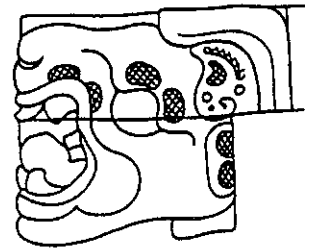


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The Name of Copan and of a Dance at Yaxchilan

by Matthew G. Looer

Based on substitutions in womens' titles at Yaxchilan, Nikolai Grube has suggested a phonetic value of *xu* for the T756 bat head. In March, while testing this reading for productivity, I came across examples at Yaxchilan that not only prove that this reading is productive but allow for the first full phonetic reading of the Copan Emblem Glyph.

Lintels 2 and 5 at Yaxchilan (Figs. 1 and 2) show Yaxun-Balam dancing with his son, Chel-Te-Chan-Mahk'ina, in the first and with his wife, Lady Wak-Chan-Ahaw, in the second. After the anniversary expression at the top of Lintel 2, the text contains a dance phrase starting with *ubah ti ak'ot*, "he went in dancing" (see Grube n. d.). This is followed by a *ti* construction which includes a main sign consisting of the bat head with kawk markings followed by an "arching kawk"

suffix, read *pi* by David Stuart (1987: 11-12). The same *ti* construction is used in the lower dance expression of Lintel 2 and in that of Lintel 5. Believing it possible that the kawk markings in the bat head simply signify that the main sign consists of the bat head conflated with a kawk *ku*, I read the collocation as *xukup* or *xukpi*.

Since the *ti* construction must refer either to the kind of dance shown or to the object used in the dance (Grube n. d.), this reading must refer to a distinctive feature of the dances shown on the lintels--most likely, the bird scepters Yaxun-Balam and his son manipulate. In Attinasi's Chol lexicon (1973: 338) there is an entry for *xuk-pi* as "bird," which satisfies this requirement. The birds on the staffs, named as *xukpi* in the texts, give their name to this dance. Note that this type of dance naming contrasts to the dance expression in the

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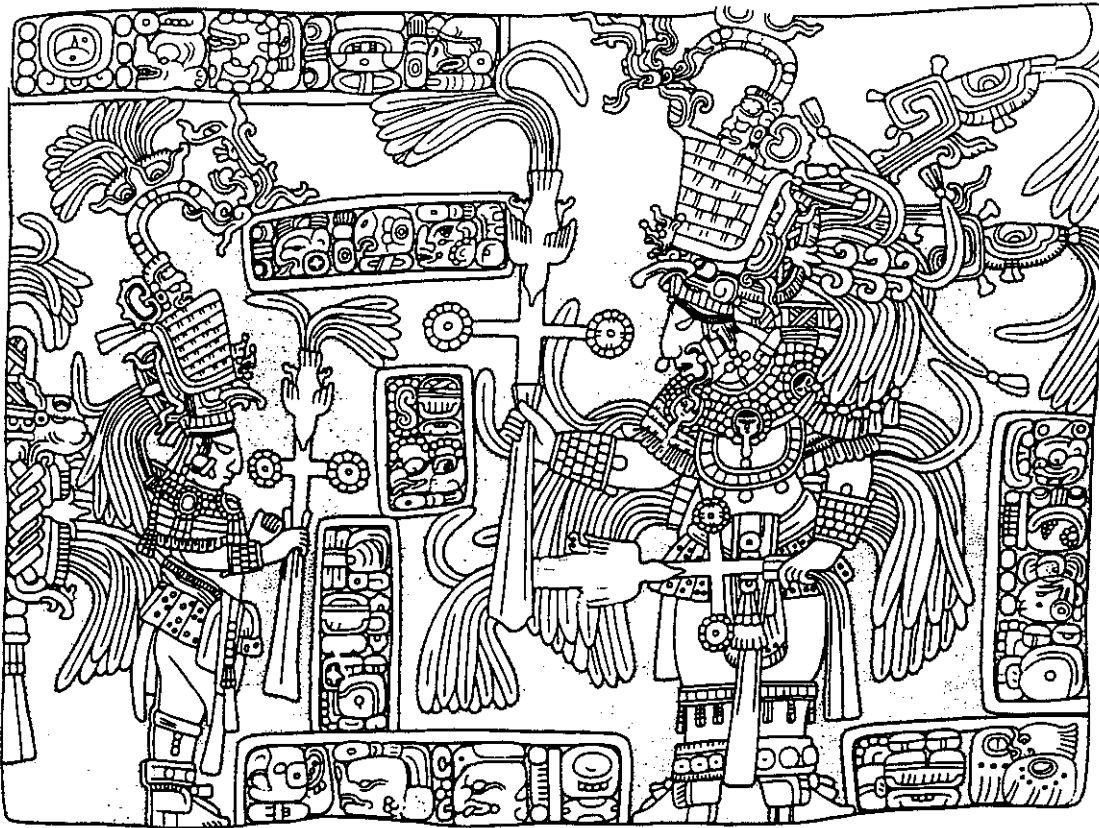


Fig. 1 Yaxchilan Lintel 2 (drawing by Ian Graham)

murals of Bonampak' Structure 1 Room 1 (caption 42), which uses the word *k'uk'* "quetzal" to refer not to an object manipulated in the dance but to the costume worn by the dancers (see Houston 1984:132-134). Since the usual word for "bird" in Chol is *mu*, I was skeptical about the "*xukpi*=bird" gloss and checked in Aulie and Aulie's (1978) Chol dictionary to see if *xukpi* really refers to a specific kind of bird. In this source there are two entries similar to *xukpi* that name specific birds. The first is *xwuqip*, glossed as "pendulo de corona, *Momotus momota*" (Aulie and Aulie 1978:214); the second is *xwukpik*,

glossed as "guardabarranco" (Aulie and Aulie 1978:140).

Momotus momota, also known by the name "Motmot," is a spectacular bird with green, blue, black and brown coloration that reaches a length of about forty centimeters including the long tail (Fig. 3) (see Peterson and Chalif 1973:112-114; and Alvarez del Toro 1980:123). The guardabarranco, in contrast, corresponds to two species of small (about twenty centimeters), drab, short-tailed thrushes, *Myadestes obscurus* and *Myadestes unicolor*, also called the Brown-Backed Solitaire and the Slate-Colored Solitaire, respectively

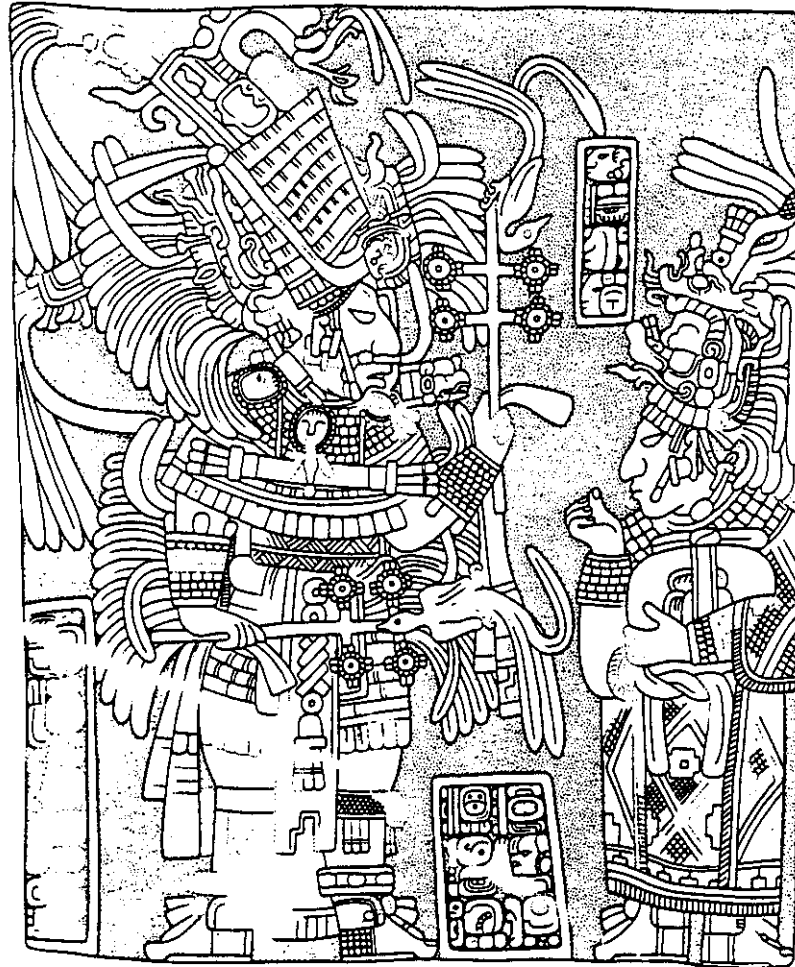


Fig. 2 Yaxchilan Lintel 5 (drawing by Ian Graham)

(Peterson and Chalif 1973:185-186, and plate 35; Alvarez del Toro 1980:184-185). Although the birds on the staffs shown in the Yaxchilan lintels are somewhat generalized, their long tails suggest that the *xukpi* in the texts refers to the Motmot and not the Solitaire.

Interestingly, the distinctive racket-shaped tips of the Motmot's tail feathers are not shown in the lintels. Perhaps the artists who carved them were simply not interested in illustrating this detail, or, since the rackets are formed by the birds' own plucking of their feather webbing (Peterson and Chalif 1973:112), the (presumably) stuffed birds

used to adorn the staffs might have been raised in captivity and restricted from stripping their tails. Alternatively, the birds used in the dance might belong to a species that does not pluck its feathers, such as the Blue-Throated Motmot (*Aspatha gularis*).

Additional support for the identification of *xukpi* with the Motmot may be found in the action of the dance shown in the lintels. The bent tail feathers of the birds in both lintels suggests that the dancers are swinging the scepters back and forth from horizontal to vertical positions. The tilting of the stuffed birds' tails that results from



Fig. 3 Motmot (after Aulie and Aulie 1978:106)

this action perhaps replicates the pendulum-like tail-swinging that is a distinctive behavioral trait of living Motmots.

The *xukpi* collocation in the Lintel 2 and 5 dance expressions at Yaxchilan also occurs as the main sign in some versions of the Copan Emblem Glyph, such as that on Copan Stela A (Fig. 4a). On other examples, the "arching kawak" may be replaced by the "double kawak," also read *pi* (Stuart 1987:11-12). In still other cases, as on

Copan Stela I (Fig. 4b), the *k(u)* is written with the full kawak, which appears under the bat's ear, confirming the original hunch that the main sign of the dance *ti* constructions at Yaxchilan consisted of the *xu* bat plus *ku*.

The ancient Maya, then, called Copan *Xukpi*, after the Motmot, whose range indeed includes both Yaxchilan, Copan, and the rest of the Maya area (see Peterson and Chalif 1973:114). Since these birds' preferred nesting site is in tunnels excavated into riverbanks, it is tempting to speculate that perhaps the original settlers of this city encountered a number of Motmot nest tunnels in the banks of the Copan river and named the city after the birds who built them.

Other versions of the Copan Emblem Glyph, such as that on the Copan Temple 11 Step, G2 (Fig. 4c), use the T854 "inverted sky" in place of the "arching kawak" or "double kawak" *pi*. Since the final syllable of the name of Copan ends in *-pi* and not just *-p*, as suggested by Stuart (1987:12), Fox and Justeson's (1984:39) suggestion of a value *pi* for the "inverted sky" is confirmed. Additional confirmation of the reading of this sign as *pi* may be found in the initial series of the Dos Pilas Hieroglyphic Stair Number 4, Step 1. Here, a sky glyph, although seemingly not inverted, is used for the main sign of the bak'tun glyph, which usually consists of either the "double kawak," the "arching kawak," or the bak'tun bird (see Thompson 1950: Figs. 26 and 27).

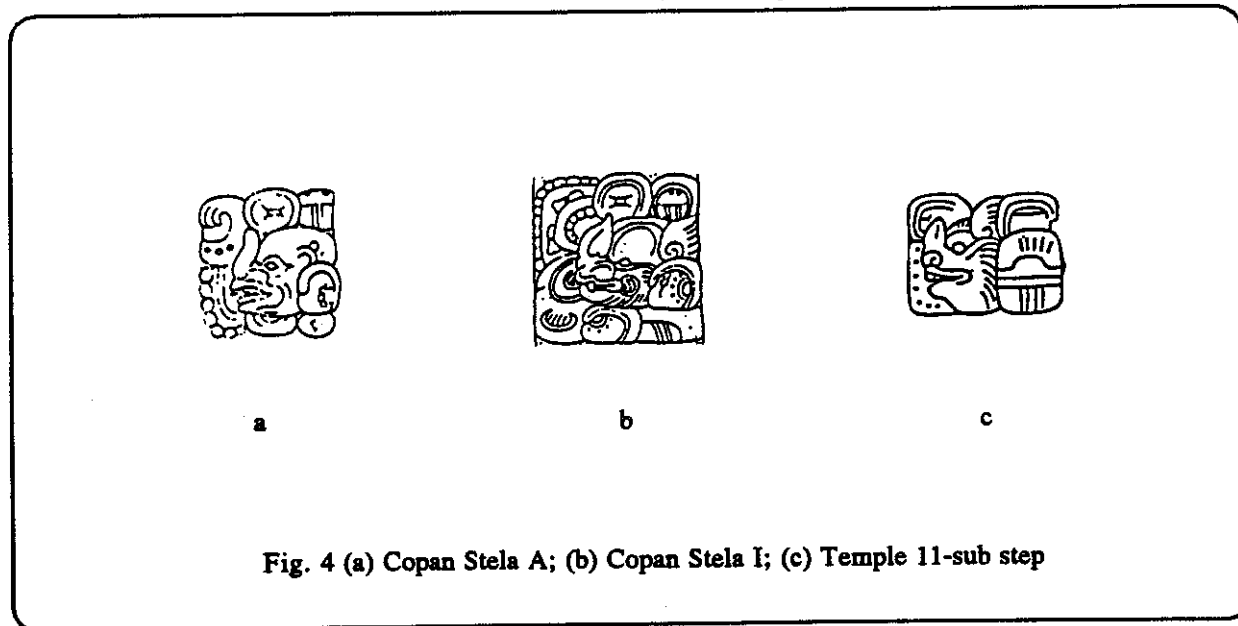


Fig. 4 (a) Copan Stela A; (b) Copan Stela I; (c) Temple 11-sub step

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