

GENERAL

Were-Jaguars and Crocodilians: A Need to Redefine

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The general consensus amongst scholars is that anthropomorphic and zoomorphic Formative art, usually associated with the Olmecs but extending to post-Columbian civilisations, are depictions of humans and/or jaguars known as were-jaguars (De La Fuente 2000: 258). More recently, there has been discussion concerning what is actually being depicted through this Mesoamerican art form. In this paper, I will argue that the art form is much more complex than first anticipated with motifs of different deities amalgamated into one depiction, thereby extolling ceremonial influence to other animals worshipped in a religion based on animism, whilst also looking critically at some anthropomorphic images of the jaguar.

Introduction

Upon entering the Mexico gallery at the British Museum, it occurred to me that the Museum was endorsing a particular view of Olmec art history; a view that is quite contentious since the issue surrounding the genre of the type of art in question has not yet been settled. Of course, I refer to the 'were-jaguar' and its feline components (see **figures 1** and **2**). In the British Museum there are perhaps two were-jaguars on display, whilst a third piece has only one feature that scholars would describe as feline (Taube 2004: 59). I would not therefore classify it as a were-jaguar.

The main 'were-jaguar' is described by the British Museum as a 'ceremonial battle-axe/axe-of-state/figurine, made of polished green quartz (aventurine)'. Interestingly the curator's comments are akin to what I will try to argue in one section of this paper, but the Museum continues to display this type of

art under the umbrella of the jaguar. Colin McEwan, the former curator of this gallery, writes (McEwan 2009: 136):

This massive ceremonial axe (celt) combines characteristics of the caiman and the jaguar, the most powerful predators inhabiting the rivers and forests of the tropical lowlands. The pronounced cleft in the head mimics the indentation found on the skulls of jaguars and has been compared to the human fontanelle. These clefts feature on other Olmec sculptures and in imagery in which vegetal motifs spring from similar cracks and orifices, alluding to the underground sources of fertility and life.

Here, McEwan refers to ideas put forth in Taube's (1996) *The Olmec Maize God* in which he identifies the cleft head as a possible piece of 'earth from which corn grows' (ibid., 41). This suggests that McEwan is aware of the interpretive difficulties surrounding this

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Figure 1: Polished aventurine axe or ceremonial axe, British Museum.¹

form of anthropomorphised art, which leads one to ask: is it not time to redefine this magnificent display of animism with an updated interpretation?

One of the most frequently seen images in the art and iconography of Mesoamerica is that of the jaguar (Taube 2004: 61). The jaguar is the largest feline creature in Mesoamerica and is depicted in a stylised, naturalistic or anthropomorphic form (Saunders 1994: 104). Furthermore, the frequency of these depictions spans thousands of years (Evans 2004: 134). Thus, the assemblage of jaguar symbolism is not really known, since it is possible that those pieces previously identified as jaguar may actually be something else (e.g. Maize imagery, see Taube 2000, or Saurian/crocodilian imagery, see Joralemon 1976). With so many differing subjective interpretations, the problem that scholars face is the question of what is fact and what is speculative—albeit sensible—interpretation.

This paper will attempt to scrutinise the jaguar and the crocodilian using ethnographic data, which will be used to critically analyse contemporary scholarly interpretations of artefacts, consider their function and symbolic attributes (if any) and assess the role of the crocodilian and how it may fit into the

symbolic landscape of the land of the jaguar. It should be noted that the motifs and characteristics of Mesoamerican art are stylised and interpretations are often derived culturally through artistic traditions. If a given motif appears to derive from a particular animal, we must analyse how humans interacted with that animal in order to understand what meaning may be attached to the motif. It is with this point that I will open my paper.

The power of the Jaguar

Ancient Mesoamerican peoples relied on close observation of the natural world and its inhabitants in order to understand the workings of the cosmos. For cultures such as the Olmec, Maya, and Aztec, the world was often understood through a series of rich metaphors involving a combination of felines, reptiles, birds (Delgado 1965: 55) and maize (Taube 1996, 2000). The earth could be viewed as a massive crocodile, turtle or iguana, while maize, a staple of Mesoamerican diets, was frequently imbued with reptilian attributes (Taube 1996, 2000; Evans 2004: 45). Occasionally symbolism converged, casting the life-sustaining 'World Tree' or 'Tree of Life' at the centre of the cosmos as a reptile which sprouted maize from its tail (see **figure 3**). These metaphors can be understood through observation of the characteristics and behaviours of animals (Coe 1972: 3). The problem begins when scholars rely on superficial resemblances of form in artworks spanning the whole of Mesoamerica (i.e. different societies and tribes over many time periods). Many previous interpretations have failed to consider that, even where there is historical continuity (i.e. feline art and iconography that spans thousands of years), this does not guarantee similarity of prehistoric, historical, or ethnographic 'cultural expressions' (Saunders 1994: 106).

Ethnographic data for Central and South America often reveals a close symbolic relationship between the jaguar and the following social themes: warfare (the warrior class, often referred to as Ocelotl sect, wore jaguar



Figure 2: Polished aventurine axe or ceremonial axe, British Museum.²

skins), social status and the wielding of spiritual power (shamans were often depicted wearing up-turned paws, necklaces of teeth etc.) and political power (upper social strata were buried with prestige items, usually jaguar related) (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975: 112; Saunders 1994: 107; Renfrew and Bahn 2012: 342). Specifically, I would agree that jaguar imagery was associated with the characteristics of the animal itself, i.e. aggression (Furst 1968: 151; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975: 45), fierceness and strength (Coe 1972: 4), and social status and supernatural protection (Kubler 1973: 21; Grove 1973: 155).

Reichel-Dolmatoff (1975: 45) highlights the fact that jaguar killing was a way of attaining social status and that local terms for the jaguar were incorporated into the titles and

names of priests, shamans, chiefs, deities and ancestors. Furthermore, in the Florentine Codex a list of descriptive adjectives used to describe the 'ocelotl' indicate that the jaguar was the bravest and fiercest of animals, whose cautious, wise and proud disposition made it the ruler of the animal kingdom (Sahagun 1950–1982, book 11: 1). As such I would argue that the Aztecs viewed the jaguar as the embodiment of a group of distinctive human qualities and that jaguar symbolism had a special place in an elite context because the jaguar itself is, as we have just encountered, the 'ruler of the animal kingdom'. The human values embodied by the jaguar were so deep rooted in Aztec society that the word 'ocelotl' could be used as a root word, e.g. those warriors who displayed qualities of valour and bravery were referred to as 'ocelotlatl' and 'oceloyotl' (Saunders 1994: 108).

The power of the Crocodilian

There are many types of crocodilian creatures living in the Mesoamerican swamp-lands such as the caiman and two species of crocodile (Stone-Miller 2004: 55), however, it would be extremely difficult to pick out exactly which species was depicted in the numerous stylistic representations of the animal, hence, I will refer to them all as 'crocodilian'.

A large number of crocodilian representations present the crocodilian as the source of plant crops in an almost deified manner (see **figures 3, 4a** and **4b**). Indeed, this view of crocodilians may derive from the same creation myth that the Aztec Cipactli (a crocodile that grants corn to humans) utilises as the world's fauna growing on the back of the crocodilian (Codice Borgia 1963: 27; Maarten 2001: 96). The crocodilian was revered as a fertility symbol all across the Americas argues Stocker, Meltzoff and Armsey (1980: 742). They reference Lothrop's (1926) ceramic find of a crocodilian pushing a 'mano' in Central America and Lathrap's (1973) discussion of the Peruvian Obelisk Tello as further reinforcement of the crocodilian-fertility link. Further, Stocker et al (1980) use Duran's

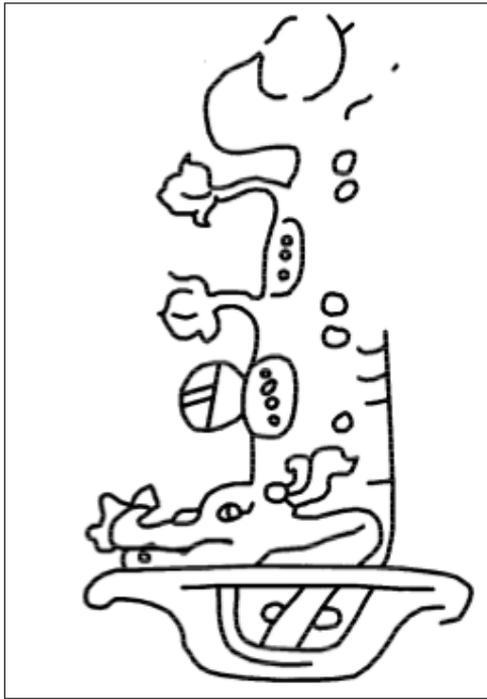


Figure 3: Crocodilian tree – crocodiles used as symbol of fertility? Pugh, 2001: 250.

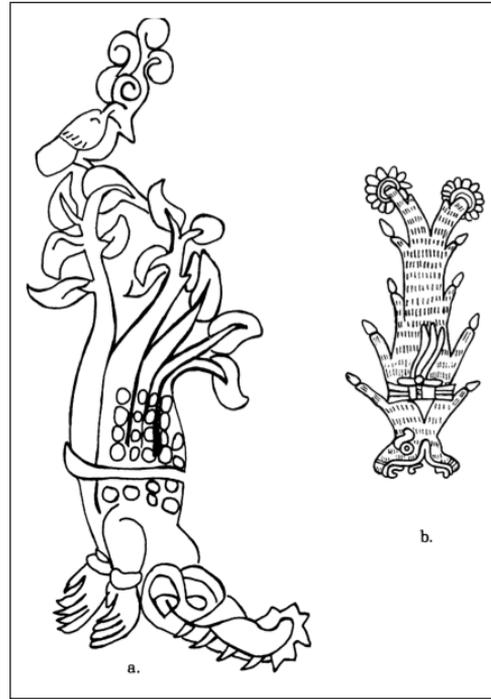


Figure 4: a) Izapa Stela 25 crocodilian fertility symbol and b) Postclassic motif. Codice Borgia, 1963: 27 (originally from De La Fuente 2000:112).

(1971: 399) explanation of the 20-day signs and the children born under them (any child born under 'Ce Cipactli' being great tillers of the soil), in order to further underline the view that the croc was a symbol of agricultural fertility and master of crops during the Formative period.

Two characteristics of the crocodilian which make it a good candidate for a fertility symbol are the fact that a female crocodile can lay up to 70 eggs at one time and their ability to congregate in large numbers, unlike the jaguar for example, due to their cold blood and their inability to over-heat; imagine seeing hundreds of crocs writhing around in a small swamped space, what would ones thoughts be regarding their fertility? (Stone-Miller 2004: 56).

When looked at as a whole, the character traits displayed by the crocodilian make it an excellent candidate for a symbol of sustenance, fertility and abundance. Taube (1996,

2000) advocates a duality among crocodilian imagery and usually relates this to maize symbolism, in effect pushing the idea that the crocodilian was regarded as a symbol of sustenance, fertility and abundance. Taube (1996, 2000, 2004) refers to this imagery as 'maize reptilians'. Adding to this symbolic view is the fact that crocodilians prey on their food from underwater (regarded as a sacred underworld) and usually drown their prey before devouring them (Minton and Minton 1973: 58), thus conjuring a supernatural affinity. Further, the booming sound the crocodilians emit sounds very much like thunder and often startles people at zoos (Minton and Minton 1973: 40). This may have been noted by the Olmecs and maybe provided them with a rationale for the extension of the crocodilian's powers to include those of a rain deity especially since the crocodilian was already associated with fertility and abundance symbolism through

iconography (Stocker, Meltzoff and Armsey 1980: 748).

Were-Jaguar versus Were-Crocodilian

Now that I have established the roles that the jaguar and the crocodilian played among their natural habitat and among the peoples that shared those environments, I will look at issues surrounding the were-jaguar versus were-crocodilian argument.

Much of the work surrounding the 'were' figures (anthropomorphised/zoomorphic figures) has focused solely on the jaguar and the Olmec's ability to incorporate stylisation and form into their art and iconography, but those generic 'feline' identifications still heavily influence perceptions and interpretations of Formative period art today (Grove 2000: 278). However, Grove (2000) also identifies some studies that have demonstrated many other animals in anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms of art that were once deemed 'jaguar', such as Stocker et al (1980) and Joralemon (1976, 1996). For example, 'the human form is the focus of Olmec art. [... but] Olmec sculptures often portray composite beings that are biologically impossible, mingling human traits with characteristics of various animals' (Joralemon 1996: 51). Here, Joralemon is also referring to 'were-jaguars' that are often displayed with cleft foreheads and an upturned, open mouth. The body is usually sexless and rotund. Scholars such as Murdy (1981) and Renfrew and Bahn (2012) believe that the were-jaguar artistic form is evidence of congenital deformities, but it is only possible to use limited pieces of art, such as the Las Limas Monument 1, to support this theory. On the other hand, Taube (1996) makes a case for reinterpretation of some anthropomorphised art work as having 'maize god' features, or even being whole maize gods. His reasoning relates to politically motivated artwork aimed at attracting foreign peoples into the Olmec economic network through trade and exchange of agriculture (ibid., 76).

Coe (1972) has argued that the cleft-forehead represents spina bifida, which is

associated with cranial deformation. Murdy (1981: 860) hypothesizes that a chief's family may have reinforced his position in society by using were-jaguar art and possibly religion (if we accept that jaguars were deities), by linking their children's deformities with the 'supernatural' jaguar, insinuating that the ruling family had 'jaguar blood' (Renfrew and Bahn 2012: 448). Of course this cannot be proven but some scholars share their interpretation as fact, which, according to Hodder (1985) makes it subject to cross-cultural generalisations and underlying bias, instead of being presented as a possibility for further assessment and examination.

Taube (1996, 2000) insists that the v-shaped cleft is actually the 'overlapping green husks' (ibid., 300) that surround the cob. Indeed, this is very possible as are the other interpretations that have been laid forth. However, this does not mean that the presence of maize motifs and symbolism alludes to a deified character that only represents a 'maize god'.

Alternatives to the jaguar were dismissed until Lathrap (1971) demonstrated that the Atlhuayan figure from Morelos wore a caiman pelt rather than a jaguar pelt. Muse and Stocker (1974) took Lathrap's work further by comparing the iconographic traits of the 'were-jaguar' to the biological forms of the caiman and successfully identified the major traits of the Olmec 'were-jaguar' as being caiman (e.g. hand-paw, flame-eyebrow, cleft-head, upturned-snout/lip, and usually crossed teeth (see **figures 5a, 5b and 6**)). This type of development in interpretations, including re-assessment of previous interpretation, is epitomised by Grove. Chalcatzingo Monument 1 was first described by Grove (1968: 486) as an 'earth monster mouth', then as a 'jaguar monster mouth' (1972: 161), and finally reinterpreted as a 'serpent mouth' (2000: 278) after he had synthesised the newly understood features of serpent representations.

At this point it is important to note that I have no intention of diminishing the



Figure 5: a) jaguar³ and b) caiman: note the ‘were’ qualities of the caiman.⁴ The cleft in the forehead region and the upturned snout are clearly noticeable on the caiman, whereas the jaguar does not have the features most scholars would label ‘were-jaguar’. In fact, check every crocodilian related figure in this paper and note the upturned snout and the spots on the skin of the crocodilians that may sometimes be misconstrued as jaguar spots.

importance of the jaguar; indeed, as has been shown by the frequency of jaguar related artefacts, the jaguar was of great cultural, and very possibly religious, importance to the peoples of Mesoamerica. At the same time it is also important to promote the crocodilian to the league to which it deserves to belong by redefining old interpretations – just as Grove did with his own interpretations. Joralemon (1976: 37) anticipates my position when he asserts that the central Olmec deity was essentially a reptilian being, although he calls it the ‘Olmec dragon’.

Another example of the contentious nature of current interpretations of jaguar and crocodilian art motifs and the meaning behind them is the issue of alleged copulation scenes between human and jaguar. The general sentiment within Mesoamerican archaeology is that the Olmecs believed ‘they sprang from a union of man and jaguar’ (Grove 1973: 133). However, Davis (1978) demonstrates that not only do the so-called copulation scenes never fully substantiate the prevailing interpretation, but that the jaguar was also associated with fertility in some Mesoamerican cultures. Furthermore, Davis argues that studies show that the Olmecs worshipped a number of gods (Joralemon 1996; Coe 1972, 2002). Thus it becomes clear that the jaguar and its motifs, in Olmec art, should be viewed as

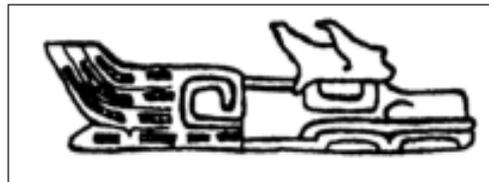


Figure 6: This ceramic design from Tlatilco is an abbreviated form of the crocodilian motif. Note the flame-eyebrows which I argue represent the tubercles above a crocodilian’s eyes and the reptilian paw/hand attached to the head of the animal. Stocker, Meltzoff and Armsey, 1980: 741.

themes which are only partially explored and ‘exploited in various individual works of art’ (Davis 1978: 456). Therefore interpretations that assign a single historical or mythical meaning are inclined to only be fractionally correct. In this sense, Davis makes a fair argument. However, what if the original interpretation, made by Grove in 1970, of the animal in question, was wrong to begin with? Could it be possible that the alleged copulation scene actually depicts a crocodilian and not a jaguar? Notice the up-turned snout of the animal in **figure 7**, and compare the animal anatomically to the caiman of **figure 5b**; the resemblance is clear. The body shape of the animal looks to be that of a crocodilian (long, bulging midriff and neck, short reptilian

hands and most importantly the epidermal exoskeletal armour that traverses the crocodilian's back). As mentioned earlier, crocodilians also have dermal spots that scholars might misconstrue as feline spots within a stylised art context.

To further illustrate my point I have cautiously added a modern artistic interpretation of a stylised were-crocodilian, taken from the Disney animation film *The Sword in the Stone*, to the discussion (see **figure 8**), although I would note that the decision to present a cartoon was not taken lightly. Although drawn almost three and a half thousand years apart and by different societies, the form of an embellished anthropomorphised crocodilian seems to remain relatively similar; the upturned snout, the rotund body shape with bulging midriff, short reptilian hands and the epidermal exoskeletal armour across the back.

I argue that one could easily make the following interpretation in relation to the alleged copulation scene: having established earlier that the crocodilian was a symbol of fertility it is appropriate that it appears in this scene, depicting something that was at first thought of as a copulation scene, in light of its connotations of fertility. Also, Davis (1978) makes it clear that there is not enough evidence to support an actual scene of copulation but it is still very obvious that there is phallic symbolism within the scene. So what did the ancients actually want to depict by drawing this rich metaphor? They placed the human phallic/reproductive symbol behind the symbol/deity of fertility with the tip of the crocodilian's tail touching what would be the testicular region where sperm is produced, thus using the cave drawing as a metaphor of 'fertile men', set in either the tone of prayer to wish, hope or give thanks for fertility, or a statement to boast or proclaim that the fertile crocodilian is effectively 'working well for them'.

It appears that no scholars have picked up on this, not so subtle, nuance in the various interpretations of the alleged copulation scene, which may highlight the inefficiencies

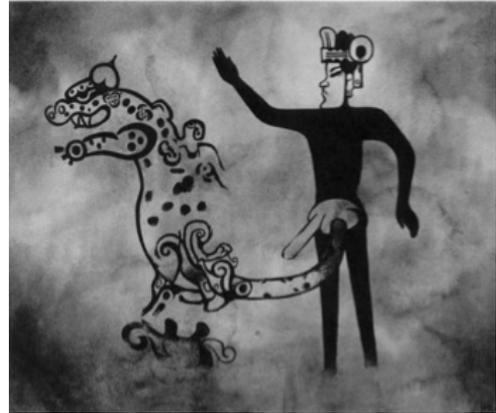


Figure 7: Alleged copulation scene, Guerrero cave painting. Grove, 1970: 17.



Figure 8: Contemporary stylised were-crocodilian.⁵

of archaeology when it comes to moving forward 'scientifically', i.e. through a series of trial-and-error hypotheses. There has been a ten-year gap in scholarly interest with regards to the interpretations of 'were-jaguars' and 'were-crocodilians', highlighting the stagnation within interpretive archaeology.

Conclusion

I argue there is a strong need to redefine certain interpretations of Mesoamerican art and iconography. If we as archaeologists are charged with unfolding the creased and skewed view of the past then it is self-evident



Figure 9: Kneeling transformation figure (stone, 19cm high).⁶ It was formerly in the collection of Ferdinand Ries, who acquired it from Petlalcingo, Puebla in 1928. This piece is known for its beautiful blend of human and jaguar forms. It seems as though it already possesses human ears, but more obvious are the pair of jaguar ears sprouting from the head. Its snarling jaw is complete with teeth that do not seem to criss-cross, as depicted in other were-jaguars (Taube 2004: 59; Renfrew and Bahn 2012: 448). This is what a true 'were-jaguar' should look like with its strictly feline characteristics.

that the stagnation in interpretive archaeology is but one of the many factors that demonstrate our failure. It is entirely possible that many were-jaguars are actually were-crocodilians and considering the evidence put forward by some recent scholars, such as De La Fuente (2000: 258) who agrees that scholars have dwelled for too long on the jaguar, it is likely.

However, it may be the case that the black and white interpretations made by scholars have left us in this predicament. Indeed, I will endeavour not to allow myself the same casualness or indifference when interpreting. Thus, is it possible that what we are seeing in the art and iconography of the

Mesoamericans is a type of dual deity, a mix of jaguar and crocodilian, and perhaps even other animals that were deified, such as birds or dragons, that embody human form?

An example of a fully formed interpretation of a single piece of anthropomorphised art is Grove's (2000) explanation of the Las Limas figure (see **figure 10**). Although this particular piece may be easier to use as an example of how Mesoamerican iconography can include more than one deified supernatural motif, Grove (2000: 279) admits that all of these motifs can be found (albeit not as fully formed) in other Formative period art. Apart from the actual person holding the supernatural baby, there are four other distinct supernatural faces that can be found on the shoulders and knees of the person holding the baby. These include a serpent on the right knee, a fish on the left knee, a saurian or dragon on the left shoulder, and a more 'anomalous' face on the right shoulder (sometimes interpreted as a mix between a jaguar and a maize god).

The positioning of these faces is important, for if the body of the person is viewed as a cosmological model (upperworld: shoulders; earth's surface: waist; underworld: knees) then the location of the animals, in the Formative period dual cosmos dichotomy of an upperworld/underworld, becomes clearer; the saurian/dragon and the other anomalous face being in the upper world, whilst the serpent and fish supernaturals are located in the underworld. Importantly, the supernaturals located in the underworld are legless whilst the upperworld deities have legs.

De La Fuente (2000: 259) attests to the strong influence of duality amongst Mesoamerican art by describing anthropomorphised art as 'monuments that portray mythical images and supernatural beings and are part of the primordial cosmogony of Mesoamerica dealing with twins'. We can evidence this today by acknowledging the duality present in monumental Olmec sculpture and some ceramic figures of the Middle-Formative period.

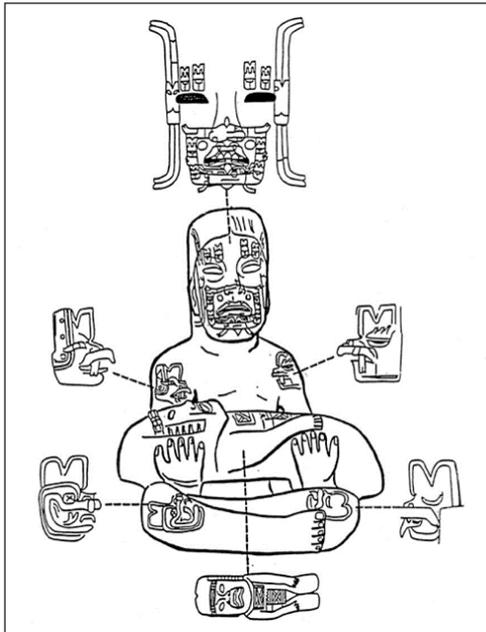


Figure 10: Las Limas figure, etched greenstone with zoological deities magnified.⁷

Another important theme in Mesoamerican anthropomorphised art is the shaman and the power of transformation. Olmecs often tried to depict the power gained by a shaman in the throes of a dimethyl-tryptamine (DMT) transformation from human to a supernatural alter ego or a co-essence; known to Mesoamericanists as a 'nagual' (see **figure 9**) from the Aztec term for phenomenon (Evans 2004: 144). This transformation from human to supernatural animal alter ego does not occur with just one type of animal, i.e. jaguar; the shaman can experience it with all animals (Stone-Miller 2004: 63). If one lived during the Olmec period and wanted to pray for fertility and at the same time one was a member of the upper echelons of society, surely it would make sense to appease both the crocodilian deity and the jaguar deity – but would that mean that two different pieces of 'religious art' were needed? Perhaps it made sense to the ancients to incorporate the two so as to make the message abundantly clear.

According to De La Fuente (2000: 258), scholars have been known to associate Olmec deities with jaguar themes, some

thought to have been induced by hallucinogenic plants and their psychoactive properties, such as DMT. However, I would argue that humans from all over the globe have, in the past, shared similar experiences, and thus, shared conceptions of nature, the earth, the universe, and other humans. This experience of development into a 'civilised society' would have included a stage of animism followed by the creation of myths that explain and defend it. It is interesting to note that one of these myths relates to dualism in the form of twins, which is very common within the mythology of most civilisations and cultures. For example, twins as symbolic myth can be found in the traditions of: Vedic ashwins, Mitra/Varuna, Isis/Osiris, Apollo/Artemis, Castor/Pollux, Remus/Romulus, and many more. In most cases they are mythical deities with natural appearance or mixed with animals and descended from a mortal mother and immortal father. In terms of the duality of twins within Olmec sculpture and art, there are many pieces that highlight this: the sculptures from El Azuzul, Monument 2 of Potrero Nuevo (see **figures 11a** and **11b**), San Martin Pajapan, Monument 44 at La Venta, and of course, much later on, the twin heroes of the Popol Vuh. It is this myth of 'founding twins' that represents a continuous theme of belief from the Olmec era to the Mexican era – from the hero twins of the Popol Vuh and the two sons of the maize god Hun Hunahpu, to the Post-classic twin myth of Quetzalcoatl, as Venus or Xolotl (De La Fuente 2000: 262).

In Jung's (1954) essay, *The Answer to Job*, he takes the book of Job, which is trying to define who Jehovah is, and comes to the conclusion that, while Job is put on trial, Job also puts God on trial (Bishop 2002: 21). God is put in the position of having to define Himself, and when He defines Himself, it becomes clear that this is no longer monotheism but dualism. Job is the first to discover that God is in effect a dual god. Is it possible that the same principle can be applied to the Mesoamerican religions? This



Figure 11: a) Potrero Nuevo Monument 2, c.1000–800 BC⁸ and b) the El Azuzul twins c.1200–800 BC.⁹

is not monotheism, it is dual oppositions all the way through: the sky and the underworld, the sea and the land and perhaps even the jaguar and the crocodilian?

Notes

- ¹ http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=424145&objectId=480731&partId=1#more-views.
- ² http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=424145&objectId=480731&partId=1#more-views.
- ³ Photo courtesy of Jorge Malecha: <http://www.taringa.net/posts/imagenes/17081349/Te-gustan-los-animales-Entra.html>.
- ⁴ Photo courtesy of Amanda Phyre (passionphyre.deviantart.com): <http://www.deviantart.com/morelikethis/72763828>
- ⁵ Courtesy of icollector.com: http://www.icollector.com/Merlin-and-Madame-Mim-cels-from-The-Sword-in-the-Stone_i11538489.
- ⁶ Courtesy of Georgellen Parker: <https://picasaweb.google.com/kancha7/02Olmec#5230392678126334962>.
- ⁷ <http://www.studyblue.com/notes/note/n/study-images-1/deck/1116226>.
- ⁸ Courtesy of Dr Bruce G. Marcot: <http://www.plexuseco.com/EPOW/>

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- ⁹ Courtesy of Christopher Minster: <http://0.tqn.com/d/latinamericanhistory/1/S/a/4/-/-/GEMELOS.jpg>.

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