



Glyph Dwellers

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A New Reading Proposal for the Water Scroll Sign T579 as YAM

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The hieroglyph listed as T579 (**Fig. 1a**) in the Thompson (1962) catalog and ZUP in the catalog of Macri andLooper (2003), is only seldom attested in Maya hieroglyphic writing. Basically, it occurs in only few secure contexts: 1) as part of the emblem glyph of Altun Ha and its place name (**Fig. 1b-d**); 2) as part of the emblem glyph of Topoxte (**Fig. 1.f**), 3) in context of a female nominal phrase with the logogram **EK'** (**Fig. 1g**), 4) designating the name of a mountain, **SAK-T579-wi-WITZ**, (**Fig. 1h**), and 5) as part of the nominal phrase of a *wahy* being formerly known as "water-jaguar" (**Fig. 1i**). There are also some examples of T579 in fragmentary inscriptions, where the contexts are, however, not clear (**Fig. 1j, k**).

So far, the most comprehensive study about the glyph T579, which is also known as the 'Water Scroll' Sign, has been published by Helmke, Guenter, and Wanyerka (2018). Their excellent article focuses on the appearances of the Water Scroll emblem glyph, which is associated with the Altun Ha royal family, and, as they argue, stresses the importance of Altun Ha despite of the seemingly small size of that site. The authors briefly mention the possible phonetic reading of the glyph as follows: "... in the absence of a fuller understanding of the semantics of this sign, we are not yet closer to proposing a decipherment. Yet, the iconography does, however, make it clear that the sign marks bodies of water, perhaps specifically freshwater, and may, in fact, represent a wave" (Helmke, Guenter and Wanyerka 2018: 115). As illustrated in **Figs. 2** and **3**, the form of T579 shows precisely the outline of a wave, with some small circles and dots inside representing bubbles, as can be seen in several examples where the sign clearly appears as part of aquatic landscapes.



Fig. 1. Occurrences of the logogram T579 (all drawings by the author): **a.** T579 in Thompson 1962; **b.** Jadeite plaque from Tomb B-4/6, Altun Ha; **c.** Drawing 34; Naj Tunich; **d.** Carved bone pin from Burial 116, Tikal; **e.** Carved bone pin from Burial 43, Chau Hiix; **f.** Example of the Topoxte toponym as **CHAK-T579-ma-NAL**; **g.** Nominal phrase of Lady 'Shining Star' of Yaxha on K635; **h.** name of supernatural mountain on wall of Tomb 25, Rio Azul; **i.** Name of a wahy creature on K0771; **j.** Fragment of Monument 133, Tonina; **k.** T579-ma on vessel in private collection (after Helmke, Guenter and Wanyerka 2018: 115); **l.** Ceramic bowl from the Naranjo area, MS0285; **m.** MS1680, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; **n.** K4562.

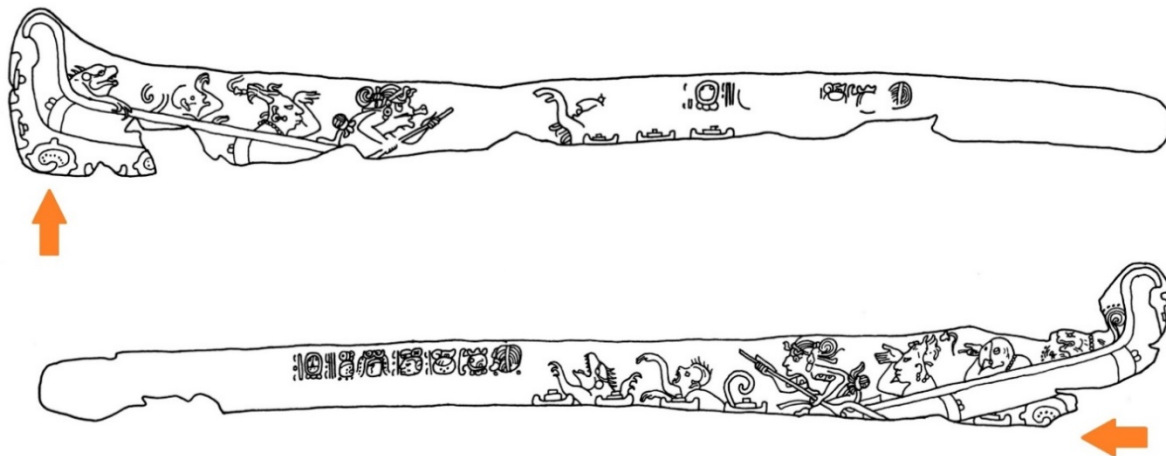


Fig. 2. Example of the 'Water Scroll' as an iconographic symbol on an incised bone from Tikal Burial 116 (The Linda Schele drawing collection, Schele number 2014; <http://research.famsi.org/schele>).

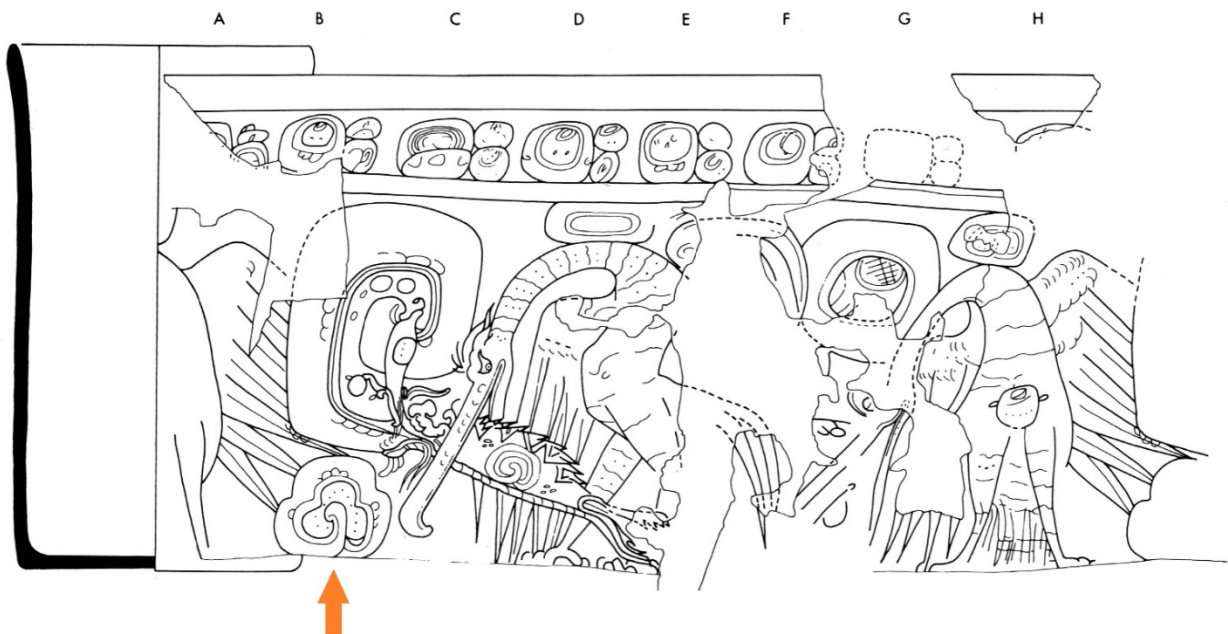


Fig. 3. Example of the 'Water Scroll' symbol as an iconographic element on a ceramic vessel from Tikal Burial 81, Structure 9, Group 4G-1. Line drawing by T. Patrick Culbert (1993:fig. 43d).

Furthermore, they mention previous proposals for a phonetic reading of the sign: "Marc Zender... initially suggested the value of **HA'** for the Water Scroll sign, based on its association with aquatic motifs and connotations. Similarly, in the monumental report of the Southern Belize Epigraphic Project, Phil Wanyerka (2003:37) suggested the reading of **JA'** for this same logogram. More recently, Sebastián Matteo (2015) has proposed the reading of **OM'** 'froth' for the same sign on the basis of the same pattern of complementation. These suggestions, however, fail to account properly for the accompanying

syllabograms, particularly the **-ni** complement seen on the jadeite plaque" (Helmke, Guenter and Wanyerka 2018: 115, note 2).

It is necessary that any proposed phonetic reading for the 'Water Scroll' sign should consider the above-mentioned occurrences. In doing so, the phonetic complements must be explained, and the translation of its reading has to make sense in each context. As is argued here, this is not the case for the reading proposal as **HA'**, nor for **OM**, given that neither "water star" nor "foamy star" appear to make sense (Fig. 1g), nor do "white water mountain" or "white foamy mountain" apply convincingly (Fig. 1h).



Fig. 4. Examples of the 'water jaguar' on K0771, K0791 and K7220 (Photographs courtesy of Justin Kerr).

At least three ceramic vessels depict and name a supernatural being known as the 'water jaguar' (Fig. 4). In each case they are referred to as a *wahy* of a lord of Seibal/Ceibal (see also Grube and Nahm 1994:690, fig. 6). On vessel K0771 (Fig. 4a), we see that the logogram **HA'** "water" is followed by T579, but not replaced by it. This may indicate that the name of this *wahy* figure was not simply "water jaguar."

The **-ni** ending as well as the phonetic complementation **-ma** are unaccounted for in the **HA'** and **OM** proposals, respectively, with the exception that **OM** ends in **-m**. One exceptional example shows a **-la** ending, however, this suffix is unlikely to be a phonetic complement for the word stem, as Helmke, Guenter and Wanyerka (2018: 115, Footnote 2) argued: "The presence of the **-la** sign may cue a **-VI** derivational suffix, such as an abstractive, and is thereby unlikely to serve as a phonetic complement and can therefore be set aside" (see Fig. 1j). In the other example, where the **-la** ending occurs (the Topoxte toponym), the **-la** sign serves as a phonetic complement for the **NAL** glyph. Thus, the question arises in which contexts the Water Scroll symbol occurs and in which contexts it is absent.

In fact, the 'Water Scroll' sign never substitutes for the 'WATER' sign T556 **HA'**, although it shows up in relation to water in iconographic contexts. Furthermore, there are few examples of 'foamy' or 'frothy' cacao mentioned in ceramic inscriptions (Matteo 2015, cited in Helmke, Guenter and Wanyerka 2018: p. 115). However, the 'Water Scroll' sign (T579) discussed here never occurs as a prefix to the term "cacao" (*kakaw*) as a separate sign. Therefore, it can be assumed that another 'water scroll' element does form an intimate part the **ka** grapheme (T738), which shows a fish, probably in an aquatic realm, blowing bubbles (Fig. 11-n).

Generally, the 'Water Scroll' sign is quite infrequent. Nevertheless, the aquatic theme is very important in Maya art, and the ancient Maya seem to have focused their attention mainly on freshwater bodies. Nonetheless, I do not concur with the idea that the sign in question is associated with fresh water, as



Helmke, Guenter and Wanyerka (2018) suspected, but I do find their idea productive that the sign may represent a wave, and more specifically waves of rough water as one usually finds them at sea or at the sea shore. As listed in the following table, a consultation of various Mayan dictionaries yields promising entries for the lexeme *yam* (and *yaam*, respectively) (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Mayan terms possibly related to Classic-period lexeme *yam/yaam*.

Language	Lexeme	Translation	Source
Yukatek	yam	concauidad y espacio entre dos cosas, e intervalo o distancia de tiempo	(Arzápalo Marín 1995:363)
	yaam	olas u ondas del mar	
	u yam kaknab	las olas del mar	
	yaam	intervalo, espacio	(Barrera Vásquez, et al. 1980:966)
	yaam	olas u ondas de la mar	
	yaam yaam	ola, onda de agua	
	yaam-ankil	olear, hacer olas	
	yaam	olas del mar	(Gómez Navarrete 2009: 85)
Lacandon	ya'm	ola (wave)	(Hofling 2014:401)
Ch'ol	yäm	rinse, enjuagarlo	(Hopkins, Josserand, and Cruz Guzman 2011:285)
Ch'olti'	yamanic	oro	(Morán 2004:34)
	yam	riña	
Chontal	yamän	reparar en el molino	(Keller and Luciano G. 1997:294)
Ch'orti'	yam	round, circular, ring, rounded surface or area	(Wisdom 1950:765)
	uyam e k'ahk'	rounded interior of the firebox (of the fireplace)	
	yamchan	ringworm	
Chuj	yama'	to grab hold of something (in any fashion)	(Hopkins 2012:406)
Tojolabal	yama	agarrar, pescar, detener	(Lenkersdorf 1979:vol. 1 416)
Tzeltal	yam	inclinarse, arquear (tallo de un árbol para alcanzar a cortar las frutas)	(Polian 2018:684)
K'ichee'	yamanic abah	Esmeralda	(Dürr and Sachse 2017:117)
	yamanik	to glitter, shine, to be brilliant	(Christenson n.d.:150)

As can be seen, *yam* or *yaam* has the meaning of "wave", and more specifically "wave of the sea." In this regard, the Altun Ha emblem glyph (**Fig. 1b**), which includes a *-ni* postfix, can now be read as **K'UH-YAM-ni-AJAW** *k'uhul yamaan ajaw*, with a possible translation of "holy lord of the glittering waves," following the entries similar to *yaman* in various dictionaries, including Ch'olti'. In this case, the *ni* may serve to indicate a nominalizing suffix for nouns, *-an* (see Lacadena García Gallo and Davletshin 2013:83). In



Tojolobal, *-an* is a suffix which derives verbal adjectives from action verbs (e.g. *lut* "close" into *lutan* "closed" (Lenkersdorf 1979:v. 1, 48)), while in Yukatek, *-a'n* can transform a verb into the past participle form (e.g. *lub* "fall" into *luba'n* "fallen" (Barrera Vásquez, Bastarrachea Manzano, and Brito Sansores 1980:463)). In a sense, *-an* bestows a lasting quality to an action. The actions of closing or falling happen in an instant, but the suffix renders them more permanent. In the context of *yam* "wave," the *-an* suffix changes the ephemeral glittering of a wave into a permanent shiny object, as seen in the dictionary entries referring to gold and emeralds.

Furthermore, when applying the **YAM** value to the toponym of Topoxte, this locative can be read convincingly as **CHAK-YAM-ma-NAL** *chak yamnal*, "place of big waves." In a broader sense, *yam* also means "curved surface." The entries in the Ch'orti' dictionary can thus be better understood as "curved" instead of "round." The term *yam*, therefore, has several meanings; however, many of these values can be combined into one semantic field. The waves are curved, thus obviously moving around and thereby "glitter" by means of reflecting the sunlight. Even the meaning of fighting seems to belong to the same field, as fighting or wrestling may involve the curving of limbs or bodies as they attack each other.

Figure 4 shows three examples of the 'water jaguar' from painted ceramic vessels. In all three scenes, the animal figure is stated to be a *wahy* of a lord of Seibal/Ceibal. The pose of the animal is the same in all three instances. Note the paws reaching outside of the frame which represents a body of water. Obviously, these three images all depict the same *wahy* figure. Therefore, the name of this figure should be the same in all three instances. However, the manner in which its name is written differs slightly on all three vessels. On K0771 it is written as **HA'-T579-ma HIIX** (**Fig. 4a**). On K0791 it is written as **HA'-hi-HIIX** (**Fig. 4b**), and on K7220 it is written as **HA' ya? HIIX** (**Fig. 4c**). The possible replacement of T579 with T126 **ya** on K7220 may constitute evidence for the reading of T579 as **YAM**. In sum, *ha' yam hiix* can be translated as "Water-Wave Jaguar," which is a fitting name that matches the three known iconographic instances, whereas an interpretation as "foamy feline" does not fit. Alternatively, I note another meaning of *yam(a)* as "to grab, to fight" in K'ichee' as well as the Ch'olti' entry "riña" (English: "fight"). Thus, the name of the 'water jaguar' may be **HA'-YAM-ma HIIX** *ha' yama(l) hiix*, or "grabbing/attacking feline of the water" (**Fig. 1i** and **Fig. 4**).

Furthermore, the combination with the logogram **EK'** (**Fig. 1g**) makes sense when considering the **YAM** value, as it does not result in "wave-star," but rather in "brilliant/shining star," again assuming that the target adjective is *yaman*, with a meaning comparable to similar terms in various Mayan languages such as Ch'olti'. The translation "oro" (gold) refers to the glittering quality of gold, as is the case with emeralds, found in K'ichee'. This translation seems desirable compared to "foamy star" when applying the **OM** transcription.

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