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Making a Mountain: The Reconstruction of Text Fragments from Palenque's Palace Tablet

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In memory of Guillermo Bernal Romero

Palenque's Palace Tablet commemorates the dedication of House A-D on August 11, 720 CE, using as a backdrop important events in the life history of the ruler K'inich K'an Joy Kitam II (Figure 1). Primordial time plays an important role in the tablet's narrative as well, in the upper figural scene of the tablet, where K'inich K'an Joy Kitam appears as reenactor of the mythologized ruler Ux Yop Huun on the day of his own accession in 702 (Stuart 2012). Ux Yop Huun was himself considered a personal embodiment of the Maya "crown," the *sak huun*, which was invested with important symbolism of ancestry and naming. One important thread woven into the long and complex narrative is the role of headband crowns themselves, placed on the heads of the king and his predecessors and possibly removed upon death. The main purpose of the tablet message is to highlight House A-D's function as a place of official crowning and initiation, crystallized in the name of the structure itself: the K'alhuun Naah, or "Headband-Raising House" (Zender 2016). Placed in the rear wall of the A-D gallery, atop a broad flight of stairs, the tablet served as a backdrop for an area where such crowning rites may have been performed, installing various court officials in Palenque's court and political sphere.

The dedication statement for the building appears in its final passage, centered on the ritual act known as *och k'ahk*, "fire entering." The final few glyphs are either missing or severely damaged. Enough details remain to show that the

lower right corner of the tablet provided a formulaic toponymic phrase, similar to ones we find in other Palenque texts of the Cross Group (Schele 1977). Here I would like to offer a reconstruction of the Palace Tablet's last few glyphs, and to briefly discuss the role of Palenque's sacred mountain in the rhetorical presentation of history and mythology.

When viewing the Palace Tablet today, on display in Palenque's site museum, we see that the final three glyph blocks at the lower right corner are completely missing. However, small fragments of these glyphs were collected during the excavation of the tablet in 1949 and remain in storage to this day. In fact, several telling details of these glyphs were included in the first very rough drawing of the Palace Tablet, published in the wake of its discovery (Figure 2a; Ruz Lhuillier 1952:Fig. 8), as well as in a finer drawing made by the artist Hipólito Sánchez not long after (Figure 2b). Field photographs from the time show some of these same details and even one or two fragments articulated with the tablet. Schele and Mathews (1979) photographed and drew these small sculpture pieces, most of which were left loose and unarticulated (Figure 3).

Based on the earlier drawings from Ruz's project, Schele and Robertson each included partial reconstructions of the final glyph block (R19). We can easily read this as **LAKAM-HA'-CHAN-CH'EEN**, a familiar combination that includes the ancient place name of Palenque, Lakamha' (Stuart and Houston 1994: 30-31). Surrounding glyphs were shown as



Figure 1. The Palace Tablet. Photograph by Jorge Pérez de Lara.

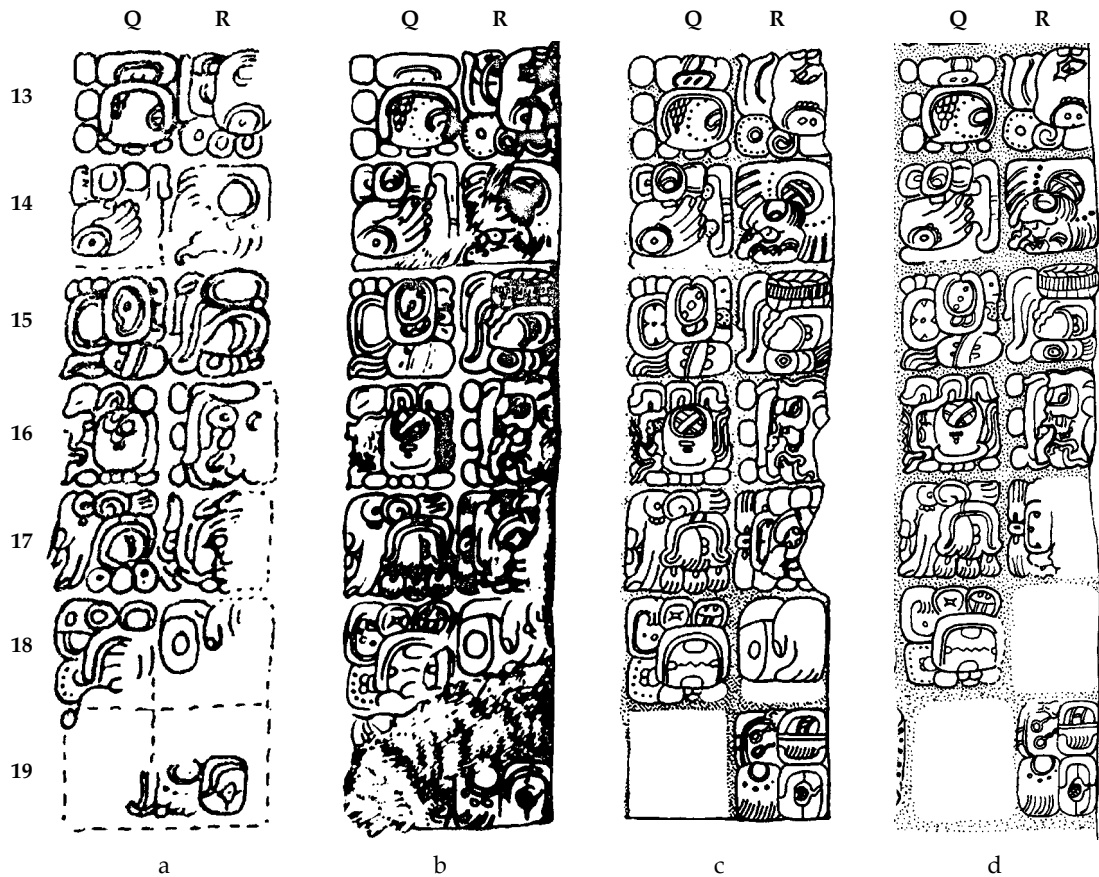


Figure 2. Comparison of drawings of the final passage of the Palace Tablet: (a) artist unknown; (b) Hipólito Sánchez; (c) Linda Schele; (d) Merle Greene Robertson.

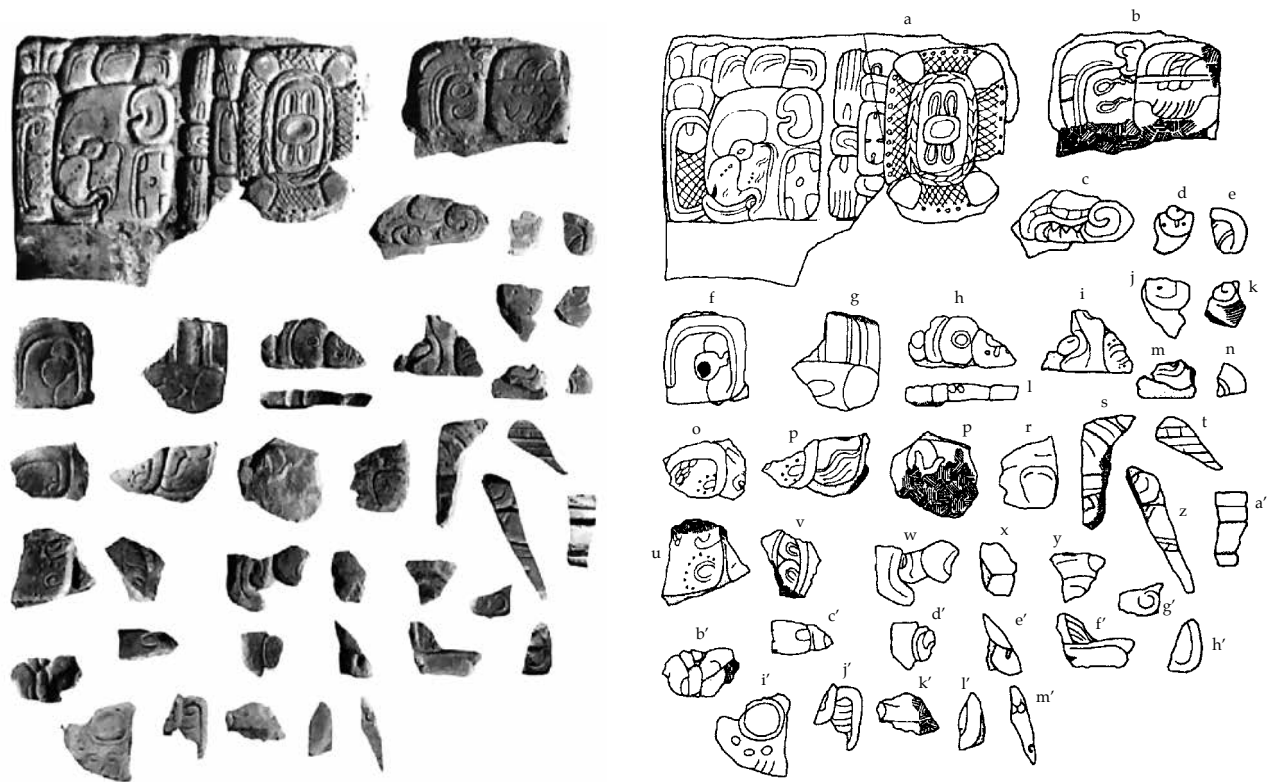


Figure 3. Fragments of the Palace Tablet as published by Schele and Mathews. From Schele and Mathews (1979:No. 38).

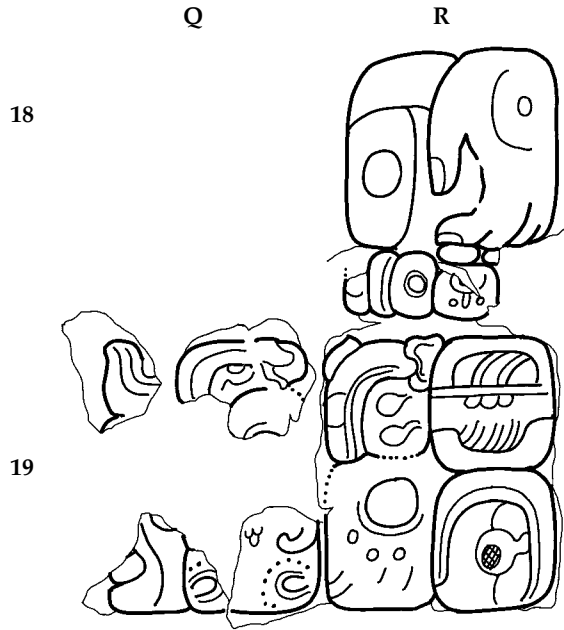
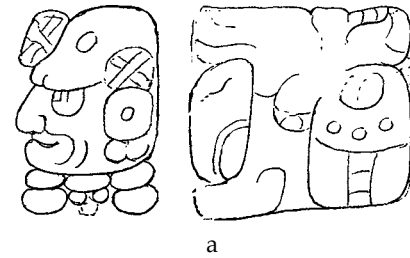
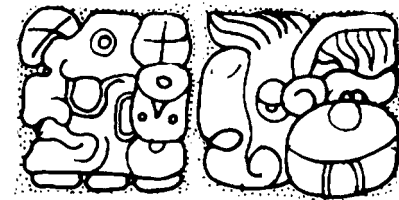


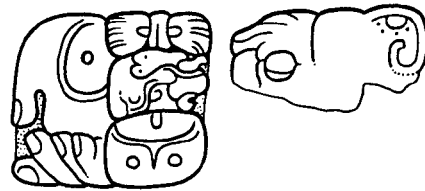
Figure 4. New reconstruction of fragments, showing final three blocks of the Palace Tablet.



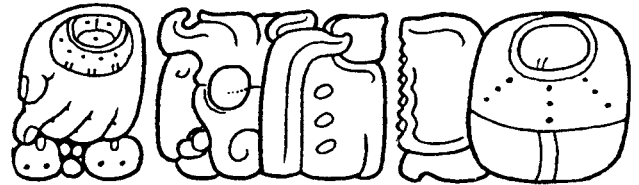
a



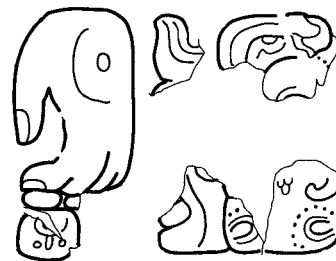
b



c



d



e

Figure 5. Comparison of toponymic phrases for *Yehmal K'uk' Lakam Witz*: (a) Tablet of the Sun, sanctuary jamb; (b) Tablet of the Sun, main tablet; (c) Temple XVIII stucco glyphs; (d) Temple XVIII jamb; (e) Palace Tablet. Drawings by David Stuart, except *b* by Linda Schele.

blank or incomplete (Figure 2c, d). Schele also included details of block R18 in her drawing, an incomplete combination that includes the signs **u** and **ye**. She seems to have copied these elements from the older INAH drawings, although Roberston omitted them altogether.

We can surmise that the first part of R18 is the start of the closing toponymic phrase, **u-ti**, spelling the intransitive verb *uht*, “to happen,” a standard element in such ending phrases.

In fact, playing with the catalogued fragments, it is possible to reconstruct the fuller toponymic phrase and identify some of the missing elements (Figure 4). For example, the **ti** of **u-ti** on the fragment labelled as *h* by Schele and Mathews, where a part of a **la** sign is also visible. This fits with fragment *b'* to give us **ye-ma-la**, a sequence familiar as a spelling found in a number of other Palenque texts, part of the fuller locational expression *yehmal k'uk' lakam witz* (Stuart and Houston 1994:31, 84) (Figure 5).

Although the first segment has sometimes been translated as “descending,” I believe it more accurate to analyze it as *y-ehmal*, a relational noun that means “under, beneath” (cf. Proto-Ch'olan *ehm-äl*, “under” [Kaufman and Norman 1984]; Ch'orti' *ejmar*, “abajo” [Hull 2016]; Ch'orti' *uyehmar e kohn*, “the down[stream] current of a stream” [Wisdom 1950]). *Y-ehmal* is probably not part of the toponym but rather a preposition that comes before the name *K'uk' Lakam Witz*, perhaps the “Quetzal Banner Hill.” As I and others have suggested, this almost surely refers to the prominent hill known as *Mirador*, which rises behind the Temple of the Foliated Cross and dominates the landscape of central Palenque (Stuart and Houston 1994:84; Houston 1996; Stuart 2006).

In the missing block we can reconstruct nearly the whole

u-ti ye-ma-la K'UK'-LAKAM-WITZ LAKAM-HA'-CHAN-CH'EEN

uhti yehmal k'uk' lakam witz lakam ha' chan ch'een

"It happened below the Quetzal Banner Hill, (at) the Wide Waters, the Sky-and-Cave."

Table 1. Reconstructed reading of final three blocks of the Palace Tablet.

glyph from the surviving fragments. In the original photos, the piece of stone catalogued by Schele and Mathews as *m* is shown in its original position, articulating just to the right of the name of K'inich Janab Pakal in the adjacent column, as the upper left corner of Q19. This is clearly the frontal crest of the **K'UK'** head. Fragment *i* clearly shows the beak of the quetzal bird combined with part of the **WITZ** logogram, while fragment *w* somewhat less clearly preserves **LAKAM** articulated with **WITZ**. Still another part of **WITZ** is preserved as fragment *u*. Other portions of the text are somewhat difficult to identify among the published fragments. Figure 5e offers a tentative reconstruction of the original glyphs. With these and the intact block R19 we see the full phrase that appears elsewhere in Palenque's texts (Table 1).

I tentatively prefer to translate K'uk' Lakam Witz as "Quetzal Banner Hill," rather than "Quetzal Wide Hill" as it has sometimes been translated, for a couple of reasons. It seems unlikely to me that both *k'uk'* and *lakam* would function as individual modifiers on *witz*, in that particular order. Furthermore, a representation of an actual quetzal banner (*k'uk' lakam*) appears on Stela 5 of Piedras Negras, as part of the headdress of K'inich Yo'nal Ahk (Figure 6). While tentative, it seems probable that "quetzal banner" is a compound modifier, perhaps describing a prominent architectural adornment that once stood atop the hill.

The name Quetzal Banner Hill may relate to the name of a temple cited in the inscriptions of the Cross Group, K'uk' Naah, or "Quetzal House." This does not refer to any of the Cross Group temples but rather to a building associated with events a day after the burning in a kiln or sweatbath, cited in the Tablets of the Foliated Cross and Sun (Houston 1996; Stuart 2006). The relevant passages note that on 2 Cib 14 Mol the deities of the Triad were "burned in the kiln," perhaps referring to the creation of ceramic effigy figures. One day later, on 3 Caban 15 Mol,

the deity effigies "ascended" to the Quetzal House where they were activated and consecrated by K'inich Kan Bahlam II and his temple priest, Nuk(?) Yajaw Chan. A short time later these same effigies were housed within the temple shrines below, on 5 Eb 5 Kayab. As a working hypothesis, I suspect that Quetzal House refers to the ruined structure atop the Quetzal Banner Hill, directly behind the Cross Group.

This close proximity between the hill and the Cross Group temples goes far in explaining the many mentions of the phrase *yehmal k'uk' lakam witz* in the temples at the foot of the mountain. We find the phrase in texts from the Temples of the Foliated Cross and the Sun, as well as in two inscriptions from nearby Temple XVIII—a small spatial cluster of mentions all "below Quetzal Banner Hill" (Figure 7). The specific description of the location of these shrines at the foot of the mountain immediately recalls the contemporary practice among the Tzotzil Maya of putting cross shrines at the base of sacred hills (Vogt 1965, 1976). The appearance of the place name in the tiny fragments at the end of the Palace Tablet therefore stands out as unusual. Why would House A-D, at the front of the Palace, be described in relationship to the hill?

The answer may lie in the Triad deities. In designing House A-D, K'inich K'an Joy Kitam II and his architects took pains to evoke certain earlier buildings and themes, including those in the Cross Group. The line of doorways and painted stucco piers, all destroyed today, intentionally echoed the facades of his father's buildings to either side, Houses A and D. And the inscriptions that once decorated the walls of House A-D make direct reference to the Triad in several ways. One of the fragmented door jambs from House A-D, partially reconstructed by Schele and Mathews (1979:No. 40), contains a direct reference to the dedication date of the Cross Group temples and the explicit "housing" of the Triad gods in their shrines, even though

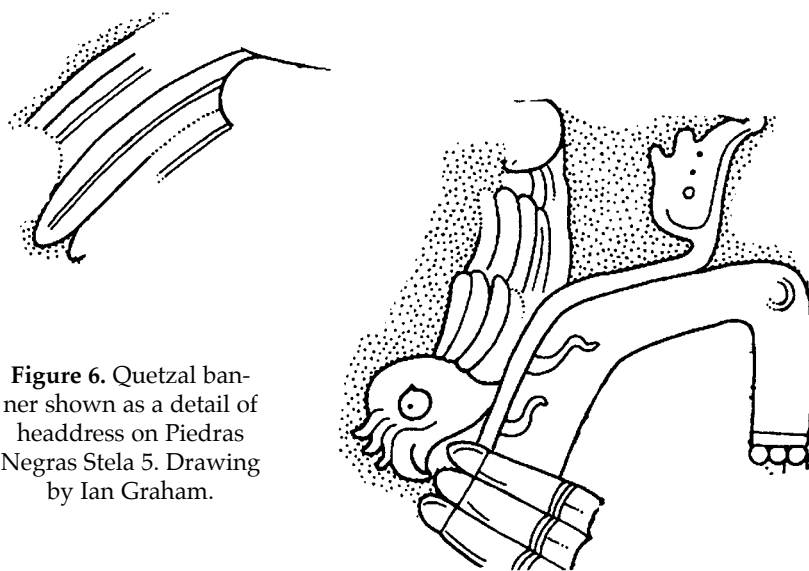


Figure 6. Quetzal banner shown as a detail of headdress on Piedras Negras Stela 5. Drawing by Ian Graham.

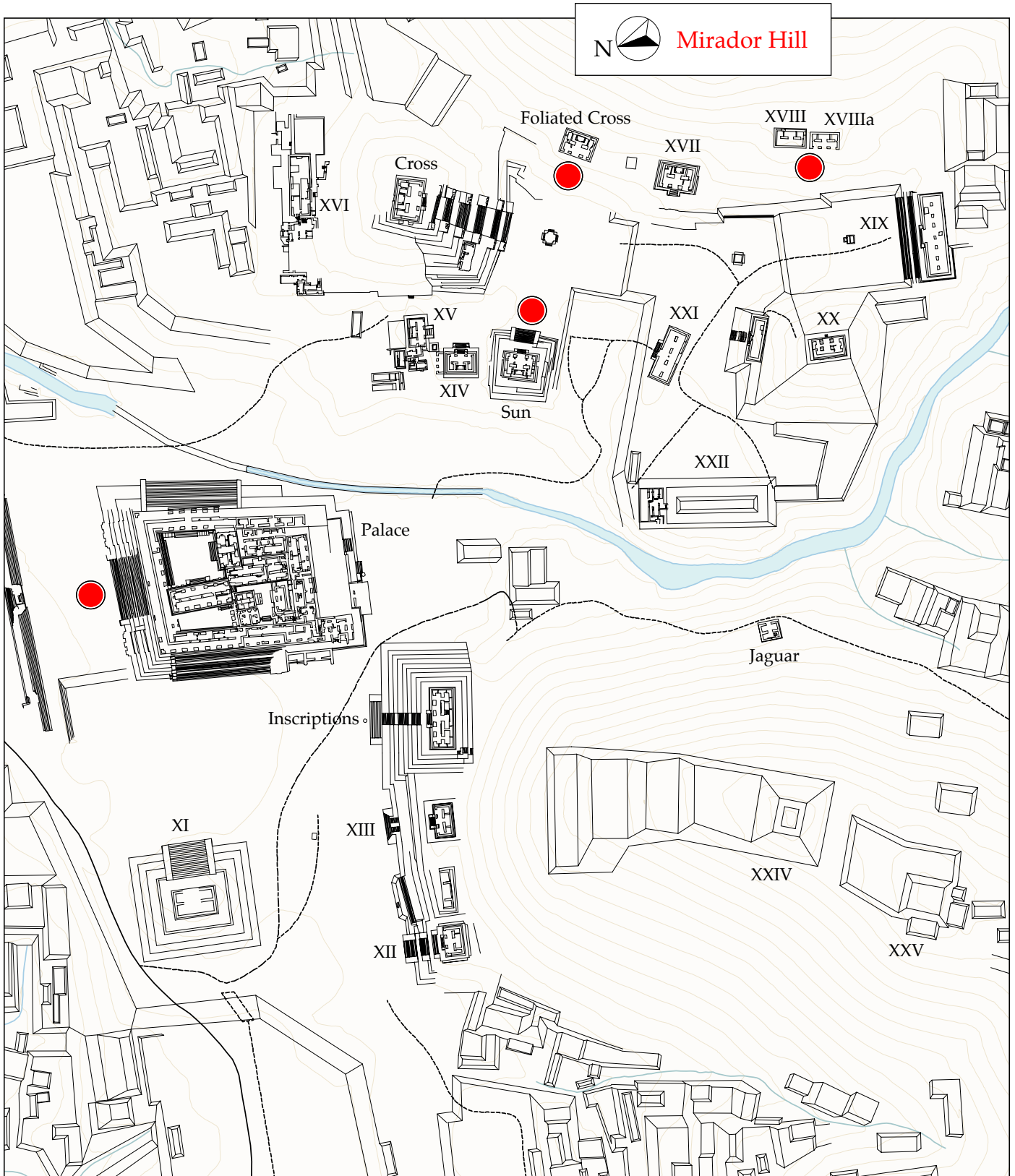


Figure 7. Map of central Palenque, showing locations of the “Quetzal Banner Hill” place name in texts of the Temples of the Foliated Cross and the Sun, Temple XVIII, and House A-D of the Palace (modified after Ed Barnhart, Palenque Mapping Project).

these are not a part of the Palace. The Triad deities are also prominently cited in two passages of the Palace Tablet itself, recounting early events in the life of K'inich K'an Joy Kitam II. When he turned seven years old, he performed his first bloodletting (*k'al mayij*) before (*y-ichnal*) the Triad gods, and they were present as well when as a young man of twenty "he received the snake-rope (*chan ch'ajan*)."¹ Clearly rites of crowning and investiture often necessitated the "presence" of patron deities such as the Triad gods, who oversee and sanction these events. Another explicit mention of this dynamic appears on La Mar Stela 1, where the local ruler receives his paper-cloth headband "before his gods" (*y-ichnal u k'uhuul*).

The many mentions of the Triad gods in House A-D therefore may pertain to the function of the building as a *k'alhuun naah*, a "Crowning House," where the three deities had a similar role as patrons and witnesses. And this may also help to explain the reconstructed place name on the Palace Tablet, so familiar from the Cross Group. House A-D's designation as being "under Quetzal Banner Hill" may be a deliberate rhetorical means of creating proximity between the Palace's northward-facing front and the sacred hill behind and to its left. When built, the K'alhuun Naah might have been conceived as a spatial "extension" of the Cross Group at the base of the sacred mountain, making the Triad deities present for the ceremonies conducted there, probably in a more public and open setting.

Note

Early field photographs of the Palace Tablet are archived at INAH. Catalog numbers of the photos most relevant for this note are 318823, 318586, 318587, and 318588. These can now be accessed online as low resolution images at http://mediateca.inah.gob.mx/islandora_74/islandora/object/fotografia%3A289083

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