

A Cosmological Throne at Palenque

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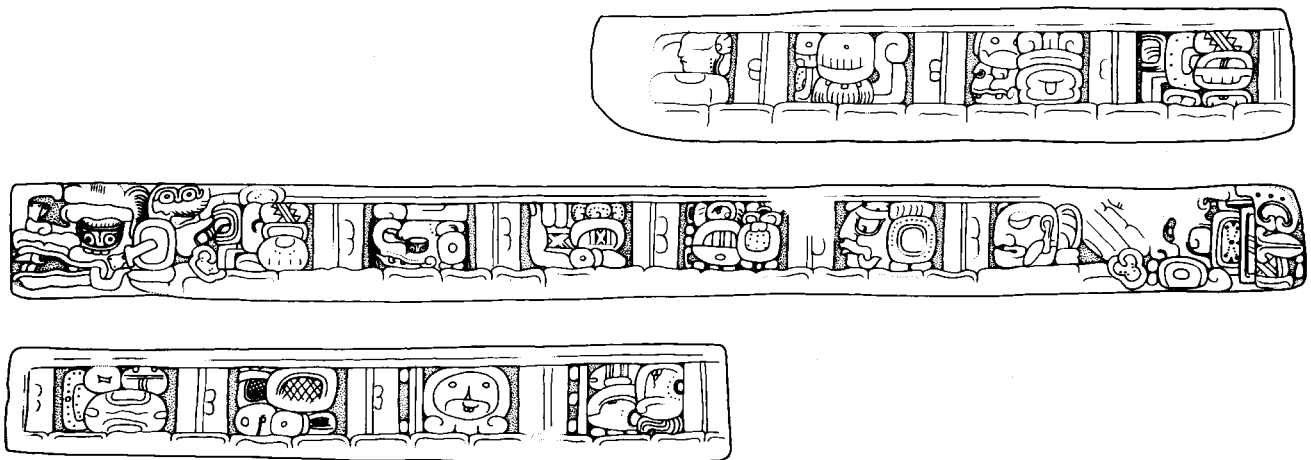


Figure 1. The left side (glyphs A-D), front (glyphs E-J), and right side (glyphs K-N) of Bench 1 from the Palace at Palenque. Drawing by Ian Graham.

Until recently Bench 1 from Palenque (Figure 1) was tucked away in the South Subterranean Building of Palenque's Palace (Robertson 1985:86-7), where it occasionally drew the attention of the passing visitor to the ruins. Now on display in Palenque's remarkable site museum, the well-preserved carved bench or throne can be newly appreciated as one of the most interesting monuments from the ruins. It is decorated in the form of the cosmic beast I prefer to call the "Starry Deer Alligator" (to distinguish it from other aspects of the same critter) and bears an inscription of fourteen glyphs. This note examines the inscription and highlights an especially interesting section pertaining to an important aspect of Classic Maya cosmology.

The initial three glyphs—certainly vital to understanding the inscription as a whole—are perhaps the most difficult to understand. One might expect that the somewhat eroded initial block could be a verb, but none of the components ([?]-[?]-ba?) point to an obvious reading. Far better preserved is block B, with the interesting sequence **a-je-ne**, likely for *ajen*. The same term appears on Hieroglyphic Stairway 4 from Dos Pilas with the numerical prefix of "three," where it seems to name a particular dance performed by a local ruler (*ak'otaj ti ux ajen ch'een*). In both cases the significance of *ajen* is unclear, although more research into the root *aj* might reveal some promising leads. The next glyph on the throne is the enigmatic *sak ik'*, "white wind," expression with the preposed "ajaw" sign (?-SAK-**IK'**), that in other contexts is known to refer to the breath and life spirit of rulers and nobles.

The next two glyphs, D and E, are more legible and perhaps the most interesting of the inscription. Since the 1980s I have been intrigued by the clear couplet structure of these blocks, *numil ta chan, numil ta kab*, which seems best translated as “passing in the sky, passing in the earth.” *Num* is a widespread root for “to pass,” as in Ch’orti, “opening, passage, conduit, lane, passage, flow.” (There is some ambiguity in the second syllable of each block, after **nu**, since one resembles **mu** whereas the other looks to be **bu**. The signs are subtly differentiated by the presence of small circles within **bu**, and many inscriptions fail to distinguish them, as here. I think it highly likely that the intended spelling is **nu-mu** rather than **nu-bu**, given that *nub* is a rare lexeme in lowland languages.)

The couplet is, I believe, the most explicit and descriptive known statement of what I call the “Starry Deer Alligator,” an aspect of what has long been known as the “Cosmic Monster.” “Passing in (through?) sky, passing in (through?) earth” aptly describes its known behavior in Maya iconography as an arching or framing element in the heavens. That it is also associated with the earth is intriguing, and likewise indicated by certain patterns in the iconography. In all likelihood this descriptive phrasing refers to the Starry Deer Alligator as the animate Milky Way (Stuart 1984), which visibly progresses during the night across the sky and into the earth.

Momentarily putting aside our analysis of the glyphs, it is interesting to consider the general form of the throne, especially as seen from the front. Here the body of the “Starry Deer Alligator” is clear, and the inscription runs within framed segments on what looks to be the back of the animal, above its lower scales. This arrangement immediately calls to mind a fascinating reference to the Starry Deer Alligator on the platform of Temple XIX (Figure 2), where it is described as the “Inscribed Back Starry Deer Alligator” (**tz’i-ba-la-PAAT?-?**, *tz’ibal paat(?) ?*). This translation is loose, of course, and the “back” reading is based on little more than the visual cue of the hunched human form. Nevertheless, it is tempting to relate this glyph to the overall form of the bench’s iconography, as well as to other examples of “inscribed” alligators in Maya art (Taube 1989).

Returning to the bench’s text, at F we find the proper name of the structure where the throne originally resided, here simply labeled by the head of the Starry Deer Alligator with a **-NAL** locative superfix. The head is identical to that at the left of the bench’s face, in a clear and welcome convergence of glyphs and iconography. Unfortunately we cannot read the glyphic head sign as yet. This place or structure is then called, in the next glyph (G), the *y-otot*, the “house of,” K’inich Janab Pakal, whose names and titles run from H through K.

Near the end of the inscription, on the right side, we find a record of a “stone-seating” (*chum-tuun*) with the Calendar Round 12 Ajaw 8 Keh, or 9.11.0.0.0. Directly beforehand is the revealing combination **tu-u-pa-ti**, for *tu-paat*, literally “on the back

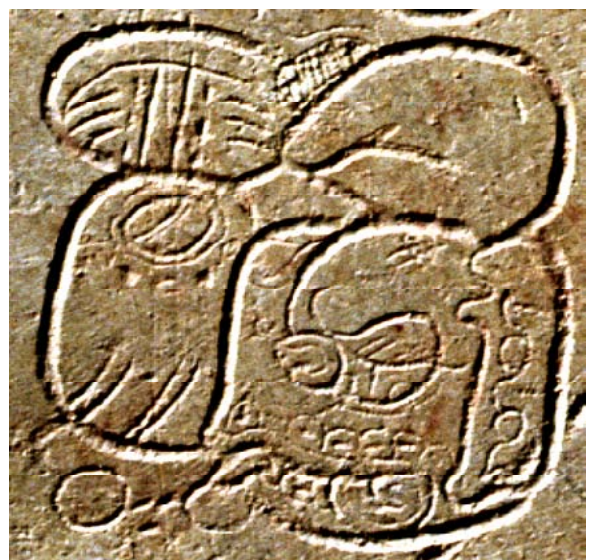


Figure 2. Name glyph of Starry Deer Alligator, possibly describing its “inscribed back” (*tz’ibal paat?*). Palenque, Temple XIX Platform, south side, E4. Detail of photograph by Jorge Pérez de Lara.

of...” When combined with temporal statements in other inscriptions from the Palenque area, this carries the sense of “right after,” in references to dates that occur only a handful of days after a period ending (Stuart 1990). There is good reason to suppose, then, that the throne was dedicated within a very short time (perhaps days or months) following the K’atun ending.

9.11.0.0.0 was a pivotal calendar station in Palenque’s history, corresponding roughly to the time when K’inich Janab Pakal had established himself as a formidable local ruler. There are numerous mentions of the K’atun ending in later retrospective inscriptions, but the bench’s record of the “stone seating” may well be the earliest of all, given that it is arguably among the earliest known monuments from Palenque. Perhaps the oldest contemporaneous local text is from the Olvidado Temple, bearing a date of 9.10.14.5.10 3 Ok 3 Pop (Mathews and Robertson 1985). The Tableritos from the Palace are also early (dedicated on or near 9.11.1.12.6) and exhibit a style similar to the glyphs on the bench; the two inscriptions may well date to within a few years of one another. In any event, the throne was one of a series of monuments and buildings dedicated by Pakal within a short few years after the turning of the K’atun, during a remarkably active and historically important era in Palenque’s history.

Transcription of the Text:

A: [?]-ba?

B: a-je-ne

C: ?-SAK-IK’

D: nu-mu-li-TA-CHAN-na

E: nu-mu-li-TA-ka-ba

F: ?-NAL

G: yo-to-ti

H: 2-WINIKHAAB?-pi-tzi-la

I: K’INICH-JANAB

J: pa-ka-la

K: K’UHUL-BAAK-AJAW

L: tu-u-pa-ti

M: 12-AJAW

N: 8-CHAK-SIHOM-CHUM-TUUN-ni

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