

DATURA AND THE VISION:

Barbara Kerr 10/1/07



The Datura plant grows as a woody, leafy stalk with spiny seed pods and large white or purple trumpet shaped flowers facing upward. Containing the drugs scopolamine, atropine & hyoscyamine, all parts of the plant are poisonous and are known to produce visions, hallucinations, delirious states and acute psychosis.

It is known by many names, a few of which are Jimson Weed, Devil's Apple, Stinkweed (although it is supposed to be quite pleasantly fragrant), Devil's weed and Toalach. z (Toloach is used in and is also the name of the "coming-of-age" ceremony practiced in the Southwest). The plant grows everywhere in the Southwest, Central and South America.

My interest is in the meaning of the iconographic details that Maya artists imbedded in their depictions. An oft repeated element is the floral characteristics of the head ornament found on the commonly named "Vision Serpent". Linda Schele called them "feather and blood fans" (Page 187/188 in "Blood of Kings"). I differ with her in that I identify them as the flowers of the Datura plant.

An excellent example is Lintel 25, K 2888 (www.mayavase.com, click on Precolumbian Portfolio). The Vision Serpent rises upward; a figure wearing a war helmet and commonly assumed to be an ancestor is emerging from his open mouth. This figure is brandishing an arrow-tipped staff. Lady Xoc kneels below him and is holding a bowl with blood-stained strips of paper, fresh from her blood-letting ritual. On the floor between the tail-rattles of the upright snake and Lady Xoc, are both a war helmet adorned with the war badge and another bowl filled with bloody paper. The text informs us with a "hand holding fish" glyph that she is "bringing forth" or "manifesting". If indeed she is "bringing forth" an ancestor from the Otherworld, (the serpent mouth being the entrance to this Otherworld), the vehicle that she uses is the Datura blossom.



The detail that attracted me was the flowery element that appears three times on the serpents head --once over the supra-orbital ridge of the eye, once on his snout and again at the joint of the jaw. These details also appear at



the end of the tail in conjunction with another serpent head. With the known qualities of the Datura plant, I speculated that this might be the flower of that very plant which has the ability to bring on hallucinations and visions. It remained to find more Maya examples.



K4644 detail



Drawing Datura flower -B. Kerr



K2888 Lintel 25 Detail

Codex vases provided the examples I needed--K 4644 is the best example of the flower atop the vision serpent's head which alternates with war badges, the same theme as on the lintel. The flower also appears on K 1819, K 3229 and the unusual full-faced view on K 1351, among others. (www.mayavase.com, click on Mayavase Database).

In profile, the 5-petaled blossom with spines at the centers of each petal, gives the appearance of a crenellated crown. The ribs of the petal centers are defined by double lines and the anthers (pollen sacs) at the ends of the stamens in the center are shown as little circular pods. This convinced me that I was looking at the same flower, the Datura blossom, which grows wild, has very wide distribution and can bring forth visions given the proper recipe.

Four web sites to look at for examples of the Datura blossom:

www.erowid.org

www.angelfire.com

www.nrdc.org/onearth/04win/garden2.asp

http://alchemy-works.com/Datura_inoxia.html