

MUSHROOM SYMBOLISM IN MAYA CODICES

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SUMMARY

The 24-page Galindo Codex has been found to correspond closely with the figures and glyphs on 12 pages, entire or in part, of the Codex Madrid. A new interpretation, based upon evidence in the Dresden, Madrid and Galindo Codices suggests that a sacred mushroom cult existed among the Maya.

By the 1560's the principal indigenous civilizations of the Americas, the Aztec, Maya and Inca, were languishing under the domination of the Spanish conquistadors. As the conquerors expanded their influence throughout the continent, old ways were demolished and a new order firmly established. Schooled in the ways of the Inquisition at home, the Spaniards adopted appropriate measures in the new world to discourage native inclinations toward the practise of heathen ceremonies, for it was believed to be indispensable that all manifestations of idolatry be extirpated. A notably zealous prelate in Yucatán at that time was Diego de Landa, who relentlessly dedicated himself to this end. On July 12, 1562, at Maní, he accordingly had assembled some thousands of idols that were wrested from the populace only after resort to extreme methods of persuasion and these together with other possessions venerated by the Maya were burned or otherwise destroyed. According to one account, among the treasures that perished were "27 rolls and signs of hieroglyphics." The *auto de fe* was laconically related by Landa (1966 ed.) in his "Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán" in these words. "Hallámosles gran número de libros de estas sus letras, y porque no tenían cosa en que no hubiese superstición y falsedades del demonio, se los quemamos todos, lo cual sintieron a maravilla y les dió mucha pena."¹ Landa had occasion to reflect on his actions which had caused such extraordinary affliction, for he was recalled to Spain and in 1564 an inquiry was begun into charges that he had exceeded his

¹ "We found among them a great number of books written in these characters and as they contained nothing in which there were not to be found superstition and devilish lies, we burned them all, which they regretted to an amazing degree and caused them great affliction."

authority and engaged in unjustifiable conduct in the pursuit of his responsibilities. It was during this period, probably about 1566, that he wrote his "Relación." In 1569 he was nevertheless exonerated and rewarded by his appointment in 1573 as Bishop of Mérida, a position he held until his death in 1579.

It is Landa's "Relación" that has not only saved him from complete denigration in the eyes of the scholarly world but has won him high praise for his incomparable contribution to the knowledge of some Maya glyphs, particularly those relating to the calendar. The vigesimal Maya system of recording time is therein explained and the meaning of pertinent glyphs illustrated and clarified.

Although we may never know exactly the magnitude of the destruction at Maní, it is certain that not all the documents and idols extant at that time were lost in this way. Some survived the conflagration and among them are the three Maya Codices which, through circumstances largely unknown to us, eventually reached their present locations in Madrid, Paris and Dresden. These unique records constitute all that has been found of this genre of Maya writing. Consequently, it was of great interest when by chance I was introduced to a Guatemalan codex that had not previously been described. Examination of photographs of this document, which I took in the summer of 1971 in Guatemala, showed it to be a reasonably faithful transcription of part of the Codex Madrid, also known as the Tro-Cortesianus.² But numerous questions remain unanswered, including the circumstances of its fabrication and the motivation of the copyist who reproduced with surprising fidelity a document of great complexity. A notable feature that draws one's attention to the Guatemalan codex is the material on which the paintings have been executed. In contrast to the known Maya Codices which are reported to be made of the inner bark of a species of *Ficus* and coated with calcium carbonate before being painted, the Galindo Codex (I so designate it after its present owner) is on parchment. Curiously, in an enumeration of the objects destroyed under Landa's direction, Dr. Justo Sierra (Tozzer, 1941) mentions that the previously cited "rolls and signs of hieroglyphics" were "on deer skin."

The Galindo Codex is composed of 12 panels painted on both surfaces and constructed in the characteristic folded screen manner of the three surviving Maya Codices. Its total length is 107.5 cm, with some

² The Madrid Codex was originally divided into two parts; a 70-page Codex Troano and the Codex Cortesianus of 42 pages. These were found to be part of the same manuscript and were united to form the Codex Tro-Cortesianus, now generally designated as the Codex Madrid.

variation in the dimensions of each panel which is approximately square and measures ± 9.5 –10 cm. The age of the codex is unknown but it is in a very good state of preservation. From information given to me by the elder Sr. Galindo (now deceased) whom I met in Huehuetenango on July 3, 1970, it has been in his family since about the beginning of this century. I have numbered the panels in the codex consecutively from I–XII and the reverse of the corresponding sequence IR–XIIR. At three places the panels are coarsely sewn together with material

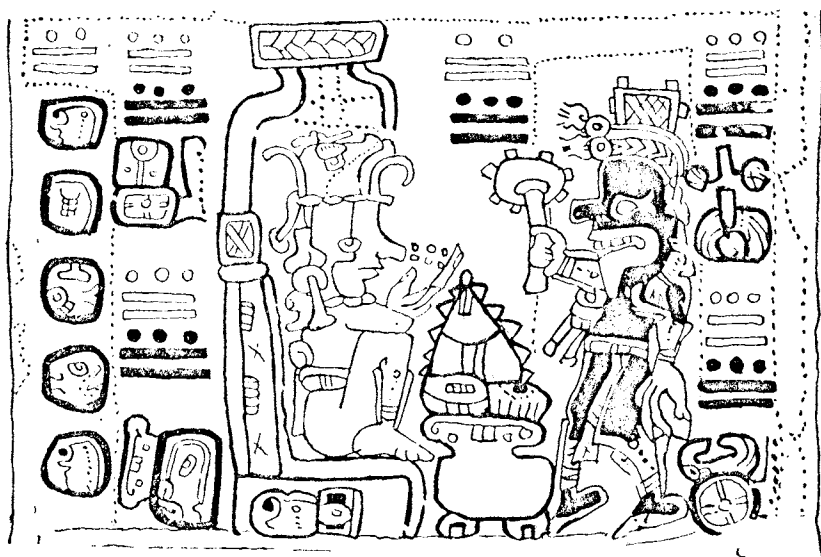


FIG. 1. Page LIb of the Madrid Codex. The mushroom offering is held outstretched by the standing figure. The protuberances are interpreted as a stylized representation of the irregular wart-like patches associated with the pileus of *Amanita muscaria*.

that appears to be identical with that of which the codex is made. This occurs between panels three and four, six and seven, and nine and ten. A study reveals that all the 24 paintings in the Galindo Codex have their counterparts in the Madrid, from which it has presumably been copied. On many pages of the Galindo, however, there are some details either of glyphs or figures that are not found in the Madrid.

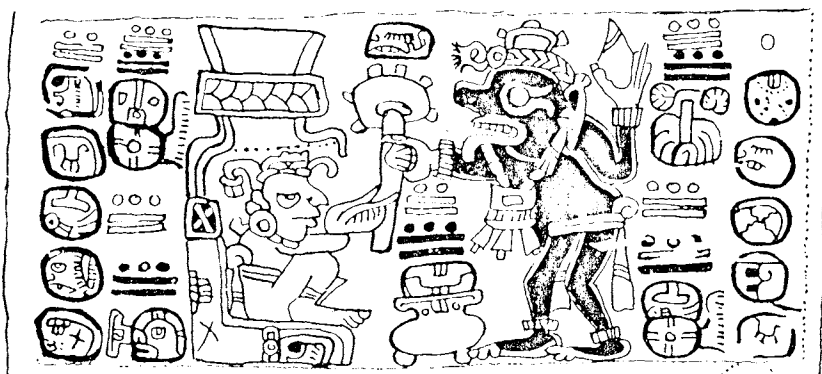
Not all the objects depicted in the religio-astrological paintings of the codices have been unequivocally identified and often we are confronted with a choice of possible explanations. A conspicuous device held by the standing figure on page LIb (FIG. 1) of the Madrid Codex

is identified in Villacorta's (1933) notes as "... la rueda del calendario, o quizá una matraca." FIG. 2 shows the corresponding painting in the Galindo codex. I would reject the interpretation of this object as being either a calendar wheel or a rattle and suggest instead that it represents a sacred mushroom. In the Dresdensis XXVa, XXVIa, XXVIIa, and XXVIIIa, the mushroom is also prominent. On these pages, Villa-

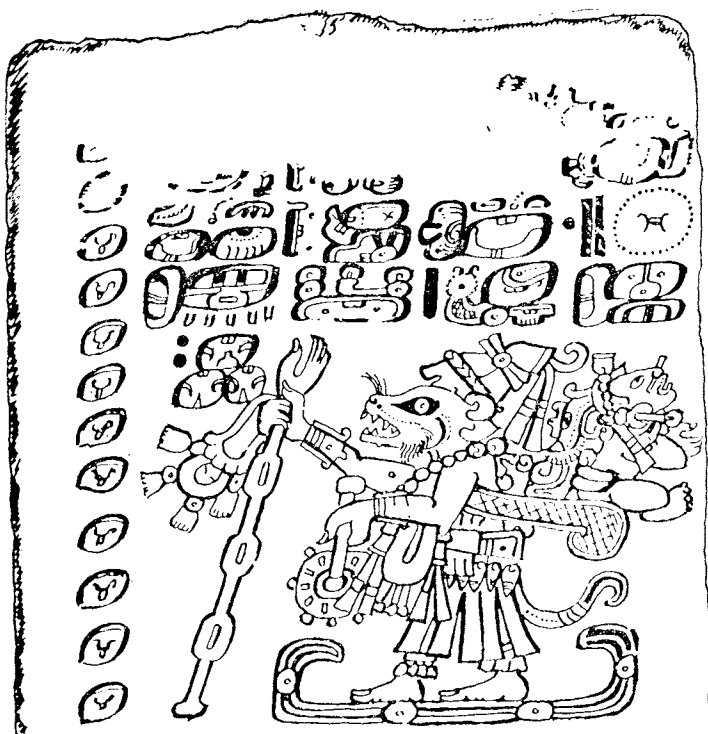


FIG. 2. Page XI of the Galindo Codex, showing close resemblance with the figures of Page LIb of the Madrid Codex, from which the former is presumed to have been copied.

corta (1933) identifies it as a fan ("abanico"). In XXVIa, XXVIIa (FIG. 4) and XXVIIIa the base is enlarged, making the resemblance to *Amanita muscaria* (L. ex Fr.) Hooker more striking. A painting very similar to the one in Madrid LIb (FIG. 1) and in Galindo XI (FIG. 2) is shown on page XCVb of the Madrid Codex (FIG. 3) in which the mushroom is still more prominently displayed. Very sig-



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FIGS. 3-4. 3. Page XCVb of the Madrid Codex. The glyph "cimi" is directly above the mushroom cap. 4. Page XXVIIa of the Dresden Codex, showing the mushroom held in the left hand of the animal deity.

nificantly, in this panel there is the solitary glyph "cimi" directly above the mushroom cap. "Cimi" is a death symbol and it is seen here intimately associated with the mushroom. Is it not possible that we are witnessing in these paintings the enactment of an ancient hieratic ritual among the Maya, in which sacred, hallucinogenic mushrooms played a critical role? *Amanita muscaria* is common throughout the Guatemalan sierra and I have collected it frequently there, most recently on June 30, 1970, in coniferous woods at Rancho de Lemoa, between Chichicastenango and El Quiché. It grows in abundance in that region and is locally called by the name "shtantilok" or "shtantalok," known and avoided because of its toxic properties. The evidence from Guatemalan mushroom stones, as pointed out earlier by the author (Lowy, 1968, 1971), although highly suggestive, is not sufficient in itself to enable us to link the Maya with a mushroom cult that has apparently disappeared in Guatemala, but if the interpretation offered is correct, as I believe it to be, then we have at hand a glimpse of one of the powerful and motivating factors governing the religious life of the Maya.

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