

## V. A MAYA HIEROGLYPH INCISED ON SHELL<sup>1</sup>

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This minimal Maya hieroglyphic text, now to join the Gates manuscript collection of Maya & Middle American documents at Princeton, is known only to have been purchased from a Florida dealer in antiquities. The glyph, incised on the inner surface of a shell and reproduced here at actual size, perhaps served as an inlay or adorno. In view of the meaning of the glyph as suggested here, the shell and its incised glyph perhaps served as an insignia or badge of a Maya of noble rank. With these brief introductory remarks, we may turn to an examination of the glyphic construction.

The hieroglyph's construction brings together several familiar glyphic elements. The total construction may be transcribed as 12.36.1016:23, the numerals corresponding to the particular glyphic elements as catalogued by J. Eric S. Thompson. As the symbolism of some of these signs has been investigated in depth, it is of interest to first examine the construction from what might be termed the symbolic approach.

Affix 12, the first prefixial element, consists of a vertical bar-like element preceded by short horizontal lines and eye-like elements. This was identified many years ago by Hermann Beyer as symbolizing the eyes and hair (or wig) of death. The affix is a member of Thompson's "count" group and has been regarded by him as an ending sign, probably corresponding to the Yucatec litz' and meaning "death throes," "expirations," or "end."

The second prefix, Affix 36, is a familiar member of the so-called "water" group and consists of an encircled formée cross with a tail of parallel dots or strokes. This is the kan cross with the dots probably corresponding to the glyphic "circlets of water." Symbolically, it is regarded by Thompson as a sign for turquoise and water as well as "precious." With the exception of a few rare examples, the affix occurs only as a prefix and this in a highly restricted range of contexts.

The main sign to which these two familiar signs are affixed is the monkey-like head of God C. A very similar head, frequently regarded as the same although there is some reason for believing it to be distinct, forms part of the glyphic construction for north and is referred to as the "North God." God C, whose peculiar profile suggests a profile view of the symbolic Ahau face, is a ubiquitous diety in the hieroglyphic texts, whose specific functions are difficult to delimit. I return to the possible significance of the sign shortly.

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<sup>1</sup> This note was written in 1962, in response to an inquiry about the possible meaning of the text when it was acquired by Princeton University, and it is published here as illustrating a minor exercise in glyphic interpretation. Several years subsequent to its writing I learned, with delight combined with chagrin, that the proposed interpretation of the God C form was anticipated, on other grounds and with respect to divinities, by William Gates at least as early as 1931.

Completing the hieroglyphic construction on the shell badge is Affix 23 employed as a suffix. Barthel has suggested that this common affix corresponds to Yucatec al, but to my knowledge the symbolism of the sign has not yet been satisfactorily explained. Of the four glyphic elements with which we are concerned here, Affix 23 is the most frequently occurring sign and occurs in the greatest number of distinct combinations. This frequency of occurrence and diversity of combination confirms the suggestion of phonetic value.

Having examined the components of our hieroglyph, what can be suggested as to its meaning? It would be relatively simple to take the explained symbolism of the various elements and to construct a plausible "reading" or interpretation on that basis. While such a procedure may be justifiable in the analysis of some Maya glyphs, it would seem to be more profitable to employ another method here.

In analyzing hieroglyphs of unknown meaning, careful examination of the glyph's context combined with a comparative survey of other contexts in which the construction occurs is often helpful. This cannot be done here since our text consists solely of the hieroglyph under scrutiny though it is possible to examine the hieroglyph's context in other inscriptions. Although usually presenting distinct methodological complications, it is also possible to examine the contexts of the separate glyphic elements, and this combined with the former discloses an interesting avenue of study here.

Since our first prefix, Affix 12, as well as our suffixed al, occur in many diverse constructions, it is convenient to set these aside to examine first the second prefix and the main sign. Examination of the entries for Affix 36 in the Thompson catalogue immediately discloses that this "water" group affix is almost exclusively associated with "emblem" glyphs or glyphs identified by the characteristic affixation of Affix 168 ("Ben-Ich") and a "water" group affix, and especially associated with a particular locality or ruined city, possibly representing a local clan name, a ruling dynasty, or even the city itself. This restricted incidence suggests that the element does not have a phonetic value but rather functions as an unpronounced determinative or as a specific word-sign ("ideogram") of quite restricted usage. Further clarification and perhaps support for this suggestion might result from careful study of Affix 36's relation to other "water" group affixes in the emblematic context and the chronology of its occurrences.

The Thompson catalogue does not provide incidence data for "portrait" glyphs, but a random sampling of the corpus of Maya texts shows that Affix 36 also occurs with God C, paralleling our incised shell example. God C, on the other hand, we also frequently find associated with emblem glyphs, on occasion in affixial form (with the "water" Affix 32 on his head) prefixed to emblems but more customarily in glyphic phrases which include emblem constructions. A second and quite common context for God C is in what appears to be personal name phrases, some of which also include emblem statements. The full range of God C contexts is unknown to me; God C enters into Glyph G<sub>1</sub> constructions (sometimes with our Affix 36 as prefix) and in many Lunar Series glyphs (also frequently with a "water" group affix) but only lengthy search through the inscriptions would define the full range of contexts (I ignore the uses of God C in the codices).

On an onyx marble bowl in the Bliss Collection (National Gallery, Washington) is a hieroglyphic text which is most interesting in regard to our present inquiry. In front of a male figure depicted on the bowl is a single glyphic construction identical with our shell glyph save for the substitution of another "water" group affix for the kan-cross-with-dots. This glyph is the first of a phrase which continues in a column of glyphs behind the figure and which again repeats the glyph but this time with Affix 12 being replaced by the lunar Affix 181. Another figure on the bowl, a woman, bears only a two glyph caption, glyphs probably constituting her name but in any case surely of nominal significance. The glyphs of the "God C phrase" of the male figure are also repeated in a band of glyphs below the rim of the bowl, together with a calendrical statement.

Now the glyphic constructions of the Bliss bowl and the associations of God C and his "water" affix in the inscriptions with names and emblems clearly argue for some sort of nominal significance, perhaps something related to a title as "dignitary" or "lord." This line of thought is further borne out by certain hieroglyphic phrases carved on the great sarcophagus of the famous secret crypt in the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque. The texts of the sarcophagus, as first pointed out by Heinrich Berlin, contain repeated name phrases. On some of the supports of the sarcophagus are carved small human heads linked with short glyphic statements. The first glyph perhaps is part of a personal name; the second glyph in three instances is "death eyes and hair" prefixed to God C with al suffix. Elsewhere on the sarcophagus there are two personages portrayed each with a glyphic text of four hieroglyphs. The first glyph is clearly nominal and refers to the depicted personage. The third glyph is God C with a "water" prefix and the following final glyph is the Palenque emblem without "water" affix. Presumably the lack of the "water" affix in the emblem glyph is explained by God C and "water" as the preceding glyph (as previously noted, God C with a "water" affix occurs as the "water" prefix to emblems in some instances). A most significant feature of these two constructions is the carving of a closed eye in each of the God C heads. The closed eye is a widespread sign of death in ancient Mesoamerican iconography and its presence in God C here is entirely consistent with the context and import of the inscription and further confirms the suggested nominal reading of our shell hieroglyphic construction.

To conclude, we may briefly return to our remaining two affixes, al and "death eyes and hair." As far as the linguistic reading of the suffix as al is concerned, we are in no position to judge its usage here without a linguistic reading of the God C element. It may be observed simply that the uses of al in Yucatec are not inconsistent with a suggested nominal meaning for the God C construction. Thompson's interpretation of Affix 12 as "death throes" would be suitable for the examples on the Palenque sarcophagus supports while one might reason that in the other sarcophagus examples the closed dead eye substituted for it. Nevertheless, such an interpretation does not seem consonant with the great majority of the examples elsewhere. Since the affix is of wide and varied occurrence, it is tempting to see in it a possible phonetic value. Yu. Knorozov has suggested that this affix has the value of ah which in Yucatec Maya is a masculine nominal prefix. Knorozov denies that ah had this meaning in the language of the hieroglyphic texts but ah as the masculine prefix would fit very well the

interpretation suggested here. Nevertheless, as Knorozov has yet to document the interpretation of Affix 12 as ah, one is hesitant to suggest this reading here without more convincing evidence.

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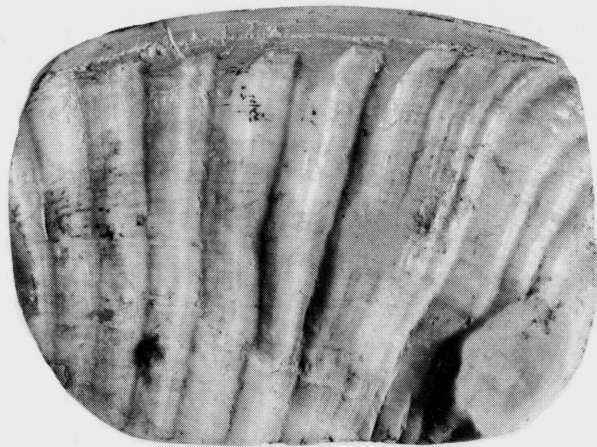


Plate 1. Recto and verso of shell with inscribed glyph. Natural size.