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# Iconography of Sky Bands, Earth Bands, Skull & Crossed-Bones Bands in Classic Maya Art

Nicholas Hellmuth

Foundation for Latin American Anthropological Research (FLAAR)  
Grup d'Estudis Precolombins (GEP) del Institut d'Estudis Catalans (IEC)

## ABSTRACT

This presentation introduces Maya motifs that tend to be in horizontal bands. The most common horizontal band is the Sky Band. The other common horizontal band is the Surface of the Underwaterworld, associated with Xibalba, below the surface. There is also an Earth Band, made of Caban symbols—rare but present at Palenque. The Witz is usually a “stone mountain” and rarely a band, but deserves to be included and studied. Another set of bands was of skulls and crossed bones; there is an endless band of these at Uxmal and nearby Puuc site of Nohpat. There are other bands that should be mentioned but not space to show each iteration: twisted bands: twisted vines, twisted snakes, twisted ropes, plus lots of decorative bands.

**Keywords:** Maya, Sky Band, Underwaterworld, Xibalba, Earth Band, Caban, Uxmal, Nohpat, horizontal motifs

## RESUMEN

Esta presentación introduce motivos mayas que tienden a estar en bandas horizontales. La banda horizontal más común es la Sky Band. La otra banda horizontal común es la Superficie del Mundo Subacuático, asociada a Xibalbá, debajo de la superficie. También hay una Banda de la Tierra, hecha de símbolos de Caban, algo poco común pero presente en Palenque. The Witz suele ser una “montaña de piedra” y rara vez una banda, pero merece ser incluida y estudiada. Otro conjunto de bandas era de calaveras y huesos cruzados; hay un grupo interminable de estos en Uxmal y el cercano sitio Puuc de Nohpat. Hay otras bandas que deben mencionarse, pero no espacio para mostrar cada iteración: bandas retorcidas: enredaderas retorcidas, serpientes retorcidas, cuerdas retorcidas, además de muchas bandas decorativas.

**Palabras clave:** Maya, Banda del Cielo, Mundo Submarino, Xibalbá, Banda de la Tierra, Caban, Uxmal, Nohpat, motivos horizontales

This presentation introduces Maya motifs that tend to be in horizontal bands. Many of these bands are well known but there are other horizontal bands that are not as well documented.

The most common horizontal band is the Sky Band; this is of celestial motifs, often as many as a dozen different celestial symbols. Obviously the Sky Band is usually up above.

The other common horizontal band is the Surface of the Underwaterworld, associated with Xibalba, below the surface.

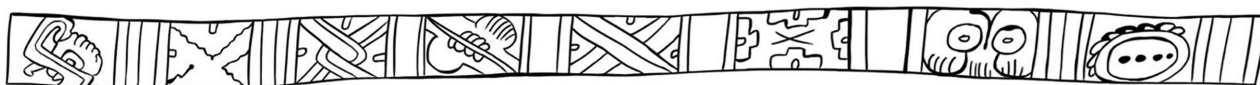
There is also an Earth Band, made of Caban symbols. This is rare but is present at Palenque in Pakal's tomb chamber.

The Witz is usually a "stone mountain" and rarely a band, but deserves to be included and studied. Witz is

usually a stone throne, obviously above the earth often as a band of Cauac Monsters.

Another set of bands that I found while doing research for this presentation was of skulls and crossed bones. There is an endless band of these at Uxmal and nearby Puuc site of Nohpat. The cosmological position and meaning of the skull and crossed bones bands are not as well known other than obvious skull rack associations, tzompantli, best known at Chichen Itza and the Aztec capital but also present at Copan, Honduras.

Due to the space limitations there are other bands that should be mentioned but not space to show each iteration: twisted bands: twisted vines, twisted snakes, twisted ropes. Plus lots of decorative bands (often with individual celestial motifs repeated continuously and not always "up in the sky").

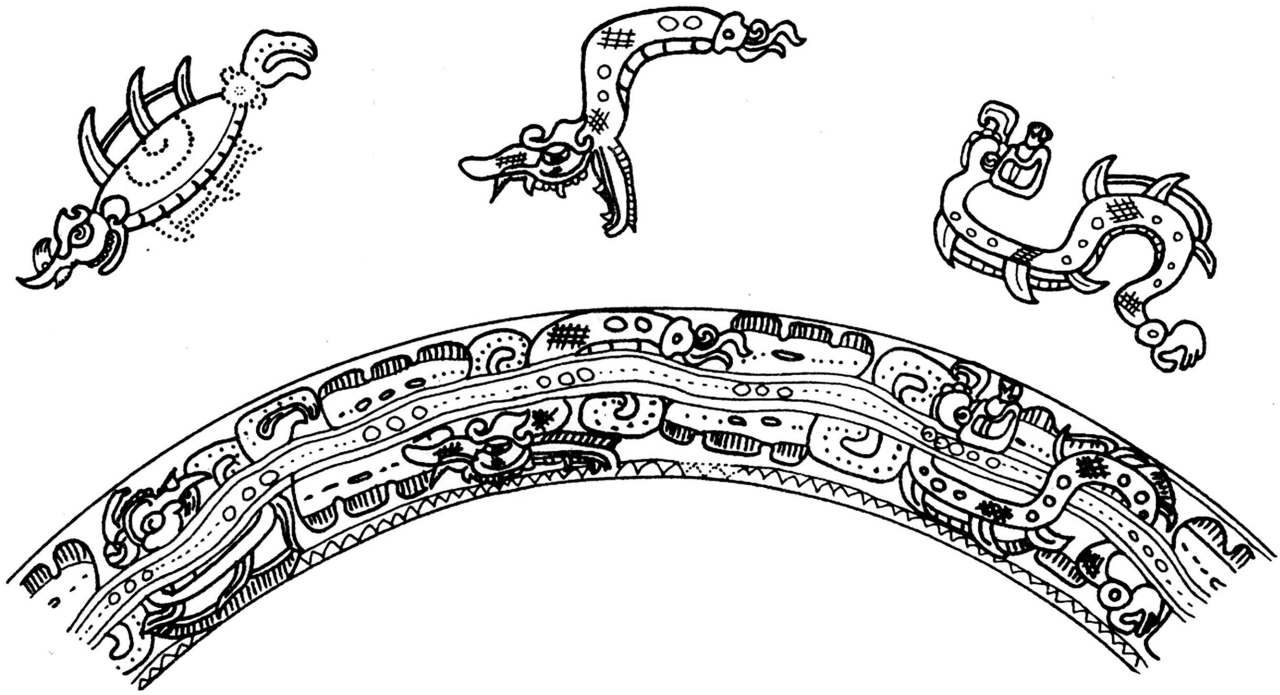


1 Celestial Bands. Drawing by Luis Molina, FLAAR Photo Archive.

### Sky Band

The Sky Band is known to most iconographers, archaeologists and has been published hundreds of times, including by archaeo-astronomers. The most obvious astronomical examples are at Chichen Itza, Uxmal, Sky Band Bench front at Copan, Honduras, and in the murals of Bonampak, Chiapas, Mexico. There are multiple Sky Bands at Palenque, so most of these celestial motifs are well known. If you study the Sky Band motifs you should also study the obsidian and chert stelae cache material since celestial motifs in clusters are also featured in these cache artifacts; scorpions are the most eye-catching.

Although most Sky Bands are in horizontal bands, there are many that are stepped. Plus Sky Bands form stairways to celestial throne rooms. Sky Bands also form the roof, often on which perches the Principal Bird Deity. All of these scenes are available, many in the CMHI of the PMAE, Harvard University. Drawings by John Montgomery and Linda Schele show these scenes as well (some are on incised artifacts so not all are on monumental stone sculptures).



2 Surface of the Underwaterworld from Hellmuth 1987a and 1987b.

### The Surface of the Underwaterworld

The Surface of the Underwaterworld is a name by Hellmuth for the common supernatural waterworld. This shallow water band is home to God N, Lily Pad Head-dress Monster, Sea Anemone Headdress Monster and other reptilian and often water lily plant-associated demons. Occasionally the full-figure hieroglyphic Tun glyph (of the Maya Long Count) shares the Lily Pad Headdress (as also do some Uinal "Bufo Toads" when full-figure format in the Maya Long Count).

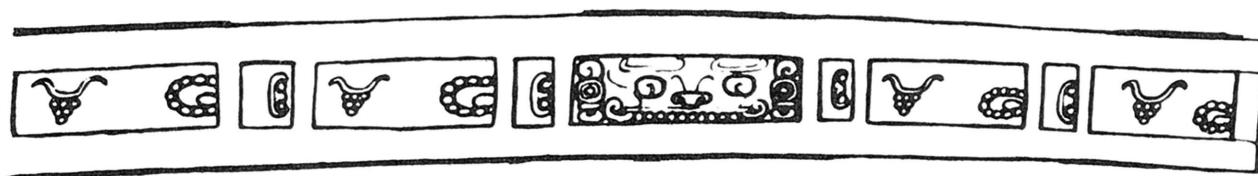
The Surface of the Underwaterworld is water that flows out of, or into caves but is also associated with brackish water (into the Amatique Bay and Caribbean Sea). An entire museum exhibit, *Fiery Pool: The Maya and the Mythic Sea* was organized by Finamore and Houston. This was their year 2010 updated expansion of the 1986 introduction in Hellmuth's PhD (published in English in 1987a and in German in 1987b). Although there are many regional and temporal variants of the Surface of the Underwaterworld, this set of bands (horizontal or undulating) is relatively well known.

### Caban Earth Band

Note that the Earth Band usually is below the ceremony taking place above.

- Moral Stela 1, drawing by R. Losardi.
- Earth Band, Moral Stela 2, drawing by A. Pavon.
- Moral Stela 3, front and both sides (back not well preserved so not shown here). There is no easy way to see details from a drawing in a database of the previous decades. When you enlarge the individual hieroglyphs the images get pixelated and all cross-hachure clumps together as almost solid black. But until the original drawings can be rescued, or an epigraphy/iconography project can redraw these sculptures, we still need to have them in our comparative illustrations. Drawing by A. Pavon.

Caban, Earth Band, with alternating Loincloth Apron Face; so seemingly the Loincloth Apron Face is generic at times, not just a major motif of the Sky Band. Palenque, Temple of the Sun, drawing by Linda Schele, SD-171. This Palenque band has been published in hundreds of books, articles and dissertations. But



3 Witz (Cauac) Stone Bands / Mountains.

rarely is it compared and contrasted with sky band, because a variant of the Profile/Half-frontal Loincloth Apron Face (typical of many Sky Bands) is here in an Earth Band.

Palenque, Temple of the Inscriptions, Pakal tomb, side of sarcophagus, drawing by Merle Greene Robertson. Drawings also in Ruz 1973: Fig. 196c. All four sides of the Pacak tomb saccophagus have the earth band across the bottom. Palenque, Temple of the Inscriptions, Chiapas, Mexico. The same scenes, drawn by Merle Greene Robertson have been published many times.

In many cases of Earth Bands, there is not space to have the entire spiral scroll squiggle downwards full height.

Once you know what to look for, you can find examples of the Caban scroll Earth Band “completely hidden” across the bottom of other vases scenes. Kerr rollout, K8622. The download from the new Dumbarton Oaks data base is about 100% better resolution than the decades-old FAMSI database (which despite low resolution assisted scholars for many decades). DO is now re-scanning the rollouts (which are on traditional medium format film, so not digital). The new scans should be available later into year 2024. This is a huge advance and raises the question, why is there no database of archaeologists’ line drawings and photographs of the previous century? Here is the entire scene; it definitely helps to have a few brain cells remaining in my 78-year old iconography-focused head that can notice such a delicate Earth Band.

### Witz Band

Witz Band now has been recognized as a band and an initial inventory is presented. These same symbols are a feature of the “stone faced” Cauac Monster.

### Muyal, Cloud Band, Sideways-S Band

Sideways-S motifs are common as clouds in Olmec art. In Classic Maya art Sideways-S Muyal motifs are occasionally in horizontal bands. But the Muyal cloud sign is often individual as a hieroglyph and usually as a motif. Only occasionally is it an actual hieroglyph. The best (and largest) example of a horizontal Cloud Band is a Cosmic Monster over the doorway of Copan Temple 22, held up by Pauhtuns at each side.

S lying down or lazy-S are terms suggested by Alejandro J. Garay Herrera, <https://www.mexicolore.co.uk/maya/teachers/resource-maya-glyphs-directory-1>

I nickname it a Sideways-S (and Band when several are in a row).

Most discussions of the Muyal glyph mention it is in Olmec inscriptions. Pool 2007: Fig. 4.6b and others cite this. Also Prudence Rice: In Search of Middle Preclassic Lowland Maya Ideologies, Mar 2021, *Journal of Archaeological Research* 29(1).

The example most commonly pictured is by John Montgomery from his 2002 *Dictionary of Maya Glyphs*. The best example of Sideways-S as a horizontal band is across the top of Kerr rollout K7459. Another horizontal band, as top of a throne, is in Kerr rollout, K3007.





4 Skull and Bones Band (at Uxmal), drawings by Ian Graham, CMHI, PMAE.

### Skull and Crossed Bones Band

The skulls are obvious; the crossed bones are obvious, but there are other motifs, like abbreviated disembodied eyes. As a long band, these symbols are 90% in the Puuc area, at Uxmal and nearby. A few variants can be found on Classic Maya vases. What needs to be done is to inventory the motifs other than just the skulls and criss-crossed bones. These motifs deserve a BA thesis or MA thesis to find more examples. But what I do is to show the features and mention that needs further research. The Skull Band is very different than a Skull Rack (though they obviously both focus on skulls). Skull Racks, Tzompantli, are best known at Chichen Itza and Tenochitlan. Tzompantli, sky racks, are also present but not often recognized or mentioned at Copan.

### Twisted Entwined Motifs

Most are horizontal, some are vertical or diagonal. There are three common focuses:

- Twisted vines
- Twisted snakes
- Twisted ropes

Plus eccentric entwined motifs issuing from the back end of bizarre composite animals.

### Decorative Bands

"Bands" are found especially on vases, bowls, and plates with repeated decorations. Would help to catalog, study, and find multiple examples of the same sequence of motifs.

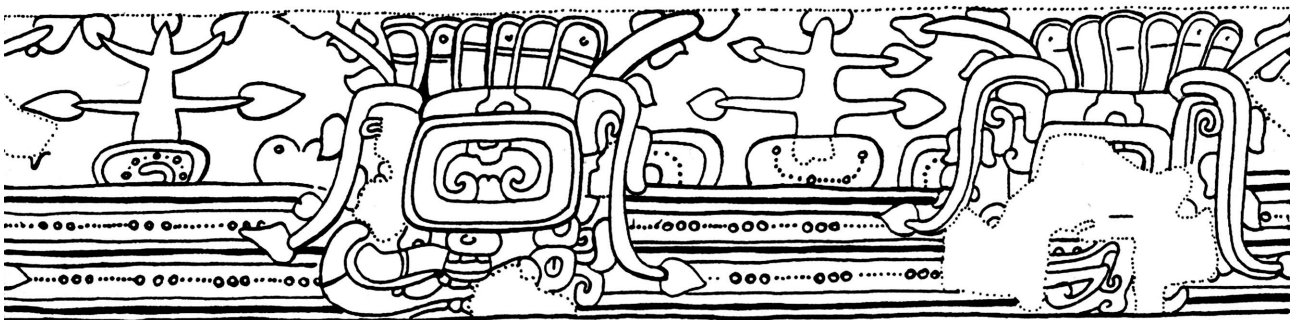
Both these bowls are in the Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquin, digital rollout with Dicomed or Better Light scan-back on 4x5" studio camera using Rodenstock or Schneider lenses.

"Decorative" to us today, but symbolic and meaningful to the Classic Maya over a thousand years ago. Most triangles are a play on the pattern of snake scales, but if you gathered together 100% of all bands of triangular motifs surely you would find more meaning than just venomous snakes.

Digital rollout by Nicholas Hellmuth, FLAAR Photo Archive, from bowl in the Museo Popol Vuh, Universidad Francisco Marroquin.

We are preparing a separate future lecture presentation on "Decorative Vases, Bowls and Plates in Classic Maya Art."

When the triangles have a row of black spots they are more like snake scale patterns. The other band (above and below the snake-triangle motifs) is not yet well defined. Codex Style exterior PSS; photo by Nicholas Hellmuth.



5 The Surface of the Underwater World is a band that I presented in Hellmuth 1986 doctoral thesis, published in 1987. This is the "band" that allowed me to recognize the Classic Mayan way of showing horizontal (or staggered or vertical) bands of motifs that were so frequent that they were clearly important.

Motifs with four segments are very common in Classic Maya art and elsewhere in Mesoamerica.

You could do a BA thesis on any one band and learn a lot (plus show your professor images they may not be familiar with).

You could do a MA thesis on Witz, Caban, related bands together.

You could do a PhD on all bands together (and find bands that I have not yet included in this lecture!).

### Summary and Conclusions on motifs in horizontal, vertical, diagonal or stepped bands

**Sky Band**, over a dozen or score of different celestial symbols

**Witz Band**, Cauac Grapes, Half Circle with Ring of Dots, Three Goggles with Scrolls

**Earth Band**, Squiggle-Shaped Caban Glyph

**Skull and Crossed Bones Band**, rare, best known from an example at Uxmal

**Surface of the Underwaterworld** (Band), very common (Hellmuth 1987a, 1987b)

### Twisted Bands

Twisted vines

Twisted snakes

Twisted ropes

### Decorative Bands:

Kan Band (relative of Sky Band)

Chevron Band

Feline spots Band

Stepped Fret Band

And lots more to be named and classified

Woven Horizontal bands of woven designs on textiles of queens and consorts bands, on hems of Maya clothing. These need more research.

And lots more additional different bands-of-Maya-motifs for you to find, name, research, and publish.

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