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Quirigua Zoomorph P and Three "Stones of Creation"

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The stelae, altars, and zoomorphs of Quirigua have provoked lively commentary since their publication by Alfred Maudslay late last century (Maudslay 1883, 1886, 1889-1902; Maudslay and Maudslay 1899). Hieroglyphic inscriptions on these monuments allowed Eduard Seler to decipher the head variants and full-figure versions of most ancient Maya numerals (Seler 1899, 1900). Soon after, in 1916, William Henry Holmes, then Director of the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology, wrote that Quirigua Zoomorph P was the finest sculpture ever produced in Native America (Holmes 1916, 1917).

More recently, Quirigua has been a focus of a new approach to ancient Maya thought. Beginning in January 1992, Linda Schele and others argued that Maya cosmology and iconography were ulti-

mately literal depictions of astronomical phenomena (Schele 1992; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993; Villela and Schele 1993).¹ Iconographic assemblages were often true representations of the night sky on the evenings specified in their accompanying hieroglyphic texts.

The Maya Hearth and Turtle are among the constellations identified both in Classic Maya imagery and by Maya of the Post Conquest era. Below I review the evidence in favor of an association of the turtle with the three stones of the Creation Hearth among the ancient Maya. These sources suggest that Maya of Classic, Colonial, and Modern Periods likely viewed these stones as both a constellation associated with the events of Creation and as structural analogs to the three-stone hearths found in most traditional homes. The archaeology of

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		4 Ahaw
8 Kumk'u		<i>hal k'ohba</i> the prophecy was spoken
<i>ox tun tzukah</i> three stones were set		<i>u tzapwa</i> they planted
<i>tun</i> the stone, Jaguar Paddler		Stingray Paddler
<i>utiy na-ho'-chan</i> it happened at the First-Five-Sky		jaguar throne stone
<i>u tz'apwa tun</i> he planted the stone		Ek'-Na-Chak-?? Black-First-Red-??
<i>utiy kab ???</i> it happened at Earth-place		serpent throne stone
<i>itwal utiy</i> and then it happened the stone was set		Na Itzamhi
waterlily throne stone		<i>utiy ch'a-chan</i> it happened at Lying-down Sky
<i>Yax-Ox-Tun-nal</i> First-Three-Stone-Place		were completed 13 bak'tuns
it was his action		<i>Wak-Chan-Ahaw</i> Raised-up-Sky-Lord

Figure 1. The Creation Passage from Quirigua Stela C. After Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:Figure 2.5.

Quirigua Zoomorph P provides additional confirmation that ancient Maya associated turtles with the mythological and astronomical three stones of the hearth.

The hieroglyphic inscription of Quirigua Stela C records that on 4 Ahaw 8 Kumk'u, the Creation Day, three stones or altars were placed by a trio of supernaturals [Figure 1]. What were these three

stones? In January 1992, Matthew Looer informed Schele that the modern Quiché Maya astronomical repertory includes a Hearth constellation.² The Quiché hearth comprises the triangle formed by the stars Alnitak, Saiph, and Rigel (Tedlock 1985:261) [Figure 2]. Dennis Tedlock argued that the Quiché Hearth constellation may have originated in the oft-repeated "wooden human" se-

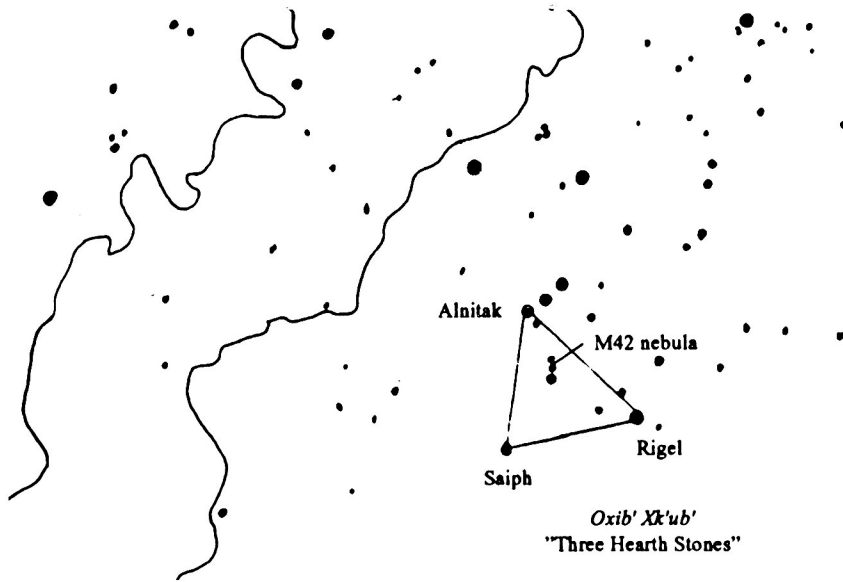


Figure 2. Orion and the Hearth Constellation. After Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:Figure 2.14.

quence of the *Popol Vuh*. In this sequence, the Creator Deities caused the destruction of the imperfect "wooden humans" at the hands of their cooking utensils, including the three hearth-stones.

As was true in the Colonial Period, when a Quiché Maya noble transcribed the *Popol Vuh* into Latin characters, three-stone hearths are still prominent features of most traditional Maya homes. In modern times, John Lloyd Stevens first observed such a three-stone hearth in a Maya home in Guatemala's Motagua Valley (Stephens 1841:1:58). Robert Wauchope's 1938 study of modern Maya houses reviewed nearly every hearth discussed by ethnologists and travelers in the last century and a half (Wauchope 1938:117-119). More recent ethnographic syntheses of the Maya region stress that three-stone hearths are yet to be found in Maya homes in the late twentieth century (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993).

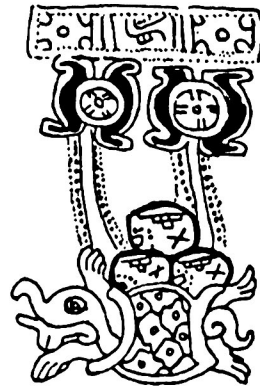


Figure 3. Madrid Codex 71

But what is the archaeological evidence for three-stone hearths and for associating such hearths with turtles and the Turtle constellation discussed in the Colonial Yucatec Maya *Diccionario de Motul*?³ In the years since 1950, partly as a result of the New Archaeology's focus on settlement patterns (Adams 1969; Sabloff 1990), Mayanists have discovered many three-stone hearths in ancient house mounds. However, Edward H. Thompson, the eccentric sometime owner of the ruins of Chichén Itzá, excavated the first ancient three-stone Maya hearths at Labná in the late 1880s (Thompson 1886, 1892:262). In addition, Schele now argues that the triadic arrangement so prevalent in Late Preclassic and Early Classic Period Maya architecture also represented the Maya hearth (Linda Schele, personal communication 1993; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993).

Ancient Maya art also confirms an association between the three-stone motif and turtles. Looper noted that page 71 of the *Madrid Codex* depicts three stones resting on a turtle (Schele 1992:140) [Figure 3]. The entire assemblage hangs from a Sky Band exactly as do the constellations of the famous *Paris Codex* zodiac.⁴ As noted above, the Colonial Maya *Diccionario de Motul* lists *Ak-ek'*, or "Turtle Star," as a constellation. Schele and others have recently advanced convincing evidence placing *Ak-ek'* at the Belt of Orion, or immediately above the Hearth constellation.

Quirigua Zoomorph P

In 1883, Alfred P. Maudslay visited the Maya ruins of Quirigua for the second time.⁵ Equipped with four tons of plaster of Paris, Maudslay's crew undertook the task of making molds of Quirigua's sculpture (Maudslay and Maudslay 1899). In the process, he discovered that Zoomorph P and the other zoomorphs at the site each sat upon three stones (Maudslay 1889-1902:2:17; Maudslay and Maudslay 1899:149). This observation appeared first in the entertaining 1899 narrative, *A Glimpse at Guatemala*, written jointly by Alfred and Anne Maudslay.

The explorer's account of the monuments of Quirigua, including Zoomorph P, appeared in more scientific form as Parts XI (September 1899) and XIV (February 1901) of the *Archaeology* supplement to Osbert and Salvin's 63-volume *Biologia Centrali Americana*.⁶ As Maudslay and his crew

realized, Zoomorph P depicts a great turtle.⁷ Were the ancient Maya of Quirigua depicting the Turtle and Hearth constellations in stone?

Postscript

Freidel, Schele, and Parker presented convincing evidence that the ancient Maya viewed the turtle as a portal to the Otherworld. The Maize God often emerges through the cracked back of the turtle. Quirigua Zoomorph P turtle also participates in this iconographic complex. Zoomorphs P and O are accompanied by spectacular altars discovered in the 1930s by Earl Morris and Gustavo Strömsvik. The Altar of Zoomorph P depicts the deity Chak dancing out of the cleft entrance to the Otherworld. Clearly this region of the site was viewed as a portal. Not coincidentally, the Quirigua ballcourt, another portal, is located nearby.

Notes

1. See Schele 1992, and Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993 for a full account of the genesis of the astronomy-centered model of Maya cosmology. The breakthrough events of 1992 owed many ideas to the work of earlier scholars, David Kelley in particular.

2. Looper discovered this fact in the notes to Dennis Tedlock's superlative translation of the Quiché Maya *Popol Vuh* (Tedlock 1985).

3. See Martinez Hernández 1930 and Acuña 1984.

4. See Villela and Schele 1993 for a full history of the interpretation of the Maya Sky Band and the *Paris Codex* Zodiac.

5. Morley (1935, 1937-1938) summarized the history of research at Quirigua.

6. Part XI, issued September 1899, included Volume II text pages 1-16 and plates 1-24. Part XIV, issued in February 1901, included Volume II text pages 17-39 and plates 25-75.

7. Holmes (1916, 1917) thought the zoomorph was a dragon.

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