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**What was the nature of Classic Maya belief regarding the Moon Goddess?**

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## belief regarding the Moon Goddess?

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The Classic Maya (250-900 A.D. (Coe 2011, p. 9)) believed in a pantheon of gods, although their belief system was somewhat different than that of classical western cultures. Maya gods are actually 'sacred entities' (Houston & Stuart 1996, p. 291) who overlapped with each other in terms of identity and function (Foster 2002, p. 164). In trying to understand the nature of the Classic Maya belief in the Moon Goddess, this must be kept in mind. The gender ambiguity of the Moon Goddess, manifested through the Moon-Maize deity, gave Maya royalty access to powers denied to normal humans; a power sustained by the belief of the Classic Maya people. Within this essay the Moon Goddess will thus be discussed in relation to iconography, nomenclature and role; her gender in relation to the phases of the moon; her purview as symbolised by the net skirt; her connection to God CH as the full moon; her conflation with the Tonsured Maize God and the new gender which is formed; and, finally, the impersonation of the Moon-Maize deity by Maya elite.

The Classic Moon Goddess was a multifaceted deity who was believed to have had many identities and roles, and is identifiable to scholars through certain symbolic images. Iconographic items include the lunar crescent, rabbit, and a beak-like nose piercing (Schele & Freidel 1990, p. 412; Taube 1992, p. 64 & 69) protruding from her upper lip (Figure 1). Additionally, the Maya depicted her performing various activities, such as sitting on a sky-band throne, weaving on a backstrap loom, or accepting the attentions of God N, the old, licentious, turtle-shelled god who held up the sky (Milbrath 1999, p. 153; Schele & Grube 1997, p. 153). Although her name has not been clearly deciphered as yet, it is "probably *Sak Ixik* and *Na Huntan*" (Schele & Mathews 1998, p. 413) meaning 'White/Weaving Woman' and 'Lady Caretaker', respectively. *Sak Na* ('White/Weaving Lady'), *Uh Ixik* ('Moon Woman') and *Uh Na* ('Moon Lady') are alternative names for the young Moon Goddess which have also been

## belief regarding the Moon Goddess?

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proposed by scholars (Schele & Grube 1997, p. 79). This variety of names could be explained by the overlap in terms of role and function which the Maya ascribed to their gods (Foster 2002, p. 164). She also had responsibilities during the calendar year – she was the patroness of the day named *Kaban* ('earth') and of the month *Ch'en* ('cave'). Hieroglyphic images of her head functioned as both the number one (Figure 2) and as the sound 'na' (Figure 3) which meant 'noble-woman' (Schele & Freidel 1990, p. 412; Schele & Mathews 1998, p. 413). However, Bassie-Sweet (2000, p. 8) argues that it was another goddess who represented *na* and the number one – the Classic period parallel of the Postclassic wife of the Maize God, Hun Hunahpu, in *Popol Vuh* mythology, known as 'Bone Woman'. Milbrath (1995, p. 81), however, points out that the attributes of the Classic period Moon Goddess were assigned to different goddesses during the Postclassic period which, when coupled with the fluid nature of Maya gods, still places the Classic One and *Na* Goddesses within the lunar complex – they were both under the purview of the Moon Goddess, despite Postclassic changes. Other related Postclassic goddesses were the youthful Goddess I, named as *Ix Ch'up* ('The Woman') by Coe (2011, p. 224), who presided over marriage, love and fertility (Taube 1992, p. 145), and the crone-like Goddess O, called *Chak Chel* ('Red Rainbow') or *Ix Chel* ('Woman Rainbow'), who was goddess of creation, medicine and divination (Coe 2011, p. 224; Schele & Grube 1997, p. 148; Taube 1992, p. 103). Due to the many Classic period images, texts and beliefs relating to this multifaceted moon deity, further issues arise which makes this a complex issue.

## belief regarding the Moon Goddess?



**Figure 1:** Glyph of the Moon Goddess and rabbit from the Copan Sculpture Museum



1

**Figure 2:** Glyphic image of the goddess of the number one



**Figure 3a & b:** The *Na* Goddess with moon glyph from Quirigua Stela J

The sex of Moon Goddess was not ideologically set as female, as there are Classic period images of the deity as female, male or of indeterminate sex.Looper (2002, p. 171-73) points out that it is difficult to determine the sex of a figure by its shape due to known conventions of ancient Maya art. Rulers tend to be identified as male or female by their clothing and the hieroglyphic text which accompanies their image. As this is such a complicated process, scholars' interpretations evolve as the study of the Mayan language progresses. Milbrath (1999, p. 151) cites Tatiana Proskouriakoff in 1993 as asserting that the person shown on Copan Stela H (Figure 8) was a woman. Later, hieroglyphic inscriptions revealed that it was actually a depiction of a male king, Waxaklajun U B'ah K'awil (Newsome 2001, p. 169; Schele & Mathews 1998, p. 158). This confusion also extends to certain humanoid deities (Robin 2002, p. 23); Taube (1985, p. 171) cites Ernst Förstemann in 1906 as identifying the

## belief regarding the Moon Goddess?

Postclassic codical figure of the Tonsured Maize God as being female due to his delicate features. Images of a deity bearing the lunar crescent and rabbit are similarly confused. This is not surprising as the Moon Goddess was often conflated with a conceptually-related male deity (Figure 4) during the Classic period (Milbrath 1995, p. 81; Milbrath 1999, p. 156; Saffa 2009, p. 47; Taube 1992, p. 67-69), such as the Maize God. Thus ancient depictions of the net costume, symbolising the earth, could equally apply to the lunar goddess or a maize god.



**Figure 4a & b:** Conflated Moon Goddess and Tonsured Maize God from Quirigua Zoomorph P

In Classic period Maya belief, the net skirt worn by the Moon Goddess brought the concepts of the moon, maize and earth together as one. Many depictions of moon and corn deities are shown wearing a net skirt of jade beads (Bell 2002, p. 102; Loper 2002, p. 174; Milbrath 1999, p. 150; Robin 2002, p. 23; Schele & Mathews 1998, p. 215; Schele & Miller 2006, p. 309; Stone 1991, p. 201) which Quenon and LeFort, as cited by Loper (2002, p. 178), suggest is a pattern representing the turtle-shell – a Maya symbol of “the green sprouting surface of the earth” (Joyce 1992, p. 64). Due to strong correlations with the earth, as symbolised in the form

## belief regarding the Moon Goddess?

of the net skirt, both the moon deities and corn gods were similarly linked in the Maya mind. Schele and Miller (2006, p. 309) assert that males undergoing the blood-letting rite would wear the net skirt. During the Classic period, a long skirt was characteristically feminine, whilst the male ritualist undergoing blood-letting would wear a knee-length skirt (Looper 2002, p. 171; Proskouriakoff 1961, p. 354-55). The act of sacrificing one's own blood was closely linked to the Maize God, and to the typically female roles of life-giving and nourishment (Taube 1985, p. 178). Stross (2006, p. 595) makes the interesting observation that within the Maya 260-Day Calendar *Kaban*, a day which was ruled by the Moon Goddess, was spent preparing the earth for the planting of maize – a food-source which was central to the Maya culture from earliest times (White et al 2006, p. 155); this underscores the connection between the moon, maize and the earth. The net skirt thus identified the individual wearing it “with mixed-gender ancestral deities embodied in the moon and maize” (Looper 2002, p. 173). Through the close identification of the moon, the corn growth cycle and the earth, the net skirt could therefore identify either a moon deity or a maize god in Classic period art.



**Figure 5:** The second of three unambiguously female Moon Goddesses is depicted wearing the net costume

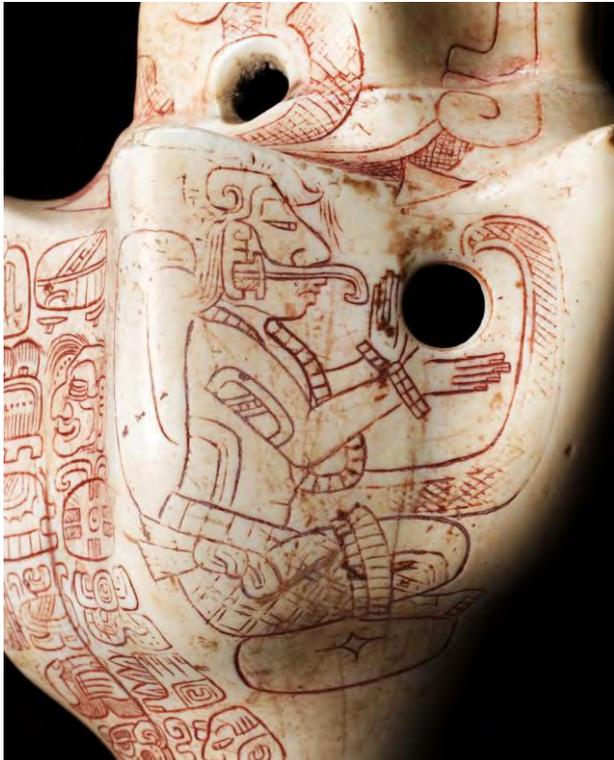
## belief regarding the Moon Goddess?

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Depending on the phase of the moon, the Classic Maya believed that the moon could be conceptualised as a female or male lunar deity, such as God CH of the Headband Twins. Today, the full moon is a lunar phase which the modern Quiché Maya considered to be male (Milbrath 1999, p. 151) and strongly related to twins (Saffa 2009, p. 70; Stross 1985, p. 10). The Postclassic Quiché text, the *Popol Vuh*, states that the Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, were transformed into the sun and the moon – Xbalanque ('Little Jaguar Sun') became the full moon, which the Quiché call the 'night sun' (Milbrath 1995, p. 73). It is an interesting point that the 'x' from Xbalanque could mean either 'little' or 'female' (Milbrath 1995, p. 73), resulting in the translation of 'Female Jaguar Sun', which reflects the gender ambiguity still associated by Maya peoples with the moon today. The belief in a male full moon stems back to the Classic period. One depiction on an Early Classic period conch-shell trumpet is of a lunar deity wearing a short net skirt (Figure 6). Taube (1992, p. 67) believed this deity to be a conflation of the Tonsured Maize God and the Moon Goddess, although later work on the hieroglyphic text showed that it was actually one of the Headband Twins, God CH. He is shown with short hair and is covered in hieroglyphs that mean 'brightness'. Schele and Miller's translation of the conch-shell text revealed that the deity "is named in the last two glyphs ... giving the name *Balam-U-Xib* or *Balam-U-Ahau*, 'Jaguar Moon Lord'" (2006, p. 309). He was the normally jaguar-patched Headband Twin, God CH, and the Classic form of Xbalanque. During the Classic Period the Headband Twins were frequently depicted assisting their father, the Tonsured Maize God (McKillop 2004, p. 218; Taube 1992, p. 60, 145), whilst the Postclassic Hero Twins were the grandsons of the Postclassic Goddess O, the old Moon Goddess (Schele and Mathews 1998, p. 413). This puts the Moon Goddess, the Full Moon God twin and the Tonsured Maize God in a close family relationship, reflecting Maya ideas about the moon, corn and the earth. This gender transformation of the moon from female to

## belief regarding the Moon Goddess?

the male during the full moon, and the strong relationship with maize, also allowed for another god to be joined with the Moon Goddess.



**Figure 6a & b:** God CH Headband Twin as the full moon, and the glyphs for *Balam-U-Xib/Ahau*

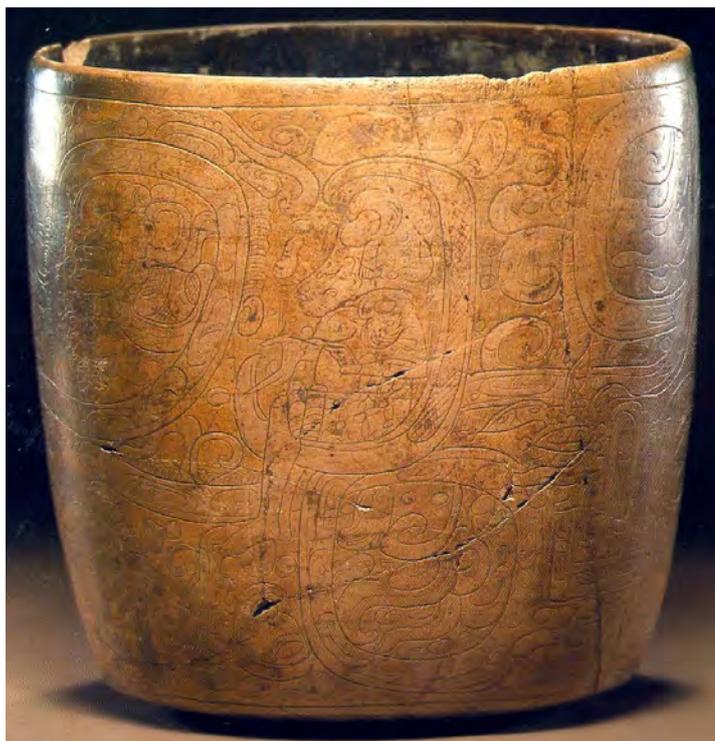
Due to the strong correlation the Maya had between corn and the moon, the Tonsured Maize God and the Moon Goddess could become a single being of superordinate gender. Present day Maya, such as the Tzotzil and Quiché, harvest maize by the full moon (Milbrath 1999, p. 151). As Taube observed, the “Classic association of maize with the moon suggests that planting cycles based on phases of the moon could well be pre-Hispanic in origin” (1992, p. 69). This close connection conceptually fused maize, the earth and the moon in ancient Maya belief (Milbrath 1995, p. 78). The maize god, God E who could be called *Hun Nal Ye* (‘One Maize Revealed’), represented the growth, death and re-emergence of the maize crop (Foster 2002, p. 167; McKillop 2004, p. 218; Stross 2006, p. 583-84; Taube 1992, p. 145). There were

## belief regarding the Moon Goddess?

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two versions of this deity; that of the Foliated Maize God, embodying growing maize ears, and the Tonsured Maize God who personified the mature ears of corn (Stross 2006, p. 591; McKillop 2004, p. 218). As the Tonsured Maize God, he was depicted by the Classic Maya as a fine-featured youth who could easily be mistaken as female (Taube 1985, p. 171, 178). He was also the deity of the number eight which, as Pitts (2009, p. 37) points out, could be confused for the goddess of the number one. Both the Moon Goddess and the Tonsured Maize God could be depicted with an 'IL'-shaped marking on the cheek (Figures 2 & 3), "a grapheme in Maya writing that reads *ix(ik)*, 'woman'" (Looper 2002, p. 177), and both wear the net skirt representing the earth from which maize was grown by the phases of the moon. On a late Classic vase (Figure 7), a deity within a lunar curve holds a rabbit and wears a short net skirt, and has a tonsured coiffure, the hairstyle for which the Tonsured Maize God was named. This being was a combined deity which represented both maize and the moon, and was a "dual-gendered, ambiguously gendered, or androgynous being" (Robin 2002, p. 24) in the same way that maize itself is dual-gendered. Maize has both male tassels at the top and female ears and silks lower on the one plant (Looper 2002, p. 181; Robin 2002, p. 24; Saffa 2009, p. 46-47). The Moon Goddess and Maize God also had "identical roles, marking the same six-month lunar semester in the eighteen-month synodic lunar calendar" (Milbrath 1999, p. 150). It is not surprising that the ancient Maya could then conflate the Moon Goddess and the Tonsured Maize God. Looper (2002, p. 181-82) suggests that during the Classic period these two divinities could be both a complementary pair and a being of "compounded" gender, producing a third gender which highlighted both their similarities and differences (Taube 2004, p. 120). It was likely to be a sacred, superordinate gender due to its creation by the combination of the two deities. When impersonating the conflated Maize-Moon divinity, both male and female Maya elite could symbolically become this third, superior compounded gender of the gods.

## belief regarding the Moon Goddess?



**Figure 7a & b:** Conflated Moon Goddess and Tonsured Maize God incised on a Late Classic vase

Male and female Maya rulers used impersonation of the Moon-Maize deity to elevate themselves above the rest of mankind, giving them the power to perform both male and female functions. Stone (1991, p. 194) notes the importance of impersonation to the Maya, which had the dual aspect of being philosophical in nature, and a way of garnering political power. Maya monarchs were generally male, so impersonation of the moon and maize deities was one of the ways in which the king could symbolically access female reproductive powers, as encapsulated in the maize plant. Copan Stela H (Figure 8) is one such example, showing a ruler wearing the long, net skirt of the Moon Goddess. Proskouriakoff (1993, p. 130) believed that it was depicting the wife of a king. Newsome alternatively suggested that it was a king dressed as the Maize God (2001, p. 192). The length of the skirt worn by the ruler is, however, characteristically feminine in length and may stress the feminine side of the Moon-Maize divinity. By comparison, king K'inich Janaab' Pakal I of Palenque is depicted on his

## belief regarding the Moon Goddess?

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sarcophagus lid as wearing a male-length net skirt (Figure 9). Newsome's hieroglyphic work confirmed that the figure was male – he was Waxaklajun U B'ah K'awil (previously known as '18 Rabbit'), one of the kings of Copan (2001, p. 169). Milbrath (1999, p. 151) points out that the date mentioned on Stela H is 9.14.19.5.0 4 Ahau 18 Muan (29 November 730 A.D.), a time which coincided with the full moon. It is likely that Waxaklajun U B'ah K'awil was impersonating the Moon-Maize deity to align himself with supernatural powers relating to the maize harvest at that particular full moon. Female rulers such as Lady Six Sky (Figure 10), the lady in the Cleveland Stela (Figure 11), and Lady Sak K'uk' (Figure 12), were depicted wearing a long net skirt or dress. The women in question were impersonating the conflated moon-maize deity to allow them to become androgynous (Looper 2002, p. 182). This androgyny, the compound gender, transferred with it the right to perform functions typically assigned to males such as rulership and warfare (Looper 2002, p. 183; Stone 1991, p. 202). The net skirt was only ever seen on the Moon Goddess and the most powerful of Maya women, and never on normal women (Stone 1991, p. 202). Lady Six Sky, regent for her young son (Sharer & Traxler 2006, p. 390), is shown on Naranjo Stela 24 standing astride a bound captive. The lady on the Cleveland Stela holds a bow-and-serpent object and a shield (Miller 2004(1974), p. 6), emblems of warfare. Lady Sak K'uk', regent at Palenque, is shown in a powerful position as she crowns her son, K'inich Janaab' Pakal I, at his coronation after he came of age (Stone 1991, p. 202). Through their link to the Moon Goddess, and those within her auspice, kings could partake in the predominantly female roles whilst female regents were able to participate in male dominated arenas. In this way, both male and female rulers during the Classic Maya period used the belief in the Moon-Maize Deity, to give themselves powers above and beyond roles which were polarised as male and female.

belief regarding the Moon Goddess?

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**Figure 8:** Copan Stela H of Waxaklajun U B'ah K'awil in a long net skirt



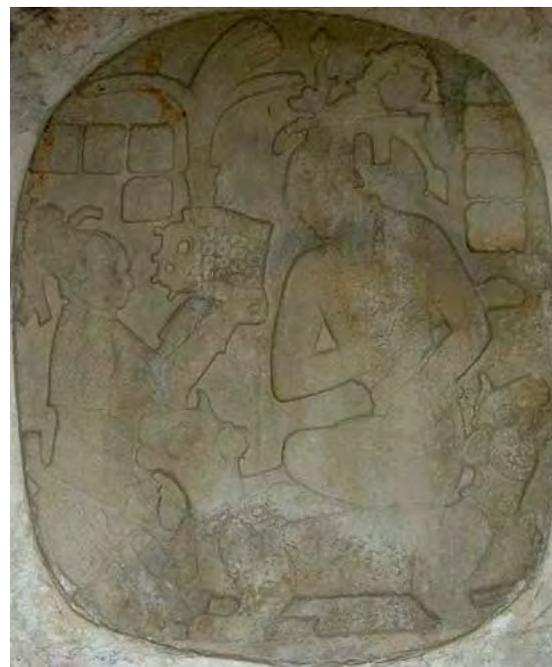
**Figure 9:** Sarcophagus of K'inich Janab' Pakal I who is depicted wearing a short net skirt



**Figure 10:** Naranjo Stela 24 of Lady Six Sky in the net skirt, on a captive



**Figure 11:** Cleveland Stela showing a female elite wearing the net outfit and carrying a shield



**Figure 12:** The Oval Palace Tablet showing Lady Sak K'uk' wearing the net costume whilst crowning her son

belief regarding the Moon Goddess?

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It is therefore clear that in the Maya belief system, the Moon Goddess was a very important deity with multiple names and functions. She was thought of as belonging to three gender categories – male, female or a compounded third sex – with which the Maya elite wished to be identified. Be she the female moon, the male full moon as God CH, or conflated with the Maize God, the Moon Goddess held sway over the lunar cycle, the maize lifecycle and the earth from which the maize sprang. Being connected to her allowed the Maya rulers the ability to play both masculine and feminine roles, despite their actual gender. The nature of this belief in a multifaceted Moon Goddess who held sway over several natural cycles thereby, in the eyes of the Maya people, granted both men and women the supernatural ability to rule the Maya city-states with great power and authority.

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## belief regarding the Moon Goddess?

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**Figures**

Figure 1: TravelPod 2011, *Copan Ruinas*, viewed 14 May 2011,

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Figure 2: Thompson, JES 1973, *The Civilization of the Mayas*, 7th edn, Field Museum of Natural History Popular Series: Anthropology: Number 25, USA, p. 49

Figure 3a: Picasa Web Album 2008, *Quiriguá – fanThomas*, viewed 2 May 2011,

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Figure 3b: Bassie-Sweet, K 2000, 'Corn Deities and the Complementary Male/Female Principle', paper presented at La Tercera Mesa Redonda de Palenque, July, 1999, p. 8

Figure 4a: McKenzie, B 2011, *Quirigua: Zoomorph P*, viewed 2 May 2011,

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Figure 5: Kerr, J n.d., *Kerr Number: K2772*, viewed 15 May 2011,

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Figure 6a & 6b: Chrysler Museum of Art: Conch-Shell Trumpet, 300-550; Maya, Tikal Area, Petén, Guatemala; Hematite incised on conch shell, 8 ½ inches; Gift of Edwin Pearlman and Museum Purchase 86.457

Figure 7a: Schele, L & Miller, ME 2006, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art*, George Braziller, Inc., Korea, p. 314

Figure 7b: Taube, K.A. 1992, *The Major Gods of Ancient Yucatan*, Dumbarton Oaks, USA, p. 67

Figure 8: McKenzie, B 2004, *Copan: Stela H*, viewed 13 May 2011,

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belief regarding the Moon Goddess?

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Figure 9: Flickr 2011, *Pacal* by *davepentecost*, viewed 16 May 2011,

<<http://www.flickr.com/photos/davepentecost/497282/>>

Figure 10: Schele, L, *Image 97059*, © *David Schele*, Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., viewed 13 May 2011,

<[http://research.famsi.org/schele\\_photos\\_list.php?search=\\*Naranjo\\*](http://research.famsi.org/schele_photos_list.php?search=*Naranjo*)>

Figure 11: Cleveland Museum of Art 2002, *Front Face of a Stela (Free-standing Stone with Relief)*, viewed 13 May 2011,

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