

Summary of My Work at Izapa

John Major Jenkins. February 1-4, 2012

In my work to understand the Long Count, I asked myself when and where it was invented. I thus began with a clue from Coe (supported at the time by Malmstrom), that Izapa was involved in the formulation of the Long Count. Following the citation trail, I first read Matthew Stirling's Smithsonian bulletin report from the 1940s. I found all the literature then available, and studied Izapan iconography via Milo Badner and Virginia Fields, quickly immersing myself in the Brigham Young University studies of Izapa and other Soconusco/Chiapan sites (by late 1994). I had briefly visited the Group F ballcourt in June 1990 (it's right on the highway to the Guatemalan border), on my way to do service work in Guatemala.

In 1995 I obtained a copy of Garth Norman's 1980 BYU Master's thesis on the astronomy of Izapa. His methodology took various azimuth measurements based on sightings from selected monuments, but he didn't mention the Group F ballcourt. At the Austin Maya meetings after-party in 1995, Linda Schele introduced me to Julia Guernsey. I tried to converse with her about Stela 11 and the various ballcourt monuments, but she did not have a working knowledge of those arrangements. (This was the same party where I met Barbara MacLeod, and watched her videotape of her doing spin dives in her airplane; next day at the conference I traded her a copy of one of my booklets for her Maya graphic art magazine.)

My careful study of the BYU maps and the rather convoluted organization of the Lowe et al. studies (BYU) resulted in identifying several things about the site that were not noted in any of the literature. Including:

- The Group F ballcourt aligns with the December solstice sunrise azimuth.
- The Big Dipper rose over Tacana volcano at sundown on the December solstice during Izapa's heyday.
- I expanded upon loosely stated observations in the BYU publications that Izapa was situated in the middle of three regions defined by geology and elevation: ocean to the south, Izapan in the narrow level strip of land running north-south through Soconusco, and high volcanic peaks to the north.

I noted that a preoccupation, in the stelae carvings, with bird and serpent beings, appeared to nicely reiterate this three-level system, which also reiterated the traditional shamanistic three-level cosmos of underworld-earth-sky. From these and other archaeoastronomical considerations emerged my interpretation of three levels and "three cosmic centers" that were of interest to the Izapans. My interpretation of "centers" found reinforcement in the observation, by the BYU scholars, that there were three main monument groups (A, B, and F) and I further underscored that these three primary centers each originally had a prominently placed throne (Group A's throne survived as a corner fragment, but was replaced in ancient times by a large flat "altar-throne" in the middle of the line of five east-to-west stelae on the north side of the Group A plaza).

Thrones symbolize the "cosmic center" — yet there were three of them at Izapa. How to understand? From this emerged my thesis that the three groups, levels, or "centers" depicted different cosmological concerns that the Izapan astronomers, or

skywatchers, were tracking. (Note here that the superficial understanding of Izapa by most Maya scholars does not allow them to even accept that there were astronomers at Izapa.) Identifying the “celestial center” counterparts to the three terrestrial monument groups was a fairly straightforward affair, if one paid attention to what was “evident” in the archaeoastronomical orientations and iconography. (Note: a discussion of what constitutes “evidence” would be relevant here, underscoring as I did in relation to Guenter’s comments in [The MEC-FACEBOOK Discussion](#) *that an extremely limited assumption about explicit “proof” does not serve the complex challenge of reconstructing ancient cosmological paradigms.*)

Group A was oriented to Tacana in the north and the associated polar movements of the Big Dipper, portrayed as a bird deity on the monuments. One reason to suspect this is the case is because the rise and fall of the bird deity is evident on several of the five stelae on the north side of the Group A plaza. That is what is happening over the northern horizon, dominated by Tacana volcano, that anyone standing in front of the five altars and stelae would be forced to contemplate. This straightforward interpretation has been overlooked by other investigators because the rise of the Big Dipper over Tacana volcano was never deduced, observed, or noted as being clearly reflected in the iconography of the relevant carvings. Acknowledging the “evident” facts of the orientations, iconography, and astronomy, we are justified in concluding that the primary bird deity at Izapa was associated with the Big Dipper.

Group B, with its three triangulated pillar-and-ball zenith-gnomons, was “oriented to” (or concerned with) the solar zenith passage. Like the bird deity associated with the polar center, a deity is associated with the zenith center. This deity is portrayed ascending into the sky on Group B monuments (it is a winged human figure/deity, probably an early version of Quetzalcoatl). There is a large prominent throne in the middle of the gnomons and it has a cross carved on the top surface. In considering these and other factors, the reference of Group B is clearly to the zenith as a sky-center. Much more can be said about the solar zenith-passage at Izapa, with its relevant 15° North latitude. The connection to the three-hearthstone iconography associated with the 3114 BC Creation Myth astronomy is relevant to my “three center hypothesis” NOT because each of the hearthstones represent one of the three Creation centers that I identify as being used by the ancient Maya, *but because the three pillar-and-ball gnomons indicate one of the three centers (the zenith) that factor into my reconstruction.*

The remaining primary monument group, the Group F ballcourt, prominently points to the December solstice sunrise azimuth. The throne and seating stones (behind and slightly above the throne) on the west end of the ballcourt orient viewers to that southeastern horizon. Accepting, by this evidence, that the solstice sunrise was the spectacle to observe, it is then noteworthy that some two hours before the December solstice sunrise during Izapa’s heyday, the dark rift/Crossroads was rising ahead of the soon-to-dawn sun. The “crossroads” of *the Milky Way and the ecliptic* in this region reflects the symbolic identity of the terrestrial throne on the west end of the ballcourt. This very eroded throne may have had, like the Group B throne, a cross carved on its top seating surface. In any case, thrones symbolize the “cosmic center” which is often indicated in the iconography by crosses.

The Group F ballcourt was thus oriented to the third “cosmic center”, indicated by the dark rift and the Crossroads as a birth or emergence place, and a center. It must,

therefore, be a total coincidence that the visually perceivable “nuclear bulge” of the Galactic Center embraces both the Milky Way-ecliptic Crossroads and the southern terminus of the dark rift in the Milky Way. Nevertheless, even without invoking the extraterrestrials that academic critics believe must be packaged with any mention of “the Galactic Center,” the symbolism of the Milky Way-ecliptic cross is enough to identify that “nuclear bulge” region as the third “cosmic center” in a rather elegant and congruent cosmological paradigm.

My study of the Izapan ballcourt provides a detailed survey and analysis of ALL the evidence; this is a comprehensive. Garth Norman of BYU offers an impressive and detailed study of Izapan geometry and astronomy, and his focus on areas of the site other than Group F augments my own reconstructions. As the BYU archaeologists note, some of the monuments in the ballcourt were probably recycled from elsewhere at the site and placed into their current positions long after the ballcourt was constructed. However, it is important to note that the symbolism of the “recycled” monuments [continued to maintain the basic, core, meaning of the ballgame: solar deity rebirth](#). And more: the Creation Myth dialectic between the forces of light (solar deity rebirth) and darkness (death, corruption, the underworld) is likewise reiterated in the carvings, and this is the expected meaning of the ritual ballgame known from the later *Popol Vuh*. In others words, the Hero Twins, Seven Macaw, and One Hunahpu are identifiable players in the monumental iconography preserved in the Izapan ballcourt.

On the Group F ballcourt throne, there is a human head emerging from between the two legs on the front of the stone. This is clearly symbolic of birthing. And, since the throne faces down the lengthwise axis of the ballcourt, to the horizon azimuth of the dawning December solstice sun, I interpret the image as a solar deity being born (or reborn). It’s a pretty nice confirmation of this reading that a stone ball and ring were excavated directly beneath the front edge of the throne. They obviously symbolize the game ball and the goal ring, cleverly stated as an analogy to the god-head being born from between the legs on the throne. Another example: opposite the throne, on the east end of the ballcourt, we find Stela 60. Garth Norman, who provides exact drawings of the Izapan monuments, identifies one (possibly two) ballplayers standing over a demised bird deity. The scene is thus interpreted as a scene known from the *Popol Vuh* — of the Hero Twins, as ballplayers, defeating Seven Macaw. In fact, there are many scenes at Izapa that involve the central deities of the Creation Myth — the bird deity, the First Father figure, and the Hero Twins, as well as a Lord or Lords of Death.

I have pointed out in my books that the god-head throne and Stela 60, being opposite each other in the ballcourt, present a dialectic that is, in fact, also present in the Creation Myth — the necessary sacrifice of Seven Macaw as the prelude to the (re)birth of the primary solar deity. This is a dialectic between sacrifice (or death) and rebirth (or life). By the way, the [“Birth-Sacrifice Monument”](#) that I documented and reported on in 2009, fifteen miles north of Izapa, reiterates this theme. The analogy between First Father’s (severed) god-head and the game ball is, indeed, also found in the *Popol Vuh*.

For a third noteworthy element in the ballcourt, we find Stela 67 in the middle of the north wall. (Immediately above and behind this stela, on a higher tier of the court, we see Stela 69, which, although fragmented, depicts the bird deity fleeing from one of the Hero Twins). Stela 67 is symbolically similar to Stela 11 (which is in Group B), in that they both show a First Father solar deity within a cleft, in an arms-outstretched gesture.

On Stela 67, the cleft is the seating declivity of a canoe; on Stela 11 it is the cleft of a toad-jaguar's mouth. The arms-outstretched gesture is interpreted by the iconographers as symbolizing the measuring act performed by one of the primordial First Father deities, and thus is a "period initiator" sign (also conversely thought of as a "period-ending" gesture).

Some context here. I visited Izapa and made measurements at the site; at this point I've been there about fifteen times. There are certain interpretive biases of the BYU scholars and later commentators (Prudence Rice, 2007) that I have addressed and clarified: <http://thecenterfor2012studies.com/dating-the-ballcourt.pdf>. Guernsey-Kappler's book and her purportedly thorough treatments of Izapa in fact barely treat the Group F ballcourt. Tim Laughton, who did his Master's work on Izapa, rejected the fact that *the ballcourt aligns to the December solstice sunrise* (because he did not account for the 7° magnetic deviation in the maps). In their brief and disparagingly incomplete allusions to my work, Aveni (2009) and Van Stone (2010) evade acknowledging that I was the first to publish the ballcourt-solstice alignment (in 1996, and then again in my 1998 book *Maya Cosmogony 2012*). In his 2011 book, *The Order of Days*, David Stuart flippantly dismisses my work at Izapa without summarizing it or citing any of the evidence I bring to bear on my interpretations.

Okay, that's pretty much the tip of the iceberg. What I'd like to emphasize is that:

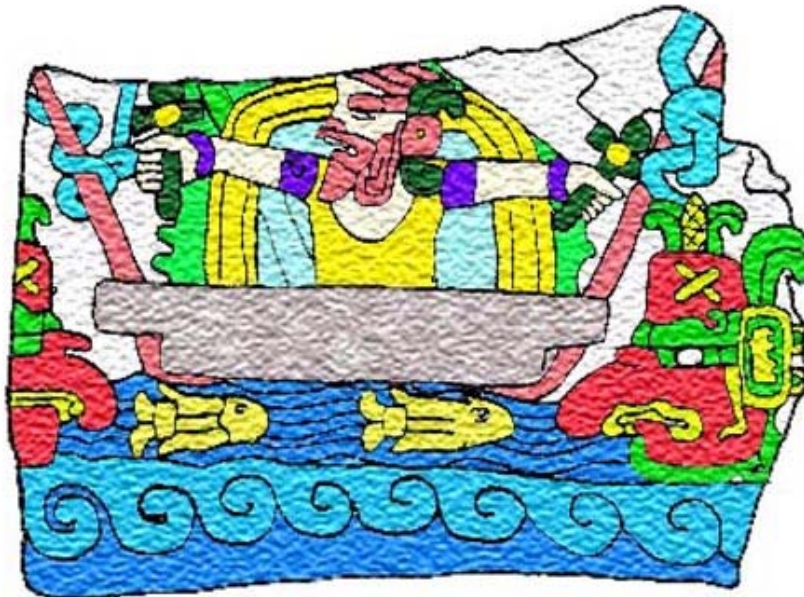
- I have proposed an exceedingly complete and congruent interpretation of the various facts of Izapan iconography and astronomical orientation. It integrates archaeology, geography, astronomy, and iconography. For 17 years I have referred to this as an "interdisciplinary synthesis" of the available evidence.
- Critics and commentators barely, if ever, mention my work at Izapa for what it is: the source of the evidence-based analytical process by which I argue my reconstruction of what 2012 meant to the acknowledged likely creators of the Long Count calendar and/or cosmology.
- That the "Izapan civilization" was likely involved in the formulation of the Long Count is acknowledged by Coe, Malmstrom, Rice, Guernsey, Norman, and other scholars.
- Two dates within the solar year are indicated at Izapa: the solar zenith-passage date (of which there are really two: May 1 and August 12), and December 21 (the December solstice). The associated iconography reinforces that the Izapan were consciously using these dates. It is striking that *August 12 and December 21 represent astronomically significant brackets for the beginning and end dates of the 13-Baktun cycle of the Long Count*, and suggests that both 3114 BC and 2012 AD were being projected during the formulation of the Long Count at Izapa.

Integrated fully into my reconstruction of Izapan calendrical cosmology are the main evidentiary areas that have concerned me, and which I cite as providing the interdisciplinary evidence for my reconstruction: astronomy, creation mythology, archaeoastronomy, iconography, calendrics, geography. The areas in which the ideas pioneered at Izapa can be found manifesting within Classic Maya traditions include: ballgame symbolism, the Creation Myth's themes and episodes, "teachings," and the

symbolism of king-making rites. My interpretation has been and remains twofold: (1) an ideology of deity sacrifice, transformation, and worldrenewal in the Creation Myth context of Era transitions (World Ages), coordinated with (2) a precession-based astronomical alignment calculated by the ancient Izapans (or “early Maya”) to be occurring in 2012. This is an integration of ideology and astronomy.

Stretching a bit, I’ve interpreted that the appearance of Seven Macaw toward the culmination of an Era, and the concomitant rebirth of One Hunahpu should Seven Macaw be successfully defeated or sacrificed, is understandable as a “prophecy” of a kind, but I take the scenario as being more of a ceremonial teaching paradigm. (The current usage of “prophecy” terminology, even by scholars, has been I think quite misleading or at least a red herring, because it carries with it heavy baggage from non-Maya ideas about prophecy.)

Finally, to the extent that Tortuguero Monument 6 (the ONE piece of new evidence on 2012 that has emerged since I did my work on Izapa in the mid-1990s) provides ANYTHING at all that echoes the same ideology and astronomy I proposed, one would think that a new appreciation for my earlier work at Izapa should be forthcoming. And it does. In this regard, Maya scholars finally commenting on what 2012 meant to the ancient Maya have drawn their interpretations almost totally from Tortuguero Monument 6 and they now echo my ideology of “transformative sacrifice & renewal” as well as my astronomical reconstruction — this is found in articles published in the Cambridge IAU Vol. 278 (July 2011) and the Palenque Round Table conference (November 2011), and includes statements by Barbara MacLeod, Carl Callaway, Michael Grofe, Sven Gronemeyer, Carlos Pallan, and John B. Carlson. Consequently, although the tendency continues to be to ignore or even mitigate my earlier work at Izapa, such flippant and under-informed dismissals should no longer be taken seriously.



Izapa Stela 67, drawing by the author.

<http://www.thecenterfor2012studies.com/Astronomy-in-TRT-SAA.pdf>
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