Debunking the Doomsday 2012 Myth Using Facts about the Maya

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Sophia Jacobs

Thesis Advisor

Melinda Messineo

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

April 2010

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2010
Abstract

December 21, 2012 is rapidly approaching and people are getting scared. Due to a misguided marketing campaign and a misinformed rumor mill, many people believe that this day has been prophesized to be the end of the world as we know it. Using evidence from Mayan scholars, elders, and enthusiasts, I provide information on the Mayan civilization as a whole in an easy-to-understand way. I also show how knowing about the mysterious Maya can abate the growing fear of an end-of-the-world prophecy being fulfilled. With this information, I hope to give readers a better understanding of the fascinating Mayan civilization as well as give them a new perspective on this “end of days” hype.

Acknowledgements

- I want to thank my advisor, the magnificent Melinda Messineo, who put up with my excuses for never having my work done when I said I would and encouraged (and edited!) me the entire time.

- Thanks also to Associate Dean John Emert who approved my thesis proposal the second time around and talked me out of the first idea I proposed to him.

- I also would like to thank my family and friends who kept me going even when I wanted to quit and listened to me whine—and especially those who kept me sane during the times when life was driving me crazy.
Introduction to Doomsday

The date December 21, 2012 has been increasingly present in popular culture. From a series of documentaries on the History Channel entitled *Armageddon: Exploring the Doomsday Myth* to a 2009 blockbuster starring John Cusack named “2012,” this date and all of the disaster it is said to entail is making a big splash in the film industry. It is even more popular in the book industry. A quick search through the book section of Amazon.com using the keyword “2012” brings up almost 33,000 titles (“Amazon.com: 2012: Books”). This does not even take into account the number of news articles that have been written about the subject. Articles about “Doomsday 2012” have appeared in such prestigious publications as *The New York Times Magazine* (Anastas) and *National Geographic* (Handwerk). While many of these articles examine the myths and misconceptions about 12/21/12, there still exists a large amount of doomsday rumors.

Most of the hype rests on two ideas that, if indeed true, are quite terrifying. First is the idea that December 21, 2012 is the day when the ancient Mayan calendar “runs out” or ends. This inevitability leads to the second concern, that the end of the calendar marks the end of the world as we know it, which is usually interpreted as the destruction of the Earth in any number of ways. These claims have caused marked distress among people who have viewed websites such as that of the fictional “Institute for Human Continuity,” which includes information about possible doomsday scenarios. This website was created as a part of the viral marketing campaign for the movie “2012,” and states its affiliation clearly on the loading screen and at the top and bottom of each subsequent page, but some people are still being frightened by this and other sites by believing them to be true. (“The IHC: The Institute for Human Continuity”) In a 2009
interview for *National Geographic*, Dr. David Morrison, a senior scientist with the NASA Astrobiology Institute, tells of some of the questions he has gotten on NASA's "Ask an Astrobiologist Website":

"A lot of [the submitters] are people who are genuinely frightened," Morrison said.

"I've had two teenagers who were considering killing themselves, because they didn't want to be around when the world ends," he said. "Two women in the last two weeks said they were contemplating killing their children and themselves so they wouldn't have to suffer through the end of the world." (Handwerk)

Of course, this is not the first time the public has panicked because the end of the world has been predicted. It seems that almost every generation has had at least one predicted doomsday. The Y2K millennium bug continues to be a joke in some circles. An article entitled "The Great 2012 Doomsday Scare" reminds readers of previous disaster prophecies:

Borrowing a forecast from Nostradamus, the 16th-century French riddler, author Charles Berlitz . . . warned that 1999 could inflict flood, famine, pollution and a shift of Earth's magnetic poles. He also spotlighted the planetary alignment of May 5, 2000, and warned that it could bring solar flares, severe earthquakes, "land changes" and "seismic explosions." . . . The "Jupiter Effect" cataclysm predicted for March 10, 1982 (named for the 1974 book about it by John Gribbin and Stephen Plagemann)
commanded headlines but never materialized.

These are only a handful of previous predictions; Richard Landes, historian at Boston University and director of its Center for Millennial Studies, estimates that there have been "hundreds of thousands at the very least" (Krupp).

So why are people so interested in prophecies of doomsdays, especially when there have been so many in the past that never came to fruition? Based on an article written by Dr. Scott E. Smith, a clinical psychologist from Maryland,

Psychologically, fear of the world ending is another form of the human existential dilemma. We are the only species that is challenged with trying to live well while having the full knowledge that someday we will die. This . . . seems to lead to all types of efforts to control, understand and even forecast that possibility. Doomsayers are actually expressing their emotional conflict about the fragility of human life. (Smith B1)

Therefore, one possible reason for the rising popularity of the 12.21.12 myth may be that it is a result of the common discomfort with the frail nature of life and that people want to be able to have some semblance of control over it. Although there is no research in this regard, another possible reason could be that 12.21.12 is simply an interesting combination of numbers and people find it frightening because of the date itself. In the same vein as the superstition that wishes made at 11:11 will come true, perhaps there is a fear that 12.21.12 is somehow a harbinger of destruction.

The only way to calm this emotional conflict is through education. Because many of the proponents of “Doomsday 2012” use the Maya and their calendar as proof of their theories, factual and unbiased information is necessary. For this reason, a concise
discussion of the Mayan civilization, beliefs, calendars, and prophecies is presented herein.

In any piece of writing about the Maya, it is common to see the words “Maya” and “Mayan” used interchangeably. An article written by Dr. Laura Martin explains the reasons behind this usage. Although there has been no formal agreement on the proper name of this culture, most scholars use “Maya” to refer to the group of people—as a noun—and “Mayan” as an adjective. Even so, the usage is still far from straightforward. “A nice clarification... is the distinction that can be made between Maya linguists, linguists who are Mayas and Mayan linguists, who are linguists investigating Mayan languages but who are not themselves Mayas” (“Difference Between Maya and Mayan”). That may be a clarification for Dr. Martin, but for curious learners it may only add confusion. For example, what are Maya linguists studying Mayan languages called? To avoid adding any more confusion, in this discourse the people themselves will be referred to as the Maya and “Mayan” will be used as an adjective.

Mayan Civilization

Knowing where a civilization originated is an important part of learning and understanding it. Not every civilization has an obvious origin, however. No one knows for certain from where the people who would become the first Maya came. Archaeologists today tend to say that the Mayan precursors came from Asia by crossing the Bering Strait land bridge during the late Ice Age (Andrews, and Andrews 6). The conquistadores who first encountered the Maya believed them to be one of the Lost Tribes of Israel (Andrews, and Andrews 8). According to the Maya, they came from
Tulán which is the mythical Atlantis. While this seems exceedingly far-fetched, there is some very interesting evidence that suggests that another explanation is needed.

The most widely accepted hypothesis asserted that the Maya came from Asia and are descended from the Mongolian races that crossed the land bridge over the Bering Strait at the end of the last Ice Age, then traveled and settled in Mesoamerica. This idea has now been discredited, however, owing to the skeletal differences between these two people and the lack of a clearly proven genetic relationship. Similarly, although it has been shown that 100 percent of pure Maya have the blood type O, indicating that they descend from Cro-Magnon ancestors, recent discoveries have found a factor in this blood type that does not occur anywhere else.

(Barrios 53)

Even though the world may never know from where the Maya originated, there is evidence that the Mayan civilization began in Yucatán around 2600 BC and descendents of these settlers developed a method of draining and canalizing the swampland, raising the agricultural production and making it possible for chiefdoms and small states to appear in present-day southern Mexico, Guatemala, northern Belize, and western Honduras. (“Maya Civilization”) During the Late Preclassic period (300 BC-300 AD), powerful and often heavily-fortified city-states emerged and in them, the people began writing, pursuing advanced mathematical and astronomical studies, and adopting a calendrical system. (“The ancient Maya - 300 BC- AD 800”)

The ancient Maya were not empire builders, forming instead independent polities that were all united by a common culture, calendar, mythology, and spiritual view of the
world. Each polity was ruled by a member of a class that claimed divine lineage. Alliances between polities were formed with marriages and trade agreements and travel was facilitated by a vast network of paved routes and rivers (Criscenzo). Even so, warfare with the aim of exacting tribute or taking prisoners was very common. Prisoners of war would be subject to ritual torture and mutilation after which they would be sacrificed to the gods. “Human sacrifices were needed to dedicate new temples, to accompany the dead and to mark important events such as the completion of calendrical cycles” ("The ancient Maya - 300 BC- AD 800").

The architecture of Mayan cities is ceremonial in nature and their pyramids are easily recognizable. Each pyramid was built from carved stones and featured a shrine to a particular deity at the peak. These would be made of limestone found locally which they quarried and shaped using stone tools. Sometimes larger pyramids would be built on top of smaller ones, which is the case of the famous pyramid of Kukulcan (the feathered serpent god) at Chichen Itzá in Yucatán. These temples would be visible for miles, projected above the surrounding jungle, likely intended to represent the power of the polity. ("The ancient Maya - 300 BC- AD 800")

The ancient Maya worshipped a pantheon of gods and had elaborate, often painful, rituals. Different areas celebrated different gods and some were considered more important than others. Each location would have its own special patron god. There was a sense of competitiveness between areas over which patron god was stronger or more powerful. “When one area overtook another through war or politics, they would impose the worship of their favorite gods on their subjects” (Criscenzo “The Maya Calendar”). The Maya were very ritualistic in their worship. Human sacrifice was common and used
for many purposes. Rulers were also expected to take part in bloodletting rituals used to commune with ancestral spirits. ("The ancient Maya - 300 BC- AD 800")

After only a few centuries, parts of the once-thriving classic Mayan civilization toppled. By 950 AD, the large Mayan cities in the southern area of Mesoamerica were deserted. There are various theories as to why the citizens suddenly abandoned their cities; one such theory is that "perhaps [the Mayan civilization was] undermined by warfare, drought, climate change and over-exploitation of the environment" ("Maya"). Another theorizes that "the collapse is thought to be an indirect consequence of the fall of Teotihuacán around 750" ("The ancient Maya - 300 BC- AD 800").

Although the Mayan civilization had fallen from power by the beginning of the 11th century AD, over 6 million Mayas still exist today in Guatemala, Mexico, and Belize. The major religion is now a "colorful hybrid of Catholicism and ancient Maya beliefs and rituals," where the stories of the saints only slightly resemble those of a European origin. Instead of practicing human sacrifice at large ceremonial centers, "devout Maya worship at mountain and cave shrines, making offerings of chickens, candles and incense with a ritual alcoholic drink." The calendars are still used to provide healing and perform rituals. (Criscenzo "The Maya Today")

Ancient Mayan Beliefs

Because the ancient Maya were a very spiritual people, it is important to know their basic beliefs. Space was divided into several different realms: Vertical space consisted of an Upperworld, Middleworld, and Underworld; horizontal space was divided into "four quadrants spread from a central axis" (Foster 159).
While Christianity has similar divisions of vertical space, these divisions and Mayan "worlds" should not be confused. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to 2012* presents a brief rundown of the Mayan underworld, middleworld (or earth realm), and upperworld. The underworld, called Xibalba, has nine levels and nine ruling gods. It is important to note that "[u]nlike the Christian view, the underworlds are not necessarily bad. They are where the dead live before being reborn. The Maya believed in reincarnation into the earth realm." This earth realm has only one level in which the living reside. The upperworlds or "heavens" have thirteen levels and thirteen ruling deities. (Andrews, and Andrews 25)

One of the most sacred concepts of Mesoamerican civilizations is the Tree of Life. For the Maya, this tree is visualized as a vertical line that goes through all three realms. Readers of the *Idiot's Guide* may find this explanation helpful:

Imagine the realms to be spinning like a top; the vertical line is the axis they spin around. The roots are in the underworld, the trunk is in the earth realm, and the branches are in the heavens, supporting the sky . . . The underworld provides the nourishment for the roots of the tree. The trunk provides life for the middle realm, which developed from the underworld. The branches support the sky. Without all three, the universe would collapse. The Tree of Life is represented in the cosmos as the Milky Way.

(Andrews, and Andrews 26)

Because the Maya are considered to be some of the greatest early astronomers, as is evidenced in their advanced calendars based on celestial events, it is logical to believe
that they recognized the importance of the Milky Way and therefore centered their idea of space on it.

As far as the divisions of the Middleworld or earth realm go, it was separated into four quadrants oriented to the four cardinal directions. Each quadrant had its own characteristics, deity, and color. In *The Book of Destiny*, Carlos Barrios describes the quadrants as such:

B’ALAM K’ITZE’ represents the *East*. His energy is Fire. He is manifested in light and clarity. He is the generator of life and associated with the color red.

B’ALAM AQ’AB’ represents the *West*. His energy is Earth. He is manifested in the hidden, the internal, and the night and associated with the color black.

MAJUKUTAJ represents the North [sic]. *His* energy is Air. He is manifested in subtlety. He is the breath of life and the generator of ideas, and he is associated with the color white.

I’KI’ B’ALAM represents the *South*. His energy is Water. He is manifested in nature. The Earth’s water and vegetation and giver of life, he is associated with the color yellow. (77-78)

These separations were acknowledged in many areas of the daily life of the ancient Maya. This acknowledgement could be seen in domestic architecture and in agricultural fields (Foster 160).

The ancient Mayan division of space is not entirely different from that of other belief systems. However, the Mayan concept of time is entirely foreign to people in
Western civilizations. "For the Maya, time was holy. It had its own set of qualities that reflected in events. Time formed history, not the other way round [sic]" (Andrews, and Andrews 52). This means that everything that happened during a certain time period occurred because the energy of the era caused it as opposed to the Western world's view that events influence the energy of the time period. The Maya believed that "[t]ime was cyclic, it breathed in and breathed out. It was alive, an outpouring of energy from the Bacab deity that governed each returning cycle" (Andrews, and Andrews 29). Because of the cyclic nature of time, prophesizing was easily accomplished. *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, a sacred book of prophecies translated by Ralph R. Roys in 1933, states that "a katun of the same name recurred after approximately 256 years, consequently at the end of that time history was expected to repeat itself" (184).

**Mayan Calendars**

One of the most fascinating and well-known traditions of the ancient Maya is their system of calendars. According to Carlos Barrios, a Mayan scholar and member of the elders' council, there are no less than 20 calendars used by the modern-day Maya, of which there are four types. These types are calendars that chart the cycle of days, the cycle of years, the orbits of celestial bodies other than the sun, and "other" (Barrios 148). These calendars are not the same as the one used by almost every other culture in that, "the Maya calendar marked the patterns of the emergence and disappearance of spiritual essence" (Andrews, and Andrews 29). As stated earlier, prophecy was an important part of the belief system of the ancient Maya. In order to prophesize, four calendars were used for specific purposes.
The first calendar, which “allows each of us to find our place in the world, understand our propensities, strengths, and weaknesses, and lead an existence that is in harmony with our individual life purpose” (Barrios 164) is the Tzolkin. The Tzolkin is a sacred calendar based on the human gestation cycle of 260 days. This cycle was separated into 13 months, each with 20 days. (Barrios 148) Each day had a specific meaning and was considered to have its own energy which determined the destiny of any person born under it. Figure I is an example.

Figure I

The Mayan Tzolkin Calendar

Source: Tzolkin. Photograph. Yucatan Adventure - Mayan Calendar - 2009 March


Notice how the outer circle contains 20 symbols, each representing a day, and the inner circle counts from one to thirteen to represent the months.

The Fixed ‘Ab (as written in Barrios’ *Book of Destiny*, though commonly written as the “Haab” calendar) is a 365-day calendar consisting of 18 months, each of which has a specific meaning, of 20 days and a five-day period at the end called “Wayeb” (Barrios 153). During the time of Wayeb, “people only did work that was absolutely necessary, fasted, and practiced self-restraint” (159). When used together, the Tzolkin and Haab calendars created the Calendar Round. According to Dr. Thomas Killion, this charted a period of 52 years and, “Each day in the 52 year cycle was a unique association and provided the name of the day people were born on and at least one of the names they used in life” (in Waskul). A representation of the Calendar Round appears in Figure II.

Figure II

The Mayan Calendar Round, the combination of the *Tzolkin* and *Haab* calendars
On the right is the Tzolkin calendar with its thirteen-month cycle and the more complicated calendar on the left is the Haab. On the outer rim of the Haab are the numbers. The next ring in contains the day symbols. With these calendars turning together like cogs, the Maya were able to predict the future during their own lifetimes.

However, the Maya did not stop there. Because the other calendars measured time based on its energy, they decided to create a new one that would be a linear representation of time—the way that the Gregorian calendar measures time. This calendar was called The Long Count calendar and measured as far as 64 million years into the future. This calendar is the one on which most of the doomsday talk is based. It is difficult to understand because it has several different measurements of time. The main units of measure are the *kin* (equivalent to one day), *uinal* (a month of 20 kins), *tun* (360 kins or 18 uinals), *katun* (20 tuns/years), and *baktun* (20 katuns or 400 years). There are also larger units such as the *analtun* which is equivalent to 64 million years. ("Maya Calendar") The Long Count calendar would have looked something like Figure III:

![Figure III The Mayan Long Count Calendar](image-url)
In a written date, all of the necessary units would be included and they measure the amount of time that has passed since the beginning of the last Great Cycle. The Great Cycle consists of 13 baktuns and the beginning date was discovered by Sir Edward Thompson to be around August 13, 3114 B.C. (Conger, and Johnson) So, a written date using the Long Count calendar would look like this: 12.17.15.17.0. Reading from the left, the first number is the number of baktuns since the beginning of the last Great Cycle, the second is the number of uinals, etc. The last Great Cycle began on the date written as 0.0.0.0.0. The Long Count date for December 21, 2012 is written like this: 13.0.0.0.0. (Conger, and Johnson) Therefore, it marks the thirteenth and final baktun since the beginning of the current Great Cycle. December 21, 2012 is the beginning of the next Great Cycle.

The most important thing to remember about the Mayan calendar is that it is a calendar. Just because our annual calendar runs out after December 31 does not mean that it has ended. The next day is the beginning of a new year, a new cycle, that begins on the same-named day as it did in the year that just ended. The same is true of the Haab, except on a much larger scale. Instead of the cycle ending after only 365 days, this katun cycle ends after 5,126 years. So look at it this way: December 20, 2012 is the last day of this cycle, equivalent to December 31 in the Gregorian calendar, and December 21, 2012 is the equivalent of the first of January of the next cycle.

Mayan Prophecy
Because the Maya were so prolific with prophesizing, it became necessary to record the individual prophecies. *The Books of Chilam Balam* contain the prophecies for various katuns (Barrios 104). The katun order is depicted in the following image (Figure IV). Although each katun follows the one before it, their numerical order is interesting. The first katun is actually called Eleven Ahau, but the thirteenth and final katun is named Thirteen Ahau.

Figure IV

The Lords of the Thirteen Katuns as seen in the *Chilam Balam*

![Diagram of the Lords of the Thirteen Katuns]

*Source: The Lords of the Thirteen Katuns. Photograph. Chilam Balam of Chumayel.*

There are several different versions of *The Books of Chilam Balam* that have been found and translated from the original Mayan. The best-known versions are *The Books of Chilam Balam of Manik* and *The Books of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, but there is a very clear Christian influence in these versions that would not have been present in the original texts which could have altered slightly or even changed altogether the intended message. Carlos Barrios uses the text from Saq Kan Tiku’ because “this ceremonial center maintained its tradition until just two centuries ago and its prophets were of the highest prestige” (Barrios 104-105).

The prophecies were translated from the original Mayan, which caused problems. “The translation of the Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel [sic] depends primarily upon the reading given to the badly punctuated and often misspelled Maya text . . . The difficulties of translation are not to be underestimated” (“Chilam Balam” xi). Based on these difficulties, some words were not able to be clearly translated. These words are enclosed in brackets in the original text and have been reproduced here.

In order to evaluate the veracity of the prophecies, it is necessary to know which katun is the present one. Unfortunately, there is a lot of confusion about which is the current katun. According to some Mayan scholars, we are presently in katun 4 Ahau (Andrews, and Andrews 114). Mayan shaman Carlos Barrios, however, disagrees; he puts us in katun 6 Ahau (Barrios 105). Here is the prophecy for katun 6 Ahau as it appears in *The Books of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*:

Katun 6 Ahau is the tenth katun according to the count. The katun is established at Uxmal. <The katun monuments> are set up on their own bases. Shameless is his speech, shameless his face to the rulers. They
shall be the inventors of lewd speech, and then God the Father shall
descend to cut their throats because of their sins. Then they shall be
regenerated; the judgment of our Lord God shall unite them until they
enter into Christianity with their families. As many as are born here on
earth shall enter into Christianity. ("Chilam Balam" 161)

Notice the obvious Christian influence as well as the difference in specificity when
compared to the prophecy found in the supposedly un-adulterated text from Saq Kan
Tiku' as quoted in Carlos Barrios' Book of Destiny:

... This reign will be one of shameless looks and foolish talk; lecherous
will be these words, lies, illusion, and deceit. ... Arguments, violent
disputes, hidden and deceitful disputes—there will be disputes among
subjects and these will be hidden. ... A great famine will occur if the
damage is not corrected, if the impostor, he of the lecherous word, is not
stopped. ...

Certain stars will bring violent disputes, hidden disputes on men
and on their sons. ... Three times there will be famine. ... There will be
depopulation and the destruction of peoples. ...

A somnolence will begin with the new reign of a new god, the one
of the cross. All will fall under the lies told in flattering words and the
subsequent hope of resuscitation that will come about with this new law,
with this prophet, this one who allows no other stars in the sky. ... Nearly
everyone will come to his palace. (Barrios 105-107)
This certainly does sound like certain events in the recent past. Recall that each katun consists of 20 years. So, if the current katun ends in 2012, that means that it started in 1992. Carlos Barrios says that “[t]his period of twenty years began on April 5, 1993, and will end on December 20, 2012” (Barrios 105). Considering this fact, the prophecy seems to point directly at some of the problems around the globe. The “depopulation and destruction of peoples” could be referring to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda that killed over one-tenth of the minority population or the “ethnic cleansing” that took place in the former Yugoslavia between 1992 and 1995. (“Genocide – Rwanda”; “Genocide – Bosnia-Herzegovina”) “Shameless looks and foolish talk” could apply to most of the politicians who have come into power in the last twenty years—or ever. It is important to note that, unfortunately, there have been enough instances of genocide and corrupt politicians in the world that this prophecy could really apply to almost any time in any place. However, notice that there is no talk whatsoever of the world being destroyed.

Since the prophecy says nothing about the world ending here and there happen to be three prophecies after this one, it seems pretty safe to say that we have a long future ahead of us. It does not always appear to be a happy future, however. For the next katun scheduled to begin December 21, 2012, 4 Ahau, the Chilam Balam predicts that “The quetzal shall come, the green bird shall come. Ah Kantenal shall come. Blood-vomit shall come. Kukulcan shall come with them for the second time” (“Chilam Balam” 161). The last time that this katun happened, 260 years ago, was 1752—when the official calendar of England and the colonies changed from the Julian to the Gregorian. This does not seem to fit the prophecy, but 260 years before that was 1492—when Columbus discovered the Americas. What this could mean for us in the next katun, between 2012 and 2032, is up for speculation. Whatever happens, it definitely sounds exciting!
The following katuns are 2 Ahau and 13 Ahau. 2 Ahau will go from 2032 to 2052. The prophecy for this katun reads, “For half <the katun> there will be bread; for half <the katun> there will be water. . . . For half of it there will be a temple for the rulers” (“Chilam Balam” 162). Katun 13 Ahau, from 2052 to 2072, sounds more ominous. Here is what is says:

The bouquet of the rulers of the world shall be displayed. There is the universal judgment of our Lord God. Blood shall descend from the tree and stone. Heaven and earth shall burn. It is the word of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. . . . At the end of our blindness and shame our sons shall be regenerated from carnal sin. There is no lucky day for us. . . . (“Chilam Balam” 163)

If one should fear the end of a katun, katun 13 Ahau sounds more threatening than the present one. Even so, it is not all negative. When “our blindness and shame” is at an end, humans will be regenerated. Again, because of the obvious Christian influence and the difficulties of translation, it is important to recall that these prophecies may not be entirely true to the original.

Our Limitations

The ancient Mayan civilization continues to be mysterious today. Where did they come from? What do all of their calendars track and what are they used for? What caused their civilization to collapse? Archeologists and other scholars continue to find new and puzzling artifacts that create more questions than answers. There is a lot of speculation as to how advanced the civilization really was; some scholars are beginning
to hypothesize that the Maya were aware of precession because their Great Cycle makes up one-fifth of the Earth’s precession cycle. An explanation on the NASA website of precession includes the following information. Imagine the Earth as a spinning top that has slowed down to one rotation a day, so the axis that it is spinning around traces a complete cone in space every 26,000 years. “Through each 26 000-year cycle, the direction in the sky to which the axis points goes around a big circle, the radius of which covers an angle of about 23.50” (Stern). Because the axis is constantly changing, the directional stars like the North Star also change at a rate of 2 degrees per complete cycle. This was a feat that could only be possible through “hundreds of years of recorded observations” (Grofe) which may have been accomplished by the Maya hundreds of years before Hipparchus of Nicea (the first person accredited with noticing precession).

There are many reasons why so many details of ancient Mayan life remain unknown. First and foremost is that there is some information that the Maya do not wish to be common knowledge. Carlos Barrios mentions several times in The Book of Destiny that there are Mayan artifacts that are being kept safe until the appropriate time comes. (Barrios 47; 68; 72; 82) Most of these artifacts are codices—the “books” in which the knowledge and secrets of the society were contained. Only three are known and are called the Dresden, Madrid, and Paris codices. (Martí)

Bishop Diego de Landa is the reason why so few codices remain. An article published by the Catholic University of America describes the situation of the Franciscan Order in Yucatán. In 1562, Landa decided to hold an “unprecedented and unparalleled auto de fe in which he and other members of the Franciscan order assumed the inquisitorial powers of a bishop and punished the Maya for worshipping their traditional
gods” in which more than 20,000 idols and forty of the Mayan codices were destroyed. “With one single bonfire, centuries of Maya culture and religion perished forever” (Chuchiak).

In Conclusion

The ancient Mayan culture and civilization continue to be the subjects of popular movies, books, and documentaries because of the growing fear about December 21, 2012. Sensationalists are cashing in on the public’s ignorance and fears through marketing campaigns proclaiming that the end of the world is near. The best way for people to find the truth amid all of the untruths in these campaigns is through reliable information. Therefore, this short discourse about the ancient Mayan civilization, beliefs, calendars, and prophecies is necessary. The Mayan civilization flourished in what is now Mexico, Guatemala, northern Belize, and western Honduras between the 27th century B.C. and the 11th century A.D. They worshipped a large number of gods and are famous for their bloody rituals and human sacrifices. Time was cyclical to the ancient Maya and events were influenced by the energy of the time period rather than the other way around. They were prolific at prophesying. They used at least twenty different calendars, several of which were used almost exclusively for the process of predicting the future. Doomsayers say the end of the Long Count calendar is equivalent to the end of the world, but there is evidence that the Long Count does not end but rather rolls over to begin a new cycle. Prophecies for the next several katuns (twenty-year periods of time as used in the Long Count calendar) are more or less hopeful, with a couple worrisome predictions of raining blood and fire. Unfortunately, many things about the Maya remain unknown because
only three of their original books have been discovered, the rest having been destroyed as part of the Catholic religious movement led by Bishop Diego de Landa. The Mayan civilization and history are subjects that should continue to be studied by scholars and amateurs alike.
Works Cited


Chuchiak, John F. IV. "In Servitio Dei: Fray Diego de Landa, the Franciscan Order, and the Return of the Extirpation of Idolatry in


Smith, Scott. "PSYCHOLOGY: Is This the End of the World as We Know It?." Capital 08 Apr. 2010: B1. Print.
