
Balan-Ahau: A Possible Reading of the Tikal Emblem Glyph and a Title at Palenque

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Michael Coe's *The Maya Scribe and His World* (1973b) first identified a sequence of glyphs that appears in fixed order in ceramic texts which accompany many different kinds of scenes. These Primary Standard Sequences are apparently not directly related to particular kinds of scenes; rather, they relate some standard kind of information, which is appropriate either to many different kinds of contexts or to the function of funerary or ceremonial pottery. It is also evident that more than one sequence of glyphs was used during the Classic period and that each of these sequences was specialized to some degree, either geographically or according to the intended function of the pot.

In addition to the various Primary Standard Sequences, which are usually located on the upper and/or lower edges of the vessel surface, secondary texts are often interspersed within the negative spaces of pottery scenes. These secondary texts are of the following kinds:

1. A full clause, which contains an identifiable verb and subject and, sometimes, an object and calendric data.

2. A phrase without a verbal component, usually located adjacent to figures within the scene.

3. A phrase that repeats one glyph or a group of glyphs in a form suggestive of a chant or ritual phrase.

The second type of phrase is of concern to this essay because the format (a column or angled distribution of glyphs located adjacent to a figure) resembles secondary texts found on Classic monuments. On lintels, for example, this kind of secondary text may occur with the T1.757 general verb or without a verbal component, but it is now known that the principal function of these texts is not to describe a particular act but to name the pictured person, and it is apparent that the Type 2 secondary text on pottery functions in a similar way.

The most widely known pot with this kind of secondary text is the Altar de Sacrificios vase showing a dance scene (Fig. 1). The subject matter of this scene is generally accepted as a historical event, perhaps the sacrificial rites attended by lords from other sites in commemoration of the death of a young woman (Adams 1971:76). But,

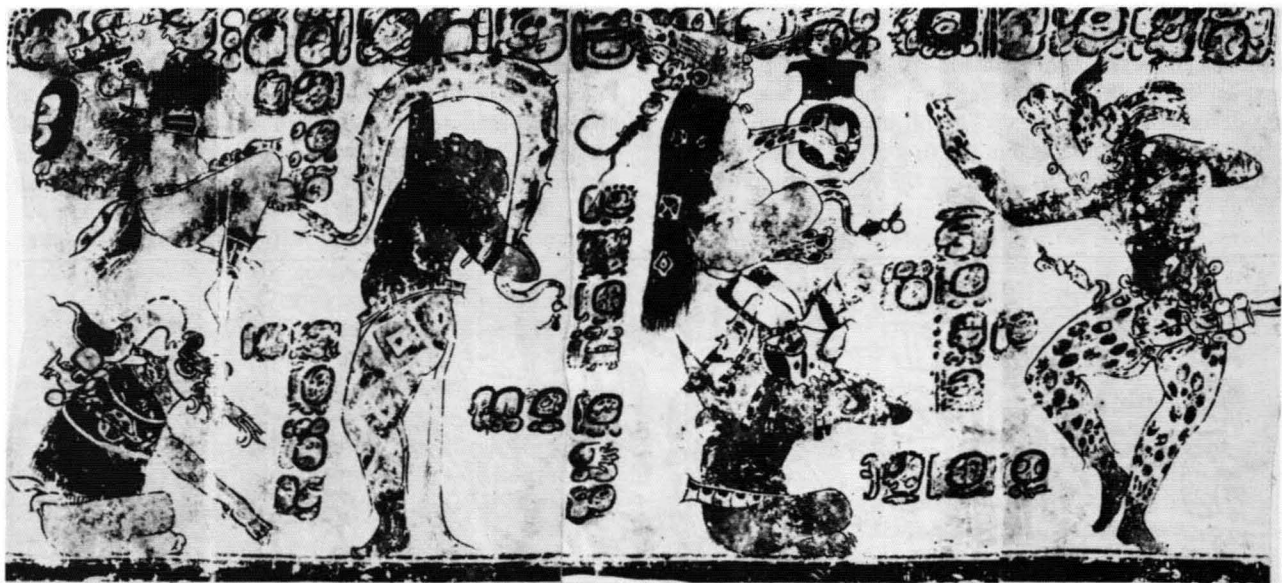


Fig. 1 The Altar de Sacrificios vase.

because the scene on this vase shares many characteristics with other kinds of scenes that are definitely not historical, I suggest that it records some mythological event. The name phrases on the Altar vase do include known emblem glyphs, but these and other emblem glyphs are now known to occur on many different pots that share the following characteristics:

1. The pictorial area of the pot usually presents a processional or episodic scene, in which the figures can occur in a variety of positions, that is, standing, sitting, floating, and so on.

2. The scenes rarely record recognized historical environments, which are marked by palace and platform motifs, thrones, and other such furniture.

3. The great majority of figures can be identified as supernaturals or “beasties” by the following features:

a. They are easily recognized as known deities, such as the jaguar god of number 7 or the water lily jaguar.

b. They violate the natural order of things: for example, they float in midair;

c. They display the features of more than one animal or combine human and bestial features without a signal that the features are elements of costumes, such as a mask.

d. They display skeletal or other underworldly characteristics, such as foliated flatulences and belches, decay spots, and so on.

The secondary figures of the Altar vase are clearly of the supernatural variety; two of them float and the other two display bestial or nonhuman features which, graphically, cannot represent masks or other assumed attributes. Furthermore, the name phrases that appear next to each figure contain a T1.539 glyph, which occurs consistently in the name phrases of creatures who are clearly nonhuman and nonhistorical.

One such scene (Fig. 2) occurs on a red-ground cylindrical vase which displays a procession of four figures – two skeletal death gods and two water lily jaguars. Each pair of figures is differentiated by feature or environment, and this contrast is reflected in the name phrase that accompanies each. For instance, the jaguar dancing in front of flames is named in the first two glyphs of his text as “K’ak’-Ix” or “Fire-Jaguar”. The two death gods are described with a “death” glyph in the second glyph of each appropriate text, but the first glyph of each name phrase is different. But, whereas the four name phrases

are differentiated according to the personage shown, three of them record some common characteristic with the T1.539 “jaguar-spotted Ahau” glyph.

Another similar processional scene (Fig. 3) shows a smoking anthropomorph, a deer-dragon, GI of the Palenque Triad, and a spider monkey; again each name phrase is differentiated according to the individual personage. And again the T1.539 “jaguar-spotted Ahau” occurs in each name. This pattern can be found in an entire category of pottery scenes.

The three illustrated vases display fourteen different individuals who are all characterized by the quality recorded by the “jaguar-spotted Ahau” glyph; of the total number of figures, eleven are indisputably supernaturals, not historical individuals.

This same “jaguar-spotted Ahau” glyph appears at Palenque as a prominent title in the name phrases of the rulers Chan-Bahlum, Kan-Xul, and K’uk. A comparison of various examples of this title glyph (Fig. 4) shows it to be composed of the following four elements:

1. The T570 main sign of one of the two Palenque emblem glyphs. The most common version is the “bone” sign, but the deer and rabbit skulls that substitute in the emblem glyph also occur in this title.

2. T188, the Classic version of Landa’s *le* sign, appears in T684 “inaugural” and T644 “seating” expressions as the glyph for ‘succession’ (*le* appears in the Quiche Popol Vuh as the term for ‘succession’). The appearance of *le* with the main sign of the Palenque emblem glyph seems to qualify this title as one concerning the “Palenque succession”. Note that the *le* can be eliminated from the title without altering its meaning.

3. The “jaguar-spotted Ahau” glyph (Fig. 4a).

4. An anthropomorphic head, which is a substitution for the “jaguar-spotted Ahau” (Fig. 4b). This Roman-nosed head is characterized by a spotted earpiece and by a strand of twisted rope or a jaguar tail with a bone or small skull. The rope/tail motif is draped along the side of the head in front of the earpiece.

The appearance of this Roman-nosed head as the head-variant of the “jaguar-spotted Ahau” glyph relates the Palenque title to the emblem glyph of Tikal, which can appear in many different variations. The most common variant is one in which the main sign is a bundle of vertically doubled strands bound horizontally by a cloth



Fig. 2 The “Fire-Jaguar” vase. Drawing by the author.

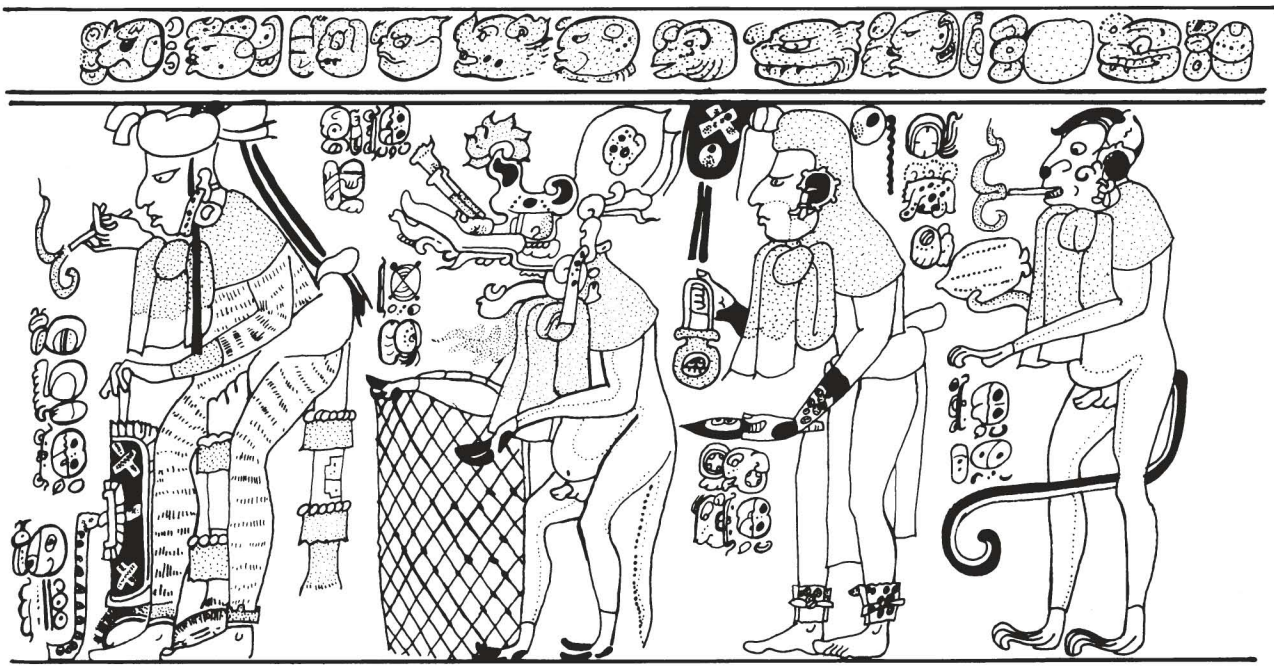


Fig. 3 The “deer-dragon” vase. Drawing by the author.

band (Fig. 5a). The strands may also occur in a horizontal arrangement with a vertical binding, which, in turn, is the basis of the zoomorphic version (Fig. 5b). However, on the monuments of Tikal Ruler B, the emblem glyph occurs in anthropomorphic form; the main sign is the same Roman-nosed head that replaces the “jaguar-spotted Ahau” glyph at Palenque (Fig. 5c). Although this anthropomorphic version of the emblem glyph is limited to the monuments of Ruler B, it appears as a prominent part of costuming on two Early Classic Tikal monuments. The heads of the protagonists of Stelae 29 and 31 are both marked with the characteristic features of the Roman-nosed head (Fig. 5d), and, on Stela 31, the face of the protagonist displays the same markings as does the title glyph from the Tablet of the 96 Glyphs at Palenque (Fig. 5e). The Late Classic examples of this head have a jaguar tail draped along the side of the head, while the example from Stela 31 shows a twisted rope. This same alternation of motifs was observed at Palenque.

An examination of the contexts in which the “jaguar-spotted Ahau” and its anthropomorphic substitute are found suggests the following set of criteria for proposing a reading:

1. The “jaguar-spotted Ahau” glyph preceded by a third-person-singular possessive pronoun (T1, *u*, or an equivalent) is found consistently in the name phrases of figures (who are for the most part clearly identifiable as supernaturals) in processional and episodic scenes on pottery.

2. The “jaguar-spotted Ahau” glyph occurs prominently as a title at Palenque, where it is found in free interchange with a Roman-nosed anthropomorphic head

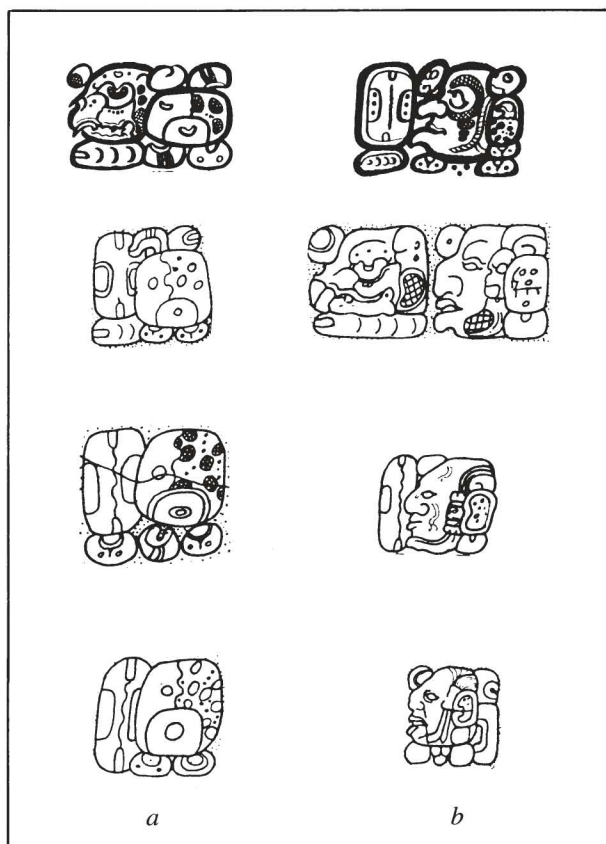


Fig. 4 The Balam-Ahau titles from Palenque: (a) the “jaguar-spotted Ahau” variant; (b) the anthropomorphic variant. Drawing by the author.

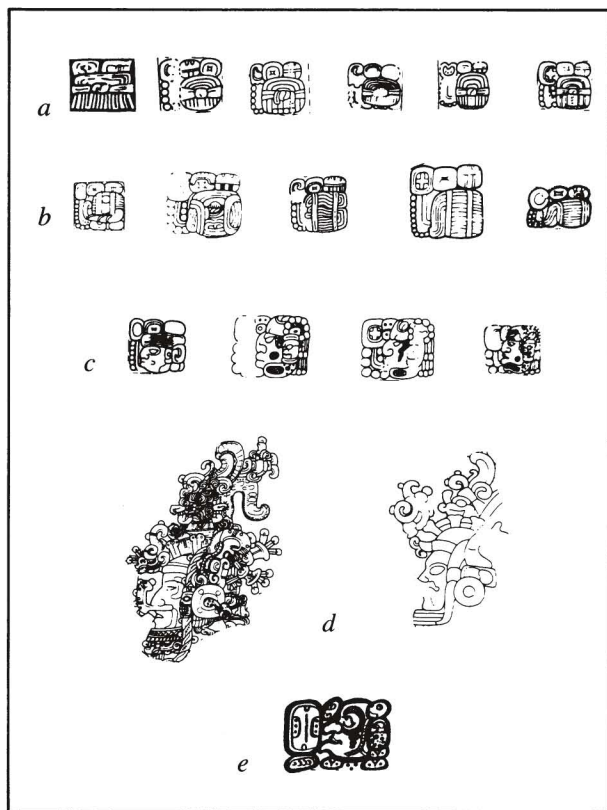


Fig. 5 The Tikal emblem glyph: (a) the horizontally bound bundle; (b) the vertically bound bundle; (c) the anthropomorphic head-variant; (d) details of Stelae 31 and 29; (e) the Balam-Ahau title from the Tablet of the 96 Glyphs at Palenque.

marked by a jaguar tail or strand of rope draped in front of the ear.

3. This same head occurs as a substitute for the main sign of the Tikal emblem glyph, which is normally a bundle of bound strands, and the rulers portrayed on the Early Classic monuments Stelae 29 and 31 are shown as if they were this anthropomorphic head.

4. In the anthropomorphic version of the “jaguar-spotted ahau”, a twisted rope and a jaguar tail interchange as a major feature.

Any reading of the “jaguar-spotted Ahau” glyph and its anthropomorphic equivalent must account for the context of the pottery scenes and for the phonetic and/or semantic property that allows the head-variant of the “jaguar-spotted ahau” glyph to substitute for the main sign of the Tikal emblem glyph. David Kelley (personal communication, 1976) has suggested a reading of the “jaguar-spotted Ahau” based on its graphic configuration as an *ahau* sign half-covered by a jaguar pelt; the terms for ‘jaguar’ (*balam*) and ‘hidden behind something’ (*balan*) are nearly homophonous in many Mayan languages. The linguistic evidence, however, is far more convincing than this nearly homophonous coincidence. *Balam* is a very widely distributed term for ‘jaguar,’ but there are two *bal* roots that relate exactly to the substitu-

tion patterns demonstrated for the “jaguar-spotted Ahau” glyph and its anthropomorphic substitute. Relevant data from various Mayan languages for the first root are as follows.

Yucatec

Motul (Martínez Hernández 1929:134-137):

bal, ah, ab esconder [to hide], abrigar (to shelter, cover), y encubrir debaxo de o detras de algo [to hide under or behind something].

balaan cosa escondida o encubierta.

balbil p.p. de *balah*, sincopa de *balahaan*, escondido tras de algo.

(Pérez 1866-1877:18):

bal, balmahi esconder, ocultar tras de alguna cosa que se anteponga [conceal behind something placed in front].

balah esconder, ocultar tras de algo.

baalan p.p. de *balah*, sincopa de *balahaan*, escondido tras de algo.

San Francisco (Michelon 1976:19):

bal esconder.

balan abrigado, escondido.

Chol

Attinasi (1973:246)

b^h:l disappear.

b^h:-l-el disappear, darken.

Kekchi

Sedat (1955:28, 212):

esconder (detrás de

una cosa) *balabanc*.

escondido *mukmu, balbo, balam*.

balabanc /ib/ esconderse detrás de una cosa.

balam /balux/ algo escondido.

balbac esconder detrás de una cosa.

The second root is as follows:

Yucatec

Motul (Martínez Hernández 1929:134-137):

bal, ah, ab colchar assi cordeles [to lay or twist thusly cords], doblarlos [double them] y torcerlos [and twist them].

(Pérez 1866-1877:18):

balah torcer hilos [twist threads].

San Francisco (Michelon 1976:19):

bal cuenta para dobleces de hilo [numerical classifier for doubles of thread].

bal, balcunah,

baal huntar hilo, hebras, cuerdo para torcerla [join threads, fibers, or strings in order to twist them].

Mopán

Ulrich and Ulrich (1976:36):

b^h la'an envuelto [enwrapped, bundled, wrapped up].

Lacandon (1979)

Barbara MacLeod, personal communication:
to roll up, wrap up *b^{al}l-ik*.

Chol

Aulie and Aulie (1978:30,35)

b^{al}l enrollar (tela o palel) [to wind, coil,
roll, wrap].

b^{al}lch'un torcer (con las manos).

-bajl sufijo numérico para contar rollos
de algo.

Cholti

Moran (1935:10):

arrollar *balâ* [to roll, wrap, twist].

Tzeltal

B. Berlin and Kaufman (n.d.:82):

b'alal enrollado [wound up, coiled,
rolled, wrapped].

b'aal arrollarse [to roll, wrap, twist].

Tzotzil

Laughlin (1975:78):

bal round off log; braid rope; twine
thread or yarn by rolling on knee
with palm of hand to make strand
for fringed garments; roll blanket.

Mocho

Kaufman (1967:9):

bal enrollar, torcer.

Quiché

Edmonson (1965:11):

balah twist.

bal unite.

Cakchiquel

(Sáenz de Santa María 1940:53):

bal tu hacer cordeles o sogas [make cords
or ropes]; retorcer los ramales de
que se compone el cordel [twist the
strands from which cords are made].

The set of meanings listed above matches exactly the set of substitution patterns found in the “jaguar-spotted Ahau” complex. *Balam* is widely used for ‘jaguar’, and the Ahau glyph is marked with a jaguar pelt. *Balan*, the past participle of *bal*, means ‘hidden behind something’, and the Ahau sign is half-hidden by the jaguar pelt. The Roman-nosed head-variant of the “jaguar-spotted Ahau” glyph is marked by a phonetic complement, which is either a jaguar tail (*balam*, again) or a twisted cord, and *balan* also means ‘twisted cords to make rope’. This same head also occurs as the substitute for the Tikal emblem glyph, of which the most common main sign is a set of strands folded vertically or horizontally and bound in the opposite direction. *Balan* means ‘rolled up, coiled, wrapped up, and bundled’.

The reading of the “jaguar-spotted Ahau” glyph and its anthropomorphic substitute would seem to be *balam-*

ahau (‘jaguar lord’) and/or *balan-ahau* (‘hidden lord’). Seemingly, the main sign of the Tikal emblem glyph is both *balan* (‘bundled’ or ‘twisted’) and *balam* (‘hidden’ or ‘jaguar’). These sets of meanings and substitution patterns seem to explain the interchange of the various graphs, but they also seem to be related to the contexts in which the *balan-ahau* glyph is found.

The consistent presence of *balan-ahau* in the name phrases of Chan-Bahlum and Kan-Xul at Palenque is explained by several factors. The Palenque Triad is particularly important to accession iconography at Palenque, and the births of these three gods are featured information in the Group of the Cross, which records the accession of Chan-Bahlum. The birth of GIII is recorded in the first half of the Tablet of the Sun, where the name phrase of this god includes eleven glyph blocks. The first glyph in this nominal series is a *balan-ahau* preceded by the title *mah k'ina* and a “torch” glyph (*tah*); one of the names of GIII is Mah K'ina Tah Balan-Ahau (Fig. 6a). Other name glyphs for GIII, however, clearly identify him simply as Ahau K'in, ‘Lord Sun’ (Fig. 6c), and as the jaguar god of number 7 (Fig. 6b). Thus, *balan-ahau* can refer to the jaguar god of number 7, who is GIII of the Palenque Triad, and whose birth date bears a special relationship to that of Chan-Bahlum. Floyd Lounsbury (personal communication, 1977) has informed me that the birth date of Chan-Bahlum (9.10.2.6.6 2 Cimi 19 Zotz') is separated by eclipse intervals, from other real or hypothetical Maya eclipse dates, and that the mythological birth date of GIII is similarly situated in relation to that of Chan-Bahlum, if uncorrected intervals – as in the table of the Dresden Codex – are employed for the computation of the latter interval. Kan-

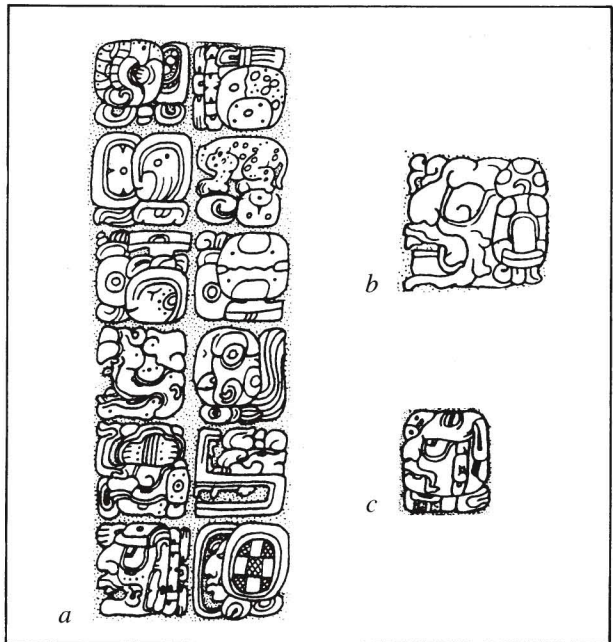


Fig. 6 Palenque: (a) birth phrase for GIII, Tablet of the Sun; (b) GIII, Tablet of the Foliated Cross; (c) GIII, middle panel, Temple of the Inscriptions.

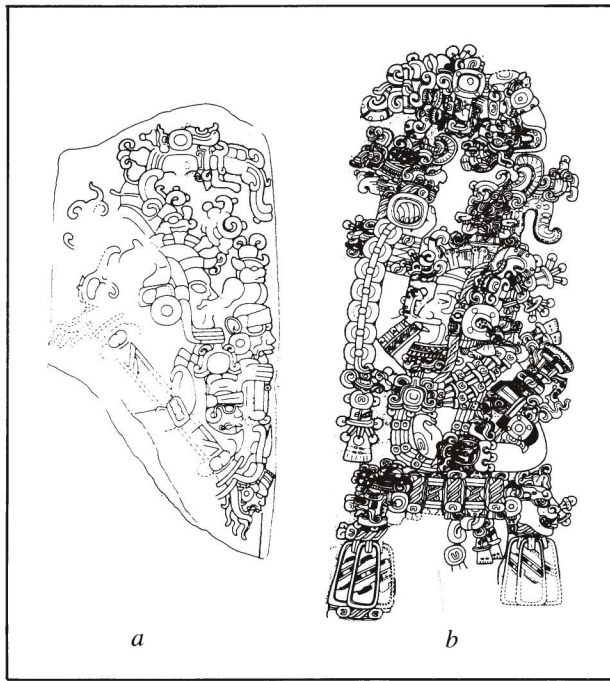


Fig. 7 Tikal: (a) Stela 29; (b) Stela 31. Drawings by William R. Coe.

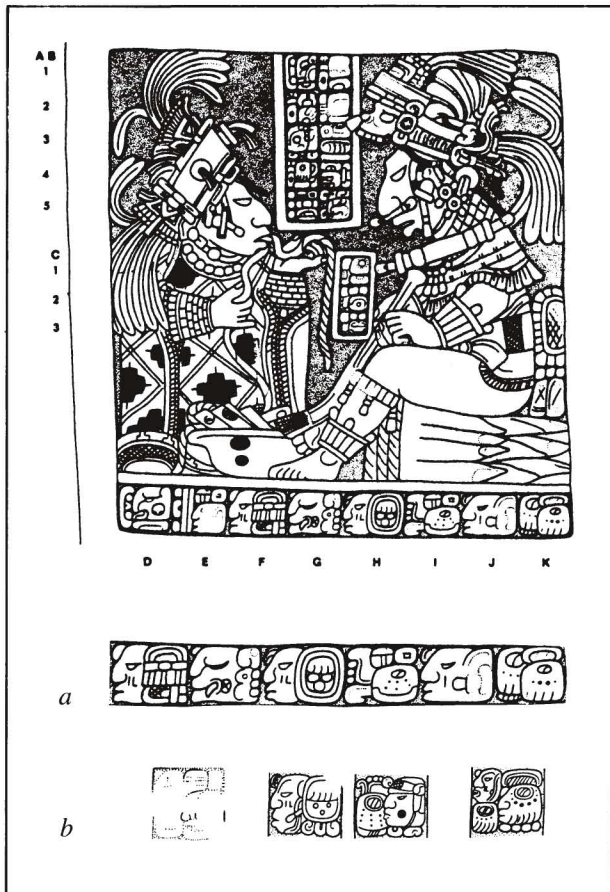


Fig. 8 Yaxchilán: (a) Lintel 17; (b) text from Lintel 43. Drawings by Ian Graham.

Xul's birth date is similarly related to the birth date of GIII, so the presence of *balan-ahau* as a title in his and Chan-Bahlum's name phrases may reflect this eclipse-related numerology. Unfortunately, the date of the birth of K'uk', the third lord of Palenque to carry this title, did not survive in the known inscriptions of Palenque, so this eclipse numerology cannot be tested in his case.

However, the particular association of *balan-ahau* with GIII and with jaguars in general can be tested at Tikal and Yaxchilán. Both Stelae 29 and 31 at Tikal, on which the protagonists are marked as the anthropomorphic version of *balan-ahau*, prominently display GIII as part of the royal regalia (Fig. 7). On Stela 29, GIII is held by the protagonist and worn as a pectoral; he emerges from the serpent heads of the bicephalic bar. On Stela 31, GIII is held in one arm by the protagonist; he also appears on the front of the belt, in anthropomorphic form, and one the rear, in zoomorphic form.¹ Two of the surviving three examples on Stela 29 and one of the three on Stela 31 are marked by the main sign of the Tikal emblem glyph. The presence of the emblem glyph on these GIII heads may function simply to mark them as specifically associated with Tikal, but since GIII can be named by a *balan-ahau* glyph, and since the main sign of the Tikal emblem glyph and the *balan-ahau* share the same head-variant, the presence of the main sign with GIII may reflect a phonetic function as well as a semantic one.

The use of the string bundle from the Tikal emblem glyph in phonetic association with jaguars is also found at Yaxchilán. The name phrase of the woman on Lintel 17 (Fig. 8a) includes the string bundle (F), apparently as a phonetic complement to, or component of, a jaguar name. The texts begin with the T1.757 general verb often found in clauses that name pictured persons (D). The name phrase contains the following five components: (1) a XII *ahpo*-Lady(?) title (E); (2) a jaguar name (F, G); (3) Lady IX, an alternative term for 'jaguar' (H); (4) a "dotted-maize" title (I); and (5) a "Lady Bacab" title (J, K). The second component contains four elements, of which the first is the female name indicator (T1001, *na*) and the last a jaguar head. Between the female title *na* and the jaguar head stands the string bundle of the Tikal emblem glyph and phonetic *tu*. This component of the name phrase reads as either *balan tu balam* or simply *balam*. In the latter case, the string bundle functions as a phonetic complement for the jaguar head, perhaps to distinguish it phonetically from the *ix* term that follows it. This suggestion is supported somewhat by the recurrence of this name phrase on Lintels 40 and 43 (Fig. 8b), where the jaguar head does not seem to be accompanied by the string bundle (although the first glyph of the name phrase on Lintel 43 is too badly damaged to provide a secure identification).

The consistent presence of *u balan ahau* in the name phrases of figures in scenes on pottery seems best explained by the nature of those scenes. In the vast majority of examples, the figures marked by the *balan-ahau* glyph either are supernatural (identified by features previously defined) or appear in contexts marked as supernatural or in the underworld. The *balan-ahau* describes

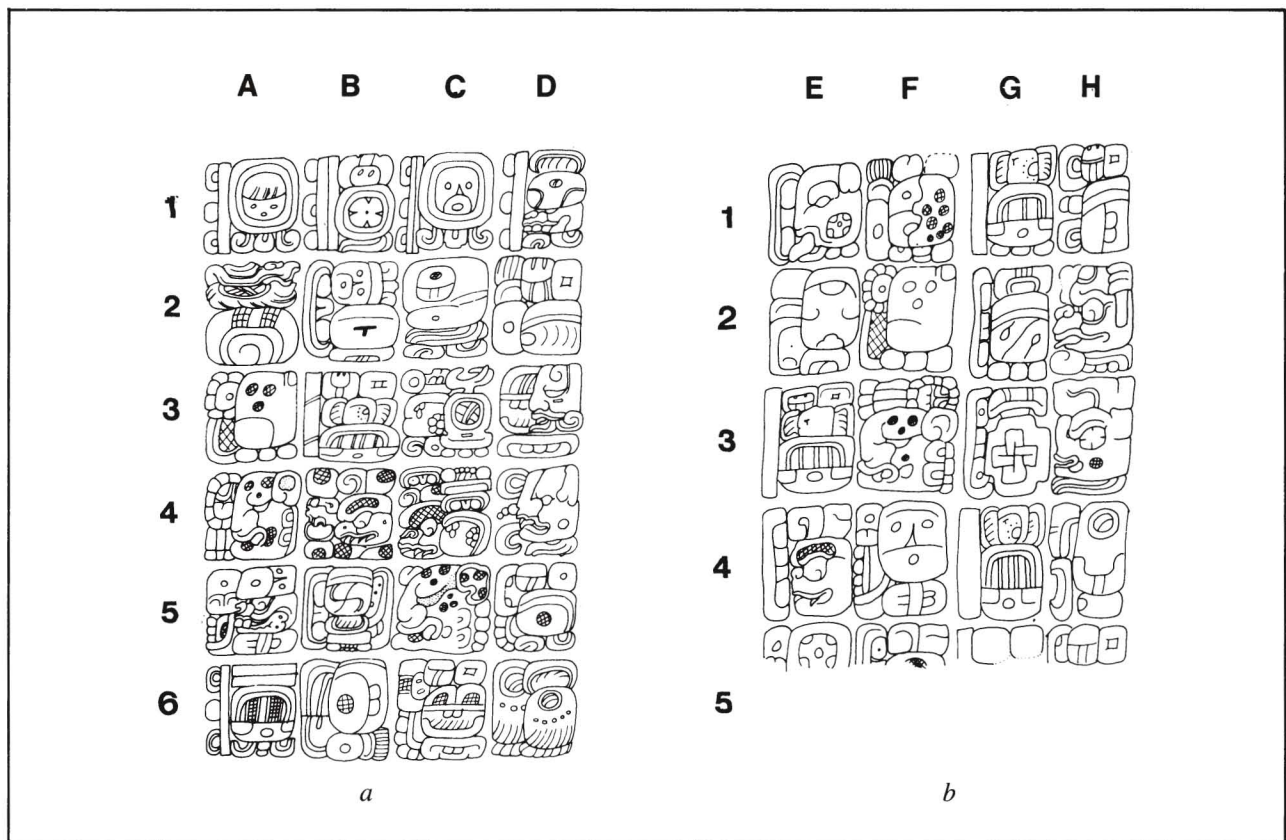


Fig. 9 Yaxchilán Stela 12: (a) front; (b) rear. Drawings by the author.

some quality shared by all these figures; the most likely quality seems to be their identity as underworld personages or their presence in underworld scenes. *Balan* means 'hidden', an appropriate description of personages who carry the title.

The funerary context of many of the pottery scenes and the proposed identification of *balan-ahau* as an indicator of underworld persons are supported by Yaxchilán Stela 12 (Fig. 9). The text from the front of the monument relates the accession of Bird-Jaguar on the death of his father and predecessor, Shield-Jaguar. This text is paraphrased as follows:

[On] 6 Ix 12 Yaxkin (9.15.10.17.14) he died, he of the shell-fist title, the five-katun *ahpo*, Shield-Jaguar, captor of Ah Ahau . . . DNIG [it was] 10 tuns and 6 days, count until 11 Ahau 8 Tzec (9.16.1.0.0) he was seated as *ahpo* of the succession, "sky god expression", captor of Ah Cauac, Bat(Bird)-Jaguar, Lord of Yaxchilán I and II, *bacab*.

The rear of Stela 12 records an event that happened to Shield-Jaguar. Since this text occurs without an additional date, we can assume that it refers to one of the events recorded on the front of the stela; for Shield-Jaguar, that event is death. The verb is an auxiliary verb + *ti* + a verbal noun construction (Josserand, Schele, and Hopkins, this volume; Schele 1980a) in which a verbal glyph appears as a noun following the T1.757

auxiliary verb and the locative particle *ti*. This kind of construction is especially frequent at Yaxchilán, and in this text the verbal noun is *balan-ahau*. Since the known context of Stela 12 includes the death of Shield-Jaguar, this verbal phrase must record some activity or state appropriate to a death event, and therefore the twisting of cords and/or the wrapping of a bundle of cords.

U balan ahau appears as a component in nonverbal phrases that name personages shown in underworld scenes found in funerary contexts. *Balan* (or *balan-ahau*) occurs as the verbal noun in an auxiliary verb phrase that records the state or an activity of Shield-Jaguar in death. In both contexts, *balan* appears to mark the named personage as "hidden" or as a "hidden lord."

Note

¹ One of the earliest known glyphic examples of the Palenque Triad is found on Stela 26 at Tikal. The phrase is introduced by the Triad Introductory Glyph, which in this case has the *ti* short in a configuration predicting that only one or two of the Triad gods will be mentioned. The glyph that follows the Introductory Glyph is a reclining figure marked as GIII by the presence of jaguar ears, paws, and tail. This same reclining figure (marked as GIII by a jaguar ear) is placed as a semantic determinative above the rear zoomorphic head on the belt of the Stela 31 figure. The front and rear heads of the belt record the same personage, GIII of the Palenque Triad, but the two forms are contrasting zoomorphic and anthropomorphic versions.