



Death of the Defeated: New Historical Data on Block 4 of La Corona’s Hieroglyphic Stairway 2¹

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In April of 2012 excavations at Structure 13R-10 of La Corona, Guatemala, revealed a row of twelve carved blocks that once formed the lowermost step of an extensive stairway that had been looted sometime in the 1960s (Ponce and Cajas 2013; Ponce 2014). This monument was likely the source of many of the well-known “Site Q” stones that appeared on the art market in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Luckily the buried lower step escaped the notice of the looters at that time, allowing the current Proyecto Arqueológico Regional La Corona (PARLC) to carefully excavate and document the stairway’s remains.

The inscriptions on the blocks from Hieroglyphic Stairway 2 are of great importance for understanding the history of La Corona and its role in political events that took place in the central Peten region during the Late Classic period (Canuto and Barrientos 2012). The *La Corona Notes* series will present many of these texts and their interpretations, beginning here with a consideration of a single stone, designated as Block 4 (Element 32) from Hieroglyphic Stairway 2 (Figure 1).

Block 4 is an isolated member of what we

have chosen to call the “Set B” blocks—a series of similar stones bearing either six or ten delicately carved hieroglyphs in a distinctive style. At least ten blocks of this set were looted from La Corona many decades ago, possibly from a more complete Hieroglyphic Stairway 2 on Structure 13R-10.

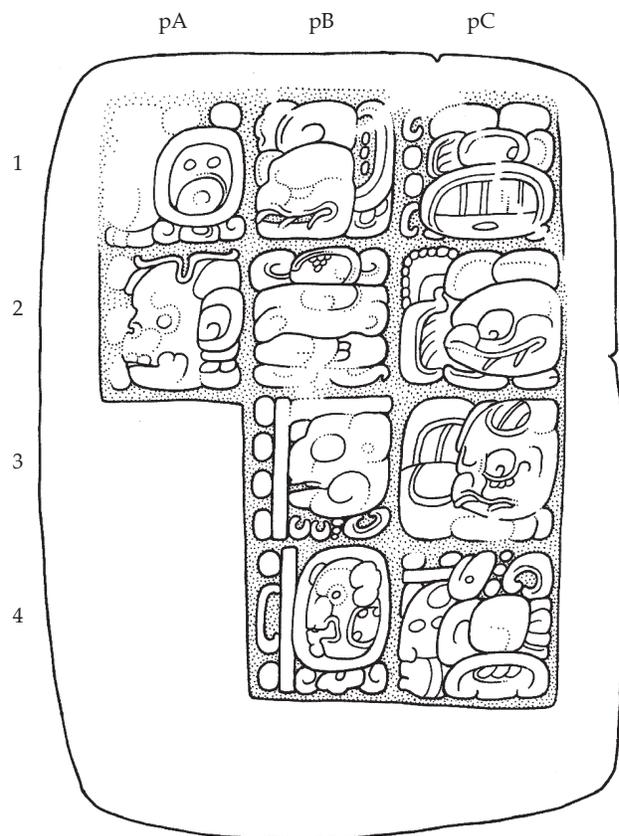


Figure 1. Block 4 of Hieroglyphic Stairway 2 from La Corona (Element 32). Drawing by David Stuart.

¹ The *La Corona Notes* series disseminates the latest results and interpretations resulting from research on the Classic Maya center of La Corona in northern Peten, Guatemala. In the spirit of the *Copan Notes*, this series is meant to produce short informal papers by project members. Considering the usual lag between discovery and publication, *La Corona Notes* provides a venue to rapidly circulate ideas, decipherments, or discoveries deemed interesting and useful to a wider public. This series will publish new notes as they are produced and in no particular order. For questions or comments, please email us at: lacorona.project@gmail.com.

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Three other stones were discovered in the 2012 excavations of the bottommost step, along with carved and inscribed blocks of other styles, all apparently reset in ancient times. All of the Set B stones once formed part of an earlier hieroglyphic stairway of considerable size that presumably existed elsewhere at La Corona. In total we are aware of at least thirteen all-glyphic blocks of the Set B series (Elements 1–8, 20, 25, 29, 32, 38). Given the similarities in shape, size, and material, it is likely that the well-known ballplayer stones looted from La Corona were once figural scenes that accompanied the all-glyphic stones of Set B.

Block 4 is thus a “floating” segment of what was once a much longer and complete historical narrative. None of the other known Set B blocks appear to articulate with it. The Set B blocks and their lengthy single inscription will be treated comprehensively in a future study; at present we simply would like to present and comment on an important historical reference on Block 4, which clarifies some aspects of the regional political history of the central Maya lowlands in the late seventh century.

The inscription begins with a Calendar Round (CR) date written as 2 Ahau 3 Pax (see Figure 1). Preceding the day sign is an eroded glyph that is surely the verb *i uht* (**i-u-ti**), implying that a Distance Number once connected this date to a previous one, on a block that remains missing. The range of known historical dates from the extant Set B stones spans several years in La Corona’s Late Classic period, from AD 687 to 716, suggesting that this CR should be placed in the Long Count as

9.13.5.15.0 2 Ahau 3 Pax December 15, 697.

This is confirmed by a partial second date recorded later on Block 4. A Distance number of 5.9 reckons forward to the day written as 7 Muluc, with Glyphs G4 and F. Adding this span to our previous date, we reach

9.13.6.2.9 7 Muluc 7 Zip April 3, 698.

This corresponds to the G4 glyph in the final glyph block, and thus anchors our two dates in the Long Count.

The event for 2 Ahau 3 Pax refers to someone’s death, with the verb *ochbih-aj*, “he road-enters,” written in block pB1 (**OCH-bi-ja**). This is an intransitive derivation that makes use of object-incorporation to form the verb stem *ochbih*, “to road-enter,” a slight elaboration on the simpler construction *och-bih*, “he enters the road.” This death glyph was first identified by Lounsbury (1974) in the inscription of the sarcophagus of K’inich Janab Pakal at Palenque. It was deciphered some years later by one of the authors based on

substitution spellings of the core verb *och* (Stuart 1998:388). To “enter a road” or “enter a path” seems to have been a common euphemism for death in the Classic period (see Fitzsimmons 2009:33).

The subject of the verb is specified by the title “the two ‘k’atun’ lord” at pC1, and then by a familiar personal name: Yuknoom Yich’aak K’ahk’ (at pB2), which is in turn followed by the well-known snake-head emblem glyph of Late Classic Calakmul. This is, of course, the famous ruler at times known by names including “Jaguar Paw,” “Jaguar Paw Smoke,” or “Jaguar Claw,” who is mentioned in the texts of a number of different sites, including several at La Corona. Here his name is spelled **yu-ku-yi-ICH’AAK-ki-K’AHK’**, following a format known from other examples of his name, including one on another Set B stairway block previously looted from La Corona which records his birth in the year 649 (Figure 2).

The death date of Yuknoom Yich’aak K’ahk’ is a new and somewhat surprising detail in the reconstruction of Late Classic Maya history. The

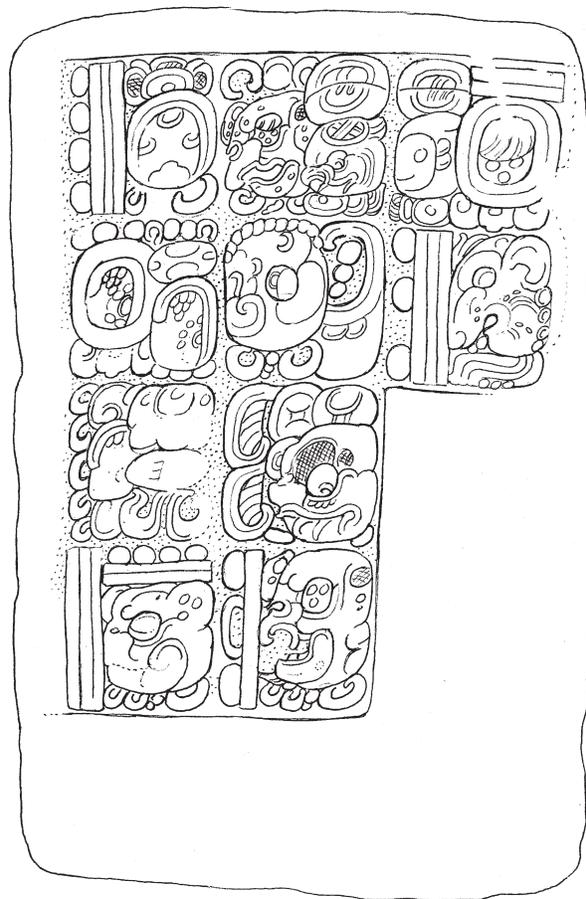


Figure 2. Looted block (Element 5) from the same original HS at La Corona (the Set B stones) bearing the name and birth date of Yuknoom Yich’aak K’ahk’. Preliminary drawing by David Stuart.

king's life is fairly well documented in inscriptions from a number of sites, including Calakmul, La Corona, El Peru, Dos Pilas, and Uxul. He was born in 649, most likely a son of the powerful ruler Yuknoom Ch'een (no direct reference to his parentage exists). Before he was king he evidently spent a number of active years traveling, as he is recorded as "leaving" at least two named locations. One wonders if these might have been important diplomatic posts or visits undertaken as part of Calakmul's complex alliance network of the time. Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk's crowning as the holy lord of the Kaanal court came in 686, in a ceremony at Calakmul witnessed by important visiting allies and subjects, including Bajlaj Chan K'awiil (Ruler 1) of Dos Pilas (Houston 1993:108). He ruled for just over a decade, and an eventful span it was: he oversaw the hugely significant k'atun ending at 9.13.0.0.0 in 692, and just three years later suffered the famous defeat by Tikal's ruler Jasaw Chan K'awiil in 695, as recorded on Tikal's Lintel 3 of Temple 1 (Figure 3). Today this war is rightly understood to be one of the transformative episodes of Late Classic Maya history.

Before the discovery of the La Corona block, the Tikal war had been the last known event in the life of Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk', and some students of ancient Maya history had surmised that he was taken as a captive on that day, or perhaps even perished then as a result (Schele and Freidel 1990:205; Schele and Mathews 1998:86; Delvendahl and Grube 2011:88). Martin and Grube (2000:111) more cautiously noted that Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk's fate was "uncertain" after the defeat, given the lack of a direct mention of the Calakmul king's capture or sacrifice. With the discovery of the death record we now know that Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk' lived for over two years after this jarring military loss at the hands of Tikal.

His short continuation on the throne is also confirmed by another historical record discovered at La Corona in 2012, on Block 5 of Hieroglyphic Stairway 2 (Figure 4). There we find mention of an "arrival" of Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk' to La Corona on 9.13.3.16.17 11 Caban 10 Cumku, only a few months after the Tikal defeat. The purpose of this royal visit is unclear, although we speculate that Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk' might have been displaced from his court and was "on the run" after his loss, or, more likely, he was visiting important allies in the region, such as La Corona, in order to shore up Calakmul's large network of vassal states in the wake of the traumatic fall of his army a few months earlier. Such motivations and detailed context are speculative of course, given that they are seldom if ever made explicit in ancient Maya texts.



Figure 3. Tikal Temple 1, Lintel 3, with its record of the defeat of Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk' in AD 695 (A3-B5). Drawing by Mark Van Stone.

Stepping back from the particulars of La Corona and Calakmul history, it is important to reiterate that the discovery of Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk's death record allows for a more nuanced understanding of a familiar war phrase at Tikal and elsewhere, *jubuy u took' pakal NAME*, "NAME's knife-and-shield fall." We now have a clear indication that the phrase need not always indicate the actual capture of the specified individual, the "owner" of the instruments of war. Rather, it would seem to refer to the fall of an overarching military leader and his campaign, as if Napoleon's "knife and shield" fell at Waterloo in 1815.

As noted above the second date recorded on Block 4 is 9.13.6.2.9 7 Muluc 7 Zip, coming 109 days after the death of Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk'. Only the day position—using the rare gopher head variant of Muluc—appears here, with the 7 Zip month record presumably on a once adjacent block that is now missing. As noted above, the presence of Glyphs G4 and F help to anchor this and the previous date in the Long Count. Not all CR dates include elements of the supplementary series in this way, and when we do find them it is usually to mark or highlight a particularly important date in the overall text's narrative. A good comparison might be, for example, the Palace Tablet from Palenque, where only two of the many CR dates of that inscription—both royal accessions—are

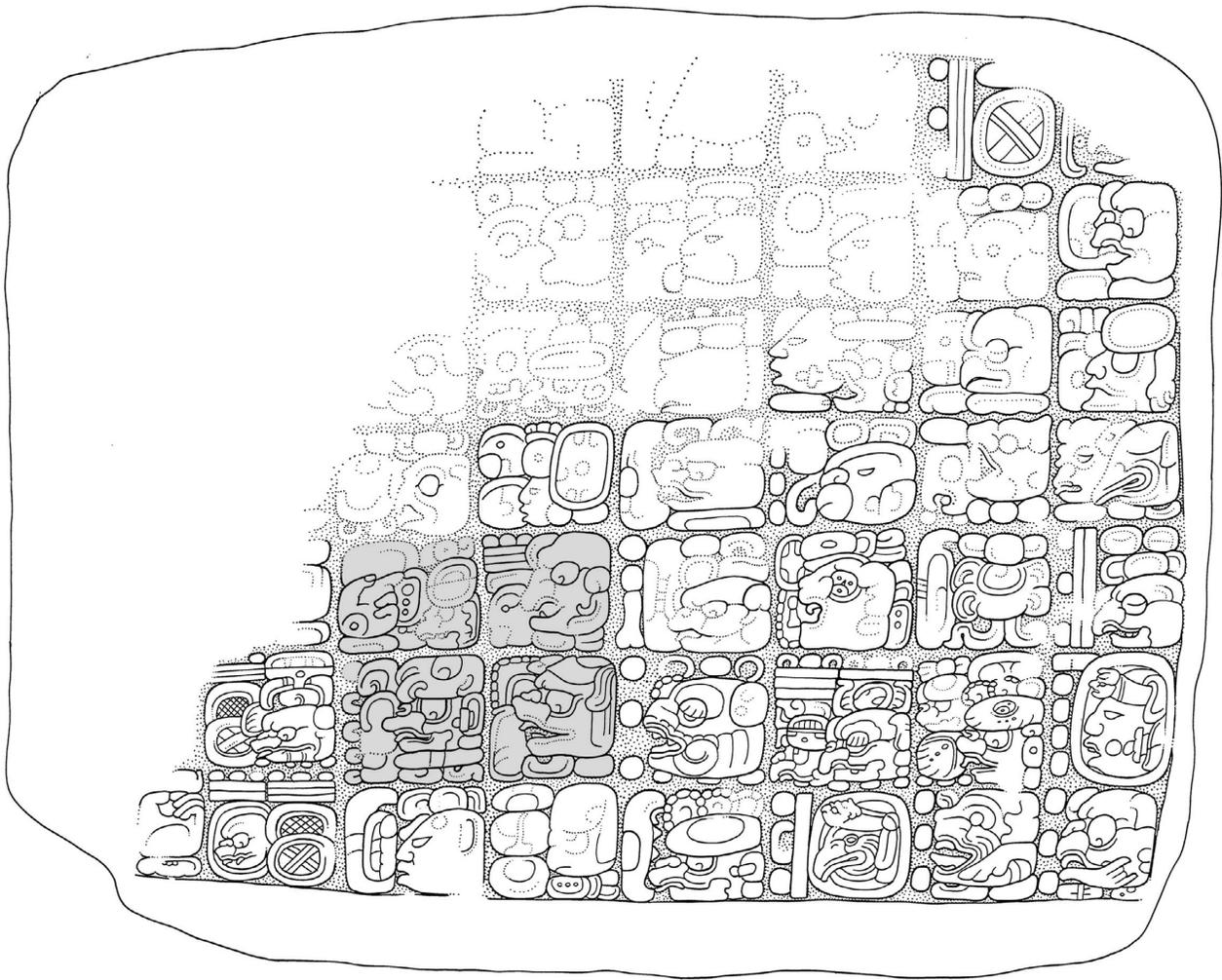


Figure 4. Block 5 from Hieroglyphic Stairway 2 (Element 33), with highlighted passage referring to the arrival of Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk' to La Corona. Drawing by David Stuart.

embellished with Glyphs G, F, and moon age data.

So what was the important event of 7 Muluc 7 Zip? Given its proximity to the death of Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk' as well as its apparent emphasis, we can speculate that this is the accession date for Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk's successor to the Calakmul throne. For some years now this ruler has gone by the provisional designation Yuknoom Took' K'awiil (Martin and Grube 2000:112). He is recorded in a few scattered texts at Calakmul, including Stela 23, where he is said to celebrate the Period Ending 9.13.10.0.0 7 Ahau 3 Cumku (Martin 2009). He also apparently oversaw the k'atun ending of 9.15.0.0.0 some twenty-five years later, indicating a lengthy reign of over three decades at least. A number of references to this king are also found on separated and looted blocks of Set B from La Corona, making clear that he was a key protagonist of the overall text under discussion. While Yuknoom Took' K'awiil's general place in

the sequence of Late Classic rulers of Calakmul has been clear, his precise accession date has not been known until the fortuitous discoveries of last year.

Remarkably, confirmation of this accession date comes from another important epigraphic discovery from 2012 at the site of El Peru. There, as Stanley Guenter has noted, a reused fragment of El Peru Stela 43 was found in Structure M13-1, with a reference to the same date, 9.13.6.2.9 7 Muluc 7 Zip, as the *ch'am-k'awiil* ("K'awiil-taking") of the king Yuknoom Took' K'awiil (Navarro-Farr et al. 2012; Navarro-Farr and Guenter 2013). Clearly the hieroglyphic block that would have followed Block 4 in its original setting would have had a similar statement pertaining to the accession of this very important ruler.

In their masterful treatment of Calakmul's history, Martin and Grube (2000:111) raise the possibility that a ruler they nickname "Split Earth" may have ruled for a short time after the defeat

and death of Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk' and before the accession of Yuknoom Took' K'awiil. Split Earth is known only from a reference on one of the inscribed bones from Tikal's Burial 116, where the date and historical context are completely ambiguous (Figure 5). With these new historical details now in hand, we can confidently say this was not the case. This mysterious ruler may have been from an earlier period in the history of the Kaanal dynasty.

Having Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk's true death date has archaeological implications outside of La Corona. Some years ago, excavations in Structure Sub II-B at Calakmul resulted in the discovery of an elaborate royal crypt, Tomb 4, interpreted by its excavators as holding the remains of Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk' (Carrasco et al. 1999). This identification seems to be based mainly on the presence of the king's name on one inscribed plate found within Tomb 4 (Carrasco et al. 1999:49). It should be said, however, that two other objects in the tomb bear the name of his predecessor Yuknoom Ch'een, including a painted cacao vessel and a fine jade funerary mask. We note that some uncertainty should still exist in identifying the king interred within Tomb 4, but if it is indeed the burial spot of Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk', then we can at least precisely date the burial to the end of 697 or the very beginning of 698.

In conclusion, Block 4 from Hieroglyphic Stairway 2 is a single unattached segment of the longer "Set B" text that originally was dedicated sometime in the early eighth century. As part of its complex historical narrative focusing on La Corona and its alliance with the Kaanal dynasty in those years, the larger inscription recorded several events in the life of the Calakmul king Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk', a major historical ally and overlord of the local La Corona court. As far as we know this original stairway did not mention the defeat of Calakmul by Tikal's ruler, but it did delve into many historical details about this important ruler, including his death in 697, recorded on Block 4. From this text we now know that Yuknoom Yich'ahk K'ahk' lived for two years after his inglorious defeat at the hands of Jasaw Chan K'awiil of Tikal in 695. The La Corona text went on to record, on a segment still missing, the accession of his successor Yuknoom Took' K'awiil. The discovery of Block 4 therefore allows us to fill in some key historical details of Late Classic Maya history and geopolitics in the central lowlands, at a time when La Corona lived out its curious role as a supportive ally of the great, yet at times troubled, Kaanal dynasty.



Figure 5. Bone from Tikal's Burial 116, depicting a captive of the Kaanal kingdom. Photograph by David Stuart.

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Appendix: Dates in the life of Yuknoom Yich'aak K'ahk'*

9.10.16.16.19	3 Cauac 2 Ceh	7 October, 649	birth
9.11.10.0.0	11 Ahau 18 Chen	18 August, 662	Period Ending (CLK: St. 9)
9.12.2.15.11,	1 Chuen 4 Zodz	26 April, 675	"leaves" unknown location (CRN: Pan. 1)
9.12.10.14.11	1 Chuen 4 Pop	23 February, 683	"leaves" K'an Tok Joloom (CRN: El. 12)
9.12.13.17.7	6 Manik 5 Zip	1 April, 686	accession to rule (PRU: St. 33, DPL: HS. 2)
9.12.14.14.14	1 Ix 12 Cumku	5 February, 687	ballgame (CRN: El. 3)
9.13.0.0.0	8 Ahau 8 Uo	16 March, 692	Period Ending (CRN: St. 1)
9.13.1.3.19	5 Cauac 2 Xul	9 May, 693	overseer at Naranjo (NAR: St. 1)
9.13.2.17.1	3 Imix 19 Cumku	10 February, 695	ballgame at Uxul (UXL: HS 1)
9.13.3.7.18	11 Edznab 11 Chen	6 August, 695	military defeat by Tikal (TIK: T.1, L.3)
9.13.3.16.17	8 Caban 10 Cumku	1 February, 696	visit to La Corona (CRN: El. 33)
9.13.5.15.0	2 Ahau 3 Pax	15 December, 697	death (age 48) (CRN: El. 32)

* Gregorian equivalents use the 584286 correlation constant.