THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE "LOOPED CORD" YEAR SYMBOL IN PRE-HISPANIC MEXICO: AN HYPOTHESIS

By H. B. NICHOLSON

Various symbols for the year were utilized in Mesoamerican iconography. Most of them appear to have been variations of devices symbolizing the intimately interconnected concepts: "precious stone" ("turquoise," "jade"), "blue-green," "rain," "rain deity," "water," etc. (Caso, 1928: 45-64; 1947: 28-29; García Payón, 1939; Thompson, 1950: 144-145, 252, 275-276; 1951: 31-35). In western Mesoamerica the broad outlines of various evolutionary changes in a basic year symbol, which is best known in the interlaced A-O form (centered in late pre-Hispanic western Oaxaca), can clearly be discerned (Caso, 1962: 68-71). In eastern Mesoamerica (Lowland Maya Area), on the other hand, the year (i.e., the tun-haab) symbol exhibited no substantial changes through time.

A different year symbol, apparently derived from a distinct concept, has recently been identified and discussed by Caso (1962: 71-73; Figs. 2-4, 7-8). The writer had independently arrived at the same conclusion and had also formed the hypothesis that this symbol, which Caso termed "una cuerda" and which appears to represent a cord or band usually configured as a loop, might well represent a stylization of the tumpline (Nahuatl: mecapalli). The evidence supporting this hypothesis is assembled in the following note.*

This "looped cord" is usually represented smooth but occasionally exhibits hatching (Fig. 2: a, b); in these cases its cordlike nature is thus clearly indicated. The cord, mecatl in Nahuatl, was often employed as a symbol of genealogical linkage in western Mesoamerican pictorials (e.g., Figs. 14, 15), but another significance must obviously be sought here. Another kind of "cord," the mecapalli, the tumpline, the standard device for carrying heavy loads throughout Mesoamerica (except in the far northwest,

* This hypothesis was first suggested verbally during a discussion period following the presentation by Caso of his paper at the XXXV International Congress of Americanists, Mexico City, August 22, 1962.
where it was supplanted by the "coolie yoke"), also comes to mind in this connection—especially in view of the usual loop (fig. 1).

But, assuming this hypothesis has some cogency, why the tumpline? Why should this utilitarian object serve as a symbol for the year? The answer would seem to lie in the concept of the year bearer. This concept is best known from the Maya area. Thompson (1950: 59-61; 124-125) has discussed most of the available information concerning it in the Mayan-speaking region of eastern Mesoamerica. He summarizes the basic concept thus:

The Maya conceived of the divisions of time as burdens which were carried through all eternity by relays of bearers. During the Initial Series Period these bearers were the numbers by which the different periods were distinguished; each number carried the period with which he was associated over his allotted course.

Thompson goes on to discuss certain Classic period inscriptions which pictorially communicate the concept, especially various monuments bearing "full-figure glyphs" (e.g., Copan D, D', W'; Quirigua B, D; Yaxchilan I. 48; Palenque Tablero de El Palacio). Occasionally these display the deity of the numerical coefficient carrying the glyph for the period on his back with the tumpline, thus very graphically and literally illustrating the fundamental concept (Fig. 5). There are some ambiguities in the concept (who bore whom?), especially raised by Yaxchilan I. 48—which are discussed by Thompson—but the essential concept is clear. Thompson also cites various linguistic data relating to this notion of periods of time conceived as burdens carried forward in relay fashion. The most basic expression, whose literal translation is "year bearer," is found in various Mayan languages (e.g., Yucatec: ab eubbaah; Jacalteca: tikum habil; Chuh: euduuk haabil; Ixil: ib yah). In addition, in the Yucatecan Books of Chilam Balam various relevant phrases have been noted (e.g., eud eub ukibat katum. Chumayel; Roys translation: "the burden of the journey of the katun").

Although the "burden of time" concept may have been especially well developed in eastern Mesoamerica, there is a certain amount of scattered evidence that it was also widespread in western Mesoamerica, far outside Mayan territory. This evidence is both archaeological and linguistic. The former will be first considered.

In Figs. 10-12 are illustrated male figures bearing date 3 with numerical coefficient 5, cartouche. They appear to have been somewhat indeterminate by Veracruz or Tajin style (perhaps kneeling) figure, shaped something like a snake. (Fig. 10 supposedly hails from Veracruz or Tajin style (perhaps kneeling) figure, shaped something like a snake. (Fig. 11, a stela from Puebla Guerrero, represents a stela of the weight of a glyph (apparently one) carried on the back of what appears to be a kind (which could indicate the year monument) cannot be established by Piña Chan. The glyph (in a elaborately decorative cartouche. A portion of what is almost certain to the glyph for the day...
the cogency, why the tumpline serve as a symbol for the concept of the year in the Maya area. Thompson passed most of the available Quiche-speaking region of the basic concept thus:

In Figs. 10-12 are illustrated 3 stone carvings which portray male figures bearing date symbols (2 certainly and possibly all 3 with numerical coefficients) on their backs with tumplines. They appear to have been found in widely separated locations. Fig. 10 supposedly hails from northern Veracruz; the style is somewhat indeterminate but seems to be related to the Classic Veracruz or Tajin style (Proskouriakoff, 1954). A seated (or perhaps kneeling) figure, grasping an object resembling a staff shaped something like a shepherd’s crook, with the other hand grasps what is almost certainly a tumpline. The latter is connected to the glyph for the day sign “house” (Nahuatl: Calle), in a cartouche. A portion of what may be a bar, standing for the numerical coefficient of 5, can perhaps be discerned under the cartouche.

Fig. 11, a stela from Piedra Labrada, eastern Costa Chica of Guerrero, represents a standing male figure stooping under the weight of a glyph (apparently with a numerical coefficient of one) carried on the back with a tumpline. The left hand grasps what appears to be a kind of staff. Unfortunately, the glyph itself (which could indicate the year bearer system of the carvers of this monument) cannot be clearly made out in the photograph published by Piña Chan. The figure is standing above another large glyph (in a elaborately decorated cartouche) which Caso (1962: 66) has identified with his “Glyph Z” (= water?)—also with a numerical coefficient of one.
Finally, in Fig. 12, a relief on one side of a monument supposedly found in or near Mexico City, a kneeling figure—which appears to display some characteristics of a rabbit—carries with a tumpline a large Calli symbol with a numerical coefficient of 11 (represented by 11 little circles edging the top and right side). As with the representations on the 2 monuments already described, one hand grasps the tumpline; the other, what seems to be a staff. This presented upraised grasping the tumpline portrayals of cargadores. Figs. 5: a-b, d, and 6 a figures bearing the Calli depictions in the Codex pictorial the stylized head which is very similar to the Figs. 3: a-b, d, and 6 a figures bearing the Calli symbols which possibly could be being drawn across 11. Moreover, the looped cord year symbol).
to be a staff. This posture, incidentally, especially the hand upraised grasping the tumpline, is a standard one in Mesoamerican portrayals of cargadores bearing burdens with the tumpline, as Figs. 5: a-b, d, and 6 attest. Also it is worth noting that the 2 figures bearing the Calli glyph rather strikingly resemble certain depictions in the Codex Zouche-Nuttall (e.g., Fig. 9), but in this pictorial the stylized houses borne by the cargadores obviously do not represent the Calli date sign.

The dating of these 3 stones is somewhat problematical. The monument reportedly from the Mexico City area bears on its other side (Fig. 13) a representation of the “man-bird-serpent,” which is very similar to the classic depictions of this being at Tula and Chichen Itza. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that it is any earlier than the Early Postclassic (Toltec) period, and it may well date precisely to this period in spite of its supposed Mexico City area provenience (various Toltec style carvings have been found in the subsoil of Mexico City). The few indubitably Toltec carved stone dates (Acosta, 1956-1957: Figs. 22: 1, 2, 6, 7; 1960: Lam. XXI) all utilize the 5-bar. Its absence here would perhaps tend to favor a post-Toltec date for this monument (at least one date [calendric name] of a Toltec ceramic vessel [Fuhrtmann, 1922: Bild 85], however, also lacks the 5-bar). Piña Chan (1960: 7) reports Monte Albán III-A ceramics at Piedra Labrada, Guerrero; Powell Rosenthal and Olson (1964: 12), on the other hand, report that “…the majority of surface finds were of Post Classic date.” I would tend to favor a Late Classic or Early Postclassic date for Fig. 11. As for Fig. 10, if its Tajinoid
stylistic affinities can be accepted, a Late Classic or very Early Postclassic date for it also would seem likely.

The available evidence points to a terminal Classic-earliest Postclassic date for the occurrence of the looped cord year symbol on carved stone monuments—more or less coeval with the prime floruit of Xochicalco (the absence of the 5-bar in the numerical coefficient of the Tenango del Valle cliff carving of 9. Calli [Fig. 7] might suggest a somewhat later date for this example, although numerical coefficients at Xochicalco [e.g., Fig. 3] oc-

casionally lack the 5-bar). There seems to be a general coincidence, therefore, between the temporal positions of our 3 year bearer monuments and those which display the looped cord year symbol.

It is barely possible that a version of the looped cord year symbol survived in one area until after the Conquest. Two fragments of the as yet only partially published (Burland, 1960: Fig. 2) "Papers of Itzcuintepec" (British Museum, Depart of Manuscripts: Egerton MSS. 2896; 2897) from the Sierra de Puebla region, depict rows of what are obviously years, in square cartouches, with each of configurated as a kind of little question that repres
comparing with the cords: the same pictorial clearly der
knotted cords are placed cartouches; in the other

Fig. 4. "La Malinche," Palacio de Cortes, Cuernavaca (found at Xochicalco). The dates 6. Foot (Caso’s "Glyph K") and 2. Rabbit are carved at the upper left and right, respectively; the latter displays the looped cord device. After Seler.

Fig. 5. Classic period Lowland periods on their backs as load
 Glyph B carrying Glyph X, Copan D; d: numerical

The square cartou

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The square cartou
cartouches, with each of which is associated a drawing of a cord configurated as a kind of figure-8 knot (Figs. 14, 15). There is little question that representations of cords are involved, as comparison with the cords illustrating genealogical descent in the same pictorial clearly demonstrates. In one case (Fig. 14), these knotted cords are placed just outside and adjoining the square cartouches; in the other (Fig. 15), they are placed inside the
d
Fig. 5. Classic period Lowland Maya representations of figures carrying time periods on their backs as loads with tumplines; a: 9 Baktuns, Copan D; b: Glyph B carrying Glyph X, Quirigua B; c: numerical coefficient carrying uinal, Copan D'; d: numerical coefficient carrying uinal, Copan W'; After Thompson and Morley.

cartouches, sharing the space with the year signs. A peculiar feature of both these series is the repetition of the same year (3 in one case, 7 in the other [both series are probably fragmentary]) rather than sequent years in the 52 year cycle, as in the usual case.

But are these knotted cord devices really intended here as year symbols, possibly related to the looped cord symbol of earlier times? The square cartouche obviously serves this function, and
in other fragments of the same pictorial year signs in square cartouches are unaccompanied by the knotted cord symbol. Also, in this document (and in the stylistically closely related *Lienzo de Metlaltoyuca*) the cross-in-circle (= “turquoise”) serves as a year symbol (a series of these are actually connected to one of the cartouches in one of the series of dates in square cartouches differently) on the usual suggested either a reading this place-glyph it is *quitzontecom* in the *Matricula Mendoza* (fol. 44r)). Considering as place-glyph for a community was placed near some association of these a number of clear-cut places and none of them appear.

Finally, a third possibility, the well-known symbol for *molpilli*, for a knotted cord, the “New Fire Ceremony” expiration of one 52 years (Caso, 1927: 11-12; Nic late pre-Hispanic times in gly under its influence the this knotted cord device and 13, *Tecpatl*. Even if it in a *Tecpatl* rather than a unprecedented for this ever years. This explanation, the less likely than the others.

Admittedly, the present only these 2 series of reppec” poses a difficult prob that it was employed in the. However, various other ex and I would not particular only be regarded as a pos survival of the cross-in-cir slightly strengthen the cl devices were concurrently system).

Whether the looped cord survived until contact, the carried as on a journey ce at this time—as is evident Sahagun. Three of these orthography) are:

Fig. 6. Traveling cargadores bearing loads with tumplines. From various pictorials; a: *Codex Mendoza*, fol. 63v; b: *Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, fol. 41v; c: *Codice Azcatlan*, Pl. XXII; d: *Codex Fejervary-Mayer*, p. 31.

which also display the knotted cord devices [Fig. 14]). Another possible interpretation of this devices is that it represents the *mecatl* element in a place-glyph, perhaps for Mecatlan, “Place of the Cord,” an important Totonac town in the eastern Sierra de Puebla region (see Kelly and Palerm 1952: 253, Map 1). This community or a homonym may be represented on the *Lienzo de Metlaltoyuca*—by a knotted cord (but configurated
The "Looped Cord" Year Symbol

Náhuatl

Torical year signs in square
knotted cord symbol. Also,
closely related Lienzo
"turquoise") serves as
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loads with tumplines.

Mendoza, fol. 63v; b:
Mayer, p. 31.

ives [Fig. 14]). Another
is that it represents the
aps for Mecatlan, "Place
own in the eastern Sierra
152: 253, Map 1).
y be represented on the
cord (but configurated
differently) on the usual stylized hill (Guzman [1939: 6] sugges
ted either a reading of "Mecaticpac" or "Cuatzontepec" for
this place-glyph (it is quite similar to the place-glyph for Cuau
tzontepec in the Matricula de Tributos (p. 22) and the Codex
Mendoza (fol. 44r)). Conceivably, then, the knotted cord device
 serving as place-glyph for Mecatlan or a similarly named com
munity was placed near each of these year symbols because of
some association of these dates with this community (however,
a number of clear-cut place-glyphs are depicted in this pictorial,
and none of them appear to be that of Mecatlan).

Finally, a third possibility is that this knotted cord stands for
the well-known symbol for the "binding of the years," the xihub
moltli, for a knotted cord was often used to designate the year
the "New Fire Ceremony" (toxiuhmolpilia) was celebrated, at the
expiration of one 52 year cycle and the beginning of another
(Caso, 1927: 11-12; Nicholson, 1959: 402-407). However, in
late pre-Hispanic times in the Valley of Mexico and areas stron
gly under its influence this year, of course was 2. Acatl; here
this knotted cord device is associated with the years 5. Tepcatl
and 13. Tepcatl. Even if the New Fire Ceremony was celebrated
in a Tepcatl rather than an Acatl year in this area, it would be
unprecedented for this event to have occurred in different Tepcatl
years. This explanation, therefore, would appear to be even less
likely than the others.

Admittedly, the presence of this knotted cord symbol with
only these 2 series of repeated dates in the "Papers of Izcuime
pec" poses a difficult problem of interpretation. It seems possible
that it was employed in these cases as an additional year symbol.
However, various other explanations are perhaps just as likely,
and I would not particularly urge this interpretation. It should
only be regarded as a possibility to be further explored (the
survival of the cross-in-circle year symbol in this region might
slightly strengthen the case for this interpretation since both
devices were concurrently employed in the Xochicalco glyphic
system).

Whether the looped cord year symbol as an iconographic device
survived until contact, the concept of periods of time as burdens
carried as on a journey certainly was extant in Central Mexico
at this time—as is evidenced by various passages collected by
Sahagun. Three of these (Nahuatl modified to a more current
orthography) are:
As has been demonstrated by both archaeological and linguistic evidence, the 4 of the 20 day signs which could serve as designations for the year were commonly conceived in various parts of western Mesoamerica to have been borne as burdens, often with the tumpline, in their passage through time. The tumpline, metapalli, would then have served as a logical and understandable symbol for these year bearers. No other explanation for the looped cord device would appear to be more satisfactory. Although I do not feel that it can be conclusively demonstrated, with available evidence that this identification is correct, enough evidence exists in its favor that it can be presented as a working hypothesis—perhaps to be definitely proved or disproved when more data become available.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank the Museo Nacional
NÁHUATL

Rabbit (year)
said (this was)
year sign, the year
ten (of the) South
tries it
it rises
its office

i.e., were put down
their office

then One Rabbit (year)
up
sign of the South
(a (this occurred)
it rises
its office

the Wind [day])...

archaeological and linguistic
signs which could serve as
monly conceived in various
have been borne as burdens,
passage through time. The
have served as a logical and
bearers. No other explana-
would appear to be more
that it can be conclusively
that this identification is
favor that it can be prese-
to be definitely proved
available.

I thank the Museo Nacional
Fig. 8. Date 3. House with looped cord year symbol (plus upper portion of a second glyph [probably "Reptile's Eye"]). Monument in Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico. Photo Nicholson.

Fig. 9. Twelve Wind carrying house on back with tumpline. *Codex Zouche-Nuttall*, p. 19.

Fig. 11. Stela, Piedra Labrada, Guerrero. After Piña Chan.
Fig. 10. Relief carving reportedly from northern Veracruz. After Medioni and Pinto.

Fig. 11. Stela, Piedra Labrada, Guerrero. After Piña Chan.
Fig. 12. Carved monument, reportedly from Mexico City area, Los Angeles County Museum. Photo Nicholson.

Fig. 13. Other side of monument of Fig. 12 ("man-bird-serpent").

Fig. 14. Fragment of "Papers of N [illegible]."
Fig. 12. Fragment of "Itzcuaintepetl" (Egerton 2:97 [4], British Museum).

Fig. 14. Fragment of "Papers of Itzcuaintepetl" (Egerton 2:97 [4], British Museum).

Reportedly from Mexico City area. Los Angeles. Photo Nicholson.

Fragment of Fig. 12 ("man-bird-serpent").
Fig. 15. Fragment of "Popoca of Itzcuintzopec" (Egerton 2897 [2], British Museum).
de Antropologia, Mexico, for permission to publish Fig. 8, the Los Angeles County Museum for permission to publish Figs. 12 and 13, and the British Museum, London, for permission to publish Figs. 14 and 15. I would also like to express my thanks to Dr. William Bright, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Los Angeles, for aid in the translation of the Nahuatl passages from Sahagun.

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1951 "Aquatic symbols common to various centers of the classic period in Meso-America," The Civilizations of Ancient America: Selected Papers of the XXIXth International Congress of Americanists (Sol Tax, ed.), 31-36, Chicago, The University of Chicago, Press.

En un reciente trabajo han presentado una excelente обзор del parentesco náhuatl, tipo de estudio a base de recopilar las listas de terminología náhuatl en los principales textos, incluyendo las conclusiones está ampliando que han de servir en el futuro de la terminología náhuatl que me parecen de importancia.

Los primos

Varios trabajos anteriores del diccionario de Molinera para primo y prima era ixuixihli. La doctora Ramírez, en los primos son designados como indica la explicación:

... algunas veces vienen de "ucahu noteachcau, "lejano", o la

Para decir que se trata de "reyu, literalmente, "ambos". Los primos se añade a los ucapan, etcétera, de primera clase.

1 Rammow, p. 137-142.
2 Citado por Rammow, p.