

The Inscriptions on Four Shell Plaques from Piedras Negras, Guatemala

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During the 1930s, the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania conducted a program of excavation at the ruins of Piedras Negras, Guatemala. In the course of that work, the vaulted tomb designated as Burial 5 was discovered below the floor of a platform (Structure J-5) at the southwest side of Court I at the west group of the Acropolis (W. R. Coe 1959:124). The burial was that of a middle-aged adult accompanied by the fragmentary skeletons of two children. With the skeletal remains were beads of clay and stone and other jewelry, carved jaguar bones, and a large number of stingray spines, six of which were incised with glyphs but badly eroded. Also among the burial goods were 209 cut and perforated *Spondylus* shells, which may have been sewed onto a cloth garment long since destroyed. Four of the shells bear incised hieroglyphs.

Morley (1937-1938:169-173) showed that the glyphs on all four shells formed a continuous text; he related the calendar round dates it contained to dates on several monuments at the site – Stelae 1, 3, 7, and 8 – all of which were situated in front of Structure J-4. This essay will expand on the relationship between the shell text (Fig. 1) and those monumental inscriptions (Figs. 2-4 and 8).

The text on the shells consists of thirty-four glyph blocks, which can be divided into four separate clauses, each of which (with one exception) appears on a different shell.

Clause I (A1-C1)

Clause I (Fig. 5) opens with a clearly recorded calendar round notation of 5 Cib (A1) 14 Yaxkin (A2), followed by the verb or event at B1. This event is represented by the so-called upended frog with the T181 verbal suffix (-ah) that Proskouriakoff identified as 'birth' in her important study of the inscriptions of this site (1960).

The two remaining glyphs of Clause I (B2, C1) name the protagonist of the birth event. Both these nominal glyphs are prefixed by the T1000a female title, which has been shown to have the value *na*, a term for 'mother' or for a woman of high position. The first of these nominal glyphs is written with a katun grapheme superfixed by

the T136 element, *ahpo* (or *ahaw*) (Lounsbury 1973). The second of these name glyphs in Clause I also carries the *ahpo* prefix. The main sign of this name, however, is not easily readable.

The date 5 Cib 14 Yaxkin appears on Stelae 1 and 3 as the date of the Long Count position 9.12.2.0.16 (Figs. 2 and 5). On Stela 1, the date (A7 and C2) is immediately followed by the birth event (B3) and the names of the same female individual. On the monument, however,

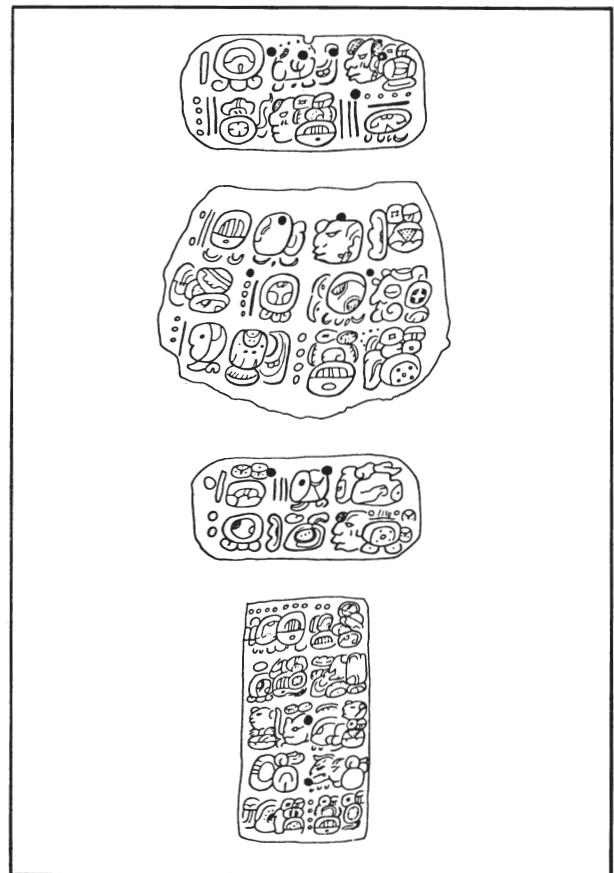


Fig. 1 Piedras Negras. The four shell plaques from Burial 5.

these names are shown in a slightly different way. The first name glyph lacks the *ahpo* element, but the glyph that follows it (D1) has *ahaw*, using the T1000e head-variant with a T229, or *ah*, phonetic complement. Because of the interchangeability between *ahpo* and *ahaw*, it is apparent that the two glyphs (C3 and D1) on Stela 1 express the same name as shown at B2 of the shell text. The second name on Stela 1, also pertaining to this female individual, is written at E1 with the same *na* prefixed to *ahpo* over T566, the “serpent segment” glyph, which is, in turn, suffixed by T116, *ne* or *-n*.

On Stela 3, the date on the shells again appears in initial series form, at A1 to A4 and B7, as 9.12.2.0.16 (Maler 1901: pl. XIII). The event is again birth, shown by the upended frog (A8). The names of the female personage are recorded at A9 and A10. Here both names are written exactly as they are on the shells, but the second name clearly shows us the intended appearance of the second name in Clause I of the shell text. It is recognizable as T505, the day sign Akbal turned on its right side. As in the shell text, this is followed by T116, *-n* or *n(e)*, the same suffix that occurs on the second name variant of Stela 1. It is interesting to note that the *na* prefix in this case is itself suffixed by the T24 phonetic variant of *na* as a reinforcing element.

By comparing Clause I of the shell text with the inscriptions of Stelae 1 and 3, we can see that the female individual under discussion had three separate name variants (Fig. 6). The first of these is Na Ahpo Katun

(T1000a.168: 28:548) on the shell text B2; on Stela 1 at C33 and D1; and on Stela 3 at A9, C3, and F3. The use of *ahpo* katun as a proper name is rare, if not unique. It is usually employed as a special title for rulers, where it refers to age by katun according to the coefficient it takes. Even granting that the *na* prefix could function as a head-variant of the coefficient one, as T1000a often does, it does not appear to do so here since the female in question – who is not a ruler – lived well over one katun, as will be demonstrated later in the analysis of the shell text.

The second name variant (Stela 1 at E1), containing the *ahpo* over the serpent segment (T566), might conceivably be read as *can*, a pan-Maya word (including cognates) for ‘snake’. This reading is strengthened by the presence of T116, *-n* or *n(e)*, which, in other glyph (i.e., *kin*), clearly serves as a phonetic complement.

In many cases in the Maya inscriptions, it appears that the two parts of emblem glyphs – the *ahpo* (T168) and the variable main sign – occur as the main elements of female names. Examples include Lady Ahpo Dos Pilas of Naranjo, Lady Ahpo Yaxchilán of Bonampak, and Lady Ahpo Palenque of Tortuguero. It is conceivable that the name Na (or Lady) Ahpo Can is a similar case, since the same *ahaw can* – but with a T130, *w(a)*, suffix making it *ahaw* – also appears at the end of the name phrase of a captive of Shield-Jaguar on Yaxchilán Lintel 45 (Fig. 6). In that text, the *ahaw can* appears at C4, where an emblem glyph would normally be. Perhaps the

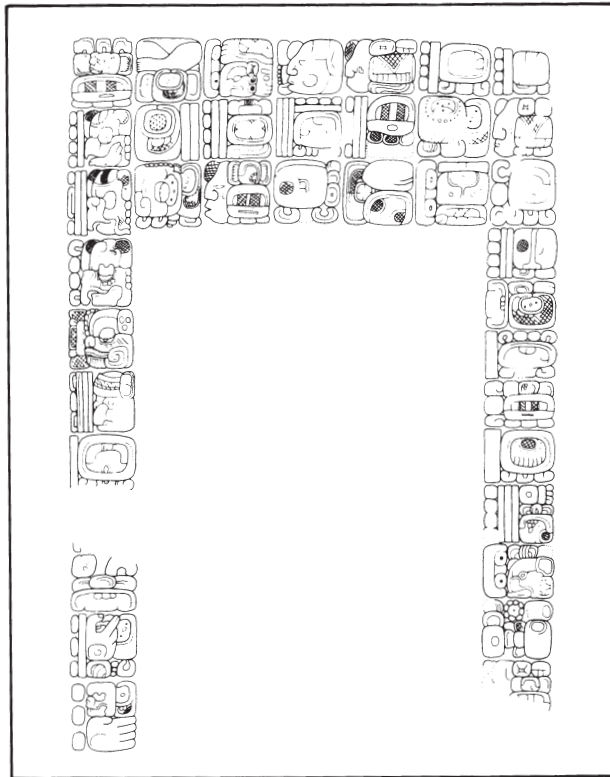


Fig. 2 The inscription on Piedras Negras Stela 1, back.

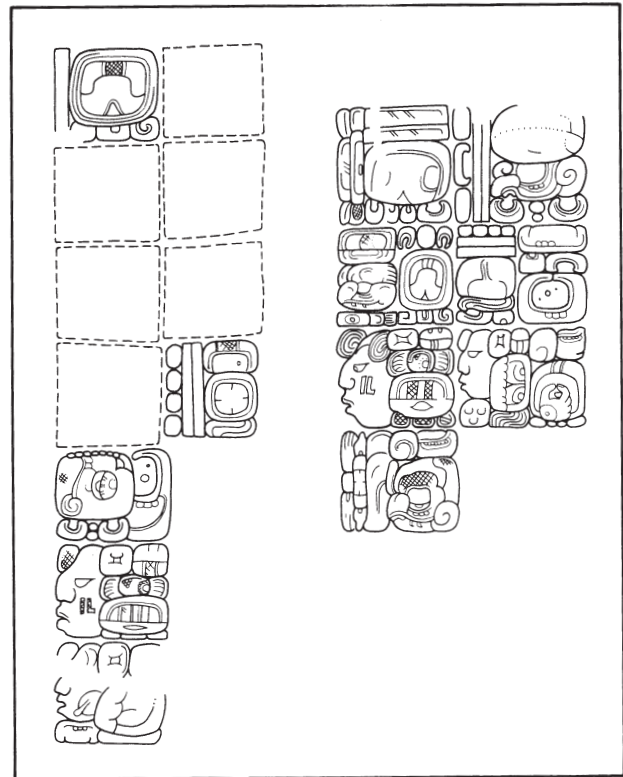


Fig. 3 Shell-related text on Piedras Negras Stela 3, back.

absence of the water-group prefix to this possible emblem glyph can be accounted for by the fact that the person depicted on Yaxchilán Lintel 45 is a prisoner in that context, not a ruler.

The third name variant of the Piedras Negras female appears in Clause I of the shell text at C1 and on Stela 3 at A10, D3, and E4. The sideways Akbal (T505) that forms the main element of the name is also suffixed by *ne* or *-n* (T116), suggesting that the original value of T505 ended with *-n*. Interestingly, this name variant of Lady Ahpo Katun is never found together with the *can* version in the same nominal phrase. Thus, the *can* and *akbal* variants appear to be interchangeable when either is found following the *ahpo* katun form of the name (Fig. 6). As noted, both *can* and *akbal* carry T116, *-n*, as a suffix, suggesting that both possess the same linguistic value as the T566 serpent segment or *can*, but such a reading can only be very tentative at this point. If the T505 and T566 elements do indeed have the same linguistic value – as indicated by their interchangeability – it would appear that the *akbal* variant of Lady Ahpo Katun’s name can work as a place reference (if emblem glyphs do indeed function in that respect), as does the serpent segment, and, if so, it would then refer to the same place. Because of the seemingly limited distribution of these references to the *akbal*/serpent segment site – so far confined to Piedras Negras and Yaxchilán – it would be possible to assume that such a site was located in the general area of the Usumacinta Valley.

Clause I of the shell text, then, can be paraphrased as follows: (It was on) 5 Cib 14 Yaxkin (9.12.2.0.16) (that)
A1 A2
 she was born Lady Ahpo Katun, Lady Ahpo “Akbal”
B1 B2 C1

Clause II (C2-G3)

Clause II of the shell text (Fig. 7) opens with a distance

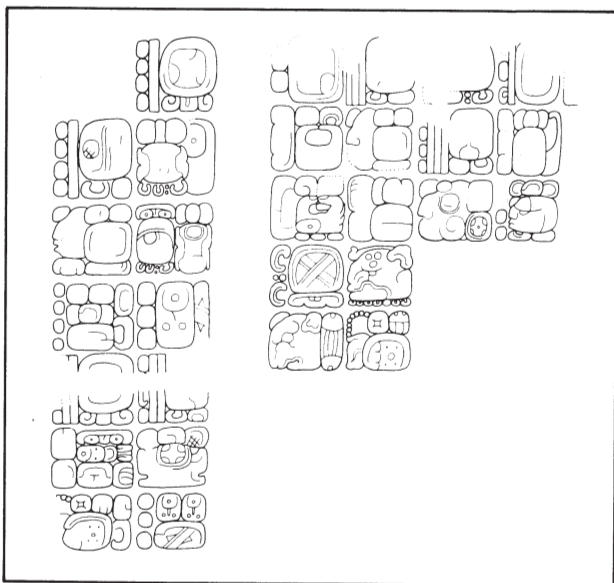


Fig. 4 Shell-related text on Piedras Negras Stela 8, side and front.

number of fifteen days and nine uinals (C2) and twelve tuns (D1), which is to be counted from 5 Cib 14 Yaxkin, recorded at the beginning of Clause I. At positions E1 and D2 an intriguing combination occurs: the first of the two glyphs is the anterior date indicator, which normally signals that the preceding date is so many days “since” a date to follow in the text, that is, the date that follows occurred *before* the date that precedes in the glyph order. In this case, however, the glyph at D2, the familiar “sun at horizon” (prefixed by the T679a posterior event indicator), combined with the anterior date indicator, appears to give the opposite meaning – the distance number is to be counted “since” the preceding date “until” a date to follow in the text. These two glyphs, therefore, function together as a posterior date indicator.

In the shell text, the distance number 12.9.15, when added to the initial series position of 5 Cib 14 Yaxkin, results in the following:

A1, A2: (9.12. 2. 0.16) 5 Cib 14 Yaxkin
 E1, D2: 12. 9.15
 9.12.14.10.11 9 Chuen 9 Kankin

As expected, the calendar round date 9 Chuen 9 Kankin follows at E2 and D3 of the shell text.

The syntax of this clause is interesting. The verb or event of Clause II is expressed at E3, following the calendar round. The verb stem is written phonetically with the *imix* form of the phoneme *ma* (T502) and with T25, *ca*, making the phonetic root *mac*, which is followed by the T181 verbal suffix *-ah*. At F1 and G1 of the shell

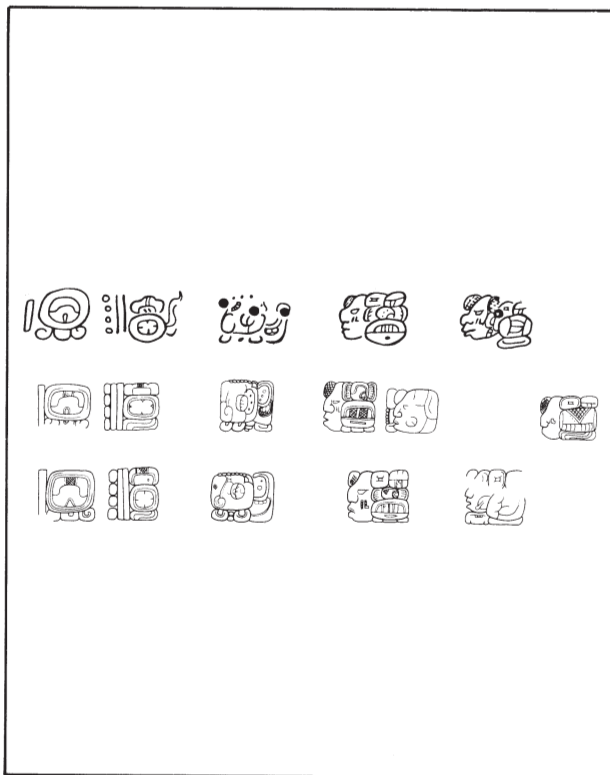


Fig. 5 Clause I of the shell text with parallel texts from Piedras Negras Stelae 1 and 3.

text appears the name phrase of Lady Ahpo Katun (F1). It is notable that the T1000a *na* element is contained in one glyph block (F1) and that the Ahpo Can name glyph at G1 is prefixed by the T23 *na* as well, working as a phonetic complement; here the T116 element is absent. The glyph following the name phrase of Lady Ahpo Can at F2 is *u cab* (T1.526), which usually occurs between the name phrases of the object and subject of a glyphic clause. Because of this context here and at other sites, the *u cab* compound can be tentatively paraphrased as 'under the auspices of' or something of that general sense, such as 'by'. Given that relationship, the name phrase at G2 and G3 appears to be the subject or agent of the clause, with Lady Ahpo Katun as the object.

That name phrase is made up of the God N title, which sometimes replaces the names of Piedras Negras rulers. It is not clear in this instance whether the God N title refers to Ruler 2, who was in power at the time of the event, or to Ruler 3, who was ruling when the texts were probably manufactured. This vagueness is not clarified by the glyph at F3, which shows that the ruler in question was in the fourth katun of his life – a four-*ahpo* katun. Both rulers indeed had lived into their fourth katun by the time the shells were inscribed. Thus, while it is impossible to tell from this clause which of the rulers is indicated, it is probable from other evidence, to be shown

below, that it was Ruler 2. The name phrase of Clause II ends with the emblem glyph of Piedras Negras at G3.

The meaning of Clause II revolves around the *mac* verb at E3, which apparently signifies an action done by Lady Ahpo Katun under the auspices of Ruler 2 or, possibly, Ruler 3. Thus, the meaning of the verb *mac* is crucial to our understanding of the clause. An inspection of various dictionaries reveals that the verb root *mac* has the general meaning 'to close' or 'to cover' in most Mayan languages (e.g., Martínez Hernández 1929:578).

Although the specific meaning 'to close' or 'to cover' does not work clearly in the shell text, there is evidence elsewhere that may bear on the matter. Glosses for *mac* and related combinations in Laughlin's unusually complete Tzotzil dictionary (1975:225) are as follows:

mac: close, cover, pin, shield, *sign up*, contract, retail, herd or drive/animals, shape up

mac: sign up, contract

*mac *** habil*: be engaged for *** year(s)

mac 'abtel: sign up for religious post

mac 'ahnil: to become engaged/at petition ceremony

The fact that this occurs only in Tzotzil does not make a very strong case for the *mac* verb of the shell text to be assigned the meaning it has in Tzotzil, but rarely are Mayan dictionaries as thorough in their treatment as is Laughlin's work. There is, however, the possibility that

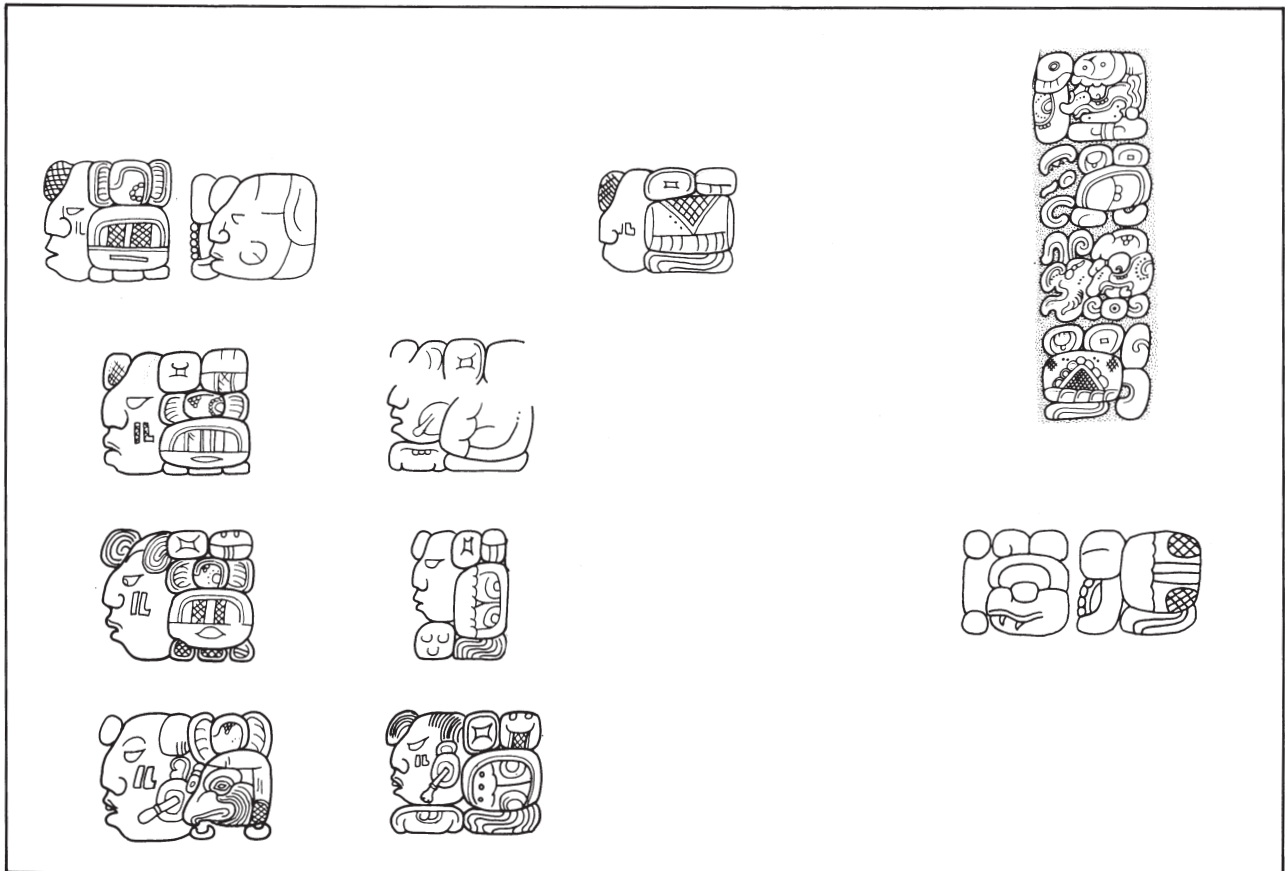


Fig. 6 Name variants of Lady Ahpo Katun on Piedras Negras Stelae 1 and 3, with related glyphs from Yaxchilán.

the meaning 'to close' or 'to cover' is the basis for a semantic pun of the sort commonly present in other Mayan languages; this would be related to the 'closing' of a contract or, by extension, to a 'betrothal' (Walter F. Morris, Jr., personal communication, 1980).

I can only speculate at this point that the meaning of the *mac* verb in the shell text has something to do with the marriage or, more likely, the betrothal of Lady Ahpo Katun and Ruler 3 of Piedras Negras. At the time of the *mac* event, Lady Ahpo Katun was approximately twelve years old, a situation at least in partial agreement with Landa's statement regarding the age of girls at marriage: "In olden times they married when they were twenty years old; but now they marry when they are twelve or fourteen. And on this account repudiation takes place more easily, since they marry without love and ignorant of married life and the duties of married people" (Tozzer 1941:100). An additional passage from Gann, related to the Maya of Belize is also noteworthy: "The Indian girls married formerly at about 14 or 15, the boys at about 17 or 18 years. After the conquest of Bacalar, however, and the expulsion of Yucatecans from Indian territory, a law was passed making marriage compulsory for all girls 12 years of age and upward" (1918:32-33).

Whatever the meaning of the *mac* event, it marks the first occasion in the inscriptions of Piedras Negras in which Lady Ahpo Katun is associated with the ruling dynasty of the site. As we will see, Lady Ahpo Katun is recorded as being related by marriage to Ruler 3 six days later. It therefore appears that the *mac* event has something to do with the marriage, whether the postulated meaning of 'betrothal' is 'under the authority of' Ruler 2 or actually 'by' Ruler 3.

There are parallel examples of Clause II of the shell text on Stelae 1 and 8 (Fig. 7) at Piedras Negras. On Stela 1, the same distance number as that seen on the shells (12.9.15) appears at D2 and E2 and brings the count forward to 9 Chuen 9 Kankin, the calendar round date of the shell text Clause II, which is seen at F1 and G1. Again, we see the posterior date indicator phrase as it appears on the shell text (E1 and D2) at D3 and E3. As expected, the event is the same *mac* (502:25.181), appearing just as it does on the shells. The name of Lady Ahpo Katun (in Ahpo Can form only) follows the event. It is interesting that this clause on Stela 1 omits the agent of the verb (Ruler 2 or 3), who appears on the shells.

On Stela 8 the corresponding clause is similar. At B18 and A19 the calendar round date 9 Chuen 9 Kankin is

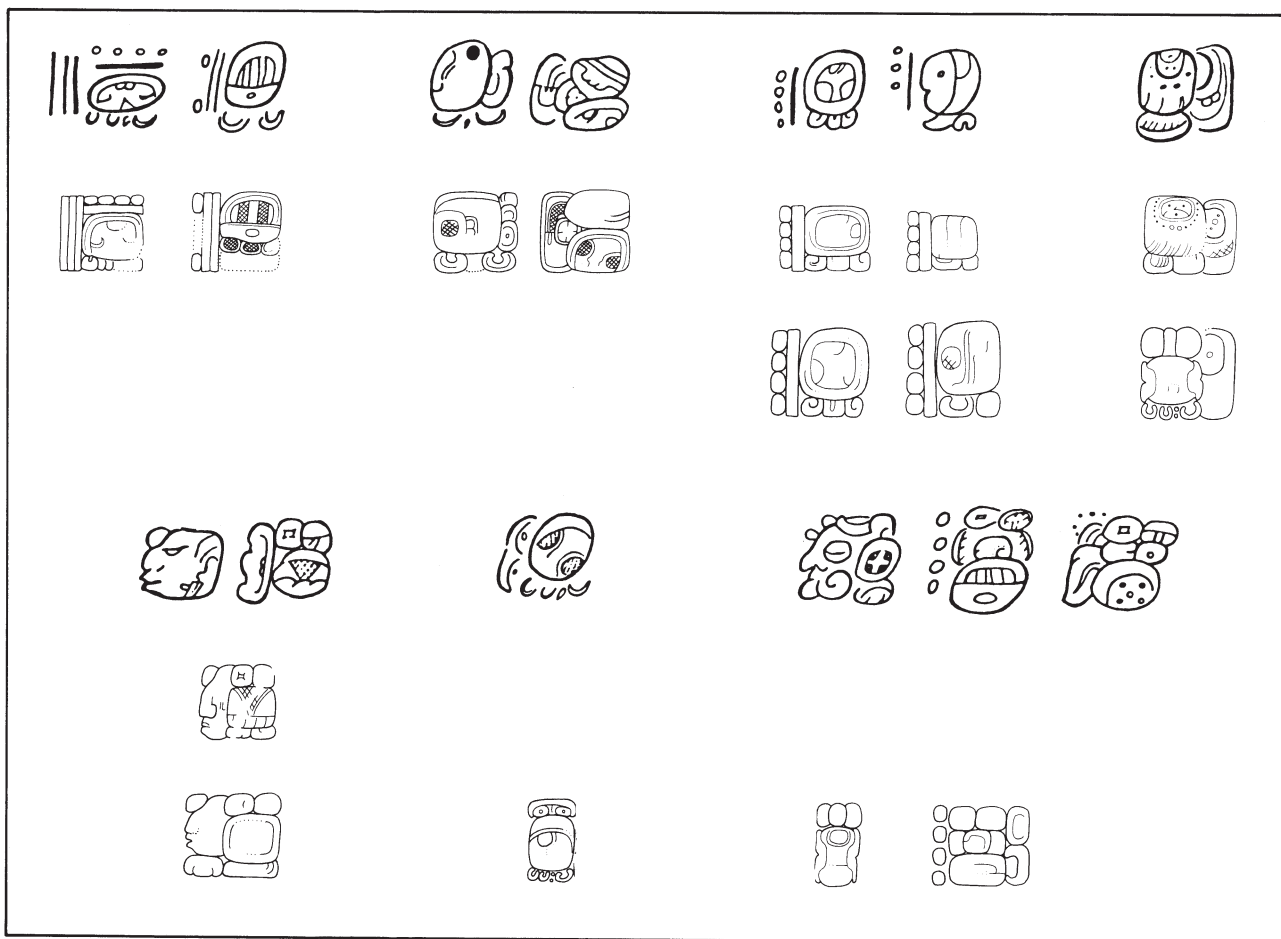


Fig. 7 Clause II of the shell text with parallel texts from Piedras Negras Stelae 1 and 8.

records the same date and *na* event with the names of Lady Ahpo Katun following at C3 and D3a. Her name phrase in this case is immediately followed by a glyph (D3b) that may designate relationship and the true name of Ruler 3 at C4.

Clause III (H1-J2)

Returning to the shells, we find Clause III beginning with a distance number of six days at H1 (Fig. 10). This distance number, when added to the 9 Chuen 9 Kankin of Clause II, works as follows:

9.12.14.10.11 9 Chuen 9 Kankin
 6
 9.12.14.10.17 2 Caban 15 Kankin

At H2 and I1, the calendar round date 2 Caban 15 Kankin appears. This is one day later than 1 Cib 14 Kankin, the date of the *na* event concerning Lady Ahpo Katun that was seen on Stelae 1 and 3.

The event at I2 is, interestingly, the same *na* event that was seen on Stelae 1 and 3. The subject of this second *na* event is recorded at J1 and J2, and the first of these two appellatives is a compound that is most frequently found in contexts where it may suggest an agency association, but this is still debatable. The second of these nominal glyphs is written with T1000a, a female head, prefixed to a title consisting of T12:585 (*ah be* or *bix[?]*). It is impossible to tell for certain whether this title refers to Lady Ahpo Katun, the protagonist of every other event on the shells, but, because of the presence of the possible agency glyph before it, I am tentatively assuming that the glyph does indeed refer to Lady Ahpo Katun, but by title only.

Clause III of the shells can be studied in comparison with glyphs E1 to F5 on Stela 8 (Fig. 4). Here the date 2 Caban 14 Kankin (9.12.14.10.17) appears at E1 and

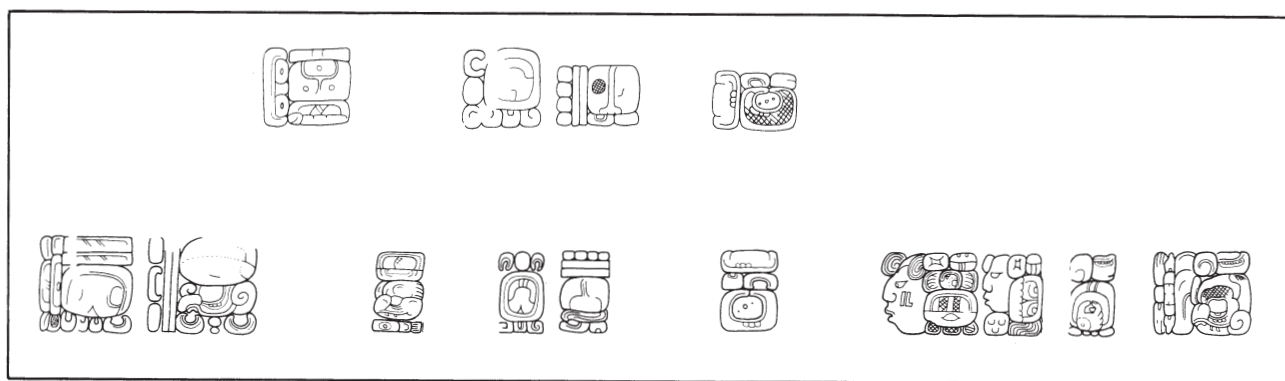


Fig. 9 Related texts on Piedras Negras Stelae 1 and 3.

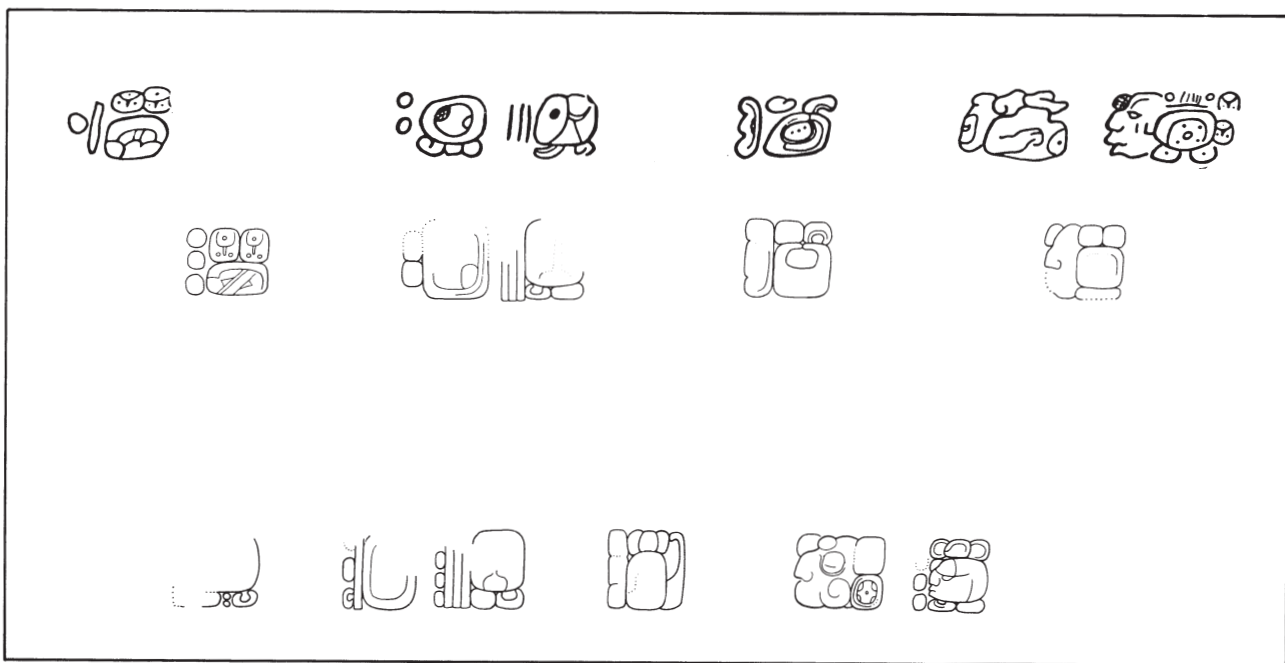


Fig. 10 Clause III of the shell text with parallel texts from Piedras Negras Stela 8.

F1 as a result of a distance number of three days counted from 12 Ix 12 Kankin, the death date of Ruler 2 (A22 and B22).

The event of the clause on Stela 8 is also the *na* event, written at E2; the subject is recorded at F2. The name of the subject is written as a female (T1000a) with *ahpo* (T168) above an eroded main sign, which would suggest the Ahpo Can variant of the name of Lady Ahpo Katun. This reading is confirmed by the fact that the glyphs at E3 and E4 name the subject as being related by marriage to Ruler 3, named at F4 and F5.

To summarize briefly the sequence of these *na* events, we find that the first one (on Stelae 1 and 3) occurs on 1 Cib 14 Kankin (9.12.14.10.16), with Lady Ahpo Katun clearly named as the subject (Stela 3). The second *na* event occurs one day later, on 2 Caban 15 Kankin; Lady Ahpo Katun is again the subject.

The *na* event appears frequently at other sites and seems to have different associations. Schele (1984) has identified the *na* event as recording sacrifice. With prisoners – its most frequent association – it carries the connotation of humiliation and shame. With rulers, it appears to relate to episodes of personal bloodletting as acts of self-humiliation in order to gain merit, probably on the supernatural level. These associations have been supported linguistically in Yucatec, Chol, Tzotzil, and other Mayan languages. In all those cases, the root of the verb is *na*, which corresponds to the glyphic expression of the event where *wa* (T130) and *ah* (T181) make up the verbal suffix *wah*, with *na* (T23) as the verb stem. Additional meanings of *na* that seem most applicable to the events at Piedras Negras appear to revolve around the acts of “wanting”, “remembering”, and “commemorating the dead”, as well as “dreaming” and “envisioning”. Thus, it appears that Lady Ahpo Katun may be remembering or commemorating Ruler 2 – who had died two and three days before the *na* events – through personal bloodletting on the two consecutive days. Such an act could also have involved the envisioning (as a result of the weakened condition after bloodletting) of Ruler 2. An episode of this “vision quest” may be the subject of Yaxchilán Lintel 25 (Fig. 11), where a royal woman is shown soon after bloodletting, having what appears to be a supernatural vision.

Clause III can be paraphrased:

(It was) 6 days (until) 2 Caban 15 Kankin (9.12.14.10.17)
 H1 H2 I1
 she “remembered” (Ruler 2) (the agent) Lady Ah Be.
 I2 J1 J2

On Stela 8 we find a calendar round date of 6 Imix 19 Kankin (9.12.14.11.1) recorded at H1 and G2 (Fig. 10). This date is surely four days after the second of the commemorative bloodletting events (with a distance number at G1?), written as *na* in the previous clause. The verb or event that follows the calendar round date is, unfortunately, not readable, but the subject of the event is named with God N, the title that, as we have seen, refers to Ruler 2. Since the date of the unknown event

is seven days after the death of Ruler 2, it may refer to a supernatural event concerning the dead ruler. The date, however, is also precisely two uinals before the inauguration of Ruler 3 (9.12.14.13.1). It is therefore possible that the event in question had something to do with the transfer of power from Ruler 2 to Ruler 3.

Clause IV (K1-L5)

The fourth clause of the shell text (Fig. 1) opens with a long distance number of zero days and four uinals (K1a), three tuns (K1b), and two katuns (L1a), which, when added to the date of Clause III, results in:

9.12.14.10.17 2 Caban 15 Kankin
 2. 3. 4. 0
 9.14.17.14.17 1 Caban 0 Mol

The date recorded K2 is written with 1 Caban, and although the haab position is written with a tun element, meaning ‘end of’ and Yaxkin, it simply means ‘the end of Yaxkin’, which is identical to ‘the seating of Mol’.

The verb or event of Clause IV is expressed at L2a with the same bloodletting event (*na*) that was seen in Clause III. The remaining portions of L2 may also be part of the verb.

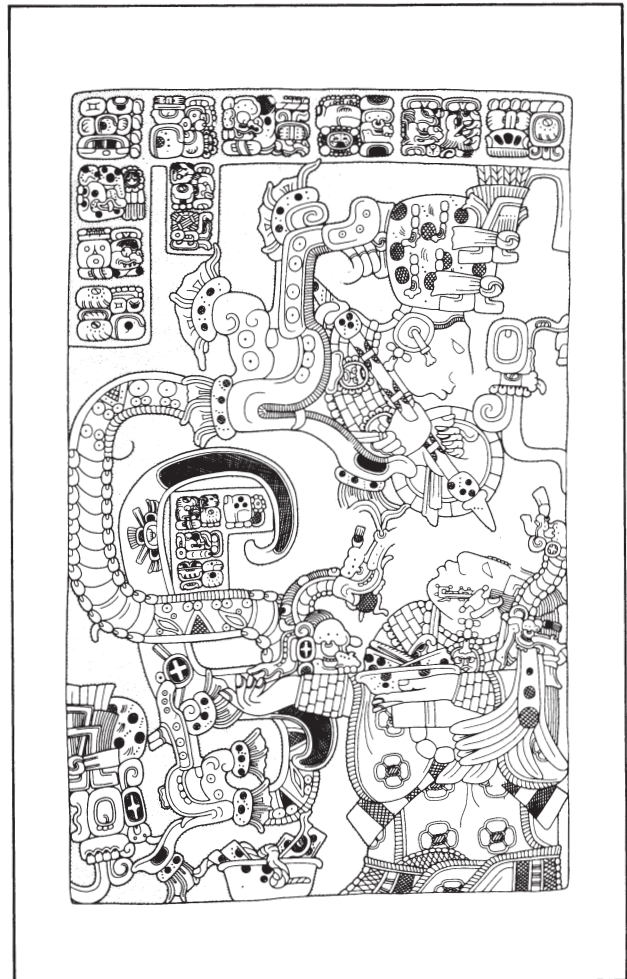


Fig. 11 Yaxchilán Lintel 25.

The syntactical order of Clause IV is much like that of Clause II on the shells, for it contains an object of the verb and a subject, as implied by the *u cab* glyph at L3a. The name of the object may be written with *na*, T1000a, suggesting that the person is female, and T74:565 with a bat compound (T117.149[?]756). The subject or agent of the verb is clearly recorded at L3b as being Lady Ahpo Can (or Katun). Thus, the event – again probably one of commemoration through bloodletting – is performed ‘under the auspices of’ or ‘by’ Lady Ahpo Katun.

Following the name of Lady Ahpo Katun, we see a glyph at K4, which, although unrecognizable, may work as a relationship glyph, as suggested by the names and titles of Ruler 3, which follow at L4, K5, and L5. These names are identified as those of Ruler 3 because of their occurrence elsewhere in other contexts: the water lily jaguar at L4 is seen on Stela 8 at F4, and the name at K5a seems to be the same as that on Stela 3 at C4(?). These names of Ruler 3 on the shells are followed by the Piedras Negras emblem glyph (K5b) and a 4 Ahpo Katun title (L5a).

A paraphrase of Clause IV:

(It was) 0 days, 4 uinals, 3 tuns, and 2 katuns until the
 K1a K1b L1a L1b
day 1 Caban completion of Yaxkin (9.14.17.14.17) she
 K2a K2b
remembered (??) Lady “Bat” under the auspices of Lady
 L2a K3 L3a
Ahpo Can, the relation (of) Ruler 3 (title), Ahpo of Piedras
 L3b K4 L4 K5a K5b
Negras, 4 Ahpo Katun, Ahpo Kin.
 L5a L5b

It is tempting to suppose that Lady “Bat” was the actual person in Burial 5 and that the purpose of the shell inscriptions is to emphasize the importance of Lady Ahpo Katun and, hence, of the bloodletting rite held under her auspices. Another possibility is that the person entombed in Burial 5 is Lady Ahpo Katun herself. The purpose of the inscriptions, therefore, could simply have been to recall important events in the past concerning her own life.

Both these possibilities appear to be eliminated by the physical evidence, for the investigation (Coe 1959:124) of the badly preserved bones of the principal skeleton in the tomb indicated the person to be a male. (It is not certain, however, that Lady “Bat” is actually female.) The exact relationship between the persons named on the shell inscriptions and the skeletal material, therefore, cannot be reconciled at this point.

Conclusion

By relating the shell text to some of the monumental inscriptions of Piedras Negras, we can make the following possible summary of people and events.

On 9.12.2.0.16 5 Cib 14 Yaxkin, Lady Ahpo Katun is born, and 12 years and 133 days later – on 9.12.14.10.11 9 Chuen 9 Kankin – she is betrothed to Ruler 3 of Piedras Negras. Three days after this engagement, Ruler 2 – probably the father of Ruler 3 – dies (9.12.14.10.14 12 Ix 12 Kankin). It appears that the date 13 Men 13 Kankin, the day after the death of Ruler 2, is recorded, but the associated event and the protagonist of that date are uncertain. On the two following days – 1 Cib 14 Kankin and 2 Caban 15 Kankin – Lady Ahpo Katun perhaps commemorates the death of Ruler 2 by bloodletting and, in so doing, may also have envisioned his image. Five days afterward, on 6 Imix 19 Kankin, an event – possibly supernatural or, perhaps, political – occurs in association with Ruler 2.

On a much later occasion, 42 years and 214 days after the last date of the eventful 10 days noted above, Lady Ahpo Katun seems to have commemorated the death of one Lady “Bat”, possibly a relation. Thus do the four shells from Piedras Negras Burial 5 commemorate the deeds of Lady Ahpo Katun.

Note

The illustrations in this essay, with the exception of Fig. 1, part of Fig. 6, and Fig. 11, are by the author. Fig. 1 is by Linda Schele. The drawing of the glyphs from Yaxchilán Lintel 45 in Fig. 6 as well as Fig. 11 are by Ian Graham.