A Maya stela from the Ethnographical Museum of Geneva

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Abstract: This article aims to present new elements connected to a Maya stela kept in the Ethnographical Museum of Geneva. We show more clearly which glyphs are readable from this inscription and then present elements which could correlate this information and that of other Maya inscriptions and which hopefully will help later to identify the ruler depicted on this stela. We also propose a short analysis of the different contexts of scattering ritual, as we showed that this is the subject of the inscription. This stela is also a very important element for a better understanding of the latest page of history in the Petexbatun region at the Classic period.

Keywords: Aguateca, calendar, glyphs, La Corona, Maya, Petexbatun, scattering ritual

Introduction: a Maya stela in the meg

The collections of the Ethnographical Museum of Geneva have, among its objects coming from Mesoamerica, a fragment of a Maya stela dating from the end of the Classic Era (9th century AD):
Engraved in bas-relief, we see a man wearing rich ornaments and on the left side of the monument (in front of his face and right arm) we clearly read a hieroglyphic inscription of five hieroglyphic blocks but which probably was previously longer. Indeed, comparing with other similar representations depicting rulers, we may notice that stelae are always showing them completely from their headdress (at the top) to their feet (at the bottom) and that most of the time, the inscription ends in the lower part of the stela.

Unfortunately, the down part of the stela is damaged and maybe still remains in some other collection or at its original place.

This inscription is composed of five blocks of glyphs, written vertically. The three first ones are quite readable and provide us with a date 13 Ahau 3 Xul, stating that this event occurs in the seventh year of counting, in the usual way of counting in Maya inscriptions.\(^2\)

According to the constant 584.283 of the modified GMT correlation,\(^3\) the date 9.19.6.17.0 13 Ahau 3 Xul corresponds to April 30\(^{th}\) A.D. 817 in Gregorian calendar and to April 26\(^{th}\) A.D. 817 in Julian calendar, and, according to the constant 584.285 of the same correlation,\(^4\) it corresponds to May 2\(^{nd}\) A.D. 817 in Gregorian calendar and to April 28\(^{th}\) A.D. 817 in Julian calendar.

The museum acquired this stela in June 1978 through a collector who, without any further precisions, said it was coming from El Peten. Unfortunately, this “collector” is known to have presented other stelae to other museums without stating their provenance and there are serious suspicions on his behaviour regarding the findings of these objects.

\(^2\) The month glyph also looks like Muan. However, the only three possibilities for 13 Ahau 3 Muan that could match with the style of the monument are 9.15.10.7.0 (which corresponds to November 15\(^{th}\) A.D. 741), 9.18.3.2.0 (which corresponds to November 2\(^{nd}\) A.D. 793) and 10.5.15.15.0 (which corresponds to October 20\(^{th}\) A.D. 845), but no one among them matches with the 7\(^{th}\) haab (since they respectively fall in the 16\(^{th}\), 3\(^{rd}\) and 11\(^{th}\) haab). Actually, 9.19.6.17.0 13 Ahau 3 Xul is the only possibility that matches both with the style of the monument and the 7\(^{th}\) haab.

\(^3\) The modified version of the Goodman-Martinez-Thompson correlation is the mostly admitted correlation between Mayan and Christian calendars. The constant 584.283 is the correlation factor that associates the “day zero” of the Maya chronology to August 11\(^{th}\) 3114 B.C.

\(^4\) The constant 584.285 is the correlation factor that associates the “day zero” of the Maya chronology to August 13\(^{th}\) 3114 B.C.
A drawing of the Geneva Stela, which was first known as Stela A of the Site Q\(^5\), was published in 1995 by Karl H. Mayer (1995): While it had not yet been restored to its exposure to the public, a preliminary drawing was done some years ago by Ian Graham\(^6\):

![Fig. 2 The Geneva Stela](image1)

![Fig. 3 Stela A of the Site Q](image2)

The five remaining hieroglyphic blocks, here designated pG1-pG5 are mostly intact, the two last ones being severely damaged, but can definitely be identified and transcribed as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>pG1</th>
<th>XIII- ‘AJAW</th>
<th>'uxlajun 'ajaw</th>
<th>13 Ajaw</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pG2</td>
<td>III-CHIKIN-ni</td>
<td>'ux chikin</td>
<td>3 Xul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pG3</td>
<td>'U-7-HAAB’</td>
<td>'u huk haab’</td>
<td>the 7(^{th}) year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pG4</td>
<td>'U-CHOK-wa</td>
<td>'u chokow</td>
<td>(he) scattered (it)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pG5</td>
<td>?-?-?</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^5\) Site Q (like "Question") was an hypothetic archaeological site that was first identified as El Peru(-Waka’). Later, this Site Q however appeared to have actually been several vassal sites of the Kaan kingdom in the Peten, like also Sak Nikte (La Corona) and other ones.

\(^6\) Courtesy of the author.
First of all, we may definitely compare this inscription to the Seibal (see map in annex) Stela 10, with the five first glyph blocks saying:

\[ \text{jo’-’ajaw-’ux-k’anasi-Ø ’u-jun-tal-winikhaab’-Ø ’u-chok-ow-Ø } \ldots \]

5-Ahau-3-Kayab-3B 3A-1-NUM.CLAS-katun-3B 3A-scatter-TR-3B \ldots ”

“It is 5 Ahau 3 Kayab, it is the 1st “20 years”/katun (10.1.0.0.0, November 26th A.D. 849). (…) scattered [incense]”

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7 Abbreviations: 3A = ergative prefix 3rd person; 3B = absolutive suffix 3rd person; NUM.CLAS = numeral classifier; TR = transitive suffix.
A very strong parallel nevertheless exists too in its calendrical part with Aguateca Stela 7:

"b’uluch-’ajaw-waxaklajun-mak-Ø 'u-waxaklajun-winikhaab'-Ø ...
11-Ahau-18-Mac 3A-18-katun-3B ...

“It is 11 Ahau 18 Mac, it is the 18th “20 years”/katun (9.18.0.0.0, October 9th A.D. 790). …”

Fig. 5 Front of Aguateca Stela 7 (redrawn from I. Graham 1967: Fig.17)
Furthermore, the chronological aspect of the Geneva Stela but also the details of the collar and decorations of the ruler depicted on this stela and, particularly, the very specific crown above his hairdress, his earrings or also the three medallions he wears as a pectoral and kind of epaulettes, allow us to narrow the identification to stelae from Aguateca in the south of Peten. We may therefore assume that Aguateca should have been its most probable origin. We have different rulers of Dos Pilas but none of them completely fits with our chronological datas. Indeed, even for the latest of them to our knowledge, the ruler of Aguateca Tan Te’ K’inch, who was coroneted in 9.16.19.0.14 5 Ix 12 Pop (February 8th A.D. 770) of which we have no mention after 802, it seems quite unlikely that he might have lived until 817 AD. This still remains nevertheless a possibility but, if not, then the ruler whose picture is on the Geneva Stela might have been the sixth ruler of Dos Pilas at Aguateca or one of his successors. In any case we lack consistent data in this particularly instable moment of Maya history in south of Peten as well as in all other Maya Lowlands.

Now, the last visible glyph in the inscription of the Geneva Stela is unfortunately too damaged to be certain of any reading. However, we would like to suggest that it is very similar to the glyph HUK-‘a-’AJAW-le “7-lordship” we find on La Corona, Hieroglyphic Stair, set B, element 7, pC4:

![La Corona, Hieroglyphic Stair, set B, element 7](redrawn from Ian Graham)
Unfortunately, the inscription stops here so it is impossible to know more about this title of a ruler who performed a “scattering (in) fire ritual” on the day 13 Kan 2 Kankin (9.13.18.16.4, October 31st A.D. 710). We might however note that, as Aguateca and other Dos Pilas kingdom sites, La Corona was a city of the Kaan polity in Petén, whose monuments were first considered as belonging to the “Site Q”. Therefore, it may be possible to find similar title glyphs both in La Corona and Aguateca.

The transliteration of the entire inscription on the Geneva Stela thus would be:

”'uxlajun-'ajaw-'ux-chikin ’u-huk-haab'-Ø 'u-chok-ow-Ø [ch’aa]j TITLE (which we might reconstruct as HUK- ’a-’AJAW-le)”

And the translation would be as follows:

“It is 13 Ahau 3 Xul, it is the 7th year (9.19.6.17.0, April 28th A.D. 817). … (he of 7 Ajawle[l]?) scattered [incense]”

Indeed, the title of HUK-’a-’AJAW-le makes here perfect sense for we have a sequence of name glyphs and titles being developed and of course, afterwards, one should expect the name of the ruler depicted on this stela, with a parallel title as the one we may see from the fragment of La Corona, Hieroglyphic Stair, set B, element 7.

This specific formulation is reminiscent of Stela 31 of Tikal, in whose inscription we can find the following sequence, connected to the 28 provinces glyph that David Stuart (2011: 6) reads as:

u k’amaw 28 pet(en?) u kuch paat(?) u kabij Siyaj K’ahk’
“he receives the 28 provinces (?); it is his burden?; it is the doing of Siyaj K’ahk’.” »

We should not forget that in one of the most crucial moments of the lowlands history, the Maya rulers divided this territory into twenty-eight provinces, which seven provinces in each cardinal direction.

It thus becomes very interesting to see the « seventh lordship » as one in the four great parts of the vassal realms in the Maya lowlands.

However, it is also interesting to observe that the HUK- ’a-’AJAW-le title probably needs to be compared, in respect to the divinatory context
where it appears on this element 7 of the set B in La Corona Hieroglyphic Stair, with the date 7 Ahau 18 Zip of the end that had to come of the transcursing *baktun*.

We indeed observe the great graphic similarity with the glyph 7 Ahau in the sequence of element 33 (in the same stairway) which, several *katun* before, was connecting this text with the end of the *baktun* and then (in the last sequence) with the end of the great cycle of thirteen *baktun* on 4 Ahau 3 Kankin. (cf. figure 7)

In other words, this would mean that the HUK-’a-’AJAW-le title has to be interpreted at the same time as a specific function for a ruler and also as a reminder sign of a chronological predicted event of which the ruler, in connection to the end of a specific calendar ending period, is the unique and efficient performer.

So, we can argue, that if we have the same glyph on the Geneva Stela, this expression was connected to *’u-huk-haab*’ and emphasizes the fact that this 7th year was that of a *katun* 7 Ahau, which at the same time had to end the complete cycle of the 10th *baktun*. 

![Fig. 7 La Corona, Hieroglyphic Stair, element 33 (Block V, B series) (redrawn from D. Stuart)](image)
Many elements show us that the coming of this date was puzzling the Mayas of the late Classic period, in a way that, in some aspects, may remind us how the coming of 1000 A.D. strongly impacted a few decades later people minds in Europe.

Regarding other forms connected to HUK-'a-’AJAW-le, we also would like to indicate that Dr. Yuki Tanaka, from Tokyo University (personal communication, 2016), recently pointed out to us that a highly similar glyph occurs on Vase K1383 (10th glyph in the PSS) from Rio Azul. The glyph here is spelt as HUK-’AJAW (-li?) (instead of HUK-’a-’AJAW-le) and its main sign is the anthropomorphic allograph for 'AJAW, but we also find it at the beginning of a sequence of name glyphs and titles, as part of the name of a deity of which the Rio Azul lord that ordered this chocolate drinking vessel was presented as the "personification" 'u-b’ahil-aan. We would like to emphasize there might be a clear connection with the deity HUK AJAW, connected to the ball game but the mention of HUK AJAW as a title is no coincidence.

Actually, the mention of this deity HUK AJAW is far from unique and we find it on three other different vases (K2794, coming from the kingdom of Kaan but probably originally made in the vicinity of Nakbe and El Mirador, K3296 presenting the ruler of Copan Yax Pasaj and K635 belonging to a sovereign of Naranjo) and also on a fragment of the hieroglyphic stair of El Peru.

These different quotations of Huk Ajaw and rulers being presented as personifications of HUK AJAW may lead us to the conclusion that different Maya rulers earned the title of HUK AJAW and that this deity is connected to the ball game as well as to the divine twins Hun Ajaw and Yax Balam.

One should notice that vase K635 shows a specific writing of the AJAW glyph with the vulture head as in La Corona and possibly on the stela from the MEG and on K3296 it is the image of Yax Pasaj, disguised with a vulture inside his hair dress.

We must stress however that none of these vases variants uses the complement -le as we have in La Corona. We therefore must remain cautious on the significiation here of HUK-’a-’AJAW-le. More investigation is required before coming to definite conclusions. Indeed, all the variants quoted above have the term 'u-b’ahil[-aan] which is not on the La Corona fragment (as well as on the MEG stela).
It is quite unfortunate that the inscription stops just there because it is clear that we lack substantial information. However, here are a few interesting philological parallels which may help us to see more of the nature of the syntax developed around the description of the scattering ritual, which was a ceremony consisted in scattering incense with a probable divinatory purpose for a new period of time.

The formulation is similar in a lot of cases and these are not the only places in which such a formulation appears. For instance, Ixtutz Stela 4 has a similar construction. If we see more in details the Ixtutz stela, here is the text:

![Fig. 8 Inscription of Ixtutz Stela 4 (redrawn from I. Graham in Zender 2002: 17)](image-url)
The inscription has been originally published by Marc Zender (2002: 18):

«
A1 XII-'AJAW
B1 VIII-TE’-PAX-xi-la/
A2 ‘U-tz’a-pa-wa-TUUN-ni/
B2 ‘U-CHOK-ko-wa-ch’a-ji/
A3 ’a-ya-YAX-ja-la/
B3 B’AAK-GOD

The transliteration of the entire inscription is: “lajchan-’ajaw waxak-te’-pax-il ‘u-
tz’ap-aw-Ø tuun ‘u-chok-ow-Ø ch’aatj-’ajaj-(ya)yax-j-al b’aak-GOD ‘u-chan
b’o[h]b’ k’uhul ho’-kab’ ajaw y-ila-Ø k’uhul mutuul ‘ajaw y-ila-Ø waxak-winik-
’ajaw-taak *chan-haab’-j-iyy ‘u[h]t-iyy-Ø cha’-’ajaw *waxak-*k’anasi ‘i-u[h]t-i-Ø
lajchan-’ajaw ? waxak-[te’]-pax-[ii]? ‘och-i-k’in? ?-*nib?’”

The given translation is: “It is 12 Ahau 8 Pax (9.17.10.0.0, November 28th, A.D. 780). Aj Yaxhal B’aa, the Master of Coyote, the Holy Lord of Ixtutz, drives the stone into the ground and throws incense. The Holy Lord of Mutuul witnesses it. Twenty-eight lords witness it also. It had been four years since 2 Ahau 8 Kayab (9.17.6.0.0, December 23rd, A.D. 776) when it came to pass on 12 Ahau 8 Pax at the West?Place that ... ? ...”»

The following analysis was proposed by Marc Zender (2002: 18) on this particular form of ‘U-CHOK-ko-wa-ch’a-ji:

«
‘u-chok-ow-Ø ch’aatj 3sE-THROW-TV.-3sA INCENSE “he throws incense” Here
the active transitive declarative suffix (TV.)—canonically of the form -V1w which, as
we have seen, was expressed as -aw in the inflection of the tz’ap verb above (at A2)—
is now expressed as -ow, reflecting the important consideration that the vowel of this
suffix always echoes the vowel of the verb-root, in this case the medial -o- in the verb
chok “to throw” (at B2) (Wald 1994). The names and titles of the grammatical subject
of both verbs (tz’ap and chok) follow immediately on the heels of this second verb,
and take up the next four glyph-blocks (A3-B4):

’a-ya-YAX-ja-la B’AAK-GOD
’U-CHAN-na-b’o-b’o K’UH(UL)-
lu-V-KAB’-’AJAW-wa
’a[jj]-yax-j-al-b’aak-GOD ‘u-chan
b’o[h]b’ k’uhul-ho’-kab’-’ajaw
AG.-GREEN/BLUE-INCH.-NOM.-
BONE-GOD 3sE-MASTER
COYOTE HOLY-FIVE-EARTHLORD
“Aj Yaxjal B’aak GOD, the Master
of Coyote, Holy Lord of Ho’ Kab’
(Ixtutz)”»
To be completely exhaustive, we would have to give the list of more than a hundred of other inscriptions in which the scattering ritual appears but we would like here just to provide the most interesting parallels.

We first may add to this list Aguateca Stela 5, which is a very interesting example:

Here is the text in transliteration:

\[
\text{waxak-'ajaw waxak-'ik'at ts}[h]tsjiy 'uxlajun-winikhaab' 'u-chok-ch'aaj 'ak'taj ti-jotob'a ? ti-? 'ets'nab'-chan-k'awiil 'u-kan ? chan-winikhaab'-'ajaw k'uh-ul-mutuuul-'ajaw
\]

The translation being:

“It is 8 Ahau 8 Uo, (9.13.0.0.0, March 16\textsuperscript{th} A.D. 692) completed 13 katun, he scattered drops he danced with a? (…) with a manikin ? Ets'nab Chan K’awiil captor of (captive’s name), 4 katun lord, holy Aguateca lord.”

Unlike the Geneva Stela, the previous examples mention scattering rituals performed for period endings but, as a matter of fact, documenting the
celebration of a scattering ritual at the near-by boundary of an important calendar date is not an exception in Maya epigraphy. Actually, the Copan Stela 3 mentions one of them precisely for the 9.10.19.5.0 12 Ahau 13 Kayab (January 25th A.D. 652), quite clearly in order that the twelfth king of the city K’ak’ Uti’ Wits’ K’awiil (628-695 AD) performs the prophecies related to the twelfth katun of the tenth baktun of the chronology, in other words, one ritual year ahead, thirteen twenties in advance:

Fig. 10 Eastern side of Copan Stela 3 (redrawn from B. Fash)
As we can see for instance on Stela 10 of the same site (which mentions for the same date a 'u-CH’AB ya-AK’AB-li expression that involucrates the name of the twelfth king and his association with the CHAN-NAL CHAK-ba-ya ka-KAN-nu vision-serpent), these rituals appear to have been performed as a kind of necromancy, whose purpose was to establish communication with the demised ancestors and the burning of these droplets seems to have ensured the possibility of communication with the invisible, in order to have some prophecies on the future. This ritual is roughly comparable to the famous episode of Ulysses just before entering into Hades’ kingdom.

Furthermore, we notice that, meanwhile the scattering ritual on La Corona Element 7 occurs in the last complete tzolkin cycle of a katun, the date chosen for the Geneva Stela similarly occurs at the end (13 Ahau) of the last complete tzolkin cycle before the beginning of the next tun. At the same time, the number of days that occurred then since the New Year (104) is precisely two fifths of that of a tzolkin and equals that of the years in a double cycle of 52 years.

We see therefore how closely are chosen the numerical and concrete calendar dates in order to coincide the ritual and the events which were associated with it. This connection between calendar, ritual and numerological considerations is an interesting subject of investigation and shows us how much Mayas cared about accuracy but also always looked for symbolical and mathematical signs to confirm their faith.

We may end with the inscription of Temple XIX at Palenque:
In this particular case, we allow ourselves to give the entire text found in *The Inscriptions from Temple XIX at Palenque: A Commentary* by David Stuart (2005: 91):

«
A1: 7-AJAW
B1: 8-K’AN-a-si-ya
A2: 7-ku-lu-TUUN-ni
B2: PAT-wa-ni
A3: yo-ko-bi-li
B3: YAX-ITZAM?-AT
A4: TUUN-ni-AJAW
B4: U-CHOK?-CH’AJ-ji
A5: K’AN-na-JOY-CHITAM-ma
B5: K’UHUL-BAAK-la-AJAW »

Here is mentioned, at the occasion of the building of a *okib*, a high leading member named Yax Itzam Aat Tuun Ajaw on the 9.6.7.0.0 7 Ahau 8 Kayab (February 13th A.D. 561), and is also mentioned a scattering ritual
performed by the king K’an Joy Chitam I (529-565). The expression used here to specify « [the] 7\textsuperscript{th} year/tun », in A2, is different from our stela in Geneva for it uses the stone sign T528/ZC1 and for the CHOK ritual is therefore subordinated to the consecration of a monument but, with a few decades ahead, the syntax is very similar.

Therefore, as we may see, the inscription of the Geneva Stela is clearly a dedicating stela documenting a scattering ritual which most likely was commemorating either a royal ceremony or another important event (maybe connected to the prophecies for the coming of the 10\textsuperscript{th} baktun, on 7 Ahau 18 Zip). Unfortunately, we cannot tell for sure who is depicted on this stela but it is quite certain this must be a sovereign of the Petexbatun. One key element of interpretation will be as follows. As is stated by Markus Eberl (2007: 75):

« Several events often occurred at the same period ending ceremony during the later part of the Late Classic. Itzamnaaj K’awiil celebrated the 9.14.10.0.0 period ending (A.D. 721) by scattering blood or incense in Dos Pilas, by adorning an altar in Seibal, and by erecting a stela in Aguateca… In summary, two trends can be identified: a) Period ending rituals diversify over the Late Classic and the ceremonies seem to become more elaborate; b) the scattering of blood or incense replaces the tying of stones as most frequent ritual. »

On p. 74 of the same publication, there is a very useful table (table 3.2) with all the associated end of period rituals, and we may observe that the connection between stone-tying and the scattering, with even sometimes dance also involved, is particularly important. We will come back to these observations in our future in-depth survey of the lexicographical use of scattering in ritual contexts.

With this brief note, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of these elements of sacred wisdom as well as ancestral visions of Maya Kingship.

Acknowledgements

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ANNEX. Map of the central and southern lowlands of the Maya area, with sites mentioned in the text