Copán Note 1

Te-Tun as the Glyph for "Stela"[1]

by Linda Schele and David Stuart

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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

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 *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 *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 *tun* or 'stone' (Fig. 1c).

Together these signs reads *te'-tun* or 'stone tree.

The use of "stone" *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 *ne* or *ni*. Two of the principal period-ending

phrases of the Classic period inscriptions used this *tun* glyph--T644.528.116, *chum tun*,

"the setting of stone," and T528.116:713, a glyph depicting a *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 *tun* appears to record the objects set up to commemorate the ends of

tuns--'stone trees' or stela.

To our knowledge, the *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

tzelah "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.[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 it

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

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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 asi 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

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n.d. A paper presented at the Sixth Round Table of Palenque. June, 1986.

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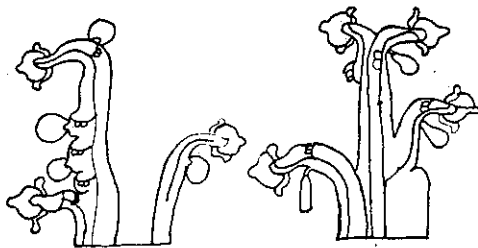   Stela Cult. *American Antiquity* 48, pp. 586-593)

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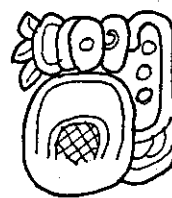   1972 *A Commentary on the Dresden Codex.* American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.
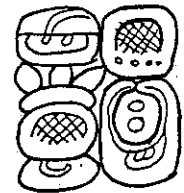
a.

b.

c.

d.   1.   2,   3.   4.
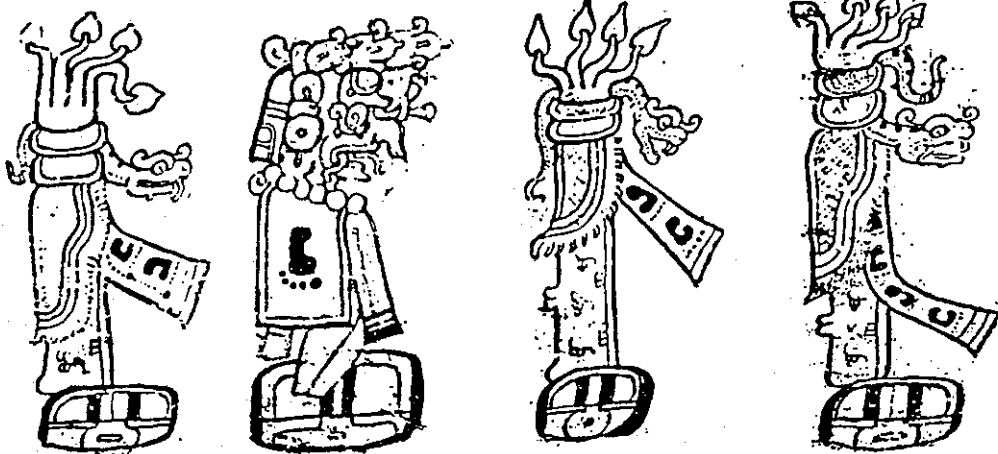
a) Dresden Codex, pages 24c-27c: Acantun "set-up stone
pillars"

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