

Polities and Places: Tracing the Toponyms of the Snake Dynasty

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One of the more intriguing and important topics to emerge in Maya studies of recent years has been the history of the “Snake” dynasty. Research over the past two decades has identified mentions of its kings across the length and breadth of the lowlands and produced evidence that they were potent political players for almost two centuries, spanning the Early Classic to Late Classic periods.¹ Yet this data has implications that go beyond a single case study and can be used to address issues of general relevance to Classic Maya politics. In this brief paper we use them to further explore the meaning of emblem glyphs and their connection to polities and places.

The significance of emblem glyphs—whether they are indicative of cities, deities, domains, polities, or dynasties—has been debated since their discovery (Berlin 1958). The recognition of their role as the personal epithets of kings based on the title *ajaw* “lord, ruler” (Lounsbury 1973) was the essential first step to comprehension (Mathews and Justeson 1984; Mathews 1991), while the reading of their introductory sign as the adjective *k’uhul* “holy” brought the sacral nature of Classic Maya kingship into plain sight (Ringle 1988). But this left open the question of what the variable main signs at their core represented. Insight here came with the discovery of glyphic toponyms, which demonstrated that a good number of emblems were based on local place names (Stuart and Houston 1994). Yet in other cases place names and emblem main signs differed, and in some instances identical emblems appear at different centers, whether employed sequentially or simultaneously. In still other instances, centers changed their emblems or used more than one at the same time. It is clear, therefore, that although emblems are associated with distinct political entities they could not refer to territories or polities in any direct sense (Houston 1993; Velásquez 2004b, 2008; Martin 2005, 2014; Bíró 2007, 2012; Tokovinine 2008, 2013).²

Over time we have come to realize that it is better to understand emblem main signs as the names of dynastic houses derived from genuine or claimed places of origin. They can be divided between autochthonous examples of dynasties that remained in situ, and alloch-

thonous ones that had at some point transferred their capitals or splintered, each faction laying claim to the same title. The landscape of the Classic Maya proves to have been a volatile one, not simply in the dynamic interactions and imbalances of power between polities, but in the way the polities themselves were shaped by historical forces through time.

Placing Calakmul

The distinctive Snake emblem glyph is expressed in full as **K’UH-ka-KAAN-la-AJAW** or *k’uhul kaanul ajaw* (Figure 1).³ It first came to scholarly notice as one of the “four capitals” listed on Copan Stela A, a set of cardinaly affiliated emblems that was believed to be a cosmogonic model of political authority (Barthel 1968a, 1968b). Initially lacking a site provenance, it was first linked to Calakmul due to that center’s immense size and the resulting inference of political importance



Figure 1. The emblem glyph *k’uhul kaanul ajaw*, La Corona Element 3 (photograph K9055 © Justin Kerr).

¹ See Martin 1993, 1996a, 1996b; Martin and Grube 1994, 1995, 2000.

² From what we know of the Late Postclassic polities of Yucatan, Maya notions of territoriality were somewhat looser than those familiar from a Western perspective (see Quezada 1993:38-44). In place of fixed boundaries there was an emphasis on people and their connections to ruling lords, where domains could be discontinuous and interpenetrating. It was only with the coming of the Spanish that fixed municipal boundaries were established for administrative purposes.

³ There is still uncertainty regarding the vowel of the *-ul* suffix (see main text p. 27). Here *-ul* is favored due to the limited possibility of some parallel to the name of the Late Postclassic polity <Ah Canul> in northeastern Yucatan (Roys 1957:11). Yet, it is also possible that a vowel harmonic principle was at work, making *-al* an equally viable option.

(Marcus 1973:913). Even so, continuing uncertainty kept a question mark attached to the attribution well into the 1990s and led many scholars to prefer the non-committal label of “Site Q” (see Schuster 1997).⁴ In 1990, David Stuart and Stephen Houston (1994:28-29) released their work on glyphic place names, identifying 3-TE’-



Figure 2. The toponyms *uxte’tuun* and *chiiknahb*, La Corona Element 13, p14 (formerly Site Q Ballplayer Panel 1) (photograph K2882 © Justin Kerr).

TUUN-ni *uxte’tuun* “Three Stones” and **chi[ku]-NAHB** *chiiknahb* “? Lake/Pool” as two locations where Snake rulers conducted ritual and political acts (Figure 2).⁵ A prime example was to be found on Dos Pilas Panel 7, where the accession of the Snake king Yuknoom Yich’aak K’ahk’ is followed by the statement *uhtiiy chiiknahb* “it happened (at) Chiiknahb.” Finding examples of *uxte’tuun* and *chiiknahb* on Calakmul Stela 89 (D5) and Calakmul Stela 51 (B3b), respectively, led Stuart and Houston, with appropriate cautions, to support the Calakmul candidacy. Beginning its work in 1993, the large-scale INAH excavations of the Proyecto Arqueológico de Calakmul, directed by Ramón Carrasco, quickly uncovered buried inscriptions whose preservation far surpassed that of the site’s standing monuments, whose poor local limestone has weathered so badly that most are all but illegible. These discoveries, together with close study of the eroded stones, produced a body of unambiguous emblem glyphs and further examples of the two toponyms (Martin 1996a, 1996b) (Figure 3).

In addition to their use as locations in a direct sense, both place names appear in titular forms that were occasionally used in place of the emblem glyph. *Uxte’tuun kaloomte’* is one of very few epithets that incorporate the undeciphered but exalted *kaloomte’* status, while *chiiknahb ajaw* takes the standard royal title of *ajaw* “lord” in the manner of a minor emblem glyph (Looper 1999:270; Martin 2005:10-11, 2008) (Figure 4). Interestingly, these titles have a long history at

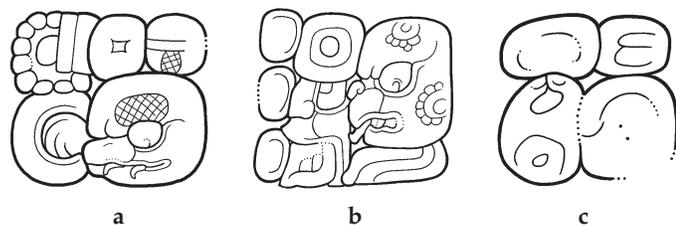


Figure 3. Emblem glyph and toponyms at Calakmul: (a) Calakmul Element 39, pB2; (b) Calakmul Element 37, B2; (c) Calakmul Element 24, A3 (drawings by Simon Martin).

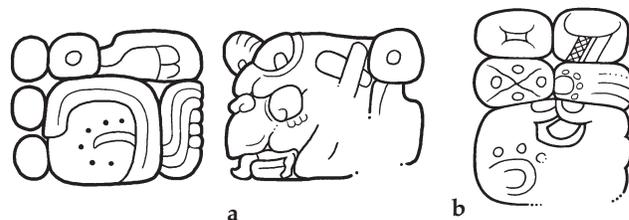


Figure 4. Calakmul toponyms as the basis of personal titles: (a) *Uxte’tuun kaloomte’* on Cancuen Panel 1, D8-C9; (b) *Chiiknahb ajaw* on Calakmul Element 30, A2 (drawings by Simon Martin).

Calakmul and are first associated with its rulers during the Early Classic Period, an era in which a different emblem glyph is attested at the site (Martin 2005:10-11, Fig. 8, 2008). There are also differences in the ways the two names are described. *Uxte’tuun* is identified as a *ch’een* (a locative category we will return to momentarily) in the statement **ta-CH’EEN-na-3-TE’-TUUN-ni** (Figure 5a), but thus far *chiiknahb* lacks this designation. In a similar vein, whereas *chiiknahb* appears in the associative form **AJ-chi[ku]-NAHB aj chiiknahb** “Chiiknahb Person” (Figure 5b), *uxte’tuun* never features in such a construction.

This takes us to the thorny issue of the type and scale of each location. Figure 2 shows them as a pair, yet any assumption that their order encodes a hierarchy of size or importance is thoroughly undermined by other toponymic pairings, which we know can be reversed at will (Tokovinine



Figure 5. (a) *Ta ch’een uxte’tuun* on Calakmul Stela 54, A15; (b) *Aj chiiknahb* on a Calakmul cache plate (drawings by Simon Martin).

⁴ The first epigraphic link between the Snake dynasty and Calakmul was made by Mathews (1979), who identified the birth-date of Yuknoom Yich’aak K’ahk’ on Calakmul Stela 9. The same set of notes gathered all monuments that carried the Snake emblem, together with those related to them, under the collective label “Site Q.” Marcus (1987:171-177, Fig. 65) identified several possible emblem glyphs on Calakmul monuments of which one, on Stela 51 (D2) in the Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, would prove to be correct. It consists of an open-jawed snakehead within which is set the name of Yuknoom Took’ K’awiil (Martin 1996a). The cautious “Calakmul(?)” attribution would continue to be used until the mid-1990s (e.g., Marcus 1993:149, 152; Stuart and Houston 1994:28).

⁵ The second of these toponyms was initially read as *nab tunich*, but a spelling of **chi-ku-NAHB** on Calakmul Element 24, A3, established that it is better read as *chiiknahb* (Martin 1996a, 1997:852) (Figure 3c). The word *chiik/chihk/chik/chiku* has several possible meanings—the last mentioned is “coat”—and it is not clear which is the correct one in this context.

2013:13). It is thought that *uxte'tuun* appears on three of the badly eroded monuments at Oxpemul (Grube 2005:95-99, 2008:203-211), a neighbor of Calakmul that entered its monument-carving prime only when the *kaanul* dynasty was in steep decline (Martin 2005:12).⁶ If so, it would suggest that *uxte'tuun* is the larger in extent and a regional descriptive of some kind. This would be among the reasons to see *chiiknahb* as a better contender for the core of Calakmul itself. This assessment is made marginally more likely by a wall mural, depicting a verdant aquatic environment, uncovered in the northern portion of the site center (Carrasco Vargas and Colón González 2005:44-45). Each of the large hieroglyphs set at regular intervals along its length read *chiiknahb kot* "Chiiknahb Wall," self-identifying the scene as a symbolic representation of this locale, which could well have mythic origins (Martin 2008). When lords of the subordinate center of La Corona travel to Calakmul for extended stays they proceed to *chiiknahb*, which could well imply that this locale encompasses the expansive palace complexes at this great city (Martin 2001:178-184). That said, descriptions of individual rituals, dances, and ballgames are said to occur *ta ch'een uxte'tuun* "at Three Stones *ch'een*" or *uhtiiy uxte'tuun* "it happened (at) Three Stones," which would be oddly unspecified locations if they do not refer to the capital in some way. Indeed, David Stuart (personal communication 2014, 2016) suggests a very different notion of scale, hypothesizing that the two toponyms refer to different portions of Calakmul itself.⁷

These issues are in no small way connected to the meaning of the *ch'een* term—a decipherment drawing on contextual, iconographic, and phonetic clues, though one that has still to be fully confirmed (Vogt and Stuart 2005:157-163). Although it literally means "cave, well, canyon, hole, rock outcrop," the *ch'een* of the inscriptions rarely refers to such features; the vast majority of examples appear instead within a metaphorical complex that defines places in some generic and culturally defined sense, elaborated in the forms *kab ch'een* "earth (and) cave," *chan ch'een* "sky (and) cave," and *chan kab ch'een* "sky (and) earth (and) cave" (Stuart and Houston 1994:7-13; Knowlton 2002:10-11; Hull 2003:425-437; Martin 2004:106-109; Bíró 2007:96-97, 2011:52-66; Tokovinine 2008:141-158, 2013:19-43; Helmke 2009:83-86; Lacadena 2009:40). These can be understood as diphrastric kennings, a form of couplet metaphor in which two conjoined words signify a third concept by allusive or poetical means.⁸ Despite the close and at times overlapping relationships between these compounds, their differing applications show that they have specific fields of meaning. Importantly, most of them are also used to describe supernatural locations possessed by gods, making them, at heart, elements of a conceptual rather than physical geography. Such references survived into the Colonial era, with *kabal/*

kabi ch'een Mani used in the Chilam Balam documents to refer to the city or territory of Mani, Yucatan (Alfonso Lacadena, personal communication 2002).⁹ These late texts in Latin script also show the pair in their possessed forms, with *<tu cab tu cheenil>* "in his earth, in his cave," direct parallels to the *tu kab tu ch'een* we see in Classic-era inscriptions. An interesting case is the Colonial phrase *<tu chi cheen itza>*, which according to Alfonso Lacadena (personal communication to Erik Velásquez García 2009) can be translated as "in the delightful cave/city of the Itzas," Ch'olan *<chi>* being a cognate of the Yukatekan adjective *<ci>* or *ki'*, "a delicious, pleasant, flavorful, or delightful thing."

Since *ch'een* is used independently of its unions with *kab* and *chan*, the main question for us is whether it acts simply as an abbreviation of those forms, or if it has some particular sense of its own. Some instances are very likely contractions of *kab ch'een* or *chan ch'een*, yet its many isolated appearances—seen in both historical and supernatural contexts—raises the likelihood that some distinction is nevertheless intended.¹⁰ For this to be the case then *ch'een* must carry a metaphorical association separate, if related, to its role in the juxtapositions of *kab ch'een* and *chan ch'een*. It is interesting in this light that lone *ch'een* predominates in certain contexts, especially in episodes of warfare, often in ways that are suggestive of urban targets (Martin 2004:108-109). Alexandre Tokovinine (2013:36) links *ch'een* to *siwan* in K'iche', a word also meaning "canyon" that features in

⁶ We are indebted to Bruce Love for sharing the nighttime photographs he took of Oxpemul monuments in 2008.

⁷ Stuart posits that *uxte'tuun* refers to Structure I and the large plaza in front of it, noting that the latter hosts three huge altar stones. The area defined as *chiiknahb* would be associated with Structure II, the Great Plaza, and the rest of the site. At least one monument in front of Structure I, Stela 54, refers to a period-ending ceremony taking place *ta ch'een uxte'tuun* "at Three Stones *ch'een*" (Martin 2009) (Figure 5a). We should keep in mind, however, that comparable ceremonies recorded on monuments elsewhere at the site are given this same location.

⁸ The first author to identify this rhetorical device in indigenous texts from Central Mexico and to coin the term "difrasismo" was Ángel María Garibay Kintana (1940:112), while Munro S. Edmonson (1971) was apparently the first to identify this feature in Colonial Maya documents. The most exhaustive study on this subject is the one undertaken by Mercedes Montes de Oca Vega (2000).

⁹ Tokovinine (2013:23-24) places this use of *ch'een/ch'e'en* in the specific landscape of the northern lowlands, with its peppering of sinkholes associated with human settlements. Yet we see no reason that the *kabal/kabi ch'e'en* couplet is not instead a continuation of the same metaphor seen in the southern lowlands of the Classic era.

¹⁰ Two texts at Tonina that could imply such an abbreviation feature the 'star war' verb, which is usually applied to the possessed form *uch'een* but there takes *ukab (u)ch'een* as its subject instead (Martin 2004:108, Fig. 3d). More clearly, the reduction from *chan ch'een* can be seen on the Tikal Marcador, where two references to the same event involving the Tikal toponym *mutul* are suffixed by *chan ch'een* in one case but solely by *ch'een* in the other (Hull 2003:429, Fig. 45b).

the Popol Vuh in the pairing *siwan tinamit* “canyon-citadel.” Another diphrastric kenning, this refers to constructed areas that are home to both lords and local gods, as well as to the cultivated lands and populations subject to them (Christenson 2003:264 n. 729, 2004: 237).¹¹ *Siwan tinamit* is clearly analogous to the *altepetl* “water-mountain” of Nahuatl-speaking Central Mexico.¹² An *altepetl* similarly consists of a central place hosting the residence of its ruling lord and the temples of its patron deities, from which settlement diffuses to a scattered rural occupation beyond. In this way the *altepetl* does not conceptually divide town and country; there was a center and a periphery but no hard division between them. The breadth of meaning ascribed to *altepetl*—which depending on context could refer to a political institution, the territory it controlled, or the population occupying it—reflects a socio-spatial consciousness shared by much of Postclassic Mesoamerica, and potentially in earlier times as well. A parallel between *kab ch’een* and the *altepetl* has already been suggested and still could serve as a general model for us (Houston and Escobedo 1997:471-472).

Caves and canyons in ethnographic and indigenous literary sources are often characterized as the abodes of the gods. To give one instance, on reaching their destination the bearers of the K’iche’ patron deities in the Popol Vuh deposit their god-effigies into canyons (Christenson 2004:182-183). Many of the shrines and temples found in Maya cities serve the same fundamental role, even if the analogy is not an overt one. By extension, it appears, the concentrations of constructed space at the heart of the polity could make it a symbolic *siwan* or *ch’een* and inspire what would otherwise seem an elliptical metaphor.

Two Snake Capitals

The firm association of the Snake dynasty with Calakmul was barely established before new information complicated the picture. In 1994 the Proyecto Arqueológico de Dzibanche, directed by the late Enrique Nalda, uncovered a series of carved blocks featuring Snake emblem glyphs (Nalda 2004; Velásquez 2004a, 2005) (Figure 6). Each carving showed a bound captive with an accompanying text, and even though their surviving Calendar Round dates cannot be fixed in the Long Count, their style left no doubt that they were produced in the Early Classic period. A second monument, carved in a somewhat later style, names a separate Snake ruler on one block while another bears the date 9.7.0.0.0 or 573. In time, these finds at

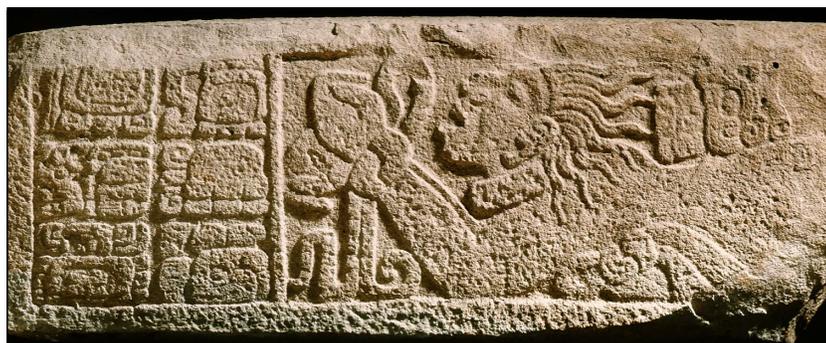


Figure 6. Dzibanche Monument 5 (photograph by Jorge Pérez de Lara).

Dzibanche brought a recognition that they were “home” references, and that this large center in Quintana Roo was a Snake capital in its own right (Velásquez 2004b, 2008).¹³

By now there were mounting signs that the tenure of the Snake dynasts at Calakmul was shorter than one might expect, with evidence for their occupation confined to the Late Classic period. One pointer here came in a retrospective narrative carved on the side of Calakmul Stela 8 (Martin 2005:7, Fig. 3). This cites the period ending of 9.8.0.0.0 in 593 and its celebration by the Snake king Scroll Serpent. The ceremony is given a specific location using the formula *uhtiiy tahn ch’een x*, “it happened in the midst of *x ch’een*,” where this particular “*x*” is an eroded toponym whose outlines have no known counterpart (Figure 7).¹⁴ From here Stela 8 quickly recaps the 9.14.10.0.0 ceremony performed by Yuknoom Took’ K’awiil in 721, ending with the statement *tahn ch’een uxté’tuun* “in the midst of Three Stones *ch’een*.” The effect of these contrasting passages is to establish that Scroll Serpent’s performance occurred at some place other than Calakmul. This is broadly consistent with the foreign references to *uxté’tuun* and *chiiknahb*, which are linked to *kaanul* kings only from 631 onwards. Perhaps the

¹¹ Allen Christenson’s comment is worth quoting at length: “These two terms together refer to the fortified hilltop center as well as the surrounding population living in the canyons and valleys where crops were cultivated. Many contemporary Quiché towns are still referred to as *siwan-tinamit* when referring to the urban center plus its surrounding dependent communities. Bunzel notes that this phrase is always used to refer to the town of Chichicastenango in ritual contexts” (Christenson 2003:264 n. 729).

¹² Although we generally find this written <*altepetl*>, it is in fact a classic difrasismo, as forms such as *in atl in tepetl* reveal (Zender 2008:33-34, n. 8; Lacadena 2009:40; León-Portilla 2011:283), where the separate components *atl* and *tepetl* fulfill the semantic function of a parallelism (see Lacadena 2010b:64-66).

¹³ It is also important to note that early Snake emblem glyphs form a cluster around Dzibanche and sites to its north, with examples seen at El Resbalon (Carrasco and Boucher 1987), Yo’okop (Martin 1997), and Pol Box (Esparza and Pérez 2009).

¹⁴ This toponym is composed of three signs, of which only the last, *AJ/a*, is relatively certain. In this context it would represent *-a’* “water,” a common component of place names (Stuart and Houston 1994:28), but one that is not necessary indicative of large bodies of water.

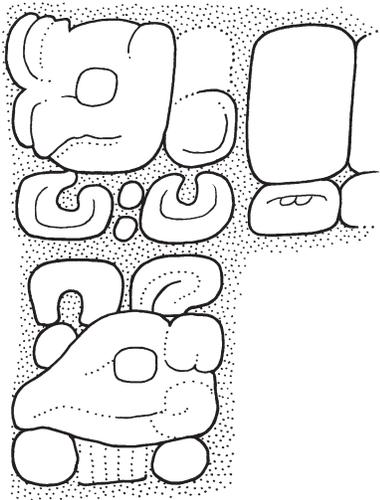


Figure 7. Calakmul Stela 8, C7-C8
(drawing by Simon Martin).

clearest argument for a “reconstitution” of the Snake polity at Calakmul comes from the initiation of a new dynastic count there, one that sets the famed Yuknoom Ch’een II as “first in order” despite the many Snake kings that had preceded him (Martin 2005:7-8). The hypothesis advanced was that the Snake dynasty shifted its seat of power to Calakmul during, or shortly before, the reign of Yuknoom Ch’een—whether directly from Dzibanche or via some intervening center (Martin 2005:11, 2014:337-339).

Support for this idea was to emerge from a passage on Step 6 of the Naranjo Hieroglyphic Stairway, dated to 631, where “Yuknoom Head, Snake Lord,” is followed by *ta uxtē’tuun aj chiiknaħb* “at Three Stones, Chiiknaħb Person.” The event to which this statement is attached plainly took place at Naranjo, so the prepositional “at Three Stones” seems contradictory here. Yet it becomes understandable if there was a need to disambiguate Calakmul from some other, more familiar, home for the *kaanul* dynasty (Tokovinine 2007:19-21).

The transfer, or secondary foundation, of dynastic groups is already well-attested in the epigraphic record, with the clearest example being the joint use of the *mutul* emblem glyph by Tikal and Dos Pilas during the seventh and eighth centuries (Houston 1993:97-102; Guenter 2003; Martin and Grube 2008:56-57). Antagonists in a protracted civil war—almost certainly based on a fraternal dispute—Tikal had a deep

history and uses *mutul* as its local toponym, while Dos Pilas,¹⁵ a breakaway kingdom based some 112 km to the southwest, employs an entirely different one. Similar developments can be recognized elsewhere, even if their historical specifics are more obscure. It is notable, for example, that the *baakal* name in the emblem glyph of Palenque is never employed as a toponym at that site, its dynasty instead describing two other centers from which they ruled: *toktahn* from 431 and *lakamha’* from 490 (Stuart 2004a:3; Tokovinine 2013:70-71). The *baakal* place name is mentioned once at Tortuguero—the seat of a separate royal house of that name—among contemporary events, and this could well suggest that it was local and constitutes a place of origin. The process of dynastic expansion and/or transfer is even more tellingly on view at Comalcalco. This most westerly Maya center was conquered by Tortuguero in 649, an event that saw Comalcalco’s incumbent *joykan* dynasty replaced by that of *baakal* (Zender 2001; Martin 2014:329-330).¹⁶

The Place of Snakes

The shared emblem glyph of Dzibanche and Calakmul leaves us with several unresolved questions, including the exact origin of the “Snake” name and the precise manner in which it signified a political entity. In full spellings it carries a *-la* suffix that is commonly seen with emblem main signs and indicative of a class of place names ending in *-l*. Similar *-il* endings in Ch’ol (Warkentin and Scott 1978:118-119) and Itzaj (Hofling and Tesucún 1997:23) convert common nouns into toponyms with the sense of “x-place.” Alfonso Lacadena and Søren Wichmann (n.d.:16-28) suggest that the *-la* suffix generates a terminal *-Vl* in the texts and offer the gloss “where x abounds” for the resulting form. Under this interpretation the “Snake” locale would be read *kanu’l* and signify “the place where snakes abound.” It seems very clear that Calakmul, supplied with a pair of distinctive toponyms, is not this location—which is entirely to be expected in the case of a dynasty that had migrated from elsewhere.

Firstly, can we be sure that *kaanul* denotes a place in the real world, rather than one only to be found in the realm of myth? This distinction touches on deeper questions about dynastic origins and the authority embodied in emblem glyphs—whether they are derived from historical acts of foundation (Bíró 2012:59-60; Tokovinine 2013:71-79) or instead drawn from supernatural charters (Grube 2004; Tokovinine 2013:72; Helmke and Kupprat 2016). Yet this dichotomy is rather misleading, since the two categories were hardly mutually exclusive in Maya thought. We have evidence, for example, that the names of certain historical places replicate those of supernatural ones, and equally that toponyms inspired by a natural landscape were supplied with divine back-stories that embedded them in local mythologies. In a Maya worldview it seems that the physical and metaphysical worlds were entwined and in some sense

¹⁵ The only proviso here is that the full Tikal toponym is *yax mutul*, which might mean “New Mutul” and indicate a still earlier forebear for that name elsewhere.

¹⁶ Christophe Helmke (personal communication 2016) pointed to the likely *ka* prefix to the Comalcalco (*joykan*) emblem glyph, which is drawn into one of the bricks found at the site. This suggests a **KAN** rather than **CHAN** reading for “sky” in this context, which, as an established toponym was evidently unaffected by the *k > ch* shift going on in Western Ch’olan at that time.

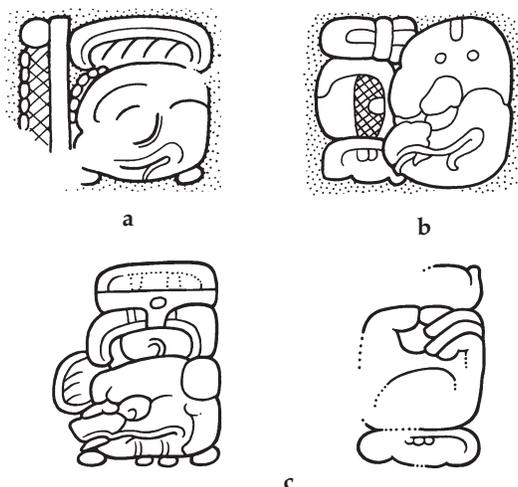


Figure 8. *Kaanul* outside the emblem glyph: (a) Dos Pilas Panel 19, Q2 (drawing by David Stuart); (b) Calakmul Element 22, A1 (drawing by Simon Martin); (c) La Corona Element 33, B6b-A7b (drawing by David Stuart).

mutually constitutive.¹⁷ Since connectedness to the divine can be taken for granted, the only question that need concern us is whether *kaanul* was ever an actual place. Three texts illustrate the issues and difficulties as we seek to resolve that question.

In a caption to the scene on Dos Pilas Panel 19 that identifies the guardian of a local prince, we find the title **AJ-KAAN-*la* *aj* *kaanul*** “Snake[-Place] Person” (Houston 1993:115) (Figure 8a). Although this might appear to be toponymic, the *aj* formula creates associations of several different kinds and is not necessarily a reference to a point of origin (see Tokovinine 2013:58). If, as seems likely given that Dos Pilas was a client of Calakmul, this visitor hails from *uxte’tuun chiiknahb*, then the reference might have the looser sense “of the Snake dynasty.” Here *kaanul* would have taken the same derived meaning it acquired in the Calakmul emblem glyph and a toponym that has come to represent a political entity.¹⁸ Another potentially relevant example appears on a block excavated by Ramón Carrasco, Director of the Proyecto Arqueológico de Calakmul (Figure 8b). At first sight, the glyph here reads **tu-CH’EEN-na-KAAN[*la*]** *tu ch’een kaanul* “in the *ch’een* of the Snake[-Place].” If so, it would remain unclear if this *kaanul* refers to a physical site or simply to the *ch’een* now possessed by the transplanted faction ruling at Calakmul.¹⁹ Yet there is more uncertainty here. The snake-head lacks the normal (though not essential) **ka** prefix and has an atypical motif in its forehead. Rather than a strange **la** infix, this could be the same

design we see on a snake-head on an alabaster bowl from the Copan region, which probably represents a form of the **bi** syllabogram. Very rarely *ch’een* takes a *-bV* suffix, as on K4909, and conceivably this is a variant of that form (Marc Zender, personal communication 2016).²⁰

A third instance comes from La Corona Element 33, which shows *kaanul* as the subject of a “foundation” event, in the form **?-*yi*-ka-KAAN-*la*** (Stuart 2012) (Figure 8c). Sadly, the glyph immediately after this has completely spalled away and the following one is damaged, so we cannot appreciate its full context.²¹ The verb in question carries a *-yi* suffix, which is characteristic of a set of roots that describe changes of state (Stuart 2005:68-69; Lacadena 2010a:16), and although its reading remains uncertain, two contenders are **KAJ** “to settle, reside” and **K’OT** “to arrive, take control over.”²² Whatever the correct solution, the action evidently refers to the establishment or re-establishment of lordly power at a particular place, in which its subjects almost always consist

¹⁷ According to the model proposed by Alfredo López Austin (2015a), in the indigenous cosmivision the world is constituted by an interlaced mixture of heavy and ethereal material, while the sacred sphere is constituted only of subtle/fine/delicate matter, so in reality everything has some physical character and is subject to the same laws of the cosmos. This leads López Austin to question the validity of the concepts “supernatural” and “metaphysical realm” to explain Mesoamerican religious concepts. In their place he has coined the terms *ecumene* (mundane space-time of creatures, perceptible to the senses) and *anecumene* (space-time of the sacred, beyond human perception and prohibited to dense substances). However, *anecumenical* beings also occupy the world because they constitute the interior (soul) of creatures and transit in a periodic or chance way through the *ecumene*. Hence both worlds are intertwined and mutually constitutive (see López Austin 2015b, 2016:79-83).

¹⁸ The progression from toponym to patronym is a familiar one worldwide (see Bíró 2012:59-60). We do not rule out the possibility that emblem main signs developed into dynastic names that could be used outside those titles, or even evolved into ethnonyms or territorial designations in some cases.

¹⁹ It might not be coincidental that another block in this series, Element 24, includes the passage **HUL-li chi-ku-NAHB *huli chiiknahb*** “arrives here (at) Chiiknahb.” One might wonder if the monument of which this was once part described events surrounding the break-up and relocation of the dynasty. Other constituent blocks mention various deities and could have provided information about the (re-)establishment of patron gods or their effigies.

²⁰ For K4909 see Justin Kerr’s database at Mayavase.com.

²¹ This final compound here slightly resembles *chiiknahb*. However, the prospective **chi** glyph is anomalously turned palm-side to us and lacks any sign of an infix **ku** syllable. Moreover, the hand is suffixed by **na**, with no evidence for an infix logogram (such as **CH’EEN**) to which it might be attached. Tokovinine (personal communication 2016) suggests that this glyph actually names the protagonist of this event (see Note 23).

²² The Ch’olan root **KAJ** “to settle, inhabit” was proposed by Dmitri Beliaev and Albert Davletshin in 2012 (cited in Tokovinine 2013:80), based on potential complementary affixes of **ka** and **ja** at Coba and Piedras Negras respectively. Stephen Houston (personal communication 2016) prefers **K’OT** “to arrive, take control over,” which has a variety of expanded forms in Ch’olti’ and Ch’orti’ Mayan and might better fit a context like the one on Piedras Negras Throne 1, where an image or effigy is the subject rather than a location.

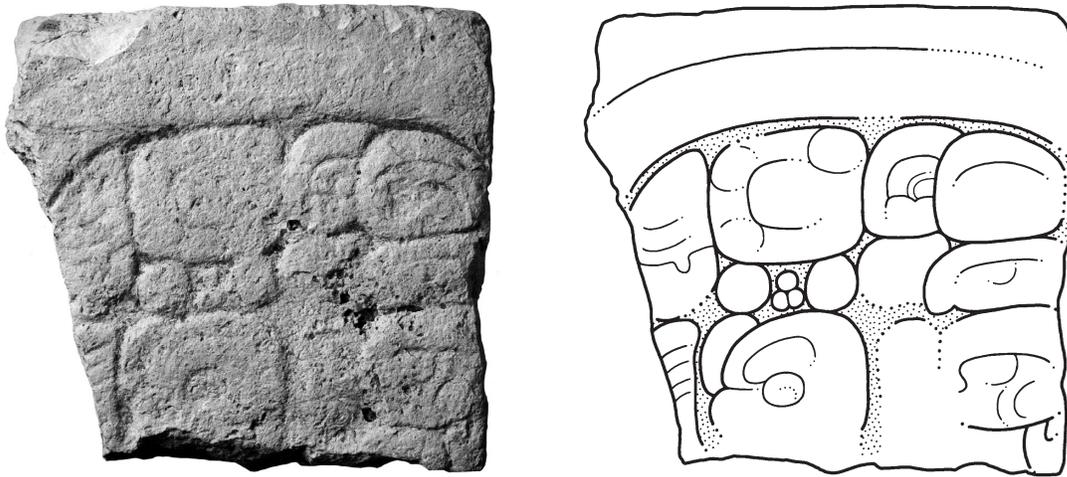


Figure 9. Dzibanche Fragment 1 (photograph and drawing by Simon Martin).

of a toponym or a possessed *ch'een* term (Stuart 2004a:3; Tokovinine 2013:79-81; Martin 2014:103-106). The historical context becomes important at this point since, transpiring in 635, a little over a year before the accession of Yuknoom Ch'een, this (re-)establishment seems to be intimately connected to the emergence of Calakmul as a Snake capital. Thanks to the discovery of Xunantunich Panel 3, we now know that this closely coincided with a “civil war” that set two bearers of the Snake title against one another (Helmke and Awe 2016a:10-11). Together with Step 1 of the Naranjo Hieroglyphic Stairway, we now understand that Waxaklajuun Ubaah Kaan, a bearer of the kingly title *k'uhul kaanul ajaw*, was defeated in 636 by Yuknoom Head, a lesser *kaanul ajaw* based at Calakmul.²³ This shows that the impetus for the shift was an acrimonious split. With this in mind it would be logical to suppose that the *kaanul* name on La Corona Element 33 has a dynastic significance and refers to the initiation of the new regime at Calakmul. However, since all the known subjects of these verbs are locations (except for one physical object) a strong case can be made that it is a toponym here. In this scenario, the statement refers to an event relevant to the break-up and civil war rather than to the establishment of power at Calakmul.²⁴

Since all of these examples remain equivocal to some degree, we are still in need of a context with an unambiguous locative sense. In 2007 three additional inscribed stones were unearthed at Dzibanche, of which two were carved with roundels containing groups of four glyph-blocks, originally parts of a continuous text. One of these, Dzibanche Fragment 1, is somewhat eroded but examination with raking light reveals the sequence **TOOK'-PAKAL-la ta-na-CH'EEN-na ka-KAAN *u-KAB-*ji-ya** *took'pakal tahn ch'een kaan(ul) ukabjiiy* “... flint and shield in the midst of the Snake[-Place] *ch'een*,

it was supervised by...” (Figure 9). Despite missing both its opening verb and its associated agent, this is a typical historical passage describing a war or war-related ritual. Furthermore, *tahn ch'een* never occurs in supernatural contexts, strengthening the case that this *kaanul* is of an earthly character. Given the small corpus of texts we have at the site, and its direct association with early Snake kings, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this is the toponym for Dzibanche—with all that implies about the origin of the Snake dynasty and Calakmul's rival in the civil war.

The newly discovered Xunantunich Panel 4, presented and analyzed by Christophe Helmke and Jaime Awe (2016b, see pp. 1–22 in this issue), makes a remarkable contribution to the debate. An explicit account of dynastic ascendancy passing from Dzibanche to Calakmul, it describes first the negation and then the formation of *k'awwilil*—an abstraction of power or authority—that is set in the contrasting locations of *kaanul* and *uxte'tuun*. A

²³ The Vase of the Initial Series uncovered at Uaxactun describes a Period Ending ceremony in 256 BCE whose presiding king is named solely by the title *k'uhul kaanul elk'in kaloomte'* “Holy Snake[-Place] Eastern Kaloomte' (High King).” One of two figures shown facing the enthroned king is named *yax ajaw aj chiiknahb* “First Lord, Chiiknahb Person.” Nicholas Carter (2015:10-13) suggests that this vessel may have been commissioned ca. AD 635 to establish a fanciful deep history of Calakmul's connection to the Snake dynasty: claiming that Dzibanche lords were already high kings of the east which counted the first ruler of Calakmul among their subjects. Erik Boot (personal communication 2016) is currently preparing a paper on this vessel, one that sees a transhistorical scene in which Yuknoom Ch'een II's reign at Calakmul is legitimated by his divinely engineered encounter with an ancient Dzibanche king.

²⁴ Tokovinine (personal communication 2016) also argues that this event took place at a named location that is not Calakmul and further suggests that it in some way precipitated Yuknoom Ch'een's rise to power, forming a backstory to the narrative of La Corona Element 33.

more deliberate and telling statement of Calakmul's Late Classic rise to prominence can scarcely be imagined.²⁵ This constitutes the underlying theme of the monumental steps that were, with little serious question, raised at Caracol in 642 (Martin 2000:57-58, Fig. 12) and are known from estranged portions distributed among the sites of Naranjo, Ucanal, and Xunantunich (Maler 1908:91-93; Graham 1978:107, 110; Helmke and Awe 2016a).²⁶

Still left uncertain is the type and scale of the *kaanul* place. This is where the interpretation of the isolated *ch'een* becomes key. If it is indeed a metonym for urban spaces, then *tahn ch'een kaanul*—the form we find on Xunantunich Panel 4 as well as on Dzibanche Fragment 1—speaks of the central core of Dzibanche as a city. However, if *ch'een* remains an abbreviation implying a larger domain, then *kaanul* would name an area within which *tahn* works to specify its “middle” and in that manner its urban core. At this juncture we might note the presence, just 10 km or so to the east of Dzibanche, of the Preclassic center of Ichkabal. Very large temple platforms, rivaling the size of those at El Mirador, are here packed on a small “island” in the midst of a low-lying *bajo* or seasonal swamp. This great ruin would have been a looming presence for the Classic-era population of Dzibanche, and they would inevitably have understood their own identity in some relation or contrast to it. If *kaanul* describes a region rather than a specific site, we might wonder if Ichkabal was a still earlier capital and seat for precursor Snake kings.²⁷

²⁵ We should note that Enrique Nalda Hernández and Sandra Balanzario Granados (2014:199-200) have uncovered evidence at Dzibanche suggesting that the local dynasty continued to call itself *kaanul* after the split and survived into the Late Classic period. Two items found in the Plaza Pom are relevant here, a *kaanul* emblem glyph modelled in stucco (Nalda and Balanzario 2014:198, Fig.18) and another incised on a fragment of ceramic vessel, both likely to be later seventh century by style. The latter mentions a character called *sakun winik ch'ok, kalamte', k'uuhul kaanul ajaw*, “Older brother prince, *kalamte'*, Holy Snake[-Place] Lord” (Velásquez García and Balanzario Granados 2016). His personal name of **a-sa[xi]-ji CHAN-na K'INICH** is otherwise unknown, though it slightly resembles the name of Ruler 7 from the Dynastic Vases (Martin 1997:858).

²⁶ The attribution is not only based on how the focus of the text falls on the Caracol king we know as K'an II, but on the recovery of an apparent fragment of the monument at Caracol itself (see Martin 2000:57-58, Fig. 12).

²⁷ Another, lesser, option is that the name was simply transferred to Dzibanche. However, given the association between the founding myths of the Snake dynasty and the “**chi-CHA**” place (Grube 2004; Stuart 2004b, 2014), we do not exclude the possibility that this important Preclassic toponym refers to Ichkabal. Another glyphic text from Dzibanche known as Fragment 2 mentions the capture of an individual from “**chi-CHA**” using the verb *chuhkaj* “capture, seize, take”—which is typical of historical rather than mythic events. Since the paleography of the inscription corresponds to the Late Classic period, we can speculate that sometime in the seventh or eighth century there was still an active location called “**chi-CHA**” and that it was not far distant from Dzibanche.

Conclusion

The epigraphic record of the Snake dynasty presents data that is specific to its own case, yet also illustrative of broader sociopolitical processes among the Classic Maya. The idea that the *kaanul* dynasty was intrusive to Calakmul—something its texts do not hide so much as celebrate—is amply reflected in the divergence between the place name fixed within its emblem glyph and the two toponyms that identify the site and its immediate environs. Material presented here indicates that the house of *kaanul* took its name from the site or locality of Dzibanche, establishing a concordance between the title and the seat of its earliest known kings. Though we do not rule out additional complexities, whether it be a Preclassic heritage that prefigured this development or the involvement of other centers, the data from Xunantunich supports and enlarges upon these conclusions. These texts add substantive data on two fronts: confirming that the emergence of Calakmul as a Snake capital was a deliberate act of dynastic (re-)foundation, while supplying entirely new information that the separation from its predecessor was not a planned transfer or expansion, but rather the result of internal strife. These events cannot be classed as particularities relevant only to a small circle of the lordly elite, but instead constitute major sociopolitical reconfigurations that affected the lives of very large populations and left profound signatures in the archaeological record. To trace the trajectory of the Snake dynasty is to reveal a key dynamic that shaped Classic Maya history.

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