Ancient Maya Afterlife Iconography: Traveling Between Worlds

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ANCIENT MAYA AFTERLIFE ICONOGRAPHY: 
TRAVELING BETWEEN WORLDS

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2000

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ABSTRACT

The ancient Maya afterlife is a rich and voluminous topic. Unfortunately, much of the material currently utilized for interpretations about the ancient Maya comes from publications written after contact by the Spanish or from artifacts with no context, likely looted items. Both sources of information can be problematic and can skew interpretations. Cosmological tales documented after the Spanish invasion show evidence of the religious conversion that was underway. Noncontextual artifacts are often altered in order to make them more marketable. An example of an iconographic theme that is incorporated into the surviving media of the ancient Maya, but that is not mentioned in ethnographically-recorded myths or represented in the iconography from most noncontextual objects, are the “travelers”: a group of gods, humans, and animals who occupy a unique niche in the ancient Maya cosmology. This group of figures is depicted journeying from one level or realm of the universe to another by using objects argued to bridge more than one plane of existence at a time. They travel by holding onto or riding objects familiar to the ancient Maya that held other-world or afterlife symbolic significance and that are connected to events related to birth, death, and leadership. This group of figures (the "travelers"), represented across time and space and on wide ranging media, provides insight and broadens what is currently understood about the ancient Maya view of life and death by indicating a persistent belief in the ability to move from one realm to another in the afterlife.
I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family who has supported me throughout this entire journey. I extend a special thank you to my extraordinary husband and best friend, Dean, who has made great sacrifices during this process. He has been patient, understanding, and has shown unwavering support. I also dedicate this work to my three remarkable children - Tori, Morgan and Liam - who have been my inspiration for (as well as distraction during) this project. I want to thank my mom, Katy Anderson, for helping me reach this goal. She understood the time, focus, and dedication required and was always available as a babysitter, sounding board, and editor. Thank you to my parents-in-law, Karon and Paul Mosley, for always cheering me on as well as making themselves available as babysitters. Lastly, I dedicate this thesis to my maternal grandparents, Marion B. and Marion F. Anderson (Mac and Bud), whom have influenced my life in far-reaching and long-lasting ways. I offer my greatest love and appreciation to each of you.
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INTRODUCTION

The ancient Maya afterlife is often depicted as a world full of festering boils, rotting flesh, farting animals, and clever twins performing feats of bravery, skill, and trickery. The inhabitants of this “place of fright” (Coe 1978:11), Xibalba, have names reflecting causes of death such as disease, sacrifice, war, or old age (Schele and Miller 1986:267-8). Some of the key members of the underworld are One Death, Seven Death, Pus Master, Jaundice Master, Trash Master, and Stab Master (Stone 1995:41). Rivers in Xibalba are called Pus River and Blood River (Tedlock 1996:353) and places of terror and torture are named Dark House, Cold House, and Razor House. Many occupants of Xibalba have black marks (decaying flesh) on their bodies and sometimes have distended stomachs or skeletal bodies. Furthermore, they are often toothless, very old, and “transformational, combining male and female features” (Schele and Miller 1986:268). Many Xibalbans are described as grotesque and not completely human (Baudez 1989:74; Spinden 1970:49). They adorn themselves with eyeballs still connected to the optic nerve and they emit odors reportedly pungent enough to be visible (Schele and Miller 1986:267-268).

The previous description of the Maya afterlife was chronicled by the Quiche Maya of the Guatemalan Highlands from 1550-1555 in a collection of creation mythologies called the Popol Vuh (Newsome 2001:18). Although sixteenth century Maya wrote the text, it was scripted in Spanish, and would have been influenced by the Spanish invasion. The central narrative revolves around the Hero Twins Hunahpu and
Xbalanque, who descend into Xibalba in order to avenge the death of their father, Hun Hunahpu, the Maize god. The twins confront the Lords of Death, engage in a ball game and numerous deadly tests and riddles (ibid.). Once the Hero Twins defeat the Xibalbans, the twins become immortal, fly into the sky, and become the sun and the moon (Newsome 2001:18). The accounts in the Popol Vuh are argued to establish a connectedness between sacrifice and rebirth (ibid.), which is demonstrated in the repeated death and rebirth of the Hero Twins. Although very influential and often cited in interpretations of the Maya, the Popol Vuh is only one view of the afterlife, and may not tell the whole story. Xibalba has its merits but it is also a limited view.

An expanded view of the ancient Maya afterlife is developed as a result of examining a broad base of sources, generated by the Maya and by nonMaya. The insight gained amplifies discussions about the ancient Maya beliefs about death and the afterlife. The movement of individuals traveling from one level of the universe to another are the subject of this thesis.

The cities of the ancient Maya extend across many of today’s political borders. They occupied the northern Yucatan peninsula in Mexico, extending south and southeast throughout Guatemala and into Honduras, and west to the border of the Aztec empire in Mexico. Modern Maya live in essentially the same region as their ancestors. The climate across the area is a mixture of tropical lowlands and volcanic highlands (Fash 1994:182). The landscape is riddled with cenotes or sinkholes and caves, which have symbolic significance as they are believed to be entrances to the underworld.
The ancient Maya developed enormous cities and possessed complex social structures that spanned the Preclassic (900 B.C.E -A.D. 250), Classic (A.D. 250-900), and Postclassic (A.D. 900-1542) Periods. They created a variety of media expressing mythological, historical, and political messages both for public and private viewing. The Maya produced their own early documents chronicling the “ancient calendar, cosmology, deities, ritual, medicine and history” in folding books made with bark or deerskin covers called codices (codex) (Sharer 1994:8). Only three Postclassic Period codices are known to have survived: the Paris Codex, the Dresden Codex, and the Madrid Codex. These codices were spared being burned, as described below, because they were sent to Europe as gifts or curiosities for officials or friends of colonists (Sharer 1994:599). Another codex, the Grolier Codex, has been dismissed as a forgery because it is from a private collection and although the paper dates to Preconquest times, the images are believed to have been added much later (Sharer 1994:603).

The Spanish kept detailed accounts in administrative records, diaries, journals, maps, and drawings of their encounters with the Maya. The writings of Spanish soldiers, missionaries, priests, and government administrators offer a view into the author’s agendas, biases, and unique perspectives. One such author is Spanish priest Diego de Landa (1524 – 1579) who wrote extensively about his experiences as a priest in the Yucatan peninsula in 1566 Relación de las cosas de Yucatán (Tozzer 1941:vii). De Landa is credited with supplying extensive information about the sixteenth century Maya, but he is also responsible for personally overseeing the burning of codices, which were
seen as a threat to total religious conversion. It has been estimated that the Spanish missionaries burned hundreds of the hieroglyphic texts (Tedlock 1996:25).

Each of the previously mentioned sources of information has influenced how the ancient Maya culture has been interpreted. Although each has value as a resource, they also have limitations. A problem lies in applying the materials gathered in the 15th and 16th centuries to centuries before or after, but it is done consistently in contemporary theories of the Maya afterlife. The information that can be gathered from the codices is limited due to their condition; many of their pages have not survived and, as mentioned earlier, they represent a fraction of the original number. In addition to the religious and cultural biases of Landa, his original transcripts were translated and copied several times, as well as lost for a period of time (Sharer 1994:607-608). Even considering the limitations, ethnohistorical records and documents are valuable resources as long as one places the information in context and evaluates the accuracy and credibility of the sources. Considerations must be made for the changes in the narrative or cultural patterns over time and thus such interpretation must be cautious.

Contextual and Noncontextual Artifacts

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, a wealth of information has been generated about the ancient Maya through both scientific and nonscientific methods. Scientific recovery requires objective observation and testable hypotheses. A key to the scientific method is that the knowledge gained is “continuously self-correcting”: theories are repeated and refined (Sharer and Ashmore 2003:22). Earlier theories are expanded or
refuted through the process of discovery, theories are expected to change over time as new information is attained or old information is examined in a new way. This is true of the Maya interpretations as well.

Non-scientific methods of recovery typically involve seeking out desired vessels or adornments often in order to sell the items for profit. Non-provenienced artifacts, which have no history of scientific recovery, have been legitimized by their use in interpretations by well-known Mayanists (Baudez 1994; Benson and Griffin 1988; Coe, 1977, 1978; Freidel et al. 1993; Kerr 1989, 1992, 1994, 1997; Newsome 2001; Schele and Miller 1986), publication in academic journals, popular magazines, and their display by prominent museums around the world. In 1997, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts was criticized by the Republic of Guatemala for not returning “a number of Maya antiquities” even after the officials at the museum were reportedly told of the Guatemalan government’s claim that the items had been stolen from an archaeological site (Archaeology Magazine 1998:18).

Many Mayanists concurrently use provenienced materials, retrieved through scientific methods, as well as non-provenienced materials as examples in their arguments, but rarely acknowledge the problems inherent in the use of materials retrieved for profit. Photographer Justin Kerr (1989:5) addresses the issue of whether or not to use exclusively contextual pieces, artifacts having been recovered scientifically, in the first of the series of Maya Vase Books (1989) and on the Maya Vase Data Base Website operated by the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. (FAMSI) (2005), where Kerr displays Maya vessels. Kerr has reported that some of the
pieces photographed are “heavily restored” (Kerr Number 694, 718, 1836, 3242, 8734), “overly retouched” (Kerr Number 3463), or are modern forgeries (Kerr Number 2211, 5655) (Kerr 1989:4; FAMSI 2005). The pieces that have been identified as suspect are still photographed and published by Kerr because he argues that they have interpretive value (Kerr 1989:5).

The incorporation of nonprovenienced or “touched up” pieces create a skewed view of the ancient Maya. It can be argued that “without any indication of its [an artifact’s] origins and context, it is deemed worthless by some or at best unreliable” (A. Chase et al. 1988:56). The Archaeological Institute of America, American Journal of Archaeology, Latin American Antiquity, and American Antiquity will not knowingly publish articles based on looted materials (A. Chase et al. 1988:56; Lynott 1997:591).

The noncontextual examples used in this study are important because the iconography can be compared to contextual pieces as a way of testing how accurate the “touch ups” are on noncontextual pieces. They have been placed in the Appendix and labeled as “noncontextual view of the afterlife” in order to differentiate between the interpretive value of the pieces. The majority of the materials evaluated date to the Classic Period (A.D. 250 – 900), although there are also examples from the Preclassic (900 B.C.E. – A.D. 250) and Postclassic Periods (A.D. 900 – 1542).

**Ancient Maya Afterlife Symbolism**

The ancient Maya believed life followed a cyclical pattern of birth, death and rebirth. Motifs related to those patterns and other significant events were commemorated
on images intended for both public and private viewing and they included themes related
to births, accessions/leadership, bloodletting, conflicts/war and deaths, as well as
cosmological and agricultural events. The transition from death to rebirth is associated
with the underworld (Freidel and Suhler 1999:255). The principle characters in the
underworld and upperworld are deities that have features distinct from humans, often
called grotesque (Baudez 1989:74; Spinden 1970:49), and can be identified by stylized or
exaggerated skeletal features displaying signs of death such as black spots, closed eyes or
“death eyes.” Death eyes are “disembodied eyes with nerve stalks still attached,” which
are usually worn around the neck of a deity (Coe 1977:16). The Maize god is also
frequently depicted in afterlife images. He is usually shown as a young man, either in
full figure or only with a head. Figures may also be shown under the surface of the earth
or water or incorporating symbols such as mirrors that are typically symbols associated
with gods.

Paddler gods, frequently shown as old men, are incorporated into many afterlife
images. Well-known examples of the Paddler gods are etched into four bone fragments
(735 A.D.) excavated from Burial 116 at Tikal. The scene involves the Paddler gods
(Old Jaguar God and Aged Stingray God) paddling the Maize god in a sinking canoe
along with five passengers: a dog, a parrot, a spider monkey, and an iguana (Newsome
2001:28; Schele and Miller 1986:270). The Maize god is seated in the center and is
holding his wrist to his forehead in a gesture believed to signal impending death (Schele
and Miller 1986:270). The wrist-to-forehead gesture is also found on the bottom part of
the register on the Rio Hondo vessel (Figure 8). It is likely that the ancient Maya equated
death with sinking underwater (Schele and Miller 1986:268). Another set of characters often shown as wrinkled, old men are the *Bacabs*, which are credited with holding up the earth (Baudez 1989:78,266). Sometimes Bacabs are shown emerging from shells (Baudez 1989:78).

The afterlife is often connected to underwater images; it is known as being a watery place. One of the most prominent water symbols is the lilypad and blossom. A variety of water symbols are depicted in Maya art as water scrolls, shell scrolls, water stacks, and water lines (Schele 1988:301). Other water-related images include crocodiles, fish, snakes or serpents, turtles, sharks, birds, standing water, oceans, lakes, swamps, and agricultural canals (Schele and Miller 1986:46). Additional symbols bridge multiple levels of the universe: clouds, smoke, umbilical cords, and twisted ropes. The ceiba tree or world tree is representative of the earth’s axis and is a portal; the roots, the trunk, and the branches bridge the underworld, here-and-now and the upperworld (Freidel et al. 1993:7; Newsome 2001:199).

Serpents are one of the most commonly displayed figures in the afterlife activities. They are often depicted in a stylized fashion, as skeletal, two-headed, and located in the sky, water, on the earth or even suspended in midair (Spinden 1970:36). They are often in motion, and have been named Feathered Serpent and Plumed Serpent.

Another recurring figure is the Cauac monster with a distinguishing feature of grape-looking clusters of loops on it. Its eyes are half closed and its forehead is indented and stepped, often showing a sprout of maize growing from it. It symbolizes stone, the ground, an opening in a rock or a building made of rock (Schele and Miller 1986:45).
The Celestial monster, also called the Bicephalic monster or Cosmic monster, has many other names and is depicted consistently within images of birth, accession, death, and rebirth. The body is often shaped like a crocodile with two heads and a single body. It may have a line of astronomical symbols across its body, called a skyband. The head on the front of the body has a long snout, a beard, large teeth and an eye that is always lidded. The head on the back of the body has a shortened snout, skeletal lower jaw, and “fleshy eyes” (Schele and Miller 1986:45). The heads that emerge from the mouths of Serpent Bars are argued to represent portraits of mythical or historical ancestors of the ruler (Stuart 1988:212). They have also been argued to be Paddler gods (Schele and Miller 1986:46).

Another significant figure in the rituals related to the afterlife is the God K manikin scepter, who is pictured with ancestors in accession ceremonies, and bloodletting sacrifices (Tate 1992:55,94). God K is easily recognized by its serpent foot, but it also has a mirror embedded into its forehead and limbs, and a long, thin axe or cigar projecting from its head (Tate 1992:55). The manikin scepter is linked symbolically to power (A. Chase 1983:108) and is usually shown being held by a prominent figure in the scene.

Cardinal directions and placement of structures within a site are significant to Maya cosmology. Gods and ancestors are associated with a northern direction. The underworld is associated with the southern direction (Sharer 1994:120). The center of the site, where palaces of the ruler are located, is argued to be the center of the cosmos (Sharer 1994:525). There are a minimum of three layers to the universe. Humans are
restricted to the surface of the earth, but upperworld and underworld creatures can journey to any of the three levels. The Maya gods were capable of inhabiting any period of time, from the distant past to infinite future. A central theme in traveling “among existences” is connected to “portals, thresholds, transitions, and co-essences” (D. Chase and A. Chase, review).

Items symbolic of the underworld have been buried as caches, rather small containers of valuables buried with purpose under or near significant structures or as burial goods across the Maya region. At the sites of Caracol and Santa Rita Corozal, Belize, caches include stingray spines, sharks teeth, coral and sea shells. Some caches also contained modeled ceramic figures of turtles, sharks, crocodiles, and Cauac or Earth monsters (D. Chase and A. Chase, review). One unique quality of each of these objects and animals is that they are capable, or parts of them are capable, of moving above and below the surface of the water (Baudez 1989:74; D. Chase and A. Chase 2004:6). Arthur Miller (1982:90) argues that Mesoamerican supernatural beings are “transitory … and on occasion occupy liminal states.” Miller (1982:91) calls the characters “complex, fluid, ever-changing” entities that “take on new identities.” The ancient Maya created a variety of scenes depicting transition or liminality.

Arnold van Gennep (1960:vii) theorized that major life crises are dealt with in similar ways in all societies. He calls the major life crises “rites of passage.” The rite of passage concepts expressed by van Gennep are divided into three stages: separation, transition (liminality), and incorporation (van Gennep 1960:vii). The separation phase is the first stage, which is signaled by an individual being removed from the community for
any number of reasons, including death. Incorporation is the final stage, when the individual rejoins the group, but with significant changes in his or her appearance, role or status. Liminality is the middle stage in an individual’s rite of passage (van Gennep 1960:vii). People in the middle stage are acquiring the knowledge, overcoming obstacles, or completing tasks necessary to be re-connected with the group, which will result in a new role and status. Victor Turner (2000:494) suggested that the rites of passage were not limited to the individual – communities could also experience a “collective liminality” creating a unity and sense of belonging between group members. Capturing iconographically, the moments of transition seem to be a topic of great interest to the ancient Maya from all periods, but especially the Classic Period.

The Traveler

The liminal beings depicted on the ancient Maya iconography can be aptly labeled “travelers.” The term traveler is synonymous with an adventurer, commuter, displaced person, drifter, floater, passenger, wanderer, or guest (Thesaurus Reference 2005). A traveler is one who takes trips to distant places, who moves from place to place, or has an “unconventional” lifestyle (Dictionary Reference 2006). The nautical definition of traveler is well-suited to describe the Maya figures and their behavior -- metal rings that move freely back and forth on a rope, rod or spar (Dictionary Reference 2006). Travelers in the Maya iconography are able to move from the underworld to the earthly realm and into the upperworld with ease by embracing objects that can bridge the different levels.
Travelers represent more than one type of entity engaged in a single behavior; travelers are diverse and use a variety of techniques to travel from one plane to another. The incorporation of the figures into various media shows their widespread application to narratives. There were regional variations as well as changes over time in the role of the traveler in the Maya afterlife iconography. Some of the travelers appear to be dead humans, while others appear to be living gods or animals. Some are actively engaged in the event highlighted in the iconography, whereas others are seemingly unaware of their surroundings. There are, however, some commonalities, the most significant one being that the travelers are all holding onto or riding objects with liminal properties—smoke scrolls, blood scrolls, clouds, a tree, scepters, ropes, umbilical cords, the moon, canoes, or lilypad stalks. They are also depicted emerging from the mouth of serpents or holding onto the Feathered Serpent.

Travelers are nearly always shown in motion. They often have death marks or show in other ways that they are decomposing. Travelers are usually depicted as nude or semi-nude, although they wear jewelry and headdresses. They can be either the focus of the scene or a character on the periphery. When in the periphery, they are often located in the top part of the register, the part that David Stuart (1988:219) suggested was designated for the ancestors; they are alert and appear interested in the ceremonial events being acted out. When on the periphery, travelers sit within elaborate headdresses of formally dressed rulers who stand on platforms or structures, with elaborately dressed attendants and bound captives. Travelers can be located in the air above the scene, floating on the water, or underwater.
Distinct groups of travelers recur in nearly all surviving media across the region. The themes of the group include birth or cosmic events, dead or dying humans, and figures that are observing or participating in events. The group of observing or participating travelers are gods, humans, and animals who are involved, to varying degrees, in rituals revolving around birth, conflict/war (possibly including Tlaloc, the Central Mexican god of rain and lightning represented by goggle eyes and scrolls at the mouth), accession/leadership, bloodletting, and agricultural or cosmological events (which often included the Maize god). The observing or participating traveler groups are represented most frequently in the media.

**Media and Sites**

The images in this study come from a variety of media: codices, murals, a gold plate, ceramic and wooden vessels, stelae, (stone monuments commemorating events: historical, legendary or cosmological), decorated stucco and architectural pieces, a lintel (usually a stone placed horizontally above the door), façades of buildings, a bench, and altars. The ancient cities from which the iconography was examined range in time from the Preclassic to the Postclassic Periods. They are found in all corners of the region, and represent large and small cultural centers. Some of the sites have been excavated extensively and others have not. Travelers have been identified at specific sites (Chase, A. 1983; Freidel 1988; Kowalski 1999; Miller 1982; Thompson 1963) and have been given a variety of names: ancestors (Newsome 2001; Stuart 1988), “sky figures” (Chase 1983), “liminal lords, monstrous creatures” (Miller 1982), “floaters-in-blood” (Stuart
1988), as well as “revival or old sky gods” (A. Chase 1983). The variety of places, time depth, and media styles in which the traveler image is inscribed or painted supports the argument that the images represent a broad-based belief in ancestors and gods journeying from one dimension to another by using objects connected to liminal aspects of life and death. The event that the ancestor or deity is bearing witness to is often related to a liminal period in the individual’s life (death, accession) or commemorated by the community (cosmology or agriculture). The messages artistically represented in the iconography broaden the current view of the ancient Maya by recognizing that their afterlife did not include being permanently bound to the underworld; they were able to travel across time and space.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative, “problem-oriented” (Sharer and Ashmore 2003:155) study is to identify and illustrate a pan-Maya Classic Period belief system based primarily on iconography that depicts humans, gods, and animals traveling or existing in a liminal state, while using objects associated with the afterlife. The current interpretations of the ancient Maya afterlife do not recognize and label travelers as a cohesive group. The iconography depicts not only how one was able to journey from one realm to another, but implies that because the figures travel from one realm to another that the afterlife was not a place where one was permanently bound. Interestingly, an abundance of traveler images come from contextual rather than noncontextual artifacts, which begs the question; “how reliable are noncontextual materials?”
A CONTEXTUAL VIEW OF THE AFTERLIFE

The figures identified as ancient Maya travelers can be traced back as early as the Preclassic Period, although the largest number analyzed in this study originate from Classic Period sites. The traveler images are not unique to the Maya, similar images were noted in the Olmec and Aztec art while conducting preliminary research for this project. The scope of this study does not permit an examination of the similarities and differences between the traveler iconography in all three cultures. There is no way to know the full variety of perishable media the travelers were originally carved, inscribed, painted, woven or molded on or into. Since they are incorporated into nearly every type of surviving media, a belief in being able to pass to other dimensions through the use of familiar objects must have been of considerable significance. Several themes of travelers have been identified; they are incorporated into different liminal periods in the life of an individual and community, Cosmic or Birth Events, Dead or Dying Travelers, Travelers Observing or Participating in Events, and Unknown Activity of the Traveler. The images that follow are organized by theme. Within each theme, the travelers described here are presented in chronological order from Preclassic to Postclassic.

Cosmic or Birth Event

The cosmic or birth events are often framed in twisted cords or umbilical cords as depicted on codices, an architectural facade, freestanding monuments, and vessels. The beings may be associated with creation mythology, literal birth, or the underworld. The
cords can be attached to the traveler, either on the stomach or on the head. The traveler in this category is often suspended in air. The figures have a mixture of god and human features. They are often nude, but wear jewelry, headdresses and other adornments. The cosmic or birth event travelers often are part of the main scene, rather than on the periphery. They may also show signs of mortality and decay. The figures are associated with the afterlife or supernatural – Bacabs, stylized serpents, lilypads signs, god K scepters, caves, and cenotes.

Two scholars who identified potential connections between ancient Maya mythology, and more recent oral histories and ethnography are Ralph Roys and Alfred Tozzer. Ethnographer Ralph Roys (1965:7) refers to a “traveler-seizure,” or the force of friction at the tip of the fire drill. The “traveler-seizure” was documented in the Colonial period as a ritual related to the Bacabs (Roys 1965:7). The drill was made with long, twisted cords, which are commonly found in the iconography with beings hanging onto or riding in the periphery of the images.

Oral traditions collected during the first years of the twentieth century told of a time in the past when a road was “suspended in the sky” (Miller 1982:92). An important part of the myth states that at one time there was a pathway in the sky connected to the land. The gods cut the large “umbilical cord” so that it no longer joined the earth with the sky, disconnecting the beings on earth from the supernatural (ibid.). The references suggest that some symbols related to the afterlife have been retained in Maya mythology until at least the early twentieth century.
Freestanding Monument

![Freestanding Monument Image](image)

Figure 1: Stela 50 at Izapa (after Miller 1982:95).

*Izapa, Chiapas, Mexico.* Stela 50 (Figure 1) is dated to the Late Preclassic Period (300 B.C-100 A.D) (Grube 2001:14). The traveler depicted is suspended in the air holding onto a cord that winds and curves downward to a skeletal figure who is seated. The cord is connected to the ribcage of the skeletal creature (Grube 2001:14). Miller describes the figure as a winged deity, and reports that there is a serpent head at the end of the cord. The cord on Figure 1 has been called an umbilical cord and a serpent (Miller 1982:95).
Architecture
Structure/Facade

Figure 2: Facade of Structure 10L-22 (Temple 22) at Copan (after Stuart 1988:204).

Copan, Honduras. The façade of Structure 10L-22 (Temple 22) (Figure 2) dates to the Classic Period (715 A.D.). The image on Figure 2 is the inner chamber of Temple 22. The structures are part of the main acropolis of Copan. Several Mayanists (Newsome 2001:70; Schele and Miller 1986:154; Stierlin 1997:64) argue that Temple 22 is a symbolic entrance to the underworld or an entrance to a sacred mountain. Earlier interpretations suggested that the building was related to the sun’s annual path (Schele 1974:20). The gods or ancestral deities (Fash 2001:122) ride beside the two-headed serpent that stretches from one Bacab to another over the doorway arch to the other
Bacab. The travelers appear to be naked except for jewelry and other adornments on their shins, bracelets, necklaces and head gear. They are attentive; some look directly at their audience.

David Stuart (1988:199,203) calls the beings ancestral deities and the activity an ancestor-related blood ritual. On each end of the platform, two Bacabs crouch. Below each Bacab is a skull. There are separations built into the structure to delineate different realms. The skulls symbolize the underworld, the Bacabs symbolize the earth and the smoke-scroll-riding-deities symbolize the above world. The deities have also been described as riding on clouds (Newsome 2001:70). Many scholars (Fash 2001:122; Freidel and Suhler 1999:258; Newsome 2001:70; Schele 1974:20; Stuart 1988:203-4) have suggested that the building’s façade was an enormous monster mouth, so that when a person walked through the archway he or she was emerging from that mouth.

Bench

Figure 3: Carved bench, Structure 9N-82 at Copan (after Baudez 1994:233).
Copan, Honduras. The carved bench in Structure 9N-82 (Figure 3) is well preserved (Baudez 1994:233). The bench is a sculpture of a double-headed Vision Serpent. An elaborately dressed human is seated on the head on the left. The body of the serpent is made up of deity figures seated facing one another, holding a variety of objects. The head to the right shows a human figure seated on it, but the upper portion of the human is missing. Beneath the serpent body are six god figures; two are holding up the body of the serpent. One figure is holding a rope or umbilical cord that descends from the serpent. The human figure displays signs that this figure is a ruler. He holds an ahau sign in his lap, which is a symbol for leadership. Another symbol of leadership is a water lily headdress with a fish nibbling on it (Baudez 1989:79). A water lily has also been identified under his knee, which has been interpreted as a symbol for a ballplayer or ruler (ibid.).

Altar

Figure 4: Upper surface of altar, base of Hieroglyphic Stairway at Copan (after Kerr 1997:677).
Copan, Honduras. Figure 4 is located at the base of the Hieroglyphic Stairway at Copan. Four nude travelers, which appear to have human form, are floating in front of a skeletal mask. Their faces and much of their bodies are no longer visible therefore, it is difficult to decipher if their faces are human or god, if they were alive or dead, and what if anything they were holding or carrying. The lower figures are more intact than the upper figures. There are twisted cords that descend vertically from the top portion of the register and then extend horizontally above the lower figures. The cord then descends vertically between the two lower figures; they appear to be holding onto it. Karl Taube (1994:662) suggests the individuals are confronting each other. There appear to be smoke scrolls on the left and right edges of the border. The combination of smoke scrolls, twisted cords (possibly umbilical cords), background of a skeletal maw, and floating humans suggest that this image is connected to birth or rebirth.
Mural

Figure 5: a) North end of Structure 16 (after Paxton 1999:324); b) South Corridor Mural 8, Structure 16 at Tulum (after Miller 1982:pl36).

*Tulum, Quintana Roo, Mexico.* The murals in Tulum date to the Postclassic Period. Figures 5a and b have a central Mexican influence and have been painted in the “International Style” for that time period (Miller 1982:71). Figure 5a is on the north end of the west wall of the Temple of the Frescoes (Structure 16).

Justin Kerr (1994:677) and Meredith Paxton (1999:324) have identified in the mural a U-shaped maw with stylized fish in the water along the bottom of the jaw. The
upper section of the mural has two serpents descending into the image: they then turn upward with their mouths open. It is unclear what is emerging from their jaws. The lower section of the mural is divided into three sections with designs similar to those of the serpent in the top mural, except there are no heads and instead plants are blossoming along the edges. The event taking place in Figure 5a has been described as a “confrontational pose” with an offering transfer (Miller 1982:93) or agriculturally-based ritual (Paxton 1999:326). God K scepter is held by a figure in the center of the image. Miller identifies death motifs in the collars of the characters’ costumes (Miller 1982:93). The characters on all levels of the images on Figure 5a are dressed elaborately and many have towering headdresses. The border of the image has been interpreted as umbilical cords and intertwined serpents (Miller 1982:95) or as staple-producing vines of maize, squash, and beans (Paxton 1999:329).

Some scholars have argued that the images are related to agricultural rituals (McAnany 1995; Paxton 1999) or sacrifice/bloodletting rites (Newsome 2001; Stuart 1988), while others argue the images are related to cosmological or afterlife associations (Coe 1977, 1978; Kerr 1989, 1992, 1997; Miller 1982; Schele and Miller 1986).

Paxton (1999:324,326) argues that the setting of Figure 5a is a cenote and the ritual depicted is related to “rain and plentiful harvest.” Cenotes and caves are places where water collects; they are associated with the central direction (Paxton 1999:325) and entrances to the underworld.

Figure 5b shows one aspect of a larger mural in Structure 16 showing a human-like body, with a god-like head in motion apparently sliding along a conduit. Miller
(1982:91) argues that the murals in Structure 16 are “neither the world of the living nor the world of the dead, but is rather a liminal condition in between.”

**Codices**

Figure 6: a) Codex Paris 22; b) Codex Paris 19 (after Miller 1982:93).

*Codex Paris.* Figure 6a and 6b are pages from the Codex Paris. The image is split into three areas: the upper, middle and lower registers. Codex 22 (Figure 6a) has been interpreted as a scene of “descending deities,” or a representation of a “cosmic umbilical cord” (Miller 1982:93). The two human figures in the center of the image are wearing decorative skirts, bracelets, necklaces (possibly made of eyeballs), and decoration on their heads. They face each other with extended hands. The travelers are touched on the heads by the twisted cord that is framing most of the image. They are
symbolically in the center realm (on the earth) because they are in the center of the image with a skyband directly above them. Arthur Miller in *On the Edge of the Sea* (1982:93) argues that the figures are deceased and that the central section is “transitional, a liminal realm” (Miller 1982:95). Miller has identified the mark on the cheek of the figure to the left as a death sign mark (ibid.).

The two central figures of Codex Paris 22 (Figure 6a) hover just above the open mouths of the serpents. Although these serpents are stylized and resemble Vision Serpents, they are lacking the second head at the rear of their bodies. A section of the twisted cord is coiled on the neck of the Vision Serpent, whose body doubles as the skyband. Twisted cords wind throughout the scene connecting each level of the image.

Just above the two central figures is a skyband, symbolically separating the earth from the sky. The cords frame the upper world beings but do not touch them. Two figures are sitting on the skyband also facing each other in a social or cosmic event. Their arms are crossed as they sit facing one another with their knees drawn up. Miller (1982:93) suggests they “confront” each other while wearing “death collars.”

The traveler featured on page 19 of the Codex Paris (Figure 6b) is suspended with an umbilical cord emerging from his middle. The cord ascends into a damaged part of the page (Miller 1982:93-94). The figure, who is likely deceased, is wearing only jewelry and a headdress. The posture of the being featured in Figure 6b is identical to the skeletal figure on Stela 50 from Izapa (Figure 1) (Miller 1982:95). The umbilical cord is “cosmic”: capable of sustaining “life through a passage from one state of being to
another” (Miller 1982:95). Herbert Spinden (1970:89) suggests the image could be the Maize god with an umbilical cord still attached.

Both Figures 6a and 6b are related to cosmic or birth events and are framed by or connected to possible cords. There are additional characters in the periphery of Figures 6a and 6b, but due to damage, it is difficult to identify what they are doing and what role they play in the event being described.

Figure 7: Codex Dresden, Farmer’s Almanac page 44c (after McAnany 1995:83).

*Codex Dresden.* The Codex Dresden is dated to the Postclassic Period. It was reportedly a resource for predicting cycles of natural disasters (McAnany 1995:81). The two gods in Figure 7 are in motion, possibly walking or dancing. Each has one hand flexed with a cord originating from his palm. In the other hand, each holds the cord (possible umbilical cords). The cords meet in the center of the image but they do not connect. In the center, lower register there is a stylized fish. Considering all aspects of
the scene, this appears to depict a supernatural event occurring with two gods in motion. They have facial features of the gods and are dressed distinctively with covers on their shins, necklaces, bracelets, and head adornments.

The event commemorated is likely a supernatural event signaled by the gods, the cords between them, and the fish placed in the scene at waist level between the deities. The event could commemorate agricultural rites: possibly “times of plenty and an abundance of maize” (McAnany 1995:81). According to Miller (1982:94-95), the twisted serpent motif found in the murals of Late Postclassic Tulum is to be understood as the umbilical cord (Taube 1994:659).

Noncontextual Vessels

Reportedly, the most prized burial goods by looters and collectors are Late Classic Period vessels (Hansen 1997:48). Figures 32 and 34 are noncontextual vessels with images likely related to cosmic or birth themes. Vessel 32 has been called the “Black Background Vase” or Kerr Number 688 (Kerr 1989:36), and is in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. There are three possible travelers in the scene. The central figure is seated on an open mouth of a stylized Vision Serpent head. There are twisted cords framing the individuals. The twisted cords wind throughout the scene and resolve into serpent heads under a figure seated on the cord. The figures are dressed similarly with headdresses, loincloths and “wristlets,” on their wrists and ankles. The central figure appears to be human, but the other figures have god and human characteristics. There are also stylized birds flying in the scene.
Figure 34, called the Birth Vase (K5113) (Kerr 1994:650-651), has unique images on the panels of the four sides. Each of the panels contains ritual and mythological information pertaining to literal and mythological birth (Kerr 1994:674). The symbolic birth could refer to the birth of the soul or a rebirth of a relationship between individuals and deities or ancestors (Kerr 1994:675). Side I is reportedly a scene of a young woman being assisted in giving birth. The woman is unclothed from the waist up and is being held around the waist from behind by Goddess O, elderly goddess of medicine, childbirth, and weaving (Kerr 1994:674; Tedlock 1996:217).

Taube (1994:659) suggests that Maya homes are metaphors for the cosmos. The modern Maya birthing techniques still incorporate ropes, which are hung from the center of the interior structure. The birth rope is essentially the umbilicus of the house. Just as the birth rope is hung from the center of the Maya house, there is also a cosmological concept of a cord hanging from the center of the sky (Taube 1994:659). The Kusansun myth (Miller 1982:92), described previously, explains the umbilical cord connecting the upperworld to the earth. Taube (1994:660) argues that the serpents descending from the sky pictured on Stela 3 and 6 from Caracol, Belize, are Classic Period iconographic depictions of birth rope. Ropes framing scenes and the twisted cords attached to the travelers are argued to be umbilical cords or the ropes used in birthing (Freidel et al. 1993:99,105; Miller 1982:93; Taube 1994:659), but they have also been interpreted as symbols of cosmic creation (Taube 1994:292). The twisted cord motif and skybands could represent an intertwined serpent or umbilical cord (Miller 1982:95).
The cosmic or birth event travelers have a distinctive appearance and behavior that set them apart from other travelers. They are often nude or nearly nude, suspended in air or water, connected to twisted or winding cords, and have god and human characteristics. The images are representing a liminal state by giving the figures ambiguous, transitional characteristics, being suspended in air or water, and holding onto twisted cords representing the cosmic umbilical cord. The cosmic or birth event iconography represented here dates from the late Preclassic to the Postclassic and originated from sites in the northeast (Tulum), south (Izapa), and southeast (Copan) regions of the Maya. Codices and two noncontextual vessels also depict similar themes.

Dead or Dying Travelers

The dead or dying travelers are usually holding onto a rope, umbilical cord, Vision Serpent, scepter, or are entangled in lilypad stalks. The object transporting the traveler may also be smoke, blood, or water. The media portraying dead or dying travelers are predominantly from the Classic and Postclassic Periods. They are represented across the region on vessels, freestanding monuments, and a mural. The characters are on a journey to the underworld. They are centrally located in the scene and are typically human with some deity characteristics.

Some of the faces of the beings have been damaged or have eroded; other images have stylized faces, creating challenges in deciphering if the being is alive or dead. Just like the cosmic or birth travelers, the ones who are dead and dying have bracelets, anklets, and headdresses.

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A well-known example of a dead or dying traveler is Pacal’s sarcophagus lid at Palenque. Kowalski (1999:338) has compared the underworld maw shown on the lid of Pacal’s sarcophagus with the border of the mural from the Temple of the Frescos (Structure 16) (Figure 5a) (ibid.) and on the edge of Figure 29 the “Ballplayer” (Stela 25 Kaminaljuyu). Schele and Miller (1986:268) interpret Pacal’s sarcophagus lid as a guide to lead Pacal’s soul through his journey into the underworld.

Vessels

Ceramic

Figure 8: Rio Hondo Covered Bowl from Quintana Roo (after Schele and Miller 1986:280).

_Rio Hondo, Quintana Roo, Mexico._ Figure 8 is a sketch of a mold-made lid dating to the Early Classic Period. The images on the body and on the lid of the vessel are similar. The bowl was found by archaeologist Thomas Gann on the bank of the Rio Hondo in Quintana Roo, Mexico, just north of the Belize border. It was on a mound with
several other pots, shells, beads, animal bones, and earflares. The bowl contained fragments of human bone (Schele and Miller 1986:280).

The iconography of the Rio Hondo bowl contains unmistakable references to being under water. The outer rim is composed of a series of water stacks divided by fish nibbling on water lilies. The water stacks, fish, and water lily blossoms represent the upper level of the register. The central images are of humans who are nude, except for anklets, bracelets and “double beads on their noses” (Schele and Miller 1986:280). Their mouths are slightly open and they appear to be dead, but still cling to the central bar. On either side of the human is a serpent with an ancestor emerging from the serpent’s mouth. Spaced evenly between humans and serpents are Cauacs, with skeletal heads and jaws, earflares, and god mirrors, the latter a symbol often shown on god-figures arms and legs. The bottom register is covered by shells with emerging heads, similar to images of the Maize god or Bacabs. The beings all have their wrists to their foreheads in a similar position as in the Maize god inscribed in the bones from Burial 116, Tikal. Schele and Miller (1986:280) identify the imagery on this Rio Hondo/Gann vessel as “dead souls in the watery underworld.”

An alternate interpretation of Figure 8 suggests the scene is the “rebirth from fish-snake monster” (Quenon and Le Fort 1997:890). Michel Quenon and Geneviève Le Fort (Quenon and Le Fort 1997:890-891) argue that the images represent the journey of the dead, moving from birth to death to rebirth; underwater images are part of that journey. Quenon and Le Fort (1997:890-891) label the shells, conch, and the heads emerging as “fish-snakes with human or possibly Maize God heads.”
Wooden Bowl

Figure 9: Burial 160, Stucco painted wooden bowl at Tikal (after Baudez 1994:183).

_Tikal, Guatemala_. The unique bowl from Burial 160 (Figure 9) dates to the Early Classic Period (A.D. 300-600). It is a wooden bowl decorated with painted stucco. There are two body-less heads floating near the Cauac monster. The figures possess characteristics associated with liminality - they are ambiguous having god and human features (scroll on mouth and god-like eye), death marks, bracelet, earflares, and headbands. Air bubbles float up in front of the figures faces and near the Cauac’s headdress, which suggests that the event is occurring underwater. Water lily blossoms emerge from either side of the headdress on the Cauac head (Grube 2001:266).
Freestanding Monument

Figure 10: Monument 23 at Quirigua (after Sharer 1990:59).

*Quirigua, Guatemala.* The images also show the being underwater or under the earth. Monument 23 (Figure 10) is a stone altar with the top surface and sides carved with hieroglyphic text. The traveler is in the lower register of the image. There is a clear line dividing the registers of the image. The hieroglyphic text surrounds an image of a building structure with bumps above it that look like the tops of the Cauac headdress in Figure 9. The traveler, who is either a deity or a human wearing a jaguar mask (Sharer 1994:325), is nude except for anklets, bracelets, and a headdress. The figure is either floating or sinking in scrolls, although Sharer (1994:325) suggests that the figure was dancing in the coils of a serpent.
Figure 11: Monument 24 at Quirigua (after Sharer 1990:63).

*Quirigua, Guatemala.* Figure 11 is a stone altar dating to the Classic Period (A.D. 795) (Stierlin 1997:58) that shows an upside-down traveler wearing a mask and holding a scroll, emerging from the mouth of a serpent. The border of the image displays the open maw of an Earth monster (ibid.). The scene may depict a masked human falling backward into the underworld (Sharer 1994:527). Newsome (2001:148) shows the image in the opposite position and suggests that the figure is the Storm god erupting from a T-shaped cleft in the earth.
Architecture

*Wall Panel of Building*

Figure 12: Temple of Jaguars, Chichen Itza (after Heine-Geldern 1966:283).

Figure 13: Frieze in lower inner temple, Pyramid of the Magician, Uxmal, Yucatan (after Heine-Geldern 1966:283).

*Chichen Itza and Uxmal, Yucatan, Mexico.* The travelers depicted on the Temple of Jaguars at Chichen Itza are similar to the images detailed on a frieze in the lower inner temple, Pyramid of the Magician, Uxmal, Yucatan (Figure 13). Figures 12 and 13 are wearing headdresses, and adornments around their ankles, wrists, and those in Figure 12 have adornments through their noses. They are holding onto lilypad stalks and are in motion. In Figure 12, the human figures are facing the Cauac monster while holding onto lilypad stalks. These are likely deceased humans on their journey to the underworld. Additional water plant and traveler images are inscribed into the temples (Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute 1995).
Figure 14: a) Stucco relief, House D of Palace at Palenque (after Morley and Brainerd 1983:411); b) drawing House D of Palace (after Spinden 1970:18).

*Palenque, Mexico.* This stucco relief from House D has been damaged around the faces and heads of both figures, which makes deciphering the image difficult. Figure 14 appears to depict one figure beheading another. The figure being decapitated is seated on a large Cauac monster head, meanwhile the other figure is in motion with one foot stepping on top of a smaller Cauac monster. Lilypad vines extend from the smaller Cauac’s head. The blossom at the end of the lilypad stalk has a Maize god head resting on it.
Figure 15: North Side of Mitla Palace Number 1, mural from lintel at Tulum (after Miller 1982:72).

_Tulum, Quintana Roo, Mexico._ Figure 15 is part of a lintel from Mitla Palace Number 1. The descending human-god figure is hanging onto a twisted cord. The figure is moving toward a disk by hanging onto a cord that continues beyond the disk. The disk that the figure is moving toward is possibly a ball in the center of a ball court. The structure on the left of the round disk is black, which could indicate a point of transition between life and death, the underworld and the here-and-now ball court or ball game in the afterlife, or possibly the use of the ball court as a conduit to the afterlife. There are body-less heads with three pedals attached to them above the traveler. The traveler has a collar and belt on, and unique hair and headdress. This image is from the Postclassic Period and has some influence from Mexico. The descending character has human and
god characteristics. The body frame is human, except for the ear, hair, and eye. This figure also has jewelry around his ankle and neck.

Noncontextual Vessels

The vessel known as File Number 4485 (Figure 34) depicts a possible dead or dying traveler. The serpent is surrounding a woman while an old man emerges from a serpent’s mouth peering at the woman. Above their heads is an undulating wave that symbolically indicates being underwater. On the opposite side of the vessel is an image of a seated man, interacting with two gods. Figure 33 (Black Background Vase) mentioned in the cosmic or birth event section, may also be connected with the descent of humans into the underworld (Kerr 1994:677).

The dead and dying travelers are primarily from the Early Classic to Postclassic Periods. They range from the northeast (Tulum), to the southeast (Quiriqua and Tikal), and northwest (Chichen Itza). They appear on murals, ceramic and stuccoed-wooden bowls and facades, painted lintels, and stone monuments. The travelers are holding onto rope, scepters, and lilypad stalks as they journey from the here-and-now to the underworld. Additional contextual materials depict the dead and dying traveler theme, but only a representative sample are included here.

Travelers Observing or Participating in Events

Images of travelers observing or participating in events date are primarily from the Classic and Postclassic Periods. They are animals, gods, humans, (and possibly
Tlaloc, the goggle-eyed god of thunder and lightening), shown sitting, hanging onto or sliding along objects capable of transferring them from the one realm to another. The travelers belonging to the observing or participating theme appear alive, alert and interested in the activities occurring around them. The images are found throughout the Maya region and in a variety of media: gold plate, freestanding monuments, murals, roof comb (structure), and stucco relief. The travelers in this genre are most often residing in the periphery. They play a supportive role in the narrative of the iconography. Most of the themes revolve around a single figure standing in a position of authority holding symbols of leadership. The travelers are often in the air, clouds, or headdress of the central figure. Sometimes they carry objects, but usually they are empty-handed.

Spirit companions are sometimes portrayed with Maya kings, climbing on their regalia or floating around them (Freidel and Suhler 1999:262). Stelae were likely ancient propaganda used to promote, justify and authenticate a ruler’s power. The event memorialized in stone, on a vessel or on a wall, may over time become recognized by the larger social group as sacred or extraordinary (Kottak 2006:374). The ruler is an intermediary between humans and deities. The authority that he holds is sanctioned by the gods, granting sacred authority (Hernández et al. 1999:190). One way of displaying the approval of the ancestors or gods is to depict them in the upper part of the register, in the headdress, watching the event unfold. By showing the ancestors or gods participating in or observing the event, the ruler’s powers are legitimized.

Although numerous observing or participating travelers were identified in contextual material, no comparable images were identified in noncontextual materials.
Conflict or War

Travelers shown in scenes with conflict or war have similar characteristics. They depict bound captives and people dressed elaborately while holding weapons. In the three examples presented, the traveler is in the upper portion of the register interlaced with an undulating form, possibly a Vision Serpent.

Gold Disk/Plate

Figure 16: Gold Plate/Disk B, from Cenote of Sacrifice at Chichen Itza (after Schele and Freidel 1990:395).

Chichen Itza, Yucatan, Mexico. Figure 16 is one of several gold embossed disks recovered from the Cenote of Sacrifice by Edward Thompson at the beginning of the twentieth century (Schele and Freidel 1990:395). Gold from the cenote originated hundreds of miles away in Panama, Central America (Thompson 1963:34), but is but is
believed to have been embossed on-site at Chichen Itza (Thompson 1963:36). There are four human figures and one deity or ancestor in the scene; three are standing, one is sitting with his arms bound, while the last figure is a traveler; identified as Tlaloc, god of lightening and war embracing a blood scroll (Schele and Freidel 1990:395) or Vision Serpent, suspended in mid-air. The traveler and the figure to the right of the bound captive are holding the same instrument.

Freestanding Monument

Figure 17: Stela 4 at Ucanal (after Stuart 1988:186).

_Ucanal, Guatemala._ Stela 4 (Figure 17) dates to the Terminal Classic Period (A.D. 849). Two figures are engaged in an event while standing on a captive in the
center part of the register. They are dressed similarly; each is holding a God K or manikin scepter. The traveler in this image has been identified as Tlaloc (Schele and Freidel 1990:386), holding an atlatl (Chase 1983:111). Some Mayanists suggest that the image depicts “bloodletting” or “scattering” rituals (Stierlin 1997:52; Stuart 1988:183). The figures are also called “floaters-in-blood” (Stuart 1988:183,219). Bloodletting events could commemorate an end of cycle. It is argued here that the traveler (possibly Tlaloc) is intertwined around a Vision Serpent.

Mayanist Joyce Marcus (1992:296) has offered a different interpretation of the blood image. Marcus suggests that instead of an “auto sacrifice,” what is re-enforced iconographically is a connection between remote ancestors and the new ruler. One interpretation of the dotted scroll motif is that they are clouds supporting ancestors (McAnany 1995:44-45). The dotted scroll motif is found additionally at the sites of Jimbal, Ixlu and Tikal in Guatemala.
Chichen Itza, Yucatan, Mexico. Donald E. Wray (1967:25) suggests that Figure 18 depicts a village under attack. Wray interprets these images as *Quetzalcoatl* (the Plumed Serpent), who was the patron of the attacking force. This could also be a traveler who is observing the activities taking place. The serpent seems to be attached to a large disc similar to the one in the Mitla Mural at Tulum (Figure 15). The traveler holds something in his hand and is, at the same time, reclining on the serpent. The traveler is elaborately dressed.
Accession or Display of Leadership

History can be rewritten. Individuals can be made to appear more important than they really were; titles and offices can accrue, perhaps not mirroring reality. Iconography can be similarly employed to create alternate meanings and realities, projecting what one hopes a given situation or cosmic setting will be, rather than reflecting what it actually is. [A. Chase and D. Chase 2001:124]

Patricia McAnany (1995:164) finds iconography to be a conservative expression that holds significant political influence. Images may be present across different political boundaries and may be manipulated for political and economic gains. The images centered around accession or leadership seem to have strong messages about the ruling power of the leader. The messages about the rulers’ power are intertwined in relationships between the supernatural and the natural world (Benson and Griffin 1988:3).

A recurring symbol of power is found in the double-headed Ceremonial Bar (Spinden 1970:49) or Serpent Bar (Schele and Miller 1986:268; Tate:1992:61). Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller (1986:268) define the Serpent Bar as a representation of the “authority of the king and the larger human community.” Sometimes the Ceremonial Bar is depicted with a “flexible, drooping body,” with wide-open jaws that have human or “grotesque faces” emerging from them (Spinden 1970:49). At other times, the bar is rigid, with astronomical signs across the body (Tate 1992:61). Carolyn Tate (ibid.) suggests that the Ceremonial Bar indicates that the ruler is a mediator between the three levels of the cosmos. The majority of the travelers represented in accession or leadership
images are deities who are alert and seemingly interested in what is going on around them. The creatures are usually located on the periphery and dressed similarly to the central figure. The central figures are elaborately dressed while commemorating an important event (Newsome 2001:16).

The most prolific topic is the travelers observing or participating in events, but in this survey there were no comparable images found in the noncontextual materials.

Architecture

*Structure*

Figure 19: Temple of the Sun at Palenque (after Freidel and Suhler 1999:261).

*Palenque, Mexico.* The reconstruction of the roof-comb on the Temple of the Sun (Figure 19) is based on fragmentary evidence (Freidel and Suhler 1999:260). It shows a ruler holding a Vision Serpent scepter; as the serpent extends outward four deities are in
position, each having one hand holding up the ceiling and the other holding onto the serpent. They also have a knee bent, which may signal that they were dancing.

According to Marvin Cohodas, the narrative being acted out in Figure 19 is an expression of the “daily passage of the sun through cosmic space” (1974:155).

Linda Schele (1974:29) refers to Palenque as the “gate to the Underworld for all of the Maya.” Arthur Miller (1973:46) has suggested that the sites of Palenque (Classic Period) and Tulum (Postclassic Period) were significant representation of ideas about death and rebirth (cosmic and human). Palenque is in the western and southern Maya region; both of those regions are associated with the Underworld (Miller 1973:46). Tulum is in the northeastern region of the Maya; therefore, using Miller’s theory, one would expect to find images related to birth in that Postclassic site. Miller points to images of umbilical cords in Temple 16 (Figure 5a) and Structure 25. Also near Tulum is Isla Mujeres, which is connected to Ix Chel, Goddess O, the goddess of the moon, childbirth, procreation, and medicine (Miller 1973:46).
Figure 20: East Side of Stela A at Copan (CPN 1) (after Baudez 1994:22).

*Copan, Honduras.* Stela A has been dated to the Late Preclassic Period (Newsome 2001:134). Claude Baudez (1994:266) calls the travelers in the Copan sculpture “animated beings,” who are a combination of royal ancestors, Maize gods, Bacabs, animals, and creatures with human bodies and monstrous heads. Baudez (1994:23) also calls these travelers “solar beings.” It is unclear if the beings are alive or dead, or if they have human or deity facial characteristics. The travelers are holding skeletal serpents while sitting in the central figure’s headdress. They are wearing adornments on their ankles and wrists. There are several beings in the headdress of this image. The underworld gods are linked by rope that represents a sacrificial symbol (Baudez 1994:33,35). The mat symbols positioned in the center of the headdress and the
serpent on Stela A represents leadership (Baudez 1994:23). Sketches from the late nineteenth century depict god faces on the human bodies holding the skeletal serpent (Newsome 2001:134). Stelae B and C from Copan have similar characters as Figure 20. Stela C contains many human and god figures (Baudez 1994:30; Newsome 2001:107) and figures around twisted cords. The east side of Stela B has several human figures on the periphery from top to bottom. There is also a Maize god head perched on a stalk of maize emerging from the leader’s headdress.

Figure 21: East Side of Stela 5 at Copan (CPN 47) (after Baudez 1994:131).

Copan, Honduras. The central figure in Figure 21 (Stela 5) is elaborately dressed and holds onto a double-headed Vision Serpent. The travelers are in the periphery. The travelers are unique because they are emerging out of shells; no other travelers on stelae are shown this way. The traveling figures are holding the Ceremonial Bar close to their
chests with one arm while the other arm is extended. Each traveler is facing the central human. The travelers are wearing earflares, necklaces, headbands and wristlets.

Figure 22: Stela D at Copan (after Baudez:1994:49).

Copan, Honduras. Figure 22 has multiple figures holding onto the serpent in the center of the headdress. The ruler may have a mask on or facial adornments, and he is holding a Ceremonial Bar. The figures in the headdress have a mixture of human, animal, and deity traits. Part of the upper register of this figure is damaged, making interpretation of the event difficult. However, part of the image that has survived clearly depicts the body of a serpent with human hands holding onto it as the serpent moves from one side of the headdress to the other.
The west, east, and south sides of Stela F at Copan have detailed scenes that include multiple deity and human figures riding or embracing either an enormous Vision Serpent or a tree. A serpent body winds throughout the top part of the register. Figure 23 is unique in that it depicts a figure holding onto the trunk of a tree. The tree is likely the sacred ceiba tree, with roots that penetrate the underworld and a trunk and branches that extended into the upperworld. The living and deceased are able to remain connected through this pathway (Newsome 2001:198). Thompson (1970:195) found that for some Maya, the roots provided a path for ancestors to ascend into the world, and the trunk and branches allowed the dead to “climb to the highest sky.” Another significant symbol is located on the top left portion of the register where a head, possibly the Maize god, is resting on the serpent body.
Copan, Honduras. Stela F at Copan (Figure 24) has god and human characters covering the stela. The main figure is standing holding the Serpent Bar. Six grotesque figures are in pairs, gripping the ropes that are the bodies of the two serpents. Three individuals are seated above the main figure’s headdress - one in front view, the other two in profile (Baudez 1994:48). Remnants of the three figures at the top of the stela still exist. Two are holding rope belts coiled several times around their waists. Baudez refers to the rope as part of sacrifice (Baudez 1994:52). Elizabeth Newsome (2001:122) argues that the images on Stela F are associated with the ball game, war, and sacrificial rites. Newsome (ibid.) identifies the cord in Figure 24b as a “bloodletting cord that falls from the maws of Vision Serpents.” There are numerous “miniature deities” on the north and south sides. The upper portion of the stela is damaged.
Additional images of travelers are on Stela H and Stela N at Copan, shown climbing round and over the bodies of serpents along the north and south sides of the stela (Newsome 2001:130; Spinden 1970:89).

Figure 25: Stela 2 at Ixlu (after Stuart 1988:187).

Ixlu, Peten, Guatemala. Ixlu Stela 2 (Figure 25) shows a central figure standing in profile and holding a God K scepter as he “scatters” with the other hand. Suspended in mid-air around the central figure are four supernaturals in dotted S-shaped motifs. Two are human warriors and two are deities. David Stuart (1988:189) refers to the S-shaped motifs as Paddler god “blood icons.” The left figure has Jaguar God of the Underworld characteristics: large, round eye, a jaguar-head cap, and feline paws and tail. Stuart suggests that the “floaters” are representative of the ruler’s blood and may be a symbolic way to conduct a Period Ending self-sacrifice (ibid.). All of these Classic Period
monuments depict very similar images, consistently portraying supernatural beings suspended within dotted S-shapes above the standing ruler. Similar images are found in other stela at Ixlu (Stela 1) and at Ucanal and Jimbal, Guatemala.

Figure 26: Stela 1 at Tikal (after Freidel and Schele 1988:65).

*Tikal, Guatemala.* Stela 1 (Figure 26) is an Early Classic stela depicting a leader dressed elaborately with a cape: high-backed sandals; a kilt or loincloth; a hand-held object, such as the bicephalic serpent bar; a staff; an effigy god; and a belt that usually has the cruller-eyed Jaguar God attached at the front and a chain with a hanging god at the side (Freidel and Schele 1988:64). The costume appears on numerous Early Classic and Late Classic monuments (Freidel and Schele 1988:66).
Uxmal, Yucatan, Mexico. Uxmal Stela 14 (Figure 27) is undated but likely from the Late Classic to Postclassic Periods (Morley and Brainerd 1983:341). It shows “Lord Chac” standing on a two headed jaguar throne and accompanied by a warrior resembling “Toltec” or Itza figures at Chichen Itza. (Kowalski 1999:277). Copan Stela 5 (Figure 21) also has conch shells as a prominent part of the scene.
Quirigua, Guatemala. The central figure in Monument 6 (Figure 28) is reportedly Cauac Sky. This is the first monument dedicated to the northern Plaza Platform, and it appears to have set precedents for the rest of the stelae in this cluster. Monument 6 initiates the practice of twin frontal portraits of Cauac Sky on the southern and northern sides. The twin portraits on Monument 6 are very similar, but are not duplicates. While both stand on elaborate Earth monster pedestals, the northern example is skeletal in contrast to the non-skeletal southern pedestal. Both wear multiple-masked headdresses crowned by the head of God C. The south-facing figure holds the double-headed Ceremonial Bar clasped horizontally across the chest, but the north facing portraits holds a manikin scepter across the chest with the right hand and a small round shield in the left hand. Furthermore, Monument 6 is the first to depict Cauac Sky wearing the distinctive
narrow beard seen on all of his subsequent portraits, which is rare in Maya art (Sharer 1990:39).

**Noncontextual Stela**

The Hauberg Stela (Figure 31) is a miniature stela believed to date to the Late Preclassic Period (A.D. 199) with “small deities climbing or grasping poles, snakes, or plants” (Hellmuth 1988:164). The central figure holds a long, drooping serpent (Sharer 1994:127). There is also a serpent head with a peering human head in its jaws hovering over the composition. David Stuart (1988:221) believes that the Hauberg Stela depicts a ruler wearing a deity mask. The serpent on the Hauberg Stela winds up and over the ruler’s portrait, and from its open jaws emerge a downward-looking head. Carolyn Tate (1992:120) refers to the image on the Hauberg Stela as an inauguration with the ruler holding a Vision Serpent. Newsome (2001:25) refers to the event as a “rite of blood sacrifice, hallucination, and supernatural communication.” Newsome argues that the central figure is a king, wearing a Chac mask, who has sacrificed war captives. The severed bodies of the victims are argued to be falling into the underworld (Newsome 2001:25-26).
Unknown Activity of Travelers

Freestanding Monument

Figure 29: Fragment of Stela 25 at Kaminaljuyu (after Parsons 1988:17).

Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala. Figure 29 was damaged and had been moved prior to its excavation by the Kaminaljuyu Project (Parsons 1988:16). The figure is unusually dressed, with “a helmet and chin strap, [and] knee padding” sitting astride a scroll or moon image. Figure 29 could represent a ballplayer in a “boxing pose” (Parsons 1988:16-18). It has also been suggested as representing the “birth of the Moon from the Underworld” (Parsons 1988:18). Along the upper right corner, just before a damaged section, is part of a “three-toothed scrolled snout” (ibid.). Whether the figure is a ballplayer, masked leader, or warrior, it is clearly tied to the same themes of afterlife. The figure is using a smoke scroll or moon scroll to travel. It is either emerging from or descending into a jaw, likely of the underworld.
Mural

Figure 30: Mural in Structure 5D-Sub-10-1st at Tikal (after Sharer 1994:110).

*Tikal, Guatemala.* The mural from Tikal Structure 5D-Sub-10-1st (Figure 30) was buried deep within the North Acropolis. It dates to the Late Preclassic Period (Sharer 1994:110). The mural consists of three badly eroded columns of smoke scrolls. Figure 30 shows one column with a leg of a figure descending. It is impossible to discern if this being is alive or dead, god or human. It is likely a traveler moving between worlds. The figure appears nude except for something around its ankle.

*Summary*

The media for each of the groupings of images that follow are presented in chronological order. Media depicting a birth or cosmic event include one freestanding monument, a structural façade, a bench, an altar, a mural, and three images from codices. The dead or dying images consist of a mural on a lintel, two vessels (wood and ceramic), two freestanding monuments, and carvings on the wall of a structure. The observing or
participating traveler images are the greatest in volume; most are on freestanding monuments, but also are on the roof comb of a structure, stucco relief and on a mural. The media include sixteen freestanding monuments, six images embedded within structures, five vessels, five murals, three codices, and one gold plate. Four noncontextual media have been included: one freestanding monument and three vessels.

Travelers constitute continuously repeated symbols in ancient Maya society. Symbols instigate social action (Turner 2000:488). To adequately gain the meaning of a particular symbol, one needs to: first examine the widest context of the symbol, consider what kinds of circumstances give rise to a performance of ritual, and then determine whether these are concerned with natural phenomena, economic and technological processes, human life-crises, or with the breach of crucial social relationships. These circumstances will probably determine what sort of ritual is performed (Turner 2000:494). These possible rituals are now considered in the concluding section.
CONCLUSION

The ancient Maya created and maintained complex cities and social structures. Material remains provide clues to better understand many aspects of their ways of life, including political and social organization, as well as religious beliefs. The ancient Maya communicated with each other, with ancestors, and with deities by embedding narratives in their architecture, stone monuments, ceramics, codices, and murals. The term traveler is necessary and appropriate to describe the beings detailed here, because they share key characteristics and behaviors related to the afterlife. There are similarities in appearance, behavior, and the objects they use to journey between realms. The travelers display traits that are associated with liminality and transitional events in the lives of individuals and/or the community represented. Images incorporated within the group of travelers portrayed here have been the subject of many interpretations and have been given a variety of names, but until now no one has argued that they all are members of a larger group representing concepts of birth, life (literal and cosmic), bloodletting, accession/leadership, death, afterlife, and rebirth.

The travelers have transitional characteristics – being dead and alive, deity and human, involved in the present and in the afterlife. The activity depicted is also transitional; the travelers are in motion, arriving and departing via objects used as conduits. Travelers tend to be significant attendants at births and cosmic events, in agricultural cycles, during journeys of dead or dying individuals, and for memorializing accessions or other leadership-related events. The argument that these themes are pan-
Maya is supported by the number of travelers, the depth of time in which travelers are represented, and the expansive region in which the images are located.

The travelers have a variety of vehicles with which to journey: a tree’s branches extend into the sky and roots penetrate the soil (Figure 23); water lilies extend above and below the water (Figures 9, 12, 13, 14); smoke originates from fire and rises through the air (Figure 31); blood is connected to life and death (Figure 25); and twisted cords - identified variously as fire drills, umbilical cords (Figures 1, 3, 4, 6b, 7, 24), a staple of diet (maize, squash and gourds); (Figure 5a) or serpents (Figure 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22) – also connect planes. In addition to the means of transportation already described, the underworld is also reportedly accessible through caves and ball courts. The Maya region’s landscape is pocked with caves, which are “especially sacred and dangerous places” (Sharer 1994:524). The ball court is also considered to be a threshold between the earthly world and the underworld (Sharer 1994:525).

The majority of traveler images date to the Classic Period (A.D. 250-900), but some contextual examples date to the Preclassic and Postclassic Periods. Some dates are not known or readily decipherable (Figures 16, 31, 32, 33, 34). The Tikal mural (Figure 30) and stucco wooden bowl (Figure 9) date to the Late Preclassic Period. The Postclassic media include murals from Tulum (Figures 5a, 5b, 15), the Codex Paris (Figure 6), and the Codex Dresden (Figure 7). Most of the material remains are from the widely recognized and extensively excavated sites of Chichen Itza, Copan, Palenque, Tikal, and Tulum. Travelers are also known from less extensively investigated sites, as
well as from those that have been moderately excavated, such as Izapa, Ixlu, Kaminaljuyu, Quirigua, Ucanal, and Uxmal.

The images relay information about the ways of life and belief systems of the ancient Maya. Arthur Miller (1982:94) has suggested that art for art’s sake did not exist among the Maya prior to contact with the Spanish. Each aspect of the image serves a purpose that goes beyond simple aesthetics. If Miller’s argument is correct, then no matter how small in stature or how peripheral the image of the traveler, it is an integral part of the narrative depicted. The participant or observer images were likely political propaganda used to prove legitimacy as a leader, inspire political backing, or provide assurance of the leader’s knowledge and ability; such figures demonstrated “otherworld” support of military pursuits and also displayed ancestral support. The accession or leadership events may have been attended by ancestors or deities who would participate, observe, supervise, or possibly only be there “in spirit.”

The travelers depicted in the cosmic or birth events were depicted on a stela, a façade of structure, a bench, an altar, a mural and three codices. The dead and dying scenes were depicted on a mural (on a lintel), two vessels (wood and ceramic), two monuments, and a structure. The figures are often nude or nearly nude, except for wristlets, anklets, headdresses, and some wear necklaces. The figures often appear sedated or deceased. In cosmic or birth events, as well as in dead or dying events, the travelers are typically central to the scene, whereas in observing or participating in accession or leadership events, the traveler is usually on the periphery of the scene. The travelers who are participating in or observing events have more elaborate dress, are more
alert than other travelers, and are smaller than the central figure. The observing or participating travelers are located on a structure, a stucco relief, eleven stelae, and a mural. The non-contextual images are found on a miniature stela, and ceramic vessels. One factor that binds the travelers is that they are all in motion – portrayed as sitting on, holding on, entangled in, or floating on top of objects that have ambiguous symbolism. The traveler is a significant aspect in the afterlife events of the ancient Maya. The ancestors and deities are shown moving from one realm to another by using items that were easily accessible and tied to multiple worlds, suggesting that the afterlife was not a place where one was confined, but rather a place that one could leave and then return. The images also imply that ancestors and deities were important members of the community and are often incorporated into the images. The implications provide additional insight into the belief systems of the ancient Maya.

Ethnohistoric documentation provides insight into the ways of life of the Maya, but the limitations of this kind of data must be acknowledged. Although the diaries, journals, and other accounts are of value, it should be noted that they were produced after the arrival of the Spanish and that those that best describe afterlife are most relevant to the Maya in one region during the 1550s or after. The highland Popol Vuh (Tedlock 1996) is used extensively to interpret the ancient lowland Maya, but when the Counsel Book was examined for evidence of travelers, no mention was found of how one travels from one level of the universe to another. Different roads to Xibalba are documented, but no details are provided about how they are employed (Tedlock 1996:36). Diane and Arlen Chase (2004:9) argue that “incautious use of post-contact materials has skewed
past interpretations of ancient Maya culture and religion; however, contextual interpretations of archaeological data are starting to change these views.” Noncontextual materials should be incorporated into theories only rarely and with notice given to the reader of the potential problems that exist when using nonprovenienced artifacts. The noncontextual travelers are far fewer in number and the scenes depicted are different from those that come from good contextual locations. It is also worth noting that the most common traveler, the participant or observer is absent in all the noncontextual materials surveyed for this study.

The results of this study show that the media is not comparable between contextual and noncontextual materials, the participant/observer is an ideal example. The research represented here is not comprehensive. Further research could examine the relationships between the traveler and dwarfs (mediator between the present and the afterlife), ball courts and ball games, caves, and cenotes. An evaluation would need to be made of the hieroglyphic texts. Additionally, the research could include an examination of the similarities and differences between the Maya traveler and similar beings depicted in Olmec (Newsome 2001:12) and Aztec art. Travelers are an example of an iconographic theme that is featured prominently in ancient Maya art. They are a group of figures that are usually depicted as traveling through different levels of existence. Usually, they ride or hold onto objects that were depicted by the ancient Maya with connectedness to the afterlife and various world levels (sky, below ground) of possible existence. They are usually inserted into scenes related to birth, death, and the legitimization of authority. For the Maya, they occur widespread in terms of both
chronology and areal extent. Taken as a whole, travelers broaden our understanding of ancient Maya views of life and death by showing how boundaries transcended in the world of the living and the world of the supernatural.
APPENDIX A

NONCONTEXTUAL VIEW OF THE AFTERLIFE
Figure 31: Hauberg Stela (after Stuart 1988:220).
Ceramics

Figure 32: "Black Background Vase" (after Kerr 1994:677).

Figure 33: File No 4485 (after Kerr 1994:545).
Figure 34: Birth Vase (after Kerr 1994:650-651).
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