THE BABY JAGUAR SERIES:  
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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CHAPTER I
PRE-COLUMBIAN MAYA CERAMIC PAINTING
The Baby Jaguar Series

1.1 An Introduction to the Maya

In ancient times, the Maya culture grew from a simple Neolithic people into one of the most culturally advanced civilizations in Mesoamerica. Their communities spanned the Mexican States of Chiapas, Tabasco, and the Yucatán Peninsula, as well as the countries of Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. These regions, referred to as the Maya lands, are further divided into geographic zones: the Pacific coastal plain, the highlands, and the lowlands. Historic evidence has revealed that Maya development occurred in sequential stages throughout these areas. Early Pre-Classic development appears to have been concentrated mainly in the highlands and along the Pacific coast. The Classic period culmination and the Terminal Classic collapse were centered in the south and central lowlands, while the northern lowland region of the Yucatán experienced a rebirth of Maya civilization during the Post-Classic period.

Figure 1-1: Map of the Maya Area
The chronological history of Mesoamerican culture is broken into the following major periods: Archaic, Pre-Classic, Classic, Terminal Classic, and Post-Classic.\footnote{This chronology reflects the most commonly cited breakdown; however, variations do exist.} The Archaic period (7000 BCE- 2000 BCE) defines the era beginning with the earliest known inhabitation, and continues through the transition into Neolithic settlements. The Pre-Classic period (Early {2000-1000 BCE}, Middle {1000-400 BCE}, and Late {400 BCE-300 CE}) is best defined by the emergence of an early form of city-state with a structured system of politics and religion. Also from this era is the first evidence of the calendar and writing systems, complex visual arts, and monumental architecture. The Classic period (Early {250-600 CE} and Late {600-800 CE}) marks the height of Maya cultural development. During this era, numerous thriving Maya urban centers emerged; such as the cities of Copan, Tikal, and Calakmul. These great centers maintained involved political and religious systems, and produced a vast assortment of visual works of art. The Terminal Classic period (800-1000 CE) marked the collapse of the great Classic period kingdoms. Following this decline, the Maya would achieve one last great revival during the Post Classic era (900 -1542 CE) concentrated in the area of the northern Yucatán. (Demarest, 2004: 8-21, Sharer, 2006: 23-53)

The Maya people earned their subsistence mainly through agricultural practices with the maintenance of major staple crops, such as maize, squash, and beans. Yet they were also known to have employed hunting and gathering methods, and to have exploited sea resources. Their religious tradition was based on a combination of ancestor worship and polytheistic ideologies. Their pantheon of deity figures was vast and complex, as was their perception of the cosmological realms of the world. Shamanism was a major
attribute of Maya religious practice. The shaman performed curing rituals, and rites to honor and communicate with deities and ancestor spirits. High priests and royal elite figures were also recognized participants in ceremonial life as feature players in ritual celebrations and offerings.

The Maya are renowned for their many cultural accomplishments, including their complex system of writing, which consists of a combination of over 800 phonetic and pictographic hieroglyphs. They used this system to keep records, including agricultural almanacs, as well as ritual and political histories. The Maya had an extensive knowledge of mathematics, astrology, and astronomy. They maintained three intricate calendar systems; the Calendar Round, the Haab, and the Long Count. These were used for agricultural purposes, ritual scheduling, as well as keeping histories. The Maya also kept accurate accounts of planetary movement, the lunar cycle, and eclipses. They could also predict the occurrences of the summer and winter solstices and equinoxes.

Aesthetic arts permeated every aspect of Maya life. Its presence is visible in artifacts ranging from utilitarian items, such as textiles and weaponry; to ritual objects, like ceramic figurines and painted ceremonial vessels; to the regalia of the elite class with their jade and obsidian jewelry, and their elaborately carved, painted, and woven elements of costume. This taste for the visual arts even carried over to architectural planning. The Maya constructed immense urban complexes; which included pyramid temples, ceremonial centers, and grand palaces. These structures were often painted inside and out with polychrome colors, and were adorned with elaborate relief carvings and magnificent stucco god masks. The courtyards surrounding these structures were filled with monumental stelae sculptures, which displayed portraits and histories of Maya
royals in full regalia, and elaborately carved ritual altars that at one time held offerings to their gods.

Although descendants of the pre-Columbian Maya remain in parts of modern Mesoamerica, much of the understanding of the ancient culture and customs of their ancestors is all but lost to them. Vast arrays of artifacts from pre-Columbian times have been unearthed from the Maya lands since the first explorations in the beginning of the nineteenth century. These objects have aided Mayanists in rediscovering the traditions and histories of ancient Maya society, yet there is still much work to be done. The following thesis focuses on a collection of twenty-one painted ceramic vases originating from the Maya southern Lowland region during the late Classic period, the Baby Jaguar vessels. These vases share a common painted theme, a story born from an ancient culture which has meaning that is not yet fully understood.

1.2 The Baby Jaguar Ceramic Paintings

The Baby Jaguar is a character found within a number of works created by the Pre-Columbian Maya people of Mesoamerica. This figure commonly appears in the form of a human infant adorned with a variation of jaguaresque features such as spotted paws, ears, and tail. The Baby Jaguar has received most of its scholarly attention from its appearance within the paintings often referred to as the “sacrifice of the baby jaguar.” These compositions appear in typical Codex Vessel Style. A codex vessel is a ceramic ware usually decorated with painted imagery, which includes one or more hieroglyphic sequences in a written style similar to that found in codex books. This so-called Codex

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2 The term codex style was initially suggested by Michael Coe in 1978.
Style is characterized by black contour lines defining all compositional elements, and most, if not all, contain hieroglyphic Codex Style script. (Coe, 1978: 16, Robiscek, 1981: xix, Reents-Budet, 1994: 8) In recent years the Codex Style has been divided into four distinct groupings denoted by place of origin. The Baby Jaguar Series (BJS) codex vessels are designated to Codex Style area A, which was initially paired with the Southern Campeche region and the area north of El Perú. (Robiscek, 1981: xxi) However, the exact origin of this grouping is still unknown because most, if not all, were purchased initially by a private collector. This means there are no records of the circumstances of their founding.

This type of elaborately painted vessel is usually found interred with the remains of elite Maya figures. For this reason, it is safe to assume that the BJS vessels were originally recovered from a burial cache. Painted ceramic vases were a highly prized art form during ancient times. The owners were Maya royals that used the vessels for everyday and ritual occasions, celebrations, and feasts. They were status goods that, not only, reflected the social rank of the owner, but also, were exchanged as gifts symbolizing friendships and unions between rulers or polities. The painted imagery that appears on this variety of pot ranges from scenes of Maya court and ritual life to images of mythological stories and characters.

The typical scene that includes the Baby Jaguar figure presents the infant in a reclined position upon a large anthropomorphic object that mimics the form of a witz altar. Early scholarship refers to this anthropomorphic altar as the “cauac monster,” a feature Michael Coe describes as common in pictorial ceramics, and most often functioning as a throne, altar, or baseline of visual scenes. (Coe, 1978: 35-36) The term
witz translates as “hill” and “mountain” in most Mayan languages, and is thought to symbolize the “First-True Mountain” to rise out of the primordial waters during the creation of the world. (Freidel, Schele & Parker, 1993:139) The witz monster is a metaphoric representation of the earthly ‘maw’ leading to the Maya underworld, Xibalba. (Newsome, 2001: 51) Positioned on either side of this centralized altar are two well-known Maya deities, Yum Cimil, a god representing death, and Chaak, a god of heavenly and earthly waters, lightning, and storms.

Figure 1-2: The Metropolitan Vase; BJS 3, Kerr #521

The Metropolitan Vessel (Fig. 1-2) was the first ceramic vase displaying Baby Jaguar imagery to receive the attention of Maya scholarship. Since the interpretation of this ceramic painting, twenty more pots have been located with similar if not identical painted imagery. The twenty-one ceramic vessels included in this grouping are listed by Kerr their number as follows: K1003, K1815, K521, K1370, K1644, K1199, K1768, K1152, K1184, K2207, K2208, K2213, K2723, K3201, K4011, K4013, K4056, K4385, K4486, K8333, and K8680. For the remainder of this study this grouping will be referred to as the Baby Jaguar Series (BJS).  

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3 Kerr Maya Vase Database number
4 See concluding illustrations a full corpus of BJS vases.
1.3 Purpose and Methodology

Twenty or more vessels adorned with the exact same narrative scene are rare in Maya ceramic art. Therefore, it is feasible to assume that the meaning of this imagery was important to the people of Pre-Columbian Maya society. Discovering the significance of this representation is what initiated this research investigation.

In order to accurately define the importance of the BJS paintings, it is first necessary to understand the meaning of the painted imagery. Chapter 2 presents a historiography of interpretive scholarship revolving around of the Baby Jaguar Series. This study exposes a number of interpretations ranging from ritual scenes involving mythological deities to connections to the Quiche Maya creation story, the *Popul Vuh*. This investigation focuses on the most common interpretation reads the BJS scene as a ritual sacrifice, where Maya the rain god *Chaak* is labeled as the executioner of the Baby Jaguar figure.

The main concern that develops with BJS sacrifice interpretations begins with the categorizing of *God Chaak* as an executioner deity. First of all, this is a function seemingly unnatural to a major water deity. Second, the supporting evidence provided by these claims is unconvincing. Therefore, chapters 3 and 4 focus on redefining the traditional role of the Maya rain god, and demonstrating that, according to historic tradition, *Chaak* was not an executioner. This objective was carried out by analyzing his

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5 This hypothesis identifies God *Chaak* and the baby jaguar as incarnations of Hero Twins, *Hunahpu* and *Xbalanque*. In the *Popul Vuh*, the Hero Twins defeat the Lords of the Underworld by means of trickery. Xbalanque sacrifices his brother, *Hunahpu*, and then brings him back to life. After seeing this act, the *Lords of Death* asked to be sacrificed then resurrected, and the twins comply, but only with the initial sacrifice. With this act, the twins metaphorically defeat death itself. (*Popul Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings*, 1985. trans. by Tedlock)
customary characterization and function in Maya ideology, including any visual and literary references linking the rain god to ritual sacrifice.

The BJS sacrifice interpretations were based off of the analysis of only a handful of BJS vessels. This is a problem because the compositional variations found by comparing the twenty-one BJS painting actually reveal evidence against sacrifice interpretations. The fifth chapter contributes an investigation focused on reviewing a sampling of undeniable visual descriptions of ritual sacrifice. The vessels of this “Sacrifice Group” are painted ceramic vessels similar to the BJS and date within the same time period, 600-900 CE. This section lists the common compositional features found in the Sacrifice Group and then compares them with those of the BJS paintings.

The final chapter of this investigation presents a new direction for the interpretation of the imagery found on the BJS vessels. These new ideas were initiated by the innovative scholarship of Mayanists, Karl Taube and Justin Kerr, and then further enhanced by the data collected from the wealth of new research accomplished by the variety of other modern scholars in this field (information that early interpreters of the BJS were not privy to). While this study does not result in a definitive answer to the mysterious iconography of the BJS, it is successful in yielding new data with the potential of furthering the understanding of a misunderstood ancient Maya custom.
The Baby Jaguar Series

BJS # 1 Kerr #1003

BJS # 2 Kerr #1815

BJS # 3 Kerr #521
BJS # 4 Kerr #1370

BJS # 5 Kerr #1644

BJS # 6 Kerr #1199
This chapter focuses on outlining the history of scholarship revolving around the interpretation of the BJS vases. This information is presented chronologically, as opposed to organization by theory, in order to highlight development over time. Each presentation is organized to recount each theory in its entirety, including all notations of supporting evidence provided. In some cases, upon conclusion of each informational set, I include a brief summary of notable issues presented including any contemporary opposing evidence. Concluding this chapter is an account of modern innovative theories that provide the support for the hypothesis proposed in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

2.1 A History of Scholarly Interpretations of the Baby Jaguar Series

Investigations of the first published codex vessel to describe the alleged sacrifice of the Maya Baby Jaguar figure occurred in the early 1970s with the published interpretations of the Metropolitan Vase, a Late Classic period (600-900 CE) codex vase originating from the Maya site of Calakmul of the Southern Campeche region. (Fig.2-1) Sir E. J. Thompson was first to read the painted scene on this vase as an act of an underworld ritual. (Thompson, 1970: pl 14d) In a subsequent interpretation of meaning, Michael Coe takes Thompson’s understanding one step further in defining the function of this ritual as a portrayal of the underworld sacrifice of the Jaguar God of Xibalba.\(^6\) This figure, Coe

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\(^6\) In Coe’s description, he refers to the infant jaguar as the Jaguar God of Xibalba. The infant received this name because of its jaguar features and “god-like” facial features. The incorporation of underworld
describes as a godlike infant portrayed with the ears, paws, and tail of a jaguar.

In his interpretation, Chaak is referred to as G1\(^7\) and is presented as “deity of dance and decapitation.” He appears visually in accordance with characteristic features later outlined by Linda Schele, such as; shell diadem and ear flares, catfish whiskers, and raised lightening axe. *Yum Cimil* is referred to by his Schellhas\(^8\) name, God A, and plays the role of recipient of sacrifice. (Coe, 1978: 35-36) The Maya god of death is illustrated as an emaciated skeletal figure with protruding stomach, tied black pom of hair, and adorned most commonly with strings of human eyeballs. (Schele & Miller, 1986: 53, Sharer, 1996:162) The anthropomorphic altar that the jaguar god reclines upon, Coe presents as the “cauac monster,” a metaphoric representation of the earthly ‘maw’ leading to the Maya underworld, *Xibalba*. Surrounding this central trio are two underworld figures that Coe describes as a “jaguarized dog” and a firefly-like being reminiscent of the underworld creatures found in the Popul Vuh. (Coe, 1978: 34-36)

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\(^7\) The Palenque Trio (G1, G2, G3) is a grouping of Maya deities celebrated as ancestor figures by the kings of the Maya city of Palenque. G1 is believed to be the oldest of the three brothers. He is linked with *Hunahpu*, the Sun God, and Venus.

\(^8\) Refers to Schellhas’s categorization of the Maya deities from the Post Classic period.
In this reference, Coe initiates the link between Chaak and the rite of human execution, leading to the widely accepted interpretation of this scene as the “sacrifice of the Baby Jaguar.” With all respect granted to Michael Coe and his extensive experience with the Maya peoples, his account does not provide comparative examples in support of his theories. He simply presents his information as if it were common knowledge, which is insufficient.

Following the publication of Thompson’s and Coe’s interpretations of the Metropolitan Vase, eight new Baby Jaguar vessels surfaced in Maya scholarship. These vessels are presented in Robiscek and Hale’s, *Maya Book of the Dead*. (Robiscek & Hale, 1981: 22-24) In these descriptions, once again, Chaak (referred to again as G1) is placed as the “executioner” of the Baby Jaguar; however, for the first time iconographic parallels are drawn in relation to the account of the Hero Twins defeat of the Lords of Death in the Popul Vuh. These parallels are briefly mentioned and based upon unconfirmed glyphic readings made by epigrapher Donald Hale. Robiscek cites personal communications with Linda Schele and Floyd Lounsbury as the source for this comparison. (Robiscek & Hale, 1981: 114-118, Tedlock. 1985: 156-157)

According to this theory, Hero Twin, *Xbalanque*, has taken the form of an infant jaguar, and the variations of his placement upon the *cauac* altar in this series of vessels represent the stages leading to his sacrifice and decent into *Xibalba*. Robiscek interprets the infant’s transition across the surface of the *Cauac* Altar (following variations present in nine vessels) to cosmology, more specifically the movement of a celestial body (the sun) across the earth’s horizon. (Fig. 2-2) (Robiscek & Hale, 1981: 117-118)
In my opinion, the weight given to this interpretation should be tempered by the fact that no evidence is cited, except for compositional similarity. To support this idea, verification must be given in order to demonstrate that these vessels were created in the same origin and in successive order to one another. At this time, there is no conclusive study linking these vessels.

Figure 2-2: Robiscek's Transition Theory¹

Robiscek’s link between the BJS compositions and the actual Popul Vuh account are inconsistent. First, he pairs the twin Xbalanque⁹ with the infant intended for sacrifice, in the Popul Vuh story Hunahpu is the twin who is slain. Second, the Robiscek transition theory results in the infant jaguar falling below the compositional ground line, metaphorically representing his death and descent into the underworld (Xibalba). In the Popul Vuh account of the sacrifice of Hunahpu takes place in the underworld realm. Robiscek does not given adequate focus to the fact that Hale’s glyphic decipherment reveals the presence of elite titles, repeated mention of God K (a deity associated with

⁹ Xbalanque maintains associations with jaguar imagery; this is most likely why he is compared with the infant jaguar.
royalty and accession ritual), as well as the phrase “young lord” appearing on vessels of this series. (Robiscek & Hale, 1981: 40-41) All three of these elements allude to reference identifications with persons of elite status. I suggest these references support the theory that defines the identity of the infant jaguar as a representation of an actual Maya elite figure.  

In the 1986 text, Blood of Kings, authored by Mayanists Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller, the individual characters of the BJS compositions are interpreted in respect to their individual personality attributes. In Schele’s classification of Chaak (as he appears on the Metropolitan Vase), she states Chaak takes the form of his eastern aspect, Chac-Xib-Chac. Presented as evidence in support of this hypothesis, Schele provides a comparison between the god’s characteristic adornments as described on the Metropolitan Museum vessel with a carved image of God Chaak from Tikal. In this study Schele is successful in noting true comparative characteristics common to visual depictions of Chaak; citing as examples the deity’s characteristic shell ear flares, shell diadem with cross bar motif, and the string knotted loin cloth appearing as identical on each figure. These features are visibly comparable and remain consistent throughout Maya visual history as distinctive attributes of Chaak. In this case, Schele’s link can be proven with actual historic evidence. Where Schele’s theory lacks sufficient support is in the conjecture that Chaak appears in the form of his eastern aspect.  

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10 This theory is further referenced in Chapter 6  
11 Many Maya gods are viewed as Quadripartite (four parts) in nature. Like the Maya cosmological breakdown, four distinctive regions (North, South, East, and West), Maya deities also maintain cardinal aspects and color associations.
My misgivings with this hypothesis begin with the fact that the support provided (a glyphic text citing the title *Chac-Xib-Chac*) comes from a ceramic vessel unverified as related to the other works she cited as examples (i.e. MET Vase [Fig. 2-1]/Tikal carving). There is also no model provided that links the visual characteristics of *Chaak* with the glyphic name *Chac- Xib- Chac*. In relation to this, there are no hieroglyphic markings denoting the name *Chac- Xib- Chac* on any of the BJS vessels.\(^\text{12}\) However, the name *Chaak* does appear in a few instances.

In the light of this evidence, throughout the remainder of this study, the figure referenced initially by Coe as G1 will be referenced as synonymous with Maya rain deity *Chaak* (and not a representation of his eastern aspect as suggested by Schele).

Another discrepancy found within Schele’s characterization of *Chaak* resides once again in the pairing of *Chaak* with the ritual of human sacrificial decapitation. Schele refers to the Sacrifice Mural in Room 3 at Bonampak as an example of God

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\(^\text{12}\) Per interpretations by Hale & Coe
Chaak’s involvement in the right of human sacrifice. (Schele & Miller, 1986: 49)

Bonampak is an ancient Maya site dating from the Early to Late Classic period. Inside a temple located at Bonampak is a series of wall murals that provide a window into Maya culture, including ritual life and warfare.

In Room 3, there is a representation of a ritual dance taking place upon the steps of a temple; elaborately costumed figures wielding hand axes appear in succession. This seems to be the closest possible representation of Chaak found in Room 3 (the presence of the hand axe is the only similarity) (Fig. 2-3). There are no images consistent with the standard representation of Chaak (i.e. shell ear flares & diadem, etc.). Nor is any evidence found of a glyphic mention of the deity’s name. Also noteworthy is that the descriptions of human sacrifice and/or decapitation in these murals are carried out by Maya mortals. (Fig. 2-4) To clarify this issue, I consulted with Bonampak expert Mary Miller, who confirmed that Schele was referring to these axe wielding figures in her
description. (E-mail Communication, 2008) Dr. Miller stated that these were the only 
*Chaak* references present in Room 3 at Bonampak. Once again, the evidence presented 
by Schele in support of God *Chaak*'s role as “executioner” is simply not adequate.

In her characterization of the Baby Jaguar, Schele again strays from Coe’s 
interpretation and names this figure as G3. 13 According to her description, G3 manifests 
in many forms; the sun god *Ahau-Kin*,14 the *Jaguar God of the Underworld* (the figure 
Coe originally attributed to the infant jaguar), and *Water-lily Jaguar*, a figure whose role 
Schele claims is not fully understood. (Schele & Miller, 1986: 50-51) The final 
manifestation of G3 she notes is the Baby Jaguar, a figure she deems to be a companion 
to the Maya rain god, *Chaak* on the BJS vessels. She titles these two as the “twins of 
sacrificial dance”. This interpretation makes note of the unique correlation she feels these 
figures share as players in the ritual of sacrifice. (Schele & Miller, 1986: 52) Schele’s 
pairing of these figures and sacrificial ritual does not surprise me because all previous 
interpretations of this scene fall along the same line. I do find it interesting that Schele 
and others pair the infant jaguar and *Chaak*, yet neglect to find a connection between the 
dual forces present in the pairing of *Chaak* and *Yum Cimil*. This pairing of characters 
strongly reflects an opposition life forces, good against evil, life versus death.

Last to be included as a reference to the BJS in the text *Blood of Kings* is a section 
entitled “Death and Journey through Xibalba,” an interpretation of Metropolitan Vase

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13 A character she presents as third born of the Palenque Triad, brother to G1.
14 Many scholars believe Maya deities can assume the forms of other gods. In Schele’s description she 
believes the infant jaguar figure is Palenque G3 assuming the form of the sun god. *Ahau-Kin* (trans. Lord 
Sun)
In this explanation, Schele’s interpretation is almost exactly the same as to that made by Coe, except for the fact that Schele now refers to G1 as deity Chac-Xib-Chac. (Schele & Miller, 1986: 52) This identical theory of execution is then referenced again by Schele in her 1992 text with David Freidel, Forest of Kings. (Schele & Freidel, 1990: 70-71)

Subsequent to the interpretations of Linda Schele, Floyd Lounsbury once again links Chaak and Baby Jaguar to the Hero Twins of the Popul Vuh, claiming Chaak (referred to again as G1) as an incarnation of Hunahpu and Baby Jaguar as Xbalanque. He describes this scene as a reenactment of the sacrifice of Hunahpu as noted in the Popul Vuh tale. (Like Robiscek, Lounsbury is sacrificing the wrong twin) As proof for his theory, he cites hieroglyphic evidence, as well as iconographic data (Xbalanque’s connection with jaguar imagery). (Lounsbury :1985)

Among the essays concluding volume one of Justin Kerr’s Maya Vase Book, Michael Coe provides a rebuttal to Lounsbury’s theory attempting to disprove for the last time associations that link the Baby Jaguar Scene with the Hero Twin’s Hunahpu and Xbalanque. In his argument, he reminds us that it was Hunahpu that was sacrificed not Xbalanque (the twin associated with jaguar imagery); therefore, the imagery presented in the Baby Jaguar composition does not match the true Popul Vuh account. In his concluding statements, Coe restates Schele’s link between G1 and Chaak in the BJS composition. In this he also states that there is no evidence that links the twin, Hunahpu, with the creation of rains. (Coe, 1989: 182)

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15 Kerr Maya Database number
It is reasonable to suggest that both the *Blood of Kings* text as well as the work of Michael Coe proved a huge influence on succeeding Maya scholarship, including future interpretations of the BJS. In fact, many of the later scholars referencing this composition simply chose to cite the interpretations by Coe and/or Schele with little variation. In *Pre-Columbian Art*, Hildegard Pang does not present a new interpretation of the Baby Jaguar composition; instead, she references the argument in interpretation made between Coe and Lounsbury. (Coe, 1999: 182, Lounsbury: 1985, Pang, 1992: 131)

In a 1992 catalogue of major Yucatan deities, Karl Taube suggests Lounsbury’s theory of *Popul Vuh* relations is false and concludes by stating that the Baby Jaguar scene appears to be a solidification of God Chaak’s role as executioner, as originally noted by Coe and Schele. (Taube, 1992: 24) In 1998, Schele, along with Peter Matthews, held true to theories of sacrifice; however, they reinvented the *Blood of Kings* interpretation by grouping God Chaak and Yum Cimil into the role of co-executioners. According to this version, the Baby Jaguar is no longer executed by means of the hand axe of Chaak; instead the infant figure is thrown to its death at the hands of the dual executioners, down the side of a mountain (referencing the infant’s appearance upon the witz [mountain] altar) and thus entering the underworld realm of Xibalba. (Schele & Matthews, 1999: 148)

In 2001, Elizabeth Newsome alluded to Schele’s initial description of the “twins of sacrificial dance,” referencing the imagery in the MET vessel as Chaak’s axe as tool
for the dismembering of the Baby Jaguar. In this commentary, Newsome also makes mention of Chaak’s role as “Lord of Decapitation” and associates it with connections between the cycle of nature (i.e. resurrection, sacrifice, and vegetal rebirth). (Newsome, 2001: 95)

The main focus of this chapter is that early interpretations of the BJS paintings, initiated by Michael Coe and then supported by Schele and others, have not proven by means of historic example that God Chaak is the executioner of the jaguar infant. Despite this, many Maya scholars embrace this portrayal of Chaak as a deity associated with ritual decapitation as accepted theory. This, however, is not true in all cases. This investigation was able to turn up a few Mayanists willing to stray from this example.

Looking back to the early 1990’s, the following essays appeared that took new approaches to the understanding of the BJS paintings. In Karl Taube’s 1994 work discussing natal imagery in Maya art, he theorized that the vessels depicting the baby jaguar could represent a ‘k’ex’ offering. The word ‘k’ex’ refers to the act of ‘substitution’ or ‘replacement’, and is often used in modern Maya curing rituals referring to the substitution of a sacrificial offering for the life of the sick. (Taube, 1994: 669) He hypothesizes that this ceremony could be related to a past Maya accession ritual or (in the case of the infant jaguar sacrifice) offerings to the underworld. Taube suggests the iconography of these vessels depicts the infant jaguar presented as a substitutive sacrifice for an actual Maya infant. (Taube, 1994: 670-672)

The innovation in Taube’s hypothesis is that, despite the fact that he still
references this scene as the “sacrifice of the infant jaguar,” he suggests for the first time that this scene may reflect an actual historic Maya ritual, and not just a description of a tale from mythology. For the Maya people, ideology and related ritual acts were intermeshed with their everyday life; therefore, it is the responsibility of scholars to consider this notion when attempting the interpretation of works of art like that of the Baby Jaguar ceramic series.

In line with this idea, Justin Kerr takes a step closer in linking this scene with historic reality in an unpublished letter to Linda Schele, entitled “Let’s Stop Bashing the Baby”. Similar to Taube’s theory, Kerr presents the idea that the baby jaguar could be a description of an actual Maya elite, and not necessarily one presented for sacrifice. He states that this scene could represent the death of an elite child, and his godly transformation and rebirth into the otherworld. In Kerr’s vision, Chaak plays the role of “welcoming committee” into the underworld.¹⁶

These inventive interpretations of the Baby Jaguar composition reinforce the questions previously raised in relation to the validity of earlier interpretations. They also provoke the need to discover which theory holds more weight in comparison to historic example.

CHAPTER III
THE HISTORIC ROLE OF GOD CHAAK
A Mesoamerican Rain Deity

In order to effectively determine the reason for Chaak’s appearance in the BJS paintings, it is first necessary to understand his traditional role among the Pre-Columbian Maya peoples. This chapter provides a comprehensive account of the major visual and written portrayals of Chaak as found in the Maya historic record. Each citation is accompanied by an analysis of the deity’s function within the reference.

3.1 A Benevolent Deity

In 1947, before the early interpretations of the BJS, Maya scholar Silvanus Morley wrote of Chaak’s significance to the Maya people as a benign deity whose role was beneficial to human life. In his narrative on Chaak, he notes…

“The rain god was a benevolent deity… always the friend of man, associated with creation and life, and never his enemy; never is he allied with the powers of death and destruction. For the ordinary Maya corn farmer whose paramount interest in life was his cornfield…Chaac was the all-important deity, and his friendly intervention was sought by the average Maya more frequently than that of the all other gods combined.”

[Morley, 1946: 224-225]

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17 Silvanus Griswold Morley was an early twentieth century Maya scholar (anthrolopgy, archeology, and epigraphy) Site fieldwork includes: Chichen Itza, Yaxchilan, Coba, Copán, Quiriguá, Uxmal, Naranjo, Seibal and Uaxactun. (Many of these sites are within the area and timeframe of the BJS vessels)

18 The spelling of the rain deities name has evolved; early references cite Chac or Chaac, recent spelling Chaak.
Morley’s *Chaak* does not appear as a deity associated with human sacrifice or decapitation, but as a god whose primary function deals with “creation and life”. Although Morley’s statements date to the early 1940s, his sentiments affirm the deity’s longevity, his links with agriculture, and his overall importance to the everyday life of the Maya people. This is a characterization of *Chaak* that is consistent in Maya visual arts and literature.

Visual portrayals of *Chaak* begin as early as the Pre-Classic period (2000 BCE to 300 CE). Images of the god are found painted upon ceramic vessels, molded out of clay, and carved upon *stelae*, as well as other architectural adornments. *Chaak* also appears as a major figure in the codex texts, and is mentioned frequently in Contact period (15th/16th century) accounts. Even today, modern Maya groups conduct rituals in honor of *Chaak* in select areas of the Yucatan and Guatemala. The main reason for this deity’s long-standing importance in Maya culture is simple. He is the deity in control of providing fresh waters for people and agriculture. It is this never-ending role that clarifies his perpetual presence throughout Maya history.

3.2 The Origin and Primary Function of the Maya Rain Deity *Chaak*

A customary ideology in many early human societies places supernatural beings in control of the uncontrollable facets of nature. Sporadic and awe-striking natural events, such as bouts of torrential rain, lightning and wind storms, droughts, and floods are out of the realm of human control yet directly affect their existence. In the effort to regain a

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19 Monumental stone monuments decorated with visual and hieroglyphic images
20 Codex texts are accordion folded books composed usually of a fig bark paper, which hold the writings of the Maya. The majority of Maya codices were destroyed during Spanish conquest or has not survived time due to the biodegradable nature of the materials they were constructed of. However, a rare few have surfaced over time.
sense of control in these situations, man turns toward the gods. When drought ravages the lands, the people respond with ritual offerings to appease the appropriate deity, in the case of the Maya, there is Chaak. (Carrasco, 1990: 98, Morley, 1946: 224-225, Demarest, 2004: 182-183) This system of belief allows the people to retain hope and control throughout periods when they feel powerless.

It is fact that the manifestations of rain deities appear to be especially common in geographic areas subject to climatic extremes and/or where agriculture is a main source of sustenance. The Maya civilization grew out of a territory known for its severe climatic variation. Depending on the season and locale, the Maya lands are subject to anything from bouts of severe drought to converse periods of hammering rain and storms.

In either instance, the presence or absence of rain directly affect the food and water supply necessary to maintain the lives of the people. Rain waters serve the purpose of feeding the agricultural fields and filling fresh water cenotes (watery pools) and cave deposits. Chaak is thus linked to the production of food, maintenance of fresh water, and has indirect associations with fertility. Chaak’s role revolves around the creation and sustaining of life, a characterization frequently referenced in visual and literary history.

21 Many Maya cities depended upon the production of farmed foods like maize, beans and squash to sustain the population. They could not survive off of what the land naturally provided.
Stela I from the Proto-Classic period city of Izapa\(^2\) (Fig. 3-1) illustrates an early example of a visual representation of *God Chaak* with an emphasis on his associations with water and food production. (Miller & Taube, 1993: 59, Miller, 2001: 62-63, Pang, 1992: 69) In this image, *Chaak* is presented as a provider of foodstuff, a fisherman bending to retrieve a fish from his net. Upon his back are water canisters, scrolls of water (symbolic of rain) stream from these vessels toward the earth.

This Izapan artist created an image of *Chaak* with the attributes of a sea creature; fish fins protrude from his arms and legs, catfish whiskers emanate from his cheeks, a serpentine belt dangles at his waist, and shell flares decorate his ears. This overall depiction demonstrates *Chaak*’s connection with rain production, as well as his presence within the watery realms of the earth which included sea life as a food source.

At the Maya site of Tikal, an incised bone fragment with a similar image of God *Chaak* was excavated from Temple 1 dating to the Classic period (600-900 C.E.) (Fig. 3-2). In this relief, *Chaak* appears again as a deity of the watery realms of the earth, bearing

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\(^2\) Izapa was founded during the Early Formative period in southeastern Chiapas on tributary of Suchiate River, the Soconusco Region. It was occupied as early as 1500 BCE through the Late Classic Period. Although Izapan art has a strong connection with the Olmec society, it also maintains strong relations with Early Classic Mayan works.
attributes such as his shell diadem and ear flares, a pronounced shark-like tooth, and fish fins springing from the rears of his arms. He carries a large fish in one hand and water vessels displaying fish imagery again upon his back. (Schele & Miller, 1986: 49) This image seems to emphasize the god’s control over the aquatic elements of the earth, since both the small fish and the water remain trapped in the vessel upon Chaak’s back, and the larger fish within his tightly clenched fist.

A large proportion of the visual references to God Chaak and his association with agriculture appear in the major Maya codex texts: the Dresden, Paris, and Madrid codices. The Dresden text includes a series of almanacs, astronomical tables, as well as astrological and ritual accounts. (Thompson, 1972: 94) It is one of the few primary sources to contain such a large collection of visual and literary references to Chaak. His characteristic image appears over 100 times in the Farmer’s Almanac section alone.

Figure 3-3: Dresden Codex, Farmer's Almanac 66 (38C- Panel 1)
The Farmer’s Almanac is a chronicle displaying attempts to predict cycles of natural disasters, such events that might provoke drought and or famine. As previously noted, the Maya place Chaak as a deity in control of water production. Figure 3-3 is one of many Dresden illustrations that pair Chaak with water imagery. The rain god is depicted with catfish whiskers and lightning axe emerging from a watery pool (cenote) while rain streams from the sky.

Figure 3-4: Dresden Codex, Farmer's Almanac (45C)

As an example of what is considered the effects of Chaak’s malevolent nature or ability to withhold rains, Almanac 68 section 45C (Fig. 3-4), describes Chaak dancing, bearing two torches above a dead deer. This has been interpreted as emblematic of a period of drought, and the instances of death (human, animal, and crop) that result from such an event are represented by the dead deer. (McAnany, 1995: 80)
In a similar visual metaphor of drought, the last Dresden Almanac image depicts Chaak standing over a weakened Maize God. (Fig. 3-5) Based on hieroglyphic evidence, Thompson interprets this scene as illustrative of the effects of drought; Chaak withholds the rain, and the agricultural fields grow weak and begin to die. (Thompson, 1972: 106)

This same image was cited as an example of Chaak associations with decapitation sacrifice, despite the fact that the text speaks of drought and not sacrificial offerings. (Vail & Hernandez, 2007: 127-132) As an interesting comparison, one image of a decapitated head does appear in the Dresden Farmer’s Almanac, and it is one of the few panel illustrations in this section that does not include an image of Chaak. (Fig. 3-6)
The Dresden artist/s use the lightning axe of *Chaak* as a characteristic feature. It appears in almost every image of the deity as a distinguishing attribute, as well as a symbol of his lightning power. In yet another context, *Chaak’s* lightning axe links him with the creation of life.

There is a belief among some Maya that a lightning bolt emanating from the hand axe of *Chaak* split the earth open, resulting in the birth of the Maize god.\(^{24}\) (Miller & Taube, 1993:60, Taube, 1995: 67, Guernsey, 2002: 76, Freidel, Schele, & Parker, 1993: 93-94) The composition of the Late Classic (600-900 CE) ceramic vessel illustrated in Figure 3-7 contains an image of this myth. In this design, *Chaak* appears in a dual representation; to the right, wielding his lightning axe, to the left, a hand stone. This depiction of a dark *Chaak* and a light *Chaak* could represent the philosophy of benevolent versus malevolent duality.\(^{25}\) Another possible interpretation is that these light and dark *Chaak* figures symbolize the god’s presence throughout the cycle of day and night. A detail that further supports this idea is the symbolic representation of earth (shell with

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\(^{24}\) Another most prominent of deities in the Maya Pantheon. Some Maya groups believe that humans are born from sprouted corn.

\(^{25}\) Some theories suggest this duality reflects the belief that *Chaak* provides rain (benevolent) and/or withholds necessary waters (malevolent). (See McAnany, 1995: 81)
crossband motif) appearing in the center of this opposition, which creates a small 
cosmogram.  

Returning to the illustrations in the Dresden Codex, one can see a comparable representation. Note the deity head centralized within the large square formed by two adjacent crescent shapes. (Fig. 3-8) Thompson defines this figure as the sun god (citing a filed front tooth/jaguar whiskers); however, I propose this deity head is more comparable to the Dresden characterization of *Chaak*. (Thompson, 1972: 76) (Fig. 3-9) The figure on page 40, section C, panel 3 of the Farmer’s Almanac is defined by Thompson as an image of *Chaak*. Note the similarities in features. Whether this is a characterization of the sun god or *Chaak*, the deity’s centralized position in this small cosmogram is a reflection of his all-encompassing presence throughout the realms of the Maya world. The left crescent is darkened and the right is left lightened, again a possible reflection of night and day. At each corner of the square is a torch or possible corn shaped emblem that denotes the cardinal regions of the world.

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26 The Maya universe, including the multiple realms inhabit by the gods as well as the four corners of the earth, are often referred to in terms of a cosmic diagram or cosmogram.
3.3 The Multiple Faces of a Mesoamerican Deity

Thus far, we have defined the common role of God Chaak as a figure directly associated with water production and maintenance, which also connects him with agricultural fertility and production. Also presented is the representation of Chaak as a dual natured deity.

“The seasons shifted in this cycle of the world quarters as weather gods like the Chaacs blessed creation with rain and agricultural abundance or withheld the clouds during the dry season and periods of famine and drought.” [Newsome, 2001: 10]

This passage by Elizabeth Newsome describes this facet of Chaak’s persona, a trait some refer to as a benevolent and malevolent temperament. In accordance with this, Chaak is benevolent in that he provides life-giving waters. In this instance, Chaak is a benefactor of life; he sustains the Maya way of living. However, periods of drought or, conversely, destructive storms are viewed as a result of Chaak’s malevolent capabilities. All the same, Chaak’s malevolence does not equate to wickedness or evil, and should be thought of more along the lines of a state of anger or annoyance than a reflection of the deity maintaining an evil side or division of his character. The Maya respond to drought and destructive storms with ritual offerings and prayer; this is not a reaction presented to the wicked deities. (McAnany, 1995: 80)

Also notable in Newsome’s description is a reference to Chaak in a plural form, “the Chaacs.” In this description, she is citing yet another division of character commonly ascribed to this divinity, a quadripartite separation. This is a common theory
that breaks down the nature of many Maya divinities into distinctive aspects related to
the four cardinal regions of the Maya cosmogram; a god of the north, a god of the south,
a god of the east, and so on. For the god Chaak, we reference a Chac-Xib-Chaak “a red
Chaak of the east,” an Ek-Xib-Chaak “a black Chaak of the west,” a Sac-Xib-Chaak “a
white Chaak of the north,” and a Kan-Xib-Chaak “a yellow Chaak of the south.” In
Chapter 2, I outlined Linda Schele’s interpretation that defined the BJS Chaak as a
manifestation of Chac-Xib-Chaak (the eastern aspect of the rain god). As previously
mentioned, there does not appear to be enough substantial evidence in the BJS painting
connecting Chaak with his alleged eastern aspect; however, a point worth making is that
this interpretation suggests that one aspect of a quadripartite deity can appear separate
from the whole. In theory, if Maya deities are truly quadripartite in nature, it seems
logical to assume that these distinctive aspects are capable of separate character traits as
well. That could mean Chaak’s eastern form Chac-Xib-Chak could maintain his own
associations with human sacrifice. Therefore, I believe a further exploration of this theory
is necessary.

The philosophy of cardinal regions divides the cosmos into four distinct realms;
north, south, east, and west; therefore, it only seems logical that the gods presiding over
this realm appear in respect to this cosmological breakdown as well. At the same time,
however, nowhere within these references does it state that these quadripartite entities
function as separate personalities. It simply appears a customary way of evoking or
ritually calling out to these deities. I would like to suggest that this cardinal separation is
metaphoric as opposed to an actual division. Instead of viewing this as an authentic
separation into aspects that appear independent of whole, this division should be
interpreted as a reference to the god’s all encompassing presence among the four regions of the cosmos. In support of this theory, I reference the fact that even in the Dresden Codex, Chaak is described not only in association with the four regions, but also a fifth Chaak figure is positioned in the center, interpreted by Thompson as Yolcab, or “the heart of the earth,” a likely association with the axis mundi. In this, the representation of Chaak (or the Chaaks) appears to mirror the quincunx formation more than a quadripartite division. Another notable example can be seen in Almanac 53 of the Dresden Codex.

Glyphic Interpretations by Thompson (1972: 94-95):


Note how the text also uses the term “tree” in association with each cardinal region. In this instance we read this as a metaphoric representation of the presence of the sacred ceiba tree as an emblem of the ideological belief that these trees behave as a structural foundation that interconnects the cosmic realms among the four cardinal regions, and its presence in the central position designated by Thompson as “the heart of earth.” (Thompson, 1972: 94-95) In line with this, in Almanac 57 and 58, when Chaak is referred to as “Red Chac,” “White Chac,” and so on, we should again see this as a metaphoric representation of the god’s presence in said region. (Thompson, 1972: 97-98)
The Almanac also references a green Chaak, (see Almanac 59 [34A]) which appears in association with the central position of the quincunx, and a possible prosperous harvest. (Thompson, 1972: 94-95) This color association again would be read as symbolic, and not as if to denote yet another fifth aspect of Chaak. In the Rituals of the Bacabs, a similar text formula is used citing symbolic references to cardinal regions and colors.

The Words (Incantation) for Jaguar-Macaw-Seizure:

“Who is your tree? Who is your bush? What was your arbor, when you were born? The red tancas-che (“seizure tree”), the white tancas-che, the black tancas-che, the yellow tancas-che, the red kantemo tree, the white kantemo, the black kantemo, the yellow kantemo. These were your trees, you, macaw-seizure. The red has-max- tree, the white has-max, the black has-max, the yellow has-max, the re kokob-max (“kokab-snake-monkey”), etc. thr red nicte-max (“erotic-monkey”), etc. These are your tree; erotic seizure, monkey seizure, are you, madness-seizure.” [Thompson, 1972: 94-95]

Apparent in this incantation is the repeated ritual mention of entities paired with each cardinal color. (i.e. red ‘seizure tree’, white ‘seizure tree’, etc.) This scheme is consistent throughout the Ritual of the Bacab’s text. It is obvious that the Maya were consistently metaphorical in their visual and literary representations. Therefore, why should quadripartite references to God Chaak be interpreted differently?
3.4 The Ritual Dance of Chaak

BJS depictions routinely depict Chaak with legs in dance momentum, raised hand axe in one hand, and carved hand stone in the other. This form of ritual dance portrayal of Chaak is found in a number of ceramic vessels with painted images other than the BJS. The design appearing upon Vessel K1336 (Fig. 3-10) describes a processional dance in which Chaak is presented alongside an unknown shamanic Maya elite and a figure referred to as Water-lily Jaguar.27

Vessel K731 (Fig. 3-11) is an image of another processional; however, this time Chaak appears in union with a Paddler god28 and two other unknown characters. In both compositions, Chaak is typically described with reptilian scales, catfish whiskers, shell diadem and ear flares.

27 Water-lily Jaguar is a mythological figure which usually wears the water-lily symbol in a diadem above its head and cape around its shoulders. (see Schele, 1986:51, Milbrath, 1999: 120)
28 Usually appearing in pairs, depicted with paddle in hand. Associated with royal bloodletting rituals. (see Miller & Taube, 1997: 128)
When comparing these vessels, note the fact that Chaak still brandishes a raised hand stone and/or lightning axe. This depiction mirrors all of the Baby Jaguar compositions less the sacrificial victim. Considering this, it appears feasible to conclude that the positioning of Chaak’s body reflects his movement through ritual dance; and not the action of striking with intention of sacrifice. If so, we can deduce that this was simply a characteristic representation of the Maya rain god in accordance with the Late Classic Codex Style. In addition, the dancing presence of Chaak may reflect more of a function as ritual participant or shamanic figure than initiator of sacrifice.

As added support to this argument, a selection of BJS arrangements actually compositionally separate Chaak from the infant jaguar either by means of an enlarged witz altar, world tree, and/or serpent spirit. In these cases, the purpose of Chaak’s performance again appears to be ritual, possibly with the intention of communicating with an ancestor spirit and/or other deities. In vessel K1003 (Fig. 3-12) of this grouping, the witz altar acts as an obstruction between Chaak and the infant.

29 Symbolic of the Axis Mundi
In this composition, *Chaak* does not appear to be in the process of an execution; instead, he seems to focus his attention on the serpent emerging from the interior of the stone altar. Similarly, in Figure 3-13, *Chaak* appears to function as ritual summoner, note the world tree that emerges from the surface of the *witz* altar adjacent to the infant figure.

Other painted scenes depicting *Chaak* portray him in communication with various forms of ancestral spirits emerging from the mouth of Vision Serpent creatures. Vessel K2772 (Fig. 3-14) presents two varying representations of *Chaak*.
The most noticeable is the full figure depiction of Chaak, adorned with characteristic shell beard and diadem reptilian scales and lightning axe. He appears suspended in mid air, with lightening emanating from his mouth, and a serpent spirit emerging from his foot. In the body of this vision, the serpent wraps around the contour of a described architectural structure until it reaches the interior where an old deity emerges from its jaws and appears to be gesturing to the rain god. A similar example occurs in K2213 (Fig. 3-15), where Chaak is once again presented in ritual dance in a scene involving the death god and a Maya infant. In this representation, however, a Vision Serpent stands before Chaak with the intent of communication.
Vision serpents are believed to be symbolic of the connective passage between the earthly world and the realm/s inhabited by ancestor spirits and/or deities. Ritual activity involving communication with other worldly spirits via a vision serpent is a common subject in Maya visual art. Royal figures are often described conjuring such beasts by means of auto-sacrificial rites. Two prime examples appear on Yaxchilan Lintel 15 & 25. Both compositions describe the summoning of an ancestor spirit and its emerging from the mouth of a vision serpent as a result of the rites of Maya elite. Lintel 15 (Fig. 3-17) depicts Lady Wak Tuun, wife of Bird Jaguar IV. Lintel 25 (Fig. 3-18) depicts Lady Xook, primary wife of Shield Jaguar II, in commemoration of his accession to the throne. (Newsome, 2001:24, Schele & Freidel, 1990:266-267, Miller, 2001:147)

Compare these images with BJS vessels K2213 (Fig. 3-15) and K4013 (Fig. 3-16).

Also a significant feature in most ritual depictions of Chaak is the hand stone that he carries; this appears in every BJS representation of Chaak. The carved face appearing on the stone normally bears a large mirror symbol. This mirror symbol has been attributed to the Maya God K, K’awiil. (Schele & Miller, 1986: 49 Carrasco, 1993:110) God K is commonly associated with the royal elite, especially in birth and accession rites. His symbolic features include an elongated serpent foot and a smoking mirror on his forehead. In many depictions, his serpent foot metamorphosizes into, or his head appears upon the tail, of a vision serpent, which also links him with ancestor communication rituals.

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30 i.e. bloodletting
32 Also referenced as GII (Palenque Trio), Bolon Dzacab, the Flare God, and the Manikan Septer.
33 Alexander. FAMSI Report; 1-3.
Another explanation of the Chaak’s hand-stone states that its head variant references the term *tzuk*, meaning “partition,” which is associated with *K’awiil*’s full name, *Tzuk Yax Ch’at K’awilnal Winik Ox Ahal Ch’u Ch’ok K’awilnal*. (Freidel, Schele, & Parker, 1993: 194) This mention of “partition” is interpreted as a reference to Primordial Creation, and the initial division of the earth, sky, and sea. (Freidel, Schele, & Parker, 1993:140) *K’awiil* is paired frequently with the deity *Chaak* in visual representations. To offer an example of the connection between these two gods, we can return to the painted scene on K2772 which describes *Chaak* with the characteristic serpent foot of *K’awiil*. (Fig. 3-14) Also, in the good majority of BJS paintings, Chaak appears in communication with the serpentine monster head/s of the *witz* altar; upon examination these creatures also take on the image of God K and his symbolic mirrored forehead. Also incorporated into many BJS paintings is the glyph T1030de, denoting the name of *K’awiil*. Perhaps this pairing of *Chaak* and *K’awiil* serves the purpose of opening the channel between worlds. (Fig. 3-16)
CHAPTER IV
GOD CHAAK AND RITES OF SACRIFICE

Executioner or Ritual Participant?

4.1 Deities of Death

Throughout Mesoamerica, there are multiple deity figures associated with death and sacrifice. The titling of these figures is dependent on the region and/or culture group; two major examples are *Cizin (Kisin)* and *Yum Cimil (Ah Puch)*. (Demarest, 2004: 183, Morley, 1946: 227) Characteristically, deities of death maintain evil or malevolent associations, and they are visually represented as rotting human corpses or skeletal figures. *Cizin* is often associated with the Maya of the Northern Yucatan, as well as the Lacandon (*Kisin*). According to Lacandon beliefs, *Kisin’s* main role is to torture the souls of the damned by fire as they enter into the underworld. (McGee, 1990:108) The version of “death” present in the BJS is usually referred to by the name *Yum Cimil*, and appears prominent within the Lowland regions of the Yucatan Peninsula. In this region, tradition states *Yum Cimil* waits among the homes of the sick and dying in order to transport deceased souls to the underworld. (Morley, 1946: 227)

If the infant of the BJS paintings is truly on his way to the underworld, *Yum Cimil* appears to be the escort. The BJS paintings in Figures 4-1 through 4-4 place *Yum Cimil* with arms outstretched toward the infant as if welcoming the child to its death. Vase K2213 even depicts the skeletal death god dancing with the infant in his arms. (Fig. 4-4)

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34 Death Gods are often associated with flatulence/rotten intestinal gas/belching, among other unpleasant aspects of human existence. The term *Cizin* derives from the root word *ciz*, meaning flatulence or stench (see Taube, 1992:11-16, Robiscek, 1978: 131)

35 Trans. *Yum* (Lord) *Cimil/ Cimi* (Death). *Pucuh* is the name for the underworld in the *Tzeltal, Tzoztil,* and *Tojolabal* Maya traditions, and also maintains associations with the Shelhaus God A and/or *Ah Puch*.
It is interesting to note that despite *Yum Cimil’s* historic associations with human death, scholars do not place him as the executioner of the infant jaguar. Instead common theory points to the Maya rain god, *Chaak*. But why? Historically, *Chaak* does not appear as a deity associated with death like *Cizin* and *Yum Cimil*. Conversely, his main function seems to serve not only as beneficial to the Maya people, but also as an essential factor in the creation and sustaining of life. In fact, the interpretations that place *Chaak* as an executioner figure in the Baby Jaguar paintings appear to argue against thousands of years of a historic tradition that define this deity as a benevolent figure associated with the production of rain, maintenance of earthly waters, as well as agricultural fertility. While it can be argued that in the Maya tradition, the rite of sacrifice is also directly linked with the success of rain and agricultural production, even in this scenario historic practice places *Chaak* as a recipient of sacrificial offerings and not an executioner deity or initiator of such rites. To demonstrate this point, this chapter will outline the major historic examples that directly or indirectly link *Chaak* with the rite of sacrifice, including images found in Classic period (250-900 C.E.) visual art, accounts of Bishop Diego de Landa, as well as references from modern Maya ritual.
4.2 Symbol of Royal Power

It is significant to note that when searching the corpus of Maya visual works of art for images that pair Chaak with human sacrifice, I was unable to find scenes of sacrifice that included references to Chaak. The only noteworthy visual description that paired the image of Chaak with victims of sacrifice was a trend in Classic period stelae iconography in which Maya kings incorporated imagery of God Chaak into their regalia as a symbol of their power. (Carrasco, 1990: 105, Martin & Grube, 2000: 131)

Among this grouping are examples of Maya kings appearing in the guise of God Chaak with bound captives and sacrificed victims. In the imagery depicted on Stela 11 at Yaxchilan (Fig. 4-5), Maya ruler Bird Jaguar IV is presented as Chaak standing over three captives who are about to be ritually sacrificed. (Miller, 2001:148)

The ruler is described in the typical profile view with a Chaak mask placed over his face. The elaborate mask was designed to reflect Chaak’s characteristic catfish-like whiskers and shark tooth, as well as his diadem with cross band motif. 37 This composition has been cited as supporting evidence to the BJS theory of Chaak as executioner. (Schele, 1986: 215) Using images such as these as support is weakened by the fact that there are also portraits of Maya kings ornamented with Chaak’s characteristic adornments that do not reference sacrifice or captive taking.

36 Bird Jaguar IV was ruler of Yaxchilan circa 752-768 CE. (see Martin & Grube, 2000: 128)
37 Compare to BJS K8680 & K4013
The panel carving from the Dumbarton Oaks Collection (Fig. 4-6) portrays Maya King Kan-Xul of Palenque (circa 704) in the characteristic garb of the rain god, Chaak. In his right hand, Kan-Xul brandishes Chaak’s lightning axe; in his left hand, a serpentine hand stone. (Miller, 1984:32) His regalia also includes a shell diadem with cross-band motif, as well as, spondelous shell ear flares. In this scene, Kan-Xul, disguised as Chaak, appears in ritual communication with his parents Lady Ahpo-Hel and Lord Shield Pacal. (Miller, 1984: 32)

It is also worth mentioning that Maya kings are represented in the act of captive taking without referring to the Chaak, such as the capture of Chac-Cib-Tok depicted on Yaxchilan Lintel 16 (Fig. 4-7). In this scene, Chac-Cib-Tok nervously awaits his own sacrifice at the hand of Bird Jaguar, who is not costumed as God Chaak. (Schele & Freidel, 1990:286) 39 As made evident by these images, Maya royals commit acts of captive taking and sacrifice with or without Chaak costuming. When they did dress as Chaak, it was to show their royal connection with this powerful deity figure, and not because of his associations with sacrifice.

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38 These shells (commonly adorned with incised decoration) were used as receptacles for sacred objects, sharpened into perforators used for bloodletting (piercing specific areas of their body with intention of letting blood offerings), and also maintain associations with the womb (female puberty rites)

39 Other examples include Yaxchilan Stela 18, which describes King Itzamnaaj B’alam II and his prisoner Aj Popol Chay, as well as the fresco murals at Bonampak (room 2).
4.3 Contact Period to Modern Time References to Chaak and Human Sacrifice

During the period of initial contact between the Maya people and the Spanish explorers, accounts were written, such as those by Bishop Diego de Landa (Account of the Affairs of the Yucatan), that describe events of Maya culture and ritual. The following text summarizes those occurrences recorded by Landa that make major mention of ritual practices involving Chaak.

Beginning first during the months of Chen and Yax, Landa writes that the four Chaaks were honored as the primary gods of the maize fields. During the subsequent month of the spring equinox Mac, the Chaaks were once again honored through celebratory feast and ritual, this time alongside creator god, Itzamna. (Landa, 1975: 109-111)

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40 The Contact period of the late 1400’s into the 16th century (depending on location), dates some four to seven hundred years after the creation of the BJS vessels (600-900 C.E.); therefore, ritual activities and beliefs are likely to have adapted along with society. Also these accounts were taken down by peoples from an outside culture; therefore, misinterpretation of ritual events is possible. With this in mind, Chaak was one of the most prominent deities of a culture in which rituals and ideology are many times hereditarily passed from generation to generation. Therefore, it is still relevant to compare the role of 15th century Chaak with the information provided by the visual descriptions of the Classic period Maya.

41 Girard references this ceremony as essentially the same ritual still performed by the Chortis Maya of today. (see Girard, 1995:89)
The following passage is Landa’s description of the ritual procedures performed during this formal rite:

“On the day of this month of Mac the old people held a feast in honor of the Chacs, the gods of cereals, and also of [Y]zamna. One or two days before this they performed the following ceremony, which in their language they called Tuppkak, they collected up every kind of field animal and insect found in their country, and gathered together in the courtyard of the temple with them. Here the Chacs and the Priest sat in the four corners, as was their custom when casting out the Devil. Each had with them a pitcher of water, which had been brought to them. In the center, they placed a great bundle of dried rods, which were bound together and set upright. Then, having first burned some of their incense in the brazier, they set fire to the rods and while these were burning they tore out with abandon the hearts of the birds and the animals and threw them on the fire to burn…..Once the hearts had all been consumed they put out the fire with the water from the pitcher held by the Chacs. They did all this in order to secure thereby…a year of plentiful rains for their cereals.” [Landa, 1975: 110]

Notice how Maya performers participate in the described ceremony in the guise of Chaak. Landa goes on to mention Chaak’s symbolic involvement as assistant to the priest in a number of other ritual performances, such as an account of a Maya baptismal ceremony (now understood to be an early version of modern puberty rites), as well as a
number of other cleansing rituals and celebratory feasts. (Shein, 1992: 70-74) In the month of *Pax*, the Maya were said to celebrate the ‘Feast of the *Pacumchac*’, during which neighboring lords and priests gathered for a five night vigil in Temple of *Citchaccoh* for prayer and offering. As part of this celebration, the symbolic *Chaaks* once again partake in an animal sacrifice. To signify the conclusion of this rite, these four *Chaak* imitators again ceremonially break large water jars filled with drink. Ceremonies celebrating the first day of the “Indian Month” occurred in the month of *Pop*. As a component of this festival of renewal, the *Chaak* players assisted a priest in preparing balls of fresh incense, as well as small boards made to hold burning offerings before honored idols. At some point in the duration of this ritual, they perform a cleansing ceremony with intent on driving out evil spirits. Upon conclusion, the *Chaaks* kindle a new fire, symbolizing new beginning. As supplementary actors in the rites following the ‘Feast of *Ihcilixchel*’,

42 the costumed *Chaaks* aided in the evocation of the gods of medicine *Izamna, Citbolotum, Ahauchamahez* by smearing idols with blue resin. During a similar evocation ritual, referred to as the ‘Gathering of the Hunters’, the *Chaaks* are summoned to anoint the offered skull of a deer with a similar blue pitch. (Landa, 1975: 118)

One important point stressed by these examples is that *Chaak* was symbolically incorporated in the form of human impersonators into a variety of rituals among this Maya group. What is more, we have evidence to another indirect link between the Maya rain god and the rite of sacrifice.

42 *Ihcilixchel* refers to the Maya goddess *Ix Chel*, a deity associated with midwives and healing powers. Also linked with the moon.
Through the duration of ritual activities accounted by Landa, I was able to find one instance that describes the Chaak impersonators in association with a ritual human sacrifice. In reference to this description, Landa states, “besides the feasts in solemnification of which they sacrifice [animals], they also commanded the priests or Chilans to sacrifice persons to remedy some misfortune or necessity…” (Landa, 1975: 83) In this passage, Landa provides evidence that the primary executioner in a human sacrifice ritual was the priest. Later in his explanation, Landa describes an account of heart sacrifice in which, once again the involvement of the four symbolic aspects of Chaak played by four honored elder men of the community behaved as assistant to the priest.

“If they were to remove his heart, they took him to the courtyard with great ceremony and attended by a large company of people, and, having smeared him with blue and put on his cap, they led him to the round altar, which was the sacrificial stone. After the priests and officials had anointed that stone with the blue color and driven out the devil by purifying the temple, the Chacs seized the poor wretch they were going to sacrifice, and with great speed placed him on his back against the stone and held him by his legs and arms so that they divided him down the middle. When done, the executioner came with a large stone knife and dealt him, with great skill and cruelty, a blow between the ribs on his left side under the nipple. He then plunged his hand in there and seized the heart and, like a raging tiger, drew it out alive…. “(Landa, 1975: 84)
This type of symbolic representation of Chaak as a supplemental ceremonial participant is a practice continued today in some modern Maya groups. (i.e. the Cha-Chac Ceremony). (Coe, 1999:232, Freidel, Schele, & Parker, 1993:32) In this ritual, the four represented aspects of Chaak assist the shaman in ceremonial rites for “a three day long ritual…to summon the storm gods who bring rain to the parched land.” (Schele/Freidel, 1990: 44) This example provides modern evidence that Chaak maintains his position as recipient, as well as honorary symbolic participant in Maya ritual.

It is important to recognize that Landa is describing human rituals where players perform a sacrifice in dedication to God Chaak. Even in the examples that cite the Chaaks’ metaphoric participation, Landa identifies the role of the four Chaak players as supplemental and the executioner of the scene as a human Maya priest. Another important fact is that none of Landa’s ritual accounts seem to match the scene described in the Baby Jaguar paintings. For example, Landa notes that the sacrificial victims were often painted blue. In the variations of supposed sacrifice of the Baby Jaguar, not once does the infant appear with false coloration. Landa also describes various methods of execution, such as death by spear, knifing, heart removal and drowning; never does he express an instance of sacrificial death by axe or hand stone, nor is Chaak or his four aspects mentioned as an initiator of death.43 (Landa, 1975: 84)

As a concluding factor, recent archeological evidence, provided via bone fragment surveys, have uncovered numerous human sacrificial remains in underground cenotes and wells believed sacred to God Chaak. Furthermore, some studies suggest that

43 Note that in these ritual accounts the four aspects of Chaak are always present collectively, never is one aspect present without the remaining three, this fact acts as support to suggested quadripartite theory discussed in Chapter 3
the favored victims of these sacrificial dedications were in fact children. (Anda Alanis. 2007: 200-201)

When compounding; the ritual accounts of the Chaak impersonators, Chaak disguised royals committing captive executions, and these modern archeological findings of child sacrificial offering to the rain god, it is easy to see how many view the misleading visual portrayal of Chaak, his axe, Death, and the infant as a scene of execution. That said, I would like to reiterate that none of the examples mentioned actually visually describe “the deity” Chaak committing these acts. All examples were indirect references, i.e. costumed human figures presented as players in a human ritual or royals attempting to assume Chaak’s power. From this analysis, we can conclude that Chaak was included in a multiplicity of ways within the ritual life of the Maya of which the rite of sacrifice was only a minute component.
In the effort to prove that the Baby Jaguar Series does not describe a scene of ritual sacrifice the following chapter presents the results of a comparative analysis between the compositional features common to visual descriptions of Maya rites of human sacrifice and the Baby Jaguar Series paintings.

5.1 The Sacrifice Group

In preparation for this study, an exhaustive attempt was made to find any paintings displaying incontestable scenes of sacrificial rites or offerings. A wide range of samples were collected to demonstrate the variety of sacrificial imagery found in Maya artworks; including, pre, post, and in the moment examples of the rite. A group of fourteen ceramic vases dating contemporaneous to the BJS were selected for this comparison without bias. [See end Illustrations, SG. 1-14] This study refers to this collection as the Sacrifice Group (SG). These vessels were analyzed with the intention of defining compositional features common to depictions of sacrifice; including, the method of execution, the executioner, and the state of the victim. This data was then compared with traits commonly found in the Baby Jaguar paintings.

5.2 Methods of Sacrifice:

Methods of execution in the Sacrifice Group include the following: opening of the chest/possible heart removal, (via eccentric flint knives [SG.1] and unknown weapon [SG.2

44 See the complete corpus of SG illustrations at the conclusion of this chapter.
disembowelment/ gouging, (via spear [SG 4, 9, 11]), and sacrifice by decapitation (via axe [SG. 5, 10, 12], unspecified weapon [SG. 2, 7, 9, 10], and blade [SG. 13 & 14]). Most relevant to this study of the BJS are the decapitation samples. From the Sacrifice Group, nine out of fourteen describe decapitation sacrifice, and three of the nine are executed by means of hand axe. This data demonstrates the already acknowledged point that decapitation sacrifices are found in Maya visual art, and hand axes were used in this type of ritual. This evidence appears in support of BJS sacrifice theories; however, when taking into consideration the manner in which SG artists describe the executioner, intended victim, as well as the overall configuration of the painted scenes, this one consistency seems inconsequential.

5.3 The Executioner

The first relative difference between the Sacrifice Group (SG) and the BJS is that the majority of the SG paintings present the executioner as a human figure, a Maya priest and/or shaman. These characters are typically depicted flanking the victim’s body, and are often accompanied by a small faction of elite Maya observers (Table 5-1/A-I).
In a few cases, the executioner appears morphed into a possible representation of a *way* spirit. In the scaffold sacrifice scene on SG 4, a potbellied creature with animal-like fur is shown disemboweling a bound victim with a spear. (Fig. 5-1)

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Way is a term that defines a belief that every person is born with a co-essence or spirit companion. The being usually manifests in the form of an animal, jaguar way spirits are usually associated with royal elite. (see Reents-Budet, 1994: 121, Freidel, Schele, & Joyce, 1993: 152)
The only recognizable Maya god in direct contact with the sacrificed victim is a portrayal of the death god (Yum Cimil/Cizin). (Fig. 5-2) In this illustration, Death holds in his outstretched arm a bloodied decapitated head. This appears to reflect a scene of self-decapitation; note the headless executioner on the left. SG8 contains an identical image of the death god holding a decapitated head.

Other non-human characters are incorporated in the SG vessels compositions, yet not as executioners. [SG. 1, 2, 4, 5 & 10] Sacrifice Group vessel 3 portrays two jaguar figures adorned with headdresses. (Fig. 5-3) These creatures could symbolize the deity figure, Waterlily Jaguar, who is incorporated in some BJS paintings. However, it is also likely that they are simply illustrations of the animal; which were commonly incorporated into a variety of Maya ritual. (Schele & Freidel, 1990:124-125 &143, Reents-Budet, 1994:17)

SG 2 describes an assembly of individuals that includes an unrecognizable inhuman character carrying the head of a decapitated victim. (Fig. 5-4) He appears with animal skin, a super-enlarged nose, and regalia similar to his human companions.

Because this creature is not truly recognizable as a deity in the Maya pantheon, it is feasible to assume this may be a representation of a way transformation.
The closest image to a deity figure or mythological character presented as an executioner is shown on SG 5. (Fig. 5-5) Note the nonhuman facial features; this vessel has been interpreted as a visual telling of a lost Popul Vuh tale, which incorporates the sacrifice of the father of the Hero Twins in Xibalba. (Reents-Budet, 1994: 278-279 & 356)

The dancing male in Figure 5-6 [SG 10] appears as victim and executioner in an act of self-decapitation or auto-sacrifice. Also present in SG10 is the bipedal depiction of Waterlily Jaguar\(^\text{47}\) accompanied by a deer figure in ritual dance both with serpents around their necks.

\(^\text{47}\) Robescek and Hale refer to this figure as Star Jaguar. (see Robescek, 1981: 44-45)
5.4 State of the Victim

The Sacrifice Group vessels represent the victim of sacrifice in three different ways. The first approach portrays the action of sacrifice, in which case the artist illustrates the ritual process (i.e. the act of decapitation, disemboweling, etc.) [SG. 4, 5, 10]. The next method describes post-sacrifice views; these examples visually depict the fatality of the victim [SG. 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 13]. Last is the rendering of the intended victim prior to sacrifice. In these cases, the figures are typically described bound and/or understood as a ‘captive’ awaiting sacrifice. [SG. 6, 7, 8, 11, 12]\(^{48}\)

Paintings that feature either “in-process” and/or “post-sacrifice” portrayals tend to visually emphasize the spilt blood of the casualty. The release of blood is one of the major purposes for human sacrifice. For some Maya groups, it is believed that when sacrificial blood is released, the victim’s soul (chu’lel) flows with it resulting in a ritual feeding of the gods and the earth. (Freidel, Schele, & Parker, 1993: 203-204) Vessel SG 3 describes this belief in sacrificial blood offered as food for the gods. (Table 5-2, A) The victim is described post-sacrifice, sliced open at the chest; note the large “god head” that drains the blood from the wound. Sacrificial blood appears covering the axe and neck of

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\(^{48}\) The Maya have a very distinctive way of notating their captives. Usually prisoners appear with arms folded behind their back and in some cases in a crouch subservient position.
the victim in painting K511. (Table 5-2, B) In the detail images described in Table 5-2, C and D blood appears dripping from and/or covering the decapitated heads, and in Table 5-2, E it spurts from the neck of the self-decapitating dancing man.

Table 5-2: Sacrifice Group Victims/ Blood Imagery

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. SG 3</th>
<th>B. SG 5</th>
<th>C. SG 2</th>
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<tr>
<td>D. SG 7</td>
<td>E. SG 10</td>
<td>F. SG 13</td>
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The composition on vessel K928 [SG. 2] presents a clear-cut example of a child sacrifice. This example depicts the aftermath of a sacrificial ritual, once again, with emphasis placed on the blood encrusted wound of the victim. (Fig. 5-7) These models
contrast with the BJS paintings, which, in all twenty one cases, contain no references to blood symbolism or inflicted wounds.

The point can be made that, due to the lack of blood and/or mortal wound imagery, the Baby Jaguar images could be categorized as a pre-ritual scene. However, in all pre-sacrifice examples from the Sacrifice Group, the intended victims are presented as bound or held captive by force of weapon. [SG. 5-8, 12] (Table 5-3) This arrangement is also not found in the BJS paintings.

Table 5-3: Pre-Sacrifice Captives

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<tr>
<td>A: SG 11</td>
<td>B: SG 12</td>
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For the sake of speculation, if by chance the BJS imagery does describe an after-sacrifice image minus the blood imagery, there still appears to be a slight inconsistency. Among the sampling of portrayals of post-ritual corpses among the SG vessels, there is emphasis placed on visually describing limp lifeless limbs and facial expressions. An example of this can be seen in painting SG 8. The image describes two lifeless children, one in the arms of an adult male and the other upon and an altar. (Table 5-4, A & B) Similar to the BJS, the intention of sacrifice appears solely as a speculation in this scene, due to the lack of blood or sacrificial weapon.
Yet the impression of lifelessness in SG 8 is projected to the viewer by the drooping limbs and limp bodies of the children. In comparison with the body portrayal of the BJS infant, there is an obvious variation. (Table 5-4, C & D) In each depiction of the BJS infants, the figure is activated with a slight but definite suggestion of life. This is most apparent in the way the infant holds its arm raised, with the back of the hand pressed to its forehead. This pose appears to be rare in Maya art, yet is not exclusive to the BJS infants. (Figs. 5-8 & 5-9)

Figure 5-8: Tikal Bone Carvings, Burial 116
(Freidel, Schele & Parker, 1993: 90)
5.5 A Transient State

Figure 5-8 illustrates a bone carving from Burial 116 at Tikal in Guatemala. The scene depicts a grouping of characters described as passengers in the Paddlers canoe. The image of the Paddlers canoe has been paired to the astronomical positions of the Milky Way galaxy in the night sky. (Freidel, Schele & Parker, 1993: 90)

The glyphic markings on this bone are translated as “11 Ak’bal, 15 Sak, Star Over Earth, the Paddler’s name...”. This is a reference to the Paddler’s position in the sky over the Earth. (Freidel, Schele & Parker, 1993: 89-90) The canoe is believed to represent the shape of the Milky Way, which, to the astronomer, appears to change its position (shifting/tilting) with the passing of time. A second bone carving from the same site describes the canoe tilting as if sinking into the water. This, again, is believed to be connected to the positioning of the Milky Way as visible across the night sky. Note the tilt of the canoe and the hand placement of the characters. This scene has been interpreted as an illustration of the journey of the maize god, the central human figure, to his birthplace. If this is truly a scene describing the birth passage of the maize god, then the physical portrayal of the characters is intended to suggest a state of transition. They are somewhere between the heavens and earth, pre-birth.

The image in Figure 5-9 is a ceramic painting depicting the Paddlers and their canoe. This time there is only one passenger, again interpreted as the maize god riding to his creation. (Freidel, Schele & Parker, 1993: 89-90) Note his right hand with wrist pressed to his forehead. Also important is the image below the canoe. This is interpreted as the actual birth scene of the maize god. He emerges from the mouth of a vision serpent
with his body positioning reflective of a just born child. This position is comparable with the Baby Jaguar figures. (Table 5-5) The BJS 5 infant (Table 5-5,A) appears either emerging from or sinking into the curled interior of the witz altar, just as the maize god (Table 5-5,B) appears to materialize from the jaws of the vision serpent. Both the vision serpent and witz monster are interpreted as channels connected with the other cosmic realms. Ancestor spirits and deities appear rising from the jaws of vision serpents in scenes depicting shamanic communication. The mouth or curled interior of the witz mimics the cavernous openings into the Earth, which are believed to be the road to the underworld.

The appearance of the witz altar is another notable absence in the Sacrifice Group. (Table 5-6, A) Incorporated instead, in most cases, are simple stone sacrificial pedestals (Table 5-6, B & C) or wood scaffolding. (Table 5-6, D) Note the altar from SG2 (Table 5-6, B) takes the shape of a skull. This is read as an obvious reference to death and/or the death god.
Returning to the notion of body positioning, another relative comparison is found on the relief carving adorning the stone tomb cover of King Pakal of Palenque. (Fig. 5-10) In this post-funerary scene, Pakal sits atop the jaws of a monster figure, a portal to the otherworld. (Schele, 1986: 284) Martin & Grube suggest this is the scene of Pakal’s death and rebirth as the maize god. (Martin & Grube, 2000: 167) Note the activated body positioning and its similarity to the BJS infant portrayal. If understood correctly, both the maize god depiction (Fig. 5-9) and the image of Pakal (Fig. 5-10) describe transitory scenes. One is a passage toward death and the other a passage toward birth.

This comparable body language between the BJS infant and the previously mentioned images suggests a possible connection in meaning. The infant of the BJS scenes appears to hover or levitate above the witz altar or the ground line in between the unidentified ritual of Chaak and calling arms of Yum Cimil. Could this suggest the infant’s position in a state of transition toward either birth, death, or a state between life (symbolized by the benevolent Chaak) and death/ the underworld (symbolized by Yum Cimil)?

50 K’ínich Janaab’ Pakal ruled Palenque 618-683 CE (see Martin & Grube, 2000: 162)
The Sacrifice Group

SG # 1/ Kerr #8351

SG # 2/ Kerr #928

SG # 3/ Kerr #1377
SG # 10/ Kerr #1230

SG # 11/ Kerr #1247

SG # 12/ Kerr #5850
CHAPTER VI
NEW THEORIES AND INSpirATIONS

6.1 Falling into the Arms of Death

Death imagery has been a recurring theme in BJS interpretations, and it is a theory that still remains a feasible conclusion. This scene, however, is not a sacrificial death, as the SG comparison has proven. But one, I would argue, by other means. Infant mortality rates were extremely high during the time these vessel paintings were created. Therefore, there was an increased likelihood of still born and/or post-birth infant fatality. With this in mind, it is rational to propose the BJS scene could reflect pre or post-birth infant death/funerary rites, possibly even an event dedicated to child heirs. I would argue that major evidence in support of death imagery lies initially in the relationship between the death god and the infant figure. (Table 6-1, A-C) These two figures interact at close range in the majority of BJS vessels where Death is consistently shown calling the infant toward the underworld. [BJS # 1-5, 11, 14-17, 21] In a small sampling, the infant is even illustrated in the arms of Death. [BJS #11-12]. (Table 6-1, C)

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<th>Table 6-1: Death and the Infant</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. BJS 1</td>
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<td>B. BJS 4</td>
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<td>C. BJS 12</td>
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As presented in chapter 1, a number of Mayanists have suggested the jaguar infant as a deity figure, i.e. *Jaguar God of the Underworld*. (Coe, 1978: 35-36, Robiscek & Hale, 1981: 22-24) In accordance with this interpretation, in the BJS paintings the *Jaguar God* is being sacrificed or passing into the underworld (a form of death). One opposition to this hypothesis lies in the fact the infant figure does not appear in all cases with jaguar features. [BJS #4, 10, 12, 17] In these instances, the infant described appears as a Maya child without features that distinguish him as a deity. These infants do, however, have traits that suggest elite status, such as the suggestion of cranial bone modification.

This information provokes the question, who is (or are?) the infant(s?) represented in this scene? I suggest it is possible that this is a description of a common ritual effecting an assortment of Maya youths. Although not completely deciphered, the majority of dates on these vessels known to vary and so does the hand of the artist. This suggests a possible variation in origin and production date, which could mean these the BJS pots were created for separate but related ritual events. The jaguar imagery or lack of could be a reflection of change in status between the youths described. The jaguar was an animal worshiped by the Maya for its power and stealth among other things. (Schlesinger, 2001: 165) It is a well known fact that Maya elite rulers and warriors often incorporated jaguar imagery into their regalia. As an example, note the jaguar pelt suit and paw gloves worn by the Maya Lord (Table 6-2, A), and the jaguar throne the ruler in Table 6-2, B sits upon.

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6.2 The Soul Companion

The jaguar was also a common way animal for royal figures. (Reents-Budet, 1994: 17, Schlesinger, 2001:165) There are many examples of jaguar way transformations in ceramic paintings; even God Chaak appears in one painted image with jaguar features. (Fig. 6-2, C) In line with this, there is an attribute consistent in many BJS paintings that supports the idea that the jaguar features denote a way transformation. This object materializes in various positions, most commonly tugging at the tail of the jaguar infant (Table 6-3, A & B), but it also appears upon its head (Table 6-3, C & D), or floating through the air (Table 6-3, E & F). Other ceramic paintings portraying way transformations also depict this type of ornamentation. Incidentally, some figures even appear with the
same jaguar features as the infant of the BJS. Note the adornment on the jaguar tail of the transfigured animal on vessel K1253. (Table 6-2, D)

Table 6-3: Detail of Unusual Ornamentation

| A. BJS 2 | B. BJS 11 | C. BJS 3 | D. BJS 16 | E. BJS 19 | F. BJS 17 |

This embellishment has been interpreted by Friedel and Schele as a symbol for a human soul (the white flower). It is this symbolic element that I put forward as a key factor in understanding the ritual described in the BJS.

Friedel and Schele discuss a type of spirit companion similar to the concept of a way, yet referred to as a *chanul* (Tzotzil Maya)/ *kanul* (Yukatec Maya of Quintana Roo). Friedel describes this entity as a soul companion, which “usually takes the guise of a wild animal and shares *ch’ulel* with the person from birth.” (Schele & Freidel, 1990:182) He notes that the fate of the soul of this animal spirit companion and its newborn human partner are intertwined, meaning that “what befalls the one affects the other.” Also interesting is that Maya “ancestral Fathers-Mothers” are believed to be caretakers of the *chanul*. (Schele & Freidel, 1990:182) This information is exceedingly comparable to the
BJS 16 (Fig. 6-1), where Chaak appears in communication with an ancestor spirit that sprouts from the mouth of a vision serpent. This comparison suggests the possible connection, that the infant jaguar is a depiction of a soul companion of an actual Maya child, similar to the chanul spirit (signified by the white flower imagery), and the ancestor spirit in BJS 16 manifests as its protector.

![Figure 6-1: BJS #16](image)

6.3 Caught Between Life and Death

Previously, I have proposed that the contrasting character roles of Chaak and Yum Cimil, as presented in the BJS, could translate as a rebus image. In this scenario, the infant or its soul companion is suspended somewhere in between life (Chaak) and death (Yum Cimil). This theory suggests that the BJS infant represents a pre-birth soul in transition toward its human counterpart. Friedel states that “human souls find the bodies of their newborn owners by traveling along the serpent’s gullet,” a reference to the vision serpent. (Schele & Freidel, 1990:196) This birth passage is referred to as the Ol Portal or “the heart,” the path that connects the earthly realm and the otherworld. This passageway is opened by means of ritual offering. (Schele & Freidel, 1990:105 & 218)
An almost unnoticeable painted object appears in many BJS paintings that is placed consistently in close proximity to the infant figure. (Table 6-4) A number of scenes describe the infant levitating above this shape. I interpret this object as an offering vessel. The vessel shape mimics the curve of a conch shell with a notable opening. Initially, the conch shape of this vessel appeared reminiscent of conch paint containers used by Maya scribes and artist (Fig 6-2, A). (Reents-Budet, 1994: 42-43, Coe & Kerr, 1998:126) However, this container seems to function as an offering plate in this instance. Note the BJS examples in which a femur bone and/or smoke scroll emerge from the gap. (Table 6-4 C, E, F, G, I) A similar paint pot-shaped ceramic offering vessel was retrieved from the Late Classic Tomb of Hasaw Cha’an Ka’awil, ruler of Tikal. This evidence clarifies the fact that this type of vessel was also used to hold ritual offerings. (Coe & Kerr, 1998: 150) (Fig. 6-2 B)

Table 6-4: Offering

![Table 6-4: Offering]
The bone imagery is also confirmable due to the comparable nature to the disembodied hand offerings that appear in numerous other ceramic paintings. (i.e. Fig. 6-3) Note the exposed femur bone. In two examples from Table 6-4 (D & J), the vessel shape has facial features similar to a deity or monster figure. This form resembles ceramic ‘god pots’, which were ritual vessels used in the vision rites of Maya kings and nobles. (Schele & Freidel, 1990: 216) It is possible that this is a representation of the offering required for the opening of an Ol Portal or birth channel.

Another human condition that is a transitional state between birth and death is illness. (i.e. Fig. 6-4) In the BJS, the arms of Death motion toward the infant as it levitates above the witz. This could suggest that the infant’s spirit has yet to reach its demise.
Friedel maintains that when referencing *chanul* partners, the infant and its soul companion are connected. Therefore, if a human infant took on a malady its companion spirit would be affected too. In the Maya culture, an illness would provoke the need for a curing ritual; thus relating back to Karle Taube’s suggestion that the BJS is a depiction of a *k’ex* rite. However, where Taube’s theory suggests the BJS infant as the substitute sacrifice; this study proposes that the infant’s image is a representation of the spirit companion of an ailing child, and the substitute offering appears within the conch shaped vessel.

### 6.4 A Temporary Conclusion

The primary aim of this thesis study was to demonstrate the need to revise past interpretations of the Baby Jaguar Series paintings, with an emphasis on redefining the role of Maya rain deity *Chaak*. Early interpretations of vessels containing Baby Jaguar imagery describe a scene of sacrifice with the infant as the victim and the Maya rain god, *Chaak*, as the executioner. It was my discontentment with these conjectures that sparked the initial investigation into how these theories were formulated. I found that the majority

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52 The Maya coupled illness with the presence of evil spirits, sometimes believed to be sent by the gods as punishment. Ritual serves to drive out the evil spirit or bad winds, and sometimes to appease the offended deity. A *k’ex* rite is a curing practice where an offering (human, animal, or symbolic) is substituted for the life of a sick individual. (Chapter 2)
were derived without benefit and support of a comparative series analysis, which led me to undertake the task of grouping together and analyzing of the Baby Jaguar vessels as a series.

A search of Maya ceramic paintings yielded a collection of twenty-one vessels containing related images of the Baby Jaguar, Chaak, and/or the Death God. A historic analysis of Chaak imagery confirmed his role as a benevolent deity with major associations with water production and agricultural fertility, and not a deity of execution and decapitation. It also revealed the poorly understood ritual function of Chaak, one I interpret as relative to shamanism. A comparative study of painted sacrifice imagery (Sacrifice Group) further disassociated the BJS from a description of sacrificial rites. It also aided in uncovering previously overlooked iconographic features, such as the notable hand symbolism, the “white flower” soul imagery, and the ritual offering vessel.

The end result of this analysis put forward three related theories, each revolving around a differing transient state: death, birth, and illness. These were accompanied by a fresh interpretation of the identity of the jaguar infant as a reflection of way or soul companion, a figure directly linked to a historic Maya infant. It is by choice that I conclude this paper without selecting one theory (birth, death, or illness) over the other. Although each bears its own traces of supportive evidence, none emerge as absolute. There is still much more information to be uncovered before a fully supported interpretation can be confirmed.

Foremost is a more thorough understanding of the ritual role of Chaak and his connection with God K’awiil and the vision serpent, a task that can be accomplished through additional comparative analysis. Also yet to be achieved is the proper translation
of all the BJS vessels hieroglyphics, which may uncover information essential to deciphering their meaning. The exact origin of these vessels is still a mystery. This is because most were initially obtained by undisclosed private individuals and thereafter passed through multiple owners. There is evidence of title glyphs on a number of BJS vessels; possibly referencing historic elite figures or polities. If the true vessel origin could be located and the glyphs translated, this may uncover information concerning actual historic Maya people and their cultural practices. Therefore, this chapter will end with the intention of a continued exploration into understanding the ritual of the baby jaguar figures, and with the hope that these conjectures will inspire a renewed interest in discovering the true interpretation of the Baby Jaguar Series paintings.
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