

# CLASSIC VERACRUZ GROTESQUES AND SACRIFICIAL ICONOGRAPHY

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Stone sculptures from the Gulf Coast of Mexico, known as Classic Veracruz works of art, illustrate many themes and ideas relating to ball court rituals, including images of antinaturalistic or supernatural beings conventionally known as gods. Three gods in particular, a vampire bat, ghoulish vulture and pulque-rabbit, explain the religious thinking of the Classic Veracruz peoples. Visual evidence in the sculptures suggests that the vampire bats drink blood spilled by sacrificial victims while the vultures consume the bodies. The rabbit symbolises pulque, the intoxicating drink provided for participants in the rituals of human sacrifice. While some parallels can be drawn between the gods at Tajin and other Mesoamerican gods, an examination of the sculptural details indicates that Tajin and Classic Veracruz civilisation as a whole developed their own specialised lines of iconography.

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## I

Portable and monumental stone sculptures from the Gulf Coast of Mexico belonging to the Classic Veracruz style represent the only major lowland Mesoamerican sculpture style in the Classic Period outside the Maya territory. Proskouriakoff (1954) and Kampen (1972) have illustrated the major monuments but very little is known about the iconography of Classic Veracruz art. Veracruz sculptures illustrate many themes and ideas relating to the ball court rituals, including scenes of human sacrifices. In addition to the ball players, priests and other performers shown in ritual contexts, Veracruz art also represents antinaturalistic or supernatural beings conventionally known as gods. Scroll-formed heads with or without bodies represent beings with no counterparts on this earth. Some of these Veracruz grotesque creatures resemble other Mesoamerican gods. Their meanings, however, cannot necessarily be understood by equation with gods from other time periods and locations. Classic Veracruz iconography clearly follows its own patterns and can be best understood by a visual analysis of the sculptures themselves.

The single most important general theme in Veracruz art is the ritual of human sacrifice. A vast number of sub-themes, including gods and their associated cults, play parts in this dramatic celebration. Three gods in particular, a vampire bat, ghoulish vulture, and pulque-rabbit, are well illustrated in the sculptures and are studied here to show how they explain the religious thinking of Classic Veracruz peoples.

## II

One of the most important gods in the post-sacrificial ceremonies is the vampire bat, presented in its naturalistic form, by men in bat costumes and by grotesque heads representing profile views of actors wearing bat masks. The bat is a native American variety, *Desmodus rotundus*, the vampire bat, a nocturnal creature that lives on a diet of blood. Vampire bats do not actually suck blood from their victims: they bite them with their sharp incisors and lap blood from the wounds with their long tongue. Vampire bats sleep by day and hunt by night, taking their blood mainly from sleeping animals. They are, however, not the sinister creatures that we associate with European vampirism. Folklore literature since the end of the nineteenth century and films have popularised a vampire character, ultimately based in part on the *Desmodus rotundus*, but with little relationship to the American bat. Leaving their lairs at sundown, in search of blood, the bats would have been attracted to ritual centres where sacrifices had taken place. Veracruz sacrifices, documented in Tajin art, show priests cutting the jugular veins of victims as a prelude to decapitation. A rarer form of sacrifice was by heart extraction. Both methods would have spilled ample quantities of blood to attract a host of winged vampires.



FIGURE 1a.



FIGURE 1b.

Vampire grotesques have the following features: a supraorbital scroll over the eye, a prominent human nose, an elongated tongue or scroll-form upper lip symbolising the vampire bat tongue, concentric circles placed in various contexts around the face and varieties of an aberrant, meandering scroll formation in the place of a body that symbolises blood.

The identification of the bat grotesque is ultimately based upon decorations on a palma in the Cleveland Museum of Art (fig. 1). A man wearing a bat mask and costume stands on a platform decorated with a grotesque head. A prominent human nose appears with a scroll-formed eye and an elongated upper lip. The formation of this grotesque head type appears to be based on elements in masks worn by persons representing the bat deity in Classic Veracruz rituals. Additional variations of this grotesque with a prominent human nose are illustrated around the upper perimeter of the stone. The role of the vampire is explained on the reverse side of the stone where a diving bat with scalloped wing tips swoops down to lick the scattered pieces of a sacrificial victim.

Aggressive vampire bats are shown at work on the Hammond palma from New Orleans where three bats in flight descend upon the body of a recumbent sacrificial victim (fig. 2). Each bat is illustrated with special emphasis upon its



FIGURE 2.

scalloped wing outlines, pointed ears and upturned nose. The lowermost bat opens its mouth and licks the chin of the sacrificial victim who places his knuckles, as if in resignation, against the bat's wing. The victim is entwined within a larger, aberrant scroll, similar to those behind grotesque bat heads: the sign for blood. In the place of a tongue, a string of beads (a common sacrificial symbol in Tajin) falls from the mouth of the bat on the upper right.

Some of the more positive examples of bat symbolism in the architectural sculptures at Tajin are listed below. Bat grotesques appear in the North Ball Court friezes on the east end of the playing field. The grotesque on the south wall has three concentric circles around its eye and a body formed by the aberrant blood scroll (fig. 3). The guilloche to the left is also provided with a

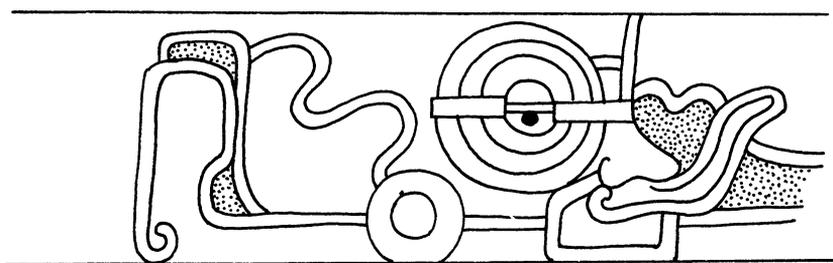


FIGURE 3.

scalloped outline to symbolise the bat wing. The companion head across the court is similar but less detailed. Yet another bat grotesque in the Mound of the Building Columns has a scroll loop below its eye, an elongated tongue, not lip, and an atypical body scroll. Two decapitated heads near the feet of a man seated on a bench, Sculpture 5, Mound of the Building Columns, have elongated upper lips and eye scrolls. Details of the grotesque head appear as masked elements on actors in Panels 5 and 6 of the South Ball Court (figs. 4 and 5). The man performing a blood-letting ceremony, Panel 5, passes a rod through his penis. This blood anoints the face of a sacrificial victim seated in a pool of pulque. This performer appears again in Panel 6, across the Court. In both cases he can be recognised by his elongated upper lip.

It would seem relatively safe to borrow a basic idea from Aztec thought and assume that sacrifices at Tajin were offered to the gods, that the priests there expressed no small concern over the proper presentation of those rituals, and that they wanted the gods to accept the offerings. Smelling blood, the vampires would be almost certain to appear at the sacrificial locations shortly after sundown. The presence of the thirsty vampires, lapping up the blood, could have been equated with the gods' acceptance of the sacrificial offerings.

The role of the bats, bat gods and human imitators is quite old in Tajin. Representations of bats occur at the beginning of the Late Classic Period in the Temple of the Niches. Since vampire bats would almost certainly be attracted to blood-letting ceremonies, the cult surrounding the veneration of the vampire bat might be extremely ancient, as old as the blood-letting ceremonies themselves.

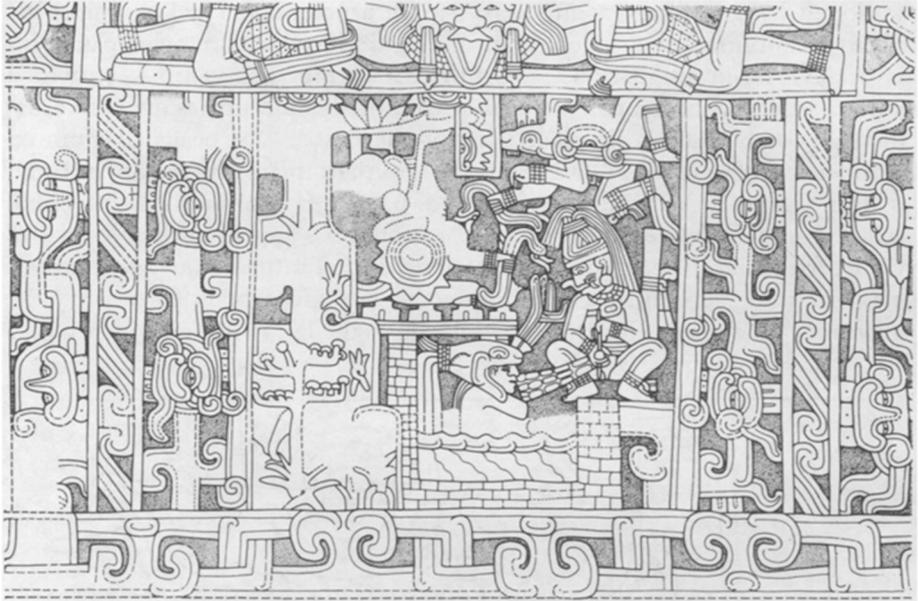


FIGURE 4.

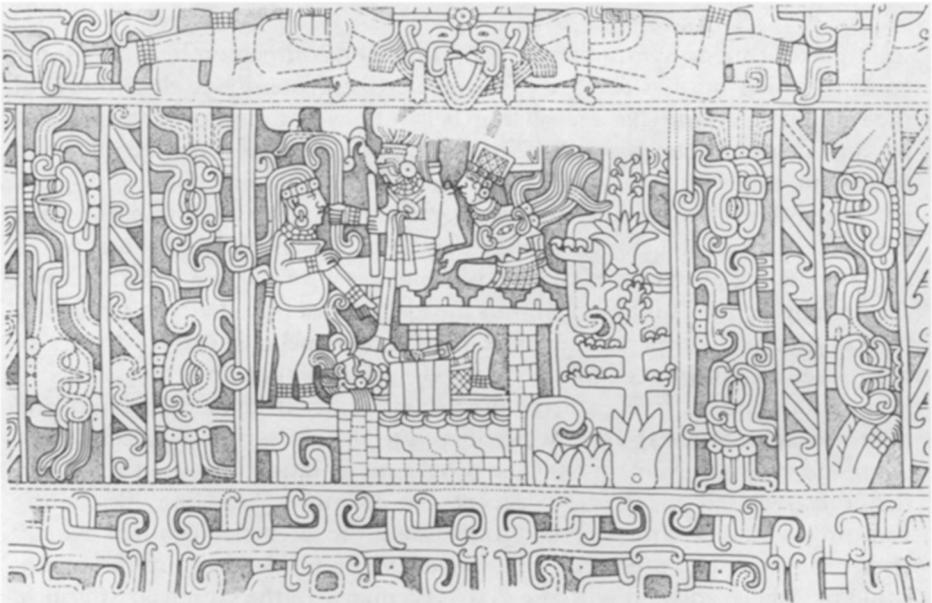


FIGURE 5.

## III

A closely related vulture cult coexisted with the vampire bats. Illustrations at Tajin and on portable Classic Veracruz sculptures show large birds consuming sacrificial victims. They are acting as representatives of the

Veracruz gods, accepting ritual offerings. These scavengers of the sky patrol above the landscape in search of food, mainly fallen animals. The sight and smell of a dead rodent will attract a flock of vultures—a platform covered by decapitated sacrificial victims would excite every vulture for many miles. Even the sight of crowds gathered in the ritual centres might have brought great numbers of the black birds to the trees around the city where they would wait in the hot sun for the victims to be felled. Together the vultures and bats consumed the body and the blood of the corpses, the gifts to the gods, to symbolise the gods' acceptance of these sacrificial offerings.

#### IV

In addition to the vampire and ghoulish symbolism, the sacrificial iconography of Classic Veracruz art also illustrates another very important associated cult: the veneration of a holy intoxicant, pulque. Pulque is made by fermenting juice taken from maguey plants. The cult is best represented in Panels 5 and 6 of the South Ball Court and Sculptures 1 and 6 in the Building Columns. Aspects of the pulque iconography in these reliefs have been discussed by Garcia Payon (1973) and Wilkerson (1976). In the art pulque was consumed by priests and other persons represented that are associated with this cult. Certain ritual attendants and the god of pulque appear to be heavily intoxicated. Iconography of the pulque cult can take the form of hieroglyphic dates, naturalistic rabbits, rabbit-headed creatures with anthropomorphic bodies, flying gods with human bodies and ritual actors wearing costume elements of the rabbit pulque symbolism.

Sculptures 1 and 6 of the Building Columns represent scenes from the life of 13 Rabbit, an historical figure that may have been a ruler of Tajin around A.D. 900 (figs 6 and 7). In sculpture 6, 13 Rabbit wears a long plumed staff secured

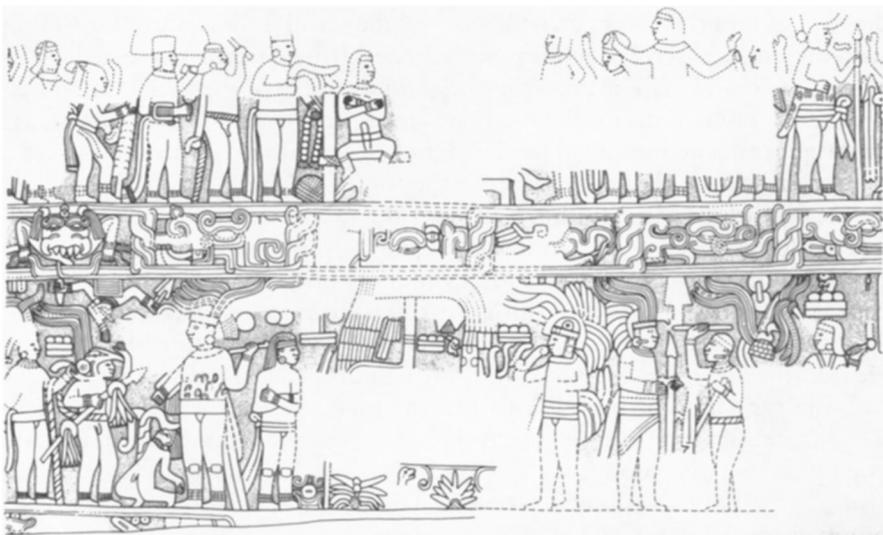


FIGURE 6.



FIGURE 7.

in his head band. A hieroglyphic sign for his name, a naturalistic rabbit profile over two bars (each signifying 5), and three dots, are set directly over his head. The man next to him, 8 Maguey, wears a tall hat decorated with small maguey plants. They are both present at ball game rituals that include the sacrifice of the players shown to the right. In the frieze directly above 13 Rabbit is another seminaturalistic rabbit with a grotesque on his torso. This grotesque has a scalloped upper outline of feathers and a long bent scroll that trails the hind quarters of the rabbit. The grotesque may have a multitude of associations, but for the present it will be identified only with respect to its rabbit connexion. Thirteen Rabbit, recognisable by his hieroglyphic name and plumed staff, appears again in Sculpture 1. His name is repeated to the left, above a sacrificial platform decorated with maguey plants. The name of this Tajin leader as a calendric date in the 260 ritual year was a name well taken for his role as pageant master in the sacrificial rituals.

Maguey plants in various stages of growth, Panel 5, South Ball Court, fill the entire left side of the complex scene. A rabbit bearing a scroll equipped with maguey signs on its tips, is suspended in the air with its legs bent to signify the idea of flight. A twisted cord connects the scroll in the hand of the rabbit with an identical scroll counterpart in the left hand of the man seated on the roof of the building. The grotesque head on the torso of the flying rabbit has a crown of saw-tooth motifs that are repeated in the other abbreviated grotesques attached to the upper border of this scene and on the perimeter of the shield held by the man seated on the top of the building. The scroll and saw-tooth motifs identify this man with the rabbit and pulque associations.

The long-haired man with fangs and a protracted upper lip wears concentric ovals over his chest and a cylinder bound with a sash and tied to his back. He lacks a skirt or a loin cloth: but this nakedness does not brand him as a lowly captive because he is exposed to perform a very dramatic blood letting. He is in the act of passing a stiff rod through his penis. This may be a spindle rod, the type used to spin fibres from the maguey plant leaf into cords for weaving fabrics and making nets. A thick flow of blood gushes forth from this large puncture and anoints the face of the sacrificial victim seated with folded arms, in the pool of pulque to the left. The blood association of this priest is signified by the vampire bat element on his face.

In the companion piece across the court, we see the mirror image of this

ritual stage reset with the actors in new locations (fig. 5). The man who received the scroll from the flying rabbit is seated to the upper right. A conventional rabbit grotesque with exterior saw-tooth motif decorations, replaces the shield. He has handed his scroll gift from the sky rabbit to the long-haired man who has finished his blood-letting ceremony. The sacrificial priest is seated directly above the victim who is in the proper supine position for sacrifice. The mutilated priest, still lacking a skirt, now holds the rabbit scroll and the cylinder which was tied behind his back during the ritual blood-letting scene. He has removed his sash that bound the cylinder and looped it around his forearm. The sash may be a natural counterpart to the scroll trailing the rabbit grotesque in Panel 5 counterparts. The sash falls down on the face of the anointed sacrificial victim who is now provided with an elongated upper lip and a scroll-formed eye like the rabbit representative above him. This lip formation is not a rabbit sign, but part of the vampire bat symbolism that plays a major role in post-sacrificial ceremonies. A performer with a pronounced squint, who may be intoxicated, holds a globular pulque vase similar to those represented in Maya and Aztec art. He also touches the sash with his finger to underscore the importance of this motif. Similar pulque vases from which skeletons rise set in pools of pulque, are found in the four corner panels of this ball court.

A third representation of the naked, long-haired priest of the pulque cult appears in Sculpture 6 of the Building Columns. Here the priest carries a sash, a string of beads and urinates on the base of a maguey plant. He will place the beads on the shoulder of the small, squinting victim standing before him who appears to have been well plied with pulque in preparation for this sacrifice.

The complex pulque-rabbit symbolism continues outside the picture frames of Panels 5 and 6 of the South Ball Court. Pairs of grotesque heads flanking the panels incorporate a scroll repeating the elevated form of the rabbit ear in Panel 5. Their design is roughly similar to the recognised rabbit grotesques as are the pairs of grotesques set in the friezes over the four corner panels in the South Ball Court (fig. 8). Grotesques above the corner panels are separated with crossed bands, common sky signs in much of Mesoamerica. The skeletons rising from globular pulque pots, set in pools of pulque, are directly below the rabbit grotesques, two of which (Panels 1 and 4) are frontal, open jaws of rabbits relating to the faces of pulque gods over Panels 5 and 6.

The borders over Panels 5 and 6 illustrate an anthropomorphic aspect of the rabbit-pulque god. The right body of the god in Panel 5 is directly over his representative, the rabbit deity in a similar pose. A broad laughing or yawning face with human features joins two identical profile bodies. The god carries a sash wrapped around either wrist, counterparts to the sashes carried by priests in Tajin rituals. Crossed scrolls at the sides of this upper frieze are common Mesoamerican sky signs. The sky aspect of the rabbit-pulque god, with bent legs to symbolise the idea of flight, is in the sky over the Tajin rituals. His open mouth, a gleeful grin or drunken yawn, and squinting eyes, may represent an advanced state of intoxication.

The single head and double body composition resembles the schema of most yoke carvings. A figure on a yoke from the Minneapolis Institute of Art

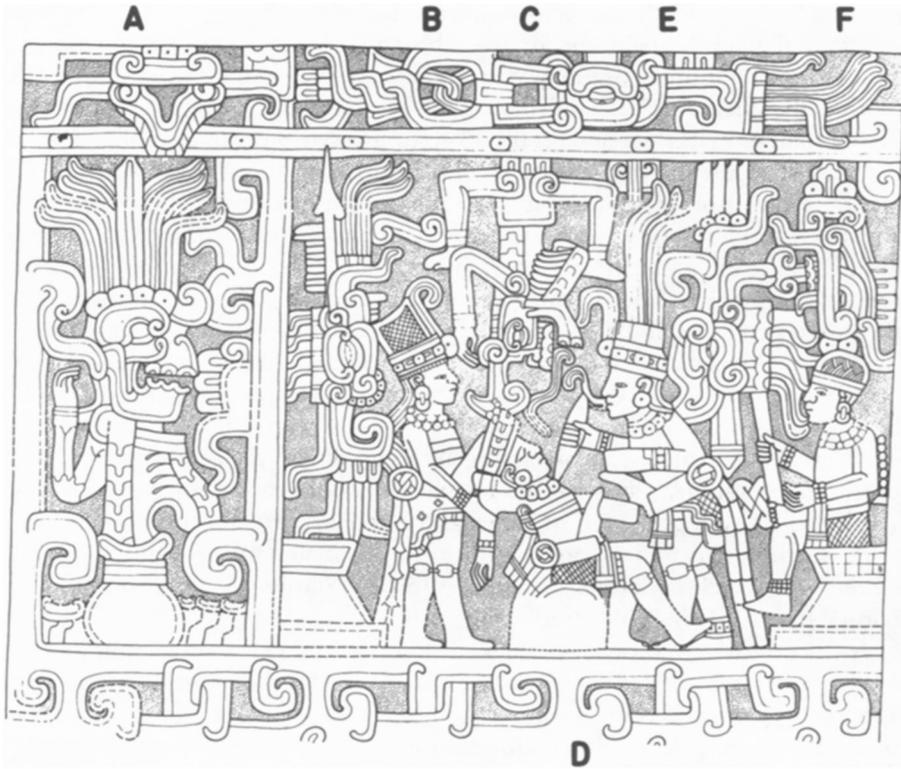


FIGURE 8.

has a broad face and two bodies following the exterior surface of the U-shaped stone. This man also holds sashes and may represent another version of the pulque sky god. It is also possible therefore that other yokes represent additional aspects of the pulque god.

Four more varieties of the anthropomorphic pulque god appear over the corner panels of the North Ball Court. Three of the gods have long extended tongues and are shown as if they were in flight. The fourth god has upraised arms, no body and an open mouth like the examples from the South Ball Court (fig. 9). An unidentified number of rabbit grotesques appear in the friezes connecting the panels, including one grotesque over a central panel representing a pool of pulque and another rabbit grotesque is adjacent to a vampire bat grotesque. The relationship of the rabbit and bat symbolism is suggested again on the reverse side of a palma in the Cleveland Museum of Art. A rabbit, deer and two other animals appear very near a dismembered corpse of a sacrificial victim being attacked by a vampire bat.

Rabbit symbolism in Aztec and Classic Veracruz art represents one of the many thematic connexions between these two Mexican art styles. The anthropomorphic aspect of the rabbit-pulque god corresponds with the Aztec god, Ometochtli (Two Rabbit), who was constantly intoxicated and notorious for his bad behaviour when under the influence of pulque. The Aztec god is one of the 400 children of Mayauel, goddess of the maguery plant.

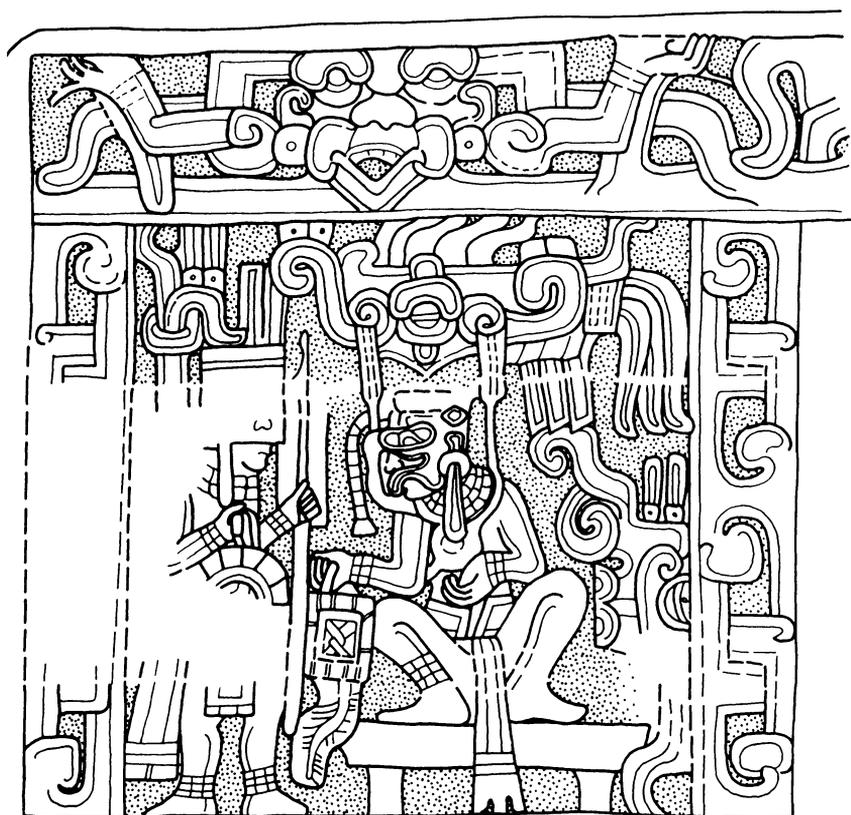


FIGURE 9.

While it is usually dangerous to borrow ideas from Aztec civilisation and use them to explain earlier ones, there is a special relationship between Aztec iconography and earlier Mesoamerican traditions that may make this practice permissible in this context. Ometochtli and his siblings are pulque gods and many of them may correspond to regional pulque gods taken over by the expanding network of Aztec authority. Deities from outside the Valley of Mexico were imported into Tenochtitlan to become parts of the international potpourri being synthesised into the emerging and eclectic concept of Aztec religion. Ometochtli's character is appropriately bacchanalian for his role as champion of the potent pulque: and like his Mediterranean counterpart, Bacchus, Ometochtli may have come from the East.

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