

Two Incised Shell Silhouette Plaques at Dumbarton Oaks

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Introduction

In 2002 the author documented two shell silhouette pendants at the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, as part of the *The Primary Standard Sequence: Database Compilation, Grammatical Analysis, and Primary Documentation* project, funded by FAMSI Grant #02047 (Mora-Marín 2003). The first shell silhouette, B-556.66.MAL, contains a typical, Late Classic Primary Standard Sequence (PSS) text (Coe 1973; Mathews 1979; Justeson 1983; Stuart 1984, 1989; Houston and Taube 1987; Houston et al. 1989; Krochock 1989, 1991; MacLeod 1990; Grube 1990a 1991). The second one, B-191.MAL, exhibits a more idiosyncratic and opaque text. These two pieces—particularly their inscriptions—are the subject of the present study.

The Artifacts

The first silhouette (B-556.66.MAL), henceforth Silhouette A, measures 10.0 x 5.7 x 0.7 cm and portrays a noble, probably a lord, seated cross-legged on a throne or bench (**Figure 1a**).

The second silhouette (B-191.MAL), henceforth Silhouette B, measures 10.1 x 5.0 x 0.75 cm and also depicts a noble, also likely a lord, also seated cross-legged on a throne or bench (**Figure 1b**).

Figure 1



a



b

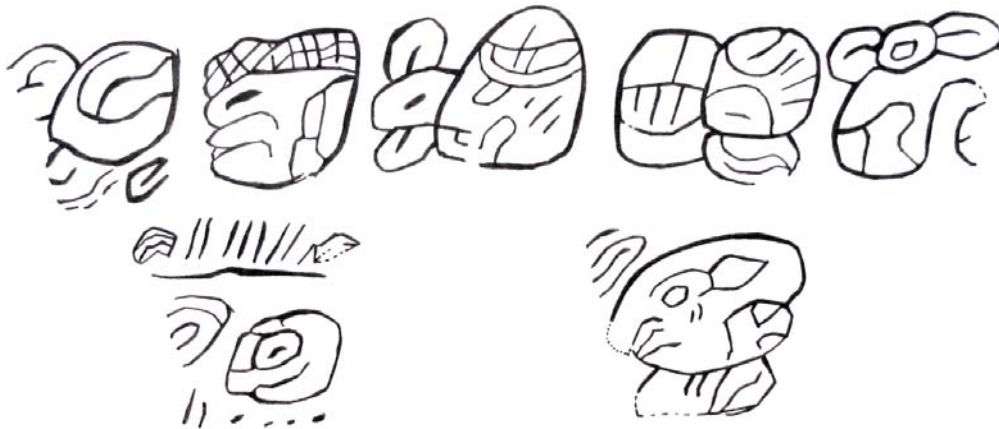
a) Photograph on file at Dumbarton Oaks used with permission of the curator. Photo #PCB556S1.jpg. b) Photograph on file at Dumbarton Oaks used with permission of the curator. Photo #PCB191S1.

Each of the texts bears an inscription that fills up the space on the depicted thrones. A photograph of the text on Silhouette A is seen in **Figure 2a**, and a line drawing in **Figure 2b**. The text is made up of 7 glyph blocks, and a total of 18 signs, for an average of 2.6 signs per glyph block.

Figure 2



a



b

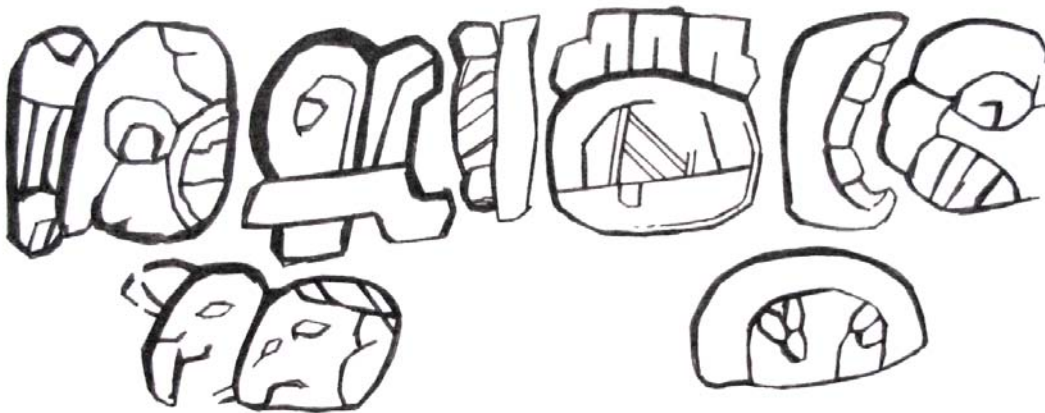
a) Close up photograph of throne on Silhouette A taken by this author. b) Drawing of inscription incised on the throne on Silhouette A crafted by this author.

A photograph of the text on Silhouette B is seen in **Figure 3a**, and a line drawing in **Figure 3b**. The text is made up of 6 glyph blocks, and a total of 11-12 signs, for an average of 1.8-2 signs per glyph block. The range estimate is the result of the second glyph block, which is somewhat unusual, making it unclear at this time whether one is dealing with a single or sign or more.

Figure 3



a



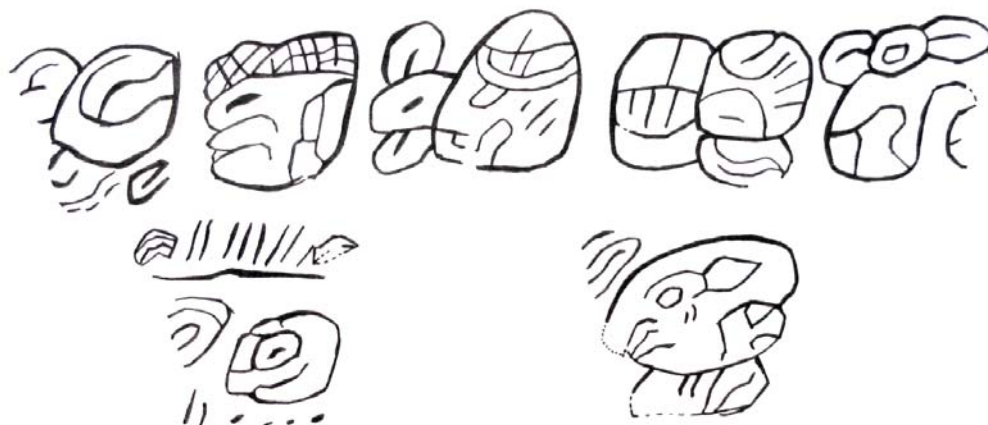
b

a) Close up photograph of throne on Silhouette B taken by this author. b) Drawing of inscription incised on the throne on Silhouette B crafted by this author.

Epigraphic Reading

Silhouette A (**Figure 4a**) conforms very well to the expected structure for a dedicatory text, particularly one of the Primary Standard Sequence variety (**Figure 4b**).

Figure 4



a

A B C D E

	7a-					
1	(7A)LAY-	GOD.N	yu-	7i-chi-ni	yu-ne	1
	ya		7UH(IL)			
2	7a-?nu-?-?la			?7u-B'AH-		2
				?hi		

b

The following transliteration and translation is offered:

(1)	7a-(7A)LAY-ya	GOD.N	yu-7UH(IL)	7i-chi-ni
	Alay	[VERB]	y-uh[-il]	?ichin
	Here	[was.dedicated]	his-pendant	[proper.name]

yu-ne	7a-?nu-?-?la
y-unen	aj+[name/title]
his-child	Mr. [name/title]

7u-B'AH-?hi

u-b'ah-i[l]

his-potrait

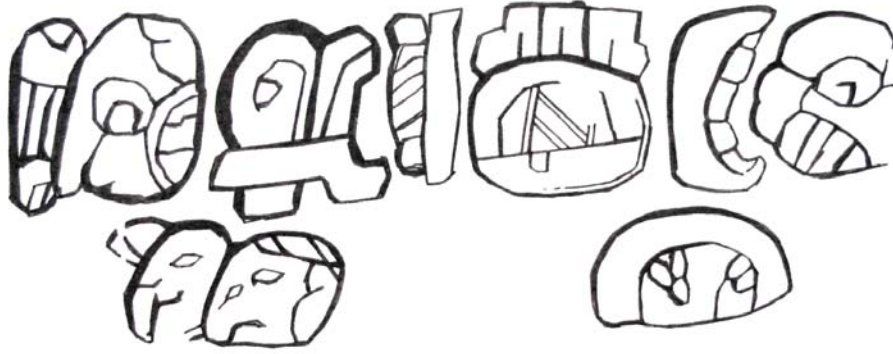
‘Here, the pendant of *Ichin*, the child of Mr. ??, was dedicated. It is his portrait’.

Basically, the text refers to the pendant itself in two senses: as a pendant and as a portrait of the pendant’s owner (cf. Houston and Stuart 1996, 1998).

Silhouette B is much more opaque (**Figure 5**). While most of the signs are readily identifiable, and in fact, at least half are phonetic, the text is highly idiosyncratic. It opens (Glyph A) with **ko-ji**, which one would expect to be the verb due to its clause-initial position. If so, an intransitive verb ending in *-i* ‘completive status of intransitives’ would be called for, one

of the shape *koj* in particular, yielding *koj-i-Ø*, where *-Ø* represents the third person absolutive suffix ‘s/he/it; her/him/it’. The following glyph, a complex glyph possibly made up of two signs, shows in part a throne or bench, presumably in reference to the throne upon which sits the noble man depicted on the pendant itself. This identification can be confirmed through a comparison with depictions of thrones in other artifacts, as in **Figure 6**. It is possible that the THRONE/BENCH sign is possessed, but if so it is not clear. If it is a throne or bench of the same sort as the one depicted on vessel K1524 (**Figure 6b**), then it would likely be a logogram **TEM** for *tem* ‘(wooden) banco, asiento (stool, bench)’, as suggested by the spelling **7u-te-mu-?li** ‘his stool/bench’ present on the depicted throne or bench on K1524 (Houston et al. 1998; Lacadena and Wichmann 2004). The next glyph block, Glyph C, shows **7aj-tsi-7i**. This may be a personal title, based on *7aj+* ‘profession marker; male proclitic; large or active animal’. Glyph D shows **7u-MUWAN** ‘his/her/its hawk’. Glyph E shows **?-?HUN**, and Glyph F shows **T528 ku/TUN**.

Figure 5

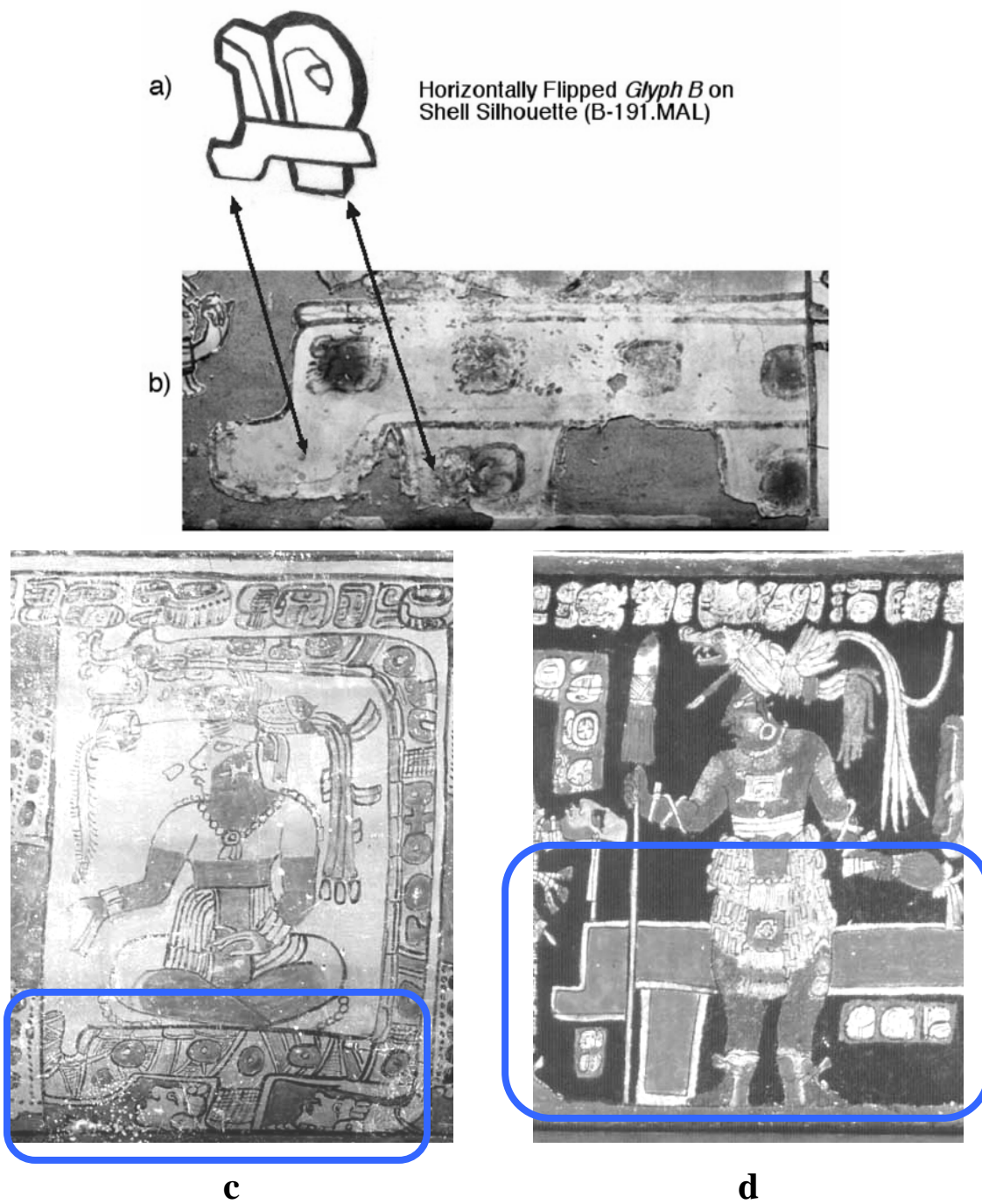


a

A	B	C	D
ko-ji	?7u- THRONE	7aj-tsi-7i	7u- MUWAN
	?-?HUN		TUN/ku
	E		F

b

Figure 6



a) Comparison of sign in Glyph B of Silhouette B with throne depicted on vessel K1524.
b) Throne depicted on vessel K8819. c) Throne depicted on vessel K2695. Details of vessels K1524, K8819, and K2695 are taken from photographs in the Justin Kerr Maya Vase Database at <http://www.famsi.org/>.

For now a very tentative and crude parsing can be made as follows: ‘The throne of Mr. Tsi’ [...] was *KOJed*’.

Preliminary Paleographic Analysis

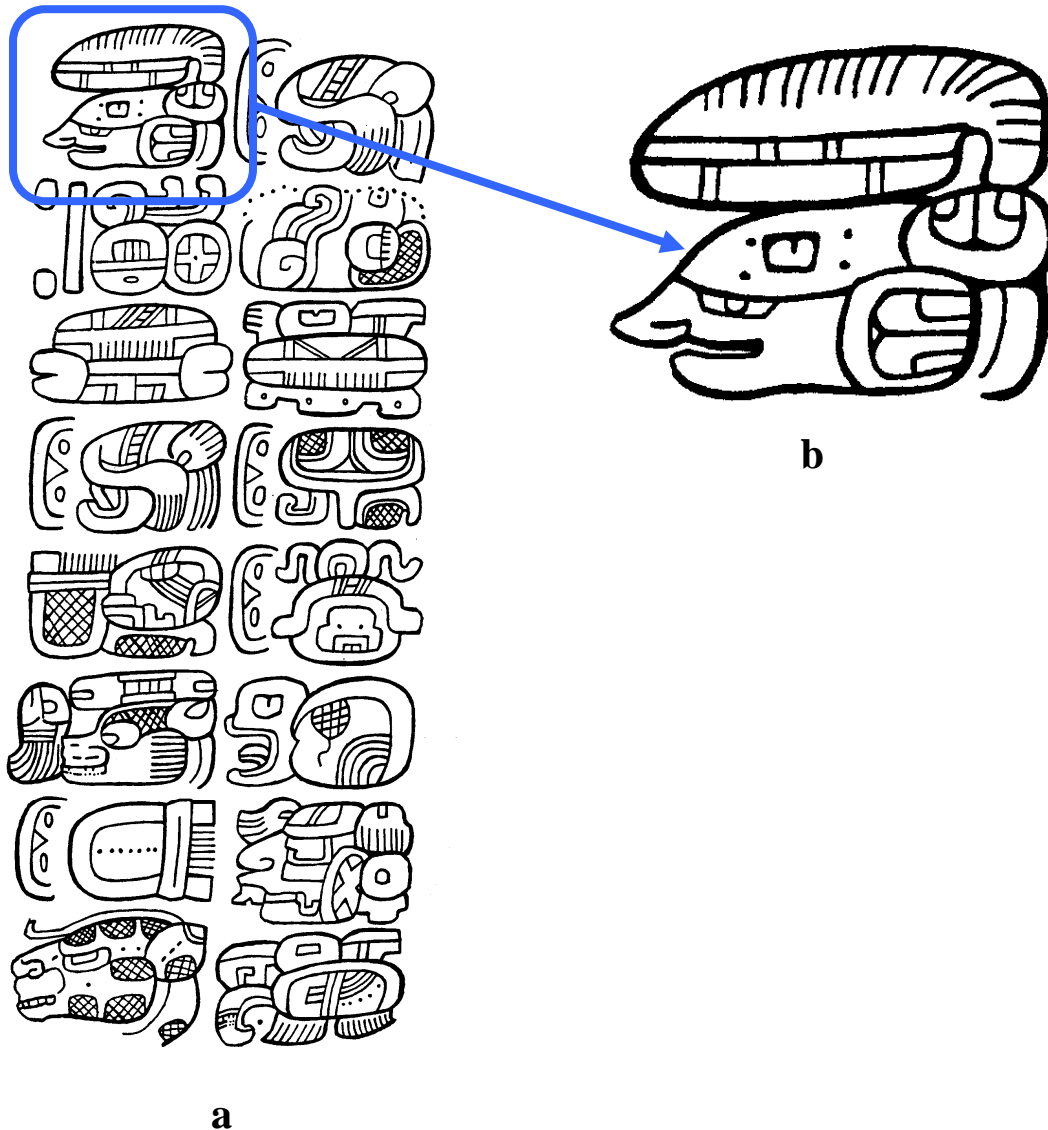
For the present analysis the author has relied on Lacadena’s (1995) study of several sets of signs and their graphic evolution over time. To use Lacadena’s results it is necessary to determine whether any datable graphic innovations are present in the two texts at hand. In their absence, it is not possible to reliably date the texts, unless one assumes that such absence signals a manufacture date prior to the innovation of certain graphic forms. This would not be necessarily correct: an absence of an innovation could simply mean that the scribe was conservative, not that the innovation had not yet occurred. However, if several of eventual changes in several of the signs present in each of the texts are simply unattested, we may use such negative evidence with more confidence than if we were dealing with a single potential innovation.

First, let us examine Silhouette A. T62 **yu**, in its two occurrences at C1a and E1a, shows the circular motif inside the central element, which points to a Late Classic date, more specifically after A.D. 593 (Lacadena 1995:210-211). Also, T126 **ya**, present at A1c, shows the central element with possible dots arranged in parallel arrangement alongside a solid line. This is perhaps indicative of a partial stage in the development of the design with three circular elements as the central element of this sign. Such innovative design was already in place widely by ca. A.D. 741 (Lacadena 1995:229-236). At the same time, T116 **ni** shows its more traditional form (Lacadena 1995:127-128), the one that predates the innovation and spread of the circular

elements along the bottom, and the one that predates the innovation and spread of the horizontal flip of the design, both innovations that began to become widely consolidated after ca. A.D. 700. Thus, it is possible to suggest, at the earliest, a seventh century date for this artifact: ca. A.D. 601-700, although possibly later. If so, it would be consistent with the A.D. 600-800 estimate postulated in Berjonneau et al. (1985:248, Pl. 394) for a shell silhouette attributed to Jaina, which shows strong similarities to the ones described here, especially Silhouette A.

For Silhouette B it is more difficult to carry out a paleographic dating. Most of the signs show conservative forms. For example, T124 **tsi** does not show major innovations—such as the 180-degree rotation of the central element that appeared by ca. A.D. 379 (Lacadena 1995:257), and thus it is not a useful sign for dating this artifact. Also, while Grube (1990b) has argued that T758d **ji**, attested at Ab, was first introduced around A.D. 652, there are in fact earlier attestations, during the Early Classic, that suggest that this is not a useful sign either in dating the text, as in **Figure 7a**, an Early Classic text inscribed on the back of a pyrite-incrusted slate mirror disk, showing the sign at A1b to be a collocation T692:758d[585] **pu-ji[b'i]** (**Figure 7b**). It is likely that a more thorough paleographic analysis focusing on T679 **7i**, attested in both silhouettes, as well as T12 **7aj**, T1 **7u**, and T528 **ku** could offer a more productive basis for the dating of this artifact. For now I would only suggest a Late Classic date for this artifact.

Figure 7



a) Drawing of text on pyrite-incrusted slate mirror back at the Jade Museum of Costa Rica by Mora-Marín (2000:Fig. 20). b) Detail: Glyph Block A.

Conclusions

More research is necessary, particularly to elucidate the nature and meaning of the text on Silhouette B. For now Silhouette A and B appear to be of rather different genres, or possibly of rather different subgenres, if it turns out that Silhouette B also contains a dedicatory text. If that were the case, then it would not be a text conforming to the typical Primary Standard Sequence

formula. As far as the dating is concerned, it may be useful to carry out paleographic research on several of the signs present on these texts, such as T1, T679, T12, etc., in order to determine possible relative dates with more clarity. Finally, it may also be possible to find the attested personal names in the known historical record, a task that could facilitate the dating and provenience assignment if determined to be related.

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