



Texas Notes on Precolumbian Art, Writing, and Culture

No. 5

September, 1990

Ba as "First" in Classic Period Titles

by Linda Schele

During the mid-seventies when Peter Mathews, Floyd Lounsbury, David Kelley, and I were working out the first paraphrased translations of the inscriptions of Palenque, we came found special ordinal constructions on the Tablets of the Foliated Cross and the Inscriptions (Fig. 1) consisting of a third person pronoun, a number, and the suffix *tal*. Among these examples were several with T4 *na* as the prefix in contexts where "first" was the logical interpretation. I (Schele 1978) pursued this clue and found the following entries for "first": Yucatek, *yax*; Tzeltal, *nahil*; Tzotz'il, 'ah, *ba'yi*, *t'ab*; Chuh *babel*; K'iche' *nabe*; Kaq-chikel *nabe*; Q'eqchi *ben*, *xben*; Mocho *bataN*. Since then, I have found *naxan* in Chol.

Yax which appears in direct substitution for the *u natal* on Palenque Tablet 14 is related to *yax* in Yucatek and Cholan languages. Although the *yax*

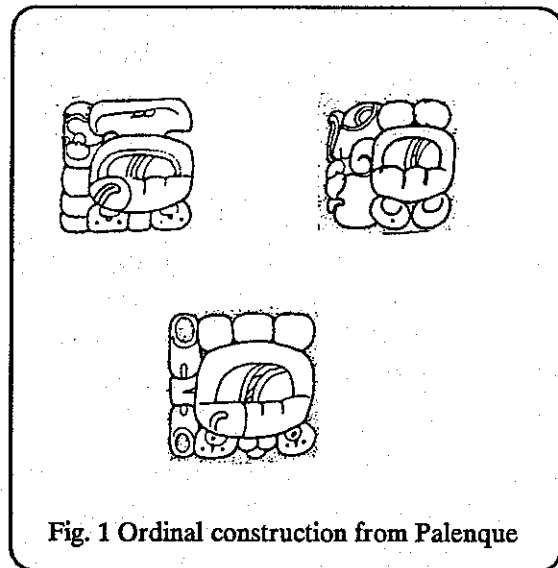


Fig. 1 Ordinal construction from Palenque

* The Texas Notes are an running series of commentaries and small reports on Precolumbian art, writing, and culture published for the purpose of quick, limited distribution among interested scholars and students working in the field. The series is published by CHAAAC, the Center of the History and Art of Ancient American Culture of the Art Department of the University of Texas at Austin. Funds for reproduction and distribution of complementary copies are provided by the John D. Murchison Professorship in Art, currently held by Linda Schele. Submissions will be accepted from contributors working in all disciplines and concerning any Precolumbian cultural tradition or its descendant traditions. Contributions may be submitted by anyone working in the field, but they may not exceed ten pages, including references. Any of the major word processors may be used, but final text must be submitted in the IBM format, although any IBM disk size is acceptable. All illustrations must be provided at the finished scale in either line or stippled drawings suitable for scanning. The publisher takes no responsibility for copy editing and the authors must clear all copyright permissions before submission of a manuscript. The editor reserves the right to reject submissions if they are deemed inappropriate or incorrectly prepared. Style conventions should follow Chicago Style B and text should be single column and formatted to conform with the paragraph, sub-titling, and other features of this note. Ventura Desktop Publisher will be used to format the text into this layout, which will then be printed on a Hewlett-Packard Laserjet III. A master copy of the recent notes will be put on file at Kinko's at the beginning of each semester and can be ordered from Kinko's Copies, 2914 Medical Arts St., Austin, Texas (512-476-3242; FAX 512-476-2371).

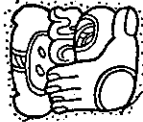
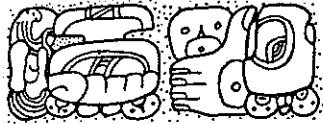


Fig. 2 "First" from Temple 14

term is more restricted in its uses in Cholan, it appears in Cholti *yax util* as "first fruits"; in Chol as *yäx'al* as "primer hijo, crianza primera"; and on Chorti in phrases like *yaxar*, "first or beginning of

a series," *u yaxar k'in e hap'*, "first day of the year," and *yaxar uqur*, "woman's first fornication."

Both of these forms of first are amply documented in the inscriptions, especially at Palenque. *U na*, for example, is the preferred way of recording the "first" lunation in Glyph C. *Yax* as "first" occurs in direct substitution for *u na* on the tablet from Temple 14 (Fig. 2).

Recently, another term for "first" became was identified in the inscriptions. My attention was first brought to it by Martha Macri (personal communication, 1984), who suggested that T1.757 when it appears in the T606 "child of mother" expression is *u ba*, "the first," as a reference to a firstborn child. I did not find this a satisfactory interpretation because the different inflection patterns appearing with T757 in this context indicated to me it ought to be a verb. However, David Stuart (n.d.b) proposed this same *ba*, "first," in a much more likely context: Tonina M69 which has a deceased lord named Wak Chan Butz' entitled *ch'ok* in one passage and *ba al*, "first woman's child," in the other (Fig. 3). Stuart suggested this is a phrase for "firstborn."



Fig. 3 Tonina M69 and "firstborn"



Fig. 4 TFC heir passage

Stuart's proposal made far more sense to me, and so I had it in mind when I was looking at Chan-Bahlam's name from the Temple of the Foliated Cross (Fig. 4) during the 1990 Texas Ad-

vanced Seminar on Maya Hieroglyphic Writing. The verbal phrase in secondary text over the small figure, *u bah ta ochte'le*[], records Chan-Bahlam's becoming the heir. It occurred to me that the *ba ch'ok* which follows this verbal phrase records him as the "first unripe one" of the realm.

This recognition instantly connected in my mind to an ambiguous passage on the Palace Tablet. It begins with the accession of Chan-Bahlam (Fig. 5) including a date, the T600 verb for accession, *suku winik* ("older brother"), *ch'ok* ("unripe one"), *Ah Pitzlawal* ("the ballplayer"), *Mah K'ina Chan-Bahlam* "is his accession holy name," *Ch'ul Palenque Ahaw*, and finally *k'atun pitzla[w]* ("one k'atun ballplayer").

The second half of the passage had another verbal phrase, but since there no additional date I take the second event to have happened on the same day. The verb is *chumwan*, but it is followed by the prepositional phrase *ta bah ch'oklel*, "in first unripe-ship." Nicholas Hopkins (personal communication, 1990) who was present during these events confirmed that the *-lel* ending is expected in Chol grammar. The person who was seated "in first unripe-ship" is named with the "ox-

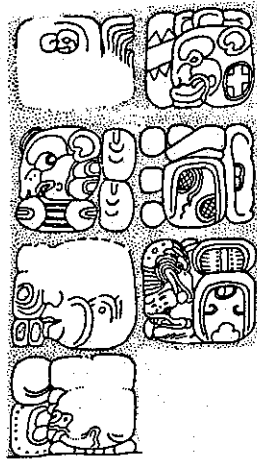
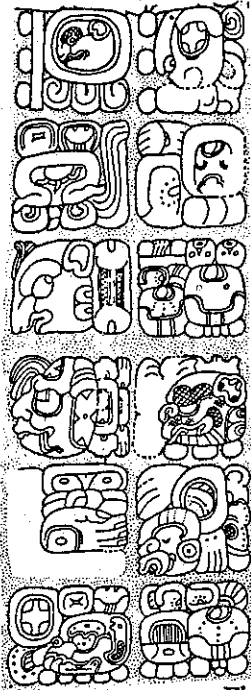


Fig. 5 Accession of Chan-Bahlum and K'an-Hok'-Xul

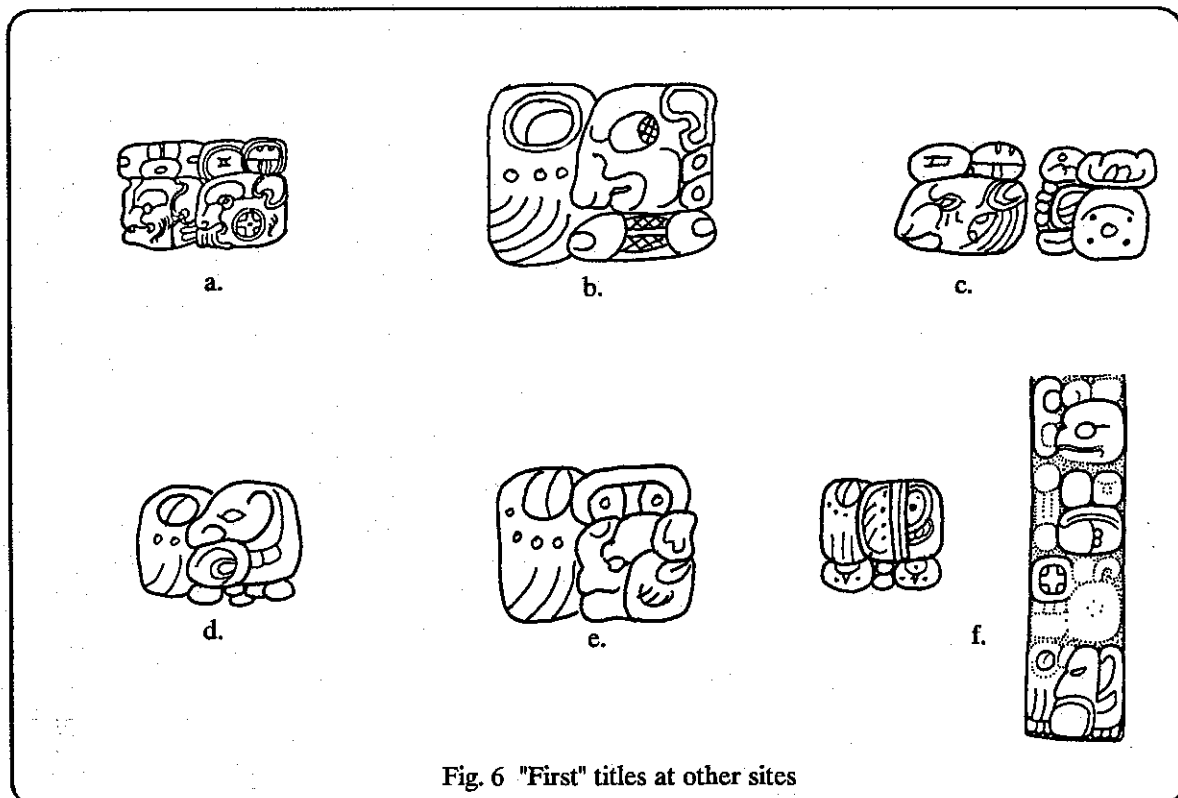


Fig. 6 "First" titles at other sites

bat-kab"/*mat* "child" names of K'an-Hok'-Xul. The name phrase ends with *itz'i winik* ("younger brother person") and *Ch'ul Palenque Ahaw*.

Thus, the Tablet of the Foliated Cross records that Chan-Bahlam became the *ba ch'ok* when he was designated as heir to the throne. In turn, his younger brother became the *ba ch'ok* on the same day Chan-Bahlam acceded.

This use *ba* as "first" is closest to entries in seventeenth century Tzotzil (Laughlin 1988:161).

- ba* best, first, first in everything, the first
- ba 'antzil nich'on* princess
- ba 'ojov* king, sovereign lord
- ba tz'ibajom* first painter or scribe
- ba jabel* first worker, top-ranking worker
- ba jnaklej* first in sitting order
- ba nich'on* firstborn
- ba vinik* noble

During the months since recognizing the *ba ch'ok* title at Palenque, I have seen *ba* used as "first" with many different titles and at many different sites. The examples below are not designed to be comprehensive, but rather to illustrate the variety and contexts I have seen.

On the Tablet of the Slaves (Fig. 6a), Chak-Zutz' is called a *ba ahaw* in what must be seen as a problematic reference, for later on in this text he is called a "sahal."¹ Earlier analysis of this title by David Stuart (n.d.a) had suggested that it was not carried by people of the *ahaw* rank, but here we have a *sahal* who is entitled the "first *ahaw*" of the kingdom. Yaxchilan Lintel 3 has another individual who is called both a "3-k'atun *sahal*" and a "k'in-mo' *ahaw*."

A panel from Pomona, Tabasco (Fig. 6b) has its protagonists titled the *ba ch'ok*. Piedras Lintel 3

1. Peter Mathews (Mathews and Justeson 1984:215) first identified this title and suggested a reading of *kahal*. Following a lead from Mathews, Stuart (n.d.a) analysed the distribution of this title and found it occurred with secondary lords at main sites and with the governors of subsidiary sites. Recently, Stuart, Grube, and others have developed substantial evidence that the value of the dotted comb sign is *sa* or *su*, rather than *ka*. Grube (personal communication, 1990) has suggested that it is *sahal*, meaning "the one who is afraid" after the root *sah* "to be afraid." MacLeod (personal communication, 1990) opted for *suhal* as a title derived from *su* "to mostrar, presentar, ofrecer, allegar" and meaning something like "the one who has presented or offered himself."

has a *ba ahaw ah nab* in the name phrase of one of the people seated on the step in front of the king and *ba sahal* with another (Fig. 6c-d). Perhaps most interesting is the sculptor's signature in the panel to the right of the king's throne. His titles include "first sculptor" (Fig. 6e)

The Lamb panel from Laxtunich names one of the two pawahtuns holding up the level where the main characters are seated is entitled a *ba sahal* (Fig. 6f). I suspect these are real people playing the role of the pawahtuns is some sort of ritual. K'an-Tok', the most frequently represented sahal in Bird-Jaguar's sculptures at Yaxchilan, is called the *ba sahal* on Lintel 6 (Fig. 6f).

This *ba* version for "first" seems to occur particularly frequently with titles. Within any one rank or occupation, it appears to distinguish the person who is "first" from others of his kind. The heir to the throne is the "first ch'ok," while there was also a noble who was acknowledged as the "first ahaw," another as the "first sahal," and still others as "first sculptor." As further studies find additional examples, I suspect that there was a "first" in just about every occupation and rank within Maya society. However, it is still a question

where the use of *ba* as "first" in just the Cholan-Tzeltalan-Tzotzil region or if it will also be found in the Yucatecan zone also.

References

- Mathews, Peter, and John S. Justeson
 1984 Patterns of Sign Substitution in Mayan Hieroglyphic Writing: 'The Affix Cluster.' In *Phoneticism in Mayan Hieroglyphic Writing*, edited by John S. Justeson and Lyle Campbell, Institute for Mesoamerican Studies Pub. 9, pp. 212-213. State University of New York at Albany, Albany
- Stuart, David
 n.d.a Epigraphic Evidence of Political Organization in the Usumacinta Drainage. Unpublished MS dated 1984.
 n.d.b Kinship Terms in Mayan Inscriptions. A paper prepared for *The Language of Maya Hieroglyphs*, a conference held at the University of California at Santa Barbara, February, 1989.