

# A Skyband with Constellations: Revisiting the Monjas East Wing at Chichen Itza

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An 1875 photograph by Augustus Le Plongeon of the East Wing of the Monjas at Chichen Itza has prompted me to write this note about the so-called zodiac appearing there. In 2009, at George and Melinda Stuart's Boundary End Archaeology Research Center, while going through several boxes of Le Plongeon materials collected by Lawrence Desmond,<sup>1</sup> I came across black-and-white prints of scenes from Chichen Itza, one of which shows the eastward-facing façade of the

East Wing of the Monjas building (Figure 1). Desmond informs me (personal communication, 2014) that it was probably taken in 1875. As such it may be the earliest extant photograph showing the details of that famous

<sup>1</sup> The Lawrence G. Desmond Collection of Augustus and Alice Dixon Le Plongeon Photographs is now part of the The George E. Stuart Collection of Archaeological and Other Materials, 1733-2006 (Collection Number 05268), housed in The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.



**Figure 1.** The east face of the East Wing of the Monjas, Chichen Itza. Photograph by Augustus Le Plongeon, probably 1875 (Lawrence Desmond, personal communication 2014), from the Lawrence G. Desmond Collection of Augustus and Alice Dixon Le Plongeon photographs. The George E. Stuart Collection of Archaeological and Other Materials, 1733-2006. Collection Number 05268. The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

façade.

A band of carved stones running across the eastern face of the building has played a significant role in the debate about the Maya zodiac, a debate that includes pages 23-24 of the Paris Codex. The history of zodiac research, including the Monjas stones and the Paris Codex constellation pages, is summarized briefly in Love (1994:93-96) and thoroughly in Bricker and Bricker (2011:708-729).<sup>2</sup>

Since Förstemann's and Seler's time it has been shown that certain animals carved on the Monjas frieze

<sup>2</sup> I take this opportunity to restate my position that constellations in the Paris Codex are not a zodiac. The zodiac is a band or belt around the sky that is about 18 degrees wide, within which the sun, the moon, and the visible planets travel. This construct began in Mesopotamia and was later adopted by Greeks, Romans, and Europeans/Westerners. Why would the Maya necessarily develop the same kind of construct as Westerners?

As evidence against a Maya zodiac, the turtle that appears on the Paris Codex pages and in the Bonampak Murals is generally accepted to be Orion (Love 1994:97) but Orion is not in the zodiacal band, lying some distance to the south of it.

If by zodiac, one means generally animals or other beings in the sky, then yes the Maya had a zodiac. But if the word zodiac is used correctly—meaning the 18-degree-wide band around the sky that has the path of the sun (the ecliptic) as its center line—then there is no evidence in my opinion that the Maya had a zodiac. They saw animals and other beings in the sky, but those beings could be well to the north or well to the south of the ecliptic, and were not part of a zodiac.

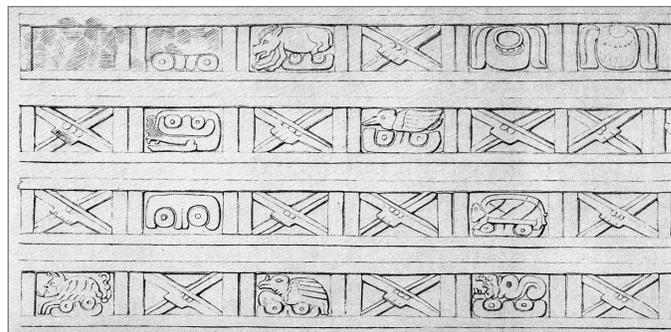


Figure 2. Annie Hunter's drawings of the Monjas skyband based on photos by Maudslay (1889-1902:3:Pl. 13).

are associated with star signs and therefore probably represent constellations (Figure 2). And since at least Spinden's time it has been recognized that the Paris Codex has thirteen beings suspended from the sky that also probably represent constellations (Figure 3). Researchers have long been trying to find a one-to-one correlation between the Monjas stones and the Paris Codex constellations, but such a linkage is elusive at best.

The Brickers have proposed to resolve the issue by suggesting that the stones in the Monjas frieze are a composite of reused stones from one or more other structures, and since they are not in their original order they have little value regarding the sequence or order

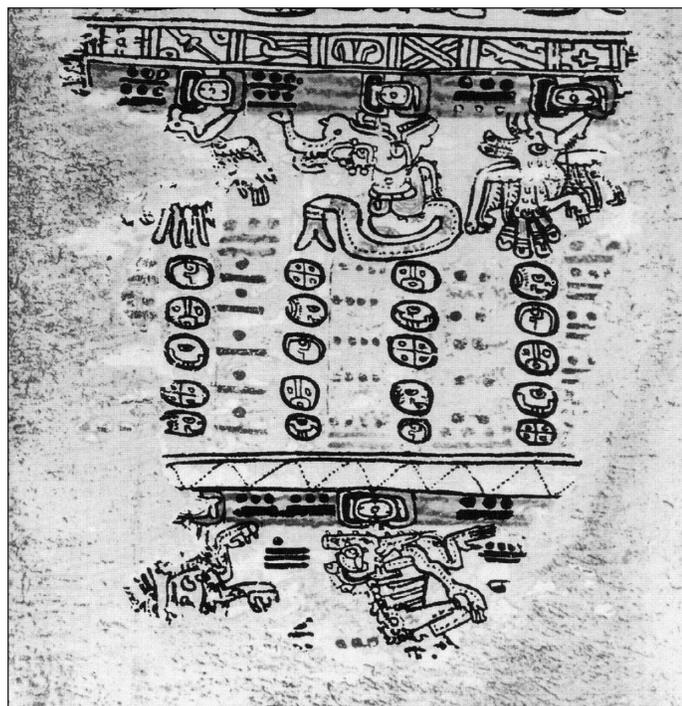
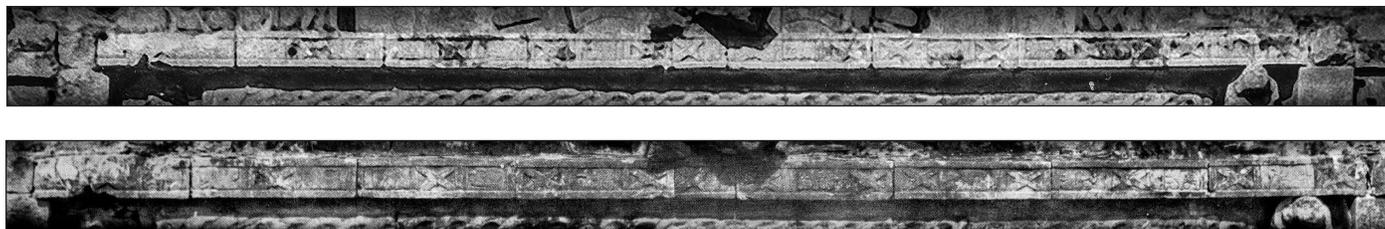


Figure 3. The Paris Codex constellation pages (pp. 23-24) from Love (1994).



**Figure 4.** (a) Detail of skyband on the Monjas East Wing showing the stones to be in the same position in 1875 as they are today (photograph by Augustus Le Plongeon, 1875); (b) detail of skyband on the Monjas East Wing as it appeared in 1932-1934, with the stones unmoved since Le Plongeon’s photograph in 1875 (Bolles 1977:113).

of constellations, neither confirming nor negating a relationship to the Paris Codex order (Bricker and Bricker 1992:164-166).

If the Monjas stones were borrowed or reused from other structures, when would that have taken place? The 1875 photograph by Le Plongeon shows the band of stones in exactly the same positions where Bolles found them in the early 1930s (Figure 4), during his work with the Carnegie Institution of Washington (Bolles 1977:113); and this is the same position the stones retain today.

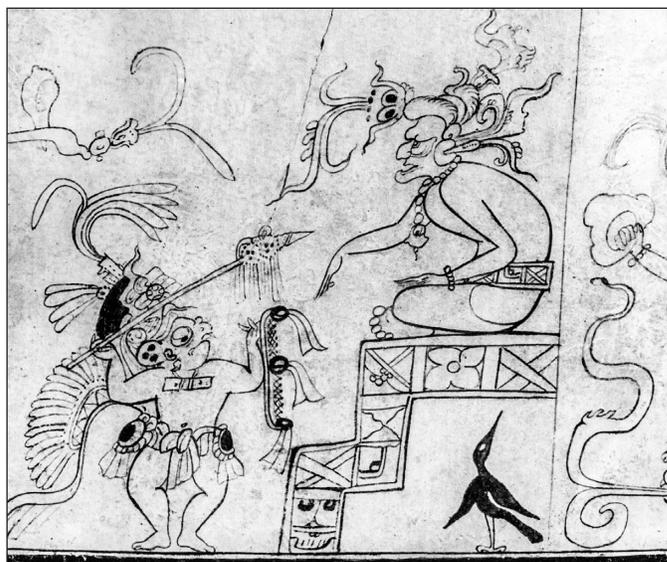
If these stones were borrowed from one or more other structures, it would have been when the East Wing façade was first built, during the Epiclassic Period of Chichen Itza’s history. It seems unlikely that the stones were rearranged by someone between the time when the East Wing façade was built and when they were photographed by Le Plongeon in 1875.

There is of course the chance that these stones were borrowed from previously existing structures by the builders themselves. This suggestion is made by Bolles (1977:125), as the Brickers point out (1992:164-166), based on irregularities of fit and lack of certain symmetry. Such reuse of stones was quite common throughout Maya history and has been clearly documented, for example, at the nearby Osario (Schmidt and Love 2009). However, the irregularities in the Monjas band of stones could also be explained as a result of less than perfect communication between the designers and the stonecutters in the workshops where the stones were carved. The façade stones were not carved in situ but were manufactured elsewhere and fitted in place by masons where coats of plaster could cover imperfections (Bolles 1977:125).

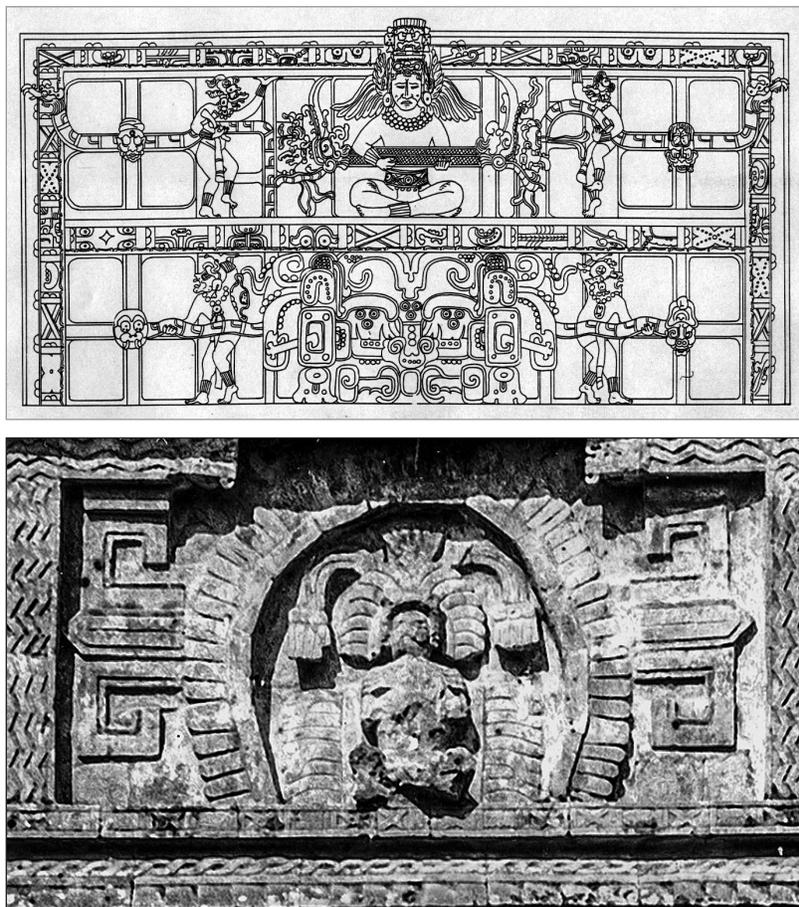
In my opinion, what we see on the East Wing of the Monjas is exactly what the builders intended the public to see, a skyband platform or throne, not a zodiac. It is a skyband of the type described by Carlson and Landis (1985:119) under the heading “Skyband Bases, Platforms, and Thrones” in their classification scheme. Skyband thrones or platforms are ubiquitous in both monumental art and ceramics (Figure 5). A skyband

platform quite reminiscent of the Monjas has been beautifully reconstructed by Merle Greene Robertson (1991: Fig. 74) from Maudslay’s photographs and the scant remains of molded stucco on Palenque’s Temple of the Sun (Figure 6).

Extended discussions about the order of the constellation images and whether or not they match the Paris Codex may in fact be moot in light of what we know from Carlson and Landis’s thorough investigation of skybands in which they were “unable to find any consistent significance in the sequence . . . of the skyband elements” (Carlson and Landis 1985:129). The designers of the East Wing of the Monjas included constellation symbols in the skyband but we as viewers cannot presume that the sequence itself, the order of the elements vis-à-vis each other, had any particular significance. The Monjas skyband is unique in that it carries constellation symbols, but in the end it remains a skyband. What we have at Chichen Itza is a skyband with constellations, not a zodiac.



**Figure 5.** An example of a skyband throne on Classic-period pottery (Carlson 1988:289; Coe and Kerr 1982:107).



**Figure 6.** (top) Reconstruction drawing of skyband platform or throne, from roof comb on Temple of the Sun, Palenque, by Merle Greene Robertson (1991:Fig. 74); (bottom) detail of seated figure on Las Monjas skyband (photograph by Augustus Le Plongeon, 1875).

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