

## THE ROYAL NAMES OF THE CLASSIC: READING AND MYTHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

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The goal of this paper is to support, through the image shown in *Plate K1609*, a possible iconographic story of a powerful myth of origin. The theory according to which the Maya kings used appellatives for their names that included concrete references to mythological scenes of gods to link themselves with the god mentioned in that specific mythical moment, and to make the achievements of the god during the chosen event something of their own, is maintained.

Personal names are, no doubt, a major source of information of which there is still plenty of information to be obtained, which will be of help for a better understanding of the behaviour and personality of the rulers, in addition to the bonds they had with the gods included in those names. In this way, answers would derive for questions that still remain unanswered, such as: why were certain gods chosen to become a part of their personal names? What was it that they tried to transmit when they chose one or another aspect of the god? Do these names include places or mythological references? Some of these issues will be approached throughout this work.

Ever since Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1960, 1963), more than 40 years ago, recognized the names of rulers for their links with glyphs of birth, accession to the throne and death, many works were conducted on royal onomastics, but still, it keeps being a practically unexplored subject. Authors like Bricker (2002) and Grube (2002) have unveiled some of the basis for the understanding of the structure and meaning of these names.

The personal names of the Classic Maya were formed by real sentences that included a subject and a predicate, which could be composed by a verb, or by several nouns (Martin and Grube 2002). In general, the subjects of these nominal clauses referred to objects, beasts or gods, and at times, their structure contained several clauses of this sort that formed a long sequence of names, which may have included titles or toponyms (Carrasco 1964). The available examples of these long sequences are but a few, and the texts on stone or pottery that have survived usually mention only one of those nominal phrases.

This work will be focused only on those personal names that include in their structure the name of a god, specifically, *Chaahk*.

The existing information about these names is not abundant, but it is known that one same appellative could be shared by kings and noblemen; occasionally, even royal objects of a remarkable ceremonial value could have been given the same name than that of a king (banners or perforators). These appellatives make it possible to derive the meaning of the god's actions, which at times reveal personal, physical or qualitative traits. The content of these personal names, in many cases, has not been examined, but a thorough reading of them together with the support of certain iconographic representations, allows for establishing the possibility that as of these appellatives, references could also be inferred connecting *Chaahk* with mythological sequences or scenes, and that possibly this was the formula chosen by the kings to become directly linked with the myths.

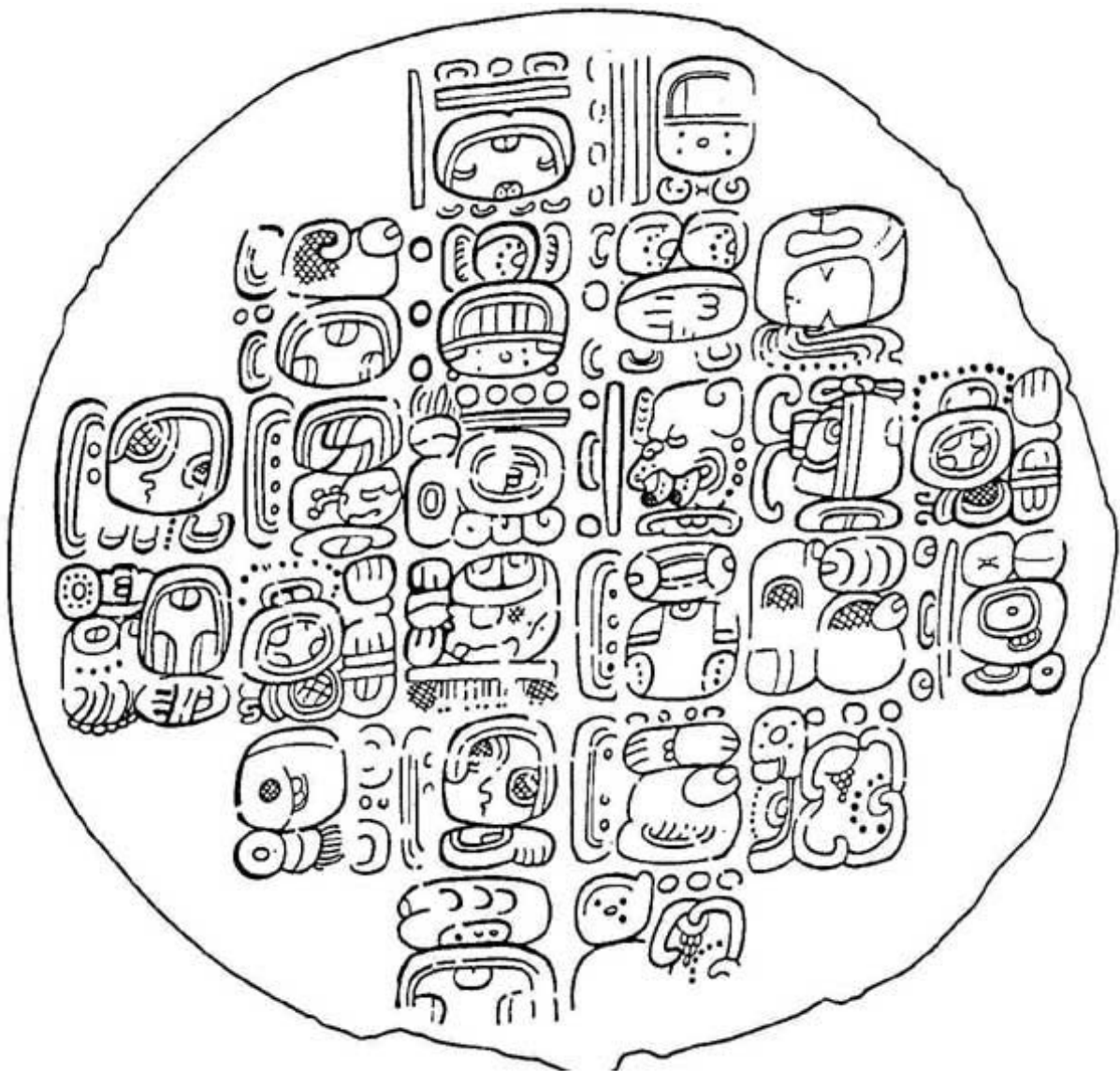


Figure 1. Marker 3 of the Ballgame, Caracol (drawing by Grube 1991).

By including the divine appellatives in the personal names of rulers formed by phrases or complete sentences, they could communicate or convey a specific characteristic of the god, making it possible to learn, in this way, the essence and

identity of the Maya gods. We should remember that there are proofs showing that rulers changed the name they had in their childhood at the time of accessing the throne, and very rarely that first name was mentioned again. Therefore, it must be kept in mind that choosing a name was something not accomplished by accident; much on the contrary, the personal name was highly relevant, as it constituted the emblem with which he would be mentioned throughout his lifetime and remembered after his death, a fact that gave the name great category and importance. Like we noted before, the names did not merely fulfil the function of a social emblem but could as well be rich in mythological contents.

To defend this hypothesis, the name of the individual considered to be the first ruler of the city of Caracol, *Te K'ab Chaahk*, *Wooden-Arm Chaahk* or *Tree-Arm Chaahk* has been chosen. The archaeological data are limited to just two texts written during the Late Classic, which place the reign of *Te K'ab Chaahk* in the year 331, our age (Figures 1 and 2). The fact that several centuries after his reign he was still being remembered, shows the political and social relevance that this individual, believed to be the dynastic founder of the city of Caracol (Grube 2002:86), must have had.



Figure 2. *Te K'ab Chaahk* (drawing by Grube 1991).

## FOUNDERS AND MYTHS

The fact of being in the presence of the dynastic founder of the city of Caracol would imply a number of circumstances, one of which would be the possible creation of a mythological bond between the ruler and the god, in this case *Chaahk*. At first sight, the reading of the name *Te k'ab Chaahk*, *Wooden-Arm Chaahk* or *Tree-Arm Chaahk*, implies exclusively a physical description of *Chaahk*, which shows the god with an arboreal-like arm; however, there are iconographic representations with which to relate the name of this ruler. The so-called *Cosmic Plate* (K1606, Fig. 3) represents a mythic sequence in which *Chaahk* emerges from the water with a ramified arm, and this could be the same scene that describes the name of the ruler.

It has been commonly believed that a close relationship might have existed between the founder rulers of dynastic lineages and the divine myths, but the information available is not sufficient to prove this fact with certainty. The classic period is not conclusive in this sense. For the time being, archaeological and epigraphical data have not brought to light texts, monuments or ceramic pieces with explicit references to the mythical origin of the gods and their links with the dynastic founders.

It is clear that it was by the end of the Early Classic period when kings began to place before the inscriptions the term *sacred k'uhul*, the king title (Houston and Stuart 1996:295), something that was not done at the beginning of the period, clearly suggesting that certain transformations were taking place on the notion of royalty at that time. The rulers begin to create bonds with the gods, not only by including the term *k'uhul* but also with the election of their personal names.

On the other hand, authors like Houston and Stuart (1996:297) support the idea that there is nothing in the names or titles of the earlier rulers that marks a difference of status with the later rulers, thus denying any possible bond with the founder-god. This reconfirms the hypothesis that all these bonds between gods, founder rulers and myths may have been established along the Late Classic period.



Figure 3. Tripod plate (Schele and Miller 1986).

As of the article presented by these authors in 1996, it is believed that it was during the Late Classic period when the iconographic and writing fashion first emerged and rulers began to endow their ancestors with divine qualities; this information is reflected in the iconographic representations and glyphic texts found in very important cities such as Copan and Palenque. The Group of the Cross narrates the mythic origin of the triad of gods and their connections with the first rulers of Palenque. Likewise, there was a remembrance of *Yax Kuk Mo'* at that time, one of the first rulers of the Copan dynasty, reflected in buildings and other architecture-related features (stelae, altars). It is true that myths were not created then, but those that already existed were rescued and linked to the ancient founder kings; no doubt, this was due to the fact that a new order was established during the Classic period, where political complexity tended to influence the modification of ideology and religion, giving way to the new politico-religious trends.

It is clear, however, that the Maya had a highly elaborated mythology whose origins went back to periods previous to the Preclassic times; one should only watch the amazing Preclassic mural of San Bartolo where the same myth of the Maize God is represented, a myth encountered centuries later in Late Classic pottery. It is believed that the union founder-myth may have at times been accomplished in a later period, as already explained, and that this is what probably happened with the individual considered to be the first ruler of Caracol.

According to the archaeological data obtained from the excavations conducted in Caracol, we know that this was a city which during the Late Classic period underwent several political and armed conflicts against very powerful cities such as Tikal or Naranjo, and that after this final confrontation, Caracol was immersed in a hiatus that lasted 118 years, when not a single dedicated monument was built (Grube 2002:95). With the accession to power of *K'inich Joy K'awil* in 798 AD, there is a re-emergence of the city and of politics. Under the auspices of this ruler, the Ballgame corresponding to Group B was built, and it was in Marker 3 of this game where the earliest reference to *Te K'ab Chaahk* appeared (Chase, Grube and Chase 1991:6). Interestingly, these markers were pieces where the founder ancestors were mentioned, probably because the Ballgame ultimately represented rebirth after death.

Should the above hypothesis be maintained, it could be easily presumed that *K'inich Joy K'awil* had a connection with the first dynastic ruler, in a political strategy aimed at strengthening his power. Actually, the only two written references to *Te K'ab Chaahk* are found in Late Classic monuments, giving way to the possibility that this was a character created by this late ruler to stress his bonds with the dynastic origins. Anyway, and concentrating exclusively on the meaning of the name *Te K'ab Chaahk*, *Wooden-Arm Chaahk*, we could be led to believe this is the graphic expression of a mythological sequence described in the tripod plate known as *Cosmic Plate*.

## READING AND MYTHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

The text in this amazing tripod plate was first read by Miller and Schele in 1986, and since then and to our days, only very few revisions were made. The epigraphic progress made in recent years and the invaluable help of Alfonso Lacadena, who played the role of guide and translator of the text, has made it possible to establish the foundations for developing the hypothesis defended in this work.

*Plate K1609* features three different texts (Figure 4): a first text narrating the mythical scene; a second text referring to its owner, the manufacture and completion of the plate; and a third text mentioning the name of the depicted individual.

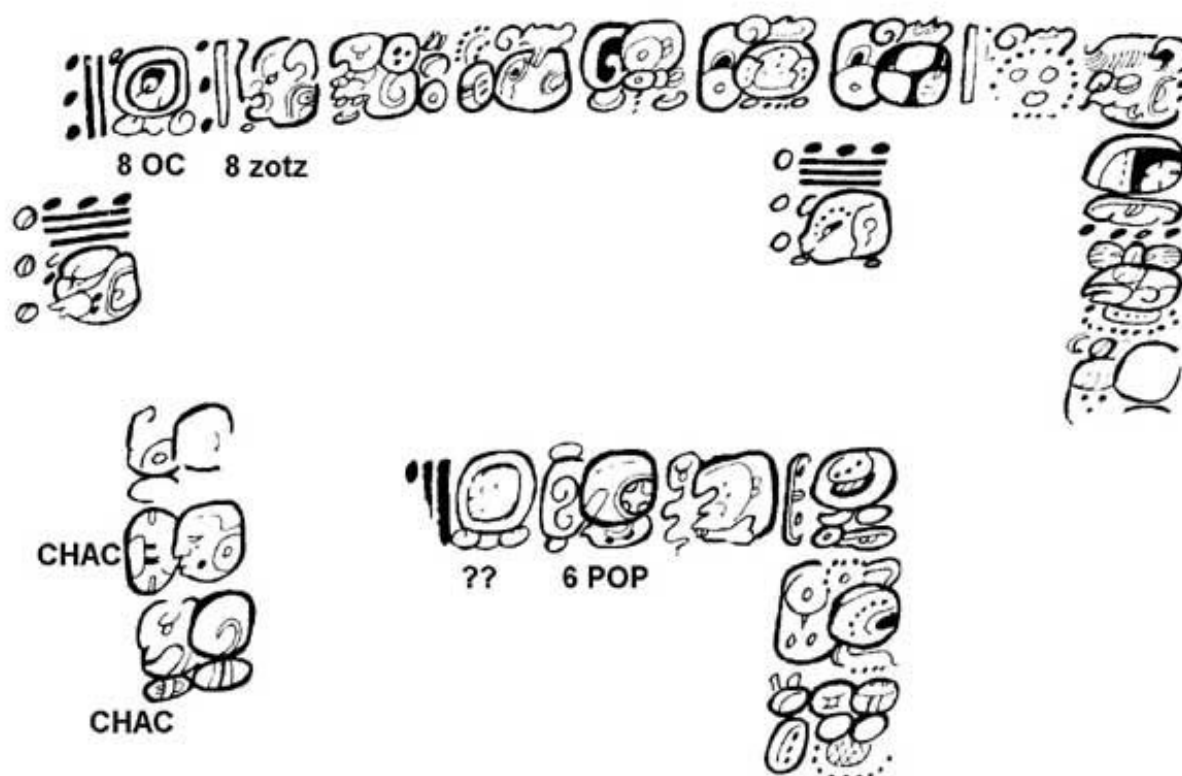


Figure 4. Drawing of the text in the *Chack Xib Chaahk* plate (Schele and Miller 1986).

## TEXT NARRATING THE MYTHICAL SCENE

It begins by dating the mythic event to the day 13 Oc and the month 8 Zotz; unfortunately, the glyphic piece of information that would place the event in its correct year is missing. The Maya, as opposed to other cultures, situated their myths in time and space, and these were events that unfolded in a real moment along the history of this people. The text proceeds with the description and geographic location of the place where the myth happened with the use of the glyph *utiya*, to take place; then, there is a glyph which was described and interpreted by Schele and Miller (1986) as “appeared, emerged from the earth”, with the affix *nal*, which indicates a location, a place. For the time being, this glyph lacks a conclusive reading and the interpretation of “sprouting” or “emerging” was maintained; then

again there is the verb *utiya*, prefixed by the particle of time/aspect *mu*, showing that it “occurred” at the *Ik Way Nal, the Place of the Black Waterhole*; this glyph represents a toponym which makes reference to some place of change or transformation.

The next glyphic block is again a locative which helps to more specifically locate the place where the preceding action took place, *Ik [?] Nal, the Place of the Black [?]*; it is not possible to read the main glyph but we know it is making reference to water, or to the place where the waterhole or pond previously mentioned was found, emphasized by its presence within the iconographic scene; the author included it in the aquatic representation wherefrom *Chaahk* was sprouting.

Subsequently, there is a third toponym that indicates the precise reference to a mythic place, a glyph that appears elsewhere represented in pottery and in other inscriptions associated to scenes of rebirth (Calvin 1997:891). One such example exists in the cover of vault of *Ek Balam*, where ruler *Ukit Kan Le'k* is shown sitting on a pillow with the glyph 5 Flower (Lacadena and Wichmann 2002), probably linking once again a ruler with this mythic place or space; an additional example is seen in the ceramic vessel *K2723*, accompanying another rebirth scene, in this case that of the Maize God (Quenon and Le Fort 1995:891). In the absence of a precise translation of this glyph, it has been denominated *Ho'Nikte*, thus reaffirming the hypothesis according to which it refers to a mythic place by excellence; this is corroborated by the two subsequent glyphs *Chan* and *Chen*, The Site (city or territory), which form an intentional diphrasing made by the scribe with which he attempted to stress the significance of the site *Ho'Nikte*, possibly the place of mythical origin where the rebirth of the body took place.

There are other toponyms linked to numerals, as seen in the Margarita substructure built in Early Classic Copan, showing the toponyms “7 site” and “9 site” which according to Nielsen (2003:228) refer as well to facts or events connected with the origin or the act of “emerging”.

## **TEXT REFERING TO THE COMPLETION OF THE PLATE AND TO ITS OWNER**

This text unveils the dating and completion of the ceramic plate outlined by the glyph *ujawante*, Tripod Plate, and then mentions the name of its owner, *Lachatunk*, followed by the emblem glyph of the city to which this ruler probably belonged; *Siku[l]*, but for the time being no data are available that would lead to the correct identification of this city.

## **TEXT MENTIONING THE NAME OF THE DEPICTED CHARACTER**

This text appears at the right of the main character, and its reading is consistent with the name of *Chac Xib Chaahk, Chaahk, the Red Man*. Therefore, the text tells about a mythological event of rebirth that was taking place in a watery space wherefrom *Chaahk Xib Chaahk*, reborn, was emerging.



Three are the places or sites that geographically place the action. They are a sequence of toponyms that would be comprised one inside of the other, from a lesser to a greater importance, *Ik Way Nal*, *Ik ? Nal* and “*Ho’Nikte*”, reading something like Santa Cruz del Quiché (Town) – Quiché (State) – Guatemala (Country). The translation would be as follows: *It was on the day of the 13 Oc of the month of the 8 Zotz when (Chac Xib Chaahk) emerged, sprouted, and this happened in the place of The Black Lagoon, The Site of the Black ? and of Five Flower (Ho’Nikte), which is THE PLACE (a mythic place by excellence). This text narrates the concrete sequence represented in the iconography of the plate.*

## ICONOGRAPHIC STUDY

Linda Schele and Mary Miller (1996) accomplished a first iconographic interpretation of what they both called the *Cosmis Plate*, focusing their proposal on the blood emanating from *Chaahk* and mentioning only that *Chaahk* could be similar to the trees present in the Palenque iconography. A second interpretation was made by Elisabeth Wagner (2002), and there, she clearly stated that *Chaahk* is shown like the tree that plays the role of *Axis Mundi*.

Both interpretations are coincident in saying that there are three well differentiated spaces: an upper, celestial one, an intermediate second one, and a third plane that places the scene in the sub-aquatic underworld. *Chaahk* occupies the intermediate position between the upper and the lower planes.

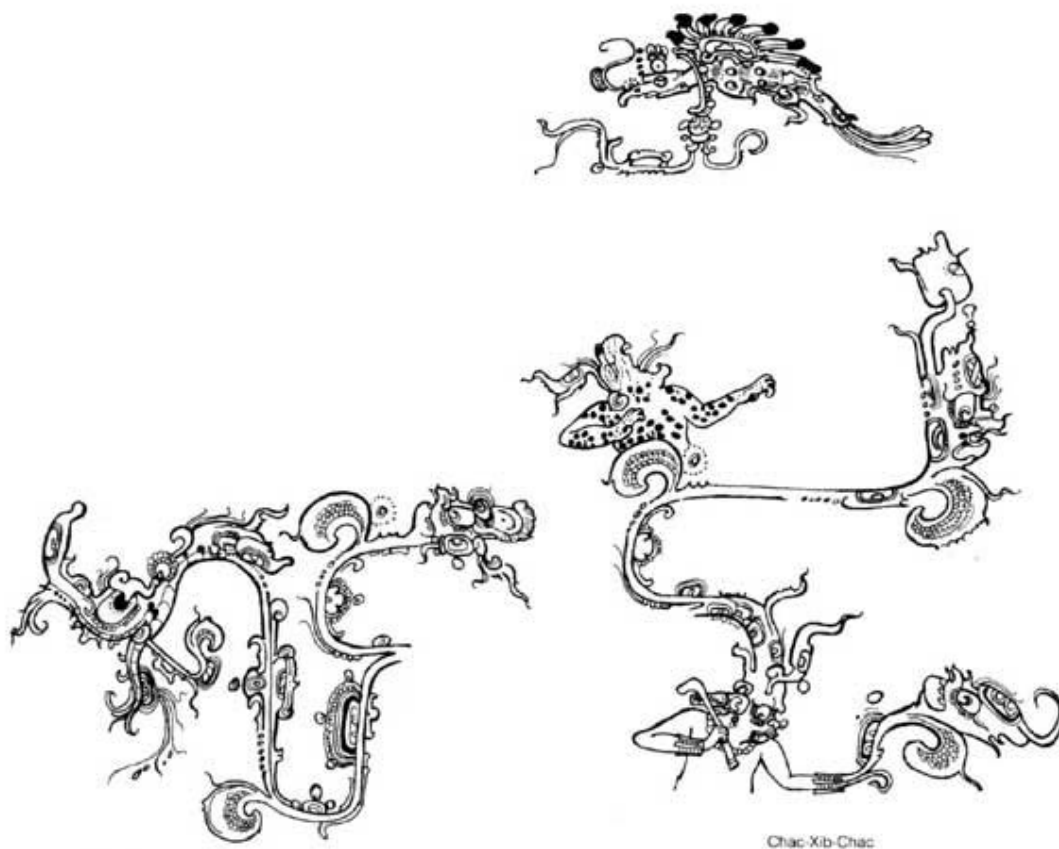


Figure 5. Drawing of the *Chac Xib Chaahk* plate, central scene (Schele and Miller 1986).



This study attempts to contribute new iconographic data to the already existing ones, and to simultaneously associate the name of the ruler *Te’K’ab’Chaahk* with the plate and the myth narrated in it. To that aim, we shall refer first to the notion of origin, rebirth or emergence of *Chaahk* breaking the primordial waters, symbolizing the victory of birth and life over darkness and death. This is supported by the text shown in the upper portion of the plate, which makes reference to the place where the events are taking place, a black waterhole located in *Ho’ Nikte*, the Place of Five Flower (Figure 5). This is a young looking *Chaahk*, consistent with the pristine moment being narrated. Over his head there is a big *Tzuk* symbol which suggests partition and announces the unfolding of *Chaahk* and his ramification to be transformed into vegetation. The ends of these branches or sprouts take the shape of serpents or heads that are symbolizing some type of vegetation. These heads are represented in other ceramic pieces, like in vase *K4119*. The arm is participating as well in this blooming, and so, *Chaahk* is being born from the waters, which symbolize the place where one is reborn to life bringing along the essence they contain.

It is important to note that the double bulge, the conventional representation of *che* or *te* in the codices, appears in the stem to which *Chaahk* is associated in this plate as well as in his ramified arm, where the same sign is also present. Likewise, it stresses that both meanings can be used to refer to woody plants, although at times it is used with a broader meaning which comprises all plants in general.

These waters forming the black pond wherefrom *Chaahk* emerges are framed within two motifs (Figure 6): the aquatic band and the jaguar, which in certain vases (*K771* and *K791*) is the way of the Sacred Lord of *Yax Ox Tun Nal*, the place where the three stones of creation were placed. They show the presence of three beings that dwell on the surface and the bottom of it, represented by a fleshless head of which water plants emerge. This iconographic motif is very frequent in ceramics, and is represented as the main motif in many Late Classic vessels.

As opposed to this monster, the upper portion of the plate exhibits the celestial monster in the form of a snake. This higher position is also occupied by two stellar symbols. All this takes place under the surveillance of the “Celestial Bird”, probably *Itzamnaah’s* alter-ego. It is worth noting that the bird is wearing the eye necklace and the *akbal* sign, suggesting this is a scene of death. But of a death in the sense of dying to be reborn, implicit throughout the iconography of this plate, and most of all, in the vegetal feature shown in it, inasmuch as the vegetation reveals existence as a continued process of regeneration.

Schele and Miller, as well as Wagner, acknowledge the vegetal, even the arboreal feature in the iconographic studies they conducted. It is clear that from the starting point of the double bulge represented both in the “stem” or “timber”, and in the arm of *Chaahk*, we are in front of the term “*te*”, used to designate a plant or a tree. Moreover, the blood observed by Schele, or some kind of “ramification” with the liquid or vital substance, could be assimilated to the emanations emerged from the “blossomed and ramified” *Chaahk*, or in other words, the *itz* or sap that feeds the plant and allows it to live, prolonged through the arm of the god and marking the

essence of the vegetal element it represents. On the other hand, the presence of the *Bursera simaruba* tree, known as *Chakah* or Palo Mulato, directly associated with the god, should be mentioned, as its soft wood was used to manufacture the ritual machete of the *Ch'a chaak* ceremonies in Yucatan. Its association with *Chaahk* could respond to the resin exudates used for lighting fires, to its flaky bark with tones that range from red to green, as well as to its blooming habits, inasmuch as the male tree produces five thousand flowers simultaneously. The god could be showing one of his positive facets by recreating life in him through the vegetation.

The mythic occasion represented in plate *K1609* could be connected, through the mention of the mythological places, the iconography of its images, and the presence of its characters, with other masterpieces of Maya pottery –*K699*, the Vase of the Seven Gods-, which, like in this “cosmic tray”, collect mythic fragments of that which must have been a wide, and most of all elaborated mythological thinking. And should it be something in common between the examples mentioned here and the “plate”, this would be the awareness that death gives way to life, that it is from the union of two ontological opposites that “wholeness” sprouts out, and there is no one better than *Chaahk* to symbolize this, he, who simultaneously is the fire and the vegetation, the sap and the “precious substance” necessary to fertilize that which fire, in his role of necessary and purifying, has previously annihilated.



Figure 6. Drawing of the *Chac Xib Chaahk* plate (Schele and Miller 1986).

It is quite possible that the Late Classic rulers had joined together *Te K'ab' Chaahk*, the first ruler of Caracol, with the rebirth of the god *Chaahk*, and that even it was used as a name, *Ox Witz*, for his entire territory, a mythical place of the Other World present in Late Classic ceramics under the form of a *way* (Calvin 1997:875), usually depicted as a deer with vegetation in its mouth.

Finally, the plate depicts an image of a *Chaahk* that is blooming, ramifying, and no matter if the bifurcations that come out of his body are made of wood or any other type of plant, it supports the appearance of the double bulge, just like we mentioned earlier; but if they are emanations of the vital substance (vegetal, in this case), we are in front of a *Chaahk* whose main component is the vegetal element, and consequently, his essence, his body and finally his arm, could belong in the semantic field of *te*.

Going deeper in the narrated myth would be risky, as this work was not intended to explain the myth itself but to establish a connection between our Caracol ruler, *Te K'ab Chaahk*, and the existence of a myth narrated in a plate as of the presence of a flourishing *Chaahk*, ramifying and making of his arm a prolongation of that blooming, of that vital substance that circulated inside the god, an arm made of “wood or made out of a tree”.

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- Figure 1      Marker 3, Ballgame, Caracol (drawing by Grube 1991)
- Figure 2      *Te K'ab'Chaahk* (drawing by Grube 1991)
- Figure 3      Tripod plate (Schele and Miller 1986)
- Figure 4      Drawing of text in the *Chac Xib Chaahk* plate (Schele and Miller 1986)
- Figure 5      Drawing in the *Chac Xib Chaahk* plate, central scene (Schele and Miller 1986)
- Figure 6      Drawing in the *Chac Xib Chaahk* plate (Schele and Miller 1986)