



## CHALLENGING THE LIGHTNINGS: SAN BARTOLO'S WEST WALL MURAL AND THE MAIZE HERO MYTH

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Music [...] gives man a grip on nature, which the gods cannot allow - Alain Ichon

The iconography of the Tonsured Maize God, an important Classic Mayan deity, is generally assumed to be grounded in mythology. To reconstruct this mythology, recourse has been made to two specific models: the Popol Vuh Twin myth and the Gulf Coast mythology of the maize hero. The first of these identifies the Tonsured Maize God with Hun-Hunahpu, the father of the Twins, while postulating the father's resurrection. The second, which is of principal concern here, focuses instead on the Tonsured Maize God's shared and varied associations with the maize god of the Gulf Coast peoples – associations pertaining chiefly to the domains of sustenance, water and rain, the dead, kingship, and such arts as writing, dance, and music (Braakhuis 2009; Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011).



Figure 1. San Bartolo 'Pinturas' Sub-1A, west wall, central scene of the maize 'triptych': Dancing maize deity challenging the pluvial deities (drawing by Heather Hurst)

To address the limitations inherent to the first model, notably the tale's primary focus on the ball game and lack of episodes explicitly linking the paternal figure to the maize, the model has been augmented in two interpretive ways, one naturalistic and the other conceptual. According to the naturalistic interpretation, the Tonsured Maize God is little more than a personification of the plant. His infant form represents the seed, his feather

adornments are maize leaves, his dance movements express growth, and the emptying of a jar into the cleft from which he emerges signifies watering the maize. More generally, the relevant scenes are seen as expressing the developmental and seasonal stages of the crop. According to the conceptual interpretation, aspects and scenes of the Tonsured Maize God are explained symbolically, with a marked emphasis on broad concepts such as ancestry, kingship, world creation, and the world centre. Thus, the maize deity's canoe voyage is thought to symbolize the destiny of dead kings; the lightning torch in his forehead, royal ancestry; and his acrobatic stance, the world tree of the centre. Both the naturalistic and the conceptual interpretations have been brought to bear on the mythological scenes that are to be discussed here.

The focus of this article is on two crucial motifs of maize deity iconography depicted in the central scene of a triptych on the west wall mural of a Late Pre-Classic temple room at San Bartolo ('Las Pinturas' Sub-1A): the turtle cave and the turtle drum. A turtle is shown complete with a clawed foot, but with the shell replaced by a four-lobed, or quadrifoil, window through which the maize deity is seen dancing while beating a turtle drum and, apparently, shaking a rattle (**Fig. 1**).<sup>1</sup> The scene anticipates the Classic turtle carapace emergence of the Tonsured Maize God. The Classic emergence itself has been interpreted naturalistically, namely as the sprouting of the maize plant from the earth following the onset of the rainy season (e.g., Taube 1985: 174-175; Miller and Martin 2004: 57; Zender 2006: 10). By positing an analogy with the Puebloan 'place of emergence', both the Classic turtle carapace emergence and the Pre-Classic San Bartolo turtle cave scene have also been explained conceptually, namely as the first emergence of the maize from a cave at the centre of the world (Taube et al. 2010: 74-75, 84 note 8). At the same time, however, a Mesoamerican narrative motif, wherein the Maize Mountain is opened by the deities of rain and lightning, figures within this conceptual interpretation. Because the turtle icon is equated with the Maize Mountain, the maize deity is assumed to be unable to leave his cave before it has been violently opened by the lightning bolts of the pluvial deities. These assumptions are examined below in the context of the Classic carapace emergences themselves.

Instead of offering a naturalistic or conceptual interpretation of the turtle of emergence and its maize deity, the present author has identified the central San Bartolo scene as a specific episode from Gulf Coast maize mythology, namely the challenge and self-revelation of the maize hero vis-à-vis the thunder and lightning deities (Braakhuis 2009: 12, 23, 30). In this identification, which appeared before the final publication of the mural, I refrained from discussing the challenge episode at any length. This shortfall is remedied here. Before doing so, however, three issues need to be addressed. First is an interpretive problem posed by the San Bartolo turtle cave icon: The turtle's widely accepted identification as the earth seems to conflict with a narrative wherein the encounter with the lightning deities is set in an overseas region. Second is the 'first emergence' interpretation of the turtle cave scene and the maize deity's role in that emergence. Third is the question of the central scene's connection to the flanking scenes.

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<sup>1</sup> Only the stick of the rattle survives. Elsewhere, an Early Classic Tonsured Maize God is accompanied by an emblem consisting of a pair of rattles (Deletaille Tripod, Hellmuth 1988: Fig. 4.4)

*Two views of the turtle carapace*

It has been noted (Taube et al. 2010: 72-75; cf. Taube 1988: 189-190) that the San Bartolo quadrifoil turtle is a variation on depictions on Pre-Classic monuments from Guatemala's south coast showing quadrifoil reptiles – a turtle (Izapa stela 8) and a crocodile (Takalik Abaj altar 48)<sup>2</sup> – and also on various Classic monuments, all with window-like frames and often a ruler figure inside.<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, the quadrifoil turtle is replaced both by turtle carapaces adorned with the glyph for 'King' (Taube 1988: figs. 3b, 4a) and by the better known Classic turtles from which the Tonsured Maize God emerges as a king in his own right.

The current interpretation of the turtle carapace as a symbol of the earth floating in the sea (Taube 1986: 57-58; Taube 1988: 193-195) – an 'earth turtle' or 'world turtle' – is based on scant data. First, Itzimte Altar 1 shows the head of a lightning deity within a turtle carapace aperture bordered by T526 'earth' (*kab/kaban*) signs; second, a Post-Classic Mayapan stone turtle is fringed with a chain of thirteen Ahaw signs that could signal a geographical projection of the 13 katuns, established in 13 kingdoms, onto a terrestrial surface equated with the back of the carapace. The second piece of evidence is less than convincing, however, both because the turtle is of a different type than the pseudo-bicephalous turtle of emergence, and because the thirteen Ahaw signs may just be another way for marking the turtle as a place associated with the origin of kingship, without the further intention of equating the turtle's surface with that of the earth. Two additional arguments buttressing the earth hypothesis also warrant review. If the emerging maize deity is viewed as a mere personification of the plant, then it seems inescapable to identify the turtle as the earth. This line of thought is, however, based on the outmoded notion that myth is directly descriptive of nature. Furthermore, whereas an earth turtle would indeed parallel the Aztec concept of the earth as a swordfish or crocodile, such a parallel could well be misleading. In sum, what seems beyond dispute is that in one case, namely Itzimte Altar 1, a turtle inhabited by aquatic deities is connected to the earth, whereas in other cases, this connection remains uncertain.

Another way of approaching the turtle icon is to view it first as the homestead of important aquatic and pluvial deities: a rain deity and an aquatic serpent in the case of San Bartolo's turtle cave, the lightning deity (god K) and the aged thunder god (god N), amongst others, in the case of the Classic turtle carapace. By this view, an identification with the earth is only one among several possibilities. Following Sahagún's (1979: 700 = Bk XI Ch. 12) description of a subterranean Tlalocan as the mythical source of all terrestrial waters, the turtle's interior cavity could represent an underground 'Tlalocan', which would in turn suggest its lateral apertures to represent passages into the sea (Braakhuis 1990: 132-133). Although this Mayan 'Tlalocan' could in principle embrace the entire earth, the turtle icon could also stand for a more restricted 'Tlalocan'. This concept appears from Gulf Coast descriptions of subterranean lakes and of lagoons as residences of the pluvial deities (see Braakhuis 1990: 133-134). Furthermore, Sahagún's description directly connects the subterranean Tlalocan to the sea, which is described as penetrating

<sup>2</sup> Chinchilla Mazariegos kindly called my attention to the fact that the reptile of the Takalik Abaj altar represents a crocodile or caiman rather than a turtle.

<sup>3</sup> Guernsey provides a detailed discussion of the Pre-Classic quadrifoil window, which she characterizes as both "a watery place associated with rain, aqueducts, pools of water, and mists" and a symbol "where the past/otherworld intersected with the present/terrestrial world" (2010: 90).

the earth through all its veins and apertures - a viewpoint widely reported from contemporary central Mexico, as well as from the Gulf Coast area (e.g., Lorente y Fernández 2012: 74; Knab 2004: 97-131; cf. Hooft 2007: 226-227). This view seems to confer a maritime character to the pluvial powers. Thus, as a representation of Tlalocan, the icon of the turtle floating on the sea could symbolize the subterranean cave and lake residences of the pluvial deities, as well as their lagoon and sea residences. The turtle icon may therefore legitimately be assumed to represent the dwelling of the thunder and lightning deities visited by the Gulf Coast maize hero.

*The turtle drum dance: Cosmic acoustics versus narrative plot*

Another issue to be discussed before examining the challenge episode of maize hero myth and its applicability to the central San Bartolo scene is the 'first emergence' theory formulated by Taube and his colleagues, which assigns only a marginal role to the maize hero. Admittedly, in his iconographic study, 'The Maya Maize God and the Mythic Origins of Dance', Taube (2009: 49-50) includes comparative notes concerning the dancing and music-making Gulf Coast maize god. He duly notes that the deity is a musician, that he crosses the water on a turtle, and then "plays music to annoy his father's killers" – music that, in Zoque-Popoluca myth, amounts to beating a turtle drum, "the same drum pounded by the dancing maize god at San Bartolo over two thousand years before" (Taube 2009: 50). Surprisingly, however, these data are not used to elucidate the San Bartolo turtle cave scene; and in the collaborative commentary on San Bartolo's west wall mural that appeared shortly afterwards (Taube et al. 2010: 76-78, 80), the turtle drum of Zoque-Popoluca myth is not even mentioned.<sup>4</sup> Instead, the explanatory focus is on all sorts of rainmaking rituals, Mayan and non-Mayan alike, that involve dance and turtle drum music, with the turtle drum itself supposedly symbolizing thunder.<sup>5</sup> The motive behind this shift of attention is not entirely clear. As noted, the authors view the maize god's emergence from the turtle through the prism of Puebloan emergence accounts.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps for this reason, the acoustic effects presumed to accompany the turtle emergence are presented as the earliest known instance of a Puebloan rainmaking complex shared with Mesoamerica (Taube et al. 2010: 77; cf. Schaafsma and Taube 2006). In any case, the plot of the maize hero episode mentioned above is brushed aside, and as a consequence, there is hardly a role left for the powerful rain and water deities occupying the turtle cave. They are treated as mere spectators: "Dancing in good company before the attentive gods of rain and terrestrial water, the central Maize God is making thunder within the cosmic turtle" (Taube et al. 2010: 77), the interior of which is suggested to serve as a giant resonance chamber (Taube 2009: 48).<sup>7</sup>

Whether the "attentive deities" are indeed such "good company" is a point to which I shall return. There is, however, little evidence to substantiate the claim (Taube et al. 2010: 76)

<sup>4</sup> Only the general notion is left that, "the Maize God was responsible for the origin of music" (Taube et al. 2010: 80).

<sup>5</sup> The idea that the beating of the turtle drum simulates (or at least symbolizes) thunder also occurs with various other authors (e.g., Quenon and Le Fort 1997: 894; Zender 2006: 10).

<sup>6</sup> The same perspective is taken in the case of the north wall maize deity (Saturno et al. 2005: 50-51).

<sup>7</sup> The speculative analogies informing this view seem to be that the maize deity's carapace drum replicates the 'earth drum', while the antler drum stick striking the turtle drum replicates the lightning 'drum stick' striking the 'earth drum'.

that the turtle drum's music was generally perceived as the sound of thunder or that this instrument was inherently a rainmaking implement. After all, it was used all over Mesoamerica in a great variety of rituals, often together with other instruments. This suggests that it was primarily appreciated for its sound rather than for one particular symbolic or magical effect. Although the turtle drum has an undeniable potential for symbolizing the aquatic realm and thus for use in rituals involving the pluvial deities, the conceptualizing explanation of the maize deity's dance as an act of imitative rain magic seems somewhat speculative as well as rather narrowly focused.

The question as to the turtle drum's connection to rainmaking may be left undecided here. The strategy of Taube and his co-authors for elucidating the San Bartolo scene is nonetheless perplexing. It seems odd to acknowledge a connection between the motifs of turtle cave and turtle drum on the one hand and the maize mythology of the Gulf Coast on the other, and yet fail to exploit this connection to penetrate the motifs' deeper meaning. More promising, it would seem, would be to look beyond Puebloan analogies and the conceptualizing approach, and to reexamine an episode from a wide-spread Mesoamerican narrative – one with known Classic Mayan and Olmec antecedents<sup>8</sup> – to see to what extent, if any, it would fit the San Bartolo turtle cave scene.

### *The flanking maize deity scenes: Narrative options*

There is additional reason for adopting the narrative approach. It will soon become apparent that even if one were to accept the dancing maize deity as a thunder maker and rainmaker, such an identification would inevitably involve the mythology of the maize hero. More importantly, the two scenes flanking the turtle drum dance also invite comparison with this mythology. Taube and his co-authors (2010: 70-71) have labeled the first of these scenes "the infant maize god born from water." Although the Zoque-Popoluca maize hero, Homshuk, is cited as a mythological instance of this 'infant maize' concept, the narrative context is ignored, and consequently the attendant figure is given scant attention, a neglect that parallels the case with the pluvial deities in the conceptualizing interpretation of the middle scene. In fact, the first San Bartolo scene shows an event immediately subsequent to the maize deity's aquatic birth (or rebirth): The baby has either been recovered from the water by the male figure that carries it, or else is about to be disposed of in the water. Maize hero mythology covers both cases, although the agent is more often female than male.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it is surely meaningful that the San Bartolo baby-carrying scene is connected to the turtle cave scene by the same undulating stream.<sup>10</sup> The proposed narrative connection provides a ready explanation: The reconstituted maize baby is transported through the water from its aquatic place of rebirth to the ocean realm of the pluvial deities (Teenek; Ochoa Peralta 2000, myth 1) and, once grown up, will undertake the same voyage, seated on a turtle.

<sup>8</sup> Like the Classic Maya, the Olmec recognized a male maize deity and associated him with a turtle and a canoe. Small Olmec stone objects include a turtle carapace with the head of the maize deity carved and incised on its breast plate as well as a canoe with maize deity heads incised on the inside (Taube 1996: 62-63 and fig. 22).

<sup>9</sup> Particularly in the Zoque-Popoluca versions, the maize egg is spotted by the female as a mirage in the water and recovered by the male from a place above the water.

<sup>10</sup> The appending of the head of what is probably a rain deity with a shell ear (Taube et al. 2010: 70) personifies the stream in such a way that it seems to emanate from the turtle cave.

With regard to the third scene, various figures have nearly disappeared from view, so that its interpretation is open to question. Nonetheless, there are at least two reasons for assuming that – contrary to the view of Taube and his colleagues (2010: 81-83)<sup>11</sup> – it shows the maize deity as a meteorological agent. First, the maize deity is flying and diving in the air, on a par with not only certain flying Olmec maize deities (Taube 1996: fig. 17a; 2000: 306-307 and fig. 11a, b) but also codical rain deities (e.g., Madrid Codex 12b, 17b2; Borgia Codex 20; Nuttall Codex 5), Tzeltal meteorological nahuales (Pitarch Ramón 1998: 216-219) and Xinca ‘flying men’ rainmakers (*voladores*; Sachse and Christenson 2005: 18).<sup>12</sup> Second is the flying maize god’s conspicuous serpent girdle, complete with what looks like bifurcated fins.<sup>13</sup> A serpent girdle is attributed by the Totonacs to their thirteen little thunder gods (Ichon 1973: 138); it is also found on rain deities and human figures with rain deity attributes.<sup>14</sup> The Gulf Coast maize hero is repeatedly described as a lightning deity and rainmaker in his own right (see Braakhuis 2009: 14-15; Braakhuis and Hull, in press); and one Zoque-Popoluca version (Córdova Ortiz n.d.) even ends with the maize hero joining his lightning relatives in the sky (*“se fue al cielo y se hizo amigo con los rayos”*). In sum, both the middle scene and its flanking scenes suggest a need for reconsidering the turtle drum dance in terms of Gulf Coast maize hero mythology.

### *The turtle drum dance: Challenging the pluvial powers*

Of four Zoque-Popoluca renderings of the relevant mythological episode (Foster 1945: 192-193; Elson 1947: 208-210; Córdova Ortiz 2004; Blanco Rosas 2006: 75),<sup>15</sup> three (Elson, Blanco Rosas, Córdova Ortiz) explicitly identify the hero’s drum as a turtle drum. An immediate effect of beating the drum is a torrential downpour sent by the lightning deities (Foster), an effect that could have furnished another argument for the drum’s role in rainmaking ritual. Yet, it will be seen that in maize hero myth the turtle drum’s role is a more encompassing one (as is that of the guitar, or harp, and violin which sometimes substitute for it) and that the thrust of the narrative goes far beyond a mere act of rainmaking magic. It would, furthermore, be missing the point to state that by beating the drum, the maize deity is just “annoying” the deities who had murdered his father. Rather, the maize deity’s musical performance is a heroic challenge to the reigning meteorological powers, which are about to be ‘tamed’, as well as being a magical procedure for making the maize grow. In each of these ways, the performance constitutes a decisive intervention, one that in its wider consequences implies introducing agriculture and thereby laying the foundation for civilization.

<sup>11</sup> According to the San Bartolo iconographers, the scene would illustrate the Classic-Mayan concept of ‘entering the water’. This expression is found as a caption in certain Tonsured Maize God scenes and can refer to the destiny of the dead.

<sup>12</sup> The maize deity may be interacting with the serpent (of which only the head and the onset of the body are visible) that seems to be hovering in the sky above the turtle cave.

<sup>13</sup> Bifurcated fins are common with Early Classic fishes and similar aquatic creatures (Hellmuth 1987: 126-130; see also Kerr vases K4562, K5391, K9181).

<sup>14</sup> Rain god with a serpent girdle: K8736 (part of an Early Classic scene including the maize deity in a canoe). Female wind and rain goddess with serpent girdle: Madrid Codex, 32b. Male person evincing the ‘goggles’ of Tlaloc, with serpents winding around the middle and the arms: K3862 (possibly from Veracruz).

<sup>15</sup> The Münch (1983: 168) version of the episode is not counted, since there it is the sound of Homshuc sawing down cedar trees for building a house at the ocean shore that draws the Old Lightning’s attention. The house may refer to some ritual structure.

The spatial centrality of the maize god's drumming in the composition of the second half of San Bartolo's west wall mural underscores its importance and is paralleled by the great insistence with which the relevant tales present the maize hero's musical feat. They highlight not only the divine musician's inexhaustible vitality, but also his unflagging determination to make his music produce the desired result. According to the Totonac version (Ichon 1973: 67), the youth's endeavour begins precisely as he starts to play; and not unlike musicians at a religious feast, he "goes on to play and play, the whole night long," until finally he is heeded. In the Zoque-Popoluca variants, the maize deity beats his turtle drum while standing at the shore of the ocean, either on the near side of the water (Foster) or in the homeland of the Lightnings on the other side (Elson). In the Foster text, the hero "began to beat on his drum," a drumming that appears to have abated neither during the first exchanges with the pluvial powers nor during the passage of a terrible rainstorm, insofar as "the boy was still on the shore, drumming." And so, when two turtles finally arrive on the shore, one after the other, to transport him, they are welcomed with an identical greeting, "Here I am, uncle, drumming." As will soon become apparent, the motif of the hero's drumming is so consequential that the turtle enabling him to reach the rain deities will subsequently be made into a drum.

The turtle drum music is directed at the dominant meteorological powers. In the Mountain Totonac versions (Ichon), these powers are represented by the Thunders (*Truenos*), whereas in the Zoque-Popoluca versions (Foster 1945: 192; Elson 1948: 209; Blanco Rosas 2006: 75) they are represented by the Lightnings (*Rayos*), the 'Old Lightning of the South' (*Nukwidyay*; Münch 1983: 168), and Hurricane (*[Ma]sawa*). Propelling the story is the understanding of these deities that the hero's music will render them subservient. The father of the Totonac maize hero, a musician like his son, was killed at a feast for this very reason: "So you want to order the world around?" (*Así que tu quieres mandar en el mundo?*; Ichon 1973: 74). In other words, the hero's intended supernatural audience is yet to be tuned in to his music: "The men [the Lightnings and Thunders, my comm.] who did not want to hear the music [...] became angry, because they had never heard that music" (Williams García 1972: 89).

The pluvial deities' opposition to the new music is unsurprising, considering that the hero's performance essentially prefigures agricultural ritual and thus announces an arrangement in which these deities will have to interact with human beings and be assigned a narrowly circumscribed task.<sup>16</sup> The ritual intent comes to the fore in a Nahua version (Barón Larios 2004: 374) that establishes a direct connection between the hero's voyage to the land of the Lightnings and the use of the turtle drum in ritual. The maize deity's turtle carrier is rewarded with the promise that, "Whenever there is a feast, they [the people] will praise god with you, singing and drumming."<sup>17</sup> In the Totonac and Tepehua versions, the ritual intent is even more explicit. The Totonac version (Ichon 1973: 77) has the hero show his mother how to play ritual music (*costumbre*) with instruments (violin and harp) made by himself. The Tepehua version concurs. When the hero's musical instrument (left by his father and retrieved from the house of his mother) was first played, "guitar and violin were heard. At that moment the music originated, not just any music, however, but that of ritual (*costumbre*)" (Williams García 1972: 89).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ichon (1973: 89) justly compares the invention of music with that of fire, and concludes: "In its origin, music has a magical role: It gives man a grip on nature, which the gods cannot allow."

<sup>17</sup> As an example of such a feast, Todos Santos is mentioned.

<sup>18</sup> The suggestion seems to be that of a single pre-Spanish instrument, perhaps a flute or a turtle

Consequently, in various Tepehua, Totonac, and Zoque-Popoluca tales, the interaction between the divine musician and the pluvial deities occurs primarily in a context of dancing, eating, and drinking at each other's feasts, with rivalry as yet prevailing over cooperation. In the Tepehua version mentioned above, the maize deity is invited to play at the dance feast (*baile*) of the pluvial deities, although the intention is to eliminate him with poisoned food. A Zoque-Popoluca version (Blanco Rosas 2006: 74-75) assigns the initiative to the maize hero, thereby underscoring the theme of tuning the pluvial deities in to ritual music. This time the Lightnings are invited to the dance feast of the maize deity, again with the intention of rendering the other party harmless. Through this invitation, the hero's turtle drum music becomes part of a celebration comparable to the Yucatec and Ch'orti' offerings of ritual drinks to the rain deities. The maize deity "wants to hold a carnival, he made a bower, and feasted with the carapace of a turtle" (*el quiere pasar carnaval, hizo una enramada y fiestó con el caparazón de una tortuga*), while the arriving Lightnings are being served maize beer. Intoxicated, they are no longer able to arrest the maize deity,<sup>19</sup> which in the present context can also take the meaning of arresting his growth.

In the Zoque-Popoluca tales, the episode's principal focus is the unhindered development of the maize. When the maize deity is beating his turtle drum to call the Lightnings, a lightning emissary arrives to demand his name. He is first told one name and then, on returning, another, whether "One who becomes like a snake's teeth" followed by "One who leafs out" (Elson 1947: 209), or "He who sprouts at the knees, he who flowers" followed by "The one who is shelled, the one who is eaten" (Foster 1945: 192). All the while, the turtle music presumably continues.<sup>20</sup> The pair of puzzling appellations dismays the major Lightning (or Hurricane).<sup>21</sup> Apparently failing to recognize the drummer as the living maize, he orders him imprisoned. Similarly, in another variant (Blanco Rosas 2006: 75), "Germinated Seed" gives way to "Born Plant."<sup>22</sup> When, in this variant, the major Lightnings themselves finally arrive to sit, drink, and talk with the hero, the hero's name has in the meantime changed to "Flowering Maize". Only then, "did the maize deity consent to go with the Lightnings to their place" (Blanco Rosas, *ibid.*).

In short, the hero's dance with the turtle drum represents a challenge issued to the pluvial deities that initiates a new and basically ritual arrangement between these powers and mankind. The turtle drum music directly relates to, and runs parallel with, the irrepressible growth and final flowering of the maize, which already implies the demotion of the all-powerful pluvial deities. An ensuing series of tests and contests merely confirms this implication.

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drum, producing the sound of two post-Conquest ritual instruments. In a comparable way, the Totonac hero institutes the music of violin and harp, but is then identified with his flute (Ichon 1973: 77-78).

<sup>19</sup> As in other tales (e.g., Taggart 1983: 211-212; Sandstrom 2005: 40), the love for alcohol that explains the violence of the pluvial deities (Stresser-Péan 2008: 76-79) leads to their demise.

<sup>20</sup> In the parallel Totonac episode (Ichon 1973: 77-78), the hero's music is resumed after each visit of the Thunders' emissaries.

<sup>21</sup> Hurricane's designation of the hero as a 'nagual' (Foster 1945: 192-193) seems to be connected in part to the hero's serial transformations.

<sup>22</sup> The Blanco Rosas epithets may be merely alternative translations of those given by Elson.

*The San Bartolo turtle drum dance as a commemorative image*

The critical episode of challenging the pluvial powers can now be compared to the San Bartolo turtle cave scene. It seems evident that the cave scene depicts a dance like the one described by the Zoque-Popoluca versions, focused as it is on a maize hero drumming and dancing with boisterous energy and on two major anthropomorphic pluvial deities (a rain deity and an aquatic serpent) sitting in repose.<sup>23</sup> The Foster version lays much stress on the indefatigable force of the hero's drumming, and the Blanco Rosas version mentions the major Lightnings sitting on their seats in the presence of the maize hero and joining in the feast.<sup>24</sup> During most of the exchanges with the hero, however, the directing major Lightnings remain in their seat of power, and it is there that the maize hero finally rejoins them (in the Blanco Rosas version), or indeed first performs his dance (in the Tepehua version). The San Bartolo scene sets off the poise of the established powers from the enthusiastic intervention of the outsider; more specifically, it appears to refer to the hero's dance performance at the place of the pluvial deities, as indicated by Tepehua myth. The storm beating the shores where, according to the Foster variant, the maize hero plays his turtle drum to call the Lightnings, recurs in the "rain-bearing wind [...] created by great waves crashing against the shore of the earth turtle" (Taube et al. 2010: 70). It should be assumed that this 'earth turtle' can equally denote the overseas homestead of the pluvial powers, a point that has already been discussed in general terms and will be considered in more detail below.

Furthermore, Taube and his co-authors (Taube et al. 2010: 77-78) have identified the square, tasseled object carried by the dancing maize deity on his back as a basket for gathering the ears of the maize. Although plausible, no ears are visible, and so the identification should be regarded as tentative.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, its consequences for the interpretation being proposed here are worth considering. A harvesting basket would give the maize god's performance the additional function of announcing the feast of the tender maize ears. As described for the Gulf Coast Nahuas (Hooft 2008: 55), it is during this feast (called *elotlamaniliztli* 'offering of the tender ears') that the farmers return home to the accompaniment of ritual music invented by their maize hero, Chicome-Xochitl, carrying baskets of young ears on their backs.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the harvest feast commemorates Chicome-Xochitl (Barón Larios 2004: 378). Thus, regardless of whether the putative basket already contains maize ears or, as appears to be the case, is yet to be filled, the

<sup>23</sup> The San Bartolo scene is only one of several encounters between the maize deity and the pluvial deities (Braakhuis 2009: 10-13). Of particular note is a scene on an Early Classic flanged bowl (Stuhr 2008: 120 no. 90) showing a maize deity iconographically comparable to the cacao deity of the Dumbarton Oaks stone bowl. He stands between the seats of a rain deity and what appears to be an anthropomorphic aquatic serpent, facing the latter. Behind the maize deity is a trunk-nosed deity depicted in full motion. He may represent a Lightning emissary.

<sup>24</sup> Regarding the Lightnings joining the feast of the maize hero, one may consider a Classic plate (K9143) showing a lightning deity in a dancing pose reminiscent of the dancing Tonsured Maize God.

<sup>25</sup> The container might also, for example, hold the seed spirits (see Sandstrom 2004: 345), although this would not basically alter the agricultural implication.

<sup>26</sup> The elote music is produced by violin and guitar, the instruments mentioned in the Tepehua version of the origin of ritual music. In an Otomi version (Oropeza Escobar 2007: 186, 191), the maize hero starts whistling the *son* of the elote as soon as he is born in a river; he also whistles it when, grown up, he is sowing his maize field.

scene before the thrones of the pluvial deities would assume a prefigurative sense. In the context of the myth, it would signal that the hero, being the first farmer,<sup>27</sup> is about to bring home tender ears from 'corn place, lightning country', an endeavour in which his father failed (Elson 1947: 204).<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the maize deity's basket could also be a visual metaphor, since ripe maize ears have a natural place in the series of stages in the growth of the maize that informs the Zoque-Popoluca episode. Representing the essence of the maize deity, the ears would more particularly answer to one of the paired epithets through which the hero reveals himself, viz. "The one who is shelled, the one who is eaten."

Within the integrated second half of the west wall mural, the heroic episode of the maize deity confronting the pluvial deities would appear to be a natural choice for the central scene of the maize deity triptych. Moreover, the challenge episode not only represents the decisive turn of events that will give the maize hero power over the aquatic realm, but also provides an essential connection to the royal accession scenes flanking the triptych. This is so, since the hero's intervention creates a new balance in the world that the king should strive to maintain. It is consistent with such a view that the acceding king to the left appears to be consecrated by the maize deity and that from their platforms both kings look out on the same dancing maize deity as the pluvial deities enthroned in their cave.

### *The turtle carapace emergence as a triumph*



Figure 2. Carapace emergence with three canoes: The maize hero carrying the seeds taken from the rain deities' realm (Schele drawing no. 5513)

<sup>27</sup> The maize hero is commonly represented as a farmer sowing his field and harvesting his crop (e.g., Alcorn 1984: 62, 341; Blanco Rosas 2006: 73-74; Oropeza Escobar 2007: 191). The Museo Popol Vuh vase accordingly shows him with a sowing bag.

<sup>28</sup> There is a widespread idea that the pluvial deities own the maize; however, it is the maize hero who has to introduce them to its proper use (e.g., García de León 1968: 351-352).

We move ahead now to the Classic emergence scenes. It will be argued that these are continuous with the central scene shown at San Bartolo and symbolize the ultimate triumph of the maize hero over the meteorological deities. In this context, it is important to note that the deities enthroned within the Late Pre-Classic turtle cave resemble those that in the Classic emergences appear from the turtle's lateral apertures, in that they all belong to the aquatic cycle that is a central concern of the Gulf Coast maize mythology. More specifically, the Late Pre-Classic precursor of the water lily pad serpent, enthroned in the turtle cave, recurs in one of the lateral apertures of the Classic split turtle carapace (K1892);<sup>29</sup> similarly, the enthroned rain deity recurs in the rain deities who attend the maize god's emergence (both on K731 and the vase discussed below). Moreover, the deities most often shown by the naturalistic as well as by the quadrifoil turtles are the lightning deity (god K) and the aged thunder deity (god N), characters that are also, at least initially, the principal antagonists of the maize hero.

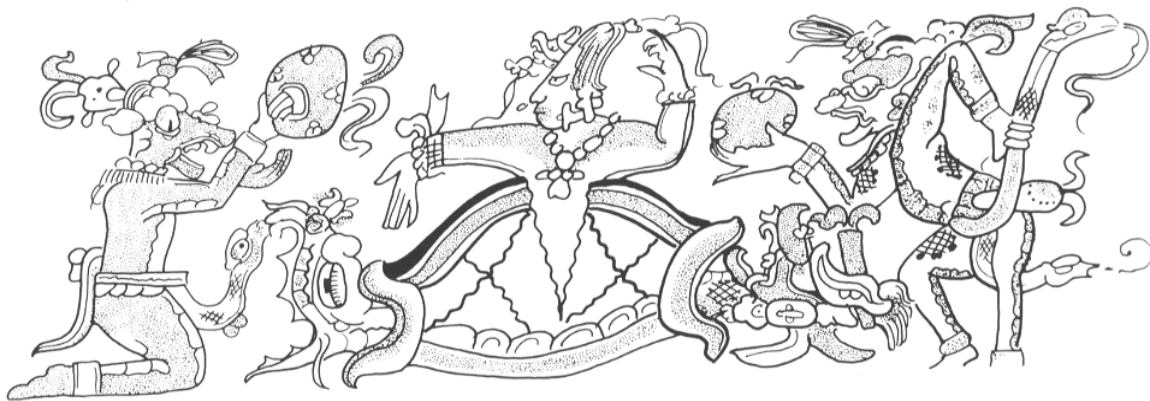


Figure 3. Carapace emergence: Rain deities paying allegiance to the triumphant maize hero (after Taube, *Aztec and Maya Myths*, 2003: 66)

The Late Pre-Classic and Classic maize deities themselves - whether dancing within the quadrifoil turtle before the pluvial deities or emerging from among them through a cleft - share important features. The Tonsured Maize God in particular is once seen to carry a bag of seeds at his emergence (**Fig. 2**), in parallel to the putative basket for transporting maize ears. This bag of seeds appears to represent another of the hero's self-identifications - occurring in a confrontation with a death god substituted for the major Lightning - viz. "I am the one that germinates, I am the new seeds, I am rebirth" (Münch 1983: 167; cf. González Cruz and Anguiano 1984: 223).<sup>30</sup> Equally important, there is a vase that shows the Tonsured Maize God emerging with a commanding dance gesture, flanked by two rain deities holding their lightning instruments (**Fig. 3**). It has been noted (Taube 2009: 48; cf.Looper 2009: 116-117) that this dance appears to be connected to the dance inside the turtle cave, in that both are performed in the presence of rain deities.<sup>31</sup> If, therefore, the dance posture assumed by the San Bartolo maize deity inside

<sup>29</sup> In the Dresden Codex (13a1, 35b2), this aquatic serpent is treated as a shape of the rain deity.

<sup>30</sup> In a previous study (Braakhuis 2009: 16-17), I mistakenly assigned this self-identification to a preceding episode.

<sup>31</sup> However, Taube (2009: 48; 2012: 746-747) considers the San Bartolo dance scene an early "version" of the Classic emergence scene, thus advocating a synchronic reading of two scenes that are here taken diachronically.

the turtle cave represents the challenge offered to the reigning pluvial deities, as is argued here, then the dance posture assumed by the Classic deity emerging from the turtle's interior appears to symbolize the hero's triumph over the pluvial deities and the latter's temporary subjugation.<sup>32</sup> This subjugation can also be taken literally, since various pluvial deities are beneath the hidden feet of the maize deity, and in one depiction (**Fig. 2**) are almost dwarfed by him.

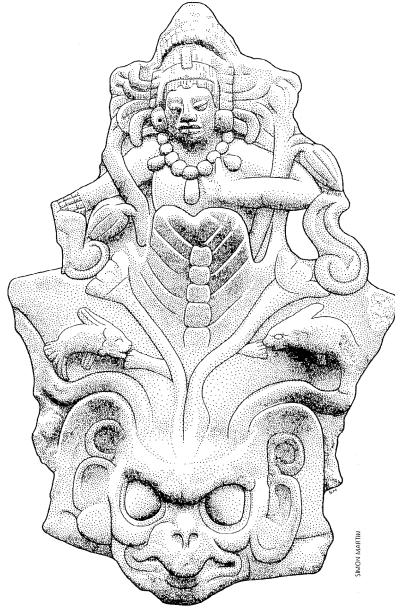


Figure 4. Cacao stems sprouting from a turtle drum: The benefits of ritual music (courtesy Simon Martin)

The carapace emergence scenes appear to correspond in two additional respects to the challenge episode and its sequel. In several Zoque-Popoluca versions (Foster, Elson, Córdova Ortiz), the Lightnings put the hero in one prison after another and there submit him to trials, from which he emerges triumphant. The carapace splitting open to let the maize deity out suggests that the dwelling of the Lightnings may also be viewed as a prison releasing its captive.<sup>33</sup> More importantly, and as noted above, the emergence from the crack in the carapace is suggestive of sprouting, especially in those Classic representations where only the deity's upper body is visible. The essence of the hero's triumph thus appears to be emblematically defined as a sprouting from amidst the Lightnings — a neat illustration of the irresistible development of the maize informing the challenge episode and announcing its outcome.

A possible emblematic use of the notion of 'sprouting' is also found with a Late-Classic ocarina (**Fig. 4**) that shows a dancing youth emerging, together with two cacao stems, from a turtle carapace (Taube 2010: 80 fig. 53B; Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011: 79 fig. 25I; Martin 2012: 119 fig. 64). In this case, however, the sprouting is arguably related to the challenge episode itself. Thus, the carapace is positioned vertically, suggesting a turtle

<sup>32</sup> This comparison finds itself reinforced by the fact that in the Classic turtle emergence the carapace can give way to a quadrifoil window (as on K4998).

<sup>33</sup> A fettered maize deity occurs on several vases (K2068, Tonsured Maize God; K6036, Foliated Maize God) and is also present in the Paris Codex (7a2).

drum,<sup>34</sup> and accordingly the youth emerges not through a cleft, but from one of the carapace's natural apertures. Rather than being "one of the clearest Late Classic portrayals of the Maize God dancing out of the earth turtle" (Taube et al. 2010: 78), therefore, the scene can be interpreted as an emblem for ritual music and its benefits, particularly the growth of the crops.<sup>35</sup> A close narrative parallel occurs when, in Totonac maize hero myth, the hero hides from the emissaries of the thunder deities in his musical instrument, only to emerge as maize (Ichon 1973: 83, 89). Also the sprouting and flowering implied by the successive names of the drumming Zoque-Popoluca hero, in an episode paralleling the just-mentioned Totonac one, could find expression in the ocarina scene. At the same time, a connection of the flowering turtle drum to the carapace emergences of the more familiar kind is suggested by the two aquatic flowers and nibbling fishes enclosing the carapace's breast plate. By the same token, the origin of turtle drum music is connected to the realm of the pluvial deities,<sup>36</sup> an emblematic reference that has narrative corollaries in the destiny of the hero's turtle carrier as the first turtle drum and in the use of this drum in the heartland of rain and sustenance.

The carapace emergence scene on the vase discussed earlier (**Fig. 3**), with its maize hero emerging from a cleft in a dance posture and its two flanking rain deities holding rainmaking attributes, can support the present viewpoint in still other ways. One of the rain deities is kneeling respectfully while presenting his attribute – a 'knuckle-duster' stone implement (Taube and Zender 2009: 180ff) – to the emerging maize hero.<sup>37</sup> The other rain deity, depicted in a swinging motion suggestive of dance,<sup>38</sup> extends a flower symbol (the glyph T646; cf. Stone and Zender 2011: 223) while holding his axe underarm behind the body. The offering of the flower – an act assigning to the Mayan equivalent of Chicome-Xochitl ('Seven-Flower')<sup>39</sup> what properly belongs to him – appears to ratify and confirm the rain deities' vow forever to make the maize flourish. Here the flower appears to be on a par with the upheld rainmaking implement, together constituting a single message of deference. Another unusual detail may allude to mild rains nourishing the tender maize: Both rain deities appear to evince snakelike (and perhaps partly avian) penises that would identify them as 'sprinklers' (Yucatec *aj hoyabilob*; Thompson 1972: 100, referring to Dresden Codex 37b1).<sup>40</sup>

<sup>34</sup> The contrast with the horizontal position of the pseudo-bicephalous turtle carapace is likely to be meaningful. When played, turtle drums are usually held in a vertical position (e.g., Bonampak room 1, procession; K530, rain god orchestra; K3040 and K5104, animal orchestra).

<sup>35</sup> The generality of the emblematic message accords with the lack of specificity of the dancing youth.

<sup>36</sup> The turtle carapace under discussion has also been viewed as budding from a water-lily plant rooted in a "paradisiacal pool" (Martin 2012: 119), i.e. the regenerative realm of the water and rain deities.

<sup>37</sup> The pose of the kneeling rain deity presenting his implement is entirely comparable to that of a kneeling deer presenting a cylinder vase, one among various mammals offering tributes to god D (K3413).

<sup>38</sup> The backward sway of the arm holding the lightning axe could suggest that the rain deity has just produced a thunder clap. Effects of thunder are noticeable at decisive moments in the maize hero tales (birth, Chevalier and Bain 2003: 227-228; triumph, Law 1957: 360; paternal revivification, Blanco Rosas 2006: 75), and are also visible at the Tonsured Maize God's emergence (Robicsek and Hales 1981: 155 fig. 57, upper rim).

<sup>39</sup> Chicome-Xochitl is likely to correspond to the 'Flower Lord' (*nicte ahau*) mentioned in the Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel (see Braakhuis 2009: 25).

<sup>40</sup> In a Pipil hero myth (Schultze-Jena 1935: 31), young rain deities produce rain by urinating.

The interpretation of the carapace emergence as a triumph carries implications for those turtle caves that show a human king seated on a throne. Such a representation – inconsistent with the traditional conception of the Maize Mountain that will be discussed presently – is readily understandable from the present perspective. An altar from El Peru (Taube et al. 2010: fig. 48A), for example, shows a quadrifoil turtle cave with what would appear to be four tasseling maize ears in the interstices. The enthroned human king inside, apparently substituting for a pluvial deity, appears to figure as a possibly ancestral ruler over 'Tlalocan', source of all agricultural plenty.<sup>41</sup> As such, the king follows in the footsteps of the victorious maize hero, an idea that finds support in the maize deity's involvement in the inauguration of the king on San Bartolo's west wall. Classic turtle carapaces carrying an abstract *Ahaw*-sign (Taube 1988: figs. 3b, 4a) may convey the same message.

### *A competing viewpoint: The Maize Mountain hypothesis*

Before pursuing other implications of the present argument, a competing interpretation of the emergence scene with the two flanking rain deities needs to be considered. In the preceding section, the fissure in the carapace was taken to result from a spontaneous internal process, or 'sprouting' – for which Maya iconography offers many examples<sup>42</sup> – whereas the rain deities' lightning instruments were viewed as their rainmaking attributes (that is, as weapons used for attacking water-bearing serpents). The same vase scene (**Fig. 3**) has also, however, been used in support of a quite different view (Taube 1986: 57-58, fig.4; Taube 2012: 747), according to which the turtle carapace represents the Maize Mountain, opened by rain deities violently throwing their lightning bolts against the rock – a theme that, in spite of its narrative importance, is not especially conspicuous in Mesoamerican art. The Maize Mountain argument is further supported by a vase (**Fig. 2**) showing another rain deity with a 'knuckle-duster' stone, this time held behind the body (K731; Stone and Zender 2011: 206-207); this particular rain deity stands erect in the first of three canoes approaching the emerging maize deity.

The Maize Mountain hypothesis potentially embraces all other carapace emergence scenes as well, and could also affect the interpretation of the San Bartolo scene.<sup>43</sup> For all its ostensible simplicity, however, the hypothesis both disregards the principal candidate for being the Classic Maize Mountain,<sup>44</sup> and fails to explain major discrepancies between the

<sup>41</sup> The El Perú representation has a close Aztec parallel. The Toltec king Huemac – the same person that played ball against the rain deities – was believed to rule over Cincalco ('Place of the House of the Maize'), a subterranean paradise not unlike Tlalocan; Motecuhzoma tried to visit him there (in a tale told by Durán and Tezozomoc, and summarized by Seler, 1962 [GA IV]: 355-356).

<sup>42</sup> Splitting from within combined with emergence: Tonsured Maize God emerging from split-Ahaw sign (K634); trees and ancestors emerging from splitting earth (sides of Pakal's sarcophagus); rain deity emerging from split rock within T-shaped sign (Quirigua Altar P'); glyphic sign emerging from split rain deity's head (Palenque Palace Intaglios). Another example of spontaneous splitting is the 'split-Ahaw variant' water deity head, with the Tonsured Maize God floating above it (Calakmul codex-style vases).

<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, the Maize Mountain concept, with its implied opening by the lightning deities, is notably absent from the San Bartolo west wall exegesis (Taube 2009; Taube et al. 2010). One finds only the oblique formula (Taube et al. 2010: 78): "The Maize God appears to be dancing out of the watery underworld with his burden of mature, harvested corn."

<sup>44</sup> The principal candidate for being the Classic Maya Maize Mountain is a mountain personified as

turtle carapace representations concerned and the Maize Mountain tales (cf. Braakhuis 1990: note 45; Braakhuis 2009: 8-9; Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011: 81-82). These tales do not mention a mountain shaped like a turtle, floating in the sea, inhabited by pluvial deities and kings, and approached by yet other deities in canoes; nor do they personify the maize recovered from it, least of all as a thunder maker.

As to the last point, the relevant Gulf Coast tales – consistent with comparable tales from the Maya area (Navarrete 2002) – imply the presence of dry instead of sprouting maize kernels inside the mountain, an inert maize supply that in the tales never appears to be personified by a male deity representing the essence of liveliness. Instead, as in Zoque-Popoluca and Teenek tales (Sánchez Bain 1999: 279-283; Vásquez García 2002: 87; Alcorn et al. 2006: 603-604), the maize hero is himself the one who, assisted by a lightning deity, recovers the dry maize from the rock – analogous to the recovery of the maize from an overseas ‘corn place - lightning country’ – or who, conversely, as in Teenek and Nahua tales (Alcorn 1984: 62-63, 341; Segre 1990: 327), stores it away in the rock. In those cases in which the hero is said eventually to retreat, discontented, into a local Maize Mountain (Alcorn 2006: 601, 603; Sandstrom 2004: 346), he seems no longer to exist as an acting person, since it is only the tangible and partially burnt maize ears that are finally brought out into the open by the lightning deities.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to these discrepancies, the Maize Mountain hypothesis does not readily explain the kneeling posture of one of the two rain deities on the vase under discussion, the offering of a flower symbol by the other, or, indeed, the imperious gesture of the emerging maize hero.<sup>46</sup> With respect to the rain deity poised with his weapon (axe or stone) behind the body, noticeable on the two vases most relevant to the Maize Mountain hypothesis, this character’s association with the split turtle carapace is less direct than it might seem: Instead of associating him with a turtle, an important vase belonging to the emergence complex (K8736) associates him with two canoes, one holding the maize deity and the other the Jaguar Paddler.<sup>47</sup>

For all of the above reasons, it is hardly self-evident that the vase scene of immediate concern here – the dancing maize deity emerging between two rain deities – should refer to the tale of the splitting of the Maize Mountain, known since the sixteenth century. Instead, it appears to spring from a more ancient tradition. The scene can be adequately explained by the maize hero’s pacification of the pluvial deities and the latter’s vow to henceforth use their weapons only for producing beneficial rains.

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a face with a stepped depression in the forehead (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993: 138-139, 283-284; Stone and Zender 2011: 138-139). Kernels can often be seen within, maize sprouts from its sides, and the Tonsured Maize God sometimes emerges from it. The existence of this icon suggests that the turtle carapace represents a different concept altogether.

<sup>45</sup> The Gulf Coast stories concerning the discontented maize hero hiding in a mountain that *ipso facto* becomes the Maize Mountain have a parallel in Maya stories relating the mountain retreat and maize transformation of the pursued daughter of a paramount mountain deity (see Braakhuis 2010, Chapter 8).

<sup>46</sup> Also of relevance here is an emergence scene in which the splitting carapace is replaced by a splitting water deity head (Robicsek and Hales 1981: 90, vessel 116). Although understandable as an alternative reference to the rain deities’ realm, this replacement is not readily accommodated by the Maize Mountain concept.

<sup>47</sup> The reference is to the second figure from the right in Kerr’s picture (K8736).

### *The turtle cave in mythical space*

Thus far a case has been built for a basic correspondence among the Late Pre-Classic turtle cave scene, the Classic carapace emergence, and the Gulf Coast maize hero myth. The correspondence between the San Bartolo cave scene and the challenge episode also suggests that the turtle cave is not always a symbol of the earth – or rather, of its subterranean domain – but can equally refer to a mythical place beyond the horizon. In the maize hero tales, the place of the thunder and lightning deities is usually situated on the other side of the sea and can only be reached on the back of a turtle. This place seems to coincide with the paradise of the old thunder deity of the Teenek Maya (Muxi'), lying in the East, in "a mysterious place inhabited by the *Tok'* (giant turtle)" (Hooft 2003: 39n.20), and attainable only by mounting such a turtle (Alcorn 1984: 83). This turtle paradise is thus a Tlalocan transposed to a world beyond, or perhaps inside, the sea.

The assumption that the turtle cave icon allows for two broad geographical interpretations is supported by a difference in the indigenous views regarding the location of the Gulf Coast residence of the rain deities. Some situate it on the near side of the sea, in a lagoon (Reyes García 1976: 16) or in a subterranean lake viewed as another 'sea' (Knab 2004: 110-111), while others situate it on the far side, beyond the horizon. In the former version, the residence, whether a lagoon or a subterranean lake (*Apan*), is described as a paradise, that is as a local Tlalocan on a par with the oversea paradise of the Old Thunder, Muxi'.

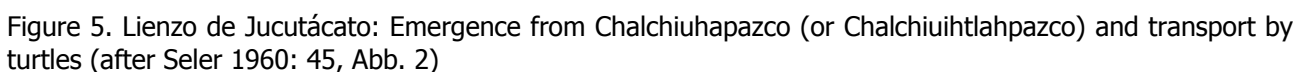
It appears to be a consequence of the symmetry of sea and subterranean world that the old thunder god commutes from the one to the other. The Huastec old thunder god, Muxi' (also referred to as *Maamlaáb*), for example, while presiding over the 'Great Lagoon' – that is, the sea in the East – has alternative residences in specific mountains of the West (Alcorn 1984: 58; Ochoa 2003: 85-87). A concept of alternation appears to be involved. According to Tiedje (2003a), "both the Tenek *Maamlaáb-Miimlaáb* [the male and female old thunder god] and the Nahua *Teyoatl-Toueynana* [corresponding ocean gods] temporarily reside in the sacred caves and mountains. Both Muxi (and his wife) and Teyoatl (and his wife) are believed to move throughout the ritual cycle from the East (the ocean) to the West (the mountains), temporarily residing in the sacred mountain located in Xilitla, S.L.P. (Huitzmalotepetl in Nahuatl; T'ídhach Ts'een in Tenek)." Tiedje further explains that this alternation is a seasonal one, the mountain being the dry season residence and the ocean the wet season residence.

It also follows from these symmetries that the turtle voyage into the sea is sometimes mirrored by a turtle voyage into a mountain. According to a local Teenek tradition (Gutiérrez de Sánchez 1993: 169), the mountain where the Koy river arises has a sacred cave,<sup>48</sup> in which "the Huastecs can go and fetch all kinds of grains or seeds, because there one finds all plants and fruits that exist on the earth. They say that a giant turtle sallies forth from the cave when a native draws near. If he mounts it, it will carry him further inside." And deep within the cave is a paradisaical garden full of fruit trees – the Teenek equivalent of *Apan* and of Sahagún's subterranean Tlalocan. Apparently, the transport to this paradise is by way of subterranean waters.

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. Alcorn (1984: 82): "The most sacred [caves] are those from which powerful rivers are born. Caves associated with the source of the Koy and Huichihuayán rivers are well known sanctuaries."

Given the assumption that the prime referent of the San Bartolo turtle cave is the overseas homeland of the old thunder deity and the associated pluvial deities, there remains the question of this homeland's precise nature. Sometimes, the hero mounted on his turtle heads for an island (González Cruz and Anguiano 1984: 221), raising the possibility that in the past the overseas homeland of the pluvial deities was more generally viewed as such an island. Taking into account the resemblance of the early San Bartolo representation of the pluvial deities' residence to the topographical treatment of mountains and other geographical features in Mexican codices, one may also ask whether such an island may not simply have gone under the name of 'Turtle Cave'.



An argument for the hypothetical concept of a 'Turtle Cave' island can be found in a Gulf Coast tradition of speculative thought concerning mythical places in the middle of the sea. There is, for example, the wide-spread notion of a 'house' in the middle of the ocean, from where the rainy season is started or announced. According to the Teenek (Alcorn et al. 2006: 604), it was made for the old thunder deity, Muxi', by ancestors under the guidance of the maize hero; according to the Zoque-Popoluca, it was made for the demoted 'Old Lightning of the South' by the maize hero himself (Müñch 1983: 169). Such mid-sea places suggest an association with turtles. The Gulf Coast Nahuas, for example, have a tale (García de León 1976: 94-95) concerning a 'Turtle Prince' (*Príncipe Galapatsin* or *Príncipe*

*Tortuguita*) who once took up residence in a house in the middle of the sea in order to govern the tides. A particularly suggestive case is the 'Place of the Jewelled Jar' (*Chalchihapazco*), depicted on the Jucutácató Canvas (**Fig. 5**). It shows a sort of cave of origins in the middle of the sea, from which the ancestors of the Olmeca-Xicalanca, seated on turtles, reach the Gulf Coast (Seler 1960 [GA III]: 44-49).<sup>49</sup> In a similar way, the Teenek ancestors reached the oversea land of the old thunder deity, Muxi', and returned from it, thus reproducing the voyages to the land of the Lightnings undertaken by the maize hero himself, whether mounted on a turtle or walking over a turtle bridge (see Braakhuis 2009: 24).<sup>50</sup>

The assumption of a 'Turtle Cave' island floating in the middle of the sea may shed light on certain floating turtle caves that give the impression of functioning as aquatic carriers. Compared to the best-known emergence scene (K1892), with its imposing curvature of the carapace and elevated position of the triumphant maize deity, most emergence scenes show a much smaller carapace. In one specific case (**Fig. 2**), such a carapace is in fact accompanied by three canoes of the same size as the carapace, with the maize deity and the canoe passengers all standing upright in their aquatic vehicles (cf. Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011: 90). Conversely, in another case (K5608), the maize god — depicted twice — stands in a canoe as if it were a turtle, again in a dancing posture. These depictions seem to refer once more to the 'Flower Turtle' that carried the maize hero towards the land of the Thunders and Lightnings,<sup>51</sup> to the giant *Tok'* turtle of the Teenek tales that provides access to the realm of the old thunder deity, and to the turtle sent off from the old thunder deity's ocean realm to carry the maize hero back to the earth (Robles, in Ochoa Peralta 2000: M1). Thus, the homeland of the Thunders and Lightnings (that is, the turtle cave of Classic and Pre-Classic times) appears to have been fused with one of its turtle carriers — a fusion that, while emphasizing the subservience of the tamed pluvial deities, conveys the sense and purpose of the maize hero's turtle voyage.

### *The turtle cave as a moral concept*

The contemporary maize hero mythology does not appear to have preserved the specific geographical notion of a 'Turtle Cave'. Even so, the Teenek still associate the homestead of their major pluvial deity with a giant turtle (Hooft 2003: 39n.20; Alcorn 1984: 83). For their part, the Tepehua and Totonac assign a crucial role to a large turtle whose cave serves as a kind of nursery for the maize (Williams García 1972: 88; Ichon 1973: 82). When the maize baby is killed and fragmented, a turtle 'nurse' (*pilmama*) collects the particles and stores them in her cave. There the maize child regenerates, and the turtle carries the maize child on her back before shaking it off and restoring it to the earth. I previously suggested (Braakhuis 1990: 129-130; 2009: 9) that the Classic carapace emergence might refer to this moment in the narrative. As set out above (in the section 'The turtle carapace emergence as a triumph'), however, I now believe that precedence should be given to the episode describing the maize hero's ascendance over the Thunders and Lightnings, and thus to the San Bartolo turtle and its cave. Additionally, versions of the nursing episode among neighbouring groups substitute other benevolent, aquatic

<sup>49</sup> For an exhaustive treatment of Chalchihapazco, see Lehmann (1974: 300 note [b]).

<sup>50</sup> With regard to the topic of 'the other side of the sea' in colonial Maya sources and in more recent narratives, see Sachse (2008) and Sachse and Christenson (2005).

<sup>51</sup> This Flower Turtle is usually paired with the weaker and unsuccessful Mud Turtle.

creatures for the turtle, usually fishes (e.g., Olguín 1993: 121-122; Williams García, in Oropeza Escobar 2007: 208-2009), whereas a parallel aquatic regeneration episode of the Zapotec Twin heroes features a crab nurse (Speck 1998: 174-176). In other words, the episode seems to be less about the cave of a turtle than about the spontaneous assistance offered by representatives of the aquatic realm. And yet, the choice of a turtle, rather than of another inhabitant of the waters, is unlikely to be coincidental (cf. Houston and Taube 2008: 139 and fig. 80; Taube 2009: 50).

It is entirely possible, for example, that the cave of the turtle nurse may still implicate, albeit indirectly, the residents of 'Turtle Cave'. This idea is supported by the Totonac and Tepehua episode, in which the turtle (like the aquatic creatures substituted for her elsewhere) essentially plays the role assigned to the rainmaking deities inhabiting estuaries like that of Tamiahua. Among these deities, called "germinators" (*tlaitskalohkeh*), the old thunder deity "gives life to the maize and makes it sprout," the maize being called by the name of the maize hero, Chicome-Xochitl (Reyes García 1976: 127-128). This task of giving life to the maize is precisely the one that Chicome-Xochitl assigns to the thunder and lightning deities at the conclusion of his earthly career. It therefore appears as if the Totonac and Tepehua myth has personified the secondary, nurturing aspect of the deities of water and rain by a female figure, so as to create an instructive contrast with the male Thunders and Lightnings, who are restive and must first be tamed.<sup>52</sup>

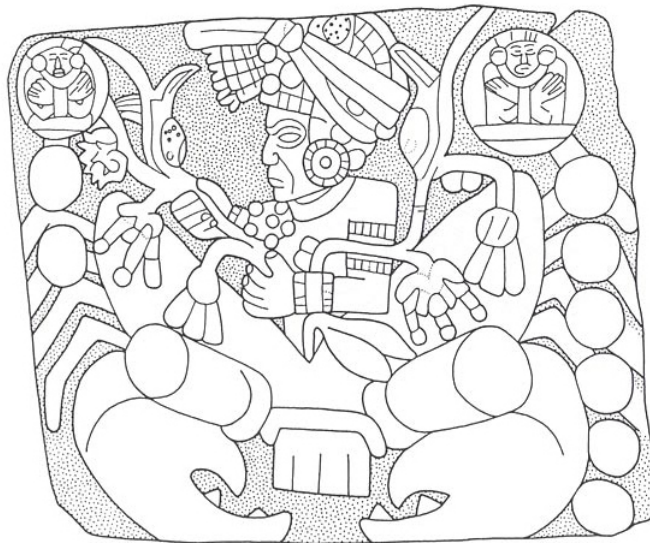


Fig. 6 El Baúl monument 7: Crab emergence (FAMSI copyright 1988: Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos)

Thus, with the cave and pond of the turtle nurse cast as a local manifestation of the realm of the pluvial deities, the myth appears to both announce and teleologically enact the

<sup>52</sup> The turtle nurse bears comparison to the Totonac goddesses of childbirth (Ichon 1973: 120-122), and, more specifically, to the Aztec goddess of childbirth, Ayopechtli ('Turtle Bed'), the subject of a short Aztec song (Garibay 1958: 128-133; cf. Braakhuis 2009: 18). Indeed, the Totonac and Tepehua turtle nurse episode may well have originated with the midwives and wet-nurses, the midwives playing a vital role in agricultural ritual.

destiny of the dwelling of the Thunder and Lightning deities, a homeland of turtles that may once have gone by the name of 'Turtle Cave'. An analogous relationship may well exist between the crab nurse figuring in Zapotec Twin myth and the Crab Cave of El Baúl Monument 7, with a deified ruler emerging from a fissure together with a flowering vine (**Fig. 6**).<sup>53</sup> Viewed in this way, the cave of the turtle nurse is perhaps the closest approximation to the turtle cave and turtle carapace icons that the maize mythology of the Gulf Coast affords.

### *Summary*

The turtle cave of San Bartolo's west wall mural, like the Classic pseudo-bicephalous turtle, is best considered as the abode of the pluvial deities. As such, it can symbolize the subterranean domain of the earth as well as a place in or beyond the sea. Since the maize deity dancing with a turtle drum inside the cave is the precursor of the heroic maize deity of contemporary Gulf Coast mythology, the scene as a whole is to be understood first and foremost within this narrative framework. The dance event can be satisfactorily explained by an episode known from the Zoque-Popoluca, Tepehua and Totonac that describes the institution of ritual music by the maize hero, the subsequent musical challenge issued to the pluvial deities, and the gathering of the maize from the latter's realm. Located between two depictions of royal accession platforms, the central scene of the triptych appears to commemorate the decisive step in the defeat of the meteorological deities, which enabled the maize hero to bring order to the aquatic realm. This reading of the cave scene as a royal commemorative image brings to the fore agricultural ritual in general rather than rainmaking ritual in particular, with the scene situated in a narrative rather than in an exclusively ritual or cosmological context.

The Classic turtle carapace emergence, iconographically connected to the San Bartolo turtle cave scene, can be viewed as an emblem for the maize hero's triumph over the pluvial deities. In line with the metaphors governing the Zoque-Popoluca episode, it adopts the image of a maize plant sprouting from the earth. In contrast to the conventional view of the carapace emergence as resulting from the splitting of the Maize Mountain – an event with a dubious connection to the surmised rainmaking ritual in the turtle cave – the present interpretation of the carapace emergence constitutes a narrative continuation of the turtle cave event, symbolizing as it does the outcome of the preceding challenge.

Two aspects of the turtle cave icon warrant particular attention. First is its geographical ambiguity, one possibility being that it may once have referred to a mythical island and homeland of turtles. Second, the turtle cave of contemporary Totonac maize hero myth, important to earlier discussions of the Tonsured Maize God's emergence, may indeed refer to the dwelling of the pluvial deities (represented in Classic Maya iconography by another turtle cave) but only indirectly – namely by demonstrating this dwelling's destiny as a nursery of the maize.

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<sup>53</sup> In this interpretation, the crab carapace represents the dwelling of the pluvial deities. In the alternative interpretation it would presumably represent the earth or the Mountain of Sustenance (the Maize Mountain).

*Concluding Remarks*

It could be argued that the present interpretation founders on the scarcity of iconographical evidence for the antagonism of the pluvial deities, a scarcity that stands in marked contrast to the vivid portrayals of such antagonism (in the form of forced contests, trials in prisons, and violent assaults) that figure in oral accounts. It can, however, be countered that it is the primordial initiative taken by the maize hero and the vindication of his rights vis-à-vis the pluvial deities, rather than the ensuing confrontations, that constitutes the decisive event and has therefore been chosen for representation. It is, moreover, a general fact of Mesoamerican iconography that important mythological episodes are not always depicted, or only infrequently so, a fact to which the various confrontations between the Twins and the death gods bear testimony.

The Tonsured Maize God is often described in terms of 'death in the Underworld' and the subsequent 'resurrection' and 're-birth'. These concepts are to some extent attributable to a particular reading of the Popol Vuh Twin myth. By comparison, in maize hero mythology, the protagonist's immortality is usually taken for granted, there being many scenes in which he is killed only to regenerate as the crop, or in which he miraculously returns to life while dancing and making music. In the present interpretation, the Tonsured Maize God's dance upon emerging from the turtle carapace expresses his triumph over the pluvial deities rather than over death itself, in which case neither 'resurrection' nor 're-birth' would be entirely appropriate terms for describing his triumphant re-emergence.

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