Flood Reptiles, Serpent Temples, and the Quadripartite Universe: The Imago Mundi of Late Postclassic Mayapán

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Abstract

Mayapan, Yucatan, Mexico, was the most prominent Maya ceremonial center from the mid-thirteenth to the mid-fifteenth century. The city was a religious center for surrounding Maya populations. Its construction was linked through cyclical reasoning to a chain of antecedent centers, the ultimate link of which lay in creation. In the heart of Mayapan lay its exemplary center, an architectural model of cosmogony composed of five temple assemblages. The central building of each assemblage was a temple decorated with serpent imagery. These five serpent temples were depicted on a mural in Structure Q-80 at Mayapan, with additional symbolism suggesting that each building was tied to a specific elite official, likely the Ajaw B’atab’ob, Jalach Winik, and AjK’in as described in ethnohistoric documents. The serpent temples also depict the primordial flood crocodilian, who was both the world and the world destroyer—hence, a symbol of both order and chaos.

The archaeological site of Mayapan in Yucatan, Mexico (Figure 1), is one of the most frequently mentioned sites in indigenous and Spanish Colonial documents (Pollock 1962:2). Mayapan lies approximately 72 km southeast of modern Merida, Yucatan, Mexico. The Late Postclassic-period (ca. a.d. 1263–1539) walled city covers 4.2 km² and contains more than 4,000 buildings (Smith 1962:171). The Chilam Balam of Chumayel, an indigenous historical document, suggests that Mayapan had four major social divisions (Edmonson 1986:8; Roys 1967:69). The city may have also been divided into four exogamous wards, spatial divisions occupied by distinct corporate groups, reflecting the essential quadripartite form of the universe similar to that of Tenochtitan in central Mexico (Coe 1965:107–109).

This paper examines the five serpent temples in the central Ch’en Mul group of Mayapan and proposes that these buildings were cardinal points that both defined the site’s central ritual district and represented the quincunx, or five-part, cosmos. Decoration on each serpent temple depicts mythological scenes signifying creation events and warning of inevitable cosmic destruction. The five serpent temples stood in temple assemblages, each of which appears to have been the ceremonial precinct of a specific elite official and possibly the social group of the official. Hence, I suggest that the ceremonial core of Mayapan provided its inhabitants and visiting pilgrims with an ideal model of the physical and social universe.

The Carnegie Institution of Washington investigated Mayapan in 1938 and from 1949 until 1955. This research resulted in a number of field reports, some of which provide the data for the present paper (Jones 1952; Shook 1954a, 1954b; Smith 1955; Winters 1955a, 1955b), Pollock (1962), Proskouriakoff (1954, 1955, 1962a, 1962b, 1962c), Roys (1962), Smith (1962), and Smith (1971) later synthesized the various field reports into larger works. The mapping and excavations carried out by this project produced abundant data, which continue to be of use to archaeologists (see Brown 1997; Carlson 1982; Chase 1992; Folan et al. 1983; Pugh 1996; Rathje 1975).

Maya polites were often envisioned as having four parts and a center (Roys 1967:125). An image of the quadripartite universe in the form of a turtle with a cross on its back was found at Mayapan (Proskouriakoff 1962b:Figure 1(b); Taube 1988:Figure 54). But a four-part division has never been defined in the layout of the ceremonial architecture at Mayapan and is not obvious in either the site plan or the plan of the ceremonial center (Figures 1 and 2). Proskouriakoff (1962a:91) “arbitrarily” divided the buildings of the ceremonial center of Mayapan into four groups but described the overall layout of the city as chaotic (Proskouriakoff 1954:102). The present paper explores the role of quadripartition among the Maya and reveals that, although idealized, the quadripartite model of the Maya universe and its mythic origins are physically manifest in the architecture of the ceremonial center of Mayapan.

THE QUADRIPARTITE UNIVERSE

Although various events led up to the creation of the Maya universe, one of the most important was the division of the world into four parts. The Maya perceived the ordered universe as being a “quincunx,” having four parts and a center as well as a nadir and apex (Thompson 1970:194–196). Creation myths vary, but in Yucatan, before the present creation, the world was covered by a flood that had destroyed an earlier creation (Roys 1967:99–100). One of the instigators of the flood was a crocodilian called Itzam Kab’ Ayin, who was sacrificed to allow the birth of the ordered...
Catastrophic flooding as a means of cleansing the world of imperfections and bringing about renewal is common in myths told throughout the world. Many cultures in North and South America have myths about a primordial flood instigated by a reptile that is sacrificed and dismembered to allow the emergence of a new creation (Sullivan 1988:57–66). Besides removing the flaws of the earlier creation, the flood is a powerful symbol of transformation, the passage from one existential category to another, or liminality (Sullivan 1988:59). The substance that once was primordial chaos becomes, after creation, the bond among the components of the ordered universe. The flood emerges during liminal periods such as calendric completions and rites of passage, but its periodicity signifies that it is controlled (Sullivan 1988:63). During such rites, the flood is re-enacted in the form of ceremonial drinking (Sullivan 1988:54) and baptism. Ceremonial drinking played a role in colonial Wayeb’ rites (Landa 1941:147–149) and the Lacandon Maya link the b’alche drink with flooding (Davis 1978:90–100).

The quadripartition that emerged from creation divided undifferentiated chaos into an orderly and understandable cosmos. This basic division underlies the Maya world, placing all reality into an ordered format. Color was one such ordered phenomenon, with green associated with the center, red with the east, white with the north, black with the west, and yellow with the south—each being the color of a world tree located in a specific direction (Roys 1967:100). The basic four-part division extended to households, fields, settlement layouts, and larger sociopolitical spaces (Coe 1965:107–109; Jones 1998:69–101). In seventeenth-century Peten, Guatemala, subordinate to the central pair, including the political ruler and high priest, were four senior–junior pairs of lesser rulers called Ajaw B’atab’ and B’atab’, respectively, each associated universe. Once slain, the world-destroying flood crocodilian became the ordered earth floating in the cosmic sea (Taube 1988:168–169). The epidermal shields of crocodiles may have been considered analogous to raised fields (Puleston 1977:463–465); hence, Itzam Kab’ Ayin may have incorporated elements of the modified earth. The head of the earth crocodilian is also seen at the base of the five world trees in the corners and center of the universe that separated the earth and sky after creation and warn of future deluges (Figure 3) (Taube 1988:170–171). In addition to being envisioned as a crocodilian or turtle, the ordered universe of the Maya was imagined as being bound by the four posts of a house, sides of a field, or entrances to a village (Taube 1988:154–161).
Figure 2. The Cenote Ch'en Mul group (adapted from Proskouriakoff 1962c; reproduced by permission of the Carnegie Institution of Washington).
with one of the cardinal directions (Jones 1998:94–96). The Madrid Codex depicts a similar dual-quincunx structure, but with paired deities (Villacorta and Villacorta 1930:374–376).

In addition to dividing, quadripartition unifies. Among the modern Maya of Oskutzcab, Yucatan, Mexico, the four cardinal places and center defined the “spatial whole,” thereby distinguishing the inside from the outside, the in-group from the out-group (Hanks 1990:300–303). In some settlements, “two heaps of stones, facing each other” located at entrances at the cardinal directions marked boundaries and were important ritual sites in Wayeb’ rites (Landa 1941:139). Yucatecan boundaries were defined by pairs of crosses located at four entrances at the cardinal directions and one central cross in the village center near the cenote. Spirits called b’alam occupying these five locations protected the circumscribed space from evil winds and wild animals (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:114).

Quadripartition is also tied inextricably to time, as suggested by its correlation with calendric completion. The four cardinal points are connected to the movement of the sun with north and south associated with zenith and nadir, respectively (Coggins 1980:731). The movement of the sun during a solar day is re-created in ceremonial circuits such as Wayeb’ rites, which move from east to north to west to south (Coe 1965:101). This is also the direction of “historical process” among the Tzotzil Maya (Gossen and Leventhal 1993:198–200). Temporal cycles, like quadripartite space, were depicted on the back of turtles and crocodilians (Taube 1989:4–9).

Quadripartite space and time emerged at creation and were the images of order as opposed to the ambiguous deluge. It was necessary to re-create the so-ordered reality at the end of temporal cycles so that the flood did not re-emerge in an uncontrolled state. Sociopolitical change was managed through calendric completion rites, during which the primordial deluge temporarily re-emerged, thereby destroying, then re-creating, social spaces and offices. By controlling the timing and manifestation of the flood, its transformations proceed under the control of ritual (Sullivan 1988:107–109). The quadripartite reality that emerged at creation provides a means to classify the world and define its limits.

As social groups create and re-create the spaces they occupy, they do so in relation to central points of reference. The shapes of centers differ among social groups, but the center, whether social or architectural, is often constructed as a microcosm of the perceived world or cosmos (Geertz 1980:13; Wheatley 1971:436–451). In societies with such “exemplary” centers, abstract archetypes and basic existential categories reside in the center for all to see and learn. Those entering central spaces directly experience and “contemplate and decipher” their symbolic content (Lefebvre 1991:221). While literally written in the stone, these seemingly eternal images of perfection are themselves artifacts of historical processes. The present paper searches for these aspects of quadripartition in the ceremonial core of Late Postclassic Mayapan.

**MAYAPAN**

Mayapan was occupied during the Classic period but was reconstructed when it became a political and religious center around A.D. 1263. Stone looting and architectural modifications erased many of the earlier structures from the archaeological record (Proskouriakoff 1962a:132). At this time, a group known as the Itza established the city as the seat of the may (Edmonson 1986:58–59). The may is a calendrical cycle composed of 13 k’atuns. A k’atun is a cycle of 20 tuns, and a tun is composed of 360 days; hence, a may cycle is equal to approximately 256 years. The rituals conducted at the completion of these cycles renewed political positions and land titles (Edmonson 1986:20–30). At the end of each cycle, the may was reseated or re-established, generally at a new location. Before Mayapan, the may had been seated at Chak’anputun (Schele and Mathews 1998:59). The rituals of the may were communal renewal rites associated with the destruction and re-creation of cosmic order (see Edmonson 1986:79–100).

Six lords were associated with the cardinal directions and center of Mayapan. At one time, AjK’in Koh’a, the high priest and Kawich, the highest ruler, presided in the center. Sulim Chan ruled in the west. Nawat and Kowoj served as guardians of the spirit of the south and east gates/forts, respectively (Edmonson 1986:81; Roys 1962:79). Finally, AjEk’ is mentioned as “the other one” (Edmonson 1986:81), presumably the lord of the north. Various indigenous and Spanish documents mention Coba, Kawich, Chan, Nawat, Kowoj, and Ek’ as both surnames and toponyms in Colonial period Yucatan (Roys 1943).

The city seating the may reigned as a religious and political center. Mayapan was a capital occupied by numerous ethnic groups and an important pilgrimage center (Arnauld 1997:117–129). During the Late Postclassic period, it became the most influential center of learning in the Maya Lowlands (Landa 1941:27). There, elites learned reading and writing, divination, healing, history, ritual practices, astronomy, and calendrics. A council headed by the Jalach Winik, the highest ruler, governed Mayapan. The Itza initially controlled the position of Jalach Winik, but 100 years after the city’s establishment, the Kokom, a faction within their ranks, deposed them (Roys 1962:45–46). The Itza and Kokom struggled with various other groups for control of the city, their most notable opponent being the Xiw. The Xiw and the Kokom/Itza controlled the city to the degree that its politics seem to follow the pattern of a dual organization (Pugh 1996). Eventually, around 1440, the Xiw overthrew the Kokom and beheaded all but...
one of the family’s elite men (Roys 1962:48). Mayapan remained the seat of the may until the cycle ended in A.D. 1539 (Edmonson 1982:197).

The ceremonial core of Mayapan (Figures 1 and 2) lies southwest of the site’s aereal center. Other ceremonial groups stand within the city, but the core has the highest concentration of ceremonial buildings. Three important features rest in the center of this concentration: Structure Q-162, or the Castillo; Structure Q-152, or the Caracol; and the Cenote Ch’en Mul. The Castillo is nearly identical to the building of the same name at Chichen Itza but smaller and composed of rougher masonry (Pollock 1962:15; Shook 1954a:95). The substructure has nine tiers with four stairways, one facing each of the cardinal directions. Buried within the Castillo is an earlier version that also had nine terraces (Shook 1954a:93). The original structure at Chichen Itza likely represented the creation mountain that emerged from the primordial sea at creation (Freidel et al. 1993:138–155). As replicas, the two constructions of the Castillo at Mayapan were also creation mountains. The relationship between Chichen Itza and Mayapan goes far beyond architectural emulation; both were the seat of the underworld. They had separated the earth and sky at creation (Miller and Taube 1993:84–85). Hence, round temples and caves were an important variable considered when searching for places of origin (Heyden 1981:28). The location of cenotes is frequently linked to the primordial emergence of ancestors and places of origin (Hedén 1981:28). The location of cenotes and caves was an important variable considered when searching for suitable locations for ceremonial architecture.

A passage of the Cenote Ch’en Mul leads toward Structure Q-143, the Caracol. The drawing of the passage leading underneath the Caracol, sketched by Smith (1954:Figure 2), was rescaled to match that of Proskouriakoff’s (1962c) plan of the central group and laid over the latter (Figure 4). A small chamber with several pools of water appears to lie directly under the Caracol (Smith 1954:Figure 2) and may have determined its location. This chamber may have been the cave from which Ehecatl retrieved the bones of the first humans.

The cenote and Castillo, the mountain/cave axis-mundi, stood together in the center of the universe, transfixing the earth, sky, and underworld. They had separated the earth and sky at creation, but creation was empowered by the wind of Ehecatl, represented by his round, western-facing temple. These three sacred points formed the center of Mayapan and situate it in the time of creation. The centers of Maya spaces are often represented by a three-stone hearth (Freidel et al. 1993:130), and the three features in the center of Mayapan may replicate the central hearth.

The Serpent Temples of Mayapan

Serpent temples have dual doorway columns and/or balustrades in the form of large reptiles. Although they are uncommon, they exist in many parts of Mesoamerica. One of the earliest such temples was Teotihuacan’s Pyramid of the Feathered Serpent, while Mayapan, El Meco (Andrews and Robles 1977:28–33), Tulum (Lothrop 1924:33), Topoxte (Wurster et al. 2000:65), and Nojpe- 

ten contain Late Postclassic serpent temples. Five serpent temples stand in the main ceremonial group at Mayapan (Proskouriakoff 1962a:91; Pugh 1996), including Structures Q-58, Q-159, Q-143, Q-218, and Q-162 (Figure 2). Structure Q-162, the Castillo, clearly stands out from the rest because of its size, four stairways, and directionality.

Structure Q-58 has a platform with four terraces and a stairway on its east side. The superstructure faces east and is composed of a rectangular sanctuary with an inner shrine. The shrine held a high frequency of Late Postclassic censer and red-slipped sherds (Shook 1954b:258). The floor of the superstructure stands approximately 9 m above the plaza. In front of the entrance to the inner shrine is the mouth of a vertical shaft, which was seven or eight meters deep and contained numerous human and animal bones, presumably of sacrificial victims (Shook 1954b:255–256). Reptile-head sculptures did not lie near the columns of this building; however, the columns had rattle-tail capitals. Reptile-head effigies found at the base of the platform may indicate that this temple had been partially destroyed (Shook 1954b:257). Under the most recent version of Structure Q-58 were two earlier major constructions.

Beneath the earliest construction lay an early Late Postclassic period plaza surface (Shook 1954b:255). The two earlier stages were similar to the latest construction because they had four tiers and faced east (Shook 1954b:255–256), but they do not appear to have been serpent temples. The builders added the reptilian elements after completing the latest construction episode (Proskouriakoff 1962a:100). Hence, the sculptures do not appear to have been part of the original plan.

Structure Q-159 has three terraces and a stairway on the east side. The colonnaded doorway faces east toward Structure Q-143, another serpent temple. The simple rectangular superstructure had an altar against the west wall. The floor of the superstructure stands about 6.4 m above the plaza and contained numerous Late Postclassic effigy-censer sherds. It also held a carved limestone turtle with an oval receptacle on its carapace (Winters 1955b:410). Such figures are found at many Late Postclassic Maya sites and were identified as boundary markers at Santa Rita, Belize (Chase 1983:228). At least one of the serpent columns depicted a crouched figure “riding” on the back of the gaping-mouthed serpent (Winters 1955b:410).

Structure Q-143 has two terraces that rest on top of another large platform that also holds several other structures. The floor of the superstructure rests 5.5 m above the plaza. The superstructure of Structure Q-143 is rectangular and has both a small antechamber and an inner sanctuary with an altar against the east wall. Numerous Late Postclassic human effigy-censer sherds littered
the floor of the inner sanctuary (Winters 1955b:401). Reptile ef-
figies with gaping mouths decorated the column bases; however,
the two heads differed in size and form. One had a rounded snout,
while the other’s snout was squared (Winters 1955b:400).

Structure Q-218 has three terraces and a single stairway, and it
faces east. On the floor of the rectangular superstructure, 5.5 m
above the plaza, were a few Late Postclassic effigy-censer sherds
(Winters 1955b:405). The columns of this temple had reptilian
effigies with gaping mouths and forelimbs. Sculptures at the base

of the balustrades depicted a serpent with a gaping mouth and its
eyes hanging from the sockets (Winters 1955b:404–406). Exca-
vations revealed a previous Late Postclassic construction of this
building with the same basic layout, but the earlier structure does
not appear to have been a serpent temple (Winters 1955b:407–408).

Structure Q-162, the Castillo, is much larger than the other
serpent temples. The superstructure or temple is composed of an
outer and an inner structure. While the doors of the outer structure
face all the cardinal directions, the inner structure faces north and

Figure 4. Underground chamber beneath Structure Q-152 (adapted from Proskouriakoff 1962c; Smith 1954:Figure 2; reproduced by
permission of the Carnegie Institution of Washington).
has a small altar against the southern wall, suggesting north as the primary direction. The inner superstructure was painted green, blue, red, orange, black, and yellow, the five principal colors, perhaps analogous to the multidirectionality of the outer superstructure. The floor of the superstructure stands 15.3 m above the plaza. Numerous Late Postclassic human effigy-censer and red-slipped sherds and sculptured stone fragments lay on its surface (Shook 1954a:95–100). The serpent-head effigies had been removed from the columns, but the rattle-tails and forked tongues remained (Shook 1954a:97). A sculptured reptile head depicting an open-mouthed serpent with a human figure on its back lay on a low platform 28 m northeast of the Castillo (Proskouriakoff 1962a:106–107) and may have been one of the missing heads.

One previous construction of Structure Q-162 appears to have had nine platform terraces, but excavations did not reach the earlier superstructure. The available data suggest that its form differed from the latest construction primarily in size, but the earlier version has better-set and mortared masonry, with cut stones (Shook 1954a:92–93). Excavations in the plaza in front of the structure indicated that the plaza floor was reconstructed thirteen times, nine of which occurred while the temple was in its final form (Shook 1954a:Figure 2). The excavation lots associated with the floors contained a majority of Late Postclassic-period sherds (Shook 1954a:98–99). If the occupants constructed a floor every \( k'atun \), the plaza’s history extended for thirteen \( k'atuns \), or a maya cycle.

The open-mouthed serpent heads decorating the temples differ from building to building and on the columns versus the balustrades of the same building. Some have forelimbs, others have figures riding on their backs, and still others have eyes that protrude from the sockets. The “serpent” heads with forelimbs most likely represent crocodilians, but rattlesnake-tail capitals once capped these columns; hence, they combined both serpent and crocodilian imagery. Similar figures with forelimbs occur in a sculpture from Camptoton (Winters 1955a:Figure 4k), in the Tulum murals (Lothrop 1924:Plate 4, Taube 1992:130), and in the Dresden Codex (Villacorta and Villacorta 1930:158). In the latter two, the crocodilians have rain pouring from their bodies, perhaps indicating catastrophic flooding, and in the Dresden Codex, a crocodilian body is partly formed by a sky bar. The reptiles with forelimbs may represent \( Itzam Kab' Ayin \), the flood crocodilian (Taube 1988:143).

Mythic scenes in the Madrid Codex show serpents with riders (Villacorta and Villacorta 1930:284–286). The most common rider is Chak, the god of rain and lightning (Taube 1992:17). One such serpent bears the label \( na-chan \) (serpent house or place). Serpents with Chak riders commonly occur in pages depicting torrential rain and flooding. A serpent riding Chak also appears adjacent to the flood crocodilian in the mural of the Castillo of Tulom (Lothrop 1924:Plate 4). A sculptured crocodilian with a rider found at Mayapan has been identified as \( Itzam Kab' Ayin \) (Taube 1989:4–5). Some serpents associated with Chak may represent lightning (Taube 1992:19). The plumed serpents in the Madrid Codex may have been associated with “water and agricultural fertility” (Taube 1992:140).

The reptilian images on columns and balustrades at Mayapan are not fully standardized and may represent assorted beings in various poses. I suggest that the effigies may depict scenes from myths, especially those associated with world destruction in the form of catastrophic flooding. At least one of the images appears to be \( Itzam Kab' Ayin \), the flood crocodilian. All seem related to catastrophic flooding. Similar gaping-mouthed reptile heads on Late Postclassic ceramics in Peten, Guatemala, have been linked to New Year rituals (Rice 1989:316–317).

In addition to representing reptiles, the temple columns may depict trees. As mentioned, a flood-crocodilian head often occurs at the base of a tree, which becomes its upraised tail (Figure 3) (Taube 1988:171). The modern Lacandon believe the pillars supporting the roof of the third heaven, occupied by the gods, are composed of serpent/vulture columns (Davis 1978:22). The columns hold up the ceiling of the temple, just as the world trees support the sky. Furthermore, recall the pairs of crosses, which are also images of world trees, at the cardinal entrances that defined the boundaries of towns.

With the exception of Structure Q-162, temples do not stand alone, but are part of a temple assemblage (Figure 5), repeated configurations of buildings defined by Proskouriakoff (1962a:91). In the central group, a serpent temple provides the foundation for each assemblage. A raised shrine rests in front of and faces into the temple. Raised shrines are small, rectangular buildings on platforms, which often contained a burial cist. Between the temple and raised shrine lies a small statue shrine. An oratorio is usually attached to the right side of the temple. Oratorios are small buildings resting on the rear of platforms, and those of temple assemblages have a C-shaped bench with a medial niche or altar. A colonnaded hall stands at a right angle to the line formed by the temple and oratorio. Halls have C-shaped walls and benches, usually with median niches or interior shrines. Particular social groups likely used colonnaded halls for corporate rituals (Carmack 1981:287–290; Pugh 1996; Rice et al. 1998:229). Temple assemblages bound halls, temples, oratorios, and shrines into a single unit, intertwining their activities and ordering relationships among the various spaces.

Although defined at Mayapan, the architectural configuration of the temple assemblage is found in other areas, as well. Late Postclassic temple assemblages have been found at Topoxte Island, Paxte Island, Muralla de Leon, and Zacpeten in Peten, Guatemala; Tipu in Belize; Isla Cilvituk in Campeche (Alexander 1998); and Kawinal (Arnault 1997:122–123; Ichon et al. 1980:194), Iximche, and Uatlan (Carmack 1981:385) in the Guatemalan highlands. Each assemblage varies slightly from the Mayapan layout.

Structure Q-162 stands alone in the center of the plaza and seemingly does not rest in typical assemblage. I suggest that it vicariously played a role in a temple assemblage, as it is inseparable from the Cerne Ch' en Mul, which seems to have been located in the position of a temple in a temple assemblage (Figure 4). The correspondence between caves and temples has been well documented (Stone 1995:35–36), and the substitution of a cenote for a temple in a temple assemblage seems plausible. To the right (south) of the Cerne Ch' en Mul lies an oratorio, and to its north, at a right angle to it and the oratorio, stands a colonnaded hall. In front of the cenote is a raised shrine, which deviates from the typical temple-assemblage plan by facing into the hall. If the Castillo and Cerne Ch' en Mul form a complete axis-mundi, then a fifth and central temple assemblage lies in the ceremonial core of Mayapan.

Five serpent temples are located at Mayapan, all of which are found in the ceremonial core and in a temple assemblage—the Castillo through the Cerne Ch' en Mul. The ceremonial core of the site focused on the cenote and Castillo, but what of the other serpent temples and their assemblages? Structure Q-159 lies roughly west of the Cerne Ch' en Mul. Structure Q-143 rests directly opposite and facing Structure 159, roughly east of the cenote. Structure Q-218 lies roughly south of Cerne Ch' en Mul. The cardinal organization would be perfect were it not for the placement of
Structure Q-58, the northern temple. This building lies farther from the others, but still to the north. Thus, the five serpent temples in the ceremonial core of Mayapan form a quincunx layout. Additional information regarding the layout and meaning of the serpent temples is found on a mural painted in Room 1 of Structure Q-80.

Structure Q-80

A mural painted in Room 1 of Structure Q-80 likely illustrates the connection between the four smaller serpent temples and the Castillo. Structure Q-80, which lies to the north of the Castillo, has a vaulted ceiling, suggesting that it was constructed during the Classic period but continued to be used into the Late Postclassic period (Winters 1955a:372). Room 1 of the structure can be entered from the south through three doorways. Five niches on the northern wall of the room contained high concentrations of Late Postclassic effigy-censer sherds, copal, and other offerings. These niches form doorways for five serpent temples in a mural painted in red, black, yellow, white, and blue on this wall (Figure 6) (Winters 1955a:369–370). Reptilian heads at their bases connect the temples. The mural was painted after the latest major reconstruction of Structure Q-80 (Winters 1955a:370).

The five temples painted in the mural could represent the four serpent temples and Castillo, as well as the four corners and the center of Mayapan. In the mural, the shape of each of the temples and the serpents at their bases seems standardized; however, the buildings differ in size and in the designs painted on them. The niche in the center building is taller and slightly more elaborate than the other niches, and the painting of its temple is taller than the paintings of the other temples. The larger and more elaborate central image most probably represents the Castillo, which stands higher and has a more complex layout than the other serpent temples. Its placement in the middle of the other temples in the mural may reflect its location in the cosmological epicenter of Mayapan.

Each of the temples on the mural incorporate different painted designs, and the actual temples originally may have been painted with the same designs. The same design elements painted on the temples of the mural decorate ceramics found at Mayapan and other sites in Yucatan (see Smith 1971:48–67). The temple at the farthest left in the mural has bands and dot-encircled devices on the substructure element. The next, moving to the right, includes bands and a “tau” on the substructure. The central temple includes bands and triangles on the substructure element and terrace and scrolls on the molding above the door. The next temple to the right has bands and step-frets. The decoration of the final temple incorporates bands, steps, and triangles.

The designs on the mural temples are very similar to those representing places in Mixtec codices (Proskouriakoff 1962a:137). In Mixtec codices, standardized images depict features such as temples, hills, and caves; however, designs within the standardized shape differentiate each geographic feature from others of the same type. Some of the variation within the images designated them as place signs (Pohl and Byland 1990:113–116; Smith 1973:172–175) connected to the rulers of the space and define either territorial boundaries of a politically central place or the central place itself (Marcus 1992:153–189). The toponym of a town on page 9 of the Codex Selden (1964) (Figure 7), translated
as “Temazcal-Cave of the Flowered War” (Caso 1964:85), closely resembles the temples on the mural at Mayapan. At the base of the cross-section of a temple lies the open mouth of a serpent, symbolizing a cave, flowing with blood and water. Gaping reptilian mouths often represented caves (Heyden 1981:12–28).

Given the similarity of Mixtec toponyms to the images on the mural in Room 1 of Structure Q-80, one might suggest that the latter represented distinct places and social groups. Because Mayapan contained a cosmopolitan melding of numerous distinct ethnic groups, the images could represent places and groups within the walls of Mayapan. Five serpent temples have been identified at Mayapan; therefore, it seems probable that the images represent these temples and that these were the locations of specific social groups. The four smaller temples in the mural represent the idealized quadripartite social divisions, and the larger temple represents the center or whole. More specifically, the four temples could be associated with the guardians of the spirits of each of the cardinal directions, the four essential social divisions.

CONCLUSIONS

The five serpent temples at Mayapan form a quincunx layout, which represent the quadripartite division of the Maya universe. A relationship among “serpent,” “sky,” and “four” is also seen in the interchangeability of these terms in certain contexts in Maya texts (Houston 1984:790–803). The temples also tie quadripartition to the flood from which it emerged and continues to emerge. They form the cardinal points and, hence, boundaries of the center and link four social groups to the cardinal directions. These sets of overlapping relationships are connected, condensed, internalized by ritual participants, and attached to emotions such as solidarity (following Turner 1967:27–30) through the symbolism of the serpent temples. The five temples, or four parts and center, formed a huge icon representing “the whole” of Mayapan and, perhaps, the universe (following Hanks 1990:300).

The layout in the ceremonial core of Mayapan is not the only example of cardinal site-planning among the Maya. The layouts of various sites suggest such planning, including Tikal (Guillemin 1968:37–38), Copan (Ashmore 1991:212–218), Quirigua (Ashmore 1989:279–280), Ek Balam (Bey et al. 1997:239), Iximche (Guillemin 1967:246–247), and Utatlan (Fox 1994:158–170). The layout of Late Postclassic Utatlan seems the most comparable to Mayapan. At the center of the Utatlan is a circular temple that, similar to Structure Q-152 of Mayapan, rests above caves (Fox 1994:164). Four lineages, associated with the cardinal directions, appear to have controlled Utatlan, with three of the four having temples in the site’s center. The fourth lineage had a small temple in its ward in the northern part of the city (Fox 1994:162–167). One might recall that the northern serpent temple of Mayapan seemed to have been a late remodeling of another type of temple,
suggested that the group that controlled it, like the Sakic who ruled the northern barrio of Utatlan (Fox 1994:160), was a late arrival. Hence, both Mayapan and Utatlan incorporated architectural correlates of the ruling elite into their exemplary centers. However, social wards paralleling the quadripartite center, similar to those of Utatlan, are yet to be defined outside the ceremonial core of Mayapan.

Serpent columns at Chichen Itza have been identified as "vision serpents," which were symbols of mediate connections between cosmic planes (Freidel et al. 1993:140, 158). This is supported by the identification of some of the serpent columns at Mayapan as na-chan similar to those described in the Madrid Codex. The association between the columns and na-chan may be even deeper, as a possible translation of the term is 'serpent house.' The temples themselves could be na-chan or, perhaps, points of contact with the Na-Ho'-Chan creation place. Na-Ho'-Chan or 'first five sky' is the place where the Paddler Gods set the "first stone of the Cosmic Hearth" and may be the origin of the "sky umbilicus" that connects the earth and sky (Freidel et al. 1993:94–95, 421; Schele and Mathews 1998:44–45). The two serpent columns on each side of the medial axes of the temples at Mayapan may be the twisted serpents of Na-Ho'-Chan. Like the Jaguar Paddler in Jimbal Stela 1 and Ixlu Stela 2, the rider on one of the column serpents of Mayapan has simian hands and feet; therefore, some serpent column riders may have been Paddler Gods.

The serpent columns of the temples of Mayapan may be vision serpents, but given the multivalence of most symbols of the center (Lefebvre 1991:222), they also have other meanings. The columns represent reptiles associated with water in the form of catastrophic flooding as well as agricultural fertility. Because the reptile effigies on the columns match scenes in codices, the various column pairs may display specific mythical events. The columns also resemble the crocodilian-trees that rose to support the heavens. Pairs of such worldtrees, in the form of crosses, stood at the four entrances of towns; hence, these columns may have marked the "official" entrances to the sacred center and guarded it from the danger. Here the serpent columns’ additional role as vision serpents connecting material and supernatural spheres seems to be evoked, as well. The serpent columns define the area they enclose as a "place apart" from everyday existence (following Barrie 1996:252). The center, the Castillo or First-True-Mountain of creation, of this "place apart" defines its nature. As mentioned, the center remains partly in the chaos of the primordium and partly in the ordered world. In this space, the divisions of reality converge, and transitions from one to the other are possible (Sullivan 1988:66, 130). The central axis-mundi embodied the moment of creation: quadripartite order emerging from watery chaos.

The five serpent temples—the center and four boundaries—still bore elements of the primordial world. The spatial periodicity of these primordial remnants subduced their destructive natures, but the symbolism of the buildings reminded those within them of past cosmic catastrophe and warned of the inevitable reemergence of the deluge. The buildings communicated the quadripartition that emerged at the beginning of time, dividing all of reality, including society, into meaningful units. At the center of ordered space was the cave-mountain axis-mundi, which represented the creation moment and transcended the cosmic planes, the divisions in horizontal space, and the cycles of time. In sum, the ceremonial epicenter of Mayapan embodied a microcosmic representation of the quadripartite universe, its creation, and its re-creation. This was the Maya imago mundi, the exemplary center or template to be emulated and preserved.

RESUMEN

Mayapan, Yucatan, Mexico, fue el centro ceremonial maya más prominente desde mediados del siglo XIII a mediados del siglo XV. La ciudad fue un centro religioso que abasteció la fundación ideológica para las poblaciones mayas circundantes. Su construcción fue establecida a través de razonamientos cíclico de una cadena de centros antecedentes, de la cual el último eslabón se dirige hacia la creación. En el corazón de Mayapan fue un modelo de cosmogonía compuesto de cinco conjuntos de templos. El edificio central de cada grupo ceremonial fue un templo decorado con imagen serpiente. Los cinco templos serpientes fueron representados en una pintura al en Estructura Q-80 en una forma que sugiere que cada
edificio fue asociado a un oficial elite, probablemente los ajaw b’atab’ob, jalach winik, y ajik’in como tal como se describe en documentos etnohistóricos. Además, los cinco templos serpientes llevaron simbolismo del largarto de inundación que fue tanto el mundo como el destructor del mundo, por lo tanto, un símbolo tanto del orden y del caos.

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