

A Possible Logogram for TZ'AP

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Stela 26 of Tikal – the so-called "Red Stela" – bears one of the most beautiful of Early Classic inscriptions. It has also proved to be a somewhat opaque text, despite the fine preservation of the extant glyphs. Here I would like to focus attention on the verb of the inscription (Figure 1), since its visual form may incorporate a unique logogram for the common verb root *tz'ap*, "to erect, place in the ground."

The widespread syllabic spelling of *tz'ap* (**tz'a-pa**, with different derivations) was first identified by Nikolai Grube (1990), who discussed its frequent appearance as a dedication verb for stelae. Typically we find it used in larger verb phrases such as:

Utz'apaw tuun..., "he erects the stone..."

tz'ahpaj u lakamtuunil..., "his stela was erected..."

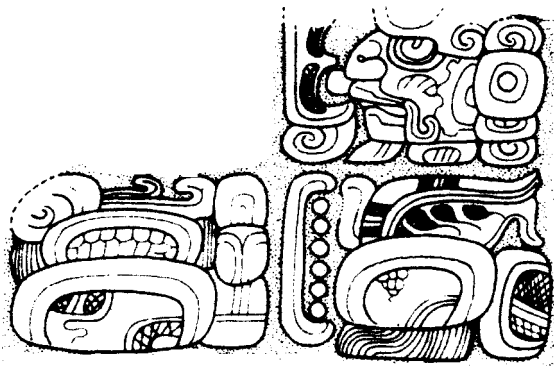


Figure 1. Verbal passage from Tikal, Stela 26. Drawing by William R. Coe.

The last form, a passive derivation, is the most common, and it is well attested on several Early Classic monuments from Tikal.

Turning to Stela 26's inscription, we find that the first discernable glyph in column D displays the head of the god GI. Its affixes point to a strong resemblance to the head variant of the demonstrative term *alay*, "here, thus," a word best known as the introducing glyph of the PSS (independently deciphered by Barbara MacLeod and Yuriy Polyukhovich). *Alay* routinely precedes verbs, and even before its decipherment it was recognized as a rhetorical "highlighter" to mark the featured event of an inscription.

The supposed verb at Ap1 has an unusual form, and I know of no similar combination of elements. A maize cob with a **NAL** superfix rests atop **KAB'**, "earth," which in turn precedes a final "knot" element that bears a strong similarity to **HU'N**, "paper, headband." All things considered, it is a weird glyph. That it is a verb is more strongly indicated by the next glyph, which much to one's relief is quite readable as **U-LAKAM-TUUN-ni-IL**, *u lakamtuunil*, "his stela." In this case it might be better understood as "their stela," since the string of glyphs that follows seems to name different gods and historical ancestors, including Chak Bay Kan, Siyaj Chan K'awiil, and Chak Tok Ich'aak.

Back to the "maize-on-earth" verbal glyph: The knotted suffix is of great interest, for it is

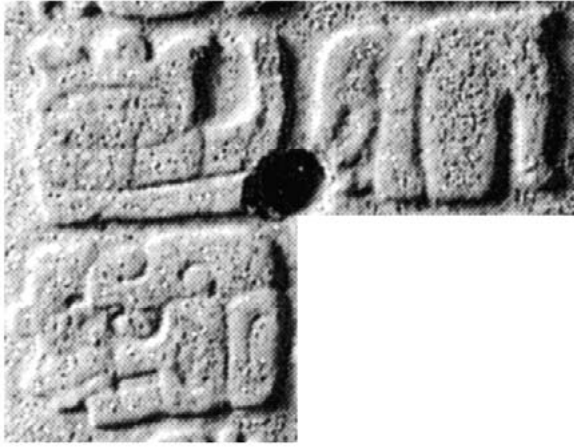


Figure 2. A possible parallel sequence from Tikal, Stela 40. The suffix on the initial verb (*tz'ap*) likely is the knot-like sign. (From Valdés, Fahsen and Cosme 1997:40 [detail of photograph by Daniel Chauche]).

known to appear on other verbs in the Early Classic inscriptions. On Stela 40, for example, we find it as a suffix on the verb **tz'a-pa-ja-KNOT** (Figure 2). The same suffix also is found on an accession verb from El Temblor, Stela 1, as well as in a text fragment from Copan (the so-called "Fragment V'3" published by Morley [1920:118]) (Figure 3). I have no satisfactory explanation for the knot-like suffix on these verbs (but I doubt it is the same as the **HU'N** sign known from other contexts). Its presence on verbs in Early Classic inscriptions is striking and possibly points to a rare change in verb morphology or spelling practices over the course of the Classic period. At any rate, there is good reason to suppose that the knotted suffix on the probable verb on Stela 26 (however that is read) presents another example of the pattern.

The presence of the *u lakamtuunil* "his stela" glyph strongly suggests that the maize-on-earth verb is a dedicatory verb. Might it in fact be a logographic form of **TZ'AP**, in a more complete parallel to the verb phrase on Stela 40? I see this as an intriguing possibility, for two reasons. First, the maize-on-earth form arguably works as a single sign, given the obvious natural association between its internal components. Second, and most suggestive, is the meaning of the root *tz'ap* in Mayan languages. Grube's decipherment of the syllabic **tz'a-pa** was so fitting for stela dedication, given that in proto-Ch'olan *tz'ap* is "drive in the ground" (Spanish *sembrar*) (see Kaufman

and Norman 1984:134). In Ch'ol the word can refer to the planting of a tree or a post. Stela 26's verb, with its maize plant atop "earth," seems to be a close visual approximation of the idea, and the same graphical arrangement might cue other seemingly related meanings of the root in Mayan languages, such as Yucatec *tz'ap*, "to put one thing atop another."

In sum, I believe we may have a unique example of a logogram for **TZ'AP** (of course, a single instance of a sign makes confirmation of any reading impossible). If correct, it is well worth considering why the sign never makes an appearance in Classic inscriptions. Stela 26's early date may hold a partial explanation, given that older Maya texts generally display a more frequent use of logograms.

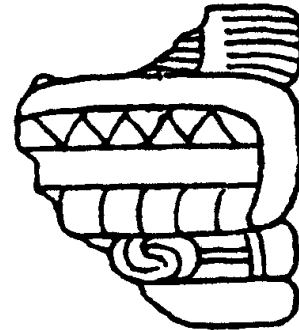


Figure 3. Copan, "Fragment V'3." (From Morley 1920:118, Fig. 20f.)

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