

## THE ARMADILLO STOOL

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### **Abstract**

This paper is a brief inquiry into the cultural importance of seats, and the cultural importance of armadillos in Mesoamerica, focusing primarily on the Maya region. Stimulated by a carved stone armadillo found in Central American Honduras whose function was not known, the author finds Mesoamerican reasons from language as well as size and form for identifying it as a stone ceremonial stool. Seating and seats were important to the Classic Maya nobility, just as the short-legged stool is still an important item of household furniture for many modern day Maya and neighboring peoples. Identification of the stone armadillo as a ceremonial stool informs a brief discussion of forms and functions of the Mesoamerican seat in past and present times, and of the role of the armadillo in Mesoamerican thought.<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Relatively new to the southern United States, the armadillo is widely found in Mexico and Central America, and it occurs in even greater numbers and variety in South America. Local peoples associate it with the underworld and with fertility, among other things, but its association with seating is what first piqued my interest in the animal, and drew my attention to the lack of attention given in Mesoamerican studies to seats and seating.

Leafing through an illustrated book of Indian art in Middle America (Dockstader 1964), I noticed a picture of what could have been a zoomorphic carved stone seat representing an

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<sup>1</sup> Orthography here employed for Mayan languages is for each language referenced by a subset of the standardized set of letters approved by Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala in 1986 for transcribing. Phonemes are represented by **p t tz ch k, q' b' t' tz' ch' k'q' s x j h' m n nh l r w y i e o a u ii ee oo aa uu ĩ ë ö ä ü**. The orthography is a normalized phonemic one, deviating from Amerindianist practice in that **x** replaces the IPA's **š**, **j** replaces the IPA's voiceless velar fricative **x**, **nh** replaces IPA's **ŋ**, **ä** replaces the midcentral vowel called shwa, **ch** replaces alveolar affricate often written **č**, **tz** replaces IPA's dental affricate **ç**, and the apostrophe represents a glottal stop or glottalization of the preceding stop. Indigenous words and phonemes are bolded rather than italicized for easier recognition. Other conventions observed in this paper include an asterisk \* preceding a reconstructed word, single quotes around word meanings, angle brackets around native words spelled as in the source, and proper names capitalized in indigenous words also. In these conventions, I follow a common practice of Mayanists. Names of Mayan languages are given in their older standardized form rather than using the currently more correct spelling. This paper has benefited from comments by Lidia Marte.

armadillo. Found in the Department of Olancho, Honduras, on the periphery of the Classic Maya region, the artifact is 9 ½ inches high and 14 ¼ inches long. It appears to have a tripod arrangement, with the tail attached to the rear leg(s) and serving as a handle. Currently residing the National Museum of the American Indian attached to the Smithsonian Institution, derived from the former Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation (# 7274), the artifact is dated to between 500 and 1000 of the current era. It was collected sometime before 1875 by one Joseph Jones. The photographic plate of the artifact is labeled "Stone Armadillo" (figure 1), with a caption indicating that "no use is obvious from the form" (Dockstader 1964: plate 135).



**Figure 1:** Stone armadillo (Dockstader 1964: plate 135)

It will not have escaped the reader that Olancho is only peripheral to the large Maya speaking region to its west, and in fact most of Honduras would be classified as part of the Central American culture area, in contrast to the Mesoamerican culture area inhabited by Mayans, Mixe-Zoqueans, and Aztecan speakers among others. One might reasonably wonder why a discussion of Mesoamerican seats and armadillos begins with a Central American artifact tentatively identified with respect to function by means of Mesoamerican evidence. The reasons are the following. First, Olancho is on the Mesoamerican periphery, neighboring the lowland Maya region. In fact some Chortí Maya live in western Honduras to this day, and the important Classic Maya city of Copan is located in Honduras. Second, during the Maya Classic period, roughly the time to which the stone armadillo is attributed, Maya trade routes passed through Honduras and went as far as at least Costa Rica, bringing Central American materials to Mesoamerica, and Maya and other Mesoamerican materials to Central America. While the stone armadillo with its curved back appears more

likely to be Central American rather than Mayan, there is little evidence concerning its location of origin, nor its intended destination. It could have been manufactured by Mayans and traded to inhabitants of Olancho, Honduras; or it could have been intended for Maya consumption; and of course it might not have been an item of trade at all. Third, we know from calques (loan translations), common in Mesoamerica, that different and even unrelated languages can share important conceptual elements through areal diffusion even while the languages remain separate and different. For example numerous Mesoamerican languages use the local variants of words for 'deer' and 'snake' to refer to the boa constrictor as a "deer snake." What is required to accomplish this is some sort of language contact, such as might occur through trade. It is therefore quite possible for a Central American language in Olancho at the time the armadillo was manufactured to maintain semantic features, through calques, that pertain also to Mayan or other indigenous Mesoamerican languages. Since we have no direct evidence concerning the function of the stone armadillo from Olancho, Honduras, it seems fair to employ indirect evidence that may have a bearing on identifying that function. In fact a rather wide variety of current descendants of Mesoamerican neighbors, and neighbors of neighbors, of the people who made the stone armadillo (presumably in Olancho), sit today on small wooden seats approximately the same size as the stone armadillo, and furthermore they call these seats "armadillos."

That is why the stone armadillo's possible function as a seat or low stool suggested itself, and that suggestion further stimulated an inquiry into both the cultural importance of seats, and the cultural importance of armadillos in Mesoamerica. Although I am persuaded that it is a correct identification, based on Mesoamerican linguistic, symbolic, and dimensional evidence, this discussion does not rest on the accuracy of identifying the Olancho stone armadillo as a seat. Bearing in mind that we have no direct evidence concerning the possible function of the stone armadillo, the indirect evidence suggests that it may well have been a stone ceremonial seat, a small bench or taboret. Yucatec Maya, Lacandón, and speakers of some other Mayan languages associate the low wooden seat (*banco* 'bench, stool, taboret') that is a common feature of household furniture, with the armadillo, which it somewhat resembles in form, even having a short tail-like appendage for a handle so it can be picked up easily with one hand. Yucatec Maya speakers refer to the bench, properly known as a **k'anche'**,<sup>2</sup> by the term **wech** 'armadillo', and the usage is so common on the Yucatan peninsula that regional Spanish of Tabasco, parts of Chiapas and Yucatan includes the words *uech* or *jueche* as terms for the bench, stool, or taboret, derived from Maya **wech** 'armadillo' (Bruce 1979:177; Santamaría 1983:1099, Schoenhals 1988:615).

Maya associations of the armadillo with the low stool or bench go beyond this metaphorical usage, however. Lacandón, a language of lowland Chiapas that is closely related to Yucatec Maya, also has the word **k'anche'** for 'bench, seat, stool', and by tradition, if one dreams of such a seat during the night, it foretells seeing an armadillo

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<sup>2</sup> The Yucatec word **k'àan-che'** 'stool' derives from the root **k'am** '(tv) receive' according to Bricker (Bricker *et al* 1998:144), whereas Bruce derives the Lacandón **k'anche'** 'bench, seat, chair' from **k'an** 'cord, hammock' (1979:177, 256), but an alternative etymology is also possible, based on the following potential cognates: Tojolabal **k'a'an** 'stool', Chuj **k'anyatz** 'stool', Mochó **q'a?h** '*palo travesado por rio* [makeshift bridge across stream]' (cf. Tzeltal **tz'amalte'** 'stool', **tz'amte'** 'crossbeam'), and Mam **q'a?j** '*banco o banca hecha de un solo trozo de maderá*'. These forms suggest a proto-Mayan form something like **\*q'a?N** 'bench, crossbeam'.

(Bruce 1978:177). According to Lacandón narrative tradition, the first pair of armadillos resulted from a practical joke played by the chief Lacandón deity on two fire lords. The chief deity, Hachäkyum invited two fire lords, one who was the god of war and the other who was the sacrificer for the rain god, to a ceremony in honor of Hachäkyum's own creator. The two fire lords were seated on traditional benches (**k'anche'**), and these suddenly turned into armadillos (**wech**) that then fled into the bushes (Bruce 1978:319). Another version holds that when Hachakyum changed the benches into the first armadillos ever, "they immediately leaped straight up into the air, a behavior that is still often displayed by the species. The two gods were tumbled onto their backsides and humiliated. The armadillos scampered off into the brush to become progenitors of their kind" (Gilbert 1995:142).

From Tabasco, Mexico, a Chontal Maya narrative of a human visit to the underworld begins with a young man gathering firewood. He loses his way and descends into the earth, somehow to be hosted by an old man and an old woman. A feast is prepared for him by animals, and the young man is seated on an armadillo. Later he returns home (Vásquez and Hernandez 1994:158-159).

In addition to the metaphorical use of the word for 'armadillo' to reference a short legged stool, and an association of armadillos with stools in Lacandón and Chontal oral narrative, other associations between the stool and the armadillo can be found in Mayan languages. For example, in Tzotzil from highland Chiapas, the nine-banded armadillo is called **tz'omol chon** (literally "stool animal"), because in tradition the armadillo serves as the stool of the Earth Lord (Laughlin 1970:100). **Tz'omol** and **tz'omolin** are both Tzotzil terms for the low one piece stool. The Sierra Popoluca people of Veracruz have a similar tradition about the Earth Lord's seat. Chane, the Earth Lord and principal Sierra Popoluca deity lives in a subterranean paradise, a source of nature and a place of abundance and happiness. He is the "master of animals," and the deer are his cattle, serpents his hammock, alligators his canoe, the jaguar his bed, while turtles and armadillos are his chairs (Spero 1987:47, Munch 1983). Moreover, the low seats on which Sierra Popoluca speakers sit in this world are called armadillos as well (Foster 2000).<sup>3</sup>

Some Mixe speakers from the Mexican Isthmus of Tehuantepec region have low stools, called **<kipkiói>**. "They are about six inches high, made of a section of a log hollowed out on the underside, and with a projection at one end serving as a handle. The handle is sometimes crudely carved to represent an animal head" (Beals 1973:112). One can guess that the animal represented on the handle is likely an armadillo.

The above associations of the stool with the armadillo in some Mayan groups, and also for the neighboring Sierra Popoluca and Mixe, in conjunction with the size and general form of the stone artifact in Dockstader's book, constitutes indirect and for me persuasive evidence that this stone armadillo artifact is a ceremonial stool. It does not need to be Maya for us to reach the same conclusion, just so long as there were at least trading

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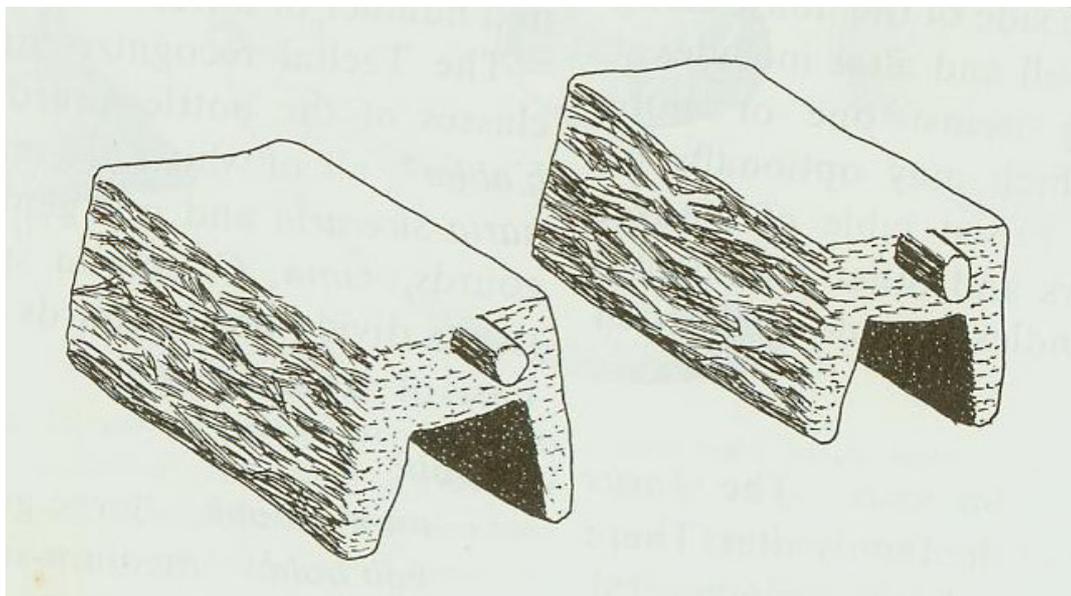
<sup>3</sup> George Foster, in an interview, said: "the little benches are armadillos. They're a half log, hollowed, with the head and a tail of an armadillo carved at each end. There were handles so you could pick it up and carry it. They were only about that high" (Foster 2000). A University of Veracruz website speaking of the Sierra Popolucas avers, "Hacen bancas, llamadas "de armadillo", con plataformas de oate, acanaladas y con cola, como el animal" (Universidad Veracruzana, Popularte n.d. – Internet: <http://www.uv.mx/Popularte/esp/scriptphp.php?sid=290>).

relationships between the people of the region in which it was found (Honduras), and some Mayan group.

### ***The Stool***

Not much has been written about seats and seating in Mesoamerica (e.g. Kurbjuhn 1980, Noble 1999), although the notion of seating is very important in that cultural area, and perhaps everywhere. Accession to office by Maya rulers was sometimes referred to by employing a glyph graphically representing the action of being seated, analogous to the western king sitting on his throne as a sign of his occupying the high office. But there is much more to seats and sitting than this. In some languages sitting can be said to imply being present and at home, as when in Tzeltal a visitor will say "Are you seated?" instead of "Are you home?" as we might. Where one sits, and on what one sits is often a function of existing cultural patterns of social differentiation pertaining to a given region, where these may mark status, gender, and/or age differences among people.

For example, the low wooden benches or stools of the Tzeltal (**tz'amalte'**), about 8-9 inches high and 12-15 inches long, are also carved from a single piece, a section of tree trunk (usually pine, *Heliocarpus*, or avocado). They have a short handle, **chikin** (literally "ear") with which they can be easily picked up and moved, and two elongated "legs" rather than four (figure 2).<sup>4</sup> Significantly, their "use is restricted traditionally to men" (Berlin *et al* 1974;127). Corresponding women's seats--**naktibal** 'seat'--are more elemental, simply a small piece of pine board approximately a foot in length. This gender specification for seating is found also among the Tzotzil, Quiché, Lacandón, and other Mayan groups, suggesting that the seat is an important element of social differentiation and organization, thus an item of considerable symbolic significance.



**Figure 2:** Drawing of Tzeltal **tz'amalte'** (after Berlin *et al* 1974:127)

<sup>4</sup> The **tz'am** constituent is also found in Tenejapa Tzeltal **tz'amhol** 'small piece of pine used as a head rest or pillow', and in Bachajón Tzeltal **tz'am-jolal** 'almohada/ pillow'. Bachajón Tzeltal also has **tz'amte'** 'viga/crossbeam', **tz'amate'** 'taburete/stool', and **tz'amal k'inál** 'physical exhaustion / agotamiento físico'. Colonial period Tzotzil has comparable cognates in **tz'om** 'chair, court', **tz'am te'** 'beam, rafter', **tz'omol** 'chair', and **tz'omol yo'** 'oy hu' ch'akel 'court (tribunal donde juzgan)'. Chol has the forms **tz'Amel** 'bañid' and **tz'AmAl** '(aj) 'tranquilo (agua,río)'.

In this gendered sense, the Tzeltal stool can thus be associated with the concept of a throne. In a seemingly endless series of conceptual replications, any male of the household in some way shares in the conceptual attributes of the male *dueño* of the household, who shares similar attributes of the shaman on a village level, who shares similar attributes with the *presidente* on the town level, who would presumably share similar attributes with the noble on the level of the urban center (if there were still nobles at this level of social organization), and who would in turn have shared similar attributes with the ruler on the state level of social organization; and all this replication of social differentiation is based on the important symbolic privilege of sitting on the more prestigious seat at a given level of organization, a concept widely distributed in societies of the world.<sup>5</sup> The conceptual attributes shared by elements on these successively higher levels of organization and integration allow for the creation of embedded cognitive structures, facilitating manipulation of symbols within an ideological system (c.f. Vogt 1970, Colby and Colby 1984). Similar conceptual replication is mirrored in the Otherworld which is where the ancestors are located, along with the godpowers associated with elements of nature, such as animals, important plants (maize, tobacco, beans), mountains, the sun and moon, lightning, rain, whirlwinds, etc.

In this world such conceptual replication with respect to the seat is well exemplified in the following passage on Quiché seats, known as **tem**, a reflex of Proto-Mayan \***teem** 'bench, stool' (Kaufman and Norman 1984:132):

Festival occasions are celebrated here, with the women congregating in the kitchen but the men always in the room with the altar. It is also where, in the "house seat," the corn is stored. since only men sit in wooden seats (*tem*), they are linguistically associated with the attic (*tem*) and occupationally connected with its contents. Like them, the corn is elevated in the house, on a wooden platform;. Here the active, male principle is at rest or in ritual posture before the house saint, and the fire, in the form of candle and incense offerings, is of a ritual nature (Earle 1986:164).<sup>6</sup>

Remaining with the Quiché Maya but going back in time, Edmonson reminds us that in the Quiché sacred book, the *Popol Vuh*, "his bench, his pillow" is used metaphorically to reference the geographic jurisdiction of a lord (1970:70). And even farther back in time:

Etymologically *tem* is a plank bench. Stone ones were built into the *palacios* of the early Postclassic period...which appear to correspond to what the *Popol Vuh* calls "gods' houses," and which served as men's houses. From the seating of the lords of Hell...we may infer that one's place on the bench was rigidly ranked by ceremonial status. (Edmonson 1971:70).

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<sup>5</sup> In days long gone some rulers were women, and one wonders if their seats were similar to the seats of male rulers. Although individuals are portrayed in various poses in Maya iconography (standing, dancing, sitting, kneeling, lying down), rulers are generally shown in the inscriptions standing or dancing, presumably because that implies active engagement, more forcefulness, and thus more power, and perhaps therefore more authority.

<sup>6</sup> Here we may wish to compare Earle's note that the male principle is at rest when on the "seat," with the Chol **tz'AmAl** '(aj) 'tranquilo (agua,río)', which appears to be cognate with Tzeltal **tz'amal te'** 'stool'. Yucatec **tem** 'satisfy, placate, relieve pain' even more clearly allows us to associate rest and tranquility with being seated. One may further suggest the possibility that the Quiché **tem** said by Earle to be the attic above the men's wooden seats is more specifically localized in the crossbeam of the attic.

Again we can see the importance of benches in social differentiation, and here going back in time prior to the Spanish invasion. Archaeological discoveries in which burials have been found beneath stone benches lend additional significance to places for seating and social organization, and have led to Elizabeth Wagner's suggestion that the Maya nobility may have copulated on benches erected over the remains of important individuals in the belief that the spirits of the dead bones could enter the children being newly created (private communication).

It is not only men and maize that have symbolically important seats. Within the ceremonial "god houses" the Lacandón deities have "seats" inside the censurs (or "god pots"), another example of conceptual replication.

When making or replacing a god pot, the most important object is not the incense burner itself but a small stone that is placed in the bottom of the god pot's bowl. These stones are taken from sacred sites believed to be the residence or temple of the god to whom the god pot is dedicated...I have heard them described as *kanche*, the benches that the gods sit on when they arrive at the god house to partake of their offerings...the stones have tremendous ritual significance (McGee 1990:52).

The notion of seating and being seated is clearly important in Mesoamerica, as elsewhere, and much ethnographic evidence indicates that what has been called the "shaman's stool" is important in the Americas, both north and south. In northern Mexico, for example the Huichol shaman will take a chair, a backed seat usually referred to as his "throne," with him when his ritual participation is called for. The "throne" can thus be seen as a device for creating sacred space, which is a requisite for opening the cosmic portal linking this world to the Otherworld (Eliade 1968). The Huichol of Jalisco, Mexico have another name for seats of the gods, **tepari**, which are carved stone seats, often circular and with a hole in the middle, through which communication is said to take place between Huichol shamans and the deities (Lumholtz 1973, Furst 1979). These sacred stone "seats" of the gods are sometimes referred to as sacrificial altars, and there is little doubt that the **tepari** "seat of the gods" is not far conceptually from being the "portal" linking this world and the Otherworld, known to the Classic Maya as the **ol** 'center', among other terms (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:215-218; Schele and Mathews 1998:45).

In San Juan Ixcatlan, Oaxaca, Mixe day signs, intangible symbols that they may be, are used in ritual and conceptualized as seats for the deities:

The day signs are used as seats by the deities for their councils and as steps where they "place their feet," or journey, ascending and descending from the celestial table at the apex. When offering a sacrifice, the shaman sees herself or himself as standing before these stairs and the offering as rising to the deities, who descend the stairs to receive it (Lipp1991:62).

It may be surmised that for the Mixe, tangible seats for deities in this world, benches and steps are often, if not always, made of stone (Lipp 1991:59, 61), and we have seen that for some other Mesoamerican groups, stones of various sizes and shapes, in appropriate contexts, are viewed as seats for deities.

The notion of steps and the sacredness of the seats for the deities, recalls the fact that the Quiché Maya term for seat, **tem**, has a cognate in Yucatec Maya **tem** 'step, altar stairway' which itself suggests a relationship in Maya tradition between seats and stairs, as

well as a relationship to the altar and the 'portal'. In Tzotzil **tem** is 'bed, platform', which further links the notion of seat to the portal, in that the portal word **way** derives from the verb **way** 'to sleep', and we may recall here Earle's suggestion mentioned above that the male principle is said by Quiché speakers to be at rest when on their seats (Quiché **tem**). Colonial Tzeltal registers **tem** and **tem alal** as 'cradle, baby's bed', again binding the notions of seating and sleeping. Colonial Tzeltal also has **ten** '(n) *grada* / step (in front of building or altar), *troje para maíz* / corn storage bin', which, particularly in comparison with Yucatec **tem** 'step', suggests that Tzeltal **ten** and **tem** as presented here are linguistic doublets, deriving ultimately from the same etymon. Similarly Yucatec **tem** 'step, altar, stairway' and **chem** 'canoe, wooden bowl' appear to be doublets. Mopan **chem** means '*mesa* / table', and though this table is for dining, the Spanish *mesa* is commonly used by Mopan and Yucatec speakers to refer to the ceremonial altar.

Chortí Maya of Guatemala also supports a relationship between the seat and the altar, in that **k'ahn** is 'bench, stand' and based on that same root is **u-k'ahnir e santo** is a 'saint's altar', implying that **k'ahn** itself could also refer to an altar. The Chortí altar is said to be a miniature version of the *milpa* (cornfield) and both are miniature versions of the universe (Wisdom 1950:430). There can be no minimizing the symbolic potency of an altar. Besides its connection with the Otherworld, it can be seen as a minimal representation of the cosmos. Earle makes this connection explicitly regarding the Quiché Maya:

A house altar maintains a condensed form of the Quiche cosmos and ecosystem. Like the house, it faces the west/south, with its back ideally to the east. In south-facing houses, it tends to be in the northeast corner, while in west-facing houses it tends to face due west, and sit in the center of the east wall. Lucas says that all houses have altars, that they are the first thing constructed on a future house site, and that they are the spiritual location of the ancestral owner of the house. It is like a hearth of the primordial, ancestral elements of the home, associated with the resting-place of corn [**tem** 'attic; stool'], the night, ritual and public ceremonial occasions (which happen generally at night), and with the sacred Mundo. This is also the place where all activities of the shaman, including divination, take place (Earle 1986:165).

To this point we have seen that the notion of seat is important in Mesoamerica, for sacred and secular reasons and purposes, and the concept participates in a kind of structural and conceptual replication that includes humans and gods, maize, and armadillos, altars and stools. We have seen some examples suggesting that while ordinary humans tend to sit on furniture made of wood, seats of the gods in this world are more likely to be of stone. The armadillo stool has led us to a wider exploration of seats and seating that could be greatly amplified from ethnographic and archaeological materials. Without pursuing the seating further, however, it is time to consider the armadillo itself.

### ***Armadillo***

The nine-banded armadillo (*Dasypus novemcinctus*) is an unevenly distributed mammal ranging from northern Argentina to the southern United States. The nine-banded armadillo is the only species out of 20, today, that inhabits the southern portion of the United States. The armadillo, which is considered to be an ancient and primitive species, is one of the only living remnants of the order Xenarthra. (Avila 1999).

The name armadillo, referring to its armored carapace, suggests a basis for some of its symbolic meaning for various peoples—that of invulnerability—but its external shell armor is not enough to foil a predator with large teeth. The jaguar, ocelot, or even a dog can bite through its shell. Though the strength of its armor is often overestimated, the animal is not defenseless. When startled or cornered, the armadillo will jump straight up, as much as three feet into the air or more, with considerable force. This defensive ability for the primarily insectivorous animal can prove lifesaving in that it can thus startle, scare, or even break the jaw of a predator. However it can be a deadly liability for the armadillo when in the path of a speeding automobile.

The armadillo, essentially toothless, has considerable strength in its legs and claws, and can dig rapidly into the earth; and when curled up in a burrow thus created, with its smooth armored back facing the outside, it is almost impossible to get a tooth-hold on it or to pull it out. Some indigenous people say that the armadillo has more "strength" than a human. If a person tries to grab it by the tail when it is burrowing it can administer a powerful blow" (Miller 1956:208). Armadillo burrows are anywhere from four to twelve feet in length, often near trees, and are salient creations of armadillos that are often identified with them. This may account for the fact that though even Tzeltal of Colonial times no longer retained the word **ib** 'armadillo'—from Proto-Mayan **\*iib** 'armadillo' (Kaufman and Norman 1985:120)—it maintained **iban** 'hole in the ground for cooking squash', along with a few other words incorporating the form **ib**, for example **ibalpak** 'striped cloth (literally "armadillo cloth)' and **chikinib** 'large leafed live oak, (literally "armadillo ear")' (named for the shape of the leaves)

The armadillo can also cross a river either by floating (in which case it swallows air to inflate its body, creating buoyancy), or by walking along the bottom, as it can hold its breath for some five minutes at a time (Avila 1999). The capabilities of walking underwater as well as of burrowing suggest strong reasons for the armadillo being seen as chthonic, an animal of the earth and the underworld, the latter being depicted in Classic Maya iconography as under water. A further indication of symbolic underworld associations is that the nine-banded armadillo has nine bands of armor, corresponding to the number nine as the number related to the underworld for the Maya, and to the nine levels of the Aztec underworld.

The earth and underworld for obvious reasons bear associations with fertility. In the Mexican Huasteca, for example, a Teenek woman may give her husband armadillo meat but she will tell him it is chicken. When he finds out, he laughs, his wife is slightly embarrassed, and for that matter he might be slightly embarrassed too. This can also be interpreted as due to the armadillo being seen as an animal of fertility, which it is, and serving such would have similar associations to those we have with oysters. The armadillo, it may be noted, bears four young, and these are always of the same sex (Avila 1999).

Cordry says that the armadillo is identified with the earth and with fertility by most of the Indigenous groups in Mexico, and discusses the use of helmet masks covered with armadillo skin for the "Armadillo Dance," which took place in small ranchos near El Limón, Guerrero, in the early spring (1980:187), by Nahuatl speakers for whom the armadillo was called **ayotochtli** (literally "tortoise-rabbit").

The dance began on May 6 and continued every Sunday in May, the month in which corn was planted. In this case, the armadillo was believed to represent the earth or earth deity and its presence in the dance was designed to guarantee the fertility of the just-planted corn (Cordry 1980:187).

A number of Indigenous peoples in Mesoamerica, including Tzotzil, Mazatec and Aztec speakers (Starr 1908), use an armadillo carapace as a container for seed corn when sowing the milpa. This use of the armadillo's shell also strongly attests to its symbolic potency, for maize is something that Indigenous Mesoamericans are extremely careful in handling, for it is, at least symbolically, their "life." Of minor but corroborating interest here is a traditional Argentine tale *The Fox and the Armadillo*, in which the armadillo (*quicquincho*) is equated with the "good agriculturalist." Also of minor interest is the Juquila Mixe practice during Colonial times of calling the third and all subsequent daughters 'armadillo' [oic] (Beals 1973:53). This suggests the possibility that the armadillo itself is gendered female, which may be fitting since it is males that by tradition sit on its symbolic representative.

The armadillo tastes good, it is said, but according to the Mixe of Oaxaca, one must be careful because this animal eats snakes, including venomous ones, and this poisons its meat. After killing an armadillo for food, one must first open up its stomach to see if there are any snakes there. If there are, it should not be eaten. (Miller 1956:208). This caution with respect to eating the armadillo, which does in fact eat small snakes, could conceivably be reinforced by the fact and observation that it can carry the disease we call leprosy, and with intense contact it can be passed from the armadillo to humans (Avila 1999).

Tzeltal speakers call the armadillo **mayil ti'bal** ("squash meat") for reasons that are not completely clear, but which may be related to the hole in the ground used for cooking squash that in Colonial Tzeltal was given the name **iban**. Hunting magic may also be responsible for the more general use of this metaphorical term **mayil ti'bal** and the loss of the original **ib** for 'armadillo'. The latter connection is made explicit by Tzotzil speakers who call the armadillo **mayil chon** "squash animal" (among other terms), explaining that it is a "term of reference substituted for the usual name when hunting armadillos lest the meat taste bad" (Laughlin 1975:225).

Another Tzotzil term for nine-banded armadillo is **kapon chon** (literally "castrated animal"), and with this entry in his dictionary of Zinacanteco Tzotzil, Laughlin gives several traditional Tzotzil beliefs about the animal.

Armadillos are believed to be transformations of turkey buzzards. They are eaten seasoned with Mexican tea. Their flesh is "cold". The shell is used during planting as a container for seed corn. A stuffed figure, representing Judas, and hung on the church during Holy Week sports an armadillo shell container. To cause an embedded thorn to drop out an armadillo tail is burnt and ground into powder that is applied to the affected part. (1975:168)

A tale told by a Chiapas Zoque speaker relates how a man's dog that liked to hunt armadillos chased an armadillo into its hole and disappeared. Eventually the dog's master arrived in the underworld where the "master of animals" explained that he could not have his dog back as it was being punished for harming armadillos (Paredes 1970:5).

Paredes also notes that:

The armadillo has some reputation as a chthonic being in Mexican belief. For example, much the same beliefs reported in Miller (p. 208) from southern Mexico are familiar to me in northern Tamaulipas and south Texas: as an eater of poisonous snakes the armadillo may be fatal to one who eats its flesh unless proper precautions are taken. Clumsy and weak away from its hole, the armadillo is possessed of supernatural strength in hind feet and tail if its head is inside its hole (Paredes 1970:198).

### ***Conclusion***

With some imagination we can see again why the armadillo makes a good stool (symbolically). It does so by connecting the one who is seated with the underworld and therefore with fertility. As an essentially female animal representing the earth in some sense, the man who sits on it is both insulated from the earth and connected with a female symbol representing fertility (i.e. the armadillo). By the same token the armadillo seed container ensures fertility for the maize, recalling the fact that in Classic Maya imagery, the maize god springs from a tortoise shell (as on the creation plate), and the armadillo shares much with the tortoise, with its short legs, its armor, its lack of other defense, and the fact that the Nahuatl name for armadillo is literally "tortoise-rabbit." Whatever armor protects the armadillo should of course be able to protect the maize seeds, and perhaps one who sits on it as well.

Coming full circle and returning to Dockstader's book once more,<sup>7</sup> the stone armadillo has a rounded back and this seems not the usual surface for a person to sit on. Furthermore its material is stone, whereas in contemporary Mayan groups people sit on wood. It is deities that are seated on stone. Stone benches do occur of course in the archaeological record, but these are found in built environments of rulership, associated with the elite, and may reflect "godlike" qualities of rulers. We have seen that the gods are given stone seats of various kinds, usually rounded in form, so it is reasonable to conclude that the stone armadillo discussed here, based on an ethnographic analogy derived from a neighboring group, could be a ceremonial stool intended to seat deity, which might, or might not, have included a "divine king" ruler or chief.

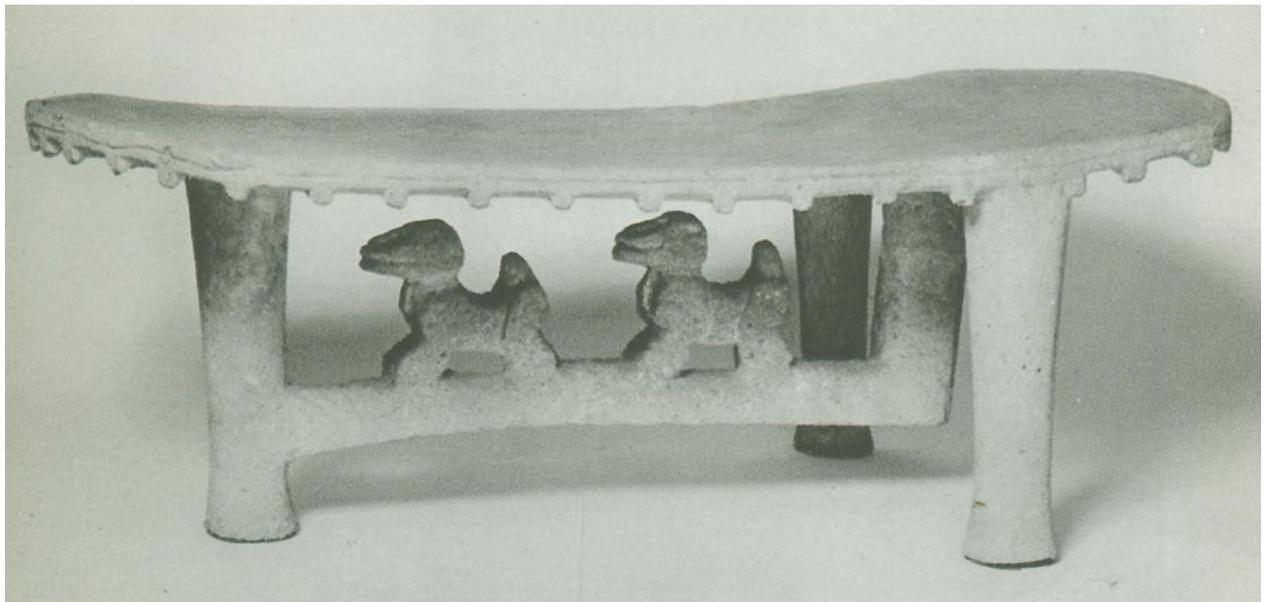
While the discussion of seats and armadillos here is by no means exhaustive, it is intended to stimulate interest and further inquiry into both topics, and particularly further research concerning the cultural implications of seats and seating in Mesoamerica.

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<sup>7</sup>In addition to the stone armadillo that is a ceremonial stool, two more images in the book may also represent seats, although they are identified there as *metates* (grindstones). The first is said to be of an "elaborately carved feline effigy" representing a "zoomorphic metate," from Ometepe Island, Nicaragua. The caption indicates that it was probably "employed in ceremonial corn grinding rites, although nothing is known for certain of their use" (Dockstader 1964:Plate 150). Its dimensions, 8 ½ x 10 x 18 ½ inches, are roughly similar to those of the armadillo seat, and not really comfortable for grinding. The feline identification may or may not be accurate. It would not be surprising if this were actually a seat rather than a *metate* (figure 3). The second, from Veraguas Panama, has three legs and is somewhat larger than the "zoomorphic *metate*" (14 ½ x 10 ½ x 30 inches), is called a "flying panel *metate*," and looks formally far more appropriate as a seat than as a *metate* (figure 4). ( Dockstader 1964: plate 189)



**Figure 3:** Artifact called a "zoomorphic metate" (Dockstader 1964: plate 150)



**Figure 4:** Artifact called a "flying panel metate" (Dockstader 1964: plate 190)

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