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The Stelae of Chichen Itza

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Introduction

For a site hardly characterized by stelae, it may seem unusual to title a paper "The Stelae of Chichen Itza," but in fact there are now two known stelae from Chichen Itza. Although they logically should be designated Stelae 1 and 2, here they are given numbers 2 and 3. The reason is that the name "Stela 1" has already been taken. In 1923 Sylvanus Morley used "Stela 1" to name a large, broken hieroglyphic monument found by him at the Caracol (Ruppert 1935:135; Morley 1923:262, 1935:276-282), even though the overall shape of the Caracol piece does not fit the typical form known as "stela" in Maya archaeology.

Stela 2

The "new" stela (which does in fact have the shape of a typical stela) was found in many fragments in the Casa Colorada group by Peter Schmidt in the 1990s and was reassembled by him and now stands in the bodega of the archaeological camp at the site. When Graña-Behrens published a drawing of the new stela on Mesoweb (Graña-Behrens 2004), he logically named it Stela 2. The present author then posted a drawing and photograph, also on Mesoweb (Love 2005), in which he somewhat quixotically altered the name to "Stela 1." In this article, I will follow Graña-Behrens and Peter Schmidt, who has authoritatively referred to this monument as "Stela 2" (Schmidt 2007:159).¹

For this article a new drawing (Figure 1a) has been prepared by the author using photographs taken over a number of visits beginning in 1998 (Figure 1b).

Stela 3

Stela 3 was part of a set of two stones found by the Carnegie Institution archaeological project near the Temple of the Wall Panels, just south of the Caracol. The Carnegie photographs are now in the Peabody Museum photographic archives, and the original upper piece is in the bodega at the Chichen Itza administrative offices.²

As can be seen in Figure 3, these two stones form part of a feathered rattlesnake's tail. The upper stone in the photograph was once carved in columns of hieroglyphs. The more recent carvers of this piece cut right over the glyphic texts to create rattles and feathers, the kind typically found on "Toltec" monuments at the site.³

On one of the Carnegie prints mounted on cardboard in the Peabody Museum archives is the hand-written note, "Temple of the Wall Panels. Serpent Tail, upper portion was originally a hieroglyphic lintel."

But on closer examination it becomes

¹ In 1999 Erik Boot presented a preliminary drawing of the stela's text based on a photograph in *Arqueología Mexicana* in his workbook for the Fourth European Maya Conference (Boot 1999).

² Image numbers for Carnegie photographs of "Serpent Tail at the Temple of the Wall Panels" are 58-34-20/32041, 32823-32826, 32880, 32881, 32944, 32945, 33804, and 34107 and may be accessed through Peabody Museum Collections Online at <http://140.247.102.177/col/default.cfm>. A photograph is published in Beyer (1937:Plate 13b).

³ I use the term "Toltec" as it has been used for the last 100 years to denote a style different from Classic Maya or Puuc. I use quotation marks to indicate that I am not taking a position in the Toltec/Chichen debate in this article, only using the term for convenience.



Figure 1. Chichen Itza Stela 2. Scale 1:10. Drawing and photo by the author.

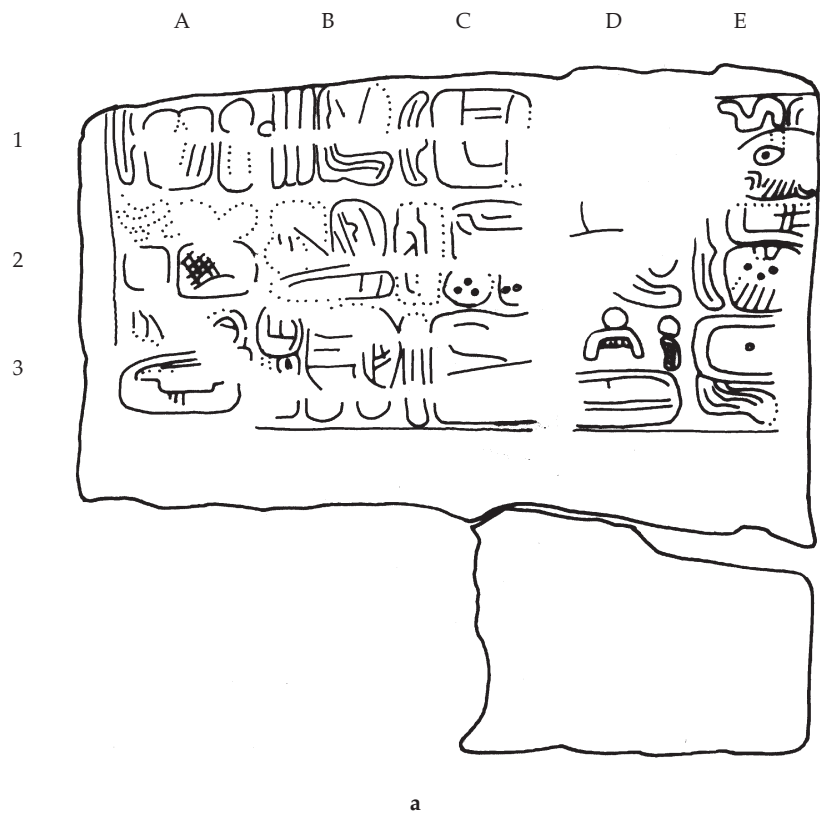


Figure 2. Chichen Itza Stela 3. Scale 1:5. Drawing and photo by the author.

apparent this was not originally a lintel, but much more likely a stela. The orientation of the columns of text to the uncarved margins is 90 degrees from what a lintel would be. One can see in Figure 2 that if we turn the stone on its “side” we have a narrow left margin and a wide bottom area that would have been the butt of the stela. The carvers of the serpent’s tail apparently cut up a perfectly good stela to use as raw material for their decorative purposes. The stela, when intact, would have had more rows of glyphs above and one or more columns to the right of what the remaining piece has.

In order to get the most data out of this piece, I drew only the lines that were part of the original hieroglyphs and left the rattles and feathers as blanks in the drawing. The result is Figure 2a. Drawings are based on four photographs with different light angles taken in 2000 (e.g., Figure 2b) and two Carnegie prints from the Peabody Museum archives.

Discussion

The purpose of this article is to present these two stelae to the field of Mesoamerican studies so that discussions about their content can proceed. It is more data-oriented than interpretive, but one point certainly seems worth mentioning. The destruction of a carved hieroglyphic monument so that it can be used as building material is not unique to Stela 3, the serpent tail carved from a stela. Evidence of this practice was also found at the Osario pyramid.

In a recently published article by Schmidt and Love, an analysis of fragments of hieroglyphic texts recovered at the Osario by Schmidt as part of the INAH Chichen Itza Project concluded that the stones with carved glyphs or portions of glyphs “were used as construction material and were not functioning as meaningful textual units when the building was first constructed” (Schmidt and Love 2009:12). In other words hieroglyphic panels and other carved stones were intentionally broken and cut to be used as building material with no evident regard for the textual content.

This has strong implications about one group replacing another group at least in terms of architecture if not ideology, and the events are clearly sequential. First the hieroglyphic monuments are carved and later someone breaks them up and reuses them. Does this suggest “foreigners” taking over the site? The reused pieces on their own are not proof, but they are certainly consistent with such a scenario.

Another point worth talking about is the “Fire Bird” in the upper panel of Stela 2. A review of bird imagery at Chichen Itza (Figures 4–5) suggests that this bird with the fire symbol on its breast is unique in bird imagery at the site. Its closest cousins are the birds on Yula Lintel 1 and Temple of the Four Lintels Lintel 1 (Figure 4a–b), but they lack the fire symbol and the upward sweeping element on the upper beak. There are other obvious



Figure 3. “Serpent Tail at the Temple of the Wall Panels.” Peabody Museum Image No. 58-34-20/34107. Used with permission of Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.

and significant differences, specifically the human head in the mouth and the flint markings on the wings. The text of Stela 3 almost certainly refers to “Fire Bird” (at position E1) and related events.

“Fire Bird” here and “Flint Bird”⁴ on the aforementioned lintels are possibly name glyphs for Maya lords or principals in the same way that K’inich Yax K’uk’ Mo’ imagery on the Margarita Tomb at Copan depicts an entwined quetzal and macaw with *yax* signs to “spell” Yax Kuk Mo’, the dynastic founder at the site (Martin and Grube 2008:194). From ethnohistorical sources we already know one very important “fire bird,” from Yucatán, K’inich K’ak’ Mo’. This legendary mythical bird of Izamal descended as a fire with wings ablaze at midday to burn the offerings laid in the temple of the pyramid of the same name (Lizana 1995:[16], 63).

Fire Bird on Stela 2 and Flint Bird on the lintels (Figure 4a–b) are not macaws but appear to be cormorants (Alfonso Escobedo, personal communication 2010).⁵ The cormorant (*Phalacrocorax olivaceus*) is *mach* in Yucatec Mayan (Hartig 1979:14). The poor condition of

⁴ This bird with the flint markings on its wing feathers has been referred to as “Knife-wing Bird” for many years, but I suggest that the nick-name “Flint Bird” is more appropriate. If the image does indeed “spell” a name, that name is very likely to contain the word *tok* “flint” as in the famous Junpik Tok’ “8,000 Spear Points” war captain mentioned in the ethnohistorical sources (e.g., Kowalski 1989:174).

⁵ Alfonso Escobedo is a renowned birder and guide in Yucatán and Mesoamerica.



Figure 4. Images of supernatural birds or human bird performers at Chichen Itza: (a) Temple of the Four Lintels, Lintel 1, front (after Krochok 1989:Fig. 4); (b) Yula Lintel 1, front (after Love 1989:Fig. 2 [see also Krochok 1988:Fig. 99]); (c) Lower Temple of the Jaguars (after Maudslay 1889-1902:3:Pl. 47 [see also Schmidt et al. 2008:Fig. 9]); (d) Tablet with Birds and Monkeys, No. 7 of House of the Monkeys, Structure 5C6 at Initial Series Group (Schmidt 2003:Fig. 53 [see also Schmidt 2007:Fig. 36]); (e) Upper relief, North Tablet of House of the Phalli, Structure 5C14 at Initial Series Group (Schmidt 2003:Fig. 31); (f) Frieze of the west façade of House of the Snails, Structure 5C5 at Initial Series Group (Schmidt 2003:Fig. 36 [see also Schmidt 2007:Fig. 30]); (g) Temple of the Owls, West Pier, east side (Schmidt 2003:Fig. 42 [see also Schmidt 2007:Fig. 32; Von Winning 1985:Fig. 53]); (h) Structure 2D3 "Mausoleum 1" (Tozzer 1957:Fig. 435).

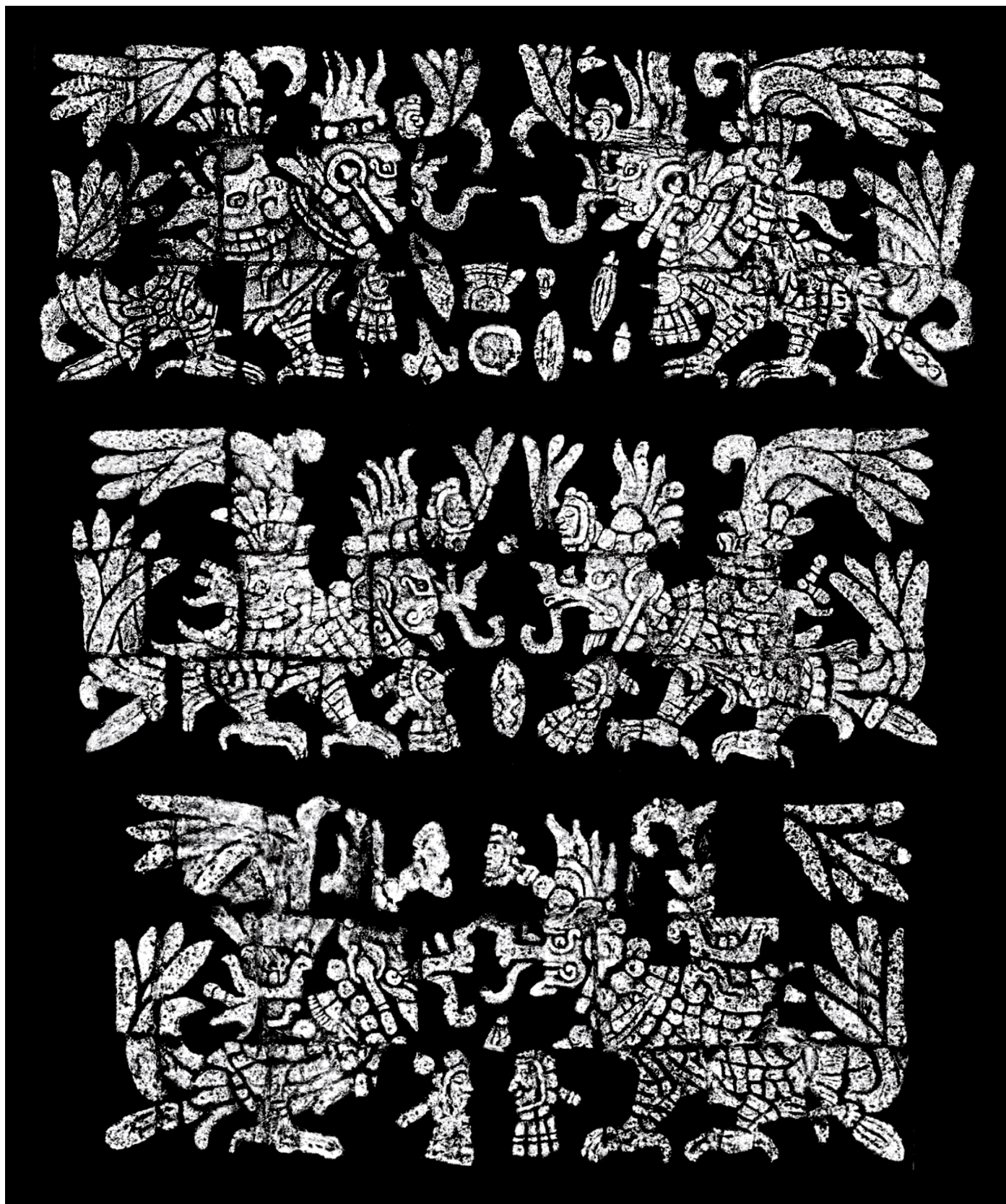


Figure 5. El Osario, Tableros Pajaros: South Panel 1, Southeast Panel 3, Southeast Panel 5. Rubbings D40673, D40674, D40675 by Merle Greene Robertson. See also Schmidt 2007:Fig. 20.

Stela 2 makes reading the glyphs very difficult, but it is not impossible that some of the lengthy eroded passages also reference the great bird, as seems to be the case on Stela 3.

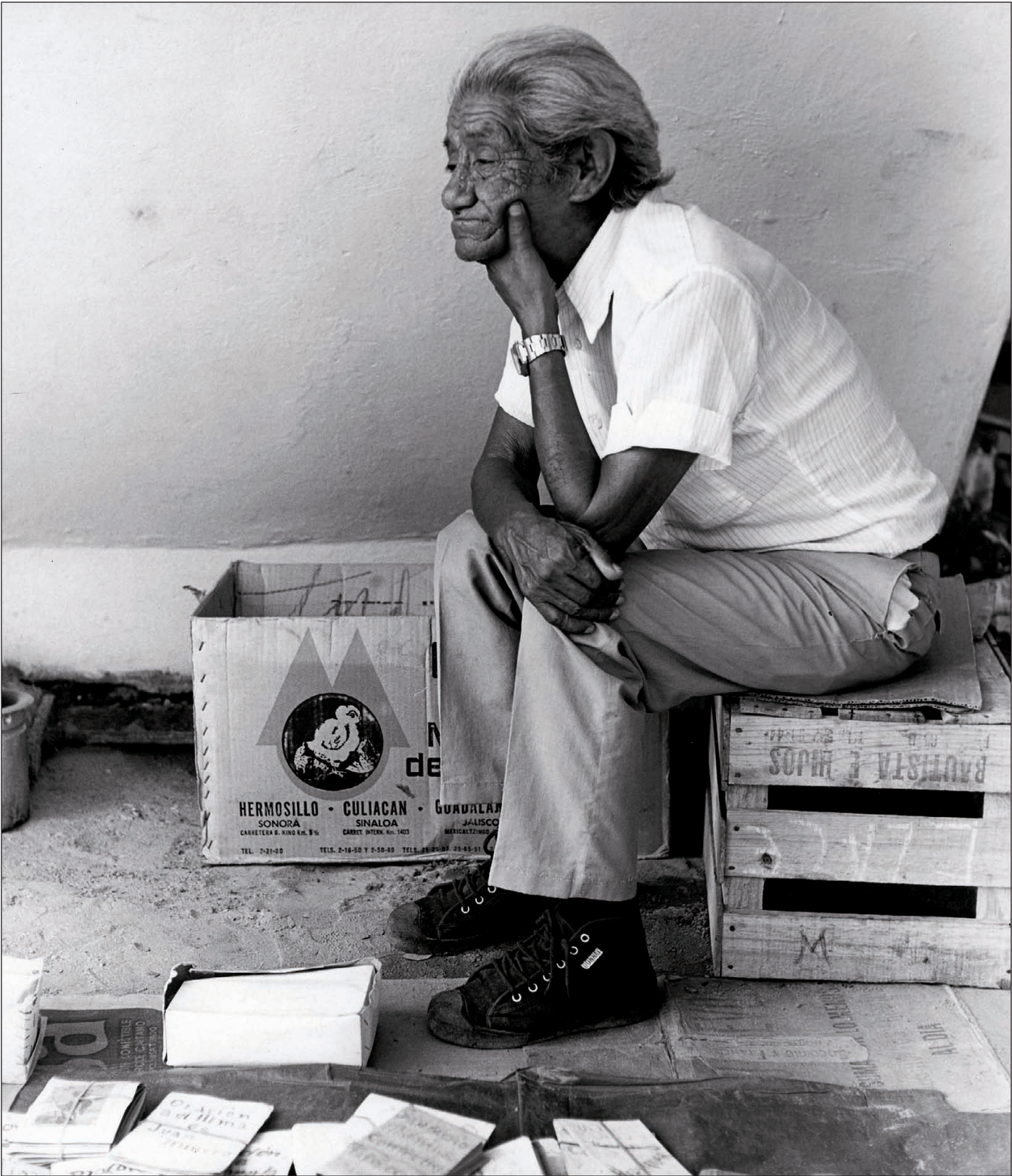
Conclusion

Fire Bird and Flint Bird, whatever their translation in Mayan, should probably take their places among the known principals at the site. They may very well be related and part of a “cormorant” lineage (but perhaps this is becoming a bit too speculative). At least one thing is clear, Chichen Itza is no longer a site without stelae. Since the more recent of the line of occupiers at the site seemed to have had very little regard for the significance of former written texts—as demonstrated here and with the aforementioned Osario fragments—one can only imagine what has been lost through destruction and/or reuse of hieroglyphic monuments. One can also imagine what telltale pieces are yet to be found.

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Palenque in 1979: Photos by Dale Hinkley (Part Two)











Neg. No. 10313, Courtesy of the Museum of New Mexico.

Morley's Diary, 1932

Editor's note

A leading archaeologist of his time, Sylvanus Griswold Morley was an Associate of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, the foremost organization excavating archaeological sites in Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras in the early part of the twentieth century. This diary continues his account of the Carnegie Institution's expedition to Calakmul begun on April 3, 1932. Morley's professional companions were his wife Frances, Karl Ruppert, John Bolles, and Gustav Strömsvik.

April 27 - Wednesday (cont)

I had wondered at giving such an exalted name as La Gloria to such a God-forsaken dump as we were now coming to, when we had gone through here more than a fortnight ago. But now I know. After 70 miles on White trucks on those shocking forest thoroughfares, in comparison this place could well be called "La Gloria". It is no less.

We got here at six even before Don Refugio Campos and his amiable family were up.

His fat assistant was about, however, and my first inquiry was whether any plataformas were in.

He replied they were just coming in at the moment, which was true. Several platforms each drawn by two mules could be seen coming up the track. I recognized our own plataforma, Roman. He is the head plataforma of the Montaña Co. which had brought us out from San Dimas.

Meanwhile Don Refugio was up and I had asked him what chance there would be of getting off at once for Kanasayab and he replied "very little". The platforms leave San Dimas coming this way about midnight, getting in about six or seven. They start back from here at 4 loaded with chicle, reaching San Dimas again between eleven and twelve. The purpose of this night travel is twofold first to avoid the great heat of the day and second to avoid the horse flies which almost eat the

mules alive at this time of year. Don Refugio thought however, that if Roman, the head plataforma, would agree to start back in an hour's time, the others would also. We needed 3 platforms in all. Each would carry 4 boxes, 3 kayaks and some miscellaneous equipment. Frances and I would ride on one, Gustav, Karl and John on another, Tarsisio, Arturo and Demetrio on the third.

Roman hesitated at first but when I offered him an extra tip of \$5. pesos apiece for each plataforma he said he would ask his companions and let me know after their breakfast. They ate in a nearby hut and after breakfast I saw him again and he said they had decided to go.

It was then 6:30 and I asked him when he would be ready and he said at eight, which was fair enough. Frances had breakfast prepared in the Campos kitchen and we thought we would be on our way again at 8:00 but this was not to be.

Eight, eight fifteen, and eight thirty came and no sign of the platforms.

At 8:30 I sent a youth – who turned out to be Roman's brother – down to Juarez, 1 kilometer distant and the punto de rieles (rail head) to find out what was wrong, and presently Roman himself came back with this boy saying the Estacionario at Juarez would not let the mules go because of the heat and flies. He suggested I go back to Juarez with him and see the Estacionario.

We walked back along the road which parallels the tramvia and presently reached a collection of a few huts, Juarez – the end of the 76 kilometer line from here to Kanasayab on the Champoton River, i.e. a shade under 50 miles.

Roman introduced me to the Estacionario who began to make the same excuses of heat and flies etc. The other two plataformas were there and joined this dismal chorus, but I too put up a strong talk. Finally I overcame the Estacionario's objections and he put the responsibility of the decision fairly up to Roman. And the latter began to wiggle. It became evident to me at once that all three plataformas had decided that propino or not they did not want to start back until later in the day and I saw I was beaten.

Four o'clock was the hour they usually started back and four o'clock was the hour they were going to start back today. Finally as a great concession Roman said they would start back at three. I asked him if he really meant it and he pulled out his watch to see that our times should agree, an empty gesture. It is now three as I write these lines and no mules, platforms or plataformas are anywhere in sight. Nor am I convinced there was any intention of leaving before 4. Very well then No hay salida temprana, no hay propino extra.

When it became evident that we could not budge the plataformas I returned to La Gloria with my bad news. This almost certainly will prevent our getting to Campeche tomorrow in time to make the train to Merida tomorrow afternoon.