Summary and Conclusion

My study has focused on Tlaloc imagery found in the lowland Maya region, and I have attempted to explain how this foreign deity was integrated into Maya cosmology as a type of thunderbolt god. The importance of lightning as a source of power and prestige is evident in the earliest forms of Maya art, and its prominence continued throughout history, even to current times. Perhaps the most obvious case is the creation of humans as related in the Popol Vuh. It was in consultation with the three Heart of Sky thunderbolt gods that the creator grandparents conceived and formed the first humans and conjured a place for them to live. The flesh and blood of humans were thought to have been made from corn and water that had been struck by lightning. Classic period rulers not only often assumed the names of lightning gods, but they were thought to have had lightning as a spiritual co-essence. The most common costume element worn by Maya rulers is a loincloth decorated with the T24/T1017 sign representing lightning’s luminous quality. Classic period headresses that were intimately associated with the identity of the owner frequently also incorporate the T24/T1017 sign, attesting to lightning’s importance to these lords’ identity.

Lightning bolts were envisioned to be the flint weapons of the thunderbolt deities. They were often depicted with serpentine form, for like deadly snakes, lightning kills with a swift strike. The thunderbolt deity GII took the form of a serpentine flint axe. One
of the most commonly depicted acts on Classic period monuments is the ruler holding a GII scepter or conjuring this god from a serpent bar. Public rituals reinforced the legitimacy of the ruling elite, while art and architecture were permanent displays that documented that authority. Clearly, the ability to command lightning was at the heart of elite power and prestige.

The deity GIII was identified with flint blades and defensive shields. Maya art frequently highlights GIII’s role as a war god for the ruling elite. The tok’-pakal “flint-shield” represented the lord’s war abilities, and its use as a metonym for war indicates the importance of flint as the most powerful and durable of weapons.

The goggle eyes of the deity Tlaloc represent the finger holes of a spear thrower, and they indicate that this specific weapon was thought to be a material manifestation of the god. It is well established that Maya deities could have multiple manifestations based on both animal and natural phenomena. The caterpillar-serpent, moth, feline, and owl forms of Tlaloc were closely identified with death, obsidian weapons, and meteors, as would be expected for a god of war in Mesoamerica. The recognition that the Lepidoptera form of Tlaloc was based on an Ascalapha odora (Black Witch Moth) rather than just a generic butterfly suggests that the caterpillar-serpent form of the deity was also based on the Ascalapha odora. The Black Witch Moth avatar of Tlaloc explains the widespread belief still evident today across Mesoamerica that the Ascalapha odora is a harbinger of death. Tlaloc’s identification with meteors also explains the commonly held Mesoamerican belief that meteors are death omens. The other nocturnal manifestation of Tlaloc that was also an omen of death is the horned owl. The identification of owls with obsidian is further seen in the owl manifestation of the obsidian merchant deity known as God L.

Foreign influences at Tikal began at a relatively early date (circa AD 250), but David Stuart’s recognition in the hieroglyphic record that there was an AD 378 military incursion led by the Kaloomte’ Siyaj K’ahk’ changed our perspective regarding the influx of Teotihuacán-style elements in Maya art and architecture from one based on trade exchanges to a more hostile and invasive interaction. The monumental event of Sihyaj K’ahk’ dispatching the Tikal king and placing Spearthrower Owl’s son on the Tikal throne dramatically changed the political landscape of the lowlands. The regalia of these conquering men highlighted their identification with Tlaloc and with obsidian. Stuart suggested that Spearthrower Owl was the ruler of Teotihuacán. His name obviously invokes military references, but there is also a direct association with obsidian, given the use of owl feathers as metaphors for obsidian blades. It is
likely that Sihyaj K’ahk’ and Spearthrower Owl were intimately involved in the obsidian trade or, more to the point, with the disruption of Tikal’s access to its highland obsidian sources.

The narratives indicate that the Kaloomte’ Sihyaj K’ahk’ arrived at Tikal with Tlaloc deities. While we may never know the full economic impetus and political intrigue behind the Tikal coup, the ruling lowland Maya soon adopted Teotihuacán military insignia and embraced the Tlaloc cult as another source of power and prestige. The Teotihuacán Tlaloc god did not displace or supersede the local thunderbolt Chahks; rather, he was incorporated into Maya cosmology as a meteor deity (a type of thunderbolt) identified with obsidian weaponry. Anyone could use flint and obsidian weapons and tools, but harnessing the supernatural power that was thought to be inherent in these substances was the prerogative of the elite. At the top of the Tlaloc cult hierarchy were the rulers and their wives in their role as Kaloomte’. In addition to their duties of appeasing Tlaloc with offerings of incense and blood, these high priests and priestesses of Tlaloc had oracle functions that involved communication not only with the deity but with their ancestors who had been associated with the cult. The Kaloomte’ also inducted others into the cult. At Copán, the lineage founder K’ínich Yax K’uk’ Mo’ was so closely identified with the Tlaloc cult that he was portrayed wearing the goggle eyes of Tlaloc on Altar Q.

The Tlaloc-decorated buildings labeled as Wiinte’naah in hieroglyphic texts were focal points for the worship of this deity. Karl Taube (2003b, 2004b) recognized the importance of fire ceremonies in relationship to the Wiinte’naah. The creation of new fire was a fundamental action by the ruling elite during ritual events. The most common form of fire creation was drilling, and this act was metaphorically related to the meteor showers associated with Tlaloc. Objects that were pertinent to Tlaloc veneration, including fire drilling paraphernalia, were likely stored in Wiinte’naah structures. War captains known as Yajawk’ak’ “vassal of fire” had curating obligations for the maintenance of Tlaloc paraphernalia and office regalia. While the Kaloomte’ Spearthrower Owl’s name is clearly connected to Tlaloc’s owl manifestation, the name Sihyaj K’ahk’ (fire born) is likely related to the fire of Tlaloc. The birth or transformation of deities from fire is a common theme in Mesoamerica.

All cultures place high value on heirloom objects. They symbolize the emotional and spiritual connections to predecessors and provide tangible evidence of those relationships. The possession of heirlooms can also create and enhance prestige and status. Heirlooms that represent important offices or titles legitimize their new owners, and the public displays of those heirlooms persuasively
reinforce that legitimization. Such was the case with the heirloom headdresses and objects of the Tlaloc cult. The high regard placed on the *ux yop huun* headdress at Palenque is a case in point. The acquisition of the *ux yop huun* headdress is portrayed on four different monuments, and its visible prominence led early researchers to wrongly assume that it was the royal headdress. In fact, most literature still refers to the *ux yop huun* as such despite the clear evidence to the contrary on the Temple XIX platform, where it is displayed alongside the royal *sak huun* headdress.

While the Oval Palace Tablet, Palace Tablet, and Tablet of the Slaves portray only members of the immediate royal family participating in the acquisition scenes, the Temple XIX platform expands the narrative to include the banded-bird officials who were custodians of the *sak huun* and the Yajawk’ak’ lord in charge of the *ux yop huun*. The narrative on the Tablet of the Slaves alludes to the role of the Yajawk’ak’ Chak Suutz’ as a new custodian of the *ux yop huun* but does not illustrate him in that role. Epigraphic evidence indicates that Yajawk’ak’ lords could move up the hierarchy of secondary offices and also become banded-bird officials. The Temple XIX platform illustrates banded-bird officials holding Tlaloc-decorated incense bags that appear to allude to their concurrent functions in the Tlaloc cult.

On the Oval Palace Tablet, Lady Sak K’uk’ hands her son K’inich Janaab Pakal I the *ux yop huun*. Lady Sak K’uk’ was never a ruler, but she was the daughter of the Palenque ruler Lady Yohl Ik’nal, and K’inich Janaab Pakal I acquired his right to rule through her. While Lady Sak K’uk’ may have had a custodial role related to this headdress, it is also likely that her appearance in the scene is a declaration of K’inich Janaab Pakal I’s legitimate right to possess this headdress. The scene on the Tablet of the Slaves supports such an interpretation. This monument illustrates the lord Tiwol handing the *ux yop huun* to his son K’inich Ahkal Mo’ Nahb III. Tiwol was the son of the ruler K’inich Janaab Pakal I, but he died before he had the opportunity to inherit the throne. K’inich Ahkal Mo’ Nahb III received his right to rule through his father, Tiwol. What is curious about the Tablet of the Slaves scene is that Tiwol had been dead for forty-two years at the time of this pictured event. So his role in the scene is not historically accurate, but it is one of legitimizing K’inich Ahkal Mo’ Nahb III as a royal who was entitled to inherit the *ux yop huun*.

The role of women in the Tlaloc cult is well illustrated in Maya art, although ascertaining their exact duties and responsibilities is more elusive. At Yaxchilán, Structure 21 and Structure 23 contain predominately Tlaloc-related iconography, and they are identified with the Kaloomte’ women Lady Ik’ Skull and
Lady K’abal Xook, respectively. Structure 23 is actually labeled as the house of Lady K’abal Xook, but the narrative states that its location is within the territory and authority of her husband, Shield Jaguar III (Tokovinine 2008:153). The Structure 23 lintels illustrate her in her role as a Tlaloc priestess performing blood sacrifices with her husband, conjuring the ancestral Lady Ohl, who appears in a Tlaloc warrior costume dressing Shield Jaguar III for war. On Stela 35 in Structure 21, Lady Ik’ Skull is also portrayed conjuring Lady Ohl, and like Lady K’abal Xook she takes on the guise of this enigmatic figure. In contrast, Lady Ik’ Skull’s narrative highlights her role as the mother of Shield Jaguar III’s son Bird Jaguar IV.

Lady Ik’ Skull is identified as a royal woman originally from the Kaanul polity. The badly eroded monuments of this great polity prevent us from fully appreciating the importance of the Tlaloc cult in its affairs, but surviving inscriptions suggest that they participated in that veneration starting at an early date. Kaanul royal women with training as Tlaloc priestesses were married to a number of foreign allies, most notably lords at La Corona and El Perú. The bride price paid to the Kaanul king for these extraordinary women must have been steep.

A similar strategy appears to have been employed by the Dos Pilas king Bajlaj Chan K’awiil, who is named in Dos Pilas narratives as the vassal of the Kaanul king Yuknoom Ch’een. Bajlaj Chan K’awiil’s daughter Lady Six Sky was a Tlaloc priestess who moved to Naranjo presumably to wed a local lord; subsequently, their son became the Naranjo king. Lady Six Sky may have been a powerful figure, but like Lady Ik’ Skull of Yaxchilán, her status was consistently linked to the fact that she was the mother of the Naranjo king.

A major conflict between Kaanul and its rival Tikal was based on access to the highly esteemed goods of obsidian, quetzal feathers, and jade procured from the eastern highlands of Guatemala. The overland route for these long-distance imports passed over the Cobán plateau before descending down the two major river systems of the lowlands (the Pasión and the Chixoy). During the Early Classic, Tikal controlled the Río Pasión section of the trade route and became quite rich from doing so (Woodfill and Andrieu 2012; Demarest et al. 2014). Kaanul attempted to isolate Tikal by dominating the sites on the periphery of Tikal’s central territory and cutting off its access to this trade route (Martin and Grube 2008). The ebb and flow of the Kaanul-Tikal competition dominated the Classic period conflicts, and the fortunes of their allies shifted up and down as these two great city-states vied for power.

During the height of Kaanul’s power, both Cancuén and Dos Pilas–Aguateca were under its sway (Martin and Grube 2008:109; Demarest et al. 2014). After
Kaanul was defeated by Tikal in AD 695, Kaanul’s power in the south lessened. Cancuén was strategically located near the head of navigation on the Río Pasión and was a port city where obsidian and jade were funneled into the lowlands. After Dos Pilas–Aguateca Ruler 3 took the throne in AD 727, he moved to maintain his access to highland goods by forming an alliance with Cancuén, as indicated by his marriage to Lady GI-K’awiil of Cancuén. The narratives on Dos Pilas Stela 2 and Aguateca Stela 2 detail Ruler 3’s military victory against the Seibal king Yich’aak Bahlam in AD 735, and Yich’aak Bahlam subsequently became the vassal of Ruler 3. Seibal is located just 15 km northeast of Dos Pilas–Aguateca, and it was a key port on the Río Pasión trade route. The patron god of Dos Pilas–Aguateca was a deity with the attributes of GI and GII, but Ruler 3 is illustrated on his two monuments in the guise of Tlaloc and wearing full Tlaloc regalia, including spear thrower and darts. These monuments were a visual assertion by Ruler 3 that he was spiritually in control of obsidian and physically in control of the obsidian trade route in the region.

The trade route across the Cobán plateau is adjacent to Cerro Xucaneb, the highest mountain of Alta Verapaz. The Maya believed mountains were manifestations of their deities. I have marshaled evidence from epigraphic, iconographic, ethnohistorical, and ethnographic sources that indicates that Cerro Xucaneb was identified with God L, the patron god of long-distance merchants and the maternal grandfather of the Hero Twins.

There are numerous examples of royal court life illustrated in Maya art that feature rulers, their families, and their courtiers. Unfortunately, there are no depictions that have been securely identified as long-distance merchants and their entourages. Nevertheless, considering that the creator grandfather Itzamnaaj, his son One Ixim, and the Hero Twin grandsons One Ajaw and Yax Bolon were role models for royals, it is logical to assume that God L was not only the patron god for long-distance merchants but also the supernatural paradigm for them. The fact that God L was the maternal grandfather of the Hero Twins suggests that there was a tradition of long-distance merchants cementing their mercantile alliances with local dynasties through marriage. Perhaps that is how Spearthrower Owl ended up with a wife and son at Tikal.

Artisans of the royal court transformed the jade and quetzal feathers brought by long-distance merchants into elite insignia. The Popol Vuh provides some insight regarding the lineage of these regal artisans. One Ixim and God L were the antecedent for One Hunahpu and the underworld deity Gathered Blood, respectively. One Hunahpu mated with Gathered Blood’s daughters and produced four sons to carry on his legacy (One Batz and One Chouen...
with Lady Bone Water and Hunahpu and Xbalanque with Lady Blood). The Hero Twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque inherited the power and wisdom of their father and grandfather, and they were the ideal role models for young royal heirs. They created a supernatural hierarchy by subordinating One Batz and One Chouen and then designating their brothers as patrons for elite artisans. Two simian artisan deities have been identified in Classic Period art as the antecedents for One Batz and One Chouen (Coe 1973). On the Boot vessel, these two monkey gods sit on the lowest tier of Itzamnaaj’s court.

While the relationship between the ruling elite and long-distance merchants was mutually advantageous, it was also adversarial. As noted, a series of pottery scenes illustrate One Ixim subordinating God L and the Paddler Gods. It is another example of the mythic establishment of supernatural hierarchy on which Classic period society was modeled. Maya merchants may have brought the privileged status markers of quetzal feather and jade to the ruling elite, but these scenes declare it was the ruler who was the most powerful.

In Mesoamerica, warfare was consistently intertwined with religious beliefs. While Maya lords wear a variety of regalia in war scenes, this study has concentrated on the gods identified with flint and obsidian weapons. It has explored the nature of the foreign god Tlaloc and how his cult was integrated into the Maya pantheon of deities during the Classic period. While the initial acceptance of the Tlaloc cult may have been instigated by the desire of local Maya lords to align themselves with powerful foreign elites, the cult soon became an integral part of the hierarchical structure of rulership. Being an Ajaw and a Bakab had significant status, but attaining the rank of Kaloomte’ placed the lord and his community at a higher level. The martial nature of the Kaloomte’ office indicates that the role of the lord as a military commander was at the forefront of Classic period power, not a surprising situation. The importance of obsidian as a much valued highland commodity suggests that the role of the Kaloomte’ also involved the control of obsidian distribution both at a domestic level and to allies.