

The Ocellated Turkey in Maya Thought

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The ancient Maya conceived of nature as a numinous realm where human beings sought to harmonize by means of appropriate religious formulas. Understanding the special and specific nature of the supernatural inhabitants of this realm takes us deeper into Maya beliefs and their expression in daily life. One of these supernaturals, little studied by investigators, is the ocellated turkey of Yucatan, *Meleagris ocellata*, an animal whose striking image accords it complex religious qualities that distinguish it from the common domestic turkey (Figure 1).

In this article we will focus on the role of *Meleagris ocellata* in Precolumbian Maya religion, since it was

conceived of as a being with dynamic religious attributes and multiple functions like the jaguar, the serpent, and the quetzal, although the iconography of *Meleagris ocellata* is limited in comparison. Additionally, as regards the generic identification of turkeys in the codices and elsewhere in Maya iconography, we will show that these pertain in the majority of cases to the variant *Meleagris ocellata*, particularly the strikingly colorful male of the species.

Understanding the religious role played by *Meleagris ocellata* in Precolumbian Maya belief is possible through the study of archaeological, epigraphic, and historical sources, since these all make reference to turkeys in



Figure 1. *Meleagris ocellata*. Photograph by David Creswell, collection number K5A02200 (www.flickr.com/photos/cresny/7156138518/in/photostream).

events that illustrate divine forces and rituals, as well as hunting activities of the Maya of yesterday and today. We base this article principally on Precolumbian hieroglyphic texts, but confirming and expanding upon what they say, connecting it with information provided by other sources.

Various documentary sources reveal an important role for the wild turkey, above all in relation to certain personages—possibly rulers—and the rituals of the New Year that can be studied in Postclassic documents such as the Dresden and Madrid codices (Lee 1985), Colonial chronicles such as those of Diego de Landa ([1566]1941), Diego López Cogolludo ([1688]1971), and Juan de Villagutierre Soto-Mayor ([1701]1933), as well as contemporary testimonies.

The Ocellated Turkey: Biological Description

A bird with large eyes but a small head in relation to its body, the ocellated turkey's unattractive head is naked and bright blue, with wart-like caruncles around the beak and on the crown. The wild turkey attracts attention by its bright red feet with long and sharp spurs. Its body, about one meter in length, is covered in different rows of feathers, some black, others grey, with the most attractive being iridescent blue and green combined with some in bronze color, while those of the tail are referred to as ocellated, which is to say with spots that look like eyes. The foregoing is true of the male bird, while the female lacks all of these features of the head as well as the spurs but has a border of white feathers around the neck. Another characteristic of the male is that when it is excited the fleshy protuberance between the eyes becomes inflamed (Rocha et al. 2009:10).

Archaeological evidence indicates that the ocellated turkey seems never to have been domesticated (Flannery 2001), although some birds may have been captured and raised for ritual purposes (Hamblin 1984:91–96). It lives in constant danger of being hunted by felines, raptors, and serpents (Rocha et al. 2009:11), although its survival is fostered by the ability to fly, albeit to a height of only a few meters. It lives on the move and can cover an area of up to 12 kilometers. It feeds on seeds, leaves, bulbs, and invertebrates, but also grain, beans, and squash (Rocha Gutiérrez et al. 2009:11), which indicates a proximity in ancient and modern times to milpas and garden plots, where it was subject to being captured.

In Precolumbian times, the ocellated turkey occupied forested areas of the Maya lowlands with the exception of the coastline, up to an altitude of approximately 500 m above sea level, for which reason it did not have much presence in the highlands.

It is precisely because of its striking physical characteristics, such as the caruncles indicating a high level of testosterone, the intense and iridescent color of its plumage, its difficulty in living in captivity, the wide

range that it covers, as well as its taste for maize, that caused the Maya to consider that the ocellated turkey belonged to a realm other than the human, pertaining to nature, to one of those sacred spaces where divine forces surround and have guardianship over human existence: the forest zone beyond human habitation, moved by occult forces and sacred energies—a world surrounded by gods and creatures. The wild turkey was an animal of liminal space, for while it lived in the forest it came to the edges to be near human settlement in order to obtain sustenance from cultivated fields and plots. Thus it lived in a world where the ecumene ended and the zone beyond human habitation began (López Austin 2008:56).

Of the ocellated turkey's physical characteristics, the most striking is its plumage, which covers a wide range of colors, all with symbolic power to convey its energy. As mentioned, the feathers of the tail have spots like eyes, and when they expand they seem to look about vigilantly, for which reason the bird was thought capable of understanding everything around it. All of which allows us to associate the wild turkey with another being of sacred and nocturnal character: the jaguar. Thus it partook of extra-human forces, dark aspects of the sphere of life, the space of mystery, disorder, and irrationality, and therefore a complement to the cosmic equilibrium (Garza 1998:131). But its symbolic richness does not end here, since symbolism prevails in its plumage: there we find blue-green, *yax* in the language of the hieroglyphs, while the ocellated turkey's caruncles are colored orange and yellow, thus *k'an* "yellow," associated with ripe grains of maize—the frequent pairing of the glyphs for **K'AN** and **YAX** suggesting the complementary opposition ripe/unripe (Stone and Zender 2011:123, 127) and therefore possibly symbolizing a center of fertility. The terms *ya'ax/ya'x* and *k'an* could comprise the *difrasismo* *k'an-ya'x/ya'ax* that we find written in the codices, associated with auguries or prognostications, *uya'ax [u] k'an*, "the green, the yellow," and in certain Colonial texts in Latin characters (see Morán and fray Thomás de Coto [c. 1647–1654]). This *difrasismo* may possibly be translated as "prosperity" (Escalante Gonzalbo and Velázquez García in press); it relates to a ritual context that we will examine below.

Yukatek Maya has three terms referring to turkeys: *úulum* <*ulum*>, *tzo'* <*dzo*>, and *kuutz* <*cutz*>. In modern times, the first two are used for the domestic turkey, with *tzo'* referring to the male, while *kuutz* refers to the wild or ocellated turkey. Thus, for example, in the Chilam Balam of Chumayel, in the Ceremonial of the *May*, the ruler Hunac Ceel demanded a turkey <*yax ulum*> (Edmonson 1986:81), i.e., one raised domestically, while in the section relating to the arrival of the Spaniards in Merida, the term employed is <*utz*> (Edmonson 1986:108), probably a corruption of the word *kuutz* <*cutz*>.

The Ocellated Turkey in Maya Archaeology

Various archaeological explorations have recovered the remains of turkeys in ceremonial and ritual contexts beginning in the Late Preclassic (400 BC – AD 292) at the site of El Mirador. These skeletal remains pertain to *Meleagris gallopavo*, the domestic turkey, possibly originating from Central Mexico, where it is native.¹ Additionally, remains have been found in the urban cores of Trinidad de Nosotros, Cancuen, Aguateca, Colha, Copan, Dos Pilas, Dzibilchaltun, Motul de San José, Labaantun, and Tipu, all in deposits pertaining to the Late Classic (600–909) and Postclassic (900–1540) (Kennedy 2006:1-34). In this last period, skeletal remains of the turkey were found in Mayapan (Manson and Peraza 2008:173), where Pollock and Ray, in 1937, discovered remains of *Meleagris* that they identified as ocellated, although in light of new biochemical analysis this determination has been questioned (see Flannery 1982:301).

On the island of Cozumel, however, remains of *Meleagris ocellata* have been found in a location that is not its natural habitat. The deposits contain young specimens, which leads Nancy L. Hamblin, who has studied the faunal remains on the island, to suggest that the islanders captured them on the mainland and raised them for ritual purposes (Hamblin 1984:91-96).

On the other hand, zooarchaeological studies at numerous Maya sites have identified the vertebrates forming the carnivorous portion of the ancient diet; in these studies we observe that the turkey scarcely appears, which indicates that its consumption was very sporadic (Götz 2014:172,175, 179) and perhaps limited to ritual uses.²

The Ocellated Turkey in Epigraphy and Iconography

The glyphic complex designating the wild turkey has been known since 1880, when Leon de Rosny read the noun “wild turkey” in the Madrid Codex through the identification in that manuscript of Landa’s syllable **ku**, associated with scenes of hunting where the prey was a bird with protuberances on its beak and head. While de Rosny read the name of this animal as *kutzo*, later Cyrus Thomas corrected the reading to *kutz*.

Yuri V. Knorozov, in his 1952 decipherment of Maya hieroglyphic writing (Knorozov 1952, cited in Coe 1995:157-163; Kettunen and Helmke 2010, 16-17), availed himself of the “alphabet” compiled by Landa in the sixteenth century. Knorozov recognized the syllabogram transcribed by the friar as <*cu*>, appearing repeatedly in clauses in the Madrid Codex. Since this sign was associated with the image of a turkey, tied up or with its throat slit, Knorozov noted that the glyph (comprised of two signs) must be read <*cutz*>, “turkey,” in Yukatek Maya (Álvarez 1980:301; Arzápalo Marín 1995:149; Grube 2003:9-10; Kettunen and Helmke 2010:18-19;

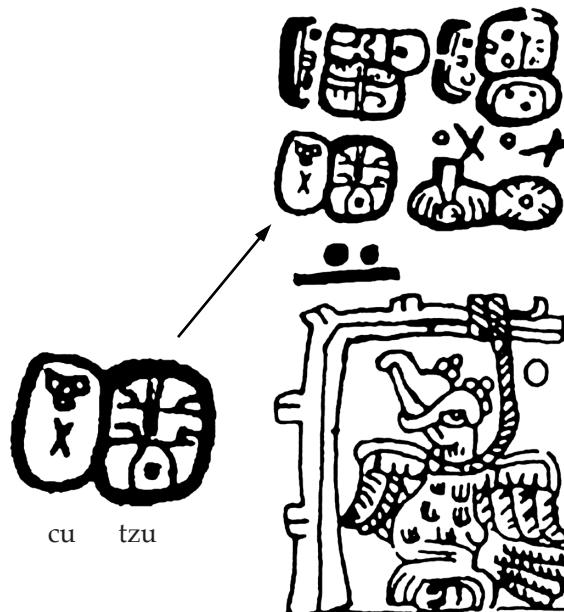


Figure 2. Identification of the glyptic compound <*cutz*> by Yuri Knorozov in 1952 (from Kettunen and Helmke 2010).

Swadesh et al. 1991:17) (Figure 2). In the Classic period, the Maya had a different designation for the male bird, *ak’ach*³ (cf. Stone and Zender 2011:94) (Figure 3), and the Classic and Postclassic iconographic depictions are very distinct.

The iconographic representations most clearly associated with *Meleagris ocellata* are found on painted

¹ The zooarchaeological team directed by Erin Kennedy Thornton has studied a number of faunal remains uncovered at various sites in the Maya Lowlands, identifying remains of the domestic turkey during excavations at El Mirador, specifically in the Jaguar Paw Temple, in the plaza fronting the Tigre pyramid, and in the Tigre pyramid itself, in Late Preclassic deposits. They also discovered the bones of various birds that, after a series of osteological, morphological, and radiocarbon analyses, turned out to be turkeys. Moreover, it was determined that they showed few signs of flying activity, such that they must have grown up in captivity having been raised domestically. It was additionally postulated that they came to the Maya area from Central Mexico, either transported live or as dried meat (Kennedy et al. 2012:4-5).

² The remains found in domestic contexts, where it is presumed that they were consumed on an everyday basis, were whitetail deer and, to a lesser degree, tortoise, peccary, and brocket deer. At a much smaller scale we find armadillo, tepescuintle, and rabbit—animals that lurk around the milpa and adjacent gardens (Götz 2014:172-181).

³ Although Andrea Stone and Marc Zender (2011:94) transliterate the glyph as *ak’ach*, there are Classic-period inscriptions such as Nim Li Punit Stela 15 where it is written with the syllables **a-k’-a-ch-a**, forming the word *ak’ach*, with short vowel (Erik Velásquez García, personal communication 2014).

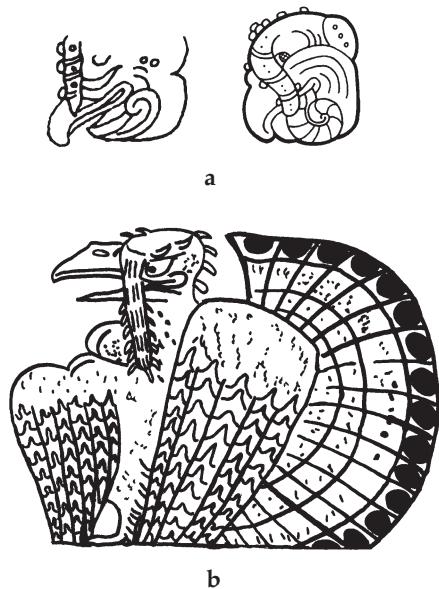


Figure 3. (a) Logographs for AK'ACH, *ak'ach*, "male turkey (from Stone and Zender 2001); (b) example of a wild turkey as a *wahyis* being (from K1001, www.famsi.org).

vessels of the Classic period (Figure 3b).⁴ In these we observe the male bird with its feathers spread out, with a fleshy appendage over part of the head, and with a fierce expression and attitude of attack. In some scenes we observe the male turkey facing baskets or vessels that contain organic remains, such as eyeballs and bones (Figure 4). These scenes indicate a clear nagualistic context for the wild turkey, as well as a dream state. In them it is common to find the name tag *ak'ach uwahy*, "the wild turkey is his nagual."

As determined by various studies (López Austin 2008:101-109; Pitarch Ramón 1996:32-84, 107-168; Velásquez García 2009:460-633), the Maya conceived—and continue to conceive—of the human body as a heterogenous compound of solid substances—comprised by the bones and flesh—and gaseous substances,

which is to say, mental essences and forces that were vital breath, independent consciousness, spiritual beings, and gods wrapped in solid matter (López Austin 2008:101; Velásquez García 2011:235). The substances, solid and gaseous, together formed the body, and the Maya differentiated between them as between those over which they exercised control and those over which they did not. In the first category we have the spirit entity *wahyis*, "auxiliary spirit,"⁵ a part of the body subject to willpower, which in its unpossessed state carries the suffix *-is*, discovered by Marc Zender (2004:195-209), a particle that marks the intimate possession of body parts whose habitual condition is to be possessed.⁶

Although for a long time *wahyis* (commonly written *way*), "nagual," has been described as co-essence, alter ego, or *toma* (Houston and Stuart 1989), we now know that this definition is not satisfactory (Stuart 2005:160-165), since co-essences, among other characteristics, live outside of the human body and die at the same time as their possessor. Given the glyptic evidence from the Classic period, it is clear that the *wahy* was conceived of as an intimate part of the human body, which is to say an entity that lives within the body of its possessor, who retains absolute control over his *wahy*. The *wahyis* of a person is associated with *nagualismo*, which is to say the

⁴ Certain polychrome vessels display naturalistic depictions of the wild turkey as an offering or sacrifice. On K2026 at MayaVase.com, we see the supreme god Itzamnaah in his anthropomorphic aspect seated on a throne and looking at himself in a mirror while he receives Ju'n Ajaw, who is in front of him and offers him eight rabbits and an enormous turkey that lacks the wart-like protuberances on the head. Given its passive attitude, without a fierce expression or spread plumage, it is probably a domesticated turkey.

⁵ For the translation of *wahyis* as "auxiliary spirit," see Moreno Zaragoza 2013.

⁶ Other spirit entities that carry the suffix *-is* are *baahis* and *o'hlis*, both treated in an exceptional manner by Erik Velásquez García (2009:460-522, 523-569), as well perhaps as *ch'ahb'-is-ahk'ab'-is* and *k'ahk'-is*.



Figure 4. *Meleagris ocellata* as a *wahy* entity. Before it is a basket with human remains. Photograph K2010 © Justin Kerr.

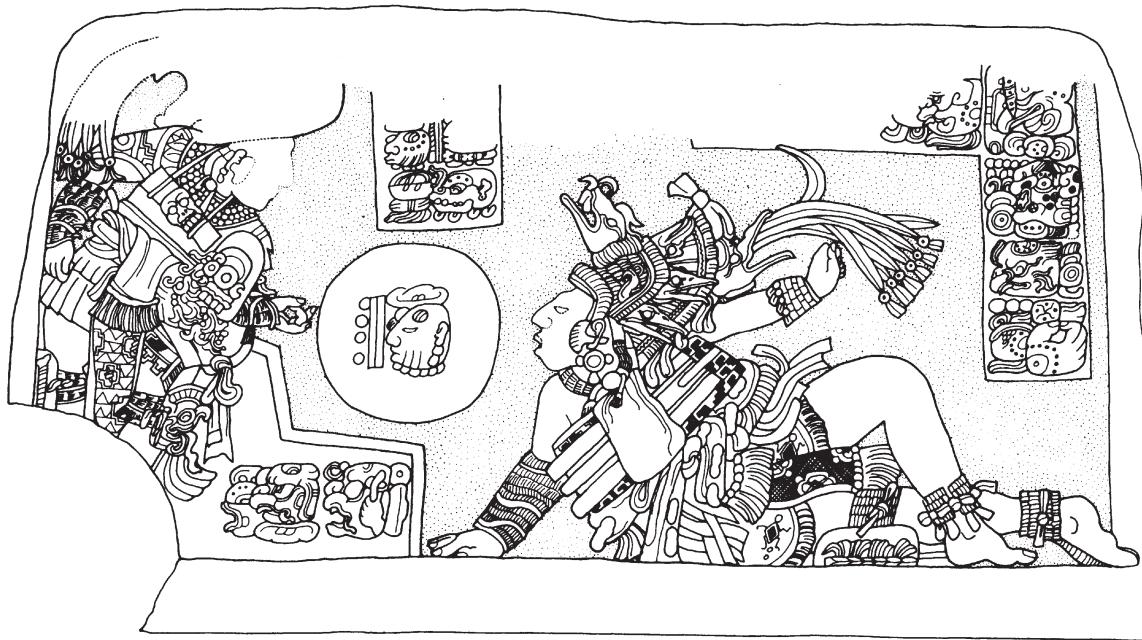


Figure 5. Panel of unknown provenance that shows, on the right, the La Corona ruler Chak Ak'ach Yuhk (from Stone and Zender 2011:108).

capacity of some human beings to transform themselves magically into an animal or a natural phenomenon. There is also the power to project outside the body, at will, one of its mental entities and insert it into the body of another. Given the strange and dark iconographic contexts of the *wahyis* entities, invariably related to animals of fearsome and fantastic aspect, David Stuart (2005:160-165) holds that these must be associated with practices of witchcraft and *brujería*, malificent acts in which Maya rulers took part.

The *wahyis* was a particular mental entity that could be acquired from birth or through special petitions throughout life. The possessors of this entity, during deep sleep, expelled their *wahyis* through the mouth so as to keep watch on their enemies and cause them damage with sicknesses during the night, when the recipients were least protected (Velásquez García 2009:570-634). Glyptic texts and ethnographic data suggest that only certain beings were possessors of *wahyis*, indicative of their power, such as the *k'uhul ajawtaak*. This entity could serve as an ally to its possessor, who could have more than one *wahyis*, some more powerful than others, with the intention of attacking enemies, because if the *wahyis* entity of a person was wounded the person suffered the same effects and would die.

Due to the secrecy that existed regarding the use of *wahyis* entities, the possessor of the wild turkey as a *wahyis* entity on K2010 is not identified by his proper name, but without doubt he is a ruler. Velásquez García (2011:248-249) opines that the scenes where *wahyis* entities appear with vessels containing human remains

represent triumphs over enemies, where the organic remains are symbolic of the vanquished human "soul," since these entities feasted on the "spirit" of their enemies. In other words, the scenes represent dream feasts that the Classic rulers caused to be painted in order to celebrate in the company of their allies:

[W]hile the *wahyis* savored the "souls" of the enemies in the dream world, the rulers tasted them while they slept in their houses. (Velásquez García 2011:248-249, authors' translation)

The fact that the wild turkey was a *wahyis* entity tells us that it was conceived of by the Classic Maya as a being gifted with exceptional powers, which could be harmful to humans from the nocturnal and dream space. Moreover, we know of at least one Maya ruler, from the site of La Corona, Guatemala, whose royal epithet included the wild turkey: Chak Ak'ach Yuhk (Figure 5), perhaps an abbreviated form of Chak Ak'ach Yuhk[no'm Ch'e'n], "Great Male Turkey, Shaker of Cities" (Velásquez García and Esperanza Olguín 2013).

The Ocellated Turkey in Postclassic and Colonial Documents

The wild turkey embodied calamitous forces that sprang forth in nocturnal spaces, as we have emphasized based on the depictions of the turkey as a *wahyis* entity. And this interpretation is confirmed by texts from the Colonial era.

In the Books of Chilam Balam the turkey *kuutz* is mentioned in the context of auguries unfavorable to

human beings that seem to be warning of the arrival of times of war and famine:

At that time there was Yax Cutz [Green Turkey]; at that time there was Zulim Chan; at that time there was the lord of Champoton. Starved trees, starved rocks, which came to be fall in *katun* 11 Ahau, being sent out from heaven (Edmonson 1982:43, authors' gloss)

López Cogolludo, in his *Historia de Yucatán* ([1688]1971:508), in describing the Franciscan friar Bartolomé Fuensalida's delegation to the Maya rebels of Bacalar, relates that a cacique named Don Pedro Noh showed what appeared to be amicable intentions by offering food in the form of cock or hen in a pie. But Fuensalida's Indian companions took this as a bad sign meaning war, not peace. It is very probable that the food served to the Spaniards was made from the meat of a wild rather than domestic turkey, the wild bird being associated with drought and war.

In modern times the ocellated turkey retains this bad connotation,⁷ as seen in a ceremony celebrated in Calkini called *Kóol Kaal Tzo'*, "pull the neck of the turkey," wherein they hang up a turkey and the participants pass underneath the rope where the turkey is swinging and, rather than strike it with a stick like a piñata, they try to reach it with their hands in order to yank the head and pull it down (Jorge Cocom, personal communication 2013), this being associated with the way that hitting and breaking a piñata signifies putting an end to the seven deadly sins of the Catholic faith.⁸

The Ocellated Turkey in the Dresden and Madrid Codices

The malign aspects of the wild turkey in the Classic and Postclassic, as well as in the Colonial period and our own times, contrast with what we find in the Dresden and Madrid codices. There, the depictions of *Meleagris ocellata*, clearly identified by the protuberance between the eyes and the large and colored caruncles, appear in ritual contexts associated directly with the gods, to be sacrificed by the deities in order to nourish the natural world and make it fertile.

The importance of the wild turkey in the Dresden and Madrid codices is owing, among other reasons, to the religious conception of the Maya regarding birds. Given that the word *muut* means "omen" as well as "bird," birds were identified as messengers of the gods,

⁷ This is also reflected in culinary contexts, given that there are turkeys that are filled with a black "message" (sauce), although in serving them they are stuffed with a sauce of tomato and achioté, which has a contrary symbolism.

⁸ Eduardo Baeza García, when he was presidente municipal of Calkini from 1956 to 1958, prohibited this ceremony as it was considered cruel, for which reason it has ceased to be performed.



Figure 6. Page 16c of the Dresden Codex, where various birds serve as messengers of the moon goddess (drawing by Carlos A. Villacorta).

as we see in the text of page 16c of the Dresden Codex (Figure 6):

Uhxla'ju'n Muwaan is the omen of Uuw Ixik, her sign.
The quetzal is the sign of Uuw Ixik, much food.
The macaw is the omen of Sak Ixik, her sign.

In this text divination is evidenced through the observation of the birds and their song. On page 95c of the Madrid Codex (Figure 7) we find the turkey endowed with this characteristic, since the text, an augury or prognostication that involves the moon goddess, is transmitted to humans through the bird. This augury is very good, since it consists of "abundant sustenance"

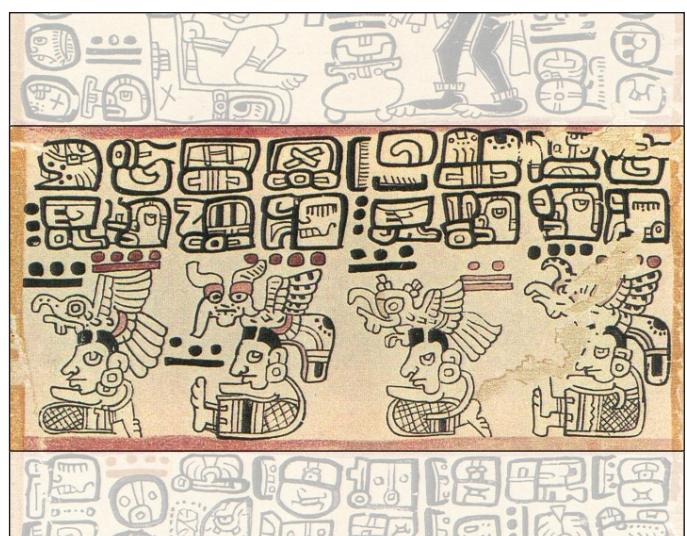


Figure 7. Page 95c of the Madrid Codex. The third image from the left shows the moon goddess with a turkey on her head serving as a messenger of her will (from Lee 1985).

(*ox wi'il*).⁹

The turkey, therefore, was conceived of as a messenger of divine will. It is shown also in association with Chaahk, the rain god, as we see on page 29c of the Dresden Codex (Figure 8). The glyphic text links it to one of the four directions, the north, as well as the color white. In front of the god's face we find the depiction of the head of a wild turkey, very probably associated with the augury of that almanac, either as a gift of the god himself or as a portent of food (*waaj*) for human beings.

On pages 25c and 26c of the same codex, the supreme deity Itzamnaah and K'awiil, the god of abundant food and royal lineage, are each holding the body of a wild turkey with its throat slit. In the first (Figure 9) we have the head of the god Chaahk atop a pole, to which Itzamnaah incenses and sacrifices a turkey as part of rite of the celebration of the New Year (García Barrios 2008:392). These offerings were carried out in the east. In the second page, 26c (Figure 10), we have the deity K'awiil scattering grains of maize over an incensario and holding the body of the turkey with its throat slit. This rite was enacted as part of the New Year ritual complex wherein the Green Tree or New Tree was planted in the south. In front of this tree we have a



Figure 8. Detail of page 29c of the Dresden Codex showing Chaahk with the head of a turkey (drawing by Carlos A. Villacorta).

turkey positioned on top of an offering vessel and, just above it, a glyptic complex reading *yaax waaj*, "first/new food."¹⁰

These pages indicate that the sacrifice of the wild turkey was fundamental in the New Year ceremonies, a time of beginning, when through its sacrifice a process of fertilization was unleashed that assured the sustenance of human beings at the start of the year. It is not by chance that the gods Itzamnaah and K'awiil are the enactors of these rites, since the first, as the supreme god and patron deity of birds, is in charge of guaranteeing, in this almanac, the profusion of birds that make nature generous in order to assure human sustenance. The second, K'awiil, whose name has been translated as "abundant food," fertilizes the earth through grains of maize and the sacrifice of birds, both rites with the intention of producing food in abundance for human beings.

Landa, for his part, relates that the sacrifice for the beginning of the year was a turkey, which was always by slitting its throat. Landa relates that in the year beginning with the day Muluk a stone figure was ordered to be made:

On arriving there, the priest perfumed it with fifty-three grains of ground maize and with their incense, which they call *sacah*. The priest also gave to the nobles more incense of the kind we call *chahalte*, to put in the brazier; and then they cut off the head of a hen, as before, and taking the image on

⁹ If the word "three" were in Mopan/Itza, it would be transliterated as *ox*. If, on the other hand, the text is in glyptic Maya, it would be transliterated *uhx*.

¹⁰ We transliterate *yaax waaj* since it is highly probable that the text is written in Mopan-Itza. If in Yukatek, it would be transliterated *yaax waaj*.



Figure 9. Page 25c of the Dresden Codex (drawing by Carlos A. Villacorta).



Figure 10. Page 26c of the Dresden Codex (drawing by Carlos A. Villacorta).

a standard called *chacte*, they bore it off all accompanying it with devotion and dancing some war-dances, which they call *Holcan okit, Batel okot*. (Landa [1566]1941:144)

This account is fused with the New Year ceremonies in the codices; therefore we suggest that it was the head of a male wild turkey that was consecrated, as well as its blood, which, by means of the ritual, was transformed to sustain the regeneration of nature.¹¹

Conclusions

The study presented here of the turkey of the variety *Meleagris ocellata*, despite limited interest on the part of investigators, indicates that the ocellated or wild turkey was conceived of by the Maya of the Classic to be one of the *wahyis* spirit entities, or “auxilliary spirits,” that were an important part of the political and religious apparatus of Maya kings. In its biological characteristics as well as its habitat, the wild turkey was accorded a series of complex qualities that permitted it to move in a dream state and especially an ambit alien from the human, outside the ecumene. As we have shown, the malign and harmful force that the wild turkey embodied in Classic conceptions continued into the Colonial era, and it is possible to find it to this day in some Maya regions.

Our proposal is that its energy was ambivalent: on painted vessels of the Late Classic its dark or malignant side seems to predominate. On the other hand, and by contrast, in the codices it is tied to fertilizing forces that impel the regeneration of nature. The function of the codex explains why information concerning the beneficent aspect of the animal is found there. These were religious texts to illustrate for priests the ritual steps that humans need to take, because they are the same actions that the gods undertake.

Here the wild turkey, *kuutz*, appears without the harmful characteristics belonging to the Classic period and inserted into ritual contexts where the gods participate. In such rituals, the wild turkey acts, like other birds, as the messenger of divine will, principally that of the moon goddess. Also, its sacrifice and immolation in the rites of the New Year give rise to times of abundant food and well-being for human beings.

In synthesis, *Meleagris ocellata* was the origin and augury of illnesses and the provoker of beneficences in Maya religion.

¹¹ Alfred Tozzer, in a note on Landa's text referring to hunting rituals, transcribes a document on idolatry where it is related that Juan Uc “killed a turkey hen and its blood he placed on the noses of the idols, the face and forehead and all the rest and this he anointed in behalf of the God of the chase...” (Tozzer in Landa [1566]1941:144). This is the first mention we find referring to the sacrifice of a female turkey, since all other cases make reference to the male.

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