

The Period-Ending Stelae of Yaxchilán

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A word for “stela” survives in Yucatec, *manak'*, and it is glossed in the Cordemex dictionary as *rastro o senal que se parece de lejos*. A related word, *manak' chi'*, means *acordar o traer a la memoria*. These translations summon the mental image of a throng of participants gathered in a gigantic plaza, using the stelae as mnemonic devices and integrating this occurrence of the ceremony with the previous times the same ceremonies occurred. With the pyramids as backdrops, the stelae were focal points for public rituals that were enacted in the plazas. For the populace, the stelae provided a static image of the ruler engaged in self-sacrifice or as a victorious warrior and protector. The kings used the stelae as proclamations of their piety and commissioned the carving of the tall stone shafts to manifest their role as the paradigm for human behavior toward the deities and the cosmos.

At Yaxchilán, over thirty stelae once towered over the people gathered in the spacious ceremonial plazas. The subset of eleven nearly identical stelae that forms the focus of this investigation was erected in the Late Classic era (between about A.D. 636 and 800). The stelae were situated in front of Structures 39, 40, and 41 on the South Acropolis, Structure 33, at the heart of the site, and in front of Structure 20 on the southeast Plaza (see fig. 1). These buildings and one side of their stelae all faced the river, and the stelae were visible, from afar, as the word *manak'* suggests, to any riverine travelers.

Very little scholarly attention has been paid to the stelae of Yaxchilán for several reasons, the most significant of which is their state of preservation. When the stelae toppled under the lashing winds and rain of the jungle, they fell in varying directions, and different sides landed facing the ground. Up on the South Acropolis, in front of Structure 41, the stelae fell away from the temple. Sections of those stelae slid down the hill, and the river sides, face down, were preserved from the torrential rains, while the temple sides were largely eroded. On these stelae, a warrior image was preserved. The stelae in front of Structure 20 and Stela 1 in the Main Plaza were blown toward the temple and fell with the

temple side downward, and a triple register image was preserved.

The problems with these stelae are, first, whether enough evidence remains of the original carving to reconstruct what the images were on the eroded sides; second, what specific dates and events were recorded on the eroded sides; and third, what the images on the stelae tell us about Maya kingship.

With some detective work, it is possible to reconstruct the imagery carved on the two broad surfaces of this group of at least eleven stelae. With the aid of a complete chronology of the site (Tate 1986:426–430), the remaining glyphs on each stela, and an analysis of the type of information presented on this group of stela, it is also possible to suggest dates and events for the eroded temple sides of Stelae 18, 19, and 20.

Sources of visual and descriptive evidence for the reconstruction of the data on the stelae are the photographs and texts published by the early explorers of the Usumacinta Valley. Teobert Maler (1903) published ex-



Fig. 1 Sketch map of Yaxchilán showing the locations of stelae in this article (drawing by Carolyn Tate).

cellent photographs of the stelae he and Alfred Percival Maudslay had encountered. Less discernible photographic images of stelae he and the other members of the Carnegie's Fourteenth Central American Expedition discovered were published by Sylvanus Morley in 1938. Merle Greene Robertson made rubbings of many Yaxchilán stelae, published in her book of 1972 (Greene, Rands, and Graham 1972). Ian Graham made drawings of some of the stelae. The images, Maler's careful observations about what was on the eroded sides of the stelae, and my own observations make it possible to state without equivocation that this group of stelae shared the same format, and to reconstruct much of the eroded information.

The design of the stelae is sufficiently regular to be described as having a format into which practically identical images were inserted. Hieroglyphic texts on the stelae differentiate the name, attributes, and dates of one ruler from those of another and create a specific historical-ritual document of the ruler as the actor in a cosmic paradigm.

Format: The Temple Side

On the sides facing the temples, these stelae had a three register composition (see fig. 2). Maler made the initial interpretation of the central register. He operated under the premise that the Mayas did not erect monuments to human endeavors, but made images of their gods. His comment about Stela 3 (see fig. 3) is typical:

The representation on the "deity side" shows us Ketsalcoatl as a beneficent deity, as is usual on the stelae of Yaxchilan. He holds with both hands the "string of joys," ornamented with little heads of bees and bordered with cocoa beans, which he has just taken from the "chest of good fortune" at his feet. Before him and behind him stand a man and a woman stretching out their hands to receive benefactions. [Maler 1903:122]

Since Maler's era Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1963, 1964) proved that these figures were not beneficent deities but historical individuals. She, Morley, and I have figured out the dates recorded, which are Period Endings and accession anniversaries. The activity of spilling a liquid from the hands can also be placed in the context of ancient Maya ritual activity. Because of comments made by the Spaniards who observed the Maya in the sixteenth century, it is known that the ancient Maya frequently drew blood from their bodies, using stone blades, fish spines, and plant thorns to pierce their ears, tongues, and penises. By relating the dots bordering the flowing liquid on these stelae to the dots issuing from Lady Xoc's mouth on Lintel 24 of Yaxchilán, David Stuart (1984e) realized that the "chest of good fortune" and "ropes of honey" represent the king's blood flowing into a sacrificial receptacle.

At the top of the temple side of the stelae are cartouches formed of an oval with the corners removed as if

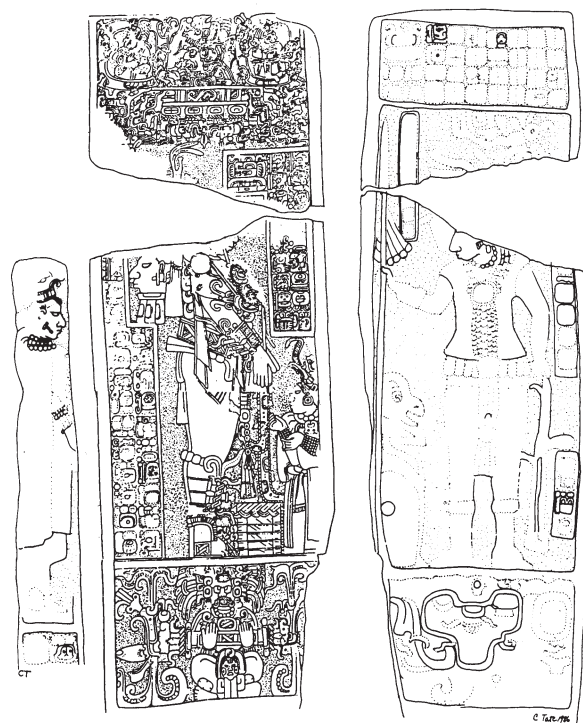


Fig. 2 Stela 1 (narrow edge drawn by the author; temple side drawing is a field drawing by Ian Graham; river side drawn by Carolyn Tate).

bitten out. From the notched corners of the cartouches project skeletal serpent fangs. These cartouches exist at several Maya sites, including Palenque and Tikal, but their identification depends on their context on these stelae from Yaxchilán (see fig. 4). On the upper register of Stela 11, in a semantic niche corresponding to the position of the oval cartouches, the parents of Bird Jaguar are named. In the other examples, the individuals in the cartouches are not named, but iconographical details suggest that they, too, are the deceased parents of the sacrificing ruler. They hold skeletal serpent bars and wear skeletal headdresses, sometimes of the Quadripartite Monster (Robertson 1974), the symbol of the sun in its journey through the underworld, the area of death, burial, and regeneration. At the upper edge of these stelae are images of the king's divine royal ancestors.

Between the cartouches is the bust of a supernatural character. It wears the crossed-bands pectoral that identifies it as one of the Hero Twins, or the related deities, GI and GIII of the Palenque Triad, who correspond mythically to the sun and Venus (see Schele and Miller 1986:48, 51–52; and Tedlock 1985:35–37; 232–237, for discussions of the Hero Twins).

Separating the ancestors and the Hero Twins from the ruler is a spatial indicator known as a sky band. It is a saurian monster infixed with symbols securely associated with the heavens, including Lamat signs for Venus, God C glyphs, and moon and sun signs. The band is terminated on each end by a monster head, whose gaping

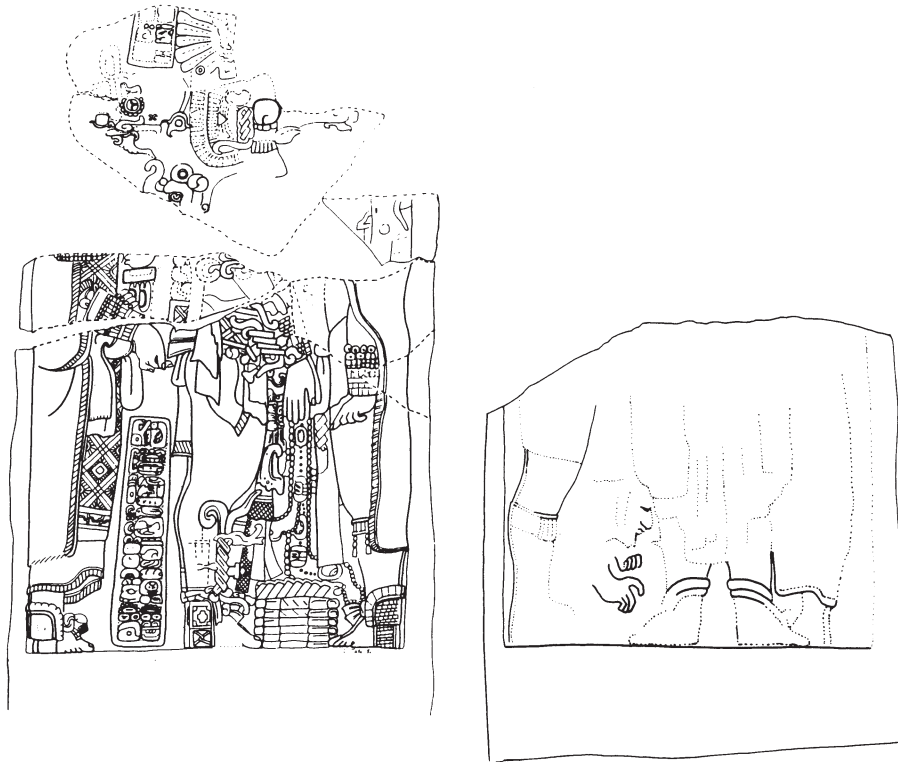


Fig. 3 Stela 3 (drawing by Carolyn Tate).

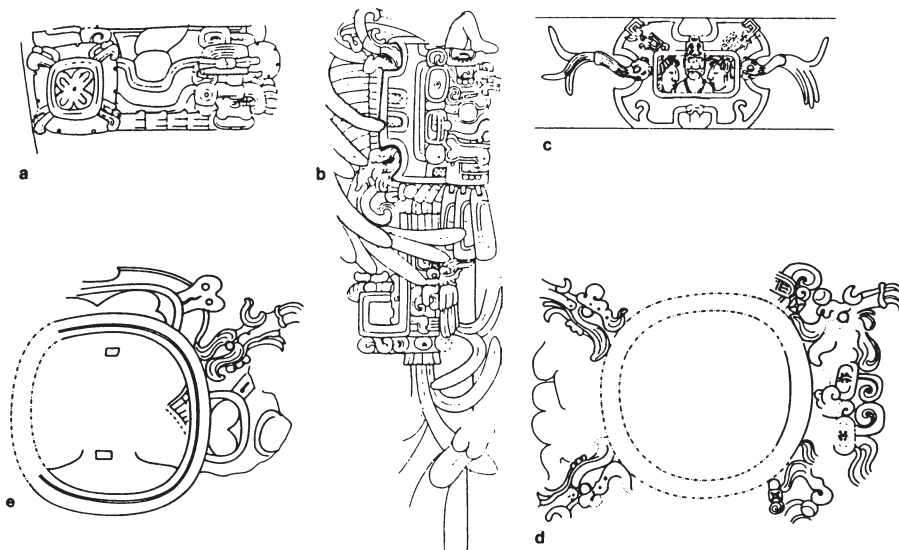


Fig. 4 Ancestor cartouches. (a) Tikal Stela 1, base, detail (drawing by W. Coe in Jones and Satterthwaite 1982, fig. 1); (b) Tikal Stela 5, detail of back-rack (drawing by W. Coe in Jones and Satterthwaite 1982, fig. 7); (c) Stucco and stone cartouche, Palenque House D (drawing by Merle Greene Robertson 1985b, fig. 358); (d) Stucco cartouche, Palenque House A, Medallion 11 (drawing by Merle Greene Robertson 1985b, fig. 136a); (e) Stucco cartouche from Palenque House A, Medallion 13 (drawing by Merle Greene Robertson 1985b, fig. 138b).

mouth contains images of GI or GIII. The sky band stretches across the upper register of the stela, as the sky stretches above the heads of humans. The sky band monsters, infixed with images of the Hero Twins and sun and Venus, are representations of the processes by which the sun, moon, and planets are born, travel, die, and are renewed. Their presence on these stelae indicates that the king's bloodletting maintains these cyclic phenomena.

Below the feet of the ruler is a frontal monster. Images

in Maya art are rarely frontal and, except in the very late Classic, frontal images are of supernatural beings. These monsters are a specific reference to the supernatural owner of the locality of Yaxchilán. This is most clearly seen on Stela 4 (see fig. 5), where a frontal muan bird, the personification of "sky," has a "split sky" glyph, the emblem glyph of Yaxchilán, infixed in its forehead. On Stela 7 (see fig. 6), the lower register contains a profile monster with a "split earth" glyph, probably a reference

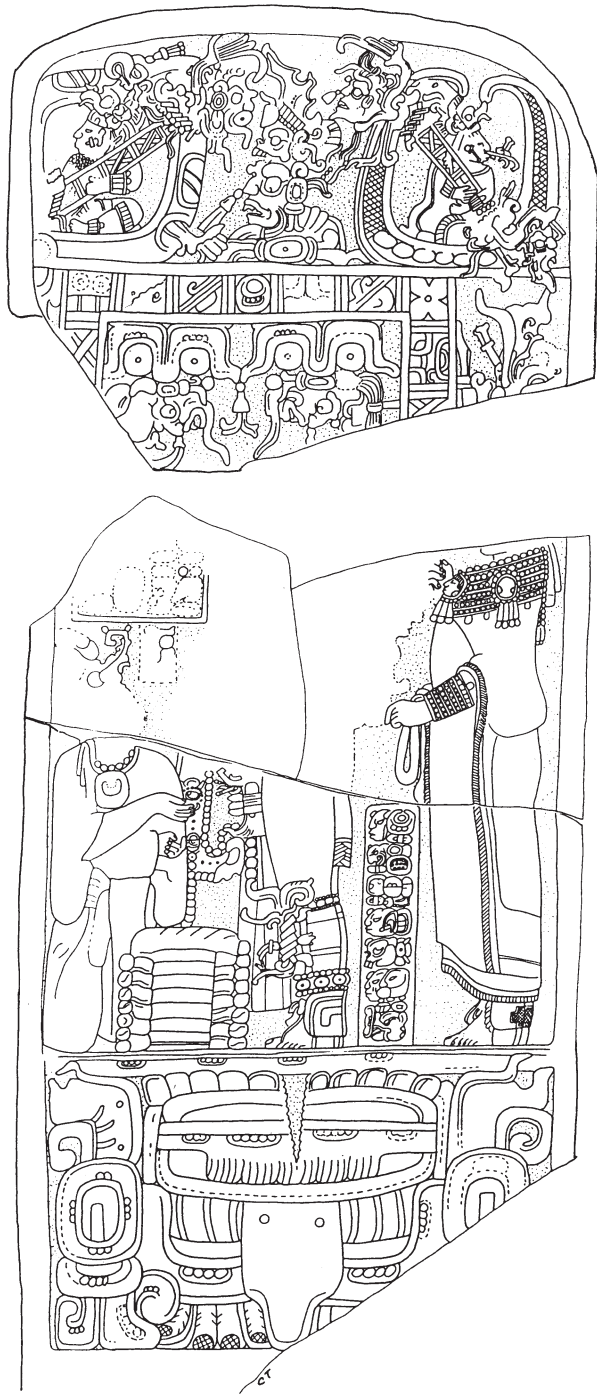


Fig. 5 Stela 4 (drawn by Carolyn Tate after field drawing by Ian Graham).

to “our place,” “our earth.” Cartouches containing a monkey, symbol of the day or sun, and a rabbit, symbol of the moon, emanate from the eye of the Split Earth Monster.

The metaphor presented on the three registers of the temple side of the stelae might be paraphrased as follows:

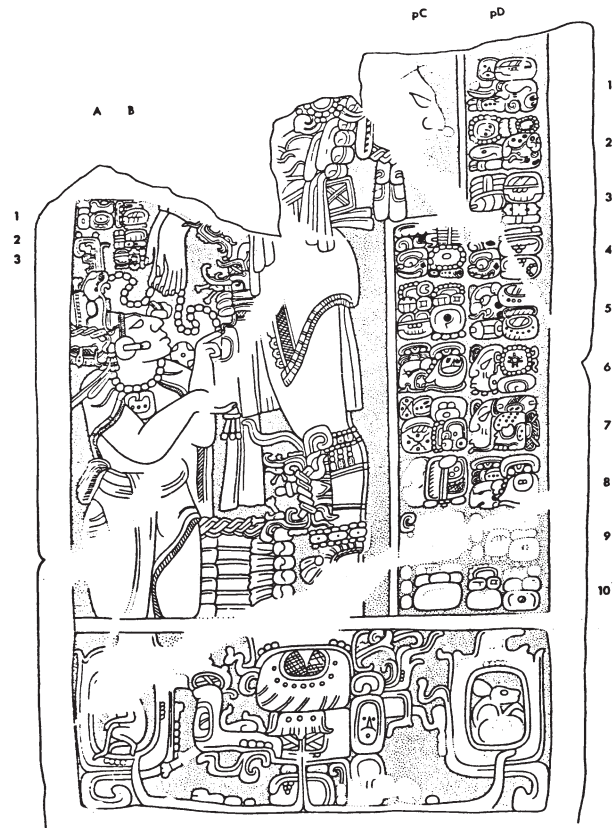


Fig. 6 Stela 7 (drawing by Ian Graham).

the ruler is responsible for uniting our place to the celestial and underworld realms. His blood nourishes the earth and the heavens, from which spring the eternal cycles of the sun, Venus, and the moon, the bodies whose travels regulate our lives and most visibly unite this earth with the cycles of the heavens. I agree with the suggestion of David Freidel, Susan Yaeger, and Maria Masucci (this volume) that this stacking of information signals a process of transformation: in this case, the transformation of blood to sustenance for place, ancestors, and supernaturals.

Format: The River Side

The river side of each stela shows the same historical ruler who is portrayed on the temple side. On the river side, the ruler always wears the traditional Yaxchilán war outfit, composed of a spear, a long scarf, a flexible shield, and a short kilt fringed with jaguar claws. The glyphs on the surviving river sides record the date of a capture and the lengthy titles of the king.

Both sides of these stela have formal precedents at Yaxchilán. The major images, a ruler in profile, letting blood, and the ruler as warrior, appear on Yaxchilán stelae from the Middle Classic Period. Stela 27 is the earliest dated stela at Yaxchilán. It records the Period

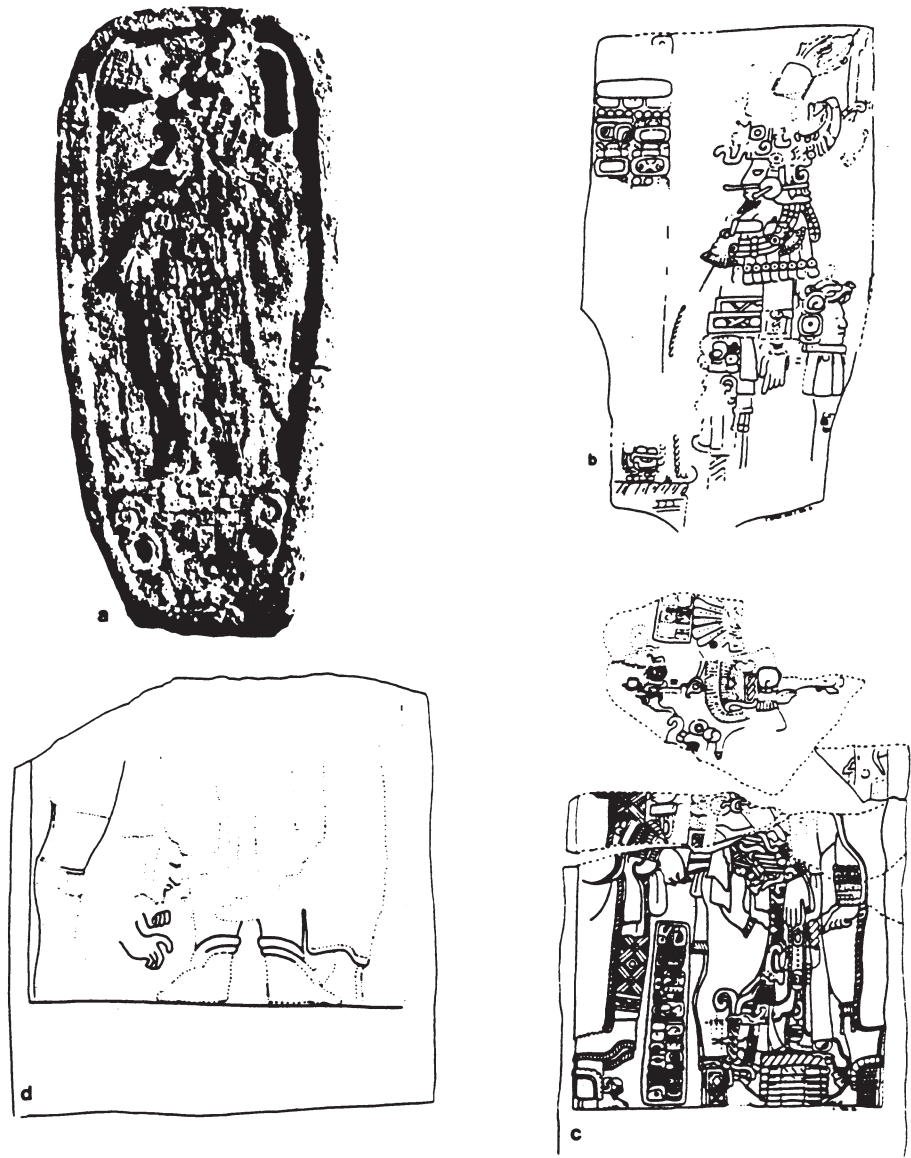


Fig. 7 (a) Stela 2 (photo from Maler 1903; reprinted with permission from the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology); (b) Stela 27 (drawing by Carolyn Tate and Constance Cortez); (c) Stela 3 temple side (drawing by Carolyn Tate); (d) Stela 3, river side (drawn by Carolyn Tate).

Ending 9.4.0.0 and shows a ruler letting blood into a receptacle. Stela 2 marked the Period Ending 9.9.0.0.0 and portrays a Yaxchilán king with a spear, as a warrior. The first known stela of the Late Classic period, Stela 3, combines bloodletting iconography on the temple side and warrior imagery on the river side. This beautiful stela became the standard Period-Ending format for the remaining ten katuns of Yaxchilán history, and for all the stelae in this study (see fig. 7). Stelae 10 and 11, erected by Bird Jaguar IV, are variants on this theme. Stela 10 is the marker for the Period Ending 9.16.15.0.0, and Stela 11 is Bird Jaguar's accession monument (see Maler 1903 for illustrations of these stelae). Several other stelae of which only fragments are known were also double format Period-Ending stelae: 8, 30, and 31, and an unnumbered fragment found in the pedestal platform of Stela 3 (see fig. 12 below).

Reconstruction of the Hieroglyphic Data

The temple side of the stelae shows a ruler bloodletting in a cosmic setting, and the river side portrays the ruler as warrior. The two sides of the stelae contained different types of historical data as well. Because various examples of the temple and river sides are preserved, with the aid of a thorough chronology of the site (Tate 1986: 426–430), it is possible to reconstruct the dates and events of some of the eroded monuments.

Several texts survive on the temple sides of the stelae. A clearly preserved hieroglyphic text on the temple side of Stela 3 (see fig. 3) records a verb and the name of the ruler. The verb is the completion hand (T713b; Thompson 1971: fig. 32). “His first katun as ahau of the lineage” (noted by Proskouriakoff 1964:185) is what he completed, and Bird Jaguar, 6 Tun, Captor of Great

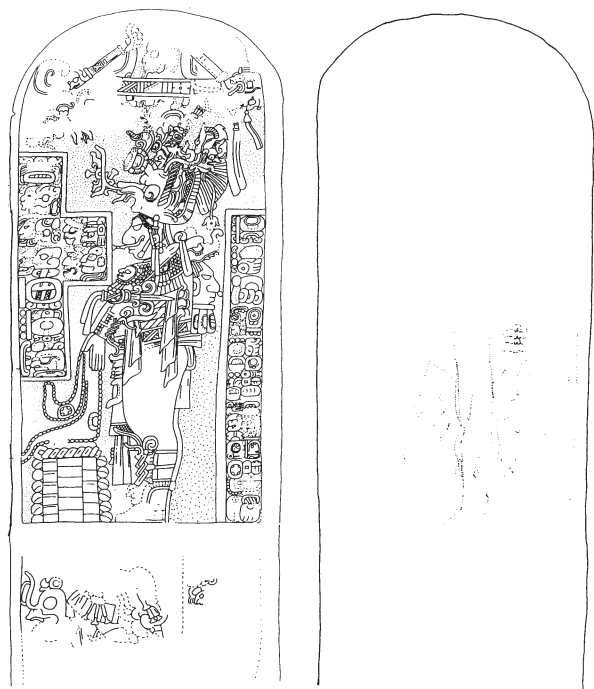


Fig. 8 Stela 6 (drawing by Carolyn Tate; temple side drawn after the field drawing of Ian Graham; river side drawn by Carolyn Tate).

Moon, Blood of the Throne of Yaxchilán is named as the ruler. These titles refer to Bird Jaguar 3, father of Shield Jaguar the Great (Tate 1986:469a) and prove that this is the earliest stela of this group.

On Stela 6, temple side, survives a Long Count date with head variant numerals (see fig. 8). The date can be clearly read as 9.11.16.10.13 5 Ben 1 Uayeb, and the event recorded is the completion of two katuns as *ahau* of the lineage by Bird Jaguar 3. Thus, the date of Stela 3, the completion of one katun as *ahau* of this ruler, can be easily reconstructed as 9.10.16.10.13, and his accession date as 9.9.16.10.13, although no known monument records that date.

Stelae 1 and 4 contain 819 day counts prior to Hotun Endings. The focal event on the temple sides of these stelae were Period Endings.

From this sample, it is possible to generalize that the hieroglyphic information on the temple sides of the stelae concerned accession anniversaries and Period Endings celebrated by the rulers. Some glyphic data also survive on the river sides of several stelae. The three stelae with legible glyphs on their river sides were originally on the edge of the platform of the South Acropolis. As the ancient visitor climbed the steep stairway to Structure 41, three images of Shield Jaguar as a warrior loomed at the summit.

At over 4 m tall, Stela 19 was the largest of the stelae in front of Structure 41 (see fig. 9). Maler (1903) gave a sufficient description of the temple side to prove that it

was a three-register cosmogram. The river side of this stela was one of the records of the capture of Ah Ahau, on the date (9.12.8.14.0) 11 Ahau 3 Pop. Proskouriakoff (1963) thought, and I agree, that this stela was probably the original record of the capture of this prisoner. The nominal phrase referring to Shield Jaguar on this monument suggests he was young when this stela



Fig. 9 Stela 19 (photograph from Maler 1903; reprinted with permission from the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology).

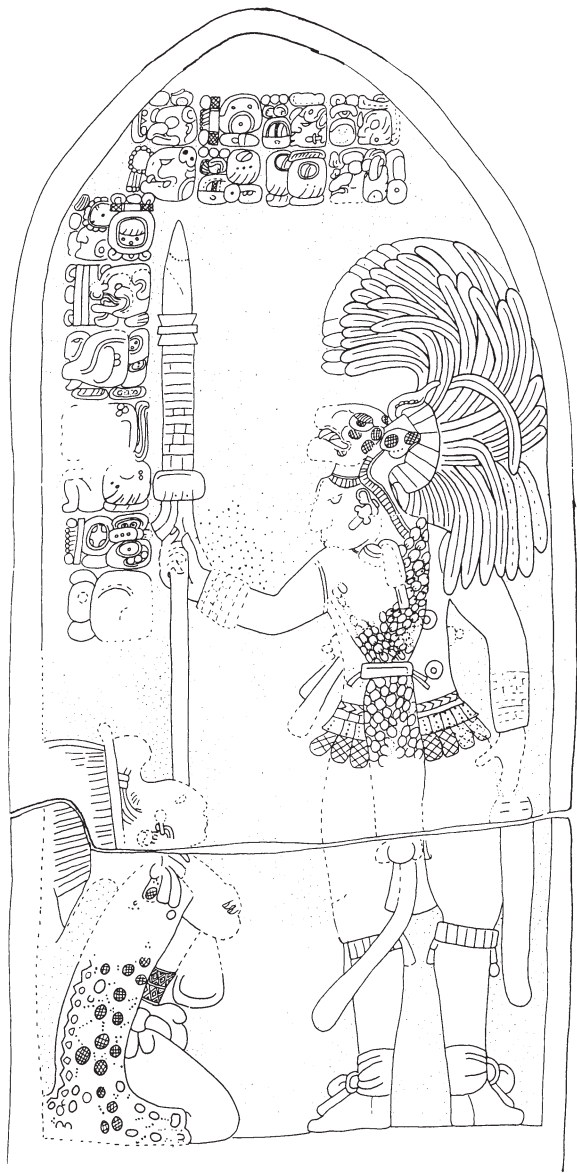


Fig. 10 Stela 20 (drawing by Carolyn Tate after the field drawing by Ian Graham).

was erected. When he captured Ah Ahual, Shield Jaguar was in his second katun of life. The Maya kings did not usually record the katuns of a ruler's life until he began his third. Shield Jaguar lived to be around ninety-five years old, and his 4 and 5 katun titles always appear in his nominal phrases. The capture statement on Stela 19 includes no katun title, and it is likely that this stela was carved before 9.12.15.0.0, when he earned his 3 Katun title.

Accepting that Stela 19 was carved to commemorate an important event shortly after 9.12.8.14.0, then there are two possible reconstructions of the date of the stela: Shield Jaguar's accession on 9.12.9.8.1, or the Hotun

Ending 9.12.10.0.0. I think that it is most likely the record of his accession, because no known stela records this important occasion. It was also the tallest stela and located in the center of the group that faced the long ascent from the valley, making it the most prominent stela on the acropolis.

Stela 20 (see fig. 10) records the date 9.13.9.14.14 6 Ix 16 Kankin as the date of the capture of Ah Kan by Shield Jaguar, who is here named with a 3 katun title. The temple side of Stela 20 probably recorded the Period Ending 9.13.10.0.0, the only Period Ending between the capture of Ah Kan and the time Shield Jaguar attained his 4th katun.

Following a similar line of reasoning as for Stela 19 and 20, if the temple side of Stela 18 (see fig. 11) represented a Period Ending, the next Period Ending after the capture of Ah Chuen on 9.14.17.15.12 is the Katun Ending 9.15.0.0.0.

All the buildings with which Period-Ending stelae were associated faced northeast, toward the summer solstice sunrise, and the river. All of them had lintels or steps that documented accessions of rulers. The vertical format of the stela was chosen as the public document of the primary function of the rulers. What does the ver-

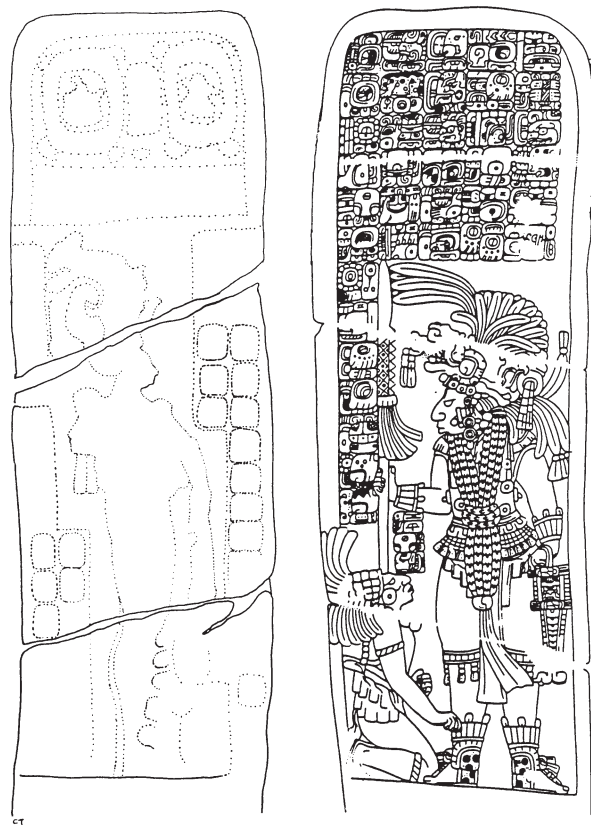


Fig. 11 Stela 18 (temple side drawn by Carolyn Tate; river side drawn by Ian Graham).

tical shape and the format of the stelae reveal about the ideal they were meant to convey?

The Cosmogram

The Mayas conceived of the universe as having three superimposed levels: the heavens, the underworld, and the terrestrial realm. In plan, the universe is quadrilateral or circular with four important points, which new evidence interprets as the solstitial rise and set points, rather than the European concepts of the cardinal directions (see Vogt 1985). In the center of the four directions is an axis mundi connecting the three levels of the cosmos, which reaches above to the zenith and below to the nadir of the sun's transit (Vogt 1985).

On these Yaxchilán Period-Ending stelae, images of the royal ancestors and the heavenly bodies appear above the ruler and the sacred territory appears below the ruler. The ruler and his blood are the axis that connects the ancestral heavens and the underworld. The form of the stela is a symbol of the axis mundi, and the ruler is its personification.

Many Maya monuments subtly demonstrate the concept of the axis mundi. On the Sarcophagus Lid in the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque, Pacal is shown falling into the underworld as he died, via the axis mundi portrayed as a tree, marked with God C signs. That it is a tree is shown by the glyph woody material, *te*, on the trunk (Schele 1976:28).

The modern Maya still contact their ancestors through trees and crosses. Evon Vogt related that the modern Tzotzil erect crosses at the sacred spots in their environment; the crosses serve as a "doorway," a "channel of communication to some deity in the cosmological system" (Vogt 1981:120, 1976: chapters 1 and 3). The concept of the tree or axis as the medium for the attain-

ment of immortality persists, as indicated by the gloss for the Spanish word *inmortal* in the de Delgaty *Vocabulario Tzotzil*. The word is *yoyal balumil*, *eje de la tierra*, literally, axis of the earth (Tate 1980:72).

The World Tree at Palenque was marked with the God C image. God C appears on the loincloth of rulers engaged in Period-Ending sacrifices at other sites. It symbolizes the lineage blood that has been shed. What is shown is not the act of letting blood, but the results. All Maya Period-Ending stelae had to make some reference to bloodletting; but at Yaxchilán no God C loincloth was needed to symbolize the bloodletting because it was explicitly portrayed. The ruler's progenitors are shown above him, and his blood and bloodline are organized pictorially into a vertical composition symbolizing the axis mundi.

In Classic times, I suspect that the stelae were markers of sacred place in the ceremonial center. The axis mundi was located between the temples that recorded the history of the sacred lineage and the plazas where the people convened.

During the Period-Ending and accession ceremonies, the king probably sacrificed his blood in the privacy of the temples. Outside, on the steps of the temples, the members of the royal court looked toward the Plaza. They saw the images of the kings letting blood on the ancient stelae. The populace, down in the Plaza, looked up toward the temples. On the same stelae, they saw the larger-than-life images of generations of kings as the vanquishers of enemies. Anyone traveling on the Usumacinta who looked up at the majestic ceremonial center also saw generations of warriors guarding the site. For both the priests and the populace, the stelae were carved to portray an ideal: eternal sacrifice of self and captives as the proper behavior to ensure harmony among the territory, the ancestors, and the cosmos.