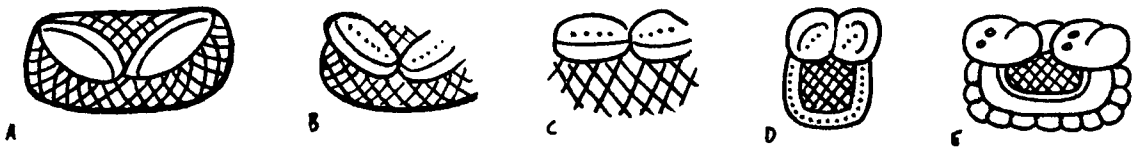


On the Graphic Origin of k'u

In his catalog of Maya hieroglyphs, Knorosov (1967) identifies the k'u sign (T604) as a representation of an "underground bird's nest." K'u is the widespread word for "nest" in the Yucatec and Cholan languages. This brief note cites three very early versions of the k'u syllable whose graphic clarity lends support to a nest identification.



The important text inscribed on the sculpture of a seated man recently unearthed at Tikal (Fahsen 1988) displays two early forms of the k'u glyph, illustrated here as (a) and (b). Another early k'u (c) occurs as part of a short text incised on a shell pendent of unknown provenance (Kerr No. 1874). A comparison of these three examples to later k'u variants (d, e) reveals the slight differences that arose during the graphic evolution of Maya writing in the Classic period. The more recent k'u forms show the distinctive pair of oval shapes above a cross-hatched space circumscribed by dots (the hatching is dropped in late Post-classic examples from the codices). As can be seen the dots are not a necessary feature in the earliest examples, and (a) displays the small ovals within the lower cross-hatched zone.

The evolution represented in the figure makes it clear that the k'u sign originated as a representation of a bird's nest. The darkened hatching represents the nest proper; the two oval shapes are, presumably, eggs placed within or atop the nest. This view differs somewhat from Knorosov's initial suggestion of an underground bird's nest.

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