In 1989 Stephen Houston, I, and (working independently) Nikolai Grube, deciphered the glyph read way (at left). This is a common the short captions that accompany images of fantastic animal-like creatures and beings on numerous Late Classic vessels. In the initial study of the way glyph, we drew a connection to the widespread meaning of “animal companion,” an aspect of the human soul.

Because the classic ceramics consistently mention the animal-like beings as the way of Maya nobles (i.e., the Seibal Lord), we originally proposed that the way beings on pottery were representations of the animal souls or “co-eesences” of Maya rulers. But the true nature of the way beings has been far from openly discussed in the literature. The panoply of skeletons, bats, snakes and jaguars and all sorts on unnatural animals, reveal that something far more dark and sinister underlies the meaning of these creatures.

We have long been aware of the connection between the way concept and the wider significance of nagualism in Mesoamerica, but the interpretations of way have not gone far enough to include the more sinister ideas of witchcraft and brujería, perhaps due to the long-standing debate about whether the very presence of such ideas in Mesoamerican folktales and belief have a European origin, as some have argued.

My contention, based on specific evidence presented at the Forum, is that the way beings are representations of the animated dark forces wielded by Classic Maya sorcerers in their attempts to influence other people, and perhaps other rulers. One could think of them as spells, curses, or other sorts of enchantments wielded by brujos. These could be manifested as diseases and afflictions of the body, or perhaps as some other misfortune, but the point always seems to be their harmful affects on others. Mesoamerican folktales are replete with such beings, and many are described in published ethnographies and other sources.

The captions linking specific way beings to “lords” of named kingdoms reveal that witchcraft – and not so much shamanism in its more general and vaguely defined sense -- was an important component of Classic Maya rulership and its overarching ideology.

In present-day Itzaj Maya, waay is specifically the word for “witchcraft, sorcery;” there is no mention of animal companions or the like. In his monumental dictionary of modern Itzaj, Hofling (1997) gives the following example:

*u-waay(-il) a’ winik-ej, “the sorcery of the man”*
At present I prefer to translate way on Classic ceramics in a similar way, perhaps in the sense that the way beings are the demonic manifestation of sorcery – the spells and enchantments themselves. That is, a typical caption might read “the ‘Water Jaguar’ (Ha’ Hix) is the Demon of the Seibal Lord.” The idea of “animal companion” is valid up to a point, but it does not go far enough to explain the underlying significance of such creatures and their powers in association with certain individuals. One widely known word in Tzotzil for “animal co-essence” is vayihel, which in the neighboring Tojolab’al language can have a much more sinister meaning:

\[
\textit{wayjel} – \text{nagual, animal compañero. Se dice que el \textit{wayjel} es mandado por el brujo para enfermar a la gente.}
\]

Alfonso Villa Rojas also described a relevant set of beliefs among the Tzeltal of Oxchuc:

“The system [of magical beliefs based on the concept of the nagual] finds its justification in its efficiency as a method of social control; it makes possible the continued attachment to traditional custom, and sanctions the moral code of the group. …There is a widely held Tzeltal belief that all chiefs and elders receive the supernatural help of a nagual. In the daytime the nagual remains “in the heart” of his master, but at night he can move about alone, quite independently of the owner’s body. Through the intermediation of these supernatural beings, the elders and chiefs are able to know the thoughts and actions of their subordinates and thus mete out punishment in the shape of illness or other misfortune. To cause illness, all the witch has to do is allow his nagual to enter the victims body and eat his soul.”

William Holland (1961) working in a nearby area, was even more explicit:

“In Larraínzar, as in Oxchuc, it is commonly suspected that most curers and \textit{principales} are able to turn themselves into malevolent animals and other natural phenomenon in order to hard their enemies and send them disease.”

Villa Rojas, Alfonso

Holland, William
A Selection of Way Demons

Here is a selected list of the more prominent and interesting way, some with a particularly demonic or macabre character. Some years ago Werner Nahm and Nikolai Grube (1992) published a fairly comprehensive and useful list of way beings, and only a few more have appeared since that time.

*Ha’ Hix,* “Water jaguar,”  
(associated with “the Seibal Lord(s)”)  

*K’ahk’ Uti’ Sutz’,* “Fire is the bat’s mouth” or “Fire is the bat’s speech”  

*Sak B’aak Nah Chapahaht,* “White Bone House Centipede”
Sitz' Chamiy
“Glutton Death”

? Hix
“? Jaguar”

? Wut Chij, “? Eye Deer”

K’ahk’ We’ Chitam,
“Fire-Eating Peccary”
K’ahk’ Neh Tz’utz’, “Fire Tailed Coati(??)"

K’ahk’ Ohl May Chamiy
“Fiery Heart ? Death”

K’ahk’ Hix
“Fire Jaguar”

K’ahk’, “fire”
Lab’te’ Hix
“Evil Stick Jaguar”?