



Chapter 2

Classic Maya portraits of Crocodiles as 3-dimensional ceramic figurines or stone sculptures and deep-relief renditions

In lecture presentation for The Pre-Columbian Society,
Dec. 14, 2024

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

Nicholas Hellmuth

On exhibit in Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquin.

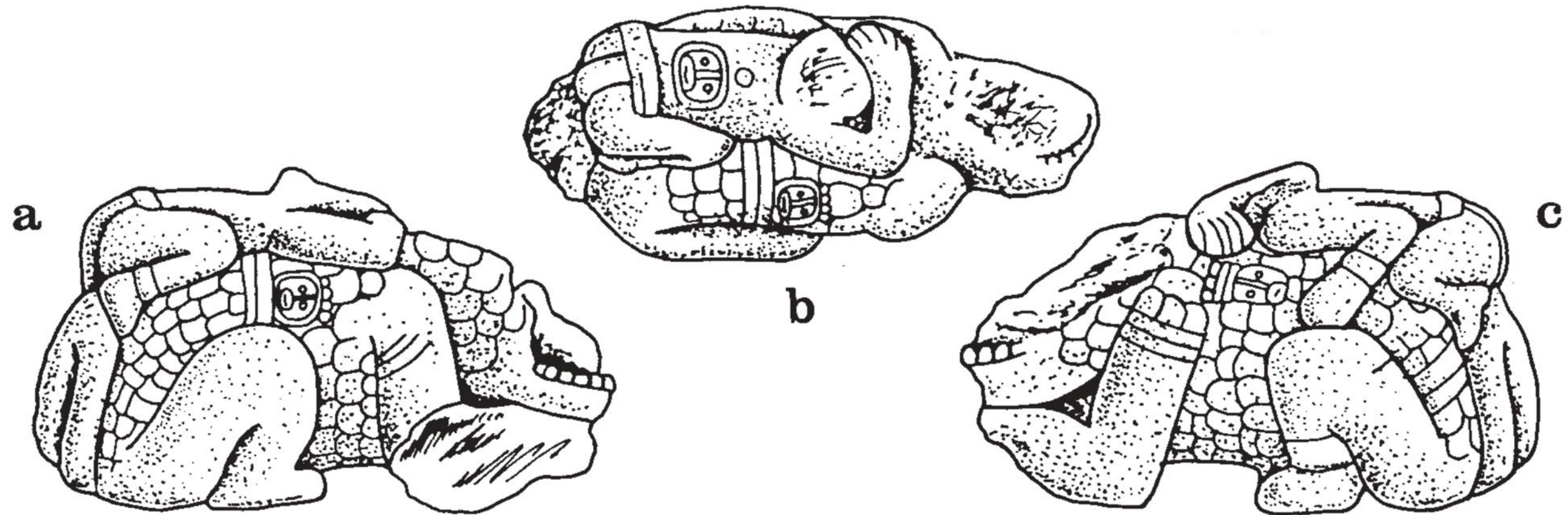


Ceramic bat
with his
buddy, Crocky,
Museo Popol
Vuh, UFM.

All smiles (to
show their
teeth and
fangs).

Photos by
Nicholas
Hellmuth
many decades
ago.





Crocodile with a person on top. Even without its head, I doubt this is God N. Excellent drawing by Karl Taube (1989: Figura 3) citing photographs in Proskouriakoff Fig. 4,e).

Another example of a man holding a crocodile. This reminds me of Roman gladiators fighting tigers or lions. So is this individual a captive from war?

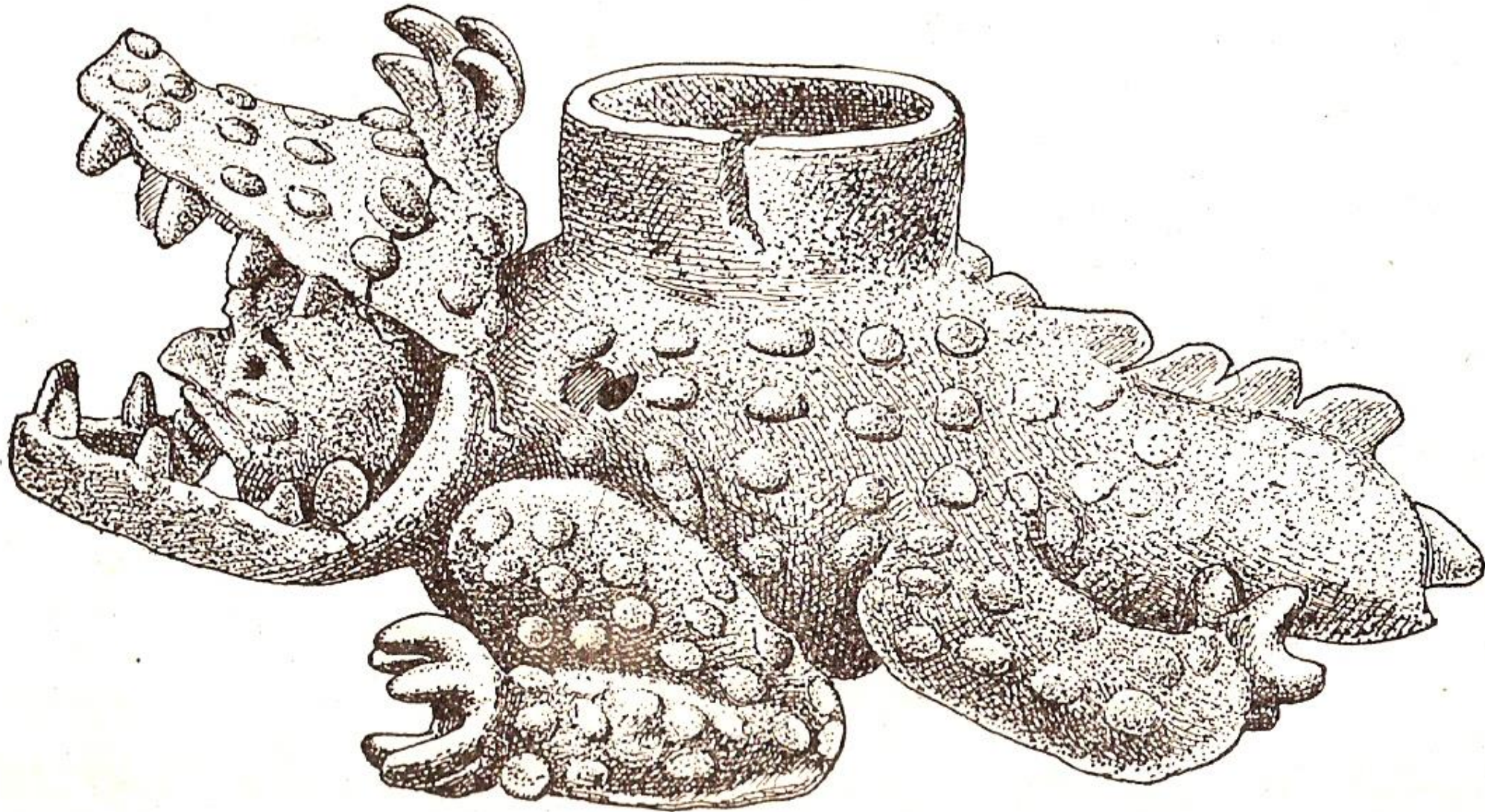
Both this scene and that of Taube are published by Garcia 2018: Fig. 7.

The tetrapod supports of this Tzakol lidded bowl are simplified peccary heads. There are dozens of examples where all the features of an actual peccary head are pictured, especially one from Calukmul that has the peccary features painted on stucco on the tetrapod support.

Photograph by Justin Kerr, K6216 at the Kislak collection.



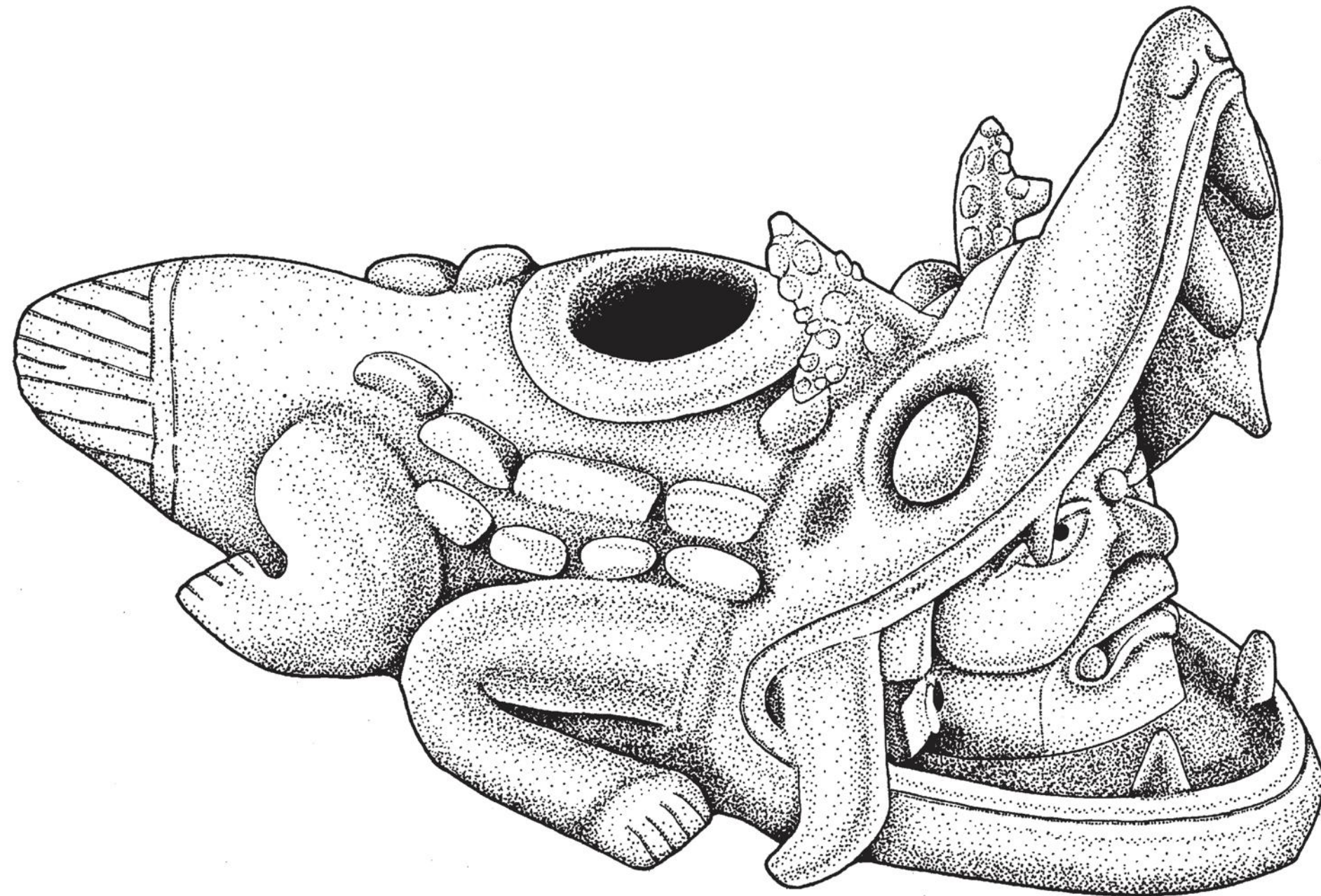
Even Gann noticed the “claw-like horns”. Are these to suggest deer antlers? (since lots of Cosmic Monster crocodiles have deer ears and deer hooves)? Or is this literally a “claw”?



Ceramic, Santa Rita, Mound No. 2, Belize, Gann 1918: page 64, Fig. 18.

Another on-line photo of same ceramic artifact.





Crocodile has old god in its mouth. Usually this is God N but sometimes it's a challenge to distinguish God N from God D. But unlikely the other elderly deity, God L.

Ceramic crocodile, 3-dimensional, Lamanai, drawing by Louise Belanger (Martin 2015: Fig. 39,a).



This 3-dimensional crocodile is in the MET museum. Has snout that I would expect of a peccary but teeth are clearly if a crocodile. Ears are the most curious since crocodiles to not have ears that stick out like this. But once you see the Cosmic Monster, you will see lots of composite creatures that are part-deer and part-crocodile. I hope to see the exhibit catalog to see if the ear is commented on.





3-dimensional ceramic crocodile drinking vessel, LACMA, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Purchased with funds provided by Camilla Chandler Frost (M.2010.115.584).

These look like cacao pods (not cacao seeds). But we have found lots of other plants of Guatemala whose seed pods are the same size and shape.

This stone ball game palma is authentic.

Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth decades ago.

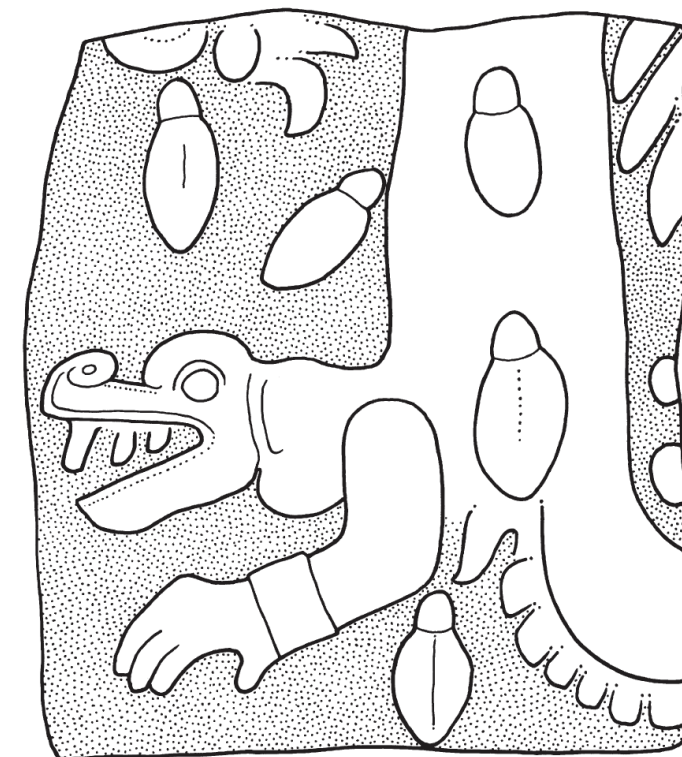
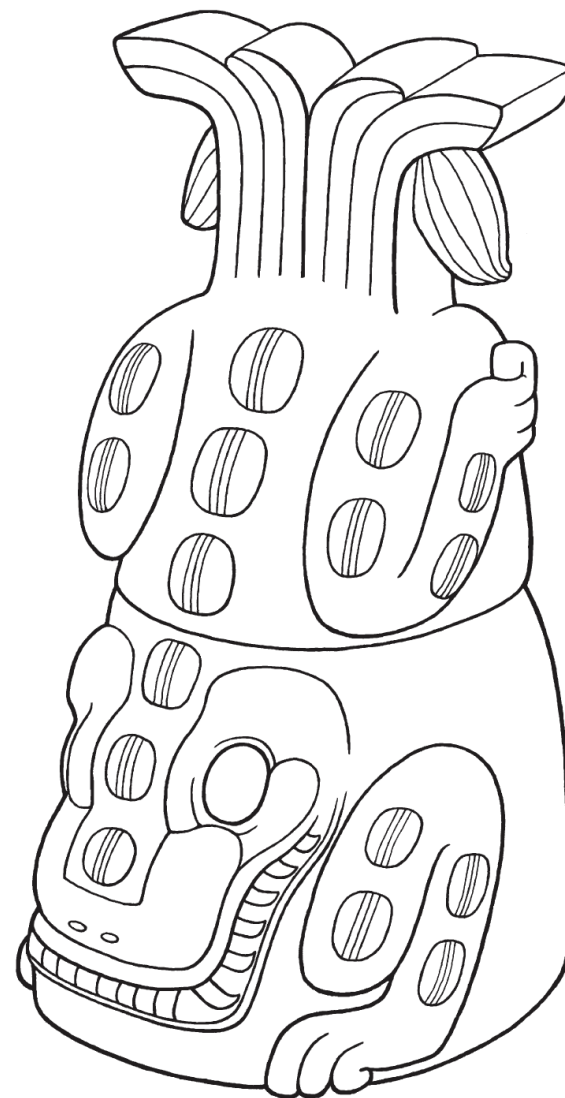


Figure 8.8. Crocodilian cacao trees. a. Reconstruction of a sculpted stone container. Late Classic period. Copan, Honduras. Drawing by Simon Martin. b. Panel fragment. Late Classic or Postclassic period. Osario Temple, Chichen Itza, Yucatan, Mexico. Drawing by Simon Martin after a field sketch by the Proyecto Arqueológico Chichen Itza, courtesy of Peter Schmidt.



Cacao seeds? Or cacao pods (since seeds are not that high)? Or some other concept?
Same crocodile palma as before, but now turned sideways so you can see it more in normal crocodile position. Photo by Nicholas Hellmuth so many decades ago we don't yet have remaining notes of in what museum.



Late Classic Maya Clay brick, Comalcalco, Tabasco, Mexico.

Since this crocodile is in the aguada behind the Tikal visitor's center museum, it is surely a *Crocodylus moreletii*.



This is the first time I have noticed the slit-open oval shape on an actual crocodile back. This is the shape on the Veracruz-style ballgame yoke. Yet other *Crocodylus moreletii* have Ceiba-like, conical spines (this crocodile at Tikal has NO conical spines! Why?).

Now we can recognize aspects of this crocodile figurine that were not mentioned previously (the slit-oval designs that rise above the body of the Maya representations of a crocodile).

This photograph has been frequently published and is on many sites on the Internet. But best to cite National Gallery of Australia, illustration for the exhibit *Fiery Pool*. What has been correction identified is that the main personage is the Jaguar God of the Underworld (JGU).





There are reportedly two long 3-dimensional crocodile sculptures at Yaxchilan. What would help would be a 3-dimensional drawing so you could see the details of each. *Crocodylus moreletii* would be the species swimming in the Rio Usumacinta.



Bicephalic but but not a “Cosmic Monster” because no Quadripartite Badge Headdress at end. Kerr photograph, K8750.



Different artists in different parts of the Maya areas emphasized different aspects. These artists in Cueva 3, Cerro Naranjo, Chiapas, show triangular spines. Strecker, Fig. 14 citing Navarrete 1996: Fig. 27c.



We all tend to automatically name any conical spines in Maya art, such as on incense burners of Quiche and elsewhere, as spines of *Ceiba pentandra*. But during over half-a-century of field work throughout Mesoamerica, we have found LOTS of totally different trees with similar spines. I show only one here (*Zanthoxylum* species) because our lecture has to cover more topics than the spines. Note our close-up photo of two crocs sunning themselves.

As we see in the chapter on Crocodiles in Late Classic Maya Sculpture of Copan, identifying the teeth of each species is helpful. Most Maya portraits of crocodile teeth are stylized, focusing on the larger teeth (to scare the viewer). But I am interested in studying all the teeth. *Crocodylus morletii*, aguada behind visitors' center / museum, PANAT.



This crocodile seems to sense that I would like to study its teeth. So it helpfully opens its jaws a bit so I can photograph the teeth.