

GLYPH

Notes

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More on Muluk: Epigraphers Reconsider Yaxchilán's Emblem Glyph

By Sherrie Kline Smith

Drawings by Glenn A. Scott

For years it was understood that the main sign of what is called an Emblem Glyph at the site of Yaxchilán in Mexico read muluk. At the 2007 Maya Meetings, however, David Stuart, and other prominent epigraphers like Peter Mathews, stated that they thought this reading may not be correct.*

Wow! I thought, this is surprising news! Mulek is an important person in The Book of Mormon, and finding a translation of one of the glyphs as his name brought a small, yet meaningful evidence that the record is true.

This startling information started me on an in-depth study to see if I could better understand how they came to this conclusion. This article is a result of my research.

Our inquiry begins at the time of the Conquest with a Franciscan friar named Diego de Landa who arrived in the Yucatan in 1549. Landa later became a Bishop and is often referred to as Bishop de Landa. The inhabitants of the New World fascinated him, but they also repulsed his Catholic principles. He was appalled at what he believed were customs and beliefs influenced by the devil. He ordered all "books" or codices to be burned. In reality, only 27 codices were burned in the famous *auto de fé* at Mani along with over 5,000 idols.

While we shudder at the burning of books, on the other hand, we thank Landa for recording many of the beliefs and customs of the Mayas in the Yucatán area. He probably had several informants, but two have been recognized: Gaspar Antoni Chi and Nachi Cocom, both Mayas.

In his treatise *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán*, written later in 1566, Landa documented much of the information provided by these men. Included were the signs for the days and months in the

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Don Beebe

Lintel 53 from
Yaxchilán

**Orthography--representing sounds by letters--changes as epigraphers work with interpreting the sounds of the glyphs and the words they represent. Currently they use muluk; previously they rendered it muluc.*

More on Muluk (continued)

Maya calendar and what he called their alphabet—signs or glyphs used to write sounds and therefore words. One of the calendar day signs was noted as “muluc” (fig.1).



Fig 1 - From Landa’s treatise *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán* - day glyphs

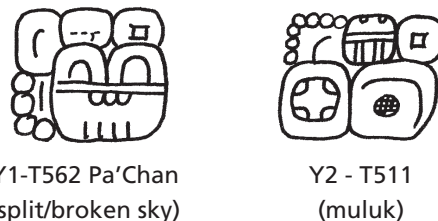
Landa’s work remained largely unknown until a French cleric, Abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg, rediscovered it in some archives in Madrid in 1863, nearly three centuries after Landa wrote it. In later years, epigraphers began to reevaluate the Landa “alphabet” and realized the signs represented syllables, not letters. This understanding opened the way for

the decipherment of the hieroglyphs.

In the 1950s, Sir J. Eric S. Thompson, a Mayanist with such clout or influence that other archaeologists and epigraphers rarely openly disagreed with him, dominated the field of Maya studies, including the hieroglyphs. In 1962 he published a catalog of all known glyphs at the time and assigned each a number still used today. The muluk glyph is T511.

For each glyph in the catalog, Thompson included known examples from monuments and codices that used the glyphs. For T511, he listed many monuments from Yaxchilán. Some were the day sign muluk, but most incorporated T511 as the main sign in a group of glyphs that was identified by Heinrich Berlin in 1958 as an Emblem Glyph. Yaxchilán is one of the few sites with two Emblem Glyphs. Berlin identified these as Y-1 (main sign T562) and the one using T511 as Y-2 (fig.2).

Fig 2 - Yaxchilán’s two Emblem Glyphs




An Emblem Glyph consists of three parts, two of which are relatively constant (fig.3). The third element is referred to as the main sign and varies according to the site. Because these almost always followed “per-

Fig 3 - Emblem Glyph components and some examples from other sites



Neil Simmons and Raymond C. Treat suggested in 1983 that Yaxchilán was a good candidate for Zarahemla. In light of the current scholarship it seemed a reasonable possibility.



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sonal” names in the inscriptions, Berlin suggested that the Emblem Glyph referred either to place names, particularly the site where it appears, or the names of ruling lineages. For years, epigraphers and archaeologists have debated how these glyphs function.

Based on this background, Neil Simmons and Raymond C. Treat suggested in 1983 that Yaxchilán was a good candidate for Zarahemla. In light of the current scholarship it seemed a reasonable possibility.

“The Maya name for this main sign [of Yaxchilán’s Emblem Glyph] is Muluc. The translation of this main sign was given by the Maya to the Spanish at the time of the Conquest” (Simmons and Treat: 1983:3).

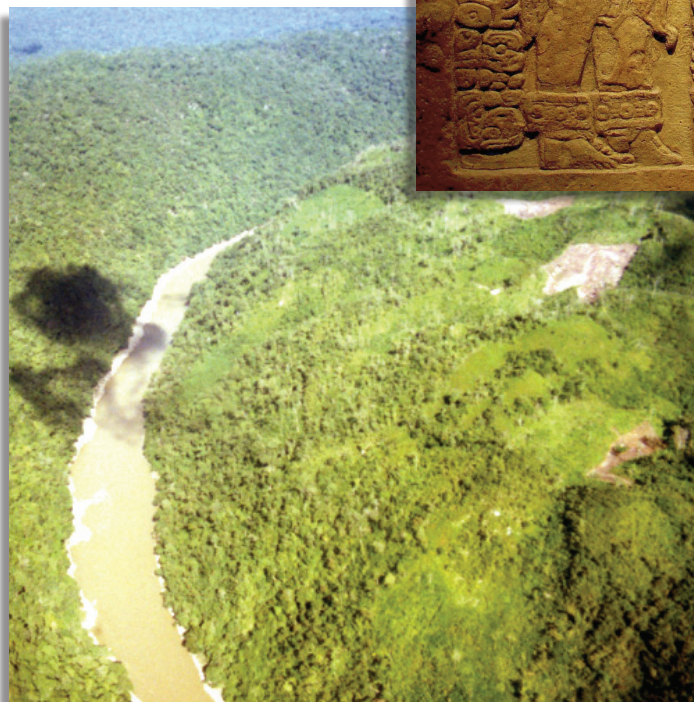
One of the three major groups in The Book of Mormon that migrated to the Promised Land was the Mulekites. Named for Mulek, a surviving son of King Zedekiah that came with the group, the Mulekites left Israel about the same time as Lehi and his family, circa 600 BC. Simmons and Treat explain that muluk could possibly refer to Mulek.

Right: Lintel 58 from Yaxchilán

Below: Aerial view of Yaxchilán high above the Usumacinta River.



Don Beebe



Don Beebe

Some two to three hundred years after arriving in the Promised Land, the Nephites were warned to leave their lands of inheritance. They fled northward and found Zarahemla, a descendant of Mulek, and his people. They joined together and became a “nation” with Mosiah as king. The Nephites ever after called this city Zarahemla, but its original name could have been Mulek. The Nephites had a custom of calling “their lands, and their cities, and their villages, yea, even all their small villages, after the name of him who first possessed them...” (Alma 6:8). Therefore, in later years the people living in the city of Zarahemla could have used two city names

together, although The Book of Mormon record does not say so.

We also find, however, another city in The Book of Mormon called Mulek (Alma 23:32, 24:2), but it doesn’t fit the geographical requirement for Zarahemla. Yaxchilán’s location, on the other hand, adds support to the theory proposed by Simmons and Treat that perhaps it was Zarahemla. Geographical references in The Book of Mormon for Zarahemla indicate that it was on the west side of a major river (Alma 4:7-8; Alma 1:83-84). Yaxchilán fits that criteria, as it sits high above the Usumacinta River in a horseshoe bend west of the river.

What does the archaeology tell us about Yaxchilán? The ruins with the marvelous

sculptures and inscriptions visible above ground (60 carved lintels, five hieroglyphic stairways, and 34 stelae) have so totally captivated the imagination that excavations have focused on these. According to Carolyn Tate, “serious archaeology began at Yaxchilán in 1972, and in 1973 its goals were established as conservation and presentation of the site and performing a systematic investigation into the socioeconomic rise and fall of Yaxchilán...” (Tate: 1992:11). From this work 26 buildings were freed from the jungle, many new monuments were found, eight tombs discovered, and a ceramic sequence developed. Most of the buildings and monuments date to after AD 514.

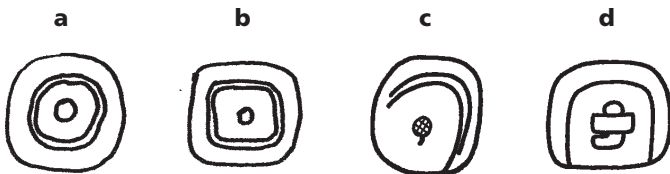
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More on Muluk (continued)

Zarahemla, though, requires a timeframe of around 400 BC to AD 33-35. After the city was destroyed by fire following the crucifixion of Christ, it was rebuilt (4 Nephi 1:9) but never attained its former status and is never mentioned in the record again. Charles Golden, an archaeologist with Brandeis University working in the region, appears to believe that Yaxchilán was a settlement before AD 300. His team may discover more in their current ongoing excavations of the region. (Look for Lyle Smith's exciting article about Golden's presentation at the 2007 Maya Meetings in the next issue of glyph notes.)

During the workshop portion of the meetings when David Stuart shared that the main sign of the Emblem Glyph formerly transcribed muluk was now in question, he did not propose an alternate reading. The following day, Megan O'Neill with the University of Southern California, who had given a presentation the prior day called "Antiquity and Materiality in Reset Lintels at Yaxchilán," asked for clarification about the ambiguity in the reading. Stuart drew the glyphs and tried to show why they decided it did not mean muluk, but did not give a satisfactory reason why. He suggested that the "original" form of this part of the Emblem Glyph included a line drawing of an ear spool (fig.4d) that has tentative

Fig 4 - Variations of the main sign of Y-2



association with the word meaning "earth." Variations of the glyph have been found at other sites, but they don't clearly understand the meaning and reading as of yet.

The Y-1 main sign has had—and is been pretty well confirmed—a reading of pa' chan or split or broken sky (Martin 2004). This Emblem Glyph appears more often than the Y-2 (muluk) glyph and can be found also in the inscriptions at Piedras Negras, Palenque, Bonampak, and Dos Pilas. Peter Mathews has suggested because Y-2 could possibly be "earth" and Y-1 refers to sky or heaven that the pair of glyphs could be a metaphor involving the opposites of Earth and Sky (Mathews 1997:68)

In the book *Classic Maya Place Names*, Stuart

and Houston wrote that some of the main signs of the Emblem Glyphs can be read phonetically, but many questions remain unanswered. "In our opinion, the ambiguity is the result of insufficient decipherment, inasmuch as we have yet to understand the precise function of all Emblem

Glyph main signs" (1994:7). They also say, however, that they substantially agree that the role of Emblem Glyphs was in reference to large political units.

According to Michael Coe, "The most recent scholarship says that while they [Emblem Glyphs] may well have begun as toponyms [place names], in time they came to be applied to the entire territory controlled by a particular *k'uhul ajaw* ('holy king')" (2005:68). He states further that recent work has identified actual city names, and they are not the same as their Emblem Glyphs. This means that

the Y-2 Emblem Glyph, regarded by Thompson as being read muluk, could refer to a greater political region than simply the site of Yaxchilán.

The statement in Alma seems to shed light on the controversy over the functionality of the Emblem Glyphs—they may refer to the city and/or geographical

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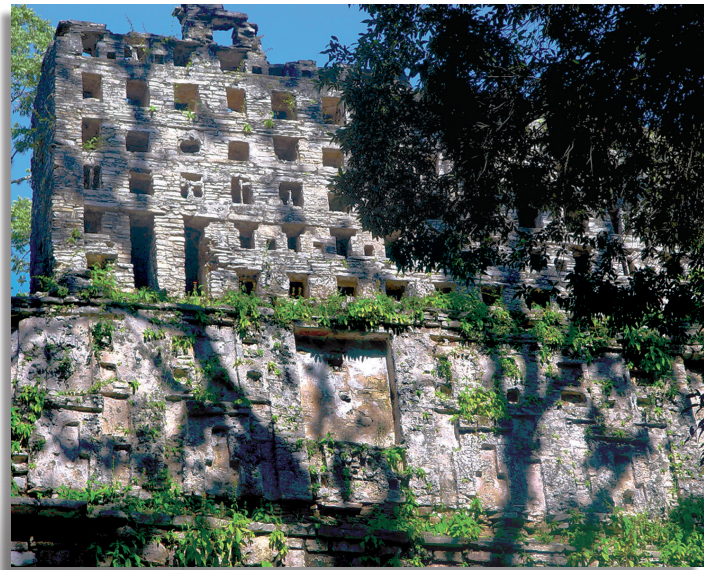
Above: The journey to Yaxchilán is a memorable adventure in itself! Jared Smith and daughter, Whitney (foreground at left), share a blue canoe with Whitney's grandparents, Ed and Karen Story (at right). Also pictured are Dorothy Seaver (in red at left) and Alberta Lewis (left back).

area and the ruling lineage name. Zarahemla was not only a city but a “land” and the name of a ruler or king.

In her article “The Yaxchilán Emblem Glyphs: Indicators of Political Change and Expansion of a Classic Maya Polity,” Ute Schüren indicates that “Y-2 (main sign T511) has been dubbed the ‘spot’ emblem” (1992:31). She never mentions *muluk* as a possible translation. Her in-depth study of the use of the two glyphs on the 130 monuments from Yaxchilán leads her to suggest that the Emblem Glyph using the “spot” glyph as the main sign or T511 belonged to another site.

The genealogical record of all the Yaxchilán inscriptions begins around AD 300 and ends AD 808. The majority of the sculptures (over 75 percent) were erected during the reigns of only two rulers between AD 711 and AD 771. Schüren writes that the Y-1 Emblem Glyph was the only one used until about AD 711 when the ruler commonly called Shield Jaguar came to the throne. From that time forward, both Y-1 and Y-2 appear together in the inscriptions. “Therefore, it can be concluded that only at this point did both Emblem Glyphs become important to Yaxchilán.” Further, she states that the distribution of

Y-1 and Y-2 should not be explained as a symbolic place name as Mathews suggested (Earth and Sky), but the pair appears “to be the result of a historical process” or a reflection of a marriage alliance between two polities (Schüren 1992:34). Her theory is strengthened because when the Y-2 Emblem Glyph appears alone, it’s always in phrases with women’s names. Thus when a ruler from Yaxchilán married a woman from the place with the Y-2 Emblem Glyph, he created a political alliance and both



Sallie Prester

Above: Yaxchilán’s Structure 33 from the backside.

Left: Yaxchilán is located in the state of Chiapas, Mexico along the Mexico/Guatemala border.



Emblem Glyphs began to appear on the monuments.

The original site or place designated by the Y-2 Emblem Glyph (*muluk*) has not been identified among the Maya ruins. “In the case of the Yaxchilán emblem pair neither a single Y-2 emblem site is mentioned in the inscriptions of other centres nor is a site yet known that shows a single Y-2 emblem distribution in the earlier monumental record” (Schüren 1992:37).

Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, however, mention that while the Y-2 Yaxchilán Emblem Glyph’s reading is unknown, inscriptions retrospectively link the glyph “with

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More on Muluk (continued)

the founder" (2000:119). Thus the question of the "spot" or muluk Emblem Glyph has still not been resolved. Nor does this study mean that Yaxchilán is not still a candidate for Zarahemla; we just do not have enough conclusive evidence that it is.

The muluk day name is not in question at this time and could still reflect the Mulek name found in The Book of Mormon. The muluk day glyph (fig.5) was not mentioned at the workshop.

Fig 5 - Variations of the muluk day glyph



In the article "Could God GI Be Christ," I cautioned, "Having suggested these correlations, however, I feel it only fair to point out that many times Stuart would say, 'It's not certain, but seems likely...' or, 'It's hard to decipher, but...' Future decipherment may change some of these current understandings, and we may have to shift our conclusions. While Stuart claims 90-95 percent of the glyphs can be recognized, ongoing explorations and workshops, like the Maya Meetings, sometimes present new readings, causing different interpretations." (*glyph notes* May/June 2007:5)

This appears to be one of those times. We should keep these scholars in our prayers that the Lord would direct their minds as they work on decipherments and understandings. The recognition of the wide-spread use of the phrase "and it came to pass" in the Maya hiero-



Sallie Presler

Above: A well at Yaxchilán

glyphs encourages us that more correlation with the language and language patterns found in The Book of Mormon is yet to come.

In light of this it may be appropriate to remind ourselves that our faith is not dependent on evidences from archaeology and epigraphy of Mesoamerica. They strengthen what is already faith. A switch in a reading or understanding of a glyph (which often happens) should not influence our faith. We hang onto the rod of iron and choose to believe.

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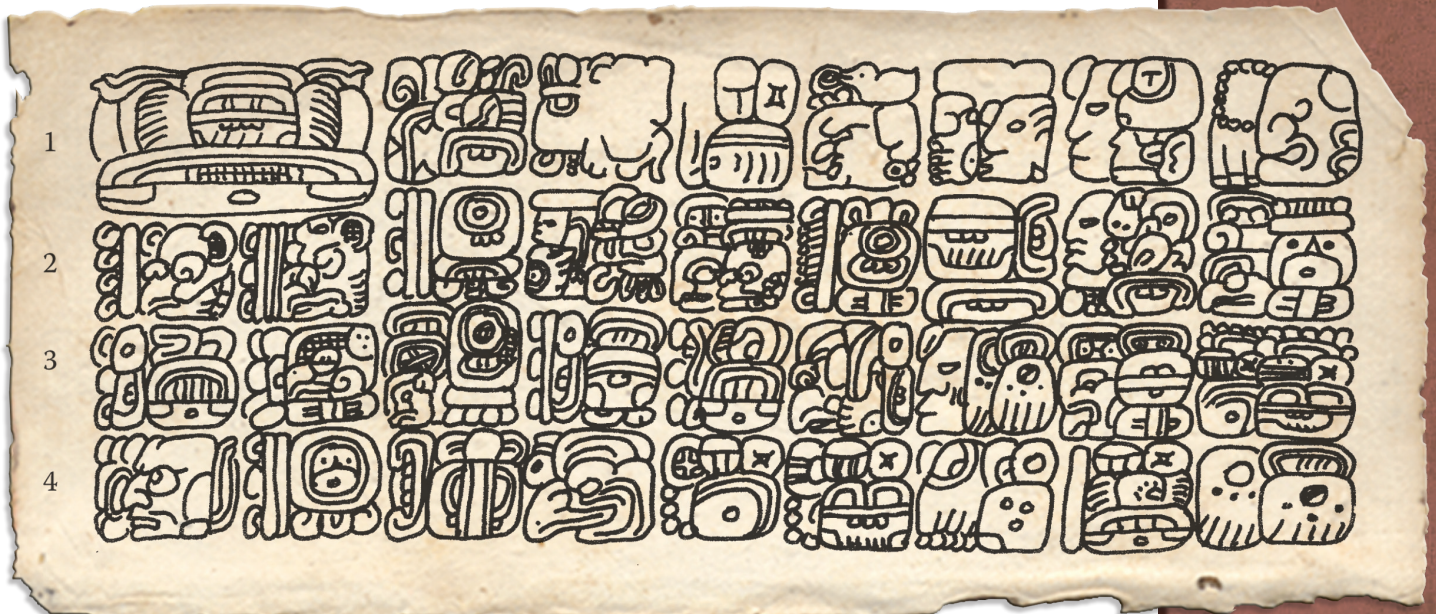
Fig 6 - Occurrences of Yaxchilán's Emblem Glyphs



Rulers*	T511	T562	T511/T562	T562/T511	Others
Early	-	10	-	-	-
Bird Jaguar III	-	1	-	-	-
Shield Jaguar I	2	12	6	3	1
Bird Jaguar IV	2	11	3	2	1
Shield Jaguar II	3	3	2	-	5
MahK'ina Skull III	1	3	-	-	-
(Women)	7	-	-	-	-
(Other Sites)	-	-	10	-	-

*Occurrences listed with the ruler who commissioned the monument. (After Matthews 1988)

Drawing of the bottom portion of Yaxchilán's Stela 11 with two occurrences of both Emblem Glyphs as a pair. See if you can find them.



*Our faith
 isn't
 dependent
 on evidences
 from
 archaeology.
 They simply
 strengthen
 what is
 already faith.*

GLYPH *Clips*

Lamanai Lasts for Over 2000 Years

Archaeologist Jim Aimers with the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, writes about his work and especially the 2006 season at Lamanai in the article "Collapse of the Maya? Investigations at Lamanai, Belize" in *Current World Archaeology* (n.d.: Issue 22, Vol. 2, No. 10).

This site in Belize, Central America, became a major center about 400 BC, remaining and flourishing continuously until the time of the Conquest. It is one of the few cities that did not collapse during many of the population shifts and changes that occurred throughout the history of Mesoamerica, especially around the Postclassic period of AD 800-900.



Lamanai also is one of the very few ruins or places that the name is known and is a name found in The Book of Mormon: Laman and the Lamanites. In Maya, Lamanai means "submerged crocodile."

Aimers writes: "I am excited about a major season of analysis in 2007. It promises to provide much more evidence that will help us understand the survival of this important site and its role in a thriving Postclassic Maya world" (23).

The article includes many great photographs, maps, and timeline.

A one-hour speed boat ride up the New River takes visitors into Lamanai which sits deep in the rain forest. The Crocodile Mask at Temple N-56 (far left photo) and the High Temple (center right photo) are highlights. Flora and fauna abound including crocodiles, boa constrictors, howler monkeys, and the black orchid, Belize's national flower.



Photos by Jared Smith & Don Beebe



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