

Mexico and Central America Bats

by Thomas Lera

The people of ancient Mexico and Central America respected creatures who symbolized anomaly and transformation like the bat. The bat was believed to be a kind of intermediary to the gods, both because of its uniqueness, and its participation in, and contributions to, man's environment.

The diversity of bats is as varied as their landscape. They found them fascinating, and used them as frequent themes in their folklore as well as a significant motif in many styles of Pre-Columbian art.

The most numerous New World bats belong to the family *Phyllostomidae*, with have a characteristic nose leaf which ranges from the shape of a leaf to that of a spear or knife.ⁱ Most Pre-Columbian bat depictions include this feature. In fact, the emblem glyph for the great Pre-Columbian city of Copan, now located in Honduras, was the head of a Leaf-nosed Bat. (Figure 1)ⁱⁱ



[Figure 1] Cayman Islands, Waterhouse's Leaf-nosed Bat Scott 459c, Nicaragua, Common Vampire Bat Scott 2110i, and the City of Copan emblem glyph, drawing by John Eric Sidney Thompsonⁱⁱⁱ

The gods of the Sky and Underworld were the most important Pre-Columbian deities largely because agriculture depended upon them both. As flying creatures, bats signify the sky, but have many qualifications for Underworld symbolism as well. They hang upside down facing the dark Underworld, they are nocturnal, roost in caves or dead trees, and use streams as flyways (caves, tree roots, and streams were considered openings to the Underworld). In Mayan mythology, the Underworld was one of the most important themes. It was where the dead were buried and the place from where plants came.

Whether or not they understood pollination or seed dispersal, these people likely saw bats visiting flowering trees or other plants. Some of the plants most important to people in the New World tropics are bat-dependent. For example, bats pollinate the Kapok tree, sacred in many regions. Its fiber is used for making blow darts and its wood for constructing canoes. Bats also distribute the seeds of the Breadnut Tree, which produce an important food staple in areas in eastern Mexico. Even today, locals not only gather the seeds as gifts of the gods but also in recognition of the contribution of the bats.



Ritual human sacrifice, often by decapitation, was common in many cultures of the ancient New World, and was an important theme in their art. Various humans, animals, or supernatural composite creatures, were agents of sacrifice in myths. Much of the bat sacrificial symbolism likely derives from the Common Vampire Bat (*Desmodus rotundus*), a small creature that feeds entirely on the blood of vertebrates.

[Figure 2] The Hero Twins, Hun ahpu and Xbalanque, descended into Xilbalba (Guatemala, Scott C724)

Throughout Mayan ruins, hieroglyphics and graphic depictions of the Vampire Bat can be found. The Maya revered the head-tearing off Vampire Bat God “*Cama Zotz*,” who killed dying men on their way to the center of the earth. In the Quiché Maya legends of the Popol Vuh (the Sacred Book of the Ancient Quichés of Guatemala), Zotziha is the House of Bats in Xibalba, Underworld of Death, where Cama Zotz is the enemy of the hero twins Hun ahpu and Xbalanque [Figure 2].

One of the tests the Lords of Xibalba required of the Hero Twins was to spend a night in Zotziha, the House of Bats, where they faced Cama Zotz. The brothers took refuge inside their blowguns, but Hun ahpu could not resist the temptation to stick his head out to see if it was dawn and was beheaded by Cama Zotz.^{iv} In 1981, Guatemala depicted scenes of Popol Vuh on their airmail stamps; Scott C724 depicts the “Odyssey of Hun ahpu and Xbalanque.”

The beautiful jade mosaic mask shown below, from the altar of the Adoratorio of Mound H at Monte Alban near Oaxaca City, is from the Late Formative to Early Classic Period (200 BC to 100 AD). The mask is 17½ centimeters high including its dangling mirrors.^v It was stolen from the National Museum of Mexico on December 25, 1985 and recovered on June 11, 1989. Its return to the Oaxaca Room in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City was commemorated on the Mexico Scott 1632 and Guinea Republic Scott 948 stamps [Figure 3].



[Figure 3] Mask of the Bat God - Mexico Scott 1632 and Guinea Republic Scott 948

The natural characteristics of bats provide a rich foundation for Mayan and Aztec symbolism. Creatures of life and death, fertility and destruction, they were thoroughly interwoven into their lives and their art.

ⁱ Hill, John E. and James D. Smith. 1984. *Bats: A Natural History*. University of Texas Press, Austin. 243 pp.

ⁱⁱ Tedlock, Dennis. 1993. *Breath on the Mirror: Mythic Voices and Visions of the Living Maya*. Harper, San Francisco, San Francisco. p. 236-237.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stephen Houston, Oswaldo Chinchilla Mazariegos and David Stuart eds., 2001, *The decipherment of ancient Maya writing, Chapter 24. The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilization* by John Eric Sidney Thompson, Norman : University of Oklahoma Press: p.186

^{iv} Tedlock, Dennis. 1996. *Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life*, revised and expanded ed. Simon & Schuster, New York. 125-126; Hull, Kerry M. and Michael D. Carrasco, eds. 2012. *Parallel worlds: genre, discourse and poetics in contemporary, colonial and classic period Maya literature, 4th Ed.* University Press of Colorado. p. 182-185.

^v Caso, Alfonso and Ignacio Bernal. 1952. *Urnas de Oaxaca*. National Institute of Anthropology and History. Mexico. pp.67 - 100.