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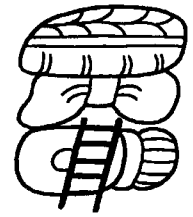
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# Glyph Dwellers



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## *A New Interpretation of the Ball Compound*

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Epigraphers have long been aware of a glyphic compound that appears frequently and prominently on images of rubber balls in Classic Maya ceramic painting and relief sculpture. The sequence consists of a number, usually 9, followed by a combination of two signs, usually T23 **na** and T501 **b'a**. In some instances, especially at Yaxchilán and in the Site Q panels, other numbers are prefixed, including 12, 13, and 14 (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Site Q Panel (after Schele and Miller 1986:pl.101a).

It seems clear that the non-numerical part of the compound is **na** + **b'a**. However, researchers have been unable to successfully interpret the compound as a whole, and specifically its relationship to the ballgame context. Usually, scholars have suspected that the glyphic meaning has something to do with water or water lilies, based on words in contemporary Yukatekan and Ch'olan languages:

Yukatek	<i>naab</i>	<i>Nymphacea ampla</i> ; común en lagos y aguadas: una planta grande con hojas flotantes y blancas flores de bello aspecto (Barrera Vásquez 1980:546)
Itzaj	<i>naab'</i>	lotus, water lily (Hofling and Tesucún 1997:468)
pCholan	<i>*nahb'</i>	sea (Kaufman and Norman 1984:126)
Ch'olti'	<i>cahnab</i>	mar (Moran 1935:46)

The numerical portion of the compound is usually interpreted as relating in some way to the scoring of the ballgame, or to the number of captives “at stake” in the game (Schele and Miller 1986:252, 254). Based on unorthodox readings of graphemes, Cohodas (1991:261-263) proposed that the non-numerical portion of the compound reads *chaan* ‘sky’ and suggested that the entire compound relates to God L.

In contrast, we favor returning to the dictionaries to find other interpretations of **na** + **b'a**. In fact, several languages provide glosses that refer to measurement:

Yukatek	<i>náab'</i>	handspan (Bricker et al. 1998:192)
Itzaj	<i>naab'</i>	handbreadths (Hofling and Tesucún 1997:468)
Mopan	<i>naab</i>	cuarta [handspan] (Ulrich and Ulrich 1976:136)
Ch'ol	<i>ñajb</i>	sufijo numeral para contar cuartas de la mano [handspans] (Aulie and Aulie 1998:283)

This second set of entries seems to fit the context of the ball compound, since the **na** + **b'a** compound is always preceded by a number. The **na** and **b'a** elements of the compound clearly function as a numeral classifier.

This interpretation is supported by a substitution in the ball compound, in which T23 may be replaced by a sign not catalogued in Thompson (1962), that depicts a right hand with spread fingers. This particular combination appears on Yaxchilán Hieroglyphic Stairway 02, Panels 10 and 13 (Freidel, Schele and Parker 1993:fig. 8:13), and in ceramic paintings, such as Kerr 1551 (Schele and Miller 1986:pl. 95), Kerr 2912, and Kerr 5206 (fig. 2a). A variant of this compound occurs on Kerr 4684 (fig. 2b). Here the hand is in a different position, and is followed by T585, **b'i**. On K1383 *náab'*/*nahb'* occurs twice in the rim text, once as a numeral classifier (fig. 3a) and once in a personal name (fig. 3b). It seems clear that the form of this grapheme relates specifically to the meaning of *náab'*/*nahb'* as ‘handspan’.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

The ballgame context suggests two likely interpretations for this compound. One is that the sign refers to the number of slaps or blows of the hand allowed in the course of a ballgame. Another is that the glyph records a standard of measurement used during the ballgame. Perhaps the ball had to be struck at least this distance from the player in order to be scored, or winning balls may have been named for the distance from which they were hit. Nine handspans would measure nearly 2 meters; 14 handspans would be nearly 3 meters.

While we remain uncertain of the exact manner in which the ball compound relates to scoring, a strong case can be made that the compound records a number followed by the numeral classifier *náab'nahb'*. This phrase almost certainly refers to some aspect of how the ballgame was played.

NOTE: All pottery images are after the *Maya Vase Database: An Archive of Rollout Photographs Created by Justin Kerr*, available on line at: <http://www.mayavase.com/>

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