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# **The Defeat of the Great Bird in Myth and Royal Pageantry: A Mesoamerican Myth in a Comparative Perspective**

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## **Abstract**

Mythic narratives occupy a privileged position in human cultures, and relate not only the creation of the world, plants, animals and people, but also the origin of social values, rituals and institutions. The pre-eminence given to myths and their explanatory value, means that these narratives are much more than the recollection of fantastic events in the deep past. The study of myths have relied on a wide range of approaches, variously stipulating that these are the product of the social unconscious, the fabricated fantasies of the rulers to bolster their claims to power, or the indistinct recollections of actual events in the distant past — beyond the reaches of orally-transmitted extra-social memory. Here we present a particular mythic motif, involving the defeat of a giant celestial bird, with solar attributes, at the hands of a culture hero or heroic twins. While we will focus on this motif and its distribution across Mesoamerican cultures, it bears remarking that similar motifs occur among Amerindian cultures in both North and South America. Together this collection of myths can be ascribed to a series of mythic cycles, wherein culture heroes set out to vanquish monsters and make the world a place suitable for the creation of humanity. Surprisingly, several Old World myths also exhibit such remarkable structural and substantial similarities, that these point to distant, yet common prehistoric origins and widespread diffusion, rather than independent and coincident convergence.

## **Introduction**

Here we build on the results of an earlier study (Nielsen & Helmke 2010) and provide our most recent thoughts and findings on the subject. First we will introduce the place of the Great Bird within the cosmology of Mesoamerican cultures, before going on to discuss the arboreal home of this avian creature, a world tree abounding in jewels and riches. The mythic motif of the Great Bird's fall and demise is then outlined, by combining a variety of sources spanning from Pre-Columbian iconography to modern myths, via ethnohistoric sources of the



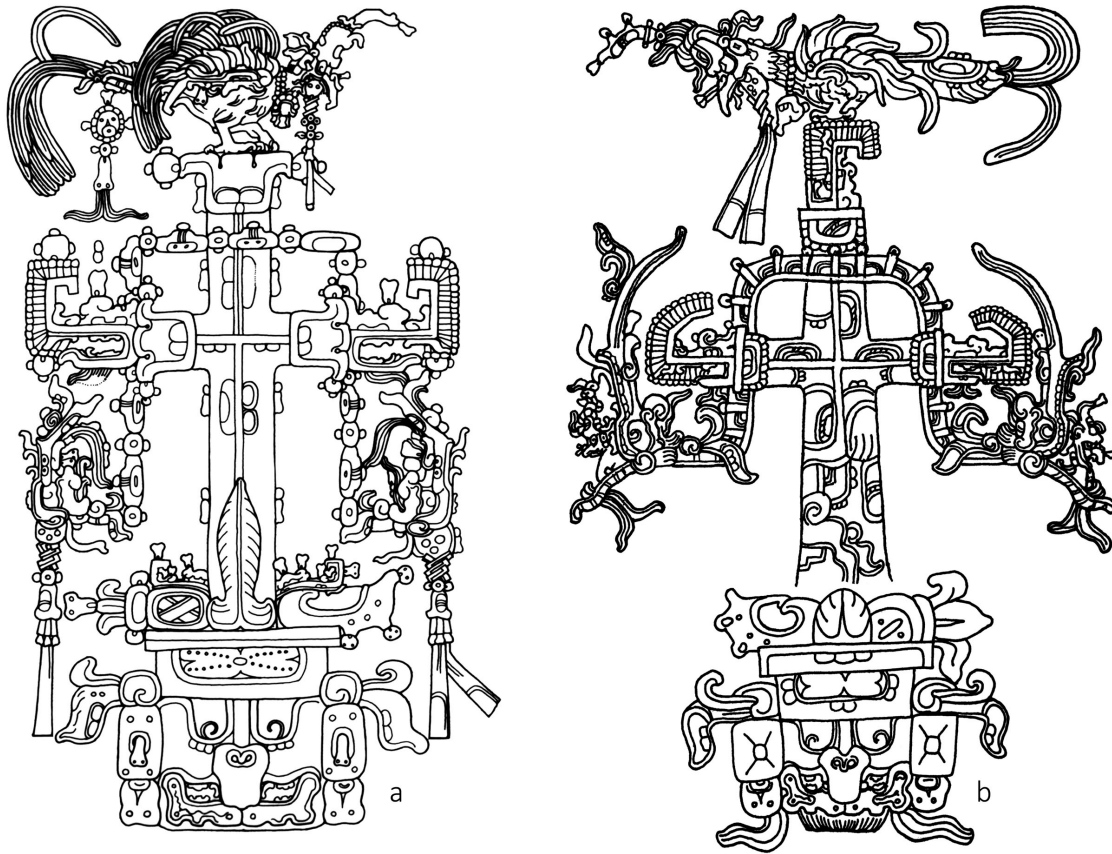
**Figure 1:** Map of Mesoamerica showing the location of salient archaeological sites mentioned in the text (map by Christophe Helmke).

Colonial period. The constituents of the mythic motif are then discussed as is the role of this myth in the ancient pageantry and rites of rulers, in light of our more recent interpretations. We close this paper by introducing promising analogues of this mythic motif found among cultures of the Old World.

### **The Great Bird in Mesoamerican Cosmology**

The Great Bird<sup>1</sup> assumed a central role in the cosmology of ancient Mesoamerican cultures (Figure 1). The paramount importance of the Great Bird is revealed by the iconography of the ancient Maya. This is nowhere clearer than in the monuments of Palenque, Mexico. The Temple of the Cross, one of the principal

<sup>1</sup> Earlier researchers have termed it the Principal Bird Deity and some of our colleagues have suggested that there is a multiplicity of different avian creatures that have been subsumed under the same heading (*e.g.* Bardawil 1976; Miller & Taube 1993: 137-138; Zender 2005: 9; Stone & Zender 2011: 46-47; Bassie-Sweet & Hopkins n.d.). While we recognize the diverse aspects of these entities, we regard them as regional and temporal variations of the same general avian creature. In addition, since our research is comparative, we have found it useful to employ a broad designation that covers all the different cross-cultural manifestations of these birds.



**Figure 2:** The Great Bird perched atop the World Tree: a) detail of the central panel within the sanctuary of the Temple of the Cross at Palenque (after Schele & Freidel 1990: Fig. 6.12). b) Detail of the sarcophagus lid in the tomb of the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque (after Schele & Mathews 1998: Fig. 3.16).

temples at this archaeological site, houses a remarkable panel within its diminutive sanctuary, in the farthest room (Houston 1991; Stuart 2006: 109-110). Commissioned and dedicated by king Kan Bahlam II in AD 692, the Temple of the Cross serves to create a mythic focal point for the royal rituals that were performed there (Stuart 2006: 111-131) (Figure 2a). Another particularly illustrative example is rendered on the famed lid of the sarcophagus of the celebrated king Janaab Pakal the Great (Robertson 1983) (Figure 2b). Both the panel and the lid are dominated by depictions of the Great Bird perched atop the world tree. Based on these examples we can see that the world tree is made manifest by sprouting from offering vessels, and the ends of the cross-shaped tree terminate in personified florid buds. The tree itself is marked with signs that indicate that it is lustrous and made of a shiny material such as polished stone (see Stuart 2006: 116, 2008; Stuart & Stuart 2008: 173; Taube 2005). Much like a liturgical stole, the world tree is adorned with open necklaces, their ends



terminating in serpentine figures that belch forth deities. On the panel of the Temple of the Cross, the necklace is composed of round beads and glyphs for *yax*, ‘blue-green’, whereas the sarcophagus lid depicts the necklace as made of nestled earspools. A very similar depiction is found among mural fragments at the great Early Classic metropolis, Teotihuacan, in the central Mexican Highlands. Found in the Tetitla residential compound, is an assemblage of fragmentary 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century murals known as the *pinturas realistas* (‘realistic paintings’), which are well known for depicting an array of motifs and scenes that are heavily influenced by Maya iconography and artistic canons, albeit produced by local artisans (*e.g.* Taube 2003; Helmke & Nielsen 2013: 212-213). Amidst the fragments is a depiction of such a tree of riches, formed by a series of nestled earspools (Taube in prep.: Figs. 12-14). This is significant since it indicates that a world tree — quite possibly surmounted by the Great Bird — was also represented in the murals of Tetitla. As such it is clear that the world tree was conceived as the source of riches, adorned with jewels and made of precious jadeite.

The Great Bird that is perched atop the world tree, serves as its guardian, and is usually represented with lengthy tail feathers, resembling those of the quetzal, and upward-turned “serpent” wings. Its pygostyle — the fleshy protuberance of the abdomen — is at times rendered as a maize cob (Taube 2000a: 313-315, Figs. 18-19), and its forehead is marked with a mirror sign. The beak is long and curving, and occasionally resembles that of a bird of prey or a macaw. At the top of its head is a jewel in the form of an extruded *yax* sign, and among the Maya the bird usually wears a distinctive diadem including a florid glyph read *ak’ab* (‘darkness’) as well as a necklace of round beads that suspend a broad trilobate pectoral. In its beak the bird clenches an element of regalia that terminates in two broad strips of cloth that are of woven together. Although not represented here, earlier examples of the Great Bird depict its wings provided with sharp projectile points (*e.g.* Taube *et al.* 2010: 31-32, Fig. 18).

The Palenque examples are far from the only sources that depict the Great Bird atop a prominent supernatural tree. Other examples depict a wide array of supernatural trees, including the Preclassic stelae of Izapa, in Chiapas, where the tree is in the shape of an upright crocodilian (Guernsey 2006) and the main tree of the Protoclassic murals of San Bartolo, Guatemala, which can be identified as a *nance* tree (*Byrsonima crassifolia*) (Taube *et al.* 2010: 43). Outside of the Maya area, the first page of the Late Postclassic *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer* depicts a series of birds perched atop four trees each aligned to the cardinal directions (*Codex Fejérváry-Mayer* 1971). These avian creatures are evidently the Mixtec equivalents of the Great Bird of the Maya. Interestingly, in the cosmogram that is



**Figure 3:** Alternate manifestations of the Great Bird: a) Huichol yarn painting (c. 1970) representing a mythical hero hunting a bird perched atop a fantastical maize tree (Anonymous 2013: Lot 4635). b) The quintipartite manifestation of the Great Bird as represented on a Late Classic Maya Codex style plate (after Robicsek & Hales 1981: Fig. 87).

rendered in the *Fejérváry-Mayer*, at each of the cardinal directions we see a separate blossoming tree, and perched atop is a different bird, including a green quetzal (east), a white hummingbird (north), a yellow parrot (south) and a bluebird (west). Returning to the Maya, a comparable cosmogram is found at the Terminal Classic site of Chichen Itza, Mexico, where a relief from the Temple of the Wall Panels shows four different birds seated atop four trees (see Roys 1933: 100, Pl. 1c). This implies that there is not a single Great Bird as such, but a quadripartite set, wherein each represents a different aspect of a greater supernatural entity. In fact, at San Bartolo, the murals depict not only the principal nance tree, but four additional trees, each surmounted by a celestial bird (Taube *et al.* 2010: 53-56; Stuart 2008). Evidence that this was also the conception of the ancient Maya is the glyphs that adorn the walls of Tomb 12 at Río Azul, Guatemala. Here, each of the walls are aligned to the cardinal directions and each bears a prominent glyph for the corresponding world direction (Stuart 1987), and below each are the respective names of supernatural raptorial birds. Thus, the northern bird is named the *Uh Tz'ikiin Ajaw* ('moon bird lord'), the eastern the *K'in Tz'ikiin Ajaw* ('sun bird lord'), the southern the *Ek' Tz'ikiin Ajaw* ('star bird lord') and the western the *Ak'ab Tz'ikiin Ajaw* ('darkness bird lord') (Stuart 2008; Taube *et al.* 2010: 53-54). This confirms the quadripartite configuration of these avian creatures, aspects that are shared with other supernatural entities of the Maya, including the thunder deity *Chaahk* (God B) the lightning deity *K'awiil* (God K) and the aged *Itzam Tuun* (God N) (see

Thompson 1970; Helmke 2012a: 85-90; Wrem Anderson & Helmke 2013: 169-177; Martin in press). Nevertheless, an unprovenanced Codex-style plate from the Maya lowlands depicts not four, but five Great Birds: four along the rim, aligned to the cardinal points and one in the middle (see Robicsek & Hales 1980: 244, Fig. 87) (Figure 3b). This fascinating vessel reveals that the Great Bird in its cosmic incarnations, was not solely quadripartite, but quintipartite, since the center figured as the fifth cardinal point in ancient Maya cosmology (Miller & Taube 1993: 77-78; Schele & Freidel 1990: 66-67, Fig. 2.1).<sup>2</sup>

### **The Great Bird and the Tree of Riches**

These examples confirm that the Great Bird was of paramount importance in the vision of the cosmos that was shared between Mesoamerican cultures. Outside of cosmology proper, the Great Bird was also of profound significance in Mesoamerican mythology. The *Popol Wuuj* provides us with additional details concerning the wealth and riches of the Great Bird. The *Popol Wuuj*, is an extremely important ethnohistoric manuscript of the K'iche' Maya, transliterated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Dominican friar Francisco Ximénez who added a running Spanish translation (Christenson 2007; Woodruff 2009). The *Popol Wuuj* remains the best account of the myths involving a giant bird named *Wuqub Kaqix*, or 'Seven Macaw'. This account relates that in the deep mythic past, in the darkness, before the celestial bodies sparkled and shone, the Great Bird sat atop its tree, declaring himself to be the light. Thus *Wuqub Kaqix* spoke:

I am great. I dwell above the heads of the people [...] I am their sun. I am also their light [...] My eyes sparkle with glittering blue/green jewels. My teeth as well are jade stones, as brilliant as the face of the sky. This, my beak, shines brightly [...] My throne is gold and silver. When I go forth from my throne, I brighten the face of the earth. Thus Seven Macaw puffed himself up in the days and months before the faces of the sun, moon, and stars could truly be seen. He desired only greatness and transcendence before the light of the sun and moon were revealed in their clarity. (Christenson 2007: 79-80)

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<sup>2</sup> A possible surviving ritual reenactment of a cosmological myth involving the fall or descent of four birds is still performed in parts of Mexico. Known as the *volador* ('flyer') ritual, four men, suspended on ropes by their legs, jump off from a 25-m high pole, while a fifth dances on the top of the pole. Although most of the original meaning of the ritual has been lost or altered since colonial times, the attributes of the participants suggest a link to supernatural, celestial birds, the cardinal directions and cosmological themes. Thus, from sources dating to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century we know that the dancers were dressed as birds, most often impersonating eagles or hawks, and that the ritual was related among other things to the solar cycle and the four directional winds (see Stresser-Peán 2005; Stuart 2008).

Now the narrative voice of the *Popol Wuuj* quickly interjects, remarking that Seven Macaw was not truly the sun, but that he exaggerated his prowess “because of his plumage and his gold and his silver” (Christenson 2007: 80). These segments corroborate that the characteristic and enduring features of the Great Bird are his jewelry and wealth and that his throne, the tree in which he was perched, was made of precious elements especially jadeite in Pre-Columbian times, but also gold and silver in the Colonial period. The coloration of the world tree is also far from coincidental since it is a luxuriant and green tree associated with maize; in much the same way as Seven Macaw is bedecked in greenstone jewelry and in the Classic period the Great Bird is at times rendered as part-maize. We have also been able to trace this Mesoamerican myth to Teotihuacan (Nielsen & Helmke 2010). There the myth is represented in the murals of a compound designated as Zona 5A, at the foot of the great Sun Pyramid, one of the largest pyramids in Mesoamerica, measuring over 220 m on a side and more than 70 m in height (Millon *et al.* 1965; Matos Moctezuma 1995). Here, the avian creatures represent solar entities emerging from the beak of the birds, as if anthropomorphic beings in bird suits. The supernatural trees associated to the falling Great Bird are shown in full bloom. Emanating from each blossom are important cultural items, such as darts for an *atlatl*, or spearthrower, an incense pouch, earspools, a loincloth, a headdress and even a little jar, spilling *pulque* (fermented agave sap) (Figure 5c) — objects and substances that defined the very essence of civilized life at Teotihuacan (Nielsen & Helmke in prep.). Stunningly, one blossom seems to yield a flame (Figure 5d) and what may be the Maize god emerges from another (Figure 5e), as if among this plethora of wealth these trees were also the primordial source of fire and maize, all covetously guarded by the Great Bird.

These attributes of the world tree partly subsist in a myth of the Huichol [Wixáritari] of north-western Mesoamerica, as distant recollections of the central mythic motif of the Great Bird perched atop the world tree. Thus, in the time before agriculture and before humanity had cultigens of any kind, a mythic hero was on a quest to find the source of maize, which the ants had already discovered. On his way he was guided by a bird who eventually took him to his future bride, Maize Woman (Bierhorst 1990: 90-98). Significantly, among the “yarn paintings” (*i.e. nieli’ka*) for which the Huichol are famed, the episode that exemplifies the myth usually involves an oversized and supernatural maize plant, atop of which is perched the bird that has guided the hero to his quarry (Figure 3a). Aptly enough, stylized ants scurry about the scene. Typically, the hero is shown drawing a bow, arrow aimed at the bird — even though the Huichol variant of the myth fails to comment on, or clarify, this aspect. Nevertheless, this is a significant feature that ties the Huichol variant with the Mesoamerican myth of the Great Bird’s defeat,



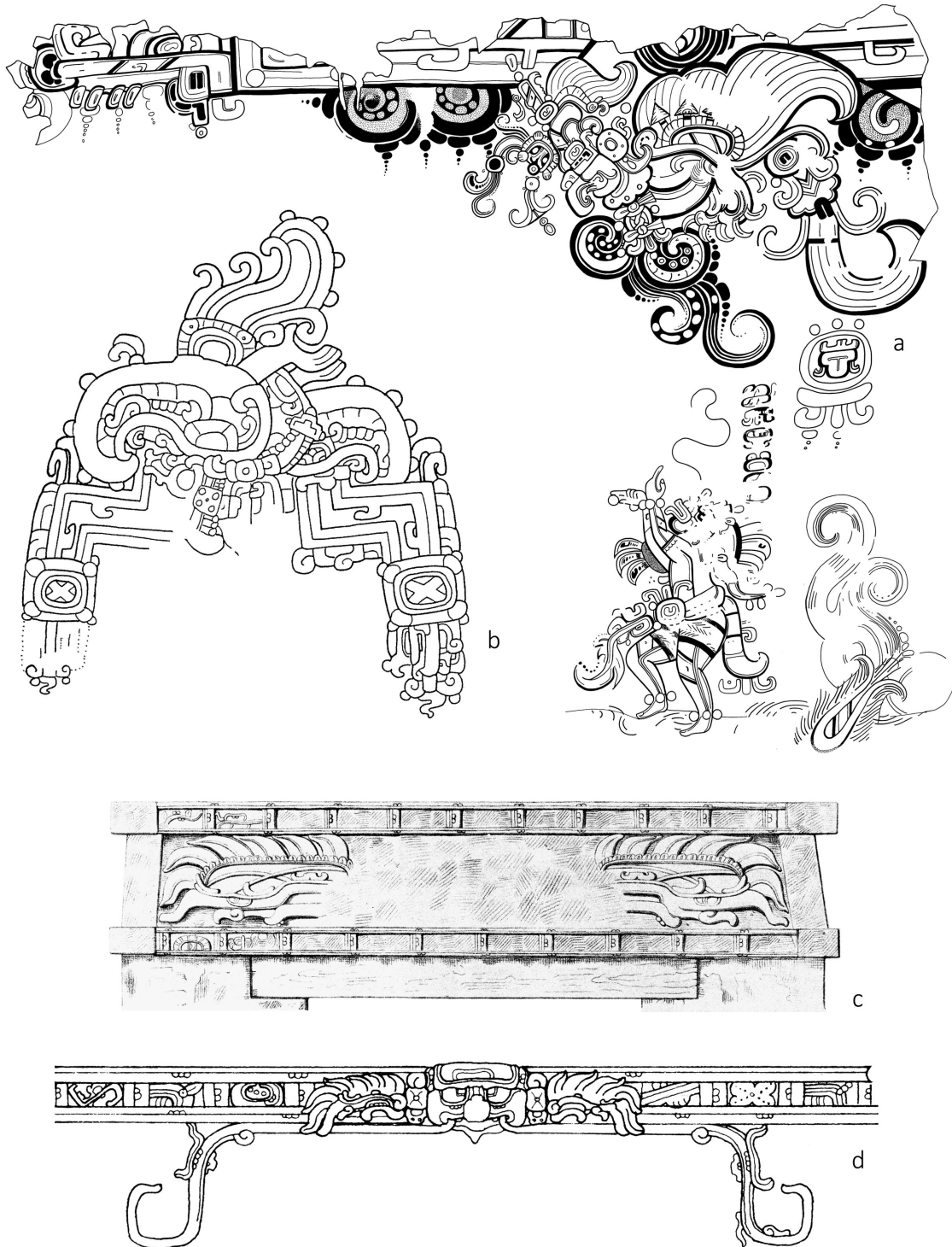
and demonstrates the integrity and continuity of the mythic motif that we are exploring here.

### **The Fall of the Great Bird**

Despite the paramount importance of the Great Bird in Mesoamerican cosmology, the myths and their depictions consistently focus on his downfall and demise. The *Popol Wuj* relates it bluntly when it states “Now we shall tell how Seven Macaw died; how he was defeated” (Christenson 2007: 80). In the Maya variants of the myth, the agents of his defeat are two heroic figures, usually referred to as the Hero Twins, who in the Classic period were ostensibly known as *Juun Ajaw* (‘one king’) and *Yax Bahlam* (‘first jaguar’). Whereas the entities of the Classic period cannot be considered direct lineal precursors to the twins of the *Popol Wuj*, namely *Junajpu* and *Xbalanke*, it is clear that both the Postclassic and Classic figures (of the highland and lowlands, respectively), are reflexes of even earlier mythical beings, with shared features and comparable nominal sequences (see Coe 1987; Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos 2011: 24-28). In addition, whereas the *Popol Wuj* is essentially mute on the subject, *Junajpu* and the Classic analog *Juun Ajaw* are clearly the more significant and salient of the two, and we therefore consider him to be the elder of the twins and will refer to him as such. The pair of Classic period heroes are distinguished by the marks that adorn their faces and bodies, *Juun Ajaw* marked with black dots and *Yax Bahlam* with patches of jaguar skin (Miller & Taube 1993: 175; Stone & Zender 2011: 44-45). Discussing the power, pride and riches of Seven Macaw the twins state:

Good shall never come of this. People will never be able to live here on the face of the earth. Thus we will try to shoot him with our blowguns. When he flies over his food, we will shoot him [...] Then his jade, his gold and silver, his jewels, his glittering things, and all things over which he keeps vigil, will come to an end (Christenson 2007: 82).

The demise of the Great Bird is thereby conceived as a necessary prerequisite to make the world suitable for the eventual creation of humanity. In this function the twins appear as monster-slayers, duplicating the heroes of other Amerindian myths, from both North and South America (Bierhorst 1985, 1988; Métraux 1946; Nielsen & Sellner Reunert 2008). The *Popol Wuj* is also explicit in stating that ridding the earth of the Great Bird served not only to pacify the world, but also gave the Hero Twins the means of acquiring the riches of the world tree and of distributing these to humanity (Christenson 2007: 82, 88). In their first



**Figure 4:** Late Preclassic, Protoclassic and Late Classic scenes of the Great Bird's descent through a cloven sky: a) San Bartolo, West Wall (after Taube *et al.* 2010: Fig. 30a). b) Takalik Abaj, Altar 13 (after Taube *et al.* 2010: 30b). c) Palenque, Temple of the Cross, Stucco frieze above the entrance to the inner sanctuary with the wings of the descending bird preserved (after Maudslay 1889-1902: Pl. 68e). d) Palenque, House E, stucco (after Schele & Miller 1986: 45).



attempt the Hero Twins ambush the Great Bird by the nance tree, where it feeds on its fruits. As the bird is about to alight, *Junajpu* discharges his blowgun and hits the bird directly in the jaw. The bird falls from the tree in agony and the twins rush over to seize the Great Bird, but it bites the arm of the elder of the two twins and tears it off at the shoulder. The Great Bird returns to his tree where he hangs the arm of *Junajpu*, all the while tormented by his dislocated jaw and fractured teeth. The twins, resorting to trickery, bid an elderly couple to pose as healers to overcome the Great Bird. They offer to cure the bird, but instead they magically remove his jeweled teeth and eyes, which we are told are the source of Seven Macaw's power. In this way they defeat the Great Bird and *Junajpu* is able to retrieve his arm and become whole again (Christenson 2007: 84-88; Taube 1993: 64-66).

In the iconography, the demise of the celestial bird can be conveyed by depicting the Great Bird with wings flapped back, thereby illustrating its descent from the sky, the crucial starting point in the narrative that eventually leads up to its final defeat, as seen in the iconography of several archaeological sites, including at Izapa, San Bartolo, Copan, Tikal and even as far afield as Teotihuacan (see Agurcia Fasquelle 2004; Fash 2011: 36-44; Jones & Satterthwaite 1982: Fig. 74; Nielsen & Helmke 2010; Taube 2006, 2009: 43; Taube *et al.* 2010: 45, 48) (Figures 4 & 5). At Palenque, there are two remarkable examples of this convention. One is the well-known stucco frieze adorning the interior of House E within the royal palace (Figure 4d). Above the northern doorway is a sky band, serving to depict the heavens in a stylized manner. From the middle of the sky band, the Great Bird is shown, facing downwards and wings flapped upwards, as if falling from the heavens (see Robertson 1985: Figs. 79-81; Schele & Miller 1986: 45). The sanctuary of the Temple of the Cross — that houses the panel that we introduced at the onset — provides us with another remarkable example (Figure 4c). The stucco frieze above the doorway of the sanctuary clearly represents the fall of the Great Bird, even though only the wings remain, but significantly, both are folded upwards (see Robertson 1991: Figs. 45-46; Stuart 2006: 109-110). Thus, whereas we see the Great Bird in its proper cosmological place, perched atop the world tree on the panel within the sanctuary, the sanctuary itself serves to commemorate the defeat of this supernatural bird.

Another means of representing the defeat of the Great Bird is to represent the pivotal scene when *Juun Ajaw* is about to shoot his blowgun at the bird. This is the most common way of representing the whole mythic motif in the Maya area, especially on figurative ceramics. Among the most telling representations of the twins' confrontation with the mythological bird are delicately painted Codex style vases, one of which is in the collections of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts



**Figure 5:** Blowgunning the Great Bird: a) Late Classic Maya Codex style vessel with the Great Bird as the target of the elder of the Hero Twins (photo courtesy of Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Accession No. 1988.1173). b) Detail of Mural 4 from Room 13 in Zona 5A at Teotihuacan depicting the descent of the Great Bird from the tree of plenty. The arrow points to the partly preserved blowgunner aiming his weapon to the birds. Note also the different objects emerging from the flowers of the tree (drawing by Christophe Helmke). Objects emanating from the blossoms of the tree of plenty: c) a jar spilling *pulque*, d) a flame and e) what may be the Maize god (photographs by Christophe Helmke).

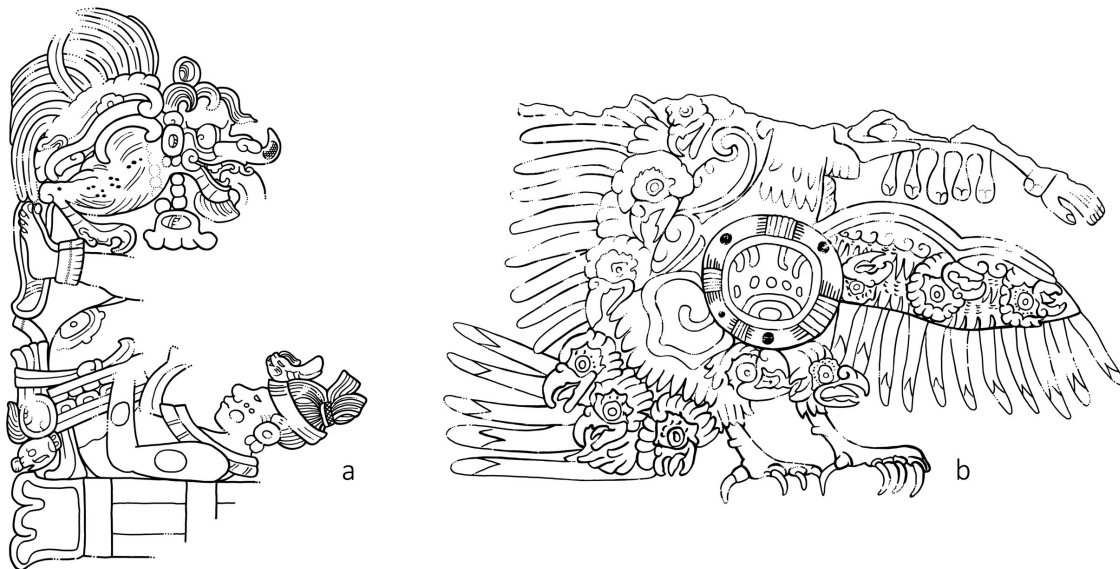


(K1226) (Figure 5a), whereas another is in a private collection (K4546) (Boot 2004), there is also the polychrome dish known as the Blom Plate (K3638) (Blom 1950), and a double-cylinder vase with modeled figures of the bird and the elder twin on the lids (K3105) (see Coe 1987: 169-172), as are other polychrome vessels that are thematically related (*e.g.* K555, K1345 & K4151). Each of these scenes depicts *Juun Ajaw* with blowgun aimed and discharged at the Great Bird, whilst it is perched atop a supernatural tree (see Zender 2005: 9; van Akkeren 2005; Stuart 2007). As such these early representations closely duplicate the key event narrated in the *Popol Wuj* wherein *Junajpu* shoots *Wuqub Kaqix* down from the nance tree. The standardization and internal coherence of the scenes is remarkable, making the composition and repetition of elements wholly diagnostic of the encounter between *Juun Ajaw* and the Great Bird. It is also noteworthy that the vast majority of – if not all – scenes known from Maya iconography depicting an individual shooting at a bird with a blowgun are tied to this mythological sequence. The same may also be true among other Mesoamerican cultures, keeping in mind the Huichol example where only the weapons have changed, the blowgun being replaced by the bow and arrow, introduced to Mesoamerica during the Postclassic period. In turn, when one considers the explanatory basis of Amerindian mythology, it follows that this primeval event in large measure commemorates, not only the defeat of the Great Bird and the inception of hunting, but also *Juun Ajaw* as the first hunter. We have also identified a series of remarkably similar scenes, among other Mesoamerican cultures, including the examples from Teotihuacan in the Central Mexican Highlands, at Jaltepetongo in Oaxaca, as well as El Tajin and Las Palmillas in Veracruz (Nielsen & Helmke 2010).

The other scene that figures predominantly in the iconography of Mesoamerican cultures follows the dismemberment of *Juun Ajaw*. Thus, at Izapa, Tonina (Figure 6a) and Copan, we have clear depictions of the Hero Twin with his arm torn off, the limb clenched in the maw of the Great Bird (Nielsen & Helmke 2010; see also Chinchilla Mazariegos 2010). In the murals of the Atetelco compound at Teotihuacan we can see an explicit example of the Great Bird clenching the arm of the Hero Twin, large drops of blood dripping from the severed limb (Figure 6b), and a Teotihuacan-style censer from the Escuintla area of Guatemala depicts what may be the Great Bird's house, the lintel above the doorway decorated – rather chillingly – with a set of five dismembered human arms<sup>3</sup> (Nielsen &

<sup>3</sup> The presence of five human arms could mean that the Teotihuacan version of the tale involved five successive attacks on the Great Bird, until finally it was vanquished. Nevertheless, Teotihuacan is known for the principle of reduplication wherein separate elements are repeated time and again, almost as if to form decorative patterns, even if these involve figurative and/or glyphic elements. As such the duplication and the number of human arms may not be significant features in and of themselves.

Helmke 2010; Chinchilla Mazariegos 2010: Fig. 4). One additional example of this motif is preserved on a ceramic applique to a theatre censer in the ex-collection of Hasso von Winning, which represents a row of six human arms, hanging from a lintel (Malter 2004: Lot 1004). Whereas the pieces of the ex-collection von Winning are unprovenienced, many of these were acquired from local residents around Azcapotzalco, a locality that in Pre-Columbian times was evidently part of Teotihuacan's realm. As a result we surmise that the piece in question, with the dismembered arms, also originates from that area, in what is now the northwestern extent of Mexico City's urban sprawl. Taken together this is clear evidence that the mythic motif is a pan-Mesoamerican one, and not one restricted to the Maya area, even though this myth is particularly well-documented in the iconography of the Classic period and the *Popol Wuj* of Colonial times. Nevertheless, we cannot stress enough that the examples we have found across Mesoamerica are not consistent with coeval dissemination and diffusion from a single donor culture, but instead point to widely shared inherited beliefs; the distinctions we see between the different cultures signal how much the primeval myth has evolved and changed over time.



**Figure 6:** The dismemberment of the blowgunner: a) Detail of the Late Classic stucco frieze at Tonina showing the Hero Twin *Juun Ajaw* under attack from the Great Bird. Note the element clenched in the bird's beak that is probably the severed arm of *Juun Ajaw* (drawing by Christophe Helmke based on photographs by Juan Yadeun). b) Detail of the Great Bird painted on Mural 1 of Patio 7 at Atetelco, Teotihuacan (drawing by Christophe Helmke based on photographs and inspection of the original).

## The Pageantry of Kings

It has long been recognized that myths serve as an integral part in legitimating social inequality and bolstering the claims of royalty to their exalted status. It is the explanatory capacity and the etiological nature of myths that provide the supernatural precedents for social structure as well as ritual behavior. The myth of the Great Bird's demise is one such myth and it was an integral part of the ideology of Mesoamerican rulers. For instance, Maya kings likened themselves to *Juun Ajaw*, the primordial hunter. The Hero Twins rid the world of its monsters and thereby paved the way for humanity. Later divine kings could thus assert their prowess as rulers by relating themselves to *Juun Ajaw*. From a magnificent scene that was finely incised into a section of bone, now in the collections of the Dallas Museum of Art, we can see a mythic scene: the first enthronement ceremony (Figure 7d). There *Juun Ajaw* is seated on his throne, an aged deity holding a large headdress, ready to crown the young lord, thereby performing the first coronation ceremony. Most remarkable of all, the headdress is fashioned from the head of the Great Bird, evidence that kings asserted their powers and traced their privileges back to that one pivotal mythic event, wherein the bird was defeated and ultimately beheaded (Nielsen & Helmke 2010). That the Great Bird was eventually beheaded is corroborated also by the iconography of the Late Preclassic Monument 8 of the site of La Lagunita in the Guatemalan Highlands (Taube *et al.* 2010: Fig. 14a). This monument depicts the head of the Great Bird, mounted on an unmistakable offering tripod (Figure 7b). Another important example is found among the aforementioned *pinturas realistas* of Tetitla, Teotihuacan (Ruiz Gallut 2002: 324-325, Fig. 10; Taube in prep.). Here one mural fragment is highly significant since it depicts the head of the Great Bird, in typical Maya fashion, but as severed from the beast, the product of the twins' actions (Figure 7a). Furthermore, close examination reveals that the basic figurative headdress of Classic Maya kings nearly always represents the head of the Great Bird, although many other features and supernatural entities could be added. Some kings also bore another piece of regalia that is equally tied to the Great Bird's defeat, namely his tail feathers and the mirror that adorned his lower back. As Karl Taube and his colleagues have remarked: "when ancient Maya nobility donned such mirrors with their pendant feathers, they were symbolically wearing the tail of the supernatural bird" (Taube *et al.* 2010: 35). Worn as an element on the back of the royal kilt, kings who wore this trail of feathers could claim to display the original trophy, a religious relic of the deep mythic past.<sup>4</sup>

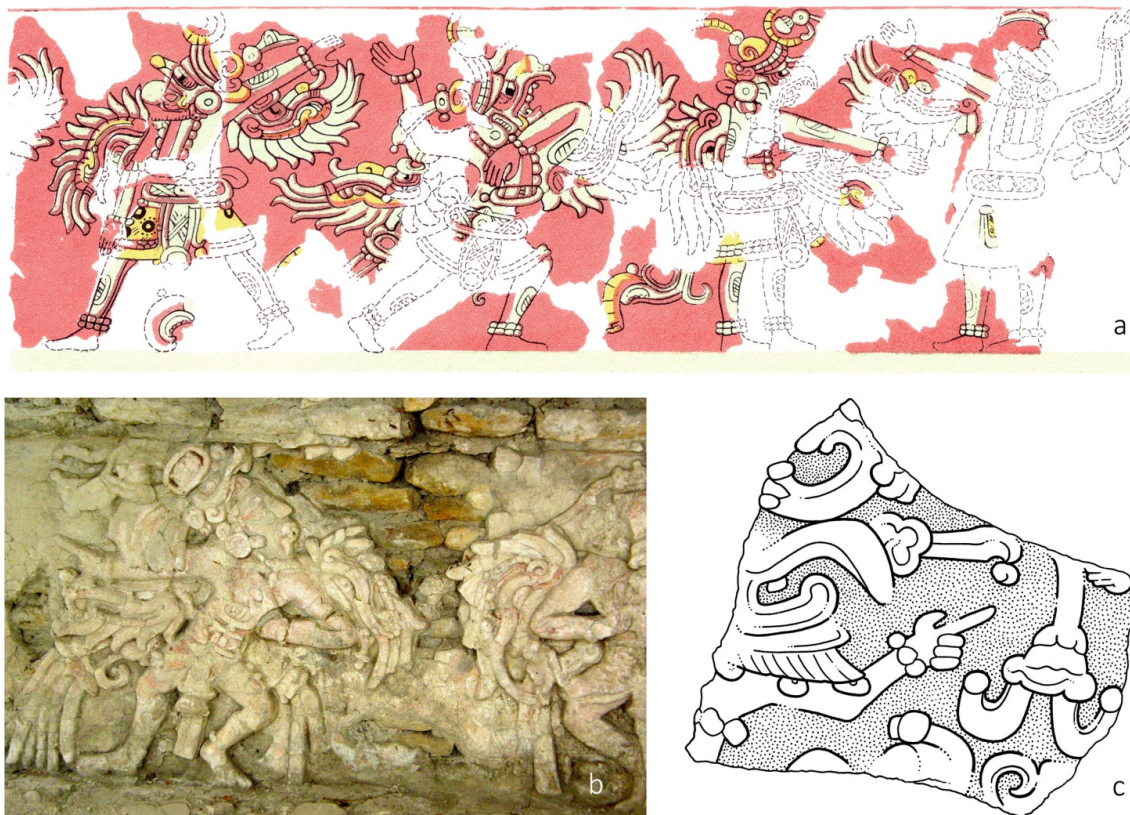
<sup>4</sup> Much as in other religions the world around, the duplication of relics at separate kingdoms undoubtedly caused some disputes and conflicts as to their authenticity between contending lineages.



**Figure 7:** The beheading the Great Bird: a) Mural fragment from Tetitla, Teotihuacan with the severed head of the Great Bird (drawing by Christophe Helmke based on a photograph by Miguel Morales). b) Monument 8 from La Lagunita, showing the head of the Great Bird placed on an offering tripod (after Taube *et al.* 2010: Fig. 14a). c) Individual wearing a headdress representing the Great Bird's head, as rendered on an incised shell pectoral from Cerro de las Mesas (drawing by Christophe Helmke). d) Maya coronation scene engraved on a miniature bone in the collections of the Dallas Museum of Art (drawing by Linda Schele).



However, the conclusion seems valid not only for ancient Maya, but also for other Mesoamerican cultures. Thus, for example, an early incised shell from the site of Cerro de las Mesas in Veracruz – now in the collections of the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City – depicts a ruler wearing an avian headdress that is surprisingly similar to the Great Bird headdresses of the Maya area (Figure 7c). At Teotihuacan, in the murals of Zona 5A – the same complex that depicts the demise of the Great Bird – we see a procession of individuals in bird suits and astonishingly, they are shown with a distinctive mark, a dot on their face, the diagnostic sign of *Juun Ajaw* (de la Fuente 1995a: 76, Fig. 6.11). Could this be a local representation of the elder twin celebrating the defeat, parading in a suit fashioned from the remains of the Great Bird?



**Figure 8:** The Dance of the Great Bird, involving impersonators performing a dance representing the downfall of the great supernatural bird: a) Stuccoed and painted tripod from Early Classic Kaminaljuyu with four impersonators representing the quadripartite nature of the Great Bird (after Kidder *et al.* 1946: Fig. 207e). b) Detail of a Late Classic Maya stucco frieze from Tonina showing four dancers dressed as the Great Bird (photograph by Christian Rozay). c) Sherd of molded and incised vase found near the Ciudadela at Teotihuacan, representing what may be a human impersonator of the Great Bird (drawing by Christophe Helmke, based on photograph in Múnera & Sugiyama 2000: Foto 116).

In the Maya area we also have several examples of individuals in bird suits, some even wearing masks depicting the Great Bird. One of the most important is an Early Classic stuccoed vase from Kaminaljuyu, in Guatemala, that depicts four individuals dressed as Great Birds, in dynamic dance poses (Kidder *et al.* 1946: Fig. 207e). Here again we have a depiction of the quadripartite nature of the Great Bird and significantly we may be looking at a depiction of a dance performed by four impersonators re-enacting a scene of the myth (Figure 8a). That this was an enduring feature of Maya culture is substantiated by a Late Classic stucco frieze discovered at Tonina, Chiapas, where we again see four performers dressed as the Great Bird performing a cosmic dance (Figure 8b). A molded and incised ceramic sherd — found in a ceramic workshop in the vicinity of the Ciudadela at Teotihuacan — may also have represented part of such a scene (see Múnica & Sugiyama 2000: Foto 116). In any case, the sherd depicts the Great Bird as an anthropomorphic entity, with the characteristic beak, his left hand pointing in a dynamic pose, again suggesting dance (Figure 8c). Unfortunately, no more of this scene has been recovered, but this demonstrates that in addition to the local Teotihuacan variant of the myth attested in the murals of Zona 5A and Atetelco, we can see that the Maya version of the myth was also known at Teotihuacan, as borne out by the *pinturas realistas* murals and the ceramic sherd from the Ciudadela.

Another dance involving the Great Bird was celebrated by Classic Maya kings when they emulated an aspect of the Maize god, in glory, after his resurrection. During these dances, Maya kings wore so-called backracks of great size, representing diminutive cosmograms. At the base were depictions of personified mountains, and rising from these were simplified sky bands. In the cavernous space between the mountain and the sky sat a supernatural entity, known as a burden that specifies which localized incarnation of the Maize god was being impersonated, since distinct Maize gods were tied to different lineages and places (see Reents-Budet 1991; Houston *et al.* 1992; Helmke & Kupprat in prep.). Perched atop the skyband is the Great Bird, showing the ordered and balanced cosmos in the time before the creation of humanity. Fantastic examples from the Guatemalan sites of Dos Pilas, Quirigua, Tikal and La Corona (Figure 9a) all show historical rulers wearing the Maize god's regalia and backrack as if to assume the guise of this deity and temporarily make manifest the mythic past in the historical present.

Dancing was of paramount importance in Pre-Columbian times, and continues to be a significant feature that persists to this day in traditional Maya communities (*e.g.* Grube 1992; Christenson 2005). Allowing us to breach the divide between





**Figure 9:** a) Ruler of La Corona performing a dance in the guise of the Maize god, replete with the Great Bird perched atop a diminutive cosmogram that forms his backrack (drawing by Christophe Helmke based on photographs by Felix Kupprat and a preliminary drawing by David Stuart). b) Detail of a Late Classic polychrome vase depicting the elder Hero Twin (K7727). Note the glyph behind his head, written **1-pu-wa** (photograph by Justin Kerr). Conjoining fragments of the eastern mural at San Bartolo that together form a Tzolk'in date c) photograph (after Saturno 2002: Fig. 7) and d) drawing (by Christophe Helmke).

the Pre-Columbian past and the present are the ethnohistoric documents, dating to the Colonial period, such as the account of Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta, who wrote that “one of the principal things which existed in this land were the songs and dances, to solemnize the festivals of their demons which they honored as gods, as well as to rejoice and find solace” (Christenson 2007: n. 424, 172). Most significant of all, however, is an excerpt from the *Título Pedro Velasco*, of 1529, written in K’iche’, which records: “Within each lineage there was a great house wherein orations were heard and judgment passed. [There] the lords danced the *Junajpu Koy* as well as the *Wuqub Kaqix*” (translation ours; see Carmack & Mondloch 1989: 160-161, 178; Christenson 2007: n. 424, 172).<sup>5</sup> Analogs to the dances celebrated in the Colonial period may be found in a Late Classic text of Piedras Negras, in Guatemala. The text in question is that of Panel 3, which celebrates the jubilee of the king’s accession in AD 749 (see Mathews 1988: 211-212; Martin & Grube 2008: 149). The celebrations were attended by foreign dignitaries, including the king of Yaxchilan, who made his way to Piedras Negras by canoeing down the Usumacinta. Two days later a dance was celebrated and during the night a particular type of *kakaw* beverage was consumed. Significantly, the dance is named the *ehm-mo’*, or ‘descending-macaw’ (seeLooper 2004: 3) and undoubtedly this describes the descent of the Great Bird, either from the heavens or his arboreal perch. This reaffirms the importance of the myth of the Great Bird’s defeat and demonstrates that dances were performed to relate this important tale. We can also see that the dances were named after the principal protagonists, especially the older twin and the Great Bird.

### Constituents of the Mythic Motif

The primary constituents of a mythic motif are the agents, the plot and more distantly the place and the time. Whereas the agents and the plot of this particular mythic motif are by now well-known, time may strike folklorists as odd since this parameter is usually under-cited in myths and only signaled in the broadest of strokes, such as “in the time before creation”, “in the darkness, before the sun”, or even just as “in dreamtime” (e.g. Isaacs 1980). Among the Classic

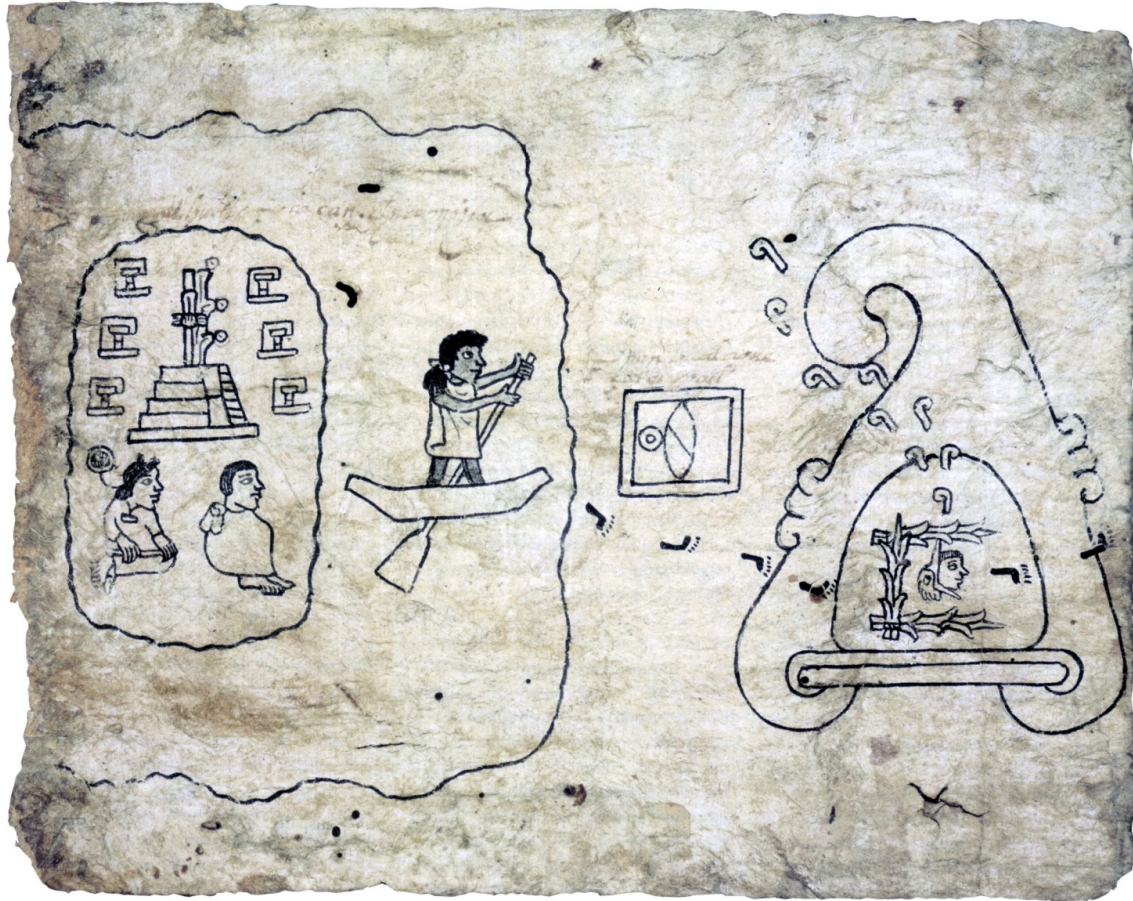
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<sup>5</sup> The segment *koy* poses difficulties to its translation. In the original *Título Pedro Velasco* it is written <*hunahpu coy*> (Carmack & Mondloch 1989: 160), but elsewhere, Allen Christenson (2007: n. 424, 172) transliterated the segment *k’oy*, introducing the apostrophe to mark glottalization. The lexeme, *k’oy* is well attested in Highland Maya languages and is variously glossed as ‘mono, mico, zarahuate’ (Kaufman 2003: 559), but occurs also in K’iche’ as compound forms such as *pich’-koy* ‘winged-monkey’ (an imaginary animal) and *che’-k’oy* ‘palo volador’ (Christenson 2004: 28, 57, 90). In comparison, *koy* in K’iche’ appears predominantly in compound forms, such as *koyökotem* ‘shaking, spasm’ and *koyökotik* ‘to tremble, shake, twitch’ (Edmonson 1965: 62), as well as *koykatik* ‘to shiver from cold’ (Christenson 2004: 66). The original spelling as <*coy*> ~ *koy*, may well be correct, since the entries associated with this term are all suitable as designations for the name of a dance.

Maya, however, most mythological scenes are accompanied by relatively precise calendrical statements, which is at odds with other oral traditions the world over (Beliaev 2011). Thus, the element of time is paradoxically over-developed among the Maya, a feature that is not as widespread among other Mesoamerican cultures, where hieroglyphic literacy was not pushed to the same extent. Interestingly, the element of time and agents may be partially blurred in this particular mythic motif since the principal hero of the two Hero Twins, is most frequently referred to in the glyphic texts as *Juun Ajaw*. This name is clearly calendrical and one might be tempted to think that this follows the same onomastic practices seen in other Mesoamerican cultures wherein the name of the date on which one was born could serve as primary designator and proper name. Nevertheless, this is not an onomastic practice among the Classic Maya (see Colas 2004). As such this date *Juun Ajaw*, or ‘one king’, must be precisely that and refers first to an event and only secondarily to a being who carried out an action on that date. What was this event? Returning to the vase of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, we can see that the accompanying glyphic caption is headed by a Calendar Round date, reading *Juun Ajaw, Ux Uniiw*, or ‘[On the day] One *Ajaw*, [in the month] three *K’ank’in*’. This must be the source of the common nominal referent, since it is on this date that the elder twin shot the Great Bird as it came down from the heavens (see also Zender 2005: 10-11; Stuart 2008). This can also be supported by a large calendrical date reconstructed from fallen fragments of the eastern mural at San Bartolo (Saturno 2002: 8, 9; Stuart 2008). Together the four mural fragments render an abbreviated date in the Tzolk’in calendar that involves the numeral ‘one’ written above a day sign cartouche that may enclose an early head-variant of ‘king’ (Figure 9c-d). What is fascinating about this calendrical statement is that it may well head off the narratives depicted in the San Bartolo murals, which in large part relate the defeat of the Great Bird, starting with its descent from the sky on the date ‘one king’, followed by the struggles pitting the hero twin against the bird, resulting in its defeat, the whole serving as the mythological setting for royal accession ceremonies that followed (Saturno *et al.* 2005; Saturno 2009; Taube *et al.* 2010). As such, one is left to wonder what the name of the elder of the Hero Twins actually was. As such it bears recalling one of the names of the elder twin recorded in a glyphic caption on another vase (K7727), where it is written **1-pu-wa**, which can be read as *Juun Pu’w*, ‘one blowgun’, quite possibly the source of the later K’iche’ name *Junajpu* (Figure 9b). This then may well be the primary name of the elder of the Hero Twins.

The transposition of dates to personal identifiers is not limited to the ancient Maya, however, since instances are also known for the Aztec pantheon. Particularly illustrative examples can be found on a monolith that commemorates





**Figure 10:** The opening page of Codex Boturini (or *Tira de la Peregrinación*) showing the beginning of the Aztec migration from the mythical place of Aztlan on the date '1 flint'. Note the representation of Wiizilooopochtli as a speaking deity bundle within the cave of the mountain Culhuacan (after Johansson K. 2007: 21).

the New Fire ceremony of AD 1507 (Caso 1927: 12-13). This monument was dubbed the *Teocalli de la Guerra Sagrada* (lit. 'the temple of sacred warfare') and represents a diminutive temple, which served as a throne (Caso 1927; Pasztory 1983: 165-169). All surfaces of this important monument are richly carved and provide a divine backdrop to the reign of the Aztec ruler Moteuczoma II who ruled from AD 1502 to 1520 (Aguilar-Moreno 2006: 45-47). The backrest of the Teocalli depicts the name of the current creation, the so-called fifth sun, emblazoned with its calendrical name *Nawi Ooliin* '4 earthquake' (Caso 1927: 35-36). Flanking the stylized sun are Moctecuhzoma to the right and to the left is the Aztec patron deity Wiizilooopochtli – also exhibiting features of the divinity known as Tescatlipooka (Caso 1927: 36-48). On the sides of the monument are two abridged calendrical statements, '1 death' and '1 flint', on the right and on the left, respectively (Caso 1927: 32-34). In addition to recording the temporal occurrence of important events, these dates also served as individual identifiers



for the two aforementioned deities, ‘1 death’ for Teskatlipooka and ‘1 flint’ for Wiitzilooopochtli, associations attested in the *Florentine Codex* (Book I: 299, 317) (see Caso 1927: 34; Pasztory 1983: 168-169). Consider for instance the *Codex Boturini*, also known as the *Tira de peregrinación* (lit. ‘the strip of the pilgrimage’), an important Aztec accordion-folded manuscript that was produced in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, shortly after the Spanish conquest (Johansson K. 2007). This fascinating codex narrates the legendary story of the Aztec and their arduous journey to the Valley of Mexico, from their origins at Aztlan — the fabled homeland. The sources agree that the travels of the Aztec tribes took place under the leadership of Wiitzilooopochtli who, in the guise of a deity bundle, communicated to the priests whose fate it was to bear the effigy. Not coincidentally, the date on which Wiitzilooopochtli ordered the tribes to leave Aztlan and begin their southward journey is none other than ‘1 flint’, as clearly recorded on the first page of the *Codex Boturini* (Figure 10). Thus, the pivotal event that is tied to the deity and served as the account’s catalyst, ultimately became his designator, in much the same way as the elder of the Maya Hero Twins was customarily referred to by a calendrical notation that refers to the start of the mythic narrative, a date that is tantamount to the defeat of the Great Bird.

Another greatly important constituent of a mythic motif is the setting, often described in rather superficial terms, but occasionally named. The importance of place in myth cannot be overstated since it provides the spatial logic and framework for an entire event or series of events. It is also through toponyms that a direct continuity can be invoked between the distant mythological past and the narrative present. Thus, as previously mentioned, Aztlan is the legendary place of origin of the Aztec and Mount Olympus is the mythic home of the Greek gods. However, we can equally think of less distant emulations of Greek localities, including — among countless others — *l’Acadie* (‘Arcadia’) of the Eastern Canadian Seaboard and the *Champs-Élysées* (‘Elysian Fields’), the famed Parisian avenue. In the mythic motif of the Great Bird’s defeat we see the bird descending from the heavens through a cleft sky, a feature that is particularly clear on some of the earlier examples, especially at Takalik Abaj and San Bartolo (Figure 4a-b). As such, this celestial feature may provide the name of the place where the Great Bird descended and was eventually defeated, a toponym that is known from the Classic Maya texts as *Pa’chan* ‘broken/clefted-sky’ (Helmke 2012b: 100-107). Furthermore, this hole in the sky is remarkably similar to other such features described in the mythology of certain North and South American cultures, through which ancestral sky-people gained access to the surface of the earth and populated the land (Bierhorst 1985, 1988).

At Teotihuacan, the stunning murals depicting the fall of the Great Bird from the tree of plenty are paired off with other murals that record a toponym, naming a mountain that is qualified by a star sign (Helmke & Nielsen 2014: 85-91). Much as in the Maya case, this ‘star mountain’ could well name a place in the central Mexican Highlands where it was thought that the Great Bird descended from the heavens. That the otherwise rare Nawaatl toponym Citlaltepētl ~ Zitlaltepēc (‘star-mountain-place’) subsists to this day in Mexico and names both the highest peak and mountains in the vicinity of Teotihuacan is all the more significant (Helmke & Nielsen 2014: 87-89). Recently, excavations conducted in the La Ventilla sector of Teotihuacan have brought to light another key piece of evidence (Sergio Gómez Chávez pers. comm. 2011). This is a post-slip incised lid to a typical tripod vase, which — in much the same way as the murals of Zona 5A — depicts an anthropomorphic solar entity emerging from the beak of the Great Bird. These creatures are paired off with another toponym. The place name in question is made up of a tri-mountain sign that is qualified by torches that frame either side. As a result we now know of another toponym ‘torch mountain’ that is also somehow related to the myth of the Great Bird. At present we are unable to comment more on this place name, except to remark that an analogous toponym is rendered in the murals of Room 16 at Tetitla. There the place names are written with mountain signs and the qualifying elements are infixes within, representing a lit torch and a necklace (see Miller 1973: Figs. 298-299; de la Fuente 1995b: 293-294, Fig. 19.35). The painted example from Jaltepetongo also originally provided a name for the location where the event transpired, but at present too little remains to be able to read it with any certainty. Nevertheless, it contained the number ‘seven’ and the twisted root sign (see Taube 2000b: 9, 22, 51 n. 5), which indicates that this was part of a locative or toponymic construction. What is significant here is that we have a series of different toponyms associated with this mythic motif, but importantly these all differ from culture to culture, demonstrating the autonomy of the myths, despite the shared underlying motif. Thus, whereas the field of mythological toponymy is a fascinating one, at present this remains an elusive aspect of ancient Mesoamerican mythology.

### Old World Comparisons

In the *Popol Wuj*, after the defeat of the Great Bird, the Hero Twins go on to slay a whole series of other monsters, including the hideous progeny of Seven Macaw (Christenson 2007: 89-100). Thereafter the twins are also challenged by the lords of death in the underworld where they undergo a series of trials involving seemingly impossible tasks (Christenson 2007: 148-168). Whereas the twins are often mentioned as acting together the account always emphasizes and gives

preference to the elder of the two twins. In Classic Maya iconography we see the same bias and in many cases *Juun Ajaw* is shown acting alone and his younger sibling is entirely absent. It remains entirely plausible that the iconography merely represents an abbreviated scene wherein only a selection of agents and features are represented. Nevertheless, the frequent absence of the younger sibling makes us wonder if the motif of the monster-slaying twins is a later merger with the motif of the Great Bird's defeat. If this were the case one would suspect that the earlier form of the Great Bird's defeat involved only one culture hero, which later became merged with and shared attributes of the elder Hero Twin.



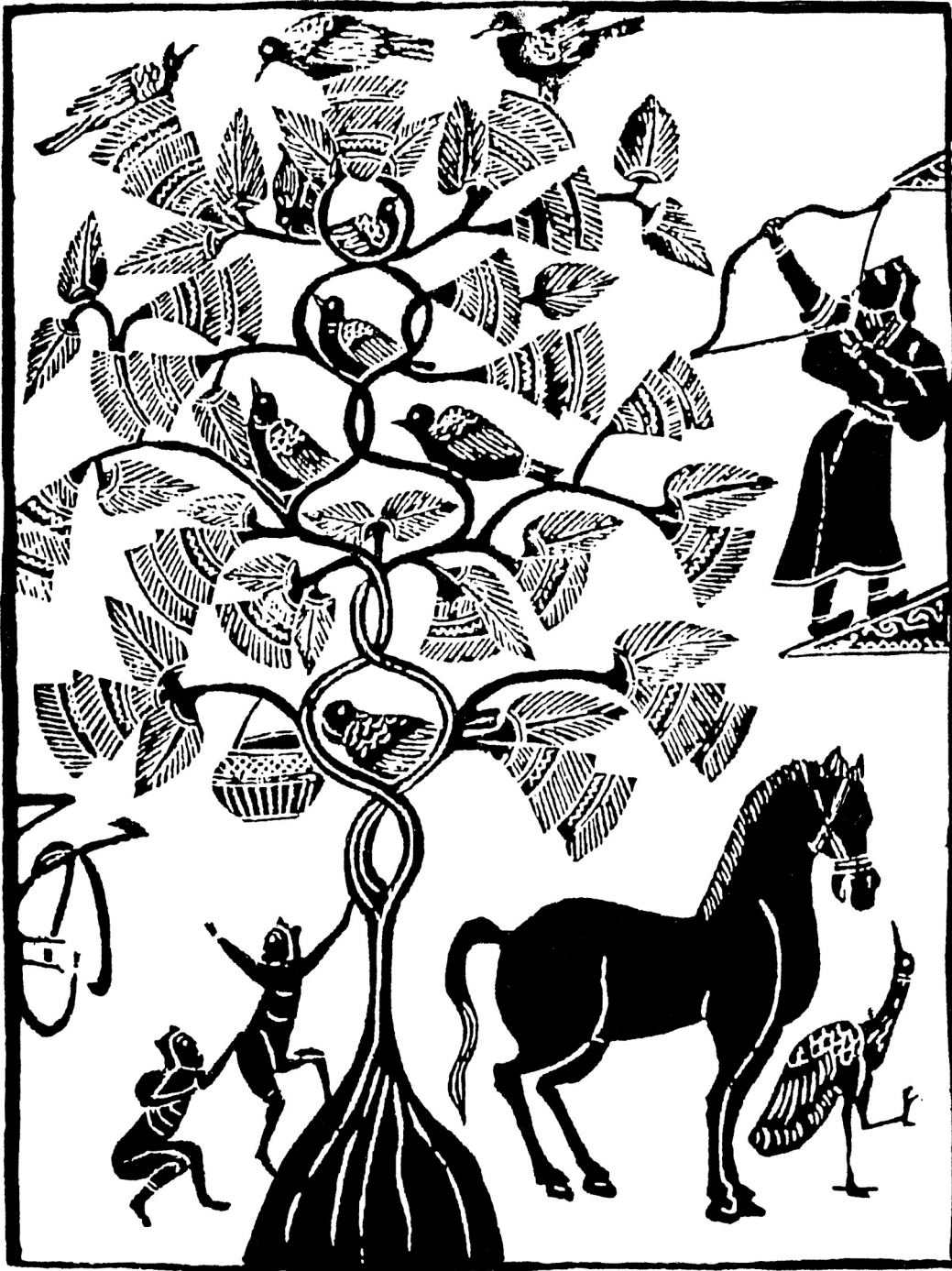
**Figure 11:** Herakles and the Stymphalian birds as depicted on Greek Attic amphorae: a) Scene showing Herakles using a slingshot (courtesy of the British Museum 1843,1103.40) and b) the same type of scene involving a bolas-type weapon (courtesy of the Musée du Louvre F 387).

If this is the case, then the myth may be related to the story of a culture hero who engaged in a lengthy cycle of monster-slayings. Myths relating the feats of a culture hero battling one or many monstrous creatures are near universal and therefore finding parallels among Eurasian myths should come as no surprise. Nevertheless, such correspondences may not be genuine especially if specific

mythic motifs are not geographically contiguous. Nevertheless, these myths can be highly instructive in terms of their figurative representations and the particularities of the motifs related in the myth. As such the myth of the Greco-Roman Herakles comes readily to mind, even if this particularly myth is most probably unrelated to the monster-slaying twin cycles of the New World. In ancient Greece, Herakles is the hero that is known for his incredible strength and who undertook the famed twelve labors, first killing the Nemean Lion and thereby acquiring his distinctive skin. After the lion, Herakles came up against a nine-headed Hydra, the Golden Hind, and the Erymanthian Boar (Burn 2003: 14-22). Most to the case at hand Herakles is also sent out to slay the Stymphalian birds that were ravaging the Arcadian countryside. These carnivorous birds had beaks of bronze and feathers that could serve as projectiles, in many ways reminiscent of the early depictions of the Great Bird in Mesoamerica (see Taube *et al.* 2010: 31-32; Helmke & Nielsen 2011: 9-10). The depictions of this labor show Herakles either shooting arrows with a bow (as for example in the mosaic floor in Lliria, Spain), with a slingshot (as represented on a black-figured amphora in the British Museum), or even using a *sistrum* rattle to scare the birds into flight (Burn 2003: 17) (Figure 11). What is interesting is that despite the fearsome attributes of the Stymphalian birds as related by the myth, these are depicted quite naturalistically as assorted waterfowl. As such were the myth and the diagnostic features of Herakles unknown, it would be extremely hard to know if these scenes represented natural hunting scenes, or the slaying of monstrous birds at the hands of a mythic hero. Were the Heraklian cycle somehow related to the monster-slaying hero of the Americas, this would imply great antiquity and shared cultural heritage going back to the late Pleistocene, and as such these myths can at most be regarded as distant echoes of one another.

Clearly, relating different myths together is a difficult undertaking. Nevertheless, myths that may well be related to the motif of the Great Bird's defeat are found in East Asia. A case in point is a legend known from Chinese mythology. The tale in question involves the hunting god named Houyi, or simply Yi, a culture hero and adept archer who descended from heaven to aid humankind. The myth starts by setting the stage, in an age of ten suns, each represented by a monstrous three-legged bird (Figure 12). These solar birds resided in a mulberry tree (*Morus* sp.) and each day one travelled across the firmament, as the sun, thereby illuminating the earth. However, around 2170 BC, the stability is upset when these sun-birds suddenly decide to all fly from the tree. The heat of the ten suns is unbearable, crops wither, the landscape desiccates, lakes dry up, animals die and people seek shelter from the unrelenting heat. To save humanity Yi shoots each of the suns in turn, and the tenth is only barely saved by divine intervention, thereby





**Figure 12:** The Chinese culture hero and hunting god Yi aiming his prodigious bow at the sunbirds perched in the world tree (after Birrell 2000: 113).

fortuitously preserving the continued existence of the sun to this day (Birrell 2000: 35-36, 42). This myth thus continues the theme of the culture hero as monster-slayer, but also relates the defeat of an avian monster with solar attributes. The iconography of this myth is remarkable also in that it represents a

tree, wherein are perched ten birds, the whole, once more, rendered rather naturalistically. Thus much as in the scenes of the blowgunners in Mesoamerica, or that of Herakles and the Stymphalian birds, it is difficult to identify natural bird-hunting scenes and to segregate these from mythological ones, if one is not attentive to all the details related by the mythic narrative.

To close, we would like to comment on a wonderful scene from the Baphuon complex within Angkor Thom, in Cambodia. The Baphuon is a temple complex built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by Udayadityavarman II and dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva (Laur 2002: 169-170; Freeman & Jacques 2003: 102-105). The complex is famed for the rich iconographic scenes that decorate the pavilions. The scenes are drawn mostly from the Hindu epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* (Dallapiccola 2003). For example one panel depicts young Krishna subduing the monstrous and nine-headed *naga* named Kaliya (Roveda 2005: 79-80, 81-82; see also Roveda 2003: 182-184) (Figure 13a). Another depicts two individuals with bows hunting a wild boar (Figure 13b). Again this scene could be taken for a natural hunting scene, but in fact it relates the encounter of the hero Arjuna with Shiva, who appeared to him in the form of a hunter. Shiva challenged Arjuna to a series of contests, including a boar hunt, and although Arjuna is ultimately defeated, Shiva is pleased by his efforts and finally rewards him with the divine *Pashupatastra*, a highly destructive and crescent-shaped weapon of the gods that has the power to vanquish all beings (Roveda 2005: 159-162; see also Roveda 2003: 228-229). Yet another scene represents two hunters, at the base of a tree (Figure 13c). One is aiming and shooting his blowgun at a bird that is perched atop the tree, whereas the other collects the birds that have been shot down and ties them to his belt. Again we need to ask ourselves: is this a natural hunting scene, or could this be the vignette of a mythic event, relating the same or similar motif that we have seen in China and Mesoamerica? The example from the Baphuon is incredible since it duplicates, in nearly every respect, the elements of the motif that we have been exploring here. As such it would be wise to consider these similarities as fortuitous and to seek another explanation. Nevertheless, the context is compelling, not the least since most, if not all, of the scenes depicted on the pavilions of the Baphuon represent mythic episodes. However, combing through Hindu mythology we have yet to find an episode that would explain the scene at hand, and as a result we wonder if this may not represent a local Khmer myth, one that was not imported wholesale from India (see also Roveda 2005: 288, Fig. 7.29). This is certainly possible considering other known contexts wherein the cosmology, religion and mythology of one culture are transposed on another. Usually the recipient culture amends and adjusts to an intractable syncretism allowing elements of the local culture to survive in this blending. We can certainly see a degree of adaptation in the case of the Khmer





**Figure 13:** Mythical panels from the axial pavilions along the first tier of the Baphuon temple complex at Angkor: a) Krishna defeating the monstrous serpent Kaliya (southern pavilion, W-S face). b) Arjuna and Shiva in the guise of hunters shooting arrows at a wild boar (eastern pavilion, E-S face). c) Two men hunting birds with blowguns (southern pavilion, S-W face) (photographs by Christophe Helmke).

*Reamker*, the Thai *Ramakien*, and the Lao *Phra Lak Phra Ram*, versus the original Indian *Ramayana*, but unfortunately we know very little about the original Southeast Asian world-view and mythology before the introduction of Hindu religion. As a result, we need to conclude here with this tantalizing and yet unresolved scene that may well signal the continuity of yet another mythic motif that is shared between cultures of the Old and New Worlds.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Above we presented a particular mythic motif, involving the defeat of a giant celestial bird, with solar attributes, at the hands of a culture hero or heroic twins. We were able to outline the mythic narrative of the Great Bird's fall and demise by combining a variety of sources spanning from Pre-Columbian Maya texts and imagery to modern myths, via ethnohistorical sources of the Colonial period. Our findings also showed that variants of the myth were narrated and played a crucial role among several Mesoamerican cultures, including ancient Teotihuacan, which suggests that this mythic motif was a deep-seated part of shared Mesoamerican creation mythologies. By comparing the mythic narratives and their different iconographic representations across time and space we have gained a better understanding of their underlying meanings and origins, but also how these were subsequently restructured and altered according to local environmental, technological and socio-political circumstances. The Mesoamerican cultural landscape area abounds in mythology recorded in post-Conquest ethnographic and historical contexts, but also offers scholars a wealth of data written down in indigenous languages and scripts from c. 200 BC and onwards. However, the written sources are but a part of the record of ancient mythology, since Mesoamerica also exhibits a staggering amount of iconography that often depict key events and turning points of mythological narratives. The task of deciphering, reconstructing and analyzing the myths contained in those Pre-Columbian sources has really only just begun, but the prospects are extremely promising – and we look forward to a time when Mesoamerican myths will figure much more prominently within the field of comparative mythology.

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