This chapter is a review of the obsidian and merchant deity God L and two river deities (the Paddler Gods) who were closely associated with him. God L was the antecedent for the underworld lord Gathered Blood of the Popol Vuh, who was the maternal grandfather of the Hero Twins (Bassie-Sweet 2008:226–238). It is my contention that God L-Gathered Blood was specifically identified with Xucaneb Mountain on the Cobán plateau.

The political dynamics of the lowlands were dominated by the conflicts between Tikal in the Central Petén and the Kaanul polity to its north. Over the course of the Classic period, these two polities and their respective surrogates and allies fought for control of resources and markets. A component of this competition was access to three highland commodities sought by the lowland Maya elite: obsidian, jade, and quetzal feathers. The Motagua fault of eastern highland Guatemala is the only known source of the jade coveted by the Classic Maya, and the Alta Verapaz region just north of the Motagua River had the highest concentration of quetzal habitat in Mesoamerica.¹ Even the Aztecs obtained quetzal feathers from this region at the time of the Spanish conquest. The major source of the obsidian used in the Petén during the Classic period was El Chayal, located just 13 km south of the Motagua River. The main land route for transporting these three products followed the Salamá valley north to the Cobán plateau before descending the
piedmont of Alta Verapaz into the lowlands (Sharer and Sedat 1987). Goods were then transported by water down the Chixoy and Pasión River systems. This route has been nicknamed the Great Western Trade Route, in contrast to the marine trade route that ran along the east coast of Belize (Demarest 2006; Demarest et al. 2014).

The Cobán plateau has primary and secondary sites, with occupation ranging from the Preclassic to the Spanish conquest period, that attest to both its strategic significance and long-term importance on the trade corridor between the highlands and lowlands (Dieseldorff 1926–1933; Sedat and Sharer 1972; Arnauld 1986; Sharer and Sedat 1987; Pérez Galindo 2006). The Popol Vuh relates a number of mythological events that were thought to have happened at specific locations in highland Guatemala, like the discovery of the corn used to create the flesh of the first humans on Paxil Mountain in northwestern Guatemala and the defeat of the crocodile deity Zipacna by the Hero Twins on the Chixoy River at Meauan Mountain. According to the Popol Vuh and other colonial documents, the cave route to the underworld taken by One Hunahpu, Seven Hunahpu, and the Hero Twins was located on the Cobán plateau (Recinos 1950:113–114; Recinos and Goetz 1953:64; Las Casas 1967; Tedlock 1996).

The Xucaneb massif defines the southern border of the Cobán plateau. The western end of the massif features Chich’en Mountain (2,200 meters), and the most important plateau site, which was also named Chichén, was located at the northern base of the mountain (Arnauld 1986). The eastern end of the massif is marked by the grand Xucaneb Mountain, the highest elevation in Alta Verapaz (2,648 meters). Xucaneb is a prominent landmark that can be seen from many vantage points, and it was undoubtedly used by travelers to mark the location of the plateau. The Maya believe mountains are manifestations of deities. The colonial period veneration of Xucaneb was noted by the priest Dioniso Zúñiga (1580–1636), who stated that the mountain was thought to be a powerful mam (grandfather mountain-god) identified with underground “thunder” during earthquakes (Feldman 2004:234, 239). The contemporary Q’eqchi’ and Poqomchi’ identify thirteen primary mountain deities, and Xucaneb is considered to be the most important (Sapper 1897; Burkitt 1902; Thompson 1930:58–59; Dieseldorff 1966; Carlson and Eachus 1977; Schackt 1984, 1986; Wilson 1990; Sieber 1999:85). They believe the elderly god Xucaneb lives in a cave on the north side of Xucaneb Mountain, and pilgrimages are made to this location to petition him for good harvests and health.
THE DIAGNOSTIC TRAITS AND NATURE OF GOD L

God L was an elderly god of the underworld, a mercantile god, and a patron god for long-distance traders (Coe 1973, 1978; Taube 1992a:79–88). On K1398, the Sun God refers to him as nimam “my grandfather” (Wald and Carrasco 2004). God L is often shown carrying a walking stick and a merchant backpack and wearing a long string of jade beads in reference to his wealth. In some examples, God L’s loincloth is untied and flows from his body. The loincloth is marked with footprints that are used in Mesoamerican imagery to depict trade and pilgrimage routes. God L’s primary diagnostic trait is a wide-brimmed hat decorated with an owl and a nest-like cluster of black-tipped owl feathers. A wide-brimmed hat is a common form of headwear for travelers, as it affords protection from both the sun and the rain.

God L’s owl often wears a headdress that spells out the name Uhxlajuun Chan Nal “thirteen sky-place,” or the bird is named Uhxlajuun Chan Nal Kuy “thirteen sky-place owl” in adjacent caption texts (Grube and Schele 1994). Uhxlajuun Chan Nal Kuy has been interpreted to be God L’s avian avatar. God L has been identified as a deity of tobacco because he is occasionally seen smoking a cigar and as a deity of cacao because cacao was an important trade commodity often used as currency (Taube 1992a; Miller and Martin 2004; Martin 2010:161, 2016). As discussed in previous chapters, owl feathers were metaphors for obsidian blades, and I have argued that God L was first and foremost an obsidian deity and the patron god for long-distance obsidian merchants (Bassie-Sweet 2011, 2012, 2013b).

God L is depicted with jaguar or armadillo features. His feline traits are apparent on the Palenque Tablet of the Sun, where he and the Jaguar Paddler God are shown in a crouching pose holding up GIII’s tok’pakal effigy. In addition to his own headdress, God L has a jaguar ear and wears a jaguar-skin cape and hipcloth. His depiction on the Temple of the Cross right jamb shows him wearing a jaguar-skin cape complete with its tail (figure 7.1). On vessels K2796 and K7750, God L’s throne is decorated with a skinned jaguar.

God L is occasionally illustrated wearing an armadillo shell or a cape in the form of an armadillo, indicating his identification with this nocturnal mammal (Kerr and Kerr 2005; Bassie-Sweet 2008:232–233). The image of a merchant carrying his backpack is similar to that of an armadillo with its shell. The most prominent characteristic of an armadillo is its ability to burrow into the earth and create elaborate tunnels. This is an appropriate attribute for an underworld deity who lives beneath the earth. As the maternal grandfather of the Hero Twins and lord of the underworld, God L was the complementary opposite of the paternal grandfather Itzamnaaj. This contrast is best seen in
the avian forms of these two grandfather deities. Both birds are messengers. God L’s owl is a bird intimately associated with death omens, while Itzamnaaj’s avian manifestation is the laughing falcon whose call predicts the life-giving rain (Bassie-Sweet 2008:235–236).

When a merchant stops to rest, he often uses his walking stick to prop up his backpack to keep it vertical, and a Cacaxtla mural shows God L’s stick and backpack in such a configuration. The stick can also be used as a weapon if the merchant is attacked by thieves, and God L’s walking stick is occasionally depicted with the hooked form of a fiery spear thrower or fire serpent (Wald and Carrasco 2004). As an obsidian trade deity, it would be expected that God L was closely associated with the obsidian deity Tlaloc. A looted panel from the Palenque region features a secondary lord dressed in God L’s headdress (see figure 3.23). His Uhxlajuun Chan Nal Kuy owl has Tlaloc’s goggle eyes. On K8740, another lord wears God L’s headdress, and the upper portion has Tlaloc eyes. In the Dresden Codex (page 74), God L is depicted as a warrior wielding an atlatl and darts. His wrists and ankles are decorated with Tlaloc’s moth wings, and he is painted black, the color of obsidian.

**THE HOME OF GOD L**

A number of scenes feature the domicile of God L. On K511, his home is depicted as a typical palace structure similar to those belonging to human rulers (figure 7.2). He sits on a throne surrounded by corn goddesses, one
of whom prepares his cacao drink. I have interpreted these goddesses to be his daughters (Bassie-Sweet 2008:234). Another depiction of God L’s palace illustrates him sitting on a throne draped with a jaguar skin (figure 7.3). The throne is further decorated with stylized Lepidoptera wings. The floor of the palace is defined by a witz “mountain” zoomorphic head, while the back wall is composed of stacked witz heads. A menacing animal, death eyes, and crossed bones decorate the roof. The implication is that God L’s palace was located inside a mountain cave associated with death imagery. It is logical to conclude that this mountain was also the Uhxlajuun Chan Nal “thirteen sky-place” from which God L’s owl originated. The specific location of God L’s mountain cave may be ascertained from the role of Gathered Blood in the Popol Vuh and the ethnographic stories regarding Xucaneb.

GATHERED BLOOD: THE MATERNAL GRANDFATHER OF THE HERO TWINS

The Popol Vuh narrative relates a series of events that occurred after Xpiyacoc and Xmucane and the Heart of the Sky thunderbolt gods created the earth. These episodes indicate that the creator grandparents had two sons named One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu and that they had a household on the surface of the earth. One Hunahpu and his brother established a ballcourt.
a great distance from their household on the frontier with the underworld. While the younger Seven Hunahpu remained a bachelor, One Hunahpu married a corn goddess named Lady Bone Water. They had two sons named One Batz and One Chouen, but Lady Bone Water died, and One Hunahpu was left to raise his sons with the help of his mother, Xmucane. The parentage of Lady Bone Water, her nuptials with One Hunahpu, and the cause of her death are not detailed. Later in the Popol Vuh story, One Hunahpu takes another wife who was a daughter of the underworld lord Gathered Blood. The leading cause of death for women was complications from childbirth. In the event that a wife died prematurely, it was customary for the widower to marry one of his wife’s sisters. I have argued that Lady Bone Water was the eldest daughter of Gathered Blood and that she died in childbirth (Bassie-Sweet 2008).

The Popol Vuh narrative states that One Hunahpu’s ballcourt was located on the path of the underworld (b’al Xib’alb’á). Xibalba was ruled by One
Death and Seven Death, who governed a council of secondary lords who were named in pairs (Flying Scab–Gathered Blood, Pus Demon–Jaundice Demon, Bone Staff–Skull Staff, Sweepings Demon–Stabbings Demon, and Lord Wing–Packstrap). Each pair was responsible for a particular kind of death. A third tier of lords held the office of Raj Pop Achij, “he of the mat of warriors.” In addition to their obvious war duties, they also functioned as messengers and executioners (Christenson 2007:119). There were four Raj Pop Achij called Arrow Owl, One Leg Owl, Macaw Owl, and Skull Owl, who were not only named after owls but took owl form. The intrusion of the ballcourt on the frontier of their territory enraged One Death and Seven Death, and they sent the four owl messengers to demand that One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu come to the Xibalba court to play ball and account for their actions. One Hunahpu and his brother descended from their ballcourt through a cave into the underworld, where they were subsequently sacrificed by the death lords after failing their first trials.

Although the body of One Hunahpu was buried at the underworld ballcourt along with that of his brother, the underworld lords commanded that One Hunahpu’s head be placed in a lifeless tree on the road. This was the beginning of the ultimate defeat of One Death and Seven Death, for the skull miraculously turned into a gourd and the tree then grew other gourds. Lady Blood, who was a daughter of Gathered Blood, approached the tree, and One Hunahpu’s gourd-like skull spit in her right hand and impregnated her with the Hero Twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque. One Hunahpu told her to leave the underworld and go to the surface of the earth, that is, to his household. Upon discovering that his daughter was pregnant, Gathered Blood demanded to know the name of the father, but Lady Blood denied having had sexual relations with anyone. Not believing her, Gathered Blood then ordered the four Raj Pop Achij lords to kill Lady Blood for her inappropriate behavior by removing her heart with a flint blade. Death by the violent removal of the victim’s heart is well documented across Mesoamerica. She avoided this sacrificial punishment by making a deal with these owl lords and fleeing the underworld. Once at the household of the creator deities, Lady Blood had to convince Xmucane that she was pregnant with Xmucane’s grandchildren and therefore was her daughter-in-law. Lady Blood was required to produce a bag full of corn ears from a single corn plant in the milpa of One Batz and One Chouen. She did so by petitioning four corn goddesses named Lady Toh, Lady Canil, Lady Cacao, and Lady Tzi (Toh, Canil, and Tzi are day names). These four goddesses were likely the quadripartite forms of her older sister the corn goddess Lady Bone Water (Bassie-Sweet 2008).
After their birth, the Hero Twins acquired the skills of their father and grandfather. With the assistance of the Heart of Sky thunderbolt gods and their grandparents, the Hero Twins subordinated a number of gods living on the surface of the earth and then dealt with the rulers of the underworld who had killed their father and uncle. In this final conflict, Hunahpu and Xbalanque refurbished their father’s ballcourt and began to play ball. Predictably, the Xibalba rulers were again infuriated by this territorial intrusion and sent their owl messengers with the same challenge. The Hero Twins followed their father and uncle’s path into the underworld, but through a series of strategic moves they were able to outwit and execute One Death and Seven Death and subordinate the other Xibalba lords. As the maternal grandfather of the Hero Twins, it is highly likely that Gathered Blood was elevated to the role of principal underworld god after the demise of One Death and Seven Death.

The place names associated with One Hunahpu’s ballcourt indicate that it was located on the Cobán plateau (Recinos 1950:113–14; Recinos and Goetz 1953:64; Tedlock 1996). Furthermore, the sixteenth-century bishop Bartolomé de Las Casas (1967:506) noted the belief that the Maya gained access to the underworld through certain cave openings that he called bocas de infierno “mouths of hell,” and he mentioned that one such cave opening specifically associated with one of the Hero Twins was located near Cobán. The fact that One Hunahpu’s ballcourt was located on the Cobán plateau and that he, his brother, and his sons used a plateau cave to enter the underworld indicates how central the landscape of the plateau was to Maya cosmology.

XUCANEB AND THE COBÁN PLATEAU TRADE ROUTE

An 1889 map by Teodoro Paschke and various accounts by travelers indicate that there were two main trails from the Salamá valley to the Cobán plateau during the late nineteenth century. The first trail left Salamá and followed the general direction of the modern No. 5 Highway. This pathway climbed the ridge north of Salamá to the Cumbre de Cachil (Cachil pass) and descended down along the valley of the headwaters of the Río Quililá before crossing the valley of Santa Rosa and two smaller ridges. From there, the road followed the Río Cahabón valley northwest to Tactic. A major Pre–Columbian site called Chican is adjacent to Tactic, and this location was clearly an important resting place on the ancient trade route, just as Tactic was in the nineteenth century. North of Chican is the Xucaneb massif that forms the south side of the plateau. Today, Highway 5 follows the old mule trail that proceeded west of Tactic, following the Río Cahabón as it skirts around the Xucaneb massive, and it finally heads...
north along the western end of the plateau. However, the ancient footpath was directly north of Chican, and it crossed over the La Cumbre pass between Xucaneb Mountain and Chich'en Mountain before arriving at the major site of Chich'en on the other side. From Chich'en, the footpath continued north across the plateau to Cobán before descending down the piedmont. After arriving at the head of navigation on either the Río Pasión or the Río Chixoy, highland goods would then be transferred into canoes for distribution into the Petén.

As an aside, there has been very little research into the specific way stations used by the ancient Maya merchants as they moved across the landscape into the lowlands, but colonial-era documents and old maps indicate the ancient footpaths that were still in use well into the twentieth century. The pathways between the Cobán plateau and the lowlands were situated to avoid the numerous steep ridges of the piedmont that run parallel to the highlands. A number of different trails were employed depending on the ultimate destination and the time of year.

The official land route during the colonial era left Cobán and headed northeast to Cahabón, then went north to Chimuchuch, Campamac, Bolonco, Tuíla, Tzunkul, and San Luis. From San Luis, the route followed the same general direction north as the modern Highway CA13 before heading northwest to Flores (Morelet 1871). This was the same general route used by the Spanish in AD 1695 to conquer the Petén Itza (Feldman 2000).

Travelers journeying to northeastern Petén from Cobán via the Río Pasión took a route east of Cobán through San Pedro Carcha, Cauiton, Chiriquiche, Tzibal, Candelaria, San Antonió, Yalpemech, and Cancuén. John W. Boddam-Whetham (1877) went from Cobán to Cancuén on this route, then took a canoe down the Río Pasión from Cancuén to Sayaxché. His description indicates that the land portion of the trip was very arduous.

The journey north of Cobán was physically much easier. Travelers passed between Montaña Chicoj in the northeast and Montaña Sacranix in the northwest and made their descent through Sacanchaj and Chitocan to Cubilhuitz. From Cubilhuitz, the path split at least three ways. Travelers heading to the Río Chixoy-Salinas would proceed northwest of Cubilhuitz and follow the Río Icbolay to its confluence with the Río Salinas. The Paschke map indicates that the northeast route from Cubilhuitz proceeded to the Río Icbolay and crossed the river at Dolores, proceeded to Sibicte and Chisec, and then passed through the breaks in the ridges to the north along the Río San Roman. Continuing northward through the lowlands via Petex Batun, it eventually ended at Sayaxché. The 1832 Rivera Maestre map also shows this route. Alternatively, travelers could continue northeast from Chisec, make their way
over or around the southern base of the Chinajá range to the Río Pasióén, and take the river downstream.

The Maya have a long tradition of making offerings to the mountain god whenever they passed by his mountain or crossed over his pass. During the colonial period, the Dominican priests of Alta Verapaz were dismayed to learn that their native carriers continued to perform such ceremonies even after their conversion to Catholicism (Feldman 2000:172–173). In the nineteenth century, Carl Sapper (1897) noted that the Q’eqchi’ burned copal incense and placed a stone, flowers, and pine boughs at mountain passes as offerings. At particularly important summits, they also performed ceremonial dances. In their 1971–1973 investigations of the Salamá valley, Robert Sharer and David Sedat (1987:450) noted that these customs were still practiced by indigenous traders transporting Salamá pottery by footpath to the market at Cobán:

The trail used in this pottery trade passes over three major ridges between Salama and Coban. In each case, every merchant in a trading party carries a stone from the base to the ridge top, where it is deposited, adding to his heavy burden during the climb to the summit. This behavior is explained by the merchants as demonstrating their humility and the respect for the mountain. The large accumulations of stone on each ridge top testify to the antiquity of both this custom and this traditional commerce.

The Cobán plateau was a significant station on the Classic period route between the highland sources of obsidian, jade, and quetzal feathers and their lowland destinations. It is inconceivable that Classic period traders would not have made offerings to Xucaneb Mountain when they crossed La Cumbre pass.

**XUCANEB, GATHERED BLOOD, AND GOD L**

Raxon Mountain, which is located 60 km southeast of Xucaneb on the Sierra de la Minas range, is the southernmost of the thirteen sacred mountains. In a general sense, Xucaneb Mountain and Raxon Mountain define the northern and southern borders of the quetzal habitat of eastern Guatemala. In addition, Raxon Mountain is the highest mountain of the Motagua fault, and jade sources skirt its base. Raxon Mountain is thought to be the manifestation of a young mountain god named Thorn Broom. Thorn Broom is a parallel to One Ixim, whose primary diagnostic traits were quetzal feathers and jade jewelry. A widespread myth concerning Thorn Broom and Xucaneb’s daughter is found in various forms across the Guatemalan highlands (see Bassie-Sweet 2008:181–184 for an overview). According to these stories, Xucaneb was...
a powerful deity living in his home on Xucaneb Mountain. He had a throne made from an armadillo shell, and his dogs took the form of a puma and a jaguar. His daughter Basket Grass was a corn goddess with great weaving skills. In Maya culture, marriage negotiations are expensive affairs in which the prospective groom must provide a series of payments to the bride’s family. One day, Thorn Broom was hunting deer near Xucaneb’s abode and saw Basket Grass weaving on the porch. He was immediately infatuated and set out to woo her without the customary marriage negotiations with her father. Thorn Broom’s first attempts were failures, but he finally seduced Basket Grass and convinced her to elope. In anger over not being paid his bride payments, Xucaneb had his daughter killed, but she was revived after Thorn Broom made amends. Nevertheless, she subsequently died again in childbirth, and her bones were transformed into corn seed. The moral of the story is that there are serious consequences even for the deities when traditions are not followed.

I have presented evidence that Gathered Blood, One Hunahpu, and his first wife, Lady Bone Water, were antecedents for Xucaneb, Thorn Broom, and Basket Grass, respectively (Bassie-Sweet 2008). In addition, God L shares numerous characteristics with Gathered Blood and Xucaneb, such as their underworld origins, their armadillo attributes, their owl messengers, and their corn goddess daughters—all of which indicate that God L was the precursor of these two gods. These parallels, coupled with the importance of Xucaneb Mountain on the trade route, leave little doubt that the mountain was thought to be the manifestation of God L.

God L’s portrait on the Temple of the Cross jamb includes a stylized loincloth extending out from his body in the front and back (figure 7.1). The loincloth is marked with footprints that refer to the path taken by this mercantile god. In light of God L’s identification with Xucaneb Mountain on the Cobán plateau, I have argued that this motif is not just a general reference to a footpath but that it specifically represents the pathway between the lowlands and the highland sources of obsidian, jade, and quetzal feathers that crossed over the Cobán plateau.

In Maya art, most scenes focus on royal court activities or the actions of deities that reinforce the power and prestige of the royal court. There is little documentation regarding mercantile operations, but what is certain is that all goods moved overland had to be transported on the backs of porters because the Maya lacked beasts of burden. The most efficient way to make such systems profitable is through the use of slave labor. One of the common features of Maya mountain gods is their desire to enslave people and force them to work. Ethnographic accounts are filled with such stories.
Nawa Sugiyama and collaborators (2018) reexamined the felid remains in Copán burials and caches, and they concluded that Copán was importing complete jaguar skins, including claws, for ritual purposes. Jaguar habitat was limited during the Classic period. The rugged terrain and low population density of the Alta Verapaz made it one of the few areas with a significant jaguar population (today, the Sierra de la Minas in Alta Verapaz still has a significant jaguar population). God L has jaguar features and wears jaguar pelts. Unlike royal thrones that often have jaguar-skin pillows or take the form of animated jaguars, God L’s throne is decorated with a skinned jaguar that includes the head and tail. Its slit eyes and serrated edge emphasize that it is a skinned jaguar. Given the jaguar imagery of God L, I think it is highly likely that he was viewed as a jaguar pelt merchant as well.

THE RIVER GODS

The Popol Vuh describes an elderly pair of river gods named Xulu (Descended) and Paqam (Ascended) who carried the title of et’amanel, “sage.” The underworld rulers consulted Xulu and Paqam regarding how they should dispose of the bone remains of the Hero Twins after the twins leaped into the pit oven and were burned to death. Anticipating that this would happen, the twins had instructed the two sages to have their remains thrown into a river that “winds among the small and great mountains” so they could be resurrected (Christenson 2007:177–178). Like the other major gods, there are Classic period parallels to Xulu and Paqam in the form of the two elderly river deities nicknamed the Paddler Gods (Bassie-Sweet 2008).

In a number of examples at Toniná and Copán, the portrait glyphs of the Paddler Gods are replaced by two cartouches that represent the ends of their paddles and that reference their role as oarsmen. Unlike their paddles in the Tikal scenes that are infixed with k’an signs, these paddles are infixed with k’in and ak’bal signs. This pairing of day and night signs has been interpreted to mean that the Paddler Gods represent the opposition of day and night, that they are a metaphor for a day and a night, or that they represent twilight (MacLeod cited in Schele 1992:257–258; Schele and Mathews 1998:414; Wichmann 2004). In the context of the tz’ak completion sign, day and night signs are paired to convey the concept of complementary opposition (Stuart 2003b), and it is likely that the k’in and ak’bal signs in the paddle cartouches have a similar function, indicating that the Paddler Gods are complementary opposites. This complementary opposition is reminiscent of the paired names Xulu (Descended) and Paqam (Ascended). The paddle cartouches indicate
the close association the two Paddler Gods had with their canoe and, by extension, the river.

The depiction of deities and ancestors in the space above a ruler’s head during Period Ending ceremonies is a common feature in monumental art, and the Paddler Gods appear in that context on Jimbal Stela 1, Ixlu Stela 1, and Ixlu Stela 2. In these scenes, the Paddler Gods cling to cloud-like scrolls similar to those used to represent the misty Milky Way river on Copán Temple 22. Rivers in the Maya region are frequently engulfed in mist even when the adjacent landscape is clear, and the Paddler Gods’ scrolls appear to refer to their misty river environment.

A number of pottery scenes illustrate a myth concerning God L and his subordination at the hands of One Ixim and his sons (Stuart 1993; Miller and Martin 2004:59–61; Wald and Carrasco 2004; Martin 2010, 2016). A key element of the scene is that God L loses his regalia. One depiction (K1560) shows a more expanded version of the story in which One Ixim subordinates the Paddler Gods and takes away their headdresses as well. Whether these actions predate or postdate One Ixim’s river journey with the Paddler Gods is unclear. What is apparent is that God L and the Paddler Gods are cohorts. This is further confirmed by the fact that all three deities are named in these subordination scenes by the same title, possibly read itzam aat (Martin 2016). Regrettably, the meaning of this title has not been ascertained. Nevertheless, what these three deities have in common is their identification with trade routes. God L was a land-based merchant, while the Paddler Gods were identified with the river canoes used to transport products to market.

The use of lowland canoes to bring products to and from the piedmont of the highlands was noted during the early colonial period. The lower piedmont area of Alta Verapaz was an important region for the inhabitants of the plateau to obtain the lowland products of achiote, cacao, cotton, and chile. In 1676, the indigenous population of the plateau was under Spanish control, but the piedmont and lowlands were not. The Dominican priest Francisco Gallego stated that there was a piedmont town at the confluence of a small river and the Chixoy that was the departure point for downstream canoe travel on the Chixoy (cited in Feldman 2000:176–177). Each year, Lacandón Chol, Itzaj, and other groups from the central Petén came by canoe up the Chixoy to trade their achiote at a fair conducted at this town. The logical location of the achiote fair is the site that is now known as Rocnimá. It is near the head of dry-season navigation on the Chixoy, and it is adjacent to the junction of the Chixoy and its tributary, the Río Copalá. Regrettably, no surveys or excavations have ever been carried out at Rocnimá. However, its history extends back
at least to the Classic period because both Dieseldorff and Burkitt acquired a number of beautiful objects of Late Classic manufacture from the site. The achioté fair indicates that lowland agricultural products were one type of commodity that highland people desired. Regrettably, Gallego did not indicate what the lowland Maya received in exchange for their achioté, but given that they still coveted obsidian and quetzal feathers, those items would likely have been part of the transaction.

SUMMARY

It is expected that the landscape along the major land route from the highland sources of obsidian, jade, and quetzal feathers to the lowland markets would feature in the core mythology of the Maya. The Xucaneb Mountain is visible from great distances and acts like a beacon marking the Cobán plateau as the gateway between the highlands and the lowlands. The identification of deities with landscape features and specifically with mountains is well documented in Mesoamerica. The mountain deity Xucaneb’s long history of veneration and his role in contemporary stories supports the interpretation that the Classic period antecedent for Xucaneb was God L—Gathered Blood, the maternal grandfather of the Hero Twins. While God L has been associated with tobacco and cacao, the iconography of his owl regalia strongly indicates that his primary role was as the patron god for long-distance obsidian merchants. It is likely that these same merchants also transported highland jade and quetzal feathers destined for royal courts. Long-distance merchants faced the dangerous challenge of traveling through foreign and often sparsely inhabited territory, where attack and robbery were likely common occurrences. The terrain and weather also presented enormous obstacles to overcome. It is not surprising that such individuals would seek powerful supernatural help and that the landscape of their travels would be incorporated into these beliefs.