

The 'Ecliptic as Road of Souls' Theory and the Iconography of Quirigua Zoomorph G

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Maya scholar Kerry Hull presented an essay called "Journey from the Tomb: Ropes, Roads, and the Point of Departure" in 2002 at the 7th European Maya Conference in London, and argued that the ecliptic is equivalent to the Yucatec Maya concept of the *kuxam suum*, a pathway engaged by departed souls in Maya eschatology. In some contexts, this may be accurate. However, the road and path imagery easily applies to several different celestial features, and interpretations in favor of another astronomical feature can be shown to have a much more consistent application in Maya iconography. Furthermore, we will see that the ecliptic crosses this after-death "road" feature and therefore planets, the sun, and the moon which enter it periodically partake of both the ecliptic symbolism and the symbolism of this other feature, which I will argue is the dark rift in the Milky Way.

Hull's piece builds upon a symbolic connection between tomb and house, showing that "the center of the house or tomb was conceived of as a portal." A larger analogy to the entire cosmos can also be argued, since the Maya words for house and cosmos are the same. Thus the idea of a portal at the center of a tomb or house would also apply to the cosmos at large. This aspect of the idea-complex was not discussed by Hull. If it was, the option of the dark rift as the more prevalent "path of departed souls" would have presented itself, because the dark rift is called the *xibalba be* (the road to the otherworld) by the modern Quiché Maya and it is located at a celestial crossroads. This is the cross formed by the Milky Way and the ecliptic, between Sagittarius and Scorpio. In Maya cosmology, crosses denote the idea of "cosmic center".

Hull presents an example that sets the stage for his idea that the road of departed souls is the ecliptic. He writes:

From Quirigua Zoomorph G we have epigraphic confirmation that the soul traveled from the tomb through the ceiling of the tomb. The inscription reads: **OCH?-b'i-ya u-SAK-NIK?-IK'-li ti-a-ku-li TUN-ni-li**, for *ochb'ihiiy usaknik(?)ik'il ti ahkil tuunil*, 'his soul road-entered at his vault'. The metaphorical expression found here, *och-b'ih*, 'the entering of the road', expressly describes death in terms of a journey that includes walking on a road. The reference to *ahkil tuunil* can refer to both a 'cave' and a 'vault' in Yucatec (Barrera Vásquez 1980:4, 576). The soul of K'ahk' Tiliw is said to have begun his journey to the otherworld by entering the road at the vault of his tomb.

Zoomorph G is modeled on Zoomorph B, and they depict a figure in the maw of either a Cosmic Monster (the Milky Way) or a "Waterlily Jaguar" (Looper 2003: 187). Looper determined that the figure on Zoomorph B is clearly the Quirigua king K'ak Tiliw, and thus the figure in the maw of the monster on Zoomorph G is also likely to be K'ak Tiliw (Looper 2003:172, 187). As Hull notes, Zoomorph G is the death monument for K'ak Tiliw. The rites were performed for him on 9.17.14.13.12, August 4, 785 (J), ten days

after his death. As Looper notes, this date was the day before the second zenith passage and therefore may echo a crowning event in K'ak Tiliw's career, when he supervised the decapitation of Copan ruler Waxaklajun Ub'ah K'awil on the first zenith passage at the latitude of Copan, April 27, 738 (J). The second astronomical component of that date, which is verified by the QRG Stela F textual reference to the decapitation happening "at the Black Hole" is the fact that Jupiter was aligned with the dark rift. This Jupiter/dark rift scenario is echoed in the complex of events spanning dates recorded over a three-month period on Zoomorph G, from K'ak Tiliw's death and funerary rite, to the dedication of the zoomorph on the period ending of 9.17.15.0.0 (October 31, 785). During this period, the next Quirigua ruler, Sky Xul, took the throne on October 9 (J).

The astronomical events of late 785 are summarized in Appendix 1. In brief, Venus and Mercury were aligned as evening stars when he died, and by the period ending of October 31 (J), Venus and Jupiter were involved in framing the dark rift. We can't assume that his death was definitely timed to these events. The funerary rites seem to have been delayed longer than usual, probably to accord with the second zenith passage date. Nevertheless, considering that these events did occur in relation to the dark rift after his death, they were probably noted as an appropriate reminder of that fateful day in 738 AD when Jupiter aligned with the dark rift.

We should also note that Zoomorph G is "analogous to the transformational imagery on Zoomorph B" (Looper 2003: 187). In Jenkins (2010) I examined the astronomy and iconography of Zoomorph B and observed that the dedication date (November 26, 780 AD) corresponded to when the sun was aligned with the dark rift. Thus, despite Looper's reading of the iconography, the figure (K'ak Tiliw) in the mouth of the Cosmic Monster is clearly an iconographic reiteration of the sun's alignment with the dark rift. We may thus suspect that Zoomorph G, at least in a symbolically analogous sense, would be a nod to that astronomical scenario. Furthermore, the actual astronomy involved in the range of dates in late 785 AD recorded on Zoomorph G literarily indicts the nuclear bulge / dark rift region as a vector in astronomical alignment processes (involving Venus and Jupiter).

Now I must get into the heart of what this note is about. Hull disregards the dark rift and goes down a separate path in arguing that the after-death road is the ecliptic. He cites Zoomorph G as a precedent for this, but as we can see the full context of that monument in relation to the larger net of iconographic and astronomical connections it shares with other monuments documenting K'ak Tiliw's life actually supports a different location for that road. Generally, it is difficult to accept that *the ecliptic* could be a road that Maya kings would enter, because they are usually accompanied by — or themselves embody at their death-apotheosis — planetary, solar, and/or lunar deities. These celestial companions can never "enter" the road of the ecliptic, because they *are always on* the ecliptic. This is a conceptual difficulty with Hull's proposal.

Instead, for a variety of reasons *the dark rift in the Milky Way* is the best candidate for the "road" of the after-death journey. Hull stated in his piece (p. 5), in regard to the *och-b'ih* death phrase which means 'road entering', that "Matt Looper first suggested that this road is the Milky Way, and that Pakal can be seen entering this road on the cover of his sarcophagus (cited in Freidel *et al.* 1993:76)." Actually, Looper was alluding to *the dark rift*, not simply "the Milky Way." Let's observe how the dark rift gets

removed from the equation, even while evidence for the dark rift interpretation is provided. Immediately after the above statement, Hull wrote “*Sakbe* is an attested term for Milky Way in Yucatec, lending credibility to this identification. (It is important to note that on Pakal’s sarcophagus lid Pakal is in fact depicted *emerging* from the open maw of a portal...”. Yes, that’s correct, the “open maw of a portal” — not simply the white band of the *Sakbe* (the “White Road” of the Milky Way), but a dark maw or *portal*. Hull quoted (see above) from page 76 of *Maya Cosmos* but apparently did not notice that the alluded to Fig. 2:12 (on page 77) mentions the “Xibalba Bih” and that, according to Schele’s subsequent words in the text the Milky Way was called both the *Sakbe* and the “Xibal Be” (same as the Xibalba Bih). However, Schele’s general phrasing is a bit misleading, as the Milky Way itself was not referred to as the Xibal Be. Rather, the dark rift in the Milky Way was this “road to awe” (the underworld or otherworld). It was a portal, a road, beyond death. The after death road of departed souls.

It’s amazing to see how the dark rift gets winnowed out of these scholarly references, even though it proves itself time and time again to be a critical key to the meaning of the texts. Hull’s idea that the tomb is like a house is interesting, and there are many other points of interest, but I don’t think that his idea of the ecliptic being the after-death road is an accurate perspective on this interesting feature of Maya cosmology. My suggested correction to Hull’s proposal comes from a more detailed analysis of Zoomorph G, referencing Looper’s work on the life of K’ak Tiliw and the relationship between Zoomorph G and Zoomorph B.

Appendix 1. Astronomical Events surrounding K’ak Tiliw’s death, his successors accession, and the period ending of 9.17.15.0.0

Immediately after sunset on the day K’ak Tiliw died, a close alignment of Venus and Mercury could be observed in the western sky, setting almost an hour after sunset. (Venus had made its first appearance as evening star some weeks earlier.) Jupiter was high over the western horizon, just passed the southern meridian at sunset, and about 15 degrees west of the nuclear bulge of the galactic center (7 degrees west of Antares), on the side of the Milky Way which opens to the dark rift. In the ten days following his death, leading to the funerary rite recorded on Zoomorph G (on which, as Hull notes, K’ak Tiliw’s soul “road-entered” at his vault or “cave” — see quote above), Uranus aligned with the sun (moving from east to west of the sun), Venus and Mercury moved higher into the evening sky, and Jupiter moved a little closer to the dark rift. By the time of Sky Xul’s accession on October 9, Venus was 2 degrees away from Jupiter and 4 degrees away from Antares. On the following day, and the day after, the new moon swept by the syzygy and then passed through the nuclear bulge and dark rift region.

The entire complex of planets, moon, and astronomical background features were no doubt part of the evening spectacle witnessed by those celebrating the new king; it lasted for almost two hours after sunset. By the 15-tun period ending on October 31, Venus had swept through the dark rift region of the nuclear bulge, reaching some 21 degrees distance from Jupiter, but both now perfectly framed the parameters of the nuclear bulge. Right after sunset, Jupiter was at its last appearance as evening star, on the western edge of the Milky Way, while Venus was higher overhead, on the eastern edge of

the Milky Way. Between them, the dark rift split the nuclear bulge. These were the celestial events that marked the three month period following K'ak Tiliw's death, from late July to late October. Considering that the funerary rites for K'ak Tiliw seem to have acknowledged his defining act over Copan (in 738 AD), and were probably timed congruently with the zenith-passage astronomy that attended that fateful day, we can also see that the other, often overlooked astronomical component of that defining act (Jupiter's close alignment with the dark rift/Crossroads) is also present in the events surrounding his death, when he entered the "after-death road" through the "central vault of his tomb."

Sources

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