*Essay*

# Were-jaguars and jaguar babies in Olmec religion

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## Abstract

The problem of Olmec iconography has troubled scholars for years. The "Jaguar Baby" motif is inseparable in its motivation from all other known Olmec objects but has never been subject to scholarly consensus. The wide use of motif demands that we investigate the significance of the jaguar to the Olmec. This piece attempts to draw together the various writings on the significance of the motif, in order to extract some meaningful conclusions about the religion of the Olmec and its relationship with the fauna of the Yucatan Peninsula. Three major discussions arise; 1) that the jaguar was a representative tool, functioning as a symbol of the dominance of the ruling class 2) that the jaguar was a "power animal" of a shaman caste and stood for a "spirit journey," recalling a shared religious experience 3) that the Olmec believed themselves to be descended from the jaguar. In all these instances, were-jaguars or jaguar babies show a transitional phase or a synthesis of the man and jaguar. By closely reading all the sources, this project draws the conclusion that the jaguar was a natural choice as a symbol of the "royal house" but had a religious importance that predated this connection and was concurrent with it.

**Keywords:** Olmec; iconography; art; religion.

## Essay

The Olmec were a pre-Columbian civilisation that was far in advance of most of their neighbours. The Olmec stylistic tag is often applied arbitrarily to art from across Meso-America and not just from the Olmec 'heartland', (the area around the gulf coast), leading many scholars to question the

veracity of these identifications. Olmec culture would likely have spread and it seems that if actual conquest did not take place, a degree of cultural hegemony certainly did. Olmec artistic ideas seem to have been widely disseminated across what is now Mexico. Whilst the vast majority of sites are on the gulf coast, such as Tres Zapotes, San Lorenzo and La Venta, many scholars now believe that the culture originated in the Guerroro region, with recent finds near Xochipala supporting this conviction (Gay, 1973). Many Scholars of Meso-American art, such as Coe and Sterling support the view that the Olmec were a 'mother culture' to the other great civilisations of Central America, although the debate about this rages on (Pool, 2007: 2). Digs at sites such as La Venta have yielded an abundance of finds, testament to the sophistication and artistic sensitivity of this ancient culture. Of these finds, one particular type has spurred the most debate and speculation. The delicately carved and gracefully composed anthropomorphic hybrid figures, known as Were-Jaguars and Jaguar-Babies respectively, have puzzled scholars for decades.

The Jaguar Motif appears in a variety of different guises. The essential elements of the Were-Jaguar or Jaguar-Baby are, the 'V' shaped cleft, clawed or paw like feet or hands and a feline head with, in some cases, a tail. With Jaguar-Babies the iconography is of a greater symbolic content and is based on facial features. These include; The 'V' shaped cleft, large almond shaped eyes, a snarling mouth with bifurcated fangs and full down-turned lips and a broad flat nose. Different levels of 'jaguarness' are visible in these images, with some being unmistakeably jaguar like. Others have a much more subtle *pars pro toto* style, which is typical of Olmec iconography (Kerr and White, 1996: 22). These representations come in a variety of forms; delicate greenstone figurines, votive axes (with the forms realised in 3 dimensions) and incised celts as well as large basalt sculptures such as those at Petrero Nuevo, Tres Zapotes, which form the Olmec "metropolitan zone." (Barbier, 1997: 32) The iconography associated with these figures, most prominently the forehead cleft, is also visible in other Olmec art, noticeably the self-conscious imitated cleft on the head gear of many of the colossal basalt heads such as colossal head number 1, from La Venta. These motifs were the driving features in the definition of the Olmec style, with artefacts such as the "Kunz axe" providing the source for archaeologists to determine what "Olmec" was, in terms of stylistic traits. It is also important to remember the enormous amount of value that must have been ascribed to these objects. The difficulty in obtaining and working jade - for the Olmec were a culture without metal tools - must have been immense. None-the-less Olmec artists must have shut themselves away for months to



 
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produce even the smallest of these objects. This incredible trouble must signify something of colossal importance to the Olmec.

Michael D. Coe, asserts that jaguars are the symbol of the royal household (Coe, 1972: 1-12). He argues that the possibility of jaguar/shaman transformation scenes is not a viability given what he believes to have been the social structure of the Olmec, a '[society] composed of ranked hereditary classes dominated by royal lineages.' If true than the traditional role of the shaman, as mediator between the spirit world and an egalitarian community would not be visible, or would certainly be periphery in an oligarchic "state." In David Joralemon's study of Olmec iconographic motifs, Joralemon identified 10 "gods" of the Olmec, whilst one was inarguably Quetzalcoatl, (Joralemon, 1976) the feathered serpent common to many later pre-conquest Central-American complexes, the others were all "Were-Jaguars" (Joralemon, 1976). The jaguar therefore, is highly important to Olmec concepts of divinity and, in later Meso-American religious traditions, some conflation of the jaguar and the god is always apparent. It is extremely difficult to draw any conclusions about the nature of Olmec culture given the total dearth of any written records. Many scholars believe that the best resource that we have for understanding the culture of the Olmec are the civilisations that postdate them. For Coe the similarities between the religion of the Aztecs and the Maya - and his subscription to the idea of the Olmec as mother culture to the great Mexican civilisations - means that we can use our knowledge of the Aztec and Maya to understand the Olmec. For this reason we can read the representation of the Jaguar in a similar way for the Olmec as we do the Aztec or the Maya. For the Aztec, the god Tezcatlopica was the son of the hermaphroditic fire god Xiuhtecuhtli, who in turn was father to the world and many of the other gods. Tezcatlopica was often conflated with the jaguar, indeed in his aspect, Tepeyóllotl (heart of the mountain) he *was* a jaguar. The royal lineage, passed as it was from Xiuhtecuhtli to Tezcatlipoca, was transferred from father to son and so Tezcatlipoca and his father became symbolic representations of the royal house on earth (and vice versa). In the Maya tradition, Itzamna who is, like Xiuhtecuhtli, of both sexes and the principal creator god, is the father of Bacab, who with his four aspects cognates to Tezcatlipoca. As with the Aztec, Itzamna and Bacab are the patrons of the royal house. Their rule in the celestial realm is seen as a legitimisation of the King's rule on the earth. To the Aztec the jaguar was a powerful symbol that equates well with the projected power of the royal leader of a warlike, conquering empire. The jaguar is "brave…fierce…wise…[and]…proud", the undisputed



 
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"ruler of the animal world" (Anderson and Dibble, 1963: 1). As such Aztec rulers were clothed in Jaguar pelts and sat upon jaguar skin thrones (Saunders 1994: 109). Thompson (1970) argued that the Mayan word "Balam", meant not only jaguar, but also ruler and it seems too that Maya rulers were privileged to wear jaguar raiment and carry jaguar items, such as the figure from Temple 3, Tikal, Guatemala (Saunders, 1994: 112). At Juxtlahuaca caverns there is a particularly impressive piece, showing an Olmec ruler. He wears a quetzal feather headdress, such as the one that an Aztec or Mayan ruler might wear (Coe, 1972: 10) and sports a jaguar pelt, draped over his arm with a tail protruding between his legs, suggesting that, as with later cultures, Olmec rulers used jaguar hide as part of their regalia. Another painting, this time from Oxtotitlan shows a warrior, painted black, with what appears to be a jaguar emanating from his testicles (Coe, 1972: 10). For Coe this points to a statement of power, heredity and priapic creative force. The Jaguar springs forth from the ithyphallic figure, a symbol of the lineage of kings, Coe likens this to the myth of creation, something that is (according to him) a pan-Meso-American complex, where the commoners, or to use the *Nuahatl* as Coe does, the *Macehualli*, were created separately from the rulers by Tezcatlopica (Coe, 1972: 8). In Coe's point of view, all of this points to an Olmec religious world-view where if the king was not entirely divine then he certainly officiated in the religious rites of the larger community. It suggests that Olmec religion was largely a tool of legitimising the rule of the upper social echelons, suggesting also that the "top god" was the patron of the royal house.

Similar to Coe in some respects Murdy (1981) argues that the jaguar baby motif was a legitimising symbol, but for different reasons. Whilst Murdy is attempting to advance a hypothesis not in line with Coe's, the evidence he provides to support it is useful in understanding Coe. The cleft, (which he believes to be a result of a neural tube defect, which would lead to a furrow in the forehead) is shown in the representations of Olmec leaders, such as colossal head 1, the "thrones" (monument 20 from San Lorenzo, Altars 2 and 5 from La Venta) and what he argues to be representations of rulers, such as the Las Limas figure. Murdy argues that some unspecified point a child was born with a facial deformity of the kind that he suggests and was "[offered] to the populace as evidence that jaguar blood ran in the family, producing were-jaguar offspring." Murdy suggests that as a more stratified social structure was supplanting the traditional egalitarian tribal community, so too did the, new officially sanctioned religious complex. This would have led to a kind of apotheosis for the Jaguar-Baby figure, resulting in its being considered as the "rain god." Deformity or illness has



 
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already been suggested as an inspiration behind the strange iconography of the jaguar baby, with acromelagy, Dwarfism and Leprosy being advanced by scholars such as Hurtado and Zárate, (1953).

This is however not an entirely conclusive argument. Coe draws his analogies in a way not recognised as correct by modern scholarship, using the "outmoded but enduring view of the Olmec as 'Mother culture'" (Saunders, 1994: 105). By conflating the Olmec and Maya/Aztec Coe is guilty of a reductive method. It does not seem entirely reasonable to suggest, with the great gulf of time between the fluorescence of the cultures, that too great a deal of cognition can be read between their deities. Whilst it may be true and, in light of the evidence from the Juxtlahuaca caverns, entirely reasonable to believe that the Jaguar was an important part of the symbolism of the Olmec royal house, it is unreasonable to apply the baggage of later religious complexes to the Olmec wholesale. Coe's assertion that a shaman transformation aesthetic is not applicable to the art of the Olmec, as it was too advanced to foster officially endorsed shamanism, is to transplant the cultural values of one tradition onto another and to infantilise shaman-based belief systems. Reilly (Kerr and White, 1996) shows that the traditional social structure of the tribe - with the shaman as the focal point for spiritual activity - could easily become rulership of, or by a divinely inspired king or chief. Citing Houston and Stuart (1989) she shows that for the ancient Maya, shaman-power and political authority were essentially one in the same, with rulers "[validating] their right to royal power by publicly proclaiming their ability to perform the shaman trance journey and transform into power animals." Reilly goes on to argue that mural 1 in the Oxtotitlan caves is a representation of the ruler undertaking the shaman "spirit" or trance journey, in the guise of an owl power-animal. The Ruler is shown literally "flying" between planes of existence, trasvering the *axis mundi* (in the form of the world tree), a motif that she shows to be commonly conflated with the ruler.

The idea of the jaguar as shaman power-animal is a convincing one. Certainly the great cost, both in terms of material and labour, suggests some deep spiritual motivation. Jadeite and the other greenstones used by Olmec lapidaries do not occur in the "Olmec heartland", Rather the source seems to be many miles away in the Sierra Madre of Puebla and Oaxaca, or Chiapas and Guatemala (Pool, 2007: 150). Furst (Kerr and Reilly, 1996) demonstrates convincingly that throughout Latin America a tradition of Jaguar Shamanism exists with roots seemingly as far back as the Olmec. In Book 11 of Sahagun's Florentine codex, we are told that Tepeyóllotl was a nocturnal god, associated with the "sorcerers" of the Aztec, who used jaguar body parts in their various rites and concoctions



 
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(Anderson and Dibble, 1963: 3). The association of the jaguar and the shaman is still a tangible one in Latin American folk religion. Reichel-Dolmatoff (1975: 46) illustrates this by showing that the Guahibo people's shamans:

Still wear headdresses of jaguar claws turned upwards, necklaces of jaguar teeth, and carry bags of jaguar fur that contain herbs stones and their snuffing equipment. The narcotic powder is kept in a tubular jaguar bone… An officiating Guahibo shaman paints his face with black spots in imitation of jaguar pelt marks, a form of facial paint that is only used by shamans.

Many of the objects carrying Were-Jaguar Motifs seem to fit into the perceived accoutrements of the shaman. The incised and modelled Spoons such as that from Chiapas, Guatemala and Veracruz that bear Jaguar-Baby faces may have been used for insufflation. The taking of hallucinogenic compounds, such as *nicotina rustica*, would fit with the current ethnographic realities of Central American shamanic practices (Kennedy, 1982). The inclusion of these jaguar motifs in so integral a component of the Spirit journey paraphernalia shows that the jaguar obviously functions as an important part of the shaman pantheon, certainly Mesoamerican religions abound with important jaguar deities and spirits (Kerr and White, 1996: 63-89). The "transformation scenes" Show the shaman between his forms, either as man or jaguar (or toad (Kennedy, 1982)), the "acrobatic scenes," detail the physical distortions and exertions necessary in achieving this metamorphosis, as in the Tacana or Huichol practices (Kerr and White, 1996: 71). The Jaguar functions therefore as a totemic power-animal, a spirit guide or psychopomp to the shaman, it is a powerful forest spirit. The prevalence of shaman paraphernalia, such as insufflation spoons, vessels, votive figurines, masks (the Dumbarton Oaks "Anthropomorphic mask" is a particularly good example) and perforators all seem to suggest that the belief in an officially and centrally administrated shamanism is highly likely, contrary to Coe's suggestions. If so, the jaguar figurines show us that the Olmec religious experience was centred not around transcendental mythos and highly ritualised events but rather was centred on individuals imbued with some power, either hereditarily or bestowed in some way by higher forces, engaging in direct dialogue and perhaps even confrontation with spirits and entities. This reading of the Olmec religious complex is atypical in light of its position as what could be seen as the first "state" in Mesoamerica.

A further possibility as to the inspiration behind the were-jaguar is that the Olmec "[believed] they sprang from a union between man and jaguar" (Grove 1973: 128-135). This suggestion of a familial



 
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relationship between man and jaguar is compelling and is a theme that has already been touched upon in my discussion of Coe and Murdy's hypotheses on the origin of the jaguar motif. Coe (1973: 3) discusses a number of Latin American mythic traditions such as the "jaguar with the human wife from whom fire must be stolen by the hero" as well as exploring the similarities between the jaguar and the man in terms of their shared appetites and habitats. All of which points to a willingness to except a kinship with the jaguar by the peoples of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. Monument 1, Rio Chiquito, Monument 3, Petrero Nuevo, Monument 20, Laguna de los Cerros and Painting 1-D, Oxtotitlan (used by Coe as an example of the jaguar/king lineage) are the artefacts suggested as support for this hypothesis and it seems, at least superficially, to be a valid possibility. Were this an accurate reading of these monuments another facet of Olmec religious beliefs would be more readily understood, the creation of man and animals would be tied closely together, perhaps even suggesting a common lineage between man and animal. Certainly if the Olmec did believe that they were descendants of jaguars they had no qualms about showing it. The plethora of different were-jaguar motifs and depictions would be explicable as showing the congenital traits passed to mankind by their animal ancestors. This would surely have impacted on the Olmec relationship with the natural world and more specifically the jaguar itself, perhaps leading to a reverence. On the other hand, if the concept of descendancy from the jaguar applied only to the ruling class than this would legitimise there presence and social status. Descendence from the Jaguar would naturally confer upon the elite all the attributes of the jaguar, its might, wisdom, power and so on.

All of these monuments have been subjected to the ravages of time and to the ritual mutilation that is seen in other Olmec monuments which makes it difficult to ascertain what is being depicted, a condition which has led to much scholarship debunking the idea of a depicted sexual encounter between a human and a jaguar and, in some cases, whether a jaguar is being depicted at all. Davis argues that the scenes depict a supplicant captive dominated by either warrior or jaguar (or possibly a shaman in the form of a jaguar (Davis, 1978: 453-457)). Pool on the other hand argues that the Potrero Nuevo monument shows a jaguar having caught a monkey (Pool, 2007: 115).

Whilst we can never know for certain the significance of the jaguar to Olmec religious view we can be certain of their importance. Whilst it is always difficult to assert with any confidence about the mystical practices of cultures long dead, the frequency of this motif is an excellent starting point for investigation, leading no doubt to the wealth of literature dealing with the subject. In my opinion,



 
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the Jaguar was an important symbol of the power of the natural world, as the apex predator of the surrounding area it would be natural for the jaguar to be subsumed into the iconography of any burgeoning chiefdom, which might later become the "royal house" (if such a term can be used accurately). However, the jaguar would always first and foremost be the creature that most played on the popular imagination and, before any conflation with the trappings of state, would indubitably have become a major part of the religious complex. As for the possibility of human/jaguar copulation, it is extremely difficult to draw any meaningful conclusions as to the significance of the jaguar motif, especially when it comes to the possibility of sexual intercourse. Those Monuments where copulation can be inferred - transmit just that - an inference.

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