The Maya Hieroglyphs for *Mam*,
“Grandfather, Grandson, Ancestor”

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One of the most noteworthy breakthroughs in Maya hieroglyphic decipherment during the 1970s was the recognition of “parentage statements” by Schele, Mathews, and Lounsbury (1977). These common phrases customarily follow a personal name phrase -- usually that of a ruler -- and specify the featured individual’s mother and/or father. Each parent’s name follows the appropriate kin term marked with a third-person possessive (ergative) pronoun, $u$- or $(u)y$-. Some years ago I reviewed the importance of these and other kinship statements in Maya texts (Stuart 1997), and offered a few new readings in an attempt to link them with documented kinship terms in Mayan languages. Presently I would like to suggest another new decipherment for a previously unrecognized relationship glyph reading *mam*, “maternal grandfather” or “grandson.” In addition to being a kinship term in several contexts, it seems that the *mam* hieroglyph can sometimes serve as a more general term for “elder” or perhaps “ancestor.” If I am correct in this decipherment, certain gaps in some texts would be clarified, and the structure of Maya kin relations and descent can perhaps now be approached with new and compelling evidence.

The hieroglyph in question has received little attention in the past, save for an important discussion by Chinchilla (1990) of its Early Classic variant, which he called the “mechudo” (Figure 1a). This earlier form represents the head of an old man, seemingly toothless, and distinguished by a large “god’s eye” not unlike that of the sun god. A long lock of hair draped before the face is also a very distinctive and important characteristic of this sign. In Late Classic texts the sign of the *viejo* (a convenient term of reference I will use throughout this essay) seems to have given way to a bird’s head sharing some of the same distinctive characteristics of the large eye and the draped hair strand (Figure 1b). The forelock in particular offers an important connection between the signs, since it appears, to my knowledge, on no other hieroglyphic element. The equivalence of these forms is indicated by a comparison of two Early Classic texts from the Tikal area, where both variants clearly substitute in the extended name phrase of *Siyaj Chan K’awil*, or
“Stormy Sky” (Figure 2). The overlap may also be seen in the name phrase of the Palenque ruler traditionally known as “Chaacal II,” which we will examine in detail momentarily.

As the Tikal examples show, the viejo sign commonly introduces name phrases of rulers of ancestors. Other examples are provided in Figure 3, most of which accompany the names of rulers or other people who “own” stelae. It is important to stress that these early cases are tend to be unmarked for possession, and therefore are not examples of relationship statements as described above; rather, these non-possessed forms simply serve as an introductory term before a personal name, as Chinchilla Mazareigos (1990) originally showed. The head is evidently some sort of designation or title for important male individuals during the Early Classic.

Associations with Parentage Statements

The possessed form of this noun is sometimes appended to conventional parentage statements, suggesting a thematic connection to kinship. To cite one important example, a text on an inscribed bone illustrated by Coe (1973) is an extended name-tag (“it is the bone of…”) and contains a standard citation of the protagonist’s mother and father (Figure 4). Near the end of the inscription, following the name of the father, we find a third possessed noun based on the bird or vulture variant of the glyph under discussion. Another name follows, and it would seem to describe a third relationship centered on the owner of the bone.

We find a similarly appended phrase in a short text on a sanctuary jamb panel from the Temple of the Sun at Palenque (Figure 5). The protagonist is the current ruler K’inch Kan B’ahlam, named in a now missing section of the text. The name of his father K’inch Janahb’ Pakal survives, followed by the relationship expression ya-AL-la-K’UHUL-IXIK, or y-al K’uhul Ixik, “...(he is) the child of the Holy Woman...,” and then
the name of the mother, Ix Tz’ak Ajaw (formerly known as “Lady Ahpo Hel!”). The text might normally end here, but it continues after the mother’s name with a possessed form of the viejo sign under discussion, in its avian variant. Importantly, this sign carries the suffix -ma (Grube 1987). A name comes next, written over several glyph blocks, and I suggest that this once more expresses a third kin relationship for the ruler. The appearance of the -ma ending on the bird here is significant, for it is not a common addition to the sign. There is every reason to believe that it here serves as a phonetic complement to the bird sign, suggesting it has a logographic value ending with -M or -AM.

The name of this kinsman of K’ínich Kan B’alám, coming after the bird glyph, occurs only in one other Palenque text, where we find an associated date. The recently unearthed platform of Temple XIX opens on its west face with the early date 9.6.7.0.0, on which occurred the making or fashioning of a monument or object known as a okib (there spelled as a possessed noun yo-ki-bi-li, for y-oki-il). The “owner” of this object bears the same name as K’ínich Kan Bahlam’s relation from the Temple of the Sun text, and I believe they are the same person. The 9.6.7.0.0 date falls nearly 130 years before the Sun inscription was carved, however, and so it is clear that this relative was deceased at the time, and possibly can be considered a venerated ancestor.

Another usage of the possessed form of this term appears within the name phrase of an early Palenque king mentioned in the Tablets of the Cross and the Inscriptions (Figure 6). Schele (1992) and several others refer to this Early Classic king as “Chaacal II.” Portions of his name phrase repeat the name of a preceding ruler who has long been known as “Chaacal I,” and far later king of Late Classic times was named “Lord Chaacal” or “Chaacal III.” Today we know that the repeating elements of the three royal name phrases are more correctly read as a-ku-la MO’-NAHB’, for Ahkal Mo’ Nahb’. The king in question has much more to his name phrase, however. As Figure 6 shows, the full form incorporates the possessed form of the viejo as well as several other
elements: yi-ti-?-li U-“viejo” a-ku-la MO’-NAHB’. This extended sequence is somewhat long as a personal name, and the internal positioning of the possessed viejo noun suggests that there is at least one imbedded possessive construction within the nominal phrase. I suggest that the final portion of the extended name, Ahkal Mo’ Nahb’, is in fact a reference to the earlier king, and that the full name phrase includes a kinship statement linking the two rulers. In this analysis, yi-ti-?-li is the core of the later name, followed by a possessed kin relationship to a lord who reigned some years before. The first Ahkal Mo’ Nahb’ ruled between *** and *** A.D., and the ruler in question came to throne in ***, after the reign of an intervening lord (“Casper”). It would therefore seem that two generations separate the two “Chaacal” rulers.¹

A similar skipping of a generation is implied in a relationship cited in an inscription from Pomona, Tabasco (Figure 7). The text is the last of a series of tablets recording a vast span of local dynastic history, and the badly fragmented inscription closes with a record of a tomb dedication ceremony, including the familiar phrase och-k’ahk’ t-u-muk-il, “the fire enters his tomb.” The deceased ruler is well-known from Pomona’s inscriptions, but the overseer of the ritual is a later king whose name is apparently not recorded. Rather, the dedicator is indirectly referred to by means of the bird version of the viejo glyph, accompanied by a u- possessive pronoun prefix. This is in turn followed by U-2-TZ’AK-B’U-IL, “the second placed-in-order (i.e., successor) from…,” and lastly the name of an earlier ruler (who is not the tomb occupant). I take this passage to mean that the one who dedicated the tomb was “the x of, the second in order” from this named ruler, implying perhaps that the tomb occupant was the intervening king. The situation is therefore similar to the Palenque name already described, where the viejo term, in either of its main variants, seems to refer to the younger of two people separated by two generations.

 Turning now to Yaxchilan, we find the “bird viejo” sign within an unusual glyph on Lintel 14 (Figure 8), where it closes the name phrase of the man standing to the right
of the scene (G1-G5). His personal name, Chak Jol, is at G4 (CHAK-JOL) and is paired there the subordinate title Sajal. The final glyph is U- before the bird head and the superfix AJAW, which can only be read as “(he is) the ‘x’ of the lord.” The central text passage of Lintel 14 offers an important parallel to this man’s name phrase. There, the woman portrayed opposite the man is identified as Ix Chak Jol (“Lady Chak Skull”), best known in Yaxchilan’s dynastic history as the spouse of Bird Jaguar IV and the mother of Itzamnaah B’alam II (Shield Jaguar II). She also carries the Sajal title directly after her personal name, with the appropriate feminine prefix. The final glyph of her name phrase is the so-called “mother of” expression first identified by Mathews, with the AJAW superfix: “(she is) the mother of the lord.” The male Chak Jol seems therefore to be related to “the lord” through the bird viejo sign, strongly indicating that it, too, is a kin term. The sharing of the name Chak Jol between the man and the woman suggests that they hold some sort of kin relationship as well – an association that will soon prove important in the present analysis.

Another example of the glyph occurs on a fine Late Classic ceramic vessel (K5164) in the “codex style” (Figure 9). Its mythological scene is one of several that depict large fantastic serpent coiled around a reclining young woman (see Robiscek and Hales 1981:Vessels 8-13). From the snake’s gaping mouth emerges an old man, who gestures to the woman. As I have argued elsewhere, the iconographic arrangement strongly suggests that this is a scene of birth, with the serpent -- a representation of the birth canal -- shown passing through the midsection of a mother giving birth (Stuart 1984, 1988). There can be little doubt that in this fanciful story the old man is the offspring of the woman. The hieroglyphic caption is longer than others we find with such scenes, and offers important clues to the interpretation of the narrative. The text commences with the Calendar Round 13 Muluk 17 Pax (a date that cannot be confidently linked to any long count position), followed by the “birth” verb, probably read siyaj, “he is born.” The name of the character emerging from the serpent comes in the next two
glyphs, evidently naming the old man. A great many codex style vessels repeat this combination of the Muluk-Pax date (at times altered somewhat from the one given here), the birth event, and this same name is repeated on a great many vessels in the codex style, but here the painter has chosen to provide more textual information. Following the name is the familiar bird form of our viejo glyph, once more with a possessive pronoun u-. This, in turn, comes before several glyphs that provide a personal name: a-ku-la ?-IK’ a-mu-chi TUUN-ni-AJAW. It remains unclear if the name pertains to a deity or some historical personage, but there can be no doubt that the intervening vulture glyph establishes some connection between this name and that of the elderly deity following “is born.” Logically, the bird sign alone must make a direct reference to the old man being born. Moreover, it is interesting to see that the bird viejo glyph once again appears in relation with a standard kinship term for parentage. Later, among the final glyphs of the scene, the possessed noun y-al (“he is her child”) links the subject of the birth to the woman’s name, written in the last four blocks.

A Proposed Reading

By now it is possible to review several important roles and associations of the viejo glyph, in both its human and bird variants. To summarize the essential points:

- The sign in the Early Classic depicts an elderly man, and is sometimes used before the personal names of ancestors. Related to this is the sign’s usage on vase K5164, where it explicitly refers to the old man born from the birth serpent.
- In several examples, it serves as an “extension” of sorts on parentage statements that specify the mother and father of a protagonist, and therefore may serve to indicate a non-parental kinship term.
• At Palenque and Tonina, it apparently indicates a relationship between two historical people separated by two generations.

• It takes the phonetic suffix –ma on one occasion, apparently as a phonetic complement, thus providing a slight clue concerning the value of the logogram as CVM or CAM.

In considering a reading of the sign that fulfills these functions, one value comes quickly to mind: mam, “grandfather” or “grandson.” Such a decipherment is fitting as a general term introducing the name of ancestors, but it seems especially compelling as a term that expressing a relationship between people separated by two generations, as in the case of the two early rulers of Palenque.

I believe that the text from the edge of the Palenque sarcophagus lid provides striking confirmation of the mam reading (Figure 10a and b). The opening segment of that inscription, on the south edge, records in short order the birth and death of K’ínich Janhаб’ Pakal, and concludes with the phrase U-TZ’AK-B’U-ji U-CHAB’-ji-ya U-ma-ma, or u-ts’ak-b’u-ij u-chab’-j-iiy u-mam, “he causes it to be ordered (?), the overseeing of his grandfather(s).” The translation of the phrase is a bit awkward and difficult, but I have considered the general sense of it being that “he (Pakal) follows in the work of his ancestors.” I believe this statement relates directly to the ancestral portraits of the sarcophagus sides, emphasizing Pakal’s continuity within the dynastic line. Be that as it may, our concern here is specifically with the term mam. The cited spelling ma-ma perhaps requires some explanation, for it makes use of two very different signs with the same syllabic value. The initial ma- is familiar as T74, but this is in fact part of a larger
ma variant that incorporates the “mirror” like main sign. This fuller ma form is widely used in spellings of the month Mak (ma-ka), where its value seems beyond doubt (Figure 10c). The glyph on the sarcophagus lid is in turn suffixed by the alternative –ma variant first identified by Grube (1987), with the fairly clear result ma-ma. It is structurally identical to the widely known mam spellings (U-ma-ma) from the Dresden Codex (Figure 11), long known since its identification by Knorosov.

The importance of the Palenque spelling becomes clear once we compare it to a passage from the fragmentary Panel 4 of Pomona, Tabasco (Figure 10b). Here we find the sequence of glyphs U-TZ’AK-ka-B’U-ji U-CHAB’-ji-ya U-MAM, where in the final glyph of the phrase is the “vulture” form supposedly read MAM, occurring now in direct substitution with ma-ma. I see this as perhaps the strongest support for the mam reading of the logogram.

The meanings of mam

A survey of the dictionaries demonstrates the pervasiveness of mam in Mayan languages, and provides semantic clues with which to analyze the viejo glyph:

YUKATEK (Martinez Hernandez 1929)
mam – abuelo de parte de madre o de madrasta; los primeros hermanos, o primos carnales hijos de hermanas, o de dos hermanos

MOPAN
mam – nieto/a del hombre (Ulrich and Ulrich 1976)
mamaa’ – abuelo

PROTO-CH’OLAN (Kaufman and Norman 1984)
*mam – grandfather, grandson, nephew
CHONTAL (Keller and Luciano G. 1997; Knowles n.d.)
mam – abuelo; nieto, nieta
mam - grandfather, grandson, granddaughter
mam-lop’ – grandchildren

CH’OL (Attinasi 1973, Whittaker and Warkentin 1965, Aulie and Aulie 1978)
mam – grandchild
mama - cousin
mam – hermano de la abuela paterna
ma (Tila) – nieto, descendiente

CH’OLTI (Gates 1935)
mam – abuelo, nieto, idolo

CH’ORTI (Wisdom n.d.)
mama’ - '(kinship term including all blood and affinal male kin one generation above
speaker, but excluding speaker's father), old man'

PROTO-TZELTAL-TZOTZIL (Kaufman 1972)
*Am-il - abuelo, nieto del hombre

TZENDAL (Ara 1986)
mamal – viejo
mamnichan – nieto, el varón

TZELTAL (Slocum and Gerdel 1965)
mam – nieto, nieta
mamal – anciano, (el) viejito

COLONIAL TZOTZIL (Laughlin 1988)
mom – nieto de varón

K’ICHE’ (Ximénez 1985; Edmonson 1965)
mam – grandfather, ancestor, elder, old man, grandchild
mam – el nieto, el abuelo
mama – el viejo, el abuelo; animal macho; jefe de la casa

KAKCHIQ’EL (Edmonson 1965)
ma(m) – elder, a Cakchiquel title in the early colonial period, particularly extended to the
heads of lineages.

POQOMAM (Niles 1957)
mam – gradfather, man’s grandchild

Q’EQCHI (Sedat S. 1955; Haeserijn V. 1979)
mam – retumbo, dios del cerro, de la tierra
Throughout these lexical examples we find that *mam* is a reciprocal kin term, equally capable of meaning “grandfather” and “grandson (or granddaughter).” It seems an old pattern as well, and it is an attested form in proto-Mayan, where *maam* is reconstructed with the meanings “nieto, sobrino, abuelo.” Clearly the word existed in Classic times, and we have seen that both “grandson” and “grandfather” are attested in uses of the supposed hieroglyphic that corresponds to *mam*: at Palenque and elsewhere, the bird form of the glyphic expression refers to the younger of the two related generations (e.g., Figure 6). Elsewhere we find the glyph referring instead to “grandfather,” and in many Early Classic examples where this is pre-posed before a name, the function seems to be almost titular, much as described above in the lexical table for K’ichean languages.

*Mam* is specifically glossed as “maternal grandfather/grandson” in Yukatek, and Kaufman and Norman reconstruct this meaning also in proto-Ch’olan. The example of the glyph on Yaxchilan, Lintel 14 (Figure 8) would agree with this specific sense, for it would immediately identify the male Chak Jol as “the maternal grandfather of the lord.” That is, Chak Jol is shown here in the company of his daughter, Ix Chak Jol, the ruler’s mother.

The maternal line of descent is also emphasized on Stela 5 from Tikal (Figure 12). On the left side of the monument, Ruler B (Yik’in Chan K’awiil) is named as the *mam* of a person bearing the title *yo-ko-MAN-AJAW*, *Yokman Ajaw*. The relationship here may again specifically be “maternal grandson,” for on the same stela the mother of Ruler B carries the very same title based on the toponym Yokman, the actual location of which is unknown. Here, as on Lintel 14 from Yaxchilan, the maternal ancestral line of the king is featured very prominently.
The *Mam* Glyph as “Ancestor”

When the *mam* glyph appears at or near the beginning of a personal name phrase (see Figure 3), it probably serves as an honorific like “elder” or “ancestor.” In many cases it accompanies the names of ancestral figures and deities, but living rulers might also bear the title as part of broader representation of divine rulership. Interestingly, the initially placed *mam* title is decidedly early in its chronological distribution, being exclusively restricted to Early Classic inscriptions (see Chichilla M. 1990). For example, on Tikal’s Stela 31 the caption above the left-side portrait of Yax Nuun Ayin, the father of the then-ruler Siyaj Chan K’awiil (Figure 3a), can now be read, in part:

\[
U\text{-}B’AH\ \text{MAM}\ \text{WINIKHAAB’-}\text{-AJAW}\ \text{NUUN-YAX}\ \text{AYIN}\ \text{MUT-la}\ \text{AJAW…}
\]

\[
u\text{-}b’ah\ \text{mam}\ \text{Winikhaab’ Ajaw}\ \text{Nuun Yax Ayin Mutul Ajaw…}
\]

“(It is) the image of the Ancestor, the Twenty-year Lord, Yax Nun Ayin, the Mutul Lord…”

Similarly, an inscription on an Early Classic vessel excavated at Uaxactun (Figure 3b) reads:

\[
y\text{-}uk’ib’\ ta\text{-}kakaw\ \text{Mam}\ \text{Naahk’an…}
\]

“(It is) the cup for kakaw of the Elder, Naahk’an…”

As we have seen, context seems important for determining a precise translation of *Mam.* On Stela 31, Nun Yax Ayin may be shown as a youth no more than twenty years of age, and perhaps far younger (Stuart 2000). Here “elder” would thus be somewhat misleading as a translation of *mam*, but “ancestor” may be more appropriate. The portrait likely
corresponds to the time of his own inauguration in the wake of Teotihuacan’s intrusive presence at Tikal (Stuart 2000), and if so, it would not be directly contemporary with the image of his son on the face of the monument. Nuun Yax Ayin was surely deceased by this time (9.0.10.0.0), and significantly he is depicted on the front of the same monument as a “floating” sun deity – a divine ancestor witnessing and sanctioning the royal ceremony (Figure 13a). A related image is found on a shell gorget decorated with a similar downward-gazing ancestor (Figure 13b), as Stephen Houston pointed out to me several years ago. The name of the ancestor is in his headdress, and is evidently repeated in the inscription of six glyphs incised into the upper part of the shell. The initial glyph is the possessed noun *yu-ha*, for *y-uh*, “his necklace.” The personal name begins next with **MAM**, which seems fitting here simply as “elder” or “ancestor.”

The glyphic pattern is identical to that attested in some Mayan languages, where *ma-* is a pre-posed honorific term for elders, lineage heads, or patron deities. This is almost certainly derived from *mam* (Edmonson 1965:70). In modern Q’eqchi, *ma-* is likened to the Spanish honorific prefix “Don,” which may provide some sense of its meaning in many ancient texts. This usage is in no way restricted to the highlands or Eastern Mayan languages, however. For the Ch’ol Maya, Attanasi (1973:291) records that *ma-* is a “prefix for the chief mayordomo of a saint, affixed to the name of the saint.”

Many writers have stressed the role of Mam as a name for a deity or group of deities in Maya religion. Thompson (1970:297), for example, presented Mam as the name for a “god of evil,” or the “spirit of evil from beneath the earth,” who was featured in numerous rituals associated with the five liminal days of the “month” Wayeb. Among the Q’eq’chi, the Mam was regarded as a fearsome character who rumbled within the earth at the beginning of the rainy season (Thompson 1970:199). While the Q’eqchi sources are fairly consistent in these descriptions, it seems likely that this idea of the Mam reflects a wider Maya concept of malignant “earth lords,” and that the term was not a proper designation for any particular deity. As a general term for “grandfather” or
“elder” in Mayan languages, *mam* came to be applied to several related but different concepts in Maya cosmology and ritualism.

In the ancient sources, the *mam* glyph is likewise never used as a proper name or designation for a god. In the cases we have reviewed, the term is used in historical settings as a term of kinship, or else as an honorific title for ancestral names. Even in the New Years pages of the Dresden, *mam* seems something of an abstract concept meaning “elder” or “ancestor,” as in *Chak Way u-mam* or *Ek’ Way ka-mam*, “Chak Way is its ancestor” (Bricker 1986:91). A similar usage of *mam* as a general idea of “ancestor” appears in a series of intriguing inscriptions from the Old Castillo of Chichen Itza, excavated several years ago by Peter Schmidt. These unpublished texts are placed at the bases of square columns adorned with carvings of flowering vines and tendrils. They consistently state **U-b’a-hi U-NIK-TE’ U-ma-ma**, for *u-b’ah u-nikte’ u-mam*, “it is the image of the flowers of his ancestor(s).”

Further investigations should hopefully refine the issues of translation raised by the complex term *mam*, and they may begin to answer the unresolved questions about glyphs and the curious patterns that surround them. Although certain points suggested in this essay may well be modified in the wake of work to come, it would appear that *mam* stands may remain a compelling decipherment of the *viejo* and the vulture signs.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. The viejo sign and its later bird variant.

Figure 2. Substitution of the bird and viejo signs in inscriptions from Tikal area. (a) Tikal, Stela 31, (b) Tzakol vessel

Figure 3. The viejo sign in selected Early Classic names phrases.

Figure 4. Inscribed bone with a parentage phrase. From Coe 1973 (text transcription by the author)

Figure 5. A text from the sanctuary jamb panel of the Temple of the Sun, Palenque (drawing by the author).

Figure 6. The name of an Early Classic Palenque king.

Figure 7. A portion of a panel inscription from Pomona, Tabasco.

Figure 8. Codex style vessel (K5164). Photograph by Justin Kerr.

Figure 10. A substitution at Palenque and Pomona. (a) Palenque, Sarcophagus Lid, (drawing by M.G. Robertson) and (b) Pomona tablet (field drawing by I. Graham, courtesy the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions)

Figure 11. Mam in New Year’s Pages of the Dresden Codex

Figure 12. Tikal, Stela 5.

Figure 13. Celestial ancestors. (a) Nuun Yax Ayin as the sun god, from Tikal Stela 31 (after Jones and Satterthwaite 19**,Fig. **), (b) incised design on oval shell gorget of unknown provenience (drawn after a photograph by Justin Kerr)

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1 A caveat is in order, however. Despite the evident difference between these royal names, the distinction was not always consistent. For example, the inscription on the side of the sarcophagus of K’inich Janahb’ Pakal cites the deaths of Ahkal Mo’ Nahb’ and his probable grandson, but the names are identical in all respects. At present I can offer no satisfactory explanation for this pattern.