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The Further Adventures of Merle¹

MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON

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Joel Skidmore
Editor
joel@mesoweb.com

Marc Zender
Associate Editor
marc@mesoweb.com

The PARI Journal
202 Edgewood Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94117
415-664-8889
journal@mesoweb.com

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Figure 1. On the Usumacinta River on the way to Yaxchilan, 1965.

"No! You can't go into the unknown wilds of Alaska!" That statement from my mother nearly 70 years ago is what changed my life forever. I went to Mexico instead, at that time almost as unknown to us in the U.S. as Alaska. And then later came the jungle, the jungle of the unknown that I loved, no trails, just follow the gorgeous *guacamayos* in their brilliant red, yellow, and blue plumage, who let you know where they are before you see them, by their constant mocking "clop, clop, clop." Mahogany trees so tall you wonder if, someplace up there above the birds and howler monkeys who keep throwing broken branches and *zapote* fruit balls at you, there is a blue sky. Early morning is filled with the songs of hundreds of different

birds, all letting each other know where they are. Evening comes early—dark by four o'clock. Colors are lost in pools of darkness. Now the owls are out lording it over the night, lucky when you see one.

But we didn't wait for nightfall to pitch our camp. *Champas* made for our cooking, *champas* for my helpers, and a

¹ Editor's note: This memoir—left untitled by the author—was completed in 2010, in Merle's 97th year. The following note appears at the beginning of an early draft: "I have been asked by so many people why I don't write a sequel to *Never in Fear*, telling more about the times I worked in the jungles of Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize, more about the Round Tables, and more about my painting trips around the world, that I decided to give it a try."

champa for me—takes time. One doesn't go roaming around the jungle after dark. This is the home of the jaguar—king of the forest who hunts in the dark of night, and his slightly smaller neighbors, the ocelot and the puma. I have seen all three in daylight, but only for the flash of a second before they disappeared, the jaguar at Bonampak, the puma at Tikal, and the ocelot at Itzan. Snakes, yes, but at night, they, like us, don't go roaming around. In daylight, just watch for old rotten leaves they like to hide under, or by a log we jungle lovers have learned not to step over without a thorough investigation first. Corals—they are beautiful—I have painted with them sleeping on the ground by my side, paying no attention to what I was doing, or whether I had the honor of having them in my painting. It is rather startling, however, when unexpectedly you run into a perfectly harmless boa—but this guy was twenty inches in circumference and ten feet long. Just get out of his way.

What was I doing roaming all over this mysterious jungle? I was making rubbings—accurate reproductions on Chinese rice paper in either sumi ink or oil paint—of all of the ancient Maya monuments. Now, where did I get so enamored with the jungle? It actually started during my three seasons at Tikal working for the University of Pennsylvania as an artist, and doing rubbings of all the stelae and altars at Tikal, and painting in watercolor besides. Little did I know then that we would be having Mesoamerican conferences over a period of twenty years at Palenque dubbed the “Mesa Redondas,” nor did I know then that I would be painting watercolors in 28 countries around the world, splashing gorgeous pinks, gold, purple, and orange from out of high mountains. One thing led to another, and it all started because my mother had such a fit about my



Figure 2. On the landing strip at Tikal.

taking her two grandchildren to Alaska. How thankful I am to have had such a wonderful mother.

All of this has come back to me as if it just happened. How is that? Well, I have 70 of my letters that I wrote to my mother while in the jungle, and from my deceased husband Bob (Lawrence W. Robertson) the detailed dairies that he faithfully kept year by year. Then, of course, my Stevenson students (now men) still remind me about some of the crazy things that happened when working with me, also a letter from a former San Rafael Military Academy student of 40 years ago, who lives in Japan with his Japanese wife and two children. You see, I have lots of reminders—so let's get started.

PART 1. THE JUNGLE

Tikal

My first introduction to the Maya world, and the big turning point of my life, was in 1959 when I went to Tikal, the huge Maya site in El Peten of Guatemala that was settled over 2000 years ago by what we call a Middle Preclassic (1000 bc – 400 BC) people. Their descendants built one of the most astonishing civilizations the world has ever seen, where most of the structures seen today date from the Classic period (AD 250 – 900), although the Lost World platform falls in the Late Preclassic (400 BC – AD 250). Huge temples towering above the dense jungle—the ceiba (sacred tree of the Maya), mahogany trees that rise 150 feet into the clouds. From a plane all one can see is the white tops of the roofcombs of these temples. It was at Tikal where I became a confirmed Mayanist right off the bat, first day. Wait a minute. Back up there. I should say that it was the beginning of my becoming a Mayanist. Patrick Culbert and Peter Harrison, I must say, were responsible for this. Although Bill Coe was the Field Director, in the three years I worked at Tikal he only showed up for one weekend, so it was really Pat and Peter who were in charge. Both are now retired, Peter living in Albuquerque with his wife Alexandra and son, who is an artist, and Pat has retired from teaching anthropology at the University of Arizona and now lives in Santa Fe with his wife Bobby who has been putting on dance programs for years there.

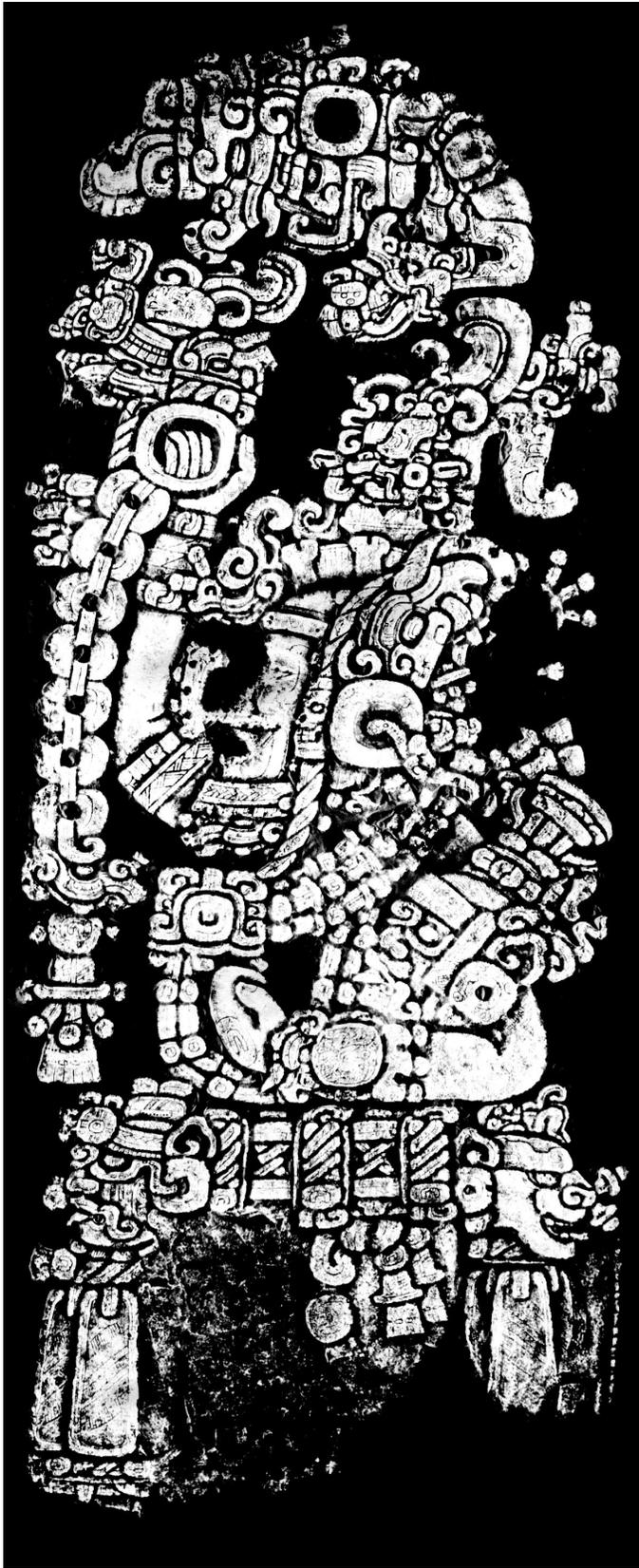


Figure 3. Rubbing of Tikal Stela 31.

Much happened in the three years (1939-1941) I was with the University of Pennsylvania (taking time out from my MFA studies at the University of Guanajuato, in San Miguel de Allende). Probably the most scary thing I did was recording Stela 31 in Temple 33 sub. The destroying of this temple caused international concern when William Coe ordered it dismantled to find out how it was constructed. I had done a large watercolor painting of this temple while standing under a huge palm tree in the pouring rain before this happened. I had to make a rubbing of the stela inside somehow. A makeshift plank about 25 feet long had been suspended from one side of the temple across a deep cavity to an opening that went into a cavern where the stela stood inside the temple. I had to carry my rubbing paraphernalia across this shaking plank a little at a time, so after about five trips, I had it all inside this dark cavity. It wasn't as easy working there as I thought it would be as the cavern was littered with piles of rocks. When finally cleared, doing the rubbing was most interesting as I did not know what it was supposed to be. Just revealing the head of the king was surprising, so perfect in execution. Every little dab of ink on the nearly-dry paper revealed something new—a surprise. Getting back out was this whole process in reverse. It turned out that Stela 31 was the most important stela at Tikal.

The first thing I was assigned to record was the roof sculpture on Maler's Palace in the Central Acropolis, where Teobert Maler, the early explorer, lived during his explorations in Tikal in 1895 and 1904. As I was used to climbing all over everything, this was fun and not hard. They first had to build scaffolding for me. Just finding the planks and tying them together with vines took forever. In the meantime I was studying and measuring the bench inside the main room that was covered with green moss and some of the best graffiti at Tikal inscribed into it. What was it used for?—a sleeping bench? (there was plenty of room for a whole family), a throne? (not exactly centered at the entrance, but bending around three sides), a storage room? (there were much better storage possibilities nearby). I had about decided it would have best served as a family room as there were so many little curtain holes that could have portioned the room into family sections, when the announcement came that up on the scaffolding I should go. It took a long time to record this roof as I was standing right against it, so seeing what I was doing was not the easiest thing when my face was almost next to the carving. Maler's Palace was so beautiful with the moss growing all over it. I loved it. Today progress has taken over and it is now all clean and shiny white.

I was doing rubbings of everything at Tikal, but no one else was allowed to do this. One day a very large woman came to where I was working and told me she wanted to do rubbings also. She was told that was not



Figure 4. Tikal Project, 1963: (upper left) “Project shacks,” Pat Culbert in white shirt at front right; (upper right) Merle’s room, aka “The Fairmont,” bucket is water supply; (lower left) Merle’s room, the lamp is a laugh, goes off at 9:30, note candle in beer bottle; (lower right) our “living room.”

permitted. Well, at lunch that day in the dining room where only the archaeologists ate, this woman burst in and held up her very large underpants on which she had done a rubbing. Lots of queer people in this world. The reason people are not allowed to do rubbings is that they do not know how to keep paint or ink from sinking right through the paper onto the stone monument. If ink seeps onto the stone it is next to impossible to get it off. There would be a lot of ruined monuments if amateurs were allowed to do rubbings.

The best food we had at Tikal was frijoles, and they were the best dark-bean frijoles I have ever had. The rest of the meal depended on how the cook was feeling. Once in a while we had yummy biscuits, once in a while meat,

maybe a little bit of beef or lamb made into a kind of stew. One time someone must have gone to Guatemala City and brought back a whole leg of lamb. Now that was something. Our cook didn’t cut it up into little day-pieces, but showed off his culinary skill by serving, to our great surprise and delight, the whole thing done just right. We bragged about that for weeks, but he didn’t do it again. Oh, I forgot. We had turkey one day. There was a little pond right in front of where our quarters were, and in this pond was a crocodile (how it got there no one knew). One day one of the workmen’s turkeys wandered down to the pond. Up comes Mr. Crocodile—grabs the turkey—but a workman grabs Mr. Turkey also. Who wins? The workman, of course, or I should say, we won,

because that is the night we had turkey for dinner. Just wait until we get to Seibal. That was gourmet all the time.

A lot of funny things (or I should say strange in this case) happened at Tikal. On August 17, 1969, I was up in the Great Plaza doing a rubbing of one of the stelae, when I noticed a huge platform all decorated with palm fronds and flowers at the base of Temple I. Then people started milling about—men in tuxedos with their shirts open and ties hanging loose (it was a very hot day). Then my friend Betty, an American who was married to the Guatemalan who owned the gas station on the road to Tikal, came dashing over to me. It was to be a wedding of a Guatemalan who had the franchise for the Gulf Oil Company in the Peten and his bride-to-be, a girl from Miami, who knew no one and could not speak a word of Spanish. Betty wanted me to come to the wedding and sit next to the bride at the banquet under the trees. Me in jeans? No way could I do that. She insisted: the poor girl would be all alone, and Betty had to be with the caterers so could not sit with the bride. The whole thing was crazy anyway so I agreed, and it was a good thing I did because the groom did not say a word to his bride at the table. Before the banquet, Guatemala government planes started landing in the Great Plaza, pouring out dozens upon dozens of women in beautiful gowns and men in tuxedos. Then the groom wanted me to climb up Temple I and take pictures of the whole wedding. I put my foot down on that. I would not do it, but Tranquil did, with my camera. The outcome of this story is that the couple were divorced within a month of the wedding.

We had fun also at Tikal. Sometimes, on a full-moon night, when not meeting in the *sala* in the evening, we would go to the Plaza Mayor and climb Temple II where we would dance to music from a recorder that another fellow had put on the platform at the top of Temple I. The acoustics were perfect.

Probably the hardest rubbings to do were the overhead *zapote* wood lintels in Temples I and IV. This extremely heavy wood (70 pounds per cubic foot) was probably carved when freshly cut, as it becomes much harder upon drying. These lintels were undoubtedly carved before installation and laborously transported up the steep temple stairs. Lintel 3, in Temple IV may have been painted red, as I found traces of cinnabar on the carved areas. Standing on the floor of the temple,

it is not possible to get a good look at the lintel. So step by step as I proceeded with the rubbing, different parts of Yik'in Chan K'awiil's story unfolds—the lord seated on a captured palanquin in victorious glory. I worked on metal scaffolding that stationed me just below the lintels. Getting on and off the metal scaffolding was not easy, as the metal rungs were set far apart—a long hoist for me.



Figure 5. The author with Lintel 2 of Temple III (Structure 5D-3) in situ and the processed rubbing.

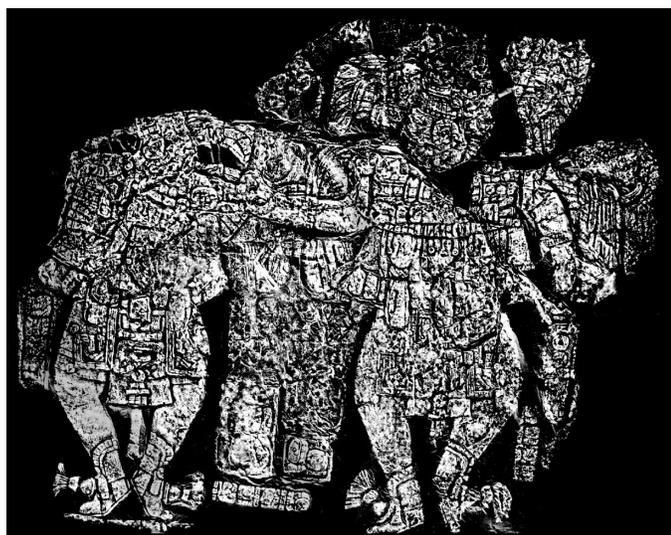


Figure 6. Photo and rubbing of Motul de San José Stela 1, showing two lords in short skirts facing each other in a dancing position.

Motul de San José

One of the closest sites to Tikal was Motul de San José, a little-known small site across Lake Peten from Flores, a town on an island that covers another site entirely—everywhere one walks there, you know you are walking right on top of a Maya ruin. The boys playing basketball in the street reminded me of the Hero Twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque of the Popul Vuh, who were playing ball in the upper world. As is said, “The Lords of Xibalba, hearing them, said, ‘Who are they who play again over our heads and disturb us with the noise they make?’” The Popul Vuh, the sacred book of the Quiche Maya, tells of their cosmogony, mythology, history, and traditions.

I finally found a man with a small boat who agreed to take me across the lake and wait for me a couple of hours while I did the rubbing. A couple of hours was nothing, as the site was up a muddy hill with no actual trail. When I finally found the stela it was in the process

of being stolen, evidence being all of the new saw blades and other implements for cutting, freshly discarded cigarette cartons, and sardine cans with the oil still inside. Where I had expected to find one figure, the monument showed two rulers or lords in short skirts facing each other in a dancing position. I barely had enough paper to do this monument it was so large; it took a long time to complete even though I worked rapidly—worried the looters would return. When I got back to the lakeshore my boatman had left, given up on me. I waited half an hour to hail another man with a canoe.

The Pasión

I had been doing rubbings at so many sites along the Pasión River that I just loved that river. Bob and I were having dinner one night with our friend Romeo Samayoa, Director of FYDEP (the department for the colonization of El Peten), when he asked me where we would like to have a piece of property in El Peten. I told him, “Anyplace that has those big pink trees will be fine.” The next summer when we returned and were again having dinner with Samayoa, he asked us if we had decided where we would like our property. It was then that I realized he was serious. I had thought it was just a joke when he asked us the year before. The government was giving property to responsible foreigners, and it so happened we had been chosen. We knew that one would be expected to either raise cattle or vanilla on the property. This was something we knew nothing about. All we knew about cows was that they gave milk and meat, and vanilla we knew absolutely nothing about. Neither Bob nor I had green thumbs. We explained that we appreciated the offer but could not accept. He said they would supply the men to get us started and build a house for us. But to be honest, we could not accept. He then said he would give us the small island off Flores, not the big island with the weather station, but the small one on the opposite side. Here they would build a house for us for a research center for the work I was doing in El Peten, and provide a caretaker for when we were not there. We had been thinking about a place for our research for some time. After long deliberation, knowing how much we loved the jungles of El Peten, we finally decided that Palenque was where we really wanted to settle. Samayoa understood, but was disappointed.

Yaxha

When I was in Flores in July, 1968, I was told about the site of Yaxha, the road that goes into Yaxha being just 45 miles from Flores. The site was reported to have stelae, so I hired Oscar Echeniva with his truck to take us there. This was going to be easy, as I was also told that a road goes right to the site, just eight kilometers in. But when we got there, Oscar, Bob, Tranquil, and I found



Figure 7. Lake Yaxha.

that the road in had not even been started, there was just a huge bulldozer sitting there ready to start a road. We had brought all of our gear—tent, hammocks, food, etc., much more than could be carried in. It was decided that 8 km would be an easy hike, so Tranquil, Oscar, and I decided to hike in, leaving Bob with Oscar's truck and our equipment and extra food. We would be back before dark. A *chiclero* came along, who said he knew the way and would lead us. The four of us then started out, bringing only four sheets of rice paper and the things to do the rubbing, a jug of water, a can of spam, and fruit juice for lunch. Our new fellow told us it would be steep at first and then level off. We soon found that this was not true, as it was steep all the way, and up and down in the blazing sun, and me with no hat. My bandana came to a partial rescue draped around my head. At what we thought was half-way, we stopped and ate our lunch. After a while Tranquil said to me, "This is the longest eight kilometers I have ever seen—something must be wrong."

When we finally got to the *chiclero* camp by the lake, we found out that it had been 15 kilometers in, not eight. It was at this camp that the *chicle* was brought in to be boiled down in a huge iron pot. There was still the lake

that had to be crossed, and then three more kilometers further to where the stela was. We knew that we would never make it back that day, so sent the young *chiclero* back to the truck with a message I wrote to Bob explaining why we did not return. This very nice woman at the camp fixed supper for us and then put a sheet on a cot in the corn crib for me to sleep on, and set up hammocks for Tranquil and Oscar. In the morning after a great breakfast, a young man took us across the lake in a small *cayuco* and then led us to where a stela was three kilometers further. The stela was 9 feet high, 3 ½ feet wide, and 15 inches thick, carved on all four sides. It had just recently been hoisted out of a hole three feet deep. The top third was missing, and much damage had been done to the rest of it. Looking around, we found another stela which, fortunately, was not in the process of being stolen. This later was identified as Stela 6. When I finished doing a rubbing of it we went back to the camp, where this nice woman had cooked a chicken for us with all the trimmings. A few years later, when Yaxha was opened up but the road still went only part way in, I returned and did rubbings of everything there.

[To be continued.]

A Late Preclassic Distance Number

MARIO GIRON-ÁBREGO¹

California State University, Los Angeles

This paper explores the possibility that a partially preserved glyph on the San Bartolo stone block, recently published by Saturno et al. (2006), might represent a Late Preclassic Distance Number (DN). The block in question is designated “pA4” (Figures 1 and 2) and is part of a longer text of at least ten glyph blocks in length. The possible identification as a distance number is made on the basis of what might be a numerical coefficient to the left of the block, as well as a few other suggestive features of glyphic morphology and syntax, to be discussed below.

To contextualize pA4 for the purpose of this analysis, I refer the reader to *Wayeb Notes* 42 (Giron-Ábrego 2012). In that paper, I argued that glyphs pA1-pA3 represented a period ending clause (PE), drawing particular attention to the early **TZUTZ** logogram (at pA2), and its similarity to a PE notation on the Dumbarton Oaks Jade Celt (Figures 3 and 4). Schele and Miller (1986:82-83) noted that the latter recorded a PE celebration, albeit with unusual glyphs² and an uncommon structural form.³ They tentatively identified the date as 8.4.0.0.0 or July 15, AD 150. Given the pronounced similarities between these two texts, I argued that the San Bartolo block represents a similar “unusual” form of recording PEs, and suggested that this may simply have been the standard practice during the Late Preclassic.

There is some reason to be cautious about these suggestions, however, as I was unable to identify a clear numerical coefficient for the proposed katun glyph.⁴ On the basis of the dating of the San Bartolo block to ca. 300 BC (Saturno et al. 2006), which is when the text was presumably painted, as well as the future form of the **TZUTZ-ma** glyph (for *tzuhitz-[alj]-oom*, “it shall be completed”), the PE should have fallen sometime between 7.3.0.0.0 and 7.5.0.0.0 (i.e., between 294 and 255 BC), or perhaps somewhat later. I should mention that previously I did not consider the possibility that the katun block might read **TA-5-“katun,”** if analyzed in the

following manner:

- Rather than **TA** and “1,” the superfix on pA3 might instead represent a bipartite **TA** glyph, in similar fashion to the third variant of T53/3M3, typical of other early inscriptions (see Mora-Marín [2001:18] for an example on the Jade Museum plaque, No. 4441).
- Rather than part of a katun glyph, the thick horizontal line of the main sign might instead represent the ubiquitous bar for the number

¹ The author would be happy to receive comments or suggestions, which can be addressed to: mario.giron-abrego@hotmail.com.

² Fields and Tokovinine (2012:188) have pointed out some homologies between glyph B2 on the Dumbarton Oaks Jade Celt and early examples of the Initial Series Introductory Glyph (e.g., Tikal Stela 4), and have also identified the former as a katun glyph. With respect to its U-shaped elements, presumably representing the number four, they point out that there is at least one fifth-century example with a similar number on Tikal Stela 31 (D17), and still another example on a jade bead from the Chichen Itza cenote.

³ The unusual format of the period ending on the Dumbarton Oaks Jade Celt refers to the use of two consecutive **TZUTZ** logograms. One, partially erased, comes before the baktun, followed by a second one preceding the katun. In Classic Period texts, the **TZUTZ** glyph normally occurs once, followed by the corresponding baktun, katun, or tun. The Dumbarton Oaks Jade Celt text therefore seems to have a redundant recurrence of **TZUTZ** prior to at least two of these temporal units (see Figure 4b, A1-B2).

⁴ I did however note that we ought to consider the possibility that the superfix on pA3 is a numerical coefficient spelled syllabically, as is the case in the Dresden Codex, page 9b, where the syllables **o-xo** spell *ox* ‘three’ (see Thompson 1960:137, Fig. 25, number 51). This is difficult to reconcile with what seems a reasonably clear prepositional **TA** in the upper left of the sign, however. Perhaps this, coupled with the semicircular element to the right (**JUUN** “one?”), merely reads *ta juun* “in/on one.” This certainly seems to be the case for a numerical coefficient on Tikal Stela 31 (D14), which provides *ta juun ajaw* “on 1 Ahau.” If so, this would make the reading of pA3 **ta *juun* “k’atun” in proto-Ch’olan, placing the proposed period ending on 7.1.0.0.0 (February 18th, 334 BC). But that is perhaps a bit too early for this text.



Figure 1. The San Bartolo stone block in the context where it was found. Photo by Boris Beltrán, courtesy of William Saturno.



Figure 3. The Dumbarton Oaks jade celt. Drawing by Linda Schele, courtesy of David Schele.

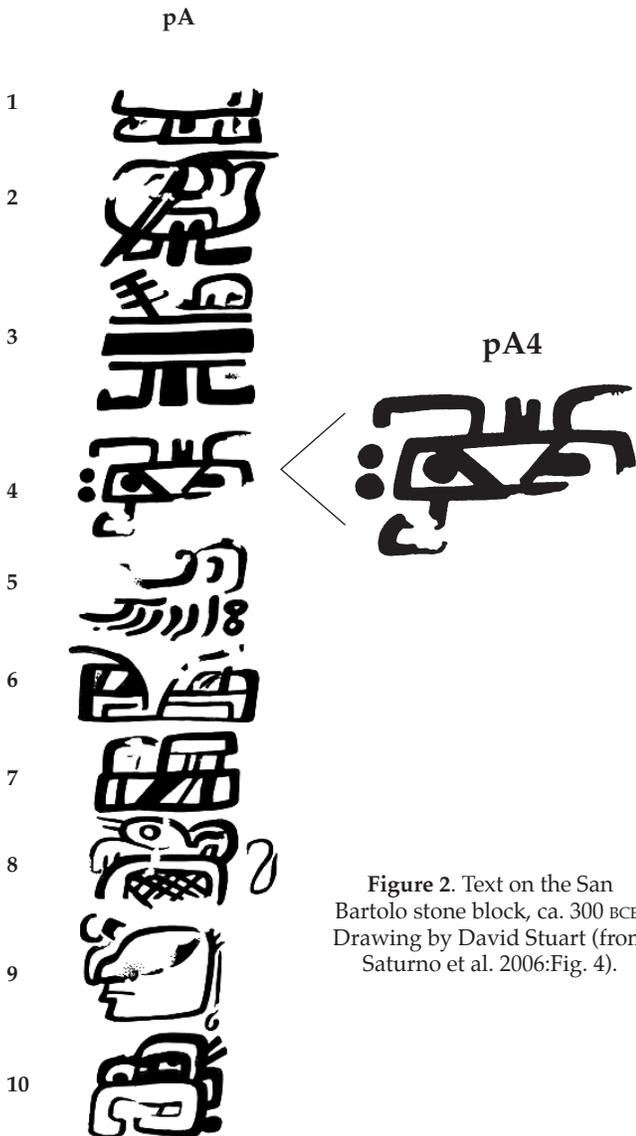


Figure 2. Text on the San Bartolo stone block, ca. 300 BCE. Drawing by David Stuart (from Saturno et al. 2006:Fig. 4).

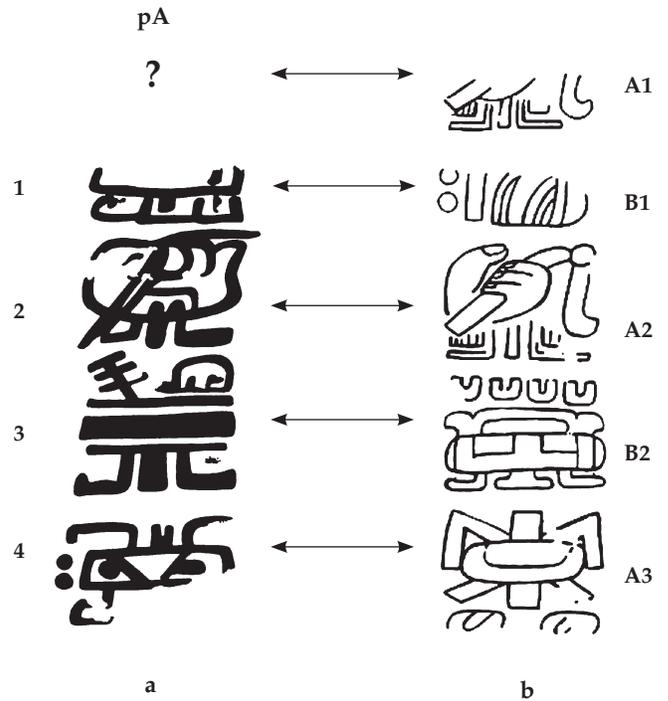


Figure 4. Comparison of San Bartolo glyphs with Dumbarton Oaks Jade Celt: (a) glyphs pA2-pA4 from San Bartolo stone block (drawing by David Stuart); rearranged glyphs A1-A3 of Dumbarton Oaks Jade Celt from double column to single column (drawing by Linda Schele, courtesy of David Schele).

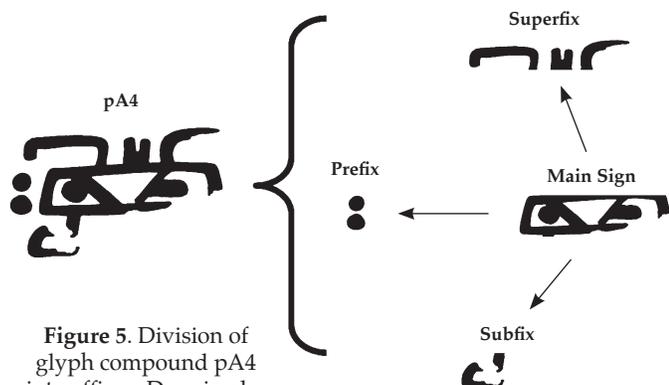


Figure 5. Division of glyph compound pA4 into affixes. Drawing by David Stuart.

“5.”⁵

The pedestal-like subfix would categorize the glyph compound as a unit of time, a *katun* in this case, but not meant to be read phonetically, similar to the subfix on the Dumbarton Oaks Jade Celt (B2).

If pA3 indeed records “on (the) fifth *katun*,” it would suggest that the PE on the San Bartolo block falls on 7.5.0.0.0 (255 BC).

In my earlier paper, I also suggested that block pA4 in the San Bartolo text (the focus of this paper) may have served a similar syntactical function as block A3 on the Dumbarton Oaks Jade Celt (Figure 4), noting some graphic similarities between the two glyph blocks and observing that both compounds are still undeciphered.

Fields and Tokovinine (2012:188) have recently suggested that the PE clause on the Dumbarton Oaks Jade Celt (A1-B2) is self-containing, and that A3 may represent the beginning of a new sentence (or clause), perhaps providing an underspelled verb, or a stative construction such as “it is,” “there is,” etc.

Along a similar line of thought, I propose that pA4 functions as a transition between two distinct clauses. As I discuss below, its prefix and superfix might represent numbers, hence the suggestion that it may represent a DN. As is well known, DNs can occur after PE clauses in order to move the narrative forwards or backwards in time (Kettunen and Helmke 2011:50; Thompson

1950:157-180). To pursue this line of thought, I’ve subdivided block pA4 into units corresponding to our understanding of Classic Period DNs (Figure 5).

The potential prefix apparently consists of two dots. Rather than the syllable-doubling diacritic (not otherwise attested until the fourth century AD), these dots are suggestive of the coefficient “2,” following the pervasive bar and dot notation of Maya hieroglyphs (Thompson 1950:130-131). The superfix, where a second number would usually be expected in a Classic Period DN, apparently extends over both the main sign and the prefix. It does not appear to fall into the bar and dot numerical classification. Instead, its overall shape is a silhouette of two squared arches with rounded corners and a smaller detail infixed between the two. Bearing in mind the logosyllabic diversity that corresponds to the “zero” in Maya writing (Blume 2011), I suggest that this may represent either a calligraphic variant or an early allograph of T173, perhaps presenting only a portion of its full form in the *pars pro toto* principle (Coe 1976). T173 is of course commonplace in Classic Period texts, where it can be read as **MIH/mi** “zero.” It is employed as the number zero in calendrical and mathematical instances, and as a syllable and negative marker in word formation contexts (Blume 2011; Grube and Nahm 1990).

The subfix, although almost entirely erased, may simply be a complementary part of the rectangular main sign, without qualities that are meant to be read phonetically, but perhaps identifying the glyph compound as a unit of time as in the case of the proposed *katun* sign.

The main sign is unfortunately rather obscure. Its internal features include only a central triangle with a dot to its left and a small horizontal line to its right. Nonetheless, I am inclined to contemplate that it represents a suppressed glyph for a unit of time, such as the “kin-uinal” combination well-known in Classic Period DNs. In the majority of kin-uinal combinations, the kin glyph is suppressed and is only inferred by the presence of its coefficient (Thompson 1950:159). As a general rule,

...the *winik* coefficient only takes the same space horizontally or vertically as the *winik* sign, whereas the *k’in* coefficient occupies the whole extent (length or vertical space) of the remaining glyph block. A worthy piece of advice is to look at the upper left corner of the glyph block: whatever number occupies that position is the coefficient of the *k’in* period. (Kettunen and Helmke 2011:54)

Assuming these Late Classic conventions can be traced back to a significantly earlier period, the numerical

⁵ If so, the lack of a glyph for *katun* itself would perhaps correspond with the way the earliest contemporaneous Long Count dates are recorded on monuments such as Chiapa de Corzo Stela 2, Tres Zapotes Stela C, El Baúl Stela 1, Takalik Abaj Stelae 2 and 5, La Mojarra Stela 1, and the Tuxtla Statuette, where the units of time are represented only by their corresponding numerical coefficient.

coefficient for days on the San Bartolo block would be the potential “zero” superfix just discussed, as it appears to extend into the left corner, covering both the main sign and the prefix or the whole horizontal space of the glyph block. The two dots in the prefix, a graphically reasonable “two,” would correspond to the uinal portion of the DN, since it covers its vertical space. In other words, the morphological segmentation of pA4 and the analysis of its affixes suggests that it begins a new sentence, with the narrative projected either backwards or forwards in time.⁶

A further clue in support of the presence of both a PE and a DN on the San Bartolo block might come from the glyph that immediately follows (Figure 6a). This glyph has a pronounced formal similarity to the so-called “Bearded God” glyph (Figure 6b-d). Although pA5 is partially erased at its upper left, its most prominent characteristic includes the characteristic descending curved lines of the Bearded God’s “beard.” The sign remains undeciphered, but several scholars have analyzed its contexts and suggested that it represents either a possessive pronoun or a dedicatory verb (Chinchilla and Fahsen 1991; Fahsen 1988; Mora-Marín 2008a:1062-1064).⁷ A DN followed by a possessive pronoun or a verb falls well within the expected parameters of later Classic-period texts (Kettunen and Helmke 2011:50).

As matters stand, the segmentation of pA4 into affixes is suggestive of the probable presence of coefficients. One of these is almost certainly “two,” another somewhat less certainly “zero.” Additionally, pA4 may fall between a PE clause (pA1-pA3) and a Bearded God glyph providing either a possessive pronoun or a verb



Figure 6. Comparison of Glyph pA5 to other inscriptions: (a) glyph pA5 of the San Bartolo stone block (drawing by David Stuart); glyph A1 from the Yale Jaguar Figurine from the Peabody Museum (drawing by David Mora-Marín, from Mora-Marín 2008:Fig. 2a); (c) glyph A4 from the Museo del Jade Fidel Tristán spoon (drawing by David Mora-Marín, from Mora-Marín 2008:Fig. 2b); (d) glyph A1 from an unprovenienced jade pendant, no. 753 in Justin Kerr’s Mesoamerican Portfolio at MayaVase.com (drawing by David Mora-Marín, from Mora-Marín 2008:Fig. 2c).

(pA5). Because of the lack of a substantial corpus of Late Preclassic inscriptions, the present argument is inevitably exploratory in nature. It is my hope, however, that I have been able to present sufficient evidence to suggest that pA4 may represent a Preclassic Distance Number.

If pA4 indeed represents a Distance Number, then an interesting implication is the likelihood that the glyphic complexity well known from Classic hieroglyphic narratives was already in place by at least the Late Preclassic period. At the same time, if the superfix on pA4 proves to be an early version of the number “zero,” then it represents the earliest glyphic example of such a number in Mesoamerica, and arguably one of the earliest instances in the history of writing where “zero” appears as an autonomous and independently employed number (Blume 2011; Ifrah 2000; Kaplan 2000; Seife 2000).

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⁶ In Classic inscriptions, DNs are of course followed by what are called “Anterior Date Indicators” (ADI) or “Posterior Date Indicators” (PDI), since they indicate either an earlier date or a later date with respect to the present narrative timeline, respectively (see Kettunen and Helmke 2011:54). No ADI or PDI glyphs appear on the San Bartolo stone block, rendering the narrative’s temporal projection difficult to discern at present.

⁷ Stephen Houston (personal communication 2012) cautions that this sign is very similar to later glyphs for *Mam* “grandfather, ancestor,” so absent a clear decipherment all of these suggestions should be taken under advisement. Chinchilla and Fahsen (1991) argue for a connection with the “God N” glyph common in ceramic dedicatory texts, now frequently read **T’AB-yi**, *t’abaay* “ascended, raised, dedicated” (Kettunen and Helmke 2011:100). Mora-Marín (2008b) specifically relates the San Bartolo glyph to a Late Preclassic jade pendant (K763 in Justin Kerr’s Mesoamerican Portfolio at MayaVase.com), reading both as *u-ni’ pa’ chan ajaw* “the nose/tip/peak of the Split Sky lord.” Nonetheless, I am more inclined to view it as an ergative pronoun or dedicatory verb introducing nominal phrases.

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