Long before 1492 great civilizations rose and fell in the Americas, completely unknown to the rest of the world. The earliest Native American civilizations emerged about the time the New Kingdom prospered in Egypt. Perhaps the most famous, the Maya, arose as Greek city-states dominated the Mediterranean world and reached its apogee as Rome’s decline ushered in the Dark Ages. The most recent civilizations, the Aztec of México and the Inca of Peru, had barely begun before the Spanish Conquistadors destroyed them. All were part of a vast independent stream of cultural development in the Americas, abruptly brought to an end by invaders from Spain and other European nations—an ending that also marked the beginning of a process that still today is linking all human societies into a single global system.

Despite the destruction and changes enforced by the Europeans, the native traditions of the Americas were never completely extinguished. Many of the survivors of defeat, and of the far more devastating epidemics of Old World diseases, refused to abandon their ancient cultural heritage. Generations of these people preserved their Native American social and cultural traditions in the face of determined efforts to stamp them out. Today, in fact, native peoples throughout the Americas are actively engaged in an even more determined effort to revive and preserve their ancestral heritage.

These efforts are rediscovering strands of a Native American heritage all but lost during the five centuries that followed the European Conquest. In the context of the existing magnificent holdings of the Library of Congress, the Kislak Collection is an unparalleled resource for information about the Conquest and its aftermath. Within this unique collection of maps, books, and personal accounts from this pivotal time are wonderful artifacts made and used by peoples in Mesoamerica, South America, and the Caribbean before the arrival of the Europeans.
Like books and manuscripts, these pre-Columbian objects record a variety of voices from the past. And these objects speak to the present, providing glimpses of long-lost people and forgotten events. Each object has a story to tell that amplifies our understanding of vanished pre-Columbian societies. Carved or painted scenes open windows to events from the past—a procession of warriors carrying offerings, for example—or illustrate ancient cosmological concepts that are echoes of beliefs still held by Native Americans today. Some objects are inscribed with texts in Maya writing, which today can be read to release a veritable flood of information. Thus, we can identify the owner of a drinking cup once used by a member of the Maya nobility, Ti Muwaan, for serving cacao (chocolate) beverages (see entry 20). A more extensive inscription on a thirteen-hundred-year-old wooden box identifies its purpose as an offering container, and records the date that its owner, Aj K’ax B’ahlam, took office in the administration of a Maya king (see entry 21).

This is a past that everyone can experience and appreciate by examining the chapter of this catalog devoted to pre-Columbian objects from the Kislak Collection. The information gleaned from the Kislak Collection helps us better understand the people who were part of some of the most important indigenous civilizations in the Americas.

ROBERT J. SHARER
Sally and Alvin Shoemaker Professor in Anthropology
Curator in Charge, American Section
University of Pennsylvania Museum
THE INDIGENOUS CULTURES BEFORE EUROPEAN CONTACT

For millennia the Americas evolved in near isolation, save for the intrepid stream of people who began crossing the Bering landbridge from Siberia roughly between 40,000 and 20,000 years ago (now, with rising sea levels, fifty-three miles of ice and water separates Siberia from Alaska). The small groups of hunters and gatherers from Asia flourished in the Americas and over the course of thousands of years spread throughout both North and South America, developing a myriad of societies, languages, and civilizations that rivaled the achievements of those in the Old World. These two separate worlds knew nothing of each other until five hundred years ago, even though several longships manned by Norsemen traversed the treacherous north Atlantic seas off Greenland to fish the Grand Banks five hundred years before Columbus. The remains of their tiny settlements have been found on the frozen shores of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, but this initial contact did nothing to change the course of history for the peoples of the Americas.

Since the concept of a cultural region called Middle America or Mesoamerica was created in the 1940s, its territory was imagined to comprise most of the modern countries of México, Guatemala, Belize, western Honduras, and El Salvador. Chronologically, the Pre-Columbian history of the region has been traditionally divided into an Archaic period (ca. 12,000–1500 B.C.), a Preclassic or Formative period (ca. 1500 B.C.–A.D. 200), a Classic period (ca. A.D. 200–900), and a Postclassic period (ca. A.D. 900–1500). Each of these periods has its subdivisions, although authorities have never agreed on precise divisions, due to significant regional cultural variations. Greater Mesoamerica, however, is a more modern conception that takes into account the active cultural connections. These connections can now be documented over a more extended region based on archaeological data coupled with recent scholarship employing ethnohistorical and ethnographical sources. For example, if we examine the evidence for the playing of rubber-ball games in ballcourts—a defining characteristic of Mesoamerica—the court found at Wupatki in northern Arizona provides the northernmost example. In the twelfth century A.D., it was a trading center where shell beads, copper bells, and even the remains of more than forty macaws from the tropical lowlands to the south have been recovered. Furthermore, ballcourts have been found on some of the islands of the Caribbean, where we know that some level of trading and exchange contact was established. The discoveries of gold bells and other gold artifacts from as far south as Costa Rica and Panama have been found in the sacred well or cenote at the great Late Classic to Early Postclassic pilgrimage center of Chichén Itzá in the northern Yucatán peninsula. Data such as these would suggest that we should explore the concept of a Greater Mesoamerican sphere of cultural interaction and exchange that would include much of the Four Corners area of the American Southwest, with extensions into what is now Costa Rica and Nicaragua—traditionally part of Central America—and even portions of the Caribbean Islands. Greater Mesoamerica naturally reflects the strengths represented in the Jay I. Kislak Collection of Pre-Columbian material culture as well as the Collection’s sources on paper written about the region.

Within the traditional Mesoamerican area, it has always been difficult to draw regional, cultural, and linguistic boundaries, but “high civilizations” have been grouped into three major zones: the Mexican Highlands to the northwest; the Maya area, extending from the highlands of western Guatemala to the Petén district of the Guatemalan Lowlands on through the Yucatán Peninsula and including parts of modern-day Belize and Honduras; and lastly a third intervening area—the Coastal Lowlands—comprising a long tropical rain forest corridor that runs from the Gulf Coast of México through the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to the southern Pacific coast. At the center of this region, on the Gulf of México side

Rollout of low vase with deer hunting procession, Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900 (see entry 98).
Clockwise from top left: Repoussé gold breastplate, Cocle culture, A.D. 500–1200 (see entry 140); House model, 200 B.C.–A.D. 300 (see entry 138); Large vase, Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900 (see entry 96); Two-part diving bat container, Postclassic Maya, A.D. 900–1200 (see entry 105).
of the Isthmus, arose Mesoamerica’s most famous early civilization, the Preclassic Olmec (1200–400 B.C.). The ancient Olmecs came to influence all of Mesoamerica, but they were themselves influenced by previous individual chiefdoms and incipient states developing in the Mexican Highlands as well as the Coastal Lowlands.

Three great strengths of the Greater Mesoamerican geographical region led to the development of several of the true high civilizations of the ancient world. First, a richly diverse geography—with many extreme ecological niches with their own microenvironments—fostered long-distance trade for raw materials and luxury goods, which, in turn, created innovative cultural exchange networks beginning in the Late Archaic period. Second, a geological wealth of stone varieties stimulated the development of new lithic technologies, such as chipped stone raised-field systems in wetlands and lacustrine zones, and extensive cacao plantations under sheltered forest canopies. Third, a rich, diverse universe of plant life that ultimately yielded the special blessings of the population’s healthful, balanced diet, beginning with maize, beans, squash, capsicum chili peppers, cacao (from which chocolate is made), plus a true shaman’s pharmacopoeia of “entheogenic”—creating god within us—plants and animals, such as peyote, Psilocybe mushrooms, Datura, morning glory seeds (e.g., for the psychoactive ololiuhqui of the Aztecs), tobacco, mescal beans, and the toxins from the parotid glands of such toads as the Bufo marinus and Bufo alvarius, to name only a few. Mesoamericans enjoyed a sophisticated system of medicine based on these unique natural sources. The miracle of the human invention of corn, beginning at least seven millennia ago in the Middle Archaic, would change all of the Americas, not to mention the rest of the world after Spanish contact beginning in the late fifteenth century.

Of the five core areas of the ancient world where writing was independently invented, including Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and the Indus Valley, Mesoamerica stands out for its creation of the full logo-syllabic Maya glyphic system where thought and speech could be recorded in the most visually diverse and visually poetic scripts ever conceived. The evidence is now strong that, in fact, two full writing systems were created: the Mayan and the still poorly known Isthmian, which was most likely derived from a different language base (hypothetically, Zoquean). Furthermore, the unique culturally defining Mesoamerican calendar system was among the world’s most elaborate and accurate, based on many interlocking cycles presided over by deified time periods and numbers. Their advanced arithmetic system was based on the count of 20 (a vigesimal system derived from the human form), the use of place notation, and included the concept of zero or “completion,” the first sophisticated mathematics of its kind anywhere in the world. This enabled the Mesoamerican peoples to develop an advanced observational astronomy and numerology that lead to cultural traditions of calendrical divination and prognostication, some aspects of which still survive among the Maya in the highlands of Guatemala today. Other systems of pictorial writing and rich iconographic representation were developed across ancient Mesoamerica. These include the pictorial hieroglyphs of the early Zapotecs carved on stone monuments and the later system recorded in books of the Mixtecs, both in Oaxaca, as well as the still enigmatic “notational sign” ensemble writing of Teotihuacán and the far better known Mexica or Aztec system, both in the Central Mexican Altiplano. These writing and iconographic forms could be and were recorded on a wide variety of media, including stone, wood, shell, ceramics, textiles, animal hides, and the unique screen-fold codex books painted on stuccoed bark papers—usually of Ficus, Morus, or Maguey agave fibers—and deer skin. Although most of the great Mesoamerican libraries are now lost forever due to the passage of time and decay as well as active destruction by the European newcomers beginning five centuries ago, much of this priceless literary cultural heritage survives on media other than paper and now receives a proper home in the United States Library of Congress, where it may be studied by scholars and appreciated by all the citizens of the world for the ages to come.

—John B. Carlson
Chapter I: From the Olmec to Columbus / The Olmec and Their Neighbors

During the Archaic period, the development of agricultural societies, the first permanent villages, and an ideology and worldview that permitted the emergence of leaders set the stage for the emergence of civilization in Mesoamerica. This phenomenon occurred entirely independently of cultural evolution in the Old World. Thus, Olmec civilization, as it has come to be known, arose and ran its course between 1200 and 400 B.C., the period known as the Preclassic or Formative. Its homeland was in the swampy coastal, riverine, and rain forest regions of the Gulf of México on the northwest side of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, particularly in the Mexican states of Veracruz and Tabasco. But the Olmec were not alone, as the beginnings of civilization can be traced throughout both the highlands and lowlands of Mesoamerica during the Preclassic era. During this time the accurate astronomical observations and elaboration of religious ideology required for the Mesoamerican calendar began, as well as the origins of a written script. Together with these cultural phenomena arose the earliest major ceremonial centers, monumental stone sculptures, and eloquent jade carvings.

Although the ethnic and linguistic identity of the Olmec of the Gulf Coast heartland is uncertain, they traded beyond this region, across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to the Pacific coast of Chiapas, Guatemala, and El Salvador, as well as up into the Central Mexican Highlands. The Olmec heartland is characterized by swampy lowlands punctuated by low hill ridges and volcanoes. The Tuxtlas Mountains rise sharply in the north, along the Gulf of México’s Bay of Campeche. Here the Olmecs constructed temple complexes at several locations, among them San Lorenzo, La Venta, Tres Zapotes, and Laguna de los Cerros. They also had extensive contacts and influence beyond the heartland: from Chalcatzingo and Las Bocas, far to the west in the highlands of México, to Izapa on the Pacific coast near what is now Guatemala. The Olmec and their neighbors were connected by extensive trade routes that carried not only material goods, but also religious and cosmological traditions and an ideology of rulership throughout Mesoamerica. Thus the Gulf Coast Olmec and a number of other Preclassic societies share both the stylistic attributes seen in their pottery, figurines, and other artifacts, as well as, most importantly, the hallmarks of the first rise of civilization in Mesoamerica.

1. Solid Seated Male Figure
México, Las Bocas. Middle Preclassic, 1100–500 B.C.
Cream-slipped ceramic. Ht. 13.5 cm. (5 1/8 in.)
KISLAK PC 0155

Many Middle Preclassic artifacts exhibit a high degree of craftsmanship, as demonstrated in this hand-modeled Olmec-style figure from the Central Mexican highlands. The flesh areas are burnished, in contrast to the hair zone or the split kilt. Red paint touches the tip of the nose, mouth, and chin, as well as the waistline and toes. Body features are picked out with incising and tiny drill holes mark the ears, nostrils, and mouth corners on this extremely naturalistic rendering. The corpulent figure is seated cross-legged, with his left hand over his knee. The left side of his arm and thigh reveal traces of black body painting (perhaps profile human faces), now mostly obscured by superficial black deposits.
2. **Solid Standing Baby Figure**
México, Las Bocas. Middle Preclassic, 1100–500 B.C.
Burnished cream-slipped ceramic. Ht. 16.5 cm. (6½ in.)
kislak pc 0004
Stout hand-modeled infantile figure in a wrestling pose. The only adornment is a pair of scored hair tufts. A very powerful miniature sculpture. The fat face is expressively rendered, including cheek and chin dimples. Such baby figures are found in Olmec and other Preclassic cultures, but their meaning remains unknown, although speculative theories abound.

3. **Carved Blackware Bowl**
México. Middle Preclassic, 1150–550 B.C.
Blackware with stucco decoration. Ht. 13 cm. (5 in.)
kislak pc 0216
Deeply carved with two confronting paw-wing motifs—a diagnostic Middle Preclassic design—and a narrow band of cross-hatched design below. The carved areas and lip are covered with a layer of pale blue-green and deep rose-colored stucco.

4. **Large Bottle with Incised Bird Profile**
México, Las Bocas. Middle Preclassic, 1100–500 B.C.
Grooved ceramic with red cinnabar. Ht. 31.8 cm. (12½ in.)
kislak pc 0154
An unusually large plain bottle of burnished tan slip, merging into fire-blackened neck and base. Bold, deep grooves, filled with red cinnabar, outline a stylized bird motif with characteristic large eye, “plumed” crest, and fantail feathers.

5. **Incised Jade Figure**
México.
Middle Preclassic, 900–500 B.C.
Pale bluish-green jadeite. Ht. 11.8 cm. (4¾ in.)
kislak pc 0158
A compact deity rendered in the Olmec style with finely incised symbolic iconography, highlighted with red cinnabar. The eyes are three-pronged, the jaguar mouth is fanged, and the arms are folded across the abdomen. The hands grasp implements or staffs. A three-petalled floral motif is central to the forehead, with crossed-bands motifs at the neck and above the loincloth. The iconography suggests Maize God associations and the Jester God style tied headband of rulership.

6. **Standing Stone Figure**
México.
Middle Preclassic, 900–500 B.C.
Mottled green and white stone. Ht. 12.7 cm. (5 in.)
kislak pc 0156
An Olmec-style frontal figure carved in utmost simplicity and devoid of ornamentation. It displays an oblong deformed head, tabular ears, fat nose, and drooping mouth. Unfortunately, the lower arms are missing. The stone may be quartzite rather than jadeite, although all green stone had comparable symbolic value for the ancient Olmec and other Mesoamerican societies. It has often been suggested that such figures were once clothed and adorned.

7. **Standing Figure Holding Baton**
México.
Middle Preclassic, 900–500 B.C.
Dark green jade. Ht. 6.6 cm. (3 in.)
kislak pc 0203
This compact little effigy is similar to jade carvings found and crafted from western and central México down to Honduras and El Salvador. A certain dynamic quality is provided by a forward hunch to the head. Clothing is limited to a wide plain belt and apron. This figure holds a blunt baton (a probable staff of authority) diagonally in front of his body. Comparable batons are depicted on other Preclassic carvings, both portable and monumental.

8. **Unusual Reclining Stone Figure**
México. Middle Preclassic, 900–500 B.C.
Dark green serpentine. L. 9.5 cm. (3¾ in.)
kislak pc 0007
The posture of this figure is unique. His head is in an unnaturally awkward sideways position, considering that the toes point up and the buttocks are delineated underneath. The folded arms are carefully carved on both upper and lower surfaces.
9. CARVED STONE MASK
México. Middle Preclassic, 900–500 B.C.
Mottled greenstone.
Ht. 13.3 cm. (5 3/4 in.)
Kislak PC 0157
The stone of this Olmec-style mask has an unusual patina, probably caused by ceremonial burning. Also, the top edge seems to have been broken in ancient times and redecorated with transverse grooves. The practice of veneration of heirloom and antique objects, often thought to contain ancestral spirits and power, was not uncommon in Mesoamerican culture. There are bi-conical drill holes at the upper lateral corners for attachment. Also the eye and mouth corners and the nostrils have drilled pits. The parted mouth reveals a toothless upper gum. The back of this mask is trough shaped and the whole is polished.

10. HUNCHBACK DWARF SCULPTURE
Guatemala Pacific Coast.
Late Preclassic, 500–200 B.C.
Speckled green jadeite.
Ht. 15.3 cm. (6 in.)
Kislak PC 0141
An unusually massive jade figure of early Late Preclassic style. A prominent shoulder hump protrudes from the back, while thick arms and legs wrap around the body to converge at the front, in the manner of the contemporary “potbellied” monumental sculptures of the same region (as at Monte Alto, Guatemala). The broad face has large dimples at the mouth corners, a plaque-like protruding upper lip below the nose, ovoid eyes, and prong-and-scroll eyebrows. A tuft of hair is carved at the peak of the head. Dwarf figures are found in a variety of contexts in scenes of courtly life across the ancient Mesoamerican world.

IZAPA
Izapa was a very large pre-Columbian site located on the Pacific coastal plain in Chiapas, México, near the Guatemalan border. Occupied throughout the Preclassic era, Izapa was one of the major sites of the Isthmian region immediately west of the Maya area. The site is situated on the Izapa River and also near the base of the volcano Tacaná, which is the fourth largest mountain in México. It covers some two square kilometers, with ceremonial precincts formed by monumental earthen platforms, plazas, and over a hundred stone stelae, about half of which are carved in a style that has become known as Izapan. Izapa reached its peak roughly between 600 B.C. and A.D. 100, although its beginnings date as early as 1500 B.C., making it as old as the Olmec sites of San Lorenzo and La Venta, and it remained occupied through the Late Classic period. Its many elaborately carved monumental stone sculptures reflect deep Mesoamerican mythological and cosmological traditions as well as the ideology of divinely sanctioned rulership that characterized both Isthmian and Maya societies.

11. CARVED HEAD FRAGMENT
West México.
Late Preclassic, 500–200 B.C.
Dark green serpentine.
Ht. 15.2 cm. (6 in.)
Kislak PC 0205
This head fragment, with the attached portion of its right shoulder, must have been broken from a sizable standing stone figure. While the facial features were battered and abraded in ancient times, the personage retains a powerful presence. The style of this figure, with trapezoid-shaped mouth and long tabular ears, is well represented in West México, although usually of smaller size.

12. "BIB-HEAD" PENDANT
Mottled light and dark green jadeite.
Ht. 6.3 cm. (2 1/2 in.)
Kislak PC 0144
This style of human head pendant, with a flat collar or “bib” below the chin, has been determined through excavated contexts to be characteristic of the Terminal Classic era. The mouth and eyes were created by rows of drill holes, and the nostrils are bi-conically drilled. Eyebrows are separately grooved. The head has a broad central crest and the ears are flat flanges with perforations drilled from behind. Also drilled from behind are seven perforations in the bib. The forehead is drilled transversely for suspension.

13. SERPENT FINIAL FOR STILETTO
Fine-grained black stone. L. 7.8 cm. (3 in.)
Kislak PC 0177
A nubbin at the base of the coiled serpent body indicates a missing stiletto blade, which must have been long and pointed. This an unusual example with few known parallels, reportedly from the site of El Baúl in Pacific coastal Escuintla,
Chapter I: From the Olmec to Columbus / The Maya

Late Preclassic era throughout most of this area, marked by the Maya as early as the Early or Middle Preclassic period. Belize, and Yucatán. Much of this area was occupied by diverse settings of the Pacific coast and highlands of Guatemala. The unmatched civilization of the Maya emerged in the late Preclassic period. Hieroglyphs and calendars were intimately related to religious concepts as well as to the ideology of rulership and many graphic elements featured deities or sacred symbols. The calendar in common use in Mesoamerica when Cortés arrived was far more sophisticated and, in some respects, astronomically more precise than the Julian calendar then used by Europeans. The Maya calendar was certainly the more complex, with the development of the Long Count system used to fix the reigns of divine kings in the endless cycles of time. The Maya also kept accurate supplementary lunar and Venus calendars, as well as tables for eclipse prediction.

Maya writing was inscribed on stone monuments, on screen-fold books of deerskin or plaster-coated bark paper, and on many other media, such as jade and ceramic. Only four of these Maya books, or codices, have survived the ravages of time and the purges of the first Spanish missionaries.

14. Stone Metate with Relief Turtle

A functional small rectangular stone metate used for grinding corn and other products, with two rectangular supports, smoothly concave working surface, and deeply grooved border. A splendid low-relief upended turtle is carved on the bottom surface. Shown are his profile head, short tail, splayed limbs, and scored lower carapace. Dimples of unknown meaning are pecked on either side of the head.

The specific form of this metate is documented archaeologically as being of Late Preclassic type. The naturalistic turtle image fits nicely in the repertoire of the coastal Izapan style, though this presentation is unique. In Mesoamerican mythology a turtle may be conceived as the surface of the earth. Here maize, the staff of life, or, perhaps, hallucinogenic powders for shamanistic rites could be ground directly on its back.

THE MAYA
The unmatched civilization of the Maya emerged in the diverse settings of the Pacific coast and highlands of Guatemala and in the vast rain forests of northern Guatemala, Belize, and Yucatán. Much of this area was occupied by the Maya as early as the Early or Middle Preclassic period. The Maya reached an initial apogee of development by the Late Preclassic era throughout most of this area, marked by monumental cities such as Kaminaljuyu in the highlands and El Mirador in the lowlands. The brilliantly painted murals at the recently discovered Late Preclassic site of San Bartolo in the lowlands of Guatemala verify that Maya writing and the institution of divine kingship were well developed by 300–100 B.C. Most of the features associated with Maya civilization—such as writing at sites like El Mirador and San Bartolo in the northern Petén district of Guatemala and at Kaminaljuyu, Takalik Abaj, and El Baúl to the south—predate the Classic Maya period. These areas supported Preclassic cities with well-planned plazas, temple-pyramids, and palaces, along with the beginnings of a hierarchically organized state system of political organization.

Late Preclassic Maya civilization underwent a still-mysterious decline around A.D. 100 that set the stage for the growth of a series of new cities, marking the greatest period of Maya civilization, the Classic period (A.D. 200–900). During this era the Maya lowlands were host to several dozen independent city-states, each ruled by dynasties of divine kings. This peak of Maya achievement is encountered in the lowlands at such spectacular polity capitals as Palenque, Tikal, Calakmul, and Copan. Many other centers of this civilization, with regional differences, are found throughout the lowlands, including the latest of the great Classic Maya capitals, Chichén Itzá, located in the northern lowlands of Yucatán. While many hallmarks of Maya civilization, such as urban centers, hieroglyphic writing on monuments, and dynasties of divine kings, disappeared in the Central Lowlands by the tenth century A.D., the final period of Maya civilization is represented by such Postclassic Maya cities as Maya-pán and Tulum, including those that were prospering at the time of the Spanish Conquest. The first European landfall in Mesoamerica occurred in Yucatán with the Cordoba expedition in 1517, when the Maya were discovered but not conquered.

Among the foremost intellectual achievements of humans in the New World were hieroglyphic writing and accurate calendars, in use in Mesoamerica by the Middle or Early Preclassic period. Hieroglyphs and calendars were intimately related to religious concepts as well as to the ideology of rulership and many graphic elements featured deities or sacred symbols. The calendar in common use in Mesoamerica when Cortés arrived was far more sophisticated and, in some respects, astronomically more precise than the Julian calendar then used by Europeans. The Maya calendar was certainly the more complex, with the development of the Long Count system used to fix the reigns of divine kings in the endless cycles of time. The Maya also kept accurate supplementary lunar and Venus calendars, as well as tables for eclipse prediction.

Maya writing was inscribed on stone monuments, on screen-fold books of deerskin or plaster-coated bark paper, and on many other media, such as jade and ceramic. Only four of these Maya books, or codices, have survived the ravages of time and the purges of the first Spanish missionaries.
More than 500 discrete Maya hieroglyphs are known. Maya writing is a logo-syllabic system where words may be expressed with word signs (logographs) and phonetic signs (usually consonant-vowel syllables) in various combinations. The Maya did have the ability to write any text word-for-word with syllabic units, but almost invariably chose composite forms exhibiting a great deal of scribal creativity. The surviving inscriptions include mostly historical information, ritual and mythical events, and statements of ownership of objects. With advances in deciphering Classic Maya hieroglyphs, scholars can now read the details of dynastic history, with records of the succession of kings, including births, coronations, deaths, and major conquests during their lifetimes.

A dominant attribute that marks most Maya capitals, especially in the lowland core, was the custom of carving commemorative standing stone stelae, usually combined with circular “altars” or thrones. These were set up in front of buildings and in plazas. The faces of these monuments were carved with the images of kings, sometimes joined by portraits of royal wives, subordinate lords, and prisoners of war. The sides and backs of stelae were often inscribed with hieroglyphic texts telling of the reigns of the kings, including their descent from divine royal ancestors, alliances, wars, and other events, accompanied by pertinent dates.

The ninth century witnessed the downfall and abandonment of most major Central Lowland Maya cities, for reasons not completely understood but likely due to overpopulation, drought, ecological damage, escalated warfare among Maya polities, and overburdened peasant classes. The Maya were never as peaceful as once imagined and, toward the end, warfare and defense systems became commonplace. Once the system of divine rulership was deposed, many of the attributes that once supported the power of kings, such as dynastic monuments, palaces, and luxury goods of jade, shell, and pottery, went into decline. The end was often gradual, but over a span of a century or more the great Classic polity and their smaller subordinates were abandoned, for they no longer served a purpose other than as disintegrating shrines to past glory.

But Maya society and culture continued on in new forms in the Postclassic period, with new cities in the Maya highlands and Yucatán. The Maya also survived the traumas of the Spanish Conquest and the oppression of the Colonial and modern eras and are experiencing a rebirth of their heritage today. Theirs is a living tradition with several million speakers of close to thirty surviving Maya languages who seek to rediscover their ancient traditions and identity and to learn more of the great literary and cultural innovations of their brilliant ancestors. The Maya objects in the Kislak Collection provide a precious archive of recorded documents with texts and iconography that will aid future scholars and all peoples of the world in giving voice to the vanished conversations of the Maya, for the past, the present, and the future.

15. Tall Black-background Vase with Teotihuacán-Maya War and Sacrifice Themes
Guatemalan Lowlands.
Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Polychrome ceramic.
Ht. 28.5 cm. (11 in.);
Rim Diam. 11.7 cm. (4.6 in.)
F1434.64 NO 0211
One of the unique artifacts in the Kislak Collection is this large Classic (ca. A.D. 600–900) Lowland Maya polychrome cylindrical drinking vessel for cacao beverages. Based on stylistic and epigraphic analyses, this black-background cylinder was created at a site in the northern Petén region of Guatemala, probably not far from Tikal, and contains the name of its owner, an important Maya lord, an Aju, which attribution is documented in the last (tenth) glyph in the dedicatory text that encircles the upper rim. This warrior Aju is depicted as a sacrificer in the form of his aggressive raptorial Serpent Bird co-essence, his way, seen twice in a pair of diptych panels that cover the main body of the vase. According to an epigraphic and stylistic study by John Carlson the painted scene gives us a unique glimpse into the world of the pervasive cult of Teotihuacán-derived Tlaloc-Venus warfare and ritual sacrifice. Two Maya scribes created this supernatural portrait composition in a melding of Maya and archaized Teotihuacán and related Mexican highland glyphs and iconographic elements at a time perhaps two centuries after the fall of Classic Teotihuacán, ca. A.D. 650. It is essentially a “Rosetta Vase” offering a rare opportunity to better understand more of the enigmatic Teotihuacán and Highland Mexican writing systems in light of the more completely deciphered Late Classic Maya system.

The representational program of the main body of the cylinder is in the form of a pair of diptychs, designated A/B and C/D (with the panels reading from left to right in the accompanying rollout illustration). Each diptych contains (1) a narrow panel on the left with the image of an open-mouthed Highland Mexican (Teotihuacán) War/Sacrifice Dragon, associated with Venus (Great Star) glyphs (A & C), and (2) a wider panel to the right with a standing raptorial Serpent-Bird Monster composed of and associated with a complex ensemble of Maya and Highland Mexican (Teotihuacán) glyphs (B & D). There are several detailed arguments that Panels A
and B form one diptych and C and D form the other. The two diptychs are similar, but contain important, probably significant, differences. Together they form a quadruplyptic composition. It can be demonstrated that the two diptychs were composed and painted by different scribes. One was likely the master and the other his apprentice, because one is far better in composition, style, and execution than the other.

Based on the detailed iconography, the central Serpent-Bird Monster figures on Panels B and D are essentially modeled on a raptorial bird, almost certainly the Mexican Eagle, Polyborus plancus, but this supernatural bird also has saurian (or ophidian) features, such as fangs and supra-orbital crest. It is composed of and surrounded by an ensemble of glyphs and iconographic elements all associated with the specific cult of Tlaloc-Venus, which regulated warfare and ritual sacrifice.

The narrow Panels A and C show the upper jaws of open-mouthed Teotihuacán-Maya Crenulated War/Sacrifice Dragons—related directly to the Teotihuacán Quetzaloatl (Feathered Serpent) figure—who is demonstrably a manifestation of Venus. Blood/sound volutes emerge from their mouths, flowing over Maya Half-Lamat Venus glyphs below.

On Panel A, a Highland Mexican Venus glyph (interestingly not the Teotihuacán Venus Glyph) appears at the top of the panel. This form of Venus glyph is most similar to the style found on temple low reliefs at and near Tikal. This type of substitution helps to elucidate the variety of iconographic compositions related to this cult as it is found throughout Mesoamerica. —John B. Carlson

16. Four Medallion Canteen Miniature Flasks
Guatemalan Lowlands. Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900. Mold-stamped low-fired cream ceramics. Hts. 7, 9, 9, and 7.5 cm. (2¾, 3¼, 3½, and 3 in.) F1434.64 NO 0257, 258, 262, 267

The Kisik Collection includes one of the world’s largest and most balanced collections of ancient Maya ceramic bottles and miniature vessels, often imaginatively described as poison bottles or pilgrim’s flasks in the literature. They have been known for more than a century from archaeological discoveries and museum collections, but their contents and purposes had remained elusive until a recent study based in part on the Kisik Collection. As a result of this research, based on glyphic, iconographic, and contents analyses, it was determined that virtually all flasks of this type were created primarily as medicine bottles, most made specifically to hold preparations of powdered native tobacco mixed with alkaline lime and other ingredients called may or moj in various Maya languages. May was, and still is, used by the Maya for its medicinal, intoxicating, and magical-protective properties. Several secondary uses are also now established, including as pigment containers. It has also become clear that such flasks were often placed within burials, usually one per individual, and that such red pigments as cinnabar, vermilion, and red iron-based ochres (such as specular hematite) were placed in and on the outsides of the flasks as a vital part of the mortuary and interment processes. In essence, Maya flasks represent the oldest known tobacco snuff bottle tradition in the world.

One of the special results of the Kisik-funded project was the decipherment and reading of one name of the Old Maya God L as May and probably Ch’ul May, “Holy Tobacco,” based on the epigraphy. He is First Shaman or First Priest, the primary Maya God of Medicine and Curing. The Old Goddess O, Chac Chel, patroness of midwives and healers, is his female counterpart and together they form the Primal Ancestral Pair, the gods known as Xpiyacoc and Xmucane in the Quiché Maya Popol Vuh legend or Oxomoco and Cipactonal in the Highland Mexican tradition. God L is the personification of tobacco itself, in all of its forms, in the same sense that the Maya Maize God E is the personification of corn. As an Old God of the Maya Underworld, patron god of merchants, messengers, and ambassadors, and of the planet Venus, God L is closely related to the Elder Brother figure known as Bankíal among the Tzotzil Maya, who is often seen facing his younger brother, God K, who is related to the smoking lightning axe of the Maya Storm God. God L also has prominent jaguar and armadillo aspects—these are probably among his ways or co-essences—and his armadillo carapace cape and wide-brimmed hat may be closely related to his elite merchant’s raincoat and gear. Old God L is also the senior cosmogonic god who presides over the almost endless re-creations of the Maya cosmos in the great 13 Bak’tun cycle, the cycle that will be complete once again around December 21, A.D. 2012.

Left: A seated figure, resting cross-legged on a large cushion with his arms crossed, leans forward, holding a brush in his left hand. He is a scribe and is surrounded by his glyphs on this “Rounded Medallion Canteen Flask.”

Center: These two “Flat-panel Medallion Canteen Flasks” were made from the same mold but were individually retouched before firing. In a ubiquitous scene on this class of flask, God K (on the left) faces the Old God L across a standard ritual seven-glyph text. God L is easily recognizable by his wide-brimmed feathered hat surmounted by a raptorial bird, most often a supernatural owl. He wears a cape, probably related to his merchant status, and a necklace of heavy jade beads. The relationship between God L and God K is suggested to be associated with Tzotzil and Tzeltal Maya legends of the Younger Brother (God K), and Elder Brother (God L), and to the world of the elite merchants.

Right: In a quatrefoil cartouche representing the entrance into the Maya Underworld, Xibalba, a supernatural known as the “Patron of [the month] Pax,” is portrayed. This deity is recognizable by his missing lower jaw with something emerging from his mouth. Different versions of his profile portrait would suggest to some that it is a flow of blood, but it is sometimes a crossed-bands motif indicating a portal, and may appear as a leaf—hypothetically, a tobacco leaf. The Patron of Pax is iconographically closely associated with God L, the personification of tobacco and an underworld jaguar deity, and here he exhibits a diagnostic jaguar paw behind his head above his earspool. —John B. Carlson
These three mold-made architectural flasks are designed to represent four-sided Maya houses or temples. Details of realistic construction can be seen, including thatch roof motifs and roof overhangs. Some of the readable texts on flasks say that they are Yoto v May, a “Dwelling Place for May [tobacco and lime medicinal or ritual mixtures].” The tobacco and other medicines contained within these little houses were holy—personified by God L—and thus such flasks were probably miniature “god houses.”

Left: The sloping rooftop is cross-hatched to show the thatch of a Maya house. An elite Maya with tied hair lock and beaded headdress sits upright with a cushion at his back, gesturing and probably speaking the text of four glyphs in front of him. These form part of a standard text found on many flasks and, depending on reading order, include the words: (A1) HaChuk (?), (B1) Ch’ok, (A2) Kol, (A3) Chan, which are hypothesized to relate to the fine young green may tobacco preparations that these flasks were created to hold.

Center: A young ballplayer graces the front side of this tall architectural flask. He wears a “yoke” ball deflector, probably fashioned from wood and padding, over his kilt. His helmet is in the form of a supernatural caiman-like monster with beaded plumage for a crest. Ballgame scenes, players, and paraphernalia are among the most common themes portrayed on flasks and it is likely that these bottles contained the tobacco mixtures that were chewed and used as poutlicies and medicines for Maya ballplayers. Such medicinal as well as ritual uses of the tobacco may mixtures are attested to in the ethnographic literature and are still practiced today.

Right: In a complex wrap-around scene reminiscent of codex-style cylinder drinking vessels, an old god (on the side pictured) faces across a three-glyph vertical text on the left edge towards a young man (or deity) who displays some characteristics of the young Maize God, but with a flare and dragon-jaw motif emerging from his forehead. The old god exhibits mirrored “god markings” and has some of the characteristics of God D, Itzamna, as well as God L, May. A further glyphic text on the right edge, which starts just over the old god’s back, begins with a date and probably describes the conversation.

---

17. Three Rectangular Architectural Miniature Flasks

18. Three Painted Codex-style Miniature Flasks
Guatemalan Lowlands. Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900. Red and brown-black-on-cream ceramics. Hts. 8, 8, and 6.3 cm. (3 3/4, 3 3/4, and 2 3/8 in.)

---

Chapter I: From the Olmec to Columbus / The Maya

John B. Carlson
Maya “flasks” are defined by a spout, usually flange-lipped; other miniatures are designated “miniature vessels.”

Left: This miniature vessel is in the naturalistic form of a crouching peccary, complete with a fixed gaze forward, angry red mouth, and a round, flat porcine snout pierced with two small nostrils, capturing the essence of the peccary, a ubiquitous denizen of the Maya forest world. Peccaries were used as food and medicine, kept for pets, and even had a place in the Maya heavens as a constellation.

Center: This unusual, highly polished dark gray bottle takes the form of the head of the enigmatic southern Maya “Fist-mouth” Supernatural whose head also appears as full-sized effigy vessels. He has an elongated head, prominent eyebrows, Roman nose, and probably scroll eyes, as seen painted in black on his vermilion-colored eyeball. A fist, with the four fingers curled down and the thumb tucked under, protrudes from his mouth as if it were a long upper lip. This flask lacked contents, save for a white lime-like coating, probably indicating the presence of a may tobacco mixture, but only chemical microanalysis, and perhaps the determination of the identity of this supernatural, will elucidate the original uses of this unique vessel.

Right: This remarkable flask takes the form of a miniature Maya enema vessel with the appliquéd figure of the bearded Old Enema Man stretched out around the belly of the pot. He is self-administering his enema with a bulb-style cluster. Based on other flasks of similar design—including true effigies of the Old Man—coupled with the fact that tobacco-based enema practices are well documented in the Americas, flasks such as this may have contained specific may tobacco enema preparations (see entry 17). Thus, the various enema rituals were likely fundamentally a tobacco-based practice, probably for ritual entheogenic as well as medicinal purposes. Native tobacco itself is a powerful hallucinogen when taken in strong doses. Based on ethnographic evidence, other substances, which may have included peyote, toad venom, Psilocybe mushrooms, and morning glory seed extract, were added to what were probably alcoholic brews such as balché. The effects would have been rapid and highly inebriating.

—John B. Carlson

19. One Miniature Effigy Vessel and Two Miniature Effigy Flasks

Guatemalan Lowlands. Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Painted and modeled ceramics.
Ht.s. 5, 6.5, and 6.8 cm. (2, 2½, and 2¾ in.)
F1434.64 NO 0289, 0290, 0297

20. Shell Cup with Six Incised Hieroglyphs

Early Classic Maya, A.D. 200–400.
Shell Diam. 17.3 cm. (7¼ in.); Ht. 14.7 cm. (6 in.)
F1434.64 NO 190

The shell from which the bowl was made is likely an example of Tonna galea (Linne) of the family Tonnidae. The bowl was made by removing the columella and interior whorls from the original, complete shell, leaving an open vessel of convenient size and shape for drinking—and then labeling it as such with incised hieroglyphs. The exterior surface of the present shell is in a remarkably good state of preservation. The cutting out of the internal structure and the polishing of all new edges thus produced, not to mention the engraving of the hieroglyphs themselves on such a hard material, must have taken long experience, patience, and great skill. At some point, the exterior surface, at least the portion in the vicinity of the apex, was rubbed with powdered cinnabar, traces of which remain.

The text labeling the shell consists of a curved stack, or column, of six glyphs engraved on the concave surface of the largest whorl defining the interior central spiral of the shell structure. The glyphs (identified by Thompson numbers) are all of known general or specific meaning and the whole phrase may be transcribed as follows:

1. 61:1070 yu-UK’
2. 11:738:130 2ka-wa
3. 44:x TOK?-TI’
4. 748 MUWAAN
5. 74:x:74 ma-?
6. 1010 K’IN or KINICH

This transcription results in: yu-uk’(ib’)(ta) kakaw . . . (Tok) Ti’ Muwaan ma-? k’in, or, to roughly paraphrase the whole, “His cup for cacao Ti’ Muwaan (Cloud-Mouthed Hawk [?] ) ma k’inich.”

With respect to the present inscription, Marc Zender notes that the bi’ and ta signs, “reconstructed” in the transcription, do indeed commonly go unwritten, or “unspelled” in the script, even though they would seem necessary for completeness. Zender goes on to observe that, unlike totally syllabic spellings, which demand the derivational suffixes for clarity, spellings incorporating logograms are somehow understood to automatically incorporate such suffixes—a feature common to many other similar scripts.

This shell drinking vessel is of more than routine interest for several reasons. First, it is a new and excellent example of the sort of “name-tagging” first described by Mathews...
(1979) and later expanded by Houston and Taube (1987), Stuart (1989), and Grube (1991). Second, specific comparisons between the inscription on the shell drinking vessel and other examples are now possible. Moreover, the name phrase contained in the shell text may now be added to the long list of named individuals, any one of which may show up in the future on another artifact, portable or monumental. Third, the shell vessel stands as the only known example of this class of artifact and is thus rare, if not unique, among the inventory of high-status artifacts of the Classic Maya. In this, Ti’ Muwaan, the Maya noble, perhaps a ruler who originally owned this piece, joins the ranks of others whose names come down to us from more than a millennium ago.

The use of such vessels for ritual drinking and, probably, feasting in ancient America has long been known, as the archaeological literature of areas in the broad vicinity of the Gulf of México and the Caribbean Sea reveals the widespread use of shell bowls and cups, particularly in the southeastern United States.

Examples of shell art and artifacts will doubtless continue to appear as archaeological research continues in the various areas of the Americas. In those cases it is fervently hoped that both the archaeological context and the precise identification of the shell itself in terms of subspecies and known range of geographical occurrence be documented and published, for only then will the real patterns of the ancient trade and exchange of elite goods begin to be known to modern investigators.

—George Stuart

21. THE WOODEN OFFERING CONTAINER OF AJ K’AX B’AHLAM OF TORTUGUERO
México, Tabasco. Late Classic Maya, a.d. 681.
Wood (sapodilla?) and red hematite.
Ht. 4.37 cm. (1½ in.); L. 15.3 cm. (6 in.); W. 3.54 cm. (¾ in.)
F1434.64 no 215

This intriguing artifact is comprised of two parts: an elongated rectangular container and its lid, both fashioned from hardwood (probably sapodilla). The base sits on four small feet and has a raised inner lip that allows the lid to sit securely on top. A full-length portrait of a Maya lord and a text of forty-four hieroglyphs are carved on the top, sides, and bottom of the box. As was a common practice in the Maya area, red hematite was rubbed onto its outer surface.

The box was first published by Michael Coe (1974), who worked out much of the calendrics and substantial portions of the main text. Although unprovenanced, Coe profitably compared the inscriptions on the box with those of Tortuguero, Tabasco, and was able to demonstrate its affiliation with that site. Matthew Looper (1991) also contributed important details to our understanding of the box’s text, including the death date of the Tortuguero king, B’ahlam Ajaw, and the first approximations of the name of his successor, Ik’ Muyl Muwaahn II. The present decipherment of the inscription was provided by Marc Zender and Karen Bassie. As we understand the text today, the main protagonist was one Aj K’ax B’ahlam (the lord illustrated on the cover), who held an important secondary office under the patronage of the late seventh-century Tortuguero king Ik’ Muyl Muwaahn II. Interestingly, the text actually concludes with the date of manufacture of the box, October 14, a.d. 681 (9.12.9.7.12 9 Eb’ 15 Ceh) and names it the yotot ma’aj’ or “offering container” of Aj K’ax B’ahlam himself.

As depictions in extant ancient art assure us, the Maya produced vast numbers of sculpted wooden artifacts. Sadly, few have survived the high humidity and moist soils of the region. As Michael Coe (1974) has suggested, the Tortuguero box may well have been found in an arid environment, such as a dry cave.

A large number of secondary lords are illustrated in Maya art and referenced in hieroglyphic texts. These lords served the ruler of their kingdom and carried specific titles referring to the offices they held and the various functions they performed. Aj K’ax B’ahlam’s office is represented by a supernatural bird wearing a plain paper headband. A number of suggestions regarding the nature of this enigmatic office have been made, ranging from “royal messenger” to “learned man” to “scribe.” There can be little doubt that holders of this title were high-ranking courtiers, for they appear in numerous carved and painted Maya throne room scenes. At the present time, however, no certain decipherment of this glyph exists and the issue is perhaps best left unresolved until more evidence comes to light.

Thankfully, we stand on somewhat firmer ground when it comes to the function of wooden boxes in Classic times. As mentioned above, the Tortuguero box is actually labeled a yotot ma’aj’, “offering house” or “offering container” (glyphic yo-OOTO-TT’ U-ma-yi-ji), suggesting that it functioned to “house” ritually important offerings or implements used in such offerings. Such name-tagging of objects is common in Maya script, similar phrases being known on everything from portable objects (earrings, ceramics, musical instruments, ceremonial censels, etc.) to stone monuments (stelae, lintels, wall panels, etc.) (Mathews 1979; Houston, Stuart and Taube 1989; Zender 1999a).
Archaeologically excavated examples of such boxes, while scarce, nevertheless assist in clarifying what is meant by this phrase. For instance, a wooden box excavated at Actun Polbitche’ in Belize, contained a stringy spine, a bone needle, a bone perforator, and an obsidian flake, as well as a number of other items associated with bloodletting (Pendergast 1974). The long, narrow dimensions of the Tortuguero box indicate that it would also have been an appropriate container for bloodletting implements.

The Narrative
The hieroglyphic text on the Tortuguero box is a continuous narrative that begins on the lid with an illustration of Aj K’ax B’ahlam, the lord who owned it. Aj K’ax B’ahlam stands in a profile view, a common convention in Maya art, indicating secondary status. Although the object he grasps in his left hand is eroded, it may well be the box itself. Aj K’ax B’ahlam wears a typical Maya loincloth, a hipcloth, flare-type earrings, and high-backed sandals, all in Late Classic style (Proskouriakoff 1950, 87). His necklace appears to be a rolled cloth or rope.

Aj K’ax B’ahlam’s headdress is made from stiff, rectangular material with the head of a long-lipped deity attached to the front of it. As seen on pottery, secondary lords regularly wear this type of headdress and some also carry the “headband bird” title. The long-lipped deity in Aj K’ax B’ahlam’s headdress wears a black-tipped feather in his headgear. Such feathers appear in a variety of contexts and are associated with both owls and hawks. The black-tipped feathers also appear on the hawk that represents the sign for the month Muan, which may have contributed to the jade-worker’s choice of jade. This unique, oddly shaped earspool may not have been a wearable jewel, but a burial item.

The timeframe then moves forward to the investiture of Aj K’ax B’ahlam into the “headband bird” office. The stone is wrapped two days after 6 Edznab 11 Zec (May 24, A.D. 679) to the Period Ending event that occurred two days later on 9.12.7.0.0 8 Ahau 13 Zec. The text on Tortuguero Monument 6 gives the birth (A.D. 612) and accession (A.D. 644) of B’ahlam Ajaw and indicates that he was the son of Ik’ Muyl Muwaahn I (Zender and Guenter 2000, 7–8). B’ahlam Ajaw ruled for thirty-five years and during this period he fought and won wars against the polities of Comalcalco, Uxte’k’uh, and Yompik (Zender and Guenter 2000, 10), as well as the raptorial birds that represent the balto, kahun, and tun time periods in the Long Count.

The text continues on the left side of the box with a sentence that links the death of the ruler B’ahlam Ajaw of Tortuguero on 9.12.6.17.18 6 Edznab 11 Zec (May 24, A.D. 679) to the Period Ending event that occurred two days later on 9.12.7.0.0 8 Ahau 13 Zec. The text on Tortuguero Monument 6 gives the birth (A.D. 612) and accession (A.D. 644) of B’ahlam Ajaw and indicates that he was the son of Ik’ Muyl Muwaahn I (Zender and Guenter 2000, 7–8). B’ahlam Ajaw ruled for thirty-five years and during this period he fought and won wars against the polities of Comalcalco, Uxte’k’uh, and Yompik (Zender and Guenter 1999b), as well as against a number of other unidentified communities.

The narrative then links the death of B’ahlam Ajaw to the accession of his son, Ik’ Muyl Muwaahn II, which occurred forty-one days later on March 8th, A.D. 680 (9.12.7.14.7 9 Manik 15 Pohp). His accession is highlighted by a focus marker that is employed in other contexts to emphasize the “peak” event in a text.

The text concludes with the date October 14, A.D. 681 (9.12.9.12.9 Eb 15 Ceh), on which day the “container of the offerings of Aj K’ax (B’ahlam) was fashioned” (pu’ulaj’-Ø yootoot u-majiy Aj-K’ax), as mentioned above.

Summary of Events on the Wooden Offering Container of Aj K’ax B’ahlam
The inscription of the box relates seven events in a very small space. Assuming there are no errors in the text, chronologically, the inscription gives three stated dates and four implied dates beginning:

- May 26, A.D. 679 (9.12.7.0.0 8 Ahau 13 Zec): the Period Ending.
- July 4, A.D. 679 (9.12.7.1.19 8 Cauac 12 Yaxkin): the accession of Ik’ Muy Muwaahn II.
- October 14, A.D. 681 (9.12.9.12.9 Eb 15 Ceh): the fashioning of the box itself.

Translation of the text
This is the image of Aj K’ax B’ahlam, the (?), in the act of (?).

The stone is wrapped two days after 6 Edznab 11 Zec, on 8 Ahau 13 Zec. B’ahlam Ajaw, Divine Ruler of Tortuguero, did not attend [the stone-wrapping].

On 8 Cauac 12 Yaxkin it had been 2 months since B’ahlam Ajaw was entombed when Ik’ Muyl Muwaahn II, namesake of his grandfather, sat in lordship.

On 9 Manik 15 Pohp it had been about a year since Ik’ Muyl Muwaahn II sat in lordship when Aj K’ax B’ahlam sat in (?)-ship.

It had been 5 days, 11 months and 1 year since he sat in (?)-ship when the offering-container of Aj K’ax B’ahlam was fashioned.

—Karen Bassie and Marc Zender

Chapter I: From the Olmec to Columbus / The Maya 15

22. Ear Spool with Incised Profile Monster Heads
Guatemalan Lowlands.
Protoclassic Maya, A.D. 100–200. Green jade. Maximum Diam. 9.8 cm. (37/8 in.)
KISLAK PC 0017
This unique, oddly shaped earspool may not have been a wearable jewel, but a burial item to be included in a cache as a dedication, or with the wealth of a lord for the Underworld. The Maya lapidaries often used the natural irregular shapes of pieces of jade in carving pendants and ornaments. This seems to have the natural shape of an ear, which may have contributed to the jade-worker’s choice of carving this precious nodule into an ornament for a royal ear.

The center hole is decorated with an incised floral quatrefoil portal motif enclosing sky-bands, while the outer space contains an incised celestial serpent monster.
distinctive coiffure. A jade earflare, which would be pulled through the hole of the flare, making a hair ornament, a lock of hair from the front or top of the head. Most often, this use is seen on carved stone stelae. As a hair ornament, a lock of hair from the front or top of the head would be pulled through the hole of the flare, making a distinctive coiffure.

Jade flares were used for purposes other than ear ornamentation. On costumes they were sometimes worn in a string, nestled together, hanging down the back or front of the figure; most often, this use is seen on carved stone stelae. As a hair ornament, a lock of hair from the front or top of the head would be pulled through the hole of the flare, making a distinctive coiffure.

Ear or Hair Flares

These objects were not the daily variety of jewelry, which would be made of such lighter-weight materials as wood or shell, but were likely crafted for ritual costuming in burials. This very valuable large pair represented high status and may once have accompanied a jade portrait death mask.

Personal adornments were symbolic of status and wealth. Depictions of lords and ladies portray them wearing necklaces, pendants, wrist and ankle bracelets, and elaborate ear ornaments. The amount of jewelry, of jade and other fine materials such as obsidian, coral, shell, and even pearl, worn by an important personage, especially rulers, was staggering, in the literal sense, since it would have been difficult to walk under the burden of such finery. Not surprisingly, there are portraits of heavily adorned Maya kings being carried in large palanquins, as on the carved lintels of Temple I and Temple IV at Tikal.

Earplugs such as these comprised a portion of the ear ornamentation assemblage. Since the Maya pierced their ears and wore earplugs at a young age, they were accustomed to wear a large flanged spool of jade. To hold it in place, however, a long tubular bead was fitted through the hole in the spool, through which was threaded a string with heavy beads at either end, which worked as a counterbalance, holding the spool in the earlobe. These “balance assemblages” could be quite elaborate, with many layers of disks and beautifully carved beads in the shape of flowers or birds. Both Maya kings and commoners wore earplugs. Even a noble prisoner, with his hair cut off and his jewelry taken from him, was given replacement earplugs made of paper.

Ear or Hair Flares
Chapter I: From the Olmec to Columbus / The Maya

fallen into severe decline by 650–00 A.D. of the Lowland Maya, even though Teotihuacán itself had motifs were common in the religious and state iconography. In the Late Classic Period, Teotihuacán but could serve as costume elements as well as decorative elements on headgear. In the Late Classic Period, Teotihuacán motifs were common in the religious and state iconography of the Lowland Maya, even though Teotihuacán itself had fallen into severe decline by A.D. 650–700.

28. Pair of Small Petal-Shaped Earspools
Guatemalan Lowlands.
Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Light green jade.
Diam. 3 cm. (1½ in.)
KISLAK PC 0143
A matched pair of floral trumpet-form light mottled green jadeite earflares. Each has a drilled hole for the attachment of other parts of the earflare assembly, or to attach them to the owner’s headdress or costume composition, or to a deity image. Such jadeite appears to be derived from sources in the Motagua River Drainage in southern Guatemala.

29. Pair of Notched Earspools
Guatemalan Lowlands.
Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Mottled green jade.
Diam. 6 cm. (2½ in.)
KISLAK PC 0096
The most precious earflares had to be cut out of a block of jade, because of the volume occupied by a pair of flares. The excess jade around the shape of the desired earspool was cut away by sawing with string or wooden blades dipped in jade, garnet, or other abrasive powder. The centers would have been bored out with a hollow-center tubular drill. Often, the two flares appear to come from the same block of jade, as we can see the match of the grain on their surfaces. Since jade is one of the hardest, most durable materials in nature, the amount of time and effort needed to produce these objects can be appreciated. Earflares are often carved in the shape of the petals of many different kinds of flowers. These small quatrefoil flares were probably inner flares in a larger earflare assemblage.

30. Two Pairs of Earplugs with Scrolls
Squared Earplugs
Top: Guatemalan Lowlands.
Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Light green jade. W. 4.7 cm. (1½ in.)
KISLAK PC 0054
Grooved Earplugs
Bottom: Guatemalan Lowlands.
Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Light green jade.
Diam. 5 cm. (2 in.)
KISLAK PC 0055
Incised and carved flares expressed various quatrefoil themes in their designs. The upper pair of square-shaped earplugs are incised with cloud (muyal) scrolls, while the lower round shapes mimic a Teotihuacán “double trapeze-form” style of flower. These objects were not exclusively used as earplugs, but could serve as costume elements as well as decorative elements on headgear. In the Late Classic Period, Teotihuacán motifs were common in the religious and state iconography of the Lowland Maya, even though Teotihuacán itself had fallen into severe decline by A.D. 650–700.

31. Jade Pendant: God N Emerging From Shell
Guatemalan Lowlands.
Classic Maya, A.D. 400–600.
Green jade.
Ht. 5.7 cm. (2¼ in.)
KISLAK PC 0207
Tiny amulets of precious jade were apparently a highly prized commodity, as they are widespread and numerous. They are found in caches, placed in burials, or used as temple dedications, and were probably carried or worn sewn to clothing and headbands. They could also be worn as pectoral pendants.
The subjects of these carvings were often gods and underworld beings. This is a portrayal of God N, an ancient deity, one of the old gods of Xibalba. He wears a netted headdress and is toothless; his function is sometimes that of scribe or teacher. On this carving, he seems to have tipped his shell back and is sitting in it as if it were a chair.

32. Jade Pendant: Deity Emerging From Serpent’s Mouth
México, Jaina Island.
Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Apple-green jade.
L. 5 cm. (2 in.)
KISLAK PC 0148
Serpents abound in Maya imagery. They may represent the body of the Underworld; gods and ancestors spring forth from their mouths and are manifested by bloodletting and hallucinogenic trances. The supernatural serpent on this pendant, who may be named Och Chan, Na Chan, or by other titles, has his mouth open and his upper jaw lifted and turned back. An ancestor emerges, wearing on his head the mask of the Sun God, as he is seen on stelae and incensarios. This carving was made from highly desired, bright apple-green jade.

33. Small Figural Pendant Carved on Both Sides
Guatemalan Lowlands.
Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Green jade with red cinnabar.
Ht. 3.5 cm. (1½ in.)
KISLAK PC 0150
This portrait of a dour-faced warrior, his head surmounted by a feline, probably jaguar, headdress, was meant to be suspended from the neck or belt (note the transverse suspension hole). Maya warriors presented themselves in ferocious animal costumes, possibly to absorb their qualities of bravery and fearlessness and to frighten their enemies. The jaguar was seen as a powerful protector, an alter ego or way, the animal co-essence that was among the components of a warrior’s soul.
Maya rulers regarded themselves as divine and their subjects believed that they could communicate with earthly beings as well as with the Underworld. In the stories of the Popol Vuh, the toad was used by the Lords of the Underworld as a messenger to bring word to the Hero Twins that they must come to Xibalba (the Underworld), to play ball with them.

On this unique carved pale green jade, a fleshy ruler sitting cross-legged and holding a flower bouquet is in conversation with the mythological toad whose Maya name is Ah Mal (which means “The Dripper,” referring to the poison that comes from the parotid gland sacs located on his back). The Maya probably used the essence of this complex toxin as a hallucinogen. The three dots in the ear of the toad identify him as the Winal, associated with this mythological figure. Winal is also cognate with the Maya word for “man” and embodies the twenty-day period of time in the ritual calendar.

The artist who created this unusually thick plaque apparently did not have time to finish it. He blocked out the areas that would contain the hieroglyphic text and began to incise the message. The beginning of the sentence is over the toad’s head and the passage would have continued from left to right in a sequence of seven glyphs. The plaque is drilled for wearing and also has seven holes along the rear bottom edge for securing it to cloth or leather, or for holding hanging adornments.

Maya probably used the essence of this complex toxin as a hallucinogen. The three dots in the ear of the toad identify him as the Winal, associated with this mythological figure. Winal is also cognate with the Maya word for “man” and embodies the twenty-day period of time in the ritual calendar.

On this unique carved pale green jade, a fleshy ruler sitting cross-legged and holding a flower bouquet is in conversation with the mythological toad whose Maya name is Ah Mal (which means “The Dripper,” referring to the poison that comes from the parotid gland sacs located on his back). The Maya probably used the essence of this complex toxin as a hallucinogen. The three dots in the ear of the toad identify him as the Winal, associated with this mythological figure. Winal is also cognate with the Maya word for “man” and embodies the twenty-day period of time in the ritual calendar.

The artist who created this unusually thick plaque apparently did not have time to finish it. He blocked out the areas that would contain the hieroglyphic text and began to incise the message. The beginning of the sentence is over the toad’s head and the passage would have continued from left to right in a sequence of seven glyphs. The plaque is drilled for wearing and also has seven holes along the rear bottom edge for securing it to cloth or leather, or for holding hanging adornments.
The Maya concept of ajaw or lord was manifested by symbolic attributes. From the earliest times, these symbols of rulership appeared in both humble and majestic forms. Archaeological excavations at the Early Classic site of Cerros in Belize recovered a cache of five small jade pendants that the ruler wore to announce his kingship. At the same time other sites were producing huge temple displays with masks of their ajawob (lords) that were part of the same concept. Part of the symbolism of the ajaw is a symmetry, either as a trefoil or in a quintuple form. Pendants could be attached to a headband or the elements carved as a crown.

On this jade plaque, the artist incised the three diagnostic ajaw elements across the top of the head of a seated figure, who holds his hands in the royal position of hands curled on the chest. A glyphic form that can be read to mean “fresh” or “young” surrounds his eyes, perhaps indicating that the individual is a younger member of a family. His mouth holds the glyph Ik, the symbol for wind or breath. However, this Ik-form is placed within a calendrical Day Sign cartouche telling us that it is the second day, Ik, in the twenty-day Winik. With the two dots below, beneath his mirror pectoral pendant, this may represent the 260-day divinatory calendrical name day of this elite individual as “2 Ik.” In other words, he may well be telling us his name.

40. Massive Jade Relief Carving
Guatemala, Río Motagua. Copán style. Early Classic Maya, A.D. 200–400. Manzanel green jade. Ht. 16 cm. (6 ½ in.); W. 12.5 cm. (5 in.); D. 3.5 cm. (1 ½ in.). KISLAK pc 0057

The Maya concept of ajaw or lord was manifested by symbolic attributes. From the earliest times, these symbols of rulership appeared in both humble and majestic forms. Archaeological excavations at the Early Classic site of Cerros in Belize recovered a cache of five small jade pendants that the ruler wore to announce his kingship. At the same time other sites were producing huge temple displays with masks of their ajawob (lords) that were part of the same concept. Part of the symbolism of the ajaw is a symmetry, either as a trefoil or in a quintuple form. Pendants could be attached to a headband or the elements carved as a crown.

On this jade plaque, the artist incised the three diagnostic ajaw elements across the top of the head of a seated figure, who holds his hands in the royal position of hands curled on the chest. A glyphic form that can be read to mean “fresh” or “young” surrounds his eyes, perhaps indicating that the individual is a younger member of a family. His mouth holds the glyph Ik, the symbol for wind or breath. However, this Ik-form is placed within a calendrical Day Sign cartouche telling us that it is the second day, Ik, in the twenty-day Winik. With the two dots below, beneath his mirror pectoral pendant, this may represent the 260-day divinatory calendrical name day of this elite individual as “2 Ik.” In other words, he may well be telling us his name.

41. Massive Jade Pendant
Honduras. Copán style. Early Classic Maya, A.D. 200–400. Green jade. Ht. 10 cm. (4 in.); W. 8 cm. (3 ½ in.); D. 2.5 cm. (1 in.). KISLAK pc 0151

In carving this substantial figure of a standing ruler, the artist presents a frontal view of the face and figure of a personage by fitting the composition into a trapezoid-shaped slab of jade. His hair is cut in a fringe across the forehead and he wears large compound earflares. His hands are held across the chest, waiting to receive the serpent bar of authority. The oblong pendant under his chin bears a Thompson T617 “Mirror” glyph inscription, indicating that it is a mirror pendant or a plaque of shiny material. From the belt around his waist, his fringed loincloth descends from a jade flare. He is standing with his knees slightly bent and wears ankle bracelets of jade.

42. Thin Jade Plaque Carved on Two Sides
Honduras. Copán style. Classic Maya, A.D. 400–600. Green jade. Ht. 8.5 cm. (3 ½ in.). KISLAK pc 0152

Side 1: The human face of a warrior, surmounted by a supernatural animal headdress, is adorned with jade earflares and collar. There are five tiny, drilled holes appropriate for sewing to a garment or collar. It would appear the reverse side was carved at a later time, perhaps as a war talisman, and the deity carved on the reverse was invoked and sacrifice made to him.

Side 2: A supernatural sits in lotus position with his head turned in profile. His large square eye is ringed and the pupil is in the form of a curl, typical of the Sun God. He wears a large belt and his arms are in the regal position in front of his body, ready to receive a serpent bar. An earflare and necklace adorn his head and neck. His hair is bound up and secured on top with jade rings, while feathers and foliage surround his head.

According to Karl Taube, the Maya saw the convolutions of the brain as clouds and the swirls on the head as both clouds and celestial serpents. A long-nose serpent is carved on the right side of the head and on the left side there is a cartouche with a god-head. In this interpretation, the face has been flayed to leave a skull-like mask with the closed eyes behind it, but the lips have been left intact so as not to mar the beauty of the lower part of the face. Maya artists seem to have had more freedom in depicting prisoners than they had when following the canons of art for royal figures. From the bound prisoners under the feet of the ruler on stone stelae or the swollen tortured faces of the prisoners on the Bonampak murals, the Maya artist treated tortured prisoners as both realistic and divine subjects.

The Maya practiced trepanning and flaying, as did the Aztecs of Highland México later in time. Xipe Totec, the God of Spring and Renewal, was a flayed prisoner whose skin was worn by performers in the bloody rites to this god. There is a figurine from the island of Jaina depicting a deep cut across the back of the head, presumably a form of trepanning, but obviously not for medicinal reasons, as the victim is a tortured prisoner.
This exquisitely carved mirror back, with its inscription of elegant glyphs, bears a text that gives its history. The first glyph in the sentence names the object u nen (his mirror). The text then notes the ruler’s name and the emblem glyph for Calakmul, and informs us that his father was also a ruler of the same site. The mirror is pierced with dual holes on opposite sides, probably for attachment to a frame of wood or ceramic.

Mirrors served as objects of magic and mysticism. The god of royalty, God K, wears as his symbol a mirror in his forehead, flashing light in the form of a flare or torch. In representations of palace scenes, it is only the ruler who is shown looking into a mirror. Even a captured ruler, at the point of his death, was allowed to see his image in a royal mirror. Mirrors were part of associated “death paraphernalia,” which included cache bundles, rolls of cloth, and food offerings. Supernatural scribes often wear mirrors as pendants and shamans performed their magic using the shining depths of pyrite and obsidian. The “dark” obsidian mirrors and the “bright” pyrite mirrors reflected the worlds in which gods and humans lived.

John Carlson, who has studied ancient mirrors extensively, has shown how perfect concave surfaces can be manufactured using the rather simple technique of rubbing together two mirror blanks with a round stone between them. A flat mirror such as this is made by assembling sections of pyrite or obsidian, grinding the edges of the pieces so that they fit as seamlessly as possible, and affixing them to a backing covered with a matrix of resin. The entire assemblage is then ground and polished on a flat stone metate using powdered pyrite or obsidian and water. A final polish is applied using powdered hematite (iron oxide).

Brilliantly reflective surfaces were produced so that true images could be seen in the dark surfaces of these mirrors, a veritable window to the other world.

Maya kings recorded their victories, their marriages and alliances, and the celebration of rituals on carved stone stelae and lintels. These events were placed in time according to the Maya calendar that recorded the great epochs of their history, as well as the individual days on which a prominent person participated in a ceremony.

This monument records an event that took place at the end of fifteenth katun, or in our calendar, sometime in the tenth century. A katun is a span of twenty years, marked with ceremonies at the end of the period. The rite recorded here is a bloodletting self-sacrifice that calls the deity or way Nā Chaan (Sky Snake) into existence. The text relates the date, (the verb is eroded), the name of the deity or way, the place of action, and the names or titles of the participants.

Maya rulers or other members of the royal household would let blood from the tongue or other parts of the body before an important undertaking, such as a war, or at the end of a specific time period. The blood was collected on strips of paper, which would be burned as an offering, rising as smoke to the gods in the sky.

Maya building façades were often decorated with portraits of rulers and warriors. In niches, walls, and roof combs life-size and larger-than-life statues were put in place to honor ancestors and the deeds they performed. A favorite material for these portraits was stucco, made from burnt limestone and crushed seashell.

Under a domed headdress, his face surrounded by a circular device possibly composed of jade plaques placed over a padded lining, a portrait of an austere Maya dignitary survives through time. He wears a rosette or a flower in the center of his turban. Maya rulers in the Classic Period used a flower as the frontal element of ornamentation in their headdresses. There is precedent for the circle of jade plaques around the face. On Early Classic buildings, such as at Kohunlich and Cerros, the portraits of rulers and gods have a similar beaded circular border around the face.
Carved on the front of this small, thick-lidded urn is a low-relief Sun God visage with spiral-grooved eyes and scroll-flanked mouth. The squared face is surrounded by beaded and grooved decorations. Smooth pecked dimples are placed on the cheeks and pug nose. A tripartite badge surmounts the hemispherical cover and the kin (Sun) sign. The inside of the deep cylindrical cavity is stained red with hematite.

Alabaster from the Ulua Valley is white and translucent, making it an extremely desirable material for the elegant carvings of this region. Supernatural beings and deities were favorite themes in the distinctive decoration of marble vessels from the Ulua Valley. In this case, the handle of the cup is a representation of the Principal Bird Deity. He is a ubiquitous creature, whose visage appears on building façades from the Early Classic period and later, throughout the Puuc area of Yucatán and Campeche.

The body of the vessel is adorned with overlapping plaques and scales bordering a scroll-like design, probably symbolizing clouds. Although it might have been used as a container, the specific function of this vessel is unknown.

The face of a deity is the central theme of this marble vessel. The Ulua Valley artists used a complex design formula, thereby imbedding the distinguishing characteristics of deities in the many scrolls that adorn the vessel.

Scrolling curls emanate from around the deity’s mouth, suggesting that this is the face of Kinich Ajaw, the Sun God, who can be identified on many ceramic cache vessels as well, and therefore may suggest the use of this vessel. Two serpent heads in profile flank the deity’s face. Jaguars serve as handles, again suggesting the Underworld theme of this vessel. The two jaguars, back to back, recall the concept of the double jaguar throne that Maya rulers sat upon to demonstrate their power. As a burial object it may have held items such as jade and obsidian, shell, and feathers that accompanied its owner to the Underworld. The vessel is set on a basketwork pedestal base, carved in one with the vase, and its material is indicated by the woven patterns of straw matting.

In many Maya households, the day begins with the woman bringing her household fire to life. Three stones are placed around the fire and a comal, a flat clay disk, is placed on the three stones, which acts as her cooking surface to bake tortillas, the Maya staff of life.

In placing the stones, she reenacts the Maya legend of the beginning of time, making the hearth the center of the universe. A number of texts from different sites carry the same message: On 4 Ajaw, 8 Kumk’u (the date of the beginning of Maya time), three stones are set in place as the gods’ first act of creation. The concept of the creation of the universe is common in Maya art, though this group of objects with its three spheres and flat disk is an unusually direct allusion. Two dates appear on the disk, both of which are mythological, suggesting that the events associated with these dates are not of this world. A jaguar is placed in the center. This assemblage may have been in the tomb of a royal lady who was given the three hearthstones and comal to accompany her on her journey into the other world.

This stone torus (doughnut shape), when set on a stout wood handle, would have been a formidable weapon; however, there are other possibilities for its use. It may have been slipped over the hand to rest against the wrist as seen on Huastec figurines. No clubs of this nature
have been seen in battle scenes, but clubs and axes were also used in execution rituals. The text provides another example of “name tagging,” which describes the object and the owner:

A–D: The date is read as 9.2.14.7.17 1 Kaban o Yax'in (A.D. 489).
E–F: Description of the object.
G: u-xi-k'a-[Po], the k'a-b'o gives us “hand.” The word xik'ab is unique and clearly names the object.
H: The possessor is called CHAK-CH'OK, “Great Youth” and then
I: hu-ke-TE. This work, huulte' (?), is most likely a personal name, but does not provide a link to any known locale.

Translation of text by Simon Martin

The incising on the surface suggests that it was dedicated in the name of a young Maya lord and it might have been made solely to be laid to rest with its owner at the time of his burial. This sentence is similar to the Primary Standard Sequence that appears on pottery vessels in the use of the God N glyph in the Dedicatory Formula statement.

51. Trio of Human-Profile "Eccentric" Flints
Guatemalan Lowlands.
Classic Maya, A.D. 400–900.
Chipped gray flint.
Median Ht. 18 cm. (7 in.)
KISLAK PC 0074; KISLAK PC 0075; KISLAK PC 0076

The so-called “eccentric” flints, of abstract, nonfunctional form, were a specialty of Maya craftsmen skilled in the art of flint knapping. These objects often appear to be scepters and were generally cached ceremonially as offerings in consecrated locations. The most intriguing examples of this craft take the form of human profiles with elaborate adornments. This group, with open-mouthed faces directed to the left, includes crested headdresses, elongated rear bustles, and arms holding apparent batons. A termination cache of nine much larger human-profile eccentric flints was found, along with vestiges of a cloth bundle, in the Early Classic “Rosalila” temple beneath Copan’s royal acropolis.

52. Two "Eccentric" Flint Scepters
Guatemalan Lowlands.
Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Chipped gray flint.
Hts. 14 and 9 cm. (5½ and 3½ in.)
KISLAK PC 0072; KISLAK PC 0073

These particular eccentric flint blades may have a symbolic function. Several known painted Maya vases show lords carrying trident flint scepters in one hand. Both two- and three-pronged chipped flints have been found deposited in sub-stela caches in the Petén district of Guatemala. Also, a trident flint with circular handle was excavated at the site of El Baúl on the Pacific Coast of Guatemala. It has been suggested that royalty could have used these pointed blades as bloodletters, although many other abstractly shaped eccentric flints lack pointed protuberances.

53. Large Shell Pectoral with Narrative Scene
México. “Maya-Toltec” style.
Postclassic Maya, A.D. 900–1200.
Incised conch shell.
Ht. 19 cm. (7½ in.)
KISLAK PC 0201

This large shell of the species Patella mexicana has been sectioned into a “horse collar” shape and delicately incised with a very complex processional scene, bordered by bands of jade bead symbols. The figural lines have been dusted with red pigment. Gordon Ekholm published a fragment of a collar-shaped shell pendant bearing the same style of narrative frieze in his handbook to the Mesoamerican hall at the American Museum of Natural History (Ekholm 1970).

The style of marching warriors most closely parallels the low-relief, carved processional scenes found in the Great Ballcourt complex at Chichén Itzá. One side of the procession begins with four personages carrying bowls containing sprouting offerings, who are being led by four warriors who face a central heap of apparent vegetal offerings. The other side of the procession begins with a warrior backed by an emblematic rattlesnake. In front of him are five more warriors, one of them bearded. Most of these men carry atlats and bundles of spears. Costuming includes feathered headdresses, large earspools, butterfly pectorals, rear disks, arms wrapped with ruffs, knee wrappings, and sandals. However, details from figure to figure vary.

54. Old God Emerging From Shell Whistle
Guatemalan Lowlands.
Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Mold-made ceramic.
Ht. 10 cm. (4 in.)
KISLAK PC 0094

The benign aspects of God N, that of scribe and teacher, appear to make him a very popular deity and he seems to become even more favored in the Late Classic and Postclassic periods. In the Early Classic to Classic periods, his shell is that of the great sea snail, the conch that roams the warm waters of the Maya coasts, although he may dwell in a variety of shell homes. The Old God sits in his shell with arms across his chest and his hair spread out over his shoulders. His shell home sits straight up with the spiral end of the shell in front and the functional whistle mouthpiece behind.
55. Two Figurines

**Left:** Figurine with Hollow Body
México, Yucatán, Jaina Island. Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900. Painted ceramic. Ht. 25.5 cm. (10 in.)
Kislak PC 0170

**Right:** Figurine with Moveable Head
México, Yucatán, Jaina Island. Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900. Polychrome ceramic. Ht. 22 cm. (8 5/8 in.)
Kislak PC 0171

Jaina is a small island off the coast of Campeche in México. During low tide a land bridge connects the island with the mainland. There is a great ceremonial site on Jaina, with dance platforms and temple structures. The main function of this spit of land, however, was as a burial ground. Thousands of burials have been found on Jaina, both elaborate and simple. The most common form of interment is in a shallow grave with the body laid out on its back. A large ceramic plate, with a hole punched in its center, covers the face and becomes the symbol for the roof of the tomb with an access to the outside. Various artifacts and small figurines, similar to these, accompany the body. Such figurines may represent warriors and dignitaries, goddesses, animals in shamanistic dress, and tortured prisoners. These elaborate headdresses, in life, may have been made from stiff fabric with attachments of papier mâché, jade plaques, and colorful feathers entwined with their own hair. The figurines were elaborately painted in blue, red, white, and black to emphasize costume details and their bodies.

These two dignified figures, with their arms crossed at the waist, show traces of “Maya blue,” a rich blue-green color, on their headdresses and earflares. The faces and legs show the remains of red pigment that gave them a ruddy complexion. The smaller of the figurines wears an attachment on the bridge of his nose to strengthen the Maya ideal of the elite profile and has an unusual feature, a moveable head (moveable appendages are often found on Preclassic Maya figurines). The taller of the two wears large jade beads. They both wear cheek-pieces, an accessory which may have been some form of face protection during hand-to-hand combat, or a status symbol unknown to us. Their loincloths are simple garments that wrap around their hips and tuck under in front to form the ex or front panel.

56. Elaborate Figure-Painted Bowl
El Salvador. Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900. Polychrome orange ceramic. Diam. 18.5 cm. (7 7/8 in.); Ht. 12.5 cm. (4 7/8 in.)
Kislak PC 0061

The artists on the borders of the Maya area used many of the themes that appear in the corpus of central core Maya vase painting, and yet they organized and delivered their messages in their own unique style. This bowl is divided into an upper and lower register, separated by a narrow band of crossed elements, which may be a type of sky-band. The scene is repeated a number of times in the upper register and again in the lower register. The inside rim of the bowl is painted with a repeat design, characteristic of vases from this area.

In the upper register, an individual with black body paint wears an elaborate headdress consisting of feather plumes attached to netting, which is emerging from the mouth of a serpent monster that appears to be facing to the rear. This serpent is the symbol of the cave mouth entrance into the other world. The figure is reaching for a feathered bird-head mask that may be used in a ceremony.

In the lower register, the plumed headdress floats free, not yet attached to the headband worn by the figure, as he reaches for strings of ornaments that may also become part of his costume. Perhaps we are privy to the preparation and dressing of a lord before entering the Underworld.

57. Incised Creamware Vessel
Guatemalan Lowlands. Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900. Ceramic with a cream-colored slip and cinnabar highlighting in the glyphs. Ht. 12.7 cm. (5 in.)
Kislak PC 0217

Finely incised on each side with a diagonal glyphic text. One side refers to God N as the Lord of the 7 Deaths, shown with characteristic “Roman” nose and netted turban (shown). The reverse glyphic text refers to the mixing of copal and cacao liquids.

58. Vase with Carved Monkey Panels
Kislak PC 0062

Monkeys are ubiquitous in Maya vase painting. The Maya were most familiar with howler monkeys and spider monkeys, whose playful antics are painted and carved on many vessels.

This deeply carved blackware vase depicts a kneeling spider monkey with his tail curled behind him. The vase had been broken and repaired in antiquity by the method of drilling holes on each side of the break and tying the parts
Chochola ceramics are uniquely recognizable by the deep carving of figures or animals in a graceful semi-cartouche and, on some vases, by the diagonal row of glyphs on the reverse side. Seated facing each other, two anthropomorphic bird-headed deities separated by a large central flare hold offerings. The bird on the right can be identified as Ta Hol, the Vulture God. He wears a smoking tripartite device on his head and his arms are feathered. He holds a tied, covered bowl in both hands, probably containing a maize tamale food offering. The other bird has god markings on his body and arms and also makes an offering.

The first glyph of the text has been identified by Nikolai Grube as hāy, meaning “thinness,” referring to the quality of the polished surface, even though the bowl is quite thick. The second glyph, identified by David Stuart, continues the Chochola style PSS and means “to carve” or “to sculpt.”

Chochola style PSS and means “to carve” or “to sculpt.”

The second glyph, identified by David Stuart, continues the polished surface, even though the bowl is quite thick.

Grube as hāy, meaning “thinness,” referring to the quality of the polished surface, even though the bowl is quite thick. The second glyph, identified by David Stuart, continues the Chochola style PSS and means “to carve” or “to sculpt.”

The howler monkey carved on the underside of the vessel can be recognized as k’in to b’atz’, a monkey who also appears on codex-style vessels holding a cacao pod and smoking a cigar. Here he is seen smoking and holding a miniature flask.

In the Early Classic style of pottery, the artist who made the bowl probably carved it as well, as the carving is an integral part of the design. This bowl is divided into four registers: the top register is fluted; the next band contains carved repeat glyphic motifs, followed by a plain, narrow band dotted by small half balls of clay. Finally, the major area around the bottom of the bowl contains a complex continuous composition of snakes intertwined with knots that appear on sacred bundles. The meaning of the combination of snakes and bundle knots is unclear. The clay is beautifully burnished to a high sheen, and the low areas of the relief are rubbed with red pigment, giving a rich and elegant sheen, and the low areas of the relief are rubbed with red pigment.
63. **Large Basal-Flange Bowl with Cover**  
Polychrome ceramic.  
Total Ht. 31.7 cm. (12⅜ in.); Diam. 39.5 cm. (15½ in.)  
KISLAK PC 0026

Basal-flanged covered vessels are common in the Early Classic period. On this bowl, we see alternating motifs of a young deer and an interlocking cosmological symbol, which also appears on the disk-shaped knob in the center of the cover. Serpent-monster heads, with missing lower jaws, encircle the center portion of the lid. Attached to their upturned snouts and at the rear of their heads are the same eccentric flints that surround the center knob. On the flange at the lower rim of the bowl and on the lid (the second band from the lower edge) are alternating orange and black step-frets, simulating architectural elements found on temples in stone construction. The remaining motifs of steps may represent the ballcourt, where the gods play out their fateful games; the steps become seating for onlookers on either side of the court.

The four monster heads perhaps represent the celestial caiman whose body may become a portion of the Milky Way as it moves across the night sky. It would then appear that this vessel, with its cosmological references, represents a model of the universe.

64. **Two Polychromed Lidded Vessels**  
Guatemalan Lowlands. Classic Maya, A.D. 400–600.  
Red, black, and gray on orange-gloss ceramic.  
Left: Total Ht. 23 cm. (9 in.); Rim Diam. 15.2 cm. (6 in.)  
Right: Total Ht. 20 cm. (7¾ in.); Rim Diam. 15 cm. (5¾ in.)  
KISLAK PC 0046; KISLAK PC 0045

The artist who conceived of these two-lidded vases seems to have painted a single message in two parts, with one part on each vessel. In this unusual presentation, what would have been painted on a single vase in different registers is here divided between two vases. How fortunate that the two vases have remained together. The vases have matching color schemes of red and black on light orange backgrounds and a highly decorative style of handwriting.

Left, on vessel “A” with the ring-shaped finial, the artist painted the lid with symbols of a bloodletting tool, an eccentric flint. The uppermost rows of glyphs contain the word u ba, a verb meaning “it will happen.” The bottom row of symbols represents a sky-band, a glyphic description of the heavens.

Right, on vessel “B” with a rattle in the lid, the text refers to the writing on the surface of the vessel. In this view of the lid, in the center, is the glyph tzib (writing) and on the body of the vessel under it is the glyph hih (the writing surface).

65. **Pinched Gourd Vessel with Two Columns of Glyphs**  
Orange-painted ceramic.  
Ht. 21.5 cm. (8⅜ in.)  
KISLAK PC 0013

In the Early Classic period, Maya artisans made vessels in elaborate and imaginative shapes and designs. Sculptural forms were more popular than the straight-walled vessels of the later Classic period.

This vessel is a copy in clay of a common gourd that is used as a water canteen. Today, in many parts of Mesoamerica, workers can be seen going to the fields with this type of gourd, the fruit of the *Crescentia cujete* tree, slung over their shoulders. To obtain such a useful item, the farmer ties a rope around the middle of the gourd during the growing period, causing the “waistline” to form. When the gourd is the desired size, it is picked, hollowed out, and dried.

The artist painted the symbol of ajaw or lord on the side of this vessel that designated it as a ceremonial water bottle, hypothetically to accompany the ajaw on his journey into the Underworld.

66. **Pumpkin-Shaped Bowl with Codex-Style Glyphs**  
Guatemalan Lowlands. Classic Maya, A.D. 400–600.  
Red and black-on-orange ceramic.  
L. 22.2 cm. (8⅜ in.); Ht. 7 cm. (2¾ in.)  
KISLAK PC 0013

In Early Classic times, the Maya artist was probably a single individual, potter, painter, and scribe, who modeled, carved, and wrote the texts that described or consecrated the vessel. Later, in the Classic period, the potter and scribe appear to
diverge into their own specialties. Scribes may have painted their texts on vases available from the local potter, or may have ordered specifically shaped vessels to fit their mood and subject matter. This delicately sliced-in-half representation of a squash testifies to the ability of an artist to adapt his painting to a most unusual shape. The artist treated the vessel as if it were the entire cosmos. Around the interior rim he painted a sky-band, with Venus star glyphs hanging from the edge of the band. The painting on the inside bottom of the bowl is eroded so that it is no longer possible to tell what sign the artist painted, but the underside of the bowl (or universe) is well preserved and here we have a picture of the Underworld and of a deity of darkness and death, but with the hope of resurrection. Two eyes staring out of a black mask combine to form a glyph that represents darkness. A flare representing fire and smoke issues from the skeletal mouth. A collar of death’s eyes hangs under the chin—a dreadful image—although from the head springs a symbol combining a mirror and a corn plant, suggesting that from death springs life. To the Maya, the growing of corn was the symbol of new life.

On the outside rim, the painted text tells us that the vessel is dedicated, is written upon, and that it is a drinking vessel. The next glyphs are eroded so that we cannot tell what type of substance the vase would have contained. The text ends with the owner’s name, which says that he is the son of a four Katun Ajaw (a lord who is more than eighty years old).

rooms, tribute is placed under the throne or at the feet of the ruler and may include vases of many shapes and styles, including lidded vases such as this. These are gifts or tribute that may also accompany the ruler to his burial.

The incised, openwork design of the pedestal imitates the basketwork base or ring upon which round-bottomed clay vessels rest. The lid is surmounted by a turtle, which had another element on his back that is now lost, and may indicate one of the Maya constellations, giving the vessel cosmological significance. A row of eroded glyphs, orange outlined with black on the rim of the vessel, may identify its purpose and name its owner. The vertical rows of glyphs are Early Classic versions of ajaw (lord) glyphs.

that can inhabit the three parts of the Maya universe: the sky, the surface of the earth, and beneath the water, the abode of the gods. The Maya conceived of the watery realm as the underworldly abode of the gods.

Cormorants, the birds depicted on this vessel, dive beneath the surface of the water to fish, putting them in contact with the Underworld. We see them in a swampy environment, through an opening in the trees and plants, perhaps at night, as suggested by the black background. The blue stucco rims on both the vase and the lid suggest the water in which the birds fish.

If this vase was used as a container for liquid, such as atole or chocolate, perhaps the lid was then inverted and used as a cup or calabash to hold the drink. The unknown artist shows enviable skill in depicting the movement and grace of the birds by his rendering of the birds’ heads, alternately raised and lowered, in characteristic poses.

The painting on the inside bottom of the bowl is eroded so that it is no longer possible to tell what sign the artist painted, but the underside of the bowl (or universe) is well preserved and here we have a picture of the Underworld and of a deity of darkness and death, but with the hope of resurrection. Two eyes staring out of a black mask combine to form a glyph that represents darkness. A flare representing fire and smoke issues from the skeletal mouth. A collar of death’s eyes hangs under the chin—a dreadful image—although from the head springs a symbol combining a mirror and a corn plant, suggesting that from death springs life. To the Maya, the growing of corn was the symbol of new life.
of stepped scroll frets frame the top and bottom, while the rim and base borders are plain pale green. The black-painted background is covered with tiny white circles that resemble a tie-dyed fabric. The feet are painted with diagonal bars and two-dots crossed-bands motifs. This patterning is quite unusual, but the derivation of the vessel shape and the symbolic motifs are closely linked to Central México.

71. Incised Cylindrical Tripod Vase
Guatemala. Classic Maya, a.d. 400–600.
Burnished black ceramic with red hematite. Ht. 15.5 cm. (6¾ in.); Diam. 17 cm. (6¾ in.) KISLAK PC 0011

This derivative of a Central Mexican style vessel was made in Guatemala and the four replicated seated human figures on the surface are Maya in style. This type, with excised, red-filled background, is found in both the southern highlands and in the Petén region of the Maya lowlands. The sides are concave, the raised basal band is studded with “coffee bean” motifs, and the hollow perforated oval supports contain rattles. The bottom of the vase is convex. Each incised figure is framed by a vertical band of three rectangles that are variants of a Teotihuacán glyph. The figures are stiffly seated with crossed arms resting on sharply bent knees. The heads are thrown back with open mouths. Details of loincloths, headdresses, and bustles are incised with cross-hatching and geometric patterns.

72. Cylindrical Tripod Vase with Owl on Lid
Guatemalan Highlands. Classic Maya, a.d. 400–600. Incised and burnished brown ceramic. Ht. 21.5 cm. (8½ in.); Rim Diam. 14 cm. (5½ in.) KISLAK PC 0059

These Central Mexican–style vessel forms were produced in abundance at the city of Kaminaljuyu in the Maya High-lands of Guatemala during the Early Classic period, as well as being duplicated at major Maya sites in the Petén. The precise provenience of this example, however, is not recorded. The incised motifs on the vessel walls and around the lipped cover are more Mexican than Maya. Similar cylindrical tripod vases manufactured in Guatemala are often decorated with Maya motifs, even though the vessel form is Mexican-derived. In this case the designs consist of interlocking scale bands with scalloped borders. The modeled hollow bird on the cover is a winged, feathered, and crested owl probably associated with the cult of warfare and sacrifice, also common to Teotihuacán iconography. The slab tripod supports are stamped with Central Mexican “talud-tablero” architectural designs, specifically with the Bar-and-Three-Dots motif over the Trapeze-and-Ray, an emblem for the practices of ritual warfare and sacrifice.

73. Double Chambered Whistling Vessel
Guatemalan Lowlands. Classic Maya, a.d. 400–600. Incised brown ceramic. L. 24 cm. (9½ in.); Ht. 25.5 cm. (10¼ in.) KISLAK PC 0182

The Maya made whistle figurines and hollow-bottomed bowls or hollow-tripod legs containing pellets that rattled. Whistling vessels are rare and they may have been used to summon or alert the gods to the offering that was being presented.

This cylindrical tripod in the style of Central México has a monkey attached to the vase by his tail, which forms a strap handle. There is a whistling mechanism in the monkey’s back with an open duct that connects to the base of the vase. Incised serpent profiles in cartouches and a repeat band of glyphs decorate the surface.

The monkey intrigued the Maya from earliest times. He plays many roles from scribe to way (alter ego or supernatural co-essence). His characterization on this vessel appears to be that of a well-behaved pet. He sits at attention wearing a crested cap with his paws held in front of him. Incised on his body are kab signs, which make reference to earth or honey, but in the compound kab winik (earth man) it means hombre del mundo, or “man of the world.”

74. Two-Part Cache Vessel with Applied God Heads
Guatemalan Lowlands. Classic Maya, a.d. 200–600. Painted ceramic. Ht. 24.8 cm. (9¾ in.); Diam. 20.5 cm. (8 in.) KISLAK PC 0006

The face of a variant of the Sun God, Kinich Ajaw, dominates the lower part of this two-part burial vessel. The scrolls in his eyes and the curls in the corners of his mouth identify this deity. The central portrait of the Sun God in a stack of masks is supported by the mask of his counterpart, the Jaguar God of the Underworld or the Night Sun. The Maya perceived the Day Sun changing into a black jaguar as he moved into the night sky and then reappeared in the morning, changing back to the Day Sun. The Sun God’s face is surmounted by another version of his own face.

The upper part of the vessel presents the mask of the
Night Sun, identified by the curl or “cruller” between his eyes. His headdress is composed of a cache vessel bearing the components of the tripartite badge with a stingray spine for blood-letting as its centerpiece.

75. Two-Part Cache Vessel with Applied God Heads
Guatemalan Lowlands.
Classic Maya, A.D. 200–600.
Painted ceramic.
Ht. 45 cm. (17¾ in.);
Diam. 30 cm. (11¾ in.)
KISLAK PC 0049

The practice of human burials created the need for large vessels that could hold the bones of the dead. The portrait of a variant of the Sun God, Kinich Ajaw, dominates many of these two-part burial urns.

The lower part of the vessel is adorned with the face of the Sun God with his spiral eyes and massive earflares. The face sits atop the mask of an earth monster deity. The tongue protrudes and curls emerge from the corners of his mouth. Over his earflares are *pohp* (mat) signs and the triadic points that make up the badges of royalty belonging to the decedent. Above the Sun God’s visage is the mask of another deity who wears the sign of the harpy eagle between his eyes.

The upper lid again may portray the Sun God, albeit in another version. The crossed bands in the mouth of this mask are the identification of this powerful deity, perhaps marking a portal opening into the Earth.

76. Flanged Effigy Incense Burner
Guatemalan Lowlands. Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Buff ceramic with traces of white pigment. Ht. 53.3 cm. (21 in.)
KISLAK PC 0020

Incensarios (incense burners) are found buried in sacred precincts. They often depict rulers surrounded by god masks or ancestors. These flanged clay chimneys emulate the scenes seen on stone stelae, where portraits of rulers are shown in all their ceremonial finery.

A ruler, wearing a headdress with birds on the brim and a shoulder cape, sits on the head of an “earth monster.” On the flanges of the incense burner are four serpents, their open jaws spewing forth ancestors.

77. Large Shallow Plate with Skeletal Monster Motif
Guatemalan Lowlands. Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Polychrome ceramic.
Diam. 34.3 cm. (13½ in.)
KISLAK PC 0064

A skeletal monster head decorates this plate. Plumed water lily flowers are attached to the end of his snout and the back of his head. From the top of his headdress and from under his chin foliated ajaw glyphs join his assemblage of elements. This glyph may be pronounced nik, meaning flower. The inside rim band of the plate is composed of a double compound of repeat glyphs and the outside band displays small white flower symbols.

Plates served several purposes in Maya life. They held food for presentation at meals or rituals and may have acted as the “roof of the tomb” in burials. Most Maya were buried in shallow graves—in sealed or vaulted rooms—in special areas such as the island of Jaina, or under the floor of a house. Lacking a formal roofed tomb, the plate covering the face of the deceased provided a painted ceiling.

Many formal tombs contain the means for the soul to communicate with the outside world. At Palenque, for example, a clay duct flows from within the tomb, up a flight of stairs to the outside. A plate that serves as the symbol for the tomb roof is pierced so that its hole serves as the means of communication. The Maya who used this plate carefully drilled through the eye of the monster head so as not to destroy the beautiful composition.

78. Large Polychrome Tripod Plate
Guatemalan Lowlands. Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Painted orange-gloss ceramic.
Diam. 40.3 cm. (15½ in.)
KISLAK PC 0179

Pages 75 and 76 of the Madrid Codex, one of the few surviving books of the ancient Maya, details a Maya view of the world. In this scenario the world is seen from above as a four-sided temple with the world tree at the top and deities performing sacrifices and presenting offerings around the sides of the world temple.

This polychrome plate performs the same task as the pages of the codex, presenting another view of the Maya universe. In the center of the plate, representing the top of the
temple, sits the “water-lily jaguar” impersonator, marked with lines and dots representing water and wearing bits of foliage on the top of his head. He may function, in this instance, as the Day Sun whose light illuminates the earth. The four interstices are shown as stone columns, the four corners of the temple. In the center of each section, the Hero Twin, Hunapu, is seated cross-legged, gesturing an unknown sign. His face dot and headband are painted red, signifying him as ajaw (lord). A flower is attached to his headband and its foliage reaches forward and to the ground. In front of his face is a glyph with a crenulated center meaning flower and fertility. Behind him, the Earth itself is presented as the cab glyph. The meaning of the inner band of glyphs signifying the periphery of the earth cannot be understood at the present, while the outer band on the rim of the plate has a repetitive text that can be read as k’ul, meaning holy or sacred.

79. Vase with Resist-Painted Abstract Patterns
Guatemalan Lowlands. Classic Maya, a.d. 400–600. Black-on-orange ceramic. Ht. 5.8 cm. (6¼ in.) kislak pc 0024

In a tour de force of design the Maya potter who made this vase also painted it in a resist technique, made all the more difficult by the diagonal fluting of the body of the vase. The juxtaposition of the diagonals and the opposing movement in the design give the vase tremendous vitality and spirit.

Resist painting is accomplished by painting the vase with a mineral paint, then holding back certain areas by covering them with a resist substance such as wax or resin. This causes the surface to fire at different temperatures, thereby producing, as in this instance, a two-color vase. The technique is related to batik textile dyeing and can be very tight and controlled, or, as we see here, a free-flowing abstract design.

80. Pair of Tall Cylindrical Vases with Jaguar Pelt Motifs
Guatemalan Lowlands. Late Classic Maya, a.d. 600–900. Black on orange-gloss ceramic. Hts. 24.7 and 26 cm. (9¼ and 10¼ in.) kislak pc 0180; kislak pc 0181

It is not unusual to find two vases with the same theme, as in this case jaguar pelt and claws with a glyphic element in the center and floral elements in the rim border. Vases were probably made in a workshop environment, with painters sitting next to each other, painting vases to order, or preparing stock vases, often with abstract themes that represented motifs well known to the populace.

What is unusual is to be able to identify the work of two different painters, probably that of a master and apprentice. The taller of the two vases is undoubtedly the work of the master; the diagonal composition is forceful, the claws well articulated and defined, and the jaguar pelt pattern carefully rendered and decoratively designed. The rim band is more detailed and the horizontal lines show sensitivity for the space. As a whole the design is well thought out and cohesive.

The shorter vase by the lesser artist demonstrates less control, less attention to detail, and a poorer technique than the master.

81. “Fleur de Lis” Vase with Primary Standard Sequence Glyph Band
Guatemalan Lowlands. Late Classic Maya, a.d. 600–900. Black and orange-on-white ceramic. Ht. 22 cm. (8¾ in.) kislak pc 0197

The polity of Naranjo in the central Petén and its subsidiaries produced remarkably beautiful cylinder vases. Many of these vases have texts that refer to individuals and their families. The decoration on the body of a number of these vessels is a symbol that has become known as the “Fleur de Lis.” It represents the reproductive parts of a flower, the petals, and, in this instance, the roots. The Maya, from their careful observation of the living world, picked a symbol of regeneration and growth to embellish vases that spoke of kinship and lineage. This vase is unusual in that the “Fleur de Lis” is painted with a blush of red.

The rim text may be translated (after Barbara MacLeod) “came into being; was blessed; the writing; the drinking vessel; the great lineage member; the name of the owner.”
82. **Codex-Style Vase: Maya Scribes**  
Guatemalan Lowlands.  
Late Classic Maya, a.d. 600–900.  
Red rimmed black-on-cream ceramic.  
Ht. 16.5 cm. (6½ in.); Diam. 12 cm. (4¾ in.)  
KISLAK PC 0022

Seated cross-legged in front of a jaguar-skin cushioned throne, a scribe leans forward, his hand next to the codex (book) in which he will write. The codex is a screen-fold group of pages in which the paper is probably made from the fibers of the fig tree. The pages are coated with stucco and polished to make a smooth writing surface. Some codices were covered with jaguar skin.

Many of the scribes and artists that the Maya depicted were in human form, often accompanied by a scribe who was a supernatural. Scribes can be old gods, Hero Twins, howler monkeys, rabbits, or other animals. Writing was the tool that enabled the Maya to record history, correct the calendar, and write prayers and auguries, each a solemn and sacred task. Because these were sacred tasks, they often invoked images of supernaturals to be their writers and artists.

In his headdress, the human-appearing scribe wears two signs of his profession, a bundle of bound reeds and two artist’s brushes that are thrust under his headband. His headdress is made of net (the Maya word paw, from which comes the title pawatun). He holds a carved conch shell (sabak kuch), which is his paint container or inkpot. His supernatural companion, who has god markings on his body, holds a brush and paint palette as well.

83. **Codex-Style Vase with Moon Goddess**  
Guatemalan Lowlands.  
Late Classic Maya, a.d. 600–900.  
Red rimmed black-on-cream ceramic.  
Ht. 15.2 cm. (6 in.)  
KISLAK PC 0196

Painted on this vase in codex style, the great serpent of Xibalba (the Underworld) rears his head and from his mouth emerges an old god wearing a net turban. The headdress and his ancient countenance identify the old god as a pawatun, one of the denizens of the Underworld. The beautiful young woman encircled by the coils of the serpent is an aspect of the Moon Goddess and as such may be the consort of the old god. He reaches out from the mouth of the serpent to embrace her. On other vases with the same scenario, and on numerous Maya figurines from the island of Jaina, the old god is seen embracing and fondling the beautiful young Moon Goddess.

There are many tales from Maya mythology that are unfortunately lost. The portrayal of the old god and this young woman with the serpent, nevertheless, may be a way of visually reclaiming this story. From versions of this scene on other vessels, we can read the name of the serpent as Och Chan, who is the alter ego of God K (the God [pictured far left] named K’awiil). We also know from other sources that God K’s leg merges with the tail of the serpent. The action is taking place in an underworld palace setting, as indicated by the swagged curtain over the heads of the participants.

84. **Fluted Codex-Style Vase: Old God Emerging from Serpent Mouth**  
Guatemalan Lowlands.  
Late Classic Maya, a.d. 600–900.  
Red rimmed black-on-cream ceramic.  
Ht. 16.5 cm. (6½ in.); Diam. 13.3 cm. (5¼ in.)  
KISLAK PC 0067

During his lifetime, a Maya ruler was required to take part in endless ceremonies. The artist chose to paint on a diagonally fluted vase a scene of a ruler performing a dedicatory rite with the help of supernaturals.

Dressed in royal finery, a ruler kneels, holding a serpent bar across his chest. A supernatural serpent head with attached jaguar attributes, which may indicate aspects of his name or titles, surmounts his feathered headdress. His kilt is made of jaguar skins, over which he wears a narrow apron with a sky-band pattern ending in scrolls. He is appropriately bejeweled with earflares, pendant, and bracelets.

The serpent bar hypothetically represents the ruler’s command of the Underworld. It is his conduit to and his control over the gods. As the serpent of Xibalba (the Underworld) glides through the tubular bar the ruler holds, an aged god emerges from the reptilian mouth while the tail has transformed into God K, K’awiil. On stelae, rulers are portrayed holding a scepter in the form of the same God K. This is the equivalent of holding the serpent bar and both show the power of the ruler over the forces of nature.

Another supernatural character, Hunahpu, one of the Hero Twins, stands holding a “lip-to-lip” cache vessel tied with a cloth ribbon. Below him is a spiked incensario with paper
offerings that will be burned. The cache vessel, which might contain offerings of jades, flints, feathers, and sea material, will be placed on the incensario to be burnt, the messages sent to the gods on trails of smoke.

85. Codex-Style Vase: Baby Sacrificial Scene
Guatemalan Lowlands.
Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Red rimmed black-on-cream ceramic.
Ht. 12.7 cm. (5 in.);
Diam. 9.5 cm. (3 3/4 in.)
kislak pc 0091

The sacrifice of infants is testified to on a number of Maya vessels, as Karl Taube has shown in writing about the k’ek ceremony that describes the exchange of things of value. That the k’ek sacrifice is an important ceremony in the accession of rulers can be seen carved in stone at Piedras Negras (Stela 11). In the Maya view it was necessary for a substitution to take place between the living ruler and a sacrificed victim who then took the ruler’s place in the Underworld.

Here a ruler on his throne offers an infant to a deity. The infant lying on a cushion of leaves will be the k’ek sacrifice for this ruler. An attendant in regal costume observes the ceremony. To the left of the scene, the sacrificer with stone knife in hand waits with the headless death god to carry out his assignment.

For the Maya artist, the ability to mix supernaturals, such as these sacrificial deities, and humans posed no problem, since the Maya ruler proclaimed his ability to move from this world to the next as an intermediary between his people and the powers of the Underworld.

86. Codex-Style Vase: Jaguar-Baby in the Underworld
Guatemalan Lowlands.
Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Red rimmed black-on-cream ceramic.
Ht. 14.5 cm. (5 3/4 in.);
Diam. 10.5 cm. (4 1/8 in.)
kislak pc 0044

On 8 Cib 4 Kayab, a date in mythological time, a god is born. So the text on this vase informs us. Plunging down from the surface of the Earth, as Karl Taube suggests, is a sacrificed child, an infant wearing god markings, a jaguar tail, and a jaguar ear. The infant, in the position of a child emerging from the womb, is being reborn in the Underworld.

Maya iconography is overlaid with multiple meanings. As the newly born Jaguar God slips beneath the surface of the earth, he symbolizes the Night Sun making its passage through the darkness to be reborn the next day. A huge kawak (stone) throne, with a reclining anthropomorphized monster head with a mirror sign in its forehead and marked with stone glyphs, is where he will come to rest. On one side, waiting to greet him into his new position as Jaguar God of the Underworld, is Chac Cib Chac, God of Rain and Lightning. He wears a collar of death’s eyes, attached to which is an upside-down akbal (darkness) vase from which rain falls. He carries an ax in one hand and a handstone in the other. He wears god markings on his body, a shell ear piece, and fish barbels, reminding us of his watery connections. His other welcomer is God A, the God of Death, whose glyphic name may mean “stinking death.” He too wears a death’s eye collar and other death’s eyes are attached to his head. His backrack is composed of unfleshed bone, death’s eyes, and shroud knots.

87. Flaring Codex-Style Vase: Seated Ruler and Dwarf
Guatemalan Lowlands.
Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Red rimmed black-on-cream ceramic.
Ht. 10 cm. (4 in.);
Diam 11.5 cm. (4 5/8 in.)
kislak pc 0068

A ruler wearing a beaded headdress sits cross-legged on his throne. Behind him are the throne back and the walls of the palace. Swagged curtains are draped over rods in the walls. Extending from under his nose is the abstract form of the underworld monster, proving his connection to the gods. He gestures towards an old god who is facing him. To his left a dwarf, also dressed in a beaded headdress and wearing large jade earflares and necklace, reflects the ruler’s finery. Dwarfs are not uncommon in throne scenes. Dwarfs may occupy a similar position to that of the jester in European courts. Usually they are dressed in the fine jewelry and costuming that implies high status in the throne room. The glyphic passage gives the titles of the ruler and suggests that an offering is being made.
88. Codex-Style Vase: Text with Sixty Hieroglyphs
Guatemalan Lowlands.
Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Red and black-on-cream ceramic.
Ht. 5.5 cm. (2¹/₈ in.); Diam. 4.5 cm. (1¾ in.)
kislak pc 0188

As in all societies where lineage served political purposes, the Maya kept dynastic lists in varied forms. The great hieroglyphic stairway at Copán, in Honduras, recorded the names of the rulers of Copán. Stelae and lintels often recorded the familial history of rulers by naming their fathers and mothers. Pakal’s sarcophagus was embellished, not only with the names, but also with the portraits of his ancestors.

Ceramic vases were also used to record lists of rulers. This vase is one of a series that details the rulers of one of the polities represented by the kan or snakehead emblem glyph. Although the seat of the Kan rulers was at the great city of Calakmul by the Late Classic period, the king list on this and similar vessels may record an earlier period in the history of the Kan dynasty, when their capital was located elsewhere.

The text starts with the calendar round date Chuwen 9 Pohp. The calendar round date is a combination of a numbered day name and a numbered month name. This date can only appear once in a fifty-two-year cycle, but since there is no other information as to the specific cycle in question, we can only guess at the year. There is always the possibility that archaeologists will find some evidence to complete the reading of the date.

The text reads, “on 7 Chuwen, 19 Pohp was born K’awiil, he holds up the sky, Lord of Kan.” The glyph reading “was born K’awiil” is a euphemism for a ruler being born; “He holds up the sky” is his name phrase. The text goes on to list the dates of birth of ten more rulers in the line, and ends with the single day sign date 8 Caban. Perhaps the text continued on another vessel, since the calendar round date must contain both the day and the month names to place it in time.

89. Tall Vase with Regal Dressing
Scene in Palace
Guatemalan Lowlands. Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Polychrome ceramic.
Ht. 23.5 cm. (9³/₄ in.); Rim Diam. 9 cm. (3½ in.)
kislak pc 0040

Fully stuccoed vases are a rarity in the corpus of Maya vessels. Stuccoed surfaces are delicate and often do not survive in the moisture-ridden climate of the rain forest.

A ruler stands in a palace building in front of his throne on which rests an offering or cache vessel. In his right hand he holds a circular banner surrounded by feathers. This may represent a smaller version of the large circular battle standards that are seen at ballgames and war events, often painted with information that would identify his person. He wears a giant macaw head over a net headdress and this also may identify his site or family name. Painted on the right leg of the throne are his name and titles, the last of which is the title buxb, literally meaning “the stood up one,” the rank held by rulers. An attendant, kneeling on the steps of the throne room, wearing an iguana headdress, speaks to the ruler. Warriors and participants in bloodletting rites may wear iguana headdresses after battles. Traces of another attendant are discernible on the right side of the throne. At the extreme left of the scene a woman dressed in a long wrapped skirt and short net huipil gestures toward the ruler.

The long text block painted on the structure that acts as the dividing wall of the room is eroded, but the remnants suggest that names and titles were present.

90. Palace Scene Vase with Four Figures and Trophy Head
Guatemalan Lowlands.
Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Polychrome orange-gloss ceramic.
Ht. 20.5 cm. (8¹/₈ in.); Diam. 16.8 cm. (6₃/₄ in.)
kislak pc 0070

Swagged curtains decorate a palace room in which an accession to the throne ceremony is taking place. A musician playing a gourd instrument (quiro), which he strokes with a slightly curved stick, bows to a regal Maya who is to be installed as ruler. A lady hovers in the background.
carrying a plate with a mask in it. She is dressed in a huipil made of striped fabric and decorated with cartouches of underworld monsters. A heavy jade pendant is suspended from around her neck while a dangle of jade beads on her back counterbalances the necklace. The new ruler wears a heavy beaded necklace with a flower (?) suspended from it. His wrapped kilt is fringed and painted. Behind the musician stands an elaborately dressed dignitary holding a staff and a ball of póm (incense), perhaps the major-domo who is directing the ceremony. On the floor, in between the ruler and the quivo player, offerings are placed in a bowl.

The main text begins with a general verb meaning “it will be done” and is followed by the glyph for accession, a picture of a tied bundle expressing the idea of “the burden the ruler will assume.” Then follows his name glyphs, which end with the sign for his office, one of the glyphs for ajaw (lord). The strings of smaller glyphs repeat the word for holy or sacred.

91. WHITE BACKGROUND VASE WITH SIX FIGURES AND Glyphs
Guatemalan Lowlands.
Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Polychrome ceramic.
Ht. 21.5 cm. (8 in.); Diam. 15 cm. (6 in.)
Kislak PC 0089
A Maya ruler wrapped in an elaborately woven garment sits on his throne greeting foreign visitors. The ruler is simply but richly dressed. His wrist is covered with a jade bracelet and a large tubular jade bead is suspended on his chest. An attendant with arms folded across his chest stands at attention behind the ruler, acting as his bodyguard. A royal mirror sits on the floor in front of the dais. It is housed in a large ceramic vessel painted to resemble basketwork. The mirror is resting on a roll of cloth and both are placed in another container that may have covered the mirror when it was not in use.

Speaking to the ruler is a dignitary, who may indeed be an interpreter. His garment, tied around his huge middle, is decorated with painted and tie-dyed designs. He wears a tubular headdress held with a flower and a tubular jade bead on his chest. The other visitor, accompanied by two dancers, is elaborately dressed. His jade collar and wristbands are made of rectangular plaques, probably incised. His headdress, surmounted with an array of feathers, is the head of the Vulture God, Ta Hol, thereby proclaiming him a Maya lord. He wears a heavily embroidered belt with panels in the front and rear and he holds a baton in each hand, which may be symbols of his office. The dancers behind him are painted black and assume a striking pose, turning away from the main scene. They both wear belts decorated with sky signs and each wears a long panel with feathers attached to his back. The glyphic inscriptions are the names and titles of the participants in this meeting.

92. VASE WITH LORDS IN THE MOUTHS OF SERPENTS
Guatemalan Lowlands.
Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Polychrome ceramic.
Ht. 22.5 cm. (8 7/8 in.)
Kislak PC 0021
The Maya depicted the Underworld (Xibalba) in numerous ways, one of which was as a great serpent with an open mouth. He can be a composite of snake, caiman, and sea snail, combined with other animals such as deer. Some refer to this as the “Bearded Dragon” because of a small beard that drops from under his lower jaw. His mouth is generally wide open with the snout curled backwards. In his gaping jaws and sinuous coils we find gods and other creatures of the Underworld. He is associated with funerary scenes where mortals descend into the Underworld and visions of ancestors appear in his open maw.

In this scene, the serpent’s head rests on a skull, while a noble lord, wearing a flower headdress in the style of the Petexbatun area, sits in his open jaws. The lord is dead and is shown as having arrived in the Underworld. The Maya make no distinction in their portrayal of the departed or the living. They are always alive, in this world or the other.

93. VASE WITH RULER, WARRIOR TRUMPETER, AND Glyph Columns
Guatemalan Lowlands.
Late Classic Maya, A.D. 600–900.
Polychrome orange-gloss ceramic.
Ht. 20.5 cm. (8 in.); Diam. 17.8 cm. (7 in.)
Kislak PC 0018
As in many armies throughout history, trumpets sounded the Maya call to war. Trumpeters are seen on a number of Maya vessels with war themes. The costumes depicted on this vase are, iconographically, dedicated to warfare. The central figure, a ruler or war chief, is dressed for battle. His helmet, patterned after war helmets from Early Classic Teotihuacán, is a tall, globular shaped helmet covered with jade plaques and the large circular Tlaloc Storm God eyes. This headdress is also seen on panels with warfare themes from the Maya site of Piedras Negras, among others. In one hand he holds a staff surmounted by a serpent deity and in the other hand, a tied rodent-like animal with another animal head at his waist. He wears a large plumed collar and an elaborate feather backrack.

The trumpeter, who is identified as such in the glyph panel directly in front of him, wears a headdress composed of...
the Teotihuacán-derived Trapeze-and-Ray emblem, another element often found on war helmets and pendants. A similar figure appears on a plate in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The third figure, wearing an unusual costume and face painting, brandishes an ax and is named as a captor.

The Maya often depicted more than one episode of a mythological story on a single vase. The primary source for Maya mythology, recorded at the time of the Conquest in the Quiché Maya epic, the Popol Vuh, relates the story of the death of the Young Corn God and his resurrection in the form of his sons, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, the so-called Hero Twins.

There are three distinct narratives painted on this vase. In the first scene, the Hero Twins are seen as hunters, and can be identified by their rope kilts, headbands, and blowguns. They are recognized as supernaturals by the “god markings” on their bodies. One of the twins uses a short blowgun, while the other, holding a long blowgun, gestures towards birds flying across the scene.

The second scene shows the father of the Twins, Hun Hunahpu, the Young Corn God, who has already been resurrected, being dressed by two young women. Xbalanque, one of the Hero Twins, sits at the edge of the platform on which the action takes place. From other sources it is clear that this is the Twin who has brought the jewels and decorations that will adorn the Young Corn God.

In the third scene Hunahpu and Xbalanque interact with a deity dressed in a net garment and holding a large woven fan. This deity may be Ek Chuah, one of the many aspects of their father, Hun Hunahpu.

The production of honey, both as a source of sugar and as a product that could be fermented into an alcoholic beverage, was important to the ancient Maya for both consumption and as offerings to the gods. To the left of this confrontation, another cormorant tries to untie a bundle. The artist has drawn groups of glyphs that seem to be repetitive, and perhaps had meaning to those who understood the scene.

We find a tableau of creatures of the Underworld being led by a black dog impersonator with an obsidian knife in one hand and a strip of cloth in the other, used, perhaps, to catch sacrificial blood. He wears a cape, which implies sacrifice. The next character is the skeletal God A, in his role as God of Decapitation, holding a bleeding, decapitated head by its hair. He wears a scarf or cape on his shoulders, which implies sacrifice. The last god impersonator wears the cape and hairstyle of God L, one of the most powerful of the underworld lords. Floating above the procession are supernatural animals: a skull-headed creature belching bad odors, a diving bat, a rabbit, and a jaguar make up the rest of the complement of this terrifying group.
The processions begin with a conch trumpet being sounded. A royal person, carried in a litter by two bearers, is accompanied by a retinue of musicians carrying trumpets over their shoulders. A dwarf and a dog are also part of the procession. The litter in which the lord is carried is made of painted cloth, richly adorned with tassels hanging from the edge. The trumpets have long wooden bodies with gourds as the bells attached to their upper ends. The trumpeters and bearers wear broad-brimmed hats over their spangled headdresses.

There are similar scenes on other vessels that provide more clues to its understanding. The appearance of the dog under the litter is one of those clues, since dogs often accompanied itinerant merchants and were guides to the Underworld.

The hunting of deer was both a food gathering and social event, as evidenced by the activities pictured on this vase. The individuals in this hunt wear the hunter’s hat favored by the Hero Twins, a style worn by both supernaturals and humans, probably woven from plant fibers. Scenes similar to the one depicted on this vase still occur in real life in Yucatán. A group of men, probably from the same village, gather together and form a hunt. If they are successful, they will march home, triumphantly carrying their prize, the deer.

This procession is repeated twice on the vase, once as a mythological scene, and again as a realistic hunt that has been successful. The dead white-tailed deer, whose tongue is protruding from its mouth, is carried in a tumpline on the shoulders and head of one of the hunters. The glyphic sign below the tongue of the deer and in front of the mouth of one of the bearers may be the “last breath” glyph. The men in the hunting party are blowing on conch shell trumpets, probably to herald their entrance to the village. The conch shell trumpet is an integral part of the deer hunter’s equipment. The hunters also carry long blowguns, as evidenced by the fact that there are no points on the ends of the shafts, which are shown split and tied along their length. The white-tailed deer was among the largest of the animals that supplied the Maya’s diet and provided skins, horns, and bones for a variety of products and ceremonies.
In decorating their ceramic vessels, the ancient Highland Maya artists of Guatemala used themes derived from their mythology. One of the most popular myths from the Quiché Maya epic, Popol Vuh, may be represented on this vase. The Popol Vuh recounts the adventures of the Hero Twins, one of whose missions was to destroy the power of the underworld gods who controlled the forces of nature. After many trials in the Underworld, known as Xibalba, the Hero Twins, by trickery and magic, defeated and removed the power of these deities, and were themselves transformed into celestial beings.

Here we see an old shell-dwelling deity, God N, about to be pulled from his shell home by a young lord, perhaps one of the Hero Twins. This young man has a Jester God prominently displayed at the front of his headdress, identifying him as an Ajaw, a Maya lord. The underworld gods, intrigued by their magic tricks, asked the Hero Twins to dismember them, believing that they would be reassembled as part of the magical performance. But the Twins do not put the gods back together and so defeat the reign and power of these malevolent beings.

In almost every image of God N, he is shown as an aged, toothless old man. God N, who lives in a shell, is associated with various rituals involving enemas and smoking tobacco, generally in association with woman attendants.

On this vase from the Maya highlands, however, he is portrayed as young man with an ornate flower headdress. Attached to his shell dwelling are stalks of flowers, which would indicate some connection to growth and fertility. The second image is a juvenile version of the same God N in his miniature shell. Attached to his shell is an image of the split plant that sends a clear message of rebirth and regrowth. The V-shaped opening of the budding plant is replicated many times as the corn plant pushing through the earth, as a cleft in a turtle carapace through which rebirth occurs, and as the end view of the ballcourt where the struggle for resurrection takes place.

In decorating their ceramic vessels, the ancient Highland Maya artists of Guatemala used themes derived from their mythology. One of the most popular myths from the Quiché Maya epic, Popol Vuh, may be represented on this vase. The Popol Vuh recounts the adventures of the Hero Twins, one of whose missions was to destroy the power of the underworld gods who controlled the forces of nature. After many trials in the Underworld, known as Xibalba, the Hero Twins, by trickery and magic, defeated and removed the power of these deities, and were themselves transformed into celestial beings.

Here we see an old shell-dwelling deity, God N, about to be pulled from his shell home by a young lord, perhaps one of the Hero Twins. This young man has a Jester God prominently displayed at the front of his headdress, identifying him as an Ajaw, a Maya lord. The underworld gods, intrigued by their magic tricks, asked the Hero Twins to dismember them, believing that they would be reassembled as part of the magical performance. But the Twins do not put the gods back together and so defeat the reign and power of these malevolent beings.

In almost every image of God N, he is shown as an aged, toothless old man. God N, who lives in a shell, is associated with various rituals involving enemas and smoking tobacco, generally in association with woman attendants.

On this vase from the Maya highlands, however, he is portrayed as young man with an ornate flower headdress. Attached to his shell dwelling are stalks of flowers, which would indicate some connection to growth and fertility. The second image is a juvenile version of the same God N in his miniature shell. Attached to his shell is an image of the split plant that sends a clear message of rebirth and regrowth. The V-shaped opening of the budding plant is replicated many times as the corn plant pushing through the earth, as a cleft in a turtle carapace through which rebirth occurs, and as the end view of the ballcourt where the struggle for resurrection takes place.
The cover of this urn carries the image of the great jaguar protector. This fierce jaguar appears earlier in time on a superb wooden lintel from Tikal, where his huge image hovers over the ruler of that site. The opening at the front of the cover may afford a means of communication with the dead.

On the body of the vessel there is a smaller jaguar that probably relates to the transformation of the individual into a supernatural. He surmounts the visage of the Sun God, Kinich Ajaw, who decorates the lower half of the urn.

105. Two-Part Diving Bat Container
Painted reddish-buff ceramic. Ht. 55 cm. (21 in.)

Essentially this is a large hollow zoomorphic container (or incensario) with a removable upper section and the whole resting on a cylindrical pedestal base. The side flanges are voluted to represent webbed wings. The bat effigy is upside down in “diving” position, with its legs and tail and male genitals (modeled on the reverse side) shown on the upper section. The hollow bat head is applied to the base, with the hollow bent arms modeled on the bottom of the wings. The clawed hands hold hooked implements. The bat wears a beaded headband, bell-shaped crest, and a beaded bib. The pointed bat ears flank the head. The eyes are half closed with slit openings, and fangs jut from the upper jaw. The brows and earspools are scrolled while the wrists, arms, and ankles are beaded. Decorative details overall are painted white. Small vent holes are placed in the various hollow elements. The upper section has fewer burial encrustations than the lower, suggesting that the two parts were separated in the burial and subjected to differing depositions.

106. Two Small Vases with High-Relief “Diving Gods”
México, Quintana Roo. Postclassic Maya, A.D. 1200–1400.
Unslipped red ceramic with post-fired polychrome pigment. Hts. 11.4 and 11 cm. (4½ and 4¾ in.); Lids: 9.3 cm. (3½ in.)

Two barrel-shaped effigy vases with raised-ring bases. One has a flat lid with peaked handles and both have elaborate applied high-relief “diving god” figures, with their legs directed upward. Two of these deities wear eagle helmets. All hold unidentified offerings in their hands at the base of the images. The painted iconography is also quite intricate.

These are from a set of seven miniature vases found near Tulum, the best known of which is at the Princeton University Art Gallery. They represent Postclassic Mixtec influence in the Yucatán peninsula and are contemporary with the late Maya site of Mayapan. What is astonishing is the brilliant preservation of the post-fired paint—red, yellow, black, white, and “Maya blue.”

COASTAL LOWLANDS

Ancient Mesoamerica may be divided into three major culture areas: the “Mexican Highlands” in the northwest, the “Maya Lowlands” in the southeast, and the “Coastal Lowlands,” which geographically separate the greater Mexican and Maya areas. This coastal corridor is a very long, continuous, and narrow stretch of alluvial plain and piedmont comprising the eastern Gulf Coast (Veracruz, México) and the Southern Pacific Coast (Chiapas in México, Guatemala, and El Salvador), linked in the middle by the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Much of this area was covered by tropical rain forest in pre-European times. In the south, the Pacific Coast region is bordered by an east–west volcanic chain in the highlands extending across Chiapas and Guatemala. Much of this highland region was intimately related to the Pacific Coastal Lowlands, most importantly the immense site of Kaminaljuyu (with over 200 mounds), now located within and beneath modern Guatemala City. Kaminaljuyu, significantly, supported a dozen ballcourts, as did the site of El Tajín in central Veracruz.

These Coastal Lowlands fostered an historic series of important cultures and art styles: from Olmec (north of the Isthmus), to Izapan (south of the Isthmus), to “Classic Veracruz” (Mexican Gulf Coast) and Classic “Cotzumalhuapa” (Southern Pacific Coast). The time range here is 1200 B.C. to A.D. 900.

The Coastal Lowlands provided a natural route of north–south communication; further, any reciprocal relationships between the various Mexican and Maya civilizations perforce passed through these Coastal Lowlands. Therefore, this was a crucial area in the development of Mesoamerican civilizations, although it has long been subject to less intensive archaeological investigation.

During the Preclassic period, this region was crucial to the development of early Maya civilization, and indeed witnessed the origins of Maya-style art in stone sculptural iconography. During the Classic epoch the Pacific Coast became strongly influenced by sculptural influxes from Highland México, giving rise to the regional “Cotzumalhuapa culture,” better known for its eclectic monumental stone sculpture.
107. Sleeping Feline Effigy Vase
Southern Guatemala. Late Preclassic Maya, 200 B.C.–A.D. 1. Mottled orange “Usulutan” ware. L. 26.5 cm. (10 ½ in.)

A very naturalistic reclining feline effigy with curving neck, relief-modeled forelimbs, perk-up ears, heavy closed eyelids, and lolling tongue. Although it lacks diagnostic jaguar spots, it may represent a puma or jaguar—or another feline such as an ocelot—as it is a monochrome ceramic. This is a collared vessel with a single vertical spout. The ceramic is polished light-and-dark mottled orange, a style and technique known as “clouded Usulutan.” This ware is common to the Pacific Coast and Highlands of Guatemala and El Salvador. The mottled effect is believed to have been achieved by the application of a resist material before firing.

108. Hollow Sleeping Seated Figure
Guatemala, Escuintla. Late Classic, A.D. 600–900. Mold-made orange “Tiquisate Ware.” Ht. 24 cm. (9 ½ in.)

Even in repose, this elegant polished figure wears an arrogant expression suitable to high status. This thin-walled, high-fired ceramic, known as Tiquisate Ware, was probably pressed from a two-piece mold. The bottom is open, there is a circular hole behind the head, and the nostrils are perforated. The mottled light-and-dark orange surface is beautifully sculptured, revealing all the contours of the body. The figure is seated with knees tightly drawn up, arms crossed on the knees, and tilted head resting in the crook of one arm. The backside shows loincloth straps. There are protruding tufts of hair on the head, modeled earplugs, and tattoo-like markings above the nose and flanking the mouth. The majority of known Tiquisate Ware, mold-made hollow figurines from the Pacific Coast, are far more rigid and stylized than is this masterpiece.

109. Carved Vase with Standing Martial Figures
Guatemala, Escuintla. Late Classic Cotzumalhuapan, A.D. 600–900. Painted orange ceramic. Ht. 27.8 cm. (10 in.); Diam. 14.5 cm. (6 in.)

A tall thick-walled cylindrical vase carved and painted in a style indigenous to the Pacific Coast of Guatemala, although this was reported to have been found near Quirigua in the Motagua River drainage, where it could well have been traded. The iconography is typically eclectic in the Late Classic Pacific Coast Cotzumalhuapan tradition. Deep carving and relief reveal two standing warriors surrounded by scrolled motifs. Both warriors hold spear-staffs, wear bird headdresses with long incised trailing elements, and emit convoluted speech scrolls. One wears a serpent belt and the other a long apron. Filler motifs between the principal figures include stylized serpent heads, eyes, and U-shaped symbols. Polished specular hematite red paint highlights the warriors and their headdresses and spears, as well as narrow top and bottom framing bands. The rim and base as well as other details of ornament were painted with a fugitive black pigment. Traces of white paint remain in the recessed carved zones.
111. Hollow Standing Female Figure
Nopiloa ceramics are made of a very thin and lightweight kaolin clay. The entire front of this figure was pressed from a clay mold, with back and bottom slabs applied by hand to enclose the frontal figure, similar in technique to the related “smiling face” figures found nearby. Nopiloa figures, however, are less stylized.
This woman carries a modeled infant slung in her over-the-shoulder shawl. She wears an ankle-length tunic, wrap-around headpiece, and earflares, likely indicating elite status. These features, as well as the eyes, mouth, and toes, are slipped in cream paint. Geometric patterns on the shawl and tunic are rendered in black lines.

112. Hollow “Smiling Face” Figure Holding Box
México, Southern Veracruz. Late Classic, A.D. 600–900. Painted buff ceramic. Ht. 72.5 cm. (28½ in.) KISLAK PC 0123
A monumental hand-made version of the common and conventional smaller mold-made “smiling face” figures from the same region. The front teeth are filed into a Tau shape, a widespread custom. This example has dynamically poised arms, with the right hand proffering a unique rectangular lidded box (the beribboned lid is not removable). Featured in costuming are the wide plain appliqué skirt, a loincloth (visible behind), anklets, wrapped arms, bar earplugs, and a tall helmet with braided flanges. The headdress and most of the body are painted red. Large vent holes were left in the back, nape of the neck, upper headdress, palms of the hands, and soles of the feet. The box and hair fringe have incised detailing.

113. “Smiling Face” Figure on Sacrificial Platform
México, Southern Veracruz. Late Classic, A.D. 600–900. Black-painted ceramic. L. 56 cm. (22 in.); Ht. 52 cm. (20 in.) KISLAK PC 0159
While Veracruz figurines strapped to benches are a standard theme in miniature representations, this example is of monumental size and of unusual complexity. The basal platform, with fret-shaped ends, rests on four tall tubular supports. Attached is a large hoop that the reclining victim grasps. He in turn lies on a tilted platform supported by an openwork crib of poles. The far end is raised on what seems to be a cylindrical incense burner. The headdress rests on a curving element attached to the basal platform. His feet are curiously raised on a double-headed monkey effigy, entirely painted with black bitumen. The nude male victim wears only a beaded necklace and anklets. His face bears the toothy smile characteristic of this genre of southern Veracruz figure.

114. Monumental Jaguar Sculpture
México, Southern Veracruz. Late Classic, A.D. 600–900. Painted buff ceramic. Ht. 63.5 cm. (25 in.) KISLAK PC 0160
A large hollow, marvelously naturalistic seated male jaguar with an open snarling mouth. It wears what we know to be a “sacrificial scarf” around its neck. The fearsome tropical jaguar was a principal sacred creature in much of Mesoamerica. The modeling of the body is more human than feline, connoting the deification of this animal. Mesoamerican peoples believed that they possessed animal companion spirits or co-essences and these animal or composite forms are often depicted in various media from Early Preclassic times up to, and past, the period of European contact. Indeed, such representations may be seen in the jaguar dances of traditional indigenous peoples to this day.
There is an intentional square opening in the upper back, as well as round vent holes behind the haunches and in the forelimbs and in the ears. A row of tiny perforations in the maws may have been intended to hold real whiskers. Further perforations under the scarf suggest the attachment of other
materials. The male genitals are modeled in relief and various scored details indicate his belt as well as folds in the scarf. The head and body are painted red, with the pupils and nostrils black. The large opening in the back suggests that this served as a container, if not an incense burner.

A famous painted monumental clay jaguar of similar form, but from Monte Alban in Oaxaca, is housed in the Mexican National Museum.

115. Double-Headed Serpent Celestial Emblem
Unslipped buff ceramic. Ht. 73.5 cm. (29 in.); W. 65 cm. (25 in.);
Cross-section: 14 cm. (5½ in.)
KISLAK PC 0194

This unique large ceramic object likely was used as a celestial frame for a standing elite figure or deity. Very simply, it is a U-shaped, double-headed supernatural serpent monster, a form that conceptually represented a canopy over the heavens—perhaps the ecliptic path along which the Sun, Moon, and planets travel—and therefore was viewed as a celestial symbol of the cosmos. It is constructed as a hollow squared tube, with abstract, appliqué profile serpent heads on the downward ends of the inverted U. These are decorated in a raised-border scroll in Classic Veracruz style. Formerly, projecting flanges or scrolls were attached to the sides as well.

There are some puzzling questions as to how this heavy three-dimensional icon was actually used. Being finished on all four sides, it was probably not an ornamental architectural attachment. Curiously, the top segment is horizontally perforated, suggesting that this could have been slung on a pole and carried in processions as an emblem, perhaps in a rain-inducing festival. In Veracruz, there is also evidence that large rectangular ceramic effigy altars may have been carried, like litters, in a similar fashion.

There are many permutations of and nuances to the U-shape and the double serpent in Mesoamerican thought. The U-form itself represents either the heavens or the earth, depending upon the orientation of the opening. The serpentine body with supernatural heads at both ends can also surround the universe or symbolize the earth “container.” In any event, the iconography embodies a philosophical dualism that was vital to Mexican and Maya religions.

116. Pair of Carved Long Bones
México, Northern Veracruz, Huastec region. A.D. 1200–1500.
Carved and polished bone.
Hts. 30.5 and 24.5 cm. (12 and 9 in.)
KISLAK PC 0125

These split bone fragments were found together in the Huastec region, but the carved pictographic panels reflect Postclassic Mixtec style from Central México. The bone itself has not been specifically identified, although judging by other identified ritual bone objects, these are likely to be jaguar. The longer example is a broken fragment; the visible upper four panels depict profile warriors with staffs; the bottom complete panel is an upended profile serpent. The smaller split bone is a complete object, with rounded spatula tip. Its upper panel shows another warrior, but the lower four panels feature the penis perforation ritual: a common Mesoamerican form of bloodletting penance. The rite is depicted at the main ballcourt at El Tajin, Veracruz, and also in Classic Maya art.

BALLGAME

A game played by two sides with a solid rubber ball, which was hit from the waist level or lower arms, the winning or losing of which could have great religious or political significance, was one of the primary defining cultural features of Mesoamerica. Virtually every major archaeological site maintained at least one architectural ballcourt.

The ballgame complex was truly pan-Mesoamerican in space and time. During the Classic period (A.D. 200–900) the Coastal Lowlands, in both the Classic Veracruz and Cotzumalhuapan sectors, hosted the climax of the ballgame “cult” in Mesoamerica: the intensive realization of fundamental symbolism, iconography, and physical accoutrements. This is the home area for the elaboration of the stone yoke (yuga), hacha, and palma paraphernalia, the greatest concentration of ballcourts, and the most prolific production of monumental stone sculpture depicting ballgame themes. Whereas the forms, rules, and meanings of the Mesoamerican rubber-ball game doubtless changed from region to region and epoch to epoch, the Classic cult as manifested in the Coastal Lowlands was surely the epitome of all ritual aspects.

The ballgame was played as both a sport and a ritual performance. As a state-level ritual event, the “game” often culminated in human sacrifice, normally decapitation. In a cosmology that embraced “sympathetic magic,” the decapitated head ritually replaced the ball itself and the heads were often pierced for display on a tzompantli skull rack. The cult may have served for purposes of divination and the prognostication of extraterrestrial events; but through time it was increasingly manipulated for worldly political purposes as well as esoteric meanings attached to the movements of the
rubber ball. The layout of the ballcourts, the action of the players, the outcomes, and the post-game sacrifices fundamentally pertained to concepts of maintaining primary cosmic cycles, particularly the vernal and autumnal equinoxes and seasonal agricultural fertility. Emphasized were the pervading dualities of dry season/rainy season, sky/Underworld, day/night, Sun/Moon, morning/evening Venus, and most especially death/rebirth. There was a preoccupation with the Underworld, including the passage and transformation of sacrificed ballplayers. This primarily symbolized the diurnal death and rebirth of the Sun. The sacrifice of the Sun (in the west), in the guise of a “privileged” ballplayer, helped to assure its successful Underworld passage and ultimate transformation and rebirth (in the east). This was metaphorically equivalent to the regeneration of maize and vegetation, and of life itself.

The U-form of the yoke, other than serving as practical midriff padding and as a solid ball deflector, esoterically symbolized the “mouth of the earth” and “cave-like entrance” - an almost somnambulistic transgression of the supernatural serpents. The frontally attached hachas, like the palmas, could have had little practical function in the execution of the ballgame. They may, on the other hand, have had important heraldic significance for the individual players or teams.

Most Classic hachas are wedge shaped or laterally flattened, and thus are more appropriately described as “thin stone heads.” The Veracruz examples generally have notched rear corners, ostensibly for ease of attachment to the side arms of yokes. The specialized tall palmas, serving the same function as the hachas, seem to have gradually evolved from squat hacha forms, and tend to cluster toward the end of the Late Classic sequence.

Another item of portable stone paraphernalia surviving archaeologically, and occasionally depicted in ballgame art, is the “handstone,” which served like a bat and perhaps as hand protection for falls to the hard, paved court. Such objects, which are found in a variety of forms, were used only in certain regional variants of the rubber-ball game.

Whereas there can be no doubt of the functional association of yokes, hachas, and palmas with the ballgame and player’s equipment, it is unclear whether the carved stone “replicas” themselves were worn during an active game. Although the surviving stone “belts” do fit sideways above the hips surprisingly comfortably, they may have been worn only during post-game sacrificial ceremonies, these perhaps taking place outside of the ballcourts. Most researchers favor the hypothesis that the U-shaped objects worn on the waist during the game normally were carved of perishable wood (or fabricated of wicker, padding, and leather), as would have been the symbolic hachas or palmas lashed to those yokes.

relief sculpture of the Kislak Collection provides an important example. The “action shot” shows an ornately dressed and bejeweled player—clearly a nobleman—kneeling and about to strike a ball that would have been shown on an adjacent block (this is one half of a larger scene). The player wears the large chest protector, glove, and flaring skirt seen in many ballgame depictions. His headdress depicts the head of a snake, perhaps a name or emblem, and is adorned with bundles of quetzal feathers. Two hieroglyphs are lightly incised into the background of the relief near the forearm of the player, giving his name and title. Unfortunately, his name is difficult to read, but in the second of the two glyphs we read the spelling of the word pitz, “ballgame” or “ballplayer.”

The stone comes from the ruins of La Corona, located in remote northern Guatemala. It was originally part of a much larger set of blocks bearing scenes of other ballplayers interspersed with beautifully carved hieroglyphic inscriptions, all of which once formed an ornate sculpted step, or series of steps, from a building or temple near its central plaza. Looters first discovered La Corona in the wilds of northern Guatemala in the mid-1960s, and the easily transportable carved stones were quickly carted off and sold on the international art market. So far fourteen stones from this building have been documented, scattered in various collections throughout the world, but many more must lie hidden. From what we can reconstruct of the partial text and the images on the blocks, the full assembly recorded mythical and historical ballgames, including matches between nobles of La Corona and the more powerful kings of Calakmul, the large expansionistic kingdom to the north. The political and diplomatic meanings of such games remain obscure, but they no doubt were key in maintaining, and expressing through ritual, a vital alliance between the two centers.

One of the other La Corona ballplayer stones made its way into the collections of the Heye Foundation, now owned by the National Museum of the American Indian. Looking at the two stones, it seems very possible that they form a pair that shows a more complete scene—this player, a ball, and his acrobatic opponent—a standard arrangement in many Maya ballgame scenes.

—David Stuart
118. Two Miniature Flasks with Ballplayer Panels
Guatemalan Lowlands.
Late Classic Maya, a.d. 600–900.
Mold-made cream-slipped ceramics with red cinnabar.
Hts. 11.5 and 13.3 cm.
(4½ and 5½ in.)
F1434.64 NO 0283;  F1434.64 NO 0301

These two rectangular architectural flasks bear identical moldpressed narrative panels on front and back. They each feature a dynamic ballplayer with long snouted plumed animal headdress and the Maya-style “ball deflector” worn high on the torso, along with additional padding. Each player leans over a large rodent-like animal image, probably a rabbit, which embodies the ball. A glyph (9 Naab) is impressed on that animal’s back, along with two other isolated round glyph-like signs above. The “9 Naab” expression indicates the size of the ball, namely nine handspans. In the Quiche Maya Popol Vuh legend, a rabbit takes an active role in a specific underworld ballgame contest between the Hero Twins and the underworld Lords of Death. This is one of several known Maya flasks impressed with the same scene. The larger flask on the right has identical three-glyph column texts of remarkable head variant forms on both narrow sides. The sides of the smaller flask are plain.

—John B. Carlson

119. Ceremonial Ballgame Yoke in Form of Toad
Carved gray granite.
L. 43 cm. (17 in.); W. 38 cm. (15 in.)
kislak pc 0134

A rather naturalistic toad representation wraps around the U-form of the yoke. Its flexed limbs are deeply sculpted in a speckled gray-green stone with brown staining. The eyes are broad ovals, the basal septum projects into the upper lip, and a wide scrolled element flows downward from the upper gum. The bottom, the inner edge, and the ends are plain.

In ballgame symbolism, the toad stands for a primal earth monster and is used as the most prevalent theme on carved yokes during the Protoclassic and Early Classic periods. This sculpture lacks the scrolled tracery common to Late Classic Veracruz stone yokes.

120. Ballgame “Knee Yoke” with Acrobat
México, Southern Veracruz.
Middle Preclassic, 700–500 B.C.
Volcanic basalt with red pigment.
L. 12 cm. (4½ in.); Ht. 10 cm. (4 in.)
kislak pc 0097

So-called knee yokes, or yugitos, are believed to be ceremonial replicas of a ballplayer’s knee padding, usually worn on a single knee for protection against frequent falls to the paved court while retrieving a low ball.

The known stone objects of this form are of Middle or early Late Preclassic date. This example is typical, with its deep U-shaped trough designed to fit the leg just below the knee. In grooved relief, the bulbous surface sustains a Late Olmec-style acrobat. At the front we see the crossed arm upper torso and the squared head with fat lips and deeply pitted eyes. Not so obvious is the fact that the body is bent around the surface, with the toed feet touching the top of the acrobat’s head. The legs continue over the top, with the belted waist and lower torso carved on the back. Red pigment remains in grooves and covers the belt, arms, and the beveled sides of the object.

121. Ballgame “Hand Stone” with Rain God
Gray-green stone.
Ht. 19 cm. (7½ in.); W. 15.3 cm. (6 in.)
kislak pc 0140

There is evidence in ballgame iconography that handstones, or manoplas, are also replicas of a player’s glove or other object that were apparently used as a hand protector for falls to the paved court. (On the other hand, they may indicate the presence of a quite different “handball” game as opposed to the more prevalent “hipball” game.) In the Middle Preclassic, such stone objects often have a form-fitting handgrip on their backs. This large example has an actual loop handle, as do a number of the smaller Classic period hand stones. Other enigmatic Classic period objects in this category are called “padlock” stones after their odd configuration.

Carved in low relief on this hand stone is an early version of the Zapotec Rain God, Cocio. Thick eye enclosures end in broad scrolls. The fanged, toothy mouth emits a double scrolled tongue. However, most known examples of this type of object come from either the Mexican Gulf Coast or the Southern Pacific Coast.

122. Flat Hacha Depicting Monkey
Guatemalan Pacific Coast.
Cotzalhuapa culture.
Late Classic, a.d. 600–900.
Tan volcanic stone.
Ht. and W. 21.5 cm. (8½ in.)
kislak pc 0153

Guatemalan thin stone hacha heads usually have squared-off lower rear corners and occasionally tenons for attachment to the wooden yoke, as in this example. Monkeys are a common theme, as well as death’s heads and raptorial birds. As in most hachas, the two flat faces are carved in mirror image. This monkey is deathlike, with its exposed mandible, tooth row, and deeply pitted nose and eyes. Other relief carving consists of a cheek line, supraorbital lobes, and forehead scrolls. The plain head comes to a sharp crest.
Chapter I: From the Olmec to Columbus / Mexican Highlands

Early Classic Teotihuacán civilization as well as the Late central region was the Valley of México, home of the great tepec. This ecologically diverse area, frequently semi-arid, extended from the Pacific coast and the state of Oaxaca in the south to the state of Hidalgo in the north. The hub of the Mexican highlands shaped frame is pecked smooth.

On the Gulf Coast, short palmas are considered earlier in the evolution of the form than the tall, graceful Terminal Classic palmas. The convex base suggests the attachment area to the yoke in its presumed emblematic ball-game function. Fierce raptorial birds are a common theme on carved Veracruz palmas, but this simple immature eagle head is charmingly unexpected. The deep-set eyes give a droll expression above the attenuated beak. In sharp, elegant relief are found eyelids, eyebrows, head crest, and flanking head scrolls. The backside is flat.

**123. Low Palma with Eaglet**
México, Veracruz. Late Classic, A.D. 600–900. Gray volcanic basalt. Ht. 21 cm. (8 in.)

On the Gulf Coast, short palmas are considered earlier in the evolution of the form than the tall, graceful Terminal Classic palmas. The convex base suggests the attachment area to the yoke in its presumed emblematic ball-game function. Fierce raptorial birds are a common theme on carved Veracruz palmas, but this simple immature eagle head is charmingly unexpected. The deep-set eyes give a droll expression above the attenuated beak. In sharp, elegant relief are found eyelids, eyebrows, head crest, and flanking head scrolls. The backside is flat.

**124. Ballgame Eagle Effigy Palma**
México, Veracruz. Late Classic, A.D. 600–900. Gray volcanic basalt. Ht. 28 cm. (11 in.)

Low palma with sharp lower notch intended for fitting to the side of a yoke in the same functional manner as the ballgame hachas. This form is somewhat earlier than the very tall scroll-decorated Terminal Classic palmas from Veracruz. Sculpted in high relief on the front is a majestic harpy eagle sporting a segmented crest, raptorial beak resting on the breast, poised claws, and stylized scroll wings. The back of this flatiron-shaped frame is pecked smooth.

**125. Funerary Mask**
Central México, Teotihuacán. Early Classic, A.D. 200–500. Carved greenstone. Ht. 18.5 cm. (7 ¾ in.); W. 21 cm. (8 ½ in.); D. 12.5 cm. (5 in.)

An unusually massive stone mask with very deep relief, but of diagnostic Teotihuacán style. These prevalent stone masks actually are found more frequently in western than in central México. The rectangular flanged ears are perforated and pairs of suspension holes are found on the rear edges at the temples and jaws. The back has a carved-out depression. The eye sockets are deeply drilled and have sharp edges with grooved definitions. Deep drill holes remain inside the parted mouth. The best hypothesis suggests that these were the funerary masks of the Teotihuacán elite that were attached to mummy bundles.
126. Funerary Mask
An exceptionally refined and sophisticated example of the stylized classic, Phase III, Teotihuacán polished stone facemasks. The artisan has taken best advantage of the green veins in this unusual hard stone. The eyes are groove-outlined and the mouth is sensitively realistic, with the lips slightly parted. The conventional tabular ears have been perforated and, as usual, there is a trough-shaped depression on the reverse side. Also there are four pairs of bi-conically drilled holes on the rear edges for attachment of the mask. Such masks were likely attached to the mummy bundles of high-status Teotihuacanos.

127. Rabbit Effigy Vessel
Central México, Tlatilco. Middle Preclassic. 1150–550 b.c. Ceramic with a cream-colored slip highlighted with black resist design. Ht. 21.6 cm. (8½ in.) KISLAk Pc 0210
West México

The Pacific Coast region designated as West México extends from the state of Guerrero northward to Sinaloa. It centers in the Mexican states of Colima, Jalisco, and Nayarit. The best-known Terminal Preclassic substyles of effigy pottery in the region carry these same names. A very early culture discovered there, called Xochipala, was generally contemporaneous with the Gulf Coast Olmec. It is characterized by distinctive clay figurines and carved stone bowls. In addition, a fair amount of jade and other fine-stone carvings has come from West México, suggesting intensive communication and perhaps trade with the Gulf Coast in Middle Preclassic times. Other distinctive Preclassic art styles also have their homeland there, such as Mezcala.

It was during the Terminal Preclassic era (approximately 200 B.C.–a.d. 300) that the famous specialized “shaft-tomb culture” became established in the states of Colima, Jalisco, and Nayarit. The associated subterranean graves consist of single or multi-domed chambers carved out some fifteen to forty-five feet below the ground. A square vertical shaft connects them to the surface. The only other area of the New World with this style of burial chamber is the northern Andes, which may be the source of the concept (there is other intriguing evidence of some pre-Columbian contacts between Pacific Mesoamerica and Colombia-Ecuador). Multiple burials in the West Mexican shaft tombs were accompanied by quantities of large, hollow figures, effigy vessels, and small, solid figurines. The style of modeled ceramic sculpture, usually described as secular, realistically and narratively depicts scenes from everyday life. However, it is more probable that there were strong funerary, religious, and shamanistic overtones for much of the inventory of shaft-tomb pottery.

The Kislak Collection includes several masterpiece examples of large, hollow effigy clay figures from each of the principal substyles: Colima, Jalisco, and Nayarit. Shaft tomb contents in Nayarit occasionally include clay house models showing realistic thatched roofs and domestic scenes of household activities. These modeled scenes are relatively rare but are extremely important for future research into the ritual and daily lives of the people. As regards the human and animal clay figures, they were placed in the shaft tombs as offerings to the dead to accompany them in their afterlife.

128. Acrobat Figurine
West México, Xochipala. Early Preclassic, 1500–1000 b.c. Reddish-buff ceramic. W. 10 cm. (4 in.) KISLAk Pc 0131
Solid hand-modeled figure, apparently of a woman performing arm and leg bends. Her plain coiffure is parted and she wears wrist and ankle bands. The eyes and mouth are punctuated. There is a long perforation through the head to the base, possibly for suspension of the spider-like object. It has been suggested that this may be a shaman in acrobatic contortions during a transformation process.

129. Temple Model
West México, Mezcala. Late Preclassic, 500–200 b.c. Carved gray stone. Ht. 15 cm. (5½ in.) KISLAk Pc 0047
The Preclassic Mezcala style of the central Rio Balsas basin in Guerrero is known for its highly abstract portable stone figures, masks, and these flat architectural models of columned temples (or perhaps porticoed houses). Perforations delineate four columns, plus a central protuberance that is grooved to represent a stylized human figure. Another carved abstract human figure lies horizontally on the flat roof. Deep grooves outline an upper and basal molding, as well as the six central access steps.
Furst, who argued that ancient West Mexican ceramic models were symbolic representations of house-and-tomb complexes, where figures visible in the upper storey corresponded to the living and those below represented the deceased, or the ancestors (Furst 1975; see also Furst 1966).

More recently, these objects have been interpreted as depicting daily activities in the lives of the ancient West Mexican mortuary tradition and lends credence to Furst’s hypothesis that the ceramic models depict house-and-tomb complexes.

Geographical Sourcing of House Models
Study of the eight ceramic house models in the Jay I. Kislak Collection provides an opportunity to ask new questions about West Mexican models. For example, where specifically in West México did these pieces originate? Ancient West Mexican house models have been attributed to Ixtlán del Río, in the southeastern region of Nayarit (see Gifford 1950), despite the fact that none of the known examples have archaeological context. Furthermore, differences in artistic styles, ceramic paste types, and firing techniques among the eight ceramic models in the Kislak Collection suggest there was more than one center of production for these objects. Through the use of archaeometric methods available at the Library of Congress, we hope to arrive at a more specific geographic origin for these objects.

With the collaboration of the Preservation Research and Testing Division of the Library of Congress and Ron Bishop at the Smithsonian Institution, neutron activation analysis (NAA) was conducted on ceramic samples from the house models in the Kislak Collection. NAA identifies trace elements present in clay, creating a chemical signature that can then be matched to specific geographical regions. These results will be incorporated into a larger study, the West México Geographical Sourcing Project, currently underway at the Library of Congress.

Form and Function of Houses in West México
Ethnohistoric documents and ethnographic research provide information on the form and function of houses in West México, from the late sixteenth century forward. The Relaciones Geográficas, which collected answers to a fifty-part questionnaire ordered by Philip II, are one valuable resource (see:

**HOUSE MODELS OF WEST MÉXICO**

Ceramic “house models” from West México (200 B.C.–A.D. 300) are some of the earliest examples of architectural representation in Mesoamerica (see Schávelzon 1982, 2004). While over a hundred house models are known from public and private collections, to date, none have been scientifically excavated, raising questions about where they were made and how they were used. Past scholarship has focused on either classification or interpretation of these objects, widely considered to be burial offerings. Hasso von Winning developed an architectural typology for the one- and two-storey ceramic representations and postulated that the figures within them reflected daily activities in the lives of the ancient West Mexicans (von Winning and Hammer 1972; von Winning 1974).

More recently, these objects have been interpreted as depicting venues for ritual drinking and feasting (Butterwick 1998). One of the most prescient hypotheses was put forth by Peter Furst, who argued that ancient West Mexican ceramic models were symbolic representations of house-and-tomb complexes, where figures visible in the upper storey corresponded to the living and those below represented the deceased, or the ancestors (Furst 1975; see also Furst 1966).

Archaeological investigation of West Mexican Late Formative period architecture, undertaken by Phil Weigand and Christopher Beekman, has revealed a correlation between circular architectural complexes (unique to West México) and ancient West Mexican models representing circular ceremonial centers, also referred to by scholars as dioramas (see Weigand 1999; Beekman 2003a; Beekman 2003b). Characteristically, ceramic ceremonial center models depict a central altar surrounded by four rectangular structures that sit on a circular base. This same pattern has been discerned in the archaeological record from Late Formative Period sites in Jalisco (Corona Núñez 1955; Long 1966; Weigand 1989, 1990, 1993, 1996, 1999; Beekman 1996; López Mestas Cabreros and Ramos de la Vega 1998; Weigand and Beekman 1998) and Zacatecas (Cabrero 1994; Cabrero and López Cruz 1998). Additionally, shaft tombs have been found below house foundations in these circular complexes (López Cruz and Cabrero 1994; Ramos de la Vega and López Mestas 1996; López Mestas and Ramos de la Vega 1998; Weigand and Beekman 1998). These finds suggest that this concentric circular architectural pattern is related to ancient West Mexican mortuary tradition and lends credence to Furst’s hypothesis that the ceramic models depict house-and-tomb complexes.

130. Hollow Kneeling Male Figure
This dynamic portrait sculpture is modeled of tan clay with red loin-cloth and beaded upper armbands. The hands are bold and seemingly clumsy, the ears are pierced for ornaments (probably made of perishable materials), and the tooth row is incised. Firing vent holes are also found in the ears. A great quantity of such amusing effigy ceramics has been discovered in deep subterranean tombs in this area, dating to the centuries around the beginning of the Common Era.

131. Female Figure
From northwest Jalisco, this figure projects a content and contemplative expression and conveys an intimacy in a formal sculptural style distinctive of West Mexican art. She has a broad back and fluidly tapered limbs. She holds a flattened palm to her cheek, lips closed with a slight smile, and her rimmed eyes look downward.
Cline 1964, 1974). The aim of the Relaciones Geográficas was to acquire data on the geography, agriculture, and natural resources in the Spanish Crown’s New World territories. Many of the reports from West México were compiled in the late sixteenth century. Responses to question number thirty-one (which focused on the types of houses, casas, found in the area) describe indigenous accommodations as small, one-storey adobe structures with stone foundations. Often the walls were mud-plastered, sometimes with colorful local clay. Roofs, when described, were made of straw (see Amaya 1951 [522]); Rea 1951, 1952). While none of the Relaciones Geográficas mentions the ancient practice of burying the deceased under house floors, these sixteenth-century descriptions correspond to archaeological remains dating to the Late Formative period. The Relación Geográfica for the town of Ameca is specific about the function of these casas, describing four different types. One of these is not for people, but for idols (casa de adoración) (see Amaya 1951 [522], 43).

The notion that indigenous constructions were function-specific, serving the needs of the living and the gods, respectively, was also observed by Carl Lumholtz in the course of his field research for the American Museum of Natural History in New York (Lumholtz 1902). For the Huichol, one of the oldest surviving tribes of pre-Hispanic origin living in the Sierra Madre of northwestern México (Jalisco and Nayarit), structures could fall into one of three categories: houses, god houses, or temples. Houses had gabled roofs which rested on four poles. The roof was so low that one had to stoop to enter. Temples were built on the same plan as houses, only larger, with a doorway that faced east and was never covered with a door. God houses comprised the third type. These structures were rectangular in shape with a thatched gabled roof and were found in conjunction with temples (Lumholtz 1902, 27–29). While the Relaciones Geográficas are silent about house-and-tomb complexes, Lumholtz observed that the Huichol in the southern part of the country buried their dead in the middle of the house in a grave just over a yard deep. Families would not abandon these buildings at a death, but would continue to dwell in them for four generations (Lumholtz 1902, 242).

Cranial Reformation in House-Model Figurines

Within the ceramic house models from the Kislak Collection are a variety of distinct figural types. Gender is relayed through dress, status through relative size and adornments, and role through the figure’s placement within the model, in addition to the attributes it is given. Some figures play drums or shell trumpets, while others sing, sleep, or climb poles. Each figure is further distinguished through the shape of its head. This may be an intentional attempt to reflect identities of kin group or ethnicity. Among the Kislak house models, three distinct cranial types are discernible. The first reflects occipital flattening, the second reflects occipital and temporal flattening, and the third frontal and occipital flattening. Distinct, intentionally modified cranial types have been identified among the large hollow ceramic figures from ancient West México, as well as on human crania from shaft tomb burials (Long 1966).

One of the first to observe that ancient West Mexicans made ceramic figures in their own likeness was Stanley Long (Long 1966). George Gill, working at about the same time, examined over one hundred scientifically excavated crania from coastal Nayarit. Within the culture groups studied, Gill discovered four different types of cranial reformation. Coincidentally, he distinguished four distinct types of cranial shape among ancient West Mexican ceramic figurines (Gill 1971; see also Gill 1977, 1985). Robert Pickering has suggested that cranial reformation may reflect ascribed status (as it must occur at birth), whereas other types of body modification, for example dental reformation, reflect achieved status (Pickering, personal communication 2006).

Cranial reformation in house-model figurines has not been discussed in the academic literature. Its occurrence on small-scale figures within ceramic house models is significant, however, as it underscores the social importance of head shape and additionally suggests that people within the same culture group or interactive sphere may have practiced different types of cranial reformation. —Juliet Wiersema

132. House Model with Musicians
West México, Nayarit. Terminal Preclassic, 200 B.C. – A.D. 300. Ceramic with traces of pre-fired paint. Ht. 23 cm. (9 in.) KISLAK PC 0231
The form and style of this house model is unusual in the West México corpus. A tall structure open on two sides is occupied by three figures. One holds a striped staff or stick and faces the back while the other two figures (one who holds a bowl and the other who blows into a gourd-like object) face the front. Directly below them sit three “musicians,” who appear to sing while playing instruments, a drum and possibly a rasp. A vertical ladder with seven steps connects the porch with the upper floor. All figures wear conical hats, ear spools, and most have a nose ring, modeled in clay.

133. Village Scene with “Volador” Ritual, and Sixteen Participants
West México, Nayarit. Terminal Preclassic, 200 B.C. – A.D. 300. Painted red ceramic. Ht. 20.3 cm. (8 in.); Base: 20.3 × 15.8 cm. (8 × 6⅜ in.) F1434.C64 0015
On a flat clay base are modeled a house and a crowd of people, as well as a tall pole in the “plaza” with an umbrella-like platform on the top. On opposite sides of the pole, pairs of men hoist by means of
logs two performers, who are about to climb the pole and engage in the spinning pole-flying ceremony. In this, they will swirl from the platform upside-down on twisting ropes. This “volador” ceremony is still performed in México today, and has profound ritual, calendrical, and cosmological roots in ancient Mesoamerica. Various seated figures are spectators. In addition, there is a drummer and a conch-shell trumpet player, as well as a bystander apparently drinking pulque—the indigenous beer brewed from the maguey agave—from a vat. The single thatched-roof hut is oval, with a narrow door opening. Details are decorated in white paint, while the rosette pole platform has an encircled cross, painted in white and yellow. This remarkable scene is as elaborate as some of the famous Nayarit ballcourt models.

134. Miniature Village Scene
Painted buff ceramic.
Diam. 9.3 cm. (3¾ in.)
Kislak PC 0198

This is one of the smallest West Mexican ceramic “village scenes” known. Mounted on a circular slab of clay is a tiny thatched-roof house model of typical proportion and six oversized (in relation to the house) seated human figures. In the center is a multi-pronged cactus effigy and some stacked foodstuffs. There are traces of black and white paint.

135. Small Domestic House Model
Painted red ceramic.
Ht. 14 cm. (5½ in.)
Kislak PC 0060

The characteristic “eared” thatched roof dominates this little replica. A simple U-shaped frame forms the sidewalls and floor; inside, one pair of seated figures stares forward and a matching pair stares out the backside. The roof and sidewalls are geometrically decorated in black and white pigments, probably in a thatch and latticework design.

136. House Model with Occupants
Painted red ceramic.
Ht. 14 cm. (5½ in.)
Kislak PC 0165

The simple pitched “eared” roof on this domestic house has a modeled bird on the ridge between the two housepost prongs. The dwelling is enclosed on three sides, with another partition covering one-third of the front. Inside three seated figures eat from a large central bowl, while their dog looks on. This model rests on five solid nubbin supports on the four corners and in the center of the flat base. Well-preserved glossy red, yellow, and white paint decorates the roof and sidewalls.

137. House Model
White paint on burnished red-slipped ceramic.
Ht. 16 cm. (6½ in.)
Kislak PC 0166

The style visible in this rare house model example originates from across the southern border of Nayarit in the area of Jalisco. The long-nosed style of the human occupants is the Jalisco “sheep-face” variant, with polished deep red slip and white-painted decoration. On the pinnacle of the sloping roof crouches a dog. The interior roof rafters are faithfully modeled as well. There are two flat sidewalls, while the floor rests on four effigy feet. Inside two figures sit facing one another and another dog peeks around the corner. One figure holds an olla jar and the food lined up in the center looks suspiciously like the entheogenic peyote cactus. Well-preserved white paint decorates all surfaces, including a cross of white dots on the bottom underside of the base.

138. Large Two-Tiered House Model with Fifteen Inhabitants
Painted red ceramic. Ht. 26 cm. (7¾ in.)
Kislak PC 0164

This square-based model depicts an unusually complex domestic house with a double-pitched thatched roof. An opposing pair of four-stepped staircases lead to the second-level overhanging porch, below which a man sleeps, resting his head in his consort’s lap. A square opening behind this pair leads into the otherwise enclosed lower level. The base to the model is flat and without openings. The upper level compartment has two solid sidewalls, but is open front and back, like a breezeway. The upper-storey inhabitants are engaged in
a feast. Inside, five seated people eat and their various utensils are arrayed on the floor. Two musicians, a drummer and a rattle player, sit on the porch facing the feasters, providing entertainment. Three attendants are in the process of climbing the steps, bearing containers of additional food and drink. Meanwhile, three modeled birds perch on the side ledges of the second-tier floor. White painted rhomboids decorate the roof and sidewalls and white paint also provides details of the costuming.

CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA

The vast area of pre-Columbian cultures south of Mesoamerica is only sporadically represented in the Kislak Collection, and therefore is not totally illustrative. For example, the ceramic traditions of the southern areas are as rich and diverse as those of Mesoamerica, but have not been a focus of the collection. Highlights of these areas do include, however, sumptuous goldwork and well-preserved textiles and featherwork.

The southernmost center of advanced civilizations in the New World, comprising the Incas and their predecessors, was located in the Central Andes (present-day Peru and Bolivia). The artistic, social, and political achievements in this area rivaled those of Mesoamerica, although the style and content of the civilizations differed, and no full systems of writing were developed. However, from the Middle Horizon Huari-Tiwanku cultures on to the Inca, detailed information was recorded in the form of knotted cord devices called quipu in the Quechua language of the Inca. The cultures adapted to the dry desert coast, such as the Moche, Chimú, and Nazca, contrasted with such Andean highland-adapted cultures as the Huari and Inca. The earliest civilization, Chavin in the high Andean Altiplano, is comparable in age to the Olmec in México, while the terminal Inca civilization in many ways paralleled the Aztec. We, however, only feature three Central Andean works of art: a plain-weave poncho, a feather mosaic panel, and a sheet-gold disk.

Another extensive culture area stretches between Mesoamerica and the Central Andes, the “Intermediate Area,” comprising what are now lower Central America (Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Panama) and the northern Andes (Colombia and Ecuador). We illustrate ten groups of objects from this zone, half of which are hammered or cast gold. Certain features of high civilization are lacking in this area, such as great cities, permanent architecture, and writing. However, the various distinctive chiefdoms produced ceremonial and luxury goods, goldwork, stone sculpture, and polychrome pottery that surpassed those of the peoples of the West Indies, for example. Through the millennia, aspects of culture and technology diffused through this Intermediate Area from the centers of pre-Columbian civilization located to the north and south.

139. Ceremonial Bird-Effigy Metate
Carved volcanic stone.
L. 77.5 cm. (30½ in.); Ht. 38 cm. (15 in.)
KISLAK PC 0167

Large tripod metate corn-grinding stone with perforated supports. The open-beaked bird finial is either a vulture or harpy eagle. Considerable geometric carving decorates the ends of the otherwise smooth concave surface, as well as the edges and the underside.

140. Repoussé Gold Breastplate
Panama. Coce culture, A.D. 500–1200.
Hammered sheet gold.
Diam. 17 cm. (6¾ in.)
KISLAK PC 0090

A splendid example of the prevalent “alligator god” elegantly pressed into a heavy sheet of gold. Four pairs of punched holes allowed for sewing the plate to a tunic. The deity displays serpent staffs in both hands and also has pairs of serpents on his headress and his belt.

141. Two Large Cylindrical Funerary Urns with Lids
Highland Colombia, Quimbaya region.
A.D. 1000–1500.
Red-slipped ceramics.
Hts. (without lids): 79 and 66 cm. (31 and 26 in.);
Diams. 30.5 cm. and 28 cm. (12 and 11 in.)
KISLAK PC 0078;
KISLAK PC 0079

A little-known style of burial urn from the central highlands. The sides are decorated with deeply grooved, bold, and simple geometric patterns. Around the top edge are four pairs of drilled holes for lashing on the low convex covers. Effigy funerary urns from the Magdalena Valley are far better known in the published literature.
142. Feather Mosaic Panel

Peru, South Coast.
Huari culture, A.D. 700–1000.
Yellow and blue macaw feathers on cotton fabric.
68 x 238 cm. (27 x 86 in.)

This feather mosaic panel was one of ninety-six recovered by Torio Mejía-Xesspe in 1943 at a site called Corral Redondo near the village of La Victoria in the Churunga Valley in Pampa Ocoña on the far south coast of Peru. A local newspaper reported the findings:

A pre-Columbian tomb was discovered, with mud and stone walls in three concentric rings. The first extended one meter above ground, and the other two were subterranean. In the outer ring, eight large portrait jars, one meter high and two meters in circumference around the widest part, were discovered. Each one of the eight contained twelve feathered panels made by ancient Peruvians. Inside the second ring the following objects were found: three small vessels of silver, a small llama of gold, two silver idols, three artistically carved wooden cups, three shawl-pins of silver, a small cloth of alpaca wool with forty-two silver discs, a small multicolor llama wool poncho, an aryballoid bottle and other ceramic plates. All of these objects have the unmistakable marks of classic Incaic style. The innermost circle was not excavated (Candler 99, 2).

Because the panels were buried in the dry coastal region for a millennium, their condition is exquisite. Each one consists of thousands of feathers from the blue and yellow Papagayo macaw (Ara Ararauna) and is arranged in alternating rectangles (Cook and Conklin 996, 417–418). The design calls forth Andean notions of duality, the idea that two complementary parts make up a whole. The base fabric is a plain cotton weave with a camelid fiber band that runs the length of the panel. Cords extend from either end. The panels have since been divided into a number of collections, including the Dallas Museum of Art; the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the Saint Louis Art Museum; the University Museum at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; the Musées Royaux d’Art et d’Histoire in Brussels; Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection in Washington, D.C.; and the Museo Arqueológico Rafael Larco Herrera in Lima.

The precision of execution and the organization required to create the panels is quite remarkable. Due to the quantity of panels, it is likely that groups of artisans were employed and it is clear that a highly organized system was at play. First, the collection of feathers was a delicate matter. It required a knowledgeable individual, as over-plucking could kill the bird. Due to the large number of feathers used in the creation of the panels, the Huari may have collected them from their own domesticated birds, or they may have acquired feathers through trade with Amazonian peoples (Reina and Pressman 99, 0–5).

Second, technical analyses at the University Museum in Philadelphia revealed that the design was created by affixing feathers of the same color to a single cord in a standard fashion for Andean feathered textiles: the shaft of the feather is bent over a carrier cord; a tying cord secures the feather to the string; and another sewing cord attaches the string to
the fabric (Greene 1991, 18). Separate knotting systems and different materials for the strings were used for each color. For example, the yellow feathers are attached to cotton cords, while the blue feathers are attached to cords made of an unidentifiable plant fiber. These findings suggest that the panels were created through a division of labor system, in order that they be completed in a timely manner.

The use of feathers to create the panels is significant and may provide insight as to their function. Birds played an important role in the mythologies of South American peoples and repeatedly appear in Andean iconography from the Pre-Ceramic period onward. Feathers were not only beautiful but they also allowed the wearer to assume aspects of the appearance and/or behavioral characteristics of their animal source. In addition, they provided strength and protection (Kensinger 1991, xx). Because of their importance, feathers were typically used to adorn objects and clothing for ceremonial use and were reserved for the elite.

Initially, archaeologists believed that the feather panels were Incan because they were found with the offerings listed above. However, since the discovery, scholars have determined that the jars are derivative of "large nonmythical [sic] anthropomorph face-neck jars of the Robles Moqo style" (Menzel 1964, 86). Furthermore, radiocarbon dating has secured the age of the panels to the Middle Horizon Epoch 2 (Cook and Conklin 1996, 417). Intriguingly, the jars were intact and not intentionally broken, as were other known Huari offerings. This may indicate either that they were being stored for future ceremonial use or that the location served as a huaca, a sacred site where offerings were left over many centuries (Menzel 1968, 68; Cook and Conklin 1996, 418).

Because the panels have end cords, they most likely served as wall hangings (although their use as cloaks or mantles has also been suggested). In fact, featherworks are known to have decorated entrances to sacred areas. For example, the Incan sanctuary on the Island of the Sun in Lake Titicaca (which was also sacred to the Huari) included three passageways through which a pilgrim must pass before entering the sanctuary space. The first was the Door of the Puma; the second, the Door of the Hummingbird, was covered with hummingbird feathers; and the third, the Door of the Pilco, was covered with pilco feathers (Bauer and Stanish 2001, 224–225). The ninety-six Huari panels may have served a similar purpose. However, this would have required an enormous structure and, to date, none survives (Rubineau 1980, 29; Cook and Conklin 1996, 418).

Whatever their purpose, the Kislak feather mosaic panel and its mates serve as a rich source for further investigation into Huari culture and its practices. —Letha Clair Robertson

143. Pair of Burial Urns
South America, Argentina. Santa Maria culture, A.D. 1000–1500. Tri-color painted ceramics.
Hts. 52 and 56 cm. (20% and 22 in.)
KISLAK PC 0168; KISLAK PC 0169
Graceful, conical-based urns with pairs of handles placed low on the sides. The flaring-rimmed necks are painted with highly abstract faces on the front and back, as well as swirl and checkerboard patterns on the bodies (red, white, and black paint). These vessels are purportedly for child burials.

This pre-Columbian culture, located near the Bolivia frontier, is not well known and museum examples are rare and seldom published. Relationships have been suggested with the contemporary Diaguita culture of Chile.

THE TAÍNO

Beginning about 2,500 years ago, people of Arawak stock migrated from South America to the Caribbean islands. They came from the rivers and coasts of Venezuela and the Guianas into the Lesser Antilles (the Virgin Islands and the Windward and Leeward islands). From there, they moved northward to the Greater Antilles (the four largest islands in the northwestern portion of the Caribbean Sea: Cuba, Hispaniola—now Haiti and the Dominican Republic—Jamaica, and Puerto Rico).

The Taíno had complex, hierarchical religious, political, and social systems. They were skilled farmers and navigators. They wrote music and poetry. Although their entire way of life drew on the diverse cultural and historical backgrounds of their predecessors, they fused these aspects of their heritage into something altogether new and unique.

They were probably absorbed in ordinary activities, perhaps netting fish, making cassava cakes, or writing poetry, when Christopher Columbus made his first landfall on their Bahaman Island of Guanahani in 1492. Within sixty years of that unfortunate encounter, the Taíno had ceased to exist. Nevertheless, their contributions to the biological, cultural, and linguistic life of the Caribbean continue to be felt today. Particularly in the Antilles, communities continue to adhere to certain Taíno practices in their worldviews, religious beliefs, language, music, and food.

Taíno society shared some similarities with that of the Europeans, but there were also aspects without parallels. Like Europeans, the Taíno society was hierarchical. The highest-ranking cacique (chief) was similar in authority to a European king. He controlled lesser chiefs who governed individual communities on the island. The upper class of chiefs, warriors, and artists ruled over a lower class of farmers, fishermen, and hunters and was comparable to the European nobility. Society and politics, however, were matriarchal and complex, and the Taíno perished before these intricate systems could be fully understood.
The Taíno grew cotton from which they made clothing. The higher the rank of an individual, the more elaborate his apparel, especially for religious ceremonies. Most of the time men wore little, perhaps just a cotton loincloth, while married women wore small skirts called naquis. For religious ceremonial events they painted their bodies and wore such decorative ornaments as belts and necklaces. Ears and noses were pierced for the insertion of feathers and jewelry. The village cacique wore more elaborate ornaments, including feathered headdresses, gold and copper jewelry, and pendants in the form of carved human masks.

When Columbus sent letters back to Spain claiming the Indians he saw were “all naked as the day they were born,” he must have been gazing upon the virgin girls, for they wore only a cotton belt.

Taíno villagers worked in the fields growing sweet potatoes and cassava, a starchy root crop also called manioc. Other common crops included squash, beans, peppers, peanuts, and pineapple. Today, we would call a Taíno farmer a conservationist. Instead of slashing and burning the forest to make a temporary clearing, as is common in the tropics, he heaped up mounds of earth in more permanent fields. This provided softer soil, retarded erosion, and improved drainage and irrigation. According to reports written by early European explorers, the Taíno also caught fish, turtles, iguanas, and manatees. The meat was boiled or barbecued, the latter a Taíno word describing the framework of sticks used to smoke and dry meat.

The Taíno played a ritual ballgame that existed in various forms throughout the Americas. Teams played in a rectangular court in a plaza flanked by pillars incised with petroglyphs. The Taíno game was both ceremonial and recreational. The ball had to be kept in the air but could not be touched by the hands. The ball was hit with the legs, hips, arms, shoulders, and head. The Taíno seem to have worn stone ballgame belts, also known as collars, that reflect their high degree of stone craftsmanship.

The Taíno created powerfully expressive objects for their religious rituals. Figurative sculptures called zemis, made of wood, stone, bone, and other materials, represented two primary deities: a supreme god or creator called Yúcahu Mao-coronti, associated with the growth of cassava, and a fertility goddess called Atabey, a goddess of water, rivers, and seas. These representations are the highest form of Taíno artistic expression.

Lesser deities, including spirits of ancestors, were believed to live in trees, rocks, and other features of the landscape. In their most important religious ceremony, the cohoba ritual, the Taínos in hallucinogenic trance communicated with their gods to ask for protection and help with the harvest. The cacique played a wooden drum as participants took their places before the zemi.

Triangular forms, usually made of stone, are among the most important Taíno artifacts. At one end, they often have the head of a human or animal that possibly represents the god of cassava, while hunched legs are at the opposite end. The ceremonial seats or duhos are some of the most artistic creations of the Taíno. These low seats or stools carved of wood or stone were symbols of the prestige and power of the caciques and shamans.
148. **Ceremonial Stone Phallus**
Puerto Rico.
Taíno, a.d. 700–1500.
Black basalt.
Ht. 16 cm. (6¼ in.)
kislak pc 0104

149. **Stylized Stone Manatee**
Haiti.
Taíno, a.d. 700–1500.
Gray stone.
Ht. 14 cm. (5½ in.)
kislak pc 0118

Animal effigy carved in the round. The four relief flippers suggest a manatee. It has prominent male genitals and a carved humanoid face. A crest extends down the back of the neck. The backside of the animal is pecked flat, suggesting that the object could have been used as a smoother or pounder.

150. **Stone Relief Deity Figure**
Haiti. Taíno, a.d. 700–1500.
Gray stone. Ht. 14 cm. (5½ in.)
kislak pc 0105
Carved in low relief is a stylized human figure with sharply bent arms and legs. The mouth is parted to reveal teeth, while the nose merges to heavy eyebrows. Scholars believe this figure may represent the Arawak God of Fire.

151. **Tri-Cornered “Zemi” Stone**
Puerto Rico.
Taíno, a.d. 700–1500.
Hard gray stone.
L. 31 cm. (12¼ in.)
kislak pc 0107
The Arawak word zemi applies to many kinds of local idols, but a prevalent variety is this triangular, pyramidal form expertly pecked with an abstract effigy image. At the front end of the central conical “mountain” is a typical Taíno grotesque face with deeply pitted eyes and wide mouth. Buttocks and squat flexed legs are carved at the back. The bottom of the object is curved and concave and in addition has a curious central pecked dimple, perhaps for ceremonial substances.

152. **Ballgame Ceremonial Stone Hip Belt**
Puerto Rico.
Taíno, a.d. 700–1500.
Hard gray stone.
L. 46 cm. (18½ in.)
kislak pc 0108
The enclosed oval stone carving probably represents belts of more perishable materials worn during the hip ballgame. The ballgame ritual and sport probably originated in Mesoamerica, where the U-shaped hip “yoke” is most common. The ballgame was performed within slab-lined ballcourts that have been discovered on the island of Puerto Rico.

The carved overlays and protrusions on this fine example doubtless duplicate the appearance of the leather-wrapped wicker bundles probably worn around the waist during the real game on the islands.

153. **Shell Maskette with Bearded Face**
Lesser Antilles, Antigua.
Taíno, a.d. 700–1500.
Carved shell.
Ht. 7 cm. (2¾ in.)
kislak pc 0098

154. **Miniature Mask Pendant**
Lesser Antilles, St. Kitts.
Taíno, a.d. 700–1500.
Carved shell.
Ht. 4.5 cm. (1¾ in.)
kislak pc 0112

155. **Two Shell Pendants of Squatting Deities**
Haiti.
Taíno, a.d. 700–1500.
Carved shell.
Hts. 5.7 cm. (2¼ in.) and 3.8 cm. (1½ in.)
kislak pc 0110

Both pendants have bi-conically drilled holes behind the heads for suspension on a cord. The incised details are of geometric character. The larger figure may be a local version of the Mesoamerican Wind God. The smaller possibly represents the frog avatar of the Rain God.
as this example, and stools with long curved backrests. The edges of this stool are broken and weathered, but fortunately the carved effigy animal head finial is intact.

THE TAÍNO POST CONTACT

Initially hospitable toward the Spaniards, the Taíno responded violently to the newcomers’ intolerance and abuse. When Columbus returned to Hispaniola on his second voyage in 1493, he found his crew’s small settlement, Navidad, had been razed and its inhabitants slain. But the Old World’s interest in expansion and its drive to spread Catholicism were not easily deterred—Columbus established a second settlement, Isabella, farther to the east.

Between 1492 and the early decades of the sixteenth century, the Taíno population declined rapidly. Of the hundreds of thousands of natives who lived on Hispaniola before the conquest, only about 60,000 remained by 1509.

To maintain their gold mines and plantations, the Spanish enslaved native people from the Bahamas, South America, and the Lesser Antilles. They also began importing slaves from Africa. Disease, however, was perhaps the most destructive element of the conquest. The Taíno did not have immunity to diseases such as influenza, measles, smallpox, and yellow fever that had evolved over thousands of years in Europe, Africa, and Asia. Thus, Taíno society disappeared in less than a century of conquest and colonization. We can still learn about the indigenous people of the Caribbean through archaeological study, but, sadly, many ancient sites and artifacts are being destroyed each year.

The Taíno left an important legacy, however. Traces of the Taíno people are evident today not only in the physical appearance of the Caribbean population, but also in the survival of many indigenous words that were incorporated into Spanish during the conquest. The Taíno names for geographical areas, plants, trees, fruits, and objects—canoe, barbecue, hammock, hurricane, and tobacco—have become common in English and other European languages.

156. Effigy Bone Vomitive Spatula
Long, gracefully curved spatula used for purging before taking the sacred trance-inducing snuff, cohoba, a powerful, nicotine-rich tobacco. The handle is expertly carved as a bent-kneed human idol, or zemi—a classic Taíno image. This figure is delicately carved with scroll designs and perforations. The earlobes and eye sockets once held inlays, perhaps of gold leaf or shell.

157. Vomitive Spatula with Short Blade
This ritual object represents a dolphin. The deeply pitted eyes likely once held inlays.

158. Stone Dog Head Snuffing Device
Lesser Antilles, Barbuda. Taíno, A.D. 700–1500. Tan steatite. L. 13.5 cm. (5¼ in.) KISLAK PC 0106
Ferocious dog head effigy with deeply pecked eyes, nostrils, and rectangular depressions on the sides of the jowls. The fanged mouth is open and grooves accentuate the dog’s features. This represents the dog god of the dead. The object functioned as a tube for snuffing the local trance-inducing tobacco during the cohoba ritual. A single drilled hole in the mouth branches to two interior channels. Holes at the top fit the user’s nostrils.

159. Ceremonial Wooden Stool (‘Duho’)
Haití. Taíno, A.D. 1000–1500. Carved lignum vitae. L. 38 cm. (15 in.) KISLAK PC 0103
Preserved prehistoric wooden chieftain’s stools are exceedingly rare, usually found only in dry highland caves. There are two basic types: low horizontal forms with concave seats, such