A Preliminary Drawing of the Inscription on An Early Classic Conch Shell Trumpet

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Introduction

In late 2005, Donald Hales kindly shared with me several photographs of an Early Classic inscribed conch shell (**Fig. 1**). The exact dimensions of the piece are unknown. Similar inscribed conch shell trumpets have been published in the past. For example, Coe (1982:120–123, no. 63) published an Early Classic example in the Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia 86.457, measuring 22.9 × 12.1 × 9.5 cm, which was also published later by Schele and Miller (1986:308–309, pl. 121).[1] See also Mora-Marín (2020) for a more detailed drawing of this text. The Chrysler example bears four drilled holes that serve as a musical scale. The present example bears five drilled holes, suggesting a similar function.

In 2009 and 2013, I prepared a drawing of the inscription, hoping to one day check such drawing against the original. It now seems unlikely that this will happen, so I have decided to publish the preliminary drawing of the inscription as is.

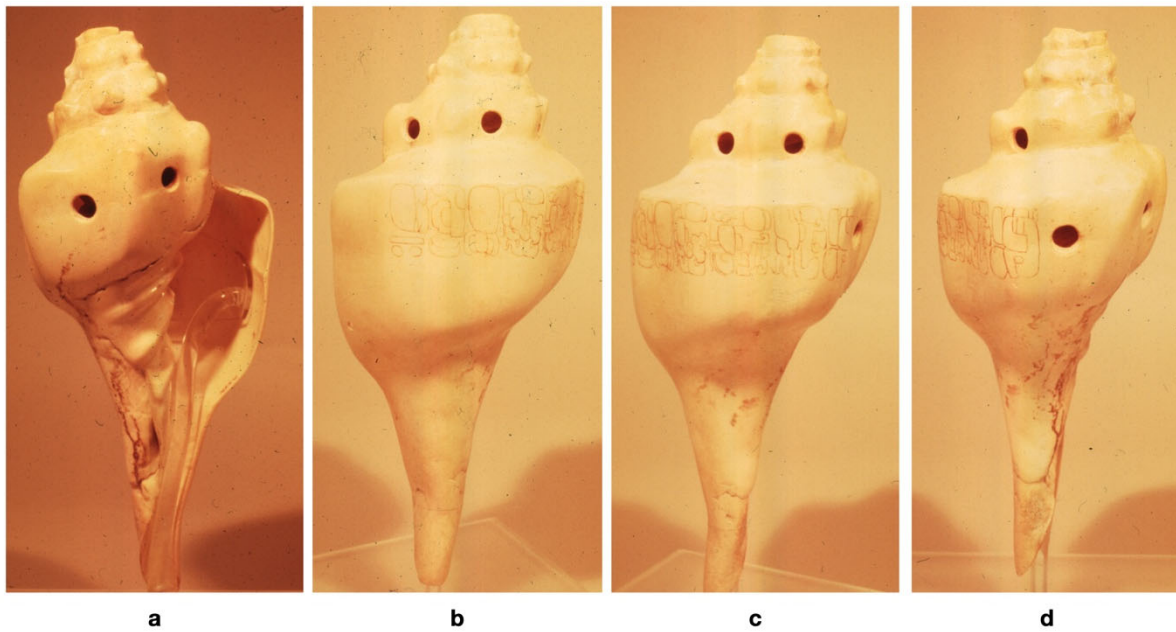[1] https://chrysler.emuseum.com/objects/27443/conchshell-trumpet. Accessed 11/8/2020.

Fig. 1. Color photos of unprovenienced conch shell trumpet. Photographs by Donald M. Hales. All Rights Reserved.
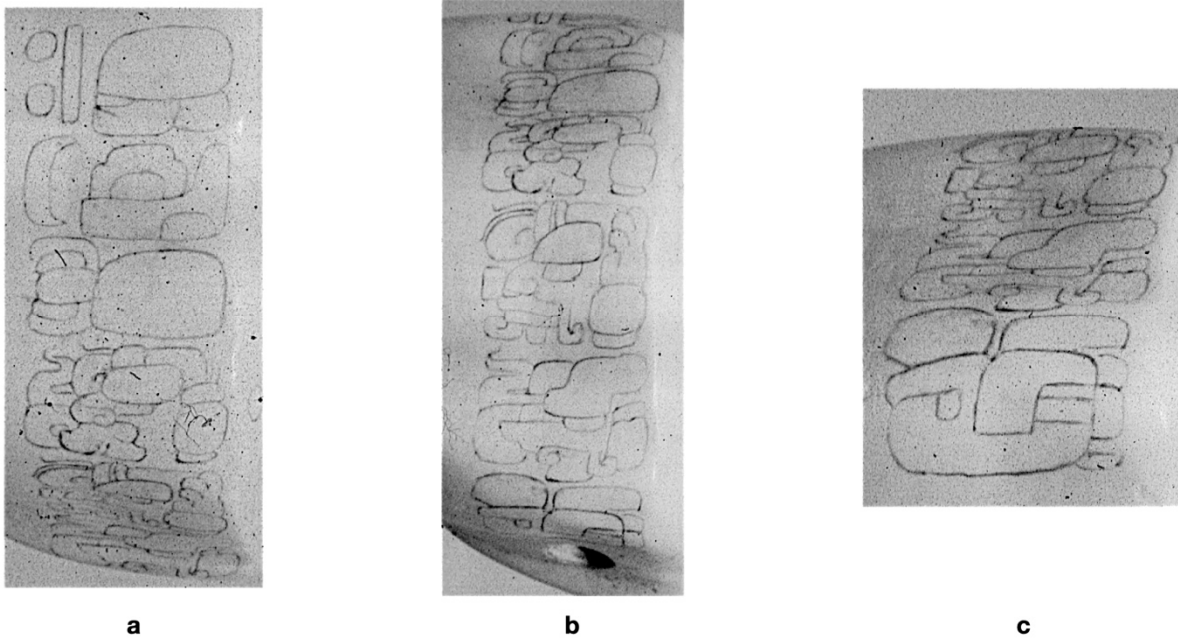

Fig. 2. Close-up images of inscription on incised conch shell trumpet. Photographs by Donald M. Hales. All Rights Reserved.

Drawing

The photos provided by Donald Hales were processed for enhancement, as shown in **Fig. 2,** in order to prepare a drawing of the inscription. Hales explained to me that the conch shell once bore stucco on the surface, but it has since been removed. It is possible that the inscription may have been clearer then, with painted-in details. Now, only incised details, mostly of the basic outlines of the glyphs, remain.

My preliminary drawing, a composite based on tracings of the glyphs from the various photographs available, is shown in **Fig. 3a**, and each glyph block is compared to the relevant, magnified sections of the photos. Some of the details can be better appreciated in photos not included in this report. The interested reader should contact me for more details.
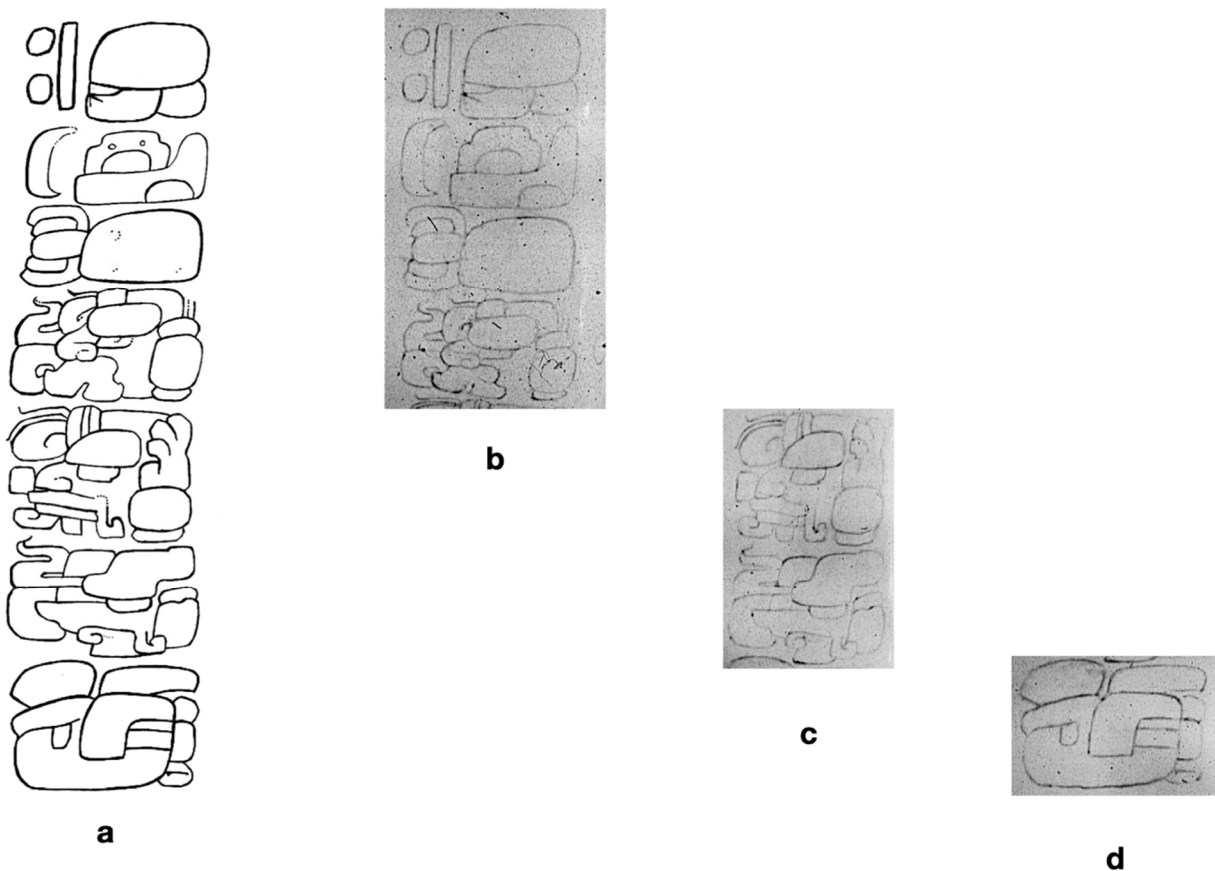

Fig. 3. Drawing of inscription by the present author compared with details of photographs by Donald M. Hales. All Rights Reserved.

Analysis

Figure 4 shows the text with each glyph block assigned a numerical label, and beside it a transcription, transliteration, and translation.

1		HUK-K'ANJALAB'-wa	huk[-te?]-k'analab'	seven[-classifier]-first.month
2		ʔu-CH'AM[AW]	u-ch'äm-aw-Ø	he grabs it
3		yu-ʔb'i	y-ub'(-il)	his conch shell trumpet
4		K'AK'-ʔhi-ʔSM4/SN7	K'ahk' (hi…) ʔhoplaj	fire-ʔburn(ing)
5		TEʔ	teʔ	wood/tree
6		K'AWIL	k'awil	*k'awil*
7		ʔyo-ʔAJAW	yo… ʔajaw	*Yo…* Lord

Fig. 4. Drawing of text with parallel transcription, transliteration, and translation.

The text opens at Glyph 1 with a date, specifically a month count, consisting of the numerical coefficient 'seven', followed by two signs, one of which is the syllabogram **wa**. Three months may exhibit the syllabogram **wa**: *k'anjalab'*, *ʔuniw*, and *kasew*. Given the composition of the spelling, consisting of two surviving signs for the month name, I regard the first two as more likely than the third, and the first as more likely than the second. The first, *k'anjalab'*, is typically spelled with the **K'AN** logogram graphically infixed within the likely **JAL** logogram, both in turn followed by **wa** (**Figs. 5a–b**). On a few occasions it appears simply as **[K'AN]JAL** with no **wa** (**Fig. 5c**). If enough damage were to affect the more typical spelling, it is possible that only the outlines of **JAL** and **wa** would remain, and that the infixed **K'AN** would be too difficult to recognize. Regarding the second option, *ʔuniw*, Early Classic examples typically show slightly pointed shape to the top part of the main sign (**Figs. 5d–f**), which the example in the conch shell trumpet lacks. Finally, *kasew* is most often spelled with **ka-se-wa**, with all three syllabograms, even during the Early Classic period. Abbreviations resulting in two syllabograms are attested, as **ka-se**, **se-wi**, or **se-wa**, the second of which does include **wa**, but all of these abbreviations are late, falling within the second half of the Late Classic, with the earliest-dated abbreviation, **ka-se**, attested on Yaxchilan Lintel 41, dating to 755 CE. The **wa** sign is not problematic with *k'anjalab'*, given that **wa** occurs in other contexts where a

b'V sign may occur instead (e.g. substitution of **b'u** for **wa** in spelling of *k'anjalab'*), or where /b'/ would be expected (e.g. **he-wa** to spell *-eb'* 'plural suffix of numerals'); for the scribes this was not an issue, but as far as I know, epigraphers do not yet have an explanation.
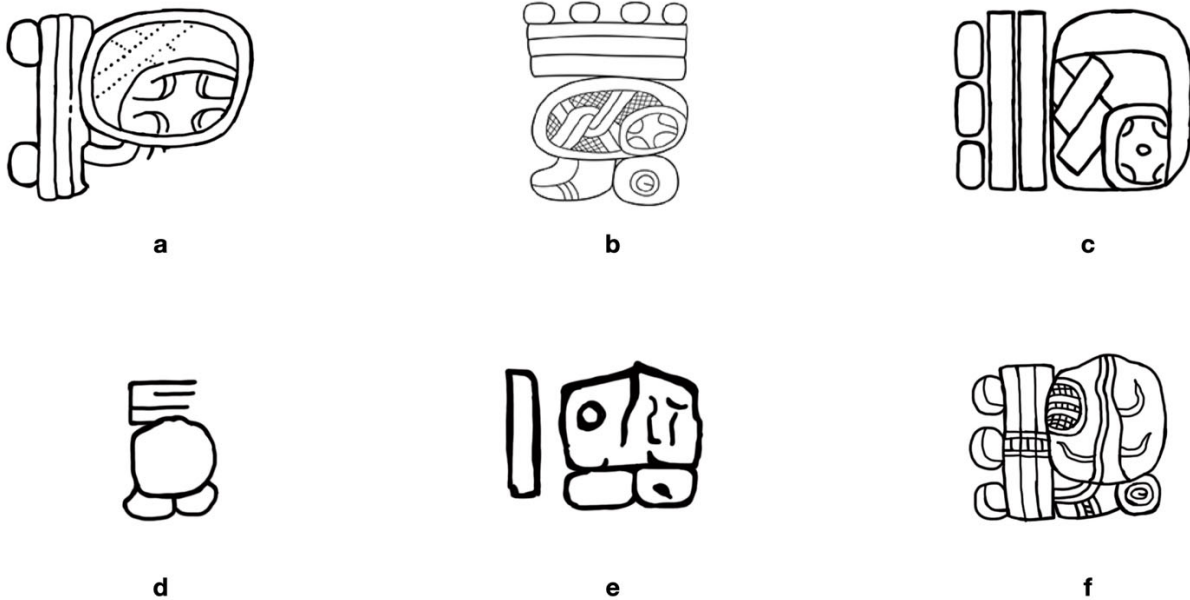
a   b   c

d   e   f

Fig. 5. Spellings of **[K'AN]JAL-wa** and **?UNIW-wa**. **a**. **HUKLAJUN-[K'AN]JAL-wa**, glyph block A6 on Tikal Stela 23 (MHD TIKSt23). Drawing by the author after drawing by William R. Coe in Jones and Satterthwaite (1982:50–51, fig. 36), **b**. **B'OLONLAJUN-[K'AN]JAL-wa**, glyph block K1 on Piedras Negras Panel 12 (MHD PNGPan12). Drawing by Dana Moot II used with permission, **c**. **?UXLAJUN-[K'AN]JAL-wa**, glyph block A10 on Naachtun Stela 1 (MHD NCTSt01). Drawing by the author after drawing by Sylvanus G. Morley in Morley (1937:334–337, pl. 40d), **d**. **LAJUN-?UNIW-wa**, blyph block C11 on Caracol Stela 15 (MHD CRCSt15). Drawing by the author after drawing by Carl Beetz in Beetz and Satterthwaite (1981:56–61, fig. 14b), **e**. **HO?-[?u]?UNIW-wa**, glyph block on Altun Ha jade plaque (MHD ALHRP2563). Drawing by the author after drawing by David Findlay in Pendergast (1982:56, fig. 55), **f**. **WAXAKLAJUN-[?u]?UNIW-wa**, glyph block A1 on Caracol Hieroglyphic Stairway (MHD CRCHS). Drawing by the author after drawing by Ian Graham in Graham (1978:107–110).

Glyph 2 is likely a spelling **?u-CH'AM** for the active transitive verb *u-ch'am-aw-Ø* (A3-grab-PLAIN-B3) 's/he grabs/grabbed it'.

Following the verb is the object, at Glyph 3: **yu-?b'i**, for *y-ub'*, 'his/her conch shell trumpet'. It is a possessed form of the noun *hub'* 'conch shell trumpet', spelled on three occasions (**Figs. 6a–c**) as **hu-b'i** in unpossessed contexts. The **yu-b'i** collocation occurs 15 times at least in the MHD (Looper and Macri 1991-2022), but almost all of these are examples in which the typical spelling **yu-k'i-b'i** for *y-uk'-ib'* 'his/her cup' has been abbreviated. The **yu-b'i** spelling on this shell may be the only example so far in which *hub'* appears possessed. If **yu-b'i** was meant to be read *y-ub'-il*, with consonant deletion of the final /l/, then the *-il* < *-iil* suffix would correspond to what Mora-Marín (2021) refers to as the dative possession suffix, which indicates that the grammatical possessor is in a dative role, typically recipient, i.e. the intended recipient of the trumpet in this case.
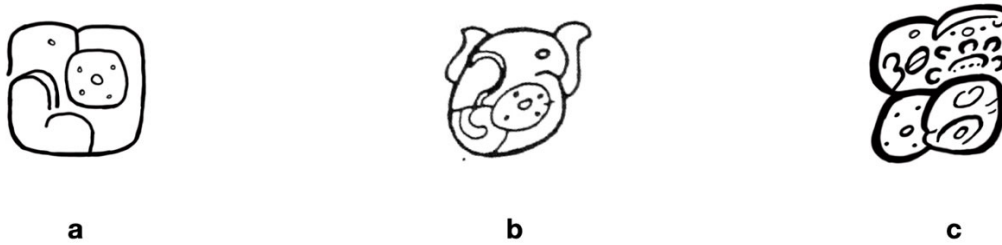
a   b   c

Fig. 6. Other examples of *hub'* 'conch shell trumpet'. **a**. **hu[b'i]**, glyph block pC on Aguateca inscribed shell fragment (MHD AGTSh647). Drawing by the author after drawing by Markus Eberl in Houston (2014:265, Fig. 13.7c), **b**. **hu[b'i]**, glyph block D1 on inscribed shell (MHD COLCLV550). Drawing by Linda Schele in Schele and Miller (1986:155, pl. 59, 59a) and drawing #7203 in The Linda Schele Drawings Collection (http://research.famsi.org/schele.html), **c**. **hu-b'i**, glyph block B3 on inscribed shell (MHD COLK8885). Drawing by the author after drawing by Nikolai Grube in Grube and Gaida (2006:Fig. 37.1).

The name of the (intended) owner of the shell trumpet follows in Glyphs 4-7. Glyph 4 consists of at least two signs, **K'AK'** for 'fire' and an anthropomorphic or deity head sign with a T60-like element (and thus possibly syllabographic **hi**) on the top, and what appears to be a handle-bar mustache on the bottom. There may be only one other occurrence of this sign, or at least one similar to it cataloged as SM4 in Looper et al. (2022), and as pointed out to the author by Matthew Looper (personal communication 8/2018), it appears on Yaxchilan Lintel 35:A7 (**Fig. 7a**), following the syllabic sequence **ch'o-la**. The same sequence, **ch'o-la**, appears as part of the spelling of an intransitivized or passivized verb on Tonina Monument 30:A4 as **ch'o-la-ja** (**Fig. 7b**), spelling *ch'o[h]l-aj-Ø-Ø*, though it is not clear what *ch'ol* or *ch'ohlaj* refers to. Kaufman with Justeson reconstruct pM *ch'ol* 'to peel' (2003:906), but it is not obvious to me how a *lakam=tuun* (subject of verb in Tonina Mon. 30 example) would be 'peeled'. The SM4-like sign in the Lintel 35 example would correspond, position-wise, to the T181/ZU1 **ja** sign in the Monument 30 example, but this could be nothing more than a simple coincidence. The Lintel 35 example is the only known example of SM4 so far, so there is simply nothing else that can be surmised about SM4 at the moment.

a   b

Fig. 7. SM4 preceded by ch'o-la and a separate example of ch'o-la sequence. a) **ch'o-la-**SM4, glyph block A7 on Yaxchilan Lintel 35 (MHD YAXLnt35). Drawing by the author after drawing by Ian Graham in Graham (1979:79). b) **ch'o-la-ja**, glyph block A4 on Tonina Monument 30 (MHD TNAMon030). Drawing by the author after drawing by Peter Mathews in Graham and Mathews (1996:77).

Alternatively, the anthropomorphic sign in question could correspond to SN7, an allogram with the **ho** value. Yuriy Polyukhovych (personal communication, 2022) has suggested that it could be meant to spell *hoplaj*, presumably an affective verb based on the root *hop* 'to burn, light, rekindle fire' (Zender 2010:10–11), and a common expression in certain names that may also involve *k'ahk'* 'fire' and *k'awil* (e.g. Copan Ruler 14, *K'ahk' Hoplaj Chan K'awil*).

Glyph 5 shows an anthropomorphic sign with a knot of hair, more elaborate than the T60-like component of Glyph 4, a sign in the mouth seemingly showing three components, and a CLAW or PAW sign topping the glyphic head's earflare. This makes it resemble, very closely, sign ST2, the logogram **TE?** for *te?* 'wood, tree', as observed by Matthew Looper (personal communication 8/2018). A few examples are provided that show the basic components of this sign in later texts (**Fig. 8**).

a   b   c

Fig. 8. Examples of ST2 **TE?**. **a**. **ya-?AJAW-TE?-wa**, glyph block I on Palenque North Facade Slab, Bodega 218 (MHD PALPNFS). Drawing from Schele and Mathews (1979:cat. 37), **b**. **ya-?AJAW-TE?**, glyph block P1 on Palenque Temple 21 Bench (MHD PALT21HB). Drawing by Dana Moot II, **c**. **TE?**, glyph block p66 on Edzna Hieroglyphic Stairway 1 (MHD EDZHS1). Drawing by the author after drawing by Guido Krempel in Mayer (2004).

Glyph 6 is the logogram **K'AWIL**.

Finally, Glyph 7 constitutes a partial Emblem Glyph: it obviates the **K'UHUL** 'divine/godly' component but bears a main sign and the title **?AJAW** 'lord, ruler'. The main sign is incomplete and ambiguous. Originally, I considered it possible that it could consist of an unusual version of the Tikal Emblem Glyph, but this is not very likely. Instead, it seems more likely that the main sign is the MZ8 **yo**, as first suggested to me by Albert Davletshin (personal communication, 6/2011), and later also by Matthew Looper (personal communication, 8/2018), as supported by a comparison with an instance of MZ8 on the Chrysler conch (**Fig. 9a**), and another instance on the Pomona Flare (**Fig. 9b**). Looper has further offered suggestions for several titles and Emblem Glyphs that utilize **yo**: *Yokib'* (Piedras Negras), *Pomoy*, *Yomotz/Yopmotz*, *Yokel* (Aguacatal/Huacutal), *Yomop*, *Yobe'*(?), *Yok Man*, *Yochin*. These are all Late Classic, which means that if the example on the conch shell trumpet at hand corresponds to one of these, it would be the earliest mention of such title or site.

a   b

Fig. 9. Early examples of MZ8 **yo**. **a**. Syllabogram MZ8 **yo** on the Chrysler conch trumpet (MHD COLK0519, B5). Drawing by the author (Mora-Marín 2020), **b**. Syllabogram MZ8 **yo** on the Pomona Flare (MHD PMBEF, C1). Drawing by the author (Mora-Marín 2001).

The text may read as follows: '[Glyphs 4-5] K'awil [Glyph 7b] Lord grabbed/carried/held his conch shell trumpet on 7-?K'anjalab'.

Conclusions

This artifact adds to the corpus of Early Classic inscriptions and of inscribed conch shell trumpets. It likely originated in the central Maya lowlands, perhaps in the Peten region, or the eastern lowlands, in the Caracol region, based on stylistic traits. It may be possible to narrow down its provenience once the name of the lord can be matched to a known case. However, the absence of an obvious *k'uhul* 'divine/godly' modifier to the Emblem Glyph could suggest that this personage may not have been a major king, and this could render such a match more difficult.

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