



# The Water-Band Glyph

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The Water-Band glyph is a very rare glyph that is not listed in Thompson’s catalogue (1962). The glyph appears in some important contexts, namely at Palenque and Rio Azul. In this note I analyze the iconography associated with the glyph and the contexts in which it appears in the inscriptions in an attempt to understand its syntactical category and semantics.



## Iconographic and Epigraphic Data

From an iconographic point of view, the glyph is likely associated with water. In fact, as Marc Zender (personal communication 2002) has kindly pointed out to me, the glyph seems to represent a portion of a so-called “water band” (Schele and Miller 1986:47). The “water-band” motif seems to represent the waves, droplets and foam that form on the surface of water bodies. Very nice representations of this same motif can be observed painted on the wall of Burial 1 at Rio Azul (Figure 8), apparently representing the watery surface of the Underworld crossed by the deceased. Another depiction of this motif may be seen in an Early Classic vessel from Tikal (Figure 9). In this scene several gods and a lady apparently swim in a watery environment with fish and waterlily plants.

From an epigraphic point of view, the glyph is rather rare but appears in several important contexts. At Palenque, on the south side of the Temple XIX bench, we find it in the context of the sacrifice of the Starry-Deer-Alligator deity (David Stuart 2003) (Figure 1). The text is transcribed as follows:

[...]	...
CH'AK-u-B'AAH	ch'ak 'u b'aah
WAY?-PAAT?-Starry.Deer.Alligator	? paat ?
ts'i-ba-la-PAAT?-Starry.Deer.Alligator	ts'ihb'al paat ?
UHX-Water.Band-wa-ja	'uhx ?
u-CH'ICH'-le	'u ch'ich'el
na-ka-Water.Band-wa-a	nak ? -a
jo-ch'o-K'AHK'-a	joch' k'ahk'a
[...]	...

In Rio Azul Burial 12, the glyph is apparently associated with the southwest direction. This is an early form of the glyph which lacks the scrolls that are visible in later examples (Figure 2). The compound may be transcribed as:

WAK-Water.Band-wa-NAL-la	wak ? nal
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At Tikal, in the stucco inscription of Temple VI, we find the glyph in the name of a person or deity (Figure 3). The text may be transcribed as:

[...]	...
<b>u-KAB'-ji-ya</b>	'u kab'jiy
<b>K'AN-na-Water.Band-wa</b>	k'an ?
<b>tu-?-ma</b>	tumam
<b>?-b'a-NOH-AHK</b>	? noh 'ahk
[...]	...

On Stela 1 from Dos Caobas, the glyph appears in the name of a captive taken by Itsamnaaj B'ahlam the Great and one of his *sajals* (Figure 4). The caption on the stela can be transcribed as:

<b>SAAK-Water.Band-wa</b>	saak ?
<b>a?-TUUN-ni</b>	? tuun
<b>B'AAK-ki</b>	b'aak

Kerry Hull (personal communication 2003) pointed out another example of this glyph, in head-variant form, from the long text of "the Vase of the 88 Glyphs" (K1440) (Figure 5). The glyph appears within a couplet:

[...]	...
<b>IK'</b>	ik'
<b>K'UH</b>	k'uh
<b>Water.Band.Head-wa</b>	?
<b>K'UH</b>	k'uh
[...]	...

This couplet appears to name two old gods who appear in one of the mythical scenes on this vessel. The head variant displays the same waving line with dots on its face and has a small curl in the bottom right just like the abstract form of the glyph. This head variant is, I believe, a zoomorphic representation of water as it appears emanating from a water scroll in a codex-style vessel from Calakmul (Figure 7). It is likely derived from representations of fish.

A final example of the glyph appears on K1485 (Figure 6) as pointed out to me by Marc Zender (personal communication 2003). In this example the glyph appears both in an associated text (as **Water.Band-wa-K'UH**) and iconographically on the back and right arm of a wind god. Another wind god in the scene features an **IK'** sign on his back, and is also associated with an explanatory caption (**IK'-K'UH**).

## Discussion

The first noteworthy characteristic of the glyph is the apparently mandatory **-wa** suffix. It appears in all available examples of the glyph in texts. There is the possibility that it may not work as a phonetic complement but rather that it is an integral part of the logograph, as in the case of T567 **WI'** and other complex logographs (Marc Zender, personal communication 2003). It is possible, however, that this is simply a statistical effect caused by the scarcity of examples coupled with the fact that certain logographs are complemented in an unusually frequent way and in the same manner (e.g., the so-called "checkers" glyph, part of the name of GIII of the Palenque Triad, is very often complemented with a **-wa** suffix).

From a syntactical point of view, the examples from Palenque, when considered alone, are ambiguous. The first collocation could be interpreted as the passive voice of a non-CVC verbal root (logograph) as indicated by the potential passivizer suffix *-wa* and the thematic suffix *-ja* (Lacadena 2004). The other collocation is more subtle, with a final *-a* suffix, but it seems to be a reference to the Starry-Deer-Alligator (more on this below).

The occurrences of the glyph at Tikal, Dos Caobas and Rio Azul in contexts where it can work only as a name are especially important. In all of these examples the glyph is complemented with a *-wa* suffix. This strongly points towards the conclusion that the *-wa* suffix at Palenque should be interpreted as either a phonetic complement to the logograph or as an integral part of the logograph, and that it should not be interpreted as a passivizing suffix.

The example from Rio Azul is particularly important since it presents the glyph as the place name of the southwest direction. The remainder of the glyphs in this inscription all relate to the main and intermediate cardinal directions, and many have natural elements such as *naahb'* (lake) and *cha'an* (sky) in their place names (this is not as clear with respect to the southeast place name). This provides some support for the idea that the Water-Band glyph may name some natural feature.

This idea is reinforced by the example from K1440 where we have the couplet *'ik' k'uh ? k'uh* ("wind god ? god"). Couplets of the form *cha'an k'uh k'ab k'uh* are common in the inscriptions and apparently link the gods of complementary natural elements. The example of K1485 provides a parallel scene, but here the Water-Band glyph clearly names a wind god. The association of a glyph with clear water iconography with the image of a wind god is intriguing and introduces a semantic nuance. Perhaps the glyph is a name for fast-moving water (Marc Zender, personal communication 2003): a flood or storm downpour.

Given the above considerations, the collocation from the south side of the Palenque Temple XIX bench might be interpreted as an intransitive verb derived from a noun, as in **WITS-ja** (*witsiij*, "it piles up") or **NAAHB'-ja** (*naahb'iij*, "it pools") (Alfonso Lacadena, personal communication 2003). Moreover, it is interesting to note that, in this example from Palenque, the context is reminiscent of the more common statements related to war and sacrifice (using the reading **CH'ICH'** for the "blood" glyph as proposed by David Stuart [personal communication 2002]):

*witsiij 'u jol/b'aak naahb'iij 'u ch'ich'el*

or, translating:

"his skull/bones pile up, his blood pools"

as seen, for example, at Dos Pilas HS2 (West, Step 3), Tortuguero M.6 and Naranjo Altar 1 (Figure 10) (Alfonso Lacadena and Marc Zender, personal communications 2002). At Palenque, the text describes the decapitation of a the Starry-Deer-Alligator followed by the likely spilling of its blood. It is quite possible, from this context and given the above discussion, that the meaning intended is the same as the more usual *naahb'iij* collocation, "it pools", as a reference to the spilling of this deity's blood.

If this interpretation is correct, the example from Palenque fits into the above mentioned category of war and sacrifice sentences, except that in this case the scribe probably wanted to emphasize the magnitude of the event and/or the amount of liquid being pooled. We would have then "his blood is thrice flooded/pooled".

The remainder of this passage has been interpreted by Dmitri Beliaev and Albert Davletshin (personal communication 2004) as being constructed based on a diphrastric kenning. The compounds **na-ka-Water.Band-a** and **jo-ch'o-k'ahk'-a** may be interpreted as appellatives describing different, but complementary, aspects of the Starry-Deer-Alligator. The final *-a* suffix can be interpreted as a particle meaning "person" (David Stuart, personal communication 2003). Thus, the form *joch'-k'ahk'-a* can be analyzed as the "fire-drilling person". In the first form, *nak-Water.Band-a*, *nak* is possibly a cognate with the Yucatec *nakal* ("rise"). Hence, the entire compound can be analyzed as "flood-rising person" or "water-rising person".

This episode might be connected with a scene from the Dresden Codex where a Cosmic Alligator, quite possibly the Starry-Deer-Alligator, is vomiting huge scrolls of water with God L and Goddess O nearby. A similar motif is also found, for example, on Piedras Negras Stela 11 where the ruler sits on a scaffold on the back of the Starry-Deer-Alligator, from whose mouth come out huge scrolls of blood (Figure 11).

## A Possible Reading

From the above discussion it is clear that the glyph is a logograph for something that is associated with water and the watery Underworld. Searching the dictionaries for appropriate words one finds in Ch'olti' (Stross n.d.; Moran 1935):

Ch'olti'      polaw              ocean, sea

Other languages seem to retain this word for "sea" and "lake", obviously distinct from the more widely-known *k'ahk'nahb'*). In the Odense Online Maya Dictionary (Dienhart 1997) we find:

Kekchi	palau	ocean, lake
Pchi	palau, pala!uj	ocean, lake
Quic	palo!, polo!	ocean, lake
Mam	palu	ocean

These entries match the iconography and contexts in which the glyph appears very nicely, and are consistent with the possible *-wa* phonetic complement. The *palaw* reading would also explain the couplet from K1440, *'ik' k'uh palaw k'uh* or "wind god sea god". However, a difficulty is posed by the example from K1485, where it would be hard to explain why a wind god would be named with a logograph for sea or ocean. One possibility is that it could be a reference to hurricanes, as the Maya certainly noticed that these big storms always came from the ocean. So, he might simply be the god of "ocean winds".

The variation in the spellings: *polaw* (Ch'olti'), *palaw* (Kekchi), *palow* (Quiche') and perhaps even *polow* (Quiche'), present some problems, namely that of establishing which was the original form and that of explaining the observed variations. Kaufman (2003:430), in his *Preliminary Mayan Etymological Dictionary*, reconstructs the original form as *\*palaw* and gives further evidence for the Kekchi form as *palaw*. The prevalence of the word in Highland languages seems to point to a very archaic origin. It is not clear whether the apparent absence of the word in Lowland languages, other than Moran's early reference, might be due to a loss of use of an archaic word or if it signals a possible loan from Kekchi to the geographically close Ch'olti' speakers. This last possibility seriously compromises the

*palaw* reading for the glyph. The variation observed in the vowels *a/o* is more difficult to explain but may be due to mistakes in recording data by the various scholars. This situation is well known, namely in the case of Moran's Ch'olti' dictionary.

For the time being, however, and lacking further examples of this interesting glyph, this proposal remains at most speculative.

## Acknowledgements

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## Figures



Figure 1. The Water-Band glyph at Palenque (drawing by David Stuart).



Figure 3. The Water-Band glyph at Tikal, Temple VI, Panel X (after Jones 1977: 43, fig. 9).



Figure 2. The Water-Band glyph at Rio Azul (drawing by David Stuart; after Adams 1999:56).

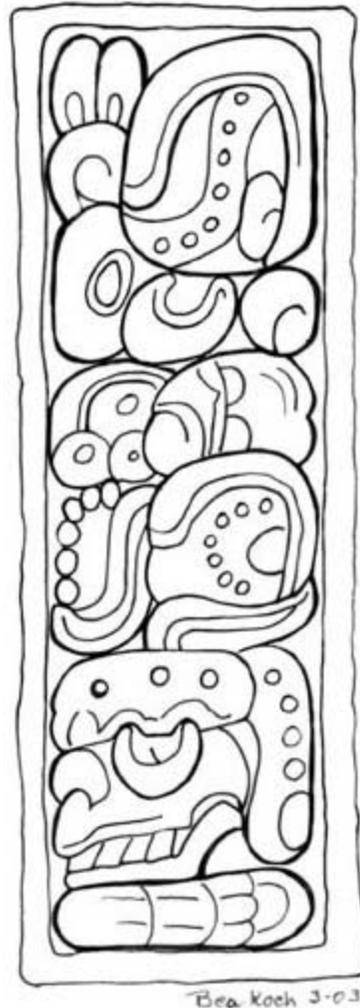


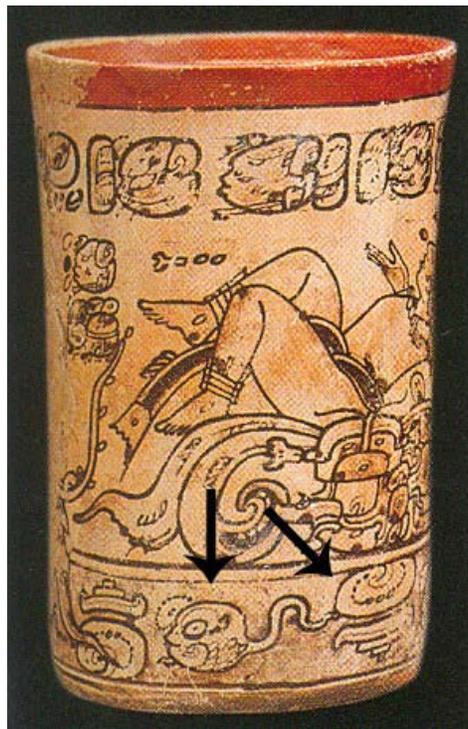
Figure 4. The Water-Band glyph at Dos Caobas (drawing by Bea Koch).



**Figure 5.** The Water-Band glyph head variant on K1440 (photo copyright J. Kerr, used with permission).



**Figure 6.** The wind gods on K1485: note associated captions between foremost wind god and female goddess (photo copyright J. Kerr, used with permission).



**Figure 7.** The zoomorphic aspect of water (photo by Jorge Perez de Lara, after Schmidt 1998:295).

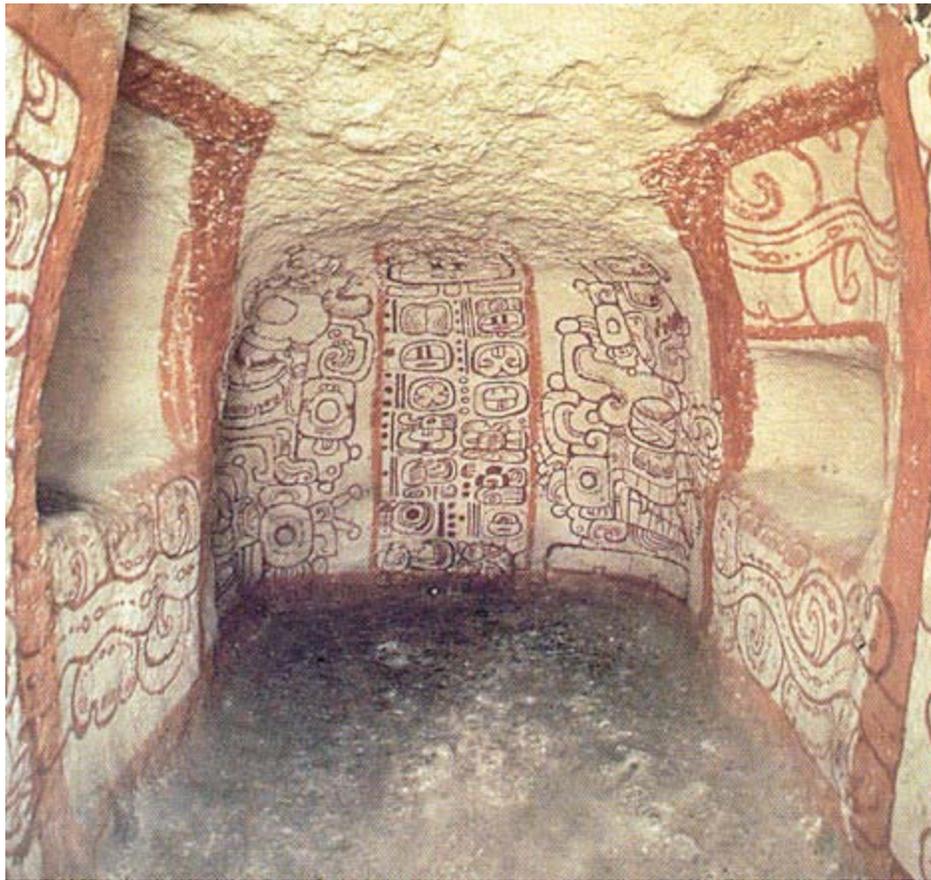


Figure 8. Wall paintings in Rio Azul Burial 1 (photograph by George Mobley, after Graham 1986: 453).

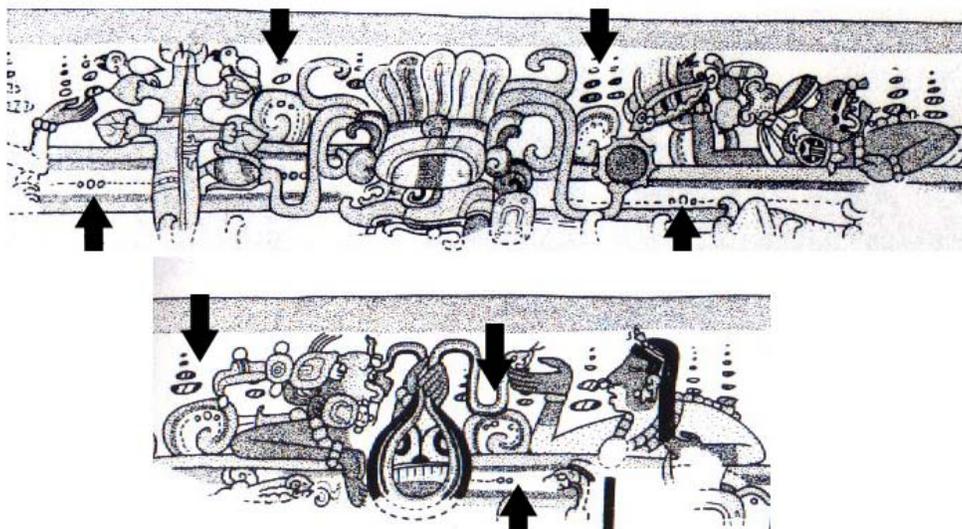


Figure 9. Scene from Early Classic Tikal vessel (after Coe 1988:102-103).

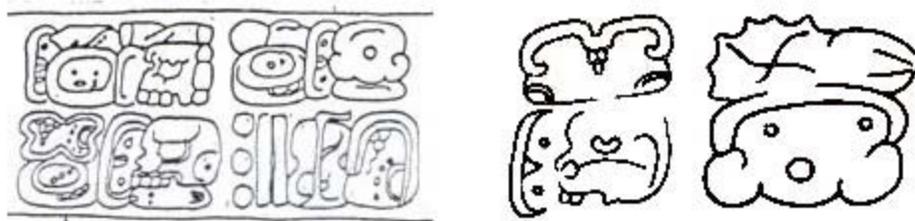


Figure 10. Blood pooled and skulls piled up at Dos Pilas and Naranjo (drawings by Stephen Houston and Ian Graham [1978:103-104], respectively).

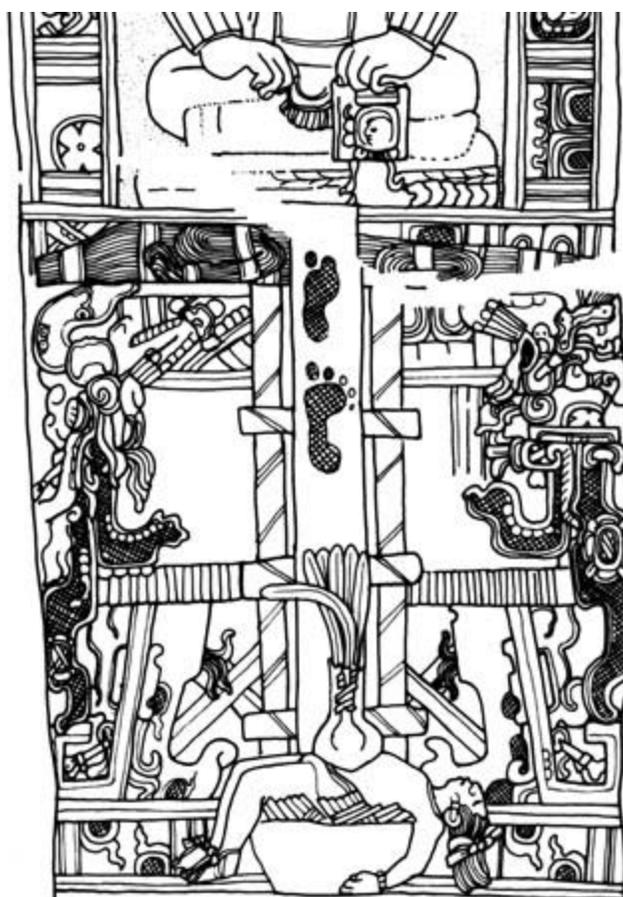


Figure 11. The Starry-Deer-Alligator in Piedras Negras Stela 11 (drawing by Linda Schele; Schele and Miller 1986:112).