Vulture Hill: The Place Name of Bonampak

David Stuart
University of Texas at Austin

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Several inscribed panels at Bonampak make reference to the hieroglyph shown in Figure 1a-d, evidently a place name. It shows a main sign depicting a long-billed bird's head, yet its distinctive outline and markings point to a fusion with a **WITZ** "hill" logogram. In three cases (a-c) this "bird-hill" takes one of the several alternate forms of the **u** prefix, but its absence in one example (a title with the **AJ-** prefix), of suggests that the initial sign was not essential to the spelling.

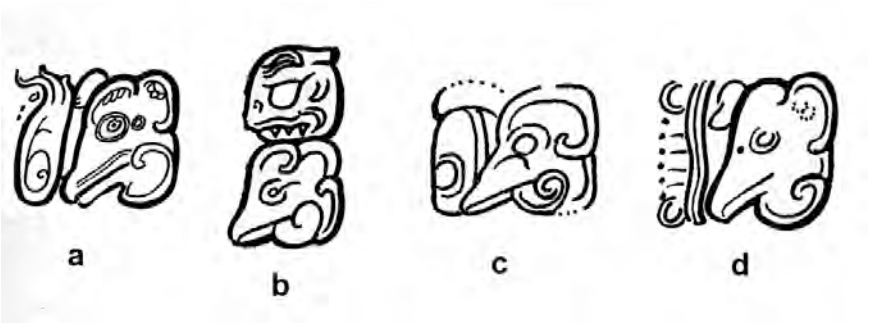

Figure 1. Bonampak's Place Glyph

There is good reason to see this bird-hill glyph as a place name specific to ruins of Bonampak. All of its known examples come from inscriptions there, and we find it cited on Bonampak, Panel 4 in connection with the accession ceremony of an early king named Yajaw Chan Muwahn on 9.8.6.13.7 11 Kaban 5 Zip (Figure 2). Of course we have long known of two emblem glyphs closely connected to Bonampak and its wider region (Mathews 1980, 1993), but the exclusive appearance of this bird-hill glyph at Bonampak suggests it may be the name of the prominent hill on which the ruins are built.

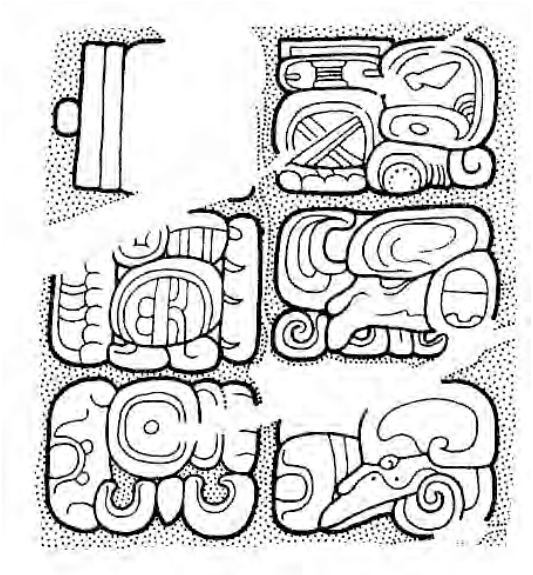

Figure 2. Bonampak, Panel 4's opening passage.
Drawing by Alexandre Safronow

The full decipherment of this place glyph hinges upon a secure reading of the bird's head. It resembles a number of elements often described as a "vulture," although surely there are other types incorporated into the wide array of candidates (one similar sign, for example, is surely the logogram for **AK'ACH** "turkey hen"). Little seems distinctive of this bird, however, save perhaps for a large circular line around the small eye.

The telling clue is, I think, the optional **u** prefix. Usually we might take this as a representation of the possessive pronoun **u**, "his, her, its," but here such a reading makes little sense. The bird-hill is clearly a place name, an unlikely context for the spelling of a possessed noun. If, however, we consider the **u** to be a phonetic complement to the place name, and specifically to the reading of the bird's head, then its optional presence would not seem so strange.

The attested word for "vulture" in Classic inscriptions is *us* or *usij*, or some cognate of this term This is perhaps spelled **u-si-ja** in a captive's name mention at Yaxchilan (Marc Zender, personal communication, 2004), and the spelling **u-su** has recently appeared in the name caption of a supernatural vulture depicted on a looted vase. With this word known from the Classic texts, it seems we have at Bonampak a logographic fusion of the elements spelling the place name "Vulture Hill" or *Us(ij) Witz*. I suggest this is a good candidate for the reading of the Bonampak place glyph.

Good backing for this reading comes from a name caption in the Bonampak murals, painted far later than the stone panels mentioned so far. As revealed by the important infrared scans by Gene Ware (Ware et. al., 2002), a glyph caption for one of the richly adorned dancers in Room 3 bears a place title that looks to be a phonetic spelling of the vulture glyph (Figure 3, at right): **u-si-wi?-WITZ AJAW-wa**. I interpret this to be a title of a local "Vulture Hill Lord," and a rare appearance of the place name in the later texts of Bonampak.

Another late example of the place name is more iconographic in presentation. On Stela 2, the later king Yajaw Chan Muwahn, who dedicated the mural room, is shown with an elaborate but unusual "featherless" headdress (Figure 4) (possibly he is shown with his wife and mother in the process of receiving quetzal plumes, in addition to sacrificial implements). The main headdress symbols are clear to see, however, including two stacked *witz* heads, easily identifiable by their profiles and large eyelashes. Above the uppermost mountain head we find a haughty vulture, dressed as a lord and seated human-like atop a sky band. I interpret the king's headdress as a symbolic array incorporating hieroglyphic elements, like many others known from the Mesoamerican world. Here, on a monument erected on the main steps leading up the mountain, Yajaw Chan Muwahn seems to assume the identity of Vulture Hill itself.

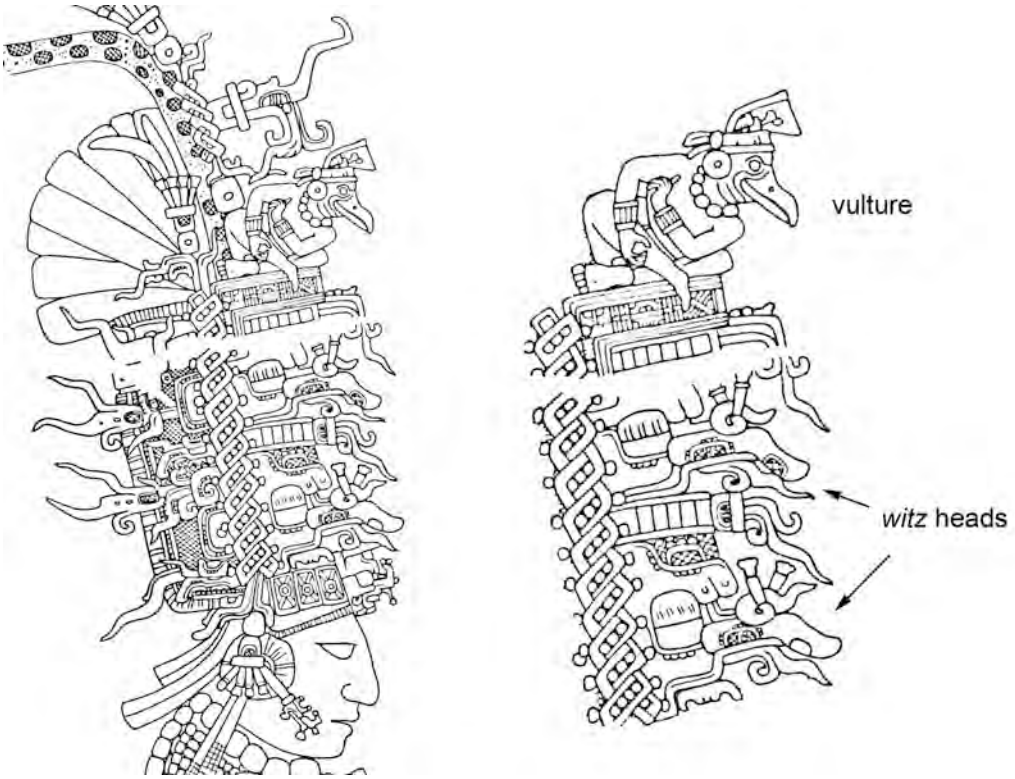

Figure 4. The toponymic headdress of Bonampak, Stela 2. Drawing by Peter Mathews.

The identification of a place glyph specific to the ruins of Bonampak allows us to refine somewhat the complex geographical picture of the area known today as the Selva Lacandona. The emblem glyphs we associated with Bonampak are far too wide in their scopes of reference to help us discern the specific locations of events within the polity. But many other poorly explored centers in the area – among them Lacanha, Ojo de Agua, Maudslay, Oxlahuntun, the Bee Ruin – must have had place names as well, possibly discernable once other inscriptions of the area are better documented.

Mathews, Peter

1980 Notes on the Dynastic Sequence of Bonampak, Part I. In *Third Palenque Round Table, 1978, Part 2*, edited by Merle Greene Robertson, pp. 60-73. Austin: University of Texas Press.

1993 The emblem glyph of Bonampak, Chiapas, Mexico. *Texas Notes* 44. Pre-Columbian Art, Writing, and Culture, Austin: University of Texas at Austin

Ware, Gene, Stephen Houston, Mary Miller, Karl Taube, and Beatriz de la Fuente

2002 Infrared Imaging of Precolumbian Murals at Bonampak, Chiapas, Mexico. *Antiquity* 76(292):325-326.