Ancient Maya Cosmological Landscapes: Early Classic Mural Paintings at Río Azul, Peten, Guatemala.

by

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Abstract

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The ancient Maya site of Rio Azul, located in the tropical lowlands of Guatemala, contains several Early Classic (250 – 550/600 CE) tombs with beautiful mural paintings. Commissioned for the interment of the royal elite, the tomb murals are painted with wonderful examples of Maya calligraphy depicting iconographic scenes of the watery underworld and hieroglyphs naming particular mountains of a cosmological landscape. This study focuses on the analysis and interpretation of the paintings and compares them to other examples in the Maya lowlands to demonstrate the widespread notion of cosmological landmarks associated to death and the rebirth of venerated ancestors.
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Chapter 1: Introduction, Location and Historiography

INTRODUCTION

In the northeastern corner of El Petén, Guatemala, in a region dominated by bajos and dense rainforest lies the ancient archaeological site of Río Azul (Fig. 1). Although the site enjoyed a long history that spanned from the Middle Preclassic (700 – 250 BCE) through the Late Classic (600 – 800 CE) it reached its apogee during the Early Classic (250 – 600 CE) when it exploded with monumental architecture and artistic development. It was in that period of glory that its rulers commissioned elaborate burial chambers beneath dedicatory buildings for the interment of the royal deceased. Its discovery in 1962 generated several years of looting that in turn revealed the magnificent existence of the Río Azul tomb murals.

The discovery of the Early Classic tombs at Río Azul was, at the time, a revealing example of the wonders of ancient Maya calligraphic painting on plastered walls. Their finding led Richard E. W. Adams to begin an archaeological project at the site in 1983 to salvage and record the murals and place them within their historical and archaeological context. The five-year project resulted in the discovery of more tombs with the same style mural paintings and by the end of the field research a total of 11 decorated tombs were recorded that dated to the Early Classic period (250-550/600 CE). Given the premature understanding of Classic Maya iconography and epigraphy upon the discovery of the tombs, preliminary interpretations suggested that the paintings were parentage statements linking the Río Azul dynasty to that of Tikal (Adams 1984, 1999). Now, with a much larger corpus and a much better understanding of Maya iconography and the
advancement in decipherment of hieroglyphic writing it is necessary to revisit the tombs and provide a re-analysis of the meaning of the paintings. When compared to other Early Classic mural paintings from sites such as Tikal and Uaxactun, the exclusion of humans as the principal element in the scene places Río Azul as an exception in Maya painting (Lombardo 2001: 101). So far, no other examples of its kind have been found. The purpose my research is to bring forward new developments in the interpretation of the murals based largely on comparative examples and increased knowledge in iconography and epigraphy. A total of nine tombs, numbered 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 12, 19, 23 and 25, are included in this study because of their decoration and preservation of mural paintings. The Río Azul tombs have been virtually neglected since the decade of the 1980s but they contain valuable information regarding cosmological landscapes and directionality that needs to be highlighted.

Royal burial ritual was clearly a major event for the ancient Maya. Great emphasis was placed in the preparation of the burial location and chambers. Effort went as far as building pyramidal structures to house royal tombs in dedication to the individual interred. Such was the case of the tombs at Río Azul where archaeology has demonstrated that the buildings housing the tombs were constructed and modified for each burial (Adams 1999). Elaborate burial practices are indicative of the importance of how distinguished members of society were treated upon death in preparation of their transformation from historical figures to divine ancestors. Ancestral veneration seems to be an overarching theme in ancient Mesoamerican thought that is tightly linked to burials. There are, in and outside the Maya area, royal burials with a focus on ancestral apotheosis and veneration. In Oaxaca, for example, Early Classic tomb paintings focused on ruler’s genealogies expressed by a series of named ancestors (Marcus 1992: 283). Tikal Burial 166 (Coggins 1975), although several centuries earlier than those from Río
Azul, is painted with figures organized in pairs on three of its walls that I think could be representations of ancestors or deities. Decorating the side panels of Pacal’s sarcophagus are his ancestors manifested as sprouting plants (Fig. 2). Río Azul, on the contrary, practiced a different pattern of mural paintings in burial chambers. In the next few chapters I argue that the main theme of the Río Azul paintings is about cosmological landscapes and directionality. Large medallion hieroglyphs were popular at Río Azul and comprise a great portion of the paintings along with more traditional hieroglyphic writing and iconography. However, the deeper meaning of the theme is not quite disconnected from ancestral veneration, as one would suspect at first glance. Comparative examples will prove that tomb murals at Río Azul describe an environment in which ancestors are reborn and resurrected. For McAnany (1995: 127), ancestor veneration and agriculture are tightly connected, which is the reason why the iconography of royal ancestor veneration is highly comprised of agrarian images of regenerative life.

Data from Río Azul was available from the series or reports produced by the Archaeological Project itself, from several small publications that followed, and doctorate dissertations (Adams 1984, 1986, 1987, 1989, 1999, 2000; Adams and Robichaux 1992; Hall 1989). Analysis of the murals themselves was challenging given the quality of the reproduced mural images and photographs, however, the record was further supported by a series of photographs produced by George Mobley of the National Geographic Society, and unpublished illustrations and photographs by Ian Graham from his first visits to the site1. New illustrations were produced using digital technology to replicate more accurate representations of the images in the state of conservation in which they were found. Illustrations were made based on the availability of photographs, and so I include

1 Photographs by George Mobley and Ian Graham’s illustrations were provided by George and David Stuart.
several previously drawn paintings. My interpretations of the paintings are based largely on comparative research and epigraphic decipherment. For comparative purposes I use as examples the decorated façade of the pyramid known as “La Casa de los Cuatro Reyes” from Balamku, Campeche (Baudez 1996), the Early Classic incised Berlin Vessel (Grube and Gaida 2006; Reents-Budet et al. 2004), Monument 160 from Tonina (Graham 2006), the polychrome codex style cylindrical vessel known as the “Bunny Rabbit Pot” catalogued by Justin Kerr as K1398 (available on FAMSI) and the stuccoed bowl from Tikal Burial 160 (Hellmuth 1987). These examples were crucial in understanding the meaning of the murals and placing them within the overall notion of cosmological landscape as the ancient Maya understood it. My aim is to provide a clear and useful understanding of yet another segment in ancient Maya religious thought that is associated with the world of the dead, that of the cosmological landscape2.

Following this Introduction, Chapter 1 continues with a more technical, but brief, description of Río Azul’s location and topography followed by an account of its discovery, archaeological background, and previous research focused on the tombs themselves. Chapter 2 deals directly with the tombs, their context and descriptions of the murals. Given certain recognizable variation in theme representation, the order in which the tombs are described is separated into three sections: 1) tombs in Structure C-1, which also happen to be earlier; 2) cosmological mountains; and 3) directionality. In order to provide more clarity in the presentation of the data, the preservation of the murals will be taken into account for the order of presentation. This chapter also discusses variation in and among the tombs in terms of context, morphology, composition and orientation, with consideration of the murals as well. Given the theme of the mural paintings, Chapter 3 focuses on cosmological landscapes, the iconography of mountains and water, beginning

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2 Ritual and cosmological landscapes will be treated and defined more fully in Chapter 3.
with the importance of such features in indigenous thought. Chapter 4 presents the reader with a series of comparative examples that support my argument about Río Azul. This study ends with brief conclusions, Chapter 5, that summarize and hopefully clarify my new interpretation of the tomb murals.

LOCATION

The archaeological site of Río Azul is located in the northeast corner of the Department of El Petén, Guatemala, less than 20 km from the border with Belize and less than 6 from the Mexican border (see Fig. 1) (Adams et al. 1984: 1). Geologically, this region is considered part of the Petén Karst Plateau composed of limestone and marl rock types (Dunning et al. 2003: 14). The site owes its name to the Río Azul that originates from large bajos or clay-floored karst basins, winding through a series of other bajos, such as the Bajo Azúcar near the site of Río Azul, to drain in the Bay of Chetumal. In the rainy season, the water level in the bajos increases making the river become a wide floodplain, while in the dry season it serves to connect a series of swamps. The remoteness of Río Azul within the tropical rainforest of the Maya Biosphere makes access difficult and often dependant on the dry season. Despite these logistical challenges, Río Azul has received considerable archaeological attention, much of it during a five-year project in the 80’s, following two decades of heavy looting.

DISCOVERY AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The site was first reported in 1962 by Trinidad Pech, an employee of Sun Oil Company, which at the time was carrying out oil explorations in the region (Adams 1999: 3). The same year, John L. Gatlin, resident geologist for Sun Oil, notified R. E. W.
Adams about Río Azul and together they made a short exploration of the site, producing a rough sketch map and excavating a few test pits (Adams 1999: 5). At the time, Río Azul was still a pristine abandoned site and had not suffered from damage by looters. That first short visit resulted in the discovery of standing architecture with modeled stucco, most notably the hieroglyphic text on the roof comb of Structure A-2 (Adams 1999: 5), a sketch map of the major architecture, and the identification of occupation spanning from the Late Preclassic through the Late Classic, with a strong Early Classic component (Adams 1999: 5; Hall 1989: 11). Between 1962 and 1983 when more formal archaeological explorations began, Río Azul was heavily looted.

The Río Azul Archaeological Project, directed by R. E. W. Adams, carried out a total of five field seasons between 1983 and 1987, during which they completed a topographical map of the site, systematically excavated buildings and plazas, explored, cleaned and documented looter’s excavations and produced the first record of monuments. Research also included the establishment of a chronology, architectural studies, analysis of tombs and associated artifacts, laboratory analysis of recovered materials, regional survey and studies of tomb murals (Adams 1984, 1986, 1987 and 2000). Basic goals included salvaging information from looter’s excavations, recording and conserving tomb murals, and reconstructing the function of each part of the city through its entire history (Adams 1999). The investigations resulted in the identification of a settlement covering an area of 3 km² divided into nine groups and 41 courtyards (Fig. 3) (Hall 1989: 14). According to Adams (1999: 185-186), the chronology of Río Azul begins at 900 BCE with the settlement of farmers and ends at 860 CE when it is abandoned and the surviving elite moved to the nearby fortress city of Kinal, which in turn was abandoned in 1000 CE.
Occupation during the early facet of the Middle Preclassic period (that is, between 1000/900 and 600 BCE) consisted of sparse settlement in the general Río Azul region (Hall 1989: 15). Much of this early evidence is from El Pedernal (also known as BA-20), a small site less than a kilometer northeast of Río Azul that was developing contemporaneously up to the beginning of the Early Classic (Black 1987). Throughout the Preclassic, Río Azul was one of many small communities that varied in size and complexity from simple farmsteads to midsized cities. Of these, Río Azul and El Pedernal developed into more sophisticated settlements with religious architecture by the end of the Middle Preclassic (ca. 250 BCE), as shown at Río Azul with Structure G-103 (Adams 1999; Valdez 1992) and elite residences, and an acropolis at El Pedernal. According to Black (1987: 217), by the Late Preclassic (250 BCE – 250 CE [sic]) the immediate region’s population had expanded beyond food production capacity due to the destruction caused by slash-and-burn agriculture. The reaction to this ecological crisis was the implementation of intensive agriculture focused in the bajos (op. cit.).

During the Early Classic, particularly by 390 CE, Río Azul reached the status of an urban center or city with a population of approximately 5,000 or slightly over (Adams 1999: 36; Orrego 1987: 57). The Early Classic period at Río Azul was a time of dynamic development in architecture and socio-economic structure, expanding to meet the needs of an increasingly stratified society with a well defined elite (see also Eaton 1987). The construction of major architectural programs such as complexes, platform residences, reservoirs and defensive structures is suggestive of Río Azul’s prominent participation in Classic Maya politics and economy. Perhaps the most obvious evidence of Río Azul’s important dynastic complexity are the series of royal tombs decorated with elaborate murals buried beneath temples and complexes.
RESEARCH ON RÍO AZUL TOMBS

The artists of Río Azul produced the most elaborate and sophisticated Early Classic (250 – 550 CE) tomb mural paintings known from the Maya Lowlands. A total of 11 painted tombs from that period were found, four of these having been discovered by looters. Obviously, this number does not comprise all the tombs at the site. Records demonstrate that looters alone found at least 23 tombs, among several crypts, burials and caches dating to different time periods (Hall 1989: 14). The characteristics of these tombs remain unclear and apparently they did not prove to have mural paintings. For the purposes of this study, I will focus on nine Early Classic tombs with mural paintings.

Following rumors of its intense looting, the first archaeologically oriented visit to the site and photographic record of the tombs was by Ian Graham in 1981 with the aid of Rafael Morales, then Director of Monumentos Prehispánicos de Guatemala (Adams 1999; Hall 1989). The majority of the looting must have taken place only a few years, possibly months, prior to that visit because the looters camp was fairly new (Stuart, personal communication 2007). Ian Graham was the first to photograph the murals in tombs 1 and 2, and produced a field illustration of the latter (see Fig. 38). Formal research on the tombs began with the Río Azul Archaeological project in 1983, focusing at first on salvaging information from tombs 1, 2, 5, 6, 7 and 12 (Adams 1984) that had been heavily looted. Subsequent field seasons revealed the existence of other painted tombs, numbered, 9, 17, 19, 23 and 25 (Adams 1986, 1987 and 2000). Original descriptions of the tombs can be found in the Río Azul reports, specifically, the articles and dissertation by Grant D. Hall (1984, 1986, 1987). Treatment of the tombs in the Río Azul Project reports include descriptions of their discovery and excavation, their architectural context, recovery and analysis of rich artifact assemblages, and an interpretation of the iconography on the murals. Hall (1989) also completed a
dissertation that focused on an analysis of mortuary traits of the tombs found in Structure C-1, taking into account the sociopolitical relationships and religious ideology of Classic Maya elites reflected in tomb characteristics.

R. E. W. Adams and Hubert Robichaux (1992) published an overview article on the 11 Early Classic tombs in an obscure publication by the National Geographic Society where they reiterated interpretations made originally in the field reports. David Stuart (1987a) provided a description of the hieroglyphs in Tomb 12 in the 1987 report, and Guatemalan archaeologist Erick Ponciano (2000) described Tomb 25 in the 1989 field report. R. E. W. Adam’s 1999 book on Río Azul included other brief descriptions of the tombs, as he found relevant to understanding the site’s history, which maintained his original interpretations.
Chapter 2: The Río Azul Tombs

The Early Classic tombs from Río Azul are exquisite and unique representations of Maya funerary art and symbolism. Even though tombs from other sites do contain beautiful murals replete with intricate symbolism, in terms of the quantity, cosmological symbolism and patterns represented, the group of painted tombs at Río Azul stand out as unique. A total of 9 tombs containing mural paintings will be described in this study that pertain to the Early Classic period (250 – 550/600 CE). Five of these were heavily looted. Previous work focused on interpreting the meaning of the tomb murals began with the first season of the Río Azul project in 1983 (Adams 1984). Grant Hall (1989) treated the tombs from Structure C-1 in his dissertation but in general the iconographic analysis of the tombs merits further updated attention. In the next few pages I will address the context of the tombs and present a new interpretation of the meaning of the murals.

TOMBS IN STRUCTURE C-1

Tomb 1:

Structure C-1 is located in Group C in the northeastern section of the site’s core (Adams 1999: fig. 3-3; Hall 1989: 38), and is composed of a main central pyramidal building, C-1A, with two flanking smaller structures where tombs 19 and 23 are located. Structure C-1 faces a large plaza to the west framed by two other major building complexes to its north and west (Fig. 3 and 4). Within Structure C1-A is Tomb 1, directly on the building’s central axis. Following Adams’ classification, it is a shaft-and-chamber tomb with its long axis running east-west (Fig. 5) (Adams and Robichaux 1992;
All walls, floor and ceiling were plastered, but the entrance on the west end was sealed with a corbelled vault. Given that the tomb’s entrance leads into a filled-in chamber led archaeologists to suggest that Structure C-1, possibly the largest temple at the site during the beginning of the Early Classic, was built over an earlier palace building (Adams 1984: 10). The location and context of the tomb indicate that Structure C-1A was built possibly in dedication to the burial and the person interred, which would further suggest that the individual might have been the original main occupant of the earlier palace.

On the west side of the plaza and facing Structure C-1 is a cluster of buildings (B111 to 131) considered to be residential (Hall 1989: 38). To the north is a large and low platform with various smaller platforms constructed on top (C67 to 69). To the east of this platform and north of Structure C-1 is a depression that may have served as a reservoir or quarry (op. cit.). The three complexes appear to be closely related to one another by their organization around the plaza and their structurally distinct functionality, serving not only for residential purposes but also for administrative and ceremonial activities.

Although looted, Tomb 1 is exceptional because of the quality of its mural paintings and their preservation. The largest of the tombs from Río Azul and certainly the one with the greatest amount of painting may also be the earliest known to date from the site. Except for the west wall (the original entrance), the north, south and east walls are painted from floor to ceiling with elaborate iconography painted in red over a smooth cream plaster. The north and south walls have niches that were left blank but surely served for artifacts that perhaps were perishable or were removed by looters along with the rest of the burial furniture. While the niche on the north wall is located vertically central with motifs above and below, the one on the south wall occupies the upper half of
the vertical space, with motifs below only. The motifs throughout the tomb are separated by thick red bands that also run along the juncture of the floor and wall as well as along the top of the wall (Fig. 6). The only sections not framed at the top are those at the corners of the east wall. The iconographic display on the east wall suggests that it is the most important section of the murals leaving the north and south walls as secondary or complimentary representations. Thus, descriptions of the murals should begin there.

The east wall of Tomb 1 features a double column hieroglyphic text outlined by a red line (Fig. 7). Following my reading of the text, it begins with the Initial Series Introductory Glyph (ISIG) containing Ak’bal as patron God of the month. After the ISIG, in positions A2 through B4, is the Long Count date 8. 19. 1. 9. 13 4 Ben 16 Mol. Between the day 4 Ben and the month 16 Mol (B7) is a short version of the Supplementary Series composed of Glyphs G, F, 11D, 2C and 29A. The Long Count date corresponds to the Gregorian date 9 September 417 CE. In position A8 is the birth verb SIH-ji-AJ-ya. Generally, this verb appears preceding a subject, however all we can say about the glyph in position B8 is that it is a name and most likely a personal name. There are several possible meanings for this name glyph: it could be the name of a historical individual and, therefore, most likely the individual interred; or the text is referencing the birth of a mythological figure given that the name is not followed by a title as was customary in Maya texts. The mythological figure could be the historical person using a non-historical name after being reborn into another realm following his life on earth. Nonetheless, the birth event on the date registered by the Long Count is tied into the overall theme of the tomb paintings and the death of the former occupant of the tomb. But it could actually be the death date as the individual’s “rebirth” into another realm.
To the north of the hieroglyphic column are two large hieroglyphs, similar in composition to those painted on the southeast corner, facing north or away from the text (Fig. 7). The motifs contain specific elements that suggest these should be treated as large hieroglyphs. The figure on the lower section has a combination of elements that can be identified as a conflation of two basic signs used as part of toponyms, usually following a particular place name. These elements are the trilobe eye, hooked beak and the hand-style lower jaw, providing the reading CHAN-CHʼEʼN, “sky-cave”, a couplet that commonly follows toponyms (Montgomery and Helmke 2007; see also Houston and Stuart 1994: 12). More simple hieroglyphic examples are found on Stela 11 from Uxbenka, Belize (Leventhal and Schele 1990) and Stela 5 from Uaxactun (Graham 1986) (Fig. 8 and 9). Above it is a profile view of a WITZ or mountain with its distinctive tendrils falling over the eye and cauac teeth. Above the witz glyph is a monkey skull and on top of the mountain’s ear flare is a deer head in combination with the sign for HA’, or water. The basal section of Stela 7 at Yaxchilan has a similar combination of elements (Fig. 10) (Tate 1992: fig. 27b). It shows an alligator in profile with its typical cross-banded eye and up-turned snout and a tuun sign below its head. The center eye tendril descends down to the base and splits into two branches that lead to two water lily cartouches on opposite sides of the alligator that contain a deer and what might be a monkey. Just above the alligator’s head is the glyph for HA’ with a cleft. Several examples of the basal sections of stelae have representations of animated witz glyphs naming specific locations, historical or mythological, upon which the ruler stands. As the Early Classic examples from Uxbenka and Uaxactun illustrate, it was fairly common for these sorts of place names to include chan ch’e’n as part of the general toponym, establishing a hierarchical locative order.
In the southeast corner of the tomb are two main elements filling the panel. On the lower section is a profile view of an alligator with the diagnostic crossed bands in the eye and the up-curled nose (see Fig. 7). Over the snout is draped an aquatic plant just like that represented in what Hellmuth (1987: 157 and Fig. 99 d-e) describes as the Tubular Headdress Monster in position F of the carved bowl from Tikal Burial 160, but it is commonly represented in scenes associated with water (see Hellmuth 1987 for a detailed description of watery underworlds and its denizens). Two thick black bands at its center characterize the stem, which makes it resemble the foliation decoration on the Pib’naah Sanctuary in the Temple of the Foliated Cross at Palenque (Stuart 2006) (Fig. 11). The alligator has a possible shark tooth in the front of its mouth (Hellmuth 1987) and its head rests on top of what appears to be a “na” sign as phonetic complement to AHYIIN, the word for alligator, reaffirming that we are dealing with hieroglyphs. On top of the alligator is a profile view of the sun God, K’INICH AJAW, with the “kin” sign on his cheek and his forehead. Both figures face away from the hieroglyphic text just like their counterparts in the northeast corner. There is no satisfactory understanding of these two glyphs. However, there are representations of crocodiles with solar connections such as the Starry Deer Crocodile that Stuart (2005: 71-75) suggests is the nocturnal aspect of the Celestial Monster (Fig. 12). As Stuart (2005: 168) further indicated, the Starry Deer Crocodile symbolized the underworld sky and in essence was the body that carried the sun through its nightly course, basically consuming it and releasing it through the tail to be reborn each day. The combination of both hieroglyphs identifying the Sun God and the Alligator might have a nominal association to the “Solar Alligator” and in the context of the tomb it could be the identification as a primordial denizen of the specific location named with the toponym on the northeast corner.
The secondary iconography in the tomb includes two panels painted with vertical woven mat motifs bordering the entrance to the chamber on either side. Traditionally, the *pop*, or mat, sign is taken to be a symbol of rulership and authority (see Appendix A). Immediately to the west are two more vertical panels painted with motifs composed of a series of stacked elements that include two similar sets, one above the other (see Appendix A). Each set contains a profile view of a reptilian head, facing west, with representations of jewels hanging from each one. The jeweled elements on the south wall differ slightly from those on the north. Although clearly reptilian heads, here they appear to be integral to the idea of dangling jewels, similar to representations of loincloths worn by rulers. Between these sets of panels and the east wall, the tomb is painted with water bands surrounding the area around the niches. These water bands have been identified as symbols of the surface of the underwaterworld (Hellmuth 1987), and can be compared to examples on Early Classic painted pottery where the themes involve scenes taking place in the underwaterworld realm (Fig. 13) (Hellmuth 1987).

The combinations of elements depicted on the murals of Tomb 1 suggest to me that the scene is set in a place in a watery realm in the underworld. The large glyphs in the northeast corner are toponyms, probably referencing specific places of the supernatural landscape. The “solar alligator” in the southeast corner may be functioning as nominal glyphs and can also be interpreted as a symbol of fertility and rebirth of a legitimate divine ruler, as amphibians frequently are depicted in such contexts (see Balamku below). The deceased is placed in a scene describing the environment where he will be reborn. I would suggest, then, that the date painted on the east wall is alluding to that mythological rebirth into another realm and not the individual’s historical birth, and therefore would be close to his actual death date or burial date.
In short, the deceased, who is identified as a figure with great authority and divine status that held a “seat of power” suggested by the secondary iconography of jewels and mats, is placed in a royal space characterized by water bands and a mythological place identified by the large toponymic glyphs on the northeast wall, to be reborn once again with divine authority.

**Tomb 19:**

Buried beneath the small structure, C-1B, attached to the south side of Structure C-1A where Tomb 1 is located is Tomb 19 (see Fig. 4) (Adams 1999: 53; Hall 1989: 42). Tomb 19 is oriented east-west in a shaft-and-chamber type of burial excavated beneath an earlier plaster floor deep in bedrock (Adams and Robichaux 1992; Hall 1989). The main entrance to the tomb is through its west end where the builders constructed a formal entrance with decorated jambs (Fig. 14). Fortunately this tomb was not looted and provided a large array of artifacts and preserved perishable materials (Fig. 15) (Adams and Robichaux 1992). Tomb 19 is an excellent example of a pristine royal burial containing a rich array of artifacts including several vessels among which is the famous screw-top vessel, and perishable materials such as wood, kapok, and textiles that are difficult to ever come by in the archaeological record.

Contrary to the common red bands bordering the walls of other Río Azul tombs, Tomb 19’s walls are painted with a reddish yellow wash and three large glyphs were painted in red over it. The tomb is not rectangular in shape like most others, but has rounded corners and the paintings are located on the east, south and north walls. The original entrance was on the west side. All three images are for the most part similar and at first glance may even seem the same (Fig. 16). They are representations of bird-like
heads in profile with squared eyes, downward-hooked nose and open mouth (Fig. 17). They wear simple but traditional jeweled ear flares and interesting headdresses composed of a central triangular shaped prong and two scrolled prongs descending on each side of the head. All the prongs end in a bead shaped element and they all have central horizontal bands in black. The east wall presents more variation than the other two. The central prong emerges from a sign very similar to that for “seed” and beneath the eye is a –na sign like the one used under reptilian eyes. Further decoration of the tomb includes geometric motifs on the doorjambs (Fig. 18).

To date we have no reliable understanding of the motifs painted in Tomb 19. Identification of certain attributes instigated Adams to suggest they were representations of the Jester God (1984, 1999). Linda Schele (1974) first coined the term “Jester God” in her analysis of the effigy gods at Palenque, and also frequently depicted as a frontal attachment to the Drum Major Headdress. Parting from that original identification, Karl Taube (1998: 454) describes the Jester God as commonly displaying themes of the world tree and the jade hearth. Because the Jester God frequently appears in sets of three jade jewels decorating the brow atop the head, Taube (op. cit.) suggests that the jades denote the axis mundi hearth. In his compelling argument, Taube (1998: 456; see also Hansen 1992: 147) identifies the images in Tomb 19 as the “triple Jester God”, each one being the head of the Principal Bird Deity topped by a tree (foliation sprouting from the bird’s head), which together represent the jade hearth (Fig. 19). Hansen (1992: 128, 147) indicated the association of the Principal Bird Deity with the Jester God attributes as a common representation on early sculpture, but also extending through the Classic period when the bird effigy is depicted as the helmet of supernatural and mortal figures. Guernsey (1997: 169-170) highlighted the importance of the Principal Bird Deity as a denizen of the supernatural realm and also as the alter-ego of Itzamna, a deity she
suggests is referenced in the images of Tomb 19 and embodied in early Jester God headdress assemblages. The complex images painted in Tomb 19 include characteristics that make their identification as Jester Gods following previous research quite convincing; however, I think it is impossible at this point to identify the heads with absolute certainty given the complexity of their characteristics and their apparent conflation of multiple things.

**Tomb 23:**

Opposite Tomb 19, on the north side of Tomb 1 and beneath the northern flanking structure of C-1, is Tomb 23 (see Fig. 4). Its general configuration is similar to that of Tomb 19, consisting of a shaft-and-chamber excavated into bedrock oriented east-west with a formal entrance on the west side (Fig. 20 and 21) (Hall 1987 and 1989). This tomb also survived the looter’s excavations. Tombs 19 and 23 were apparently later in time than Tomb 1 and the reason why C-1A and C-1B were built in the late fifth century (Adams 1999: 53; Hall 1987).

Unlike the other tombs from Río Azul, Tomb 23 presents very little decoration and in fact its walls are bare, except for the wash applied over the plaster and a thick red band circling around the base of the walls. Hall (1987: 121) indicated that the red paint might have also extended across the floor. From the ceiling of the tomb protrudes a boulder on which two glyphs were painted in red. The top glyph has the moon sign as lower register and a NAH sign on top (Fig. 22 and 23). Although somewhat difficult to identify, it appears that the Moon Goddess is being represented inside the moon sign. The exact meaning of the combination of elements in this hieroglyphic compound is uncertain, but the use of NAH, “house, first”, is indicative of it being the name of a
building or of the tomb itself (see Houston 1998: 351) and associated with the Moon Goddess. The bottom glyph is a frontal view of an animated turtle or reptilian creature with scrolled eyes and big round nose.

**TOMBS CONCERNED WITH COSMOLOGICAL LANDSCAPES**

There are five tombs that I have sorted out for their concern with labeling mountains in a cosmological landscape. For clarity reasons, the descriptions begin with Tomb 25 because of the beautiful preservation of the paintings. This will allow a better understanding of the remaining three tombs that unfortunately are quite eroded.

**Tomb 25:**

Away from the rest of burials with painted murals, Tomb 25 is located beneath Structure B-56 and is of bedrock-cavity type oriented north-south (see Fig. 3) (Adams and Robichaux 1992: 415) and does not seem to have been looted (Ponciano 1989: 176). Similarly to Tomb 12, Tomb 25 also had two basins dug into the floor in addition to a sealed cache beneath the original location of the deceased ribcage, where two Early Classic bowls of the type Aguila Orange: Aguila Variety were found lip-to-lip (Ponciano 2000: 239).

This tomb is very similar to Tomb 6. In fact, three glyphs are repeated. The glyph on the west wall is the same in both tombs and those on the north and south are also the same but in swapped positions. The east wall is the only one with a distinctive glyph or text. The hieroglyph on the east wall of Tomb 25 is very eroded, however,
Robichaux (in Adams 1999: 96) suggested the possibility that it may be an AK’BAL\textsuperscript{3} \textit{sic} sign preceded by the numeral 9 and thus the name “Nine Darkness” of the female former occupant of the tomb (Fig. 24). There are no other examples at Río Azul of personal names written in that fashion and therefore I suggest it is labeling something other than a name.

The glyph on the north wall has the glyphic WITZ-NAL preceded by the conflated signs SAK and “shell”, or “white shell”. On the south wall is once again the glyph for WITZ-NAL, but this time preceded by the symbol for “celt” or “shiny”. David Stuart (personal communication 2007) suggested the reading of the “celt” sign as LEM(?), which as an adjective means “shiny” and acts as a modifier when placed in the initial position. Finally, on the west wall we have the exact same glyph as that on the west wall of Tomb 6, with slight variation. In this particular case, the WITZ glyph is conflated with the stepped element tinted red. The traditional “step” glyph is read EHB’, but when filled in red it may have a different reading. The NAL appears as affix and in front is the sign for “blood”. Although uncertain, a possible reading for “blood” is CH’ICH’ or K’IK’ (Stuart, personal communication 2007). The reading of this glyph could be CH’ICH-EHB’(?)-WITZ-NAL. Semantically, -NAL remains a bit elusive and does not exist in any Mayan languages as a suffix on places although it may exist in a few archaic forms of hieroglyphic documents; however, while still a pronounced suffix, the foliated maize sprouting from the cleft depicts the idea of a Sustenance Mountain and in fact may be a marker for ritual places (see Stuart and Houston 1994 for an understanding of -NAL).

\textsuperscript{3} The word for “darkness” is AK’AB. AK’BAL refers exclusively to the name of the Day Sign in the Tzolk’in Calendar.
Tomb 6:

Located in Structure A-3 Complex, along the central west façade of Structure A-4 (Adams 1984: 58, Adams and Robichaux 1992), this tomb seems to have been associated with Sanctuary 2 (Fig. 25 and Appendix B) (Orrego 2000: 72). Structure A-3 Complex is composed of five temples that sit on three different levels on top of a massive platform. Unfortunately, intensive looting in Structure A-3 Complex also affected Tomb 2. Orrego (2000) described the chronology and constructive sequence of A-3 complex using pottery recovered from excavations as well as investigations in the looter’s trenches. Apparently, the multiple phases of elevated construction took place very quickly between approximately 385 and 500 CE (Adams 1999: 42). Prior to construction of any elevated building, a large area in the group was leveled creating a very large plaza that is present in all construction phases of A-3 Complex and therefore is the earliest identifiable architecture in the group dated to Late Preclassic (300 BCE – 250 CE) (Orrego 2000: 63). Subsequent and continuous modifications to this building occurred during a span of about 900 years, from 300 BCE to 600 CE (op. cit.). The construction of A-1 is contemporaneous with that of A-5, the southernmost temple, which was added to the Complex upon the placement of Tomb 4 in A-1 and Tomb 10 in A-5, which interestingly do not contain any mural paintings (Orrego 2000: 72). Classified as shaft-and-chamber, Tomb 6 has an east-west long axis with a carved basin towards the center of the floor and a vaulted roof (Fig. 26). It was affected by the same looter’s trench that reached Tomb 12. The floor and walls were plastered and subsequently painted and, like Tomb 2, the vault was never plastered. According to Orrego (2000: 72), Sanctuary 2’s construction sealed and commemorated Tomb 6 as the final architectural additions to A-3 Complex in the sixth century CE.
The walls of the tomb are bordered with thick red bands leaving cream panels in which the glyphs were painted. The inner edge of the red bands was lined with a narrower orange band. Each panel was painted with relatively simple hieroglyphs. The north, south and west walls have a single glyph, and the east wall has a set of four in double columns.

**East Wall:**

The text on the east wall reads **YAX-AK-la(?) NAH u-K’ABA’ ya-ATOOT** (Fig. 27). AK means “grass and thatch” and though its identification is not completely certain as such, it is probably labeling the building as “green thatch house” (Stuart 2006: 135). This sign, with the “sprouting” vegetation, also appears in the hieroglyphic texts from Temple XIX and with slight variation on the Temple of the Foliated Cross at Palenque where it is used as the proper name of the shrine inside the temple (op. cit.) (Fig. 28). On the Temple of the Foliated Cross they used K’AN or “yellow, ripe”, while at Rio Azul it is preceded by the YAX sign for “green, unripe” (op. cit.). NAH is “house”. u-K’ABA means “its name”, where u- serves as a third person singular ergative pronoun. Finally, ya-ATOOT translates as “his/her dwelling”. This particular spelling is a variant form of OTOOT, “home/dwelling”, and is found in Early Classic texts (Stuart 1998: 378). Thus, the complete text translates as “green thatch house is the name of his/her dwelling” and may be naming the house of the individual interred or the building that houses the tomb itself. Speculating a bit further, it is plausible that this “green thatch house” is labeling the tomb itself much like the example in Tomb 23.
**North Wall:**

This panel contains a hieroglyphic version of the **WITZ**, mountain, glyph preceded by a variation of the sign **LEM?**, “shiny” (Fig. 27), providing the reading “shiny mountain”. Above the **WITZ** is the sign for **NAL**, confirming that the compound is functioning as a place or location. This place name appears again on the south wall of Tomb 25 and, as we will see in comparative examples later on, it is not an uncommon adjective for cosmological mountains.

**South Wall:**

Very similar to the north wall, once again is the use of **WITZ-NAL** but in this particular case it is being named as **SAK-**“shell” (Fig. 27). The “white shell” mountain is the same one named in Tomb 2’s north wall, Tomb 5’s east wall and on Tomb 25’s north wall.

**West Wall:**

The **WITZ-NAL** glyph here is used with the familiar sign proposed in the description of Tomb 25’s west wall to read **CH'ICH?-EHB’?** (Fig. 27), which we will see again on the west wall of Tomb 5, below.

**Tomb 5:**

Tomb 5 is located beneath Structure C-7 (Adams 1984: 56), which is directly south of Structure C-1 where Tombs 1, 19 and 23 are found (see Fig. 3). Structure C-7 is in the center of a small patio framed on all four sides by smaller range structures. The looted tomb was classified as shaft-and-chamber, dug 4 m into bedrock making it the
deepest of these types of tombs at the site (Adams and Robichaux 1992). Access to the tomb was originally through a square shaft of almost two meters that was subsequently sealed with limestone and mud mortar from its entrance down one meter (Adams 1984: 56). Tomb 5’s long axis is oriented north-south and is overall shaped like a bathtub (Fig. 29). Its distinguishing features include two steps running along the length of the west wall, as well as two shallow basins carved into the floor on opposite ends of the tomb (op. cit.). Excavation in the area of the shaft provided an assemblage of ceramics that allowed dating of the tomb to the Early Classic period (Hall 1986).

There are a total of nine glyphs comprising the murals of Tomb 5, however, only six have been published in the reports (Adams 1984, 1986). The walls were painted in panels framed by red bands. There are four large main glyphs that are distributed centrally on each wall. In the corners are a series of small glyphs accompanied by coefficients. The glyphs were labeled by Adams (1984: Fig. 10) as Glyphs 1 through 9 following a clockwise orientation beginning with the north wall. The unpublished glyphs include the one on the north wall, Glyph 1, and the two small ones in the southeast corner, Glyphs 4 and 5.

**East Wall:**

Glyph 3 is the main motif on the east wall (Fig. 30). The basic component of the glyph is missing due to destruction by looters. However, there is enough still present to be able to identify it as having been a **WITZ** sign. It is like the better-preserved example on the west wall of this tomb and like those of tombs 1 and 2. This interpretation is based on the still visible **NAL** element present on other **WITZ** signs and the two components identifying it, **SAK**- and “shell”, or white shell, seen in tombs 2, 6 and 25. Glyph 2 is
smaller and is represented by the numeral nine and a left footprint on its side. Because it was painted in near the corner it is tempting, but highly speculative, to suggest a link to the directional glyphs present in tombs 2 and 12.

South Wall:

The main section of principal glyph on the south wall is missing and the illustration of what remains is very poor and makes any type of accurate identification difficult (Fig. 31). There are vague indications that the pattern continues and that it was likely a WITZ glyph. It is possible to recognize the ear flare and the -NAL sign as an affix, which are common elements in all other examples of the mountain glyph. Unfortunately, its identifiers or the nominal affixes are completely obscure in the poor drawings available. Although there are no clear indicators, one can speculate and consider the possibility of this glyph being one that is found in other tombs, for example “shiny mountain” given the pattern of use established in tombs 25 and 6. Of course, as we shall see in the comparative examples of other sites, there are other “mountains” that could very well be named in Tomb 5 but we will never know for certain.

West Wall:

There are three glyphs on this wall. Glyph 8, being the principal one, is located in the center and is of greater size. Glyphs 7 and 9 are in the corners and smaller. Glyph 8 is the best preserved of all the paintings in Tomb 5 (Fig. 32). It is clearly an animated WITZ in profile with cauac teeth, an ak’ab symbol on its snout and three tendrils over its eyes. The distinguishing nominal affixes are the sign for blood, CH’ICH or K’IK, and the element for “step” that is tentatively suggested above to be read EHB’?”.

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**CH’ICH-EHB’(?)-WITZ** also appears in tombs 6 and 25 also on their west walls. The steps are shown tinted red that could be symbolically representing the blood from sacrificial victims flowing down the pyramid. In front of the **WITZ** is an undecipherable sign with the coefficient 5 floating above it. Glyph 7 is also obscure but has the numeral 14, like Glyph 9, which also has an unreadable main sign.

**Tomb 7:**

Tomb 7 was found looted beneath Structure A-2 of the A-3 Complex and corresponds to the fifth construction phase, sometime between 470 and 474 CE (see Appendix B) (Adams 1984: 59; Orrego 2000: 71). Orrego (2000) suggested that the construction of tombs 7 and 12, beneath A-4, buried and sealed earlier architecture with their commemorative structures. Oriented lengthwise east-west, the tomb is classified as bedrock-cavity sealed with a roof vault. The floor of the tomb has two basins, like Tomb 5, dug at either end as well as a small wall niche in the northwest corner (Fig. 33). Both floor and walls were plastered, but not the ceiling (Adams 1984: 59-60).

Even though all the walls are framed with red bands, only the east wall has any further decoration. It consists of a single hieroglyphic column with eight glyphs (Fig. 34). My transcription is as follows:

A1: 3 Ik’
A2: Glyph G9
A3: Glyph C
A4: Glyph A, 29 days
A5: Seating of Yax
A6: **OCH-HA’**
A7: **HA’-la-**[“shell”?]-[quatrefoil]
A8: 3 ?
The Calendar Round date 3 Ik’ Seating of Yax likely corresponds to the year 470 CE, falling within the range of dates for the construction phase. In positions A2 through A4 there is a very short version of the Supplementary Series. The first sign in position A6 is the verb OCH, “to enter”, followed by HA’, “water”, translating as “to enter the water” that can be understood as a metaphor for death, or “to die”. The statement of death is commonly found in the inscriptions as OCH-BIH, or “entered the road”. The use of “water” in this particular case is in agreement with the general theme of the tombs at Río Azul of the underworld being a watery place (see also Stuart 2000: 507; Schele and Miller 1986: 267; Hellmuth 1987). I would also suggest that och-ha’ is more ritualistic and therefore used at Río Azul in cosmological contexts, contrary to och-bih that is frequently used in contexts related to political affairs. Another early example of a death statement using this verb is on Tikal Stela 31 (Stuart 2000: 478). The following glyph, in position A7, describes the location. The first element is HA’-la, or ha’al, which translates as “watery”. The next two signs do not have a specific reading and in fact the top sign is badly preserved; however, it is quite likely the glyph for “shell”. The bottom element is the sign for “quatrefoil”, which is a form dating back to the Preclassic symbolizing a cave or opening into the Otherworld (Guernsey 2006; Love and Guernsey n.d.). Given the symbolism of quatrefoils as portals or caves and their frequent depiction with mountains (i.e. Chalcatzingo Monument 1, Tres Islas Stela 1) along with the presence of a sign that is likely “shell”, it seems plausible to entertain the possibility of this being yet another form of representing the cosmological landscape being mentioned in other tombs of Río Azul.
Tomb 2:

Tomb 2 is located beneath the staircase of Structure A-1 (Adams 1984: 55; Hall 1987: Fig. 30; Orrego 2000: 61), the northernmost of five temples on the large Structure A-3 Complex. Tomb 2 belongs to what has been identified as the sixth construction phase for A-3 Complex (op. cit.) (see Appendix B). This tomb also has an east-west long axis and has been classified as bedrock-cavity type covered with a corbelled vault of cut limestone (Fig. 35) (Adams 1984: 55; Adams and Robichaux 1992: 415). The interior of the tomb walls were plastered and smoothed in preparation for the application of paint. Apparently, the destroyed vault was never finished with plaster but left rough (op. cit.). Unlike other tombs, Tomb 2 contains a bench carved out of the east wall.

Unfortunately, there is no complete published record of all the mural paintings in Tomb 2. The description provided here is based largely on original drawings made by Barbara Cannell during the Río Azul Project in the 80’s, a photograph of the east wall, and original field drawings by Ian Graham⁴ (Fig. 36, 37 and 38, respectively). The quality of the drawing reproductions made the analysis challenging, but it is possible to make some important observations regarding the content of the tomb’s decoration. According to the available data, only the north, east and west walls were painted. Each wall is rimmed at the top by a thick red band and a narrow purple line, which was also applied at the corners separating the walls into panels (Adams 1984: 11). Looters heavily damaged certain parts of the murals and apparently two large glyphs had faded when attempts were made to record them (op. cit.).

⁴ Provided by David Stuart.
North Wall:

There are two images painted on the north wall. The first one consists of a large animated WITZ head in profile with its usual eye tendrils and long snout. Above the eye are two important components, the glyph for SAK or white and the glyph for shell, for which there is no consensus on its reading. Floating above this large main glyph is the year-bearer 4 Ik’ (Fig. 36). Also on the north wall, in what seems to be the northeast corner, is another image that appears incomplete. It consists of a head in profile with a sign above it that highly resembles the sign in the northeast corner of Tomb 12 (Fig 36 and 45). Interestingly, just like Tomb 12, it is also preceded by the coefficient six. Below the face floats a right footprint and interpretations of this also remain elusive, but footprints do appear in other tombs at Río Azul accompanied by a coefficient, usually a nine. More significantly is its direct resemblance to the footsteps in the Madrid Codex illustration on pages 76-75, that are placed in the corners of the universe separating the four directions (Fig. 39) (Paxton 2001: 39). Paxton (2001: 39) suggests that each footprint corresponds to a uinal of 20 days and the four corners together comprise a 360-day tun and the five-day uayeb is represented by five dots painted outside the cross in the southeast corner. MacLeod (1989: 119) pointed out that the haab is thought to “walk” based on an expression found in the The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel, validating the proposal that the footprints in the Madrid Codex are in fact calendrical. There is no absolute certainty that the footprints painted in the corners of the tombs at Río Azul have any calendrical meaning. Although, Paxton (2001) did indicate that the organization of the illustration on pages 76-75 of the Madrid Codex had very early origins. Furthermore, it seems highly suggestive that they appear in the corners and that the signs above the footprints in the northeast and southwest corners of Tomb 2 are also painted in the same corners of Tomb 12, which we know contains directional symbolism.
East Wall:

The image on the east wall is very similar to the main representation on the north wall. Again, there is a large animated WITZ head in profile with cauac teeth and three eye tendrils (Fig. 37). The nominal components for this particular mountain are unique among the Río Azul examples. It consists of an inverted vessel decorated with an encircled mat symbol preceded by the coefficient 9. The nine and the inverted vessel appear naming a mountain in the example from Balamku (see below) confirming its nominal character. Above the WITZ is another year-bearer corresponding to 4 Kaban. The year-bearers painted above the mountains were interpreted originally as Calendar Round dates based on the mat symbol on the inverted vessel being identified as the month Pop (Adams 1999: 60). Aside from being an impossible date, there is enough evidence pointing toward their more reasonable identification as year-bearers. Stuart (2004) made a compelling argument to prove that the year-bearer concept went back in time and was not only something of the Postclassic period. However, the year-bearers for the Classic period were not the same as those of the Postclassic and several monuments hold examples of them being Ik’, Manik, Eb, and Kaban (Stuart 2004: 3). Pomona Panel 1 shows two (rest of monument is missing) “Pawahtun” impersonators holding the day signs 4 Ik’ and 4 Kaban (Fig. 40) that Stuart (2004: 4) suggests are the closest Classic correspondence to the Postclassic year-bearers. Ethnographic studies in the Maya Highlands of Guatemala have revealed direct equivalences to Classic Maya year-bearers in their notion of the Solar Calendar, obviously with variations in name due to languages (Tedlock 1982: 92-104). For the highland Maya, each year-bearer (“Mam” in Quiche) is received or greeted on particular sacred mountains that are directly associated with the four directions (op. cit.) (Fig. 41). Thus, I believe that the day signs in Tomb 2 are
actually year-bearers directly associated with mountains, similar in meaning as that given by modern highland Maya.

**West Wall:**

Although less clear than the other two walls due to damage by looters, it is possible to recognize the distinct WITZ sign (Fig. 36). The sign above the mountain in this particular case remains completely unidentifiable based on the available records but functionally it must be serving to name the mountain, following the pattern set by the other examples. The pattern set by other tombs is suggestive that the mountain named on the west wall of Tomb 2 could likely correspond to CH'ICH-EHB’?-WITZ-NAL, especially given the consistency of appearance this mountain has on west walls.

Like other tombs described above, the imagery in Tomb 2 represents specific mountains of the ancient Maya cosmological landscape, whether historical or mythological remains unknown. The presence of year-bearer signs above the mountains and the glyphs in the corners like those of Tomb 12, along with the comparative examples from the modern highland Maya, confirm the notion that there was a directional importance to each mountain. Tomb 2 is a good example of two themes being represented at Río Azul, cosmological landscape and directionality. I will address directional patterns of representation of the mountains on the tomb walls in the final section of this chapter.
TOMB CONCERNED WITH DIRECTIONALITY

Tomb 12:

Tomb 12 is located beneath Structure A-4 and also corresponds to the same time period as Tomb 7 (Orrego 2000: 71). Its long axis is oriented east-west and is also a bedrock-cavity type of tomb (Fig. 42) (Adams and Robichaux 1992: 415). Looters discovered it while they were excavating the trench that led them to Tomb 6. Both tombs, 6 and 12, are along the same east-west line under Structure A-4 in alignment with Sanctuary 2 (see Appendix B and Fig. 25). Tomb 12 is the easternmost and closest to the central axis of Structure A-4. The floor of this tomb is marked with two rectangular-shaped dug out basins, larger than those in other tombs, and at each end of the tomb and between the basins was a cache pit (Hall 1987: 146). Walls and floor, including the interior of the basins, as well as the vault were finely plastered. Unfortunately, the damage caused by looters left only few remains of the wealthy array of artifacts that otherwise would have been present.

This tomb is renowned for having glyphs representing the cardinal directions painted on each corresponding wall. Another valuable feature is the text running along the top of the east wall that contains the verb mu-ka-ja, muhkaj or “he was buried”, instead of the more common metaphorical OCH-BIH, “entered the road”. Following the pattern of other tombs, the walls were smoothed with whitish plaster and thick red bands were painted along the top and bottom of each wall as well as in the corners. The directional glyphs were painted centrally in each panel in sets of two in a single column. Secondary glyphs were painted in each corner of the tomb (Fig. 43).
Directional Glyphs:

The main sign in the top compound of each set on all four walls is identical except for the first sign of the affixes. The variation is associated to each direction, which is named in the bottom glyph of each wall (Fig. 44). Thus, the reading on each wall is as follows:5

East: K’IN-TZIKIN?-AJAW EL-K’IN-la
South: EK’-TZIKIN?-AJAW NOHOL?-la
West: AK’AB-TZIKIN?-AJAW OCH-K’IN-la
North: UH?-TZIKIN?-AJAW NAAH-la

As we can see, each direction appears associated to a specific “lord” or patron represented by stars and metaphors accompanied by the title ajaw. East, where the sun rises, is using the Sun Lord and its opposite, west, where the sun sets uses the symbol for darkness, Dark Lord. Venus Lord is used for the south and Moon Goddess(?) for north. These two points, north and south, have been interpreted to mark the moments between sunrise and sunset, that is, the heavens and the underworld (Ashmore and Sabloff 2002: 203; Tedlock 1992: 19), or as zenith and nadir defined by the sun’s highest and lowest points in its journey (Bricker 1983; Paxton 2001: 24). Stuart (1987: 162-163) suggested the idea of these glyphs being nominal in character after comparing the k’in affix on the east glyph to an example on Stela 16 at Caracol, Belize, where the context supported this reading.

5 The transcription is after D. Stuart. There is no adequate translation for TZIKIN.
Secondary Glyphs:

These are four smaller glyphs that were painted in each corner over the red band (Fig. 45). Although there does not seem to be a concrete interpretation of these glyphs, they contain recognizable phonetic symbols and logograms. It also remains unclear whether they are to be read sequentially or if they are stand-alone signs. In the northeast corner is a compound that is composed by the main sign NAHB, “pool, large body of standing water”, with a NAL, “place”, affix and preceded by the coefficient 6, WAK. This would therefore be read WAK NAHB-NAL or “six water place” (Fig. 45a). Although the exact meaning of this compound remains somewhat elusive I suggest it might be a place name associated directly with midpoints between the Maya cardinal directions as it is placed in such position on the tomb walls. I believe another example of this glyph appears in Tomb 2, different in presentation, but also on the northeast section of the north wall (see Fig. 36). Returning to Tomb 12’s secondary glyphs, in the southeast corner is a glyph with the main sign CHAN, “sky”, and its phonetic complement –na. ?-CHAN-na is probably naming a place in the sky world, or the heavens (Fig. 45b).

The glyph in the southwest corner, opposite the compound in the northeast corner, also has the coefficient six. The main sign has the phonetic complement –wa and the affix NAL, indicating it is also a cosmological place name. So far, the reading for this compound is WAK ?-wa-NAL (Fig. 45c). Finally, on the northwest corner and the last of the secondary glyphs is another undeciphered compound. A proposed reading for this is YAX ?-le-NAL, suggesting a place name involving the color green or “unripe” (Fig. 45d). Significantly, “le” can be either phonetic or a logogram and in this particular case

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6 An association of Tomb 12 secondary glyphs with the Madrid Codex and the partitions of the Universe were addressed several years ago by Freidel et al. (1993: 73).
given its position in the compound it might be a logogram, LE. At Balamku (see below), “le” signs establish the visual connection with water imagery, where they are used to represent the watery environment. These secondary glyphs seem to be nominal in character, possibly of mythological places somehow associated with the four directions or their patron deities. However, because they are placed in the corners, in between each cardinal direction I would suggest they are naming midpoints in the greater scheme of the Universe as understood by the ancient Maya. If the association of “le” to water is correct, I find it interesting that the opposite corners, northeast and southwest, are related to sky and water, the latter being directly connected to the underworld.

Text:

The hieroglyphic text on the east wall is painted over the red band bordering the wall and the ceiling. It begins with a Calendar Round date of 8 Ben 16 Kayab (A and B) and as the typical structure of texts goes, it is followed by the verb (C) and then the subject (D-F) (Fig. 46). Thus, I transcribe the text as 8-BEN?-16-K’AN-a-si-ya mu-ka-ja 6-MUYAL-CHAN-NAL. According to Stuart and Houston (1994: 44-47) this is a varied spelling of wak chan muyal witz, “Six Sky Cloud Mountain”, that appears on Stela 5 from El Zapote and on a tablet from Pomona7 (Fig. 47). Here, at Río Azul, the artist omitted “mountain” because it may have been obvious but clearly establishing that the burial took place in a specific “place” that elsewhere has been identified as “mountain”. The last two glyphs naming the individual and the Río Azul place have no reliable reading. The main sign of the glyph in position E is a snake’s head, or CHAN/KAN, but I do not know how to read the affixes. The verb mu-ka-ja, “to bury” is referring to the

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7 Peter Mathews has labeled it “Tablet of the 96 Glyphs” because of its similarity to the Tablet of the 96 Glyphs at Palenque. I find using the same nomenclature confusing and do not use the name in the main body of this document.
burial of the subject who was certainly a ruler at Río Azul and former occupant of the tomb. The Calendar Round has two possible Long Count dates, 9. 0. 14. 8. 13 and 9. 3. 7. 3. 13. The former corresponds to the year 450 CE and is most likely the date intended given that it falls in proximity to the date in Tomb 1 (Stuart 1987a: 163), but I also think it is the most likely given the architectural chronology of the building.

**TOMB VARIATION**

Based on artifact analysis in associated architectural contexts and radiocarbon dates, the time span for the construction of the tombs ranges from 417 to 600 CE (Adams 1999; Hall 1989; Orrego 2000). Although speculative, Tombs 1, 19 and 23 have been considered the earliest of the set included in this study, based on artifact analysis, stratigraphy and radiocarbon dates (Adams 1999; Hall 1989). C-1 tombs are noticeably different than others, not only morphologically, but also in mural composition. Tombs 1, 19 and 23 were constructed as “shaft-and-chamber” burials, like Tomb 5, in Structure C-7 (Hall 1989: 185). Hall (1989: 179) suggested that Tomb 5 corresponded to Tzakol 1-2 (250 – 450 CE), making it relatively contemporaneous with the tombs in Structure C-1 and establishing a chronologically significant marker based on architectural features. Tombs in Structure A-3 Complex and Tomb 25 in Structure B-56 were all built as bedrock-cavity burials. Chronologically, Tombs 2, 6, 7 and 12 correspond to various construction phases of A-3 Complex spanning 450 to 600 CE (Orrego 2000).

A general similarity in most tombs (1, 2, 5, 6, 12 and 25) is the use of paneling to organize the motifs on each wall, which resembles the formatting reflected on some Codex-style vessels and in the Dresden Codex. The only tombs that differ in this respect are tombs 7, 19 and 23. Despite the similarity in organization of paintings on the walls,
mural representations differ among tombs. More noticeable are those from Structure C-1, which are distinct in composition and meaning. Tomb 1, for instance, is the only tomb with practically all wall surfaces painted and also contains the most variety of representations. Tomb 1 combines text and iconographic imagery. The text is concerned with dates, place names and personal names and is represented in traditional hieroglyphic double column texts and also with large medallion glyphs. The iconography is concerned with water and kingship imagery. Also in Structure C-1, Tomb 19 was painted with unique (among the available sample from Río Azul) paintings representing what to date have been identified as three Jester Gods (Adams 1999; Schele 1974; Taube 1998), highly associated with divine kingship. Tomb 23 is the simplest of the three tombs in Structure C-1. Its walls were left plain and only the boulder protruding from the ceiling was painted with two hieroglyphs, possibly nominal in character.

The tombs in Structure A-3 Complex as well as Tomb 25 in Structure B-56 are all hieroglyphic. Tomb 7 seems to be the earliest of the set and its murals consist of one single-column hieroglyphic text on the east wall with the remaining walls left bare. My analysis has determined that Tombs 2, 5, 6, and 25 all are similar in that they have hieroglyphs distributed on each wall that generally represent the same theme, that is, nominal glyphs for sacred mountains. Three mountains are repeated in several tombs: **CH’ICH-EHB’?-WITZ-NAL** was painted on the west walls of tombs 5, 6 and 25. **SAK-** “shell” **WITZ-NAL** appears on the north walls of tombs 2 and 25, on the south wall of Tomb 6 and on the east wall of tombs 5 and 7. **LEM?-WITZ-NAL**, or “shiny” mountain, was painted on the north wall of Tomb 6 and on the south wall of Tomb 25. In both Tombs, 6 and 25, the east wall is reserved for information that is probably relevant to the individual interred or the location of the tomb itself. Tomb 12 is similar in painting organization to Tombs 2, 5, 6 and 25. It shares a closer relationship with tombs 2 and 5.
in that it also has secondary glyphs in the corners of the tomb. However, Tomb 12 is clearly concerned with directionality and is painted with the four basic cardinal directions on each corresponding wall. A historical text runs along the top of the east wall of Tomb 12 that, nonetheless, mentions a specific place known elsewhere as a mountain.

As I have demonstrated, except for the three tombs in Structure C-1 (1, 19 and 23), the Río Azul tombs are concerned with two closely related themes, sacred mountains and directionality. The glyphs’ overall pattern of distribution is highly suggestive of an intentional directionality to the mountain names, which are seemingly landmarks of the ancient Maya cosmological landscape. We know from modern Quiché cosmology that sacred mountains were closely related to aspects of the calendar and associated to cardinal directions (Tedlock 1982). Río Azul Tomb 2 is a clear example that this ideology extends back in time, at least to the Early Classic period, and links ancient sacred mountains to the calendar by placing year-bearers in direct association with specific mountains.
Chapter 3: Cosmological Landscapes, Iconography of Mountains and Water.

Cosmological Landscapes:

Before understanding what a “cosmological landscape” is, I find it necessary to define the word “landscape”. The term itself allows for multiple interpretations and it is generally a difficult concept to discuss because it is applied in many ways. It can mean the topography and land forms of any given region, a lived-in terrain, land seen from a particular vantage point (Olwig 1993; Ingold 1997), but it can also be an object, an experience, or a representation (Lemaire 1997). When addressing the visual images of landscape, Daniels and Cosgrove (1998: 1) define it as a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings. In essence, it can also be a way of seeing the world by specific people. Every day life on any particular landscape can therefore give way to a relationship with metaphysical, imagined, or idealized conditions. As a way of explaining existence, religious constructs include intangible “places” or “landscapes” where creation takes place and where the dead souls linger in the afterlife. The ancient Maya left evidence of their imagined “other” worlds in paintings, hieroglyphic texts, and also in their built environment, particularly sacred architecture, which is understood to have a special connection with the supernatural realm (Pope 2006: 28). But there is a religious aspect about landscapes that is important when describing a landscape as “cosmological”. Landscapes become sacred in many different ways. Hierophanies will consecrate a space or place, but man can also construct sacred spaces by performing rituals (Eliade 1985: 108). Mountains are possibly the most prominent and awe inspiring features of the natural environment. Since ancient times, mountains
have held symbolic meaning as markers of the lived-in landscape and emulated in the built-environments of ancient societies such as the Maya. According to Eliade (cited in Pope 2006) the “most prevalent archetype for the built environment is that of the Sacred Mountain, which was a mythic location that stood at the center of the world and functioned as the axis mundi connecting the heavens, the earth and the underworld”. For Eliade (1985) built pyramids are symbols of the center of the world and serve as intersecting points between Heaven, Earth and the Underworld, between Life and Death. Pyramids, as replicas of sacred mountains are also sacred spaces because they are loci for communicating with the otherworld. From the “center”, an intersecting point, the “Universe unfolds and extends toward the four cardinal points” (Eliade 1985: 112). Ethnographic studies have revealed that communities venerated several sacred mountains that are directly associated with directionality (Vogt 1969; Tedlock 1982). In cosmological thought the world of the living is doubled or replicated in the cosmic level (Eliade 1959: 9) and in the case of the Mesoamerican societies that “other world” was where the gods lived, where mortal kings became venerated ancestors. As a place for habitation, that world was imagined based on real world features and given the sacredness of mountains for the living, they were replicated as the main features of the “Cosmological Landscape”.

Given the symbolism of mountains and water in the Río Azul tomb paintings, I find it important to briefly describe indigenous beliefs using ethnographic studies from the Maya area to stress the significance of features of the natural landscape in their religious thought.
Throughout the history of Mesoamerican religion, up to the present day, certain mountains have been considered sacred entities. In fact, mountains continue to be ritual shrines for many modern communities to this day. To illustrate one compelling example among the modern Maya, ethnographic studies in the Kekchi region are helpful in understanding the powerful meaning of landscape features in indigenous thought (Brady and Prufer 2005: 367). For the Kekchi, the Earth God is the most important deity, *tzuultaqa’*, or “hill-valley”, which is also used to refer to geographical landmarks like hills and valleys that receive names and become animated personalities of the landscape (op. cit.). Because mountains frequently have caves, their association in religious thought is almost inseparable. Caves are the entryways to the heart of the mountain and thus take one symbolically to the heart of the earth (op. cit.). For the Kekchi, the earth is female and mountains are male, and therefore concerned with fertility, that is, birth and rebirth. Caves are symbols of fertility, places of creation, portals to the Underworld and the dark world of the dead (Brady and Prufer 2005; Miller and Taube 1993: 56). I believe that some ancient Maya burial practices are closely related to this ideology. Archaeologists frequently find burials that have been carved into bedrock in order to place the deceased in proximity with the heart of the earth. Burials in the North Acropolis at Tikal, which might be considered the “heart” of the city, are another example (Coe 1990). It is not sufficient to be buried in the ground but there is more symbolic meaning to burials cut into the core of the earth, bedrock, particularly when the deceased is someone with divine authority.

Given this long-lasting symbolic meaning of mountains as features of the natural and ritual landscape, communities throughout time frequently settled in locations marked by mountains, caves, springs or other natural landmarks. It is particularly noticeable in
early communities like Chalcatzingo in Morelos, Mexico that lies in the shadow of a mountain (Grove 1984). It has also been suggested that pyramids were built as symbolic representations of mountains (Miller and Taube 1993: 120; Reilly 1999: 18; Townsend 1991). Complex C at La Venta has been thought to be an imitation of real volcanic cones in the region (Reilly 1999) and the twin pyramids at Tenochtitlan mirror two prominent volcanoes to the east, Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl (Miller and Taube 1993: 120). As Cosgrove (1998: 15) suggested, landscape as an ideological concept is a specific way of experiencing the world developed by, and meaningful to, certain social groups. Besides trying to replicate the natural landscape, we find other more specific ways of representing it and incorporating it into cultural practices. Specifically in the Maya area exist vast examples of iconographic representations of mountains as building decoration, carved on monuments, painted on pottery or as part of murals. The iconographic ‘mountain’ is represented as a large animated witz hieroglyph (Fig. 48). Witz is the Mayan word for mountain and its hieroglyph is easily recognizable in the inscriptions (Fig. 49). Stuart (1987b) identified various forms of witz, and pointed out that what is commonly referred to as the cauac glyph is in fact a logographic form for “mountain”. Witz is often used as an important part of emblem glyphs (Fig. 50a), highlighting the association of mountains with places, but it is also frequently found represented as a large animated hieroglyph at the base of carved stelae or on the surface of other monuments and iconographic displays such as mural paintings and decorated pottery (See Fig. 60 and 61).

Iconographic mountains generally have a monstrous appearance and tend to be large in size. Characteristics of the iconographic witz include large eyes that commonly have three tendrils descending from the eyelids, large snouts and teeth often depicted as small cauac symbols. Variations exist in the symbols used to decorate the snouts and overall appearance. Generally, in frontal views the forehead resembles the witz
logograph with its decorative elements and will have a cleft in the center. AK’AB signs are frequently included in parts of the forehead or on the snout. Profile views of the animated witz depict it with large overhanging snouts decorated with various elements. They have a dreary appearance and in fact resemble large animistic mountains, sometimes decorated with foliage symbolism and other times bare and craggy looking (Fig. 50b). Because of its animated character it often wears large ear flares with the quincunx decoration on the main flare and trilobe and bead jewels attached to it like the ear flares worn by other deities such as K’inich Ajaw, for example. Although many different examples exist, the animated witz is distinctly recognizable by the main features mentioned above. Many times the mountains will be named by hieroglyphs placed inside the cleft, as at Balamku (see Fig. 56).

The hieroglyphic form of writing witz, or ‘mountain’, can be phonetic, logo syllabic or logographic. The phonetic writing will include the syllables wi-tz(i) while the logo syllabic will combine the syllable wi as a phonetic complement for the logogram WITZ, which can also stand alone as a logogram (see Fig. 49) (Coe and Van Stone 2005: 127; Stuart 1987b: 342).

WATER

Water was just as important as mountains and in fact highly related to each other because mountains are one of many sources for water. Among other features of the natural environment, Mesoamerican people worshipped mountains, springs, rivers and large bodies of water (Miller and Taube 1993: 184). For the ancient Maya, control over water systems was a political manipulation to gain power through the promotion of rituals related to water and employed as a physical and symbolic tool for organizing and maintaining social order (Scarborough 1998). Aside from mere need of water for
survival, Mesoamerican population’s dependence on agriculture made water a main concern and for many communities settlement location was influenced by water availability. Although accessibility did not prevent large cities from developing in regions that suffered from seasonal rainfall and lack of flowing water, however, systems were created that permitted these groups to retain water in manmade and natural reservoirs. Ethnographic studies in highland Chiapas, Mexico, have revealed that settlement and social relationships in Zinacantan are significantly influenced by the location of water holes (Vogt 1968 and 1969: 157). In the central lowlands sites like Dos Pilas and Palenque were laid out with special attention paid to natural springs. As Scarborough (1998: 138) summarized, “controlling water access and the manner by which land was developed to accommodate the use of water typifies aspects of Maya political economy through time.”

Besides the socio-political importance, water also holds substantial religious significance and, in the Maya pantheon, the rain God, Chahk, is one of the most important and longest continuously worshipped gods. Hellmuth (1987) describes several deities and beings that inhabit the watery underworld, including the frequently depicted “Waterlily Monster.” But water was not only a thing for the living or of the living world; it was also an important element of the netherworld. There is a vast array of examples depicting the “underwaterwold” cosmogram on vessels or painted on walls. Hellmuth (1987: 101) has identified in Early Classic funerary art an assemblage of decorations that are consistent and conspicuous for the surface of such a mysterious world that he describes as “an undulating band decorated with encircled curls and double yokes” (see Fig. 13). This assemblage of elements is frequently associated with fish, water lilies, cormorants, crocodiles (water reptiles), frogs, and herons, re-enforcing the watery environment being depicted. But aside from the zoomorphic creatures that inhabit
watery worlds, Hellmuth (1987) also identified a series of humanoid figures and deities. It seems that the iconography used to depict the underwaterworld itself is fairly consistent and easily recognizable, but the characters portrayed in it can vary widely. No matter what the composition of the elements comprising the watery surface are, they usually are decorated with watery dots or aquatic flora imagery that can be realistic or representational.
Chapter 4: Rio Azul Tomb Mural Theme and Comparative Examples

Rio Azul Tomb Theme

After reviewing the iconography of mountains and water it becomes clear that the overall theme of the mural paintings in the tombs of Río Azul is referencing such features of the cosmological landscape. They are naming particular mountains that are most likely not specific real places, but, as we shall soon see, elements of a supernatural landscape associated with the world directions. The current available record from Río Azul exhibits a set of specific mountains that are mentioned in several tombs, and others that are just mentioned once, however, it is quite probable that other examples exist that were never found in the archaeological record, or that are not recognizable among those very eroded paintings in some of the known tombs. So far, the most frequent mountain named is “white shell(?) mountain”, that appears in tombs 25, 6, 5, 7 and 2 at Rio Azul. Except for Tomb 6, which has this mountain named on its south wall, SAK-“shell”-WITZ-NAL was painted on the north walls of tombs 2, 5 and 25. The next most common mountain, CH’ICH-EHB? WITZ-NAL, or “blood-step(?) mountain” also has a consistent directionally specific placement, on the west walls of tombs 5, 6 and 25. The combination of these elements is very interesting and, although highly speculative, it reminds one of the notion of blood being poured over the stairways of pyramids as sacrificial offerings. Another mountain that appears more than once is LEM?-WITZ-NAL, perhaps translated as “shiny mountain”, and it is painted on the north wall of Tomb 6 and south wall of Tomb 25. One other clearly identifiable mountain is the one mentioned on the east wall of Tomb 2 that is being named by the inverted vessel symbol combined with a symbol for pop, “mat”. Although there is only one clear example of this
mountain at Río Azul, it is not a random occurrence, as we shall see with another example from the site of Balamku, Campeche.

Tombs 5, 6 and 25 are the most straightforward nominal glyphs for mountains from the Río Azul examples. However, it is safe to assume that the murals in Tomb 2 are functioning the same way with stylistic variation and possibly a deeper meaning than just nominal given the presence of year-bearers. The difference lies in the form of representation, instead of using strictly glyphic elements, *witz* is shown in an animated iconographic form. The day signs painted above the mountains are directionally significant year bearers. Directionality was also important in the placement of specific mountains on the walls of the tombs. As Tomb 12 indicates, directionality was of prominent relevance to the people of Río Azul, particularly in association with the dead and the cosmological landscape of the netherworld. Spatial orientation for the Maya is different than the modern directions established by the reading of a compass and cardinal terms are used to represent more than just directions, they also stand for cardinal places determined by features of the natural environment, be they terrestrial or celestial (Hanks 1990: 299). For the Maya there was also a fifth direction, the center, which is “constituted by the corporeal field currently occupied by the actor” (Hanks 1990: 302). This idea of directionality allows us to entertain the possibility that the tombs of Río Azul are representing an imagined world defined by specific landmarks, or landmark places, where the dead were reborn and the body itself is considered the center from which the referential features are projected.

Tomb 1 contains additional information that supports the idea of the overall theme of the tombs being that of a cosmological landscape. Contrary to the other tombs that are naming several mountains, Tomb 1’s imagery and text are specifically representing a particular location and describing the nature of that netherworld where the deceased souls
are transported after death. The presence of water in the levels below the earth is not an uncommon occurrence in Maya funerary art and cosmology. Hellmuth (1987) compiled a large corpus of Early Classic funerary art, mostly from pottery, that illustrates the “underwaterworld” and its principal occupants (e.g. Tikal Burial 160 stuccoed vessel, Fig. 59). A scheme of the place of the earth within the symbolic representation of the Maya universe also allows us to see that the level below the earth is water (Fig. 51) (Hanks 1990: 305). Thus, Tomb 1 at Rio Azul clearly depicts a specific place, identified with a toponym in the northeast corner, which is located in a watery realm. The hieroglyphic text on the east wall of Tomb 1 also is suggestive of the idea of rebirths occurring in the afterlife realms.

**COMPARATIVE EXAMPLES**

In the Maya area we find examples of structures or pyramids decorated with mountain iconography, for example Structure 10L-22 at Copan has animated witz glyphs stacked on the corners (Fig. 52) (Fash 2005: 117) and we find a similar architectural treatment at the site of Hormiguero in the Rio Bec region in Campeche, Mexico (Andrews 2000). Obviously, these are not the only examples of mountain iconography incorporated into architectural plans; however, they are good examples that illustrate how pyramids can serve as symbolic metaphors of ritual landscape. Mountains can also be found as elements of complex building façade decoration, like the example from Balamku described below.

Beyond the architectural association between the natural and the built environment, mountain symbolism appears frequently in iconographic displays and hieroglyphic texts. Classic Maya rulers are often depicted on carved stelae standing on top of animated mountains, which may be historical or mythical (see also Stuart and
Houston 1994). In the case of the latter they may be used to reassert the divine powers of rulership. Mountains are also found painted or carved on pottery and stone altars. There are a handful of important comparative examples that help understand the symbolism on the Rio Azul tomb murals, which I describe below. They are evidence of a widespread notion among the ancient Maya of a cosmological landscape where cosmic rebirth took place and was characterized by sacred mountains in a watery place. Many of these examples contain references of mountains named at Rio Azul and provide a more vivid visual representation. I believe they are essential in understanding the symbolism painted on the tomb walls at Rio Azul.8

**Berlin Vessel:**

In my view, the Berlin Vessel is an extraordinary comparative example of cosmic rebirth in a cosmological landscape. This Early Classic tripod vessel of unknown provenience is of the type Lucha Incised and is currently housed at the Museum für Volkerkunde in Berlin, Germany (Reents-Budet et al. 2004; Grube and Gaida 2006). The vessel is decorated with a scene divided into two parts. One of them is a burial event overseen by six mourners (Fig. 53). Here, the deceased is bundled and lies on top of a stone bier in front of an animated three-sided mountain. Above the cleft of the mountaintop is the image of the radiant sun flanked by a monkey to the left and a jaguar to the right of the viewer. Inside the sun disc, which is outlined by serrated celt signs and flower symbols is a profile view of the animated seed with a sprouting seed forehead, just like the example on the Tonina monument that we shall explain below, which can be interpreted as a sign of life and fertility. In the mountain cleft is a cartouche with a

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8 All comparative examples in this section are my descriptions based on published photographs and illustrations.
winged element that is probably naming the mountain. The entire scene and location is set on a watery surface. The second scene, on the opposite side of the vessel also takes place on a watery surface and consists of the deceased being reincarnated as a cacao tree, flanked by his parents who are also represented as ancestors reincarnated as trees (Fig. 54) (Fields and Reents-Budet 2005: 239). The deceased wears his name as part of his headdress, which also appears on one of the vessel’s feet. He is referred to as a Lord of Itza’ (Boot 2005: 37). This concept of the rebirth of ancestors as trees is also seen on the sides of K’inich Janab Pakal’s sarcophagus at Palenque (see Fig. 2). On the vessel, the trees are sprouting out of the basal platform of a pyramid that is represented in front of an animated mountain. Inside the basal platform is the skeleton of the deceased. The mountain is distinguished by the forehead elements visible behind the trees and the snouts descending to the ground on the sides of the pyramid decorated with AK’AB symbols. The juxtaposition of the pyramid and the mountain in a scene of death and rebirth is important and consistent with the notion of pyramids as replicas of mountains and burial locations, entities associated with death, life, fertility and rebirth. More importantly, it is a good example of mountains as landmarks of the cosmological landscape of the netherworld where divine kings are reborn. Because this example pictorially illustrates an act of reincarnation taking place in a watery location associated with a mountain, it helps visualize the symbolic meaning of the Rio Azul tombs, particularly Tomb 1.

**Balamku:**

A very important example to compare with Rio Azul comes from the site of Balamku in Campeche, Mexico. This recently discovered site, located some 60 km west of Xpuhil and Calakmul, and about 150 km south of Edzna, has an important pyramidal
structure decorated with a beautiful stucco façade. The building is known as “La Casa de los Cuatro Reyes” (The House of the Four Kings) and was researched by the Biosfera Calakmul Project in the mid 1990s (Baudez 1996). The façade exhibits four alternating scenes depicting animated avec heads with the distinctive attributes such as eye tendrils, large over-hanging snout, cauac teeth, and forehead with a cleft (Fig. 55). The avec heads are at the same level as a band of watermarks. In this particular case, the water band is represented differently than examples described by Hellmuth (1987) and consists of le signs separated by squiggly lines forming interlocking triangles (Baudez 1996: 38). The mountain clefts are very large and in them sit large amphibian creatures, seemingly two frogs on the left and two crocodiles on the right. This is supported by the decoration on the edge of the cornice depicting frog skin markings on the left and crocodile scales on the right (Baudez 1996: 37; Carrasco 2005: 202). Immediately above the snout and directly in the center of the forehead where the cleft begins are distinctive hieroglyphs. From left to right are the blood sign, SAK—“shell”, a sign formed by the head of a peccary over a half-moon, and finally an inverted vessel with the numeral nine (Fig. 56). This latter one differs slightly in composition from the other three. The hieroglyph is in fact replacing the snout instead of being on the forehead of the avec. Regardless, it is functionally the same. On top of the open mouths of the amphibians sit kings in a cross-legged position on top of jaguar pelt cushions with their hands at their chest in the typical Early Classic crab-claw gesture. The two almost complete examples, those at the center, depict the king wearing a very elaborate headdress featuring the Sun God. It was common among ancient Maya rulers to include their names or personal identifiers in headdresses when being pictorially represented (Houston 2004) and therefore I suggest there might be nominal characteristics in the Balamku headdresses that identify the kings. In fact, the Berlin Vessel shows the deceased king being reincarnated as a tree and he
wears his name as part of a simple headband (see Fig. 54), supporting the suggestion that at Balamku it might be the same.

The scene is clearly taking place on the surface of a watery realm. The water lily motifs also mark the space of the mountains as one of water. Alternating with the four *witz* are three jaguars. The body and claws are clearly feline, however, their faces have reptilian features (Baudez 1996: 38) with skeletal lower jaws. The two felines on the opposite ends of the façade appear in a kneeling position with their limbs tied, while the one in the center is seated and free. It has long been known that jaguars are denizens of the underworld and in many occasions are associated with the Sun God in its nocturnal voyage. At Balamku, the jaguar entities are confirming the environment being depicted: that of the afterlife and watery realm visited by the dead. I believe this scene is representing the rebirth of royal ancestors from the mountains of the cosmological netherworld landscape. The fact that the kings are emerging from the open mouths of the amphibians is supportive of the idea of rebirth\(^9\), just like the Maize God is reborn from the carapace of the turtle (Freidel et al. 1993). Three mountains from Balamku also appear in Tombs 25, 6, 5, and 2 at Río Azul tombs, “blood mountain”, “white shell mountain” and the inverted vessel mountain, confirming the existence of a widespread ritual landscape in the mythological netherworld of the ancient Maya. While the fourth mountain, named with the hieroglyph of a peccary head and a half-moon, does not appear on any of the walls of the Río Azul tombs, a similar combination of elements appears on a carved wooden vessel that is assumed to have come from Tomb 1 (Fig. 57) (Adams 1999: 84). The bowl depicts a profile view of **WITZ** conflated with **AHYIIN**. The alligator is represented by specific markings on the snout and the scroll identifying the

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\(^9\) Izapa Stela 6 depicts a Preclassic image of a frog in similar position as those at Balamku and it burping an object from its open mouth. While not an ancestor, it is a good example of the meaning of amphibians in ritual contexts.
nostril. Above the forehead, where the cleft would normally be viewed from a frontal orientation, is a peccary head in profile wearing a K'IN sign on its forehead. Peccaries are often found in Maya iconography associated with cosmological scenes (Taube and Miller 1993: 132). The nominal character of the hieroglyph at Balamku in association with a mountain and its appearance in a similar context at Rio Azul are suggestive of the overall theme representing the cosmological landscape. Furthermore, I find it significant that there are four mountains being represented at Balamku that might be directly tied into the four-part scheme of directionality. Contrary to the more complete scheme represented at Balamku, Rio Azul commonly refers to three in each tomb context (Tombs 2, 5, 6 and 25). I do not think it was strictly necessary to always represent four to imply the importance of directionality and its relationship to the cosmological landscape, especially because at Rio Azul the structure of the representation on tomb walls set the stage, so to speak, and we know from other examples described here that these mountains often appeared alone (“Bunny Rabbit Pot” and Rio Azul Tomb 1).

Tonina:

The beautiful carved altar, numbered Monument 160, from Tonina depicts a royal ancestor being reborn from a cosmological mountain (Fig. 58) (Graham 2006: Fig. 9:97). This monument is an important comparative example because the mountain emphasizes the argument about rebirth in watery realms marked with mountains, but also because the mountain on Monument 160 is labeled as one familiar to us from Rio Azul indicating that this aspect of Maya cosmology was widespread. The scene is complex and partially eroded; however the central and main section is preserved. The monument is circular with the central motif in the center and paired glyphs enclosing it. At the bottom of the main scene and toward the edge of the monument is a frontal view of a three-sided
mountain. This particular mountain face differs slightly from other examples discussed. Here, it appears to have a combination of crocodilian features with those of the more standard WITZ, and can be compared to the example carved on the wooden vessel from Rio Azul (see Fig. 57). But regardless of what the actual facial features may be, the headdress or forehead are without doubt the witz, characterizing it as a mountain. Another difference related to this mountain is that instead of maize foliage emerging from the top there are aquatic plants like others known from watery realm depictions, which would also support the amphibian nature of this mountain representation and emphasize the nature of the environment being depicted. Among the stylistic elements of the head are various “celt” markings like the nominal affixes of the “shiny mountain” of Río Azul. From the cleft emerges a seed that also resembles the outline of a turtle carapace, a common interplay in Maya iconography, inside which is an animated profile view of a seed whose forehead is represented by a clefted seed. Above the cleft is what appears to be a cushion on which sits a royal ancestor cross-legged and with his arms folded and hands at his chest in reverential position. This resembles the scenes on the Balamku structure façade but here the individual is facing to the left of the viewer. Directly in front of the individual’s face is a reptilian creature with open maw from which emerges a head-banded face with aging features. Head-banded individuals are also known from underwaterworld scenes depicted on the carved vessel from Tikal Burial 160 (Hellmuth 1987: Fig. 99), that consists of the “animated seed” in a watery surface alternating with headbanded characters that are directly associated to witz glyphs placed above their heads (Fig. 59). It is significant to point out that although quite eroded there are in fact three mountains. Two smaller mountains flank the central one and are marked with clefts of their own. On top of each is a seated figure in similar posture to the individuals from Balamku. The conservation of the monument prevents proper
identification of these individuals, but it is probable that they are ancestors of the main character performing in the center. The individual to the left of the viewer is almost completely eroded but the one on the right at least shows that he and the central figure are wearing similar headdresses.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to see the entire scene but it is safe to place Tonina Monument 160 in comparison to examples described for Río Azul and Balamku as pictorial representations of the cosmic rebirth of royal ancestors from mountains in the watery environment of the netherworld. For the Tonina monument the watery location is being depicted through the aquatic plants and amphibian nature of the mountain itself.

The Bunny Rabbit Pot or K1398

On this famous cylindrical vessel is painted a scene that includes God L and Kawiil interacting (Fig. 60). This is a good example of the variety of contexts and frequency of representation of, in this case, one particular mountain. In one scene, the rabbit standing on top of a mountain is stealing the broad headdress of God L, who is standing in front. On the other side of the vessel and a separate scene, God L, who is now deprived of his regalia, is kneeling in front of Kawiil who is seated on a jaguar cushion on top of a profile animated WITZ, just like the one the rabbit was standing on. The snout of the witz, in this particular case, is represented with a deer’s head. However, what is important to notice is that the eye of the mountain is being replaced with the sign for shell, the same sign that is used at Rio Azul (Fig. 61). To further support this is the text floating directly in front of Kawiil and directly linked to the deity by a speech scroll. The text comprises four glyphs in single column and begins with a variant of SAK as affix to a shell sign followed by a known bird-head variant of WITZ. Here, the witz is written using the vulture head variant. The third glyph down is the compound xa-MAN-
n(a), xaman, or north\(^{10}\) (Fig. 61). This is crucial not only because the color “white” is associated with north in Maya cosmology, but because at Río Azul the “white shell mountain” is frequently associated with north, but the scene also confirms the association of the “white shell mountain” to the underworld environment and cosmological landscape. I find it extremely significant that the familiar “white shell mountain” is the landmark of a completely different scene than what I have described so far. However, I think it is suggestive that there were particular landmarks of the cosmological landscape that were permanent features so sacred that they were frequent venues for different mythological narratives and events.

**Tikal Burial 160 Vessel**

A beautiful vessel decorated with stucco provides further evidence regarding the identification of mountains in the watery underworld. I include this vessel because although it does not depict mountains like the previous examples, it is related to that concept and to the watery realm of the underworld. The painted scene takes place in a space marked by a distinct water band and the “Water Lily Monster” (Hellmuth 1987). Alternating with the seeds are representations of head-banded figures with jaguar characteristics (Fig. 59). Three of them have distinct hieroglyphs above their heads that name them as lords of specific mountains. In position D (following Hellmuth’s nomenclature) is \textbf{LEM?-WITZ-AJAW}, “Lord of “shiny” Mountain”; in position E is \textbf{? WITZ-AJAW}, in this case I cannot offer an identification of the name; and, in position I is \textbf{9-TE’-WITZ-AJAW}, “nine-mountain-lord”. Unfortunately, there is no reading for the nominal element in position E. Nine is an important number associated to the

\(^{10}\) Identification of some of these glyphs with particular variants, like the bird head witz, was with assistance by D. Stuart.
underworld and it also appears at Balamku in association with the inverted vessel mountain and in Tomb 5 at Río Azul it appears with a footprint on the east wall. We are already familiar with “shiny mountain”. What is significant about the Tikal Burial 160 vessel is the suggestion that each mountain in the netherworld had an affiliated lord or patron and also reconfirms the essence of the environment.

The examples described above illustrate the importance of the Río Azul tomb murals and their cosmological symbolism. The Balamku façade, Tonina Monument 160 and the Berlin Vessel are vivid representations of ancestral rebirth, while at Río Azul the tomb murals serve as symbolic identifiers of the environment where reincarnation takes place.
Chapter 5: Conclusions

Following my reanalysis of the Río Azul murals I can now suggest with more certainty that the theme is concerned with labeling particular mountains of a cosmological landscape closely associated with the Maya conception of directionality. Given the long-lasting sacred and ritual significance of mountains as major sacred spaces of the natural environment they were primordial landmarks within that imagined landscape set in religious thought. At Río Azul the tomb is the stage, it is that otherworld and it is being symbolically marked as such using text and image. There is a tight relationship between the locations of the tombs within sacred architecture, which we know are associated with mountains, as the intersecting point between the cosmic levels. The tombs are placed below surface level as a metaphor for the “underworld” and the walls tag specific mountains surrounding the cosmic space inhabited by the deceased. The comparative examples that I described above provide a deeper significance to that cosmological landscape and strengthen the interpretations for the Río Azul murals. First of all, the connection with Río Azul is clearly established by the identification of mountains having the same name. Secondly, those examples highlight a specific event that occurs in that sacred space and that is the rebirth of rulers as divine ancestors. Their rebirth into a spiritual life is sacred by the mere fact that it is inaccessible to the living but also because, as Eliade (1961) explained, rebirth is a symbolic repetition of the creation which implies a reactualization of the primordial event –creation of all things. I point this out because I believe that cosmogony was a primary concern for the people of Río Azul, and the Maya in general, as illustrated with the examples above. Although this concept is weighed with religious constructs, I would like to point out that the examples
from Balamku and Tonina played a political role also, serving to legitimize rulership and sanction power and authority through divine ancestral veneration by representing the resurrection of dead kings from the mountains of the cosmological landscape (see McAnany 1995).

Seemingly, there was a hierarchical importance placed on certain mountains as primordial landmarks in the cosmological landscape. Rio Azul’s Tomb 12 highlights the importance of directionality in the netherworld and although we do not know with certainty how the directions are associated to the mountains, repetitive placement of particular mountains on specific walls in the tombs may possibly hold some hints. For example, except for Río Azul Tombs 5 and 6 where “white shell mountain” was painted on the east and south walls, respectively, all other cases including the K1398 vessel associate it with the north. I do not find this coincidental given that the ancient Maya associated specific colors with cardinal directions and “white” was for north (Coe and Van Stone 2001). Another pattern might be elucidated from “blood step? mountain”, which is painted always on the west walls in the tombs. Unfortunately, there are not enough examples to determine a pattern for the rest of the mountains or to confirm the frequent placement of these two mountains. The scene at Balamku is presented in a two-dimensional plan that makes associating the mountains with any particular direction difficult. However, Balamku displays the four-part scheme of the universe and if one were to wrap the façade around the building each mountain would correspond to a particular direction, although that is only symbolically implied.

The lack of pictorial specificity at Río Azul that exists in other examples of resurrection or rebirth of ancestors may provoke some to question my argument that the tomb murals are in fact referencing the location where the royal deceased are transported
to be reborn as venerated ancestors. The early example of Tomb 1 is insightful in that respect. As I explained earlier, the scene painted in Tomb 1 does not name any of the mountains mentioned in other tombs; rather, it depicts more vividly the environment and highlights what seems to be a very particular location. This is further supported by the use of a toponym in the northeast corner of the tomb. More specifically, the hieroglyphic text on the east wall mentions the birth of an individual whom we assume is the former occupant of the tomb; however, the lack of a title linking the name to a polity suggests that the birth is taking place in that landscape and in essence is a “rebirth”. The scene in the panel to the right of the glyphic text, the “solar alligator”, may be a name of a particular denizen of that sacred space.

Although, there are obvious stylistic variations among the available examples it is also apparent that the ancient Maya envisioned a landscape where the dead were rejuvenated and resurrected. Seeds, a source of life, are more often than not represented as floating secondary elements in scenes such as at Balamku and on the Tonina monument. Or, they take a more participatory role and act as the main source of life such as on the Berlin vessel that depicts the sun rising or emerging from the clefted seed. The important link here is with the vessel from Tikal Burial 160 where the head-banded figures are associated to particular mountains, one of which appears at Río Azul, in a watery realm full of plants and life.

For at least two centuries, the time during which sophisticated burials were constructed at Río Azul, the embedded ideology about the afterlife was centered on an imagined world where dead kings would become alive again. We know from various examples, including Río Azul, that dynastic continuity was a foremost concern to Maya elites and this was ensured through ancestor veneration. In public scenes such as the stucco façade at Balamku or the altar from Tonina, the population was consistently
reminded of the divine powers of the ruling elite. However, as I have argued, at Río Azul the murals are in a way functioning as descriptive symbolic elements of the netherworld where the notion of rebirth or resurrection takes place but it is not publicly displayed.
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(drawning by author, not at scale, based on photographs by G. Mobley courtesy of D. Stuart)
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Vita

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