

The Bolon Yokte Reference on the Copán Hieroglyphic Stairway

[The Center for 2012 Studies](#), Note 1. © John Major Jenkins. May 30, 2010

In an email of December 2, 2009, Maya scholar Erik Boot brought to our attention a reference to the Bolon Yokte deity on the Copán Hieroglyphic Stairway. It directly involves 18 Rabbit's decapitation on April 27, 738 (J). The pictures that Boot references are reproduced here:



Diagram 1. Glyph block sequence from image provided by Looper, from Stuart's 2008 presentation at the Austin Maya meetings. Notice that the fourth and fifth glyph blocks appear joined in the stonework.

On the top row, at the right, we see the reference to 18 Rabbit. In the bottom row, we have the decapitation of 18 Rabbit (left glyph block), followed by "with his flint, his shield" (apparently a reference to the method of decapitation, using a flint), then the "yitaj" expression ("in the company of") and the reference to Bolon Yokte (you can see the bar for "5" above his head, and parts of the four dots above the bar, represented the "nine" or "bolon" in his name). It is important to note that these three glyph blocks in the bottom row appear to be a single connected unit in the stonework. This is significant because we find a conflicting presentation of these glyphs on page 78 of Looper's *Lightning Warrior* (2003: Fig. 3.3). There, Looper assembles glyphs based upon George Byron Gordon 1902 book *The Hieroglyphic Stairway*. In the plates in that book cited by

Looper, we find a glyph arrangement in which the Bolon Yokte glyph-block is disconnected and missing:



Diagram 2. The full image from Plate VII of Gordon (1902). The three pertinent glyphs are on the right side, fifth row down. These are enlarged in the image below.



Diagram 3. Close-up of the glyph-block sequencing depicted in Gordon (1902). Note that the glyph block on the right is not the Bolon Yokte glyph.

It is a little difficult to make out, but you can compare the first two glyph blocks with Diagram 1 and see that they are the same. Then, there is a white space that indicates a disconnect, as if Gordon had assembled the blocks differently — the third glyph-block is clearly not the same as the Bolon Yokte glyph block in Diagram 1. However, Looper didn't replicate Gordon's sequence; instead he placed a glyph block for 18 Rabbit's name to the right of the "with his flint, his shields" statement:

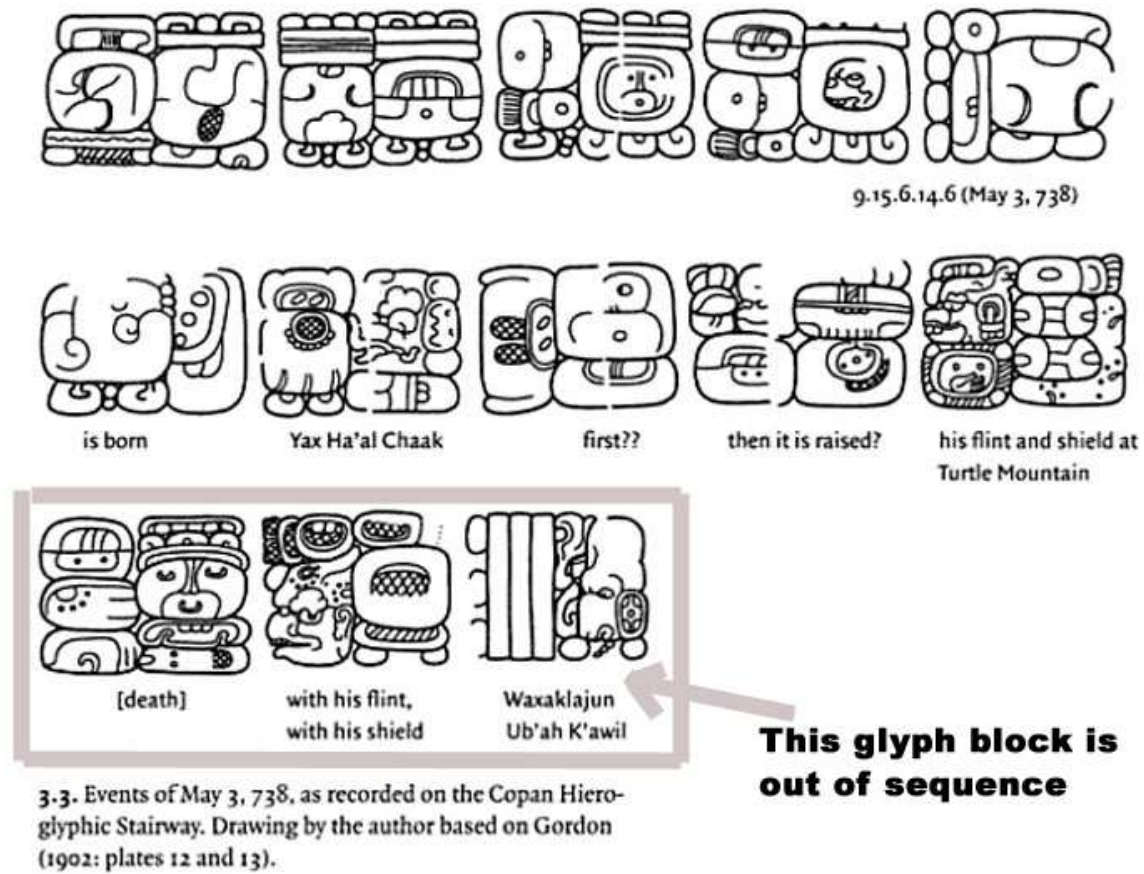


Diagram 4. Text from the Hieroglyphic Stairway as depicted in *Lightning Warrior* by Loofer (2003: 78).

This does not represent an accurate sequence of the glyph blocks, if Diagram 1 above does indeed accurately portray the unbroken sequence in the stonework, as it appears to do. Loofer summarizes his reading of the first two glyph blocks as follows. The first one, on the left, refers to “the departure of breath from the body and makes no reference to decapitation” (Loofer 2003: 77). In comparison, the text on Quirigua Stela F states that 18 Rabbit was decapitated. Loofer insightfully notes that this suggests distinct differences between Copán and Quirigua in the meaning ascribed to 18 Rabbit’s death. The second glyph block, according to Loofer, reads “with his flint, with his shield.” Loofer notes this is unusual in the context of the passage, which continues in his diagram (apparently incorrectly) with 18 Rabbit’s name. He admits that it is difficult to interpret.

Perhaps we can add some clarity to the meaning of the passage if we correct the third glyph block (see Diagram 1). According to Boot (email of December 2, 2009), “[t]he final two collocations spell yitaj balun yokte’ k’uh.” The death event thus “takes place in the company of Balun Yokte’ K’uh.” The word “yitaj” means “he accompanied/he has accompanied it” — referring to Bolon Yokte’s presence at the death which involved “with his flint, with his shield.” The question is, whose flint and shield is it? Loofer may have assumed that the owner of the flint and shield must have been 18 Rabbit, and placed his name after that glyph block so that it appears that the flint and shield belong to 18 Rabbit. That this is the case is suggested by Loofer’s

suggestion/assumption that the passage may refer to 18 Rabbit's death "by arms" or "in war" (Looper 2003: 77). It would seem so with this placement of 18 Rabbit's name. However, if we restore what is apparently the correct glyph-block sequence, then the flint and shield is owned by Bolon Yokte.

The Hieroglyphic Stairway thus suggests that in some way Bolon Yokte sacrificed or killed "the breath" of 18 Rabbit with a flint knife wielded by Bolon Yokte himself. Erik Boot wrote in his email that the staff topped by centipedes and flints on QRG Stela J is the staff of Bolon Yokte. The iconography of Stela J depicts two flints emerging from the mouths of two centipedes that are at the top of the staff, positioned along the sides of the figure portrayed on the stela, who is none other than K'ak Tiliw:

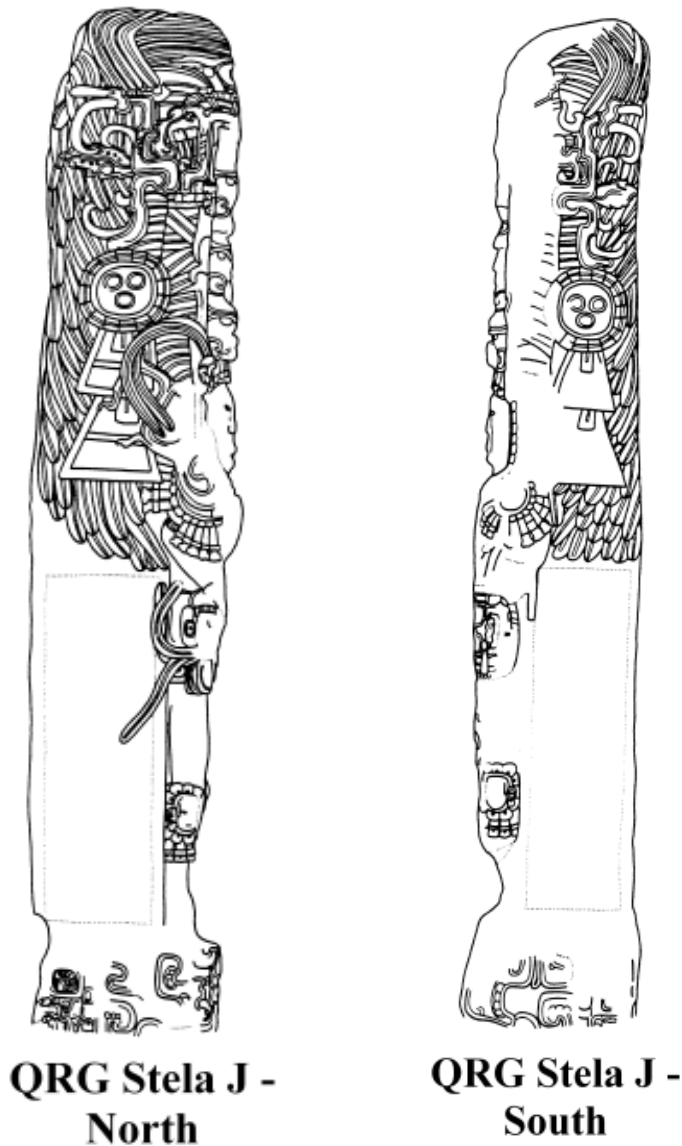


Diagram 5. Quirigua Stela J. The staff of Bolon Yokte – flints in mouths, and shields. From Looper (2003:108).

Erik wrote in his email: “Stela J depicts K’ak’ Tiliw and within the full composition of the portrait two huge open jawed centipedes are visible, with flints emerging from their mouths, and shields below. . . . The staff topped by centipedes and flints is the staff of Balun Yokte’ K’uh.”

The flint knives are emerging from the mouths of the centipede, which are traditionally the underworld portals. The position of the knives also replicates the traditional position of speech or song scrolls, and thus the “life breath.” Here we have an interesting paradoxical conflation of life and death imagery, which is made even more striking when we consider that, in the Copán H.S. text, 18 Rabbit’s death is depicted as his breath being diminished or taken. Bolon Yokte is here perhaps a breath stealer, a death merchant, and a transformational period-ending deity. (The end of a king’s long reign is indeed the end of a period, in some sense.) It seems that on the QRG Stela F and Zoomorph G, it is K’ak Tiliw who supervises or accompanies or facilitates the death of 18 Rabbit. This is also the case here on Stela J, although in this context K’ak Tiliw appears to be playing the role of Bolon Yokte. Perhaps the distinction in the conceptualization of 18 Rabbit’s death that Looper alluded to involves QRG asserting that K’ak Tiliw was the sacrificial priest/actor while at Copán they chose to recognize the higher deity through which 18 Rabbit’s death would be more in the way of a transformation, perhaps even an apotheosis. We may suspect that such a framing by Copán would cast a dubious light on K’ak Tiliw’s self-representation, underscoring his *coup d’état*, daring to assume the role that should be left to a deity.

On the other hand, deity impersonation by Maya kings is well known. In 756 AD, when Stela J was dedicated, just under eighteen years had elapsed since 18 Rabbit’s decapitation, which many scholars suspect was some kind of ritual act (see Jenkins 2009: 271-73). The later monuments of K’ak Tiliw are revealing as to how the ritual decapitation of 18 Rabbit was mythologized and embedded into the official rhetoric. If, for example, K’ak Tiliw took on the identity of Bolon Yokte when he sacrificed 18 Rabbit, some kind of period-ending allusion may be present in this act. The fact that Jupiter was alignment with the dark rift on that date may be significant, because the dark rift has an astronomical association with the 13-baktun period ending in 2012. Spatially, it represents the road or portal to the underworld (referenced as a “black hole” on QRG Stela F), a liminal transition zone between realms. The phrase “black hole” evokes a sense of a mysterious abyss. In addition, Bolon Yokte has an association with the 2012 period ending on TRT Monument 6, as well as the previous 13-Baktun period ending in 3114 BC on the Vase of the Seven Lords and in other inscriptions. The sacrifice rite would almost, of necessity, signal a transition since sacrifices precede renewal and the entry into a new period. This may have been utilized as a socio-political trigger, or statement, by K’ak Tiliw, to emphasize that a new era had begun in which Quirigua would be dominant over Copán, unlike the way it had previously been subservient to Copán for many katuns.

The inscription on QRG Stela J and the astronomy associated with the dates referenced in that text reveal a strategy connecting K’ak Tiliw’s accession date with 18 Rabbit’s death date in addition to the dedication date of Stela J (on April 12, 756 AD). Astronomically, this date presents Jupiter opposite its position on April 27, 738 (J), when K’ak Tiliw decapitated 18 Rabbit (i.e., when Jupiter was *opposite* the dark rift). The association between the 756 date and the 738 date is explicit in the context of the

inscription. The text of Stela J combines Ka'k Tiliw (the titular “Lord of the Black Hole”) with his own accession date (9.14.13.4.17; December 31, 724) as well as with 18 Rabbit’s decapitation (April 27, 738). Following the decapitation phrase, K’ak Tiliw receives the God K scepter — a rite usually reserved for accession to the throne. Both sides (of the stela) are tied to 9.16.5.0.0 (the 756 AD date) with Distance Numbers, and compare accession and decapitation (sacrifice). This is an interesting equation. As Looper writes, accession and sacrifice are “dual supports for the ruler’s power” (Looper 2003: 106-107). The reason for this is probably because a *new being* is born at an accession rite, and new births and new eras require a sacrifice. God K has a close association with mirrors, doorways to the spirit realm out of which gods and ancestors are born (or emerge from a supernatural realm). Mirrors (obsidian ones) are black and are associated with “the Black Road”, i.e., the dark rift in the Milky Way.

The basal panel of Stela J is very interesting. Looper writes that it signifies a “[v]ictory over Copan through a supernatural metaphor” (Looper 2007: 107). The basal register of Stela J consists of a “personified Waterlily head” held between open profile centipede jaws. Looper writes that “[t]hese jaws are skeletal and have the long ‘snaggle teeth’ that identify them with the portal to the underworld, elsewhere known as ‘the Black Hole’” (Looper 2007: 107).

Conclusion

It seems pretty clear that the dark rift in the Milky Way, as the underworld portal, provides an underlying astronomical context that helps us understand the transformational ritual enacted against Copán by K’ak Tiliw, *in the guise of Bolon Yokte*. The Stela J iconography that evokes K’ak Tiliw as Bolon Yokte finds a certain amount of reinforcement from the inscription itself, in which “uyokte” occurs twice and “yokte” occurs once, directly following a “Black Hole” place name. The phrase “bolon tzakaj” occurs once at E5.

This note is intended to clarify what appears to be conflicting viewpoints on the sequencing of important glyphs on the Copán Hieroglyphic Stairway, because of scholars using different images sources. However, the unbroken appearance of one glyph sequence (Diagram 1) gives preference to that image, in which case Bolon Yokte apparently plays an important role in the sacrifice of 18 Rabbit in 738 AD. The significance of this could be that Bolon Yokte is a deity involved in sacrifice at period endings.

Sources:

Boot, Erik. Email of December 2, 2009.

Gordon, George Byron. 1902. *The Hieroglyphic Stairway*. Peabody Museum.

Jenkins, John Major. 2009. *The 2012 Story*. New York: Tarcher / Penguin Books

Looper, Matthew. 2003. *Lightning Warrior*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Stuart, David. Presentation at the Maya Meetings in Austin, 2008.