Most modern scholars agree that religious belief played at least some role in the exercise and legitimization of political authority among the Classic Period Maya. Many have seen Maya rulership as a form of divine kingship, or a system in which the ruler draws his authority from a special relationship with the divine (e.g., Demarest 1992; Fields and Reents-Budet 2005; Freidel and Schele 1988; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993; Houston and Stuart 1996; Inomata, this volume; Schele and Miller 1986). For example, Arthur A. Demarest (1992) has drawn on African and Southeast Asian parallels to argue that Maya polities were “theater states” in which the ruler’s display of his supernatural connections was the main force behind his political authority. Inomata (2006, this volume) similarly notes that the theatricality of ritual acts was responsible for drawing large masses of people to participate in community formation centered on the royal court. Others, particularly Linda Schele and David A. Freidel (e.g., Freidel and Schele 1988; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993; Schele and Freidel 1990; Schele and Miller 1986), have viewed the Maya ruler as shaman. According to these scholars, village-level ritual specialists of the Formative Period developed into a form of institutionalized shamanism during the Classic Period. Even scholars who take a primarily materialist perspective acknowledge the importance of ritual in the legitimacy of power and the mobilization of goods (e.g., Lucero 2003). These scholars all agree that religious belief and its behavioral
expression, religious ritual, were used to legitimize social inequality and the authority of the ruler and his court.

In this chapter, I will also argue for the importance of religious ritual in the negotiation of political relationships among the Classic Maya. However, it is important to note some deficiencies with the ways previous scholars have dealt with this topic. First, as Sarah Kurnick notes in her introductory chapter to this volume, simply observing that rulers served a religious role within the polity does not go far enough to explain how that role was acquired and maintained, nor the particular ways in which it induced followers to obey. Secondly, as Kurnick also notes, studies of divine kingship among the Maya have focused on the ways rulers represented themselves in text and image and not enough on how those representations were received by non-rulers. In this chapter, I hope to address these questions by focusing more attention on the actual content of Classic Maya religious beliefs and rituals. For example, how can we understand and categorize “the divine” among the Maya? What did the Maya believe that particular supernatural entities did in the world and how did rulers act as intermediaries? How were the interests of followers served by the ruler’s intercession? And how did that intercession play a role in the authority of particular rulers or royal lineages?

In her introductory chapter, Kurnick invites us to consider the many contradictions inherent in the negotiation of political authority. Rulership has often been thought of in terms of difference: those with authority are set apart from others in some way. At the same time, rulers must also emphasize the ways in which they are the same as their followers, because obedience to commands (Max Weber’s classic definition of authority) is only likely to be long-lasting if followers feel that obedience is in their best interest. If a ruler is completely different from them, followers will lose incentives to obey.

In this chapter, I will apply this framework to a new consideration of Classic Maya divine kingship. Specifically, I will examine patron deities among the Classic Maya. Each Maya polity had its own set of patron gods. These gods were believed to belong to the whole community and serve the interests of all of its members. While scholars have recognized patron deities among the Maya and other Mesoamerican groups, certain misconceptions have impeded our understanding of their role in political relationships—namely, they are often considered an outgrowth of ancestor veneration. I will define patron deities and discuss the ways in which they differed from other supernatural beings. I will also discuss the importance of patron gods in the negotiation of Classic Maya political authority. I will end with a case study to illustrate these claims based on excavations at the site of La Corona, Guatemala.
La Corona is a small site located in northwestern Petén (figure 5.1). The site was occupied for approximately the duration of the Classic Period, starting in the third or fourth century CE and continuing to the mid-ninth century CE. La Corona has an unusually rich historical record for a site of its size, providing a great deal of detail about the ruling family and its relationships. The La Corona Regional Archaeological Project has undertaken excavations since 2008 under the direction of Marcello A. Canuto and Tomás Barrientos.

**Figure 5.1. Map of the Maya area showing the location of La Corona.**
Under its auspices, my excavations were focused on Structures 13R-2, 13R-3, 13R-4, and 13R-5, a set of patron deity temples in an architectural group known as Coronitas (figure 5.2). The function of these structures was identified as patron deity shrines by means of a carved hieroglyphic panel recovered from Structure 13R-5 (Canuto et al. 2006). The text of this panel makes it clear that Structure 13R-5 was a shrine constructed for a patron deity in the year 677 CE by ruler K’inch ? Yook (Guenter 2005). The panel also makes mention of an earlier construction of three temples for three other patron deities in the year 658 CE by K’inch? Yook’s father, ruler Chakaw Nahb Chan (Guenter 2005). The best candidates for these three patron deity temples are Structures 13R-2, 13R-3, and 13R-4. Not only are they adjacent to the known patron deity shrine 13R-5, they are also of approximately the same size as one another and, in their final phase of construction, were built at the same time in a single architectural program. No other structures at La Corona obviously fit the criteria of a set of three temples built at the same time. The ability to identify Maya patron deity temples is rare. In fact, these circumstances exist at only four other sites: Chichen Itza, Palenque, Tikal, and Yaxchilan. And while some of these have been investigated, none of them have undergone a program of excavation designed to identify ritual activities or participants. At La Corona, my excavations explored the architectural phases of the temples as well as the remains of ritual activities left as middens and refuse.

Based on archaeological and epigraphic evidence, I argue that patron deity veneration was a strategy employed by Classic Maya rulers to negotiate the contradictions inherent in rulership. Rulers promoted the polity-wide veneration of patron gods as a way of emphasizing a shared ethnic or community identity. At the same time, rulers represented themselves as having a special relationship to patron deities, and thereby as uniquely suited to serve the community’s interests through their intercession. Archaeological evidence at La Corona indicates that this strategy was successful in promoting institutionalized rulership. In fact, it was so successful that La Corona rulers introduced new patron gods in periods of dynastic upheaval. A close examination of patron deity veneration can fill in some of the gaps left by other studies of Maya divine kingship and help us see Classic Maya polities as complex entities in which authority was constantly under negotiation.

RECONSTRUCTING CLASSIC MAYA RELIGION

Understanding the role of religion in Classic Maya politics demands that we begin by understanding Maya religious beliefs. Numerous hieroglyphic
inscriptions make reference to deities and the practices that the Classic Maya used to venerate them. However, relying solely on inscriptions has its drawbacks, since they represent a specific viewpoint and often a specific rhetorical purpose. In the case of the Classic Maya, inscriptions were almost always commissioned by rulers and occasionally by lesser elites. There are no known inscriptions commissioned by nonelite people. Thus, it is difficult to know whether inscriptions represent the religious beliefs of the whole society or simply that which its rulers most strongly promoted.

Archaeological evidence can be used to supplement these data by looking for the presence of religious ritual as practiced by different segments of
society. Recent archaeological approaches to commoner ritual often focus on domestic contexts, where nonelites could more freely shape the content of religious rituals, beyond the watchful eyes of rulers (e.g., Gonlin 2007; Joyce and Weller 2007). These studies provide a contrast to elite-sponsored ideology and thus offer a theory of commoner resistance as shaped through ritual. However, commoner participation (or nonparticipation) in public rituals also played a role in shaping power relations among Mesoamerican groups (Joyce and Weller 2007:146–47, Joyce et al., this volume; Beekman, this volume). As I will discuss later in this chapter, there is archaeological evidence to suggest large-scale commoner participation in Classic Maya public patron deity rituals.

Finally, Maya religion can be examined by turning to the historical and ethnographic records from more recent periods. Ethnohistoric documents from the Maya area, such as the Popol Vuh, the Titulo de Totonicapan, and the Annals of the Kaqchikels describe the era immediately prior to the Spanish conquest. Furthermore, some religious beliefs and practices exist in syncretic form in contemporary Maya communities. The Maya area has a rich ethnographic record from the mid-twentieth century that reveals similarities between modern beliefs and those recorded on Classic Period monuments.

THE NATURE OF MAYA DEITIES

The exact nature of Maya gods has been a source of study for decades and continues to be debated. One line of study has been the identification of individual deities and the classification of these deities into different groupings (Schellhas 1904; Thompson 1950; Hellmuth 1987; Taube 1992). Other scholars have argued that a pantheon of deities in the Greco-Roman sense misunderstands Mesoamerican religion in general (Baudez 2002; Marcus 1978; 1983; Stuart 2005). They contend that ancient Mesoamericans viewed deities as a manifestation of “the vital force or power that inhabits the blood and energizes people and a variety of objects of ritual and everyday life” (Houston and Stuart 1996:292).

In fact, both views are true: Classic Maya gods behaved as specific personalities in the sense of a pantheon and as representations of vital natural forces. This is because the Classic Maya actually had two different categories of gods. These categories have already been recognized as “major gods that are the personifications of universal phenomena as well as natural and cosmological forces . . . and . . . local gods like tutelary deities” (Sachse 2004:9). In this chapter, I refer to these categories as general gods (those that represent natural
forces such as the sun, rain, wind, etc.) and patron gods (those that belong to particular communities). The Classic Maya referred to both of types of entities as *k’uh* (Ringle 1988), and they were therefore clearly related to one another in some way. In fact, most patron gods can be identified as an aspect or local iteration of an original general deity. Thus, general deities actually became patron deities by forming special relationships with particular communities. As patron deities, their behavior differed from the impersonal general deities and more closely resembled the Western conception of gods, like those of ancient Greece.

At Palenque, the forging of this local relationship of supernatural patronage was made explicit and was referred to as the “arrival,” the “earth-touching,” and the “birth” of the site’s three main patron gods during the ancient past (Lounsbury 1980:112–13). In fact, Palenque texts also include mythological activities of the patron god “GI” before this birth. For years scholars were confused as to how GI could perform mythological actions before his own birth and concluded that there must be two different GIs (Lounsbury 1980:112). However, Stuart (2006:173–74) has asserted more recently that there was simply one GI who took two forms: pre-birth and post-birth. This “birth”/“arrival”/“earth-touching” event corresponded to the descent of the general deity into his patron deity form, forging a new relationship with the Palenque community.

**PATRON GODS VS. ANCESTORS**

Many scholars have argued that patron deities among the Classic Maya are, in fact, simply deified ancestors (e.g., Proskouriakoff 1978:116–17; Marcus 1983, 1992; McAnany 1995:27; Wright 2011:232–33). But the Maya drew a clear distinction between these two categories. To begin, they had separate words referring to them: *k’ub* for “god” and *mam* for “ancestor.” Furthermore, a close examination of epigraphic data demonstrates that Maya patron gods and ancestors behaved in very different ways from one another. For example, only patron deities appear to have existed in the form of effigies while ancestors did not. Furthermore, patron deities were active participants in the world of human beings. They were given credit for success in war, the overseeing of important rituals, and even the passage of time. Ancestors, on the other hand, were passive, merely gazing down from above upon their descendants (see Baron 2013:165–66). Thus, patron deities and ancestors should be seen as distinct categories of supernatural entities. Deceased ancestors did not become patron deities over time.
There are reasons for the confusion between patron deities and ancestors. One is that ancestors were often depicted with the attributes of general gods, specifically the Sun god (or Moon goddess in the case of female ancestors) and the Maize god. Nevertheless, ancestors were not depicted with attributes of their site’s own patron gods and rulers hardly ever incorporated the names of their polity’s own patron deities into their title strings. Another source of confusion is the fact that patron deities were often described as *ajaws*, or “rulers,” making it seem as though they had once been living rulers of their home communities. They are sometimes even given accession statements. However, dynastic counts (numbered lists of rulers) never originated with patron deities but always with an identifiable human ancestor. Thus, the comparison of patron deities to ancestors should be seen as a rhetorical trope rather than a belief in their origins as human beings.

The integrity of the trichotomy I have outlined here (general deities–patron deities–deceased ancestors) is demonstrated by comparison to modern Maya religious beliefs. John Watanabe (1990) defines three types of supernatural beings among the modern Maya of Guatemala. First, patron saints are associated with community identity and sociality. Watanabe describes them as “accessible” and “worldly.” They are not town founders or ancestors but were introduced to the community in the ancient mythic past. These can be distinguished from a second category, ancestors, who were once real living people and who founded the town and its traditions. Ancestors are believed to be the original owners of family lands, and offerings are made to them in order to establish continued claim to these plots. However, patron saints are not themselves considered ancestors, nor vice versa. A third type of supernatural being is Earth Lords, also referred to as “mountain owners” (Watanabe 1990, 1992; Siegel 1941), Satan (Warren 1978), Judas (Bunzel 1959; Warren 1978; Watanabe 1992), and Maximon (Christenson 2001; Mendelson 1965 in Watanabe 1992:122; Reina 1966). These supernatural entities are believed to own the mountains that surround the community. These mountains are seen as a source of great wealth, and thus Earth Lords control access to worldly success. They are associated with amoral intractability, sometimes stealing away souls, sometimes granting riches.

These three supernatural categories correspond to those I defined above. Patron saints are in many ways the modern equivalents of pre-Columbian patron deities. This link can be readily established by examining the history of the conquest, in which Spanish friars intentionally made use of beliefs in local patron gods to facilitate the introduction of patron saints (Baron 2013). General deities, on the other hand, include creator gods and underworld gods.
Allen Christenson (2001:186–87) argues that Maximon/Earth Lords closely correspond to the ancient Maya underworld deities, especially the one nicknamed “God L” by scholars: “Like [Maximon], God L was an aged deity famous for his lascivious nature . . . Both deities are closely associated with the sacrifice of gods and cosmic devastation . . . and cigars are part of their standard iconography. Also, both God L and [Maximon] are patrons of the underworld, jaguars and long-distance travel.” These gods are aloof and do not represent specific communities or actively participate in human affairs. Finally, ancestors in both periods were once real, living people and thus distinct from the other two categories.

The distinctions between different types of supernatural entities among the Maya are interesting in their own right but are even more significant if we consider what these practices meant for social relationships within Maya communities. Each lineage, whether elite or common, had its own set of ancestors to venerate at the household level. Patricia A. McAnany (1995) has aptly described these practices as “living with the ancestors,” in that they often involved burying lineage members beneath household floors and continuing to interact with them in certain ways after their death. By venerating these ancestors, each lineage in the community, no matter what its social status, maintained links to the past, which conferred privileges such as access to ancestral lands and social status. While Maya rulers also venerated ancestors, McAnany argues that kingship was more than simply kinship writ large. Instead, kingship was essentially an extractive institution that appropriated, politicized, and ultimately superseded kin-based social organization. Rather than a series of autonomous lineages, each with its own rights to land and resources, the institution of hereditary rulership promoted the claims of the ruler to these resources as superior to all lineage-based claims.

This was accomplished in several ways. First, royal ancestors were promoted as superior to all other ancestors within the community, thus conferring exceptional (royal) status upon their descendants. The practice of depicting royal ancestors as fused with the Sun god, Moon goddess, or Maize god was one way to accomplish this task. Another strategy was to neutralize the kinship-based claims of rival lineages: “An effective means of quelling dissent to centralized rule is to dismantle the organizational nexus of that dissent—the kinship structure—and thereby reduce factional conflict to simple class conflict, which yields a more easily controllable playing field since conflict is resolved in favor of those who have the power to resolve it” (McAnany 1995:150). McAnany suggests that the desecration of competing lineage shrines or the appropriation of lineage resources were effective ways of neutralizing competing lineages.
Finally, I propose that a third strategy for overcoming the lineage system was to promote the alternative practice of patron deity veneration. As I discuss below, patron deity veneration practices were ideal for negotiating the contradictions inherent in rulership. As rulers promoted themselves above all other lineages, they faced the task of demonstrating that their authority was advantageous for the community. The discourses associated with patron deity veneration presented the well-being of the entire community, regardless of lineage, as dependent on the benevolence of patron gods, thereby making their veneration more important than ancestor veneration. At the same time, rulers presented themselves as uniquely suited to intercede with patron deities on behalf of the community due to their personal relationships with these gods.

PATRON DEITY VENERATION: BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Unlike ancestors, who belong to particular lineages, patron saints in modern Guatemala are identified with the whole community. Saint images are often dressed in each town’s traditional clothing and are only prayed to in the indigenous language of the community rather than in Spanish (Watanabe 1990, 1992). In the Maya highland region, where language and dress differ substantially from town to town, both of these features serve as markers of ethnic/community identity to a strong degree. Thus, forms of dressing and speaking to the saint reinforce the notion that the saint is a member of the community although he/she may have a Spanish name. Maya community members say that their patron saints provide the community with protection and well-being (e.g., Reina 1966:122). In Santiago Chimaltenango, for example, it is said that the saint protected the community from the worst atrocities of the Guatemalan Civil War, while their immediate neighbors suffered far worse under the army occupation (Watanabe 1990:134). If, however, proper rituals for saints are not carried out, they are believed to punish the whole town (Reina 1966:18).

The associations between community well-being, ethnic identity, and patron saint/deity veneration can be traced back through time. For example, in Native histories from highland Guatemala, the gods that various groups received at the mythical city of Tulan before the first dawning of the sun defined ethnicity. The K’iche narrative presented in the Popol Vuh is most explicit in this regard. At the time it was written, the K’iches consisted of three political units—the Nima K’iches, the Tamub, and the Ilocab—that struggled for dominance. Written from the perspective of the Nima K’iches, the text describes a single ethnic, though not political, identity for the three
groups, based on their worship of the patron god Tohil: “thus was the naming of the three Quichés. But ... it was the same god’s name, Tohil Quiché, for all of them. It was Tohil for the Tamub as well as for the Ilocab. There was only one name for the god among them. Therefore the three groups of Quichés were not divided” (Christenson 2003a:213). As with modern patron saints, Tohil was believed to provide benefits to the whole K’iche nation, such as agricultural abundance, human fertility, security, and protection from shame, misfortune, injury, illness, etc. (289–90).

Differences between the highland nations are also expressed in terms of their allegiance to certain patron gods. While the Popol Vuh describes the progenitors of the K’iches receiving the god Tohil, it specifies that the Kaqchikels received a different god. The Kaqchikels’ own account (Otzoy 1999) names a pair of deities given to them at Tulan. These gods played an important role in subsequent conflicts in the region. The Popol Vuh foreshadows the eventual subjugation of competing ethnic groups by describing their defeat by the trickery of Tohil (Christenson:216–18). And the Kaqchikels’ eventual capture of the effigy of Tohil constituted a major victory over the K’iches (Otzoy 1999:178).

The associations between patron deities and ethnic identity are harder to prove for the Classic Period, chiefly because ethnic designations are rare in hieroglyphic texts and references to commoners are entirely absent, let alone commoner ethnicity. Nevertheless, inscriptions indicate that patron deities were associated with particular places, which suggests that the ethnic associations seen in later periods were likely true of the Classic Period as well.

A good example of this phenomenon is a deity nicknamed “GI-K’awiil” of Ceibal. This deity was also venerated at other nearby sites of the Petexbatun region, including Aguateca, Cancuen, La Amelia, and Tamarandito (Houston and Stuart 1996:302). In the seventh century, an offshoot of the Tikal dynasty founded a new site in the region at Dos Pilas (Houston et al. 1992), apparently bringing its own patron gods from Tikal (Schele and Freidel 1990:389–90). Over time, the Dos Pilas dynasty conquered other sites in the area, including Ceibal, reducing them to client states. Then the Dos Pilas dynasty itself splintered, and one of its offshoots established a petty court at Ceibal, replacing the original dynasty (see Martin and Grube 2000:61–65). By the end of the eighth century, the Petexbatun region had collapsed entirely and Ceibal was depopulated. About thirty years later, a new Terminal Classic dynasty from Ucanal established itself at Ceibal (Schele and Mathews 1998) until the site was eventually abandoned completely. In spite of these dynastic changes, GI-K’awiil remained a patron deity of Ceibal throughout its history. References to his veneration can be found in each of the four periods mentioned: before Ceibal
was conquered by Dos Pilas, after it was conquered, when a splinter of the Dos Pilas dynasty took over the site, and when it was ruled by a dynasty from Ucanal. This demonstrates that GI-K’awiil was associated with Ceibal itself, and presumably the entire community, rather than the ruling dynasty.

Another suggestive example comes from the inscriptions of Copan. There, a series of patron gods of the site were referred to as *koknoom Ux Witik*, “the guardians of Copan” (Lacadena and Wichmann, 2004:106). Rather than protecting a particular lineage, these gods were associated with the place itself, suggesting that they belonged to and protected all the people that lived there. Further evidence for the association of patron gods with entire communities was found during excavation at La Corona. As I will discuss shortly, midden deposits from the patron deity temples and other structures at the site indicate that elites and commoners alike carried out patron deity veneration rituals.

As in later periods, Classic Period patron deities were believed to provide supernatural services for their home communities. On hieroglyphic monuments, they are commonly stated to “oversee” important rituals such as period ending ceremonies (Baron 2013:205). In other cases, texts suggest that they actually caused time to elapse, using the verb *ukabjiyi* (roughly translatable as “to make happen”). Other examples of this verb attribute success in war to patron deities as well (205–6). Such divine intercession would have benefited the whole populace, not just the ruler alone.

In exchange for the benefits that patron saints and patron deities provided to their home communities, they required care, comfort, and maintenance. In the case of modern Maya communities, this usually requires providing the saint’s altar with flowers (Bunzel 1959:166; Cancian 1965:34; Reina 1966:102; Siebers 1999:53; Wisdom 1940:376), incense and candles (Bunzel 1959:166; Cancian 1965:34; Oakes 1951:60; Valladares 1957:148; Vogt 1993:18; Watanabe 1992:124; Wisdom 1940:381), sweeping and maintaining the church building where the saints reside (Cancian 1965:34–35; Oakes 1951:60; Reina 1966:102; Siebers 1999:53; Watanabe 1992:109), making sure the clothes of the saint are washed and in good repair (Cancian 1965:34; Christenson 2001:92; Reina 1966:105, 145; Vogt 1993:118; Wisdom 1940:417), and making sure the saints are generally comfortable (Reina 1966:121).

The feeding of saints is also an important responsibility. Usually, saints are described as “eating” candles and incense, as if such items were food (e.g., Bunzel 1959:166; Vogt 1993:1). For example, one informant claimed that without candles, rum, and incense, God and the saints “would have no tortillas” (Wagley 1949 in Watanabe 1992:76). In other instances, however, saints are believed to actually partake of food and drink (e.g., Reina 1966:115; Wisdom
Saint feeding involves the sharing of food between humans and saints within the context of the annual patron saint fiesta. At these public feasts, all members of the community are invited to participate and large amounts of food and alcohol are consumed (Bunzel 1959:254; Cancian 1965:38; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962:150–56; Siebers 1999:64, 66; Siegel 1941:72; Watanabe 1992:124; Wisdom 1940:385, 387, 449–50).

Similar practices are also described in Native authored histories. The Popol Vuh, the Titulo de Totonicapan, and the Annals of the Kaqchikels all indicate that patron gods during the Postclassic Period existed in effigy form (Christenson 2003a:286; Carmack and Mondloch 1983:177; Otzoy 1999:156). The nations were required to feed these effigies with the hearts of captured enemy warriors as well as with auto-sacrificial blood (Christenson 2003a:219). Other offerings used to feed the gods included flowers, corn, incense, and animals (Carmack and Mondloch 1983:191; Otzoy 1999:155). In one passage from the Annals of the Kaqchikels, the founders of the nation are instructed that they must “carry, feed, and eat with” their gods (Otzoy 1999:156). This implies an obligation of ritual feasting: the Kaqchikels were not only responsible for sustaining the gods but also participated in commensal feasts with them in order for their veneration to be properly achieved. The Title of the Lords of Totonicapan, another K’iche account, also describes the dressing and adorning of the god Tohil: “The son of the ruler was the first to load the hand of Tohil with jades, metals, mirrors and offerings all around, and a loin cloth wound around his hips” (English translation based on Carmack and Mondloch 1983:196, 253; Christenson 2003b).

Such practices can also be traced to the Classic Period in hieroglyphic texts and images. The Temple of the Inscriptions from Palenque describes the gifts of clothing and jewelry given by the site’s rulers to the patron gods on each major period ending (Macri 1988:116–17). These include headdresses, necklaces, ear flares, and “dressings” (Stuart 2006:166–67). Numerous inscriptions also discuss the ritual bathing of deity effigies (Stuart, Houston, and Robertson 1999:ii–50). Finally, effigies were housed in temples analogous to human structures, described with terms such as wayib (dormitory) (Houston and Stuart 1989), otoot (house) (Stuart 1987:33–38), and pibnaah (steam bath) (Stuart 1987:38–39; Houston 1996).

As in later periods, Classic Maya patron gods were also fed. Yaxchilan Lintel 35 describes the patron deities of that site eating two sacrificed noblemen from Calakmul (Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006:123). Tortuguero Monument 6 possibly describes patron gods consuming chocolate and pulque, an alcoholic beverage (Gronemeyer and MacCleod 2010:45). The Temple of
the Inscriptions at Palenque refers to a gathering of lords in which patron gods consumed some sort of beverage.

Archaeological evidence at La Corona points to ritual god feeding as well. Every structure excavated in the Coronitas group has turned up midden deposits that point to the large-scale and long-term consumption of food in the area (see figure 5.2). Excavations on Structure 13R-9 and the back patio it shares with 13R-10 (Acuña 2006, 2009; Patterson, Garza, and Miguel 2012; Ponce and Cajas 2012) recovered massive amounts of ceramics, including many polychromes. Also recovered were animal bones and ceramic drums. Behind Structure 13R-10, Carlos Fernández (2011) excavated a *chultun* (a human-made pit dug into bedrock) that was filled with over 6,000 sherds, including utilitarian vessels, fancy serving vessels, and drums (Caroline Parris, personal communication 2012). It also contained over 1,100 animal remains, including deer, turtle, bird, domestic dog, opossum, large rodent, fish, and mollusks. The good preservation of these animal remains, the lack of taphonomic activity such as rodent gnawing (Fridberg and Cagnato 2012), and the ability to refit sherds from different levels of the chultun (Caroline Parris, personal communication 2014) all indicate that they were probably deposited all at once, in a single event. Other food remains included maize; seeds from the tomato family, including possibly chili seeds; amaranth seeds; and seeds of leafy greens (Fridberg and Cagnato 2012). A deposit next to the chultun included over 400 sherds, many of which were large water jars and food-processing basins (Caroline Parris, personal communication 2012). Over 700 animal remains were recovered, including deer, peccary, opossum, birds, turtles, and mollusks, as well as two teeth of a large feline (Fridberg and Cagnato 2012). Another midden deposit was located next to Structure 13R-7 (Perla Barrera 2013). It too contained numerous vessels, many of them fancy, including Fine Gray Ware, and a small number of animal bones that have yet to be analyzed. These data indicate that the structures along the northern side of the Coronitas group were a venue for large-scale food consumption.

On the patron deity temples themselves, midden deposits were recovered along the back terraces and ceramics were also left on the front terrace platforms. In her analysis, Caroline Parris (personal communication 2012) found that in the midden deposits, 13 percent of the identifiable vessels were plates, 16 percent were jars, 53 percent were bowls, and 18 percent were high-status drinking vessels (vases and Fine Gray bowls). Of the vessels recovered from the front terraces, the identifiable assemblage consisted of 72 percent jars, 22 percent bowls, and 6 percent plates. This high percentage of jars and bowls suggests that liquids were served at the front of the temples. The fact that both
fancy and more utilitarian liquid serving vessels were recovered points to the presence of both elites and nonelites. Individual celebrants probably brought their vessels with them. They were served liquids from the abundant jars on the front terraces. After performing god-feeding rituals, participants then discarded their individual vessels off the back of the temples, where they accumulated as middens. Most of the serving jars remained in place at the front of the temples, perhaps as a way of commemorating the abundance of the feast. The small percentage of plates both on the front and the back of these temples suggests that while meat consumption was an important aspect of ritual feasting in Coronitas—as seen by the faunal remains in nearby middens—actual god-feeding rituals may have involved mostly liquids rather than solid foods, possibly because of the ease with which liquids could be smeared on deity effigies (as opposed to solid foods, which could not be so obviously “consumed”). Another possibility is that low-status celebrants did not use ceramics to hold solid foods but rather tortillas or the leaves of unwrapped tamales.

The evidence from archaeology, inscriptions, Native histories, and modern ethnographies indicates that patron deities—and later, patron saints—were believed to belong to the entire community where they resided. They were believed to protect and sustain their home communities and, in return, their effigies were bathed, clothed, sheltered, and fed. The feeding of patron deities involved ritual feasts in which humans and gods both participated in the consumption of food. The durability of these practices and beliefs across many generations indicates their importance and strength within the Maya understanding of the universe.

**PATRON DEITY VENERATION AND MAYA RULERSHIP**

The veneration of patron deities was tied to the authority of the Maya ruler. This is made explicit in the Popol Vuh. As discussed above, it describes the worship of Tohil as central to K’iche ethnic identity, even for nonruling groups. Somewhat contradictorily, the Nima K’iche rulers simultaneously claim sole responsibility for performing arduous fasts to supplicate the patron gods on behalf of the people: “They [cried] out in their hearts on behalf of their vassals and servants, as well as on behalf of their women and children. Thus each of the lords carried out his obligations. This was their way of showing veneration for their lordship . . . In unity they would go forth to bear the burden of the Quichés. For this was done for all” (Christenson 2003a:290–91). This passage implies that rulers were benevolent and that they fulfilled the important social function of supplicating the gods so that the nation could thrive.
But the passage does not end there. It goes on to claim that the benefits of rulership were ultimately the reward for this ritual service rather than the fruits of tyranny or conquest: “They did not achieve their lordship, their glory, or their sovereignty by deception or theft. They did not merely crush the canyons and the citadels of the small nations and the great nations. Great was the price that the nations gave in return. They sent jade and precious metal . . . They sent precious gems and glittering stones. They sent as well cotinga feathers, oriole feathers, and the feathers of red birds” (Christenson 2003a:291).

Thus, in this rhetoric, the rights and privileges of rulership were a direct result of the ruler’s ritual service. Similar devices appear in Classic Maya monuments. In inscriptions referring to patron deity veneration, rulers took all the credit for properly carrying out rituals for the care and maintenance of patron gods, ignoring the participation of other community members. In addition, rulers claimed close, personal connections to patron deities, probably to argue that they were uniquely suited to carry out certain ritual responsibilities due to their familiarity with the gods. Some inscriptions describe the king-god relationship as like the one between parent and child. We see the phrase ubaah ubuuntabhn (his precious thing) describing patron gods at Palenque (Houston and Stuart 1996:294). The same phrase may also appear on El Encanto Stela 1 of Tikal (Martin 2000a:53). This phrase is usually used in parentage statements to describe a mother’s love for her child. As Stephen D. Houston and David Stuart argue (1996:294), the idea is probably to express the loving care offered by the king for the patron god effigies. At Caracol, Palenque, and La Corona, we also see the phrase ubaah uch’ab yahk’abil, usually expressing the relationship between father and son, used to describe the relationship between king and patron god. Finally, on the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque, a passage records that the ruler “satisfies the hearts of his gods” (utimiw yohl uk’ubil) (Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006:189) with gifts of clothing, jewels, and a new temple. Although not as explicit as the Popol Vuh, Yaxchilan Hieroglyphic Stairway 3 draws a connection between ritual service to a patron god and royal authority. The text describes the accession of a ruler who receives the royal headband, a key symbol of royal power, during the ceremony. This headband is called Bolon Tzak K’ab’ Chaak (Many Conjurings of [Aj] K’ahk [O] Chaak), an important Yaxchilan patron deity. The name of the headband thus suggests that the office of kingship was intimately tied to the ritual responsibility of conjuging the site’s main patron deity.

The rhetorical devices employed in the Popol Vuh and on Classic Maya monuments emphasize both the ways that patron gods benefit the whole community and the ways in which rulers were uniquely positioned to supplicate them.
This allowed rulers to negotiate the contradictory situation in which they were required to present themselves as exceptional while at the same time members of their home communities, with the best interests of all people at heart.

This strategy for negotiating contradictions would have been especially important during times of political uncertainty, community conflict, or dynastic upheaval. This may explain the interesting phenomenon of patron deity introduction and accumulation. A good example can be seen on the Tikal Marcador text, which tells of events surrounding the entrada event of 378 CE. Although there is debate in the scholarly community about what exactly happened at this time (Braswell 2003), we know that the site went through some important dynastic events. A foreign warlord arrived at Tikal and the ruler died on the same day. The new ruler was the son of a foreigner named “Spearthrower Owl.” It has been suggested that these events represent a takeover of Tikal by Teotihuacan (Stuart 2000). The Marcador text indicates that on the same day these events took place, a god arrived at Tikal named Waxaklajun Ubaah Kaan (“Eighteen Images of the Snake”) (Stuart 2000:493–94; Taube 2000). Although this god would eventually appear in iconography and inscriptions at a variety of Maya sites, this is the earliest known reference to him in the Maya area. The deity’s introduction is thus correlated with these dynastic changes, and the god subsequently became important at Tikal and at other sites. This did not mean a replacement of older Tikal patron deities, however. It merely added a new god to the mix.

A similar pattern can be observed in the inscriptions of Copan, although without explicit explanation. At certain points throughout the site’s history, new patron deities appeared, while old deities continued to be venerated. Chante’ Ch’oktaak and Bolon K’awiil were first mentioned in 542 CE during the reign of the eighth ruler. Chante’ Ajaw was first mentioned in 613 CE during the reign of the eleventh ruler. K’uy Nik(?) Ajaw and Mo’ Witz Ajaw were first mentioned in 715 CE, during the reign of the thirteenth ruler. Finally, Tukun Witz Ajaw and Chan Bate’ were first mentioned during the reign of the sixteenth ruler. These accumulated patron gods all persisted up until the end of the hieroglyphic record and in inscriptions of Ruler 16 were referred to as the “guardians of Copan,” as discussed above. This process was probably common at Classic Maya sites, resulting in the long deity lists seen in many inscriptions.

I propose that the sudden introduction of new patron deities at Classic Maya sites was a strategy employed by rulers to compete with the claims to authority of rival candidates to the throne. As discussed above, ancestor veneration was an important religious practice during the Classic Period (and
today) that allowed practitioners to claim certain rights based on heredity. In order to suppress these competing claims, rulers with tenuous authority could replace rival ancestor cults with new patron deity cults. Since patron deity veneration was discursively linked to the well-being of the entire community, the introduction of new patron deities at the expense of one particular lineage could be justified. Thus, the ruler could remove a potential rival while at the same time originating and encouraging new discourses of community cohesion linked to his religious authority. A good example of this process can be seen in the history of patron deity veneration at La Corona.

**PATRON DEITY INTRODUCTION AND ACCUMULATION AT LA CORONA**

As discussed, Structure 13R-5 of the Coronitas group was dedicated as a patron deity shrine in 677 by La Corona ruler K’ínich ? Yook. Structures 13R-2, 13R-3, and 13R-4 were dedicated as shrines to three other patron deities by his father, Chakaw Nahb Chan, in 658. Because of the rich hieroglyphic record at La Corona, it is possible to reconstruct several generations of this dynasty’s family tree (Ringle 1985:152–53; Martin 2008). The family ruled La Corona nearly continuously from 625 ce until after 745 ce (figure 5.3).

Irregularities in the historical record suggest, however, that this family did not exert royal authority for the entirety of La Corona’s history. The panel found in Structure 13R-5 discusses the arrival of a person named Tahn K’ínich Lajua’ to La Corona in 314 ce. While this panel was carved under the authority of K’ínich ? Yook, the text implies that this early settler was not a member of his lineage but instead belonged to a different family. The royal or elevated status of Tahn K’ínich Lajua’ can be inferred from his name. K’ínich refers to the Sun god and is typical in Classic Maya royal names.

K’ínich ? Yook’s family apparently traced its lineage to a ruler nicknamed “Vulture” who ruled during the early sixth century. His reign was associated with the introduction of a patron deity. La Corona Panel 6 (previously known as the Dallas Altar) depicts the arrival of Vulture’s wife at La Corona (Martin 2008). She stands on a palanquin that also carries the large effigy of a Teotihuacan-style deity (Taube 2000). Such palanquins are also depicted on Tikal, where they are known to depict captured patron deities of other sites (Martin 1996, 2000b). The historical record does not give any information about the period immediately following Vulture’s reign, from approximately 550 to 625 ce. This suggests that his lineage lost power at the site once again, as they did not later commemorate rulers from this time.
Vulture’s lineage regained authority at La Corona when Sak Maas came to power in 625 CE. Sak Maas appears to have introduced the patron god Ikiiy, since the two are closely associated in the text of Hieroglyphic Stairway A (David Stuart, personal communication 2012). Sak Maas died a violent death in 656 CE (Grube in Grube, Martin, and Zender 2002:85) after the apparent coup of a man named K’uk’ Ajaw.

K’uk’ Ajaw himself died violently two years later, in 658 CE, the same day that Chakaw Nahb Chan, the son of Sak Maas, came to power. His short-lived rule presents another irregularity in the royal succession of La Corona. After defeating his father’s usurper, Chakaw Nahb Chan built temples for three new patron deities named Yaxal Ajaw, K’an Chaak, and Chak Wayib Chaak (Guenter 2005). This temple dedication took place only thirty-five days after Chakaw Nahb Chan’s violent accession. These temples correspond

Figure 5.3. The family tree of La Corona’s main royal lineage and other La Corona rulers.
to Structures 13R-2, 13R-3, and 13R-4, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Chakaw Nahb Chan’s son K’inich ? Yook dedicated his own patron deity temple in 677 ce, corresponding to Structure 13R-5. His brother and son ruled after him until approximately 745 ce, when the hieroglyphic record falls silent again for four decades. When it resumes, the new ruler appears to belong to a different lineage.¹

There are thus three instances in the history of La Corona in which the main royal family came to power after a different lineage had been in control: the early sixth century, 625 ce, and 658 ce. And on each occasion, a new patron deity (or deities) was introduced. This pattern alone suggests that the introduction of new patron deities was a strategy employed by rulers of La Corona in times of political upheaval. But archaeological excavations reveal that at least one of these introduction events took place at the direct expense of competing ancestor cults.

Excavations in 13R-2 and 13R-4 exposed the back terrace walls of early platforms. I refer to this construction phase as the “Mam Phase.” While it was not extensively explored, a midden that had accumulated behind the Mam Phase platform of 13R-2 contained ceramic material dating to the mid-sixth century (Caroline Parris, personal communication 2012). Following these early platforms, a series of new construction episodes took place on all three structures. First, an 8-meter pyramidal platform was constructed on 13R-4. A similarly sized platform was next constructed on 13R-3, followed by a third on Structure 13R-2 (figure 5.4). While these platforms were built sequentially, not all at once, they appear to date to the mid- to late sixth century, with the 13R-4 platform built around 550 ce and the 13R-2 platform constructed sometime around 600 ce or slightly later. I refer to this major period of construction activity as the “Muk Phase.” The purpose of these platforms became apparent upon deeper excavation: tombs were discovered under the Muk Phase of Structures 13R-2 and 13R-4. (A similar tomb is probably buried under 13R-3, but excavation was not conducted due to safety concerns). Crucially, these tombs correspond to the period of La Corona history between Vulture and Sak Maas, when the epigraphic record is silent and a different lineage probably ruled the community.

The tomb under Structure 13R-2 (Burial 6) was unlooted but had suffered from collapse, water damage, and animal activities. Nevertheless, important information was recoverable (Baron 2012). The tomb had been cut in bedrock below the central axis of the Muk Phase platform above. The occupant of the tomb was an adult, probably a male (Patterson 2012:374). He was laid with his head to the east and his bones were treated with red pigment. He was
buried with the bodies of a turtle and a crocodile as well as hundreds of locally available fresh water mollusks (Baron, Fridberg, and Canuto 2011). Fifteen ceramic vessels were also recovered, although some of them may originally have been placed above the tomb itself. The burial was sealed with a wooden roof that has since rotted away. On top of this wood was placed a woven mat, the impression of which survives in the fill above. After placing this mat and offerings, mourners covered the tomb with a large deposit of lithic flakes. While approximately 7,000 lithics were recovered, it is estimated that the total amount of lithics was between 20,000 and 30,000.

Figure 5.4. South profile of Structure 13R–2 showing principal phases of construction.
The features of this tomb suggest strongly that the occupant was a ruler of La Corona. His bones were treated reverentially with red pigment. Woven mats were symbols of royal authority among the Maya and similar lithic deposits have been found with royal tombs at other sites in the region (Demarest et al. 2003; Moholy-Nagy 1997). The construction of an 8-meter funerary shrine over the tomb also attests to the high status of the individual. Notably, he was not buried with many exotic wealth items. Only small amounts of marine shell were recovered and jade was not recovered at all. This suggests that this ruler did not have strong foreign connections, even though rulers of La Corona’s main royal family had a close relationship with Calakmul, a powerful royal court located in Campeche (Martin 2008; Canuto and Barrientos Q. 2001). This, along with the silence of the epigraphic record about this period, suggests that this ruler was from a different lineage.

The tomb under Structure 13R-4 (Burial 2) was unfortunately looted. However, it had similar features to those seen in Burial 6 (Baron 2011). The tomb was also cut into bedrock and recovered bones had also been treated with red pigment. The funerary platform constructed over the tomb was also 8 meters high. Given the proximity of Burials 2 and 6, it is likely that these two occupants were members of the same lineage. They were both probably rulers of La Corona who reigned during the late sixth century but did not belong to the site’s most successful royal lineage. Their funerary shrines (Structures 13R-2 and 13R-4 along with 13R-3) were constructed sequentially, as each ruler died. Their descendants and family members would have used these shrines to carry out ancestor veneration rituals, in order to established continued claims to hereditary rights.

But in 625 CE, Sak Maas, from Vulture’s lineage, acceded to power at La Corona, introducing the patron god Ik’iwy to bolster his claims. The accession of Sak Maas’s son did not occur smoothly, however, as K’uk’ Ajaw carried out his short-lived coup. When Chakaw Nahb Chan eventually did accede to power, he did so after the violent death of K’uk’ Ajaw. And thirty-five days later, Chakaw Nahb Chan introduced his own patron deities and dedicated their shrines.

The final phase of Structures 13R-2, 13R-3, and 13R-4 corresponds to this event. While the previous Muk Phase consisted of a sequence of platforms, the final phase, nicknamed the “K’uh Phase,” was a single architectural program that united the three platforms (figure 5.4). The K’uh Phase consisted of new front stairways and façades on the three buildings, with the new architecture only measuring about a meter thick. The K’uh Phase did not extend onto the back terraces of the platforms, leaving the Muk Phase terraces exposed.
The superstructures of the three shrines were made from perishable materials, as evidenced by the presence of daub and the lack of recovered vault stones. This rather shoddy architecture is consistent with a construction phase completed in just thirty-five days. Thus, the archaeological record appears to show that Chakaw Nahb Chan, almost immediately upon his accession to power, replaced funerary shrines of a rival lineage with the temples of three newly introduced patron deities.

I propose that the introduction of new patron deities at La Corona was a strategy employed by rulers of the site’s main royal lineage to gain political authority. It is clear from the epigraphic record that this family contended with other elite lineages for control of the community. As at other Maya sites, ancestor veneration would have played a role in this struggle. By venerating important deceased ancestors, elite lineages made claims to hereditary rights to royal authority. The erasure of competing ancestor cults negated the claims of rival lineages, framing them as non-authoritative pretenders to power. By replacing these competing ancestor cults with new patron deity cults, rulers ideally situated themselves in the contradictory position of leadership. This position required the ruler to be, in some ways, unique and apart from the rest of the community, thereby justifying his claims to tribute and status, yet simultaneously part of and concerned with the well-being of the community, thereby inducing followers to obey. The belief that patron deities belonged to and served the entire populace, regardless of lineage, reinforced ethnic similarities between ruler and followers. Yet the ruler’s claims to a close, affective relationship with these gods emphasized his unique ritual responsibilities and the debt owed to him by the community.

But as Kurnick notes in her introduction, it is not enough to identify the rhetorical claims of Maya rulers. In order to understand the creation and maintenance of political authority, it is necessary to investigate whether these claims and strategies were successful. In the case of La Corona, it appears that they were. The many midden assemblages of the Coronitas group indicate that feasting events and god-feeding rituals were an important and long-lasting tradition. The participation of nonelites in these rituals points to the overall success of the royal strategy of introducing new patron deities. By participating in these events, commoners and other elites gave their implicit consent to the authority of the community’s rulers.

It is interesting to note that many of the midden assemblages in the Coronitas group are dated to the late eighth century or later, at a time in which the main La Corona royal family appears to have lost power once again. Thus, the patron deities that were originally introduced to bolster the claims of one
lineage over another came to be naturalized and accepted as a part of local identity, regardless of which dynasty ruled. This is a similar pattern to that seen at Ceibal, described above, where GI-K’awiil remained as patron god in spite of dynastic changes. The rhetorical stance taken by Chakaw Nahb Chan, that patron gods served everyone and that their caregivers were thus worthy of authority, was successful for him but ultimately unsuccessful for his descendants. An alternative royal lineage was equally capable of caring for the patron gods of the community and was therefore worthy of support when it eventually gained power in the late eighth century. The slow accumulation of new deities at Maya sites may reflect this pattern. New rulers introduced new patron gods, like Lewis Carroll’s Red Queen, running just to stay in place.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have given a review of the importance of patron deity veneration among the Classic Maya and its role in the creation and maintenance of political authority. I have demonstrated that patron deities were just one of a series of different supernatural categories recognized by the Maya. They differed from more general deities in their special relationships with particular communities and they differed from ancestors in their active intervention in human affairs. While the Classic Maya practiced ancestor veneration as a means of claiming hereditary rights, patron deities were believed to look after the well-being of the entire community. In order to supersede the claims of competing elite lineages, Maya rulers took steps to neutralize the power of rival ancestor cults and simultaneously promoted themselves as having a special relationship with the patron deities of the community. In many cases, Maya rulers even introduced new deities as a way of further reinforcing their authority over their followers.

This process can readily be seen in the archaeological and epigraphic record at La Corona. Throughout the site’s history, periods of civil conflict and dynastic change resulted in the introduction of new patron gods by the main royal lineage of the community. And in some cases, these newly introduced deities were given temples built directly atop the now defunct ancestor shrines of a competing lineage. This strategy appears to have been successful, as there is evidence showing the participation of nonelites in patron deity veneration rituals. In the later history of the site this ruling lineage became a victim of its own success by failing to adequately differentiate itself from other potential rulers. Thus, any ruler who cared for patron gods was worthy of support, no matter which lineage he belonged to.
These strategies and their results reveal some of the complexities of Classic Maya rulership. It was not sufficient for rulers to be unique, nor to be similar to other members of the community. To maintain authority, rulers had to be both unique and similar. And strategies that began as a means of negotiating this contradiction may have ultimately led to different results over generations of reinterpretation. As at La Corona, many Maya communities display a gradual accumulation of patron deities as new gods were introduced through time. But as the veneration of these gods became a routinized aspect of community religious life, it was no longer sufficient for the maintenance of political authority by particular rulers. Instead, these leaders were forced to introduce more new gods, or to adopt new strategies altogether, as the need arose. By examining patron deity veneration, therefore, we gain a glimpse into the highly complex and contradictory nature of political authority during the Classic Period. Maya rulers were forced to support their claims to authority through a never-ending process of negotiation and reassessment.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Marcello Canuto and Tomás Barrientos, directors of the La Corona Regional Archaeology Project, for their support over the years that I worked at La Corona. I would also like to thank Diana Fridberg, Clarissa Cagnato, Caroline Parris, and Erin Patterson for sharing the results of their artifact analyses with me and all the other members of the project for years of fruitful collaboration. The research described in this chapter was made possible by a Wenner-Gren Foundation Dissertation Fieldwork Grant (8260), the University of Pennsylvania Department of Anthropology, the Penn Museum, and the Louis J. Kolb Society.

NOTE

1. This assessment is based on the fact that the main La Corona royal family was strongly allied to Calakmul and married princesses from its royal line on three separate occasions (Martin 2008). The later ruler of the site, however, married a woman from Tikal, Calakmul’s traditional enemy (Barrientos et al. 2011).

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