



The PARI Journal

A quarterly publication of the Pre-Columbian Art Research Institute
Volume XI, No. 1, Summer 2010

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Electronic version
available at:
www.mesoweb.com/
pari/journal/1101

The PARI Journal is made
possible by a grant from
Precolumbia Mesoweb
Press

ISSN 1531-5398

A Hieroglyphic Block from the Region of Hiix Witz, Guatemala

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In recent years, private collectors in Guatemala have been registering their holdings of Precolumbian art with the Registro de Bienes Culturales. This agency, part of the Instituto de Antropología e Historia (IDAEH), is responsible for bringing privately held artefacts into the official registry of Guatemalan national cultural heritage. Not only does this

process end any possibility of these works entering the international art market, but it makes them available for scholarly study—thereby enriching both our knowledge of the past and the cultural patrimony of Guatemala.

Where Maya objects carry hieroglyphic inscriptions there is the potential of “re-provenancing” them, using mentions of

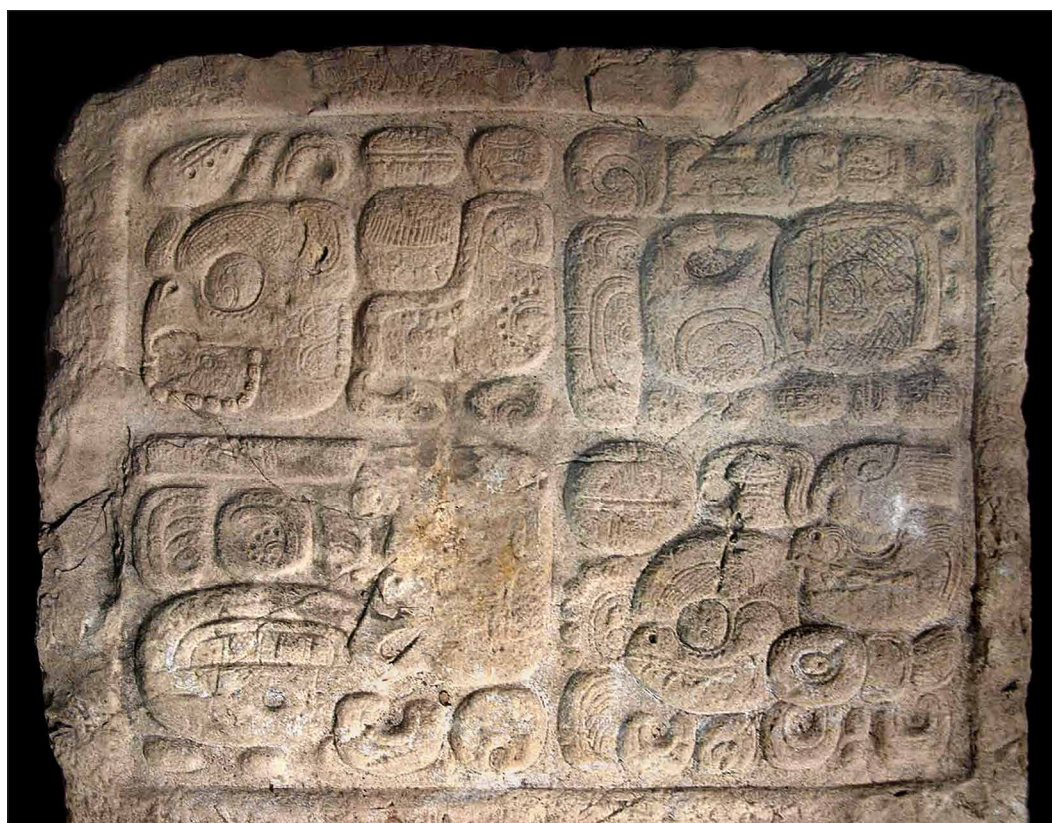


Figure 1. The hieroglyphic block registered by IDAEH as No. 1.2.144.915 (photograph by Dorie Reents-Budet).

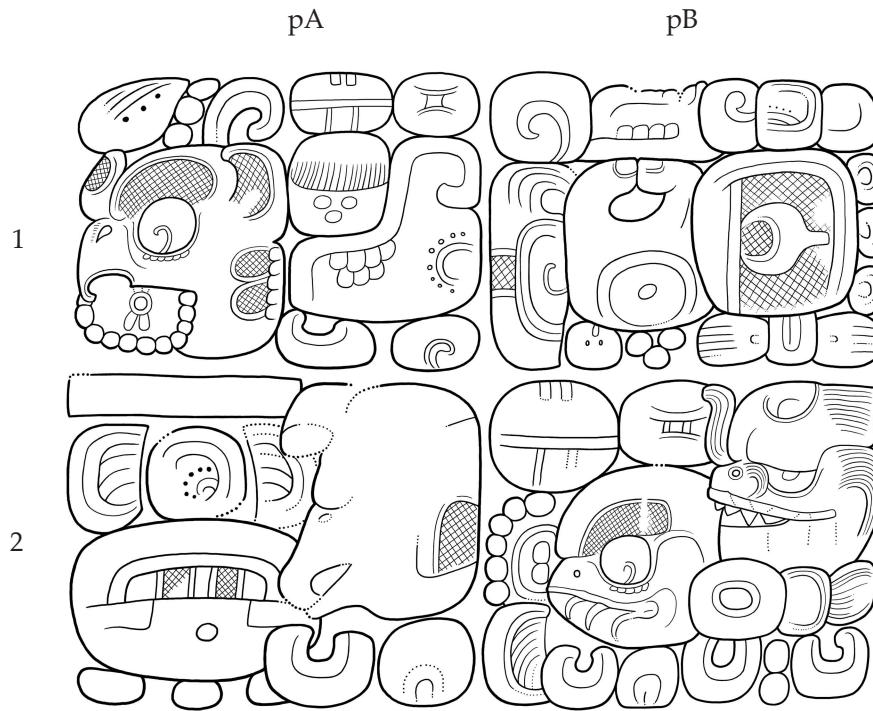


Figure 2. The inscription of the new block (drawing by Simon Martin).

specific people and places to determine their origin and restore them to the historical narrative of the Classic Period. Such is the case with a finely carved panel recently registered with IDAEH as No. 1.2.144.915.¹

This sculpture, currently in a collection in Guatemala City, is a carved block of fine-grained limestone of pale buff color that bears eight hieroglyphs, most in excellent preservation (Figure 1). It measures 37 cm in height, 41 cm in width, and is 15 cm thick. The nature of the inscription makes it clear that it is but part of a much longer text and this, together with its format and size, suggests that it was once a riser from a hieroglyphic stairway.

The Inscription

The text we have begins midway through a phrase and lacks its opening date and verb, both of which fell on a preceding, now-missing block. Instead it starts at pA1a with what we can take to be the name of the principal participant, which consists of the head of a bird with a beaded motif in its mouth and additional elements above (Figure 2). This is a conflated spelling that, thanks to comparable examples elsewhere, we can disassemble with confidence. It begins with the beaded motif—note the diagnostic “propeller” device at its heart—that seems to depict a flower of some kind and reads **JAN/JANAAB** in other contexts.² Best known from the name of K'inich Janaab Pakal, the great king of Palenque, it is more widely seen as part of G3, one of the nine calendrical patrons known as the “Lords of Night.” The

next term is formed from the three-part superfix and the pictographic position of the “flower” in the bird’s mouth. These constitute the sign **TI'** “mouth,” whose stand-alone form combines the superfix with a stylized mouth. The issue is a little more complex, however, since this design also forms the basis for two other hieroglyphs, the verbs **UK'** “to drink” and **WE'?** “to eat,”—which are distinguished by the signs for “water” or “bread” set into the mouth area respectively (Stuart in Houston, Stuart, and Taube 2006:110, Fig. 3.5 a-d). Since these distinctions can be omitted in fused spellings such as this one, it can be hard to determine the correct reading.³ As we shall see in a moment, the comparable spellings suggest that a plain **TI'** is intended in this case. Finally, we come to the avian itself which is read **O'**, the onomatopoeic name for a type of bird. As a whole, the reading is therefore **JAN(AAB)-TI'-O'** or *Jan/Janaab Ti' O'*.

The next glyph, pA1b, identifies this character as a human ruler by means of the emblem glyph **HIIX-**

¹ We wish to thank Sofía Paredes Maury, Director of the Fundación Ruta Maya, for bringing this monument to our attention.

² Syllabic substitutions for this sign give **ja-na-bi**, but there are some indications that its base value is actually **JAN** (Marc Zender, personal communication 2008).

³ This formula of x-in-the-mouth-of-y appears elsewhere in the personal names of humans or supernatural beings. For example, the name of one *way* “spirit companion/co-essence” is **K'AHK'-TI'?-SUUTZ'**, literally “Fire-mouth? Bat” (see Grube and Nahm 1994:701). At least one of these names does involve a verbal form, however, in this case “to eat,” as seen in **K'AHK'-WE'?-CHITAM** (see Grube and Nahm 1994:698).



Figure 3. Map showing the location of La Joyanca, Pajaral, Zapote Bobal, and other sites referenced in the text (Precolumbia Mesoweb Maps).

WITZ-AJAW-wa “Jaguar Hill Lord.” This refers to a polity that has been recognized by epigraphers for some time, but only recently has evidence emerged linking it to the ruins of La Joyanca, Zapote Bobal, and Pajaral (Stuart 2003; see also Arnauld 2002:49-51; Breuil-Martínez et al. 2005:304-307; Gámez, Fitzsimmons, and Forné 2007; Stuart 2008). Lying in the western portion of the department of Petén, Guatemala, this area is bounded by the sites of El Peru to the north and Itsimte-Sacluk to the east (Figure 3). The distribution of Hiix Witz names and titles at three sites is unusual but not unprecedented, perhaps reflecting a system of multi-capital governance or a sequence of shifting seats of rulership. Pajaral has at least one early monument and it has been persuasively suggested that its imposing hilltop acropolis is the original “Jaguar Hill” (Stuart 2008). Zapote Bobal is the largest of the three, with the greatest number of monuments, and may well have been the dominant center in the Late Classic period (Breuil-Martínez et al. 2005; Gámez, Fitzsimmons, and

Forné 2007).

The same Janaab Ti’ O’ name and Hiix Witz title appear on at least four unprovenanced vessels in the Kerr archive at www.mayavase.com: K1387, K5646, K8665, and K8722 (Figure 4a–d). They provide good examples of the flexible spelling strategies used in the script, with the same sequence of terms represented in varied ways, especially in the emblem glyph. It will be noted that none of these expanded renderings shows evidence for the “eat” or “drink” derivations of the mouth sign, and its value is therefore to be understood as a plain TI’. One or more of these individuals may be the self-same Janaab Ti’ O’ of the new block, although given the enthusiasm with which Maya dynasties mined their own history for later regnal names we should not be surprised to find multiple kings with this appellative (in one especially common pattern new rulers took the names of their grandfathers). In addition, there is evidence for this name-title combination on one, or more likely two, stone monuments—to which we will

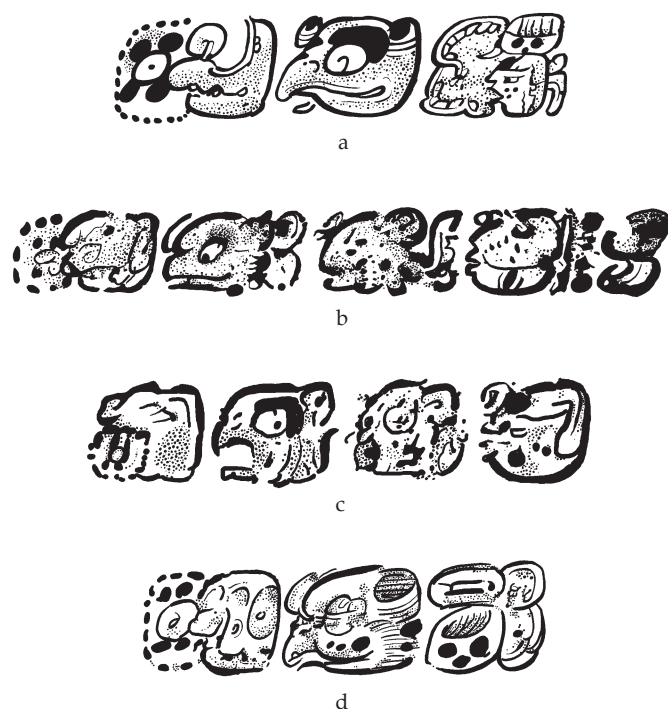


Figure 4. Names of Janaab Ti' O' of Hiix Witz on painted vessels: a) JAN(AAB)-TI' O' HIIIX-WITZ-AJAW-wa (K1387); b) JAN(AAB)-TI' O'-o HIIIX-wi tzi-a *ja-wa (K5646); c) JAN(AAB)-TI' O' HIIIX[WITZ?] AJAW (K8665); d) JAN(AAB)-TI' O' HIIIX-WITZ-AJAW (K8722). Drawings by Simon Martin after photographs by Justin Kerr.

return momentarily.

The next block, pB1a, is filled with **yi-chi-NAL-la** for *yichnal* "before/in the sight of." This term is used where the actions of one participant are "overseen" by another, in the sense of supervision or sanction.

The person who does the overseeing comes at pB1b, where we find the spelling **yu[kul]-no-ma-CH'EEN** *Yuknoom Ch'een*. This was the name of a well-known king of Calakmul, Mexico, who reigned from AD 636 to either 685 or 686 (Martin and Grube 2000:108-109). He is mentioned in the inscriptions of Dos Pilas, Cancuen, Uxul, El Peru, La Corona, Moral-Reforma, and an unknown site close to Piedras Negras—and of course at Calakmul itself (Martin 2000:43). The largest of the Classic Maya political centers, Calakmul lies approximately 130 km (80 miles) to the northeast of the Hiix Witz region.

The next glyph-block, pA2a-b, supplies the title "Five K'atun Lord" in the form **5-WINIKHAAB?-AJAW-wa**. This is a marker of advanced age (beyond 79 years) that Yuknoom Ch'een achieved in 680 (Martin 2005:8). If used contemporaneously then it would place the now-missing event rather precisely to the period between this date and his death in 685 or 686. However, since there is some possibility that it is applied retrospectively, all we can be certain of is that the stone was carved after 680 and refers to an event before 686. The titles of Yuknoom

Ch'een conclude at pB2a with the familiar emblem glyph of Calakmul: **K'UH-ka-KAAN-AJAW-wa** *k'uhul kaan ajaw* "Holy Snake Lord."

The final compound at pB2b is another familiar term, this time **u-ti-ya uhtiiy** "it happened (at)." Often associated with Distance Numbers that count back to an earlier date, it is also used to introduce the location where a given event took place (Stuart and Houston 1994:7-12). In such cases it can define a particular locale within a home site—such as a building or architectural complex—or a different center entirely. Given the range of sites that used the Hiix Witz title we might appreciate the need for specificity, but it could refer to a distant place like Calakmul. Hopefully the emergence of additional blocks in the series will ultimately allow us to understand its role in this case.⁴

Observations

This delicately carved block is a fine example of Classic Maya calligraphy in stone, but it is the content of the inscription that imbues it with historical importance. As well as it can be reconstructed, it refers to an action performed by the ruler of Hiix Witz under the supervision of the Calakmul king. As such, it supplies new information about the political circumstances of the Hiix Witz kingdom in the Late Classic and is the clearest evidence yet that it fell under the sway of Calakmul.

Other factors are relevant to this issue. The appearance of a Janaab Ti' O' of Hiix Witz on K1387 (Figures 4a, 5) is significant because this is a codex-style vessel of the kind closely linked to the Calakmul kingdom and the sites under its control.⁵ The chemical composition of this particular vessel, however, does not match those sampled at Calakmul, nor that at any site in the Mirador Basin that lies to its south—seemingly the core production area of this ware. Stylistically, K1387 is closely wedded to fellow codex-style vessels and perhaps this vase, and a matching dish K1388, were simply made at a Mirador Basin center for which we have no comparative material. In any event, it is extremely rare, even unique, for a polity outside the greater Mirador area to be named on a codex-style vessel, and this was already a clue to a connection between Calakmul and

⁴ A stone of similar format but unknown size, also in a collection in Guatemala (Mayer 1991:Pl. 97a), could be another block from this series (David Stuart, personal communication 2009). The content of that text is entirely chronological, but cannot be fixed in the Long Count.

⁵ Stanley Guenter (2003:Note 9) has noted the resemblance of K1387 to a codex-style vessel naming Yuknoom Ch'een found in Tomb 4 of Structure 2 at Calakmul (although it does not appear to be in the same hand) and accordingly suggested that this king and the Hiix Witz lord were contemporaries. Additionally, a plate now labeled K3636 (originally published in Robicsek and Hales 1981:Table 2a) is said to be in codex-style and carries the name of a different Hiix Witz lord: **yu-ku-la CHAN-na K'AWIIL**.



Figure 5. Photograph K1387 © Justin Kerr.

Hiix Witz.⁶

The link was enhanced with the appearance of one of the aforementioned stone monuments. This features a ballgame scene with two players, one of whom is captioned with a clear Janaab Ti' O' name and an eroded but discernible Hiix Witz title, the other evidently identified as the Calakmul king Wamaaw K'awiil (Tunesi 2007:15-18, Figs. 4, 6).⁷ The latter is known from just one other text dated to 736 and could not have been in power before 731 (Looper 1999:270; Martin and Grube 2000:112-114). Falling some years after the last possible date of the new block, we might suspect that this ballgame involves a later namesake of our Janaab Ti' O'. In fact, since an inscription at another site places a Hiix Witz ruler of a quite different name to the year 732, we can take this as very probable.⁸

Another monument, this time a fragmentary block currently in storage at the Museo Sylvanus Morley, Tikal, Guatemala (Mayer 1991:Pl.155), provides a better candidate for our Hiix Witz lord. This is one of a group of stairway risers that David Stuart (personal communication 2006) has linked to matching blocks found at the site of El Reinado, Guatemala (Mejía and Laporte 2004:249-251, Figs. 13-26)—just a little to the south of the Hiix Witz region. Here a Janaab Ti' O' name bears a suspected Hiix Witz emblem and has been dated to around 692, based on the record of the 9.13.0.0.0 Period Ending on a companion block (Stanley Guenter, personal communication 2006).⁹ There is a Calakmul connection here too, since this calendrical ceremony is performed at, or in some other way connected to, that city.¹⁰

The nature of Calakmul's influence across the central lowlands is clear from the hegemonic character of its relationships with other polities (Martin and Grube 1995, 2000). This is especially true of the foreign references to Yuknoom Ch'een, which consistently state or imply his dominant status. These include several cases in which

he supervises the inaugurations of subject rulers, twice using the *yichnal* term employed on our new block. Whatever the precise nature of the missing verb, the new block is important in confirming that Hiix Witz was directly engaged in Calakmul's sphere of interaction in the late seventh century and took a subordinate role. In

⁶ Laura Gámez, James Fitzsimmons, and Mélanie Forné (2007:361) posited a relationship between Hiix Witz and Calakmul based on their parallel associations with the polities of El Peru, Piedras Negras, and Dos Pilas.

⁷ This would be one of the very few occasions on which the Hiix Witz title includes a K'UH(UL) "holy" prefix. A regular feature of emblems, its near-absence at Hiix Witz may be relevant to its political structure and, on a more practical level, makes it hard to distinguish a "king" from a wider *ajaw*-status class in this territory.

⁸ Yaxchilan Hieroglyphic Stairway 3, Step V, records the capture of one Hiix Witz lord in 732 (Mathews 1997:146) and the "arrival here" of another a few months later. Neither carries the Janaab Ti' O' name, with the first identified by the sequence **na-ku chi-u**, the second by **?-TI'-K'AWIIL** (see also K2803). Given the unknown governmental structure of the dispersed Hiix Witz kingdom—together with the problem of distinguishing a true "king" in the absence of a full emblem glyph—this is not so much conclusive as highly suggestive that the later reference to Janaab Ti' O' introduces a new character.

⁹ The **JAN(AAB)-TI' O'** sequence runs from pC2b to pD2a, while the damaged jaguar head at pD2b seems to be a conflated form of the emblem **HIIX[WITZ-AJAW]** (Mayer 1991:Pl. 155). The eroded phrase continues, possibly naming Janaab Ti' O' as a vassal of Yuknoom Ch'een (David Stuart, personal communication 2010).

¹⁰ This date, expressed only as a Calendar Round, is linked to the Calakmul toponym *Uxte'tuun* via an as yet unreadable term (David Stuart, personal communication 2006; see Mayer 1991:Pl. 156, 158). But this intriguing monument could be rather later than 692. One phrase might describe the local ruler of El Reinado as the grandson of the Dos Pilas king Bajlaj Chan K'awiil (c. 648-692>), as identified by a rare subsidiary name in the sequence pA3b-pA4a (Mayer 1991:Pl. 127). (It is conceivable, but not without difficulty, that the same fragment names another grandson, the Dos Pilas ruler K'awiil Chan K'inich [741-761].) We should also recall that Dos Pilas was another polity with relations to Hiix Witz, since Bajlaj Chan K'awiil sought refuge there after a defeat by Tikal in 673 (Fahsen et al. 2003; Guenter 2003:24).

this it joins a chain of contacts from Cancuen in the far south to Uxul on the periphery of the Calakmul polity (see also Freidel et al. 2007).

We cannot yet say if this stone originated at Zapote Bobal, Pajalar, or La Joyanca—or, indeed, at some other as yet unrecognized locale—but we can situate it with reasonable assurance within the ancient Hiix Witz kingdom. Once an isolated fragment, it now finds a home in our ever-growing understanding of Classic Maya political dynamics.

Summary of the reading

- pA1a **JAN(AAB)-TI'-O'** *Jan/Janaab Ti' O' Janaab Ti' O'*
 pA1b **HIIX-WITZ-AJAW-wa** *Hiix Witz Ajaw*
 Jaguar Hill Lord
 pB1a **yi-chi-NAL-la** *yichnal* overseen by
 pB1b **yu[ku]-no-ma-CH'EEN** *Yuknoom Ch'een*
 Yuknoom Ch'een
 pA2a **5-WINIKHAAB?** *Ho Winikhaab?* Five K'atun
 pA2b **AJAW-wa** *Ajaw* Lord
 pB2a **K'UH-ka-KAAN-AJAW-wa** *K'uhul Kaan Ajaw*
 Holy Snake Lord
 pB2b **u-ti-ya** *ulhtiiy* it happened (at)

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