

# Divine Patrons of the Maya Ballgame

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The ballgame played a significant role in Classic Maya religion and social life. Despite a great deal of thorough research, scholars are still far from fully understanding its complicated symbolism and possible social or political implications.

Unlike the well-documented Aztec ballgame, the Maya one is mentioned only twice in the early colonial Yucatan sources. First, Diego de Landa briefly notes a kind of ballgame played in the youths' houses (Tozzer 1941: 124). He does not specify what kind of game it is and whether it is played elsewhere. A second mention, now of Maya origin, comes from the Dresden codex (41a), where a rain god Chaak is depicted sitting in the ballcourt with an accompanying *pitsil Chaak* – "ballplayer *Chaak*" – which confirms the iconographic interpretation. The texts of the manuscript, however, date back to the early Post-classic, which makes the abovementioned passage hardly applicable to the 16<sup>th</sup> century data. Another frustrating fact is that there is no Late Postclassic site with a formal ballcourt. Thus, the famed Maya ballgame tradition might have disappeared even before the Spaniards arrived in Yucatan.

For several decades the only historical 'key' to the archaeology and iconography of the Classic Maya ballgame was a version of the hero twins myth recorded by Francisco Ximenez in Chichicastenango (Highland Guatemala) as a part of Popol Vuh (Tedlock 1985). Michael Coe pointed out a similarity if not continuity between the Classic mythology and the story of Hun Ahpu and Xbalanque (Coe 1989). Linda Schele's reconstruction of the mythic and ritual context of the Maya ballgame laid the groundwork for any later research (Schele and Miller 1986; Schele 1987; Schele and Grube 1990; Freidel et al 1993).

Briefly, she emphasized the Venus cycle and the Maize God death-and-resurrection myth as core religious aspects of the game. The ancient Maya were believed to reenact, through the ballgame, the mythic Underworld contest between the gods of life or fertility and the gods of death. This may have been an agriculture-related ritual or an apotheosis of the military conquest. Archaeologically, that twofold symbolism may be represented by the so-called 'creation' and 'three-conquest' ballcourts, or by related hieroglyphic stairways.

The term "three-conquest" resulted from the translation of *'ahaal* ("conquest" instead of "creation"), proposed by Nikolai Grube and Linda Schele, for the new translation would fit the military symbolism of ballgame sacrifice.<sup>1</sup> By now several *hux-'ahaal* or "three-conquest" ballcourts and stairs are known (**Fig. 1**).<sup>2</sup> However, none of the *hux-'ahaal* structures' dedicatory inscriptions contain any direct reference to the hero twins.

The understanding of the Maya ballgame tradition centers on the marker of the Copan ballcourt A IIb with its *Ol*-framed text thought to state that *Waxaklaju'n 'U-baah K'awiil* played ball in order to reenact the mythic contest between *Ju'n 'Ajaw* (Hun Ahpu) and '*Mixnal*' (the Classic Maya god of death and sacrifice). The text visibly consists of two passages, each starting with '*u-baah*' ("his self/image..." or "this is the self of...") (**Fig. 2a**)

(left figure, identified as *Ju'n 'Ajaw* hero twin)

**'u-ba-h(i)? JUN 'AJAW WAK-mi-[NAL]?**

*'u-ba:h Ju'n 'Ajaw Wakminal*

"...this is the self (image) of *Ju'n 'Ajaw* (from) *Wakminal*."

(right figure, identified as *Mixnal*)

**'u-ba WAXAKLAJUN 'u-ba K'AWIL**

*'u-ba[:h]Waxaklaju'n 'U-ba[:h] K'awi:l*

"...this is the self (image) of *Waxaklaju'n-'U-baah-K'awiil*."

(There is one more glyph, inscribed in the ball: **K'AN-TUN-(ni)** *k'a[h]n-tu:n* "flat (bench?) stone" = "marker".)

The text clearly states that the Copan king *does not* impersonate one of the hero twins. On the contrary, the inscription identifies the king with the character previously labeled "*Mixnal*".

Another monument, crucial for the supposed Classic Popol Vuh ballgame myth continuity, is La Esperanza ('Chinkultic') ballcourt marker (**Fig. 2b**). The image on latter has long been recognized as that of *Mixnal* as a ballplayer striking a ball with an inscribed *Ju'n 'Ajaw*'s head. The text along the rim of the marker consists of a Long Count date (9.7.17.12.14), a Calendar Round date (11 Ix 7 Zotz), and a verb *t'ab* "to ascend," thus, referring to the dedication of the ballcourt, or of this particular monument, or both. The second inscription consists of the two columns, accompanying the central figure:

(M1) **'u-ba** (M2) **ta 'OCH-K'AK'** (M3) ? (N1) **K'INICH** (N2) **?-lu** (N3) **CHAN-'AJAW**

*'u-ba[:h] ta' 'ochk'a[h]k' ...-K'i[h]nich ... Chan 'Ajaw*

"...this is his self (image) in the fire-entering (dedication), {name compound?}-*K'ihnich* {either the name or a placename} *Chan 'Ajaw* (either a "sky lord" title, or an "emblem glyph")."

It seems that the text refers to the same (as in the rim text) dedication act, which the ballgame could be a part of.<sup>3</sup> The protagonist is a local lord, not a mythic character.

Recent publications on the archaeology and epigraphy of Copan have shown that the message of the main ballcourt is complex. The dedication event is likely mentioned in the inscription on the round marker set in the plaza floor before the '*Motmot*' structure in the vicinity of the newly built ballcourt — both are dedicated to the founder of the dynasty *K'ihnich Yax K'uk' Mo'* (**Fig. 3a-c**) (Kowalski and Fash 1986; Williamson 1993; Fash 1997, 1998: 230-233).

One of the Yaxchilan ballcourts was also dedicated to the royal ancestors: as Carolyn Tate supposed (Tate 1993: 59-62), the "5 katun" title of *Itsamnaah Balam* II, depicted on the marker "b", and its cartouche in the likeness of the double-headed *Chapaat Chan* suggest that the monument was committed after his death (**Fig. 3d**).

Meanwhile, the three-conquest stair, committed probably about the same time as the ballcourt

(the markers of the latter lack any date) was dedicated as the stair of the ruling holy lord, *Yaxuun Balam* IV. A dedicatory text from Tonina reveals a similar practice in the following passage (**Fig. 1b**):

(D3) 'i-'EL-NAH-ja WUK-'IK'-K'AN-NAL-(la) (C4) HUX-'a-ha-l(i) {BALLCOURT}-(na) 'u-{BALLCOURT}-(na) (D4) ya-'AJAW-te pi-tsi-l(a) (C5) K'INICH-BAK-NAL-[CHAK] (D5) K'UH po 'AJAW-(wa)

... 'i-'elnahaj Wuk-'Ik'-K'a[h]n(?) -Nal (Wuk-'Ik'-K'a[h]nal?) hux 'aha:l ... 'u-... yajawte' pitsil K'i[h]nich-Ba:knal-Cha:k k'uh[ul] Po[po'] 'ajaw

"... and then was dedicated (literally 'house-burnt') the "Seven-Black-Benches(-Place),"<sup>4</sup> the three-conquest ballcourt, the ballcourt of the *yajawte'*, the ballplayer, *K'ihnich Baaknal Chaak*, holy (divine) king of *Popo'*. "

But still, what does the three-conquest story mean? The text on the seventh step of the Yaxchilan hieroglyphic stair remains the unique version of this myth (**Fig. 4**). There, the dedication event (a yet undeciphered "stone-in-hand" verb) is placed in a broad mythical and historical context. The three-conquest story takes shape as a sequence of the three beheadings (*ch'ak-baah*), which happened in the immeasurably distant mythic past. The first beheaded one is the Maize God, while the other two remain unrecognized, their names undeciphered. All the beheadings (the only known *ch'ak-baah* with a visual reference is the self-beheading act of the god A', *Akan*) take place on the three-conquest stair of the Black-Water(Hole, Portal?)-Place (*'Ik'-Way-Nal*) in *Wakminal*. In Copan, as we know, the latter place name was associated with *Ju'n 'Ajaw*. Thus, of all the Popol Vuh characters only the Maize God and *Ju'n 'Ajaw* hero twin might patronize the game. Even then, in the dedicatory ballgame sacrifice *Yaxuun Balam* impersonated yet another deity that has no Popol Vuh counterpart – *Yax-Chiit-Ju'n-Winik-Nah-Kan*, also known as the "Waterlily-Serpent".

The abovementioned dedication's historic or, more properly, "dynastic" framework is represented on the sixth and eighth panels (**Fig. 5 a, b**), which depict the king's father and grandfather performing ballgame sacrifices. Interestingly, the grandfather's name is spelled quite unusually as it includes *Wuk-Chapaat-Chan-K'ihnich-'Ajaw* instead of the yet not fully read name of the local divine patron, also occurring in the name phrase of *Yaxuun Balam*. I would speculate that the grandfather merely impersonated *Wuk-Chapaat-Chan-K'ihnich-'Ajaw*, though it is not stated directly in the text.

As for the ballgame sacrifice itself, the full story is told on the La Amelia hieroglyphic panels (Schele and Grube 1990: 3-5), depicting a post-game ritual dance (**Fig. 6a**). There, the victim is "thrown" as the ball of the holy king: "... he was thrown (rolled down), the captor of *Balamnal*, nine palms is his name, ..., he is the ball (literally "the wrapped thing") of *'Ahtob-'Ajaw*, holy king of *Mutal, bakab*." To complete the sacrifice story, a supernatural character discovered by N. Grube and W. Nahm should be mentioned. This way is named *Balan-Chan-Winik* (Grube and Nahm 1994: 711) and his visual association with the captive-as-a-ball theme is explicit (**Fig. 6b**).

The Yaxchilan three-conquest stair reliefs are also extremely valuable, for they represent a series of the so-called "vision rites" and the non-royal ballgames of the sub-lords (*sahalob*). The latter impersonated a new set of deities, thus broadening the list of the game patrons.

One of these patrons is the Wind God, identifiable both visually (ballplayer's mask) and glyphi-

cally (spelled as *'Ik'-K'uh*, "Wind-God" in the accompanying inscription) (**Fig. 7a**). The recognition of other masks without glyphic 'hints' remains problematic (**Fig. 7b**). I think it could be *Chaak*, or even his particular Yaxchilan incarnation, *K'ahk'-'O-Chaak* – a skull-headed deity with large 'goggles,' and with flames instead of lower jaw (**Fig. 5c**). The rain god involved in the ballgame does not occur in Yaxchilan only. The Dresden codex passage offers *Chaak's* explicit reference to the game (**Fig. 7d**). Additionally, the markers of the Tenam Rosario ballcourt (Fox 1994) depict the impersonators of *Tlaloc*, a counterpart of *Chaak*, with a protruding element similar to those on the Yaxchilan ballplayers' masks (**Fig. 7c**).

But the most widespread divine patron of the ballgame (and probably the very *patron* of the game) is the so-called "old deer god," recognizable for his man-deer traits.<sup>5</sup> His Postclassic counterpart is known as *Wuk-Si'p*, while the Classic name consists of number seven and a sign representing his bearded head, sometimes with a phonetic complement *-wa*, thus it can be read as *Wuk ...w*. Whatever his functions might be, the deity was clearly 'generic,' closely associated with the Underworld and such 'elder' gods as L and N.

Strong epigraphic evidence confirming his role as one of the principle divine patrons of the ballgame can be found in Copan. There is an inscription on the vessel published by Justin Kerr and first mentioned by Nikolai Grube (Grube 1992) (**Fig. 8a**). The scene likely represents *Yax Pasaj* dancing after the ballgame, his face hidden behind an 'old deer god' mask while the text states:

(A3) 'AK'-**ta-ji** (B3) **ti pi-tsi-l(i)** (C1) **xu-'u** (C2) **YAX-pa** (C3) **sa-j(a)** (D1) **CHAN-(na) yo-**  
 ['AT]-**(ti)** (E1) **xu-[ku]-p(i)** 'AJAW (D2) **NOHOL CHAN-(na)** (E2) **(yo)-YOK'IN-(ni)** (D3) **ba-ka-**  
**b(a)** (E3) **ch'a-HOM-(ma)** (F1) 'u-**ba-li-'AN** (F2) **WUK-?-wa** (F3) **ti pi-ts(i)**

... 'ak'taj ti' pitsil xu' Yax Pasaj chan yoa:t Xuku:p 'ajaw nohol chan yok'in bakab ch'ajo'm 'u-ba[:h]il-a'n Wuk ..w ti' pits

"... he danced with a ballgame 'xu', *Yax Pasaj*, the sky penis, the lord of *Xuku:p*, southern celestial (southern sky?) *yok'in*, *bakab*, he is the impersonator of *Wuk ..w* in the ballgame."

The *Wuk ..w* patronage of the ballgame can be traced at Copan not only for *Yax Pasaj's* reign. A previously unidentified left-hand side figure on the south marker of A IIb has a 'deer ear' and a 'pointed bearded chin' — traits recognizable as old deer god features (**Fig. 2a**).

Moreover, apart from the famous but unique mentioning of *Ju'n 'Ajaw* playing ball against '*Mixnal*,' the impersonation of *Wuk ...w* in the ballgame is cited on a vessel (K1383) from another Maya site, as the king of Rio Azul is said to impersonate *Wuk ..w* in *chalaaju'n nab*, probably a local version of the game.<sup>6</sup> (**Fig. 8b**):

(C1) 'u-**ba-li-'AN** (D1) **WUK-?** (E1) **ti CHALAJUN NAB-(ba)** (F1) **TSAK-ja** (F2) **K'AWIL**  
 (F3) **nu-?** (F4) **HO' PET HUX-HAB-te** (F5) **ba-ka-b(a)**

... 'u-ba[:h]il-a'n Wuk ... ti' chalaaju'n nab Tsakaj K'awi:l ... Ho' Pet Huxha:bte' bakab

"...he is the impersonator of *Wuk..* in the «twelve palms» *Tsakaj K'awiil*, "lord" of *Ho' Pet Huxhaabte'*, *bakab*."

Yet another evidence comes from El Peru (**Fig. 8c**). There, the dedicatory phrase similar to that of Yaxchilan ({STONE-IN-HAND}-**na-ja 'EB-[bu]?**) is preceded by the ballgame event and the

impersonation of *Wuk*....

The close connection of the deity of hunting and feasting with the ballgame places the latter in a wider ceremonial sequence. This correlates with some activity-related deposits from the ballcourts sampled by John Fox (Fox 1996: 485-487, 490-493). For example, on top of and behind Copan Ballcourt B fragments of at least 6 jars, dense scatters of censer fragments, dense concentrations of green obsidian blades and projectile points were recovered. Various locations in the Piedras Negras South Group ballcourt vicinity contained large bottle-necked vessels, bowls, cylindrical vessels, ceramic 'counters', cylindrical *manos*, chert and obsidian tools, opossum, peccary, deer, and turtle bones. Around the smaller Tonina ballcourt *manos*, *metates*, obsidian projectile points, blades, and flakes were found.

Epigraphy and iconography, too, prompt a broader understanding of the Maya ballgame tradition. A good example is the vessel from *Hixwits* (K2803) with a distinct 'ballgame scene' (**Fig. 9**). Its owner, as stated in the PSS, was a certain *ch'ok Hixwits bate'* (O1-P1), while the text in the vertical column refers to another royal person, probably one of the ballplayers:

(R1) 'u-ba-h(i) (R2) ta [pi]-tsi (R3) CHAK ch'o-k(o) (R4) (ke)-KELEM (R5) SAK-MUWAN-(ni) (R6) K'UH 'IK' 'AJAW-(wa)

"...*'u-ba:h ta' pits cha:k ch'ok kelem Sak-Muwa:n k'uh[ul] 'Ik' 'ajaw.*"

"...this is his self (image) in the ballgame, "youngster" youth, *Sak Muwaan*, holy lord of 'Ik' (Motul de San Jose)."

So it can be supposed, the vessel was dedicated (as a gift?) to commemorate the royal visit. Significantly, there is no warfare or sacrifice involved. Another vessel, K3842, offers a visual relation of the ballgame (lower register) to giving or presenting precious gifts (upper register) (**Fig. 10a**). An unusual scene on the Dos-Pilas hieroglyphic stair is also worth mentioning, as the two groups in a distinct ballgame outfit are represented with two bundles between them, which could be either balls (as in the Popol Vuh), or some bundles with gifts or probably with precious objects for ballgame stakes (**Fig. 10b**).

A Chichen-Itza case is worth particular mention. There the twelve "typical" ballcourts, located within different elite groups, are dwarfed by the truly megalithic Great Ballcourt. As has been recently pointed out by Eric Boot (Boot 2000), the major theme of the Great Ballcourt imagery recalls the so-called *toma de posesion* ceremonies, the installment of the new ruling lineage and the accession of his successors. A similar iconography is present in the earlier ballcourts, especially the Mercado and the Monjas ones (Krochock and Freidel 1994: 369-373). Interestingly, in the latter's northwest corner some remains of related activities were found: a midden containing 12 gallons of sherds and 33 obsidian blades (Fox 1996: 492). So it may be assumed that the initial stage of the ballgame tradition in Chichen-Itza implied competitive feasts and *toma de posesion* ceremonies, strengthening particular elites and forming a network of contacts between them. I would speculate that the drastic political consolidation resulted in the replacement of those competitive single group-enforcing rites by a new ballgame ceremonialism, emphasizing the identity and the integrity of the community as a whole, while the elite ballgame tradition was deliberately eliminated. The latter could explain the absence of ball-

courts in Mayapan: something happened to the 'communal' ballgame ceremonies but the elite tradition had already been extinguished.

## Discussion and Conclusions

As has been proposed by David Stuart, most monumental inscriptions are in essence dedicatory statements (Stuart 1995: 99-118, 155; 1998: 374-376). The evidences suggest that the ballgame events recorded could be part of broader dedication rituals. Consequently, the human sacrifices mentioned or depicted could be in fact dedicatory, that is, associated with the ballcourt and its specific functions as a locus for the game (of this so special form of sacrifice), but not with the ballgame itself. The holy king would perform that sacrifice as a 'symbolic ballgame' in a sequence of various dedicatory ceremonies.<sup>7</sup> If this is true, was there a proper ballgame sacrifice at all?

Another highly problematic point is the validity of the Popol Vuh story for reconstructing the Classic ballgame-related myths and rituals, questioned in this paper. Of course, one should not dismiss entirely retrospective reconstructions, but it seems that the "cosmic ballgame" would not correlate with the available epigraphic data. The point is on what level the generalization of the material should be aborted.

Some Aztec parallels would be worthy in this case. Several legends with 'strong ballgame presence' are known: a version of *Huitzilopochtli* myth recorded by Tezozomoc (1878: 227-229); a story of *Topiltzin* and a *tlachtli* model as written by Ixtlilxochitl (1975: 279); the ballgame of *Quetzalcoatl* versus *Tezcatlipoca* (when the latter turned into a "tiger") recorded by Mendieta (1870: 82; Stern 1966: 67); the ballgame between *Huemac* and the tlalocs as told in the codex Chimalpopoca (Bierhorst 1992: 156). What these stories have in common is that they are unique (regional?) versions of the widespread and otherwise 'ballgame-free' myths. But what is universal for these and other ballgame occurrences in Aztec sources, pictographic codices included (Krickeberg 1966; Nicholson and Keber 1991), is that the ballgame may be a 'framework' for any story involving competition, engagement, and that the ballcourt is a special, often magic location for it. As such an 'inserted framework', the ballgame has not much to do with any of the stories it 'frames,' rather, 'framing' signifies the continual importance of the game in a particular community. Of course, the 'proper' ballgame deities, like *Amapan* and *Uapatzan*, mentioned by Sahagun (Anderson and Dibble 1981: 145), were more constant.

It is tempting to speculate that a similar 'framing' occurred with the Maya ballgame tradition. The myths referred to in the dedication ceremonies are likely different. Of several deities impersonated in the game, only the hunting god is mentioned constantly. As for the Popol Vuh story, the ballgame there might well be a result of regional 'framing.' A famed K'ekchi' performance of the hero twins story celebrating the foundation of San Juan Chamelco in 1543 (Coe 1989: 161-162), for instance, had not a single reference to the ballgame. Thus, the latter was not the 'core' of the myth.

The Maya ballgame cannot be separated from the Pan-Mesoamerican tradition, where this game is primarily a way to settle disputes, to mediate relationships between various groups on different levels. For the Maya the competitive ballgame tradition and related rituals were of no lesser importance

than for others, notably the Aztecs. The variety of Maya ballgame patrons reflects the complexity of the tradition, far from "just military" or "just cosmic" (etc.) symbolism.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Probably, a better translation would be "the conquered one." Supporting evidence comes from Palenque, where the inscriptions on the captives depicted in the Eastern court state the following: {date} **na-wa-j(a) ya-ha-l(i) KALOM-[te]** ...*na[h]waj y-aha:l kalo'mte* '...he was adorned (a widespread reference to sacrifice), the 'ahaal' of the *kalo'mte*'; {date} **na-wa-j(a) ya-ha-l(i) K'UH BAK-la 'AJAW** ...*na[h]waj y-aha:l k'uh[ul] Ba:kal 'ajaw* ...he was adorned, the 'ahaal' of the holy (divine) king of *Baakal*.

<sup>2</sup> Those of Yaxchilan, Tonina, Naranjo, and Copan, respectively; see Fig. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Several Spanish authors, notably Motolinia (1970: 180), describing the Aztec ballgame tradition mention a symbolic ball-throwing in the dedication ceremony.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, a similar **K'AN-NAL-(la)** spelling occurs in the dedication passage on the 'Ante' step, Copan (Schele and Grube 1990: Fig. 2e; Schele andLooper 1996: 116): {date} **PAT-[la]-j(a) K'AN-NAL-(la) 'e-b(u)** ...*patlaj k'a[h]nal 'e'b* "...got formed the bench-stair (or the bench-place-stair?)." With a set of *kahn-tu:n 'e'b* examples, the *k'a[h]nal*, literally 'benchy,' reading for **K'AN-NAL-(la)** seems most appropriate. One would suppose that either the sloping sidewalls or the end zones' steps of the Tonina ballcourt could be 'benches' too. That might help with understanding the structure's name, as well as the nature of 'similarity' between ballcourts and stairs.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Hellmuth was probably the first scholar to look for a supernatural patron of either ballgame or hunting. He managed to find a specific aged character with 'pointed bearded chin' and 'monkey profile', though he didn't identify those features with any known Maya deity and proposed the title of 'Lord Deer Hunter,' referring to 'generic status' (Hellmuth 1987, 1991). The occurrences of the «bearded chin-monkey profile» character can be roughly divided into three groups: hunting scenes («hunting parades» included); ballgame scenes; mythic scenes. The first two were proposed by N. Hellmuth, though it would be worthwhile adding some pure mythology to get more full-figure images, not just headdresses so much valued by the scholar.

<sup>6</sup> The enigmatic number of 'palms' substitutes *pits* in the inscriptions sometimes. One can speculate that it meant different kinds of Maya ballgame of which the 'nine palms' (*bolon nab*) was the most widespread. For a thorough account on *bolon nab* in Maya inscriptions see: Boot 1991.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, the royal ballgame outfit, distinctly 'non-functional', on the steps VI, VII, and VIII of Yaxchilan HS (those dealing with sacrifice and dedication), contrasts with the sublords' 'normal' ballgame gear on the steps IV, V, IX, X, XII, XIII, which probably depict 'real' games (interestingly, with 'number+nab' references).

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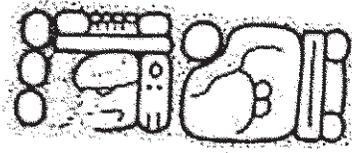
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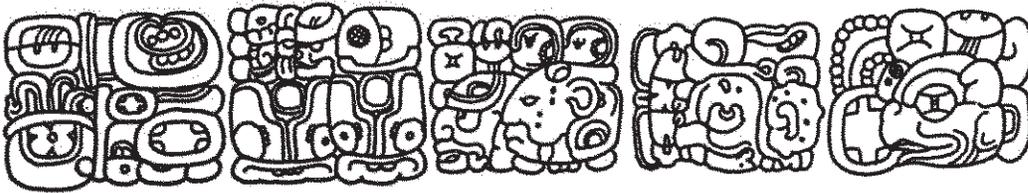
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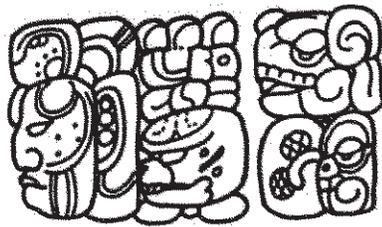
Figure 1



a



b

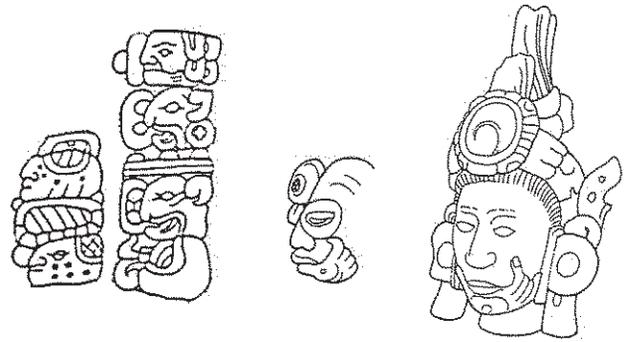
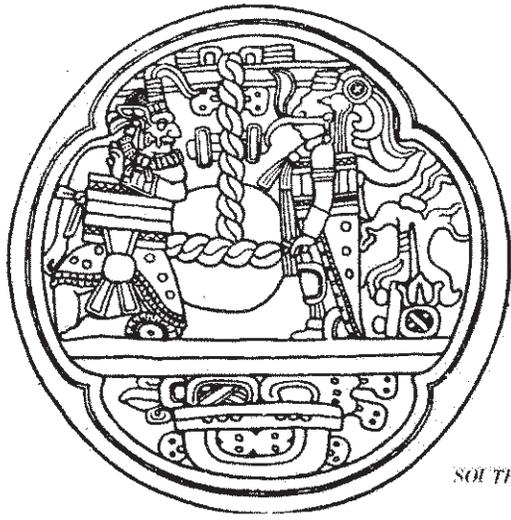


c



d

Figure 2



CENTER

a



b

Figure 3

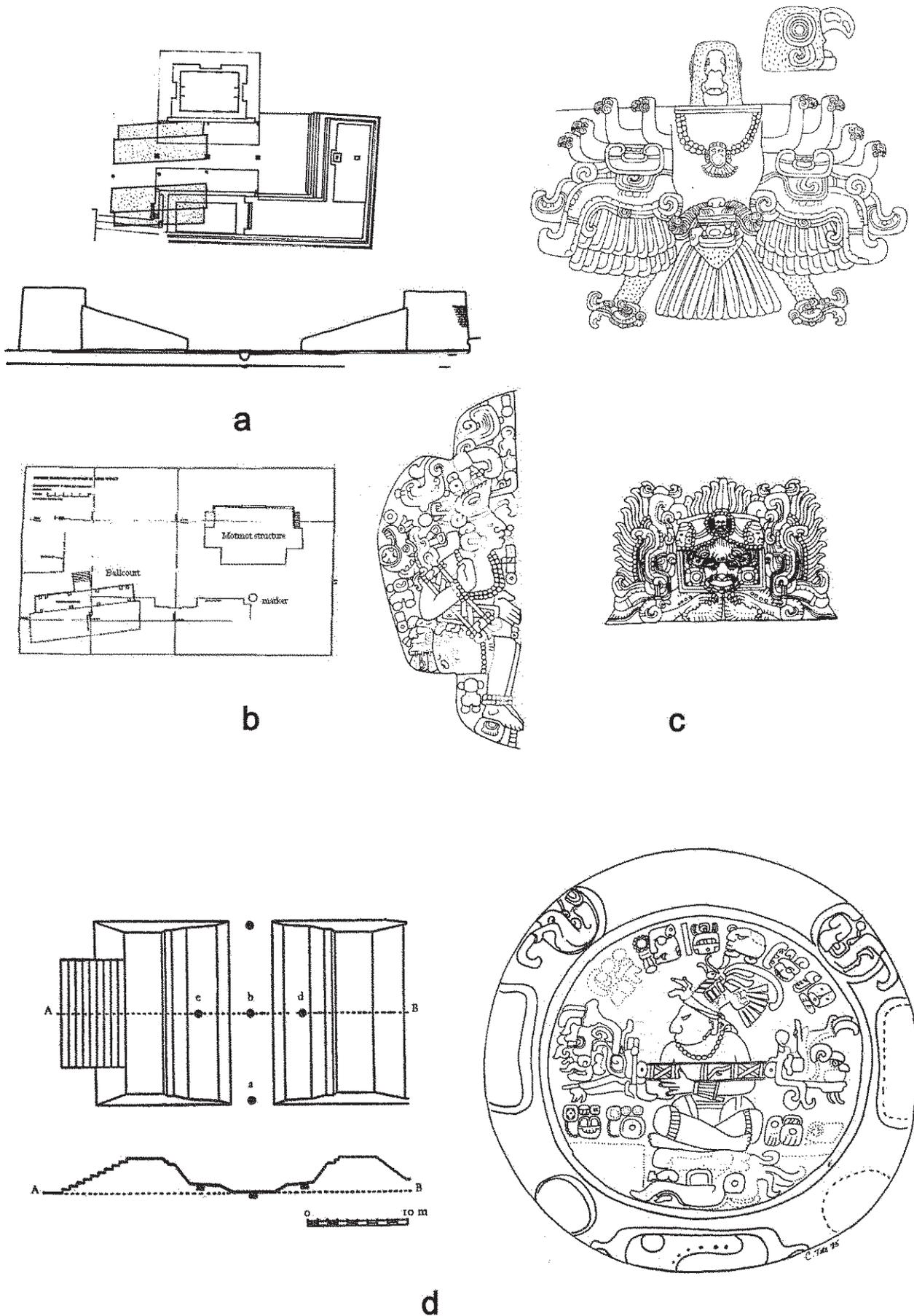


Figure 4

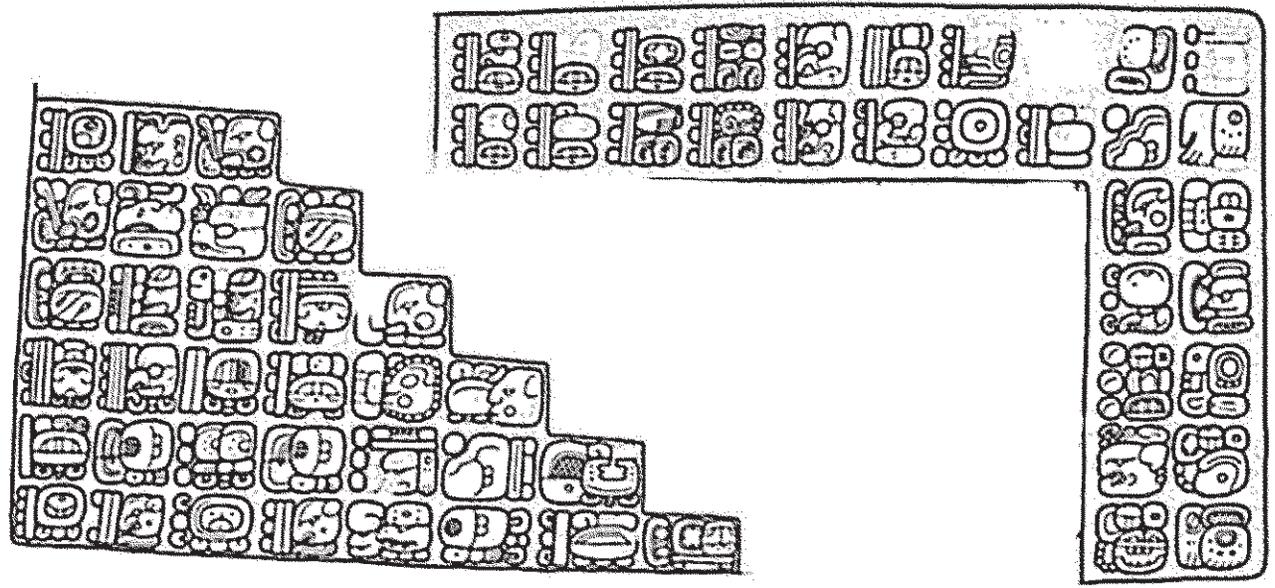
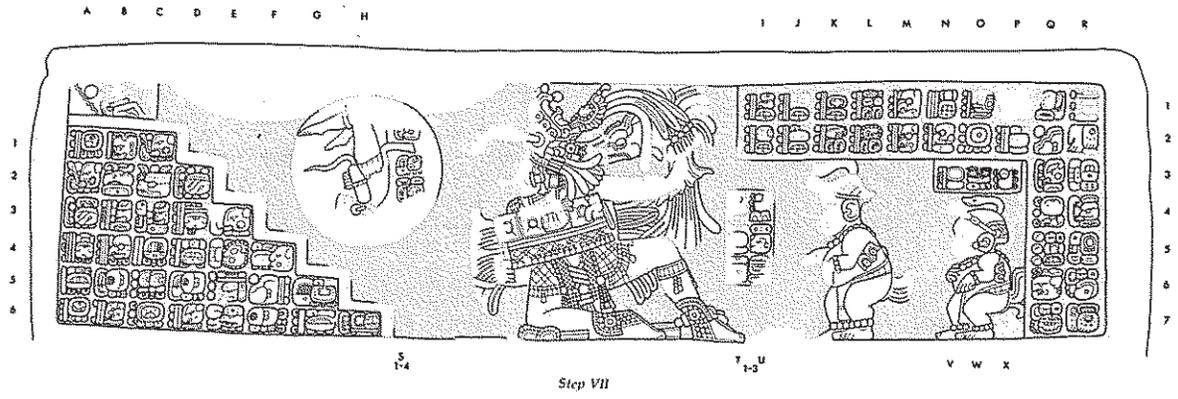
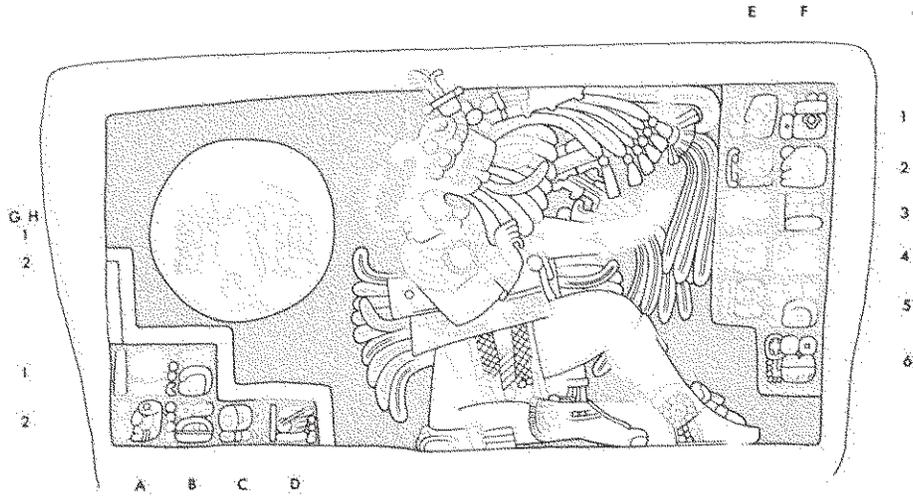
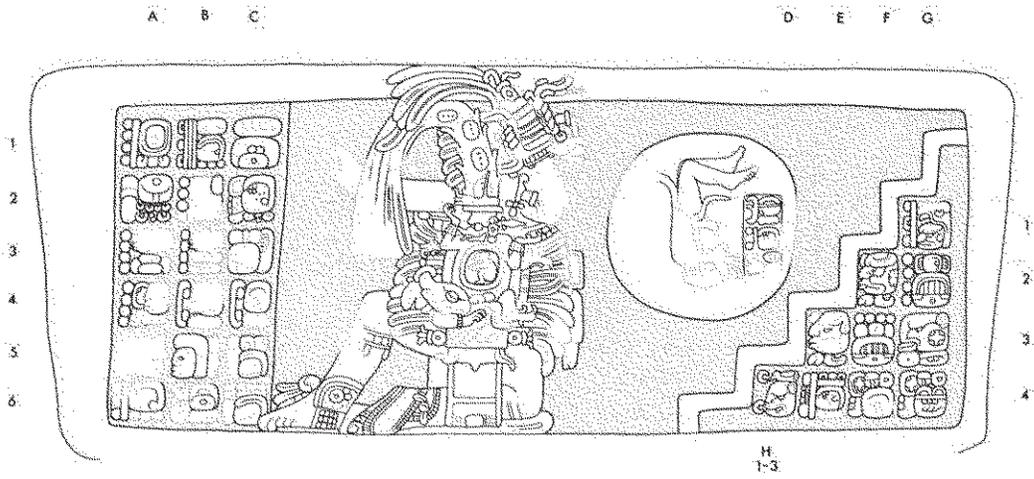


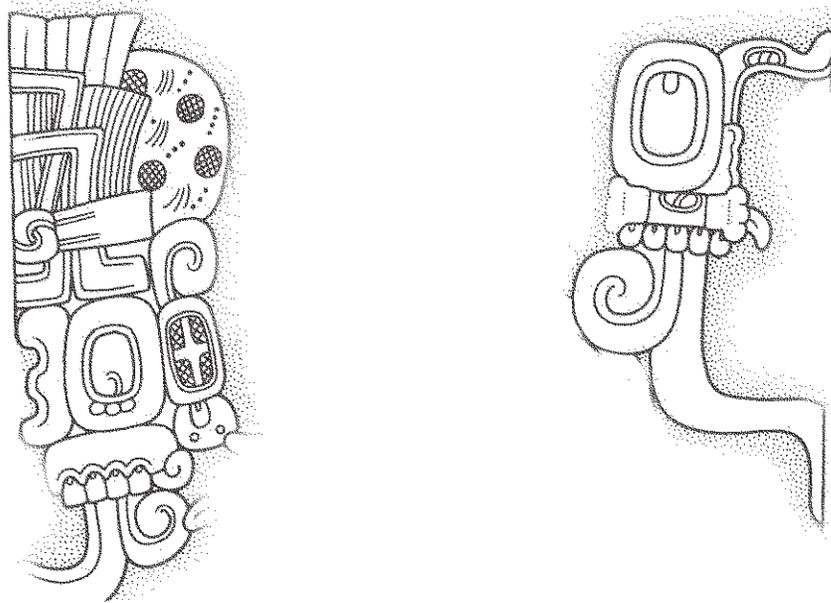
Figure 5



a

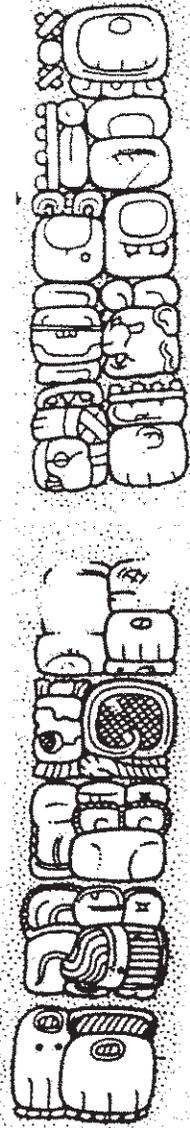
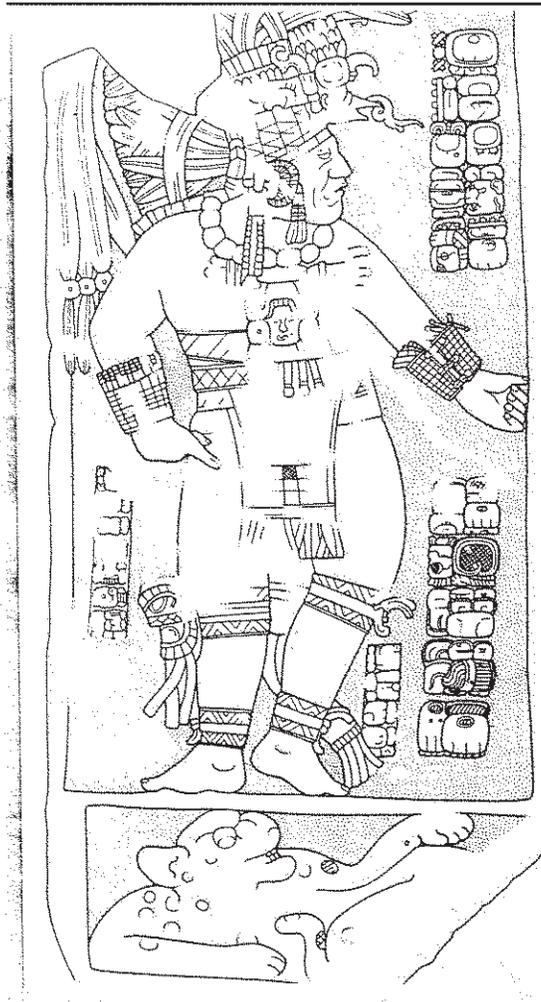


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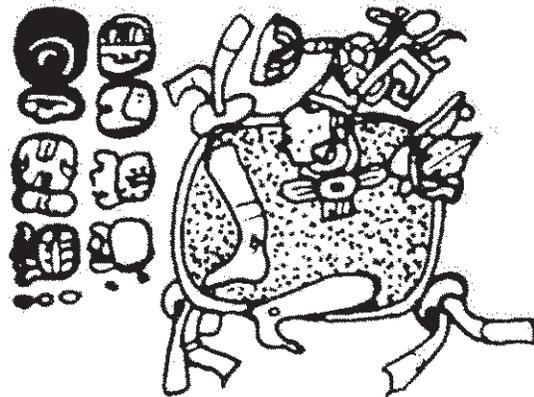


c

Figure 6

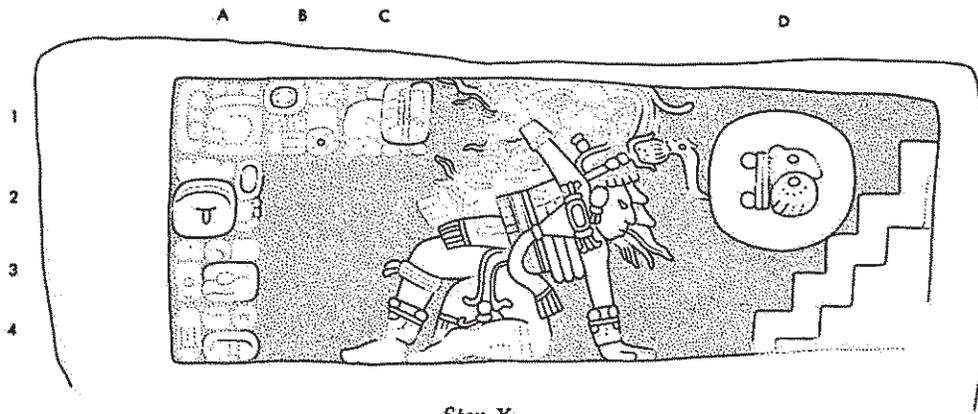


a

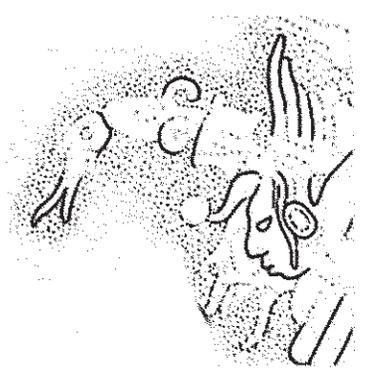


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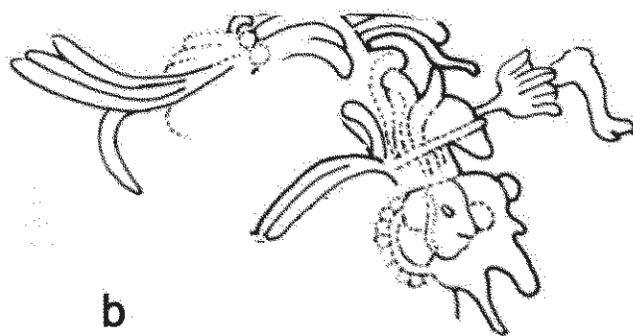
Figure 7



Step X



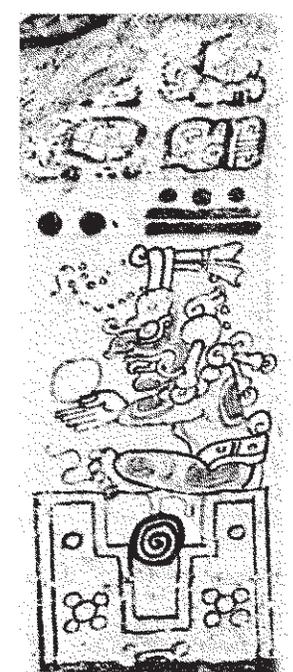
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b

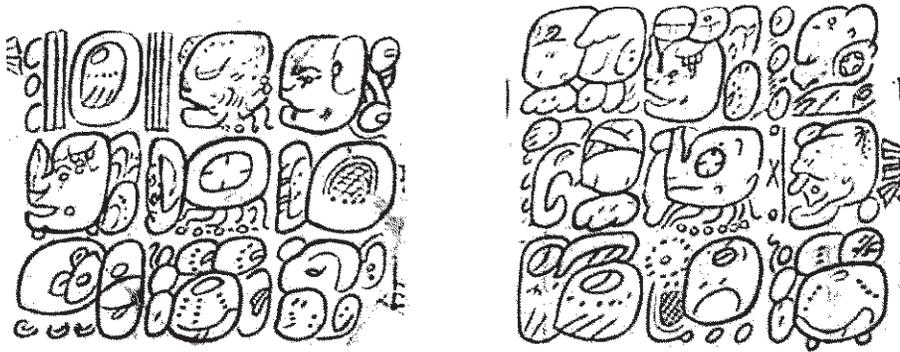


c



d

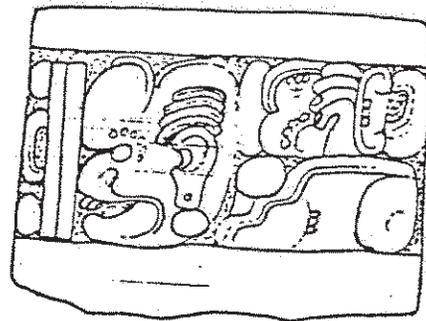
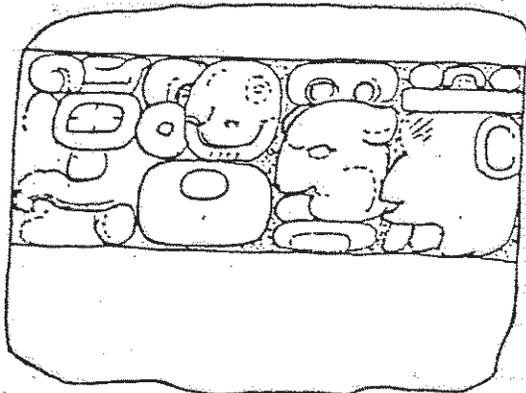
Figure 8



a



b



c

Figure 9



L M N O P Q



R

1



2

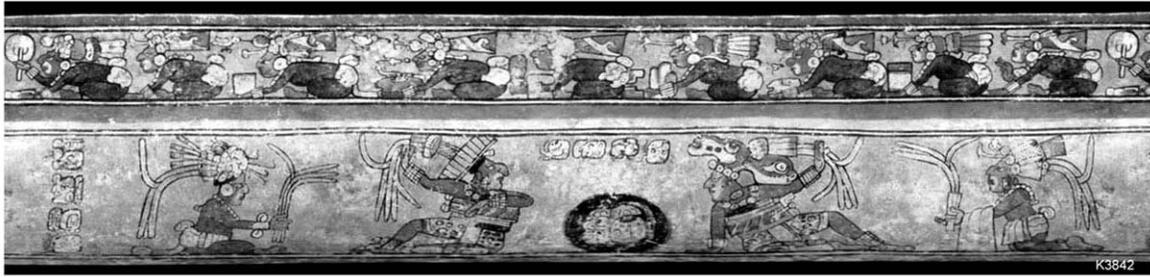
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4

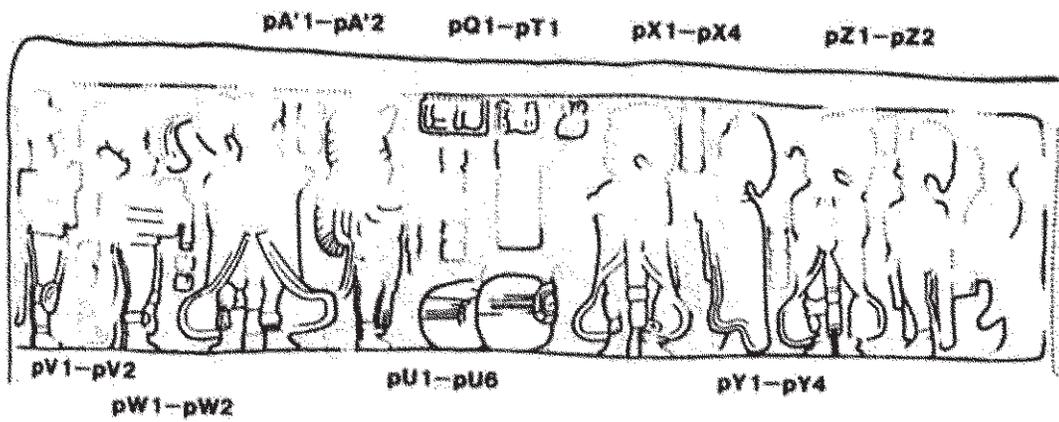
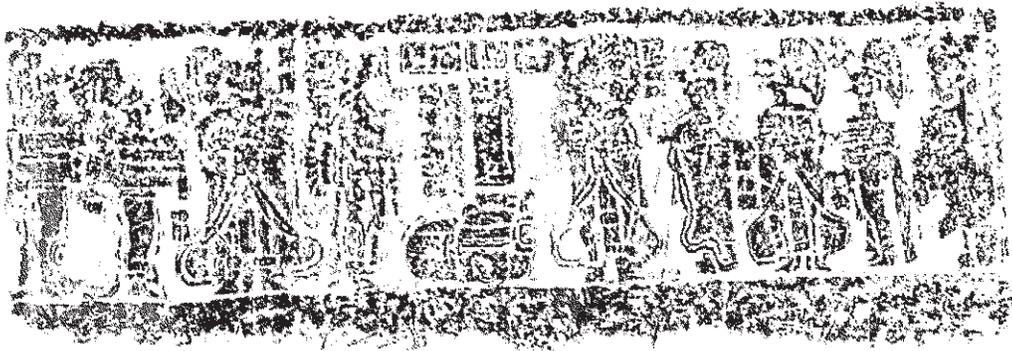
5

6

Figure 10



a



b