

The World before the Opening of the Atlantic

Primary Source

The Creation of Animals from the *Popol Vuh*



ABOUT THE READING The *Popol Vuh* is the sacred book of the Maya, one of the indigenous people of Mesoamerica. It tells the story of how the Heart of Heaven and the Heart of Earth, the Mayan names for god, created the earth and human beings. It also tells stories of thousands of years of Mayan history. It is believed that the stories were first written in hieroglyphics, an ancient form of writing. However, the Spanish destroyed many Mayan texts during their conquest of the Mayan people, so the stories had to be passed along orally until they were written in Latin in the 16th century. The version of the Creation of Animals you will read is a modern translation by Victor Montejo.

VOCABULARY

guardians protectors,
keepers
consumed destroyed



As you read ask yourself, what do the creators want from the animals? How do they react when they don't get it?

THE CREATION OF ANIMALS

The Creators and Makers asked themselves, “Will there only be silence and stillness beneath the tree branches and vines? It would be good if there were creatures in the trees and forests.”

This is what they said, and all at once they created animals both big and small to live in the trees and forests. They created deer, birds, pumas and jaguars. Then they created serpents and poisonous snakes to be the **guardians** of the vines. Then the Creators and Makers gave the other animals a

Puma is another word for mountain lion.

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proper place to live.

“You, deer, shall live in the meadows, in the valleys and along the river banks. You will walk on all fours, multiply and live among the forest plants and trees.”

And to the birds they said, “You, birds, shall live in the trees, among the vines. There you will build your nests and multiply.” This is what they said to the deer and the birds, and to all the other animals who were given their proper place to live on the earth.

After creating the birds and the animals, the Creators and Makers said, “Talk, cry out, sing, each according to what you are. Praise us and thank us for creating you. Invoke the names of the Creators and Makers, who are the fathers and mothers of all life. Thank our forefather who is God, the Heart of Heaven and the Heart of Earth.” This is what they said, but they were not able to get the animals to speak like humans. The animals tried to speak, but instead they squawked, chattered, roared and howled. Each creature made a different sound or cry.

When the Creators and Makers realized that the animals could not speak, they said, “Since you are unable to speak, we have changed our minds. You will live just as you are in the valleys and the forests. We have decided to do this since you are unable to speak and praise us for having created you. We will go on with our work until we have made a creature who is respectful and able to sing our praises. From now on your flesh will be **consumed** and eaten. This is your fate.” They said this to the animals, both big and small, who lived on the earth. From then on, the flesh of animals could be eaten.

Call out the names of the gods.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Gods are sometimes given human behaviors or characteristics, such as greed or sympathy. In what ways are the Creators and Makers in this story like humans? Use information from the story to support your response.

2. What behavior by humans does this story justify? How does it justify this behavior?
