



# Texas Notes on Precolumbian Art, Writing, and Culture

No. 69

March, 1995

## An Alternative Reading for the Sky-Penis Title

by Linda Schele

Austin, Texas

The "sky-penis" title came to the attention of epigraphers in a letter sent to William Fash by Floyd Lounsbury in 1978. In this letter, Floyd presented a structural analysis of the name phrases of the last king of Copan. In that letter, he suggested a reading of Yax-Pak, but more importantly he identified the full substitution pattern of an expression that would shortly become known as the "sky penis" title. I (1986:325-327) used his patterns as the basis of the charts of Yax-Pasah's name in *The Blood of Kings*. And by that time, David Stuart had prepared a comparative chart demonstrating the variability in the title for *Ancient Maya Writing*, a book on glyphs that was never finished. I don't remember how we came to realize that one of the forms of the titles represented male genitals, but it believe Lounsbury, Mathews, and I had made this identification by the early eighties.

Based on his own studies, Tom Jones (1994:79-86) presented a phonetic reading of this title as *yox at*, "scarred penis," and *tox at*, "bleeding penis." I consider his arguments to be well made, but I have recently seen another example at Tzum that may suggest another reading.

As Stuart's comparative chart (Fig. 1 and 2) and Jones's work showed, the title consists of the *kan* (in Chol, *chan*) written as either the sky in standard or

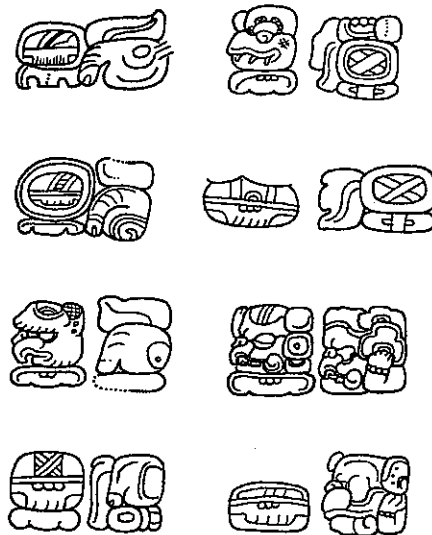


Fig. 1 Various examples of the "sky

bird form or as a snake." Barbara MacLeod pointed out in her own commentary on this title that *kan* is not only "sky" in Yukatek, but also "tall or high."

The second part of the title occurs in several variant forms. The main sign can be a penis with

\* 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. Copyright is held by the authors and the CHAAAC and may be copied for scholarly purposes without further permission. 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. Aldus Pagemaker or Corel Ventura 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 during each year and can be ordered from Kinko's Copies, 2901-C Medical Arts St., Austin, Texas 78705 (512-476-3242; FAX 512-476-2371). Authors are encouraged to use the unifroma alphabet to transcribe Maya words, and the editor bring manuscripts into compliance in some cases.

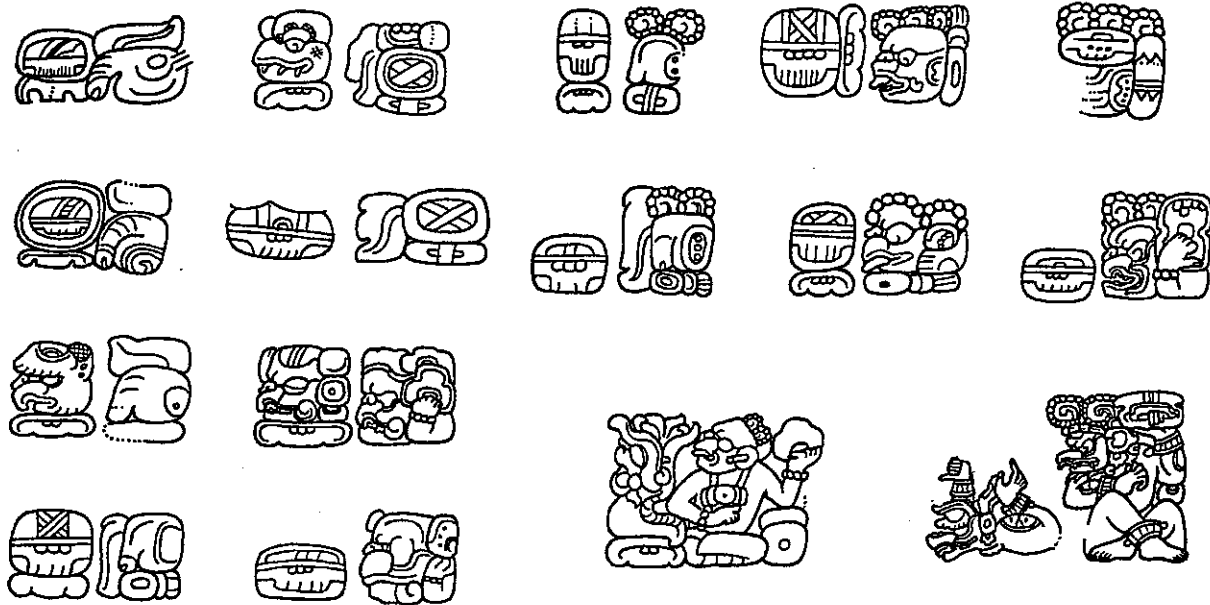


Fig. 2 Stuart's type set for the "sky-penis" title

scrotum preceded by T115 *yo* and followed by either *ti* or *ta* in one of several forms. One of the fully phonetic forms includes *yo*, *a*, *ta*, and *ta*, to give *yo-at*. Because the possessive of the word *at* requires a *ya* rather than a *yo*, Jones proposed that the scars often shown on the penis function phonetically as *xa*. Using *yo* and *xa* together, he derived *yo-xa*, "scar," as the reading.



Fig. 3 Tzum St. 6 photo of the title

Nikolai Grube has seen another entry in the Cordemex (Barrera Vásquez 1980:593) that gives an alternative reading not requiring the *xa*. *Oatlil* is glossed as "erection." The *yo* would give the possessive of this term as *yoat*, "his erection."

Support for Nikolai's suggestion comes from Tzum Stela 6 (Fig. 3-4). This monument is broken, but the name of the protagonist survives in full. The action is *u tz'ap lakam?? tun*, "he erected a big stone." The name follows with *Su-pi* preceding the sky glyph, *kan*. The next glyph contains *to-ho* and *a* over the penis and scrotum glyph. Together, the title reads *kan toh at* in the most complete spelling known to date.



Fig. 4 Drawing of the title by Eric Von Euw

This Tzum example appears to give a full phonetic spelling to the other version of the title identified by Lounsbury and Stuart. Several examples have *to* prefixed to the genital sign or to its replacement, a Chak holding a stone quatrefoil. Since several of these Chak examples have *ta* or *ti* suffixed to them, I have always suspected that the Chak is a personification form that does not change the reading of the title.

The particular version of Chak can be associated with those that dangle off the rear of ruler's belts from the Early Classic period onward (Fig. 5). The stone is a form of lighting that Chak used to crack open the turtle's back in Creation imagery. The resulting crack

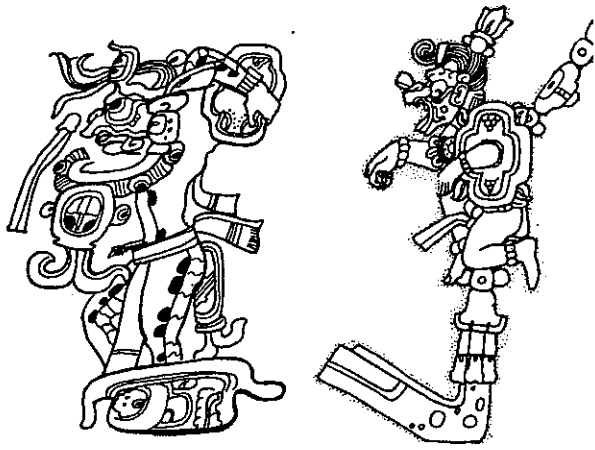


Fig. 5 The stone carrying Chak

is sometimes called *hom*, "chasm," or *hol (ol)*, "hole or crack." Chak can therefore be identified as a portal cracker.

Although the *to* sign occurs with the genital variant, it was most frequently used with the Chak version of the title. The Tzum example above suggests that the *to* sign spelled an independent word *toh*, which usually occurred without the final *h* spelled out. *Toh* is a rich word in Mayan languages, but in Yukatek, one of its meanings is "straight." In the same entry giving, *oatlil* as "erection," *tohtal* also appears as "erection." The suffix *-tal* is an inchoative in this context.

Given the full syllabic spelling at Tzum, I suggest that this title had two readings that were equivalent. *Kan yoat* "tall or heavenly erection," or *kan toh at*, "tall or heavenly erect penis," seem to represent the different ways of designating the same title. I suspect this title referred to the king in his bloodletting and procreative roles, but it also associated him directly with Chak as the sky cracker. Perhaps the Maya considered that the king's penis as it cracked a woman's portal to give birth to a child and as it cracked open the Otherworld so that ancestors and gods could be born into this world was the analog of Chak, who cracked open the turtle so that the Maize God could be reborn.

The use of *at* as a title is amply documented for



Fig. 6 The At Winik

Tzotzil, where *at winik* is a term for people of immense prestige and power. The most extraordinary use of this title was documented in George and Gene Stuart's 1975 *Mysterious Maya* (NGS). They published a painting of the Sun-Christ from the church in Zinacantan (Fig. 6). Male genitals hang from the chin of the image to mark it as an *at winik*. Finally, it has occurred to me that the term *achi* used among highland Maya groups today as the general term for human being and people Maya derive from this ancient title. *At* of the Cholan languages would be *ach* in both Yukatek and K'ichee.

#### References

- Jones, Tom  
1994 *Of Blood and Scars: A Phonetic Rendering of the 'Penis Title.'* *Seventh Palenque Round Table, 1989*, Virginia M. Fields, general editor, Merle Greene Robertson, general editor: 79-86. San Francisco: The Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute.
- Lounsbury, Floyd  
n.d. Letter on the inscriptions of Copan to William Fash. Dated January 14, 1978.
- Schele, Linda, and Mary Ellen Miller  
1986 *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art*. New York: George Braziller, Inc., in association with the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth.