

## Cosmos and Creation among the Late Postclassic Lowland Maya

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The prehispanic Maya, like their neighbors in Mesoamerica, believed in a number of cataclysmic destructions and re-creations of the world order. Moreover, the prospect of another such event was a constant threat, especially at times of transition, which included the accession of a new ruler to power or a shift among ruling deities such as occurred at yearly intervals (based on the cycle of the sun) or at other intervals (based on the cycles of the visible planets). Maya people, in common with much of the pre-industrial world, conceptualized the heavenly bodies as deities impacting the lives of those on earth.

Maya stories of creation are focused not on one specific place, but rather involve a complex movement among the earth, the Underworld, and the celestial realm. What we know of this mythology comes from sources as distant geographically as Yucatán, the Guatemalan highlands, and the Petén, and from narratives recorded in diverse media that are separated temporally by more than 1500 years. The focus of the present discussion is on creation stories recorded in Late Postclassic Maya painted media, including screenfold books (codices) and murals, believed to date from the mid fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries and to have been painted in the northern Maya area where Yucatec Maya was spoken (Vail and Aveni 2004).

Time does not permit a detailed consideration of Maya creation stories referenced in codical texts. Those that have been explored in the most detail include page 74 of the Dresden Codex (Figure 1), which has been interpreted as referencing the flood that led to the destruction of the previous world (see, e.g., Taube 1988) and Dresden 61 and 69, which Carl Calloway (2007) suggests refer to the birth of time. Readers interested in exploring these themes further should refer to recent discussions by David Stuart (2005) and Erik Velásquez (2006).

References to the sky (glyph T561, read as *ka'an* in Yucatec, or the presence of a skyband) are ubiquitous in texts and images from the Maya codices, with 78 such references in the Dresden Codex, 29 in the Madrid Codex, and 24 in the Paris Codex. Of these, there are 77 examples of skybands. These numbers do not take into account other celestial references (i.e., to the planets Mars and Venus, the constellations, solar and lunar eclipses, etc.), of which there are numerous examples.

In the present context, I offer examples of several previously unrecognized scenes from the Maya codices that appear to reference creation events, albeit within the context of historical time.

My thesis holds that certain elements found in Late Postclassic Maya iconography and texts, including the presence of a crocodilian in the sky, references to eclipses paired with downpours, and the setting up of the world trees, are symbolic of world destruction and renewal events. Their presence in texts dating to the historical period, where they are generally found in astronomical tables or almanacs highlighting calendrical period endings, suggests that they function to remind the reader of the (mythological) past that may likewise influence the present and the future. Generally occurring at times of transition (such as an eclipse or the heliacal rise of Venus), they serve as metaphors of the destruction and renewal that such periods of time embody.

The Dresden Venus table offers a case in point. Its five pages depict a succession of events along the right side of the page. On Dresden 46, the upper picture features a Pawahtun figure wearing a saurian headdress who is seated on a skyband marked with the head of K'awil, a deity associated with the power of lightning and also the personification of sustenance (Figure 2).<sup>1</sup> The Pawahtun figure is named in the text as Ayin Pawahtun, the alligator (or crocodile) Pawahtun. This calls to mind the ascent of Itzam Kab' Ayin (the earth caiman) into the sky just prior to the deluge that destroyed the previous world, an incident that many believe is illustrated on page 74 of the Dresden Codex (Stuart 2005; Taube 1988, 1993; Velásquez 2005). This event is described in the Books of Chilam Balam as follows (from the Pérez, 117.5-15; translation by Timothy Knowlton 2007):

Ca ix liki noh Itzam Cab Ain cuchi	<i>And then great Itzam Cab Ain<sup>2</sup> ascended, back then</i>
Dzocebal u than u vudz katun hekklai hun ye ciil	<i>That this deluge may complete the word of the katun series</i>
Bin dzocebal u than katun	<i>That the word of the katun might be complete</i>
Uaxaalahun tuc bak u habil	<i>Eighteen piles of four hundred is the the era</i>
Ca tac uuclahun pis i	<i>When there's already seventeen counts there</i>
Dzocebal u than katun	<i>That it may complete the word of the katun</i>
Ma ix y oltah bolon ti ku	<i>But Bolon Ti Ku did not desire it</i>
Ca ix xoti u cal Itzam Cab Ain	<i>So then Itzam Cab Ain's throat was cut</i>
Ca ix u ch'aah u petenil u pach	<i>And then he sprinkled the island of its back</i>
Heklay ah vuoh puc u kabae	<i>This is its name: Calligrapher Hill</i>
Ma ix u toh pultah u kaba tiobi	<i>Neither did he really confess to them its name</i>
Ti ti xan [kaxan?] tun u uich ti ualac y ahaulil hele lae	<i>He had bound(?) the eyes then of this current reign</i>

<sup>1</sup>K'awil's name may be translated as *k'aa* 'abundance of' *wi'il* 'sustenance' (Thompson 1970:289).

<sup>2</sup>Itzam Cab Ain is the Colonial spelling of the name Itzam Kab' Ayin.

This text, as Knowlton (2007) notes, takes place on the day 1 Ahaw within *k'atun* 13 Ahaw. This is of interest in light of the previous discussion, as 1 Ahaw marks the starting date of the Dresden scene on page 46 mentioned above.<sup>3</sup> The Chilam Balam text appears just prior to the 11 Ahaw myth of the flood, involving the destruction and re-creation of the world. The flood itself, which is described as “one fetching of rain, one lancing of rain” (Chumayel 43.14; translated by Knowlton 2007), is paralleled by the scene on Dresden 74 (see Figure 1), where rain is shown being poured from an olla (its “fetching”) and in association with a black deity with a spear (its “lancing”), as Knowlton (2007) so convincingly demonstrates.

This event – the destruction of the world by water – is followed by its re-creation (Knowlton 2007):

Valic can tul ti ku Can tul ti bacab Lay hayesob	<i>Four stand as gods Four as Bacabs They caused their [the core-less people] destruction</i>
Tuchij tun ca dzoci hay cabil	<i>And then when the destruction of the world was finished</i>
Lay cahcunah uchebal ca tzolic kan xib yui Ca ualhi sac imix che ti xaman	<i>They settled this [land] so that Kan Xib Yui puts it in order Then the White Imix Tree stands in the North</i>
Ca ix ualhi y ocmal caan V chicul hay cabal	<i>And stood as the pillar of the sky The sign of the destruction of the world</i>
Lay sac imix che valic cuchic	<i>This White Imix Tree stands there supporting it</i>
Ca yx ualhi ek ymix che Cu [lic] ek tan pidzoy Ca yx ualhij kan ymix che V chicul hay cabal	<i>Then the Black Imix Tree stood where the Black Bellied Pidzoy resides Then stood the Yellow Imix Tree The sign of the destruction of the world</i>
Culic kan tan pidzoy Cumlic ix kan xib yui Yx kan oyal mut Ca ix ualhij yax imix che t u chumuc	<i>The Yellow Bellied Pidzoy resides And Kan Xib Yui sits The Yellow Caller Bird Then the Blue-Green Imix Tree stood in the center</i>
U kahlay hay cabal	<i>The History of the destruction of the world</i>
Cumtal u cah u lac canah ual katun Chumayel 43.16-28	<i>The ceramic idol sits down above the page [relating the] katun</i>

<sup>3</sup>See Thompson (1972) and H. Bricker and V. Bricker (2007) for a discussion of the calendrical structure of the Venus table.

The *Bacabs* mentioned in this text correspond to the deities known in other contexts as Pawahtuns (Taube 1992).<sup>4</sup> They are described in Landa’s *Relacion de las cosas de Yucatan* as “... four brothers whom God placed, when he created the world, at the four points of it, holding up the sky so that it should not fall. They also said of these *Bacabs* that they escaped when the world was destroyed by the deluge” (Tozzer 1941:135-136). The figure seated on the skyband on Dresden 46, therefore, embodies the events discussed in the Chilam Balam texts referenced above – in this case, the ascent to the sky of Itzam Kab’ Ayin, in the form of a Pawahtun, prior to the flooding of the earth. Another scene, that on Paris 22 (Figure 3), shows the four Pawahtuns in the sky.<sup>5</sup> They, and the skyband on which they are seated, are surrounded by a blue cord that, unlike the *kuxan su’um* described by Alfred Tozzer in 1907, appears to be filled with water rather than blood. It was as the result of the cutting or severing of this cord, we believe, that the great flood was precipitated (Vail and Hernández 2007).

The middle register of Dresden 46 (Figure 4) contains additional connections to the scene on Dresden 74 (Figure 1) discussed previously. Both feature a black-painted deity with weapons, who is identified as “God L” on Dresden 46 and linked to the eastern appearance of Venus (i.e., as morning star). The figure on Dresden 74 has likewise been identified as God L (Hernández and Vail 2007; Vail and Hernández 2007; Zimmermann 1956; but see Taube 1988, who identifies him as a black version of Chaak). He, too, carries weapons associated with Venus in its role as a warrior (a spear and *atlatl* darts). On Dresden 46, God L holds a shield in one hand and an *atlatl* in the other. His dart is apparently aimed at K’awil, who is described in the caption as being speared (A3-B3 of text in illustration *a*). Indeed, we see K’awil with a dart emerging from his chest in the bottom register of the page (illustration *b*).

The spearing of K’awil, we are told, causes “damage to” (*yah?*) the people, the maize, and the food (C1-D1 and C3-D3 of text in illustration *a*). We are also told *u muk ka’ yax-k’an* ‘it is an evil omen for the green and yellow [maize]’, or alternately, ‘the green and yellow [i.e., ripe and unripe] [maize] is buried’ (at C2-D2 of text in illustration *a*). This may refer to the time when maize was not available upon the surface of the earth, but was buried within a mountain. We learn of this from the Popol Vuh of the highland Maya K’iche’ culture; similarly, it is a common theme in the mythology of highland Mexico. In the Yucatecan Books of Chilam Balam, the seed corn was stolen and was taken not to the Underworld, but rather to the sky, where it remained out of reach of those residing on the earth (Knowlton 2007).<sup>6</sup> The theft of the maize is the event preceding the flood itself (described above). Once the maize goes missing, life on earth cannot be sustained. This state of affairs seems to be reflected in the hieroglyphic caption to the scene depicting the wounded K’awil on Dresden 46 (illustration *b*), which refers to *u muk* ‘evil omens for’ [or ‘the burial of’] the mats and thrones [a couplet referring to ‘rulership’] (at B1-A2 of text), followed by negative auguries for the rulers (*ahaw*) and the ‘sprouts’, or *ch’ok* (sons of rulers) (at C1-D2).

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<sup>4</sup>I have italicized proper names spelled using the Colonial orthography (e.g., *Bacab*) to distinguish them from the spellings used by epigraphers today (e.g., B’akab’).

<sup>5</sup>Like the Chaaks, the Pawahtuns had directional aspects associated with the four world quarters.

<sup>6</sup>Recall that K’awil’s head is found on the end of the skyband upon which the Ayin Pawahtun is seated in the upper register of Dresden 46.

Although not previously interpreted in this light, Dresden 46 appears to embody references to the mythological destruction of the world that occurred when Itzam Kab' Ayin ascended into the sky and the maize seed was stolen. The latter event is framed within the context of the heliacal rise of Venus as God L, who is responsible for wounding the embodiment of maize and abundance on the earth.<sup>7</sup> The prehispanic Maya who drafted this table as a warning of Venus' might framed it within a powerful metaphor known to all Maya—the destruction of the earth, which was believed to be the fate of humanity should the appropriate rituals not be enacted to appease Venus.

The remaining four pages of the Dresden Venus table may likewise have connections to Maya creation mythology, specifically that relating to the maize, as each page includes glyphic references to evil omens for the maize/sustenance and/or its burial. The figures depicted do not relate as clearly as those on Dresden 46 to known mythology involving the theft of the maize (or death of the maize god), but it is nevertheless of interest that they represent characters referenced in both Maya and highland Mexican mythology. Moreover, each of the deities depicted in the guise of Venus as warrior derives from outside of the northern Maya lowlands (Fig. 5). Included are Lahun Chan (Dresden 47), a Chontal deity also referenced in the Books of Chilam Balam, and three Nahuatl deities—Tawisikal (Dresden 48), Chak Xiwitel (Dresden 49), and Kakatunal (Dresden 50) (Riese 1982; Taube and Bade 1991; Whittaker 1986). In interpreting these pages, we may expect to find that the cosmology being referenced likewise derives from foreign (i.e., non-Yucatec) sources. I hope to have additional results to report along these lines by the time of the SAA meeting in Vancouver.

Connections between Dresden 46 and Dresden 74 suggest a re-examination of the latter in light of the thesis that world destruction and creation provide a template for modeling events in the past that inform on the present and the future, such as are commonly seen in Maya astronomical tables. The disconnect that has always existed between those who view the scene in question as the destruction of the world (presumably a previous creation) by flood and those who see it instead as a historical event that can be linked to Long Count dates in the table (see, e.g., V. Bricker and H. Bricker 2005) can be easily resolved if one takes into account the framing of historical episodes within metaphors of world destruction and renewal. Astronomical events in the form of eclipses and the heliacal rise of Venus, among others, appear to have been linked very explicitly with the mythology of world destruction described in detail in Colonial sources like the Yucatec Books of Chilam Balam or the K'iche'an Popol Vuh. Such events would have been followed by a restoration of the world order, such as occurs for example on Dresden 25-28 (the pages immediately following Dresden 74), as Karl Taube (1988) demonstrated in his doctoral research.

It has previously been suggested that Dresden 74 is cognate with the two almanacs on Madrid 32 (Zimmermann 1956) (Figure 6). This is of particular interest in light of the previous discussion, and I would likewise suggest that Madrid 33a bears a number of similarities to Dresden 74 but also to the Venus table (see also Hernández and V. Bricker 2004). This is suggested specifically by the figure of Chaak on Madrid 33a who is painted black and kneels in a posture similar to that

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<sup>7</sup>It is of interest in this regard that in the Chumayel version of the 11 Ahaw myth, *Bolon Dzacab* only returns after the appearance of Venus, here called Lahun Chan, and the sun (T. Knowlton, personal communication, February 12, 2008).

assumed by the Morning Star deities on Dresden 46-50 (compare specifically to Dresden 48; see Figure 7). He holds a shield and an axe; the former, I believe, indicates a link to other Venus deities, whereas the latter signifies his role as a rain god (see Šprajc 1993 for a discussion of the connection between rain and Venus). It is also of interest that the victim of his attack is the maize god, who figures prominently in the hieroglyphic captions to the Venus table and is the victim of the deity Tawisikal on Dresden 48 (Figure 7b).

In other respects, this almanac bears a greater similarity to Dresden 74 (Figure 8). Note that the two have in common a skyband, a solar eclipse, and rain imagery. Another correspondence includes the bundle on Madrid 33a containing the distance number and coefficient pair, which is similar to “ring numbers” seen in the table associated with Dresden 74 (the lower water table). Unlike the Madrid example, however, they contain black numbers only, the *k'in* portion of a larger distance number written above them (see V. Bricker and H. Bricker 2005). The frog-like figure pictured above Chaak in the Madrid almanac may play a zodiacal role (Hernández and V. Bricker 2004), or it may function as a symbol or harbinger of the rainy season, as appears to be its role elsewhere (see, e.g., Madrid 31a).

Although there is much work to be done to flesh out the examples mentioned above, I would like to conclude my discussion with what I interpret to be further references to events from the story of creation appearing in the seasonal table of the Dresden Codex (Dresden 65-69).

The Maya rain god Chaak is the protagonist of the seasonal table. The events of interest to us occur in the upper table, on pages 65a-69a (Figures 9-10). There are several distinctive “episodes,” the first of which involves the receiving and conjuring of K’awil by Chaak (D. 65a2, 3), the appearance of Chaak carrying weapons (D. 66a1), Chaak pictured in the rain (a flood?) beneath a skyband with eclipse glyphs (D. 66a2), and a reference thereafter to Chaak at *ho(’)* *ka’an* (D. 66a3), which may be the same as the place of creation referred to in a Classic period text as *na ho chan* (*chan* is the Ch’olan cognate of Yucatec *ka’an* ‘sky’).<sup>8</sup> This text from Quirigua Stela C states (afterLooper 1995; Macri andLooper 2006):

chan ajaw waxak ol jal k’oj	[On] 4 Ahaw 8 Kumk’u the image was manifested.
k’al? ux tun	The three stones were bound.
u tz’apwa tun [name] [name]	Jaguar Paddler and Stingray Paddler set up a stone.
utiy na-ho-chan	It happened at House?/First?-Five-Sky,
hix-tz’am?-tun-aj	the jaguar throne stone.
u tz’apwa tun ik’-na-yax-?	Black House First ?? set up a stone.
utiy kab-kaj	It happened at earth place,
chan-tz’am-tun	the snake throne stone.
i utiy k’al? tun na itzamnaj	And then it happened, Itzamna bound the stone,
ha’-tz’am?-tun	the water throne stone.
utiy ch’a chan yax ux tun nal	It happened at ?? Sky, at first Three Stone place.

The *na ho’ ka’an/chan* is the location where the first of three hearthstones, believed to form part of the constellation Orion (the Maya turtle constellation), was set up (Schele 1992). It is of

<sup>8</sup>Knowlton (personal communication, February 12, 2008) notes that the word *ho* may have other meanings and is used in Colonial period creation texts in the sense of ‘to remove’ or ‘to take out’.

interest that the other two stones are linked to the earth and the water, and that the text describes these events as occurring before the sky had been raised.

We know from epigraphic research that K'awil and the figure referred to as *Bolon Dzacab* in Colonial texts are aspects of the same deity. In the Books of Chilam Balam, *Bolon Dzacab* symbolizes the earth's bounty (Knowlton 2007). This, I believe, is the meaning of the two references to K'awil in the first section of the Dresden seasonal table. In a different episode (D. 67a2-3), we are told that K'awil is speared by the black Chaak and then bound. This recalls the theft of the maize in the Chilam Balam account and parallel episodes in the Maya codices in which the maize god and K'awil are speared (e.g., on Dresden 46, Dresden 48, and Madrid 33a; see Figures 2 and 7).

Additional parallels between the seasonal table and other codical almanacs include the scene on Dresden 67a1 (Figure 10), which pictures the female creator deity Chak Chel overturning a jar of water, here perhaps intended to represent floodwaters since she is depicted in her bestial (destructive) aspect. Chak Chel appears in a similar guise on Dresden 74 and also on Madrid 32b (see Figure 6), a scene which previous scholars (e.g., Zimmermann 1956) have suggested is cognate to the events depicted on Dresden 74. The possible "flood" on Dresden 67 is only one of a number of scenes showing rain falling from skybands onto figures below. What is crucial in terms of understanding the narrative (or multiple narratives) represented on these pages is differentiating which are intended to signal destruction and which have positive associations. The hieroglyphic captions are extremely helpful in this regard. The scene on Dresden 68a1, for example, which shows two figures of Chaak seated back to back on a skyband, is associated with a caption that mentions 'rising sky' (*nak ka'an*) at S2, perhaps a reference to the sky that was raised after the flood, and also includes a reference to food (*wi'il*) and maize (*nal*) at S3. The iconography has been interpreted as showing the shift from the dry to the rainy season (V. Bricker and Bricker 1988), as indicated by the rain falling on the second of the two Chaaks. Unlike that associated with Chak Cheel, it appears to be a fertile and not a destructive rain.

The following frame appears to represent the start of yet another episode, this one also concerned with what may be a flood event (Dresden 68a2-3). This is signaled in the first of the two frames by the picture of the caiman in the sky (see previous discussion) and the rain falling from the skyband. In this instance, however, the caiman conflates with an animal known as the "Mars beast" that represents the appearance of Mars in the nighttime sky. In the following frame, the two eclipse glyphs dangling from the skyband call to mind those on Dresden 74. Like that scene, Dresden 68a3 pictures rain, perhaps floodwaters, falling from both eclipse glyphs.

In the final frame of this episode (and also of the almanac), D. 69a1 shows Chaak atop a spiny tree (probably a ceiba), with two crocodilian heads at its base. This imagery is suggestive of the trees that were set up following the flood of the previous world (see previous discussion). It is of interest that the tree's trunk and branches consist of the body of the bicephalic earth caiman (see, e.g., Dresden 4b-5b; Figure 11). The text on D. 69a1 concludes with the caption *oox wi'il muuk* 'abundance of food is the omen' at Z3, indicating a propitious future.

The events depicted in the Dresden seasonal table are difficult to disambiguate, presumably because they represent more than one narrative sequence. There are clear indications of

references to creation events that would have affected the destiny of the date in historical time on which they are depicted. Clearly, the Maya conceived of the path of the seasonal year (which is the calendrical purpose of the table) as being influenced by events in the mythological past. The movements and actions of the rain god in both mythological and historical time underscore what can be expected to occur in the lives of the Maya people who relied on this table to plan their futures.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The seasonal table and other astronomical imagery examined above provide compelling evidence for multiple episodes, rather than a single one, in which world destruction was conceptualized in terms of a flood, usually as the result of an eclipse. The Venus table also argues for specific stations of the planet's appearance being linked to metaphorical episodes of world destruction and renewal.

Although this line of research has earlier antecedents in the work published by Linda Schele and her colleagues (Schele 1992; Schele and Grube 1997; Schele and Villela 1996; Villela and Schele 1996), the proposal that the astronomical tables recorded in the Maya codices may incorporate elements of Maya creation mythology is relatively new. I await with interest a discussion of these ideas at the Vancouver meeting.

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