

Some notes on the Jaguar God of the Underworld

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Jaguar God of the Underworld (JGU) is without doubt one of the most important and also more enigmatic deities of the ancient maya. The cult of this god seems to be very ancient, probably originating in the Pre-Classic or even in the Olmec era. This is clear from the many, very early, representations of “were-jaguar” beings in Olmec monuments and jaguar-like gods in Pre-Classic temple facades.

During the Classic Period the JGU became one of the most important deities in the Maya pantheon as attested from the plentiful iconographic and epigraphic references in maya monuments and ceramics. With the Maya Lowland Collapse the deity seems to have lost some of its former importance, and was even assumed by some scholars to have disappeared as it could not be identified with any of the deities, for example, present in the Codexes.

Despite the importance of the god, and as is usually the case with other deities, its name has not been deciphered so far given the apparent lack of a phonetically transparent spelling. In this note I review some of the existing epigraphic data for the JGU glyphs and explore a connection that has been proposed elsewhere [FALTA] with the Post-Classic God M. This connection turns out to produce some interesting results that, in my opinion, provide a likely reading for the glyph of the JGU.

II. THE JGU IN THE CLASSIC PERIOD

A good measure of the importance of the JGU in the Classic Period is the amount of iconography associated with the god in both monuments and ceramics.

Main Characteristics of the Classic JGU

The JGU appears in the inscriptions in the form of a very characteristic glyph representing the head of a zoomorphic creature whose diagnostic features are as follows:

- a roman nose;
- a jaguar ear;
- a kind of a cord, surrounding the eye and ending in a knot above the nose;
- an “ak’bal” marking in the lower back of the head, and;
- occasionally a sharp, triangular shaped tooth.

In figure 23 we see examples from Tikal, Copan, La Corona, Naranjo, Tonina and Palenque.

With such clear diagnostic features the glyph name of the god is rather easy to identify in most inscriptions.

The Cult

In certain maya polities the JGU seems to have taken the role of a patron god, although it is not clear whether this patronage refers only to the ruling elite, the city, or even a province.

At Naranjo, for example, we find numerous references to the cult of the JGU. In altar 1 (figure 11) the ruler *aj wosaaj* links the JGU with the founding of the lineage. Later rulers of Naranjo also seem to prefer to impersonate the JGU in their monuments as in stelae 21 and 30 (figures 21 and 24). Naranjo area vessels such as [FALTA] also point to the importance of this deity in the region.

In Palenque, for example, the JGU was one of three patron gods. Several texts from the site tell the story of these deities and most importantly, the texts in the Temple of Inscriptions and the Palace tell us a bit about the cult associated with these gods. In particular, they tell us that these gods, or more likely, bundles with efigies were much revered and that, in case of war, their destruction was a major prize for the enemies. Another representation of the JGU, typical of the Palenque area, is in the form of portraits in the base of incensarios establishing a connection with fire that is well attested iconographically and epigraphically. These incensarios were mostly found in or nearby temples and in caves, an indication of ritual use.

At Tikal we find an immense amount of JGU related iconography in stelae and in temples. The god features prominently in most of the Early Classic stelae from Tikal, and the rulers at this time often carried the JGU glyph in their names. The “plaza of the seven temples”, for example, is so called due to the seven small temples that border it on the eastern side. The largest of this temples (figure 10) has large symbols of the JGU eye (to be discussed below) sculpture in the back wall. Since the JGU was the god associated with the number seven, this may indicate that these temples were used for its cult. The impersonation of the JGU in connection with fire drilling and mortuary rituals is also attested, namely in altar 5 (figure 12) where the king *jasaw chan k’awiil* and a *masu’ul* lord named *kan tuun wayis* are dressed as the JGU while exhuming the bones of a royal lady.

Several other sites, such as Yaxchilan, Tonina, Caracol, also show very important references, both iconographic and epigraphic, to the god attesting its widespread importance in the Classic Period.

The myths

Other representations of the god appear in the corpus of maya ceramics where we have glimpses of the myths he was involved in. These scenes appear mostly in Codex Style ceramics from the Nakbé area and tell us that there are three major episodes that seem to be specific of the JGU.

- “the sacrifice of the baby jaguar”. This young half-human, half-jaguar being appears to be the precursor of the “adult” JGU form. He is shown being carried or most often thrown into a *wits* monster by an aspect of god A with *chaahk* close-by. Several supernaturals witness the event (figure 13);
- “the stoning of the JGU”. This episode is known only from one vase (figure 16) and shows an anthropomorphic supernatural throwing a large stone at the JGU. The JGU appears squashed under the stone;
- “the burning of the JGU”. The imolation of the JGU is perhaps the most important episode related to the JGU and shows one or more supernaturals with lit torches, preparing to burn a tied up JGU (figures 14 and 15). This episode is also represented at Naranjo stela 35 in a similar context. The inscriptions are also very explicit and describe the action as *puluy* (“was burned”).

The sacrifice by imolation seems to have been used by the maya, namely with war prisoners, and it seems that in the act they re-enacted this mythic episode with the JGU. In fact, this has been observed by Grube and Martin [8] in the context of a conflict between Yaxha’ and Naranjo in the Terminal-Classic. In Naranjo stela 35 (figure 19), the current Naranjo ruler, *itsamnaaj k’awiil*, holds a lit torch in preparation to imolate a tied captive nearby. A sculpture from Toniná also shows a prisoner from the site of *anaayte’* tied and seated and wearing the typical attributes of the JGU.

Prisoners were commonly subject to an action, *nawaj* (“was adorned”), and this may be the case of one such prisoner in the guise of the JGU prepared for the final sacrifice with fire.

Association with fire

The association of the JGU with fire rituals and, in particular, with fire drilling is well attested both iconographically and epigraphically as discussed by David Stuart [9] in an insightful paper.

Impersonators of the JGU commonly carry a knotted staff used to drill fire. Very clear examples are, stela 30 of Naranjo (figure 24), stela 9 from Sacul (figure ??[FALTA]) and altar 5 of Tikal (figure 12), as given by Stuart. Several other examples may be seen at Tikal from the late 5th, early 6th century. In stela 13 (figure 25) we have the ruler holding a drilling staff and the inscription reads: *u b'aaj k'ahk' u tahn JGU ...* or “the image of fire is the center of the JGU”.

An interesting point about fire-drilling rituals is that they were common to Mesoamerican civilizations and that, for example, with the Aztecs they were performed by night. There is some evidence that this was also the case with the Maya. In fact, in the caption from Naranjo stela 30 we read: *u b'aaj ti ak'ab' ... u b'aaj JGU* or “the image, in darkness, ...the image of the JGU”.

Another important link of the JGU to fire is attested by the fact that he is by far the most commonly represented deity in efigy incensarios in the Maya area [9]. The amazing examples from the Palenque area are well known but several other example exist from other sites such as Seibal and even from the Maya highlands.

Association with war The association of the JGU with war is well attested in the inscriptions. The head of the JGU appears pervasively in war shields held by rulers as in Naranjo stela 21 (figure 21). In fact, the god seems closely related with the fundamental war symbols of the maya, flint spears and shields. This is particularly evident in the iconography of the Tablet of the Temple of the Sun in Palenque (figure 22).

Jaguar featured supernaturals are also the most commonly represented in war palanquins. The palanquin captured to Naranjo by *yik'iniiy chan k'awiil* of Tikal is an anthropomorphic representation of the JGU (figure 20) and he is named *k'in hix ik hu'un* (“sun jaguar dark headband”). There are other references to these *k'in b'ahlam* (“sun jaguar”) palanquins, namely from Dos Pilas, which may also be manifestations of the JGU. Naranjo stela 23 (figure 27) refers the burning of a god, explicitly represented as the JGU head, belonging to a Yaxha' ruler, likely a reference to a palanquin god. The vase K7716 (figure 17), also from the Naranjo area, names the ruler *aj wosaaaj* and shows a court assembly with a nearby JGU palanquin.

III. THE CLASSIC JGU AND THE POST-CLASSIC GOD M

Of the Post-Classic gods known from the surviving codexes, one seems to share some characteristics with the JGU, namely the association with nocturnal fire drilling rituals and war. This is Schella's God M, also known as the “pinocchio god” because of its characteristic nose. It was also the god of merchants in Yucatan, a feature apparently not shared by the Classic Period JGU. Scholars have long identified God M with the god referred by Landa as *ek chuah* (spelling uncertain). The god appears only once in the Dresden Codex which contains mostly divinatory material but is frequently depicted in the Madrid Codex which deals with more mundane subjects.

Speaking of the military aspect of god M, Karl Taube [7] refers:

“In the Madrid Codex, God M appears frequently with a carrying pack and a spear. Schellas (1904:36) interprets the military aspect of God M as a reflection of the dangerous life of the merchant, who frequently must repel attacks while traveling in foreign territories.”

the cult of this god was apparently connected with the need for security during traveling:

“Landa (in Tozzer (1941:107) notes that during a journey, one would offer incense at night to *ek chuhah* to ensure a safe return. The same traits of militarism, cacao, and night fire ceremonies are to be found with the Yacatecuhtli merchant complex of Central Mexico. Although he is not black, Yacatecuhtli has the same elongated nose found on God M. To the Aztec, merchants were considered as front-line warriors or vanguards of the army. One particular type, the *naoaloztomeca*, were disguised merchants, who penetrated enemy territory as spies (Sahagún 1950-71, bk. 9:21-25).”

Finally, referring to the jaguar attributes of God M, Taube says:

“Along with the agedness and black body coloration, the Post-Classic God M displays another physical aspect of God L: a face with jaguar attributes. Thus, on the aforementioned gold disk in Santa Rita style, he appears with long canines and spots around the mouth, characteristics suggesting of the jaguar. In the previously mentioned mural scene at Santa Rita, the full figure God M also appears to have jaguar ears and spots around the mouth.”

In terms of iconography, the main characteristics of this god as observed in the Codexes are as follows:

- black body, except of a small portion around the mouth;
- a very unusual “pinocchio nose”;
- dropped lower lip;
- a curl around the eye.

In the Madrid Codex the god carries an elaborate headdress, a traveler’s bundle and a flint spear. The contexts where it is found in the Madrid Codex can be summarized as follows:

- drilling fire (figure 6);
- walking, carrying flint spear and bundle (figure 7);
- being killed by another supernatural using a flint spear and a large stone (figure 8);
- participating in some ritual, usually presentation of offerings (figure 9).

Interestingly, the scenes where God M is being killed may allude to the perils of traveling, of being killed on the road. Security was a major concern for the maya merchants. Moreover, God M seems to be killed with a spear and always being thrown a large stone. This may have an interesting parallel in the Classic Period myth of “the stoning of the JGU”, previously discussed.

The name glyph of god M in the Codexes is almost always given as a logogram that I will be referring here as “dark eye” (figure 18). The glyph seems to represent the eye of the deity with the curl around it.

The Connection between the JGU and God M

Besides the association with fire and war, the JGU and God M share another important characteristic: the name glyph. As I observed above, the name of God M in the Codexes is given by the “dark eye” logogram. Interestingly, this same logogram seems to substitute freely for the head variant of JGU in Classic Period inscriptions. As evidence for this we may observe the following:

- at Pomona (as pointed out by Erik Boot) and Seibal the JGU is substituted by the “dark eye” as the patron god in the ISIG (figures 29 and 30);
- the head variant of the JGU also substitutes freely for the “dark-eye” glyph in the glyph C of the lunar series;
- as first noted by Erik Boot, in a mirror support from Topoxte’ we get the the expression JGU-*nib*’ written with the head variant (figure 4). In several stelae and an altar from Naranjo we see the same expression as a title of the local kings. Here it is written as “dark-eye”-*nib*’ (figures 3 and 26). This is evidence for a Naranjo area title and for the equivalence between the JGU head variant and the “dark-eye”;
- the JGU head variant is sometimes suffixed with a *-ji* syllable, for example:
 - in a mirror support from Topoxte’ (figure 4);
 - Copan stela F (figure 2);
 - at Yaxchilan, Lintel 10 (at E2);
 - this phonetic complement is also observed in one example for the “dark-eye” glyph, in the PSS of K681 (figure 1). Notice that the suffix is clearly a *-ji*. Compare with the similar suffix in the name of *aj wosaaj (a-wo-sa-ji)* in the same text.
- the name of the JGU in the inscriptions of Naranjo stela 35 and Yaxha’ stela 31 (figure 28) is given as *yax u nen b’ahlam ik JGU*. The last part of this name, *ik ?j*, is structurally very similar to the colonial Yucatec *ek chuah*.

IV. THE MEANING OF *chuah*

God M was likely called *ek chuah* (spelling uncertain). Usually translated as “black scorpion”. This however makes little sense for the name of a god that is associated with merchants and fire rituals. Checking the dictionaries for an appropriate CVC root, we find that there is one *chuh* with the generic meaning of “to burn” or “to sacrifice by fire” in several lowland languages of the Yucatec branch (as far as I can tell the root is not attested in Ch’olan branch languages):

Odense Dictionary [4]:

BURN	Yuca	chuj	(1975a; trans.; ”burn someone”)
BURN	Yuca	chuj	(1967/1973:cs143; verb: ”burn”)
BURN	Yuca	chuj	(1964a/1973:cs143; verb: ”burn”)
BURN	Itza	chujul	(1971; Span. ”quemar”)
BURN	Mopa	chuw-ic	(1962/1973:cs143; ”burn (it)”)
BURN	Mopa	chuw	(1962/1973:cs143)
BURN	Jaca	chaw	(1976)
BURN	Kanj	chaw	(1976)

Colonial Yucatec [1]:

- CHUH: sacrificio, holocausto. CHUHIL: holocausto quemado en fuego. CHUHANKIL: sacrificar y sacrificio; sacrificar algo; sacrificar quemando en fuego o matando. CHUHINAH: sacrificar quemando.
- CHUH: quemar herida, o dar botón de fuego. CHUUH: quemar. CHUHAH: cauterizar; quemar pegando el fuego o lo caliente sin incendiar. CHUH KAB: horno o calera.
- CHUH: labrar con fuego.

One cannot fail to link these entries to the episode of the “burning of the JGU”, where the god appears ready to be sacrificed through imolation. Moreover, this is inline with the fire imagery of both the JGU and God M. The dark color of God M may be an allusion to burning.

While the connection between the JGU, God M and fire is in good agreement with the root *chuh*, the connection with merchants seems elusive. However, an explanation may be found in the following entries from Colonial Yucatec [1].

- CHUH: la bolsa que se forma con la falda del vestido, prendiéndola a la cintura o llevándola alzada con la mano o la que se forma en un lienzo tomado o suspendido por sus extremos. CHUCHUH: cosa enfaldada o pendiente de lienzo tomado por sus cuatro extremos. CHUHUL: la porción de cosas traídas en la falda abolsada o lienzo tomado por sus extremos, contenidas en la bolsa del CHUH.
- CHUH: enfaldar. CHUHAH: llevar en la falda formando bolsa, en lienzo tomado por sus extremos o puntas. CHUUH: llevar algo como granos, en el rebozo, delantal o falda, abolsándolos.

Indeed, the same CVC root, *chuh*, that takes the meaning of “burn”, “imolate” also means “to put something in a bag/bundle”. This is a fitting name for a merchant god and, if proven correct, a lovely pun connecting a fire deity with a merchant deity.

As a final remark, it is worth mentioning that the names of deities are likely some of the most conservative items in the vocabulary of a language due to the divine nature of the subjects. Moreover, god names spread easily geographically through contacts and importation of cults. This fact points to the real possibility that, taking linguistic evolution into consideration, the Classic Period JGU and its Post Classic counterpart, were known by the same name.

For these reasons I believe that the Classic form of the Jaguar God of the Underworld was likely called *chuhaaaj*, meaning “burned one”.

V. CONCLUSION

In this note I reviewed the iconographic and epigraphic data currently available for the JGU. Evidence connecting the JGU to fire and war is overwhelming. The possible connection between the Classic JGU and the Post-Classic God M was explored and some interesting facts regarding the etymology of the name *chuah* are presented. In particular, a root *chuh* exists in Yucatec languages that relates both to “burning” and “putting something into bundles”.

The data provides an interesting connection between fire and merchant deities, perhaps enlightening the origin of the Post Classic *ek chuah*. Based on this material I speculate that the name of the Classic JGU was possibly read *chuhaaaj* with a meaning of “burned one”, thus establishing a continuity of the Classic tradition into Post Classic times.

VI. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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FIGURES



Fig. 1. Detail of K681



Fig. 2. Detail of Copan stela F



Fig. 3. Detail of Naranjo stela 21

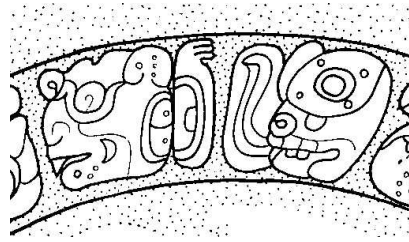


Fig. 4. Detail Topoxte mirror drawing



Fig. 5. Detail from the Madrid Codex

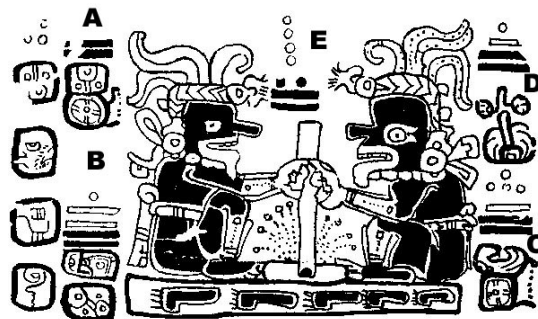


Fig. 6. Detail from the Madrid Codex



Fig. 7. Detail from the Madrid Codex

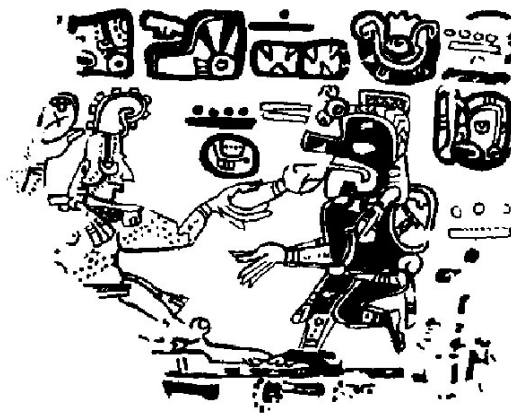


Fig. 8. Detail from the Madrid Codex



Fig. 9. Detail from the Madrid Codex



Fig. 10. Plaza of the Seven Temples at Tikal

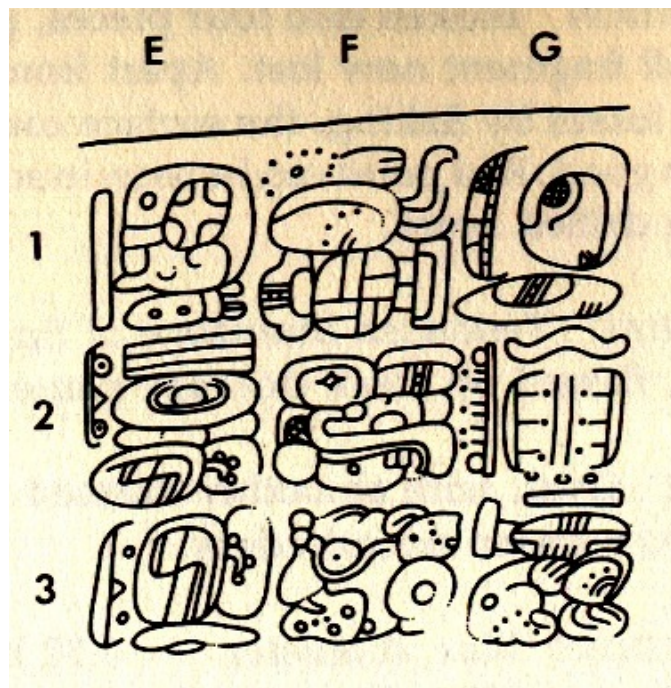


Fig. 11. Detail of Altar 1 from Naranjo

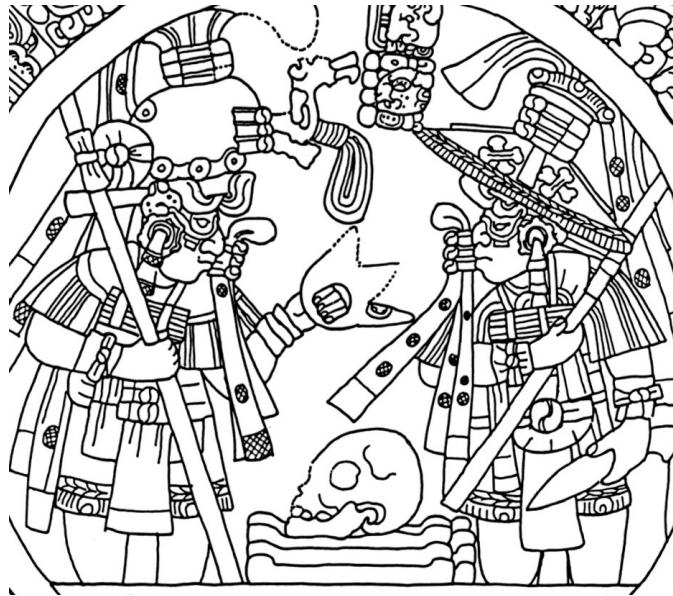


Fig. 12. Detail of Altar 5 from Tikal



Fig. 13. Detail of K2208



Fig. 14. Detail of K1299



Fig. 15. Detail of K4598



Fig. 16. Detail of K4118



Fig. 17. Detail of K7716



Fig. 18. Examples of the “dark-eye” glyph

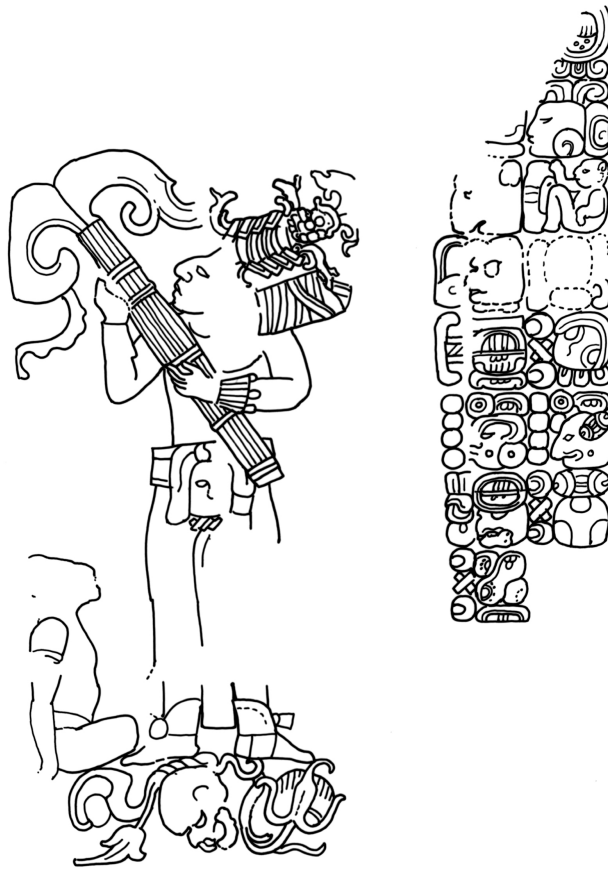


Fig. 19. Stela 35 from Naranjo

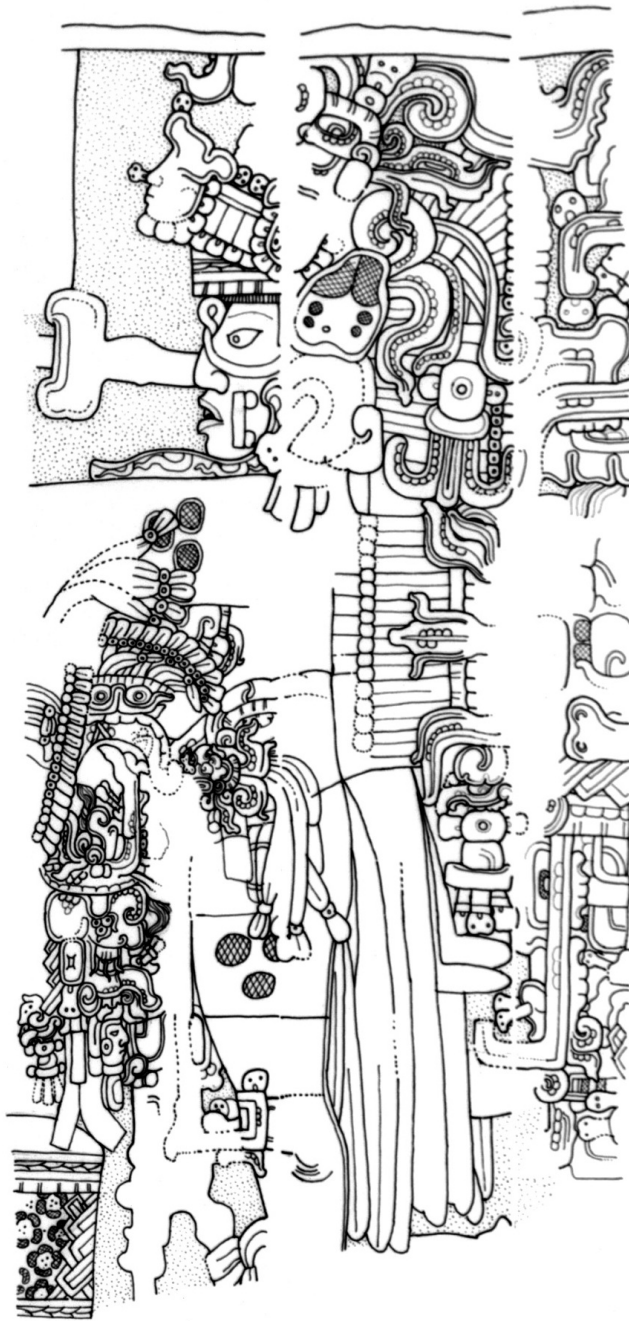


Fig. 20. Tikal lintel 2 from temple 4

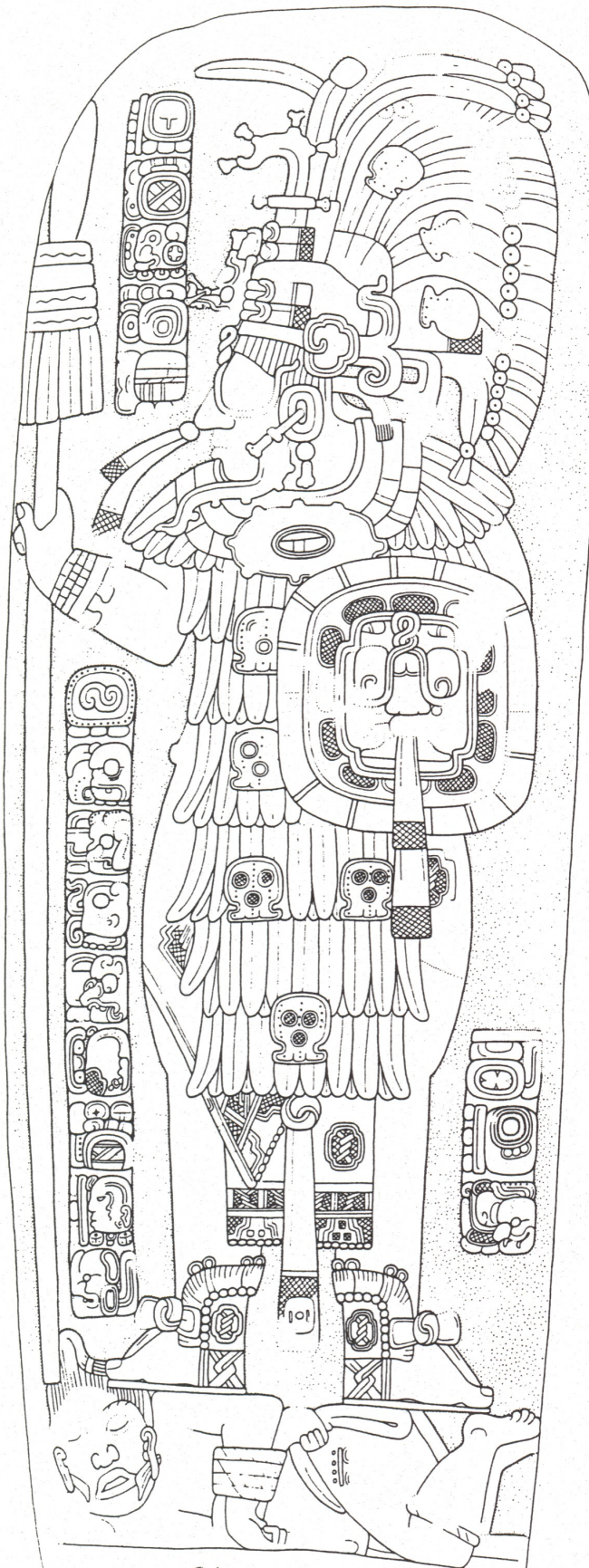


Fig. 21. Naranjo stela 21

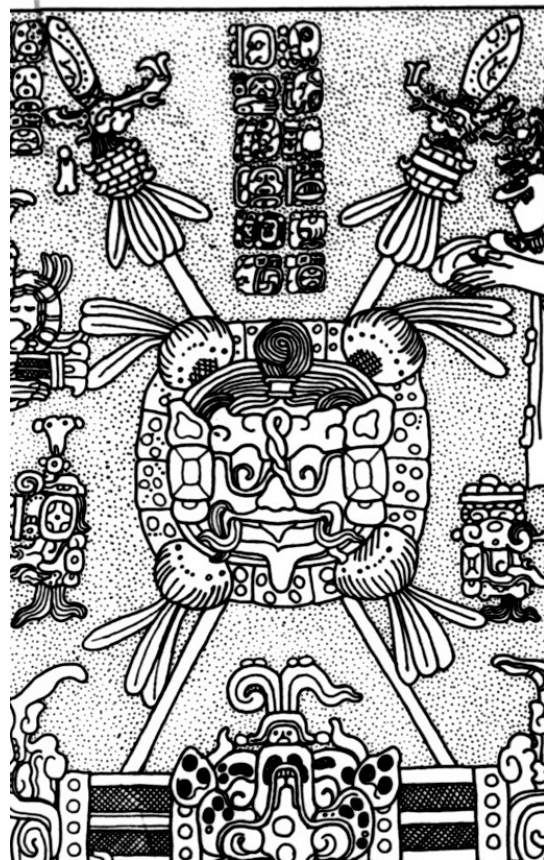


Fig. 22. Detail of Tablet from the Temple of the Sun

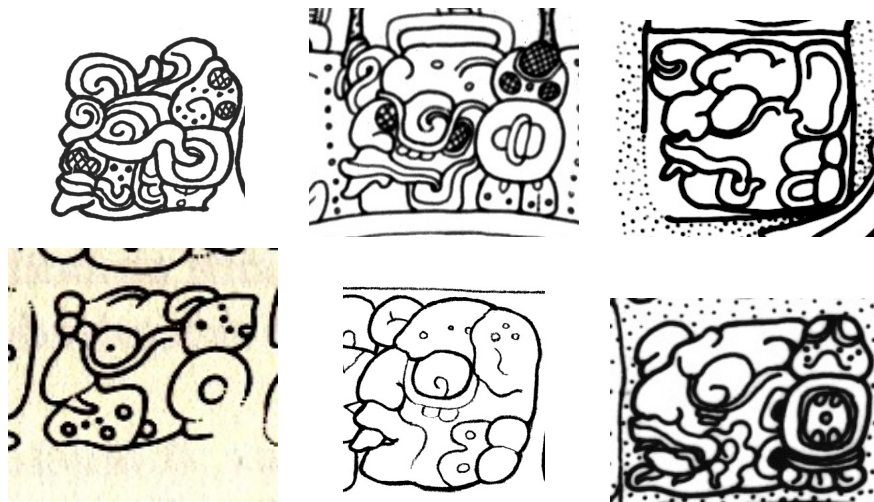


Fig. 23. Examples of the JGU head variant

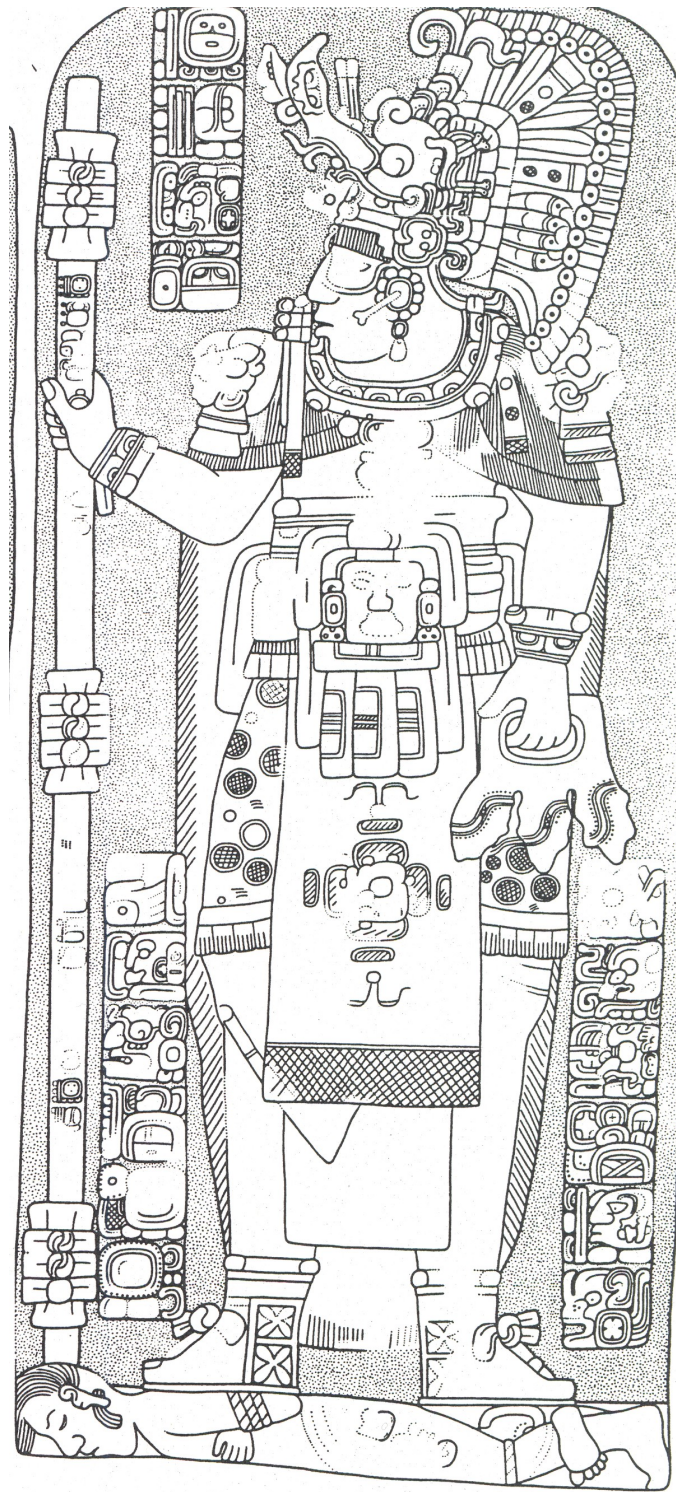


Fig. 24. Naranjo stela 30

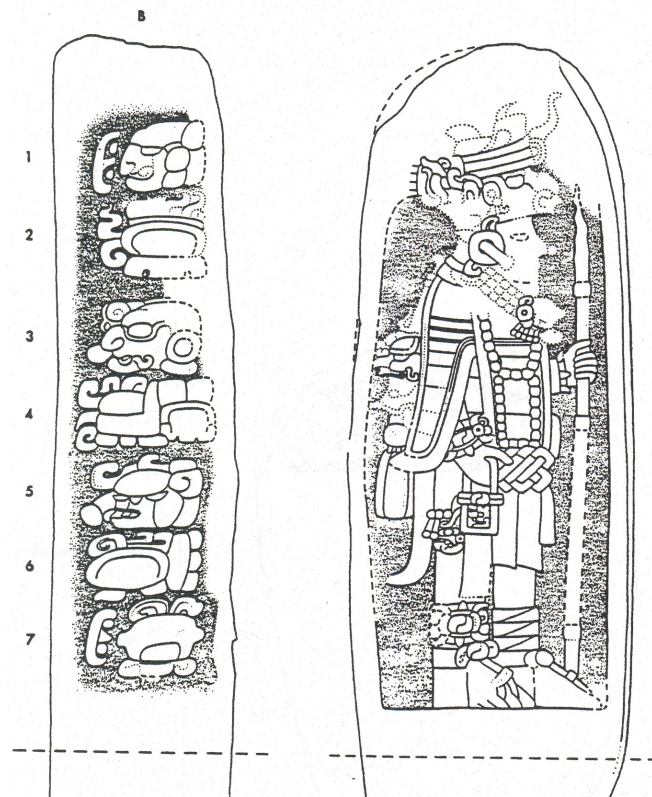


Fig. 25. Tikal stela 13

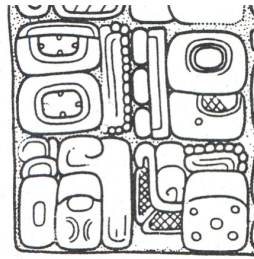


Fig. 26. Detail of Naranjo stela 13

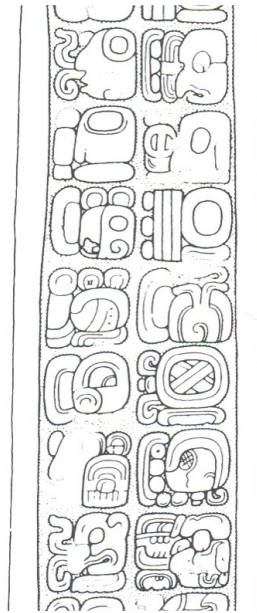


Fig. 27. Detail of Naranjo stela 23

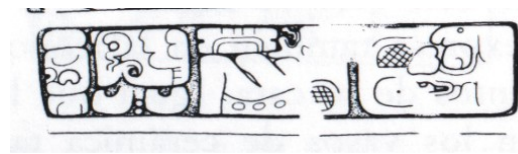


Fig. 28. Detail of Yaxha' stela 31

Fig. 29. Detail of Pomona ISIG with "dark-eye"

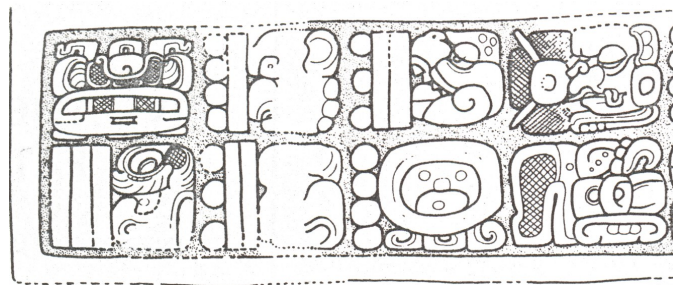


Fig. 30. Detail of Seibal ISIG with "dark-eye"