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A Broken Sky: The Ancient Name of Yaxchilan as *Pa' Chan*

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Emblem glyphs have long been a focus of research in Maya studies and remain the primary means by which we attempt to penetrate and comprehend the political geography of the Classic Maya. By now it is well known that each represents a royal title and describes the *k'uhul ajaw* or "holy lord" of an individually named polity or kingdom.¹ Many of these compounds have succumbed to decipherment in recent years, unmasking the original names of these petty states. Slowly we are building an indigenous nominal landscape, a map of political identity that was rich in both topographic and conceptual symbolism.

The emblem glyph of Yaxchilan, Chiapas, Mexico, was one of eight identified by Heinrich Berlin in his original discovery of the form (1958). In fact, the site used two distinct emblems, often paired, which Berlin dubbed Y-1 and Y-2. Yaxchilan monuments are generously provided with examples of both, but it is clear that Y-1—nicknamed "cleft sky" or "split sky"—was the more dominant, not least because it was the only one seen in foreign contexts (appearing in the inscriptions of Piedras Negras, Palenque, Bonampak, and Dos Pilas). To judge from the plentiful supply of split sky signs on pottery linked to Uaxactun, this polity appears to have had the same name.²

The cleft sky is formed from the conventional T561 CHAN "sky" sign by the addition of a split or notch in its upper portion—together usually regarded as a distinct sign designated T562 (Figure 1a,

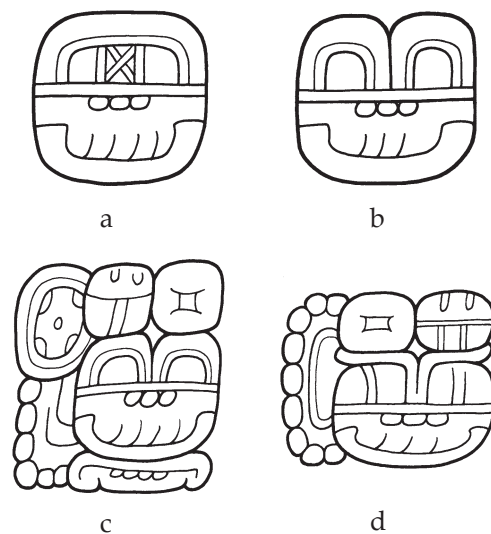


Figure 1. The cleft sky sign in the Yaxchilan Emblem Glyph: a) T561; b) T562; c) YAX St.10, H2; d) PNG P3, K1.

b).³ At Yaxchilan itself this modification is usually shown as a plain arching divide or V-shape cut (Figure 1c), although in most foreign mentions tendril-like emanations, known as T299, are added (Figure 1d). Like the normal sky glyph, the cleft sky can be suffixed by *-na*, suggesting (though not proving) that *chan* is still involved in

¹ For the evolving history of emblem glyph research see Lounsbury 1973; Ringle 1988; Mathews 1991, 1997; Stuart and Houston 1994; Martin and Grube 2000.

² The monuments of Uaxactun, few of which survive in good condition, have provided little help in this matter. The only likely split sky there, and this probably a toponym, appears on Stela 2 (Graham 1986:136).

³ For glyph designations see Thompson 1962.

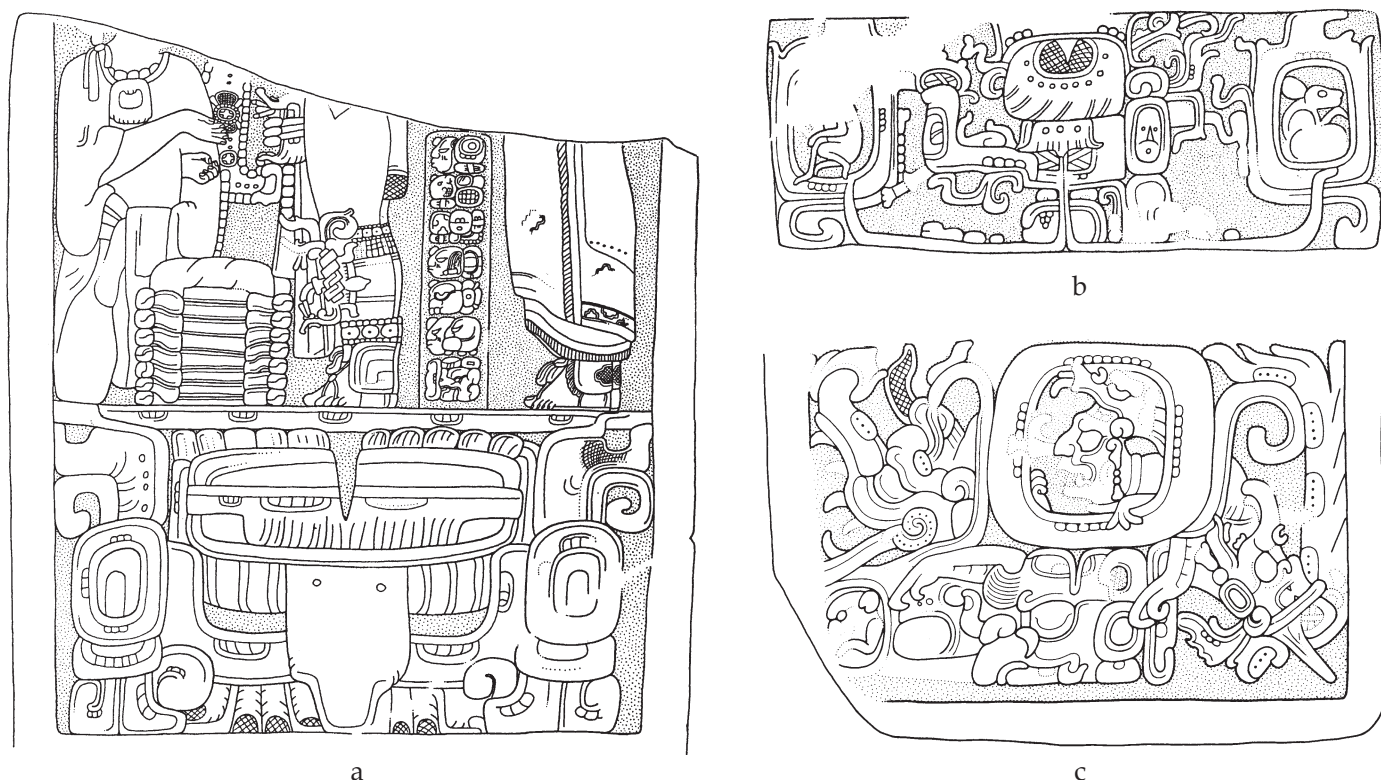


Figure 2. Basal toponyms on Yaxchilan monuments: a) YAX St.4; b) YAX St.7; c) YAX HS.3, Step III.

the reading.

Each Maya polity was centered on a core settlement or city, whose name was sometimes adopted to represent the entire domain (Stuart and Houston 1994). Because of its presence in the emblem glyph we know that the split sky named the Yaxchilan state—but there is good reason to believe that it also named the city itself (*ibid.*:57-58). For example, it is shown as a basal pedestal on Yaxchilan monuments, a motif describing the specific location where pictured events occur. This is most clearly seen on Stela 4, where a large supernatural bird bears a cleft sky sign in its forehead (Tate 1992:192) (Figure 2a). This particular avian is a head variant for **CHAN** “sky”—which makes a persuasive case that this word had an active role in the name. A different pedestal appears on

Stela 7, which presents us with an even more fantastic beast wearing a split **HA'** “water” glyph (Mathews 1997:242) (Figure 2b). This reference immediately evokes the Usumacinta River, which flows in a great horseshoe around Yaxchilan and its environs—and only a scant few meters below the ceremonial core of the city. Our supporting creature combines a number of cosmic motifs and has a distinctive eyelid design that helps signal a *chan* reading. Indeed, the split here belongs not to the “water” but to an underlying but obscured “sky” sign. A fuller version of the sky bird returns in the basal register of a block from Hieroglyphic Stairway 3 (Figure 2c). This is more obviously a glyphic spelling, with a preceding **TAHN** logograph (and what may be an infixed **HA'** sign) and final **-na** phonetic complement. *Tahn* is a familiar component of locative expressions, meaning “(in the) middle (of)”, “in, inside”, or perhaps “(in) front (of)”.⁴

These elements recur in, and are to some extent clarified by, textual references to the Yaxchilan toponym (Figure 3a-c). All three known instances—which oddly enough appear on a single monument—share the sequence *tahn ha' ? chan*. Taking one of these passages (Figure 3a), the most straightforward translation would

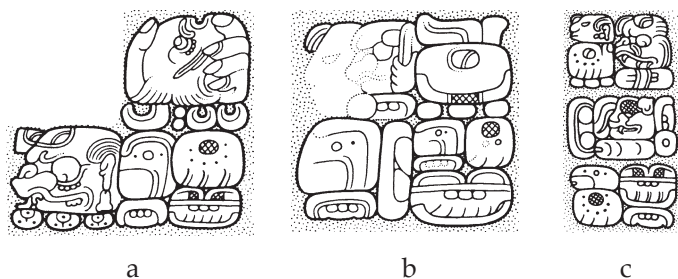


Figure 3. Toponymic statements at Yaxchilan: a) YAX L.25, M1-M2; b) YAX L.25, U1-2; c) YAX L.25, I3.

⁴ For the latter see Stuart 2004.

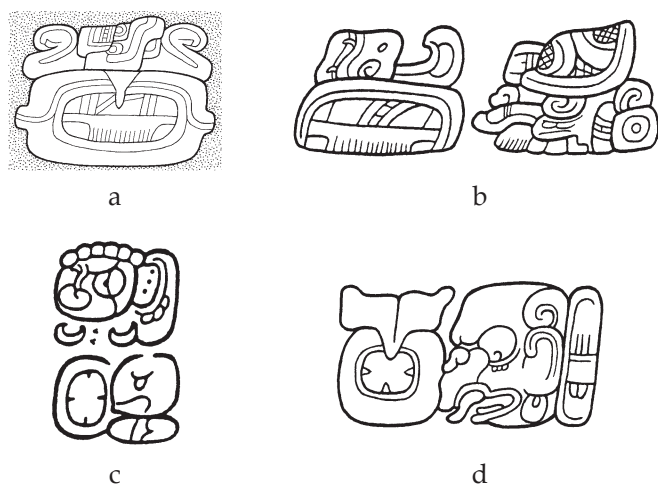


Figure 4. The cleft device in spellings of “birth”: a) Tikal St.26, zA4; b) unprovenienced vessel; c) PNG P.1, zA1-2; d) MQL St.11, B6a.

be *tzakjiij k’awiil tahn ha’ ? chan* “conjured K’awiil in front of the water of Yaxchilan”.⁵

What remains to be understood is the precise value of the cleft and the semantic basis of its relationship to “sky”. Split motifs appear in several different hieroglyphs, and at least one has already been tied to a decipherment. The “Stormy Sky” name used by at least two Early Classic rulers of Tikal depicts the lightning god K’awiil emerging from a crack in the sky (Figure 4a). David Stuart recognized the substitution of this form for another spelled **SIH-ja-CHAN K’AWIIL** *Sih(y)aj Chan K’awiil* “Sky-Born K’awiil” (Houston and Stuart 1996:295) (Figure 4b). The bent-armed posture of the god signifies newborn or infant status and alludes to ideas about the genesis and transformation of deities (Taube 1994; Martin 2002). A similar substitution seemed apparent in personal names found at Piedras Negras and Machaquila. A secondary lord at Piedras Negras is called **SIH-ya-ja K’IN-cha-ki** *Sihyaj K’in Chaak* “Sun-Born Chaak” and this was plausibly equated with “Cleft”-**K’IN-CHAAK-ki**, the name of two kings of Machaquila (Stuart, Houston, and Robertson 1999:47) (Figure 4c, d). This connection had notable implications for Yaxchilan, since if true it would demonstrate that the cleft alone could stand for *sih* and its inflected form

sihyaj. There seemed little reason not to extend this value to the Yaxchilan main sign and, consequently, *Sihyaj Chan* “Sky-Born” gained wide currency among epigraphers.

The difficulties that remained were centered in Early Classic Yaxchilan, where emblems differed from the familiar and much more common Late Classic forms. In two early cases (Lintels 22 and 47) a single sky sign is cleaved entirely in two (Figure 5a); while as many ten examples on the four-lintel sequence of Structure 12 (Lintels 11, 49, 37 & 35) show the sky sign attenuated on one side, sometimes with a clearly serrated or torn edge, effectively supplying a “half-sky” (Figure 5b).⁶ While it was still possible to imagine that these might refer to notions of “birth”—some supernatural birth scenes in Mesoamerican art show the origin cracked in two like an egg—the logic was decidedly thin.

This reflects the state of affairs until the discovery of a new inscription at Dos Pilas, Guatemala, in 2001. In an operation by the Cancuén Archaeological Project of Vanderbilt University and the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala, ten previously unknown blocks of Dos Pilas Hieroglyphic Stairway 2 were recovered from Structure L5-49 (Fahsen 2002). Federico Fahsen analyzed the inscriptions and shared his findings with Nikolai Grube, who added his own observations and brought images of the texts to the European Maya Conference held in Hamburg later that year. These historically intriguing passages abound with local toponyms—some well known, others completely unseen. The most significant from an epigraphic viewpoint appeared on a new block from the East stair, a compound spelled **K’INICH-pa-a-WITZ** *k’inich pa’ witz* (Figure 6a). Grube noted its close resemblance to the toponym of Aguateca—a site only some 12 km distant from Dos Pilas—which consists of **K’INICH**-“Cleft”-**WITZ** *k’inich ? witz* “Great-Sun

⁵ This is not the only possible translation, since it is still unclear whether *ha’* is to be understood as a reference to: a) Yaxchilan’s location close to a river; b) Yaxchilan’s location within a great bend in the river and (roughly) midway down its length; or c) a watery metaphor for the great plaza of the city. Such questions are only amplified by the other two examples—both of which follow the name of Ix K’abal Xook, a prominent Yaxchilan queen. Between person and place come glyphs that read *yohl tahnil* “heart of the chest of” in one case (Figure 3b) and *uyokte’el* “foot of the tree of” in the other (Figure 3c). These appear to be metaphorical, even poetic, ways in which the queen is set in some relationship to the city—as if to say that she is the “heart and soul” or “pillar” of the place. Hypothetically, the continued presence of the *tahn* sign in these instances might reflect its absorption into the parent toponym (in a process not unlike the one that produced Tancah, Quintana Roo). This would explain its otherwise odd appearance as part of the expanded pedestal spelling on Hieroglyphic Stairway 3 (Figure 2c).

⁶ An unprovenienced Early Classic vessel textually linked to the Uuxactun area also shows a fully divided T561 sign.

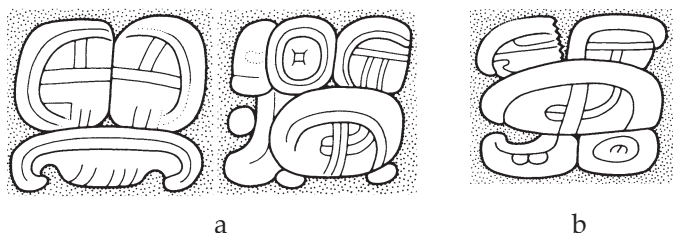


Figure 5. Early emblems at Yaxchilan: a) YAX L.47, D8-C9; b) YAX L.35, B2.

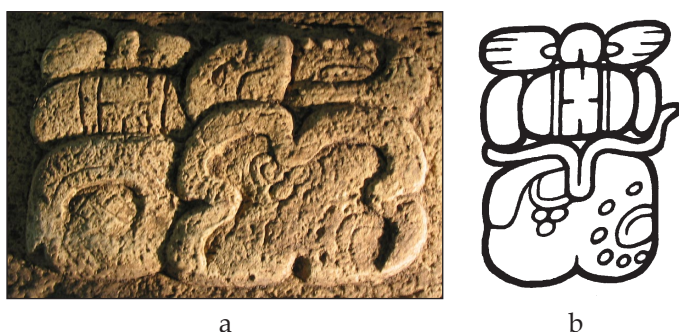


Figure 6. The toponym of Aguateca as *k'inich pa' witz*: a) DPL HS.2 East, Step 5/2, F2; b) AGU St.1, B10a.

“Cleft” Mountain” (personal communication 2001; Grube in Fahsen 2002) (Figure 6b).

As first described by Stuart, the “cleft mountain” is a literal reference to the topography of Aguateca—a site positioned on a high, rocky escarpment riven by a deep chasm (Stuart 1987: 20-23; Stuart and Houston 1994:9-12). Initially, it was not clear that the split device was a lexeme in its own right, and the idea that it was a semantic embellishment to the mountain sign was favored.

The word *pa'* and its derivatives are rich in meanings appropriate to the Aguateca place name. In Yukatek dictionaries we find: *pa'* “quebrar (to break)”; *pa'a* “dividir (to divide)” (Barrera Vasquez 1980); *paa* “cosa quebrada (something broken)” (Martínez Hernández 1929); as well as compound forms such as *pa'al pak'* “portillo de pared (gap in a wall)” (Barrera Vasquez 1980). Intimately related are *pa'x* “quebrar (to break)” and its compounds, for example *pa'axal muyal* “deshacerse los nublados (the clouds break up)” (Martínez Hernández 1929; Barrera Vasquez 1980). The same root appears in the Yukatek relatives of Itzaj with *pa'* “rajar (to split)” (Hofling and Tesucún 1997) and Mopan with *pa'al* “quebrado, rajado (broken, split)” (Ulrich and Ulrich 1976). In the highlands of Guatemala: Mam has *paaxj* “rajarse (to split)” (Maldonado Andrés 1986); Q'anjobal has *paq'a'* “quebrar algo con las rodillas y manos (to

break something with the knees and hands)” (de Diego Antonio et al. 1996); Q'eqchi' has *paq'al* “rajado, quebrado (split, broken)”; and K'iche' *pa'x* “quebrado, rajado (broken, split)” (Ajpacaja Tum et al. 1996).

If the parallel between Aguateca and Dos Pilas holds then, as Grube suggested, the split motif must signal a **PA'** value and the Aguateca place name be decipherable as *k'inich pa' witz* “Great-Sun Split Mountain”. The logic of this was compelling, and it occurred to me that it might be just as applicable to the Yaxchilan place name. Here a *pa'* reading would provide a much better explanation for the problematic cracked and divided sky signs of the early period, as well as an arguably more coherent compound of [**PA'**]**CHAN** *pa' chan* “split/broken sky”.⁷

There are two additional lines of evidence that support the identification of the cleft as marking **PA'**. One comes from far to the north at Xcalumkin, Campeche. Here we see a substitution in the name of a historical character called Kit Pa'. Usually spelled **ki-ti-pa-a**, on one occasion it is rendered with a very rare split sign, T649, in place of T586 **pa** (Figure 7a, b).⁸ Although occasionally included in syllabaries under **pa**, it is clear from the iconography that this must be logographic **PA'**—here in the form **ki-ti-PA'-a** (Dmitri Beliaev personal communication 2002). From its position at the end of the sequence we can deduce that *pa'* most likely acts as a noun in this case.⁹

The significance of T649 **PA'** is that it would constitute a “full” sign—one which is almost always conflated elsewhere.¹⁰ The reasons for this are not hard to discern, since the Maya were keen to exploit the iconic

⁷ It is possible that additional derivational or inflectional suffixes were attached to the *pa'* root, but not represented in the spelling at Dos Pilas. Parenthetically, Alfonso Lacadena had considered a *pa'* value for the cleft at one time, but abandoned it in light of the emerging data on *sihyaj* (pers. com. 2001). See also Boot (2004).

⁸ A rather eroded version of this sign may appear on a small drum altar from Edzna, while the codex-style vessel K1457 has another candidate at I3, this one with emanations and the internal cross-hatching of T586 **pa** (Robicsek and Hales 1981:100).

⁹ *Pa'* has more than one sense in Mayan languages, and as a noun can describe an enclosing wall or fortress, or a bank of earth, such as one might find on a riverbank. The word *kit* appears in Yukatek as an honorific form for fathers and uncles and has that metaphorical sense in a number of god names (one possible, rather loose translation of *kit pa'* would thus be “Father Fortress”).

¹⁰ We see this same phenomenon in the “Knot-Eye Jaguar” name that was popular among kings of the Lacandon region. It has been commonly assumed by epigraphers (myself included) to be a conflation of the tied cloth band T684a **JOY?** with the jaguar head T751 **B'AHLAM**. However, close inspection of the “Brussels Stela” reveals an unconfused version of the same name in which the first part is clearly a skull with a knotted cloth band threaded through its eye—resembling the manner in which a trophy skull might be carried or displayed. This sign is, to my knowledge, unique in the corpus and only otherwise represented in its union with the jaguar head.

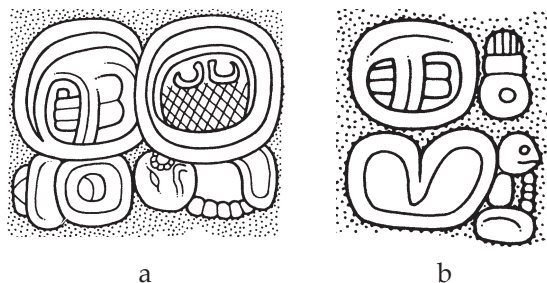


Figure 7. Substitution in the name of *ukit pa'* of Xcalumkin: a) XLM C.6, A2; b) XLM P.7, C2.

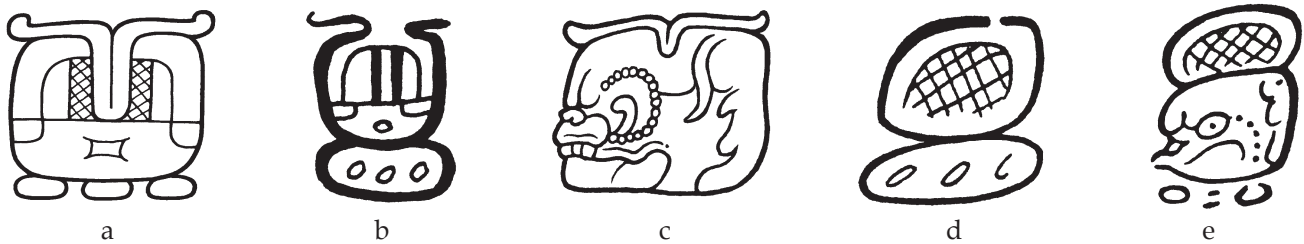


Figure 8. Variations in the spelling of the month name Pax: a) T549; b) Dresden Codex 61c; c) DPL St.2, D7; d) NTN G.1b, G4; e) K1813, A2.

potential of the writing system to forge meaningful, semi-illustrative unions wherever they could (Martin in press). To graphically depict the subject as split or broken proved almost irresistible. The rare Xcalumkin spelling may well have arisen precisely because the grammatical purpose and sense were different—there was no object to be divided or broken.

The second example, the month name Pax, is not so telling but does raise some interesting iconographic issues. Epigraphically, we know that Pax had much the same reading in the Classic era (Stuart 1987:28, 33)—although recent developments allow us to refine its spelling. The most common version, T549, is illustrative of a split-log drum mounted on three squat feet (Kelley 1976:135, 333)—with the same emanations seen in some split skies rising from a central cleft (Figure 8a). This is duly reflected in Yukatek *pax* “tambor, música (drum, music)” (Barrera Vasquez 1980), *paax/pàax* “instrumento musical (musical instrument)” (Bastarrachea, Yah Pech, and Briceño Chel 1992; Bricker, Po’ot Yah, and Dzul de Po’ot 1998); as well as Mopan and Itzaj’s *pax* “marimba, música” (Ulrich and Ulrich 1976; Hofling and Tesucún 1997).¹¹

The T549 logograph shows occasional **xa** suffixes, while a more common conflation shows the skull sign **xi** with the cleft and tendril device in its crown (Figure 8b, c). Fully syllabic versions are formed from **pa-xa** and **pa-xi-la** (the latter includes a nominal ending of **-VI**) (Figure 8d, e). The variation of these **xa/xi** forms raises an important issue, since we now know that the vowels chosen for terminal syllables serve as a guide to vowel quality within the word (Houston, Stuart, and Robertson 1998). In particular, the disharmonic **-xi** endings point to vowel complexity, while the synharmonic **-xa** endings are more typical of a simple short vowel. There is a temporal dimension here, since the **-xi** signs are, where known, earlier in date than the **-xa** forms. This conforms to a pattern in which spellings change as the Classic period progresses and vowel complexity is apparently lost (ibid.). Even if *pax* “drum/music” did not originate in *pa’/pa’x* “split” (by way of the split-log drum), there is clear intent to exploit its homophonic qualities and

to portray Pax with the same cleft that is elsewhere diagnostic of *pa’*. While it is tempting to read T549[**xi**] and **pa-xi** as *pa’x(VI)*, the target during the Classic was more likely the *paax/pàax* still seen today—in the form *paax(VI)*. Spellings from the mid-eighth-century onwards, including the Postclassic Dresden Codex, show **-xa** endings—but whether this reflects a genuine shift to short vowel *pax*, or simply an erosion of earlier conventions, is hard to say.

From the description above, it will be clear that the tendril-like emanations of T299 do not constitute an independent sign, but are instead features of the open clefts in **PAX** and, less consistently, in the prototypical **PA’** (as well as in other, seemingly unrelated split signs).¹² The similarity between these lines and those that emerge from the human eye glyph is more than coincidental, since both refer to types of sensory experience, with sight and sound as related projective emanations (Houston and Taube 2000:286). Our tendrils would seem to represent radiating sound: whether the vibrations of a split-log drum (Justeson 1984:342) or, in the case of the more elaborated Yaxchilan emblems, the din of a sky rent asunder.

Conclusions

Grube’s proposal for the Aguateca place name as *k’inich pa’ witz* has implications for a number of other cleft motifs in the Maya corpus. In the interpretation set out here, it offers a reading for the name of Yaxchilan which satisfies outstanding iconographic problems and

¹¹ The name Pax for the sixteenth Maya month is only attested in Yukatek (see Thompson 1950:Table 8). Rare **-la** suffixes in the Classic era (see A2 of K1813 at www.mayavase.com, Figure 8e in this paper) clearly point to a **-VI** ending, presumably **-al** to give *pa’xal* or *paaxal*. Another common variant shows an amphibian with a cleft crown—which, if not indicative of a dialectal variation, should be a separate logograph, perhaps based on a homonym.

¹² Boot (2004) covers the ground first explored by Grube in recognizing the cleft motif as analogous to the **pa-a** spelling on the new Dos Pilas step. Citing many of the same examples listed in this study and referring to the Yaxchilan case, he argues that the underlying **PA’** logograph is T299.

provides a rationale for all its variants.

Early forms of the emblem glyph adopt an illustrative approach, but in time T561 **CHAN** was modified by a formulaic cleft we can equate with T649 **PA'** to create the amalgam T562. Although this was to all intents and purposes a logograph in its own right, the open issue of intervening suffixes suggest that **[PA']CHAN** remains the best transcription. The T299 emanations were optional embellishments to **PA'** with no value of their own, although their conceptual importance should not be underestimated. Earlier confusion between the *pa'* and *sihyaj* signs was understandable, given that the latter includes the self-same split motif, albeit purely illustrative and silent in value.¹³ The dominant Yaxchilan emblem glyph would now read *k'uhul pa' chan ajaw* "holy lord of split sky"—with the place name formula *tahn ha' pa' chan*, meaning "in front of the water of split sky" or perhaps "mid-water split sky".

Can we get closer to the actual meaning of the Yaxchilan name? The split device undoubtedly represents a portal for the birth or rebirth of deities in Maya iconography. The Maize God himself is famously reborn through a split in the earth created by the lightning axes of storm gods. We know too that a break in the sky brings forth K'awiil, a personified bolt of lightning. Yet the earliest examples of the Yaxchilan name, as we have seen, do not emphasize these supernatural gateways so much as the idea of division and breakage. This suggests that a split, broken, or cracked sky is closer to the original semantic intent.¹⁴

The craggy karstic peaks that rise to the back of Yaxchilan and dot the landscape around it could be viewed as breaking the sky with a jagged edge (Alfonso Lacadena, personal communication 2001). But interestingly the Motul Dictionary, a colonial Yukatek source, gives us *pa'xal u chun ka'an*, an idiom with the sense of "amanecer (to dawn)" (Martínez Hernández 1929; Barrera Vasquez 1980). A literal reading of the Mayan would be "the base of the sky breaks", describing the first light to penetrate the horizon and a direct analogue to our own "break of day" or "crack of dawn". Whether it is this kind of metaphor, or a quite different one, that is at work, I suspect the solution to the Yaxchilan place name lies somewhere in this literary and poetic realm, rather than in a particular mythic narrative or reference to local topography.

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Illustration Credits

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¹³ Recent work by Barbara MacLeod, David Stuart and others recognizes that the full **SIH/WINIK** "birth/hatch" glyph shows the newborn emerging from a split in T533 "capped ajaw"—an undeciphered sign with the sense of "seed/egg". A better reading for the name at Machaquila might be Pa' K'in Chaak "Split Sun Rain God".

¹⁴ The lack of emanations in the Yaxchilan T562, while seemingly incidental, could imply that the sense is not one that involves a violent or noisy accompaniment. Foreign references lack the subtlety of this distinction and include them in fully elaborated forms that imply no change to the reading.

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