

# THE MAYA VASE BOOK

## A BRIEF NOTE ON THE NAME OF A VISION SERPENT

LINDA SCHELE

On a long hot August day in 1973, Gillett Griffin, David Joralemon, and I spent a wonderful, intense day walking through the ruins and talking about the soon-to-explode world of Maya religion and history. During that exchange, David told me about one of the publications which would stimulate that explosion of understanding--he warned me to order Michael Coe's new book as soon as it was announced. Thanks to that warning, I ordered one of the first thousand printed of *The Maya Scribe and His World* and was there to participate in the exponential advances that came from his truly amazing insights into the imagery and texts on Maya pottery. The impact of that book, along with the new avenues of research opened the *Primera Mesa Redonda of Palenque*, which took place in December of the same year, have truly changed the way we see and understand the ancient Maya and the world created in their fertile minds. Michael Coe's identification of the Primary Standard Sequence and his convincing arguments that scenes on pottery depicted myths that eventually became the Quiche Maya Popol Vuh, elevated the painting and texts on pottery to the status of primary source from the neglected oblivion into which they had fallen.

The essays in this book review the history of scholarship on pottery and inscriptions, present new readings on the PSS, and the findings on mythology, meaning, and imagery that have been gleaned from pottery in the year's since Coe's pioneering work. During those years, my primary contribution (Schele 1983 and 1988) has been to identify the "jaguar-covered ahau" that appears in so many name phrases as a title identifying the creature depicted as an Underworld denizen. Since these creatures appear on more than one pot, the same technique that Schellhas (1904) used to identify the names of the gods in the codices can be applied to find the names of the animals, people, spirits, gods, and "bumps in the night" that inhabit the Maya Underworld. In 1985, I prepared comparative charts in anticipation of a chapter in a book I was working on with George and David Stuart. Others have since employed the same techniques to find a profusion of new names of these creatures, and the work continues. This area of study is one of great potential for immediate and future research.

In this brief essay, I want to deal with only one of the many name phrases that have been discovered, both to point out the

name of one of these creatures and how that name relates to other areas of study. One of the Vision Serpents that appears repeatedly in pottery scenes is distinguished by a deer antler and deer ear attached to its head (Figure 1). That it is a Vision Serpent is amply demonstrated by the number of examples that belch gods of various sorts from its gapping mouth. In at least three of its occurrences, this beastie is named *chih chan* in an adjacent

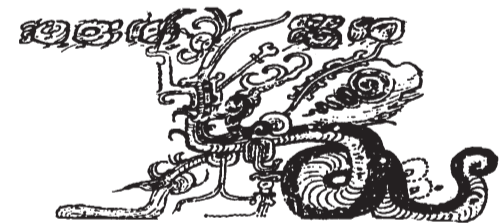


Figure 1 Kerr file No. 531



Figure 2

phrase (Figure 2; a,b and c,d). In the fourth (Figure 3), it is also called *chih chan* (written with "sky" rather than "snake"), but the creature shown is a deer wearing a snake around its neck. The creature is a "deer serpent" whose name survives as the great Horned Serpent of Chorti myth, and as the fifth day of the Yucatec 260-day calendar. Thompson (1950:75) made this connection between the modern Chorti myth and the ancient day name, but at the time the "deer-serpent" combined-creature on the pots had not yet been identified.

Perhaps the most interesting new piece of information is the name for the fifth day in the Chol calendar. In a list of day names

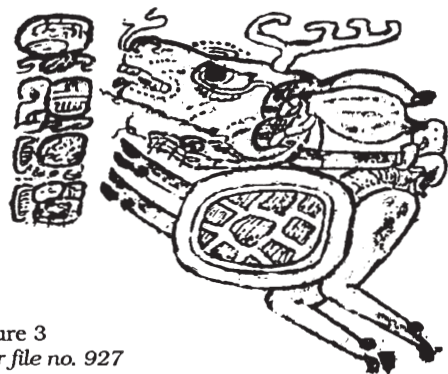
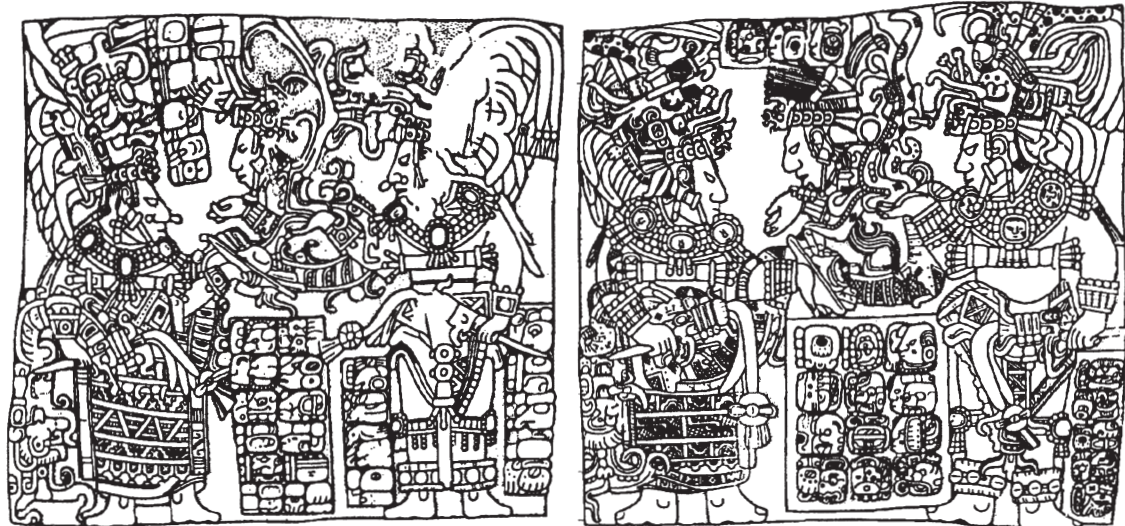


Figure 3  
Kerr file no. 927



Yachilan Lintel 13

Yaxchilan Lintel 14

	auxiliary verb	"yax-mul"	"hun-uitic"	"na-chan"	lancet
Pomona Wall Panel					
Pomona Panel X					
Quirigua J					
Yaxchilan Temple 33					
Yaxchilan Lintel 14					
Yaxchilan Lintel 13					

Verbal phrases associated with the "na-chan" blood-letting events  
(Pomona and Yaxchilan drawings courtesy of the Peabody Museum, Harvard University)

(1988:375) lists *nachan* as the fifth day. This word corresponds to a word that appears in the names of other Vision Serpents. David Stuart (personal communication, 1988) has identified the name of the Vision Serpent on Yaxchilan Lintel 14 as *Chaanal Chac Bay Chan* (Figure 4), and he has recognized the same name repeated on Copán Stelae 10 and 13.



Figure 4

Yaxchilan Lintel 14

His insight has led me to conclude that the *Yaxol Hun Uinic Nachan* that I have previously identified with vision rites (Schele 1982:67), is in fact the name for another of these Vision Serpents. In this context, the word for "serpent" is usually prefixed by *na*, exactly as in the Chol name for the fifth day. Thus, the Yucatec name for that day used a borrowed name from one Vision Serpent to substitute for another one, which was probably the standard name in the Cholan languages.

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