

Chasing the Maya “Big Bang Theory”

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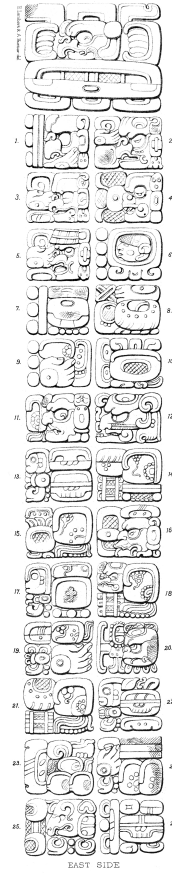
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The Maya Exploration Center graciously offered vital support for my dissertation research into ancient Maya cosmology that took me on a whirlwind six month journey through the United States, Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras to chase the ancient Maya gods through dense jungle vine, across lofty palaces and temples and down into dusty bodega archives. On this trip, I sought to catalogue a unique set of inscriptions that preserve the Ancient Maya version of their “Big Bang Theory” at the turn of the 13th Bak’tun—a cosmogenic burst of activity that took place during primordial time when germinal energies were awakened and the drama of creation unfolded.

These inscriptions speak of actions that took place on a single day, the start of the current Maya era on August 11th 3114 BC and the end of the 13th Bak’tun cycle. This inaugural era date is expressed in modern notation as 13.0.0.0.0 4 Ajaw 8 Kumk’u. The era date also corresponded to the start of the Maya Long Count Calendar that tracked the number of days from the “zero date” or a fixed point in time from which all mythical and historical dates were later calculated (similar to how the modern, Gregorian Calendar counts from a start date, the probable birth date of Christ). Historically speaking, the year 3114 BC presages Maya Classic Maya civilization by at least two and a half thousand years so the era date was most likely thought of taking place within the murky, mythic depths of deep, primordial time.

What is certain is that inaugural day was a busy one. Over fifty passages record at least fifteen distinct mythic events took place (with still more actions and gods yet to be deciphered). The Maya calendar places all these events somewhere within the course of the pre-dawn, sunrise, sunset, and night time hours of the first day; a tick-in-time that balances on very cusp of a new cosmic era; a moment when the old counts and gods diminish and fade, only to be renewed and reborn. As a whole, these events emphasize the orderly framework of the cosmos. It is an order not only related to knowledge of the world, but a cosmic order that arises out of the great mystery of the universe, the *mysterium tremendum* that partly revealed itself through the intricate mathematical machinations of the Maya calendar and its godly divinations.

In virtually every era day text this cosmic order is somehow reaffirmed. For instance, one era day inscription occurs on a chocolate cup known as the Vase of the Seven Gods. The vase boasts a fine-line painting that is a mythic “snapshot” of a pivotal era day event that occurred in the underworld, mountain palace of God L, who is pictured sitting on his jaguar throne within a caiman-topped temple. Like a group of ancient calendar priests, the gods gather within the dark incubus of a primordial mountain. The accompanying text says that on the day 4 Ajaw 8 Kumk’u the gods present were “ordered.” The event (ts’ak) describing this organization of gods is intrinsically linked to the same eternal and meaningful order embedded the natural world: to cycles of wind and rain, sun and moon, and light and darkness. Incidentally, this cosmic order first practiced by the gods, later became part of a sacred charter that governed elite Maya conduct where cosmic order became moral order. The vase scene also shows that the gods arrived bearing tribute caches and a bundled altar capped by feathers (the altar is pictured in the lower register beside the lower, front-most god seated in front of God L) that will likely be set as a foundation stone to mark the important occasion.



Quirigua Stela C
East, drawing by
Annie Hunter

Another era day passage from Stela C of the Guatemalan site of Quirigua, tells of the next stage in the story when three like-in-kind altar stones were set in a triadic arrangement by four primordial gods. A jaguar, serpent and water stone were placed at the edge of the sky at a sacred locale named the New “Three-Stone Place.”

A creation event that is a participatory affair where there is no single god or causal force that brings about the world is a very pan-Mesoamerican idea. Like in the opening chapters of the Popol Vuh, a Colonial document detailing the Quiché Maya creation story, the world is built not by a single cosmic force or god but through a conversation between two or more primordial gods. Specifically, the opening chapters of the Popol Vuh state that the Heart of Sky, along with the Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent, create the world through a council by reaching an agreement and bringing together their ideas. This meeting of the minds is similar to how we might initiate a building project by gathering together to draw up a set of blueprints—every invention be it of the gods or man begins with a conversation.



Dresden Codex Page 60, courtesy of FAMSI

Prior to this renewed order another era day inscription offers a glimpse of the frenzied disorder that existed in what was most likely the nocturnal hours prior to the first dawn. Page 60 of Dresden Codex, one of the few surviving Maya screen-fold books, shows two gods engaged in combat. The god holding a spear thrower and darts (on the viewer's right) is the Bolon Yokte' K'uh. The deity on the left who is being attacked

is God N. What forces of nature do God N and Bolon Yokte' K'uh represent? Brandishing such

fearsome weapons as the spear thrower (and in other cases a rope, a spear and a shield) the Bolon Yokte' K'uh is shown to possess a war-like destructive force and is a god associated in the inscriptions with major calendar transitions and death (yet his exact duties and profile are yet to be fully understood). God N is well known as a sky-bearer and is akin to the god Atlas in Greek mythology who holds up the sky. The result of an attack by the Bolon Yokte' K'uh is nothing short of disastrous. Logic dictates that with the downing of the God N sky-bearer the pillars of the sky are threatened, and with it the space-time continuum. It seems that the ancient scribes understood that order only exists in juxtaposition to disorder.

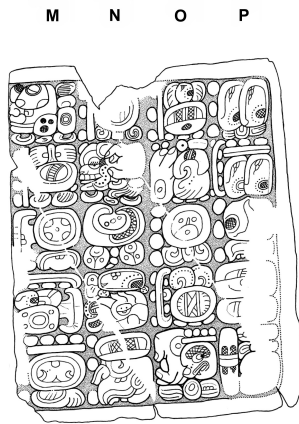
For the ancient Maya these custodial gods of time that helped usher in the new era were tangible beings in the likeness of man who were worshiped and deified as living gods (e.g. the number eight was the Maize God and the number three was the God of Song and Flowers). The dedicatory date carved on a monument was often shown through fully animated portraiture with the custodial gods of time, hoisting, dragging, and carrying the day and month cycles into place, as if time cycles were goods being toted to a modern day market place. This of time is wonderfully illustrated on Copan's Stela D from



Copan Stela D, drawing by Linda Schele

Honduras where personified and animated numbers carry Long Count cycles and day names via tumplines strapped across their foreheads. The gods rest just long enough to be recorded and then return to fetch a new burden for a new day. For era day the 4 Ajaw, the number four was the Sun God and the burden he carried into place was that of Lordship.

These gods of numbers and cyclic renewal not only ruled the past but also the future. December 21st, 2012 will mark a momentous occasion within the ancient Maya calendar. The day will announce the close of the 13th Bak'tun period of the Long Count Calendar. This period ending is a cyclic event that happens approximately once every 5125 years (13 x 144,000 days to be exact). The last time the end of the 13th Bak'tun occurred was on era day, August 11th 3114 BC. From the corpus of Classic Maya inscriptions there are but two surviving texts that speak to the future 2012 date



Tortuguero Monument 6
final passage, drawing by
Sven Gronemeyer

from the archaeological sites of La Corona, Guatemala and Tortuguero, Mexico. At Tortuguero, the 2012 text occurs on the final passage of Monument 6. As December 21st, 2012 approaches the exact interpretation of this text has become the subject of much scholarly and popular debate (a Google internet search on “Maya 2012 prophecy” now creates a mere 2,290,000 hits). The current academic discussion on whether the Tortuguero inscription is or is not linked to a prophetic statement has yet to reach any scholarly consensus. Interestingly, the Bolon Yokte’ K’uh of era day is the primary god linked to the 2012 passage on the Monument 6 inscription.

Therefore, it would behove Maya scholars to learn more of this enigmatic deity in the hope of understanding his true significance as god of cyclic transition and renewal. However, there can be little doubt that the ancient Maya would have deemed the 2012 date as a numerological echo of the previous primordial era date, and they would have marked the occasion of the 13th Bak'tun with great solemnity and fanfare as they had done throughout their history by erecting temples, altars and carved stone pillars called stelae. The inscribed stelae recorded the passing of time (usually by way of 20 year time spans called k’atuns) by charting the exact position of the sun and moon as well as those gods and sacred acts that were thought to preserve the order and life of the community.

Looking back on my research travels, I now understand the James Joyce quote: “Anything deeply considered is a pathway to the gods.” Having mapped the gods and forces that spawned creation, they guided my discovery as I stepped from the known to the unknown. I encourage all those interested in the Maya to initiate their own path of discovery, and explore first hand their magnificent shrines and temples whose animated walls still radiate with gods of earth, water, mountain and sky. As you stand face to face and peer into the mask of the divine, you will be given a glimpse into the *imago mundi* of the ancients and encounter how myth gave birth to the Maya universe.