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New Year Records in Classic Maya Inscriptions

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Figure 1. Passage from Stela 18 at Naranjo. Drawing by David Stuart.

Throughout Mesoamerica the first station of the 365-day calendar saw the arrival of the “year bearer,” a day named for the corresponding position of the 260-day count. Only four day signs could fall on the opening day of the year, and in Postclassic Yucatan these were K’an, Muluk, Ix and Kawak. In combination with their particular numerical coefficient (1 K’an, 2 Muluk, and so on), these gave name to each year in a lengthy 52-year cycle. Although there is ample evidence of the year-bearer system in the calendar of the Postclassic Maya of Yucatan (Taube 1988) and even also among some modern highland communities (Tedlock 1982), Mayanists of the last century saw no evidence of year bearers in the records of the Classic period. Bowditch (1910:81) believed that the year-bearer calendar simply did not exist in the Classic period, whereas Thompson (1950:128) opined that if it did, it was not recorded on the monuments. In this essay I sketch out the evidence for a different view: that the year-bearer calendar was ritually important for the Classic, and possibly even Preclassic Maya, and that indications of it do indeed appear from time to time in the earlier textual record.

We begin with the inscription on Stela 18 from Naranjo. Its badly weathered incised text includes a fascinating record of the date “1 Ik’ Seating of Pop,” corresponding to the Long Count 9.14.14.7.2 (Figure 1).¹ Two event phrases follow, the first consisting of the curious “paw-and-pillow” verb that, on the basis of other examples, may signify accession to office.² The subject of this verb is simply written as *ch’oktak* (**ch’o-ko-TAK-ki**), a plural noun meaning “the youths.” A second, longer sentence then offers a more descriptive account of what transpired on the same day:

¹ The drawing of the Stela 18 passage presented here shows slight modifications from Graham’s rendering from the *Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions* publication (Graham 1974). The shallow incised lines make the text particularly difficult to draw and analyze.

² Only a handful of examples of the “paw-and-pillow” logogram exist, and as yet it remains undeciphered. The best case for its function as an accession verb comes from the Site Q panel published by Coe (1973:28), where it takes the affixes *-na-ja*, possibly indicating an anti-passive construction (Lacadena 1998). Although the chronology of the panel’s inscription is notoriously troublesome, the date accompanying this verb is probably cited again on another Site Q panel, where the event is clearly accession.

tz'a-pa-ja LAKAM-TUUN U-CHAB-ji-ya K'AHK'-ti-li-wi-CHAN-CHAHK

tz'ahpaj lakamtuun u-chabjiy K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Chahk

The stela is erected; K'ahk' Tiliw Chan Chahk oversees it.

Stela dedications are commonplace on Period Ending dates, of course, yet Stela 18 offers a rare exception to this pattern. While “1 Ik' Seating of Pop” seems a strange day to mark with the erection of a *lakamtuun*, I wonder if its proximity to a New Year—that is, the “seating” of the initial month—may go some way toward an explanation.

I find Stela 18's mention of a stela erection on a “seating of Pop” to be highly reminiscent of the New Year rites attested several centuries later in Yucatan. In Postclassic Yucatan, each New Year ceremony centered on the



Figure 2. Upper registers from the *Dresden* New Year pages, depicting the “arrival” of the year on the days Eb, Kaban, Ik' and Manik. (a) D25a, (b) D26a, (c) D27a, (d) D28a.

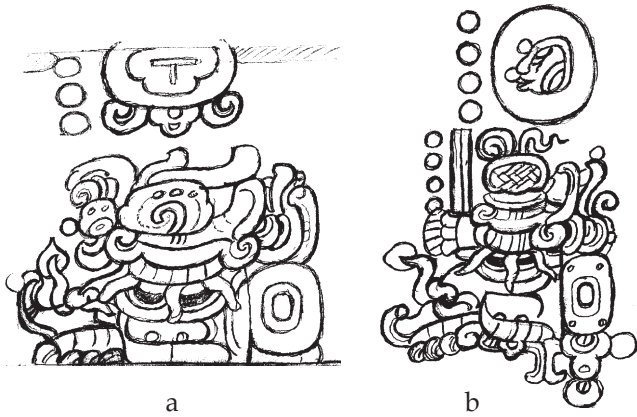


Figure 3. Two wall paintings from Rio Azul Tomb 2, depicting 4 Ik' and 4 Kaban days above emblems for directional mountains. Field drawing by Ian Graham, Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

erection of an *akantun*, a marking stone (or stones), at one of the four cardinal directions surrounding a community (Tozzer 1941:139, 141 n. 669, Coe 1965). These *akantuns* are widely seen as Postclassic survivals of an earlier stela tradition of Classic and Preclassic times, and vestiges of the same practice can be found among some communities in modern-day Yucatan (Sosa 1989). Might we have, therefore, a Classic period record of similar rituals associated with a year bearer?

Even if we do entertain the likelihood that the Naranjo ceremony foreshadows later New Year rituals, we are confronted with a thorny numerological problem. Conventional wisdom notes that the Classic Maya year bearers fell not on the “seating” of Pop, but only on the

first day of the month, 1 Pop (Thompson 1950:124-126). In Postclassic Yucatan the four year-bearer days were the so-called “K’an set” (K’an, Muluk, Ix and Kawak) (see Tozzer 1941:135), and the ritual documents of the Colonial era often refer to the particular year through a number and one of these day signs. In the codices the year-bearer days are thought to be shifted back one position to the “Ak’bal set” (Ak’bal, Lamat, Ben and Etz’ nab), and this has long been seen also as a reflection of an earlier system used by southern sites in the Classic period. To posit that the Naranjo passage is an actual year-bearer record necessitates proposing yet another shift to a new set of days (the “Ik’ set”) that fell on the seating of Pop. This, I admit, would be a rash conclusion to draw from the Naranjo evidence alone.

Nevertheless, it is significant that among the Kiche, Mam, Ixil and Pokomchi Maya the true year bearers correspond (with obvious local variations in the names) to Ik’, Manik, Eb, and Kaban (Tedlock 1982:92)—the very same system I propose may be in use at Naranjo and other lowland sites in Classic times. Thompson (1950:127) saw little significance in this pattern, however, and was insistent that the original bearers of the years for the Maya had to fall on the first day, or 1 Pop. In his view the highland Maya usage was a confusion of Pop’s seating for the first day of the month: “...it would not be difficult for the two events to be confused or merged by a people not overly strict in the preservation of the old ways” (Thompson 1950:127). This is a strange statement, given that these Maya communities were among the most traditional and ritually conservative into the twentieth century.

In the four New Year pages (25-28) of the *Dresden*

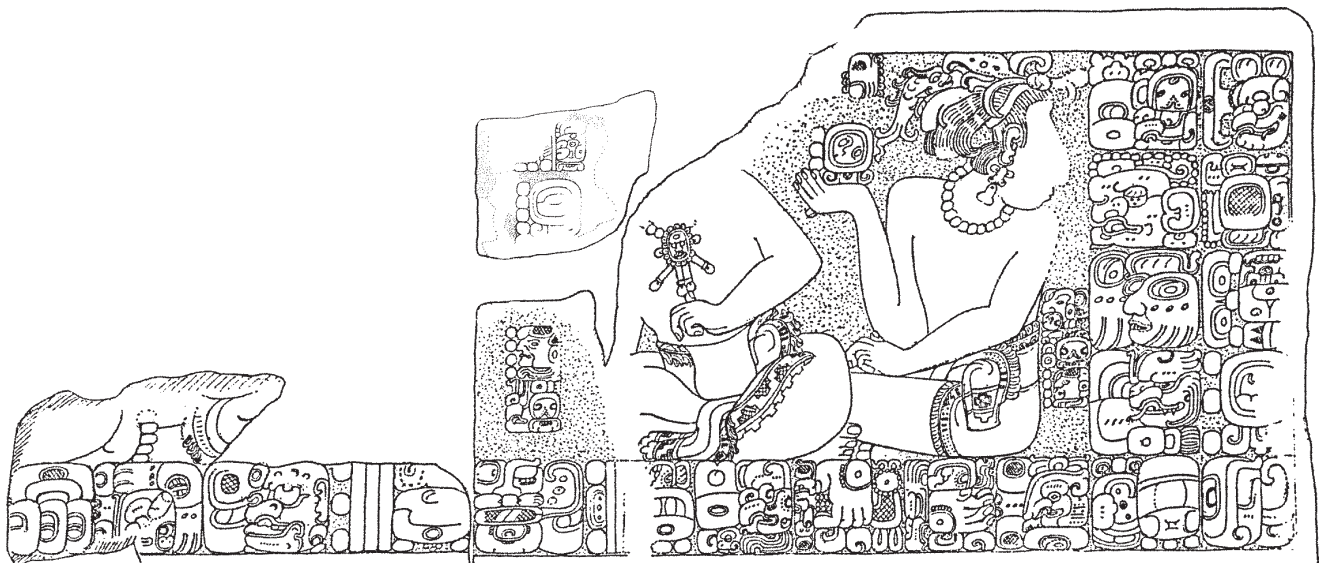


Figure 4. Pomona Panel 1. The two seated figures at right, named and adorned as “Pawahtuns,” hold the day signs 4 Ik’ and 4 Kaban. Two other individuals were originally at left. Composite field drawing by Ian Graham and David Stuart, courtesy of the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Peabody Museum, Harvard University.



Figure 5. Late Classic red ware plate depicting the Maize God, with four sets of day signs arranged along the inner border. Each set begins with a day sign of the “Ik’ set” (From Whittington 2001:Fig. 95).

Codex (Figure 2a-d) we find that the “Ik’ set” of days is repeated thirteen times at the upper left margin of each page, before the striding possum (or is it really a raccoon?) who carries a patron deity of the New Year to one of the four world directions. The event in each case seems to be *tal-iiy*, “he arrived” (Bricker 1986:110). Although the shifted “Ak’bal set” of traditional Yucatecan year-bearer days are given in the lower left margin of these same pages (again in a line of thirteen signs) this does not demonstrate that the *Dresden* conforms to the Postclassic system; if anything, the upper registers may offer evidence that the arrival of the new year fell on the seating of the first month. However, in the *Paris Codex*—clearly a later document than the *Dresden*—we find the Yucatecan system well represented in its own New Year pages.

Turning again to the Classic period, we find more indications that Ik’, Manik, Eb and Kaban were the year-bearer days of that era. Tomb 2 from Rio Azul shows on two of its walls the day signs “4 Ik’” and “4 Kaban” above large mountains, where they clearly have directional associations similar to those of the Postclassic year bearers (Figure 3). These Rio Azul examples are no doubt related to the similar glyphs held by impersonators of “Pawahtuns” on Panel 1 from Pomona (Figure 4). There were originally four such

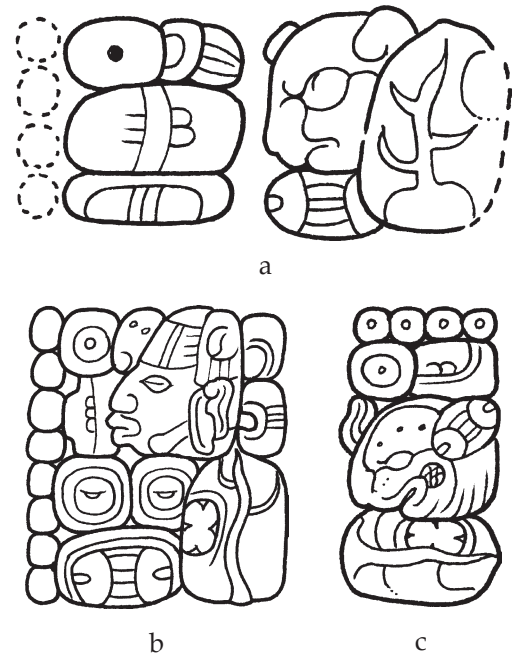


Figure 6. Mentions of the “four youths” in inscriptions at Palenque and Copan: (a) Palenque Tablet of the Sun, caption, (b) Copan Stela 6, (c) Copan Stela I, C2b.

figures on the panel, and I would tentatively suggest that they are the closest Classic correspondence to the year bearers of the Postclassic. They are shown holding, or bearing, the days associated with the seating of the first month. The “four” on each day sign is perhaps used to convey the quadripartite system at work, as well as provide a necessary number prefix.

The structure represented in the iconography of Rio Azul and Pomona reflects the basic Classic Maya subdivision of the twenty days into four units of five days, each associated with a cardinal direction. This arrangement is clearly shown on a decorated plate (Figure 5), where the four five-day sequences begin with Ik’, Manik, Eb, or Kaban. This can be taken as good evidence that the year itself began with one of these four days, establishing them as the Classic Maya year-bearer days.

The “youths” (*ch’oktak*) mentioned on Naranjo Stela 18 assume an office or position on the day 1 Ik’ Seating of Pop, and it is tempting to think that they relate to the four directional gods so closely associated with the year bearers in Mesoamerican cosmology. In fact, in the inscriptions at Copan and Palenque, as well a few other sites, the same term *ch’oktak* routinely takes the numerical coefficient “four” (Figure 6). The contexts of most if not all these cases strongly suggest

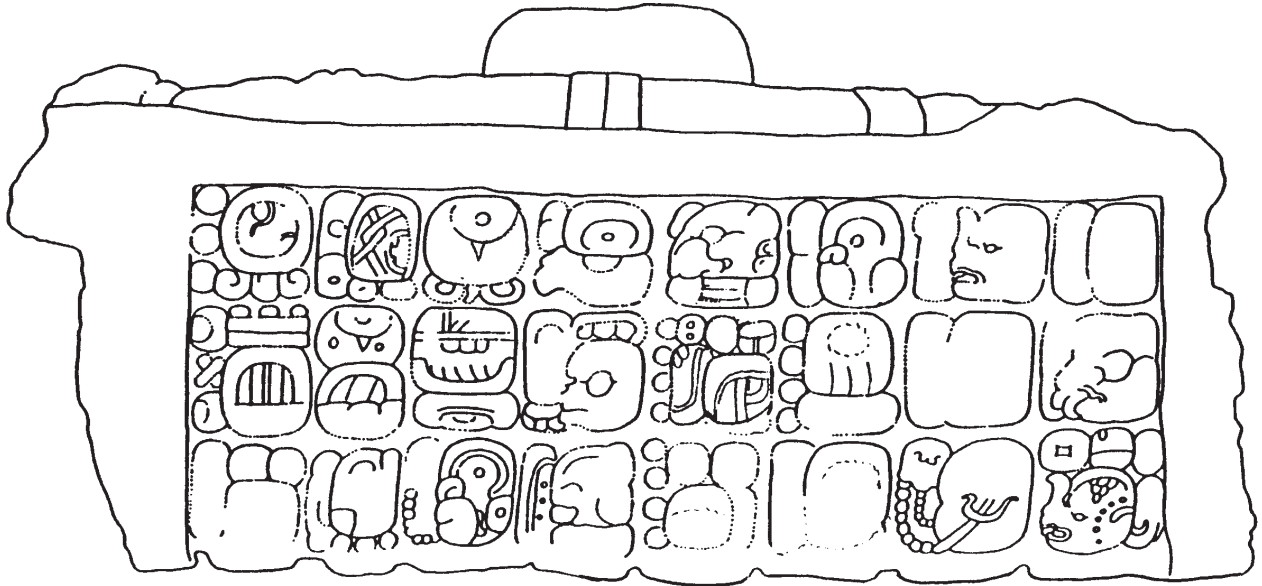


Figure 7. Top of Copan Altar U. Drawing by Linda Schele.

that “four youths” refers to a set of deities. Stela 6 at Copan, for example, mentions the four youths at the close of its opening passage describing the rites of 9.12.10.0.0 (Figure 6c). The relevant glyph (4-CH’OK-ko-TAK) follows directly after *chan te’ ajaw*, “the four lords,” who are likewise named as witnesses of the scattering ceremony on the Period Ending. On Stela I (Figure 6d), we read *i-tzahkaj K’awil u-chabiiy chante’ ch’oktak Bolonte’witz*, or “K’awil was conjured, overseen by the four youths (at) the nine hills place.”

Altar U at Copan strengthens the connection between New Year dates and a set of four deities. The top of the altar (Figure 7) bears an inscription opening with the Calendar Round 3 Kaban Seating of Pop, corresponding to 9.18.2.5.17. This is stated as being the precise thirteen-year anniversary “in the rulership” of an enigmatic character or deity named (at least in part) Yaxk’amlay (at this time, the ruler of Copan was the famous Yax Pahsaj Chan Yopaat), and indeed his own seating in office is recorded elsewhere on the altar and in a few other texts as 9.17.9.2.12 3 Eb Seating of Pop. True haab anniversaries such as this are rare in Maya texts, and it seems as though the New Year on the “Seating of Pop” is the dominant idea connecting the two dates. At least one other (likely) deity was also seated on the 3 Eb day, named K’anujok’uh (“Precious is the Head of the God”), and he too is named in connection with the anniversary atop Altar U. What I find most interesting in the same inscription, however, is the later mention that these deities are related if not equivalent to “the youthful gods, the four lords.” Because “the four youths” or “the four lords” seem to be collective terms for gods, and given their strong associations with the New Year both at Copan and Naranjo, I tentatively suggest that they are designations for the Classic Maya year bearers, established, re-ordered and renewed on the seating of Pop. Several quartets of gods, including the supposed “Pawahtuns,” are key in the iconography of spatial cosmology in the Classic period, and in colonial Yucatan their categories as sky bearers, year bearers, rain makers and guardians overlapped in fundamental ways (Thompson 1970; Taube 1992). I suggest the same was true in the Classic period.

There are other “seating of Pop” dates mentioned in Maya inscriptions,

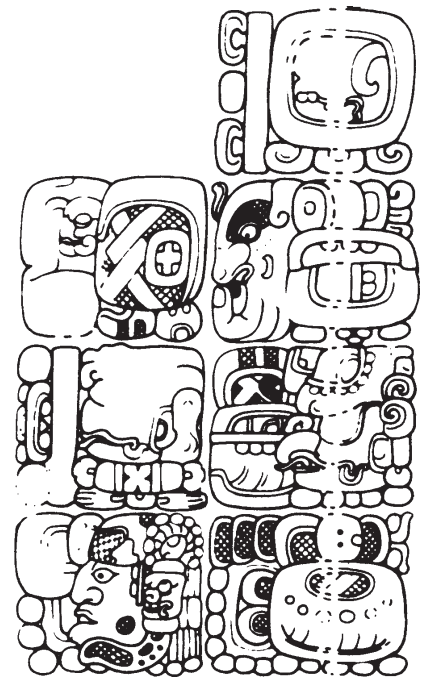


Figure 8. Passage from Tikal Temple IV, Lintel 2.

and not all are explicitly linked to the New Year. For example, we find in the inscription of Lintel 2, Temple IV from Tikal a mention of the date 9.15.12.11.12 6 Eb Seating of Pop (Figure 8). The verb is obscure, and the associated protagonist is Yik'in Chan K'awil (Ruler B). The episode comes just a day before the "star war" with Naranjo (see Martin 1996), suggesting that a New Year rite is not necessarily the rhetorical focus of the inscription. Also, the text on a looted stela now on display at the Hudson Museum in Orono, Maine, may mention a New Year date. This monument records a K'atun ending overseen by a ruler, and the short inscription closes with a Distance Number linking the K'atun ending to the day 7 Manik' Seating of Pop, possibly 9.17.0.0.7. No explanatory statement accompanies this second date, strongly suggesting that its significance was self-evident as a chronological anchor, much as Period Endings are in the discursive structure of many texts. I suggest that the closing date records a New Year station, and is linked to the Period Ending.

Turning from the hieroglyphic inscriptions, finally, there is new and compelling confirmation that the year-bearer system was prominent in some of the very earliest Maya art and writing. The recently unearthed Preclassic murals of San Bartolo, Guatemala, display a dizzying representation of gods and divine settings, and feature on the west wall a series of sacrificial rites associated with world trees in the four cardinal directions (Taube, Stuart and Saturno, in preparation). As Karl Taube has just recently shown (personal communication 2004), these are direct antecedents to the similar sacrifice scenes from the New Year pages of the Dresden Codex, painted some 1500 years later. The main hieroglyphic text of the west wall, placed in the precise center of the composition, prominently displays the day 3 Ik'. Given the theme of the surrounding painting, I suggest this is a year-bearer day 3 Ik' Seating of Pop. It is difficult to pin this down in the Long Count, but given the present archaeological evidence for the dating of the murals (William Saturno, personal communication 2004), these placements seem closest:

- 7.11.6.9.2 3 Ik' Seating of Pop September 9, 131 B.C.
- 7.13.19.4.2 3 Ik' Seating of Pop August 27, 79 B.C.
- 7.16.11.17.2 3 Ik' Seating of Pop August 14, 27 B.C.

Much more needs to be done on the texts and iconography surrounding year bearers, but I hope to have at least demonstrated that the year-bearer concept was important enough to the Classic Maya to have been mentioned in several monuments and paintings. In no small way the evidence points to the Classic Maya having yet more in common with their Mesoamerican neighbors.

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