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## New Readings of Glyphs for the Month Kumk'u and their Implications

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In May 1991, Linda Schele, Peter Mathews, Floyd Lounsbury, and David Kelley assembled at the University of Calgary for our third mini-conference on Palenque inscriptions.<sup>1</sup> The technique that we have developed consists of a three-level transcription and translation done by consensus. The first level of transcription is the most literal, with each sign represented phonetically as close as possible to the glyphic original. The second is an English transliteration retaining the Maya word order. The third is a free translation using appropriate English grammar and syntax. We use

Chol day and month names for level one and traditional Yukatek terms for level two.

This process forced us to confront the month glyph for Kumk'u as it was spelled during the Classic period. *Kumk'u* is, of course, the Yukatek name for the month. Gaspar Antonio Chi added phonetic complements, *ku k'u*<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 1) to the regular month glyph to specify the Yukatek pronunciation. His

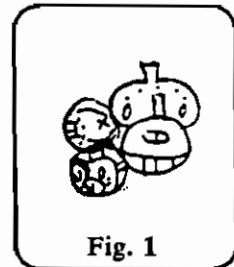


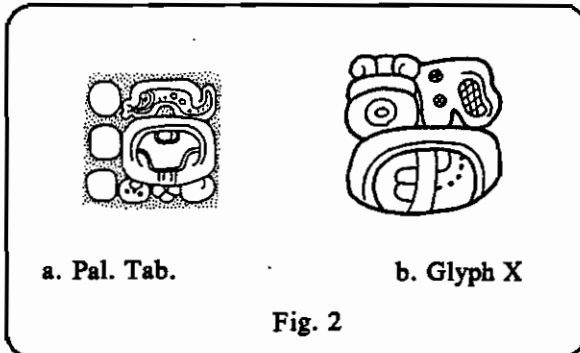
Fig. 1

1. These mini-conferences have been sponsored by the John D. Murchison Professorship of Art, University of Texas at Austin.
2. Thomas Barthel was the first to suggest that the second sign was *ku*. In 1988, John Carlson saw a xerox copy of the original Landa that George Stuart had obtained from Spain and made the same association. Bill Ringle (1988) came to the same conclusion independently and published his decipherment of the God C water group as *k'u*.

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complements show that the Yukatek month was *kum k'u*, "olla or pot god." Nevertheless, although the *ku k'u* syllables helped confirm how the Yukateks pronounced the month, they did not help with the reading of the main signs of standard glyph compound.

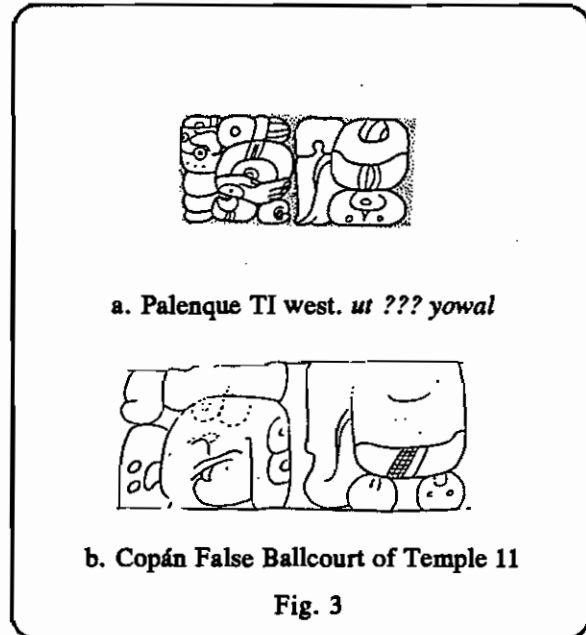
We were working on the Palenque Palace Tablet when we came to a Kumk'u glyph (Fig. 2a) and were faced with the problem of giving it a literal transcription as a phonetic entity. The parts were already known to us. In his work on the Dresden Codex, Floyd Lounsbury had proposed the super-



fix of the *kumk'u* glyph reads *o*, based on his conviction that several versions read *och*, "food" or "sustenance." We tested his *o* value in several other contexts, such as in glyph X (Fig. 2b). Victoria Bricker (1990) and Bruce Love (1984) independently deciphered the maize glyph as *wa* and the inverted ahaw has long been accepted as *al/la*.

Peter Mathews compared this *owal* reading to the Chol list included by J. Eric S. Thompson (1950:107) in his compilation of Colonial-period month names. He realized immediately that the Chol month name *Ohl* is likely a misspelled or distorted version of the Classic-period *owal*. As he made that connection, the rest of us were beginning to forge others.

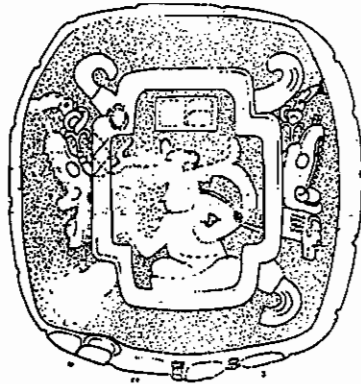
Schele had long been curious about a glyph spelled *yowal* that appeared prominently on the west panel of the Temple of Inscriptions at Palenque (Fig. 3a). She had also seen it on the False Ballcourt on the south side of Temple 11 at Copán. In the dedication phrase of this stairway inscription (Fig. 3b), the verb is *wa??h(a) yowal*, "was set, the yowal." She had also noticed that *yowal* was on the altar of El Peru Stela 38, al-



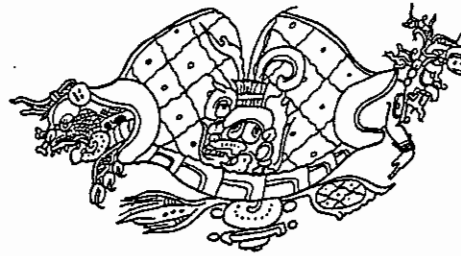
though she had not been able to explain how it worked.

When all four of us looked again at Ian Graham's drawing of the altar (Fig. 4a), the connection became clear. The text records "were completed, the twelfth of three k'atuns, *tu yowal ak*." The picture shows a lord sitting inside a quatrefoil cartouche with toothy animal heads on either end. These are the same heads that appear on the turtle in resurrection scenes where the Maize God emerges from a crack in the shell (Fig. 4b). Furthermore, the text says *tu yowal ak*. *Yowal ak* is "yowal of the turtle," and *tu* is "in (or at) his," so that we have "at his owal of the turtle." It seemed to us there was no option in interpreting this—the *yowal ak* could only be the turtle's crack. From the side, it looks like a crack, but from above it is a quatrefoil opening. The man on the El Peru Altar is sitting in a turtle-crack he owns, probably part of the architecture or sculptural array of El Peru.

This identification makes sense at Copán because the *yowal* would be the crack or portal made by the false ballcourt (Fig. 3b). At Palenque, the *yowal* refers to a particular location also. Each example (Fig. 3a) follows an *ut* ("it happened at") verb and is part of a place name consisting of a shell-in-hand over *wa*. We do not know how to read this modifier, but it apparently



a. El Peru, altar of Stela 35



b. The Resurrection Vase

Fig. 4

specifies the particular kind of *owal* portal being discussed.

Suddenly all these discoveries connected back to the *kumk'u* name. The month was called "pot god" in Yukatek and the *owal* portal is featured on at least two carved lip-to-lip cache lids, including one excavated at Tikal (Fig. 5a). The "Seven-Black-K'an" glyph is now known to be a supernatural location down the *owal*. Furthermore, most of the other carved cache vessels have scenes floating in *ch'ul* and the most common motifs are locations in the Otherworld (Fig. 5a,b), sacrifices in the portal (Fig. 5c), serpents, and other visions rising up through the portal (Fig. 5d).<sup>3</sup> Most of the points of view on these rising serpents look down the hole, but at least one is depicted in profile (Fig. 5e), with the serpent seen sideways rising up into our world.

These flat-bottomed plates were not only one of the principal vessels used for cached offerings, but they consistently show Vision Serpents rising from them. There were three kinds of plates we can document: a *lak* (plate), a *hawa(n)te'* (plate with three legs), *sak lak* (the cache vessel).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Freidel, Schele, and Parker (n.d.) are con-

vinced that the Quadripartite God is the deified version of these offering plates. They all have the *owal* portal inside them waiting to be opened by the proper ritual. *Owal* was the name of the portal and *yowal* was its possessed form. On a related note, Mathews and others at the meeting realized that the Nahuatl word *yoalli* means "darkness."

After the mini-conference, Schele went to Copán for her regular field season. While working in the storehouses, she found two fragments from stone censers called *sak lak tun* by the Copanecs (Stuart 1986). Each of these censers recorded a calendar round date with *Kumk'u* as the month, but rather than being spelled *Owal*, it was *ha-wa*. Schele took it to be a reduced form of *hawa(n)te*, the three-footed plate.

When Nikolai Grube arrived at Copán, she shared the new *owal* information with him and then told him about the *haw* spelling and her interpretation. He immediately supplied a much better one. Having seen the same spelling of *Kumk'u*, he had looked up *haw* in Yukatek. Barrera Vásquez (1980:186-187) glossed *haw* as "volver algo boca arriba o de espaldas; poner algo de espalda." It is also "abrir camino, partir tierras."

3. Much of this iconography was worked out by Rebecca Cox (1991) in her thesis on the meaning and function of carved lip to lip cache vessels.

4. Stephen Houston and Karl Taube (n.d.) found the *lak* reading; Houston and David Stuart (1989) deciphered the *hawa(n)te*, and Schele (at the 1988 Maya Hieroglyphic Workshop) found the *sak lak* on cache vessels.

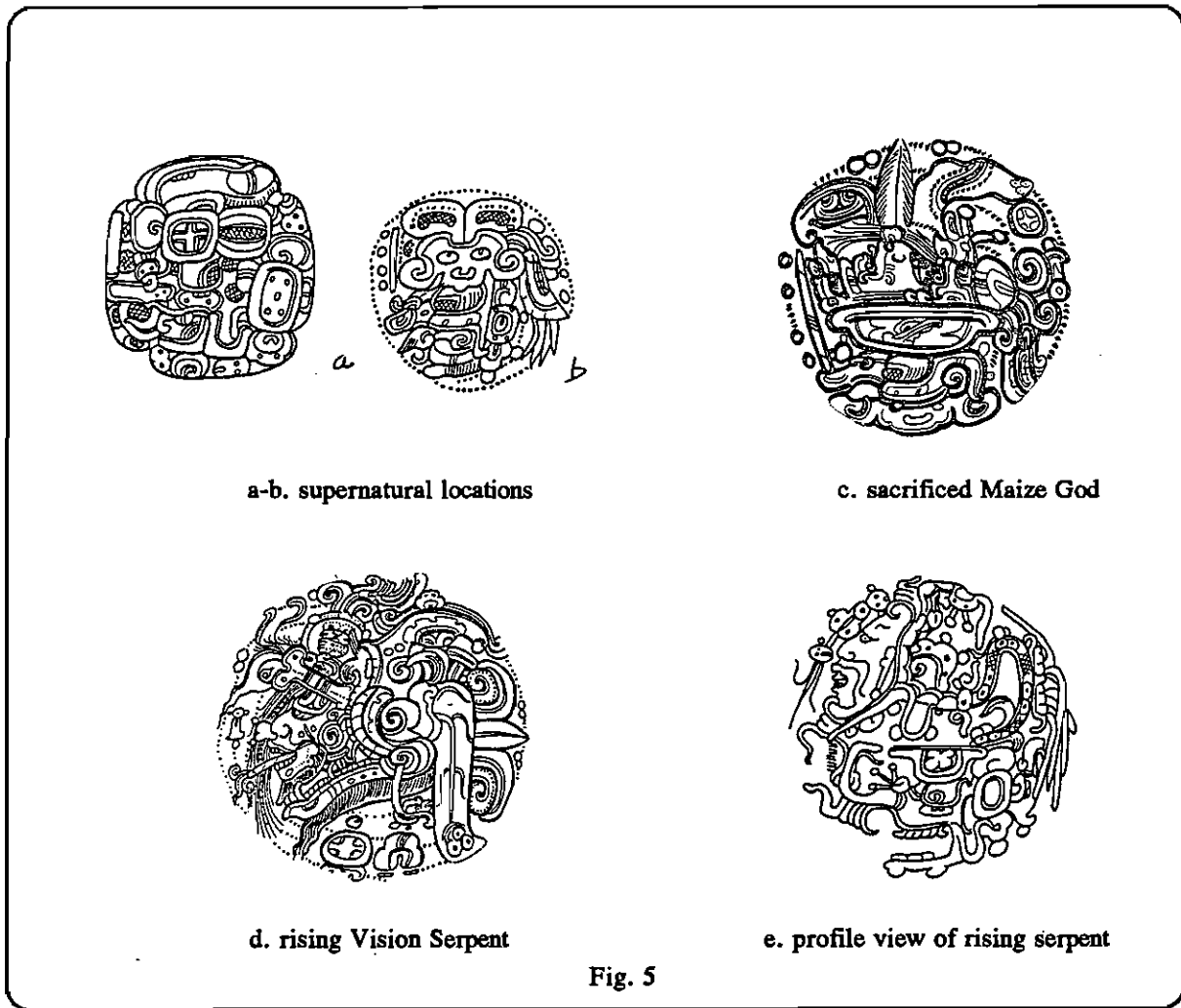


Fig. 5

Interestingly both of these meaning relate well to the plate and sarcophagus lid at Palenque. The image (Fig. 6) shows Pakal on his back in a plate as he falls down the maw of the *Sak Bak Chan*, the "White-Bone-Snake." The verb that describes this action has been deciphered by David Stuart (in a 1988 letter) as *och bi*, "he entered the road." The *haw* reading for the "pot god" in which he sits is "to open the road."

Chol and Tzotzil glosses of *haw* also seem appropriate to the context of the portal. Aulie and Aulie (1978:63) list *jaw* as "partir (naranja, calabaza, corcho)." Laughlin (1988:207) has *jav* as "break into pieces, break open (pomograntes, cotton)" and *javan* as "lay face up." The Ara Tzeltal has *ghau (jaw)* "ençetar, partir" and *ghauayon (jawayon)* as "estar de espaldas." The "face up"

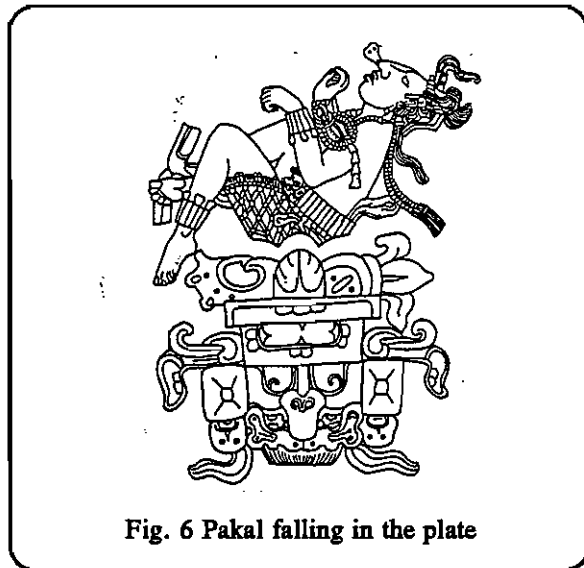


Fig. 6 Pakal falling in the plate



Fig. 7 Madrid "birth" scenes

entries identify this *haw* as cognate to the Yukatek term, but in Chol, Tzeltal, and Tzotzil, *haw* also means "to split or break open."

This meaning is directly related to the crack in the turtle carapace we have already discussed, but in addition, it appears to relate to birth imagery depicted on Madrid Codex 18-20a (Fig. 7). These scenes show gods emerging from the open mouths of snakes, birth, frogs, and *k'u* heads. Lounsbury (1975) identified the glyph recording the action as *u sih*, "he was born," in Yukatek. The glyph represents a split open object, perhaps a squash, with a *si* sign emerging from it. The second glyph in each text names the being who gives birth to the god. There is no direct connection between the words used in these scenes, but the splitting open of the serpent's mouth, the splitting open of the squash, the back-down position of Pakal as he falls, and the cracking open of the turtle shell all relate to this *haw* root.

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