



Glyph Dwellers

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Two Maya Inscribed Limpet Pendants

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Over the years, several limpet shells inscribed with Maya hieroglyphic texts have come to light. In this report, we discuss two of these, located in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and in a private collection.

Limpet pendant, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (2015.479)

The inscribed limpet in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) is highly fragmentary (**Figs. 1-4**). Only the remains of nine glyph blocks survive, incised onto the shell's perimeter. Based on a comparison with an incised limpet shell in the Houston Museum of Natural Science (HMNS, Loan 48.1997.02; also known as the "Taylor Limpet") to which this work is closely related, the MFAH shell was probably perforated on one side of its long axis and worn as a pendant. The surviving glyphic texts are located on the diagonal axes and are designed to be read from a single vantage point. In contrast, the HMNS limpet inscription is arranged symmetrically on the long and short axes of the shell and is oriented so that it can be read around the shell's circumference, similar to many Maya painted ceramic plates.



Fig. 1. Inscribed limpet shell, 5 x 6 ½ x 1 7/8 in. (12.7 x 16.5 x 4.8 cm). The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of the Harry K. Wright Collection, 2015.479.



Fig. 2. Inscribed limpet shell, detail. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of the Harry K. Wright Collection, 2015.479.



Fig. 3. Inscribed limpet shell, detail. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of the Harry K. Wright Collection, 2015.479.

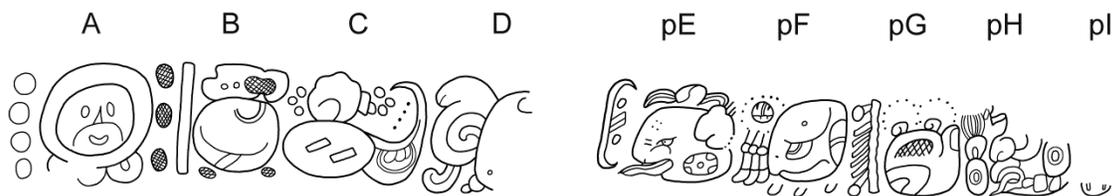


Fig. 4. Limpet shell. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of the Harry K. Wright Collection, 2015.479. Drawing of the inscription by Matthew Looper and Yuriy Polyukhovych.

The inscription begins with the Calendar Round date recorded on the upper edge of the shell: 4 Ajaw 8 Kumk'u. This CR is well known to Mayanists, corresponding to the base date of the Long Count calendar, the so called "creation" date of 11 or 13 August 3114 BCE, when various gods were believed to have established cosmic thrones or platforms associated with sacred locations (see Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993:65–67; Looper 1995). However, the event recorded on the limpet shell does not correspond to any of the verbal phrases previously known to have been associated with this date. It is *t'ohxaj*, a verb otherwise known only from several inscribed shell pendants from Comalcalco (Armijo Torres, Gallegos Gómora, and Zender 2000:323, fig. 6; Zender 2004:254, figs. 74, 76, 77). On the Comalcalco pendants, the verb is associated with historical dates and is followed by the name of an historical individual who is acting *yichnal* "in front of" a god. On the MFAH limpet, the glyph that follows *t'ohxaj* is possibly *yichnal* as well, but it is quite damaged.



There are two difficult issues to resolve relating to this part of the text. First is the placement of the date in the long count, and second is the interpretation of the verb. While the CR 4 Ajaw 8 Kumk'u is usually associated with 13.0.0.0.0 in Maya texts, there is no firm evidence that this is the correct placement of the date on the HMNS limpet. An alternative is that it refers to some other historical or even legendary date, similar to the Chancala-area panel in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.2010.115.112), which may represent the historical date 10.0.6.16.0 4 Ajaw 8 Kumk'u (Stuart 2011; cf. Tokovinine 2012:72). The interpretation of *t'ohxaj* is also difficult. This is the passive form of the verb *t'ox*, meaning "to split," in various lowland Mayan languages (see Kaufman 2003:853). While Zender (2004:260) suggests that this term refers to bloodletting in the context of the Comalcalco pendants, the MFAH limpet provides no confirmation for this idea.

Because the remainder of the phrase, which probably recorded the agent, is missing, we are able to pick up the narrative once again on what was once the lower left glyphic sequence. Here we see the verbal phrase *ubaahil a'n*, which often introduces statements of deity impersonation in Maya texts (see Houston and Stuart 1996). In this case, the deity represented is Itzamna (Itzam Kokaaj), named here in typical fashion with the deity portrait followed by a *ji* complement. Next, the following blocks would have recorded the name of the person who performed as this deity, though it only partly survives: **AJ to-k'a ti-TI'**. Interestingly, the same individual is likely named on the HMNS limpet, where his full name is written Aj Took'aaj Ti' ? Ho' (Fig. 5). On the HMNS limpet, this person is said to be a two-k'atun lord, and he is also stated to be a deity impersonator, in this case, of a wind god (*ik' k'uh*). Although this individual is not known from other inscriptions, it is likely that the HMNS and MFAH limpets are companions. Because the CR date recorded on the HMNS limpet can be reconstructed as 9.18.3.7.12 (794 CE), we can suggest an approximate date for the MFAH limpet at around the same time. It is interesting as well that these two shells ended up in adjacent museums in Houston, Texas.



Fig. 5. Inscribed limpet shell. detail. Houston Museum of Natural Science, Loan 48.1997.02. Drawing by Matthew Looper and Yuriy Polyukhovych.

Table 1. Transcription and translation of inscribed limpet shell. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of the Harry K. Wright Collection, 2015.479.

A	4 AJAW	4 Ajaw	4 Ajaw
B	8 BIX-OHL-la	waxak Bixohl	8 Kumk'u
C	t'o-xa-ja	t'ohxaj	is split/divided?
D	yi-chi?-NAL?	yichnal?	in front of?
pE	u-BAAH-hi A'N	ubaahil a'n	it is a representation of



pF	ITZAM KOK/KOKAAJ-ji	Itzam Kokaaj	Itzam Kokaaj [deity]
pG	AJ to-k'a	Aj Took'aaj	Aj Took'aaj
pH	ti-TI'-_	Ti' _	Ti' _
pl	_	_	_

Inscribed limpet pendant, Private collection

Another inscribed limpet shell recently came to light in a private collection, after photos of it appeared on ArtTrak Tribal Art newsletter in March 2016. We were able to view this object in person and present photographs and a drawing of its text (**Figs. 6, 7**). This piece is clearly a pendant, with two holes for suspension on one long side. It features a continuous framed Late Classic-style inscription around its perimeter, probably originally consisting of 13 blocks, most of which survive in good condition. The text begins with a CR date of 13 K'an/Ajaw 8 Keh. The day name in the 260-day cycle is here written with a portrait head with features similar to the Maize God (normally the day K'an); however, based on the coefficient of 8 for the haab, this could also be a peculiar rendering of Ajaw. Various possible LC positions are possible for this CR, such as the tun-ending 9.18.6.0.0 (796 CE); however, considering the overall content of the text, we think that this is likely to be a mythical date.



Fig. 6. Inscribed limpet shell, private collection. Photograph by Yuriy Polyukhovych, 2016.

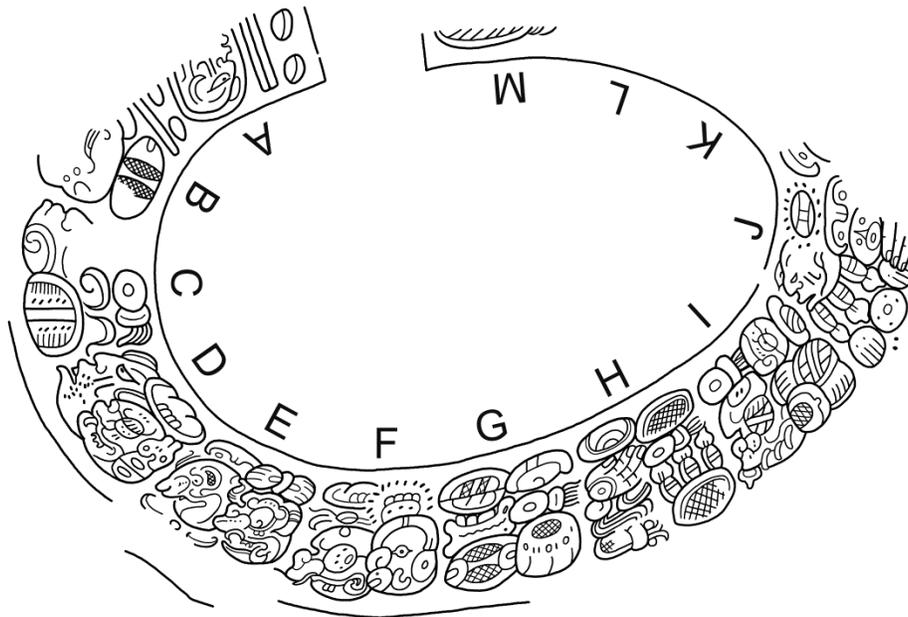


Fig. 7. Inscribed limpet shell, private collection. Drawing by Matthew Looper and Yuriy Polyukhovych, 2016.

The event, written at position C, consists of an unidentified verb with an infixed **yi**, which gives the mediopassive suffix. The outline of the main sign of this verb is reminiscent of the *k'in*-infixed head read as **PUL** "burn;" however, it is too eroded to be sure. What follows is the prepositional phrase *ti k'ahk'* "with fire." The subject appears next in block D, consisting of a probable female head followed by **na** and **HIX**. Although the critical diagnostics that allow us to identify the human portrait head in this block as **IX** "lady" are difficult to discern, the lines of tiny dots that emanate from the mouth are reminiscent of the dotted designs that adorn the face of Lady Xok on Yaxchilan Lintels 24 and 26. Alternatively, this head could be the Maize God, in which case, it likely reads **JUUN**, with a **na** complement. This person, Lady Nah? Hix, is unknown from other inscriptions. The next block, E, introduces an agency expression with *ukabijiyi*, followed by the name of an unknown god: *maach naah k'uh* (Maach Naah god). Rulers are said to have performed rituals under the authority of a god in other inscriptions, as on several monuments from Copan, Palenque Temple XIV tablet (F3), and Caracol Stela 3 (C5).

The next block, G, contains another verbal phrase: *i chokoy ti ha'*. The verb *chokoy* "got scattered" is well known from Maya inscriptions as a period-ending event. In the calendrical context, it refers to the scattering of incense. On the limpet, its appearance lends support to the interpretation of the initial CR as a period ending date, though again, it could be mythical. In this case, it is followed by the prepositional phrase *ti ha'* "into the water."

The next block, H, begins with another verb *k'alwaan*, interpreted by Stuart as a ceremonial binding (Stuart 1996). In the inscriptions, this event mainly refers to the dedication of monuments as well as the inauguration of rulers. This expression often precedes a possessed object (e.g. Yaxchilan Lintel 23, A2) or an office, introduced with a preposition (e.g. Palenque Temple of the Sun, Q3). On the limpet, we see **tu** beneath *k'alwaan*. This is likely a preposition combined with the third person ergative pronoun,

meaning "on his/its." Next is **pa-ti** or *paat*, which means "back, end." Next, below *paat*, is a grapheme consisting of three celt-like forms capped with leaves, emerging from another syllable **pa**. The "sprouting celt" grapheme could correspond to the upper portion of the grapheme interpreted tentatively by Stuart (2005:180) as possibly **AK** or **AKAN** "grass." It can be compared formally with examples from Rio Azul Tomb 6 Mural east (A1), Palenque Temple XIX stone pier (Q2), and Palenque Temple XXI bench (G10). Beneath **AK/AKAN** is the syllable **pa**, which we believe to be combined with the following **ti** to form the word *paat*. Since this is followed by **AHIIN** "crocodile," it seems reasonable that the entire sentence includes an abbreviated diaphrase *tupaat ak/akan(?)*, *tupaat ahiin*, "on the back of the grass(?), on the back of the crocodile." This phrase immediately calls to mind the inscription of Palenque Temple XIX platform, which may refer to the mythical sacrifice of the "painted back," "hole-back" Starry Deer Crocodile (see Stuart 2005:68–76). It is possible that the limpet could somehow relate to the event described at Palenque.

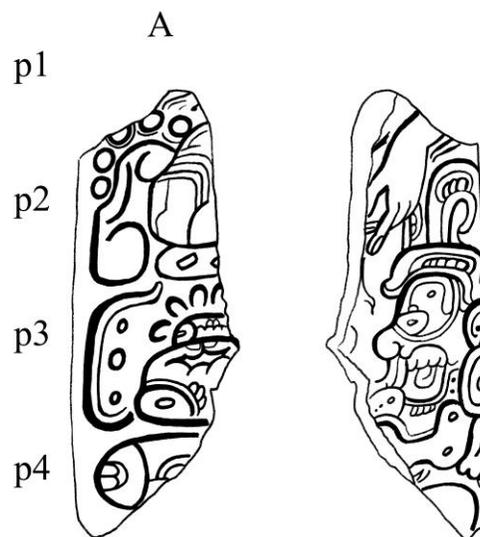


Fig. 8. Inscribed shell, Palenque. Drawing by Yuriy Polyukhovych.

The next verbal phrase begins with **hu-li** (*huli*) and then an eyeball infixed into the "sky elbow" **K'ABA'**. We suggest that the eyeball here is a replacement for the God C face embraced by the "elbow" in the full form of **K'ABA'**. Eyeball motifs very similar to the one appearing here function as the main element of **K'UH** logograms in several instances, such as Tikal Temple IV Lintel 3, F6 and codex style ceramics (K1004, K1728). *Huli* must be the verb "arrive (here)," and *k'aba'* is "name," which must be the subject of the sentence.

The following block, J, begins with a Maize God or female head (**IXIIM/JUUN** or **IX**), and again we have a possible **AK** logogram below it. The combination of the head plus "grass" may be a toponym, referring to the location where the "name" arrived. Below this is **bi** and possibly **xi** (the same grapheme that appears on Tortuguero Monument 6, H11), with a possible "doubler" beneath it. If this is the case, then we may have *bixix* or *xixib*. If it is *bixix*, then this could be the verb *bix* "depart" plus a mediopassive suffix. An analogous situation pertains to the shell from Palenque Group B Structure 1, which features a Dedicatory Formula that includes the "Step" dedication verb **T'AB(?)** with a suffix **-xa** (**Fig. 8**;



Polyukhovych 2012). On the limpet shell, *bixix* would make some sense, considering that in the previous block we have the "arrival" of a name. This would constitute a diaphrase of contrasting elements.

The other half of block J begins with **mo-po** or **po-mo**, which should be the subject of the sentence. Next is yet another verb, *uch'am/uk'am*, "he/she takes (it)." After this, at block K we can just make out the remains of the bracket **u-**, which likely provides the possessive pronoun that would normally precede the object that is taken. Next, the missing block L would have given the name of the person who took the object. The final glyph block, M, is almost completely gone. Only the remains of the syllable **ka** survive.

In conclusion, this inscription is difficult to interpret. It probably refers to a sequence of at least five ritual events. The first of these is a fire ritual involving Lady Nah? Hix under the authority of the deity Maach Naah. Next is a scattering into a body of water, followed by a dedication or accession "on the back of the grass(?), on the back of the crocodile," the arrival of a name, possibly a departure, and then lastly the taking of some object. Like the other limpet shell discussed above, it is likely that this piece dates from the very end of the Classic period, though its precise date is not known. Likewise, the geographical origin of this piece is uncertain, as no toponyms, toponymic titles, or referenced individuals who are known from other texts appear on the shell.

Table 2. Inscription from limpet shell, private collection. Photographs by Yuriy Polyukhovych, 2016.



A	13 OHL/ AJAW	uxlajuun Ohl/Ajaw	13 K'an/Ajaw
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B	8 CHAK- SIHO'M	waxak Chaksiho'm	8 Keh
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C **_-yi ti K'AHK'** **_ ti k'ahk'** **_ with fire**



D **IX? na HIX** **Ix? Nah? Hix** **Lady? Nah? Hix**
[personal name]



E **u-KAB-ji-ya** **ukabijiiy** **under the**
ma-chi **Maach** **authority of**
 Maach



F	na-hi K'UH	Naah k'uh	Naah god
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G	i-cho-ko-yi ti HA'	i chokoy ti ha'	and then it got scattered into the water
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H	K'AL-wa-ni tu-pa-ti AK/AKAN? pa-	k'alwaan tupaat ak/akan? tupaat	dedicates? it on the back of the grass?, on the back of
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I	-ti AHIIIN hu-li K'ABA'	tupaat ahiin huli k'aba'	on the back of the crocodile. The name arrived
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J	IX/IXIIM/ JUUN AK/AKAN? bi- xi-xi? po-mo u-CH'AM/ K'AM- _	? bixix? pom? uch'amaw	? [toponym] departs? ?. He/she takes
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K	u- _	u- _	his/her _
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L	_	_	_
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M _-ka- _ _ _

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