Large print exhibition text

LIVES OF THE GODS
DIVINITY IN MAYA ART

THE MET

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The ancient Maya revered a multitude of gods and goddesses who ruled over aspects of the world, from the cycles of day and night to the ownership of the earth's resources, including rain and agricultural bounty. Images of the gods' mythical lives and primeval struggles—struggles that resulted in the formation of the world and its inhabitants—endure in the art of the Classic period (A.D. 250–900). Caring for the gods was a primary duty of kings and queens, who modeled their deportment on the deities. In Maya writing, these monarchs were referred to as "godlike" or "sacred" (*k'uhul*), from the hieroglyphic sign *k'uh*, for deities, sacred substances, and objects. Rulers commemorated their close connections to divinity in elaborate works of art.

This exhibition brings together objects that honor the extraordinary talent of Classic-period Maya artists, some of whom signed their work. Inspired by the gods' mythical actions, artists inventively explored the origins of the sun, the moon, maize, and royal dynasties

in monumental sculpture as well as in delicate ornaments and ceramics. Understanding of these objects' profound religious meanings has advanced significantly in recent decades, thanks to leaps in the decipherment of Maya writing, nuanced interpretations of mythical sagas recorded shortly after the Spanish invasion in the sixteenth century, and collaborative research with contemporary Maya peoples.

Audio Guide

Listen to exhibition curators discuss a who's who of Maya gods, hear Classic Mayan inscriptions read aloud, and learn stories from speakers of Poqomchi', one of many Mayan languages in use today.

metmuseum.org/Lives-of-Gods-Audio

Audio Guide 600

Click on the audio guide link on your device or go to https:/www.metmuseum.org/audio-guide and enter the number.

The Audio Guide is supported by

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Mayan Languages

Ancient Maya scribes wrote a language referred to as "Classic Mayan." Six million people today speak thirty languages that belong to a common linguistic family. Some of these are used by diaspora communities in the New York area, including K'iche' (featured in the introductory text in this gallery).

Map of archaeological sites in the Maya area

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It is organized by The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Kimbell Art Museum.

#LivesOfGods

Read, listen to, or watch stories about the works in this exhibition on The Met website.

metmuseum.org/LivesOfGods

Lo’ Took’ Akan(?) Xok (Maya, active 8th century)
Squared vessel
Naranjo or vicinity, northern Peten, Guatemala, 755–80
Slip-painted ceramic with post-fire stucco

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Anonymous gift

Seated on a throne covered by a jaguar pelt, an old, cigar-smoking, jaguar-eared god presides over an assembly of ten deities. The associated hieroglyphic caption is brief: groups of named gods were aligned at K’inchil, or Great Sun Place, on August 11, 3114 B.C. The consequences of the gathering are unclear, but this mythical event was among those that set the world in order and created the conditions for the advent of people, cities, and kingdoms.

Image caption:
Detail of the artist’s signature. Photo © Museum Associates / LACMA

Creations

To the Maya, creation was an extended process shaped by waves of chaos and new beginnings. Inscriptions date the lives of the gods to very ancient times, sometimes hundreds of thousands of years in the past. Gods were born and enthroned as kings of divine realms, but they were beset by struggles. Hieroglyphic texts tell of the killing of primeval creatures, which set in motion floods and other disasters that signaled the ends of eras. Detailed colonial-period accounts from Guatemala and Yucatán likewise place the actions of the gods in deep history, and describe ancient epochs destroyed by cataclysmic events.

Inscriptions on stone sculptures and ceramics highlight specific foundational events that occurred around August 11, 3114 B.C., a mythical date well before the advent of cities and writing in this part of the world. On this date, inscriptions say that deities "were set in order"—placed in a row—and the gods put stones in mythical locations. Maya kings replicated these divine actions at celebrations marking the ends of calendrical periods, each calculated at regular

intervals from 3114 B.C., in emulation of the primordial acts of the gods.

Itzamnaaj

How we read the name glyph for the elderly celestial god in ancient Maya religion is still uncertain. One possibility is Itzamnaaj, the name of a major deity in colonial Yucatán. The spelling of this important god's name may have evolved through the centuries.

Image caption:
Drawing by Mark Van Stone

Censer stands

Probably Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico, ca. 690–720
Ceramic, traces of pigments

Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

Bowls of burning resins were once placed on top of these elaborate stands, which portray gods with both human and animal features wearing tall headdresses of stacked masks. During religious rituals, gods rested on these censer stands, which were thought of as their embodiments. The smoke of burning incense, together with food and drink, prayer, music, and dance were offered to nourish the gods, appease them, and encourage them to grant their favors to devotees.

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The jungle-cloaked landscape of Tikal and El Mirador, Guatemala

Film by Ricky López Bruni

Throne back

Usumacinta River region, Guatemala or Mexico, 7th–9th century
Limestone

Museo Amparo Collection, Puebla, Mexico

Skillfully carved in silhouette on the backrest of a throne, a bearded lord and his companion observe a small supernatural creature seated between them. The diminutive figure, a messenger from the old celestial god Itzamnaaj, has a human body with winged forearms and the head of a jaguar deity. Symbols in the lord's headdress suggest that he is impersonating Itzamnaaj while he listens to the words sent by the god himself. This visitation and performance take place in a dark mountain cave, the type of space regarded as a dwelling for the gods. Caves, and their architectural counterparts, temple chambers, were favored settings for Maya religious rituals.

Hieroglyphic block with the name of Itzamnaaj
Tonina, Chiapas, Mexico, 7th–8th century
Sandstone

Museo de Sitio de Toniná, Mexico, Secretaría de Cultura–Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia

Signs in Maya script are often shaped as human or animal heads—these are contractions, as the same signs may appear as a full body without altering their reading, as with this hieroglyphic block. This example of Maya writing takes the shape of a bird with a leg and claw at the center, curved tail to the right, left wing extending above, and right wing falling to the left. The head that gazes upward is not avian, but that of Itzamnaaj, the old god. The bird stands on a syllabic sign that conveys the ending of the word *muut*, “bird.”

Palenque

Never unified, the Maya region was made up of many competing city-states, sometimes allied, sometimes at war. Located in the foothills of the Chiapas mountains in Mexico, Palenque was the seat of a powerful dynasty that traced its origins to deities who ruled like kings in primeval times. Known in antiquity as Lakamha', probably meaning "Place of Great Waters," the densely inhabited city was built around a series of springs spanned by bridges and aqueducts. Builders channeled these waters to support construction of an elegant building complex. Some of the finest stucco and stone carved panels in Maya art adorn these palaces, temples, and tombs of deified ancestors. In 692, King K'inich Kan B'ahlam II dedicated temples that commemorated the mythical birth of the city's three patron gods. Their worship is attested by hundreds of ceramic censers with portraits of the gods, found by archaeologists in the temples' stepped pyramids.

Image Caption:
Aerial view of Palenque, Mexico. Photograph by Michael Calderwood

Vessel with mythological scene

Belize or Guatemala, 7th–8th century
Polychromed ceramic

Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

Maya artists relished humorous mythical episodes that at the same time conveyed profound meanings related to the origin of the gods, the world, people, and social institutions. On either side of this vessel, Itzamnaaj is awkwardly poised astride a peccary (a wild pig) and a deer. As in a modern comic strip, a fine, undulating line links his lips to his words, asking a man for directions in pursuit of a runaway—the aim of the old god's amusing chase.

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Deity face pendant

Southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, or Belize, 7th–9th century
Jadeite or omphacite, iron ochre

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Jan and Marica Vilcek Gift, 2007 (2007.134)

Pendant

Southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, or Belize, 7th–9th century
Jadeite, pigment

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Steven Kossak, The Kronos Collections, 2015 (2015.677)

Jade, a rare material whose color and durability were highly prized by the Maya, was painstakingly carved into delicate ornaments to adorn the bodies of royalty and members of the nobility. The objects’ imagery reflected the identity and status of the wearer, often linking that person with divine power. These ornaments feature the heads of mythical birds—one appears in a dignitary’s headdress—with large squinting eyes frequently seen on solar deities.

Whistling vessel

Guatemala or Mexico, 5th century
Ceramic

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1963 (1978.412.90a, b)

A foreboding supernatural bird perched on one chamber of this double vessel faces a kneeling young man on the other, while a third creature climbs up its side. The submissive position of the young man suggests he is luring the creature into a trap to overthrow the bird. Despite his impending defeat, this majestic deity was revered as an avian manifestation of Itzamnaaj. A whistle inside the head of the bird sounds when water is poured in the vessel’s opposite chamber.

Conch-shell trumpet

Peten, Guatemala, 4th–6th century
Conch shell, hematite

Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia, Gift of Edwin Pearlman and Museum purchase

In Maya belief, objects are animated beings who eat, drink, breathe, and have agency. This conch-shell trumpet is enlivened by imagery made visible in two orientations: when viewed with the spires down, a face is revealed; when viewed in the present orientation, an inscription spells the object's name. Two youthful deities are incised on the surface of the shell—the lunar Maize God, seated on a pillow, and a solar deity, Juun Pu'w, seen here with large black sores, holding a serpent in one arm.

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Image caption:
Left: Detail of the lunar Maize God. Drawing by Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos; Right: Detail of Juun Pu'w, a solar deity. Photo © Museum Associates / LACMA

Stela with mythological scene

Stela 25, Izapa, Chiapas, Mexico, 300 B.C.–A.D. 250
Stone

Museo Arqueológico del Soconusco, Tapachula, Mexico, Secretaría de Cultura–Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia

Maya gods and the myths associated with them were based on earlier traditions. On this relief panel, created in the centuries before the Classic period, are elements of a remarkably enduring myth about the origins of the world. At left, an upended crocodile becomes a lush tree. To the right, a figure holds up a vertical element on which a monstrous bird is perched. Perhaps a mythical hero or god, he has lost an arm, likely in confrontation with the bird. This conflict reappears many centuries later in the early colonial book known as the *Popol Wuj*. Despite this initial loss, the gods who became the sun and moon ultimately defeated the monstrous avian being, who had pretended to shine like the sun but shed only a dim light.

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Day

Maya mythical narratives describe the unhappy lives of the first people, who suffered in cold darkness and trod on a soggy earth dominated by vicious creatures. These people welcomed the first glorious sunrise, which dried the earth and marked the beginning of a new era with regular cycles of night and day. Unable to stand the heat of the sun, the primeval creatures of the previous era died or receded into the darker fringes of the world, allowing communities to settle down, raise crops, and prosper.

The struggles among gods in primordial times were favored subjects for Maya artists. Painters and sculptors paid great attention to the confrontation between a young solar god and a monstrous bird, one of the vicious creatures who opposed the rise of the sun. This great bird was eventually defeated, but came to be revered as a god, overlapping with the elderly celestial god Itzamnaaj.

The sun was associated with life-giving forces, and rulers identified closely with this power, often adding the title K'inich, or Sun God, to their name. Deceased

kings were often portrayed as glorious new suns rising in the sky, overseeing their successors' performance of royal and religious duties.

Sun God

The name of the Sun God, K'inich, derives from *k'in*, a term that refers to the sun and the day, as well as to heat and things that are hot.

Image caption:
Drawing by Mark Van Stone

Incised bone with an accession ceremony

Guatemala, Mexico, or Belize, 7th–8th century
Bone, pigment

Dallas Museum of Art, The Otis and Velma Davis Dozier Fund

Perched on a dais marked with celestial signs in the upper right, the avian deity Itzamnaaj watches over the enthronement of a young lord, seen at the lower right. At left, a dignitary is about to crown the lord with a large headdress portraying Itzamnaaj. By donning the headdress, the ruler embodied the power of the old celestial god: the head of the bird rose above the monarch's face, while its long wing feathers curved behind.

Plate with gods shooting blowguns

Mexico, 7th–9th century
Ceramic

Museo Maya de Cancún, Mexico, Secretaría de Cultura–Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia

This plate features two young gods shooting blowguns at a supernatural bird pictured at center. Their skin is ridden with black sores, symbolic of humility and sickness, contrasting with the bird's ostentatious appearance. Colonial and modern mythical narratives, including the *Popol Wuj*, explain how young, humble, and sometimes ailing heroes vanquished older, stronger, and wealthier foes who opposed their rise as luminaries.

Deity figure

Southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, or Belize, 3rd–6th century
Jade (pyroxene jadeite)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.1069)

Portraits of deities combine human and nonhuman attributes. Carved in costly jade, this effigy figure seated in the customary pose of a king wearing elaborate jewels also boasts animal features, including scales on the arms and a pointed beak. Still other elements, such as the large eyes with square pupils, have no correlates in the natural world, underscoring the figure’s divine status.

Deity figure

Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico, ca. 680
Jade

Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, Secretaría de Cultura–Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia

This deity effigy was part of the rich funerary offerings placed inside the sarcophagus of the great seventh-century king K'inich Janaab Pakal I of Palenque. It portrays the patron god of Pax, one of the months of the Maya calendar. A jaguar deity, the god belongs to the realm of the forest, and his face often appears on the trunks of trees. In his avian manifestation he served as a messenger for Itzamnaaj.

Sun God (K’inich)

Northwest court of The Palace, Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico, 7th–8th century
Stucco

Museo Regional de Antropología Carlos Pellicer Cámara, Mexico, Secretaría de Cultura del Estado de Tabasco

This portrait of K’inich, the Sun God, was once part of the ornamentation of a building in the palace complex at Palenque. As the seat of royal authority, the palace buildings were covered with stuccoed and painted decoration that linked the kings of Palenque to the city’s patron gods and proclaimed their long dynastic background. Deceased rulers were glorified as new suns emerging from cartouches normally occupied by the Sun God. In this portrait, the solar deity is recognizable by the squinting eyes and T-shaped teeth. Some individuals sought to replicate this appearance by cutting the outer corners of their frontal incisors.

Panel fragment

Palenque region, Chiapas, Mexico, 7th–8th century
Stone

Museo de Sitio de Palenque Alberto Ruz L'Huillier, Mexico, Secretaría de Cultura–Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia

This warrior, armed with a shield and spear, wears a headdress featuring a centipede head with long, curved fangs. Although his name is unknown, the figure's royal identity is confirmed by a beaded diadem on his forehead. Marks on his forearms normally present in portraits of the Sun God—*k'in* signs for "sun" or "day"—suggest he is impersonating the solar deity. The angular serpent-head element that passes through his nose indicates the Sun God's fiery breath. The Sun God was regarded as a warrior, whose rays were comparable to fighters' darts and the painful sting of centipedes.

Night

Night and darkness are the domains of the disorder that prevailed before the sun first rose. While sunset is associated with decay and death, nighttime is also related to fertility. Maya peoples liken the remains of the dead to seeds that carry the promise of rebirth and sprout from the dark interior of the earth.

Maya artists excelled at creating imaginative, often terrifying images of nocturnal deities. Jaguars, active after dark and the most powerful carnivores in the Maya area, figure prominently in representations of nighttime gods. Of the multiple jaguar gods and goddesses, all had aggressive, warlike personalities. Yet they were sometimes overcome and mocked in mythical encounters by younger and less imposing deities.

Nocturnal deities could also be beautiful. Maya artists depicted the Moon Goddess as a young woman, who was sometimes identified in texts as the sun's wife or mother. She, along with other goddesses, was broadly associated with reproduction, as well as with the textile arts of spinning and weaving.

Jaguar God

The names of deities are frequently rendered as profiles of the gods themselves. The glyph for the jaguar god of night, fire, and warfare combines human and jaguar features, together with marks that denote it as a nocturnal deity. The reading of this name remains uncertain.

Image caption:
Drawing by Mark Van Stone

Lintel with woman in a moon cartouche

Usumacinta River region, Guatemala or Mexico,
8th–9th century
Limestone, pigment

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by the Shinji Shumekai Ancient Art Fund and Joan Palevsky

Clad in a long blouse and wearing abundant jewelry, this royal woman is seated inside a lunar crescent, the characteristic way of depicting the Moon Goddess. Her headdress features a Water-lily Serpent, a mythical being closely associated with lunar deities, while the hieroglyphic inscription tells us that she is impersonating the serpentine deity. The portrait was likely carved after her death, and may have been paired with one that represented her late husband as a new sun. Several stelae from the Usumacinta River region show deceased parents, likened to the sun and the moon, overseeing their successors' performance of dynastic rituals.

Censer stand

Building 3, Group B, Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico, 7th–8th century
Ceramic

Museo de Sitio de Palenque Alberto Ruz L'Huillier, Mexico, Secretaría de Cultura–Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia

Found in the residence of a member of the nobility at Palenque, this majestic jaguar deity has the distinctive ears and claws of that powerful nocturnal predator. Shown here wearing a warrior headdress, the jaguar god is related to night, fire, and warfare. He is often represented as a star or planet in myths that explained the origin of warfare as a confrontation among the stars.

Cylinder vessel

Mexico or Guatemala, 7th–8th century
Ceramic, pigment

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund

A key episode in modern mythical narratives describes a young suitor who, disguised as a hummingbird, approaches a closely guarded maiden and sets creative acts in motion. Here, a young man has a distinctive hummingbird attribute: a curved beak projects from his nose to pierce a flower. He is probably the mythical suitor of the story, and approaches the maiden—the Moon Goddess—while she sits on a celestial throne behind an old god, likely her protective father.

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Cylinder vessel with the Moon Goddess and other deities

Mexico or Guatemala, 7th–8th century
Ceramic

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by Camilla Chandler Frost

Holding a rabbit in front of her, the Moon Goddess presides over an assembly of four lunar gods, who are perhaps related to the moon's phases, with crescent-shaped moon signs hooked under their arms. The scene is likely related to myths that explained why there is a rabbit in the moon, which involve salacious tales of the rabbit's trickery. Here, the rabbit has taken the clothes of a powerful merchant god, who kneels humbly before the goddess.

Rabbit pendant

Guatemala or Mexico, 7th–9th century

Shell, pigment

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of Frank Carroll in memory of Clytie Allen

Incised flake with deity image

Cache A26, Structure L, Group A, Uaxactun, Guatemala, 4th–8th century

Obsidian

Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala City, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala

Incised flake with deity image

Cache 45, associated with Stela P29, Great Plaza, Tikal, Guatemala, 4th–8th century

Obsidian

Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala City, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala

Incised flake with deity image

Cache 42, associated with Stela P20, Great Plaza, Tikal, Guatemala, 4th–8th century
Obsidian

Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala City, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala

In mythical narratives, rabbits—considered denizens of the moon—are cunning tricksters, capable of overcoming stronger and larger animals. In royal court scenes, rabbits perform as musicians and scribes. These incised obsidian flakes portray the Maize God—who, among other attributions, was a lunar deity—holding a rabbit in his arms. The flakes were part of ceremonial deposits at Tikal, a major Maya center in the Petén region, and neighboring Uaxactun.

Vessel with mythical scene

Guatemala or Mexico, 7th–8th century
Slip-painted ceramic

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Anonymous gift

Mythical narratives explain how the gods magically transformed themselves to seduce young goddesses. Here, a youthful goddess is ensnarled by a large serpent that grows from the leg of the lightning god K’awiil. An old god emerges from the mouth of the serpent, and lunges for her. The accompanying hieroglyphic text refers to the birth of a god, likely the result of this encounter.

Cylinder vessel

Yucatan, Mexico, 7th–9th century
Earthenware with slip

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of Frank Carroll in memory of Frank and Eleanor Carroll

Created in a style emulating wood or stone carving, this vessel features a young woman cradling a cub and confined inside a large conch shell depicted in a cutaway view. She is likely the daughter of the old god who sits next to the shell. Modern narratives tell of young goddesses whose parents keep them away from suitors by locking them inside jars, boxes, or other enclosures—the function of the conch shell here. Despite their precautions, suitors still manage to enter, in this case producing animal offspring.

Seated female

Mexico, 7th–9th century
Ceramic, pigment

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Pre-Columbian Collection, Washington, D.C.

Embracing couple

Mexico, 7th–9th century
Ceramic, pigment

Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, Katherine Margaret Kay Bequest Fund and New Endowment Fund

Ceramic figurines provided artists with opportunities to depict lively, sometimes sexually suggestive mythical episodes. Women were depicted individually or interacting with others, including lecherous old men. The man lifting the skirt of a young woman here is both older and smaller than she, features intended to make his amorous approaches appear pathetic and humorous.

A mouthpiece in the back turns these hollow figurines into whistles. Their pigments include Maya blue, obtained through the chemical combination of indigo with a special kind of clay.

Four lidded vessels with animal heads

Structure F8-1, El Zotz, Guatemala, 4th century
Ceramic

Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala City, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala

Artists created elaborate feasting vessels with animal-headed knobs, flattening the creatures' bodies into painted or incised decoration on the lids. Noisy inhabitants of lowland Maya forests, howler monkeys were revered creatures associated with both the day and the night. Other animals include a peccary, or wild pig, as well as mythical beings such as a turtle with a human head emerging from the mouth.

Lidded vessel with howler monkey

Structure F8-1, El Zotz, Guatemala, 4th century
Ceramic

Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala City, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala

This vessel depicts a howler monkey wearing a beaded collar. The creature's arms, with long-fingered paws, are incised on either side of the lid; folded legs, marked with signs for "darkness," appear on the vessel walls. The quatrefoil medallion on the front of the vessel—the monkey's chest—contains an image of the Maize God in an acrobatic posture.

El Zotz

Nestled in the densely forested foothills of a natural corridor that controlled access to the major city of Tikal (present-day northern Guatemala), the site of El Zotz encompasses three centers. The highest of these was a center of courtly life featuring buildings, courtyards, and temples that served as a royal necropolis. One important structure, dubbed the Temple of the Night Sun, was built above one of the earliest tombs at the site, likely that of the founder of the Pa’chan, or “Split/Broken Sky,” dynasty that ruled El Zotz. Painted a deep red, the temple’s cornices are covered on all four sides with five-foot-high stucco masks depicting celestial and nocturnal deities. This west-facing temple was likely related to the sun and the cult of dynastic ancestors, whose death and afterlife were comparable to sunset followed by glorious reemergence at dawn.

Image caption:
Detail of facade, Temple of the Night Sun, El Zotz, Petén, Guatemala. Image: Courtesy the El Zotz Archaeological Project, Brown University; scans by the Center for Advanced Spatial Technologies, University of Arkansas

Two ear ornaments
Four plaques
Bead
Three celts

Structure F8-1, El Zotz, Guatemala, 4th century
Jade

Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala City, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala

Imported from sources in the Motagua River valley of highland Guatemala, jade was the most valued material in Maya lapidary art. Rulers wore magnificent jade jewelry in life, and these ornaments accompanied them in death. The objects exhibited here were part of an elaborate belt, with three celts, or axe- shaped implements, hanging from a broad perforated bead. The earspools were part of a small mosaic mask originally at the center of the belt assemblage.

Muwaan Bahlam as captive impersonating jaguar deity

Red Altar, Monument 180, Tonina, Chiapas, Mexico, ca. 700
Sandstone

Museo de Sitio de Toniná, Mexico, Secretaría de Cultura–Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia

According to the inscription on his belly, this unfortunate warrior, Muwaan Bahlam, was captured on September 7, 695. By recording this high-ranking prisoner’s name on the monument, the king of Tonina, who commissioned these reliefs, highlighted his own victory and cast his triumph as analogous to the deeds of deities. Muwaan Bahlam was likely killed in a sacrificial ritual where he was compelled to impersonate the powerful jaguar god, reenacting that deity’s defeat.

Yax Ahk’ as captive impersonating jaguar deity

Red Altar, Monument 155, Tonina, Chiapas, Mexico, ca. 700
Sandstone

Museo de Sitio de Toniná, Mexico, Secretaría de Cultura–Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia

Identified by the hieroglyphic inscription on his leg, Yax Ahk’, the lord of a place called Anaayte’, along the Usumacinta River on the modern border between Guatemala and Mexico, is shown as a captive impersonating the jaguar god. The flaming jaguar ear and the twisted cord between his eyes are attributes of the deity, a warrior who was himself captured and tortured by fire in primordial war myths.

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Rain

Chahk, the god of rain and storms, was venerated throughout the Maya region, and acts of appeasement to him were, and still are, critical for the well-being of communities. Water is a scarce resource in the Maya Lowlands, and the inhabitants of ancient cities survived the long dry season by storing rainwater in reservoirs. They also suffered periodically from excessive rains and wind brought by hurricanes. A capricious, unpredictable god, Chahk was often depicted brandishing an axe in the shape of K'awiil, a deity that personified lightning. While both Chahk and K'awiil were portrayed with humanlike bodies, certain features are decidedly fantastic, such as large spiral eyes, long fangs, and reptilian scales.

K'awiil himself was often depicted with a smoking axe through the forehead and a serpentine left leg. This powerful deity was related to ideas of abundance: lightning strikes were thought to fertilize the earth. K'awiil had power over the reproductive forces of living creatures, including plants and people, and all forms of wealth and abundance. He was often held by rulers

in the form of a scepter or axe decorated with his likeness, a symbolic link between kings and queens and the power of lightning, fecundity, and wealth.

Rain God

The profile-face glyph of the god of rain and storms is normally complemented by the syllable *ki*, which indicates that the name ends with the sound *k*. Scribes sometimes rendered it using the syllables *cha* and *ki*, which also produce the reading “Chahk.”

Image caption:
Drawing by Mark Van Stone

This gallery features ambient audio of thunderstorms. For assistive listening, join our free Wi-Fi network (MetMuseumFreeWiFi) and scan the QR code. First-time users, please scan a second time after downloading the app.

metmuseum.org/Maya-Gods-Listening

Ornaments

Structure 5C-49, Tikal, Guatemala, 7th–8th century
Spondylus shell

Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala City, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala

These ornaments show aquatic deities with fins in the cheeks and above the nose. They were made from the red shell of the spiny tropical bivalve *Spondylus*. Highly appreciated for their color and shape, such shells were imported into the Maya region from warm waters off the Pacific coast.

Throne leg

Palenque, Mexico, ca. 784
Limestone

Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, Secretaría de Cultura–Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia

Delicately incised on the leg of a stone bench, this supernatural head, depicted in profile, spells the name of a mythical location. While its full reading is uncertain, the place-name corresponds to a stony waterhole. References to water include fins, aquatic plants, and some of the attributes of the rain god Chahk. A serrated V-shaped mark in the crown of the head indicates that this mythical location was split open, likely to give birth to deities.

Attributed to the Metropolitan painter (Maya, active 7th–8th century)
Vessel with mythological scene
Mexico or Guatemala, 7th–8th century
Ceramic, pigment

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, 1968 (1978.412.206)

Painted in a style called "codex," for its resemblance to Maya painted books, this vessel features a baby jaguar deity reclining on a personified mountain. The other protagonists include the rain god Chahk, wielding an axe and a hand stone, and a skeletal death god, both in positions that suggest dance. The black wash in the lower part indicates an aquatic location.

Attributed to the Metropolitan painter (Maya, active 7th–8th century)
Vessel with mythological scene
Mexico or Guatemala, 7th–8th century
Ceramic

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller and Gifts of Nelson A. Rockefeller, Nathan Cummings, S.L.M. Barlow, Meredith Howland, and Captain Henry Erben, by exchange; and funds from various donors, 1980 (1980.213)

In a variant of the myth about Chahk and the baby jaguar seen on a nearby vessel, this ceramic shows a fully grown jaguar on a personified mountain. Chahk emerges from the water, wielding weapons, while a glyphic caption names him as “first rain.” This mythical narrative was related to the origin of the Chatahn Winik lords, who were spread over a broad region between northern Guatemala and Mexico.

Vessel with mythological scene

Mexico or Guatemala, 7th–8th century
Ceramic

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Justin Kerr, in memory of Barbara Kerr, 2014 (2014.632.1)

Rain droplets fall on the landscape surrounding a stone building. Inside, the Maize God stands next to a bound captive. Both have elongated heads crowned by locks of hair. They are about to be freed by Chahk, who has split the roof wielding his axe, whose strikes are comparable to thunderbolts. In modern narratives, the Maize God pacifies the unruly rain deities to bring about orderly rainy seasons that will quench his thirst and allow him to grow.

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Tripod plate with mythological scene

Guatemala or Mexico, 7th–8th century
Ceramic, pigment

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of the Mol Collection, 2021 (2021.320)

Multiple levels of the cosmos converge in this intricately painted plate. Emerging from the dark waters of a sinkhole, the rain god Chahk occupies center stage. Exuberant tendrils emerge from his head, terminating in personified flowers, a roaring jaguar, and a serpent. Celestial creatures reign above, including a bird and a crocodile-headed being in the upper right. Below, a partly effaced Maize God sprouts from the submerged rhizome of a water lily.

Lidded tetrapod bowl

Guatemala or Mexico, 4th–5th century
Ceramic, pigment

Brooklyn Museum, Ella C. Woodward Memorial Fund

The pronounced hook at the tip of this waterbird's bill suggests that it is a pelican who eagerly bites an unfortunate fish. This is no ordinary bird, however. It wears ornaments, and its wings, which extend over the lid's surface, sport wide feathers growing from flattened serpent heads. This mythical bird is complemented by supernatural animal heads on the bowl's legs.

Lidded tetrapod bowl with paddler and peccaries

Mexico or Guatemala, 4th–5th century
Ceramic, cinnabar

Dallas Museum of Art, The Roberta Coke Camp Fund

Carrying the day's catch on his back, a lucky fisherman rows his small canoe through a mythical realm. The fisherman sports a flowerlike *k'in*, or "sun" sign, on his head and navigates waters lined by rows of flowers along the rim of the lid and the base of the bowl. Oddly enough, this aquatic landscape is supported on the flat noses of four peccaries, or wild pigs—terrestrial creatures that form the legs of the bowl.

Bird ornament

Guatemala or Mexico, 600–800

Shell

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Mrs. Gertrud A. Mellon Gift, 1963 (1978.412.103)

This delicate shell pendant depicts a long-necked water bird—likely a heron—with its wings spread. The head of a deity with an oval eye and a grimacing, long-toothed mouth is incised on the breast. Comparable depictions on painted vessels show that the bird and the deity face on its chest are a single being rather than separate entities. This extraordinary bird was also a star or constellation in the Maya concept of the heavens.

Vessel with water bird and hieroglyphic text

Mexico, 600–900

Ceramic

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Justin Kerr and Dicey Taylor, 2017 (2017.396)

Bands of tiny dots interspersed with bubblelike circles denote water in Maya art. Here, a water band doubles as a leafy plant that encircles a long-necked heron. Waterfowl and other aquatic creatures were favorite subjects for artists, reflecting their importance in Maya views of the landscape and its inhabitants. According to the diagonal inscription on the back, this vessel was intended for luxurious drinks made from cacao seeds—the source of modern chocolate.

Crocodile whistle and rattle

Mexico, 700–800
Ceramic, pigment

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.1143)

Common inhabitants of swamps and lagoons, crocodiles held key roles in Maya cosmology. The earth was equated with the back of a crocodile emerging from water, while the sky was embodied by another creature that combined crocodile and deer attributes. Painted in luxurious Maya blue, this crocodile doubles as a whistle, blown through the right hind leg, and a rattle, with clay pellets inside the front half of the modeled figure.

Scepter with profile figures

Mexico or Guatemala, 7th–8th century
Flint

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, 1967 (1978.412.195)

The multiple appendages of ritual flint objects, some flaked into profile faces, led archaeologists to refer to them as “eccentric flints.” Far from whimsical, these carefully composed showpieces depict deities who sometimes merge in form and meaning. The tall-nosed profile face at the center of this flint corresponds to the Maize God, yet the flaming torch in the figure’s forehead is a distinctive attribute of K’awiil. Both deities were related to abundance and wealth.

Eccentric flint depicting a canoe with passengers

Maya Lowlands, 7th–9th century
Chert

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Museum purchase funded by the Alice Pratt Brown Museum Fund

Filled with marvelous mythical beings, this canoe and the example at far right transport reptilian creatures at the prow and stern, each joined by one of the major gods at the center. K’awiil, the lightning god, rides on the flat canoe, whereas the Maize God is shown on the curved flint boat. The saga of the Maize God includes a watery transit through death before his triumphal rebirth.

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Incised flake with deity image

Cache 131, Temple II, Tikal, Guatemala, ca. 700
Obsidian

Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala City, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala

Imported from sources in the Guatemalan Highlands, obsidian—a volcanic glass—was employed for making sharp cutting tools and weapons. This flake shows the head of K'awiil with his characteristic traits: a large eye with a spiral pupil, a serpentine snout, an elongated head with a mirror inset in the forehead, and a flaming torch projecting from the mirror. Vegetation grows behind his head, denoting his association with fertility and abundance.

Eccentric flint depicting a canoe with passengers

Mexico or Guatemala, 7th–9th century

Flint

Dallas Museum of Art, The Eugene and Margaret McDermott Art Fund, Inc., in honor of Mrs. Alex Spence

Rainstorms in the Maya Lowlands

Film by Ricky López Bruni

Maize

Maize is the staple crop of the Maya, and closely associated with ideas of personhood. Narratives from highland Guatemala explain that the gods first attempted to create people from clay and wood, which yielded awkward beings who did not recognize their creators. On their next attempt, the gods made people from maize, successfully forming well-shaped, intelligent humans who could speak and worship their creators appropriately.

The Maize God is an eternally youthful being who endures trials and overcomes the forces of death. Maya artists portrayed him as a graceful young man with glossy skin and a sloping forehead, his elongated head resembling a maize cob crowned with silky, long locks of hair. The epitome of male beauty, this young god was also associated with jade and cacao, two of the most valuable items in ancient Maya economies.

Episodes from the Maize God's mythical saga appear on some of the finest ceramic vessels known from the ancient Americas. Formally appealing and conceptually rich, the Maize God's transit through

death and his subsequent rebirth were metaphors for regeneration and resilience.

Maize God

The profile of the Maize God—which also stands for his name—possibly reads *ixi'm*, or "maize." The glyph is often combined with the numeral one, yielding the reading Juun Ixi'm, "One Maize."

Image caption:
Drawing by Mark Van Stone

Chahk

Mexico, 9th century
Limestone

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1966 (66.181)

This monumental depiction of Chahk from the northern lowlands highlights the rain god's warlike aspect. Clutching the handle of a large axe, he is shown with an open mouth and pronounced cheeks, as if shouting or threatening, evoking the power of a tropical storm. The two holes in the axe shaft served to attach a blade or blades, now missing. Maya kings were sometimes depicted impersonating Chahk, brandishing weapons much as the god brandished the forces of thunder and lightning.

Farmers in the relatively dry plains of Yucatán continue today to perform ceremonies in honor of multiple rain deities who are still known by the name of Chahk. The gods are presented with food, drink, candles, and tobacco, and are offered carefully prescribed prayers, all in hopes of receiving much needed rains.

Codex-style plate

Guatemala or Mexico, 680–740

Earthenware, paint, slip

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Landon T. Clay

The Maize God emerges from the split carapace of a turtle swimming in dark waters, like a plant sprouting from the earth. His flawless appearance contrasts with that of his attendants: the young solar god Juun Pu'w is covered with black pustules, while the god watering him like a maize sprout—the lord of wild animals—has patches of jaguar pelt. Painted by a master of the codex style (so-called for its resemblance to Maya painted manuscripts), the scene refers to the origin of maize.

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Maize God emerging from a flower

Mexico, 7th–9th century
Ceramic, pigment

Brooklyn Museum, Dick S. Ramsay Fund

Maize God emerging from a flower

Mexico, 7th–9th century
Ceramic, pigment

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.728)

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Maize God in corn husk

Mexico, 7th–9th century
Ceramic, pigment

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of Frank Carroll in memory of Frank and Eleanor Carroll

Emerging as a corn cob from a husk, or a pistil from a flower, the Maize God depicted here is a metaphor for new growth and regeneration. Though often portrayed in an active pose, bending, swaying, or dancing, these

versions of the deity represent him as still, with arms crossed. The heads of these figurines conceal whistling mechanisms: when air is blown through the long, hollow stem it produces a high-pitched sound.

Vessel with Maize God myths

Southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, or Belize, 7th–9th century
Ceramic, pigment

Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Some vessels were painted in a simple style, depicting the ribald antics of divinities. Here, a group of young gods—one holding a blowgun—watches as the Maize God frolics with two naked women in a pool of water. The god's amorous encounters were seen as temptations, moral failures that ultimately resulted in his death but also rebirth. On the opposite side of the vessel, a paddler begins the journey across water that marked the god's mortuary transit.

Vessel with the rebirth of the Maize God
Tomb 1, Structure II, Calakmul, Campeche, Mexico, 7th–8th century
Ceramic, pigment

Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, Secretaría de Cultura–Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia

Reclining on his back with arms and legs bent, the Maize God adopts the conventional pose that artists employed to depict babies. In this variation of his aquatic rebirth, he emerges from a cleft head, possibly representing a seed. Below, tadpoles swim in dark waters. The vessel was left as an offering in an elite tomb at the powerful city of Calakmul. Its decoration, evoking the Maize God's death and rebirth, provided an optimistic model for the death and afterlife of rulers.

Plate with the Maize God emerging from a water lily

Southern Campeche, Mexico, 7th–8th century
Ceramic, pigment

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Anonymous gift

Despite his clear association with a terrestrial crop, the Maize God is an aquatic being. In colonial and modern narratives, maize deities are killed in water, then reborn. On this plate, the god sprouts from the submerged rhizome of a water lily, while a fish swims below. The encircling band adds a celestial dimension to the scene, as if the rebirth happened in the heavens or the viewer were watching it from the sky.

Plate with dancing Maize God

Burial A3, Structure A-1, Uaxactun, Guatemala,
7th–9th century
Ceramic, pigment

Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala City, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala

Using rapid brushstrokes, pottery painters from the region around Uaxactun and Tikal, important cities in the Petén region, created lively portraits of the dancing Maize God. Elements of the dancer's costume swing as the figure twists and swirls, perhaps evoking maize stalks waving in the breeze. Dozens of similarly decorated plates are known, attesting to the popularity of this design. The signs in the encircling band are decorative, unreadable imitations of writing.

Bowl with the Maize God as cacao tree

Guatemala or Mexico, 5th century
Carbonate stone

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Pre-Columbian Collection, Washington, D.C.

The roundels in this stone vessel show the Maize God as a cacao tree, with pods growing from his limbs. The source of chocolate, cacao seeds were among the most valuable goods in the ancient Maya economy, used to prepare luscious drinks consumed during religious rituals and on festive occasions. Some depictions of the Maize God show him bearing large sacks or baskets of maize and cacao synonymous with abundance—of food, wealth, and prosperity.

Image caption:
Above: Seated Maize God as cacao tree with a vessel; Below: Reclining Maize God with cacao pods and an open book. Drawings by Simon Martin

Pair of carved ornaments with the Maize God

Southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, or Belize, 5th–7th century
Shell

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Pre-Columbian Collection, Washington, D.C.

Pair of carved ornaments with the Maize God

Southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, or Belize, 5th–7th century
Shell

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Arthur M. Bullowa Bequest, 1995 (1995.489a, b)

Often depicted as a vigorous youth, the Maize God can also be shown as spent. In Maya art, closed eyes signify death, and representations of the Maize God's head are akin to harvested corn cobs. One pair of these ornaments originally had tiny inset earspools, likely of jade.

Maize God

Temple 22, Copan, Honduras, 715
Limestone

British Museum, London

The Maize God’s slender body and handsome face evoke the beauty of ripening corn. His head, like a maize cob, is elongated and mostly bald except for a thick brow surrounding the face and long locks growing from the crown, evoking corn silk. Abundant jewels enhance his gracious appearance and signal his preciousness. He has a youngster’s unblemished skin and was sometimes portrayed as a baby. Like a tender child, he demands constant attention and care, lest he die. Failure to appease the Maize God could bring hunger to families and entire communities.

Knowledge

Books made from long strips of folded bark paper were repositories of knowledge about the gods and rituals, the sacred calendar, celestial observations, and predictions for events to come. Scribes who spent long years learning the intricacies of Maya writing employed hundreds of signs in varied combinations. Only four of the books created in the pre-Hispanic period have survived to the present day. Fortunately, texts that remain on relief sculptures and delicately painted ceramics provide a direct source for Classic Maya political history, such as alliances and conquests, and spiritual beliefs. Some of these works include the names of the artists and scribes who made them—the only artists known by name from the ancient Americas.

In the sixteenth century, Maya scribes adopted alphabetic writing introduced by Spanish missionaries, and created accounts of their history and religious beliefs, including a book known as *Popol Wuj*. Written by the K'iche' of the western Guatemalan Highlands, this account describes the origin of the world, the

former eras, the birth of the sun and the moon, and the discovery of maize. Despite centuries of religious change, many members of modern Maya communities observe the sacred calendar and venerate traditional deities.

Chuwen

The glyph Chuwen, which corresponds to the name of the patron deity of scribes and artists, portrays a howler monkey—a noisy inhabitant of Maya forests—with the pointed ear of a deer and markings signifying darkness.

Image caption:
Drawing by Mark Van Stone

Heads of aged beings
Casa del Coral, El Mirador, Guatemala,
7th–9th century
Stucco

Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala City,
Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala

Artists displayed great imagination in the creation of grotesque creatures. These finely modeled heads with luxurious blue paint range from the nearly human to the decidedly fantastic. Their wrinkled faces and toothless mouths evoke old age, in a departure from standard, dignified representations of respected elders and aged gods. Surely perceived as strange, perhaps even amusing, these heads belong to the realm of the wondrous and sometimes fearsome supernatural beings that populated Maya views of the world.

Three glyphs

Temple XVIII, Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico,
7th–8th century
Stucco

Left: Museo de Sitio de Palenque Alberto Ruz L'Huillier, Mexico, Secretaría de Cultura–Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia; Center and right: Museo Regional de Antropología Carlos Pellicer Cámara, Mexico, Secretaría de Cultura del Estado de Tabasco

Each of these blocks bears three to five signs that, together, convey words or phrases. Maya writing combined syllables and logograms—signs that carry meaningful linguistic units or morphemes. Though their delineation varied, they were often shaped as the heads of humans, animals, or deities. Respectively, these blocks spell the first part of the name of K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb III, a ruler from the city of Palenque, and the phrases *i uht* (then it happens) and *unah tal* . . . (his first . . . [undeciphered]). The first word of the monarch's name, K'inich, is also that of the Sun God, and was often employed as a royal title, asserting the king as possessor of the deity's fiery visage, capable of projecting heat like the god himself.

Vessel with scribe

Tomb 1, Structure III, Calakmul, Campeche, Mexico, 4th–5th century
Ceramic

Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, Secretaría de Cultura–Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia

This lidded vessel was an offering in the burial of an important lord at Calakmul. It contained the remains of food that was prepared for the deceased in the afterlife. The figure on the lid defies certain identification, but pointed deer ears projecting above the earspools suggest that it is a scribe, or perhaps a monkey deity, the patron god of scribes.

King Jaguar Bird Tapir

Monument 168, Tonina, Chiapas, Mexico, early 7th century
Sandstone

Museo de Sitio de Toniná, Mexico, Secretaría de Cultura–Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia

This vigorous portrait of King Jaguar Bird Tapir celebrates his worldly might and divine connections. Carved in deep relief characteristic of sculpture from Tonina, the ruler wears an impressively tall headdress composed of stacked masks representing supernatural beings. Centipede heads emerge from either side of the ceremonial bar in his arms, a ritual object often seen in royal portraits, while a snarling jaguar head graces his elaborate belt. Circular glyphs on the side of the monument describe Jaguar Bird Tapir's accession to the throne. The portrait is the work of talented sculptors who served the Tonina royalty, and of scribes who kept detailed records of dynastic succession and the life events of kings and queens.

Ancestor emerging from a flower

Jaina Island, Campeche, Mexico, 7th–9th century
Ceramic, pigment

Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, Secretaría de Cultura–Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia

Whistle with an old man emerging from a flower

Mexico, 7th–9th century
Ceramic, pigment

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Pre-Columbian Collection, Washington, D.C.

In Maya thought, the bones of the dead are comparable to plant seeds that carry progeny and fertilize the earth. The old men here are ancestors, growing like flowers in the afterlife. These objects functioned as whistles: blowing into the stem would create sounds that animated the rituals in which they were used.

Codex-style vessel

Guatemala or Mexico, 8th century
Ceramic, pigment

Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

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Pendant with monkey head

Aguateca, Guatemala, 8th century
Shell

Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala City, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala

Gods were literate, and often shown reading or writing. On a fragmentary vase, a scribe with the appearance of the Maize God reads from a large book with a jaguar-pelt cover. Another vessel shows old gods reading aloud to young apprentices. Fine undulating lines link their mouths to the numbers and words they utter. Monkey deities—the patron gods of scribes, artists, and painters—were depicted with great sensitivity in both monumental works and personal ornaments.

Codex-style vessel with scribe

Grupo Códice, Nakbe, Guatemala, 8th century
Ceramic, pigment

Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala City, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala

Patron Gods

Maya artists created monumental sculptures to celebrate historical events and depict the close ties between rulers and the gods. Freestanding slabs known as stelae stood in the large plazas of Maya cities; others were set on buildings as wall panels, lintels, stairways, or other architectural sculptures. The inscriptions on these sculptures cast monarchs as comparable to the gods of a primordial era, situating their actions in a cosmic time frame and listing the deities who were present at dynastic events such as accession ceremonies, when a new ruler attained the throne. Taking names that referred to aspects of godly power, rulers impersonated gods in ritual events by donning their clothes, masks, and other insignia. Kings and queens were especially keen to commemorate patron gods: local incarnations of major deities associated with ruling dynasties and cities.

Depictions of royal women show them appeasing the gods, sometimes in rituals that involved shedding their blood, in order to conjure successful outcomes in birth and battle. After death, kings and queens were

sometimes equated, respectively, with the sun and moon deities. While not considered gods during their lifetimes, rulers were nevertheless believed to have supernatural powers. Some of the sculptures on view in this gallery were created shortly before the ninth-century abandonment of many lowland cities.

Ajaw

The essential component of the sign Ajaw, “king,” was a headband with a jewel on front, which marked regal status. Among several variants, the most common glyph shows the profile face of Juun Pu’w, a young pustulous god, wearing the headband.

Image caption:
Drawing by Mark Van Stone

The Dance of the Macaws in Santa Cruz Verapaz, Guatemala
Film by Ricky López Bruni

Watch the full video about the Dance of the Macaws on The Met website.
metmuseum.org/LivesOfGods

King Yihk’in Chan K’awiil on a palanquin

Lintel 2, Temple IV, Tikal, Guatemala, 747
Zapote wood

Museum der Kulturen Basel

A scant few works carved in wood in antiquity survive to the present day. This remarkable lintel—the horizontal support that once spanned the doorway into the inner sanctum of a massive temple—presents a celebration in the wake of Tikal’s victory over rival Naranjo. Tikal’s king, Yihk’in Chan K’awiil, appears in profile at center carried on a palanquin seized from his rival, bearing a round shield and holding a scepter with the figure of K’awiil, the lightning god and a symbol of rulership. The king is dwarfed, however, by the god looming behind him: this being, face shown in profile, has the markings of a jaguar deity, including a feline ear and spots on the thigh. A beaklike projection in front of his nose identifies him as Hummingbird Jaguar. One of Naranjo’s patron deities, he has been taken captive and is being paraded through Tikal.

Image caption:

Drawing of Lintel 2, showing (1) King Yihk'in Chan K'awiil, (2) Hummingbird Jaguar deity, and (3) inscription of Tikal's victory. Drawing by William Coe, courtesy the Penn Museum

Tikal

Tikal, set in the tropical rainforest of northern Guatemala, was one of the largest Maya cities, with a population estimated at around 60,000 at its height. A cosmopolitan metropolis, Tikal interacted with remote regions as far away as the Valley of Mexico. Struggles for power between Tikal and the great city of Calakmul, in what is now Mexico, dominated the political landscape of the Maya Lowlands from the sixth through the eighth century. Tikal's rulers invested a staggering amount of effort in enlarging the temples that housed the tombs of early monarchs. In the eighth century, new pyramidal temples with towering roofcombs grew to dominate the urban landscape. Wide, elevated causeways connected these ritual spaces, serving as processional paths for the performance of dynastic pageants. Monuments and inscriptions throughout Tikal declared a continuity in sacred kingship that defied the city's turbulent history.

Image caption:
Aerial view of Tikal, Guatemala. Photograph by Ricky López Bruni

Lady K’abal Xook conjuring a supernatural warrior

Lintel 25, Structure 23, Yaxchilan, Chiapas, Mexico, 725
Limestone

British Museum, London

Maya rulers summoned deities to oversee events such as their enthronement, the dedication of temples and monuments, and their military campaigns. The gods sanctioned the monarchs’ actions and conveyed their divine power to human affairs. Here, Lady K’abal Xook, the wife of Yaxchilan king Shield Jaguar III, conjures a deity at the time of her husband’s accession to the throne. A creature with the segmented body of a centipede and the triangular patterns of a snake rises above a bowl of ritual implements, including papers with drops of Lady K’abal Xook’s own blood. Likely performed to ensure the king’s success in warfare, the ritual calls forth a supernatural warrior armed with a shield and spear that springs from the creature’s maw.

K’in Lakam Chahk and Jun Nat Omootz (Maya, active late 8th century)
Panel with royal woman
Usumacinta River region, Guatemala or Mexico, 795
Limestone

Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund

An elegant woman holds up K’awiil, the lightning god, who gestures toward her as if in conversation. Recognizable by his serpent foot and the smoky axe emerging from his forehead, K’awiil was often evoked by rulers celebrating important ritual events.

Likely once part of a palace interior at a center affiliated with Piedras Negras, this panel, as with others from the area, bears two signatures, carved in low relief on either side of the royal woman. Sculptor K’in Lakam Chahk also collaborated in the creation of Throne 1, on view nearby.

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Cylinder vessel

Guatemala or Mexico, 7th–9th century
Ceramic, pigment

Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Gift of Dicey Taylor, Ph.D. 1983, and Justin Kerr

Cylinder vessel

Naranjo, Peten, Guatemala, 7th–9th century
Ceramic, pigment

Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia, Gift of Edwin Pearlman and Museum Purchase

The surreal creatures that populate these vessels—a man decapitating himself; a jaguar set on fire while standing on his front legs; three white dogs; a peccary, or wild pig, eating fire—pertain to the realm of dreams and spirits that manifest while sleeping. Indeed, captions on each vessel identify the characters as *way* (dreams) belonging to lords of specific cities. These images relate to acts of sorcery—powerful people could harness them to inflict sickness and damage on their enemies.

Sak[. . .] Yuk[. . .] Took' and Sak[. . .] Yib'ah Tzak B'ahlam (Maya, active 8th century)
King Yuknoom Took' K'awiil
Stela 51, Calakmul, Mexico, 731
Limestone

Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, Secretaría de Cultura– Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia

One of the finest surviving stelae from Calakmul, an impressive city that competed against Tikal for regional primacy, this monument depicts one of that kingdom's last great rulers, Yuknoom Took' K'awiil. Clothed in resplendent finery, he wears a long cape, an elaborate pectoral, and a serpentine headdress that reveals his curly hair. He grasps a spear in his right hand and stands on a captive, a visual convention for representing military prowess. His royal name links him with the lightning god K'awiil, underscoring his close connection with godly power. The finely incised text to the left of the king's face records the names of the two sculptors.

Image caption:
Sculptors' signatures. Drawing by Simon Martin

Wajaat Na Chahk and a collaborator (Maya, active 8th century)
A feast at the court of King Itzam K'an Ahk II
Panel 3, Structure O-13, Piedras Negras, Peten, Guatemala, ca. 782–95
Dolomite

Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala City, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala

Shattered in antiquity and since reconstructed, this panel depicts King Itzam K'an Ahk II seated on a throne. He leans in as if to speak with one of the fourteen standing and seated courtiers and visitors from the kingdom of Yaxchilan who joined him to celebrate his first katun, or twenty-year period in office. The hieroglyphic text explains that the king performed the dance of the descending macaw and drank fermented cacao at sunset. The scene is a retrospective view, however, as the monument was commissioned several generations later, by King K'inich Yat Ahk III. The panel was one of the last monuments to be erected at Piedras Negras; its text and imagery underscore not only themes of dynastic

succession but also crucial diplomatic relations in a time of changing political fortunes.

Image caption:
Hypothetical reconstruction of Panel 3, Piedras Negras. Watercolor by M. Louise Baker, courtesy the Penn Museum

Piedras Negras

Ruled by the powerful lords of the Yo’kib dynasty, Piedras Negras is perched on the eastern bank of the Usumacinta River, the modern border between Guatemala and Mexico. As this once-powerful polity began to be eclipsed in the late seventh century, the rulers of Piedras Negras embarked on a building campaign to declare their continued strength and the divine nature of their rule. Artists adorned the palaces, plazas, and temples with some of the most inventive and accomplished relief sculptures known from the ancient Americas, the study of which led to crucial breakthroughs in the study of Maya writing in the twentieth century.

K’inich Yat Ahk III, the last named ruler of Piedras Negras, led extensive military campaigns before he was captured in the early ninth century by the rival king of Yaxchilan. Shortly thereafter, monuments ceased to be erected at Piedras Negras and other cities in the southern Maya Lowlands, even though Maya dynastic culture flourished in Yucatán and the highlands of Chiapas and Guatemala.

Image caption:
Piedras Negras and the Usumacinta River, Guatemala. Image: Courtesy Megan E. O'Neil

K’in Lakam Chahk and Patlajte’ K’awiil Mo[. . .]
(Maya, active 8th century)
Throne with two lords in the eyes of a mountain
Throne 1, Structure J-6, Piedras Negras, Peten, Guatemala, 785
Dolomite

Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala City, Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes de Guatemala

This throne, similar to that seen in the panel nearby, shows two figures silhouetted in the eyes of an animate mountain, perhaps portraits of King K’inich Yat Ahk III and a courtier named in the text at the top of the throne back. A complex political situation led to the king’s accession, according to accompanying text, which celebrates the dynastic and divine powers that supported his rule. Such favor was ultimately insufficient, however—the king was captured in 808 by a rival lord from Yaxchilan, likely responsible for the intentional destruction of the throne. (The blows were aimed at the heads; the present ones were reconstructed in the 1930s.) Both Piedras Negras and

Yaxchilan were abandoned shortly after this violent conflict in the early ninth century.

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Image caption:
Left: detail of the signature of sculptor K’in Lakam Chahk; Right: detail of the signature of sculptor Patlajte’ K’awiil Mo[. . .].
Photographs by Jorge Pérez de Lara

Column

Campeche, Mexico, 800–900
Limestone

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1963 (1978.412.88)

More than seventy feathers grace the headdress of this standing lord. The long feathers, obtained from the tails of resplendent quetzal birds, were costly trade items. Here, they are attached to flowers, engulfing the king in a cascade of wealth and beauty. A warrior, he holds a shield and a curved obsidian blade. His red face suggests links to the Sun God, hinting at his status as a deified ancestor honored by a smaller, crowned figure standing to the left.

The display of wealth may be deceptive. At this time, many cities lay abandoned and transitions to new artistic styles were taking hold. No glyphic text identifies the figure, a mark of changing cultural practices and fresh ways of relating to the gods and rendering their divine visages.