

An Early Maya Text from El Mirador, Guatemala

RICHARD D. HANSEN

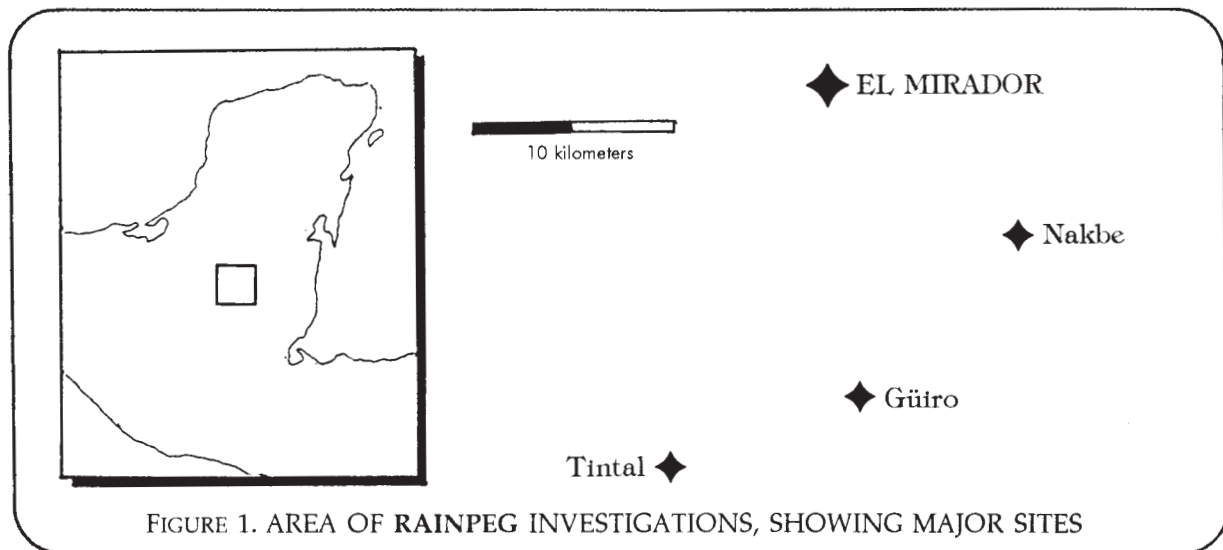
Institute of Archaeology, University of California, Los Angeles

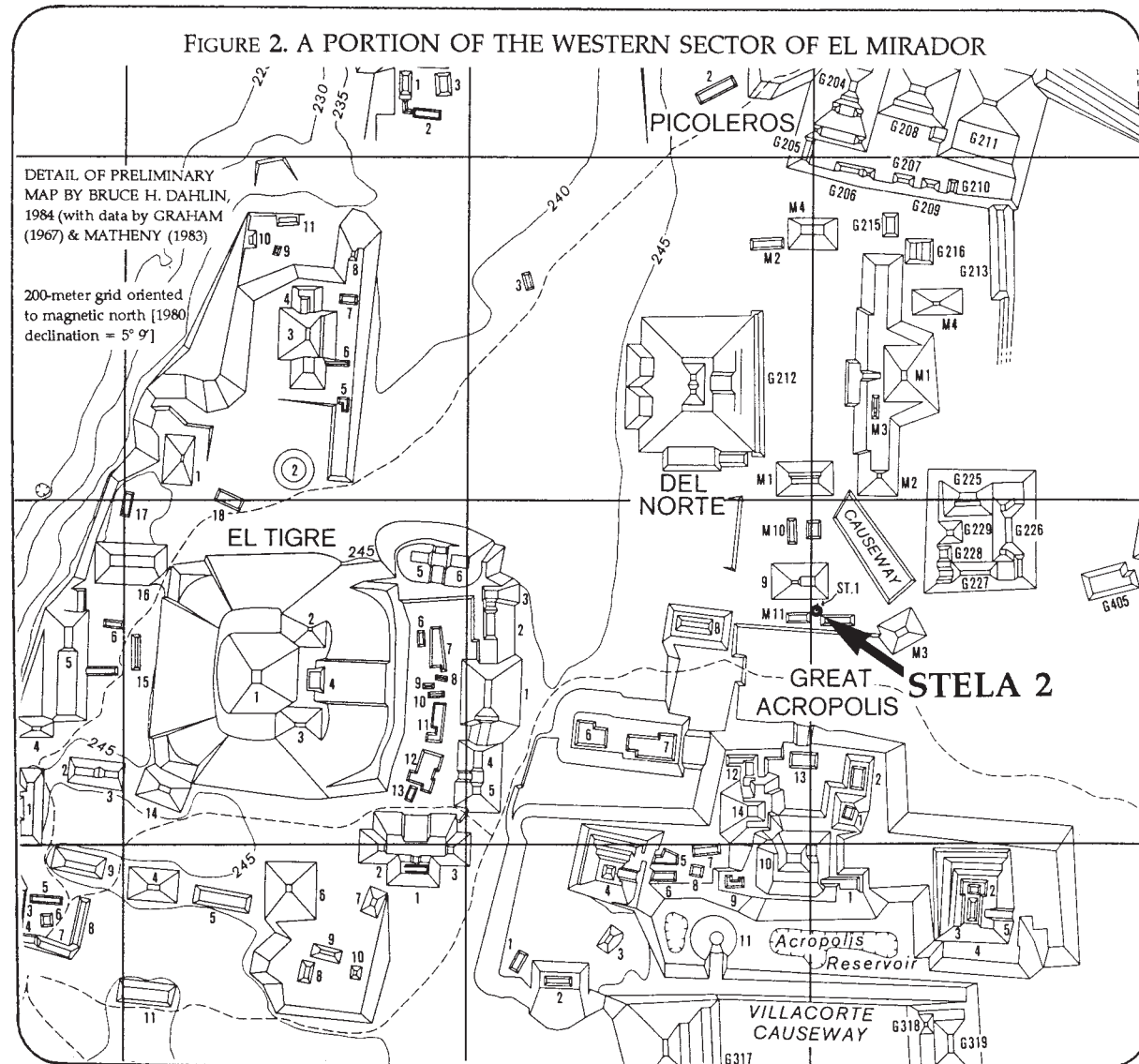
RECENT FIELD RESEARCH conducted by the Regional Archaeological Investigation of North Petén, Guatemala (RAINPEG), a long-term study project under the auspices of the University of California, Los Angeles, has revealed substantial new data about the earliest inhabitants of the extreme north-central portion of the Department of Petén, Guatemala. Excavations and surface reconnaissance were conducted in 1989 and 1990 at the large sites of Nakbe, Tintal, and El Mirador.

Detailed night examination and photography of the monuments at El Mirador have defined a portion of a previously suspected early hieroglyphic text on Stela 2. By utilizing a simple but highly effective process, the text was accurately recorded. Analysis suggests that the text is one of the earliest yet known from the Maya Lowlands.

THE SETTING

The large Lowland Maya site of El Mirador is located in the extreme north-central Petén approximately nine kilometers from the Mexican border (Fig. 1). The site received extensive investigation from 1979 through 1983 under the direction of Bruce H. Dahlin, then of the





Catholic University of America, and Ray T. Matheny of Brigham Young University (see Matheny et al. 1980; Dahlin 1983; Matheny 1986; Forsyth 1989; Howell 1989; Copeland 1989; Hansen 1984, 1990). Recent archaeological work at the site by the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1990 under the direction of the author, included excavations and a re-examination of the monuments located in the Grand Plaza of the site (Fig. 2). This process included the careful removal of moss, leaves, and fungi from the several monuments concentrated near two small mounds excavated previously by Glenna Nielsen (Nielsen 1980; 1990). Special care was taken to clean a raised panel on the upper right corner of Stela 2 (Fig. 3), since the location of the panel suggested the possibility of a text. Detailed examination with controlled lighting at night confirmed the presence of glyphs in the lower left corner of the panel.

STELA 2

EL MIRADOR STELA 2 was discovered by Ian Graham in 1962 (see Graham 1967) and drawn during his explorations at the site in 1970. This drawing was first published by Parsons (1986: Fig. 186) although it was incompletely reproduced (Fig. 4a). The original drawing by Graham indicated an awareness of some sort of undetermined detail in the lower portions of

FIGURE 3.
EL MIRADOR
STELA 2,
SIDE A



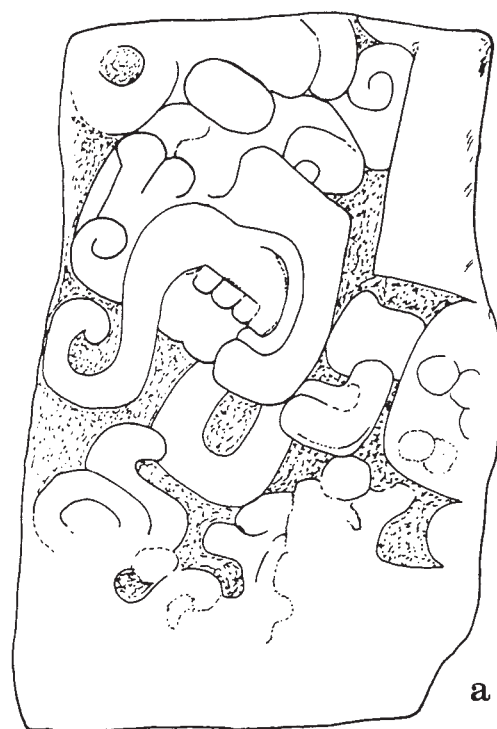
PHOTOGRAPH BY
R.D. HANSEN, 1990

the upper right panel (Fig. 4b). In 1980, Jody Hansen of Project El Mirador redrew the monument and further noted the presence of several inscribed elements on the lower portions of the panel (Fig. 4c), although these were drawn with some uncertainty due to the extensive moss, fungi growth, and the lightly inscribed nature of the glyphic elements. The presence of the panel merited a re-examination of the stone in light of the possibilities for an early text.

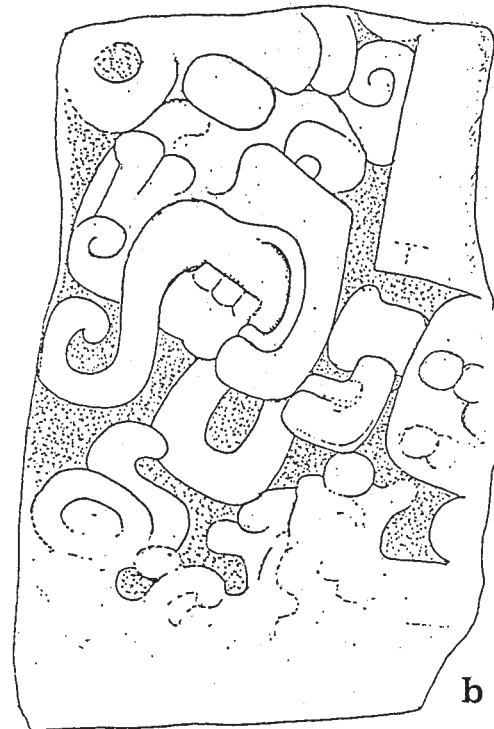
The antiquity of El Mirador Stela 2 is suggested by the early iconography engraved on both sides of the stone, as well as the excavations conducted by Nielsen (1980: 32-35; 1990) on two small mounds in the immediate vicinity of the monuments. Nielsen discovered that the constructions, built with large slab stones set on edge, dated to the Late Preclassic Period (ca. 300 BC-AD 150), based on ceramic associations (Nielsen *ibid.*, Matheny 1986:341).

El Mirador Stela 2 is a bifacially carved monument approximately .94m high, .68m wide, .23m thick, and, at a specific gravity constant of 2,700 kilograms per cubic meter (Sidrys 1978: 174), weighs roughly 400 kilograms. The relief depth ranges from 1.5 to 3 centimeters. The sculpture is apparently a fragment, although the contemporaneity of the actual sculpturing of both faces is uncertain. There is strong evidence (see below) that the monument was unfinished.

FIGURE 4. EL MIRADOR STELA 2, SIDE A, DRAWINGS



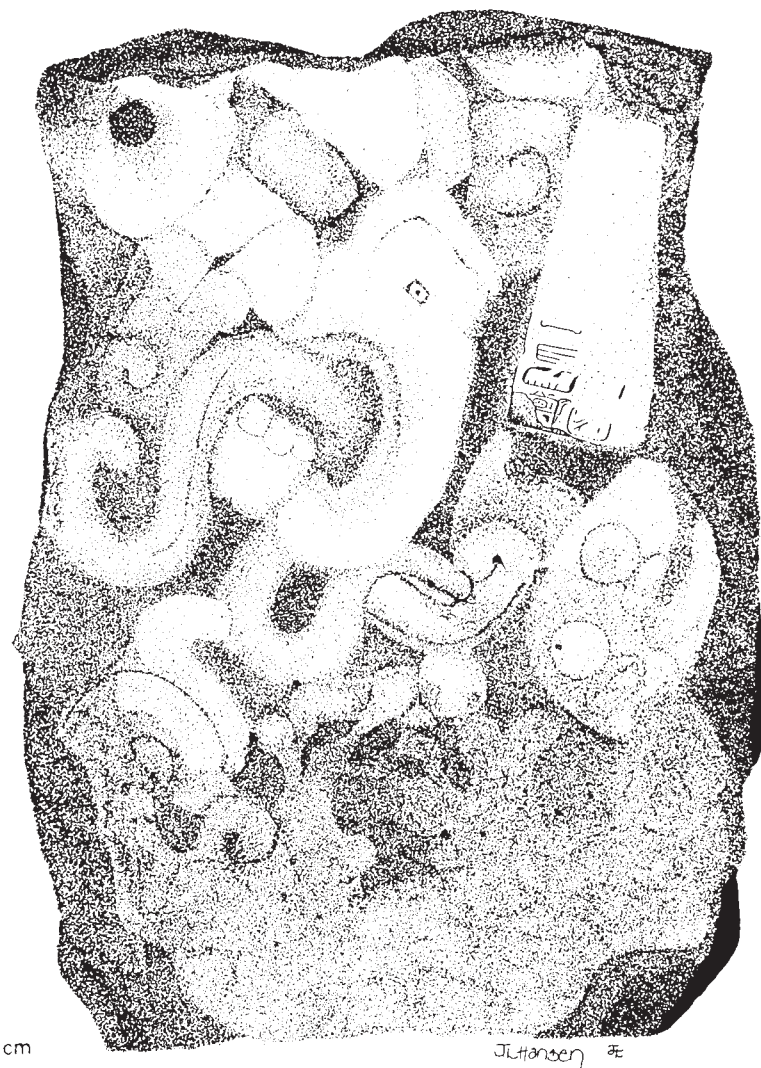
a



b

- a: MRD Stela 2, Side A. Drawing published by Parsons (1986: Fig. 186)
 b: MRD Stela 2, Side A. Original drawing by Ian Graham, 1970
 c: MRD Stela 2, Side A. Drawing by Jody Hansen, 1980, with corrections by R.D. Hansen, 1990

c



ICONOGRAPHY

THE IMAGE AND TEXT reported in this paper appear on Side A of Stela 2 (see Figs. 3 & 4). The former consists of a slightly downward-looking profile head in the upper left of the field. The forehead is marked by a possible tufted eyebrow element, and the nose is distinguished by a slightly rectangular nostril. The eye is also generally rectangular. A portion of a large earpool, at the left corner of the stone, appears to be circular. A large projecting alveolar "long lip" element begins immediately below the nose and arcs down, ending at the chin. The mandible is fleshless, with the ramus and at least three teeth clearly depicted. A serpent, with the tail below the ramus curves up over the mandible, through the mouth, and out, passing under the descending alveolar projection into the area below, creating a three-dimensional illusion. The head of the serpent appears to the immediate right of the end of the alveolar "trunk." Several scrolls and other unidentified elements, all badly weathered, may be seen in the lower portion of the scene.

The glyph panel shown in Figure 6 is located in the extreme upper right corner of Side A, with an incised scroll (a foreshortened breath scroll?) inset between the panel and the

forehead and nose of the downward-looking head. Immediately below the panel is an unidentified bracket and scroll (?) element which curves down below the head of the serpent and toward the base of the trunk. Another element in slightly apsidal form is found along the extreme right edge of the monument, with the remains of two "droplet" motifs in raised relief situated in a horizontal-diagonal pattern. The angle of these elements matches the orientation of the Long-Lipped Deity image, suggesting a relationship between the two.

I believe the identity of the long-lipped deity portrayed in the upper left area of the monument is closely related to the Principal Bird Deity (Bardawil 1976), in part due to the skeletal mandible and the pronounced alveolar lip. However, relationship of the long-lip element on early deities to the *danta*, or tapir (*Tapirus bairdii*), has been noted by Navarrete (1987), and is also a possible, although I believe a less likely, candidate.

The Principal Bird Deity, a common figure in the early art of the southern Maya area, has been associated with *Vucub Caquix* ("Seven Macaw"), the patron deity of the former era of time in the Popol Vuh, by numerous investigators (e.g., Lowe 1982:19, 267; Cortez 1986; Barba de Piña Chan 1988; Coe 1989). Of particular interest is the fact that a serpent extends over the fleshless mandible and through the mouth. This image is duplicated with the serpent

FIGURE 5. EL MIRADOR STELA 2, SIDE B

PHOTOGRAPH
BY R. D. HANSEN,
1990



0 10 20 cm

DRAWING BY JODY HANSEN,
WITH CORRECTIONS BY
R. D. HANSEN, 1990

extending up through the profile open mouth on the "serpent wing" of the Bird Deity of Izapa Stela 25 (*see* Norman 1973: Pl. 42). Although depicted in a variety of forms, and often associated with a variety of supernatural figures, the serpent is frequently shown wrapped around the neck of the Principal Bird Deity and other supernatural bird representations (*see* Norman, *ibid.*; Robicsek & Hales 1981:121, Fig 22A; 32, Vessel 50; 287, Vessel 168; Clarkson 1978: Fig. 1).

Side B is the partial depiction, from the waist down, of a standing figure in a typical stance common on early sculpture, with the legs in tandem position (Fig. 5). The nearest or proximal leg is the left leg of the protagonist and is parallel with the right edge of the sculpture. What is believed to be the remnants of a belt spool (a ball player's belt?) is found in the upper portions of the thigh, while a large scroll-like element extends from the spool element to the back of the thigh and down onto the leg. The protagonist is apparently wearing pantaloons, typical of early Maya monuments (e.g., Kaminaljuyú Stela 11; San Diego Cliff Carving; Uaxactun Stela 5). An unidentified element is appended near the back of the proximal knee from which emanates a split scroll that curls down to the back of the calf.

Portions of an apron can be seen extending down from the waist. However, the

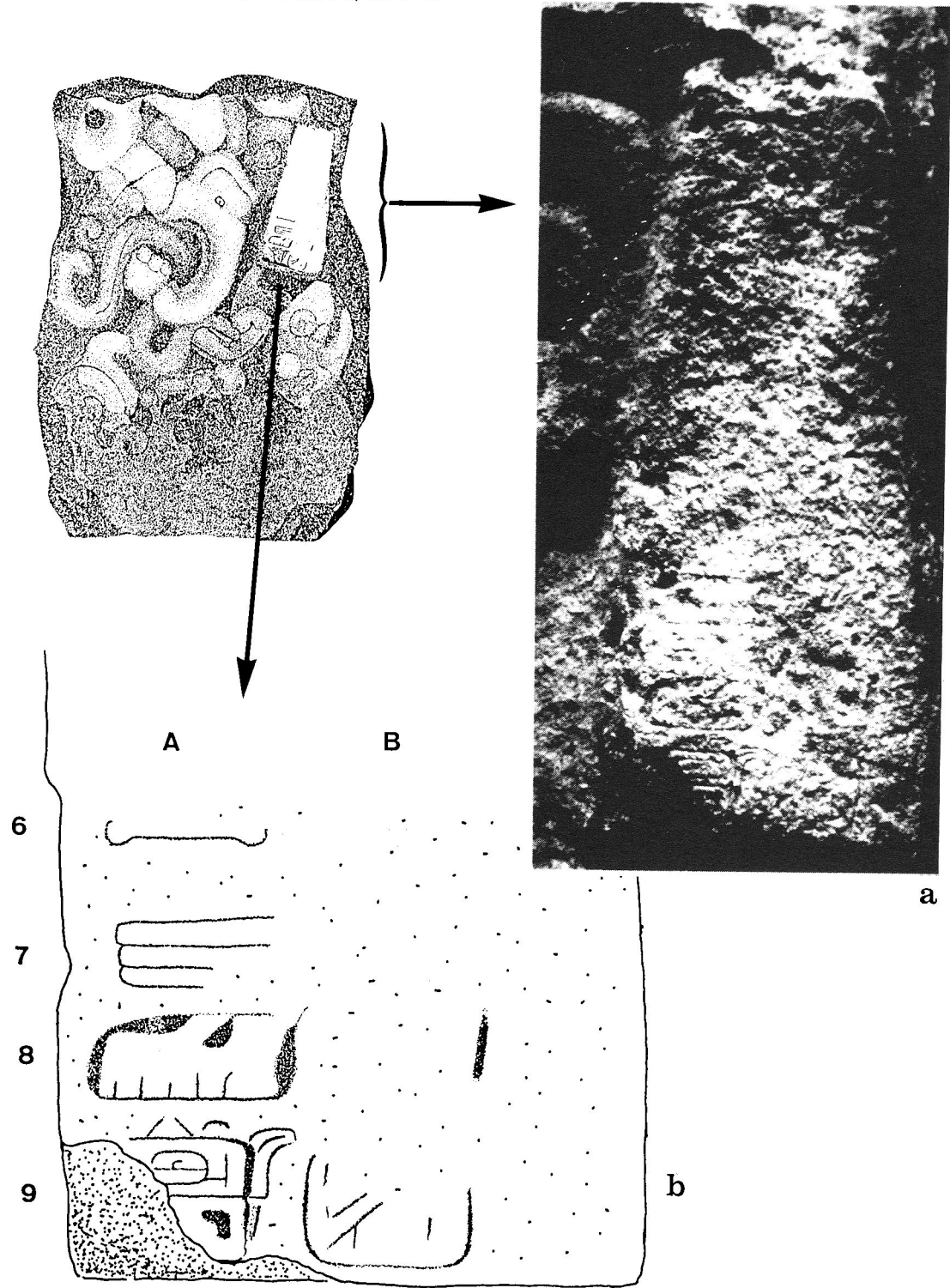
elements on the apron are poorly defined, and it is possible that was never finished. Evidence for this is found at the base of the monument. Both feet are missing, but the protrusions of limestone which were to form the ankle knots were uncarved, except for a small finely carved, but unfinished portion of the knot on the proximal bundle. In sum, the unfinished knots, vague elements on the apron, and the lack of definition of the associated elements suggest that Side B of the monument was never finished.

THE TEXT

The hieroglyphic text recorded during the 1990 expedition to El Mirador is located on the lower portions of a raised panel located in the upper right corner of Side A. The panel measures 31 centimeters long, 13 wide at the base, and nine centimeters wide at the top. The area covered by visible glyph elements corresponds to the lower 10 centimeters of the panel.

The panel of Stela 2 was very carefully cleaned, and moss, leaves, mushrooms and other fungi removed from the surface. In order to accurately record the glyphs, detailed photographs were taken of the panel to supplement a simple mold made of the inscription.

FIGURE 6. THE TEXT ON STELA 2, SIDE A



a: MRD Stela 2, Side A, detail of glyph panel (Photograph by R.D. Hansen, 1990)

b: MRD Stela 2, Side A, detail of glyph panel (Drawing by R. D. Hansen, 1990, based on a paper mold of the panel, the original stone, and photographs)

This mold was made by soaking a sheet of thick paper in rubbing alcohol and gently pressing the paper on the panel with a soft toothbrush. After the images were thoroughly impressed, the paper was carefully removed and dried over a candle, and subsequently compared again to the panel under controlled lighting. In the absence of latex, this process allowed a quick and accurate recovery of the glyphs. The procedure clearly can do nothing to overcome either the weathered condition of the panel or the finely incised nature of the text, nor can it always aid the normal problems attending interpretation—for example, could there have been dots above the "15" element? All in all, however, the casting process guarantees that the glyphs recovered are virtually as accurate as the carving itself.

The glyphs were visible only on the lower portions of the panel (Fig. 6). If the panel had been completely filled by the original carver, there would have been approximately eight vertical glyph blocks, according to the size and spacing of the elements now present. The puzzling lack of glyphs in the upper portion of the panel suggests either that the fine-line incisions have simply weathered away, or—and this seems extremely unlikely—that the scribe began at the base of the panel and the text was never finished. Otherwise, I cannot account for the pattern of preservation on the panel. If weathering is the cause, it appears to have been remarkably even, with no marked removal or flaking of the stone surface. The glyphic elements appear to read as follows (see Fig. 6b):

	A	B
6	number (5?)	
7	number 15	
8	<i>imix</i> element or phonetic <i>ba</i> (T501?) (Stuart 1987)	?
9	<i>ma</i> affix (T74) title (var T513,514) T17, var. T575, 814?:x title main sign? <i>wi</i> (?) suffix (T117?) (Stuart 1987)	probable title

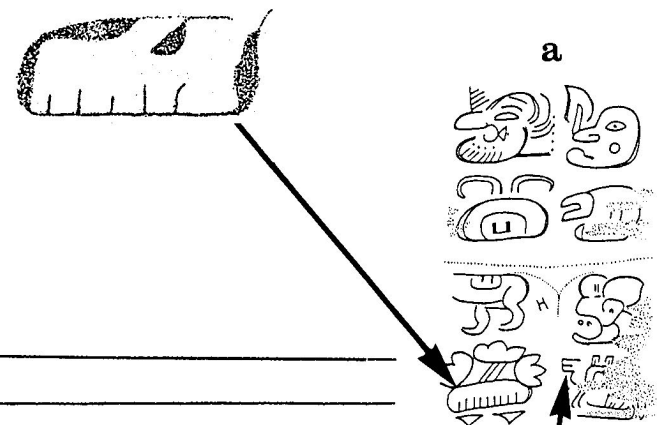
The reading order of the inscription is uncertain, since early texts are often read in single columns rather than in the A-B row, or double-column format (Justeson 1986:447). However, the double-column format in the Maya area had most likely developed by about 250 BC (Justeson 1986:453; Marcus 1976:64), and I believe it to have been in existence on the panel of Stela 2. Additional evidence for the double-column format is suggested at A7, where the number 15 and *imix* (A8) is an impossible calendric combination (in the orthodox system of date notations in the 260-day "Sacred Round"), and suggests that the number is associated with another glyph at positions B7-B8, of which only a single incised line remains.

The numeric reference in A6 is inferred by a single basal line with a slight "barbell" form, and due to its incomplete nature may be incorrect. Three contiguous bars at A7 appear to form the coefficient of 15, and the proximity and size suggests that it may be associated with A8, perhaps as a name or a title.

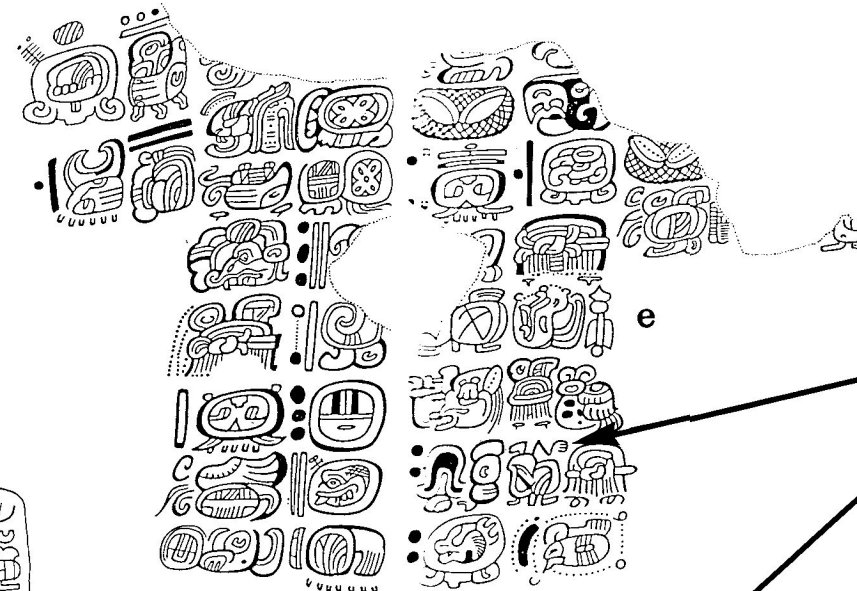
The block at A8 (Figs. 6 & 7a) is a rare form of an *imix*-like glyph, which could be a variant of T501 or T556 through T562. I do not believe the *imix* element is calendric, but

FIGURE 7. EL MIRADOR STELA 2, A8, AND A SIMILAR GLYPH IN AN EARLY TEXT

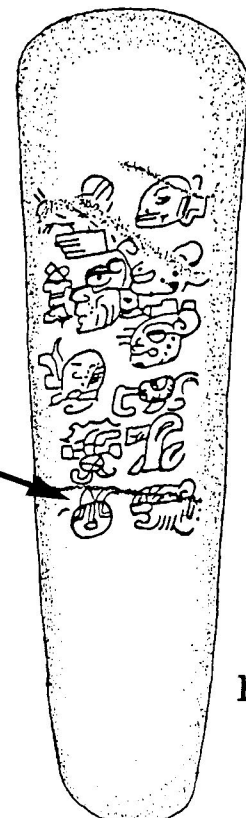
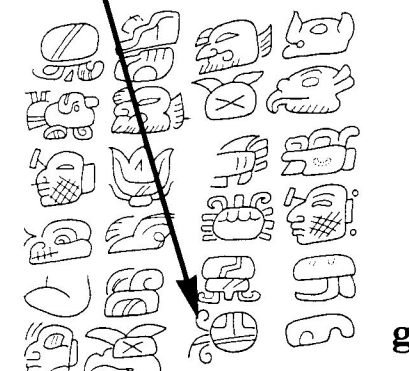
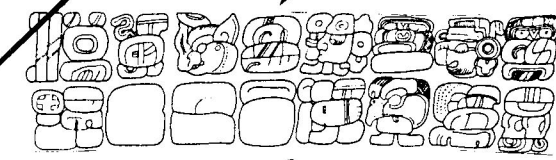
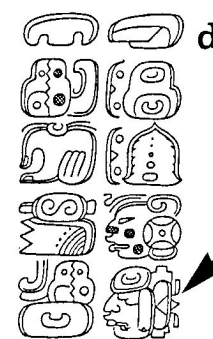
a: COL, early were-jaguar text (from Coe 1973:25)



a: COL, early were-jaguar text (from Coe 1973:25)
 b: COL shell-shaped, greenstone earflare (after Schele and Miller 1986:79)
 c: COL Celt fragment (after Schele and Miller 1986:83)

FIGURE 8. EL MIRADOR STELA 2, A9, AND SIMILAR ELEMENTS IN EARLY TEXTS (a-c: The T117 (?) suffix; d-h: a *ma*-like element)

d: COL, early text (from Covarrubias 1957: Fig. 94; Fields 1989:172)
 e: TIK stone figure "Hombre de Tikal" (drawing by Ozaeta, Pinelo, & Caal [in Fahsen 1988: Fig 4])
 f: COL, "Hauberg Stela," base. Seattle Art Museum (after Schele 1985:136)
 g: COL, stone pectoral, back. Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C. (Schele and Miller 1986: 120)
 h: Hatzcap Ceel celt (drawn by R.D. Hansen from photograph [in Thompson 1931: Pl. 33])



possibly a phonetic *ba* that probably forms part of name. A single, incised, vertical line is evident in B7, and this unknown glyph may be the phonetic complement of A8.

The glyph is A9 however is probably a title, according to text syntax, and the affixes associated with the main cartouche suggest probable phonetic values. The affix associations of this glyph block suggest that it is considerably more sophisticated than is generally assumed for early southern Maya scripts where the glyphs are generally depicted as the heads of animals, supernaturals, or humans (Justeson et al. 1985:32; and see Gibson et al. 1986). The glyph is a compound form which reads, according to the Thompson Catalog, as: T74:17 or var. 814?:main sign.117.

The superfix, T74, is an early *ma* form (Fig. 8d-h) found also on several other early texts (Thompson 1931: Pl. 33; Covarrubias 1957: Fig. 94). The relative role of the *ma* morpheme, both in this early context and in later Maya scripts, suggests that it is most likely reflective of the Mixe-Zoque value of *ma*, meaning "great" or "big" (Justeson et al. 1985:44).

The main glyph block of A9 consists of a compound, the upper portion of which is possibly T17, tentatively read as phonetic *yi* by Stuart (1987:25), or an early variant of T575 or T814. The upper compound on A9 may be found on glyph D1 of the Hauberg Stela (Fig. 8f)

(Schele 1985:136). The content of the entire glyph is uncertain because a portion of the upper compound and over half of the lower compound are missing on Stela 2.

The suffix is possibly an early variant of T117, which Stuart (1987:13) identifies as phonetic *wi*. (Justeson, however, [1984] suggests that the element has the phonetic value *na*). This element is also located as a prefix on versions of the T168:518 compound glyph on two early objects (Schele and Miller 1986: Plate 22; Coe 1973:25) (Fig. 8a-c). In both of these cases, the T117 prefix is attached to a "knobbed ahau" (Fields 1989:53) compound affix that is substituted for the later T168 *ahpo* morpheme (Lounsbury 1973). The difficulties in assigning phonetic values to early texts, however, make attempts for a phonetic decipherment extremely difficult and further success must await an enlarged corpus of early Lowland script.

The faintly inscribed lines of B9 form a partial glyph that is probably a title according to syntactical order, and represents the last glyph in the text.

DATING

The antiquity of the sculpture on Stela 2 is suggested by iconographic comparisons with monuments of probable stylistic or thematic contemporaneity, particularly at sites such as Kaminaljuyú (e.g., Stela 11, Altar 9 & Altar 10) and Abaj Takalik (e.g., Stela 4 & Altar 13) (Parsons 1983, 1986; Graham et al. 1978). The standing figure on Side B with the feet in tandem position also resembles early Lowland monuments such as the Hauberg Stela (Schele 1985) and recently discovered monuments at Nakbe and Tintal (Hansen, in prep.). However, the archaeological context of Stela 2 and many of the other monuments also suggests at least a Late Preclassic date for the sculptures, as determined by Nielsen's excavations of "altar" platforms of that period in the plaza adjacent to Stela 2. These small architectural platforms were constructed by placing large "blank stelae" on edge around the borders of the construction (see Matheny 1986:343 for an example on the Central Acropolis at El Mirador). The ceramics recovered from the constructions suggest a Chicanel occupation and utilization around the beginning of the Christian Era, according to the sequence determined for the site (Forsyth 1989). I estimate Stela 2 to have been carved very late in Cycle 7 or early in Cycle 8.

SUMMARY

The early text discovered by the UCLA RAINPEG expedition on Stela 2 at El Mirador in 1990 has provided evidence for a sophisticated script on a monument that dates to the late Cycle 7/early Cycle 8 era, according to iconographic and archaeological contexts. A simple procedure implemented in the field allowed accurate recovery of the text. The monument introduces a new early text in the corpus of formative Maya script with indications of phonetic values.

SUBMITTED JANUARY 1991



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