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A Tale of a Tail: The GII Prefix

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The following paper examines the possible meanings of the prefix in the name of GII from the Palenque Triad (Fig. 1). This glyph is clearly related to T120 (Fig. 2a), and to Landa's letter *n* (or *ene*). David Kelley first suggested that this is derived from *neh*, 'cola [tail]' (1962:302f). However, the prefix appearing in the name of GII invariably appears as a compound grapheme composed of the T120 tail, with the comb (fish fin) affix, AA1 (T25).¹ There are several possible reasons for this.

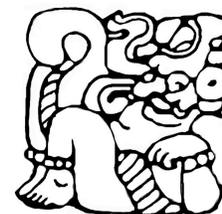


Figure 1. PAL TFC GII after Schele (Schele and Freidel 1990)

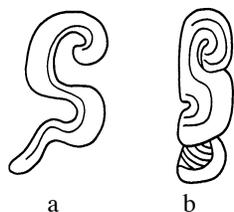


Figure 2. 1S3 a) T120, b) GII prefix. By Looper (Macri and Looper 2003)

Macri and Looper (2003:171–72) include all logographs of GII and God K together under the same code, SSF,² while they recognize the prefix T198 (Fig. 2b), as a variant sign of T120, with both coded as 1S3 (Macri and Looper 2003:276–77). Following Davoust (1995:567), the authors define 1S3 with both the syllabic value of **ne** and the logographic value **nehn** 'mirror', supporting the reading of *nehn* for the apparent mirror 1M2 (T617a) on the head of GII as God K³ (Fig. 3). Following David Stuart's reading of God K as **k'awil** (1987:15),⁴ Nikolai Grube suggested a reading of *Nen*

¹ Codes from Macri and Looper (2003) are followed by the corresponding Thompson numbers.

² In Justeson (1984): GII is recognized as God K from Schellhas (1904).

³ Linda Schele and Jeffrey Miller (1983:3–20) proposed *nen* or *lem* for 1M2 (T617a) as the "mirror" attribute of God K.

⁴ Transcribed *K'awil* in Martin and Grube (2000), based on vowel length potentially indicated by syllable disharmony (see Houston, Robertson and Stuart 1998).

K'awil for the name of GII (Schele and Matthews 1993). Similarly, based on the depiction of *K'awil* as an infant, *unen*, ‘baby; child’ (Ch’ol *une*’; Ch’orti’ *unen* (Kaufman and Norman 1984:135)), Simon Martin has proposed that the name of GII reads *Unen K’awiil*. Martin proposes a similar reading for Tikal’s *Ix Unen B’alam* (Fig. 4a) (Martin 2002:62–63).⁵ In this case, the prefix before the infantile form is the tail (T120), or specifically, the jaguar tail ATB (T834).

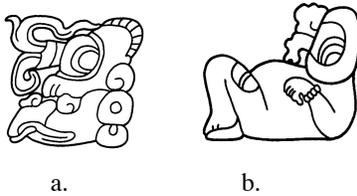


Figure 3. a) God K, b) GII.
By Looper (Macri and Looper 2003).

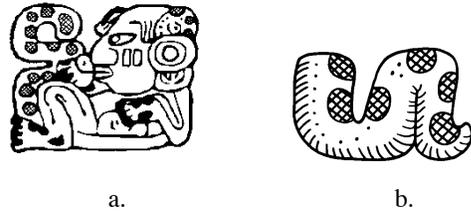


Figure 4. a) *Une' B'alam*, by author after Coe in Jones and Satterthwaite 1982. b) ATB by Looper (Macri and Looper 2003).

The jaguar tail glyph ATB has the syllabic value **ne**,⁶ and the two earliest examples of this glyph reveal comb-like striations that apparently indicate shading, or the hair on the tail (Fig. 4b). These lines may be compared with those in the prefix on the earliest example of the name of GII on the Palace House C (Fig. 5a), as well as in the name of Aj Neh Ohl Mat (T198 as **neh**, Fig. 5b). Thus, Martin suggests that the lines derive from the hair in these earlier tail glyphs (Martin 2002:61n.9). But why does the name of GII almost always carry this compound version of T120 (T198)? Substitution with T120 or ATB might be expected if the phonetic values are equivalent.⁷

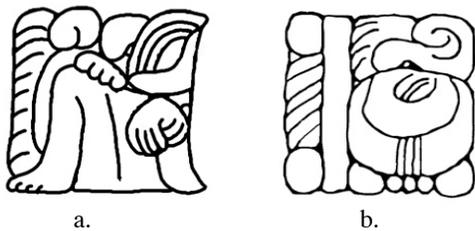


Figure 5. a) PAL Palace, House C, GII b) PAL T1e Aj Neh Ohl [Mat]. By author after Schele.



Figure 6. PAL T1m GII
By author after Schele.

⁵ Given as *Une' B'alam* in Martin and Grube (2000:27), with *une*’ also attested as ‘baby’.

⁶ Hopkins (1991:263) in Macri and Looper (2003:83).

⁷ Only one example of the name of GII from a recently excavated Comalcalco spine has been found with a singular T120 prefix (Martin 2002:62). See Fig. 10.

Combining AA1(T25)/T120

Looking at subsequent examples of the GII prefix, the striations appear to conform to a separated, diminutive version of the comb affix AA1 (T25) combined with the T120 tail (Fig. 6). This possible compound presents a number of interesting possibilities:

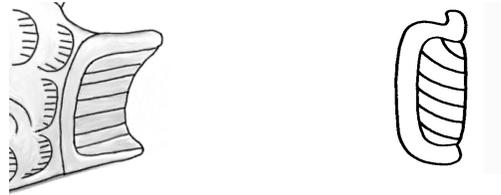


Figure 7. a. Fish caudal fin. b. AA1 **ka**. After Looper (Macri and Looper 2003:39).

1) *Semantic similarity: fish tail and animal tail*

The comb affix AA1 apparently represents the fin or scale of a fish, and it freely substitutes for a full figure glyph of a fish, known to represent the syllable **ka**, acrophonically derived from some reflex of proto-Mayan **kar* ‘fish’ (Macri and Looper 2003:39–40, 51). Macri and Looper demonstrate the close correspondence between AA1 and visual representations of fish fins and scales appearing on a Middle Formative Olmec ceramic vessel from the valley of Mexico (Fig. 7a). Notably, in this same image the tail or caudal fin of the fish appears to most closely resemble the common forms of AA1 (Fig. 7b), and it is possible that AA1 was known to represent the caudal fin. As such, in the GII prefix compound with T120, AA1 may actually be a non-phonetic indication of the semantic similarity between a fish tail and an animal tail, perhaps to distinguish T120 from other scrolled glyphs as **neh** ‘tail’. However, this would still not fully explain the preference for this compound in the GII prefix, above the use of a T120 or ATB as **ne**.

2) *Phonetic: the tail of the Vision Serpent*

If the combination of AA1/T120 indicates a pronounced **ka-ne**, this would seem to suggest a reference to *kàan* ‘serpent’ in Yukatek, and in the attested name of *Kàan B’alam* at Palenque. Simon Martin has proposed that this may be the name of the Vision Serpent⁸, known to relate to God K, both as his serpent leg, and his animal *way*, or *nagual* (Houston and Stuart 1989:8). In combination with the T120 tail, this *kàan-neh* may additionally suggest that God K is the tail of the Vision Serpent, which is indeed the case. If this would at first seem to be the intended reference, this argument may be undone by the appearance of the AA1/T120 compound affix in other words which seem to suggest no such meaning, some of which are explored below.

3) *Repetition: a rare variant of the duplication sign*

It is possible that the AA1 **ka** in the GII prefix may be a rare substitution for the two-dot duplication sign (22A), which instructs the reader to repeat the phonetic value of the following sign⁹. In this case, the phonetic **ka**, as well as the doubling sign itself, may be read as both *ka* ‘two’ and *ka*’, a prefix indicating repetition, or ‘again’¹⁰. Combined with the following T120 tail as **ne**, the compound may read **ne-ne**, thus providing the reading *nehn* ‘mirror’ (proto-Ch’olan **nehn* ‘mirror’ (Kaufman and Norman 1984:126)). It follows that this combination would be morphemically distinct from the singular appearance of T120 as **ne**, without the AA1 affix.

⁸ Martin (2000) personal communication to Joel Skidmore (2006).

⁹ David Stuart and Stephen Houston (1994:46) first identified the function of the two-dotted duplication sign.

¹⁰ Holfing and Tesucún (1997:338): *ka* ‘again’.

A phrase from the Tablet of the Foliated Cross in Palenque, also describing GII, provides a comparable example of the 22A two-dot reduplication sign used in combination with the jaguar tail, ATB, here following HE6 (T1) **u-** as **u-ne-ne**, *unen* ‘child’ (Fig. 8).

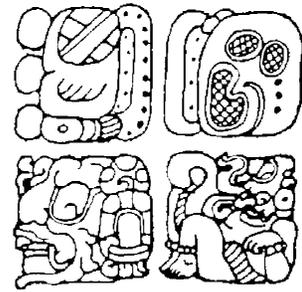


Figure 8. PAL TFC L3–M4. After Schele.



Figure 9. Comalcalco Spine Text U26-E2. After Zender (Martin 2002).



Figure 10. Comalcalco Shell Text U26-8B. After Zender (Martin 2002).

A similar example from a recently excavated Comalcalco spine (Zender, Armijo and Gallegos 2000) shows the same exact duplicated ATB compound as *unen* (HE6:22A:ATB) directly preceding the name glyph of K’awil (Fig. 9). Martin proposes that this new reading confirms the value of the prefix in GII’s name as *Unen*. Furthermore, he proposes that the prefix (he identifies as T198) as **ne** is a consistent underspelling of *unen*, based on Marc Zender’s (1999) observation that duplication is commonly omitted (Martin 2002:62). However, it remains a possibility that the common GII prefix actually indicates a duplication of **ne**.

Yet another example of the name of GII from Comalcalco (Zender et al. 2000) shows the only known example of GII with a singular T120 **ne** without the AA1 affix (Martin 2002:62). Curiously, this is also the only known example in which the entire name glyph of GII is also clearly prefixed above by HE6 **u-** (Fig. 10). Could this indicate that the similarly shaped AA1 affix, here absent, carries the value of **u-** in *unen* or *une*? If so, this would not fully explain the presence of the AA1 affix in other examples where it appears in combination with T120, though it remains a compelling possibility.

If the presence of AA1 **ka** represents a rare variant for duplication in the GII examples, where else might this occur? Further investigation is required to determine if there are any other examples of AA1 as duplication.

An examination of the remaining examples of the proposed combination of AA1 with T120 may indicate that they are to be read as **ne-ne**, though even the clearest examples suggest that this may either be redundant information, or that they may simply read as **ne**. Part of the name of the seventh ruler of Copán reads *B’alam Nehn* (Fig. 11), which appears with various forms of **na**, such as 1G1 (T23), following the proposed AA1/T120 combination.¹¹ Here, the may indicate the *Vh* in **nehn**, not otherwise indicated in a simple repetition.

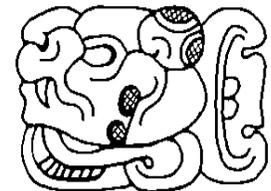


Figure 11. B’ahlam Nen. After Martin (Martin and Grube 2000).

¹¹ See Martin and Grube (2000:197) and Schele (1992:162).

Another curious example, from Dos Pilas Hieroglyphic Stairway 4, Step 1, has a rare full mirror form of 33B (T69), followed by a clearly distinct combination of AA1/T120 (Fig. 12), within a compound that begins with **ox-a**. Linda Schele proposed that this is a substitution for **ox-a-he-la**, as in Peidras Negras Lintel 12 (Schele 1992:162). However, in this instance, the final **ne** or **nen**, in combination with **he**, may refer to the pronunciation of the 1M2 mirror depicted as **nehn** ‘mirror’.



Figure 12. DPL HS Step 4. After Houston (1993).

One interesting example of a substitution of the singular T120 with the AA1/T120 compound occurs in Glyph Y on Yaxchilan Stela 11. On the southeast side of this stela, the singular T120 appears with Glyph Y, while on the northwest side, Glyph Y appears with the combined AA1/T120 as a suffix. While this may be evidence for the equivalence of these graphemes, it appears that Glyph Y itself reveals an internal reading of **ne-ne**, and the AA1/T120 compound may simply reinforce this reading (Grofe 2006).

Conclusion

Almost all known examples of GII include a prefix that contains **ne** T120, clearly prefixed by AA1. This rare compound glyph can be seen in other limited contexts in which it also appears in association with *nen* or *nehn*, with both an initial *ne-* and a final *-n*. A value of **nen** or **nehn** thus supports the interpretation of the name of GII as either or both *Nehn K'awil* and *Unen K'awil*. Martin proposes that the GII prefix represents a consistent underspelling of *unen*, though this specific compound may represent a more complete spelling of this word. I have proposed several possibilities concerning the meaning of the AA1 affix in combination with the standard T120, and apart from underspelling, it appears that only the function of duplication would transform a single phonetic **ne** into **ne-n(e)**. Further data is required to determine the productivity of this reading.

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