

## The *Way* Glyph: Evidence for “Co-essences” among the Classic Maya

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“[R]eversal or association between humans and animals recalls what appear to be zoomorphic expressions in ancient Maya art...” (Bruce 1979:70)

**A**MONG THE MOST WIDESPREAD OF MESOAMERICAN CONCEPTS is that of a “companion spirit,” a supernatural being with whom a person shares his or her consciousness (Foster 1944; Monaghan n.d.; Stratmeyer & Stratmeyer 1977:133; Villa Rojas 1947:583). According to ethnographic reports, groups as far apart as the Huichol in Mexico and the Maya of Central America believe in such spirits (Foster 1944:100; La Farge 1947; Saler 1964). What is puzzling, however, is why the concept of a “companion” has had so little impact on interpretations of Precolumbian iconography and religion (see Bruce 1979:70-73; Furst 1973). In this paper, we make two points: first, that Maya hieroglyphs and art do indeed document the notion of a companion spirit as far back as the Classic Period; and second, that these beings appear to have been central to much of Classic Maya art and religion.

### ETHNOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

Companion spirits have long been of interest to anthropologists. In the 19th century, both Brasseur de Bourbourg and Brinton wrote at length on the subject, with Brinton voicing the more widely cited view that “guardian spirits” (his term for companion spirits) were the vestiges of a “secret organization” dedicated to the “annihilation of the government and religion which [whites] had introduced” (Brinton 1894:69). Although few scholars believe this today, Brinton did provide the foundation for all later research on the subject.

Of more recent studies, Foster’s work on companion spirits in Mesoamerica is perhaps the most influential (Foster 1944). Foster’s contribution was to distinguish between two beings: a spirit companion and a transforming witch. The former, the *tonal*, was linked to people by fate or fortune, usually according to a person’s date of birth; the qualities of the *tonal*, which might be an animal or bird, were reflected in the character and personality of its “owner” (Foster 1944:103). The witch, or *nagual*, was far more sinister: By night it took the form of an aggressive and feared animal, which strove to injure and kill its victims. Both terms were, of course, Nahuatl in origin (Andrews 1975:455, 474). More recent studies have tended to accept Foster’s distinction (Holland 1961:168-172; Kaplan 1956:363), although some have not (Wagley 1949:65).

In our opinion, the most useful label for companion spirits is neither *tonal* nor *nagual*, but “co-essence,” a term introduced by Monaghan (n.d.). A co-essence is “an animal or celestial phenomenon (e.g., rain, lightning, wind) that is believed to share in the consciousness of the

person who 'owns' it" (Monaghan n.d.:115). The linkage is so close that when the co-essence is wounded or destroyed, the owner grows ill or dies (Thompson 1958:273-277). As a label, "co-essence" is relatively close to the sense of *tonal*, although it is preferable to other terms in that it avoids the pitfalls of using Nahuatl terms for Maya concepts (Saler 1964:306) and steers away from ideas of "witchcraft" and "werewolfism," which are of doubtful relevance to many parts of the Maya region (Correa 1955:81; La Farge 1947:151; Saler 1964:306; Wisdom 1952:122).

Co-essences take many forms in the Maya area. Some are reptiles, rain, dwarfs, balls of fire, comets, inanimate objects, or rainbows; others appear as huge bucks, birds, flying jaguars, or peculiar composite creatures (Foster 1944:87; Wagley 1949:65-66). Most behave in odd ways or show unusual features—great ugliness or bloodshot eyes are thought to be sure marks of a co-essence (Saler 1964:313). For much of the time they are incorporeal and lie deeply embedded "in the heart" (Villa Rojas 1947:584). Yet when a person is asleep his co-essence roams. It is probably for this very reason that a broadly distributed term for co-essence builds upon the root "sleep" or "dream" (see below). Bruce in particular (1979:23-24) shows that Lacandon co-essences, the *oneno'*, manifest themselves to their owners in dreams.<sup>1</sup>

Co-essences have two other interesting features: Humans are not the only entities who have them, and many people have more than one. Historical accounts suggest that the deities of the Quiché Maya possess co-essences (Foster 1944:87), and that some villagers regard saints, such as St. James the Apostle, as their spirit companions (Saler 1964:310). Nor are the spirits limited in number: According to several sources, individuals and gods may have more than one co-essence, particularly if the owner is powerful or spiritually knowledgeable (Foster 1944:88; Stratmeyer & Stratmeyer 1977:130,139). Yet, as among the Mam, "(m)ost people go through life knowing that they have a *nagual* (co-essence), but never knowing what it is" (Wagley 1949:65). Such knowledge is often restricted to the ritual and calendrical specialists of traditional Maya society.

The notion of co-essences, however interesting from a psychological perspective, never found a sympathetic audience among the secular and ecclesiastical authorities of colonial Guatemala and Mexico. The masked dances that apparently represented co-essences—the *nawal* of Yucatán (cognate with *nagual*?) and the *tum teleche* of highland Guatemala—soon came to be seen as heretical and deviant practices (Bricker 1981:148; Chinchilla Aguilar 1953:290-291). Within a few centuries of the conquest spirit companions had joined the witches, demons, and lycanthropes of the Spanish Colonial imagination.

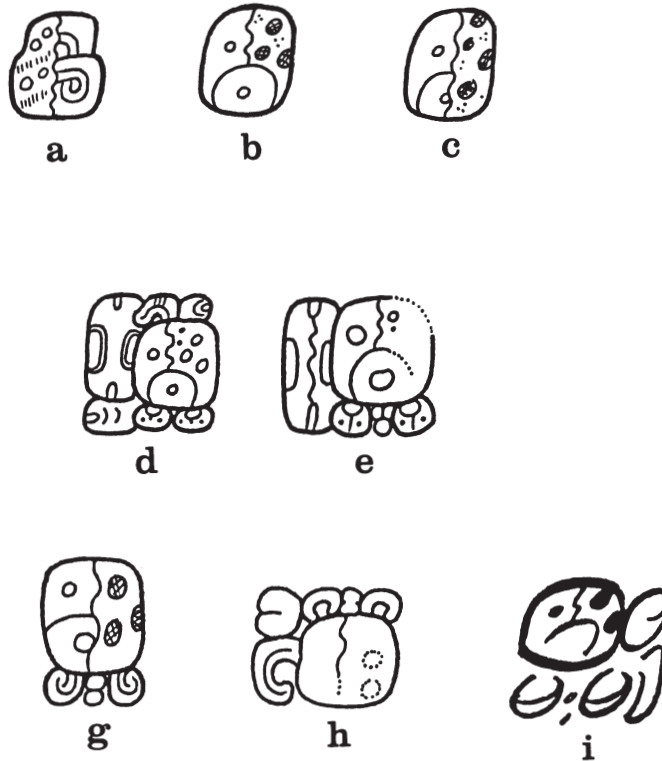
#### CO-ESSENCES IN THE CLASSIC PERIOD

At the beginning of this paper we asked an important question: Do co-essences, so widespread in the belief system of the living Maya, appear in Classic Maya art and writing? We now believe that a relatively common hieroglyph, T539 (or T572 in the codical form deciphered by Bricker [1986:90-91]), is the sign for co-essence, and that its reading is **way** (Fig. 1a-c).

A number of scholars have studied T539 with varying success. Kelley (1962: Pl. 14) identified the sign as a reference to the equinox, while both Adams (1977:415) and Quirarte (1979:137) preferred to see it as a title for lords of a jaguar lineage. Neither interpretation is convincing since the authors fail to base their arguments on phonetic decipherments or to explain precisely how their identifications elucidate the contexts in which T539 appears.

So far, the only epigrapher to propose a phonetic decipherment is Linda Schele, who reads the sign *balan-ahau/balam ahau*, "hidden lord" or "jaguar lord" (Schele 1985; 1988:298). Schele's interpretation is attractive, for it at once takes account of the glyph's components—an "ahau" face and the pelt of a jaguar (*balam* or *balan* in Mayan languages)—as well as substitution patterns in the inscriptions of Palenque and Tikal. It also helps explain the contexts of T539. According to Schele, the glyph identifies dozens of underworld creatures who dance in scenes on

FIGURE 1. THE WAY GLYPH AND ITS PHONETIC COMPLEMENTS



a-c: Generic forms of *way*.

d: PAL Tablet of the Temple of the Sun, H9.

e: PAL Tablet of the Temple of the Foliated Cross, *alfarda*, J1.

f: COL, Late Classic painted vase, detail (After Quirarte 1976: Fig. 8-4 [B4]).

g: YAX Lintel 15, F1.

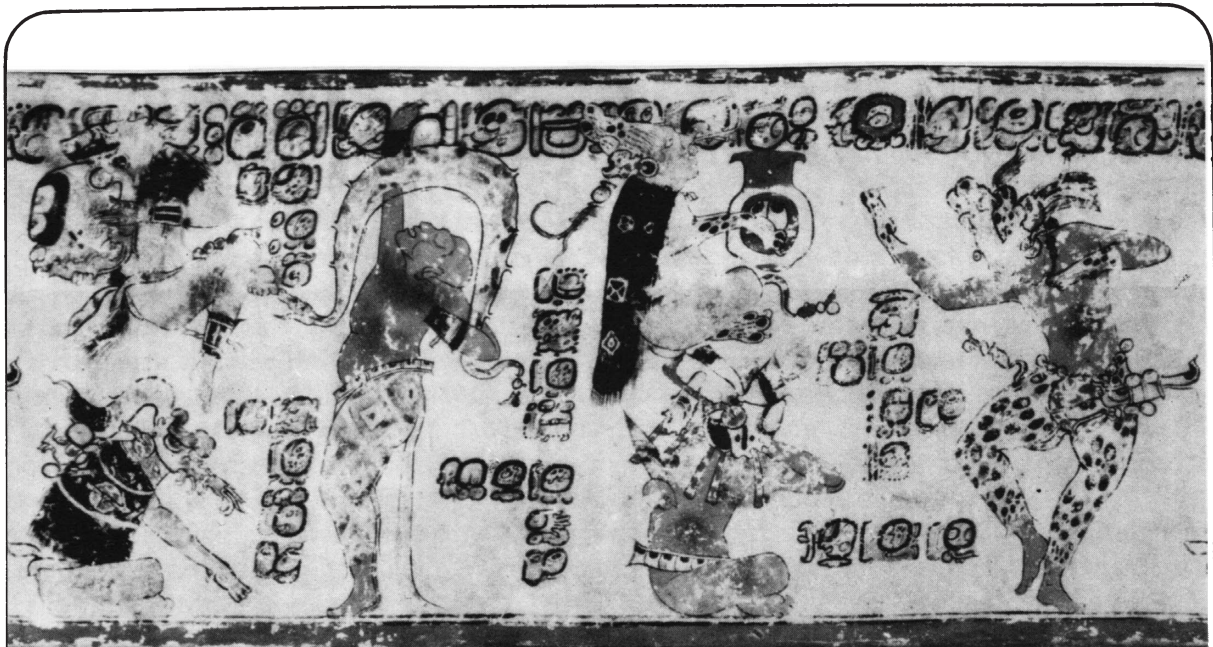
h: COL, Panel in the New Orleans Museum of Art, detail.

i: COL, Late Classic "codex-style" bowl (Kerr no. 1811).

Classic Maya vases. The figures on the famed vase from Altar de Sacrificios (Fig. 2) are perhaps the best known examples of such beings. Can these images represent, as Schele suggests, the "hidden lords" or royal dead in the underworld? At the very least, Schele makes a good case that such figures are supernatural, a possibility overlooked by most other authors (Schele 1988:298).

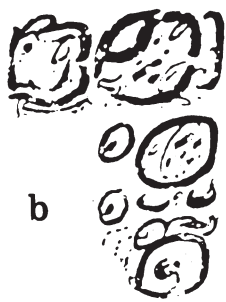
Nevertheless, we feel that Schele's reading is incorrect, and that dead lords are not the main characters on these vessels.<sup>2</sup> Our evidence is primarily epigraphic. In most cases, the affixes attached to T539 or T572 are the phonetic signs *wa* and *ya* (see Stuart 1987:46-47 for a syllabic chart). Typically, *wa* appears before T539; *ya*, after it. At Palenque, a glyphic compound that incorporates T539 shows that the *wa* prefix is entirely optional (Fig. 1d,e). In a few instances, *wa* and *ya* are found together—*wa-ya*/T539 or T539/*wa-ya*—or they do not occur at all (Fig. 1f-i). In our opinion, the most obvious explanation for such spellings is that the phonetic signs, which spell *way*, trumpet the reading of the glyph they are attached to. Accordingly, we propose that T539 is a logograph with the reading **WAY**. The affixes are simply functioning as phonetic complements.

To be convincing, however, the reading must explain the contexts noted and studied by



a

a: ALS, burial 96. Late Classic polychrome vase (rollout photograph by Otis Imboden, courtesy of the National Geographic Society, Washington, and the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Guatemala).  
 b-g: Same as a, above. Enlarged views of six gly-  
 phic passages.



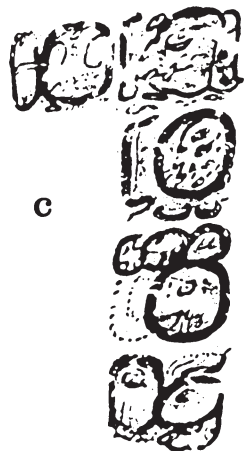
b



d



f



c



e



g

FIGURE 2. A PAINTED VASE FROM BURIAL 96, ALTAR DE SACRIFICIOS, GUATEMALA

Schele. In these cases, T539 with phonetic complements and prefixed *u* occurs in captions that refer to the supernatural figures and relate them to certain historical personages, each denoted by an Emblem Glyph or place name. Thus, the supernatural is the “T539” of such-and-such a person. Here, the *way* reading has to explain the relationship between the supernatural and historical figures.

We believe that it does so. The following dictionary entries—far from exhaustive—support our hypothesis:

YUCATEC	<i>way</i>	“transfigurar por encantamiento” <sup>1</sup>
	<i>vaay</i>	“familiar que tienen los nigrománticos, bruxos, o hechizeros, que es algun animal. . .” <sup>2</sup>
	<i>vayazba</i>	“soñar” <sup>2</sup>
	<i>wayak’</i>	“visión entre sueños” <sup>1</sup>
	<i>vayak</i>	“prognóstico, o palabra o de adivinos, o de sueños” <sup>2</sup>
LACANDON	<i>äh-way</i>	“wizard” <sup>3</sup>
	<i>way-äl</i>	“metamorphose” <sup>3</sup>
PROTO-CHOLAN	* <i>way</i>	“dormir” <sup>4</sup>
	* <i>wayak’</i>	“sueño” <sup>4</sup>
CHOL	<i>wäy</i>	“other spirit” <sup>5</sup>
	<i>wäyäl</i>	“sleep” <sup>5</sup>
	<i>wäyibäl</i>	“sleeping place” <sup>5</sup>
COLONIAL TZOTZIL	<i>vay</i>	“sleep, take lodging” <sup>6</sup>
	<i>vayajel</i>	“witchcraft” <sup>6</sup>
	<i>vayichin</i>	“dream” <sup>6</sup>
	<i>vayajom</i>	“brujo, nigromántico” <sup>6</sup>
TZOTZIL	<i>vayihel</i>	“animal transformation of witch, animal companion spirit of witch” <sup>7</sup>
	<i>vayihin</i>	“send animal transformation or animal companion spirit (witch)” <sup>7</sup>
TOJOLABAL	<i>wayi</i>	“dormir” <sup>8</sup>
	<i>wayhel</i>	“nagual” <sup>8</sup>
	<i>wayjelan</i>	“hechizar” <sup>8</sup>
	<i>wayjelani</i>	“brujear” <sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Barrera Vásquez, et al. 1980:916

<sup>2</sup> Martínez Hernández 1929:888,889

<sup>3</sup> Bruce 1979:15

<sup>4</sup> Kaufman & Norman 1984:135

<sup>5</sup> Whittaker & Warkentin 1965:114

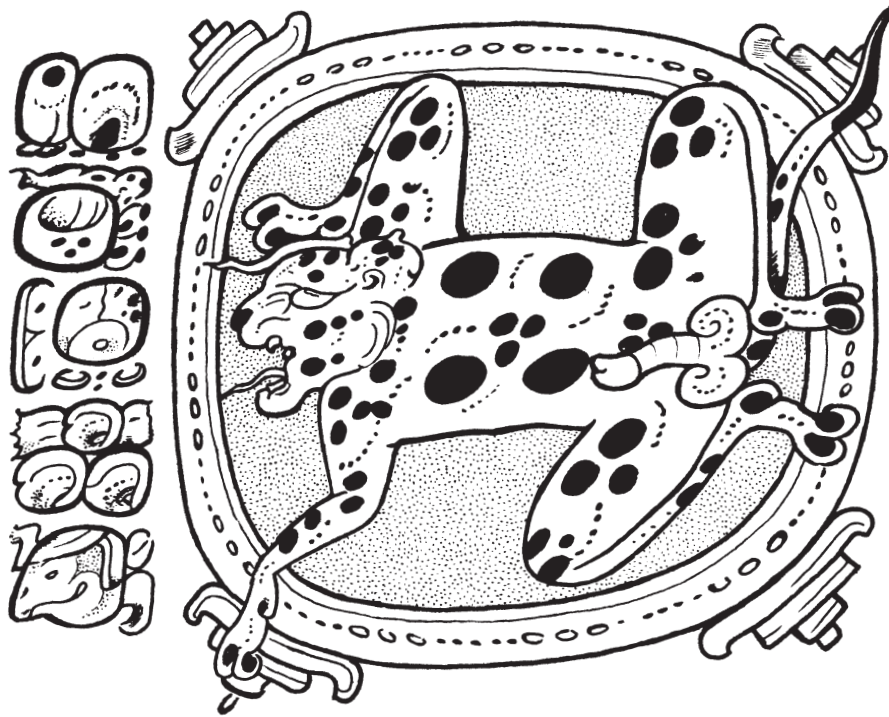
<sup>6</sup> Laughlin 1988:326,327

<sup>7</sup> Laughlin 1975:365

<sup>8</sup> Lenkersdorf 1979:107,252,347,486

Note: The orthographies and misspellings of the dictionary sources have been retained.

FIGURE 3. "WATERY JAGUAR" AS THE WAY OF THE LORD OF SEIBAL

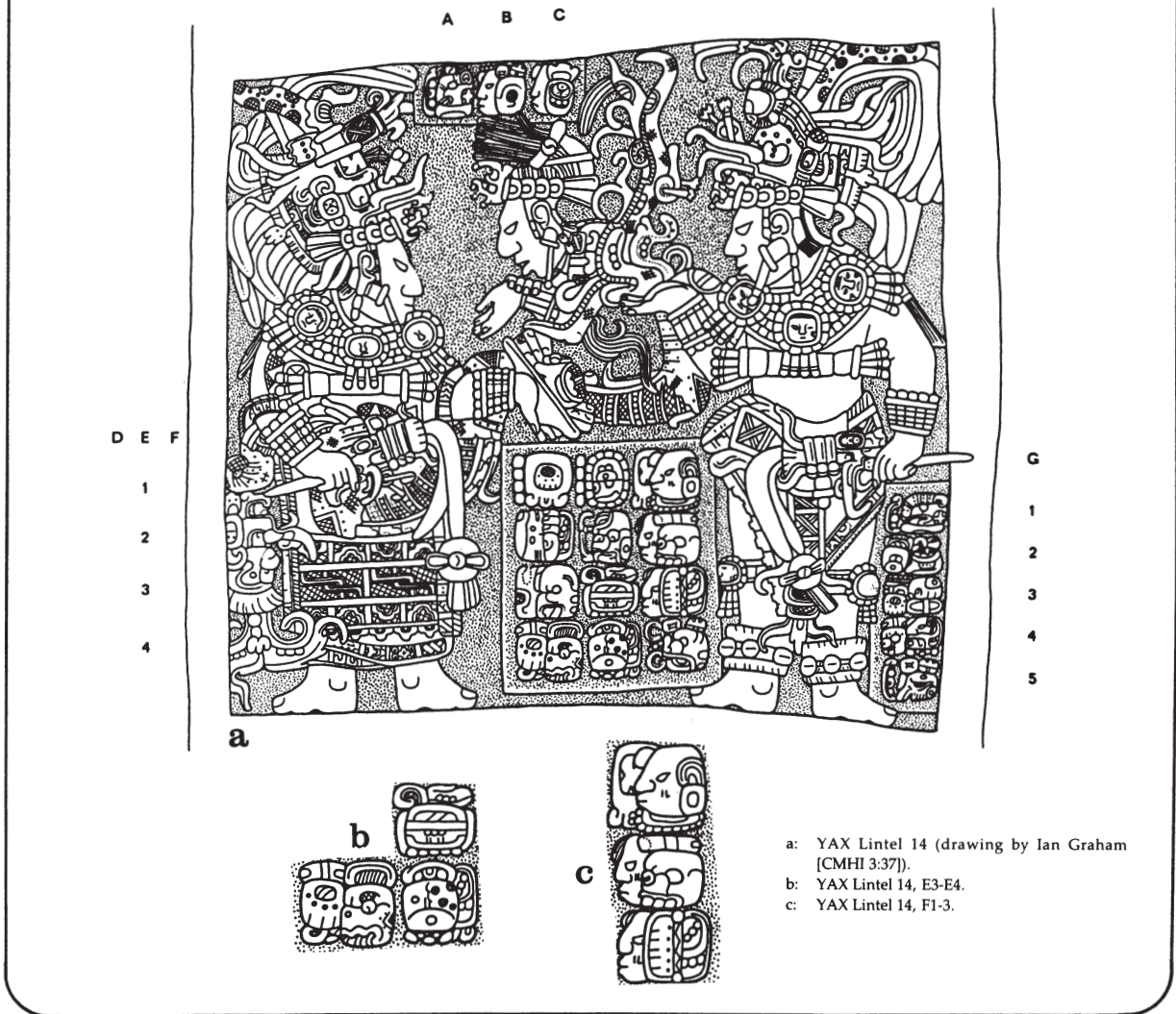


COL, Late Classic vase (Kerr no. 771), drawing of detail by David Stuart.

Uniformly, the root is "sleep," with various semantic and grammatical extensions, including "dream," "witchcraft," "nagual," "animal transformation," and, most important of all, "other spirit," or co-essence, as in the Chol phrase, *kome xiba abi i wäy jini x'ixik*, "because [the] devil was the other spirit of the woman" (Whittaker & Warkentin 1965:114). In several glosses, such as those from the Motul dictionary of Colonial Yucatec, the terms have obviously been influenced by Spanish preconceptions. For example, *vaay* is described as an animal *que, por pacto que hazen con el demonio se convierten fantásticamente* [an animal that, through a pact made with the devil, is fantastically transformed]—an idea with clear antecedents in European belief (Martínez Hernández 1929:888). Following Monaghan, we believe the notion of transformation or metamorphosis to be secondary to the definition and perception of self-identity.

How, then, do the terms explain T539? First, *way*, or "co-essence," is acceptable in terms of the affixes *wa* and *ya*. Second, the expression *u-WAY*, or "his/her/its co-essence," neatly explains the relationships stated on the Altar vase between the supernatural creatures and the historical figures to whom they pertain. A particularly clear example shows that a "water-jaguar" is the *way* of a Seibal lord (Fig. 3).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the behavior of such creatures is in accordance with Maya concepts of the co-essence: the supernaturals cavort as though dancing in

FIGURE 4. THE SERPENT WAY OF "LADY CHAK-SKULL" OF YAXCHILAN



the *tum teleche* (Karl Taube, personal communication, 1989); they behave and look as animals do not; and they tend to appear as composites of various creatures, including deer and monkeys, or snakes and deer. Thus, the "gods," "deities," "dead lords," and "underworld denizens" thought to occur on some Maya vessels are Classic Period expressions of co-essences. It is not at all clear that they are associated with mortuary rituals or underworld dances (see Schele 1989:146).<sup>4</sup>

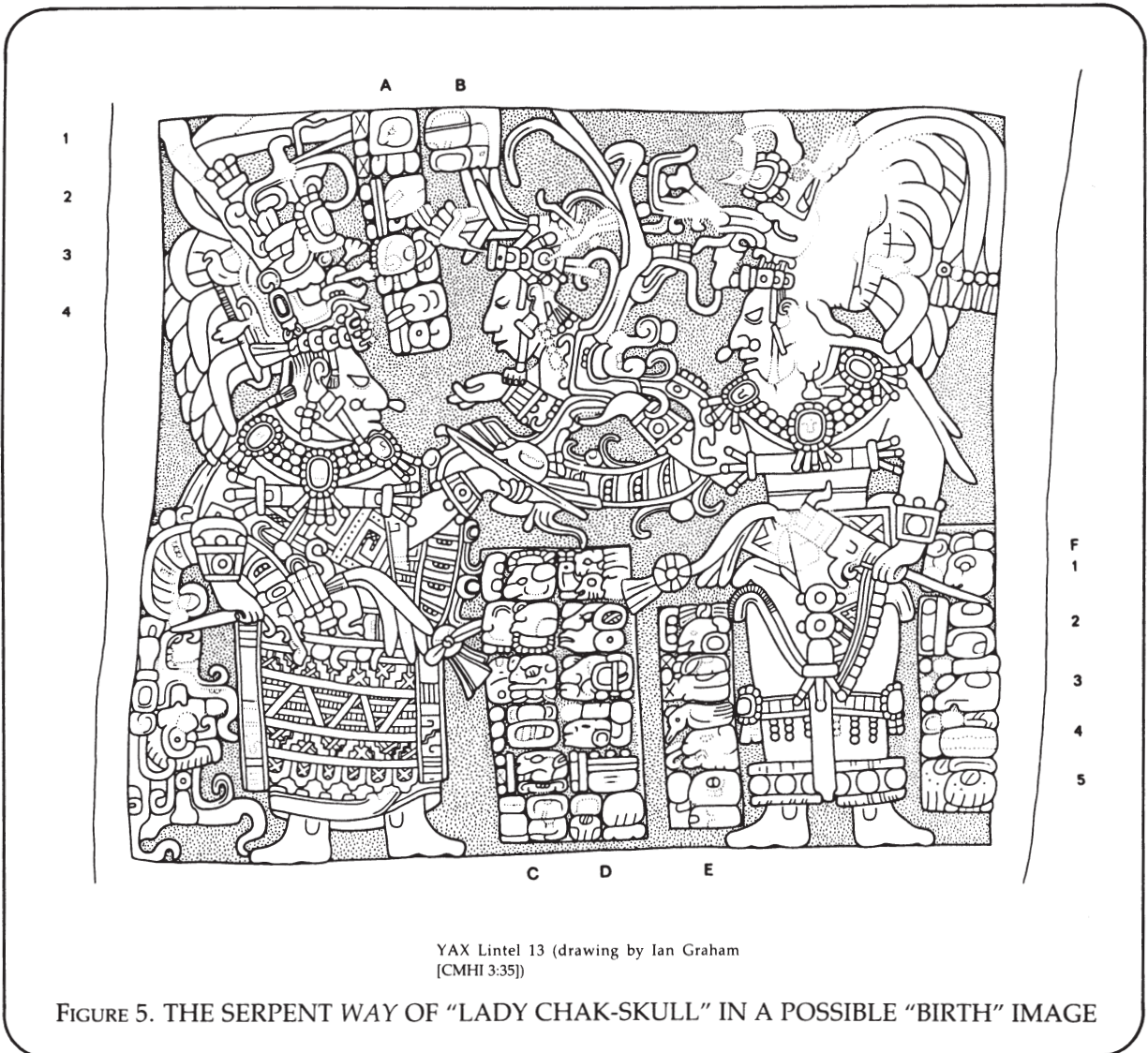
The *way* glyph may also throw some light on the nature of the so-called "vision serpents" studied by Schele and Miller (1986:177). They presume these creatures to be "hallucinatory visions. . .symbolized by a rearing snake" that materializes after bloodletting rituals (Schele 1989:146-148; Schele & Miller 1986:46-47, 177). On Yaxchilan Lintel 14, a serpent known as *kaanal chak bay kan* is named as the *way* of "Lady Chak-Skull" (Fig. 4). The serpent passes through or around her body, as it does on a companion monument, Lintel 13. Lintel 13 is noteworthy for its reference to the birth of Lady Chak-Skull's son, who may be represented by the human face emerging from the mouth of her *way* (Fig. 5). Can this scene represent an elaborate visual metaphor for birth?

On a related matter, we have found evidence that another serpent was regarded as the *way*

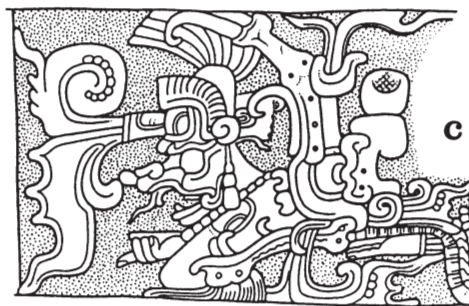
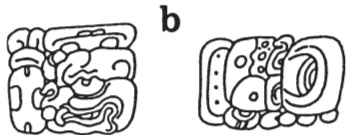
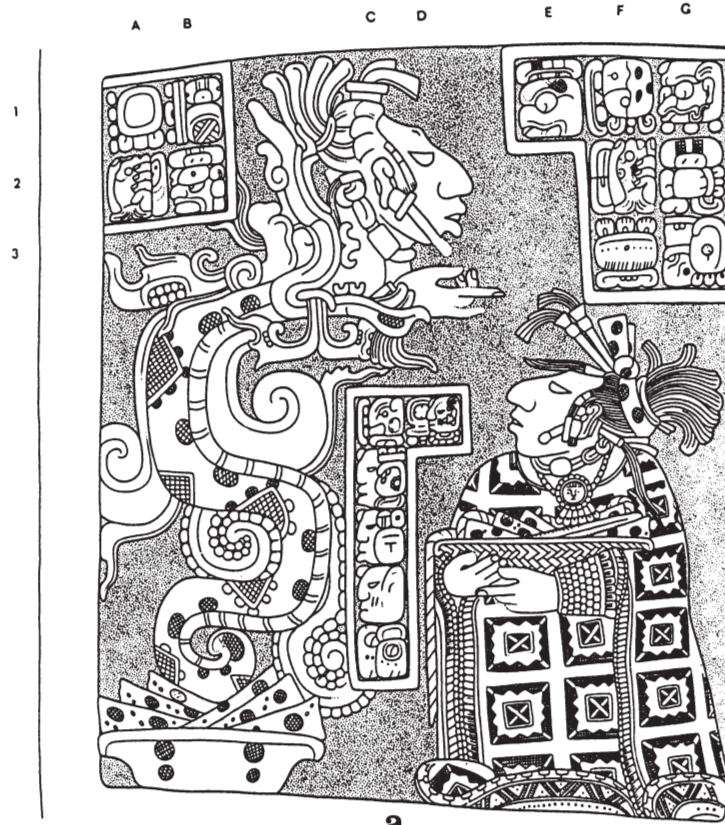
of *K'awil*, or God K, an important deity of the Maya (Fig. 6). In one text, the serpent is named both as *na kan* or *na chan*, and as the *way* of God K (Fig. 6a).<sup>5</sup> In two other examples, from Palenque Temple XIV, the name shifts to *sak bak na kan*, "white bone *na kan*." Yet there is a difference: the snake head has been stripped of its flesh, creating a strong resemblance to some two-headed serpent bars (Fig. 6b,c,d). Conceivably, when lords held such bars they were thought to grasp or to possess the *way* of God K.<sup>6</sup> Of course, the fact that gods have co-essences is hardly surprising, given the information presented above.<sup>7</sup>

Data from Copán raise another point about the serpent. We suspect that in some instances what concerned the Maya was not the snake, but God K's leg, which often ends in a reptilian head. On the East Door, South Jamb of Copán Temple 11, an inscription implies that *y-ok*, "his foot," is the *way* of God K (Fig. 6e). This reference explains scenes on Classic Maya pottery that display large, coiled serpents attached to God K's foot. In these images, the Maya have apparently juxtaposed a deity and its co-essence. In some examples, the God K image is diminutive or absent altogether, perhaps indicating that some isolated serpent images in Maya art are to be understood as God K's foot.

Rarely, T539 contains a quincunx sign, read *bi*. When this sign appears, the reading of





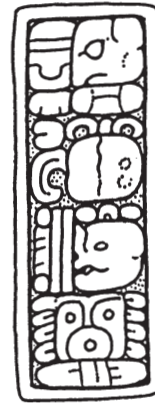


- a: YAX Lintel 15 (drawing by Ian Graham [CMHI 3:39]).
- b: PAL Temple 14 panel, B6-A8 (above) and F2-E3 (below) (drawings by Linda Schele).
- c: YAX Lintel 39, detail (drawing by Ian Graham [CMHI 3:87]).
- d: CPN Temple 11, east door, south jamb, A2-4 (drawing by David Stuart).

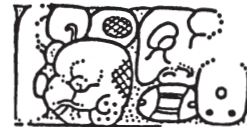
FIGURE 6. THE SERPENT WAY OF GOD K



a



b



c



d

a: PNG Stela 15, secondary text (drawing by David Stuart).  
 b: COL, panel in the New Orleans Museum of Art (drawing by David Stuart).

c: COL, details of two panels (drawings by Stephen Houston).  
 d: CAY, Panel 1, A15-B15 (drawing by David Stuart).

FIGURE 7. THE WAY GLYPH IN CH'OK WAYAB NAMES

T539 almost certainly changes from **way** to **wayab**. This combination forms part of three names found in texts from the Usumacinta region (Fig. 7). In the first name, the full reading is: **kan-ch'o-ko/wa-WAY-bi/xo-ki** (Fig. 7a), or **KAN-na-ch'o-k'o/wa-ya-WAY-bi/?/xo-ki** (7b). We would read his name as *Kan Ch'ok Wayab Xok*. The *wayab xok* portion of this name also appears as part of the name *Chak Wayab Xok* in the Books of Chilam Balam (e.g., Edmonson 1982:74). In two other names (Fig. 7c,d & e), one of a captive and the other of a local ruler from El Cayo, we again see the combination *ch'ok wayab*.

*Way* or *wayab* also appears in a name of a deity mentioned twice in the inscriptions of Palenque (Fig. 8a & b). Here, **way**, with a **bi** infix in one example, is preceded by the sign for "black" (**ik'** or **ek'**). Together this precedes the head of God B, Chaak, suggesting a reading *EK' Wayab Chaak*. This makes sense in light of the color-direction symbolism of both the Chaaks and the so-called *uayeyab* entities known from Yucatán (Tozzer 1941:137).

When **li** is added to the combination **way-bi**, the result is probably **wayabil** or **waybil**. In most examples, this refers to a kind of structure (Fig. 9). In Colonial Tzotzil, the similar form *vayebal* means "bed," "dormitory," "hostel," or any sleeping place or article for sleeping (Laughlin 1988,1:326). The Temple of the Inscriptions at Tikal seems to be one such structure,



a

- a: PAL Palace Tablet, F12 (drawing by David Stuart).  
b: PAL Tablet of the Temple of the Foliated Cross, G11 (drawing by David Stuart).



b

FIGURE 8. *EK' WAYAB CHAAK*, A PALENQUE DEITY



a

- a: PNG Lintel 12, L1-N1 (drawing by David Stuart).  
b: COL The "Dumbarton Oaks Tablet," Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, from Palenque or vicinity, A5-B5 (drawing by David Stuart).  
c: TNA Fragment 91, pC2-pD2 (drawing by David Stuart).



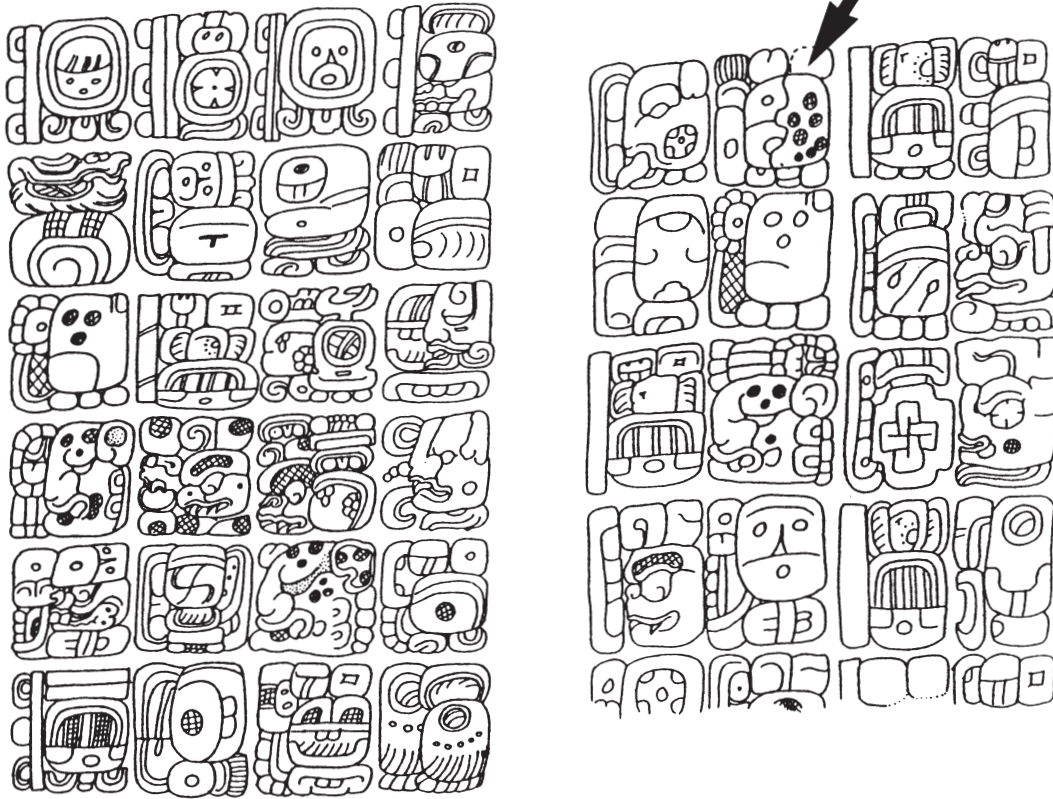
b



c

FIGURE 9. THE WAY GLYPH IN *WAYBIL*, AN ARCHITECTURAL REFERENCE

FIGURE 10. WAY IN A POSTHUMOUS REFERENCE TO LORD "SHIELD-JAGUAR" OF YAXCHILAN



YAX Stela 12 (drawing by Linda Schele).

a: COL, Late Classic "codex-style" vase, detail (drawing by David Stuart after Robicsek & Hales 1981: Table 15, C).



a

b: COL, Late Classic "codex-style" bowl, detail (drawing by David Stuart after Robicsek & Hales 1981: Table 1,1).



b

FIGURE 11. SUBSTITUTION BETWEEN WAY AND THE "PERCENTAGE SIGN"

and additional references of the same kind are known from unprovenienced wall panels. Our present hunch is that the structures served either as “sleeping places” (based on the meaning of the root *way*), or possibly as locations where co-essences dwelt or manifested themselves. This speculation may elucidate the use of T589 in a posthumous reference to “Shield Jaguar” of Yaxchilan (Fig. 10). Did the Maya simply believe that Shield Jaguar was “asleep” at the time? The suggestion that the Maya linked sleep with death is less farfetched when we consider that in at least one context, the WAY glyph alternates with the well-known “percentage sign” associated with death (Fig. 11).

### CONCLUSIONS

In our judgement, the *way* decipherment fundamentally changes our understanding of Classic Maya iconography and belief. It indicates that many of the supernatural figures, once described as “gods,” “underworld denizens,” or “deities,” are instead co-essences of supernaturals or humans. More than ever, then, Classic Maya beliefs would seem to coincide with general patterns of Mesoamerican thought. We are also convinced that the reading undermines the “mortuary” or “underworld” hypothesis of Maya vase painting. Elsewhere we have shown that pottery texts, once held to be descriptions of the heroic conquest of death, record more mundane matters, such as vessel types and beverages (see Houston, Stuart, & Taube 1989). It appears now that much of the imagery on ceramics relates to Maya perceptions of self. As a result, death and the afterlife can no longer be regarded as the dominant themes of Maya pottery art. Our final point concerns the certainty with which Maya lords identified their co-essences. Today, this skill is restricted to the more powerful and well-educated members of traditional Maya society (Villa Rojas 1947:583). For the Classic Maya, such self-knowledge may well have been an important marker of elite status.

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## NOTES

1. We hasten to add, however, that the Lacandon *onen*, which passes through the patriline, is quite distinct from the more idiosyncratic notions of co-essences that are documented among other Maya groups (Bruce 1979:20-22). Consequently, Lacandon beliefs may be aberrant.
2. In all probability, the view that Maya pottery texts and images are funerary in intent stems from Coe's original contention that Maya vases record a kind of native American "Book of the Dead" (Coe 1973:22; 1978:11-14). Until recently, this interpretation dominated all discussions of pottery art and writing (see Schele and Miller 1986:266).
3. The "water-jaguar," here illustrated from Kerr 771, also appears on Kerr 791, a vase whose style is virtually identical to that of the Altar vase. Again, he is called the *way* of the Seibal lord.
4. It is important to Note that T539 is an appropriate icon for *way*. In Late Classic examples the sign consists of a face that is partly covered by feline pelage. Presumably, the face represents a human and the pelage a co-essence, with each depicted as part of an integral whole. In addition, we suspect that the few places in which T539 alternates with a jaguar pillow, T609a, may reflect a word in Yucatec Maya: *way*, "retrete o re-  
tramiento donde uno duerme" (Barrera Vásquez et al. 1980:915).
5. The serpent is probably similar to the one depicted on Tikal Temple IV, Lintel 3, and named at F8 in the text of that sculpture (Jones & Satterthwaite 1982: Fig. 74).
6. Schele suggests (personal communication, 1989) that the so-called "fish-in-hand" glyph (T714) may well be a glyph for "materialization" rather than "bloodletting," as Proskouriakoff (1973:172) proposed (see Ringle 1988:16 for a similar line of reasoning).
7. Karl Taube speculates that this will prove to be a common pattern; in his opinion, the Principal Bird Deity is likely to be the *way* of God D (personal communication, 1989).

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