

The Milky Way and Quirigua Zoomorph B

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Zoomorph B from Quirigua is an ornate carving on a large roundish boulder. I base my description on Matthew Loper's reading of the zoomorph in his book *Lightning Warrior* (2003). In regard to how the zoomorph depicts the astronomy on the date of the zoomorph's dedication (9.17.10.0.0, November 26, 780 AD (J)), I will make one obvious correction to Loper's reading that has important implications.

As Loper notes, the text and the iconography on Zoomorph B support each other (2003: 172). According to Loper, the creature depicted in the carving is the so-called Cosmic Monster, a "supernatural crocodilian" (172). Loper notes that the clawed forelegs and hind-legs, as well as the joints marked with large water scrolls accented with flower signs, "allude to the animal's identification with the underworld or primordial sea" (172). In Maya cosmo-conception the underworld is a watery place. The head of the Cosmic Monster has crossed eyes and gaping mouth, out of which emerges a figure who must be K'ak Tiliw (Loper provides the iconographic arguments). Interestingly, footprints are carved below the jaw, suggesting a "path" which Loper says is "the royal path." They therefore indicate the path or road into the underworld and indicate, as Loper shows, that the mouth is therefore the dark rift in the Milky Way. This is not at all far fetched considering Loper's subsequent observations. The rear end of the Cosmic Monster, like other depictions of this creature, bears a mask of the Quadripartite Badge. The tail of the Cosmic Monster wraps up and around the badge, and ends in "a head identified as that of the Principal Bird Deity" (172).

Zoomorph B was placed at the western edge of the platform, and Loper now turns to his consideration of how "the monumental image also has an astronomical dimension" (174). He writes that "In the sky the Cosmic Monster form of the Milky Way is the only conformation that stretches from east to west, with the rift in its western extremity interpreted as the mouth of the creature" (174). Here he draws from the ideas of Linda Schele and cites Freidel, Schele and Parker (1993: 85-87) and Milbrath (1999: 291). Some scholars do not agree with Schele's work on this point, but let us hear Loper on the point he makes. He notes that after sundown on the evening of the dedication date of Zoomorph B (November 26, 780) "the Milky Way was visible in this conformation" (174).

Loper sees this as evidence that the monument represents the sky at a specific node in time. Now, however, we find an unaccountable dislocation of his celestial positionings, for he concludes that the sky image was "a gigantic crocodile bearing **the sun on its tail**, floating in the waters of the underworld" (175; emphasis added). Actually, on November 26, 780 AD (J) the sun was positioned in alignment with *the mouth* of the Cosmic Monster (the dark rift), not the tail. (See Appendix 2 for a discussion of other astronomical events near the dedication date). With this correction based on the actual astronomy occurring on the dedication date, Loper's subsequent comment allows an entire framework of dark-rift alignments in Maya iconography to fall

into place. “On Zoomorph B the ruler [K’ak Tiliw] emerges from the mouth of the crocodilian just as the maize deity is reborn from the cleft shell of the cosmic turtle” (176). You see, Looper ascribes to the idea that the “Ak” turtle constellation, in Gemini, is where the maize deity is reborn, following Schele’s work on this concept. This is probably an accurate reading in the contexts in which Schele examined it, but in his examination Looper has forced the sun on Zoomorph B into that position in order to make his analogy between the solar lord K’ak Tiliw and the maize god. Instead, what we apparently have is an oppositional inflection of the same underlying mytho-cosmic construct, in which the sun can be reborn from the Ak turtle in Gemini but can also be reborn from the dark rift in the Milky Way (near Sagittarius).

This is an area that I have offered clarifications on in my previous books. As I wrote in my 1998 book *Maya Cosmogogenesis 2012* (1998: 284-285):

“If the turtle or ‘Ak’ glyph was hailed as the key to Grube’s and Schele’s interpretation of Maya Creation happening near Gemini-Orion, then the ‘to be born’ frog glyph [on Izapa Stela 11] is the epigraphic and iconographic key to my reading of Creation at the Milky Way dark-rift near Sagittarius.”

Looper further states that “Zoomorph B represents the culmination of the sacrifice/rebirth cycle begun with Stelae C and A north” (176). The sun’s alignment with the dark rift evidently involves the “culmination” of a “sacrifice/rebirth cycle,” and Maya kings could imitate the solar deity being sacrificed and reborn. This deity complex, complete with the implicated astronomical features, is congruent with what I identified happening on the carved monuments at Izapa. (See Appendix 1 for a longer excerpt from my book *Maya Cosmogogenesis 2012*.)

So, with this correction made, we can suggest the larger implications of acknowledging the actual astronomy involved. First, a Maya king depicts himself as emerging from the maw of a Cosmic Monster who is the Milky Way, and whose maw is the dark rift in the Milky Way. The context is sacrifice and renewal rites. The iconographic depiction is congruent with the sky on the date referred to on the monument. These ideas are identical to the ones that also apply, at times, to solar rebirth, the maize god’s birth, often depicted as occurring from an earth cleft associated with the exact opposite side of the sky from the dark rift. We should entertain the probability that the dark rift is also a vector for Maya ideas about sacrifice and renewal.

The role of the Tortuguero king Bahlam Ajaw in the rite performed with Bolon Yokte in relation to the 2012 date on Tortuguero Monument 6 has certain conceptual resonances with what K’ak Tiliw is portrayed as doing at Quirigua (Jenkins 2010). They are both period endings; they both involve deity sacrifice (binding or “wrapping” on Tortuguero Monument 6) attended by a Maya king. They both involve dates on which the sun was positioned at the maw of the Cosmic Monster.

For more on the ideas and evidence explored here, see my essay “The ‘Ecliptic as Road of Souls’ Theory and the Iconography of Quirigua Zoomorph G,” at:

<http://thecenterfor2012studies.com/2012center-note16.pdf>

Appendix 1. Excerpt from *Maya Cosmogenesis 2012*.

The following excerpt is from pages 284-285 of Jenkins (1998).

Stela 11 is one of the most symbolically striking monuments in Group B. In my book *The Center of Mayan Time*, I emphasized this stela as the best Izapan monument representative of the World Age astronomy of the 13-baktun cycle end-date. It faces the December solstice sunrise, where the dark-rift rose shortly before the solstice sun during Izapa's heyday. I still feel that Stela 11 tells a simple and straightforward story about the sky towards which it faces: the rebirth of the world.



← Diagram 147. Stela 11: December solstice sun in the dark-rift. A visual portrayal of the astronomical alignment of the 13-baktun cycle end-date. Drawing by the author.

Is this stela only telling us about the sun's rebirth at dawn? Is it only portraying the sun's annual rebirth on the December solstice? No, for it is short-sighted to limit the metaphor to the daily and annual levels. It does not take a great leap of insight to understand Stela 11 for all it is worth. If we accept that the toad-jaguar's mouth symbolizes the dark-rift, Stela 11 says 'the sun is reborn when it is in the dark-rift—the place of transformation, the portal to the Otherworld, the birth canal of the Milky Way Great Mother.'

In Stela 11 we can clearly see the true meaning of the dark-rift "mouth" of the Milky Way as a birth place. Gareth Lowe, one of the archaeologists who excavated Izapa in the 1960s, associates Stela 11 with the day-sign Ix (Jaguar).¹² The toad-jaguar's mouth has symbolized the portal to the Otherworld since Olmec times, and the modern Quiché Maya call the dark-rift the *xibalba be*, the road to the Otherworld. Commonly, Underworld portals were visualized as caves. In the Tzotzil Maya language of highland Chiapas, the word for "cave" is *ch'en*, which also means "vagina."¹³ Lowe also associates Stela 11 with the Yucatec Maya haab month Chen.¹⁴ Here we have meaningful connections implicit in the work of Maya scholars that associate Stela 11 with jaguar mouths, caves, portals to the Otherworld, and birthplaces.

And what of the solar deity emerging from the toad-jaguar's mouth? The outstretched hands on Stela 11 represent completion or measurement — a typical period-ending concept. In the *Popol Vuh*, First Father measured the cosmos at the beginning of time. On Stela 11 we see a frog or toad (the Milky Way) birthing the solar First Father deity. In the calendar, the frog or toad glyph stands for the 20-day uinal period of the Long Count. As such, it represents time-period completion (and commencement). In Maya hieroglyphs, when the frog's mouth is upright and open, the meaning is "to be born" and "date initiation."¹⁵ This identification is basic and very important, and confirms that Stela 11 represents the alignment of the December solstice sun with the dark-rift in

the Milky Way which occurs on the 13-baktun cycle end-date in A.D. 2012. Furthermore, given the “to be born” meaning of the upturned frog’s mouth, the way the future alignment was thought of in Izapan/Maya Creation myth involved the solar First Father hero being reborn, or emerging from, the dark-rift portal to the Otherworld, which was symbolized by the mouth of a snake, caiman or frog (the Milky Way itself being the snake or frog or caiman).

My emphasis on the fact that the upturned frog-glyph means both “date initiation” (as in a new Creation) and “to be born” (as in the sun in the dark-rift) challenges Maya scholars Nikolai Grube's and Linda Schele’s identification of the celestial Creation Place of the Maya. They focused exclusively on the “Ak” turtle glyph as a reference to the three hearth stones of Creation (three stars in the Orion constellation). On certain Classic-period ceramics, the First Father Maize Deity is reborn from the back of a turtle. Thus, they argue the celestial location of his rebirth is in Orion. However, the Classic-period representations of the cosmic turtle’s back (Orion) as a birth place may not reflect the original Izapan Creation myth. Ultimately, the frog-mouth birthing-glyph is just as compelling as Schele’s interpretation of Maya Creation, which focused only on the Milky Way/ecliptic Creation crossroads near Gemini.¹⁶ In terms of astronomical exactness, the scenario near Sagittarius is much more precise than the one proposed for Gemini-Orion. (The three hearthstones in Orion are quite far from both the Milky Way and the ecliptic.) An important and central aspect of Maya Creation astronomy definitely appears to have gone unrecognized by scholars. *If the turtle or “Ak” glyph was hailed as the key to Grube’s and Schele’s interpretation of Maya Creation happening near Gemini-Orion, then the “to be born” frog glyph is the epigraphic and iconographic key to my reading of Creation at the Milky Way dark-rift near Sagittarius* (italics in original). — end of excerpt.

(End note references 12-16 follow. The full citations for sources cited in these notes can be found at <http://alignment2012.com/bibbb.htm>.)

12. Lowe et al. (1982:285).

13. Laughlin (1975:132).

14. Lowe et al. (1982:285).

15. Kelley (1976:36); Lowe et al. (1982:295).

16. Schele (1992b); Freidel et al. (1993).

Appendix 2. Astronomy and 9.17.10.0

The dedication date of Zoomorph B was a half-katun ending. It would have been the reference point for astronomical events occurring within a reasonable range of this date. The half-katun date corresponds to November 26, 780 (J) according to the 584283 correlation. Just before sunrise on this date, Jupiter was just passed zenith. Curiously,

Jupiter was in very close conjunction with Uranus (45' of arc, which is $\frac{3}{4}$ of a degree). In fact, two weeks later (on December 10 at 2:30 a.m.) Jupiter and Uranus were separated by only 1'40" of arc. In comparison, the width of the full moon is 30' of arc. Just before sunrise on November 26 (J) a 26-day-old moon rose as a sliver. The sun was positioned at the southern terminus of the dark rift (the maw of the Cosmic Monster depicted on Zoomorph B), and this is portrayed on the monument. Four days later was moon dark, when the moon was not visible, in conjunction with the sun and still near the maw. On that day (9.17.10.0.4), the sun and the moon were positioned at the crossing point of the Milky Way and the ecliptic, and Saturn was even closer to the sun than the moon, 1 degree 14' away.

In early November (let's say, for example, on November 6), Venus, Mars and Saturn appeared in the west just after sunset, and they were positioned in the nuclear bulge at the southern terminus of the dark rift. That would have been a striking site in the western sky. How many of these astronomical events were consciously noted by the Maya, we can't say for sure. However, since Maya astronomers were constantly tracking events in the sky, it's very likely that these events were noted and compared to historical events unfolding before them.

Sources

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Milbrath, Susan. 1999. *Star Gods of the Maya: Astronomy in Art, Folklore, and Calendars*. Austin: University of Austin Press.

Astronomy software used: Starry Night Pro, v. 6.2