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A Postclassic Cholula Plate Painted With a Classic Maya Glyph

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Research into the origins of the Late Postclassic International Style and pictographic communication system over the last three decades has demonstrated conclusively that it originated at Cholula around 900 CE according to a stratigraphic sequence for the polychrome ceramics in which the style was executed (Lind 1994; McCafferty 1994; Plunket Nagoda and Uruñuela Ladrón de Guevara 2018; Pohl 2003; Rojas Martínez Gracida and Hernández Sánchez 2016). Recognizing the striking similarities in the use of slip paint as well as the representational imagery and associated system of standardized pictographic signs, John Paddock first proposed that this highland Mexican Postclassic horizon style actually had its roots in the production of the Classic Maya polychrome of the central Peten (Lind 1994:98). Indeed, early Cholula Aquiahuac polychrome dating to 900–1150 CE displays a number of Maya traits. For example, Ocotlan Red Rim ceramics that emulate Classic Maya “codex style” vases are notable with their refined black line-work applied over white slip and a distinctive red-banded rim (Lind 1994:82; McCafferty 2001:64–70; Robicsek 1983). Some floral and geometric designs even emulate the symbolism of Classic Maya skybands (Stuart et al. 2017).¹

Iconographic studies of early Cholula polychrome have led to the identification of specific religious and ritual themes that link it to the Classic Maya (Coltman 2020; Pohl 2003, 2020, 2021; Rojas Martínez Gracida and Hernández Sanchez 2016). A predominant image appearing on Tecama period polychrome plates and cajetes is a portrait head. The personage has

monkey-like features with a bulbous forehead, crested hair, and ribbon-like designs curving up over the lips and around the eyes, together with an elaborate song scroll that emerges from the mouth. The imagery is diagnostic of both the Maya God M and God N, patrons of merchants, emissaries, scribes, singers, musicians, and buffoonish performers (Coltman 2020; Pohl 2003, 2021; Rojas Martínez Gracida 2008; Taube 1989:360–367, 1992:88–99; Tokovinine and Beliaev 2013:191–193).² A white hand appearing over the mouth and the yellow band across the face of some examples

¹ David Stuart identified a “Maya skyband” composed of the Nahuatl *ilhuitl* or “festival day” sign and the Maya *k’in* or “day, sun” sign appearing with the representation of a courtly painter in Codex Telleriano Remensis Folio 30r (Stuart et al. 2017; see Pohl 2004:382 for discussion). Linear bands of signs of this kind constituted an international system of ideographs that extend back to the Middle Preclassic.

² Representations of scribes on Maya polychromes display attributes associated with God N. An invocation to God N with his name glyph appears in the Primary Standard Sequence–Dedicatory Formula (Coe and Van Stone 2001:99–100). The merchant-ambassador God M presents himself to his associate who is dressed as God N, a Pa’ clown, on Chama vase K593, suggesting that the gods or their impersonators engaged in shared ritualism (Pohl 2021; Taube 1989:367). The God M clown-merchant association continues into the Late Postclassic through Ek Chuah and Yacatecuhtli. The connections between monkeys, clowns, painters, and scribes is equally notable in Early Postclassic Cholula Tecama polychrome, indicating that it is more than the medium that continues into the Postclassic but the associated performances as well. It continues in the dances of the Viejos and the Negritos of contemporary Indigenous performances across Mesoamerica.



Figure 1. Polychrome dish with a glyph-like decoration of a combination of a hand and a face. Princeton University Art Museum, y1967-147. Height 6.7 cm., diameter 28.3 cm. (2 5/8 x 11 1/8 in.). Gift of Thomas C. Roberts, Class of 1921, Mrs. Roberts, and Gillett G. Griffin. Photo: Jeff Evans, Princeton University Art Museum.

anticipates the iconography of the Postclassic Nahua deity Macuilxochitl (Pohl 2020; Spranz 1974:96-108, 379-398). Macuilxochitl was an avatar of Xochipilli, the Postclassic manifestation of the Classic Maya Maize God or Young Lord, whose cult was celebrated at the Great Pyramid at Cholula (Pohl 2020; Taube 1985). Macuilxochitl was also one of the five Macuiltonalequeh, the patrons of sorcerers, diviners, and healers whose cult originated with the Classic Maya god Ahkan or God A' (Coltman 2020; Grube 2004; Pohl 2020; Taube 1994:11-17).³

The Princeton Plate

A plate or dish preserved in the Princeton University Art Museum suggests that the development of Cholula's Tecama iconographic complex lies in the earlier Aquiahuac phase (Figure 1). The plate has a bowl-like shape and was constructed of a thick, coarse granular, low-fire, gray to brown clay, 28.3 cms in diameter. A central image is painted on the interior in black, dark gray, red, yellow, and white slip. Designed in the manner of the compounded signs characteristic of Maya hieroglyphic writing, the image is composed of a hand within which a human face appears. The face has the elongated shape of the Classic Maya Young Lord-Maize God emulating the head glyph with which

the god is named in Classic Maya texts (Zender 2014). The identification is further confirmed by the appearance of the distinctive hair lock on the forehead and breath beads emanating from the nose (Figure 2).

Comparing the composition and style to Classic Maya plates that feature the head of the Young Lord-Maize God has led the Princeton University Art Museum to identify the object as originating in the lowland Peten-Campeche region dating to 600-900 CE. However, the Princeton Plate has always been a conundrum. The relative lack of sophistication in the construction of the vessel, its weight, together with the robust line-work and exaggerated features of the glyph's construction when compared to the refinement of Classic Maya artisanship, has caused many scholars to question its attribution. On the other hand, comparisons to highland Mexican traditions do suggest direct stylistic antecedents. An early Classic mural depicts a Maya Young Lord-Maize God in Teotihuacan style (see Taube 2017 for discussion of comparable iconography) (Figure 3a). The representation is typical with its diminutive body and enlarged head with an upturned Maya-style eye. It is notable how much it anticipates the design of human representations in the Late Postclassic International Style that would later evolve at Cholula, indicating a familiarity with both Classic-period highland Mexican and Lowland Maya conventions

³ The shared identity between Xochipilli and Macuilxochitl suggests some aspect of the positive and negative components of a single concept. Taube has proposed that Ahkan represents essentially the dark side of the Young Lord-Maize God with the two representing anthropomorphic aspects of a maize agricultural cycle from planting as the re-birth of the Maize God to harvesting as the aspects of death and decay connected with Ahkan (Taube, personal communication 2023).

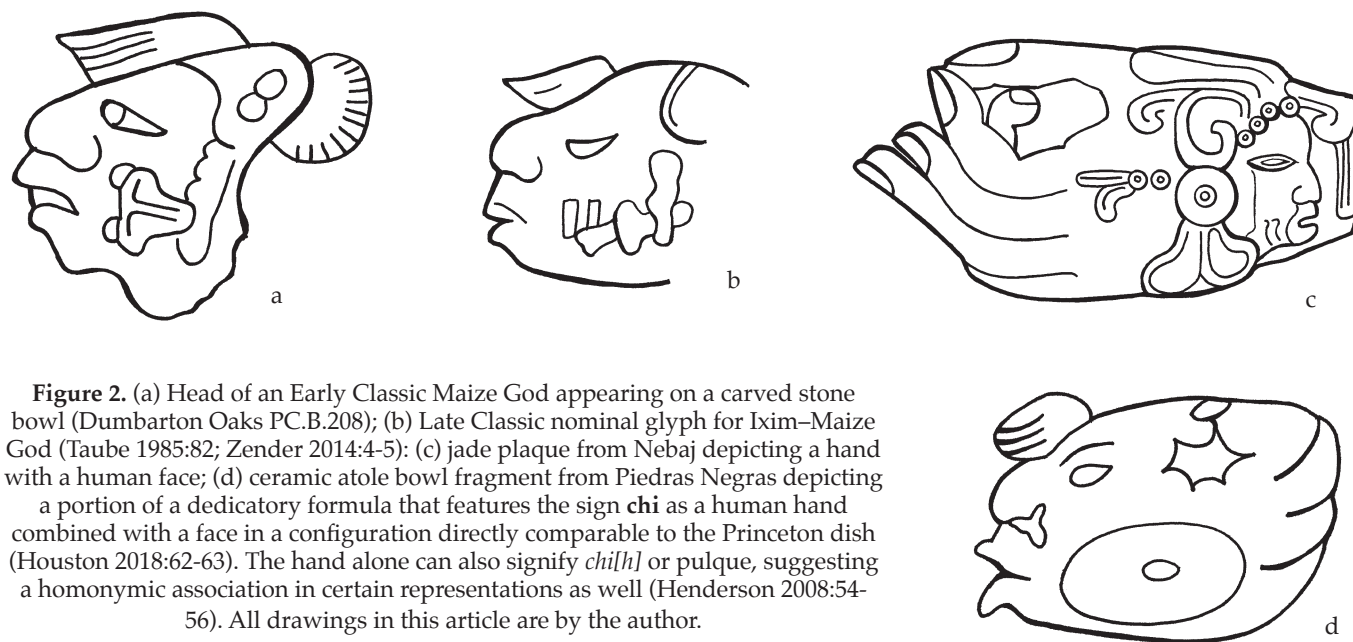


Figure 2. (a) Head of an Early Classic Maize God appearing on a carved stone bowl (Dumbarton Oaks PC.B.208); (b) Late Classic nominal glyph for Ixim-Maize God (Taube 1985:82; Zender 2014:4-5); (c) jade plaque from Nebaj depicting a hand with a human face; (d) ceramic atole bowl fragment from Piedras Negras depicting a portion of a dedicatory formula that features the sign *chi* as a human hand combined with a face in a configuration directly comparable to the Princeton dish (Houston 2018:62-63). The hand alone can also signify *chi[h]* or pulque, suggesting a homonymic association in certain representations as well (Henderson 2008:54-56). All drawings in this article are by the author.

in the style's continued development during the Catalina phase 1350–1500 CE.

A stylistic transition from Early Classic at Teotihuacan to the Late Classic is documented at Cacaxtla, where artists exhibited an even greater knowledge of Classic Maya iconography and its ritual context, particularly with regard to the kingdoms of the upper Usumacinta area (Brittenham 2015; Turner 2019). However, the lack of Maya hieroglyphic writing is striking. Rather, pictographic signs appear at Cacaxtla instead as calendrical names or locatives that draw on both Teotihuacan and Maya pictographic antecedents. This sense of hybridity extends to the representation of the human form as well. Most notable is the depiction of individuals that display distinctive Classic Maya facial characteristics, including the remarkable anthropomorphic maize plants bearing the faces of the Classic Maya Young Lord–Maize God (Taube 1992:45). Nevertheless, technical execution at Cacaxtla is also at variance with Classic Maya convention in a manner comparable to the Princeton Plate with heavy black line-work defining highly exaggerated features including a large nose, a pronounced angular brow ridge, an extended back-sloping forehead, receding chin, and an enlarged upturned eye (Figure 3b).

Given the cultural connections that link Late Classic Cacaxtla with Early Postclassic Cholula, we propose that the Princeton Plate originated at Cholula on the basis of its form, size, and manufacturing technique, and that it anticipates the more commonly encountered plates of the Tecama phase. Although the glyph depicting a human

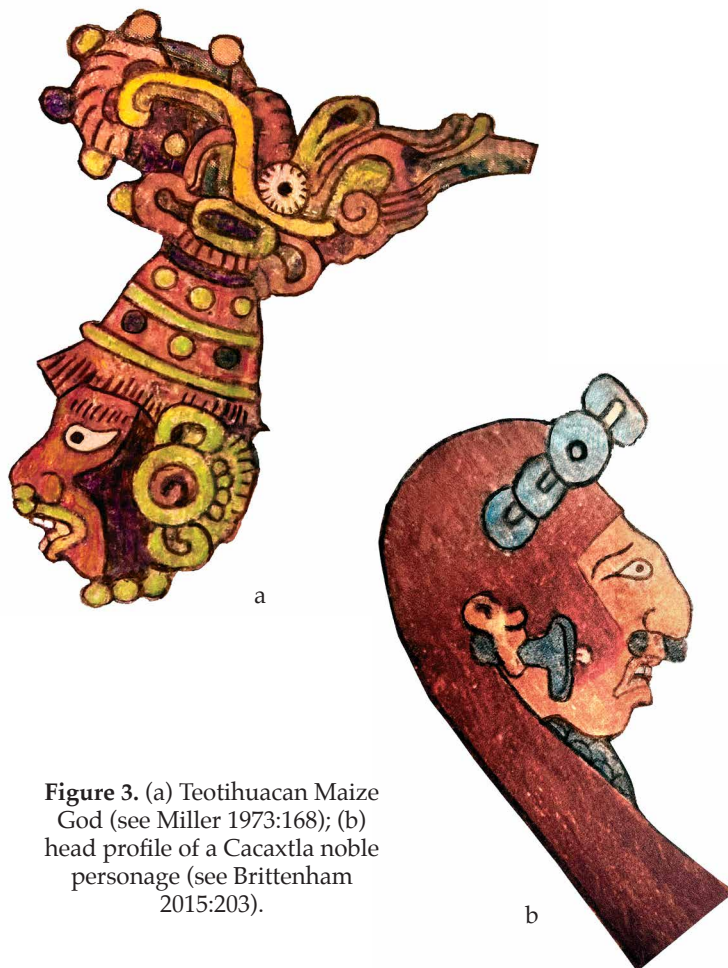


Figure 3. (a) Teotihuacan Maize God (see Miller 1973:168); (b) head profile of a Cacaxtla noble personage (see Brittenham 2015:203).

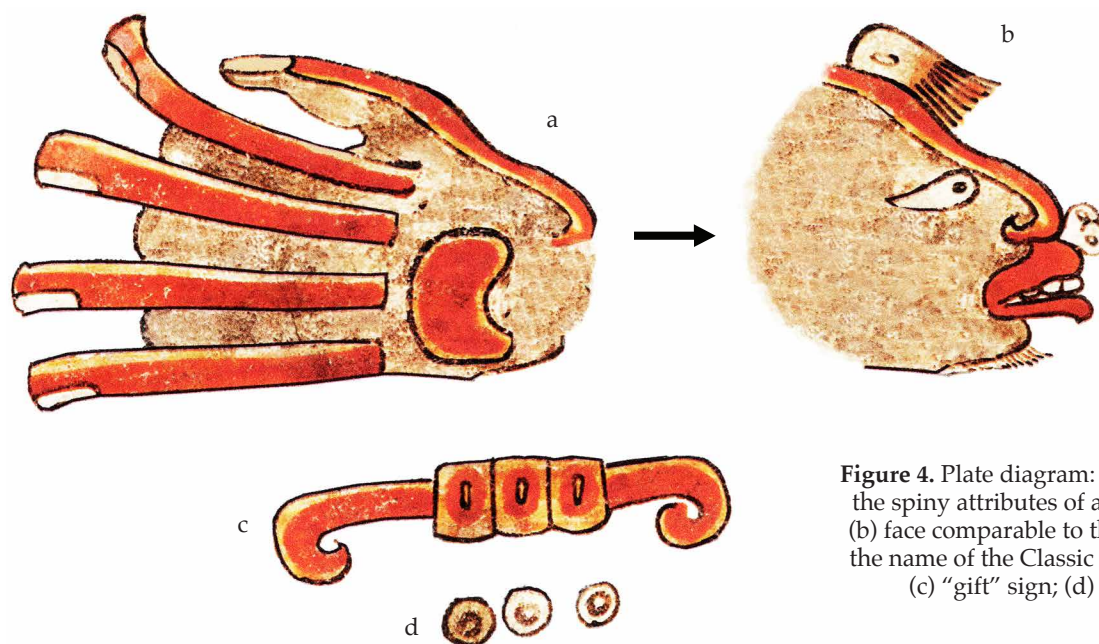


Figure 4. Plate diagram: (a) hand featuring the spiny attributes of a spondylus shell; (b) face comparable to the head glyph for the name of the Classic Maya Maize god; (c) “gift” sign; (d) tonalli sign.

face with a hand is overall Classic Maya in appearance, the painting style has more direct antecedents in the Maya iconography exhibited in the mural traditions of Cacaxtla and Teotihuacan of highland Mexico. However, it is the rim design that provides us not only with a conclusive provenience as Cholula but a date range as well. Stratigraphic excavations carried out at various locations across Cholula over the past half-century have enabled investigators to develop a sophisticated system of seriation that allows them to identify sub-styles and time periods with considerable accuracy. For Cholula ceramic specialists, the rim design on the Princeton Plate with its alternating red and white color sections with radiating lines is conclusively diagnostic and confirms that the Princeton Plate dates to the earliest phase of polychrome production at Cholula known as *Estela* within the *Aquiahuac* phase extending from 900 to 1150 CE (Lind 1994; Plunket Nagoda and Uruñuela Ladrón de Guevara 2018).⁴

Symbolic Meaning

There is no question that the painter of the Princeton Plate had an intimate familiarity with Maya hieroglyphs, especially considering the syllabic associations that can be attributed to the signs (Figure 4). On the other hand, the compounded symbolism of the human hand with the head variant of the name for the Maize God also pictographically anticipates themes that have been identified in the development of Late Postclassic International Style iconography, namely the Young Lord–Maize God, God M, God N, and Ahkan at Cholula during the Tecama phase. Elsewhere Pohl has discussed in detail the iconography of the hand and face combination as

it relates to a transitional Classic to Postclassic Ahkan–Macuiltonal theme at Cholula, with its thematic emphasis on calendrical divination, curing, and sorcery (Pohl 2020, 2021). This in turn Pohl first recognized as the primary contributing source to the iconography that would subsequently define the late Postclassic Nahua god Tezcatlipoca at Cholula (Coltman et al. 2020; Pohl 2007:11).

The hands served as a sorcerer’s divine instruments. They were believed to be activated by incantations that called upon supernatural patrons to invest the fingers during the manipulation of codices, ceramic vessels, censers, and other ritual objects to assist the sorcerer’s powers of visionary prophecy (Pohl 2007:24–25). However, the exaggerated features of the hand on the Princeton Plate with its long, curved narrow fingers painted in red, with white fingernail tips applied over a darkened palm, suggest the use of contour rivalry to define a spondylus or thorny oyster as well.⁵ Spondylus shells were used as paint palettes, sacred instruments by which artists recorded divinatory calendrics in codices.

⁴ As Michael Lind observed to John Pohl (personal communication 2013), “That is some plate. To tell you the truth if I only had sherds from the rim and wall of the plate I would immediately classify it as Cholula, most likely *Estela* polychrome which is early (950–1150 CE).”

⁵ Bryan R. Just suggested to Pohl that the hand represents a spondylus shell (personal communication 2019). The depiction of hands which simultaneously represent other creatures is seen, for example, in a Classic Maya polychrome bowl preserved in the department of special collections at the John F. Kennedy Library, California State University Los Angeles, which depicts a pair of hands wrapped around the exterior in which the fingers double as the legs of a spider (M-2011.8).

Palace sorcerers also used spondylus shells to cast maize kernels across the images of gods depicted in the codices during the course of divinatory invocations (Figure 5). The association of the shell with acts of calendrical recording and divination is represented in Classic Maya hieroglyphic writing. The number zero appears glyphically as a shell for example. Zero can also be represented either as a shell compounded with a human hand or as the head variant glyphic name for Ahkan in which the god is depicted with a hand across the mouth (Blume 2011:53-55; Stone and Zender 2011:118-119). The three signs together therefore anticipate the expression symbolized by the glyph on the Cholula Plate, an apt symbol for the use of the bowl in divinatory ritualism together with other instruments including the codices (Figure 6).

Finally, two secondary symbols relate the iconography of the Princeton Plate to the development of the Late Postclassic International Style at Cholula. The bound volute upon which the glyph is set appears to be an early form of a pictograph that symbolizes the sacred qualities of a gift or offering in both polychrome ceramic representations and the codices (Rojas Martínez Gracida 2009). The associated white circles on the other hand anticipate the representation of the sign *tonalli*, a Nahuatl term that translates as “soul,” “day,” and “solar heat,” which became increasingly predominant in Cholula polychrome in the subsequent Tecama and Catalina phases after 1150 CE (Berdan and Anawalt 1992:1:220; Boone 2000:35; Lind 1994:94; Seler 1904:155-156).

Among its many uses and interpretations as an ideogram, the word *tonalli* signified certain animistic qualities by which objects could become endowed through manufacture, handling, and use by their possessors (Furst 1995:93-95; López Austin 1988:1:204-207). A comparable concept has been proposed with regard to the production of polychrome Classic Maya feasting wares (Reents 1998:76-77). A correlation between *tonalli* and the Maya term *baah* or “head” and “face” has also been advanced by epigraphers in proposing that the artistic representation of the face was possessed of a kind of shadow soul of the person or spirit force it represented in Classic Maya art (Houston et al. 2006:72-80).

The crafting, painting, and inscribing



Figure 5. Codex Magliabechiano 78 depicts a woman casting maize kernels and beans with a spondylus shell.

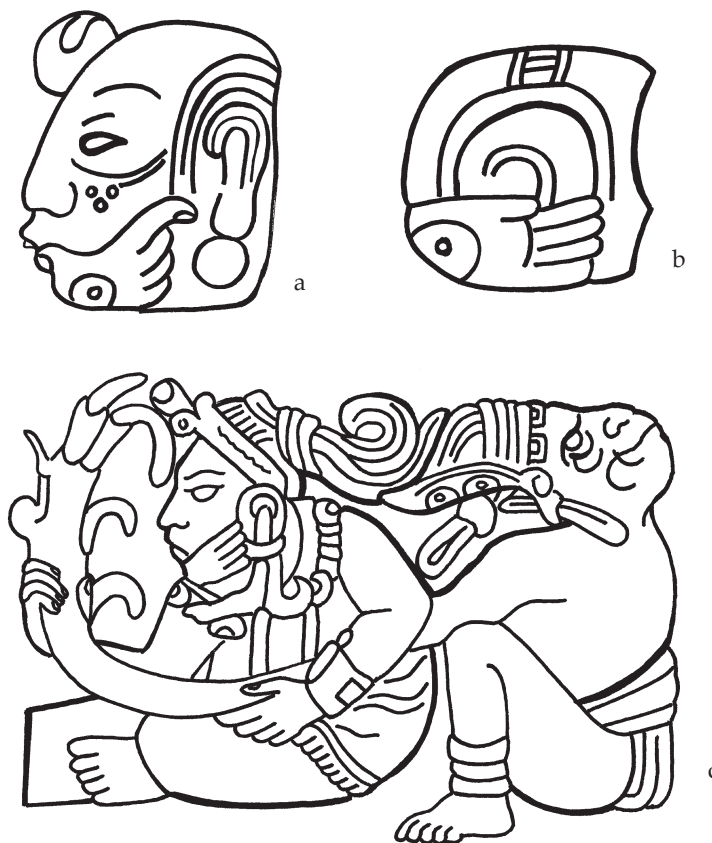


Figure 6. (a) Ahkan as head variant for the number zero; (b) the Shell-in-Hand glyph; (c) the baseline for the day sign count of the divinatory calendar, 0 Kin, represented in full figure glyphs by Ahkan paired with God N as a monkey scribe on Copan Stela D.

of polychrome vessels was performed by a specialized class who engaged in patron-painter relationships with the paramount class (Bishop 2022; Just 2012). The vases were completed with a hieroglyphic rim text or Primary Standard Sequence that proclaimed that the vessel was to be likened to a work of divine creation (Reents 1998:77). The artists themselves seem to have been perceived as sorcerers who could conjure thoughts, dreams, or even the gods and ancestors by bringing them to life through the representations they painted on their vases. The concept persists with the contemporary Lacandon Maya who manufacture ceramic effigy pots to use in their appeals to the gods for blessings or visionary powers. After modeling the image and adding diagnostic attributes with paint, it is believed that the vessels can become endowed with the life force of the deity they represent to transform them into vehicles for transmitting offerings through songs and prayer during rituals (McGee 1998:43; Palka 2005:251).⁶

Being of shallow construction with the glyphic symbolism applied to the inside in contrast with the raw exterior surface, indicates that the Princeton Plate was not intended for serving simply comestibles, but also as a vessel in which special offerings were to be placed. Both pictographic representations and historical accounts reveal that these would have included a range of ritual objects from maguey blood letters and bloody strips of paper used in penitential rites to animal parts, maize, copal, or cacao beans among other offerings (Lind 1994:87; Nicholson 1994; Rojas Martínez Gracida 2009). The interior symbolism therefore contextualizes the contents and prompts the diviner or healer for the recitation of prayers to a supernatural recipient during the offering. While it is possible to ascribe Maya syllabic terminology to the compound hieroglyph, **IXIIM** for Maize God and **chi** for hand or pulque for example, any specific meaning or context the glyph lends to the object seems secondary. Perhaps it even constitutes a pseudoglyph. Our examination of its constituent parts, on the other hand, suggests a more literal pictographic reading as “To the maize god, the tonalli of this gift is made by the hand of the diviner.” Neither of these interpretations is inconsistent with the other. In fact the plate may anticipate the transitional development of the Postclassic International Style and communication system that evolved at Cholula over the subsequent two centuries in which some linguistic context is conveyed through homonyms, but it is fundamentally representational—what you see is what you get (Boone 2000; Smith 1973; Whittaker 2021).

Discussion and Conclusions

Research into the cultural developments on the Plain of Puebla at a time when Late Classic Maya was the dominant civilizational engine of Mesoamerica indicates that

the Cacaxtla city-state together with its successor at Cholula had a profound investment in Maya elite ritual culture between 650 and 1200. This extended from the use of specialized ritual dress, objects, even the cosmetic alteration of the cranium, to the subsequent introduction of Classic Maya polychrome manufacturing techniques, together with the invocation of Classic Maya deities like God L with his merchant’s carrying frame, the Maize God at Flower Mountain, dancing *wahy* impersonators, and blue astral Ahkan-Tzitzimimeh beings. It is entirely consistent with the ritual sources of power promoted by a Classic Maya subordinate class who administered second-tier centers across the Peten and engaged in polychrome production and distribution as their own particular socio-political device (Bishop 2022:20-30; Turner 2019).⁷ The Princeton Plate demonstrates furthermore that these Puebla city-state elites knew how to use Maya hieroglyphic writing. Given the capacity for that writing system to also incorporate symbolic elements of non-Maya communication systems, the nagging question becomes why didn’t the peoples of highland Mexico continue to use writing during the subsequent Postclassic period?

Rather, by 1350 CE what evolved at Cholula was an exclusively pictographic communication system. It depended on representational symbols to transmit information through standardized images that composed logographs and ideographs (Boone 2000; Boone and Mignolo 1994; Boone and Smith 2003; Hernández Sánchez 2005; Mikulska 2008, 2010, 2015; Whittaker 2009:47-48, 2021). Its employment was an ingenious response to the redistribution of power among Postclassic nobles who communicated in as many as fifteen different languages across southern Mexico and beyond (Pohl 2009:3-5, 2012). When the founder of the Dominican order in Oaxaca, Domingo de Betanzos presented Codex

⁶ The goddess Ixchel appearing on Classic Maya vases and Postclassic codices continues to be represented in ceramic form by the Lacandon today. The fact that vases have been found intentionally broken while plates are punctured with a hole through the central image is indicative (Boot 2016; Carlson 1988). It reflects the belief that an object possesses a life force that needs to be neutralized when it is discarded or buried.

⁷ Andrew Turner proposes that the distinct similarity of the Cacaxtla murals to Maya artwork raises serious questions about the relationship of the city-state’s inhabitants and the Maya lowlands that are difficult to reconcile through emulation models (Turner 2019:228-230). Even the “Teotihuacan” influence is consistent with the Maya display of symbols and signs associated with the metropolis during the Late Classic after Teotihuacan had collapsed. For Turner the evidence indicates that Cacaxtla was established by a Maya class of merchant elites who migrated into the Valley of Puebla and established the city-state together with a local constituency as a node of economic and cultural interaction. He compares specific iconographic elements displayed through dress and objects that clearly associate the personages portrayed in the murals with cogates represented on polychrome ceramics.

Cospi among other codices to Pope Clement VII in 1533, they were described as “nicely painted books that looked like hieroglyphs by which they understand each other as we do by letters” (Domenici and Laurenrich Minelli 2014:171, 189). Some scholars have therefore proposed that the Late Postclassic International Style and symbol set constituted a writing system. They argue that investigators simply need to expand their definition of what writing was in Mesoamerica to account for the differences in the various communication systems (see Rojas Martínez Gracida and Hernández Sánchez 2019 for discussion). Semasiographic studies have revealed much in terms of the complexity, sophistication, and effectiveness of the Late Postclassic International communication system. Nevertheless, significant differences between Classic hieroglyphic and Late Postclassic pictographic writing suggest that their invention and deployment reflect inherently different ritual, sociological, political, but particularly metaphysical priorities. Most notably, there are no Postclassic “texts,” which is to say signs that constitute connected passages of information that could be considered in any way comparable to the Classic Maya use of script (Whittaker 2009:47-48, 2021). Consequently, we should be thinking of Maya writing and the Late Postclassic International pictographic system as divergent communication strategies within the broader Mesoamerican development of a spectrum of “instruments for seeing” rather than arguing for direct parity between the two as writing systems (see Hamann 2004 and Martin 2006 for discussion).⁸

The divergence appears to have its roots in the Classic Maya social order. There is little question that by the seventh century, Maya writing had evolved into an ingenious instrument that empowered a hegemonic sociopolitical order of ranked lineages extending across the northern Peten and adjacent areas (Martin and Grube 2000:20-21). Inscribed on stelae and other monumental forms, hieroglyphic texts celebrated the achievements of divine overlords through the recounting of their shared heroic ancestral history. The degree to which military triumphs together with rituals of accession were commemorated within these personality cults testifies to the fact that their power over subordinates was fixed, rigid, and profoundly coercive (Houston 2011; Martin 2020:52).

Polychrome, on the other hand, was largely produced by non-royal artisans who served under the direction of a subordinate class of noble patrons. In contrast to their K’uhul Ajaw overlords, they documented their agendas of political dominance almost exclusively through representational narratives portrayed on feasting wares. Hieroglyphic texts are greatly reduced in the medium. The primary standard sequence that appears as a rim text is largely an account of the divine creation and presentation of the vessel, the inscribing of the vessel by the painter, the noble patron who commissioned

the vessel, the vessel’s form, and the vessel’s contents (Coe and Van Stone 2001:98-107; Stuart 1989).

Scenes of courtly life predominate in the narratives. Many depict a noble seated on a dais receiving tribute from his constituents or negotiating a marriage alliance. Other scenes reverence the cults of certain gods. The merchant gods God L and God M or their avatars appear prominently, indicating an investment in the acquisition of wealth through expeditionary trade, over which subordinate nobles served as the agents for their overlords (Gillespie and Joyce 1998). Sorcery is a major theme in which nobles become possessed of their *wahy* co-essences and dance ecstatically together in drinking cults dedicated to the god Ahkan. Some have hieroglyphic captions that connect them with the names for diseases, indicating that they boasted the abilities of diviners and healers as well (Stuart 2020). Mythic scenes portray creation stories in which the biographies of gods and culture heroes allegorically reflect an internecine dispute that first defined the social classes. Stemming from the polygynous relationships of the Maize God, a rivalry arises between offspring, resulting in the triumph of the hero twins who epitomize the qualities to which Classic Maya noble overlords aspired, while their half-brothers are disgraced and transformed into monkeys as the patrons of scribes, artisans, poets, singers, and clowns. In other words, the theme that predominates in early Cholula polychrome with representations of God M and God N on the Tecama plates (Figure 7).

Among the titles attributed to subordinate elites in hieroglyphic texts, that of *ajk’uhuun* is especially relevant to any discussion of scribes, artisans, and merchants constituting a distinct class in Maya society

⁸ The promotion of the Late Postclassic International Style and pictographic communication system as “writing without words” is largely predicated on studies of surviving codices by investigators as “books” examined in rare manuscript departments of university libraries. The reconstruction of the communicative environments in which the codices were actually used show that they functioned in very different ways. They ranged from divination boards upon which sorcerers cast maize kernels across the images of the gods to determine the positive or negative outcome of their petitions, to storyboards displayed on the walls of palaces for the recitation of creation stories, heroic feats of ancestors, and records of genealogical descent. Remarkably, the analysis of the pigments has revealed that codices were painted with organic colors extracted from flowers. The colors endowed the representations of people, places, and things with a *tonalli* life-force together with the generative power of ritual speech to transform the ephemeral phenomena of a flower world paradise inhabited by gods and ancestors into a permanent one on earth (Domenici 2021). The presentation of the codices was always a ceremonial occasion attended by feasting and drinking from a stunning array of polychrome plates, cups, bowls, vases, cajetes, and ollas during which nobles sung the *xochicuicatl* or flower song. If the codices contribute primarily to the oral component of ritual performance then the polychrome ceramics inspired the visual.

(Bishop 2022:31-32; Martin 2020:89). While hieroglyphic inscriptions identify *ajk'uhuuns* as literally the “possessions” of overlords, the House of the Bacabs located within the Las Sepulturas Group of the Copan valley bears testament to the major concessions that these office holders had gained from their overlord on the eve of Copan’s ninth-century collapse (Webster 1989). Sculpted portraits of monkey scribes holding brushes and paint pots were prominently displayed on the exterior of the building. Scribes frequently feature the

attributes of ritual dress associated with God N in Classic Maya art. The monkey scribe’s special “deer ear” is a good example (Martin 2015:220; Taube 1989:362). Reliefs depict God N kneeling in supplication while holding real-life suzerains aloft as the atlantean of a bench throne-table. They are a testament to the rank of the secondary elite that nonetheless became intrinsic to the *ajk'uhuun*’s emergent source of political power and autonomy.

As a civilizational invention, Classic Maya writing is comparable to other major scribal traditions of the ancient world. However, its connection with the political ambitions of the paramount overlords who sponsored it appears to have also assured its demise. By the middle of ninth century, architectural construction and monument dedication ceased, together with the attendant ritual institutions that supported the centuries-old networks of sociopolitical control across the Peten. The effusive public proclamations of the achievements of divine rulers vanished with their class.⁹ In contrast, Cholula emerged to dominate the Plain of Puebla by instituting a system of rotational power within a corporation of multiple ranking lineages (Pohl and Knab 2019). Was Classic Maya writing essentially rejected along with the repressive institutions of the overlords it supported? The decision by the early Postclassic merchants of Cholula to redeploy Classic Maya polychrome, exemplified by the Princeton Plate, as the basis for the development of a new pictographic communication system rooted as much in the metaphysical properties of representational art as any appeal to internationalism, indicates that it was.

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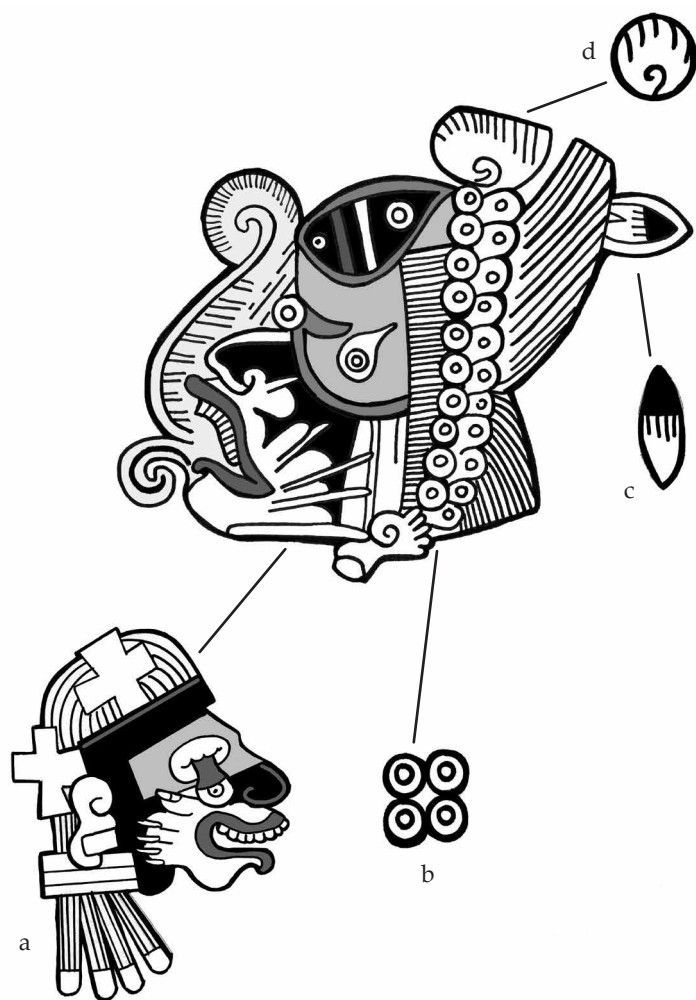


Figure 7. The central image of a Tecama phase plate combines the attributes of the Classic Maya God N and Ahkan by depicting the head of a buffoonish monkey scribe with a white hand painted across the mouth. Between 1150 and 1350 CE, Cholula artists introduced the abstract imagery and symbol set that became the basis for the development, standardization, and distribution of the Late Postclassic pictographic communication system during the subsequent Mártir phase between 1350 and 1521 across Mesoamerica. Depicted are the late Postclassic cognates for Maquiltónal, the patron of diviners and sorcerers (a), together with three elements of a symbol set including the tonalli signs (b), the flint knife (c), and the ball of eagle down (d).

⁹ Often regarded as a “vestigial” or even “degraded” system by scholars in the past, the use of Maya hieroglyphic writing during the Postclassic, with its short captions and rhetorical phrases that complement the representational art, is entirely consistent with its use in the polychrome tradition by the specific class of Maya elite discussed here. Maya vases depict scribes painting codices, demonstrating a clear association between ceramic and codical media. Furthermore, we know that the construction and use of writing in the Maya divinatory codices also passed through a Cholula “filter.” The organizational layout of the Maya codices belies a Nahua-based Borgia Group format (Just 2004). It reflects an active dynamic between the Plain of Puebla and the Maya region that results in the incorporation of the Late Postclassic International Style at Mayapan initially, followed by Tulum and other associated Yucatec trading communities of the eastern Yucatan coast subsequently (Masson 2003; Taube 2010).

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The Classic Maya Term for ‘Bloodletter’ and Naj Tunich Drawing 20

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The ancient Maya ritual practice of cutting or piercing the ears, tongue, or penis with a pointed object to cause bleeding is well known. Particularly important was the mortification of the male member. The objects used to bleed the penis were awls and lancets of bone or obsidian, stingray spines, and other objects of animal origin. The blood was sprinkled onto paper in a vessel; then the paper was burned in a censer, transmuting the blood into smoke. For the elite, such autosacrificial acts took place during every major event of life, as well as in relevant calendar festivals such as period endings (Schele and Miller 1986:175-208; Baudez 2013:176-276; Stemp et al. 2018:308-309).

The lexical references thus far known in Classic Maya vocabulary for bloodletting instruments focus only on their general function (*jul* ‘awl’) or their material (*kokan* ‘stingray spine’, *bak* ‘bone’). In contrast, the recent analysis of one of Naj Tunich’s more enigmatic hieroglyphic texts, Drawing 20 in Andrea Stone’s 1995 catalogue, reveals a new term for these objects based on their ritual function.

Drawing 20 (Figure 1) is located on the back wall of the first chamber at the beginning of the Western Passage of Naj Tunich, within one of the cave’s most important groups of paintings. It consists of a vertical hieroglyphic text of six blocks adjacent to the image of a naked male youth most likely engaged in self-mortification of his penis. Although the bloodletting instrument is not visible due to the position of his body, his phallus is prominent and has what appear to be cut marks (Stone 1995:139-140, 197; Sheseña 2022:94-95). As we will see, the hieroglyphic text complements the image, naming the instrument used to perform the rite. Below, amid more details of our study, we offer a reading of the complete hieroglyphic text.

The text opens with the spelling **u-ba-ji**, intending *u-bah*, ‘(it is) his image with ...’. This expression generally refers to a person in the scene adjacent to the text (Houston and Stuart 1998)—in this case, the young man. The substitution of **ji** for the expected **hi** reflects the widespread loss of the distinction between /j/ and /h/ which occurred around AD 700, a phenomenon first recognized by Nikolai Grube (2004:81). Other examples of the **ba-ji** spelling in similar expressions are found at Yaxchilan on Stela 35 (B4) and on Lintel 17 mentioned below. As on many other Classic Maya monuments, ‘his image’ is followed by the preposition **ti** or **ta** ‘in, with,’ signaling either the activity in which the protagonist is immersed, naming the object he uses, or both. Following this pattern in Naj Tunich Drawing 20, although the preposition is partly erased we can discern the sign **ti**; thus we have the phrase *ubah ti* ‘(it is) his (the young man’s) image with...’.

The sequence **yi-chi-bi** follows; we analyze it as *y-ich-ib*—a possessed noun referring to an object. The suffix *-ib* derives an instrumental noun from a verb root; here the intransitive verb is *ich*, for which Charles Wisdom’s Ch’orti’ dictionary (1950:91) gives the following meanings:



Figure 1. Naj Tunich Drawing 20. Redrawn by Mauricio Magariño from a drawing by Andrea Stone.

ič 'secretion, water of an organism'
uyič e išik 'menstruation, menstrual flow'
uyič up'ah 'any secretion of one's body'
p'ur.ič 'perspiration'
ičih 'secrete,' 'water' [cl. 3]
war aičih una'k' uut 'his eyes are watering'
ičiaar [*ičih-a'r*] 'secreting, secretion'

Thus the object termed *y-ichib* must be an instrument (literally 'the secretor of') with which one causes the flow of blood.¹ Unfortunately, we do not see in Drawing 20 the actual instrument used, but we propose the term [*y-lichib* to have had general application as 'bloodletter.' The term here is distinctive in that it refers to the

ritual function of the object, regardless of its material.

The phrase thus far is *u-bah ti y-ichib*, '(It is) his image (that of the young man) with the bloodletter of ...' in clear reference to the action he performs.

On Yaxchilan Lintel 17 we find another case, one not previously recognized by epigraphers, where the same term is used: **u-ba-ji ti-CH'AB** [**AK'AB**]-**li ti-yi-chi**, *u-bah ti ch'ab 'ak'abil ti y-ichi[b]*, '(it is) his image in creation-darkness [autosacrifice] with his bloodletter' (Figure 2). In the scene

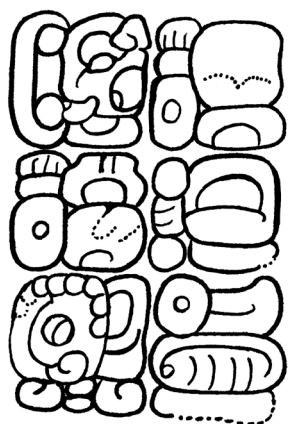


Figure 2. Detail of Yaxchilan Lintel 17. Redrawn by Mauricio Magariño from a drawing by Linda Schele.

which accompanies the text we see the king Bird Jaguar IV (Martin and Grube 2008:128-133) holding an exaggeratedly large awl, presumably of bone, in a manner suggesting penis perforation.

In Naj Tunich Drawing 20, the term *y-ichib* 'the bloodletter of' is followed by a couplet which twice includes the sign T533 with a black spot uniquely infixed. Given its complexity, this phrase requires a closer analysis.

Barbara MacLeod (2020) has proposed that the most

likely value of the sign T533 is **BAK**. Considering the multiple iconographic contexts of the sign tying it to maize, as well as a standard script death phrase including *sak bak* 'vital force' and a common parentage statement including *bak* 'infant,' and thanks to telling substitutions on bone and in the Madrid Codex, MacLeod has concluded that the **BAK** reading fits all T533 contexts outside the day-sign cartouche. In addition to the relationship of *bak* to 'vital force' and 'newborn infant,' *bakal* entries in the dictionaries refer to various stages of the life cycle of maize from *xilote* (new ear) to corncob. We will see below that this value fits the context of Naj Tunich Drawing 20, tying a term *bak* to burnt offerings and their fragrances.

In Drawing 20 the sign T533 appears twice in the couplet which follows the **yi-chi-bi** spelling. Pairings of this type typically organize the information into two or three constituents, each composed of two elements. Of these, the first is repeated while the second will vary, preserving a certain semantic relationship between them, as follows: A-B, A-C (Hull 2003:384-501; Lacadena 2009:37, 2010:58). The structure of each of the two constituents indicates that element A—the one that is repeated—corresponds to an antipassive verb incorporating the following noun (B, C), its patient. This type of structure (AP + noun) characterizes expressions such as the Yucatec *ch'a-chaak* 'take/seize-rain/storm/lightning,' and lends itself well to the naming of rituals (MacLeod and Sheseña 2013:205-206; Sheseña 2022; MacLeod in press).

Let us begin with the analysis of elements which do not repeat. The first of these (T565 **TAN**) perhaps corresponds in this context to proto-Ch'olan **tan* and Yucatec *ta'an*, both meaning 'ash' (Kaufman and Norman 1984:131; Barrera Vásquez 1995:770-771), rather than its usual function as 'center.' In this section of the cave, there is abundant evidence of charred offerings, with hearths everywhere in niches, many with small partly burned objects mixed with the ashes (Brady 1989:80-89; Stone 1995:127-128). Blood-stained paper would have been the paramount component of these offerings. One of these hearths lies at the foot of the wall below Drawing 20 (Stone 1995:127). We know that the Maya believed in the transmutation of ritual offerings by fire, which made them available to the gods to consume (Cuevas García 2007:24-25).

This identification suggests that the second of the variable elements (spelled **si-ji**) represents some other noun in semantic symmetry with the word 'ash.' The obvious referent would be the proto-Ch'olan **sih* 'gift' (Kaufman and Norman 1984:130), also found in Yucatec (Barrera Vásquez 1995:725-726); here—as noted above—it is spelled with **ji** due to the Late Classic loss of the distinction between /j/ and /h/. In Naj Tunich the word *sih* 'offering' is a perfect fit.

The words 'ash' and 'offering' require that the

¹ There is one other script context for the intransitive root '*ich* 'secrete, flow, pour out' of which we are aware. This verb appears three times (at A10, C8, and D2) on the West Tablet of the Inscriptions at Palenque (Guenter 2007:40-41). These statements were first deciphered and translated as '*ich naik* 'indeed may it pour out...' and '*ichik* 'may it pour out...' by MacLeod in a March, 1999 presentation at The Maya Meetings at the University of Texas at Austin. This verb is followed by *u-tim[aljel a[w]-ohl* 'the appeasement of your heart' in direct address to the deceased K'inich Janab Pakal and his gods.

transitive verb represented by the “black smudged” T533 form coherent sentences with them. The aforementioned logographic value **BAK** (‘maize’ or ‘infant’) here invokes a rebus or homophonous entry in the Lacandon language. In the Lacandon Maya–Spanish–English dictionary of Hofling (2014:71–72), the transitive *b’akik* means ‘dar olor / give fragrance.’ The same meaning appears in the dictionary of Baer and colleagues (2018:13):

bak u bok v. tr. ‘esparcir (olor)’, ‘perfumar’ [‘sprinkle (smell)’, ‘scent’]

bukrucho’, *jach ki’ u bok*; *tan u bak u bok*. ‘La vainilla huele muy sabrosa; está perfumando el aire con su aroma’ [‘vanilla smells very delicious; its fragrance is perfuming the air’].

In this sentence, the *fragrance (bok)* of the vanilla is the agent of the antipassive verb *bak*.

The couplet *bak tan, bak sih* ‘the scattering of ashes, the spreading of offerings’ conveys the concept of distributing, scattering, or spreading (*esparcir*) both an offering and its ashes in the form of fragrance arising from burning. The black spot in T533 in this context is suggestive of burning. This expression is representative of a special ritual language used in this and other caves (Sheseña 2022) and refers to the stage of the ceremony when the burning of the bloodstained paper transmutes it into fragrant smoke. That the root *bak* ‘spread / scatter fragrance’ appears only in a Yucatecan language² indicates either that some of the visitors to this cave were bilingual or (more likely) that the gloss ‘spreading’ for *bak* existed in Classic Ch’olan but was lost in modern Ch’olan.

Syntactically, the couplet name of this phase of the ritual is the grammatical possessor of the bloodletter: *y-ichib bak tan bak sij* ‘the bloodletter of / for (literally ‘belonging to’) the scattering of ashes, of the spreading of the offering.’

The last sentence of the text of Drawing 20 is clearly read **u-mu-ku ch’o-ko**, *u-muk ch’ok*, literally ‘(it is) his concealment, the youth.’ In Yucatec the verb *muk* is ‘to hide, conceal, bury’ (Barrera Vásquez 1995:534–535); here *u-muk* is a possessed nominalization in the sense of ‘his / their [ritual] retreat, the youth(s).’ This consisted of an underground sequestration for a group of youths involving autosacrifice and propitiation.³

We may now read the complete text as follows:

² In Yucatec (Barrera Vásquez 1980:27) *bak* is ‘derramar agua u otro licor...’ This must be cognate with the Lacandon entry under discussion.

³ The root *muk* is transitive; thus the nominalized form may have been *muuk* or *muhk*. An alternative possibility, suggested by David Mora-Marín (personal communication 2023) is that **u-mu-ku** is an underspelling for a nominalization *u-mukul*. Drawings 17, 18, 21, and 22, all near Drawing 20, depict other youths probably or unquestionably engaged in bloodletting.

u ba-ji ti-yi-chi-bi

u-bah ti y-ichib

‘(It is) his image with the bloodletter of / for

BAK-TAN BAK si-ji

bak tan bak sij

ash-scattering, gift / fragrance-spreading;

u-mu-ku ch’o-ko

u-muk ch’ok

(it is) his / their (ritual) retreat, the youth(s).’

Under what circumstance of all those we might contemplate would this young man have mortified his genitals? Thanks to information gathered by Diego de Landa we have an answer, assuming that the youths in retreat in Naj Tunich were more willing than those observed by the aforementioned good bishop. According to Landa’s data on Yucatec ceremonies during the time of the Spanish conquest, it was young men in particular who offered their blood. This occurred during the year-end rituals of Wayeb. Landa (1986:66) states (our bold):

Había muchos que derramaban sangre cortándose las orejas y untando con su sangre la piedra que allí tenían de un demonio que se llamaba *Chacacantun*. **Aquí tomaban muchachos y por fuerza les sacaban sangre de las orejas**, dándoles cuchilladas en ellas.

[There were many who shed blood by cutting their ears and smearing with their blood the stone which they had there of a demon called *Chac Acantun*. **Here they took boys and forcibly drew blood from their ears**, knifing them there.]

These youths’ acts in Landa’s time also included the piercing of the penis as a group ritual, which recalls the image of the famous Drawing 18 in Naj Tunich. This painting, located very near Drawing 20, depicts an erotic ritual coupling previously associated with Wayeb rites (Sheseña 2022:79; see also Bricker 1986 and Taube 1989). Perhaps the chamber where these paintings are found was the preferred performance space for such year-end events (Sheseña 2022:79). We therefore propose that the rite of self-sacrifice represented in Drawing 20 took place in the context of a year-end celebration.

Finally, it is appropriate to demonstrate the poetic format in which the text is presented. This was formulated by the scribe in listing the constituent expressions in a parallel structure as follows:

**u ba-ji
ti-yi-chi-bi**

**BAK-TAN
BAK si-ji**

**u-mu-ku
ch’o-ko**

*u-bah
ti yichib*

*bak tan
bak sij*

u-muk
ch'ok

'(It is) his image
with the bloodletter
(for) ash-scattering
(for) the spreading of the offering
(it is) his/their retreat,
the youth(s)'

In turn, these expressions are organized into two semantic pairs, one of them nested (ABBA) (see Bassie-Sweet and Hopkins 2018:112), which can be graphically expressed as follows:

A *ubah ti yichib* '(It is) his image with the bloodletter
B *bak tan* for ash scattering
B *bak sij* for the spreading of the offering;
A *umuk ch'ok* (it is) his/their retreat, the youth(s)'

In this scheme, the nested pair (BB) corresponds to the featured part of the bloodletting ritual, while the other pair (AA) refers to the actor(s) of the ritual. Since the actor(s) in both AA components are the same (the youth[s]), the scribe chose the rhetorical device called *omission* (Josserand 1991:20-21), which aims at not duplicating common elements in two related sentences. Such a complex structure confers literary quality and greater ritual formality on the text (Bassie and Hopkins 2018:112-113).

Our analysis of the text of Naj Tunich Drawing 20 has allowed us to recover not only an ancient Maya term for 'bloodletter' (*y-ichib*, literally 'his secretor'), but also two phrases describing a central part of the ritual (*bak tan bak sih*, 'the scattering of ashes, the spreading of the offering'). It has allowed a better understanding of rites wherein young people engaged in the mortification of their genitals while in ritual retreat. Finally, it has offered a window onto the poetics employed by ancient scribes to document for posterity a practice as prestigious for them as it must have been painful.

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