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In This Issue:

**The Paw Stone:
The Place Name
of Piedras Negras,
Guatemala**

by David Stuart

PAGES 1-6

•
**Return to the
Great Forests**

**Frans Blom's
Letters from
Palenque:**

**December 14-20,
1922**

PAGES 7-10

•
**Morley's Diary:
April 15-17, 1932**

PAGES 11-16

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The Paw Stone: The Place Name of Piedras Negras, Guatemala

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The inscriptions of Piedras Negras, Guatemala and nearby El Cayo make occasional reference to a place name or toponym that has remained unidentified since its initial recognition over a decade ago (Stuart and Houston 1994:33). The glyph (Figure 1) assumes a regular appearance in the inscriptions and is composed of two basic units: a feline paw sign, as yet undeciphered, above **TUUN-(ni)**, *tuun*, "stone". The latter is a common term in Mayan place names today as well as in ancient times (for example, Lakamtuun). In this study I will offer a few observations about the "Paw Stone" glyph and its textual appearances, and then refer to a significant clue to its nature as a place glyph associated with the ceremonial center of Piedras Negras.

First a few words on the reading of the initial paw-like sign. This bears a close resemblance to the logogram **ICH'AAK**, "claw" (Stuart 1987), but its orientation and internal markings suggest it is a different sign. The **ICH'AAK** element appropriately emphasizes the animal's claws, whereas the upper sign of the toponym seems "de-clawed" by comparison, showing more the darkened pads underneath. The same inward-facing paw sign probably occurs at Tonina in a royal name read *K'inich Ich'aak*

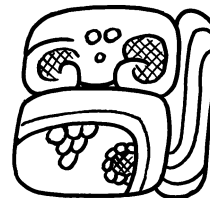


Figure 1. The Paw Stone glyph.

Chapat (Martin and Grube 2000:186), although we might entertain another decipherment if indeed this is a different paw. Perhaps these paws are simply stylistic variations of one another, but for the moment I will refer to the glyph and the place name simply as "Paw Stone", with the understanding that this is no literal translation.

I know of six examples of the Paw Stone glyph. Four appear on Throne 1 of Piedras Negras, and another from Panel 1 of El Cayo. (During a visit to Piedras Negras in April, 1998, I saw another possible example on Stela 18, though in a very weathered text.) Throne 1 dates to the reign of Ruler 7, the last documented king of Piedras Negras, and its text sheds some light on the years leading up to his accession. In this interesting time, Ruler 6 (*Ha' K'in Xook*) is said to "lose the rulership" on 9.17.9.5.11, over a year before the inauguration of his suc-

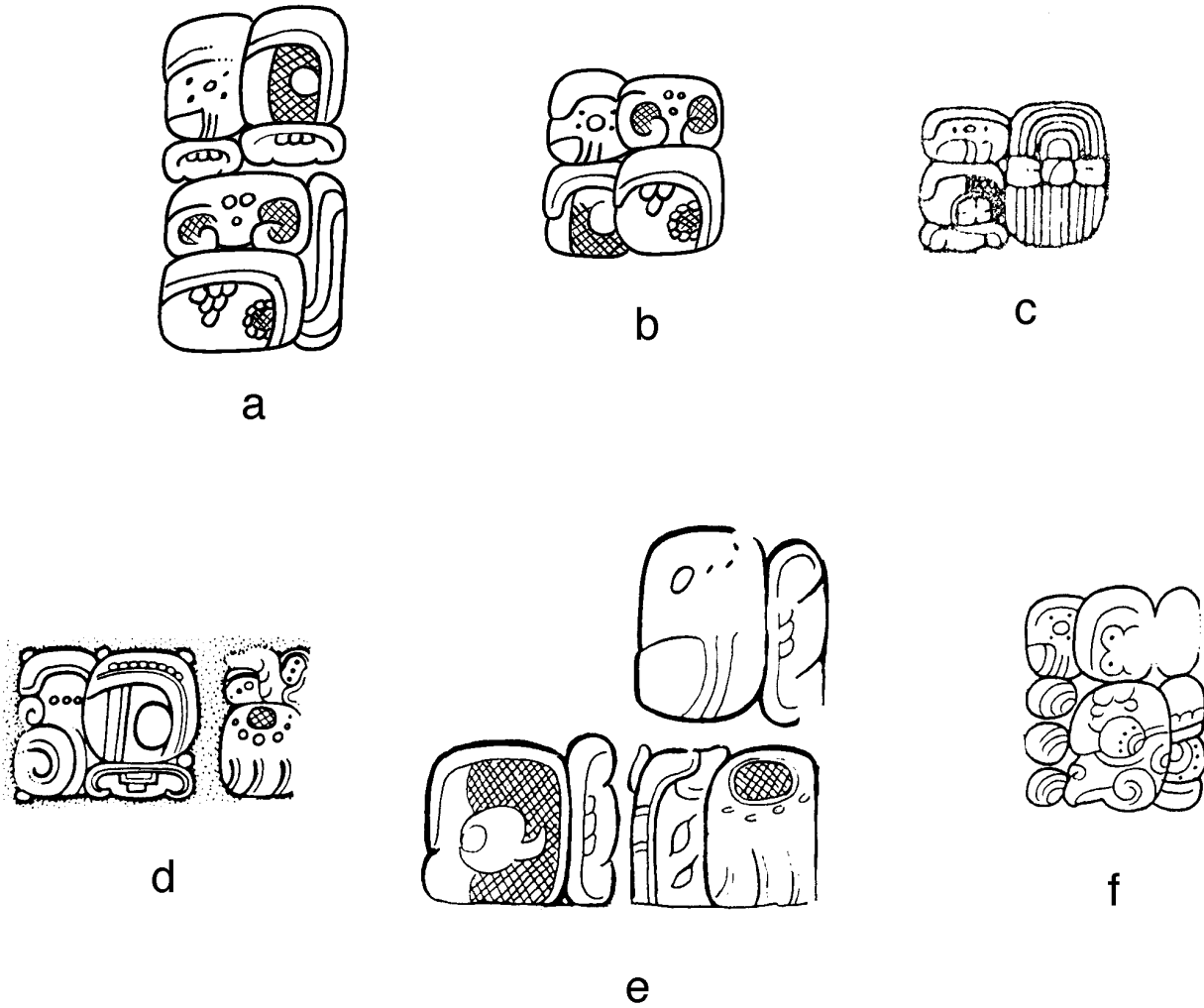


Figure 2. Parallel expressions of *tahn ch'een* before various toponyms. (a) Piedras Negras Throne 1, Support 1, (b) Piedras Negras Throne 1, Support 2, (c) Tikal Temple 1, Lintel 3, (d) Dos Pilas Stela 8, (e) Palenque Temple XIX Platform, South, (f) Caracol Stela 3.

cessor. Throughout these complex passages we see the Paw Stone glyph prefixed by the revealing combination of **TAHN-CH'EEN-** ("in front of the cave/spring..."), which regularly appears with toponyms in the inscriptions of several other sites (Stuart and Houston 1994) (Figure 2). At Tikal, for example, the standard emblem glyph main sign (**MUTUL?**) appears as part the very same expression, where it occupies the same position as the "Paw Stone" (Figure 2c). Dos Pilas Stela 8 displays its own local toponym (**?-HA'**) in a parallel example (Figure 2d), and at Palenque's Temple XIX we find *tahn ch'een Lakamha'* ("in front of the Lakamha' spring") probably in reference to the Otolum River (Stuart 2000) (Figure 2e). Stela 3 from Caracol mentions the local place name *Uxwitza'* ("Three Hill Water") in much the same way (Figure 2f). Yet another example from El

Peru Stela 31, reads *tahn ch'een Waka'* ("in front of the Waka' cave/spring") likewise specifying the location of an important ritual at El Peru, named *Waka'* in ancient times. The many parallel phrases leave little doubt that the Paw Stone glyph was an important place name associated with Piedras Negras.

In his recent and useful discussion of place glyphs from the Piedras Negras region, Zender (2002) does not mention the Paw Stone glyph and suggests instead that the local toponym was possibly **K'IN-a**, sometimes reduced simply as **K'IN**. This is indeed the base term of an important title found with Piedras Negras kings and nobility, usually spelled in full **K'IN-ni-AJAW** in addition to a modifier. Clearly, as Zender suggests, *K'in* or *K'ina'* (if they are indeed the same – I suspect a distinction) was some local term of significance, but I would

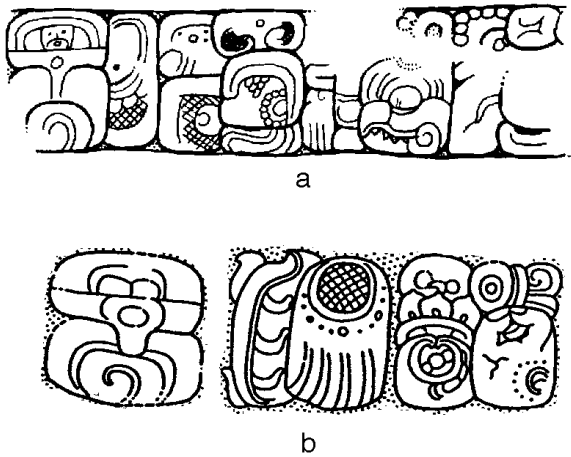


Figure 3. “Foundation” events with toponyms at Piedras Negras and Palenque. (a) Piedras Negras Throne 1, Seat, (b) Palenque Temple XVII.

caution that the exact scope of its reference is difficult to determine. Unlike the Paw Stone glyph, *K'in(a')* does not operate in local Piedras Negras inscriptions in obvious toponymic contexts.

One appearance of the Paw Stone glyph on Throne 1 comes at the beginning of the text, along the face of the seat (Figure 3a). The initial two or three glyphs are missing, but we soon clearly read **TAHN-CH'EEN-"PAW"-TUUN-ni**, after a verb that in other settings seems to mean "to set" or "to establish" (no firm phonetic reading has been suggested). Again we can point to a parallel from Palenque's inscriptions (Figure 3b), where the same verb appears directly before the local Lakamha' place name (the **TAHN-CH'EEN** phrase is absent). The Palenque event takes place in the Early Classic, and almost surely refers to the founding or establishment of Lakamha' as a political community (rulers before this time are usually associated with a Palenque locale called *Toktan*). The similarity between these texts is even more striking, for it is likely that the "establishment" event recorded on Piedras Negras Throne 1 is also from the Early Classic. A long distance number of 15 K'atuns and a missing number of haab's connect this initial event to the birth date of Ruler 7 (9.15.18.16.7), suggesting that the "foundation" took place near the very beginning of the B'ak'tun. The name associated with this early event looks like that of Ruler 7, but is more likely the name of an early king, perhaps the founder of the dynasty. (It is also the name of another important early ruler named on Panel 2, in connection with the date 9.3.16.0.5 — far too

late to be the same individual, suggesting that there were at least three kings with the same name.) I suggest that the initial glyphs of Throne 1 record the founding of the Paw Stone location, probably the ritual center at Piedras Negras.

Like Throne 1, El Cayo Panel 1 sheds some important light on the murky history before Ruler 7. One key passage (Figure 4) concerns the death and burial of an unnamed subject, probably a local El Cayo *sajal* who was the father of the panel's protagonist, named Chan Panak. The passage reads in part:

T'ab'ay ?-tuun Chan Panak
Y-ichnal ?-Chak-? K'uhul Yokib' Ajaw K'in Ajaw

(Then) Chan Panak went up to 'Paw Stone' in the presence of "Ruler 5," the Holy Lord of Yokib', The Sun Lord.

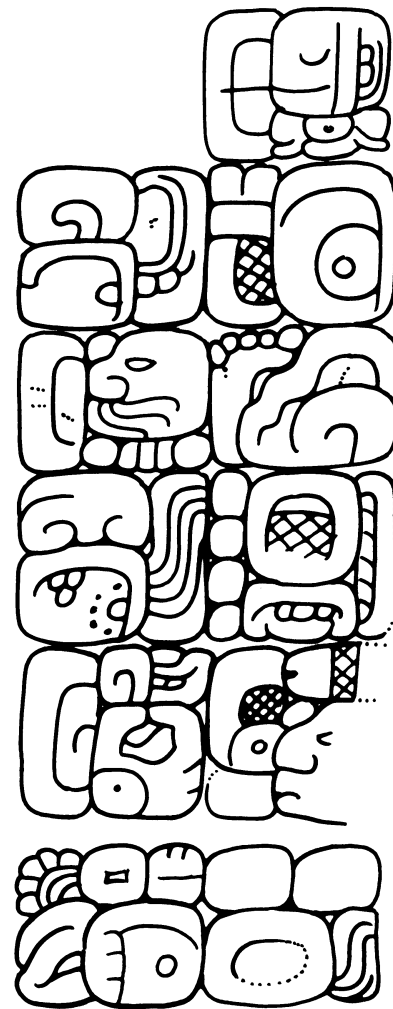


Figure 4. Passage from El Cayo Panel 1.



Figure 5. Two views of Piedras Negras Altar 4 (Photographs courtesy of the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions archive).

I interpret this statement as the record of a visit of the young Chan Panak (12 years old at the time) to the regional capital downriver directly after his father's death. The trip was surely politically charged and may have occurred in order to confirm the boy's role as heir to the *sajal*-ship. Indeed, Chan Panak would assume the office some nine years later, according to a passage near the end of Panel 1's inscription. "Going up to 'Paw Stone'" may well refer to the steep and arduous climb to Piedras Negras's acropolis from the riverside. Alternatively, the sense may simply be that one traveled and arrived at a distant locale, rather like the English usage of "going up" to a visited place. This in fact seems likely, since we find in other inscriptions that the same *t'abay* ("ascend, go up") can appear in conjunction with *lok'oy*, "exit, leave" to describe journeys and the precise sequence of departure and arrival. For example, on Hieroglyphic Stairway 2 of Dos Pilas, we read that kings "go up" to distant communities after military defeats (Fahsen 2002). The

t'abay event at El Cayo seems to come also as a result of a politically disruptive event.

Although "Paw Stone" seems a plausible place name for Piedras Negras, it is likely to refer at times to a particular sculpted monument. Altar 4 is a large square table-like monument that once rested on four elaborately carved supports in the center of Piedras Negras's principal plaza (Figure 5a and b). It was found by Maler in fairly good condition, but the careless removal of the four elaborately carved and inscribed supports in the 1930s left the large upper slab to decay on the forest floor, where it today can be found broken in two fragments.¹

The four supporting heads are all recognizable as three-dimensional forms of the glyphic head variant for **TUUN**, "stone" (Figure 6). During a visit to Piedras Negras in 1998 I realized that the altar's table, long left discarded, was sculpted in the form of a three-dimensional jaguar paw (Figure 7). The two long edges of the slab show a paw much like the glyphic sign we have seen, and a third side, clearly visible in photographs from the 1930s, represents the four rounded toes (see Figure 5a). The fourth side of the stone (the "heel" of the paw) once bore a hieroglyphic text that is now completely eroded. The large stone paw atop four large **TUUN**-sign supports thus creates a remarkable three-dimensional and "interactive" form of the toponym. It seems appropriate that this "3-D glyph" was placed in an isolated setting in the very center of Piedras Negras's principal plaza, where it would have served various ritual purposes as a toponymic emblem. When Chan Panak of El Cayo "ascended the Paw Stone" in the presence of the Piedras Negras king, one wonders if Altar 4 was where he stood. A ruler or nobleman standing atop Altar 4 would reproduce a frequently seen composition in Maya art, where a toponymic glyph is shown beneath a portrait of a standing ruler.



Figure 6. The head variant of **TUUN-ni**, *tuun*, "stone."

Altar 4's situation recalls the probable design of a toponymic emblem in the floor of Machaquila's main plaza

¹ Three of the supports are displayed in the National Museum in Guatemala City; the fourth is at the University Museum in Philadelphia.

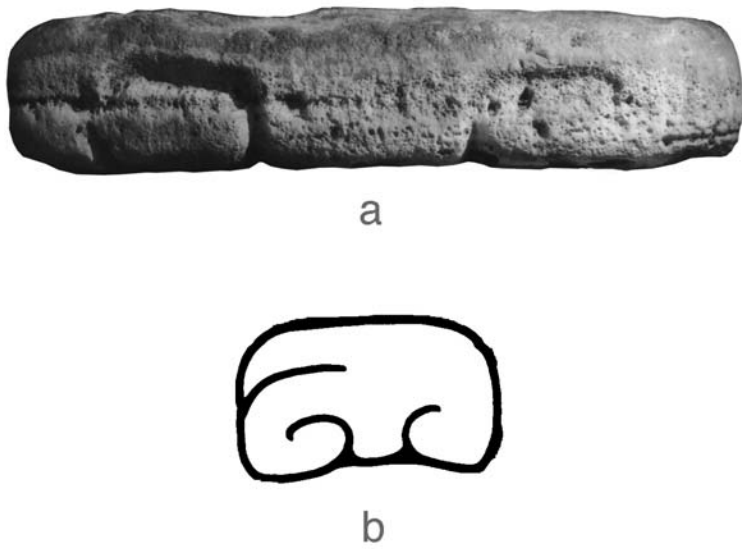


Figure 7. Comparison of Altar 4's slab to the "paw" sign (photograph by the author, courtesy of the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions.)

(Figure 8). The faint quatrefoil-shaped outline of stones documented by Graham (1967) in the center of the plaza echoes the form of the Machaquila place glyph (Stuart and Houston 1994), suggesting that here a "glyph" forms the center of the local ceremonial landscape. Altar 4 is similarly placed in the center of Piedras Negras's principal plaza in order to explicitly label the surrounding ritual space as the "Paw Stone". Three-dimensional Maya glyphs like Altar 4 are far from common, but at least one other comes to mind. Altar M of Quirigua (Figure 9a) represents a fully sculpted dog's head with HA' ("water") elements over the eyes, which is perhaps a representation of a supernatural "water dog" place glyph cited in several inscriptions at Copan and Palenque (Figure 9b, c). The reading of this glyph is not secure, but the dog and water signs seem consistent enough to posit a connection.

The identification of a main toponym for Piedras Negras adds yet another to the growing list of

place names, and again raises the question about the Emblem Glyph of the kingdom (**yo-ki-b'i**) and what relationship it may have to the Paw Stone reference. Emblem glyphs and localized toponyms do overlap at some sites, but the presence of two different glyphs at Piedras Negras reflects a more normal pattern wherein the two locational terms have different scopes of reference. The **yo-ki-b'i** emblem seems an archaic and more generalized name, associated even with mythological dates on the fascinating inscription from Piedras Negras Altar 1. By contrast, the opening passage from Throne 1, discussed above, suggests that Paw Stone might be a true local toponym for the site "founded" in the Early Classic. These remain tentative ideas, however, given that early Piedras Negras inscriptions are so few and far between, leaving the beginnings of its history extremely opaque.

For me, the most interesting aspect of the Paw Stone is its "3-D" form as displayed by Altar 4 — a beautiful example of the intersection of Classic Maya art, writing, and notions of landscape. One cannot help but wonder if other similar examples of "topo-script" may have gone unrecognized at other Maya sites.



Figure 8. The plaza of Machaquila (from Graham 1967).

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a



b



c

Figure 9. Altar M of Quirigua (a) compared to examples of the "Water Dog" toponym glyph (b, c).