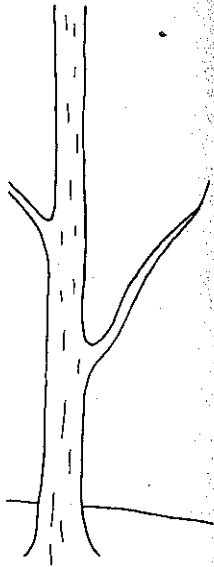
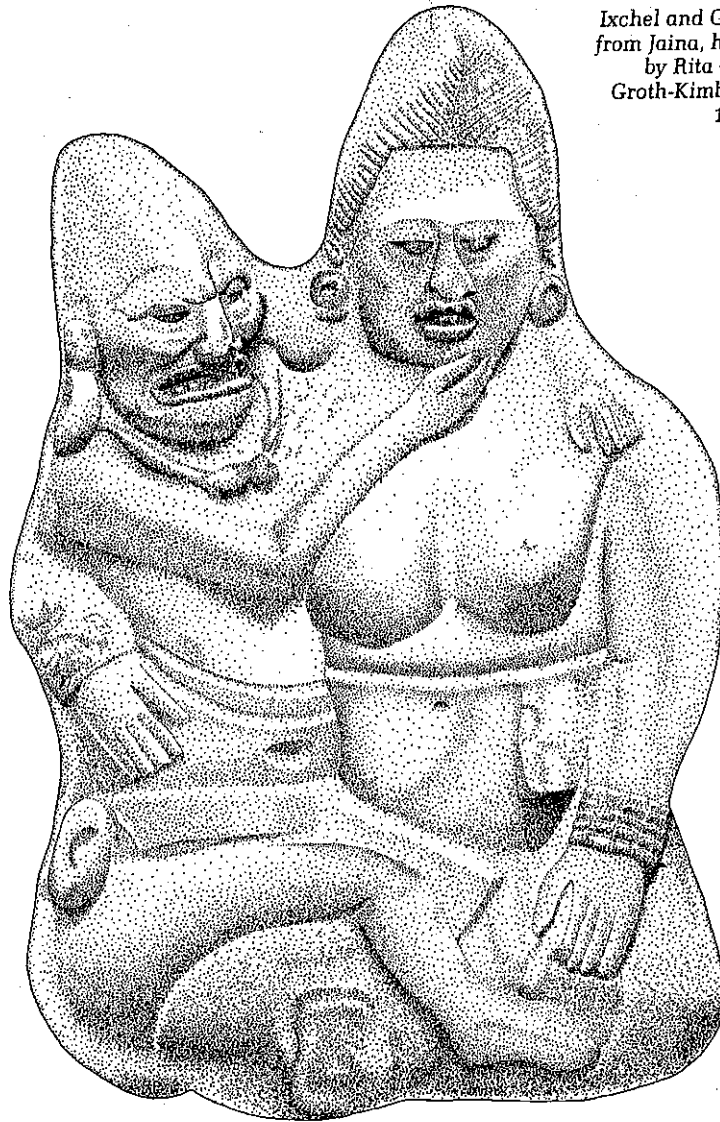


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Ixchel and God N, a pottery figurine from Jaina, height 10.7 cm. (Drawing by Rita Granda, ROM after I. Groth-Kimball, Maya Terrakotten, 1960, fig. 28)



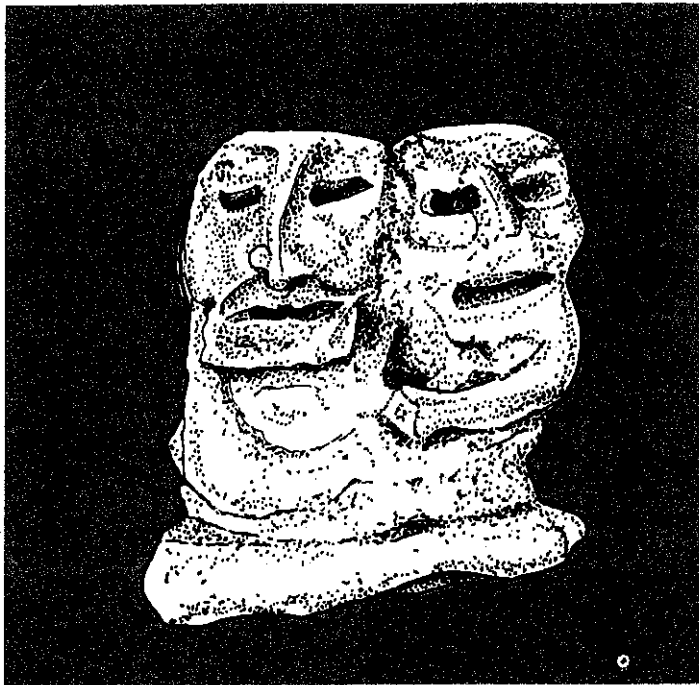
light hurts your eyes, you
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The Old Man and the Moon

A 14th-Century Figurine from Lamanai

David M. Pendergast

OVER THE YEARS the excavations at Lamanai in northern Belize have turned up a huge store of objects from ancient Maya life, many of them of kinds previously unknown in the area (see "The Church in the Jungle", *Rotunda* 8:2, 1975, pp. 32-40; "A Face from the Past", *Rotunda* 10:1, 1977, pp. 4-11; and "An Ancient Maya Dignitary", *Rotunda* 13:4, 1981, pp. 5-11). In the 1981 season we began work on a great complex of structures just at the back of our camp, and here as elsewhere we encountered quantities of new information on the occupation of Lamanai from the 10th to the 16th century, and even earlier. We had bypassed this area in earlier



Left: The Ixchel-God N figurine from Lamanai, height 6.1 cm. (Drawing by Louise Christianson)

Right: Ixchel and God N, a Jaina figurine, height 25.6 cm. (Reproduced by permission of The Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, Washington, D.C.)

seasons because of its singularly unattractive appearance; with nothing save masses of boulders visible on the faces of its many platforms, it seemed a most unlikely prospect for excavation. This year, however, we decided to have a look at a small rise on top of the largest platform, and as a result we are now engaged in what could become a task stretching over the two remaining years of the Lamanai project.

By mid-season we had begun to reveal structures buried beneath the masses of boulders and to clear a large complicated residence at the west side of the main platform (see "Lamanai 1981: A Regular Three-Ring Circus", *ROM Archaeological Newsletter* No. 192). The roof and upper walls of the house were probably constructed of poles and thatch, so that all we have left are the wall bases and the floors of numerous rooms and courtyards. There is also evidence of a staggering number of alterations and additions to the original structure. At its north end the house once boasted a courtyard bordered in part by small platforms that may have supported other residences. In the courtyard and at all other sides of the house lay masses of refuse, the residue of an age that knew nothing of green plastic bags and twice-weekly visits from massive trucks.

The refuse surrounding the house gives us myriad insights into the lives of the building's occupants, though we are often left with almost as many questions as would face an archaeologist attempting to unravel the skeins of our lives by sorting through those plastic bags. Mixed in with the most recent part of the courtyard deposit, which dates from



(Map by David Findlay, ROM)



Right: Pottery whistle figurine from Jaina depicting a dwarf with some God N features, including the headdress, height ca. 9 cm. (Drawing by Rita Granda, ROM after C. Corson, *Maya Anthropomorphic Figurines from Jaina Island, Campeche, 1976, fig. 16d*)

Below: Ixchel and God N, as depicted in the Dresden Codex. (Drawing by Rita Granda, ROM)



about the end of the 14th century A.D., were tools, jewellery, and other appurtenances of daily living. Among these was a small figurine that is far more interesting than its size and less-than-beautiful appearance would lead one to expect.

The figurine must have been made hastily, though by someone to whom the handling of potting clay was a familiar task. Although crudely executed, the little object depicts two people skilfully enough to make their identification reasonably clear, and to give the piece an ineffable quality that belies its insignificant size and unfinished appearance. The figurine is a representation of a not uncommon Maya theme—a rather ugly old man embracing an attractive young girl. In this case it is more the ugliness of the lefthand figure than any great beauty in his companion that suggests the identification of the pair, though the artist managed to give the girl a face fair enough to make her seem, at least in comparison with her escort, not altogether without charm. The figurine is, in fact, an excellent example of an ancient artist's mastery of minimal representation, a style we think unquestionably modern.

At first glance the little figurine seems to be a bit of

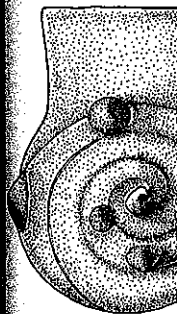
soft pornography, and hence as modern in image as in execution. In fact, however, the scene has symbolic significance and was not meant to depict an event in real life. Interpretation of its meaning depends largely on the identification of the two figures—the kind of question often fraught with difficulty but here, fortunately, somewhat less perplexing than usual. Other representations of the scene exist which, because of their high quality, give us a greater number of identifying clues; they include figurines from the island of Jaina, off the west coast of the Yucatán Peninsula, that depict facial features and elements of costume in striking detail. The scene also appears in the Dresden Codex, one of the lamentably few pre-Columbian Maya books that have survived the assaults of time and Christianity.

The couple does not, as far as I am aware, appear on pottery vessels, though at least the male—and probably also the female—player in the drama is depicted alone fairly frequently on pots and elsewhere in the corpus of Maya art. The evidence from the various depictions is enough to identify both participants in the scene and to suggest that the obvious assumption about what they are up to is far from the

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urine's true symbolic meaning.

The age of the male figure, along with features of costume in the more elaborate portrayals, marks him as God N, a deity who often appears emerging from a marine shell but who sometimes wears a turtle shell on his back instead. Although the marine shell is generally identified as a conch, it seems, even allowing for considerable artistic licence, that some other species is represented unless the shell is that of a juvenile, which is unlikely in view of the advanced age of the deity. Because we do not know the ancient name, God N has undergone various identity crises over the years; in scholarly treatises his role has shifted from the seemingly obvious sea deity to an impersonation of Mam the Earth God to one of the four *Bacabs*, beings who held up the sky over the heads of ancient Maya believers. This last identification is the one now generally accepted.

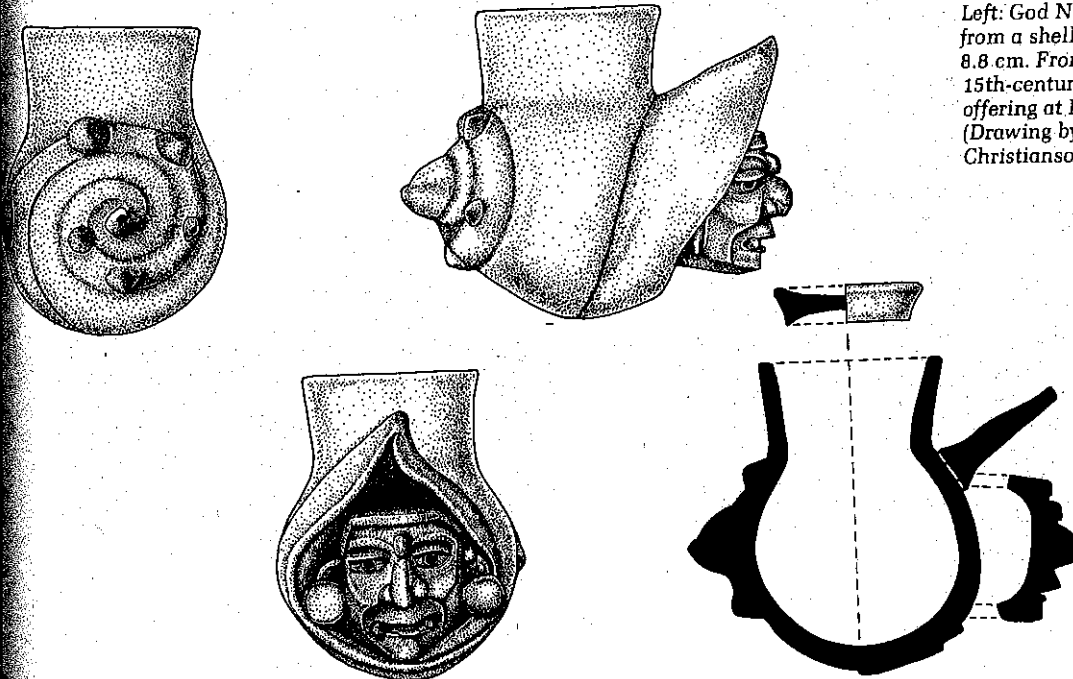
While he often bears a tun (Maya year) glyph in his headdress as an identifying symbol, God N also appears wearing a deer-head headdress both in Jaina murals and on a gold disc from the Cenote of Sacrifice at Chichen Itzá in northern Yucatán. Sometimes, as in the Lamanai depiction, he is bareheaded and without a shell or other mark of identity; presumably his age and his unpleasant appearance were sufficient to tell a knowledgeable ancient Maya who he was and what he represented.

The young lady is also identifiable, not so much by her costume or other symbols as by her youth. There is only one young female deity clearly identifiable in the Maya pantheon; she is *Ixchel*, the Moon Goddess. Her associations are also known: in the ubiquitous combination of characteristics that seems to

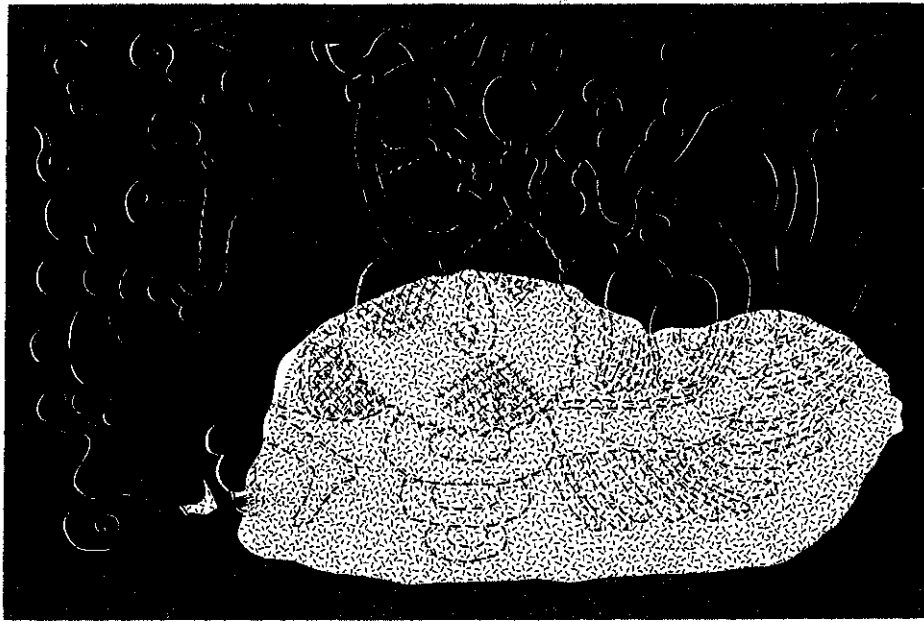
have marked most or all Maya deities, *Ixchel* was the moon and, at the same time, goddess of procreation, of the earth, and of water. This last association presumably linked the goddess to the marine shell symbol, and by extension both she and the shell came to be associated with birth. Thus the goddess's realms and symbols overlap those of God N, and their joint appearance begins to look more logical than the difference in their ages makes it seem.

God N, as an aged *Bacab*, was linked with the sky he helped support and so shared this sphere of the world with the Moon Goddess. At the same time the shell, symbol both of water and of the nether regions of the earth, bound both deities to these other two principal realms of the environment; thus the pair may have been a dual embodiment of the complete universe. Because God N cannot be said to have held dominion over the sky in the same manner as did the Moon, he might seem the less important member of the pair were it not that he appears much more frequently in Maya art than does *Ixchel*. Probably we should see the two as equal, and view their union as a doubly strong metaphor in Maya religious thinking.

Though there is a fairly clear theological basis for the pairing of the two deities, the explanation for the seemingly erotic nature of their union is a bit more elusive. The possible interpretations of the gods' pairing are legion, but the procreation/birth symbolism associated with *Ixchel* and presumably extended in part to God N through the shell symbol suggests that the scene may be a metaphor for creation or re-creation. The shell may reinforce the meaning through its association with water and hence, in



Left: God N emerging from a shell, height 8.8 cm. From a 15th-century A.D. offering at Lamanai. (Drawing by Louise Christianson)



Left: God N looking a little flabby in his old age. From an Altun Ha bowl, ca. A.D. 550-600. (Drawing by Rita Granda, ROM)

Maya religious logic, with fertility. Perhaps the Moon Goddess, whose celestial embodiment was renewed every twenty-eight days, is revitalizing the aged God N through their union while they are jointly engaged in renewing the forces of nature. There was surely once a tale in Maya mythology that explained the scene, but in its absence we can only propose an explanation for which, unhappily, no solid proof can be offered.

The Lamanai figurine does not add to our meagre store of knowledge about the union of the Old Shell God and the Moon Goddess, but it does tell us something about the importance of that union in Maya belief. The figurine's presence amidst domestic refuse and its simplicity of manufacture show that it was a household object. The form of the base suggests that the piece was intended to be set on a table or bench or perhaps on a domestic altar. At any rate, it is clear

that by the 14th century the pair of deities had made their way into the homes of the Maya, whereas earlier their depictions were seen mainly on the public ceremonial stage. While the existence of the Ixchel-God N pair in the home may reflect changes in religious practice, it must also show how deeply the significance of the couple ran through Maya life.

The Lamanai piece may be the latest representation of the paired deities that has been found in the Maya Area, and is evidence that the conjoined gods maintained their importance as much as eight hundred years after their earliest known appearance in Maya art. Sadly, the symbolism constituting that importance, together with so much of ancient Maya culture, has failed to survive the centuries; we are left with only the simple little figurine to show that Ixchel and her aged shell-bound lover once held sway at Lamanai.

David Pendergast, Department of New World Archaeology Curator, is seen here with his wife, Elizabeth, excavating an offering at Lamanai, where he has been directing work since 1974. The ninth season of the project is now under way, as the second volume of his final report on the Altun Ha excavations goes to press and the third nears completion. Volume 1 of *Excavations at Altun Ha, Belize, 1964-1970* was published by the ROM in 1979.



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