



Research at El Zotz, Guatemala

The Epigraphy of El Zotz

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Epigraphic data from the region of El Zotz is scant but vital, including vestiges of a dynastic history at the very center of the Maya world. Dating to the end of the Early Classic and possibly extending into the beginnings of the Late, this is an era for which the evidence is more fragmentary than cohesive. In the mid-1990s, David Stuart recognized important details on a wooden lintel looted from Structure 1 of El Zotz in about 1975, according to information provided by Ian Graham, who recovered fragments of the lintel in situ (Figures 1, 2).¹ This sculpture was sold illegally to the Denver Museum of Art and later recovered for eventual display in the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in Guatemala, where it can be seen today.

In examining the glyphic details of the lintel, Stuart took note of two emblem glyphs connected to El Zotz. One has as its principal sign a stylized symbol of a small earflare, together with a *ji* suffix (an indication of its still unknown reading). The other shows a conflation of the sign *AJAW*, “lord,” and a “split sky.” Stuart’s reaction was one of surprise, for two reasons. In the first place, these signs are strongly linked to the site of Yaxchilan in Chiapas, where they serve as emblem glyphs of the dynastic seat. In the second, Peter Mathews

(personal communication 1982) had pointed out that a “split sky” glyph also corresponded to the principal sign of Uaxactun, a hypothesis that had won a certain degree of acceptance in the scientific literature. In part, Mathews based his identification on the use of this emblem on a vase which is now



Figure 1. El Zotz Lintel 1.

¹ A glyph of what may be a personal name appears on the lintel and also on Stela 1 of El Zotz, yet another sign of the perspicacity of Graham in this regard (Figure 3).

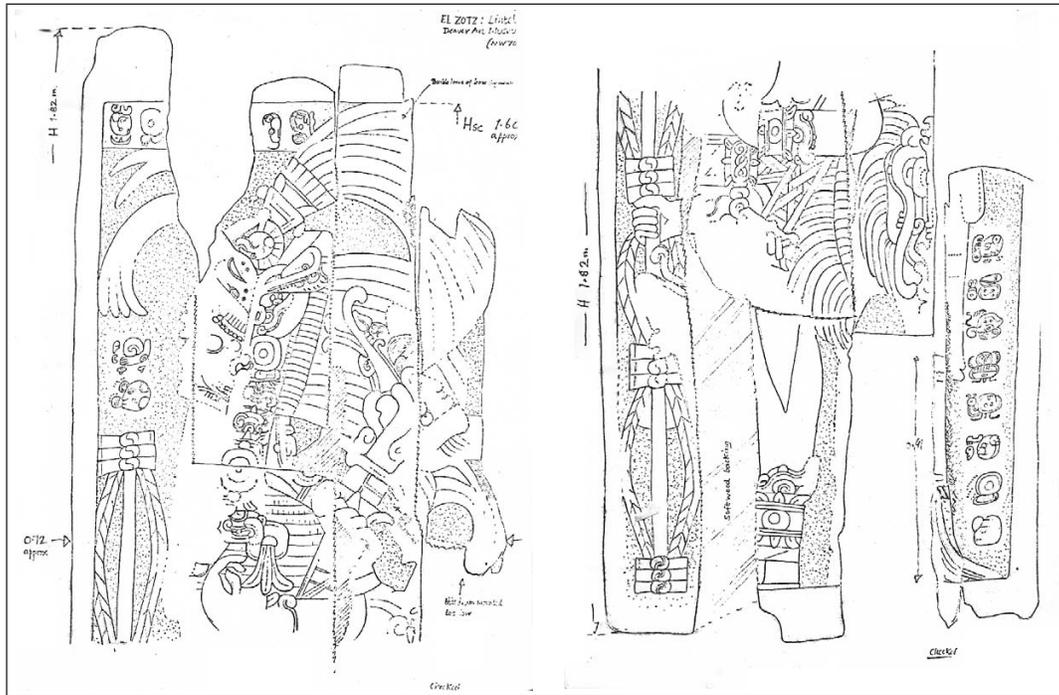


Figure 2. El Zotz Lintel 1. Drawing by Ian Graham.

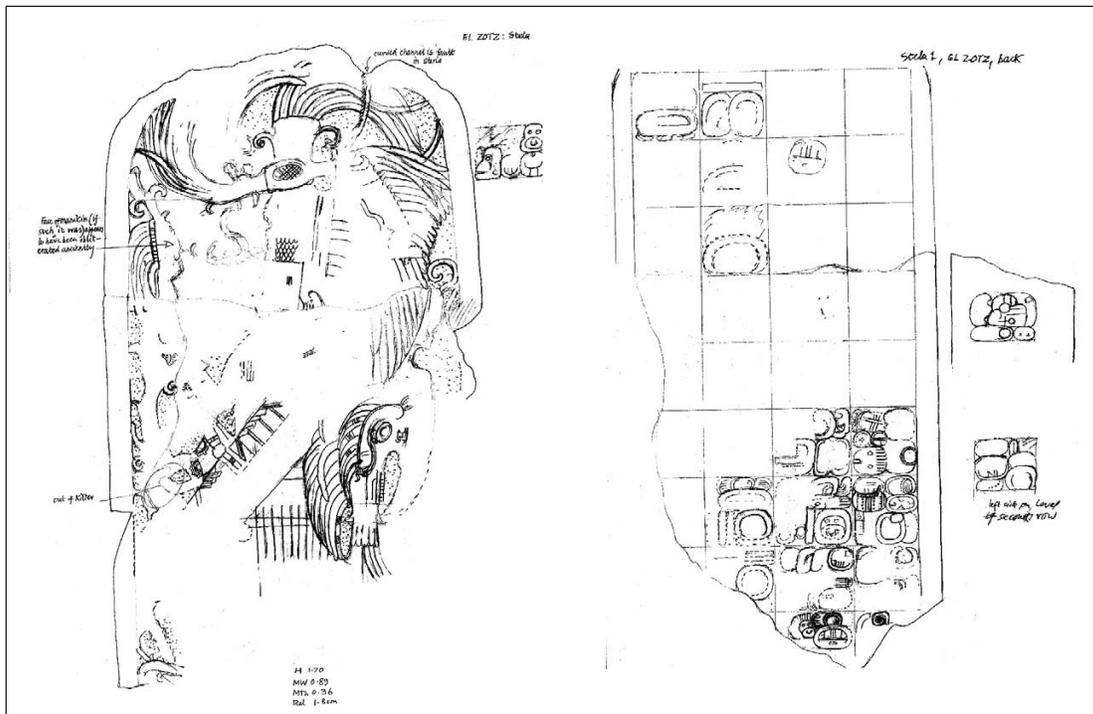


Figure 3. El Zotz Stela 1: front (left), back (right). Drawing by Ian Graham.



Figure 4. Canberra vessel (K8458). Photographs by Justin Kerr. Drawing by Peter Mathews.

found in the National Gallery of Australia, a collection formed a few years after the grievous looting of El Zotz (Figure 4). The vase displayed the “split sky” sign in the context of an emblem glyph. Mathews considered that the vase, by its form and its date—and for reasons not very explicit—probably came from Uaxactun. However, the same name appeared on the lintel from El Zotz, which entailed serious problems for his interpretation.

For now, the evidence seems increasingly strong that the “split sky” glyph pertains to El Zotz rather than Uaxactun. A relevant consideration is the presence of a possible local glyph for Uaxactun, in the form of a K’AN sign, sometimes with *ko* (Uaxactun Stela 12:B3, Stela 14:C2). That is, the texts of Uaxactun show no connection to the “split sky” but rather to a different set of dynastic references. The only example of “split sky” at Uaxactun appears on the right side of Stela 2, at position B9. The context, after the verb “ascend,” uses the toponymic attribute *NAL* and has the sense of “give tribute,” as in parallel references on Stela 12 of Dos Pilas and Stela 12 of Naranjo. In other inscriptions, such as Hieroglyphic Stairway 2 of Dos Pilas, the toponymic glyphs that follow this verb for “ascend” record the act of “going up” to foreign sites. In no instance do they relate to a

local site.

The rulers of El Zotz utilized a singular name, with the following elements: (1) **CHAK**, the color “red” or the adjective “great”; (2) a fish in vertical position, probably carrying a non-phonetic value; and (3) an animal head, sometimes with the features of a dog, fox(?), and feline (Figure 5). A variant inscribed on a stela at Bejucal (7 km northeast of El Zotz) and on a vase of unknown provenance (K679 in Justin Kerr’s database at

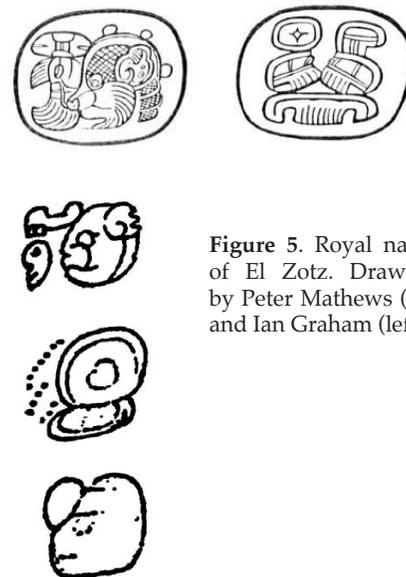


Figure 5. Royal names of El Zotz. Drawings by Peter Mathews (top) and Ian Graham (left).

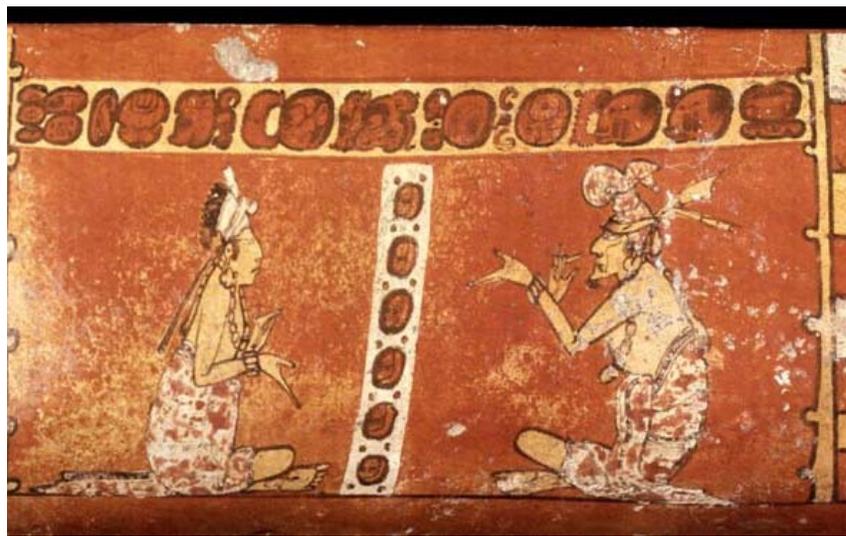


Figure 6. Vessel associated with El Zotz (K679). The signs **a-ku** appear in the sixth glyph of the horizontal band, immediately following the animal head prefixed by a fish in vertical position. Detail of rollout photograph by Justin Kerr.

www.mayavase.com; Figure 6) adds the name **a-ku**, *ahk*, “turtle.” The vessel is highly significant in that it can be connected to a nexus of some dozens of unprovenanced vases in private collections (e.g., K1743, K2699, K3060, K5350, K5465, 7147, K8393, K8418). This group of vessels shares a range of features, including a stylistic date at the hiatus or transition between the Early and Late Classic, a reddish background or palette, the peculiar usage of “split sky” in place of the pronoun **u**, and the first images in Maya art of *way*, a group of supernatural entities. It is probable that a great quantity of vessels with these features come from El Zotz or its vicinity, something that methods like neutron activation analysis could confirm.

The problem with the texts of El Zotz is to extract an intelligible pattern from their content, with dynastic sequences and other results usually achieved by epigraphers. We know that at least three of the rulers carried the name previously discussed: a lord from the era of “Smoking Frog,” a personage of consummate importance in Maya history, that is, at the end of the fourth century (c. AD 400); another mentioned on the lintel, which dates stylistically to the last years of the Early Classic; and the name from the vessel (K679), with a date at the beginning of the Late Classic (unless it is an anachronistic image). Another reference appears on an artifact, a mirror back, excavated in Bagaces, Costa Rica, without doubt an import

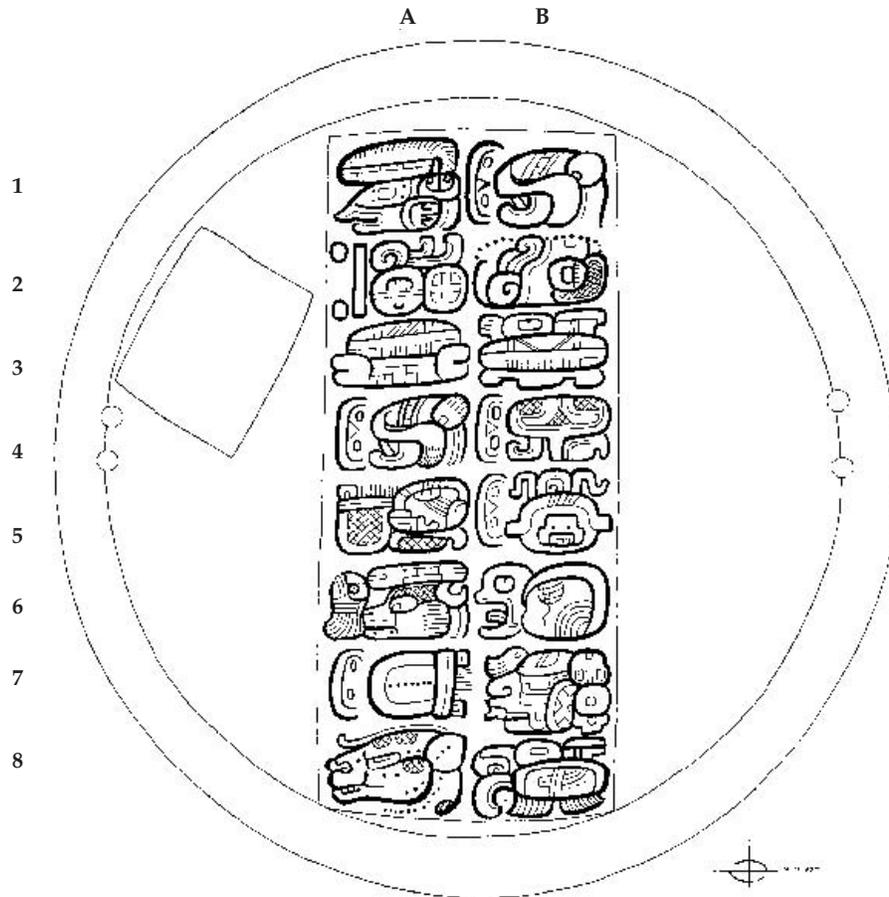


Figure 7. Mirror back from Bagaces, Costa Rica. Drawing by James Porter.

into the region of its discovery (Figure 7). This text names a ruler of El Zotz, followed by a reference to a “gift” (?), *si*, of the sovereign lord of El Peru, K’inich Bahlam, with his emblem glyph *wa-ka AJAW*. Thus it can be suggested that El Zotz belonged to the sphere of El Peru for at least part of its political era. The link is not unexpected, given the relative proximity of El Peru, 50 km directly to the west.

In the epigraphy of El Zotz there is therefore a pattern of dates from the middle to the end of the Early Classic, with less solid ceramic evidence of the Late Classic. It is possible that there is another mention at Tikal, in the context of a war against the “site of the small earflare”—perhaps El Zotz—on 9.15.12.11.13 7 Ben 1 Pop (February 4, AD 744), possibly related to problems between Tikal and Naranjo. These references give the impression of not very friendly relations with Tikal, although Stela 1 of Bejucal leaves no doubt that the dynasty of El Zotz recognized “Smoking Frog” as sovereign during his extraordinary stay in the Peten. In

historical terms, the last years of El Zotz are wrapped in mist and obscurity.

The only topic remaining to be discussed is the relationship with Yaxchilan, whose dynasty shared the same two emblem glyphs, a feature which cannot be accidental. One interpretive option is that the Yaxchilan dynasty originated in the central Peten, that this royal family, like that of Dos Pilas, sprang from a foreign dynasty, perhaps as an inferior or cadet lineage. Unfortunately, the dates of El Zotz currently cannot sustain this hypothesis, in that there are no sherds early enough to reflect an antecedence to Yaxchilan. Another possibility is that El Zotz was part of a wider zone, with early settlements in the region west of Tikal and Uaxactun. The other option is simply that the use of these emblem glyphs in the two cities was fortuitous, equivalent to the use of “Hix Witz” in the zone of Zapote Bobal and at La Honradez, to the northeast of the Peten. Clearly further epigraphic investigation is called for.

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