of the earth. The

initiation signifies dying, to be later reborn in the realm of the sacred. The serpent is an animal that transforms itself; in a sense, it gives birth to itself. It sheds its old skin, renewing itself cyclically just as plants do, thus becoming immortal. The serpent brings the sacred to mankind because it is the animal connected to the vital cosmic and divine energy, to the great Mother Earth, to water, to the phallus and to wisdom. For this reason, the man who is connected to the serpent acquires its qualities. The one who is penetrated and swallowed by the serpent dies to return to life transformed into a man with access to the hidden mysteries of the cosmos, the secrets of life, death and the future.

In short, the serpent—the sacred power that impregnates all—is a vital force. It is the procreator of the universe—thus linked to water, blood and semen—which sustained the creator gods at the beginning of time, in that static moment before genesis. It was the life force with which they formed the world and since then, has been the driving force that continuously generates life. It is also death—but that death which is transformed into new life in an eternal cycle, and the sacred death which transfigures men, bringing them closer to the gods. ▲ *Translated by Jana L. Schroeder*

IMAGES OF SERPENTS IN THE TEMPLO MAYOR OFFERINGS

Carlos Javier González

Like most religious buildings, the Templo Mayor, or Great Temple, of Mexico-Tenochtitlan was the scene of a variety of ritual activities, by means of which not only a mythical conception of the world, but also the forces emanating from the gods, were given material expression. Research has shown that the Templo Mayor was the *axis mundi*, the site of confluence of two force-fields that, according to the Mesoamerican cosmopolitanism, guided the distribution of the Universe both vertically (upper world and underworld) and horizontally (the four directions).

At the same time, this and other temples of pre-Hispanic Mexico also constituted the symbolic representation of a hill, sometimes two. Eduardo Matos has suggested that the northern half of the building, consecrated to Tlaloc, might stand for Tonacatépetl, or the "Hill of Sustenance," while its southern twin, devoted to Huitzilopochtli, represents the hill of Coatepec which, as legend has it, is the birthplace of the Mexica tutelary deity. In this respect, the location of the Coyolxauhqui monolith, which shows her dismembered and in warrior attire, is particularly telling: it is placed at the foot of the stair leading up to the shrine of Huitzilopochtli.

It is for these and other reasons that we may define the Templo Mayor as a sacred space, the host of supernatural forces, at the same time as it was a place of human reunion or communication with the gods. Whenever it was renovated or enlarged, lavish offerings were deposited among the stones and earth of its foundations. Of course, the value of such offerings should be assessed in terms of the sacred and symbolic nature of their components, rather than on a material level. At the end of a brilliant analysis, Leonardo López Luján demonstrates that several offerings placed divine images in a context that reproduces and synthesizes, through an extensive accompanying paraphernalia, the three fundamental levels into which the Mexica divided the world: the lower or aquatic, the terrestrial, and the higher or celestial. In other words, the gods—personified in effigies—positioned themselves in a manner propitious for deploying their powers and interacting with mankind. The gifts offered by priests were intended to ensure that these forces would be beneficial.

The material recovered from the Templo Mayor offerings includes several images of snakes, which is hardly surprising in light of the important role played by this reptile in indigenous religious thought. Many of these images were found in what López Luján calls “consecration offerings,” because of their unusual opulence: they refer to the three levels of the Universe, and they appear to have been deposited *en masse* in the building as part of the consecration or inauguration rituals during phase IVb in 1469. In such cases, the serpent is almost always present in the form of heads and rattles of green-gold obsidian, fashioned with the utmost care and realism. The facial characteristics differ in each specimen, as though the artist’s intention were to individualize them. The eyes are marked by polished depressions, and some were pitted to grip probable incrustations. Although these pieces were found apart from the main offerings at the time of excavation, it is very likely that they were originally connected to them by some perishable material, since both heads and rattles exhibit deep circular cavities at the back. One specimen still bore traces of wood in this cavity when it was found.

The beauty and craftsmanship of certain *tecalli* or alabaster pieces is no less striking. Most of these represent the scepter-like objects held by certain deities, principally those associated with rain and water, illustrated in pictographic documents. These also take serpent form, and in the Templo Mayor consecration offerings they are repeatedly juxtaposed with other objects such as deer heads, canes filled with seeds or *chicahuaztli*, obsidian plaques ending in a swallowtail, and ceramic versions of the glyph for

ollin, or movement. As a group they seem to embody the water/fire opposition and the flow of divine forces. The scepters, in particular, are related to water by their serpent form and may also allude to the lightning bolts that herald and accompany rain.

The symbolic alliance of serpents with earth and water is most explicitly expressed in Offering 41, one of the most unusual of the set. It contains fifteen snake figures, the majority rendered in the Mezcala style of Guerrero; the four exceptions are rectilinear with clearly marked rattles, imported from the Mixtec region. However, it is the first and most typical kind that interests us here. The objects had been placed in a cubical, lidded stone box, with reliefs carved on the outside. On the lid we recognize the face of Tlaloc, with his long fangs and great circular eyes. This is prolonged by two arms descending along the lateral faces and ending in two hands at the front. The body is inscribed on one side with a pair of calendar glyphs (13 Rain and 13 Reed), and on the opposite face with the *chalchibuitl* emblem, primordial symbol of water, of precious substances, and of life. The lateral faces are each completed by a bent leg and sandalled foot—anatomically related to the head. The offering was thus enclosed in the very body of the god—a principle that persists among today’s Lacandon Indians, who set their offerings inside pots considered to be divine effigies. Alfredo López Austin has commented that in this custom, “vehicle, image and force are merged into one.”

The elements of Offering 41 refer to water and to the way of life developed by societies inhabiting the lake region of the Valley of Mexico: sea snails; fish carved out of shells and green stone; little stone canoes complete with oars; *ātlatl* or spear throwers; trident spears (*minacchalli*) used for catching fish and birds; miniature stone ducks, amphibians, coiled serpents (in addition to those already mentioned) and many other objects. The cubical Tlaloc recipient was, in turn, enclosed by stone ashlar which were an integral part of the building. On the floor, between the urn and the sides of the box, Mexica priests scattered a mass of sea snails, to gratify the god of rain with an aquatic environment. The ultimate intention may have been to recreate the first moment of creation, when myth recalls that Tlaltecuhtli roamed the seas before she was cut in two by Quetzalcóatl and Tezcatlipoca, transformed into huge serpents, in order to create the earth.

The plentiful use of serpent images in the Templo Mayor offerings can only be properly interpreted in the light of this animal’s strong links with local cults of earth and water. However, the raw materials that went into making them, as well as the range of styles, reveal

that they were obtained, through tribute or otherwise, thanks to the Mexica policy of military expansionism. Obsidian, a strategic resource which was also used in weapons manufacture, generally came from the area around Otumba, near Teotihuacan; although the highly prized green-gold variety can be found to this day in Sierra de las Navajas in the state of Hidalgo. *Tecalli*, or Mexican alabaster, was sent from the Mixtec zone of Puebla. As for the Mezcala-type figures, they were probably seized by plundering abandoned ceremonial centers, for they belong to an artistic tradition that predates Mexico-Tenochtitlan. Like many other objects from Teotihuacan, they exemplify the recuperation and recycling of the past. ▲ *Translated by Lorna Scott Fox*

OBSESSED BY THE SERPENT

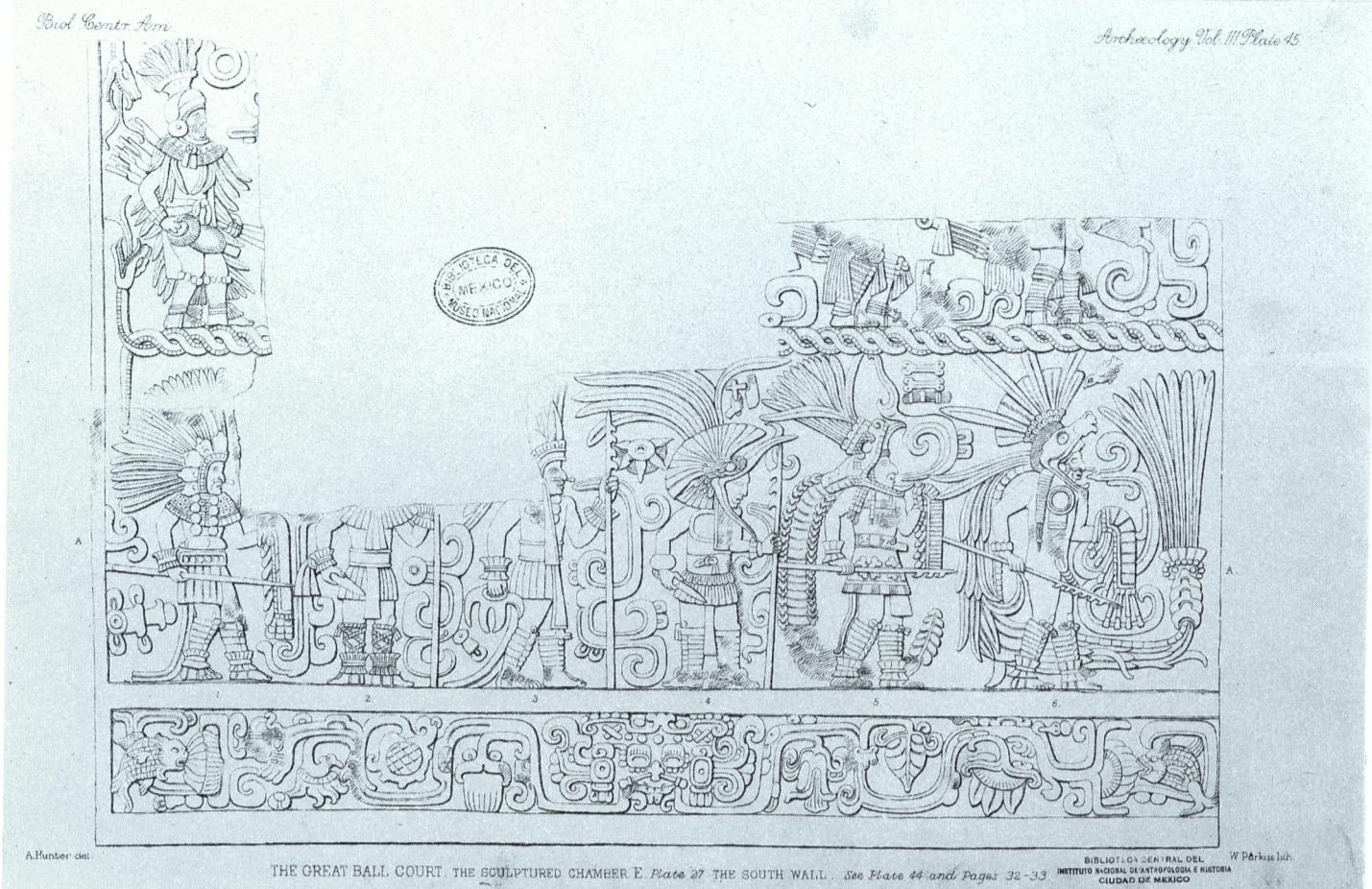
Sara Ladrón de Guevara

All across the vast territory of Mesoamerica, and throughout its long history, the serpent played a leading role in the visual images that serve as metaphors for human thought. Considering the wide variety of fauna native to this complex region of Mesoamerica, only very few species became part of the iconography of art. As Miguel Covarrubias noted, the eagle, the jaguar and the serpent were among the creatures that featured most strongly in the pre-Hispanic imagination, recognized as being endowed with unique personalities, rich in symbolic meaning. Indeed, the quality that distinguished gods from men in Mesoamerican art was the fact that the human aspects of deities were combined with animal traits and attributes, which made them into superior beings, quite the reverse of Western cultural prejudices.

As a symbol, the serpent encapsulates a multiplicity of meanings, some of which are complementary, others contradictory. These meanings are expressed according to the attributes displayed and the context of the representation. The most familiar association, owing to its frequency, is the presence of feathers. Here, the serpent becomes identified with a crucial deity in the Mesoamerican pantheon: the plumed serpent, Quetzalcóatl.

During the Postclassic period, an important time of transition (800-1200 A.D.), Quetzalcóatl was the object of an intense cult which in several parts of Mesoamerica, swelled into a veritable messianic movement.

El Tajín was one of the centers of this cult. The god’s attributes are obsessively depicted in architectural space, on painted and carved surfaces and on ceramic vessels, as no doubt they also adorned codices and textiles. The plumed



A. Hunter del
THE GREAT BALL COURT. THE SCULPTURED CHAMBER E. Plate 27. THE SOUTH WALL. See Plate 44 and Pages 32-33. W. Perkiss lith.
BIBLIOTICA CENTRAL DEL INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE ANTROPOLOGIA E HISTORIA
CITUDAD DE MEXICO

serpents of El Tajín allude unmistakably to a Quetzalcóatl represented *ad infinitum* in the space by another of his emblems, the stepped fret. Repeated in serial form, this design appears in the architecture of the monumental wall known as the Great Xicalcoliuhqui. In El Tajín, the snake images display a peculiar eye in spiral form in addition to feathers. Called the "divine eye," it is the motif which betrays the divine status of figures that are not necessarily serpentine. As an independent glyph, the spiral eye can be found on countless occasions in the interlaced patterns characteristic of the El Tajín style.

But there are not only plumed serpents at El Tajín. Even more common, perhaps, is the realistic snake with its flexible body, its ability to coil about itself or become entwined with another. The resulting knot stands for opposition and its resolution, in the form of another crucial glyph: *ollin*, or vital motion.

The sculptural corpus of El Tajín includes the tangled figures of two serpents covering some human figures, while elsewhere we see the reptiles surrounding humans in a circle. This is the position they adopt on the relief carvings of the North Ball Court and on other stone *tableros* found at the Pyramid of the Niches. The depiction of two entwined snakes forms the sign of *ollin*, as we have mentioned, whereas the ring of snakes invokes the circular notion of eternal return. Since time was viewed by Mesoamerican peoples as cyclical, serpents provided the perfect sign to represent the idea of a return to the starting point. In this way, such abstract concepts as

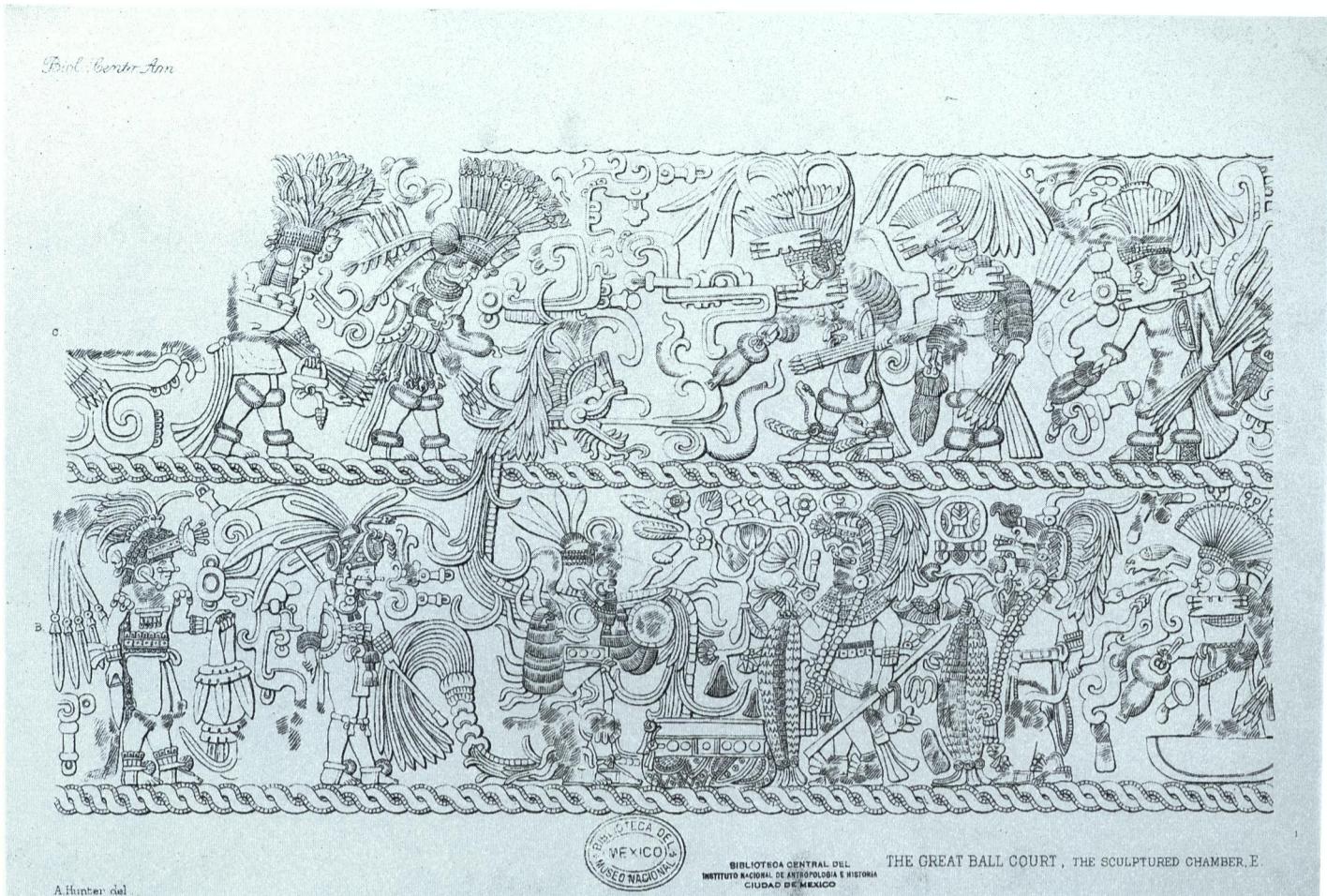
the movement of life, or the cycles of time, could hardly find a better incarnation than deified serpents with feathers and spiral eyes.

In the piece known as the Altar, it is the sun, home of fire, which is bracketed by a pair of plumed serpents. Their coils spell the *ollin* glyph twice over, in keeping with the preoccupations of El Tajín's iconography. *Ollin*, or movement, is found in these many intertwinings but also exists in the ball game, which was paramount in El Tajín. If we consider the seventeen ball courts discovered on the site to date, we can appreciate the way the city was encircled by spaces devoted to a ritual in which the very concept of movement was embodied in the image of the sun carved on stone and surrounded by a tangle of snakes, symbolizing the conciliation of opposites.

On the Altar, movement is suggested through the bodies of the snakes along the central, vertical axis and radiating in the four directions, as though they were paths for the flow of time, change, opposition and the harmony of contrary currents. In this way, the piece makes clear, first, the horizontal plane with its four directions, then the vertical. But we can also observe how the bodies of the serpents themselves betray another dimension, that of time—the cyclical unfolding in all five directions.

The jets of water on the lower corners of the same piece spring from zoomorphic heads resembling stylized serpents. These two creatures, combined with the pair ringing the sun, may possibly add up to the four serpents which, according to the *Bacab* ritual, shaped the world.

Relieve en un tablero de piedra. Procesión de guerreros con atavíos de serpientes emplumadas. Muro sur. Juego de pelota. Chichen-Itzá. Posclásico. Dibujo de Alfred P. Maudslay.



There is no doubt that the foremost ceremony performed in El Tajín was the ball game. All representations of this ritual feature serpents in a number of symbolic associations.

We should first remember, that the corners of the oldest ball courts harbored monolithic sculptures of serpent heads. Since the El Tajín court lacks stone rings in its walls, it is fair to assume that these reptile heads served as goals.

The meaning of the snake as an illustration of the ball game is made evident in one piece which synthesizes, in just a few strokes, the underlying concepts of the game: the *coincidentia oppositorum*. This is the frieze within the building, showing part of a ball court. Two human profiles are presented in confrontation like the two teams of players. Both figures sport headdresses adorned with snakes, two each, one facing forward and the other toward the back of each head. The front-facing serpents meet at the center of the relief, where their tongues curl about each other to form the sign of *ollin*. This design sums up the clash of opposites enacted in the game's ritual and the resolution achieved by movement.

Another important event associated with the ball game, and practiced throughout Mesoamerica, is sacrifice by decapitation. Once more, metaphor is supplied by the serpent, made to represent blood. In the carved stone *tableros* found at the ball courts of Chichén Itzá, Yucatán, or Aparicio, Veracruz, blood is depicted in the shape of seven serpents, spurting like the fluid of life from the severed neck. A triangular *tablero*

from El Tajín, which is unfortunately incomplete, shows a sacrifice in the middle of a ball court. The buildings on either side can be seen, along with the ball in the form of a skull, in further reference to sacrifice. In the top section, three carved serpent heads, which were most probably accompanied by four more, complete the image representative of sacrificial blood.

As we contemplate the serpents of El Tajín, another ancient idea communicates itself: that of the cosmos as a complex web of ropes and knots. This notion has been promoted by researchers such as Klein, Rodhe, González Torres and Miller, all of whom have found such networks alluded to both in the chronicles (*Mendietam, Chilam Balam*) and in codices (Vindobonensis, Paris). At El Tajín, the image of the mooring ropes of the universe is a common one, and it is often the bodies of serpents that form the knots so obsessively represented in the friezes overrunning the buildings, almost so as to ensure their omnipresence at the site.

In conclusion, the manifestations of the Mesoamerican serpent at El Tajín demonstrate the snake's function, as center of the convergence of a range of signifiers. The snake is the path along which time flows and the bridge which permits the passage from space to another. It is vital movement, the coincidence of opposites and their resolution. The snake is a circle with no beginning and no end, yet by the same token it is both beginning and end: it is life and death, joined in a single aesthetic instance. ▲

Translated by Lorna Scott Fox.

Relieve en un tablero de piedra. Ceremonias de guerreros itzaes con serpientes emplumadas. Muro sur. Juego de pelota. Chichen-Itza. Posclásico. Dibujo de Alfred P. Maudslay.

Página 80:
Diseño extendido de un yugo. Veracruz. Clásico. Miguel Covarrubias.

A Dream Inflamed

THE LIVING QUETZALCOATL

D.H. Lawrence



I am the Living Quetzalcoatl.

Naked I come from out of the deep
From the place which I call my Father,
Naked have I travelled the long way round
From heaven, past the sleeping sons of God.

Out of the depths of the sky, I came like an eagle.
Out of the bowels of the earth, like a snake.

All things that lift in the lift of living between earth and sky,
know me.

But I am the inward star invisible.
And the star is the lamp in the hand of the Unknown Mover.
Beyond me is a Lord who is terrible, and wonderful, and dark
to me forever.

Yet I have lain in his loins, ere he begot me in Mother space.

Now I am alone on earth, and this is mine.
The roots are mine, down the dark, moist path of the snake.
And the branches are mine, in the paths of the sky and the bird,
But the spark of me that is me is more than mine own.

And the feet of men, and the hands of the women know me.
And the knees and thighs and loins, and the bowels of strength
and seed are lit with me.

The snake of my left-hand out of the darkness is kissing your
feet with his mouth of caressive fire,
And putting his strength in your heels and ankles, his flame in
your knees and your legs and your loins, his circle of rest
in your belly.

For I am Quetzalcoatl, the feathered snake.
And I am not with you till my serpent has coiled his circle of
rest in your belly.

And I, Quetzalcoatl, the eagle of the air, am brushing your faces
with vision.

I am fanning your breasts with my breath.
And building my nest of peace in your bones.
I am Quetzalcoatl, of the Two Ways.

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