

REPTILIAN SYMBOLISM AND COSMOLOGY IN ANCIENT MESOAMERICA

Andrew Turner • University of California, Riverside
Wednesday, October 26, 2011 • 7:30PM • Free Admission

Ancient Mesoamerican peoples relied on close observation of the natural world and its inhabitants in order to understand the workings of the cosmos. For cultures such as the Olmec, Maya, and Aztec, the world was often understood through a series of rich metaphors involving reptiles. The earth could be viewed as a massive crocodile, turtle, or iguana, and maize, a staple of Mesoamerican diets, was frequently imbued with reptilian attributes. Occasionally symbolism converged, casting the life-sustaining World Tree at the center of the cosmos as a reptile that sprouts maize from its tail. These metaphors can be understood through observation of the characteristics and behaviors of reptiles.



This presentation investigates artwork spanning three millennia in Mexico and Central America, and explores the metaphorical underpinnings of depictions of reptiles in Mesoamerican religion and cosmology.

Andrew Turner received B.A. degrees in Art History and Classics from the University of Arizona in 2008, and a Master's in Anthropology from UC Riverside in 2009. His research interests include the art, symbolism, and religion of ancient Mesoamerica, the Andes, and the American Southwest, and he has traveled extensively to archaeological sites and collections in Mexico and Peru. Andrew has given several public presentations on Mesoamerican and Andean archaeology, and has worked as a curatorial intern at the Tucson Museum of Art and LACMA. He is currently a doctoral student at UC Riverside working on a dissertation in Anthropology on ancient Central Mexican art and writing systems, as well as a Master's thesis in Art History on ceramic arts in ancient Peru.