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## 2012: The End of the World as We Know It?

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## 2012: The End of the World as We Know It?

***Evelyn French***

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Many so-called “2012 doomsayers theorists,” such as John Major Jenkins and Jose Arguelles successfully convinced a portion of the modern Western world that the ancient Maya had predicted the end of the world. They swayed many into believing that the world was supposed come to a violent end on December 21, 2012. This important date is referred to as the end of the “Great Cycle” of 13 Bak’tuns, according to translations of the ancient Maya hieroglyphic texts. But what evidence, if any, in the archaeological record suggested a cataclysmic collapse in support of these doomsday predictions? Here, I explore the root of these concepts of violent collapse. Although we now know their predictions were false, they seem to have gotten a good deal of the Western world worried about what was to come this past winter. What exactly did these doomsayers like Jenkins and Arguelles predict and how do their predictions compare with what the ancient and contemporary Maya say? The archaeological evidence that survives suggests the ancient Maya would not have feared this time but would have celebrated it as a time of renewal. Although the ancient Maya mythology suggests destruction of the world at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> Bak’tun, a new world would no doubt have been anticipated by the ancient Maya who would have celebrated this period as a time of rebirth and renewal, much like other important period endings in their calendar. Below I review the doomsayers’ theories and present evidence from several archaeological contexts that suggest the predictions of December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2012 do not accurately reflect the thinking of the ancient Maya.

### **CALENDAR SYSTEM**

December 21, 2012 is the last day of the Great Bak’tun Cycle, a cycle within the ancient Maya calendar system. The Maya along with other civilizations across ancient Mesoamerica developed and used a very complex calendar system that holds the key to our understanding of the 13<sup>th</sup> Bak’tun that came to an end in December of 2012. The Maya had two intertwining calendars, a 365-day solar calendar and a 260-day ritual calendar. When these two calendars are combined they repeat their day names every 52 years, and are thus called the 52 year Calendar Round by archaeologists. When denoting time longer than 52 years, the ancient Maya used what is called the Long Count (Martin 2012: 24). This non-repeating vigesimal (base-20) counting system fixes a given Calendar Round day with a larger bundle of time, known as the “Great Cycle of 13 Bak’tuns.” We can break down the Long Count into the following units of time: 1 day is 1 *kin* (0.0.0.0.1); 20 *kins* is 1 *Winal* or 1 month (0.0.0.1.0); 19 *Winals* is 1 *Tun* or 1 year (0.0.1.0.0); 20 *Tuns* is 1 *K’atun* or ~20 years (0.1.0.0.0); and 20 *K’atuns* is 1 *Bak’tun* (1.0.0.0.0).

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According to the Maya and their Long count system, the current world comprises of 13 bak'tuns, equivalent to 1,872,000 days or 5,125 solar years. This "Great Bak'tun Cycle" is said to begin August 11, 3114 BC. Adding roughly 5,125 years, this brings the end date of the current world to what is traditionally calculated as December 21, 2012.

When written in text the Long Count date would be followed by the day names designated by the 52 year Calendar Round. For example the first day of the current time was written as 0.0.0.0.0 4 Ahaw 8 Kumk'u and the last day of the 13<sup>th</sup> bak'tun is written as 13.0.0.0.0 4 Ahaw 3 Kank'in (Carlson 2011: 145). At the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> Bak'tun, many Maya archaeologists believe the calendar will reset to zero and the pattern of the Long Count begins again with the beginning of a new world order (Carlson 2011:146).

### **CREATION MYTHOLOGY AND THE POPOL VUH**

The basis for these so called "Maya prophecies" predicting the violent end of current world is rooted in the Maya calendar but also stem from Maya Mythology. Specifically, the Maya creation myth known as the Popol Vuh is the most well known Maya myth. There have been many interpretations of these mythic stories and what they meant to the Maya. The archaeological evidence suggests that the creation myth found in the Quiche Maya Popol Vuh was present across much of the Maya area. It was carried through time with oral tradition possibly dating back to the Middle Preclassic period (900-500 BC) until it was written in Latin sometime between 1554 and 1558. (Rice 2007: 3).

Within the Popol Vuh the story of the creation and destruction of the first three worlds for their imperfections is the foundation for the so called "Maya prophecies." Doomsayers say our world will end violently just as the first three worlds did because our world is not perfect. However, the worlds were said to be destroyed before the beginning of time and had no connection to the calendar system unlike the doomsayer prophecies. It is possible that it was vital to the Maya that they worship and sacrifice to their gods as they believed they too would be punished if they did not. It is more likely that the ancient Maya would have believed the gods put much effort into creating the perfect world for humans and creating the right people to count their days and worship the gods (Callaway 2011: 39).

The entirety of the Popol Vuh also shows how important time and day keeping was to the ancient Maya. The gods asked the people to keep their days, showing that the Maya believed that counting and keeping the days was as important as worshipping and sacrificing to the gods. They believed they were forever indebted to the gods and thus had to sacrifice to them. It is possible that this is where people like John Major Jenkins got his ideas as to why the Maya would have believed their world would end at the conclusion of the 13<sup>th</sup> Bak'tun in December of 2012. However, our evidence from the Popol Vuh

suggests this would have not destroyed the world but it would have been a time of rebirth and renewal, if this time period had any significance at all (Van Stone 2011: 29).

Why was the tracking of time so important to the ancient Maya? There is no way to know for sure how significant time was to the ancient Maya but there are a few clues that can point us in the correct direction. One of the first being, as already pointed out, time and the ability to track it was considered to be a gift from the gods. It was a requirement for the gods that their people could count the days (Read and Gonzalez 2000: 83). Kay Almere Read and Jason J. Gonzalez (2000: 115) state, “Calendars help control the transformative change that is a natural part of life,…” The rituals surrounding the ancient Maya calendar affected all aspects of life, including planting, harvesting, marriage, travel, business transactions and more. Furthermore, one’s personality was defined by the day they were born on. Each person was given a calendrical day name that gave them both positive and negative traits (Read and Gonzalez 2000: 116). It is safe to say that the calendar was an important aspect of Mesoamerica life as well as an esteemed honor. With the calendar being an important aspect of life, it is no wonder why they referenced time in many ways throughout history. It is not surprising that the period ending dates such as the one on December 21 would have been celebrated not feared.

### **DOOMSAYER’S PREDICTIONS**

What exactly have these doomsayers like Jenkins and Arguelles predicted? They seem to have gotten many in the Western world worried about what was to come this past winter. Some people have been making jokes (Figure 1) or movies, while others were truly convinced of an apocalypse and bunkering down in preparation for the end of the world. It seems that the basis for their panic stemmed from the belief that the Maya gods would make everything die. This pandemic death would cause the world as we know it to cease. These doomsayers also believed that “Damaging sunspots [would] reach their peak” (Aveni 2009: 3). The prediction was that this phenomenon would cause a mass extinction of the earth and send the earth into a black hole. These ideas seem to have been based on (mis)interpretations of the Maya mythology and the calendar system (Aveni 2009: 4).

John Major Jenkins is one of the largest players in the doomsday predictions of 2012. He has written two books and many articles on the subject, conducted many interviews, and has a website titled “Alignment2012.com.” Here, he provides summaries into the “inner workings” of the ancient Maya calendar system as well as a glossary of terms. Jenkins calls these “Late Breaking Discoveries.” (alignment2012.com).

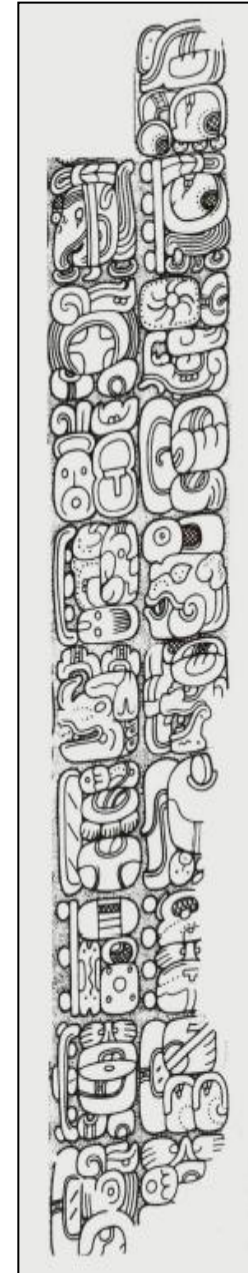
After the release of the Hollywood blockbuster *2012*, Jenkins did a series of interviews with various television networks including CNN, BBC, MTV, NBC, CNBC, and CBS (alignment2012.com). He states that he was reporting the truth, but the interviews never aired because of a conspiracy of which he calls the “Hollywood Illusion

Machine.” Jenkins does admit that the Maya did not predict the end of the world; he merely believes that an important “Galactic Alignment” that occurs only once every 260,000 years is nearing. He believes that this is expressed in carved monuments at the site of Izapa, although he admits they have not been translated thoroughly, nor does he provide any detail to which monuments at Izapa.



**FIGURE 1.** *Maya 2012 Cartoon* (after *Bizarro Comic, Blogspot.com*).

**FIGURE 2. (right)** *Text of Tortugero Monument 6, Tabasco Mexico.*



### ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing what the ancient Maya would have really done at a time like this. However, we are left with stone monuments known as *stelae*, pottery, temples and the few codices left untouched by the Spanish. Reason would suggest that if the ancient Maya truly believed the end of the current world would be on December 21, 2012 they would have written about it and warned others about it on their surviving monuments. Yet, there are only a scant few examples of any mention of the upcoming date.

One of these monuments was found in Tabasco, Mexico and is known as the Tortugero monument 6 (Figure 2). The text is specifically a building dedication and up until recently this was the only monument with an inscription referring to the 13<sup>th</sup> Bak'tun period ending on December 21. It is suggested to originally have been a temple sanctuary panel and was then reused as a capstone to a tomb (Callaway 2011: 149). The text describes the life and ceremonies of Balam Ajaw, Jaguar Lord. Jaguar Lord was born in AD 612, and ruled for 35 years. After the historical text the monument reads:

It's the end of the thirteenth Bak'tun  
 On 4 Ajaw of the third K'ank'in  
 Of the display of 9 dog-tree in the  
 Great impersonation/investiture.

According to Mark Van Stone (2011: 16) this simply means Bolon Yokte, a minor god, will dress up and perform a ceremony wearing deity costumes. These deity costumes were not uncommon for Maya rulers and royalty to wear and many gods are depicted as wearing them. The costumes would often be worn during ceremonies and rituals. There is no mention of the end of the world or any profound event to occur on December 21 on the Tortugero Monument 6 (Van Stone 2011: 16).

Even though there are a few mentions of December 21, 2012 date, like the Tortugero Monument 6, there are many references to beginning of time and other important period ending dates. It is important to look back onto the beliefs surrounding the beginning of time and other period ending dates when discussing the end of time. It can provide important information on how each cycle was to be celebrated and the importance of it to the ancient Maya. If time was understood to the ancient Maya as cyclical (as opposed to our linear time) as suggested by many Maya scholars, then they truly would have believed that history would repeat itself.

One of the significant references for our purposes is in the Dresden Codex, a Postclassic document, specifically on pages 60 and 61. However, the Dresden Codex must be taken with a grain of salt. Since it is dated close to the time of European contact, it shows some evidence of being corrupted by the European influence (Van Stone 2011: 16). The Dresden Codex does provide us with some vital information on the creation of time. The text speaks of how old gods from before the first day of creation (August 11, 3114 BC) slowly fade away and when the time starts again they will reborn into the new world (Callaway 2011: 38). These were not new or different gods, but the same gods reborn in a new era of time, demonstrating that this was not a time of destruction and total annihilation, but rather, a time of rebirth and regeneration of life and the cosmos.

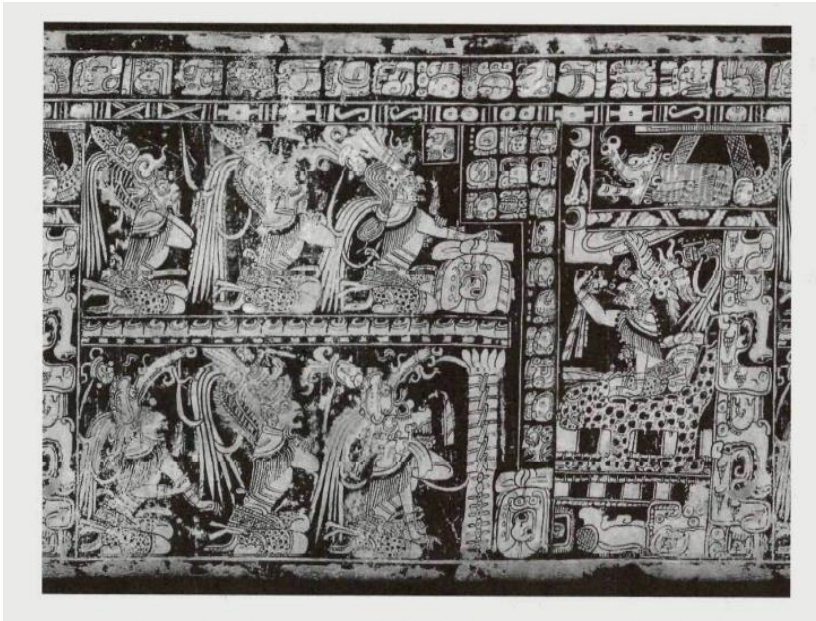
Other references to the beginning of time are found on the Vase of Eleven Gods (Figure 3) and the Vase of Seven Gods (Figure 4). These two chocolate cups or vases were painted by two different artists, but they share strikingly similar aspects (Van Stone 2011: 20). Both of the vases depict the gathering of the gods before the beginning of time. Both depict God L—a powerful creator god and lord of the underworld (see Beaucher, this issue)—sitting upon a throne in the underworld while the other gods are presenting bundles of offerings to him (Callaway 2011: 39). The most significant aspect of the two vases is the first 15 glyphs on both the vases are identical. One important glyph, *tz'ak* (Figure 5), meaning ‘to order’ appears on both vases directly following the date 4 Ajaw 8 kumk'u the first day of the current era.



**FIGURE 3.** *Vase of Eleven Gods.*

*Tz'ak* has several different meanings and one must look at its context to truly understand its meaning. The verb in this context could very well mean ‘was set in order back then’ as suggested by Callaway (2011: 40). The definition of the verb *tz'ak* is also more easily found by looking at other context in which the glyph is located. The glyph is used in the context of ordering things like links on a chain or even the bones in a human arm. One of the more common ways it is used is when listing the rulers of a dynasty. And finally *tz'ak* is used as a stopper between phrases or time periods. It indicates when one phrases is ending and another is about to begin (Callaway 2011: 41) *Tz'ak* in the sense of a stopper or indicator could have been exactly what the artist of the Vase of Eleven Gods and the Vase of Seven gods were using it for. Not only were the gods organizing and ordering the cosmos but one time period was ending while another was beginning.





**FIGURE 4.** *Vase of the Seven Gods.*



**FIGURE 5.** *Verb tz'ak meaning 'to order.'*

There are also several references, throughout the Maya region, of period ending dates. One significant reference is at the site of Chichen Itza in Mexico on the Caroccal panel 1. This panel describes the life of ruler K'ak Upakal in the 17 tun of Ka'tun 1 Ajaw (10.2.16.0.1-10.2.17.0.0). It also refers to the rites and rituals surrounding the (Callaway 2011: 43). It describes a cosmic altar or pedestal that is changed at the start of the era. The ruler K'ak Upakal closely connected himself to ideas surrounding time on purpose. He did this in order to show how as a ruler, he was closer to the divine powers and that he had a connection with the power of time.

Another reference to a period ending date offers a different perspective on the December 2012 bak'tun ending. It is found on the mortuary building at Palenque that was built in honor of the ruler Pakal. It contains a long text that narrates the history of the site. Narration specifically describes the events during the rule of Pakal, events leading up to his kingship and a time when the Great Lord Pakal would return (Van Stone 2011:

29). The text and the dates indicate that the Maya priest believed that the bak'tuns did not, in fact, end at the 13<sup>th</sup> bak'tun, but would instead go on to the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> bak'tuns. Current time would continue to the 20<sup>th</sup> bak'tun. This suggests that the time would not reset on December 21 as believed previously but would continue on a linear path. Van Stone (2011: 30) argues that time for the Maya would never reset. After the 20<sup>th</sup> bak'tun the dating would continue on to a Pik'tun, which would then be followed by five zero (1.0.0.0.0) (Van Stone 2011: 30).

There is also physical evidence of the celebration for ka'tun ending dates. For example at the Preclassic site of El Mirador thirteen stelae were found at the E-group, a group of buildings used to observe the sunrise of the solstices. Twelve of the stelae are left blank and only one is carved. Although the dating is approximate Prudence Rice (2007: 177) argues that each of these monuments was erected at the end of twenty tuns to celebrate the end of a ka'tun. This shows a connection between the observing of the solstices and the celebration of period ending dates. There is also evidence of monuments being erected in honor of period ending dates at Tikal, on Stela 31, Uaxactun, and Xultun (Rice 2007:177).

Even though there are many stelae with references to period ending dates there is no evidence for how they would have been celebrated either at a state or household level during Preclassic and Classic times. However, from colonial documentation we are aware of how the period endings were celebrated during the Late Postclassic and Colonial-period. The end period dates were celebrated with grand festivals and feasting. These festivals contained processions, drinking, speeches, confirmation of land titles and officership and sacrifice (Rice 2007: 177). There were also wooden or stone crosses erected to commemorate the ancestors. Rice (2007: 177) points out that this erection of crosses to commemorate the ancestors shows a direct connection to the pre-Hispanic tradition of stone monument erection on period ending dates.

Finally, recent evidence has been found at the site of Xultun in Peten, Guatemala that clearly demonstrates the ancient Maya did not believe the world was going to end. At Xultun, a mural was uncovered that contains a scene depicting a king and his retinue. But more importantly, the walls are covered with calculations that were used to track large amounts of time. Some of these calculations go thousands of years into our future, putting a halt on any belief that the ancient Maya thought the world would end at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> Bak'tun on December 21, 2012 (Vance 2012).

## **MODERN MAYA**

Despite many years of suppression, the modern day Maya have been able to preserve many of their traditions and religious ideologies. When asked directly about the 2012 prophecies and the upcoming 13<sup>th</sup> bak'tun ending they respond by saying that

mother earth is hurting and this time of renewal will give her strength to be restored. They do not believe that this is a time for panic and even though the doomsayers have brought much business to their areas they resent the ideas that have come from the doomsayers (2012: *The Mayan World*).

Many Maya believe that they are directly connected with earth; they believe that one cannot survive without mutual love for one another. It is believed that we are currently destroying mother earth and she needs our help to fight back against the people hurting her (2012: *The Mayan World*). I found no reports of Maya saying that they believed that they would be destroyed on December 21, 2012, but instead felt they would become empowered to fight back against the people suppressing them and harming mother earth. They believe the ending of the 13<sup>th</sup> bak'tun will bring energy to the earth that will help to restore her to her former glory.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION**

There is so much clear evidence that the ancient Maya did not predict the end of the world. Even the current modern Maya people do not believe that December 21, 2012 would mark a catastrophic event. It is clear from what we know about both ancient and contemporary Maya beliefs that period endings, instead, mark a time of renewal, a period where things and time are set back to the beginning. So why did so many Americans and Western cultures believe that the world would actually end on December 21, 2012? John B. Carlson (2011: 144) points out that this disposition is deeply seated within our culture and religion. He points out that the Book of Revelations from the Bible has us continually looking for the Apocalypse. Matthew Restall and Amara Solari (2011: 155) provide us with more blunt reasoning. Simply put, people are ignorant. They argue that people's lack of understanding of the Maya calendar and belief system has led people to fall for these wild accusations of an apocalypse. This can be seen when one types "Maya calendar" into a Google image search and thousands of pictures of the Aztec Calendar Stone appear. Clearly, the general public's lack of knowledge led to this vast misunderstanding. There is no clear evidence to believe that the world would end on December 21, 2012.

The ancient Maya left behind an abundance of information for us to find. With some patience, Maya scholars, archaeologists and epigraphers have been able to study their creation myths and decipher their ancient text to unlock the mysteries of their culture. There is no mystery, however, as to whether or not the world would end in December of 2012 as the Maya themselves left no indication to suggest that the Maya lords or gods wanted to destroy the world at the end of the current Baktun. It is clear that those who did believe the world would end on December 21, 2012 were not aware of the ancient Maya calendar and their ideology. In examining the wild speculations of doomsayers like John Major Jenkins and Jose Arguelles, it is impossible to believe

someone could make such claims about a culture they know so little about. No, this is not a time of destruction, but arguably, a much needed time of rebirth and renewal in the world.

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