



# The Maya Flood Myth and the Decapitation of the Cosmic Caiman<sup>1</sup>

ERIK VELÁSQUEZ GARCÍA

*Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, UNAM*

The 1999 discovery of the hieroglyphic platform of Temple XIX at Palenque (Stuart 2000a) opened the doors to a new understanding of Classic Maya mythology. Dedicated during the reign of K'inich Ahkal Mo' Nahb' III<sup>2</sup> in AD 734, it begins with an account of a series of cosmic events that occurred during the final bak'tun of the previous creation. These events include the enthronement of god GI in the sky under the supervision of Yax Naah Itzamnaaj on March 10, 3309 BC, as well as a decapitation event that happened eleven years later. This passage (Figure 1), partially deciphered thanks to contributions made by David Stuart (2000a:29, 2005:68-77, 176-180, 2006:101), narrates the decapitation of a crocodile or caiman with star and deer attributes (the "Starry Deer Crocodile"), that we can observe in other contexts as a patron god of the month Yax,<sup>3</sup> the head variant of the eighth day of the Maya calendar, Lamat, or the personification of the glyph for "star," "Venus," or "planet," EK' (see Förstemann 1906:182-196; Thompson 1960:77, 105, 220-221; Kelley and Kerr 1974:184; Kelley 1976:38; Closs 1979:147-148; Aveni 1991:316).

The text of the platform of Temple XIX seems to refer to this crocodile as *Way(?) Paat Ahiin(?)*, *Tz'ihb'al Paat Ahiin(?)*, "Hole(?)-Backed Caiman(?), Painted-Back Caiman(?)," an interpretation suggested by Stuart (2005:70), who proposed that the logogram of the seated and hunched male figure (T227) could be read as **PAT** (*paat*), "back." This proposal is

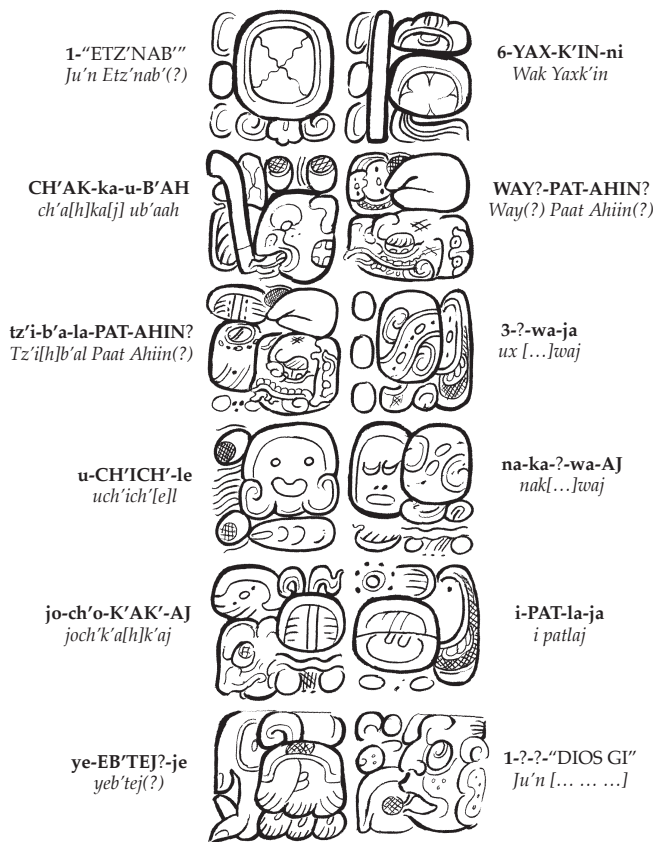
suggestively supported by Stela 16 from Dos Pilas and Stela 2 from Aguateca (Figure 2), dedicated in AD 736, only two years after the platform of Temple XIX at Palenque. While this last inscription refers to the decapitation of a "caiman with a painted back," the collocations on the Dos Pilas (D2-C3) and Aguateca (D1-C2) stelae apparently describe a cutting act performed over a "decorated-back K'awiil," an event that took place under the reign of Dos Pilas Ruler 3. The resemblance, chronological proximity of the passages, and the syllabic spelling of the word *paat* (**pa-ti**) (Figure 2b, c), reinforces the suspicion of a presumed **PAT** reading for the hunching man logogram.

As Stuart (2003a:2; 2005:73) has argued, the image of a caiman with a written or painted back finds itself happily embodied in the cosmological throne from the underground levels of the Palenque Palace. In this monument, the body of a starry caiman

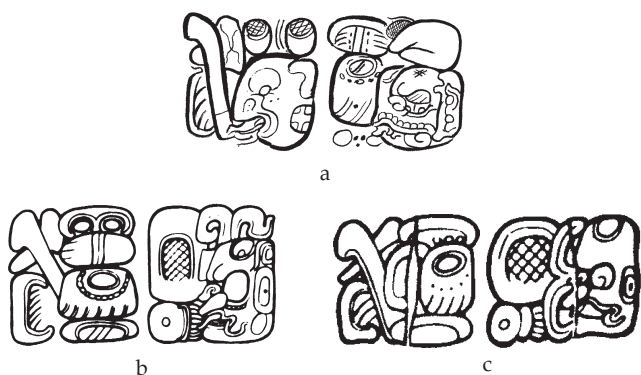
<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was read at the 30<sup>th</sup> Maya Hieroglyphic Forum at Texas, on March 18, 2006. Some of the ideas were formulated in an earlier paper presented at the XXIV Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte: Arte y Ciencia (Velásquez García 2002b:445-448). This text constitutes an updated version, with additional commentary and data.

<sup>2</sup> In this work, I follow the suggestions for transcription and transliteration proposed by Alfonso Lacadena and Søren Wichmann (2004), except that in the case of this ruler's name I defer to David Stuart (2005).

<sup>3</sup> In some instances, such as the one appearing in the Initial Series Introducing Glyph of Yaxchilan Lintel 21 (A1), the patron of the month Yax (Starry Deer Crocodile) is accompanied by a phonetic complement **-na**, which makes it clear that its reading is not EK', "star/planet," but probably AHIN(?), "caiman" instead.



**Figure 1.** Palenque, Temple XIX Platform, south side, E2-H1: *Ju'n Etz'nab'(?)* *Wak Yaxk'in cha[h]ka[lf] ub'aah* *Way(?) Paat Ahiin(?)*, *Tz'i[h]b'al Paat Ahiin(?)*; *ux [...].jwaj uch'ich'[el] nak[...]jwaj*, *joch'k'al[h]k'aj*; *i patlaj yeb'tej(?) Ju'n [... ..]*, "[on] 1 Etz'nab' 6 Yaxk'in the head of *Way(?) Paat Ahiin(?)*, *Tz'ihb'al Paat Ahiin(?)*, was cut; copiously flowed the blood of the one who raises the stream(?), the one who drills the fire; then the work of *Ju'n [... ..]* formed it" (drawing by David Stuart).



**Figure 2.** Parallel glyphic phrases from monuments consecrated within a period of only two years: (a) **CH'AK-ka-u-B'AH** **tz'i-b'a-la-PAT-AHIN?**, *ch'a[h]ka[lf] ub'aah* *Tz'i[h]b'al Paat Ahiin(?)*, Palenque, Temple XIX Platform (AD 734), south side, E3, E4; (b) **CH'AK-ka-u-tz'i-b'a-li pa-ti-K'AWIL**, *ch'a[h]ka[lf] Utz'i[h]b'aal Paat K'awiil*, Dos Pilas, Stela 16 (AD 736), D2-C3; (c) **CH'AK-ka-u-tz'i-b'a-li pa-ti-K'AWIL**, *ch'a[h]ka[lf] Utz'i[h]b'aal Paat K'awiil*, Aquateca, Stela 2 (AD 736), D1-C2 (drawings by David Stuart [a] and Ian Graham [b, c]).

with deer features is supplied with an interesting hieroglyphic inscription, while the rear head of the entity is actually a quatrefoil and discarnate censer being dragged by the monster, as opposed to part of its body (Robertson 1985:28; Stuart 1988:203, 2005:167-168). This caiman is one of a lengthy list of such saurians which feature painted or written bodies, amongst which could be mentioned, for example, Quirigua's Zoomorph B, Copan's Altar T, and the one that appears in the mural of Structure 2 at Coba's Grupo Las Pinturas (see Taube 1989:7, figure 5a), as well as the one of pages 4 and 5 of the *Dresden Codex*.<sup>4</sup>

According to Stuart (2005:74-75), there are some caiman depictions that carry underground holes or cavities on their backs, which could illustrate the concept of *Way(?) Paat Ahiin(?)*, "Hole(?) -Backed Caiman(?)," mentioned on the platform of Temple XIX. Although the phrase *Way(?) Paat Ahiin(?)*, *Tz'ihb'al Paat Ahiin(?)* appears to be ambiguous, as it is not clear if it refers to two different saurians or to a single entity being described with parallel couplet-structure phrases (Stuart 2005:69-70, 176, 2006:101), at present I am somewhat more inclined to favor the second of these options, by virtue of the syntactic *parallelism* attested in Maya hieroglyphic literature (Bricker 2000:106-110; Lacadena n.d.:5-6), as well as by the fact that later written sources (see below) support the idea of the decapitated caiman as only a single entity.

On a more general level, the Starry Deer Crocodile is probably a depiction of the underworld sky, the night firmament, or a symbol of the night (Wagner 2001:287; Stuart 2005:72-73), just as it is manifested on the famous Cosmic Plate (Figure 3), where several stars hang from the saurian's body, whose curvature constitutes the upper rim of the scene. In Stuart's view (Stuart, 2005:70-71), the Starry Deer Crocodile "is a variation or aspect of the 'Celestial Monster'" or "Cosmic Serpent" entity that was first identified by Herbert J. Spinden in 1913 (see Spinden 1975:53-56).

### The flooding of blood

In a number of examples dating to the Classic period (Figure 4), we notice that both crocodile or caiman heads vomit a torrential liquid decorated with conch shells, jade beads, small bones, rows of dots, completion signs, and **K'AN** and **YAX** logograms. As previously demonstrated by Stuart (1988, see also Schele 1985:37; Schele and Miller 1986:48), the relationship between these elements is associated with the symbolism

<sup>4</sup> The text written along the body of this saurian appears to be related to the death god and a series of fatalistic auguries (Davoust 1997:115; Schele and Grube 1997:100), which could bear some connection to the decapitation and death of the caiman that prompted the creation of a new cosmological order.

of blood, as can be observed in depictions of quatrefoil bloodletters (Figure 5) that are held in the hands of Maya rulers. The image of a celestial caiman pouring blood (Figure 4) suggests a flood or torrential rain, as can be confirmed by a hieroglyphic passage written on the platform of Temple XIX (Figure 1) which seems to refer to a deluge of blood.

The collocation at F4 (Figure 6a) seems to contain a verbalizing suffix *-aj* (see Lacadena 2003), added to a logogram of water streams which has not been deciphered yet.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the coefficient three that accompanies this inscription seemingly has the function of an “augmentative” (see Grube 1997:88), in which sense it occurs on a vessel from Rio Azul, where the expression *ux kab’u’[u]l* (Figure 7a) means “many are our beans,” or the well-known codical augury *ox wi’[il]* (Figure 7b), “a lot of food.” In this manner, a plausible translation for the collocation *ux [...].waj* could be “copiously it flowed.” The fact that this flow refers to a deluge of blood and not of water is wholly confirmed by the logogram **CH’ICH’**, “blood” (Figure 6b), also deciphered by Stuart (2003b:4, 2005:76). In this instance, it appears accompanied by the ergative pronoun *u-*, as well as the partitive-possession pronoun *-el* (see Houston, Robertson and Stuart 2001:30-31), indicating that the spilled blood belongs to the subject that is mentioned next (Figure 6c-d). Although this name is still difficult to understand, it appears to refer to the decapitated caiman (Stuart 2005:76). Its nominal phrase appears to be composed, however, of two parallel expressions.<sup>6</sup> The first one (Figure 6c) begins with a *nak* verb, which has been associated by Lopes (2003:4) with the Yucatek term *nakal*, “to rise,” and is followed by the so-called “water-band” noun; both of them produce a compound or derived noun (see note 5 and Stuart 2000b:15; Lacadena 2003:848, 857). This in turn ends with an agentive suffix *-aj* which, following Stephen D.

<sup>5</sup> It has been tentatively read by Luis Lopes (2003) as **PALAW**, “lake” or “ocean,” a reading that does not appear to have endured further scrutiny amongst scholars, probably because the iconography of the logogram suggests a stream, river, or ford, more than a lake or ocean (Stuart 2005:75; Marc Zender, personal communication, March 16, 2006). It is difficult to explain the coexistence of this purported “lake” logogram with the well known *naahb’ (na-b’i/NAH-b’i)* expression, which also means “sea.” In my opinion, the “water-band” logogram represents a noun or nominal root, for this is what its presence in collocation F5 of the Temple XIX Platform suggests (**na-ka-?-wa-AJ**). As Stuart (2005:76) has mentioned, this expression appears to be parallel to that of E6, which consists of a compound noun (a verb-object combination) plus an agentive suffix *-aj*, pointing to the fact that the “water-band” logogram performs in these contexts the same syntactic function as the glyph for “fire” (**K’AK’**).

<sup>6</sup> I would like to thank Barbara MacLeod (personal communication, March 18, 2006) for having helped me to understand the second of these parallel phrases (E6: *joch’k’al[h]k’aj*) and its possible relationship with the first one (F5: *nakl...waj*).

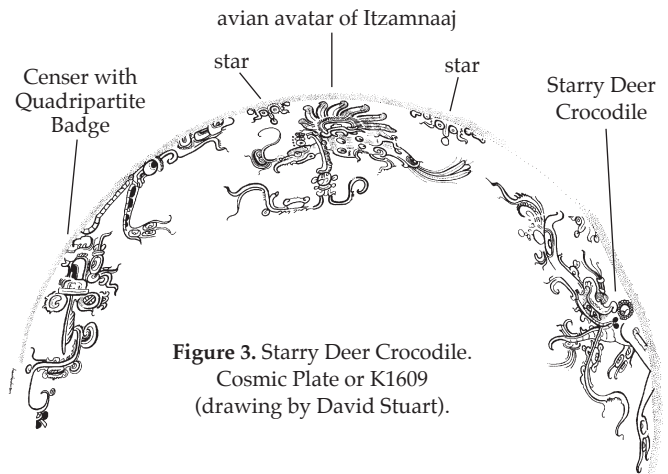


Figure 3. Starry Deer Crocodile. Cosmic Plate or K1609 (drawing by David Stuart).

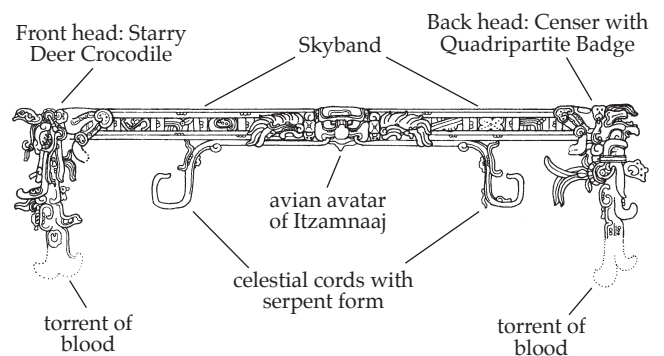


Figure 4. Starry Deer Crocodile. Palenque, Stucco in House E of the Palace or *Sak Nu[h]k Naah* (ca. AD 654) (drawing by Linda Schele).

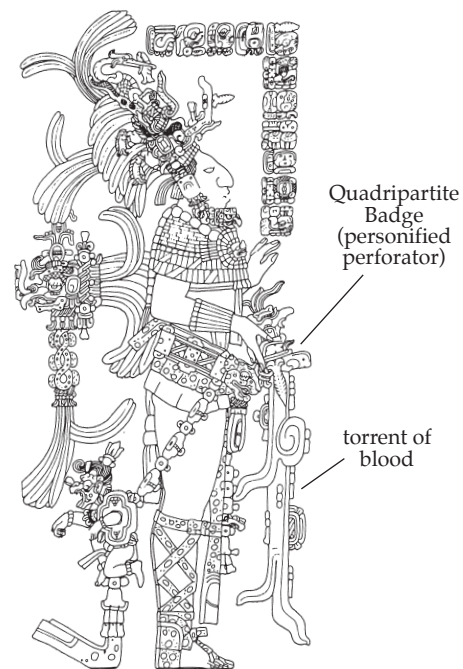
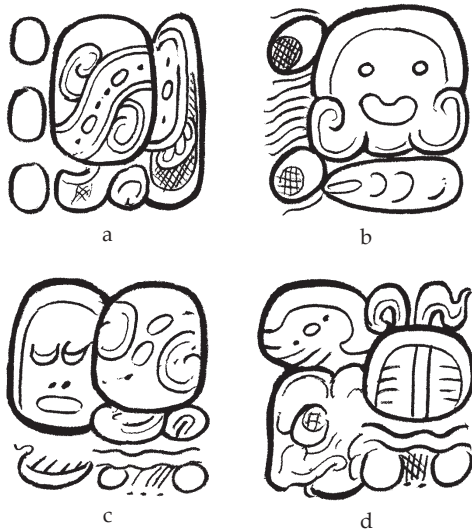


Figure 5. Palenque, Temple of the Cross, West Sanctuary Tablet (drawing by Linda Schele).



**Figure 6.** A passage where the blood of a person who raises the stream and drills the fire flows: (a) **3-?-wa-ja**, *ux [...].waj, ux [...].waj-ø*, three 'stream'-VERB-3SA, "a lot it flowed"; (b) **u-CH'ICH'-le**, *uch'ich'[e]l, u-ch'ich'-el*, 3SE-blood-POSS, "the blood of"; (c) **na-ka-?-wa-AJ**, *nak[...].waj, nak-[...].waj*, to rise(?)-'stream'-AG, "the person who rises the stream," (d) **jo-ch'o-K'AK'-AJ**, *joch'k'al[h]k'aj, joch'-K'ahk'-aj*, to drill-fire-AG, "the person who drills the fire." Palenque, Temple XIX Platform, south side, F4-E6 (drawings by David Stuart).

Houston, John Robertson, and David Stuart (2001:6-7), refers to a "person," in this case, "a person who raises the stream" of blood.<sup>7</sup>

Similar to this last example is the expression *joch'ka[h]k'aj* (Figure 6d), "the person who drills the fire." Although the identity of this individual is not explicitly mentioned, it is worth observing that "drilling the fire" is a ceremony that usually follows the destruction of the world by a deluge, as referenced in the mythological sources of highland Mexico.<sup>8</sup> In this case, because it constitutes an indirect allusion to the Starry Deer Crocodile, the fact that this caiman was a symbol of cosmic destruction and renewal is emphasized. Maybe because of that, "the person who drills the



**Figure 7.** Sentences where the numeral "three" has the function of an augmentative: (a) **3-ka-b'u-la**, *ux kab'u'[u]l, ux ka-b'u'ul-ø*, three 1PE-bean-3SA, "many are our beans," Vase K2914, possibly from Río Azul; (b) **3-WI'**, *ox wi'[il], ox wi'il*, three food, "a lot of food," *Dresden Codex* (drawings by Erik Velásquez García, J. Antonio Villacorta, and Carlos A. Villacorta).

fire" is immediately followed by the phrase *i patlaj* "and then it was formed" (F6), an event that according to Stuart (2000a:29, 2005:68, 180, 2006:101), describes the "creation of a new cosmological order," overseen by the god GI,<sup>9</sup> who also seems to be the agent who decapitates the caiman that spilled its blood (Stuart 2000a:29, 2005:177, 2006:101).

In this light, the whole passage of Temple XIX alludes to a process of destruction, creation, and renewal of the universe, initiated by the decapitation of a celestial caiman on the sacrificial date 1 Ètz'nab', which in turn caused a deluge of blood. This blood could also be linked to the sacred liquid of dynastic succession, as mentioned on Stelae 6, 11, 14, 25, and 33 from Piedras Negras (Figure 8), where the accession ceremony of the kings is presented as an act of cosmic relevance which includes the flooding of blood, the sacrifice of a victim, and the rebirth of a lord in his new condition as ruler, an act of destruction and creation of a new political order (see Proskouriakoff 1960:455; Stuart 1988:195; Taube 1988:340-350, 1994:671-674).

### The flooding of water

Among the Maya groups that left behind written testimonies during the Postclassic and Colonial periods, we find different accounts that revolve around the existence of a flood that wiped out the previous world and allowed for the creation of a new cosmological order. With the K'iche', for instance, this flooding was produced by Uk'u'x Kaj ("Heart of the Sky"), or Juraqan, Mother and Father of the Gods, in order to annihilate the race of the men of wood (Recinos 1984:94-98; Christenson 2003:85-90).<sup>10</sup> Bartolomé de las Casas (1967, II:507) also mentions that amongst the Q'eqchi' people from Verapaz, "there was news about a flood and the end of the world, and they called it *Butic*, which means

<sup>7</sup> It is worth observing that the meaning of the verb *nak* as "to raise" is only tentative, for we are not as yet sure about the sense of this transitive expression. For other possibilities, see Stuart (2005:76, note 26).

<sup>8</sup> According to the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (Garibay 1979:33), only two years after the flood, Tezcatlipoca-Mixcoatl "wanted [...] to feast the gods, and that is why he brought out flame from the sticks, which he usually did, and that was the beginning of fire-making out of flints, which are sticks that have a heart, and once that flame was obtained, it was a fiesta to make many and great fires."

<sup>9</sup> In this passage, I am following a recent suggestion of MacLeod (n.d.), according to which the expression at position G1 could be analyzed as **ye-EB'TEJ?-je** / *yeb'tej(?)* / *y-eb'-t-ej* / 3SE-suffering-TRANS-NOMIN / "the work of."

<sup>10</sup> As reported by Fray Francisco Ximénez (1977:120), similar ideas could have been present among the Kaqchikels: "what these [people] said about the flood was also attested at Guatemala by the Achi Indians (these are the Cacchiquels) stating that they had it painted between others of their antiquities [...]."

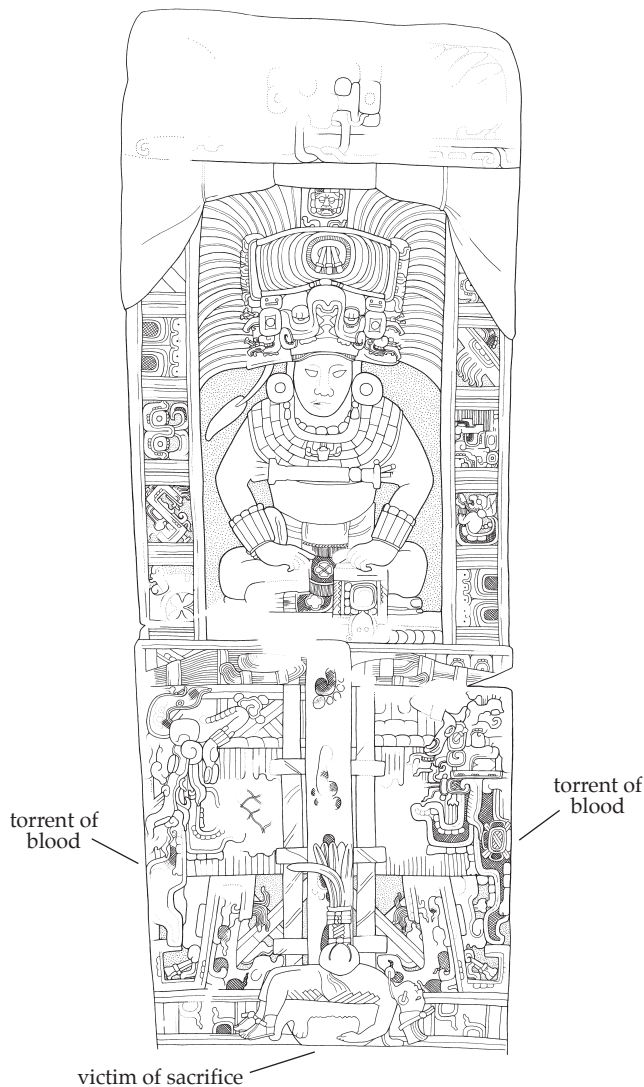


Figure 8. Piedras Negras, Stela 11, front (drawing by Linda Schele).

deluge of many waters and also judgment,<sup>11</sup> and so they believe that another *Butic* is yet to come, which is another flood and judgment, not of water, but of fire, which they say has to be the end of the world, in which all creatures will fight each other [...].”

A similar passage is contained in the *Relación de la ciudad de Mérida* (De la Garza 1983, I:72), which confirms the belief in successive floods of water and fire<sup>12</sup> as well as a caiman that symbolizes the flooding and the earth:

They had also news about the fall of Lucifer and the Flood, and that the world shall end by fire, and in order to signify this they performed a ceremony where they painted a caiman that meant the Deluge and the Earth, upon which caiman they made a great pile of wood and put it on fire, and after it was turned into live coal, they flattened it and the main priest passed barefooted over the live coal without being burnt, and after him everybody else who wished also passed, understanding by this that *it was the fire that shall finish them all*.<sup>13</sup>

For the Yukatek Maya, the flooding was caused by Ajmuken Kab’ (“He Who is Buried Underneath the Earth”) and by the B’olon ti’ K’uh (“The Nine Gods”), telluric forces that outraged the thirteen gods of heaven and robbed them of their insignia (Roys 1967:99-100). As a consequence of this, the sky fell and, according to Landa (in Tozzer 1975:135-136), the four B’aah Kab’ escaped the destruction. Maybe because of this, the word B’aah Kaab’ is written on page 74 of the *Dresden Codex* (Figure 9),<sup>14</sup> a passage traditionally interpreted as the destruction of the world caused by a flood (Thompson 1993:214-216; Davoust 1997:256-257; Schele and

- <sup>11</sup> Q’eqchi’ *but’* “inundación” (Sedat 1955:36; Haeserijn 1979:76)  
*but’i ha’* “inundación, diluvio” (Sedat 1955:36; Haeserijn 1979:76)  
*but’bu* “inundado” (Haeserijn 1979:76)  
*but’irc* “inundar, inundarse” (Sedat 1955:36; Haeserijn 1979:76)  
*but’unc* “inundar” (Sedat 1955:36).

<sup>12</sup> The belief in successive fire and water floods seems to have been common in the extreme southeast of Mesoamerica, as is suggested by an interesting dialogue that took place near the Nicoya Gulf between Gil González de Ávila and the cacique Nicoragua. An excerpt from it could be translated as “[...] once a time lapse ignored by mortal men goes by, a fire from heaven will fall down to bring everything to ashes” (see Anglería 1964:563).

<sup>13</sup> In Stuart’s opinion (Stuart 2005:76, note 25) this could be associated with the passage of the Temple XIX Platform that alludes to a “Painted-Back Caiman” (Tz’ihb’al Paat Ahiin[?]), one of whose indirect names is “the person who drills the fire” (*joch’k’a[h]k’aj*).

<sup>14</sup> Strangely enough, it appears written at B3 as *b’a-ka-b’i* (B’aa[h] Kaab’), as opposed to *b’a-ka-b’a* (B’aa[h] Kab’). Since Alfonso Lacadena (1997:190, note 9) and Gabrielle Vail (2000:48) have found in the *Madrid Codex* some disharmonic examples like *KAB’-b’i*, *kaab’*, “bee/honey/hive,” and this word is homophonous with “earth” in Yukatek, it is worth exploring the possibility that this spelling might reflect a local vernacular form:

Proto-Mayan	<i>*kaab’</i>	“miel / abeja” (Kaufman and Norman 1984:117)
	<i>*kab’ ~ kaab’</i>	“tierra // earth, land; pueblo // town” (Kaufman and Norman 1984:122).
Proto-Ch’olan	<i>*chab’</i>	“miel / honey” (Kaufman and Norman 1984:117)
	<i>*kab’</i>	“tierra // earth, land; pueblo // town” (Kaufman and Norman 1984:122)
Chontal	<i>chab</i>	“panela / piloncillo / dulce” (Pérez González and de la Cruz 1998:37)
	<i>kab</i>	“tierra” (Pérez González and de la Cruz 1998:49).
Ch’ol	<i>chab</i>	“miel” (Aulie and Aulie 1978:46)
Ch’orti’	<i>chab’</i>	“panela / miel / colmena / abeja” (Pérez Martínez et al. 1996:30)
Yukatek	<i>kaab</i>	“abeja / miel” (Bastarrachea, Yah Pech and Briceño Chel 1998:94)
	<i>kaab</i>	“el mundo o la tierra” (Bastarrachea, Yah Pech and Briceño Chel 1998:94).

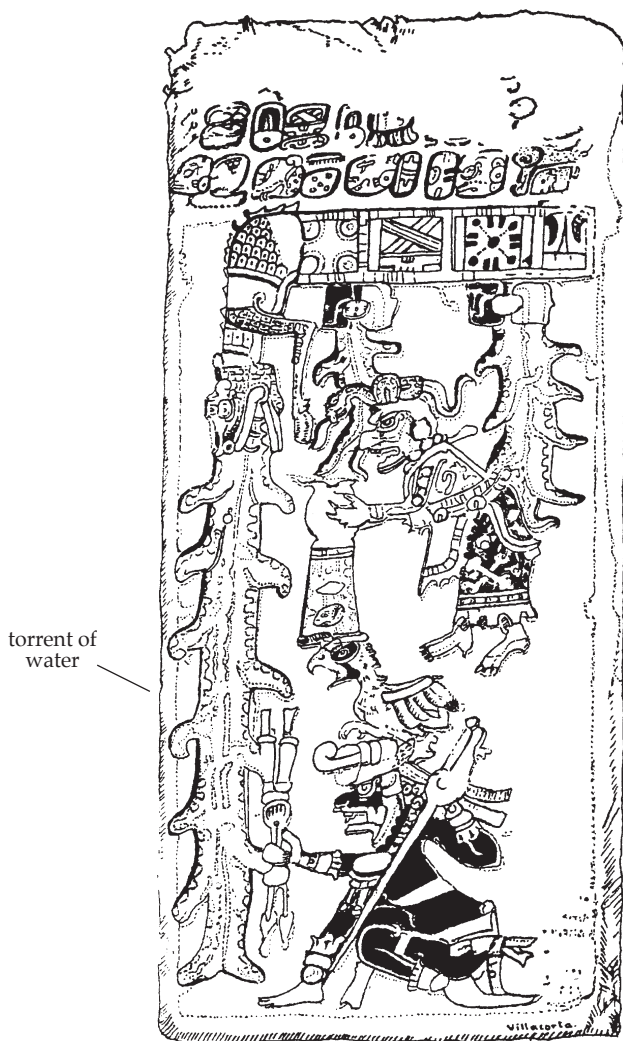


Figure 9. *Dresden Codex*, page 74 (54) (drawing by J. Antonio Villacorta and Carlos A. Villacorta).

Grube 1997:198-199). In this scene we observe that the old Goddess O—Chaahk Chak Chel—is pouring out the destructive waters that she carries in a jar,<sup>15</sup> while a black-painted God L holds his weapons over the surface of the earth while wielding a long staff. Streams of water descend from the jaws of a pluvial caiman and from a pair of eclipse glyphs that it carries below its body. According to Karl Taube (1995:72), the expressions “black sky” (B2: **IK’-CHAN-na**) and “black earth” (C2: **IK’-KAB’-b’a**) that appear in this scene are a possible reference to the destruction of the world.

In Michael Coe’s (1973:14) opinion, this topic was picked up on page 32a of the *Madrid Codex* (Figure 10), where another black deity, which has been identified as Zimmerman’s God Z (Zimmermann 1956:164; Bricker 1997:21; Sotelo Santos 2002:165-166; Hernández and Bricker 2004:295-296), appears holding his weapons under a sky band from which rain is pouring. We no-

tice that the god grasps a spear, two darts, a shield, and a spearthrower.<sup>16</sup> A snake, which probably represents lightning (see Taube, 1997:19-22; Miller and Taube 1997:106), seems to tear a hole in the celestial band. As on *Dresden Codex* page 74, we find eclipse signs that hang from the band. Underneath the scene in the *Madrid* (M32b) there is an image of the goddess Chak Chel, between whose open legs a stream of water is pouring, which corresponds perhaps to the destructive liquid that the goddess pours on *Dresden* page 74 (De la Garza 1984:232-234).

It is well known that the scene of the flood precedes the New Year pages of the *Dresden Codex* (pp. 25-28), where amongst other ceremonies, the erection of trees in the four corners of the world can be observed. As noted by Taube (1995:72-73), the account of the flood also precedes the New Year ceremonies in Landa’s *Relación* and the cosmological myth about the erection of world trees in the Chilam Balam books of Chumayel, Maní, and Tizimin, which confirms the basic idea expressed on the platform of Temple XIX of Palenque, in the sense that the flooding unleashed a process of cosmic destruction and renewal.

An important passage contained in the Chilam Balam books of Tizimín and Maní describes how the flooding was preceded by an eclipse and caused by a pluvial and celestial caiman, whose head was severed in order to build the new cosmological order out of its dismembered remains. I quote the version of *Chilam Balam of Maní* contained in the *Pérez Codex*:

[In the reign of 13 Ahau and 1 Ahau were the days and nights that fell without order, and pain was felt throughout the land. Because of this] Oxlahun ti Ku [the Thirteen Gods] and Bolon ti Ku [the Nine Gods] created the world and life; there was also born Itzam Cab Ain [Iguana Earth Crocodile]. [Ah Mesencab] turned the sky and the Petén upside down, and Bolon ti Ku raised up Itzam Cab Ain; there was a great cataclysm, and the ages ended with a flood. The 18 Bak Katún was being counted and in its seventeenth part. Bolon ti Ku refused to permit Itzam Cab Ain to take the Petén and to destroy the things of the world, so he cut the throat of Itzam Cab Ain and with his body formed the surface of Petén (Craine and Rein-dorp 1979:117-118, brackets in original).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The liquid being poured by the goddess contains the numbers 5.1.0 plus an **EB’** logogram (Davoust 1997:257). As Eric Thompson (1960:81) has noted, in Mayan languages there exist a number of entries that associate the word *eeb’/yeeb’* with the concept of “humidity, mist or harmful dew” (Guillermo Bernal, personal communication, March 27, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> I would like to thank Alfonso Lacadena (personal communication, April 28, 2006) for calling my attention to the presence of the spearthrower.

<sup>17</sup> See the Spanish translation in Ermilo Solís Alcalá (1949:230-231). The version of the *Chilam Balam de Tizimín* can be found in Maud W. Makemson (1951:39-40) and Munro S. Edmonson (1982:40-41). In addition, the version of Alfredo Barrera Vásquez and Silvia Rendón (1990:87) is worth mentioning.

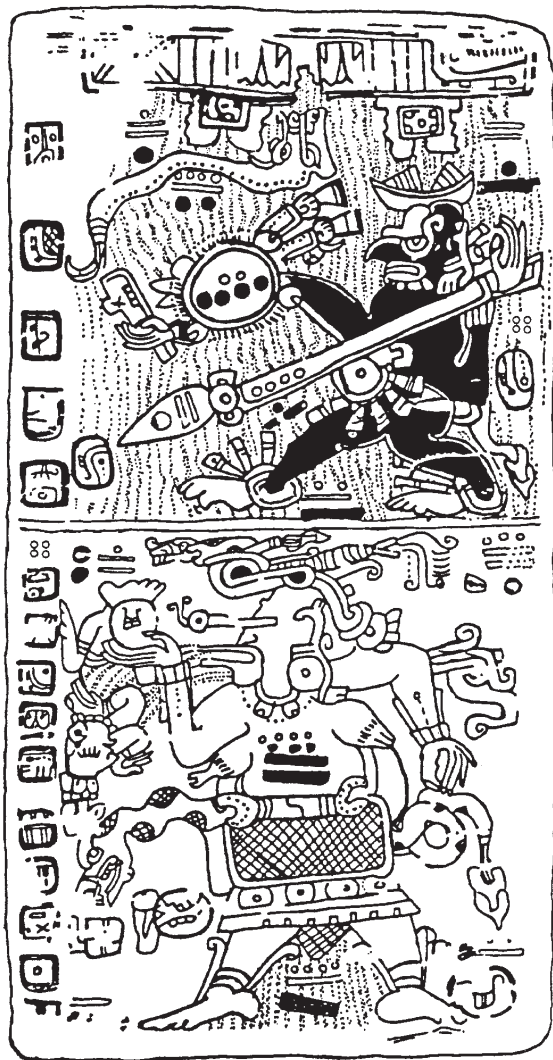


Figure 10. *Madrid Codex*, page 32 (drawing J. Antonio Villacorta and Carlos A. Villacorta).

This passage confirms what is told in the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, in the sense that B'olon ti' K'uh and the cthonic forces of the Underworld were the agents that brought down the skies, but also the force behind the current creation, because when decapitating the celestial caiman, they made it possible to construct a new world. In addition, this text satisfactorily explains the presence of eclipse hieroglyphs that we can appreciate in the Postclassic scenes of the flood (Figures 9, 10), information that is confirmed by Bishop las Casas (1967, II:507), referring to the events that surrounded the deluge of fire that will end the current cosmic order; he affirms that "the moon and the sun will eclipse, telling that they will be eaten, which is their way of speaking, because whenever there is an eclipse, they say that the moon or the sun are being eaten."<sup>18</sup>

Of utmost importance is the possibility that the pas-

sage contained in the *Chilam Balam* books of Tizimín and Maní can help us to understand the relationship between the flood, the decapitation of the cosmic caiman, and the construction of a new cosmological order, as expressed on the platform of Temple XIX at Palenque (Figure 1). In this inscription, the decapitation of the caiman with the painted back took place on a 1 Etz'nab' date. The manner in which these concepts persisted through time can be exemplified in a mural painting from Structure 44 at Tancah (Figure 11). It represents a character (possibly God E, Lord of Maize) who holds in his right hand a logogram OL/WAJ from which a maize ear is sprouting.<sup>19</sup> The individual depicted uses as a helmet a full-body caiman with a spotted back, on whose torso we can find the glyphs for Etz'nab' and Ajaw, which might possibly be a reference to the day when the decapitation took place and creation began, as symbolically expressed in the medical spells from the *Ritual of the Bacabs* by the paired set of dates 1 Ajaw and 4 Ajaw.

Within the poetical texts of these incantations, the origin of the world is conceived as a divine copula or a cosmic hierogamy that took place at the twilight of time, at the conclusion of the mythical night that preceded the first sunrise,<sup>20</sup> which was symbolized by an act of decapitation, destruction, and dismemberment:

Four are my red husking tools. So I chopped his neck; so I husked his surplus part (*holmal*). This is the lust of creation, the lust of darkness [...] Cut ye his neck! Husk ye his surplus (or slippery?) part! Four are my husking tools. Lo, I chop the neck of the lust of creation, the lust of darkness (Roys 1965:40, fols. 116, 117)<sup>21</sup>

This allusion to a radical act of destruction, which in

<sup>18</sup> According to Robert Redfield (1964:116-117), in 1948 the *h-meeno'ob'* from Chan Kom, Yucatán, still believed that an eclipse had accompanied the flood that destroyed the previous world.

<sup>19</sup> Maricela Ayala Falcón (personal communication, March 27, 2006). The motif of the maize ear sprouting from an OL/WAJ logogram is fairly common in Postclassic depictions of God E (Taube 1997:46, 48).

<sup>20</sup> To better apprehend this cosmic hierogamy and the symbolism of dawn (1 Ajaw) and the solar rising (4 Ajaw), earthly darkness and celestial light, two aspects of Creation, see Thompson (1997:243-244, 366, 407-408). In my opinion, the caiman depicted in the wall painting from Structure 44 at Tancah shows aspects of both the destruction (Etz'nab') and the creation (Ajaw). In other Mesoamerican mythic complexes related to the caiman, bearing on this paper, the saurian symbolizes the origin and beginning of earth, man, and calendrical time (see Barrera Vásquez 1976; López Austin, López Luján and Sugiyama 1991).

<sup>21</sup> "De cuatro secciones fue mi gran corte, / le descuarticé la cabeza, / le descuarticé las entrañas, / totalmente abierto fue todo como en el desenlace lujurioso del coito, / el desenlace lujurioso de la noche / [...] / Cortadles la cabeza, / destrozadles las entrañas. / De cuatro secciones fue mi gran corte, / así las descuarticé. / Les voy cortando la cabeza / en la lujuria del coito / en la lujuria de la noche" (Arzápalo Marín 1987:354).

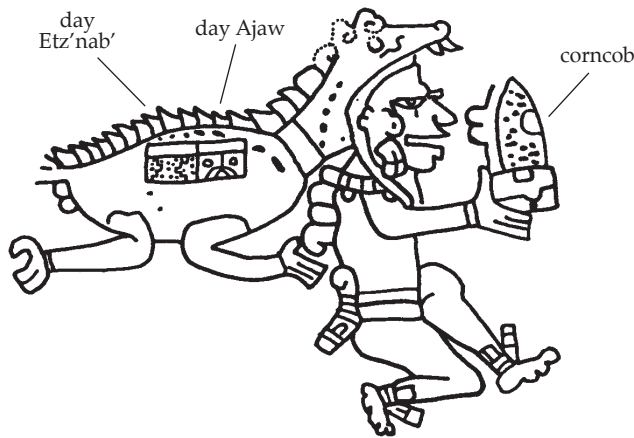


Figure 11. Tancah, Structure 44, Room 1, Mural 1 (drawing by Karl A. Taube).

turn allowed the procreation of the universe, could be related to the narrative of the caiman that caused the flooding, a myth which seemingly prevailed embedded within the consciousness of indigenous medicine men, as can be noted in another spell from the *Ritual of the Bacabs*: “Who are his *kalo* (deputies)? This is to be said: First (or green) *huh*-iguana, first *itzam*-lizard, first *haamcab*[-flood] [*ah-am-cab*, ‘spider-bee’?], first *bekech*-lizard” (Roys 1965:30, fol. 83).<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusions

Comparative analysis of hieroglyphic texts, Precolumbian images and colonial alphabetical texts has made it possible to verify the diachronic and geographical persistence of a basic core of Maya beliefs, related to the destruction of a previous world by flooding, a cataclysm that allowed the construction of a new cosmological order. Beyond this, the myth of the great flooding and decapitation of the caiman, documented from the eighth century in Palenque until the eighteenth in the books of Chilam Balam, had important variations throughout these ten centuries. Most noticeable amongst them is probably the fact that in the Classic Maya version, the liquid being spilled by the caiman is blood, whereas in the *Dresden Codex* and the colonial sources that followed, the liquid can be identified as water.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the eclipse that served as a preamble for the flooding does not seem to be present in the Palenque version, while the names of gods and entities that appear in all these accounts are also different.

A faint echo of the Classic Maya version might possibly be found in the famous myth collected by Alfred M. Tozzer (1982:179) exactly a century ago, at a village close to Valladolid, Yucatán. According to this version, during the first times of creation there existed a road suspended in the sky that was called *kuxa’an suum*,

“living rope,” from the center of which blood poured out. “For some reason, the rope was broken, the blood was spilled,” and this caused a flood that separated the first cosmic age from the second.<sup>24</sup>

Taube (1995:70, 73) has pointed out that the myth of the decapitation and dismemberment of the Itzam Kab’ Ahiin caiman is suspiciously similar to the nahuatl version contained in the *Histoire du Mexique* (Garibay 1979:108), which narrates the manner in which Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl chopped up the body of the Tlaltecuhli monster, and with its dismembered body parts, formed the world. The data contained in the text of the platform of Temple XIX at Palenque reveal that this is not a tradition that was recently introduced amongst the Maya, but that all these different versions proceed from a Mesoamerican cultural background whose origins became lost somewhere in the depths of time.

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<sup>22</sup> “¿Quiénes son los demás? / Habrá de decirse. / La primera iguana, / el primer cocodrilo, / el primero del diluvio / la primera lagartijuela” (Arzápalo Marín 1987:329).

<sup>23</sup> Several authors have noticed that in Mesoamerican world views, water and blood form a pair of complementary and co-substantial opposites that merge together into the concept of “precious liquid” (Schele 1987:2; Baird 1989; Carlson 1991:7, 12; 1993:69; Velásquez García 2002a:244). I therefore agree with Stuart (2003b:4) that these types of symbolic association “do not simply represent [...] ‘binary oppositions’ [...] but rather paired and complementary illustrations of a conceptual whole [...]; they are part-and-parcel of the one another.” In light of this, the exchange of blood for water in the liquid poured during the flood reflects only two aspects of the same cosmological element.

<sup>24</sup> According to an account recollected at Chan Kom, Yucatán, the flood annihilated a race of dwarves called the *p’uuso’ob’*, who belonged to an age when all the Precolumbian buildings were built (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1964:12, 330-331).



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## The Maya Flood Myth and the Decapitation of the Cosmic Caiman

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