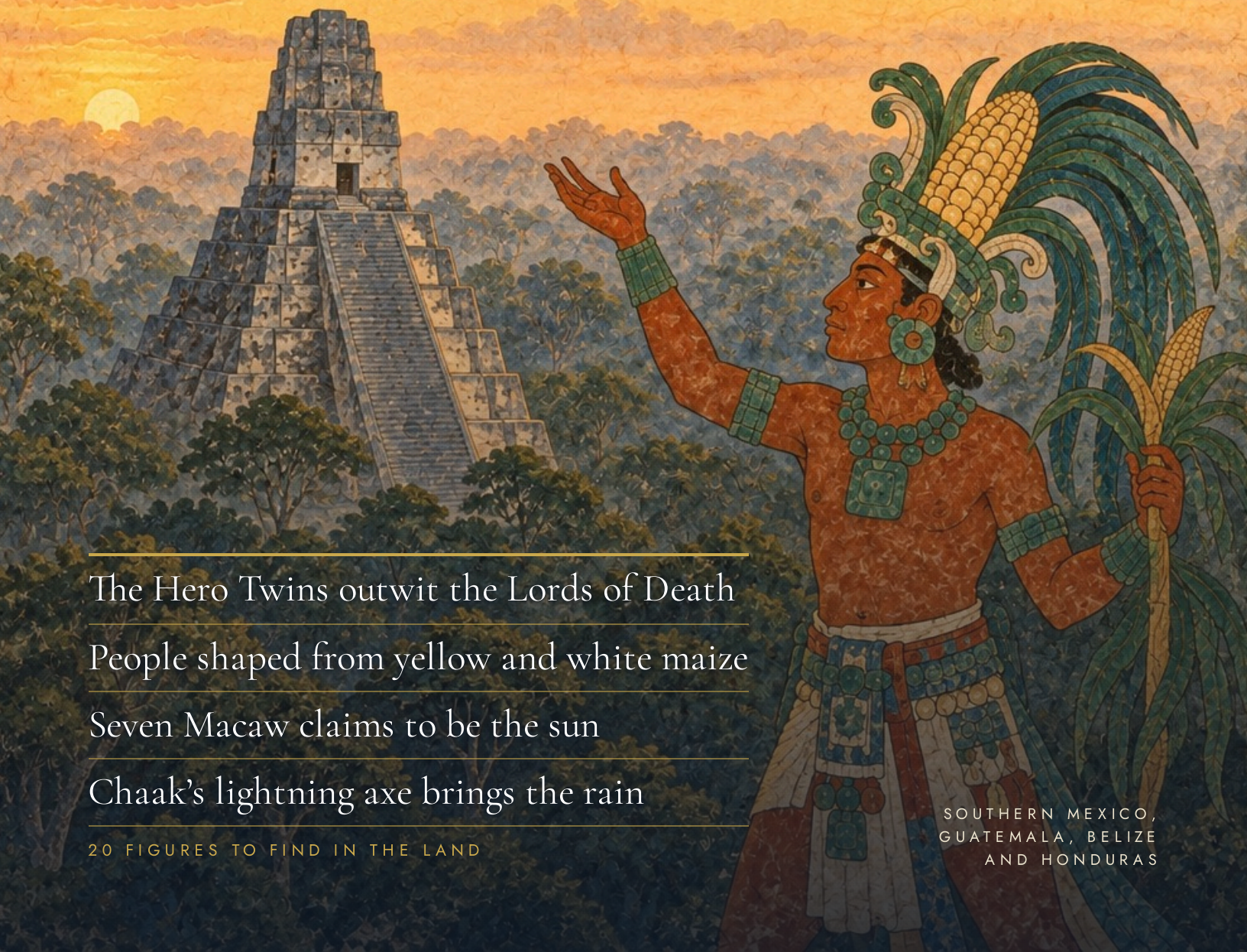
Maya

K’iche’ Maya · Yucatec Maya · Nahuatl

POPOL WUJ



The Hero Twins outwit the Lords of Death

People shaped from yellow and white maize

Seven Macaw claims to be the sun

Chaak’s lightning axe brings the rain

20 FIGURES TO FIND IN THE LAND

SOUTHERN MEXICO, GUATEMALA, BELIZE AND HONDURAS

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The ceiba World Tree joins Xibalba, the earth and the heavens

INTRODUCTION

Maya and Mesoamerican Mythology Field Guide

Mesoamerica is one of the world's great cradles of civilisation. Its peoples shared a calendar, a sacred ballgame, a layered cosmos of sky, earth and underworld, and a deep reverence for maize as the substance of human life.

This guide focuses on the Maya, whose K'iche' book the Popol Vuh is among the most complete mythological texts to survive from the Americas, with related figures from the wider Mesoamerican world.

People and maize share one substance.

CONTEXT

How Mesoamerica Holds Its Myths

Maya myth survives in carved stone, painted ceramics, a small number of screenfold books and colonial-era manuscripts written down by Maya authors in their own languages. Living Maya communities continue to keep stories, ceremonies and the 260-day calendar today.

Living Maya communities continue to keep stories, ceremonies and the 260-day calendar today.

SOURCES

The Popol Vuh (K'iche' Maya, written in the 16th century, copied by Francisco Ximénez c. 1701). The Dresden, Madrid and Paris Codices. The Books of Chilam Balam (Yucatec Maya). Classic Maya inscriptions and painted vessels. Murals of San Bartolo, Guatemala.



Carved stone and painted vessels keep the myths of the Classic Maya

THE THREE LEVELS OF THE COSMOS

The Maya world is layered: thirteen levels of the heavens above, the earth in the middle, often pictured as a great turtle or crocodile floating in water, and nine levels of Xibalba, the underworld, below. A great ceiba tree joins them at the centre.



Hunahpu and Xbalanque face the Lords of Death in the ball court of Xibalba

THE FEATURE

The Twins in Xibalba

Trials in the houses of the underworld.

The Twins pass the House of Darkness, Razors, Cold, Jaguars, Fire and Bats. In the Bat House Hunahpu's head is taken, and Xbalanque fashions a substitute from a squash.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A bat; jaguars; a ball court; a head shaped like a squash.

Kukulkan Quetzalcoatl in Nahuatl

The feathered serpent.

Across Mesoamerica the feathered serpent is linked to wind, learning and rulership. At Chichén Itzá the equinox light forms a serpent of shadow descending the pyramid's steps.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

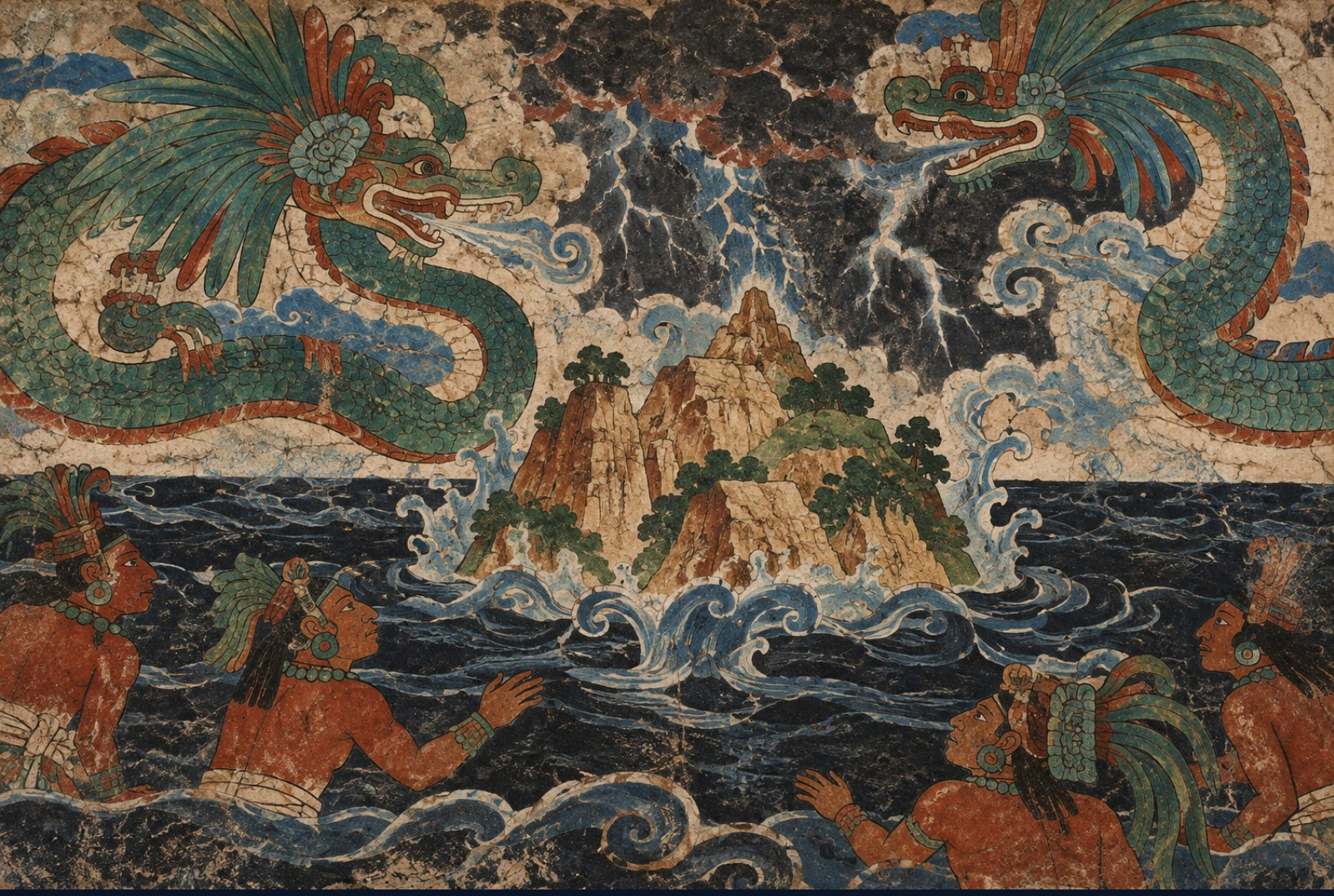
A serpent with feathers; a long body down a slope.



The feathered serpent descends the steps at Chichén Itzá

MAIZE AND THE MAKING OF PEOPLE

In the Popol Vuh the gods fail three times to make people — from mud, from wood, and from other materials — before succeeding with dough of yellow and white maize. People and maize share one substance.



I · CREATION

I The Making of the World

Sky, sea and the patient attempts of the creators.

Above: The earth rises from the primordial sea at the creators' word

Tepeu and Gucumatz

Sovereign and Quetzal Serpent

Creator powers resting in the primordial sea.

In the stillness before creation, the creators speak with Heart of Sky, and the earth rises from the water at their word: "Earth," they say, and it is formed.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *Land emerging from water; feathered forms upon a sea.*

Heart of Sky

Huracan

Sky power of storm and lightning.

A one-legged storm power, threefold as lightning, who joins the creators and later sends the flood that destroys the wooden people.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *Storm shapes; a one-legged figure; lightning.*

The Failed Creations

Mud people, wooden people.

People of mud dissolve and cannot speak. People of wood have no hearts and forget their makers; a flood destroys them and their own tools and animals turn against them. Their descendants are said to be the monkeys.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *Crumbling figures; monkeys in trees.*



Grandmother Xmucane grinds maize; from the dough the first four men are shaped

The First People of Maize

Four first fathers made of maize dough.

Grandmother Xmucane grinds yellow and white maize nine times, and from the dough the creators shape the first four men, then their wives.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *Figures of grain; a woman grinding at a stone.*

The World Tree

Yaxche', the ceiba

Axis joining underworld, earth and sky.

The green ceiba stands at the centre of the world, with trees of four colours at the four directions. Its roots reach Xibalba and its branches the heavens.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A tall tree with spreading crown and buttress roots; a cross-shaped tree.*



II · THE HERO TWINS

II Hunahpu and Xbalanque

The great cycle of the Popol Vuh.

Above: The Twins take aim at Seven Macaw with a blowgun

Seven Macaw

Vucub Caquix

A vain bird who pretends to be the sun.

Before the true sun rises, Seven Macaw boasts that he is the sun and moon. The Twins shoot him with a blowgun and replace his jewelled teeth with maize, and his glory falls away.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A great bird with a broken beak; a bird on a tree top.*

One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu

The father and uncle of the Twins.

Summoned to Xibalba for playing ball too loudly, they fail the lords' tests and are killed. One Hunahpu's head is hung in a calabash tree.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A head among gourds in a tree.*



The skull in the calabash tree spits into Blood Moon's hand

Blood Moon

Xquic

Daughter of an underworld lord; mother of the Twins.

She approaches the calabash tree; the skull spits into her hand and she conceives. She escapes Xibalba and proves herself to Xmucane by gathering a net of maize from a single plant.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A young woman beneath a tree; a net filled with maize.*



The Twins rise into the sky as the sun and the moon

Rising as Sun and Moon

Victory over death.

By trickery the Twins defeat the lords of death, attempt to restore their father, and rise into the sky as the sun and the moon.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *Two figures ascending; a sun and a moon together.*



III · DEITIES & POWERS

III Rain, Maize and the Feathered Serpent

The forces on which the life of fields and cities depended.

Above: Chaak strikes the clouds with his lightning axe to bring rain

Chaak

Chac

Rain god; carries an axe of lightning.

Chaak strikes the clouds with his lightning axe to bring rain. He is often fourfold, one for each direction, and is honoured in Yucatec rain ceremonies still performed today.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A long-nosed face; an axe raised; masks on building facades.*



Reborn from a cracked turtle shell, the earth, assisted by his sons

The Maize God

Hun Hunahpu in Classic art

Young, graceful; dies and is reborn.

The Maize God is cut down at harvest and descends to the underworld; on painted vessels he is reborn from a cracked turtle shell, the earth, assisted by his sons.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A youthful figure rising from a split shell; a head like a maize ear.*

Itzamna

Aged creator; patron of writing.

An elderly god associated with the sky, priestly knowledge and the invention of writing, often shown seated on a throne.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *An old man with a large nose seated; a figure holding a book.*



Goddess of the moon and weaving, at her loom beneath the rabbit in the moon

Ixchel

Goddess of the moon, weaving and childbirth.

An elder goddess honoured on the island of Cozumel by pilgrims, associated with healing and with the loom.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
>
> *A woman at a loom; a rabbit in the moon.*



IV · PLACES & SIGNS

IV Underworld, Ballgame and Sky

Where myth meets the landscape and the heavens.

Above: The Sacred Cenote at Chichén Itzá, a doorway to the realm of Chaak

Xibalba

Place of Fear

The underworld; ruled by lords of death.

Reached by steep stairs and rivers of blood and pus, entered at a crossroads of four coloured roads. Caves and cenotes were seen as openings to it.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A cave mouth; a sinkhole of water; a crossroads.*

The Ballgame

Pitz

A sacred game of skill.

Played with a heavy rubber ball struck with the hips. In myth it is the contest between heroes and the lords of death; ball courts stand in nearly every Maya city.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A long I-shaped court; a ball in flight between walls.*

The Milky Way

White Road; Sak Beh

A road and a tree in the sky.

The Milky Way was seen as a road to the underworld and, at other seasons, as the world tree or a great caiman stretched across the sky.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A long pale road; a crocodile across the night.*

Venus

Noh Ek', the Great Star

Morning and evening star.

Maya astronomers tracked Venus closely; the Dresden Codex contains a table of its cycles. Its appearances were linked to warfare and timing of ceremonies.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A bright star at dawn or dusk; a star glyph.*

The Cenote

Ts'ono'ot

Sacred water-filled sinkhole.

In the dry Yucatán, cenotes are the source of water and doorways to the realm of Chaak. The Sacred Cenote at Chichén Itzá received offerings for centuries.

> LOOK FOR IN THE LAND
> *A round pool in the ground; a deep well among trees.*

A NOTE ON RESPECT

Maya peoples are living cultures, with millions of speakers of Maya languages today. Spellings follow modern orthography where practical; older spellings such as Chac and Ixchel are widely used. Many versions exist; note the source a telling follows.

The plates in this issue are interpretive illustrations, not historical artefacts.



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