

[2012: Is the Fear Justified?](#)

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Predictions

2012: Is the Fear Justified?

There appears to be little reason from the point of view of science, astrology or Mayan prophecy to be concerned that the world will end two years hence

By Dr. Edwin C. Krupp, Director Griffith Observatory, Los Angeles

The \$200-million disaster movie 2012 opened November 13, 2009. Earning \$750 million, it seemed designed to break all records for disaster spectacles--with cracking continents, plunging asteroids, burning cities and a tsunami throwing an aircraft carrier through the White House. The movie's ominous slogan: "Find out the truth." Two more major movies about the 2012 doomsday are reportedly in the works.

Anyone who cruises the Internet or all-night talk radio knows why. The ancient Maya of Mexico and Guatemala kept a calendar that is about to roll up the red carpet of time, swing the solar system into transcendental alignment with the heart of the Milky Way and turn Earth into a bowling pin for a rogue planet heading down our alley for a strike.

None of it is true. People you know, however, are likely becoming a bit afraid that modern astronomy and Maya secrets are indeed conspiring to bring our doom. I'm an astronomer and a specialist in the astronomy of ancient people, so people are asking me about this. Here's what I tell them.

Birth of a Notion

We've had similar scares in the recent past, but none quite like this. The last time the world got all worked up over the mystical turning of a calendar was the false millennium of January 1, 2000. Never mind the actual y2k computer-date bug. True-believer authors (and their imitators) published scary and/or hopeful books about the moment's prophetic potential to catch an immense cosmic wave and change everything for either good or ill. Borrowing a forecast from Nostradamus, the 16th-century French riddler, author Charles Berlitz predicted catastrophe in his 1981 book *Doomsday 1999*. Berlitz (fresh off books on Atlantis and the Bermuda Triangle), warned that 1999 could inflict flood, famine, pollution and a shift of Earth's magnetic poles.

In the 1990s an entire "Earth Changes" movement swelled into being as the end of the century neared, with all sorts of millennial expectations--earthquakes, plagues, polar axis shifts, continents sliding into the sea, Atlantis rising and more.

When January 1, 2000, came and went with nothing worse than ski-lift passes printing the date as 1900, the focus shifted to "5/5/2000" several months later. Most believers in the power of planetary alignments forgot the failure of earlier lineups to induce disaster. 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.

Throughout history, end-of-the-world movements missing their mark number in the "hundreds of thousands at the very least," says Richard Landes, historian at Boston University and director of its Center for Millennial Studies. But people eager for the world to end are not to be denied and this time, of course, all will be different.

The Rollover

What exactly is the Maya calendar about to do? On December 21, 2012, it will display the equivalent of a string of zeros, like the odometer turning over on your car, with the close of something like a millennium. In Maya calendrics, however, it's not the end of a thousand years. It's the end of Baktun 13. The Maya calendar was based on multiple cycles of time, and the baktun was one of them. A baktun is 144,000 days: a little more than 394 years.

Scholars have deciphered how the Maya calendar worked from historical texts and ancient inscriptions, and they have accurately correlated so-called Maya Long Count dates with the equivalent dates in our calendar. Just as we number our years counting from a historically and culturally significant event (the presumed birth year of Christ), Maya times were numbered from a date endowed with religious and cosmic significance: the creation date of the present world order. A Long Count date is the tally of days from that mythic startup. Most experts think the start point corresponds to August 11, 3114 bce [interestingly close to one Hindu calendar's beginning at 3102 bce].

Most of the Maya calendar intervals accumulate as multiples of 20. An interval of 7,200 days (360 x 20) was known as a katun. It takes 20 katuns to complete a baktun (20x7,200=144,000 days). Although some ancient inscriptions turn 13 baktuns into an important reset milestone, others imply that the calendar simply keeps running. For instance, it takes 20 baktuns to make a pictun.

No one paid much attention to the end of Baktun 13 until fairly recently. In 1975 Frank Waters, a romantic and speculative author, devoted a brief section to the subject in his book *Mexico Mystique*. He identified the 13-baktun interval as a "Mayan Great Cycle," overestimated its duration as 5,200 years, and equated five such cycles with five legendary eras, each of which ends in the world's destruction and rebirth. There is no genuine Maya tradition behind any of this. [When asked, one Mayan shaman said, "Only the cycle will end. Time will continue, and we will learn to live in peace and harmony, for we are all a part of a plan to help the Gods complete the creation and perfection of the world."]

Waters also miscalculated the date when the calendar would supposedly pull down the shades. "The end of the Great Cycle . . . will occur December 24, 2011a.d.," he announced, when the world "will be destroyed by catastrophic earthquakes." Exact date aside, the doomsday ball was now rolling.

Another book in 1975 spotlighted the Maya calendric roundup. Dennis and Terence McKenna discussed it in *The Invisible Landscape: Mind, Hallucinogens, and the I Ching*. That book at least got the Baktun-13 end date right: December 21, 2012. It also noted that the date is the winter solstice, when the Sun will be "in the constellation Sagittarius, only about 3 degrees from the Galactic Center, which, also coincidentally, is within 2 degrees of the ecliptic." The McKennas continued, "Because the winter solstice node is precessing, it is moving closer and closer to the

point on the ecliptic where it will eclipse the galactic center." In reality this event will never happen, but it hardly matters. The McKennas linked the whole arrangement with the concept of renewal and called 2012 a moment of "potential transformative opportunity."

Broader interest in 2012 caught on beginning in 1987. In *The Mayan Factor: Path Beyond Technology*, Jose Argueelles (an "artist, poet and visionary historian" according to the dust jacket) linked the 13-baktun period with an impalpable "beam" from the center of the Milky Way Galaxy. According to Argueelles, the Maya knew when we entered this beam and when we would leave it, and set their 13-baktun cycle to mark our passage through it accordingly. The beam, he asserted, operates as "invisible galactic life threads" that link people, the planet, the Sun and the center of our galaxy. Neither Maya tradition nor modern astronomy supports a belief in any such beam. It stemmed instead from Argueelles' personal philosophy, which emphasizes "the principle of harmonic resonance." Argueelles also concluded that the planets are "orbiting harmonic gyroscopes" that "play a role in the coordination of the beam," which advances the development of anything with DNA. The year 2012, therefore, will bring a rosy version of the apocalypse.

If this sounds a bit familiar, you're right. In 1987 Argueelles and his followers predicted, with worldwide fanfare, that August 16-17 of that year would bring a Maya-Galactic "Harmonic Convergence." That event turned into a global phenomenon, with thousands gathering at Earth's "acupuncture points" to create a "synchronized and unified bio-electromagnetic collective battery." Unfortunately, the date passed with nothing more than colorful newspaper stories.

Galactic Guessing Games

Fast-forward to 1995. That year John Major Jenkins packaged several of these themes into *Maya Cosmogenesis 2012*. According to Jenkins, the winter-solstice point and the center line of our galaxy will line up exactly on December 21st. Arguing that this motivated the Maya to contrive the calendar to end on that date, Jenkins concludes that it will be "a tremendous transformation and opportunity for spiritual growth, a transition from one world age to another." In fact, astronomy cannot pinpoint such a "galactic alignment" to within a year, much less a day.

Jenkins did acknowledge that the winter-solstice Sun actually crosses the center of the Milky Way anytime between 1980 and 2016. Elsewhere, he expands this approach zone to a 900-year period, and settles for an imprecise alignment to

which December 21, 2012, is arbitrarily and circularly assigned. Real astronomy does not support any match between the Baktun-13 end date and a galactic alignment. The advocates both admit and ignore this discrepancy.

What did the Maya themselves think about End Times? There is no evidence that they saw the calendar and a world age ending in either transcendence or catastrophe on December 21, 2012. Some Maya Long Count texts refer to dates many baktuns past 13 and even into the next pictun and beyond. For instance, an inscription commissioned in the 7th century by King Pacal of Palenque predicts that an anniversary of his accession would be commemorated on October 15, 4772.

In all of the Long Count texts discovered, transcribed and translated, only one mentions the key date in 2012: Monument Six at Tortuguero, a Maya site in the Mexican state of Tabasco. The text is damaged, but what remains does not imply the end of time.

The Secret NASA Conspiracy

Some advocates for the 2012 catastrophe say that what will actually cause the devastation is an alignment of planets. There is no planet alignment on the winter solstice in 2012. Nonetheless, advocates of doom connect the fictional alignment to astrological predictions or groundless claims about a reversal of Earth's magnetic field and unprecedented solar storms. Many Internet postings and guests on all-night apocalyptic radio have elaborated on these themes.

In particular, several threads of irrational thought have created an Internet phantom: the secret planet Nibiru. It's the bowling ball, and Earth is the pin. There is no such planet, though it is often equated with Eris, a plutoid orbiting safely and permanently beyond Pluto. Some insist, however, that a NASA conspiracy is in play and that Nibiru, looming in on the approach, can already be seen in broad daylight from the Southern Hemisphere. It was supposed to become visible from the Northern Hemisphere, too, by last May, but like a fickle blind date, it stood up those awaiting it.

Others on the Web, confused about the supposed alignment of the winter-solstice Sun with the Milky Way's center, have declared that the Sun is now plummeting to the Milky Way's center and dragging Earth with it. The predicted result? Earth's

polar axis will shift.

Most of what's claimed for 2012 relies on wishful thinking, wild pseudoscientific folly, ignorance of astronomy and a level of paranoia worthy of Night of the Living Dead. Pipi

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What is the Hindu View of 2012?

Hindus came a bit late to the 2012 end-of-the-world hysteria. But then during his March, 2010, visit to Mauritius, Hinduism Today's publisher, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, was told some youth were seriously worried that their lives were soon to be cut short. Despite the sophistication of Hindu astrology and the propensity of our astrologers toward voluminous predictions, none, to our knowledge, attached any significance to December 21, 2012, until recently. Most still don't. David Frawley (Pundit Vamadeva Shastri), for example, states, "Nothing major is likely to happen on Dec. 21, 2012, from the standpoint of Vedic astrology, as far as I can see." "There's nothing to it," concurs Acharya Bharat, a Vedic astrologer living in Oregon. Even Western astrologers see no significance to the date.

One book from a Hindu does speak of 2012 as a time of catastrophe: Sri Sathya Sai Baba & The Golden Age. The author, Amala Chaudhuri, quotes extensively from New Age writers Gregg Braden and Elia Wise about earth changes. But the only quote from Sai Baba simply states, "There will be physical repercussions because of growing selfishness, minor adjustments to the planet and a certain clear out." The author then concludes, "It has been estimated that the world population will be reduced to one and a half billion after the reversal of the Earth's magnetic poles [probably in 2012, she states elsewhere] leading to the Golden Age.... These findings seem to fulfil the predictions of Sai Baba." Unfortunately, many readers interpret the book to be a reflection of Sai Baba's views.

The Yugas

Hindu scripture does indeed describe great cycles of time and the destruction and creation of the entire universe. The Puranas describe a kalpa or "day" in the life of Lord Brahma of 4.32 billion years. A kalpa comprises 994 cycles of yugas. The Sat Yuga is 1,728,000 years (corresponding to morning in an Earth day, and reaching its fullness at noon); the Treta Yuga is 1,296,000 years (afternoon); the Dvapara Yuga is 864,000 years (evening) and the Kali Yuga is 432,000 years (night). A kalpa of yugas is followed by an equal period of sleep. A year of Brahma's life is 360 such days and nights, and He lives for 100 such years--a total of 309 trillion human years. At the end of the life of Brahma, all of creation is reabsorbed into Siva at Mahapralaya. After a period of time, creation is again issued forth. How often this cycle is repeated is symbolized by Siva's necklace--made of dozens of skulls of past Brahmas.

According to the common traditional calendar, we are presently in the 51st year of the life of Brahma, and entered a Kali Yuga in 3102 bce (coinciding with the death of Lord Krishna). We therefore have some 426,000 more years of Kali Yuga to go until we enter the Sat Yuga, when, according to the Vaishnavite belief, Vishnu's Kalki Avatar will appear.

More than a few Hindu saints of recent times, including Sri Yukteswar (the guru of Paramahansa Yogananda), Sri Aurobindo and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (founder of Transcendental Meditation), spoke of a transition from the Kali Yuga to the Sat Yuga--or from a period of lower consciousness to one of higher consciousness--in our current time period. None, however, predicted a catastrophic changeover.

Sri Swami Mayatitananda Saraswati does foresee a time of great upheaval beginning soon. She predicts natural disasters causing 50 million deaths, submergence of lands in Europe, rising of lands in the oceans, rampant disease, and "chaos within formalized religious structures, specifically Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism." According to her augury, 2025 begins a 10,000-year "Golden Age" when mankind will live in higher consciousness.

Even if the Kali Yuga lasts another 426,000 years and Kalki is born to end it, He will, according to the Vishnu Purana, "reestablish righteousness upon Earth. The minds of those who live at the end of the Kali age should be awakened and shall be

as clear as crystal."