

A Reading of the “ox-‘ahaal” (3-conquest) stairs of Yaxchilan

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Abstract

Despite progress in decipherment of Maya hieroglyphic script in recent years, there are still a great many glyphs that epigraphers are unable to read completely. This can be for a number of reasons. In many cases, the remains of the glyphs are too badly eroded to be properly understood. In other cases, it is due to a lack of consideration of a particular inscription. The hieroglyphic stairway found at the base of structure 33 at Yaxchilan (arbitrarily named stairway 2) has received very little scholarly attention. This is, in part, due to some of the steps' poor condition. One step, VII, is of particular interest. On this step there is a unique story concerning three celestial characters. It is the purpose of this paper to suggest that these three characters are all aspects of the same Maya deity, the Maize God. This argument is grounded in current Maya epigraphic research, and an existing tradition of the multi-faceted nature of Maya supernaturals.

Keywords: Hieroglyphics, epigraphic research; Maya supernatural.

Essay

Hieroglyphic stairways were a common architectural form for the Maya. The risers of the stairway were decorated with hieroglyphic text, sometimes carved images, giving them the name 'hieroglyphic stairway'. Although they may have been built earlier, the majority date from the late Classic period. The entirety of the Maya era in Central America has been divided into different eras based on the development of particular artistic styles and conventions. The Classic era (which we are concerned with in this article) ranges from C.E. 250 to 900. When we talk about the late-Classic

era, we are primarily concerned with approximately C.E. 650 to 900. After C.E. 900, the Maya region saw what is often termed as a ‘collapse’, but what can more accurately be described as a decline in architectural and social development. This is known as the *post*-Classic era.

Stairways had a number of functions for the Maya culture. The main purpose was to recount dynastic and political histories. Due to the layout of the stairway, it is an ideal medium through which to establish a chronological narrative, such as a dynastic history. There are also examples of hieroglyphic stairways showing scenes of the Maya ball game. Many scholars, such as Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller, agree that the Maya ball game originated around 1500 B.C. with the Olmec people, the mother culture to Mesoamerica. The rules of the game are generally unknown due a lack of written accounts. From what historians have been able to ascertain, the ball game was played with two players or more, using a large solid rubber ball, usually on a designated court area. Despite the lack of accounts, there is a significant amount of carved architecture and ceramic sculpture which offers an insight into this Maya ritual. In the Classic era, ball courts were used as symbols of power and prestige. There are many depictions of rulers and members of the elite playing the ball game, either as part of a larger ritual to commemorate important cosmological events, or in celebration of major victories over political enemies. Highly decorated panels surrounded the ‘I’ shaped playing court, and intricately carved hieroglyphic stairs often stood proudly at one end.

One such hieroglyphic stairway is stairway 2, at Yaxchilan. Yaxchilan was a large and important Maya site, particularly significant during the Classic era. It is situated on the southern bank of the Usumacinta River, in Chiapas, Mexico, on the border with Guatemala. Originally named Menché Tinamit by Maya scholar Maudslay, it was renamed by Maler in 1901 as Yaxchilan – a combination of *yax*, meaning “blue” or “green”, and *chilan*, which according to Maler meant ‘that which lies or is scattered around’ (Schele, 1993). Maler thought this was a more appropriate name for the site. This hieroglyphic stairway is attached to structure 33, one of the more central and most elaborately decorated structures at the site. It consists of thirteen panels arranged along the top step, leading up to the structure. I will be concentrating on one panel from the step, panel VII, and giving a critical reading of the characters that are found there.

Step VII of stairway 2 has two distinct and separate bodies of text, which describe two completely separate series of events. To the left hand side of the step there are glyphs that give an account of a

3-Conquest story, involving three supernatural entities. 3-Conquest stories are not uncommon in Maya culture, rulers used them to add to their prestige and reaffirm their skills as warriors by recounting their conquests in battle. What makes the step at Yaxchilan so interesting is that the conquest story is not based on the ruler who commissioned the stairway, or any human conquest. The supernatural nature of the story is entirely unique in the Maya region. Not only this, but each of the three characters on the step are described as “self decapitating” (“*ch’ak-ka-b’a*” in Maya). This form of self sacrifice was unusual, even for the Maya people. Self sacrifice was common among the Mesoamerican cultures as a form of ritual, and only the most important people were permitted to participate. Decapitating oneself, however, was not part of common rituals that involved self sacrifice. Decapitation was more often used in the ritual sacrifice of captives, along with heart removal. There is no mention in the text of the three characters being captives of anyone.

This leads to another problem that scholars have had with this text. According to the hieroglyphs, there are three characters; *hul-nal-yi*, *t’za-ayin*, and *na-nal-(?)-kab-ahau*. The first, *hul-nal-yi*, is known to be the Maize God. He is fundamentally linked to all aspects of life in his associations with fertility, resurrection, creation and the agricultural cycle. The Maize God was also one of the most important deities in the Maya pantheon, and by the late-Classic era had two different forms. A figure known as the Foliated Maize God became distinguishable from the Tonsured Maize God. The Foliated Maize God is shown in Maya art as a tree, or type of foliated plant, whereas the Tonsured Maize God had a human head, which is elongated to resemble a maize cob. This is not the only example of the Maya having multiple versions for the same deity. The Popol Vuh was the Quiché Maya book of Council, which contained the Maya stories of creation, and an important dynastic history. It introduces a multitude of names and identities for the creator couple: ¹

the Maker, Modeler,

named Bearer, Begetter,

Hunahpu Possum, Hunahpu Coyote ... (Tedlock: 1996)

¹ The creator couple, Xmucane and Xpiyacoc, were the first two beings in existence. They helped to create the world and the heavens. They were the grandparents of the Hero Twins, who played a huge part in the Popol Vuh.

The list goes on, giving the creator couple over a dozen names between them. Similarly, *Itzamna*, another Maya creator God, is given at least half a dozen different names and variations by the Maya. These variations take on different meanings depending on the context. For example, when represented with a tonsured coiffure (a particular type of hairstyle), he is thought to represent an older version of the Maize God (Taube: 1985). However, in his bird form, *Itzamna* becomes *Itzam-ye*, and sits on top of the World Tree to represent his place in the celestial realm (Thompson: 1970). I would therefore suggest that the following two characters, *t’za-ayin*, and *na-nal-(?)-kab-ahau*, fit into this tradition, and are both different aspects of the Maize God proper.

From direct translations we can see that *t’za-ayin* means ‘giver caiman’. In Mesoamerican culture, the caiman is directly related to both the Earth, and to water and the Underworld. For the Maya, the world rested on the back of a huge caiman, which drifted in a great lake or sea (Taube, 1989). Its back was the base on which all things grew and flourished. This particular caiman was called *Itzam-Cab-Ain*, and was the terrestrial aspect of the previously mentioned *Itzamna*. *Itzamna* himself has close connections with the Maize God, as both are related to the creation of humans and life. They are often seen together, particularly in the post-Classic codices. The Maya codices are folded books created prior to the Conquest of Mesoamerica. They contain information regarding the practical and religious life of the Maya. Today there are just four known surviving codices.

In other representations of the all-important World Tree the caiman can also be given this guise. The World Tree grew at the centre of the Earth, and was believed to have connected the heavenly, terrestrial and Underworld realms. Stela 25 from Izapa, an early Maya site, and pillars from the north temple of the Great Acropolis at Chichen Itza are two examples of the convention of depicting the caiman as a World Tree in Maya culture. This immediately links *t’za-ayin* to the Foliated Maize God, whose representation is also a tree.

It is my contention that the *t’za-ayin* is the caiman counterpart and a representation of the terrestrial aspect of the Maize God. I have translated the final character, *na-nal-(?)-kab-ahau*, as First Maize Earth Lord. Mayanists such as Karl Taube believe the Tonsured Maize God is the Classic ‘prototype’ to Hun Hunahpu from the Popol Vuh, a Quiché text transcribed in the sixteenth century. Hun Hunahpu is one of the sons of the creator couple who, after a series of unfortunate events, found himself sacrificed and decapitated in the Underworld. His sons, the Hero Twins, were able to reunite

his head and his body, and he was resurrected and reborn as the Maize God. Once the Maize God was resurrected, he performed a ritual which resulted in the first maize plant being created.

According to the Popol Vuh, the corn that was found to make the first humans came from the ‘Split Place, Bitter Water Place’ (Tedlock, 1996). This refers to a cave that is probably surrounded with water. I would argue that the scenes depicting the Maize God being transported by the Paddler Gods show them travelling from the Underworld (where Hun Hunahpu was reborn) through the ‘bitter water place’ to the cave (‘split place’). I believe that it was here the Maize God was resurrected, and that he performed an auto sacrifice ritual using the tools he carried in the bag. According to Maya myth, the Maize God performed self sacrifice rituals to create the first World Tree (Shele, 1993). The Classic Maya glyph for self sacrifice is the hand scattering glyph *ch’ul / k’ul*, which depicts droplets falling. *Ch’ul* is also an adjective to describe something as “sacred” or “divine”. These falling droplets could also be interpreted as seeds being scattered. It could be suggested that the Maize God’s sacrifice of blood was transformed into seeds which took root in the ‘split place’ and sprouted into the first maize plants. It is because of the link between self sacrifice and the *ch’ul* glyph that this aspect could be part of the Maize God, the creator of the first maize plant, which is linked to the First Maize Earth Lord.

The Maize God creates the World Tree for the current world age, thus making him the *first* maize. Having produced this first seed, all human life will be created from him, as will their sustenance. In a similar way, the Maize God could be a Lord of the earth, he spilled his blood in order to make the soil fertile enough for the maize seeds to grow and produce new life. Alternatively, the ‘Earth’ component of the name may refer to the ‘split place’ where the first maize was found, and as such be referring to his reign over the place, rather than the earth itself.

This is an only a brief analysis of the three characters on step VII at Yaxchilan. A more comprehensive discussion would include an in depth analysis of the relationship of the Maize God to *Itzamna*, and a greater degree of scrutiny into the Popol Vuh story. This article has looked to introduce the problem of the *ox-‘ahaal* step at Yaxchilan to the reader, and suggest one possible interpretation for it. By suggesting that *tz’a-ayin* and the First Maize Earth Lord are both aspects of the Maize God, I have placed them into an existing tradition within Maya religion. This will be the

basis of further research, by the author, in a project which is based around all of the steps on Yaxchilan hieroglyphic stairway 2.

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