DID THE MAYA PREDICT AN APOCALYPSE IN 2012? IN A WORD: NO.

With clear evidence to the contrary, we return to this question and reflect upon why we in a 21st century American society are so strongly drawn to this idea. Western society has long been fascinated with “End of Time” predictions, and we share an underlying human quest for certainty through religious thought and scientific inquiry. A particularly well-developed theme within Judeo-Christian traditions, the idea of an impending Armageddon has been a core tenet of Christianity from its very outset. When the original Judgment Day failed to materialize, a new End of the World was predicted for the year 1000 CE, attended with great anxiety. More recently, dire millennial predictions were revived for the year 2000 CE, and to almost everyone’s great relief, global markets and civilization continued on.

The Pre-Columbian Maya did not predict the end of the world would occur in December 2012. This particular interpretation of ancient ideas results from a blending of a precious few Classic-period Maya texts with notions drawn from indigenous Mesoamerican and European writings from the Colonial era, and topped up with speculations from modern writers seeking to fit it all into a predictive package tied to the calendrical-cycle completion date.

Yet, as scholars have noted, the remarkable achievements of ancient Maya astronomers—including their ability to accurately predict the movement of Venus and other planets based on naked eye observations—do not imply that their interests were the same as ours or that their interpretations were meant for us. The ancient Maya clearly understood that their Long Count calendar would extend far into the future. They considered themselves the true people created from the ideal substance, maize, and they had no inclination to agonize over a future annihilation event linked to the Long Count cycles. In fact, this calendar system fell out of use among the Maya centuries ago, while other calendar systems continued on.

For generations, the Maya looked to their calendars as a way to give shape, order, and meaning to past events and to inform decisions concerning proper timing for things to come. The Long Count—a count of days based on the appearance of the sun, not the movement of other celestial bodies—allowed Classic Maya kings to present themselves within that grand...
sweep of time and to draw comparisons to events and person-
ages of the past. But the Long Count was not used to predict
future events, and the few ancient texts that anticipated the
completion event in 2012 did not address what may come;
instead they referred to the coming cycle completion as a tem-
poral benchmark framing events and individuals of their time.
In fact, the monuments erected at the site of Coba in Yucatan
present such an astounding span of Long Count cycles that the
upcoming date in December 2012 pales in comparison.

Why are we drawn to this idea of cataclysmic events sup-
posedly predicted by ancient people to occur in 2012? Some
writers anticipate widespread destruction triggered by a galac-
tic alignment of the sun with the plane of our Milky Way gal-
axy. Others foresee a cosmic re-awakening and renewal set to
begin in 2012. In the latter view, a genuine transformation will
follow if proper religious observance and sacrifices occur at
the time of the cycle completion. This idea of a transformation
resonates with many people and conveys their optimism for
the future.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IN DECEMBER 2012?

As Yukatek archaeologist José Huchim Herrera commented,
“The Maya today do not worry about what will happen. We
are not worried, because the date is simply the ending of a long
period and the beginning of a new cycle.” In his mind, the
event is cause for celebration, rather like New Year’s Eve, with
a positive sense of hope for individuals, family, and friends.
Indeed, the new cycle beginning in 2012 is an opportunity for
greater awareness of the world around us, and a time to be
more conscious of our impact on the environment and our
legacy for future generations.

For Huchim, along with countless Maya and others who
work in collaboration with them, the future, beginning in 2012,
relies on a strong sense of cultural heritage and commitment to
expand opportunities. While much remains to be accom-
plished within the modern nations of the Maya world, Maya
individuals and their communities have greater legal and social
standing today than at any time over the past 500 years. Among
the outcomes of the peace agreements signed in 1996, conclud-
ing Guatemala’s long civil war, the human rights of indigenous
Maya people were formally recognized and initial steps taken
to dismantle the government structures of ethnic discrimina-
tion. Maya children now can be educated in their own lan-
guages. Maya adults can serve in political office. And indigenous
communities have the right to administer their traditional
land holdings.

In Mexico, Guatemala, and neighboring countries, Maya
people are increasingly involved in the research, conserva-
tion, and management of their cultural heritage sites. Yukatek
archaeologist Huchim finds great satisfaction in his work for
the Mexican government overseeing activities at the famous
archaeological parks of Uxmal and Chichen Itza near his
childhood home. Following in the footsteps of his parents and
grandparents, Huchim has worked in archaeology for over
30 years, and he represents a growing number of Maya who
hold positions of authority guiding the research programs and
workforces at many sites.

The year 2012 and those that follow will be momentous, but
not because of the turn of the 13th Bak’tun. The engagement
of the Maya in regional and national political and economic
affairs will shape their future, and establish greater represen-
tation of diverse communities within modern nations. With
access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities
for households and communities, Maya traditions will con-
tinue to enrich our global heritage.

LOA TRAXLER is Curator of the exhibition MAYA 2012: Lords
of Time.