Many ancient Egyptian myths were written down using hieroglyphics, a type of picture writing. Vowels weren't used in this type of writing, so we have to guess what they were. For instance, some scholars write “Re” to refer to the Egyptian sun god. Others spell his name “Ra.”

As told in the myth, Horus was to follow Osiris as Egypt’s ruler. But first he had to battle his uncle Set. Set was still determined to rule Egypt himself.

The day finally came when Horus and Set met in combat. According to one myth, Horus won the battle and took Set prisoner. But Isis took pity on Set, who after all was still her brother. She released him.

This enraged Horus. He chased after his mother and chopped off her head.

But the moon-god, Thoth, was keeping an eye on things. For some reason, he chose to rescue Isis by changing her head into a cow’s head and attaching it to her body. That’s why Isis is sometimes pictured wearing cow’s horns.

Eventually, Horus did triumph over his uncle. He went on to rule Egypt, just as his parents had planned.

THE TWINS' VISIT TO THE UNDERWORLD

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

Below is a list of words that appear in the story. Read the list and get to know the words before you read the story.

agile—nimble; quick
appetizing—tasty; flavorful
aveng—take revenge on behalf of someone
commotion—disturbance; uproar
devised—designed; thought out
dismal—dreary; gloomy
emerged—came out
features—parts of the face
felinos—cats
fiends—demons; monsters
leery—careful; on one’s guard
misshapen—twisted; deformed
obligingly—willingly; agreeably
ravine—small, steep cut in the earth, usually made by running water
resurrected—brought back to life
scuttling—scampering; bustling
severed—cut off
shunned—avoided; scorned
soundly—completely

tremors—violent shaking; earthquakes

Main Characters

Hunahpú—“god of the hunt”; twin to Ixbalanqué
Ixbalanqué—his name means “little Jaguar”; twin to Hunahpú
Lords of Xibalba—rulers of the underworld
THE
TWINS' VISIT
TO THE
UNDERWORLD

A Mayan myth from Central America

The Mayan twins have been challenged to a ball game by the lords of the underworld. To lose means death for the twins—and the lords have never been beaten. But playing ball is not all the twins have to worry about.

Running at full speed, Hunahpu¹ skillfully bounced the rubber ball off his head. In return his twin brother, Ixbalanqué², bounced the ball off his hip. Then the brothers rushed toward the goal—a stone hoop set in the wall above their heads.

¹ (hoon a poo²)
² (ish' bal an ka²)
The twins were playing an exciting game of tlachtli. But as exciting as their play was, it also brought back some sad memories for the twins.

“This is the same court that our father and uncle used to play on,” noted Hunahpú. “That is, before they were defeated by the lords of Xibalba.”

“Yes,” replied Ixbalanqué. “Perhaps if we play loud enough, we can wake the evil lords from their sleep.”

With that, Ixbalanqué shot the ball straight through the hoop. The twins jumped up and down in excitement, for such shots were nearly impossible.

Indeed the two made such a commotion that the earth shook beneath their feet. Far below, the lords of the underworld felt the tremors and woke from their long sleep.

“Someone is playing tlachtli up there,” said one of the lords.

“They’re playing on the court right above us,” replied another. “No one has played on that court since Hun-Hunahpú and his twin brother years ago.” Of course, the lord was referring to the twins’ father and uncle.

“Judging from the noise they make,” noted another, “we have a couple of new champions on our hands.”

The lords of the underworld were great ball players themselves, and they hated to lose. So they decided to take action.

“We better not wait to challenge these new players to a game,” said one of the lords. “They may get so good that they defeat us.”

So the lords sent for one of their messengers—an old owl.

“We need you to go to earth,” the lords told the owl. “Find these new ball players. If they’re as good as they sound, invite them to visit us. Say that we’ve challenged them to a ball game here in Xibalba.”

The owl left at once. He had no trouble finding the tlachtli champions. All he had to do was follow the tremors to their source.

The owl watched Ixbalanqué and Hunahpú play with admiration. It was soon clear that they were truly excellent players.

When the game was over, the owl went up to the twins and greeted them.

“You play well,” said the owl.

The brothers thanked him, but they were not sure why an owl would be interested in tlachtli.

“I carry a message from the lords of Xibalba,” the owl continued. “They wish to challenge you to a game.”

Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué looked at one another.

“How do we know this isn’t some kind of trick?” Hunahpú asked the owl.

“The lords heard you play, and they figured you must be pretty good,” replied the owl. “They just want to find out. You know that tlachtli is their favorite game, don’t you?”

“Yes, and they’re good,” said Ixbalanqué. “The lords of Xibalba defeated our father and uncle.”

The two young men were silent for a moment. They both thought of their father, Hun-Hunahpú, who had also been a tlachtli champion.

“Our father and uncle never returned from that game,” remarked Hunahpú.

“That is so,” replied the owl. “They lost. So the lords of Xibalba cut off their heads and hung them from a calabash tree.”

“If we accept this challenge, we could lose our heads,” said Ixbalanqué.

“Perhaps,” Hunahpú replied. “But we both know that we’re better players than our father and uncle. There’s a strong chance that we’re good enough to defeat the Xibalba.”

“It would also give us a chance to avenge the deaths of our father and uncle,” said Ixbalanqué.

“Tell the lords of the underworld that we accept their

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2 (tlachtli)
3 (shí bal’ba) Xibalba is the name of the Mayan Underworld. It is also the name of the underworld lords themselves.
4 (boonk’hoon a poo’)
5 A calabash is a tropical American fruit tree.
challenge,” said Hunahpú to the owl.

As soon as the owl left, the twins started preparing for their trip. They packed special tlachtlí gear—arm and hip guards made of rubber and colorful ankle bracelets. They also packed several of their own rubber tlachtlí balls.

In a short time, Ixbalanqué and Hunahpú were heading down the long black road to the underworld. They crossed a deep ravine with a boiling hot river steaming below. Then they crossed another river that flowed with blood. On and on they followed the black road. Finally they came to a gate in a stone wall.

“This must be Xibalba,” said Ixbalanqué. “Sure does seem gloomy.”

Suddenly Hunahpú gasped. “Look over there!” he exclaimed, pointing at a calabash tree. From it hung two heads.

“Father! And uncle!” Ixbalanqué said in a hushed voice. “With luck, our heads won’t end up beside theirs,” added Hunahpú.

As the twins stared at the tree, the lords of Xibalba walked up to meet them.

“Greetings,” said the lords to the twins. “And welcome to Xibalba. We are delighted you’ve accepted our challenge.”

Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué studied the lords, carefully sizing them up. The Xibalba seemed kindly enough at first glance, but the twins were leery. They knew that before long, they would be playing those lords in a game of life and death.

“Please make yourselves at home in one of our fine guest houses,” said one of the lords with a little smile. “We’ll play ball first thing in the morning.”

Ixbalanqué and Hunahpú were then led to a stone building called the House of Gloom. The structure certainly lived up to its name. The inside was totally dark. There wasn’t a single window to let in a glimmer of light.

“Fine hosts we have,” grumbled Ixbalanqué.

“I’ll say,” agreed Hunahpú. A sudden noise caught his attention.

“Listen,” he said. “Do you hear strange scuttling noises? I bet they’ve sent demons to frighten us.”

“Let’s not light our torches,” suggested Ixbalanqué. “We don’t want to attract these monsters.”

The twins felt around in the dark, trying to find a bed—or at least a few comfortable chairs. But there seemed to be no furniture at all.

Muttering under their breath, the two settled down on the cold, rough floor.

The twins survived that dark and frightening night in the House of Gloom. But they didn’t get much sleep. All night long the unseen demons filled the air with unearthly howls and screams. Ixbalanqué and Hunahpú were constantly on guard, afraid of being attacked in the dark.

Nevertheless, when morning came, Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué boldly marched out to the ball court. And they soundly defeated the lords of the underworld! In fact, the twins were so skillful at passing the ball back and forth that the Xibalba never really gained control of the ball at all.

The lords were furious. No one had ever beaten them before.

“We can’t let them get away with this,” declared one lord. He called the twins over.

“You must give us a gift,” the lord said to them.

“Tomorrow you must bring us four bunches of flowers,” said another lord. “You must hand them over before our next game begins.”

Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué looked at each other in puzzlement. They had just won the tlachtlí game. So why should they bring the lords a gift? And besides, where would they find flowers in the underworld?

But the twins didn’t dare protest, for the lords were too powerful. So they politely agreed.

With that, the lords led Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué to their second guest house—the House of Knives. This place would prove to be even worse than the House of Gloom.

As they entered, the twins realized that the house was a dark prison. “How are we supposed to find flowers in this dismal place?” asked Ixbalanqué.
Before Hunahpú could respond, they both heard something move. What the twins saw next made them both forget about flowers. Before them stood a group of monstrous fiends holding spears.

“We’re trapped!” said Ixbalanqué in a whisper. “What can we do? We have no weapons.”

“I don’t know. But we’d better act fast,” warned Hunahpú. “Our hosts don’t look very friendly.”

At that moment, one of the fiends pointed his razor-sharp spear at Hunahpú’s face. Another fiend aimed his spear at Ixbalanqué. Behind those two monsters stood many more, all armed in the same way.

Ixbalanqué thought quickly. “You look like a hungry fellow,” he said to the fiend standing in front of him. “Too bad you don’t have anything better than my brother and me to eat.”

“Yes, too bad,” agreed Hunahpú. “We won’t be tasty at all. I’ll bet you’d rather have some nice animal meat.”

The fiends exchanged glances and slowly nodded. The twins really didn’t look very appetizing.

“Kill us if you like,” said Hunahpú pleasantly. “But maybe we can make some kind of deal.”

“That’s right,” continued Ixbalanqué. “Once we get out of here, we promise to return with lots of meat.”

The fiends lowered their spears and stared stupidly at the twins. Their mouths watered at the very idea of animal meat. They grumbled a little among themselves, then wandered off into different parts of the house.

Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué breathed deep sighs of relief. They were safe—at least for that night. In fact, the only sensible thing to do was sleep. So the twins looked around for a bed. But they couldn’t spot one in that gloomy place. Finally they chose a corner and settled down for another night’s sleep on the floor.

But Hunahpú couldn’t put the coming day out of his mind. He kept wondering what would happen when they showed up on the court with no flowers.

Hunahpú rolled over on his side and gazed into the dark room. Suddenly he gave a little jump. A line of ants was marching past his face. Hunahpú sat up carefully, so as to not crush any of the insects. He reached out and touched his brother’s shoulder.

Ixbalanqué hadn’t been sleeping either. His eyes widened when he saw the parade. Ixbalanqué leaned over and spoke softly to the ants. Hunahpú did likewise. Following a long, quiet conversation, the ants promised to help the twins. After that, Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué finally went to sleep.

When the twins woke early the next morning, they saw that the ants had kept their promise. A steady stream of fresh flowers moved across the floor toward the twins. Each flower was carried by several ants.

The ants put the flowers in a pile between Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué. When there were enough flowers for four bunches, the twins thanked the ants politely.

Before long the lords of the underworld arrived at the House of Knives and unlocked the door. They were amazed to see the twins still very much alive. They were even more astounded when Ixbalanqué and Hunahpú each held out two bunches of fresh flowers.

The lords accepted the flowers as calmly as they could. But they were so upset that they lost the tlahctli game again that day.

From then on, the twins’ visit to the underworld settled into a kind of routine. Each morning Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué played ball against the lords of the Xibalba. Sometimes the twins won and sometimes the game was a tie. But the lords of the underworld could never beat them. Then each night the twins were forced to stay in a different and more dangerous place.

One night the twins were sent to the House of Cold. Most people who slept there froze to death in their sleep.

“We must survive this somehow,” Hunahpú said, his teeth chattering. “Remember what our grandmother told us when we were small?”

“Yes,” replied Ixbalanqué, shivering. “There are six houses here in Xibalba. Anyone who can survive a night in
each one becomes immortal."

“If we don’t find a way to get warm soon, this will be the last house we see,” said Hunahpu.

Ixbalanque and Hunahpu searched the barren house. Just when they thought they couldn’t stand it anymore, they found some old logs and knots from pine trees. Quickly the twins built a fire and huddled together for warmth. So they survived the House of Cold.

Another night, Hunahpu and Ixbalanque were sent to the House of Jaguars. There they were surrounded by hungry felines, who growled and spit and clawed at them. But the twins found some old bones and threw them to the beasts. The jungle cats were satisfied, and the twins emerged unhurt the next morning.

Hunahpu and Ixbalanque also survived the House of Fire by dodging all around its dancing flames. The twins didn’t sleep at all that night. Still, they managed to tie the lords in their tlachtli game the following day.

But the twins spent the most horrible night of all in the House of Bats. As soon as they entered, giant mouselike creatures swooped down upon them. These bats had long dangerous teeth and wing tips as sharp as spears.

“This looks like our last evening in Xibalba,” said Ixbalanque. “I can’t see how we can possibly survive the night in a place like this.”

Then Hunahpu noticed something. “Look,” he hurriedly said to his brother. “The bats never seem to touch the floor. Let’s try lying flat on the ground. Then maybe we’ll be safe from their sharp teeth and wing tips.”

Without further delay, the brothers flung themselves down. And Hunahpu’s plan seemed to work. As the night wore on, Ixbalanque and Hunahpu started to think they might survive after all.

But then Hunahpu made a terrible mistake—he raised his head to see what the bats were doing. With a hideous shriek, the Lord of the Bats dove at Hunahpu and sliced off his head.

Poor Ixbalanque could do nothing to help his brother. He feared the same would happen to him if he moved even a finger.

The next morning the lords of Xibalba unlocked the door to the House of Bats. Of course, they were expecting to find both twins dead. To their delight, the first thing they saw was Hunahpu’s severed head.

“But where’s the other brother?” asked one of the lords. “If he were dead, surely his head would lie here as well.”

“It doesn’t matter if he’s dead or not,” said another lord. “If he meets us on the playing field alone this morning, he doesn’t stand a chance of winning.”

Laughing noisily, the lords of the underworld took Hunahpu’s head to the ball court. There they hung it up as a trophy.

As for Ixbalanque, he wasn’t dead. He was hiding in another part of the house. And although Hunahpu was headless, he wasn’t dead either. Of course, without his head he couldn’t see or hear or smell or speak. But his body could still stand and walk.

The House of Bats had been the sixth and last house. Ixbalanque knew he had won immortality by surviving it. But the thought didn’t cheer him.

“Unless I find a way to get my brother’s head back soon, he’ll die,” thought Ixbalanque.

Ixbalanque sadly led his brother’s headless body out of the House of Bats. Where in this cruel place could he find help? He knew better than to ask for aid from the Xibalba.

Then Ixbalanque remembered how the ants helped them find flowers. “Perhaps the animals will help me,” he thought.

So Ixbalanque called all the animals of the underworld together in a meadow. Swift rabbit, strong-winged hawk, and agile goat—at least one of every kind of animal—gathered around the brothers. The last to appear was the turtle, who crawled slowly up behind the rest.

“Friends, I need your help,” said Ixbalanque. “My brother, Hunahpu, has been injured in the House of Bats. The wound is

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1 A jaguar is a tropical American wildcat. It is brownish-yellow with black spots and is larger than a leopard.
pretty serious, as you can see. His body still lives, but his strength is failing. I'm afraid the lords of the underworld will destroy us both—as they destroyed our father and our uncle.”

At this the animals chattered and squealed and snorted and barked. One rabbit remarked, “I'd like to help you, but I can't think what to do.”

In fact, none of the noisy animals could think of a way to help the twins. One by one, they fell silent.

Finally the silent turtle walked forward. Ixbalanqué looked at the little animal and was filled with despair. What could a turtle possibly do to help?

By this time, Hunahpú’s body was slumped on the ground. Without a word, the turtle crawled to the body and climbed up onto Hunahpú’s shoulders.

When the turtle reached Hunahpú’s neck, he stuck fast. Then the turtle roughly took the shape of the head. Suddenly Hunahpú sat up straighter.

Ixbalanqué rushed to his brother. He could see that Hunahpú was growing stronger again.

“Brother,” said Ixbalanqué, “sit still and I’ll shape your features.”

Rapidly Ixbalanqué pushed and pulled at the tough, turtle-shell head. First, he shaped a nose that looked like Hunahpú’s. He was relieved to see the nose drawing deep breaths of air. Then Ixbalanqué formed ears that looked like Hunahpú’s.

“Brother, can you hear me?” Ixbalanqué asked.

Hunahpú nodded with his strange new head. Feeling encouraged, Ixbalanqué pushed and pulled until he had made two eyes that looked like Hunahpú’s. The eyes blinked at him and gazed around the meadow.

Finally Ixbalanqué shaped a mouth similar to Hunahpú’s. Now Hunahpú could speak.

“My thanks to you, brother,” said Hunahpú with his new mouth. “And thanks to the noble turtle who has loaned himself to me. Now I can see and hear and smell and speak. But if I’m to be in top form for the game today, we must figure out how to get my own head back.”

The brothers whispered together and worked out a plan for defeating the Xibalba in the tlachti game. They called the rabbit who had said he wanted to help. Quietly they shared their plan with him.

“I can help! I can help!” squealed the rabbit, jumping up and down with excitement.

The rabbit ran off into the tall grass, and the twins went to the ball court. Of course, the Xibalba were astonished to see the brothers appear, looking ready for a good game of tlachti.

The lords turned and stared at Hunahpú’s head, still hanging in the ball court. Then they turned back to look at the new head on Hunahpú’s body. The new head looked like Hunahpú, all right. But there was still something wrong with it. It was rough and missapen, like an unfinished sculpture.

“This is surely some kind of trick,” said one of the lords.

“Well, it’s not likely to work,” said another.

The lords of the Xibalba laughed and took their places on the tlachti court. They were sure that a man with a weird head could never beat them at their favorite ball game.

But Ixbalanqué and Hunahpú knew exactly what they were doing. On the very first play, Ixbalanqué hit the ball far out of the court into the tall grass. The rabbit, who had been hiding there, jumped up and chased after the ball.

“That rabbit will get our tlachti ball!” screeched one of the lords of the underworld.

“Quick, chase the rabbit away!” yelled another lord.

“Someone get the ball!”

All the Xibalba ran after the rabbit. Ixbalanqué took advantage of that moment of confusion. He leapt up and snatched Hunahpú’s real head from where it hung over the tlachti court.

Seeing that he was no longer needed, the turtle freed itself from Hunahpú’s neck. Quickly, Ixbalanqué put his brother’s real head back in place. Then the twins gently lowered the turtle to the ground and thanked him for his help.

As the turtle waddled off the court, Hunahpú’s features faded from his shell. By the time he disappeared into the tall grass, he looked like a normal turtle again.

When the Xibalba returned to the court with the ball, they
were amazed to see that Hunahpú had his own head back. But there was nothing the lords could do except continue the game—and lose. With both of them back in action, the brothers easily won.

After the game, the Xibalba team got together to discuss their situation.

“We’re never going to beat these twins in a tlachtli match,” said one of the lords.

“We’ll have to finish them off some other way,” said another.

“But how? They’ve survived six nights in our terrible houses. What else can we do?”

The lords of Xibalba talked and argued for a long time. Finally they devised a plan. They built a huge bonfire near the ball court. Then they invited Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué to join them.

“We have another game we like to play,” one of the lords said to the twins. “We take turns running through the flames.”

“Will you join us at our game?” asked another.

The twins glanced at one another. They knew that the lords of the underworld were up to no good. But after their adventure in the House of Fire, one bonfire didn’t look too frightening.

“We’ll be happy to join you at your game,” said Hunahpú.

“Then be our guest,” said one of the lords. “Please go first.”

The twins both laughed, then leapt willingly into the flames. Within moments, their bodies were burned to ashes.

Of course, the lords of Xibalba didn’t enter the flames at all. Cheering and celebrating their trick, they took the twins’ ashes to the Sea of Xibalba. And there they scattered the ashes with cruel laughter.

However, the twins had known exactly what they were doing. Since their brave deeds had earned them immortality, no fire could ever kill them.

Five days later, Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué were resurrected. In the shapes of poor fishermen, they appeared among the lords. The brothers looked ragged and dirty. But because they danced and entertained the lords of the underworld, they were welcomed.

Some of their best tricks had to do with fire. They burned down buildings and magically restored them. Then they took turns burning each other. Even though nothing remained of their bodies except ashes, the twins sprang back to life unharmed. They even burned a dog and brought it back to life.

The lords of the underworld were amazed at the twins’ magic. When they saw living things killed and restored to life again and again, they wanted to share the experience. So the Xibalba asked the fishermen to perform the magic on them.

At first the fishermen refused.

“Oh, no,” said Hunahpú shyly. “We’re just two ragged fishermen, and this is just a simple trick.”

“We don’t deserve to have fine lords like you honor us by taking part,” added Ixbalanqué.

These words made the lords of the underworld even more determined. They loudly insisted on taking part in this wonderful magic.

Finally the sly fishermen agreed. Ixbalanqué and Hunahpú obligingly burned the lords of the underworld. But there they stopped. They never brought the Xibalba leaders back to life.

When the people of the underworld saw that their lords were truly dead, they knew better than to fight the twins. They begged the brothers for mercy. Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué agreed not to kill them. But they did make certain rules.

“You people of the underworld shall be shunned by the people above,” said Ixbalanqué.

“You only food shall be the flesh of wild animals,” said Hunahpú.

“And you shall no longer be allowed to play ball,” said Ixbalanqué.

The people of the underworld groaned and protested—especially at the last rule. They loved to play ball more than anything. But the Xibalba had no choice but to accept their situation.

Before they left the underworld, the twins took the heads of their father and uncle down from the calabash. Then they
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returned to the surface of the earth, each carrying one of the heads.

When they reached the surface, the twins tossed the two heads into the air. The heads soared up into the sky. One became the sun and the other became the moon.

"Now we have truly avenged the deaths of our father and uncle," said Ixbalanqué.

"And we've proven we are the best ball players ever," added Hunahpú.

The brothers grinned at each other, pleased with their victory. Then they set off for the ball court, ready to play another game of tlachtli.

INSIGHTS

The story of the twins is one of the myths included in the Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the Maya.

The Popol Vuh is similar in a way to the Old Testament. It begins with a creation story. This story tells of the gods' several attempts to make a living thing that would worship them. The last part of the work is a history of the ancestors of the Maya, including both real and legendary people.

The Maya and other people who lived in Mexico and Central America actually played the ball game you read about in the myth. A similar game is still played today in parts of northern Mexico.

The tlachtli game was played on a long and narrow ball court measuring around 75 feet long and 25 feet wide. Low walls or benches marked the boundaries on each side.

The game itself roughly resembled a combination of basketball, volleyball, and soccer. Teams ranged in size from two to eleven men each.

The object of the game was to get a small but heavy rubber ball through rings or hoops placed at each end. The contest was made more difficult in that the ball could only be hit with the thighs, shoulders, heads, or arms—never the hands, feet, or lower legs.

It is thought that tlachtli had a religious significance. This is because the ball courts were usually built close to temples. No one is certain exactly what this significance was. But we do know that players often honored the sun god before a game.

The players on a Mayan ball team were very serious about winning. And well they should be. The captain of the losing team was often beheaded.

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