

THE ALTUN HA JADE PLAQUE: DECIPHERING THE INSCRIPTION

by

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Nine years ago, the junior author of this paper published a description of an inscribed jade plaque from the ancient Maya site of Altun Ha in Belize, then British Honduras (Pendergast 1969). The plaque, which measures 20.2 x 6.7 x 1.9 cm and weighs 583.5 grams, was recovered from the tomb of a ruler of the small city-state, and was part of a rich assemblage of burial accompaniments very briefly described in the 1969 article. The crypt (Tomb B-4/6) lay in the core of the level of modification designated B-4, 2nd D in the Temple of the Masonry Altars (Fig. 1), one of the major ceremonial structures in the central precinct of the site. The position of the tomb relative to earlier and later construction in the temple suggested a date for the interment of ca. A.D. 650, and vessels from the tomb, now reconstructed, support that suggestion. A full description of the tomb will appear in Volume 2 of the final report on Altun Ha excavations, scheduled to be published in 1979.

The beautifully executed carving on the obverse surface of the plaque, depicting a figure in right profile seated above two full-front faces (Fig. 2), was described in Pendergast's 1969 article. While the aesthetic and iconographic qualities of the front of the artifact lend it great importance, the feature of greatest significance consists of the 20 glyphs which adorn the reverse surface (Figs. 2, 3). The 1969 article contained an attempt at analysis of the hieroglyphic text which was, to put it kindly, not blessed with great success. Pendergast was not then, nor is he now, an epigrapher; this fact was surely apparent to readers of the article, even though the writing was done at a time when knowledge of the workings of the Maya hieroglyphic system was still in relatively short supply.

The 1969 list of glyphs was followed by a paragraph which seems, in retrospect, a bit too pessimistic even for that time. Pendergast wrote:

"It should be apparent from the foregoing that, like most other Maya glyphic texts, this group of twenty glyphs seems a hopeless jumble of symbols and meanings, a maze through which no path can be cleared. Though the text is almost certainly meaningful, any attempt to read meaning into it would require flights of fancy beyond the bounds of propriety. Other than noting the frequency with which the prefix 11 occurs and the considerable number of celestial symbols present, it seems to me preferable to leave speculation regarding the significance of the text until such time as our knowledge of the meanings of the glyphs, as well as the workings of the system, has increased."

As will soon be apparent, the time mentioned in that pessimistic paragraph is now upon us. This is due in large part to the fact that there has been a steady advance in Maya hieroglyphic research since 1969, and also to the existence of a finished drawing of the plaque, from which the glyphs can be read far more easily than was possible with the drawings available at the time the original article was written. The new drawing likewise makes it possible to recognize some elements on the obverse surface of the plaque which was obscured by flaws in the stone, and not clearly shown in the earlier drawing. Most important among these is a small human figure reclining atop the tree-of-life behind the main personage, his face lying at the upper left corner of the scene. But it is not the purpose of this paper to re-examine the obverse carving; rather, we wish to present an interpretation of the glyphic text, as an illustration of the strides made in Maya epigraphy since the time of Pendergast's original article.

The twenty glyph blocks are to be read in the normal Maya manner, left to right and down the double column. From the presence of two dates in the text, we can divide the inscription into two clauses, the first comprising blocks A1 - A4, and the second B4 - B10. The presentation below follows the format of the 1969 article, treating the text block by block, but adds a new dimension in the form of discussion of each clause as a whole. Glyph identifications which precede the glyph block discussions utilize the notation system of J. Eric S. Thompson (1962).

Clause 1 (A1-A4)

A1 - B1) VIII.506:125/VII.109:552 "8 Kan 7 Zip"

All these elements are very clear. The placement of this date in the Maya Long Count will be discussed later.

A2) 126 ?? .190.181

In modern Maya clause structure, the verb is normally the first element. It is now well established that this was also the case in Classic Maya times, for all the verbs that have been securely identified in the inscriptions ("birth", "accession", "death", etc.) are usually first in their clause, immediately following the date. It is therefore reasonable to expect that this glyph at A2 is a verb. This view is strengthened by the probable presence of postfix T181, which is commonly regarded as a verbal suffix indicating a past tense form. The 'main sign', T190, is an axe.

In several passages in the Madrid Codex an almost identical glyph can be seen in an apparent verbal context. In M96d there are four separate clauses; the first two are of three glyph blocks each, read vertically, and without accompanying picture. The third and fourth are of four blocks each, and each has an accompanying picture of a god fashioning a wooden mask. In the fourth clause, the first glyph appears to be exactly the same as that at A2 on the Altun Ha plaque. On page 97a of the Madrid Codex the same glyph begins all three clauses, although in the pictures below no axe is visible. On page

97b a similar, but not identical, glyph begins all three clauses, and the axe is visible in the pictures below. It thus appears that this glyph can function as a verb related to the fashioning of wooden masks.

However, another interpretation is possible. Thompson (1966: 6) gives examples of compounds with bat (baat means "axe" and is the reading which Thompson given to T190) referring to war. So a reference to war is at least indirectly supported here, and the event may well be a conquest by the personage whose name follows. This latter interpretation is somewhat strengthened by the reading given below for glyph A4.

B2) 228 ?. 78 ? : 513 ? . 181 ?

Although only one of the constituent signs of this glyph can be fairly securely identified (the prefix T228), the glyph is in the position where the name of the protagonist of the clause is to be expected. In other words, this is the personal name of the man who is the subject of the verb at A2. The prefix, T228, is the third of Landa's a's (Tozzer 1941: 170), and is substitutable with T12, which can be read ah, following Knorozov (1955: 26). Clearly the two signs are related semantically, if not phonetically. Since the sign almost exclusively precedes names and titles (as it does here), the reading ah is a good possibility for T228, as ah is in most Maya languages a prefix denoting agent. The main sign is possibly T513. It is unclear whether the remaining detail is one sign or two. If two, T78 is likely as the superfix and T181 as the postfix, although T181 is rare in name glyphs.

In sum, all that can be said with certainty about this glyph is that it is the name of the subject of the verb at A2, and that this interpretation is supported by the presence of the prefix ah.

A3) 11.526:246 u-cab (or cognate form), "the second"

The prefix is T11, a functional equivalent of T1, which is generally accepted as the third person possessive pronoun u, "his, hers, its, theirs". Whether the equivalence is phonetic as well as semantic is not yet established. The main sign is clearly the same as the Caban day-sign, and there is good evidence for reading it "cab" in at least some non-calendrical contexts. Ru-cab is Quichean for "second" (the ru of Quiche is equivalent to Yucatec u). In view of this, it is interesting to note that the glyph is often recorded as the title of the second oldest son when he succeeds father and elder brother as ruler. Whether or not this is the correct interpretation of the glyph, it is clearly a title of Maya rulers. David Kelley has already argued that T1.526:246 be read u-cab and regarded as an "appellative" glyph (Kelley 1962: 324, Fig. 4).

B3) 671[544].116 chikin "west"

The main sign is the manik hand, and can be given the phonetic value chi/che.

It has the kin sign, T544, infixed, and a postfix read as syllable final -n. Hence as a whole the reading is chikin, which means "west". The directions often occur in title contexts, where the general sense is "lord (or some other title) of the west (or other direction)." Some examples, with the direction west, are shown in Fig. 4. On the Altun Ha plaque, the usual accompanying titles are not present, but there is a good possibility that the following glyph, A4, is a title.

A4) 109.299:548:126 chac pax, "great pax"

This is the last block of the first clause, and most likely accompanies the "west" glyph at B3. The main sign is clearly pax, although Thompson's Catalog (1962: 164) has no entries of pax in a non-calendrical context. Especially in view of possible interpretations of the verb of this clause, it may be significant that Landa (Tozzer 1941: 165) mentions a five-day martial festival during the month Pax, culminating in the holcan okot, "the dance of the warriors", also called the batel okot. The warlike aspect of this title is further supported when one considers that chac pax is glossed "war drum" in at least one Yucatec Maya dictionary (Pio Perez 1866-1877: 66). The prefix (T109, chac) is no doubt to be read here in its meaning of "great" rather than "red".

Clause 2 (B4 - B10)

B4) 11.573a:12

This is the so-called "Distance Number Introductory Glyph" of Thompson (1950: 160-162). However, in several examples (and this is one of them), there is no Distance Number associated. Thus, while the glyph usually precedes Distance Numbers, its function is clearly more general; apparently it serves to introduce any 'count' glyphs, including Calendar Round dates such as the one which follows here.

A5 - B5) VII.526:125/V.559:130? "7 Caban 5 Kankin"

Again there is no doubt about this Calendar Round date. Its placement in the Long Count is discussed below.

A6) 11.24?:713a.181

This is another event glyph, or verb, and inscriptions from other sites have to be reviewed as a basis for its interpretation. There are three other known examples of this glyph, one each at Palenque, Quirigua, and Yaxchilan (Fig. 5).

At Palenque (Fig. 5b), the event concerns 'Lord Hok' (Mathews and Schele 1974: 66-67). This lord is said in other Palenque inscriptions to have acceded to power on 9.13.10.6.8 5 Lamat 6 Xul. Since this is also the date of the clause at Palenque which contains the verb under discussion here, and since Lord Hok is named as protagonist, it is obvious that the verb must be a variant form of the statement for "accession".

The same glyph occurs on Stela J, Quirigua, as the verb for the clause dated 9.14.13.4.17 12 Caban 5 Kayab, where 'Two-legged Sky' is the protagonist (Fig. 5c). David Kelley has suggested that the verb is a functional equivalent of the 'up-ended frog' birth glyph (Kelley 1962: 327-328). However this does not now seem to be the case. On Stela D (west side, A1-A9) at Quirigua, the Initial Series date is 9.16.13.4.17 8 Caban 5 Yaxkin -- exactly two katuns after the Stela J date. 'Two-legged Sky' is again the protagonist, and the clause can be paraphrased "completion of two katuns [since] the accession of 'Two-legged Sky' ", with "accession" marked by the 'affix cluster' found so frequently after the 'seating' and 'toothache' glyphs for accession at Piedras Negras by Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1960: 469-470). Moreover, Zoomorph G at Quirigua (Y2 - Z2) records the important date 9.14.13.4.17 12 Caban 5 Kayab, again with 'Two-legged Sky'. The main sign of the verb (Y2a) is eroded, but it has the affix (actually a portmanteau for two affixes) which often occurs with the 'seating' glyph for accession. That the glyph at Y2a was indeed the seating glyph is indicated by the following glyph, which is Proskouriakoff's 'affix cluster' of accession. An excellent case can thus be made for this date being the accession of 'Two-legged Sky', rather than his birth, as Kelley suggested.

The Yaxchilan example of this verb is on the HS 3 (tread on the upper step of the middle doorway of Structure 44) (Fig. 5d). There is no evidence from the Yaxchilan inscriptions that makes it mandatory that the verb of the clause be read "accession", but the clause parallels the Quirigua Stela J statement, and the conclusion is obvious. The ruler involved is 'Shield-Jaguar'. In her important study of the Yaxchilan inscriptions, Proskouriakoff (1963: 155) found no clear accession statement for 'Shield-Jaguar', but it is noteworthy that she suggests that he must have come to power about 9.12.8.14.1, and certainly by 9.12.10.0.0. The accession date proposed here -- namely, 9.12.9.8.1 5 Imix 4 Mac -- is almost exactly half-way between these two.

On the basis of comparisons with the occurrences discussed above, the verb at A6 on the Altun Ha plaque can safely be interpreted as "accession", and the name of the new ruler can be expected to follow.

B6) 175?: 504variant.184 ___ k'ina, "--- lord"

Apart from the fact that in Maya clause structure the name of the protagonist is to be expected immediately following the verb, there is another reason for regarding this glyph as a personal name. It will be seen that the next glyph, at A7, is an Emblem Glyph, and personal names almost always precede Emblem Glyphs. This interpretation of B6 is further supported by the presence of affix T184, which is part of the honorific title read by Floyd Lounsbury (1974) as mah k'ina, which can be roughly translated "lord". The usual form of the affix is T74.184, as a prefix, but there are several examples at Palenque (where the compound is most common) which record only T184; the T74 is clearly an 'optional extra'. T184 alone presumably is to be read k'ina; this form is also documented in Colonial-period dictionaries as a title. At many sites (Copan, Quirigua, Tikal, Naranjo, Caracol, Yaxchilan -- see Fig. 6), postfixing the compound seems to have been the preference; this is also the case at Altun Ha. Unfortunately, the two nominal signs here

are unclear. The prefix looks most like the so-called 'Two-legged' (T175) of 'Two-legged Sky' of Quirigua. The main sign appears to be T504, akbal, with a cleft top. A suitable nickname for the ruler could thus be 'Akbal lord', with no implication that the first part of his name is an accurate reading.

It will be noted that the name of the protagonist of the second clause is not the same as that of the first. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the two were different people, for apparently it was not unusual for a ruler to take a royal name at accession. Many of the Palenque rulers, for example, had different names before and after their accession. Thus it may be that this ruler's personal name is the one at B2, but that upon accession (at 7 Caban 5 Kankin) he adopted a royal name. This speculation is somewhat enhanced by the presence of the honorific T184, k'ina in the proposed 'royal' name.

A7) 35.168:578?.116 (Emblem Glyph)

There is absolutely no doubt that this is an Emblem Glyph as defined by Heinrich Berlin (1958). It has both of the affixes diagnostic of Emblem Glyphs, namely one of Thompson's (1950, Fig. 43) 'water group' prefixes -- in the present case T35 -- and the T168 superfix. The latter is the superfix which Thompson (1950: 281) originally read ben-ich, later as ah (Thompson 1972: 151). More recently Floyd Lounsbury (1973) has amassed overwhelming evidence that it is to be read ahpo, "chief, ruler". The postfix to the main sign is clearly T116, the syllable-final -n discussed briefly above (B3); this clearly indicates that the reading of the main sign ends in -n. The main sign itself is a scroll; T576, 577 and 578 are all candidates for its identification, as well as T856.

What may be the same Emblem Glyph occurs on monuments from the Dos Pilas area (Dos Pilas, Arroyo de Piedra, Aguateca, Tamerindito) in Guatemala. It appears that there may have been a site in that area in Early Classic times with an Emblem Glyph identical with, or at least similar to, the one on the Altun Ha plaque. In view of this and the fact that the jade is obviously a portable object, the possibility that the plaque was an import from the Dos Pilas area cannot be ruled out. Nevertheless, this is far from established, and the extensive tradition of jade-working at Altun Ha may argue for identification of the plaque as a locally-produced object. In any case, it is not even certain that the Emblem Glyphs from the Dos Pilas area and Altun Ha are in fact the same, and so we can tentatively regard the Emblem Glyph at A7 as that of Altun Ha.

B7 - B10)

This statement must be considered as a whole before the single glyph blocks can be discussed adequately. A pattern similar to the statement can be seen in texts from almost all Classic Maya sites, in which the order is : (Date) (+ Event [Verb] +) Name 1 (+ Emblem Glyph 1) + glyph at B7 + Name 2 (+Emblem Glyph 2) + glyph at A10 + Name 3 (+ Emblem Glyph 3). In other words, we find a pattern with only one event expressed, but

three names mentioned. It is possible that the statement has to do with three people performing a single action, but is far more likely that it is an expression of some sort of personal relationship. This likelihood is strengthened by the fact that the name (2) following the B7 glyph is always female, while that following the A10 glyph (Name 3) is always male. Where we have adequate dating information, personages 2 and 3 can be shown to be older than personage 1 by about a generation. This enable us to hypothesize that the statement is one of parentage, with the glyph at B7 representing a mother-child relationship, and that at A10 a father-child relationship.

There is far more to the argument than can be presented here; other relationship glyphs, for example, can substitute for the ones at B7 and A10 of this text. A detailed discussion of 'parentage statements' in the Classic Maya inscriptions is the subject of a paper currently being prepared by Linda Schele, Floyd Lounsbury, and Mathews. Three such parentage statements are illustrated in Fig. 7.

B7) 126.19:670:??

This is one of the glyphs which expresses the relationship between mother and child (of either sex). However, it is still unclear whether the statement is to be interpreted as:

"Name 1/his mother Name 2/ his father Name 3";
 or "Name 1/ child of Name 2/ child of Name 3";
 or "Name 1/ child of Name 2, (who is the)/ wife of Name 3".

Present evidence suggests the second of these interpretations.

A8 - B9) 35.1002a/561a.24/??:501?.head/168:518a

These four glyphs record the name of the mother. The main sign of A8 is the female head T1002a, which is prefixed by one of the 'water group' prefixes, T35. B8 is a compound with "sky" as its main sign. Such a glyph is very common as the name or title of royal women at such sites as Tikal, Naranjo and Yaxchilan.

A10) 122.535.24

This glyph expresses the relationship between father and child. In most cases the 'capped ahau', T535, is prefixed by T1, u, as well as by the smoke scroll T122. Since u is the third person singular possessive pronoun in (Yucatec) Mayan, the sense "A, his child B", i. e., "B's child A", is implied. However, in the Altun Ha plaque example there is no u -- an omission which rarely occurs elsewhere -- so other possibilities for interpretation must be left open.

B10) 28:1031c "Katun"

This must be the name of the father. The glyph is simply a katun head variant. Such chronological elements are not uncommon in Classic Maya name glyphs; in title phrases, at any rate, statements such as "lord of three katuns" are not at all rare. The father of 'Shield-Jaguar' of Yaxchilan was called (in addition to his personal name 'Bird-Jaguar') "ah-6 tuns", "he of six tuns" (Fig. 9c). A lady of Piedras Negras was called "Lady ahpo katun".

On the basis of the text at A8 - B10, it is apparent that the parents of 'Akbal lord' were 'Lady Sky' (A8 - B9) and "Katun" (B10).

There remains the discussion of the Long Count positions of the two dates in this inscription. Pendergast has dated the burial at A.D. 650-700 (Pendergast 1969: 86), but additional data from Structure B-4 now indicate that the earlier of these two figures is most likely to apply to the interment. In the original article, he provides as the most likely Long Count positions for the two dates (9.6.15.6.4) 8 Kan 7 Zip and (9.7.11.2.17) 7 Caban 5 Kankin, A.D. 569 and 584 respectively. Reasonable Long Count positions for the dates are as follows:

(9.6.15.6.4)	(9.7.11.2.17)
(9.9.8.1.4) 8 Kan 7 Zip and	(9.10.3.15.17) 7 Caban 5 Kankin
(9.12.0.14.4)	(9.12.16.10.17)

The style of the glyphs in the text can be used to reduce these possibilities. The lack of T74 affixed to T184, for example, is predominantly an Early Classic phenomenon -- pre-9.10.0.0.0. However the best evidence is in the form of the day-sign Kan (A1). Before 9.10.0.0.0, Kan is almost universally depicted in the form it has on the plaque; after that date, it changes quite radically in style. Therefore, we can fairly safely eliminate dates after 9.10.0.0.0, and are left with the dates suggested in the 1969 paper as the best possibilities. There is, however, a chance that the dates should be placed on Calendar Round later, which would still not be inconsistent with Pendergast's dating of the burial.

As the reader can judge from the glyphic interpretations presented above, we are still a long way from being able to provide a reading of the glyphs in Maya. We are, however, now in a position to give an approximate paraphrase of the plaque text, with dates based on Thompson's revised correlation of the Maya and Christian calendars:

Clause 1 (A1 - A4)

"On (9.6.15.6.4) 8 Kan 7 Zip [May 2 (O.S.) or May 4 (N.S.), A.D. 569] the personage (at B2) who was the second chac pax of the west, made a conquest (?)."

Clause 2 (B4 - B10)

"On (9.7.11.2.17) 7 Caban 5 Kankin [Dec. 2 (O.S.) or Dec. 4 (N.S.), A.D. 584] the accession occurred of 'Akbal lord' (the ruler named at B6) of Altun Ha (?), who was the son of 'Lady Sky' and of 'Katun'."

We shall almost certainly never know whether the dates given in the text were the actual times of the events described, or points in the calendar which were ceremonially determined. The date situation here is standard, in that when two dates are recorded in a Maya inscription with no Distance Number to link them, it is usual that the second follows the first by less than a Calendar Round of 52 Maya years. In any event, the later date provides a terminus post quem for the manufacture of the plaque, and the sense of the text to which the dates refer is now clear. This is a far cry from Pendergast's "hopeless jumble of symbols and meanings, a maze through which no path can be cleared" of nine years ago, and it is but one of many examples of the ways in which epigraphic and archaeological research are combining to give us new insights into the achievements and the history of the ancient Maya.

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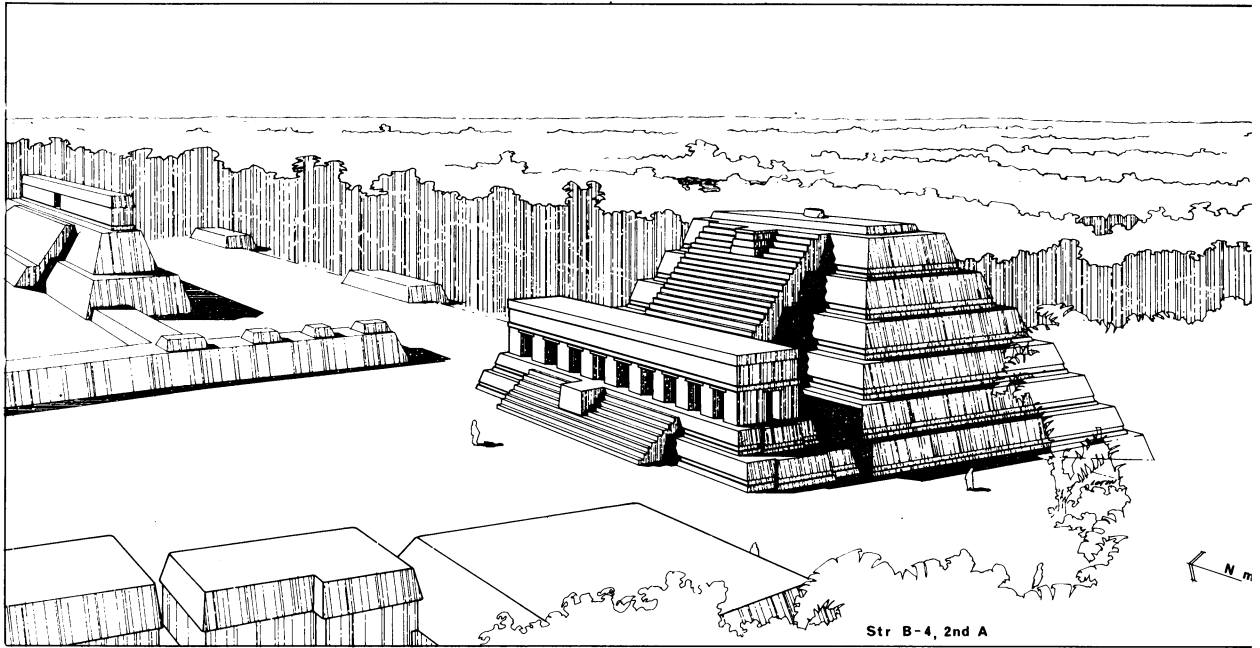


Figure 1a. Structure B-4 as it was before the construction which housed Tomb B-4/6. A slight modification of this stage is shown in the 1969 article.

Figure 1b. Structure B-4 at the level of modification which contained Tomb 6. The to lay beneath the small raised center section of the base stair.

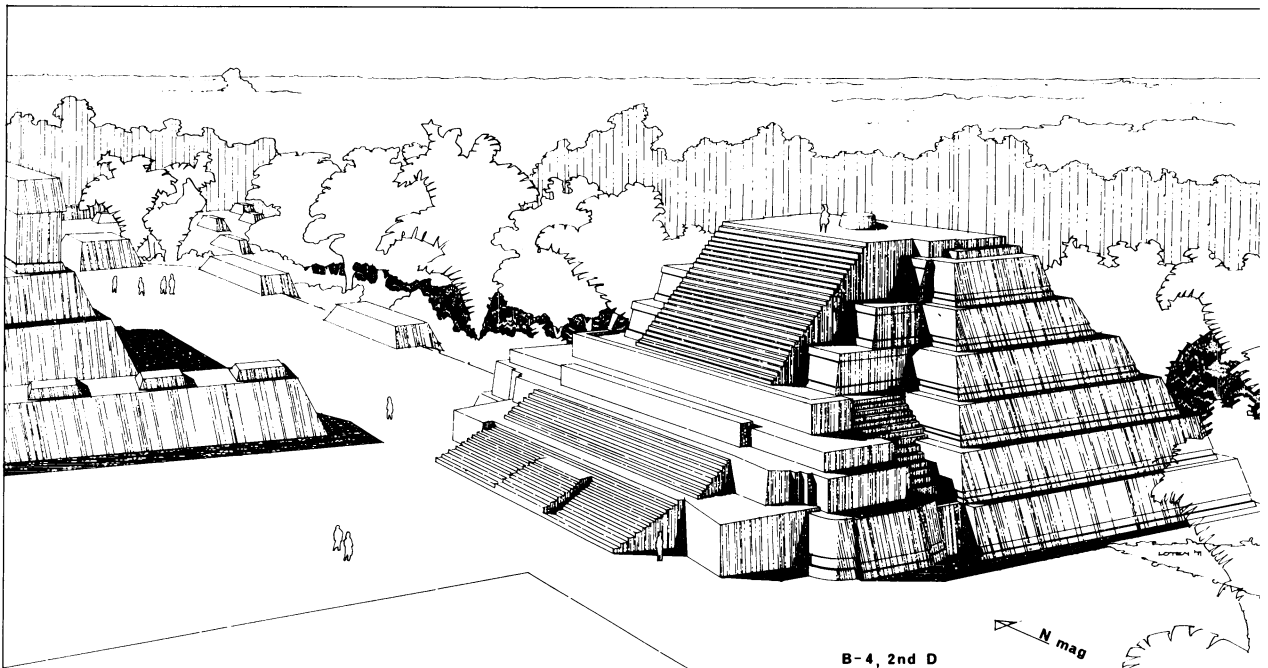




Figure 2. The Altun Ha Jade Plaque.



Figure 3. The Altun Ha Jade Plaque. Photo of Back.

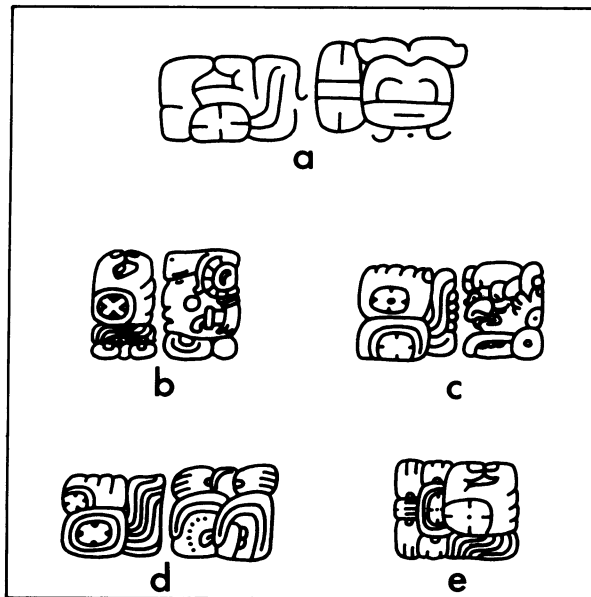


Figure 4. "West ---" Titles.

- a. "West chac pax." Altun Ha Jade Plaque, B3-A4.
- b. "West ahau." Quirigua Stela F, East, B17b-A18a.
- c. "West 'batab'." Yaxchilan Lintel 1, H2-I2.
- d. "West 'macuch'." Naranjo Stela 24, E9-D10.
- e. "Mah k'ina of the west." Palenque area panel.




























DATE	'ACCESSION'	NAME	EMBLEM GLYPH
a			
b	     	 	
c	     	 	
d	   		

Figure 5. Accession Expressions.

- a. Altun Ha Jade Plaque, A5-A7.
- b. Palenque Palace Tablet, M15-P12 (some glyphs have been omitted for reasons of space).
- c. Quirigua Stela J, F3-F8.
- d. Yaxchilan H. S. 3 (Structure 44, Middle Door, Upper Step, C10-C13).

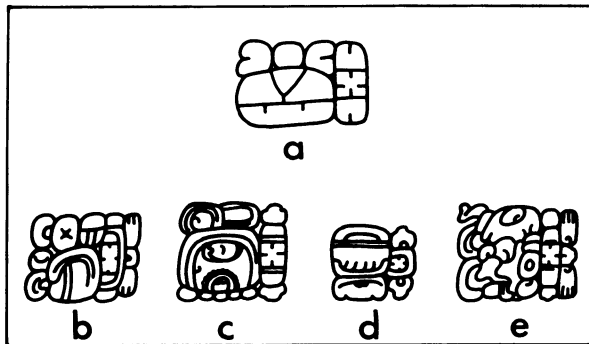


Figure 6. Glyphs with (mah) k'ina as suffix.

- a. Altun Ha Jade Plaque, B6.
- b. Naranjo Lintel 1, F3.
- c. Tikal Stela 5, A7.
- d. Yaxchilan Lintel 2, J2.
- e. Aguateca Stela 1, D3.

NAME OF CHILD	EMBLEM GLYPH	Child-Mother Relationship	NAME OF MOTHER	Child-Father Relationship	NAME OF FATHER	EMBLEM GLYPH
a						
b						
c						

Figure 7. Parentage Expressions.

- a. Altun Ha Jade Plaque, B6 - B10.
- b. Tikal Stela 5, C5 - D12.
- c. Yaxchilan H. S. 3 (Structure 44, Middle Door, Lower Step, B4b-A7a).