

Maya Glyph Description Vocabulary (MGDV)

Author: Sim Lee



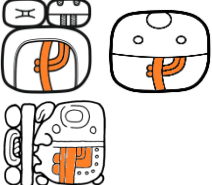



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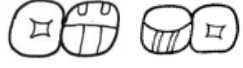




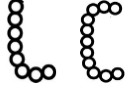

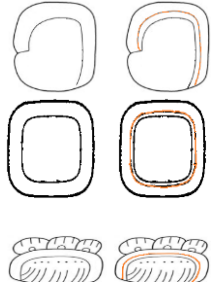
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







This is a list of the terms which I use in describing and contrasting glyphs. In many of the examples, I've highlighted portions of a glyph to show what the term is meant to indicate. Also included in the list are the so-called "property markers". These are already well known in the epigrapher community, but I've included them on the list for the sake of completeness. The images used in the examples have been taken from all manner of teaching resources (and from MHD, Bonn, and Thompson) and adapted without due credit.

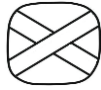
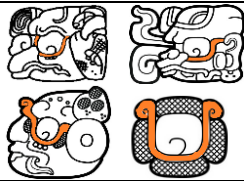
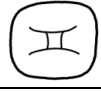
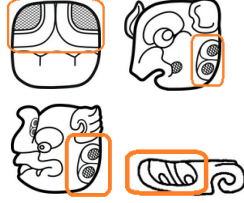
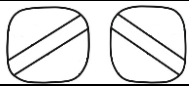


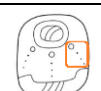
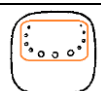
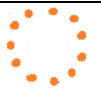
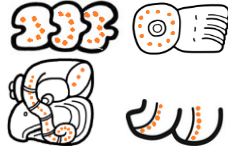



Strictly speaking, I should write many of these terms in double quotes, to show (for example) that "bay" doesn't (iconographically speaking) refer to a *real* bay, but is just a way of describing a glyphic element or shape. However, some of the terms like "bar" and "diagonal band" really *are* a bar and a diagonal band. For the sake of consistency (and to avoid cluttering up the text with lots of double quotes), I will often use these terms without double quotes. On some occasions, I will however add these "scare quotes", if I feel a need to emphasize the descriptive rather than referential nature of the term.

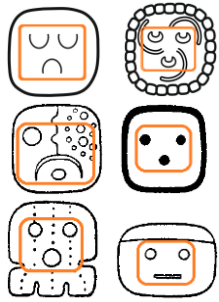





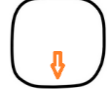

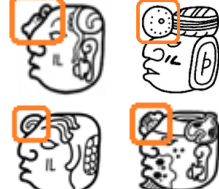


Readers are encouraged to send me suggestions for further terms, especially if they already are widely used in the current literature (please cite references). Furthermore, for terms coined by me, readers are also encouraged to point out an equivalent term which is more widely used in the current literature (again, please cite references). I would then replace "my" term with the more generally accepted one and modify my notes accordingly.


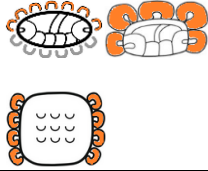
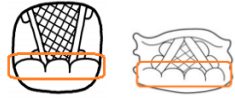
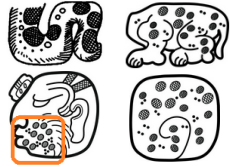





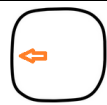
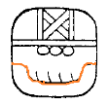
name	Example	Description / Comment
%-sign		Resembles a % symbol, but the / is curved, an S-shape with not much curling at the ends. In some variants, the middle portion of the curved line can be thicker than the ends, i.e., the curve tapers the further from the centre it gets, with two "pointed ends". Often though, the curved line is just of uniform thickness.
abstract	-	The opposite of "representational". A glyph which is not very clearly derived from the drawing of something in the real-world (or where the derivation is not obvious). The boundary between "abstract" and "representational" can be unclear – I tend to think of the variant of WINIK which resembles a human face to be "abstract", because I don't know if it really <i>is</i> the representation of a human face.
ajaw band		This is an L-shaped (knotted) cloth band in the top and right of an AJAW glyph.
ajaw strap		A vertical band going from the ceiling to the floor (often slightly curved). One or two (slightly curved) L-shaped bands, going from the ceiling to halfway down, going <i>under</i> the vertical band and emerging very slightly on the other side as two semicircles. Perhaps a representation of the strap which – coming down the side of the face – holds the ruler's headdress to his head. Found in the (abstract) full variant of AJAW . A similar element is also found in SIBIK , IB , and some variants of Glyph-G ₄ .
ajaw face		A basic boulder outline, with a small washer in the middle of the bottom (= "mouth") and a small inverted-V in the middle of the top of the small washer (= "nose"), 2 non-touching dots (= "eyes"). Also called a la -face, due to its occurrence in the syllabogram la . As the default for la is for the face to be "upside down", the element held by the hand in the example given here is sometimes explicitly called a " <i>right-side-up la</i> -face".
axe-head outline		The outline of the "rounded" variant of NAAH .
bar		A long, narrow rectangle: vertical bar or horizontal bar = Maya digit "5". A vertical bar could also be considered to be a "pillar".

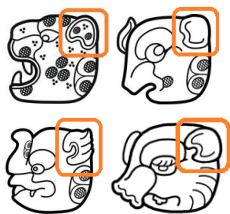









bay		<p>A large or medium-sized and round “inward” indentation in a main outline.</p> <p>A bay is most commonly found as the area “enclosed” by the two ends of a UH / “moon” crescent, as in the first example. TOOK, the word for “flint”, often has two bays in the outline, though not going in as deep as those in UH / “moon”.</p>
ben ich		<p>This is simply an old nickname given to the reduced form of the stylized variant of AJAW: two small, touching boulder outlines, the one resembling the syllabogram po and the other resembling the Tzolk'in day name “BEN”. They can occur in either order – either “po” first or “BEN” first.</p>
blades of grass		<p>A series of medium-length vertical lines, which can be slightly curved or wavy. Also called “grass blades”.</p> <p>See also “double blades of grass”.</p>
bloated crescent(s)		<p>Crescent where the tips (almost) meet, with very blunt tips, and the enclosed area / bay is a small circle. They could also be thought of as a “bloated horseshoes”.</p>
blob		<p>An amorphously shaped element. Often cross-hatched.</p>
blood cartouche		<p>MHD's term is “day sign cartouche”. The “blood” is a reference to the scrolls at the bottom.</p>
blood drops		<p>A (usually) vertically oriented sequence of dots (often touching, but not strongly so), can be slightly curved. Most often encountered in connection with K'UH, where it takes the form of having either 2 sides (“L-shaped”) or 3 sides (“C-shaped”).</p>
blue dot		<p>At some sites (at certain periods of history, or when carved by certain scribes), two or three non-touching dots (quite a distance apart) or three touching dots or (sometimes) even a whole row of touching dots were written at the bottom of a main sign (specifically, the ones with a boulder outline). These were purely decorative elements and didn't contribute anything to the reading of the glyph. HAAB and various other logograms could be subject to this sort of decoration.</p> <p>It seems to be useful to have a convention for transliterating these elements, so that it's clear to the reader (when the reader compares a drawing of an inscription to its transliteration) that these dots do not write la or ma (or ya or wa).but are instead purely decorative.</p> <p>The “blue dot” is the symbol used to transliterate these decorative elements. A single dot in the transliteration stands for two or more touching or non-touching dots (especially along the bottom of a boulder-outline main sign), when the dots in the glyph are purely decorative and do not contribute to changing the reading of the glyph in any way.</p>
bolding		<p>The examples show pairs where the first is without and the second with bolding. There is only a slight difference between bolding and reinforcement: whether the ends of the “bolding line” end in white space or touch another element.</p>

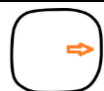







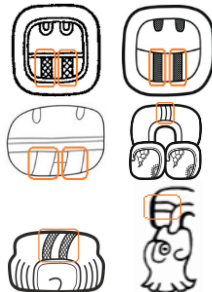


bone jaw		<p>The bone jaw can be asymmetric or symmetric:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asymmetric: This element has one knob on the left and two knobs on the right. The centre of each knob can have a small dot, with a wavy line through the main (long) axis of the bone, splitting into a “Y” on the right. Two or three touching dots on the top side of the left side of the bone, represent teeth left in the jaw. This element is found at the bottom left of skulls and other glyphs connected with death (also in other positions). • Symmetric: This element has two knobs on the left and two knobs on the right. The centre of each knob can have a small dot, with a wavy line through the main (long) axis of the bone, splitting into a “Y” on the left and right. Two or three touching dots on the top side of the centre of the bone represent teeth left in the jaw.
bone property marker		<p>An oval outline, with three non-touching dots in a line down the centre of the long axis. It appears infixed in skulls, but also on the bodies of insects, to reflect their hard, shiny, bone-like structure. It appears in AHIIIN = “crocodile”, perhaps because the horn-like plates of the scaley head and body also suggest bone.</p> <p>As can be seen from the examples, the dots are very often (but not always) in a straight line. Nor is the enclosing element always a perfect oval (it’s sometimes even absent).</p>
boulder, boulder outline		The most common outline of a “main sign” glyph – a square with rounded corners – what is apparently sometimes called <i>calculiform</i> (from Latin for “pebble-shaped”).
bracket		See Grip.
breath property marker		See “sound and singing property marker”.
bump		<p>A small but distinct and round “outward” indentation in a main line.</p> <p>The examples show a 3-bump line and a 4-bump line.</p> <p>A bump is basically the same feature as an indentation, but seen from the opposite perspective. The two examples show a horizontal line with (respectively) three and four bumps, but this corresponds to (respectively) two and three indentations.</p>
bowtie/butterfly		An element that is most often found at the top of ma , but also as part of the abstract form of K’INICH .
cave		<p>There is “cave” (which is asymmetric) and “symmetric cave”:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cave: A boulder-outline with top half of left wall, ceiling, right wall all bold; the end of the top-left bolding bulges slightly out from the main outline of the boulder and ends “smoothly”, i.e., the bolding itself has its own “end”; often the inner wall of the bolding is reinforced as well. • Symmetric cave: A boulder-outline with bold walls and ceiling - the ends of the bolding meet the floor at a point, without having its own smooth “end”. This is in contrast to a normal “cave”, where the left end of the bolding is rounded.
ceiling		The top of a component (typically of a boulder outline), from the inside.
circle		Some glyphs have an almost perfect circle outline, instead of a boulder (which is a square with rounded corners).
comb		A crescent (= the “frame” of the comb) with many short straight “blades of grass” growing inside the crescent, perpendicular to the long side of the crescent (= the “teeth” of the comb). Sometimes called “ ka -comb” for emphasis, as it is the most common variant of the syllabogram ka .


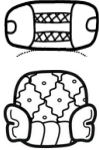




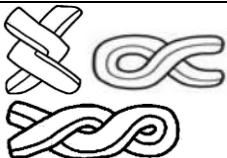
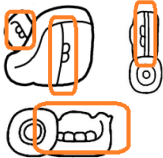
crossed bands		A bold X-element. Note however that one of the diagonal bands always passes under the other.
cruller		The nickname of this element is derived from the confection which resembles wavy strands of string or thin rope. It's found around – under and on both sides of (but not above) – the eye of certain gods, in particular the PAX-god (patron of the Haab-month of PAX), the JGU, and in KAL = “to chop/hack”.
cushion		This element is called a “cushion” because it's supposed to represent a cushion with a depression in the middle (where a button is sometimes found, in modern cushions).
darkness property marker		Two non-touching cross-hatched oval-ish areas, each with a protector. Each oval-ish area touches opposite sides of the inside of the enclosing element. The two protectors touch in between the two cross-hatched areas, along one part of their arc. This property marker marks black objects or animals, or nocturnal animals (e.g., bats, rats, etc), or objects (e.g., obsidian) and concepts associated with blackness or darkness. One of the most distinctive features of AK'AB .
diagonal band		A band which goes from one corner of a boulder to the opposite corner. Can be further specified as a “NW-to-SE band” or a “NE-to-SW band”.
dot		A small circle, usually inside or touching another, larger element.
dot cascade left		A quarter circle arc of dots (NW quadrant) going downwards and to the left, the dots don't touch one another, and decrease in size downwards.
dot cascade right		A quarter circle arc of dots (NE quadrant) going downwards and to the right, the dots don't touch one another, and decrease in size downwards.
dot necklace		A semi-circular arc of dots, “hanging downwards”, i.e., left and right extremes higher than the middle, with dots increasing in size the closer they are to the middle; the dots don't touch one another.
dotted circle		A circle consisting of dots instead of a single circular line.
dotted spine		A longish line of (non-touching) dots, running down the centre of an element, roughly parallel to an outer edge.
dotted protector		The “kidney eye” in the example has a dotted protector around it. The “pond” in KAWAK and the “feelers” in the syllabogram to also often have dotted protectors. The dots can be touching or non-touching – the significant aspect is that they “protect” another element.
double blades of grass		Pairs of grass blades, with one member of each pair shorter or thinner than the other.
eyeball(s)		A smaller cross-hatched circle within a larger circle. The smaller circle touching the larger circle for some section along the circumference.

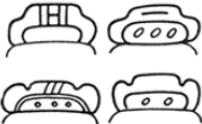
face		<p>Three non-touching elements, arranged with two on top (the “eyes”) and the third centred below (the “mouth”). The elements can be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dots, or • U’s (“smiley face”), or • The bottom element can be an inverted-U (“sad face”), or • Anything else suggestive of a face (e.g., crescents, horizontal bars, etc).
feeler(s)		<p>A feeler is a scroll which starts basically vertically and then curls around to the left (a “left feeler”) or to the right (a “right feeler”). There can be two or three left feelers in a row, or a left and right feeler next to one another. See also protected feeler(s), PAX-feelers.</p>
fingers-down hand		<p>A horizontal, rectangular boulder with a largish bay in the bottom right corner, 3-4 curved lines at the end, creating the image of the fingers of the hand, slightly curled, viewed from the back.</p> <p>Perhaps more the paw of an animal than the hand of a human?</p>
fish-u		<p>This is a stylized representation of a fish, with the eye in the middle of the left wall, the two groups of longish parallel ticks being fins (or a fin and a tail), and the triangular elements on the outside of the right wall being teeth.</p>
flames		<p>A two-component element, where the one component resembles a leaf which curls into itself while the other resembles a longer, “wavy” leaf which doesn’t curl into itself.</p>
flint		<p>Very common outline of a glyph – oval shape, with one axis distinctly longer than the other; basically, a “boulder (outline)” flattened along one axis or a rectangle with rounded corners. The term is inspired by the general outline of TOOK’ = “flint”.</p>
floor		<p>The bottom of a component (typically of a boulder outline), from the inside.</p>
floppy pear		<p>A pear-shaped outline (but a rather squishy pear), most commonly seen in one of the variants of HUL – the one commonly used to write HUL-OHL = <i>Kum’u</i>, the month name.</p>
forehead ornament		<p>An element that appears outside of the main outline of an anthropomorphic head, touching a small amount of the top left corner (i.e., more than just at a single point).</p>
grapes		<p>A triangular formation of dots (apex pointing down) – typically 3, 2, and 1 dot in a downward direction, with a vertical squiggle hanging down from the bottom dot of the apex. Also known as “stalactite”.</p>
god tooth		<p>This element occurs with deity heads – a small, longish, very slightly curved triangular component, found in the mouth and pointing roughly in a south-west direction.</p> <p>Do not confuse the term for this small <i>element</i> with “tooth”, which is the <i>outline</i> of a main sign.</p>
grass blades	-	<p>See “blades of grass”.</p>

grip		<p>A slightly curved bold-L (often rotated or reflected, not in the standard orientation of an L). This could even be a very rectangular bold-C. Suggestive of a towel rack or some grip to help one steady oneself when stepping into or out of a bathtub. The example shows a left and a right grip, the right grip in the example has a spine or reinforcement.</p> <p>Also sometimes called a “bracket”.</p>
horseshoe(s)		<p>A U-shaped element (or a crescent without the two tips), always attached to a longer line or surface (at the “ends” of the horseshoe). Horseshoes can be “thin” or “fat”. A “fat” horseshoe can also be called a “bloated crescent” (the “bloating” makes the sharp tips of a crescent disappear).</p>
indentation		<p>A very small caron or circumflex within a main line.</p> <p>The examples show a line with two indentations and with three indentations.</p> <p>An indentation is basically the same feature as a bump, seen from the opposite perspective. The two examples show a horizontal line with (respectively) two and three indentations, but this corresponds to (respectively) three and four bumps.</p>
jaguar spots		<p>A random scattering of cross-hatched (and non-cross-hatched) dots of varying sizes, optionally on a background of very tiny dots (almost resembling stippling but more irregular).</p>
KAWAK		<p>This is the well-known “cave with stalactite and pond”. The name is from the Yucatec day-name. It’s useful to have a separate name for this component, which occurs in the said day-name, in TUUN, ku, SIHOOM, pi etc.</p>
kidney		<p>A typical “kidney shape”. There’s not that much difference between a “bloated crescent”, “fat horseshoe” and such a “kidney”.</p>
ladder		<p>An element which resembles a ladder, with two or more rungs. The sides may be bold (=pillars) or not bold. The sides of the ladder are often slightly curved (with the bend going to the left, as in the examples).</p>
la-face		<p>A basic boulder outline, with a small washer in the middle of the bottom (=“mouth”) and a small inverted-V in the middle of the top of the small washer (=“nose”), 2 non-touching dots (=“eyes”). Also called an “ajaw face”, due to its occurrence in the logogram for the day name AJAW.</p> <p>As the default for la is for the face to be “upside down”, the element held by the hand in the example given here is sometimes explicitly called a “right-side-up la-face”.</p>
leaf		<p>The iconographic origin of this element is a leaf. A leaf can have a spine or a bold spine; it can also be bilobate or trilobate, depending on the number of “indentations” in the outline. The indentations can be very shallow, or go quite deep into the leaf.</p>
left wall		<p>The left of a component (typically of a boulder outline), from the inside.</p>
lipped-u		<p>A U-shape where the left vertical line has a horizontal line going left from the top, and the right vertical line has a horizontal line going right from the top.</p>

mammal ear		This element (somewhat) resembles an (inverted) “heart shape”. Found in the top right of glyphs portraying the heads of mammals: bats, jaguars, dogs, etc. In some cases, it can be more kidney-shaped than heart-shaped.
moon glyph		Iconographically speaking, this glyph is a representation of the crescent of the (of course, non-full) Moon. Either the whole crescent (first example) or part of the crescent (second example) may be present. Various other elements can be in the “bay” of the crescent. Found in many glyphs, including UH , ja , and some variants of HUL .
na-outline		Outline of a typical na syllabogram. The logogram YAX has a very similar outline, except that (typically), the middle bump does not extend beyond the main outline of the glyph in the na-outline.
partitive disk		A “washer” infixed in a main sign, usually in the bottom left or right corner. Perhaps a representation of the cross-section of a bone, where the inner circle encloses the marrow, and the outer circle is the outer surface of the bone. The partitive disk can either be attached to the inside of the main sign’s outline, or free from it. In contexts not related to body parts or branches of trees, it can also be called a “washer” (particularly if totally infixed and not touching the side).
pax-feelers		Two bold, wavy feelers, each feeler ending in a sharp point, touching for much of the bottom, as appears at the top of the month-name PAX . PAX-feelers always go a little bit into the main glyph.
pillar(s)		A long vertical bar going from a floor-like component to a ceiling-like component. A “long strut”.
pond		A semi-circle to three-quarter circle attached to a larger surface, often with a “parallel” arc of non-touching dots on the outside. The nickname arose because it was once thought that it represented a sub-terranean pond inside a cave in a mountain.
precious object property marker		The logogram K’AN = “yellow”, “precious” is used to mark yellow-coloured (or light brown) animals or objects, and also precious objects.
property marker	-	See under specific, individual property markers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • bone • breath = sound and singing • darkness • precious object • shininess • sound and singing = wind / breath • stone • wind = sound and singing • wood
protected feeler(s)		Each feeler has a “cover” which “protects” it. The “protector” is a roughly circular element which can be a single line or consist of touching or non-touching dots, forming an arc which is 3/4 to 7/8 of a full circle.
reinforcement		The examples show pairs where the first is without and the second with reinforcement. There is only a slight difference between bolding and reinforcement: whether the ends of the “bolding/reinforcing line” end in white space (=reinforcement) or touch another element (=bolding). In this way (for example) a distinction can be made between whether a ceiling is merely “reinforced” or actually “bold”.

representational	-	The opposite of “abstract”. A glyph which is very clearly derived from the drawing of something in the real-world.
right wall		The right of a component (typically of a boulder outline), from the inside.
rugby ball		An oval-shaped element, resembling a rugby ball.
shiner / shininess property marker		<p>A bold oval attached along quite a long edge to the inside of the main sign in which it is infixed. The bold oval has another, smaller, bold oval infixed within it, also attached along quite a long edge to the inside of the outer oval, on the opposite edge to where the edge where the outer oval is attached to the main sign.</p> <p>As a logogram in its own right, it is perhaps read LEM, but there seems to be some uncertainty about this. Infixing as a property marker, it has no influence on the reading of a glyph and is only present because the concept expressed by the logogram is in some way shiny.</p>
sound and singing property marker		<p>A “bold T”. Musical instruments (e.g., rattles), belt-pendants (because they can make clanging sounds), drums etc are often marked with this property marker.</p> <p>The bold T can sometimes be found rotated 90 degrees anticlockwise (as in the second example).</p>
soundwave		Series of “parallel” semi-circular lines/arcs, possibly decreasing in size
spine(s)		A single line, perhaps slightly curved, running down the centre of any longish element. A longish element can occasionally have multiple spines, typically 2 to 4 (see last example).
stalactite		A triangular formation of dots (apex pointing down) – typically 3, 2, and 1 dot in a downward direction, with a vertical squiggle hanging down from the bottom dot of the apex. Also known as “grapes”.
stone property marker		<p>There appear to be three or four distinct stone property markers:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A wavy X. 2. “pond” (see under “pond”). 3. “stalactite/grapes” (see under “stalactite/grapes”). 4. “three dots (or washers) and three scrolls” (in iconography, not in glyphs).
strut(s)		<p>A short bar between two longish components. A strut is normally vertical, but doesn’t have to be. If there are two struts, they may touch. A strut can be plain or cross-hatched – in effect, “a short pillar”.</p> <p>Struts can occasionally be slightly curved.</p>
thumb-up hand		<p>A boulder with a small “bump” in the top right corner, creating the image of a thumb pointing upwards.</p> <p>This is an outline shared by ho, cha, k’a.</p>
tick(s)		A very short line, perpendicular to and on only one side of the main line.

tooth		<p>Resembles the outline of the head of a duck, with the “duckbill” on the bottom left. Iconographically speaking, this is a representation of a tooth. Often seen with reinforced or bold walls and ceiling. When a circle is infixed, it’s considered to be the decorative bead / precious stone which Maya nobility had implanted into the surface of a (front) tooth. When there are dot cascades to the left, these are considered to be drops of saliva. Furthermore, various objects like a bone, a piece of wood, or a burning torch can protrude at an angle from the left.</p> <p>This is an outline shared by (one variant of) chu, ha, and (one variant of) ye.</p> <p>This is the <i>outline</i> of a main sign and is very different from a “god tooth”, which is a small <i>element</i> protruding from the mouth of deity heads.</p>
turtle shell		<p>The turtle shell can be stylized or representational:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stylized: the shell of the turtle is reduced to a regular oval (or flint outline), and the gap where the head and tail emerge are reduced to dots (or semicircles) at the end of the oval. Representational: the shell of the turtle remains visibly a shell (the carapace takes 3/4 of the height of the total) while the smooth flat belly plates of the plastron take only 1/4 and are recognizable at the bottom. Similarly, the gap where the head and tail emerge are still distinctly recognizable, and the waterlily motif covers the carapace.
tv screen		<p>Boulder containing a slightly smaller bold boulder. Often found as part of the “blood cartouche” in day names.</p> <p>Also serves as a cartouche for day names, even without the blood scrolls.</p>
vault		<p>An internal inverted-u band, creating a single “chamber” under the vault – typically inside a boulder outline.</p>
walls		<p>The left and right walls of a component (typically of a boulder outline), from the inside.</p>
washer		<p>A small circle inside larger circle, with a considerable (but not excessive) difference in size between the two circles. So called because it resembles the plastic or rubber “washers” used to ensure a tight seal where pipes are connected, to prevent leakage (also used for nuts and bolts, in between the nut and the bolt).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If the inner circle is only slightly smaller than the outer circle, then it becomes more a “circle with bold perimeter” than a “washer”. If the inner circle is very much smaller than the outer circle, then it becomes more a “circle with a dot in the centre”. <p>In certain contexts (in connection with body parts or branches of trees), it can also be called “partitive disk”.</p>
weaving		<p>Two strands of rope which cross and interlock. They don’t have to be completely independent strands – they might be a single strand, “doubling back” on itself, as shown in the second and third examples. And there may be more than one crossing of the strands – the first two examples show one crossing, the third example shows two crossings.</p>
wind property marker		<p>See “sound and singing property marker”.</p>
wood property marker		<p>A slightly curved line (occasionally bold but usually not), with two touching dots on one side. The long line can be attached at both ends, or only at one end, and freely “dangling” at the other. There can occasionally be more than two touching dots, but two is the most common form.</p>

YAX-outline		<p>Outline of a typical YAX logogram. The syllabogram na has a very similar outline, except that (typically), the middle bump extends beyond the main outline of the glyph in the YAX-outline.</p>
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