Quirigua Zoomorph P and Three "Stones of Creation"

Khristaan D. Villela

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 ultimately literal depictions of astronomical phenomena (Schele 1992; Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993; Villela and Schele 1993). 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

* The Texas Notes are an ongoing series of commentaries and small reports on Precolombian art, writing, and culture published for the purpose of quick, limited distribution among interested scholars and students working in the field. The series is published by CHAAAC, the Center of the History and Art of Ancient Culture of the Art Department of the University of Texas at Austin. Funds for reproduction and distribution of complementary copies are provided by the John D. Murchison Professorship in Art, currently held by Linda Schele. Copyright is held by the authors and the CHAAAC and may be copied for scholarly purposes without further permission. Submissions will be accepted from contributors working in all disciplines and concerning any Precolombian cultural tradition or its descendant traditions. Contributions may be submitted by anyone working in the field, but they may not exceed ten pages, including references. Any of the major word processors may be used, but final text must be submitted in the IBM format, although any IBM disk size is acceptable. All illustrations must be provided at the finished scale in either line or stippled drawings suitable for scanning. The publisher takes no responsibility for copy editing and the authors must clear all copyright permissions before submission of a manuscript. The editor reserves the right to reject submissions if they are deemed inappropriate or incorrectly prepared. Style conventions should follow Chicago Style B and text should be single column and formatted to conform with the paragraph, sub-titling, and other features of this note. Ventura Desktop Publisher will be used to format the text into this layout, which will then be printed on a Hewlett-Packard Laserjet III. A master copy of the recent notes will be put on file at Kinko's at the beginning of each semester and can be ordered from Kinko's Copies, 2901-C Medical Arts St., Austin, Texas 78705 (512-476-3242; FAX 512-476-2371).
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 Looper informed Schele that the modern Quiché Maya astronomical repertory includes a Hearth constellation. 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-
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 ethno-graphic 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 2. Orion and the Hearth Constellation. After Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:Figure 2.14.
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*? 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. 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. 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*. As Maudslay and his crew realized, Zoomorph P depicts a great turtle. 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 or 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**


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


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


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

**References**

Acuña, R. (editor)

Adams, R.E.W.

Freidel, David, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker

Holmes, William H.


Martinez Hernández, Juan
1930 Diccionario de Motul maya-español atribuido a Fray Antonio de Ciudad Real y arte de lengua Maya por Fray Juan Coronel. Talleres de la Compañía Tipográfica Yucateca, Mérida.

Maudslay, Alfred P.
1883 Explorations in Guatemala, and Examination of the Newly Discovered Indian Ruins of Quiriguá, Tikal, and the Usumacinta. Proceedings of the Royal Geographic Society 5(4):185-204.


1889-1902 Archaeology. 5 vols. (four of plates, one of text). Appendix to Biologia Centrali-Americana; or, Contributions to the Knowledge of the Flora and Fauna of Mexico and Central America, edited by Frederick Ducane Godman and Osbert Salvin. 63 vols. R.H. Porter and Dulau, London.

Maudslay, Alfred P., and Anne Cary Maudslay

Morley, Sylvanus Griswold


Sabloff, Jeremy A.

Schele, Linda

Seler, Eduard


Stephens, John L.
1841 Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatán. 2 vols. Harper and Brothers, New York.

Tedlock, Dennis

Thompson, Edward H.


Villela, Khrista D., and Linda Schele

Wauchope, Robert