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Once and Future Kings: Classic Maya Geopolitics and Mythic History on the Vase of the Initial Series from Uaxactun

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Almost all Classic (ca. AD 250–1000) southern lowland Maya inscriptions, whether on monuments or portable objects, focus on events that were either contemporaneous with the texts themselves or had taken place within a few generations. Yet a few exceptions make clear that the kings who commissioned such texts were keenly interested in more ancient history, and that they understood certain kinds of events in the distant past as foundational to their own authority. Such events included what are, to modern eyes, clearly mythological stories: cosmic battles or self-decapitations, carried out by supernatural beings tens of thousands or even millions of years before the centuries during which Maya hieroglyphic texts were produced (e.g., Carter 2014b:361-365; Stuart 2005:158-189). They also included the more plausible, yet nonetheless mythohistorical, deeds of apparently human rulers active in the Middle Preclassic (ca. 1000–400 BC) and Late Preclassic (ca. 400 BC–AD 250) periods. While stories of the mythic past certainly set precedents for the behavior of Classic rulers, many of whom traced their dynasties back to divine founders, accounts of Preclassic human rulers seem to have had special implications for how Classic Maya elites thought about the sociopolitical order in which they lived. A polychrome ceramic cylinder vessel—the so-called “Vase of the Initial Series”—excavated at Uaxactun by the Carnegie Institution of Washington, and now in the collection of Guatemala’s Museo Nacional de Antropología y Etnología, is interpreted here as an example of this second ancient

historical genre. It is further suggested that the vase was produced at the neighboring site of El Zotz (Figure 1). Possible implications of that fact and of the vessel’s hieroglyphic and representational content are considered in light of existing evidence about seventh-century southern lowland Maya geopolitics.

A number of Early and Late Classic inscriptions recount events said to have taken place in the Preclassic period. Such texts typically address certain kinds of acts by Preclassic divine kings, usually presenting them either as unique events foundational to Classic social order (e.g., the establishment of dynasties or courtly centers) or as acts which could be repeated or re-enacted by Classic kings (e.g., Long Count period-ending rites or temple dedications). For instance, the Tikal ruler Sihyaj Chan K’awiiil set his own celebration of the 9.0.10.0.0 half-katun ending in AD 445 in the context of calendrical rituals long past, including one conducted by an “overlord” (*kaloomte’*) whose undeciphered nominal glyph depicts a jaguar’s head and a “lord” or “maize kernel” sign with three sprouting leaves (Stuart 2011:3-4, 2012a:140). A dedicatory text from Palenque’s Temple XXI (AD 736) looks back to an earlier set of shrine dedications by a Late Preclassic king in 252 BC (Carter 2010:137, 2014b:361-364; Stuart and Stuart 2008:225-230). Another text from the same site records that a different ancient ruler “tied on his name, Ux Yop Hu’n (‘Three Leaf Paper’).” Though presented here as a historical personage, Ux Yop Hu’n is, as David Stuart (2012a) showed, the so-called

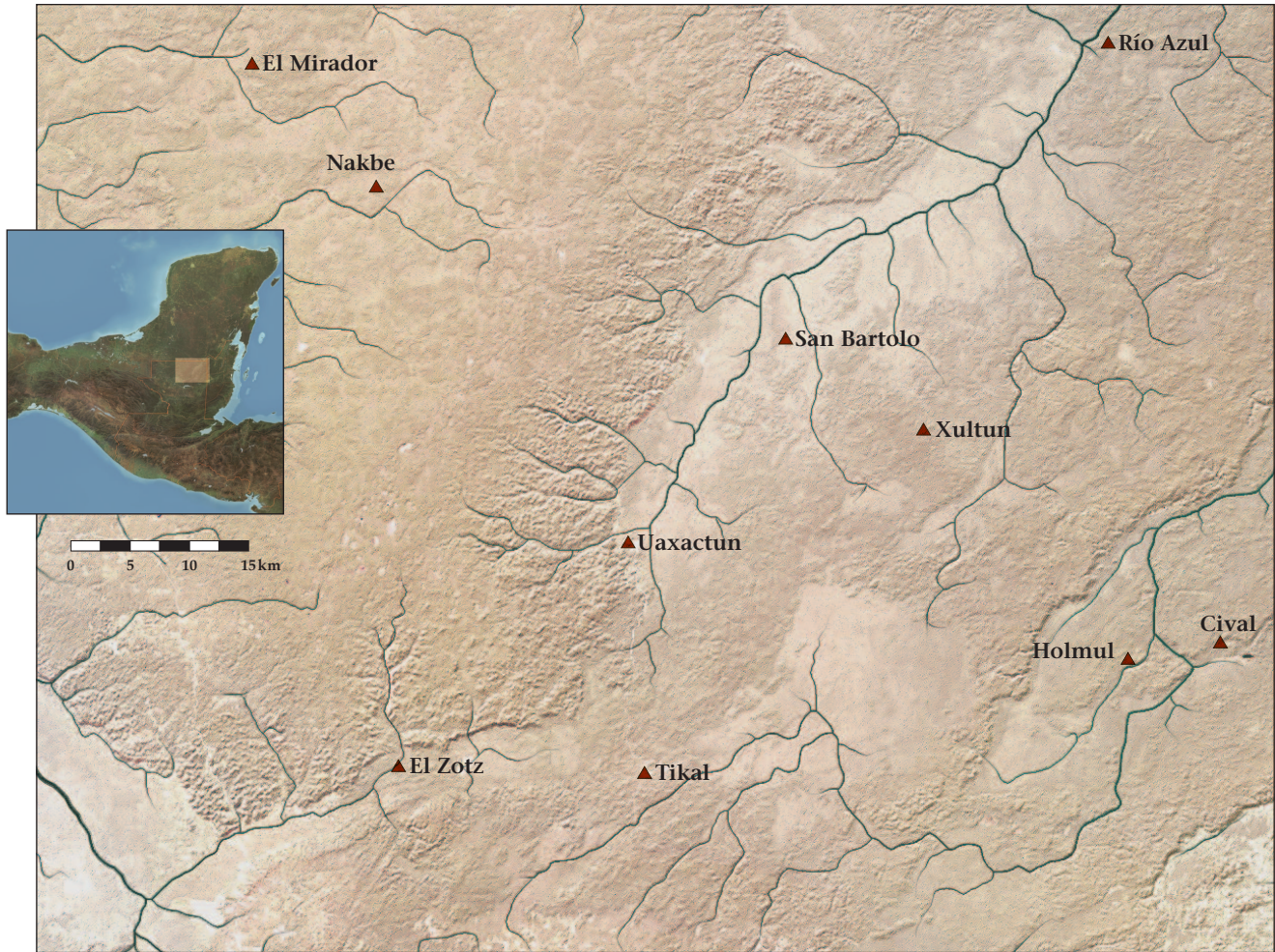


Figure 1. Uaxactun and El Zotz in their regional context (map courtesy of Precolumbia Mesoweb Press).

“Jester God”: the divine personification of the essence of *amate* bark paper, the royal headbands fashioned from it, and, by extension, rulership itself. In its narrative context, Ux Yop Hu’n’s act begins the practice, well attested for Palenque’s Classic rulers, of kings taking regnal names upon accession to the throne (*patwani u ?jelk’aba’ bolon tz’akbu ajaw*, “was made the name-changing of the many ordered lords” [see Stuart 2012a:124-125]). Like these and other Classic accounts of primordial history, the Vase of the Initial Series presents Preclassic lords as sources of moral and political legitimacy for royal practices current at the time the vase was produced. The vase is unique, however, in that its texts deal not just with the beginnings of royal dynasties or customs, but with the origins of geopolitical relationships among specific lowland Maya centers.

The Vase of the Initial Series

The Vase of the Initial Series was found in 1931, included with other funeral offerings in a crypt in the substructure

of Str. A-I, a pyramid in Group A of epicentral Uaxactun (Figure 2) excavated by Robert E. Smith of the Carnegie Institution of Washington (A. Smith 1932:2-6; R. Smith 1937). Str. A-1 consists of six successive pyramids, some with multiple construction phases, built over one another over several centuries. R. Smith (1937:223-224) dated the earliest pyramid (designated Pyramid A) on the basis of its architectural style to no later than the end of the fifth century AD, while the latest phase of the last structure (Pyramid F) was dated by its association with Stela 7 to about AD 810 (9.19.0.0.0 in the Long Count calendar).

The burial from which the Vase of the Initial Series was recovered belonged to the penultimate major construction stage, Pyramid E (Figure 3), which probably predates Pyramid F by two hundred years. Previous iterations of the building had faced north, onto the Main Plaza, but with the construction of Pyramid E its orientation shifted to the south, towards the elevated South Court (R. Smith 1937:209). Pyramid E may have lacked a roofed superstructure, since no traces of walls

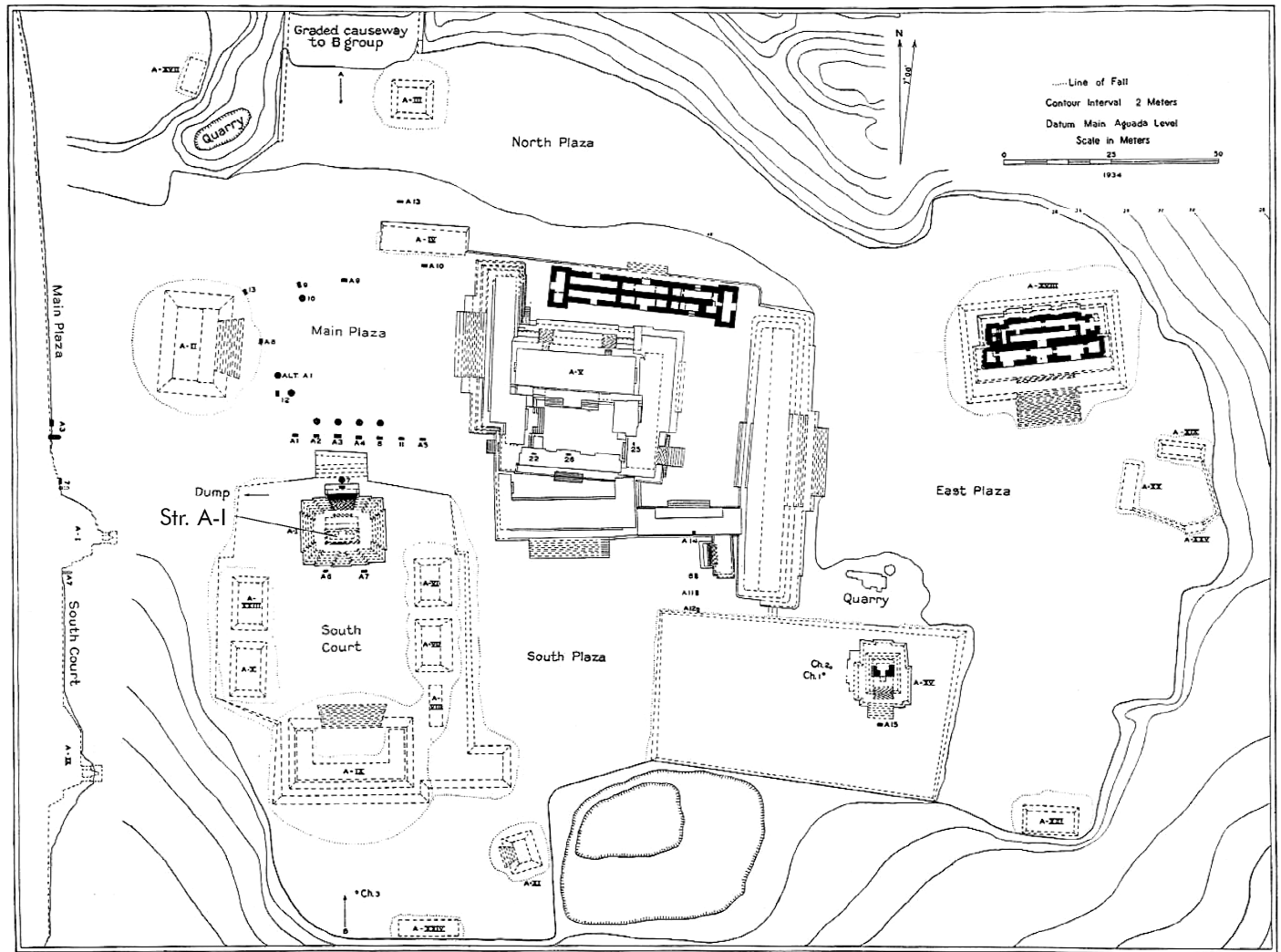


Figure 2. Plan and section of Group A at Uaxactun, from R. Smith (1937:Fig. 1). Courtesy of the Carnegie Institution of Washington.

or postholes were found; instead, a sunken, rectangular area in the uppermost of three terraces—5.02 meters from east to west by 1.37 meters from north to south, and about 30 centimeters deep—formed the evident spatial focus of ritual activity. The walls and floor of the sunken court were stuccoed and painted red, and the center of it showed signs of intense burning. Below the burned area, excavation revealed four spaces containing human remains and burial goods (Figure 4): two parallel crypts (Crypts I and II) oriented north–south; a third east–west crypt (Crypt III) connecting the southern ends of Crypts I and II; and a less well-defined space between Crypts I and II containing some human bones and ceramic vessels (Burial A10) and packed with reddish-brown earth. All three crypts contained polychrome ceramic vessels; in addition, a stingray spine and artifacts of jade, marine shell, deer antler, and turtle bone were recovered from Crypts I and II. The Vase of the Initial Series was placed just northeast of the head of the occupant of Crypt I, an adult male who had been laid out with his head to the

north (R. Smith 1937:205-209).

The vase itself (Figure 5) is a flat-bottomed, straight-walled cylinder intended, according to its dedicatory text, for the service of “fresh tree cacao” (*tzih te’el kakaw*). Its ceramic fabric is creamy white and finely textured. Its whole surface was prepared with cream-colored slip; the interior and base are otherwise undecorated, while the cream slip was left exposed here and there on the exterior as part of the decorative scheme. The painted exterior surface depicts a courtly ritual, wrapping around the whole vessel and rendered against a vivid red background (Figure 6). Its visual focus is on a ruler seated on a throne covered in jaguar hide. His headdress includes an agnathous feline head with volutes extending from the mouth. Behind him stand two attendants, one holding a ceremonial fan, the other wearing a long cloak and carrying a tridentate eccentric flint and a sacrificial bowl from which hang cloth or paper streamers. The seated ruler and the two attendants behind him were subject to some erosion over the centuries during

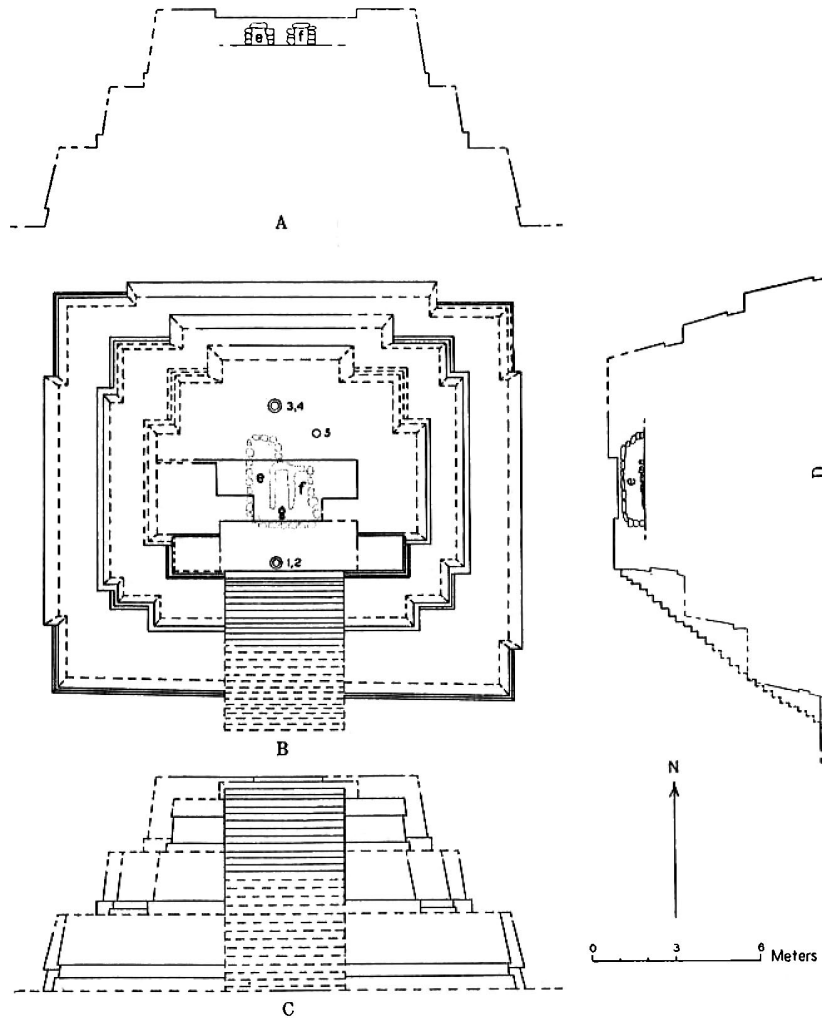


Figure 3. Plan and profiles of Uaxactun Str. A-1, Pyramid E, from R. Smith (1937:Fig. 7): (a) longitudinal section; (b) ground plan; (c) elevation; (d) transverse section; (e) Crypt I; (f) Crypt II; (g) Crypt III; (1-5) ceramic vessels buried in fill. Courtesy of the Carnegie Institution of Washington.

which the vase lay buried. It can still be said, however, that the shape of the second attendant's face suggests old age, and that his costume is consistent with the dress of sorcerers and sacrificers depicted on codex-style and other Late Classic vessels.

Facing the central king are two other lords, evidently subordinates, wearing similar costumes: mantles hanging long over the front of the body, feathered headdresses, and elaborate "Holmul Dancer" backracks. Named for their prominence in scenes of the dancing Maize God on red-and-orange-on-cream polychrome vessels from the area of Naranjo and Holmul, such backracks are well represented in depictions of royal costumes on Late Classic stone monuments (Coe 1978:94; Reents-Budet 1991:217-219). One lord carries a tridentate flint; the other holds a tall traveler's staff, indicating that he has come on a journey. Seated between the visiting lords is an anthropomorphic jaguar holding up two flared-walled bowls placed lip to lip and bound with

a strip of cloth. Such bowls were widely used to hold mortuary and dedicatory offerings, including precious substances, sacrificed animals, and human body parts. A torch tied to the jaguar's back, an element connected in other historical and mythological scenes to the immolation of captives, indicates that the animal is itself destined for sacrifice.

The vase bears five hieroglyphic inscriptions: a circumferential rim text describing the vessel's dedication and naming its owner; a long text of 17 glyph blocks disposed in three vertical columns and containing the Initial Series date from which the vessel takes its name; and three brief captions naming characters in the presentation scene. At the time of its discovery, the long inscription represented the second known Initial Series in a ceramic text, and the only complete one; even now, more than eighty years later, Long Count dates in inscriptions on ceramics are not much better attested. Of the other captions in the scene, the one between the two

courtly attendants is too damaged to read, but the two naming the visiting lords are legible.

Previous work

From the moment of its discovery, the Vase of the Initial Series attracted scholarly interest for the aesthetic quality of its painting and the informational content of its texts. Yet a review of the literature shows that neither the messages its images and inscriptions convey, nor the social and historical contexts in which those messages mattered, have hitherto been well understood. The ceramic contents of the Str. A-1 tombs were published straightaway (A. Smith 1932), before a report on the rest of the structure had been prepared, and even before the building itself had been fully excavated. Of the vessels from the tombs, only the Vase of the Initial Series was considered sufficiently important to merit a separate published study. This was written by Sylvanus Morley, and, in keeping with his calendrical interests and the state of epigraphic knowledge at the time,

focuses almost entirely on the Initial Series portion of the long text (Morley 1932). Morley had not seen the vase firsthand and relied on photographs and on three manual illustrations: a black and white rollout drawing of the exterior surface by Antonio Tejada Hijo, along with two watercolor paintings by Mary Louise Baker, one a rollout and the other a perspective view (A. Smith 1932:13, Pls. 4 and 5).

The principal problem which occupied Morley’s attention was the evident mismatch between the Long Count and Calendar Round dates of the main text. As illustrated by Baker, the Long Count date with which the inscription opens is the k’atun ending 7.5.0.0.0 (December 29, 256 BC), preceding the vessel’s production by more than eight hundred years. This date is somewhat earlier than that of the earliest known Mesoamerican monument with a Long Count date, Takalik Abaj Stela 2, whose damaged inscription was carved sometime between 7.6.0.0.0 (September 15, 236 BC) and 7.16.19.17.19 (July 19, 19 BC; see Graham et al. 1978:90-91). Meanwhile, Baker rendered the Calendar Round date following the Initial Series as 8 Ajaw 13 K’ank’in, whereas the expected, correct date for 7.5.0.0.0 would have been 13 Ajaw 3 Sek.

Morley accepted Baker’s illustration of the Long Count date, but, while noting that those who had seen the vase in person favored Baker’s interpretation, he believed from his own examination of the photographs that the Calendar Round date as written was 13 Ajaw 13 K’ank’in rather than 8 Ajaw 13 K’ank’in (Morley 1932:15). The problem was that 13 Ajaw 13 K’ank’in was still not the expected Calendar Round date for 7.5.0.0.0. Compounding this problem was the fact that, in 1932, no contemporaneous Long Count date earlier than 8.14.3.1.12 (September 18, AD 320, on the Tikal-area Leyden Plaque) was universally accepted, while the earliest known retrospective date on a Maya monument was 8.5.18.4.0 (March 19, AD 158, on Naranjo Stela 25). Working in highland Guatemala, Walter Lehmann had previously excavated, documented, and correctly identified the dates of two monuments from bak’tun 7—Stela 1 from El Baúl (7.19.7.8.12, or May 6, AD 29) and Stela 2 from Colomba (on which only the bak’tun coefficient of 7 survives)—but these dates remained controversial until an article by Michael Coe (1959) settled the question, and Morley was either unaware of Lehmann’s claims or did not accept them (see Lehmann 1926:175-176; Waterman 1929:183, 186). Considering 7.5.0.0.0 far too early for even a plausible retrospective date, Morley suggested what seemed to him the most parsimonious explanation: that the ancient scribe had attempted to record 8.5.0.0.0 12 Ajaw 13 K’ank’in, but that he had left a dot out of the coefficient in the bak’tuns place (changing 8.5.0.0.0 to 7.5.0.0.0) and added an extra one to the tzolk’in date (writing 13 Ajaw instead of 12 Ajaw). Even the later date, Morley recognized, was too early to be

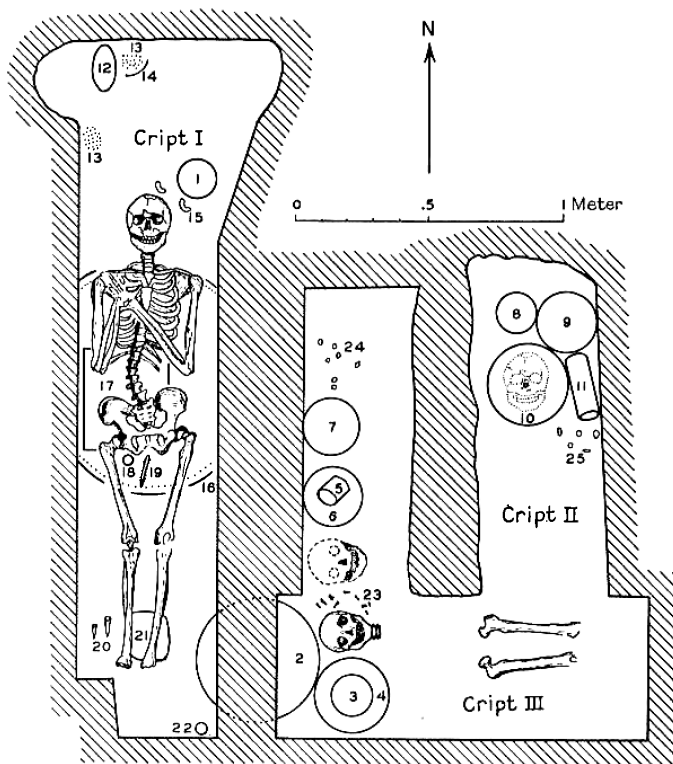


Figure 4. Crypts in Uaxactun Str. A-1, Pyramid E, from R. Smith (1937:Fig. 8): (1–11) ceramic vessels; (12) fragmentary skull of small mammal; (13) carved pieces of bone, possibly beads; (14) fragment of ceramic vessel; (15) marine shells; (16) hole below charred wood; (17) area of charred wood underlying skeleton in Crypt I; (18) large jade bead; (19) stingray spine; (20) deer antlers; (21) turtle bone; (22) jade bead; (23) human teeth; (24) iron oxide; (25) jade and shell ornaments. Courtesy of the Carnegie Institution of Washington.

contemporaneous with the vessel painting, which he believed on stylistic grounds to be no earlier than about 9.15.0.0.0 (AD 731) (Morley 1932:16-17).

A comparison of Baker's illustrations to a photograph of the inscription (Figure 7) confirms that she was in fact correct about both the Long Count and the Calendar Round dates. Concurring with Morley that these anomalous dates represented errors on the part of the ancient scribe, and pointing as well to unspecified "errors in details of glyphs," J. Eric S. Thompson argued that the artist had possessed only limited knowledge of the Classic Maya script and calendar alike: he was not part of the better-educated elite responsible for the production of the stone monuments with (correct) Long Count dates, nor did he base his composition on a paper original prepared by such a person (Thompson 1962:17). In his re-analysis of the vase, George Kubler (1977:17) offered a different interpretation. He proposed that the discrepancy between the two dates could be accounted for if the artist who painted the vessel had intentionally combined an ancient Long Count date (7.5.0.0.0) with a Calendar Round position (8 Ajaw 13 K'ank'in) corresponding to a more recent event. Since the only quarter-k'atun ending in the Classic period which occurred on that Calendar Round date was 9.5.0.0.0 (July 6, AD 534), Kubler suggested that the inscription alluded to this second period ending. At the same time, he thought for reasons of style that 9.5.0.0.0 was far too early for the actual production of the vase, which he considered a late eighth-century work (Kubler 1977:17).

Following Kubler's work, the Vase of the Initial Series received only limited scholarly attention. Kubler's proposed date for the piece won some acceptance, notably by Juan Antonio Valdés and Federico Fahsen, who identified the paramount figure depicted on the vase as a mid- to late eighth-century ruler of Uaxactun with the title of *Chik'in Chakte'* (Valdés and Fahsen 1993:45, 2004:145).¹ Estella Weiss-Krejci (2011:38-39) interpreted the scene on the vessel as potentially a rite of exhumation and reburial in Str. A-1 itself. She favored a Tepeu I date for its production, but did not attempt to link the vase to historical rulers at Uaxactun or elsewhere.

Provenance and Dating: Paleographic and Radiocarbon Evidence

More recently, the Vase of the Initial Series received some renewed attention as a result of the activities of the El Zotz Archaeological Project (e.g., Carter et al. n.d.; Houston 2014). This is because, although interred at Uaxactun, the vase was evidently produced by a scribal atelier which was active in the El Zotz

¹ In fact, the reference in the long text on the vase is to an *elk'in kaloomte'* ("eastern overlord"), not an *ochik'in kaloomte'* ("western overlord," the correct reading of the title previously read *chik'in chakte'*).



Figure 5. The Vase of the Initial Series. Photograph © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM # 58-34-20/70120 (digital file # CI020046).

kingdom to the southwest during the Tepeu I ceramic phase (defined as the Mo' phase at El Zotz, ca. AD 550-650; Walker 2009:296). Such a date is consistent with Morley's (1937:230-233) proposal (cf. Kubler 1977:15, 18, 21). The El Zotz workshop produced round-sided bowls, cylindrical vases, and, more rarely, wide serving plates (e.g., Doyle and Carter 2010:106), with figures and hieroglyphs painted on red, yellow, or cream backgrounds. Often, the underlying cream backgrounds of these vessels are nearly covered over by fields of vibrant red on which texts and images are painted in black and other colors, with the original cream left—by the careful omission of paint or the use of resist techniques—to highlight a few design elements. More than thirty El Zotz-style vessels are known to scholars, either in museums or private collections, and they are on the whole well documented (Houston 2008:3-5). Yet almost all of these were excavated illegally, either at El Zotz or other sites; the only two complete examples recovered



Figure 6. Rollout painting of the Vase of the Initial Series by Mary Louise Baker. Image courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

in legitimate, scientific excavations are Uaxactun’s Vase of the Initial Series and a yellow-background drinking vessel excavated in an outlying residential complex at El Peru-Waka’ (Eppich 2011:293).

Several El Zotz-style vessels bear only dedicatory texts above plain fields of color or repeating, geometric motifs. More commonly, they depict bizarre *wahy* beings, perhaps malicious spirits or personified diseases, although deities, other supernatural entities, and occasionally human beings are also represented (Houston 2008:4). Although the school probably lasted considerably less than a century (Houston 2014), dedicatory texts on its vessels name no fewer than nine different owners, at least five of whom are attributed the titles of El Zotz’s royal dynasty: *Pa’chan ajaw* (“Fortified Sky lord”), *k’uhul Pa’chan ajaw* (“holy Fortified Sky lord”), and an Emblem Glyph whose main sign is a logogram depicting an earspool. Both the Pa’chan and “Earspool” Emblem Glyphs are shared with the kings of Yaxchilan, although a historical link between the two dynasties has yet to be identified. Monuments from El Zotz make it clear that the site was ruled by Pa’chan and “Earspool” kings (Houston et al. 2006:9-11), while kings of Uaxactun used a still-undeciphered title in place of a typical Emblem Glyph (Houston 2014). The Pa’chan workshop’s center of production can thus be confidently placed in the El Zotz kingdom, not at Uaxactun.

Even when their owners’ names are not written or preserved, El Zotz-style vessels can be recognized by their visual style, especially that of their hieroglyphic texts. Almost ubiquitous among vessels of this school

is the use in their dedicatory inscriptions of the spelling **PA’CHAN-na** to render, not *Pa’chan*, but the third person singular ergative pronoun *u* in *u jaay*, “his vessel” (Houston 2008:4) The motivation behind the substitution remains mysterious, but it is limited to El Zotz-style ceramics.² Other scribal choices typical of the El Zotz school are a fondness for zoomorphic and anthropomorphic head variants for signs in their dedicatory sequences and a tendency to break off those sequences just where one would expect to see the names of the vessel owners.

Although its subject matter is mythic history rather than the usual parade of *wahy* beings, the color scheme of the Vase of the Initial Series—including the use of resist painting in the black-on-red-on-cream glyphs of the dedicatory text—is characteristic of the Pa’chan artistic school. The rim text includes typically El Zotz-style head variants for logograms, syllabograms, and morphosyllabic signs, including a deer’s-head character for **chi** (derived from logographic **CHIJ**, “deer”), a bat’s-head sign for **tz’i** (see MacLeod and Reents-Budet 1994:125) and a human-head variant of **U** depicting a

² Because most El Zotz-style vessels using this idiosyncratic spelling pair *u jaay*, “his vessel,” with *yuk’ib*, “his drinking-instrument,” it is tempting to read those passages as “the Pa’chan vessel, his drinking-instrument.” The usual addition of **-na** to **PA’CHAN** strengthens the appeal of such a translation. Yet the text on the vessel photographed by Nicholas Hellmuth that belonged to a *bolon chan k’in* person (see below) lacks *yuk’ib* and moves straight from *u jaay* to the owner’s name or title. Only by reading **PA’CHAN-na** as *u* can grammatical sense be made of this text.

beaten captive with a closed, swollen eye. The clearest paleographic link with El Zotz, of course, is the use of PA'CHAN-na for U. These clues are buttressed by onomastic evidence: although the dedication does not include a royal Emblem Glyph, it does provide one name or title of the owner, *bolon chan k'in* (perhaps "Nine" or



Figure 7. The long passage on the Vase of the Initial Series. Photograph © Stephen D. Houston.

"Many Celestial Suns;" Figure 8a). This same appellation appears on two other Pa'chan-style polychrome vessels (Kerr 1989:126 [K1901]; Kerr 1994:635 [K4988]) which exhibit the same color scheme and decorative techniques as the Vase of the Initial Series, and on a third El Zotz-style vessel photographed in black and white by Nicholas Hellmuth (Figure 8b-d). In the Hellmuth photograph, *bolon chan k'in* follows the name and Emblem Glyph of a Pa'chan king, suggesting that it may be a title rather than a personal name; on the other hand, on one of the two vessels photographed by Kerr (K4988), it precedes another name or title, while on the other (K1901), it stands alone. Whether or not *bolon chan k'in* denotes the same person in all four instances, the conclusion that the Vase of the Initial Series was crafted under the patronage of a lord of El Zotz is almost unavoidable.

Kubler's proposed Tepeu II date for the vase relied on stylistic evidence from the painted scene, in that some of the ritual paraphernalia depicted, like the ceremonial fan borne by the attendant and the tridentate flints held by two other characters, appeared in monumental art in the mural paintings of Str. 1 at Bonampak (ca. AD 791) and on stone monuments at Naranjo, Piedras Negras, Tikal, Xcalumkin, and Yaxchilan between ca. AD 711 and 800 (Kubler 1977:18). He likewise dated the polychrome plate found in the narrow passage joining Vaults I and II of the Str. A-1 burial to Tepeu II because of similarities he perceived between the postures and banded staffs of the characters thereon and depictions of royal rituals on eighth-century monuments published by Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1950:21, 26, 99).

Contrary to Kubler's interpretation of their pictorial styles, paleographic evidence points to a Tepeu I date for both vessels. Undisputedly Tepeu I vessels excavated at Uaxactun, and vessels from contemporaneous phases at Tikal and El Zotz, show the same preference for head variants in dedicatory texts, deployed at close to one character per glyph block, evident on the Vase of the Initial Series (Figure 9). Even though the plate bears strings of pseudoglyphs around the perimeter of its interior instead of a legible hieroglyphic text, these too fit into Tepeu I scribal trends, including the use and shape of the "death" motifs separating clusters of pseudoglyphs from one another. A fragment of a polychrome vessel, recovered from the sub-floor fill of a building in the royal palace of El Zotz, mentions a holy Pa'chan lord in its dedicatory text. The construction phase was carbon dated to AD 540-650 (1490 ± BP), consistent with other associated Mo'-phase ceramic material (Carter et al. n.d.; Houston 2014). The implication is that the whole ceramic oeuvre of the distinctive Pa'chan school as defined here, and the Vase of the Initial Series in particular, dates to no later than the seventh century AD.

Kubler's (1977:18-23) premise that the earliest instances of a representational element on securely dated, public monuments provide a *terminus post quem* for ceramic vessels or other portable objects on which it also



Figure 8. Instances of the *bolon chan k'in* name or title on El Zotz-style vessels: (a) *bolon chan k'in* on the Vase of the Initial Series; (b) name and titles of a *Pa'chan* king, including *bolon chan k'in*, on an unprovenanced ceramic vessel (drawing by the author after a photograph by Nicholas Hellmuth in the collection of Dumbarton Oaks); (c) *bolon chan k'in* on an unprovenanced vessel (drawing by the author after a photograph by Justin Kerr [K1901]); (d) *bolon chan k'in* and a further name or title on an unprovenanced vessel (drawing by the author after a photograph by Justin Kerr [K4988]). Image (a) courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

appears is intuitively appealing, but is not borne out by the evidence from Maya art history. Artistic developments in the central and southeastern Maya lowlands at the end of the Late Classic period, for instance, provide a strong counterexample. Commencing at the end of the

eighth century AD (e.g., on Stela 1 from Piedra Quebrada), stone monuments at sites in that area depicted relatively naturalistic tableaux of courtly life and dialogue among allied lords. Stylistically, these scenes departed sharply from earlier conventions governing royal stelae, which,

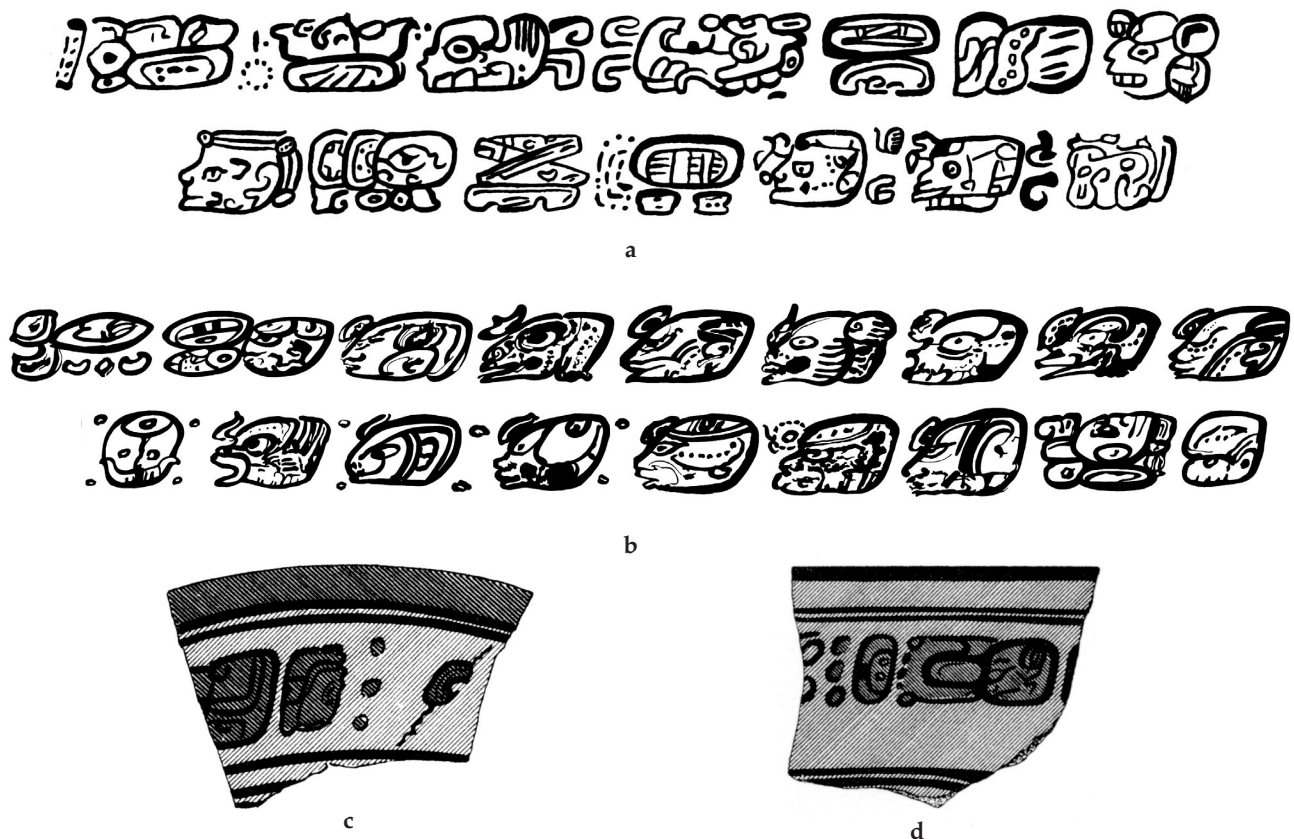


Figure 9. Hieroglyphic and pseudoglyphic texts on vessels from the Tepeu I or contemporaneous ceramic phases: (a) Tepeu I polychrome bowl excavated at Uaxactun (R. Smith 1955:Fig. 80d); (b) unprovenanced ceramic plate in the El Zotz style, ca. AD 550–650 (drawing by the author); (c) Tepeu I polychrome dish excavated at Uaxactun (R. Smith 1955:Fig. 36a.10); (d) Tepeu I polychrome dish excavated at Uaxactun (R. Smith 1955:2:Fig. 36a.11). Images courtesy of the Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University.

albeit with considerable local variation, called for kings to be shown carrying out period-ending rituals while wearing elaborate ceremonial attire. At the same time, the new style drew for its content and layout on the long-standing traditions of similar scenes on seventh- and eighth-century polychrome ceramic vases (Carter 2014a:168). Clearly, representational conventions did not change at the same rate in every medium, and painted drinking vases provided more scope for experimentation and rapid change at many sites than period-ending stelae did. Thus, the temporal lag between the depictions of elements like tridentate eccentric flints and ceremonial fans on seventh-century ceramic vessels—of which the Vase of the Initial Series is not the only example—and their appearance in monumental art in the eighth century can be explained by the different social contexts in which the two media were produced and viewed. Seen in this light, the style of the scene on the vase does not necessarily point to a later date for its production than does the style of the dedicatory text.

Exegesis

By contrast to the dedicatory text, the inscriptions accompanying the scene on the Vase of the Initial Series (Figure 10) have no obvious connections to El Zotz or the Pa'chan dynasty. Instead, they refer to people associated with the city of Calakmul and, at least potentially, to the powerful Kan dynasty. Beginning in the mid-sixth century AD, Kan kings contended for hegemony over the southern Maya lowlands with the Mut kings of El Zotz's and Uaxactun's massive neighbor, Tikal (Martin and Grube 1994). Originally based at the site of Dzibanche, in present-day Quintana Roo, the Kan court moved southwest to Calakmul in AD 635 under a king known to epigraphers as Yuknoom "Head" (Grube 2004; Martin 2005:5-6; Stuart 2012b; Velásquez García 2005:2-3).

Following the Long Count and Calendar Round dates in the long text on the Vase of the Initial Series is a description of a period-ending ritual: **K'AL-TUUN-ni** (Figure 10a). Since the name of the protagonist follows, this must be an underspelling for *u k'altuun* ("it is his stone-binding") or *u k'alaw tuun* ("he binds the stone"). That protagonist's name, presumably belonging to the seated figure at the center of the scene, includes the glyph **K'UHUL** ("holy"); a human-face sign with an axe infixed in the eye, probably a conflation of **AJAW** ("lord") with another sign; and finally the **KAN** ("snake") logogram. This epithet is not the Kan dynastic title *k'uhul Kan ajaw* ("holy Snake lord"), but, as discussed below, it may allude to the Kan royal line. Rather than an Emblem Glyph, this king—"Holy Lord ... Snake," a provisional designation pending a more secure reading of the human-face conflation—takes the title *elk'in kaloomte'* ("eastern overlord").

Kaloomte' was the most exalted title of Classic Maya

lordship, applied to regional hegemon to whom other kings owed allegiance—and, on occasion, to members of their families. Rarely seen in the hieroglyphic corpus, *elk'in kaloomte'* contrasts with the *ochik'in kaloomte'* ("western overlord") title used in the Late Classic period by the kings of sites including Tikal, Copan, and Yaxchilan, which may itself derive from connections with the Central Mexican metropolis of Teotihuacan. Kan kings claimed the dignity of *kaloomte'* for themselves and their distant forebears. Vessels belonging to the "Painted King List" group—a congeries of codex-style vessels (see Coe 1978:16; Reents-Budet et al. 2010) produced in the Mirador Basin in the late seventh or early eighth century AD—bear texts, copied from a single original, listing as many as eighteen generations of mythohistorical Kan kings (Carter 2014b:350-351; Martin 1997). These vessels assign two of those kings

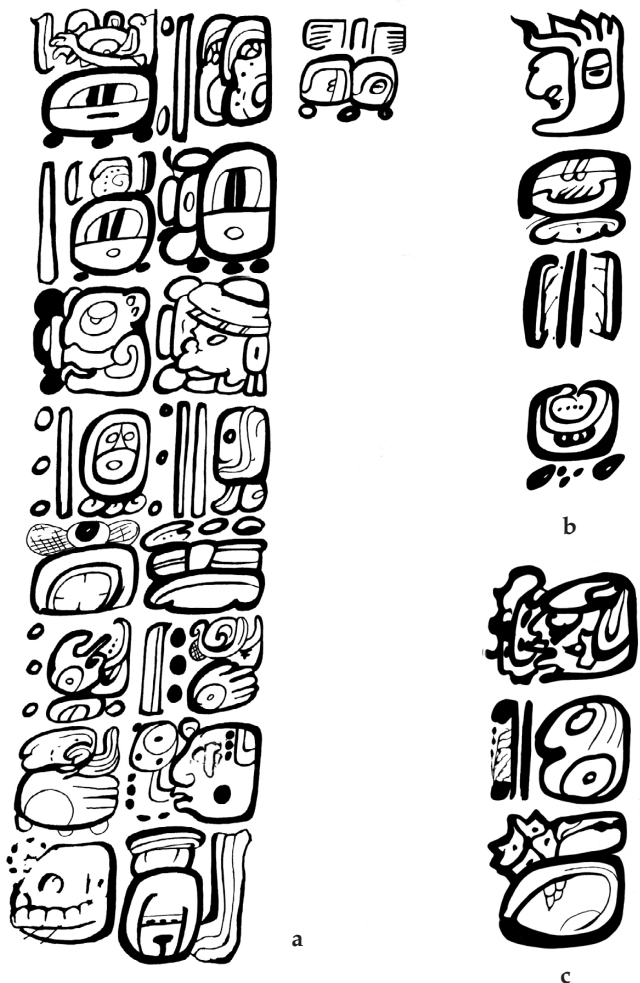


Figure 10. Captions from the mythohistorical scene on the Vase of the Initial Series: (a) long text recording the date 7.5.0.0 8 Ajaw 13 K'ank'in and naming "Holy Lord ... Snake," the eastern *kaloomte'*; (b) nominal caption of *K'uk'ul Kan*, the *sajal*; (c) nominal caption of *Yax Ajaw*, he of *Chik Nahb*. Drawings by the author after photographs by Stephen D. Houston.

the *kaloomte'* title, but without a directional modifier. In the Classic period, not only Kan kings but also ladies of the Kan family who married into ruling houses of other sites sometimes used the title as well, as at El Peru-Waka' and La Corona (Martin 2008:2). The Kan princess Uuh Chan Lem, who married king Itzamnaaj Bahlam III of Yaxchilan, is called an *elk'in kaloomte'* in inscriptions commissioned by her son Yaxuun Bahlam IV. Besides its appearance on the Vase of the Initial Series, *elk'in kaloomte'* as applied to male rulers is vanishingly rare, although it is attested once on Stela 9 from Lamanai (AD 625; Grube and Martin 2004). Given its use at Lamanai and the eastern origins of the Kan dynasty, the title seems literally to denote overlordship in the east of the Maya world; it is exotic to the central lowlands, including the area around Tikal.

The names and titles of the two subordinate nobles standing in front of "Holy Lord ... Snake" are interesting in their own right. The one in front, K'uk' Kan or K'uk'ul Kan ("Quetzal Snake") is the *sajal* or local governor of an unspecified territory (Figure 10b). As Stephen Houston pointed out, this constitutes both an example of homophony in the hieroglyphic script—since KAN ("snake," "sky," and "four") is here spelled with the "sky" instead of the "snake" logogram—and an extremely rare Classic instance of the name K'uk'ulkan, which by the Terminal Classic and Postclassic periods had come to denote Maya versions of a celestial deity important throughout Mesoamerica (Houston 1984:799-800; Taube 1992:136-140). The ophidian sense of his name is confirmed by K'uk'ul Kan's backrack, which displays a feathered serpent with a quetzal's head. Behind K'uk'ul Kan stands Yax Ajaw ("First Lord"), who is described as *Aj Chiik Nahb*, "He of Chiik Nahb" (Figure 10c). Chiik Nahb, "Coati Pool," denotes the city of Calakmul or a precinct thereof (Stuart and Houston 1994:28-29; Tokovinine 2007:21). Yax Ajaw's headdress prominently features a spotted cat's head with a bundle of plumes stuffed in its mouth, a costume element favored in sixth- and seventh-century Maya portraiture by people bearing the title of *sak wahyias*. Poorly understood but widespread in inscriptions from northern Guatemala and southern Campeche, *sak wahyias* almost always denotes elites who were in some way part of the Kan dynasty's sphere of influence (Martin 2003:44, n. 48).

All three characters whose name phrases survive thus confirm and extend an onomastic pattern already discernible in other Classic inscriptions dealing with the Preclassic past. Historical kings' names tend to be sentences about gods or noun phrases derived from social roles, animals, or things (Colas 2004a, 2004b, cited in Wichmann 2006:280). By contrast, the names of those ancient kings whose reported acts set precedents for Classic monarchs tend to refer to the basic markers of rulership, such as royal headbands (in the case of Ux Yop Hu'n and a character with a related name whose

celebration of a k'atun ending sometime before AD 317 is retrospectively recorded on Tikal Stela 31 [AD 445; see Stuart 2004:219]), bloodletters (Palenque's U Kokan Kan, "The Spine of the Snake"), and the scaffolds supporting royal thrones (Yax Ehb Xook, "First Stairs Shark," who founded Tikal's Mut dynasty around the end of the first century AD [Martin and Grube 2008:27]). Such names may or may not have been borne in life by real people, but they were certainly felt by later generations to be appropriate for kings who had established royal dynasties and traditions. The names on the Vase of the Initial Series are of the same kind. K'uk'ul Kan's name is that of a god or culture hero, while Yax Ajaw *Aj Chiik Nahb* could hardly be more transparent in describing that person as the first ruler of Calakmul. Meanwhile, their overlord's name seems especially significant: "Holy Lord ... Snake" may allude to the structure of the Kan dynastic title and the name of the royal line, a possibility strengthened by his title of "eastern overlord" and his suzerainty over the lord of Calakmul. The name "Holy Lord ... Snake" does not, it should be noted, find an obvious match in the Painted King List. None of the names from the list begin with *k'uhul*, "holy," and the only one which includes *kan*, "snake" (U K'ay Kan, "The Song of the Snake") differs substantially from "Holy Lord ... Snake" in its structure and content. If "Holy Lord ... Snake" does denote any of these ancient kings, it must do so as a second name or an honorific title. Supporting this possibility is the fact that names beginning with *k'uhul* are unattested, or nearly so, not just in the Painted King List but in the Classic hieroglyphic corpus generally.

Whether or not the scribe who painted the Vase of the Initial Series identified "Holy Lord ... Snake" with another Preclassic Kan monarch, his treatment of the date in the long text is consistent with the intellectual culture of the Kan royal court in the seventh century AD. The Painted King List includes numerous Calendar Round dates for royal accessions which are mathematically impossible in the standard correlation between the tzolk'in and haab calendars and represent multiple nonstandard correlations rather than the consistent application of a single alternative system. These dates were likely manipulated for numerological or ritual reasons destined to remain obscure to epigraphers. Since previous attempts to explain the mismatched Long Count and Calendar Round dates on the Vase of the Initial Series by reference to period endings temporally proximate to the vase's inferred date of production have not been convincing, the most plausible explanation—if not the most satisfying one—may simply be that the Calendar Round date was dictated by similar considerations.

The Vase in Historical and Anthropological Context

Like other prestige goods whose production required both technical skill and mastery of esoteric scribal,

religious, and historical knowledge, polychrome drinking vessels with hieroglyphic inscriptions like the Vase of the Initial Series were probably produced by elite artisans and circulated primarily through gifting in ritualized contexts like feasting and tribute presentation (e.g., Foias 2007:173-183; Halperin and Foias 2010:394-395; LeCount 2001:931-939). Because such vessels tended to move through networks of personal relationships among rulers and other members of the elite, rather than through the broader and more anonymous channels of market exchange through which most Maya ceramics may have traveled (Masson and Freidel 2013:203-221), their distribution in the archaeological record permits some educated inferences about the nature and extent of those connections. Of course, the presence of a pot made by one “palace school” at another court’s capital need not imply a long-lasting alliance between the two kingdoms: other potential explanations include regifting, trade, heirlooming, tomb robbery, and tribute extraction in the context of military conflict (Stuart 1989:158). One can only speculate, for instance, about the complicated channels by which a carved jade belt ornament produced at Piedras Negras in AD 699 came to be deposited in the great cenote of Chichen Itza by that site’s Terminal Classic inhabitants (Houston 2010:275; Proskouriakoff 1974:205). Yet in a case like that of the Uaxactun vase, produced at a neighboring center and interred in a royal tomb so soon after its production that the tomb’s occupant may well have been its first owner at Uaxactun, one is on firmer ground in suggesting that the vessel was a gift from a king or lesser lord of the Pa’chan court. The implications of that gift, in the context of sixth- and seventh-century Classic Maya geopolitics, are considered here.

At the time the Vase of the Initial Series was painted, the Pa’chan kingdom—like the Waka’ polity based at the site of El Peru to the west—was part of an alliance network headed by the Kan dynasty. The Kan court’s relocation to Calakmul in AD 635 may have served geopolitical ends, bringing the royal court closer both to its enemies at Tikal and to crucial vassal polities in northern Peten and southern Campeche. At the same time, the move must have been politically complicated: Calakmul was already an ancient and prosperous city, ruled since no later than AD 411 by lords of a different line whose undeciphered dynastic title is written with a bat’s-head logogram (Martin 2005:6-7). This family did not disappear with the arrival of the Kan lords, since kings using the same “Bat” title asserted their authority at Calakmul and nearby Oxpemul in the mid-eighth century AD, after the golden age of the Kan court had come to an end (Grube 2005; Martin 2005:5-9). Like Yax Ajaw on the Initial Series vase, Yuknoom “Head,” who oversaw the AD 635 move, is described in one inscription as “He of Chiik Nahb,” but it remains unclear whether he was born at Calakmul or acquired the epithet by

moving his court there (see Tokovinine 2007:20).

Connections between El Zotz and the Kan hegemony may date back to at least the mid-sixth century. A wooden lintel from that period, reprovencened by Ian Graham to a pyramid at El Zotz (Houston et al. 2006:9), portrays a Pa’chan ruler and names his parents: an “Earspool” king and a lady with the title of *sak wahyias*. In the absence of explicit hieroglyphic records, evidence for a Kan-Pa’chan alliance in the seventh century, when the Vase of the Initial Series was painted, is circumstantial yet persuasive. An El Zotz-style vessel buried in an elite tomb in an outlying residential group at El Peru-Waka’ points to friendly relations between the Pa’chan and Waka’ polities, with the latter a close and potent ally of the Kan kingdom (Freidel et al. 2007:71; Guenter 2005; Martin and Grube 1994:14-15). Ambitious royal building projects in the site epicenter testify that El Zotz’s own elites flourished during the “hiatus” period at Tikal (AD 562-692). During this period, following a military defeat by a Kan-led coalition, Tikal’s kings erected no known stelae and found themselves alternately at war with and submissive to Kan rulers, while internal conflict within the royal family led to the foundation of a rival Mut kingdom at Dos Pilas in the mid-seventh century (Houston 1993:97-110; Martin 2003:23-30). The Dos Pilas kingdom was brought under Kan suzerainty in short order, and at least one Tikal king—“Animal Skull,” who was in office by AD 593 and may have reigned until as late as 628—may also have been a Kan vassal (Martin 2003:25; Martin and Grube 2008:40-41). It is likely no coincidence that the ceramic masterworks of the Pa’chan school, including the Vase of the Initial Series, date to this time: the Kan dynasts, and perhaps powerful Kan supporters like the Waka’ kingdom, may have provided the Pa’chan court the political and material resources it needed to flourish in the shadow of its mighty neighbor Tikal.

It is this historical context which makes sense of the narrative scene on the Vase of the Initial Series, a scene which would otherwise have no evident connection to the Pa’chan polity. As interpreted here, the scene presents a mythohistorical charter for the authority of the Kan dynasty, represented by “Holy Lord ... Snake,” over the “First Lord” of Calakmul and thus his heirs. In supplanting the “Bat” lords of Calakmul, Yuknoom “Head” was not disrupting the order of divine kingship in the central Maya lowlands, but reasserting a paramount authority for his lineage which stretched back to the beginnings of kingship at Calakmul and perhaps the inception of the Kan line. As a grateful vassal of the Kan dynasty, the Pa’chan king who commissioned the vessel naturally enough accepted his suzerain’s version of the ancient past and tasked his own subordinate lords with memorializing that account on a precious cacao-drinking vessel.

To modern scholars, the informational value of the Vase of the Initial Series lies not in the propositional

content of its historical texts—who can say now whether the people it depicts ever lived, or on what evidence a scribe at El Zotz believed them to have done so—but in what it reveals about how seventh-century Maya intellectuals thought about their past. Like other mythic and historical Classic Maya texts, the captions on the Vase of the Initial Series offer no citations or corroborating evidence for their claims. The exalted, ancestral status of the characters in the narrative, and the authority of the king who commissioned the vessel—an authority made manifest in its painstaking and beautiful surface treatment—are sufficient to assure readers of its veracity. As a body of work, Classic Maya mythic history was in large part made through the crafting of venerated objects—monuments, polychrome vessels, and the now-lost codices sometimes depicted in more durable media—that functioned as the currency of personal and political obligation among kings and aristocrats. If bestowing a gift establishes a claim on the recipient, then, among the ancient Maya, some royal gifts came with the obligation to adopt certain versions of what had happened in the past and what those events meant for living people. The Vase of the Initial Series appears to tell one such story about the subordination of Calakmul and other polities to “Snake” overlords from the east—and as it was in ancient times, so it must be again.

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The Further Adventures of Merle (continued)

MERLE GREENE ROBERTSON

Doing the rubbings of the sides of the Sarcophagus in the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque was most interesting, but very difficult because everything is so close to the edge of the crypt. There are three ancestors portrayed on each of the long sides and one each of Pakal's mother and father on both the north and south ends. When doing the rubbings on the east side of the Sarcophagus, there was not room for me to get my head behind the Hasselblad camera, so I measured the distance

from the stone to the mirror in the camera, set it, and then pulled the trigger. Fortunately, the pictures turned out well, as can be seen in Volume I of the *Sculpture of Palenque* (Figure 1). When the Maya were doing these carvings, they first made a cartoon in either black or red and then used the drawing as their guide for carving. However, in several places they didn't keep within their cartoon lines. Parts of some of these drawings can still be seen today, and show in my photographs (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Sarcophagus, East Figure 1, Ahkal Mo' Nahb I (from Robertson 1983:Fig. 190).



Figure 2. Guidelines for carving (from Robertson 1983:Fig. 173).