

Unmasking “Double Bird”, Ruler of Tikal

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Few periods in Tikal history are more obscure than the years that precede its fall from grace at the end of the Early Classic; the prologue to the long, dark winter of the Hiatus era. The king that presided over this key juncture has long been known as “Double Bird”. His reign, which endured from about AD 537 to 562, has been discussed by several authors (e.g. Coggins 1975, Jones 1991; Jones and Satterthwaite 1982; Haviland 1992; Schele and Freidel 1990; Harrison 1999), but the paucity of the data means that we have only the sketchiest understanding of his life. His monumental record is restricted to a single badly battered stone, Stela 17 (see Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:38-42, Figs. 24, 25), supplemented by a handful of equally poorly preserved foreign citations.

In 1997 I had the opportunity to study photographs of Stela 17 taken by the Tikal Project in the University Museum, Philadelphia, and later the same year re-examined the monument at Tikal.¹ Although the record remains very impoverished, progress was possible in a number of areas, especially in regard to the king’s name.

The Name of Double Bird.

The nickname Double Bird was first inspired by a pair of eroded head-forms close to a Tikal emblem glyph on Stela 17 (Coggins 1975). The pairing appears in an extended royal name phrase on the back side, covering the section F6-F9 (Figure 1). Examination of their badly eroded prefix suggests that it is the bar-and-dot numeral for “7” (Figure 2a). This identifies the whole compound as a well-known deity name or title associated with the Sun God (Figure 2b, c). The upper head is skeletal with prominent incisors, a fantastic beast now known to represent a mythical centipede (Grube and Nahm 1994:702). The lower head, a creature seen in a few other contexts, has yet to be identified securely.²

Erik Boot has convincingly linked this [u]7-CHAPA:T-? form to (*ah*) *uuk chapat* “Seven Centipede”, a deity listed in the Cordemex Dictionary (Barrera Vásquez 1980:898; Boot 1999). This same god name is actually repeated on the left side of Stela 17 at

C2, where a prefix of “7” is clear (Figure 2d, 3), while there are at least two other occasions when Tikal kings use this combination as a nominal element (both in conjunction with the Sun God K’inich Ajaw) (Figure 2e, f). While this is certainly one of the appellatives carried by Double Bird, as we shall see, the most important and characteristic components lie elsewhere.

The only time we see Double Bird’s name reduced to a single compound is at the site of Caracol, Belize (Grube 1994:106). Here Tikal emblems attached to dates falling within his tenure appear on Altar 21 and Stela 6, though in all cases the preceding names are missing or poorly preserved. The best surviving example is found high on Stela 6; a monument now housed in the University Museum, Philadelphia. Here the arrangement of signs is very much like

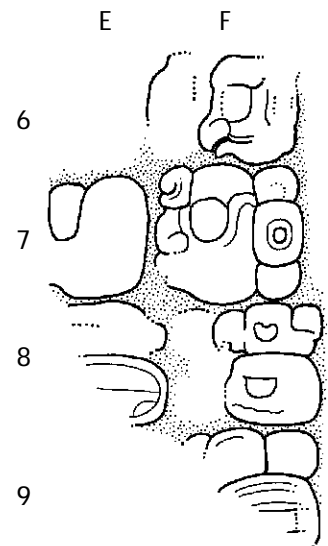


Figure 1: “Double Bird” name phrase on the back side of Tikal Stela 17, F6-F9.

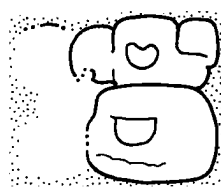


Figure 2a

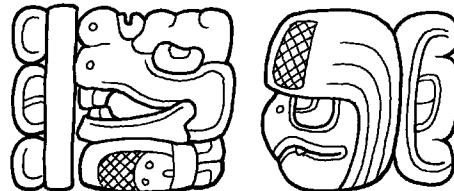


Figure 2b

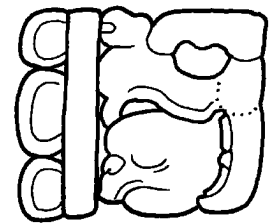


Figure 2c

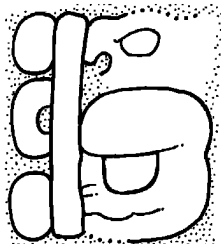


Figure 2d

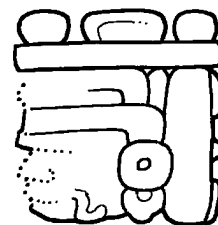


Figure 2e

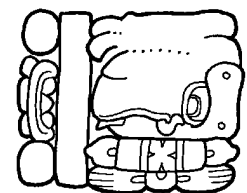


Figure 2f

Figures 2a-f: The [u]7-CHAP A:T-? glyph:

- a) Tikal Stela 17, F8
- b) Copan Altar of Stela 13, D-E
- c) Copan Stela 19, F6

- d) Tikal Stela 17, C2
- e) Tikal Stela 27, C3
- f) Tikal Temple IV, Lintel 2, A5

those of the Tikal 'founder' Yax Ehb' Xook ("First Step Shark"), as seen on Tikal Stela 22 at B4 (Figure 4a, b). In this case the *ehb'* "step" element takes the form of a lashed ladder T193, though on other occasions it is replaced by T843, a flight of platform steps (Stuart 1999). The head-form at Caracol differs in some respects, in particular by what seems to be an infixed *k'in* sign. It is possible that we have a conflated form here, where the "shark" has been combined with the head of the Sun God K'inich Ajaw.

Evidence that this is indeed another of Double Bird's names comes from the left side of Stela 17 (Figure 3). Here at D2 the serrated form of **YAX** is joined to the tied ladder **EHB'** and putative shark sign **XO:K** (Figure 4c). If we compare it to the name of the founder himself, part of a dynastic count on the back side at H2, the identification is clear (Figure 4d). Returning to the left, the next sign at C3 is a badly abraded deity head with a Roman nose and large eye. It is possible that this is a portrait of **K'INICH(-AJAW)**, representing the same extended form suggested by Caracol Stela 6. Based on these clues we might easily identify Double Bird as a partial namesake of the founder and indeed, initially this seemed the



Figure 4a

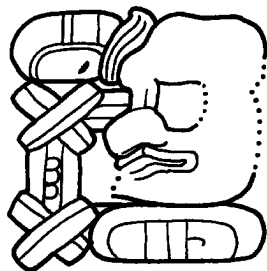


Figure 4b

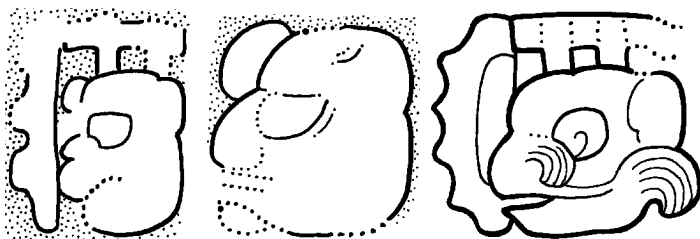


Figure 4c

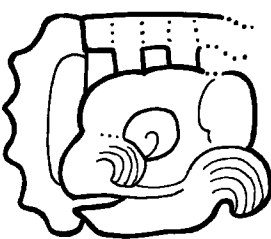


Figure 4d

Figure 4a-d: Yax Ehb' Xook K'inich and Yax Ehb' Xook.

- a) Caracol Stela 6, A5
- b) Tikal Stela 22, B4

- c) Tikal Stela 17, D2-C3
- d) Tikal Stela 17, H2

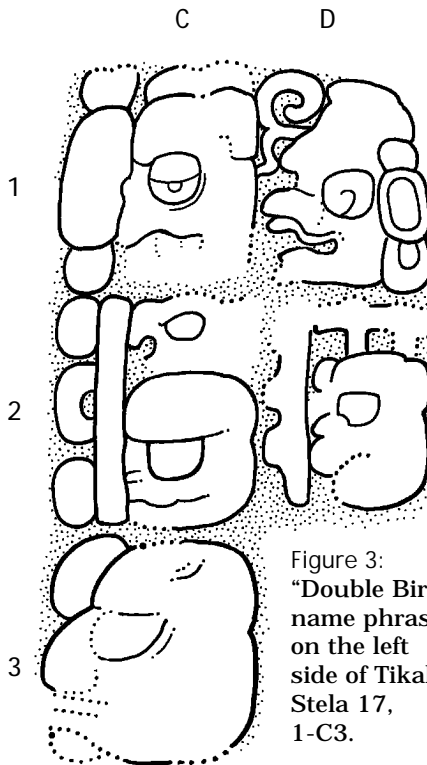


Figure 3: "Double Bird" name phrase on the left side of Tikal Stela 17, 1-C3.

most logical conclusion. However, the issue proves to be more complex still.

The nominal phrase seen in the section C1-D1 provides another candidate. The first sign here, though rather effaced, is the "reverse-S" of T367. This substitutes for the numeral "6" in dates and works in a similar fashion in one of secondary names of the Tikal king Chak Tok Ich'aak I (a.k.a Jaguar Paw) (Figure 5a, b). Given that *wak* is the word for "six" in Proto-Ch'olan (Kaufman and Norman 1984:161), as well as being the root form in almost all Mayan languages, it has long been a working assumption that T367 has the value **WAK**. This is joined to a bird head that is the avian variant of **CHAN** "sky". At D1 we have the head of God K or **K'AWIL** — completing the form Wak Chan K'awiil. If we return to the king's name phrase on the

back side we find the sequence repeated. The compound at F6 is damaged but it includes the "sky bird" once again, while at E7 we have the iconic "flaming mirror" version of K'awiil (compare with H8, where the preservation is better (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:Fig.25b).

There are a number of contexts in which "6" and "sky" combine, many of them supernatural locations. Based on Yucatecan entries it has been posited that *wak* here refers to "upright" or "raised up" (Barrera Vasquez 1980:906; Schele and Freidel 1990:472), though there are certainly other options. It is possible that the king is named simply as "K'awiil of the Raised? Sky (Place)". Yet other Chan K'awiil pairings in names are part of verbal forms - as in the "god who does such-and-such" — where a preceding element constitutes the root (Houston and Stuart 1996:295; Grube 2001). In many cases the appropriate verbal suffixes are deleted from the glyphic spelling and only read by context. If we were to employ the same interpretation of *wak* in this case we would have "K'awiil who raises the sky."

Whatever its reading, evidence that Wak Chan K'awiil is a key part of Double Bird's name comes from an important and previously little-studied plate (Figure 6). Its rim text records the date 9 Ajaw 3 Kum'u, equivalent to the Period Ending 9.6.0.0 or AD 554 (a tiny dot 'corrects' a mispainted 8 in the day coefficient, while the month is given in the rare **ko-lo-AJA W** variant of Kum'u). This is the only surviving record of this juncture at Tikal. After

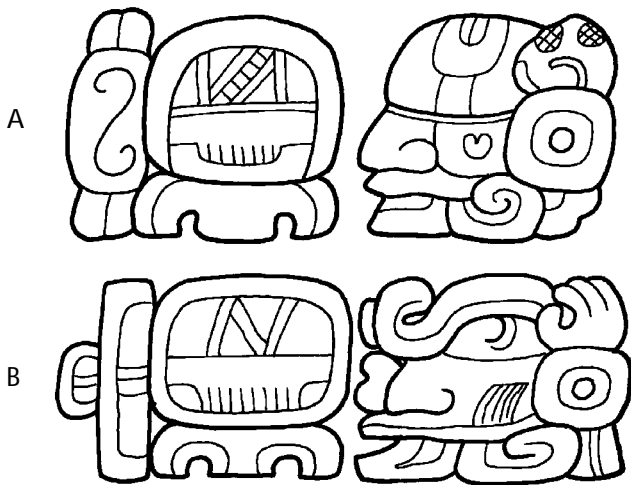


Figure 5a, b: A substitution between T387 and “6” in a secondary name of Chak Tok Ich’aak I. a) Tikal Stela 31, C13-D13. b) Tikal MT.140, cache vessel lid from Tikal Str. 5D-46, Positions G-H.

the standard “stone-binding” verb *k’altuun*, we have a jaguar deity head followed by our Wak Chan K’awiil name (Figure 7a).³ After this we get a second jaguar god portrait, one also seen in this position on Stela 17 (at F7).

The king’s royal title is then given as *ochk’in kaloomte’* the “West Batab”. After this, we find the date 2 Ajaw, representing a jump back in time to the Period Ending 9.3.0.0.0 in AD 495. The celebrant, who bears a full *k’uhul mutal ajaw* “Divine Lord of Tikal” title, is Chak Tok Ich’aak II (a.k.a. Jaguar Paw Skull), who ruled c. AD 486–508.⁴ There were already strong signs from Stela 17 (H7-H9) that he was Double Bird’s father (Schele in Jones and Satterthwaite 1981:40).

With this information in mind we can identify a number of other references to Double Bird, all of



Figure 6: Unprovenanced plate K8121 (after a photograph by Justin Kerr).

them on ceramic vessels. With these we can expand his nominal sequence still further. One vessel that is very likely, though not certain to come from his reign is K5452. We see the same spelling of Wak Chan K'awiil, here preceded by *kaloomte'* (see Reents-Budet 1994:136-137; Kerr 1997:803) (Figure 7b). The position of this name/title is very unusual for the southern lowlands, but does appear in the nominal phrases of his two Middle Classic predecessors at Tikal: "Kaloomte' B'alam" and the "Lady of Tikal" (Martin and Grube 2000:38). The text goes on to introduce the name of the king's mother, but the rather cursive style (and some remaining uncertainty about reading order) makes any tie to the mother named on Stela 17 problematic.

Another unprovenanced plate shows the same Wak Chan K'awiil name, this time followed by a full Tikal emblem glyph (Figure 7c). Preceding it is a verbal Sky-God compound; this time featuring the Chaak-related lightning god called Yoaat or Yopaat.⁵ It is quite common for Maya kings to have a series of such names, each featuring a different deity. A further plate supplies this name in more complete form, demonstrating that the common element of "fire" is also included: **K'AK'-?-CHAN YOP?-A:T** (Figure 7d). The root here is represented by a strange sign that has few ready parallels in the monumental corpus. Conceivably, a truncated form of this name appears on Stela 17 at E8. Though it would be out of order and lacking the god name, there are precedents for both such features elsewhere.

Double Bird, like all Maya kings, had a long and complicated nominal sequence. Often the most distinctive part or "core name" appears at the very end of such a series, but there are too many exceptions to call this a rule (quite a number of them at Tikal). Some long names show a set order, but others show little regard for such a structure, and not only do elements change position, they can be omitted as required, or even show deletion within the name element.

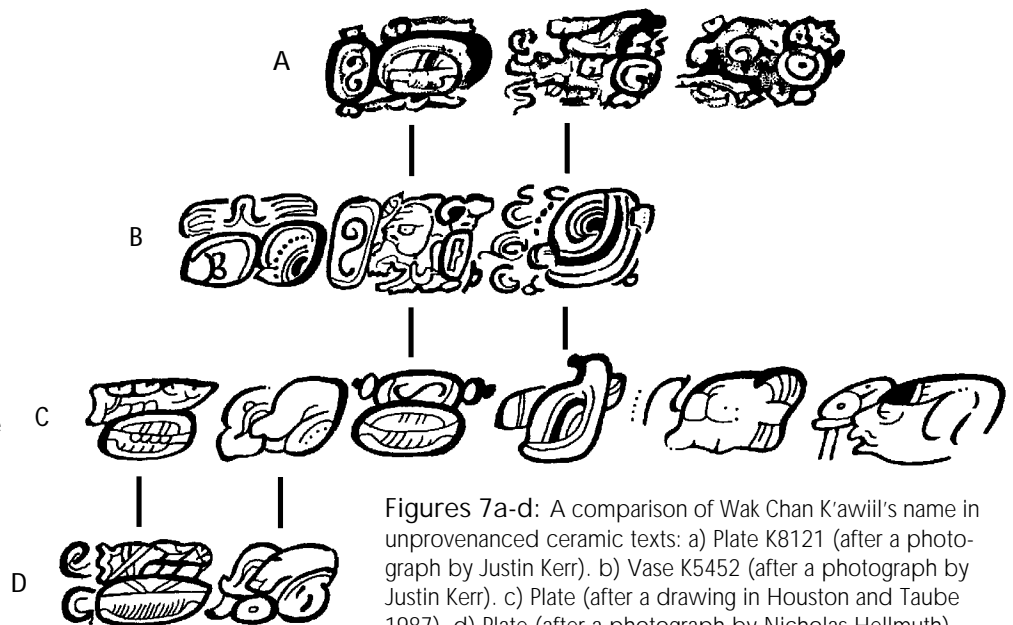
It is still possible that Yax Ehb' Xook K'inich constitutes this core name: it seems to appear in the single glyph block on Caracol Stela 6, it concludes Double Bird's name on the left side of Stela 17 and may well have appeared in the same position on the back (at the destroyed E9). The evidence from ceramic

texts is ambiguous. On occasion painters seem to have started at one end of a name sequence and simply filled the available space. Figure 7d would seem to represent just such an example. However, near contemporaries such as Tikal's Animal Skull show considerable care in including their core name whether the sequence is long or short. On balance, Wak Chan K'awiil is the most consistent name used by Double Bird, and this is how he will be referred to here.

The reign of Wak Chan K'awiil

What then can be said about the life and times of Wak Chan K'awiil? The review of Stela 17 outlined above has led to a number of additional historical details (Martin 1999; Martin and Grube 2000). It seems clear now that the reading order of this monument differs from its ascribed labels: that it begins on the right side, progresses to the back, before finishing on the left. The almost complete destruction of the opening right face text is especially regrettable — it must once have dealt with the king's early life and may even have touched on some of the dynastic intrigues that led to the succession of the Lady of Tikal (probably his sister). A Distance Number of 2.10.7.5 counts back from the last date recorded on the left face, 9.6.3.9.15 (AD 557), to 9.3.13.2.10 (AD 508). Quite possibly this position marks his birth and may have been the opening Long Count date of the right face, but this remains unconfirmed.

The only legible text on the right supplies a Distance Number in excess of 1 K'atun leading to an *i-huli* "arrival here" event.⁶ The date of this is too damaged to reconstruct and any further explanation was lost when at least one more row of glyphs was destroyed when the monument was broken. The subsequent Long Count of 9.5.3.9.15 (AD 537)



Figures 7a-d: A comparison of Wak Chan K'awiil's name in unprovenanced ceramic texts: a) Plate K8121 (after a photograph by Justin Kerr). b) Vase K5452 (after a photograph by Justin Kerr). c) Plate (after a drawing in Houston and Taube 1987). d) Plate (after a photograph by Nicholas Hellmuth).

that opens the back face has long been taken as his accession date, though the accompanying verb is damaged beyond recognition. The inclusion of the Tikal toponym *yax mutal* in this phrase makes any normal inaugural statement most unlikely, and this may relate instead to the arrival that precedes it. Some parallel for this kind of sequence may be seen in the inscriptions of Naranjo (Schele and Freidel 1990:185-186). Here the arrival of Lady Six Sky in AD 682 is followed 3 days later by a temple dedication and, later the same day, an action she performed which involved the Naranjo toponym. These episodes clearly represent an assumption of power by Lady Six Sky, an outsider from Dos Pilas, and constitute some form of dynastic “refoundation”.

Signs of an irregular succession at Tikal, together with these poorly preserved but tantalizing clues, begs the question whether Wak Chan K’awiil could have been a returned exile. Long texts, such as that on Stela 17, often signal important dynastic narratives that support complex or contestable claims to power (here one immediately thinks of Tikal Stela 31). It is interesting, and perhaps significant, that the back of Stela 17 names a lord of Xultun called Upakal K’inich “Shield of the Sun God” (G4-G5).⁷ Sadly, his relevance to the narrative is contained in the damaged and poorly understood glyph at H3.

Wak Chan K’awiil evidently maintained Tikal’s powerful presence in the southern lowlands. Both Caracol Stela 6 and Altar 21 describe his “supervision” of the local king Yajawte’ K’inich II’s accession in AD 553 (Grube 1994:106). But this situation was not to last. The maturing landscape of lowland kingdoms was becoming a hostile place for Tikal. Altar 21 goes on to describe the collapse in Tikal-Caracol relations, first an attack or execution enacted by Wak Chan K’awiil in AD 556, and then his “star war” defeat on 9.6.8.4.2 or AD 562 (Houston 1991:40; Grube 1994:106). Due to the poor condition of this stone the identity of Wak Chan K’awiil’s tormentor remains uncertain — but there is reason to think that Sky Witness of Calakmul was ultimately responsible (Martin and Grube 2000:39, 89-90). There is a further mention of a Tikal king later the same day on Altar 21, representing either the accession of a new ruler or, more probably, Wak Chan K’awiil’s death.

Concluding Thoughts

What we can say about Wak Chan K’awiil/Yax Ehb’ Xook K’inich today comes from a useful mixture of re-analyzing old materials and the injection of data from new texts. We have moved beyond a simple nickname to compile a sizeable nominal sequence, which, though it cannot be read in every detail, does give us a much better idea of how this king

was known to his contemporaries.

Stela 17 has divulged a few more of its secrets, with a good chance that further work will extract others. The prospects at Caracol, where the relevant texts are so badly effaced, are less promising. The data from K8121 is especially important. It supplies an unequivocal association between the Wak Chan K’awiil name and the Period Ending 9.6.0.0.0, as well as providing a firm tie to Chak Tok Ich’aak II, putting his parental status beyond any reasonable doubt. While the idea of Wak Chan K’awiil’s exile is no more than a hypothesis, K8121 does make a determined connection between the two kings which passes over the problematic tenure of the Lady of Tikal and Kaloomte’ B’alam, rulers of Tikal from around AD 511 to at least 527.⁸ The use of the *ochk’in kaloomte’* pair by Wak Chan K’awiil could also be seen as significant. This title is specially associated with Mexican authority, and he was the fifth and last generation of Tikal kings who could claim unbroken descent from Spearthrower Owl, a probable lord of Teotihuacan (Martin and Grube 2000; Stuart 2000).

It would be overly emotive to dub his reign “tragic” or “ill-fated”, but a range of complementary data does indicate that his tenure ended in decisive defeat, breaking Tikal’s power for several generations to come. We may never know the circumstances behind this precipitous fall, but in the turbulent and fiercely combative world of the Maya kingdoms, we can safely assume that Wak Chan K’awiil’s end was met with celebration by many.

Notes:

- 1:** I would like to express my thanks to Christopher Jones and Jeremy Sabloff for their hospitality at the University Museum and generosity with the Tikal archive materials.
- 2:** Although this sign shares a *-na* phonetic complement with *chan* “snake”, it represents a different creature with its own, rather variable, diagnostic features. It often resembles some forms of the day sign Men, as well as stellar-associated glyphs such as those from the Río Azul murals in Tomb 12.
- 3:** The “sky” sign is here topped by a vegetal element. If it were to be T86 **NAL**, producing *chanal*, one would expect it to recur in other examples of his name. Instead it may represent the putative T108 **cha** variant, serving here as a phonetic prefix (Grube in MacLeod 1991:3; Zender n.d., pers. communication 2000).
- 4:** The glyph that precedes the name of Chak Tok Ich’aak could prove to be the same one seen on Stela 10 at D3 (Jones and Satterthwaite 1982:Fig.14). If so, it may constitute a pre-inaugural name and make the young Chak Tok Ich’aak the main protagonist in the war against Maasal/Masul (Martin and Grube 2000:37, 39). Note too the scribal error in painting the “celt” sign in place of *chak* “great/red” in the king’s name.

5: David Stuart has suggested that the T115 sign reads **YOP** "leaf" in addition to an acrophonic syllable of **yo** (pers. communication 1999).

6: For the decipherment of the root *hul* see MacLeod 1990. The "pointing hand" is usually fused with the "moon" sign T181 to form a single logograph reading **hul** "arrive here". But on some occasions T181 can be omitted (see Naranjo Stela 8, C5 and Stela 13, E6). There is no physical sign that the hand could be a damaged **TZUTZ** glyph in this instance and thus part of a Period Ending expression. The damaged Calendar Round date could not, in any case, conform to the anticipated 9.5.0.0.0 position of 11 Ajaw 18 Sek.

7: For reasons that are still unexplained the *mutal* toponym of Tikal appears on Xultun Stela 6 on a date that may fall in 511 (see Von Euw 1985).

8: See Martin and Grube 2000:38-39 and Martin in a forthcoming publication of the School of American Research. For a speculative reconstruction of events at this time, see Guenter 2000.

All illustrations by Simon Martin.

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