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THE *AJ K'UHUN* TITLE

Deciphering a Classic Maya term of rank

Sarah Jackson and David Stuart
Department of Anthropology, Harvard University, 11 Divinity Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA

Abstract

The God C title, found in numerous hieroglyphic texts, refers to junior members of the royal court and is therefore crucial to our understanding of Classic Maya political structure. Over the past two decades, the amount of epigraphic work on the God C title has been significant. A consensus on its reading and meaning, however, has yet to be reached. In this article, we build on earlier research to suggest new ideas for reading this glyph, based on semantic and grammatical re-evaluations of the title. Our proposed readings are *Ajk'uhulhun*, which might be read as "he of the holy paper" (expanding on previous interpretations), or, alternatively, *Ajk'uhun*, "one who obeys, venerates" or "one who keeps," based on a grammatical reassessment. In addition, we suggest a new understanding of the *aj-* and *ix-* agentive prefixes, traditionally understood as masculine and feminine markers, respectively. We examine these possible readings in archaeological and iconographic context, using subsidiary nobles of ancient Copan as a case study. Through our discussion we aim to illuminate the meaning and significance of the God C title, and in doing so to highlight the evolution of the methodologies employed in Maya hieroglyphic decipherment over the past two decades.

Classic Maya inscriptions routinely record royal events and histories, but recent research has revealed that the texts can no longer be seen as the exclusive domain of kings and royal families. As epigraphic research has demonstrated over the past decade or more, non-regal persons may be named or mentioned in hieroglyphic texts; these individuals frequently carry specific titles that refer to rank and occupation within court society (Houston and Stuart 2001; Schele 1993; Stuart 1993; Villela 1993). This paper focuses on one such non-regal term of reference, often called the "God C title," carried by numerous court members during the Classic period (Figure 1). The God C title is found in texts throughout the Maya lowlands and is perhaps the most widespread of the "subsidiary" titles known from the corpus of inscriptions. Its most important examples come from Copan, where the title occurs on the inscribed benches associated with elite residences located away from the main acropolis (Webster 1989). The decipherment of the God C title, if firmly established, will therefore shed light on the nature of political and social relations within Classic court society.

Specialists in Maya writing agree that the God C title is an important term of rank, but a surprisingly wide range of readings have been proposed over the past two decades. These suggested translations include:

"He of the Blood" (Schele and Miller 1986:155)
"He of the Temple" (Ringle 1988)
"Intermediary" (Stuart 1992, 1993:331–332)
"Mason, Architect" (Schele 1992:45)
"Messenger" (Lacadena 1996)
"He of the Holy Book" (Coe and Kerr 1997:91, following Houston and Grube, personal communication 1994)

How are we to judge these very different readings? In an era of rapid progress and general consensus in Maya glyph decipherment, it is very unusual to encounter such variety in the proposed readings for a single glyph. As we will see, the differing views emerge from ambiguities in how one reads the signs that constitute the God C title. More directly, they reflect important changes in the methodology underlying Maya epigraphic analysis over the past two decades.

In this paper we revisit the God C title and build on previous readings to offer new possibilities for understanding this title. Besides adding readings to the list presented earlier, we will discuss the God C title and the history of its reading in order to illustrate the evolving methodology of Maya hieroglyphic decipherment, highlighting the pitfalls and advantages of specific approaches used in epigraphic research. This paper, therefore, will go beyond analyzing a single hieroglyph, important as that is. We hope that our discussion will refine the methods and approaches of decipherment as the study of Maya inscriptions continues to mature.

THE GOD C TITLE AND ITS VARIANTS

The God C title occurs in scores of inscriptions dating to the Classic period (300–800 A.D.), but, significantly, it never accompanies the personal names of supreme rulers or kings, who were called *K'uhul ʼAjawob'*, or "Holy Lords." Rather, its numerous examples consistently occur with the names of social or political subordinates who were nevertheless -ranking "elites" in their own right (Houston 1993:130–134; Stuart 1992). Holders of the God C title, some of them women, often had close familial ties to kings, and frequently they appear in artistic representations of royal courts and palaces, where they sit or stand in close proxim-

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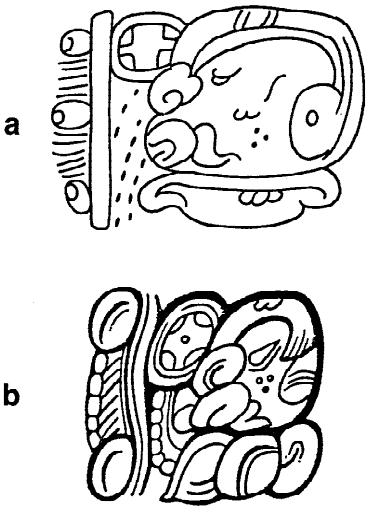


Figure 1. Examples of the "God C" Title: (a) from an incised shell pendant of unknown provenance, after John Graham (1971:Figure 1); (b) from Tonina, undesignated fragment (courtesy Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions, Peabody Museum, Harvard University).

ity to the seated king (Figure 2). Even though the high status of the title comes across clearly in the artistic and written sources, it also can be discerned archaeologically. Probably the clearest evidence of this comes from Copan, Honduras, where the large architectural complex known as Group 9N-8, widely interpreted as a lineage compound, was governed by a lord bearing the God C title (Webster 1989). The inscription carved on the interior bench of Structure 9N-82 expresses a specific and close relationship between the named noble and the contemporary high king of the Copan polity. The nature of such social and political bonds between the holders of the God C title and rulers has remained largely mysterious and, we feel, can be approached only through a well-considered decipherment of the hieroglyph itself. We will revisit this question, and the case of Copan's Structure 9N-82, later in this paper.

The label "God C title" is used here simply as a term of reference and derives from the glyph's principal element, or "main sign," depicting the portrait head of an important supernatural entity designated "God C" nearly a century ago by Paul Schellhas (1904). This is a monkey-like face in profile, usually with a semicircle of dots or points attached to its front or left side (Figure 3b). God C remains a somewhat enigmatic entity in the religious art of the Classic Maya, but there is general agreement that it serves in some way "to embody the ancient Maya concept of godliness" (Taube 1992:31).

The God C sign alone does not spell the title. It is the second of three essential components, the values of which are all more or less firmly established:

1. The prefix T12 (using J. Eric Thompson's [1962] sign catalog) (Figure 3a) has long been read as the logogram **AJ-** or **AH-**, spelling the common male agentive particle *aj-*, which comes before either noun or

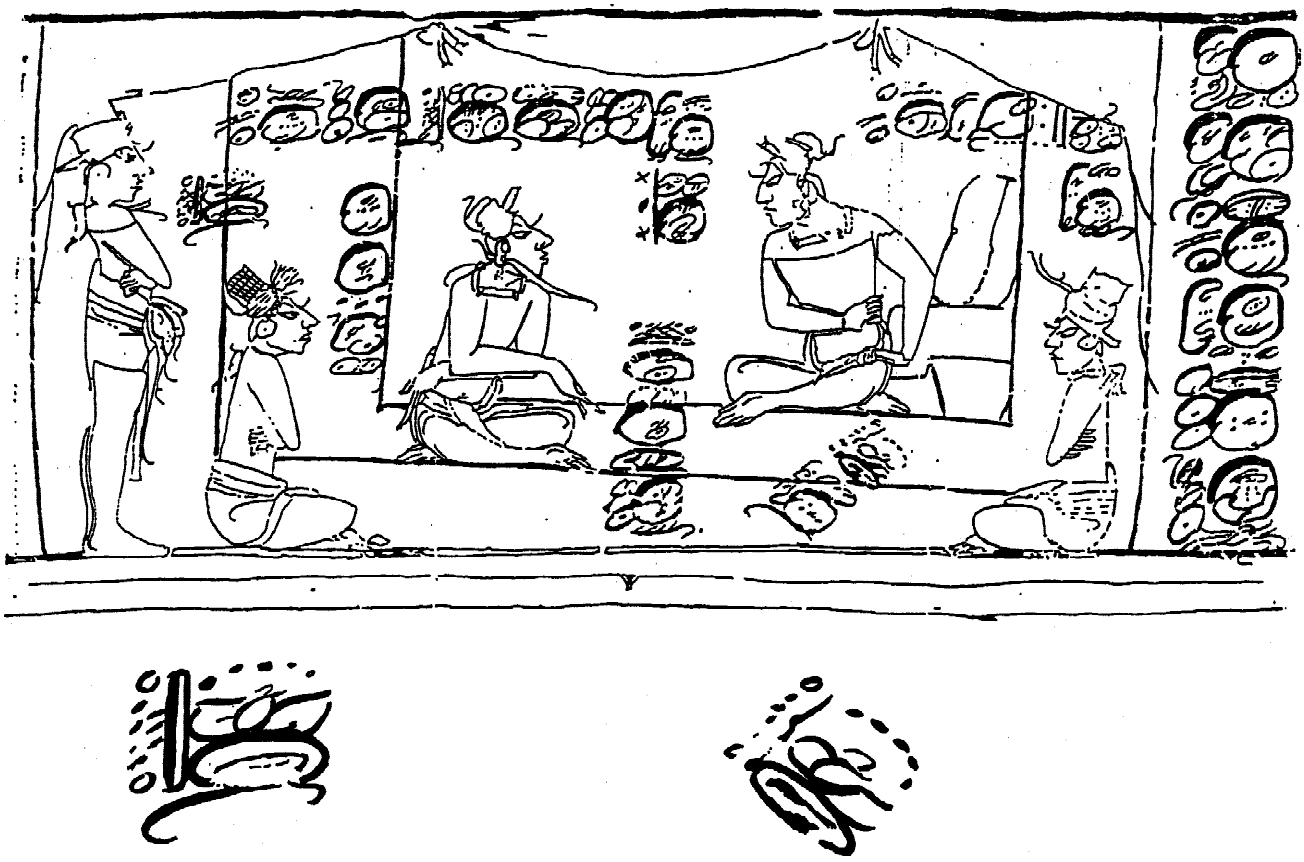


Figure 2. A vessel from El Señor del Peten showing a royal and an example of the God C title (from Cortes de Brasdefer 1996:Figure 5-3b).

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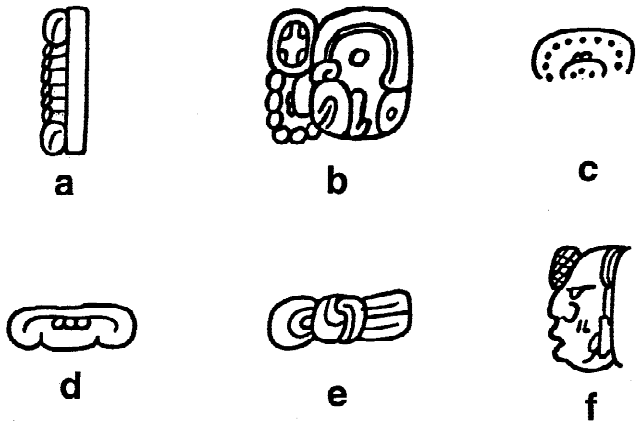


Figure 3. Selected hieroglyphic signs: (a) AJ or a; (b) and (c) K'UH (god) or K'UHUL (holy); (d) na; (e) HUN (book, paper); and (f) IX, the prefix on feminine names and titles.

verb stems to convey the meaning "he of . . ." or "one who . . ." This sign is less commonly known to be a purely phonetic sign **a**, and then only in late inscriptions.

2. The so-called God C main sign read **K'UH**, for *k'uh* (god, holy thing). In many contexts, the sign may also serve to represent the derived adjectival prefix *k'uhul* (holy). Orthographically the God C sign was often reduced to an abbreviated form simply shown as the semicircle of dots before the face, a sign long known in the epigraphic literature as the "water group" (Figure 3c). It should be noted that in some recent studies, the God C sign is transcribed as **CH'UH**, this being the Ch'olan and Greater Tzeltalan descendant of Common Mayan **k'uh* (god) and the allomorph of Yukatecan *k'uh*. Although the general Ch'olan affiliation of the hieroglyphic script is well established (Campbell 1984; Houston et al. 2000), we nevertheless opt for the **K'UH** transcription based on revealing syllabic spellings of the word as **k'u-hu**, a fine example being on Yaxchilan, Lintel 37, Block D7 (see Stuart et al. 1999). Not only does this spelling help us to resolve the issue of the initial consonant, but it also shows the importance of the final *-h* of the root, which, as we will see, may be important in deciphering the God C title.
3. Finally, the suffix T24, well accepted as the syllable **-na** (Figure 3d).

The values for these three signs are widely accepted, and it seems straightforward to suggest a transcription **AJ-K'UH-na** or something very similar. Nearly all of the attempted readings of the God C title interpret the initial **AJ-** as the agentive prefix, which seems a reasonable assumption, given the titular function of the glyph. But even this seemingly secure reading has been questioned in some recent discussions.

To complicate matters, we find a fourth sign added in several late examples of the glyph. This is a "knot" sign that elsewhere bears the value **HU'N** (book, paper) (Figure 3e). The knot is not consistently present, but when we do encounter it, the **-na** element may follow it or be dropped completely (see Figure 1). There appears to be no functional change in the title when the knot appears, suggesting that the **-na** functions as an optional phonetic complement to the **HU'N** reading, much as it does in the many examples of Glyph F of the Supplementary Series. The evidence suggests, therefore, that this form of the God C title can be read as **AJ-K'UH-HU'N-(na)**, or **AJ-K'UHUL-HU'N-(na).** The difference between them lies in whether the God C serves to indicate a noun root *k'uh* (holy thing) or an adjective *k'uhul* (holy).

Before we attempt to deal with the linguistic and lexical issues raised by these values and alternative spellings, some patterns of the title's distribution are worth mentioning. Like many other personal titles cited in Maya texts, the God C title appears occasionally as a possessed noun, where it intercedes between two names, linking the individuals in a direct and intimate way. In these constructions, a noble is called "the [God C title] of . . ." a named king (Figure 4). Copan's inscriptions hold the most important examples of these affiliated titles, and these will be discussed in detail near the end of this paper. Evidently, more than one of these nobles could be affiliated with a king at a given time, and there are indications of internal ranking among them. An inscription at Tonina cites two holders of the God C title as witnesses of a period-ending ritual by the king (Figure 5). At nearby Palenque, two others are named on the celebrated sarcophagus lid of the important local ruler K'inich Janahb' Pakal (or "Pakal," as he is often called). One named Chak Chan may have been of higher status than the other, given the central placement of his portrait in the border area of the decoration. The two God C nobles are depicted also on the legs of the sarcophagus—probably as metaphorical "supports" for the ruler—but only Chak Chan is portrayed twice (Robertson 1983:Figures 154, 161).

The God C title exhibits interesting patterns of association with other important subordinate titles cited in Classic inscriptions. One of the most significant "subroyal" offices was called *sajal* (glyphic **sa-ja-la**), which seems to refer in many cases to second-tier rulers who oversaw satellite communities, rather like provincial governors. Significantly, we know of no case in which a *sajal* bears the God C title, suggesting some exclusivity between these two subordinate terms. One important *sajal* cited at Palenque was named Chak Zutz' (Schele 1993), and on the Tablet of the Slaves of that site we find reference to "four lords" who were designated by the God C title and clearly affiliated with Chak Zutz', not the contemporary ruler of Palenque (Figure 6). There can be little doubt, therefore, that subordinates designated by the God C title (or groups of them) could be directly affiliated with elites of slightly different rank and position, not just high kings.

Unlike some other important honorific terms, the God C title is not restricted to one gender. A majority of cases occur with male nobles, but several examples of the title occur with women (Figure 7). These are slightly different in form, distinguished by the addition of the common feminine noun prefix **IX-** before the **AJ-**, giving us **IX-AJ-K'UH-na** or **IX-AJ-K'UH-HU'N-(na)**. The combination of the two prefixes **IX-** and **AJ-** raises important questions, because in Mayan languages these particles often serve as the mutually exclusive female and male agentive prefixes (she of/who . . . and he of/who . . .), respectively. A possible resolution will be offered later, once we consider some of the previous interpretations of the title.

A SURVEY OF PREVIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

Among the first published notices of the God C title is a brief mention by Linda Schele and Mary Miller (1986:155), who read the glyph simply as "He of the Blood," without specifying any phonetic or linguistic values for the signs. At the time, the initial **AJ-** or **AH-** prefix was known, but the God C sign remained less well understood as a hieroglyphic element. Schele and Miller's "He of the Blood" gloss derived from the use of the God C or "water group" sign as an iconographic motif representing royal

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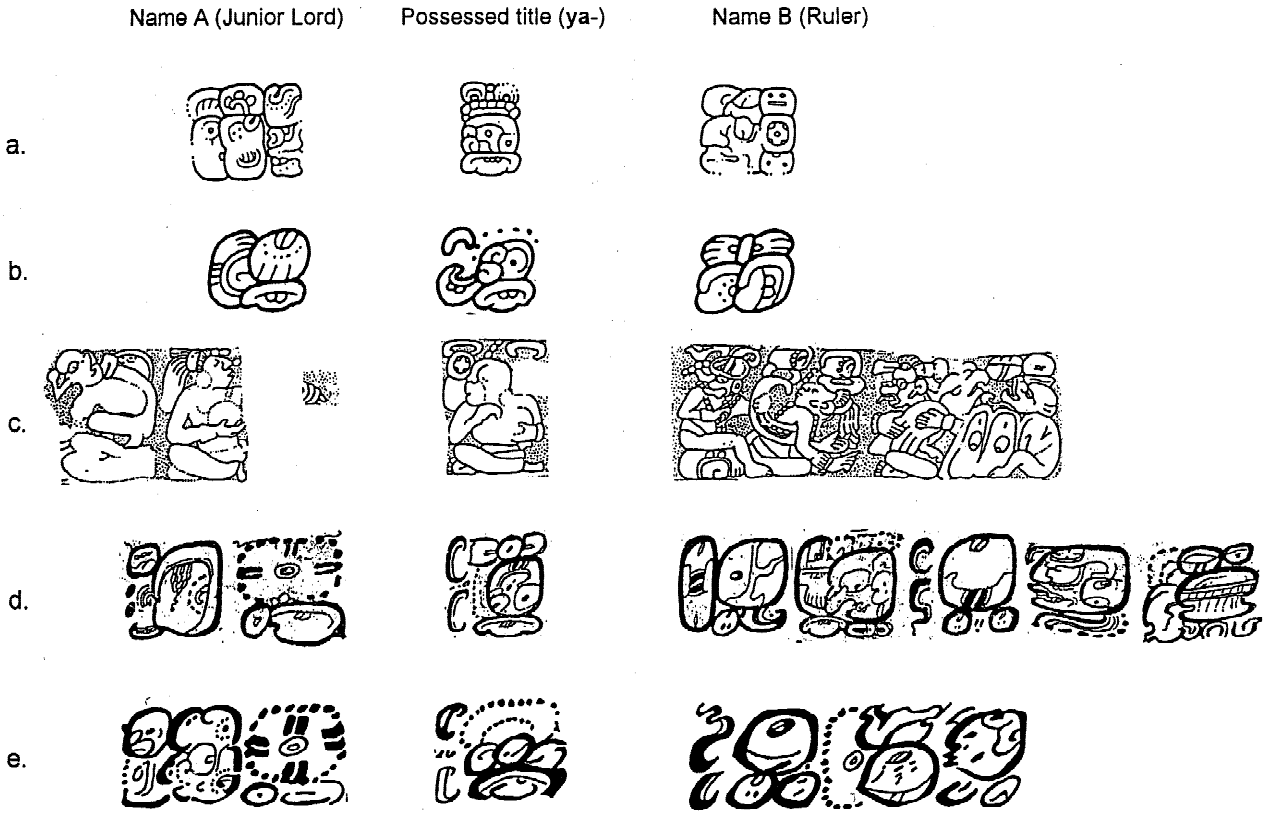


Figure 4. "Possessed" God C Titles: (a) from a Piedras Negras-area text (from Houston 1993:Figures 5–8); (b) from a vessel in the Dumbarton Oaks collections (after Houston 1993:Figures 5–7a); (c) Copan, bench from Structure 9M-146 (drawing by Barbara Fash); (d) Kerr 4669 (photograph copyright Justin Kerr); and (e) a painted bowl, Kerr 7786 (drawn from a photograph by Justin Kerr).

sacrificial blood or some associated quality (Stuart 1984, 1988). The **-na** suffix remained unexplained in their assessment.

New possibilities of decipherment came after William Ringle's (1988) important reading of the God C sign as **K'U/CH'U** or **K'UL/CH'UL,** building on Thomas Barthel's (1952) much earlier suggestion of this value. As noted, these values have since been refined as **K'UH** and **K'UHUL**. Ringle applied this value in the context of the God C title, reading it in full as *ah k'u na*, or "he of the temple" (literally, "he of the holy house"). Ringle proposed that at Palenque, the title refers to the king Pakal, a suggestion with which we disagree because in the example he cites that the title in fact belongs to a subordinate lord. Overall, however, his phonetic reading seems reasonable. One problem lies in his analysis of the final sign as logographic **NA(H)** (house), because T24 is principally a syllabic sign with the value **na**. The word *nah* (house) in other glyphs is regularly conveyed by the logogram T4 (**NAH** or **NOH**), a glyph that never appears with the God C title.

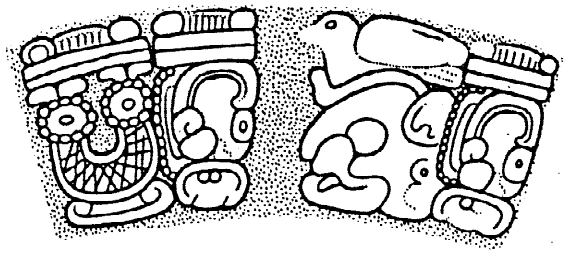


Figure 5. Two God C titleholders from Tonina, Monument 110 (from Graham and Mathews 1999:143).

Schele (1989) offered a very different analysis of the title in her studies of the inscriptions from Group 9N-8 at Copan. Focusing on possessed forms of the title, she suggested a reading **ya-k'u**, relating them to the Ch'orti verb *y-ahk'u* (give, yield, produce, furnish, sacrifice, beat, whip) (Wisdom 1950:447). She posited a somewhat similar meaning, "the gift of," in another published study of these texts and a reading of "the house offering" for the same glyph (Schele and Freidel 1990:328–329). However, these analyses did not recognize the glyphs as possessed variants of the God C title, as Stephen Houston (1993) would later establish to the satisfaction of most epigraphers.

One of the authors (Stuart 1992, 1993:331) examined the God C title, noted its general association with subordinate figures, and remarked on its use as a relationship glyph at Copan, evidently expressing some connection between a noble and a high king. Stuart suggested a possible connection to the Classical Yukatec term *ah k'ul*, glossed in the sources as a political "intermediary" or "mediator." Although an attractive possibility, given the glyph's clear use as a title of palace functionaries, there is little epigraphic support for this reading. Like Schele's "gift" suggestion, it fails to take into account the title's **-na** suffix. Moreover, it is grounded exclusively in Colonial Yukatec sources,

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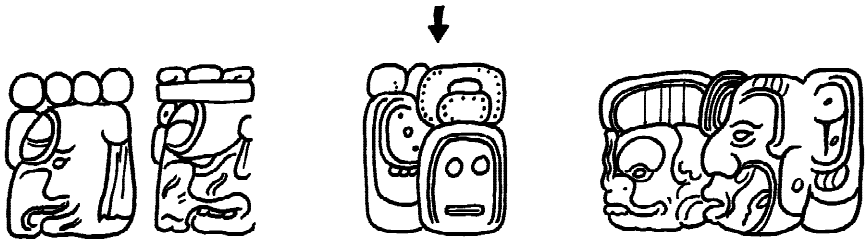


Figure 6. The God C title in association with *Sajal*. Excerpt from the Tablet of the Slaves from Palenque. Drawing by Merle Greene Robertson.

whereas Classic-period inscriptions have closer affinities to Greater Tzeltalan languages and, more specifically, the Ch'olan subgroup (Houston et al. 2000).

The role of the God C title as a term for secondary figures in throne scenes led one of the authors (Stuart) to entertain a possible meaning of "courtier" (cited in Fash 1991). It is important to stress, however, that this idea has no linguistic basis whatsoever. This "functional" gloss represents a common tendency in epigraphic work in the 1970s and 1980s, when the semantic domain of a verb or noun glyph seemed vaguely discernible, even if phonetically opaque. As will be demonstrated, such readings of glyphs cannot be viewed as "decipherments," which must always rely on a more complete phonetic and morphological understanding of a given term.

After her initial proposals based on the possessed forms at Copan, Schele (1992) revisited the God C title and suggested a meaning of "mason" or "architect." This was based on an understanding of the God C sign as logographic **CH'UL,** without any association with concepts relating to "god" or "holy." Rather, she noted the sixteenth-century Tzotzil *ch'ul*, meaning "brush, clean, cleanse, plane, polish, and purify," and *j-ch'ul-na*, meaning "mason" (Tzotzil *j-* being an allomorph of the agentive *aj-*) (cited in Schele et al. 1998). Schele's analysis agreed with Ringle's earlier supposition that the **-na** suffix was to be read logographically *na(h)* (house, structure) but resulted in a very different interpretation: "one who beautifies houses" instead of "he of the holy house." Schele's suggestion that the glyph is an occupational term for "architect" is unlikely, however, because "house" does not seem to be a part of the glyph, as discussed earlier. In addition, the occurrence of the God C title with royal women, often the mothers of kings, presents a major problem. Given what we know of traditional gender roles in Mesoamerica, we seriously doubt that royal women were "masons" or "architects," although one could perhaps argue that these are metaphorical references.

Houston (1993:130) analyzed the structure of the God C title much as we have already presented it, noting "an initial **ah** or **a**, the head of God C, read **ch'u** or **ch'ul** (or, in Yucatecan languages, **k'u** or **k'ul**), and a phonetic sign for **na** or **nV** (where **V** is an undetermined vowel)." He was the first to point out how the appearances of the title with the names of royal women posed a problem for understanding the presence of the supposed masculine agentive prefix *aj-* (Houston 1993:131). Houston also identified the possessed forms of the God C title on two hieroglyphic benches at Copan and cogently explained the prefix sign **ya-** as a prevocalic ergative pronoun *y-* before the *a-* which begins the title proper (Houston 1993:132). Regarding the function or meaning of the title, Houston (1993:130) simply states that it "without exception refers to subordinate figures at Maya courts."

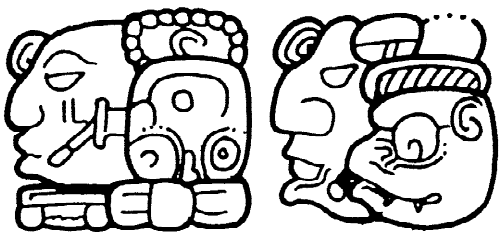


Figure 7. The God C title in reference to a woman, from Stela 10 at Yaxchilan. Note the appearance of the feminine prefix **IX-** before the **AJ-** agentive (from Houston 1993:Figures 5–3b).

In a recent analysis, Lacadena (1996) emphasizes many of the same patterns and problematic issues surrounding the God C title and introduces new evidence in support of a very different analysis. He is the first to attempt to explain the curious use of a "knot" element after the God C sign and rightly sees this variant spelling as a key to understanding the glyph. In other contexts, this glyph is **HU'N**, signifying "book," "headband," or, more generally, "paper." Lacadena differs from other analysts by suggesting that the initial signs of the God C title are syllabic rather than logographic and suggests that the proper transcription is **a-k'u-HU'N-na**. This he relates to the Ch'ol Mayan term *ak'hun* (messenger) (Lacadena 1996:3). The verb root is *ak'* (to give), before the object noun *hun* (paper, book). Lacadena suggests that the larger term exhibits a phonetic elision between the *ak'* root and the preceding male agentive *ah-* or *aj-*, giving the literal significance, "(he who) gives/bears book(s), paper(s)" (the underlying expression *ah-ak'-hu'n* resulting in *ak'-hu'n*). Considered more broadly, Lacadena's proposal is very different from earlier suggestions in viewing the three main signs of the title as purely phonetic elements. Even the God C is a syllable in his analysis, spelling **a-k'u** for *ak'*, and is stripped of any logographic function.

Another important decipherment emerged around the same time as Lacadena's proposal. Houston (personal communication 1995) and Grube (cited in Schele et al. 1998) proposed a fully logographic assessment **AJ-K'UHUL-HU'N(-na)**, for *Aj K'uhul-hu'n* (He of the Holy Books). Michael Coe and Justin Kerr (1997) recently endorsed this reading in their overview of Classic Maya script and calligraphy, where the glyph is seen as a specific type of scribal title. They use iconography and ethnographic analogy to suggest that the title may have encompassed roles that included those of scribe, master of ceremonies, marriage negotiator, and tribute recorder (Coe and Kerr 1997:91–95).

One can readily see that the two most recent proposed decipherments—"messenger" and "He of the Holy Books"—are very different, deriving from very different understandings of the God C sign itself and its **AJ-** prefix. To reiterate, Lacadena views these two signs as syllables (**a** and **k'u**), whereas Houston and Grube and others view them as logograms (**AJ-** and **K'UH[UL]**).

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The God C sign alone—arguably the semantic centerpiece of the hieroglyph—is never to our knowledge used in Classic inscriptions with the syllabic value **k'u**. All instances of the sign outside of this title show it to have the logographic value **K'UH** (god) or **K'UHUL** (holy). However, in rejecting the "messenger," we do not necessarily agree with the interpretation of the title as "He of the Holy Books." Rather, we believe that alternative readings are possible based on a more refined understanding of the spelling conventions in the script. In addition, the translation of the constituent words may be understood in a broader context than has been proposed.

THE AGENTIVE PREFIXES

A vexing issue surrounding the decipherment of the God C title concerns the ever-present **AJ**- prefix. This sign is routinely used in the inscriptions to spell the word *aj-*, which is usually described as a masculine agentive prefix attached to certain nouns, place names, or verb roots to express an association of a male individual to a place, an occupation, or some other repeated activity. Its feminine counterpart, according to numerous grammars and lexicons of Mayan languages, is *ix-*. The two often appear in complementary distribution, as in Colonial Yukatec *ah Mutul* (*el de Mutul*) and *ix Mutul* (*la de Mutul*) (Coronel 1998 [1620]:129). In the feminine variants of the God C title glyph, however, both *ix-* and *aj-* appear together (Figure 7), seemingly in contradiction of the mutually exclusive pattern of gender distinction. Indeed, the presence of the supposed *aj-* in female versions of the title was Lacadena's essential reason for rejecting the agentive function of the T12 sign and positing the syllabic **a-** value in its place.

However, we suggest that a closer look at their usage shows that the two particles *aj-* and *ix-* are not mutually exclusive, nor are they always gender-specific. One Classical Yukatec definition of *ah* (the cognate of Classic Mayan *aj-*) from the *Calepino Motul* is "*he or she* of a place" (Arzápalo Marín 1995:5–6; emphasis added). In contrast, *ix-* is defined as "she who has the last name of . . ." (Arzápalo Marín 1995:388–389). In Classical Yukatec *ix-* thus has a more targeted function as a feminine modifier, whereas *aj-* is explicitly presented as gender neutral (see Clark and Houston 1998). A similar blurring of these gender distinctions can be seen in other languages, as well. In some dialects of Ch'ol, neither *aj-* nor *x-* has strong male or female associations; both are described simply as prefixes that *"se presenta con sustantivos de los dialectos de Sabanilla y Tila para indicar que es persona"* (Aulie and Aulie 1978:27).

In Ch'orti, the modern language perhaps most closely related to Classic Mayan (or "Classic Ch'olti") (Houston et al. 2000), it appears that *aj-* likewise has a more general connection to "doers" of actions, whether male or female (Wisdom 1950; Wichmann 1999). One need only compare, for example, the Ch'orti terms *ah nirom* (curer), *ah nirom winik* (male curer), and *ah nirom ixik* (female curer) to illustrate the pattern. Indeed, a survey of many Mayan grammars reveals that the general use of *aj-* as a general agentive prefix applicable to both men and women is a widespread, and therefore presumably ancient, pattern (e.g., Bricker 1986:39, 43; Haviland 1988).

A telling example from the Classic inscriptions shows that this more complex interaction of the *aj-* and *ix-* prefixes has considerable time depth and suggests an explanation for the feminine form of the God C title (Figure 8). A woman named on a carved shell from Burial 5 at Piedras Negras carries the title **IX-AJ-b'i-k'i?-la**, which is without doubt the feminine form of the term **AJ-b'i-k'i?-la** found elsewhere in many Piedras Negras texts. These can be analyzed as a toponymic term, "(s)he of *B'ik'al*(?)." *Ix-* thus appears before *aj-* to specify a female member of a larger category of persons described by the general *aj-* agentive. In the case of the God C title, this pattern resolves a problem raised by several writers. The **AJ**- sign can indeed represent the agentive particle in combination with the feminine prefix **IX**-.



Figure 8. Feminine and "unmarked" forms of a title from Piedras Negras: (a) **IX-AJ-b'i-k'i?-la,** from the inscribed shells of Burial 5; and (b) **AJ-b'i-k'i-la,** from a figure caption on Stela 12.

NEW IDEAS

Let us now concentrate on the God C and **-na** elements that follow the **AJ**- prefix, for these parts seem to serve as the semantic core of the title. As stated earlier, we strongly believe that the God C is a logogram read **K'UH** or **K'UHUL**, as is the case in virtually all of its other uses in the Classic inscriptions, and is not a purely syllabic element. It seems certain that the title in question includes the basic root *k'uh-* (god or sacred object). Such a conclusion is not surprising and agrees with most of the proposed decipherments that have been offered. The key to a more incisive reading seems instead to rest with the final **-na** element, which we know is sometimes replaced by the larger form, **HU'N-na**.

One valuable way to modify our understanding of the meaning of the title is semantic rather than grammatical in nature. One widely accepted reading today is *Aj k'uhul hu'n* (He of the Holy Books), which is interpreted as a title associated with scribes and bookkeepers within royal courts (Coe and Kerr 1997). This reading is the most likely of the proposals outlined so far, but we feel strongly that it may be overly narrow in its translation of the word *hu'n*, which in addition to "book" carries the more general sense of "paper." In the hieroglyphic texts, the **HU'N** logogram is sometimes intended to mean "headband," which was made of bark paper.

Examination of ethnographic sources reveals these wider meanings of the word *hu'n* or its cognate forms, which we believe are important to understanding the meaning of the God C title. In addition, many sources reflect the profoundly sacred and important nature of paper among modern Maya groups. R. Jon McGee (1990:150) notes the Lacandon use of the word *hu'un* to refer to both "paper" and "book" and documents the ritual use of *chäk hu'un* ("red-paper," or bark cloth dyed red and worn around the head during rituals or tied around god pots) (McGee 1990:45). Arguably, therefore, the God C title, if read *Aj k'uhul hu'n*, could be translated as "He of the Holy Headbands." This might be an appropriate reference to subordinate figures in Maya art who sometimes hold royal headbands in "crowning" scenes, but admittedly

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we know of no clear examples where such attendants are named with the God C title. Another more encompassing reading of *Aj k'uhul hu'n* is "He of the Holy Paper." It is important to acknowledge the broader possibilities of meaning present in these proposed glosses of this title. The scribal connotations of "He of the Holy Books" are potentially misleading, not necessarily in content, but certainly in narrowness of focus.

Significantly, the reading of this title as connected to paper resources, first suggested by the presence of the **HU'N** sign, may be supported through iconographic, ethnohistoric, and ethnographic evidence. Individuals appearing on panels or in other iconographic scenes (including, among others, Piedras Negras Lintel 1 and a number of looted pots) who are named with the God C title usually sport very distinctive headgear, which has been interpreted as paint brushes, pencils, or even bark paper bundled together (Coe and Kerr 1997; Lacadena 1996).

Ethnographic and ethnohistoric sources throughout Mesoamerica remark on the importance of paper and paper making by community members (Christensen and Marti 1971; Landa [in Tozzer 1941]; McGee 1990; Sahagun [in Anderson and Dibble 1950]). Both Sahagun and Landa (Anderson and Dibble 1950; Tozzer 1941) recorded uses of paper in rituals, and Sahagun mentions the use of paper in a ritual context in order to pay a debt to the gods (Anderson and Dibble 1950:199). Indeed, paper was an important tribute item for the Aztecs (Christensen and Marti 1971:53). Both Aztec and Classic Maya iconography show that paper was used as a part of bloodletting ceremonies, where it was splattered or smeared with blood, then burned. Alan Sandstrom and Pamela Sandstrom (1986:11) suggest that this burning constituted a symbolic sacrificing of the paper. They also note that among modern Nahua and Otomi groups, the cutting of paper into images of the gods is an important part of ritual and a method of communication with the gods (Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1986:23). Paper has also been documented being used to ornament idols (Christensen and Marti 1971:9).

There is ample evidence to support the idea that paper was an important substance both economically and ritually in the pre-Columbian Maya world. Therefore, the idea of ritually or politically important people being controllers, keepers, or producers of paper and paper material is not out of the realm of possibility. We suggest therefore that the recent proposal "He of the Holy Books" may be only partly right and could easily encompass wider meanings that shed light on the ritual and political role of God C title-holders within ancient Maya communities.

Although we feel that a general connection to paper might eventually explain the title's meaning, there is a strong alternative to consider based on more recent understandings of Maya hieroglyphic orthography and Classic Mayan grammar. The **HU'N** element has thus far been explained as a simple word sign (book, paper, headband, etc.) following its customary usage in other contexts, such as in Glyph F of the Supplementary Series. But this interpretation faces a potential problem: the appearance of **HU'N** or **-HU'N-na** in the God C title is quite rare and generally late in date, falling in the last century of the Classic period. If we posit that the title refers to "book" or "paper," then why might the logogram be so infrequent? Lacadena (1996) suggests that the title reads phonetically as **a-k'u-na**, where the weak initial consonant of *huun* is elided after the root *ak'* (give). In his interpretation, the knot logogram reinforces the underlying lexeme in *ak'(h)uun* (give paper) in the term for "messenger." This explanation for the optional use of **HU'N** deserves further consideration, but this general syllabic interpretation of the God C title has its own problems, as we have shown. Overall, we believe that such distributional patterns could be seen as evidence against the supposition that the word *hu'n* is signaled by this title.

We must entertain some alternative explanation that takes into account the ubiquitous use of **-na** and its very occasional spelling as **-HU'N-(na)**. A compelling explanation comes from recent advances in understanding the spelling conventions of the Maya script—in particular, the use of "morphosyllables" to spell derviational suffixes on nouns and verbs. The sequence **K'UH-na** is made of a consonant–vowel–consonant (CVC) logogram and a consonant–vowel (CV) syllable. Similar combinations of logograms and syllables occur with some frequency throughout the Maya script, some clearly instances of "phonetic complementation," where the syllable serves to reinforce the consonantal ending of the logogram, as in **K'IN-ni**, **CHUM-mu**, or **PAKAL-la**. But other cases show that the CV syllables can be less dependent on logograms and convey certain derivational morphemes on a root. These have been called "morphosyllables" in recent analyses by Houston et al. (2001). Examples include **WAY-IB'** for *way-ib'* (dormitory, shrine) (instrumental suffix) (< *way* 'sleep'); **'AHK-AL** for *'ahk-al* (turtle) (adjectival form) (< *'ahk* 'turtle'). We see in these and other cases that that the final CV syllable sign usually serves to represent -VC morphemic (versus phonetic) endings. In another example, the familiar **K'UH** logogram can be modified by the addition of the derivational sign **-UL** to spell **K'UH-UL,** for the adjective *k'uh-ul*, "holy, divine." Here the ending on *k'uh-ul* is the -V*l* adjectival suffix, but out of its context it might also be seen as the -V*l* "partitive" or "attributive" noun suffix common in Mayan languages. The partitive suffix is spelled quite differently, however, as **K'UH-IL**, for *k'uh-il* or *k'uh-ul* (one's god), demonstrating that Maya scribes distinguished among similar-sounding suffixes that served different grammatical roles. Historically, the vowel of the partitive -V*l* suffix is very likely to have been reduplicated from the root, but the script regularly made use of the **-li/-IL** sign to mark the morpheme, apparently regardless of the changing vowels. This may be due to the "fossilization" in the script of an earlier underlying form *-il*, which later came to be generalized as a -V*l* ending.

Given the prevalence of these derivational signs, it is possible that the **-na** suffix indicates a certain morphemic ending on **K'UH**. The combination **K'UH-na** could therefore be morphemically representative of *k'uh-an* or more generally *k'uh*-V*n*, making use of a -V*n* suffix that derives verbs from certain noun roots in Mayan languages but unattested thus far in the hieroglyphic script. The vowels of the -V*n* endings vary considerably, but they often reduplicate the internal vowel of the root ($CV_1C–V_1n$).

But what of the infrequent spellings employing **-HU'N(-na)**? Rather than always being taken as the logogram for "book" or "paper," it is possible that its appearance in the God C title could be purely phonological, bridging the final consonant of *k'uh* with a vocally reduplicated -V*n* suffix. Some morphosyllables are ambiguous in the spelling of vowels, but the late use of **-HU'N** may have been done to give a more precise form *k'uh-un* or *ch'uh-un*. It is important to stress that the long vowel of *huun* (paper, book), although indicated by disharmonic spellings throughout most of the Classic period, was msot likely shortened by this time, when the vowel length drops suddenly from standard orthographic conventions (Houston et al. 1998). This would account for the late appearance of the "knot" on the God C title, at a point when **HUN** was its more accurate pronunciation and, therefore, capable of such a "bridging" role after **K'UH**.

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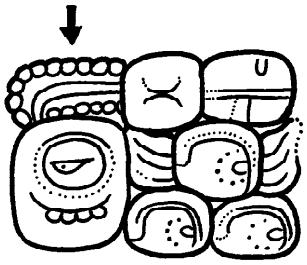


Figure 9. The spelling K'UH-HUL for *k'uh–ul* (holy) on Seibal Stela 8, A4.

This unusual role of the well-known **HUN** or **HU'N** sign might seem unlikely at first, but there are precedents for similar spelling conventions in late inscriptions. We have seen that the adjectival form *k'uh-ul* is often spelled with the simple logogram **K'UH(UL)** or **K'UH-UL**, but in a few rare cases we also find it rendered by **K'UH** with the **HUL** (eye-in-moon) sign suffix (Figure 9). This last **HUL** element is otherwise used to spell the verb "arrive," but in this context it is used solely for its sound value: **K'UH-HUL**, *k'uh-ul* (holy). The **-HUL** and **-HU'N** signs therefore have similar roles in spelling two different suffixes on *k'uh*.

The orthographic details therefore suggest a possible reading *Aj k'uhun* in which *k'uhun* is the semantic pivot of the title. Table 1 provides a survey of the forms *k'uh*-V*n* or its cognate form *ch'uh*-V*n* in the lexical sources. The meanings in Colonial Tzotzil (*ch'u-un*) and Tojolabal (*k'u-an*) are all similar, expressing the ideas of "to obey, worship, venerate." A possibly related meaning documented in Chontal Mayan is *ch'uh-u(n)* (to celebrate, as in a religious festival). These employ variants of the suffix -V*n* which derives transitive verbs from certain noun roots in Tzelatalan languages (Kaufman 1963:68). The same morpheme is very common in Chontal, where it similarly "derives transitive verbs from root CVC positionals, nouns, numeral classifiers, affects, and some apparent root transitives" (Knowles 1984:92). Significantly, Knowles (1984:92) posits that the -V*n* ending is an allomorph of an earlier underlying form *-an*, another transitivizing suffix. This may explain the early use of the **-na** sign on the title, where it was meant to indicate the ending on *k'uh-an*.

As an interesting (and perhaps semantically related) side note, in Ch'olti and Chontal we find that the meaning of the derived transitive verb *ch'uh-n-an* is "to guard, keep," as in the Chontal term *ajch'ujnajtaq'uin* (*el que guarda el dinero, banquero*; see Table 1). It is difficult to know how the *-n-an* suffix is morphologically related to -V*n*, but both "venerate" and "guard" do seem to reflect a semantic connection based on the use and activities surrounding sacred beings or objects. Importantly, these languages are historically among the closest, if not the closest, to the ancient language of the Classic hieroglyphic inscriptions. It is therefore possible to entertain a meaning of the God C title as "one who keeps, guards" precious or sacred goods. As we will discuss later, this semantic result may find a direct application in a number of artistic sources from the Classic period, where we find suggestive associations of *Aj k'uhun* individuals with scenes of royal throne rooms and tribute presentation.

THE GOD C TITLE AT COPAN: A CASE STUDY

Aj k'uhun nobles played key roles in many kingdoms of the Late Classic period, but their prominence in Copan archaeology is especially revealing. There, two lords with the title are prominently named in inscriptions excavated in elite lineage compounds located away from the site center, allowing us to consider the title within the context of Copan's settlement and well-known dynastic history. Group 9N-8, known as Las Sepulturas, is the best known of these architectural groups. It is dominated by Structure 9N-82, or the "House of the Bacabs" (Fash 1991:160–162; Webster 1989). Within the structure is a large bench-throne bearing a long inscription in ornate, full-figure glyphs (Figure 10). The more modest Structure 9M-18 is located closer to the main acropolis and also held a similar ornately inscribed bench-throne (Figure 11) (Willey et al. 1978). Each inscription is similar in date and in theme, recording the dedication of the building and noting the relationship of an *Ajk'uhun* to a Copan king (see the Appendix for a transcription).

The elaborate settings of these bench inscriptions show that *Ajk'uhuns* were more than modest "courtiers." They were powerful lords in their own right, overseeing, in the case of Group 9N-8, complex social units and evoking royal and cosmological symbolism in their sculpted monuments (Sanders 1989). The inscriptions also emphasize this close association with royalty. In the text of the Structure 9N-82 bench, we find that the protagonist of the building, possibly named Mak' Chanal, is described as the son of

Table 1. Mayan words possibly associated with the *Ajk'uhun* title

Ch'olti (Moran)	*chuhnan*, guardar algo, esconder
Ch'orti (Perez Martinez et al. 1996)	*ch'ujb'an*, ahorrar, guardar, alzar
Chontal (Knowles 1984)	*ch'uh-u(n)*, to celebrate
	ch'uh-n-an, to keep safe, deposit, safeguard something
Chontal (Keller and Luciano G. 1997)	*ch'ujnan*, ahorrar, guardar
	ch'ujonib, vitrina, caja con o sin vidrio para guardar trastos
	ajch'ujnajtaq'uin, el que guarda el dinero, banquero
Colonial Tzotzil (Laughlin 1988)	*ch'uun*, believe, honor, obey, respect, revere, trust, worship
	jch'uun pak'tayej ch'u, pagan
	jch'uun vinik ton, idolator (< *vinik ton*, "idol of stone"; lit., "man-stone")
	jch'uunwanej, faithful or obedient person
Tojolobal (Lenkersdorf 1981:2:499)	*k'u an*, obedecer, creer, observar, confiar
	k'u anum, peregrino, romero, obediente

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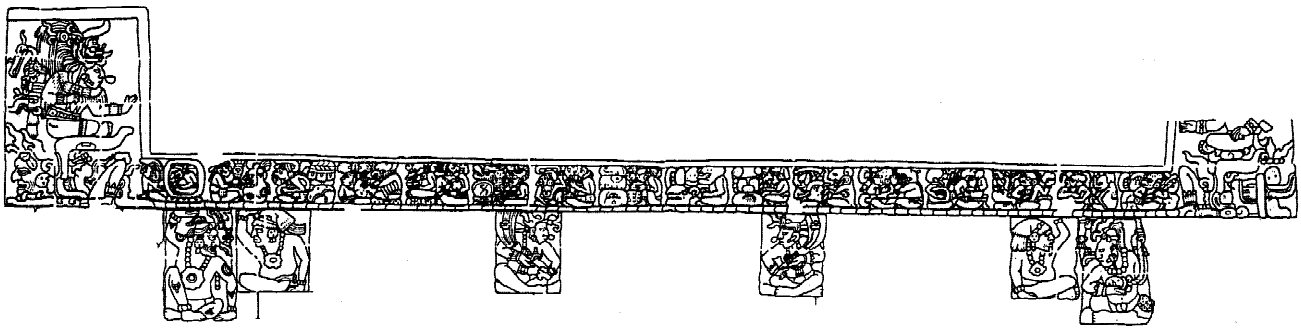


Figure 10. The Sepulturas Bench from Copan, Structure 9N-82. Drawing by A. Dowd (from Baudez 1994:Figure 111).

a woman named Ix K'in Ajaw, "Noblewoman of *K'in*," and possibly as the "successor" (or son?) of a man whose name prominently includes the deity K'awil, perhaps an indicator of high-status elites. Most important, later in the text, the noble of this building is called "the *Aj k'uhun* of" the contemporary king of Copan, Yax Pasaj, whose name closes the inscription.

Such statements of "royal possession" or subsidiary elites are common in inscriptions at other sites, most notably in connection with the important office or status *Sajal* cited in texts in the western Maya area and parts of Yucatan. *Sajals* were apparently rulers of secondary sites within kingdoms of Yaxchilan, Piedras Negras, and Palenque, among others, and they exhibit a striking "personal" connection to high kings. The principal subsidiary site affiliated with Piedras Negras was El Cayo, and was governed by several *Sajal* nobles who were all seated into their junior office within months of the inaugurations of the Piedras Negras kings who "own" them (Houston 1993:130). At Copan, we do not find records of lords being installed or seated as *Aj k'uhuns* under the auspices of rulers, but the intimate connection to individual kings is nevertheless clear. Like the inscription form Structure 9N-82, the bench inscription from Group 9M-18 cites its protagonist (whose name is no longer readable) as "the *Aj k'uhun* of" Ruler 15 of Copan, the predecessor of Yax Pasaj. However, the date of the inscription is later, from the reign of Yax Pasaj, who is named within as a celebrant of a calendar ritual. Here, the *Aj k'uhun* is affiliated not with the contemporary king, but with a deceased predecessor (Stuart 1992). This curious juxtaposition indicates not only that *Aj k'uhun*s were closely associated with their rulers, but that the nature of this association was unique and personal enough that it was not automatically transferred from ruler to ruler.

It is possible that the title *Aj k'uhun*, possibly meaning "one who keeps, guards," has some connection to the distinctive activities documented in the excavations of Group 9N-8. The larger architectural complex was very likely the setting for the small-scale production of high-status items, including shell jewelry and cloth (Fash 1991:158–160; Hendon 1991; Webster 1989). Numerous buildings to the north of the main courtyard contained ceramics and exhibited construction styles indicative of a non-local and non-Maya residential population. Structure 9N-82 physically dominates this group, and presumably its noble occupant dominated or oversaw the activities within the larger complex. It seems likely that this particular *Aj k'uhun*, at least, governed a large corporate group that attracted outside populations, many engaged in specialized economic activities, including elite craft production. The situation recalls the important role we have seen of *Aj k'uhun* titleholders in representations of royal palaces, where tribute presentation is a recurring theme. One particularly interesting example is a painted vessel from the central Peten region (Figure 12) that depicts an *Aj k'uhun* seated before an enthroned ruler. Other secondary figures in the scene stand or sit among large bundles of tribute goods (Reents-Budet 1994:335–336). Significantly, the main caption on the scene includes the glyph **yu-b'u TE'**, or *yub'te'* (tribute cloth) (Houston, personal communication 1992). The association of an *Aj k'uhun* with elite tribute goods is therefore suggested by two very different kinds of data: the archaeological evidence of activities at Group 9N-8 at Copan, and several painted scenes on Classic-period ceramics. The connection is vague in some respects but perhaps compelling enough to suggest that the title "one who keeps" or "one who venerates" might refer to the role of these nobles as royally sanctioned coordinators of elite craft production and the distribution and payments of such goods within the political economy of the royal court.

CONCLUSIONS

The God C or *Aj K'uhun* title refers to an extremely important position within ancient Maya courts and elite communities. In the course of describing the glyph, we have, we hope, illumi-

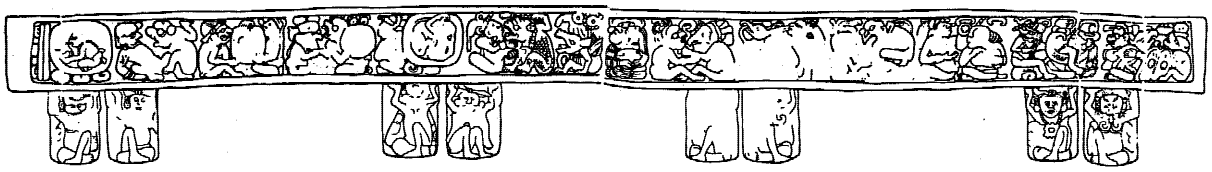


Figure 11. The "Harvard Bench" from Copan, Structure 9M-146. Drawing by Barbara Fash (from Baudez 1994:Figure 112).

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Figure 12. A tribute scene on a Maya vessel, K1728. A God C title designates the figure seated at the farthest left. Photograph copyright Justin Kerr.

nated not only its possible meanings, but also some of the complexities and subtleties inherent in Maya hieroglyphic decipherment as it has developed over the past two decades. The God C title may not yet be deciphered in full, but the overview of its many proposed readings provides a compelling microcosm for looking at how the decipherment has progressed from a heavy reliance on general, visually cued glosses ("He of the Blood") toward more linguistically sophisticated analyses (Lacadena 1996). The eventual decipherment of the God C title will benefit not only from a more detailed knowledge of hieroglyphic readings and orthographic conventions, but also from the unusually rich archaeological context for understanding its political and social significance.

One small but important consequence of our discussion is a new assessment of the male and female agentive prefixes *aj-* and *ix-*, which we believe are not mutually exclusive particles in Classic Mayan, as has long been believed. We suggest that *aj-* functions as a "general" agentive (one who . . .) to which *ix-* can sometimes be added as a feminine modifier (*Ix Aj k'uhun*).

We have cited two promising decipherments for the God C title that are phonetically similar but semantically quite different. The first is a logographic assessment, which would be read **AJ-K'UHUL-HU'N-na**, or *Aj k'uhul hu'n* (One of the holy books/paper/headbands). This builds directly on earlier suggestions but emphasizes that the term *hu'n* has a much broader significance than "book." Choosing among alternative glosses of "paper" or "headbands" results in very different meanings for the title, all of which deserve serious consideration. The second assessment is more novel and requires a rethinking of the very grammatical structure of the God C title. This interpretation is *Aj k'uhun* (spelled **AJ-K'UH-na** or **AJ-K'UH-HUN-na**), meaning "One who keeps, guards" or "One who worships, venerates." Both proposals are attractive because each seems appropriate as a term for junior elites who were overseers of some type or were loyal "venerators" of high-ranking kings. The idea of an assigned venerator may explain examples such as those we find at Copan, where a God C titleholder is tied to a certain ruler even after death. After all, could one whose occupation it is to venerate a given ruler be expected to change allegiances?

Future research will help to resolve this and other questions raised by the God C title. We offer both interpretations in order to contribute more possibilities to the ongoing scholarship on this topic and to share the progress of our own thinking about the meaning of this title. At this stage, it is difficult to choose among the readings emphasized here, but we feel that the range of viable decipherments is now narrowed considerably.

RESUMEN

Por más de una década, los especialistas en la escritura maya se dieron cuenta que el supuesto "título Díos C" es uno de los términos de posición u ocupación más importante en las inscripciones del periodo clásico. Significativamente, el título acompaña sólo a los nombres de hombres y mujeres elites que no eran reales y por eso se tiene la posibilidad de jugar un papel crítico para la comprensión de la estructura política de los maya clásicos. Se siguieron por muchos epígrafistas varias interpretaciones diferentes del título de Díos C; tal vez la más aceptada es *Aj k'uhul hu'n*, "Él de los libros sagrados." Sin embargo, se puede decir que no se encontró un consenso y cada interpretación propuesta tiene problemas. En este artículo, se usan estas investigaciones anteriores para ofrecer unas observaciones nuevas sobre la estructura fonética de la ortografía del título y la extensión semántica de sus raíces y morfemas. De estos modelos salen dos posibilidades nuevas. Una se basa en un entendimiento informado por la cultura, del sustantivo *huun* como "papel" en vez de solamente "libro," y que tal vez se refiere a la importancia documentada de las materiales papeles en los ritos mayas y mesoamericanos. Se enreda, en la otra propuesta, una interpretación muy diferente de la ortografía glífica como *Aj k'uhun*, "uno que obedece, adora" o posiblemente "uno que guarda." Este puede referir a una función especifica de los que tenían este título en la sociedad de los cortes clásicos. Aunque no se da una resolución final por nuestras interpretaciones, se refleja una comprensión más refinada de la ortografía de los jeroglíficos. Además, se usa en estos análisis un asunto semántico sobre el prefijo agentivo *aj-*, que mucho tiempo se entiende específicamente como "él de" en contraste a *ix-*, "ella de." Se sugiere de la evidencia lingüística y epigráfica un grado de ambigüedad en la referencia de género

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del prefijo *aj-*, porque en los textos clásicos cuando el título estaba usado por las mujeres nobles, tiene la combinación notable *ix-aj-*. Evidentemente, se indica el género femenino por *ix-* pero no se usa un agentivo específicamente masculino; se queda sin marcar. Además de los complicados asuntos epigráficos y lingüísticos, se examinan estas nuevas interpretaciones del título Díos C en el contexto de la evidencia arqueológica e iconográfica, usando los elites subsidiarios del antiguo Copan como base del estudio. Por medio de esta discusión se ilumina el sentido y significado del título Díos C y también la evolución de la metodología usada para descifrar la escritura maya durante las dos décadas pasadas.

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Appendix. Inscriptions on the subsidiary benches at Copan

Transcription of text on the bench of Structure 9N-82

A	**11-AJAW**
B	**3-YAX-ZIHOM?**
C	**T'AB'-Vy / yo-OTOT**
D	**ma-k'a-na / CHAN?-al**
E	**ya-AL-la / IX-K'IN-AJAW**
F	**U-TZ'AK-b'u-Vl / k'u-K'AWIL**
G	**U-MAM? / ?-ze?**
H	**yo-k'o?-lo / ?-po-mo**
I	**u-mu-TI' / XOK?**
J	**ko-xo-pa / AJAW-wa**
K	**U-?-ku-B'A(H)?**
L	**ya-K'UH-Vn**
M	**YAX-pa-sa**
N	**CHAN-na / YOPAT?-ti**
O	**K'UHUL-?-AJAW-wa**
P	**?-KALOM-TE'**

Transcription of text on the bench of Structure 9M-146 (the "Harvard Bench")

A	**11-?**
B	**17?-PAX**
C	**?-?-?**
D	**2-HA:B'? / u-to-ma**
E	**12-AJAW**
F	**8-TE'-PAX**
G	**CHOK?-ch'a-ji**
H	**YAX-pa-sa-CHAN**
I	**YOPAT?-ti**
J	**I-T'AB'-Vy**
K	**yo-to-ti? / ?**
L	**? / YA-K'UH-Vn**
M	**K'AK'-yi-pi-ya-ja**
N	**CHAN-K'AWIL**
O	**?-AJAW**

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