This chapter explores the nature and characteristics of the deity Tlaloc in the Maya region and reviews his various avatars, including his feline, caterpillar-serpent, moth, and owl forms. As noted in the introduction, meteors share visual similarities with lightning, and the Mayan terms used to describe meteors were also used to describe lightning. There is significant evidence that the Maya incorporated the Central Mexican Tlaloc deity and his various avatars into their pantheon as types of lightning deities specifically identified with meteors and obsidian (Bassie-Sweet 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b; Bassie-Sweet et al. 2015).

METEORS, METEORITES, AND COMETS

Meteoroids are small rocky or metallic debris traveling through space. When meteoroids enter the earth’s atmosphere, they catch fire and burn, creating a flash of light called meteors (also known as falling stars or shooting stars). Meteors are most often white, but they can also be blue, green, yellow, or red. Meteor showers are simply numerous meteors that appear to radiate from the same point in the sky. In modern nomenclature, they are usually named after the closest constellation to the radiant point, like the Perseid meteor showers that now occur in mid-August in the vicinity of Perseus. Meteors are most frequently seen at night, but large, bright meteors called fireballs or bolides are visible even during the day. Very large fireballs are
called superbolides and can be accompanied by sonic booms. Large meteors can leave a smoky streak in the sky that can last up to thirty minutes. From a visual perspective, meteors and comets are completely different. Comets are asteroid-like objects that look like white smudges. They remain in the sky for long periods of time and move slowly in relation to the background of stars. Unlike meteors, comets are exceedingly rare.

In Mesoamerica, meteors and comets are described in multiple ways. Most often they are characterized as fiery arrows, torches, cigar butts, worms, caterpillars, snakes, supernatural beings with malevolent qualities, and omens of doom. Comets are visually associated with smoke and fire, as seen in the Q’eqchi’ term for comet butz’ chahim “smoke star” and the Yucatec terms such as budzal ek “smoky star” and kak nob ek “fire big star” (Sedat 1955:198; Lamb 1981; Köhler 1989, 2002). Welden Lamb (1981:238) noted that the Yucatec term halal ek “arrow star” is glossed as “comet that runs,” while u halal dzutan “arrow of the warlock” is explained as an ignited comet. He insightfully noted that both terms suggest the speed of a meteor, not a comet. The Lacandón Maya believe comets are the discarded cigar butts of the rain gods (Tozzer 1907:158). In a similar fashion, the Ch’orti’ characterize meteors as the cigar butt of a god, as do the Yucatec Maya (Brinton 1881, 1883; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:206; Girard 1966:74). In nineteenth-century Yucatán, Daniel Brinton (1883:252) noted that meteors were thought to be stumps of huge cigars thrown down from the sky by thunderbolt deities called Balams. In his description of the Yucatec of Quintana Roo, Alfonso Villa Rojas (1945:102) described a mythical place in the East where all the various Chahk gods gather at the start of the rainy season “to receive orders and arrive at understandings before going out to water the world.” The first thunders heard at this time of year are said to be the signal for this meeting. The meteors seen in the East are thought to be the cigarette butts of these Chahks.

As streaks of light, meteors are naturally associated with fire and smoke. This is reflected in the use of the Tzotzil term chôb “torch” to describe both meteors and St. Elmo’s Fire (Laughlin 1975:137). In the Tzotzil and Tzeltal areas, the co-essence called poslom is identified as a meteor and a fire (Laughlin 1975:284, 513). In Postclassic highland Chiapas, it was thought that ritual specialists could transform into thunderbolts and balls of fire (meteors) (Núñez de la Vega 1988:133; Calnek 1988:46). Francisco Núñez de la Vega noted that one of the co-essences of ritual specialists could take the form of tzihuízin, which he identified as cognate with the Postclassic Aztec deity Xiuhcoatl (Brinton 1894:20). Karl Taube (2000) has identified a number of Mesoamerican deities including Xiuhcoatl as meteors, and these will be discussed below. The identification of leaders with thunderbolts and meteors is still found in highland Chiapas.
(Guiteras-Holmes 1961; Vogt 1969; Hermitte 1964; Nash 1970; Laughlin 1977; Spero 1987; Pitarch 2010:44). The leaders of the community are thought to use their thunderbolt and meteor co-essences to protect the community. After death, the souls of these same leaders are thought to live on in the mountains surrounding the community and continue their guardian roles.1 Edwin Braakhuis (2010:31–32) noted the Q’eqchi’ and Ixil beliefs that mountain gods take the form of meteors or send each other messages in the form of meteors.

THE MYTHOLOGY OF METEORS AND OBSIDIAN

As noted in the introduction, the so-called star wars logograph includes a star sign with water falling from it. Citing a number of ethnographic sources that relate meteors to war, David Stuart (1995, 2011) has suggested that the star refers to a meteor, that is, a falling star. However, across Mesoamerica, meteors and meteorites are not associated with water but are thought to be the obsidian arrows, darts, and spears of certain deities (Tozzer 1907:157; Laughlin 1975:513, 1988:423; Köhler 1989, 2002; Tedlock 1992:180–181; Milbrath 1999; Taube 2000, 2000b:292, 330). A colonial period K’iche’ term for a meteor is ch’olanic ch’umil “star that makes war” (Tedlock 1992:180). While the Lacandón Maya and Tzotzil refer to meteors as arrows, the K’iche’ specifically call them flaming arrows, and they believe the ancient obsidian points and blades they encounter in their fields are the remnants of a meteor.2 The identification of meteors with obsidian is also reflected in the characterization of meteorites and obsidian as the feces of stars. As noted by Carlos Trenary (1987–1988) and Ulrich Köhler (1989), such terms are found in Central Mexico languages as well as in Ch’ol, Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojolabal, K’iche’, Kaqchiquel, and Yucatec. The description of obsidian as excrement of stars can be compared to the Mayan terms for charcoal and embers that literally mean the “shit of fire” (Kaufman 2003:504–505). In this context, charcoal and embers are what remain after the firewood is spent. In a similar fashion, coffee grounds are referred to as coffee shit (Laughlin 1975:93). Obsidian is not being compared to feces per se but rather metaphorically as the remnants of a shooting star.3

There are four general categories of animals in Maya taxonomies—mammals, reptiles/amphibians, birds, and fish—that are effectively defined by their modes of locomotion: walkers, crawlers, fliers, and swimmers, respectively (Hopkins 1980). Snakes, caterpillars, and worms are thus classified together. This is reflected in the Ch’ol term lukum “worm,” which also can be used to refer to snakes (Hopkins et al. 2010), and the Tzotzil term chon “snake” that also describes caterpillars (Acheson 1962:4; Laughlin 1988:192). It is thought
that when meteors hit the ground, they can take the form of snakes, caterpillars, worms, or maggots. The Tojolabal characterize sansewal as lightning or meteors that take the form of little worms of fire or small black snakes (Lenkersdorf 1979:13, 312, 325, 370). The Codex Telleriano-Remensis illustrates a meteor as a red, yellow, and blue striped caterpillar with spines along its back (Köhler 2002:4). A similarity between these stinging animals and obsidian is that both can inflict painful wounds just from handling them. Many obsidian eccentricities resemble such creatures.

Charles Wagley (1949:65) recorded several myths regarding the co-essences of the Mam of Santiago Chimaltenango in northwestern highland Guatemala. There is a common belief that whatever happens to a person’s co-essence will happen simultaneously to the person. Numerous stories tell of a hunter killing a puma or jaguar in the mountains, only to find out later that someone in the village died at the same time. The explanation is that the prey was actually the co-essence of the deceased. In Wagley’s story, a hunter killed a puma with his machete, and at the same time a young man in the village was struck by a ball of fire and subsequently died. The wounds on the puma and the man were on the same parts of the body, and there was consensus that the hunter had killed the man’s co-essence. The interesting part of this story is that a machete, the modern equivalent of ancient stone weapons, was equated with a ball of fire. It is reminiscent of obsidian and flint weapons that were identified with fiery meteors and thunderbolts, respectively.

Given the association of meteors with weapons of war, it is not surprising that meteors were viewed as omens of illness, death, and destruction throughout Mesoamerica (Alcorn 1984:143; Tedlock 1992:181). As an example, a flu epidemic in the village of Chan Kom was believed to be caused by the Geminid meteor shower that had been particularly impressive that year (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1934:276). Oliver La Farge and Douglas Byers (1931:129) noted the Jacalteca belief that if a falling star (tahuwi’) bursts over a house, someone in the house will die. A meteor falling near a house is a sign of impending illness. The Tzotzil believe the poslom co-essence, which takes the form of meteors, causes illness (Laughlin 1975:284). The Ch’orti’ think a meteor has the ability to destroy crops and is a sign that someone has died or will die (Metz 2006:130, personal communication 2017).

**REPRESENTATIONS OF OBSIDIAN**

Some depictions of Classic period spears incorporated both flint and obsidian, like the one on Yaxchilán Lintel 41 (figure 3.1). The spearhead itself was
made from flint, but obsidian points were imbedded into the shaft and form a zigzag-like pattern. While flint is more durable, obsidian makes a sharper tool for cutting and slicing. For example, it has been noted that during the twentieth century, when the Lacandón Maya were still frequently hunting with bows and arrows, they preferred obsidian arrowheads over those of flint because they were more effective at killing prey (Nations and Clark 1983). The Dominican priest Francisco Ximénez (1967:328) commented on the superiority of obsidian battle weapons used by the Postclassic K’iche’ over the metal swords of the Spanish. Quoting the conquistador Bernal Diaz, he stated that they were so sharp they could cut off a horse’s head.

The manner in which obsidian is depicted in Mesoamerican art is varied. At Teotihuacán, obsidian blades are illustrated with a hooked shape that is decorated with a zigzag motif (Séjourné 1956:122) (figure 3.2). In some examples, the blade has blood dripping from the end, a bloody heart impaled on it, or both. These obsidian blades are found in many contexts ranging from handheld objects to elements of place names. Such blades are often seen decorating the headdresses of Tlaloc warriors. The obsidian zigzag motif is also
found in Postclassic Central Mexican codices. As an example, the name of the ruler Itzcoatl “obsidian serpent” was represented by a serpent with either obsidian points along its back (Matrícula de Tributos folio 2r) or the zigzag design (Codex Telleriano-Remensis folio 29r). As will be discussed below, the Maya frequently incorporated the Teotihuacán obsidian zigzag design into their portrayals of Tlaloc, but their semantic markers for obsidian itself are quite different.

Illustrations of obsidian objects with hooked shapes are quite common in Maya art (Schele 1984; Schele and Miller 1986; Nielsen and Helmke 2008). As an example, the curved shape of a prismatic blade is found on a personified obsidian bloodletter used for penis perforation (Joralemon 1974). In hieroglyphic texts, the T712 ch’ab “penance/creation” sign is represented by a hook-shaped obsidian lancet that resembles a stylized fist (Schele 1984:27–38; Houston et al. 2006:130–132; Stone and Zender 2011:75). The lancet is marked with the T24 lightning luminosity sign, which is consistent with the notion that the Maya categorized meteors as a type of lighting (figure 3.3a).

Bowls containing the T712 obsidian bloodletter as well as prismatic blades, stingray spines, and cords used in bloodletting are illustrated on a number of Yaxchilán lintels, such as Lintels 13, 14, 15, 17, 24, and 25. On Lintel 25, the
T24 sign infixed on the T712 obsidian bloodletter has been replaced with a T504 ak’ab “night, darkness” sign (see figure 6.3). In many hieroglyphic texts, the T712 sign appears in the metaphoric couplet u ch’ab (T712) u ak’ab (T504) “his creation, his darkness” that is associated with acts of creation and devotion involving bloodletting (MacLeod and Houston cited in Stuart 1995:231; Stuart 2005a; Knowlton 2012) (figure 3.3b). Stuart (2005a:283) commented that the ch’ab-ak’ab couplet “is so pervasive in the Classic texts that it can be rightly regarded as one of the principal operating forces of kinship and its ritual duties.” In some examples of the ch’ab-ak’ab couplet, the T712 and T504 signs are conflated and the T504 sign takes the place of the T24 infix, just as it does in the Yaxchilán example (figure 3.3c). Conflation of signs is a common convention. There are many examples in Maya art of obsidian eccentrics, axes, spearheads, sacrificial blades, and scepters that are infixed with the T504 ak’ab “night, darkness” sign. Marc Zender has noted that the ak’ab “night, darkness” sign is used as a semantic marker on some animals to indicate their nocturnal

Figure 3.3. a. T712 ch’ab sign, b. u ch’ab u ak’ab couplet, c. u ch’ab u ak’ab conflated signs
nature, and it has long been thought that the T504 sign appears in these obsidian contexts as a semantic marker to indicate the black translucent nature of obsidian (Zender cited in Houston et al. 2006:13; Stone and Zender 2011:145). However, given the pervasiveness of the ch'ab-ak'ab couplet and its conflated form, it is apparent that the appearance of the ak'ab “night, darkness” sign on obsidian bloodletters in Maya art is a clear example of how hieroglyphic text is directly incorporated into imagery (Bassie-Sweet 2019; Bassie-Sweet and Hopkins in press).

Objects in Maya art can be presented in personified forms. The handles on obsidian bloodletters and stingray spine bloodletters that were used to perforate the penis were depicted as a jaw-less zoomorphic creature wearing a headdress composed of three knots and long feathers (Joralemon 1974). Either a stingray spine or an obsidian blade marked with T24 or T504 signs protrudes out of the mouth like a tongue, such as the bloodletter held by the young K’inich Kan Bahlam II on the Tablet of the Foliated Cross (see figure 1.17). This zoomorph with its three-knot motif is also found decorating costume elements, like the ends of loin cloths positioned over the groin (see figure 0.10). Just the feathers and knots can function as the pars pro toto form of the bloodletter. For instance, a number of parentage statements employ the T712 ch’ab sign to express the relationship between a father and son. On Naranjo Stela 8 (F7), the knotted headdress of the bloodletter zoomorph substitutes for the T712 sign.

The obsidian blade itself is personified in many images. On Piedras Negras Stela 7 and Stela 8, the ruler is depicted dressed in Teotihuacán-style costumes while holding a spear in his right hand. The hook-shaped obsidian spearhead is marked with the T504 ak’ab sign and takes the form of a skeletal being (figure 3.4). Hanging from the distal point of the spear is a Teotihuacán-style symbol for a bloody heart. Direct analogies can be made to the numerous images of hearts impaled on obsidian knives that are found in the art of Teotihuacán (figure 3.2). Many illustrations of hook-shaped obsidian eccentrics are tipped with the sacrificed heart motif, such as those found on Dos Pilas Stela 2 and Aguateca Stela 2 (see figures 0.7, 0.8). Both of these monuments depict Dos Pilas Ruler 3 with obsidian eccentrics decorating his costume elements. His loincloth and hipcloth display Tlaloc’s face with obsidian bloodletters curling out from the mouth and tipped with the sacrificed heart symbol. The sacrificed heart symbolizes the lethal nature of these obsidian objects and their direct association with human sacrifice. The sacrificed heart is distinct from the T506 sign that represents the Mayan word obl “heart.”
Another example of Teotihuacán sacrificed heart symbolism is featured in the Teotihuacán-style costume of the Copán ruler K’ahk’ Uti’ Witz’ K’awiil depicted on Copán Stela 6 (figure 3.5). The apron and shoes of K’ahk’ Uti’ Witz’ K’awiil are decorated with the sacrificed heart motif. In Teotihuacán art, fire is illustrated as a swirl of flame that is quite distinct from the Tl22 smoke-flame scroll of Maya art. Beneath the sacrificed heart motif on the apron are three Teotihuacán fire signs. The implication of this juxtaposing is that sacrificial hearts were destined not only to be consumed directly by a god but also to be burned as an offering to him. Such sacrificial burned offerings were a pan-Mesoamerican tradition. The fact that the Copán artist chose to use the Teotihuacán fire symbols is significant.

**THE TRAITS OF TLALOC**

Tlaloc is most often illustrated as a skeletal head that lacks a mandible (figure 3.6). His nose is often represented by a tri-lobed element that resembles the number three or the capital letter E. Obsidian eccentricites in this shape have been recovered from archaeological contexts. Tlaloc’s most obvious diagnostic trait is his goggle-like eyes. It has long been recognized that these eyes represent the finger holes of an atlatl (Nuttall 1891), and the implication of
this identification is that Tlaloc was specifically equated with this type of weapon. This is certainly apparent in the weapons held by Maya lords who are dressed in the costume of Tlaloc and carry atlatls, such as Ruler 3 of Dos Pilas-Aguateca (see figures 0.7, 0.8).

While Tlaloc consistently wears earrings marked with a ʼkan “yellow” sign, the primary element of his headdress is the so-called Central Mexican year sign. Darts and fire torches are also frequently seen in his headdress, as are bundles of Tagetes lucida (yellow marigold) flowers that were used as incense offerings (Taube 2000; Christenson 2007:233; Nielsen 2006). Some Tlaloc headdresses also have a rectangular base decorated with tassels. What the tassels represent is uncertain, but it is a common form found in the art of Teotihuacán (see the Atetelco murals).

In many Tlaloc depictions, his effigy, his headdress, or both are placed on a jaguar-hide bundle, such as the Tlaloc pictured on vessel K1905, the Yaxchilán Structure 21 murals, Lintel 25, and Stela 35 (figures 3.5, 6.3, 6.4). Other Tlaloc bundles are made from deerskin, like the Tlaloc headdresses featured on Dos Pilas Stela 2 and Aguateca Stela 2 that are worn by Dos Pilas-Aguateca Ruler 3 (see figures 0.7, 0.8). The headdress is attached to a deerskin bundle in the form of a deer haunch, which includes the hoof of the deer as a semantic marker to distinguish it from jaguar skin. As will be discussed below, the owl and moth manifestations of Tlaloc are also presented as sacred bundles in a number of contexts.

The Tlaloc headdress often also includes the headdress and accoutrements that represent the office of a Chʼajom. An example is found on
Yaxchilán Lintel 25 that illustrates a double-headed caterpillar-serpent (the Waxaklajuun Ub’aaah Kan, see below) with a Tlaloc emerging from the jaws of the lower head (see figure 6.3). The Ch’ajom insignia is placed over Tlaloc’s forehead at the base of the year sign and jaguar bundle headdress. The upper head of the Lintel 25 serpent disgorges a female named Lady Ohl who is carrying a shield and a double-headed flint spear. She wears a face mask in the form of Tlaloc as well as Tlaloc’s jaguar-skin bundle and year sign headdress. Like the lower Tlaloc, a Ch’ajom insignia is pictured at the base of the year sign. However, there is also a second Ch’ajom insignia above Lady Ohl’s forehead, indicating that she is a Ch’ajom. She has the bound ponytail of a Ch’ajom, which confirms this identification. Kneeling before Lady Ohl is Lady K’abal Xook, the wife of the Yaxchilán king Shield Jaguar III. She too wears a Ch’ajom insignia on her forehead and has the bound ponytail. On Yaxchilán Stela 35, another Yaxchilán queen also wears a Tlaloc headdress, Ch’ajom insignia, and ponytail (figure 3.7).

WAXAKLAJUUN UB’AAH KAN AS A MANIFESTATION OF TLALOC

In Maya mythology, deities had various manifestations. As an example, the creator grandfather Itzamnaaj had turtle, laughing falcon, opossum, and conch shell forms (Taube 1992a; Bassie-Sweet 2000, 2008). Like these deities, Tlaloc had a number of manifestations that included creatures with caterpillar-serpent, feline, moth, and owl features that will be discussed below. In Maya art, Tlaloc is frequently seen emerging from the mouth of a double-headed serpent that is named in hieroglyphic texts as Waxaklajuun Ub’aaah Kan, roughly translated as “18 are the faces of the snake” (Schele and Freidel...
1990; Houston and Stuart 1996:299; Stuart 2000a:493). As noted in chapter 2, the Chahk deity K’awiil is often portrayed with a leg that takes the form of a thunderbolt serpent. In the Copán Structure 26 temple inscription, Tlaloc’s leg takes the form of the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan in a manner thematically parallel to the depictions of the leg of the K’awiil as a thunderbolt serpent (figure 3.8). In other words, the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan was a manifestation of Tlaloc (Bassie-Sweet et al. 2015; Bassie-Sweet 2019).

An examination of the attributes of the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan indicates that it has a snake-like body (hence his name includes the word kan “snake”). While most frequently illustrated as a double-headed serpent, the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan is occasionally depicted with the tail of a rattlesnake, such as on Piedras Negras Stela 9 (figure 3.27). A stucco building facade at Acanceh illustrates a series of mountain toponyms with each place represented by a different animal (Miller 1991). One such place name is the rattlesnake form of the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan (figure 3.9a). The Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan cradles a hooked obsidian eccentric with its body. The body is shown with the underbelly of a snake, but it is also marked with Teotihuacán-style Lepidoptera signs.

Lepidoptera include butterflies and moths, and the Maya employ the same term for both of these insects.
As an example, large moths and butterflies are called *pejpem* (Ch’ol) and *pehpen* (Tzeltal), while smaller ones are *sulup* (Ch’ol) and *supul* (Tzeltal) (Hunn 1977:280–285; Juán Jesús Vásquez, personal communication 2004). This same lack of distinction is found in Nahuatl, where *papalotl* refers to both butterflies and moths. As Taube (2000) has demonstrated, a primary diagnostic trait of the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan is stylized Lepidoptera wings and antennae that suggest it is a type of caterpillar (the larval form of Lepidoptera) (vessels K1350, K1351, K1810, K1899, K3057, K3072, K4993, K5621, K8266). Caterpillars were seen as a kind of serpent, as reflected in the entry in a late sixteenth-century Tzotzil dictionary where the term *chon* refers to both snakes and caterpillars (Laughlin 1988:192). On Yaxchilán Lintel 25, the double-headed Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan has a body like a caterpillar.

There is a series of pottery vessels that depict just the head of the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan caterpillar-serpent (Robicsek and Hales 1981:table 15, table 16). In these examples, the Lepidoptera wings decorate the eyebrow and snout of the beast. The superior molding of the Acanceh stucco facade is adorned with a series of Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan eyes, with their eyebrows decorated with Lepidoptera wings. The pupils are illustrated as cross-hatched circles. In Maya art, cross-hatching is a convention used to indicate the color black. The obsidian zigzag design forms the base of the Lepidoptera wings and indicates the close association of obsidian with such wings. Another example of the
zigzag design is found on the eye of the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan in the place name below the molding (figure 3.9b). Similar motifs are seen on vessel K1350 and BOD table 15b; each illustrates two Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan heads decorated with Lepidoptera wings and the zigzag motif (figure 3.9c). This same juxtaposing of Lepidoptera wings and the zigzag design is found on the border of the hipcloth and apron worn by Dos Pilas-Aguateca Ruler 3 (see figures 0.7, 0.8). The Lepidoptera wings on the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan are semantic markers to indicate it is a caterpillar. Although the Lepidoptera wing elements of the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan have been identified as those of a butterfly (Taube 2000:282–285), there is clear evidence that Tlaloc was
identified with the Black Witch Moth (Bassie-Sweet 2011, 2019; Bassie-Sweet et al. 2015:136–138) (see discussion below).

As Taube (1992b) has cogently argued, the prototype for the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan is the Teotihuacán serpent illustrated on the facade of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent that he has nicknamed “the Teotihuacán war serpent.” As noted by a number of authors, there were eighteen of these beings on each side of the staircase. The skin of this serpent is formed by shell-like platelets or spangles, and it wears a Tlaloc headdress. In Maya art, many illustrations of the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan have this platelet surface, particularly when worn as a headdress, as on Piedras Negras Stela 7, Piedras Negras Stela 8, and Bonampak Stela 3 (figures 3.18, 3.31, 5.7). The remains of such platelet headdresses have been found in royal tombs (Stone 1989; Bell et al. 2004). On Naranjo Stela 2, the ruler K’ahk’ Tiliw Chan wears a Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan headdress, and the rattlesnake tail of the beast appears between the ruler’s legs (figure 3.10). The loincloth apron and shield of K’ahk’ Tiliw Chan are also decorated with images of the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan.

Taube (1992b, 2000) noted that the Teotihuacán war serpent Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan was the precursor for the Postclassic Xiuhcoatl serpent of Central Mexico that has similar Lepidoptera wings and often takes the form of a serpent or a caterpillar. As noted by Taube, the Xiuhcoatl is the personification of an atlatl and a spear. Taube observed that the snout of the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan has a back-curved shape that is reminiscent of the hooked end of an atlatl and that coronal atlatls are often depicted as the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan, such as on Bonampak Stela 3 (figure 5.7). Taube also noted that meteors were characterized as obsidian spear darts or arrows and were thought to be manifestations of Xiuhcoatl (one of the meanings of the word *xiuh* is meteor). The back-curved snouts of these beasts are often decorated with numerous round star signs that likely refer to a meteor shower. Given that there were eighteen images of the Teotihuacán war serpent on the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, it is possible that the name Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan “18 the faces of the snake” refers to a meteor shower (Bassie-Sweet 2011; Bassie-Sweet et al. 2015:132).9

Meteor showers were associated with the drilling of fire, and a reed dart or arrow frequently served as the vertical drill in Central Mexican new fire ceremonies (Seler 1990–2000:3:213, Taube 2000). The role of the Xiuhcoatl as a fire drill was noted by Sahagún, and a number of scenes illustrate fire being drilled on the back of a Xiuhcoatl (Seler 1990–2000:3:215; Taube 2000). Flames were frequently illustrated as feathers in Central Mexican art, and atlatls are often shown with fire-like feathers in place of the round star signs (Taube 2000:274). Many examples of the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan headdress include a burning
dart or torch in reference to the fire nature of this deity (Nielson 2003).

The Yaxchilán ruler Bird Jaguar IV is illustrated on Lintel 8 in the midst of a battle, while Lintel 41 shows him either preparing for this battle or returning from it (see figures 0.12, 3.1). In both scenes, he carries a long spear. The caterpillar body of the Xiuhcoatl represents an obsidian dart (Taube 2000), and illustrations of this beast depict its body as trapezoid segments (figure 3.11). Below the spearhead on Lintel 41, two such trapezoid segments flare out from the spear shaft. Below this pair of stylized caterpillar bodies is a series of obsidian chips embedded in the staff. The chips form the zigzag pattern that is used at Teotihuacán to represent obsidian. Long spears were the preferred weapon in the Classic period for close-contact warfare (Aoyama and Graham 2015:14). On Copán Stela 6 and Naranjo Stela 2, the leg ornaments of the ruler are decorated with the obsidian zigzag pattern and the trapezoid segments (figures 3.5, 3.10). Similar trapezoid segments appear on the leg ornaments of a ruler illustrated on Naranjo Stela 19 and Copán Structure 26 (figures 3.12, 3.19). The implication of this imagery is that the legs of the ruler were thought to be like obsidian spears. In other words, the ruler did not just throw Tlaloc’s meteor spear, he was equated with it. Such a concept fits with the many examples of lords dressed as the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan. As noted by Stephen Houston and David Stuart (1998), donning the costume of a deity transforms the individual into that god.
Figure 3.11. Yaxchilán Lintel 41 spear, Xiuhcoatl

Figure 3.12. Trapezoid motif, Copán Structure 26
FELINES

Tlaloc appears to have had both jaguar and puma manifestations. Before addressing these avatars, a brief discussion about the nature of felines and their portrayal in Maya art is necessary. Jaguars (*Panthera onca* (Proto-Mayan *b’ahlam*)) and pumas (*Puma concolor* (Proto-Mayan *kōj*, Kaufman 2003:582)) have ranges that are quite similar and that extend across the Maya region. Both of these predators stalk and pounce on their quarry. The preferred method of killing is to grab the head of their prey and pierce it with their powerful jaws. This is thematically similar to the standard convention used in Maya art to represent the capture of a foe where the victor grabs the hair of the victim. The obvious visual difference between jaguars and pumas is that jaguars are spotted with a black rosette pattern, while pumas are born with black spots but lose them as adults. In comparison to pumas, jaguars have bigger heads and are much larger, stockier, and heavier. Jaguars also differ from pumas in that they are powerful swimmers, and they often have territory adjacent to water sources. Although the term *kōj* “puma” has a wide distribution in Mayan languages, a sixteenth-century Tzotzil dictionary refers to pumas as *tzajal bolom* “reddish jaguar,” while the Ch’ol refer to pumas as *chāk b’aijum* “red jaguar” in reference to their fur, which can range from yellow-brown to deep reddish (Laughlin 1988:504; Hopkins et al. 2010:19). These terms indicate that pumas are thought to be a type of jaguar and imply that spotted jaguars are the dominant category.

There is a jaguar logograph (T751) that highlights its fangs and short pointed ears (figure 3.13a). Phonetic substitution patterns indicate that the T751 sign represents the word *b’ahlam* “jaguar.” The *b’ahlam* sign frequently, but not always, features the spotted coat of the jaguar, and it often has *ak’ab* “night, darkness” signs on its cheek to mark it as an animal of the night. The sign used to represent water is a logograph of a water lily. In some instances of jaguar portraiture, the jaguar has a water lily on its forehead that is likely a reference to this feline’s love of water. The *b’ahlam* logograph is a very common sign in the hieroglyphic corpus and is often found in the nominal phrases of Maya lords. As an example, the name of the Seibal king Yich’aak Bahlam “the claw of the jaguar” is composed of a logograph of a jaguar paw and the *b’ahlam* sign (Stuart 1987:27) (figure 3.13b). The jaguar paw logograph is used as the generic sign for “claw.” The same is true for the logographs composed of a jaguar’s tail that were used to represent the word *neh* “tail” and a headless jaguar (T832) that was used to represent the word *k’ew* “pelt” (Stone and Zender 2011:205; Zender et al. 2016). These are cases where the prime example of a category is used to represent the entire category, and they demonstrate the high status of the jaguar.
In Classic and Postclassic period inscriptions, the fourteenth day name of the *tzolk'in* calendar is represented by a logograph of a feline’s eye with three black spots (the T524 sign), and it occasionally has phonetic complements that indicate it represents the word *hix* (Stuart 1987:19; Stuart and Houston 1994:21). The fourteenth *tzolk'in* day name is also *Hix* in the Postclassic–early colonial period calendar of Yucatán and in the surviving highland calendars (Akateko, Chuj, Ixil, Kaqchikel, K’iche’, Pokomchi, Q’eqchi’, Mam, and Tzeltal) (some sources write the word as *ix*). In Q’eqchi’, *hix* refers to a jaguar, although the term does not appear in other Mayan languages outside of the calendar context (Sedat 1955:264; Wilson 1972:399). Evidence that *Hix* represents a jaguar is found in an AD 1722 record of K’iche’ day names where the fourteenth day name is not *Hix* but rather *Balam* “jaguar,” suggesting an equivalency between the terms *hix* and *balam* (Weeks et al. 2009:77). In a colonial period Yucatec document regarding day names, *Hix* is described as “The fierce jaguar. Bloody his mouth; bloody his claws. Devourer of flesh. Killer of men” (Thompson 1950:82). As Thompson noted, the day name Hix is parallel to the Central Mexican calendar day name Ocelotl “jaguar.”

Not all day signs retain the same value outside of a calendar context, but the T524 *hix* sign does. In some of these instances, *hix* is represented by a jaguar that is distinguished from the *b'ahlam* jaguar by its T524 eye (figure 3.13c). Portraits of felines marked with the T524 *hix* sign or named as such in an adjacent caption text are common in Maya art. For instance, vessel K771 depicts a *way* animal co-essence that takes the form of a roaring male feline sprawled across a cartouche that represents a pool of water (figure 3.14). The personal name of this feline in the adjacent caption text is composed of a water lily blossom (water), a cartouche representing the pool of water, and the T524 *hix* sign (Stuart and Houston 1994:21; Grube and Nahm 1994:690). The illustration of this water pool feline is a full-figure depiction of his glyphic name (Bassie-Sweet and Hopkins in press). Vessel K791 illustrates another water pool *hix*, and in this case the feline head is tilted backward and his mouth is wide open in the process of an exaggerated roar. Yet another *hix* co-essence is
seen on vessel K792, and he, too, is illustrated roaring. In the Bonampak battle mural, the ruler Yajaw Chan Muwaan is decked out in a tunic of feline skin (Miller and Brittenham 2013:fig. 119). He wears a headdress that features a huge feline head with the bix sign in its eye. The mouth of the bix is wide open in a ferocious roar. On the Palenque Palace Tablet, the king K’inich Janaab Pakal I sits on a throne decorated with a bix feline with a roaring mouth (figure 5.1). Although jaguars, pumas, and ocelots scream and growl, only jaguars roar. Some researchers have concluded that the bix feline is an ocelot (Leopardus pardalis) (Spanish tigrilla) (Helmke et al. 2015). Given that the bix feline is illustrated roaring, I find this identification unconvincing. Furthermore, the Kaua description of a killer feline hardly fits the timid nature of the ocelot.

The identification of the bix feline as a jaguar raises the question, why did the Maya have two terms for jaguars? Imitating the territorial and mating vocalizations of game animals to attract them is a common hunting technique used all over the world. In the past, Maya hunters lured jaguars by re-creating their roar using a string and gourd instrument that imitates this sound (Emmons 1996:73; Nations 2006:56). Male jaguars roar as a warning to other territorial and mating competitors and also during coupling with the female (the

**Figure 3.14.** Hix jaguar, vessel K771 (drawing after Justin Kerr)
courtship sequence involves a fairly intense physical struggle). The fact that the K771 bix displays not only testicles but a prominent penis suggests that he is in mating mode. Jaguars are the supreme predators of the forest, and warriors were naturally identified with this feline across Mesoamerica. I suggest that the bix feline represents a roaring male jaguar defending his territory; and as such, he makes a quintessential role model for Maya lords. A jaguar roar sounds like a cross between a low-pitched grunt and a cough. It is possible that bix is an onomatopoeic word that imitates the jaguar’s roar.

The jaguar is ubiquitous in Maya art. Numerous Maya lords include b’alam and bix in their name phrases, and Maya lords are often depicted dressed as jaguars or wearing jaguar-skin elements. Prime examples of this attire are seen in the Bonampak murals, where various warriors sport jaguar-skin capes, tunics, sandals, and headdresses in both court and battle scenes (Miller and Brittenham 2013). Jaguar skin frequently decorates the base of spears. Jaguar skin was also incorporated into thrones as a symbol of high status, and it was used to cover codices. Jaguars and jaguar skins are particularly well rendered on Ik site pottery that often features the distinctive rosette pattern, the orange of the fur, and the creamy tones of the underbelly. The remains of jaguars are a frequent component in tombs and caches (Pohl 1983). For instance, Yaxchilán Structure 23 Tomb 3 contained twenty-seven jaguar claws (García Moll 2004:268), while jaguar teeth have been recovered at Uaxactún (Smith 1950:tables 6, 90). The placement of ungula phalanges on either side of the Uaxactún Burial A31 occupant indicated that the body had been covered by a jaguar skin. Jaguar bone was frequently carved, as in an ulna found in Piedras Negras Burial 82.

Nikolai Grube and Werner Nahm (1994) cataloged thirteen different co-essences that have jaguar characteristics, and even today, jaguar co-essences are believed to be among the strongest. Copán Altar Q documents a series of sixteen Copán rulers beginning with K’ínich Yax K’uk’ Mo’. The dedicatory cache of the altar contained the remains of fifteen jaguars and pumas. It has been suggested that these felids may have symbolized the co-essences of the Copán rulers (Fash 2001; Fash et al. 2004:70; Sugiyama et al. 2018). Highland funerary urns frequently feature portraits of jaguars.

In contrast to the jaguar, the puma is not prominently featured in Maya art and hieroglyphic writing, but there are clear examples of this feline. It has long been recognized that the reddish-colored feline illustrated on page 47c in the Dresden Codex is a puma (Tozzer and Allen 1910:358), and the adjacent caption text names this puma as chak bahlam “red jaguar,” an attested name for a puma. Although quite rare, there is a Classic period logograph representing the word koj “puma.” It is a portrait glyph of a feline with a
T521 winik “human being” sign in its mouth (Grube et al. 2003:II:8; Martin and Grube 2008:145) (figure 3.13d). Pumas are known to be more aggressive than jaguars in their interaction with humans (Atran 1999:172), and the puma logograph appears to incorporate this behavior to distinguish a puma from a jaguar. This eating convention is similar to the logograph of a youthful man with a water glyph in his mouth to indicate the action of drinking (Stuart 1995:39, 67; Stuart et al. 1999; Zender 1999:63–65). The pre-accession name for the Piedras Negras ruler K’inich Yo’nal Ahk II was Koj “puma” (Martin and Grube 2008:145), and a prominent youth featured in the Bonampak murals was also named Koj (Chooj) (Houston 2012). A number of Classic period vessels illustrate secondary lords wearing a headdress in the form of a puma head (K2781, K5062), and a secondary lord in the Bonampak murals wears a puma-skin cape (Miller and Brittenham 2013:136). Burials at Uaxactún and Copán contained puma skeletal remains and teeth, further attesting to their high esteem in the Classic period (Smith 1950:table 6; Pohl 1983:73; Fash et al. 2004). Some of the highland funerary urns feature red felines without spots that could also represent pumas.

In sixteenth-century Yucatán, Bishop Diego de Landa described a temple dedicated to the deity Cit Chac Coh “father red puma.” During the month Pax, the war captain called Nacom was feted in this temple and treated like a deity (Tozzer 1941:165). Landa also stated that warriors dressed in jaguar and puma skins when they went to war (Tozzer 1941:122). Ralph Roys (1933:197) noted that head chiefs were referred to as pumas and jaguars in Yucatán. In the Popol Vuh, the second generation of K’iche’ lords were given puma and jaguar claws as symbols of their authority (Christenson 2007:258). The seventeenth-century bishop of Chiapas, Francisco Núñez de la Vega (1988), noted that pumas were thought to be the strongest co-essences, and even today, among the Tzotzil of San Andrés Larráinzar, pumas are believed to be among the most powerful of the co-essences along with the jaguar and the coyote (Holland 1961:142). In the Chuj region, powerful men have both puma and whirlwind co-essences (Hopkins 2012:43). Still, the fact that young lords were named after pumas but Maya kings were named after jaguars indicates that jaguars were higher ranked by the Classic Maya.

THE FELINE TLALOC

Many deities have jaguar traits, like GIII, the Jaguar Paddler God, the Hero Twin Yax Bolon, and the maternal grandfather of the Hero Twins, God L. In previous publications, I reviewed the jaguar manifestations of Tlaloc
Examples of feline Tlalocs are seen on two medallions from Palenque Group B; each illustrates a jaguar head with cross-hatched circles representing its spotted fur (figures 3.15, 3.16). Lepidoptera wings decorate its eyes, and a figure wearing a Tlaloc mask emerges from its mouth. Dos Pilas Stela 2 and Aguateca Stela 2 illustrate Ruler 3 wearing a face mask of Tlaloc, indicating that he has taken on the guise of this deity (see figures 0.7, 0.8). On both monuments, Ruler 3 wears spotted jaguar leggings complete with claws, indicating that he is also a jaguar. Vessel K7749 illustrates two combatants engaged in a fierce struggle; each is flanked by an attendant (Taube and Zender 2009). On his back, the left attendant wears a motif composed of a spotted jaguar paw with a stylized Lepidoptera wing and zigzag design cuff. The claw of the jaguar is marked with smoke-fire curls. Vessel K8266 illustrates two depictions of Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kans that have jaguar skin decorating their snouts and eyes (figure 3.17). The bases of many Lepidoptera wings are formed by jaguar skin, like those on the Yaxchilán Lintel 25, BOD table 16c, and K1350. There are also jaguar-skin effigy bundles representing Tlaloc, such as the ones seen in the Tlaloc headdresses on Yaxchilán Lintel 25 (see figure 6.1).

The juxtaposing of felines with Tlaloc traits is widespread, although none of the following felines exhibit the spotted fur of the jaguar. On the Dos Pilas and Aguateca stelae, Ruler 3 wears a feline head with Tlaloc eyes at his waist, while the front paws of the feline hang on either side. Obsidian eccentrics curl from the mouth, while the cuffs of the paws are decorated with Lepidoptera wings that are trimmed with the obsidian zigzag design (see figures 0.7, 0.8). Piedras Negras Stela 8 depicts a similar feline with Tlaloc eyes in the headdress of the ruler (figure 3.18). The sacrificed heart motif drips from his mouth. The paws of the feline appear on either side. On Naranjo Stela 19, the ruler’s headdress has the form of a feline that has the long snout of the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan and Lepidoptera wings (figure 3.19). This feline also wears Tlaloc’s year sign. The Palenque ruler K’inich Kan Bahlam wears a similar feline headdress with Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan attributes on the Temple XVII Tablet (see figure 1.7). The head of the feline is framed by the obsidian zigzag design. On La Corona Panel 6, a large effigy figure has feline ears, tail, and feet, Tlaloc’s goggle eye, the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan’s upturned snout, and the arm, torso, and legs of a human (figure 3.20). He wears cuffs on his wrists and ankles decorated with the zigzag motif and Lepidoptera wings. These various examples demonstrate that Tlaloc had a feline form without spots. I have assumed in the past that these are also jaguar Tlalocs, but a recently reconstructed facade on Structure 10 of the Rastrojón complex at Copán suggests that Tlaloc also had a puma avatar.
Figure 3.15. Tlaloc jaguar, Palenque Group B medallions

Figure 3.16. Tlaloc jaguar, Palenque Group B medallions

Figure 3.17. WaxaklajuunUb’aab Kan, K8266 (drawing after Justin Kerr)
The facade of this building illustrates felines without the spots of a jaguar, and as such they have been identified as pumas (Fash et al. 2016) (figure 3.21). The Rastrojón pumas have Lepidoptera wings on their snouts and ears, and they wear cuffs on their paws that are decorated with Lepidoptera wings. The cartouches in which these pumas sit are also marked with Lepidoptera wings. This raises the possibility that the Dos Pilas, Aguateca, Piedras Negras, Palenque, and La Corona felines that lack jaguar spots are actually pumas as well.

**THE BLACK WITCH MOTHTLALOC**

Numerous types of natural-looking Lepidoptera are illustrated in the art of Teotihuacán, and many of these are clearly butterflies, such as those seen in the Tepantitla murals frolicking among flowering plants (Pasztory 1976;
see Headrick 2003, 2007 for an overview). Lepidoptera forms of Tlaloc are also common in Teotihuacán art. For example, such a being is depicted on a Teotihuacán vessel with scalloped wings marked with the obsidian zigzag design (figure 3.22a). The backs of mirrors are frequently decorated with figures dressed in Teotihuacán-style costume. Such a mirror back now housed in the Cleveland Museum of Art depicts a figure wearing a Lepidoptera headdress (Berrin and Pasztory 1993:126, 274). The wings of the Lepidoptera feature the obsidian zigzag lines (figure 3.22b). In Maya art, a number of Tlaloc images feature the hooked proboscis of a Lepidoptera, like a headdress illustrated on a looted panel from the Palenque region and the headdresses worn by the Yaxchilán ruler Bird Jaguar IV on Lintel 8 and Lintel 41 (figures 3.23, 0.12, 3.1). A
proboscis is the long tubular mouth part used by Lepidoptera to suck nectar and decaying fruit. In its coiled position, a proboscis has the hook shape of obsidian eccentric and atlatls (Berlo 1983:83, Headrick 2003:151). In some examples of the Lepidoptera form of Tlaloc, the antennae are represented by the feathered end of an obsidian dart or by the torch that is also found in Tlaloc’s year sign. The feline Tlaloc illustrated on La Corona Panel 6 carries a Lepidoptera form of Tlaloc on his back (figure 3.20). On the Palenque panel, Lepidoptera wings decorate the proboscis and wings, with the zigzag motif framing the eye (figure 3.23). Lepidoptera forms of Tlaloc are seen on vessels K1497, K3229, K4644, K5180, K5424, and K5877; the proboscises and eyes in all these examples are festooned with Lepidoptera wings (figure 3.24a). In addition, a Tlaloc headdress is juxtaposed with the beast on K4644 and K5046. A Dzibilnocac plate illustrates another Lepidoptera form of Tlaloc with the obsidian nose element of Tlaloc juxtaposed with the proboscis (figure 3.24b). Lepidoptera are rarely represented in Classic Maya art outside of the Tlaloc complex. As discussed above, the meteor deity Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan is a caterpillar-serpent decorated with Lepidoptera wings. It is highly likely, then, that the Lepidoptera form of Tlaloc is specifically the adult Lepidoptera form of the Waxaklajuun
Figure 3.22. a, b, Teotihuacán Lepidoptera, Cleveland Museum of Art mirror

Figure 3.23. Palenque looted panel (drawing after Donald Hales)

Figure 3.24. a, Lepidoptera Tlaloc, K4644, and b, Dzibilnocac plate
Ub’aah Kan (Bassie-Sweet 2011, 2019; Bassie-Sweet et al. 2015:136). However, the question remains, what species of Lepidoptera was Tlaloc?

Ever since its identification as a Lepidoptera, it has been argued that this form of Tlaloc was a butterfly and that these Lepidoptera represent the soul of death warriors (Seler 1990–2000:5:313–322; Berlo 1983, 1984; Taube 1998, 2000; Headrick 2007). This was primarily based on the important role butterflies played in the myth concerning the afterlife of Aztec warriors. As noted by Sahagún (1959–1963:3:49), the souls of dead Aztec warriors could take the form of five different species of birds and three different species of butterflies. Evidence that the souls of dead Classic Maya warriors were thought to take butterfly form is, however, completely lacking. Ever since its identification as a Lepidoptera, it has been argued that this form of Tlaloc was a butterfly and that these Lepidoptera represent the soul of death warriors (Seler 1990–2000:5:313–322; Berlo 1983, 1984; Taube 1998, 2000; Headrick 2007). This was primarily based on the important role butterflies played in the myth concerning the afterlife of Aztec warriors. As noted by Sahagún (1959–1963:3:49), the souls of dead Aztec warriors could take the form of five different species of birds and three different species of butterflies. Evidence that the souls of dead Classic Maya warriors were thought to take butterfly form is, however, completely lacking.16 There is significant evidence that the Lepidoptera form of Tlaloc was specifically based on a moth. Certainly, the fire and meteor characteristics of Tlaloc are more suitable for moths than for butterflies, given the nocturnal nature of moths and their habit of hovering around fire sources, such as hearths and torches. Furthermore, the obsidian goddess Itzpapalotl had a Lepidoptera form that was based on the Rothschildia orizaba, a moth (Beutelspacher 1994).17

As discussed above, the Maya identified Tlaloc with meteors. Ethnographic evidence supports the identification of moths with meteors. The meteor co-essence of the Tzotzil known as poslom is associated with moths. A Tzotzil shaman can perform witchcraft by sending poslom to cause disease and illness in his enemies, and this poslom can take the form of yashal “blue-green, gray” and yellow pehpen (Holland 1961:190–192). When the source of an illness is suspected to be the witchcraft of a shaman, the sick person hires another shaman to perform a curing (Vogt 1969:410). The witching shaman sends agents to the site of the curing to spy for him. Like the poslom, these agents are thought to take the form of moths that are attracted to the flames of the curing candles (Robert Laughlin, personal communication 2011). They are killed to prevent them from returning to the witching shaman. In Chenalhó, moths are thought to belong to the nocturnal evil spirit Pukuh and are called pehpen of death (Guiteras-Holmes 1961:293, 301). When Pukuh enters a home, a person becomes sick and cannot recover unless they move away. Moths are also associated with death in the Huastec region (Alcorn 1984:908). In a Tzotzil myth concerning warfare, four Zinacantán leaders are described using their co-essence forms of thunderbolt, rainbow, wind, and a really big moth (Laughlin 1977:134). They are able to use their co-essence forms to destroy the enemy.

There is strong ethnographic evidence that the Lepidoptera form of Tlaloc was specifically based on the species Ascalapha odorata (Black Witch Moth). Black Witch Moths are one of the largest of the Lepidoptera species, and the
wings can reach an astonishing 7 inches. Because of their size, they are often confused with bats (another nocturnal being associated with death). As discussed above, meteors (the nocturnal celestial manifestations of Tlaloc) were seen as signs of impending illness and death. Given his role as an obsidian and war god, Tlaloc was naturally associated with death. One of the most ubiquitous beliefs found across Mesoamerica is that the appearance of a Black Witch Moth inside a house is an omen that a member of the household will become ill or die (Hoffmann 1918; Hogue 1993; Beutelspacher 1994; Joljá Project field notes). The near-universal fear of the Black Witch Moth is reflected in its Aztec name micpapalotl or miquipapalotl “death moth” (Beutelspacher 1994:22, 29, 83–84) and its Ch’ol name pejpem xib’aj “moth demon” (Joljá Project field notes; Juán Jesus Vásquez, personal communication 2004). The Ch’ol kill these moths when they enter their houses because of their death association (Joljá Project field notes).

There is also convincing visual evidence for the identification of the Lepidoptera form of Tlaloc as a Black Witch Moth. The wings of a Black Witch Moth have scalloped edges like the wings of the Lepidoptera form of Tlaloc and zigzag patterns like the zigzag design that represents obsidian (figure 3.25). Most interesting, the tip of its hind wing is decorated with tri-lobed motifs that are similar to Tlaloc’s tri-lobed nose element. The hook-shaped motif on the forewing resembles the T712 obsidian bloodletter. The base of a Black Witch Moth wing has a furry texture similar to the jaguar skin often pictured at the base of the Lepidoptera Tlaloc. These ethnographic associations and physical attributes make it clear that the Black Witch Moth was the role model for the Lepidoptera Tlaloc.

A feature on many illustrations of warriors is a stylized Lepidoptera worn under the nose and over the mouth (von Winning 1987). Given that some of these are depicted with colorful wings, it is likely that these nose plaques represent a variety of different species of Lepidoptera. In the context of Tlaloc warriors, I suggest that the nose plaque specifically represents the Black Witch Moth. I believe these nose plaques explain Tlaloc’s tri-lobed element located over the nose area of the god. The tri-lobed element is an abbreviated reference to the wing of the Black Witch Moth. It is an example of the pars pro toto convention of Maya art and hieroglyphic writing in which depictions can be reduced down to just their diagnostic traits. When such a Tlaloc is seen emerging from the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan as on Yaxchilán Lintel 25, it mimics the metamorphosis of the Black Witch Moth from its larval form to its adult moth form.

Yaxchilán Lintel 8 illustrates the ruler Bird Jaguar IV and his subordinate Sajal in the heat of battle subduing their respective enemies (see figure 0.12).
Figure 3.25. *Black Witch Moth*

The sentence stating the capture of Jeweled Skull by Bird Jaguar begins on the upper left of the scene and concludes on the upper right. By reading this capture text, the viewer is brought to the image of Bird Jaguar grasping the arm of Jeweled Skull, who is further identified by his name glyph inscribed on his thigh. Bird Jaguar IV wears a Tlaloc headdress in the form of the Black Witch Moth and holds an obsidian-encrusted spear over Jeweled Skull’s body. The message conveyed to Jeweled Skull by Bird Jaguar IV’s Black Witch costume was surely one of impending death.

In many illustrations, Teotihuacán warriors wear a nose plaque that has the form of a stylized Lepidoptera, and a number of scholars have noted that *talud-tablero* architecture has the visual form of the Lepidoptera nose plaque (von Winning 1947, 1987; Headrick 2003). It may be that the *talud-tablero* buildings in the Maya region that were decorated with Tlaloc imagery were intended to represent the Black Witch form of Tlaloc. Certainly, a Tlaloc temple decorated with moths where human sacrifice was performed would dramatically reinforce the death association of moths.
THE OMINOUS NATURE OF OWLS

Before discussing the owl form of Tlaloc, a review of the literature regarding owls is in order. Like the Black Witch Moth, various species of owls were viewed as omens of illness, death, and war across Mesoamerica. In the sixteenth century, Bishop Diego de Landa (Tozzer 1941:202) briefly commented that owls were viewed as omens that caused the Maya a great deal of worry. A sixteenth-century Kaqchikel dictionary notes that an owl that lands on a house at night is an omen of death and sickness for the occupants (Coto 1983:443). Sahagún (1959–1963:5:161–163, 11:42, 46) gave more detailed descriptions of the owls known by the Aztec as chiquatli and teculutl (tecolotl). He noted that the chiquatli was an ashen-colored owl with eyes like spindle whorls and a call that was a screech. These are the characteristics of the barn owl (Tyto alba) (Martín del Campo 1940). The chiquatli was thought to be the messenger of the underworld couple Mictlantecutli and Mictecacihuatl, and its screech from a roof terrace indicated that someone from the household would die. If someone was already sick, they would not recover. The hoot of the tecolotl portended death from illness or war for an individual and the members of his entire household (Sahagún 1959–1963:5:161). In the end it was thought that only the walls of the house compound would remain standing, and it would be used as a toilet and garbage dump by others. Clearly, the tecolotl was the ultimate sign of destruction and humiliation. Sahagún characterized the tecolotl as a horned owl with a deep voice that says tecolo-tecolo-o-o. No owl has a call that sounds like tecolo, but a deep o-o does correspond to the low hoot of the great horned owl (Bubo virginianus) (Kendall 1992:113). In the hierarchy of owls, the great horned owl is the largest and most impressive, with a wing span that can reach 5 feet. It is the quintessential owl of Mesoamerica. Today, the Spanish term tecolote, a loan from Nahuatl, survives as a generic term for horned owls.

Ethnographic studies in the Maya region attest to the widespread view of owls as harbingers of doom. In nineteenth-century Yucatán, Daniel Brinton noted (1883:248) that “the owl is looked upon as an uncanny bird, presaging death or disease, if it alights on or even flies over a house.” Robert Redfield and Alfonso Villa Rojas (1934:210) reported that the Yucatec Maya of Chan Kom view the owl as an evil omen. The Itzaj of the central Petén believe owls are omens of death (Atran 1999:172). The call of the barn owl indicates the death of a foreigner, while the pygmy owl’s diminutive appearance portends widowhood. A violent end is indicated by the horned screech owl. For the Mopán, the owl called wo’ch’ič’ich’ announces death at night, while the screech owl ajb’aaaw is a sign of death and bad things and is thought to be the spirit companion of a sorcerer (Hofling 2011:85, 459). A great horned owl entering a
The intimate relationship between witches and owls is seen in Ch’ol myths where owls are thought to be witches’ companions (Josserand et al. 2003). There is also a widespread belief that witches can take the form of owls or that their co-essences are owls (Maynard 1963:98; Acheson 1962:43; Woods 1968:95; Hull and Fergus 2011:48). Charles Wisdom (1940:339, 389, 1950:1028) recorded
the Ch’orti’ belief that the *p’urem xooch* (black owl) is a bird of ill omen, and its presence near a home for several days portends the death of a family member. The female black owl is thought to be a sorceress in disguise. In the K’iche’ region, Ruth Bunzel (1952:91, 139, 272, 282, 344) noted that owls were thought to be the messengers of the ancestors, who send the owls to perch on the family home. Such an owl is an evil portent.

A prime example of supernatural owls as messengers and omens of death is found in the Popol Vuh episodes that relate to the conflict between the creator deities and the lords of the underworld. The two rulers of the underworld (One Death and Seven Death) had four war councilors under their command who took the form of owls (Arrow Owl, One Leg Owl, Macaw Owl, and Skull Owl) (Christenson 2007:119, 132). The duties of these owl lords included conducting heart sacrifices and delivering messages. One Death and Seven Death instructed the four owl councilors to deliver a message to One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu, commanding them to come to the underworld to play ball against them. The end result of that confrontation was the death of One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu. When the owl councilors later arrived at One Hunahpu’s home to deliver a similar message to One Hunahpu’s sons, their grandmother Xmucane was distraught because she recognized them as omens of death.

The four owl councilors were involved in another episode where they were supposed to sacrifice Lady Blood, who was pregnant with the Hero Twins, and return her heart to One Death and Seven Death (Christenson 2007:131–134). A direct association between owls and heart sacrifice is illustrated in an owl headdress found in the Teotihuacán Tetitla Portico 11 Mural 3 (Miller 1973:fig. 301). Juxtaposed on the outstretched wings of the owl is a motif of an open human chest with an exposed heart. Protruding from the heart is a bloody obsidian blade.

**Representations of Owls**

Owls have several unique features that set them apart from most other birds. Typically, an owl will sit motionless in a tree, watching and listening for prey. Its keen hearing is enhanced by its facial ruff, a concave surface of stiff dark-tipped feathers. The ruff functions as a reflector, channeling sounds into the ears. The owl’s large forward-facing eyes provide it with stereoscopic vision. Without moving its body, an owl can turn its head 270 degrees to follow the movement it sees or the direction of a sound. No matter what direction an owl faces, it will swivel its head to look directly at approaching prey or foe.
In Mesoamerican art, owls are most often illustrated in a frontal pose that reflects this natural behavior.

In the art of Teotihuacán, front-facing birds have long been identified as owls (von Winning 1948, 1985; Miller 1973; Seler 1990–2000:5:252–256; Kendall 1992). The murals of Tetitla Portico 25 illustrate owls with large round eyes, facial ruffs, and dark-tipped feathers. The motif of an owl, spear thrower, and shield is also well-known (von Winning 1948, 1985; Berrin and Pasztory 1993; Stuart 2000a). It has been suggested that the motif functions as the insignia for a military order (von Winning 1987; Berrin and Pasztory 1993). The spear thrower owl motif is also combined with a mountain sign in a place name found in the Atetelco murals at Teotihuacán (Nielsen and Helmke 2008). David Stuart (2000a) identified an individual in Maya inscriptions whose nominal phrase is composed of the Teotihuacán-style spear thrower and an owl motif, and he proposed that “Spearthrower Owl” was a ruler of Teotihuacán (see chapter 4 for a discussion of this individual). This owl is depicted on the Tikal Marcador sculpture as a horned owl.

Postclassic Central Mexican codices illustrate many owls. As an example, a number of codices illustrate a series of 13 avian creatures that are thought to refer to the 13 day numbers of the 260-day calendar. In the Codex Tudela, each illustration is accompanied by a Nahuatl gloss. On page 99r, there are two forward-facing birds. The first is hornless with a prominent facial ruff and is labeled chicuatl, while the other is horned and labeled tecolotl (Kendall 1992:113). As discussed above, these are the barn owl and the great horned owl, respectively. In the Códice de Santa María Asunción, the logograph of an owl with horns often has a te phonetic complement to indicate it is a tecolotl (Lacadena 2008:7, 11).

Birds that are clearly based on owls are also illustrated in Codex Borgia, and these avian creatures feature horns, facial ruffs, and black-tipped feathers (pages 7, 12, 52). Two types of owls are illustrated on Borgia page 71. The first has a skeletal face with horns, while the second has an exaggerated facial ruff. The tips of the facial ruff feathers are tipped with lithic blades, as are this owl’s wing feathers. Similar owls are seen in the Codex Laud, Codex Fejérváry-Mayer, Codex Vaticanus, Codex Borbonicus, Codex Tonalamatl Aubin, and Codex Nuttall.

Owls with and without ear tufts are well represented in Maya pottery figurines and whistles (Berlin 1960:fig. 10e; Bernatz 2006:213–214; Eberl 2007; Halperin 2007:213; Triadan 2007). Owl whistles may have been used to reproduce the call of these birds. The identification of owls in Maya art is facilitated by caption texts. In Yucatec Maya, a word for owl is kuy, and illustrations of
some forward-facing birds are named in the accompanying text as kuy, which unequivocally confirms this identification (Grube and Nahm 1994; Grube and Schele 1994; Stuart 2000a:508). These kuy owls are portrayed with round eyes, ear tufts, and black-tipped feathers. In pottery scenes, Nikolai Grube and Werner Nahm (1994:703–704) identified an avian co-essence that is named in the adjacent caption text as a kuy “owl.” Although shown in profile view, this owl is depicted with a black-tipped feather over his ear. An owl and a headdress full of black-tipped owl feathers are the diagnostic traits of the maternal grandfather God L. Grube and Linda Schele (1994) summarized the evidence that God L’s owl was specifically named Uxhlajuun Chan Nal Kuy “thirteen sky-place owl” (see chapter 7 for further discussion of God L). Uxhlajuun Chan Nal Kuy’s standard depiction is in profile view, and its ear tufts are often represented by a single black-tipped feather.

In hieroglyphic writing, an owl with black-tipped ear feathers or its pars pro toto black-tipped feather is used to represent the syllable 'o' (glottal stop + o) in the spelling of various words (Stuart 1998b:387, 2005b:105, 2013c) (figure 3.26a). Although Stuart reads the sign as o’, the glottal stop is initial, not final, and the glyph is a CV syllable sign ‘o’ (Bassie-Sweet and Hopkins 2017:190). By convention, when not specifying phonetics, initial glottal stops are not written. The faces of some o owls are infixed with an ak’ab “night, darkness” sign that functions on animals as a sematic marker to indicate their nocturnal nature (Zender cited in Houston et al. 2006:13; Stone and Zender 2011:145). Examples of the o owl are seen in the spellings of the main sign of the Toniná emblem glyph or in a variation of the och “enter” verb. Like many syllabic glyphs, the o sign appears in contexts where it cannot function as part of the spelling of a word but must itself represent a logographic word (Stuart 2005b:105, 2013c; Martin and Reents-Budet 2010). Stuart concluded that in these contexts the o owl was an onomatopoeic bird name, and he compared it to the oo bird that is found in several incantations in the Ritual of the Bacabs (Roys 1965:138; Stuart 2005a:105). The o owl appears in the name of a Hix Witz ruler (Janaab Ti’ O), the name of the deity GIII’s shrine (K’inch O Naah), and the name of a Yaxchilán god (Aj K’ahk’ O Chahk).

Owls with black-tipped feathers are employed in Maya art in many other contexts. The personified sky glyph and cave sign are represented by an owl with the black-tipped ear tufts and feathers (figure 3.26b, 3.26c).21 The head variants and full-figure variants for the baktun, k’atun, and tun periods are represented by a number of avian forms, one of which is an owl with black-tipped feathers (figure 3.26d). The emphasis on these avians’ ear tufts suggests that they are based on a great horned owl or a screech owl. The fact that the
Maya did not adhere to a strict convention of owls being portrayed in a frontal pose leaves open the possibility that some of the Teotihuacán predatory birds illustrated in profile may also be owls.

WHEN AN OWL IS NOT AN OWL

In the Maya haab calendar, the fifteenth month is called Muwaan, and this term appears in other contexts as well—as in the nominal phrases Muwaan Mat, K’inich Muwaan Jol, and Yajaw Chan Muwaan (Thompson 1950:114; Schele and Grube 1994; Martin and Grube 2008). There are Proto-Mayan names for hawks, like *ti’iiv and *xik (Kaufman 2003:606–607), and a sak ‘i’ “white hawk” has been identified in Maya art and hieroglyphic writing (Stone and Zender 2011:124–125). The term muwaan and its cognates are found as generic words for hawks, falcons, and kites in Mopán, Itzaj, Ch’olti’, and Ch’orti’ (Grube and Schele 1994; Hofling and Tesucún 1997:76; Hofling 2011:312; Robertson et al. 2010:323). The term is often combined with adjectives to describe specific kinds of hawks. Wisdom’s (1950:1032, 1034) Ch’orti’ bird list includes the entries six muahan “vulture hawk” for a large black hawk, sut’s muahan “bat hawk” for a small white-breasted hawk that has a bat-like face and eats insects, and tcaktcak muahan “dark hawk” for a large reddish hawk. In a similar fashion, the Itzaj term noj muwan “big hawk” refers to the large black hawk-eagle, and ajšāk mujan “white hawk” describes the white hawk Leucopternis albicollis (Hofling and Tesucún 1997:122, 128). Mopán also has the term sāk mujan for a white hawk as well as ya’ax mujan for a green hawk, and b’ox mujan for a black hawk (Hofling 2011:80, 105, 114, 136, 197, 475).

The word muwaan itself is specifically used to name the collared forest falcon (Micrastur semitorquatus) in Yucatec Maya and Itzaj (Steggerda 1943:237; Atran 1999:191). Both Frank Smythe and George Stutton describe part of the collared forest falcon’s call as sounding like a human moan. It is interesting that the English word moan is itself an onomatopoeic word. Smythe (1966:42) states that the call of the collared forest falcon falls off “toward the end into a
quavering, human-like moan.” Sutton (1951:125, 140) characterizes this part of
the forest falcon’s call as “an astonishingly human cry, almost a moan”; “how
startlingly human were those loud, slightly quavering moans.” It is highly
likely, then, that the collared forest falcon’s muwaan name is another ono-
matopoeic bird term.

The logographic sign for muwaan illustrates an owl in a profile view with
black-tipped feathers marking its ear tufts. However, in contrast to the other
horned owls discussed above, the muwaan bird is always illustrated in the act
of swallowing another bird. Sometimes the bird is only visible as feathers in the
mouth of the muwaan, but in detailed depictions the feet of its avian prey stick
out of its mouth. The size of the prey’s feet suggests that the prey is bigger than
the muwaan (figure 3.26e). Semantic markers are common in Maya art and
hieroglyphic writing. So it is extremely likely that the depiction of the muwaan
bird eating a large avian functions as a semantic marker to qualify the nature of
the muwaan bird. In fact, this dietary behavior is consistent with the collared
forest falcon, for its primary diet is birds, and often the birds are much larger
than it is—such as Crested Guans, Great Curassows, Ocellated Turkeys, and
owls (Whitacre 2012:252). However, the central conundrum remains—why was
a bird-eating horned owl used to represent a word for hawk?

The answer lies in the collared forest falcon’s nature. The large eyes of the
collared forest falcon are an adaptation to its preferred territory of dense,
dark forest. George Lowery and Walter Dalquest (1951:556) recorded that the
natives of Veracruz “consider it to be a kind of owl because of its large eyes and
shade-haunting habits.” It also has a facial ruff or disk that David Whitacre
(2012) noted “lends an owlish appearance” to the bird. Although mostly diur-
nal, the collared forest falcon is also known to hunt in the twilight like an owl.
Despite the fact that it does not have horns, the Q’eqchi’ referred to it as xukub
k’uch “horned hawk” (Hull n.d.). It seems apparent that this name is the result
of its owl-like nature. In summary, the muwaan hawk is illustrated as an owl
because it has qualities that place it in this category of predatory birds.

THE OWL TLALOC

The association of Tlaloc with owls has long been noted (Arroyo de Anda
1963:235). Given the owl’s identification with death and with the night, it is
not surprising that the meteor deity Tlaloc would have an owl avatar. A prime
example of the Owl Tlaloc is illustrated on Piedras Negras Stela 9 (figure 3.27).
The surviving narrative on this monument relates the 9.15.5.0.0 10 Ajaw 8 Ch’en
( July 26, AD 736) Period Ending of Ruler 4 and the seventh tun anniversary
of his accession. Although significantly damaged, the scene on Stela 9 depicts Ruler 4 in a frontal pose with a captive kneeling beside him. He holds a spear in his right hand and a Teotihuacán square shield and incense bag in his left. His headdress contains a bundle decorated with black-tipped owl feathers and what is likely owl down. In the center of the bundle is a cartouche trimmed with the Teotihuacán blood symbol. The cartouche is the pub “reed” sign that Stuart (2000a:501–506) has identified with Teotihuacán. On top of the bundle is the head of the owl with Tlaloc’s goggle eyes, and it holds a sacrificed heart in its beak. This Owl Tlaloc has an upright feather on its brow and a feather protruding from each of his k’an cross earrings. He wears Tlaloc’s year sign headdress. On each side of the bundle are the wings of this Owl Tlaloc.

Jesper Nielsen and Christophe Helmke (2008:463) noted that the name of an obsidian mountain featured in the Teotihuacán Atetelco murals is composed of a conflation of an owl and a spear thrower and suggested that such spear throwers “were believed to imbue the flight of darts with the same killing speed and precision as a raptorial bird pursuing its prey.” Although not noted by Nielsen and Helmke, the Atetelco owl lacks feet and its body is represented as a round bundle with wings attached. It is an owl bundle. In Maya art, supernatural bird wings are typically composed of a serpent’s head with short secondary feathers and long primary feathers extending out from
the serpent’s mouth (Bardawil 1976). Instead of regular serpent wings, the Piedras Negras Stela 9 wings are conflated with the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan (figure 3.27). In short, these owl wings are marked with symbols for meteors and, by extension, obsidian. The base of the wing is decorated with a sky band and with the obsidian zigzag design that reinforce this identification. While almost all birds make noise when they fly, owls are almost soundless. The silent flight of an owl is visually similar to the silent flash of meteors across the night sky.

When owls are defending their kill or their territory from an intruder, they puff up their bodies and spread their wings in a threatening pose. The composition of the Owl Tlaloc bundle on Stela 9 replicates this threat display of owls. Consequently, this owl bundle takes on a more ferocious appearance than a simple effigy bundle. On Dos Pilas Stela 2, the feline Tlaloc worn by Ruler 3 has an Owl Tlaloc perched on its goggle eyes in the threat pose (see figure 0.7). The juxtaposing of an owl and a feline is also seen on Los Horcones Stela 4, where the owl perches on a jaguar’s head (Navarrete 1986:fig. 9). The Tzotzil believe a large lowland owl called mut bolom (literally, jaguar’s bird) guides jaguars to their prey (Laughlin 1975:245). The Tzeltal terms mutil balam “jaguar’s bird” and mutil coh “puma’s bird” refer to an owl (likely the Mottled Owl), who anticipates the appearance of a jaguar or puma (Hunn 1977:23). The owl/jaguar motif is reminiscent of these highland owls.

There are a number of examples of the Owl Tlaloc in pottery scenes, such as the two Owl Tlaloc heads illustrated on vessel K8504 (figure 3.28a). Each owl wears a Tlaloc year sign headdress and a Lepidoptera wing with jaguar skin and obsidian zigzag motif at its base. A black-tipped feather decorates the beak of the bird, which is opened wide. Two full-figure owls with Tlaloc’s goggle eyes and k’an cross earrings are depicted on vessel K6809 (figure 3.29). The better-preserved example has a Lepidoptera wing with the zigzag motif at its base positioned over its eye. Below this motif is a Tlaloc headdress with a single black-tipped feather as its central element. The bird’s tail feathers are also black-tipped. Perched on its beak is a Moth Tlaloc wearing a headdress composed of a bundle, black-tipped feather, and year sign motif. The bundle is marked with the same dots and short feathers as the body of the Owl Tlaloc, which suggests that it is an owl bundle. Unlike real owls, the mouth of the Owl Tlaloc has pointed teeth. In its mouth is the sacrificed heart motif. As noted above, this symbol appears on obsidian objects, where it symbolizes the lethal nature of these objects and their direct association with human sacrifice. The K6809 owl perches on a toponym composed of two sky signs with smoke bellowing from them. In front of its raised right
talon is a star sign, surely a reference to the smoking star nature of this beast. The Owl Tlaloc is framed on either side by Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan meteor caterpillars that also have star signs attached to the smoke curls that bellow from their mouths.

Another Owl Tlaloc with a wide-open mouth is featured on the Acanceh building facade (figure 3.28b). The tip of the beak is marked with a Teotihuacán sacrificed heart motif, while obsidian eccentrics are positioned on top of the beak and on his wings. Yet another full-figure Owl Tlaloc with outstretched wings is featured on the Late Classic plate K8121 (Martin 2003:23; Martin and Grube 2008:39) (figure 3.28c). The rim of the vessel is composed of a band of the zigzag obsidian pattern and a text that refers to the 9.6.0.0.0 9 Ajaw 3 Wayeb (March 22, AD 554) Period Ending of the Tikal ruler Wak Chan K’awiil and his father’s earlier 9.3.0.0.0 2 Ajaw 18 Muwan (January 30, AD 495) Period Ending. The breast of the Owl Tlaloc is a stylized Tlaloc headdress that includes the obsidian zigzag design. A blood symbol hangs from the owl’s mouth, and a black-tipped feather decorates its brow. Its wide-open mouth and outstretched tongue are positioned immediately under the
3 Wayeb Period Ending date. The five days of Wayeb were considered to be an unlucky period. One has to wonder if the owl’s open mouth implies that he is in the process of calling out a death portent.25 The wings of the K8121 Owl Tlaloc are composed of black-tipped feathers and blades of obsidian and flint. These examples of juxtaposing make it abundantly clear that black-tipped owl feathers were metaphors for lithic blades. The identification of predatory bird feathers with lithic weapons is found across Mesoamerica (Taube et al. 2010: 31–32).26 As noted above, obsidian-related owls that function as place names are illustrated in the Teotihuacán Atetelco murals (Nielson and Helmke 2008) (figure 3.30a). These Atetelco owls are juxtaposed with a symbol for a mountain that is decorated with obsidian blades. When compared to the Owl Tlaloc on Piedras Negras Stela 9, the three obsidian blades that protrude from the top of the Atetelco owl mountain are visually parallel to the three feathers of the Owl Tlaloc (figure 3.30b). The importance of the motif of three owl feathers on the head of the Owl Tlaloc is seen on vessel K1463, which illustrates a Motul de San José lord wearing a Tlaloc god as a necklace (http://research.mayavase.com/kerrmaya_hires.php?vase=1463). The lord’s headdress is composed of the head of an owl with three single black-tipped feathers

Figure 3.29. Lepidoptera Tlaloc, vessel K6809
Figure 3.30. a. Atetelco mountain place name, b. Piedras Negras Stela 9 Owl Tlaloc

Figure 3.31. Piedras Negras Stela 7  
(drawing after David Stuart)
protruding from it. The association of an owl with the three-feather motif is also seen in the headdress of God L on K511. In this scene, the wing of Uhxlajuuun Chan Nal Kuy is depicted as just three feathers (see figure 7.2). Other examples of headdresses composed of three black-tipped feathers are found in the war scene on page 60a of the Dresden Codex. The central figure, who wears the three-feather headdress, brandishes an atlatl while holding two spears in his other hand. Behind him is a second warrior bedecked in the same headdress. He holds an atlatl and spears in one hand and carries an incense bag in the other. Even in scenes where the Owl Tlaloc itself is not visible, its black-tipped feathers decorate Tlaloc headdresses. This is seen on Piedras Negras Stela 7 and Stela 26, where black-tipped owl feathers are included among the long quetzal feathers of the ruler’s headdress (figures 3.31, 3.32). The composition of the three feathers on the head of the Owl Tlaloc is also reminiscent of the three obsidian blades found in the headdresses of a Teotihuacán warrior (figure 3.2). It is likely that the three–owl feather motif originates from this Teotihuacán headdress.

The close association between obsidian and the Owl Tlaloc is seen on the staircase of Copán Structure 26, which is decorated with sculptures of obsidian eccentrics that are infixed with the eyes of the Owl Tlaloc (Fash 2001:110). On Structure 21, the Owl Tlaloc’s eyes formed a band across the building’s facade. The pupils of these eyes were inlaid with obsidian, as were the eyes of the Tlaloc heads that decorated this building (Fash 2001:130).

**Figure 3.32.** Piedras Negras Stela 26 (drawing after John Montgomery)
There is a type of incense bag and shield associated with Tlaloc that is marked with the logographic sign T₅₈₃. The T₅₈₃ glyph is a circle motif with four circular elements marking its corners, and it is usually set within a dotted cartouche (figure 3.33a). Phonetic substitution patterns (ja-na-bi) indicate that this propeller-like logograph represents the word janaab, although the etymology of the word is unclear (Stuart and Houston 1994:81). Early research suggested that the T₅₈₃ janaab sign was either a reference to a flower because

**Figure 3.33.** a. T₅₈₃ sign, b. janaab owl, c. and d. T₉₃₂ pakal sign, e. T₅₈₃–T₉₃₂ conflation (T₆₂₄), f. Janaab Ti’ O glyph

**THE JANAAB OWL**

There is a type of incense bag and shield associated with Tlaloc that is marked with the logographic sign T₅₈₃. The T₅₈₃ glyph is a circle motif with four circular elements marking its corners, and it is usually set within a dotted cartouche (figure 3.33a). Phonetic substitution patterns (ja-na-bi) indicate that this propeller-like logograph represents the word janaab, although the etymology of the word is unclear (Stuart and Houston 1994:81). Early research suggested that the T₅₈₃ janaab sign was either a reference to a flower because
it shares a cartouche shaped like floral motifs or a reference to a *jan* “corn tassel,” based on the fact that a colonial Ch’ortí’ dictionary lists the word *ban* (*jan*) as a term for a corn tassel. On the other hand, David Stuart (cited in Guenter 2007) noted that the full form of the T583 sign was a bird with this sign in its eye. In other words, T583 is simply the *pars pro toto* form of this bird. Several examples of the bird in the name phrase of K’inich Janaab Pakal I illustrate it with the black-tipped feathers of an owl (figure 3.33b).

There is iconographic evidence that the *janaab* owl was identified with the Tlaloc cult. The Palenque Temple XIX pier illustrates two secondary lords dressing the king K’inich Ahkal Mo’ Nahb III in an elaborate bird costume (Stuart 2005b:49). The lord on the right wears a Yajawk’ak’ headdress (see chapter 5 for a description of this type of headdress). He is framed by two blocks of caption text that name him. The first block, located adjacent to his headdress, gives his personal name Yok Ch’ich Tal and his Yajawk’ak’ title. The second block, below his right elbow, states that he was also the Ajk’uhuun of K’inich Ahkal Mo’ Nahb III, the holy lord of Palenque. Many lords carry both titles, such as the secondary lords of Comalcalco (Zender 2004b:151). Yok Ch’ich Tal holds up an incense bag in his left hand that he is likely going to give to his king. The strap of the bag is made from jaguar hide, while the bag itself is decorated with an Owl Tlaloc that wears Tlaloc’s *k’an* cross earring (figure 3.34). Although the lower tassel of the bag is damaged, enough remains to indicate that it was decorated with fire scrolls. On the Tablet of the Slaves that pictures K’inich Ahkal Mo’ Nahb III accepting the *ux yop huun* headdress, he clutches in his left hand a similar owl incense bag with a jaguar strap and fire scrolls that cascade down its tassel (figure 5.9). This owl has the typical sacrificed heart motif in its mouth, and it sports a black-tipped owl feather and a dart juxtaposed with its wing. Although its eye has the goggle shape of Tlaloc, it also has four circles, indicating that it represents the T583 *janaab* sign. A number of lords incorporated the term *janaab* in their nominal phrases, like the Palenque ruler K’inich Janaab Pakal I and his maternal grandfather, Janaab Pakal, for whom he was named. We are fortunate to have over forty examples of K’inich Janaab Pakal I’s nominal phrase in the Palenque corpus for comparison, and seven of these employ the owl with the T583 sign infixed in its eye to represent the word *janaab* (figure 3.33b). As discussed above, the T524 *bix* sign is inserted in the eye of a jaguar to qualify the type of jaguar. The T583 *janaab* sign functions in the same manner. That is, the T583 sign names this owl as a *janaab* owl as opposed to an o owl or kuy owl.

In the context of the *Janaab Pakal* nominal phrases, *janaab* qualifies the kind of shield for which K’inich Janaab Pakal I and his grandfather were
named, that is, a type of owl shield. In its fullest form, the T932 *pakal* “shield” logograph is composed of a round shield with a border of cross-hatching and tassels demarcating its four corners. A flayed face decorates the center of the shield. In three examples of K’inich Janaab Pakal I’s name, this logographic *pakal* sign is preceded by the T583 sign rendering the phrase *janaab pakal* (figure 3.33c, 3.33d). K’inich Janaab Pakal I’s name is most often written using a conflation of the T583 sign and the T932 *pakal* sign, with the T583 sign placed on the face of the shield (figure 33.3e). Thompson gave this conflated
janaab-pakal sign the designation T624. In essence, the conflated T624 sign is an image of what a janaab shield might look like. When the pakal sign is rendered using phonetic syllables, janaab is represented by either the T583 janaab sign or the conflated T624 janaab-pakal sign. In this latter context, the scribe obviously did not intend the compound to be read janaab pakal pakal; rather, he retained the conflated form because it was intrinsic to the meaning of the name phrase.

K’inich Janaab Pakal I’s name literally means “owl shield.” In Maya art, the shields of the Tlaloc cult often feature the avatars of Tlaloc, and some of these are decorated with the Owl Tlaloc (Proskouriakoff 1950:fig. 32). None of the Mayan dictionaries or ethnographic studies records the term janaab as the name of an owl, and it is not onomatopoeic (Kettunen 2017). This raises the possibility that the term refers to some specific aspect of the Owl Tlaloc.

The name Janaab is not restricted to Palenque nominal phrases. It is incorporated into rulers’ names at such sites as Hix Witz, La Corona, Caracol, Nim Li Punit, Seibal, and Sacul (Martin 2008; Martin and Reents-Budet 2010; Carter 2015; Prager and Braswell 2016). Janaab Ti’ O was the name of a Hix Witz lord, and ti’ has the value of mouth in this context (Martin and Reents-Budet 2010). In one conflated example of the name, the T583 janaab sign is placed in the mouth of the owl, suggesting that the name means “janaab-mouthed owl” (figure 33.3f). Owl-mouthed owl doesn’t make much sense, but the placement of the T583 sign in the mouth is highly reminiscent of the sacrificed heart motif that is a main feature of the mouth of the Tlaloc Owl. This suggests that the term janaab was the name of the Teotihuacán sacrificed heart. It is also conceivable that the term janaab was not a Mayan word for this motif but a Teotihuacán loan word. At the very least, it can be concluded that the term janaab was intimately associated with the heart-sacrificing owl of the Tlaloc cult.

Spearthrower Owl’s nominal phrase is written in a variety of forms. Based on syllabic substitution, the name has been read as jatz’o’om kuh “striker owl or owl that strikes” (Nielsen and Helmke 2008). Stuart (2019) has argued that the full name is “striker heart owl,” based on a nominal glyph on Tikal Burial 116 bone 336 that includes a T506 obl “heart” glyph. He believes the juxtapositioning of heart symbolism with owls doesn’t indicate the owl’s role in heart sacrifice but rather that the owl was the one being sacrificed. Given the overwhelming evidence that owls were viewed as messengers of death and that the heart-sacrificing lords of the Popol Vuh had owl forms, I find this interpretation unconvincing. I retain the moniker Spearthrower Owl with the caveat that it is a nickname.
ANCESTORS AS METEORS

Given the belief that ancestors could take the form of meteors, it is possible that some of the depictions of Tlaloc warriors were intended to represent ancestors as meteors. On BOD 107, a Tlaloc warrior sits on a flaming Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan while holding a flaming Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan scepter. The motif floats in the scene, suggesting it is in the sky. Similar motifs occur on vessels K1552 and K1647, which originated in the Mirador basin under the Kaanul polity’s influence. In these two abridged examples, the motif is reduced to just the bust of the figure and the Lepidoptera wing and flame of the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan. Stuart (2013a) noted that these motifs have the added element of a flaming jaguar paw and argued that it was a reference to the Kaanul king Yuknoom Yich’aak K’ahk’, whose name “claw of fire” is represented in his nominal phrases by a flaming jaguar claw. I would extend that interpretation and argue that the motifs represent Yuknoom Yich’aak K’ahk’ as a flaming meteor. I suspect it is a reference to him as an ancestor who takes the form of a meteor.

One example of a Mirador basin vessel depicts the head of an Owl Tlaloc with a star sign at its base, suggesting that these motifs are celestial (Robicsek and Hales 1981:table 12i). A large number of Mirador basin ceramics depict either Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan heads or Black Witch Moth heads, and in some examples, the motif is reduced to Tlaloc’s k’an cross earring (Robicsek and Hales 1981:208–209, 216–217). The k’an cross is one of the signs found on sky bands. I suspect in this sky context that the k’an sign may be a pars pro toto sign for Tlaloc and, by extension, meteors.

SUMMARY

This overview of the deity Tlaloc indicates that Tlaloc had caterpillar-serpent, moth, feline, and owl forms and that these various avatars had strong associations with war, death, obsidian weapons, and meteors. Depictions of these individual avatars often incorporate the attributes of the other avatars. At Teotihuacán, many images of an Owl Tlaloc appear to be conflated with a Lepidoptera Tlaloc (von Winning 1987; Headrick 2003). In these examples, the head and eye are those of the owl, but the proboscis, antennae, and wings of the Lepidoptera also appear. These avatars are not hybrid beasts per se; the artist has simply combined the features of these two Tlaloc manifestations into one composition. This is similar to the illustrations in Maya art that combine the Feline Tlaloc and Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan. In contrast, the appearance of Lepidoptera attributes on the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah
Kan and Black Witch Moth forms of Tlaloc suggests that the Waxaklajuun Ub’aah Kan was the caterpillar form of Tlaloc and the Black Witch Moth its adult form.

The identification of Tlaloc with obsidian and, by extension, meteors in Maya imagery indicates that the Maya incorporated Tlaloc into their pantheon of deities as a type of thunderbolt god. Chapter 4 discusses the Kaloomte’ lords who headed the Tlaloc cult and installed others into the sect.