

## The Mythological Identity of the Figure on the La Esperanza (“Chinkultic”) Ball Court Marker

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IT HAS LONG BEEN RECOGNIZED that the ancient Mesoamerican ball game, far from being a simple sporting event, was one charged with strong religious meaning and cultic aspects. Among the principal writers on the subject are Seler (1960 [1902-23],3: 308-310), Krickeberg (1966), Pasztory (1972), Cohodas (1975), and Taladoire (1981). Several of these have also noted the importance of the ball game in the *Popol Vuh*, sacred book of the Quiché Maya. More recently, Baudez (1984), Schele and Miller (1986:241-264), Miller and Houston (1987), Kowalski and Fash (n.d.), and others have pointed out specific instances of Late Classic Maya art depicting ball game scenes which can be interpreted as references to characters closely related to *Popol Vuh* figures such as the Hero Twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, or the various death gods and minor characters of that epic myth. As a result, it is generally accepted that when the elite competed in a major ball game, they in effect brought myth to life. The idea that the ball game constituted a re-enactment of mythical exploits such as those preserved in the *Popol Vuh* may have been current by the end of the Early Classic Period. Indeed, this is the implication of the image and text of the famed carving (Fig. 1) which, although widely published as the “Chinkultic ball court marker,” is known to have come from La Esperanza, Chiapas, a modern settlement some 8 kilometers west of the site of Chinkultic. (Note 1)

The La Esperanza monument is an almost perfectly preserved discoidal stone, with a diameter of 55 cm. and a thickness of 14 cm. Its carved face consists of a circular band containing 12 glyphs, including the Long Count date 9.7.17.12.14 (A.D. 591) (Note 2). The glyph band surrounds a central area which varies between 33 and 34 cm. in diameter. This central panel shows a ball player in a half-kneeling position, vigorously propelling a large ball with his right hip while seeming to support himself with his outstretched left hand against a glyphic panel. In this instance, that panel may have been intentionally placed so as to function as an architectural component of the scene, perhaps representing the sloping bench-like platform flanking a ball court alley—a use of glyphic texts as architectural elements such as has been noted by Mary E. Miller (1986:148). The player wears a characteristic Classic Maya ball game costume as most completely discussed by Hellmuth (1975:12). It consists of a short fabric hip cloth covered by a large protective skirt or apron of deer hide held in place by a protective girdle of basketry and a three-ribbed wooden ball deflector at upper midriff level. The three-ribbed yoke-like deflector portrayed on the ball court marker is much like that found in Burial 195 at Tikal (Jones 1985:49). The La Esperanza player’s left arm appears to be covered by cotton or animal fur padding.





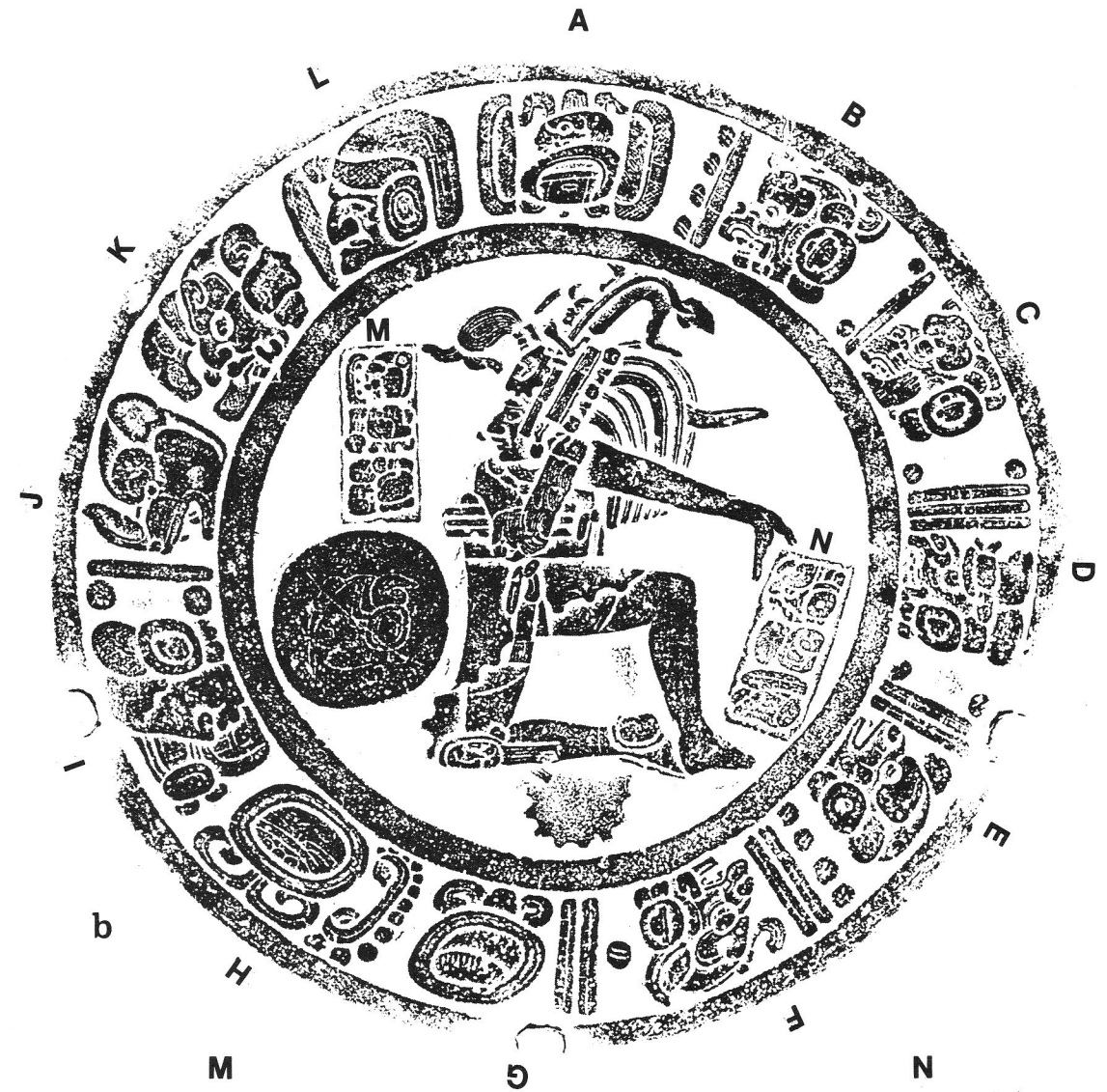
a

1:4

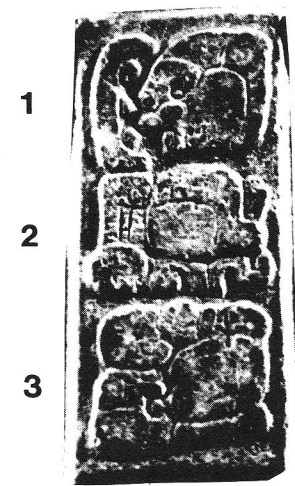
a: COL, discoidal stone with one face carved, collected at Colonia La Esperanza, Chiapas, México, now in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, México. (Photograph by Otis Imboden, courtesy of the National Geographic Society and the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, México.)

b: Same as a. Rubbing by Kojin Toneyama, Luis Nishizawa, and Mrs. Nishizawa, 1963 (Reduced from Plate I-37 of *Relief Sculpture of Ancient Mexico* by Kojin Toneyama. Published in Japan in 1971 by Bijutsu Shuppan-sha, Tokyo, and in the United States and Canada by Boston Book and Art, Boston, Massachusetts)

c & d: Same as a. Details of small glyph panels



b



1  
2  
3

c



1  
2  
3

d

FIGURE 1. THE LA ESPERANZA BALL COURT MARKER



## ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

Navarrete (1984:49), Méndez (1988:34), and other investigators have noted that the costume of the La Esperanza figure is that of a ball player. A more detailed analysis of the upper section of the figure suggests that he is either a deity or a human deity-impersonator. Clearly visible on his forehead is a cloth wrap, marking him as one of the "Headband Gods" or "Headband Twins" defined by Michael Coe (1973:13-14) from depictions on Maya pottery, and believed to be Classic Maya counterparts of the later Hero Twins of the *Popol Vuh*, Hunahpu and Xbalanque (Schele & Miller 1986:51). In this case, the "Headband Twin" depicted seems to be an anthropomorphic version of GIII of the "Palenque Triad" (see Berlin 1963), or Xbalanque, whose diagnostic hank of hair projects prominently above the figure's forehead (Fig. 2). The name Xbalanque has been interpreted by Lounsbury (1985:54-56) as having the meaning "Jaguar-Sun." An alternative reading by Edmonson (1971) is "Jaguar-Deer." GIII, thought to represent the Classic Period precursor of this deity, has anthropomorphic jaguar features identical to those of the so-called Jaguar God of the Underworld, long considered to be a deity connected with the night or underworld sun (Thompson 1960:74, 82, 134). A jaguar diagnostic, the large spotted tail that curls from the top of the headdress, may relate to his identity as GIII. It should be noted, however, that jaguar tails frequently appear on Late Classic depictions of headgear, such as that on the La Pasadita lintel illustrated by Schele and Miller (1986:137).

Attached to the front of the headdress on the La Esperanza ball court marker is a shell, possibly a spondylus or, more likely, a conch depicted in cross-section. This is probably attached as a symbol of the underworld, indicating the locale occupied by the GIII Headband Twin. While shells in general are widely recognized to have such subterranean associations in Maya iconography (Thompson 1960:49, 133), an example particularly pertinent to the La Esperanza headdress device occurs on a Copán sculpture of the god of the number Zero illustrated by Schele and Miller (1986:281-82, Pl. 110) (Fig. 5). On it, a hook design identical to that shown on the interior of the La Esperanza figure's shell occurs as the central element of a shield or medallion on the front of the Copán figure's headdress. Since the god of the number Zero is recognized as an underworld divinity, I would interpret the hook design on the Copán figure as a shell motif associated with an underworld shield. Such shields often bear the visage of the Jaguar God of the underworld in Classic Maya art (Note 3).

The underworld connections of the La Esperanza figure are also indicated by his fringed collar, bordered at intervals by "death eyes." Such collars appear frequently on beings such as

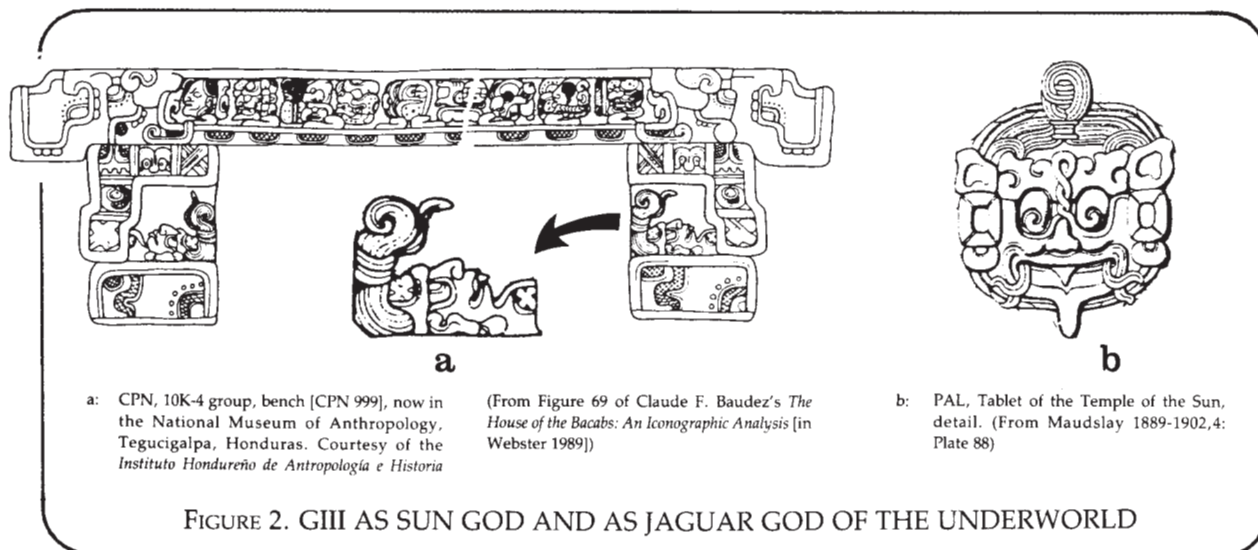


FIGURE 2. GIII AS SUN GOD AND AS JAGUAR GOD OF THE UNDERWORLD

God A , the death god (Fig. 3b). Death and underworld associations are also implied by the presence of a small skeletal figure above the shell motif in the headdress, and by the long-stemmed plant tipped by a pointed leaf at the top of the headdress. Navarrete (1984:49) has identified this as a water lily, a well-known symbol of the surface of the watery underworld (Coggins 1983:26, 44-51; Hellmuth 1987:138-146; Schele and Miller 1986:46-47, 124, 141,182). It closely resembles similar plants attached to the headdresses of the god of Zero and the figure identified as Hunahpu (and/or the ruler "18 Rabbit") on the central marker of Copán Ball Court IIb (Fig. 4).

The GIII Headband Twin, or his impersonator, strikes a large ball lightly inscribed with a glyph that is apparently a variant of the name of GI. It consists of a youthful male head in profile wearing a caplike element edged with circlets or beads. This headgear is a serpent design associated with the Classic version of the so-called "Chicchan God" of the Postclassic codices (Kelley 1976:65-67). Berlin (1963:98) pointed out a close association between GI and the Chicchan God, and more recently Schele and Miller (1986:51) have noted that the serpent variant of the Chicchan God is named by the glyph for *Hun-Ahau*, and relates in some fashion to Hunahpu, or GI of the Palenque Triad (Figs. 5). In particular, the caplike infix on the La Esperanza profile head is virtually an exact duplicate of the form appearing on the profile head preceded by the number One which is believed to name the ball player on the left side of the Copán ball court marker as Hunahpu (Schele and Miller 1986:351, 257, Pl. 102) (see Figure 4). This identification is significant, because the La Esperanza marker clearly has a ball itself named by the Chicchan variant of an Ahau head. The Ahau head possibly refers to the Classic counterpart of the Hero Twin Hunahpu of the *Popol Vuh*. If so, then this is a visual depiction of a mythological incident closely related to the episode in which Xbalanque plays ball against the lords of Xibalba using the severed head of his brother Hunahpu as the ball (Tedlock 1985:144-147).

According to the narrative, Hunahpu had lost his head to a monstrous bat when he poked it out of his blowgun in the House of Bats. It was then taken to the ball court at the behest of One Death and Seven Death, the rulers of Xibalba. There, a temporary head for Hunahpu was fashioned from a squash, but Xbalanque enlisted the help of a rabbit in regaining his brother's head. The scene then unfolds as follows:

And when the ball was dropped in again, it was the head of Hunahpu that rolled over the court:

"We've won! You've done! Give up! You lost!" they were told. But even so Hunahpu was shouting:



a



b



- a: CPN Acropolis, East Court. Portrait of the god of the number zero, now in the Cleveland Museum of Art. (Drawing by Linda Schele [from Schele 1987b:2])  
 b: DRESDEN 5c. Portrait of the death god.

FIGURE 3. PORTRAITS OF THE DEATH GOD

"Punt the head as a ball!" he told them.

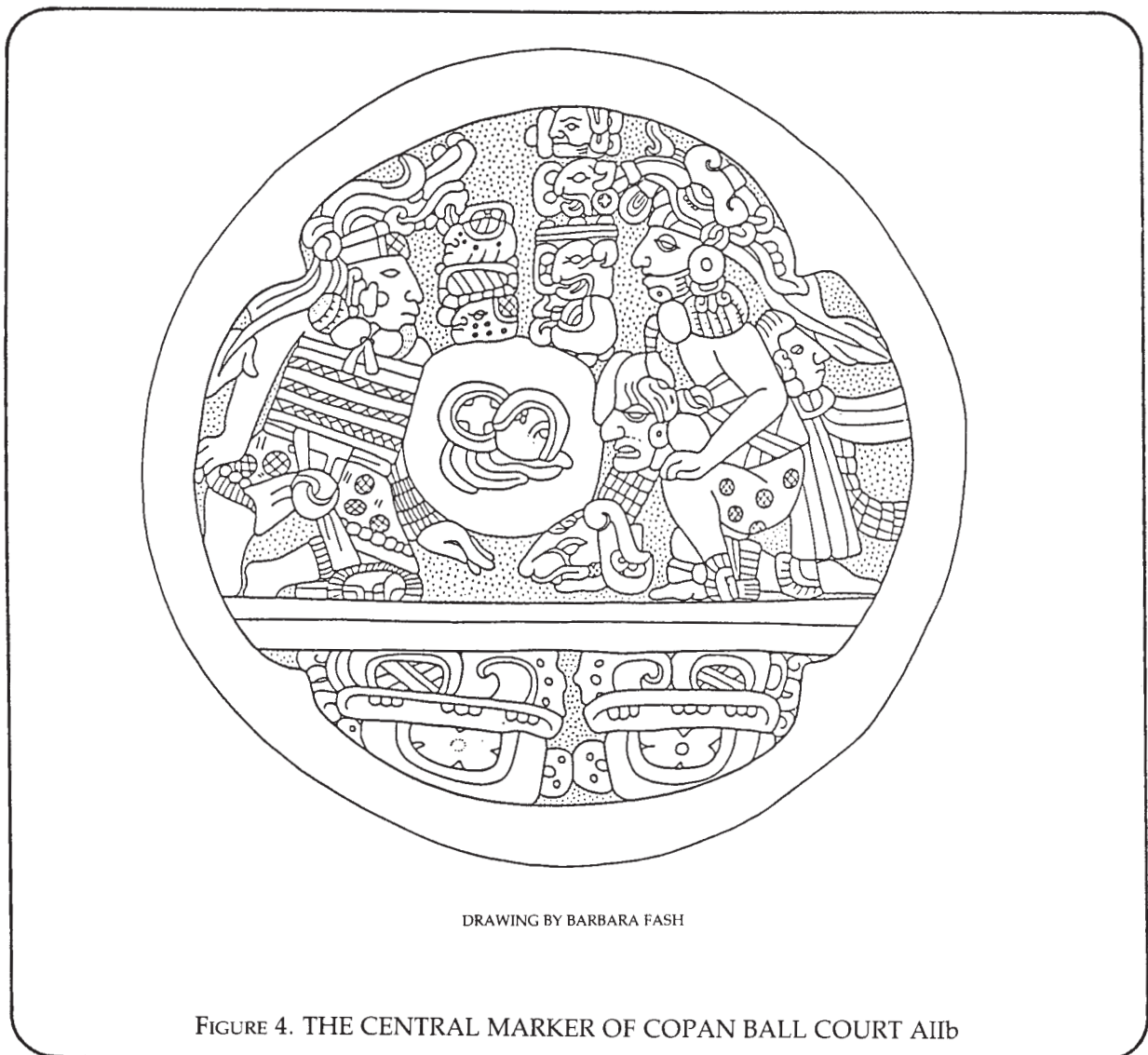
"Well, we're not going to do them any more harm with threats," and with this the lords of Xibalba sent off the ball and Xbalanque received it, the ball was stopped by his yoke, then he hit it hard and it took off, the ball passed straight out of the court, bouncing just once, just twice, and stopping among the oaks. Then the rabbit went off hopping, then they went off in pursuit, then all the Xibalbans went off, shouting, shrieking, they went after the rabbit, off went the whole of Xibalba.

After that the boys got Hunahpu's head back. Then Xbalanque planted the squash; this is when he went to set the squash above the court.

So the head of Hunahpu was really a head again, and the two of them were happy again. And the other, those Xibalbans, were still going in search of the ball (Tedlock 1985:146-47).

#### THE HIEROGLYPHIC TEXT

The hieroglyphic text of the La Esperanza marker begins directly above the ball player's head with a clear Initial Series Introductory Glyph and a Long Count date of 9.7.17.12.14 at





positions A-F in Figure 1 (and see Note 2). The Calendar Round date 11 Ix 7 Zotz appears at positions G and J. The Lord of the Night, at position H, is G2 (Thompson 1960:209, Fig. 34:8). Following the calendrical information, there are two glyphs which are also found in the pottery texts defined by Coe (1973: 18, 21, 22, & Tables 1 & 2) as the Primary Standard Sequence. The first of these is a T1011 (Note 4) head with large squared eye with a hooked pupil, a jaguar ear, a *tau* tooth, a cheek “barbel,” and a distinctive spondylus shell earplug (Fig. 6a). This is the head of GI of the Palenque Triad, which in some instances substitutes for the more common T617 Initial Glyph of the Primary Standard Sequence (Grube in press:3; Coe 1975:24, No. 14). The second glyph is the head of God N, identifiable by the aged face, and “stocking cap” headdress with crosshatched net attached at the front—the “God N verb” of the Primary Standard Sequence—which seems to have some type of dedicatory function (Schele 1987a:133). Together, these glyphs form part of what Grube (in press:2) has called the Introductory Formula of the Primary Standard Sequence. The exact meaning of that glyphic phrase is uncertain, but it apparently has a generalized introductory meaning, and in some way may serve to “dedicate” the ball court marker.

Glyph M1, the first in the small glyph panel above the ball, is T1:757, the general or auxiliary verb that often introduces glyphic clauses (Schele 1982:26, 160-174). Mayer and Grube (1984:72) have suggested that it may read *u bah*, with the meaning “here it is said,” or “here it is written.”

Glyph N1 is the head of the sun god, with characteristic Roman nose, large squared eye, and filed frontal tooth. In some cases, as at Palenque on the Tablet of the Temple of the Sun, at C6, and the Tablet of the Temple of the Foliated Cross, at L7 (see Schele [1987a:91, 109]), the head of the sun god is connected to, and seems to have the same general meaning as, the *mah k'ina* title defined by Lounsbury (1974:ii) (Fig. 7a). It may have such a meaning in this case, although the possibility exists that it names the adjacent GIII ball player. Berlin (1963:95) noted that a sun-god like head substitutes for the regular GIII “checkerboard” glyph on Tablet 2 of the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque. In the example from the Temple of the Sun mentioned above, the sun god-*mah k'ina* title is associated with the name of GIII (Schele 1987a:91) (Fig. 7b).

Glyph N2 consists of a possible fish fin, T52, and T568a, phonetic *Iu*. The final glyph, N3, is composed of a T563 sky sign above a T747 headband vulture, which is known to have the value AHAW (Thompson 1960:88; 1962:330-34; Mathews & Justeson 1984:206-09). The final glyph thus serves to name the sun god at N1 as a “sky-ahaw,” or celestial lord. The use of a similar sky-ahaw title occurs on the Early Classic Leiden Plaque (Schele and Miller 1986:121) as part

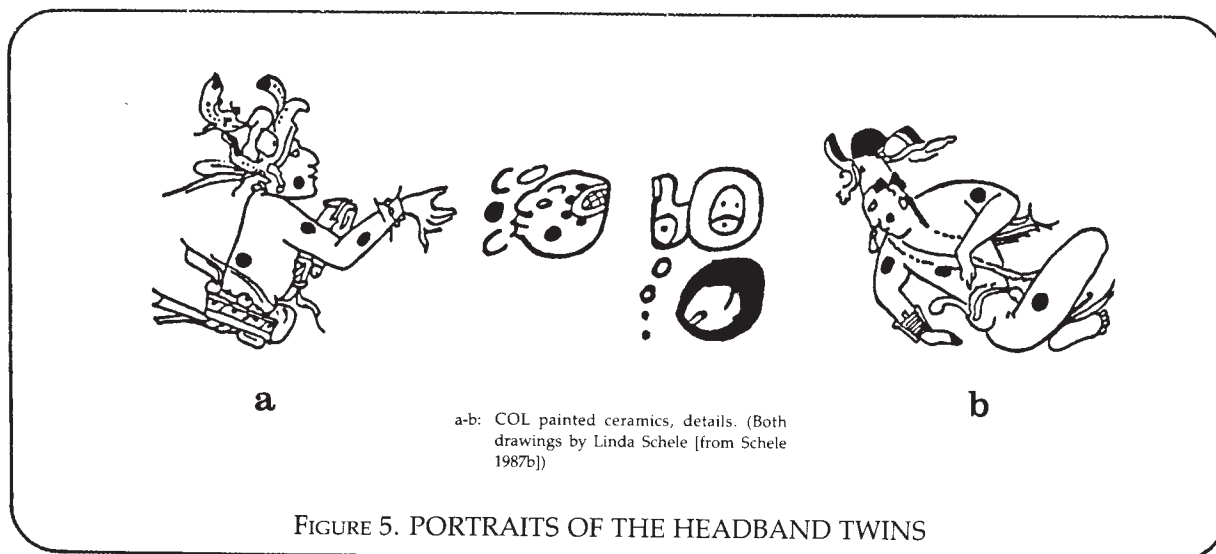


FIGURE 5. PORTRAITS OF THE HEADBAND TWINS

FIGURE 6. SUBSTITUTIONS IN THE PRIMARY STANDARD SEQUENCE

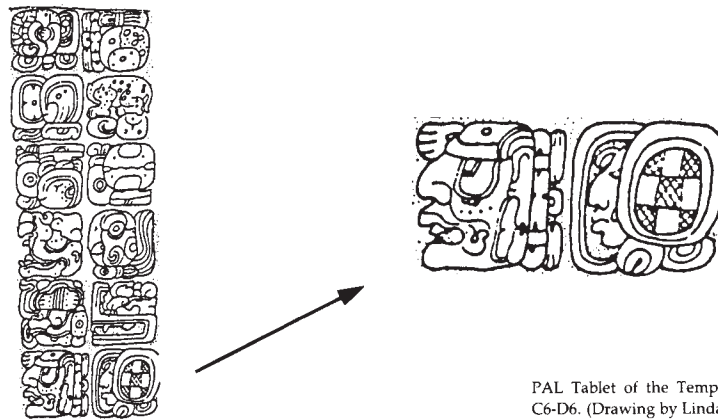
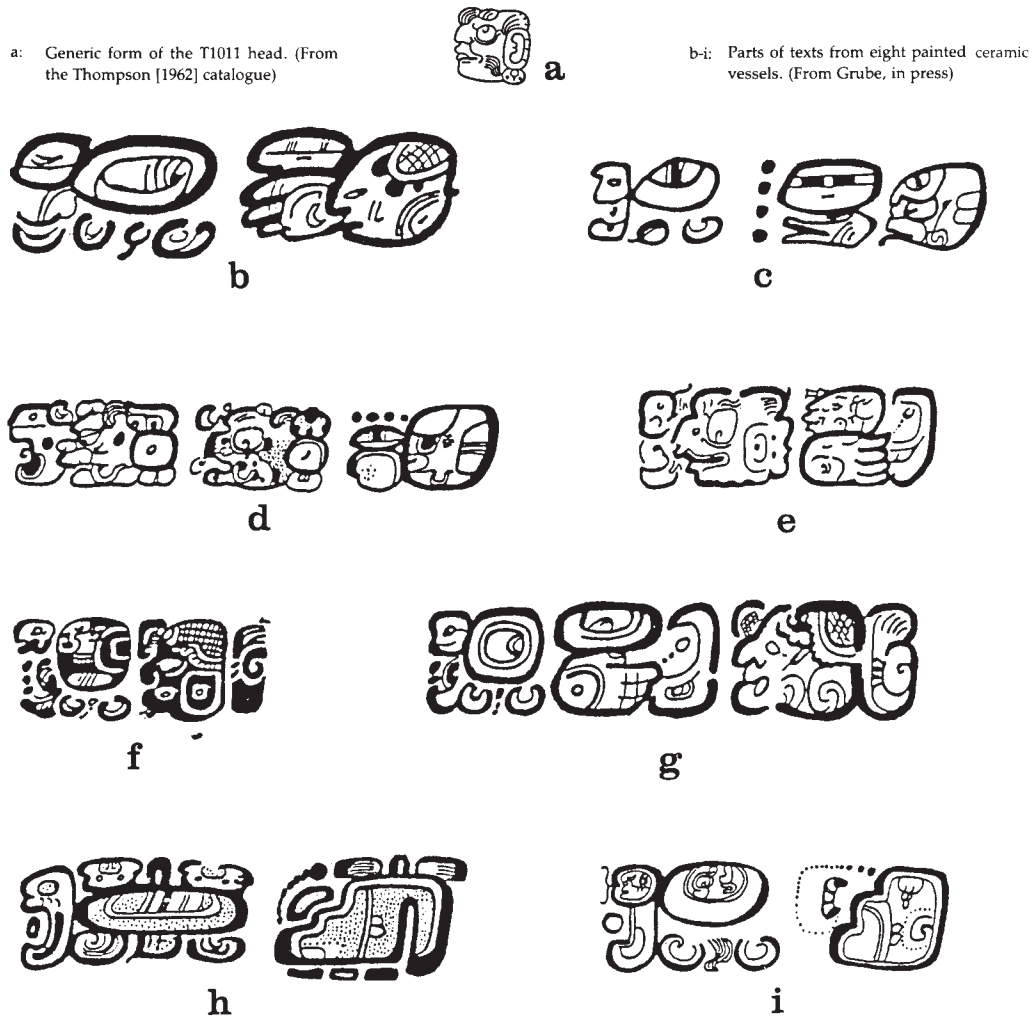


FIGURE 7. THE SUN GOD MAH K'INA TITLE

of the ruler's name phrase, while the use of T563 "sky" in personal name clauses is well attested, as in names of Rulers A and B at Tikal (Jones 1977). Alternatively, Peter Mathews (personal communication, March, 1989) suggested that the final glyph might function as an Emblem Glyph, since there are recognized examples of Emblem Glyphs in which a postfixed ahaw head substitutes for the more common T168 *ahpo-ahaw* superfix (Mathews & Justeson 1984:216-18, Fig. 31). In this case, the T563 sky sign would presumably serve as a locative, while the ahaw would be read in the sense of "lord of." In either case, whether interpreted as "sky-lord" or "lord of the sky-place," the final glyph seems to function as a title associated with the GIII sun god name glyph at N1.

To summarize, the La Esperanza ball court marker appears to depict GIII of the Palenque Triad, believed to be the Classic Period counterpart of Xbalanque of the Popol Vuh, or an impersonator of this deified hero. He strikes a ball marked with a Chicchan variant of the *ahaw* glyph that can be interpreted as a reference to Xbalanque's brother, Hunahpu, whose head was indeed used as a ball in the contest between the Hero Twins and lords of the underworld. Following the Long Count date of 9.7.17.12.14, 11 Ix 7 Zotz, appear the head glyphs of GI God N which form a dedicatory phrase related to that which occurs frequently in the Primary Standard Sequence. The smaller glyphic caption associated with the GIII figure begins with an auxiliary verb, and, after two intervening glyphs, there is a GIII sun-god name glyph, followed by fish fin-*lu* and a sky-*ahaw* title (or possible Emblem Glyph?). I would interpret the GIII sun-god name glyph as a reference to the GIII ball player on the disk. This seems to be a reference to the Hero Twin Xbalanque himself, although it was undoubtedly understood that human rulers playing in the court which originally housed this marker embodied the Twins during play.

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#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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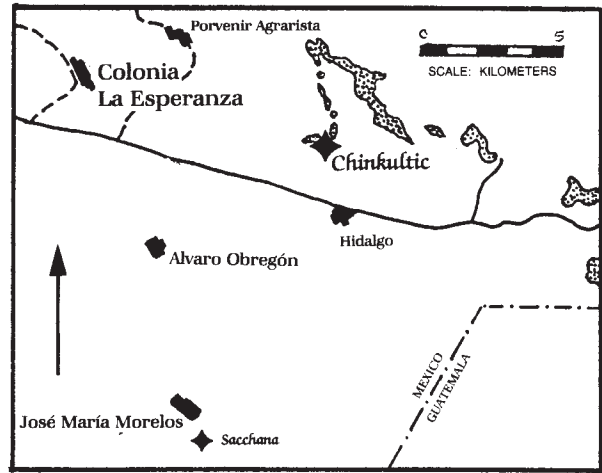


## NOTES

1. Blom and Duby (1957, 2:53-54) were the first to publish the correct provenience of the piece as Colonia La Esperanza, Chiapas (see accompanying map). Their information came from Xavier Mandujano, then Federal Inspector of Monuments for the Comitán area. Thompson (1965:333, note 2) confirms the place of origin, but locates Colonia La Esperanza "a few kilometers to the north [of Chinkultic]." Borhegyi (1968:128, figs. 1 & 15) supplies a map, unscaled, showing "Col. La Esperanza" some 15 kilometers west, and slightly south of Chinkultic. The map published by Navarrete (1984: Fig. 1) is a copy of Borhegyi's map. The 1:50,000 provisional version of Sheet E15D84 ["Tepancoapan"] of the national cartographic coverage of Mexico, 1983, shows La Esperanza about nine kilometers west and slightly north of Chinkultic. These new cartographic data—used as the basis of the accompanying map—cannot be reconciled with the previous maps cited, but correspond to the Mexican 1:250,000 series (the "Las Margaritas" sheet [E15-12 D15-3], and match the small-scale map of Chiapas sites in Ball's (1980) report as well.

According to details supplied by Navarrete (1984:49), the sculpture was discovered during the razing of a ruined modern house. Keleman (1956: plate 82c) apparently originated the incorrect attribution to Chinkultic, which was carried on by Proskouriakoff (1950:121-22, & 186), Gallegos (1976: 123, cover & overleaf), Cardos Méndez (1988:3-4), and others. Since the monument lacks archaeological context, it is impossible to know its site of origin. Ball (1980:93), however, notes that excavations carried out by Navarrete at Chinkultic suggest that the ball court there *postdates* A.D. 900. Furthermore, Ball's analysis of Chinkultic ceramics indicates a possible occupational hiatus at that site between about A.D. 350 and 700—a span that includes the date on the marker.

2. The monument was first dated by Enrique Juan Palacios (1937). Subsequent investigators have accepted this date (Keleman 1956:134, PL. 82c; Proskouriakoff 1950: 121, 186;



Morley 1938, 4:393,419). Proskouriakoff (121-22) also writes, "The early date...is confirmed by the treatment of the featherwork, which is raised on one side and has the quill indication in the center. While the 9.7 date should not be literally accepted as the contemporaneous one, it was probably not very far in the past when the monument was carved."

3. It should be noted that the day-sign Cib, the symbolic variant of which consists of a stylized univalve shell, is represented by the Jaguar God of the Underworld on Yaxchilan Lintel 48 (Thompson 1960:84, Fig. 9:50-68). Although the Cib shell generally lacks the interior "hook," Coggins (1983:26) identifies a similar hook cartouche on the architectural masks of Structure 1-sub at Dzibilchaltun as "the cross section of a shell with the hook denoting the convolution of a gastropod."

4. The use of "T-numbers" refers to the glyphic classification in Thompson's (1962) catalog.



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