

The Yaxha Emblem Glyph as *Yax-ha*

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THE Emblem Glyph of Yaxha, El Petén, Guatemala, (Fig. 1) was first identified by Justeson (1975). It is distinguished by the sign YAX (T16) and a head sign which may represent a parrot or turtle. Most epigraphers, myself included, have considered the presence of an initial YAX in this case to be coincidental. In this brief report, however, I argue two points: (1) following some previous suggestions, the head sign T743 which follows YAX possesses the value of **a**, which in the script may function as both **ah** and **ha**, and surely represents a parrot rather than a turtle; and (2) the place name Yaxha is a very old one, possibly dating back to the Classic Period.

Kelley (1976:201) first suggested the **a** value for the T743 head sign, based on an entry in Landa's "alphabet" (Fig. 2a), and its interchangeability with T238, long recognized as **a** (2b). The first **a** given by Landa seems to be T743 or a similar head sign having a blunt, down-curved beak. This has generally been thought to represent a turtle (*aak* in Yucatec). Here I will provide reinforcement of Kelley's suggestion by noting a number of examples in which T743 replaces other established forms of **a**.

(1) At Palenque, the sign T743 substitutes for T12 in the name of the ruler "Aac Kan." The example using T743 occurs in the text on the edge of the sarcophagus lid in the crypt beneath the Temple of the Inscriptions (Fig. 2c), while that employing T12 appears in the text of the East Tablet

- a. YHX Stela 2, C1 (Drawing by David Stuart)
- b. NAR Stela 23, F20 (CMHI 2:60)
- c. TIK Temple IV, Lintel 3, B4 (Jones & Satterthwaite 1982: Fig. 74)

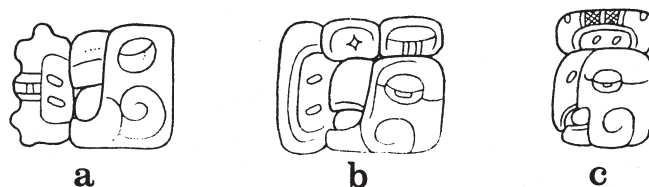


FIGURE 1. THE EMBLEM GLYPH OF YAXHA

of the temple itself (Fig. 2d). T12 (and T13 as well) has long been recognized as having the **a** value (Knorozov 1955, Sec. 2, 3-10), and the apparent equivalence of T743 in this glyph would strongly indicate that in this case it, too, has the value **a**. As the initial sign of the name glyph, the **a** possibly stands for the male agentive *ah*, as it is known to do in many instances.

(2) Another personal name mentioned at Palenque indicates the equivalence of T743 and another well-known sign for **a**. The name glyph of the ruler “Chaacal III” (“Lord Chaac” in the 1974 dynastic list of Mathews and Schele) customarily has four component signs. These are (a) the honorific prefix *mah k’ina*; (b) a sign standing for **a**, usually T229; (c) T528, or CAUAC; and (d) the suffix T178, or -I(a) (Fig. 2e). One example of this name published by Schele and Mathews (1979) comes from the fallen stucco text of Temple XVIII. It reveals that the second and third elements of the compound, the **a** and the CAUAC, can be replaced by a conflation of T743 and CAUAC (Fig. 2f). From this, it seems clear that T743 stands for the more common T229 version of **a**.

(3) The Bonampak Emblem Glyph identified by Mathews (1980) usually has as its main sign a conflation of two elements — T743 and a lobed sign which resembles T512, but with a protruding “bone” as a distinguishing mark. Often T743 is the dominant sign of the two in such conflations, with the only indication of the other sign being the bone element in place of the upper beak of the animal (Fig. 2g). In the version of this same Emblem Glyph which appears on the lintels of Yaxchilan Structure 12, these two components are separated (Fig. 2h). Here, the T229 **a** is the prefix to the complete version of the second element. T743, then, functions in a manner similar, if not identical, to T229 in these examples, perhaps as an initial **a-** or **ha-** in the yet incomplete phonetic reading of the Bonampak Emblem Glyph.

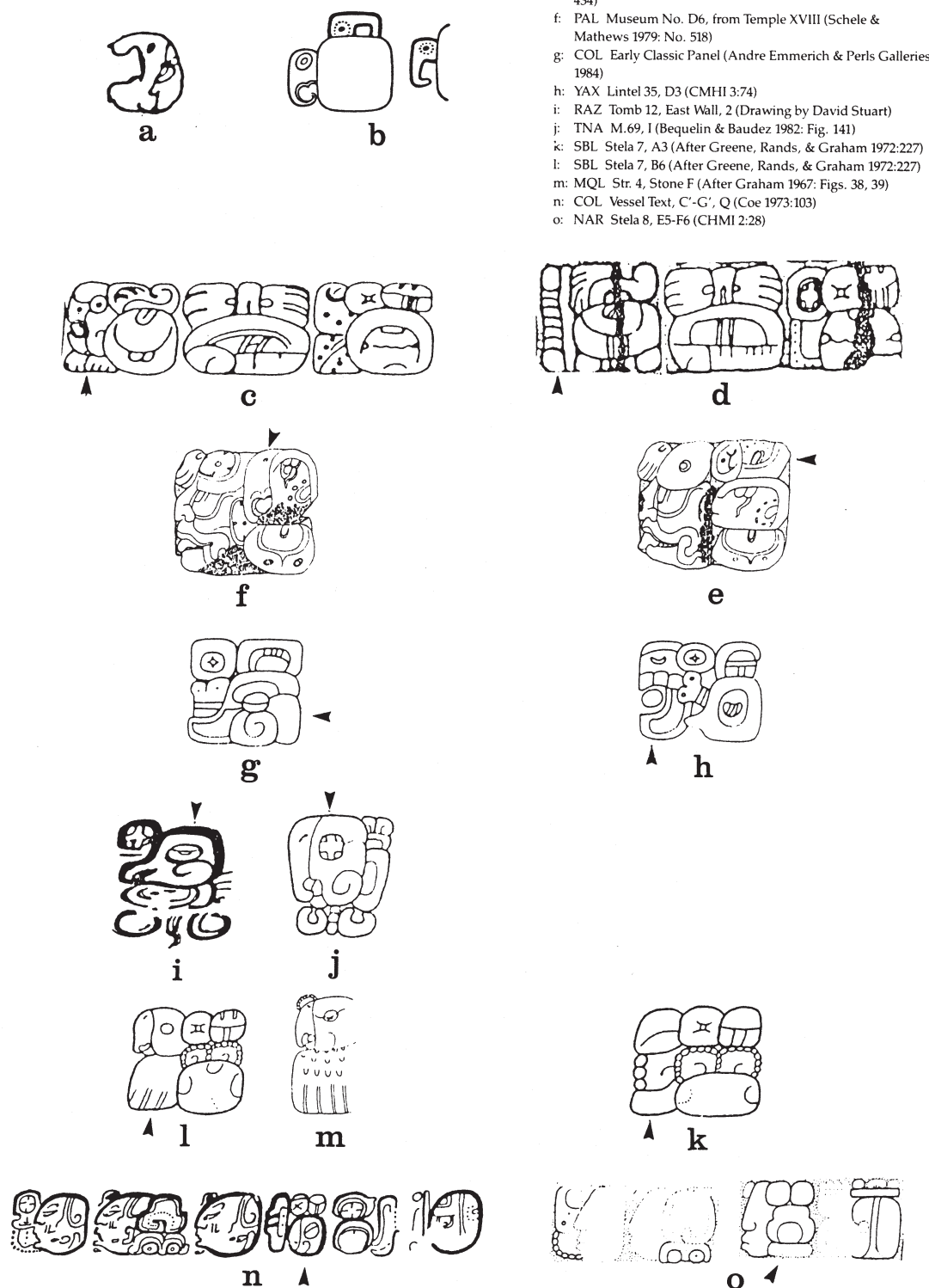
The T229 **a**, and probably the T238 **a** as well, appear to be nothing more than abbreviated versions of T743. Both probably represent the beak of the animal shown in T743. The distinction between the two rests, I believe, in the degree of their graphic representation: T229 shows both the upper and lower beak while T238 shows only the upper portion, which over time became rather exaggerated in its curvature. Such a derivational pattern for these signs would account for their common phonetic value, and can perhaps stand as the best evidence that T743 is to be read **a**.

(4) The glyph of the seventeenth month (T743 [281]: 57:126), usually referred to by its Yucatec name *Kayab*, has been read by Fox and Justeson (1984:67) as *Kanasi*, the documented Cholan name of the corresponding month. They note the K’AN sign which is always present in the glyph as an infix of T743, as well as the apparent ending -i in T126 (Fig. 2i,j). With these values clear, Fox and Justeson propose that T57 is possibly to be read as *si*, but they do not suggest any possible function for T743. If T743 is read **a**, however, with the initial K’AN, the usual infix, **k’an-a-si-(i)**, or *Kanasi*, results.

(5) One important substitution at Seibal not only helps to secure the **a** reading of T743, but also presents a major piece of evidence in establishing what animal the sign represents. The name of the ruler on Seibal Stela 7 has the T229 sign as a prefix, either as the male agentive *ah* or as a phonetic complement to the AHAW component of the name (Fig. 2k). In the second reference to this ruler on Stela 7 the T229 **a** is replaced by a sign which is clearly made up of the T743 **a** head with a bird wing extended beneath (Fig. 2l). Justeson (1975) notes an identical sign from the carved blocks of Machaquila Structure 4 (Fig. 2m), and identifies this as a fuller version of the T743 head. That this bird is specifically a parrot seems clear, especially when T743 and T743-with-wing are compared to the parrot figure portrayed on the Tikal bones, again as pointed out by Justeson. The T743-with-wing sign must therefore be read as **a**, and should not be viewed as something separate from T743. Indeed, most of the **a** signs we have discussed up to this point — T229, T238, T743, and T743-with-wing — are perhaps different stages of abbreviation and extension of a single sign that represents a parrot (Thompson 1950:166). I would, however, make an important distinction between T743 and the “macaw” signs, which have a rather distinctive set of characteristics. T743 may represent some other species of parrot or perhaps a generic “non-macaw” parrot.

What of the identification of T743 as a turtle? Aside from the suggestion, noted above, that the

FIGURE 2. T743 AND OTHER GLYPHS AS a



a value given by Landa for T743 (or a similar sign) was derived from Yucatec *aak*, "Turtle," (**ahk* in Proto-Cholan), the most extensive argument for the turtle identification is that of Thompson (1950:116). He based the turtle identification on the use of T743 in the glyph for the month *Kayab*, described above. Arguing that the K'AN element is probably a reference to water, Thompson suggested that this would indicate some water association for the T743 animal. This, Thompson stated, would seem to make a turtle identification much more likely. I doubt this, however, based on the simple fact that K'AN is never infixed with T743 outside the context of the *Kayab* glyph. Thus, K'AN seems to function as a distinct sign which, perhaps following some traditional orthographic custom, is always infixed into the *Kayab* glyph without qualifying the animal portrayed. The *Kanasi* reading for this glyph offers a far more likely explanation of each component in the month glyph. In any case I strongly doubt the validity of a general water association of the K'AN sign and, therefore, the turtle identification of T743.

Kelley (1976:122) is probably correct in his identification of the turtle glyph on page 17a of the Madrid Codex, but given the generally poor scribal practice evident in that manuscript, I would hesitate to be certain in equating this sign to T743. Landa's *a* could very well be a turtle head derived from *aak*. However, since the *a* reading for T743 seems beyond doubt, I am inclined to believe that this is instead a corrupted drawing of the T743 parrot. To summarize, there seems to be no direct support for the traditional turtle identification of T743 in the Classic inscriptions.

(6) The last glyptic context suggesting the *a* value of T743 is the Yaxha Emblem Glyph itself. This Emblem Glyph is used in the name of the woman who was apparently the wife of the Naranjo ruler "Smoking Batab." Presumably this indicates the origin of this noblewoman who married into the ruling family of Naranjo.

The clearest example of this glyptic name phrase appears on a painted vase published by Coe (1973:103) shown in Fig. 2n. Although the vase is without provenance, the same Yaxha woman, as Coe notes, is named on Naranjo Stela 8. The relevant passage on Stela 8 is somewhat eroded (Fig. 2o), but there can be little doubt of the correspondence between the glyptic elements in the two name phrases. Indeed, the only difference between them lies in a substitution of the T743 parrot by a small elongated subfix placed beneath the eroded *YAX* sign on Stela 8. Unfortunately this sign is too eroded to identify. It is reasonable to assume, however, that this might be some equivalent to T743, or *a*. We have already seen that many previously identified affix forms of *a* (including some graphically derived from T743) substitute for the parrot head, and I think it is likely that this effaced sign was of this set, perhaps T229. The *a* reading for the T743 parrot would, in any case, provide an explanation for this substitution in the name of the woman from Yaxha.

The above discussion has sought to confirm Kelley's suggestion that T743, the second sign of the Yaxha Emblem Glyph, is to be read *a*. This has been shown primarily through substitutions and graphic relationships with other *a* signs, including T12, T229, and T238. Another sign which did not enter into this discussion was the "lunar" sign T683b (T181). All of these are capable of standing for the male agentive prefix *ah* (Proto-Mayan **aj*), and T683b, at least, is known to stand for the verbal suffix *-ah*. As phonetic syllables all these signs also seem to function as *a*, *ah*, or perhaps *ha*. The *ha* value for T683b is largely interchangeable with the other noted *a* signs, it is conceivable that *ha* could be a reading for these others as well. This apparent lack of distinction between *a*, *ah*, and *ha* in the writing system reflects an important principle by which certain weak consonants, such as *h*, are ignored in certain spellings. In this way any *a* sign, including T743, could conceivably read *ah* or *ha*.

It therefore appears from epigraphic evidence that the Emblem Glyph of Yaxha can be phonetically transcribed as *yax-a*, *yax-ah*, or *yax-ha*. I therefore propose that the place name Yaxha was used during the Classic Period, probably in reference to both the site and the lake which go by this same name today.

Is one justified in supposing that the name Yaxha might date as far back as the Classic Period? The earliest known published reference to Lake Yaxha is by Villagutierre Soto-Mayor. In recount-

ing the travels of two priests through the Petén in 1618 he wrote:

Two leagues from Tipu runs a large river which, because the waters were low, was possible to wade. Don Cristobal, a robust, powerful and corpulent man, took the two priests across on his shoulders. After crossing the river they went eight or ten leagues and came upon a large lake called Yaxhaa. Having no canoe to cross it, and because it was two leagues long, the Indians told the fathers they would have to return to the village of Tipu because they could not continue without a boat, and it was necessary to go that way. (Villagutierre Soto-Mayor 1983:69)

It is impossible to know with certainty the age of the Yaxha place name. The above reference implies that it was in use before Spanish contact in direct reference to the lake, though there is no mention of its association with nearby ruins or settlements. Bullard (1970) notes, "The Maya name 'Yax-ha' (Green Water) is the ancient designation, having been in use at the time of the Itza domination of the Central Petén." As the name of a natural resource, "Yaxha" may have been a toponym handed down over the centuries with little or no change. Any survival of an ancient place name would of course require a population by which it could be passed on. It is therefore significant that Lake Yaxha is one of the few places in the Petén known to have held rather steady populations after the Classic collapse. Topoxte, situated on the islands of Lake Yaxha, was one of the largest Postclassic centers of the entire Petén (Bullard 1970).

If the Emblem Glyph of Yaxha is indeed to be read *Yaxha*, it would be implicit that, as is the case today, the name of the lake was also that of the site and its associated polity during the Classic Period. After the Collapse and the abandonment of the ruins known today as Yaxha, the name may have survived as a reference to the lake or, perhaps, as an ancient name for Topoxte. If so, this example would provide an important piece of evidence in favor of the notion that Emblem Glyphs can refer specifically to places rather than to ruling families (Mathews 1984).

In conclusion, the evidence presented above suggests the intriguing possibility that Yaxha has been a name well known to the inhabitants of the Petén for nearly two thousand years.



PRINTER'S DEVICE FROM 1701 EDITION
OF VILLAGUTIERRE-SOTO MAYOR

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