Embodiments of Heat in the Iconography of Highland Maya Effigy Funerary Urns

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The art history of the Maya has been an area of study for over a century. In that time, the majority of research has focused on art from Classic period (250 - 900 CE) Lowland Maya cities of southern Mexico, Belize, Honduras, and Northern Guatemala. In contrast, the art of the Highland Maya, from the mountainous regions of southern Mexico and southern and central Guatemala, has received considerably less attention. This paper rectifies that disparity to an extent by examining the effigy funerary urn as an important genre of Highland Maya art (Figure 1). This survey and analysis of fifty-five Highland urns represents the first systematic study of urn iconography.[1] Highland Maya effigy funerary urns represent a unique departure from earlier burial customs. These urns boast a complex and consistent iconographic program that includes jaguar deities, the Maize God, and the old god of the hearth, as well as skulls, spikes, and personifications of the earth. In order to demonstrate that the iconographic complex of Highland effigy funerary urns makes explicit the analogy that exists between Maya eschatology, the life cycle of maize, and the rebirth of the Maize God, this essay shows that heat, as represented in urn iconography by various jaguar deities and the old god of the hearth, was an important component in Highland Maya funerary practice.

As fire- and hearth-related entities, the jaguar deities and the old god of the hearth provide the heat necessary for the regeneration of the body, a conceptual process informed by observation of the life cycle of maize. These vessels are related to architectural tombs, domestic structures, and incense burners by virtue of their iconography and related conceptual significance. These urns condense the ideas embodied by these structures and objects, those of sprouting and re-birth, into a single ceramic vessel. Following a brief introduction to the genre, the parallel between the life cycles of the Maize God and humans is outlined. Next, the urns' pervasive heat- and hearth-related imagery is addressed, concluding with an explanation of how the embodiment of heat in the iconography of urns informs the function of these vessels.

Effigy funerary urns date to the Late Classic to Early Postclassic period, probably between 800 and 1100 CE, and were produced within the Guatemalan Highlands, most likely in the northern regions of the Departments of Quiche and Huehuetenango in the area surrounding Nebaj.[2] The urns that are the focus of this study were looted and are therefore without provenance. However, stylistically and iconographically similar examples have been recovered in situ from sites such as Nebaj.[3] The bundled bodies of elite members of the community were placed in the urns in a flexed position (Figure 2), and buried in temple structures or other ceremonially important locations.[4] Many of the urns retain traces of their original red, white, yellow, black and blue paint, evidence of their interment in an enclosed, protected space. Highland funerary urns are typically cylindrical in form, although square and rectangular examples have been recovered. Urns range in size from one and a half feet tall up to three feet tall and with diameters from approximately one to two feet, thus providing plenty of space for complete or disarticulated human remains.

Each ceramic urn is composed of two basic elements: a large decorated urn body and accompanying lid. Surviving lids are conical in form and regularly feature a jaguar. Modeled clay sculptural elements and painted imagery are the primary means of decoration. Many urns possess flanges on either side of the body and offer an extended space for such painting. The body is dominated by a central figure, typically a jaguar deity, the Maize God, or the old god of the hearth known as Huehueteotl in Central Mexico. Urns typically depict either the faces of deities, one usually emerging from the mouth of another, or solitary full-figured representations

[1] These fifty-five examples have been chosen based on their formal and iconographic similarities as well as their accessibility. Other examples are known to the author, but have been excluded to limit the scope of this essay. The urns discussed in this paper are in the collection of the Museo Popol Vuh in Guatemala City. For a detailed discussion of the urns and additional photographs, see Kathleen McCampbell, "Highland Maya Effigy Funerary Urns: A Study of Genre, Iconography, and Function" (master's thesis, Florida State University, 2010).

[2] Museo Popol Vuh Guidebook (Barcelona: Brustamante Editores, S.L., 2003), 53; Andrés Ciudad Ruiz, "La Tradición Funeraria de las Tierras Altas de Guatemala Durante la Etapa Prehispánica," in *Antropología de la Eternidad: La Muerte en la Cultura Maya*, ed. Andrés Ciudad Ruiz, Mario Humberto Ruz, and Ma. Josefa Iglesias Ponce de León (Madrid: Sociedad Española de Estudios Mayas, 2005), 94-96; and Maria Josefa Iglesias Ponce de León, "Contenedores de Cuerpos, Cenizas y Almas: El Uso de las Urnas Funerarias en la Cultura Maya," in Ruiz, et al., *Antropología de la Eternidad*, 224.

[3] Mary Butler Lewis, "Excavation Notes from Nebaj, Guatemala, 1941," n.d., Archives of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia, PA.

[4] Ciudad Ruiz, "Tradición Funeraria de las Tierras Altas," 94-96; Ponce de León, "Uso de las Urnas Funerarias," 224.

(Figure 3). The variation in representations of deities on effigy funerary urns offers clues about the nature of these figures and the symbolic function of the urn in Maya burial practice. To contextualize this function, a brief discussion of the mythology surrounding maize is necessitated. As was previously emphasized, the Maize God serves as an intermediary for understanding how the life cycles of humans and maize are related.

The *Popol Vuh*, a sixteenth-century K'iche' Maya creation narrative recovered in Chichicastenango, a Highland town located little over twenty miles from present day Nebaj, records the discovery of maize and the creation of people.[5] The *Popol Vuh* recounts that human flesh and bone were formed from maize dough.[6] People, and thus the bones interred in funerary urns, are composed of maize or are equivalent to maize. References to maize in Highland Maya languages make explicit this connection between maize and the human body. In Tzutujil maize seeds are referred to as *muk* "interred ones," or *jolooma*, "little skulls."[7] Similarly the K'iche' word for a single ear of corn is *wi*, or "head."[8] Multiple references to the importance of heat and its relationship with maize, and thus humans, are given in the *Popol Vuh*. One example describes how the lives of the Hero Twins, a pair of important mythological characters, are analogous to that of the ears of maize that the Twins plant in the center of the home of their grandmother.[9] Although not explicitly stated, the maize is planted where the hearth would traditionally be located. The Twins state that the maize that grows there will inform their grandmother if they are alive or dead, depending on whether the plants sprout or dry up.

In Mesoamerican myth, birth and transformation often take place in dark, heated spaces, the most notable of which is the birth of the Maize God, whose life and death are understood through a comparison with that of maize.[10] The famed ceramic vessel known as the "Resurrection Plate" (Kerr Vessel 1892), depicts the Maize God's birth from the earth, which is represented by a large turtle (Figure 4). The heat and darkness that allow him to sprout or re-grow are illustrated in the flaming skull from which he is born. This skull includes an *ak'bal*, "darkness" sign, which forms its eye. Humans and maize are also understood to lead parallel lives as they undergo continuous cycles of birth, death, planting/burial, and re-growth. Bodies placed in urns may thus be understood within the context of the life cycle of maize. They have died and their bones, or seeds, have been buried, or planted, in the darkness of the urn, just as maize seeds are planted in a field and now require the heat necessary for regeneration. In urn iconography, this heat is provided by the depictions of jaguar deities and Huehueteotl, the old god of the hearth.

One of the most striking features of the iconographic program of effigy funerary urns is the frequent appearance of jaguar deities. There appear to be three different types of jaguars in this program, a naturalistic jaguar, and two other gods arbitrarily referred to as the Jaguar God of the Underworld and the Water Lily Jaguar. These three types of jaguars may essentially be one and the same, or at least different manifestations of the same idea, because they can be readily substituted for one another on urn bodies and lids.

The primary central figure on effigy funerary urns is the so-called Jaguar God of the Underworld (Figure 5). He is typically represented with jaguar ears and a twisted cord-like element between his swirled god eyes. Normally, this jaguar deity is shown emerging from the mouth of a reptilian creature, possibly a personification of the earth or the serpent from whose mouth the sun emerges (Figure 6). This particular deity is most often portrayed on urns that echo the shape of incense burner stands, with only a few exceptions.

5 Allen Christenson, trans., *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya: The Great Classic of Central American Spirituality, Translated from the Original Maya Text* (Winchester, UK: O Books, 2003). This essay relies on Allen Christenson's translations of the text. For a second translation refer to, Dennis Tedlock, trans., *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings* (New York: Touchstone, 1996). Scholars often use the *Popol Vuh* to explain imagery dating to as early as the Preclassic period. While this early imagery does support the idea that the mythological narrative recorded in the book has ancient roots, it is nevertheless problematic to apply a sixteenth-century text to monuments and objects that predate it by a millennium and are from a different area of the Maya world. Conversely, the effigy funerary urns are much closer in time and location to the *Popol Vuh*. The *Popol Vuh*, literally "Council Book," was recorded by anonymous K'iche' Maya in the middle of the sixteenth century. Sometime between 1701 and 1703 a Spanish friar named Francisco Ximénez made the only surviving copy of the K'iche' manuscript and translated it into Spanish. In addition to recording the gods' creation of people and the adventures of the Hero twins, the book includes the founding and history of the K'iche' kingdom.

6 Christenson, *Popol Vuh,* 195. In the third and final attempt to create people, maize found by animals in Paxil/Cayala Mountain is used to form human flesh and bone. The text reads, "[t]hus their frame and shape were given expression by our first Mother and our first Father. Their flesh was merely yellow ears of maize and white ears of maize. Mere food were the legs and arms of humanity, of our first fathers. And so there were four who were made, and mere food was their flesh."

7 Robert S. Carlsen and Martin Prechtel, "The Flowering of the Dead: An Interpretation of Highland Maya Culture," *Man* 26, no. 1 (March 1991): 28. See this article for more maize-related vocabulary and for an explanation of the concept of Jaloj-Kexoj, which is a process of ancestral transformation understood through observation of the agricultural process, thus further connecting humans with the life cycle of maize.

8 Christenson, *Popol Vuh,* 137.

9 Ibid., 160. Xmucane's house, like all Maya houses, is essentially a microcosm of the universe, with the four corners representing the points of the cardinal directions and the hearth being the world center. The dead are also often buried beneath the floor of the house, revealing yet another connection between humans and maize. For more on the house as a microcosm see, Michael D. Carrasco and Kerry Hull, "The Cosmogonic Symbolism of the Corbeled Vault in Maya Architecture," *Mexicon* 24, no. 2 (2002): 26-32.

10 Michael D. Carrasco, "From Field to Hearth: An Earthly Interpretation of Maya and Other Mesoamerican Creation Myths," in *Pre-Columbian Foodways: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Food, Culture, and Markets in Ancient Mesoamerica*, ed. John E. Staller and Michael D. Carrasco (New York: Springer, 2010), 616-621.

This is not surprising given that this figure appears with great frequency on Classic period incense burners, a context that emphasizes his relationship with fire and heat.[11]

David Stuart first suggested that this figure is associated with fire, citing the god's frequent association with fire-drilling rituals and appearance on ritual incense burners as evidence of the relationship.[12] Altar 5 from Tikal portrays two figures impersonating this deity as they open the tomb of a woman who had died eight years earlier.[13] Both figures are depicted with the twisted cord element between their eyes and the figure on the left has a jaguar ear above his ear spool. These figures are performing a fire-drilling ceremony meant to renew or restore something that has diminished over time, specifically heat.[14] The altar makes explicit this connection between burial and fire or fire ceremony. Additionally, Michael Carrasco has argued that San Antonio, the Ch'orti God of Fire and the Hearth, is a manifestation of this jaguar deity, further connecting this figure with heat and fire-related ritual.[15]

Nikolai Grube and Werner Nahm have demonstrated that a number of jaguar *way* characters, or spirit companions, are related to fire or heat.[16] One of these *way*, the *k'ak hix* "fire jaguar" is shown engulfed in flames on Kerr Vessel 5367, a polychrome ceramic vase (Figure 7).[17] Figures such as the *k'ak hix* often share characteristics with a jaguar frequently seen on urns, particularly the appearance of a vegetal element protruding from the forehead and a red scarf draped across the shoulders (Figure 8). The connection between fiery *way* figures and this jaguar, whose cranial protrusion resembles that of the Water Lily Jaguar, suggests that it, too, has connections to heat and fire. This jaguar and the Jaguar God of the Underworld, along with a naturalistic jaguar devoid of any forehead elements, are interchangeable within urn iconography. This suggests that these three figures are different aspects of the same idea. The old god of the hearth is also a part of this system of alternation.[18]

Previously, the existence of a Maya equivalent of Huehueteotl had not been proven. However, the appearance of the figure of an old god whose representation is interchangeable with that of jaguar deities now known to embody heat and fire, confirms that these deities, in particular the Jaguar God of the Underworld, are symbolically equivalent to the old god of the hearth. Huehueteotl, with his sagging, wrinkled face and missing teeth may be represented either emerging from the mouth of a saurian or in full-figure on urns (Figure 9). One urn depicts a triad of old gods and is especially significant, as it confirms this deity's identification as the equivalent of Huehueteotl. As the god of the hearth, Huehueteotl here embodies the three individual hearth stones. On Naranjo Stela 30, a ruler impersonating a jaguar deity and clutching a fire-drilling staff wears a headdress that includes the three hearth stones.[19] This suggests that jaguar deities may be associated with a very specific fire, that of the three-stone hearth of creation from which the Maize God emerged. This only further emphasizes the connection between jaguar deities, the old god of the hearth, fire, and heat.

On urns, the three jaguar deities and Huehueteotl are each depicted emerging from the mouth of a saurian earth creature, or as full figures in the exact same position and size on urn bodies. Although only a limited number of urn lids survive, it seems that each of these deities can easily replace one another as decorative elements on urn lids which adhere to no apparent pattern. These substitutions suggest that these figures are manifestations of the same idea: heat, fire, and the hearth. These figures, along with depictions of the Maize God and representations of skulls, ceiba spikes, and personifications of the earth place effigy funerary urns into the same larger conceptual category as tomb architecture and ceremonial objects like incense burners. These objects and spaces share this iconography and stress the importance of heat as a critical element in the process of birth and regeneration.

11 Prudence Rice, "Rethinking Classic Lowland Maya Pottery Censers," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 10, no.1 (Spring 1999): 36.

12 David Stuart, "The Fire Enters His House: Architecture and Ritual in Classic Maya Texts," in F*unction and Meaning in Classic Maya Architecture*, ed. Stephen D. Houston (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1998), 384-409.

13 Ibid., p. 407 and fig. 24.

14 Ibid., 384-409. See Stuart's essay for an explanation of *och k'ahk'* "fire entering" ceremonies and the Jaguar God of the Underworld's involvement. See McCampbell, "Highland Maya Effigy Funerary Urns," 53-54, for a further discussion of these ceremonies as they relate to effigy funerary urns.

15 Michael D. Carrasco, "The Mask Flange Iconographic Complex: The Art, Ritual, and History of a Maya Sacred Image," (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2005), 262-263.

16 Nikolai Grube and Werner Nahm, "A Census of Xibalba: A Complete Inventory of *Way* Characters on Maya Ceramics," in *The Maya Vase Book, Vol. 4*, ed. Barbara and Justin Kerr (New York: Kerr Associates, 1994), 687.

17 This figure is also found on K2942 and K3924. Also see the *ha hix* "water jaguar" (K771 and K791) discussed in Grube and Nahm, "Census of Xibalba," 690; and in Karl Taube, "The Jade Hearth: Centrality, Rulership, and the Classic Maya Temple," in Houston, *Function and Meaning*, 443. Another figure, the *k'intan bolay*, "sun center jaguar," who is listed in the text describing the birth of GIII in the Temple of the Sun at Palenque, is also related to this concept. See Carrasco, "Mask Flange Iconographic Complex," 128, 260-261; and Grube and Nahm, "Census of Xibalba," 687.

18 Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1993), 189. The old Aztec god of the hearth is traditionally shown in human form with sagging cheeks, missing teeth, a wrinkled face, and often a hunchback to emphasize his old age. His image is often found on incense burners from Central Mexico.

19 Taube, "Jade Hearth," 440. Taube also calls attention to Tonina Monument 74, which features a ruler with the three hearth stones in his headdress and a staff and costume similar to that on Naranjo Stela 30. Additionally, the fire-drilling staffs held in the hands of the rulers on both Sacul Stela 9 and Naranjo Stela 30 have three sets of three-knotted strips of paper tied to them.

The process of birth and re-birth is understood through a comparison of the lives of humans with that of maize and the plant's personification, the Maize God. As discussed, birth and transformation occur in dark, heated spaces. These urns, with bodies placed inside and literally surrounded by depictions of fire, would certainly qualify as such a space. By placing bodies in a vessel symbolically consumed by fire, the dead reference the birth of the Maize God out of the primordial hearth or hearth stones. As embodiments of heat, jaguar deities and the old god of the hearth, Huehueteotl, permit the urns to be symbolically heated forever, allowing the transformation of the body to take place and the life cycle of maize and the Maize God to be repeated in perpetuity.

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[*facing page*] Figure 1. Highland Maya effigy funerary urn with jaguar lid and urn body featuring the Jaguar God of the Underworld emerging from the mouth of a saurian, Late Classic period - Early Postclassic period, painted ceramic. Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquín. Author's photo.

[*above, left*] Figure 2. Diagram of a Burial Urn. Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquín.

[*above, right*] Figure 3. Highland Maya effigy funerary urn with jaguar lid and urn body featuring a full figured naturalistic jaguar framed by vertical bands of skulls in flange-like position, Late Classic period - Early Postclassic period, painted ceramic. Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquín. Author's photo.

[*right*] Figure 4. *The Resurrection Plate*, Kerr Vessel 1892, Late Classic period. Photo credit: Justin Kerr, courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.

Figure 5. Highland Maya effigy funerary urn with Jaguar God of the Underworld and ceiba spikes, Late Classic period - Early Postclassic period, painted ceramic. Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquín. Author's photo.

Figure 6. Highland Maya effigy funerary urn with Jaguar God of the Underworld emerging from the mouth of a saurian and skull flanges, Late Classic period - Early Postclassic period, painted ceramic. Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquín. Author's photo.

Figure 7. Kerr Vessel 5367 with the *k'ak hix* engulfed in flames, Late Classic period. Photo credit: Justin Kerr, courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc.

[*left*] Figure 8. Highland Maya effigy funerary urn with Maize God lid and urn body featuring a jaguar with a forehead protrusion emerging from the mouth of a saurian and skulls in flange-like position, Late Classic period - Early Postclassic period, painted ceramic. Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquín. Author's photo.

[*above*] Figure 9. Highland Maya effigy funerary urn with three Huehueteotl figures, Late Classic period - Early Postclassic period, painted ceramic. Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquín. Author's photo.