

Chapter 4

Crocodiles in Bas-relief Sculptures at Copan, Honduras

In Symposium Presentation July 27, 2023

Iconography and Ethnozoology
of the Crocodiles and Caiman
of Mesoamerica
and their relation
with the Cosmology of the Underworld and the Heavens

Nicholas Hellmuth

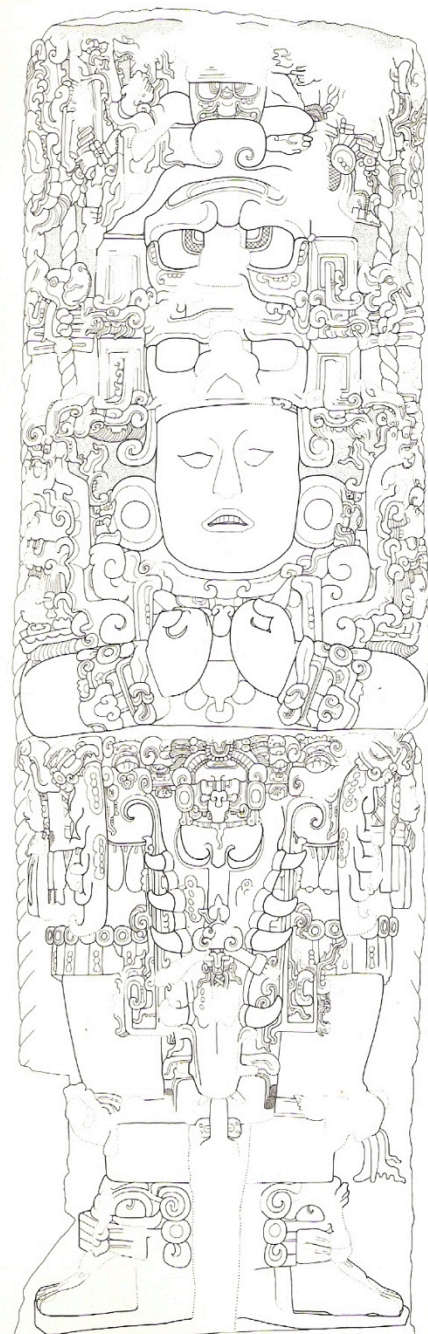


Crocodiles at Copan, Honduras

I first visited Copan by the late 1960's and in subsequent years brought a complete photography team along with portable studio lighting and an electric generator, because the best way to document bas-relief sculptures is with portable studio lighting. IHAH kindly provided permits for photographing at night. In return we provided photos and during those past years our photos were used on posters to show visitors what they could see at Copan. The last time I went to Copan I noticed that our photos of Altar Q were still displayed in at least one of the museums.

The various projects at Copan of capable archaeologists have also resulted in their excellent photography including 3-dimensional.

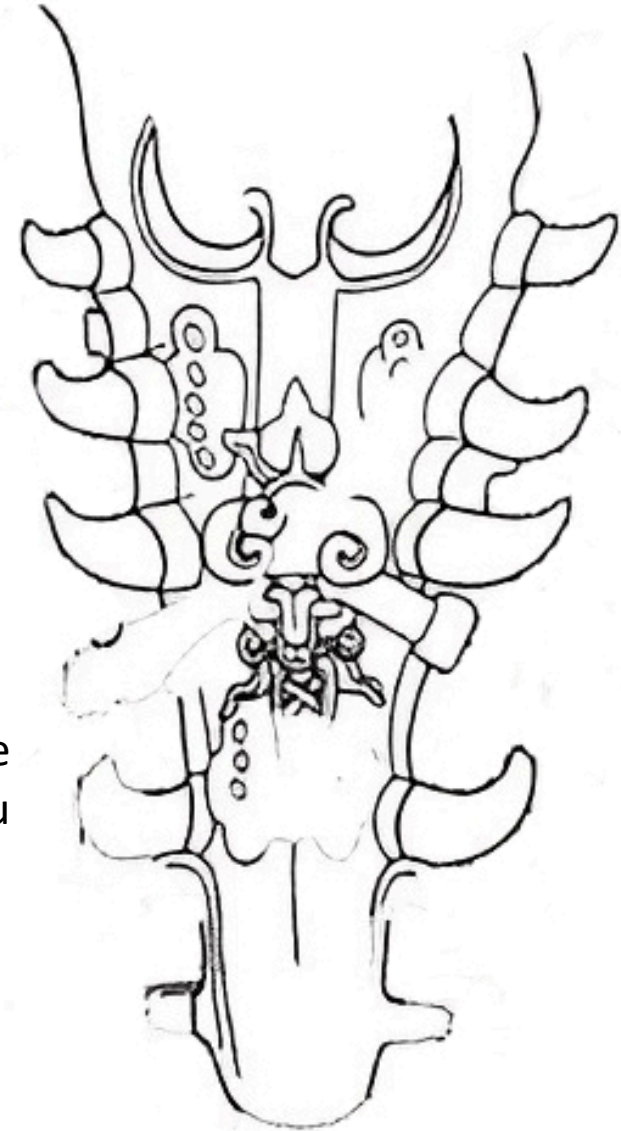
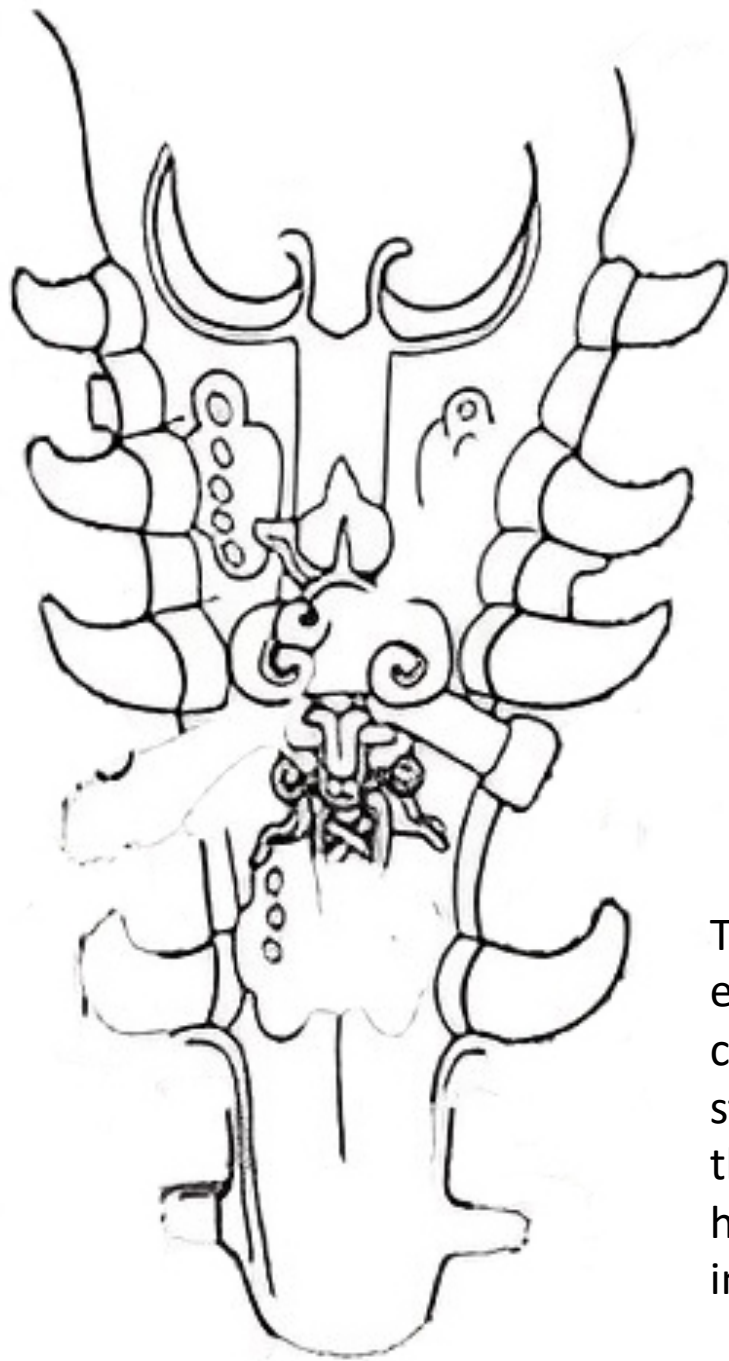
The present chapter on crocodiles at Copan Honduras shows several of our photos that bring out detail.



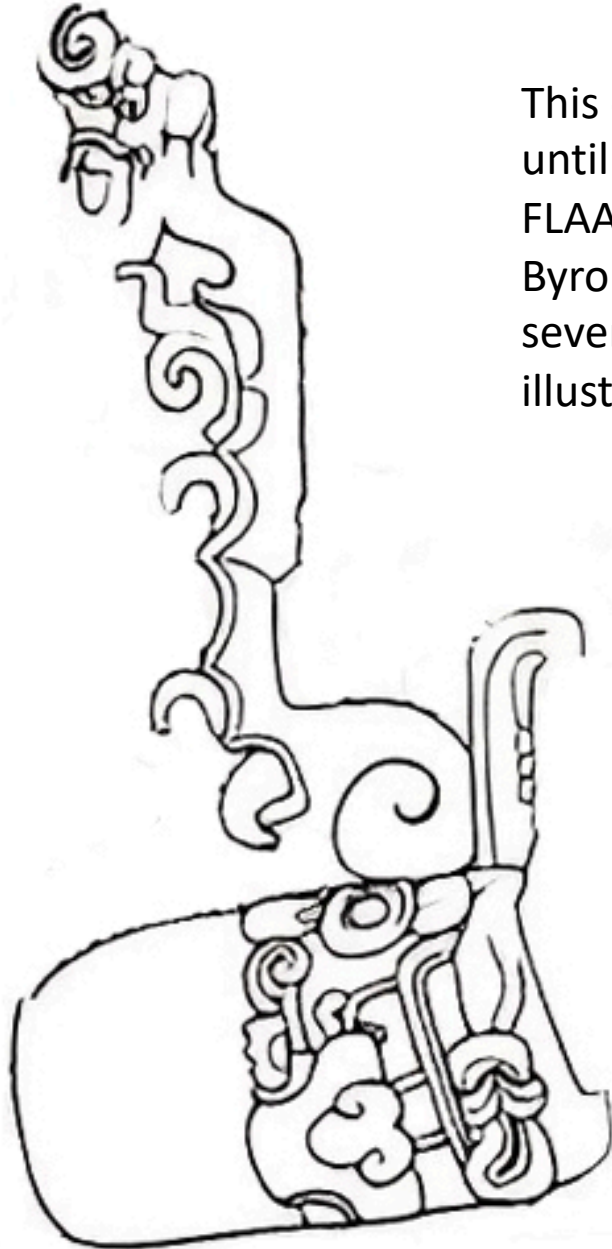
Copan Stela C, CPN 4
Baudez 1994: Fig. 7.
Excellent drawing by
Barbara Fash.

Photo by Nicholas
Hellmuth of
crocodile part.

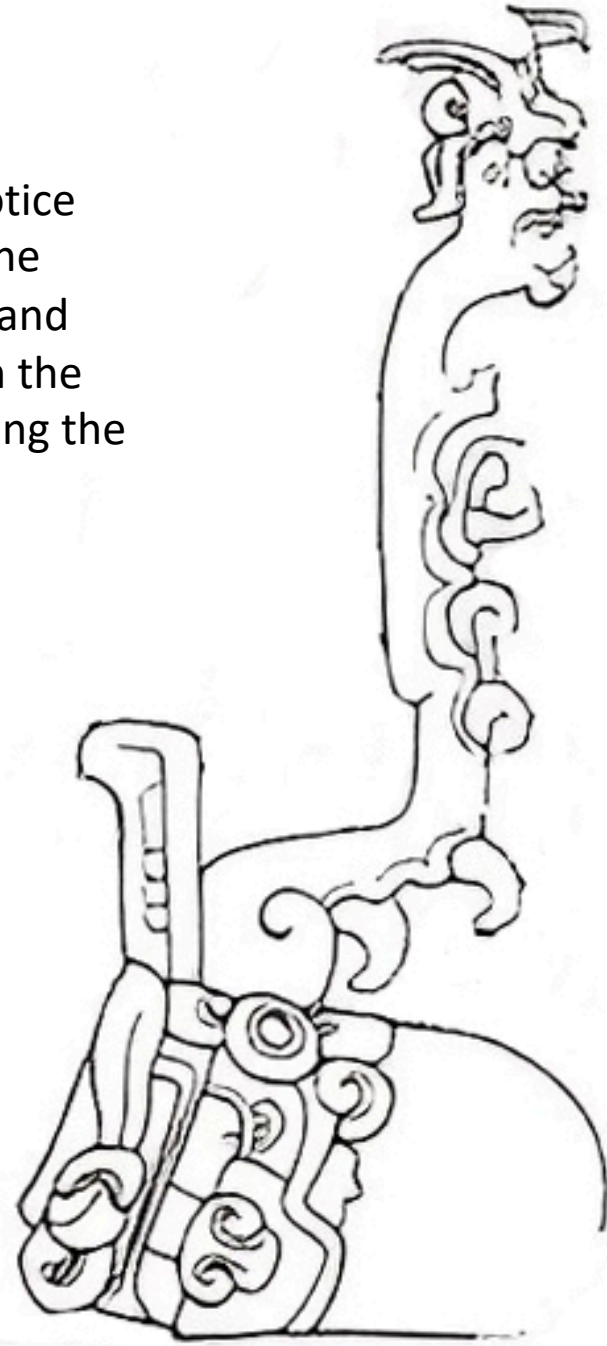


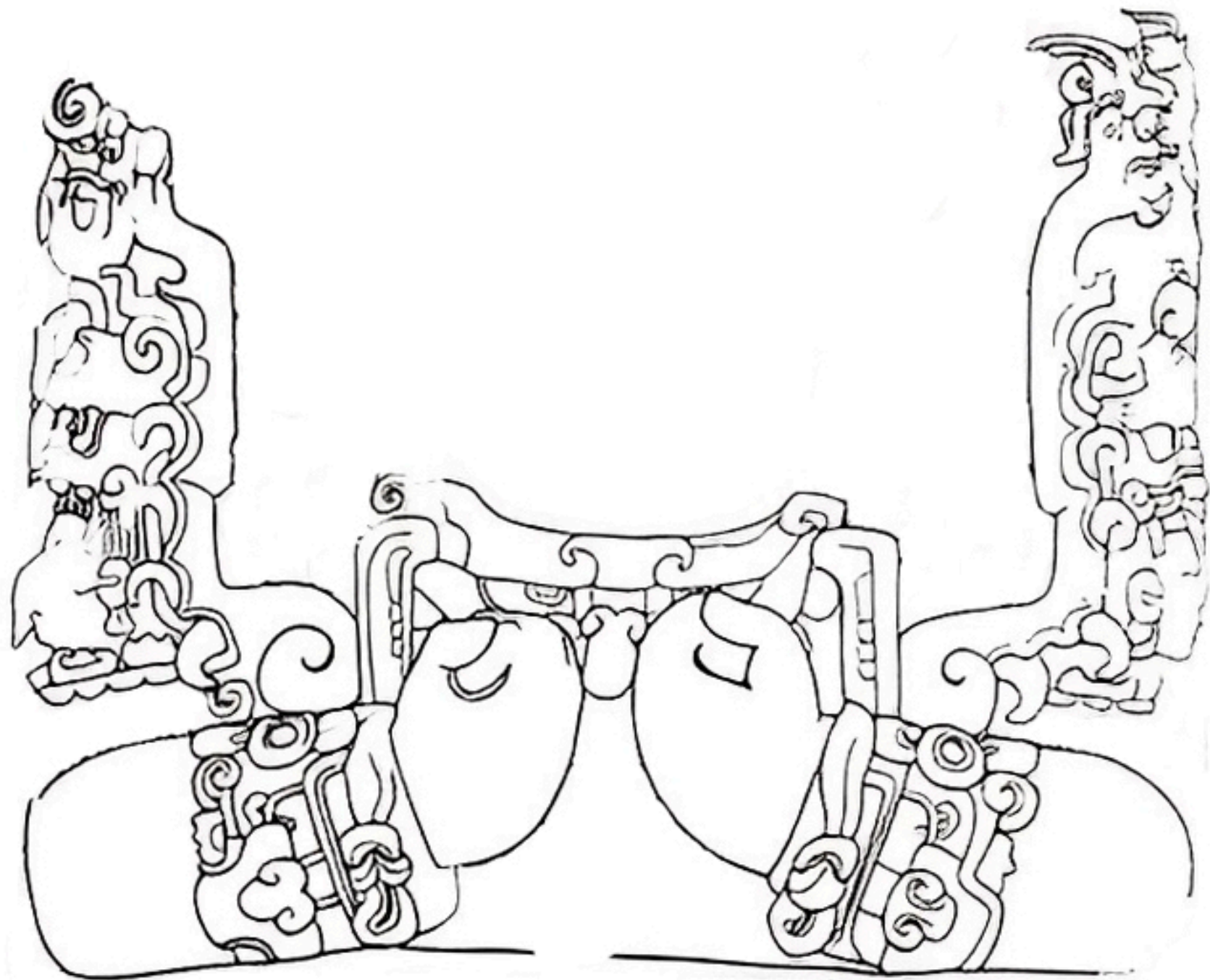


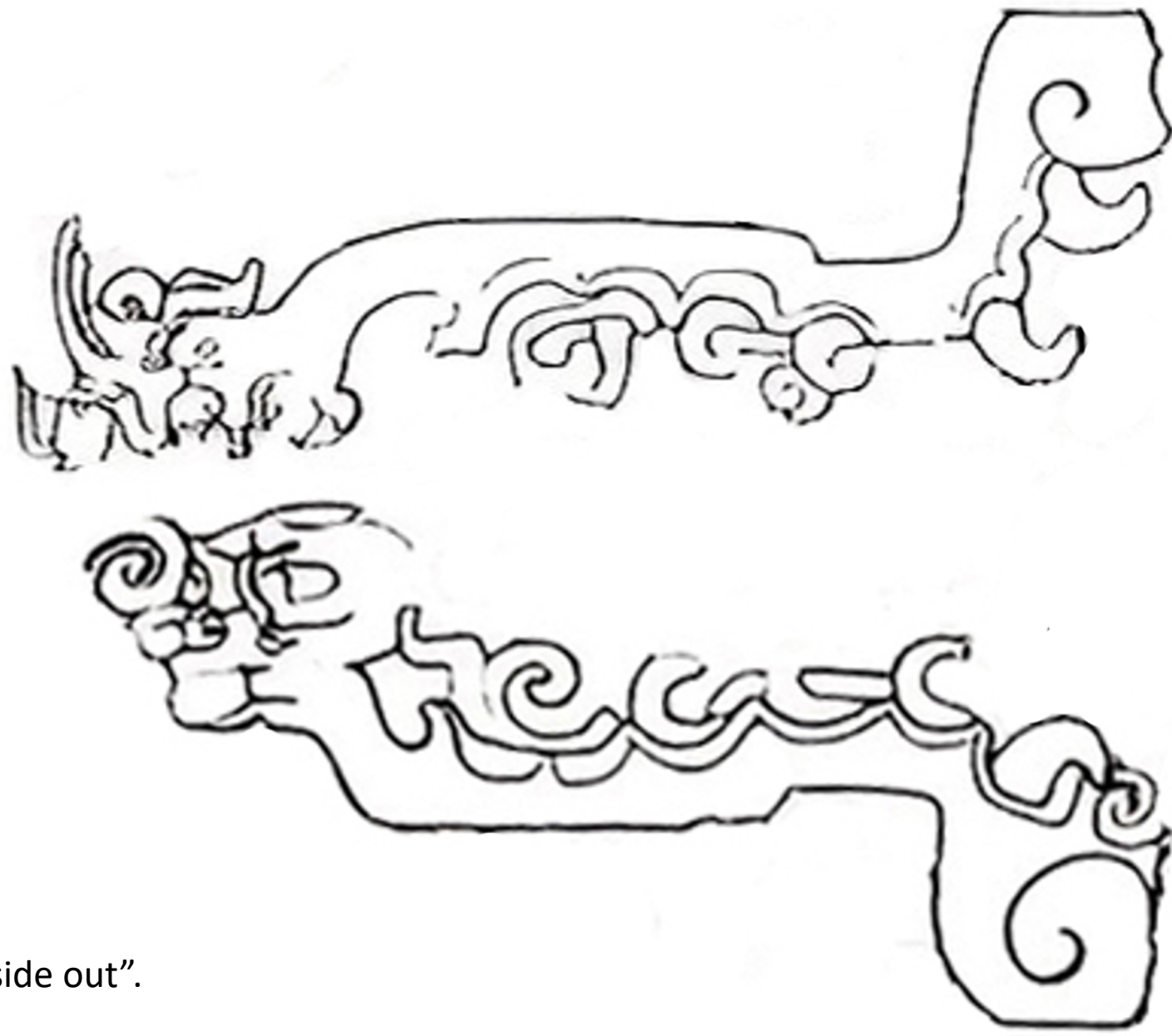
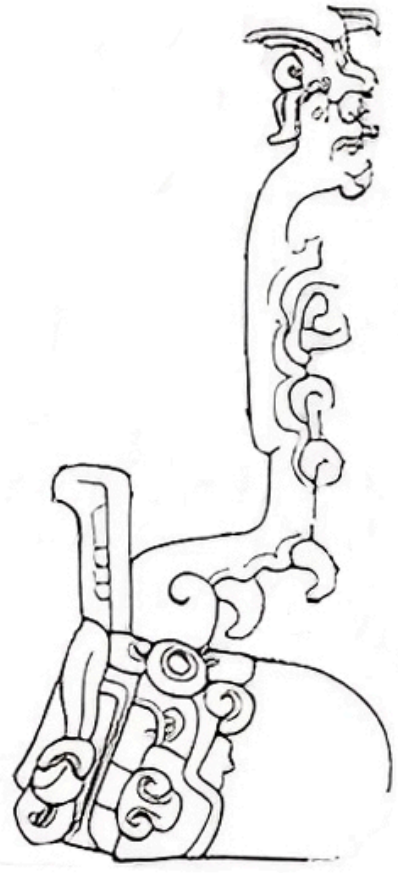
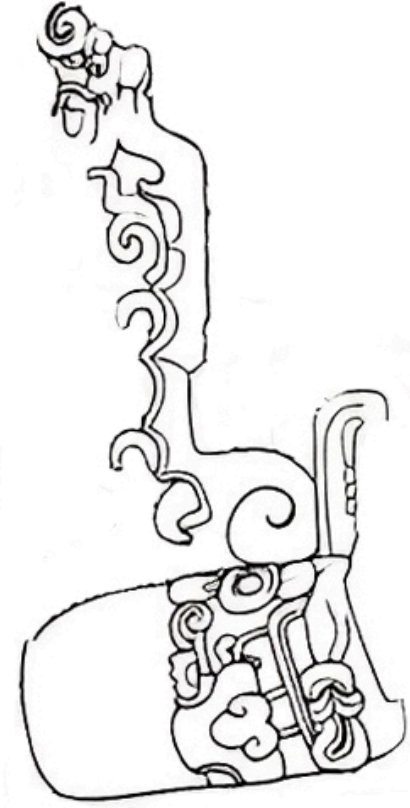
To see the details it helps to pull each individual creature out of the complex illustration. And once you start looking at details, you notice there are actually two crocodile heads (one frontal and the other in two separate profiles).



This crocodile I did not notice until I was working with the FLAAR team (Norma Cho and Byron Pacay) that assist in the several months of preparing the illustrations.







This Classic Maya sculptor really “turned this crocodile inside out”.

Having a deity head at the end of a reptilian snout is common, but usually it is a variant of the Loincloth Apron Face. But here it’s a different supernatural face.



This Copan sculpture has lots of teeth but all are of identical triangular shape and all the same size. No fangs, so not like a snake or crocodile. Some iguanas and Bufo toads have identical dentition (triangular, and in a row) but this head is not a toad and not expected shape for an iguana. So we show this head but it's identification needs further research.

Photos by Nicholas Hellmuth in past decades.



A monster head on Copan CPN 26, Stela N, has the same triangular dentition (photo at the right). Both photos by Nicholas Hellmuth, FLAAR Photo Archive



But this is more easily identifiable as an actual crocodile, albeit stylized as usual. Obviously the large teeth that are most visible are what are featured.



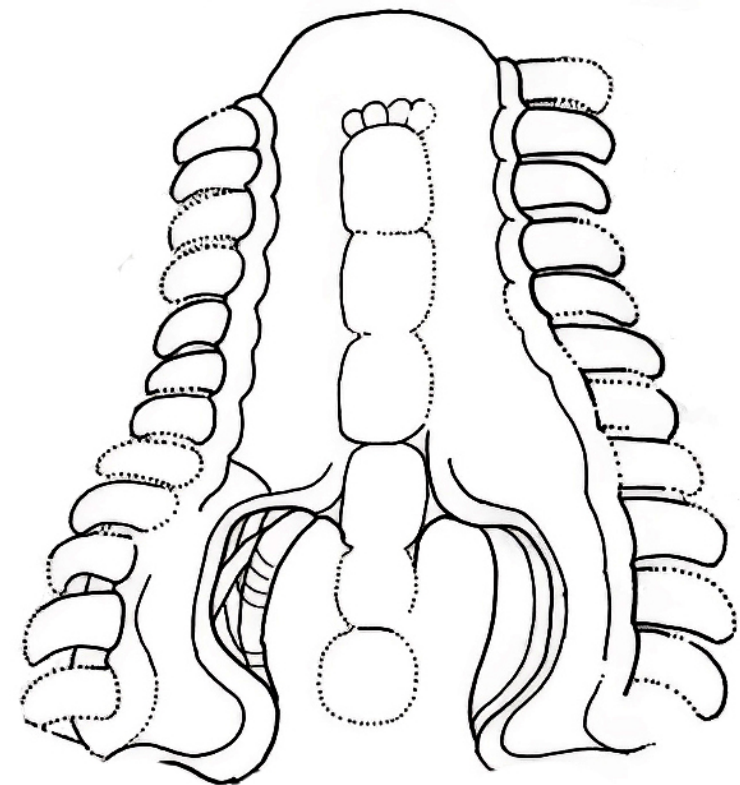
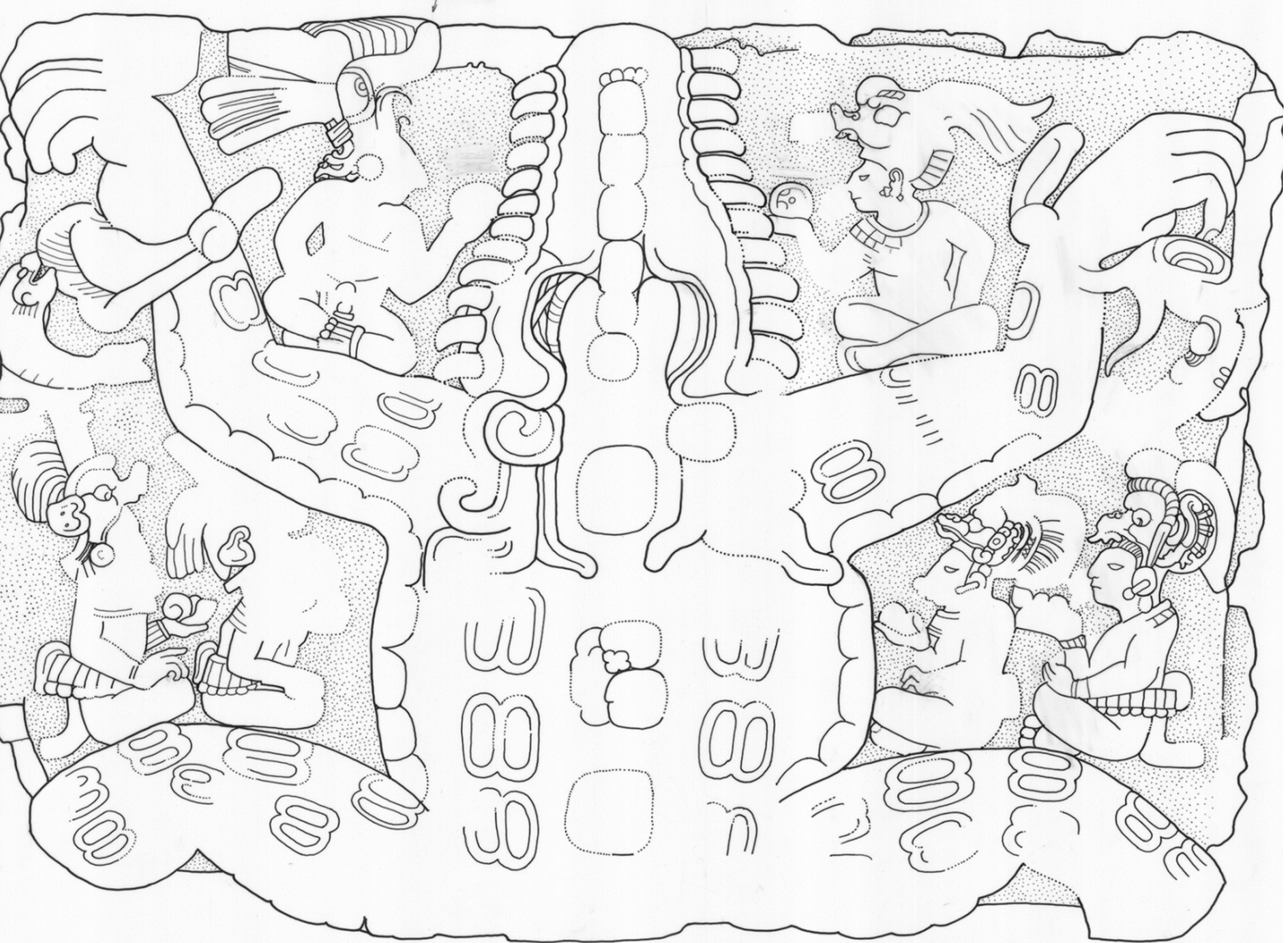
Here are the actual teeth of a *Crocodylus moreletii*, posing for me.

Los Sapos is best known for the impressive 3D sculpture of a Bufo toad. But there are also crocodiles in this area of rock outcrop sculpture.

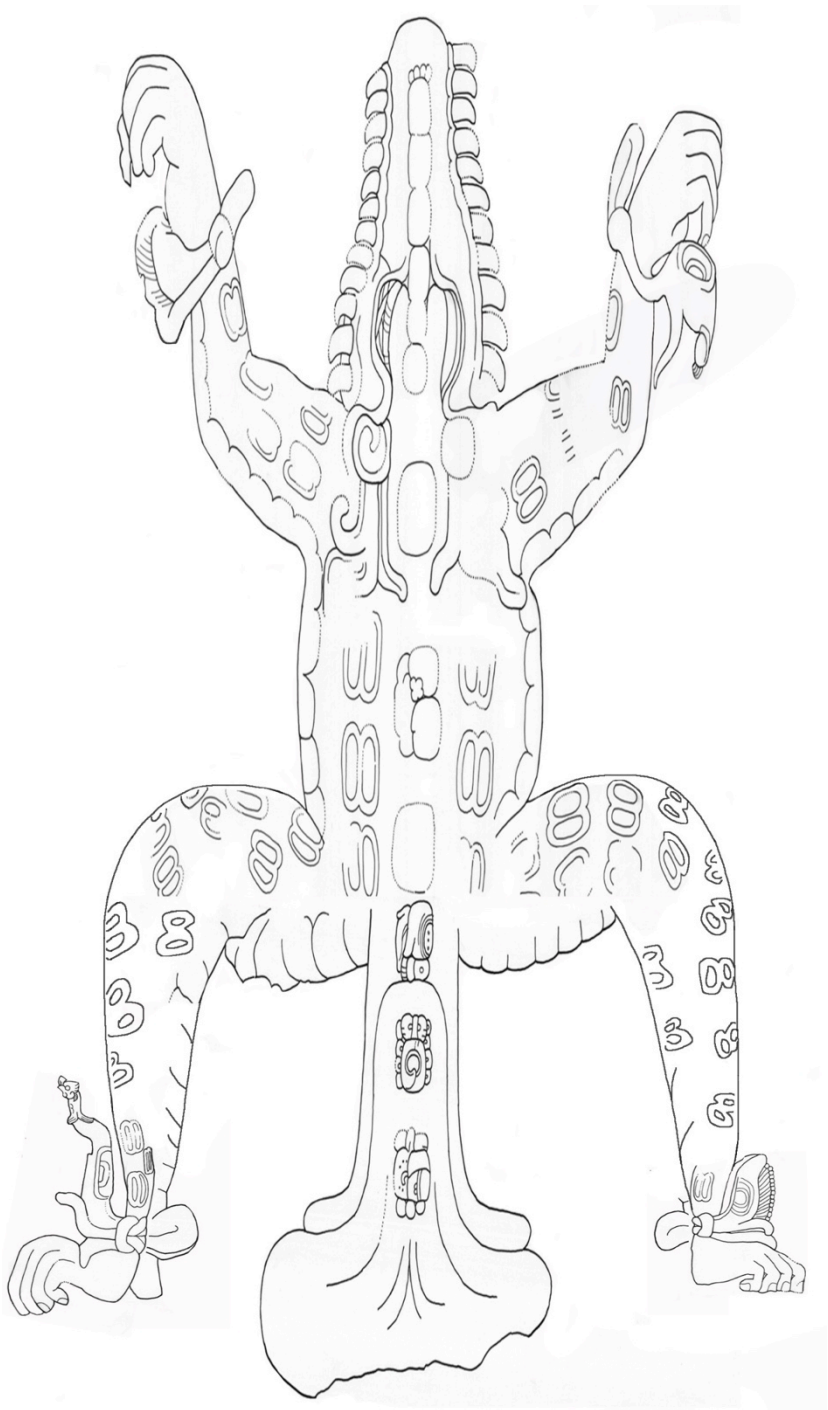
I have not yet found line drawings of these crocodiles. I would appreciate if someone knows these drawings and could send me a link.

This is on a hill overlooking the valley of Rio Copan. A nice hotel is nearby.





Obvious crocodile. Teeth simplified, exaggerated and stylized to make this reptile look more dangerous. Pattern on hide also simplified. Copan Altar T, CPN 33. Drawing by Linda Schele, SD-1021, AncientAmericas.org.

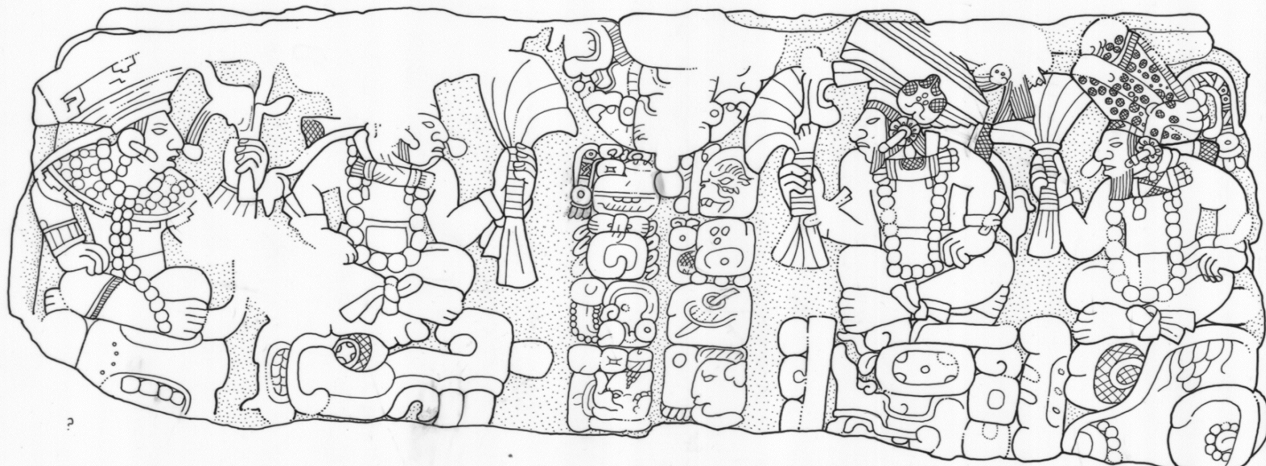
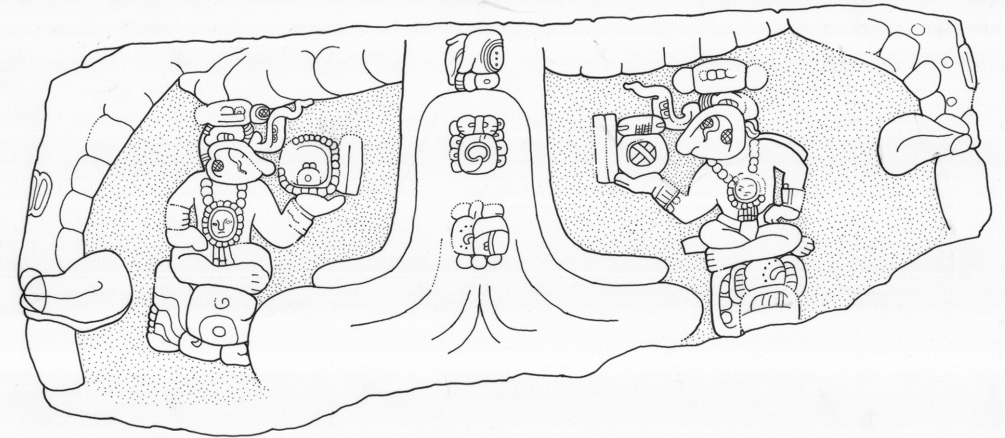
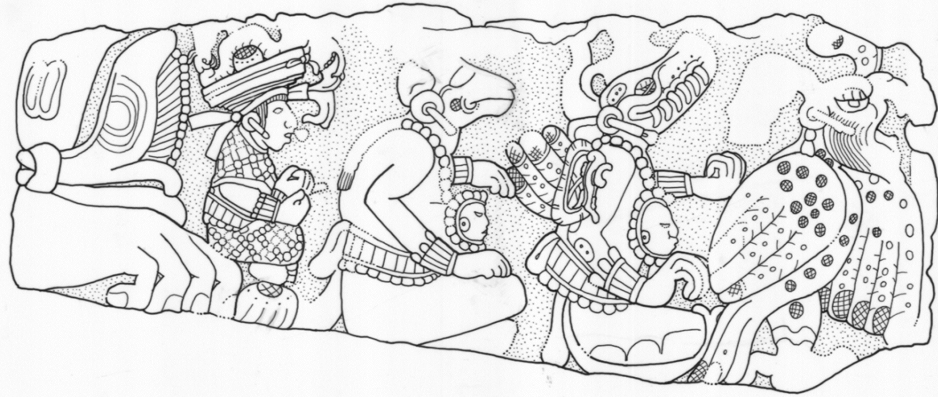


To show the hand-like claws and to show which aspect are stylized, it helps to digitally prepare a slightly more realistic body size and shape. Rendition by Byron Pacay, FLAAR Mesoamerica, based on Linda Schele drawing SD-1021. Copan Altar T, CPN 33.

As is common the arms and legs are slightly anthropomorphic, especially the front “hands and fingers”.

The water lily flower stems wrapped around the ankles and wrists are common in Maya art. But the spayed almost bird-like tail is unexpected. Tail was enhanced, modified. So this tail needs ethnozoological and iconographical research to learn what was its intention.

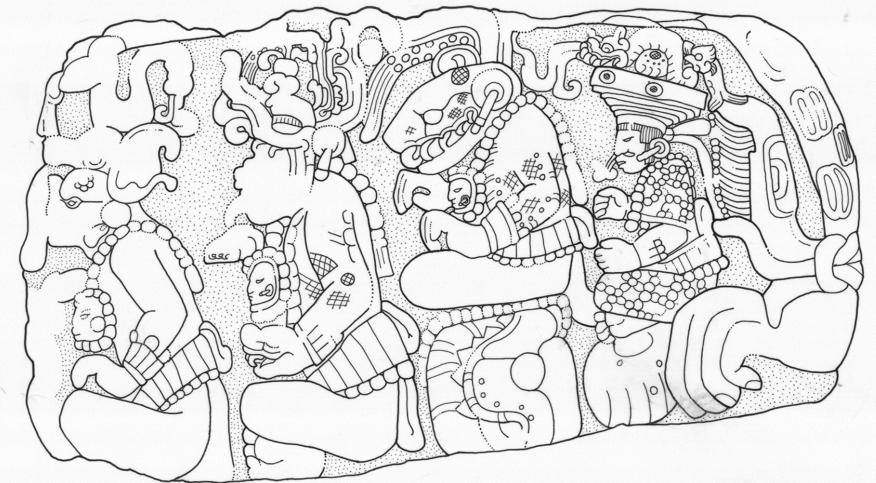
A team of several people help prepare each FLAAR PowerPoint presentation. Total time is about two to three months for a 1 hour lecture. But FLAAR is a research and educational institute, so we like to make our material available (it is easy to copy drawings from our unlocked PPTx file).



LEFT SIDE S. KLEINER

SD-1019

CPN 33/ ALTAR T / L. Schele '91 corrected from LS drawings of B.M. casts M. Van Stone 19/10/97



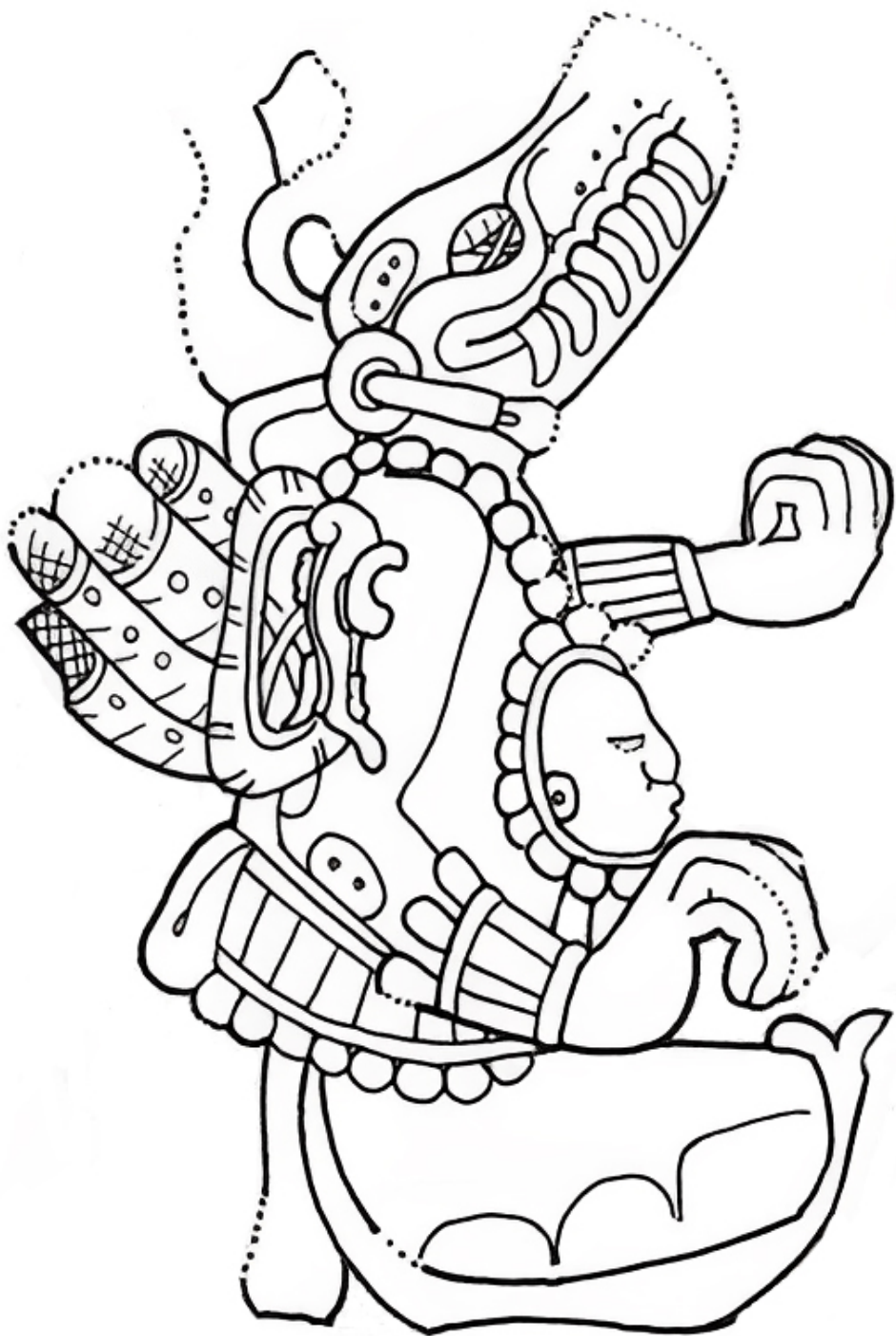
CPN-33/ALTAR T
L. Schele '87/'96
M. Van Stone msked
corrections from LS
drawing of casts in
British Museum of plan
16 Sept. 97

RIGHT SIDE L. KANE
SD1020

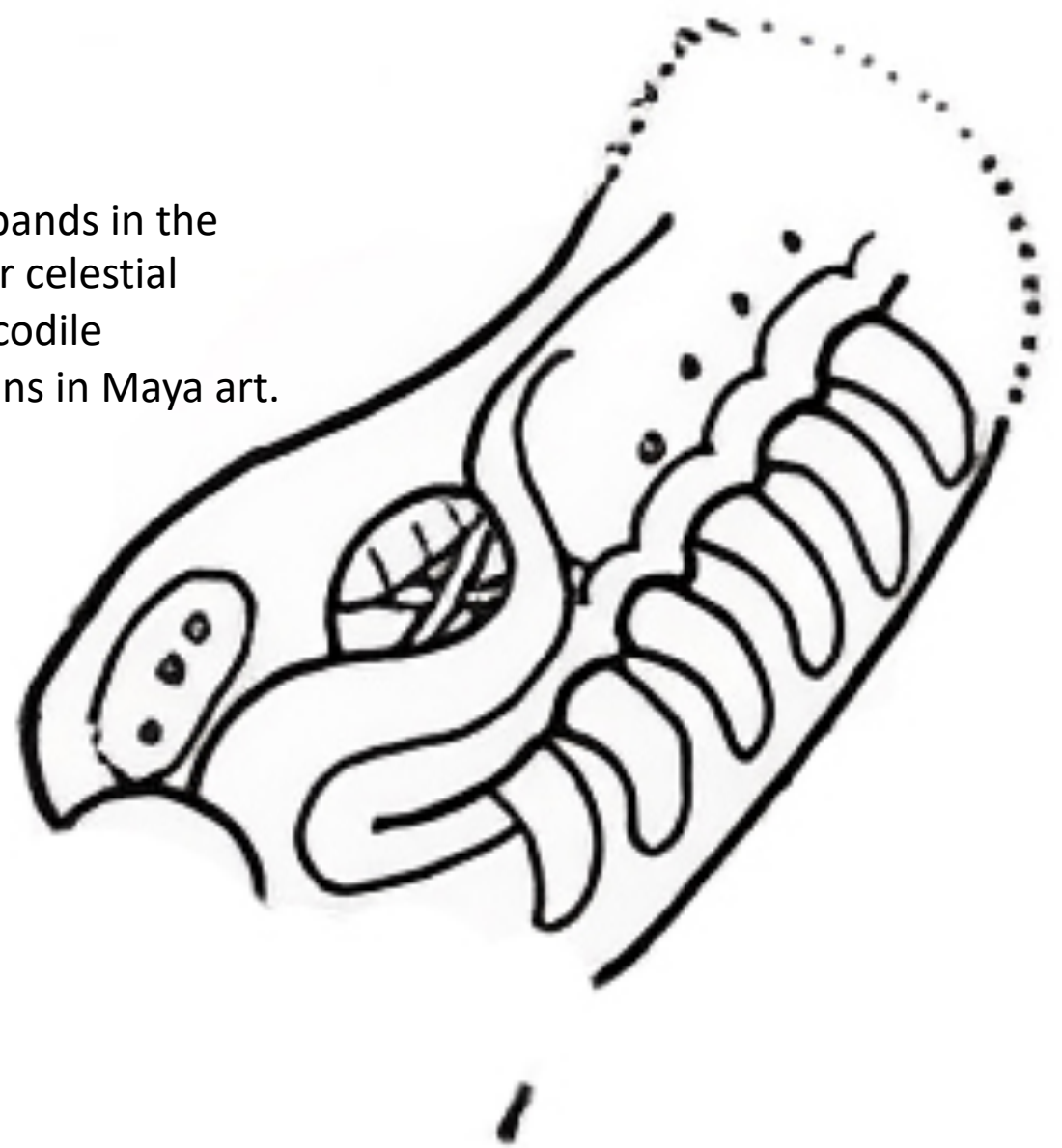
The sides of Copan Altar T, CPN 33, also have an obvious crocodile (headdress) plus a second reptile. Drawings by Linda Schele.



The giant “paw” of the crocodile (on top; one “paw” seen here at left) has human fingers and even fingernails. The headdress of the seated figure is an obvious crocodile. His hands have abnormal fingers and his thigh has reptile design. He has winged feathers on his back. Drawing by Schele updated by Van Stone, in helpful AncientAmericas-LACMA database.



The crossed-bands in the eye is another celestial aspect of crocodile representations in Maya art.

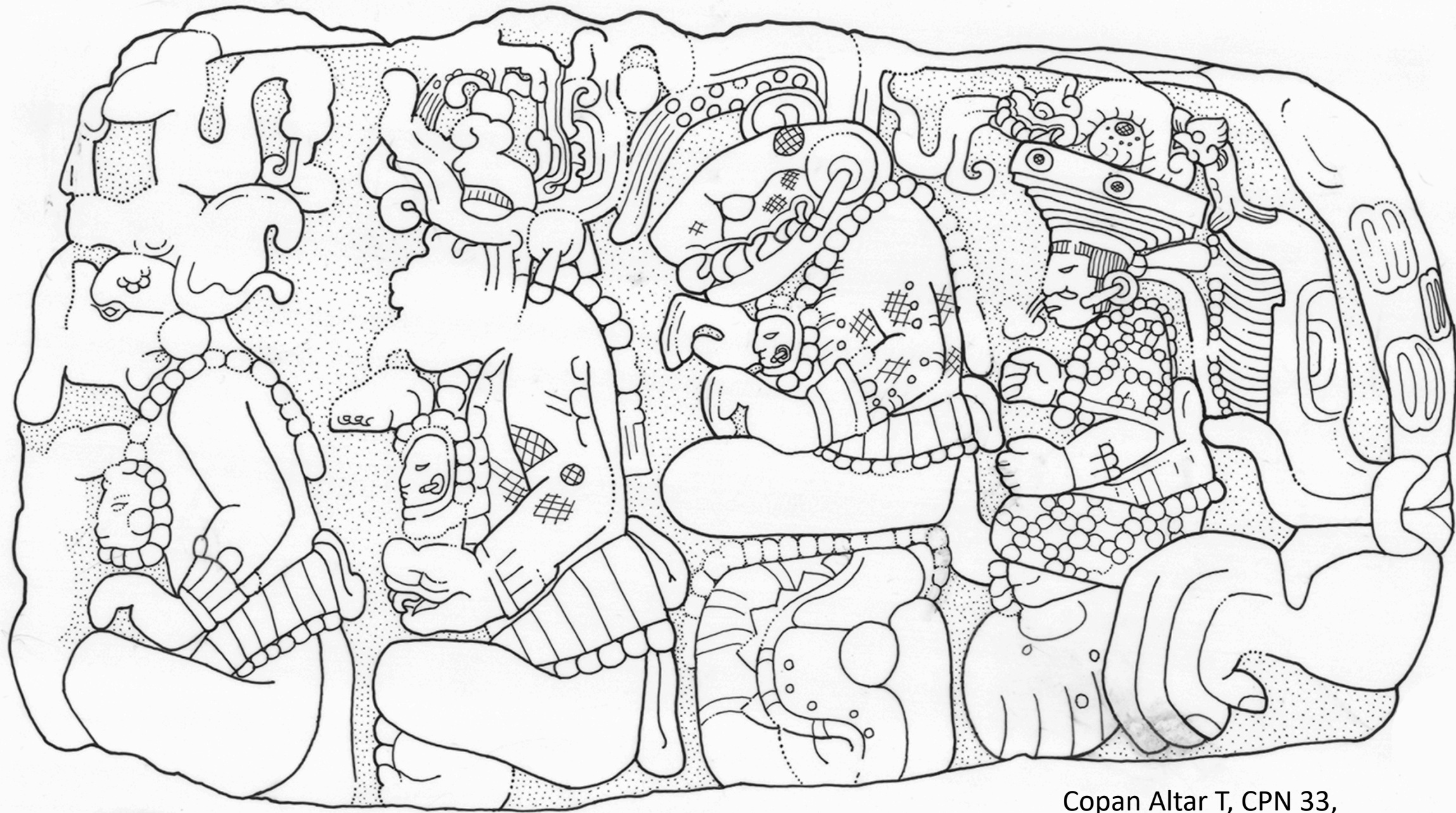


It helps to learn which symbols are in the eye, because some crocodiles are composite monsters with the Starry Eyed Deer, so it's eye is different.



To compare the stylized teeth it helps to see the actual teeth close-up. So whenever a crocodile poses for me, I get down on the ground so I can get a good view of the size, shape and arrangement of the teeth.

Crocodylus moreletii at Tikal, January 2013, photo by Nicholas Hellmuth.



Copan Altar T, CPN 33,
Schele drawing SD-1020.

This face lacks any bump or curl at the end of its “snout”. So no “crocodile snout end.”

Teeth are stylized, as on the obvious crocodile across the top.

Cross-hachure on the body may help ethnozoologists, iconographers and epigraphers ID this as iguana or composite iguana-crocodile. No celestial symbol in the eye; no crest. So only the teeth are mas o menos “crocodile like”.

The teeth on the upturned animal head are found on Bufo Toad and on Iguana. But no Bufo ear or Bufo glands are shown.



Long mouth is obviously a crocodile.

Decoration atop end of the nose area is also a bit crocodile-like

Slight crest over the eye.

Eye itself not a celestial symbol but the row of teeth make this an obvious crocodile.

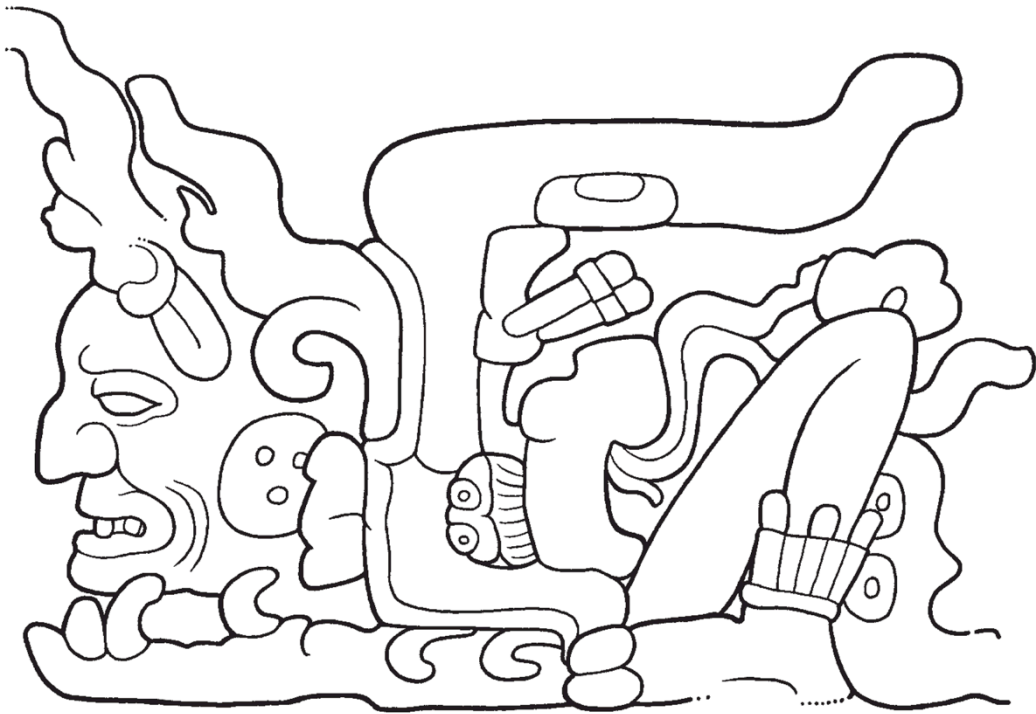
Copan,
Honduras, photo
by N. Hellmuth.





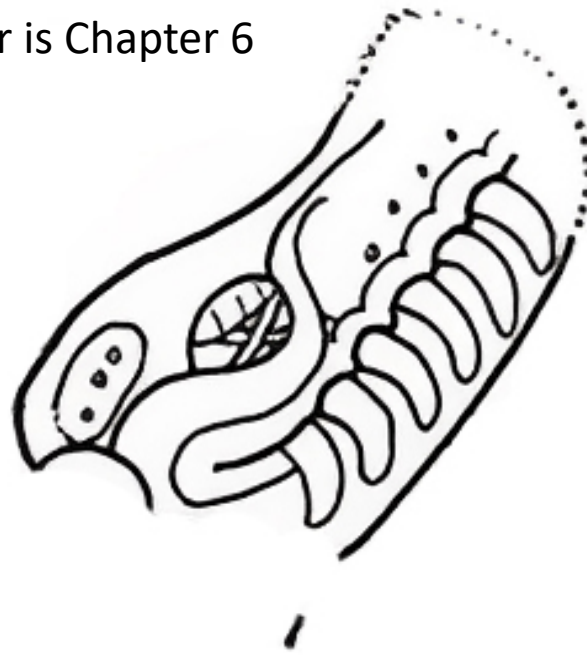
Each sculptor had their own style. The swirl as superorbital plate is not common. The dentition is not crocodile-like but size, shape of head is acceptable and the Crossed-Bands in eye is when the crocodile aspects are featured. This drawing is from half-a-century ago and needs to be found again on a more recent drawing of this Copan CPN 26, Stela N. This drawing is from my 1970's-1980's library research from Maudslay Volume I, Plate 82, in preparation for my PhD dissertation and is published in the Surface of the Underwaterworld, the English edition (Hellmuth 1987a: Fig. 166,d).

This crocodile and many other parts of the lower section of Stela N are no longer extant. Would help to do a new drawing of the lower part from cast's taken by Maudslay and stored in the UK to rescue this crocodile.

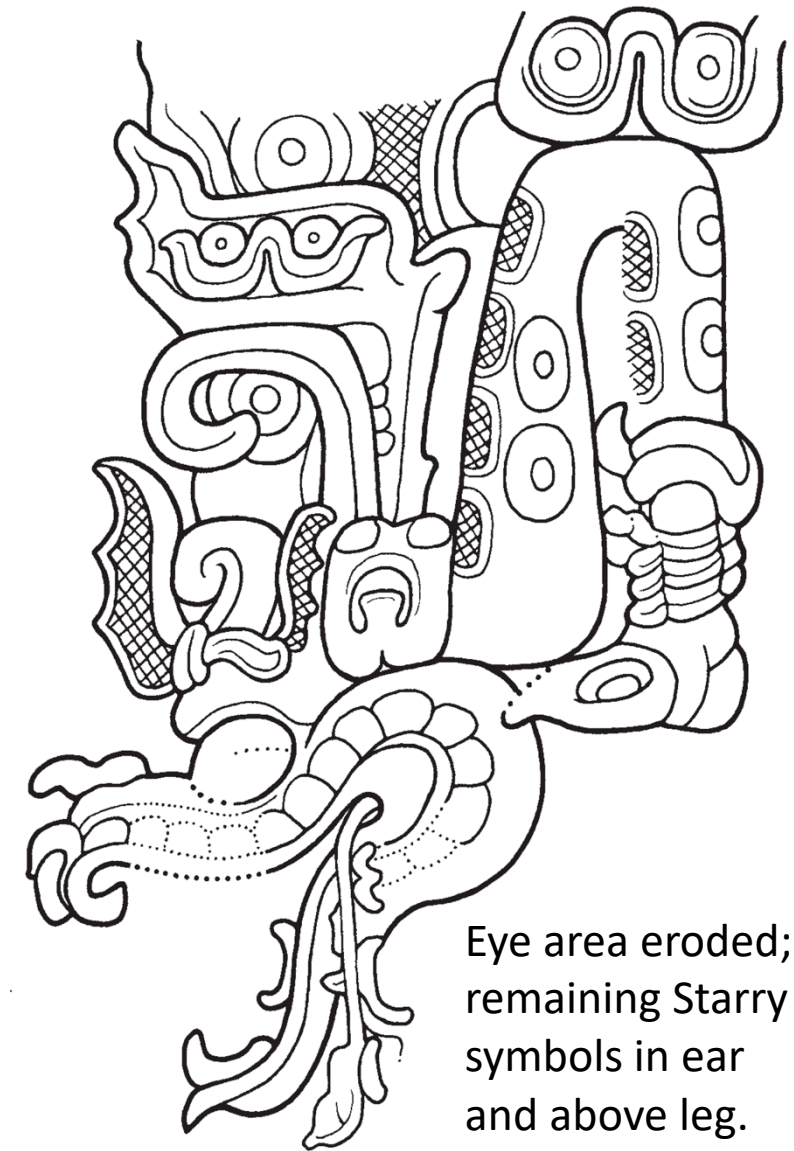


There are also crocodiles and Starry Eyed Deer Crocodiles of Cosmic Monsters at Copan. I show one above and the rest of these in the chapter on Cosmic Monsters.

Copan, Structure 9N-82, bench, far left side, drawing by Simon Martin (Martin 2015: Fig. 12a).



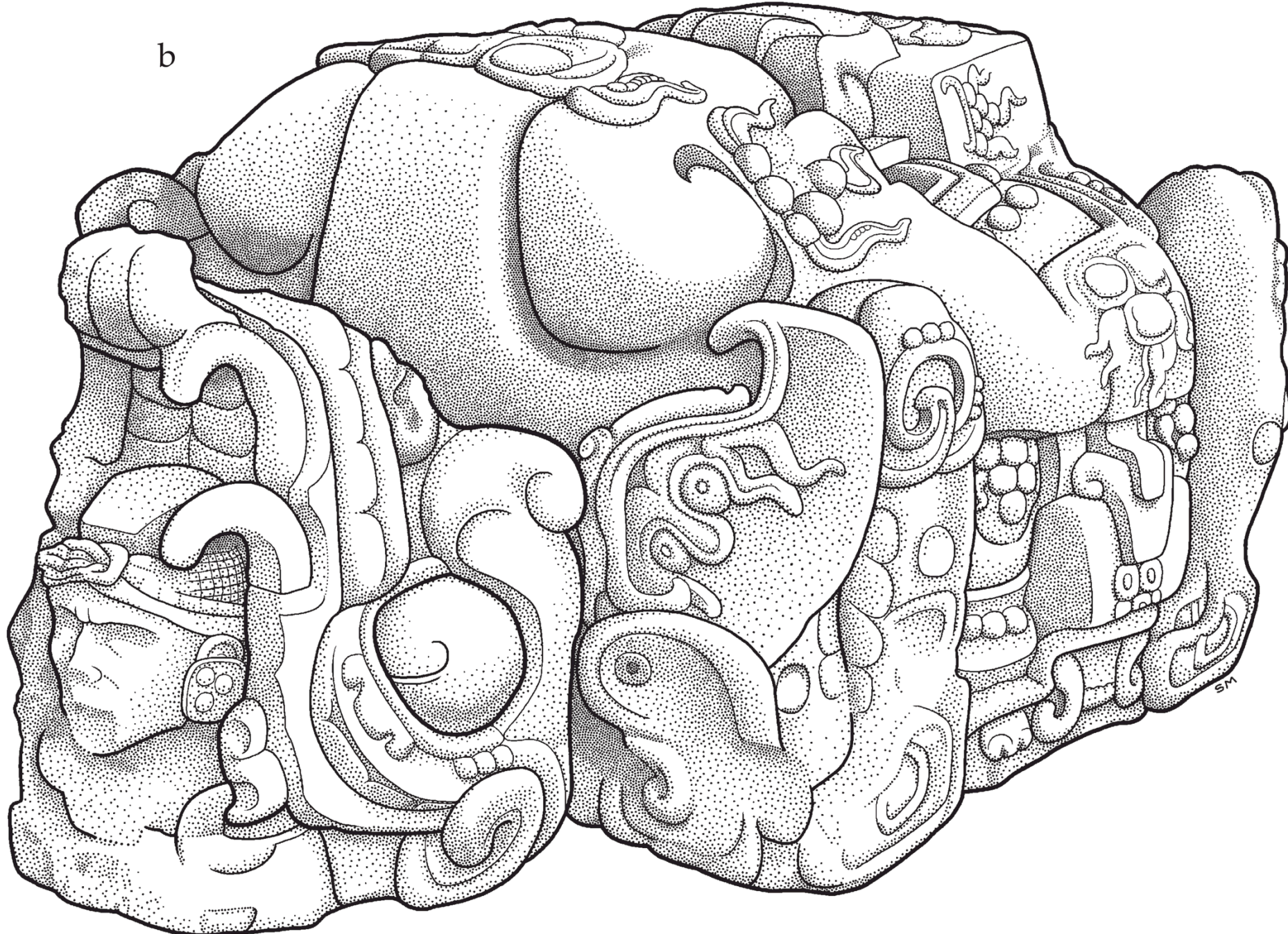
Crocodile with Crossed-Hands in its eye. Crossed-Bands are very common in Crocodiles not inside a Cosmic Monster (but exceptions do occur). Copan Altar



Eye area eroded; remaining Starry symbols in ear and above leg.

Starry Eyed Deer Crocodile, left end of Cosmic Monster Copan Str. 22, drawing by Simon Martin in Martin 2015: Fig. 12a.

b



Crocodile, with clearly defined God N head coming out. CPN 25, Altar of Stela M, excellent drawing by Simon Martin in Martin 2015: Fig. 39,b.

There is a Quadripartite Badge Headdress deity at the other end, so this is a COMPLETE Cosmic Monster.

Deer symbol is on the ear, instead of the usual position in the eye. So this is a crocodile head with deer ears, with Cauac Monster on top and on both sides.

This Cosmic Monster image ends our presentation of crocodiles at Copan and moves us into the next chapter to get into more detail on the many different kinds of bicephalic (two-headed) Cosmic Monsters.