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The Xoc, the Sharke, and the Sea Dogs: An Historical Encounter

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Ah xixteel ul Chac Uayab Xoc
T u kin u ii izay kak
U tzai ne xoc.

Chilam Balam of Tizimin

Scale of Dragon, Toote of Wolfe,
Witches Mummy, Maw, and Gulfe
of the ravin’d salt sea Sharke.

Macbeth, Act IV, Scene 1

In a now classic paper published in 1944, J. Eric S. Thompson attempted to demonstrate the presence of rebus writing among the ancient Maya through the latter’s use of a glyph representing an object (a fish) to convey the semantic value of a verb (‘to count’). The heart of Thompson’s argument was the observation that two Yucatec words, one for ‘count’ and the other for ‘shark’, possessed the same phonetic value: *shoke* (rhyming with *smoke*), expressed orthographically as *xoc* or *xoc*.

Since Thompson’s suggestion, discussions of the subject have been enlivened, from time to time, by impulses (inspired by the Maya model) to play upon the similarity in sound between the Yucatec *xoc* and the English *shark*, the improbable idea of an etymological relationship between the two words perhaps springing briefly to mind to produce faint smiles. While not wishing to deny those smiles, nevertheless, what follows is an attempt to pursue the possibility that *xoc* is indeed the source of the English word *shark*.

The first question that such an inquiry must address is whether present understanding of the etymology of *shark* leaves room for so unlikely an hypothesis. Is there any need for exploration of the origin of *shark*? And if so, is there cause for carrying that exploration to the New World?

The English *shark* has a number of semantic values that suggest a variety of etymological interrelationships proceeding by degrees from obvious to obscure. As a noun, *shark* has three meanings. One is the subject of this study and refers to certain voracious, cartilaginous fishes. A second applies figuratively to persons who behave like those fishes. A third describes a person who sponges on others, or cheats or swindles in a petty way.

As a verb, *shark* has two meanings: one obviously derive from the fish: *to shark* can mean ‘to fish for sharks’ or ‘to prey upon like a shark’. It can also mean ‘to victimize’, ‘sponge upon’, ‘swindle’, ‘extort’, ‘practice fraud’, ‘pilfer’, ‘obtain by cheating’, ‘live by shifts and stratagems’, or ‘collect hastily’. Finally, it can mean ‘to cut or tear’ (Bradley 1914:633-634). One of the earliest attempts to account for the word appeared in 1689 in the anonymous *Gazophylacium Anglicanum* which, with no allusion to the fish, defined *shark*, or *sherk*, as a ‘shifting knave’, and derived it from the English *search*, or the French *chercher* ‘to seek’ (Anonymous 1689). This explanation was repeated in N. Bailey’s great *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* of 1721 to account for *shark* as a verb, meaning ‘to go shifting and shuffling about’. But Bailey also included in his definition of *shark*, ‘the most ravenous of Fishes, which will chop a Man in two at a Bite’, and suggested the Saxon *scearan*, ‘to cut in pieces’, as the source of the fish’s name, which was then applied figuratively to persons (Bailey 1724). Both of these etymological accounts have been repeated by various authorities well into the current century, with the role of *chercher* being expanded to explain the fish’s name as well. Yet another explanation was pursued in George William Lemon’s *English Etymology* of 1783, which argued that *shark*, in its ichthyological sense, came from the Greek *carcharias*, as applied to *canis marinus* ‘the sea-dog’, so-called from its rough teeth or voracious appetite (Lemon 1783). This Greek root theory proved particularly popular. It was accepted by Noah Webster in 1828, though with the observation that in New England, while the fish was pronounced ‘shark’, the verb, meaning ‘to live by shifts and petty stratagems’, was pronounced “shurk”. David Booth’s *Analytical Dictionary* of 1836 was less certain of the Greek theory. Wishing to restrict the word *shark* to a single species (as had a number of his predecessors), Booth noted that the species name, *carcharias*, was from the Greek word for ‘sharp’, and that the early naturalists had called the shark *Canis carcharias*, probably alluding to Homer’s ‘sharp-toothed dogs’. He then concluded:

Adverting, therefore, to the usual transformation of letters, the word *Shark* may be derived from *carcharias*; but this origin will hardly account for the use of the nearly obsolete verb, TO SHARK (or SHRIRK), which, in common language, signifies to live by tricks, or petty frauds. (Booth 1836:285)

In 1890, A.S. Palmer’s *Folk-etymology* tried to resolve this difficulty by observing that, whereas *shark*, as a
‘sharper, rogue or cheat’, is generally regarded as a figurative use of the word for the fish, it is really a form of the German Schurke ‘a cheat or knave’, and the fish’s name is distinct, coming from the Latin carcharus (Palmer 1890:351-352). But the 1903 Century Dictionary and Cyclopaedia, noting that shark was usually derived from the Greek carcharias through the Latin carcharus, pointed out that the necessary Old French forms between carcharius and shark were not to be found, and suggested that perhaps the English word did not initially refer to the fish (Whitney 1903:5552). These observations have led a number of etymological works of recent time to adopt the position that shark, the fish, was named after shark, the man, which came from the German Schurke (‘rogue’), which was, in turn, from the Old Middle German scurgo (also ‘rogue’) (Shipley 1945:320; Partridge 1983:614).

Varied though they be, these several etymological explanations have some common features. They are all abstract constructions, reflecting neither a systematic ordering of evidence nor an historical sense of time and place. For analytical purposes, they can be separated into two categories. On the one hand, there is the idea the shark as applied to the fish, is derived from a source that had nothing to do with fish. Thus chercher, scearan, and Schurke are argued to have produced the word shark to describe some quality or habit which English seamen then recognized in a particular fish and for that reason promptly christened it shark. On the other hand, there is the idea that shark, from the very beginning, meant the fish, for the simple reason that it was descended from Greek and Latin words that had already been applied to the same fish: carcharias and carcharus. The weaknesses of the first of these two alternatives are threefold. First, no sources have been produced to link chercher, scearan, or Schurke to shark. Second, the earliest surviving uses of shark are clear references to the fish. Finally, the earliest subsequent application of the word to predatory humans betrays its roots by invoking the metaphor of the fish. This occurs when the protagonist of the anonymous 1596 play, “Sir Thomas More,” declaims, “For other ruffians, as their fancies wrought, . . . Would shark on you, and men like ravenous fishes Woold feed on one another” (Clayton 1969:80). Thus, the second alternative, that shark was first of all a fish, appears to be the only position that evidence will support. But it has already been mentioned that no intermediate forms between carcharius and shark have been found. How, then, did the etymological connection between the two words come to be made?

The answer to that question lies in a work published in 1668 by John Wilkins, entitled An Essay towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language. The essay contained a dictionary that was preceded by a “Table of Fishes” that had been drawn up in 1666 by Francis Willoughby and John Ray, naming twelve distinct species under the category of viviparous, oblong cartilaginous fishes. Its dictionary was the earliest to define shark as a fish. It did so, however, not by applying the word to all twelve of the cartilaginous species mentioned, but by limiting it to Canis carcharias, whose binomial happened to be the only of the twelve to contain the Greek word (Wilkins 1668:132-133). This binomial had been assigned in 1553 by Petri Belloni to the species renamed Squalus carcharias by Linnaeus in 1758, and notorious today as Carcharodon carcharias, the Great White Shark (Belloni 1553:58-60; Linnaeus 1894:235). For the present inquiry, the significance of Wilkins’ Essay is twofold. First, in tying shark specifically to C. carcharias, the work unwittingly laid the grounds for the later theory that the former was derived from the latter. Second, the association of shark and carcharias occurred in print for the first time in this Essay of 1668. The date is important, for it comes almost a full century after the initial appearance of shark in English, at which time it had been used to describe not C. carcharias, but a fish of a different genus, and even a different family, the Alopiidae. Thus, no better case can be made for the classical origin of shark than could be made for the French, Saxon, or German origins.

It appears that present understanding of the etymology of shark is about what it was in 1914 when the New English Dictionary stated (and the Oxford English Dictionary later repeated) simply: “Of obscure origin.” Clearly, new light on the subject is needed, and that the light might better be sought outside of Europe is suggested by a comment contained in these same two dictionaries:

The word seems to have been introduced by the sailors of Captain (afterwards Sir John) Hawkins’ expedition, who brought home a specimen which was exhibited in London in 1569. The source from which they obtained the word has not been ascertained.

The expedition referred to was the last of four ambitious trading ventures organized by William and John Hawkins, and launched from Plymouth during the 1560’s. Carrying English goods south, the expeditions had obtained slaves from the African coast, crossed the Atlantic, and entered the Caribbean to sell their cargoes to the colonists of the islands and the Spanish Main. It is therefore at least conceivable that at some point the men of this fourth voyage picked up the word xoc in the fall of 1568 and imported it to England upon their return in January 1569, as shark. But questions arise. Had these veteran English sea dogs never seen sharks before? In fact, had Englishmen at home never seen sharks? If they had, what did they call them? And if they already had a name for them, why would they adopt a new one?

To address these concerns it is necessary to look briefly at the distribution and behavior of sharks themselves. Lack of familiarity with sharks on the part of Englishmen or Europeans of the late Middle Ages seems likely from the fact that sharks seldom, if ever, entered the rivers of Northern Europe. They are sea creatures, and as such, they have had to develop a means of preventing their dessication by osmotic loss of water through the permeable membranes of their gills into the salt-concentrated sea. In contrast to the bony fishes, which meet the prob-
duced to English readers the untranslated word Catalan.

rén, the Spanish picked up a Carib word and made of it the Italian canis marinus. Thus, Pliny's Romans of antiquity, closer contact with sharks had left an impression of vicious dogs of the sea. Thus, Pliny's "ravin'd salt sea Sharke") and have not (to my knowledge) been recorded as ever having entered the rivers of Europe.

But they are also, generally, warm water creatures, which, though widely distributed in all of the oceans (including the Arctic), are found in substantially greater concentrations in tropical waters and in the warmer currents that bathe the Eastern shores of Australia, Africa and the Americas. And though fairly common in the Eastern Mediterranean, their occurrence in the Atlantic waters of Europe's Western seaboard nations is irregular, the larger pelagic species occasionally appearing in the warmer waters of the summer months. Sporadic encounters that fishermen are sure to have had from time to time must have contributed to Medieval Europe's impression of great monsters that populated the waters to the West. But in the Mediterranean, among the Greeks and Romans of antiquity, closer contact with sharks had left an impression of vicious dogs of the sea. Thus, Pliny's canis marinus. The metaphor of the dog spread to the North to dominate the European image of the shark, from the Italian pessecane and French chien de mer to the German Meerhund and Hundfisch and English sea dog and dogfish.

In the meantime, Portuguese and Spanish ships sailed south and west into the tropical waters of the African coast and the New World, encountering sharks in such numbers and of such size and ferocity as they had never before seen. The seafarers returned with striking stories of the terrible fish, and with a name for it as well. Whether the Spanish picked up a Carib word and made of it tiburón, or the Portuguese seized upon an Arawak word and fashioned it into tuburão, the word quickly established its claim to the Iberian Peninsula, becoming tauró in Catalan. As tidings of the New World reached to the North, so did tiburón. Fernández de Oviedo included a description of the Caribbean tiburón in his Natural historia de las Indias of 1526. Translated by Richard Eden and published in London in 1555 in a collection entitled The Decades of the Newe Worlde or West India, it introduced to English readers the untranslated word tiburón, described as "a very great fishe and very quicke and swifte in the water, and a cruell deuourer" (Arber 1885:231). Tiburón appeared in French in Joubert's L'histoire poissons in 1558 (Murray 1926:2), and in German in a 1580 Fugger Newsletter regarding an incident that occurred in the Atlantic during the passage of a Portuguese ship to India the previous year:

What called forth still greater surprise on my part were other big fishes that are in the ocean and that eat men alive, whereof I have been myself a witness. For when a man fell from our ship into the sea... there appeared from below the surface of the sea a large monster, called Tiburon; it rushed on the man and tore him to pieces before our very eyes. (Matthews 1959:66)

That same year, an Englishman who had taken passage aboard a Portuguese ship to Goa wrote home, remarking on the tropical sharks, and using the Portuguese word for them:

And to speake somewhat of fishes in all places of calme, especially in the burning Zone, neere the line (for without we never saw any) there waited on our ship fishes as long as a man, which they call Tuburones, they come to eat such things as from the shippe fall into the sea, not refusing men themselves if they light upon them. (Hakluyt 1927:236)

A 1588 translation of Mendoza's travels in the West Indies is typical of the image of the tiburón presented to sixteenth century English readers:

But above all other, there is an infinite number of great fishes called tuburones, and are in great skulls [schools]; they are marvellously affected unto humaine flesh, and will follow a shippe fuite hundred leagues, without meaning of it one day. Many times they [the sailors] have taken of the fishes, and do finde in their bellies all such filth as hath beene thrownne out of their shipp in many dayes sailing, and whole shippes heads with horses and all. If they [the tuburones] chance to finde a man in the waters side he [the tiburon] will eat him all; if not, all that he doth fasten on he doth sheare it clean away, be it a legge or an armee, or half his body, as many times it hath beene seene, and they doe it very quickly, for that they have many rows of teeth in their heads, which be as sharpe as razors. (Mendoza 1970:219)

A 1604 translation of José de Acosta's 1590 account of sharks at the port of Santo Domingo, referred to “the incredible raving of the Tuburons, or sharker” (Acosta 1970:147). In a similar style, in the narrative of his 1593 voyage to the South Seas, Richard Hawkins (Sir John's son) wrote of “the most ravenous fishe knowne in the sea,” after explaining that “the shark, or tiberune, is a fish like unto those which wee call dogge-fishes, but that he is farre greater” (Markham 1970:150).

It would appear that whatever prior perception Englishmen might have had of sharks, their voyages into the tropical waters of the New World (whether actual or vicarious) brought them into contacts of such intensity that they perceived the fish as something new, requiring a new name. They were more than sea dogs or dogfish. But why sharks? Why did the English not adopt the Iberian word? They were familiar with both the Portuguese and Spanish versions of it. So why shark? And if shark is in fact from the Yucatec xoč, why is there no trace of it in Spanish? How could it possibly have journeyed from Yucatec to English without having passed through Spanish? But to pursue these questions it is necessary to turn to the word xoč itself, and ask yet two more. How widely distributed was the word xoč among the Maya in
In support of his 1944 reading of xoc, Thompson cited four sources that had been brought to his attention by Ralph Roys. The Vienna dictionary defined xoc as tiburón, remarking that its teeth were used by the Indians for arrows; the Pio Perez dictionary listed hkan xoc as a species of tiburón; George Gauñer had identified the Yucatec ah kan xoc as the Póto or Caaing Whale (Globicephalus melas) and Short-finned Blackfish (G. brachypterus); and the Chilam Balam of Tizimin included a chac uayab xoc which Roys had translated “great (or red) demon shark or whale,” having concluded that xoc or xoc referred to “an ill-defined group of large fish or whales.” In addition to these, Thompson found xoc defined as tiburón in the only non-Yucatec source cited, a fragmented seventeenth-century Pokomchi dictionary. While favoring an interpretation of xoc as ‘shark’, Thompson nevertheless concluded that the fish portrayed in the glyphs “was probably a large mythological creature with no immutable characteristics, and with a tendency to become anthropomorphized.” Holding to essentially the same interpretation, in 1950 Thompson added the Ah Xoc of the Chilam Balam of Kaua to his Yucatec evidence (Thompson 1971:78). To these sources of Thompson’s may be added the Alcalá dictionary’s definition of tiburón as ah kan xoc, a similar definition in Beltran’s Arte del idioma Maya of 1746 (Baterra Vásquez 1980:379), and a neglected entry in the Vienna dictionary that defines “arrows that have tiburón teeth for arrowheads” as xoc yee halal (xoc arrowhead), all seeming to support the interpretation ‘shark’.

Thompson contended that the glyph of the mythological fish, which appeared as the variable element in the initial series introductory glyph when functioning semantically as Xoc, the patron of Zotz (Figure 1a), could also function as a rebus for a verb of identical phonetic value meaning ‘to count’. His argument rested upon the observation that the widely distributed count glyphs, or anterior and posterior date indicators, frequently substituted the fish’s head (Figure 1b) for the Muluc sign (Figure 1c) without any change of meaning, but which when considered with the ti suffix prescribed a reading of xoc ti ‘count to’. It was apparent that the visual symbol of the fish, xoc, was used to carry the sound of a verb that, in itself, had nothing to do with sharks, whales, or fish in general. Thompson was not maintaining that every fish presented in the inscriptions or in Maya art was intended to represent this sea creature. He was specific in excluding a large number of them from such a reading: “Most naturalistic fish in Maya art are fresh water varieties, since they are usually shown feeding on water lilies.”

While there has not been agreement regarding some specific creature intended by the xoc-fish, nevertheless, it has been consistently associated with the sea. Roys had translated the Tizimin’s chac uayab xoc as a “great (or red) demon shark or whale,” and later, in the Ritual of the Bacabs, he rendered the same phrase “red ominous shark” (Roys 1965:39, 147). In El libro de los libros de Chilam Balam, Alfredo Barrera Vásquez consistently translated chac uayab xoc as “el maligno Xoc, Tiburón,” wording the first reference to the creature thus: “A las orillas del mar tendrá abiertas sus fauces el terrible Ayin, Cocodrilo; tendrá abiertas sus fauces el maligno

**Fig. 1** Xoc, the patron of Zotz (a); posterior date indicators with ti suffix and main signs Xoc (b) and Muluc (c).
Xooc, Tiburón” (‘At the edge of the sea the terrible Crocodile will have opened its jaws; the malignant Shark will have opened its jaws’ [Barerra Vásquez and Rendon 1948:169-170, 180-181]). This same passage is translated by Munro Edmonson as “At the edge of the sea – Otherwise the port of the East priest Munul Ain; Otherwise the port of the East priest Uayah Xoc,” with the latter clarified in a note as ‘were-shark’ (Edmonson 1982:74). But whether interpreted as the great (or red) demon shark (or whale), the ominous shark, the malignant shark, or the East priest were-shark, the chac uayab xooc of the Chilam Balam of Tizimin remained a fearsome and threatening creature of the sea. That this is the monster that shares the count glyph with the Muluc sign seems certain from Barrera Vásquez’s compilation of the day auguries from the Chilam Balam of Kaua, wherein the entry for the day Muluc reads: “Ah-Xoc, the tiburón, and Ah-Balam, the jaguar, are its [Muluc’s] omen. Devourer of one’s children. Devourer of one’s wives. Deathly children. Deathly wives . . . Killer of opossums, too.”

This identification of the xoc as a creature of the sea, and more particularly a shark, perhaps helps to account for the difficulty of finding evidence for the existence of cognates in Maya languages other than Yucatec, a difficulty which Thompson acknowledged and lamented in his original paper in which Pokomchi alone was cited to support an argument otherwise based exclusively upon Yucatec sources. But if the Yucatec people’s greater exposure to the shark-infested shores of its peninsula can be summoned to account for the xoc-fish of its dictionaries and Chilam Balams, Thompson’s problem is not thereby attended to. Indeed, the insistence upon identifying the xoc as a sea creature raises some interesting questions. Inasmuch as the apparent substitution of the xoc-fish for the Muluc sign can be found at Maya sites located some 200 kilometers from the sea, then must not the glyph have lacked meaning for the majority of land-based peoples to whom it was supposedly addressed? Moreover, if the key to the interchangeability of the two forms of the count glyph is to be found in the relationship between the day Muluc and its omen Ah-Xoc, then would it not seem that it was not the fish that replaced the day sign to provide the phonetic value of an alternate verb, but rather that the Muluc was substituted for the rebus fish, and both were to be read as puns? In extending the pun to a second stage beyond the always invisible verb, the Muluc version of the glyph would have been predicated upon its reader’s awareness of the missing visual rebus, the phonetic value of which it perpetuated. Thus the two glyphs would not have represented two different verbs meaning ‘to count’, but would have been semantically and phonetically identical, to be read xoc. If this conclusion is valid, then the ubiquity of the concept of the xoc-fish among the Classic Maya would seem very firmly established, and failure to locate cognates must be seen as just that – a failure to locate them, not a denial of their existence. But a further consequence of the apparent ubiquity of the xoc-fish is that it becomes tempting to seek a fresh water source for the concept.

Among the stories and drawings collected by Roberto Bruce from the Lacandon of Naja is a tale told (and illustrated) by Chan Kin and his sons concerning a water-being of the lakes and rivers of the Lacandon Selva. The story was variously titled Xak Xok, Ah Chak Xok, and Ah Chak Xok yetel Ley (the Chak xok and the Boy). Long ago, a male Chak Xok approached a man who was fishing in a lake and asked for his daughter in marriage, promising that the man would henceforth always catch large fish if he agreed to the arrangement. When the latter did so, the Chak Xok said, “Tomorrow I will come for your daughter, then, when you send her to the lake. You may think you see an alligator carry her away, but do not fear. It will not be an alligator, but I.” Thus it happened.

Later, a female Chak Xok asked the man for his son in marriage. But the boy overheard and fled to the jungle where he appealed to the Chembal K’uh who enabled him to become a seagull. The boy flew over the lake and dived into the water in search of his sister. He found her living with the Chak Xok. As his brother-in-law, the Chak Xok was obliged to receive the boy. One day, while the Chak Xok was visiting his grandmother (a great turtle), the boy tried to persuade his sister to flee with him. But she was pregnant and chose to remain to have her child. Then one day the boy went swimming in the Río Usumacinta with the Chak Xok. When the latter put its head beneath the water, the boy quickly thrust a hot pepper into its anus, killing it instantly. But the girl still wished to stay to have her child. However, it was no child that she bore, but many small alligators. The girl remained with her children and the boy returned alone.

The first point to be made about this story told by the landlocked Lacandon is that the Chak Xok are presented as fresh water denizens, at home in both an anonymous lake (though probably Lago Naja) and the named Río Usumacinta. The second point is that the story’s narrators made no attempt to portray the Chak Xok as sharks. Indeed, the shark is conspicuously absent. Even Bruce’s commentaries upon the story make no allusion to a fish. Chak, he tells us, is ‘red’, though it also means ‘dwarf’. And xok may be associated with ‘count’, possibly implying “‘calculators’, mathematicians’ or ‘wizards.’” The story leaves us to guess at the Chak Xok’s form. The male Chak Xok himself denies being an alligator, though conceding that he might easily be mistaken for one. Later, in apparent contradiction to this denial, he appears to have fathered a brood of alligators. But lest too much be made of this, we should remind ourselves that the Chak Xok’s grandmother was a turtle (albeit a large one), and not insist that the grandson breed any truer than had his ancestors. The drawings, however, which accompanied the narration, support Bruce’s editorial comment that the Chak Xok are said to look like Occidentals.

There is yet another feature of the Lacandon story that merits attention. The river in which the boy so rudely dispatched the Chak Xok was the Usumacinta. But the narrators do not give it that name. They call it Xokla’,
which prompts Bruce to interject, “Xokla’ appears to be a contraction of Xok-ol-ha’, ‘water of the Xok’.” But this Lacandon word is surely a cognate of the Acalan-Chontal xocel haa, recorded in the Maldonado-Paxbolon papers of 1610-12 to describe the water over which Hernán Cortés constructed his famous bridge in 1525, and which Ortwin Smailus has translated as simply ‘rió’ (Smailus 1975:65). Similarly, the Vienna dictionary offers ‘rió’ as its translation of the Yucatec x-ocol ha’ and x-ocola’ (Barerra Vásquez 1980:949).

With these definitions in mind, it is interesting to return to the Maldonado-Paxbolon papers in which Don Pablo Paxbolon, as cacique and governor of Acalan-Tixchel, recorded in his native Chontal through the pen of his son-in-law, Francisco Maldonado of Campeche, his relocation of a number of Indians to the drainage of the Rio Mamantel, which empties into the Laguna de Términos some eight kilometers east of the mouth of the Rio Candalaria. Between 1571 and 1588, Don Pablo established four pueblos, of which two spoke Chontal, one spoke Yucatec, and the fourth Chontal and Yucatec. The last of these, settled between 1571 and 1573, and located directly on the Rio Mamantel, is recorded in the Paxbolon narrative as Xoquelha, Xocola, Cocelka, and Jocola, orthographic variations on the Chontal and Yucatec words for ‘river’. It is of some interest that after 1610 these names no longer appear in the records and the town assumes the name of the river itself, Mamantel (Scholes 1972:230). In the meantime, what appeared to be different species of fresh water sharks came to be known from other parts of the world. In India, the Ganges Shark (C. gangeticus), reported as early as 1822 at Calcutta (again with the sawfish), was later found 230 kilometers up the Hooghly River, and in 1880 was said to have been responsible for twenty river attacks upon humans, most of which were fatal. In the summer of 1959 it was said to be responsible for thirty-five such attacks. In Africa, the type specimen of the Zambezi Shark (C. zambezensis) was taken at Tete, 185 kilometers up the Zambezi River. The same shark was subsequently found in a number of other African rivers, including the Gambia, where in 1933, three specimens were taken at McCarthy Island, some 300 kilometers from the sea. Like the other two fresh water Carcharhinidae, C. zambezensis had a reputation for ferocity and was charged with numerous unprovoked attacks upon humans. But the three sharks had something else in common: they were all regarded as closely allied to (or, from time to time, even confused with) a warm water, maritime shark of wide distribution and with an equally ferocious reputation, the Bull Shark (C. leucas). Indeed, in 1961 Bigelow and Schroeder abandoned their descent theory and argued that C. nicaraguensis and C. leucas were synonymous, one and the same species (Hamilton 1822:3-4; Budker 1971:138-142). In 1966 Thomas Thorson led a team that collected nineteen sharks from Lago Nicaragua and various points along the Rio San Juan, all of which proved indistinguishable from the
marine shark. That the sharks were not landlocked seemed apparent from the fact that "sharks were observed both below and above the three major rapids as well as actually in the rapids, most of them headed upstream" (Thorson, Watson, and Cowan 1966:385). These observations prompted a two-way tagging program which established beyond any doubt that a single species, C. leucas, freely ascends and descends the Río San Juan to become at turns the Nicaragua Lake Shark and the Caribbean Bull Shark.

A similar fate has befallen the other two fresh water sharks. In 1963 C. zambezensis was declared synonymous with C. leucas, and today the majority of collected specimens of C. gangeticus are regarded as the same species (Castro 1983:136). Thus, three sharks from three different continents thought to be separate, permanently adapted fresh water species, appear to represent a single, marine species that moves at will from salt water to fresh and back. Apparently unique among the sharks, but in common with the sawfish, C. leucas has managed to meet the cartilaginous fish's problem of over hydration upon entering fresh water by means of an osmoregulatory mechanism involving a drop in the urea content of the body fluids by as much as fifty per cent (Thorson 1976:565-566). Thus, while the high concentration of urea in the tissue establishes an osmotic pressure that restricts the typical shark's penetration of fresh or brackish waters to brief probes, there appears to be no limit to the ability of C. leucas to enter and remain in fresh water.

Nor are the fresh water excursions of the latter limited to the haunts of the Lake Nicaragua, Ganges, and Zambezi sharks. In the Western Atlantic, C. leucas is common in shallow marine environments from New York to Brazil and is notorious for entering brackish or fresh water lagoons and river estuaries. To the north of the Maya area it has been identified some 180 kilometers above the mouth of Chesapeake Bay. 440 kilometers up the Atchafalaya-Black River near Jonesport, Louisiana, and in the Río Papaloapan and Río Pánuco. The deepest known penetration of the northern rivers was recorded on September 8, 1937, when the "Alton Evening Telegraph" featured a story and photographs of an eighty-four pound, five-foot specimen of C. leucas that had been caught in a net located 2.800 kilometers up the Mississippi River near Alton, Illinois. To the South, it has been recorded in the Río Patauca in Honduras, the Miraflores Locks of the Panama Canal, and, of course, in Lago Nicaragua and its effluent, the Río San Juan (from which, in 1953, a single fisherman was reported to have taken 7,000 specimens in an eight month period). But perhaps the most striking identification of C. leucas occurred when in October 1943, one was taken and photographed at Iquitos, Perú, at a distance of 3,500 kilometers upriver from the estuary of the Amazon!

Within the Maya region itself the presence of C. leucas in the Río Dulce and its source, Lago Izabal, has established a reputation for the latter second only to that of Lago Nicaragua as a home of fresh water lake sharks. In Belize, an exceptionally large, three and one-half meter specimen of C. leucas is reported to have been taken from the Río Hondo in 1979, some 100 kilometers from its mouth. Unidentified sharks, in all probability C. leucas, have been reported by a variety of sources from the Río Motagua, the Belize and Sibun Rivers, the Río Grijalva and Río Champoton. Of particular interest to this study are numerous reports of sharks in the Río Usumacinta and its distributary, the Río San Pedro, some of which have been identified as C. leucas (Thorson 1976:567). Whether these sharks have been sighted above the canyon rapids below Piedras Negras, I do not know, but it should be remembered that the conviction that sharks could not possibly ascend the rapids of the Río San Juan prevented the acceptance of Oviedo's theory of the Caribbean origin of the Lake Nicaragua shark for over one hundred years following Squier's doubts of 1852. In this regard, it is worth noting that the river that enters the Usumacinta from the Mexican side between Piedras Negras and the rapids is called the Río Chocola, yet another version, I suggest, of 'water of the xoc'. Similarly, to the west of Lago Izabal, one the Río Polochic, which empties into the lake (and like it, is notorious for its sharks), there flourished until 1631, a Manche Chol town by the name of Xocolo (Thompson 1970a:64). That this town, too, should be read 'water of the xoc' receives support from the observation that the immediate upstream neighbors of the Manche Chol were the Pokomchi, the only language group other than Yucatec in which Thompson was able to find the word xoc meaning 'shark'.

Thus the Bull Shark, Carcharhinus leucas, emerges as a prime candidate for a fresh water xoc, and prompts consideration of a scenario perhaps something like the following. The movement and settlement of the ancient Maya around and along the great rivers was accompanied by an awareness of a dreaded creature that dwelt in their depths. Though far from common, nevertheless, the rare occasions and frightful circumstances in which the creature was encountered were sufficient to create and sustain a powerful impression of malignancy and savagery. Lurking unseen in the muddy waters for twenty or fifty years or more, the xoc would suddenly strike to tear at the leg or arm of a woman at her wash, or seize and devour a child at play. The rivers came to be spoken of with reference to their notorious inhabitant, and in time, xocola, 'water of the shark' or 'sharky water', came to mean 'river'. So familiar did the Maya world become with the reputation of the xoc that its image, or even that of the day with which it was associated, could be incorporated as a rebus into public inscriptions with full confidence that it would be readily understood. The xoc itself became mythologized into Ah Xoc, Ah Kan Xoc, or Chac Uayab Xoc, an ominous demon that killed and devoured women, children and animals, a were-shark whose anthropomorphic tendencies finally, among the Lacandon, lost all connection with the rarely seen shark that had been its source and inspiration, and survived in the
almost unrecognizable form of the Chak Xok, the water-being who carries children into the watery depths and who looks like an Occidental. Apart from its mythological career, however, the word xoc became generalized in the coastal regions of Mayadom (probably during the Classic Period or earlier, but certainly by the Conquest), to include not simply the river shark, but to apply to all sharks.

Whether the preceding scenario is found acceptable, the evidence respecting the distribution and meaning of the word xoc in the sixteenth-century seems clear. The concept of the xoc as either a fresh water or marine creature, or both, appears to have existed in Yucatec, Chontal, Lacandon, Chol and Pokomchi, and it further appears that the creature in question was a shark. Had the ships of John Hawkins touched the Maya coast at any point between the Río Dulce and the Río Grijalva in 1568, their crews would quite likely have encountered persons whose vocabulary included the word xoc. And from Diego de Landa’s observations of about 1566 that “there are many tiburones on the entire coast,” it seems equally likely that those same men would have encountered sharks, and that the conditions sought by this study might have been met: the convergence of xoc, sharks, and English sea dogs. However, the earliest documented English contact with the area was not until William Parker’s attack upon Campeche in 1597, almost thirty years after sharke appeared in English. How, then, might Hawkins’s sailors have acquired the word xoc?

Embarking from Plymouth Harbor on his flagship, the Jesus of Lubeck, on October 2, 1567, with a fleet of six ships laden with English merchandise and some four hundred men, Captain John Hawkins had sailed south to reach the familiar African slave coast. For three months the fleet had scoured the coast for its black cargo. Pressing Portuguese into service as pilots from time to time, and pushing the length of the coast farther than he had ever before done, Hawkins had gathered an unprecedented supply of slaves for the venture ahead. In early February of 1568, for the third time in his career and the first without a Spanish pilot, he had pointed his fleet toward the West Indies. Reaching Isla Dominica at the end of March, his vessels had turned south to the Spanish Main where for the next four months they moved slowly westward from port to port, displaying their wares ashore in makeshift shops, to trade for provisions, monkeys, parrots, and other souvenirs, and, of course, gold, silver, and pearls. At Borburata, Hawkins had been fortunate in finding a pilot who, in exchange for a few slaves, was pleased to guide the fleet to Río de la Hacha and assist in obtaining a license to trade from the town treasurer. But for the most part, the Englishmen had made their own way, learning what customs and language of the colonists they could and foraging inland on occasion to encounter and, at times, collect fruit, plants, or animals with names that did not sound Spanish.

By the end of July, with most of his cargo sold, his ships well provisioned, and the season of the huracanes almost upon him, Hawkins was ready for home. Setting a northwesterly course from Cartagena, he aimed at running the Yucatan Channel, turning the western tip of Cuba, and bearing northeastward through the Florida Straits to catch the prevailing Westerlies that could have his fleet in Plymouth Harbor by November. Reaching Isla de Piños, the fleet followed the southern shore of Cuba, doubled Cabo San Antonio, and headed eastward into weather that was to turn the highly successful merchant venture into the greatest English maritime tragedy of the century. For days on end, the ships and men fought the storm that impeded their passage through the Florida Straits, until at last Hawkins signaled his fleet to turn and run before the wind. Blown northward along the western coast of Florida for yet more days on end, Hawkins found himself in unfamiliar waters, without a pilot, a ship missing, and a badly battered fleet, the flagship of which was in desperate need of repairs. Following a brief respite, the wind shifted to the North and again forced the English ships to run before it, driving them deep into the Gulf of Mexico toward the Bay of Campeche.

When the wind finally relented, the wearied seamen found themselves in sight of three low reefs, unknown to them, but familiar to the Spanish as the Triangulos, located forty leagues west of the Yucatan Peninsula at the latitude of Celestun. On the following day, Sunday, September 12, 1568, with the reefs still in sight, the Englishmen espied two small vessels approaching from the East. Giving chase, one of Hawkins’s pinnaces intercepted the slaver and brought its captain aboard the Jesus. Captain Francisco Maldonado of Cadiz had been bound for the port of San Juan de Ulua with a cargo of wines from Santo Domingo destined for Mexico City, when the same storm that had driven the English ships to the Triangulos, forced him to take refuge in the nearby port of Campeche. In response to Hawkins’s queries, Maldonado informed the Englishmen that the harbor of San Juan de Ulua was far better than that of Campeche to effect the needed repairs of their two largest ships, the Jesus and the Minion. But he also warned them that the annual fleet from Spain was due at any time at the same harbor. Hawkins ordered the Spanish wine ship to sail with his fleet to San Juan de Ulua, and keeping Maldonado aboard the Jesus, he required his pilot to join them as well. Unlike Maldonado, the pilot, Bartolomé Gonzales, had not been forced into Campeche by the storm. It was his home. He was a resident of the Yucatan port (Wright 1929:158-159). He was, furthermore, a man whose business was to know his coast – the names and locations of its reefs, islands, harbors, river estuaries, currents and tides, and of course, the names and behaviors of its more prominent life forms. Among the latter, the most prominent would surely have been one known to the Yucatec people from Campeche northward and, to the Chontal to the South, as xoc. For four days this Campeche pilot guided the English fleet on its fateful way toward San Juan de Ulua. And on September 16, from the deck of the Jesus of Lubeck, Bartolomé Gonzales
piloted the fleet into the harbor through a channel between two reefs to bring its vessels to their moorings in the lee of an island upon which the Spanish had established a small garrison.

A peaceful arrangement was made, Hawkins requesting a license to purchase materials needed to provision and refit his ships. But the Spanish fleet arrived the next morning and changed everything. After an awkward truce which left the two fleets moored side-by-side to the island with the English in control of the latter until the Jesus and Minion would be fit to resume their voyage, the Spanish were discovered preparing a surprise assault on September 23. A day-long battle ensued. Ships grappled with each other, broke free, lost their masts, went up in flames, exploded or sank. Scores of men were thrown overboard to the drifting Jesus. The Spanish itself was abandoned, many of its crew (Hawkins among them) escaping to the Minion as it pulled away from the crippled flagship. The Spanish lost both of their warships. Hawkins lost all but the Minion and the Judith. By morning, the Judith had fled and the Minion, short of water and provisions, and with two hundred men crowded onto her decks, was alone. Storms and hunger followed. Seeking relief, but finding none, the Minion sailed north, its desperate crew eating the ship’s monkeys, parrots, dogs, and rats. Finally, on October 8, half of the crew elected to be put ashore to take their chances with the Indians or Spanish, rather than continue in the overcrowded, underprovisioned ship. Ten days later, from some point north of the Rio Panuco, the Minion again set her sails for England with one hundred survivors of the Battle of San Juan de Ulua aboard. Little is known of the terrible journey home, but it is estimated that when the Minion finally slipped into Mount’s Bay in Cornwall on January 25, 1569, of those one hundred survivors, perhaps fifteen remained alive (Williamson 1949:156).

Again, it seems appropriate to consider a possible scenario, but this time one that might have left those fifteen men with an indelible impression of the xoc. Mingling with the English strangers on the decks of the Jesus of Lubeck as he piloted their fleet through waters so familiar to him, Bartolomé Gonzales of Campeche might have taken considerable pleasure (perhaps even pride) in informing them of the names and nature of whatever caught their attention during those four days from the Triángulos to San Juan de Ulua. As happens so often among men plunged into intimate and prolonged contact with each other, the crew of the Jesus might have expressed its camaraderie through the cultivation of a distinctive speaking style and jargon that fostered identification with the group. It might quickly have adopted xoc as its name for those remorseless tiburones that so relentlessly followed the ship through those tropical waters. Then came the battle. With the water teeming with mangled and bleeding men, dying and dead, and others living and sound, but clinging to floating debris, or desperately swimming to nearby ships, the harbor offered prime conditions for that occasional attendant of tropical naval battles, a shark ‘feeding-frenzy’. The new word fresh in their minds, the men of the Jesus were suddenly face-to-face with the full ferocity of the xoc itself, and as they leaped to the deck of the Minion, or clambered its bulwarks from the bloodied water, the name and the brute were joined in their minds forever. The weeks that followed underscored their terrible trauma as, day after day, one by one, the men on the Minion dropped their dead mates into the trailing wake of the ship and the raving jaws of the xoc.

To be sure, no such incident has been found in the records. But it is a poor history that fails to reach beyond the scattered documents that chanced to withstand the stinginess of time. Historical witnesses do not put everything to pen. Nor does all that they write survive. Indeed, it is precisely the historian’s act of transforming the fragmented impressions of extant documents into vivid and compelling episodes of human endeavor that comprises the substance of history. That there is room for such imagination in the current inquiry is emphasized by the saddened words with which Hawkins closed his brief True Declaration of the Troublesome Voyage shortly after the return of the Minion:

If all the miseries and troublesome affairs of this sorrowfull voyage should be perfectly and thoroughly written, there should neede a paynfull man with his penne, and as great a time as hee had that wrote the Iiues and deathes of the martirs. (Hawkins 1569:15)

Those untold “miseries and troublesome affairs” may well have included a scenario similar to that suggested above. But whether they did or not, as will be seen, the handful of haggard sea dogs that stepped from the decks of the Minion and onto English soil in late January of 1569 carried with them a vivid impression of a monster of the tropical sea, whose name they were prepared to communicate to their countrymen. But how?

By the middle of the sixteenth-century the printing press had provided England with its first effective instrument of mass communication. Early essays in modern journalism, ballads and broadsides issued from printing shops in mounting numbers, celebrating public personages, exhorting religious renewal, or announcing the birth of some monstrous two-headed child or calf, or the appearance of an extraordinary creature from the sea. The year prior to the departure of Hawkins upon his tragic expedition, for example, the London public was treated to a broadside that circulated under the heading The Description of a Rare or Rather Most Monstrous Fishe taken on the East Coast of Holland. The accompanying woodcut reveals that the subject was an impressively proportioned cuttlefish (Anon. 1566). Again, on October 11, 1568, as the Minion rode at anchor in the Gulf of Mexico, its crew nursing the wounds of San Juan de Ulua and preparing for the long journey home, seventeen enormous “fishes” swam some ten miles up the Orwell River in Suffolk and cast themselves upon its banks not far below
Ipswich. London was immediately apprised of the event as hundreds of double-columned, single-sheet broadsides spilled from the press of Thomas Colwell, located beneath the conduit on Fleet Street amongst the many taverns frequented by the city’s actors, poets, and authors. The broadside boasted a large woodcut which, though highly stylized and not very convincing in itself, nevertheless, confirms the impression of a Killer Whale (Orcinus Orca) that emerges from the detailed description beneath it (Granger 1568). However, neither this whale nor the cuttlefish were identified by name, both being left at “monstrous fishes.”

Six months after the return of the Minion on January 25, 1569, yet another broadside occasioned by the appearance of a great sea creature was dispatched from the Fleet Street shop of Thomas Colwell. On Thursday, June 16, some English fishermen working the Straits of Dover had taken and killed a large and unfamiliar fish that had followed a school of mackerel into their nets. The following day, Friday, they brought it up the Thames to Billingsgate Market in London, where it attracted immediate attention. On Saturday, the fish was flayed and gutted, its meat cut and sold for food, and its skin stuffed and mounted at one of the Fleet Street taverns, the Red Lion. Within the week the broadside announcing the fish’s capture and display swept the streets of the city. Authored by an otherwise anonymous “C.R.” and headlined The true discription of this marueilous strange fishe, which was taken on Thursday wassennight, the xvi. day of June, this present month, in the yeare of our Lord God M.DLXIX., its format followed that of the previous year’s Killer Whales. With a bit more realistic illustration than its predecessor and an equally detailed description, the broadside, proclaiming that “here hath neuer the lyke of it ben scene,” introduced a new fish to the English public (Figure 2): "Ther is no
proper name for it that I knowe, but that sertayne men of Captain Haukinses, doth call it a Sharke.” And the species? Alopias vulpinus, the Thresher Shark.

It seems appropriate that this 1569 broadside should not only contain the earliest record of what is perhaps the sole Maya loan-word in English, but also use it to label the earliest English description of a species known today by that same word. Thompson would have liked that. And I suspect that if he had considered further the possibility that the earliest documented phonetic evidence to support his theory of rebus writing among the ancient Maya was to be found in his own English language, there would have crept over Thompson’s face, a faint smile.

Acknowledgments

This paper owes its inspiration to an impromptu dinner discussion following the March 25, 1983, session of Linda Schele’s VII Workshop on Maya Hieroglyphic Writing, during which Sheila Billingsley raised the question of a relationship between xoc and shark. I am grateful to Sheila for the tenacity with which she pressed the question and for the encouragement given me to pursue the matter, after bringing to my attention the following passage from the Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology:

Said to have been so named by sailors of Capt. John Hawkins’s expedition who brought home a specimen which was exhibited in London in 1569; of unkn. origin. (Onions 1966:817)

I am also indebted to Linda Schele, Barbara MacLeod, Nicholas Hopkins, Kathryn Josserand and S. Jeffrey K. Wilkerson for their generous assistance, criticism and support. I am similarly indebted to Jon McGee for bringing the Lacandon material of Roberto Bruce to my attention, and to Richard C. Day, Morris Herman, and Robert C. Burroughs for reading and commenting upon the text. Fig. 2 is a photostatic copy from the University of Michigan Microfilms; the original is in the Huth collection of the British Library. The drawings of fig. 1 and the map are my own.

Footnotes

1 “The fighters arrive with the East priest Uayab Xoc / At the time of seeking fire, / Of seeking shark tails” (Edmonson 1982:96).

2 Throughout, I have retained the orthographic forms of my sources; thus xoc, xoc, and xok all appear. Unless otherwise indicated, references to Thompson are to Thompson 1944.

3 Samuel Johnson (1756) had already linked shark to Canis carcharias, but without explanation.

4 Because it is focused upon the origin of shark as applied to the fish, this discussion ignores the distinct possibility of a separate, but later, origin for the meanings associated with the spellings and sounds of sherk, shirk, and shark, alluded to above by Webster, Booth, and Palmer.

5 This comment is, however, followed by: “Cf. Ger. dial. (Austrian) schirk sturgeon: see SHIRK ab’” (Bradley 1914:633).

6 Spanish authorities tend to support the first of these explanations while Portuguese tend to support the latter (cf. Corominas 1954:441-2; Silveira Bueno 1967:4107).

7 “fichas que tienen por casquillos dientes de tiburon.” Andrews and Zapata 1978:600.


9 This reading seems closer to the shaving habits of William of Ockham than that proposed by John S. Justeson and William M. Norman at the Quinta Mesa Redonda de Palenque in June 1983: “Preclassic and very early Classic compounds may have made use of -*ta or -*tay as a derivational suffix on more verbs than did proto-Cholan. One possible instance which we cannot elaborate on now would be a hypothetical *mul-ta, meaning ‘accumulation’ or ‘to accumulate’, based on *mul ‘to heap up’; this could be the original of the constant part of the anterior and posterior date indicators” (Justeson and Norman 1983). However, in support of the latter, it should be remembered that Ockham was a Westerner and would probably have found the Maya penchant for redundancy beyond the help of his razor.

10 All references to this story are to Bruce 1976:48-49, 142-144.


12 S. Jeffrey K. Wilkerson is my source (personal communication) for the C. leucas taken from the Río Hondo as well as a probable one about 23 kilometers up the Sibún. Fishermen are my source (August 1983) for the Río Champotón.

13 Fishermen have informed me (August 1983) of the presence of sharks in the Usumacinta at Emiliano Zapata.

14 The latter rendering was suggested to me by Barbara MacLeod.

15 “Hay muy gentiles ostiones en el río de Champotón y hay muchos tiburones en toda la costa” (Landa 1982:123).

16 For excellent treatments of this third of Hawkins’s ventures to the New World see Williamson 1949:119-156 and Unwin 1960:112-219.

17 I have modernized the spelling.

18 The exhibited specimen was undoubtedly that described in the 1569 broadside and mistakenly imagined to have been brought to England on the Minion.
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