

## *A Carved Wooden Box from the Classic Maya Civilization*<sup>1</sup>

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The finding of any wooden object from the Classic Maya civilization is a rare event. While the small box described here is of unknown provenience and is in a private collection, the long text with which it is carved makes it of exceptional importance. It measures 15.3 cm. long and 4.37 cm. high, with lid. The material is a hardwood, probably sapodilla, and the surface has been rubbed with red hematite pigment. The box is oblong in shape with four feet, and comes in two pieces; inside is a small stone figurine of relatively crude workmanship, probably from the Mixtec area and of much later date than the box itself.

How such a perishable object could have survived almost 13 centuries of destructive forces is a mystery, given the wet, tropical conditions prevailing in the Maya lowlands. One possible explanation is that it might have been found in a cave. A very similar, although plain, box was discovered by David Pendergast in the cave of Actun Polbilche, near the Sibun River in Belize. Within it was a bone bead, a cut shell, a stingray spine, a bone needle, an obsidian flake, a bone pin, and a fragment of jade, and lying nearby were 34 pottery vessels belonging to the last decades of the Classic and the early part of the Post-Classic (Pendergast 1974). However, it is certain that the carved box illustrated here is much earlier, dating to the end of the seventh century A.D. It is also definite that our box was manufactured in the Tortuguero region of Chiapas, not far west of Palenque, and it is not unlikely that the limestone hills above Tor-

tuguero could have contained the cave that produced the box.

The upper surface of the lid has been carved with the standing figure of a Maya lord, grasping a staff in one hand and what may be a knife in the other. He wears high-backed sandals and a headdress felled on the front with the jawless head of a long-lipped god; a Moan-bird feather is fixed to the top of the deity's head. Unfortunately, the glyphs above and below the figure are badly eroded and almost impossible to read.

The remaining text is extraordinarily long for such a tiny object, consisting of 41 glyphs arranged on the sides and on the bottom. It will be seen that the glyphs running around the lid are to read in pairs with those on the sides of the body, and that the text continues unbroken on the bottom. There is a series of dates given which all seem to fall within the late seventh century. At F1 is one of the Emblem Glyphs for Palenque, and at E1, G1, and P2 the name of a person who appears prominently on Stela 6 at Tortuguero, possibly the lord in whose honor this masterpiece was fashioned. Not only are the glyphs themselves in Palenque style, but there are several glyphs and glyph combinations which are typical of Palenque. Tortuguero, on the basis of its inscriptions, was subsidiary to Palenque, and one would expect to find glyphic conventions of the latter site on objects manufactured at the former.

Accordingly, I have paired the glyphs of the remaining text and read them as follows:

<sup>1</sup>I thank my colleague Floyd G. Lounsbury for a number of useful comments on the inscription on the box, as well as David H. Kelley and Peter Mathews (who drew my attention to the importance of Stela 6 from Tortuguero). The drawings are by Diane Griffiths Peck.

A1	6 Etz'nab	L1	11.x
B1	11 Tzec	K2	1 tun
A2	2 days	L2	seating } "enthronement"
B2	end of haab	M1	113.168:188 } "enthronement"
C1	8 Ahau	N1	229.617a: 126? (Initial Sign of pottery texts)
D1	13Tzec	M2	9 Manik
C2	74.743? (cf. Pal. Inscr. E. Q4)	N2	5 days lacking to completion of Pop
D2	x:88.229	O1	seating } "enthronement" (with variant main sign)
E1	168:751a (name, see Tort. 6. A3: B8: D8: F5)	P1	113.x } "enthronement" (with variant main sign)
F1	Palenque Emblem Glyph	O2	12.669:? (deceased?)
E2	2 uinals	P2	751a (name, same as E1, G1)
F2	less one day?	Q1	} D.N. 1.11.5
G1	168:751a (same as E1)	R1	
H1	8 Cauac	Q2	
G2	12 Yaxkin	R2	seating } "enthronement" (with variant main sign)
H2	seating } "enthronement"	S1	113.x
I1	113.168:188 } "enthronement"	S2	79:534.181 (action glyph, cf. Tik. L3, H3)
J1	95.632.575 (cf. D.38a, 41b)	S3	115.614:515:? ("in the temple")
I2	Muan	S4	11.74:575.? ("south")
J2	511?.580	S5	12.669:? (deceased?)
K1	672 var.x		

The calendrical information might be summarized as follows:

A1-B1	6 Etz'nab 11 Tzec	(9.12. 6.17.18)	Date 1
A2	2 days	+ 2	
<hr/>			
C1-D1	8 Ahau 13 Tzec	(9.12. 7. 0. 0)	Date 2
B2	end of haab		
E2-F2	2 uinals, less one day	+ 1.19	
<hr/>			
H1-G2	8 Cauac 12 Yaxkin	(9.12. 7. 1.19)	Date 3
K2	1 tun (D.N.?)	+ 1. 0. 0?	
<hr/>			
		(9.12. 8. 1.19?)	Date 4
<hr/>			
M2-N2	9 Manik 15 Pop	(9.12. 7.14. 7)	Date 5
Q1-Q2	D.N. 1.11.5 <sup>2</sup>	+ 1.11. 5	
<hr/>			
	(9 Eb 15 Ceh)	(9.12. 9. 7.12)	Date 6

Date 1, two days before the tun ending, has no action glyph with it, nor is the tun ending followed by one. However, the "seating" glyph immediately followed by a glyph prefixed with 113 is associated with Dates 3, 4, 5, and 6. I am informed by Floyd Lounsbury that the 133.168:188 combination, along with "seating", signifies "enthronement" in Palenque texts, and he considers that the head substituting for 168:188 in Dates 5 and 6 is merely a variant.

There is, of course, always room for doubt in in-

scriptions from the greater Palenque region. The 39-day interval from Date 2 to Date 3 is expressed in a unique manner, rather than by the usual Distance Number, if this reading is correct: this would mean that the superfix of the Quincunx glyph at F2 is to be interpreted as "less one", going counter to the conclusion of Thompson (1950: 170-1) that Quincunx only substitutes for the usual kin sign in Distance Numbers when the coefficient is 5 or 7. He reads this in Yucatec as *bix* on the basis of this usage in Yucatec, Pokoman, Kekchi, Quiché, and

<sup>2</sup>David Kelley has noted to me the close approximation of this interval, 585 days, to the standard Maya Venus period, 584 days.

Cakchiquel; however, in other Mayan languages, this restricted application of the classifier is not found (Floyd Lounsbury, personal communication). The 1 tun glyph at K2 may or may not be a Distance Number; if it is, then the hypothetical Date 4 lacks the Calendar Round equivalent. I do think that it is implied, however, since 1 tun is immediately followed by an “enthronement” glyph pair. Of considerable interest is the “lacking” glyph with number five superfixed before the Pop month sign at N2. Such an employment of the glyph has so far been known only to express the idea that 5 tuns were lacking to the end of the current katun, that is, the fifteenth tun had been reached (Thompson 1950: 191-2). It therefore seems that the reading “five days lacking until the end of Pop” is called for here. Finally, the obvious Distance Number at Q1-Q2, like the 1 tun glyph at K2, reaches no expressed date, nor does it tell one whether to count

forward or backward.

It would be rash to claim a final and definitive interpretation of the inscription, but there are some suggestive clues. The glyphs at O2 and S5 imply that the personage who appears to be the principal figure in the text (168: 751a, *Ah Balam* “Lord Jaguar”?) is deceased. The dates refer to various occasions on which he seated himself upon his throne, presumably at Tortuguero, while the final four glyphs carved on the underside of the box suggest ceremonies in his honor to be carried out in a temple placed to the south, either in Tortuguero, or in the parent center, Palenque. Lastly, the box is some way, either by descent as an heirloom or, more likely, by ancient looting of the tomb of “Lord Jaguar” himself passed into the hands of a Post-Classic *cacique* and was deposited by him, together with a Mixtec figurine, in a remote cave of inland Chiapas.



Fig. 1. *The Box itself.*

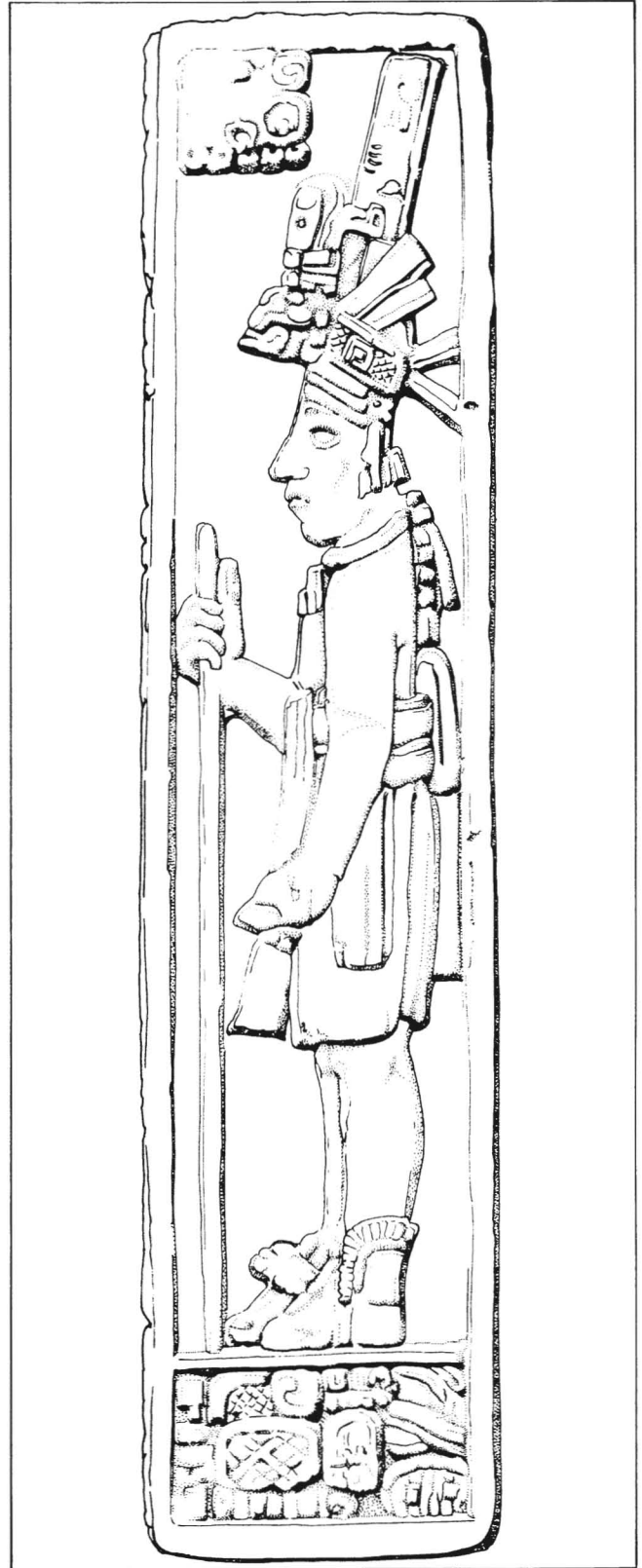


*Fig. 2. The side of the box.*





*Fig. 3. The top of the box.*



*Fig. 4. The top of the box, illustrated.*

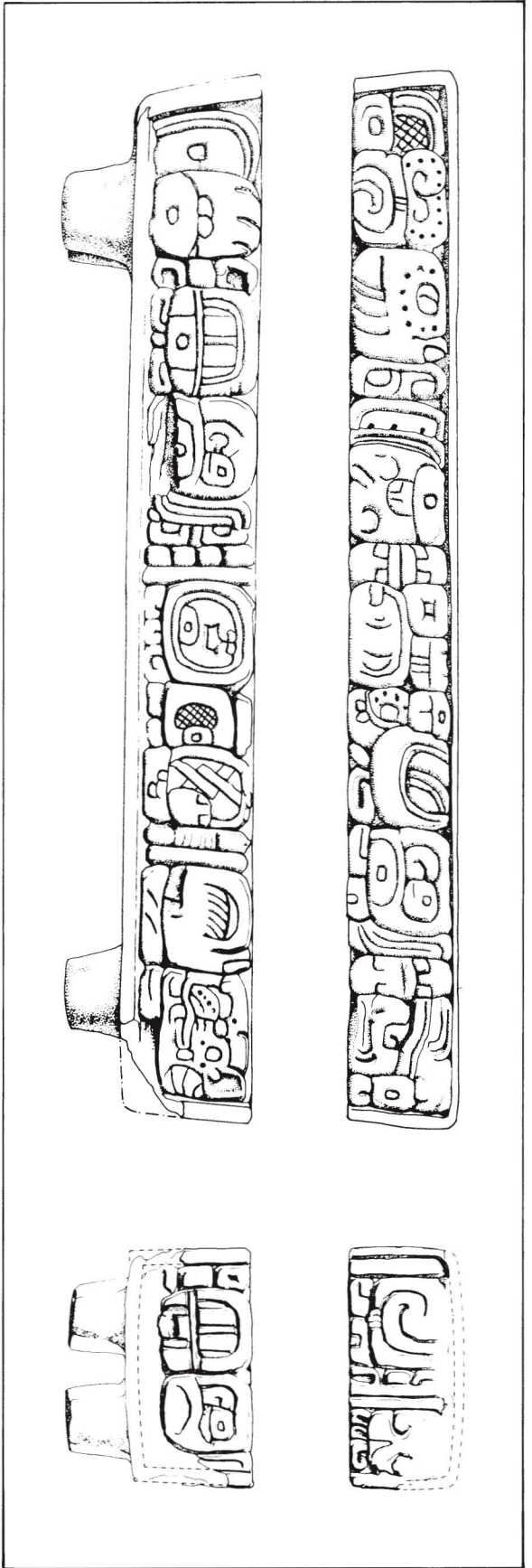


Fig. 5. The right side and top end.

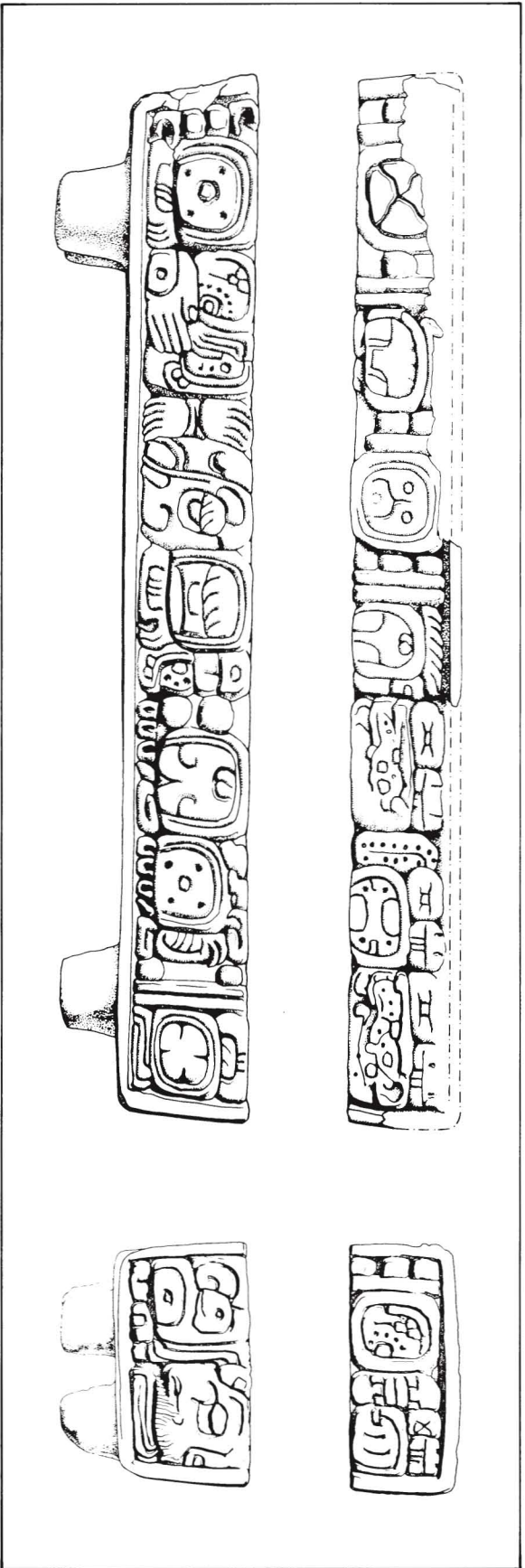


Fig. 6. The left side and bottom end.

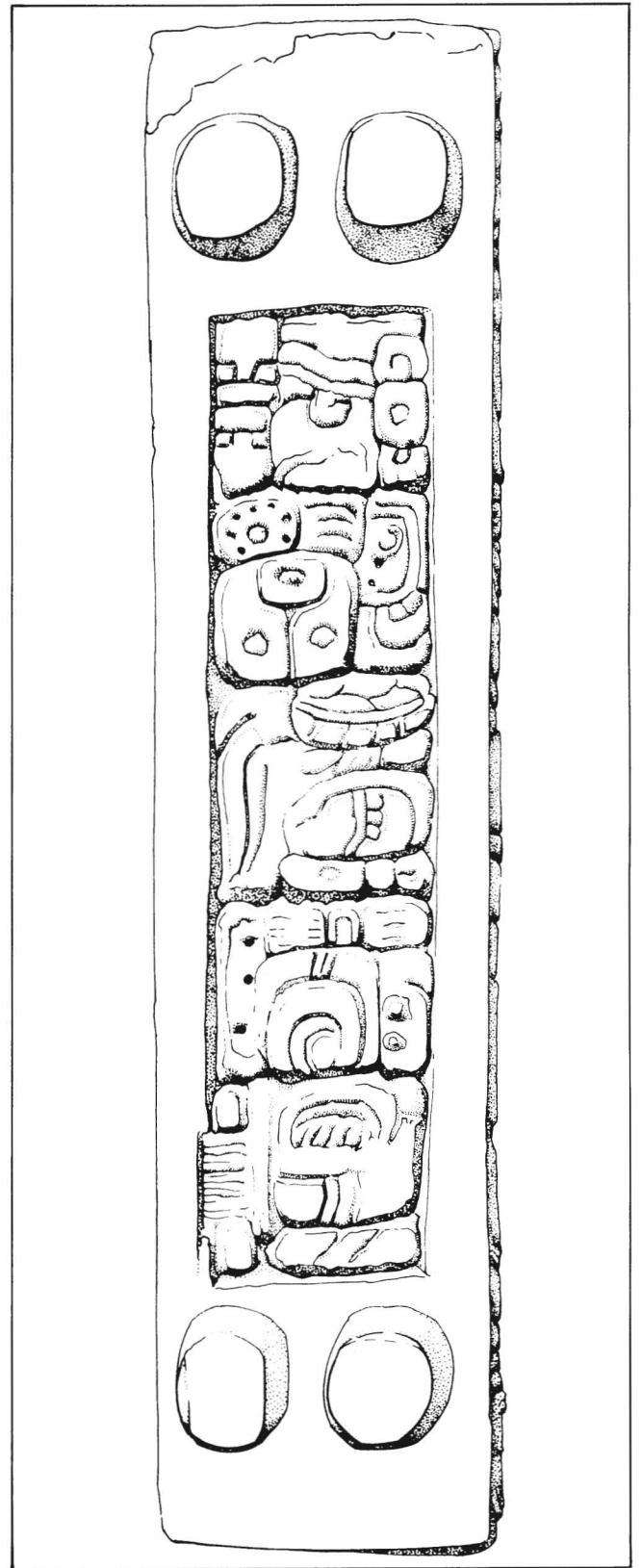
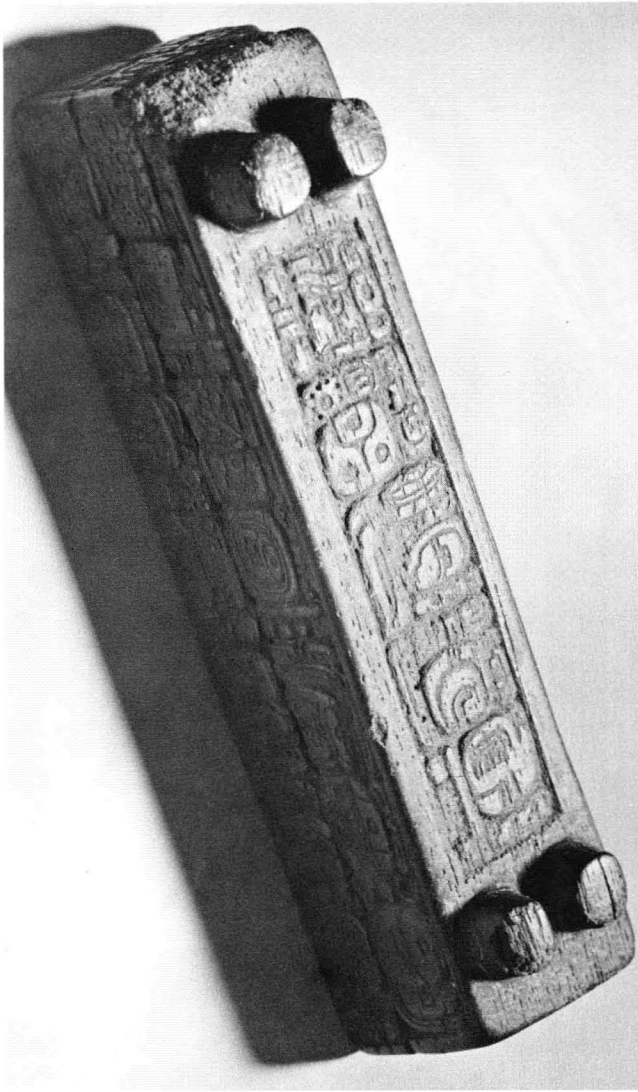


Fig. 8. The underside, illustrated.

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