

# La Corona Find Sheds Light on Site Q Mystery

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A perfectly preserved hieroglyphic panel discovered this past April in northwestern Peten, Guatemala (see map on page 1) appears to be the final piece of the puzzle that confirms the identification of La Corona as the mystery location designated Site Q. La Corona, situated in the northern portion of the Laguna del Tigre National Park and recently under considerable threat from invaders destroying the jungle, came to the attention of archaeologists in 1997 when Ian Graham and David Stuart visited and named the previously unknown site. Stuart, who has been investigating the Site Q enigma for years, noticed that hieroglyphic texts at La Corona suggested it may have been the famous Site Q that has long fascinated and mystified epigraphers.

Site Q (based on the Spanish interrogatory *¿Que?* “which?”) was named by Peter Mathews more than a quarter century ago after he noted that numerous monuments in museums and private collections around the world appeared to have been looted from the same site. The monuments of Site Q featured the well known “Snake” emblem glyph, which was later determined to be associated with the large Mexican site of Calakmul. The Site Q monuments clearly did not derive from Calakmul, however, and epigraphic research revealed that Site Q was a small polity directly under the authority of the “Snake” kings of Calakmul.

The location of Site Q, however, remained a mystery. Graham and Stuart’s discoveries at La Corona made it the leading candidate; there clearly were intimate ties. La Corona Stela 1 bears the names of two rulers of the Site Q dynasty, K’inich Yook and his younger brother Chak

Ak’aach Yuhk (Stuart, in Graham 1997:46), while a number of altars revealed the ancient name of La Corona, Sak Nikte’, as also pointed out by Stuart in communications with fellow epigraphers. Some scholars, though, were skeptical of the link, as La Corona was a relatively small site and the surviving monuments did not stylistically resemble the Site Q corpus. In fact, upon returning from La Corona in 1997, Ian Graham had declared, “...I doubt that La Corona is the source of the Site Q panels, since the sculpture remaining there does not match the style of those panels” (Graham 1997).

The Site Q corpus is dominated by small hieroglyphic panels, and while Stuart and Graham found blank stone blocks of the same size and stone type as the Site Q monuments, no trace of actual carved Site Q-style carved panels was found at the site. In 2000, however, Stuart undertook a petrographic analysis of plain stone blocks from a stairway at La Corona. This analysis indicated that they matched geologically the stone from which the Site Q monument in the Hudson Museum at the University of Maine had been carved. The preponderance of evidence led Stuart (2001) to affirm that La Corona was either Site Q, or one of sites from which Site Q monuments had been looted.

The Waka’ Project expedition to La Corona—under the auspices of the El Peru-Waka’ Project, directed by Dr. David Freidel of Southern Methodist University and Dr. Hector Escobedo of the Universidad de San Carlos—was designed among other things to test the idea of La Corona as Site Q. The six-day expedition in April, 2005 involved the collaboration of a number of different



Photo by Stanley Guenter/El Peru-Waka’ Archaeological Project.

organizations, including archaeologists from Southern Methodist University and Yale University, officials from the Guatemalan Instituto de Antropología e Historia (IDAEH) coordinated by Salvador Lopez, and members of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) who have been working in the area for a number of years monitoring one of the few remaining nesting areas of the scarlet macaw.

While Damien Marken and Lia Tsesmeli mapped the central plaza of La Corona and its associated structures, Marcello Canuto explored the other small sites in the vicinity of La Corona and Stanley Guenter examined the hieroglyphic monuments. On the very first day of exploration two small carved tablets, each bearing a single hieroglyph, were found in looters' debris on structures surrounding the central plaza. A number of looted tombs were also found. Curiously, the looted tombs were entirely barren of artifacts, the floors having been swept clean by the looters. This prevented a quick dating of these tombs by associated ceramics. There was a general dearth of ceramics at the site, the reason for which is not clear. It is certainly unusual, as most Maya sites are littered with pottery sherds.

Excavation of a latrine pit did uncover a fair amount of ceramics, and a cursory and preliminary examination of these indicated Early, Late, and Terminal Classic dating. Given that these came from only a single locality, this evidence is not overly informative. In addition to sherds and monument fragments, a number of pieces of stucco decoration were found, indicating that the ruined structures surrounding the central plaza of La Corona were once brilliantly decorated with life-size human figures modeled in stucco.

The most remarkable find of the expedition, however, was the discovery of La Corona Panel 1, a perfectly preserved monument bearing more than 140 hieroglyphs still covered by their original red paint. The monument was discovered by Marcello Canuto in a looters' trench. On April 23, the second-to-the-last day at the site, Canuto was taking GPS readings on various mounds on the site's periphery but the extensive tree cover was interfering with the satellite signals. Leaving the GPS unit on a nearby rock to work on its own trying to connect with the satellites, Canuto took the opportunity to explore inside the looters' trench, and at the furthest point within the hole he noticed a stone that appeared to have lines upon it. A closer inspection revealed that these were hieroglyphs carved onto a stone monument, and Canuto proceeded to advise his companions of the find.

Canuto, Guenter and Marken then exposed and cleared the monument, revealing its size and the perfection of its state of preservation. The monument actually consisted of two separate panels that bore a single, long hieroglyphic text (discussed below) and featured a central scene of two lords facing each other, engaged in a "scattering" ceremony. The monument was clearly at extreme risk of being looted, and so early on the day

the expedition left La Corona the panels were excavated and removed to Flores and thence to Guatemala City, where La Corona Panel 1 would be safe and available for further study.

Already as the monument was being exposed in the ground it was clear that this panel provided confirmation of David Stuart's identification of La Corona as Site Q. The new finds from La Corona were presented at the XIX Symposium of Archaeological Investigations in Guatemala in July, 2005, and the panel was presented publicly at a press conference in Guatemala City on September 12 attended by Manuel de Jesus Salazar, Minister of Culture and Sports, Salvador López, head of the Department of Prehispanic Monuments, Hector Escobedo, co-director of the El Peru-Waka project, and Marcello Canuto. These data will be published in full at a later date and are here briefly summarized.

La Corona Panel 1 is of extreme importance to the question of the identification of La Corona with Site Q. The hieroglyphic text begins with an Initial Series date of 9.12.5.7.4, 4 Kan 7 Mac (October 25, 677), the date of the dedication of the panel and the temple in which it was found. The ancient name of the pyramid was *wak mihnal*, or the "six nothing place," the name of an otherworld location relatively common in Classic Maya inscriptions. The temple, according to the inscription, was dedicated to a god named apparently K'uhul Winik Ub' and titled, rather unoriginally, the *wak mihnal k'uh*, or "god of the six nothing place." The dedication of the temple, and this panel inside it, was carried out by K'inich Yook, one of the most important kings of the Site Q dynasty.

Following the discussion of this dedication, the text of Panel 1 goes back in time to relate a similar dedication event carried out by K'inich Yook's father, Chak Naahb' Kaan—a Site Q personage thus far not identified on any of the previously studied monuments from La Corona. In 658, according to Panel 1, Chak Naahb' Kaan had three stones "constructed" in honor of three deities. These are named Yax Ajaw, K'an Chaahk and Yi...b' Chaahk, and the "stones" dedicated in their honor are likely other hieroglyphic panels, as the same term is used in describing the dedication of La Corona Panel 1.

The text then details a visit by K'inich Yook to Calakmul in November of 673. After a six-day journey K'inich Yook arrived at the great Snake Kingdom capital and visited Calakmul's king, Yuhknoom Ch'een, the most powerful Maya king of the Classic period. The central scene appears to show K'inich Yook performing a ceremony at Calakmul during this visit. Unfortunately, while the name of K'inich Yook is clear, the name of his companion is not, although he definitely appears to be a lord of Calakmul.

The date of this journey is quite interesting, as it occurred less than six months after a burning event mentioned on Dos Pilas Hieroglyphic Stairway 2. The object of this torching appears to have been El Peru (see Guenter 2003), and the perpetrator seems to have been Tikal, as part of its campaign against the king of Dos Pilas,

B'ajlaj Chan K'awiil. If Tikal attacked El Peru, this would explain why B'ajlaj Chan K'awiil did not seek refuge in Calakmul during his five-year exile from Dos Pilas but appears to have remained in Hix Witz, just to the south of El Peru. A Tikal occupation of El Peru would have put it in an excellent position to threaten La Corona, just to the north, and this may well explain K'inich Yook's trip to Calakmul.

This theory is supported by the following passages on La Corona Panel 1. These include an enigmatic *lok'oy*, or "exiting" event by Yuhknoom Yich'aak K'ahk' ("Jaguar Paw"), heir and successor of Calakmul's king Yuhknoom Ch'een. A similar event involving Yuhknoom Yich'aak K'ahk' and K'inich Yook's younger brother, Chak Ak'aach Yuhk, is mentioned on Site Q Glyphic Panel D (for drawing see Mathews 1998), but the date is completely different.

The text continues by recording the accession of K'inich Yook in 675. This is most curious as Site Q Panel 2 mentions that K'inich Yook acceded in 667. The likely explanation for this discrepancy is that the 675 accession is actually K'inich Yook's re-accession as king of La Corona after returning to that site from Calakmul. We know that in 677 Yuhknoom Ch'een fought a campaign against Tikal that liberated Dos Pilas. An earlier phase of Calakmul's reconquest campaign may well explain K'inich Yook's re-accession upon his return to La Corona.

La Corona Panel 1 also mentions two enigmatic *taliy* events that are connected with the dedication of the panel in 677. These *taliy* events are much earlier, however, falling in AD 314 and 3805 BC. The latter is clearly a mythological date while the former could be historical. The two *taliy* events are clearly related to the panel's dedicatory date as all three share the same tzolkin date, 4 Kan. "Coincidences" such as this usually signal "like-in-kind" events, and thus the *taliy* events should be somehow connected with the *pat tuum* event that dedicated the panel and the temple in which it was placed.

*Taliy* is a rare event in Maya inscriptions and appears to refer to the start of a journey. Panel 1 seems to relate that named gods journeyed, presumably before becoming associated with the temple in which the panel was placed. The god who embarked on a journey in 3805 BC is specifically said to have left *wak mihnal*, and if this god ultimately came to be associated with the Panel 1 structure, it would have been a homecoming of sorts, given the structure's identity as a real-world *wak mihnal*. The *taliy* events remain poorly understood, as no clear toponym is present in the passage referring to the 314 event and the names of the actors are otherwise unattested.

La Corona Panel 1 concludes by listing the hotuns leading from the dedication of the panel until the next Katun Ending. These are:

9.12.10.0.0, 9 Ahau 18 Zodz	(May 8, 682)
9.12.15.0.0, 2 Ahau 13 Zip	(April 12, 687)
9.13.0.0.0, 8 Ahau 8 Uo	(March 16, 692)

This is a common pattern seen on Maya monuments,

where a text concludes with a reference to a future Period Ending. La Corona Panel 1 is unusual in the number of Period Endings it includes in this practice.

This new monument from La Corona is extremely important, not only for its remarkable state of preservation but also for the information it reveals. Not only does Panel 1 refer to two well known Site Q kings, the text is carved in a style virtually identical to Site Q Panel 1 (see Mathews 1998). The carving is so similar that it is very likely that the same sculptor(s) carved the two monuments. In addition, the figural scene on La Corona Panel 1 is carved in the same style as Site Q Panel 3. The La Corona monument features two male figures facing each other, engaged in a scattering ceremony. Site Q Panel 3 also features two individuals in this type of ceremony, but in this case they are a man and a woman. This royal couple is Chak Naahb' Kaan and Lady Chak Tok Chaahk, the parents of K'inich Yook, who it so happens is the left-hand figure on La Corona Panel 1. In other words, this panel is the first monument recovered in situ at La Corona that emulates the style, composition, and size of the Site Q monuments now located in museums and private collections. The new panel thus constitutes the exact type of evidence that Graham was looking for in 1997.

Finally, it now seems extremely likely that Site Q Panels 1 and 3 were taken from La Corona, and so the discovery of La Corona Panel 1 goes a long way to allowing us to demonstrate that many, if not most, Site Q monuments were looted from La Corona. Sadly, there is currently no way to conclusively prove this probable connection. While it is extremely likely, the process of looting destroyed the archaeological context that connects the monuments to the structures in which they were found. However, further excavations at La Corona are quite likely to uncover more information that will allow us to connect more Site Q monuments with this site.

Unfortunately, La Corona continues to be a site under threat. WCS workers studying macaw populations in and around La Corona continue to deal with illegal invaders to the park. IDAEH has recently sent guards to the site and hopefully this will alleviate much of the pressure.

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