

Glyphs for “Right” and “Left”?

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Figure 1

The Marcador inscription from Tikal cites two sequential glyphs displaying the “flat hand” with variable upper signs (Figure 1). These presumably form a couplet expression of some sort, and it is reasonable to suppose that they are based on the noun **K’AB**, “hand,” with differing adjectives: “the *x* hand, (and) the *y* hand.” (An identical-looking hand sign is at times used to represent **K’AL**, “to bind,” but this is an abbreviation of a larger sign grouping.) In this short note I posit that the differing upper portions of these glyphs each have patterns of occurrence suggesting they are to be read as “right” and “left.”

The first of the paired variables is familiar as the principal component of the “south” glyph, identified first by Rosny (1876) in the *Codex Madrid*. It is not an exact replica of “south,” however, which regularly shows the addition of rows of small “u” shapes at each side, and sometimes the suffix **-la** or **-lo** (Figure 2a-b). The second of the paired terms with “hand” at Tikal is far less familiar, and is indeed a rare sign in the script, with only a handful of occurrences known. In some instances this seems to be a logogram, as in its appearance with the



Figure 2a



Figure 2b

hand, but in other settings it looks to be a CV syllabic sign.

The “south” glyph is widely thought to read *nohol*, the word for “south” in the Yucatecan language, attested also in Chontal and Cholti. The **-lo** suffix on a “south” glyph written in Naj Tunich cave offers good support for this reading (Stuart 1987), but it still remains unclear how the “south” glyph would be fully parsed as a spelling of *nohol*. The root of the term is *noh*, which has the related meanings of “large, great,” “principal,” or “right-side.” The main sign of the “south glyph,” which we have seen above the hand at Tikal, is probably a single logogram, and it is reasonable to entertain **NOH** as a possible value. (The flanking “u” shapes on the “south” glyph probably constitute a separate sign [we shall see that they never appear with the supposed **NOH** logogram outside the context of the directional term], and they are known in other settings to be parts of the syllables **xo**, **no**, and sometimes **jo**. In the south glyph, I wonder if it might be an abbreviated form of **no**, producing a full spelling **no-NOH-la** or **no-NOH-lo**, for *nohol*.)

The **NOH** reading seems fitting in the context of the “hand” terms on Tikal’s Marcador. The first glyph of the pair would simply read **NOH-K’AB**, a widespread and familiar term in Mayan languages for “right hand.” Might it be possible, to continue this line of speculation, that the other glyph stands for “left hand”? The word for “left” in proto-Ch’olan is **tz’eh* (Kaufman and Norman 1984), a word that might be entertained as a value for the sign above the second hand on the Marcador text, **TZ’EH?-K’AB**.

A **TZ’EH** reading is impossible to confirm from direct, internal evidence, but there are suggestive lines of evidence to support it as a provisional decipherment. As noted earlier, two of its appearances suggest the sign can serve as a CV syllable. On Tikal MT 9 (Figure 3), it is found after the syllable **ye-** in a combination of elements that is difficult to analyze semantically. The initial **ye-** suggests the presence of an ergative pronoun (*u*)y- before *e-*, in which case a synharmonic Ce syllabic reading for the second sign seems at least plausible.

In one of the stucco glyphs from Palenque’s Temple XVIII, the sign in question is combined with the syllable **he**, in what looks to be a transitive verb construction (Figure 4), preceded by an ergative pronoun and, in the first portion of the block, an independent “topicalizing” or demonstrative pronoun

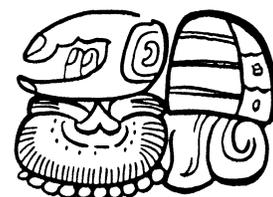


Figure 3

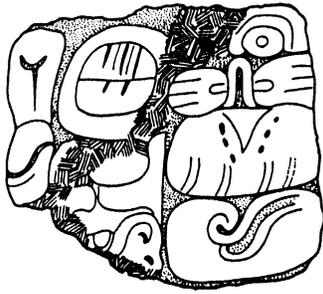


Figure 4

ha-i, for *ha'i*, “(it is) he, that one...”. Parallel constructions suggest that the syllables spelling the transitive verb ought to be synharmonic in their vowels, indicating again a **Ce** value for the sign under discussion.

Another Palenque glyph from an inscribed *incensario* suggests the same pattern (Figure 5). Near the end of the inscription a positional verb (ending in **-wa-ni**, *-wan*) describes an action involving the dedication of the sculpture. Once more, parallel spellings of *-wan* positionals indicate that their roots are regularly spelled synharmonically (cf. **pa-ta-wa-ni**, **CHUM-mu-wa-ni**, **wa-a-wa-ni**, **he-ke-wa-ni**, etc.). Here the initial sign is the toad’s head, read **e** or **he**, strongly suggesting a **Ce** value for the second sign. If we entertain a **tz’e** value for the syllable, from logographic **TZ’EH**, the result is a very fitting verb for the dedication of a censer stand: **e-tz’e-wa-ni**, *etz’-wan*, “it is set down.”

The above discussion has provided some circumstantial evidence of the phonetic values of the variable signs, possibly **NOH** and **TZ’EH** (syllabic **tz’e**), but there is further contextual evidence to consider. An inscription from “Site Q” (Figure 6a) refers to an individual bearing the name or title, **U-TZ’EH?-K’AB-K’INICH**, *Utz’eh(?)k’ab K’inich*, “The Left Hand of the Sun.” A similar glyph appears once more on Tikal’s MT9 (Figure 6b), but with the opposite adjective: **NOH-K’AB-K’INICH**, *Noh(?)k’ab K’inich*, “Right Hand (of) the Sun.” Importantly, the first of these two parallel terms is a possessive construction before **K’INICH**, similar to other names or titles that describe body parts of the sun god (for example, the Caracol name **K’AK’-U-JOL-K’INICH**, *K’ak’ Ujol K’inich*, “Fire is the Head of the

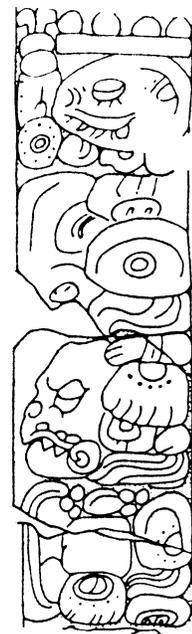


Figure 5

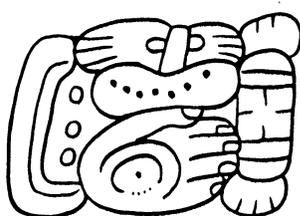


Figure 6a



Figure 6b

Sun”). Similar expressions can be traced in a few inscriptions (Figure 7), and in one instance **AJAW** replaces the **K’INICH**. The pattern supports the interpretation that the



Figure 7

hand sign and its adjective refer to some bodily feature of the sun god or some other character.

Perhaps more significant is the repeated juxtaposition of the posited terms for “right” and “left” with the sun itself. As students of Maya cosmology have often noted (Gossen 1979; Tedlock 1982; Watanabe 1983), the sun’s path defines the principal axis of the universe, with its “right” and “left” determining the perpendicular axis that corresponds to our “north” and “south.” In Chamula and other Maya communities, the celestial “sides” are perceived from the sun’s own perspective (Gossen 1979). It seems fitting, therefore, to find “right hand” and “left hand” in direct association with the sun god in the ancient texts.

In summary, the glyphic readings **NOH** and **TZ’EH** are very far from established, but it is hoped that the observations and patterns here put forward can be expanded, leading to further insights and more refined decipherments.

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