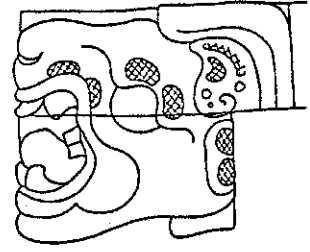


Copán Mosaics Project

Copán Note* 36

November, 1987
Copán, Honduras



Two Altar Names at Copan

by Linda Schele

The texts of Altars G and S, like many other monuments at Copan, include references to their proper names as well as the term for their general class of object. The glyphs recording the dedication ritual, the proper names, and the object type on these altars contribute to the understanding of texts at other sites, such as Palenque.

Altar G

Altar G was dedicated on 9.18.10.0.0 10 Ahau 8 Zac, not by Yax-Pac, the reigning king, but by his half brother, Yahau Ah Bac, the protagonist of Altars U and T (Stuart and Schele 1986 and Schele and Grube 1987). The altar (Fig. 1) is carved into the contour of a double headed reptilian creature who is marked both by feathers and by legs. The eastern head is fleshed and emits God N from its mouth, while the western

head is skeletal and emits a badly damaged deity who was most likely God K. The fleshed end sports the cloven hoof and ear of a deer, a shell earflare, and a venus sign in its eye, clearly identifying the creature as the front end of the Cosmic Monster that adorns the inner door of Temple 22.

The western head may be intended to represent the same being in its skeletal manifestation in a pattern that echoes the Cosmic Monster as it is presented in the upper registers of the stelae of Yaxchilan. However, there are also significant differences in the west head of Altar G, the most important of which are the snaggle teeth attached to the end of the muzzle and the lidless eye. This Snaggle-toothed Dragon often appears at the corners of ancestor cartouches and as the head of the Double-headed Serpent Bar in its

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skeletal form¹. Altar G may, therefore, be merging these two related, but usually distinct icons.

The inscription is broken into two halves (Fig. 2), the dedication of the monument recorded on the north side, and the name and titles of the protagonist, who is recorded on the south side along with a series of locations and ritual information. The dedication text is my focus in this note.

A1-B1 records the Calendar Round date 10 Abau 8 Zac. The dedication verb appears at A2 and is composed of T79 over a house sign with the positional inflection *-wan* (T130:116).² The proper name of the monument appears at B2 and the name of the kind of object at A3. The remaining part of the text records that the dedication occurred in the land of Yax-Pac, the current high king of Copan.

I shall return to the class of object later and focus for now on the proper name. It is composed of a partially eroded sign that is most likely to be T4 *na* adjoined to a serpent head distinguished by a beaded mark on its forehead and black spots above its eye. This same serpent beastie appears on a broken altar at Copan (Fig. 3b) where it appears in an expression for bloodletting used at many different sites, including Copan (Schele 1982:64-67). The last component of the text at Copan is the serpent head from Altar G, now prefixed with a T25 *ca* sign. In comparable expressions from other sites (Fig. 3a), this serpent is usually prefixed by a *na*, which can be seen in the Copan text as the last sign of the previous glyph. We are, therefore, dealing with a glyph reading *na-chan*.

The first clue to the identification of this serpent is found on Classic period pottery where a snake complete with deer ear and horn is recorded with the name *chi-chan* (Fig. 4), the same creature known today as the Chihchan

among the Chorti of Jocotan, Guatemala. In the Yucatec list of day names this creature corresponds to the fifth day, Chicchan. In a list of Chol days names gathered from ethnohistorical sources by Lyle Campbell,³ the fifth day is listed as Nachan, the very term that appears in the bloodletting expression at Copan and elsewhere. Nachan and this serpent head with the beaded forehead element seem to be special versions of the Chihchan or Chicchan serpent. The function of this deer-serpent in pottery scenes associates it with the Vision Serpent so central to bloodletting and vision rites.

Altar G, however, does not depict a serpent. The legged beastie on the east end is the front head of the Cosmic Monster, depicted in a fleshed state and with the horn and ear of a deer. This creature is legged and thus crocodylian in nature, but it appears that the ancient Maya did not keep their categories of supernatural creatures as clearly distinguished as we would like. This creature and its skeletal opposition on the west end were considered by the Copanecs at least to be in the same category of being as the Chihchan.

Altar S

Altar S is a low, boxlike throne (Fig. 5) found on the northwest corner of the mound of Stela 7 in the modern village (Morley 1920: 226-230). The text begins with the Long Count notation 9.15.0.0.0 4 Ahau 13 Yax. The predicate recording the action for this day at F has been noted by Morley for its similarity to similar ritual phrases on Stela B, which carries the same date. This phrase consists of *u*, a zero sign, *yo-wa* followed by *u chaan* and the impinged-bone locative. This part of the inscriptions then concludes with *ho katun utom Uc Ahau Uaxaclahun Zip u lahun*

1 The Snaggle-toothed Dragon is rarely shown in full-figure form, but all other examples show him without legs. He is usually serpentine, but his appearance here indirect contrast to a flesh head may suggest that the snaggle-toothed head is simply the skeletal form of reptilian grotesques.

2 This verb appears in several different variants, the most usually of which can be found on Altar U. In that text, T565 *ta* or T102.59 *ta:ti* replaces the thatched house sign, suggesting that its value in this context is *ta*, *tat* or *tot*. At Palenque on the Palace Tablet and on Altar U at Copan, this verb records the dedication of sculpted monuments, and apparently not houses/

3 I think this list is the work of Campbell and Justeson, but I do not have the reference here in Copan.

baktun or "in five katun it will occur 7 Ahau 13 Zip, the tenth baktun."

The final clause begins with the same dedication verb as Altar G, but this time is highlighted with the *iwal* "and then" prefix (I1b). The proper name of the altar is recorded at J1a1 followed by the cauac variant already identified as the class of object. The final glyph is the name closer sign that appears following proper names of house and other monuments at Copan and elsewhere. The animal head recording the name may well be the same snake head as appears on Altar G, but it is a little too eroded to confirm that identification.

The Class of Object

The names of both Altar G and S contain a four corner cauac sign with a plus to T-shaped cut in the center and a leave shape in each of the corners. The cauac markings are most likely present to mark the object as made of stone. The eccentric contour and cut out center suggests it is a piece of worked stone. On Altar G (Fig. 6a), glyph is inflected with T24, which many epigraphers now suspect is a *-vi* ending, a suffix that is expected on a noun derived from a general noun like 'stone.' On Altar S, T116, the phonetic sign *ni*, is affixed to sign as a complement, perhaps for the root *tun* (Fig. 6b).

There are only two other examples of this signs in the corpus⁴ On Dos Pilas 26 (Fig. 6c), it follows a scattering glyph and it is suffixed by T23 *na*. On Dos Pilas Stela 17 (Fig. 6d), it follows the T757 auxiliary verb and appears with a prefixed *na* as well as now unreadable sign.⁵ Both Dos

Pilas texts occur on stelae, but they are in texts which specifically recorded the dedication of those monuments. They may function, especially in the case of Stela 26, as references to the stelae as worked stone.

The quatrefoil cauac glyph then appears to record a general class of objects that includes one altar carved into the shape of a Cosmic Monster and a Snaggle-toothed Dragon, a low, flat altar carved with inscriptions on four sides and a figurative scene on the top, and a stela. The most likely identification of the object class is, therefore, carved stone.

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⁴ Thompson (1972:109) classified this glyphs as a variant of *lamat* and gave it the catalog number T510c and T510d, although in a footnote he said these examples "are somewhat aberrant forms and possibly do not belong here." He was correct in his assessment--this sign is not a variant of the venus sign.

⁵ This second Dos Pilas example in fact may not be the same glyph. Thompson (1972:109) lists one example from Dos Pilas, and since Stela 26 was not discovered until after his catalog was published, I presume it is this same example.

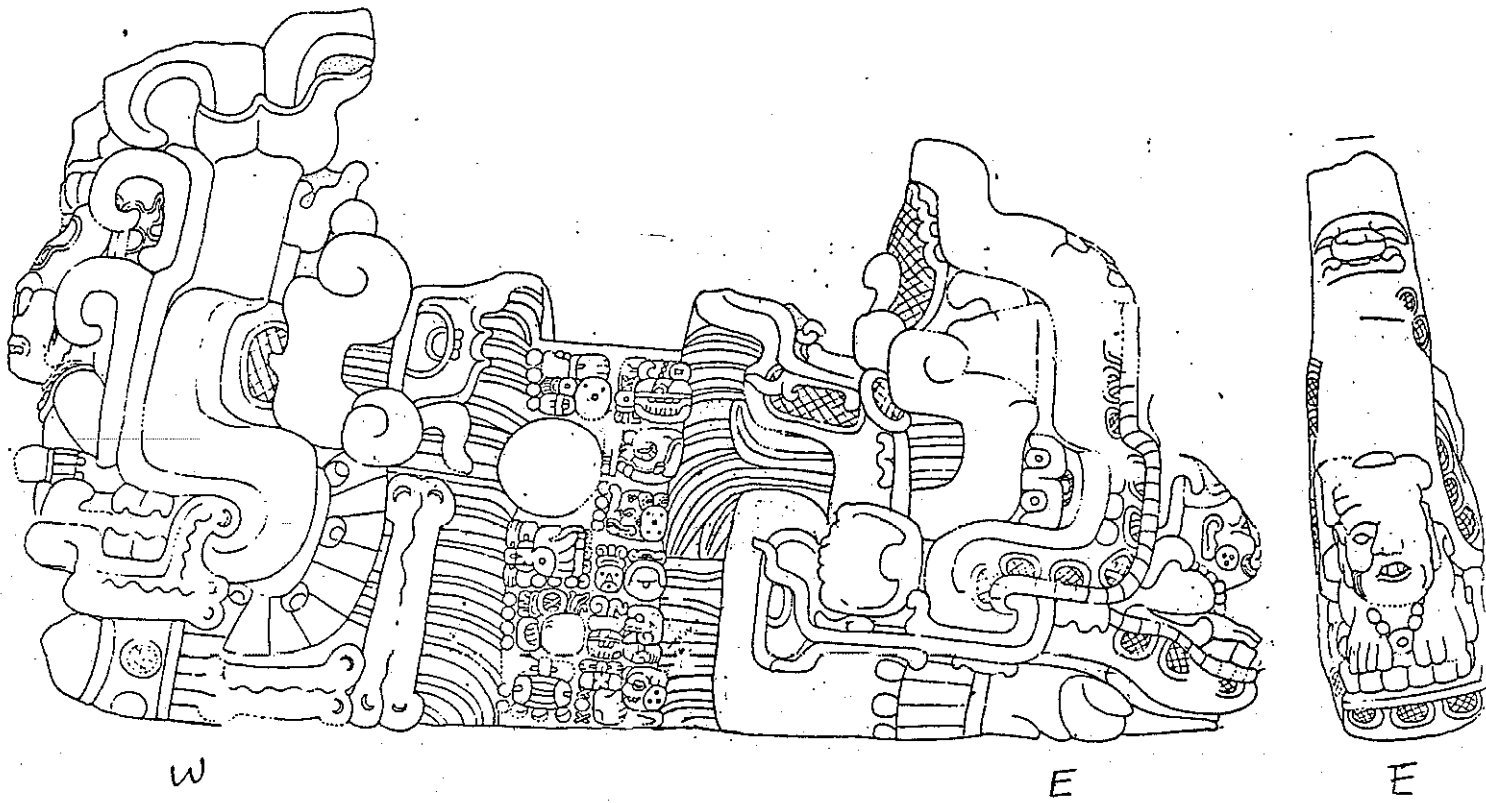
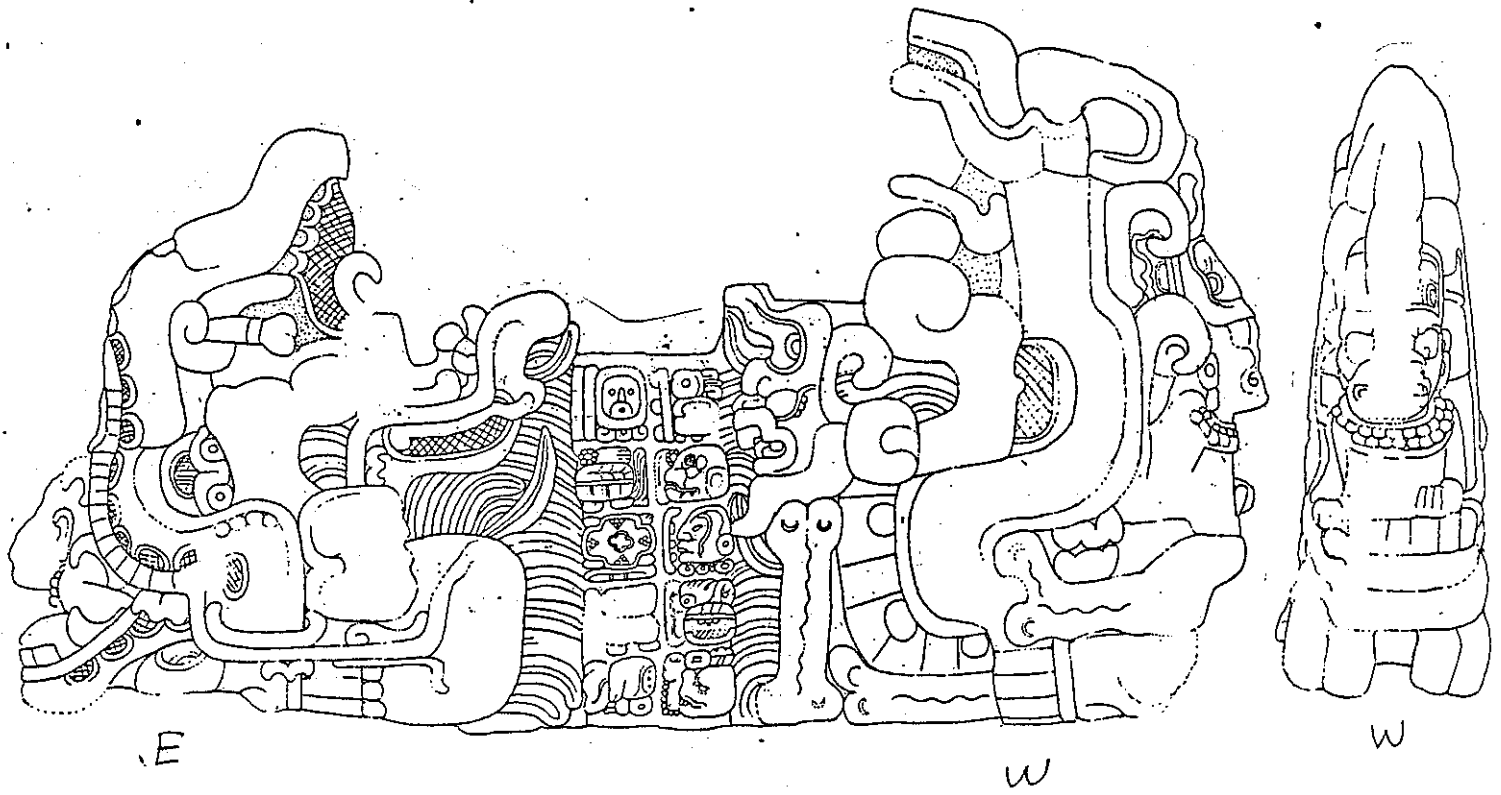


Fig. 1 Altar G

9.18.10.0.0

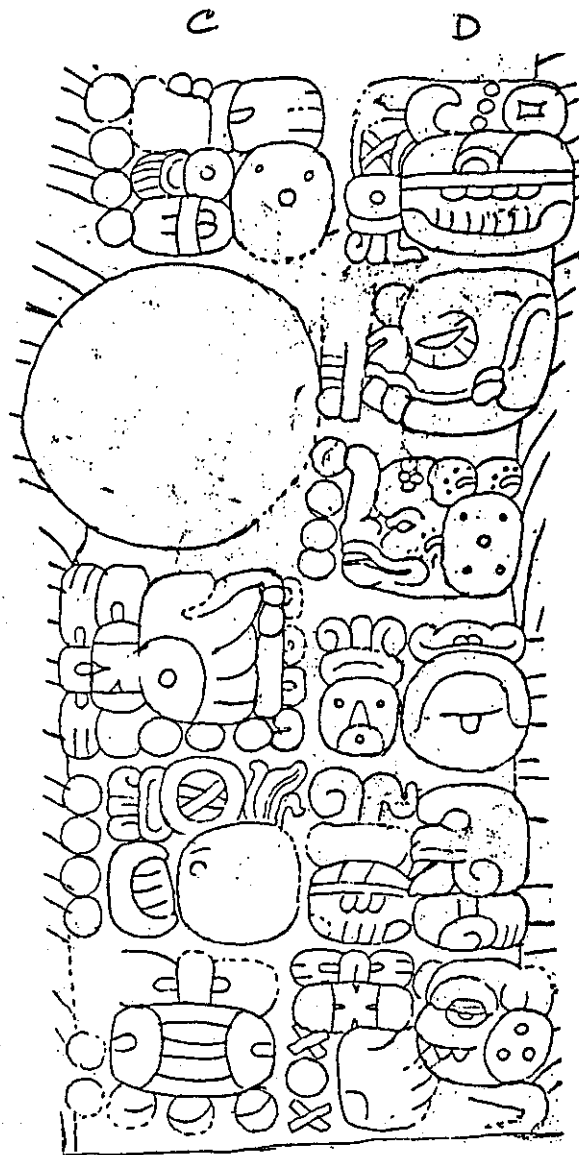
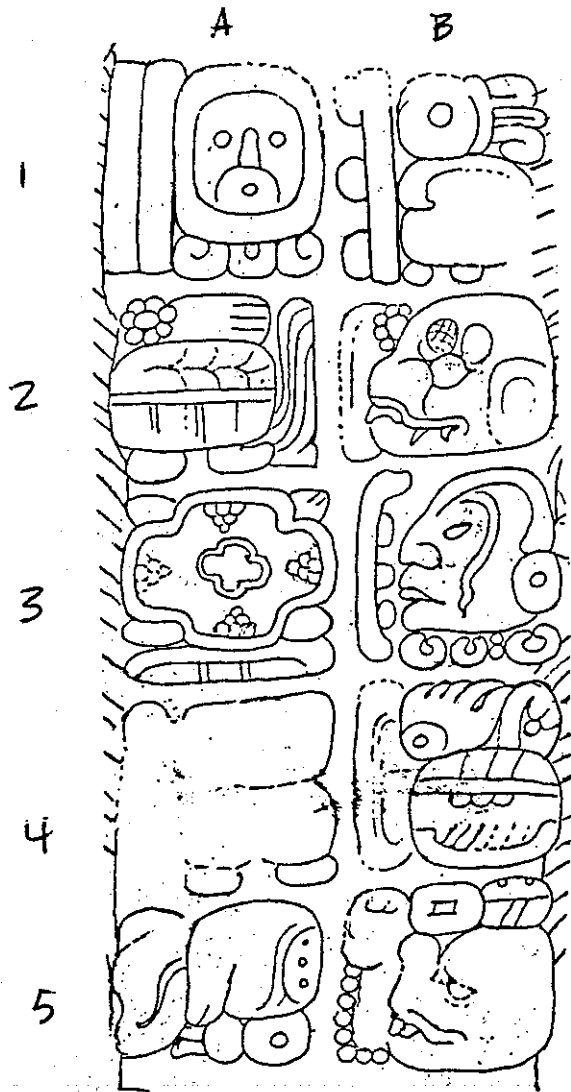
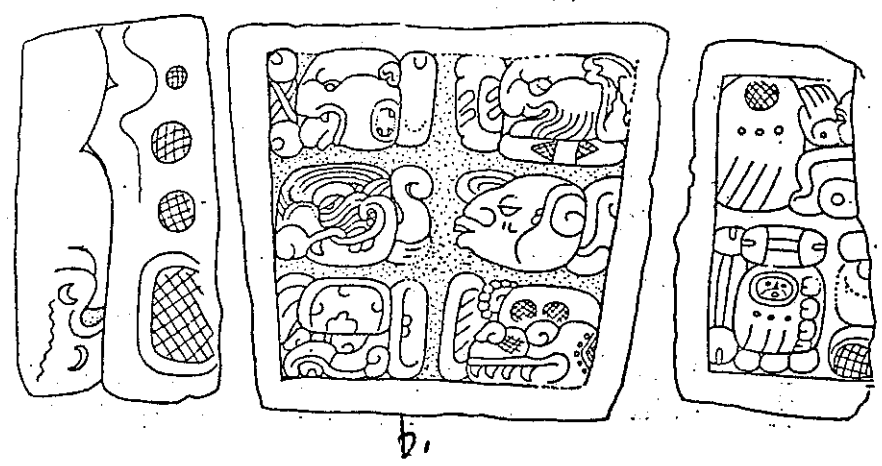


Fig. 2 The inscription on Altar G

	auxiliary verb	"yax-mul"	"hun-uinic"	"na-chan"	lancet
Pomona Wall Panel					
Pomona Panel X					
Quirigua J					
Yaxchilan Temple 33					
Yaxchilan Lintel 13					
Yaxchilan Lintel 14					
Yaxchilan Lintel 1					

a.



b.

Fig. 3 (a) the Na-chan bloodletting expression; (b) an fragment from Copan

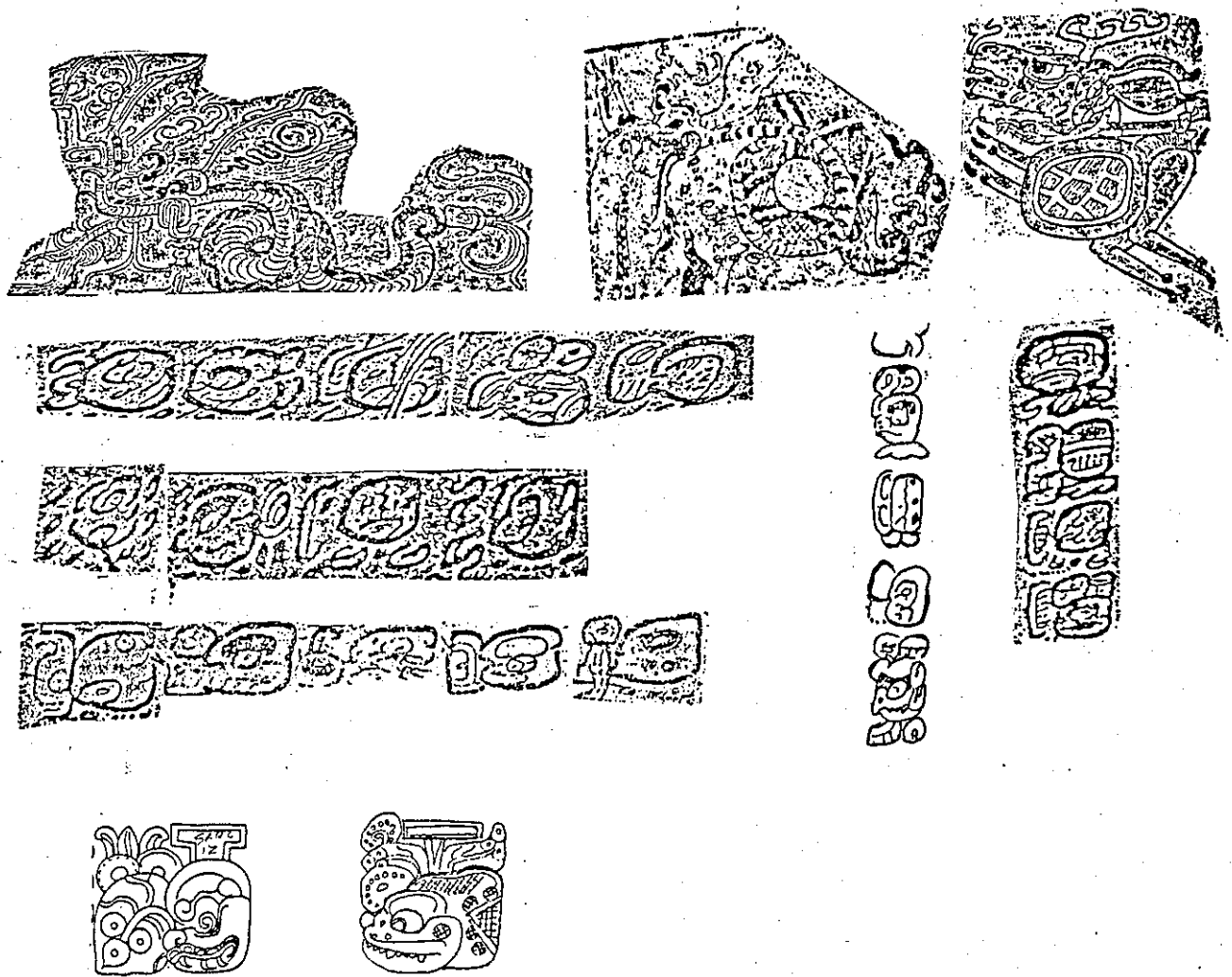


Fig. 4 The Chihchan Serpent on Pottery

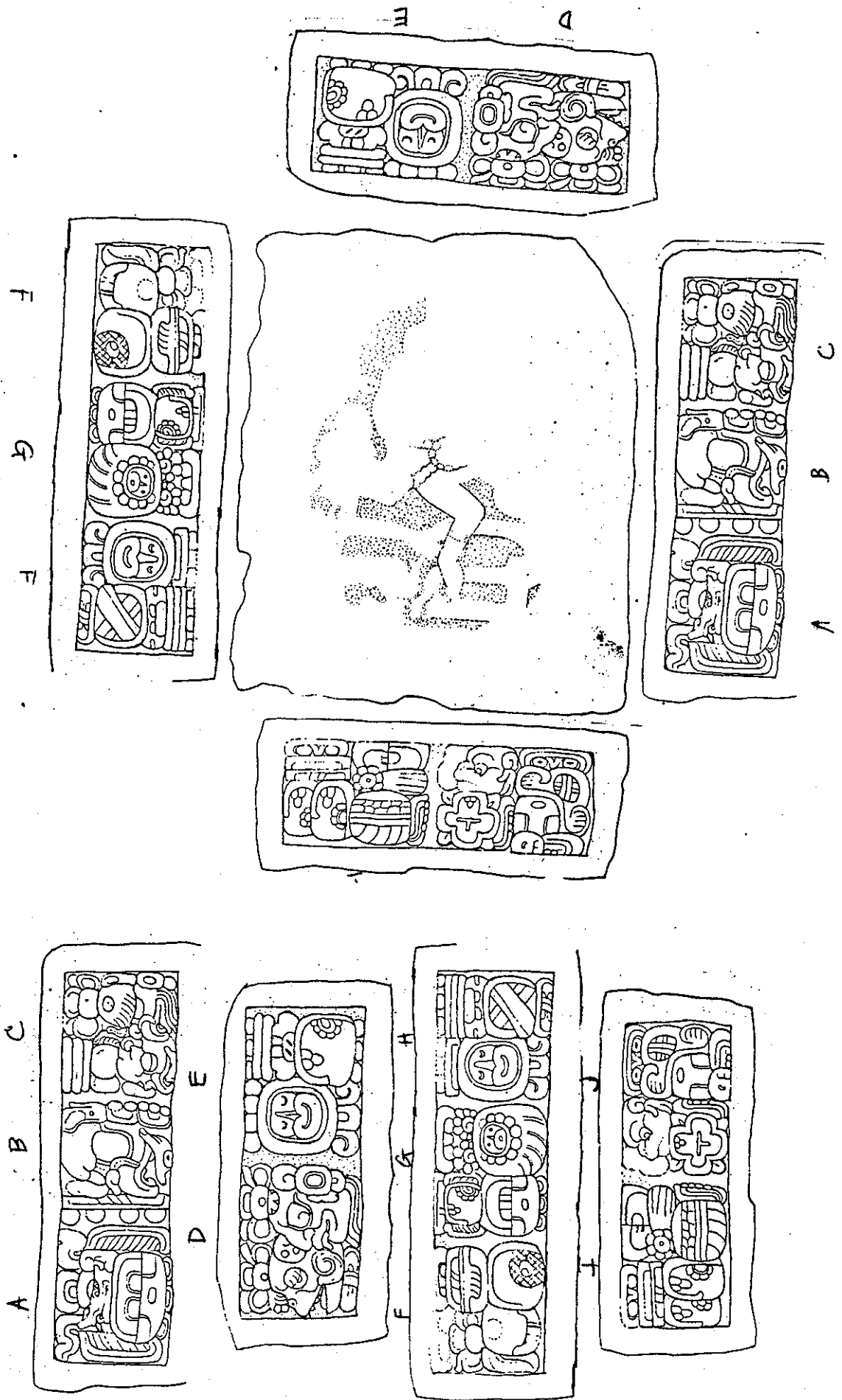


Fig. 3

Fig. 5 Altar S

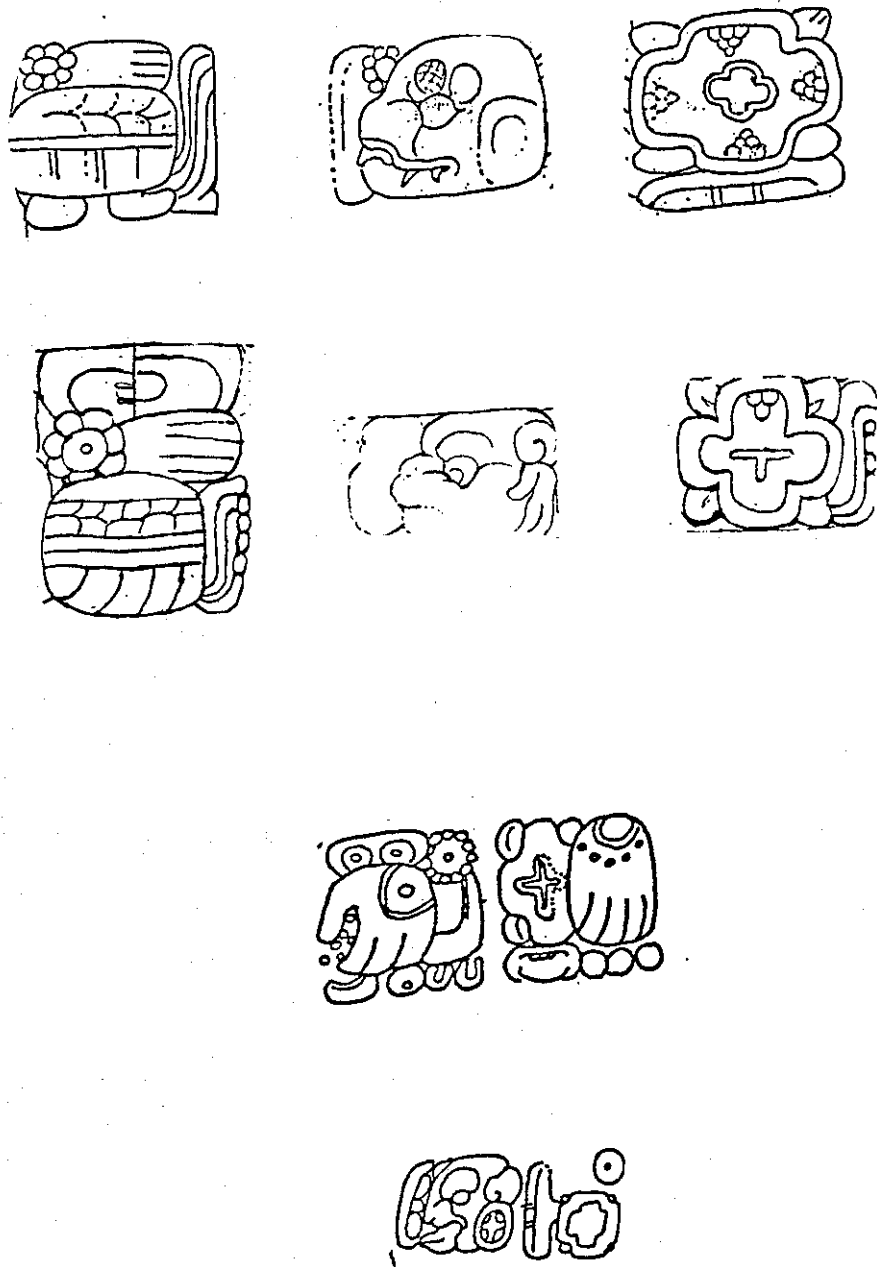


Fig. 6 The Class of Objects; (a) Altar G; (b) Altar S; (c) Dos Pilas Stela 26; (d) Dos Pilas Stela 17.