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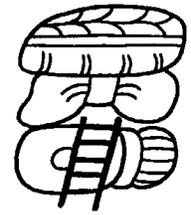
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# Glyph Dwellers



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## *The Inscription on Dumbarton Oaks Jade B-157.MAJ*

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In the Dumbarton Oaks collection of Precolumbian art is an elegantly inscribed Maya jade plaque, dated stylistically by Coggins to the later part of the Early Classic period (400-500 CE) (Clancy, Coggins, and Culbert 1985:116; see also Lothrop, Foshag, and Mahler 1957: no. 117, p. 252, pl. 68 top). The process by which ancient artists in Costa Rica reworked the jade resulted in the partial damage of the cartouche surrounding the two-glyph inscription on the plaque. Nevertheless, the two glyphs themselves are almost perfectly preserved, aside from shallow depressions that obliterated some details of glyph 2 (Fig. 1).

The Handbook of the Robert Woods Bliss Collection of Pre-Columbian Art (1963:13) reads the glyphs as “apparently signifying time periods,” which Coggins elaborated in the following manner: “...they are allegorical rather than historical since they are head glyphs for the *tun* and for the *uinal*, the 360-day year and 20-day month” (Clancy, Coggins, and Culbert 1985:116). Both of these interpretations are probably incorrect. True, the zoomorphic head of glyph 1 has a curved beak, skeletal lower jaw, and scroll-eye seen in some of the **tun** variants. However, it possesses certain distinctive features not typical of any of the **tun** allographs, especially the **chi**-like hand in the forehead and the arrow-like form pointing to the eye. It also has a tassel-like prefix.



Figure 1. Jade, Dumbarton Oaks 157.MAJ.

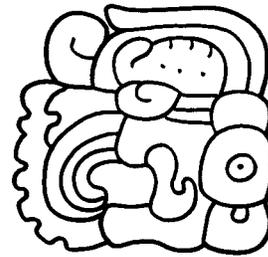


Figure 2. TIK Marcador, D5.

A similar sign appears on the Early Classic Marcador from Tikal at D5, in a toponymic context (Fig. 2). The Tikal zoomorph is similar to that on the jade in its general appearance, including a curved beak, skeletal jaw, and scroll-eye. It also has a chi-like hand in the forehead with dots on the hand itself.

The main difference between the two signs is that the Tikal example has banding adjacent to the eye, instead of the arrow seen on the jade. It is possible that these graphic elements are equivalent. The tassel-like prefix of Glyph 1 consists of a dotted disk, probably representing a flower, but the lack of an ak'b'al infix makes it unlikely that this is T152 **itzamnah**. It is also not the same as T79 **pät**. While it is possible that this prefix is an unique grapheme, it seems more likely to be part of the main sign (a floral attachment to the forehead).

Glyph 2 is similar to the personified **winal** glyph in its heavily lidded eye; however, it lacks the mouth scroll and triple-dotted "ear" typical of the **winal** frog or toad. Further, the creature has three long curved fangs, rather than the short serrated teeth usually seen on the **winal**. These qualities suggest that rather than a toad or frog, the being is a snake (T764 **chan**). While most examples of T764 in the Maya script have a scroll-eye, the vision serpent depicted on the Pearlman conch trumpet also has a heavy-lidded eye (Fig. 3; see Schele and Miller 1986:308f). This image confirms the identification of the glyph on the jade as T764 **chan**.

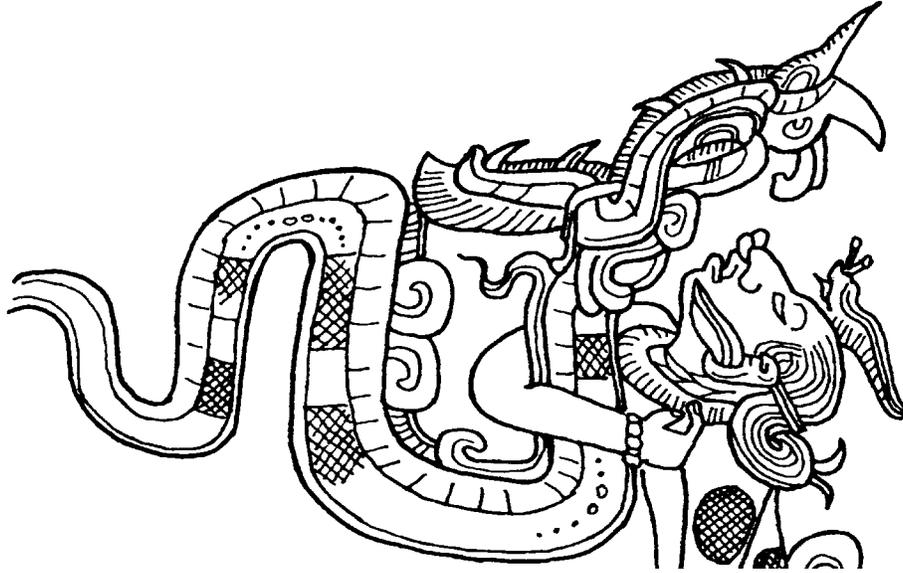


Figure 3. Pearlman Conch Trumpet (after Schele and Miller 1986:309).

In summary, distinctive features of the two glyphs on the Dumbarton Oaks jade suggest that they are not **tun** and **winal** as previously supposed. The lack of numerical coefficients also suggests this. Instead, the first sign may be a variant of the supernatural zoomorphic glyph appearing on the Tikal Marcador D5. The second glyph is T764 **chan**. Together, the glyphs may have named a supernatural being or might have been part of a personal name.

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