

The Myths  
of the  
Popol Vuh in  
Cosmology,  
Art, and Ritual

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edited by

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and Frauke Sachse

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## Introduction

*The Popol Vuh as a Window into the Mind of the Ancient Maya*

ALLEN J. CHRISTENSON AND FRAUKE SACHSE

### THE ORIGINS OF THE POPOL VUH

The Popol Vuh was compiled in the mid-sixteenth century by surviving members of the ancient K'iche'-Maya royal court. It is the single most important highland Maya text of its kind, containing a narrative of the creation of the world, the ordering of the cosmos, the nature of the gods, and the historical development of the various highland Maya groups prior to the Spanish Invasion. Since its first publication in the nineteenth century, the Popol Vuh has had a major impact on our understanding of both Precolumbian and present-day Maya culture. The myths found in the Popol Vuh have clear antecedents in the arts as well as textual records that reach well into the Preclassic era. Many of these mythic stories mirror a fundamental worldview that is at the core of present-day Maya oral traditions and ritual practices. Connecting the ancient past with the present, these myths help us understand Maya thought through time. The present edition not only aims to deepen our understanding of the myths contained in the Popol Vuh but also presents the work of some of the leading scholars in the field of Mesoamerican culture that elucidates how Popol Vuh mythology can aid in the analysis and interpretation of the ancient Maya past.

The authors of the Popol Vuh wrote that their work was based on an ancient book that was venerated by the Precolumbian K'iche' kings who consulted it often. They described this older version of the Popol Vuh as an *ilb'al*, literally "an instrument of sight." The word today is used to refer to the clear quartz crystals K'iche' *ajq'ijab'* (traditional highland Maya religious specialists) use in divinatory ceremonies. It is

also the word used for magnifying glasses or spectacles, by which things may be seen more clearly. The kings are not described as “reading” the text but rather “seeing” its contents:

They knew if there would be war. It was clear before their faces. They saw if there would be death, if there would be hunger. They surely knew if there would be strife. There was an *ilb'al*—there was a book. Popol Vuh was their name for it. (Popol Vuh, fol. 54r; Christenson 2007: 287)

The authors of the sixteenth-century text of the Popol Vuh wrote that what they compiled was based in some way on the contents of the more ancient version. There has been a great deal of speculation regarding the nature of this Precolumbian Popol Vuh and its relationship to the version we have today. The introductory section of the Popol Vuh includes the following statement:

We shall bring it [this book] forth because there is no longer the means whereby the Popol Vuh may be seen, the means of seeing clearly that had come from across the sea—the account of our obscurity, and the means of seeing life clearly, as it is said. The original book exists that was written anciently, but its witnesses and those who ponder it hide their faces. (Popol Vuh, fol. 1r; Christenson 2007: 64)

This passage raises some intriguing questions. First, did the Precolumbian version of the Popol Vuh exist in the sixteenth century, and second, was it available to the K'iche' authors of our present version? The text suggests that the answer to both questions may be yes. The first sentence of the passage, which acknowledges that “there is no longer the means whereby the Popol Vuh may be seen,” may be interpreted as referring to the destruction or loss of the original book. But the phrase may simply mean that the text is hidden and unavailable for public display. This is certainly in keeping with modern highland Maya usage of the phrase. In traditional Maya communities, sacred objects such as old books, official papers, and ritual paraphernalia are generally kept wrapped in bundles and hidden in chests or kept out of sight in the lofts of houses. They are rarely taken out except under ritually appropriate circumstances. For example, in the Tz'utujil-Maya community of Santiago Atitlán, the town's most precious silver vessels, documents, missals, and other ritual objects are kept in a locked chest. This chest is only opened once a year. When this occurs, the doors are locked and men are posted as guards to ensure privacy. The objects are removed from the chest one by one, checked against a very old inventory, and laid out on the ground on cloths to ensure that they do not touch the ground. The contents of the chest are considered living beings and must be allowed to “breathe” and to be reanimated with prayers and offerings, or they would die. During the year, if anyone were to ask about the contents of this chest or any number of others

scattered around the community, the common answer is that *ma kaka'yi' ta* "they cannot be seen." On the other hand, if something has been stolen or destroyed, the answer is that *ma k'o ta* "it does not exist," or if the person knows the circumstances, he will describe the disappearance. The assertion that the Popol Vuh could not be seen does not therefore necessarily mean that it did not exist anymore.

The next sentence in the passage asserts that "the original exists that was written anciently" and that it is the "witnesses and those who ponder it" who "hide their faces." The text is clear here that the ancient book "exists" rather than "once existed." It is the keepers of the text who are in hiding, implying that the Precolonial version may have still been available to the authors at least by the mid-sixteenth century. The authors of the version of the Popol Vuh available today were anonymous. In the text they refer to themselves as "we," as seen in the passage just quoted. This indicates that more than one contributed to the compilation of the book. The text suggests, however, that they were members of the old K'iche' nobility. Toward the end of the book, the authors declare that the three Nim Ch'okoj (Great Stewards) of the principal K'iche' ruling lineages were "the mothers of the word, and the fathers of the word" (Christenson 2007: 305). *Tzij* (word) is used in the text to describe the Popol Vuh itself (folio 1 recto, in Christenson 2003: 13, 264), suggesting that the Nim Ch'okoj may have been the authors of the book. Nim Ch'okoj was a relatively minor position within the K'iche' nobility, charged with certain duties at royal banquets, perhaps including the recitation of tales dealing with the gods, heroes, and past rulers of the K'iche' nation. In this position they likely would have had access to manuscripts containing such traditions at the K'iche' court (Tedlock 1996: 56–57; Akkeren 2003).

Unlike other documents of the period, the authors of the Popol Vuh chose to remain anonymous, referring to themselves only as "we" (Christenson 2007: 64). The authors' anonymity is unusual since most Early Colonial period highland Maya documents were prepared for some official purpose, such as land titles submitted to the Spanish courts to assert border disputes and claims of privilege. These were all duly signed by their authors as testimony of their veracity. For whatever reason, those who were responsible for compiling the Popol Vuh did not wish their identities to be known. It is likely that those who wrote the Popol Vuh purposely hid their names as it was not intended for the eyes of Spanish ecclesiastical and political authorities. Although the text was compiled after the Spanish Invasion, the authors described the traditional Maya gods as luminous, wise beings who "gave voice to all things and accomplished their purpose in purity of being and in truth" long before the arrival of the European invaders (Christenson 2007: 63). There is certainly no denigration of the Maya gods such as is found in the *Título de Totonicapán*, which was prepared as a legal document and submitted to the Spanish courts. So as not to offend the ecclesiastical and secular Spanish authorities, the K'iche' authors of

the Totonicapán document stress that they are the “grandchildren and children of Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” and that they became “lost in Assyria” because of Shalmaneser (Carmack and Mondloch 1983 [1554]: 174), a reference to the lost ten tribes of Israel that was a fairly common explanation for the presence of people in the New World taught by the earliest Christian missionaries. The *Titulo de Totonicapán* declares that they “fell into lies” and briefly mentions the sun god Junajpu and the moon god Xb’alanke as examples (1983 [1554]: 174).

This stands in marked contrast to the Popol Vuh, which has virtually no intrusive Christian or Spanish cultural influences in the text itself and describes the ancient Maya gods as beneficent and life-giving, as in this prayer:

Pleasing is the day, you, Juraqan, and you, Heart of Sky and Earth, you who give abundance and new life, and you who give daughters and sons. Be at peace, scatter your abundance and new life. May life and creation be given. May my daughters and my sons be multiplied and created, that they may provide for you, sustain you, and call upon you on the roads, on the cleared pathways, along the courses of the rivers, in the canyons, beneath the trees and the bushes. Give, then, their daughters and their sons. (Popol Vuh, fol. 54r–54v; Christenson 2007: 289)

Such unapologetic reverence for the ancient gods would have been offensive to the Spanish authorities, not to mention the Roman Catholic clergy. During the early decades of the Spanish Invasion, the most obvious expressions of Maya religion and literature were either destroyed or forced into hiding. Precolumbian texts were singled out as particularly dangerous hindrances to the conversion of the people to Christianity and were actively sought out and destroyed. Those who were found in possession of such books were persecuted and even killed. Bartolomé de Las Casas (1958: 346) witnessed the destruction of a number of such books in the early sixteenth century, which were burned to “protect” the Maya from their traditional religion: “These books were seen by our clergy, and even I saw part of those which were burned by the monks, apparently because they thought [they] might harm the Indians in matters concerning religion, since at that time they were at the beginning of their conversion.”

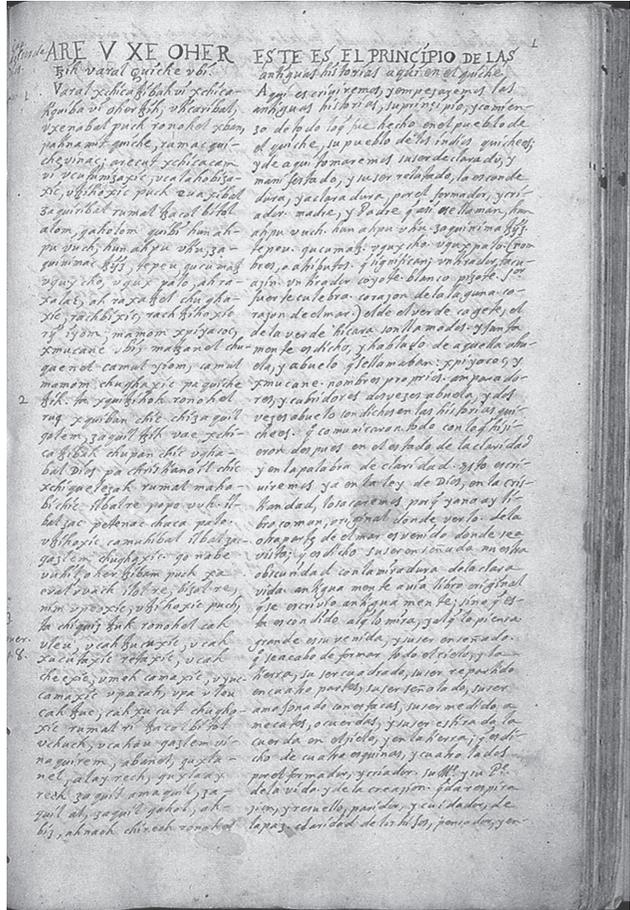
As much as 200 years later, Francisco Ximénez (1929–31, I.i.5) wrote that in the K’iche’ community of Chichicastenango, many indigenous books were still kept in secret so the Spanish authorities would not learn of them. It was the loss of such precious books as the Precolumbian version of the Popol Vuh that may have prompted K’iche’ scribes to preserve what they could of their literature by transcribing the contents into a form that would make it safer from the fiery purges of the Christian authorities. The authors of the Popol Vuh may have recognized the danger in this and cloaked themselves with anonymity to protect themselves.

Regardless of whether the authors of the sixteenth-century manuscript version of the Popol Vuh had direct access to a Precolumbian book, it should not be assumed that they wrote a word-for-word transcription of the original. The few Precolumbian Maya books that survive, as well as the numerous inscriptions found on stelae, altars, architectural wall panels, and the like, all bear texts that are highly formalized and condensed references to dates, persons, and events that briefly outline the stories they wish to tell. These are often accompanied by illustrations to further elucidate the otherwise terse prose. No known Precolumbian text contains the kind of long storytelling devices, descriptive detail, commentary, and extensive passages of dialogue found in the Popol Vuh. Nor is the structure of the written language conducive to such extended narrative. The Popol Vuh, as written in the mid-sixteenth century, is more likely to have been a compilation of oral traditions based to one degree or another on mythic and historical details outlined in a Precolumbian codex with their associated painted illustrations.

#### THE XIMÉNEZ COPY OF THE POPOL VUH

The fate of the sixteenth-century transcription of the Popol Vuh is unknown for the next 150 years. At some time during this period, it was taken from Santa Cruz del Quiché to the nearby town of Chuwila,<sup>2</sup> now known as Santo Tomás Chichicastenango. Chichicastenango had long since eclipsed Santa Cruz in size and importance, and most members of the K'iche' nobility had transferred their residence there. Between 1701 and 1704, a Dominican friar named Francisco Ximénez, the parish priest of Chichicastenango, came to obtain the manuscript. Since 1694, Ximénez had served in various Maya communities where he learned a number of dialects and studied K'iche' grammar so he could teach it to newly arrived clerics. Ximénez was also interested in the ancient traditions of the K'iche'. He noted that in his parish the people still conserved ancient "errors" they had believed prior to the arrival of the Spaniards (Ximénez 1929–31, I.i.54). His curiosity concerning ancient K'iche' history and religion may have overcome the suspicion of the guardians of the Popol Vuh manuscript, and they allowed him to borrow it, at least long enough to make a copy. In his *proemium*, Ximénez writes that the book had a wide circulation in the town and that the K'iche' knew the myths from the Popol Vuh and other, similar books well:

It was with great reserve that these manuscripts were kept among them, with such secrecy, that none of the ancient ministers knew of it; and investigating this point, while I was in the parish of Santo Tomas Chichicastenango, I found that it was the doctrine which they first imbibed with their mother's milk, and that all of them



**FIGURE 1.1.** Folio 11r of the Ximénez manuscript (Ayer MS 1515) of the Popol Vuh. Courtesy, Newberry Library, Chicago.

knew it almost by heart; and I found that they had many of these books among them. (Ximénez 1929–31, I.i.5, in Recinos et al. 1950: 6)

Ximénez’s copy of the Popol Vuh manuscript comprises a total of fifty-six double-sided folios and is organized in two columns, the original K’iche’ text on the left and a Spanish translation on the right (figure 1.1). Ximénez explains that he modified the orthography of the original text that was shown to him in Chichicastenango. We do not know what else Ximénez may have changed or left out in the process of copying, but his manuscript is the oldest version of the K’iche’ text we have today. It is unknown what happened to the original sixteenth-century manuscript version, although presumably Ximénez returned it to its K’iche’ owners.

After the expulsion of the religious orders from Guatemala and the closing of all convents and monasteries in 1829, Ximénez's papers ended up in the library of the University of San Carlos in Guatemala City, where they were first discovered by Juan Gavarrete. Gavarrete produced a handwritten copy titled *Empiezan las historias del origen de los Indios* (Beginning of the history of the origin of the Indians). However, this copy was not published until 1872 (see Recinos et al. 1950: 45–46).

In 1854, a copy of the original Ximénez manuscript was shown to the Austrian diplomat Karl Scherzer on his travels through Guatemala. Scherzer showed particular interest in the text of the Popol Vuh and commissioned a copy of the Spanish column, which he published on his return to Vienna in 1857 under the title *Las historias del origen de los Indios*. Only a short time later, the French priest, collector, and scholar Charles Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg obtained Ximénez's papers, including a copy of the Popol Vuh, for his personal collection. In 1861, he published the first translation of the original K'iche' text into French under the title *Popol Vuh: Le livre sacré et les mythes de l'antiquité américaine avec les livres héroïques et historiques des Quichés*. After Brasseur's death, the manuscript was purchased by Alphonso Pinart, who sold it in 1883 to the American collector Edward E. Ayer. In 1911, Ayer donated his collection to the Newberry Library in Chicago, where the Popol Vuh resides today, cataloged as Ayer MS 1515.

Ever since Brasseur's first rendering into French, many scholars have contributed to making the Popol Vuh accessible in European languages. The number of existing editions and translations is too long to be listed here in full, but to give an idea of the scholarship that has been produced on the text over the years, we would like to mention a few.

While most of the early scholarship was based on Brasseur's translation, scholars sometimes produced their own translations, such as that of Eduard Seler, published posthumously by Gerd Kutscher in 1975. The first systematic translation that also reproduced the K'iche' text, however, was the German version made by Leonhard Schultze-Jena in 1944. This translation is rarely used today due to its rather dated linguistic style, although in many instances his translation is remarkably precise. Similarly, José Antonio Villacorta Calderón produced a line-by-line translation of the K'iche' text into Spanish that was published in 1962 and was for a long time the standard Spanish translation.

A more popular translation into Spanish was produced by Adrián Recinos in 1947. Recinos's translation was later rendered into English by Delia Goetz and Silvanus G. Morley (1950), which became one of the most widely distributed editions in the English-speaking world. Munro S. Edmonson (1971) published the entire K'iche' text with parallel English translation, arranged for the first time using parallel couplets, recognizing that the Popol Vuh was composed utilizing Maya poetic forms.

Dennis Tedlock released his translation based on the original K'iche' text in 1985 (republished in a second revised edition in 1996). Allen J. Christenson produced a two-volume critical edition of the Popol Vuh. The first volume contains a grammatic English translation (2003, 2007). The second volume includes the original K'iche' text in both its original modified Latin and modern orthographies, as well as a literal line-by-line literal English translation (2004). The later electronic version also includes a high-resolution scan of the original manuscript, as well as a new Spanish translation of the text (2007).

After releasing a poetic monolingual K'iche' edition of the "Popol Wuj" in 1999, the Guatemalan scholar and native speaker of K'iche' Enrique Sam Colop published a Spanish translation of the text in 2008. There are also translations of the Popol Vuh, in whole or in part, rendered into other Mayan languages. For the most part, these are re-translations of either Scherzer's edition or other Spanish translations (see, e.g., ALMG 2001a, 2001b, 2001c). Several of the aforementioned editions are referenced in the present volume. Each translation reflects a different hermeneutical approach and has its own merits.

#### THE POPOL VUH IN MAYA STUDIES

Early scholarship recognized the Popol Vuh first and foremost as a source for the mythology of Mesoamerica in general. The first scholars who referred to the Popol Vuh in their research include Hubert Bancroft, Daniel G. Brinton, H. D. Charencey, and Eduard Selser, among others (see Recinos et al. 1950: 45). Brinton (1881, 1882) used the text to reconstruct ancient Maya religion by analyzing the names of the K'iche' gods and their mythic histories. Similarly, the father of Mesoamerican studies in Germany, Eduard Selser (see, e.g., 1894, 1907), used the myths of the Popol Vuh to analyze and interpret indigenous texts from Central Mexico.

More recently, ethnohistorians have attempted to place the Popol Vuh in the context of other written sources composed by K'iche' and Kaqchikel scribes to reconstruct the Precolonial history of the highland Maya (Recinos et al. 1957; Edmonson 1964; Carmack 1968, 1981; Fox 1978, among others). Robert M. Carmack's groundbreaking work in this regard relied heavily on his analysis of the Popol Vuh as the central source against which all other indigenous texts from highland Guatemala were matched and compared.

The value of the mythological narratives from the Popol Vuh for our understanding of ancient Maya culture was again recognized in the 1970s, when Michael D. Coe first identified the characters of the Hero Twins in the iconography of Classic Maya vases (see preface, this volume). Coe's identification established a new paradigm for both iconographers and epigraphers to search for parallels between

Colonial and Classic Maya written records. This includes a growing awareness of the strong Central Mexican influence on Postclassic highland Maya culture that is also reflected in the Popol Vuh narratives, as previously noted by Seler (1913). Building on Coe's foundational work, David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker (1993: 43) asserted that the mythic traditions of the Popol Vuh, as well as other Colonial Maya texts, are key to interpreting core elements of ancient Maya religion: "The Popol Vuh is a touchstone and the closest thing to a Maya bible surviving to the present." Scholars working to interpret the material remains of ancient Maya culture, religion, and ritual practices have often taken into account the ancient myths from highland Maya texts such as the Popol Vuh.

The Popol Vuh has also had a significant impact on archaeological research. Our understanding of Popol Vuh mythology has helped identify related ritual practices in the archaeological record, including the cosmological layout of architectural patterns, burial practice, and cave rituals (see, e.g., Moyes and Awe, chapter 7, this volume). For example, the archaeological interpretation of ballcourts and the caches found therein has been helped by the textual understanding of the role of the ballgame in the Popol Vuh and its function in ordering the cosmos. Similarly, Classic Maya burial practices are better understood with reference to the eschatological mythology in the K'iche' text. The mytho-historical sections of the Popol Vuh that describe the arrival of the K'iche' forefathers following a long migration with various settlements along the way have helped identify specific archaeological sites in the highlands. It is again Robert Carmack's (1981) well-published study of the K'iche' capital at Q'umarkaj (Utatlán) that is the best-known example of this approach, which combines archaeological and ethnohistoric research based on the Popol Vuh.

Even more relevant is the role of ethnographic research, or more precisely the cultural knowledge of present-day highland Maya, for our interpretation of the Popol Vuh text. Iyaxel Cojtí Ren's analysis of the *saqarib'al* "dawning places," included in this volume, is just one of many examples (see chapter 4). The scholarship on the Popol Vuh, which interprets not only the text itself but how it assists in reconstructing Ancient Maya culture and thought, is relevant to modern Maya people today. Particularly since the devastating Guatemalan civil war (1960–1996), the Popol Vuh has become a focal point for uniting disparate Maya groups as part of a general resurgence in interest in their ancestral heritage that crosses language and cultural backgrounds. In this context, the Popol Vuh constitutes an important source of modern identity, not only for K'iche' or highland Maya but for all Maya people. Any scholarship that employs the Popol Vuh to reconstruct ancient Maya culture and thought therefore has an ethical dimension inasmuch as it must not only include the voice of the K'iche' but also be aware of being "heard" by all Maya who recognize the Popol Vuh as a marker of their identity.

### THE CONTRIBUTIONS IN THIS VOLUME

The chapters in this volume reflect an integrated and comparative approach to the Popol Vuh, by which its myths are analyzed to elucidate the ancient Maya past while recognizing that archaeological and ethnographic information can reciprocally help us better understand the text itself. The chapters are grouped into four thematic parts.

The first part includes chapters that focus on the interpretation of highland Maya worldview and thought through analysis of the Popol Vuh text itself.

Allen J. Christenson's contribution analyzes the *topos* of world and human creation. Christenson discusses the mutual interdependence between deities and humans. Much of the first half of the Popol Vuh text is devoted to the creation of the world and the gods' attempts to order it as a self-sustaining entity. The gods focused their efforts on forming beings who would be able to perpetuate not only the life of the world they established but their own lives as well. Sacred ritual, performed at the proper time and in a manner established by ancient precedent, is necessary to maintain the link between this world and the world of the sacred. This reciprocity is fundamental to Maya thought—humans could not exist without the gods nourishing and sustaining them with food, light, and water. At the same time, the gods require nourishment as well in the form of prayers, offerings, and properly timed rituals of rebirth.

In the following chapter, Frauke Sachse analyzes the textual and cosmological coherence of the Popol Vuh as a source. She argues that the narrative myths of the text are combined to fit the cultural logic of highland Maya eschatological belief, which sees human life as analogous to the growth cycle of maize. Analyzing the account of world and human creation, as well as the migration of the K'iche' people, she shows that this analogy forms a conceptual metaphor that is reflected in the language of the Popol Vuh and creates a window into highland Maya cultural worldview.

Iyaxel Cojtí Ren's contribution complements the preceding two chapters in that it identifies a narrative element from the Popol Vuh as a cultural metaphor. Drawing on analogies between Central Mexican and Maya mythologies, Cojtí Ren interprets the mythic episode in the text that describes the first dawn of the sun (*saqirik*) as a metaphor for the foundation of cultural and political power through ceremony. Cojtí Ren argues that "dawning" rituals were a shared cultural trait among the various major highland Maya groups, particularly the K'iche' and Kaqchikel. She asserts that the existence of *saqaribal* altars is proof of the continuity of this concept to the present day.

The second part of this volume groups together chapters that focus on understanding the Precolumbian Maya archaeological record as it relates to the myths of

the Popol Vuh. The first two chapters deal with the interpretation of architectural arrangements and burials.

Jaime J. Awe shows that Maize God mythology reaches back into the Preclassic era and can be identified in the architectural program at Cahal Pech (Belize). Analyzing the components of a burial within a specific structure of the site, he argues that the cosmological interpretation of this layout is informed by the Popol Vuh narrative and proves the continuity of an eschatological belief in resurrection.

Thomas H. Guderjan and Colin Snider show how the narratives of the Popol Vuh can be used to understand Classic Maya architecture. Based on a case study from Blue Creek in Belize, they argue that architectural arrangements reflect political power that is legitimized by religious ideology. The role of the Hero Twins as ballplayers, as well as the description of the Mountain of Sustenance as the place of human creation in the Popol Vuh, assist in understanding the cosmological layout of Classic Maya sites. This includes the function of monumental architecture, ballcourts, and the positioning of caches.

In their joint chapter, Holley Moyes and Jaime Awe demonstrate the relevance of Popol Vuh mythology for the interpretation of archaeological finds in Classic Maya caves. They provide a detailed analysis of the Main Chamber of the undisturbed cave at Actun Tunichil Muknal in Belize. Drawing on creation mythology from the Popol Vuh, they demonstrate that the artifacts and remains found in this context show that the cave was used to ritually reenact mythological world creation.

Part 3 is devoted to the analysis of ancient Maya iconographic motifs. Barbara MacLeod proposes that the deeds of the Hero Twins in the Popol Vuh were rooted in specific narrative themes also found in Classic Maya mythology. Drawing on evidence from two recently discovered Codex-Style ceramic vessels as well as calendric data from Naj Tunich cave, McLeod links the recurrent motif of the sacrifice of the “Baby Jaguar” and “Snake Lady” with the history of the Hero Twins in the underworld realm of Xibalba. Not only does this elucidate the survival of elements of this major cycle of ancient Maya myth into the sixteenth century, but it broadens our understanding of the richness of the underlying story.

Karen Bassie-Sweet and Nicholas Hopkins compile data drawn from Classic Maya ceramic art as well as textual evidence to explore the nature and role of predatory birds in the Popol Vuh. Birds play key roles in Maya mythology as avatars and messengers of various gods, rulers, and secondary lords. This study focuses on the eagle and the laughing falcon and their relationship to specific Maya deities as well as analogous gods venerated by the Nahua cultures of Central Mexico.

The chapters in the fourth part of this volume are concerned with mythological continuities and change. Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos critically evaluates the

methodological approach of using the Popol Vuh as a source for the interpretation of Classic Maya iconography and ancient Maya religion and mythology. He reassesses Michael Coe's original association of the Hero Twins and their father with the images of the Headband Twins and the Maize God on Classic Maya ceramics. Drawing on comparative evidence from other parts of Mesoamerica, Chinchilla Mazariegos proposes an alternative interpretation of Classic Maya imagery with the solar and lunar heroes in Mexica and Oaxacan mythology and cautions against using the Popol Vuh as a sole source for reconstructing Classic Maya mythology.

Julia Guernsey's chapter connects the myths of the Popol Vuh with iconography from Preclassic Izapa. Focusing on the Great Bird imagery, or the Principal Bird Deity and its association with Seven Macaw from the Popol Vuh narrative, she discusses continuity and change in the mythological representations. She argues that the myth evolved over time, based on changes in the principles of social organization.

The last chapter in this part by Jesper Nielsen, Karl Taube, Christophe Helmke, and Héctor Escobedo expands the approach to mythological continuity and change, demonstrating that narratives from the Popol Vuh can be key to understanding mythologies from other parts of Mesoamerica. They likewise focus on the fight with the Great Bird, presenting iconographic evidence from Teotihuacan murals, Central Mexican codices, and Izapan monuments to demonstrate that the slaying of a Great Bird with solar aspects was a common Mesoamerican mythological theme.

#### FINAL REMARKS

The present volume combines interpretations of myths from the Popol Vuh with analyses of archaeological, iconographic, epigraphic, and ethnographic data that can be elucidated from the narrative found in this important highland Maya text. Several of the contributors reflect on the methodological aspects of their comparative approach. Indeed, appropriate caution must be taken when utilizing the Popol Vuh as a tool for interpreting Mesoamerican religions outside its temporal and geographic origins. The authors of the Popol Vuh did not intend to record a comprehensive theogony that addressed all aspects of their religion, ceremonial practices, or worldview. The text belongs to a very specific area of the Guatemalan highlands that had just recently suffered the trauma of invasion by a foreign power. Their world was far different from that of their own K'iche' ancestors, much less that of the Classic Maya in the distant lowlands of the Peten and Yucatan or the inhabitants of other regions of Mesoamerica. Nevertheless, the Popol Vuh does preserve fundamental aspects of worldview and ancient mythology that often resonate with analogous concepts found in the art and literature of ancient Mesoamerica. Despite all the potential pitfalls, the Popol Vuh has proven to be a rich and reliable

source for indigenous beliefs regarding Maya deities and their actions in the mythic past. It is, after all, the singular text in which Maya voices, only recently torn from their Preconquest world, speak of their own myths and history, apparently with their people in mind as the intended listeners. Nearly every scholar in the field of Mesoamerican studies has used it to one degree or another as an aid to interpret the literature and artistic motifs of the region. The list of recent scholars who have relied on passages from the Popol Vuh in their work is far too lengthy to include in a comprehensive way. Many appear in this volume as contributors. Suffice it to say that the importance of the Popol Vuh as a window into the mind of the ancient Maya has only grown with time tempered, as is appropriate, with the understanding that it is just one window and we all wish there were more like it.

#### A NOTE ON SPELLING CONVENTIONS

The authors of the Popol Vuh utilized a modified Latin script that had been developed by early missionaries and taught to the ruling elite in special monastery schools soon after the Spanish Invasion. In this volume, the K'iche' terms from the Popol Vuh are rendered in the modern orthography for highland Maya languages as published by the Academy for Mayan Languages of Guatemala (1988). Where the etymology of proper names and titles is ambiguous or unclear, the original spelling in the manuscript is retained. This applies also to the title of the book Popol Vuh itself, which is kept in the original spelling out of respect for the orthographic rendering used by the sixteenth-century K'iche' authors of the text.

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