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# Rock Images at La Casa de las Golondrinas and the Kaqchikel Maya Context in Guatemala

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**Abstract**

This paper places La Casa de las Golondrinas, a Pre-Columbian rock image site, in its Kaqchikel Maya cultural context. This is an exploration of both the cultural situation of the paintings and the meaning of a selection of the images. A comparison of sacred locations in contemporary use in the Kaqchikel highlands to the prehistoric locations of La Casa de las Golondrinas reveals that the same features are present in both the contemporary and Pre-Columbian milieu. Further comparisons show that there is a concordance of themes in the Pre-Columbian rock art with those found in the Kaqchikel ethnographic studies. Some of the matters covered are portals to the spiritual world, mythological deities and other spiritual beings, sacrifice and ritual celebrations, and the quincunx, which defines the sacred world's four corners and center. This paper discusses a variety of single images and image clusters pertaining to seasonal rituals and creation using ethnographic information by Kaqchikel Maya archaeological and cultural scholars, the Popul Vuh, and sources on Maya cosmology and art.

**Keywords:** Maya; Kaqchikel; rock art; sacred places; cosmology; Guatemala highlands

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Academic Editor: David Whitley

Received: 11 August 2025
Revised: 14 November 2025
Accepted: 20 November 2025
Published: 27 November 2025

**Citation:** Robinson, Eugenia Jane, and Luis Paulino Puc Rucal. 2025. Rock Images at La Casa de las Golondrinas and the Kaqchikel Maya Context in Guatemala. *Arts* 14: 154. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts14060154

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## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the rock art site La Casa de las Golondrinas, situated in a southern section of the central highlands of Guatemala. It is the largest single rock art site known in Guatemala (Garnica 2025). Golondrinas (the name we will use throughout this text) has hundreds of images and is the most studied rock art site in the Guatemalan highlands.

Research over the past decades by the Proyecto Arqueologico del Area Kaqchikel (PAAK), an archaeological survey project, has located and recorded many examples of the rock art, and also carried out excavations and produced radiocarbon dates that have allowed for the dating of the site from approximately 1450/1000 B.C. until the Spanish conquest in A.D.1440/1640—a span of nearly 2500 to 3000 years (Robinson et al. 2007).

This paper was developed to explore two basic questions about the potential for available ethnographic and ethnohistoric information to enhance our understanding of this major site:

- Can ethnographic and ethnohistoric information help us understand the meaning and importance of the site itself?

  And,

- Does the ethnographic and ethnohistoric information add to our understanding of the rock art images at the site?

## 2. Theoretical Framework

We have approached these questions using a grounded theory based on work performed at a number of other rock art sites, where the use of ethnographic and/or ethnohistoric information has proven to add greater insights into the rock imagery, the site itself, or both. Some of the well-known examples are San Rock Art in South Africa (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2015); Australia in Arnhem land (Taçon 2022); North America (Whitley 2021); and the North American area, with the Huichol of Mexico serving as the interpreters (Boyd 2016).

## 3. Materials and Methods

In the Kaqchikel case, we can draw from recent ethnographies where Kaqchikel informants provide insights into their culture based on their oral traditions, reference to ethnohistoric sources, and religious knowledge. In one case, we are fortunate to have reference to Judith Maxwell's study of the Kaqchikel sacred landscape guided by Ahpub' Pablo García Ixmatá, a community spiritual leader (ajq'ija' "daykeeper"), and an archaeological colleague and informant, Luis Paulino Puc Rucal, who is keen to investigate, record, and share knowledge about the culture of his people. Our two living informants have not experienced rock art as part of their living cultural traditions, so as recommended by Layton (2001, p. 316), we will draw on anthropological information from other Mesoamerican groups and their known iconographies from Mesoamerica to illuminate the meaning of certain images.

With a few exceptions by Garnica (2025) and Stone and Godoy (1998), this approach of referring to ethnography and Mesoamerican iconography has not generally been put to use in the documentation and study of rock art in Guatemala. This approach is in large part the result of some recognized constraints on the ethnography and ethnohistory of the Maya, especially in the highlands, and their "fit" with rock art. The principal constraint is the discontinuity of Maya culture caused by the Spanish conquest: beginning around 1525 A.D., Spanish rulers and clerics intentionally suppressed indigenous culture and outlawed traditional practices and belief systems, replacing them with Catholic Christianity. This suppression continued through a prolonged armed campaign against Maya communities in the 1980s, but the situation improved with the Peace Accords in 1996 that permitted the Maya to practice their religion openly. The surviving roughly half of the Guatemalans who are Maya are linguistically and culturally distinct in many ways, although maintaining some common elements of being "Maya." The Kaqchikel Maya, originally an offshoot of the Kiche, are one such linguistic and cultural subgroup; they occupy a substantial part of the southern and eastern Guatemalan Highlands and the Antigua Valley, with its connection to the South Coast.

Despite these constraints, there exist several significant resources that are recognized as valid sources of relevant ethnographic and ethnohistoric information regarding the Kaqchikel and related Highland Maya. They include the following:

- Ethnohistoric documents: The Annals of the Cakchiquels and the Popul Vuh (the latter being a documentation of the Kiche/Kaqchikel belief system and history that was created by Mayan religious leaders shortly after the conquest and kept hidden for many years).
- Documented ethnographic research on current practices of traditional Maya religion among the Kaqchikel, especially the work of Judith Maxwell of Tulane University.
- The archaeologically and ethnohistorically documented epoch of extensive pan-Mesoamerican adoption of a common set of core beliefs and shared symbol sets derived from Central Mexican models and Aztec iconography that were taken up during the Late Postclassic period (Boone and Smith 2003).

- Key informants, including celebrants of the present-day Maya religion and individuals who embrace traditional Kaqchikel knowledge and beliefs while living in modern Guatemala.
- Limited archaeological excavation and dating at the Golondrinas site itself.

As documented in the following sections, we drew on these resources to provide ethnohistoric and ethnographic content to use in evaluating Golondrinas and its imagery.

## 4. Geography and History of Golondrinas

The rock image site, Golondrinas, is the subject of this chapter. The site is located at the southern end of the Antigua Valley in the Kaqchikel Maya-speaking area in the Guatemalan highlands (Figures 1 and 2). The Kaqchikel-speaking area is 3500 sq km and extends between Lake Atitlan on the west, the Motagua River on the north, Cerro Alux on the east, and the Pacific piedmont on the south.

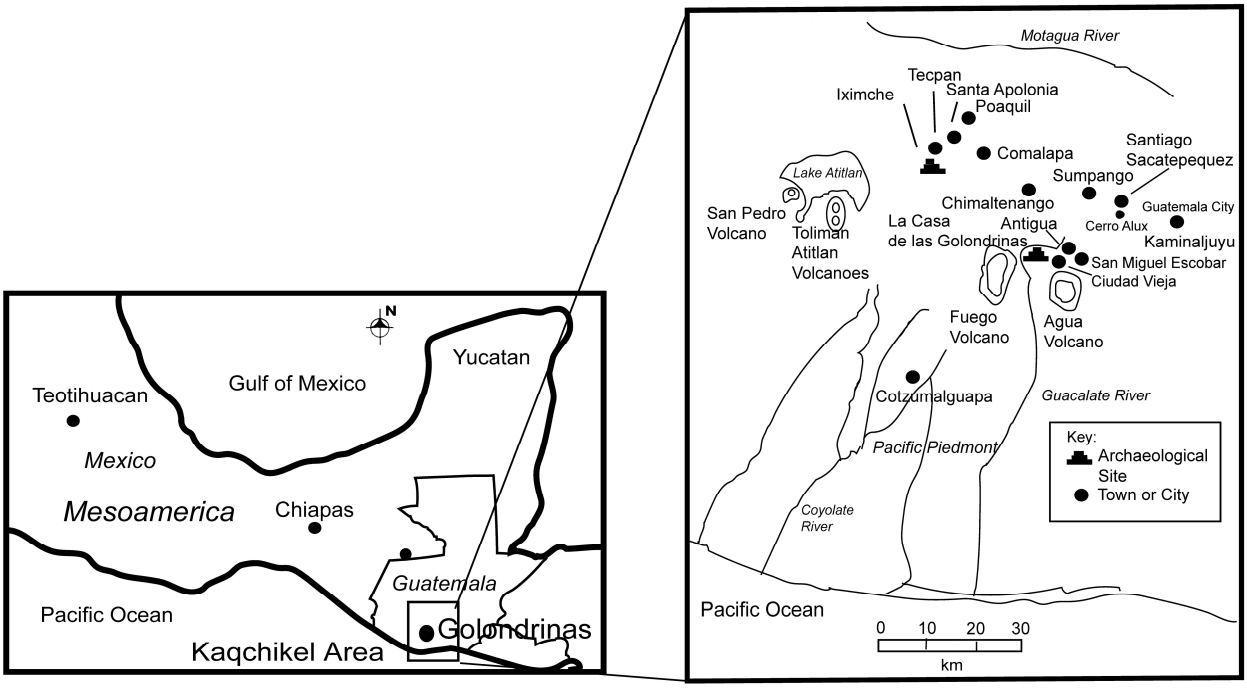



**Figure 1.** (**left**) The Kaqchikel study area's location in Guatemala and Mesoamerica and (**right**) the location of Golondrinas in the Kaqchikel area.

The site is located at the base of the Agua Volcano (Water Volcano) (Figures 2 and 3a) and is a mere 10 km from the western Acatenango (Place of Reeds) and Fuego (Fire) Volcano across the valley (Figures 2 and 3b)—the latter is the most active volcano in the Sierra Madre. Seated on the pedestal of the Agua Volcano, the site is located on the west bank of the Guacalate River and is the single largest registered rock art site in Guatemala (Stone and Godoy 1998). It extends 600 m east–west, is 40 m tall, and has at least 500 paintings. The site was discovered by ecologists in the early 1980s from a boat; they saw paintings on the rock walls while investigating the types of fish in the Guacalate River in the Finca Urias. The site was registered by Sergio Erick Castillo Godoy, who named it La Casa de las Golondrinas ("House of the Swallows"—referred to as "Golondrinas" in the remainder of the text) for the birds that nested in the rock crevices. Sergio Erick Castillo Godoy and Andrea Stone visited the site and published a short description of it (Stone and Godoy 1998). The site is near Ciudad Vieja, a suburb of San Miguel Escobar, once the capital of the Kingdom of Guatemala in the 1500s. The Kaqchikel name for Ciudad Vieja was *B'ulb'üx Ya'* (Recinos 1950, p. 20), which is translated as *Chorro de Agua* (Lutz 1984, p. 49)—or spring or

bubbling water. As there are springs that descend from the Agua Volcano near Golondrinas, the Kaqchikel name may have actually been for the site itself.

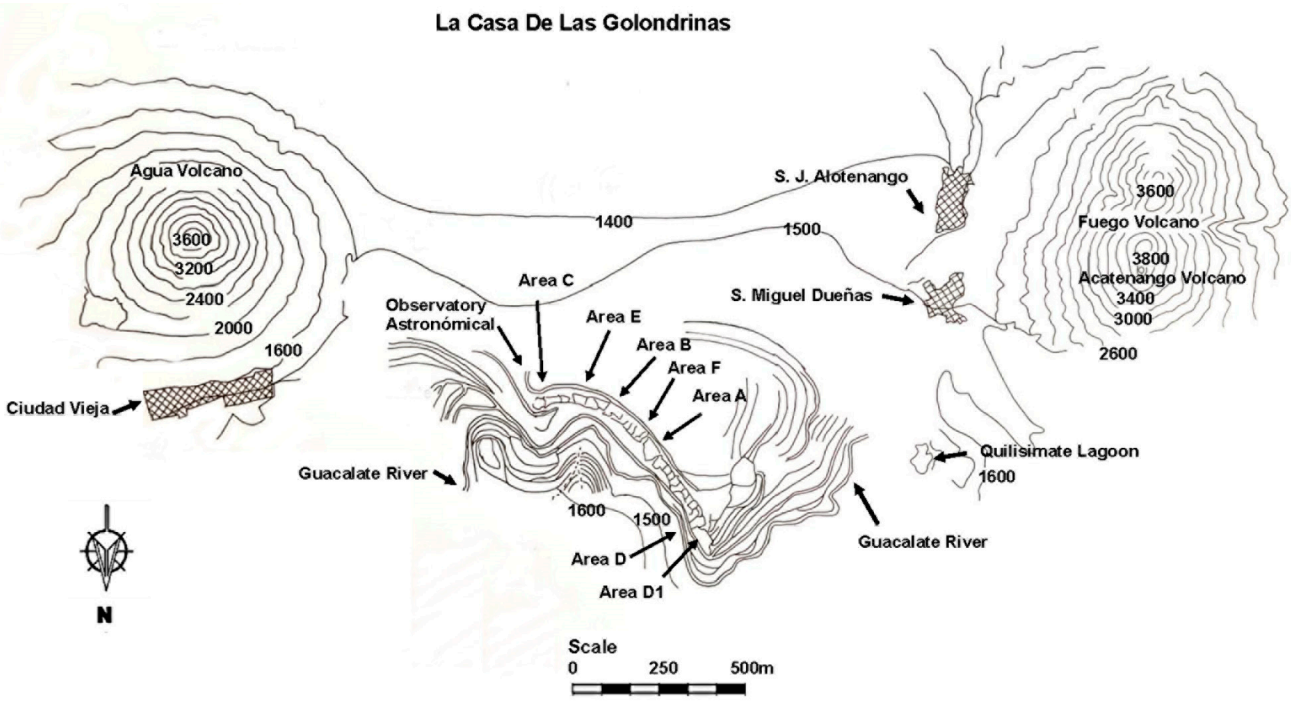



**Figure 2.** The location of Golondrinas, surrounding towns, and volcanoes. The map shows the locations of Area A–F, the Observatory, the Guacalate River, and the Quilisimate Lagoon. The scale has been enlarged four times and goes with the central section showing the details of the site (Map by Puc and Robinson).



(**a**) (**b**)

**Figure 3.** (**a**) The Agua Volcano. (**b**) The Fuego Volcano.

Two projects, the Proyecto Arqueológico del Área Kaqchikel (PAAK) (1991–present) and Galina Eschova's study (Eschova et al. 2023) have explored the site. The long east–west trending wall has large panels that the PAAK project defined as Areas A, B, and C. Because of their large size, these panels could have fronted public spaces for 50 or more persons. There are also medium and small panels in Areas D, E, and F—many of these are in areas that are difficult to access, potentially private locations. The PAAK initiated a review of the paintings of the site in 2023–2025: Luis Paulino Puc Rucal, a Kaqchikel speaker, ethnographer, and archaeologist, was the director of field operations. He and his team used current technologies to locate paintings with GPS points and record known and newly discovered images with professional photographs and multispectral images.

The understanding of the site by the PAAK has evolved over the past decades. The first set of studies was in the early 2000s, and publications and presentations were presented about the recording of the paintings at the site with photographs and scaled drawings (Robinson and Ware 2002). Excavations in the center of the site in Area B found strata with diagnostic ceramics of the Middle Preclassic Agua Phase (800–300 B.C.); the Late Preclassic Sacatepequez Phase (350–100 B.C.); the Early Classic Terrenos Phase (200–600 A.D.); the Late Classic Pompeya Phase (600–800 B.C.); and the Late Postclassic Medina Phase (1200–1524 A.D.). Radiocarbon dating of carbon returned a date in the Early Postclassic Primavera Phase (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** The Antigua Valley Chronology and Phases at Golondrinas by diagnostic ceramics and radiocarbon dates (shown in the right column by an x).

| Time Period (Antigua Valley) | Name of Phase (Antigua Valley) | Date of Phase | Phases Represented at Golondrinas by Radiocarbon Dates or Diagnostic Ceramics |
|---|---|---|---|
| Archaic | Unnamed | 4000 B.C. | |
| Early Preclassic | Urias | 1700–1000 B.C. | x |
| Middle Preclassic | Agua | 800–350 B.C. | x |
| Late Preclassico | Sacatepequez | 350–100 B.C. | x |
| Terminal Preclassic | Xaraxong | 100 B.C.–A.D. 200 | |
| Early Classic | Terrenos | 200–600 A.D. | x |
| Late Classic | Pompeya | 600–800 A.D. | x |
| Early Postclassic | Primavera | 800–1200 A.D. | x |
| Late Postclassic | Medina | 1200–1524 A.D. | x |

An additional date in the Early Preclassic (1700–1000 B.C.)—the Urias Phase—exists for the site (see Table 1). During a project in 2002 to date the paintings (in collaboration with Marvin Rowe, Ruth Ann Armitage, and Karen Steelman) 16 samples of paint were extracted from the site (Robinson et al. 2007), but only one sample yielded a date. The sample of red and white paint was from Area C, but unfortunately there was no image associated with the paint. The date yielded by plasma oxidation with a 2 sigma calibration is 1450–1000 B.C., placing the paint in the Early Preclassic period (Robinson et al. 2007).

A painting on a tall rock at Lake Amatitlan near Guatemala City, the "Diablo Rojo" (Rezzio Carpio 2019), was dated by Marvin Rowe and had nearly the same date as the paint sample. This painting is in the Olmec style and is of two people standing in a ceremony. These two locations of paint—Golondrinas and the Diablo Rojo—continue a line of Olmec

monuments placed along the piedmont of the Pacific coast, some placed at major centers, such as Tak'alik Ab'aj (Clark and Pye 2000).

Thus both radiocarbon dates, the diagnostic ceramics, and one processed paint sample show that the site had at least intermittent, if not continuous, activity from the Early Preclassic to Late Postclassic periods 1400/1000 B.C.—A.D. 1440/1640 with one gap in the Terminal Preclassic (see Table 1).

This is a surprisingly long period of use—nearly 3000 years. It includes the Early Preclassic years starting around 1400–1000 B.C. in the Antigua Valley when agriculture was evolving as a basis of the economy and the support for settled village life. The Middle Preclassic period (800–100 B.C.) has evidence of early sedentism with small hamlets and villages (Braswell and Robinson 2014). The Classic period (A.D. 200–800) saw more complex cultural developments in which large earthen structure groups were seats of territorial units and there was interregional contact with Teotihucan in the Mexican highlands and Cotzumalguapa situated on the Pacific coast (Robinson 2014). During the Late Postclassic (A.D. 1200–1524) there was the development of state societies. This latter period is characterized by militarism and interethnic wars (Robinson 1998). During this same period, there was interaction throughout Mesoamerica, as evidenced by the use of the Postclassic "International" Style of painting (Boone and Smith 2003), emanating from Central Mexico and adopted by both the Kaqchikel and their neighbors the K'iche.

Linguistic studies give us an idea of who lived in the area through time. Ethnohistorical documents and glottochronological analysis indicate that there were three different languages spoken. Kaufman (1969) and Campbell (1999) both place Kaqchikel as a Postclassic development from K'iche'. Kaufman further posits that K'iche'an could have been the Preclassic and Classic language in the area; he calculates with glottochronology that it evolved as early as 700 B.C. Prior to that, residents were "Eastern Maya" speakers. Campbell's reconstruction of language change follows the same trajectory.

Because of their themes and styles of painting, two paintings at the site (to be discussed later) have been interpreted to date to this late period. In summary, we have the chronological placement of two paintings and one paint sample. Unfortunately there are no other paintings with certain chronological dates garnered by chemical methods, nor by the seriation of themes or styles, nor by the superimposition of images, nor by the superimposition of different colored layers of paint. Some of these approaches to dating may be successful in the future. The paintings of Golondrinas (except for a few) are monochrome and have solid red paint.

The excavations in Area B also yielded abundant cultural materials. Their analysis and what they can add to the interpretation of the site are in process. In addition to the carbon for dating, faunal bone, human bone, lithics of obsidian, and plant materials have been found. Features include a Late Postclassic cache in a large ceramic vessel set in burned grasses. The cache contains 18 spindle whorls that have calendrical significance—18 is the number of Maya months of 20 days (360 days) plus the Wayeb' (5 days) making a year of 365 days. Gabrielle Vail thinks that the cache represents a "world renewal (rebirthing) ritual" (Gabrielle Vail personal communication 2025). In the lower levels was an Early Classic—a possible ritual feature—and a Middle Preclassic deposit of ceramics from the back wall of Area B.

*Kaqchikel Late Postclassic History*

The Kaqchikel people left the K'iche peoples' center of Q'umarkaj in A.D. 1470 and then established their own capital, Iximche, and linguistic and ethnic group. During these years speakers of the Chajoma Kaqchikel were situated to the northeast (Hill 1996) and the Pipil were on the Pacific coast. The Kaqchikel politically dominated the Antigua Valley and

Pacific coastal areas by A.D. 1500. However, prior to this time in the Late Classic, people spoke K'ichean languages ancestral to modern Kaqchikel, Tz'utujil, and K'iche' (Robinson et al. 2023, pp. 200–1). Ch'olan was probably spoken in neighboring Kaminaljuyu, and the language of Teotihuacan, "northern Mije Soke", was spoken in the Kaqchikel highlands as well as on the Pacific coast.

The Kaqchikel, initially an allied warrior force of the K'iche, had a long-term political association that dissolved in 1470 when there was a rebellion in the K'iche court. Prior to that, documents indicate that the Kaqchikel, together with the K'iche', conquered locations in the northern, eastern, and western highlands and the Pacific coast. This alliance was active through the reigns of the K'iche ruler Qukumatz (A.D. 1400–1425) and K'iq'ab' (A.D. 1425–1475). Showing that these allied peoples had a broad knowledge of the geography and settlements of the Highlands, the locations where they established influence include the Baja and Alta Verapaz, Sacapulas, Huehuetenango, Totonicapan, Quetzaltenango, and Zunil and Mam territory in the western highlands; Almolonga (the Antigua Valley); and Santa Maria Chiquimula in southeastern Guatemala (Cojti Ren 2020, pp. 74–76). Eventually, the K'iche' rewarded the Kaqchikel by allowing them to establish their own *tinamit*, or citadel, and government at Chi Awär, located in Chontala, east of Chichicastenango, in 1430 (Cojti Ren 2020, pp. 80–85). In 1470 the Kaqchikel established their own capital at Iximche, near Tecpan.

## 5. The Antigua Valley Environmental Setting

Golondrinas is situated 1500 m above sea level in the piedmont of the Sierra Madre mountains above the Pacific coast. This area now has a mild climate with a mean annual temperature of 15–18 degrees Centigrade. It has a wet season between May–October and 80–160 cm/yr of precipitation. There are occasional droughts associated with El Nino.

The environmental and ecological studies of the Antigua Valley span 4000 B.C. to A.D. 900. Corn remains were discovered in lake cores dating to 4000 B.C. In the Archaic period of 4000–2000 B.C. there are indications that burning of the landscape and preparing it for planting took place by foragers (Freidel et al. 2011). The early presence of pottery-using people starts at 1800 B.C.; these were probable immigrants from the Pacific Coast, where a dry climate was unfavorable at that time (Neff et al. 2006; Freidel et al. 2011). By 800 B.C., settled agriculturalists were living on the hills of the Antigua Valley, using its rich volcanic soils, fertilized by ash from the nearby Fuego Volcan, and plentiful rainfall, an ideal environmental setting for populations adopting agricultural and sedentary lifeways in the Preclassic period (Robinson et al. 2002). The aquatic resources in this area of the Antigua Valley would have also been attractive to settlers. Near the Guacalate River was Lake Quilisimate and swamps that had fish, turtles, crabs, other aquatic species, and plant resources. The environmental location thus provided plentiful and necessary resources for early agriculture, hunting, fishing and collecting in the zone.

However, this seemingly idyllic location for settlement at an elevation of 1500 m above sea level was marked by environmental disruptions (Freidel et al. 2011). There were tephra falls of 0.25–0.50 m in depth and occasional strong earthquakes. A series of volcanic eruptions occurred in the Late Preclassic period of 280 B.C., and another in the Early Classic period A.D. 260, both marked by sharp drops in pollen and deposits of ash and a decline of population in the Antigua Valley (Freidel et al. 2011). In the Late Classic there was desiccation in the nearby laguna in A.D. 785—a period of drought experienced across the Maya area (Haug et al. 2003). In the Postclassic period, A.D. 900–1500, there were improving conditions with a gradual increase in herbs and cultigens throughout the Postclassic period.

## 6. Ritual Landscapes and Kaqchikel Ethnography

The Maya, like other Mesoamerican people, believe that features in the natural world have supernatural importance and these are thus integrated into the cultural landscape. Mountains, caves, and springs in particular have symbolic meaning, often associated with myths and religious beliefs (Adams 2005; Brady and Ashmore 1999; Grove 1999; Townsend 1982). Ritual landscapes can be defined as the "products of stereotyped actions, including specific acts and sequences of acts. . . that represent the socially prescribed orders by which communities define, legitimize and sustain their occupation of their traditional homelands . . . traditional wisdom often is tied to places. Thus the landscape is full of history, legend, knowledge, and power that help structure activities and organize relationships" (Anschuetz et al. 2001, p. 178). Single sacred locations can even be respected by more than one ethnic group, which seems to be the case at Golondrinas, where painted motifs derive from both Maya and Central Mexican sources. This section explores the roles of water and mountains, which are typical sacred features in Mesoamerica, and their importance as locations for the recounting of history and legends; designated places for celebrations, and identified portals where transformation takes place in the Kaqchikel ritual landscape.

Judith Maxwell and Ajpub' Pablo Garcia Ixmatá surveyed sacred locations in the Kaqchikel area. The Kaqchikel physical locations that are sacred are features of mountains, vertical rock faces, rock overhangs, rockshelters, and caves, along with water sources. Their survey also found tunnels, trees, and burrows to sometimes be important landscape features. (Maxwell and Garcia Ixmatá 2008). Associated with these physical features are cultural narratives of historical events, mythical beings, cultural knowledge and power, but also the definition of a homeland. The cultural features considered here are presented below.

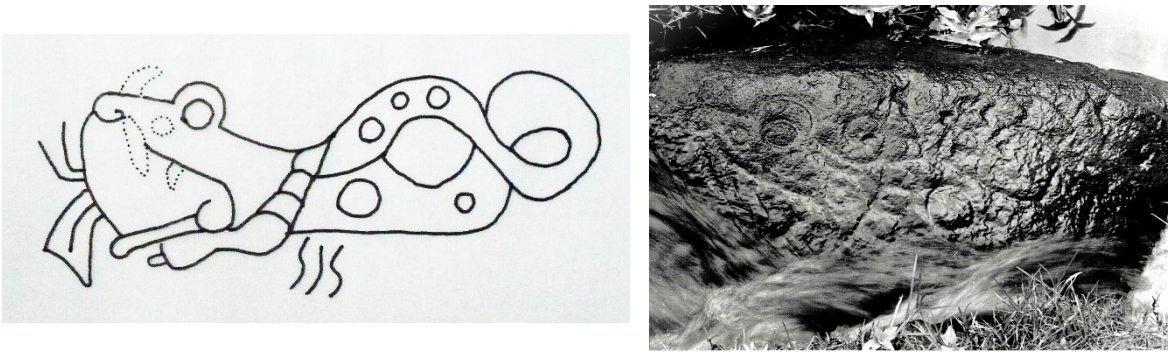
### *6.1. The Quincunx and the Guardians of the Community*

In addition to the physical locations mentioned previously, Maxwell and Garcia Ixmatá describe many features of the Kaqchikel physical territory that represent their constructed spiritual and ritual landscape. One of the cultural constructs is that settlements around community centers mark four designated corners as "Guardians" of the community. The spatial organization is that of a quincunx, a square or a rectangle with two equidistant lines that emanate from the diagonal corners and cross at the center. For example, Iximche was a capital of the Kaqchikel in the Postclassic period. Around this center are guardian sites and their altars are located at approximately the four cardinal directions. Maxwell notes that the quincunx organization actually has points above (that reach the blue sky) and below (that reach the green earth) in the center.

Of particular interest for this study is that other locations are guardians of places. In addition to the examples presented here is Junajpu. The large Agua Volcano, called Junajpu by Kaqchikel people, was designated as a Guardian of Santa Maria de Jesus, a town that lies east of the volcano. The name, Junajpu, recalls the mythical story of the two hero twins—principal actors in the Popul Vuh myth. Junajpu, a masculine figure, after many trials and tribulations with his brother, is transformed into the sun, and the Kaqchikel view him as one of the original people and a god. His name and personage is associated with the Agua Volcano.

In the Sumpango municipality there are also beliefs that a snake named *Cumetz* was present in the community and that it represented the *nawal* protector of the town. Its silhouette is formed by a stream located to the west in the middle of the sacred places of El Tragon and Chichulin. From the top of a hill, the form of the serpent can be seen, and it is said in mythology that the silhouette of the serpent remained in place after its death. Its form reached the west side of the current Catholic church and the La Taquiej ravine, but most of its silhouette can be seen in a section that runs from the north to the south (as told by Marcelo Sulá to Luis Paulino Puc Rucal).

Vinicio Garcia discovered a large petroglyph (1 m long) of a serpent carved into a rock in a stream (Figure 4a,b). It is located at the Fabrica de Hilados Belen, south of Chimaltenango (García 1992, p. 19). This artwork, coupled with the story of *Cumetz* from Sumpango, shows that the mythology of large serpents—perhaps both were guardians—was extant in the Kaqchikel highlands and represented with riverine landscape features as well as petroglyphs.



(**a**) (**b**)

**Figure 4.** (**a**) *Petroglifo Belén*. Redrawn from García (1992, Figure 10) by Robinson. (**b**) photograph of the petroglyph in situ by Robinson.

### *6.2. Historical Events Related to Sacred and Ritual Sites*

At some of the sites that Maxwell and Garcia Ixmatá surveyed, they were told by informants that the location was known for reenacting historical and mythological events. One of these historical events, the defeat and sacrifice of an opposing champion, Tolk'om, was recounted in the Xajil Chronicles (Maxwell and Hill 2006). After his demise, his body parts were thrown into a lake, where the waters were stirred by the pieces of the body of Tolk'om. Maxwell and Garcia Ixmatá explain,

> "While subsequent rituals performed at these sites recall and celebrate these events, they also consecrate the space. The Xajil Chronicles (Maxwell and Hill 2006) gives four names associated with this original sacrifice: Kaqb'atz'ulu' (the mountain), Tza'm Tzaqb'äl Tolk'om (the precipice from which his quartered and arrow riddled body was cast) and Pan Pati', Pa Yan Ch'okol (sites next to Lake Atitlan where the waters roiled stirred by the pieces of Tolk'om's body). Kaqb'atz'ulu remains an active ritual site. Both Pan Pati' and Pa Yan Ch'oköl continue to serve as spaces for spiritual contact, sacrifice and ritual." (Maxwell and Garcia Ixmatá 2008).

### *6.3. Caves/Openings/Cracks—Portals*

Other locations, such as entrances to caves or the faces of rocks, can be portals. One is well known as a cave—it is at Iximche and called *Iximche' Jul*. It is said that it connects to Q'umarkaj, the K'iche' capital, but it terminates within a few feet of the opening. In San Juan Comalapa there is another opening—Kuplaj Ab'äj "where soldiers emerge from the rock, generally at night, to train and to guard the mountain." (Maxwell and Garcia Ixmatá 2008). In other locations there have been human disappearances and also the apparition of mountain spirits in the form of animals. Holes can be altars where spirit animals pass, which are usually chickens or snakes. As Maxwell and Garcia Ixmatá say,

> "At the Chwi' K'ajol site men working the cornfields have seen a stranger, sometimes a man, sometimes a youth, climb up along the ravine only to disappear in the rock face. At an altar above Xe Na Koj spirit soldiers emerge at midnight,

march in formation, and then re-enter the solid rock faces." (Maxwell and Garcia Ixmatá 2008).

### *6.4. Rock Shelters as Shrines and for Dances*

Maxwell and Garcia Ixmatá also surveyed the area around Lake Atitlan, an area of the Tz'utujil people today. Here they found Xe K'istilin, a rock shelter north of San Juan La Laguna which is known as a place where dances were staged and celebrated. Maxwell also identified Pa Saq Mam, a rock shelter with a hunting shrine with animal bone caches. Brown's survey of hunting shrine sites around Lake Atitlan found that the shrines, locations of usually hundreds of animal bones (Brown 2006), were places for ritual to please the lord of the animals before and after a hunt. Informants told her that the secondary bones left at the ritual site are believed to be recreated into other animals by the Lord of the Animals.

### *6.5. Mountain Peaks*

Xe'Kupila, another sacred site located near the peak of a mountain near Comalapa, has areas for burning offerings (Maxwell and Garcia Ixmatá 2008). Another sacred location on a mountain peak is Xek'owil in Santa Apolonia (Figure 5). A stela and tenon head, Late Classic in date, are situated on the mountain peak and have been spatially organized to create an altar—and there are also remnants of prehistoric structures.



**Figure 5.** Stela and sculpture at Xek'owil.

The ethnographic information presented here reinforces the idea that the ritual landscape of the Kaqchikel Maya has varied locations and activities associated with them. The placement of guardians of towns, in this case Iximche, is structured by a quadripartite organization where protectors are placed at four corners around a town center. The Kaqchikel share this same organization with the Quiche of Momostenango, where four named mountains surround the town center (Tedlock 1982, p. 82). As well, we have learned that mythological serpents can serve as protectors in Sumpango. Historical events and visionary experiences are connected to places deemed ritual locations such as hillsides at Lake Atitlan, the setting for the story of Tolk'om's defeat. Stories based in underground features such as tunnels exist in the Quiche where a man was drawn to enter the underground space and saw dignitaries from the past and talked to them (Tedlock 1982, p. 149). We have also reviewed the possibility of rock shelters used for dances and shrines and mountain peaks for ritual.

## 7. Present Day Spirituality and Ritual

As many authors have described, Maya spirituality has been openly practiced since the Peace Accords of 1996 (Hart 2008). This post-civil war agreement ended discrimination and allowed "the Maya political, social, and cultural rights, including to their forms of worship" (Hart 2008, x). Unlike in the past, the Maya can practice their religion openly. Although there is a great variation in practice, usually there is at least one Ajq'ij' (daykeeper) presiding. Maxwell and Garcia Ixmatá explain the current day practice of the Maya religion and the key content of existing Maya religion.

> "All the sacred sites share features which allow *ajq'ijab'* to recognize them, even if the site is inactive. Some features are apparent without spiritual training. Physical prominences generally have one or more associated altars. Large exposed vertical rock faces, rock overhangs, caves and tunnels are propitious spots for altars. Of course, not every rock or cliff is consecrated space. *Ajq'ijab'* can feel the energy of the physical environment. Once a spot has been identified as a portal for appropriate energy, then rituals may be performed there. Each rite, in successfully establishing communication with the ancestors and the spiritual realm strengthens the connection provided by that portal. Each full ritual begins with a re-creation of the cosmos, establishing the four corners of terrestrial plane, erecting the sky, crafting woman, man, the human generations and the spiritual plane. In counting the days, not in the yearly round, but in the ritual cycle (13 successive iterations of each day), time too is set in motion, yielding an Einsteinian universe, a space-time continuum".

> "The ritual invocation calls upon the celebrants' ancestors, both close genetic kin and legendary forebears, as well as on the spiritual agents of creation. These spirits, both human and supernatural, are guests at the banquet laid out as an offering. Part of the offering is presented through the ritual fire; part is laid or poured along the altar, proportions dictated by the knowledge granted the celebrant *ajq'ij*. The consumption rate of the fire indicates both the hunger of the spirits and their acceptance or rejection of the offerings and the petition. At first neglected ritual sites may burn very rapidly and part of the spiritual communication may include instructions for subsequent offerings to reactivate the site and supply further spiritual sustenance."

> "Each site has at least one day of the 260-day ritual calendar, the *cholq'ij* (cf. cognate Yucatec Maya *tzolk'in*), which is associated with that site. Each altar, then, can be named by its eponymous day(s), specified by both the day-named and its

> numeral coefficient, such as *Waqxqi'I'x* "Eight Jaguar". Just as each day of the calendar round has certain virtues, making it propitious for certain undertakings and their associated petitions, so each ritual site with its associated day lends itself to these same undertakings and petitions."
>
> "Ajq'ijab' select specific days for ritual according to the needs of their clients. They likewise select the appropriate altars. If, for some reason, the ritual can not be done on the most propitious day, a series of accommodations can be made, establishing spiritual connections through the host day and invoking complexes of associate day-bearers. Likewise, the altar chosen need not always be that associated with the day of the ritual celebration. One of the tasks of the ajq'ij is to negotiate the spiritual interrelations of the calendar day, the day-spirit of the altar, the day-spirit of the client, and that of the celebrant himself." (Maxwell and Garcia Ixmatá 2008)

## 8. Golondrinas as a Sacred Site

Golondrinas shares many of the ethnographically identified characteristics of sacred sites as referenced by Maxwell and Garcia Ixmatá's report (2008). Golondrinas is situated between the powerful presences of the Agua Volcano, the Fuego Volcano, and Acatenango, translated as "Place of Reeds." It is characterized by vertical rock faces, rock overhangs, and rock shelters. It overlooks—at a distance of about 50 m—the Guacalate River, which itself has nearby origins from the volcano. The site also has paintings by cracks in the rocks and areas that seep water—potentially specific sacred locations within the larger site (Maxwell and Garcia Ixmatá 2008).

In July of 2008, Judy Maxwell, Ann Scott, Ajpub' Pablo García Ixmatá and Eugenia Robinson visited Golondrinas. Maxwell noted that the types of ritual carried out today indicate that a rock, if so designated by a ritual specialist, is a place for connections with ancestors and the spiritual realm as well as in-dwelling spirits and co-essences. When Maxwell's colleague Ajpub' Pablo Garcia Ixmatá, a daykeeper, visited Golondrinas in July of 2008 he found it to be a powerful place, but dormant because of the lack of ritual activity on this private property. Located in the midst of a large coffee plantation, for the past two centuries the Golondrinas site has not been accessible for religious use. After viewing the entire site, which included expansive public spaces and more secluded high locations with excellent views, García chose a mid-elevation location where the rock wall made a right angle and where he felt there was a high level of "concentration" (Figure 6). The location was a "mouth" or "door" of the site, a portal for communication and hence appropriate for making the connection with the ancestral spirits and the spirit-owner of the site.

That day García performed a ceremony. First, he made a circle of lit candles. During the ceremony he addressed all the people that had had a presence at the site and their grandparents and gave thanks to them as well as to our respective universities. García stated that the altar's day number and patron is 12 No'j (12 Pensamiento or thought). When asked about the drawing of the painted motifs he confessed his complete lack of knowledge about them. But he suggested that the figures were either *nawals*, a type of individual guardian spirit, or they were something the deceased grandparents, reached through ritual, had told the maker to paint. Today, indigenous people in Guatemala appear to have no insight into the paintings' past purposes or meanings. However, the indigenous people in the Lacandon area seem to have a greater understanding of paintings in their area. Palka notes that the Lacandon Maya believe that the cliff shrine of Mensabak is one of the most important pilgrimage sanctuaries in the area, and they attribute the painted rock art on the cliff to the resident gods" (Palka 2014, p. 285 quoting Soustelle 1970, p. 28).



**Figure 6.** Daykeeper García preparing the ritual location near a corner of the rock matrix of Golondrinas.

The sacred features discussed in this section have correlates in the Highland area as well as throughout Mesoamerica. Hlúšek (2020) has summarized the chief features of the sacred landscape in Mesoamerica, drawing from other works by Broda et al. (2001); Broda and Gámez (2009); and Peniche et al. (2011), stating that core features of Mesoamerican religion are "ritual landscape, sacred mountains, the agricultural cycle, and rain making rituals have been an integral part and even the core of Mesoamerican religions since deep Pre-Hispanic times until now. In fact they have been closely interconnected with the very basis of human life—the subsistence." (Hlúšek 2020, p. 41). These elements have persisted in spite of the conquest and the 500 years of colonialism and modernization. In the mountainous area near the Kaqchikel territory we see the persistence of the importance of these natural features, especially mountains, in several communities: the Quiche' of Momostenango (Tedlock 1982), the Tzotzil of Zinacantan (Vogt 1969); the Q'eqchi' of Alta Verapaz (Abigail and Brady 1994); and the Lacandon of the Lake Mensabak region of Chiapas (Palka 2014). This brief review supports Hlúšek's (2020) statements about the presence of core elements of Mesoamerican religion in the Kaqchikel area as well as in numerous other regions in varied mountainous environments in the southern part of Mesoamerica.

## 9. Sacred Content of Selected Rock Paintings

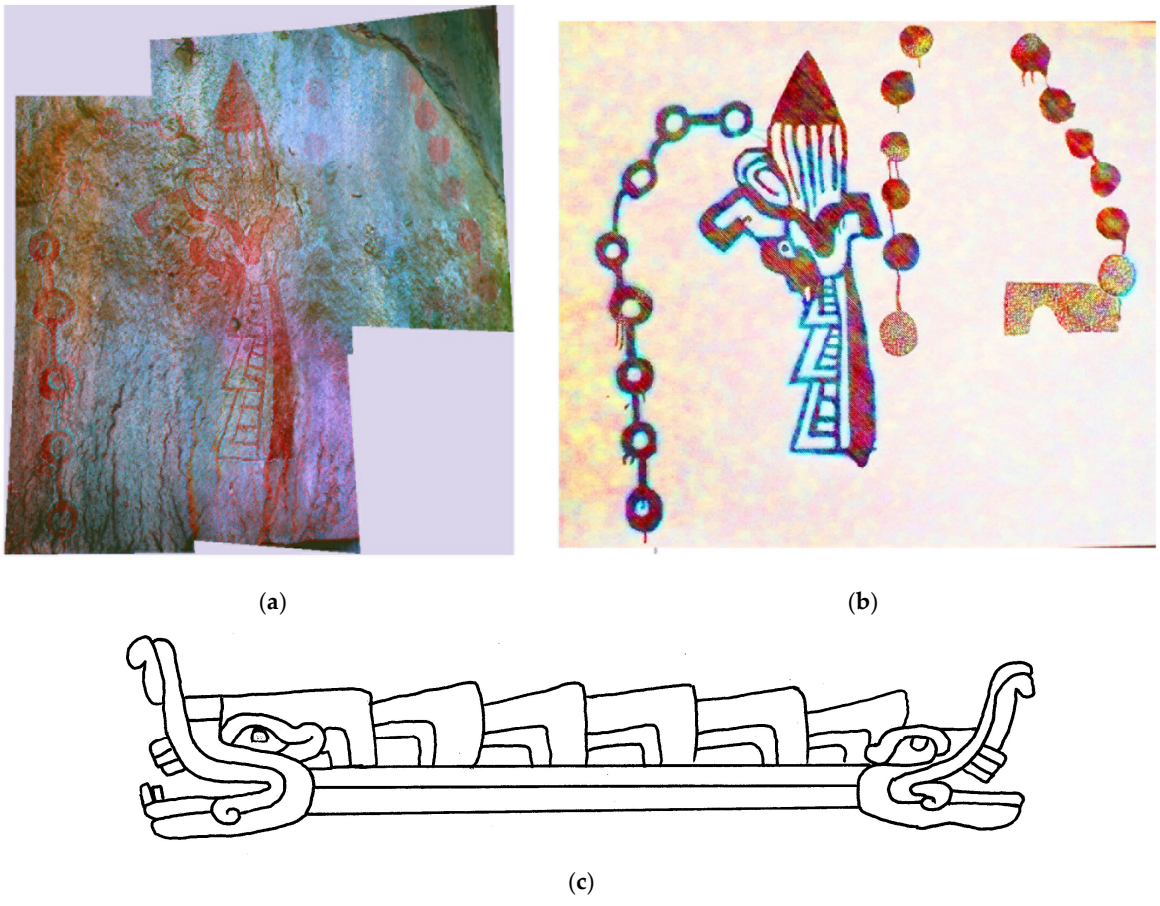
The plausible likelihood that Golondrinas is a sacred site establishes a basis for the application of ethnographic and other historic information to explore the potential sacred content of its images. The following sections identify specific images or image clusters where this approach is applied. In the following selection of images, there are specific spiritual and mythical stories and behaviors associated with the images. The themes are derived from Maxwell and Garcia Ixmatá's work and are historical events, mythological

deities, portals, dances, sacrifices, guardians of a place/spiritual figure, ritual celebrations, and the quincunx.

### *9.1. Interpretations of Historical Events and Mythological Deities*

#### 9.1.1. The Fire-Serpent

The Fire-Serpent with a Flint in its mouth is a painting situated about 12 m above the ground surface in Area B, on a projecting rock (Figure 7a,b). The painting is 74 cm tall. The Fire-Serpent's image is a bichrome: the figure was created with a red line, and it has a turquoise outline; this may be a reference to Xiuhcoatl's color, turquoise, probably meaning fire. In the painting, the Xiuhcoatl is shooting upwards, its serpent head is first and the three sections of its segmented tail hang below. In its open mouth is a pointed Flint with dripping blood on its tip. Eight circles or dots, each with a numerical value of one, arch away from the Flint to the left, and twelve solid dots circle to the right of the bearer of the blade. The Xiuhcoatl has a predecessor in lowland Maya art of the Classic period; however, the numerals associated with this image indicate that this is a Late Postclassic highland Mexican image. In Figure 7c, is a comparative painted representation of the Xuihcoatl framing a mirror from the Codex Borgia.



(**a**) (**b**)

(**c**)

**Figure 7.** (**a**) Xiuhcoatl—Fire-Serpent (photograph by Gene Ware and processed by Bob Mark); (**b**) Xiuhcoatl painting showing the blue painted line (painting by Robinson); (**c**) Xiuhcoatl drawing of upper Xiuhcoatl in the border of a mirror. Detail of the Codex Borgia, 46. From Taube ([1992] 2018, Figure 22b redrawn by Robinson).

The Late Postclassic Xiuhcoatl painting is one of the symbols of the Late Postclassic International style. This is an elite style and iconography, established by the Aztec and shared throughout Mesoamerica in the Late Postclassic period (A.D. 1200–1524). A variant of

it—the Southwest Maya style—was used in murals in both the K'iche capital of Q'umarkaj and the Kaqchikel capital of Iximche (Smith 2003). The International symbol set includes the Sun, the Moon, the Xiuhcoatl—the Fire-Serpent—and the Flint (Boone and Smith 2003). The Fire-Serpent was a mythological weapon of fire and solar heat of Huitzilpochtli, the premier god of the Aztecs.

An interpretation of the date is that it has a calendrical date of 8 Flint and could identify the year as A.D. 1448 or, more likely, A.D.1500 or could be read as 12 Xiuhcoatl (Caso 1971; Stone 1999, p. 7). Stone commented that Aztec nobility placed dates on rocks for "historical commemoration linked to important sites in the landscape, especially those tied to their mytho-historical traditions" (Stone 1999, p. 4). Thus, this date might "Commemorate a new Fire ceremony, coronation, sacrifice, migration or conquest. With the combination of the Flint to the Xiuhcoatl, a celestial weapon of fire, these glyphs might record the conquest of the Iximche Kaqchikel of this sacred place" (Robinson 2008, p. 144) when the Iximche Kaqchikel were known to be expanding into the area of the Kaqchikel zone and onto the Pacific coast.

Like the Tolk'om example cited previously, in which an historical event of conquest was commemorated and sacralized in the rural Maya area in contemporary times, this Xiuhcoatl example attests to the same practice in the Late Postclassic; this symbol, as well as others of the International symbol set, legitimatized the state society and warfare, and through these symbols, the state made reference to mythological weapons and human sacrifice (Miller and Taube 1993; Smith 2003; Taube 2000). It is highly possible that the Xiuhcoatl was adopted by the Iximche Kaqchikel elite and used to establish their domination and politicization of this important, sacred location.

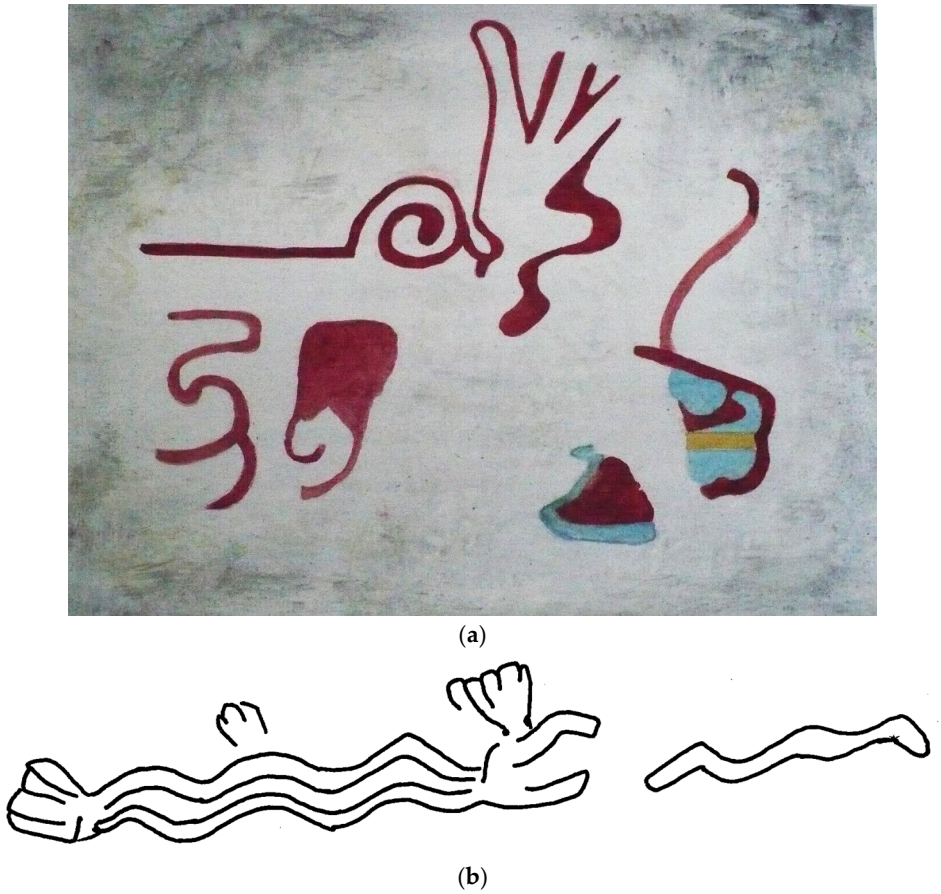
#### 9.1.2. Plumed Serpent

A polychrome plumed serpent painting exists on a rock wall in area B. (Figure 8a). The 75 cm-long image was executed in a red outline and has traces of yellow and blue fill in the red outline in the jaw area. It faces east and has a long nose, scroll eye, and three-feathered plume atop its head; the latter is its defining feature as a "feathered serpent."

Serpents in Mesoamerica and the Maya have many aspects—they represent the sky, water, lightning and creation (Hernández and Patricia 2022; Miller and Taube 1993; Vail and Looper 2015). Q'uqulkan (Feathered or Plumed serpent) is a deity who was widespread in Mesoamerica in the Late Postclassic period (Ringle et al. 1998; Folan et al. 2016). The Golondrinas serpent most resembles a carving of a serpent in the ritual cliff of Tzibana in the Lacandon territory at Lake Mensabak, Chiapas, called "quetzal-feathered serpent" or Gugumatz in Kaqchikel, or Quetzalcoatl in Aztec Nahuatl, or K'ul'ulkan for the Yucatan Maya (Figure 8b) (Palka 2014, p. 217).

The Lacandon Maya's K'ul'ulkan, which they claim they have actually seen, is an immense serpent with large scales and a large feather headdress. Various of these large serpents can fly in the sky, "can fan the clouds and sky, producing thunder, wind, and rain. The Yucatec Maya also believe that large serpents roaming on the earth and flying through the air actually live in caves, ponds, and cenotes" (Palka 2014, p. 218).

Insights from ethnography amongst the Ch'orti' in southern Guatemala indicate that this could be another serpent that Girard (1962) described, "Noh Chih Chan", a great serpent that guards the water (Girard 1962, p. 95; Vail and Looper 2015, pp. 131–32). At the start of the rainy season on 22 April, a pilgrimage is made to the spring of the Conquista River where sacrificial offerings are made to the serpent to release moisture that becomes the clouds and creates rain. (Vail and Looper 2015, pp. 131–32). A famous dance is performed for the "Horned" Serpent of Chiquimula or *Noh Chic Chan* in Jocotan, Guatemala amongst the Ch'orti' (Palka 2014, p. 36; Garnica 2025).



(**a**)

(**b**)

**Figure 8.** (**a**) Plumed serpent deity from Golondrinas (Painting by Robinson); (**b**) Feathered serpent (carved into rock cliff at water's edge) at Tzibana ritual cliff at Lake Mensabak, Chiapas, Mexico (redrawn from Palka 2014, Figure 5.9).

Today Q'uqulkan (Quetzalcoatl or the Feathered serpent) is memorialized at the Kaqchikel town of Santiago Sacatepequez; a western guardian site is named Q'uqulkan. As described by Maxwell and Garcia Ixmatá (2008) "The guardian arises not from a cliff or mountain face, but from a streambed. . . Elders report having seen the feather serpent arise amid a shower of golden light from the streambed in days when the stream ran clear." (Maxwell and Garcia Ixmatá 2008). The streambed has two ritual sites tied to the seasonal rise and fall of the water of the stream: one is at the foot of the rock face situated just above the high water during the rainy season; the other is just upstream, where water falls and is turbulent. "Daykeepers note that previously they were able to commune with the ancestral spirits here, the communication facilitated by the feather serpent daemon." (Maxwell and Garcia Ixmatá 2008). This example indicates that the feathered serpent was an interlocutor, a facilitator of communication of religious specialists and the forefathers in the spirit world.

Another example of a Postclassic period-age serpent known in the Maya area is the Chicchan serpent shown in the Madrid Codex pp. 12–18. (Vail and Halpern 2018, http: www.mayacodices.org accessed on 11 June 2025) (Figure 9). In this codex, it is undulating across the pages and associated with rain throughout. The rattles represent the Pleiades and Venus (Milbrath 1999, p. 261).

In the Golondrinas case, the painted serpent located on the physical base of the Agua Volcano may also define a "serpent mountain", or *Coatepec*, one of the important elements of Tollan, the birthplace of the Aztec nation. Golondrinas may have been interpreted as a "Coatepec" equivalent, a potential "birthplace" of the Kaqchikel Maya as they established their presence in this sacred landscape.

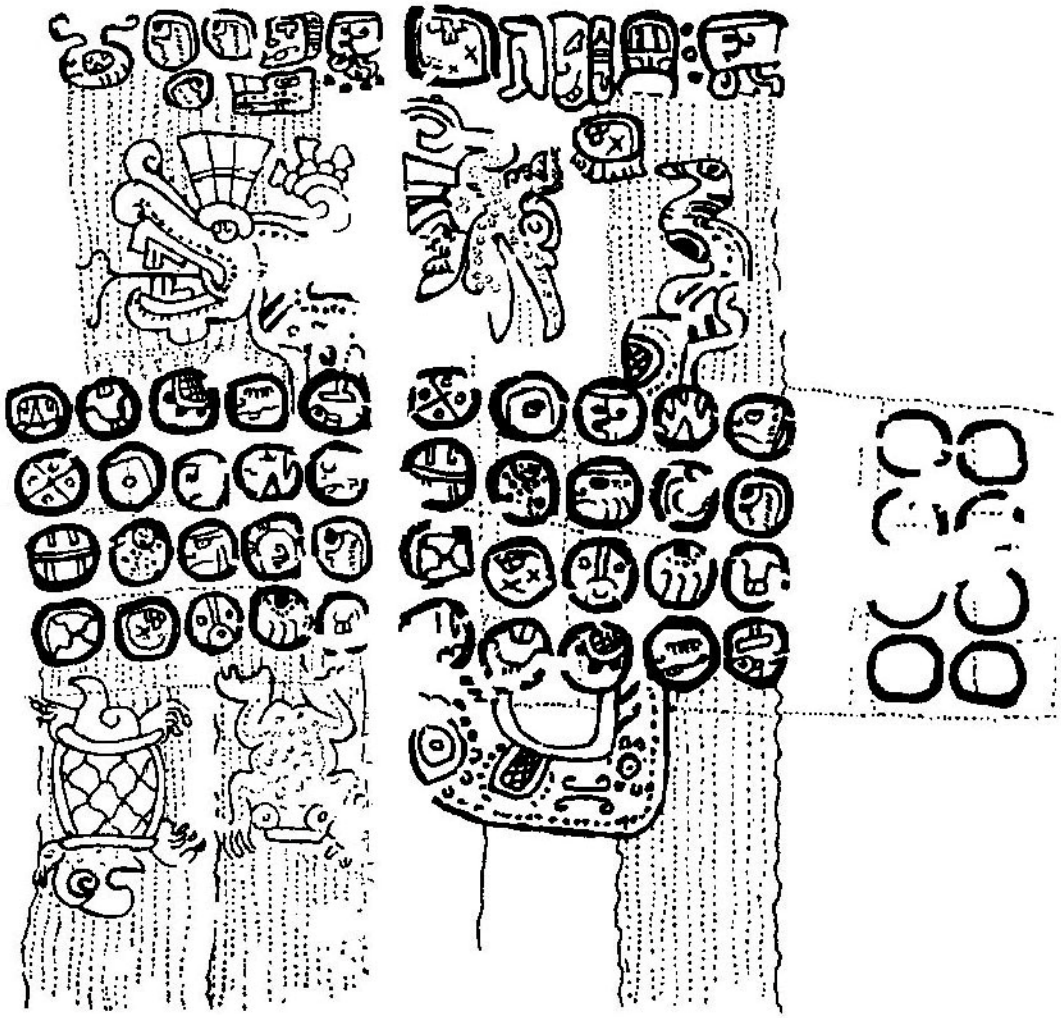


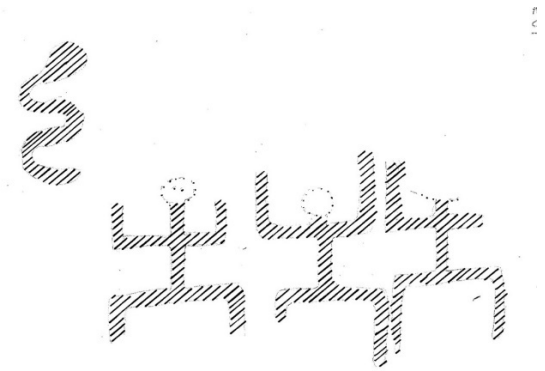
**Figure 9.** The Chicchan Serpent in the Madrid Codex pp. 12–18 Frame 7 Available online: http://www.mayacodices.org (accessed on 11 June 2025).

The basic story around the "Coatepec" concept is that Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec God of war, while leading his migrating people, was upset that his travelers wanted to stop at "serpent hill," a green mountain, encircled by water and reeds at its base. In the Aztec codices "serpent hill" is illustrated with a mountain and a serpent head and neck, or a complete reptile (see Schele and Kappelman 2003, Figures 2.3 and 2.5). Schele and Kappelman (2003) note that the happenings at serpent hill encompassed two primary directives: a divine mandate for acts of war and sacrifice and a model for the organization of sacred space that included the Snake Mountain, a ballcourt, and a place of sacrifice.

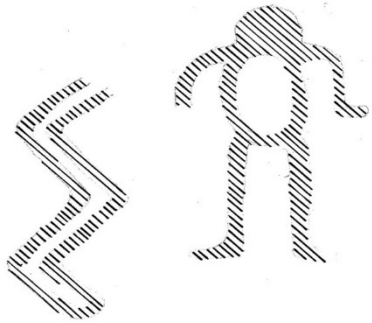
Golondrinas, in addition to fitting the description of a coatepec—a "home" location for the Mexica, was adopted by the Kaqchikel as a place for ritual activities in this Mexicanized time period.

#### 9.1.3. Serpent–Person Interaction

An involvement of humans with serpents is documented at Golondrinas (Figure 10a,b). Human figures, in active and inactive poses, are shown with them. Dances with serpents are documented in the Quiche' area from Santa Cruz del Quiche' (Hernández and Patricia 2022). This dance and its long period of preparation, including gathering the serpents, is an annual celebration of their patron Saint Elena de la Cruz from the 16–19th of August. In this case, the original reason for the dance has been lost to time, but it does occur during the rainy season.



(**a**)



(**b**)

**Figure 10.** (**a**) three figures with serpent, Area E; (**b**) one figure with serpent, Area A (base drawings Marlen Garnica).

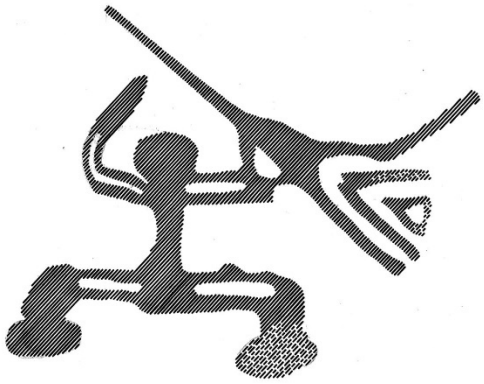
9.1.4. Portals

Portals can be cracks in a stone wall. In Area E there is a small rock with an opening and there is an individual with a spear—possibly a spiritual "hunter" guardian who has transitioned from the rock. It could be Junajpu (Figure 11a,b). It is a unique example of a figure in an "X-ray style." In Area A is another monumental painting of animals below a crack in a rock that today disgorges water. (see the section on Creation for a description).



(**a**)

**Figure 11.** *Cont.*



(**b**)

**Figure 11.** (**a**) Image of a "hunter" is next to an opening in the rocks and is emerging from or entering the Agua Volcano. (**b**) "Hunter" (Base drawing by Robinson).

## 10. A Solar Calendar at Golondrinas

### *10.1. A Sun Calendar in the Highlands*

Area C is on the eastern side of Golondrinas. This side is distinguished by having an "observatory," a natural projection of rock, 2.4 m tall, that has been modified (Figure 12). The upper area of the projection has been reduced, and a 4-inch wide "eye" or sight has been biconically drilled through the rock. Below the "eye" is a smoothed area that is a cupule for water.

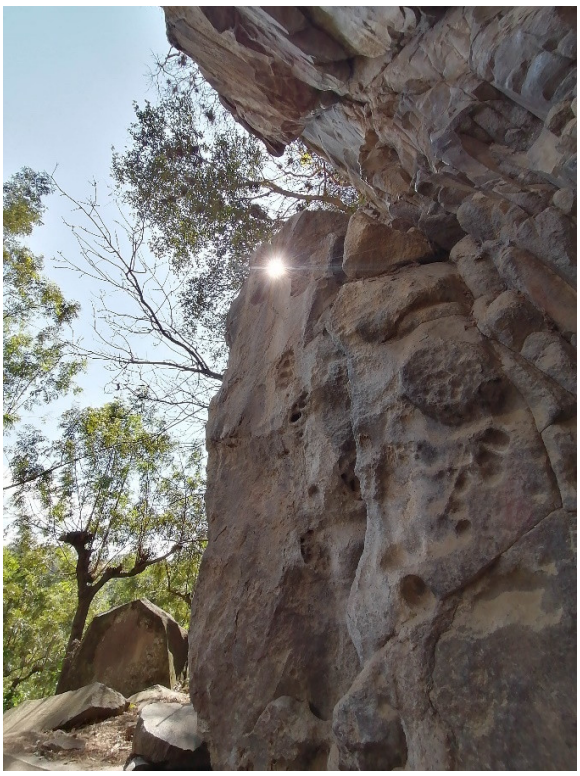


**Figure 12.** The stone observatory with sunlight from the east illuminating the 4-inch biconical hole. (Photograph by Puc).

To the west side of the observatory is a long panel which has paintings in an area 9.5 m wide by 4 m high (Figure 13). Most of the large paintings at this location are "suns", circles or concentric circles with rays—these are labeled C4, C5, and C10. One figure, C8,

is a bird—the head and wing are visible—that possibly represents a sky-oriented avian and may be a mythological bird near the sun, as it is located high on the wall in line with the other "sun" images. We identify this bird as 7 Macaw of the Popul Vuh. This was a monstrous bird with brilliant eyes who pretended to be the sun and was ultimately shot and defeated by Junajpu.

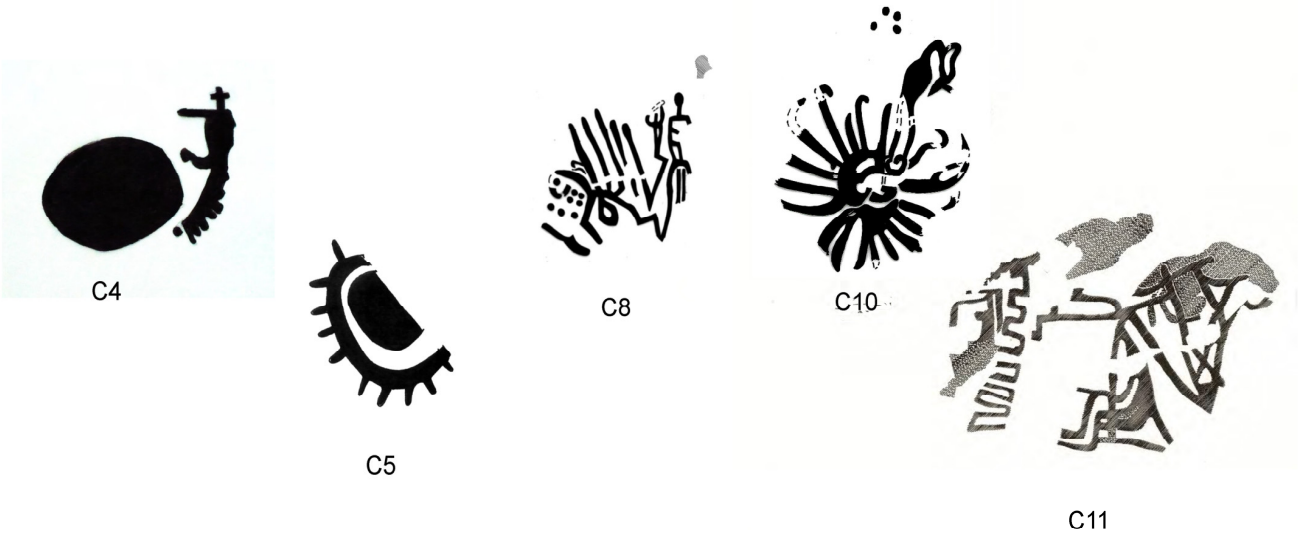



**Figure 13.** Images on Wall C.

Our current interpretation of two of these "suns" (Figure 13, elements C4, C5, and C10) is that they were painted here because they mark the play of sunlight along the wall at Golondrinas in the morning. Puc Rucal and Robinson (2024) note that

> "Haremos un análisis de las pinturas rupestres de la Casa de las Golondrinas, en donde se encuentran plasmadas distintas escenas relacionadas al movimiento del sol desde la visión del pueblo maya Kaqchikel."
>
> "Los solsticios y equinocios, representan un cambio y comienzo, para los pueblos originarios, por lo que son recibidos con celebraciones por medio de ofrendas y ceremonias".
>
> "Estos acontecimientos también están vinculados a la conexión con nuestros ancestros, nuestras cosechas y la forma en que nos conectamos con la tierra. Este conocimiento que permanece en el imaginario colectivo Maya Kaqchikel, se da por medio de la tradición oral y la observación, este es un legado ancestral que se transmite y practica de generación en generación."
>
> "Una de las prácticas y conocimientos, relacionadas a la observación del sol, se da cuando el sol sale del lado este, que es para nosotros en donde nace el sol, por lo que nuestros abuelos con mucha reverencia y respeto lo saludan con la frase en idioma Kaqchikel "Loq'olej q'il, "El Gran Senor Sol"' y que en el calendario actual se da el 21 de marzo. Lo que representa un día y una noche larga." Puc Rucal and Robinson (2024)
>
> English Translation
>
> "We will analyze the rock art of La Casa de las Golondrinas, from the Kaqchikel perspective where different scenes related to the movement of the sun are depicted."
>
> "The solstices and equinoxes represent a change and a beginning for indigenous people and are welcomed with celebrations of offerings and ceremonies."

> "These events are linked to the connection with our ancestors, our harvests and is the form in which we connect with the earth. This knowledge which remains in the Kaqchikel Maya collective imagination, is passed down through oral tradition and observation, it is an ancient legacy that is transmitted and practiced from generation to generation."
>
> "One of the practices and knowledge related to the observation of the sun is that when the sun rises in the east, which for us is where the sun is born, because our grandfathers with much respect and reverence greet it with the phrase in the Kaqchikel language *"Loq'olej q'ij"*, the great sun", and that in the actual calendar it is the 21st of March, that represents an equal day and night." (English translation by E. Robinson 19 May 2025)

Recent observations by Paulino Puc have found that two paintings in Area C mark the position of sunlight on the 21 March equinox and on the winter solstice 21 December. During the 21 March equinox, the sun light goes through the hole in the "observatory" and falls on painting C4. On 21 December the sunlight passes over C4 and C5 between 9 and 10 a.m. in the morning. In another western area of the site, the sun falls on a panel by water on 21 June, the summer solstice.

For the Kaqchikel people these dates are seasonally important. For the Kaqchikel Maya the 21 March equinox marks the beginning of winter (the rainy season) (Puc Rucal and Robinson 2024). This time is also the time for the second planting of maize; one oral version of the calendar states that planting should take place between 27 March and 27 April. This time period in the oral tradition is also marked by the passing of the Azacuans (birds) that bring the water and announce that the winter has arrived (Puc Rucal 2017, p. 62). As Puc wrote,

> "De acuerdo a las enseñanzas de nuestros ancestors los mayas, de nuestros tatarabuelos, bisabuelos y abuelos es que a finales del mes de marzo y a mediados del mes de abril, cuando pasan las aves llamados Azacuanes en el cielo formando una cruz, esto para los mayas kaqchikeles es de mucho respecto. Por esa razón se nos ha inculcado tener respeto a estas aves, porque se consideran sagradas. Estas aves anuncian la llegada del invierno. Se enseña desde la niñez, que ellos vienen del lado este donde nace nuestro astro rey, en idioma maya kaqchikel *Ri Rokoley Kij*—nuestro gran sol—y podemos decir es cuando nace el invierno, y es un signo o código que nos indica la llegada o inicio del invierno y nace la lluvia."
>
> "Y cuando las aves llamadas Azacunes vienen del lado oeste, donde muere nuestro rey, en idioma maya kaqchikel *Ri Rokóley Kij*—nuestro gran sol—, es un signo o código que nos indica la muerte del invierno, es el anuncio que la lluvia está terminando y anuncia la llegada del verano." (Puc Rucal 2017, p. 62).
>
> English Translation
>
> "According to the teaching of our ancestors the Mayas, from our great-great grandfathers, great grandfathers, and grandfathers is that at the end of the month of March and until the middle of the month of April, when the birds called the Azacuanes pass in the sky forming a cross, this for the Mayas Kaqchikeles is greatly respected. For this reason we are taught to have respect for these birds, because they are considered sacred. These birds announce the arrival of the rainy season. By training since a child, when they come from the east side where our sun lord is born, in the Maya Kaqchikel idiom *Ri Rokoley Kij*—our great sun—we can say that is when the winter is born, and it is a sign or message that indicates to us the arrival or beginning of the winter and the rain is born."

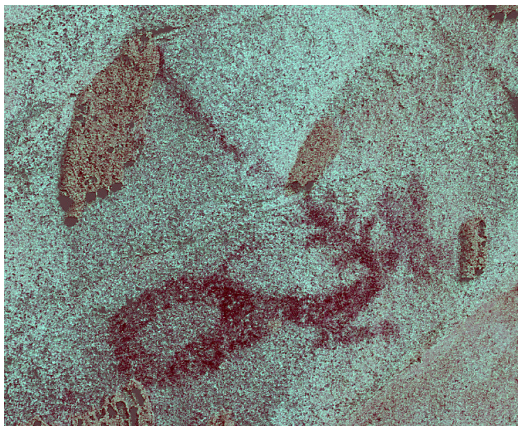
> "And when the birds called the Azacunes come the from the west side, where our king dies in the Kaqchikel idioma *Ri Rokoley Kij*—our great sun—it is a sign or a message that shows us the death of the rainy season, it is the announcement that the rain is stopping and announces the arrival of summer." (Translation by Robinson 27 May 2025)

### *10.2. Ceremonies of Hunting/Sacrifice and Seasonal Animals*

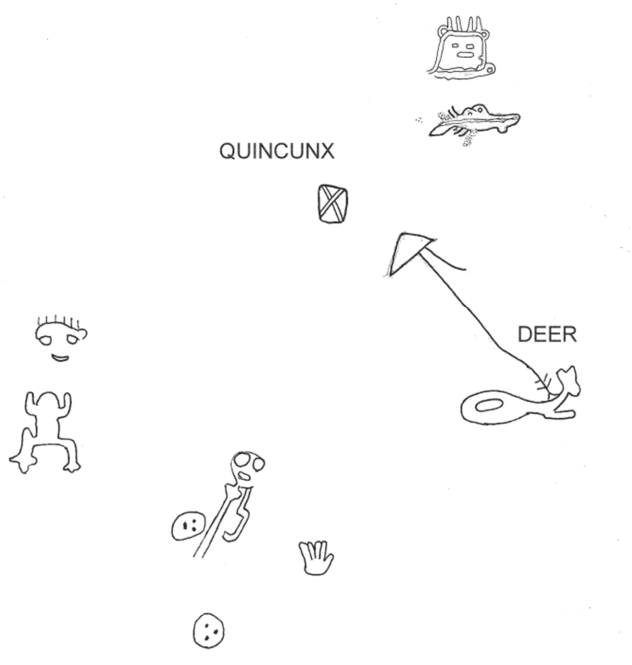
Paintings of ceremonies of hunting or sacrifice—the two might be related—in which the seeking out of the animal and ultimately the collecting of its blood are depicted exist in two locations in Area A and Area E and seem to show the piercing of animals with a spear, suggesting their blood was gathered as an offering rather than depicting a shot during a hunt where the hunter would focus on the chest area to kill the animal.

The first figure is a deer and is located above the "Observatory" (Figure 14a,b).

The image (Figure 14a) shows a recumbent deer with its head up with a spear?, shown as a stick with fletching, touching the animal on its upper neck near the head.



(**a**)




(**b**)

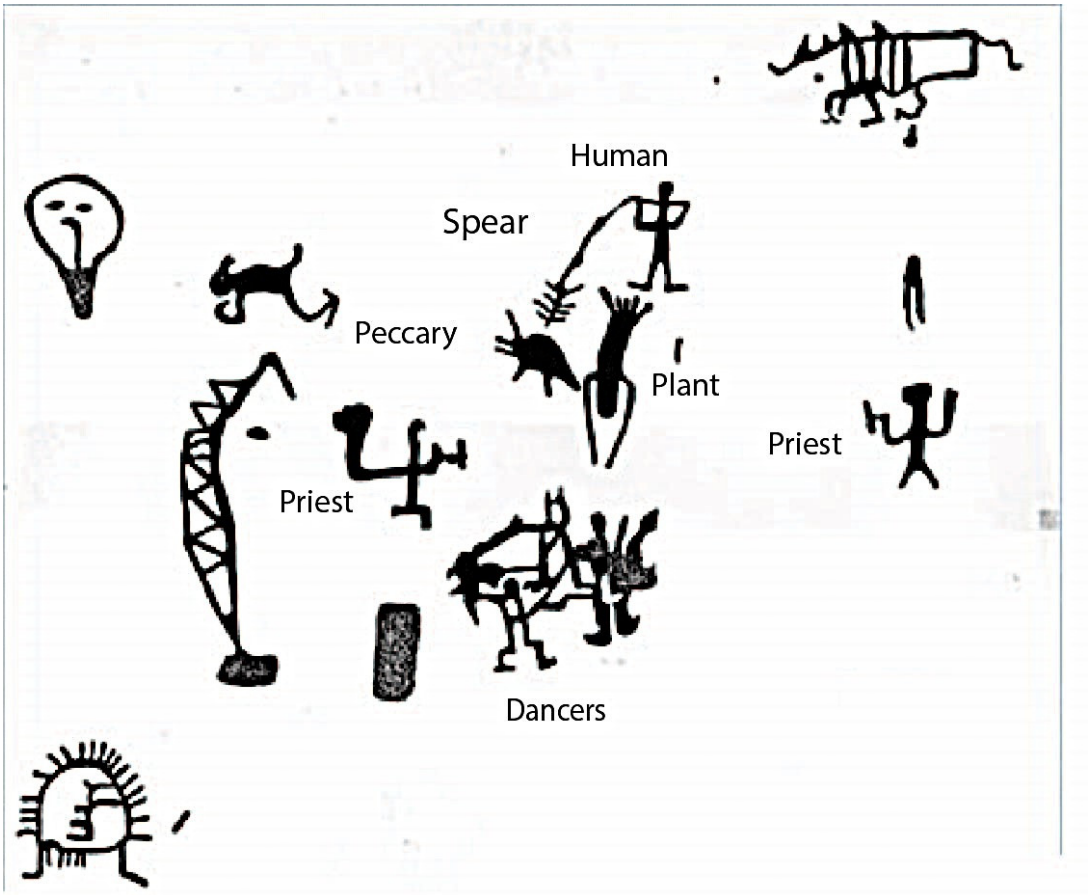
**Figure 14.** (**a**) Photograph of deer being pierced by a spear shown with fletching from Area A. (Gene Ware). (**b**) Drawing of images above Area A (base drawing Marlen Garnica).

The deer in Maya iconography is symbolic of a "father" that dies, but it is also the animal that is hunted during the dry season (Looper 2019), and it is expressly connected to the vernal equinox. Looper discusses the deer and its relationship to the dying sun, i.e., the sun that descends to the west during the rainy season and into darkness. Of interest here is its relationship to seasonality; amongst the Ch'orti' deer hunts are between February and April and span the time of the vernal equinox (Looper 2019). The Huichol believe that sprinkling of the blood of the deer over corn seeds will sanctify them before planting (Lumholtz 1900). In a passage of the Popul Vuh related to an offering made to three Gods of the Q'uiche, Tohil, Auilix, and Hacavitz, the blood of a female deer and female birds was sought and offered to the Gods as a drink. However, the painted version on the wall at Golondrinas seems to be showing bloodletting, perhaps at the start of the vernal equinox, as part of a ritual for the initiation of planting.

Another element of this motif cluster is the quincunx—a rectangle with four points with diagonal lines crossing at the central axis. As Maxwell and Garcia Ixmatá (2008) explain, this image establishes the four corners of the terrestrial plane and its center during the invocation to a ceremony and represents Q'anil, a new beginning (Figure 14b).

In a small alcove, many meters above the ground surface in Area E, another image is the stabbing by a human of a round bodied animal that appears to be a peccary (Figure 15). The overall profile of the animal represents the form of the body well—the only hesitation about this identification is the large size of the tail—peccaries have discrete tails. To the right of the peccary is an image we have interpreted as a plant showing roots and a floral top.

Looper (2019) identifies the peccary as a rainy season animal. It is often paired in Maya art with the deer; the two animals shown together in Maya art together represent two major seasons of the year—the dry season and the wet season. Interestingly, figures in a circle accompany this image, suggesting that a celebration went on at the same time. Examination of a panel from the lowland site of Naranjo shows a deer sacrifice with glyphs for "priests." (Tokovinine and Fialko 2019). Robinson suggests there are two human figures—possible "Priests"—that frame the scene, brandishing ritual "tools" used in ceremony.




(**a**)



(**b**)

**Figure 15.** (**a**) Peccary Sacrifice, Dance and "Priests": drawing of the figures on a wall with individuals identified (Base drawing by Paulino Puc). (**b**) Photograph of a painting of a priest figure on the right of the mural in Figure 15a.

## 11. Paintings with Connections to the Popul Vuh

To understand the mythology and cosmovision of the Maya, we, like many other Maya scholars, turn to the Popul Vuh, a K'iche written history and religious book. Christianity was established in Guatemala in 1534, and Spanish clergy regarded indigenous books and literature as idolatry; to facilitate conversion they burned these codices and manuscripts. The Popul Vuh was probably compiled between 1554 and 1558 by the indigenous nobility to conserve important mythology and history in a written form—a modified Latin script.

They kept it hidden from the Christian friars, and the Popul Vuh moved through several hands over the centuries; it is now housed in the Newberry Library in Chicago, Illinois. This book was probably "based to one degree or another on mythic and historical details outlined in a Pre-columbian codex with their associated painted illustrations." (Christenson 2007, p. 35). The Popul Vuh—"The book of Counsel"—has been translated many times (Edmonson 1971; Christenson 2007; Tedlock 1996; Recinos 1950).

The Popul Vuh has three parts: the indigenous myths of creation; the exploits and trials of the hero twins, Junajpu and Xbalanque, and an historical account of the K'iche' people. So far we have found concordances with the rock art at Golondrinas with the first two sections—creation and the hero twins. As Chinchilla (2017) notes, true correspondences between the Popul Vuh text and Maya art can only be expected when there is text with an image—so far we have found no identifying painted texts at Golondrinas. However, we have found paintings of deities known from Aztec iconography. Otherwise, we are interpreting images and image clusters with their probable concordance with mythological events such as creation and Gods as described in the Popul Vuh, which—because of the Kaqchikels' late separation from the Kiche—corresponds most closely with Kaqchikel belief systems.

### *11.1. The Hero Twins*

The hero twins were painted on a wall of Area A and are located 30 m to the west of the Observatory and 6.1 m to 6.4 m above the ground surface (Figure 16). Puc thinks that the figure with a crown is Junajpu, the more important of the two twins. There are lines emanating from their heads—they could be cords used to connect figures from a lower realm to an upper realm in the sky, as seen in the Madrid Codex p. 19 (see Figure 17 for comparisons) (Gabrielle Vail personal communication 2024; Vail and Looper 2015).

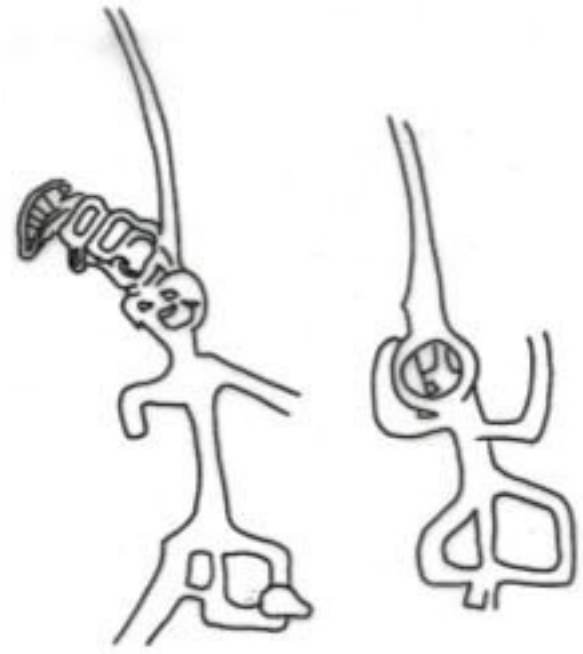


**Figure 16.** The Hero Twins, Area A. (Redrawn by Robinson of an original by Puc).

The hero twins are famous for their defeat of 7 Macaw, a monstrous bird who wore finery and jewelry and, with his bright "sun" eyes, considered himself to be the sun—but the world was only dimly lit by him (see illustration of 7 Macaw, Figure 13, C8). The hero twins considered him to be too prideful and Junajpu shot him with a blowgun and hit him

in the jaw, dislocating it and hurting his teeth. Eventually his teeth were replaced by corn and his eyes taken out. He was defeated by Junajpu and Xbalanque.

The story of the Popul Vuh goes on to explain the exploits of the family of Junajpu and Xbalanque. These young twin brothers, who are ball players, are invited to go to the underworld to play ball with the Lords there. After many trials, deceptions, and tricks, they defeat these lords. They then leave the underworld victorious, having defeated the Lords of Xibalba, and ascend to become the sun and the moon.

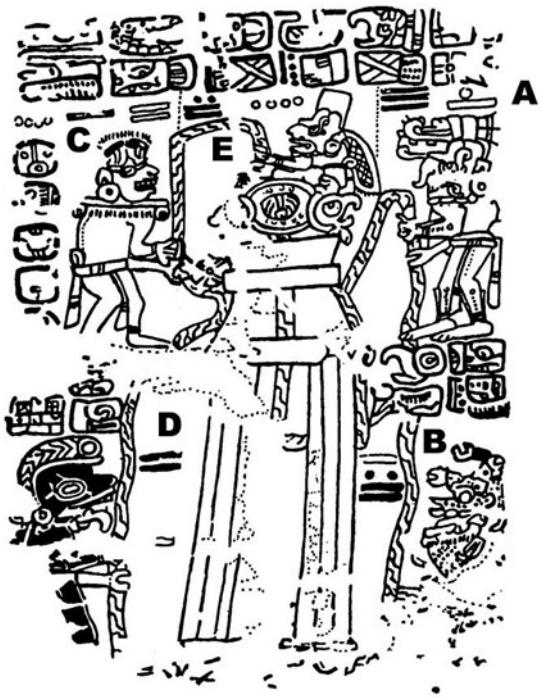



**Figure 17.** Madrid Codex, p. 19. This drawing shows the connection of cords to reach the god Itzamna atop a construction. Available online: http://mayacodices.org/ (accessed 5 August 2025).

*11.2. Junajpu, the Principal God Ajpu'*

Paulino Puc identifies the image (Figure 18) as a *nawal* that refers to the personage of the Popul Vuh, Junajpu, the twin of Xib'lamke', who conquered the lords of Xibalbá. These twin lords are considered to be the first grandparents. The identification of Junajpu is recognized by the fact the Junajpu used the blowgun, and the name is a combination of he (aj) and hunting and shooting (pub), or when combined, ahjub' (Zapil Chivir 2007, p. 65). Therefore, this name symbolically refers to the characteristics of a shooter with precision and tact, as well as clarity, life, and strength. It is symbolized by the combination of the sun and a human being—due to the derivation of the given name for the first humans who were connected to the deities.

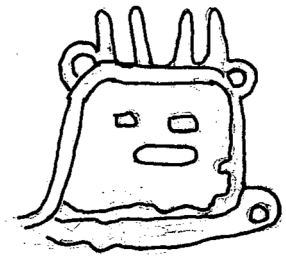


**Figure 18.** Junajpu Area C, Golondrinas (drawing by Robinson).

*11.3. Creation According to the Popul Vuh*

The creation of the world was by Gugumatz with Xmucane, Xpiyacoc, and Heart of Sky. The world at its inception was still and quiet. In the words of the Popul Vuh,

> "There is not yet one person, one animal, bird, fish, crab, tree, rock, hollow, canyon, meadow, or forest. All alone the sky exists. The face of the earth has not yet appeared. Alone lies the expanse of the sea, along with the womb of all the sky. There is not yet anything gathered together. All is at rest. Nothing stirs. All is languid, at rest in the sky. There is not yet anything standing erect. Only the expanse of the water, only the tranquil sea lies alone. There is not yet anything that might exist. All lies placid and silent in the darkness, in the night."

> "All alone are the Framer and the Shaper, Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent, They Who Have Borne Children and They Who Have Begotten Sons. Luminous they are in the water, wrapped in quetzal feathers and cotinga feathers. Thus they are called Quetzal Serpent. In their essence, they are great sages, great possessors of knowledge. Thus surely there is the sky. There is also Heart of Sky, which is said to be the name of the God". (Christenson 2007, pp. 67–69)

Two of the world's levels are described: the world's lower level (water) and the upper level (sky) are defined. Later the earth was formed.

> "Then they called forth the mountains from the water. Straightaway the great mountains came to be. It was merely their spirit essence, their miraculous power, that brought about the conception of the mountains and the valleys. Straightaway were created cypress groves and pine forests to cover the face of the earth." (Christenson 2007, pp. 71–72).

Zipcana, a giant crocodile was also engaged in forming the mountains—he formed them when he raised his back and the projections there became the mountains.

> "Then they conceived the animals of the mountains, the guardians of the forest, and all that populate the mountains—the deer and the birds, the puma and the jaguar, the serpent and the rattlesnake, the pit viper and the guardian of the bushes." (Christenson 2007, p. 74).

This red painting in Area A, 1.7 m tall, is of animals descending (could also be ascending) and is located below a crack in the wall where water seeps out from the mountain itself today (Figure 19a). A close look at the paintings within this cluster (Figure 19b) reveals that there is one frog, two fish, one squirrel, one animal with a bushy tail, one crab, one alligator or lizard, and one long necked bird. There are two figures that are unknown, although they could be tree frogs or mice. The animal with the bushy tail has a face within its chest area. None of the fauna or birds have enough detail to be identified to their genus or species. (Carr and Robinson 2004).

The creators in a section of the Popul Vuh, "She Who Has Borne Children and He Who Has Begotten Sons" want guardians for the animals and homes for them and they said,

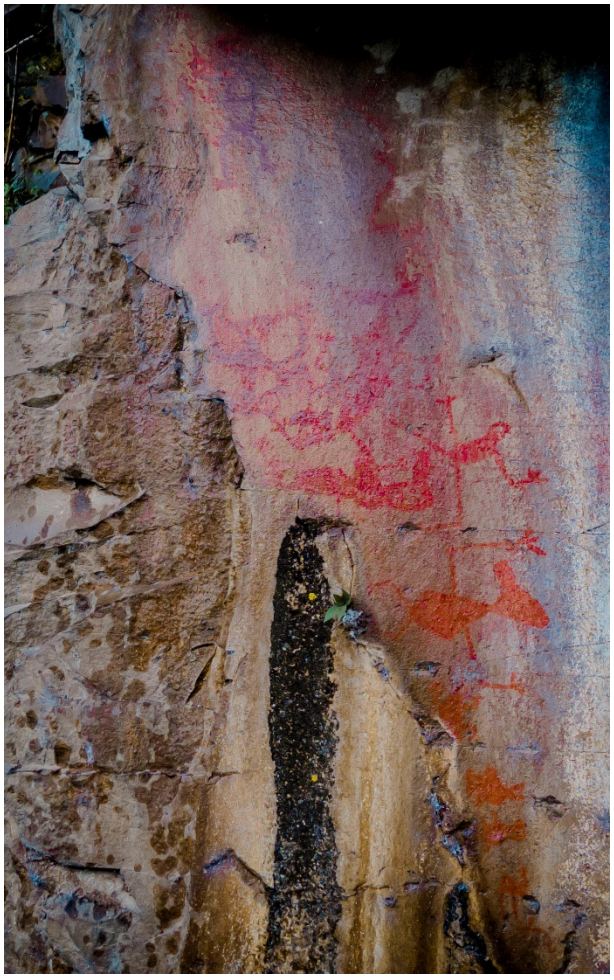
> "You deer, will sleep along the courses of rivers and the canyons, Here you will be in the meadows and in the orchards. In the forests you shall multiply. You will walk on all fours, and thus you will be able to stand, they were told. . .. You, birds, you will make your homes and your houses in the tops of trees in the tops of bushes. There you will multiply and increase in numbers in the branches of the trees and the bushes. . .. Thus all was completed for the deer and the birds." (Christenson 2007, pp. 74–75).

These creations did not turn out well because they could not speak. From the Popul Vuh we learn that "they just squawked, they just chattered, they just howled. It wasn't

apparent what language they spoke; each one gave a different cry" (Tedlock 1985, p. 78). Thus the animals were demoted and they were eaten.

Following the creation of the animals and their failure to please the lords, there were other attempts to create creatures that could communicate and worship the gods. The next attempt was the creation of mud people, but they were unsuccessful because they fell apart and they did not sustain their makers. Another attempt was to make effigies of carved wood, but these were failures also and they were crushed and destroyed. Finally, humans made of corn were successful and were able to speak and make sacrifices to the lords.

In another section of the Popul Vuh, there is the recounting of the transformation of the twin brothers, One Batz and One Chouen, the older brothers of the Hero Twins (Junajpu and Xbalanque) into spider monkeys. The older twins dwelt with their grandmother and were accomplished people until the hero twins defeated their older brothers by tricking them into climbing a tree that they could not descend, and they became animals. They transformed into spider monkeys, identified by their long curly tails, and became the patrons of singers, musicians, and artisans.



(**a**)

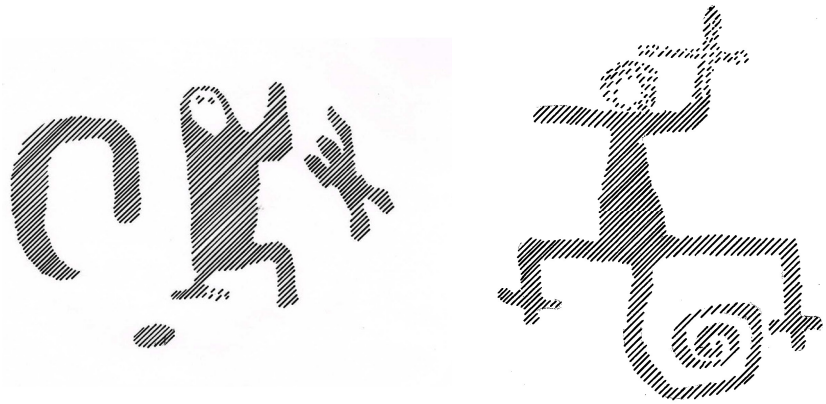
**Figure 19.** *Cont.*



(**b**)

**Figure 19.** Animals, Area A: (**a**) "Animals" (photograph by Robinson). (**b**) "Animals" (Base drawing by Robinson).

Monkey paintings are found near the western entrance of Golondrinas and in motif clusters in Areas A and E (Figure 20a,b). Placement of these monkey paintings on walls near the entrance of the site could indicate that musicians and artisans were nearby and represent the creative location for the arts at the Golondrinas site. From the Popul Vuh "it is said that the spider monkeys that are in the forest today are descendants of these people. This was their heritage because their flesh was merely wood when it was created by the Framer and the Shaper. Therefore the spider monkeys appear like people, descendants of one generation of framed and shaped people. But they were only effigies carved of wood". (Christenson 2007, p. 9)



(**a**) (**b**)

**Figure 20.** (**a**) Monkey painting, Area A; (**b**) Monkey painting Area E. (drawings by Robinson).

## 12. Discussion

To our knowledge, there is nobody alive who can tell us the meaning of all the images painted on the rock walls of Golondrinas. From a minimalist perspective, a rock art site like Golondrinas could be viewed as simply a large expanse of exposed rock on which many individuals over time left images having little meaning for us today of more than the personal expressions of the individuals themselves. To explore the possibility of deeper meaning at the site, we have turned to the limited but significant set of ethnographic and ethnohistoric sources that reflect the past and continuing cultural context of the Kaqchikel Maya and other Maya and Meso-American areas.

This exploration has revealed what we believe to be important and plausible dimensions of the site and the imagery found there. Of overarching importance is the recognition that the Golondrinas site itself has powerful attributes that are associated with recognized sacred sites in the Kaqchikel area and beyond. These attributes include mountains—examples are the Golondrinas itself and other sites in the Kaqchikel area, including Xek'owil. The combination of mountains and bodies of water is especially powerful, not only in the Kakchikel area but in other Meso-American sites, including the concept of the ideal settlement (the Coatepec) that underlies the Mexican site of Tenochtitlan and the present day beliefs of the Q'eqchi who inhabit the "mountain-valley" and the Lacandon who live near a large lake territory that they consider to be a living entity. Elsewhere in the Kakchikel area and other Maya and Meso-American areas, specific large areas of exposed rock and caves are sacred, and in many places these are sites for ongoing ritual practice, such as at Q'umarkaj, the Postclassic capital of the Q'iche, and Iximché Jul, a small cave at Iximche, believed to connect to Q'umarkaj.

Golondrinas itself lies in the midst of three major mountains, one of which—the dormant volcano "Agua"—is identified by Kaqchikel tradition and legend as associated with the supernatural hero Junajpu, while the other two—especially "Fuego"—are active volcanoes that bring fire from the underworld to the surface. Golondrinas also overlooks a still-present body of water—the Guacalate River—which itself is fed by springs from the Agua volcano and is located near what was formerly a substantial lake and source of food and water. The imposing rock wall itself, almost 600 m long, fits the parameters of places where the Kaqchikel believe that spirits reside and where communication with those spirits and with ancestors is possible with appropriate rituals. This dimension of the site was affirmed in the visit by a currently practicing celebrant—a "Daykeeper"—of the Maya religion, who found Golondrinas to be a powerful place and performed a ceremony there.

This perspective—that Golondrinas has been a sacred site, not just an exposed rock wall—then leads to the further application of the available ethnographic and ethnohistoric information to some of the images found at the site. This ethnographic information is especially strong in several areas: the mythology and cosmology of the past, through the Popul Vuh, as well as past and continuing concepts of time and natural cycles held by the Kaqchikel. Archaeologically established information regarding the shared set of beliefs and symbols that pervaded multiple Meso-American cultures, including the Kaqchikel, in the Late Post-Classic period provide additional ethnohistoric context. These include the imagery of the Xiuhcoatl—the Fire-Serpent—clearly represented at Golondrinas, and of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, which is widely seen across Meso-America and potentially found in fragmentary form at Golondrinas. Belief in these supernatural serpents as primal forces is connected with the importance of serpents in Maya and wider Meso-American belief, with rituals involving serpents or serpent representations still practiced in some traditional areas. We find this practice to be plausibly represented in several sets of imagery at the site. The Popul Vuh's mythologic information is the basis for our identification of the likely representations of key images—the principal God Ajpu', the Hero Twins, and the creation of animals.

The finding of a calendrical feature within Golondrinas and the documentation of the connection of the equinox and later solstices with sun images painted on the rock wall expand our potential understanding of other images at the site. The Maya did not see time as a flat line in which important events happen without predictability. They were deeply concerned with understanding the cyclical nature of time and of the key natural elements that were required to sustain life—especially of the seasons and the coming of rain. These cycles were not simply to be observed but also required sustainment through ritual practice, including sacrifice. We find these practices to be plausibly represented as sacrifice of deer—an animal associated with the dry season and specifically with the vernal equinox—and of a peccary, which is associated with the rainy season. This image content related to seasonality and ritual adds to the suggestion that Golondrinas was not a collection of random images, but a place where important spiritual requirements of Maya life were brought to connect them with the greater powers that the site represents. As Palka (2014) notes, the act of producing an image in a sacred site is itself an act of communication, connecting the image with the supernatural forces that hold power over human life.

In reality, we will never have a way to validate these interpretations beyond the frameworks provided by the ethnographic and ethnohistoric sources, the archaeological record and findings at the site, and the current belief system of the present descendants of the Kaqchikel Maya. However, these sources have taken us beyond the thinking that Golondrinas and its spiritual imagery cannot be understood. The application of these sources has opened a new way of seeing and interpreting the Golondrinas site, and we believe this approach to be worthy of further research and analysis.

**Author Contributions:** Investigation, L.P.P.R.; Resources, L.P.P.R.; Data curation, L.P.P.R.; Writing–original draft, E.J.R. and L.P.P.R.; Writing–review & editing, E.J.R.; Funding acquisition, E.J.R. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author. Chronological Data presented in Table 1 is available at (Robinson et al. 2007).

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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