

Astronomical Events Leading Up to Bahlam Ajaw's Accession on February 4, 644 AD (J)

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Maya astronomers were constantly tracking and observing the movements of planets, the moon, and the sun. Why shouldn't we also try to be aware of these dynamics? The momentous approach of, for example, the death of an aging king and the accession of a new king, would be attended by attention to celestial auguries. The months leading up to the accession of Bahlam Ajaw, in early 644 AD, were filled with astronomical alignments against important background features that are identifiable themes on Bahlam Ajaw's biographical Monument 6, as well as the main theme that attended his birth.

On November 1, 643 (J), Jupiter and Uranus were in very closely conjunction, positioned in the nuclear bulge at the southern terminus of the dark rift in the evening just after sunset. Mercury was to the west and Venus was to the east, on the edges of the Milky Way, while the Jupiter-Uranus combo was close to the galactic equator. This scenario was soon dissolved into the sun's passage through the area, rendering it temporarily not visible. Strikingly, there was a conjunction of the sun, Jupiter, Venus, and Uranus at the crossing point (of Milky Way and ecliptic). This multiple conjunction included Venus's inferior conjunction preceding its first appearance as Morningstar, which happened around December 5 (with Uranus nearby). Mercury was already established as a morning star at that time. Then Jupiter appeared in the pre-dawn morning skies around December 13. The sliver of a 27-day-old appeared next to Mercury and Venus in the predawn of December 15, right at the crossing point. Moon dark happened at the winter solstice two days later and the sun thereafter began its northward climb along the eastern sunrise horizon.

The predawn sky continued its celestial displays, however, with Mercury aligning with Jupiter on December 26 (J), followed by Venus and Uranus positioned on the galactic equator at the maw of the dark rift in mid-January (with Jupiter on the edge of the Milky Way). On Bahlam Ajaw's accession day (February 4, 644 J), Venus and Jupiter were in conjunction and rising two hours before sunrise while Mercury was just then making its first appearance as evening star. The Mercury circumstance should be of interest to us, because this day (February 4, 644) was the day of Bahlam Ajaw's accession, and he launched his first war campaign 116 days later (Mercury's synodic period is 117 days). As Michael Grofe has pointed out, February 4 was also very close to a solar nadir passage at the latitude of Tortuguero. Grofe also noted that the first war event occurred three days after a total, visible, lunar eclipse positioned at the dark rift/Crossroads.

The overall point of the above was to describe in detail the astronomical events occurring during the three months preceding Bahlam Ajaw's accession. In terms of the ongoing observational interests of the Maya sky watchers, the entire gestalt of sky movements is important to consider because there are configurations and culminations of planetary positions in the night sky that had more meaning to the Maya than precise dates of alignments, stations, or maximum elongations.