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Sky Band Iconography



Part I, Sky Bands on Maya Plates

FLAAR Reports
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Introduction

A Sky Band is a row of celestial motifs. A true Sky Band is normally more than just one motif. A true Sky Band has vertical lines (and often a vertical space) between each celestial motif.

On plates a Sky Band is circular, around the flat area or around the raised edge of the plate. On vases and bowls the Sky Band is horizontal around the upper part or around the middle or occasionally around the lower part. Sky Bands are often found on thrones or ceremonial bars.

On stone stelae, panels and murals, Sky Bands are on clothing, on accessories, on thrones, on architecture and in other parts of the scene. Lots of the monuments with Sky Bands are listed in Appendix 1 of Carlson and Landis 1985: 130ff.

Part I (a separate PDF) shows Sky Bands on Maya Plates. Part II shows Sky Bands on Maya vases and bowls. Part III shows Sky Bands in rollouts by Justin Kerr and by Nicholas Hellmuth. Part IV will show Sky Bands on stone sculptures and murals.

Our goal is to make more Sky Bands available to students, iconographers, and epigraphers, to encourage them to find even more (from provenanced vases, bowls and plates and from museums that we have not photographed).

The plates we show in Part I are from photography in museums and collections around the world. We cite plates that are in the Kerr archive plus any plate for which we have documentation available. But we no longer have a list of which plates we photographed in which museum in the previous century. We often photographed the plates in collections before they were donated to a museum. For plates on the Internet, we cite what museum if the Internet lists that information.

So far, the most complete classification of the motifs of Sky Bands is by Carlson and Landis (1985, Appendix II). Today, with 39 more years of resources (Kerr archive and FLAAR Photo Archive) we can add several more motifs, plus suggest a name for #2 "Sun Deity" which is a profile/half-frontal version of the Loincloth Apron Face.

Most in-depth reports on the Sky Band are from 1980's-1990's (or before). Christopher Layser has a helpful 2018 MS thesis on one Maya vase that includes a Sky Band.



Fig. 1. One fragment is still missing (left of the face). The Sky Band and the ring of conjoined Kan-like crosses are also found on the plate in the following drawing. The black divided step motif is common on Maya plates but I have not yet found this in any previous inventory of celestial motifs of the Sky Band.

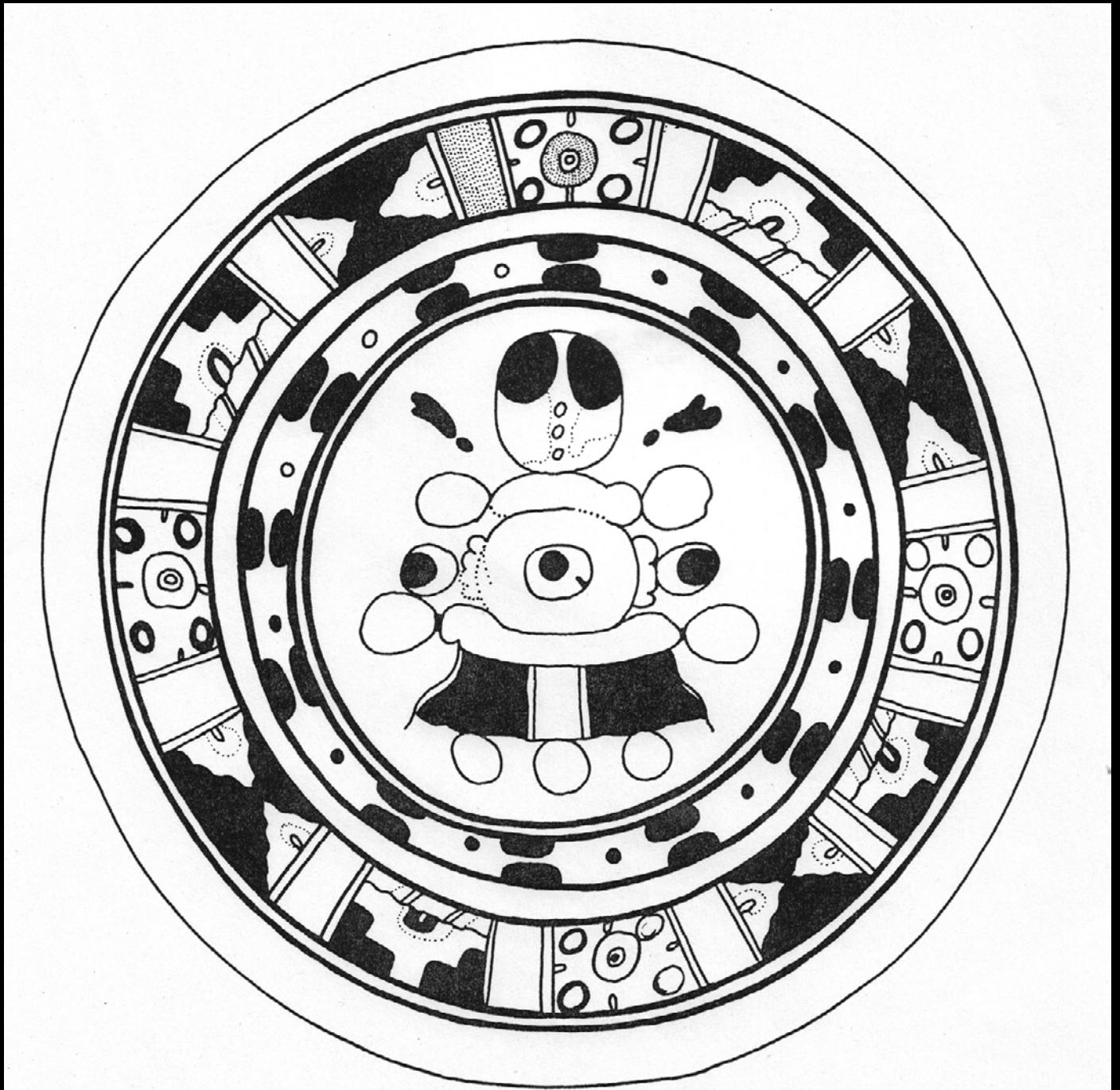


Fig. 2. This plate is perhaps by the same atelier as the previous plate (due to the similarity of both circles of motifs around the center). The black divided step motif is common on Maya plates but I have not yet found this in any previous inventory of celestial motifs of the Sky Band. There are four on this plate, near the variant of the Etz'nab' triangular motif. Drawing by FLAAR illustrators.



Fig. 3. The black divided step motif.



Fig. 4. The black divided step motif.



Fig. 5. The black divided step motif.



Fig. 6. The black divided step motif.



Fig. 7. Potential Etz'nab'.



Fig. 8. Potential Etz'nab'.



Fig. 9. Potential Etz'nab'.



Fig. 10. Possibly a Late Classic variant of Carlson and Landis's "Codex" Kin (1985: Appendix II, #1).



Fig. 11. A regional stylistic variant.



Fig. 12. A regional stylistic variant.



Fig. 13. The double-row of two circles motif at 9 o'clock and three other locations is, so far, not any catalog of Sky Band Motifs. Two circles yes, but not two rows of them. Drawing by FLAAR illustrators.

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Fig. 14. Profile/half-frontal Loincloth Apron Face is at the lower right (and not repeated). The oval motif at the left is not often found and is not in any motif catalogs that I have found so far. The steps-on-four-sides is either a variant of another motif or a new one not yet listed; you can also see this motif in Fig. 32 and Fig. 54. Two examples are also on the Sky Band of Fig. 57.



Fig. 15. Etz'nab, crossed bands, potential variant of Kan Cross, and probable Akbal symbol.
Drawing by FLAAR illustrator.



Fig. 16. The black divided step motif is featured five times, alternating with probable Etz'nab' motif.

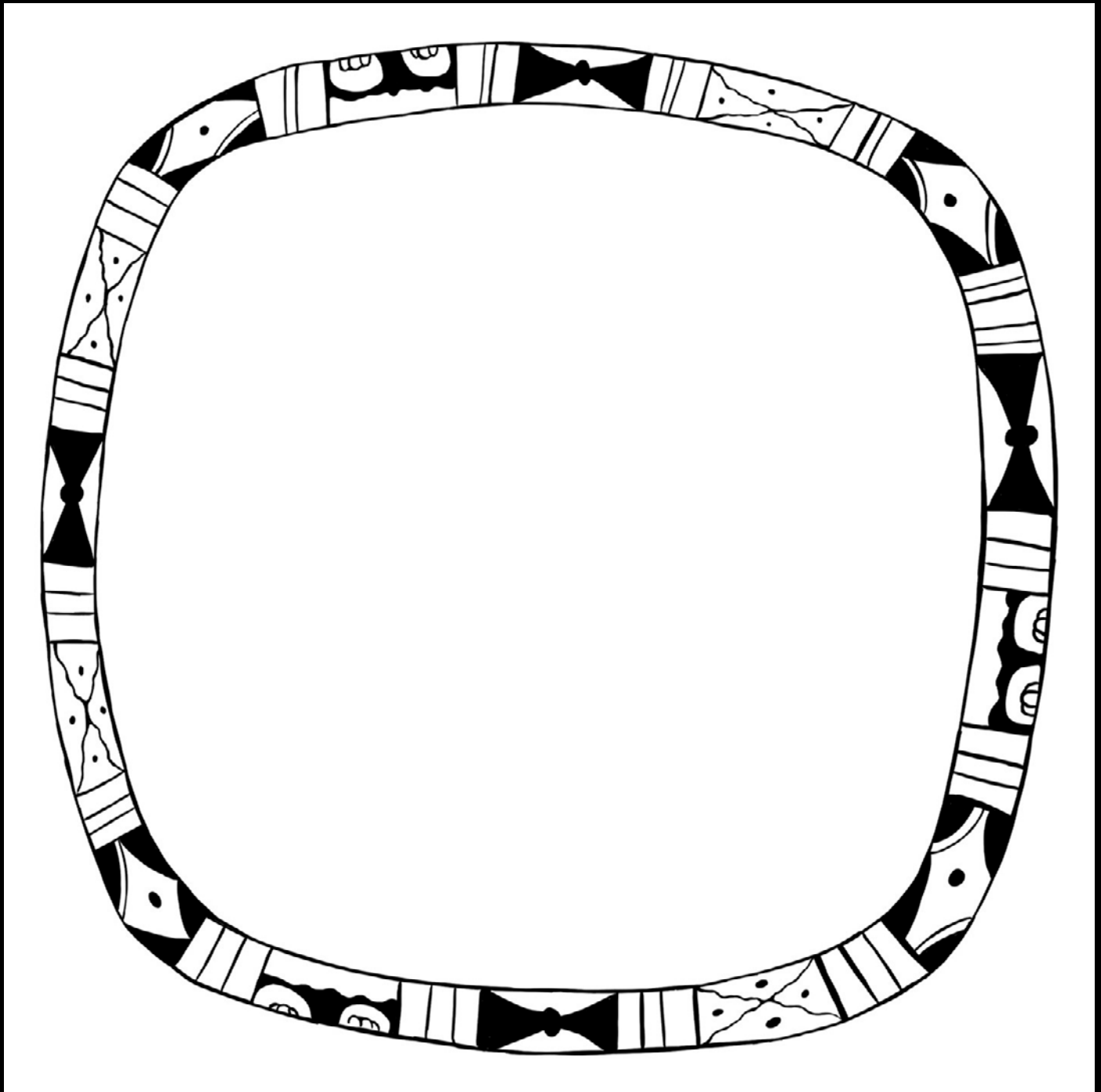


Fig. 17. Sky Band from Dos Pilas rounded-square plate, published by Houston. Drawing by Luis Molina, FLAAR. If the open (non-blackened) Etz'nab' is present, then the black triangles touching each other have to be re-named. The other black-cornered motif is rare and is not in previous catalogs.

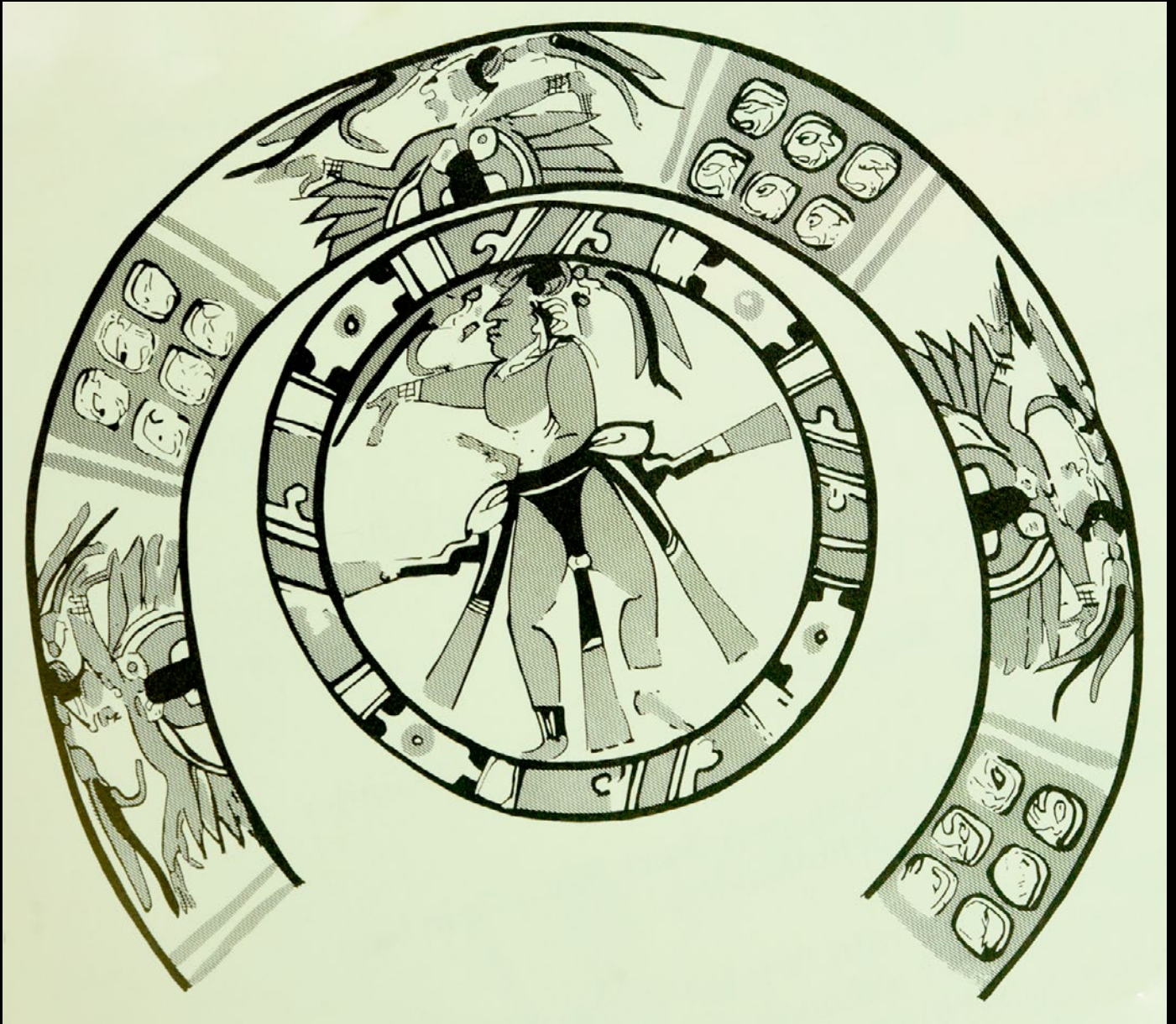


Fig. 18. Tikal Burial 147, Culbert 1993: Fig. 78a.

Kan Cross alternates with a diagonal motif that is not in other catalogs unless this is a Tikal variant of "beard and scrolls" (Carlson and Landis 1985: #13) but that has no "beard."

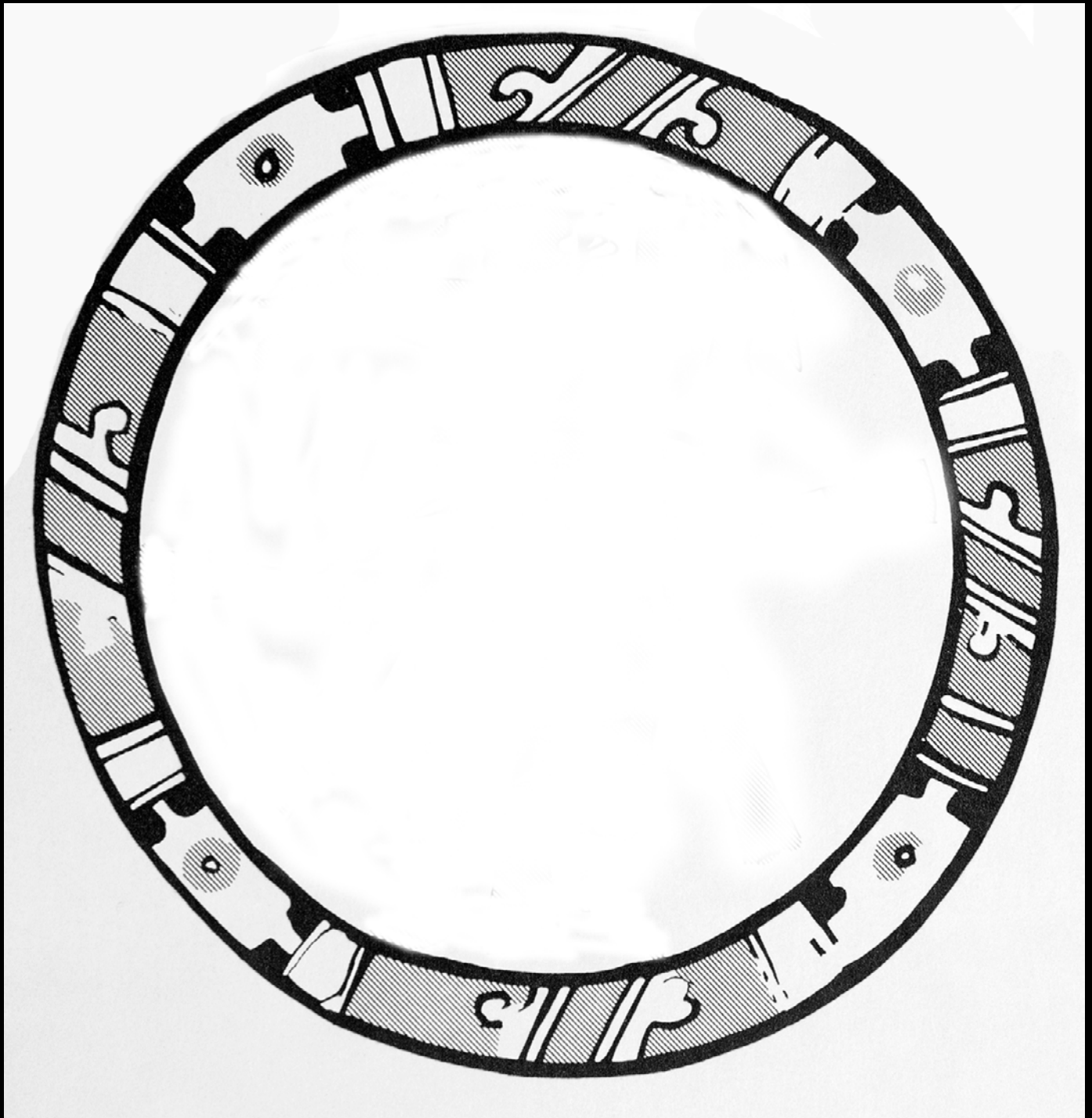


Fig. 19. The diagonal motif needs further study to find it elsewhere.



Fig. 20. This is a FLAAR drawing by Barbara Van Heusen that Kerr put in his rollout catalog as K3072. Since there are no vertical divider panels and no rectangular frame, I would not list this as a traditional Sky Band, but the stepped-fret and the oval can be found elsewhere.



Fig. 21. Motifs of the Sky Band can be found throughout Mexico, far from Maya sources. This is a plate in the museum of Cholula, drawing by FLAAR illustrator Luis Molina.



Fig. 22. More diagonal motifs but this one looks more similar to a non-bearded variant of "Beard and Scrolls" (Carlson and Landis 1984: #13). Possible Venus/Lamat symbol at the top. Two other motifs in this plate are also eccentric variants of other motifs. Fundacion La Ruta Maya, on exhibit at Hotel Hyatt Centric, Guatemala City. Drawing by Luis Molina, FLAAR.

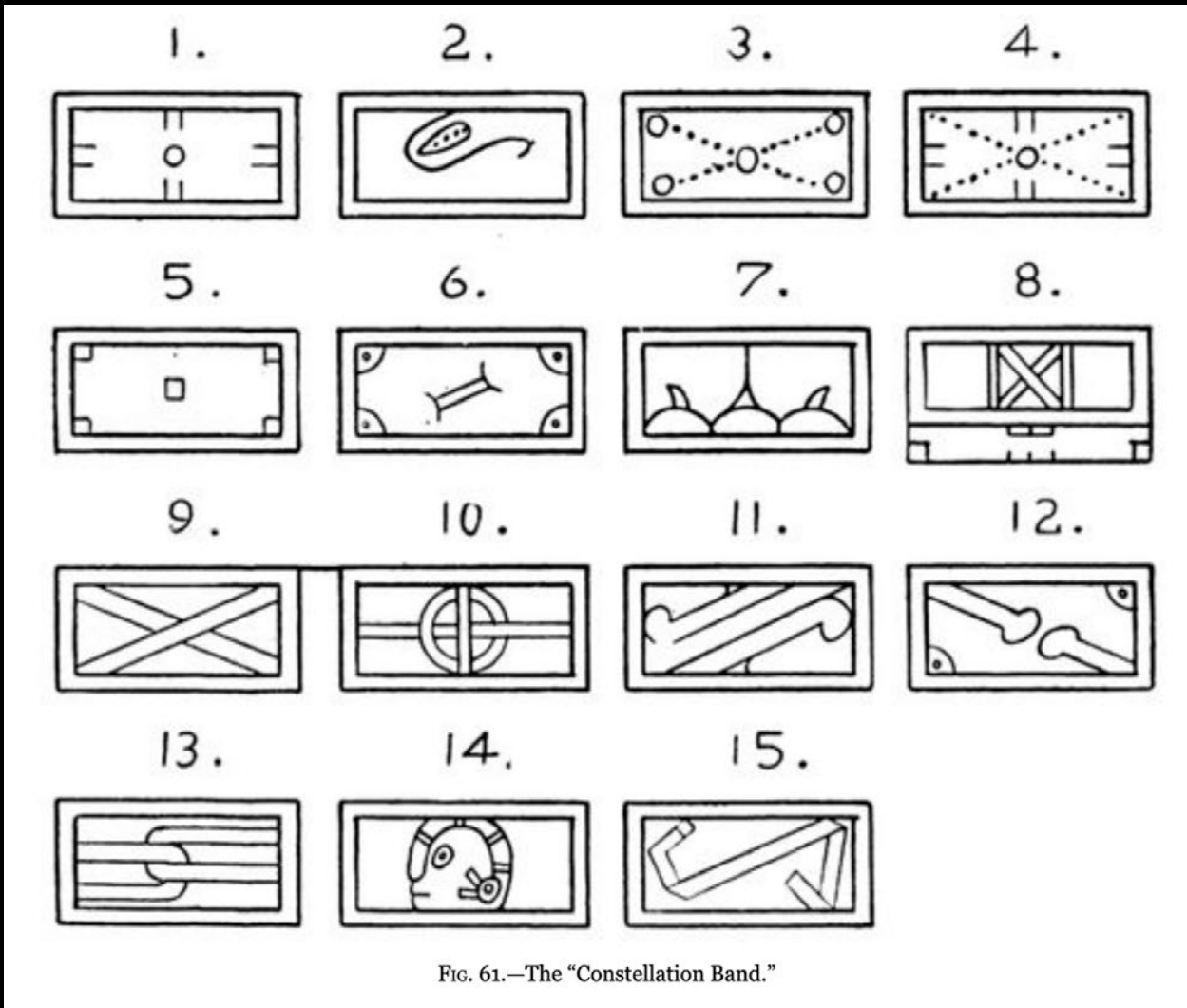


FIG. 61.—The "Constellation Band."

Fig. 23. There are several more common motifs not yet known to Brinton (Fig. 61). Plus the motifs in rows on Pabellon Molded-Carved pottery are Tepeu 3 in date and very eccentric.

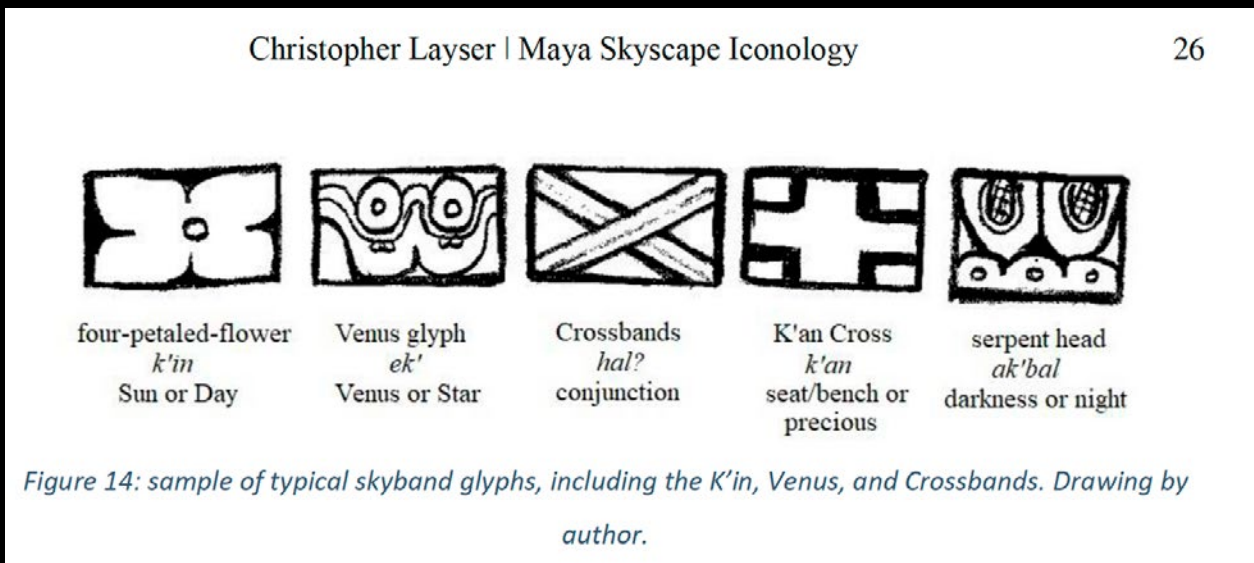


Fig. 24. This and the following motifs are from Layser.

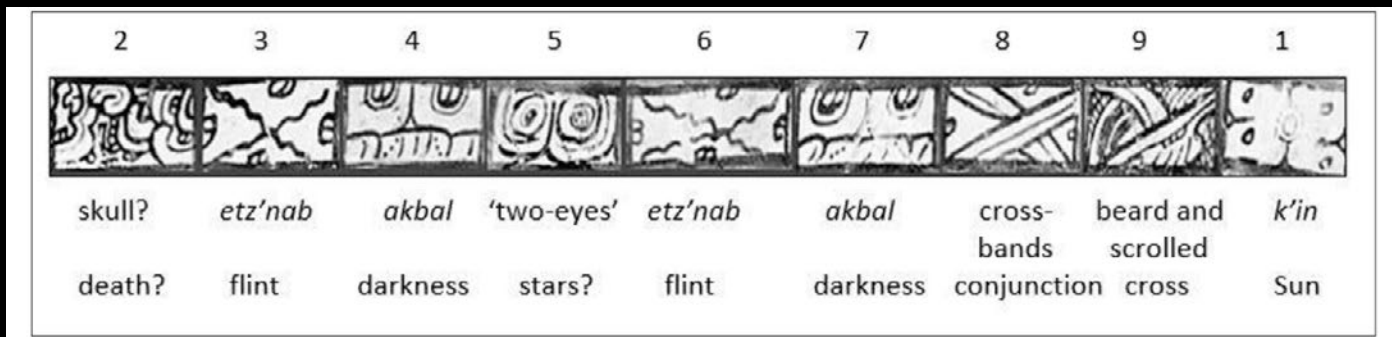


Figure 16: Compressed version of the glyphs depicted on the Skyband of the Vase of Days.

Fig. 25. A key additional motif is the profile/half-frontal Loincloth Apron Face, which is common at Palenque in sculpture. That is motif 2 in the above row (not yet recognized as a Loincloth Apron Face in that caption). Drawing by Layser.



Fig. 26. At the left (9 o'clock) and across at the right (4 o'clock) are two of the same motif with Cauac-like grapes. The motif at the bottom is atypical. All the others are common: Kan Cross, Crossed Bands, Etz'nab. This plate is in Robicsek and Hales 1981: Vessel 166.



Fig. 27. Another example of an oval motif at upper left. Robicsek and Hales 1981: Vessel 167.



Fig. 28. Robicsek and Hales 1981: Vessel 174, by those authors from Sotheby Park Bernet, 1981. 4-petalled flower is potential Kin. Stepped-fret is worth noting, but neither of these symbols are in a rectangular frame—they are divided by a vertical line of spots. The same vertical spots are associated with step fret in Fig. 60 and Fig. 61, suggesting they may all be from the same atelier.



Vessels 154-156

Fig. 29. Robicsek and Hales 1981: Vessels 154, 155, and 156.
To study the Sky Band on Vessel 155, a better photo is needed, with better lighting on the top half.



Fig. 30. This is the first plate that we show that has a Zip Monster and a Serpent Skin Pattern. Has two other motifs not previously documented but needs an original photograph to show them (Robicsek and Hales 1981: Table 23, Vessel F). There are several other paintings by this atelier (with the PSS divided into segments).

A much better photo is in Fig. 50.



Fig. 31. Variant of a Sky Band (has vertical divider panels and rectangular frames, but crossed-bands is the only recognizable celestial motif). The # motif is not seen elsewhere so understandably not in motif catalogs. Has nice PSS around the plate.



Fig. 32. Sky Band in two segments (Robicsek and Hales 1981: Vessel 72). The motif in the top left segment is the same as in Fig. 14 and Fig. 54. Two examples are also on the Sky Band of Fig. 57. The plate is shown in color in the Kerr archive (next photo).



Fig. 33. Kerr K5824.



Fig. 34. There are two black divided step motifs, with a vertical column of dots in the middle. Three Kin signs of 4-petalled flowers; two potential Etz'nab' motifs but these with black triangles may be another motif if not a black variant. There are two crossed-bands atop two circles (not shown in catalogs). At 8 o'clock is an oval with four-sided black areas; I have not seen this in catalogs so far.



Fig. 35. There are four black divided step motifs.

There are four black-white triangles that are either a black variant of Etz'nab' or something else. The motif at the top, bottom, and both sides is similar to others on other plates. I estimate this is a possible variant of a Kin symbol, but I am open to other suggestions.



Fig. 36. Drawing by Luis Molina, FLAAR. Photos of the Sky Band symbols are on the following pages.



Fig. 37. The motif with two half-ovals is not in any motif list that I have seen so far.



Fig. 38. The motif with two half-ovals is not in any motif list that I have seen so far.



Fig. 39. On the following pages I show macro close-up photos of each motif.



Fig. 40. Potentially a variant of "Beard and Scrolls" (Carlson and Landis 1985: #13).



Fig. 41. Is this a simplified Kin within an oval frame?



Fig. 42. Three examples of this motif; I have not yet found it in any list.



Fig. 43. Motif that needs to be found elsewhere and identified.



Fig. 44. Another version of this motif that needs to be found elsewhere and identified.



Fig. 45. Oval with three spots inside. Since it is a complete oval, I do not "see it" as a moon crescent, though lunar symbols, crescent form, do have a row of three circles (Carlson and Landis 1985: #4).



Fig. 46. There are several diagonal motifs in other Sky Bands but this is an undocumented variant.



Fig. 47. Traditional crossed bands are very common in lots of Sky Bands.



Fig. 48. Traditional crossed bands.



Fig. 49. Serpent skin pattern motif at the left. Zip Monster at the right.
In between is a potential bearded sky motif.



Fig. 50. The crowded motif at 2 o'clock and 8 o'clock are not documented. The motif at 10 o'clock is a possible bearded sky variant. The same plate is shown in Fig. 30, published by Robicsek and Hales (1981: Table 23, Vessel F).



Fig. 51. All traditional motifs, Kerr K7185.



Fig. 52. Cropped from Kerr K7185.



Fig. 53. The Etz'nab' motifs are easy to recognize. Several diagonal "beard and scroll" motifs. A Kan-like cross is next to a Venus/Lamat-like motif. The motif at 7 o'clock is not yet documented.



Fig. 54. Another Codex Style plate, but several of the motifs are different. There is an excellent profile/half-frontal Loincloth Apron Face at 4 o'clock and an oval motif at 8 o'clock. The steps-on-four-sides is either a variant of another motif or a new one not yet listed; you can also see this motif in Fig. 14 and Fig. 32. Two examples are also on the Sky Band of Fig. 57.



Fig. 55. The Sky Band rectangles occupy top and left of this plate. The crossed bands is the only motif that I recognize, plus perhaps the motif at 9 o'clock. The motif with horizontal row of spots is not documented, nor are other motifs on this plate.



Fig. 56. This is more likely a bowl rather than a plate, but it's Codex Style so is nice to show with so many Codex Style plates. The large oval is still not documented. The crossed bands has tiny designs on all four corners.



Fig. 57. Has several shapes of crossed bands, Etz'nab' triangles, and the undocumented oval motif. Atypical is the "chain link" at lower right which Carlson and Landis put as "Woven" Form of Crossed Bands (1985: #11). The steps-on-four-sides is either a variant of another motif or a new one not yet listed; you can also see this motif in Fig. 14, Fig. 32 and Fig. 54. Two examples are also on the Sky Band here on Fig. 57 (at left and right).



Fig. 59. This Sky Band has wide Kan Cross shape with two circles in the center. Whether this is a new motif or variant on the Kan Cross has yet to be decided. Kerr photo, K5603.



Fig. 60. Step fret and oval are not in rectangular frames—they are divided by a vertical row of dots. Same spots and same step frets on Fig. 28 and Fig. 61.



Fig. 61. The triangle with black dots is not a common Sky Band motif. The Etz'nab'-like triangles has a vertical Sky Band divider on both sides but all the other motifs have a vertical row of spots as dividers. Same spots as dividers are on Fig. 28 and Fig. 60. But the present plate has no step-fret.



Fig. 62. The Etz'nab'-like triangles have the same designs in the non-black part as on the plate of Fig. 61. The shape of the Kin 4-petalled flower is also similar. This plate has the same upside-down steps as other plates. But what is different is the oval "sperm" motif and the three motifs that have stacks of horizontal areas alternating black-red-black. A question would be whether this plate is Codex Style or a regional variant (with red in some motifs and not just around the rim).



Fig. 63. A profile/half-frontal Loincloth Apron Face is the bottom motif of this short Sky Band. I am not entirely convinced that the motif in the center is a Zip Monster because there is no recurved snout reptilian face.



Fig. 64. "Two eyes" symbol (Carlson and Landis 1985: #6) has Sky Band dividers between each motif.



Fig. 65. We have not yet found a photo of the entire plate but we show the motifs and vertical separation area that suggests a possible Sky Band (though the motif here is not yet well documented for traditional Sky Bands).



Fig. 66. The center of the plate may have had a wide frontal Year Sign.



Fig. 67. Another example.



Fig. 68. Another example.

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Fig. 69. This motif is very common. Whether or not it is a variant of a Kin sign needs to be studied further.



Fig. 70. Another example.



Fig. 71. Another example.



Fig. 72. This is another plate where we have not yet found the entire ceramic. But we show the macro photos of the probable K'in sign (4-petaled flower).



Fig. 73. Due to lack of space the ends of each of the four petals is cut off.



Fig. 74. Another example.



Fig. 75. Another example.



Fig. 76. The motif at the top and bottom is framed in a Sky Hand style vertical divider. These crossed-V-bands are different than the basic crossed bands.

Discovery of undocumented Sky Band Motifs

So far I have noticed 18 motifs associated with Sky Bands that are not yet in other catalogs of Sky Band motifs. This is almost a 100% increase (so far just from plates; I have yet to peruse vases, bowls, and sculptures). Surely a student researching to write a PhD dissertation on Sky Bands can find more. And an iconographer or archaeo-astronomer can also find more.

Black divided step motif (Figures 1, 2, 3, 16, and others) is found on many plates but they may all be from one atelier or one region.

The double-row of two circles motif, Fig. 13.

Oval motif, Fig. 14, Fig. 27, Fig. 45, Fig. 54, Fig. 57, Fig. 60.

Steps-on-four-sides is either a variant of another motif or a new one not yet listed; you can see this motif in Fig. 14, Fig. 32 and Fig. 54. Two examples are also on the Sky Band of Fig. 57.

Sky Band from the rounded-square plate of Dos Pilas (Fig. 17) has two different motifs with black triangular aspects that are not yet in any list. This plate is on exhibit in MUNAE, Guatemala City.

Rounded-square plate of Dos Pilas has a second motif that is not yet named or defined (Fig. 17).

Need to discuss whether the step-fret (Fig. 20, Fig. 28, Fig. 60 and more) should be added to list of Sky Band motifs.

Undefined motif on the plate in Fig. 30.

motif in Fig. 31 is not yet found in other Sky Bands so understandably not in catalogs.

Oval with four-sided black areas, Fig. 34.

Motif with two half-ovals, Fig. 36 and following.

Unnamed motif, Figs. 42, 43, 44.

Fig. 53, the motif at 7 o'clock is not yet documented.

Fig. 55 has Sky Band motifs not yet noticed elsewhere and thus not in the helpful catalogs by other iconographers.

Triangle with black dots, Fig. 61.

Motifs that have stacks of horizontal areas alternating black-red-black, Fig. 62

"Sperm" motif, Fig. 62.

Unknown motif, Figs. 65, 66, 67, 68.

References cited and other suggested reading

CARLSON, John R. and Linda C. LANDIS

1985 Bands, Bicephalic Dragons, and other Beasts: The Skyband in Maya Art and Iconography. In *Fourth Palenque Round Table, 1980*, Merle Greene Robertson and Elizabeth P. Benson, editors, pages 115-140. The Palenque Round Table Series, Volume VI.

CARLSON, John R.

1988 Skyband Representations in Classic Maya Vase Painting, in *Maya Iconography*, ed. by Elizabeth P. Benson and Gillett G. Griffin, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp.227-293

CULBERT, T. Patrick

1993 The Ceramics of Tikal. Tikal Report 25A, University Museum, University of Pennsylvania.

HOUSTON, Stephen D.

1992 Historia y arqueología en Dos Pilas, Petén. In *V Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala, 1991* (edited by J. P. Laporte, H. Escobedo and S. Brady), pp.273-282. Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, Guatemala.

Figure 7 has a “rounded square” plate with a Sky Band.

LAYSER, Christopher

2018 Can an Iconological Analysis of a Classic Period Vase (K1485) Further our Understanding of Ancient Maya Skyscapes? MA Thesis in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology.

ROBICSEK, Francis and Donald HALES

1981 The Maya Book of the Dead: The Ceramic Codex. University of Virginia Art Museum.

This book on Coded Style pottery also shows other styles. Lots of plates, vases, and bowls have Sky Bands. I show samples of the plates here in Part I.