Sharper than a Serpent’s Tooth: A Tale of the Snake-head Dynasty as Recounted on Xunantunich Panel 4

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Good things come in twos or threes, or so the saying goes, and this has certainly been the case with the discoveries made during this past field season at the archaeological site of Xunantunich in Belize. In June of this year, an important hieroglyphic panel was unearthed, which we designated Panel 3. Surprisingly, this panel was not raised by the rulers of Xunantunich themselves but had been hauled from another site in antiquity. Based on the type of stone, the style, and the execution of the glyphs, it clearly once formed part of a much larger hieroglyphic stair raised by K’an II, one of the dominant kings of Caracol in the seventh century. Considering the importance of the find, we promptly prepared a paper and were fortunate to see it rapidly to press (Helmke and Awe 2016). Just five weeks later, a matching Panel 4 was found as two conjoining fragments at the base of a pyramidal structure that concealed a large vaulted royal tomb within. As if these finds were not significant enough, the glyphs of the new panel convey vital historical information concerning the Snake-head dynasty that dominated the lowland Maya political arena in the seventh century. Here we present an analysis of Panel 4 (Figure 1), building...
in relation to other similar texts in the Maya lowlands, situate Panels 3 and 4. The glyphic text of Panel 4 is of the hieroglyphic stair as a whole, in order to better on the earlier study of Panel 3 (Helmke and Awe 2016).

cite just a few examples, the Romans extirpated obelisks many cultures, both ancient and more contemporary. To carry it back to the victorious kingdom may be unex ment as a result of a successful military engagement and That the ancient Maya should dismantle a monu monuments at the behest of their leaders. Thus Rome soldiers bearing the great golden candelabrum or Menorah (Holloway 1987:Fig. 3). The plunder of Israel was eventually housed in the Temple to Mars Ultor (“Mars the Avenger”), a structure raised by Augustus to accommodate the sacred objects of conquered states, where victorious generals dedicated their spoils to Mars (e.g., Barchiesi 2003).

As is well known, victorious armies frequently re sort to looting in addition to the displacement of larger monuments at the behest of their leaders. Thus Rome was not the only city in 62 BC, as the Romans shipped to Rome in antiquity, starting with those of Seti I and Psammetichus II, shipped to Rome in 10 BC on the command of Augustus (Laistner 1921; Scarré 1995:20). Honoring the drawing conditions, in which they were seized, that battle also bore great divinity effigies, serving as protective deities looking over the welfare of both the king and his armies. In these panoplies were seized, these palanquins were seized and marched triumphantly through the capital, a foreign de ity now smiling upon the victorious king. As we can see there are a great many points of equivalence here, and paramout among these is the forceful acquisition of statuary representing deities, as if the victors could accrue more divine protection by accumulating divinities in their midst and even naturalizing conquered deities. With this overview we hope to give a sense of the proclivity of victorious armies to forcibly acquire monu ments of conquered states, to better contextualize the Maya in stance involving the hieroglyphic stair of K’an II. Establishing this precedent, we surmise that additional instances exist that have yet to be identified.

However, we must also point out that martial action is not the only explanation for the transportation of monuments across the landscape. For instance, Stela 9 at Calakmul is made of dark-gray slate, which does not occur geologically in Campeche (Ruppert and Denison 1943:Plate 48; Graham and Williams 1971: 163-165; Marcus 1987: 139) (Figure 2).1 In con trast, at Caracol, located 165 km to the south, on the margins of the old city, a 36-foot high statue was erected in AD 337. This material was raised at the site between the sixth and eighth centuries (Beetz and Satterthwaite 1981:56; 74). Considering the close ties between Caracol and Calakmul it seems most likely that the slab of slate from which Stela 9 was carved was gifted to Yukno’ m Ch’een II around AD 658 by the newly enthroned K’an II. Upon its arrival to Paris in the late fifteenth century, nor was Constantinople when it was sacked large palanquins, or litters, upon which kings were carried into the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin (ironically, it was originally named the Friedenstor, or “Arch of Peace”). This Quadriga repre sents the personification of victory riding in a chariot drawn by four horses, echoing the Roman triumphal practice. Napoleon having conquered Prussia, it was not deemed apt for the Quadriga to remain in Berlin, and in 1810 it was dismantled and carried off. This case makes it clear that monuments, or at least great stone slabs, were transported over large distances and represent favorable diplomatic relations. Panels 3 and 4, which we take to be part of K’awil’s journey to Yuhkno’ m Ch’een II around 637, show that the king and his chariot were raised at the site to such a gesture of political amity. Assuming their point of origin at Caracol and considering the great size of these panels we can also assume that they were transported over the Mopan river, which may help to explain the presence of such panels at Ucanal and Xunantunich, since both are situated on the earlier study of Panel 3 (Helmke and Awe 2016). We will also review the chronology of the hieroglyphic stair, in order to better situate Panels 3 and 4. The glyphic text of Panel 4 is analyzed, and we discuss syntactical and poetic features in relation to other similar texts in the Maya lowlands, drawing particular parallels with the text from Tikal and Caracol. Before we do so, however, we will delve briefly into the historical background behind the hieroglyphic stair that these panels once comprised the hieroglyphic stair found their way to Naranjo, but one panel has also been found at Ucanal (Martin 2000a:57-58, Fig.12). The majority of panels that once comprised the hieroglyphic stair was also dismantled and carried off (Martin and Grube 2000:92; Grube and Martin 2004:70- 71). These diplomatic ties were closely followed by the accession of the successor of the Snake-head dynasty. In fact, the kings of this dynasty, such as K’awil, were sometime depicted with a headdress or deity effigy, from the same king in 627 fully recorded in 622, as is the receipt of a gift, possibly a 9.10.10.0.0. It is on this date that he dedicated the great ritual precinct of Tenochtitlan among the Aztec. This is the temple known as <Sharper than a Serpent’s Tooth> (Sorek 1993; Scarre 1995:224). Interestingly, these obelisks is the forceful acquisition of statuary representing deities, as if the victors could accrue more divine protection by accumulating divinities in their midst and even naturalizing conquered deities. With this overview we hope to give a sense of the proclivity of victorious armies to forcibly acquire monu ments of conquered states, to better contextualize the Maya in stance involving the hieroglyphic stair of K’an II. Establishing this precedent, we surmise that additional instances exist that have yet to be identified.

Figure 2. The front faces of Stela 9, the slate-stela of Calakmul, apparently depicting Yich’ aak K’ahk’ in AD 662, well in advance of his accession, which trans pired 24 years later (photograph by Harri Kettunen).
the banks of this stream (Figure 3). Moreover, with such a route, the sites of Ucanal and Xunantunich appear as viable stop-off points on the return journey from Caracol to Naranjo. Irrespective of the specific processes at play, these panels speak of a close relationship maintained with Naranjo, be it the result of shared participation in a common war effort against Caracol, or as gifts bestowed on a cherished vassal. These monuments thereby make tangible the vicissitudes of alliances and royal relations in antiquity. That said, we offer these words more to provoke thought than to provide definitive answers, and we now turn to consider the context in which Panel 4 was discovered.

Context and Circumstances of Discovery

We discovered Panel 3 at Xunantunich to the south of the axial stairway of Structure A9 on June 3, 2016. The monument was found lying on its side, leaning on the stair-side outset, abutting the terminal construction phase of Structure A9. The northern stair-side outset was partially cleared and no matching monument was encountered there. As a result, and considering the secondary context of Panel 3, we moved quickly to see that first monument to press (Helmke and Awe 2016). Recognizing that other fragments of the Naranjo hieroglyphic stairway were missing, we decided to explore the north flank of Structure A9 to continue exposing the architecture and look for a matching monument. Our efforts paid off, and on July 11 of the same year we discovered Panel 4 as two conjoining fragments at the northeastern base of Structure A9 (Figure 4). Unlike Panel 3, however, the two fragments of Panel 4 were discovered lying facedown above the plaza floor. Also in contrast to Panel 3, the fragments of Panel 4 were not located in front of the stair-side outset of Structure A9, but just to the north. The first fragment (Frag. A) was actually found lying 2.7 m north of the axial stair, or 60 cm north of the northeastern corner of the stair-side outset (Figure 5), and the second fragment (Frag. B) was located 40 cm north of the first fragment. This location suggests that Panel 4 could originally have been placed in the same manner as Panel 3 to the south, leaning against the basal terrace of Structure A9, but that it was subsequently knocked over and fragmented by a combination of taphonomic disturbances, including tree fall and architectural collapse. While it remains possible that the monument was intentionally terminated by the Maya in antiquity and displaced to the context in which we discovered it, at present this hypothesis appears less likely without additional supportive evidence. Much like the previously discovered monument, Panel 4 was not associated with any artifactual materials that can be used to assist in dating its re-deposition at Xunantunich, nor inform us as to the types of activities that these monuments may have attracted. That said, monument termination may account for the condition of the leftmost portion of glyphs in the first medallion on Panel 4 that show damage and pitting. In addition, a large section of a glyph is missing from Panel 3, and it either broke off during transport of the monument or it may have been purposely spalled off in antiquity as part of a termination ritual.

During the axial trenching of Structure A9, the steps of the terminal stair were uncovered and around halfway up it was apparent that the core was collapsing inwards along with some of the steps. This was a clear indication that a tomb might be located within the structure. The capstones of the tomb were subsequently uncovered and the chamber was opened, revealing a large rectangular space measuring 4.5 m north-south and 2.4 m east-west, making it one of the largest tombs discovered in Belize to date (Figure 6). Significantly, this is also the very first royal tomb discovered at Xunantunich, a fact that created quite a stir in the international media (e.g., Foresmann 2016; Surugue 2016). The tomb and its contents will be the subject of another more detailed study and publication, but we can relate some of the more salient features. The tomb was found to...
The newly discovered Panel 4 at Xunantunich (drawing by Christophe Helmke).

contain the remains of an adult male, estimated to have been 20–30 years of age at death. He was lying in an extended and supine position with his head to the south. Because all of Structure A9 have been conclusively dated we will be better equipped to assess the relationship, if any, that the panels all originally formed part of the same monument, even though they were scattered between at least four different archaeological sites. Considering just basic metrics such as the maximal width and height of the more squared medallions, we can see that these were not laid out according to a fixed template since the widths range between 37.5 and 40.6 cm, whereas their heights range between 34.1 and 37.3 cm (Table 1). These divergences may seem significant, but if we compute their variance in terms of standard deviation we can see that the differences are quite minor, since that for widths amounts to ±0.62 and heights to only ±0.90 cm, whereas the other two edges are less neatly so, with the top edge of the upper medallions and the left edge is on average 11.2 cm to the left of the medallions. The thickness of Panel 4 ranges between 25 and 27 cm, making it slightly thicker than Panel 3, which was 22 cm thick on average. Therefore, more of the blank portion of Panel 4 must have been integrated into the architecture, but we can expect that the margin between the edge of the medallions and the steps would have been comparable on both. Based on these measurements, Panel 3 can be estimated at 0.270 m\(^3\) and Panel 4 at 0.374 m\(^3\). Using an average weight for limestone (1 m\(^3\) = 2,611 kg) we can convert these volumes to mass estimates, with Panel 3 weighing in at around 705 kg (1,554 lbs) and Panel 4 at 976 kg (2,152 lbs). Thus Panel 4 weighed a little under a metric ton, which may also explain why it fractured into two. The breakage undoubtedly followed an original fracture, since similar defects and hairline fractures are also perceptible in the stone of Panel 3. Alternatively, Panel 4 may have been fractured during transport, which in turn may have eased its move from Caracol to Xunantunich, not least considering that this is the single largest monolith of the hieroglyphic stair discovered to date.

These characteristics have important implications for understanding how the entirety of the narrative on the hieroglyphic stair once started and ended, something that we will return to below. The medallions measure on average 40 cm wide and 36.3 cm high. The space between them is 25 cm from edge to edge whereas the upper edge of the monolith is only 3.5 cm above the top edge of the upper medallions. In other words, the frieze is thus about 1 cm thick, which may help explain why it fractured into two. The frieze may therefore have been constructed concurrently with the building of the structure. As such, it is not surprising that Structure A9 may have been raised as part of a single major construction effort, built with the explicit purpose of housing the exalted deceased, as a type of funerary temple. The juxtaposition of the hieroglyphic panels with this structure is therefore all the more remarkable, although we need to emphasize that the panels were set in front of Structure A9 secondarily. As a result, once the tomb and Structure A9 have been conclusively dated we will be better equipped to assess the relationship, if any, that the various panels were eventually encountered, including Str. B5 at Caracol, Str. B18 at Naranjo, Str. A9 at Xunantunich, and the ballcourt at Ucanal, so that we can begin to define the time periods when these panels were erected in their secondary settings. This will help to flesh out the events surrounding their production, displacement, and eventual re-deposition. Until that time, we will content ourselves with commenting on metric attributes, as well as paleographic and calendrical features that help to establish the unity and coherence of the panels as a single monument.

To start, some comments can be made concerning the physical properties of the medallions that establish the coherence of their design and thereby confirm that the panels all originally formed part of the same monument, even though they were scattered between at least four different archaeological sites. Considering just basic metrics such as the maximal width and height of the more squared medallions, we can see that these were not laid out according to a fixed template since the widths range between 37.5 and 40.6 cm, whereas their heights range between 34.1 and 37.3 cm (Table 1). These divergences may seem significant, but if we compute their variance in terms of standard deviation we can see that the differences are quite minor, since that for widths amounts to ±0.62 and heights to only ±0.90 cm, whereas the other two edges are less neatly so, with the top edge of the upper medallions and the left edge is on average 11.2 cm to the left of the medallions. The thickness of Panel 4 ranges between 25 and 27 cm, making it slightly thicker than Panel 3, which was 22 cm thick on average. Therefore, more of the blank portion of Panel 4 must have been integrated into the architecture, but we can expect that the margin between the edge of the medallions and the steps would have been comparable on both. Based on these measurements, Panel 3 can be estimated at 0.270 m\(^3\) and Panel 4 at 0.374 m\(^3\). Using an average weight for limestone (1 m\(^3\) = 2,611 kg) we can convert these volumes to mass estimates, with Panel 3 weighing in at around 705 kg (1,554 lbs) and Panel 4 at 976 kg (2,152 lbs). Thus Panel 4 weighed a little under a metric ton, which may also explain why it fractured into two. The breakage undoubtedly followed an original fracture, since similar defects and hairline fractures are also perceptible in the stone of Panel 3. Alternatively, Panel 4 may have been fractured during transport, which in turn may have eased its move from Caracol to Xunantunich, not least considering that this is the single largest monolith of the hieroglyphic stair discovered to date.

The Hieroglyphic Stair of K’an II

Whereas it remains outside the scope of this paper, we remain hopeful that a collaborative team will eventually be convened to conduct petrographic analyses and chemical assays on the various panels in order to ascertain their geological profile and to properly tie these to their place of origin, as a single hieroglyphic stair raised by K’an II. In addition, we hope that sufficient data can be gathered from the archaeological contexts in which the various panels were eventually encountered, including Str. B5 at Caracol, Str. B18 at Naranjo, Str. A9 at Xunantunich, and the ballcourt at Ucanal, so that we can begin to define the time periods when these panels were re-erected in their secondary settings. This will help to flesh out the events surrounding their production, displacement, and eventual re-deposition. Until that time, we will content ourselves with commenting on metric attributes, as well as paleographic and calendrical features that help to establish the unity and coherence of the panels as a single monument.

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Table 1. Graph showing the width vs. height of the squared glyphic medallions that together comprise the hieroglyphic stair (excluding Steps 5 and 6; all are interior measurements omitting the incised outline). The width of Step 9 is reconstructed as is the height of Medallion 1 of Panel 3. Data points are color-coded by site.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Panel</th>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Width (cm)</th>
<th>Height (cm)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pan. 3 M1</td>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pan. 3 M2</td>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pan. 4 M1</td>
<td>Step 9</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pan. 4 M2</td>
<td>Step 10</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7. The newly discovered Panel 4 at Xunantunich (drawing by Christophe Helmke).
on either side of their respective means. In addition, we can see that width and height are also highly proportionately similar between the columns. The linear correlation coefficient ($r$) of Pearson Product-Moment Correlation) for all panels has yielded $r = 0.99531$, indicating that the two variables are nearly perfectly and positively correlated.  

Another study that would be interesting to conduct would be to account the shape and surface areas of the medallions to determine their degree of co-variability and whether these are comparable to the data in our linear computations presented here. We suspect that such a study would yield positive results and complement the cursory study that we have made of the width-to-height ratios of the medallions of the Xunantunich panels. Clearly the widths are larger than the heights, forming medallions that most often conform to the shape of a rounded or square, or supernipple ($r = 0.708 - 0.757$) (see Gardner 1977), and from our computations we can see that these are generally disposed according to a 10:8 or 10:9 ratio. This gives a sense of how this outline or frame of the medallions was drawn.

In addition to the physical properties, there are also elements of style that are relevant to paleographic analyses, confirming the integrity of the hieroglyphic stair. In particular, the choice of signs and the specific alllographs used are highly instructive. As found on Panels 3 and 4, there are several clear points of correspondence between these panels and the hieroglyphic stair. To this we can add the calendrical references that these panels exhibit, since they dovetail perfectly with former gaps, precisely filling these lacunae and weaving together a more complete narrative.

Calendrics
All that remains of calendrical information on Panel 4 is the half of a Calendar Round that initiates the text. The date in question (pB1) is clearly written [18 UN-wa](w) for [waaklii'aajal unii], or “18 Ki’ank’in,” providing a record of the half of the calendar. This date corresponds to December 7, 630, and closes the k’atun, or twenty-year period, that concludes the entire narrative recorded on the hieroglyphic stair. Interestingly, rather than commemorating an event, this record of the [“even” k’atun](w) spanning from a period ending when both the last three digits are set to zero, both the start and end of the narrative presented on the hieroglyphic stair are marked by the end of this period. This means that both the start and end dates of the narrative provide important calendrical information on Panel 4 (pB2a) exhibits a small circular area on the chin, marked with crosshatching, presumably representing stubble. The same feature is found on the profile of the aged deity known as C9, a Lord of the Night, represented on Step 5 (Figure 8b). In addition, the owl head-variant with the distinctive trilobate eye on Panel 4 (pB3b) is also found in two other instances on the hieroglyphic stair, although neither is particularly well preserved. The similar element is an instance on Step 6 (L2a) where it also functions as the logogram [CHEN?], and another on Step 2 (D11) where it serves as the logogram k’i’, as part of the sequence [K’UH-K’AN?]-tu-ma-ki’ (see Thompson 1950:55-54; Graham 1978:111; Closs 1984:78, Table 1; Proskouriakoff 1993:40-41). The date on Panel 4 appears to record the very end of the narrative, which is the most surprising given that this panel must have been mounted on the very left end of the hieroglyphic stair, at the place where one expects the narrative to begin. Based on this evidence, it now seems clear that Panel 4 does indeed record part of the 624 date and that the 9.10.10.0.0 Long Count served as the dedicatory date for the entire narrative. Whereas in previous reconstructions the place of the Initial Series Introductory Glyph at the onset of Step 5 has been assumed to be at the very end of the narrative (see Helmke and Awe 2016:Table 1), it now seems more probable that this would have initiated the entire hieroglyphic text.

In the presence of an Initial Series Introductory Glyph at the onset of Step 5, the record of the entire Long Count date, and the fact that this text on the step closest with a record of the Lord of the Night (Glyth G and an idiosyncratic Glyth F), all suggest that the entire hieroglyphic stair may once have begun on this step. Interestingly, the last glyph in the text of Step 5 is a peculiar Glyth F, which provides the title of the foregoing Glyth G (see LaRue 1978:111). This thus this can be understood as “spokesperson for the crown,” since certain regal headdresses were made of paper and the qualifying “mouth” serves here by means of synecdoche to designate the office (see Zender 2004:215-221). Interestingly, on Step 5, the logogram [K’AN](w) is surmounted by a rabbit bearing the title [Pek Sa’uul, which names the small elevation at the north corner of the second terrace above (similar to Steps 1 and 6). Based on these observations, we have been able to integrate Steps 5 and Panel 4 at the very start of the narrative and have incorporated the dates recorded on Panel 4 with those found on the steps recovered at Naranjo, allowing us to present a complete and updated chronology for the entire narrative (Table 2). The monuments discovered at Xunantunich are thus evidently helping us to close important gaps in the chronology and narrative. Despite these lacunae, it is interesting to note that the ancient scribes made some attempts to define clauses according to the format of the hieroglyphic stair as a whole, which
is to say to fit them within the boundaries imposed by the medallions. As such, clauses recorded on both Panels 3 and 4 can be said to be end-stopped on each monolith, implying syntactical pauses at the close of each pair of medallions. Thus, the three clauses of Panel 3 may be contained within the two medallions of the monolith, with the final subclauses each headed by a Calendar Round.

Unlike the previously discovered Panel 3, where the glyphic text was divided between two medallions but bore three separate clauses each headed by a Calendar Round, the text of Panel 4 records but one lengthy clause even though it spans two medallions. That being said, the lengthy clause can be divided into two principal sentences or clauses, the latter a subordinate phrase consisting of paired secondary clauses, elaborating on the event of the initial primary clause. Thus the syntactical structure of the text presented on Panel 4 exhibits a high degree of structurality, bespeaking the use of poetic language. We will explore each of these clauses in turn.

Primary Clause

If the 18 K’ank’in date that initiates the first medallion (pA1) was not enough to anchor its place in the larger Long Count, the second glyph block (pB1) confirms that the date is a lahuntun period ending (Figure 11). As we have already touched upon above, a lahuntun period ending means that the turning point of a particular Long Count date exhibits a major fraction at the level of the “years,” representing half of a k’atun. This glyph block immediately follows the Calendar Round and is, as is to be expected by syntax, verbal in function. This expression is written as [TAN][LAM]-wa for u-tan-lam-wa, involving the locative term tan “middle, center,” which is adverbial to the transitive verbal root lam that has a broad semantic domain. Reflexes in modern Maya languages include lam in Ch’ol, which is glossed as “diminish,” describing among other things the way in which candles burn, while the cognate lam in Yukatek is the verb “sink” (Wichmann 2004:239). From these entries we propose that the Classic Maya semantic domain was akin to “diminish, elapse.” As such, the expression refers to a period of time that is “half-elapsed,” and this is used especially for half-k’atun intervals as is the case here (although half-bak’tun intervals and relative time spans are also known; see Thompson 1950:192-193). The derivation of the verbal expression here deserves some additional comments, since the use of a third person pronoun prefix is rather rare. This implies that we may be looking at the active voice, wherein the – aw phrase marks the subject and the – au suffix represents the active transitive inflection (see Lacadena 2010a:37). The direct object is suppressed since the remainder of the clause that follows names the subject, the agent of the action, who is responsible for the event.

The remainder of the medallion is given over to three separate head variant or portrait glyphs, split over two

or refute these speculations, but they provide some additional observations that may help us to understand the original sequencing of the panels that comprised the hieroglyphic stair.

Figure 10. Isometric sketch of the possible articulation of Panel 4 and Step 5 in the original hieroglyphic stairway. Together these would have formed the very beginning of the glyphic narrative presented on the stairway. Drawing by Christophe Helmke.

Figure 11. The glyphic medallions of Panel 4 discovered at Xunantunich (drawing by Christophe Helmke).
the the order in which they appear is consistent and dupli
cates that of Panel 4, with the Jaguar Paddler appearing first and the Stingray Paddler appearing last (Helmske 2012a:89-95) (Figure 12a-b).

It is from iconographic depictions that the order is made evident, since the Jaguar Paddler is always depicted at the bow of a large dugout canoe, whereas the Stingray Paddler is shown as the stern of the same vessel (Mathews [1981]2001:Fig. 40.4; Schelle and Miller 1986:52, 270-271; Freidel et al. 1993:89-92; Stone and Zender 2011:50-51). From these scenes we can see that the paddlers ferried the deceased Маиze god, their canoe eventually sinking into the watery underworld, bringing about the “water-entry” that is at the heart of the Classic Maya language, since these can be elided by the speaker if the syntax -ta and the second does not provide a prepo
tion (tahn) rather than a more typical preposi
tion as a rhetorical device. The closing segments in both this segment can be analyzed in couplet fashion as a paired set of appositions, wherein each can be divided into three segments, a head, medial segment, and closure:

Head: machaj - k’an’ul
Medial: tahn - ch’éen - kan’ul
Closure: pahtaal - k’an’ul

In this pair of noun phrases the medial segment is repeated and therefore serves as the syntactical pivot, the subject of these clauses. The head consists of two qualifiers to the subject, which involve derived verbal roots. The head and medial segments constitute the predicate of each clause. Thus we can see that these subclauses together exhibit some degree of parallelism as a rhetorical device. The closing segments in both cases are essentially prepositional subclauses involving toponyms or place names, although the first involves a spatial term (tahn) rather than a more typical preposi
tion (ti or ta) and the second does not provide a prepo
sition, requiring the reader to reconstruct it (probably t’u). The suppression of prepositions in Maya writing is something that has been recognized for some time and is an integral part of both the writing system and the language, since these can be elided by the speaker if the context is deemed sufficiently clear (Stuart and Houston 1994:13-17; see also Soledad López Oliva 2012). The first head is machaj (pA3a), which can be seg
mented as mach-a-j. In some earlier studies the sequence ma-ch’a-j was thought to record the passive inflection of a transitive verb such “to take, remove with the hand,”

Transliteration: ma-cha-ja (pA3a) K’AWIL-(li) (pA3b) TAN-na (pB3a) CH’EN (pB3b) ka-KAN-la (pA4a)
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mente...
such as in the mythic tale recounted on the so-called Regal Rabbit Vase (K1398) (see Stuart 1993; Helmke 2012b:179-184). On this vase—originally belonging to K’ahk’ Tilio Chan Chaaak, thirty-eighth king of Naranjo (r. AD 693-728)—we see a rabbit stealing the regalia of the underworld deity God L. Humiliated, the near-naked God L pleads his case to the Sun God in God G’s presence as the location of his regalia and the rabbit. It is in the Sun God’s reply that we see ma-cha-jah-a: T’UL-TA-hi-ná—invoking a segment that qualifies the rabbit in a derogatory manner (Figure 14a)—which could mean that “the … rabbit has been taken from me” (Beliaev and Davletshin 2006:25-26, 39 n. 38), although an alternate interpretation would see the initial segment as part of a negation, as in “there is no rabbit … with me” (e.g., Hull et al. 2009:39, Figure 4). In another example, in the East Panel of the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque, we see the lament of a time of his reign (Guenter 2007:17; Skidmore 2010:61). Whereas the function of machaj-chum-tuun (Figure 14b), and here the most cogent and literal translation qualifies the rabbit in a derogatory manner (Figure 15)—which could mean that “the … rabbit has been grasping,” a very literal sense this evidence of how the taking of the Manikin scepter as part of the royal accession ceremony, but on a more intangible level it can thus be best understood as the acquisition or the taking of authority (see Stuart 2005:277-278). Although this verb is seen elsewhere in the glyphic corpus (see Schele 1980:196, 307), this particular accession ceremony with paramount importance to the Snakhead dynasty, to judge from the Dynastic King lists represented on a series of elegant Codex-style vases, where they unfailingly make use of this one verb (Martin 1997:855-856) (Figure 15). Appropriately the first subclause informs us that there is no political authority at the location mentioned in the closure. The toponym that comprises the closure can be read as talan ch’een kan’ul, or literally “the middle of the Kanul’s cave.” As we touched upon above, talan functions as the spatial term “middle,” specifying that we are talking about the very heart of a particular location. The term ch’een “cave” is here written with its owl head variant, including its distinctive feathered ear and the diagnostic trilobate eye (see Helmke 2009:544-552). The reading of this glyph was first proposed by David Stuart (see Vogt and Stuart 2005) although its logographic value remains hypothetical in the absence of clear phonetic substitution sets. In addition, the exact meaning of the term remains a matter of discussion since it both literally refers to cavernous sites but also to “settlement” or even “polity capital” by means of simile (Grube and Martin 2004:122-123), based in part on the Mesoamerican practice of ascribing caves to the sacred landscape of urban centers (see Beady 1997) and the use of metaphors for higher order sociopolitical units. The final term is here written ka-KAN-la, and whereas there has been some uncertainty concerning the reading of this sequence, based on a substitution set providing the spelling ka-na-la (on ceramic vessel K1901) it seems clear that the whole should be read kan’ul, involving the suffix -ul marking a place where something abounds (see Lacadena and Wichmann n.d.:21-27; Helmke and Awe 2013:101-105). Thus kan’ul, the so-called “cave,” may be translated as “place where snakes abound.” Although clearly a toponym, it served as the basis for and was eventually absorbed into the emblem glyph, or dynamic title (see Figure 15), of the royal house that eventually took Calakmul as its capital during the Late Classic (Velasco García 2004, 2008a, 2008b; Martin 2005). It is because of the uncertainties in the reading of the toponym involved in this emblem glyph that researchers have opted for the more descriptive designation “Snake-head Kanul” (Marcus 1973/1992:1987-173-176; Martin 1997:856). However, on Panel 4 we do not have an emblem glyph, but a plain reference to the toponym, tied to the place of origin of the Snake-head or Kanul dynasty.5 This is all the more noteworthy since the reference on Panel 4 may be the first example wherein Kanul’a is used as a place name of historic significance that is framed by contemporary events. This is all the more significant considering that all other examples of kan’ul refer to this locality as a supernatural place (Helmke and Kupprat 2016:43-44). Regardless of the degree of literality or figurativeness adopted in any given translation, we can see a great deal of overlap in emic thinking concerning this place name and caves, and the idea that the term ch’een may embrace all these concepts within its semantic domain. There is in fact supportive evidence for both interpretations. For one, we now know that Kanul’a was the name ascribed to a mythic cave where the Maize god is said to have been devastated and eventually resurrected, a sacred 4 The latter studies also report on forms that may be reflexes of Classic Mayan, such as ma'k for sac-tz’uy, wherein the -s prefix marks the periphrastic (Knowles-Berry 1987:338, 344-345; Tandet 2013:36, 43).

5 The Classic Maya term Kan’ul also has clear echoes with the Postclassic group known as the <Ch’ol> that dominated the northwestern portion of the Yucatan peninsula (Rois 1975/1972; Barrera Vásquez 1980:299). While it is unclear if there is any relation between the Postclassic group and the dynasty of the Classic, tellingly both appear to have the /u/ vowel in the suffix, Sharper than a Serpent’s Tooth

Figure 14. Examples of the expression ma-cha-jah-a in Classic Maya texts: (a) detail of K1389, providing part of the caption of the Sun God; (b) detail of a clause of the East Tablet (MI-N3, Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque, drawings by Christophe Helmke).

Figure 15. Excerpt of the king list presented on the longest known Dynastic Vase (KL735), showing extensive use of the verb ch’een-mak’ul as the accession statement for a series of different monarchical, including ones named Yahk’o in ‘Yic’aa K’ahk’, Tajo’ in Uk’ch K’ahk’, Sky Witness, Yahk’o in ’T’u’uk’u’, ‘Wind Breeze’ (drawing by Christophe Helmke).
site of paramount importance to the dynasty bearing this same name (Helmeke and Kupper 2016:57-63). In effect, the dynasty that bore the name may even have regarded such a cave as their primordial place of origin and emergence, considering the many Mesoamerican and Native American precedents for such ethnogenesis mythology (Morley 2009:111; Grube and Helmeke 2004:110; cf. Schele and Mathews 1998:79). For another, Kan’ul may well have been the original toponym of Dzibanche, the erstwhile capital of the Snake-head dynasty (Simon Martin personal communication 2009; Martin and Velásquez García 2016, see pp. 23-33 in this issue). Whether the name of the latter was derived from the mythic precedent, or whether there was an actual area in the region that was deemed to be this place of origin and ultimately gave the settlement its name, is unknown. Irrespective of the ambiguities, this first subclause makes it clear that Kan’ul, the place of origin of the Snake-headed dynasty, devotes its authority in AD 642, when the lahuntun period following the lahuntun period ending is celebrated.

This leads us to the second subclause of the couplet, which is headed by the logogram PAT and subjected by a very eroded B syllabogram (pAAb). This glyptic compound provides the head of the second subclause and involves the verbal root pat "to shape, fashion, form, make, build" (Stuart 1998:381-384). This verbal root is used especially with regard to the production of objects made of clay and other raw materials, but it also refers to the construction of masonry buildings. The use of this verb, in connection with k’awiil as the second subject (pAbA), does suggest the possibility that both appositions speak of the absence of ritual statuary at one location and its production at another. It may well be that these clauses are functioning on both literal and abstract levels, in which the verb pat "makes" or "forms" god effigies as a means of imbuing and sanctifying royal power in a given location; on the other it is clear that the presence or absence of political authority is the thrust of these clauses. On Page 4, the verb pat PAT is followed by the syllabogram B, indicating that we are not just looking at a verbal form but a derived one. The finalization of the verbal root with the directional suffix -ul, which derives nouns as an instantiation of the former noun (Lacadena 2010a:37). Thus, a possible analysis is pat-ahu, wherein the postvocalic /h/ serves to nominalize the verbal root and /-u/ to "complete something that is formed, shaped, made." Together paht-ahu forms a specific referent that is made, shaped, or formed, thereby narrowing the original semantic domain of the root, although without any clear reflexes in Colonial or modern Mayan languages it is difficult to pin down the intended meaning. In any case, it is clear that the second subclause is not just a verbal observation that is very much tangible or political authority that is decidedly manifest. The second subclause may not provide a direct antithesis of the former subclause, but certainly sets it in contrast, pointing out the divergence of states in the two places. Thus, the elegant couplet recorded in the second meqpecified can be said to be the antithetical parallelism, wherein the two initial segments are reversed to more effectively convey the core meaning framed by two semantically parallel phrases involving the numeral classifier -te after the numeral va', "three" and preceding the noun tuun, "stone." This name place was first identified as one associated with Calakmul by David Stuart and Stephen Houston (1994:26-29) in their seminal work on Classic Maya toponyms. Based on subsequent work it is now clear that this place name is one that designates the site of Calakmul and its immediate environs (Martin 1997:852; see also Martin and Grube 2000:104). As such, in stark contrast to the first, the use of the verb paht-ahu "makes" with the noun tuun "stone" is well established at Calakmul in AD 642. Together these two subclauses, although embedded in ritual language and poetic constructions, convey bold statements of the wanting and wanting of power at two different locations. Thus these clauses provide, in emic terms, an articulate description of the dynastic re-establishment of the Snake-head dynasty that is the original owner of the site of Calakmul, a process that was evidently thought to be completed by the lahuntun period ending of 9.10.0.0.0.0.

2 Despite the erosion, detailed inspection of the monument under taking light, coupled with examinations of the literary devices, it is clear that the final sign below PAT is the syllabogram B (T44). The form of this sign also agrees with similar allographs on Step 1 (B2d) and Step 5 (N2a).

3 An alternate analysis would see PAT-II realized as pat-iil, wherein the iton vocative /-i/ suffices for the vocative. In contrast, the phrase variation, also seen on other verbs (Alfonso Lacadena, personal communication 2016). A possible translation would be "it is formed/ made the k’awiil.

4 Fascinatingly, almost the same type of construction is seen in the stucco text adorning Str. 5D-141 at Tikal (David Stuart, personal communication 2016; see Schle and Mathews 1985:79, Fig. 2:20). Part of this text can be transcribed as PAT-II ya k’awiil-ax and transcribed as pat-aal-dj k’awiil, the head and the medial segment of this clause. Interestingly, the place that closes the stucco text at Tikal may well be "the second successor [of/in] k’awiil" involving the numeral classifier -al also seen on other verbs (Alfonso Lacadena, personal communication 2016). A more narrow definition of parallelism sees it as a rhetorical device wherein the initial segment of each clause is absolutely repeated to create the desired effect (Lacadena 2010a:16; Lacadena and Hull 2012:19-22). Using this definition, the paired phrases in Medallion 2 can better be said to form neatly contrasting couplets (Bright 1990:138) but do not exhibit parallelism as such. The details of these literary devices aside, the second subclause informs us that political authority that is decisive was celebrated. The use of the term k’awiil in the inscriptions of Panel 4 is remarkable since it anticipates a phraseology that is seen in later monuments at Calakmul. As observed by Simon Martin (2005:8), the term is seen in dynastic counts, especially in the texts of Stela 52, 89, and 115. In these passages the names of Calakmul kings are closely connected with dynastic count titles, specifying their place in the dynastic sequence. From these texts we can see that Yuhk’no’o’iich’aak K’ahk’ (r. AD 686-697) is listed as the successor of Yuhk’no’o’ich’el Ch’een II (r. AD 636-686) (Stela 115 (Figure 16a) and that Yuhk’no’o’ich’el To’ K’awiil (c. AD 702-731) is listed as the third successor (on both Stela 52 and 89). From this it follows that Yuhk’no’o’iich’aak K’ahk’ must have been considered the second successor and that Yuhk’no’o’ich’el Ch’een II was deemed the dynastic founder of the Late Classic Snake-head dynasty. Significantly, the term k’awiil follows each of the dynastic counts, although a clear explanation for this appearance has been wanting. Thus, for instance, Yuhk’no’o’ich’el To’ K’awiil is said to be a’ux ta’ aub’uil k’awiil, or "the third successor [of/in] k’awiil" (see Martin 2005:Fig. 4b-c; Stuart 2011:Fig. 21 (Figure 16b)). Now, with the text of Xunantunich Panel 4 we are in a better position to tackle the wording presented in the decades of forthcoming monuments at Calakmul. As we have seen, possible interpretations of the term k’awiil include both a literal sense of "effigy" but also a more figurative meaning of "authority" as in political power. As such, the dynastic counts are probably best understood as monarchs that are successors of the original political authority, established and reified in the reign of Yich’aak K’ahk’ must have been considered the second successor and the use of the term k’awiil in these texts therefore has very little to do with a theon but quite to the contrary with more abstract conceptions of political ideology, intertwined with conceptions of differentizing perceptions of natural forces (see Helmeke 2012b:75-79; Valencia Rivera 2015).

With the reign of Yuhk’no’o’ich’el Ch’een II we might wonder why he was considered as the starting point for the new Snake-head dynasty established at Calakmul. One possibility may be that he was the first Snake-headed king to accede to power at Calakmul proper, although at present this remains conjectural. This also has to be considered in light of his predecessor, Yuhk’no’o’ich’aak K’ahk’—who reigned from AD 630 to 636 (Martin and Grube 2008:105, 106)—especially since Step 6 of the hieroglyphic stair found at Naranjo names him as kan’u’u’ajaw ta’uxte’ tuun, or "the third successor, [of/in] the place of origin..." (see Martin 2005:Fig. 4b). The use of the toponym Uxte’tuun is important here in that he is clearly signaled as being a Snake-head king, but one established at an alternate location, namely Calakmul (Tökönövy 2007:19-21). What remains clear though unspoken is that Snake-head kings were originally established elsewhere. The text of Xunantunich Panel 4 makes it plain that this locality was named Kan’u’u’ajaw and presumably served also to designate the original capital, ostensibly the site of Dzibanche, based on current evidence (see Velásquez García 2004, 208a, 2012b:75-79; Valencia Rivera 2015).
key passage on Element 33 therefore echoes forcefully that on Panel 4, in relating the founding of the Snake-head dynasty in the first half of the seventh century.

At first sight the accession of Yuhkno’om Ch’een II, recorded on May 1, 636 (9.10.3.10), seems innocuous enough, an ordinary transition from Yaxajuun Ubaah Kan to his successor (Martin 2005:11-13). The defeat of Waxaklajuun Ubah Kan (Helmske and Awe 2016:9-11). Interestingly, this defeat took place less than a year after the accession: Yuhkno’om Ch’een II and that of his predecessor (Martin 2005:11-13). The accession of Yuhkno’om Ch’een II was caused by conflicting claimants to the throne, each side asserting their rights of succession (Helmke and Awe 2016:9-11). The defeat of Waxaklajuun Ubah Kan is recorded on Step 1 of the hieroglyphic stair, as well as the dynastic struggles of the Snake-head kings, and it seems likely that the relocation to Calakmul was caused by conflicting claimants to the throne, each side asserting their rights of succession (Helmske and Awe 2016:11-12). As such, whereas we cannot be certain of the date the accession of Yuhkno’om Ch’een II, the passage discovered at Xunantunich contribute greatly to our understanding of the tumultuous decades of the Snake-head dynasty, shedding light on the pivotal role that they played in the affairs of Caracol and Maya polities generally. Panel 4, which appears to open the entire narrative that once graced the hieroglyphic stair makes a surprising statement right from the onset, clarifying that political had once and for all been established at Calakmul. This is a very bold statement and appears as a declaration to all of the Snake-head kings, perhaps setting the stage and thereby explaining the amount of attention lavished on the Snake-head kings as overlords of Caracol. As such, the deeds of K’an II are recounted, but only to the extent that they could be intertwined with the actions of the Snake-head kings. This is how the hieroglyphic stair is such an important source pertaining to the dynastic affairs of Snake-head kings, since it tracks the rulers of the dynasty from the vantage point of a vassal, as if waiting with bated breath to see who would win in the final outcome. Thanks to the recent discoveries made at Xunantunich many gaps have now been closed, with Panels 3 and 4 standing as substantive bookends of this great stair. This monumental bears witness to the fissioning of the Snake-head dynasty and its eventual re-establishment at Calakmul, whence it seems on to control much of Classic Maya politics for the remainder of the seventh century.

Acknowledgements

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Figure 17. Step 6 of the hieroglyphic stair found at Naranjo (after Graham 1978:109; drawing by Ian Graham © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM# 2004.15.6.30).

Figure 18. Detail of Element 33 (Block 5) of the La Corona Hieroglyphic Stair 2, referring to a possible “foundation” of Kan I in 626, the accession of Waxaklajuun Ubaah Kan contended by Yuhkno’om ‘Head’. That the former was the more established, legitimate heir, at least to the throne, is implied by the use of the qualifier k’uhul, “godly, divine,” in his emblem glyph on Panel 3, whereas Yuhkno’om ‘Head’ is designated for a agor as an erstwhile exalted prefix. While the relationship between these two contenders remains unknown, a likely scenario would see them as agnatic or paternal half-siblings, of the same father, with different mothers. Such a model would see their strife anticipating the lengthier and more dire civil war involving the half-brothers of the Mut’ul dynasty, just two decades later (see Houston 1995; Martin and Grube 2000:42-43, 56-58).

While many queries still remain concerning the fascinating monument of Kan II, the panels discovered at Xunantunich contribute greatly to our understanding of the tumultuous decades of the Snake-head dynasty, shedding light on the pivotal role that they played in the affairs of Caracol and Maya polities generally. Panel 4, which appears to open the entire narrative that once graced the hieroglyphic stair makes a surprising statement right from the onset, clarifying that political had once and for all been established at Calakmul. This is a very bold statement and appears as a declaration to all of the Snake-head kings, perhaps setting the stage and thereby explaining the amount of attention lavished on the Snake-head kings as overlords of Caracol. As such, the deeds of K’an II are recounted, but only to the extent that they could be intertwined with the actions of the Snake-head kings. This is how the hieroglyphic stair is such an important source pertaining to the dynastic affairs of Snake-head kings, since it tracks the rulers of the dynasty from the vantage point of a vassal, as if waiting with bated breath to see who would win in the final outcome. Thanks to the recent discoveries made at Xunantunich many gaps have now been closed, with Panels 3 and 4 standing as substantive bookends of this great stair. These monumental bear witness to the fissioning of the Snake-head dynasty and its eventual re-establishment at Calakmul, whence it seems on to control much of Classic Maya politics for the remainder of the seventh century.

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