

THE JAGUAR AND THE MAYAN CULTURES

INSTRUCTOR: Dr. A. D. Krieger

Anthropology 475

March 1969

BY: Dale R. Croes

INTRODUCTION

The jaguar is the largest cat found on the American continent, where it ranges from Texas through Central and South America to Palagonia. The jaguar easily adapted to the area known as the Mayan region. Before man's arrival this giant cat had few enemies. After man appeared he and the jaguar subsisted side by side in natural fear of one another. The jaguar could not relate his association with humans, but man, being of a symbolic nature, had attempted to define his relationship with this spotted cat. This paper is an attempt to show how the Mayan felt towards the jaguar and used his symbol in their culture.

As an animal the jaguar was continually present to the peoples of Middle America. People in this area undoubtedly often came into contact with this mysterious cat of the forest. They saw the jaguar in their surrounding territory and could hear the cry of this great cat at night. This cry is deep and hoarse in tone, and consists of the sound pu pu, often repeated. The jaguar is basically yellow-gold with rosette-like spots. It is powerfully built, with a large head. A big male has a mouth wide enough to encase a human's head. The jaguar sometimes attains a length of nine feet, of which the tail comprises some two and a half feet and a large male can weigh up to 400 lbs.. This cat usually avoids man and rarely purposely attacks him unless wounded, trapped, or pressed by hunger. It is a skillful climber and preys basically upon deer and small mammals and sometimes upon fish. It has developed a fond love of water. (See the title page for an example of the appearance of the jaguar.)

EXAMPLES OF THE JAGUAR IN MAYAN ART

The jaguar in Mayan art was never highly conventionalized to a large degree. He remained a relatively realistic animal whenever he






was depicted. Here are some examples of different ways Mayan artists represented these creatures:



THE JAGUAR MOTIF

The jaguar motif is prominent in most of the major civilizations of Middle and South America. The Olmec art of Mexico is characterized by their were-jaguars and the Chavin art of Peru is centered around the feline motif. The jaguar motif in the life of the Maya is quite signifi-

cant and possessed a religious importance secondary only to the serpent. Its magnificent figure is found throughout Mayan art. It is represented on their monuments, stelae, in their murals and codices, sculptured on their royal thrones and in their courts and its figure signifies certain powers in Mayan mythology and social structure. The pelts of the jaguar were highly prized and were worn to display high social status. It was a symbol of great military rank in the later Mayan stages and the jaguar is often depicted in the Post-Classic as enjoying the torn out heart of a sacrificial victim.

The species that the Mayan represented is probably Felis hernandezi, the Mexican race of jaguar. The distinguishing mark of the jaguar, in addition to the general form with the long tail, short ears and claws, is the presence of the rosette-like spots. These are variously conventionalized as solid black or hatched markings:  , as small circles:  , or as a central spot ringed by a circle of dots: . Frequently the solid black spots are used, either in a line of spots down the back and tail or scattered over the body. The tip of the tail is characteristically black, and the teeth are often prominent. Occasionally a jaguars form will be represented without any spots. These are hard to distinguish from the puma figure, yet the general characteristic features of the jaguar (roundish ears, etc.) can often differentiate it.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE JAGUAR AS A SUPERNATURAL POWER AND IN MAYAN MYTHOLOGY

The Mayans conceived the jaguar as more than an animal of the forest. He stood as a creature of supernatural powers and even as a deity. The true significance of the supernatural aspect of the jaguar is unclear, but little scraps of evidence indicate something of the nature of these mythological beliefs. In the Mayan terminology Balam means "jaguar"

and signifies something mysterious or hidden. Firstly the jaguar seems to have been a form of the earthgod and of the night and secondly as a strong animal he appears to have been an animal of the sun god (Anders, 1963). He is often considered a god of the underworld or darkness. As god of the caves and darkness he became sort of an Atlas, who carried the world on his shoulders. Great supernatural strength is invested into the jaguar figure and it follows in the Post Classic Mayan tradition that one cannot shoot more than four arrows at this animal without great danger. The number four clearly refers to the cardinal points and the jaguar is often equated with the fifth direction or the up and down (Anders, 1963). This also corresponds with the fact that he is god of the inner world, i.e. it implies the up and down direction.

The Chacs or Rain Gods of the Four Quarters were conceived in the form of jaguars (Tozzer, 1910). The association of the jaguar symbol and water or rain is evident in certain archaeological material. The jaguar is shown depicted with the symbolic waterlily or flower symbol. Here is an example of four symbolic jaguar figures:



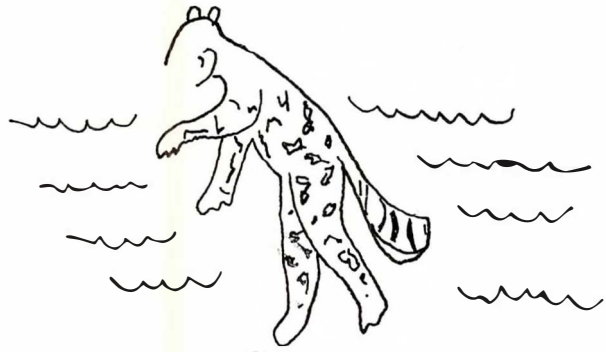
9.



10.



11.



12.

The first two figures are shown with the waterlily symbol and the third is two views of an alter which depicts the two jaguars in a diving form between grotesque heads which may be depictions of the rain god. This third figure does not clearly illustrate the waterlily, but it is possibly there. The fourth figure (12) is a jaguar painted in a water pond from the Temple of the Warriors, Chichen Itza. The association between water (rain) and the jaguar probably stems from the fact that this animal loves water and swims often. The Mayans probably gave the jaguar certain supernatural power over water and rain and therefore life. The waterlily and jaguar was certainly significant.

Certain other jaguar figures surely depict this animal as a supernatural form. Many of these forms show the jaguar in elaborate or moderate human dress. Fig. 10 shows a jaguar with loins cloth, ankle wraps, elaborate headdress, wristlets, scraf, and nose plugs. Some of these these figures seem militaristic in dress (see figs. 13&14). Others have speech scroll-like symbols flowing from their mouths (see figs. 13,15,&16). Figures 13 and 14 (pg.6) may be dressed in military armor, the same as is occasionally depicted on Mayan warriors (Follett, 1932). The powerful jaguar may have been a totemic symbol to the warriors. There also

may have been a jaguar military deity. The Aztecs had a jaguar military order and the jaguar became the conventional representation for brave warriors. Since the chief warriors in Mayan murals were often clothed in jaguar skins this garment probably represented high military rank.



13.



14.



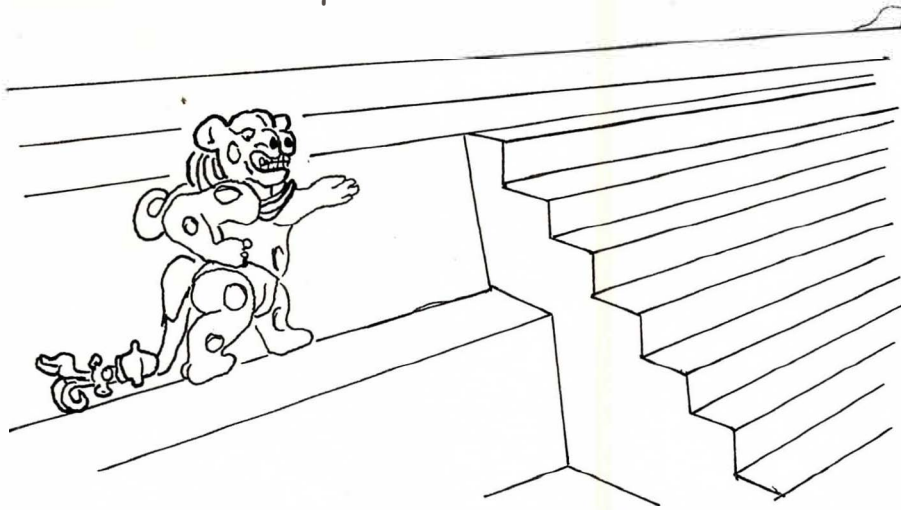
15.



16.

THE JAGUAR STAIRWAY

The jaguar stairway is a walk way which leads down into the East Court at Copan. There are two statues, on either side of this stairway, of upright jaguars. These two guardians of the stairway, with their rampant postures and snarling mouths, are forthright representations of the dreaded beast of the forest. (see fig. 17, pg.7). These jaguar

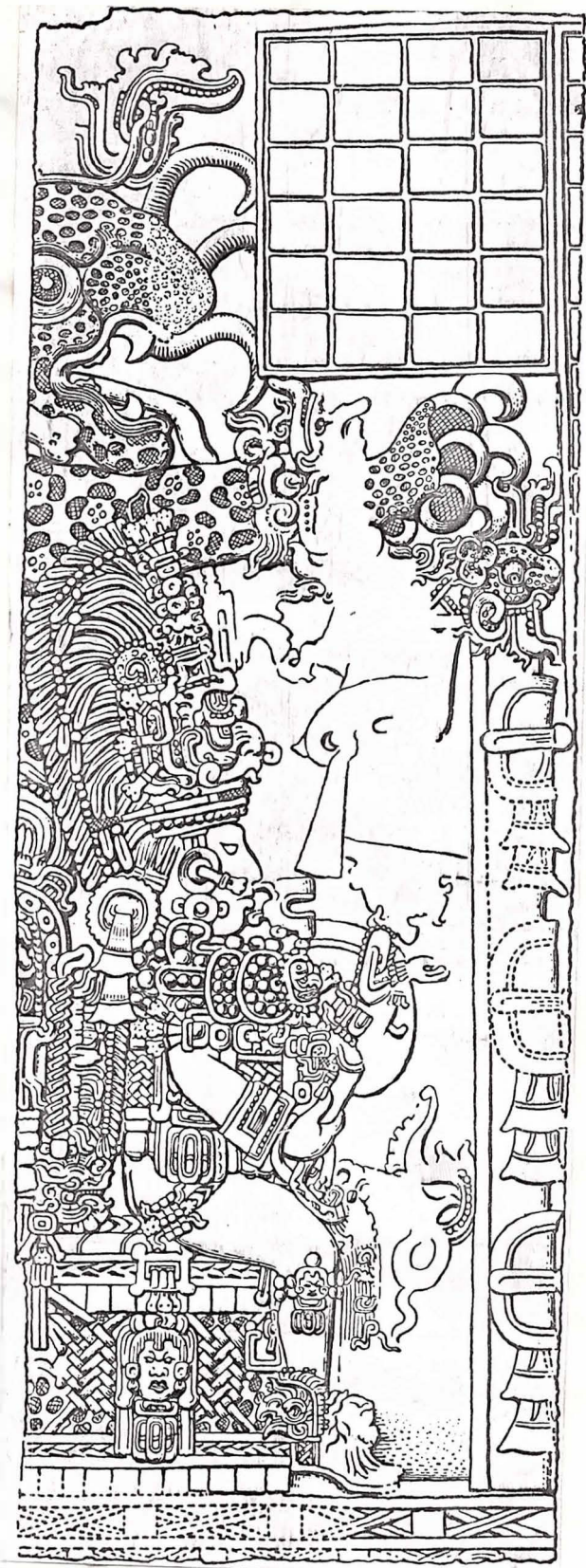


17.

figures have collars and loincloths, and were once covered with bright red paint. Their bodies were originally incrustated with disks of polished black obsidian to simulate the spots of a jaguar. Their tails are elaborated into a symbolic design. All these features imply that this was more than a jaguar image, but a jaguar deity showing the direction up the important stairway. At the top of this stairway is the representation of a head which is often called the goddess Venus. This may correspond with the jaguars position as the supernatural power of night and darkness. This court may have been used for religious rites involving Jaguar Priests and used for associated traditions dealing with the jaguar and Venus.

THE JAGUAR AND MAYAN ROYALTY

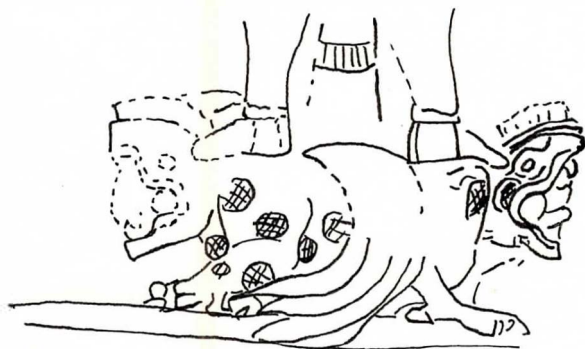
The jaguar stands for a symbol of royalty because of its magnificent power and beauty. These characteristics of felines in general makes them the outstanding figure in royalties throughout the world. The Mayans are no exception. They use their jaguar figures in thrones and the prized jaguar pelt is the symbol of high rank. The jaguar thrones are represented at a number of sites, particularly Palenque, Uxmal, and Chichen Itza. There seems to be basicly three styles of



18.



19.



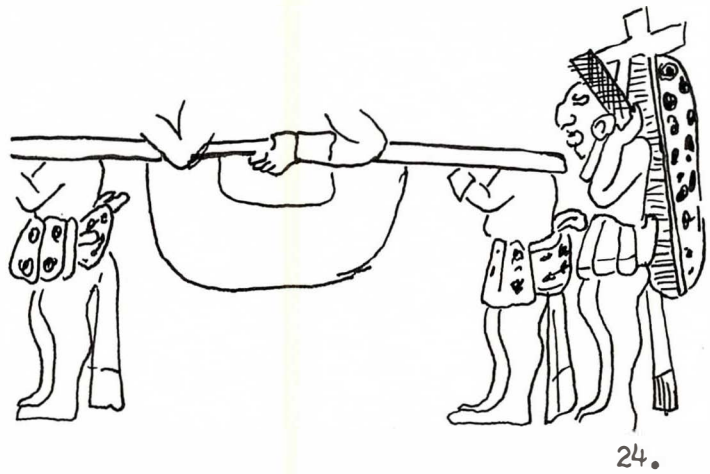
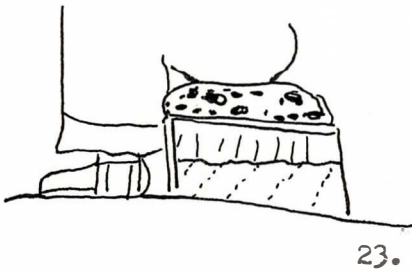
20.



21



22.



jaguar seats. The first is the double-headed jaguar seats and these are depicted in flat relief at Palenque and Uxmal (figs. 19&20). The other two are natural jaguar figures of stone (Chac Mools) and cushion thrones covered with the cat's skin (figs 21,22,23 Chichen Itza; &24). Fig.21 is an example of a real jaguar seat found in the Interior Temple of El Castillo, Chichen Itza. This jaguar seat is painted red and jade disks are inlaid to represent spots (Morley/Brainerd, 1963). Fig. 22 is a mural painting representing a person seated on this style of jaguar seat. Fig. 23 is also a mural in the Temple of the Warriors depicting a jaguar cushion seat. The entire mural on the South bench of the Temple of the Warriors depicted a file of fourteen human figures seated on jaguar upholstered seats. These are seats of high ranking warriors.

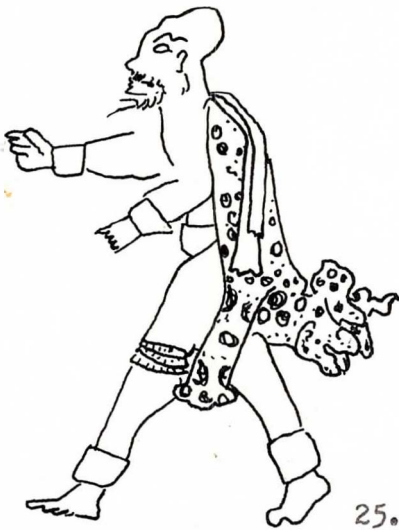
A vase from Ratinlinxul (the Ratinlinxul vase) shows a person of royalty being carried on the shoulders of retainers who wear jaguar skin wraps. The retainer in behind carries a jaguar-cushioned throne (fig.24).

A wooden door lintel from Temple IV, Tikal, Peten, Guatemala depicts a person, probably of royalty, seated on a jaguar seat with a very powerful image of an enraged jaguar behind him.(fig. 18). This is again a symbol of jaguar strength and power surrounding a human figure of authority.

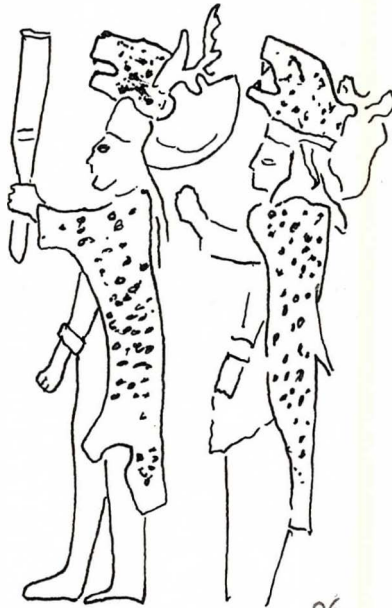
THE JAGUAR IN MAYAN COSTUME

The jaguar skin is frequently represented as a garment. There

seems to be three basic styles of dress using this spotted pelt. There are first complete jaguar-skin cloaks worn over the shoulders with the head hanging down (figs. 25&26). Secondly there is a wrap-around kelt-like dress which is worn around the waist (figs 27&28) and thirdly there are jaguar skin uniforms which are tailored and form a sleeveless suit for the chief or chief warrior (figs. 29&30). Here are some examples of jaguar skins in dress:



25.



26.



27.



28.



29.



30.



31.



32.



33.



34.

Headdresses are also frequently jaguar in origin. It is common for the jaguars' head to be used as the headdress (figs. 26,31,32,&33) or the jaguar skin is incorporated in the headdress (figs. 29&30). Notice that fig. 32 has the waterlily-like flower coming out of the top of the jaguar headdress. This also indicates the jaguars' association with Chacs or the Rain Gods (water and life symbol).

Fig. 29&30 are from the Classic wall murals of Bonampak. These figures are important chiefs or principle warriors. Besides their jaguar uniforms they also have jaguar footwear, jaguar headdresses, and a jaguar skin wrapped around their spears. These are believed to represent their high status as principle warriors or chiefs.

The jaguar-skin kelts seem to indicate a different status role. It is suggested that in both figs. 27&28 these persons are involved in religious rituals. Fig.28 is from a fine Classic-Stage wall painting found at Uaxactun, and it is said to probably date from the early period and is therefore the oldest known wall painting in the Mayan area. These figures may be the Jaguar Priests or high ranking religious persons.

Figs. 25&26 again seem to represent figures of a different social rank. They seem to be powerful personages, but of a different position. It is difficult to assert their rank in comparison to the other two, yet one might guess that they are in between the other two ranks.

Fig.31 is a unique representation of what is probably someone in ritual dress. He has a complete jaguar costume including a claw knife to represent the jaguar's paw. This is probably from some sort of

ritual scene.

An important concept to note is that the majority of these murals are from Classic Maya and therefore early. It is generally believed that the Mayans did not have the bow and arrow until the Post-Classic. This means that the Mayan hunters had to use the spear or other devices to kill jaguars for their skins. This indicates that some of the Mayans had to have been specialized hunters to know how to hunt and kill this very dangerous cat. Fig. 34 shows two jaguar pelts being offered in a religious scene. How were these pelts obtained by the Mayans ? How could they hunt the jaguar ?

JAGUAR HUNTING AMONG THE MAYAN

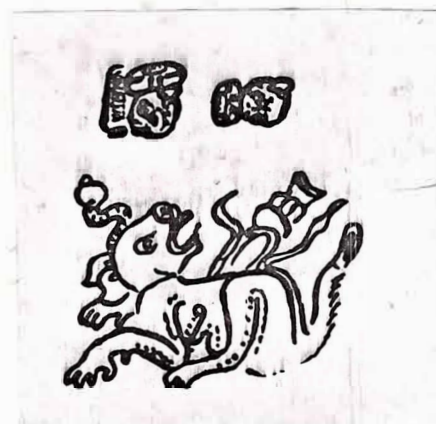
The Mayan people certainly had a method of obtaining their jaguar skins. This paper will propose that the Mayans had techniques of hunting this cat and I will try to explain possible ways the spear-bearing Mayan could destroy this 350 lb. spotted cat. First, though, I might suggest another possible way they could have obtained these skins; that is besides hunting. This different situation would be to keep young wild jaguars as pets and raise them in captivity until they could be killed for their skins. The keeping of young wild animals as pets occurs often among agriculturalists and also among hunters. Ethnographically the Lacandonis in Peten and eastern Chiapas had young jaguars running about like dogs (Curwen and Hatt, 1953). Undoubtedly this practice was carried on very early among the Mayan. After the jaguar grew, it would certainly have to be confined with a rope or in a cage, for it is basically too dangerous even in play. Fig. 35 is an example of a living jaguar in captivity. This cat seems young and is bound by ropes. It is not beyond the Mayan capability to keep

a jaguar in captivity and this practice may have been common.

It is also likely that the Mayans had methods of hunting the jaguar. Occasionally a jaguar turns man-eater and the Mayans certainly had techniques of destroying these man killers. From the size of some of their jaguar shoulder cloaks (fig.25) it seems most likely that these were wild jaguars and not ill-feed, docile, jaguars who where the product of captivity. Evidence of hunting the jaguar is shown in the fantastic depiction of a speared cat (fig 36). This could possibly be a speared puma, but there are three points against this assumption. First jaguars and pumas do not generally live in the same territory, and the jaguars are quite common in the Mayan region. The present day native hunters claim the tigre kills the puma on sight (Siemel, 1967). Secondly the puma is almost impossible to approach close enough to spear; where as the jaguar will stand at bay and fight a man with a spear. And thirdly this cat has a black tipped tail which is often an attribute of the painted Mayan jaguar. Notice also the waterlily-like symbol protruding from the Cat's head. This again is associated with the jaguar symbol.



35.



36.

If we assume that the Mayan hunter did hunt the jaguar, which is quite probable, than how could he have gone about such a hunt ?e Natives of Middle and South America still hunt this cat and some hunt

with only bow and spears. From some accounts of these jaguar hunts it might be possible to visualize how the Classic spear-bearing Mayan hunter stalked and killed the spotted beast.

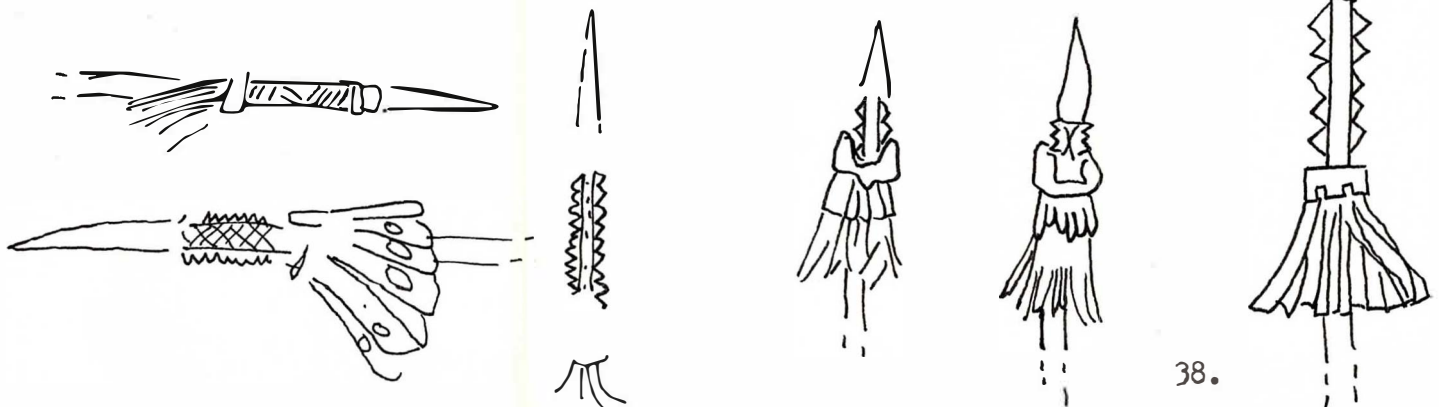
The Mayans had dogs and could have easily used them for tracking the jaguar. A jaguar will not usually bother a human. Even when hunted with dogs, the big cat prefers to get away if he can. If he is cornered on the ground he will fight, of course, and this usually involves the loose of many dogs. An average chase is a few miles. Three out of four tigras will tree, and then they are sitting (ducks) cats. Its the ones that come to bay in grass, bush, or vines that are the ones a good hunter can engage in a spear-fight with.

The spear used by present day natives in jaguar hunts has a iron blade. One native jaguar spear is known as the zagaya. The handle of this spear is six ft. of heavy hardwood. The blade is hand-forged steel, ten inches long and $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide in the middle. There is a 4in., curved crossbar to prevent the cat from sliding down the shaft. The blade must be razor sharp for the tigre's pelt is very tough. See fig.37:



37.

The Mayans had spears depicted in their art which may have been used in jaguar hunts (fig.38). These have long thin stone blades with saw-tooth edges below the hafting. On each is a cross-bar-like protrusion which would also prevent a cat from sliding down the shaft.



38.

Once the natives had the jaguar treed all they would have to do is spear it using a ałlatl or by hand, or shoot it with arrows. Once a jaguar came down from the tree he could be finished with spears.

If the jaguar does not climb a tree and simply stops and decides to fight, then one has a different situation. Usually a hunter with a spear comes in close to the cat and attempts to provoke a charge. It usually takes very little to trigger a charge. Any sudden movement or loud noise will do it. A quick scuffing of feet, a clod of dirt thrown in his direction even a shrill yell, and the cat comes streaking out to fight.

For all the danger inherent in a spear fight, the spear is a safer weapon than the gun in thick cover. There may not be time to use a gun, and the spear can do something the gun may not - stop the cat in mid-air. No matter from which direction he comes, or how close or fast, if the blade is there to meet him, the cat ends his rush on it.

When the jaguar attacks and if the hunter is in position the cat will impale himself on the blade with the force of his own rush. The battle usually lasts only a few minutes and only one fighter lives (Siemel, 1967).

This example demonstrates how the early Mayans, equipped only with spears, could chase and destroy the largest and most dangerous carnivore on the American continent.

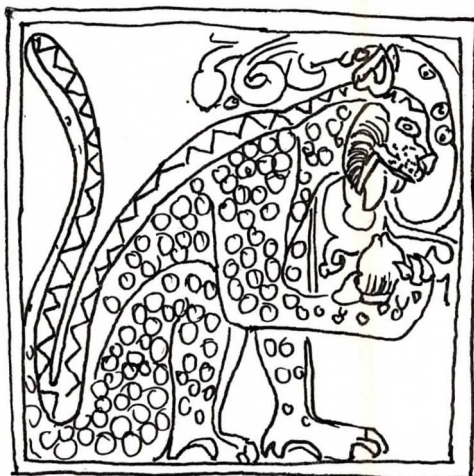
THE JAGUAR AND HUMAN SACRIFICE

In the Post-Classic some of the Mayan groups were involved in the rites of human sacrifice. The jaguar was also included in this tradition. At Chichen Itza a platform of the North Terrace has panels, which depict alternately eagles and jaguars each holding what appears to be a

human heart (see fig. 39). Since eagles and jaguars were symbols of military orders in Yucatan, it seems not unlikely that the performance staged on these platforms were in some way connected with the ignoble art of waging war, which, through Mexican influence, was evidently gaining importance at this time.

Another possible jaguar - sacrifice association is seen in a clay figure of an anthropomorphized jaguar or a man in the guise of a jaguar (see fig. 40). He holds what may possibly be a heart. This piece seems to have been made to serve as a lid or stopper.

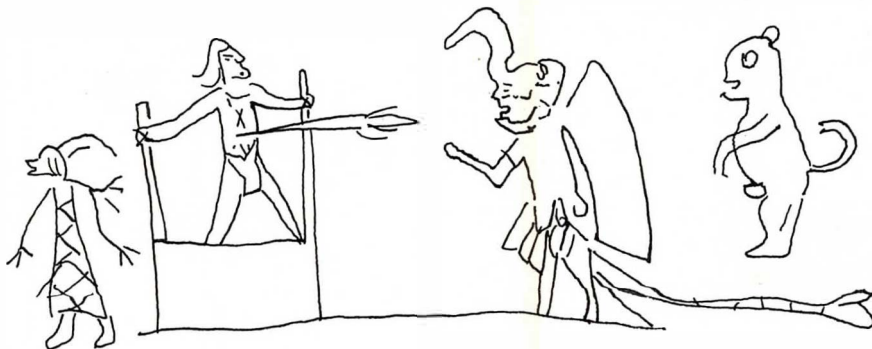
A third jaguar and sacrificial scene is illustrated in graffiti from Temple II at Tikal, Peten, Guatemala, showing an arrow shooting ceremony. This human sacrifice by bow and arrow was certainly Post-Classic. The jaguar is positioned behind one of the priests or dancers (Morley/Brainerd, 1963).



39.



40.



41.

CONCLUSION

The jaguar was a deity -- a symbol of darkness, a god of rain, of earthly things, of life, a god of night, mystery, and strength. He was a military order, a totemic symbol, and a symbol of human sacrifice. But the Mayan cultures went extinct and so did the "jaguar deity". The jaguar is still in the Mayan region in the same form as he has always been. What is missing is the Mayan civilizations and cultures. The Mayan people believed that the supernatural jaguar was real, but they have disappeared taking their "Jaguar God" with them. What is left is the Mayan art and the reality of the jaguar figure still lives within it. Hopefully this paper has revealed a small fragment of this reality.

PUBLICATIONS FROM WHICH THE ILLUSTRATIONS WERE OBTAINED

- Illus.No. 1-7 Tozzer, A.M., 1910
8. Morris, E.H., 1931
- 9-11 Anders, F., 1963
12. Morris, E.H., 1931
13. Anders, F., 1963
14. Kidder II, A., and C. Chincilla, 1959
- 15-16 Morley, Sylvanus, 1963
17. Proskouriakoff T., 1946
18. Anders, F., 1963
- 19-21 Morley, S., 1963
- 22-23 Morris, E.H., 1931
- 24-25 Morley, S., 1963
- 25-27 Rivet, P., 1954
28. Morley, s., 1963
- 29-30 Rivet, P., 1954
31. Follett, P., 1932
- 32-33 Morley, S., 1963
34. Rivet, P., 1954
- 35-36 Anders, F., 1963
37. Siemel, S., 1967
38. Follet, P., 1932
39. Proskouriakoff, T., 1946.
40. Kidder II, A., and C. Chincilla, 1959
41. Anders, F., 1963

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anders, Ferdinand, Das Pantheon der Maya, Groz, Austria, 1963.
- Covarrubias, Miguel, The Eagle, The Jaguar, and the Serpent: Indian Art of the Americas, Knopf, New York, 1954.
- Covarrubias, Miguel, Indian Art of Mexico and Central America, Alfred A. Knopf, 1957, New York.
- Follett, Prescott H.F., War and Weapons of the Maya, Middle American Research Series, Publ. 4, 374-410, 1932, New Orleans.
- Kidder II, Alfred, and Carlos Samayoa Chincilla, The Art of the Ancient Maya, 1959, New York.
- Makemson, Maud W., The Book of the Jaguar Priest: a Translation of the Book of Ch'iam Balam of Tizimin, with Commentary, Henry Schuman, New York, 1951.
- Morley, Sylvanus G. and revised by George W. Brainerd, The Ancient Maya, Stanford University Press, 1963, Stanford, California.
- Morris, Earl H., et al. The Temple of the Warriors At Chichen Itza, Yucatan, Carnegie Institution of Washington (CIM), Publ. 406, 2 vols. 1931, Washington.
- Murie, Adolpho, "Mammals from Guatemala and British Honduras", University of Michigan, Museum of Zoology, Miscellaneous Publications, no. 26, pp. 7-30. Ann Arbor, 1935.
- Proskouriakoff, Tatians, An Album of Mayan Architecture, Carnegie Institution of Washington, Publ. 558, 1946, Washington, D.C.
- Rivet, Paulo, Cites Maya, 4th ed., A. Guillot, Paris, 1954.
- Stemel, Sasha, "The Cat Man Returns", Outdoor Life 139: 46-9+, NY, 67.
- Spinden, Herbert J., Mayan Art and Civilization, The Falcon's Wing Press, 1957, Indian Hills Col.
- Tozzer, A.M., and G.M. Allen, "Animal Figures in the Mayas Codices", Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Vol. IV, No. 3, Cambridge, 1910.