

# Towards an Etymology of the *saajal* Title<sup>1</sup>

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The first hieroglyphic title for a non-royal noble came to light in the early 1960s, and six decades of subsequent scholarship have now succeeded in peopling the Late Classic Maya court with over a dozen distinct designations for non-royal courtiers, nobles, and priests (Houston 1993:128-136; Houston and Stuart 2001; Jackson 2005, 2013, 2015; Jackson and Stuart 2001; Kelly and Zender 2016; Martin 2020:85-95; Proskouriakoff 1964:186-190; Stuart 1985; Villela 1993; Zender 2004). As a result, Maya political organization and the contributions of these secondary but important figures have become increasingly well understood, even as much remains mysterious or still poorly known. For example, some titles remain effectively undeciphered, such as ‘banded bird’ (see Martin 2020:25). Others are still of uncertain transcription and meaning, such as *a-na-bi* (see Zender 2004:222-226). Perhaps most challenging of all has been the *sa-ja-la* title. Although the first non-royal title to be recognized (Proskouriakoff 1964:186-190; Stuart 1985), and by far the most numerous and widespread of the secondary titles (Martin 2020:86-88; Zender and Kelly 2015, 2023, in press), both its transcription and its etymology have hitherto remained uncertain. This paper seeks to address that shortcoming.

I begin with a review of the title’s identification and decipherment, highlighting developing understandings of its constituent signs and their values. I then offer new evidence bearing on its etymology, phonology, and historical evolution, proposing that it originates with the adjective *saaj* ‘small, young.’ The adjective alone was occasionally used as a title meaning ‘(the) small/young one.’ But *saaj* also generated the compound nouns *saajal* ‘small/young child’ and *saajxib* ‘small/young male.’ Of these, the former ultimately developed into the common title *saajal* meaning ‘petty noble.’ From this designation developed still other titles, both ascribed and achieved—*ch’oksaajal* ‘young petty noble,’ *ixsaajal* ‘petty noblewoman,’ and *baah saajal* ‘chief petty noble’—each with their own distributions and contextual significance. As will be seen, this proposal allows fresh engagement with the origins, development, and meaning of this most salient of the non-royal epithets. Yet caution must also be urged, lest we fall into an etymological trap of assuming that all holders of the ‘petty noble’ designation were the same, or had access to equivalent authority, privileges, and responsibilities. Cross-culturally, titles have frequently been shown to be

rather mercurial, shifting their significance in different contexts, and changing their meanings considerably over time.

## Identification and Decipherment

The *saajal* title was first isolated by Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1964:186-190) in her foundational study of Yaxchilan’s Late Classic inscriptions. She recognized the title’s frequent association with what she termed “battle-companions”: secondary figures accompanying rulers during military engagements. Such figures typically receive shorter or smaller caption texts, are often relegated to the less prestigious left side of compositions (Palka 2002), and never bear the emblem glyphs of polity rulers, instead taking the title which can now be read as *saajal*. A paradigmatic example is Yaxchilan Lintel 8 (Figure 1), where the *saajal* K’an Tok Wayaab appears alongside king Bird Jaguar IV in a scene dating to AD 755. While both are engaged in military action, the king dominates the right hand of the scene, wields a spear, and is physically associated with larger hieroglyphs giving his name and titles, including the Yaxchilan emblem (E2–E3). By contrast, the *saajal* is to the left, unarmed, and captioned by smaller glyphs, the final one his *saajal* title (B1–D3). Proskouriakoff also observed three examples of this title in the famous gathering of non-royal nobility on Piedras Negras Panel 3 (1964:189-190). Although Proskouriakoff was incorrect in seeing the title as marking descent from a prominent local lineage (her “Moon-sign family”), her other observations have been more lasting and have set the stage for much later discussion of *saajals* as a class of secondary nobility.

As additional examples came to light during the 1960s and 1970s, especially at sites far removed from Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras, it became clear that the *saajal* title could not refer to a single family but must instead provide a more general term for non-royal nobles. In this period, the title was read as *cahal* due to the confusion of visually similar but nonetheless distinct T25 *ka* ‘comb’ and T630 *sa* ‘double-comb’ signs.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Several arguments first published here were presented earlier this year at the 88th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology (Zender and Kelly 2023).

<sup>2</sup> T-numbers, as here, refer to Thompson (1962). Three-digit codes, such as PM1 below, refer to Macri and Looper (2003).

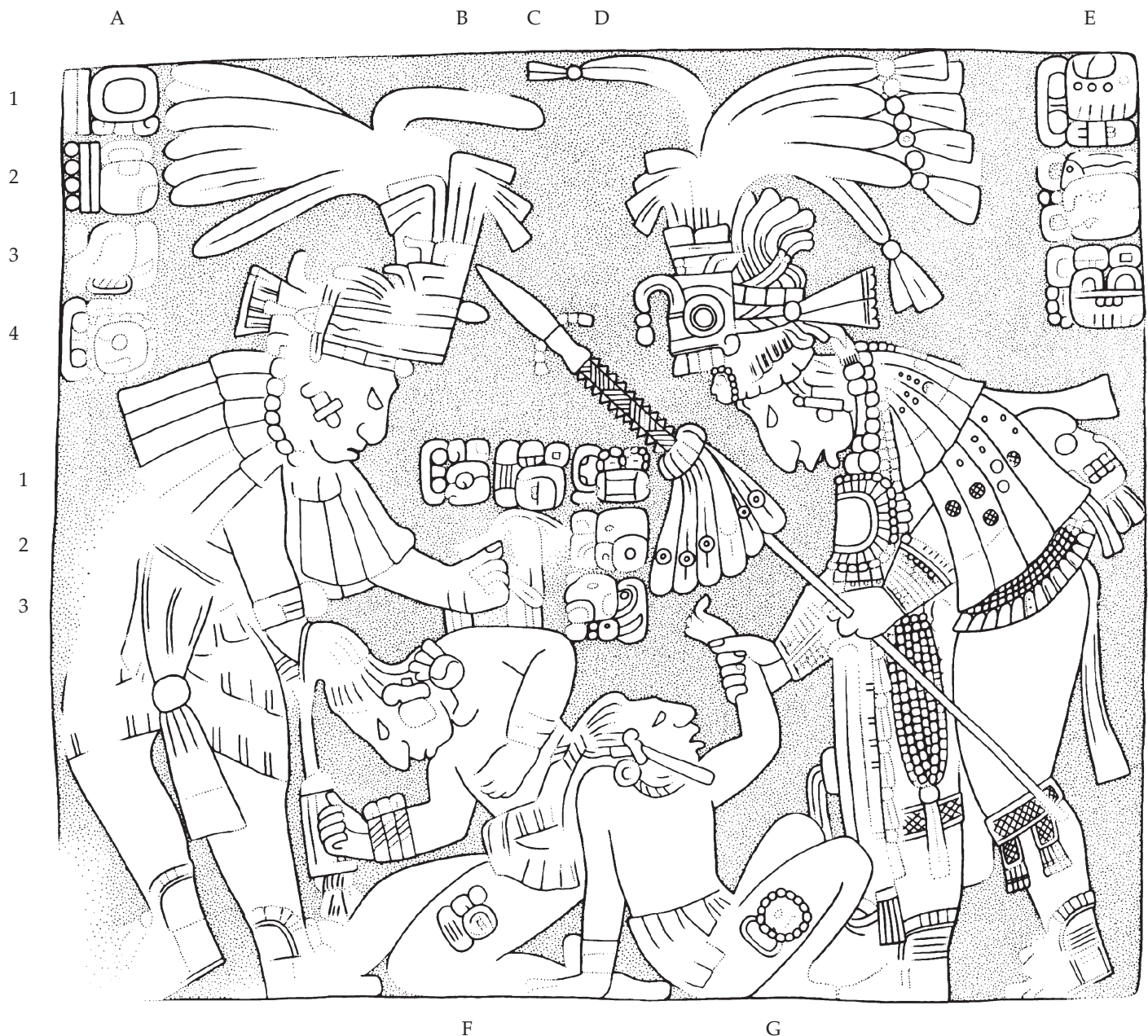


**Figure 1.** Captive-taking scene with the *saajal* K'an Tok Wayaab (left) and king Bird Jaguar IV (right), Yaxchilan Lintel 8 (drawing by Ian Graham © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 2004.15.6.5.8).

It was not until the 1980s that the *saajal* title could be demonstrated to function as a noble title analogous to the better-understood *ajaw* title. In an unpublished but influential study, David Stuart (1985) first set out the two key variants of the *saajal* title (Figure 2a-b), establishing the equivalence of T630 'double-comb' (Figure 2a, first sign) and PM1 'earth-in-mouth' (Figure 2b, first sign). This called into question the then-current *cahal* reading, though the *sa* value was not yet evident (Stuart 1985:Note 2). Stuart demonstrated that *saajals* received their titles in accession ceremonies parallel to those of

paramount rulers: e.g., *jol[h]yaj ta saajalil*, 'he was encircled in the *saajal*-ship' (Figure 2c). And he observed that their subordination to paramounts was revealed through grammatical possession in the form *usaajal* 'his *saajal*' (Figure 2d). He also recognized the feminine version of the title, *ixsaajal* (Figure 2e), and its implications for hereditary status (Stuart 1985:14-15), to which we return below. Finally, he noted that the title referred to "lesser rulers of small dependency sites under larger centers" (Stuart 1985:2), including the implications of this observation for establishing the boundaries of

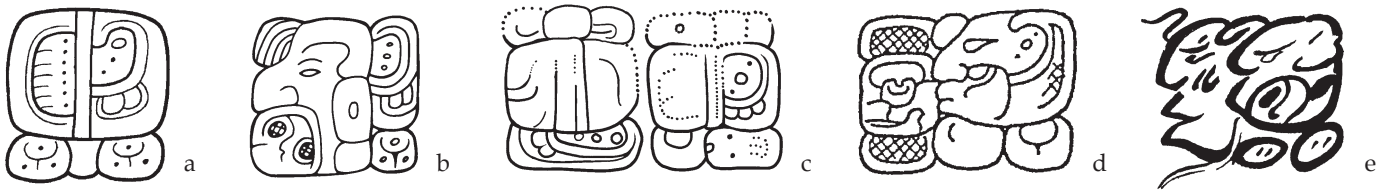


**Figure 2.** Examples of the *saajal* title: (a) **sa-ja-la** title with T630 ‘double comb’ **sa** sign, Kuna-Lacanha L.1, I1 (drawing by Simon Martin, after Martin 2020:Fig. 9a); (b) **sa-ja-la** title with PM1 **sa** sign, PMT Panel 1, pT1 (drawing by the author); (c) **[jo]JOY-ja ti-sa-ja-la[li]**, *jo[h]yaj ti saajalil*, ‘he was encircled in the *saajal*-ship,’ COL Laxtunich L.2, E1 (drawing by David Stuart); (d) **u-sa[ja]-la**, *usaaajal*, ‘his petty noble,’ Miraflores Panel Fragment A, pC1 (drawing by David Stuart); (e) **IX-sa[ja]-la**, BPK murals, II-36 (drawing by John Montgomery); (f) **ch’o-ko sa[ja]-la**, COL Lausanne stela, I5-J5 (drawing by Simon Martin).

ancient polities. These discoveries have been repeatedly tested against new finds and the development of increasingly sophisticated epigraphic analysis, which makes it encouraging to note that they remain just as salient today as they were almost forty years ago.

By the early 1990s, Proskouriakoff’s and Stuart’s findings had led to a consensus view of *saajals* as “rulers of subsidiary centers in the polity” and to occasional glosses of ‘governor’ (Schele and Mathews 1991:251, n. 1). Perhaps surprisingly, this view has also remained largely current (e.g., Becquelin 2019; Jackson 2005, 2013, 2015; Jackson and Stuart 2001:225; Martin and Grube 2008:150; Parmington 2000, 2003; Regueiro Suárez 2022; Tokovinine 2005) even as the phonetic decipherment of the title has continued to shift beneath it.<sup>3</sup> First came David Stuart’s (1988) recognition of a **sa** value for T630 and the main sign of T1004 (i.e., PM1), prompting an update from *cahal* to *sahal*, though this did not immediately convince everyone (Schele 1991:11 n. 4) at least in part due to continuing uncertainties regarding the title’s etymology and meaning. Considerably later, Nikolai Grube (2004) noted a consistent separation between the velar (*j*) and glottal (*h*) fricatives in Classic Maya writing, prompting yet another update from *sahal* to *sajal*. These developments are encouraging indications of the health of the field of Maya epigraphy: sensitive to empirical evidence, with continually evolving theories and methodologies of decipherment, as I have previously noted elsewhere (Zender 2017:36).

That said, it may seem suspect that consensus regarding the roles and responsibilities of *saajals* could survive continuous tinkering with the title’s decipherment. The apparent discrepancy is explained by the consideration that—absent a consensual etymology for the title, and therefore regardless of its precise decipherment—contextual and functional analyses have always dominated discussions of its significance (see especially Houston and Stuart 2001:61–64 and Martin 2020:86–88). I hasten to add that this is all to the good. As Houston and Stuart (2001:62) have noted, citing chronological and regional variation in the title’s employment, it would surely be a

“nomenclatural conceit” to imagine that “the *sajal* title intrinsically tells us something important about a Late Classic noble” (see Martin 2020:86 for a parallel point).<sup>4</sup> These are important considerations which must be kept in mind as we consider a potential etymology for the *saajal* title.

### Etymological Origin and Semantic Development

It has not always been fully appreciated that the *saajal* title is of uncertain transcription, of unknown etymology, and without unambiguous descendants in either Colonial or modern Mayan languages. In other words, while we may now confidently represent its usual glyphic spellings with the romanization **sa-ja-la** (Figure 2a–b), I suggest that the consensual normalization of this form as *sajal* has been premature, masking several uncertainties that still require careful consideration. We have learned a considerable amount about Classic Mayan orthographic conventions in recent years, and although spellings such as **ka-ka-wa**, *kakaw*, ‘chocolate’ and **yu-k’i-bi**, *yuk’ib*, ‘his/her drinking cup’ once led us to expect isomorphy between glyphic spellings and Mayan lexemes, we now recognize that such narrow

<sup>3</sup> With notable exceptions, such as Houston and Stuart (2001:61–62): “[i]nitially, epigraphers had thought that a *sajal* served as a kind of ‘governor’ at smaller sites near a larger city. The pattern around cities like Yaxchilan and Piedras Negras exemplifies this arrangement ... But the pattern is more complicated than that. We now know that *sajals* often appear at court, so they are not always limited to some corner of the ‘provinces’.”

<sup>4</sup> For a broader perspective, consider the English titles *lord* and *lady*. These descend from Old English *hláford* ‘bread-giver’ and *hláefdige* ‘bread-maker’ (Bosworth and Toller 1898). Although rich with insight into Anglo-Saxon concepts of nobility and their obligations to commoners, modern English *lord* no longer evokes the redistribution of grain, nor does its bearer owe his social status and political power to the dispensing of loaves. Similarly, *lady* has undergone pejorative semantic changes typical of many English terms for female titles—e.g., *mistress*, once the feminine equivalent of *master* (McColl Millar 2023:37–38). It cannot be stressed enough that titles change their meanings over time.

transcriptions are in the minority. Rather more common are instances where a class of weak consonants is underrepresented (Zender 1999, 2014). For example, **ba-la-ma**, *ba[h]lam*, ‘jaguar’ and **tz’i-bi**, *tz’i[h]b*, ‘writing’ lack any indication of the internal *h* which must have been present given the testimony of Mayan languages (see, e.g., Proto-Ch’olan *\*b’ahlām* ‘jaguar’ and *\*tz’ihb’* ‘writing,’ Kaufman and Norman 1984). Similarly, in the well-known verbal formula **chu-ka-ja**, *chu[h]kaj*, ‘he was captured’ (Figure 1, A3)—indeed in all known contexts of the Classic Mayan *-h-...-aj* passive—the prerequisite passivizing *-h-* is never indicated glyphically (Lacadena 2004). This also applies to consonants other than *h*. Thus, in the typical **ba-la-ja** representation of the first element in the name of Bajlaj Chan K’awiil of Dos Pilas, the internal *j* is always omitted (Zender 2004:222, n. 83, 2010). Of particular relevance here is the frequent elision of the first member of a consonant cluster, meaning that a glyphic spelling such as **sa-ja-la** might conceivably represent *sa[ʔ]jal*, *sa[h]jal*, *sa[j]jal*, *sa[w]jal*, *sa[y]jal*, *sa[l]jal*, *sa[m]jal*, or *sa[n]jal*. The vowel of the first syllable might even have been long (i.e., *saajal*) rather than short. In light of these considerable complications, it becomes easier to understand why a consensual etymology has hitherto eluded us.

The most influential etymology was proposed by Nikolai Grube and Werner Nahm (1991; see also Freidel et al. 1993:174, Houston and Stuart 2001:61, Houston et al. 2001:36–37, Jackson 2013:12, and Stuart 2013). Drawing on the Colonial Yucatec verbs <çah> ‘be afraid’ (Motul I, f. 95v) and <çahal> ‘have fear’ (Barrera Vásquez et al. 1980:707–708), they suggested the meaning ‘feared one’ or perhaps even ‘fearful one.’ Although acknowledging its uncertain etymology, Simon Martin notes that a meaning of ‘one who fears’ would at least have the virtue of “reflecting the proper obeisance that a vassal should display to his king” (Martin 2020:86). But there are several good reasons for us to question this etymology. The root is restricted to the Yucatekan languages, with no indication of a cognate in the Ch’olan subgroup most closely associated with the inscriptions. Further, the Yucatekan root is verbal, whereas an adjectival or nominal form would be more appropriate for a title. While the Yucatekan languages do have several adjectival and nominal derivations, they all involve a *-V<sub>1</sub>k* suffix which is not attested in our glyphic title: Yucatec *sahak* adj. ‘fearful’ (Bricker et al. 1998:238), Lacandon adj. *sajäk* ‘fearful’ (Hofling 2014:297), and Itzaj n. *saakil* ‘fright’ (from earlier *\*saj-ak-il*) (Hofling and Tesucún 1997:556). Given these difficulties, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the popularity of this etymology stems more from its agreeable semantics and considerable history in the literature than any evidence that can be adduced in its favor. Finally, militating against the shared onsets of *saajal* and *sahak*, there is no shortage of plausible roots in the relevant languages, including Ch’olan-Tseltalan *\*sa’*

‘boastful, haughty, vain’ (Laughlin 1988:293; Wisdom 1950:631), *\*sak ~ sa’* ‘to search’ (Hull 2016:352; Laughlin 1975:300, 1988:293; Smailus 1975:165; Whittaker and Warkentin 1965:166), and *\*saaj* ‘small, young’ (to be explored presently). This embarrassment of riches compels us to seek for confirmation beyond mere phonetic similarity.

I would suggest that the Q’eqchi’ terms *saaj* ‘young’ and *saajal* ‘young boy’ (Haeserijn 1979:293) are relevant to this question. Gloss aside, the latter obviously looks suggestive for our purposes, and we will find that there is a good explanation for the similarity. Although originating in the Alta Verapaz, the Q’eqchi’ began migrating northwards during the late nineteenth century, at which point they must have encountered survivors of the early ninth century collapse. As a result of this contact, their language contains numerous borrowings from Ch’olan (Wichmann and Hull 2009; Zender 2017:27–28). Tellingly, there are no cognates for the terms *saaj* and *saajal* in Q’eqchi’s closest relatives, the K’ichee’an branch of the family, and this makes it likely that these terms also represent borrowings. Did they come from Ch’olan? In contrast with the absence of relevant forms in K’ichee’an (apart from Q’eqchi’ itself), it develops that the Ch’olan-Tseltalan languages contain numerous relevant forms, indicating considerable time depth (Table 1). Taken together, these forms provide compelling evidence of an ancient proto-Ch’olan-Tseltalan adjective *\*saaj* ‘small,’ reflexes of which have been inherited into nearly all its descendants. This clearly indicates that this root would have been available to the language of Classic Mayan inscriptions as well. Like many older forms, however, the original root has undergone both phonetic and semantic changes in several of its descendants that require some discussion before we attempt to connect it to the *saajal* title.

To begin with phonology, the shared initial *\*s-* is of course clear.<sup>5</sup> The vowel is somewhat less straightforward than it may at first seem. Ch’orti’ and Tseltal do not preserve either vowel length or any consistent echo of vowel length, so we must look to the Western Ch’olan languages and Tsotsil. Although Ch’ol and Chontal usually reflect earlier *\*aa* with *a* and earlier *\*a* with *ä*, it turns out that the presence of *\*j*, *\*h*, or *\*ʔ* all block the latter development (Kaufman and Norman 1984:85–86). This means that both *\*saaj* and *\*saj* would have fallen together as *saj* in Western Ch’olan. Tsotsil, on the other hand, regularly reflects earlier *\*aa* with *a* and earlier *\*a* with *o*, regardless of the presence of *\*j*, *\*h*, or *\*ʔ* (Zender 2015), so Tsotsil *a* supports proto-Ch’olan-Tseltalan *\*aa*. To move to the final consonant, while nearly all these forms have *-j*, it must be highlighted that this is a purely

<sup>5</sup> Note that <z> in De Ara’s Colonial Tseltal (‘Tzendal’) manuscript consistently represents *s*.

Table 1. Reflexes of proto-Ch'olan-Tseltalan \**saaj* 'small'

|              |                          |       |                                                                                                                           |
|--------------|--------------------------|-------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ch'ol        | <i>saj</i>               | adj.  | small, little<br>(Attinasi 1973:312; Josserand and Hopkins 2001:50; Schumann 1973:65; Vázquez 2011:456; Whittaker 1957:3) |
|              | <i>saj-tun</i>           | c.n.  | pebble<br>(Attinasi 1973:312)                                                                                             |
|              | <i>saj</i>               | adv.  | barely, at all<br>(Vázquez 2011:207, 466)                                                                                 |
|              | <i>saj</i>               | part. | honorific (kinship terms)<br>(Vázquez 2011:349)                                                                           |
| Chontal      | <i>saj-ab t'an</i>       | i.v.  | speak in a low voice, whisper<br>(Keller and Luciano 1997:209)                                                            |
| Ch'orti'     | <i>sab-jut</i>           | adj.  | small-eyed<br>(Hull 2016:351)                                                                                             |
|              | <i>sab-sab</i>           | adj.  | tiny because of being dried up<br>(Hull 2016:351)                                                                         |
|              | <i>sab-ran</i>           | v.    | become small (of grains of corn or beans)<br>(Hull 2016:351)                                                              |
| Col. Tseltal | <i>zagh zagh</i>         | adj.  | low in voice<br>(Ara 1986:126v)                                                                                           |
|              | <i>zagh zagh cop-ogh</i> | i.v.  | to speak in a low voice<br>(Ara 1986:126v)                                                                                |
| Tseltal      | <i>saj-saj k'op</i>      | n.    | whisper<br>(Berlin and Kaufman 1997:61; Polian 2018:522; Slocum et al. 1999:103)                                          |
|              | <i>saj-saj k'op-oj</i>   | i.v.  | to whisper<br>(Polian 2018:522; Slocum et al. 1999:103)                                                                   |
|              | <i>saj-laj-an</i>        | aff.  | to whisper, murmur<br>(Polian 2018:521; Slocum et al. 1999:103)                                                           |
|              | <i>saj-son</i>           | aff.  | to whisper, murmur, speak softly several times<br>(Polian 2018:522; Slocum et al. 1999:103)                               |
| Tsotsil      | <i>saj-laj-et</i>        | aff.  | to whisper, murmur<br>(Cowan 2001:73)                                                                                     |
|              | <i>saj-sun</i>           | aff.  | to whisper, murmur, speak very quietly<br>(Cowan 2001:73; Hurley and Sánchez 1978:109)                                    |

Orthography respects the source with three exceptions: (1) Attinasi's *sa*: is given as *saj* since he consistently represents CVh and CVj as CV: (Attinasi 1973:35, 53-54) as can be seen in his *ba*: 'mole,' *ba:läm* 'jaguar,' *cha:k* 'lightning,' *k'a:k* 'fire,' *ta*: 'pine,' *tz'i:b* 'writing,' and *wa*: 'tortilla'; (2) markers of implosion (') are omitted on Ch'orti' *b*, and; (3) some forms are segmented (e.g., Ch'ol *saj-tun*) to facilitate comparison. Grammatical abbreviations are as follows: adj. (adjective); adv. (adverb); aff. (affective/expressive); c.n. (compound noun); i.v. (intransitive verb); n. (noun); part. (particle); v. (verb).

orthographic matter in all but two of these languages. Only Tseltal *-j* and Colonial Tseltal <-gh> preserve information bearing on the identity of the final fricative, which was clearly a velar. Finally, the Ch'orti' *sab* forms require additional explanation, as *-b* is not the usual reflex of *-j* in this language. In this case, I suspect that pre-Ch'orti' once had a form closer to Chontal *saj-ab*, and that it underwent a regular Ch'orti' development from \**sajab* to *sa'b* and thence to *sab*.<sup>6</sup> Thus, we are on firm ground in proposing \**saaj* as the ancestral form.

We turn now to semantics. Three of the six descendant languages—two in the Ch'olan branch, one in the

Tseltalan branch—preserve an adjectival sense, making \**saaj* adj. 'small' the most parsimonious reconstruction.

<sup>6</sup> Both V<sub>ij</sub>V<sub>2</sub> and V<sub>1</sub>hV<sub>2</sub> regularly undergo reduction to V<sub>2</sub>? in Ch'orti': e.g., \**-aj-al* > *-a'r* thematic suffix + nominalization; \**ajan* > *a'n 'elote'*; \**bihil* > *bi'r* 'road, path'; \**ch'ahoom* > *ch'o'm* 'youth'; \**ch'ajan* > *ch'a'n 'mecate, twine'*; \**ch'ehew* > *ch'e'w* 'plate, dish'; \**ch'ohok* > *ch'o'k* 'mouse, rat'; \**k'uhul* > *ch'u'r(ir)* 'god, saint'; \**pajay* > *pa'y* 'skunk'; \**pojow* > *po'w* 'pus' (Ch'orti' forms from Hull 2016). Thus, inherited *sajab* should have developed to *sa'b* in Ch'orti', where a later change would have seen the glottal stop absorbed by the following *b*, as in the related change \**xihab* > *xya'b* > *xyab* 'comb.'

Moreover, it is relatively easy to trace the various developments deriving from this core sense. Ch'ol is the only language which preserves an uncompounded and underived form of the original adjective, but the derivations in Ch'orti' and Colonial Tseltal are clear, and no obstacle to an original adjectival meaning. Note also the Ch'ol adjective-noun compound *saj-tun* 'pebble (lit. small stone).' This will be helpful when we venture to explain glyphic *saaj-xib* and *saaj-al*. Ch'ol, Chontal, and the Tseltalan languages also have adverbial senses of the same adjective, which is a common development in the Mayan languages (Polian 2017:220-221). Where the derivation in Ch'ol adds the nuance 'barely, at all'—presumably via the intermediate sense 'small or negligible degree'—the adverbial derivations in the other languages are even closer to the root meaning, at least inasmuch as 'speaking in a low voice,' 'whispering,' and 'murmuring' can all be understood as 'speaking small.' As noted above, where Chontal employs derived *saj-ab* as an adverb, Ch'orti' only preserves compounded or derived forms of its cognate *sab* with the original sense of 'small, tiny.' The affective developments of \**saaj* in the Tseltalan languages are fascinating, since such forms are often predicated on onomatopoeia, as here with reduplicated *saj-saj* interpreted as a whispering, murmuring sound. All the *saj* affectives involve the characteristic morphology of these forms, including reduplication and the suffixes *-laj*, *-an*, and *-et* (see Zender 2010:6-10, Table 1). Finally, the evolution of \**saaj* 'small' into an honorific for kinship terms—as in Ch'ol *saj ijt's'in* 'dear younger sibling' (Attinasi 1973:312; Vázquez 2011:349)—also makes sense insofar as honorific particles often derive from diminutives and hypocoristics. A classic illustration is Nahuatl *-tzin-tli* 'compounding element with honorific or diminutive sense' (Karttunen 1992:314). As such, we may infer that proto-Ch'olan-Tseltalan \**saaj* was most likely an adjective meaning 'small,' though there is every reason to believe that it was also employed as an adverb with related senses, particularly with verbs of speaking.

Although not widely recognized, a straightforward descendant of proto-Ch'olan-Tseltalan \**saaj* occasionally appears in the inscriptions. One context is the compound noun **sa-ja XIB**, *sajxib*, 'small / young male,' likely showing loss of its inherited long vowel, as typical of the eighth century (Houston et al. 2004). The construction, an adjective-noun compound, parallels Ch'ol *saj-tun* 'pebble' noted above (Table 1). The *sajxib* title is carried by two captives on an unprovenanced panel fragment in the collections of the de Young Museum (Figure 3), as recognized by Houston et al. (2001:36). The original root also appears without compounding in the **sa-ji**, *saaj*, 'youth' (lit. 'small / young one') title carried by several courtiers in the late-eighth-century Bonampak murals (Figures 4a-b), as also first noted by Stephen Houston (2012:167, Fig. 7). Additionally, the same mural program

provides two individuals with **sa-ja** captions (Figures 4c-d). These have traditionally been seen as abbreviations for *sajal*[], which remains a possibility, but the nearby **sa-ji** spellings suggest that one or both—as well as other similar 'abbreviations'—might instead represent a late vowel-shortened *saj*. While relatively rare, these titles usefully illustrate the continued currency of the original *saaj* root into at least the late eighth century.

Ch'olan languages also contain a relevant source for the terminal *-al* of the longer *saajal* title: Proto-Ch'olan \**al* 'woman's offspring' (Kaufman and Norman 1984:115). Although the narrow reference to a 'child of mother' may seem limiting, Hopkins et al. (2011:7) have noted that the term is typically "used in a broader sense outside kinship terms," thereby accounting for the more general glosses attested for Ch'ol *al(äl)* 'baby, boy, child, offspring' (Hopkins et al. 2011:7; Whittaker and Warkentin 1965:156). Given this, I conjecture that early Ch'olan had developed a compound noun \**saaj-al* initially meaning 'small child.' Through usage as a label for young children, whether commoner or noble, some speakers may have begun to associate it exclusively with the latter and, still later, as young nobles took on political roles and responsibilities in the court, developed it into a formal title meaning 'petty noble.'

The proposed semantic melioration from 'small child' to 'petty noble' is in fact quite likely, with considerable precedent from a comparative perspective. For instance, as Ringe and Taylor (2014:127) have noted, proto-Germanic \**knehtaz* 'youth, boy' developed into Old English *cniht*, retaining its primary meaning of 'boy' but now with the secondary meaning 'armed noble soldier.' Still later, Middle English *knicht* ~ *knyght* referred only to the noble title, the original sense having been lost. Similarly, proto-Germanic \**kelpaz* 'child' retained this sense into both Old English *cild* and Middle English *childe*, but the latter had also acquired the secondary meaning 'young noble training to become a knight.' This is the intended sense of Shakespeare's "Child Rowland to the dark tower came" (*King Lear* 3.4.195), adopted by Robert Browning (1855) for the title of his famous poem. Outside of English, the same developments can be seen in Spanish *hidalgo* 'noble,' which derives from Old Spanish *fijodalgo*, transparently a contraction of *fijo de algo*, with the first term from Latin *filius* 'son' (Campbell 2020:110). Similarly, as noted by Luján (2010:294), the Latin accusative *infāntem* 'infant' gave rise as expected to Spanish *infante* 'infant' but also, later and secondarily, to the sense 'king's son' and therefore 'prince.' The related noun *infanta* 'princess' was evidently derived directly from this specialized sense of *infante*, for it lacks the more general meaning. In Mesoamerica, Nahuatl *-pil* 'one's offspring, son or daughter' and its close etymological relationship with *pil-li* 'noble person' (Karttunen 1992:194-195) are often cited in illustration of these developments. Relevant precedents can also be found in

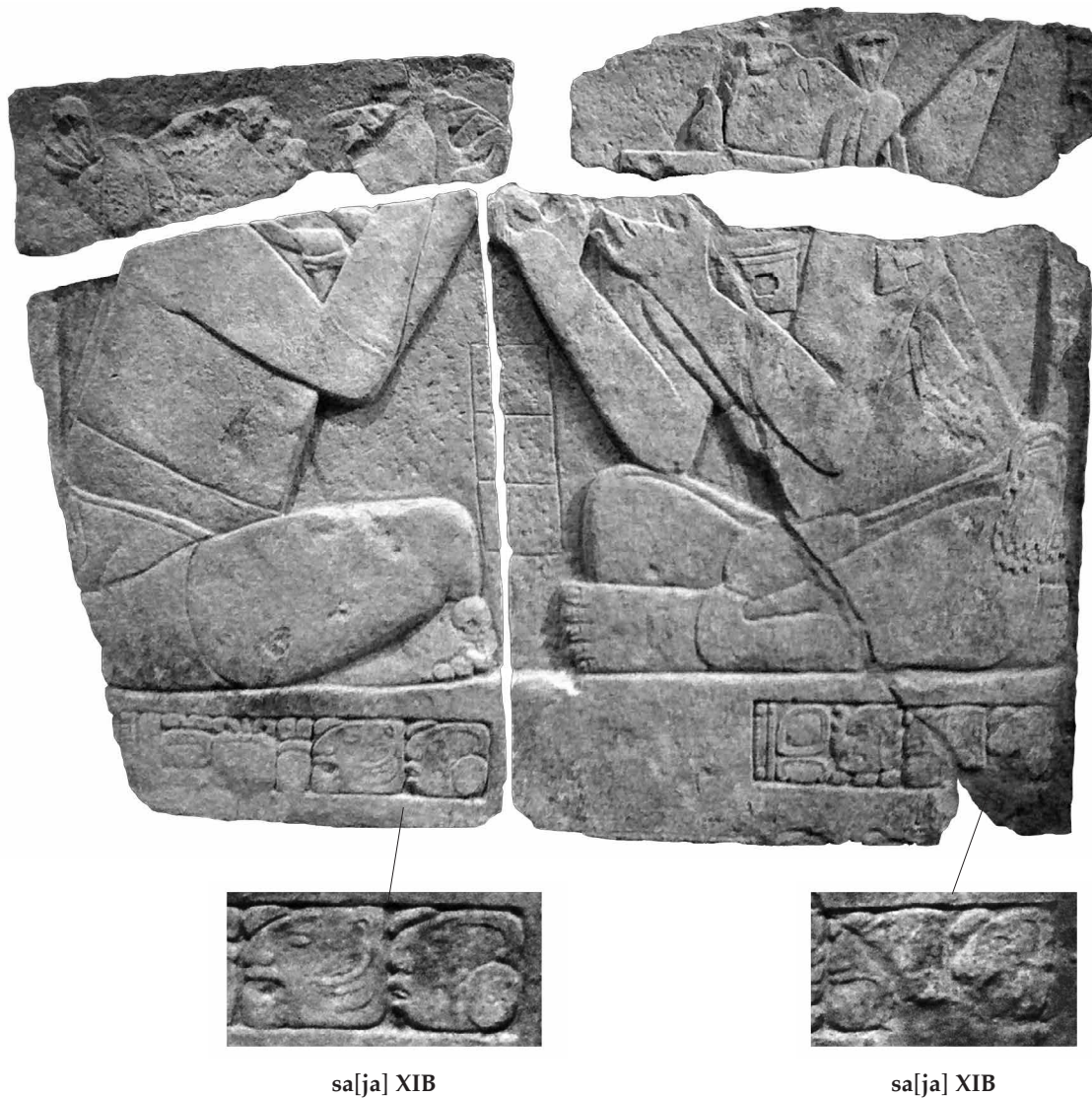


**Figure 3.** The *sajxib* title, unprovenanced relief panel fragment, de Young Museum, San Francisco, accn no 2005.107.1 (photograph by the author).

the Ch'olan languages themselves. Thus, parallel with Spanish *hidalgo*, Ch'ol *al* developed in another context into the now-obsolete Ch'ol title *yalajaw* 'prince' (lit. king's child), as recorded in the late nineteenth century (Fernández 1892:47; Hopkins et al. 2008:84). And finally, while proto-Ch'olan *\*ch'ok* 'young child' (Kaufman and Norman 1984:119) has retained this sense into both Ch'olti' <choc> 'niño o niña' (Morán 1695, f.145, l.3) and Chontal *ch'ok* 'child' (Knowles 1984:415), the term is known to have developed into a noble title in Classic Mayan (Houston 2009:156-157). Such developments provide considerable support for the proposed evolution of *saajal* 'small child' into a title meaning 'petty noble.'

At this point, we have accounted for the origins of the Classic Mayan titular forms *saaj* 'youth,' *saajxib* (later

*sajxib*) 'young male,' and *saajal* (later *sajal*) 'petty noble.' All but the latter are rare in Classic Maya inscriptions, but how widespread was the *saajal* title itself? While space precludes a full exploration of its distribution here, this has been done elsewhere (Zender and Kelly 2015, 2023), and a forthcoming study details the 172 citations of the *saajal* title in the corpus from ca. AD 550-864 (Zender and Kelly in press). For now, we may observe that although the title first appears in the Central Petén, it occurs "largely in the western Maya lowlands and dates exclusively to the Late Classic period" (Houston and Stuart 2001:61). It is by far the most common non-royal title, and equally noteworthy for being "the only secondary title to show local paramountcy" (Martin 2020:88). But not all *saajals* were of equal authority; "[a]t Yaxchilan, the *sajal* seem more tightly bonded to their overlord,

who often makes an appearance on monuments at subsidiary centers; in contrast, the *sajals* at Piedras Negras are more distant rhetorically from their lords, suggesting greater degrees of independence” (Houston 2000:175). This considerable spatiotemporal variation seems to have led to further refinements in titular nomenclature, including what appear to be ascribed titles: *ch’oksaajal* ‘young petty noble’ (attested between 766 and 864, see Figure 2f) and *ixsaajal* ‘petty noblewoman’ (ca. 692-791). The former are invariably youths, suggestive of ascribed rather than achieved status. The latter are not known to have ruled subsidiary sites, nor to have acceded to *saajal*-ship, and there are indications that they may have either inherited or married into *saajal* status (Zender and Kelly in press). The suggestion is one of a burgeoning noble class (Houston and Stuart 2001:73-74, Fig. 3.6) potentially leading to the establishment of the *baah saajal* ‘head petty noble’ title (attested between ca. 757-791). One such was K’an Tok Wayaab, whom we have already met as a *saajal* on Yaxchilan Lintel 8 (Figure 1). This nobleman was evidently promoted to *baah saajal*-ship at Yaxchilan sometime between ca. AD 755 and 757.<sup>7</sup> Another *baah saajal* can be found on Piedras Negras Panel 3 (Figure 5), in a nocturnal gathering at the court of Ruler 4 in AD 749 (Martin and Grube 2008:149). Here we see the *baah saajal* K’an Mo’ Te’ seated directly below and in front of the paramount. The only other nobleman of equal rank is the *ti’sakhuun* ‘crown-speaker’ who sits

facing him (Zender 2004:210-221). Two other *saajals* sit behind them, albeit closer than still other subsidiaries bearing the less-exalted *a-na-bi* and ‘banded bird’ titles. Clearly, such scenes reveal relative ranking, indicating that the *baah saajal* was something of a *primus inter pares*, serving as an intermediary between the paramount and the polity’s *saajals*.

The roster of *\*saaj*-derived titles has now expanded considerably: *saaj* ‘youth,’ *saajxib* ‘young male,’ *saajal* ‘petty noble,’ *ch’oksaajal* ‘young petty noble,’ *ixsaajal* ‘petty noblewoman,’ and *baah saajal* ‘chief petty noble,’ all contemporary titular forms. As we have seen, at least two of these titles (*saaj* and *saajxib*) developed into vowel-shortened variants during the eighth century, and it is possible that all of them did so, though as noted above this is impossible to confirm in spellings like *sa-ja-la*. This remarkable proliferation is suggestive of the increasing importance and influence of the non-royal nobility into the eighth century, but it also serves to indicate just how disruptive the early ninth century collapse must have been for not even one of these six titles to have survived into contemporary Ch’olan languages.

Nonetheless, I suggest that at least *saaj* and *saajal* were borrowed into Q’eqchi’ before disappearing from Ch’olan. That an elite title both *developed from* a compound meaning ‘small child’ or ‘young child’ and then later *developed into* a title meaning ‘young boy’ may seem difficult to credit, but far stranger semantic shifts have taken place, and there are at least two viable ways in which this might have come about. Recent discoveries highlight the truly massive populations of the central southern lowlands during the Late Classic (Canuto et al. 2018), as well as the considerable regional variation that must have characterized the contemporary vernacular languages of this region (Kelly 2022). In light of this, one or more Ch’olan dialects could have retained the original meanings of both *saaj* and *saajal*, dutifully loaning these words to Q’eqchi’, potentially in the wake of the collapse, though it is also possible that these words made their way south during the Late Classic period, arguably the maximal extent of Ch’olan sociolinguistic influence. Indeed, that Q’eqchi’ still reflects the terms *saaj* and *saajal* with long vowels suggests either that the borrowing preceded the eighth century loss of this feature in Classic Mayan or that the words came from an otherwise unknown dialect of Ch’olan which had not lost inherited long vowels. In any event, there are clearly several pathways for Q’eqchi’ speakers to have received these words in their original meanings.

But there is also precedent for the development of noble titles into designations for youths and children. For instance, the Classic Mayan high title *ch’ahoom* ‘censer’ (Zender 2017:30, n. 51) developed via normal sound changes into modern Ch’orti’ *ch’o’m* (see footnote 6), but its meaning has since shifted to ‘youth’ (Hull 2016:127). Similarly, in addition to the proposed borrowing of

<sup>7</sup> His three appearances as a *saajal* are on YAX L.42 (752), YAX L.8 (755), and the undated Retalteco L.1 (Houston et al. 2006:Fig. 2), while he returns as a *baah saajal* on YAX HS 2, Step X (757) and YAX L.6 (757) (Regueiro Suárez 2022:172-180, 304-309). Houston et al. (2006) suggest on the basis of Retalteco L.1 that K’an Tok Wayaab may have ruled the subordinate site of Tixan, Petén.



**Figure 4.** *Saaj* and *saj* titles in the Bonampak murals: (a) *sa-?ji*, III-4, C1 (cf. Houston 2012:Fig. 7a); (b) *sa-ji*, III-9, B2 (cf. Houston 2012:Fig. 7b); (c) *sa[ja]*, I-48, B2 (cf. Miller and Brittenham 2013:Fig. 142); (d) *sa-ja*, II-37, A3 (cf. Houston 2012:Fig. 10) (drawings by John Montgomery).

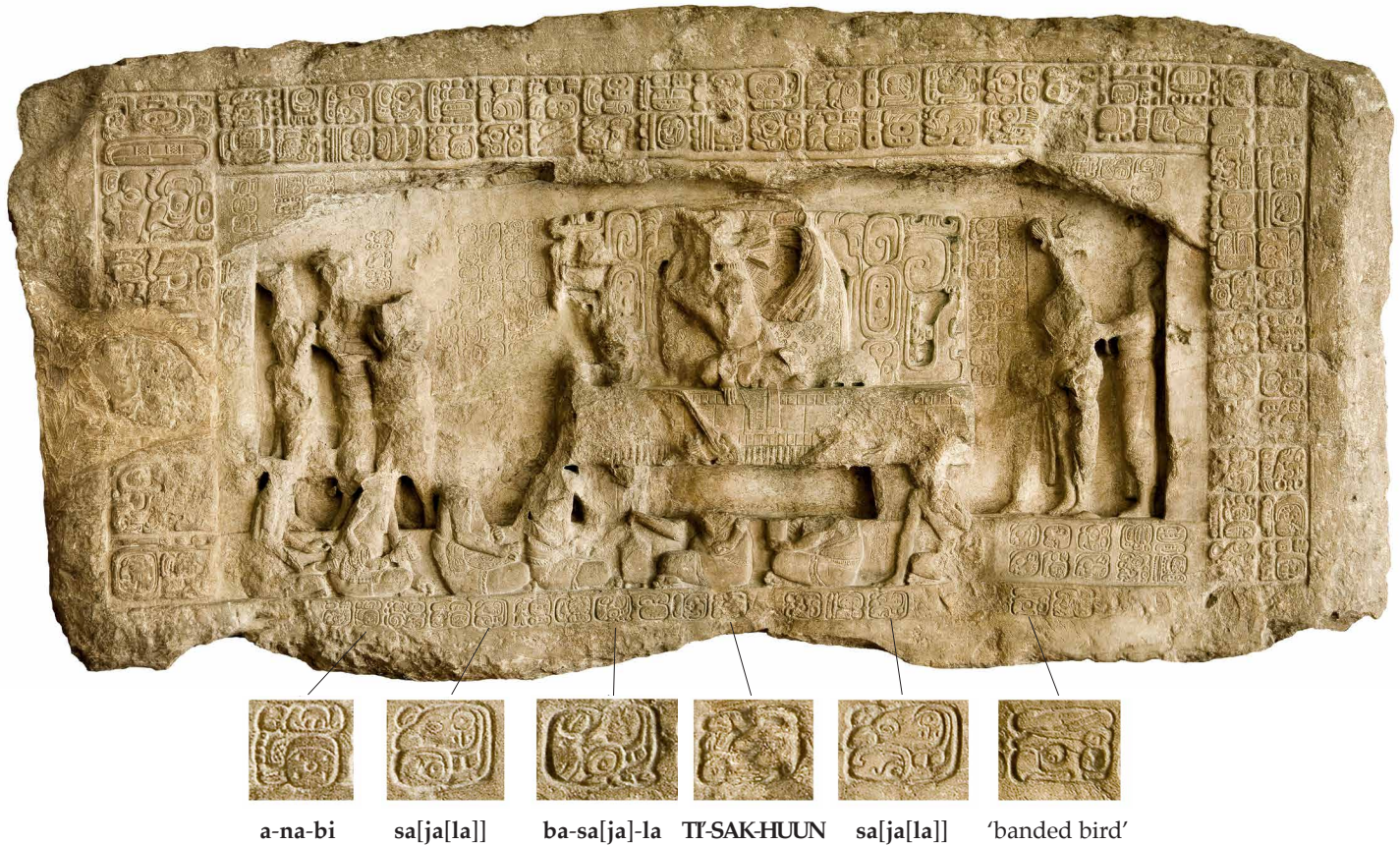


Figure 5. Piedras Negras Panel 3 (photograph by Jorge Pérez de Lara).

Classic Mayan *saajal* ‘petty noble’ into Q’eqchi’ as a term meaning ‘young boy,’ Q’eqchi’ is also known to have borrowed the high titles *ajaw(al)* ‘lord(ship)’ and *ch’ahoom* ‘censer,’ likewise changing their meanings to *ajawal* ‘son’ and *ch’ajom* ‘boy, young man,’ respectively (ALMG 2004:26, 72). As such, it remains possible that Q’eqchi’ had indeed borrowed the Ch’olan titles *saaj* ‘small (one), youth’ and *saajal* ‘petty noble’ while nonetheless altering them into terms meaning ‘young’ and ‘young boy.’ Indeed, it is even possible that both situations obtained, such that *saaj* ‘small, young’ was borrowed from a non-shift dialect with its original meaning intact, while the Classic Maya titular form *saajal* ‘petty noble’—which clearly once held considerable currency—was borrowed and adapted into a term meaning ‘young boy.’ If acceptable, this analysis considerably alleviates the longstanding uncertainties regarding the proper transcription of *sa-ja-la*. In place of the now widely accepted *sajal* I therefore propose *saajal*, though I note that this would in any case have reduced to *sajal* in the eighth century.

## Conclusions

This concludes my investigation into the etymological origins of the *saajal* title. I have argued that this most popular of the Classic Mayan non-royal titles can

ultimately be traced back to the proto-Ch’olan-Tzeltalan adjective *\*saaj* ‘small,’ inherited essentially unchanged into Classic Mayan. The adjective itself is attested as a Classic Mayan title meaning ‘small one’ or ‘youth.’ But it also formed adjective-noun compounds such as the comparatively rare *saajxib* (later *sajxib*) ‘small male’ or ‘young male’ and the much more frequent *saajal* ‘small child’ or ‘young child.’ The latter likely continued in this meaning among many speakers, even as others developed it into a title meaning ‘petty noble.’ As with all titles, both the behavior of key titularies and changing sociopolitical contexts would each have contributed to shaping the title’s development over the three centuries during which it is presently attested. Once the *saajal* title existed, increasingly fine-grained distinctions between inherited status and official rank seem to have compelled the development of additional ascribed designations (i.e., assigned at birth), namely the *ch’oksaajal* ‘young petty noble’ and *ixsaajal* ‘petty noblewoman’ titles. Finally, as paramounts perhaps sought to impose some order on a burgeoning petty nobility, the *baah saajal* ‘chief petty noble’ title was established in the late eighth century. Potentially, these numerous titles and the social roles they captured were of sufficient influence that *saaj* and *saajal* made their way south into the language of the neighboring Q’eqchi’ during the height of the Late

Classic period. But it seems more likely that these terms were borrowed considerably later, long after the ninth century collapse, when northward-migrating Q'eqchi' farmers came into contact with the descendants of survivors. At that point, Q'eqchi' may have borrowed the original, unaltered terms *saaj* 'young' and *saajal* 'young boy' from one of a potentially large number of regional Ch'olan dialects. Alternatively, Q'eqchi' borrowed the innovative Classic Mayan titles *saaj* 'youth' and *saajal* 'petty noble,' altering their semantics as needed to reflect the vastly different sociopolitical reality of the nineteenth century.

A secondary focus of this paper has been a detailed review of the decipherment of the *saajal* title, highlighting developing understandings of its constituent signs and their values over the past sixty years. Such accounts are often unrealistically tidy, producing the impression of continual incremental progress towards an almost preordained conclusion, without any of the dead ends and mistakes that are in fact all too common in our field. For this reason, I have noted both missteps and disagreements in what was in fact a rather long and complicated process. The title's initial recognition was a major achievement, even despite its erroneous interpretation as a patrilineal designation (Proskouriakoff 1964). The first attempts at decipherment required two decades of additional evidence, but even so there was considerable confusion between similar but nonetheless distinct signs, leading to an initial reading of *cahal*, despite carefully-expressed concerns (Stuart 1985). Even after considerable evidence in favor of a *sahal* reading had been advanced (Stuart 1988), some remained unconvinced and continued to embrace the earlier reading (Schele 1991). Eventually, *sahal* gained sufficient adherents to pass into consensus. It was nearly another twenty years more before the next key proposal, *sajal* (Grube 2004), which has also become consensual. And here we are, still two more decades later, with a new proposal that the field consider *saajal* instead. Each of these increasingly-nuanced decipherments boasted a community of supporters into which new interpretations initially emerged as minority voices, gaining advocates slowly—if at all, since many would-be innovations did not succeed in gaining any adherents—before eventually building a new *communis opinio*, thereby setting the stage for yet another cycle. I hope that the evidence advanced herein for *saajal* will be convincing to colleagues, and that I have duly considered any possible objections or counterevidence, but in light of the developments outlined above am nonetheless prepared for the additional nuances that new discoveries and interpretations may yet bring.

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