

## The Exhibition

### Humankind and Nature

Maya territory encompassed five states in Mexico today, as well as Guatemala, Belize, and part of El Salvador and Honduras. It is a region of striking environmental contrasts, from the coasts of the Yucatan Peninsula and the jungle lowlands to the mountainous highlands of Chiapas and Guatemala. Since time immemorial, tracing an age-old cultural continuity, the Maya people have lived in close harmony with their surroundings. The inhabitants of this region had access to abundant natural resources, which they exploited throughout their long history. For thousands of years, from the earliest hunter-gatherers followed by the first agricultural societies and settlements that date back to the Preclassic period to the Mayas of today, the inhabitants of the area possessed a subtle understanding of the environment based on natural and biological observation.

Maya society adapted to the environment and knew it quite well, exploiting all of its natural resources. The depth of their knowledge of plants and animals was reflected in cultural and artistic forms of expression. For the Mayas and other Mesoamerican societies, natural phenomena and the original animal inhabitants of the tropical jungle belonged to a different realm, but the natural entities were the closest experience of otherworldliness in their day-to-day lives. Flora and fauna represented the link between humans and the sacred powers of the cosmos. They served as allegories of their religious thought.

We can discern ties of sympathy, similarity, consubstantiality, and kinship. The inseparable relationship between man and nature was expressed in many ways throughout their culture. The rainforests of the American continent shaped Maya life and their understanding of the universe. It also produced specific and original forms of knowledge which can be seen in the sculpture, ceramics, and painting in the exhibition, as well as in their daily life, religion, mythology, and traditional wisdom. Keen observers of plants and animals, they became veritable naturalists, referencing particular characteristics and properties-with attention to almost microscopic detail-of each living thing, whether a flower, fish, crustacean, bird, or mammal. The ancient Mayas were able to grow their sacred plant, maize, by challenging nature through the construction of towering cities in the inhospitable tropical rainforest and on the karstic plain of the peninsula. Their descendants, the modern-day Mayas, continue to live in southeast Mexico in peaceful coexistence with indomitable nature.

In this way, plants and animals not only served as food, but also as partners in an interconnected world where some human ways of life were not at odds with nature. Some plants were regarded as bearers of sacred powers; maize, together with the blood of divine animals, such as the tapir and serpent, were the substance from which the first human beings were made. Mushrooms and plants with psychotropic properties were essential for shamanic rites. Animals were conceived as brothers to mankind, spirit companions who could be man's alter-egos, as well as epiphanies of sacred entities. Thus, plants and animals and their connection with humankind were recurrent subjects in Maya visual arts in both naturalistic and stylized representations.

Mauricio Ruiz Velasco Bengoa

### Community and Daily Life

The everyday routine of Maya peoples, as in the case of all stratified societies, varied according to the status of individual members. Everyone fulfilled a specific function in the maintenance of the

economic and political order that upheld the prevailing social and religious ideology through time. Gender, age groups, rural or urban residence and professions were other factors that determined differences in the daily life of individuals.

By and large, sculpture and painting on monuments and buildings portrayed the ruling elite. Alone or accompanied by attendants, these individuals carried out a variety of rites in political and religious ceremonies. Members of royal courts, rendered as sumptuous interiors, were depicted on polychrome ceramics. At the same time, highly expressive terracotta figurines, particularly those from burials on Jaina Island, represented not only the nobility, but also other individuals of diverse ranks and professions. What's more, the impressive variety of figurines reveals pervasive customs, such as cranial deformation, attire, and body ornamentation. This vision is reinforced by items from everyday life that have been found in living quarters in ancient Maya cities. The subject matter is also reiterated in other objects created in diverse materials.

Accession to the throne, marriage alliances, the presentation of infant heirs, relations of vassalage, ceremonies involving auto-sacrifice and invocation of gods and other supernatural forces, judgment of war captives, the ritual ballgame, musicians, dances, funerary rites, and burials were among the range of activities represented. This imagery attests to the ceremonial complex in which a kingdom's ideology was disseminated and perpetuated in specific periods.

Tomas Perez Suarez

## The Heart of Cities

Maya urbanism varied through time, but the function of cities was always the same: to house a population that performed specific functions. Apart from growing food, the people devoted their time to administrative tasks, religious worship, providing services, serving in the military, the sciences, and the arts, and manufacturing pieces to meet the needs of the nobility and the rest of the population.

Cities boasted sprawling plazas, massive temples, sumptuous palaces, ritual ballcourts, ceremonial altars, and wide roads. They also housed structures for administrative duties and the storage of tribute, payment in specie that the productive classes paid to the state to sustain the bureaucracy.

In addition to serving as the residence for centralized political and religious power, the heart of cities was a mirror of the cosmos. Spatial arrangement and building layout obeyed the Maya conception of the universe. According to Classic period beliefs, the Mayas metaphorically equated the level plane of plazas with the surface of the primordial lake or ocean or the surface of the earth; pyramidal structures were conceived as sacred mountains that towered to touch celestial realms and facilitate human communication with the principal deities. Similarly, the playing field of ritual ballcourts had conceptual parallels in the sky and the underworld.

The architectural styles of different provinces attested not only to refined aesthetic tastes, but also marked territorial boundaries. Among the major cities that archaeologists have uncovered are [Mirador](#), San Bartolo, Nakbe, [Tikal](#), [Uaxactun](#), [Yaxha](#), [Quirigua](#), El Peru, and Piedras Negras in Guatemala; [Calakmul](#), [Balamku](#), [Becan](#), [Palenque](#), [Yaxchilan](#), [Bonampak](#), [Uxmal](#), [Kabah](#), [Sayil](#), [Labna](#), [Chichen Itza](#), [Ek' Balam](#), and [Mayapan](#) in Mexico; and [Copan](#) in Honduras.

In addition to the remarkable sculptures that have been found at these sites, centres, a number of temples and palaces were decorated with murals that reveal the sophisticated technical skill of Maya artists. These paintings display an uncommon richness of natural colours, an array of textures, and surprising durability. Many of them, above all the renowned murals of [Bonampak](#), displayed nuanced combinations of light and shadow and tonal variations to create the sensation of three

dimensions. Moreover, the complex technique employed at [Bonampak](#) and throughout the Maya area was based on the application of pigments to a surface made of lime, calcite sand, and a plant gum additive; the layers of organic material in the paint confirmed that an agglutinant bound the colour to the dry surface of the wall. Master painters created a wide range of tonalities and produced subtle effects of transparency and opaqueness, as they used line drawn on the colour surface to define details and emphasise expressions.

Tomas Perez Suarez

## Man in the Face of Time and the Stars

The Mayas had a special interest in the transient nature of the cosmos. They regarded time as the actual movement of space, not as an abstraction, and said movement was ruled by cycles. This dynamic vision of spatial reality and the changing cosmos was produced primarily by the passage of a sacred entity that was the axis of their worldview: the Sun (k'in, which also means 'day' and 'time'). In their cosmology, similar to that of other peoples at other times, the course of the Sun was envisioned as a circular movement around the earth, which included a daily and a yearly cycle. Based on this belief along with meticulous observations of the skies, Maya astronomers were able to calculate the days when the equinoxes and solstices-key events in the Sun's annual cycle-would occur with exacting precision. The apparent path of the Sun determined the changes that took place on earth (e.g., day and night, hot and cold, agricultural abundance and drought). Therefore, time was conceived as cyclic movement governed by stable laws and it was measured by the rising and setting of the Sun and other celestial bodies.

However, as these cosmic forces were charged with sacred power, their effects could be felt at different moments in the world and had an impact on all living beings, granting them multiple qualities and meanings, at times contradictory. As a result, the Mayas focused on understanding and systematising change by developing mathematics and a remarkable calendric system.

One of the features shared by the great civilisations of the Ancient World was the use of a precise system of calendric computation. The Mayas were not the creators of their calendric system; instead, it was their neighbours, the late Olmecs or 'Epi-Olmecs; who formulated a calendric system sometime around 100 BC that combined the Long Count and the Calendar Round; the latter was composed of intermeshed cycles of 260 and 365 days. Likewise, it was the Olmecs who established the arithmetic system based on units of twenties and who introduced the notion of zero; necessary for the functioning of the positional numbering system.

In roughly AD 250 the Mayas adopted the Olmec system and developed it to unparalleled complexity. Little by little, they created new ritual and astronomical cycles, such as a nine-day cycle of 'the Lords of the Night' as well as the Lunar Series. This sophisticated computation included the accurate recording of days that transpired in each lunar cycle, which began with the first appearance of the Moon on the horizon after conjunction. Some cities in the Usumacinta River region, such as [Bonampak](#) and [Yaxchilan](#), invented a seven-day cycle to establish correlations between multiple calendric cycles. The erudite Palenque dynasty made use of the seven-day computation, but revolutionised it by formulating a new cycle based on a multiple of it: 819 days. The creativity and mathematical inventiveness of Maya time counters and astronomers meant these systems were in constant evolution. In a number of Maya cities, inscriptions marked the anniversaries of the synodic cycle of the planet Venus, whose canonical or standard duration was 584 days. The same can be said of computations of the planet Mars, estimated to be 780 days. These Classic period specialists, expert operators of the 'Maya time machine', did not leave a record their calculation tables on stone monuments. Instead, they produced long codices in which they transmitted and passed down their knowledge, while also recording their innovations. Unfortunately, these books have not been preserved. Nonetheless, the recent discovery of a Maya astronomer's home at the site of Xultun,

Guatemala, made it possible to document the use of tables and computations painted on the dwelling's walls. Despite the loss of some parts, the remaining records indicate that they involved cycles of varying duration, such as the tzolk'in (260 days); haab (365 days); Calendar Round (18,980 days); Venus cycle (584 days); Mars cycle (780 days); and possibly that of Mercury (117 days) and eclipses (11,960 days), as well as lunar tables. Once the remains of the house of this anonymous Maya astronomer are uncovered, we will be able to imagine the life of an intelligent and cultivated man, obsessed with untangling the mysteries of celestial bodies. Unbeknownst to him, when he was alive, around AD 814, other astronomers in medieval Europe and faraway imperial China were trying to resolve the same problems, experiencing the same solitude, anguish, and joy of the profession.

Contrary to what might be expected, the collapse of Classic period Maya society (ca. AD 800 to 900) did not result in the loss of calendric and astronomical knowledge. On the Yucatan Peninsula, Maya people in the Postclassic (AD 900-1521) preserved and even improved computations, as seen in the astronomical sections of the Dresden Codex. The Maya calling in this field even survived after the conquest in colonial times. Consequently, the Yucatec Mayas avidly studied Spanish almanacs (known as *Reportorios de Los Tiempos*) and tried to reconcile European knowledge with their traditional expertise, as can be seen in the *Libros de Chilam Balam*. The Maya mentality, always open to change, impelled them to accept the accidents of their history and to explore new ways of thought, from pre-Hispanic times to the present.

Guillermo Bernal Romero

### The Ruling Elite and their Historiography

Equipped with a powerful tool to track the passage of time, the ancient Mayas exploited their calendric know how to record the key events in their historical development. For this end they devised a system of writing in the full sense of the term. The early dynasties made their first forays into writing in the third century AD in the north and east of the Peten region in Guatemala and southern Campeche and Quintana Roo in Mexico. Inspired by late or Epi-Olmec systems, Maya elites in this region created hieroglyphic signs that were adapted to the characteristics of their spoken language: an ancient form of eastern Chol. They established two sorts of glyphs: logograms, which expressed complete words, and phonograms, which only conveyed syllabic and vowel sounds. Gradually the system was refined and perfected in the Early Classic period (AD 300-600), particularly in the mighty capitals of [Tikal](#), [Uaxactun](#), [Yaxha](#), Dzibanche and [Calakmul](#), among others. Through writing, eastern Chol became the language of prestige and the lingua Franca of Classic period Maya society. Little by little writing extended beyond the area of its origin. It was adopted by the budding dynasties that arose in peripheral zones, such as those of [Palenque](#), [Pomona](#), Piedras Negras, [Tonina](#), [Yaxchilan](#), [Ceibal](#), Naranjo, and [Copan](#), to mention only a few of the best known. In the north it was assimilated by outlying capitals as far away as [Edzna](#) and [Coba](#), not to mention many other cities on the Yucatan Peninsula.

As the shared intellectual patrimony of Maya kingdoms, dynasties deployed writing on public monuments such as stone stelae, altars, tablets, and lintels, as well as in mural painting on buildings and on luxury ceramics to record historical events worthy of memory. The elites reinforced their status by leaving accounts of their feats in war and ceremonies conducted by their rulers. Inscriptions often referred to the remote past to tell of dynastic founders to demonstrate that the authority of rulers was firmly anchored in a history populated by illustrious ancestors who validated the kings as their legitimate heirs. In fact, in some Maya cities their records went back thousands of years into the past to detail the military actions of the gods and the epic deeds that allowed them to reshape the cosmos. Today, advances in the decipherment of glyphic writing have brought the voice and discourse of these Maya dynasties back to life. More than a thousand years later, Maya texts now shed light on the past of one of the most brilliant cultures in the Ancient World.

## Sacred Forces

All cultures have a means of expressing their experience of the sacred in tune with their times and the distinctive features of their group, which has led to the proliferation of religious diversity, despite a strong undercurrent of shared parallels. The Mayas conceived of a universe filled with sacred forces in constant interaction with themselves and with humankind. These forces ruled over all existence. Sacred language to express a religious experience or the relationship between human beings with a higher reality had to be symbolic, for it revealed the ineffable, that which could not be described in conceptual language; it attempted to communicate the simultaneously rational, irrational, and emotional experience of the divine, of the infinitely powerful, of what is beyond or behind visible and palpable reality. In this way human beings have always found images or accounts to convey this experience to others; these become their symbols, myths, and rites, which as a whole comprise 'religious events' distinctive to each community. This means that the figures of the sacred are not divine per se, but rather representations of the divine. As such, it is impossible to speak of 'idolatry' if not as a decadent manifestation of a religion that arises when believers no longer know that the symbols, myths, and rites represent something beyond their appearances. Therefore, when the Spanish conquistadors described indigenous religions as idolatrous, they were unaware that Catholicism could also be characterised in the same way, if they reflected on their own beliefs of the sacred, in other words, the multiple representations of Christ, the Virgin Mary, angels, saints, and devils.

In the sweep of Maya works that symbolise the sacred, we can find images that combine human and animal features, along with symbolic conventions to denote meaning: fantastic animals, such as the feathered serpent, or special gestures employed by a human figure that allude to a sacred nature stemming from a sacred power possessed by the individual. For instance, the sacredness of life was expressed by images of pregnant women or women with their hands placed on their belly to represent the mother goddess and the cult to maternity, whereas images of phalluses alluded to male fertility. Symbolising the mother earth, the sacred power of the mother goddess was invoked to instil women with fertility. The great mother, who required care and rain to ensure her fertility, was propitiated through rituals. Female power, the dark and hidden pole of the cosmos, was one of the strongest forces that played a decisive role in the continuity of the world. The figure of the mother is the most archaic, the most atavistic image, and conceptually the ultimate cave of origin of all life.

Among the features of personalised deities—those depicted as entities with human faces bearing supernatural traits or as animals—serpentine images predominate. They can be identified by their prominent eyes with a volute drawn in the pupil (the 'divine eye'), long nose or snout, the upper jaw of a serpent, and fangs. Others display signs of old age, such as wrinkles or a toothless mouth, or a pronounced jaw, but combined with some sort of supernatural symbol. The powers of certain animals were also rendered in visual arts. Jaguars, tapirs, quetzals, deer, and crocodiles were prominent supernatural creatures, in addition to serpents; whereas turtles, opossums, and toads were recurrent characters in myths and sacred images. In some cases animals symbolized specific levels of the cosmos: the sky (two headed rattlesnake and quetzal, as well as the feathered rattlesnake), the earth (crocodile), and the underworld (boa or ochkan serpent). Diverse animals, human-animal and human-animal-plant hybrids or fantastic animals (a fusion of diverse creatures) incarnated the forces of nature, such as the Sun, wind, water, and lighting. Meanwhile, other animals served as emissaries of the almighty gods (macaws, owls, nocturnal butterflies). At the same time, plant species symbolized sacred energies, such as maize, the ceiba (kapok) tree, and psychotropic plants. Protective deities watched over human activities, such as war, trade, farming, and beekeeping, while 'Lords of animals: humanised beings or creatures in the shape of animals, cared for wildlife.

All of these entities and powers formed part of a complex universe of sacred forces that permeated the cosmos. They exerted their influences over the world and over humankind, changing depending on the order of time.

Mercedes de la Garza

### Human Connections with the Gods: Rites

Rites are another way of experiencing the sacred, whether through public or private, collective or individual religious practices based on exacting rules established by a community. They can include words, postures, chants, songs, dances, and other specific actions that are believed to possess a true material efficacy.

According to Maya myths concerning the origin of the universe, rewritten after the Spanish conquest as rich narratives in Maya languages rendered in the Latin alphabet, human beings were created to venerate and feed the gods, for the existence of the entire universe depended on these powerful entities. Consequently, divine worship was a priority in community life, which led to the creation of sprawling ceremonial areas in cities, ornate temples, myriad stelae, altars and shrines, offerings deposited in tombs, and hieroglyphic inscriptions that recorded the history of ruling lineages to bear witness to the rituals they performed.

One of the most important rites in many religions is the re-creation of the origin of the world. This was periodically staged, but not as a form of memory or a commemoration. Instead it was an action in the present intended to create the world anew, indeed to regenerate time itself. The rite brought chronological, profane time a stop, and in this timeless lapse it transported the community to the sacred time of origin, which burst into profane time to hold it in suspense, so that the world could truly be created again.

Among the Mayas, rites corresponding to the re-creation of the world were the annual renewal of the primordial hearth, composed of three stones, to generate a new fire that would illuminate and warm the new cosmic era, the mythical event recorded on Stela Cat [Quirigua](#), Guatemala. The three stones of the hearth were conceived as three thrones, which symbolized the three tiers of the cosmos: sky, earth, and underworld. This re-creation of the primordial hearth was ritually staged in Yucatan during the five ominous uayeb or extra days ending the solar calendar, regarded as a timeless interval that symbolised the formless chaos of the primordial era prior to creation. The Mayas in Yucatan extinguished the fires in their homes and fasted, performed penance, and ingested intoxicating beverages that symbolised the return to chaos (a modern-day vestige of return-to-chaos rites conducted by most ancient cultures is Carnival or Mardi Gras). At the end of these days, a new fire was lit and distributed to the people on the first day of the new year: O Pop.

That periodically recreated world had to be constantly maintained, because without the ritual, the Sun would stop in its course and die, which would lead to the death of the entire cosmos. The land would become barren and would no longer produce; rain would cease to fall; living beings would no longer procreate. For the Mayas all of this meant the existence of the cosmos was in the hands of humankind, who in this way became the axis sustaining the world.

All rites included purification ceremonies or entrance rites, such as sexual abstinence, sleep deprivation, fasting, ritual bathing, and offerings of blood by means of auto-sacrifice. After these practices, the principal public rites were carried out. They were highly diverse, but all of them included prayers, burning incense (mainly copal resin), chants, dances, processions, and dramatic re-enactments of myths and histories of illustrious deified ancestors. Likewise, the people consumed special food (such as ocellated turkey, deer, and xoloitzcuintli dog), sacred brews (such as chicha, a fermented corn beverage, and balche, a sort of mead), and made bloody sacrifices as a central part

of the rite.

Offerings, intended as food for the gods, were frequent and highly varied. As the gods were invisible and impalpable, they had to be sustained with subtle matter, such as the fragrance of flowers and incense, and the flavours of food and drink. However, their principal nourishment was the vital energy that resided in the blood of animals and human beings, which was released when the palpitations of the beating heart were silenced when it was severed from the body or by burning it. Therefore, the principal rituals implied the shedding of blood and the death of the victim, so major religious celebrations culminated in the sacrifice of both human beings and animals. An explanation of sacrifices can be found in the Popol Vuh, which stated that once the world was complete, with the appearance of the Sun and Moon in the sky, the gods asked people to offer blood to animate them, and with this, to set the life of the cosmos itself in motion. In short, human sacrifice was based on the belief in imperfect deities who were born and died, and who thus needed to be fed to survive; myths state that men were created with divine blood, so in reciprocity people had to offer their blood to sustain the gods. Therefore, blood was the essential bond that joined humankind to the gods.

Unlike large-scale official celebrations, devoted to the major divinities, there were rites of passage (such as baptism and a puberty ceremony), shamanic initiation rites, ascetic practices practiced by shamans, divination ceremonies, and healing rites. All of these were private rituals of a family nature. Rulers, who also had shamanic powers, were expected to practice rigorous rites, such as fasting, sexual abstinence, sleep deprivation, and auto-sacrifice. A number of images in the visual arts show them performing initiation rites and auto sacrifice, which included extracting blood from the male member, perhaps because it was regarded as the blood with the greatest vital energy and powers of fertility.

Shamanism was a key aspect of religions. It revealed the dark, private, and secret dimension of the vital experience of the supernatural, the experience that activated the cerebral zones of the irrational, unconscious, nocturnal and magic 'soul' the essential aspects of which have survived to the present, although with new meanings and forms. Shamanism was based on the idea that in addition to the world that can be perceived in the state of everyday watchfulness, there are other worlds in which human beings can access special states of consciousness in which the spirit can be detached from the body. One of these is in dreams, another in ecstasy, the product of strict ascetic practices and the ingestion of psychotropic mushrooms, plants, or animals. For this transformative capacity, these natural entities-were believed to possess sacred forces that could be transmitted to whoever ingested them. Not all human beings had access to these substances, only those who had been chosen by the gods to serve as intermediaries between sacred forces and humankind or those who served as healers, diviners, and midwives. In brief, shamanic powers consisted of establishing direct ties with the gods, descending to the underworld, ascending to the sky, transmuting into animals, and above all, possessing exceptional powers of vision that enabled them to know the hidden causes of things, including illness, which could be cured with chanted prayers and magic formulas, accompanied by plant, animal, and mineral remedies. Shamans must have formed a specific group among the ancient Mayas, but a number of sources reveal that rulers were also believed to possess shamanic powers. They were sacred beings with a special charisma, not only as members of an illustrious lineage, but also by performing initiation rites that endowed them with uncommon powers and by constantly practicing rites of abstinence. Colonial texts state that they prayed, fasted, and performed sacrifices to obtain divine favour, while some artifacts, including Classic period ceramics, show rulers consuming psychotropic substances, applying enemas, being transformed into animal alter-egos, and presiding over complex rituals.

Another rite of special significance for rulers was the ballgame. Its importance cannot be denied given the presence of ballcourts within ceremonial precincts in all major cities, in addition to ballcourt markers bearing sacred figures and mythical scenes, several of them associated with the origin of the universe. Ballgame symbolism was not limited to the Mayas but was widespread

throughout Mesoamerica. It embodied the struggle of opposites, of luminous celestial beings against the dark entities of the underworld that unfolded on the playing field as recounted in the Popol Vuh; or the struggle of the Sun and the Moon and the stars as revealed in several Nahua myths. The movement implied in the clash of opposites was the dynamism that sustained the very existence of the universe. For this reason the ritual ballgame and holy war symbolised the struggle between these cosmic forces. In this way, the game played by rulers and other high-ranking men served the ritual function of propitiating the movement of the stars through sympathetic magic, which fostered the existence of the universe. Upholding the cosmos was the foremost responsibility of rulers, who served as the axis mundi.

Mercedes de la Garza

### Entering the Path: Funerary Rites

Complex funerary rites arose from the idea of the spirit's existence after the body's death. The individual's conduct on earth had no bearing on the final resting place of the deceased; instead the form of death was the deciding factor, which in turn was determined by the gods. Xibalba or the underworld was the most common destination, which the spirit reached after a lengthy journey into the bowels of the earth on a path fraught with perils in which the spirit could die. At the end of the journey, the spirit met the gods of death and occupied its place of eternal rest. However, sometimes the soul could return and participate in the rites of its descendants, especially the spirit of rulers and their relatives, as depicted in artworks where the ruler's portrait serves not merely as a memory, but as a living presence.

As a result of these beliefs, tombs contained a wealth of objects: vessels containing water and food, figures of people, deities, and animals, personal ornaments, and at times the corpse of a dog, which would guide the spirit on its path. When the sepulchre was for a ruler or a member of the ruling family, men and women were sacrificed to accompany the deceased. For commoners, more humble but no less revealing ceramic and other pieces, like those deposited with the dead on Jaina Island, Campeche, were intended to reproduce life in order to imbue death with vitality to mitigate the anguish associated with the end of life. Clay figurines, as well as funerary pottery, clothing, and the accoutrements of those who passed demonstrate a desire for the continuity of life on earth in the beyond without any changes. Moreover, the spirit of the deceased was never alone, for it was accompanied by others on the way, as well as by the spirit of the dog, the foodstuffs, the jewellery, and the water that were placed in graves.

Mortuary rites were of special significance and the tombs of rulers stood out for the complexity and luxury of their funerary goods. Kings' burials commonly yielded finely wrought jade jewellery and other materials. A jade bead, symbolizing the spirit of the deceased, was placed in the corpse's mouth to ensure immortality. In many royal burials, such as that of K'inich Janahb' Pakal of [Palenque](#) and those of [Calakmul](#) rulers, the face of the leader was covered with a mask made of precious materials, predominantly jade. These masks sought to replace the transitory face of the deceased with a portrait that would defy the ravages of time, absorb the personality of the great lord, preserve him magically from death, and fix his spirit (pixan) which resided in his head and thus protect him from the evil beings lying in wait for him on his path to the underworld, his final abode.

The same religious idea can be found in other cultures, for example in Mycenaean Greek culture, in which burials of eminent rulers, such as Agamemnon, contained a gold mask covering the king's visage, while pectorals, necklaces, armlets, and ear ornaments all made of gold adorned his body. In the Classic Maya world, where gold was not used, jade was the most highly prized substance. Indestructible, precious, and symbolically charged, it was the ideal material to create mosaic masks and royal insignia.

Jade was the symbol of sovereignty, power, and immortality in a number of civilisations in other parts of the world, such as China. For its beauty, it was emblematic of perfection, vital energy, and preciousness. Meanwhile, its hue, called yax in Maya, designated the colour green, associated with vegetation, but it also meant blue, which conceptually linked it to water, the vital origin of the cosmos, as well as to the sky, the abode of life and fertility deities. Consequently, jade was the symbol par excellence of the sacred ruler.

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