9. The Tree of the World

While we live in a model of the world that vests our definitions of physical reality in science and spiritual reality in religious principles, the Maya lived in a world that defined the physical world as the material manifestation of the spiritual and the spiritual as the essence of the material. For them the world of experience manifested itself in two complementary dimensions. One dimension was the world in which they lived out their lives and the other was the abode of the gods, ancestors, and other supernatural beings...

These two planes of existence were inextricably locked together.
—L. Schele and D. Freidel, A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya, 1990

9.1 The Time of the Flower Children

The ancient or preclassical Mayan period stretches far back into the mists of antiquity, to the second millennium BC (Coe 2001). Around 50 BC, almost simultaneously with the Teotihuacan in central Mexico, the period of the Mayan city-state began, among the first city-states being Cerros and Izapa. Between the third and ninth centuries AD—the classical period—the Mayan civilization was to achieve the highest excellence in every sphere, with the development of the great city-states in what is today southwest Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras.

The classical period ended between the ninth and 10th centuries (Webster 2002), and this collapse has remained so far unexplained. It occurred suddenly and probably dramatically, to the extent that it has even been possible to trace the last date recorded in inscriptions in every single city. This is one of many examples of a collapse of a civilization that is still shrouded in mystery, even though the plethora of data available for the Mayas allows us to use mathematical techniques to attempt to simulate the phenomenon (Hamblin and Pitcher 1980, Lowe 1982). Whatever the cause, at the time of the Spanish conquest, the Mayan civilization had already vanished many years earlier, although pockets of Mayan people lived
on, scattered about in little villages. Since then, the population has suffered many hardships, but has managed nevertheless to retain its own identity and traditions.

Mayan city-states were highly complex constructs, politically speaking. They were autonomous, but linked by structured, mutual alliances, which often resulted in conflict between them (Schele and Freidel 1990). This tangle has only begun to be unraveled gradually in the last few decades, due to the deciphering of inscriptions, initially made possible by the brilliant insight of Tatiana Prouskianoff. Up to the 1950s, a rather iniquitous and dangerous archaeological mindset persisted, whereby the Mayas were seen