



Glyph Dwellers

Report 86

August 2023

Drawings of the Maya Incised Shell Plaques at the Yale University Art Gallery

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In addition to other important inscribed Maya objects, the Yale University Art Gallery collection includes a set of ten glyphic shell plaques, designated with the accession numbers 1973.88.34a-j. While the plaques have been known to scholars for decades, and some drawings have been published, the recent uploading of high-quality photographs to the museum website makes it possible to produce a new set of drawings, presented here. These were checked against additional photos taken by the author at the museum in Spring 2023. Each plaque contains at least one glyph block (or partial block), while three of the plaques (G, H, J) contain two blocks each, resulting in a total of thirteen glyph blocks. The plaques containing two blocks are arranged vertically, suggesting that at least part of the original text(s) to which these plaques pertained were arranged in single columns. The content of the glyph blocks is highly fragmentary, suggesting that the original text(s) were longer. Further, George Kubler asserted that many or all of them have had their edges recently cut (Kubler 1986: 142). This makes it impossible to fit the plaques together, as has been done successfully with mosaic stone sculpture at Copan, for example (Fash 1992; Fash 2011). A microscopic study of the surfaces of the plaques would likely help in understanding the history of their modifications (see Velázquez Castro 2012).

An analog for the original configuration of the plaques may possibly be seen in the incised Shell Plaques 1 and 2 from Piedras Negras Str. O-13 Burial 13 (**Fig. 1**). They are distinct in format from other examples of incised plaques, such as the plaques found in Cancuen Burial 77 (Barrientos Quezada 2014:498, 748, fig. 9.154, 9.155, 11.68), Piedras Negras Burial 13 Shells 3-6 (Houston et al. 1998:fig. 3), or the plaques in the Miho Museum (Miho Museum 2004:102–103, 198), which have shaped outlines (**Fig. 2**). All of the Yale

plaques seem to be Late Classic in date, based on paleography (see below), as well as a highly calligraphic style that preserves the variability in line-width and whiplash flourishes of brush painting (cf. Kubler 1986: 143).

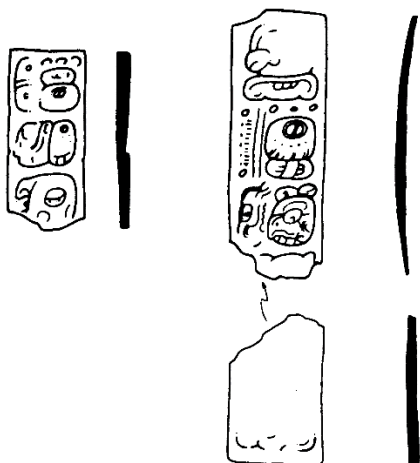


Fig. 1. Glyphic shell plaques with vertically arranged blocks, Piedras Negras Burial 13. (Houston et al. 1998:fig. 3).



Fig. 2. Glyphic shell plaques with shaped outlines, Miho Museum, Kerr 7970. Photograph by Justin Kerr.

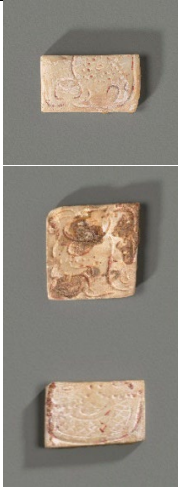




The physical characteristics of the plaques are described in various publications and on the museum website (Anonymous 1974:78; Kubler 1986:142–143, 304, no. 311, fig. 159). The largest (H) is 4.1 cm high and 3.2 cm wide, while the smallest (B) is 1.2 cm high and 2 cm wide. It is interesting to note that the plaques fall into two groups by width. One set of four plaques (C, D, H, I) measures between 3.2-3.35 cm in width, while the other six plaques (A, B, E, F, G, J) are between 1.95 and 2.1 cm wide. Further, within the "narrow" set, all complete blocks are roughly square in proportion, suggesting that these plaques pertained to texts with a similar appearance. However, details among the plaques within the "narrow" set suggest that more than one artist was involved in their production. For example, several plaques in this set have drilled "dots" (B, E, F), while the other three plaques—along with all of those in the "wide" set—have linear gouges for the "dots" (A, G, J). This, along with other irregularities in glyphic forms suggest that the "narrow" plaques originally pertained to at least two different texts, though plaques G and J are similar enough to suggest these were created by the same artist (possibly a single text cut down into the present two plaques).

In contrast to the "narrow" set, the proportions of the "wide" set are considerably wider than high and are more proportionally variable. The height:width block proportions of Plaque H are about 1:1.5, while the Plaque D block measures about 1:1.75. Plaques C and I are similar to each other, with block proportions of about 1:2.5. This variability could suggest that this set pertains to at least three separate original texts, assuming that the artists employed consistent block proportions within a single text. In sum, the surviving blocks on these plaques represent fragments of texts likely arranged in vertical columns and created by at least two different artists, possibly originally pertaining to five or more texts (**Table 1**). In



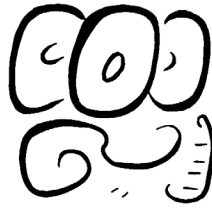
the rest of this report, I discuss the content of each plaque text in order by their accession number, as there is no way of placing them in any proper reading order.

Table 1. Typology of plaques based on block width, proportion, and artistic style. Photos approximately to scale. Shell fragments with Mayan glyphs, A.D. 600-900. Yale University Art Gallery 1973.88.34a-j. Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, Fund.

Narrow Blocks		Wide Blocks		
Drilled dots (B, E, F)	Gouged dots (A, G, J)	<i>h:w ~ 1:2.5 (C, I)</i>	<i>h:w ~ 1:1.75 (D)</i>	<i>h:w ~ 1:1.5 (H)</i>
				

**Plaque A: Parentage expression**

Shell fragment with Mayan glyphs, A.D. 600-900. Yale University Art Gallery 1973.88.34a. Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, Fund.

yu-ne²

yunen

his child

Plaque A comprises a well-known possessed noun that usually serves as an expression of parentage between a child and their father. Because the plaque is out of context, it cannot be determined which two persons were related through the term, though in the original text, there likely would have been personal names/titles both before and after this block. The block shows two syllabograms **yu** and **ne** with a small "doubler" sign, indicating that the **ne** sign is meant to be read twice. The resulting term *yunen*, is spelled with the same two graphemes, but without the doubler sign, in various texts starting in the Early Classic and continuing through the Late Classic. Examples include: K1216, K3409, La Naya Stela 1 (Bowers Museum of Cultural Art 81.80.1), Nim Li Punit Stela 7, and Tikal Miscellaneous Text 4.

Plaque B: Logogram, possibly part of a personal name

Shell fragment with Mayan glyphs, A.D. 600-900. Yale University Art Gallery 1973.88.34b. Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, Fund.



MO'

??

??
[part of
personal
name?]

Plaque B consists of a single grapheme, though the top part of the sign is missing. It represents a macaw head which functions in various texts as either logographic **MO'** or syllabic **mo**. Because it occupies the entire block, it is most likely that this example is the logogram. This grapheme is extremely common in the script during the Classic period, attested in hundreds of examples, though often conflated with another grapheme, such as **BALAM** or **K'UK'**. While the identification of the grapheme depicted on Plaque B is clear, its meaning is not, given that "mo'" was used commonly to form a range of personal names. It is likely that it had this function in the original text (Kubler 1986: 142). An unusual feature of the **MO'** from Plaque B is the ear-like motif on the right side, rendered as five arcs. A similar ear-like motif appears on the same grapheme shown on "Brussels Panel" A1 (**Fig. 3**).

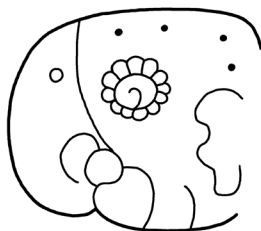

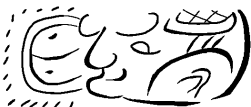


Fig. 3. **MO'** from Brussels Panel A1. Drawing by Matthew Looper.

Plaque C: Dedication verb

		<p>T'AB?-yi</p>	<p>t'abaay?</p>	<p>ascends?</p>
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Shell fragment with Mayan glyphs, A.D. 600-900. Yale University Art Gallery 1973.88.34c. Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, Fund.

Plaque C consist of a vertically compressed glyph block containing two graphemes. The main sign (PA3) represents an aged deity head with net headdress combined with a stylized footprint "prefix". This sign, probably read **T'AB**, frequently appears in dedication sequences for monuments and objects (Grube and Gaida 2006:64–65; Stuart 1998:409–417; Wagner 1995). Infixated into it is a **yi** syllabogram, indicating a mediopassive suffix. The particular form of PA3 with the "footprint" prefix is a Late Classic configuration formed by the merging of a simple aged head grapheme (**Fig. 4a**) with the footprint motif that originally appeared together with another form of **T'AB?**, depicting a stairway with an ascending footprint (**Fig. 4b**). The curve flanked by two dots that appears in the prefix on the plaque is reminiscent of Late Classic examples such as K5416 (**Fig. 4c**).

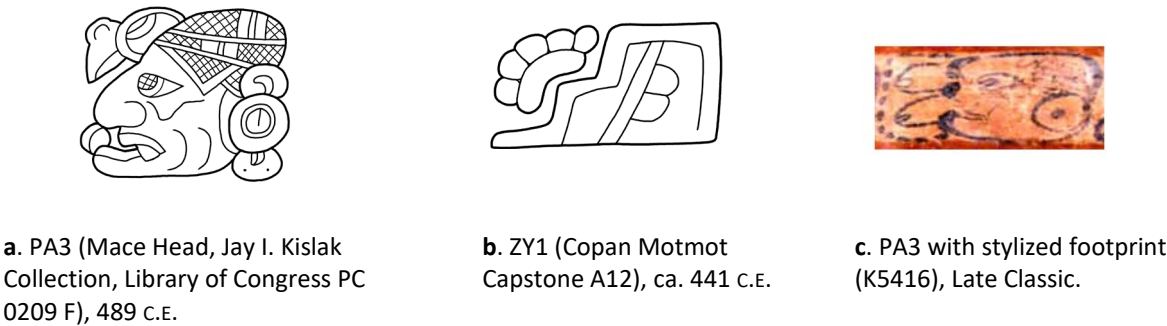


Fig. 4. Merging of 'footprint' element of ZY1 with PA3. **a, b.** Drawings by Matthew Looper; **c.** Rollout photo by Justin Kerr.

Although the broader context of this block is unclear, it was probably part of a longer dedication expression, preceded by an Initial Sign and followed by an object reference, and then the name and titles of the owner. Examples of this dedication verb also appear on other incised shells, such as K7970 Plaque 6 and Piedras Negras Incised Shell 6 from Burial 13 (see Houston et al. 1998:fig. 3).

Plaque D: Agentive title?

<p>Shell fragment with Mayan glyphs, A.D. 600-900. Yale University Art Gallery 1973.88.34d. Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, Fund.</p>		a-la-TAN?-na	aj? Latahn?	he of Latahn?
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Plaque D shows a combination of three well-known syllabograms (**a**, **la** and **na**) framing a main sign that might be T606 **TAN**. The first sign in the block, **a**, might represent an agentive *aj*, and if so, the entire block would be a title, possibly *aj latahn*, 'he of Latahn'. Latahn is otherwise unknown in the corpus of Maya inscriptions.

**Plaque E: Logogram**

Shell fragment with Mayan glyphs, A.D. 600-900. Yale University Art Gallery 1973.88.34e. Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, Fund.



TE'

??

??

Plaque E comprises a single glyph block, representing the logogram **TE'**. Literally 'wood' or 'tree', this term is used in numerous expressions, including personal and deity names, toponyms, and titles. Therefore, it is impossible to understand its specific meaning without additional context. The form of the grapheme appearing here is significant, in that it has a curled pupil (like K8393, K2220, K7268) instead of the usual "squinting" Sun God-like eye in most examples. Its ear is also replaced by a large jaguar paw with the claws facing backwards, as appear also on K4655, Palenque North Façade Slab, and Tortuguero Monument 8.

Plaque F: Syllabogram

Shell fragment with Mayan glyphs, A.D. 600-900. Yale University Art Gallery 1973.88.34f. Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, Fund.




ch'a

??

??

Plaque F comprises a single grapheme, the syllabogram **ch'a**. Like Plaque B, the upper part of the grapheme/block is missing. Like Plaque E, this would have been part of a larger term, now lost.


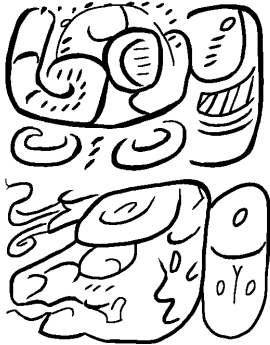
Plaque G: Deity name

		<p>K'INICH- chi</p>	<p>K'inich</p>	<p>K'inich</p>
<p>Shell fragment with Mayan glyphs, A.D. 600-900. Yale University Art Gallery 1973.88.34g. Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, Fund.</p>	<p>a-AJAW- ja-wa</p>	<p>a-AJAW- ja-wa</p>	<p>Ajaw</p>	<p>Ajaw</p>

Plaque G includes two glyph blocks, read in sequence as *k'inich ajaw*. This is likely a reference to the name of the Sun God, which sometimes appears in the longer form of Wuuk Chapaht Tz'iikin K'inich Ajaw (see Boot 2005:250–256; Houston and Stuart 1996:299; Stuart 2005:159; Taube 2003:410). While it the plaque could be a reference to the Sun God himself, it might also be an example of the name of the god invoked as a title for a human individual of exalted status.

The spelling of the first term, *k'inich*, appears on several texts including K533, K1896, K2873, K3844, Naj Tunich text 29, and Piedras Negras Stingray Spine D. The second term is an example of a redundant syllabic spelling. As far as I am aware, this is the only example of unpossessed *ajaw* spelled with a combination of the logogram and full syllabic spelling. There are several examples of possessed *ajaw* spelled **ya-AJAW-ja-wa**.



Plaque H: Personal Name

		<p>SIH-ya-ja</p>	<p>Sihyaj</p>	<p>Sihyaj</p>
<p>Shell fragment with Mayan glyphs, A.D. 600-900. Yale University Art Gallery 1973.88.34h. Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, Fund.</p>	<p>K'AWIL-la</p>	<p>K'awiil</p>	<p>K'awiil</p>	<p>K'awiil</p>

Plaque H is composed of two sequential blocks spelling out what is likely a personal name based on a deity name, Sihyaj K'awiil (see Houston and Stuart 1996:295–296, Fig. 4c). Persons with this name are mentioned on vase K1453, a Late Classic vase from the Motul de San Jose area (Just 2012:26–27, 171–174, cat. 6) and Naranjo Stela 22. On the Naranjo stela, Sihyaj K'awiil is stated to have been taken captive at K'an T'uhl ('Yellow Rabbit'), an unknown site, in 695, though his place of origin is unknown (Martin and Grube 2008:76). It is unclear if the plaque refers to one of these individuals, or to someone else. Because this phrase is out of context, another possibility is that it is a verbal phrase, stating the birth of the deity K'awiil, analogous to a Panel at Dumbarton Oaks (PC.B.145), which records the birth of a deity called Ajan K'awiil (Tokovinine 2012).



Plaque I: Agentive title

		<p>AJ-po-ko</p>	<p>aj Pok</p>	<p>he of ??</p>
<p>Shell fragment with Mayan glyphs, A.D. 600-900. Yale University Art Gallery 1973.88.34i. Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, Fund.</p>				

Plaque I shows a single glyph block composed of three graphemes. The first is **AJ**, which usually represents an agentive prefix 'he of'. Following this are two signs: **po** and **ko**. Together, these probably represent *pok*, possibly a reference to a place, though this locale is unknown elsewhere in the corpus. The representation of **ko** is unusual, with a larger circle and smaller short line in the center rather than the usual two darkened bars connecting the circles at either end. A transitional form, in which there are two (partly obscured) oval gouges instead of the darkened bars is found on Palenque Temple XVIII stucco 17 (**Fig. 5**).

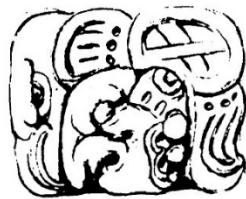




Fig. 5. Palenque Temple XVIII Stucco block 17. Drawing after Fernández and Berlin (1954:fig. 1).



Plaque J: Deity reference

		o-la-si	ohlis	heart-
<p>Shell fragment with Mayan glyphs, A.D. 600-900. Yale University Art Gallery 1973.88.34j. Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903, Fund.</p>		K'UH	k'uh	god

Plaque J consists of a sequence of two glyph blocks reading *ohlis k'uh*, 'heart-gods' (Stuart, Houston, and Robertson 1999:II-41). The first term is the root *ohl* 'heart' with an *-is* absolutive suffix associated with body parts (Zender 2004:200-204). In the Maya script, this sequence occurs as a reference to deities of diverse roles at various sites, such as Chancala, Chichen Itza, Comalcalco, Jaina, Palenque, and Yaxchilan (Boot 2005:326; Prager 2018:597-598).

In conclusion, the shell plaques at Yale seem to have been cut down from at least 5 larger plaques which were probably originally in a single-column format. The inscriptions of the plaques can be attributed to at least two artists. The original text content of the plaques cannot be reconstructed based on the surviving fragments, which consist of a parentage expression (Plaque A), isolated logograms (Plaques B, E), a dedication verb (Plaque C), agentive titles (Plaque D, I), a syllabogram (Plaque F), a deity name (Plaque G), a personal name (Plaque H), and a deity reference (Plaque J).

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Megan S. Doyon at Yale for providing access to the plaques as well as for sharing materials relating to them. I also thank Martha J. Macri, Yuriy Polyukhovych, and David Mora-Marín for helpful comments on the essay. I am very grateful to Justin Kerr for his kind permission to publish his rollout photographs of Maya vessels and still photographs of other objects.



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Glyph Dwellers is an occasional publication of the Maya Hieroglyphic Database Project at California State University, Chico, California. Its purpose is to make available recent discoveries about ancient Maya culture, history, iconography, and Mayan historical linguistics deriving from the project.

Funding for the Maya Hieroglyphic Database Project is provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, grants #RT21365-92, RT21608-94, PA22844-96, the National Science Foundation, grants #SBR9710961 and IBSS1328928, the Department of Native American Studies, University of California, Davis, and the Department of Art and Art History, California State University, Chico. Additional funding for this project was provided by a Franklin Research Grant from the American Philosophical Society.

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ISSN 1097-3737