



# A Reading for the “STINGER” Glyph<sup>1</sup>

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The most revealing iconographic representations of the “Stinger” glyph appear in Early Classic monuments or tomb paintings. In the painted walls of Burial 1 at Río Azul (Figure 1), the glyph appears as an unusually large “tooth” sticking out of the mouth of a saurian creature, likely a crocodile (Marc Zender, personal communication 2003).

A bit earlier, on Tikal Stela 39 (Figure 2), a monument attributed to the Early Classic ruler Chak Tok Ich’aak (a.k.a., Great Jaguar Paw), we have part of the name of a predecessor written as **CHAK-TOK-ICH’AAK** followed by the name of the Tikal dynastic founder **EHB’-XOOK**. Both the head variant form of the jaguar paw (**ICH’AAK**) and the head variant of the shark (**XOOK**) have huge stingers sticking out from the upper jaw. They share the same iconographic features we see in the Río Azul example.

In this representation, the glyph has a sharp tip unlike its representations in the inscriptions where this tip is rounded while preserving its other features. This nuance in its appearance may be due to the fact that the Maya seemed to avoid glyphs with rectilinear outline. Besides sticking out of the jaws of zoomorphic creatures, namely the **XOOK** beast itself, there are other iconographic reasons to



Figure 1. Stinger glyph on saurian zoomorph in mural from Río Azul Burial 1 (from Van Kirk and Van Kirk 1996:100).

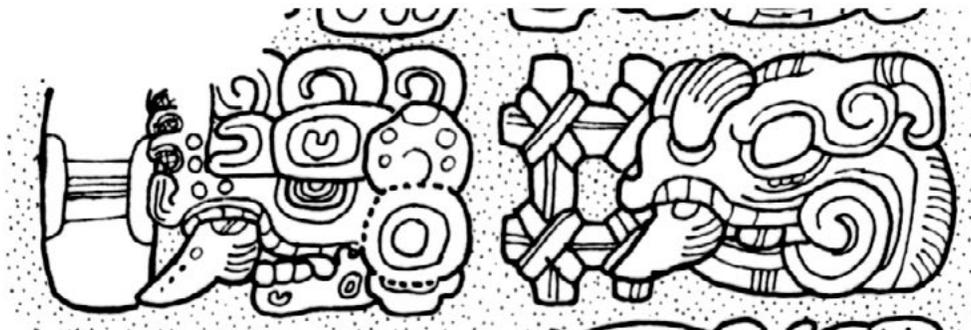


Figure 2. Stingers on Tikal Stela 39 (drawing by Linda Schele, courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies: [www.famsi.org/research/schele](http://www.famsi.org/research/schele)).

<sup>1</sup> While circulating this work, I became aware that Marc Zender (2004) had previously reached the same conclusions regarding the logographic value of this sign.

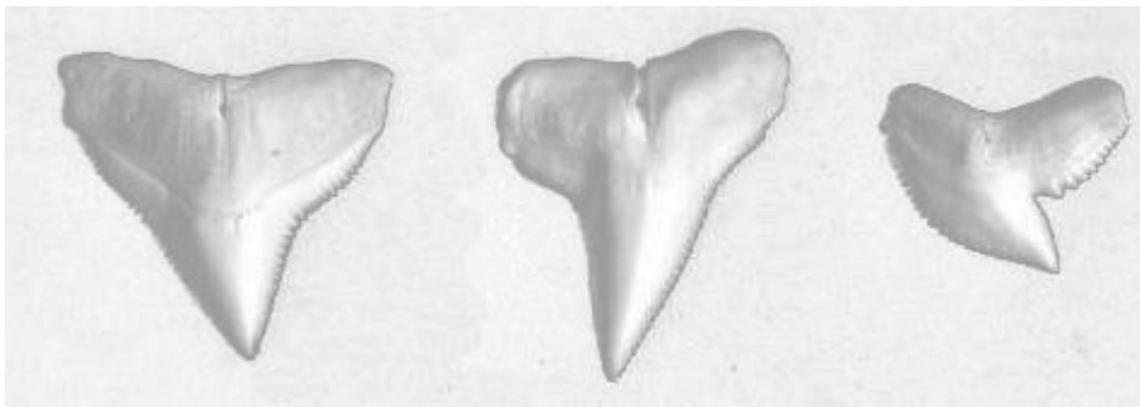


Figure 3. Caribbean shark teeth: bull shark (*Carcharhinus leucas*), hammer head shark (*Sphyrna mokarran*) and tiger shark (*Galocerdo cuvieri*) (adapted from ReefQuest Centre for Shark Research: [www.elasmo-research.org/education/evolution/guide\\_r.htm](http://www.elasmo-research.org/education/evolution/guide_r.htm)).

identify the stinger glyph as a prototype for a shark tooth. Indeed, in these early representations the glyph has a remarkable resemblance to a shark tooth, with a sharp tip, serrated outline, and slightly curved and tri-lobed look due to the roots of the tooth. Most shark teeth (namely those from species from the Caribbean Sea) show these same characteristics (Figure 3).

These unusually developed teeth appear very frequently in the representations of deities, namely GI and the Sun God, K'ihnich Ajaw, sticking out from their mouths or attached to the fantastic creatures that form their headdresses (Figure 4).

This representation has its most dramatic example in the green fuchsite mask probably looted from Río Azul and currently on display in the Barbier-Mueller Museum in Barcelona, Spain (Figure 5).

Another line of evidence also points to the fact that the glyph represents a sharp object probably used for piercing the body. Representations of another glyph recently deciphered by Albert Davletshin and Marc Zender as KOKAN “spine” (Davletshin 2003) feature the same lines along the outline of the glyph. These clearly indicate a sharp, serrated edge. Both signs also share a sequence of inner dots, likely representing droplets of blood resulting from auto-sacrifice (Figure 6).

However, the glyph does not seem to read “tooth”. Rather, it seems to stand for some generic object used to pierce the body. In this note, I follow Marc Zender’s (2004) nickname for the glyph as “Stinger.” The inscription from a false stingray spine from Holmul (Figure 7) gives us some more clues about its meaning:

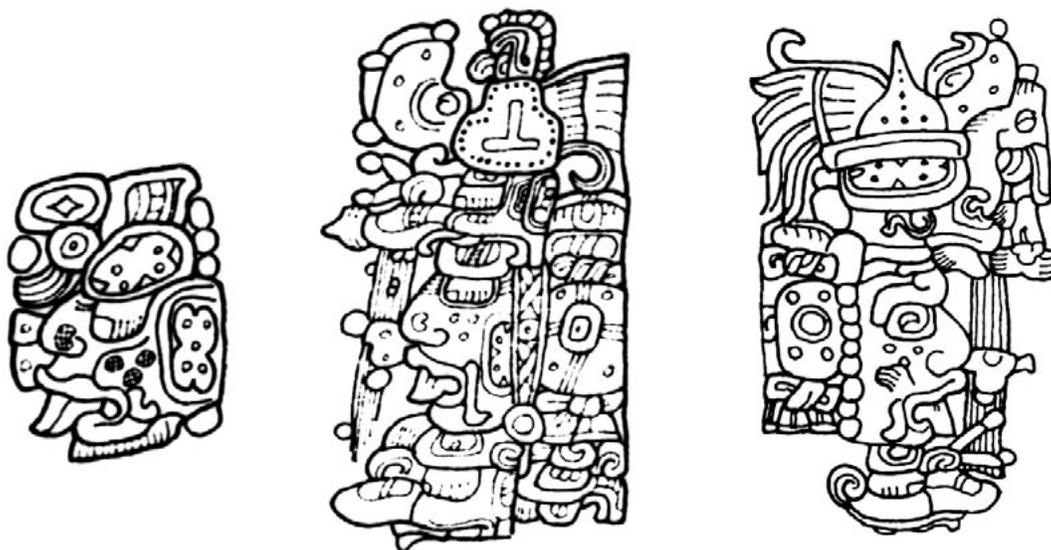


Figure 4. Stingers on deities and their headdresses (drawings by Linda Schele, courtesy of the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies: [www.famsi.org/research/schele](http://www.famsi.org/research/schele)).

**ya?**-“Stinger”-“Stingray Paddler”  
**u-KOKAN TOK-CHAK-WAYAAB’**

If indeed the glyph in the first collocation is “Stinger,” as it appears, this couplet apparently relates the stinger of the Stingray Paddler to the actual stingray

spine of the lord, as in:

“The spine of Tok Chak Wayaab is the stinger of the Stingray Paddler” (see Stuart et al. 1999:157).

The glyph appears most notably in the names of Early



Figure 5. The Rio Azul fuchsite mask (from [www.latinamericanstudies.org/mayan-masks.html](http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/mayan-masks.html)) and the top two glyphs from the incised text on the back (after Coe and Kerr 1997:44).

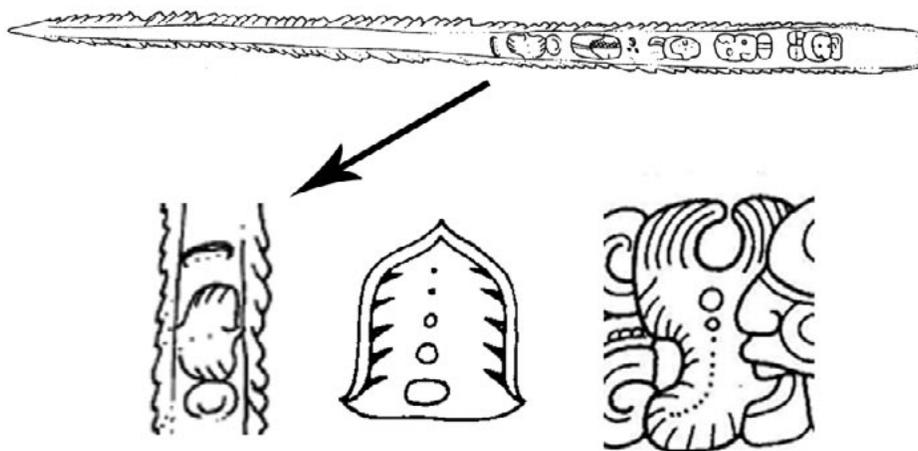


Figure 6. Comparative iconography of the Spine and Stinger glyphs (drawings by Stephen Houston, adapted from Houston et al. 2000).

Classic kings from the *Ak'e* polity, cited on Yaxchilan Lintel 37 (Figure 8). The names are of the form **ya-** “Stinger”-“Sky God”, and **ya-** “Stinger” **a-ku**.

Similar constructions also appear on the Houston Panel and on the Po’ Panel. Despite the small number of examples of this glyph, the initial **ya-** is apparently not optional, and thus most likely provides the **y-** ergative pronoun followed by “Stinger,” which must therefore be a word starting in **a-** (Marc Zender, personal communication 2005).



Figure 7. False stingray spine from Holmul (drawing by David Stuart, from Stuart et al. 1999b:II-46).

One Middle Classic king from Piedras Negras (Figure 9) and a Late Classic namesake also have names that include the very similar compounds **ya-** “Stinger?”-**a-ku** (e.g., Piedras Negras Lintel 2, Alvaro Obregon Wooden Box), **ya-** [“Stinger?”] **AHK** (e.g., Piedras Negras Lintel 3, Stela 12, Throne 1) and “Stinger?”-**AHK** (Yaxchilan Lintel 10). Thompson (1962:458) catalogued the form [“Stinger?”] **AHK** as glyph T1083a, obviously unaware of the earlier non-conflated forms (Marc Zender, personal

communication 2005). Given the other examples, the missing **ya-** in the last example is most likely underspelled (Marc Zender, personal communication 2005). This is also consistent with the writing style of this very late monument. In these examples, however, the “Stinger” glyph presents a different look with a rounded edge, a full circle inside with cross bands and two irregular lobes. It is tempting to identify these forms as allographs (especially given the exact same pattern of

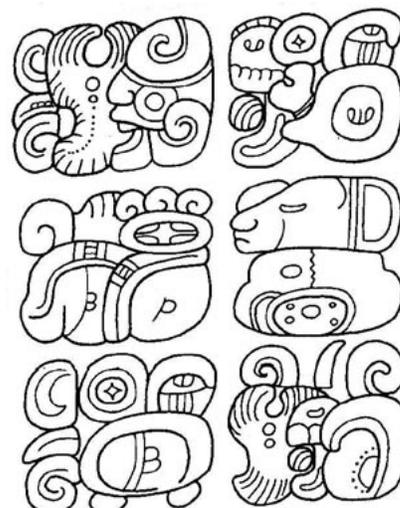


Figure 8. The “Stinger” glyph on Yaxchilan Lintel 37 (drawing by Ian Graham, from Graham 1979, CMHI).

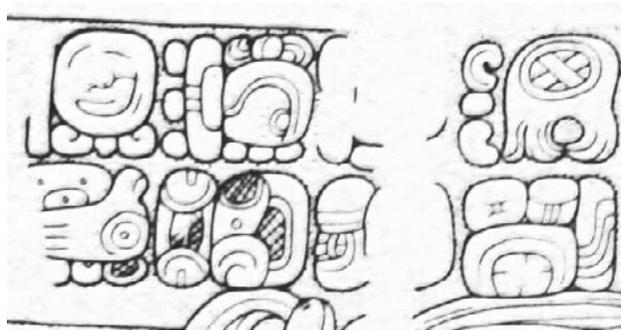


Figure 9. A possible variant of the “Stinger” glyph in the name of a Piedras Negras ruler. Piedras Negras Lintel 2 (drawing by David Stuart, from Schele and Miller 1986:149).

K3248



?-ni-wi

CHAN-na

YOPAAT-ti

ya-“Stinger”-WAY-si

K8660



u-CHAAK

IK’-T533/35-na ya-“Stinger”-ta wa-WAYIS

Figure 10. “Stinger” examples from codex-style vessels (photographs by Justin Kerr, from Kerr 2005).

prefixation and use in royal names), however, to my knowledge there is no intermediate example that bridges the gap between both representations, and therefore some caution is required.

Two more examples of the canonical “Stinger” glyph can be found on the Codex Style vessels K3248 and K8660 (Figures 10-12)

K3248 shows some signs of overpainting, but the shape of the “Stinger” glyph seems legitimate. The glyph is associated in a collocation with the common **WAYIS** title seen in this ceramic complex, and is spelled **ya-“Stinger”-WAY-si**. In K8660 we have a very similar collocation spelled **ya-“Stinger”-ta wa-WAYIS**. This last example provides a very clear **-ta** phonetic complement that apparently is a legitimate part of the original painting.

Given the above evidence, and assuming the reality of the **-ta** phonetic complement on K8660, the “Stinger” glyph should be a word of the form **at**, **aCat** or perhaps **aCV(‘)Vt**. Indeed, some research in the available dictionaries for Lowland Maya languages provides a likely candidate for the reading as the simplest possible word: **AT** (Zender 2004). I am unaware of any Maya word with either of the alternative spellings and with appropriate semantics.

The meaning of **AT** as penis is of course well known. A logograph (T761) representing a penis exists, and is most often complemented with a **-ti** suffix.

This implies a long vowel as in **AAT** (c.f., pM *\*aat*, “penis”).

The **-ta** suffix on K8660 may be explained in two ways. The word the “Stinger” represents could originally have been **AT**, distinct from **AAT** “penis”. But in my opinion a more plausible possibility lies in the fact that the semantic domain of **AT** is much broader than just the usual “penis” gloss. In fact, the word seems to apply to any stinging or darting object, and also to parts of objects that stick out. In this view, the word for “Stinger” is homophonous with the word for “Penis” although each glyph stands for distinct concepts. Still in this view, the suffix in K8660 could be explained by the loss of vowel length in the Late Classic period. The iconographic style and free flowing calligraphy of the vase are consistent with this time frame. Lacking a phonetically transparent spelling of the glyph, the value proposed here should be viewed as an exercise of informed speculation. Nevertheless, some entries from Maya languages are relevant:

Yucatec (Barrera Vásquez 2001:2 and 961):<sup>2</sup>

<i>yach</i>	“aguijon en general”
<i>yach yik’il kab</i>	“aguijon de abeja”
<i>yach xux</i>	“aguijon de avispa”
<i>yach kak</i>	“racimos que cuelgan de lo alto de las grutas que van destilando y cuajando [estalactitas]”

<sup>2</sup> The final *-ch* sound in Yucatekan languages corresponds to a final *-t* sound in the Ch’olan and Tzeltalan languages.



Figure 11. K3248 (photograph by Justin Kerr, from Kerr 2005).

This last entry is interesting since the “Stinger” glyph appears in the Early Classic examples as sticking out of the mouth of zoomorphic creatures.

- (y)ach *sina’an* “el aguijon del alacran”
- (y)ach *nokak* “canal del edificio que sale fuera de la pared (gargola)”
- (y)ach “miembro viril, aguijon de insecto, vara delgada de arbol”

Tzotzil (Laughlin 1975:47):

*at* “penis, stinger / wasp, bee / , trigger, pendulum”

Tzeltal (Solum 1965: 206):

- yat* “su pene”
- yat c’ahc’* “llama de fuego”

Houston, Taube and Stuart (in press) mention that in

Mayan languages the word for penis “can be applied to any darting thing leaving an effect.” This makes perfect sense with the above examples.

In light of this proposal, the name of the *Ak’e* king previously nicknamed “Fish Fin” and spelled *ya-“Stinger”-“Sky God”* should read *y-at* “Sky God,” and be translated as “the stinger of the Sky God.” The name of this “Sky God” is still undeciphered. Thus, this king was saying that he *was* the stinger, piercing object, of the “Sky God,” and therefore associating himself with the instrument of penance of the god.

Finally, the example of the Holmul false stingray spine also shows that, despite the likely reading of **AT** for the glyph (otherwise the widespread word for “penis” in Maya languages), the meaning intended was not “penis” but rather “stinger” or “piercing object.” The words are no doubt semantically related, but nevertheless distinct. This distinction can also be inferred from the fact that the “Stinger” glyph never

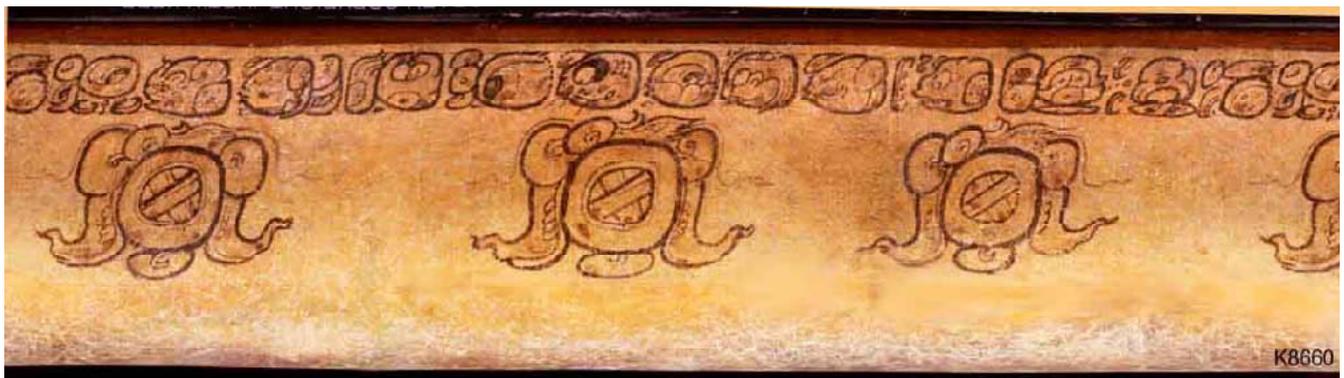


Figure 12. K8660 (photograph by Justin Kerr, from Kerr 2005).

substitutes for the “penis” glyph.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Marc Zender for his generosity, and for sharing the details of his work on this glyph. Thanks also to Kerry Hull, Søren Wichman, Barbara MacLeod and Alexandre Tokovinine for their comments on this work. Thanks to Justin Kerr for generously providing the Maya Vase Database, and to FAMSI for providing this and other invaluable resources to Mayanists. Last, but not least, thanks to Joel Skidmore for his support and editorial skills. Naturally, any mistakes or misapprehensions are my own.

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