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Maya Myth: Will the World End in 2012?

Ξένες γλώσσες / In English



This painted vase shows the cigar-smoking lord of the Underworld, God L, as he presides over an important ritual at the dawn of the last creation in 31 14 BC. The black background probably alludes to a primeval world before the arrival of light.

Again there comes a humiliation, destruction, and demolition…. There came a rain of resin from the sky. There came the one named Gouger of Faces: he gouged out their eyeballs. There came Sudden Bloodletter: he snapped off their heads.

THE POPOL VUH, 16TH CENTURY

COME DECEMBER 2012, the current race of humans is due to be wiped from the face of the earth in a fearful cataclysm, which, to judge from the last destruction by fire, flood and a plague of demons, will come in an unexpected and terrible form. At least, that is what we can expect to be told as we enter the 'final countdown' of the ancient Maya calendar. Give or take a day or so, the 23rd of that fateful month will mark the end of 13 Bak'tuns of the Long Count cycle, completing a journey of 1,872,000 days that began with the last such event in 3114 BC. But what do we actually know about this elaborate system and what did the Maya think was going to happen in 2012?

The Maya, the most sophisticated and literate of Central America's ancient civilizations, believed in a cyclical universe, one that had experienced recurring creations and annihilations. The best source on these ideas is the Popol Vuh, or 'Book of Council', a mythological epic produced by the Quiche Maya of highland Guatemala, probably in the late 16th century (though perhaps based on an original written in hieroglyphs). It begins with the parting of sky and earth, which allows the first light into the world. It then describes how the Creator Gods try to populate it with humankind. Their first attempt produces the animals of the earth, but since they cannot speak and praise their makers they are banished to the forest as failures. In the second, people are formed from clay, but they jabber insensibly and their bodies start to crumble. The gods break them up in disgust. For the third creation humans are formed from wood, but they have no souls and forget their creators. To destroy them the gods not only produce the aforementioned flood, fire and demons, they even make their cooking utensils rise up against them, crushing their faces with stones. Finally, the gods try maize dough as the stuff of life and the people of today came into being.

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