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ABAJ TAKALIK 1976: EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATIONS

by

J. A. Graham, R. F. Heizer, and E. M. Shook

1. Preface

In February, 1976, in the course of a preliminary exploration of the archaeological site of Abaj Takalik, Department of Retalhuleu, southwestern Guatemala, for the purpose of evaluating its potential for more intensive investigations, a number of very important discoveries were made. While these finds serve to justify more thorough investigation of the site in the near future, an interim and preliminary report should be of interest to colleagues. Since fuller investigations will greatly expand our present information on the site, the present report will not attempt to present all data resulting from our 1976 preliminary investigations nor to undertake detailed analysis of the data collected which are still in the process of study.

Monument terminology for sculptures previously reported from the site follows that of Miles (1965: 246) and as expanded, with a single exception, by Parsons (1972: 203). In a later report we will provide a fuller table of terminology including early references to these and other monuments from sources not utilized by Miles and Parsons. The earlier practice of referring to sections of the site by names of the various modern fincas which now divide up the ruins, as well as references to the site as Colomba, have created considerable confusion and some misunderstandings; to correct this problem, Miles (1966: 246) christened the ruins "Abaj Takalik" (her translation of "piedra parada" into Quiche), a convenient designation now generally adopted.

In the present report we have provided descriptions of only a sampling of the many new or unpublished sculptured and plain monuments from the site; further work will expand our data on these and other monuments and will further provide a better photographic record than we were able to obtain with the limited time and resources available to us. Most of the monuments for which we were able to make some record appear on the present map; numerous other monuments, and probable monuments, were noted, but the lack of time precluded investigation. As with other aspects of this report, the map is preliminary and is subject to amendment upon more intensive study of the site.

2. Background of the 1976 UCB Project

During the summer of 1975 we discussed the feasibility and profitability of detailed explorations at Abaj Takalik. Shook had carried out brief reconnaissances at the site on several occasions during the course of his surveys of south coast archaeology, recording a number of unpublished monuments. With his interest in south coast archaeology in general and in particular with his recent excavations at Monte Alto, an exploration of Abaj Takalik could yield interesting comparative data as well as contributing to a better understanding of the south coast as a whole. Graham and Heizer were particularly interested

in the possibility of finding an Olmec sculptural site on the south coast, a possibility enhanced by the fine Olmec relief that had come to Shook's attention some years earlier (Shook and Heizer 1976). Finally, Graham had long been interested in the site for the possible light that might be focused upon early Maya hieroglyphic writing and sculptural art. Thus, aside from general questions about early Mesoamerican cultural development in which we all shared a common interest, the site further provided the potential possibility of seeing our individual, specialized interests intermeshing.

Since the ruins of Abaj Takalik are distributed over the properties of several different fincas and continue to be intensively planted in coffee, extensive explorations would probably run against a number of practical problems. For these and similar additional reasons, we decided to attempt a month long, preliminary season of investigation which hopefully would provide us with an adequate basis upon which we could evaluate the potential and feasibility of further work at the site.

In the late summer of 1975 Graham applied to the National Geographic Society for the basic funding of a preliminary season of explorations at the site; supplemental financial support from the Graduate Division of the University of California was also sought to enable the project to be combined with the training of graduate students in archaeology. Applications to the Center for Latin American Studies at the University resulted in grants to two of our students who were to assist in the explorations. In addition to most enthusiastic encouragement, a very generous contribution from Judge Jon and Francesca Wiig, of Antigua, made possible the participation of two additional students, provided vehicles essential to the project, and other useful field equipment.

During the fall of 1975 Shook undertook various local arrangements in Guatemala, and in November Shook and Heizer visited the site briefly to make final arrangements for our camp there. By early January of 1976 all preliminary tasks had been completed, and on January 29, Shook, Heizer, and Graham arrived at the site. On January 30, Colin Busby, Brian Dillon, Mark Johnson, and Edgar Torres arrived on schedule in Retalhuleu, having made the long bus trip from San Francisco, and work began the following day. Unfortunately, Shook was unable to remain at the site beyond the beginning of the work, and the disastrous February earthquake prevented his return with the exception of a brief visit at the end of the investigations. Similarly, Heizer joined friends in Antigua to lend assistance for a period when the extent of the earthquake devastation became known. With two exceptions, we worked a seven day week; the season had been scheduled for one month, and we reluctantly terminated operations on February 28 despite important discoveries continuing to be made up to the very end.

It is very difficult to adequately express our appreciation to all the many persons who contributed to the success of our work. Dr. Luis Luján Muñoz, Director of the Instituto de Antropología e Historia, provided the necessary authorization and gave us very stimulating encouragement. All members of the family of Don Manuel Ralda of El Asintal provided countless courtesies. In addition to permission to undertake the work on their finca, Don Manuel and his son, Don José Luis, generously allowed us to remove

a number of coffee trees impeding explorations and they provided enthusiastic encouragement at every opportunity. Doña Stela Ralda de Schaeffer permitted us the use of the main house at her Finca La Palmera and greatly simplified problems of feeding our group by providing a cook. The success of our work at Abaj Takalik owes a great deal to the kind interests and the warm appreciation of the value of archaeological exploration and its contribution to the history of Guatemala by the Ralda family.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge the devotion, hard work, and invariably cheerful attitudes of our four student colleagues. Without their invaluable assistance, we would have considerably less to report here.

3. Earlier explorations at Abaj Takalik

Although the mounds and stone monuments at Abaj Takalik were commented upon by a number of early writers, the brief report of Gustav Brühl published in 1888 is particularly interesting. Although Brühl complained of the dense vegetation, the structure and monuments of the site were clearly considerably more exposed than after the great ash fall resulting from the eruption of the Santa Maria volcano in 1902. Already some monuments had been removed from the site (e.g. Monument 3) while other known monuments were to become lost. Brühl, for example, gives a brief description and the measurements of Stela 4, a monument not to be "rediscovered" until 1969 (Parsons 1972: 204). He observed that the ruins are "scattered over a vast area on the plantations of Santa Margarita and San Isidro" and "consist of foundation-walls of stone edifices." It is unfortunate that Brühl's account is not fuller; his descriptions are not always helpful but many of his data are valuable.

A distinguished visitor who came upon the site quite by accident only a few years after Brühl was Karl Sapper (1894). Traveling with his brother, Sapper provides a brief description of Stela 1 which he linked to the style of Santa Lucia Cotzumalhuapa. Curiously, the Sappers did not see any of the other sculptured monuments although the opinion was offered that additional carved monuments were surely to be found away from the road. Stela 1, standing in the edge of the road cutting through the eastern side of the site, was viewed as they were passing through; perhaps time was not available to stop to undertake further investigation.

The German artist Max Vollmberg (1930; Lehmann 1926: 175) sketched Stela 1 and noted other monuments, and he provided the stimulus for Walter Lehmann to visit the site in 1925. Stela 2, which appears to have been largely exposed during Brühl's visit, was now almost entirely buried and had to be excavated by Lehmann. To Lehmann belongs the credit for correctly recognizing the great antiquity of the Abaj Takalik sculptures, an observation not generally accepted for decades to come.

J. Eric S. Thompson visited the site in 1942 (Thompson 1942, 1943), providing the fullest information to date on the ruins. Curiously, Thompson was unaware that this was the site of Lehmann's "Piedra Schlubach" and Piedra Fuentes" although he was aware of Lehmann's earlier account.

Subsequent to Thompson's report on the monuments at Abaj Takalik, several archaeologists paid brief visits with Miles (1965) publishing Monument 6 and Stela 3, and Parsons (1972) publishing Stela 4.

4. The Site and its Setting

An introduction to the environmental setting of Abaj Takalik can be obtained through discussions of two adjacent areas. Coe (1961: 7-14) and Coe and Flannery (1967: 9-15) provide informative sketches of the ecology of the coastal plain immediately southwest of Abaj Takalik, and Parsons (1967: 22-23) describes the natural setting of the lower Pacific piedmont not far to the east. Finally, an interesting account of the area and of life in Retalhuleu in the late 19th century is provided by Otto Stoll (1886: 67-255) who practiced medicine there from July of 1879 to January, 1881.

The ruins of Abaj Takalik are situated in the municipio of El Asintal which has been part of Department of Retalhuleu since 1940. The southern limits of the site, as marked by mounds, begin a few kilometers north of the village of El Asintal on the Finca Santa Margarita. Construction continues northward across the Fincas San Isidro Piedra Parada, Buenos Aires, and San Elias. During the 1976 explorations, it was possible to survey in detail only the section of the site on the Finca Santa Margarita.

The site lies at an elevation of some 600 meters. Before being cleared for sugar cane and coffee planting the site was covered with heavy tropical forest as can be judged by a few remnant stands. Portions of the deep, steep-walled barranca on the eastern edge of the ruin is still covered with a luxuriant growth. The barranca carries in its bottom the Ixchiya, a small stream forming the western branch of the Rio Nil. The mounds occupy a ridge running north-south with a gentle slope toward the south. As can be seen from the accompanying map of the southern portion of the site, the ancient center was laid out as a series of wide, level terraces with steep fronts. These terraces were made by cutting back into the rising slope. We assume that the earth which was removed was used to build the mounds which stand on the level terraces, but without excavation it cannot be determined whether the steep terrace fronts consist of dumped fill or are simple truncations of the natural subsoil. The terraces are variable in width, ranging from 140 to 220 meters. Terrace fronts range from 4.6 to 9.4 meters high. Since terrace fronts are not correlated with terrace width, this might reflect variable slopes in the original terrain.

The mounds vary greatly in size and height. Details of their forms were very difficult to determine since we could not clear the structures, and the thick mantle of the 1902 Santa Maria ash fall has further obscured many features. Dimensions and such details as corners of the constructions shown on our map must be considered solely as approximations. No cut stone masonry was observed in the structures, but it is clear from Brühl's observations made prior to the ash fall and from our own limited exposures that a number of mounds had been faced with stone cobbles. It is also likely that some structures had stairways built of large, naturally shaped, stone blocks. A considerable

use was made of a distinctive locally mined material for flooring; this consists of partly decomposed, massive and slabby andesites principally derived from the topmost lava flows beneath the brownish layers of weathered ash. This material makes a good floor and has the additional quality of an interesting, varicolored texture.

Presumably, the mounds served as substructures for buildings constructed of perishable materials. Further interpretation of the architecture of Abaj Takalik and the functions of its constructions must await excavation.

5. Notes on Selected Sculptures

Including the slightly more than a dozen sculptures reported from Abaj Takalik prior to 1976, we now know of more than fifty stone monuments of various types. These include carved and plain stelae, carved and plain altars, and a great variety of miscellaneous monuments ranging from Monument 1, an enormous boulder with its famous Olmec petroglyph, to both large and miniature "pot-belly" sculptures as well as other carvings of previously unknown types. Further exploration will surely increase this corpus.

Abaj Takalik is a ruin with notably large monuments. Six altars weigh between 4.5 and 7.0 tons; the largest altar weighs in excess of 11 tons. Stelae are similarly monumental; five weigh between 1 and 5 tons; 4 weigh between 5 and 10 tons; 2 are over 10 tons, and the largest intact stela weighs 17.25 tons. Average weight of the 12 largest stelae is 14.8 tons.

The stone of almost all Abaj Takalik monuments is andesite and is identical to the natural boulders which abound in the site and surrounding areas. Preliminary petrographic studies of the principal monuments have been undertaken by Howel Williams of the University of California, and it is anticipated that he will carry out a field study at the site during a forthcoming season of work.

Stela 2. (Plates 1 and 2)

It appears likely, although it is by no means certain, that Stela 2 is Dr. Brühl's upright "monolith" with a "low relief... figure of a twisted serpent, surrounded by ornamental scrolls," looking "at a rectangular shield in the centre of the slab" (Brühl 1888). If this is the case, the stela was largely exposed at the time of Brühl's visit. In any case, removal of the present ground surface and the thick ash deposit resulting from the 1902 Santa Maria eruption would expose about half of the carved height of the monument. When Lehmann visited the site in late 1925, however, only the top of the monument protruded above the ground surface and excavation was necessary to expose the hieroglyphic panel and other details of the carving. When Thompson visited the site in 1942 "only the top few inches" of the stela were exposed. "Because it was the object of offerings and worship by Indians working in the neighborhood, Sr. Zacarias Saenz, owner of the farm, had it interred" (Thompson 1943: 102). It is interesting to note that Brühl had

observed a "half-burned tallow candle, as an offering of the Indians" in front of his "monolith" which we believe may have been Stela 2.

Although Thompson was familiar with Lehmann's account of the "Piedra Schlubach," as Lehmann christened the monument, he failed to correlate it with Stela 2, and he excavated the monument once more. According to local informants, Stela 2 was excavated still another time when the late S. W. Miles visited the site in 1958. Apparently, all of these excavators of Stela 2 dug only to the base of carving since none mentions the great unsculptured circular altar (Altar 5) which virtually abuts the base of the stela.

Although Walter Lehmann (1926: 176) correctly recognized this monument as "an ancient Maya stela," Eric Thompson was the first to refer the style of Stela 2 to that of Izapa, an identification that most students have echoed to the present day. Proskouriakoff (1950: 176) early pointed out the relationship of the costuming of the single preserved figure to that of early Maya art in the Peten while the absence of hieroglyphic texts at Izapa but present on both the known stelae at Abaj Takalik should have provided a strong clue to the weakness of Thompson's view. With the discovery of additional monuments during the 1976 investigations which provide additional examples of Maya costume and hieroglyphic writing, the proper cultural affiliation of Stela 2 can no longer be confused.

The hieroglyphic text, preserved with clarity only in its beginning, has generally been accepted as presenting a Cycle 7 Initial Series date. Lehmann, accepting the great antiquity of the monument, argued no more than for an early date of Cycle 7 or Cycle 8 of Maya Long Count chronology. Thompson (1943: 103) considered the initial numeral as "far and away the best" at 7 although he was reluctant to concede a contemporaneous date in the Maya lowland calendar. Proskouriakoff (1950: 176), M. D. Coe (1957), and others have accepted the Cycle 7 notation, if not an actual contemporaneous Cycle 7 date.

The cycle coefficient is damaged; while a reading of 8 is a remote possibility, the number is clearly much the best at 7, as Thompson stated. Only the left edge of the katun coefficient is preserved, with the remainder of the text entirely flaked away. The preserved, minimal portion of the katun coefficient is best interpreted as the end of a bar. The space from the base of the ISIG to the base of the cycle bar measures at most a half centimeter difference off the distance from the base of the cycle bar to the base of the supposed katun bar; the distance from the base of the ISIG to the top of the cycle bar is precisely the same as the distance from the bottom of the cycle bar to the top of the supposed katun bar. This strengthens the identification of the preserved fragment of the coefficient as the end of a bar and further suggests that a dot had been centered above the bar in the now flaked away central area. The area beneath this admittedly somewhat ephemeral bar and dot of the katun coefficient is entirely lost, thus permitting a probable reconstruction of the katun coefficient at 6, 11, or 16 for the full value. Three probable date spans¹ thus emerge:

¹ The Western calendar conversions include the astronomer's "year 0" which is customary among Maya epigraphers when converting Maya dates to Western B. C. equivalents.

- a) 7.16.0.0.0 - 7.16.19.17.19 or 38 - 18 B. C.
- b) 7.11.0.0.0 - 7.11.19.17.19 or 136 - 117 B. C.
- c) 7.6.0.0.0 - 7.1.19.17.19 or 235 - 215 B. C.

Since we know so little of the Late PreClassic/ProtoClassic Maya art and writing, it is difficult to make a selection from these three possibilities on a purely stylistic basis. It might be argued that the absence of a variable -- the patron of the month -- suggests an extremely early position; this argument would be stronger if we had a well preserved ISIG with variable on Abaj Takalik Stela 5 at 8.4.5.17.11. The tun element is absent from the ISIG (which does possess the variable) on Tres Zapotes Stela C at 31 B. C., but the later Tuxtla Statuette similarly possesses a double-bar element replacing the standard ISIG tun sign. Furthermore, the highly unusual constructions preceding the Cerro de las Mesas Initial Series of Early Classic age similarly lack the tun element while the geographically nearer El Baul Stela 1 at A. D. 11² presents even greater irregularities. To complicate matters still further, Abaj Takalik Altar 12, which has no preserved date but which may belong to the epoch of Abaj Takalik Stelae 1-2, possesses a series of signs carved along its sides which recall ISIG's of the Tres Zapotes Stela C type. Thus, we may best leave this argument to be resolved when fuller data are available.

The stela was set near the base of a sloping cobble facing forming the surfacing of the structure behind the monument (Plate 2). In front of the monument, the cobbles join a characteristic Abaj Takalik floor, consisting of varicolored aggregates of partly decomposed, massive and slabby andesites. A thin deposit containing a few sherds and particles of charcoal immediately underlies the floor and is mixed with the lowest levels of the floor itself. Beneath this cultural material are clean, culturally sterile deposits. A sample of charcoal from this sub-floor deposit was submitted to the Institute of Planetary and Geophysics at UCLA for radiocarbon age measurement. Dr. Rainer Berger kindly undertook processing of the sample, UCLA-1996, which yielded an age of 2100 B. P. \pm 170 years, remarkably close to the reconstructed epigraphic date of the monument suggested above.

Stela 2, carved of andesite, measures 2.1 m. high, 1.52 m. wide, and has a thickness of 0.85 m. Its weight is calculated at 9.42 metric tons.

Almost abutting the base of the stela was a large circular altar (Altar 5) without sculptured embellishment. The width of the altar spanned the lower cobble facing in front of the stela and continued out above the specially prepared floor in front of the stela and its associated structure. The altar rested upon a solid foundation of cobbles and clay. The altar has a maximum diameter of 2.25 m. and a maximum thickness of 0.40 m.

² This derives from a new reading of the Herrera number series (Graham, n. d., a).

Stela 5. (Plate 3)

Only the uppermost few centimeters of this monument protruded above the present ground surface upon discovery. Excavation disclosed that the monument was still standing erect behind a large circular altar, Altar 8, and centered upon the west front of Structure 12.

The stela is carved on the front with two standing figures facing an inscribed panel while the sides carry subsidiary seated figures with a badly eroded, short column of glyphs above each. The carved figures on the front are of very great interest in recalling such early Maya figural art as is to be seen on the Leyden Plaque. Both figures hold the hands in a grasping gesture before the chest; the figure on the observer's right clearly holds a long, undulating serpent, recalling the traditional serpent bar of so much later Maya ceremonial art. Both figures wear belt heads with the characteristic three pendant "shells."

The glyph panel is unfortunately none too well preserved. A double column (A-B) of glyphs both open with a very eroded sign, possibly the ISIG although no certain details can be now recovered. In each case a five term number series follows to be concluded by a group of four badly eroded glyphs, the first in each case almost surely being a day sign. The number series of column A transcribes as 8.4.5.17.11 (A.D. 126) while the number series of column B records 8.2. or 3.2.10.5 (A.D. 103 or 83). The katun term of column B clearly shows only two dots, but since these are irregularly spaced one must consider the possibility that a coefficient of 3 was intended.

These readings presented here assume that the coefficient of the day sign is suppressed. If this is not granted and the final number of each series (the supposed "kin" term) is regarded as the day coefficient, then we have some sort of abbreviated notation. While one might accept suppression of the cycle coefficient as "understood," the suppression of another coefficient in a purely positional notation would surely seem to lead to chaos. Purely for the argument, it might be noted that a suppressed "completion" for the "uinal" term would yield Sacred Almanac days with coefficients equal to the value of the final term of each number series.

While we have made clear that we do not favor this reconstruction, it would not in any case result in a major chronological shift for the date of the text. The sculptural style of the figures is fully in agreement with the early, first quarter of Cycle 8, placement.

The small seated figures on each side of Stela 5 bear very close resemblance to similarly placed figures on Izapa Stela 18 and perhaps represent Izapan visitors to the site although the figures are rendered in Maya fashion (Graham, n.d.b).

As the first new stela to be discovered during the 1976 work, and as an extraordinarily important Maya sculpture, it seems appropriate to designate this monument as "La Estela Ralda."

The height of the front carved panel of Stela 5 measures 1.66 meters while the total height of the monument is 2.11 m. The width of the stela is 1.22 m. and it is 0.6 m. thick.

Altar 12. (Plate 4a, b)

This great sculptured stone is positioned at the center of the east face of Structure 4 in front of the butt of Stela 11, another huge monument which unfortunately is now shattered into dozens of fragments although it was still standing intact and regarded as a landmark within the memory of older inhabitants of the area. From the carving of the top of the altar, Altar 12 might be suspected to originally have been also a stela and to have been re-used as an altar. However, the carvings around the periphery of the altar are oriented to a horizontal placement of the monument, and while these of course could have been executed at a later date, the sculptured depiction on the top of the altar overlaps the side at the base of the composition and thus argues against an original upright placement.

The carving of the top of the altar, long exposed to the elements, is very poorly preserved. A large, centrally placed human figure is turned toward his right where a column of glyphs, free of an enclosing frame, separates him from a smaller figure wearing a loin clout consisting of a long, basically naturalistic, serpent, perhaps the forerunner of the loincloth apron with serpentine elements whose development in Classic Maya art has been studied in detail by Proskouriakoff (1950: 70-71). The size of the smaller figure may derive from the irregular surface of the stone and the artist's desire to accommodate this figure to the irregular space at hand. If this is so, we have a more directly comparable example of the familiar format of two figures facing a glyphic text; both figures extend the right arm in a gesture toward the explanatory, hieroglyphic caption. The larger figure stands upon a band which features two highly exotic grotesque figures at each end somewhat reminiscent of the arrangements seen on Izapa Stelae 22 and 67 although the iconographic themes are different.

Although we suggest that the Altar 12 scene represents a rather free adaptation of the two figure/central glyph panel format, the composition could also be interpreted more literally as a figure of great rank receiving an inferior. The monument, together with Altar 13, was discovered during the final days of our reconnaissance; time and inclement weather did not permit the construction of scaffolding necessary to record properly with carefully controlled night photography the badly weathered top of the monument.

The sides of the altar, with the exception of that portion adjacent to the butt of Stela 11 and which could not be exposed, bear a series of sixteen glyphs. Each glyph possesses an early form of Affix 124 as superfix. The main element consists of full figure forms, purely human, anthropomorphic with zoomorphic elements, or purely animal, kneeling upon a bar-like element divided by a medial line. Behind each figure is a series of concentric, semi-circular bands, the outermost ornamented with two

circles to each side of the glyph. These glyphs, for which more detailed study is reserved to a later date, resemble Initial Series Introducing Glyphs; the bar-like basal element recalls the Introducing Glyphs of Stela C at Tres Zapotes and the Tuxtla Statuette.

Altar 12 was discovered during the visit to the site of Judge Jon and Francesca Wiig, who have given their generous support to archaeology at the University of California for many years and who contributed very substantially to the success of the Abaj Takalik explorations. We consider the circumstances most fitting that this great archaeological monument be designated the "Wiig Altar."

The altar measures 2.7 x 2.0 m.; its thickness at the periphery averages about .85 m. Weight of the altar, without knowing thickness at the center, may be estimated to be in excess of 11.7 metric tons.

Altar 13. (Plate 5a, b)

Altar 13 is found east of Altar 12, across the open space between Structures 3 and 4, placed near the center of the west face of Structure 4. The altar was placed at the base of the now fallen, massive, plain Stela 17.

Altar 13 is clearly a re-used stela; both the composition of the carved surface together with the missing butt and lower portion of the carving as well as the shape of the monument clearly indicate this.

Unfortunately, Altar 13 is badly weathered and severely damaged in parts. Careful night photography should bring out much detail, nevertheless. It was discovered during the final days of our work, when time and unfavorable weather together with a shortage of laborers prevented construction of a stable scaffolding necessary to proper photography.

The upper portion of the monument was carved with a great profile "dragon" design. Beneath this most details of the carving are lost with the exception of the right (observer's) border. Here a human figure in left profile is presented. The figure is particularly interesting for its long beaded, trellis-patterned skirt often associated with portrayals of women. This garment which is so common in Late Classic Maya art was also present in Early Classic Maya art, since the figure on the back of El Zapote Stela 5 wears the beaded garment at 9.0.0.0.0. Since the El Zapote figure is unusual in several respects, it is interesting that there are some curious similarities to the figure on Altar 13. Altar 13, however, may be of Late PreClassic age; specific elements of the carving link the monument to the sculptures of Abaj Takalik Stelae 1 and 2.

The height of carving of the original stela exceeded 2.9 m., the break for the missing basal portion occurring above the feet of the human figure. Maximum width is 1.8 meters while the thickness at the peripheries of the monument average 0.55 meter. Weight of this fragment may be estimated at about 7.0 metric tons.

Monuments 14-16, Three Sculptures in Olmec Style (Plates 6-8)

The top of the large platform designated Structure 7 contains a number of monuments. Time permitted us to examine only a north-south line of monuments which include Monuments 14-19 as shown on the map. All of these monuments are sculptured, but some are represented at present only by incomplete fragments, and all are considerably weathered.

Monument 14 bears carving on both front and back sides; we designate the west side with its high relief figure as the front. The front figure consists of a squatting human, possibly a female, with arms bent at the elbow and hands placed upon the chest below the breasts. A small animal is held in the crook of each arm. The left (observer's) figure is clearly a feline with a cat's face and pointed ears, paws, and a long tail, while the right animal appears to be hooved, possibly representing a small deer or a peccary. The head of this hooved beast is badly weathered and is partly broken away; it appears to have a snout. The principal figure wears a narrow rectangular apron suspended from a belt. The facial features are much worn, apparently naturally, rather than deliberately, defaced. Large earspools are clearly shown and the mouth is of Olmec form. A hat or forehead band is shown, above which what appears to be hair extends out on both sides. The carving, in high relief with rounded contours, recalls Olmec style not only in terms of specific stylistic elements but in the sculptor's technique and approach as well.

The back of the monument is less well preserved, but it bears carving in low relief.

When excavated, Monument 14 was upright but canted strongly to the south side so that the upper right corner of the front was exposed above the modern ground surface. The head and front paws of the feline were thus exposed to view, and the carving was well known to local inhabitants who identified the animal as a rabbit. Generally known as "El Conejo," the monument was the subject of ritual interest and in exposing the front sculpture we found a quantity of candles and glass bottles placed next to the stone.

The stone measures 0.87 meter in height, 1.18 meter in width, and 0.48 meter in thickness. Maximum height of relief (on the front) is 0.22 meter.

Monument 15 resembles Monument 14 in bearing a high relief figure on the front (west) but with low relief carving on the back. The monument was found upright but buried to its very top by the modern ground covering. The badly weathered front presents the shoulders, arms, and head of an anthropomorphic figure within a concave area or niche. The figure appears to wear a stiff cape which covers his shoulders and extends down to the middle of the upper arm. No facial features are preserved but two large, round centrally-perforated earspool flares can be seen. Below the chin there seems to be the remains of a necklace ending in a raised boss. Although also poorly preserved, the "hands" of the figure suggest large, clawed paws. No body features are apparent below the level of the lower arms.

The back of the monument presents buttocks, legs, and a long tail. One might, therefore, interpret this sculpture as a figure crouched or emerging from a niche and extending invisibly backward through the stone to have his rear-quarters emerge on the opposite surface. On the other hand, it is possible that the back of the monument depicts the rear end and tail of a large feline which continued upward and over the top of the monument, now missing, to constitute a "guardian" or "alter ego" for the figure in the niche below.

The monument in its present incomplete form measures 1.4 meters in height, 1.27 meters in width, and 0.52 meters in thickness. The maximum height of relief on the front is 0.15 meters while the low relief on the back measures only 0.02 meter.

Monument 16 was found upright, but buried with only the top barely exposed at modern ground level. The monument consists of a rectangular block of stone, badly weathered and perhaps intentionally defaced. The sculpture appears to represent a helmeted head, its heavy, squarish elements suggest an Olmec sculpture of primitive aspect, although this impression may be partly the effect of its poor preservation. Found near the very end of our work in February, 1976, we did little more than expose and photograph this and the immediately neighboring monuments on Structure 11. The stone measures 0.9 meter in height, 0.58 meter in width, and 0.4 meter in thickness; maximum relief is 0.05 meter.

6. Concluding Remarks

Abaj Takalik Monument 6, a crudely incised boulder sculpture, was removed in 1958 from the bed of the El Asintal-Colomba road which cuts through the eastern edge of the site. According to S.W. Miles (1965: 247; see also Broman Morales 1968: 492-493), the pottery from above and around the carving was of Early and Middle Preclassic types. The 1976 preliminary investigations at Abaj Takalik were largely confined to surface survey with only occasional excavations being undertaken to more adequately expose and study sculptured monuments near present ground surface; thus it is not surprising that we found no ceramic evidence to either confirm or dispute Miles' view of an Early Preclassic sculptural presence at the site. Since the modern road bed generally lies at a considerably deeper level than those reached in our explorations, it would be well to keep an open mind with respect to the possibility of discovering very early sculptural activity at the site. Reaching these levels may prove to be very difficult.

Monuments 2, 3, and others as yet unpublished at Abaj Takalik provide good examples of the "pot-belly," boulder sculpture tradition which is widely distributed along Pacific Guatemala with important extensions beyond at Kaminaljuyu, Copan, and elsewhere. Miles (1965) also was inclined to attribute these sculptures to her earliest sculptural division although few writers seem to have considered seriously this view. Perhaps the most thorough investigation of a series of sculptures of this type has been in the still unpublished excavations at Monte Alto; based upon those excavations, Parsons

(1976: 329) has concluded that the sculptures were carved during the early Late Preclassic. At Finca Santa Letecia in El Salvador radiocarbon dates for a pot-belly excavation have been published suggesting a somewhat earlier positioning, *i. e.* late Middle Preclassic (Newsletter: 4). Since these and other types of sculpture were being re-used and re-positioned as late as the Late Classic (*e.g.* Bilbao Monument 58; Parsons 1969: 122), the dating of placement may be of very little aid in assessing the age of carving. At Abaj Takalik we doubt that pot-bellies were being carved during periods when radically different and far more sophisticated sculptures were being produced. We think, therefore, that the pot-bellies are no later than Middle Preclassic.

A series of relief sculptures at Abaj Takalik, Monuments 1, 14-16, and several others clearly relate to the Olmec style and fully demonstrate the presence of Olmec sculptural sites in Pacific Guatemala. Although all of the Olmec sculptures at Abaj Takalik thus far uncovered are reliefs rather than sculptures in the round, these do include high relief carvings with rounded contours which thus relate conceptually to the Olmec sculptural tradition of southern Veracruz - western Tabasco. True sculpture in the round also clearly relating to Olmec style is present in Pacific Guatemala as the Sin Cabezas carvings (Shook 1950; Parsons and Jenson 1965: 143-144) fully demonstrate. Similar, though cruder, miniature carvings from Abaj Takalik also demonstrate a link between Olmec carving in the round and the pot-belly tradition. We are confident that further explorations at Abaj Takalik will reveal additional examples of Olmec sculptural art.

The precise chronological parameters of the Olmec monumental style as well as its internal chronology have yet to be fully demonstrated to our satisfaction. The general attribution to the Middle Preclassic largely derives from excavations at La Venta, Tabasco, where the sculptures (for which excavation data exist) were all found on or in the latest constructional stage; it is not unreasonable to suggest, as has been done, that at least some of these sculptures were re-positioned from earlier placements. At San Lorenzo, however, with sculptures so closely resembling La Venta art that a substantial time difference in carving seems unlikely, it is argued the carvings were all last positioned in Early Preclassic times. Since we do not have confidence in the precise chronology of Olmec sculpture in Mexico, we see no virtue in attempting to date the Abaj Takalik Olmec pieces on this basis. At Abaj Takalik we also believe that many of the Olmec sculptures we located are probably re-set monuments. Thus determining the age of placement, a primary goal of future investigations, will unfortunately probably not enlighten us with respect to the age of carving.

At some point in the Late Preclassic, Maya style stelae and altars were being erected at Abaj Takalik, a tradition which persisted into the Protoclassic period. Many of these monuments also carry inscriptions in Maya hieroglyphic writing, including Initial Series dates antedating the earliest dated inscriptions thus far found in the lowlands to the north. Although the art style and writing are "early" in terms of later Early Classic Maya development, these monuments at Abaj Takalik display a fully developed Maya style lacking any clear relationship to known earlier sculptural styles. The local Olmec sculpture clearly does not provide plausible antecedents for the genesis of this

distinctively Maya style whose origins thus remain unknown. The closest ties of these monuments may be found in a few scattered sculptures from the Pacific slope, such as Chocola, El Baul Stela 1³, and Bilbao Monument 42⁴ as well as a number of monuments at Kaminaljuyu in the highlands. A relationship to a few poorly known sculptured fragments from the lowlands are also evident, as Altar 1 at Polol, Uaxactun Stela 10 and other monuments at that site, as well as the Loltun cave relief. The question of a Pacific slope, highland, or lowland origin for Maya hieroglyphic writing and sculptural art thus should remain open. The variety of early sculptural activity on the Pacific slope, and now with the discovery of a well developed phase of early Maya art there, clearly enhances the argument that this region may have seen the origins of Maya art. Nevertheless, we must remember that the intensity of Classic period occupation in the lowlands has greatly obscured our view of Preclassic developments there, and until more extensive exposures of Preclassic levels have been accomplished, we believe it premature to reach final decisions. With such crucial and fundamental historical questions still quite unresolved, the construction of hypothetical models seeking to explain "why" Maya civilization developed in particular environments seems rather academic.

To students who have become accustomed to thinking of a widely distributed "Izapan civilization" occupying the Pacific slope of Guatemala during the Late Preclassic-Protoclassic period, it will come as a surprise to find that we do not recognize "Izapan" monuments at Abaj Takalik, particularly considering that the great site of Izapa lies only some 70 kilometers to the northwest. Abaj Takalik Stela 4 (Parsons 1972) shares a few iconographic details and motifs to the art of Izapa, as do some of the other monuments of Abaj Takalik, but even Parsons who considers Stela 4 to be illustrative of the Izapan style noted that the sculpture is "atypical" of Izapa and that "the stylistic feeling is perhaps closer to Miraflores and Arenal phase stone carving at Kaminaljuyu than that which has been found at the type site of Izapa" (Parsons 1972: 204). Since none of the published monuments from Izapa show any close formal relationship to the early Maya style, the art of Izapa and that of the early Maya must be related largely in terms of certain motifs and iconographic themes; the basic subject matter of the two arts is fundamentally different as are the concepts and approaches of the artists working in the two styles (Graham, n. d., a). There are clearly major cultural differences, and presumably political ones as well, between Izapa and neighboring Guatemala.

3 A number of writers refer to the Herrera stela from El Baul as "Izapan" in style. In fact, a careful stylistic analysis of the carving demonstrates that while certain motifs are shared with some of the art of Izapa, the monument is fundamentally Maya in concept (Graham, n. d., a).

4 Parsons (1967) perceptively noted the basic affiliation of the Bilbao sculpture to early Maya art. His term, "proto-Maya," however, seems unsatisfactory since we now see the style is fully Maya both in terms of subject matter and iconography as well as in the artist's basic conception of the art. Furthermore, we cannot agree with his assignment of some of the sculptures at Izapa, as well as other sites, to this early Maya style while other monuments which he considers to be "Izapan" should properly be assigned to the early Maya style (Graham, n. d., b).

On the basis of the sculptural corpus now known, major carving of sculpture at Abaj Takalik may have come to an end with the Early Classic period. Later intensive occupation of the site is demonstrated, however, by surface ceramics and the probable re-positioning of many of the older sculptures. Plain stelae may have been erected at this time, and some carving of sculpture may have occurred, but the importance of the site as a significant center of sculptural art probably declines with the development of the Cotzumahuapa sculptural style centered around Santa Lucia some 80 kilometers to the southeast.

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Plate 1. Abaj Takalik Stela 2 and Altar 5.



Plate 2. Abaj Takalik Stela 2, illuminated by night photography.



Plate 3. Abaj Takalik Stela 5, illuminated by night photography.



Plate 4, a (above). View of carved side sides of Abaj Takalik Altar 12.
Plate 4, b (below). Night illuminated view of two glyphs from side of
Abaj Takalik Altar 12.



Plate 5, a (left). Abaj Takalik Altar 13.
Plate 5, b (right). Detail of human figure at lower right corner.



Plate 6. Abaj Takalik Monument 14.

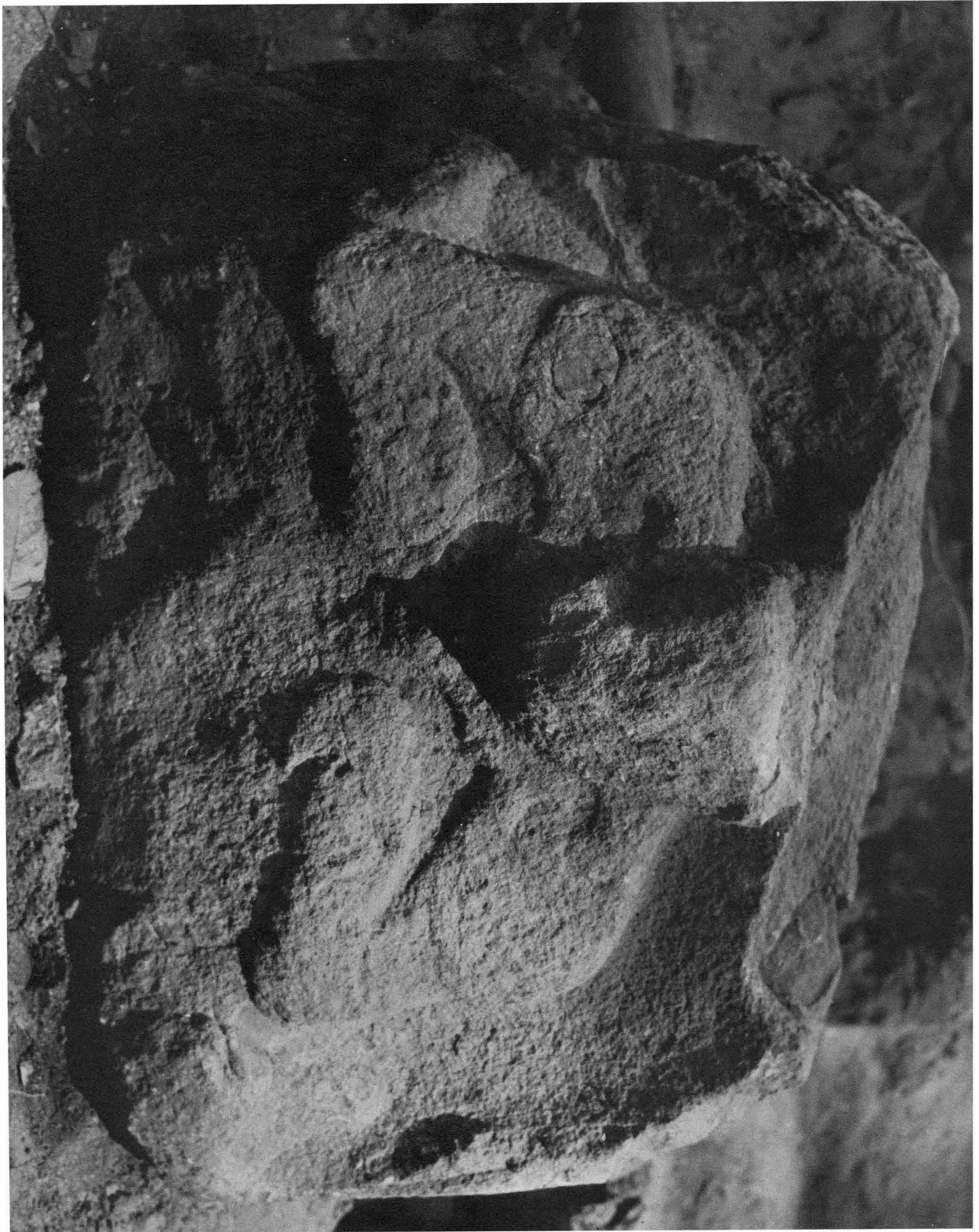


Plate 7. Abaj Takalik Monument 15.



Plate 8. Abaj Takalik Monument 16.