

Copan Stela C: Sun King in the Creation Place

John Major Jenkins

Excerpt from Jenkins, *Galactic Alignment*, (Inner Traditions, 2002, 40–42. Adapted from essay in the *Institute of Maya Studies* newsletter, “The Astronomy of Copan’s Stela C”, Volume 29, Issue 12, December 2000 (ed. Jim Reed).

In this brief essay I will provide a verbatim excerpt from my 2002 book *Galactic Alignment* (Inner Traditions), share its verbatim precedent in my *Institute of Maya Studies* essay from December 2000, and reiterate for potential commentators what I explicitly said. It’s curious that my work often gets paraphrased, even by the most well-intentioned writers, in a way that is inaccurate and/or provides a framework that seems to dismiss, or asserts a conceptual distinction in which a disagreement or difference of approach is registered. And then, when the cited source is actually consulted we find something completely different. I begin with the excerpt from my 2002 book (2002: 40–42):

Copan Stela C: Sun King in the Creation Place

Perhaps the most striking new evidence for a Mayan understanding of the galactic dimensions in which the earth spins comes from Copan, the southernmost Mayan city. Copan Stela C (fig. 3.5) is the well-known 18 Rabbit statue that Schele and Mathews note is dated 9.14.0.0.0 (December 5, 711 according to the 584285 correlation).⁴ This would have been the first *katun* ending after 18 Rabbit’s accession to rulership. But, as Schele points out, this political anniversary was also attended by astronomical events occurring in the eastern sky that faces the side of Stela C containing the young 18 Rabbit. The iconography on the statue helps us understand what it may portray astronomically.

The east-facing image is of the solar king standing in the maw of a crocodile form, holding a double-headed serpent bar that represents the ecliptic. He is wearing a draped loincloth that is ornamented with the jaws and teeth of a crocodile, which means he is in the crocodile’s mouth. What is the significance of this? As David Kelley points out, the upturned frog-mouth glyph means “to be born” and the upturned crocodile’s mouth probably has a similar meaning.⁵ For a king, accession to rulership was a kind of rebirth into a new identity, thus the motif of “being born” is appropriate for Stela C. We see this imagery on many Maya monuments. For example, even the early Maya Stela 11 from Izapa, replicates this basic idea (see Chapter 18).

As noted above, Copan Stela C is dated December 5, 711 (Gregorian calendar). Schele notes in *Code of Kings* that on December 5, 711, Venus was on the Milky Way (as evening star right after sundown), and this confirms the Venus iconography identified on the statue. However, another important conjunction occurred on that date: *the Sun was aligning with the dark rift in the Milky Way*. The

Milky Way’s dark-rift feature appears like a great cleft near Sagittarius, and is called the *Xibalba be* (Road to the Underworld) by the modern Quiché Maya. As a portal, this astronomical feature was symbolized by a door, a road, a cave, or a mouth (as in a crocodile’s or snake’s mouth). Clearly, the crocodile mouth in which 18 Rabbit stands could very well be the dark rift in the Milky Way.

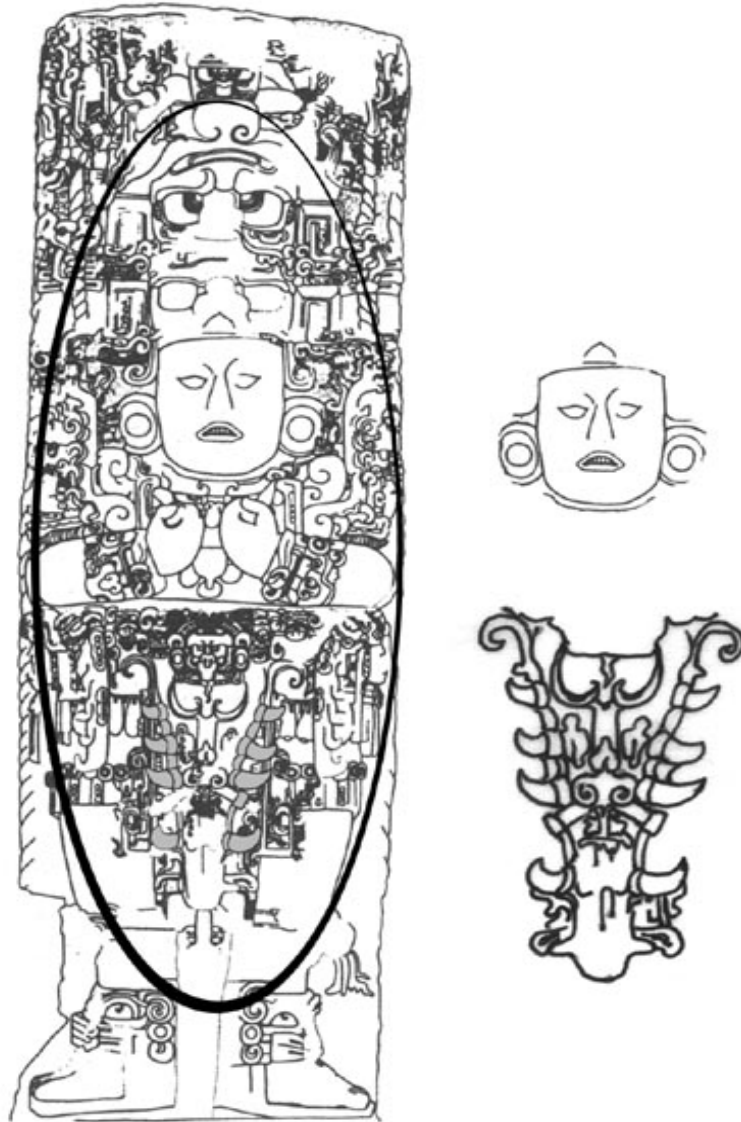


Figure 3.5. Copan Stela C, the sun king in alligator-mouth regalia

It is worth mentioning that the west-facing side of Stela C depicts an aged 18 Rabbit. The turtle altar that is in front of him symbolizes Orion, whose belt stars outline the Ak turtle’s back. In early December, when the monument was dedicated, an east-west hierophany occurred: the Sun, aligned with the dark rift, rose in the east while Orion set in the west. This is the Galactic Center–Galactic Anticenter axis, and the Janus-faced Stela C seems intended to encode this information.

But what, essentially, can we conclude the east side of Stela C depicts? We see a solar king (sun) holding a serpent bar (the ecliptic), “inside” a crocodile mouth

(the dark-rift). Stela C depicts the sun inside of the dark rift. This interpretation is confirmed by the celestial event toward which Stela C faces—*on December 5, 711 the sun was indeed aligning with the dark rift in the Milky Way*. Is this simply a coincidence? In Maya ceremony and symbolism, the meaning of this image involves the rebirth of the sun and the authority of kingship. If the ancient Maya of Copan consciously intended Stela C to encode this alignment, then we need to look seriously at the concept of “sun in dark-rift” and how it may have been included in other facets of Maya cosmology—most notably, in the end-date astronomy.

End Notes:

4. Schele and Mathews, *Code of Kings*, 141.

5. David Kelley, *Deciphering the Maya Script*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), 36. See also Jenkins, *Maya Cosmogogenesis 2012*, 52–53, 285. —*end excerpt*

Note that, in the final sentence alone, I suggest that *if* this astronomical configuration of 711 AD was intended by the Copan astronomers, then “we need to look seriously at the concept of ‘sun in dark rift’ and how it may have been included in other facets of Maya astronomy...”. Including, of course, its like-in-kind manifestation “in the end-date astronomy”. The entire excerpt with the final brief allusion to the era-2012 astronomy *does not* convey a position that Copan Stela C necessarily and intentionally reflects the placement of the sun at the same position on the 2012 cycle-ending date. What I expressed is that the investigative process can proceed from this evidence that the Maya were aware of the concept of “the sun in dark rift” and I invited further exploration as to “how it may have been included in other facets of Maya cosmology” which unavoidably includes “the end-date astronomy” (because the sun also aligns with the dark rift on the 2012 cycle-ending date).

It should be noted that I was the first who noticed and published the connection between the iconography on the Stela C monument and the astronomy associated with its dedication date, in the *Institute of Maya Studies* newsletter of December 2000 (Volume 29, Issue 12). My brief essay was reprinted in my 2002 book *Galactic Alignment* (full text above). As can be seen, what I actually wrote is that the Copan Stela C astronomy should be explored for how it may have manifested in other facets of Maya cosmology. I state the mythological associations, in that the dark rift in the Milky Way is the *Xibalba* in the Maya Creation Myth, with various associated symbolic meanings as stated. So, the mythological associations of that sidereal position, and indicating the possibility of other as yet unarticulated “facets of Maya cosmology” were the intended point of my observations. That the like-in-kind astronomy of 2012 should be included is unavoidable.

To assume that the two astronomical situations, one in 711 AD and one in 2012 AD, reflect or parallel each other is merely a factual observation. The idea that the Copan astronomers *intended* the dedication date and the iconography of Copan Stela C to symbolize the same alignment as on December 21, 2012 (happening on a solstice) is not a conclusion that I jumped to. However, one might indeed argue that the image is a core prototypical image of Maya cosmology, most likely embedded into the Long Count during its formulation, with an intentional pointing at the future alignment of 2012. The image has a conceptual basis, and one inflection is the alignment in 2012. The question of

whether the Copan astronomers were aware that the astronomical alignment they enshrined as a profound image of kingly legitimization also occurs on 13.0.0.0 in 2012 (the parallel itself being *a fact*) is potentially resolvable based on a fuller treatment of the evidence, including Tortuguero Monument 6, dedicated 42 years before Stela C was dedicated. But that evidence wasn't known when I wrote my original piece in 2000 or my 2002 book (largely in 2000-2001).

Since the mid-1990s I have explored the “mythological” associations of the galactic alignment astronomy, in various Maya traditions as well as in the Creation Myth depictions, iconography and archaeoastronomy of the pre-Classic period (at Izapa), and my suggestion for further elaboration and exploration of the theme of “sun in the dark rift” may be taken up by other scholars. Notice that I suggested we should look further into “other facets of Maya cosmology” that are suggested by the Copan Stela C astronomy — this is exactly what may produce further discoveries and deepen our understanding beyond anything I have identified thus far.

The idea that Maya dates might be meaningful because they refer to the sun's alignment with the dark rift and Crossroads was something that occurred to me in 1994, which I wrote to Linda Schele about. I also alluded to that approach in my book *Maya Cosmogenesis 2012* (1998). It took years to move things forward because there was no encouragement or feedback on the point from scholars, so I was on my own until the astronomy of Tortuguero Monument 6 began to be unraveled in early 2009. The Copan Stela C discovery occurred to me in early 2000. The sequence of discovery and my early notes are found on pages 3-5 of “[The Maya Exploration Center Facebook Discussion on the Astronomy of 2012 and Tortuguero Monument 6](#)” (2011) on *The Center for 2012 Studies* website.

I provide below (next two pages) my original piece from the *Institute of Maya Studies* newsletter, written in early 2000 and published in December 2000 (Vol. 29, Issue 12). Notice that the piece is almost identical to the reprinted version in my 2002 book. A difference is that the brief mention of 2012, which occurs in *the last four words* of the 2002 version, *does not appear in the original version*. I was not concerned with arguing that Copan Stela C proved the Copan Maya were aware of the galactic alignment in era-2012. Rather, I was opening the door on further research which would help us understand how the Maya thought about these types of astronomical alignments.



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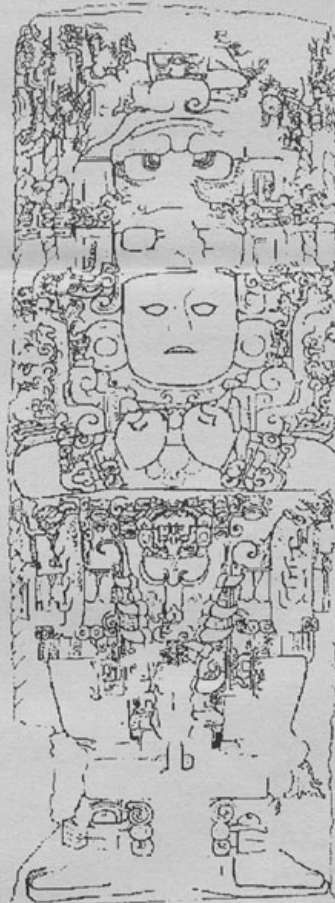
The Astronomy on Copan's Stela C

By John Major Jenkins

Copan Stela C, familiar to many by its appearance in ads in every issue of Archaeology magazine, features the Ruler popularly known as 18 Rabbit. Stela C is dated 9.14.0.0.0 (December 5, 711 according to the 584285 correlation) in the Code of Kings by Linda Schele and Peter Matthews. This would have been the first katun ending after 18 Rabbit's succession to rulership. As Schele points out, this political anniversary was also attended by astronomical events, occurring in the eastern sky toward which Stela C faces. The iconography on the statue helps us understand what it may portray astronomically.

The image is of the solar king standing in the maw of a crocodile form, holding a double-headed serpent bar that represents the ecliptic. Wearing a draped, pants-like breech-clout that is ornamented with the jaws and teeth of a crocodile, the meaning is apparent: he is in the crocodile's mouth. What is the significance of this? As David Kelley points out, the upturned frog-mouth glyph means "to be born" and the upturned crocodile's mouth probably has a similar meaning. For a king, accession to rulership was a kind of rebirth into a new identity, thus the motif of "being born" is appropriate for Stela C. We see this imagery on many Maya monuments. For example, even the early Maya monument, Stela 11 from Izapa, replicates this basic idea.

As mentioned, Copan Stela C is dated December 5, 711 A.D. (Gregorian calendar). As Schele notes in Code of Kings, on December 5, 711, Venus was on the Milky Way (as evening star right after sundown), and this confirms the Venus iconography on the statue that she identifies. However, another important conjunction occurred on that date: the sun was in alignment with the dark-rift in the Milky Way. The Milky Way's dark-rift feature appears like a great cleft



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Andrew Mossberg, Editor.



(Continued from page 1)
 near Sagittarius, and is called the Xibalba be (Road to the Underworld) by the modern Quiché Maya. As a portal or doorway, this astronomical feature was symbolized by a door, a road, a cave, or a mouth (as in a crocodile's or snake's mouth). Clearly, the crocodile mouth in which 18 Rabbit stands could very well be the dark-rift in the Milky Way.

What does Stela C depict? We have a solar king (sun) holding a serpent bar (the ecliptic), "inside" a crocodile mouth (the dark-rift). Stela C depicts the sun inside of the dark-rift. This interpretation might seem facile if it were not confirmed by the astronomy toward which Stela C faces—on December 5, 711 AD the sun was indeed aligning with the dark-rift in the Milky Way. Is this simply a coincidence? In Maya ceremony and symbolism, the meaning of this image involves the rebirth of the sun and the authority of kingship. If the ancient Maya of Copan consciously intended Stela C to encode this alignment, then we need to look seriously at the concept of "sun in dark-rift" and how it may have been included in other facets of Maya cosmology.

John appears in the Discovery Channel's "Places of Mystery" episodes on Copan and Chichén Itzá, airing this Fall. Visit his website at: Alignment2012.com Comments and inquiries can be directed to kahib@ix.netcom.com For more information on the "sun in dark-rift" iconography, refer to his book *Maya*



Cosmogenesis 2012 available through our own IMS website at: www.mayastudies.org

Pictures: Front page, Stela C, Ruler 18 Rabbit. Above, Stela 11 from the site of Izapa.



John Major Jenkins is the author of *Maya Cosmogenesis* and has spoken several times at the Institute on his research into Mayan Archaeoastronomy.

So, the original piece of December 2000 *does not even explicitly mention the 2012 cycle-ending*, and the 2002 version only briefly adds it, as one of the many "facets of Maya cosmology" that could and should be explored.

John Major Jenkins. © October 10, 2014; revised October 29, 2014.