Over the past three decades it has become increas-
ingly clear that cave formations occupied a privileged
position in ancient Maya culture and ritual practices.
Whereas such dripstone formations are commonly dif-
ferentiated between stalactites (which form from the
ceiling of a cave) and stalagmites (growing on the cave
floor), another useful term is speleothem, which is a
broader catch-all term for cave formations (e.g., Self
and Hill 2003). The latter term is particularly useful
in its archaeological application since it serves as a
means of cataloging fragments of dripstone formations
encountered in excavations, where it is often difficult to
properly identify whether these fragments stem from
stalactites, stalagmites, or other types of formations
such as helictites or flowstone draperies (see Jennings
1985:159-163).
Karen Bassie-Sweet (1991:82-84, 110-126, 1996:70,
151-152), drawing on a range of evidence, was among
the first to comment on the ritual importance of spe-
leothems and their central role in rituals, both within
caves and without. Likewise, James E. Brady has been
instrumental in drawing the attention of his colleagues
to archaeological examples of flowstone and dripstone
formations, which were subjected to deliberate break-
age and removal in antiquity (Brady et al. 1997, 2005). A
number of researchers have followed up on this work,
including Polly Peterson (Peterson et al. 2005) and
Shawn Morton (2015) as part of their doctoral work in
the caves of central Belize.
Although the motivations behind these actions are
not always clear, instances are known wherein large
columnar dripstone speleothems were deliberately
broken by the ancient Maya and erected as monolithic
monuments, either within another portion of the
cave or at a surface site (Brady et al. 1997; Awe et al.
2005:238-240; see also Stone 2005). One such instance is
that of Petroglyph Cave in Belize, where a 3.5 m-high
speleothem column, interpreted by Barbara MacLeod as
a “stela,” was erected in the entrance amidst rimstone
dams that are embellished by geometric petroglyphs
(Reents-Budet and MacLeod 1997:12, 25, 88; see also
MacLeod and Puleston 1979-75). The sexual connota-
tions of caves as womb-like spaces coupled with the
visual simile of speleothems as phallic expressions may
be part of the explanation, as has been cogently noted by
other authors (Brady 1988:53; Bassie-Sweet 1991:83-84,
113; Stone 2005:216).
The archaeological site of Yaxchilan, in present-day
Mexico, provides several key examples of the practice
of erecting speleothems as monolithic monuments. One
such speleothem monument—designated Stela 31—was
carved with an elaborate iconographic program and a
series of glyphic captions. As will be discussed below,
this instructive example demonstrates the importance
of speleothems in royal rituals and reveals that erected
speleothems, on a par with conventional stelae, could
serve to commemorate rites performed at important
calendarical stations.
The erection of speleothems as monuments also
raises intriguing questions when this practice is com-
pared to the erection of monoliths within caves, such as
those that have been documented in subterranean sites
in western Belize. These remarkable archaeological fea-
tures were discovered in a series of caves of the area, in-
cluding Actun Tunichil Mucnal (Figure 1), the Laberinto
de las Tarántulas, and Actun Chechem Ha (Awe et al.
2005; Moyes 2006; Helmke 2009). One of the questions
that arose as part of this research was whether these
slate and limestone monoliths should be considered as
megalithic monuments or even stelae, commemorat-
ing, as they do at surface sites, particular rituals that
coincide with important calendarical stations. Clearly
these monoliths were the focal points of ritual activi-
ties in much the same way that monuments at surface
sites were ceremonial foci, considering the fragmented
ceramic vessels, obsidian blades, charcoal, and special-
function ceramic implemernts, including polychromatic
vases, censers, and a barrel-shaped molded-carved
vase, found around the base of the monoliths (Awe et
al. 2005; Helmke 2009:339-341, 378-387). At surface sites,
the monoliths in point of ritual offerings at a cave in the Soke region of 1991) and an erected speleothem also served as the focal restricted to the Maya area, since a stela-like monument these monoliths, it should be remarked that they are not concerted study and consideration in order to ascertain the category of monoliths erected within caves deserve. Evenings, of which there were none (see Awe et al. 2005:Fig. 9.17). As a result, whereas speleothem monuments can be considered ritual foci, they apparently did not witness or warrant the same type of dedicatory rituals as stelae at surface sites. Speleothems erected at surface sites and the special category of monoliths erected within caves deserve concerted study and consideration in order to ascertain the features that they share with stelae, but also those that set them apart. As to the spatial distribution of these monoliths, it should be remarked that they are not restricted to the Maya area, since a stela-like monument of basalt has been reported from a cave at Tzotziluacan in the central Mexican highlands (Sorocou Szénés 1985, 1991) and an erected speleothem also served as the focal point of ritual offerings at a cave in the Soke region of western Chiapas (Domenici 2010:356, 367) (Figure 2). In turn, clarifying the function of these monoliths in Mesoamerica allows us to better appreciate the ancient activities that they attracted, both within caves as well as at surface sites. It is precisely these queries that I will address here, by concentrating on one particular case study from the Maya area, the columnar speleothem that was erected at the archaeological site of Yaxchilan, Mexico, a monument designated Stela 31. Context and Background Yaxchilan Stela 31 is noteworthy for the fact that it is a large speleothem (originally a stalactite) that was carved and erected as a monument (Figure 3). The speleothem measures approximately 2.48 m high (height above lowest carving) and has a variable diameter, ranging between 34 and 41 cm. Due to its shape, the iconographic scene and glyphic texts carved into the speleothem span around the circumference of the monument (Graham and Von Euw 1977:10; Mathews 1988:226; Tate 1992:132). Aside from the engraved decorations, the exterior surface or cortex of the speleothem has not been altered. This is in itself remarkable since the ancient Maya were adept at modifying natural surfaces, even grinding down and polishing exterior surfaces of shell and vessels made of travertine, to produce smooth, burnished, and soft surfaces (e.g., Borhegyi 1952; Fash 1991:166; Inomata et al. 2001:292; Houston 2014a:258-261; Inomata and Eberl 2014:110-113). In the case of the Yaxchilan speleothem it was meant for all to see that this is patently a speleothem, an alien and otherworldly stone hauled to the daylight from a dark cavern. It was the upper shaft of this monument that was discovered by Teobert Maler at the foot of Structure 33 during one of his three trips to Yaxchilan between 1895 and 1900. The toppled shaft, being exposed to the elements, has weathered and much of its exterior cortex has spalled off. Intriguingly, Maler noted: "I have found similar stalactite columns in front of other structures, which leads to the supposition that there must be an extensive stalactite cave near Yaxchilan from which the ancients procured their columns. This cave, probably concealed in the neighboring mountain range, is at present wholly unknown. It would be interesting to find it at some future time" (Maler 1903:158). The additional speleothems that Maler found include that found at the base of Str. 36 beside Stela 9 (Maler 1903:168), another in front of Str. 41 in association with Stelae 15, 16, 18, 19, and 20 (Maler 1903:179), and a fourth, measuring 2.8 m long, that was found in a secondary context south of Temple 3 (Maler 1903:185) (Figure 4). In addition, several caves have been identified at the site, including that associated with Str. 1, known as Maler’s cave, as well as the cave below the grouping of Strs. 84-86, that below Str. 39 of the South Acropolis, and another associated with Strs. 44 and 45 of the West Acropolis (see Graham and Von Euw 1977:6-7; Tate 1982:150-151, 231, 250). This marks the terrain of Yaxchilan as one blessed with sacred geography, exhibiting a variety of caves—some of the most charged physiographic features of Maya cosmology—all integrated into the architectural fabric of the ancient city (see also Brady 1997; Brady and Ashmore 1999). Despite Maler’s astute observations, which constitute a promising start, Stela 31 has not received the same attention from scholars as the other monuments at the site, perhaps owing to its irregular form and appearance as well as its unusual raw material. However, to anyone with an interest in caves (or it might be said, anyone swayed to the “dark side”) this seems rather bizarre, since certainly this monument stands out as the most fascinating one at the site. Even the prodigious Sylvanus G. Morley failed to make explicit mention of it in his magnum opus (Morley 1937-1938). And even more recently, as I was finishing this paper, it was brought to my attention that a drawing of the iconography of Stela 31 had been published by Stephen Houston (2014:Fig. 50). Yet, despite my keen sense of anticipation, this drawing too revealed itself to be partial, focusing on one part of the iconography. Thus until this paper, no complete drawing of the monument has been published, nor has the iconography or epigraphy been coherently described or analyzed, or its date properly ascertained. The speleothem would eventually be pulled from oblivion and receive the designation “Stela 31,” courtesy of Ian Graham, who undertook work at Yaxchilan from 1970 onwards as part of his documentation for the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions (Graham and Von Euw 1977:10). Yaxchilan was the focus of concerted excavations and an ambitious consolidation project by Mexico’s Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) between 1973 and 1985 under the direction of Roberto García Moll. It was in 1975, as part of these investigations, that the area around the shaft of Stela 31 was cleared, revealing its well-preserved butt (García Moll and Juárez Cossío 1986:160, n. 68). As part of the concerted study and consolidation efforts, a stone hauled to the daylight from a dark cavern. 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of these efforts the fragments were reassembled and the monument was re-erected in situ. Just two years later, in 1977, Peter Mathews arrived on the scene to initiate his study of the Yaxchilan glyphic texts, which remains the focuses of their efforts the fragments were reassembled and the monument was re-erected in situ. Just two years later, in 1977, Peter Mathews arrived on the scene to initiate his study of the Yaxchilan glyphic texts, which remains the cornerstone of our understanding of the dynastic history of the site (Mathews 1988). In 1978, Don Patterson served on the INAH project and in April of that year, took on the challenging task of producing a rubbing of Stela 31 on a cloth sheet (Patterson 2007:114-115). Over the course of three days he produced a field drawing from the rubbing, checking the tracing against the original monument (Patterson 2007:113, Fig. 7). Now, four decades later, I hope that the present study helps to redress the fact that Stela 31 has remained little more than a designation in the academic literature. Stela 31 was erected in front of Structure 33, one of the most imposing structures at Yaxchilan, given its size and location (Morley 1937-1938:530-551; Graham and Von Euw 1977:10; Mathews 1988:226; Tate 1992:213-220) (Figure 5). The monuments associated with Str. 33 (Altar 9, Hieroglyphic Stair 2, Lintels 1 through 3, and Miscellaneous Sculpture 1) have traditionally been attributed to the reign of Yaxuun Bahlam IV (Ad 752–768) (see Mathews 1988:332, 334; Tate 1992:223-224; Proskouriakoff 1995:115-116), although the structure may well have been completed by his son Shield Jaguar IV as a tribute to his father (Martin and Grube 2000:132). 1

In particular Altar 9 has been ascribed to the reign of Yaxuun Bahlam IV (Mathews 1988:213; Tate 1992:224), whereas it appears that Lintels 1 through 3 should be credited to Shield Jaguar IV (c. Ad 769–800+) (Martin and Grube 2000:132). This conclusion derives from the fact that the pre-accession name of Shield Jaguar IV is incongruously styled with a full emblem glyph on Lintel 2, while he is anachronistically referred to by his accession name on Lintel 1. These are important clues that betray the retrospective nature of the references, suggesting that the monuments were raised after Shield Jaguar IV had come to the throne, around AD 769.

1 The names of Yaxchilan rulers deserve some comment. In certain cases I have opted to use the commonly accepted nicknames, especially for instances that remain problematic in their reading, such as Shield Jaguar, whose name consists of the head of a jaguar preceded by the diadem that is typically associated with the supreme collegial deity God D, but also with the great avian creature known as the Principal Bird Deity (see Bardawil 1976; Nielsen and Helmke 2015). Neither the name of God D, nor the diadem have been coherently deciphered, and as such it seems premature to present a reading of this name. Conversely, where I feel that there are sufficient grounds I have provided a complete reading, such as Yaxuun Bahlam, wherein the first portion of his name refers to a particular type of bird, the lovely cotinga (Cotinga amabilis), which is phonetically complemented by ya- (e.g. Lintels 39, 41, and 43) and substituted by the sequence ya-a’-a’-ni on Stela 12.

Hieroglyphic Stair 2 is more difficult to attribute, but since the risers depict Yaxuun Bahlam IV on Step VII, his father on Step VI, and his grandfather, Yaxuun Bahlam III (Ad 629-669+), on Step VIII (Martin and Grube 2000:130), it is reasonable to suggest that this inscribed stair was also raised by Yaxuun Bahlam IV. The focus is evidently on the ruler, who is represented on the axial riser, which is also the largest of the entire stair, flanked on either side by his father and grandfather. However, this may partly result from preservation, since the adjoining risers (Steps V and IX) are now eroded and it remains unclear whether Shield Jaguar IV was originally represented, in which case the entire stair might also be attributable to his reign.

Miscellaneous Sculpture 1, the larger-than-life sculpture of a seated monarch that is housed within the sanctuary of Str. 33, may well have served as an ancestral cult figure depicting Shield Jaguar III, as is suggested by the name embedded in the headdress (Martin and Grube 2000:132) (Figure 6a). This sculpture also bears a connection to Yaxuun Bahlam IV since his name appears in the glyphic text on the back of the statue (Morley 1937-1938:Pl. 178Fb; Mathews 1988:227; Tate 1992:220, Fig. 117b) (Figure 6b). Yet, considering that elements of Shield Jaguar IV’s name are rendered figuratively in the headdress of the statue—a relatively common practice for labelled royal portraiture in the Classic period—it seems most plausible that it too is

Figure 4. Map of Yaxchilan showing the location of Structure 33 and Stela 31, as well as other speleothem monuments and caves at the site. In addition other structures and monuments mentioned in the text are also represented. Contour lines indicate elevation intervals of ten meters (map by Christophe Helmke, based on the survey by John Bolles and maps by Ian Graham and Philip Winton, after Graham 1977:5-6 and Martin and Grube 2000:116).

Figure 5. Structure 33 at Yaxchilan with Stela 31 in the foreground, Hieroglyphic Stair 2 along the uppermost step, and Lintels 1 through 3 above the doorways of the superstructure (photo: Mark and Sarah Prior).
his work depicts him, its text providing yet another retrospective reference to his father. The picture that emerges is thus one in which Yaxuun Bahlam IV initiated the construction of Str. 33 but it was his son and successor Shield Jaguar IV who either completed or refurbished the structure, hence the mixed dates and patronage of the various sculptures associated with the terminal-phase construction. Consequently, the earliest contemporary date borne by a monument associated with Str. 33 is that of Altar 9 dated to AD 751 (9.16.0.0.0) (after Morley 1937–1938:Pl. 105b, 107a, 178Fb). One set of dates remaining to be properly placed are those that were recorded on the back of the statue found within Str. 33, designated as Miscellaneous Sculpture 1. Although the text is extremely weathered, an extant photo (Morley 1937–1938:Pl. 178Fb) indicates that it mentions Yaxuun Bahlam IV, his name and warrior title “he of twenty captives” are evident. That sentence is followed by a weathered distance number that can be reconstructed as 14 days, 2 months, and 7 years, leading up to a partial Calendar Round, wherein only the Haab remains, possibly 7 Xul. Based on the extant imagery and text of the monument are well preserved. Based on the extant imagery the dominant figure, and presumed protagonist, defines the right edge of the scene and is therefore designated as Figure 1. The identity of the seated figure is not entirely clear. Some elements of garment may at first sight suggest that this is a female, but based on comparisons to analogous compositions and iconographic programs, especially that of Stela 7, it is possible to identify the seated figure as male. This Figure 2 is seated beside a woven basket and wears a cape and large jewelry including broad bracelets, quadrangular earflares, and a large beaded necklace suspending a spiny oyster shell (Spondylus sp.) pectoral. This individual also wears a great head-dress that includes the cranium of a snouted animal with curved fangs surmounted by a supernatural entity with goggles framed by “death eyes,” in large measure recallings a local adaptation of a central Mexican divinity such as the War Serpent (Taube 1992:59–68; Nielsen 2003:93–94) or the Storm God (see Pasztor 1974; Wrem Anderson and Helmke 2013). A very similar headdress is represented on Stela 18 (dated to c. 9.12.5.2.12, AD 677) where a victorious Shield Jaguar III is shown wearing it. The second standing person on Stela 31, Figure 3, at the left edge of the scene, is only preserved below the waist, but based on what remains this individual wore much the same attire as the protagonist. Both standing figures wear high-backed sandals, pointed hip-cloths (Tate 1992:88, 132), and loincloths, each ornamented with personifications of bloodletting implements (see Schele and Miller 1986:43–44). Due to better preservation we can also see that Figure 1 wore a small ancestor masquette with a cluster of three celts at the small of the back and an elaborate headdress. Close inspection reveals that Figure 3 also wore a small masquette at the small of the back, and although heavily weathered, one can make out the outlines of what may be an aged human head which until now has remained undated. Assuming that Stela 31 is contemporaneous with the other monuments of Str. 33, a very narrow window emerges, considering that the other dated monuments record a limited span of six years. However, based on contextual association alone and the retrospective nature of many of the texts it would seem prudent to date Stela 31 more broadly to the latter half of the eighth century by attributing the monument to either the reign of Yaxuun Bahlam IV (Mathews 1988:226; Tate 1992:132) or Shield Jaguar IV (Martin and Grube 2000:134). Temporal incidence of the dates recorded on the monuments of Structure 33. The HS 2, Step VII date is retrospective.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monument</th>
<th>Long Count</th>
<th>Tzolk'in</th>
<th>Haab</th>
<th>Gregorian Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HS 2, Step VII</td>
<td>9.15.13.6.9</td>
<td>3 Muluk</td>
<td>17 Mak</td>
<td>22 October 744</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altar 9</td>
<td>9.16.0.0.0</td>
<td>2 Ajaw</td>
<td>13 Sek</td>
<td>19 October 751</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lintel 1</td>
<td>9.16.1.0.0</td>
<td>11 Ajaw</td>
<td>8 Sek</td>
<td>4 May 752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lintel 2</td>
<td>9.16.1.0.0</td>
<td>11 Ajaw</td>
<td>8 Sek</td>
<td>4 May 752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lintel 3</td>
<td>9.16.5.0.0</td>
<td>8 Ajaw</td>
<td>8 Lotz</td>
<td>13 April 756</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lintel 2</td>
<td>9.16.6.0.0</td>
<td>4 Ajaw</td>
<td>3 Lotz</td>
<td>8 April 757</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Iconography

Due to the extensive breakage and spalling of the monument, nearly half of the original carving has been lost. The meticulous refitting and curation efforts of INAH conservators, however, resulted in the restoration and reerection of the monument in situ. The speleothem’s irregular natural surface was modified by a weathered distance number that can be reconstructed as 14 days, 2 months, and 7 years, leading up to a partial Calendar Round, wherein only the Haab remains, possibly 7 Xul. Based on contextual association alone and the retrospective nature of many of the texts it would seem prudent to date Stela 31 more broadly to the latter half of the eighth century by attributing the monument to either the reign of Yaxuun Bahlam IV (Mathews 1988:226; Tate 1992:132) or Shield Jaguar IV (Martin and Grube 2000:134). Temporal incidence of the dates recorded on the monuments of Structure 33.
The elaborate iconographic scene and glyphic captions engraved into the speleothem shaft designated as Stela 31 (roll-out drawing by Christophe Helmke based on raking light photos by Harri Kettunen and Christophe Helmke).

Emerging from the maw of a feline, presumably naming a prominent forebear. A salient point of comparison is the nearly identical masquette worn by Yaxuún Bahlam IV on Lintel 2 at La Pasadita (Figure 8), an important monument that we return to below.

In many respects it is the headdress of Figure 1 that is of greatest interest since—in addition to the great spray of feathers at its back—it portrays the head of the thunder deity Chaahk, surmounted by the head of a reptilian bird with black-tipped feathers, the whole topped by what has been called a shell diadem and a Jester God. The shell diadem with its distinctive crossed bands is a characteristic feature of particular manifestations of the thunder deity, such as Chak Xib Chaahk (“Red Man Chaahk”), associated with the eastern cardinal direction (see Schele and Miller 1986:69), and Yax Ha’al Chaahk (“First Rains Chaahk”), an incarnation of the first rains of the rainy season (Helmke et al. 2003:110, n. 5; Lacadena 2004:88-93). A depiction of a victorious Yaxuún Bahlam IV standing before three kneeling captives is found...
The name of the tutelary deity appears in yet another context, on one of the nine carved and incised bones from Tomb 2, the final resting place of Ix'k'ab'al Xook, within Str. 23 (Mathews 1988:172; 173; Stuart 2013). It is clear that this short text was a sort of name-tag providing a description of the object and a statement of ownership. The text reveals that the bone is that of a jaguar, that it was owned by Ix'k'ab'al Xook, and that its epigraphy was carved to represent Ajk'ahk' O'chaahk. However, the spelling of his name is significant here, since the drawings that have been produced by David Stuart (1990b, 2013:Fig. 1) make it clear that the name is not simply written with the vocable sign o'ch'ahk', a predictive glyph naming the thunder deity, as it is usually found in all other contexts, but as the logogram OCH that represents the rattle of a rattlesnake, which by means of rebus is used as the intransitive verb "to enter" (see Stuart 1998:387-389). This highly illustrative example, which might constitute a hypercorrect spelling, may well indicate that the name of the deity was actually ajk'ahk' och-chaahk', which might constitute a hypercorrect spelling, may well indicate that the name of the deity was actually ajk’ahk’ och-chaahk’, but that elision of the palato-alveolar affricate /ch/ in this theonym accounts for the way in which it is written in other contexts, adequately reflecting the spoken form. Based on this revealing example, the name of the deity can be aptly compared to other theonyms that entail verbal expressions involving fire, names of particular manifestations of deities that were also the preferred accession names of rulers in the eastern Maya Lowlands (see Grube 2002; Colas 2004, 2006; Helmke 2010:75-79).

The event that brings the three figures of Stela 31 together is a scattering ceremony, an important ritual event that probably had its origins in agricultural rites wherein rulers symbolically sowed the seeds of the first figurative planting of a given season (see Houston 2014b:83-84). Drawing analogies to similar rites performed by other pre-industrial societies reveals that the divine power of the ruler was thought to virtu-ally imbue the seeds and grains with sexual potency, thereby heightening the fertility not only of a restricted plot in proximity of the royal palace or a salient temple, but of the whole of a territory under the control of the monarch (e.g. Anonymous 1913:293-294; Uphill 1963; Scullard 1981:68). In the Maya area scattering rituals are documented for the whole of the Classic period, but especially for the Late Classic (e.g. Aparicio 1913:293-294; Uphill 1963; Scullard 1981:68).
languages, that we can ascertain the sense of this
are preserved in Ch’olti’ and among Highland Maya
well as the meaning of the reflexes of this
terms (Stuart 2003). It is from these contexts, as
written corpus as a
difrasismo—a metaphorical expres-
“yellow” and “blue-green” in their literal and adjectival
grams
objects within the stream itself. These are the color logo-
descendants of maize, held perhaps in woven baskets, such as
rituals involved the king, who from his hands released
-
conventional—rituals performed by the king, and attended by two
additional figures.

**Table 2. Chronological Incidents of Monuments at Yaxchilan commemorating scattering rituals.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monument</th>
<th>Long Count</th>
<th>Tzolk’in</th>
<th>Haab</th>
<th>Gregorian Date</th>
<th>Agent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HS 1</td>
<td>8.17.10.25</td>
<td>Chichkan</td>
<td>18 Waj</td>
<td>14 June 379</td>
<td>Yaxuun Bahlam I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela 27</td>
<td>9.4.0.0.0</td>
<td>13 Ajaw</td>
<td>18 Yax</td>
<td>19 October 514</td>
<td>Knot-eye Jaguar I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela 3</td>
<td>9.10.16.10.13</td>
<td>7 Ben</td>
<td>16 Sek</td>
<td>6 June 649</td>
<td>Yaxuun Bahlam III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela 6</td>
<td>9.11.16.10.13</td>
<td>5 Ben</td>
<td>1 Wayeb</td>
<td>21 February 669</td>
<td>Yaxuun Bahlam III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela 18</td>
<td>9.12.5.2.12</td>
<td>3 Eb</td>
<td>15 Mol</td>
<td>28 July 677</td>
<td>Shield Jaguar III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela 1</td>
<td>9.16.10.0.0</td>
<td>1 Ajaw</td>
<td>3 Sip</td>
<td>18 March 761</td>
<td>Yaxuun Bahlam IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela 4</td>
<td>9.17.5.0.0</td>
<td>6 Ajaw</td>
<td>13 K’ayab</td>
<td>30 December 775</td>
<td>Shield Jaguar IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stela 7</td>
<td>9.7.5.0.0</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Shield Jaguar IV</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Proskouriakoff 1993:24-25, 112-113) (Table 2).

This wonderful collection of monuments allows us to make some broad comments as to the nature of the scattering ceremony represented on Stela 31. Among the scattering monuments at Yaxchilan the two that are most similar to Stela 31 are Stela 1 and 3. Stela 3 dates to the reign of Yaxuun Bahlam III and Stela 1 is evidently an emulation by his later namesake, especially considering the many shared features, such as the pose and regalia of the protagonists. A vital part of scattering rituals involved the king, who from his hands released or symbolically sowed a stream that is framed by small beads and floral elements onto a small altar, bound in strips of cloth. At times the king also showered his blessings on a seated, subservient figure, as seen for instance on Stela 7 and 31. The material that was scattered has attracted a fair bit of discussion, some scholars initially suggesting that the streams represented auto-sacrificial blood (see Stuart 1984, 1988; Schele and Miller 1986; Proskouriakoff 1993:112), others noting that the streams are made of “water.” This situation has only been exacerbated by time, its depressions, the details of which are almost obliterated. “This situation has only been exacerbated by time, its depressions, the details of which are almost obliterated.”

Epigraphy

In keeping with the initial assessments by Mathews (1988:10), Stela 31 indeed exhibits three glyphic cap-
tations, as in the text of the area; see Lacadena and Wichmann 2002:291-293, Table VI), and the k’in or “day” (E1), each accompanied by a prefixed sign read with “nothing, none.” This indicates that this was an important “even” date, 9.16.0.0.0, commemorating the completion of the sixteenth k’atun, which can be correlated to May 10, AD 751 in the Gregorian calendar, using the GMT+1 correlation (see Martin and Skidmore 2012).

This date is significant for several reasons. For one it makes this speleothem stela coeval with the earliest dated monument of Str. 33, namely Altar 9, and one can thus wonder if Stela 31 was once paired with this altar at its dedication. Noteworthy in this regard is Mathews’s identification of the name of Yaxuun Bahlam IV on Altar 9 (Mathews 1988:213). Whereas the possi-
bility remains that these are retrospective accounts, there is nothing in the texts of Altar 9 and Stela 31 to suggest that these are ex post facto, as with most of the texts associated with Str. 33. As such, it implies that Yaxuun Bahlam IV was already wielding some kind of power at Yaxchilan before his formal enthronization, precisely one year later in AD 752 (9.16.1.0.0) (Mathews 1988:205-206, 213-214; Martin and Grube 2000:127-128). Whether Yaxuun Bahlam IV wielded power during the “interregnum” that preceded his accession has been the subject of considerable discussion (Proskouriakoff 1963:316, 1964:178-181; Mathews 1998:205-217). That he did is made evident by the fact that he eventually won the throne, no doubt after decisively defeating any rivals. In this respect we see the accompanying Calendar Round and Supplementary Series (Figure 10a). This crucially important segment was identified by the author during a visit to the site and photographically documented with the assistance of my colleague Harri Kettunen (Helmke 2012b). For whatever reason this segment has not been noted by previous researchers, or at the very least has not stimulated any written commentary. This segment is evidently important because it allows us to fix the date of the monument and to ascertain its relation to the other monuments of Structure 33 as well as to the monarchs who commissioned them.

Although the very start of the text is now missing, since it occurred on a part of the speleothem that has spalled off, we can reconstruct the first glyph (A1) as an initial Signatory Glyph, which typically precedes Long Count dates, whereas the second glyph block (B1) undoubtedly provided the bak’tun portion of the date that records periods of 400 vague years, which is to say 394 solar years. It is virtually certain that this should have been 9 bak’tun, considering the style of the monument, which is clearly Late Classic. The first block (C1) remains and records the k’atun (period of c. 20 years), and its coefficient is partly eroded it must record 16 k’atun. The ten or “vague solar year” follows (D1), as does the winak or “month” (here written WINIK-k’i as is in keeping with the texts of the area; see Lacadena and Wichmann 2002:291-293, Table VI), and the k’in or “day” (E1), each accompanied by a prefixed sign read with “nothing, none.” This indicates that this was an important “even” date, 9.16.0.0.0, commemorating the completion of the sixteenth k’atun, which can be correlated to May 10, AD 751 in the Gregorian calendar, using the GMT+1 correlation (see Martin and Skidmore 2012).

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The first mention of a contender to the throne, a certain Yaxuun Bahlam, may have figured solely as heir presumptive, brooding apparent. Yaxuun Bahlam, as the son of a minor consort, court, even during the years after the passing of her hus-

The Tzolk’in is followed by Glyph G (D4) that records -

drawn from a mythological location (Helmke 2012c:100-

1 On the lintels (with the notable exceptions of Lintels 33 and 39), the nomino-titular segments of Yaxuun Bahlam IV tend to be shorter when compared to those found on his stelae. Thus for the most part most of the sections account for between 2 and 6 glyph blocks, with an average of 3. This is precisely why in the case of Stela 31 the comparison is made to the stelae of Yaxuun Bahlam IV, rather than to the iconography of the stela, it stands to reason that it

2 This may also help to explain why his accession took the turbulent interregnum that preceded his accession.

3 The Yukatek reflex is of great interest since it includes a rising tone, which indicates that the

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5 The Yukatek reflex

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7 This can be translated as “he bound the stone” (see Stuart 1999:2)

8 The second glyphic caption is associated with the seated individual, Figure 2 (Figure 11a). It is the shortest of the three captions, consisting solely of two glyph blocks. The first is a kuts-TUN-ni (F1), and although its constituent signs can all be read without any difficulty, their correct transcription is problematic. The combination of a-kuts is usually an underspelling of the common anthroponym Abkil “turtle” (apparently derived from a toponym meaning “where turtles abound”); see Lacadena and Wichmann 1996:150-151; Helmke and Kupperat 2016:41-43, which is so commonplace in the Usumacinta

9 The combination of these two patterns of phonetic complementation is difficult to explain at present, not least if we consider the possibility that the segment a-kutu-TUN-NI (F1) may have been used on this occasion for two different purposes. On the one hand the term a-kutu-TUN-NI, rendered in a hypercorrect spelling. As such this compound has the literal meaning of “turtle-stone” or “arched/covered-stone” (see Barrera Vásquez et al. 1980:4-

10 This can be translated as “he bound the stone” (see Stuart 1999:2)

11 This can be translated as “he bound the stone” (see Stuart 1999:2)

12 This can be translated as “he bound the stone” (see Stuart 1999:2)
remains difficult to parse and interpret at present, but it may involve the possessed form of the root *aw* “shout, yell” (see Kaufman 2003:716), tied as a kinship term for family members of the same generation. Of interest is the Eastern Maya kinship term “annab,” which can be glossed as “man’s sister” (Kaufman 2003:107-108). Although this is explicitly not the solution for the text at hand, since it ties together two ostensibly male figures, the possibility of a semantic shift in a conjunctive term should not be excluded outright. An alternative analysis of the title as *aw-annab* has been presented elsewhere (Sheseña 2008).

...
as monuments thus precedes the interregnum and is a custom that Yaxuun Bahlam IV would have inherited from his father. Another building, Structure 36, can also be attributed to the reign of Yaxuun Bahlam IV based on the associated Stela 9. The practice of erecting speleothem monuments may have endured until the reign of K’inch Ixill Itzamnaa IV, the last known ruler of Yaxchilan, since his Str. 3, dated to AD 808 was also associated with a speleothem monument. Thus there is a nearly continuous sequence of speleothem monuments that can be attributed to a patrilineal succession of four rulers over a century. Therefore these speleothems do not represent a random collection of monoliths, but perhaps conmemorate specific cave rituals wherein important scattering rituals were celebrated within the reigns of each of these kings. It remains within the purview of future studies to sample each of the speleothems and conduct elemental analyses to attempt to source them to the cave of their origin, as well as to refine the chronological series offered here.

The major question of interest remains, however, precisely the use of the speleothem as a stela. Why erect a speleothem before Str. 33 and not a limestone stela? This cannot be just a function of relative proximity to caves, since caves are relatively commonplace throughout the lowlands and yet multiple speleothem monuments are a distinctive characteristic of Yaxchilan, a peculiarity that begs for an explanation. In order to account for the monument’s source material, one might speculate that the sexual connotations of caves and the phallic symbolism of speleothems (Brady 1988; Brady et al. 1997:732-736) may be the motivation for these monuments, as if to enhance the potency of ‘scattering rituals and produce particularly bountiful harvests. Alternatively, the possibility remains that the erection of speleothems is a regional trait, particularly since a series of “oddly shaped slabs of limestone without carvings” have been reported at the site of Yoxiha in Chiapas (c. 29 km south of Palenque), along the course of the Rio Tulijá (Blom and LaFarge 1926-1927:1:223). Based on extant descriptions and published photographs this group of monuments appear to be speleothems that were once erected along the base of the principal structures (Blom and LaFarge Fig. 180). However, Stela 31 is far from the only piece of evidence that suggests caves were intimately related to the ritual celebration of important calendrical rituals. For one, the paintings of Group 2 within Jolja cave in Chiapas make it clear that an important 9 Ajaw period ending was celebrated at the site by figures bearing torches (Stone 1995:87-88; Bassis 2002). Similarly, the painted glyphic text of Group 5 records the completion of the bak’tun on the 9.0.0.0.0 period ending of Yaxchilan, since his Str. 3, dated to AD 808 was also associated with a speleothem monument. Thus there is a nearly continuous sequence of speleothem monuments that can be attributed to a patrilineal succession of four rulers over a century. Therefore these speleothems do not represent a random collection of monoliths, but perhaps conmemorate specific cave rituals wherein important scattering rituals were celebrated within the reigns of each of these kings. It remains within the purview of future studies to sample each of the speleothems and conduct elemental analyses to attempt to source them to the cave of their origin, as well as to refine the chronological series offered here.

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Figure 14. Andrea Stone inspecting the glyphic text designated Drawing 88 painted on the wall behind the speleothem erected within the North Passage at Naj Tunich (photo: Chip Clark, courtesy of James Brady).

Figure 15. Excerpt of Drawing 88 that mentions a pilgrim from Caracol, named Tz’ahyaj ‘K’ahk’ along with another companion (photo: James Brady).

Carcion 1:  
AI:  
ISIG  
B1:  [9-P1K] bulau, p'il  “9 bak’ tun”  
Cl:  [16]=WINAK?=HAB \[16]’=k’atun’  
D1=MH-HAB \[16]’=k’atun’  
D2=MH-K’IN-ni \[16]’=k’atun’  
D3=2-AJAW \[16]’=k’atun’ “no years”  
D4=5=I/K=K’IN \[16]’=k’atun’  
Carcion 2:  
P1= a-k’u=to=TUN-ni \[16]’=k’atun’ “mouth of the crown” (Glyph F)  
G1=K’AK’=MAX \[16]’=k’atun’ “fire spider monkey” (anthroponym)  
G1=K’UH \[16]’=k’atun’  
P1= a-k’u=to=TUN-ni “6 arrived” (Glyphs E+D)  
G2 ya-na-ba=tsi-li \[16]’=k’atun’ “the sculptor (? of the tzi’l” “different-same”  
G3=TUN-ni \[16]’=k’atun’ “tree seer” (exalted title)  
P1= at=ku=to=TUN-ni “6 arrived” (Glyphs E+D)  
G4=ka’-b’al \[16]’=k’atun’ “the companion of – “with”  
G5=SAK’-ba-la \[16]’=k’atun’ “white-round …”  
G6= ? \[16]’=k’atun’ “turtle stone” ~ “cave”  
P2 ya-wa-CHAN-na “30 days” (proper name)  
Carcion 3:  
G1=K’AB’ \[16]’=k’atun’  
G1=K’ABA’  
References  