



# The Inscribed Markers of the Coba-Yaxuna Causeway and the Glyph for *Sakbih*

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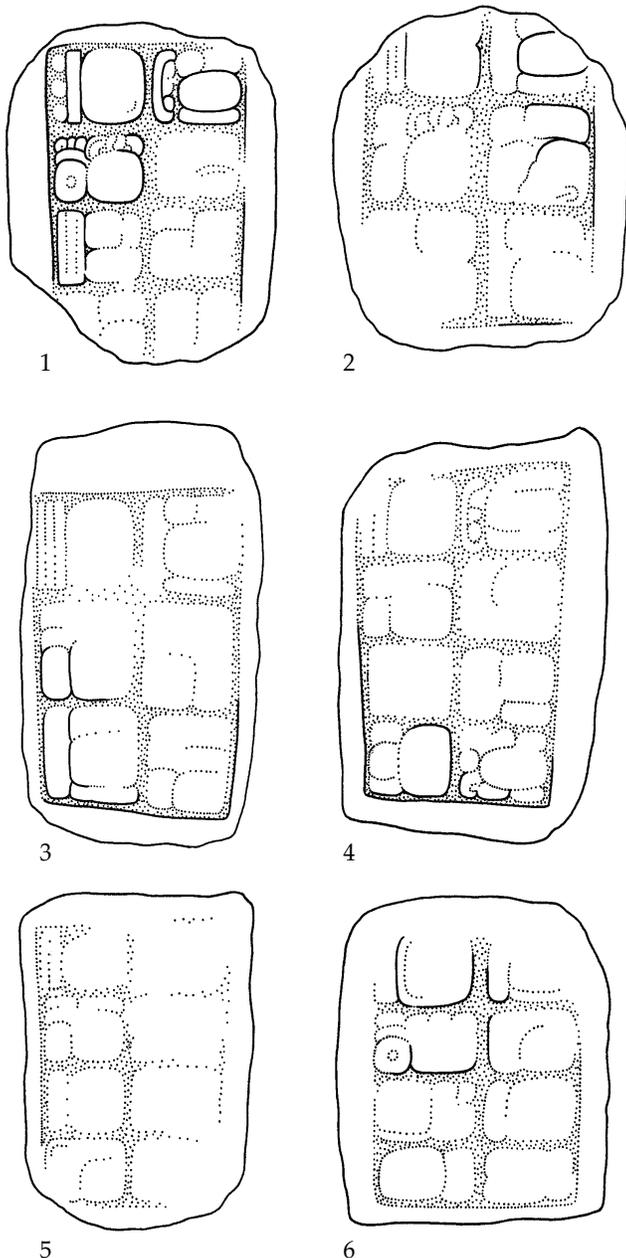


Figure 1. The Coba causeway stones. Drawings by David Stuart.

In their fascinating early traverses along the great Coba-Yaxuna causeway, Thomas Gann (1926) and later Alfonso Villa Rojas (1934) each came upon a number inscribed stones resting at various intervals along the 100 kilometer roadway, called *Sacbe 1* in Coba's local numeration (Benevides Castillo 1981). The similar styles and formats of the stones, six in total, suggest that they were designed and dedicated as a set, perhaps when the causeway itself was constructed. No other Maya causeway exhibits similar marker inscriptions, to my knowledge. The Coba-Yaxuna stones are all in very poor condition, but the outlines of a few glyphs are here and there discernable. Figure 1 provides drawings of the small monuments, originally designated "Inscribed Stones" 1 through 6 in their first publication by Villa Rojas (1934).

Despite their weathered condition, the inscriptions show a number of similarities, if not outright repetitions. In block A2 of each it is possible to discern the prefix **SAK** before an eroded main sign with what looks to be a **-hi** superfix. The sign arrangement strongly suggests that this glyph reads *sakbih* (**SAK-BIH-hi**), the Ch'olan form of the familiar Yukatek word *sakbeh* (*sacbe*) "road" (Figure 2). I suggest that all six stones, spread apart over some distance, were dedication markers for the causeway. The possible date glyphs at A1 and verbs at B1 on each stone are consistent with such an interpretation, but we will probably never know the details of these worn inscriptions. Perhaps the discovery of another in better condition will someday shed light on their overall meaning.

Although the Coba examples are all very weathered, similar "road" glyphs are attested in the codices and in the Classic inscriptions. As is generally known, the combination **bi-hi** or **BIH-hi** (the "quincunx" sign can be either syllabic **bi** or, at times, logographic **BIH**; its role here can be either) appears in the *Dresden Codex* in direct association with road imagery (see Page D41c, for example). A more direct reference to "causeway" occurs on *Dresden* page 39a,

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Figure 2. Detail of page 39a of the *Dresden Codex*. Drawing by Carlos Villacorta (from Villacorta and Villacorta 1976).

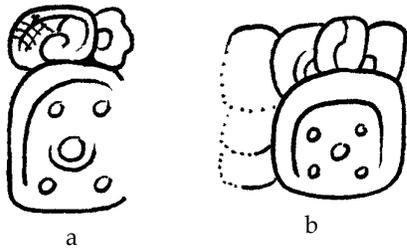


Figure 3. Two spellings of the death verb **OCH-BIH**, “to road-enter.” (a) From the sarcophagus lid of Pakal, block 19a, (b) Piedras Negras, Stela 1, block C18. Note the use of **-hi** in the second example.

where we find the logograms **SAK-BIH** (the footprint variant) in a somewhat unusual setting, but without any obvious road visible in the accompanying scene (Figure 2). In Classic texts, the appearance of *bih* is most widely attested in the metaphor for death *ochbih*, “to enter the path.” Nearly all spellings of this phrase make use of two joined logograms **OCH-BIH**, but it is interesting to note that on a few occasions the **hi** is included, for **bi-hi** or **BIH-hi** (Figure 3).

Copan’s inscriptions exhibit at least a few other “road” glyphs. On Temple 11, the inscription on the

north jamb of the east doorway shows the combination **bi-hi** in a sign arrangement identical to what I suggest is found on the Coba-Yaxuna road markers (Figure 4). The general context here is unclear, although its association with the date 9 Chikchan 13 Zip (9.17.1.3.5, or 24 March, 772) may relate to the vernal equinox, and some discussion of the sun’s “path.”

Copan’s Hieroglyphic Stairway has two interesting references to roads, possibly with cosmological overtones (Figure 5a and b). Each example is similarly presented as a **SAK** sign with a **BIH** logograph infix, preceded by the number “four.” **4-TE’-SAK-BIH**, or *chante’ sakbih*, “the four roads,” seems to be the intended meaning. Four causeways are not attested at Copan—only two, to the west and east—but I nevertheless suggest that “four roads” refers to the well known cosmological scheme where paths are associated with each of world directions (Tozzer 1941:39; Tourtellot et al. 2002). As Bernardo de Lizana wrote in the early seventeenth century: “There (at Izamal) they offered great alms and made pilgrimages from all parts, for which reason there have been made four roads or causeways to the four cardinal points, which reached to all the ends of the land, and passed to Tabasco, Guatemala and Chiapas” (cited in Villa Rojas 1934:189). A four-part roadway sys-

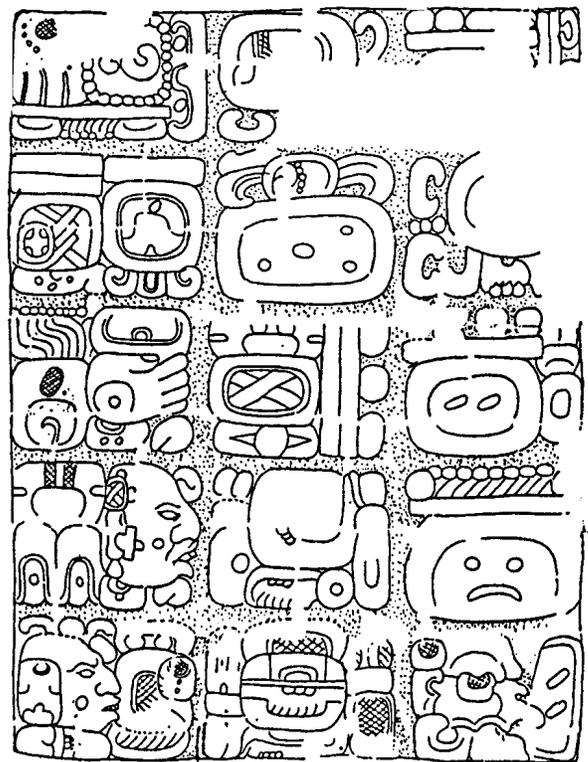


Figure 4. “Road” glyph (**BIH-hi**, second row center) on jamb text of east door of Copan, Temple 11. Drawing by Linda Schele.

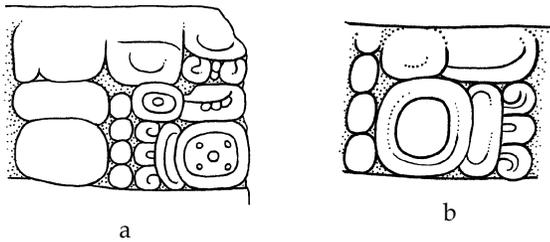


Figure 5. Two mentions of “four roads” (4-SAK-BIH) on Copan’s Hieroglyphic Stairway. (a) Step 29, (b) Step 6. Inked from preliminary drawings by Barbara Fash.

tem might also be ideally based on the solstice points of sunrise and sunset at winter and summer. The apparent reference to 4-U-BIH K’INICH, *chan u-bih K’inich*, “four are the paths of the sun,” on the basal register of Caracol, Stela 6, perhaps has some connection to the same idea (Figure 6).

We see from such scattered examples that the term *sacbe*, so familiar to Maya archaeologists today, was in use in ancient times. The purpose of raised roadways was no doubt varied in the Classic period (Shaw 2001; Eberl 2001), and if more epigraphic mentions of them ever appear, one hopes that they may shed more light on the use and design of built roads within ancient Maya communities.

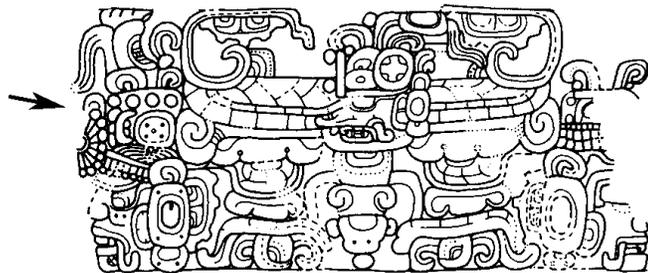


Figure 6. Detail of Caracol, Stela 6 (front), showing *witz* mountain mask and the glyph 4-U-BIH (arrow) above the sun god (K’INICH). Drawing by Carl Beetz.

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