

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND - Mayan Culture

The Maya were one of the major cultures in the New World. Located in what are now Guatemala and the Yucatan Peninsula, they were farmers of a soil so rich that it was easy for them to acquire a surplus of food. Corn was their major and honored crop. Their surplus enabled them to devote as much as half their time to other pursuits, and they became well-known for their knowledge of astronomy, their construction of major pyramid-shaped temples and limestone palaces, and their works of art. The Maya were expert mathematicians, and they also possessed a written hieroglyphic language that they used in writing books.

The Spaniards conquered the Maya in A.D. 1524 and burned their principal city, including all of their books, to ashes. Spanish missionaries converted the Mayan population to Roman Catholicism and taught many of the Maya to write their own language in the Latin, phonetic alphabet. They encouraged the Maya to record their traditions and history in the Western form of writing. Today, more than 300,000 people continue to speak the Maya language.

The Mayan creation myth is part of an ancient epic known as The Popol Vuh, which is the greatest surviving Mayan document. It was written anonymously in the Mayan language using the Latin alphabet between 1554 and 1558. Scholars believe this document is either a translation of a manuscript in the ancient Mayan hieroglyphic language or a collection of stories and songs recorded directly from the Mayan oral tradition.

In about 1700, a Catholic missionary translated The Popol Vuh into Spanish. He spoke the Mayan language fluently, and he persuaded the Maya to show him this manuscript of their ancient history. There is no record that any other Spaniard ever saw the Mayan document. The Spanish manuscript disappeared for 150 years. In the 1850s, it was discovered in the library of the University of San Carlos in Guatemala City; it was first published in Vienna in 1857.

APPEAL AND VALUE

The Popol Vuh is an ancient document of striking literary beauty. It reveals more than the talent of the anonymous recorder. It reflects the thoughts and values of this ancient people and the ability of their language to express them.

The part of the epic that tells the Mayan creation myth shows a Christian influence. The language and some of the ideas are similar to the opening chapters of the Old Testament. This is not surprising, given the fact that Spanish missionaries were already teaching the Maya about Christianity when the anonymous author recorded The Popol Vuh.

It is interesting to compare the type of human beings the Maya gods wished to create and the relationship between these gods and their people with those of other creation myths.