

# The Further Adventures of Merle (continued)

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## Itsimte

One time in April, 1970, when I was in Sayaxche with my students Paul Saffo, Jeff Smith, Don Hart, Dick Millard, Jim Kinslow, and Steve Hyde, getting ready to go to Dos Pilas, Joya Hairs, an archaeologist friend who worked at Kaminaljuyu, said she was going to Guatemala City, and that we could have her jeep to go to a new site that she just recently saw—Itsimte. We took her up on it as Itsimte was quite a ways away with no road or trail to it. So we set out the next morning with Joya's brother, who lived in Sayaxche, driving—driving like crazy, through savannas, through fences, and banging into trees—but we finally got there without losing anyone. We parked the jeep at the foot of a high mound and proceeded to climb up the grade that had previously been ascended on horseback when the soil was soaking wet, so it was rutted dried mud we were negotiating all the way. Having to walk crooked because of the dried mud, we were all pretty sore campers when we finally reached the site, six kilometers up.

Upon arriving, we were immediately struck by the looting that was going on. One stela that was lying down had a saw cut that went all the way across the top. The base was still standing, but portions were already missing. Another stela had a three-inch-thick slab neatly sawed off the top. Another had large holes drilled in it, I suppose where they would next be sawing. As the students gathered evidence about who the culprits might be, I hurriedly did rubbings of two stelae that were still intact (Figure 1). We almost ran down the hill, we were so eager to get away before the looters returned. I was taking my boots off before getting in the jeep when a fellow in a white tee shirt came running toward us. Then from behind the bushes, four more men in army uniforms came at us with machine guns. I wasn't afraid, as I had papers from FYDEP in my pocket asking for police protection in the jungle of El Peten. I thought that as soon as they saw who we were, they would apologize and that would be it. No. They practically tore the jeep apart looking for "their loot" that we were stealing. Tranquil kept telling me not to show them my papers, but after enough time had gone by with this guy's gun at my stomach, I showed them my papers. They took a look, and then let us go, but said nothing. We drove off. In a minute Paul said, "You know, the insignias on their arms were paper." When we arrived at Sayaxche,



Figure 1. Rubbing of Itsimte-Sacluk Stela 1 (Maler's Stela 4).



Figure 2. Camp at Naranjo.

we told Julio. He called the police, and the first thing they asked me was what the mens' hands looked like. I had noticed that they didn't look any different from mine. He said they were probably from the city, off for a lark, stealing monuments and selling them.

The problem now was that the driver of our jeep and our guide were from the area and might be recognized by the looters, so their whole families might be in danger of being killed. Another possibility was that the rest of us would be taken as hostages, or killed. The policeman was surprised that they hadn't already killed us. We were advised to leave Sayaxche as soon as possible. I got in touch with Samayoa, our FYDEP protector, by radio, and told him what had happened. He said he would be in Sayaxche and take us to safety in two days. That was too long for me. We already had *permiso* papers to work at Naranjo near the Belize border so, packing all night, by morning we were ready to hide in a truck that took us to Melchor.

### Naranjo

By 3:30 on April 3, 1970, we had arrived at the junction into Melchor. The truck dumped us and all of our gear in the middle of the road and turned back. While the students stayed with the luggage, Tranquil and I walked into town to find a place to stay and someone to take us to Naranjo. There was no hotel, but a kind woman said she could put us up in three rooms. As there were not enough beds in the rooms, Paul Saffo, being the youngest, and Tranquil were assigned to mattresses on the balcony. It turned out that they were the only two who got any sleep. There were so many bedbugs in the others' beds that they got no sleep at all. These beds cost \$1.00 each, and that is all they were worth, considering the bedbugs. Breakfast, however, was gourmet—armadillo, fried eggs, frijoles, tortillas, and all the coffee we wanted—35 cents a person. All of the policemen in the area were eating breakfast at the same time. They took their breakfast and dinner there every day. Finding someone to take us to Naranjo was our problem then. Plenty of men wanted to do this, but then they had no truck, or if they had a truck they said it would be wrecked trying to get up the climb to Naranjo. We finally ran into Rafael Morales, whom I knew from Tikal, and who also worked with Ian Graham at Naranjo earlier that year.

He said he would get a fellow with a truck and take us. Off we went, muddy road all the way, and so steep that in places we all had to get out and push the truck.

We finally arrived in this beautiful deep jungle—carosa palms 150 feet tall, sweeps other palms of 40 feet. As both Rafael and our guide Julio had worked there, it was easy finding the stelae. Our camp was already set up from Ian's trip, so we just cleaned it all up, buried the tin cans, and made ourselves at home (Figure 2). A deer-skin chair was still there. I had my tent, and the boys all had their hammocks. Don was made cook. Dinner the first night was rice curry, shrimp, chutney, tortillas, apricots, coffee, and one small drink of rum mixed with Tang. We always had good food when in the jungle. Our "john" was an immense ceiba tree with high folds at the bottom that was just perfect.

Everyone was assigned a monument to clean and take notes on—size, condition, depth of carving, etc., while I did the rubbings of everything there. We all worked constantly all day long for five days. The only problem was the ticks. We all had them, but Jeff Smith managed to always have the most. We figured they came from the deer-skin chair. Evenings were spent pulling ticks off each other. On the last day at Naranjo, I had been working non-stop from breakfast, finally finishing Stela 25, the earliest example of the formative phase of the Late Classic period at this site (Figure 3). It showed a simply clad figure holding, almost vertically, a ceremonial bar with serrated knives protruding from the wide-open jaws of a serpent, instead of the manikin figures usually shown on ceremonial bars. When I arrived back at our camp at dusk dinner was ready. They sat me down on a stool, and proceeded to take my boots off. Now that is when I should have been suspicious. Next I was offered my



Figure 3. Rubbing of Naranjo Stela 25.

glass of rum and Tang, and we all cheered. Why wasn't I suspicious by then? I got up and was going to my tent to get a dry shirt, when I tripped over a vine and fell. Now, here the story changes. All of the boys insisted I was drunk. They had put all of their portions of rum in my glass, and as it was mixed with orange Tang, I could not tell the difference. To this day these now-grown men insist they were right.

### Dos Pilas

Dos Pilas was the first site I went to in the Petexbatun. This was in 1971. Ian Graham, from England, and I were the only non-Guatemalans working in El Peten, Ian recording the hieroglyphs and I recording the art. I worked at Dos Pilas three times, always more-than-sharing time with the darn mosquitoes. I thought they would be so heavy with my blood that they would just fall and die, but no, they were very persistent buggers. And if it wasn't the mosquitoes it was the constant rain, or always being on the alert for stela robbers who were known to be in the vicinity. Just getting to Dos Pilas was a major undertaking. Seemed straight up, up, up, mud all the way, so much mud that I could hardly walk in my mud-encased boots. The second time was even worse. It took one and a half hours to get from Sayaxche to the starting place in the Petexbatun where you start to go up to Dos Pilas. The river was so high that there was no place where we could see to pull up to the shore. As a matter of fact, we had to get out of the boat and, standing hip-deep in water, pole the canoe into what looked like a shore. It took about fifteen minutes to get the gear all sorted so it could be carried by the workers with tump lines on their heads. Tump lines are made by stripping the green bark from a tree about 2½ inches in diameter and pulling with all one's force to skin it. This bark strip is then tied to a gunny sack that has been oiled, making it waterproof. The tump line holding the sack of supplies is then put across the carrier's forehead.

Where there should have been a trail, there was none. It was 17 kilometers up to Dos Pilas, but climbing over and around the huge trees made the distance much further. A hurricane had blown down many huge mahogany trees that we had to climb over. Watch for snakes when doing that: they love logs to hide behind and snatch archaeologists. I knew, so I was careful. It took five hours to reach Dos Pilas. After managing to get there with a storm that was fast approaching, I discovered almost immediately that looters were either still there, or upon hearing our approach, had hidden, or went down to the river below. This was the time looters had just stolen the eight-foot-tall Stela 17 that I had done the rubbing of two years before (thankfully it was documented). The stela was cut into three pieces, and the entire front sawed off with a power saw. In doing this, the inscriptions on the sides were also ruined. One of my workmen went to Sayaxche to report the theft. Six policemen came to investigate, but there was

nothing they could do—it was gone. Later, this stela was found sandwiched between two slabs of marble, ready to be shipped to Puerto Barrios. The prisoner panel, however, was missing.

While Poncho went back to Sayaxche to report the theft, we were fast making our camp—*champas* for our hammocks and a *champa* for cooking. The storm did come roaring in the middle of the night and blew the ridge pole of my *champa* on top of me, just missing my head. I was not hurt, but it was a tricky business building another *champa* in the dark, in pouring rain. That night we all slept in soaking wet clothes. Nevertheless, Dos Pilas was always my favorite Maya site. The stelae there are spectacular, and for the most part in pristine condition. It was a joy doing rubbings of them, in spite of the mosquitoes. My favorite was the 14-foot-tall Stela 2, depicting an over-life-size figure who wears an immense eagle-down headdress with a Mexican year-sign in it (Figure 4). What captured my astonishment and awe however, as the ink was tapped on to the paper little by little, was the nine-inch-tall owl wearing a “bow tie” that hangs just below the skull necklace around the figure’s neck. This stela took forever to finish, not just the figure, but the piles of hieroglyphs above the figure’s head that had to be very carefully done for interpretation by the epigraphers.

Doing the rubbing of the elegant Late Classic Stela 16 was a challenge, working in alternate periods of rain and sun. Everything was so overgrown that at first I did not realize that the stela was so high up, but as I climbed, I saw that it was half buried in forest debris. A pit had to be dug for me to get to the bottom of the monument, but as it rained so much, the pit soon filled with water. That meant the water had to be bailed out continually, leaving me soaking wet and muddy. All the time I was doing this rubbing, I was balancing myself on the side of this steep, muddy mound.

The ultimate highlight at Dos Pilas was the “Processional Stairs” (Figure 5). I came upon them accidentally while struggling through the underbrush and bumped into what looked like a step. It was so dense there that the brush and trees in front had to be cut to let in sunlight so I could take pictures and also to see what was there. Voila! When the area was finally cleared by Tranquil, his brother, and me, we were looking at something that had not been seen for over 1000 years. On one stairway is a long row of dignitaries, some standing facing the central figure, while the others stand facing forward. All wore long flowing wide gowns highly decorated that were split down the middle. All wore decorated boots, some low and some high. At the center of the stair were two bound bundles like the Tikal Emblem Glyph with hieroglyphs above them. Surprisingly, these figures were in almost pristine condition. They were so beautiful and so unique that after photographing everything, I then spent two days making detailed sketches of all of the stairs, as well as notes on the depth of carving and differences in designs on the figures’ gowns in my field book.

Since I was there, a new hieroglyphic stairway was discovered in 2001 by the caretakers of the site, and then excavated by Federico Fahsen and a team from the Cancuen Archaeological Project of Vanderbilt University and the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala. From these newly discovered steps much more of the history of Dos Pilas has come to light. Today you can even drive to Dos Pilas. Don’t think I would like that. So much of the beautiful forest will be gone, as well as the hundreds of parrots and other rare birds who made this area their home.

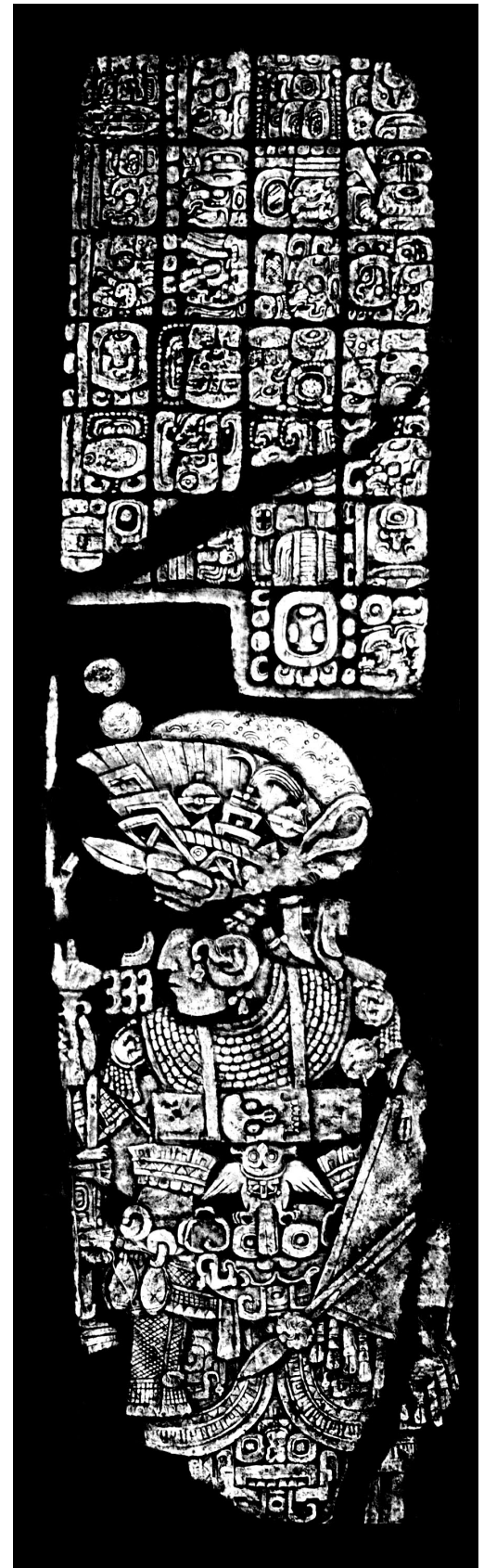


Figure 4. Dos Pilas Stela 2.



Figure 5. Making rubbings of the Processional Stairs.