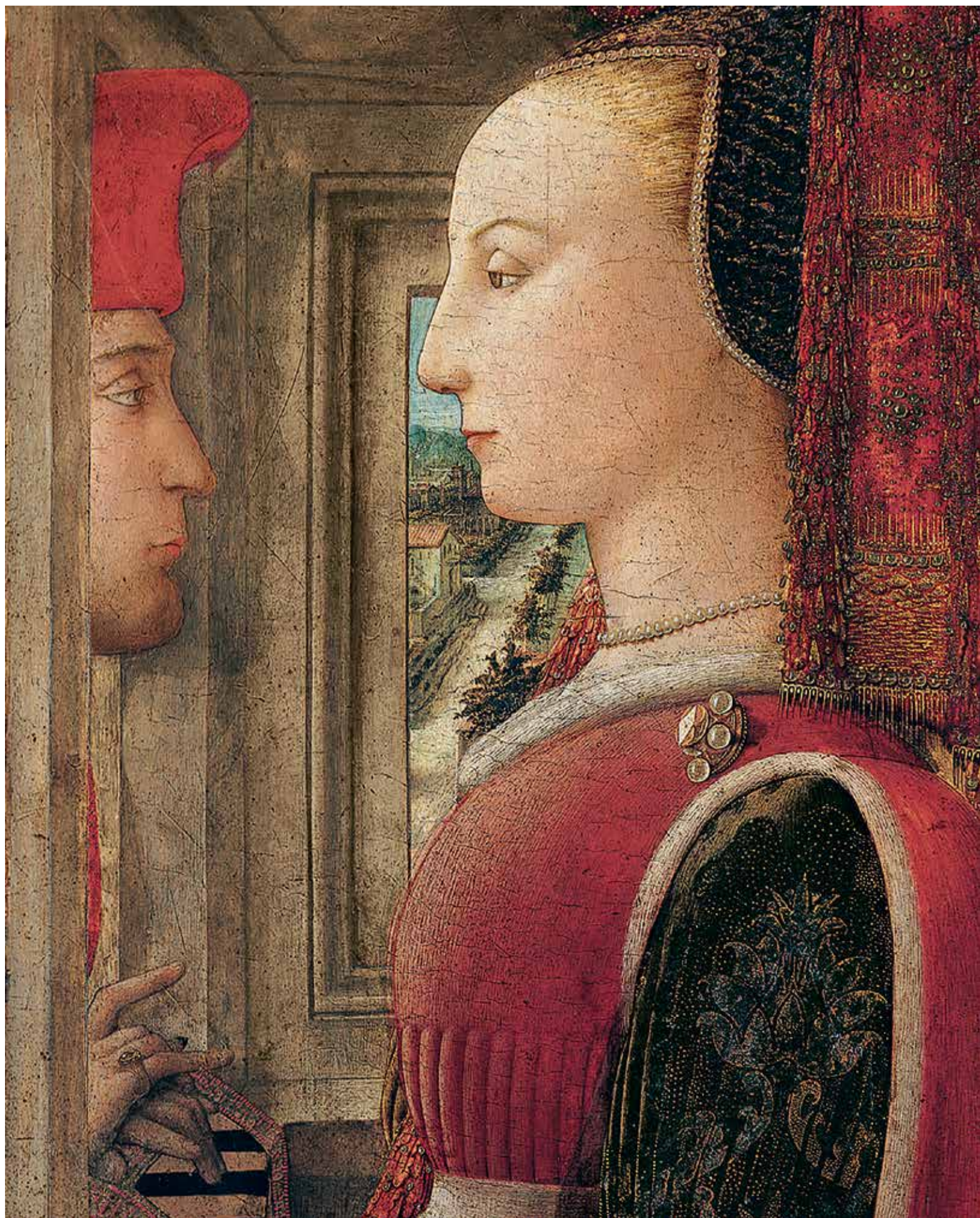


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Illustration on p. 2: Fra Filippo Lippi (Italian, ca. 1406–1469). Detail of *Portrait of a Woman with a Man at a Casement*, ca. 1440. See fig. 1, p. 64.

Illustration on pp. 8–9: Detail of the Metropolitan Vase. Guatemala or Mexico. Maya, Late Classic, 7th–8th century. See fig. 7b, p. 47.

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MANUSCRIPT GUIDELINES FOR THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM JOURNAL

The *Metropolitan Museum Journal* is issued annually by The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Its purpose is to publish original research on works in the Museum's collection. Articles are contributed by members of the Museum staff and other art historians and specialists. Submissions should be emailed to: journalsubmissions@metmuseum.org.

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ABBREVIATIONS

MMA The Metropolitan Museum of Art
MMAB *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*
MMJ *Metropolitan Museum Journal*

Height precedes width and then depth in dimensions cited.

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JAMES A. DOYLE

Creation Narratives on Ancient Maya Codex-Style Ceramics in the Metropolitan Museum

Within the Classic Maya royal courts (ca. A.D. 250–900), slip-painted ceramic drinking cups did more than deliver chocolate and other savory drinks to guests at parties and feasts. They served as active agents, as storytellers. Someone holding one of these painted ceramic vessels—also referred to as pots and vases—could experience a sort of Precolumbian filmstrip. The curve of the cylindrical vessel allowed only a portion of the scene, framed by an upper and lower border, to be viewed, inviting the user to turn the vessel slowly in order to take in the entirety of the wonderfully detailed paintings. Around the rims or in the negative spaces of the compositions, painters included hieroglyphic texts that provided captions for the characters or actions portrayed. These painted vessels were not decorative art objects per se; they were a form of dynamic, illustrated literature.

fig. 1 Map showing locations of principal ancient Maya archaeological sites mentioned in the text



This article examines five Classic Maya vessels painted in what is known as the codex style in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, including an acquisition from 2014. Through analysis of the imagery on these and related vessels, the author proposes new interpretations of the foundational Maya myths about rain, agriculture, and rebirth out of death and destruction.

MAYA BOOKS

A group of Maya vessels that came to the attention of scholars in the 1960s became referred to as “codex-style” pots because of their shared painting style, which bears a close resemblance to the style employed in the four Precolumbian Maya codices that are known to survive.¹ These codices are screenfold books, folded in accordion fashion to create separate but contiguous rectangular panels. Dating to the Postclassic Period (ca. 1000–1492), they are made of bark paper or hide and vary in preservation and quality. The authenticity of one, the Grolier Codex, is still disputed.² The most skillfully rendered and best preserved, known as the Dresden Codex, was probably created in the eleventh or twelfth century and is named after the Royal Library at Dresden, which acquired it in 1739 (fig. 2).

The Dresden Codex was a key document in the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphics.³ Since the original publication of facsimiles of the Dresden Codex in 1880 and 1892, studies of its pages have led to fundamental understandings of Maya numeration and calendrics. The

facsimile editions contain details subsequently lost because of slight damage to the codex during the wartime bombing of Dresden. Knowledge of both the vigesimal (base-20) numeral system and the phonetic approach to decipherment arose from research on this document. In the twentieth century, studies of the codex revealed the extent of the Maya people’s interest in recording astronomical events and documenting them in almanac-type tables that charted eclipses and the cycle of Venus. In addition, images of deities in the Dresden Codex informed the interpretation of Classic Period art.

The artistic tradition of Postclassic illuminated manuscripts developed directly from Classic Period traditions of narrative painting.⁴ We know from painted depictions on ceramic vessels that the Classic Maya themselves had screenfold books (figs. 3a,b,c), although none have been preserved. Several codex-sized containers—rectangular, lidded boxes in both wood and stone—have been found, suggesting that codices were stored and kept in royal courts and were included as offerings in burials and cave shrines. Classic Maya screenfold books are frequently depicted in scenes of courtly life. Scribes are shown actively painting the books, which are often bound in precious jaguar pelts. They are also shown referring to books while engaging in animated conversation and sometimes speak about numbers in what may be scenes of instruction (fig. 3a). On occasion, scribes are portrayed as animals such as monkeys or rabbits, have shell-shaped

fig. 2 Pages from the Dresden Codex (11th or 12th century), after facsimile editions by Ernst Förstemann, 1880, 1892 (Sächsische Landesbibliothek Dresden, Mscr.Dresd.R.310). Left: p. 18; right: p. 70

fig. 3 Drawings of scribes from scenes painted on Maya codex-style vessels. (a) Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth (AP 2004.04) (K1196); (b) Princeton University Art Museum (y1975-17) (K511) (see fig. 6); (c) unknown location (K760). In the Maya vase database (www.mayavase.com) created by Justin Kerr, each rollout photograph has a unique identifier consisting of the letter K followed by three or four digits. See note 9 for further information.



inkpots, and hold a type of stylus or brush (fig. 3b). In one scene, it appears that the book itself has come to life (fig. 3c): as a zoomorphic scribe with monkeylike features points to the volume's pages, complex mythological beings decorated with vegetation and bones sprout from the codex, perhaps giving clues to the supernatural nature of the book or its content.

THE CODEX STYLE

In the absence of illuminated codices from the Classic Maya period, the sample of narrative painting that survives intact from that era amounts to a few in situ murals and a larger corpus of painted pottery. Archaeologist Michael Coe brought the codex-style pots of the late seventh through the early ninth century to scholarly

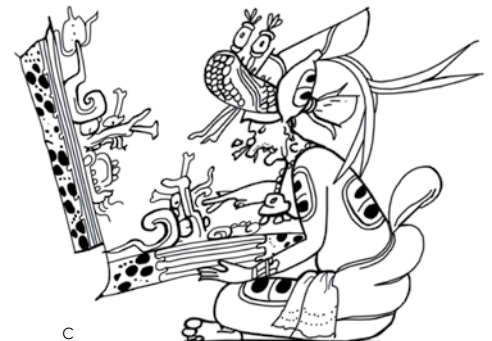




fig. 4 Codex-style vessel. Guatemala or Mexico. Maya, Late Classic, 7th–8th century. Ceramic with red, cream, and black slip, H. 5¼ in. (13.3 cm), Diam. 4½ in. (10.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David Heller, 1983 (1983.543.3)



fig. 5 Codex-style vessel showing the birth of the Maize God. Calakmul, Campeche, Mexico. Maya, Late Classic, 7th–8th century. Ceramic with red, cream, and black slip, H. 6½ in. (15.5 cm), Diam. 4½ in. (11.7 cm). Museo Nacional de Antropología, México City (10-566398)

fig. 6 The Princeton Vase. Petén, Guatemala. Maya, Late Classic, A.D. 670–750. Ceramic with red, cream, and black slip, with remnants of painted stucco, H. 8½ in. (21.5 cm), Diam. 6½ in. (16.6 cm). Princeton University Art Museum, Museum purchase, gift of the Hans A. Widenmann, Class of 1918, and Dorothy Widenmann Foundation (γ1975-17)

attention with a landmark exhibition at the Grolier Club in New York in 1973. The show and its accompanying catalogue, *The Maya Scribe and His World*, presented for the first time a sufficient number of objects in museum and private collections to allow for a comparative and typological study of Maya pictorial ceramic painting. In the years that followed, Francis Robicsek and Donald Hales undertook a study of the codex-style corpus, published in 1981 as *The Maya Book of the Dead*. They identified themes or myths that were repeated in similar iterations across several vessels, and they named key characters that seemed to play important roles in various scenes.

The characteristics of the codex style are a cream or yellowish slipped background, often framed by red bands above and below, and a black calligraphic line delimiting figures and hieroglyphic texts. Sometimes the painters applied a gray or brown wash to shade figures or other features. One seventh- to eighth-century vessel in the Metropolitan's collection (fig. 4) bears the simple shading of the codex style: the artist emphasized the two seated gods in a manner very similar to those found on the pages of the much later Dresden Codex.⁵ In contrast to the richly polychromed vases and bowls from the large corpus of Maya vessels, codex-style pots stand apart in their gray scale, which is almost certainly a reflection of their development vis-à-vis calligraphic books.

Unfortunately, since few whole codex-style pots are known from archaeological contexts, the function

or historical significance of the great majority of these vessels is not fully understood. One exception is a drinking cup showing the birth of the Maize God, found in Tomb 1 of Structure XV at Calakmul, Campeche, Mexico (figs. 1, 5). In this scene, the Maize God emerges from the head of a disembodied vegetal creature in a watery landscape; the hieroglyphic text describes the drinking cup as used "for fruity chocolate."⁶ During the Classic Period, the royal court of Calakmul anchored a massive conurbation that straddled the modern border between Campeche, Mexico, and Petén, Guatemala. The sheer quantities of codex-style potsherds recovered from the center of Calakmul and nearby sites across the northern border of Guatemala suggest strongly that the most active workshops for this style of ceramic art were located in this area. Most likely, the kings and queens of Calakmul commissioned scribes and painters, who may have been nobles themselves, to produce these vessels for the sovereigns' use and also to be presented as gifts in diplomatic exchanges with the rulers of other city-states.⁷ Evidence suggests that codex-style vessels might have been produced within just one or two generations in the mid- to late eighth century, precisely when the dynasts at Calakmul were heavily engaged in long-distance relations, both diplomatic and hostile, with their peers at Maya cities such as Tikal and Palenque.

The mystery surrounding the identity of the makers and commissioners of the codex-style pots is compounded by the fact that very few of these

fig. 7 (a) The Metropolitan Vase. Guatemala or Mexico. Maya, Late Classic, 7th–8th century. Ceramic with red, cream, and black slip, H. 5½ in. (14 cm), Diam. 4½ in. (11.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, 1968 (1978.412.206). (b) Rollout view

objects—in contrast to many of the finest Maya polychrome vessels—name their owners as royal individuals. Furthermore, little is known about the structure of ceramic workshops in Classic Maya courts, as very few artists signed their work. It is generally agreed that the potters were not also the painters; perhaps teams worked in sequence to create sets of distinct vessels for use with different foods and drinks.⁸ Barbara and Justin Kerr, building on the pioneering early work of Coe and Robicsek and Hales, and using their own groundbreaking database of rollout photographs of Maya vessels, identified at least three artists or schools of codex-style painting.⁹ The first group of eight vases by the same hand or school, or exhibiting the same technique, includes the renowned Princeton Vase (fig. 6). The Kerrs' second group revolves around the Metropolitan Vase (fig. 7) and six other vessels that were painted by



b

fig. 8 (a) Codex-style cup with stepped tripod supports. Guatemala or Mexico. Maya, Late Classic, 7th–8th century. Ceramic with red, cream, and black slip, H. 4 ½ in. (11.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 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). (b) Rollout view



a



b

fig. 9 Three views of a codex-style bowl with water lily jaguar holding an enema. Guatemala or Mexico. Maya, Late Classic, 7th–8th century. Ceramic with red, cream, and black slip, H. 4 1/8 in. (10.5 cm), Diam. 7 1/8 in. (18.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Morris A. Long, 1987 (1987.450.1)



the same artist or in the same workshop. The final group, by the artist whom the Kerrs dubbed the Fantastic Painter, includes vessels in which the scribe experimented with an unusually fine line to create outsize creatures that seem to rise out of or sink into the lower border.¹⁰ Scholars have concluded that the Metropolitan Master, as the painter of the Metropolitan Vase is known, was one of the most innovative artists of the Classic Period, directly responsible for, or having influenced, more than a dozen codex-style masterworks.¹¹

CODEX-STYLE VESSELS IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

The identification of the Metropolitan Master was based on a cylindrical drinking cup that the Museum of Primitive Art purchased in 1968 and transferred to the Metropolitan Museum in 1978 (fig. 7).¹² In 1980, the Museum purchased another exceptional codex-style cup, one with stepped, tripod supports, that shows a

similar scene with three mythological characters (fig. 8).¹³ Gifts in 1983 (see fig. 4) and 1987 (fig. 9) of two more codex-style vessels added depth to the collection and featured new deities and characters, including the anthropomorphic jaguar wearing what seems to be a bib of white cotton, seen in figure 9a. This enigmatic image shows the jaguar holding an enema bladder with a syringe in the paw of its outstretched front leg. (The ancient Maya consumed alcoholic beverages through enemas; special enema tubes made from bone have been found in royal tombs.) A supernatural, bicephalic serpent emerges from the lower left of the enema bladder; the head of the serpent on the left of figure 9b holds an ax, as if to threaten the skeletal Death God. The Death God, to the right of the jaguar, is shown legless and with its hands raised. Anthropomorphic jaguars of this type appear on other vessels also, including the cup shown in figure 8. Unfortunately, interpretation of the scene with the enematic jaguar is impeded by a lack of comparative imagery and by the overpainting of the hieroglyphic text directly to the right of the jaguar.

With the addition of a gift in 2014 (fig. 10), the Metropolitan Museum's collection of codex-style pottery has grown to include three of the best-preserved and most elaborate mythological scenes from Maya art. The three vessels (figs. 7, 8, 10) tell three versions of a story, or perhaps three parts of a longer narrative. Although the sequence of events shown on the vessels is unclear, it is possible to reexamine the themes by considering imagery from several other codex-style pots in public and private collections. All three of the Museum's vessels seem to feature the Rain God as the main character, known by the nominal hieroglyphic logogram or syllabic spelling transcribed as Chahk. On two of the vessels, Chahk is depicted interacting with an anthropomorphic jaguar and a Death God; and on one of them (fig. 7), the protagonists are accompanied by a



small sampling of what the Maya considered creatures of the night, beings that included dogs, fireflies, toads, and various deities.

Chahk is a fearsome individual in Maya art (fig. 11). He is often shown in frenetic motion, dancing and wielding weapons used in ritual combat, such as chert axes and boxing stones with handles.¹⁴ Like Chahk, rain in the tropics is unpredictable and full of motion. Sudden afternoon storms blow in as gusts, knocking dead limbs from trees. Chahk's ax, perhaps representing lightning, was heard during such tempests, and the effects of its force were seen. The Maya clearly recognized multiple versions of Chahk, ranging from human to supernatural and from young to aged. Chahk had many aspects, and Maya lords sometimes took royal names that incorporated various combinations of his traits. For example, at the site of Naranjo, Guatemala, a well-known lord of the late seventh and early eighth century acceded to the throne with the name K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Chahk—roughly, “Chahk Who Makes Fire in the Sky.”¹⁵

The most important characteristics of Chahk are his associations with water and the hydrological cycle, as expressed by his accoutrements and body markings.¹⁶ Scholars used to refer to Chahk as the Barbel God because Maya artists often depicted his body with fish scales, gill slits, or barbels similar to those found on catfish. His unruly hair is a key attribute, and he often wears a headdress resembling vegetation or aquatic flowers. He is most often adorned with ear flares made of Spondylus shells, signaling a deep connection with the sea and the richness of its products. Sometimes Chahk is shown as a fisherman, an allusion to the Maya

fig. 10 (a) Codex-style vase showing Chahk breaking open a building, the dancing Maize God, and a seated captive. Guatemala or Mexico. Maya, Late Classic, 7th–8th century. Ceramic with red, cream, and black slip, H. 7½ in. (19 cm), Diam. 4½ in. (11.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Justin Kerr in memory of Barbara Kerr, 2014 (2014.632.1). (b) Rollout view





belief that rain could bring bountiful food in the form of fish. Chahk was still considered a vital force by Yucatek Mayan speakers in southern Mexico into the colonial period, and rainmaking rituals involving Chahk are still practiced today in the Northern Yucatán.¹⁷

THE METROPOLITAN VASE: CHAHK AND THE BABY JAGUAR

On this vase, the Metropolitan Master painted one of the finest extant deity portraits in the Classic Maya corpus (fig. 7). The young Chahk poses in mid-stride, lifting off his left foot and extending his right leg in front of him, gracefully pointing his toes. The underside of each leg is marked with a scale pattern, evoking a shimmering, wet, aquatic creature. He wears the complex loincloth of knotted cotton typical of his costume; the rear panel of the loincloth terminates in the shape of a fish tail. His necklace is unique, with extruded eyeballs as pendants and a pectoral in the shape of an upside-down water jar that bears the hieroglyph for darkness and has what looks like a small serpent emerging from its mouth.¹⁸ Other jewels, on his ankles and wrists, may be of jade or another precious material, and his head-dress is a sprouting tangle of watery vegetation. The shell earrings meet the barbel that extends from his nostril and projects beyond his chin. The god's human aspect is emphasized by the distinguished

profile of the face, the musculature, the ankle joints, and the finger- and toenails. In his right hand, Chahk grasps the wooden handle of a shining stone ax, and in his left hand he holds an animate boxing stone depicted with eyes, nose, and a mouth.

The Rain God actively engages with a giant, jawless creature, likely the representation of what is referred to in the hieroglyphic texts as a *witz*, the spirit of a mountain. The god's right leg crosses in front of the creature's lip, while his left arm passes behind the lip's curled tip. It is as if Chahk, the personification of rain, needs to partake in a ritual combative dance with an animate mountain to set the actions presented here in motion. The mountain monster has a feathered eyelid, present on crocodilians in Maya art; a jagged tooth; and liquid or vegetation spewing forth from a cavelike mouth and spilling on the ground line at Chahk's feet. The head of the mountain is embellished with grape-bunch markings, signifying that it is a stony place.

A supernatural baby jaguar sprawls on its back across the top of the zoomorphic mountain, flailing about fitfully as if searching for stability. The jaguar's face has otherworldly features and contrasts sharply with Chahk's more human visage. Its square eye is a marker of divinity in Maya art, and the overbite with sharklike tooth is another sign that this reclining deity is a peer of Chahk and the Sun God, both of whom are

fig. 11 Drawings of Chahk figures painted on Late Classic Maya vessels. (a) MMA 2014.632.1 (fig. 10); (b) MMA 1980.213 (fig. 8); (c) Princeton University Art Museum (y1986-98) (fig. 12); (d) Dallas Museum of Art (1991.44); (e) Private collection (K4013); (f) Private collection (K8608)

sometimes shown with a similar protruding tooth. The creature's knotted hairstyle and vegetal headdress are similar to Chahk's, and its ears, paws, and tail are masterfully painted to resemble those of a juvenile jaguar. Portrayals of this same creature occur in a hieroglyphic logogram found in some royal names.¹⁹

On the right side of the *witz* is a frightening creature of the night, its skeletal head marked with sutures and accented by two extruded eyeballs. It has an insect-like carapace, the distended belly of a corpse, spindly legs with knobby knees, and long, extended arms. This is likely a Death God, a denizen of the Maya underworld who plays a role in the myth of the birth of the baby jaguar. He, too, dances, rising off his left foot and extending the right, as if echoing Chahk's dance. His grasping hands seem to reach for the baby jaguar or the hieroglyphic caption hovering above him. He wears an elaborate dorsal backrack costume composed of textiles, bone elements, and extruded eyeballs.

The Death God has two creepy companions. Floating behind him, a firefly appears as a skeletal cyclops with a central eye in the form of *akbal*, the hieroglyph for darkness. Three extruded eyeballs crown his head, and his insectlike hind legs and abdomen are delicately rendered. He holds a cigar or torch, a Maya artistic convention signifying a creature of the night: the light of a cigar being smoked in the dark mimics the bioluminescent flickering of lightning bugs. Below the firefly is a mischievous dog with spotted tail and ears. He pants behind the dancing Death God and raises a front paw as if begging for food or playing. Most of the text that floats above the baby jaguar is opaque in meaning, but the eighth and final glyph block in the sequence refers to the presumed owner of the vase with a noble title, *k'uhul chatan winik*, which was used in certain places during the Classic Period.

The overarching theme of this vessel is the necessary interaction of life-giving rains and rotting death to produce new life, represented here by the Baby Jaguar God. The presence of the death god and his companions evokes a sense that when organic remains decay and rains fall, life begins anew at the fertilized site. This chain of events occurs on the top of a mythological mountain at the center of the Maya world. The gray wash used on the lower portion of the vessel perhaps represents water or steamy breath that emerges from caves in order to create clouds and produce rain. Chahk in all his glory emerges from and interacts with the mountain cave as he celebrates the birth of the baby jaguar while wielding his lightning ax. The Death God's pose seems to show that he has tossed out the baby

jaguar or that it has slipped from his hands, or perhaps that it was snatched from his clutches.

CHAHK OF THE "FIRST RAIN"

The Met's small drinking cup, also by the Metropolitan Master or workshop, features a related myth and a text that places the depicted events at the start of the tropical rainy season (see fig. 8). The black-on-cream painted scene, framed by vivid red bands on the flaring rim and the base, centers on a feline with dark spots. This "water lily jaguar," a character known from depictions and hieroglyphic texts on other vessels and monuments, crouches on a large *witz*. The jaguar wears a white cape, and delicate vegetation sprouts from its head and front paw.

Over the jaguar's hindquarters, Chahk brandishes a boxing stone in his right hand. In his left, he holds a large ax marked with the hieroglyphic symbol for shiny objects (an emblem composed of concentric, capsule-shaped elements). Chahk actively addresses the jaguar on the mountain, perhaps in a menacing attack or celebratory dance. He is shown in full supernatural form, with his typical knotted hair and vegetal headdress, marine shell earrings, and a pectoral seemingly made of knotted cords (fig. 11b). A single tooth projects from his fishlike mouth. The hieroglyphic text above the boxing stone specifies that this is the Chahk of the "First Rain," setting the scene at the start of the rainy season.²⁰

Rather than shrinking down the characters to show their bodies' full length, the artist chose to terminate the figures at the waist. A smudgy border at the bottom of the scene may denote that the action takes place in a smoky or watery location, possibly a low-lying area flooded by the early rains, perhaps in the seasonal swamps around Calakmul itself.

The other personage on the vessel, to the left of the water lily jaguar, is a dancing Death God who interacts with a supernatural serpent emerging from the mountain. This death deity is depicted as both skeletal, with a humanoid cranium sporting two extruded eyeballs and black face paint, and insectlike, with a segmented torso and a similarly segmented headdress. He raises his hands as if to beseech or threaten the jaguar, who faces him. A tasseled jewel representing a nose ornament or perhaps sacred breath emerges from the Death God's nostril.

The hieroglyphic caption between this character's back and the tail of his headdress (on the left in the rollout photograph) likely contains a logogram for his name in the damaged glyphic head with black face paint. The caption further states that "it is his *wahy*," or co-essence—his alter ego.²¹ The "his" in this phrase



fig. 12 Two views of a codex-style tripod vessel with a scene showing Chahk, a baby jaguar, and a Death God. Petén, Guatemala. Maya, Late Classic, 7th–8th century. Ceramic with red, cream, and black slip. H. 4 3/4 in. (12.1 cm), Diam. 5 1/2 in. (13.6 cm). Princeton University Art Museum (y1986-98)

likely refers to the vessel's owner, who some have argued was a royal youth, although the cup carries no reference to a specific dynasty. *Wahy* beings are often personifications of death, disease, and other unsavory aspects of the Maya cosmos. By “owning” the *wahy* beings and depicting them, Maya nobles harnessed the power of these negative aspects of mythology. With its blackened eyes, this particular *wahy* might be related to the anthropomorphic deity Akan, associated with decapitation and drunken abandon. The glyphic caption SAJ-JA²² (to the left of Chahk's ax-head) refers to the Death God's “whitening” state, as the flesh desiccates and the bones get bleached by the sun.

The text seen at the center of the rollout photograph is difficult to interpret: it either names the owner as a child (*b'a-ku*) or refers to a head stone (*ba-TUUN-[ni]*)—perhaps the boxing stone—depicted in another part of the image. This vessel's owner, too, is referred to as a *k'uhul chatan winik*, but the artist does not seem to have set out to portray actual events or name a real royal owner of the cup. The glyphic phrase for “child of mother” is included in what seems to be a statement of the vessel owner's parentage, but the phrasing is unconventional and difficult to discern. The date created by combining the day and month names is also fictive and does not fit into the actual cycles of time. Recent research on newly excavated texts has revealed

that 7 Muluk, the day name that appears both on this vessel and on the Metropolitan Vase, was the day of accession of an important Calakmul king. This finding might account for the presence of the same inscription on codex-style vessels reportedly from the area of Calakmul.²³ In other words, the reference to 7 Muluk may anchor this mythological scene in an actual royal event; the cup's users would have been reminded of the day their king took office.

At least a dozen vessels are known with similar iconography featuring Chahk, the Death God, and a baby jaguar interacting in the same narrative scene. Five of these works can tentatively be attributed to the Metropolitan Master or an associated workshop. A drinking cup in the Princeton University Art Museum (fig. 12) is strikingly similar to the Metropolitan's two works in this group; in fact, the dimensions of the Princeton cup and the T-shape of its tripod supports strongly suggest not only that it was painted in the workshop of the Metropolitan Master but that it was also formed by the potter who made the cup shown in figure 8.

The Princeton cup shows Chahk with supernatural features, including barbels on his cheeks and shiny markings on his legs, wielding an ax (fig. 11c). Behind him crouches the anthropomorphic water lily jaguar (seen partially in fig. 12, above left) with the white

cotton bib. The jaguar's paw is raised and pressed to its forehead in a pose of anguish. There is also a firefly above and to the right of the jaguar that holds a torch (not seen in these views of fig. 12) and displays the same features as the insectlike torchbearer on the Metropolitan Vase. On the left, the Death God reaches for the baby jaguar, which seems to be sliding off the *witz*. The baby shows more humanlike characteristics than its counterpart on the Metropolitan Vase, though it has a tail and the "cruller" under-eye ornaments associated with the Jaguar God of the Underworld, the personification of the sun as it travels around the earth at night.

The text, here to the left of the baby, records the date 7 Muluk, which appears on the Metropolitan Vase. The text also contains a phrase that could refer to a ruler acceding to the throne by grasping the scepter of K'awiil, the Lightning God. The Lightning God, usually depicted with a smoking celt lodged in his forehead and with feet terminating in serpent heads, is intimately associated with royal accession and regalia. Actual sculpted K'awiil scepters resembling those depicted have been found in archaeological contexts, suggesting that these objects were taken up by Maya kings when they assumed power. A vase in the Dallas Museum of Art shows a similar realistic, reclining baby jaguar and a comparable phrase for "grasping" that also may signify the commemoration of an accession to the throne.²⁴ The Dallas Chahk shares many physical characteristics with the Metropolitan Vase's Chahk, though the former is marked as supernatural and the motif on his pectoral is a percent sign (fig. 11d) rather than the hieroglyph for "night."²⁵

The Chahk–Death God–Baby Jaguar scene appears on about ten vases painted by hands other than those of the Metropolitan Master and his close followers.²⁶ The painters of these works were unequally skilled and generally demonstrated less control than the Metropolitan Master group in the spacing of figures and the execution of the calligraphic line. They clearly present the same event but introduce different versions of the characters or altogether new ones, along with varying hieroglyphic dates, verbs, and names.²⁷ Among these vessels, the archaeological context is known of only one securely identified fragment (fig. 13), which was found within the midden of Structure XX at Calakmul.

CHAHK THE "STRIKER"

The scenes considered thus far perhaps represent the same myths, or two different moments in the same narrative, pertaining to the Rain God and the start of the rainy season. The newest addition to the Metropolitan's

collection of codex-style vessels shows a different side of the story, one that is unique in the corpus of Maya ceramic paintings (fig. 10).²⁸ This spectacular codex-style vessel bears a mythological scene in which an aging Chahk wields a ceremonial ax in his left hand while placing his right hand on a stone temple or palace that he has presumably split open.

Several features distinguish this Chahk (fig. 11a) from the ones painted by the Metropolitan Master and his followers. Although he is shown with the familiar watery vegetation headdress, Spondylus earspools, and barbels, the tiny wisps of hair on the knob of his head are nothing like the bushy, unruly tangle of knotted hair seen in his other portrayals. The torso of the god is uncharacteristically saggy, accented with skin rolls—a convention in Maya depictions of geriatric bodies. A rather plain loincloth and trilobed pectoral contrast with the more elaborate dress and jewelry seen in other representations of Chahk. Most peculiar here is the volute of vegetal smoke that the god vomits out. The spewed matter flows between his legs and upward, so that he appears to be seated in the crook of the watery emanation. Rather than dancing, he crouches. The text, which runs beneath the entire length of the upper band, refers to the "raising" of the "drinking cup" in an act of dedication. The vessel's owner is noted as "striker" (ja-JATZ'-ma, *jatz'oom*), a name perhaps relating him to the ax-wielding figure of Chahk.²⁹ The designation could also indicate the owner's earthly role in the perpetuation of agricultural cycles—that of breaking open the soil to sow maize.

Though Chahk is the largest character in the scene, the action seems to center on the two figures seen in



fig. 13 Drawing of a codex-style bowl fragment showing Chahk holding a boxing stone. Campeche, Mexico, Calakmul Structure XX. Maya, Late Classic, 7th–8th century

fig. 14 Drawing of a scene on a codex-style vase showing Chahk seated on a jaguar pillow behind the bound Maize God





fig. 15 (a) Tripod plate showing Chahk as the great progenitor. Maya, Late Classic, 7th–8th century. Ceramic with red, cream, and black slip, Diam. approx. 16½ in. (42 cm). Private collection. (b) Drawing of a detail of the plate shown in fig. 15a

front of the cracking temple. The one on the left, a youthful Maize God, identified by his cob-shaped head with wispy tassel hair and the shining hieroglyphs on his arms, poses as if in mid-dance. To his left sits a forlorn captive with black face paint and arms bound behind his back. The text to the left of the captive may identify him as a historical or mythological character, although the phrasing is difficult to interpret. The “grape-bunch” motif located to the right of the cleft on the temple’s facade signifies that the building is made of stone, and four half-quatrefoil motifs marked with crosshatching perhaps represent windows in the walls. A dark mythological serpent emerges from one of the quatrefoil voids, and an aged god emerges from the serpent’s mouth.

The direction of the figures’ gazes reveals the sequence of events. The old god emerging from the serpent stares at the back of the aggressive Rain God, who in turn focuses intently on the building he is destroying. In contrast, both the Maize God and the captive look upward. Scattered about the scene are circles and teardrop shapes aligned vertically in twos and threes. These likely represent raindrops falling as a result of Chahk’s ritual actions. Looking skyward, the Maize God and captive are awaiting the first rains, blessed for their life-giving powers but cursed for their destructive ability.

By breaking open the building’s roof, Chahk could be bringing the Maize God back to life. The contrasts between good and evil, growth and decay, and the shine of youth versus the sag of old age converge in this mythic scene encapsulating the relationship between rain and maize.³⁰ The act of destroying in order to create may be the message encoded here, as in the scenes showing Chahk interacting with the baby jaguar and the Death God. Although Chahk is often associated with watery bounty, it is rare to see him explicitly related to maize or the Maize God himself. One example of this pairing occurs on a codex-style vase with pseudoglyphs showing a figure that appears to be Chahk seated on a jaguar pillow behind a captive Maize God (fig. 14).³¹ Another instance is found in the text inscribed on Stela 12 from the site of Piedras Negras, Guatemala, which refers to Chahk as “the corn tamale,” or “he of the tamale place.”³²

Other codex-style vessels provide hints of the diverse array of characters Chahk engaged with in the Classic Maya spiritual realm. He seems to have been associated with a wide variety of *wahy* personalities. In an unknown private collection, a vase probably by the Metropolitan Master or his workshop shows an aged Chahk (fig. 11f) dancing before a *wahy* toad while a

coterie of creatures, including a firefly and crouching feline, looks on.³³ Chahk attacks human victims with the help of *wahy* accomplices (K1653); he attacks fantastic beasts in the form of giant peccaries (K3450); and he dances with *wahy* spirits around body parts of a dismembered god.³⁴

The depictions of Chahk on seventh- and eighth-century pottery consistently show him as a central figure in regenerative mythologies pertaining to vegetation. On a large tripod plate, he appears as the great progenitor (fig. 15). Wearing his trademark Spondylus earrings and brandishing his ax, he rises waist-high from a watery realm. The rest of the scene literally grows from his head and left arm as elaborate, vegetative scrolls fill the space around him, sprouting gods' heads, a serpent's maw, and even a howling water lily jaguar. On the rim, aquatic motifs and water lilies evoke the wet environment of the baby jaguar's birth. The plate presents the world of the Rain God at the precise moment of creation and imbues the products placed in it during feasts with a mythological dimension.³⁵

LARGER NARRATIVES: CHAHK, THE MAIZE GOD, AND MAYA CREATIONS

The reiteration of the iconographic complex of Chahk and the Maize God by both the same artist and different artists suggests the existence of macro- or meta-narratives—of a larger story or myth behind these images. However, the lack of textual inscriptions on many codex-style vases makes it difficult to securely identify characters other than Chahk himself. Prior attempts to interpret this iconography have relied on

Postclassic books, post-contact texts such as the sixteenth-century *Popol Vuh* (the “Book of the People” of the K'iche Maya), and other colonial sources.

The discovery in 2001 of the Preclassic murals (ca. 300 B.C.–A.D. 250) at San Bartolo, Guatemala, has given a time depth to the relationship of Chahk and the Maize God.³⁶ In a scene on the west wall of the mural room, a piscine Chahk seated on a throne inside a giant turtle carapace gestures toward a dancing Maize God (fig. 16). The Maize God wears a turtle shell drum around his neck and beats it frenetically with deer antlers as he dances. A third character, identified as the personification of terrestrial water (as opposed to falling rain), also gestures to the dancing Maize God.³⁷ This painting testifies to the perpetuation of imagery representing personified maize and rain from ancient times to the Classic Period of the Metropolitan Museum's vases.

One of the great seventh-to-eighth-century codex-style plates, now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, shows the Maize God emerging from a turtle, an image that is possibly a later interpretation of the creation scene depicted at San Bartolo.³⁸ Creation myths from as early as the first millennium B.C. thus situate the interaction of gods in special places such as turtle carapace caves and watery *witz* landscapes. In other sections of the San Bartolo mural, the Maize God interacts with a snarling *witz* monster and even appears as an infant being carried. Images of mythological infants, possibly representing new beginnings, are common at San Bartolo; in one scene, five infants with umbilical cords are shown shooting out of an exploding gourd in a gush of blood.



fig. 16 Drawing of a mural detail showing a creation scene with the Maize God dancing before Chahk, enthroned. San Bartolo, Guatemala. Maya, Preclassic, ca. 100 B.C.

Early Classic texts (ca. A.D. 250–550) provide clues to the date that the Maya assigned to the creation of the mortal realm. Accounts of creation reference a Maya calendar date (13.0.0.0.0 4 Ajaw 8 Kumk'u) from the mythic past that corresponds to a date in 3114 B.C. in the modern calendar. The date was so iconic in Maya thought that it was often recorded by its day name only, as in a text inscribed on the reverse of a greenstone mask-pendant in a private collection.³⁹ This fourth- or fifth-century text describes a series of actions by Sky and Earth Gods, and the mask with which it is associated portrays a version of Chahk, complete with fishy barbels and forehead marked with the hieroglyph “YAX-WAY-bi.” This phrase, which is also written into the creation text on the back of the pendant, refers to a “first” or primordial “sleeping place,” which may be a metaphor for a house of the gods. Chahk was the face of creation for this Early Classic sculptor.

Parallel texts from the Late Classic period, too, allude to the watery realms of Chahk. An inscription on Quirigua Stela C, from A.D. 775, recounts the involvement of the Paddler Gods, two deities who in various scenes pilot the Maize God's canoe, in setting up a primordial, three-stoned hearth—a symbol of creation. On two vessels known as the Vase of the Seven Gods (K2796) and the Vase of the Eleven Gods (K7750), texts dated 4 Ajaw refer to the gods being “ordered,” and their orderly appearance in an otherworldly court scene, as depicted on the pots, reflects this creation event. The relief-carved Tablet of the Cross at Palenque, dated to A.D. 692, prominently features the local patron deity, known as G1 of the Palenque Triad, in the 4 Ajaw 8 Kumk'u creation event, in which the deity is said to have “descended from the sky.” G1, with fishy barbels and Spondylus earflares, is a local expression of aspects found elsewhere in the Rain God Chahk.⁴⁰ The codex-style vases in the Metropolitan Museum are thus examples of the culmination of a centuries-long tradition of revering Chahk and the Maize God through visual narratives. They are progenitor deities for the Maya, appearing both in the earliest mural programs and in texts that refer to past events that happened in deep time.

FUNCTION AND SOCIAL INTERPRETATIONS

If the codex-style pots were in a sense didactic, designed to teach all who handled them about the crucial mythology of maize, the staple food, they must have played a role in organizing the moral behaviors of the Classic Maya around good and right actions intended to propitiate the gods. Thus, it is possible to learn about the code of ethics in courtly Maya society

from the conventions depicted by its most celebrated painters, such as the Metropolitan Master. For example, scenes showing both Chahk and the Maize God, though rare, always include images of bound captives, allusions to violence. Drinking cups bearing such images would have conveyed the message that too much rain (or water) is harmful to maize plants (or harvested cobs); perhaps they were used in ritual celebrations of good harvests or in ceremonies appealing for temperate “first rains.”

There is ample evidence from colonial histories and twentieth-century ethnography that Chahk played a major role in rainmaking rituals.⁴¹ It stands to reason that Chahk cups mentioning the first rain could have been physical reminders of the celestial machinations that created the primordial precipitation. Such vessels would have been used during feasts or celebrations and then placed in tombs of the ancestors, where, visible to the gods, they would remind the deities that men were correctly honoring the mythic foundations of human society.⁴² Rulers probably impersonated Chahk and the Maize God on occasion, sometimes even incorporating Chahk into their royal names in order to oversee with godlike authority the all-important production of maize, thus legitimizing their power over their subjects.

Though Chahk and the Maize God appear in scenes affirming agricultural fertility and the triumph of “first, green” life over brown death, they do not appear in codex-style scenes depicting the birth of humankind. A recent reconstruction of human creation myths from Classic Maya pottery and ethnographic folklore brought to light such a narrative, in which an aged, ancestral god calls forth his courtly artisans—a monkey, a vulture, and a canine, among others—and together they shape human heads out of clay, later carving and painting them to give them individual identities.⁴³ Parallels to this story are found among the twentieth-century creation myths of the Tzotzil and Tzeltal peoples of highland Chiapas, Mexico.

Therefore, it seems plausible that two or more parallel creation myths—one for the natural world and agriculture, and one for mankind—underpinned the oral histories and ritual activities of the Classic Maya. In the Late Classic period in the area around Calakmul, artists of the royal courts were tasked less with depicting the creation of humans from clay than with showing Chahk and the Maize God in triumph over the Death Gods so that the divine baby jaguar could be brought into the world. Though a matter of speculation, it is possible that environmental problems such as prolonged drought contributed to an emphasis on representing the

fig. 17 Head of a Rain God. Chichen Itza, Mexico. Maya, Late-Terminal Classic, 10th–11th century. Fossiliferous limestone, $13\frac{3}{4} \times 11\frac{1}{8} \times 9\frac{3}{8}$ in. ($34.9 \times 30.2 \times 23.8$ cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1963 (1978.412.24)

fig. 18 Monumental figure. Mexico. Maya, Late Classic, 9th century. Limestone, $84\frac{1}{2} \times 24 \times 20$ in. ($214.6 \times 61 \times 50.8$ cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1966 (66.181)



first rain and the renewal of the Maize God's life cycle in the visual arts.⁴⁴ Kings and queens, through the works of their court artists, sought to reassure their subjects that rain was coming, and that all was right in Chahk's world.

Together, these seventh- and eighth-century painted scenes form a poignant reminder of a story told for generations and subsequently lost. The rupture in the Classic Maya social fabric caused by the collapse of the political institution of dynastic kingship rendered the making of such images obsolete. As Maya peoples abandoned the majestic Classic Period cities, the vibrant communities of artists who produced the codex-style vessels disbanded. Portrayals of Chahk that survive from later centuries, such as the Metropolitan Museum's limestone Rain God head from Chichen Itza, Mexico, and the standing Chahk with a double-bladed ax, tend to be monumental and fearsome (figs. 17, 18). It had become imperative for Chahk to be imposing and publicly viewable rather than delicately rendered and shared at elite feasting celebrations.

CONCLUSION

Creation stories are an important source of artistic inspiration across cultures. For the Classic Maya of the Yucatán Peninsula, Chahk and his companions were an enduring subject for more than a millennium. Through the centuries, artists returned to specific mythological scenes pertaining to rain, maize, and the creation of the



Maya world. Such scenes were rendered imaginatively and in exquisite detail in the final years of the Classic Maya cities. The master painters of codex-style pottery, inspired by the elaborate imagery in screenfold books, appear to have been active over the course of only a few generations and in a restricted area of elite courts. Available epigraphic evidence shows that scribe-painters

were often members of the royal family and operated under supervision of the royal courts in workshop settings to produce pottery-based illustrated literature. A workshop model might explain the repetition of subjects and the adherence to stylistic conventions visible in the codex-style painting; indeed, multiple sculptors signed large Maya stelae, and often one among them is identified as the “head” sculptor or master artist.⁴⁵ In contrast to monumental sculpture, however, Maya ceramics circulated widely through trade and as diplomatic gifts. Codex-style works continue to pose key questions, such as why certain artists chose particular motifs or narratives, and what specific purpose their work was meant to serve.

It is possible that pots of different shapes and sizes, painted in the same workshop, were created as sets for certain people or specific grand occasions. Other types of polychrome pottery were clearly made as sets; matching vessels were often commissioned for royal youths to own or to present as gifts to their peers from neighboring city-states.⁴⁶ Codex-style pots representing the same or similar scenes may have been commissioned as diplomatic gifts to individuals in peer dynastic polities. Given the extent of looting in southern Campeche and northern Guatemala, it is possible that these matching sets were discovered in separate contexts and have been reconstituted only through the dedication of researchers such as Justin and Barbara Kerr to recording all the known examples.

A final consideration is that the experience of painting itself, the difficult process of planning out and executing a scene with a whiplash line and subtle shading, could have been the main purpose of production. It is possible to imagine a master painter instructing a class of apprentices, perhaps training them simultaneously in the art of mythic storytelling and painting. The repetitions of these scenes, then, would signify a collective session of artistic creation rather than isolated copyings of a master template. We could thus be seeing multiple visual manifestations of an oral tradition by members of a group of artists, each one of whom interpreted the essential elements of a myth in distinctive and personal ways, always within the confines of established painterly rules.

As earlier researchers have argued, the models for codex-style painted vessels were likely pages from sacred Maya books. Vases afforded limited space for narrative content, and the majority of artists depicted only a handful of figures at most; someone holding or viewing a vase potentially could see just one character or feature at a time. Turning the cup and reading the

text could have been part of a performance, the scene on the vessel serving as a mnemonic device for the recitation of mythic creation stories or reenactments of mythico-historic events. Perhaps we are given a glimpse of now-lost epic poetry through the codex-style artists’ calligraphic lines, passed down from generation to generation in the Classic Maya world. Kings, queens, and nobles used codex-style scenes to travel back to a time before humans, when the gods were set in order and the first rains helped maize to grow. In these rare vessels, we, too, gaze back to a time when the world was young.

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NOTES

- 1 The Precolumbian Maya codices are the following: Dresden Codex (Codex Dresdensis): Sächsische Landesbibliothek—Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden (Mscr.Dresd.R.310); Madrid Codex (Códice Tro-Cortesiano): Museo de América (70300); Paris Codex (Codex Peresianus): Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Mexicain 386); Grolier Codex: Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City.
- 2 Coe et al. 2016.
- 3 See, among others: Humboldt 1810, pp. 266–70, pl. XLV; Kingsborough 1831–48, vol. 3; Förstemann 1880; Brinton 1882; Förstemann 1892; Thompson 1972; Wald 2004; Bricker and Bricker 2005; Tedlock and Tedlock 2007; Aldana y Villalobos 2014.
- 4 Lacadena 2009; Lacadena 2010; Hull and Carrasco 2012; Law et al. 2013; Rossi, Saturno, and Hurst 2015.
- 5 Sometimes on codex-style vessels the names of the days are set apart in a red cartouche, continuing a long tradition of using hieroglyphs with bloody, decapitated figures as signs for the names of days, a nod to the violence necessary to jump-start cycles of Maya time. See Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006, pp. 93–95.
- 6 Preliminary studies of the contents of codex-style vessels have failed to identify conclusively any organic matter except, on a flask marked as a tobacco container, nicotine. See Loughmiller-Newman 2012.
- 7 Hansen, Bishop, and Fahsen 1991; Martin 1997; Carrasco Vargas et al. 1999; Martin 2002; García Barrios and Carrasco Vargas 2006; Delvendahl 2008; Reents-Budet et al. 2010; García Barrios 2011a; García Barrios 2011b.
- 8 Reents-Budet 1994; Just 2012.
- 9 Kerr and Kerr 1988. Since the 1970s, the Kerr rollout photograph database (www.mayavase.com) has played a critical role in studies of Maya art and the decipherment of Maya writing. Each rollout photograph on the database has a unique identifier consisting of the letter K followed by four digits.
- 10 See, for example, K1199, K2207, and K3450.
- 11 Schele and Miller 1986, p. 287; Cohodas 1989, p. 204.
- 12 Published references include: Foncerrada de Molina 1970, figs. 1–4; Thompson 1971, pl. 14d; Foncerrada de Molina 1972; Coe 1973, no. 45; Willey et al. 1974, pp. 238–39, fig. 192b; Coe 1978, no. 4; Robicsek 1978, pp. 159–60, fig. 172; Robicsek and Hales 1981, pp. 24, 41–42; Lounsbury 1985, fig. 6; Schele and Miller 1986, pl. 117; Cohodas 1989, fig. 14.2; Delvendahl 2008, pp. 127–28; Van Akkeren 2012, fig. 2.
- 13 Published references include: Robicsek and Hales 1981, pp. 24, 41–42; Kerr and Kerr 1988; Robicsek and Hales 1988; Looper 2003, p. 87, fig. 3.13; Lacadena and Wichmann 2004; Barrois and Tokovinine 2005; Griffith and Jack 2005; García Barrios 2008, pp. 12–13, 140 fig. 3.3g, 145 figs. 3.7, 3.156a, and 519; Keener 2009, p. 6; Van Akkeren 2012, p. 700; Brittenham and Nagao 2014, n. 36.
- 14 Taube and Zender 2009.
- 15 García Barrios 2007, pp. 20–21, fig. 3.
- 16 Taube 1996; García Barrios 2008; Pallan Goyol 2008.
- 17 See, among others, Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993, pp. 25–33.
- 18 Pillsbury et al. 2012, p. 45.
- 19 Martin 2002.
- 20 The hieroglyphic phrase for “First Rain” was first identified by David Stuart on the Copan Hieroglyphic Stairway. Stephen Houston, personal communication, 2014.
- 21 Houston and Stuart 1989; Grube and Nahm 1994.
- 22 In transliteration of Maya hieroglyphs, syllabic decipherments, such as *b’a-ku*, are written in lowercase, and logographic decipherments, such as SAJ-JA, are written in capital letters.
- 23 Stuart et al. 2015.
- 24 Dallas Museum of Art (1991.44, K1370).
- 25 The most elaborate scene in this series by the Metropolitan Master occurs on a vessel in an unknown private collection (K4013). The same cast of characters is featured: the Death God reaches for the baby jaguar, and a fishy Chahk (fig. 11e) with ax and stone in hand floats above the mist billowing from the animate *witz*. The tall (7½-inch) vessel allowed for full-length renderings of the characters and an expanded version of the wilderness symbolized by the animate mountain. A living tree with a godlike visage grows from the mountain and jaguar-paw ear. From the tree emerges an ornate serpent known from other scenes. An aged god with an elaborate pectoral and a flaming torch piercing his head issues from the maw of the serpent and gestures toward Chahk as if in conversation. A lack of substantive hieroglyphic text complicates the interpretation of the scene with the central tree, though a similar tree scene by a different artist (K1815) refers to the “First Rain” Chahk.
Another vessel from an unknown collection (K4011) has imagery parallel to the two Metropolitan scenes. In this scene the baby flails in the air rather than reclines, as if falling toward the *witz*. Again, Chahk is referred to as the “First Rain” God, and a similar smoky wash on the lower portion of the scene obscures details. A falling baby jaguar also appears on a cylinder vessel (K4056) that introduces a new character to the Rain God–Death God drama. Behind the ax-wielding Chahk, an aged individual with a long proboscis, perhaps a jester or a figure in an animal costume, holds fans or standards.
- 26 One group of codex-style vases may illustrate another myth associated with the baby jaguar and anchor the myth in the realm of human rulers. It seems that a mortal Maya traveler, portrayed with distinctive clothing and markings, presented the infant to a seated ruler. This scene appears on at least four vessels (K1200, K4384, K5855, K8655), but its meaning is difficult to discern, as only one of these vessels has an accompanying text (K5855).
- 27 The Death God appears with centipede creatures (K1644), carries a tiny version of himself on his back (K1815), and engages in the atypical actions of scattering blood (K1768) and cradling the baby jaguar in his arms while dancing (K2213). An owl or other raptor flies behind Chahk in at least two scenes (K2208, K3201), replacing the firefly as a denizen of the air. Chahk in one instance is explicitly shown as destructive, vomiting lightning or bellowing sound and holding a flaming ax blade.
- 28 One other codex-style vessel shows an ax-wielding Chahk with a split-open building (K2772). The scene on this vessel is decidedly different from the one in figure 10. It presents two different versions of the Rain God wreaking havoc on the building, and two kneeling warriors and three royal females seated on a jaguar throne; see Bassie-Sweet 2008, pp. 146–47, fig. 7.9, and Pallan Goyol 2008, p. 26, fig. 5. The cleft building is marked with the Maya sign for “scent, musk” (see Houston 2010), and the old god emerges from an elaborate serpent that grows from the foot of one of the Rain Gods. The Maize God and attendant captive are absent.
- 29 Zender 2004.
- 30 Cf. Carrasco and Hull 2002, p. 27. Karl Taube (1996) has interpreted this scene as showing Chahk releasing the Maize God from the building, a trope found in varying forms throughout Mesoamerica.

- 31 For a rollout image of this vase from an unknown collection, see K6036.
- 32 Waaj Nal Chaahk: “Chaahk es el tamal de maíz”; “Chaahk el del lugar de los tamales.” García Barrios 2008, p. 273.
- 33 See K8608 for a rollout image of the vase.
- 34 For the last-mentioned image, see Robicsek and Hales 1981, p. 25, Vessel 30.
- 35 Schele and Miller 1986, pp. 310–12, pl. 122.
- 36 Saturno et al. 2005; Taube et al. 2010.
- 37 Taube et al. 2010, p. 77: “Dancing in good company before the attentive gods of rain and terrestrial water, the central Maize God is making thunder within the cosmic turtle. The San Bartolo turtle scene constitutes a wonderfully detailed and early version of a major episode of Classic Maya creation mythology, the emergence of the Maize God out of the earth turtle.”
- 38 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (1993.565); Robicsek and Hales 1981, pp. 91, 94, 117, no. 117.
- 39 Van Stone 2010, pp. 52–54.
- 40 Classic Maya depictions on various media also hint at the nefarious, destructive precursors to creation involving the Maize God and Chahk. In scenes delicately incised on bones from the eighth-century Tikal Burial 116, chaos ensues when the Paddler Gods take the helm of the Maize God’s canoe. In at least three different scenes the canoe is sinking, much to the dismay of its passengers, who throw their hands to their foreheads in distress. The Maize God also appears on a series of codex-style vases (dubbed the Water Group by Justin Kerr) that show the deity standing waist-deep in a wash of water and receiving gifts of tribute from warriors. The Water Group vases may refer to a catastrophic flooding event in which the Maize God is submerged. In one of these vases (K4117), a human figure (known informally as Sky-Raiser, but whose name remains undeciphered) may be a mythical founding figure of the polity at Calakmul. He does not appear in the guise of the Maize God, as in the other Water Group scenes, but wears the Rain God’s trademark knotted pectoral and Spondylus earrings. In fact, he may be impersonating Chahk in this scene of watery destruction.
- 41 E.g., among the Chorti’ Maya; see Girard 1949, pp. 813–63.
- 42 Jackson 2013, pp. 118–35.
- 43 Beliaev and Davletshin 2014.
- 44 Gill et al. 2007; Kennett et al. 2012.
- 45 Houston 2016.
- 46 Houston 2009.

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