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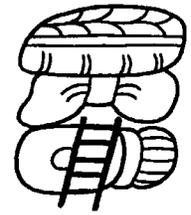
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# Glyph Dwellers



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## *Mutal*, a Possible Mixe-Zoque Toponym

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The main sign for the emblem glyph for the ancient sites of Tikal and Dos Pilas has been identified by David Stuart as an image of hair twisted or coiled and tied into a bun, *mut* (Schele, Fahsen, and Grube 1995:5). This can be seen in the variants of the sign shown in Figure 1. The sign appears at Tikal from the time of the earliest inscriptions, and was later used also at the site of Dos Pilas.

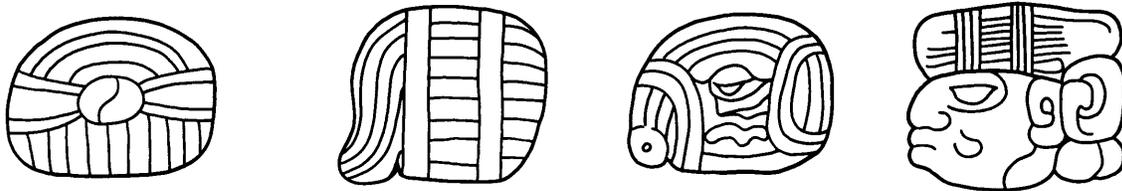


Figure 1. Examples of **mu'ut** from Tikal and Dos Pilas (drawings by Matthew Looper).

Related words are attested in contemporary Yukatekan languages:

*mut* 'rodete para asentar olla o vasija'[coil for setting a pot on] (Barrera Vásquez 1980:542)

*mu'ut* 'abultado' (Hofling and Tesucún 1997:459)

*mut pol* and *mut k'ax pol* 'rodete hacer la mujer de sus cabellos' [coil women make with their hair] (Barrera Vásquez 1980:542) (literally 'head twist' 'head mountain twist')

Although it is clear that a hair bun is what is represented by the sign, 'hair bun' seems an unusual toponym. A more likely source can be found in the Mixe-Zoquean root *\*mu't* 'manar/spring (water)' (Wichmann 1995:384) or *\*mut* '-ä 'manar' [to well up] (Terrence Kaufman personal communication, March 2000). This would suggest a reference to the seasonal pools of water, the *bajos*, that are characteristic of the site.

Grube and Martin (2000:74f) cite correspondence from Stuart in which he suggests **mu'ut** or **mutul** as the reading for sign. Of 167 examples found in the Maya Hieroglyphic Database, over 30 clearly show a **la** suffix. The suffix *-al* in Yukatekan and other Mayan languages functions as a locative, literally meaning 'place of'. The full toponym would have originally have been read *mutal* 'place of the pool(s)'.

Harrison emphasizes the importance of this geophysical feature:

. . . Tikal's swampside location readily suggests an excellent reason for its settlement in addition to trade considerations. In Central American, swamps are considered to be places just like towns, and accordingly are given names. The "Bajo de Santa Fe" lies immediately to the east side of Tikal, forming its eastern border. On the border of this swamp are a series of the earliest known settlements. . . In all likelihood, these earliest settlers reached the Tikal location by water routes and settled there because of ease of access, fertility of the uplands surrounding the flanks of the swamp, and the prominence of the ridges that characterize the center of the site (1999:15).

Some of these early settlers may very well have been Mixe-Zoquean speakers who first called the site *mu'ut*. Further support for this hypothesis comes from the modern name Tikal. Martin and Grube offer as a source *ti ak'al* 'at the waterhole' "ascribed by hunters and other forest travellers to one of the city's ancient reservoirs" (2000:30). It would appear that Tikal was originally named by speakers of a Mixe-Zoquean language. The Yukatekan speakers who later inhabited the site retained the original name, but represented it visually by using a similar sounding word in their own language. The name "Tikal" used up to the present time represents a translation of the original Mixe-Zoquean toponym into Yukatekan.

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