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Recovered History: Stela 11 of Coba

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In memory of Joaquín García-Bárcena

Until only a short while ago, specifically the year 2010, it was thought that only the upper portion of Stela 11 had survived the vicissitudes of time. Erected in front of the final stairway of Structure 1 of the Coba Group, in Patio A (Figure 1), this fragment was located inside a small, low-walled shrine atop a stone pavement, with its carved side facing west. A circular

masonry altar was positioned directly in front of the monument, with two square altars a few meters further to the west (Figures 2 and 3). It should be noted that the stela, its shrine, and the group of altars were initially investigated by the archaeologists Jaime Garduño Argueta and Antonio Benavides Castillo in the 1970s (Benavides Castillo 1976).

The first written reference to Stela 11 is from notes taken by Teobert Maler during

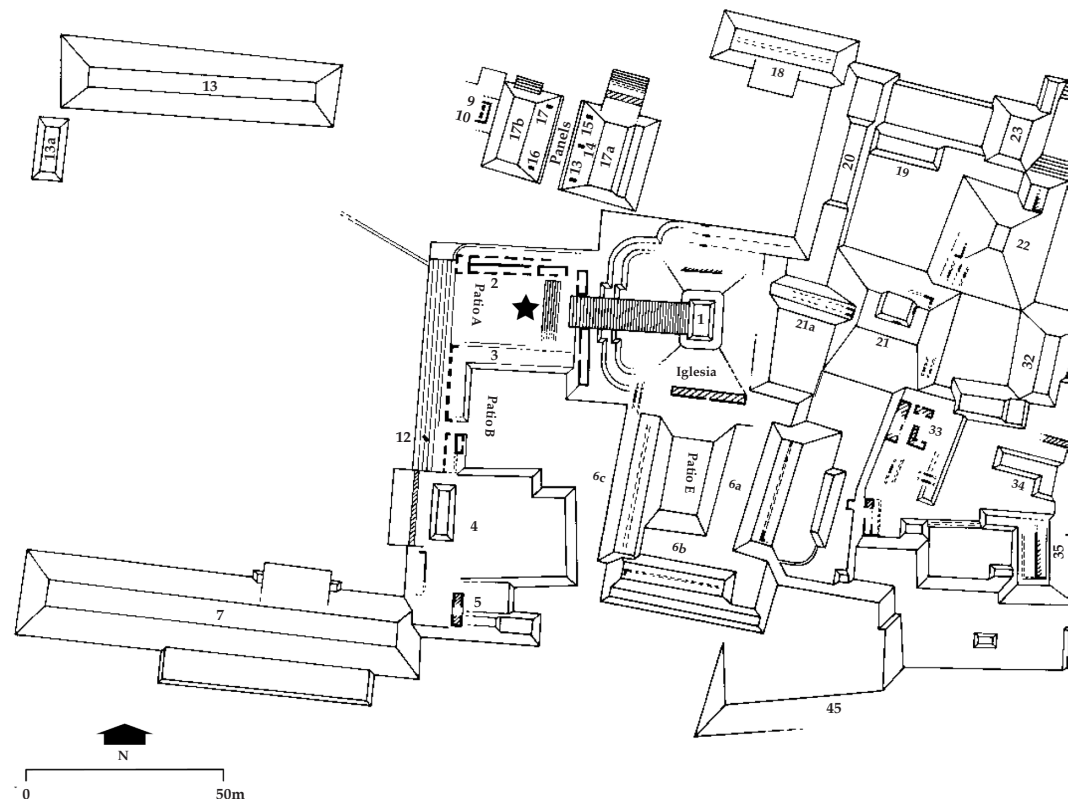


Figure 1. Location of Stela 11 in the Coba Group (after Graham and von Euv 1997:Map 1).



Figure 2. The upper fragment of Stela 11, its shrine, and the circular altar in front (photo: María José Con Uribe).

his short stay at the site in 1891:

People today call this slab the “table-top.” Peraza tells me that the Indians of Chemax claim that their ancient “saint” is buried here, and that the day they recover their former empire the temple will be opened anew and their “saint” disinterred. (Maler 1932:13, authors’ translation)

The second mention is provided by Thomas Gann, who also alludes to the principal structure of the Coba Group, which he calls Nohku,¹ as well as Stelae 9 and 10 and their respective altars, where he found the remains of burned candles and a metal receptacle that, he assumed, were used to burn incense. Servolo Canul, Gann’s chiclero guide, told him that hunters were accustomed to burning a candle in front of the “sacred idols” carved on the stelae in order to invoke the aid of the ancient deities that still ruled the forest, lakes, and cenotes, since they considered them more effective than Christian gods in bringing about a good hunt (Gann

1926:117-118). This tradition of honoring Stela 11 continued until many years later:

The few Catholics of Coba, lacking any meeting place for religious ceremonies related to agriculture, carry their offerings to the archaeological zone and place them before a

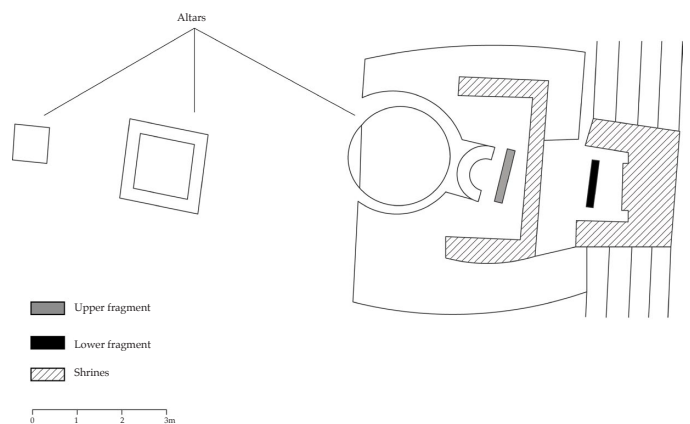


Figure 3. Architectural plan showing the location of the upper and lower fragments of Stela 11 as well as their respective shrines and altars (after Con Uribe 2011:66).

¹ This means “great temple” or “big temple” (Gann 1926:119). Today it is known as La Iglesia, or Structure 1 as designated by the Proyecto Cobá.



Figure 4. Shrines of the two sections of Stela 11 (photo: María José Con Uribe).

stela, this practice being carried out individually. Sometimes they gather in groups for archaeological ceremonies, such as the mass celebrated by a Catholic priest in front of an archaeological mound when they were praying for rain. In this each week they brought *sacá* (a maize drink) before the stela that they considered to be an image of the Virgin. (Maas Collí 1977:3, authors' translation)

In 1988, when Hurricane Gilbert toppled a ramon tree that in turn caused the stela to fall over, the community considered it to be the cause of subsequent fires and the lack of rain that devastated the region. Once the stela had been re-erected (work carried out by archaeologist Luis Leira Guillermo), Justino May, the community *hmen* (shaman), conducted a ceremony of thanksgiving that took place in the Coba Group without women present (Leira Guillermo 1989). As late as 2004, María José Con observed candles burning in front of the stela, a custom now abandoned.

Carrying out a more extensive surface maintenance of the Coba Group in 2010, we found the lower fragment

of Stela 11, which was set into the first steps of the final stairway of La Iglesia (Structure 1) (Con Uribe 2011), just behind the shrine that housed the upper portion of the same stela (Figure 4). The discovery was due to the expert eye of Esteban May, a worker from Coba, who was able to recognize the surface of the monument still standing out from between the stairs (Figure 5).

During the process of liberation, we noted that the lower fragment of the monument² was surrounded by a small shrine with low and wide walls in the form of an inverted "U," which had been set into the stairway of the final construction phase of Structure 1. The north and south walls of the shrine began on the first step of the stairway and extended to the riser of the fifth step. The back wall of the shrine was sloped and probably served to support the back of the stela.

² The fragment's maximum measurements are 1.07 m in height by 1.18 m in width and 0.23 m in depth.



Figure 5. Liberation of the lower fragment by Esteban May (photo: María José Con Uribe).

The stela was not vertical when found but leaning slightly forward (Figures 6 and 7). We do not know if it was broken intentionally or if the breakage was accidental; however, it should be taken into account that there was a cist beneath the monument that might have diminished its stability and contributed to its eventual collapse. The circular cist³ was made from smaller stones than those of the fill taken from around the stela and was covered with two large stones in the form of a lid (Figure 8). A rich offering was found in its interior (Figure 9), composed of seven *Spondylus* shells, two shell beads, a snail shell, two worked fragments of mother of pearl, two fragments of gray obsidian blades, and an assemblage of greenstone pieces made up of 65 beads, two bead fragments, four pairs of earflares, nine earflare tubes, an ax,⁴ eight polished fragments, and several unpolished fragments (Figures 10 and 11).

As a related investigation, a pit was dug in front of the upper fragment of the stela; given that the monument was relocated,⁵ probably during the Postclassic, there could well have been a late offering that was not detected in previous archaeological work. The excavation only revealed the presence of three stucco floors that were previously broken, as well as loose stones and soil indicating that the front of the stela had already been dug up. Consequently, we only found an assortment of

modern offerings, such as a small prism of amethyst and two Mexican coins, a 500 peso coin from 1987 and a 100 peso coin from 1990 (Con Uribe 2011).

The excavation having been completed, the lower fragment of the stela was moved so as to protect it from the weather and from human factors, as well as to fabricate a replica that could be later located at the site.⁶ During the process of cleaning it became clear that the remains of carving were in an exceptional state of

³ The cist's dimensions are some 78 cm north-south by 66 cm east-west.

⁴ Similar to the type that hangs from the belts of Maya rulers depicted on various monuments, as in the case of Stelae 4 and 5 of Coba.

⁵ Ever since the pioneering work of the Carnegie Institution of Washington in Coba (Morley 1927, 2006; Pollock 2006; Thompson, et al. 1932), it has been held that various monuments were moved from their original placement and relocated in other sectors of the settlement. This is evident above all in those cases where only part of a stela was found standing, be it the upper or lower portion. With this in mind, we think that the upper fragment of Stela 11 might have been relocated by the ancient inhabitants of Coba at a date subsequent to its carving, a hypothesis confirmed by the discovery of the lower section and its rich offering.

⁶ The replica was created by the artist Vincent di Vincenzo, in collaboration with Johanne di Vincenzo and Jacques Morand.



Figure 6. The base Stela 11 within its shrine once excavations were complete (photo: María José Con Uribe).



Figure 7. The west face of Stela 11, showing remains of carving (photo: María José Con Uribe).



Figure 8. Cist located beneath the monument (photo: María José Con Uribe).



Figure 9. The offering at the time of its discovery (photo: María José Con Uribe).



Figure 10. Group of *Spondylus* shells found as part of the offering (photo: María José Con Uribe).



Figure 11. Greenstone and shell objects found within the cist (photo: María José Con Uribe).



Figure 12. Lower fragment of Stela 11 (photo: Vania E. Pérez Gutiérrez).

preservation, a highly unusual characteristic for the corpus of monuments from Coba.

Carefully examining the monolith's surface, we observed the finely carved legs of an individual wearing sandals and a loincloth with a long front flap (Figures 12 and 13), as well as the end of a necklace supporting a bar carved in the image of a defleshed head, with three tubular beads⁷ at the ends (Figure 14). Accompanying the central figure was a smaller, kneeling captive with hands bound, wearing earflares, a *ko'haw*⁸ headdress, and a belt around his waist (Figure 15). Iconographically, Stela 11 is similar to other Coba monuments such as Stelae 1, 4, and 6 of the Macanxoc Group, where the rulers are shown richly attired, standing on or next to smaller captives and holding large ceremonial bars (Figure 16).

In addition to the figures described, Stela 11 also contains a text composed of eighteen glyph blocks (Figure 13). The first part of the inscription corresponds to the end of columns A and B, as indicated by Ian Graham and Eric von Euw (1997) in their drawing of the upper fragment of the stela (Figure 17); the first two incomplete glyph blocks must correspond to coordinates A18 and B18.⁹ While this section of the text is difficult to understand due to the high degree of erosion and loss of some glyphs of the upper fragment, we can observe that the passage includes a nominal clause in which the name Chan Yopaat is written, preceded by what resembles a *kalo'mte'* title conflated with at least two additional elements.

Glyph A19 corresponds to a logogram of unknown

phonetic value, similar to glyph T1013 in the Thompson (1962) catalog, displaying a mask-like element and a jaguar ear. A similar reference to this name is found on Stela 1 (H16-H17), where the sequence *kalo'mte'... Chan Yopaat* is recorded (Figure 18) as part of an anthroponym of one of the rulers of Coba who acceded on 9.12.10.5.12 4 Eb 10 Yax (Gronemeyer 2004; Stuart 2010).

Unfortunately, the remaining portion of the text is illegible until one arrives once again at the inscription of the lower fragment, in columns G and H. However, in Ian Graham's drawing of the upper portion one can see part of the glyph corresponding to the final part of

⁷ In a study of Dos Pilas Stelae 1 and 17, Linda Schele and Mary Miller noted the presence of this type of element in the paraphernalia worn by the ruler Bajlaj Chan K'awill, which is described in the following terms: "Below the knot pectoral, he wears a second one—a bar carved in the form of a skull, with three cylinders attached to each end. This skull pectoral is normally worn when the king is dressed as a warrior and plans to take captives" (Schele and Miller 1986:76).

⁸ This headdress corresponds to a type of helmet made of small rectangular shell plaques that relates to the "War Serpent" depicted in the Old Temple of the Quetzalcoatl Pyramid in Teotihuacan (Taube 1992, 2000; Miller and Taube 1997; Stone and Zender 2011). This entity is tied to the war cult and was known among the Maya by the name Waxaklaju'n Ubaah Chan, "Eighteen Are the Heads of the Serpent." The rulers of different sites would wear headdresses with the image of this being, or the *ko'haw* proper (Schele and Miller 1986:76).

⁹ A15 and B15 in the numeration of Graham and von Euw (1997:45). As will be seen below (e.g., Figure 23), the discovery of a new upper fragment of Stela 11 compels this amendment.

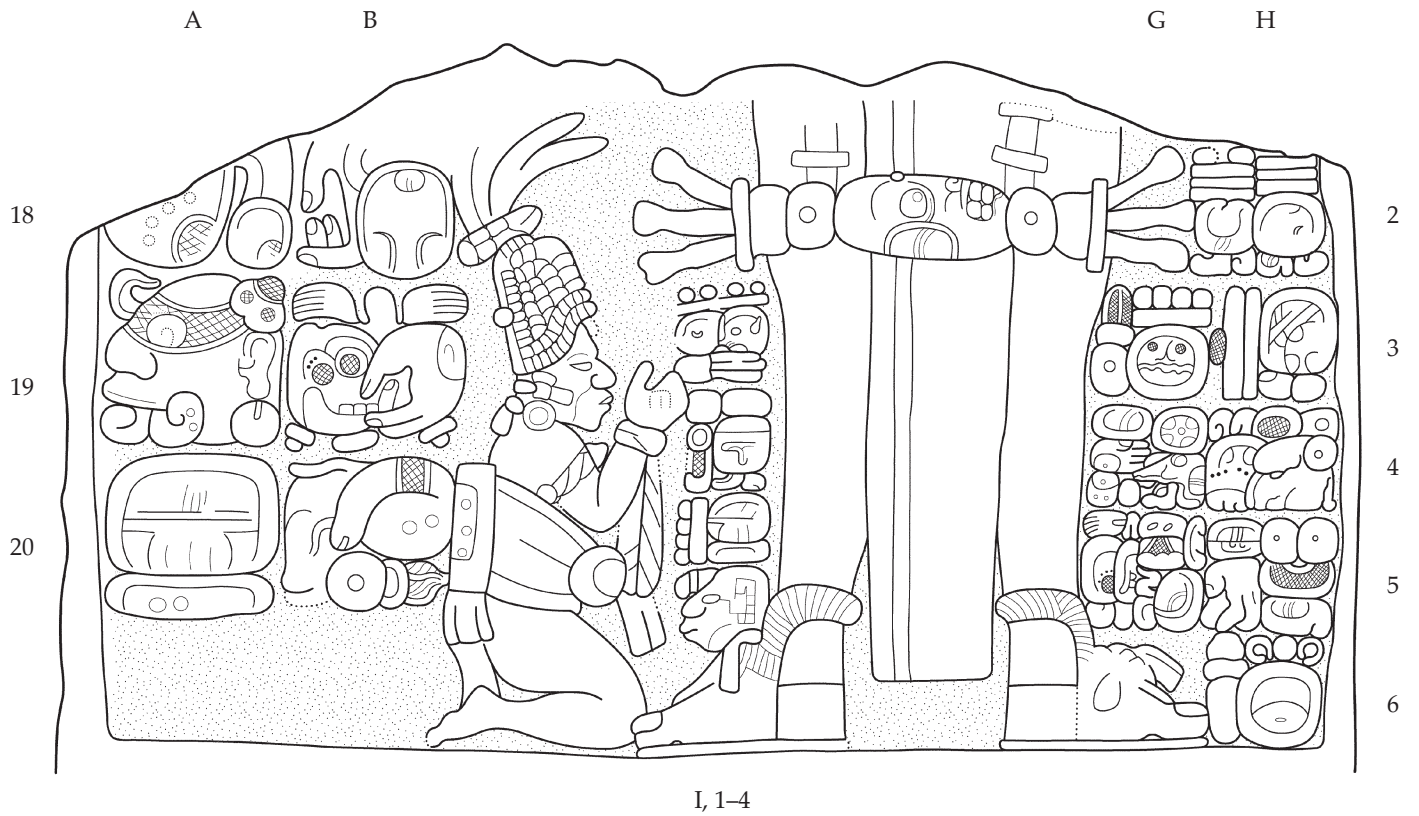


Figure 13. Lower fragment of Stela 11 (drawing: Octavio Q. Esparza Olguín).

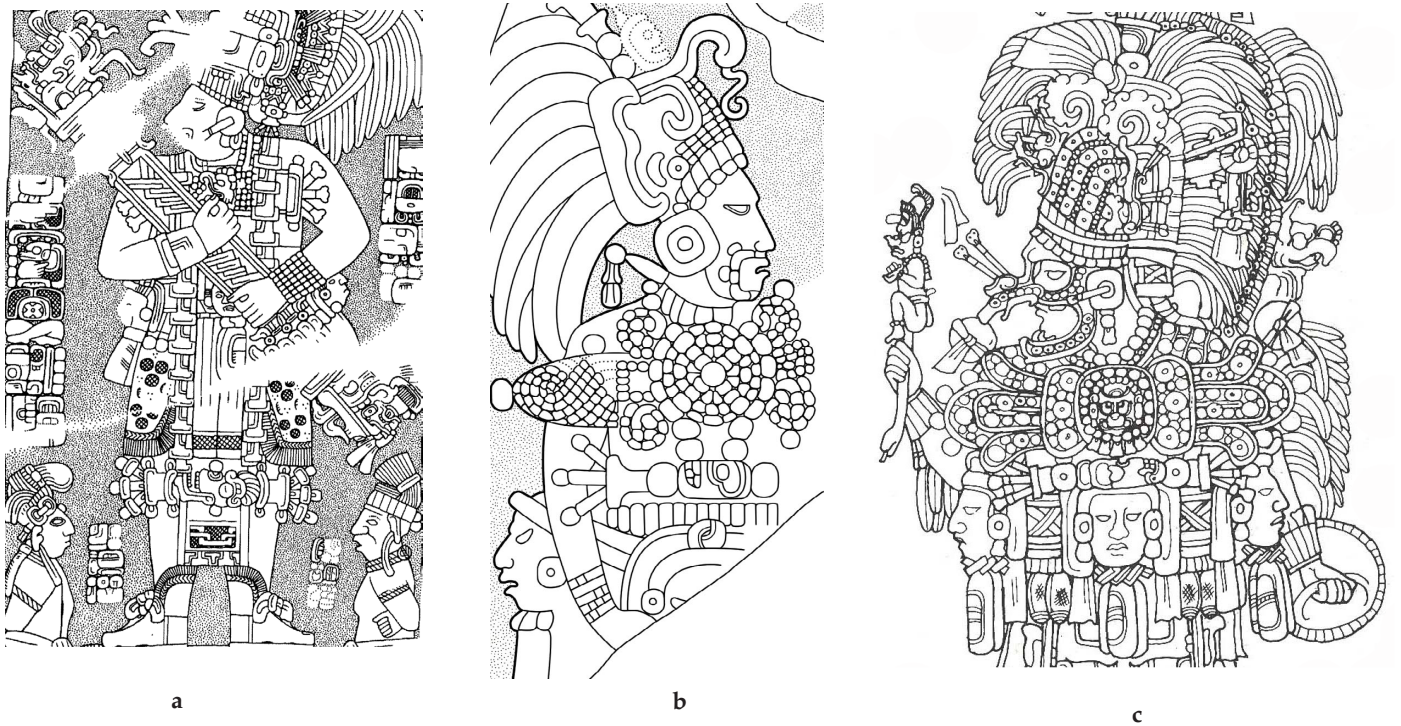


Figure 14. Depictions of skulls with tubular beads (compare that of standing figure on Stela 11 in Figure 13): (a) Coba Stela 20; (b) Pol Box Stela 3; (c) Dos Pilas Stela 1 (drawings: *a* Ian Graham and Eric von Euw © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM# 2004.15.6.18.1); *b* Octavio Q. Esparza Olguín; *c* Linda Schele.

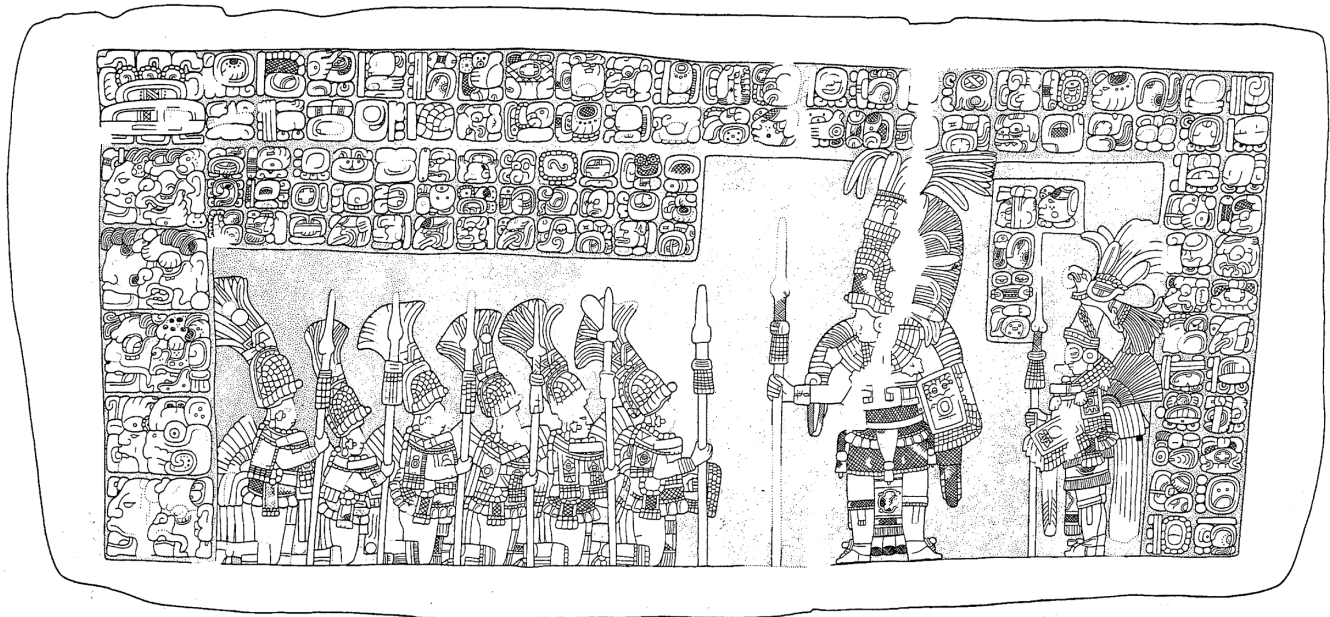


Figure 15. The *ko'haw* shell-plaque helmet: compare that of kneeling figure on Coba Stela 11 in Figure 13 with kneeling figures above on Piedras Negras Panel 2 (drawing by David Stuart).

the text, probably the expression *utz'akaj* (H1) that serves to introduce Distance Numbers, such as the one that follows in H2. From this point on the inscription reads:

(G2) 17-he-wa (H2) 15-WINAL-ji-ya (G3) ti-9-AK'AB? (H3)
 11-K'AN-JAL-wa (G4) K'AL-la-? (H4) SAK-HUN-na tu-BAH
 (G5) KAL-ma xa-MAN-na K'AWIL (H5) i-CHOK-ch'a-ji (H6)
 ti-1-AJAW

*huklaju'n he'w ho'laju'n winaljiyy ti balun ak'ab(?) buluch k'anjalaw
 k'al ... sak hu'n tu baah kal[o'm]te' xaman k'awiil ichok ch'aaj ti ju'n
 ajaw*

“seventeen days and fifteen score days on [the day] 9 Ak'bal
 11 Pop the white band was tied on the head of Xaman K'awiil,
kalo'mte'; then he scattered drops on [the day] 1 Ajaw”

As one can see, the inscription records a Distance Number of 17 days and 15 score days that connects to a Calendar Round 9 Ak'bal 11 Pop, corresponding to 9.9.19.2.3 (March 13, AD 632). The text explains that on this date a white headband-tying event was celebrated, associated with the accession to power of a character named Xaman K'awiil (who carries the prestigious *kalo'mte'* title).¹⁰ Afterwards he carries out a “scattering” ceremony on 1 Ajaw. This latter date is recorded in the Short Count



Figure 16. Coba Stela 1 (drawing: Ian Graham © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM# 2004.15.6.18.1).

¹⁰ At first we thought that the glyph might refer to a North *Kalo'mte'*, thereby adding another example to the limited attestations of this title at sites such as Ek' Balam and Ixlu (Lacadena García-Gallo 2003; Guenter 2014). However, the syntax employed in the other texts of the northern lowlands, such as the Mural of the 96 Glyphs at Ek' Balam (where we have the sequence *xaman kalo'mte'*), is a clear indication that in the case of *Kalo'mte'* Xaman K'awiil the cardinal direction is associated with the theonym K'awiil and not the title. Also, there is a tendency at Coba to place titles of rank before the nominal clause, as also seen the texts of Ek' Balam, indicating the presence of Classic Yukatek in the inscriptions of the site (Grube et al. 2003; Lacadena García-Gallo 2003, 2005).

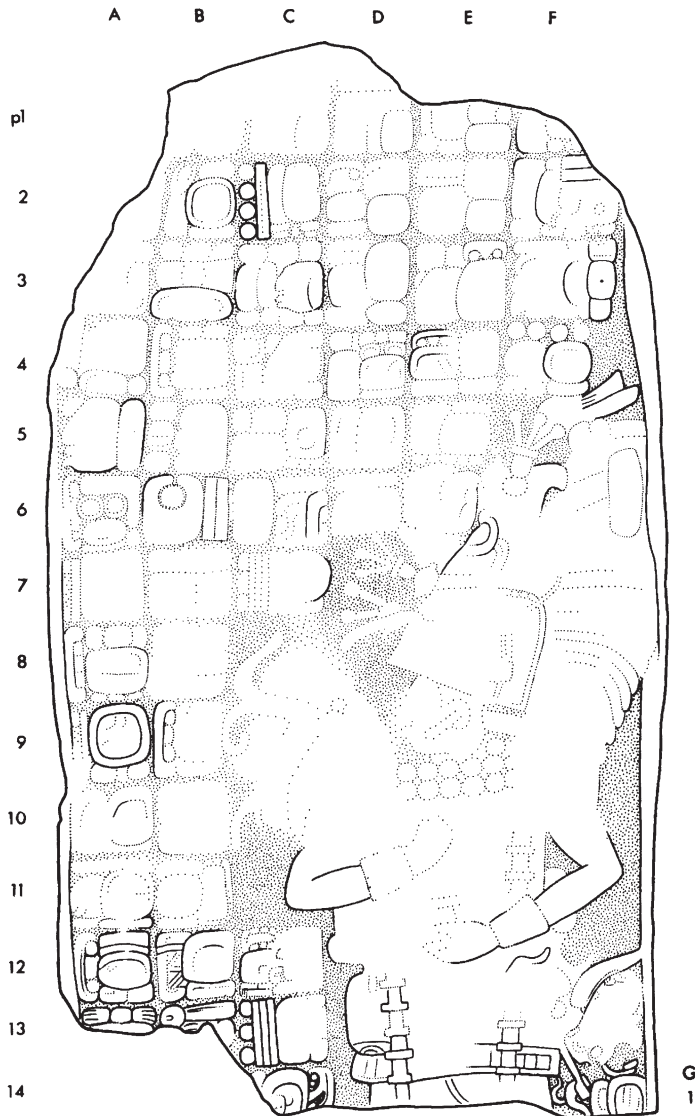


Figure 17. Upper fragment of Stela 11 (drawing: Ian Graham © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM# 2004.15.6.18.14).

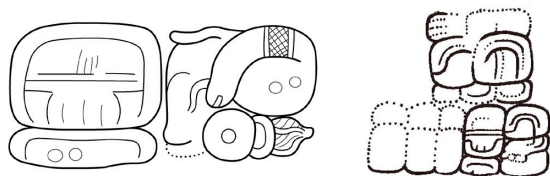


Figure 18. The anthroponym Chan Yopaat from Coba Stelae 11 and 1 (drawings: *a* Octavio Q. Esparza Olguín; *b* David Stuart, from Stuart 2010:4).

and refers to the end of the tenth *k'atun* celebrated on 9.10.0.0 1 Ajaw 8 K'ayab (January 24, 633). Given this reference it is possible to reconstruct the rest of the dates and their relationship with the Distance Number in G2–H2:

$$\begin{array}{r}
 9.10.0.0 \quad 1 \text{ Ajaw } 8 \text{ K'ayab} \\
 - \quad \quad \quad 15.17 \quad \text{Distance Number} \\
 \hline
 9.9.19.2.3 \quad 9 \text{ Ak'bal } 11 \text{ Pop}
 \end{array}$$

With these dates established, we can say that Xaman K'awiil acceded on 9.9.19.2.3 and almost a year later carried out a scattering ceremony in connection with the culmination of the tenth *k'atun* (Esparza Olguín 2016). Interestingly, this scheme is quite similar to that shown on other Coba monuments such as Stela 4, where the period ending date is recorded in the Initial Series, with retrospective references to accession in other parts of the text. Accordingly, it is possible that Stela 11 displayed the 9.10.0.0 count at the beginning of the inscription, thereby commemorating the end of the tenth *k'atun*.

Like most of the rulers documented in the monuments of Coba, Xaman K'awiil carried the *kalo'mte'* title signifying a leader of the highest rank in Classic Maya society, whose hegemony extended beyond the limits of his polity. Additionally, the structure of this ruler's name is similar to that of other individuals recorded in the corpus of Coba inscriptions, as in the case of Kalo'mte'...K'awiil, whose anthroponym is recorded on Stela 1 (G20–H20) and who was probably the founder of the dynasty (Stuart 2010).

It is important to point out that the name of Xaman K'awiil was not previously detected on any monument at the site, and his presence here has increased our knowledge of the dynastic sequence of Coba,¹¹ previously studied by investigators such as Sven Gronemeyer (2004), David Stuart (2010), Daniel Graña-Behrens (2012), and Stanley Guenter (2014), among others.¹²

Another feature of the stela is a text of four glyph blocks associated with the image of the captive, arranged in column I (see Figure 13). Although the majority of the glyphs are in a good state of preservation, the overall reading is complicated. Glyph block I1 contains the sequence 9-?-?, where the glyphs located below the number could comprise a single logogram, although it is difficult to be certain. Later, in position I2, we have the logograph **IK'** accompanied by the

¹¹ In fact, the reign of Xaman K'awiil comes between those of Rulers A and B in Stuart's (2010) list of kings.

¹² As a result of archaeological and epigraphic work undertaken in recent years by the Proyecto Cobá, it has been possible to achieve significant advances in the listing of Coba rulers, with about a dozen having been identified (Esparza Olguín 2016). The data from these investigations will be published shortly.

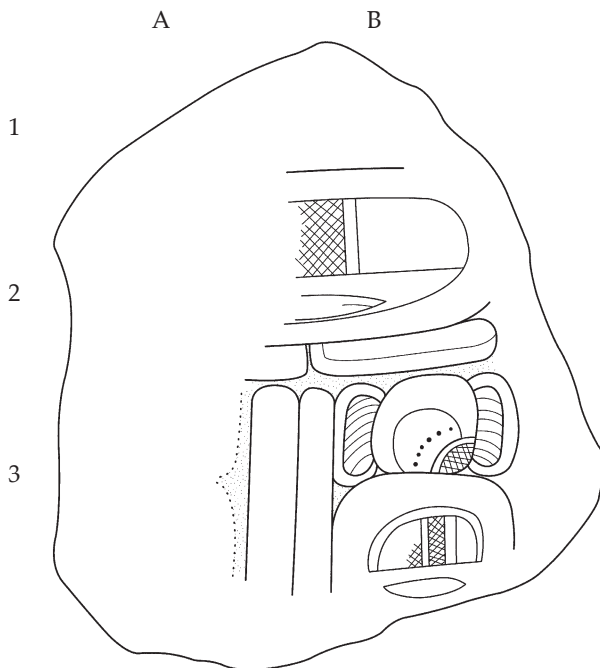


Figure 19. Stone with remains of carving, known as Fragment 1, corresponding to a part of the upper section of Stela 11 (photo: Vania E. Pérez Gutiérrez; drawing; Octavio Q. Esparza Olguín).

syllabogram *wa* in combination with other elements that are difficult to distinguish.¹³ The text closes with the expression *balun chan* and a glyph in the form of an anthropomorphic profile whose reading is uncertain. In all probability the text makes reference to the name of the captive and his place of origin, as in the case of other bound captives with short glyphic texts.

In addition to the recently discovered lower block, it is probable that a second fragment (currently located in the Coba bodega) was originally part of Stela 11, specifically the upper portion where the Long Count was recorded (Figure 19). This fragment, measuring 0.40 m high by 0.35 m wide and 0.15 m deep, was discovered at the foot of the access stairway to La Iglesia, during excavation and consolidation work in the 1970s (Jaime Garduño Argueta, personal communication 2014).

The block in question is delicately carved with part of the Initial Series Introductory Glyph, a small portion of the *bak'tun* position, and the *k'atun* glyph accompanied by the numeral 10. As mentioned previously, it is probable that the initial date of the monument was 9.10.0.0.0 1 Ajaw 8 K'ayab (January 24, 633), which at least corresponds with the numeral 10 in the *k'atun* position of the fragment's text. Furthermore, the proportions as well as the calligraphy and size of the glyphs (above all the fine carving of the internal lines) is very similar

to the lower fragment of Stela 11, such that there is sufficient basis for concluding that the piece in question is indeed a small fragment of the upper portion of the stela (Figure 20).

Modern Beliefs Regarding Stela 11

In addition to the notes taken previously by Maler and Gann with regard to the cult devoted to Stela 11, we can take into account other interesting references that permit us to measure the importance of this monument for the modern inhabitants of Coba. Above all is a brief text written by the archaeologist Antonio Benavides Castillo, who comments:

It is interesting to mention that even today Patio A constitutes an important meeting place for some Mayas who live in the Coba zone. They say that they see in Stela 11 the representation of a virgin who they call Coleb'. Before her they pray, make offerings, and light candles. Their prayers are directed at bringing good luck for the hunt or so that rain regularly soaks their crops. This magico-religious practice has existed for thirty years, since the current settlers of the *ejido* founded the settlement. It was also then that the pyramid received the name La Iglesia. (Benavides Castillo 1981:40).

From the same era comes a note by William Folan with regard to the cult directed at the stela and La Iglesia:

The stela fronting the temple is the object of considerable veneration by contemporary hunters who burn candles and incense in front of the stela-sacrificial stone before going into the forest. Local mythology associates this temple with

¹³ While the signs bear a similarity to the emblem glyph of Motul de San José, the glyphic compound is not clear enough to be certain that it refers unequivocally to this far-distant site.

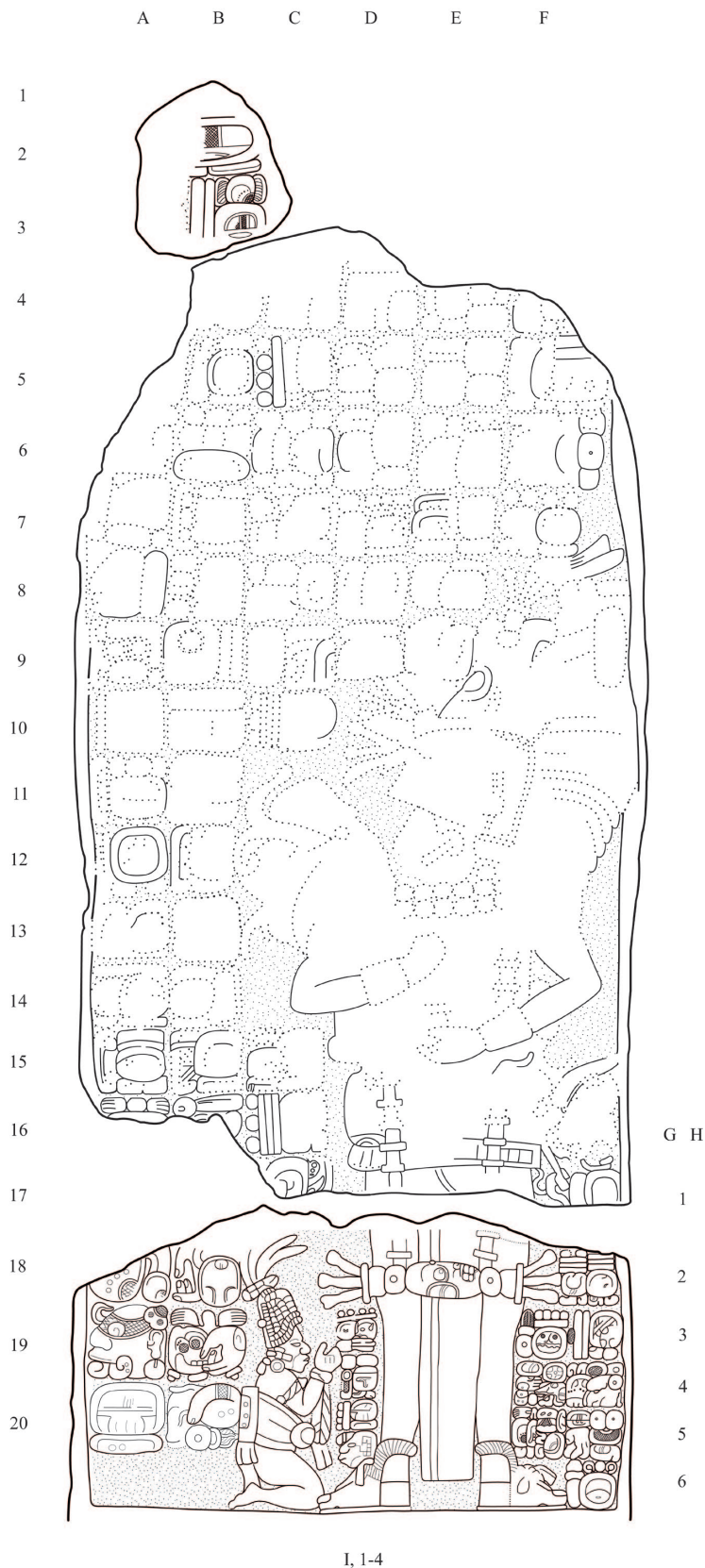


Figure 23. Constituent parts of Stela 11 now positioned (drawings of the top and bottom fragments by Octavio Q. Esparza Olguín; middle section redrawn by Vania E. Pérez Gutiérrez after Graham and von Euw 1997:45).

Chibirias (or Ix Chebel Yax in Maya), a goddess associated with regeneration. Chibirias plays an important role in Coba. She is, in effect, the contemporary patroness of this village and as such, needs to be consulted on important decisions, for example, whether to remain in or to leave the village. It is believed that if Chibirias is not informed, the person who moved out of the village could become ill or die if the goddess is not placated by a series of offerings and prayers. (Folan et al. 1983:71).

Both the account of Benavides Castillo and that of Folan¹⁴ speak of feminine deities to which the inhabitants of Coba turn in order to have a good hunt or successful harvest. In the case of Colebí,¹⁵ her name appears in an entry in the Motul dictionary, which defines her as *señora o ama de siervos y esclavos* (Ciudad Real 2001:118). Another work that mentions this personage is the *Cantares de Dzitbalché* (Barrera Vásquez 1965), where she is referred to as *Bella Dueña y Señora* (Garza et al. 1992:383). Moreover, Bastarrachea Manzano (1970) mentions that modern Maya refer to the Virgin Mary¹⁶ by the name of Colebil, who could well be a deity associated with the moon in ancient times.¹⁷ This interpretation is supported by data collected by J. Eric S. Thompson regarding the syncretism of the Maya of the Colonial era for whom “[t]he gods had the ability to merge with alien deities, as the moon goddess with the Virgin Mary; the sun god, to a lesser degree, with Jesus; and the Chacs with archangels and saints of the Roman Catholic church” (Thompson 1970: 249).

Additionally, while Chibirias remains a more enigmatic and elusive figure in the written sources of the Colonial period, we have this interesting reference by fray Bartolomé de las Casas:

¹⁴ A second note by Folan, this time contained in a publication co-authored with Piedad Peniche Rivero, also indicates that “[l]ocal mythology relates this temple [La Iglesia] to the historical Maya goddess Chibirias, better known by the Prehispanic Maya as Ix Chebel Yax. She is believed to be the wife of Itzam Za [sic], the Maya god of creation, who in Coba could be represented by the great crocodile that is said to live in Lake Coba in front of La Iglesia” (Peniche Rivero and Folan 1978:69).

¹⁵ Written as Ko’olebil in the Motul dictionary (Ciudad Real 2001). Regarding the name of this and other deities mentioned throughout this section, the orthography employed in the consulted sources is preserved.

¹⁶ In some sources it is mentioned that Colebil is also the name by which the modern Maya refer to different aspects of this deity, such as the Virgen de la Concepción or the Virgen de Fátima (Bastarrachea Manzano et al. 1998).

¹⁷ A similar idea was formulated by Mercedes de la Garza, who mentioned that Colebil is now a title that the Maya give to the Virgin Mary, but that in the Prehispanic era it must have been the name of some relevant feminine deity related to the moon.

Otra cosa referiré yo, harto nueva en todas las Indias, y que hasta hoy en ninguna parte de ellas se ha hallado, y ésta es que como aquel reino entrase también, por cercanía, dentro de los límites de mi obispado de Chiapa, yo fui allí a desembarcar como a tierra y puerto muy sano. Hallé allí un clérigo, bueno, de edad madura y honrado, que sabía la lengua de los indios por haber vivido en él algunos años; y porque pasar adelante a la cabeza del obispado me era necesario constituílo por mi vicario y roguéle y encarguéle que por la tierra dentro anduviere visitando a los indios, y con cierta forma que le di les predicase. El cual, a cabo de ciertos meses y aun creo que de un año, me escribió que había hallado un señor principal que, inquiriéndole de su creencia y religión antigua que por aquel reino solían tener, le dijo que ellos cognoscían y creían en Dios que estaba en el cielo, y que aqueste Dios era Padre y Hijo y Espíritu Sancto, y que el Padre se llama Izona, que había criado los hombres y todas las cosas: el Hijo tenía por nombre Bacab, el cual nació de una doncella siempre virgen, llamada Chibirias, que está en el cielo con Dios. [...] Añadía más: que por tiempo se habían de morir todos los hombres, pero de la resurrección de la carne no sabían nada. [...] Los señores todas estas particularidades saben, pero la gente popular solamente cree en las tres personas Izona, y Bacab, y Echuac, y Chibirias, la madre de Bacab, y en la madre de Chibirias, llamada Hischen, que nosotros decimos haber sido Santa Ana [...] Todo lo de suso así dicho me escribió aquel padre clérigo, llamado Francisco Hernández... (Las Casas 1967:648–649)

The deities mentioned by las Casas have been pointed out before by other authors such as Alfredo Barrera Vásquez and Silvia Rendón (1991), who mention that the ones alluded to in the text correspond to Itzamnah (Izona), Ek Chuah (Echuac), Ix Chel (Hischen), and Ix Chebel Yax (Chibirias). Apparently the last named was associated with painting and embroidery (see Knowlton 2015 for additional details), and may have been related to other entities such as Ix Hun Tah Dz'ib (Lady Unique Owner of the Paintbrush) and Ix Hun Tah Nok (Lady Unique Owner of the Cloth), both named in Ritual of the Bacabs (Arzápalo Marín 2007; Thompson 1970:206). Fray Diego de Landa mentions her in his *Relación* when he relates the voyage of Francisco Hernández de Córdoba to Isla de Mujeres, the land that the latter christened with this name

on account of the idols representing the goddesses of the country which he found there, such as Ix Chel, Ix Chekel Yax, Ix Hunie, Ix Hunieta. They were clothed from the waist down and had their breasts covered, as is the custom of Indian women. (Landa 1941:9)

Finally, it might be noted that Eric Thompson (1970:206) suggests that Ix Chebel Yax, as patroness of painting, brocading, and weaving might be identified with the old Goddess O, documented in Prehispanic texts and enduring under countless names after the conquest.

There is a clear link between feminine deities of the Prehispanic Maya and the Virgin Mary of the Colonial and modern periods. Both Colebil and Ix Chebel Yax are goddesses who appear in Colonial texts marked by a strong syncretism, in which they mix the qualities of

the pre-conquest gods with figures more representative of Christian cult. Thus both deities embody the mother of god, always virgin, though in the Precolumbian period associated with the moon, weaving, and the art of painting.

In a similar fashion, another feminine entity with roots in the Prehispanic era may figure in the thoughts of the inhabitants of Coba, namely Ix Macan Xoc, “Lady Hidden Shark”,¹⁸ who is mentioned in Ritual of the Bacabs (Arzápalo Marín 2007) and who Bastarrachea Manzano (1970) associates with a figure related to the dangers of transport by canoe. Likewise, the same author mentions that there could have been points of contact with other aquatic deities such as Sac Wayab Xoc “Sinister White Shark.” It is well known that one of the largest lakes in Coba is known today as Macanxoc, a local epithet of a certain ambiguity in meaning, since the possibility exists that the name may derive from the phrase *ma kin a xoc*, “I can’t read” (Thompson et al. 1932), or else from a name given to a thicket of guano palm (Maler 1932). A third option, the most viable in our opinion, is that it is a direct reference to the ancient goddess Ix Macan Xoc, in which case one may deduce her importance as a local deity for the bygone inhabitants of the settlement.

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¹⁸ Another proposal for this name is “She of the Completed Count.”

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The Further Adventures of Merle (continued)

MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON

Cacaxtla

Mural painting at Cacaxtla was unknown to everyone before Marta Foncerrada de Molina, my friend from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in Mexico City, circulated pictures that came from the site near Puebla, not anywhere near Maya territory. I had been with Marta when she went to Puebla to write up the material on Cacaxtla and for me to take pictures for her. There were no tents covering these mysterious murals, so we could get right up next to them and see the wonderful color that was still in pristine condition.

These murals had been discovered by looters who were so astounded by what they had found that, realizing they must be very important, they turned them over to the authorities instead of stealing them. If these murals had not been found intact like that, but brought to some other place, no one would have believed that they had come from near Puebla, so far from Maya territory. I took dozens of pictures of this unusual find. I sent the film to the States to be processed with instructions that 8" x 10" copies should be sent to Marta, to George Kubler at



Figure 1. The Portico, South Panel (photo: Merle Greene Robertson).



Figure 2. The Portico, South Jamb
(photo: Merle Greene Robertson).



Figure 3. The Portico, North Jamb
(photo: Merle Greene Robertson).

Yale, and to me.

Well, a funny thing happened. Later, I was at a party at the home of Donald Robertson, a professor at Tulane University and my mentor. There were probably 75 people in attendance. FedEx came to the door with a huge package for me. I didn't know anyone knew I was in New Orleans then, so why would I be getting a package? Everyone wanted to see what it was. Well, the photo company got their directions wrong and sent 18" x 20" copies of everything to me. Nobody there had ever seen the Cacaxtla murals or pictures of them, so they were all amazed. We tacked these large, beautiful, color prints on every open space on Don's walls. The rest of the time at his party was spent just looking at them. The

outcome was that Don Robertson was accused by INAH of selling photos of Cacaxtla. Don is as honest as the day is long and would never think of doing anything illegal. Someone was at the party (we didn't know who) that wanted to get him in trouble. There were people from other countries at this party, but who the guilty person was we never found out.

It wasn't until the next Mesa Redonda that we learned that Kubler had not received his copies of the Cacaxtla mural photos. What had happened was that when FedEx delivered the package at Yale, someone in Kubler's office put the package way up on top of the bookcase and never told him. A cleaning lady found it there, much later. Mystery solved.



Figure 4. The Platform, East Talud (photo: Merle Greene Robertson).



Figure 5. The Portico, North Panel (photo: Merle Greene Robertson).