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The cover art was designed by Barbara Borg after Room 1, South Wall, Temple of the Frescoes, Bonampak, as reconstructed at the National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City. Art adaptation for this issue by Mary Lee Eggart.

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THE HUMAN HAND AS POWER OBJECT IN YUCATEC RITUAL

Bruce Love
Dumbarton Oaks

In the Dresden New Year ceremonies, the opossum actors in the top scenes carry a staff with a human hand on the end (fig. 1). As recently as 1972, Thompson wrote, "The staff terminating in a human hand has sporadic distribution in the art of Middle America, but its significance is unknown" (1972, 90). To help discover its significance, I look at the distribution of this staff in the Maya and Central Mexican codices. Then I examine an important ethnohistorical document that casts light on the use of the hand. Finally, I look at some recent ethnographically recorded Yucatec ritual prayers in which the "great hand" again appears. By combining the pre-Hispanic, the ethnohistorical, and the ethnographic sources, an interpretation of the hand emerges as a power object--or even more than a power object. It is a power object raised almost to the level of deity. This paper examines the human hand as an object of power and veneration in Yucatec ritual.

The staff with the hand in the Dresden is first mentioned by Eduard Seler (1939 [1902-23] I, 64). He suggested it was cognate with a Mexican staff he identified as a rattle stick (*chicauaztli*), often associated with a death god. Förstemann (1906, 122) called it a staff of office. There is a remarkably similar staff from the Mexican Codex Borgia (Seler 1963, III, pl. 56) noted by Seler (1939a, I, 57) (fig. 2). This is the staff labeled by Seler palo de sonajas, or *chicauaztli*.

All other examples are from the Maya books, either the Madrid or the Dresden Codex. There is one example of this staff from the Madrid on page 89d (fig. 3). On Madrid 20c (fig. 4) there are two staffs with different tips: one has a bird, and the other is topped by what is apparently a flint blade. However, the shafts are also different, so their identification with the staffs-with-hands is not certain. On the staffs with the bird and the flint blade there are tear-drop shapes that are cross-hatched inside the shaft. I think it is safe to say that these two staffs are not cognate.

Another drawing on Dresden page 34a (fig. 6) shows a staff with the shaft identical to that of the staff-with-hand, but with an object that is apparently a blade. The blade, however, does not have the usual diagonal wavy lines that most drawings of flint blade have. If it is a blade at all, it is a special kind of blade. This scene also has several elements in common with other New Year scenes, especially from the Madrid, including the stepped altar, the drums, and some of the offerings.

There is one drawing of a staff-with-hand in Dresden that is unmistakably identical to the New Year staffs (pg. 31b, fig. 5). It is carried by a Chaak with a headdress and a pouch much like that of the opossum actors in the New Year passages. Other aspects of the Chaak costume, such as the bow and the ribbons on the headdress, the ear ornaments and the incense pouch match up nicely with those of the opossum actors.

This completes the inventory of the staff-with-hand element in the Maya books. Neither it nor the tear-shaped object discussed above occur in the Paris Codex.

Ethnohistorical evidence contributes to a possible explanation for the significance of the human hand. Bernardo de Lizana (1893, 4-5) is one of the lesser chroniclers of New Spain. He came to Yucatan in 1606 and lived and worked there until his death twenty-five years later in 1631. In his Historia de Yucatan he gave a description of the remains of five major temple mounds in the northern Yucatan town of Izamal.

The temples were named as follows: P'a P'ol Chak, in the center; Itzamat Ul to the east; Hun Pik Tok' in the south; K'ab Ul to the west; and K'inich K'ak'mo to the north. K'inich K'ak'mo is the one best known, being famous as the largest pyramid in volume in Northern Yucatan. More significant here, however, is the one to the west, K'ab Ul, which means, according to Lizana, 'the hand that does work'. Lizana reported this rather remarkable object of veneration as being situated on its own k'u, or temple mound. An excerpt from the Lizana translation goes as follows:

These Indians built another altar and temple over another mound to their king or false god Ytzmat Ul where they put the figure of a hand that served to remind them and they say that there the dead were raised and the sick were healed by touching the hand and this was the one that was in the part of the east and so it was called and named Kal (sic) Ul, that means the hand that does works. And there they gave offerings and made pilgrimages from everywhere (Lizana 1893, 5; translation by Charles Koertge, emphasis mine).

Cogolludo gives the same account, writing in the 1650s. Lizana is the primary source but his Kal Ul was corrected to Kab Ul in Cogolludo's (1954, I, 354) version.

That the figure of a hand should be worshipped like a god at Izamal might seem rather surprising. This practice is not described in any accounts of Maya religion with which I am familiar. There is, however, evidence for this type of worship in the ethnographic data. In Love (1986, 64-98) I compared published ethnographers' typologies of Yucatec gods and spirit beings with typologies gleaned from a review of ethnographic Maya

prayers. While grouping together types of spirit beings found in the Maya prayers, I noted a category Noh K'ab, 'great hand' or 'right hand'. This category appears in ritual from near Ticul, Yucatan (Hanks 1984); in the Wahil Kol prayers from Becanchen (Love 1984); in a bee ceremony (Poot and Bocara 1980); in the Cave of Balankanche' prayers (Arzapalo 1970); in ritual at Chan Kom (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934); and in the "milpa mass" recorded by Brasseur de Bourbourg (1870). Lines from the texts where these references to hands occur are below.

In de Bourbourg is found "utial k'ubik ti u kab dios yumbil, dios mehenbil, dios espiritu santo" 'I offer it to the hand of God the father, God the son, God the holy spirit' (1870, 101-102).
Villa 1945:160, 1987:458

In Chan Kom, "u kab dios" 'the hand of God' appears again, but also there are "noh u kab nucte chaak, noh kab nucte balam" 'the right hand of the great Chaak, the right hand of the great Balam' (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934, 345).

In the prayers from the Cave of Balankanche, "noh kris noh u k'a'" 'great Christ, great his hand' is often addressed (Arzapalo 1970, 82,98).

In a bee ceremony recorded by Poot and Bocara, offerings are made to, and prayers addressed to, the right hands of "hahal dios" 'true god', "santo cristo" 'holy christ', and "koolebil Maria" 'Virgin Mary' (Poot and Bocara 1980, 13-15).

In a santiguar recitation from near Ticul, the prayers conclude with the lines "aweensik ten akichkelem no ak'ab yook'ol le kweempo" 'you lower for me your beautiful right hand over the body' (Hanks 1984, 160).

From my own field work with prayers from a Wahil Kol ceremony from Becanchen, at the end of the fourth and final chant, the h-men calls the milpa farmer holding the ceremony over to the mesa and instructs him to make a pledge over it:

In yum kin k'ubik in promesa tu noh ah k'ab utial u luk'ul tin wok'ol.

'My father, I offer my pledge to the great right hand for protection over me' (Love 1984, 300 and field notes).

So it is apparent that the great right hand has been an important part of Yucatec ritual for some time, at least from the time of the writing of the codices up to and including the present. An understanding of the hand reached by studying the ethnohistorical account of Lizana and various ethnographically recorded prayers leads to an interpretation of the staff with the hand in the Dresden New Year ceremonies. The hand is an object of ritual power, with healing properties.

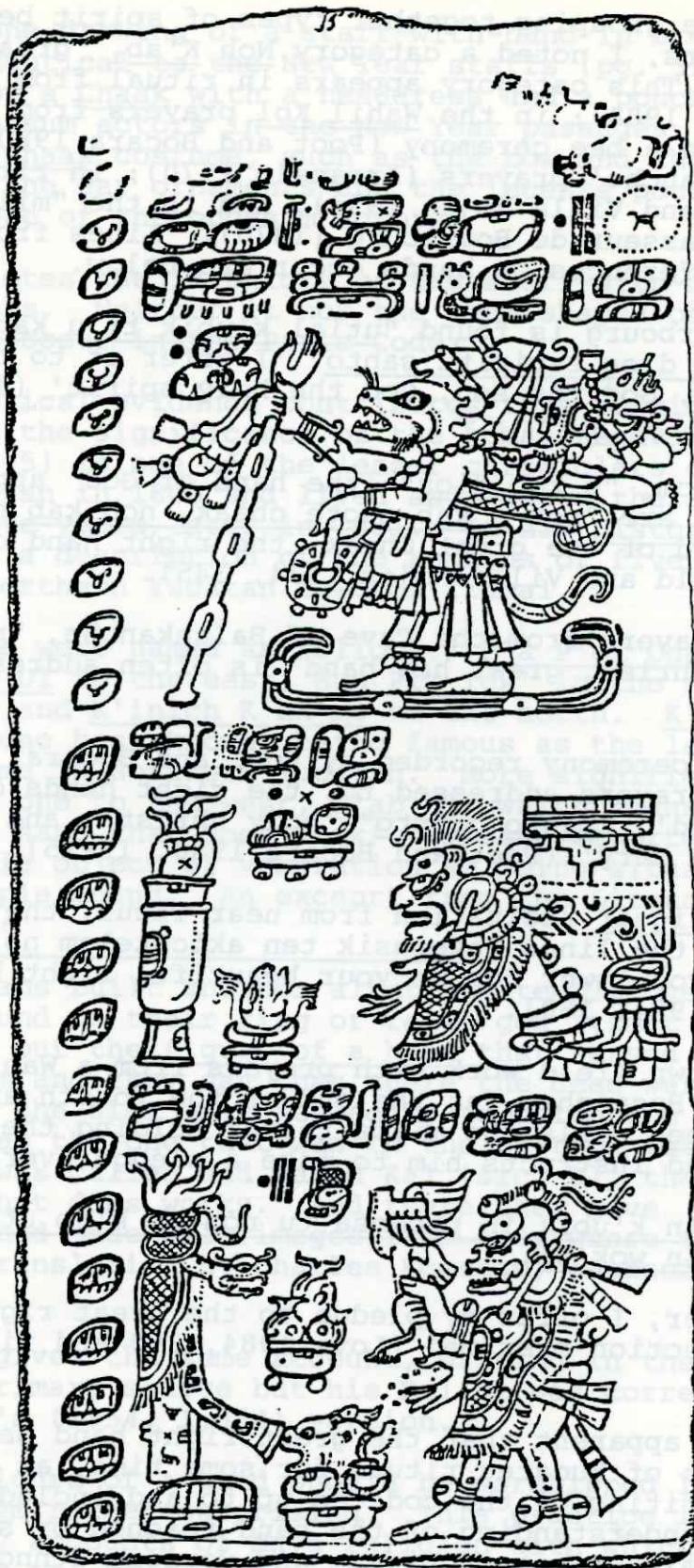


Figure 1. Page 27 of the Dresden New Year Pages Showing the Staff with the Human Hand (after Villacorta and Villacorta 1930).

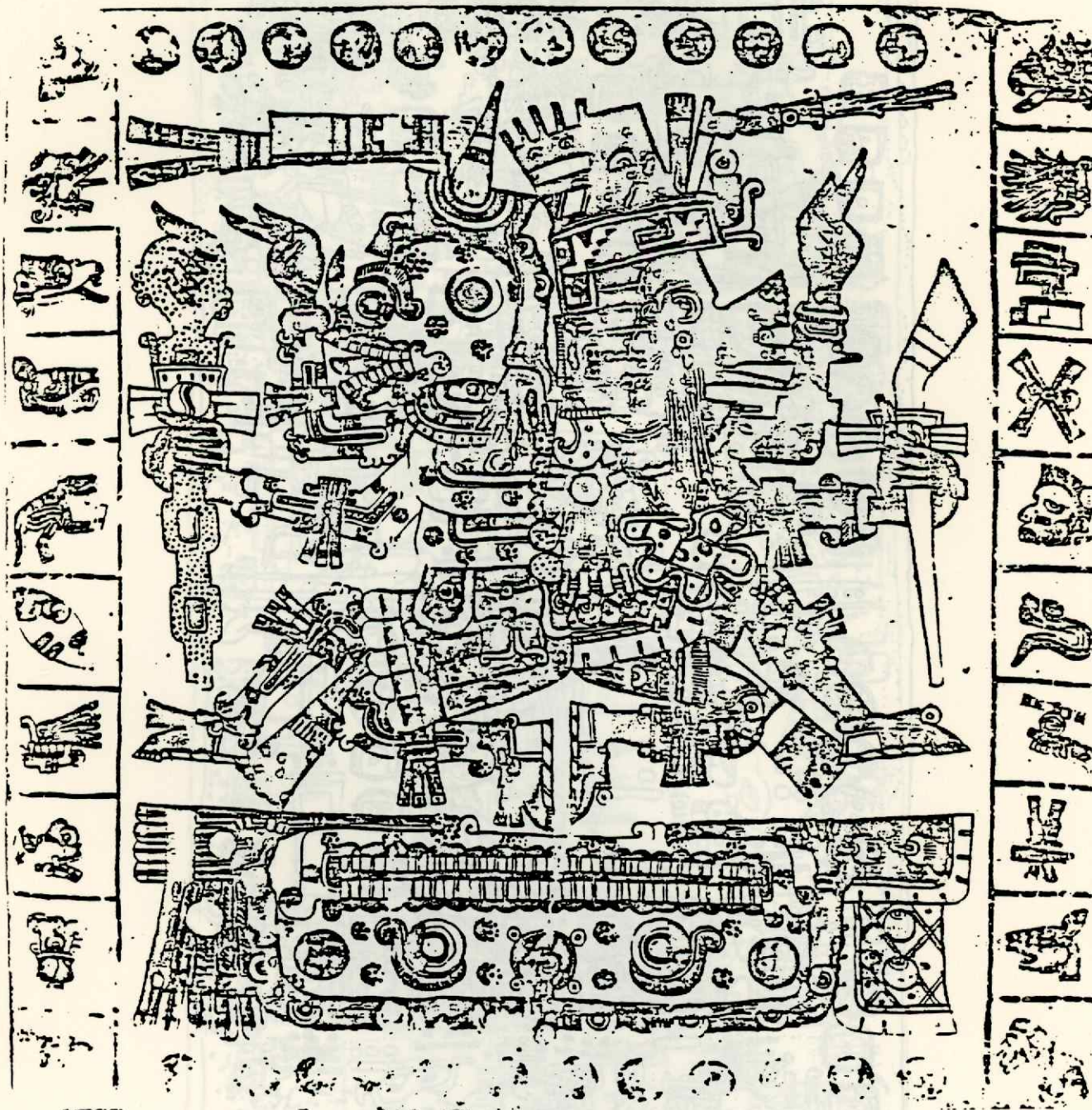


Figure 2. The Staff in the Borgia Codex (after Seler 1963, III, Pl. 56).

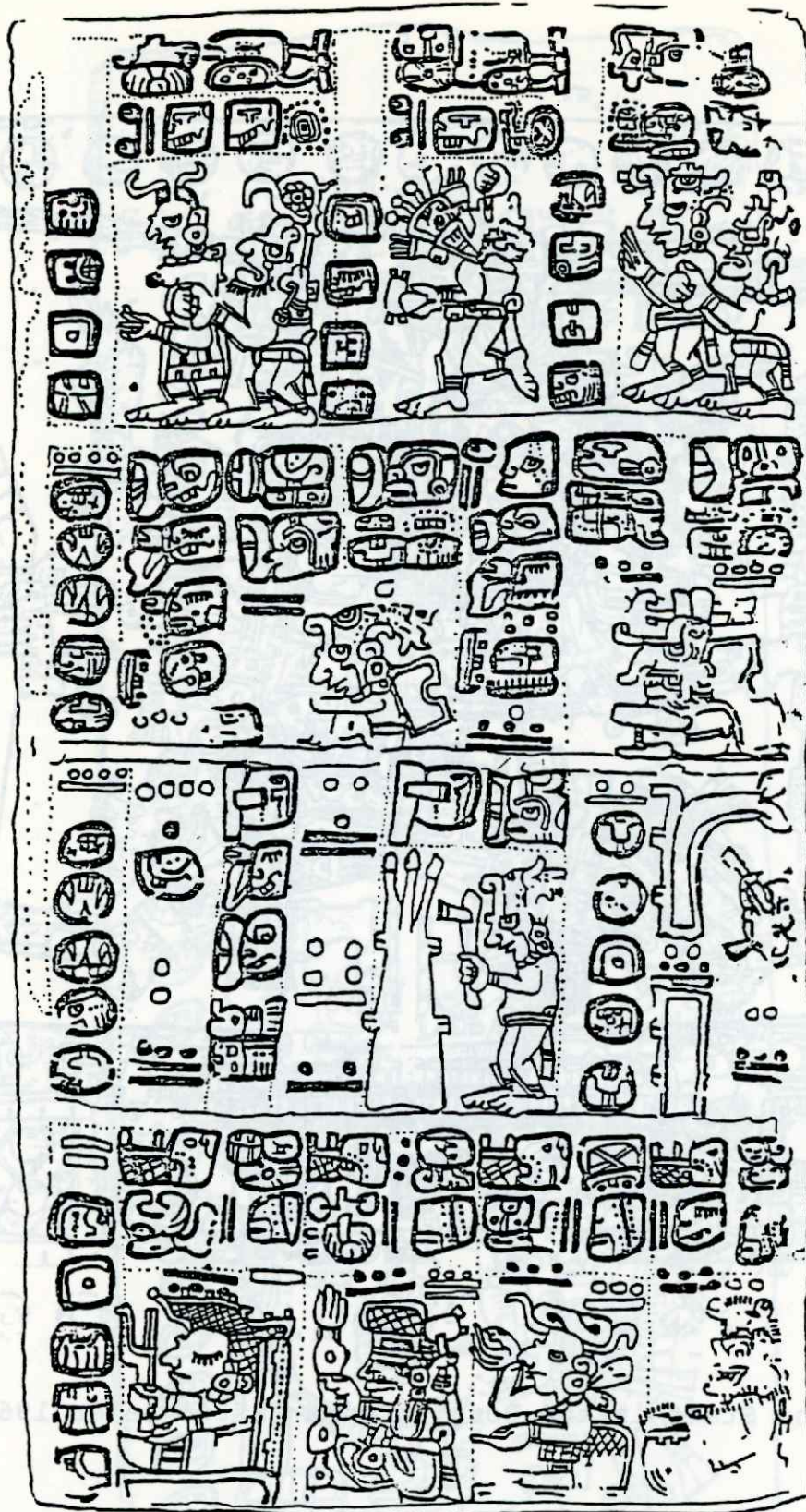


Figure 3. Staff-with-hand in the Madrid Codex, page 89d (after Villacorta and Villacorta 1930).

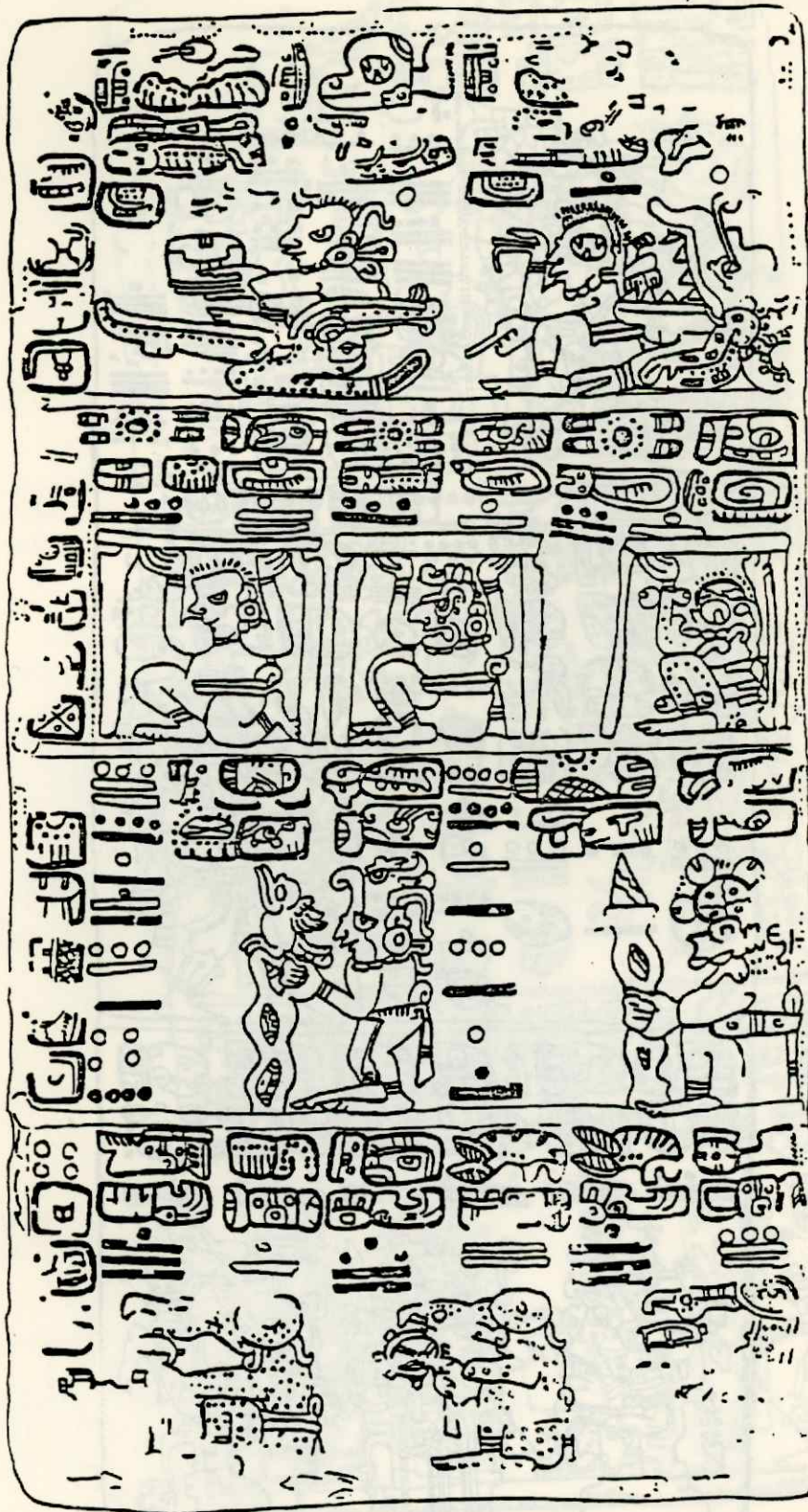


Figure 4. Similar but Different Staffs in the Madrid Codex, page 20c (after Villacorta and Villacorta 1930).

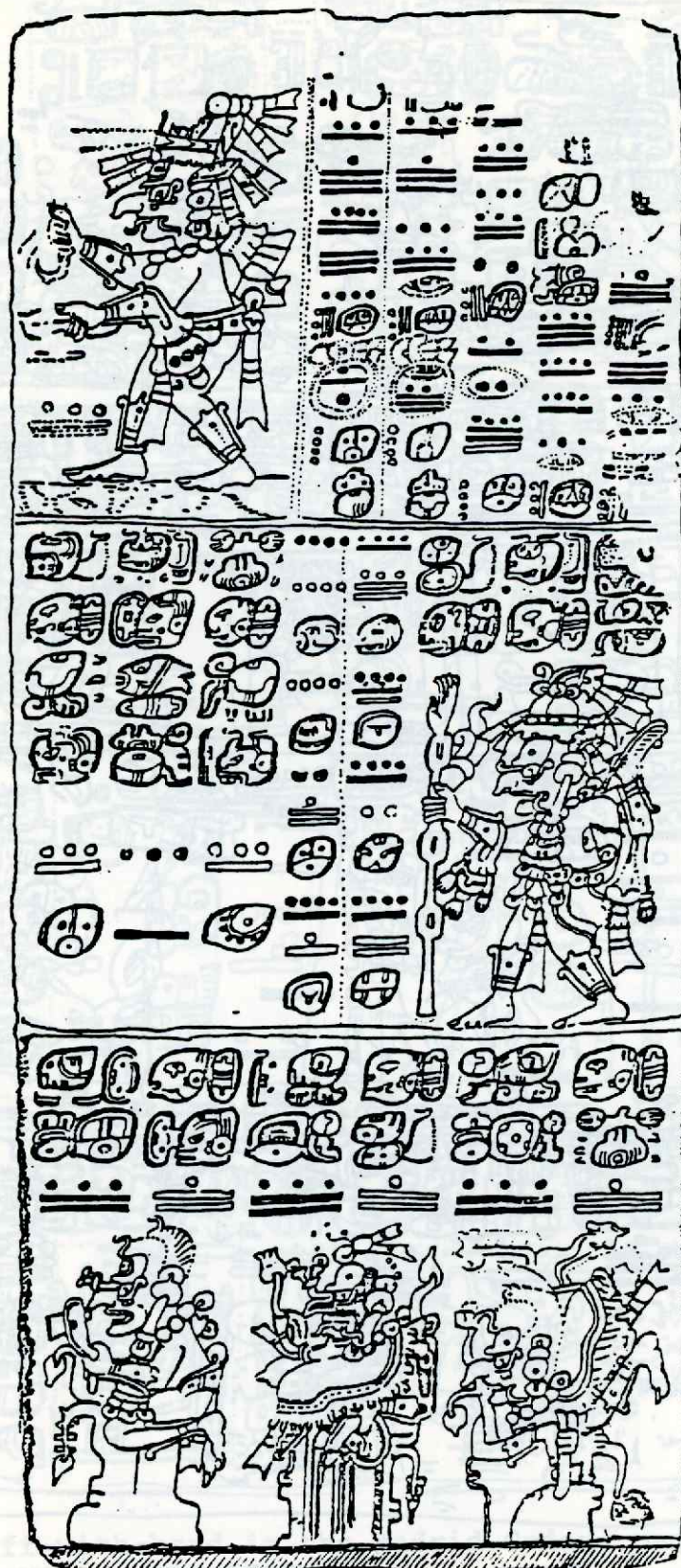


Figure 5. Identical Staff to the New Year Pages, Dresden 31b (after Villacorta and Villacorta 1930).

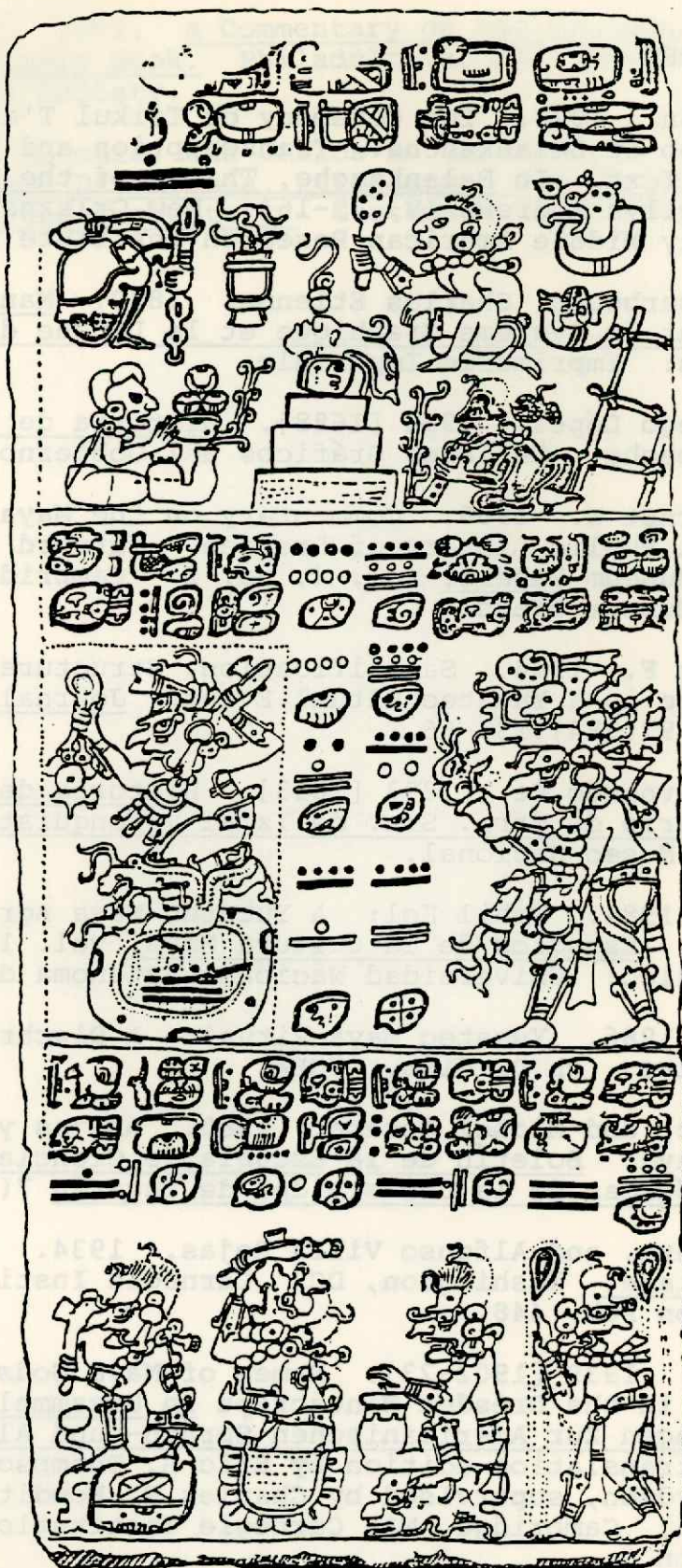


Figure 6. Staff with Apparent Blade from Dresden page 34a (after Villacorta and Villacorta 1930).

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