Copán Note 1

Te-Tun as the Glyph for "Stela"¹

by Linda Schele and David Stuart

June, 1985

Copán, Honduras

Diego de Landa in his discussion of the New Year’s ceremonies of Yucatan described four objects called acantun which stood at the four entries to the village (Fig. 1a). The association of Landa’s description of the New Years ceremonies with the New Years pages of the Dresden has long been recognized. All four pages in the Dresden are divided into three registers, with the upper one depicting the possum mam of the Uayeb day striding along with the Patron of the upcoming New Year on his back. In the second register this patron god is shown in the house of the principal with the offerings appropriate to each year. In the lower scene, the patron god who will be carried by the Mam to the house of the principal in the following year is shown sitting before a tree. This tree is Landa’s

¹ The Copán Notes are a running series of commentaries and small reports deriving from the multidisciplinary research project designed to record and analyze the monolithic and architectural sculpture of Copán. The Copán Mosaics Project has received support from the Center for Field Research (Earthwatch; 1985 and 1986), Northern Illinois University (1985 and 1986), The National Science Foundation (1986 and 1987), The National Endowment for the Humanities (1986 and 1987), the National Geographic Society (1986), The H. John Heinz III Charitable Foundation (1986), and the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia (I.H.A.H.; 1985 and 1986), and is conducted under the authority and jurisdiction of the I.H.A.H. through a five-year agreement between the I.H.A.H. and Northern Illinois University. According to the terms of that agreement, any publication using materials (either written or in the form of line drawings or photos) derived from the Copán Mosaics Project must receive prior written consent from the Project director (William Fash) and the Director of the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia (Ricardo Agurcia).
acantun. The term seems best understood as a combination of ak-\-a'an, the past participial of the verb ak 'to stand upright,' and tun, a term for 'stone. Accepting this etymology, Thompson (1972:91) interpreted the acantun as "set-up stone pillars" and associated them with the acante, "set-up wooden posts" mentioned in the Rituals of the Bacabs. Lounsbury (personal communication, 1975) has suggested that the acantun of Landa's description and the Dresden codex scenes are stelae set up at the four directional entries to a Maya village.

In the Dresden Codex, each acantun terminates with multiple branches ending in a single leaf, and the trunk of the tree has the double bumps characteristic of the glyph for 'tree,' te' (Fig. 1a). A cloth with footprints, perhaps representing the 'steps of the year,' adorns each tree below the leafy branches. Most importantly, the shaft of each tree displays cauac signs signaling that it is a stone tree, an identification reinforced by the presence of a T548 tun glyph under one of the trees. Landa's acantun is, therefore, a 'stone tree.'

In the Classic period inscriptions, a glyphic expression with just this reading occurs repeatedly on period-ending stelae. One of its component signs is a representation of the trees shown on the Sarcophagus sides at Palenque. Like the Dresden acantun, this tree is characterized by a single large leaf attached to the ends of thick branches marked with the "double-bump te' sign (Fig. 1b). It appears to function as a general icon for "tree" since particular species are specified by attaching fruits or glyphic signs to it without altering the characteristic shapes of branch or leaf. In this manner, cacao, avocado, nancé, mamey, and guanavana fruits are added to the Sarcophagus trees to specify those varieties. This glyphic and iconic pattern matches the use of animal and plant
classification terms in modern Mayan languages, in which \textit{te}' or a cognate is almost invariable used in combination with other words when naming particular kinds of trees.

This same icon with multiple branches and cauac 'stone' signs is the \textit{acantun} shown in the Dresden New Years pages. During the Classic period, this general sign for 'tree' (T767) was combined with or followed by the T528:116 glyph for \textit{tun} or 'stone' (Fig. 1c). Together these signs reads \textit{te'-tun} or 'stone tree.

The use of "stone" \textit{tun} as the term for the 360-day year began with the custom of marking the passage of each year with the setting of a stone (Justeson and Mathews 1983). In the inscription, this term for 360-day year is written with a cauac sign (T528) following by the phonetic complement T116 \textit{ne} or \textit{ni}. Two of the principal period-ending phrases of the Classic period inscriptions used this \textit{tun} glyph--T644.528.116, \textit{chum tun}, "the setting of stone," and T528.116:713, a glyph depicting a \textit{tun} glyph held in an outstretched hand. The association of cauac marks with stone is amply supported by the use of cauac signs as the stones atop a dead fall trap on Madrid 90a and by the consistent depictions of cauac markings on axe and spear heads made of flint. Eccentric flint in both plain and personified forms displays cauac signs as well and the glyph for 'carved stone' seems to be a cauac with eccentric contours. Thus, the combination of the 'tree' sign with the T528.116 \textit{tun} appears to record the objects set up to commemorate the ends of tuns--'stone trees' or stela.

To our knowledge, the \textit{te-tun} glyph appears only on stelae and in the great majority of examples only with period-ending dates on which the stela was erected. It usually appears following one of two verbs. The first of these (Fig. 1d 1-2) appears in the 819-day count, a expression which seems to record that the God K of the appropriate color was
set in place in successive quadrants of the sky. In the Dresden Codex, this verb also appears with the four world direction as an action in which the four Chacs successively occupy one of the quadrants. Victoria Bricker (n.d.) has recently proposed a reading of tzela\textsuperscript{h} "to sidle or move sideways"; this reading works well with the 819–day count, but it does not seem appropriate to the use of this verb in stela dedication events. However, the consistent presence of the –lah suffix on this verb does support its identification as a positional verb.\textsuperscript{2}

One occurrence of this verb is particularly important. On a fragment left by looters near the Palenque railroad station, this verb precedes a glyph composed $u$, T87 te, T228 a, 178 la, and T528.116 tun to read $u$ teal tun. In this example, the standard te' sign substitutes for the general tree sign.

The second verb has T586 pa as one of its signs (Fig. 1d 3–4). We have no suggested interpretation for the pa verb except to point out its consistent appearance with period ending dates and its frequent association with either te-tun or the T528.116 tun glyph. It appears to record some dedication event or perhaps the setting or erection of the stela. One occurrence of this verb is particularly relevant to the te-tun glyph.

The appearance of stone trees on the New Years pages of the Dresden Codex and its clear correspondence to these pages to Landa’s description of equivalent ceremonies which included a acantun suggests that the Maya conceived of the tall upright slabs upon which they recorded history to be stone–trees. The use of the te-tun glyph with the dates

\textsuperscript{2} T178.181 appears consistently on T644 chum "to be seated" and other positional verbs. Lah is documented in Yucatec as a perfective suffix for positional verbs and in Cholan the remnants of an equivalent suffix can be detected in such terms as buchlib, 'seat'.
usually identified as the dedication of stelae and its occurrence exclusively on stelae suggests that the Classic Maya word was stela was te-tun or 'stone tree.'

Addenda: It seems that te-tun is still used in the Copan region as an expression for "stone," both by Spanish and Chorti speakers, although the term is generally recognized as a Chorti expression. Reyna ------- gave Barbara Fash the following information in June 1986:

_Tetunte_ es una palabra muy común que se usa para llamar así a las piedras. Es muy escuchada entre la gente del campo. Por ejemplo la gente que trabaja con el Doctor Fash siempre se oyen decir ¡Que tetuntón! ¡gran tetunte! Tetuntero, si se trata de una piedra muy grande o muchas piedras. Se oye decir a la gente del pueblo o a personas que parece no importarles la escultura de las Ruinas, ellos dicen :los tetuntes de las Ruinas."

In August, 1986, Federico Fahsen and Juan Pedro LePorte informed us that _tetunte_ is also used in Guatemala as a term for "stone" with the implication of a very large and heavy stone.

References

Bricker, Victoria

Justeson, John and Peter Mathews


Tozzer, Alfred


Thompson, J. Eric S.

a) Dresden Codex, pages 24c-27c: Acantun "set-up stone pillars"

b) Trees from the Sarcophagus sides, Temple of Inscriptions, Palenque

c) Te-tun glyph from Copán Stela C

d) Verbs occurring with the te-tun glyph:
   1. Tonina M30
   2. Tonina M74
   3. Copán Stela F
   4. Copán Stela B