

The Birth-Sacrifice Monument

An examination of the iconography and setting of a previously undocumented large carved boulder near the pre-Classic site of Izapa in southern Chiapas

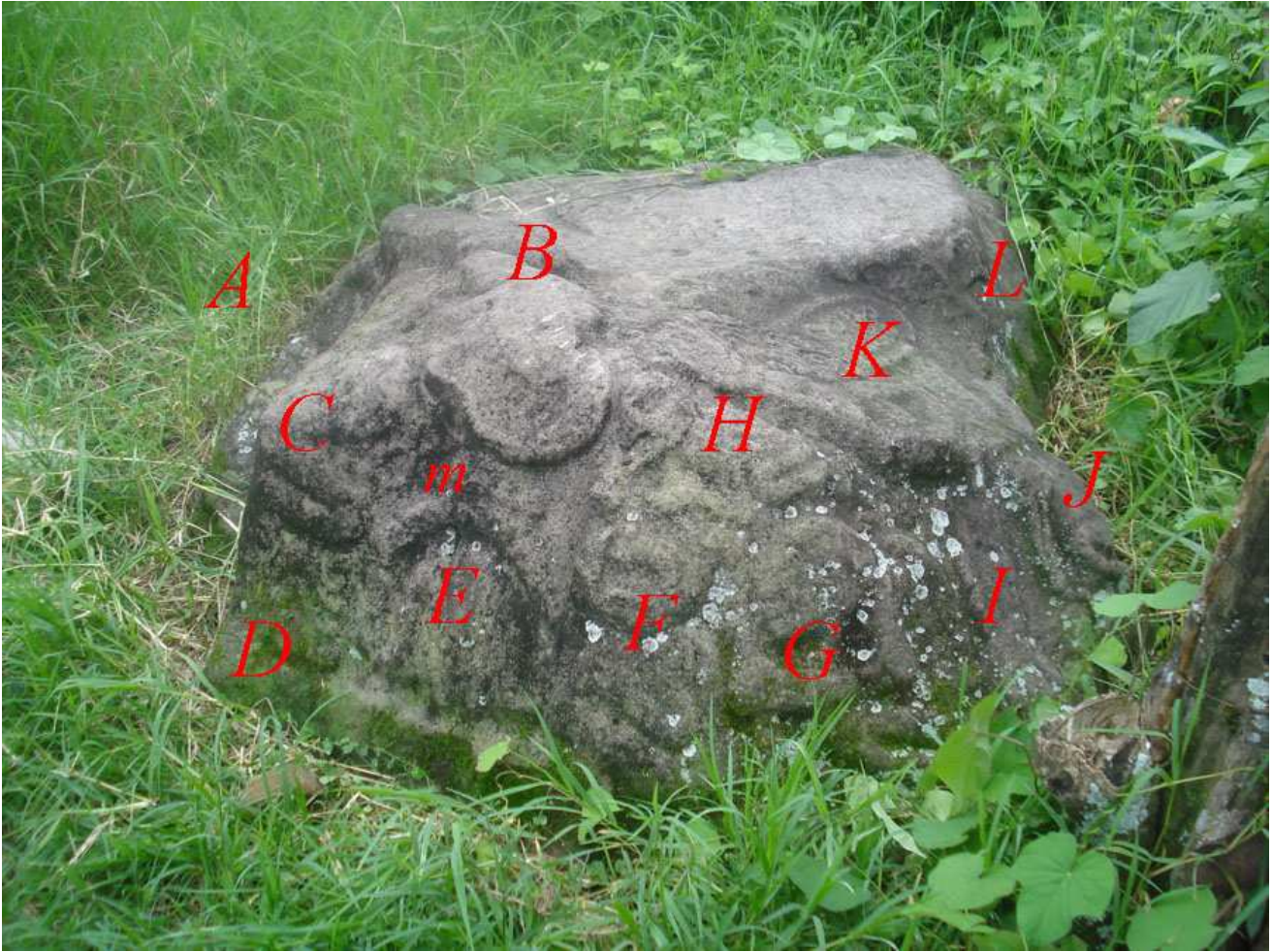
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Abstract. Three previously undocumented carved monuments from southern Chiapas are presented here. The Birth-Sacrifice Boulder is the largest and most elaborated of the three. The symbolic themes are striking and are related to Creation Myth imagery and birth and sacrifice themes also found in the Izapan ball court. The second carving is a crouching headless alligator, found nearby. The third carving is on private property two miles from Izapa and is reminiscent of the Olmec “Pot Belly” figures, but this one has a shallow depression on top which collects water.

In August of 2007, during one of my trips to Izapa, I was told of several carved boulders in the mountains north of Izapa. Although I had to depart the region that day, the boulder was later located by my friend and Tapachula resident Rodolfo Juan Huerta and a few photos were taken. These photos proved intriguing, showing a deer and an alligator and several images that were hard to make out in the eroded stone. Technically, the boulder is not a “new” discovery, as it has been known to locals for some time and in fact it is in a field near residences in the finca 11 de Abril. The site of the boulder is within 100 yards of the main road which goes into the high country, up the flanks of Tacana volcano. Nevertheless, I could find no mention of it in the literature, so I planned to document it on a future trip. Although I returned to Izapa briefly again in May and August of 2008, those trips were consumed with other goals in very short time-frames, and I had no chance to visit the boulder until June of 2009. I had finally convinced a film documentary venue to go with me to Izapa, and the topic of the boulder came up. It was yet another documentary on 2012. I vetted them carefully and they were interested in the idea of filming this archaeological scoop. And so the plan was made, and the film became NBC’s “2012: Startling New Secrets,” which aired beginning November 8, 2009.

It was important to examine the boulder carefully in person. After carefully cleaning it off, I was able to get a handle on the overall content of the imagery, including some small details which would be hard to capture in photographs. After three hours of sketching and scrutinizing, we left and I was confident that almost every feature of the iconography could be identified. I had little idea what to expect, but based on the photo of the caiman — which partially resembles the one on Izapa Stela 25 — I suspected that a link to the ideologies expressed at Izapa was possible.

The following photograph serves as an introduction to the overall orientation and carved faces of the monument. The boulder is roughly 6 feet across and 3 ½ feet high. It is roughly circular, with a flat face on top and several roughly flat surfaces around the circumference. The carvings occupy these flat surfaces as well as small niches. Corners of the stone were incorporated in one figure (the frog), but mostly the figures were placed in flat areas.



*Figure 1. The Birth-Sacrifice monument. Finca 11 de Abril, north of Izapa.
Photo and diagramming by the author, June 2009.*

- A. This is a group of four images (a caiman, a deer, and two circular images) that is on the left face of the boulder and cannot be seen in the photo. It will be pictured and described in Figures 2a and 2b.
- B. Two alligator bodies on top of the boulder. The tail of one of them can be seen sweeping down between C and H.
- C. A frog body, headless, incorporated into the angular corner of the stone.
- D. This is an incensario, below the frog, much like incensarios depicted on Izapa Stelae 5 and 12. Such a positioning suggests the frog is a sacrifice offering. Sacrifice is a repeating theme on this carved monument.
- E. This is a squatting female figure in the birthing (“hocker”) position. Similar to the figurine found in the mound west of the Izapa Group F ballcourt. This birthing image is, I believe, the central motif of the monument, placed in the center of the front face of the monument between two sacrifice image-complexes.

F-G-H. This grouping appears to function together as a coherent statement. F and G are two human figures. F faces to the left, toward the birthing woman. Behind him squats G, a human figure holding an ax, in the act of chopping F's neck. G's teeth appear to be barred, and the entire head is skull-like. I suggest G is a death-head figure, sacrificing F. Over the two figures we see H hovering, or flying. Its face appears beak-like, its mouth is open, and mottled workings of the stone give the appearance that water, vomit, or blood (some kind of liquid) is pouring out of its mouth, in front of F. This flood of liquid pouring forth from a sky-deity is a feature reminiscent of the flood pouring from the mouth of a sky-caiman (who some have associated with the Milky Way) on the last page of the Dresden Codex, associated with period-ending prophecies in the books of Chilam Balam.

I-J function together. I is a fish, upturned. J is a pelican, cormorant, or other long-beaked bird, perhaps catching the fish. These figures are reminiscent of fish-bird iconography on Izapa Stela 5. The themes of "mouth and food," sacrifice, consuming, and transformation seem alluded to, and are noted in other areas of the monument.

K. This is a strange human-faced insectoid warrior figure, perhaps with wings. A bee god perhaps? A better picture is provided in Figure 3, and its prominent location on a flat top face of the monument deserves closer inspection.

L is a seemingly incomplete body with two legs. See Figure 4. It is positioned next to the warrior-insectoid figure.

m: This is a little braid design, which is enlarged and highlighted in Figure 5.



Figure 2a (above). Here we see the caiman clearly. Notice the jagged cuts to its body on the right. The concentric circle image above its head may belong more to the grouping on the upper surface. It may be related to a “1” symbol portrayed on a carving preserved in the Tapachula museum (see Figure 6) — suggesting a later Central Mexican dating for this carving. The deer on this museum piece is also reminiscent of the deer next to the caiman's head, which is better seen in the photo below. The worked carving below the caiman is difficult to make out. It may be a snail or just a geometrical working, of which there are a few on this boulder. Photo by Rodolfo Juan Huerta.



Figure 2b. Deer, full figure. Notice the caiman's mouth near the deer's ear. Photo by Rodolfo Juan Huerta.



Figure 3. The prominent nose and face of this figure, with perhaps insectoid arms below to the right, can be seen in this image. The spiral design and wing-like body-extension can be seen to the right. A stylized headdress, not clear in this photo, suggest a royal personage or composite anthropomorphic deity-human. The face appears human, but the body appears insectoid. It was executed in a nice flat surface of the top part of the stone, suggesting importance. Photo by the author. I have many more photos from various angles.



Figure 4. Odd two-legged, seemingly incomplete figure, to the right of the winged-warrior insectoid creature on the top face of the boulder. Photo by the author.



*Figure 5. Odd abstract design next to frog, above birthing woman.
Photo and line drawing by the author.*

Six images in the following *Photo Sequence #1* provide other views of the various design elements in the super-narrative of the carved monument. All remaining photos and line drawings are by the author unless otherwise stated.



Here we see what I believe to be the intended “front” of the monument. The central birthing-woman in the hocker position is difficult to make out, so I will outline her legs and body and arms and head in the following highlights of the above image:



The classic hocker-birthing image is here evident on the front face of the monument. A few words on interpretation of iconography will be helpful here. Critics of iconographic analysis often dismiss interpretations wholesale, claiming that nothing can ever be known for sure about the original meanings intended. The subjects are mere “pictures” and viewers are likely to project a wide spectrum of subjective meanings into the pictures. Two things: first, few things are ever absolutely certain in the effort to reconstruct ancient knowledge systems. Second, the same critique can be applied to epigraphy --- the decipherment of Maya hieroglyphic writing. The reason why epigraphy is placed in a category of greater credence is because there is a methodology at work. There are recognized forms of glyphs, syntactical structure of inscriptional passages, and known variants. And yet, it should be said, Maya epigraphy is constantly being improved and old decipherments are very often revised. Iconographic systems of expression in Mesoamerica preceded the development of hieroglyphic writing, and the same rules, checks, and balances can be applied. In the example of the “hocker” figure above, the certainty of the meaning of this image as “birth” is virtually indisputable, although I have grown accustomed to having virtually everything I offer being disputed, dismissed out of hand, or cleverly misinterpreted. All interpretations of iconography can come with a “maybe not” caveat, as should every epigraphic decipherment. I identify this image as the central frontal image of the boulder for obvious proportional and structural reasons, and therefore I identify the nearby figure-complexes to the left and right as ancillary statements which speak to the meaning of the central image. In this case, they speak to it in terms of a dialectical pairing of *sacrifice* imagery

with the central *birth* image. It thus logically follows that a primary message or “reading” of the boulder is about the relationship between sacrifice and birthing. This ideological complex can be identified in Mesoamerican thought as being related to ceremonies attending period endings, an interpretation that the sky-figure spewing liquid (above the skull figure on the right) and the cut caiman (to the left) both support.



Here we see a close up of the image-complex comprised of F, G, and E (in Fig. 1). The skull-head on the lower right is more apparent. The beaked figure above with liquid coming out of its mouth is also more apparent here. Below this, the round head of the figure being chopped, and its shoulder, can be roughly seen. These three are clearly part of a coherent symbolic statement to the right of the central birthing woman. I took notes and made sketches at the site in June 2009. See Fig. 8 for a line drawing of these figures.



One of the figures on the top of the monument. Side view? Perhaps a large rodent?



Here above, and outlined below, one can see the fish and the pelican-like bird (a cormorant?).



Note the upward-facing fish-mouth and the downward facing bird-peak. We see a similar up-down polarity and cyclic process on several of the Izapan monuments. These kinds of long-beaked birds feed on fish, so a death-life cycle of food sustenance is also suggested.

End of *Photo Sequence #1*



Figure 6. Deer head (?) and round dot on monument in the Tapachula museum, similar to the deer and dot on left side of monument. The day 1 Deer in the 260-day calendar?

Commentary and interpretation

On the Birth-Sacrifice monument we find iconographic styles and motifs similar to ones found on Izapa's stelae. The central theme appears to be "birth attended by sacrifice," in the context of period-ending & Creation Mythology iconography (the sky-figure who spews liquid and the cut caiman). It can also be shown that this ideological theme of sacrifice & birth is also the primary message of the Izapan ballcourt monuments (Jenkins 1998). The front face of the monument has the birthing woman in the center, flanked by two sacrifice scenes. I propose this is the front face because of the birth-image's central placement between two sacrificial symbol-complexes (the incensario-frog on the left and the decapitation scene on the right).

The roughly flat top face of the boulder contains an anthropomorphic hybrid being which may be a bee god, or other insectoid creature, with human face and a stylized headdress. The caiman on the angular back-left face is cut in half with three jagged cuts, which may relate to Creation Myth inscriptions from Palenque and other contexts — a creation act which gave rise to the three planes of the universe (Grofe 2006; see also Grofe 2007). The head-chop sacrifice is also strikingly reminiscent of the Temple XIX creation narrative at Palenque (Stuart 2005). (For more on caiman symbolism see

Garcia 2006 and Taube 1989). These ‘sacrifice and creation’ themes are also generally reflected in various episodes preserved in the Hero Twin myth, which is depicted in various ways at Izapa. Consuming is utilized in several paired images on the boulder, such as the fish-eating-cormorant (see last picture in Photo Sequence #1) and the deer-eating-caiman (see Fig. 2b). I suggest this highlights food, sustenance, consumption & production, birth & death, reciprocal relationship and transformation. In fact, the deer-caiman complex is on the back left while the fish-cormorant is on the analogous opposite position on the back right of the monument.

It is tempting to date the boulder on some stylistic grounds to the same pre-Classic period of the Izapan stelae (400 BC to 50 AD) with which it shares certain iconographic motifs. Other elements may indicate post-Classic Central Mexican influence. Perhaps Carbon-14 dating will be possible. In my travels in the region I have noted that many pre-Classic and Classic Period artifacts have been found in the fincas (such as Casa Argovia) and other areas around Izapa. Much of this is understudied — known to locals but often missed by archaeologists interested in the pre-Classic realm of Soconusco. The New World Archaeological Foundation did the work at Izapa in the 1960s and continues to study and survey other nearby sites such as La Blanca and Paso de Amada. But carved boulders and sometimes stelae are often turned up in odd locations outside of the known archaeological temple sites. For example, while visiting Izapa in 2007, a homeowner near Tuxtla Chico showed us a carved figure in her backyard that was in the typical folded-arm position reminiscent of Olmec “pot-bellied boys” (also seen in later Maya iconography).



Figure 7. Carved stone near Izapa. Note reflection in the water.

The origins of the site of nearby Paso de Amada go back to 1500 BC. Izapa itself contains evidence of habitation going back to 1500 BC. The Birth-Sacrifice boulder may also represent a later Classic Period attempt of some artisan, who had visited the site of Izapa, to emulate its message and motifs. It would thus be an example of a sculptural duplication, or imitation. This would highlight the importance that the rendered motifs had in the philosophical ideology of those who saw them at Izapa. I have suggested in my 1996 and 1998 books (*Izapa Cosmos* and *Maya Cosmogogenesis 2012*) that Izapa was retained (not ritually decimated) as a pilgrimage site of initiatory rites through the Classic Period. Perhaps the carved boulder is a record of the insights gleaned by one artisan-initiate,

emphasizing an interrelated ideology that connects period endings to ceremonial sacrifice, birth/rebirth/renewal, and transformation.

To summarize, a master-image follows — an outline drawing and brief overview of the central sections of the Birth-Sacrifice Monument:



Figure 8. Sections on the left (A), middle (B), and right (C) sides of the monument. The imagery on the top face and far right and left sides are excluded. Photo and drawing by the author.

Areas indicated by the smaller black letters in the image above:

A. An incensario (offering burner) — there is one like this on Izapa Stela 5.

B. The squatting birther image (the traditional “hocker” position) — much like the statue found in the mound behind the ballcourt at Izapa.

C. A human figure being sacrificed / decapitated. The mythic prototype of this story is referential to the beheading of One Hunahpu in the Underworld ballcourt.

D. A lord of death sacrificing the human figure (C). It looks like it has teeth bared and death skull like a skull of death — a typical way the Lords of Death were portrayed.

E. This seems to be a bird deity who may be vomiting liquid, much like the caiman sky deity on the last page of the Dresden Codex. It places the depicted events at a period ending, because a flood occurs at the end of one of the World Ages in the Popol Vuh.

F. The tail of one of the alligators on the top of the boulder.

G. A frog body carved on the corner of the monument, right above the incense burner. A sacrificial offering (a jaguar) hanging above an incensario is depicted on Izapa Stela 12.

H. The three cuts where the caiman on the left side of the boulder is located. It is sacrificed and cut with two or three cuts, producing three sections. The caiman here is similar to the one Izapa Stela 25, associated by many with the Milky Way. The back end of the body of the Stela 25 caiman splits into several branches that flower into leaves and fruits. As in the Palenque Temple XIX text, this reiterates the idea of cutting or sacrifice of the Cosmic Caiman as a creation act, a requisite prelude to renewed growth or rebirth.

Main section of the scene, in big **blue letters, A, B, C:**

A: This, I believe, is an offering scene, which partially involves the idea of sacrifice. The incense burner is the tool of offering; the frog is a symbol of life being transformed via the offering/sacrifice, because frogs are transformed forms of tadpoles. The caiman body, which touches this imagery complex on the left, augments the imagery, as it is a sacrifice of the caiman that divides the cosmos into three levels (Grofe 2006). This is also in a Creation Text at Palenque (Stuart 2005). This is transformational imagery. Thus, A = sacrifice & transformation.

B. This is a woman in the traditional “hocker” / birth position = birth / renewal / regeneration. This is the center of the action on this main face of the boulder. B = birthing & renewal.

C. Here is another tripartite image complex, this one focusing on death, decapitation, sacrifice. The death figure holds an ax against the neck of the human figure. The bird above evokes a period-ending flood image and points its beak to the left of the main action below. C = death & sacrifice and a possible reference to a World Age period ending.

The three main sections show the interrelationships between *sacrifice, transformation, and birth/renewal*. This is the main idea in my interpretation of how the ancient Maya thought about cycle endings, including the one in 2012. The Birth-Sacrifice monument from finca 11 de Abril reiterates the main message in the Izapan ball court, which according to my reconstruction also encodes the astronomy of the era-2012 alignment (Jenkins 1998).

I have not treated all the iconographic motifs on the monument in detail, so my hope is that other researchers and iconographers will contribute their own insights to understanding this intriguing and previously undocumented monument, which seems to have been composed to make a rather elaborate statement about creation mythology, sustenance, sacrifice, and birthing.

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Additional images:



Boulder field outside of Tapachula with boulders of many different types, washed down from the high mountains and volcanic peaks.



Alligator (headless) from house patio across the street from the Birth-Sacrifice Boulder.
Photo by Rodolfo Juan Huerta.



Figure with tail on top of the monument. Caiman / alligator?



Frog body formed into left corner, above incensario on the front face,
just to the right of the corner.

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