



# The Captives of Dzibanche<sup>1</sup>

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In mid-2001, I had just finished giving an epigraphy class at the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia when a student approached me. He said that he had been trying to understand the hieroglyphic text on a plate and wondered if I would mind taking a look at it. Upon doing so, I concluded that the text provided an example of the rare first-person plural pronoun, “we.” Because of this, I asked him for permission to draw the text and use it in my classes on Classic Maya grammar. My student (Miguel Ángel Butrón) responded that the material was not his, but that it belonged to Dr. Enrique Nalda’s project. A few days later, Miguel Ángel introduced me to Dr. Nalda. I explained my reading to him, and he told me that the plate came from a burial at Kohunlich. Enrique then asked me if I would write a note for *Arqueología Mexicana* (Velásquez 2002), which seems to have been well received by the epigraphic community. It was through this exchange that I came to know Enrique Nalda and, without exactly meaning to, began my collaboration with the Proyecto Arqueológico

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“Sur de Quintana Roo.”

At this same time, Enrique told me about a collection of hieroglyphic steps that he and his team had recovered in Dzibanche eight years before. These stones, now disordered, had originally formed part of a stairway. Each step bears a hieroglyphic text and a scene with a captive (Figure 1). Sometimes the names of these individuals, which can be found in the inscriptions, are repeated in the helmet of a mask they wear on their backs (Figure 2a), and occasionally the nominal clauses of the victims are followed by an ordinal expression—like this one (Figure 2b, glyph A3), which speaks of the sixteenth captive—suggesting that the hieroglyphic stairway had once contained an enumeration of prisoners.

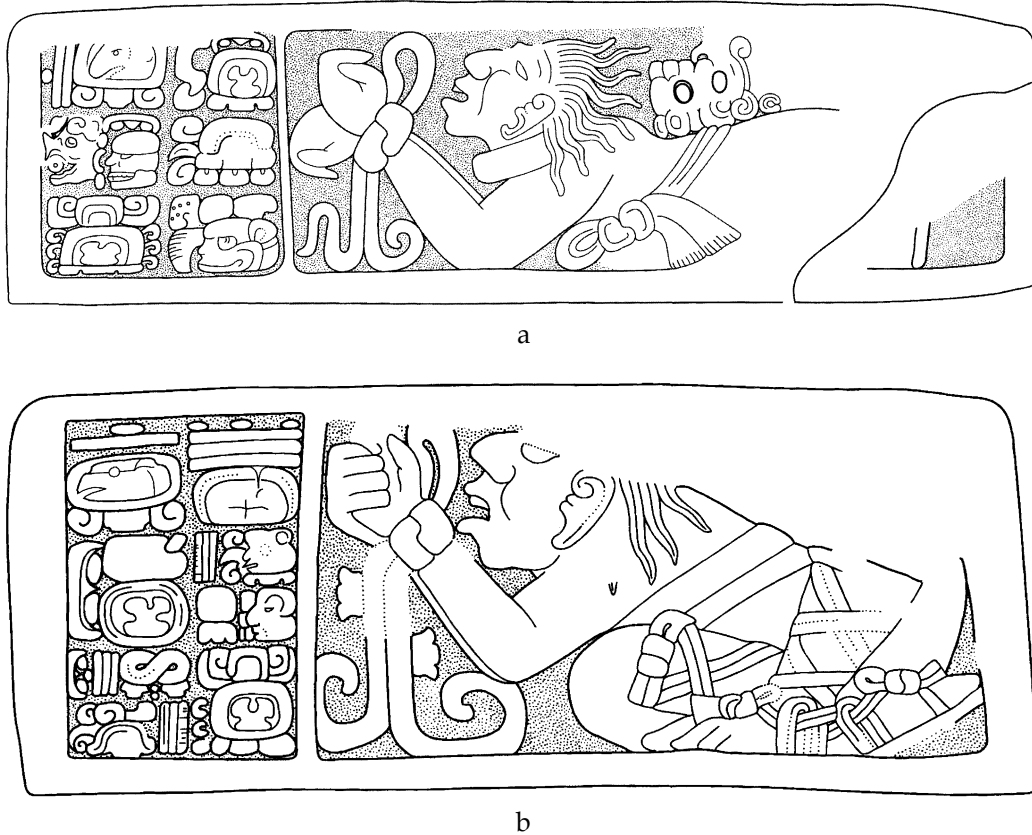
What most drew my attention when I saw the hieroglyphic steps of Dzibanche for the first time was the presence of a glyph whose principal element is a serpent’s head (see Figure 2a, glyph B3). In 1973, Joyce Marcus proposed an association of this serpent’s head with the large Mexican site of Calakmul, an idea that has since been endorsed by many investigators, who now see the serpent-head em-

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was read at the book launch for *Los Cautivos de Dzibanche* (Nalda 2004), on April 5th, 2005.



Figure 1. Dzibanche Monument 12 (after Nalda 2004:45, photo by Jorge Pérez de Lara).



**Figure 2.** Two hieroglyphic steps from Dzibanche that contain the name of Yuhkno'm Ch'e'n I, divine lord of Kaan:  
a) *yu-ku-no-CH'EN-na K'UHUL-ka-KAN-AJAW*, Mon. 5; b) *yu-ku-no-ma-CH'EN*, Mon. 11.

blem glyph as the principal title of the lords of Calakmul, *k'uhul Kaan ajaw*, “divine lord of Kaan” (in Proto-Mayan \**kaan* means “serpent”). For this reason, upon seeing the Dzibanche steps, I commented to Enrique, “It’s the emblem glyph of Calakmul!” But he calmly told me, “No, it’s not the Calakmul emblem, at least not at this time, because we have it many years before it appears at that site,” which caused me a great deal of surprise.

It is precisely around this theme that Nikolai Grube’s paper in this book revolves. “The Origin of the Kaan Dynasty” (Grube 2004) presents arguments in support of a thesis that first saw print in Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube’s *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens* (Martin and Grube 2000)—that Calakmul was not the original nor only capital of the Snake polity, and that the city was formerly ruled by a different dynasty. In light of the Dzibanche steps, Grube considers the possibility that this center was an Early Classic capital for the Kaan polity (Grube 2004:117). This idea is not supported exclusively by the evidence from Dzibanche, but also by the lack of early inscriptions associating the Kaan emblem glyph with the ancient city of Calakmul (Martin and Grube 2000:103).

The earliest Calakmul monument is Stela 114, with a long inscription including the period-ending date AD 435 (Pincemin et al. 1998). On no part of the stela do we find

the Kaan emblem glyph. In 514 another lord of Calakmul dedicated Stela 43 of his city, but it too does not display the Kaan emblem. And in 623, Calakmul erected Stelae 28 and 29—the earliest monuments of this site during the Late Classic period—yet the Kaan emblem glyph appears on neither. By this time, various rulers who take the emblem glyph of the Kaan dynasty had been mentioned in the inscriptions of diverse Maya sites, but never in association with the toponyms of Calakmul and its region: Uxte’ Tuun and Chi’ik Naahb’.

The first time that the Kaan emblem glyph is clearly associated with Calakmul is in the year AD 631, when the Kaan lord presides over a military attack against the ancient city of Naranjo, in Guatemala. The inscription suggests that the Naranjo sovereign “was eaten or tortured” under the supervision of Yuhkno’m Head, lord of Kaan, an event which occurred in Uxte’ Tuun (Martin and Grube 2000:72, 106), an unequivocal reference to Calakmul. The reign of Yuhkno’m Head coincides with the first foreign mentions of the Calakmul toponym, and it was during the reigns of his immediate successors that most of the stelae of Calakmul were erected. This suggests that it may have been Yuhkno’m Head who reconstituted the Kaan kingdom in Calakmul (Martin and Grube 2000:106).

To summarize, the emblem glyph of the Kaan dynasty



is only clearly associated with Calakmul after AD 631, but before this time it is still unclear where this important lineage resided. As explained in this book, the hieroglyphic steps of Dzibanche constitute the earliest reference to the rulers of Kaan. Their chronology is still somewhat problematic, but the latest date at which they could be placed is 518, which is to say at least 113 years before the first direct mention of the Kaan emblem glyph in association with Calakmul. Two Kaan rulers are mentioned at Dzibanche, Yuhkno'm Ch'e'n I (Figures 2a-b) and Yax ? Yopaat. The first of these is the agent of the Dzibanche wars, and the captor of the prisoners named on the steps. The manner in which he is cited leaves little doubt that he, in early times, was the sovereign of Dzibanche, since no other individual is mentioned as a local lord.

It is worth asking where the captives of Dzibanche came from. None of the steps mentions a place of origin, yet one of the prisoners is named Yax K'ahk' Jolo'm, a name which resembles that of a personage named on the hieroglyphic steps of El Resbalon: K'ahk' Jolo'm (see Carrasco and Boucher 1987:Figs. 4, 6). El Resbalon is a site close to Dzibanche and, although we deal here with two distinct individuals with the same name, it should be mentioned that many proper names obey a markedly regional distribution, judging by which Yax K'ahk' Jolo'm and the other captives of Yuhkno'm Ch'e'n surely came from places close to Dzibanche.

Of crucial importance for any understanding of these inscriptions is the interesting article by Simon Martin (2004), which can also be found in this book. In it are explained with great detail the difficulties presented for the decipherment by certain unclear expressions which appear on the steps. One of these, *och[i] uch'e'n* (Figure 3a), literally means "entered the cave of..." but there are so very few examples of this phrase in the corpus of Maya inscriptions that its precise meaning proves rather unclear. As the reader of this book will see, *ch'e'n*, "cave," is a metaphor for "settlement" or "city" in Mayan inscriptions, just as it appears on the Tablet of Temple XVII of Palenque (Figure 3b), where the local lord entered into

the "cave Throne of Reeds" of his enemy, where "Throne of Reeds" (*Pu[h] Tzam?[V]l*) is a toponymical reference to Tonina. According to Simon Martin, *och[i] uch'e'n*, "he entered the cave of," is equivalent to invading the settlement of the enemy and is therefore a metaphorical reference to warfare. The latter can be demonstrated by the fact that *och[i] uch'e'n* can be substituted, on some steps (Figure 3c), with the better known war expression *chu[h]kaj-ø*, "was captured." Finally, I must point out that on step number 15 one can see a previously unknown Maya hieroglyph (Figure 3d). It is a human head wearing a bird helmet that must, given its position (after *och[i]*), be a variant of the already understood *ch'e'n* glyph. This example is unique in the Maya world.

Much more difficult to decipher is a hieroglyphic compound whose function is to relate the name of a captive with that of his captor—that is, with Yuhkno'm Ch'e'n, lord of Kaan (Figure 4a). This expression begins with the syllable *ya* and terminates with an agentive suffix *-aj*, whose precise function is to link the name of one person with that

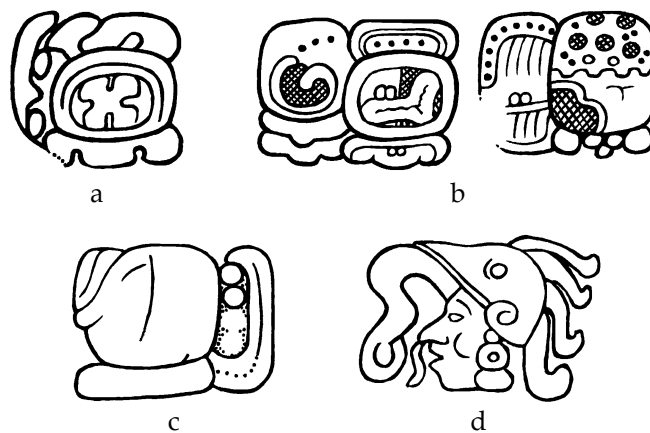
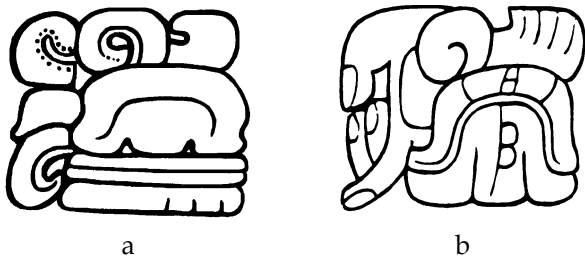


Figure 3. Some glyphic expressions for "war": a) OCH-u-CH'EN-na, *och[i] uch'e'n*, Dzibanche Mon. 18, A2; b) OCH-u-CH'EN-na pu-TZAM?-la, *och[i] uch'e'n Pu[h] Tzam?[V]l*, Palenque T.XVII tablet, A17-B17 (drawing by Nikolai Grube); c) chu-\*ka-ja, *chu[h]kaj*, Dzibanche Mon. 13, A2; d) OCH-CH'EN, *och[i] [u]ch'e'n*, Dzibanche Mon. 15, A2.



**Figure 4.** Glyphic expressions that connect the name of: a) a captive with that of his captor, ya-T514-AJ, Dzibanche Mon. 18, B3; b) a captor with that of his captive, ye-T514, Yaxchilan L.35, C1 (drawing by Ian Graham).

of another (Houston et al. 2001:6-7). The main sign (T514), however, is undeciphered, although it seems to begin with the vowel “a” and, in other regions, with “e,” and includes among its parts the sounds *ah/eh*. Since agentive suffixes can only be added to nouns (ibid.), it can be gathered that this undeciphered collocation is an expression related to the concept of “captive(?)” or “prisoner(?)” Similar expressions (although without the agentive) are found in other parts of the Maya world (Figure 4b) where, just as at Dzibanche, they are located between the name of the captor and that of his captive, suggesting that they serve to relate the one to the other.

In contrast to other epigraphy books, where the results of academic investigations are poured out in forms which seem “secure” and “definitive,” the aim of *Los Cautivos de Dzibanche*, and particularly of my article (Velásquez 2004), is to provide an initial epigraphic and linguistic analysis, making the limitations of phonetic readings and translation apparent, but also providing multiple ideas that might guide in the development of future inquiries. It is to be expected that this might occur, because as soon as this book appeared for sale it began to inspire new reflections among those epigraphers who had just acquired it.



Dzibanche Temple II viewed from the top of Temple I (photo: Stanley Guenter). The rear facade of Temple II is decorated with paired columns framing plain panels. The beginning of this architectural style at Dzibanche coincides with the seating of the *kalo'mte'* mentioned on the inscribed wooden lintel of Temple VI (AD 551), suggesting that the style is associated with the hegemonic ascent of the lords of Kaan (Nalda and Balanzario 2004).

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